PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

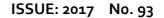**Singapore** | 19 December 2017

Surveillance and Control: The Encampment and Biometric Identification of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

By Su-Ann Oh*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The influx since 25 August of more than 600,000 Rohingya, referred to as Bengali in Myanmar, has created a humanitarian emergency in Bangladesh.

- Biometric technology is being used to register the refugees for the first time in Bangladesh. Only refugees with a registration card will be eligible for relief supplies. The Bangladesh government is using registration to restrict the freedom of movement of the refugee population.

- Keeping the refugees in camps and settlements, while easing the distribution relief aid, is a way of controlling their movement. Bangladesh wants to separate the Rohingya from the local population and ensure that it will be easy to repatriate them.

- The Bangladesh government's efforts are not all-encompassing due to the sheer numbers of refugees, the inaccessibility of certain new makeshift settlements, and the lack of resources.

- Many refugees, well aware of the implications of encampment and biometric registration, have devised strategies to take advantage of or avoid these controls.

* Su-Ann Oh is Visiting Research Fellow at ISEAS-Yusok Ishak Institute. She would like to thank the editors and reviewers of ISEAS Perspective for their help in improving this article.

INTRODUCTION

Since 25 August, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya, referred to as Bengali in Myanmar, have fled northern Rakhine State, Myanmar to seek sanctuary in Bangladesh. Bangladesh first responded by turning them away but as increasing numbers showed up and international attention intensified, it allowed all of the refugees in. These new refugees join their compatriots, bringing the total number of Rohingya refugees to an estimated 830 000.[1]

The instinctive response of the Bangladesh government to the influx of refugees is anxiety - over national security, diplomatic relations with Myanmar, domestic political stability and the economic burden of hosting so many refugees. Consequently, as this article shows, it controls and surveilles the refugees through biometric identification and encampment. The enumeration of refugees, while useful in documenting the scale of the phenomenon and in developing plans for aid provision, is part of an overall strategy of control. In a similar vein, camps, designed to provide aid more effectively, serve as a tool for the containment and segregation of refugees. In contrast, research shows that restricting refugees to camps hinders them from contributing as productive dynamic individuals, thus making their skills less available to the host community. Nevertheless, the Bangladesh government's reach is limited due to the scale of the emergency, and many refugees have devised strategies to take advantage of the system or to avoid it altogether.

NUMBERS, REGISTRATION AND CONTROL

Obtaining valid and accurate numbers is a challenging task given the scale of the emergency and the constant stream of refugees trying to cross the border into Bangladesh. Yet this is necessary in order for the Bangladesh government and NGOs to plan and provide the resources and services needed by the refugees. At present, two counting exercises are being conducted separately, one by the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission (RRRC) of Bangladesh and the other by the UN Agency for Migration, the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The intention is to reconcile these two sets of numbers in December.

The RRRC launched a family counting exercise with the support of the UNHCR on 4 October 2017 to collect information on refugee numbers, needs and vulnerabilities.[2,3] For the first time, Bangladesh is using biometric registration – photographs and digitized fingerprints – to record all Rohingya refugees, new arrivals as well as those who were already in Bangladesh before 25 August – so as to obtain an accurate count of the refugee population and to be able to identify them. Those who register are issued a card from the Bangladeshi authorities with a unique identifier number.

---

[1] Inter-Sector Coordination Group. *Situation Update: Rohingya Refugee Crisis. Inter-Sector Coordination Group*, 26 November 2017.
https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/171126_weekly_iscg_sitrep_final.pdf (accessed 27 November 2017).
[2] RRRC and UNHCR. "Fact Sheet – Family Counting". 25 November 2017.
https://data2.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/10 (accessed on 27 November 2017).
[3] Tarek Mahmud. "Bangladesh completes biometric registration of 224,000 Rohingya refugees". *Dhaka Tribune*. 21 October 2017
http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2017/10/21/biometric-registration-rohingya-refugees/ (accessed on 16 November 2017).

