

Issue Brief

Caught Between Desperation and Danger: Why Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh Continue to Risk Perilous Sea Journeys

**No. (5/2026)
Humanitarian Sector**



Rohingya refugees wait for rescue aboard a boat anchored off the coast of Aceh Province, Indonesia, in October 2024 (Photo: Chaideer Mahyuddin/AFP)

19 June 2026

1. Introduction

(a) Main Focus	This report examines the factors and circumstances driving Rohingya refugees to leave refugee camps in Bangladesh and undertake dangerous journeys to other countries. It explores the humanitarian, socioeconomic, and security conditions within the camps, as well as the motivations behind onward migration despite the significant risks involved.
(b) Geographic Scope	Rohingya refugee camps are located in Bangladesh, particularly those in the Cox's Bazar region and surrounding areas hosting displaced Rohingya populations.
(c) Time Period	March 2024 – April 2026.

In 2017, under the pretext of “clearance operations,” the Myanmar military committed atrocities that escalated to the level of genocide, forcing hundreds of thousands of Rohingya from the northern Rakhine State, Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships to flee to neighboring Bangladesh. Currently, these refugees are dependent almost entirely on international organizations, including the United Nations and the Government of Bangladesh, for their basic necessities, education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and physical security. While the humanitarian aid provided barely meets their necessities, the Rohingya refugees face strict prohibitions against legal employment within Bangladesh. Furthermore, they are restricted from constructing residential shelters and establishing school facilities.

On the other hand, international organizations are facing a severe funding crisis, forcing them to reduce essential aid for food, education, and healthcare for the millions of Rohingya living in the refugee camps. Consequently, the Bangladeshi government has implemented restrictive measures along the border to prevent Rohingya refugees from crossing.

Nevertheless, the renewed clashes between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military have driven a fresh influx of Rohingya across the border. The Bangladesh government does not officially recognise the Rohingya as "refugees" and instead categorises them as "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals" (FDMN).

However, as they face multifaceted challenges and restrictive living conditions in the country, they are increasingly seeking ways to flee Bangladesh for third countries, intending to resettle there.

This study is primarily based on reports from regional media and human rights organizations, statements from international bodies including the United Nations, official releases from the governments of both countries, and interviews conducted directly by our Centre for Arakan Studies (CAS).

2. Summary

5th May 2024

(a) Human Traffickers Extort Up to £3,000 per Fleeing Rohingya

Amidst the proliferation of human trafficking networks, Rohingya refugees are facing high mortality rates, severe torture, and systemic abuse during perilous maritime journeys. As conditions within the Bangladeshi refugee camps deteriorate daily, these individuals are risking everything they own to flee to Southeast Asia in search of freedom and employment opportunities. However, upon beginning their journey, human traffickers exploit their desperation, extorting up to approximately [£3,000](#) per refugee.

October 19, 2024

(b) Rohingya Found Dead During Escape from Myanmar

Monks outside a monastery in a remote area in southern Thailand found a group of Rohingya refugees in distress on October 17 and alerted the police. At least [10](#) were in critical condition, many unconscious. Two were dead. Survivors were taken to hospitals in Chumphon province, south of Bangkok. One is reported to have since died.

24th October 2024

(c) The Rohingya community has been facing the gravest threats since 2017

Newly arrived Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh need urgent access to food, shelter and medical assistance after enduring the worst violence against their communities since the Myanmar military-led campaign in 2017, Amnesty International stated.

New arrivals in particular expressed concern that they were unable to [register](#) with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to access essential support. As a result, many are going without meals and are afraid to venture out for fear of deportation, even when in need of medical care.

4th April 2025

(d) Myanmar confirms 180,000 Rohingya eligible to return, Bangladesh says

Myanmar has confirmed that [180,000](#) Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh since fleeing their homeland are eligible to return, according to the Bangladeshi government.

Shafiqur Rahman, a Rohingya refugee, told Reuters: “After so many years, they have only verified 180,000 people. It feels like nothing more than an illusion. We want a genuine solution.” He further stated, “Myanmar must unconditionally repatriate everyone, rather than selectively accepting only certain individuals among us. They must also recognize all our rightful rights, including our citizenship. Without these guarantees, this process holds absolutely no meaning for us.”

24 May 2025

(e) UN fears 427 Rohingya perished at sea in search of safe shelter

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) expressed concern on Friday that 427 Rohingya may have perished at sea after two boat tragedies off the coast of Myanmar earlier this month in search of safe refuge. Nearly [1 in 5 people attempting sea movements](#) in the region have been reported dead or missing in 2025, making the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal among the deadliest in the world.

20th June 2025

(f) Destabilisation of Refugee camps in Bangladesh could lead to a new exodus of Rohingyas

Over the years, some Rohingyas have been able to leave [Bangladesh for Malaysia](#) or other destinations. This includes youths escaping conscription into insurgent groups and girls who are sent to “marry” Rohingya men overseas.

