

How well prepared is Cox's Bazar for both COVID-19 and the monsoon season?

*With the first few cases of COVID-19 reported in Cox's Bazar, and with the monsoon season fast approaching, how well prepared are Rohingya Refugees for the next few months, asks **Arkoprabho Hazra (Independent Researcher, India)**.*

"We are extremely concerned that there will be a new humanitarian crisis in the district if a cyclone hits while we try to contain the COVID-19 outbreak", [said the Deputy Chief of Mission for IOM Bangladesh](#), Manuel Pereira, on 19 May.

The global spread of COVID-19 has been rampant, adversely affecting the Global South, as well as the Global North. So far, [COVID-19 has resulted](#) in the death of more than 250,000 people and has affected more than 5 million people around the world.

Vulnerable communities are expected to be particularly hit during this epidemic, and the Rohingya Refugees currently surviving in Cox's Bazar, are one such vulnerable population. As of now, there have been [five confirmed cases of COVID-19](#) within the Rohingya Refugee camp, and the fear among the people of the camp only keeps increasing. One case [reported in the vicinity](#) of the camps last month was enough to make the entire humanitarian community aware that it wasn't too late before the virus entered the camps. Apart from this, the upcoming Amphan cyclone has been termed as the '[crisis on top of crisis](#)' for the Rohingyas at Cox's Bazar. But how prepared are the humanitarian agencies on the ground to tackle the spread of COVID-19 along with handling the most difficult monsoon season set to plague the camps in Cox's Bazar?

Current situation in the refugee camps

The refugee camps are in no way well-prepared for COVID-19. Firstly, the camps are densely cramped in very small areas, housing around 8 to 10 people in one sheltered house. At a time when one of the vital measures to tackle the COVID-19 situation is to practice social distancing and self-isolation, the characteristics of these refugee settlements make it very difficult to adopt such measures.

There has also been a severe lack of information available to people in camps. Human Rights Watch, in a recent [article](#) mentioned how restrictions on internet and phone services have expedited the spread of misinformation in the camps. Refugees have said that they think people who report symptoms of COVID-19 could be taken away and killed. Due to these appalling conditions, several international organisations have asked to [lift such internet restrictions](#) during the pandemic.

Something else of huge concern is the current COVID-19 response framework seems to have innumerable flaws when looking at measures being taken for the older Rohingya Refugee population. We all are well aware that the most critical or vulnerable demographic to this virus are older people, and it seems like this factor has been overlooked in the camps. According to [Matt Wells \(Amnesty International\)](#), humanitarian organisations fail to reach out to older men and women with basic information about what is going on and how to be safe. This is not anything new. In 2019, Amnesty International published an [article](#) on how humanitarian assistance falls short for older Rohingya men and women who are not able to access basic services — health care, sanitation, food and water.

Monsoon preparedness at refugee camps amidst the spread of COVID-19

A recent World Health Organisation (WHO) [situation report of 26 March](#) is one of the major sources of detail of what measures are being taken to respond to the spread of COVID-19 inside the camps. Through this report we are made aware about how a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) of COVID-19 surveillance has been established and is currently being followed by all agencies, working in the camps. Such an unprecedented situation also takes a huge toll on people's mental health, owing to which, the WHO, as a part of the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Working Group, had trained 40 psychologists and counsellors, until 21 March. Along with this, the WHO has been carrying out webinars and training workshops for medical, as well as non-medical workers. According to the report, the major concern lies in the area of sample testing, wherein the samples collected from the health facilities in the camp, for their assessment will have to be sent to Dhaka, which delays the entire process of sample testing.

Apart from the general measures being taken for the COVID-19 situation, humanitarian organisations on the ground continue to take measures for the upcoming monsoon season, as well as measures to tackle the imminent cyclone threat. But, [according to UN High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\) spokesperson, Andrej Mahecic](#), due to COVID-19, a lot of measures that are usually in place for monsoon preparations have been heavily affected due to the deferral of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) efforts, including slope stabilisation work and the improvement of drainage systems. Simultaneously, the relocation of refugees residing in areas of high-risk flooding and landslides have also been hindered, along with delay in delivering essential supplies to due COVID-19 lockdowns in place.

Despite the drawbacks, humanitarian organisations in the camps are trying to cater to the most critical situations by distributing tie-down kits to help the sustenance of refugee shelters against high winds, in addition to keeping the Emergency Preparedness and Response Teams (EPRT) in standby, to operate in situations of extreme weather conditions.

The Protection Working Group (PWG), in collaboration with the UNHCR and, Age and Disability Working Group [carried out two online training sessions for](#) people at the camps that emphasised the specific needs to strengthen the response to monsoon and cyclone during this pandemic. Along with this, the interagency emergency response teams, known as the [Protection Emergency Response Units \(PERU\) have also been activated by](#) the PWG to help in COVID-19 response during the monsoon season.

Currently, in preparation against the Amphan cyclone, volunteers are providing day and night [early warnings to the community through loudspeakers at](#) mosques for early action and strengthening shelters, across all 34 camps. At the same time, several [emergency preparedness meetings are taking place for](#) the Cyclone Preparedness Programme, involving different stakeholders at the camps.

Looking ahead

As discussed above, the destruction of sanitation facilities will largely disrupt proper sanitation methods. At the same time, the demolition of several houses during the monsoons will reduce the chances of practicing social distancing and self-isolation. At such times, [recommendations of](#) the ISCG from last year — that monsoon contingency plans should incorporate the risk scenario of the flooding of Naf River and strengthen area-based monsoon responses — would be very significant and should be implemented correctly.

It is also essential to remember that several humanitarian organisations are working at the camps to tackle COVID-19 while preparing for the upcoming monsoon season, thus the support to these organisations to aid and help the refugees will also be essential, through individual contributions, to enhance their responses in the camps.

As of now, any special plan or framework for monsoon response, integrated with the COVID-19 perspective, has not been finalised for the Rohingya Refugee camps by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). With the monsoon season fast approaching it is time that such frameworks are put in place because, without such plans, the safeguarding of an already vulnerable population will not be guaranteed.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: Palm Trees. Credit: [Dimitrisvetsikas1969, Pixabay](#).