

April 2,
2020

joint letter:

**Re: Restrictions on
Communication,
Fencing, and
COVID-19 in Cox's
Bazar District
Rohingya Refugee
Camps**

joint letter

To: Sheikh Hasina Wazed
Prime Minister
Old Sangsad Bhaban
Tejagaon, Dhaka-1215
Bangladesh

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Re: Restrictions on Communication, Fencing, and COVID-19 in Cox's Bazar District Rohingya Refugee Camps

April 2, 2020

CC:

Minister of Disaster Management and Relief Enamur Rahman

Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner Mahbub Alam Talukder

Signatories:

ARTICLE 19

ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights

Action Corps

Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN-Burma)

Amnesty International

Arakan Rohingya National Organisation

Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network

Association Rohingya Thailand

Beyond Borders Malaysia

British Rohingya Community UK

Burma Campaign UK

Burma Human Rights Network

Burma Task Force

Burmese Rohingya Association in Japan

Burmese Rohingya Community in Denmark

Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK

Canadian Burmese Rohingya Organization

Canadian Rohingya Development Initiative

Dear Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina,

As authorities around the world struggle to cope with the spread of COVID-19, it is crucial that States act to protect the most vulnerable, including refugee populations.

We, the 50 undersigned organizations, have welcomed the Bangladesh government's efforts to host the Rohingya refugees who were forced to flee atrocities perpetrated by the Myanmar Army. We also commend the Bangladesh Government for working closely with the humanitarian community on COVID-19 preparedness and response in Cox's Bazar District, including efforts to establish isolation and treatment facilities.

Now we write to urge you to lift ongoing mobile internet restrictions and halt the construction of barbed wire fencing around the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar District. These measures threaten the safety and well-being of the refugees as well as Bangladesh host communities and aid workers, in light of the growing COVID-19 pandemic.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads to Bangladesh, unrestricted access to information via mobile and internet communications is crucial for slowing the transmission of the disease and saving the lives of refugees, humanitarian workers, and the general population of Bangladesh. Lifting restrictions will not only enable community health workers to quickly share and receive the most reliable and up-to-date guidance during this evolving pandemic, but will also help in coordination with community leaders. We urge you to ensure refugees, local communities, and aid workers alike can freely access mobile and internet communications, in the interest of protecting human rights and public health.

Since September 2019, Bangladesh authorities have prevented Rohingya refugees from obtaining SIM Cards and directed telecommunications operators to restrict internet coverage in Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar District. According to Bangladesh's Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner Mahbub Alam Talukder in Cox's Bazar, authorities have confiscated more than 12,000 SIM Cards from refugees since September and refugees report that in some instances authorities have prohibited the use of mobile phones altogether.

Emgage Action
European Rohingya Council
FIDH - International Federation for Human Rights
Fortify Rights
Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect
Global Justice Center
Human Rights Watch
Institute for Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention, Binghamton University
International Campaign for the Rohingya
International Human Rights Clinic, Harvard Law School
Justice For All
Justice4Rohingya UK
Kaladan Press Network
Karen Women's Organization
Myanmar Alliance for Transparency and Accountability
People Empowerment Foundation
Pusat KOMAS, Malaysia
Queensland Rohingya Community
Refugees International
Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights
Rohingya Action Ireland
Rohingya Association of Canada
Rohingya Global Youth Movement
Rohingya Human Rights Network
Rohingya Peace Network Thailand
Rohingya Refugee Network
Rohingya Today
Save Rohingya Worldwide
Society for Threatened Peoples Germany
U.S. Campaign for Burma
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

WITNESS

These restrictions should be lifted in light of the government's recommendation to those experiencing COVID-19 symptoms to contact the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research, hotline. Without a phone or SIM Card, abiding by this instruction is impossible. Furthermore, without access to mobile and internet communications, aid workers and others will be forced to deliver critical health information in person, heightening their risk of exposure to COVID-19 and slowing the effectiveness of the response.

Access to information is an essential component of an effective public health response to a pandemic. On March 19, [experts from the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#) called on all governments to "ensure immediate access to the fastest and broadest possible internet service" in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that, "[e]specially at a time of emergency, when access to information is of critical importance, broad restrictions on access to the internet cannot be justified on public order or national security grounds."

In addition to providing access to information, there is a critical need for the government to take extra precautions to ensure the safety and well-being of the refugees. On March 24, Commissioner Mahbub Alam Talukder told media that in response to the spread of COVID-19, "All activities will be suspended in every camp. . . . However, emergency services with respect to food, health, and medicine will continue as usual." The Bangladesh government should ensure that protective measures, including provision of sufficient personal protective equipment, are available for the aid workers and volunteers providing these essential services in accordance with the [Inter-Agency Standing Committee's "Interim Guidance" on COVID-19](#) response operations in humanitarian settings.

During this time, the Government of Bangladesh should work in close collaboration with international humanitarian organizations and Rohingya-led groups to disseminate accurate and timely information on COVID-19 and mitigate the risk of the virus spreading into the camps and in adjacent host communities.

The government should further balance travel restrictions to ensure that additional humanitarian health workers can safely enter the country and camps without facing undue bureaucratic impediments.

We also write to share our concern regarding the construction of barbed-wire fencing around refugee camps. On September 26, 2019, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal [announced plans](#) to construct barbed-wire fencing and guard towers around Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar District. Various statements by government officials have made it clear that the purpose of the fencing is not to protect the Rohingya, but rather to confine them. The Bangladesh Home Minister told journalists the reason for building the fencing was to "ensure that the Rohingya do not leave the camp and join our community." Construction on the fencing began in November 2019.

This construction is motivated by concerns arising prior to the global outbreak of COVID-19, but now risks not only harming refugees but impeding the response to the pandemic. The Bangladesh government's construction of fencing to enclose the Rohingya refugee camps has created heightened distress, fear, and mistrust among Rohingya refugees, posing greater risks to public health and needless obstructions to humanitarian access as it will become harder for refugees to enter and exit the camp for services.

In constructing barbed-wire fencing to confine Rohingya refugees, Bangladesh risks mirroring the behavior of Myanmar authorities, who presently confine more than 125,000 Rohingya to more than 20 internment camps in five townships of Rakhine State. Instead, Bangladesh should ensure proper access to health care with ease of mobility. This is particularly crucial for those most vulnerable in the refugee camps, including those living with disabilities, older people, and children.

Rohingya refugees remain vulnerable as they depend on humanitarian assistance. It is critical to maintain humanitarian access to the camps at this time. It is equally important to prepare the Rohingya community—men, women, and youth—to be capacitated to support their community at this time. Rohingya community volunteers will be the first responders in this crisis and must be equipped with personal protective equipment and trained accordingly on health and hygiene promotion.

We urge you and your government to uphold the rights of Rohingya refugees to health, freedom of expression and access to information, and freedom of movement. We also call on the Bangladesh Government to ensure non-discrimination between refugees and citizens in accessing timely COVID-19 testing and treatment.

We strongly believe these protections will also benefit overall public health in Bangladesh.

We thank you for your attention to these issues, and we offer our assistance and support to protect the lives and well-being of all those within the territory of Bangladesh, including Rohingya refugees.



