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Conflict Dynamics between Bangladeshi Host Communities and Rohingya Refugees

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Refugees from Myanmar's Rakhine State line up to register near a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, on September 26, 2017. (Photo by Tomas Munita/New York Times)

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Summary

- More than 950,000 Rohingya refugees currently live in camps in the area of Cox's Bazar, in southeastern Bangladesh, after fleeing religiously motivated violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar. This study expands on a small but growing body of research that documents increasing hostility among the Bangladeshi host community toward the Rohingya.
- Host community members see the effects of Rohingya refugees on their lives and communities as mostly negative and are frustrated by continuing assistance to the refugees, whom they view as having received sufficient aid.
- Host community members rarely interact with refugees, but interaction is often negative when it occurs. Host community members are also losing confidence in the ability of government to address their concerns, and many see violence as an acceptable response to their grievances.
- Rohingya refugees view intercommunity relations with Bangladeshis as far less tense than do host community members.
- A range of conflict mitigation approaches that involve citizens, the Bangladeshi state, and the international community is urgently needed to alleviate intercommunity tension and forestall potential conflict.



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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines the perceptions and experience of conflict, governance, and politics among Bangladeshi and Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The analysis utilizes survey and focus group research funded and published by the International Republican Institute, a democracy-assistance organization headquartered in Washington, DC. The report was commissioned by the South Asia program at the United States Institute of Peace.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace. An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our website (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

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Rohingya refugees arrive in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, on September 18, 2017. They are some of the 700,000 Rohingya who began fleeing religiously motivated violence in Rakhine State in August 2017. (Photo by Tomas Munita/New York Times)

Introduction

In August 2017, approximately 700,000 Rohingya Muslims fled to Cox's Bazar in southeastern Bangladesh from their homes in Rakhine State, Myanmar. The Rohingya, who have faced religiously motivated violence and discrimination in Myanmar for decades, were escaping a violent military crackdown on their community after Rohingya militants attacked Myanmar police outposts.¹ In March 2022, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken described the Myanmar military's actions against the Rohingya as genocide and crimes against humanity.² This 2017 wave of Rohingya refugees was the third influx of Rohingya into Bangladesh over the last 50 years. In the late 1970s and early 1990s, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fled violence in Myanmar, but most had returned home prior to 2017. In the most recent wave, few have so far gone back. Today, more than 950,000 refugees live in Bangladesh in over 30 camps, which constitute the largest and most densely populated refugee camps in the world.³

The Bangladeshi government allowed the newest wave of Rohingya into Bangladesh and continues to provide safe haven to the refugees. Various Bangladeshi government offices and agencies oversee the camps in coordination with the United Nations, foreign donors, and international and domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working to ensure safety and provide humanitarian assistance. Under the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention, which is the cornerstone of refugee law, refugees cannot be denied rights and protections based on race, religion, or other identity categories; penalized for illegal entry; expelled against their

Despite initially welcoming the Rohingya, the Bangladeshi government has maintained strict rules to prevent their social integration and calls them “forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals” instead of “refugees.”

will; or denied access to work and education.⁴ However, Bangladesh is not a signatory of this convention.

Despite initially welcoming the Rohingya, the Bangladeshi government has maintained strict rules to prevent their social integration and calls them “forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals” instead of “refugees.” The government fears a long-term refugee encampment of

this size, which would put significant strain on Bangladesh’s limited economic and governance capacity. Bangladesh graduated only recently (November 2021) from the United Nations’ rating of “least developed country,” and the areas surrounding the camps are largely impoverished.

The primary goal of the Bangladeshi government regarding the Rohingya crisis is repatriation. Bangladeshi law prohibits intermarriage between Bangladeshis and Rohingya and inhibits refugees’ access to Bangladeshi schools.⁵ More recently, the government has restricted cell phone service in the camps, shut down unregistered schools, and constructed barbed wire fencing around encampments. It has also ejected several humanitarian NGOs from the camps for allegedly encouraging the refugees to oppose returning to Myanmar, which most Rohingya view as too dangerous under the current Myanmar junta.⁶ Diplomatically, Bangladesh has continuously called for international pressure on Myanmar to ensure repatriation of the refugees.⁷ After the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar, the Bangladeshi government reiterated its intention to continue working with the Myanmar junta for the “voluntary, safe and sustained repatriation of the Rohingya sheltered in Bangladesh.”⁸

