

### Relocating the Rohingyas in Bhashan Char: Advantages and Disadvantages

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Following the launch of a military campaign in Myanmar, heavily include rape, murder, torture and arson, almost 743,000 Rohingya Muslims left for Bangladesh from Rakhine state in 2017. This large number of refugees joined 300,000 others who arrived here earlier, making the total number stand at one million. This massive exodus of refugee at Cox's Bazar left the refugee camps overcrowded, which led the Bangladesh government to consider a temporary plan for the relocation of refugee under its Ashrayan-3 policy. The government has declared that it intended to move the displaced refugee to Bhashan Char, also known as Thengar Char, a low-lying island located in Hatiya Upazila of Noakhali District. Initially, 100,000 refugees will be located under this project and the cost of the project stands at Tk 3094.95 crore

### Bhashan Char: A new home for Rohingya Refugee

What is Char? Char means a tract of lands surrounded by water which is formed by the sediments carried in murky water of the river system. In Bangladesh, the formation of new char island creates new opportunities for the vulnerable communities to establish new settlements and pursue new agricultural and farming activities. All the chars are the properties of the Bangladesh government, which has assigned the forest department to look after the tree plantation programs to make the emerging chars habitable and stable.

In reference to the definition of Char, "Bhashan Char" means floating island. This particular island is a spit of land formed by accumulated slit. The island emerged in 2006 in the Bay of Bengal and about 39 km away from Noakhali in an estuary of the Meghna River. Though the islet was covered in a dense green even a few years ago, now the entity has taken a new look altogether with new constructions painted pink.

Bangladesh government's plan to relocate the displaced Rohingya refugees temporarily in Bhashan Char has raised a big question- "Why is the country racing to turn an uninhabited and muddy island into a home for more than one million Rohingya Refugee?" The straightforward answer to this question is to ease congestion at the cramped and crowded camps in Cox's Bazar. The relocation project comes with many benefits for the Rohingya community. Let's look at the bright side of the project.

## Facilities at Bhashan Char: The Bright sides of the Relocation Project

Several key concerns have been raised by different observers when the government initiated the relocation plan. The first concern revolves around the stability of the island as the slit island is geologically more vulnerable to cyclone, storms surges and floods. But the Bangladesh government has taken the necessary initiatives to oversee the construction of flood defense embankments, concrete housing structure, cyclone shelters, solar power grid, prefabricated food and storage warehouses and road system. The Bangladesh government has assigned the Bangladesh Navy to develop Bhashan Char to protect it from natural calamities and make it habitable under Ashrayan-3 project, with the support of a foreign construction firm and a foreign consultancy firm.

Sinohydro, a Shaghai-listed Chinese construction company, also popularly known for constructing China's Three Gorges Dam, has started working on 13-kilometer flood-defense embankment on this project. On the other hand, HR Wallingford, a British engineering and environmental hydraulic consultancy that delivers solution for the protection of vulnerable communities, is supporting the project by providing advice on coastal stabilization and flood protection measures. The company is working on a coastal infrastructure design that will introduce a flood defense embankment protecting the area to international standards.

All the necessary efforts have been made to make the islands eco-friendly human habitat to relocate nearly 100,000 Rohingyas to relieve the overcrowded camps in Cox's bazar. The houses are built, solar panels are set for electricity, biogas fuel system is introduced for cooking, waste management system are developed, the cyclone centers are constructed and mobile network is made available. Now the island is ready to host the refugee communities.

### The Architectural Structure of the Construction

The project site has already been developed with 120 plots. Each plot consists 12 buildings including a cyclone center. Each cyclone center can withstand strong winds of up to 260 km per hour and will accommodate 1000 people and 200 cattle in emergency. In normal situation, the shelters will be used for educational, administrative, medical, religious and community activities. Two cyclone shelters will be used for law enforcement activities, hospitals will be set in two centers and two centers will be given to UN representatives, general administration and the Refugee

Relief and Repatriation Commissioner. The other shelters will be used as mosques, super shop and community clinics. Additionally, there will be buildings for the NGOs and international organizations. Spaces have been allocated for a day-care center, orphanage and guest houses.

Each building will accommodate 16 families in 16 rooms. A family made up of four members can live in a room. As per the calculation, a building will accommodate 64 persons and a block will host 768 persons. While the United Nations set the minimum standard 3.5 square meters in an emergency situation, each person in the island will have 3.6 square meters as a living area. In every room, there are four beds, a ceiling fan and a light. Two kitchens with 16 cooking stoves will be shared among 16 families. Each building has six toilets and four bathrooms. Four warehouses will be used to store food and other non-food items.

