



CPA UK Bilateral Visit to Bangladesh

8-9 November 2017



Final Report





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Executive Summary

CPA UK undertook an eye-opening, interesting and worthwhile visit to the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The delegation visited the Kutupalong Camp, run by UNHCR, and met with representatives from the Bangladesh Government and the International Rescue Committee. These differing views and experiences complemented the first-hand accounts that the delegation heard from refugees regarding their plight and the humanitarian response in Bangladesh.



Project Overview

- 1.01. CPA UK sent a delegation of ten UK MPs and Peers to attend the 63rd Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Dhaka from 5-7 November 2017. Following the Conference, the delegation travelled to Cox's Bazar, near the border with Myanmar, to visit the Kutupalong refugee camp that is administered by UNHCR.
- 1.02. The annual Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference (CPC) brings together approximately 500 parliamentarians and parliamentary staff from across the Commonwealth. The CPC saw the coming together of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's global membership to address critical issues facing today's parliaments.
- 1.03. The overall main conference theme for the 63rd CPC was 'Continuing to enhance the high standards of performance of Parliamentarians'.
- 1.04. Hon. Emilia Monjowa Lifaka MP, Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly of Cameroon, was elected as the Chairperson of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association International Executive Committee at the 63rd CPA General Assembly.
- 1.05. There has been significant interest in the House of Commons and Lords regarding the humanitarian situation facing the hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas who have had to leave their homes as the result of violence from the Burmese military. The Department for International Development (DfID) has provided over £45 million of humanitarian support and the UK Disasters Emergency Committee has raised a further £9 million. MPs and Members of the House of Lords from differing parties have regularly asked the Foreign Office and DfID about the steps they have taken to support the Rohingya and to tackle the situation.
- 1.06. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has taken the lead in providing emergency humanitarian relief to the Rohingya in Bangladesh. CPA UK and UNHCR developed a one-day programme for the delegation that explored a number of objectives that are outlined below.

Aim & Objectives - Bilateral Visit to Cox's Bazar

- 2.01. **Aim.** Enhance the knowledge of UK parliamentarians regarding the humanitarian situation facing Rohingya Refugees who have entered Bangladesh and the international humanitarian response.
- 2.02. **Objectives.** The visit expects to achieve the following objectives:

Objective 1. Increase UK parliamentarians' knowledge and understanding of the humanitarian situation facing Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

Objective 2. Explore the humanitarian response from the international community





HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

Objective 3. Understand the contribution of DfID to the humanitarian response

Objective 4. Explore the coordination of the relief effort by the Bangladesh Government and international organisations

Delegation

3.01. The UK delegation to CPC consisted of:

Rt Hon. Lord Foulkes of Cumnock (Lab) - *Delegation Leader*

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods MP (Lab)

Lord Davies of Stamford (Lab)

Paul Flynn MP (Lab)

Philip Hollobone MP (Con)

Rt Hon. Maria Miller MP (Con)

Yasmin Qureshi MP (Lab)

Virendra Sharma MP (Lab)

Eleanor Smith MP (Lab)

Jo Stevens MP (Lab)

Baroness Uddin (Non-affiliated)

Accompanying Officials:

Jon Davies - *Chief Executive, CPA UK*

Helen Haywood - *Deputy Chief Executive, CPA UK*

Robert Harper - *Delegation Secretary & Asia Pacific Programme Manager, CPA UK*

3.02. Rt Hon. Maria Miller MP attended CPC but did not attend the bilateral visit.

3.03. Two MPs from the Maltese Parliament joined the UK delegation on the visit to Cox's Bazar. The Maltese MPs were:

Alexander Muscat MP (Partit Laburista)

Ryan Callus MP (Partit Nazzjonalista)

Key Issues

Humanitarian situation in Bangladesh

4.01. When the delegation visited Kutupalong Camp on 8 November, almost 600,000 Rohingya had left Rakhine State since 25 August 2017. The latest UNHCR assessment (24 November) now puts the figure of new Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh at 624,000, taking the total number of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh to an estimated 931,500. Kutupalong Camp had a population of just over 30,000 before August 2017 but this has increased substantially as large numbers of new arrivals have settled adjacent to the existing camp.