After failed efforts to induce voluntary repatriation to Myanmar, the government has redoubled efforts to relocate Rohingya to Bhasan Char, a remote island off the coast of Bangladesh.⁹ Despite the concerns of human rights organizations about the inadequate flood protection and poor infrastructure on Bhasan Char, the government has moved nearly 30,000 refugees there, with the goal of relocating 100,000 in total in the near future.¹⁰ The living conditions in both the mainland and offshore camps are poor. Consequently, many Rohingya have tried to flee Bangladesh by boat to Malaysia, which refuses to provide shelter to Rohingya refugees. Dozens of Rohingya have died at sea while fleeing.¹¹ Even with prospects dimming for repatriation, the Bangladeshi government has been reluctant to plan for a sustainable, long-term approach to ensure the well-being of the refugee population.¹²

With conditions inside and outside the camps deteriorating and large-scale repatriation impossible under current conditions, frustration among Bangladeshis is growing. Anecdotal evidence, along with a growing number of research reports in recent years, shows increasing discontent in the host community over insecurity, environmental degradation, economic costs, and other negative effects of the camps. While violence between Bangladeshis in the host community and Rohingya refugees remains limited, the potential for greater conflict rises as Bangladeshis’ grievances go unaddressed.

To better understand conflict dynamics in the host community, the International Republican Institute (IRI) funded a mixed-methods study of the perceptions and experience of conflict in two Bangladeshi host communities in the unions of Hnila and Whykong in Teknaf Upazila and Rohingya refugees in two camps in Teknaf.¹³ In Hnila, researchers selected villages adjacent to camp 22, which in January 2023 had an estimated refugee population of 23,103; in Whykong, researchers selected villages adjacent to camp 26, which in January had an estimated refugee population of 42,841.¹⁴ Data collection

was carried out by the Bangladeshi research firm Innovative Research and Consultancy and overseen by the authors of this report. It included two components—a survey of the host community population and focus group discussions convened with segments of the host and refugee communities.

The host community survey was carried out between December 4 and December 23, 2021. Enumerators interviewed a representative sample of 1,050 adult residents in 51 villages across Hnila and Whykong, which have a combined population of approximately 97,700 residents.¹⁵ Simultaneously with the survey, six focus group discussions were held with host community members in Hnila and Whykong—three in each location. The 48 focus group participants included young men and young women (ages 18–35) from both locations; adult men (36 and above) from Whykong; and adult women from Hnila. The focus groups were segregated by age and gender.¹⁶ Six focus group discussions were also held with Rohingya refugees in camps near the survey data collection areas: three discussions with Rohingya from camp 22 and three with Rohingya from camp 26. The 48 Rohingya focus group participants included young men and young women from both camps; adult men from camp 22; and adult women from camp 26. As with the host community discussions, these focus group discussions were segregated by age and gender.

The research design and methodology in this report have some limitations. Although this report refers to findings from the “host community,” the views of Bangladeshis in two of Teknaf’s six unions are not generalizable to the whole host community, which is typically defined as the combined populations of Teknaf Upazila and Ukhia Upazila. Additionally, the findings from six focus group discussions with Rohingya refugees are not generalizable to the whole refugee population. Nevertheless, the data in this report affirm a trend seen in research from other host community areas and Rohingya camps.

Rising Resentment in the Host Population

In 2017, many Bangladeshis living in Cox’s Bazar welcomed and supported arriving refugees. In the early months of the influx, Bangladeshis provided food, shelter, and clothing to refugees. Local Islamic organizations raised funds for the relief effort and called for more assistance to the Rohingya.¹⁷ In a survey conducted about one year after the Rohingya arrival, 70 percent of Bangladeshis in the two primary host community upazilas (Ukhia and Teknaf) reported they had provided aid to a Rohingya refugee, and 81 percent said Rohingya integrate well into the local community.¹⁸ This research in the host communities points to four key reasons for this early support: religious similarity, long-standing linkages with Rohingya refugees, rhetorical solidarity from Bangladeshi political elites, and Bangladeshis’ own experience as refugees during the country’s liberation war in 1971.¹⁹

In 2018, research began to show a shift in the opinion of Bangladesh’s host population. Qualitative and quantitative public opinion studies showed emerging resentments about intermarriage, economic competition, and declining safety. In Xchange’s 2018 survey in host communities around the camps, 85 percent said they did not feel safe with Rohingya living nearby and the same share believed that Rohingya children should be excluded from Bangladeshi schools. Nearly 50 percent