The island will have a dam, jetty, a meteorological unit and a fire service unit. The security and surveillance of the island will be enhanced with the establishment of a police camp, the installation of 120 cameras and the watchtowers, and construction of perimeter fencing.

## **Electricity facility**

Though the islet is detached from the main land, one does not need to worry about electricity. The entire island has a solar-powered architecture. Solar systems are set up on the rooftops of total 1,440 buildings, including 120 cyclone shelter centers. It is estimated that the buildings have around 52,000 lights. Besides, almost 1000 solar-powered street lights have been set to illuminate the streets at night.



### **Water, Transport and Network Facilities**

The water facility for the refugee community has been introduced here as well. There are two big lakes in the island. However, the ponds, having 5,461 square feet each, will be used as alternative sources for water. A system has been made to store rainwater as well. As for the internal communication, 42km roads have been constructed. Battery-run rickshaw and human haulers can use the road very easily. Network connectivity within the island is not a big issue as the cellular network service will be provided by the two biggest mobile network operators in Bangladesh, Grameenphone and Robi.

#### From Cox's Bazar to Bhasan Char: The need of relocation

As mentioned before, in 2017, renewed violence and atrocities, including reported rape, arson and murder, drove a wave of Rohingya refugee into Bangladesh. Nearly one million Rohingya people made their way to Cox's bazar refugee camps till date.

Kutupalong and Balukhali are the two major camps in Cox's Bazar, hosting a large number of refugees. Quite simply, the camps are hosting refugees beyond its capacity. System mismanagement, ineffective planning, poor water, sanitation and hygiene facilities and other issues lead to the contamination of water and agricultural lands at the camps. The health issue is one of the major concerns in the camp, especially during the outbreak of coronavirus pandemic. Additionally, the expansion of the camps has already resulted in environmental degradation.

Cox's bazar is one of the vulnerable districts in Bangladesh with a high poverty rate. The mass exodus of Rohingya refugee from Myanmar posed economic and security

challenges for this region. The prices of food and transport have increased following the arrival of a large number of refugees. The crisis has also resulted in unfair competition in the job market. Most of the Rohingya refugees are willing to offer work at a low rate, and therefore, they are taking the jobs of the local people. However, these extra number of people not only changed the living cost of this region but also increased crimes in this region.

It is observed that the number of arms and drug-related incidents has sharply increased in Cox's bazar camps over the last three years compared to other crimes. In 2019, the highest number of human-trafficking related crimes and other murders took place in the camps. According to the statistics by Cox's Bazar police, almost 725 criminal cases have been filed against 1,664 Rohingya individuals between August 2017 to August 2020. This displaced group is spotted to involve with robbery, smuggling, rapes, theft, murder, illegal drugs and arms business, and last but not the least, human trafficking. Between January 2019 to July 2020, nearly 100 Rohingya refugee were killed in gunfights when the law enforcement agencies launched crackdown against them for their involvement in drug business, human trafficking, and robbery in camps.

However, it is nearly impossible to curb the criminal activities in the area even with the continued surveillance because the Rohingya people is directly involved with the network of crimes, especially drug smuggling. In Teknaf, the Border Guard Bangladesh seized Yaba (an illegal drugs) worth 36.77 lac taka from Rohingyas. In this region, the highest number cases were filed for the possession of drugs or committing drug-

related crimes. At the same time, the incidents of illegal arms use are taking place in this region. Almost 17 arms cases are recorded in 2020.

The cases of robbery, murder and human trafficking have also increased in the Cox's Bazar district. In order to curb the criminal activities, the Bangladesh government has deployed two Armed Police Battalions in the camps. Additionally, the Bangladesh Army has built wire fences around the camps to reduce the criminal activities. For controlling the crime-related incidents, the government had to stop the spread of information. Therefore, the authorities slashed the internet speed. The humanitarian groups and international organizations were critical of the steps taken by the authorities. But little did they realize the government has taken the necessary steps to strengthen the security in the camp area.

Because of the complete unwillingness of the refugees to go back to Myanmar, the two attempts of repatriating the refugees were failed. The first attempt was made in January 2018 and the second attempt was taken in August 2019. The refugees refused to board buses that would have taken them back to their country. The Rohingya community is only willing to go back if Myanmar government meet their demands. Unless the security, freedom of movement and work opportunities are guaranteed, they do not want to go to Myanmar. Bangladesh can't forcefully send them back to Myanmar because of following the principle of non-refoulment.

Though the repatriation process was failed twice, the Bangladesh government is still trying to bring Myanmar to the discussion table to facilitate the process. Following the pressure from the international community, Myanmar signed a bilateral agreement

with Bangladesh. No major progress concerning the process is observed so far. As Myanmar couldn't secure a conducive situation in the Rakhine state for the dignified return of the Rohingya refugee, it is unlikely to see a sustainable Rohingya repatriation anytime soon.