On 25 November, the RRRC reported that there were 624,551 newly arrived individuals. For the rest of the numbers provided, the RRRC does not distinguish between refugees who arrived before or after 25 August. It has reported that 70 per cent of the refugees are from Maungdaw in Rakhine State and 76 per cent have families of between one and five members. As is often the case in refugee situations, the population is skewed towards women and children, with the former making up 52 per cent, and the latter 55 per cent of the population. Almost a third of households have been identified with a vulnerability: single mother households, members with a serious medical condition, disability, older person at risk (although the risk is not defined), child-headed household, older person with child, separated child, single father and/or unaccompanied child, with half of the total being single mother households. The refugees reported having received aid in the form of food, shelter material, sanitary material, medicine and household items. [4] The Bangladesh Immigration and Passports Department has registered 663,694 persons through biometric registration.[5]

The IOM, using a process called Needs and Population Monitoring (NPM), reported that there were 624,000 new arrivals as of 25 November.[6] It provides information on the number of refugees by date of arrival (before or after 25 August) and by location (see Table 1 in next section).

The number of Rohingya refugees is being collected to provide better information. However, there is also a political reason. The system has been set up so that only those with registration cards will be eligible for relief supplies. Thus, the provision of aid is conditional upon the individual's willingness to be legible to the state. The other way in which biometric identification is being used as a tool of control is that it enables the Bangladeshi government to keep track of the refugee population. It has explicitly stated that this will be used to prevent them from obtaining Bangladeshi passports, IDs and drivers' licences, among other documents. The other use of biometric registration is to enable the Bangladeshi government to expedite repatriation.
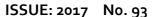
Biometric registration adds another dimension to the identification, differentiation and classification of refugees In Bangladesh. Discursively, the Rohingya are labelled in two different ways. Before 5 October, they were referred to as Undocumented Myanmar Nationals. On 5 October, the Bangladeshi foreign ministry declared that they would be called 'forcibly displaced Myanmar citizens'. In both of these discursive approaches, the Rohingya are stripped of their ethnicity and refugee status, but there is an insistence that they are citizens of Myanmar. Administratively, they are categorized as illegal migrants (all except the 33,148 who are registered as refugees by the UNHCR), which also erases their refugee identity. Biometric registration is another way in which refugee bodies may be classified as other. In other words, biometrics may be viewed "as a technology of biopower whereby the body and life itself are the subject of modalities of control, regimes of truth and techniques of sorting and categorisation."[7]

---

[4] RRRC and UNHCR. *Fact Sheet*, 25 November 2017.
[5] Inter-Sector Coordination Group. *Situation Update,* 26 November 2017.
[6] Inter-Sector Coordination Group. *Situation Update,* 26 November 2017.
[7] Btihaj Ajana. *Governing through Biometrics: The Biopolitics of Identity*. Baskingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 4.

Some Rohingya refugees are aware of these conditions and are using them to their advantage. One Rohingya woman who has lived in Kutapalong refugee camp for eight years, was reported to have registered as a new arrival so as to gain access to relief supplies.[8] This is a survival strategy: her husband worked as a daily-wage labourer and made enough for the family to get by but is no longer able to leave the camp for work because security at the camp has been increased due to the arrival of new refugees. On the other hand, other Rohingya refugees who were already living in established makeshift settlements or with the local community in Bangladesh before this crisis have decided not to participate in the exercise. They are aware of the control that the Bangladesh government will have over them through biometric registration, and prefer to remain illegible to the authorities, continue life as part of the local community and avoid repatriation altogether.[9]

ENCAMPMENT AND RESTRICTIONS ON MOVEMENT

The new arrivals have settled in a variety of locales: UNHCR-managed refugee camps (Kutupalong RC and Nayapara RC, RC stands for refugee camps), established makeshift settlements, in newly established spontaneous settlements and with the host community. Table 1 shows that the majority – over 80 per cent – of new arrivals are living in the newly established spontaneous makeshift settlements.[10] Many newly arrived refugees sought shelter at the registered refugee camps and established makeshift settlements as these locales possess some infrastructure and services. However, these are already full to capacity and so most new arrivals are living in newly established settlements where there are no toilets or running water, little shelter or food.[11]

---

[8] Radio Free Asia. "Bangladesh Officials Face Daunting Task in Counting Rohingya Refugees". 8 November 2017. http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/bangladesh-refugees-11082017160127.html (accessed 16 November 2017).

