

Rohingya refugees refuse repatriation to Myanmar as persecution fears continue

“Once we see that our relatives in Myanmar have gotten full citizenship rights,” said one community leader, “no one will have to force us to go back.”

by [Jennifer Chowdhury](#) in the [April 21, 2019](#) issue

When Dil Mohammad found out that he was on a list of 2,000 Rohingya refugees to be sent back to Myanmar, he drank a bottle of rat poison. His wife forced him to vomit and rushed him to the nearby Doctors Without Borders hospital.

“It’s better to die in Bangladesh, where I would get a proper Islamic burial, than be killed in Myanmar for being Muslim,” he said. “God will forgive my act of suicide because he knows our pain.”

Some 700,000 Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority from northern Rakhine state across the border in Myanmar, have flooded into refugee camps in Bangladesh since August 2017. A United Nations report released weeks later detailed how [Rohingya villages were razed](#) and civilians were raped and killed in an organized and systematic way “by the Myanmar security forces often in concert with armed Rakhine Buddhist individuals.”

According to a recent Amnesty International report, satellite images show that Myanmar’s military has built bases and roads where the Rohingya villages once stood.

When families began arriving in Bangladesh, local families helped them set up shelters and provided food and water until aid groups and Bangladesh’s armed forces arrived to set up makeshift camps. The small nation, one of the most densely populated in the world, has been hosting more than a million refugees for more than a year. The government appears to be very much set on repatriation or relocation of the refugees.

In October, Bangladesh and Myanmar agreed to put into effect a bilateral repatriation agreement, with the first 150 refugees scheduled to return in mid-November. The plan was opposed by the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, and other aid groups.

Khairul Bashir, a community leader, said all the families in his section of the camp were prepared to die if the authorities forced them to go: "There's a mice problem in the camps right now, so we all have rat poison in the house."

On repatriation day in November, the cars that were supposed to take the first group of 150 people went away empty, since Bangladesh and Myanmar had agreed to take only those who were going back to Rakhine state voluntarily.

According to Abdul Hamid, a community leader in the camps, a few weeks before repatriation began, officials from Bangladesh's Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission summoned 54 refugees and told them that those who were willing to go back to Myanmar would receive identification cards to replace ones that had been confiscated in Myanmar under a 1982 law that stripped the Rohingya and other minorities of their citizenship, including blocking access to state schools beyond primary grades and placing restrictions on marriage.

Besides proving their identity, the assembled refugees were told in November, their new cards would guarantee them certain rights. Instead, they wanted the 1982 law to be repealed.

"They told us Bangladesh would bring us back if we were treated badly there, but how are we supposed to believe that?" Hamid said.

Hamid said he left a flourishing restaurant business and expansive ancestral farmland in Myanmar. His family now receives meager rations of rice and lentils supplemented by occasional meat and vegetables when they manage to obtain cash. They sleep in a dusty hut with sewage running in a gutter out front.

"We struggle with the refugee life here, but we're grateful to be alive," Hamid said. "We'd rather die here than be killed just for being Muslim in Myanmar."

He and others are also unwilling to relocate to Bhasan Char, an uninhabited Bangladeshi island in the Bay of Bengal. According to local media reports, preparations are under way to move more than 23,000 Rohingya there this spring, a

decision questioned and criticized by human rights groups. The island takes two and a half hours to reach by boat, and during monsoon season the water there rises up to eight feet above normal levels.

One of the Rohingya's demands is the release of more than 130,000 Muslim prisoners who have been detained for six years in Myanmar.

"Once we see that our relatives in Myanmar have gotten full citizenship rights and [are being] treated humanely, no one will have to force us to go back," Hamid said. "We will gladly go back ourselves." —Religion News Service; with added information

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Rohingya refugees refuse repatriation to Myanmar."