

PERSPECTIVE

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Food Assistance and the Social Construction of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The lives of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are controlled by the host government and humanitarian organizations.
- Food shortages are severe and the distribution and use of food aid is strictly regulated.
- Bangladeshi authorities' distribution of food treats the Rohingya refugees as simple, acquiescent subjects who require a strong guiding hand.
- This does not bode well for when it comes to their possible repatriation.
- Humanitarian organizations are more flexible but provide food to the Rohingya refugees solely as a means to assuage hunger, stripping it of its social and cultural meaning.

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INTRODUCTION

Rohingya (referred to as Bengali in Myanmar) have been fleeing to Bangladesh since the end of August last year after a series of militant attacks and Burmese military reprisals. It is estimated that the current total Rohingya refugee population in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh is between 886,000 and 915,000.¹ The large numbers coupled with the modest resources of the refugees have necessitated an emergency relief response prioritizing assistance in the areas of food, health, shelter, sanitation, education and protection, among other services.²

Taking food assistance as its starting point, this article examines the underlying system of ideas that the Bangladeshi government and humanitarian organizations have about the term 'refugee'. Through a consideration of refugee coping strategies, host government responses and humanitarian organizations' operations on food assistance, I show that the provision of food aid is not just an apolitical act of assistance but also one which is embedded in relations of power that are continually (re)produced through laws, practice and discourse. In the conclusion, I offer some thoughts on the social construction of the term 'refugee' and its implications for the lives of refugees in Bangladesh.

FOOD SHORTAGE

In an assessment conducted between September and October 2017, a sample of refugees reported that the shortage of food was the third most urgent need after money, and household goods and non-food items.³ Later that year, the World Food Program and its partners carried out an assessment on food involving more than 2,000 families. They reported that the majority (80 per cent) of new arrivals were fully dependent on external assistance for food and that slightly more than a third (38 per cent) of the local host community population was also facing food shortages. The range of foods consumed by both the refugees and host communities was limited to rice, oil, vegetables and pulses. The refugees had difficulty getting meat, fish and eggs, and hardly ate any fruit or dairy products.⁴ In other words, while food assistance was essential to providing sustenance to the respondents, it was not sufficiently varied or of high enough nutritional content.

This was reflected in the findings on children's nutrition. A nutrition survey conducted in October and November 2017 in two of the refugee camps and in the makeshift camps found that there was global acute malnutrition among all children of 6-59 months old, ranging from 14.3 to 24.3 per cent.⁵ Global acute malnutrition is an indicator of acute malnutrition, and 10 per cent or more of children constitutes a serious emergency. In addition, a study conducted between October 2017 and May 2018 found that while stunting rates have fallen from 44 to 38 per cent, it is still near the World Health Organization's critical health emergency threshold of 40 per cent.⁶ In sum, the children surveyed were facing serious malnutrition.

REFUGEE STRATEGIES

Given the severe food shortage, the refugees have devised strategies to cope with the shortage of food. From reports and media articles, I have identified three sets of methods although there are probably more strategies being used. The first involves the reduction in the amount and variety of food consumed such as relying on less preferred food, reducing the number of meals, portion size, and/or consumption by adults, sending family members to eat elsewhere and marrying off daughters to reduce the number of household members to feed.⁷ The second involves the formation of new households: sons are married with young girls and the couple is registered as a separate family so that more ration cards may be acquired. The extra food is kept as stock.⁸ The final set of strategies involves the liquidation of assets or the acquisition of credit such as the sale of jewellery, using savings, borrowing money, buying food on credit and the sale of food for other types of food or other items. Apparently, only 2.9 per cent of the new arrivals in the survey reported selling food aid as one of their three income sources and none as their main source of income. However, about 12 per cent of the new arrivals reported having sold some of their ration to meet other basic needs such as other food items not included in the basket, firewood, and to cover health-related costs.⁹ Thus, food rations are used both as food and as a resource that may be converted into cash (or other items, in the case of bartering) to purchase basic necessities.

