

## From Cox's Bazar to Bhasan Char: An Assessment of Bangladesh's Relocation Plan for Displaced Rohingyas

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**ABSTRACT** The Rohingyas are among the world's most persecuted communities, who, until a mass exodus in 2017, mainly resided in Myanmar's Rakhine State. In 2017, about 712,179 Rohingyas made their way to Bangladesh, taking the total number of Rohingya refugees in that country to 855,000.<sup>1</sup> The overcrowding caused by this influx at the Cox's Bazar refugee camps has led the Bangladesh government to consider temporarily relocating the Rohingya refugees to the silt island of Bhasan Char under its Ashrayan-3 policy. This brief analyses the merits of Bangladesh's plan to relocate the displaced Rohingya people to Bhasan Char.

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## INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is the eighth most populated country in the world but ranks 92<sup>nd</sup> in terms of land area. The country's density, therefore, is high: as of 2018, 1,115.62 people occupied every square km in Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> The situation

is exacerbated by the nearly 855,000 displaced Rohingya people who have sought refuge in the country after fleeing persecution in neighbouring Myanmar.<sup>3</sup>

The Rohingyas in Bangladesh mostly reside in or around two official camps, Kutupalong

Figure 1: Bhasan Char at a glance



Source: "Bangladesh Is Not My Country" The Plight of Rohingya Refugees from Myanmar, Human Rights Watch, 5 August 2018, [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/bangladesh0818\\_web2.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/bangladesh0818_web2.pdf)

a Prepared by Sayanangshu Modak, Research Assistant, ORF, Kolkata.

and Balukhali, located in the Cox's Bazar district. Cox's Bazar is among Bangladesh's most vulnerable areas, with a poverty rate far exceeding the country's national average.<sup>4</sup> The camps are filled beyond capacity, with only 10.7 square metres of usable space per person.<sup>5</sup> Ineffective planning, coupled with the mismanagement of water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, has led to the contamination of drinking water sources and agricultural land at the camps.<sup>6</sup> This poses major health and safety risks for those living in and around the camps. Furthermore, the rapid expansion of the camps has caused environmental degradation in the region.<sup>7</sup>

In 2015, the Bangladesh government proposed relocating the displaced Rohingyas to the Hatiya island in the Bay of Bengal under its Ashrayan Initiative.<sup>8</sup> The plan was revisited following the exodus in 2017 of about 712,179 Rohingyas from Myanmar into Bangladesh.<sup>9</sup> The government announced that it intended to move the displaced people to Thengar Char, better known as Bhasan Char,<sup>10</sup> a low-lying uninhabitable island located in Hatiya Upazila of Noakhali District (See Figure 1).<sup>11</sup> As a pilot initiative, around 100,000 people will be "temporarily relocated"<sup>12</sup> under the government's Ashrayan-3 project,<sup>13</sup> at the cost of US\$380.31 million.<sup>14</sup>

The government has already built facilities at Bhasan Char<sup>15</sup> and had planned to begin moving the Rohingyas there in December 2019.<sup>16</sup> However, the plan has been put on hold and the United Nations (UN) has offered to first assess the arrangements made on the island.<sup>17</sup> Bangladesh cannot send the Rohingyas back to Myanmar without violating the

international legal principle of non-refoulement<sup>18</sup> and drawing widespread condemnation. It is therefore developing Bhasan Char as a temporary relocation area to ease the burden on the already congested camps.

