

Shedding Light on the Limbo:

A Case Study Evaluating the Problems in the Kutupalong Refugee Camp and How Aid Agencies Provide Support to Address the Issues

By Siyi Ding

Author Bio

I am currently a high school senior at Shanghai SMIC Private School International Division. I am interested in a wide range of humanities and social science subjects such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology and their interplay with social justice issues. I am also passionate about various types of community service, such as tutoring, helping women in my community pursue their passion for sports through my nonprofit, and organizing club booths at school. In the future, I hope to learn and achieve more about women's empowerment and provide more support with my own skills.

Abstract

This paper examines one particular refugee camp, Kutupalong Camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, which hosts refugees fleeing religious persecution in Myanmar. I identify several key problems that have arisen in this camp: lack of education and inclusion, food insecurity and malnutrition, and gender-based violence. Various actors are trying to address these problems by working with host communities, addressing structural issues, and providing knowledge to refugees. Actors need to recognize that the three problems are interconnected, and therefore equal attention and resources should be given to each of them to better address the humanitarian problems in Kutupalong camp.

Why was the Kutupalong Camp established? What humanitarian problems does it seek to solve? What are some ways that various actors have tried to solve humanitarian problems within the camp?

Keywords: Humanitarianism, Humanitarian Crisis, Kutupalong Refugee Camp, NGO, Educational Inequality, Sexual Violence

Introduction

As we live in this intertwined world, multiple events can occur simultaneously. While we as outsiders are discussing the seemingly distant scenes in the news, there are people who are taking action right now to help the underprivileged world, rebuilding people's homelands because they were destroyed by another political party, or setting up emergency shelters to prevent homelessness due to rising global temperatures. Each movement behind such actions has been carried out with tremendous human power and countless efforts to alleviate the pain and suffering of these groups of people. All of these actions are attributable to humanitarianism - the promotion of human welfare. Humanitarian action, on the other hand, is the compassionate response to extreme and specific types of suffering caused by organized human aggression and natural disasters (Slim, 2015). International and local aid organizations have been working for decades to solve problems related to poverty, forced migration, sexual violence, etc., and the work has never stopped. It is heartening to see humanitarian agencies working together to provide relief to the underprivileged world and minimize the suffering of people. In short, humanitarian aid reflects a very human reaction of compassion and caring to the brutality and destruction of war and calamity, and it is a generally accepted ethical practice (2015).

One scenario where this help is often needed is refugee camps. Refugee camps, according to the United Nations, is "temporary accommodation for people who have been forced to flee their home because of violence and persecution." The establishment of refugee camps could be traced back to the 1990s, and today, nearly four million refugees reside in planned or self-settled camps (UNHCR, 2016). Humanitarian aid agencies, such as the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), have been providing support for refugees to restart their lives. This paper examines one particular refugee camp, Kutupalong Camp in Cox Bazar, Bangladesh, which is mainly home to refugees fleeing religious persecution in Myanmar. This paper discusses the reasons for the camp's establishment, the types of humanitarian problems it seeks to address, and some of the ways in which various actors have attempted to address humanitarian problems within the camp.

Literature Review

In this literature review, I looked at some works that evaluate the purpose of refugee camps, history of camps, and some problems that have occurred in various refugee camps around the world.

A refugee camp is a reflection of recent development in humanitarian ethics. Resilience humanitarianism is a paradigm founded on the idea that "people, communities, and societies have the capacity to adapt or recover from tragic life events (Hilhorst, 2018). Such tragic events include violence, natural disaster, as well as ethnic and religious persecution. Refugee camps can be powerful means for communities to recover from tragic events (Mollica, 2014). Historically, refugee camps have emerged as a response to forced migration starting in 1915 (McConnachie, 2016). As compared to their predecessors of the prisoner of war (POW) and internment camps, refugee camps tend to endure longer and carry a humanitarian mission, with international organizations and other actors carrying out humanitarian assistance within them (2016).

Refugee warehousing is defined as "the practice of keeping refugees in protracted situations of restricted mobility, enforced idleness, and dependency - their lives on indefinite hold (USCRI, 2019)." Refugee warehousing runs counter to the fundamental human rights specified in the 1951 Convention, which encompass essential entitlements such as the freedom to work (Articles 17-19), unrestricted mobility (Article 26), and access to education (Article 22). This practice also worsens prolonged refugee situations by depriving them of these rights (USCRI 2004b, 38). In addition to their criticism of refugee warehousing as a humanitarian practice, scholars also analyzed problems that arise in camps around the world.