The dramatic swing in Bangladeshis' opinion of the Rohingya refugees is grounded, in part, in the tangible effect of over 700,000 refugees arriving at once in a geographically small and relatively sparsely populated area.

supported prohibiting Rohingya access to public facilities like hospitals and mosques. Large majorities were also concerned about declining land access, rising cost of living, traffic congestion, and increasing crime.²⁰ Another study in Cox's Bazar conducted in 2018 showed that significant majorities believed the refugees were ungrateful, created social problems and security threats, caused environmen-

tal degradation, and had an incompatible culture. In addition, large majorities said the Rohingya were getting more than they needed, were a burden, and should be "deported soon."²¹ A 2018 national survey from the Asia Foundation found that 65 percent of Bangladeshis did not welcome Rohingya refugees, and 40 percent said they "should leave now."²²

The dramatic swing in Bangladeshis' opinion of the Rohingya refugees is grounded, in part, in the tangible effect of over 700,000 refugees arriving at once in a geographically small and relatively sparsely populated area. The latest census data from Bangladesh show approximately 470,000 residents of the host community in Cox's Bazar, meaning that refugees far outnumber local residents. Numerous studies in Cox's Bazar have documented the negative impact of the refugee camps on the surrounding communities.²³ Among the most commonly cited deleterious effects are rising prices for high-demand foodstuffs like meat and fish; declining prices for basic foodstuffs, which are resold by refugees from their aid supply, thereby undercutting local vendors; job competition driving down wages; depletion of land and deforestation; water and air pollution; rising criminality, including human trafficking, drug trafficking, and gang violence; increased road traffic and overcrowding; declining quality of local schools as teachers leave for higher-paying jobs at education NGOs in the camps; and overburdened local government institutions that cannot respond to community concerns.

These concerns, coupled with continued international and domestic support for the camps, have fed a conspiratorial belief that the Bangladeshi government, domestic and international NGOs, and the international community favor the Rohingya, and that refugees plan to establish their own state in the area and impose their cultural practices.²⁴ These tensions and conflicts between refugees and host communities are found across the world and are not unique to Bangladesh.²⁵

New Research on Host Perceptions

Building on existing research, IRI's survey and focus group data show persistently high levels of frustration among Bangladeshis about the effect of the Rohingya refugees in their community; disillusion about the prospects for an equitable solution to the crisis; and the potential for inter-community violence, specifically violence against refugees.

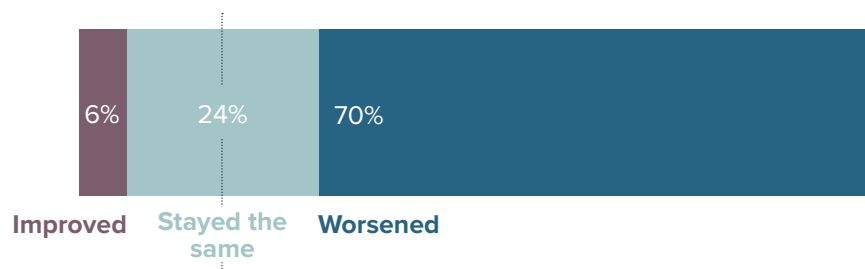
NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF REFUGEE IMPACT

Survey and focus group data show persistent and strong negativity in the host community toward the Rohingya. Close to three-quarters—70 percent—of respondents say their life is worse since the arrival of the Rohingya (figure 1). A young woman from Hnila said, "Nothing but bad has happened to us since the Rohingya came." A man from Whykong said, "We feel suffocated"

FIGURE 1.

Bangladeshi response: Rohingya effect on quality of life

How has your life changed since the arrival of the Rohingya?



since the Rohingya arrived. Daily living conditions remain poor in these communities, which many residents blame directly or partly on the presence of the refugees. Over 50 percent of respondents said they have trouble feeding themselves and their families. Only 2 percent said they are able “to afford most things I want.” Over 60 percent of respondents said drinking water and health care are either unavailable or not frequently available; and only a slight majority said food and electricity were “frequently available.” Some 92 percent of respondents said jobs were “not easily accessible” (81 percent) or “unavailable” (11 percent).

