



Shelter from the Storm - Rohingya refugees continue to need a safe haven

February 2021

From its beginnings, the Hebrew story was of a people in exile, of foreigners resident in foreign lands suffering oppression and persecution. Their history of exile and exodus, particularly the escape from slavery in Egypt, revealed to the Israelites the nature of their God and defined their relationship with God and other people. Throughout the Older Testament, God is identified as the God who cares for the exiled and the persecuted refugee. Hospitality to the stranger became one of the most potent moral forces in ancient Israel.

The Christian story continued to uphold God's call to solidarity with the homeless and displaced. Mary and Joseph were forced to take Jesus and hide in Egypt as Herod sought to kill the baby Jesus. Jesus travelled through strange lands, choosing to spend time and share meals with the most marginalised and oppressed people of his society. He called on people to love their enemies, give all they had to those in poverty, and offer hospitality to strangers. He taught that faithful obedience to God was marked by such deeds. The way people responded to strangers and those in poverty identified them as people of faith.

Thus, the Uniting Church in Australia has understood that part of its missional call is to seek justice for people seeking asylum and refugees.

Since late August 2017, more than one million Rohingya Muslims fled Rakhine State in Myanmar to escape the large-scale campaign of ethnic cleansing carried out by the military. The atrocities committed by Myanmar military in August and September 2017, included mass killings, rapes, and widespread arson, amounting to crimes against humanity. In some cases, the Myanmar soldiers brought shovels to dig mass graves and acid to burn off the dead's faces and hands so the bodies could not be easily recognised. Buddhist neighbours in villages often joined in the massacres of Rohingya.

The military, assisted by local extremists, massacred an estimated 13,000 Rohingya.

Most of the Rohingya refugees fled to neighbouring Bangladesh. Over 900,000 refugees have been housed in a settlement in Cox's Bazar. Around half of them are children. It is positive that the Government of Bangladesh has provided sanctuary for the Rohingya refugees. However, it is also clear that it has done so with some reluctance. For example, the shelters for Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar are only allowed to be constructed from bamboo and tarps. Many have collapsed, and in January 2021 there was a fire that destroyed over 500 shelters.

In December 2020 the Government of Bangladesh began to transfer Rohingya refugees to the island of Bhasan Char.

Human Rights Watch reported speaking to refugees who were listed to be transferred to Bhasan Char who stated they had not agreed to do so. In early December, 1,642 Rohingya refugees were transferred to Bhasan Char. A further 1,800 refugees were transferred to Bhasan Char at the end of December.

Bhasan Char is vulnerable to cyclones and prone to flooding. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees opposed the transfer of Rohingya refugees from Cox's Bazar to Bhasan Char. They stated they had not been invited to make any technical assessments of the suitability of Bhasan Char as a location to place refugees.

There have been reports that Rohingya refugees on Bhasan Char have had their freedom of movement restricted and their mobile phones confiscated. Refugees that went on a hunger strike were subjected to physical assaults by Bangladeshi security forces.

Media reports indicated that the Government of Bangladesh plans to relocate up to 100,000 Rohingya refugees to Bhasan Char.



In November 2020, the NGO Fortify Rights issued a report 'Torture in my Mind' that found high levels of mental health problems among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. The research suggested up to 89% of Rohingya refugees reported experiencing symptoms indicative of depression, 84% symptoms indicative of emotional stress and 61% symptoms indicative of PTSD.

What you can do

Write polite and respectful letters to:

Senator The Hon. Marise Payne
Minister for Foreign Affairs
PO Box 6100
Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Salutation: Dear Minister



Points to make in your letter:

- Thank the Australian Government for the assistance it has so far provided to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.
- Express concern that Rohingya refugees are being forcibly transferred to the island of Bhasan Char which is vulnerable to cyclones and prone to flooding.
- Also, note reports that there are inadequate health care facilities on Bhasan Char.
- Ask that the Australian Government request that the Bangladesh Government not transfer Rohingya refugees to Bhasan Char island unless such transfers are genuinely voluntary and not until the UN High Commissioner for Refugees has conducted a technical assessment of suitability of Bhasan Char to house refugees.
- Ask what financial and other assistance the Australian Government has recently allocated to support Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Ask how much of this funding assists with mental health services for the refugees.

Also write to:

His Excellency Mr Mohammad Sufiur RAHMAN
High Commissioner for Bangladesh
High Commission for the People's Republic of Bangladesh
57 Culgoa Circuit
O'Malley, ACT 2606

Salutation: Your Excellency

E-mail: hoc.canberra@mofa.gov.bd

Points to make in your letter:

- Thank the Government of Bangladesh for providing a safe haven for hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees forced to flee Myanmar to escape a campaign of mass murder by the Myanmar military.
- However, express concern at reports that Rohingya refugees are being forcibly transferred to Bhasan Char, which is vulnerable to cyclones and prone to flooding.
- Also, note reports that there are inadequate health care facilities on Bhasan Char.
- Ask that the Bangladesh Government not transfer Rohingya refugees to Bhasan Char unless such transfers are genuinely voluntary.
- Ask that the Government of Bangladesh allow the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to do a technical assessment of Bhasan Char's suitability to house refugees. Ask that all further transfers of Rohingya to Bhasan Char be suspended until such an evaluation is completed and considered.

Photo credit – The photo above is courtesy of Paintings/Shutterstock.com