One set of problems that refugee camps create is connected to the structures used to house refugees in the camps. Poor building and housing issues were common as a result of host nations' inattention and refugees' perceived inferiority. Thomson discovered that the Tanzanian government required Congolese and Burundian refugees to build the camps with sun dried mud brick and thatched roofs so that they could be dismantled without a trace in the research studying Congolese Refugee Camps in Tanzania

(Thomson, 2014). The red mud of their huts and the camp atmosphere affected practically every aspect of Nyarugusu inhabitants' life, giving the camp a dirty feel (2014).

Another set are public health challenges such as disease outbreaks. Because refugees often live in crowded areas, there tends to be poor sanitation which causes public health issues. The International Rescue Committee indicated that following an outbreak of Cholera illnesses at Hagadera in Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya, at least three refugees died and 504 others were treated for acute dehydration (n.d.). UNICEF reported that there has also been an outbreak of 14 cases of measles in the Kakuma refugee camp due to drought and malnutrition issues among inhabitants (Tembo, 2023).

And lastly, some of these issues are social. The prominent ones include gender based violence and lack of resources. According to Smith, "assistance-related sexual exploitation" is a result of warehoused conditions in which women, girls, and young men are subjected to different types of "sexual concubinage," including "sexual abuse by aid agency employees (Smith, 2004)" Majok stated that due to limited resources, refugees are sometimes forced to compete with host populations for food, health care, and education services, resulting in the impression of "refugees as a burden" in the host country (Majok, 2019). Though these issues exist outside of the camp and are not created by it, life in the camp can create additional challenges, because there is a lack of accountability and because conflict usually affects marginalized people more.

Methodology

The data and information collected in this article are primarily from secondary sources published in online articles or peer-reviewed journals that contain mainly qualitative data accessible through either Google Scholar or Jstor. There is also a lot of primary and secondary information consisting of sources generated from various Non Governmental agencies' websites and reports, such as the UNHCR. Some of the sources are from authoritative journalistic sources such as the New York Times. I chose to do a qualitative case study on the Kutupalong refugee camp because it is currently the largest refugee camp in the world with a variety of problems. It is worth analyzing because it would give me a more holistic view of

all kinds of problems and how aid organizations are addressing them. Through the paper, I incorporated broader themes of the Research Practicum, such as humanitarian ethics, humanitarianism, and international aid. Some challenges did arise during the process. Due to time constraints, I was unable to directly interview the residents of the refugee camp, which is a drawback of my primary data. I took all of my primary sources from previously published refugee reports on aid websites.

Case Study and Empirical Background

The Rohingyas in Myanmar

The Rohingyas are an ethnic, linguistic, and religious minority of Myanmar and the Rakhine region (Rahman, 2010). They claim to be the descendants of Moorish, Arab, and Persian traders, as well as Moghul, Turk, Pathan, and Bengali troops and migrants. During the 15th to 19th century, Islam spread its influence over the Northern Arakan region, and many Rohingyas became Muslims. However, following the 1962 military revolution that brought Myanmar's present dictatorship to power, the Rohingyas were systematically denied their civil, political, economic, and social human rights, culminating in the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Act as the majority of the country were Buddhists. The Myanmar regime's (the State Peace and Development Council [SPDC]) campaign of extermination, ethnic cleansing, and genocide against the Rohingyas caused the present generation of Rohingyas to migrate to Bangladesh for safety (2010).

According to UN Refugees, thousands of Rohingya left Rakhine in August 2017, fleeing deadly assaults and communities in their homeland (UNICEF Bangladesh, n.d.). Thousands of families were slaughtered or split up, entire towns were set on fire, and there were numerous reports of breaches of human rights (UNHCR, 2021). This caused an unprecedented cross-border exile to neighboring Bangladesh, and within a few weeks, around 500,000 refugees entered Bangladesh in search of safety and shelter (UNICEF Bangladesh, n.d.). There are currently around 860,000 Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, with more than half of them being children. They fled to Cox Bazar in search of stability, living quality lives, and possibly chances to continue education and jobs (n.d.).

The Refugee Camps in Cox Bazar

The Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox Bazar, Bangladesh, is now the world's biggest refugee camp (2019). It is home to around 800,000 Rohingya refugees who have escaped harsh persecution in neighboring Myanmar. The Rohingyas have been placed in two refugee camps - Nayapara and Kutupalong, which are co-managed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Bangladesh government (2019). Bangladesh's government ceased recognizing these Rohingyas as refugees in 1992 (United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2001). Following that, there were continuous efforts to "repatriate" a significant number of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar, however, many of those who were repatriated have subsequently returned. "Some refugees interviewed by UNHCR in 1992 said they did not want to return to Burma. UNHCR announced their withdrawal from the repatriations in December 1992, due to incomplete UNHCR access to the refugees and reports of forced returns and of abuse of refugees by camp officials (2001)."