[9] Tarek Mahmud. "Rohingyas living in Bangladesh for years avoid biometric registration". *Dhaka Tribune*. 7 November 2017.
http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2017/11/07/rohingyas-living-bangladesh-years-avoid-biometric-registration/ (accessed on 16 November 2017); Anders Bjornberg. "Rohingya Territoriality in Myanmar and Bangladesh: Humanitarian Crisis and National Disordering". In *Myanmar's Mountain and Maritime Borderscapes: Local Practices, Boundary-Making and Figured Worlds* edited by Su-Ann Oh, pp. 146-168, Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016.

[10] Inter-Sector Coordination Group. *Situation Update,* 26 November 2017.

[11] IOM. "270,000 Flee Myanmar in Two Weeks: UN Migration Agency in Bangladesh Scales Up Emergency Response." 8 September 2017. https://iom.org.bd/news/270000-flee-myanmar-two-weeks-un-migration-agency-bangladesh-scales-emergency-response/ (accessed on 16 November 2017).
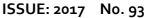
Table 1. Number of Rohingya refugees by location and by arrival (prior to and after 25 August 2017)

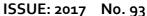| Location	Population before 25 August 2017	Post-25 August influx	Total Refugee Population
Makshift Settlement/Refugee Camps			
Kutupalong-Balukhali Expansion	99,705	341,618	441,323
Kutupalong RC	13,901	11,842	25,743
Leda MS	14,240	10,034	24,724
Nayapara RC	19,230	15,327	34,557
Shamlapour	8,433	18,265	26,698
New Spontaneous Settlements			
Hakimpara	140	55,133	55,273
Thangkhali	100	29,846	29,946
Unchiprang	-	30,384	30,384
Jamtoli	72	33,457	33,529
Moynarghona	50	21,432	21,482
Chakmarkul	-	10,500	10,500
Host Community			
Cox's Bazar Sadar	12,485	1,683	14,168
Ramu	1,600	830	2,430
Teknaf	34,437	34,075	68,512
Ukhia	8,125	9,543	17,668
Total Rohingya	**212,518**	**623,969**	**836,487**

Source: Inter-Sector Coordination Group. *Situation Update: Rohingya Refugee Crisis. Inter-Sector Coordination Group*, 26? November 2017. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/171126_weekly_iscg_sitrep_final.pdf (accessed 27 November 2017).

Only 33,148 are registered as refugees with the UNHCR and they live in two UNHCR-managed camps, Nayapara and Kutupalong.[12] The reason that only this number is registered as refugees is because the Bangladesh government refuses to allow the UNHCR to register Rohingya as refugees. It is concerned that doing so will encourage more refugees to come to Bangladesh.

In general, there are some benefits to having the status of registered refugee: camp residents are provided food rations and non-food provisions, shelter, education, health and sanitation, the possibility of resettlement to a third country and some protection from the UNHCR and INGOs. Nevertheless, the assistance provided is basic, the living conditions are poor, and there is little access to resources. Whole families of up to 12 family members live in a hut measuring 10 span by 10 span with a thatched roof, a mud floor, and walls made of flattened

---

[12] UNHCR. "Bangladesh Fact Sheet". March 2017. http://www.unhcr.org/protection/operations/50001ae09/bangladesh-fact-sheet.html (accessed on 16 November 2017).

bamboo.[13] In addition, resettlement is no longer an option as the Bangladesh government suspended that possibility in 2010.