These coping strategies are born out of the refugees' lack of resources, and the flawed distribution and limited food rations provided to newcomers. Under World Food Program's General Food Distribution programme, rations of rice, vegetable oil and lentils are distributed to new arrivals. Other types of foodstuff have to be acquired through their own means. Also, the allocation of food to households is based on a rough estimation of the number of members in a household. In the beginning of the refugee influx in August last year, it was logistically challenging to gather accurate information on the number of members in each family. As a result, an amount was calculated based on a rough average of five members per family so that the food would be distributed to the recipients quickly. Consequently, all Rohingya families, regardless of size, received the same ration of rice, lentils and vegetable oil every two weeks from the World Food Program. Although some measures have been put in place to remedy this, there are still families that fall through the cracks. For example, refugee households with more than eight members get two ration cards but a household with seven members is entitled to one card only.¹⁰ Given these logistical lapses, the World Food Program and other organizations involved in food aid began scaling up on food assistance in late October 2017.

COPING STRATEGIES: AGENCY OR SUBVERSION?

These coping strategies are the Rohingya refugees' attempts to manage extremely challenging circumstances. However, this has not been interpreted in the same way by the Bangladeshi government. In November 2017, it was reported that the Bangladeshi authorities considered "the sale and purchase of relief rations a criminal offense".¹¹ The month before, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) had detained at least 25 Rohingya caught selling relief supplies; they were later released with a warning. In early November, Border Guard Bangladesh arrested 10

Bangladeshis from Kutupalong camp for attempting to purchase rations from refugees; they were sentenced to one to six months of prison.

Given the shortage of food, lack of dietary diversity and the flaws in the food distribution system, markets are actually an efficient mechanism for (re)distributing aid. However, by making the sale and purchase of relief items a criminal offence, the Bangladeshi authorities are declaring that the refugees' bartering and trading activities are illegal and even criminal. "[C]onsumption is subject to social control and political redefinition" and the Bangladeshi authorities' criminalization of the sale of food aid is an attempt to exert control over refugees' consumption practices.¹²

In addition, the Bangladeshi authorities justified the enactment of the law on the grounds that the refugees should be conserving food assistance because the amount of aid was falling and that in two months, they would not get anymore.¹³ This paternalism and the efforts to control consumption provide us with clues about the crux of the matter. The Bangladeshi authorities construct refugees as passive and docile subjects of charity, people who should meekly accept whatever assistance they are provided regardless of its suitability and desirability, and who are unable to judge the appropriate actions needed for their survival and wellbeing. Thus, when the refugees barter or trade their aid supplies - behaving as active and discerning economic actors - they overturn the Bangladeshi authorities' conception of them. The enactment of the law against trading food assistance is thus an exercise in sovereignty designed to regulate the refugees' behaviour so that they conform to the figure of the refugee that the authorities have of them. This point is important because it shows that the term 'refugee' is socially constructed and that governments are able to impose their idea of what that means and to compel refugees to behave accordingly.

FOOD: SUBSISTENCE OR NOURISHMENT?

In other refugee situations, humanitarian organizations have also sought to control consumption by labelling aid items with the phrase "not for sale". This practice mirrors the Bangladeshi authorities' desire to control consumption, and the way in which humanitarian organizations construct the category 'refugee'.

To its credit, the World Food Program has not prohibited the sale of rations in Cox's Bazar, and has left it to the beneficiaries to decide what they do with it. It is aware of the limited variety and nutritional value of their food basket and has made changes to the food programme following the survey conducted in October and November 2017. These changes are aimed at improving the diversity of food items by scaling up an existing e-voucher programme which allows refugees to buy 19 types of food (such as vegetables, eggs and dried fish) through prepaid debit card entitlements. The plan is to expand this programme to cover all existing refugees and the new arrivals by the end of 2018.¹⁴

While it is encouraging that the World Food Program has increased the diversity of their food basket, it is telling that the justification given for this was "food insecurity", "limited dietary

diversity” and “child malnutrition”. Nowhere is there a mention of taste, appetite or satiety in the report on the survey conducted in October and November 2017 or in its press releases. Thus, while the World Food Program recognizes the agency of its beneficiaries, it holds nutritional status in the form of “macro and micro nutrients” as the valid reason for increasing the range of foods available. Refugees are reduced to caloric and “nutrient” intake, and food is stripped of its sensory, social and cultural meanings. In other words, food provided by humanitarian organizations to refugees is meant to assuage hunger, not to satisfy the appetite, celebrate culture or nourish the soul.

CONCLUSION

My aim is not to single out the World Food Program but to point out that the language surrounding food assistance for refugees reflects the way in which the term ‘refugee’ is constructed by the host government, international society and by the myriad of donors, agencies and organizations involved in refugee relief. I believe that this analysis of how the figure of the refugee is constructed is valuable beyond its academic purpose.