4.02. According to the International Rescue Committee, 95% of new refugees do not have access to adequate drinking water and a third are forced to defecate in the open. The UK delegation asked UNHCR about the issue of water and sanitation. Kutupalong Camp has an established water network but this does not extend to the new parts of the camp. Newer areas rely on boreholes, which has a negative effect on the quality of water available and sanitation, including the use of open latrines.

4.03. The only paediatric clinic in Kutupalong is full. Malnourishment among children and the problems with sanitation has led to many incidences of cross-infection among new arrivals.

4.04. The delegation enquired about the nutrition status of new arrivals and existing refugees. An UNHCR survey conducted with the latest influx of refugees identified chronic malnutrition within new arrivals. The survey recorded an eight-fold increase in severe malnutrition since August and a ten-fold increase among all refugees since 2016. UNHCR has seen severe malnourishment among new arrivals due to a food crisis in Myanmar. Efforts to tackle malnourishment among refugees is hampered by the limited availability of food in Bangladesh. Issues with the delivery pipeline of food has resulted in the majority of food aid constituting of rice, which has not aided efforts to resolve malnourishment.

4.05. The issue of women's safety was raised with both UNHCR and the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The delegation met with a number of refugee representatives, including the Chair of the Camp Committee, a youth representative, the leader of Block B in Kutupalong, and a representative from a women's support group. Abdur Rahim, Chair of the Camp Committee, has lived in Kutupalong all of his life. The Kutupalong Camp was established in 1992 in response to an earlier movement of refugees from Rakhine. The women's support group revealed the poor opportunities for girls' education in the Camp and many child refugees drop out of education at an early age - some as young as ten.

4.06. Problems with women's safety is exacerbated by organised crime which have allegedly infiltrated the Camp Committee leadership. IRC warned of the threat of human trafficking and methamphetamine smuggling. A number of the delegation witnessed young girls dressed and acting in a sexualised manner that provided circumstantial evidence of the problem of sexual exploitation by organised criminals. IRC is training national and international responders to include prevention of and support to those who suffer gender based violence.

4.07. Educational facilities are stretched. All 11 schools in Kutupalong were used as temporary accommodation for new refugees for over a month. The school that the delegation visited is teaching 340 children in double shifts. Half of the teachers are refugees and the other half are Bangladeshi.

Situation in Rakhine State, Myanmar

4.08. Information on the situation in Rakhine State is difficult to corroborate given restrictions from the Burmese military. The Rohingya population in Rakhine was estimated as 1.2 million before the latest crisis, meaning that well over half of Rohingyas are now refugees. The IRC estimates that 78% of the population in Rakhine live below the poverty line.





4.09. During a meeting with the Chair of the Camp Committee the delegation asked where the refugees would like to go. The response was a desire for citizenship in Myanmar. Many of the Rohingya refugees that the delegation met with expressed a desire to return home as long as their rights were respected. An IRC survey found that just 11% of Rohingya refugees wanted to return to Myanmar.

4.10. However, the current situation, with ongoing Burmese military activity, makes repatriation difficult and dangerous for the Rohingya. The Committee Chair was also asked what he felt will happen with the remaining Rohingya. He replied that those remaining would like to leave but for the military. Many of those remaining are further south so fleeing to Bangladesh would be both arduous and dangerous. UNHCR has seen a number of boats carrying refugees arrive, which is often the only escape route for refugees living away from the Bangladeshi border.

4.11. A small resettlement opportunity was previously available to Rohingya in Bangladesh but this was suspended in November 2010. Resettlement was available in a number of countries, including the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the Netherlands. Only about 900 refugees were resettled.

