

Relocating Rohingyas to Bhashan Char: Facts and Facets

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Bangladesh built facilities on Bhashan Char, an island in the Bay of Bengal, with the aim of relieving pressure on densely packed refugee camps in Cox's Bazar district where they are a despised and stateless minority.

The island emerged from the sea about a decade ago which has sustained itself against the disaster prone Bay of Bengal. It covers an area of about 40sq km accessible by boat. The Bangladesh government built 1,440 housing structures to shelter around 100,000 people on the island, as a part of a project started in 2017 to relieve the overcrowded camps in Cox's bazar. The 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. The houses are built, solar panels are set for electricity, biogas fuel system has been introduced for cooking, waste management systems are developed, the cyclone centers are constructed and a mobile network is made available. Now the island is ready to host the refugee communities. The project site has already been developed with 120 plots. Each plot consists of 12 buildings including a cyclone center. Each cyclone center can withstand strong winds of up to 260 kmph and will accommodate 1000 people and 200 cattle in emergency. The island has been developed in a way that will not only introduce a comfortable living but also make the Rohingya community financially and socially empowered.



CFISS STRATEGIC HIGHLIGHTS

The Cox's Bazar camp which already holds about 1 million Rohingyas is close to a situation where it is not feasible to shelter any more refugees due to the cramped space and high density of people. To ensure proper living standards, the government has decided that any new refugee found adrift will be transported directly to Bhashan Char instead of Cox's Bazar.

In May, some 300 Rohingyas, who had been stranded at the sea for several weeks, were rescued by the Bangladesh Navy and taken to the island, where they have been living for five months now. Throughout this period there have been several accusations made by the rescued refugees against the authority as well as the island itself. In order to clarify the allegations, Bangladesh authorities on September 5, arranged a three-day "go-and-see visit" to Bhashan Char for 40 Rohingya refugees, including camp leaders.

After the visit, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a report which stated that the Rohingyas residing on Bhashan Char are anxious to return to the Cox's Bazar camps where their relatives were residing. In sheer desperation they began a hunger strike and made allegations against the Navy regarding how poorly they are being treated and how inefficient the facilities are in Bhashan Char. Amnesty International also reported similar incidents which even included sexual harassment, being huddled up in a small room with inefficient resources such as food, clothes and toilets.

However, Bangladesh Navy denied these claims stating these are completely baseless allegations made to demean them. It is nothing but a desperate attempt by the rescued refugees to go to the mainland camp in Cox's Bazar. The Bangladesh Navy is providing

them everything they need. Rohingyas are the most persecuted population of the world. While every other country turned their backs and refused to take them in, our Navy rescued the group. The Navy also ensured that the infrastructure in question in Bhashan Char is an accommodation made on par with the United Nations standard, it is not a prison. The falsified unrealistic news was also addressed by the Inter Services Public relations (ISPR) which stated that The Bangladesh Navy has been working tirelessly to ensure a smooth life for the forcefully displaced people of Myanmar in Bhashan Char.

Recently, BenarNews published a news report where they provided statements of several Rohingya leaders who were part of the “go-and-see visit” to Bhashan Char. They expressed that the aforementioned allegations they heard were false. Instead they admired the facilities as overall management of the place including the security and safety were commendable. They also stated they were shown around the whole embankment and other installations including the fish farming ponds, residences, mosques, health centers, schools, playgrounds and cemeteries. In addition, they were ecstatic to see the topology which is similar to the coastal villages or riverine areas of Myanmar and motivate some families to shift from the Cox's Bazar Camps.

The International Community based on the HRW Report has been shown a scenario which puts the spotlight upon statements made by rescued, desperate refugees who were homesick. This has created an emotional wave which is portraying the work of the Bangladesh government as violation of human rights. But from the full interviews from the returning camp leaders, it is evident that the idea they have of Bhashan Char

is quite the opposite. There have been many negative reports regarding the NGOs who are creating false and dramatic stories to influence the international community and use it to their advantage. Reports have already been made by the Cox's Bazar authorities against the NGOs that they have violated their terms and conditions which led to many of them being suspended from the camps. There have also been reports of NGOs abusing their connection with the UN and the international community to navigate the aid relief to their advantage. They are creating a different atmosphere in the camps which is more aid and relief based whereas the Bangladesh government is trying to empower them by relocating them to Bhashan Char. These NGOs' true motives can be deemed questionable as they seem to be more focused towards keeping the Rohingya in Cox's Bazar camps and continuing their work there in high facilities that are provided to them instead of working towards the betterment of the Rohingya people.

Bhashan Char is already a far better option than the Cox's Bazar camps stated by DW News journalist Naomi Conrad who visited the island back in 2019. Moving to Bhashan Char would be a better solution to protect the huddled up Rohingya refugees living in camps from the second wave of COVID-19 which is predicted to hit by the end of November. Bhashan Char promises a lot more space and a hygienic environment for the refugees as well. The focus of the international media needs to move away from false sentimental statements and address the issue from all perspectives especially when the community leaders themselves are commending the work Bangladesh government has done for them and showing their willingness to move to Bhashan Char.