Bangladesh has hosted over a million Rohingya refugees since August 2017 and is mobilizing resources to care for these individuals who have nowhere else to go. However, the situation in the camps in Cox Bazar is complicated. Since the refugees live in crowded areas, this raises the likelihood of landslides and heightens the chances of fires, where the Rohingyas struggle with housing, dwelling quarters, sanitation, lack of drinking water, education, and health difficulties (Islam and Siddika, 2021). International Humanitarian Agencies are providing support to alleviate the living conditions of Rohingyas and addressing some of the issues that arose in the camps.

Data Analysis: Humanitarian Aid in Kutupalong to Address Challenges

To provide timely and effective aid, humanitarian organizations work in each of the major fields of humanitarian action, such as water, health, nutrition, cleanliness, housing, and education (Islam and Siddika, 2021). This guarantees that the

individuals living in the refugee camp are accessible as simply as possible and that the supply of relief items is not imbalanced (2021). Fortunately, relief efforts have led to some positive changes for Rohingya refugees. Some challenges addressed are education and inclusion, food security and malnutrition, and gender-based violence.

Lack of Education and Inclusion

Education in refugee camps is often inadequate compared to the educational attainment rate for individuals worldwide. In a published report from the World Bank, a large portion of Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar hold a very low literacy rate with large gender gaps, and "school-aged children only had limited access to informal learning centers in camps at baseline (World Bank, 2021)." The report indicates that the 2019 Cox's Bazar Panel Survey baseline showed "only 60% of host adults in Cox's Bazar can read," one-third of the grown-ups has never attended school, while another 25% has only completed primary school (2021). This means that the literacy rate among refugees in Cox's Bazar is relatively low, and most do not even reach secondary school level.

Fortunately, the Bangladeshi government and humanitarian aid organizations have been aware of this problem for some time and have taken many steps to raise the educational level of refugees. Initiatives such as Children on the Edge, a child rights organization that supports marginalized children in Bangladesh, India, Uganda, Myanmar, and Lebanon, has worked on providing education for the Rohingya youths in the camp. The initiative has "established 75 Learning Centres which have all been running five days a week since June 2018, providing education for 7,500 children (Children on the Edge, 2023)." A total of 150 teachers from Bangladesh and Rohingya communities have received comprehensive training and are actively conducting daily classes: the training encompassed a wide range of subjects, including effective communication, child rights, health, hygiene, first aid, trauma identification, classroom management, and techniques to create an engaging learning environment (2023).

Moreover, on January 29, 2020, the Bangladesh government eased education regulations and authorized the implementation of the Myanmar Curriculum Pilot (MCP) within the refugee camps

(World Bank, 2021). The pilot program aims to focus initially on Rohingya students in grades 6-9, an older age group that currently faces limited educational opportunities compared to younger children. The curriculum's preparation includes a diverse range of subjects such as Burmese, English, mathematics, science, and social studies. Subsequent phases of the program are projected to extend access to education for students in various grades and cover additional subjects (2021).

UNICEF has been actively involved in providing education for Rohingyas, particularly youths who were unable to complete their studies in Myanmar. Ehsan, a 14-year-old teenager who lost both of his arms in an accident, is one notable example. Despite his loss of arms, Ehsan's desire for studying remains. After UNICEF launched the Myanmar curriculum last year, Ehsan participated in a private tutoring program as well as a learning center (UNICEF, 2023). Ehsan is one of the smartest students in his class, and he is now in grade 6, ready to graduate to grade 7. And up until 2022, the refugee camps in Kutupalong witnessed the enrollment of the initial 10,000 children, who are now receiving education following the national curriculum of their home country, Myanmar (UNICEF, 2022).

Humanitarian aid agencies have also been working on promoting inclusivity among the Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar through building user-friendly infrastructure to the disabled. For instance, 9-year-old Irfan has to rely on his brother to carry him to the bathroom everyday, otherwise he might trip and fall due to some body disabilities (UNICEF, 2022). This has become a great burden for Irfan. Luckily, UNICEF and partners have been responding to the needs of people living with disabilities in the camps, including children like Irfan. So far 1,000 disability friendly latrines have been constructed. This supports ease of use, whenever Irfan requires its services. "I am happy that I can use the new latrine by myself," says Irfan (UNICEF, 2022).