While working on the process to facilitate repatriation, the government decides to work on the temporary relocation project to improve the living condition of the refugees and build safe housing for them. The government has been trying to mobilize resources and develop comprehensive relocation plan. A healthy and comfortable life is waiting for the Rohingya if they relocate to the island. Now, 22 refugees use a single toilet in the cramped camps of Cox's Bazar. But if they move to Bhashan Char, 11 people will use a toilet.

The island has been developed in such a way that will not only introduce a comfortable living but also make the Rohingya community financially and socially strong. One of the bright sides of the relocation is the Rohingya refugee will be able to access to various means of livelihoods, including fishing, poultry farming, sheep and cattle rearing, cultivation of rice and different crops, handicrafts, carpentry, tailoring and other types of community services. They can set up their own ventures within the territory and start saving money to be economically independent. It is important to mention that the existing camps in Cox's Bazar offer limited scope for livelihood. With 98 percent development of the whole project, the island is ready to ensure a much better livelihood for the Rohingya community.

From the security perspective, the relocation plan of the government is a necessary move to curb the criminal activities in the Cox's bazar district. Appalled by the increasing insecurity, there is an ongoing tension between the Rohingya and host community. Because of the increasing involvement in human-trafficking, illegal use of arms and drugs, robbery, rape and other criminal activities, Rohingya people are now perceived as a threat to the local community. Since the government has taken internal and external security measure in Bhashan Char through the installation of security cameras, perimeter fences, watch tower and police posts, it will be comparatively easy for the law enforcement agencies to monitor the movement of the refugees and control the criminal activities.

### The Criticisms of the Relocation Plan: A Debate over Bhashan Char

The relocation plan has stirred debate over several concerns. Undoubtedly, the plan has some disadvantages. However, it is important to note that the advantages of relocating the Rohingya refugees surpass the disadvantages of such initiative. This is because the government and Bangladesh Navy have made a comprehensive plan while working on the project, addressing each issue accordingly.

The first concern is about the vulnerability of Bhashan Char to natural disaster. A char or coastal island is formed when tidal currents carry a massive amount of sediment in the shallow water. The newly emerged Chars are more susceptible to flooding than the old Chars. Since Bhashan Char emerged only 14 years ago in the Bay of Bengal, this island is still vulnerable to floods, cyclone and storm surge. Also, the area is 10,000 acres at high tide and 15,000 acres at low tide. The Rohingya people fear that

the island may completely wash away with the tidal surge. However, considering the geographical setting, the houses in the Bhashan Char are built at the height of 4 feet for the protection from high tidal waves. Additionally, a three-meter-high flood defense embankment has been set up to save the island from high tidal waves and natural calamities. The cyclone shelters have also been designed in a constructive way. The ground floor of the cyclone shelter is above the ground around four feet. The first floor of the shelter is at the height of 10 feet above the ground.

The island's detachment from the mainland is the second concern. Along with the Rohingya refugees, the humanitarian workers are concerned as to how the refugees will receive supports in emergency condition since the island is disconnected from the main land. The concern has already been taken into consideration. Therefore, two helipads have been constructed, and eight motorboats are kept in the island for any kind of emergency transportation and evacuation.

The third concern is all about standard of living in the island. Aid workers discourage the Rohingya group to move into the island on the fact that they will be cut off from the international organizations and NGOs working in Cox's Bazar for the protection of the refugee by providing food, shelter, education and healthcare. However, it can be said that the aid agencies are thinking of their own interests. As for the healthcare facilities, the cyclone shelters will be used as hospitals and clinics. While working on the project development, the government has designed facilities in order to look after the well-beings of the refugees.

### **Conclusion**

In the wake of security challenges concerning Rohingya refugees, Bangladesh has stepped up to find a feasible solution to ease this crisis. The government has been doing what it can do to reduce the congestion and improve the livelihood of Rohingya despite having inadequate funding and facing failed repatriation process. No matter how hard the government tries to find a durable solution amid rampant poverty, overpopulation problem and poor socio-economic condition, the efforts are met with opposition from the aid agencies citing the communication problem. Though UN has appreciated the efforts of the Bangladesh government for devising an alternative solution, the organization emphasized on undertaking independent assessment to evaluate the safety, sustainability and protection prior to the relocation. The Bhashan Char relocation project is till on hold. If the foreign aid agencies and other entities complicate the relocation plan through opposition, it will be challenging for the government to execute an effective solution. Needless to say, temporary relocation in Bhasan Char island will improve the livelihood of Rohingya refugee, as well as address the ongoing security concerns. Therefore, a cooperation between different groups are expected to facilitate the temporary relocation process for the successful management of the crisis.

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