The lives of the Rohingya in Bangladesh are controlled and regulated by the host government and humanitarian organizations who have the power to define what a refugee is and is not. For the Bangladeshi authorities, the Rohingya refugees have been constructed as simple, acquiescent subjects who require a strong guiding hand in managing their challenging circumstances. Given this view, the likelihood that the refugees will not be trusted to know what is best for them during their stay and eventual repatriation is a worrying prospect.

In contrast, the humanitarian organizations respect the agency of the refugees but reduce them to biology where it concerns food aid. The troubling point here is that while in Rakhine State, Myanmar, the Rohingya were also reduced to pure biological life but through the removal of different dimensions of their humanity – the need to attain permission from the authorities to move, to marry, to vote, among other things. This population thus faces at least two ways in which they are made less than human arising from their identity as Rohingya, and their status as refugee. The Rohingya are right in demanding the guarantee of full citizenship before they return to Myanmar as they know they will only be trading one form of biological life for another otherwise.

This is not to say that these definitions are fixed. In fact, they are constantly being (re)produced in everyday life. On their part, the refugees do not passively accept the limitations of food assistance, but are actively engaged in activities to stretch and augment it. In so doing, they contest the authorities’ definition of what a ‘refugee’ is. Nevertheless, in an arena of powerful players, those with more force will be heard, and the opinions of the Rohingya refugees may well be drowned out by the clamour of (well-intentioned) voices.

¹ These two numbers differ as distinct methodologies were used to count the refugees. Inter Sector Coordination Group. *Situation Report Data Summary. Rohingya Refugee Crisis, Cox's Bazar*, 7 June 2017 (covering 22nd May to 4th June 2018).

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/iscg_situation_report_-_data_summary_07_june_2018.pdf> accessed 18 June 2018.

² Inter Sector Coordination Group. *Bangladesh: Cox's Bazar refugee response (4W) – as of 12 June 2018*. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/180610_4w_final.pdf> accessed 18 June 2018.

³ International Rescue Committee. *October 2017 Assessment Report: Undocumented Myanmar Nationals influx to Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh*, p. 6

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Assessment%20Report_UMN_Bangladesh_IRC_RI_October%202017.pdf> accessed 18 June 2018.

⁴ For food security partner organizations, see Inter Sector Coordination Group. *Bangladesh: Cox's Bazar refugee response*. World Food Program. *Refugee influx Emergency Vulnerability Assessment (REVA) – Summary Report*. December 2017 <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000050429/download/?_ga=2.143847542.259193222.1529305971-258867557.1529305971> accessed 18 June 2018.

⁵ World Food Program. *Refugee influx Emergency Vulnerability Assessment (REVA)*, 2017.

⁶ Save the Children. *Nearly 40 percent of Rohingya children in Cox's Bazar are stunted: new study*. 12 June 2018 <<https://www.savethechildren.net/article/nearly-40-percent-rohingya-children-cox-s-bazar-are-stunted-new-study>> accessed 18 June 2018.

⁷ World Food Program. *Refugee influx Emergency Vulnerability Assessment (REVA)*, 2017; VOA. *Food and Safety Concerns Fuel Rise in Refuge Rohingya Child Brides*. 12 December 2017.

<<https://www.voanews.com/a/rohingya-child-marriages-common-amid-food-crisis/4160049.html>> accessed 18 June 2018.

⁸ VOA. *Food and Safety Concerns*, December 2017.

⁹ World Food Program. *Refugee influx Emergency Vulnerability Assessment (REVA)*, December 2017.

¹⁰ VOA. *Food and Safety Concerns*, December 2017.

¹¹ Radio Free Asia. *Some Rohingya Refugees Engage in Illicit Sales of Food Rations in Bangladesh*.

10 November 2017 <<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/rohingya-bangladesh-11102017162306.html>> accessed 18 June 2018; Aljazeera. *Rohingya refugees sell aid to fund basic diet*. 12 February 2018 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/rohingya-refugees-sell-aid-fund-basic-diet-180206185922617.html>> accessed 18 June 2018.

¹² Appadurai, A. "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value". In *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective* edited by A. Appadurai, pp. 3-63, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p.6.

¹³ Radio Free Asia. *Some Rohingya Refugees Engage in Illicit Sales*, November 2017.

¹⁴ World Food Program. *WFP Reiterates Commitment to Supporting Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*. 14 February 2018 <<https://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/wfp-reiterates-commitment-supporting-rohingya-refugees-bangladesh>> accessed 18 June 2018.

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