Food Insecurity and Malnutrition

Another identified problem in the camps in Cox's Bazar is food insecurity and malnutrition among refugees, especially children and women. A survey conducted in 2021, titled UNHCR SENS (Standardized Expanded Nutrition Survey), in

collaboration with the Bangladeshi government and the World Food Programme, revealed that the prevalence of low wasting (measured using Middle Upper Arm Circumference - MUAC criteria) was less than two percent among women of reproductive age, as well as pregnant and lactating women, indicating a significant decrease since 2017 (ReliefWeb, 2020). The report noted that younger children aged 6 to 23 months were more prone to malnutrition and anemia compared to older children aged 24 to 59 months. In addition, UNICEF indicates that the rate of acute malnutrition in the camps affects more than eleven percent of children, while over thirty percent of children suffer from chronic malnutrition (Jean, 2020).

Many NGO efforts have been put into addressing this issue as well, as some agencies seek to assist Rohingya refugees to improve their food security, achieve more dietary diversity, and strengthen their self-reliance. Some examples include the ESFL project implemented by the Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation - the programme has assisted 22,000 families with vegetable production (UNHCR, 2022). 7,000 of these families are in the host community, whereas 15,000 are in the Rohingya community. Through the Local Service Providers (LSPs) and the formed Service Provider Association (SPA), refugees and host communities have continued simple access to information and technical assistance. The existing Collection and Sales Centers and Farmer Group Markets in the Host Community can now sell a portion of their products to WFP (World Food Program) merchants. As a result, the Rohingya refugees would have increased access to fresh vegetables in the camps (2022).

The most evident and dangerous type of malnutrition prevalent among refugees is severe acute malnutrition (SAM), also recognized as severe wasting (UNICEF, 2021). This condition arises when a child's immune system weakens due to a lack of proper nutrition and recurrent infections like diarrhea. In 2021, UNICEF-supported clinics in Rohingya refugee camps provided treatment to 6,923 children under the age of five suffering from SAM, while 869 Rohingya children aged 6 to 59 months without underlying medical problems were admitted to UNICEF-supported comprehensive nutrition facilities. Among these cases was Nur Kayas, a 23-month-old boy, who was brought to the Integrated Nutrition Facility after battling severe diarrhea. Nutrition experts were able to

identify her severe acute malnutrition during the initial assessment and collaborated with her mother, Sajida, to formulate a nutrition plan that includes frequent monitoring and counseling to aid her recovery and well-being (2021).

Gender Based Violence and Inequality

Data gathered from 19 camps in Cox's Bazar by the International Rescue Committee has revealed that 81 percent of gender-based violence (GBV) within the Rohingya camps is committed by intimate partners, with 56 percent of these incidents involving physical violence (Win, 2023). Women from Kutupalong refugee camp among the Rohingya community reported that religious leaders with ties to Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) leaders inside the camp often discourage women from pursuing employment outside the home. They also criticize fathers who permit their daughters to pursue education or work with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and issue threats to women seeking divorce. Conservative factions of young people and men have begun to monitor women's decision-making processes, imposing strict dress codes, such as the constant wearing of burqas, and questioning women's presence in public and workplace environments (2023). These actions further limit the freedom of movement for women and girls.

An anonymous girl in the camp once said, "I have been beaten two times by Rohingya men with umbrellas while I am going to my workplace. Most of the time I feel afraid to go outside alone. Domestic violence also not a new issue here. Rohingya men assume that they need to show themselves to be manly by controlling their wife and beating them if the wife fails to fulfill the domestic task or fails to fulfill their will. The protection mechanism is not functioning well (2023)."

To address this issue, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) teams in Asia and the Pacific region have been implementing a range of programming focused on gender-based violence (GBV). IOM arranged a sequence of cultural gatherings featuring individuals with disabilities in the areas of Ukhiya, Teknaf, and Cox's Bazar as part of their commemoration of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. These events served as a platform to heighten awareness about the unique

risks of gender-based violence (GBV) that arise at the intersection of gender and disability (2021).

Furthermore, IOM has been taking steps to enhance accessibility for women and girls with mobility challenges by installing ramps in its Women and Girls Safe Spaces. These efforts ensure that these spaces remain accessible to all. Women and girls with disabilities have been a focal point in the distribution of dignity kits, as well as in initiatives aimed at promoting awareness about GBV, protection, and the risks associated with trafficking. The IOM released a story book titled "Stories from Rohingya Women and Girls," which was showcased in eight IOM-led Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS). This publication features the artwork and narratives crafted by Rohingya women and girls, reflecting their memories, emotions, aspirations, and dreams (2021).

