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CONFLICT DYNAMICS BETWEEN THE HOST COMMUNITY AND ROHINGYA REFUGEES IN BANGLADESH

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION STUDY

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*Focus Group Discussion Study: Conflict Dynamics Between the Host Community and
Rohingya Refugees In Bangladesh*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In August 2017, over 700,000 Rohingya Muslims fled into Bangladesh's southeastern district of Cox's Bazar from neighboring Burma. The influx of refugees has led to economic and environmental strain on the host community of Bangladeshis who live around the camps. In addition, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and organized crime are creating violence inside and outside the camps. Amid these challenges, a small number of research studies have documented rising tension in the host community toward the refugees.

In December 2021, the International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted a public opinion study in two Bangladeshi host communities and in two Rohingya refugee camps near these communities. The study found growing hostility among Bangladeshis toward the refugees; in contrast, Rohingya are eager for peaceful relations with Bangladeshis and to return home once it is safe.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To understand the views, experiences, and sources of conflict between Bangladeshis and Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, IRI conducted a representative survey and six focus group discussions (FGDs) with Bangladeshis in two areas of the host community—Hnila Union and Whykong Union—which are adjacent to large Rohingya camps. In addition, IRI conducted six FGDs in the Rohingya camps that abutted these communities. The Bangladeshi research firm Innovative Research and Consultancy (IRC) carried out data collection, which was overseen by IRI's Center for Insights in Survey Research. This report provides the key findings from the FGDs.¹ The findings from the survey have been published separately.²

In the Bangladeshi host communities of Hnila and Whykong, three FGDs were held in each location. The FGDs had forty-eight FGD participants including young men and young women (18-35) from both locations;

adult men (36 and above) from Whykong; and adult women from Hnila. In the Rohingya camps (camp 22 and 26), three FGDs were held in each location. The 48 Rohingya FGD participants included young men and young women from both camps; adult men from camp 22; and adult women from camp 26. The FGDs with Bangladeshi and Rohingya were segregated by age and gender.

This FGD study captures the perceptions of Bangladeshi and Rohingya participants. IRI does not endorse the views expressed during the discussions and did not independently confirm the factual claims made by the participants. Given the small sample of the population that has participated in this study, the views expressed in the FGDs cannot be generalized to whole population. This report's findings are suggestive of broader political dynamics that need further investigation.

¹ Quotes cited in this report were translated from Bangla and have been minimally edited to ensure clarity. As much as possible, the English translations preserved the original syntax, word choice, and grammar. The FGDs were conducted in a local dialect of Bangla spoken by both Bangladeshis in Cox's Bazar and understood by Rohingya. A Bangladeshi moderated the FGDs.

² International Republican Institute, "Community-level Survey on Perceptions of Rohingya Refugees and Social Cohesion in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, December 2021," June 16, 2022, <https://www.iri.org/resources/community-level-survey-on-perceptions-of-rohingya-refugees-and-social-cohesion-in-coxs-bazar-bangladesh-december-2021/>.

KEY FINDINGS FROM HOST COMMUNITY FGDS

Bangladeshis view Rohingya impact negatively

The FGD data indicate that negative views about the refugees are widely held in the host community. Nearly all FGD participants said that their lives are worse off since the refugees arrived. Bangladeshis in the area report difficultly finding jobs, rising food prices, increasing crime, and declining environmental conditions.

“ Nothing but bad has happened to us since the Rohingya came.”

Young woman from Hnila

“ We feel suffocated.”

Adult man from Whykong

Bangladeshis are concerned about crime and violence inside and outside the camps

Many FGD participants noted violence and illegal activity increasing as a result of the camps. Participants said that drug trafficking and human trafficking are increasing. They claimed that the drug “yaba,” which is a methamphetamine produced in Burma, is being transported through the camps and into Bangladesh. News reports have linked this drug trade to corruption among Bangladeshi government officials and police members who profit from allowing the trade.³

“ There are many in our area who do the yaba business with Rohingyas...Yaba is brought here from the Rohingya camp.”

Young man from Whykong

Bangladeshis have soured on international aid to the refugees

Many FGD participants argued that the Rohingya have received sufficient aid from the international community and Bangladesh government. Most participants said that when the Rohingya arrived, they personally provided assistance to the refugees including food and shelter. Now, most participants said they would not provide further aid. Several participants said that Rohingya have so much aid that they sell off leftover goods to Bangladeshis.

³ For details see: Gavin Kelleher, “Smokescreen Rohingya: the bad actors exploiting a growing refugee crisis,” *South China Morning Post*, December 26, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/2179116/smokescreen-rohingya-drug-smugglers-human-traffickers-and-corrupt>; “Fake NIDs for Rohingyas: ACC files cases against 17 people,” *The Business Standard*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/crime/fake-nids-rohingyas-acc-files-cases-against-17-people-261388>.

“ I will not help them anymore because they get everything they need now.”

Young man from Whykong

“ If they leave, we will have fewer people here and we will be able to live as beautifully as before.”

Young woman from Hnila

Bangladeshis want Rohingya removed from the area

Nearly all FGD participants supported removing the refugees from Cox's Bazar. While many participants wanted to ensure Rohingya safety in Burma prior to their return, a large number said they should be sent back to Burma immediately. Among participants, there was nearly universal support for sending the refugees to Bhasan Char island, which is a remote island off the coast of Bangladesh that humanitarian groups have criticized as unsafe for refugees.

Bangladeshis are frustrated with government responsiveness

Most FGD participants expressed discontent with government services and the responsiveness of elected officials. Participants said that politicians primarily come to their area only during elections and disappear afterward. This leaves few mechanisms for accountability.

“ Whom shall I complain to except Allah?”

Young woman from Hnila

KEY FINDINGS FROM ROHINGYA FGDS

Rohingya speak positively about relations with Bangladeshis

In contrast with most Bangladeshi FGD participants, refugees cited positive interactions with the host community. Rohingya FGD participants described their relationship with Bangladeshis as brotherly and cordial. The Rohingya also said they were grateful to be in Bangladesh and appreciated the help of the local community.

“ We are with Bangladeshis; we are in Bangladesh. We do not quarrel with them.”

Rohingya woman

Rohingya are eager to go home but not to Bhasan Char

Among Bangladeshis, conspiracies have emerged that Rohingya seek to establish their own state in Bangladesh. In contrast, the Rohingya FGD participants are eager to return to Burma once it is safe. However, in the meantime, no FGD participants wanted to go to Bhasan Char, which they view as too dangerous.

“We can see our country from here. The heart breaks for our country.”

Rohingya man

“We do not want to go...It's better to eat poison than to go to Bhasan Char.”

Rohingya woman

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