## EXPLORING BHASAN CHAR

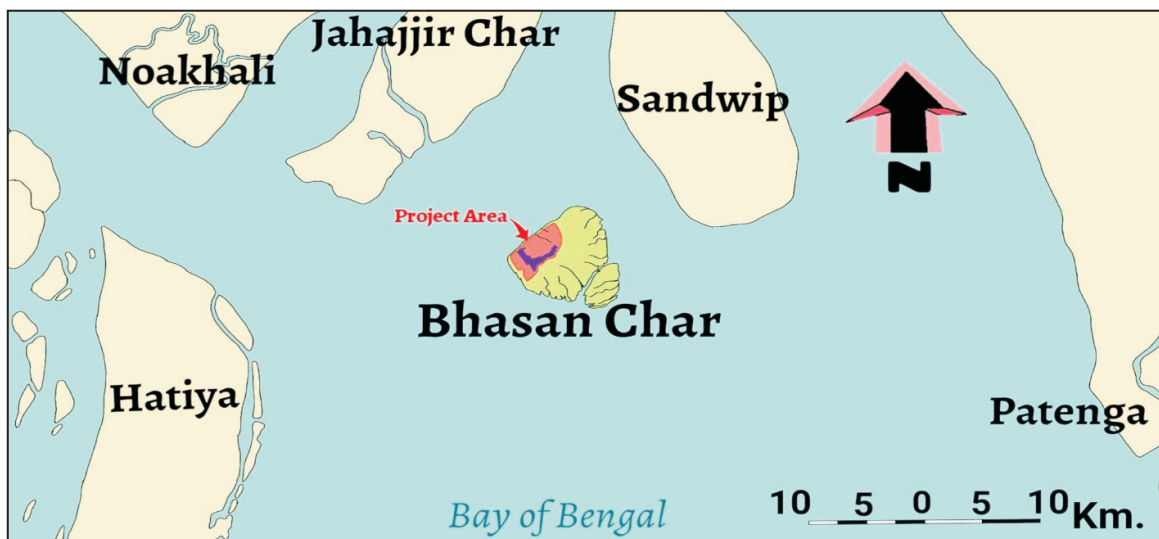
*Char* islands are fragile landmasses formed over time by sediments carried in the murky waters of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river system. These islets are vulnerable to erosion and floods. Besides, the Bay of Bengal is also a delicate zone; about 40 percent of all global storm surges every year are recorded in Bangladesh.<sup>19</sup> Some *chars* wash away in strong tides, while others stabilise over several decades and are used for fishing and farming and are eventually inhabited. The *chars* are the property of the Bangladesh government, which has tasked the forest department to oversee the planting of trees to stabilise these lands.<sup>20</sup>

Bangladesh has several inhabited *char* islands,<sup>21</sup> historically occupied by vulnerable communities<sup>22</sup> despite the environmental risks.<sup>23</sup> During the monsoon season, the river flow increases, washing over the *chars* and damaging the shelters, crops and livestock. As the river recedes, often new *chars* emerge.<sup>24</sup>

Bhasan Char, which means "floating island", emerged in 2006 about 30 km from the mainland, and remains fragile and prone to erosion.<sup>25</sup>

The island is located 21 nautical miles from Noakhali, 11 nautical miles from Jahajir Char, 4.5 nautical miles from Sandwip, 28 nautical

Figure 2: Location of Bhasan Char



Source: "Ashrayan 3 Project at a glance", Dhaka Television, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWFhH9rB2IY><sup>b</sup>

miles from Patenga, and 13.2 nautical miles from Hatiya (See Figure 2). The only mode of transport from Bhasan Char will be motorboats, and it will take about three hours to reach Hatiya, the nearest island. During the monsoon season, about 60 percent of Bhasan Char is submerged underwater.<sup>26</sup> Given the presence of sea pirates in the area, it will also likely be difficult to reach the island without assistance from the Bangladeshi navy.<sup>27</sup>

Global warming and climate change also pose massive risks to Bhasan Char, including an increase in the surface temperature of the sea, rise in sea levels, changes in the precipitation patterns, and frequent storm events.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the occurrence of severe cyclonic storms over the Bay of Bengal has increased by 26 percent over the last 120 years, intensifying after the monsoons. Between 2005 and 2015, the Bay of Bengal region experienced more than 20 such events.<sup>29</sup> Bhasan Char is located at the northern end of the Bay of Bengal and the mouth of the

Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river system. It will be in the first area of impact if a tsunami or cyclone hits the region. Given these environmental hazards, moving the Rohingya refugees to the island raises many concerns.<sup>30</sup>

To be sure, Bhasan Char was not the Bangladesh government's only relocation option; there were six feasible sites in the Ukhiya subdistrict that could accommodate 263,000 people. These sites are located between the mega camp and the coast. Since these sites fall within the restraint area designated by the government to limit the free movement of the refugees,<sup>31</sup> they were not considered.

Government officials have stated that the temporary relocation of the Rohingyas to Bhasan Char is an attempt to provide them with sufficient space, facilities and livelihood options, which are lacking at Cox's Bazar.<sup>32</sup> On-ground realities, however, paint a different picture.

<sup>b</sup> Prepared by Jaya Thakur, Junior Fellow, ORF, Kolkata.