TENSE INTERACTION AND HIGH THREAT PERCEPTION

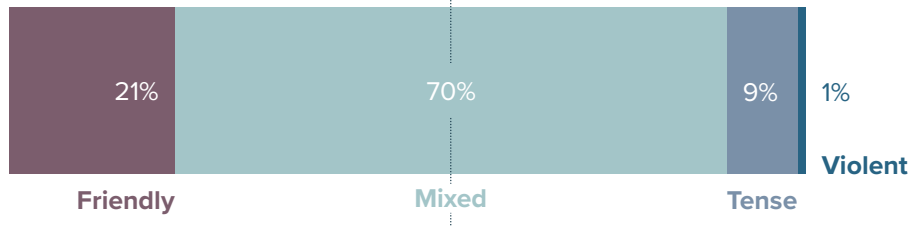
Among Bangladeshis, the survey and focus group data show a high degree of fear and animosity toward Rohingya despite limited interaction with refugees. Among respondents, 61 percent said they never interact with refugees, while 20 percent said they meet Rohingya “somewhat often” or “occasionally.”²⁶ Only 18 percent said “very often.” Sixty-six percent said they do not feel comfortable cooperating or making friends with Rohingya. Many focus group participants also said they do not talk with Rohingya in their communities. However, the interaction that does occur is often viewed negatively. Only 21 percent of survey respondents described their interaction with Rohingya as “friendly,” while 70 percent said it was “mixed” and 9 percent said “tense” (figure 2, question 1). Only 1 percent said their interaction with Rohingya was violent, but in response to another question about “clashes between the Rohingya and Bangladeshi communities,” 60 percent of respondents described the level of violence as either “high” (20 percent) or “medium” (40 percent).

Many focus group participants complained of violence from drug trafficking and human trafficking that emanates from the Rohingya camps, which is often facilitated by corruption among police and local politicians.²⁷ A young man from Whykong said, “There are many in our area who do the yaba business with Rohingyas. . . . Yaba is brought here from the Rohingya camp.” (Yaba is a methamphetamine that is produced in Myanmar and commonly trafficked through the Rohingya camps into Bangladesh and across South Asia.) Several participants claimed that a combined Rohingya and Bangladeshi criminal group, which operates from the surrounding mountainous areas, is kidnapping Bangladeshis for ransom and contributing to an environment of chaos and violence.²⁸

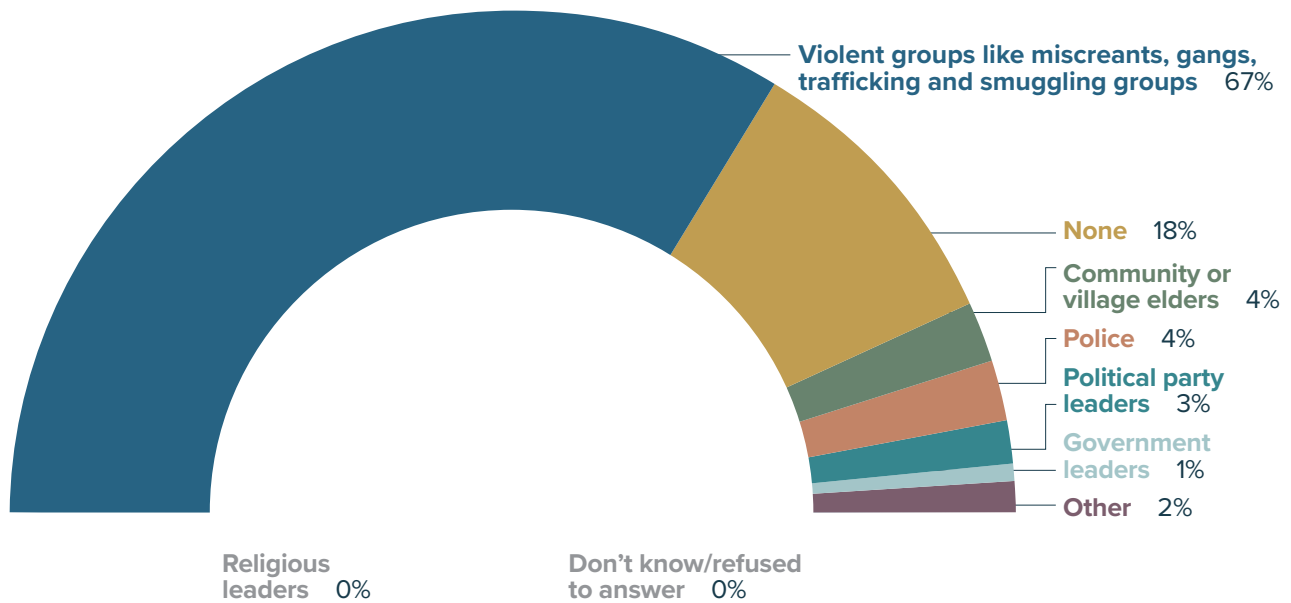
FIGURE 2.