4.12. The circumstances of the departure of refugees was raised a number of times. One refugee explained how his opportunities in Kutupalong are far greater than in Rakhine State. There are movement restrictions in Rakhine so he was not allowed to visit neighbouring villages and he was unable to observe Islam. He was beaten by the military for visiting another village and his brother was killed by government forces.

UNHCR Operations in Kutupalong Camp

4.13. Kutupalong Camp was established in 1992 and run by UNHCR. Before the current influx, Kutupalong and nearby Nayapara had approximately 30,000 inhabitants.

4.14. The large numbers of new refugees has put increasing strain on UNHCR operations. Refugees that cross the border at official posts are given a token for emergency non-food items (NFI) that can be collected from UNHCR. This emergency aid provides rudimentary shelter for refugees. UNICEF are also operating to provide immediate support but there is not enough shelter.

4.15. The UK delegation asked how new refugees were informed about the support available to them. The Camp Committee helps new refugees find and access the available services.

4.16. In meetings with other organisations the cooperation between UNHCR and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) was questioned. It was argued that the delivery of services could be constrained due to a lack of clarity over whether UNHCR or IOM should provide services to the Rohingya in Bangladesh. It was posited that the definition of Rohingya as refugees or migrants lies behind this issue but CPA UK was unable to explore further.





4.17. Overcrowding is a severe issue in and around Kutupalong as the access roads are very poor. UNHCR pointed out that the original camp covered 3,000 acres but less than half of this area is habitable due to geographic constraints. The delegation raised this with the Deputy Commissioner of Cox's Bazar District who claimed that the Rohingya are now occupying 26,000 acres and have destroyed much forest in the surrounding areas.

Long term situation and planning

4.18. The meeting with the Deputy Commissioner was useful to explore the Bangladesh Government response and the approach to the long term needs of the refugee population. The delegation asked a range of questions in an attempt to gather information on how the Bangladesh Government views the long-term needs of the Rohingya.

4.19. The delegation pointed out that this is likely to be a long term problem. During discussions with UNHCR one suggestion to tackle overcrowding was to establish new, smaller refugee camps. This was put to the Deputy Commissioner who argued that Bangladesh does not know the numbers still to come so this sort of planning is difficult. Moreover, the Commissioner mentioned that Bangladesh has a limited supply of land, much of which is populated.

4.20. Similarly, the delegation requested to know if Bangladesh would put in place more permanent structures with international support. The Deputy Commissioner acknowledged that if the Rohingya refugees stay long term the government will put a plan in place, but no long term action had yet been taken.

4.21. The impact of the refugees on Bangladesh was also discussed. Virendra Sharma MP asked whether the refugees move on anywhere else in Bangladesh and how they impact on land, education and transport. The Deputy Commissioner revealed that the local authorities were still working out how to sustainably share resources and land between the local population and the refugees. Delegation Leader Rt Hon. Lord Foulkes of Cumnock suggested that the refugees could be an asset if incorporated into the system. The Deputy Commissioner argued that Bangladesh already has a lot of young people.

4.22. Discussion then centred on what the international community can do to help. Here, the Deputy Commissioner's message was clear. He asked for the international community to pressure Myanmar to solve the problem.

4.23. Difficulties in dealing with the long-term needs of the refugees were also raised during conversations with Cat Mahony, IRC's Field Director for the Emergency Response Team. Ms Mahony was in Bangladesh on a 30-day tourist visa as this was the only visa she had been granted. She has to leave the country every month and hope to be let back in to coordinate IRC's on-the-ground response.

4.24. This disruption is exacerbated by difficulties international NGOs face in getting the necessary registrations to operate in Bangladesh. IRC revealed that some registrations can take over a year,





depriving the Rohingya of vital humanitarian assistance. Funding is largely available for the emergency response but further bureaucracy hampers efforts as NGOs have to apply for permits to deliver specific projects. The required FD7 permit usually takes 24 hours to approve but often takes five days and lasts for three months.

