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## Issue Brief

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*

# Bangladesh and the Rohingya Refugees

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After days of international pressure to address the situation of the Rohingya in the Rakhine State of Myanmar, and recognize the human rights abuses being suffered by the community, Nobel Peace Prize



Laureate and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi finally spoke about the issue on September 19. However, her speech caused much consternation as it underplayed the concerns of the Rohingya, over 420,000 of whom have fled to Bangladesh over the past several weeks,<sup>1</sup> following widespread violence and destruction.

The Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina Wajid has subsequently called for Myanmar to take back the refugees, and accused the Myanmar government of laying landmines along the border to stop the return of the Rohingya.<sup>2</sup> The crisis has been described by the United Nations as “ethnic cleansing” and Myanmar has faced severe international criticism, including in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in New York from September 12-25, 2017.<sup>3</sup>

In Bangladesh, the refugee crisis has led to several health and security, as well as political, concerns. Aid groups have been trying to control the spread of diseases among the Rohingya in the border camps, starting a “massive immunization program” for some 150,000 children, and working to secure thousands of unaccompanied children.<sup>4</sup> Bangladesh has also launched a birth control drive in the refugee camps, as it fears a population boom – in fact, authorities in the country have already identified 70,000 new or expectant mothers.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://religiondispatches.org/shocked-by-aung-san-suu-kyis-insensitivity-to-ethnic-cleaning-dont-be/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/bangladesh-restricts-rohingya-refugees-starts-immunization/article19702972.ece>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-18/vaccinations-underway-in-bangladesh-border-camps-in-struggle-to/8957244>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/bangladesh-frets-about-population-boom-in-rohingya-camps-9231714>

The living situation in the refugee camps is described as poor, with families sleeping outdoors, squatting in farmlands and roadsides, and facing competition for basic necessities. Keeping a control on the population then is a priority for the Bangladesh government, which is also building a large new camp to accommodate the increasing numbers of refugees.<sup>6</sup> In addition to Bangladesh asking the Myanmar government to allow the refugees to return, the country's police have also announced that the Rohingya can only stay in fixed places allocated to them and not travel elsewhere, not even to live with friends or families already living in Bangladesh.<sup>7</sup> News agencies in Bangladesh also report that the refugees hope to return to Myanmar, but "not without securing their rights as citizens" in their home country.<sup>8</sup>

Despite Sheikh Hasina's concerns over the lack of US support for her country over the refugee crisis,<sup>9</sup> in his first mention of the Rohingya since becoming the President of the US, Donald Trump assured Bangladesh of American support in a meeting with the Bangladeshi Prime Minister on the sidelines of the UNGA, though the nature of the support remains unclear.<sup>10</sup> For her part, Sheikh Hasina has also affirmed that while UN organizations will help Bangladesh to deal with the crisis, the registration of the Rohingya refugees will be carried out by her country's military.<sup>11</sup> Bangladesh has also sought support from other Muslim majority countries to deal with the Rohingya refugee crisis at the OIC Contact Group Meeting on Rohingya at UNGA Headquarters,<sup>12</sup> and Saudi Arabia has promised \$15 million as aid in this regard.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the diplomatic endeavors, and continuing support of aid groups and plans to accommodate the increasing refugee numbers in new camps, this is likely to be a long-term crisis that will require sustained and planned development projects, as well as lengthy legal and citizenship processes, for any adequate solutions. Civil society and human rights organizations in Bangladesh have been focusing on the immediate needs facing the refugees, such as their living conditions, security and health concerns, and citizenship rights, with Sheikh Hasina also visiting refugee camps and telling to the media that

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41291650>

<sup>8</sup> <http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2017/09/19/in-bangladesh-camps-rohingya-refugees-wish-to-return-home-as-citizens>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-bangladesh-trump-exc/exclusive-bangladesh-pm-says-expects-no-help-from-trump-on-refugees-fleeing-myanmar-idUSKCN1BU07C>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.dhakatribune.com/world/2017/09/19/us-bangladesh-rohingya-issue-trump-tells-hasina/>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/2017/09/20/pm-urges-oic-show-unity-rohingya-issue/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.dhakatribune.com/world/2017/09/20/saudi-king-orders-15m-help-rohingya-refugees/>

Bangladesh will feed and take care of the refugees.<sup>14</sup> However, there is also a parallel concern reflected in the Bangladeshi media and government regarding the pressures that the Rohingya refugees will bring to the country, since even basic registration is proving to be difficult,<sup>15</sup> and hence there have been repeated calls for Myanmar to create conditions that will allow them to return.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/09/12/bangladesh-can-feed-700000-rohingya-refugees/>. See also: <http://www.dhakatribune.com/world/south-asia/2017/09/19/rohingya-hindu-horror-myanmar-military/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/09/16/unregistered-rohingya-refugees-spreading-across-bangladesh/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/09/12/bangladesh-can-feed-700000-rohingya-refugees/>