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Rohingya refugees say no return to Myanmar without equal rights: Oxfam report

Rohingya refugees interviewed by Oxfam in Bangladesh say they will not go back to Myanmar until their safety can be guaranteed and they have equal rights, including being able to work and travel freely, according to a report released today.

The report, *I still don't feel safe to go home: Voices of Rohingya refugees*, found Rohingya refugees are so deeply traumatised by their experiences, including rape and seeing loved ones killed, that they say they would commit suicide if forcibly returned before their safety can be guaranteed.

Refugees are unwilling to return without these guarantees despite reporting feeling unsafe at night in the overcrowded, makeshift settlements in Bangladesh, with a very real fear of kidnapping and sexual abuse.

The report is the result of interviews with more than 200 Rohingya refugees living in makeshift camps in Bangladesh.

Fatima Sultan*, a 20-year-old refugee, said: "I want to go back to my home – when we are treated as citizens, when there is no violence, when women are not tortured and kidnapped, when at last we can be free".

Sanjida Sajjad* added: "If we are forced to go back we will set ourselves on fire".

Bangladesh and Myanmar recently agreed to begin repatriating Rohingya refugees at the end of January. Oxfam has warned that the conditions for people to return safely and voluntarily are not yet in place and that the UN should play a lead role in any repatriation process, with humanitarian aid allowed to reach all who need it.

Paolo Lubrano, Oxfam's Asia humanitarian manager, said: "People we talked to were incredibly traumatised by what they had been through and now face new threats in the camps, from trafficking to sexual abuse. The fact that many refugees – particularly women – said they would rather kill themselves than return now shows the urgent need for a real and lasting solution to the decades-long oppression of Rohingya people.

"The international community has collectively failed generations of Rohingya while they have been brutally attacked and systematically discriminated against. Instead of standing by while crimes against humanity go unchecked, the UN and world leaders should take their share of responsibility and work with the Myanmar and Bangladesh governments to find a durable resolution to this crisis, through diplomacy, emergency relief and development support.

"The Bangladesh Government has generously welcomed in the Rohingya - it should now recognise them all as refugees so they can receive the support they need and remove administrative barriers that are hampering the humanitarian response."

Oxfam is calling on the Myanmar authorities to act to end the violence and implement the recommendations of the Kofi Annan-led Rakhine Commission report, including ensuring that all people in Myanmar have equal rights. Returns need to be safe and voluntary, with guaranteed freedom of movement. Independent investigations into human rights violations are essential, with those responsible brought to justice, as well as compensation for lost land.

Oxfam Australia's Chief Executive Helen Szoke, who visited the refugee camps in Bangladesh recently, said the current crisis, whereby more than 626,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh in 100 days - was a tipping point that should spur the international community to find a permanent solution.

"There are now close to a million Rohingya in Bangladesh – more than in Myanmar," Dr Szoke said. "However, the UN appeal for funds to provide vital aid for the next three months is still short by USD\$280 million (AUD\$365 million).

"The Australian Government has responded generously to the crisis so far, contributing AUD\$30 million for the first stage of the response. But with the crisis likely to go on for years, it is now time for donors to support longer term needs. Oxfam also calls on the Australian Government to urge the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh not to start the returns process until it can be assured that returns will be safe and voluntary."

For interviews, more information or a copy of the briefing paper, which includes more refugees' testimonies, please contact Dylan Quinnell on 0450 668 350 or dylanq@oxfam.org.au

Oxfam spokespeople are available for interview, in Cox's Bazar, Melbourne and other locations.

Footage: a mother who gave birth shortly after arriving in the refugee camp (available with and without titles)
<https://wordsandpictures.oxfam.org.uk/?r=110979&k=425ebf71df>

Photos of Rohingya refugees: <https://wordsandpictures.oxfam.org.uk/?c=34707&k=131de40e1b>

Notes to editors

*All names have been changed

Oxfam's report, "*I still don't feel safe to go home*": *Voices of Rohingya refugees*, is available here -
<https://oxf.am/2l4a2nW>

Oxfam spoke to 208 Rohingya people about their needs, hopes and fears, through 28 in-depth interviews, and 23 focus group discussions involving 180 people. The interviews and discussions took place in Kutupalong and Balukhali refugee camps between September and November 2017.

All the refugees Oxfam spoke to said they felt unsafe at night. More than half of the groups reported having seen girls and women being approached by strangers – some of whom their families then lost track of. Many women were afraid of getting lost in the camps and felt unable to leave their tents without appropriate clothing. More lighting, signposting and designated safe spaces are needed in the camps to protect vulnerable people from harm.

Oxfam is providing aid including clean water and toilets, and has so far reached more than 185,000 people.

Oxfam is working in several camps and settlements in Ukhia and Teknaf sub-districts of Cox's Bazar, installing water points, toilets and showers and providing soap and other essentials to Rohingya refugees. Oxfam is developing a pilot project to reach more people with nutritious food via an innovative e-voucher system, working with local food sellers. So far, Oxfam has reached at least 185,000 people and is planning to reach more than 200,000.