Bangladeshi responses: interactions with Rohingya

How would you describe interactions with the Rohingya?



What/whom do you feel most threatened by when you leave your home?



How would you rate the level of violence in your upazila for the “attacks by local violent groups like gangs, miscreants, trafficking and smuggling groups”?

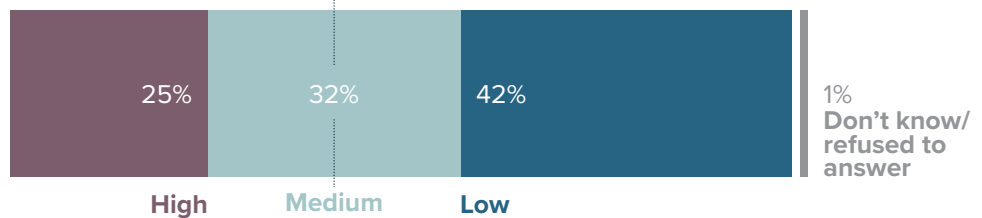
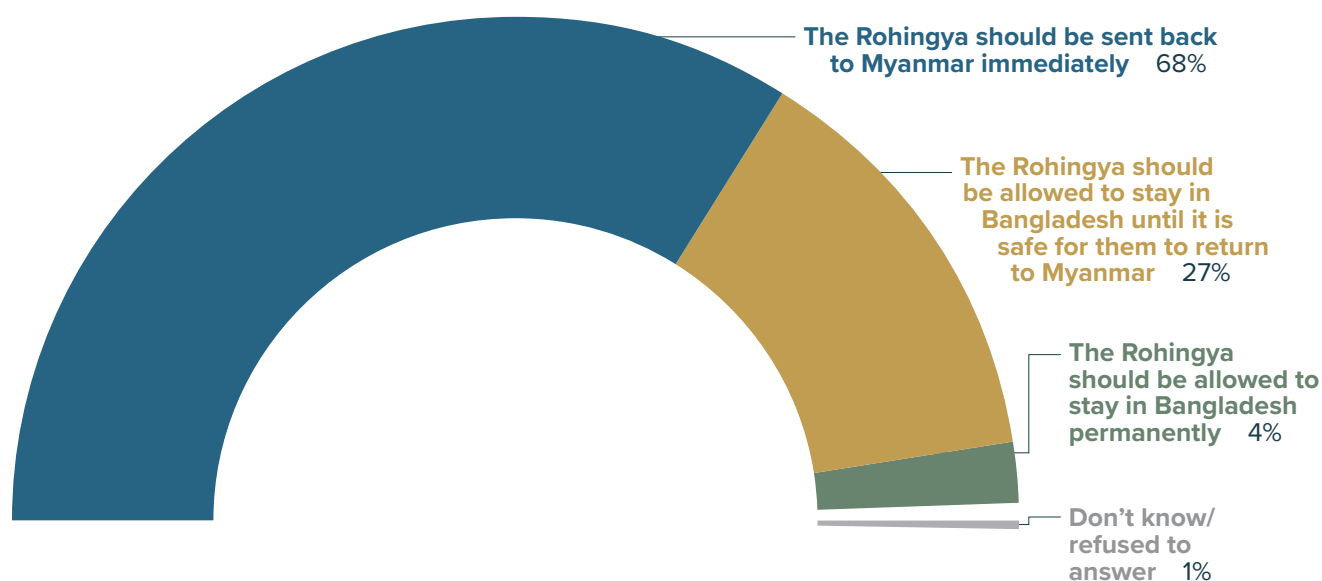


FIGURE 3.

Bangladeshi response: length of Rohingya stay

When it comes to dealing with the Rohingya situation, which of the following statements comes closest to your own personal opinion?



Although many Bangladeshis read news coverage of violence and crime coming from the refugee camps and some experience it directly, their views are also likely shaped by political elites, whose rhetoric about the Rohingya camps has become more dire. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Foreign Minister A. K. Abdul Momen have repeatedly called the Rohingya a security threat that jeopardizes the stability of the region.²⁹ This rhetoric likely contributes to the high perception of threat among Bangladeshis seen throughout this research despite limited evidence of direct interaction or conflict.