Restrictions imposed from September 2019 at the Cox's Bazar camps have taken a toll on the displaced Rohingyas. The planned second round of repatriations to Myanmar<sup>c</sup> in August 2019 failed, as most of the refugees refused to return without any assurance of safety or citizenship.<sup>33</sup> Bangladeshi authorities responded by imposing widespread restrictions. High-speed mobile internet has been stopped; pop-up markets that emerged since 2017 have been closed down; and the government is pressuring humanitarian organisations to stop offering cash incentives to volunteer workers.<sup>34</sup> The government appears to be indirectly forcing the Rohingyas to either return to Myanmar or move to Bhasan Char, leaving them with little real choice.

How does the Bangladesh government plan to address the geographic problems posed in Bhasan Char? Some of the plans for Bhasan Char are similar to measures adopted by the country for its citizens residing in other *chars*. Bangladesh is currently working with the Netherlands and the International Fund for Agricultural Development on a project to develop five *chars* located in the same district as Bhasan Char. The project involves building climate-resilient infrastructure, land settlement and titling, and means for livelihood.<sup>35</sup>

Life on the *chars* is tough due to the extreme weather conditions, including storms and flooding, and residents often must migrate to the nearby mainland when the *chars* are submerged. People living here are

mostly impoverished and survive in calamitous conditions.<sup>36</sup> Yet, they have settled on the *chars* by choice, are citizens of Bangladesh, and receive assistance from the government and humanitarian organisations.

The Rohingyas, on the other hand, are a persecuted, displaced community from neighbouring Myanmar, are not citizens of Bangladesh, and will not be provided with local ID cards,<sup>37</sup> limiting the opportunities available to work or move around freely. Crucially, the Rohingyas have little choice of where they live—either they move to Bhasan Char or continue to live in crowded camps—even as they hope to return to Myanmar.