In the two UNHCR-managed camps, the Bangladesh government restricts the freedom of movement of camp refugees. Although there are no fences around the camps, there are security gates, and military and paramilitary checkpoints. The residents are not allowed outside without an Exit Pass that they must obtain from the camp authority, although many manage to leave with a pass. At present, all refugees – new and old, registered refugees and unregistered – are confined to the areas designated by the Bangladesh government and are not permitted to travel by roads, railways or waterways. Bus and truck drivers have been asked not to transport the Rohingya, and police check posts and surveillance in key transit points have been established to prevent the refugees from travelling to other parts of the country.[14]

In an effort to deal with the humanitarian crisis, Bangladesh has opened up a new site near the Kutupalong refugee camp, which is part of a larger 3,000-acre piece of land known as Kutupalong Extension to house new arrivals.[15] Table 1 shows that more than half of new arrivals are living in this area. The decision to provide a site for the new arrivals is consistent with Bangladesh's desire to keep the refugees from moving to other parts of Bangladesh. In general, governments have tended to favour refugee camps as a device of control and surveillance because it prevents the integration of refugees into the host society, minimizes actual or perceived risk to national security, prevents refugee competition with the local community for employment, resources and services, prevents ethnic imbalance in border areas, shifts the responsibility of meeting refugees' needs to the international donor community, creates an opportunity to develop previously neglected remote areas and prevents or minimizes societal insecurity.[16] Yet, research shows that refugees are a productive economic resource whose skills may be an asset to state-building and economic betterment. Confining them to camps inhibits their ability to contribute positively to their host society.[17]

In the case of Bangladesh, political conflict with residents of the Chittagonian hills, forthcoming elections, competition among locals for resources, the desire to keep the refugees separate from the local community, and a long-standing policy of "passive

---

[13] Kazi Fahmida Farzana. *Memories of Burmese Rohingya Refugees: Contested Identity and Belonging*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

[14] Aljazeera. "Bangladesh restricts movement of Rohingya refugees". 17 September 2017. http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/bangladesh-restricts-movement-rohingya-refugees-170917004640300.html (accessed on 16 November 2017).

[15] UNHCR. "Bangladesh: Rohingya refugees moved from Kutupalong camp to new site." 27 October 2017. http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2017/10/59f2f1a44/bangladesh-rohingya-refugees-moved-kutupa long-camp-new-site.html (accessed 16 November 2017.

[16] Gaim Kibreab. "Why Governments Prefer Spatially Segregated Settlement Sites for Urban Refugees." Refuge. 24(1), 2007.

[17] Karen Jacobsen. "Can Refugees Benefit the State? Refugee Resources and African Statebuilding". *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 40(4), 2002: 577-59; Roger Zetter. "Refugees and Forced Migrants as Development Resources: The Greek Cypriot Refugees From 1974." *The Cyprus Review; Nicosia* 4(1), 1992: 7.

inhospitality" to discourage more refugees from arriving combine to make encampment desirable to the government.[18] The challenge for the Bangladesh government though is that it does not have the capacity to monitor the camps and settlements thoroughly and consistently. In particular, it has difficulty gaining access to the many newly established spontaneous settlements which are surrounded by boggy ground or water. This inaccessible terrain has the advantage of keeping government control at arm's length but makes for extremely difficult aid distribution.

CONCLUSION

The sheltering and provision of more than 700,000 refugees – both old and new – is a formidable undertaking. Although it was initially reluctant to allow the refugees to enter, Bangladesh has since been lauded by observers for its efforts. Nevertheless, the use of biometric registration and encampment to restrict the choices and freedom of movement of the refugees may be detrimental to Bangladesh in the long-run, as it reduces them to dependent victims and disregards them as dynamic resources.

Far from being passive victims, the Rohingya refugees have shown a keen awareness of the political and personal implications of the Bangladesh government's practices. They have devised ways to ensure their survival in a situation where the political and economic odds are stacked against them.

---

[18] Anders Bjornberg. *Rohingya Territoriality*, 2016.