RESENTMENT AT INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

In the focus group discussions and the survey, host community members said Rohingya have received enough support and advocated for their removal from the area. “I will not help them anymore,” said a young man from Whykong, “because they get everything they need now.” Another man from Whykong said, “[The government] gave accommodation, food, land to the Rohingya. But we couldn’t eat here. The government made them happy and showed so much love. Now the government understands the reality [of our suffering].” According to another man from Whykong, “Wealthy foreign countries can take Rohingya. It would have been better if foreign countries had taken them. Rich states can take anyone there. Our environment is being ruined here.”

This frustration has led to a strong sentiment for removing the Rohingya from Cox’s Bazar. While many focus group participants said it is important to ensure Rohingya safety before their return, others advocated for immediate removal. In the survey, 68 percent of respondents said

Rohingya should be sent back to Myanmar “immediately” (figure 3). Among focus group participants, there was nearly universal support for sending refugees to Bhasan Char as a secondary solution. “If they leave, we will have fewer people here and we will be able to live as beautifully as before,” said a young woman from Hnila.

LEGITIMACY, PROBLEM SOLVING, AND VIOLENCE

The survey shows mixed opinions on the government’s performance generally and on the Rohingya issue specifically. Majorities approved of the national and local governments’ performance on the refugee issue, though respondents were more confident that local governments, as opposed to the national government, could resolve issues in general. The survey suggests that some of the public’s approval for the performance of the national and local governments is being buoyed by nongovernmental actors filling service delivery gaps. Sixty-five percent of respondents said they receive services for security, education, and infrastructure improvement—typically governmental service sectors—from NGOs, private companies, village leaders, or religious organizations. Furthermore, the national and local governments have effectively deflected blame for the refugee situation onto the international community and increased their hostile rhetoric regarding the Rohingya, which echoes popular opinion and likely boosts public approval of the government.

Still, the survey showed significant criticism of government performance. One-third of respondents disapproved of both the national and local governments on the Rohingya issue; 18 percent “strongly” disapproved (figure 4, questions 1 and 2). In response to another question, a majority said the concerns of people are not reflected in the policies and actions of the local government, and 61 percent said they are not able to easily resolve issues with the Rohingya.

Focus group participants also expressed frustration with the government’s lack of responsiveness and accountability. Many participants said politicians and elected officials come to their area during election periods but largely disappear afterward, leaving problems unaddressed. A young woman from Hnila asked, “Whom shall I complain to except Allah?”

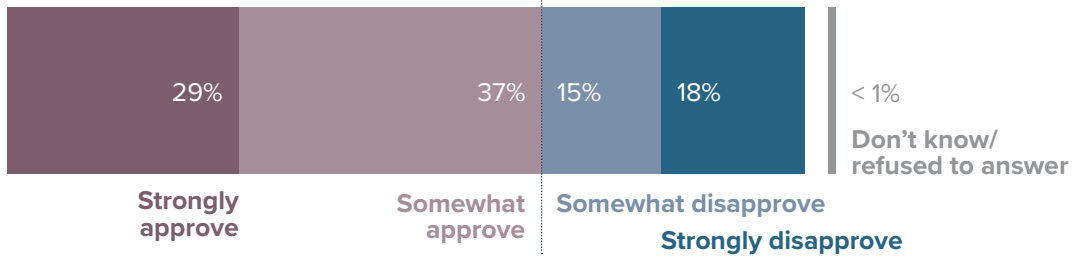
In the absence of strong government intervention, residents of these unions rely heavily on nonstate actors to resolve most types of disputes with Rohingya and others. Most respondents indicated they would seek help from the police for violent crimes, but large majorities preferred village or community elders to solve problems such as nonviolent crime (64 percent), land disputes (56 percent), and water disputes (69 percent). A majority had “a lot of confidence” that village elders and religious leaders could resolve disputes fairly and said they “always” respected their decisions. These were the only two actors trusted to this degree.

Despite high levels of confidence in some local actors to solve disputes, many respondents still saw violence as an acceptable way to address their problems. Seventy-six percent of respondents “strongly” or “somewhat” agreed that problems in Bangladesh cannot be solved through peaceful means (figure 4, question 3). On the Rohingya issue specifically, nearly 50 percent of respondents said it is “definitely acceptable” or “somewhat acceptable” to use violence “to express grievances over tension with the Rohingya” and an additional 29 percent expressed measured support for violence, calling it only “somewhat not acceptable.” Less than a quarter described this type of violence as “definitely not acceptable” (figure 4, question 4).