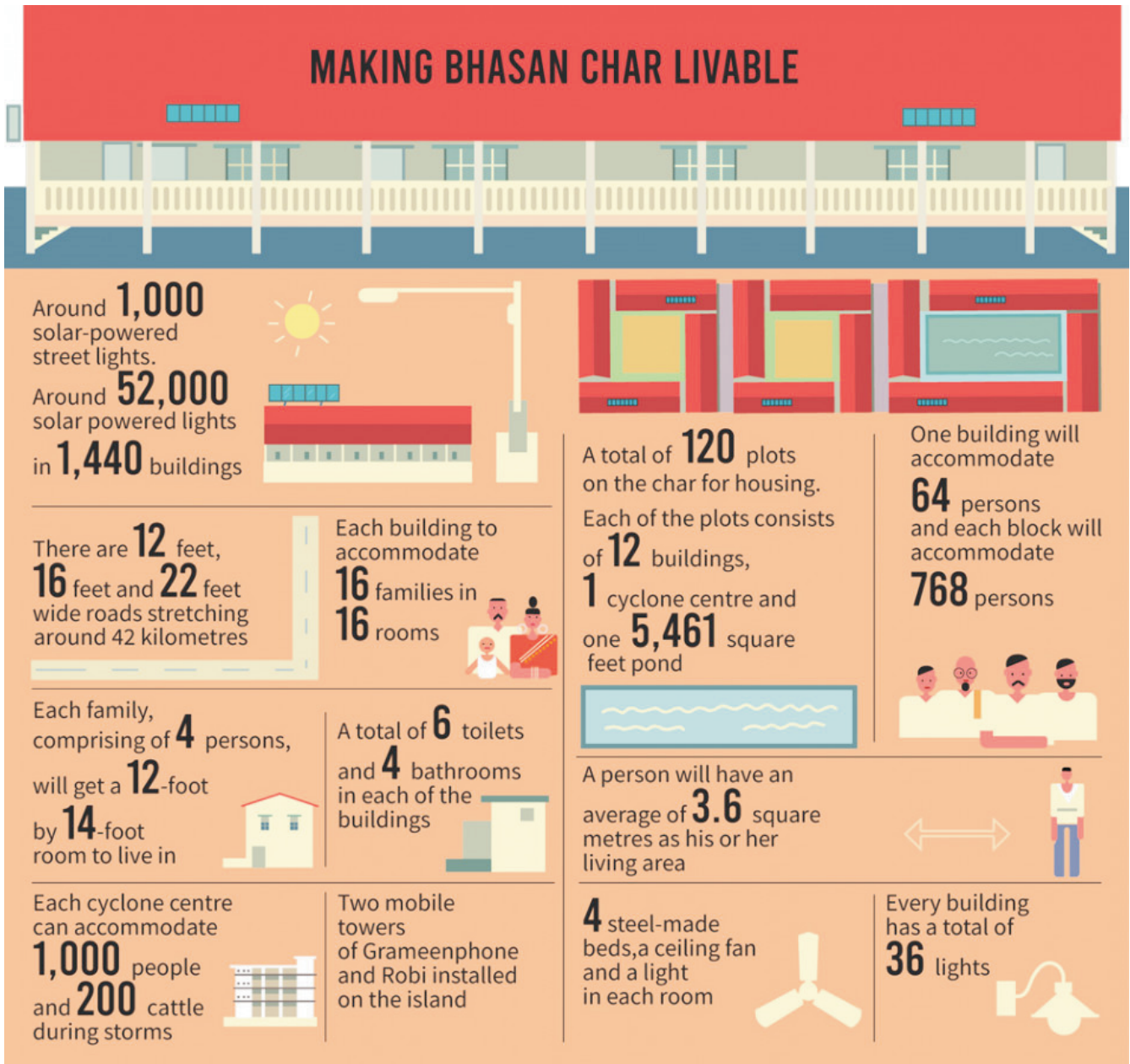
### Facilities at Bhasan Char

The Bangladesh government tasked the navy with developing Bhasan Char to make it habitable under its Ashrayan-3 project, with assistance from Chinese construction firm Sinohydro and British engineering company HR Wallingford.<sup>38</sup> Semi-permanent shelters have been built to house about 100,000 refugees, which can be expanded to accommodate 400,000 in the future.<sup>39</sup> Rows of identical steel and concrete barracks have been built around a central courtyard with a pond in about 6.7 square km of land. Each barrack is made up of 16 simple, airy rooms that can accommodate up to four people each. Every block has two shared community kitchens, six toilets and four bathrooms each for men and women. There are 12 barracks per cluster and 120 clusters in total, in which about 92,160 people can be accommodated.

c The repatriation would have been done via a written agreement between Myanmar and Bangladesh where the former will attest that they have created safe and dignified conditions back home for the return of the Rohingyas. It will be voluntary in nature and not by force.



Figure 3: Provisions created at Bhasan Char



Source: "An inside look at Bhasan Char – the new home for Rohingyas", *The Business Standard*, 30 December 2019, <https://tbsnews.net/rohingya-crisis/inside-look-bhashan-char-new-home-rohingyas>

The houses are built at the height of four feet as protection from high tidal waves.<sup>40</sup>

Additionally, each cluster has one multipurpose shelter that can withstand strong winds of up to 260 km per hour and can accommodate nearly 1,000 people and 200 heads of cattle. The shelters may also be used for administrative, educational, medical and

other community activities.<sup>41</sup> Reports indicate that of the 120 shelters, two each will be used as hospitals, by law enforcement authorities, and by UN representatives and the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner. Three shelters will be used as mosques, one as a "super shop", and four as community clinics. An orphanage, a day-care centre, and guest houses have also been built.<sup>42</sup>

Provisions for rainwater harvesting have been made, alongside solar power, solar pump and biogas facilities. Diggings for deep tube wells with potable water at a depth of 700-750 feet have been made; the water will be supplied to the clusters through solar pumps.<sup>43</sup> Crossroads, pathways within the clusters, and access roads to the landing sites have been constructed.<sup>44</sup> Four warehouses are being built to store food and non-food materials. The island will also have a jetty, a dam, a fire service unit, and a meteorological office. A police camp has already been built on Bhasan Char,<sup>45</sup> but security and surveillance will be enhanced with the installation of 120 cameras, construction of watchtowers and perimeter fencing.