19th August 2025

(g) 95% of Rohingya families in Bangladesh depend on humanitarian aid

Over 95% of Rohingya living in Bangladesh depend entirely on humanitarian aid for basic needs, including food, healthcare, and education. As of June 4, the United Nations’ 2025 Joint Response Plan had received less than [22 percent](#) of its required funding. The UN has warned that without additional funding to cover the shortfalls, it will no longer be possible to meet even the most fundamental needs in the Cox’s Bazar refugee camps. This would include closing most Rohingya schools and suspending both primary healthcare services and food distributions in the camps.

11th September 2025

(h) Border Guard Bangladesh Arrests 12 Traffickers and Rescues 111 Malaysia-Bound Individuals

Lieutenant Colonel Ashiqur Rahman, Commander of the Teknaf-based BGB Battalion 2, [stated](#), “Those arrested are active members of a human trafficking syndicate. They were identified and apprehended following thorough investigations. Our intelligence indicates that they are directly implicated in illicit trafficking operations, moving individuals from Bangladesh to Myanmar, and subsequently transporting them illegally by sea to Malaysia.”

24th September 2025

(i) Border Instability Halts Rakhine-Bangladesh Border Trade

Rakhine-Bangladesh border trade operations have ground to [a complete halt](#) due to recent, escalating tensions between Bangladesh and the Arakan Army (AA). According to local merchants, the suspension of trade relations was triggered by an incident in which Bangladeshi fishing boats allegedly killed an Arakan Army coastal guard officer within Rakhine territorial waters. This incident was further compounded by mutual allegations of drug trafficking and human smuggling from both sides, alongside direct clashes with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in the border region.

5th November, 2025

(j) Bangladesh Joint Forces Rescue 25 Human Trafficking Victims at the Border Ahead of Malaysia Transit

During a joint operation conducted by the Bangladesh Coast Guard and Navy near the Myanmar border in Teknaf Township, authorities intercepted [25 individuals](#), including children, who were being prepared for illicit maritime transit to Malaysia. Two human traffickers were apprehended at the scene. Reports indicate that the traffickers had been holding the victims in captivity, subjecting them to torture while extorting financial ransoms from their families.

10th November 2025

(k) Migrant boat tragedy highlights worsening plight of Rohingya

Amnesty International’s Myanmar Researcher Joe Freeman [stated](#), “In Myanmar, Rohingya civilians face food shortages, forced labour, arbitrary detention and restrictions on movement while they remain trapped in a conflict between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army (AA) that has driven more Rohingya into camps in Bangladesh.”

Meanwhile, US funding cuts have led to shortages in shelter, education services and aid in the Bangladesh camps, putting additional strain on communities and further compelling people to seek the dangerous option of fleeing by boat.

1st April 2026

(l) Bangladesh provides Myanmar with refugee data for verification amid repatriation delays

Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dr Khalilur Rahman [stated](#) on March 30 that information on over 800,000 Muslim refugees has been sent to the Myanmar junta for verification to facilitate repatriation. Currently, around 1.4 million Muslim refugees remain in Bangladesh, sheltered in camps in Cox's Bazar and on Bhasan Char Island. Healthcare services are deteriorating, and crime rates are particularly high in the camps. The World Food Programme provides 12 USD per person per month in food assistance, but has announced that aid will be reduced starting this month.

21st April 2026

(m) Scarce food, bleak futures spur Rohingya refugees to gamble with death at sea

The U.N. Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported that nearly 900 Rohingya were missing or confirmed dead in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal in 2025, making it the deadliest year on record for regional sea crossings, with more than 6,500 attempted. According to the agency, between January and mid-April this year, more than 2,800 Rohingya attempted such journeys. “The Rohingya population is very young and aspires to a better life, but that hope is increasingly turning into desperation,” [said](#) Astrid Castelein, a UNHCR official.

22nd April 2026

(n) The Andaman Sea Tragedy: Why Rohingya Youth Continue to Risk Death to Leave the Camps

The Rohingya population [has endured](#) years of forced displacement, largely confined within refugee camps where legal recognition remains unresolved and durable solutions remain absent. Life in these camps is not only materially constrained but structurally limited. There is no legal access to formal employment, no sustainable pathway to higher education or professional development, and no credible framework for either repatriation or integration.

April 24, 2026

(o) Myanmar and Bangladesh Ranked among the Top [10 Countries](#) Facing the Most Severe Global Food Crises

According to a United Nations report released on Friday, Myanmar and Bangladesh are ranked among the top ten countries experiencing the world's most severe food crises.

27th April 2026

(p) Rohingya camps see rise in trafficking despite aid efforts

Human trafficking in Rohingya refugee camps in southern Bangladesh is rising despite years of humanitarian intervention, exposing persistent gaps in law enforcement, legal access, and protection systems for one of the world's most vulnerable displaced populations. Their stateless status, movement restrictions, and limited economic opportunities have created conditions that traffickers exploit, particularly targeting women and children. According to the 2025 Anti-Trafficking Working Group report, victims increased by [nearly 29%](#) compared to the previous year. Women and girls account for 33% of victims, while a quarter are children under the age of 18.