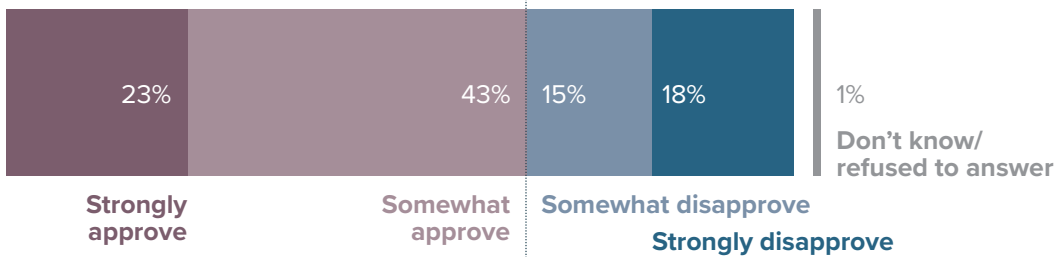
FIGURE 4.

Bangladeshi responses: addressing the Rohingya issue

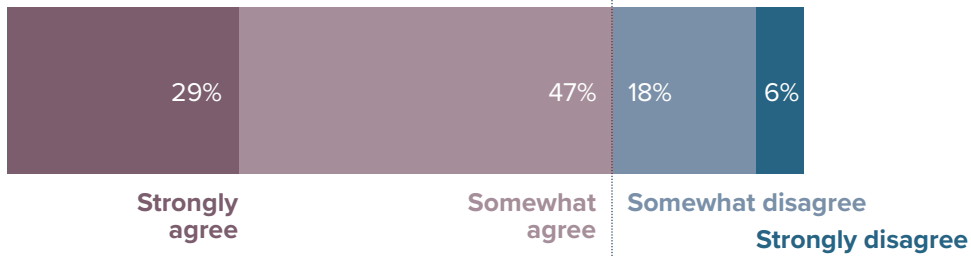
Please rate the current national government's performance on addressing the Rohingya refugee issue.



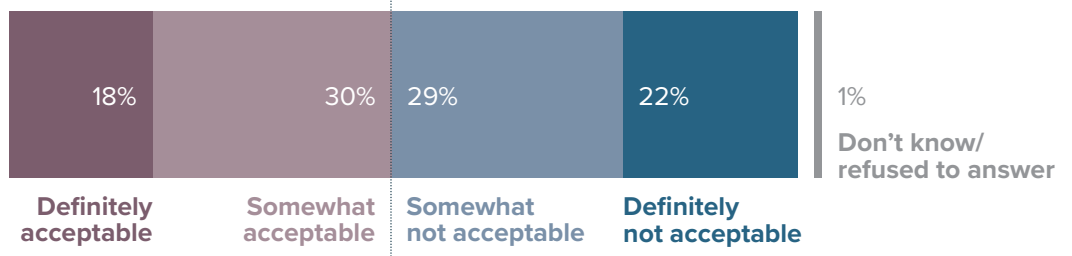
Please rate the current local government's performance on addressing the Rohingya refugee issue.



The problems in Bangladesh cannot be solved through peaceful means. Do you agree or disagree?



Please tell me if using violence is acceptable or not "to express grievances over tension with the Rohingya."



New Research on the Rohingya Perspective

In six focus group discussions with Rohingya refugees, an entirely different—and more benign—picture emerged of relations between the host community and refugee population.

Most Rohingya focus group participants described frequent and warm interaction with Bangladeshis. Most said they do not get into fights with Bangladeshis but did acknowledge that they heard of conflicts in other areas. “We are with Bangladeshis; we are in Bangladesh. We do not quarrel with them,” said a Rohingya woman. “We mingle like brothers,” said a Rohingya man. Some participants described playing cricket and soccer together. Many participants complained about basic services and living conditions in the camps but were grateful to be in Bangladesh.

Contrary to conspiracy theories about Rohingya intentions to never leave Bangladesh, most Rohingya focus group participants expressed a strong desire to return to Myanmar once conditions are safe for them. A Rohingya man said, “We can see our country from here. The heart breaks for our country.”

There is a large disjuncture between Bangladeshi and Rohingya views on Bhasan Char. While Bangladeshi focus group participants strongly favored relocating Rohingya to the island, Rohingya participants were adamantly opposed because of the island’s dangerous conditions. “There is only jungle around. . . . It would be better to go to our own country,” said one participant. Another Rohingya woman said, “We do not want to go. . . . It’s better to eat poison than to go to Bhasan Char.”