Since Bhasan Char is at an average altitude of 2.84 meters above the mean sea level,<sup>46</sup> many low-lying areas have been filled with sand to raise their height and to protect the new centre from river erosion or floods. A three metre-high flood defence embankment is being built to protect the island from tidal waves and natural disasters.<sup>47</sup> Two helipads have been

constructed, and eight high-speed boats have been provided for emergency evacuation and transport.<sup>48</sup>

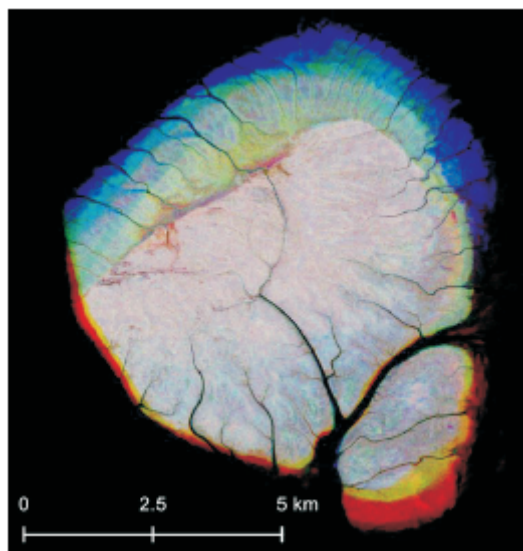
## ROHINGYA RELOCATION PLAN: UNCERTAINTIES

Although the facilities built on Bhasan Char will provide the Rohingyas with better living conditions than what are available at the Cox's Bazar camps, many worries remain over the government's relocation plans.

### Environmental concerns

Tidal currents carry massive amounts of sediment to the shallow waters, and the ebbs and flows of these currents create coastal landforms or *chars*.<sup>49</sup> Younger *chars* have a lower elevation than older ones, meaning they are more susceptible to flooding.<sup>50</sup> Bhasan Char itself is relatively new—emerging in 2006—and is thus geologically more vulnerable during storm surges, floods and cyclones. The government is addressing the

Figure 4: Movement of Bhasan Char surface to the north. 2015 (Red), 2016 (Green) and 2017 (Blue)



Source: Andreas Braun and Bad Saulgau, "Radar Satellite Imagery for humanitarian response Bridging the gap between technology and application", Dissertation work, Tubingen University, 2019, <https://d-nb.info/1192751515/34>

issue by building dams and raising the platforms of the houses on the island.

Bangladesh has been building dams on the *chars* since the 1960s.<sup>51</sup> Recent research suggests that such human-made earthen dykes could be putting the islands at higher risk by disrupting the natural land elevation process through the deposit of silt.<sup>52</sup> When Cyclone Aila struck the low-lying Polder 32 island in 2009, about 330 lives were lost, over 8000 people went missing, and about one million people were left homeless. In 2016, the tidal flows in the Meghna estuary caused erosion that destroyed 8 km of newly-built embankments.<sup>53</sup>

Studies also revealed that sea-level changes from 2015 to 2017 had moved the Bhasan Char surface northwards, with the southern part slowly vanishing (See Figure 4).<sup>54</sup> This raises further questions about the sustainability of the resources built on the island and the viability of the government's plans.

Besides, Bhasan Char will be the first to be hit should a cyclone or tsunami strike the region. It will be highly difficult to make arrangements and build facilities to protect the island from such natural calamities.

### **Healthcare facilities**

According to the Ashrayan-3 project, the shelter houses built to safeguard from floods or storm surges will be used for medical purposes as well. The government has indicated it will provide 40 hospital beds,<sup>55</sup> but this is woefully inadequate to cater to the nearly 100,000 people it plans to relocate to the island. To meet the World Health Organization's prescribed 1:1000 doctor-

patient ratio,<sup>56</sup> about 100 trained doctors will be needed at the Bhasan Char medical facility. The government has not made known how many doctors and nurses will be there. It has announced, however, that in a medical emergency, patients will be moved to hospitals in Hatiya District. Given that the mainland is roughly a three-hour boat ride away, patients in critical condition may not survive the journey, or their condition could worsen.

The easy availability of essential medication is also crucial, but the government has yet to address how it aims to ensure this.

### **Education programmes**

Despite designating some shelters for education purposes, education does not appear to be a priority, and no concrete plans have been made.

According to the UN Human Rights Commission's 2019 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya crisis, "over 39 percent of children aged 3-14 years and 97 percent of adolescents and youth aged 15-24 years [in the refugee camps] did not attend any type of education facility."<sup>57</sup>

Ensuring access to education can contribute to the growth of the individual and help them establish a livelihood.