4.25. The difficulties in navigating the permit procedure was highlighted in examples provided by IRC where Government officials require burdensome levels of detail. Bangladeshi officials had responded to permit requests by seeking clarification on the colour of buckets used in a project and the number of staff allocated to project components. The permit system is centralised in the Office of the Prime Minister so any scrutiny of the Bangladeshi response would need to be focused here.

Summary

5.01. The visit was an eye-opening and intense experience for the delegation but achieved the objectives of increasing knowledge and understanding of the humanitarian situation facing Rohingya refugees and the emergency response from the Bangladesh Government and international community.

5.02. The international community, including the UK's Department for International Development, have made substantial financial contributions to the relief effort and the delegation calls for more emergency assistance to be forthcoming so that UNHCR's funding request is met. At our visit in November only 67% had been fulfilled for 2017.

5.03. The delegation praised UNHCR for the excellent work they are undertaking in difficult circumstances. However, it is clear that, as a UNHCR representative said, they are merely a "sticking plaster". While impressed by the UNHCR response, serious concerns were identified.

5.04. The most obvious and immediate concern is the situation in Myanmar. From the numerous first-hand accounts, and reports from INGOs, of recently arrived refugees it is clear that the Burmese military is acting with impunity in Rakhine State. The delegation called for the UK Government to contribute to greater international pressure on the Myanmar Government to cease its military campaign.

5.05. Repatriation and citizenship for the Rohingya are key, interlinked, issues. The overwhelming message from refugees that the delegation met was a desire for justice and citizenship in Myanmar. The delegation calls for the UK Government to ensure any repatriation agreement between Myanmar and Bangladesh allows for voluntary repatriation, safety guarantees and a commitment to giving the Rohingya citizenship.

5.06. The delegation also praised the generosity of Bangladesh for hosting over 900,000 Rohingya refugees. While acknowledging the accommodating spirit of the Bangladesh Government and people, the delegation raised concerns over the lack of long term planning. While supporting repatriation efforts, the delegation calls for an acknowledgement from the Bangladesh Government that the Rohingya refugee





crisis is likely to affect Bangladesh for a number of years and that requisite planning - such as infrastructure and job permits for refugees - should be accelerated to ease the crisis.

5.07. Substantial concerns exist regarding the registration and permit process for international NGOs in Bangladesh. Reports of an overly bureaucratic and time-consuming process are detrimental to the emergency relief efforts and the delegation asks the Bangladesh Government to ensure that the registration and permit process for international NGOs is completed as quickly as possible.

5.08. There was extensive media coverage resulting from the visit. Both Rt Hon. Lord Foulkes of Cumnock and Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods MP penned articles that appeared in *The Herald* and *Independent* respectively.

Outcomes

6.01. Rt Hon. Lord Foulkes of Cumnock asked a question in the House of Lords on Thursday 23 November. In response, the Minister of State from the Department for International Development (DfID), Lord Bates, acknowledged that DfID had begun planning for a "...protracted refugee crisis in Bangladesh" and "Discussions with the Government of Bangladesh and key partners have begun to identify acceptable solutions that protect and respect the rights and freedoms of refugees."

6.02. Subsequently, Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods MP secured a Westminster Hall debate on Tuesday 28 November. A number of the delegation spoke in the debate, raising questions about the humanitarian response and asking how the UK Government would pressure the Myanmar Government to cease their ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya. Mark Field MP, Minister for Asia and the Pacific, responded on behalf of the UK Government. Minister Field said that the UK Government supports the repatriation agreement between Bangladesh and Myanmar but that substantial progress on the ground is necessary. The Minister also touched on the UK's humanitarian and diplomatic response, including the first UN Security Council presidential statement on Burma in a decade.

6.03. On Wednesday 29 November the delegation took part in an open report-back session to their fellow parliamentarians in the UK Parliament. A number of interested MPs and Peers heard the delegate's thoughts and experiences and the session proved effective in further raising the profile of the Rohingya refugee crisis in Parliament.