The starkly divergent views of Rohingya and Bangladeshis need more research to fully explain. One plausible explanation is that the level of interaction shapes intercommunity perceptions. Bangladeshi survey respondents and focus group participants reported limited interaction with refugees but often held hostile and fearful views of the Rohingya; conversely, Rohingya focus group participants noted frequent and cordial interaction with Bangladeshis. It could be that the Rohingya, who are forced to interact with Bangladeshis as a consequence of living in Bangladesh, have cultivated better relations with the individual Bangladeshis they regularly meet while Bangladeshis, who can avoid refugees, hold antagonistic and untested views of refugees. However, the small number of Rohingya participants in this study prevents conclusive insights.

Recommendations

The results of this survey and focus group research confirm worrying trends of rising tension and frustration that portend greater intercommunity conflict, particularly one-sided violence directed toward Rohingya by the host community. This research shows widespread negativity—at times built more on perception than reality—about the effect of Rohingya on the local area and population. It also shows mixed and often tense interaction with refugees, deep frustration with continued support for the Rohingya, and an openness to violence despite general trust in local dispute resolution institutions.

Addressing this potentially combustible situation will be vital to ensuring a sustainable humanitarian effort in Cox's Bazar. International and domestic stakeholders, including international organizations, foreign embassies, international and domestic NGOs, and the Bangladeshi government, should consider several actions, some centered on citizen response and some relying on the state.

One key action will be to develop the capacity of informal conflict resolution institutions. Given the strong legitimacy of community elders and religious institutions, these individuals and organizations should be trained in dispute resolution, civic instruction, nonviolence norm-building, and other approaches to peacefully resolving conflict.

It will also be important to support programs designed to prevent, mitigate, and resolve conflict in Bangladesh. A range of conflict-focused programs are needed both between and within the host community and Rohingya camps, including peace messaging, intercommunity dialogues, cross-community awareness-raising programs, conflict resolution trainings, and intercommunity activities such as sports competitions.

Increasing development aid to host communities can also play a role in ensuring that anti-Rohingya violence does not begin to escalate. The Bangladeshi communities around the Rohingya camps often have significant poverty, poor infrastructure, and weak government service delivery. The residents of these areas often resent the camps receiving aid while their communities suffer. International assistance for the host communities has begun but should be increased to help reduce frustration with the Rohingya and international community. Amid other humanitarian crises, such as the one in Ukraine, international organizations and NGOs should not lose focus on Cox's Bazar.

Among state-focused steps to contain violence against Rohingya refugees, the first is to build the capacity of formal conflict resolution institutions. The Bangladeshi police and other security services along with other conflict-relevant government agencies should build more trust with local communities to address disputes. This can be done through listening sessions in local communities as well as more responsive and transparent policing on local issues.

A second important state-focused step is to improve government responsiveness. The lack of responsiveness and accountability of elected officials frustrates many people in the host community. Elected leaders and local government officials should increase their visibility in local communities and work to improve service delivery. By showing greater attentiveness to local concerns, broader frustration about the Rohingya will likely decline.

It will also be useful to improve capacity and oversight of local police to interdict illicit trafficking. A key grievance of host community members is drug and human trafficking and the violence that accompanies these illicit activities. Bangladeshi police and other security forces need greater capacity to prevent organized crime, but should themselves be subject to more oversight to discourage corrupt practices that facilitate criminality.

Finally, the Bangladeshi government should develop a sustainable approach to the refugee situation. The government has resisted developing a long-term strategy to sustainably shelter the Rohingya for fear of reducing pressure on Myanmar and incentivizing more Rohingya refugees to come across the border. The government should acknowledge the long-term presence of Rohingya refugees on its territory and develop a plan that bolsters refugee living conditions, civil society, and self-reliance; improves camp security; and provides assistance to the host communities. The United Nations and other international actors should help facilitate a conducive environment to enable

voluntary return, ensuring that these decisions are made based on accurate information and that support is provided for returnees. A sustainable and humane encampment plan does not preclude ultimately repatriating Rohingya to their homeland when conditions allow.



Bangladesh's government and people deserve praise for welcoming and sustaining the Rohingya refugees. The growing frustration among the country's elected officials and citizens over the refugee situation is understandable but perilous. While the presence of the camps has created undeniable hardships for Bangladeshis, their perception of the refugees' negative impact is often worse than the reality and appears to be feeding violent attitudes. To mitigate suffering, anger, and the potential for violence, actions are needed to foster positive intercommunity relations, improve local government capacity, and calibrate development aid to the host community and the refugees. Given the difficult political conditions in Myanmar, the situation in Cox's Bazar must be made sustainable until the refugees can safely return home.

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