### **Livelihood opportunities**

The Bangladesh government has promised to provide livelihood opportunities at Bhasan Char, including agricultural work; fish, poultry and dairy farming; apiculture; and handicrafts.<sup>58</sup> Shops will also be set up in the designated market place. The government is



partnering with NGOs to buy the works produced by the Rohingyas on the island and sell them on the mainland.<sup>59</sup> However, the process of setting up work opportunities remains unclear. There is also the question of whether the refugees will have the necessary skills required to engage in these activities, and for that, the government will need to design and implement skills training programmes.

Indeed, food insecurity is a big concern for many *char* households, which are particularly sensitive to seasonal income and consumption trends.<sup>60</sup> It is imperative to know what crops can be grown on the *chars*, including Bhasan Char, to avoid potential periods of hunger.

Also, many *chars* are located near the mainland, with residents commuting daily to work or sell their produce there. Such opportunities will not be available to the Rohingyas that will be relocated to Bhasan Char as the island is more than three hours away from the mainland.

### Privacy and rights

Bangladesh has taken several security measures against internal and external threats on Bhasan Char, including constructing a watchtower and perimeter fence and setting up police posts. In the past, there have been instances of crimes like theft, murder, drug and human trafficking, and gender-based violence at the Teknaf and Ukhiya camps.<sup>61</sup> The government wants to avoid any such outbreaks of violence by installing security cameras to monitor the movement of the people closely.

By taking such stringent actions, Bangladesh appears to view the Rohingyas as

culprits—without them even having committed a crime—rather than as the persecuted people they are. In such a constricting environment, Bhasan Char appears much like a detention centre.<sup>62</sup> Geographic compulsions will mean the restrictions on movement remain, while constant surveillance may disrupt daily life and cause grievance and alienation. Additionally, their status as displaced people means the Rohingyas are at the mercy of the government and international organisations to protect and uphold their rights.

### Domestic constraints

Many in Bangladesh view the Rohingyas as outsiders and a threat.<sup>63</sup> Some Bangladeshis even resent the government's efforts to assist the displaced Rohingyas, believing it should first do more for its citizens.<sup>64</sup> Although many concerns have been raised over the Rohingya relocation plan, authorities believe that Bangladeshis who live on similar *chars* and face the same environmental risks as Bhasan Char, will readily agree to live on the island<sup>65</sup>

Bangladesh has had to balance a commitment to non-refoulement with attempts to expand its economy for many years. The continued presence of the displaced Rohingyas—and the government's attempts to provide them with a sanctuary—has put a strain on the economy and threatened to undermine its efforts to grow.<sup>66</sup>

Bhasan Char may be Bangladesh's attempt to resolve these issues—it offers the Rohingyas a temporary shelter, reasserts the notions of Bangladeshi citizenship and territorial sovereignty, and allows the

government to reassure its citizens that it can control migration and guard the border.

### Geopolitical posturing

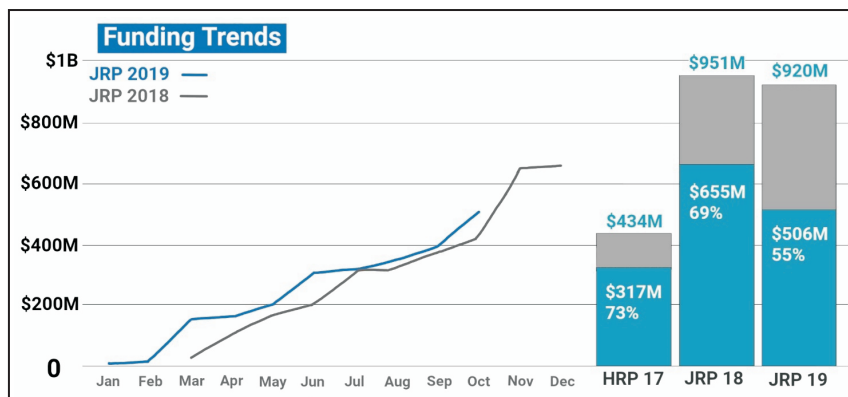
Bangladesh has repeatedly stated that it plans to “temporarily” relocate the Rohingyas to Bhasan Char, but just how long that might be is undetermined. It will be dependent on a host of factors beyond Bangladesh’s control—the Rohingya people getting citizenship rights in Myanmar, an assured safe and dignified return to their homes, and protection from persecution once back. The two recent failed repatriation efforts are a testament to the challenges in establishing suitable conditions for the Rohingyas’ return to Myanmar<sup>67</sup> and ascertaining the time that will be required to do so.