May 2026

(q) Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh Should Be Granted the Right to Work

Granting refugees the legal right to work is a critical step toward improving their mental health and psychosocial well-being. Despite hosting a massive displaced population in highly confined camps, Bangladesh is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and currently prohibits refugees from formal employment. Studies indicate high rates of depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and suicidal ideation among the refugees, conditions exacerbated by chronic unemployment and a complete reliance on dwindling humanitarian aid. [Research](#) demonstrates that access to employment mitigates mental health issues by fostering self-reliance and restoring personal dignity.

To address this, pragmatic steps have been proposed, including training refugees in household-based artisanal industries, establishing joint garment factories where both refugees and local host communities can work together to promote social cohesion, and developing community-based mental health support networks.

3. Findings

1. In 2025 alone, nearly 900 Rohingya individuals died or went missing at sea, marking the highest regional casualty rate on record. For instance, in October 2024, a group of refugees was discovered in dire condition near a monastery in southern Thailand, which included the bodies of two deceased Rohingya individuals. According to data provided by the United Nations, approximately one in five individuals who attempt these journeys end up dead or missing. Between January and April 2026, over 2,800 individuals fled via these routes, indicating that the tragic trend of fatalities is highly likely to persist throughout the current year.

2. Within the refugee camps, 95% of the Rohingya rely entirely on international aid for their basic needs, including food, healthcare, and education. Meanwhile, the United Nations itself is

facing severe funding challenges. Furthermore, U.S. budget cuts have halted shelter maintenance and educational services across the camps. Although the World Food Programme provides only \$12 per person per month, leaving refugees struggling to survive, it has announced further aid reductions starting from April 2026.

3. According to a 2025 report by the Anti-Trafficking Working Group, the number of trafficking victims increased by nearly 29 percent compared to the previous year. Among those trafficked, women and girls account for 33 percent, while a quarter of the victims are children under the age of 18. Human traffickers extort up to £3,000 per refugee, frequently abducting individuals and subjecting them to torture to demand ransom from their families.

4. However, the Rohingya remain unwilling to return without guaranteed citizenship rights, physical security, and voluntary resettlement conditions. Although the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh stated in April 2026 that data on over 800,000 refugees had been submitted to the Myanmar military junta for verification, the repatriation process remains stalled.

5. These mental health crises are severely exacerbated by chronic unemployment and a total reliance on rapidly diminishing humanitarian assistance. Experts propose that access to employment can mitigate these psychological issues by fostering self-reliance and restoring personal dignity.

4. Analysis

By this upcoming August, it will have been exactly nine years since hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees were forced to flee to Bangladesh due to the brutal military operations launched by the Myanmar armed forces in 2017. Unlike previous exoduses in 1978 and the 1990s, the current crisis is unprecedented in both its massive scale and its prolonged duration.

More importantly, unlike previous exoduses, the current crisis involves ongoing legal proceedings against the Myanmar government and military leadership in international courts, representing a concerted effort to achieve justice and accountability through international law. Furthermore, the situation on the ground has shifted significantly; the Arakan Army (AA) now exercises territorial control over the region previously held by the Myanmar military. Consequently, the repatriation process for refugees has become far more complex than in any prior period.

Based on international experience, there are three primary durable solutions to address mass displacement crises: 1) voluntary repatriation, 2) local integration, and 3) third-country resettlement. Currently, the Western international community, the United Nations, and the host nation, Bangladesh, focus on repatriation as the primary path. However, given the deep-rooted systemic obstacles to a safe return, many experts argue that the second and third options should also be considered. Specifically, efforts should concurrently focus on alleviating the refugees' immediate plight by granting them employment opportunities within Bangladesh, equipping them with the necessary skills for resettlement in third countries seeking labor influxes, and safely paving a secure path toward eventual repatriation.

To facilitate a safe return of populations to the northern Rakhine townships, a pragmatic solution must be pursued through tangible compromises and concrete guarantees among key stakeholders. This requires securing legal and rights-based protections from the Naypyidaw government, which maintains centralized authority. Concurrently, it demands realistic negotiations and assurances between the Government of Dhaka and the Arakan administration, which exercises de facto control on the ground.

About Center for Arakan Studies

The Center for Arakan Studies is an independent, non-partisan research organization established in December 2021 by journalists, political analysts, researchers, and social workers. The Center aims to enhance understanding of Arakan affairs by publishing rigorous research on human rights conditions, political, economic, and social developments in Arakan, as well as issues related to Arakan within Myanmar and internationally. The Center produces policy briefs and monthly reports on topics related to Arakan, which are published through its website and various publications.

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