The IMO also hosted a roundtable gathering that saw the participation of 30 representatives from various institutions, government bodies, and women working with different NGOs and INGOs in Cox's Bazar. The purpose of this discussion was to address topics related to migrant women's protection and socio-economic empowerment. The participants engaged in conversations about the challenges, opportunities, potential interventions, and solutions related to gender equality, violence prevention, migrant protection, and the socio-economic empowerment of women (2021).

In addition to IOM community outreach initiatives focused on addressing gender inequality, UN Women and the Bangladesh Police, with funding from the governments of Australia, Germany, and Japan, have established five relief centers for women and children in the camps over the past three years. These 24/7 help desks are manned by trained female police officers and offer a range of essential services to women and children facing violence. These services include medical care, psycho-social counseling, sexual and reproductive healthcare, and connections to other vital support services. An additional five help desks tailored for women and children are currently in the process of being established (2021).

Analysis

During the research process of examining how local initiatives and international organizations use different methods to address the problems of lack of education, food insecurity, and gender-based violence in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar, I realized that these problems are interconnected and have a complex correlation. For instance, the lack of education can limit refugees' access to the information, opportunities, and skills they need to become economically self-sufficient and self-reliant. Thus, without education and employment prospects, refugees are more likely to experience food insecurity, as they may not be able to earn a living or access resources for their livelihoods. This could also exacerbate gender-based violence, as women may not know how to secure their rights and what resources they can access for support due to their limited education. Inadequate education can also lead to early marriage, which is often associated with a higher risk of domestic violence. If women and girls are often disproportionately affected by food insecurity in camps, they might face discrimination in access to food, making them more vulnerable to violence.

All three issues are exacerbated in refugee camps due to the overcrowded and resource-scarce environments, where the refugee population exceeds available resources and services. Addressing these interconnected issues requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account the complex web of factors. This may involve providing educational opportunities, livelihood support, and gender-sensitive programming to break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy, food insecurity, and gender-based violence. Additionally, strengthening the overall infrastructure and support systems in refugee camps is essential to mitigate these challenges.

Conclusion

There are a few reasons I chose to conduct a case study on a particular refugee camp. Firstly, I have previously completed a research project that interviewed staff members working at a local NGO based in Kenya, Action Africa Help International, to address challenges faced by women and children in the Kakuma Refugee camp (Kenya). I examined how this NGO taught skills to refugees in that camp,

and resulted in alleviating lives for the women and children. Secondly, I was inspired by the piece on the "Goma: A Total Ethical Disaster" that I read for the research practicum, which discusses the disagreement between the local government and humanitarian organizations in treating the cholera outbreak in the camp. The article also stressed the downsides of humanitarian aid that made the situation worse, and I believe that there should be more awareness of the different applications of humanitarian aid.

The Kutupalong Refugee Camp in Bangladesh was established after the Rohingya Crisis, and became one of the largest and most densely populated refugee camps in the world due to the influx of Rohingya refugees fleeing violence and persecution in Myanmar's Rakhine State. My research focuses on this refuge for those escaping religious persecution in Myanmar. Within the camp, three primary challenges have emerged: limited access to education and integration, hunger and malnourishment, and incidents of gender-based violence. Various local and international aid agencies are working together to address these issues, engaging with local communities, tackling underlying structural problems, and imparting knowledge to the refugees.

During my research, certain limitations arose. One significant constraint was the limited time available, preventing me from investigating another major issue within the camp: environmental concerns. This encompasses challenges such as deforestation, driven by the camp's rapid expansion for shelter construction and firewood, leading to soil erosion and biodiversity loss. Furthermore, the deforestation and steep terrain make the region susceptible to landslides during the monsoon season, endangering camp infrastructure and residents. Additionally, water source contamination and inadequate sanitation can result in waterborne diseases and river and stream pollution. In future research, I aim to delve deeper into how humanitarian organizations are addressing the environmental challenges and promoting sustainable practices within the camp. It is crucial for stakeholders to acknowledge the interconnected nature of these issues and allocate resources and attention equally to effectively tackle the humanitarian challenges in Kutupalong Camp.

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This past summer was very enriching for me. Thanks to this program and your guidance, not only was I able to write my own research article, but I also conducted an actual field research in Bangkok, Thailand, where I visited local humanitarian organizations working to address gender inequality and climate issues in Thailand. Through interviews and conversations with NGO organizers and community members, I was able to gain an understanding of the economic, social, and cultural challenges faced by marginalized women, children, and gender groups in Thailand. This trip was significant for me because it not only gave me the opportunity to explore the application of the concepts we talked about on a larger scale, but also showed me the heartwarming side that many people (or organizations) are working to address social inequalities to improve lives. It has also given me faith that one day I will be able to use the knowledge and skills I have gained in anthropology to serve the marginalized groups in this global community.

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