Around 855,000 Rohingyas continue to live in the Cox’s Bazar camps after having fled Myanmar in 1978, 1991-92 and 2017.<sup>68</sup> While it may be difficult for the displaced Rohingyas to return to Myanmar even in the distant future, Bangladesh’s policy toward them remains focused on near-term repatriation.

Bangladesh may be hesitant to acknowledge that it will have to host the Rohingyas for some years as this would reduce the pressure on Myanmar to improve conditions to facilitate their return. An official admission could also create a pull effect, drawing more Rohingyas across the border, and may breed further dissatisfaction among Bangladeshis.<sup>69</sup> Yet, by not addressing the long-term challenges and instead choosing to focus on temporary solutions, Bangladesh may be unable to uphold and protect the fundamental human rights of the Rohingya people.

The country must also contend with the economic implications of hosting the displaced Rohingyas. Financial assistance from the international community has been dwindling (See Figure 5). Globally, humanitarian aid has been unable to meet the medium- or long-term needs of those facing protracted displacement.<sup>70</sup> The most significant gap in funding is often in crucial sectors such as livelihood and education. As the current crisis looks set to be long-drawn, the international community must provide Bangladesh—and the Rohingya refugees—with financial assistance.

Figure 5: Funding trends over the years



Source: “Rohingya Refugee Crisis Joint Response Plan 2019 funding update”, Inter Sector Coordination Group, 22 October 2019, [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2019.10.22\\_jrp\\_2019\\_funding\\_update.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2019.10.22_jrp_2019_funding_update.pdf)<sup>d</sup>

d Prepared by Jaya Thakur, Junior Fellow, ORF, Kolkata

Bangladesh welcomed the recent International Court of Justice (ICJ) order that Myanmar takes immediate measures to protect the Rohingya community from further persecution.<sup>71</sup> But the ICJ cannot enforce its ruling and adhering to it is entirely voluntary. Nevertheless, the ruling provides Bangladesh with the opportunity to re-engage with Myanmar's major allies—India, China, Japan, and Russia—to gain their support in finding a sustainable solution to the Rohingya crisis.

## CONCLUSION

*Char* developments and settlements are in constant danger, given that their existence is dependent on the flow and temperament of the waters around them. Bhasan Char, a relatively new formation, is completely isolated from mainland Bangladesh. Although the government has constructed housing and other facilities on the island, questions remain over the sustainability of such a geographically unstable land. Adverse climatic conditions, coupled with rising sea levels pose a threat to the integrity of Bhasan Char and other such landmasses. The facilities on the island might not be adequate to sustain the Rohingyas if a disaster were to strike.

Concerns over the provisions for health, livelihood, education and security on the island also persist.


Bangladesh's poor socio-economic conditions—rampant poverty, overpopulation and susceptibility to natural disasters and climate change—further complicate efforts at finding a durable solution for the displaced Rohingyas. Therefore, the focus of its programmes and policies so far has been to provide short-term relief assistance. The

government is doing what it can to support the displaced Rohingyas, but inadequate funding has remained a challenge. The international community must quickly rejuvenate its financial support to ease the stress on the country.

After two failed repatriation attempts, Myanmar is silent and listless to make any further efforts. The ICJ ruling may bring some change, but what and how far is yet to be seen.

With little to go forward with, Bangladesh has been influencing and pressurising humanitarian agencies to endorse Bhasan Char<sup>72</sup> as an ideal place to relocate the displaced Rohingyas. The UN Human Rights Commission's 2020 Joint Response Plan appears to support the government's plans.<sup>73</sup>

A significant factor that remains absent from the broader Bhasan Char debate is the will of the displaced Rohingyas to settle on the island. The Bangladesh government has repeatedly stated that it will not force any Rohingya person to relocate to Bhasan Char and the move is entirely voluntary. But rights groups have warned that many of the names that appear on the official list of volunteers were not consulted, raising concerns about forced relocations.<sup>74</sup>

Given that efforts to repatriate the Rohingyas to Myanmar may not prove fruitful any time soon, the Bangladesh government must consider lasting solutions. Relocating the Rohingya refugees to Bhasan Char is not a suitable long-term option. Integrated solutions are yet to be formulated and must emerge from a formal policy framework that looks beyond Bhasan Char. 

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ENDNOTES

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