6.04. Following the report-back it was agreed that representatives from the delegation would seek to meet with the Bangladesh High Commissioner and the Myanmar Ambassador to raise a number of issues. CPA UK will facilitate

Further resources





7.01. Both UNHCR and IRC provided background information that provided the latest assessment of the situation in Bangladesh. There is an [UNHCR Weekly Operational Update](#) from 24 November and [IRC Report](#) from 7 November.

Acknowledgements

8.01. CPA UK would like to thank Lane Krainyk, Massoumeh Farman-Farmaian and all of their colleagues at UNHCR for organising the programme for the delegation and for their time to accompany them to the Kutupalong Refugee Camp. Their knowledge and experience was incredibly useful for the delegation.

8.02. CPA UK are grateful to the Deputy Commissioner of Cox's Bazar District and the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner for explaining the official Bangladeshi response to the crisis.

8.03. CPA UK are also grateful to the staff at the British High Commission in Dhaka, including HE Alison Blake, David Ashley, Paula Corrans and Stephen Brown, for their assistance. Thanks also the staff at DfID Bangladesh, Jane Edmondson and Annette D'Oyly.





Full Programme

Wednesday 8 November		
09.30	Depart Dhaka Hazrat Shahjalal Airport to Cox's Bazaar on Biman Airlines BG433	
10.25	Arrive Cox's Bazar	
11:00	Drop luggage at hotel	White Orchid Hotel
11.30-12:35	Departure for Kutupalong (KTP) Camp	(Approx. 1+ hr)
12.35 - 12:55	Arrive at KTP Camp	Reception by UNHCR & briefing on the refugee response operation (registration, assistance, key challenges) (15-20 min)
12:55-13:00	Walk to Camp Committee Office	Accompanied by UNHCR
13:00-13:25	Meet with elected refugee leaders and community groups	Discussion with registered refugees on the impact of the recent refugee influx, measures being taken by the community
13:25 - 13:30	Walk to KTP school facility	Briefing and Q & A with UNHCR on the way
13:30-14:00	Visit KTP school facility	Visit premises, meet with refugee children & teachers
14:00 - 14:10	Drive to NFI distribution point (area before Bamboo bridge)	Accompanied by UNHCR
14:10 - 14:15	Visit distribution point	Accompanied by UNHCR
14:15-14:40	Drive to Rubber Plantation transit centre	Accompanied by UNHCR
14:40-15:20	Visit transit centre & services available; meet with newly arrived refugees on an ad hoc basis	Accompanied by UNHCR - opportunity to dialogue with refugees on their arrival, situation,
16.00 - 17.00	Transfer to Cox's Bazar	
17:15 - 17:45	Meeting with Deputy Commissioner of Cox's Bazar District	
18:00	Transfer to hotel	
19:00	Meeting with International Rescue	





	Committee	
	Evening free	
Thursday 9 November		
08.30	Visit UNHCR Compound	Accompanied by UNHCR (if needed)
08:45-09:30	Meeting with Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner	
09.45	<i>Transfer to Cox's Bazar Airport</i>	
11.05	<i>Depart Cox's Bazar to Dhaka on Biman Airlines BG434</i>	
13.00	Arrive Dhaka Hazrat Shahjalal	

About the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK

CPA UK is one of the largest and most active branches in the CPA community and delivers a unique annual international outreach programme in Westminster and overseas. CPA UK works to encourage parliamentary diplomacy and build parliamentary capacity on behalf of the UK Parliament and the wider CPA. Through activities such as conferences, seminars, delegations and parliamentary strengthening teams, CPA UK provides Members with a practical, current and first-hand perspective on international issues facing fellow parliamentarians across the Commonwealth. Working with CPA UK's international outreach programmes also enhances Members' understanding of issues facing diaspora communities in their own constituencies. For more information, visit www.uk-cpa.org