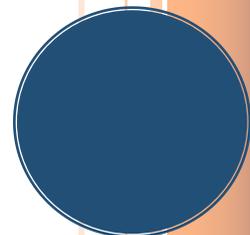


*Seeking opportunities to  
respond to the Rohingya  
Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh*

Joseph Xavier SJ, JRS Deputy International Director;  
Vinny Dunstan Joseph SJ, representing Myanmar Jesuit Mission;  
Stan Fernandes SJ, Regional Director - JRS South Asia



## BACKGROUND

As on 28 September 2017, the new arrivals of Rohingya refugees fleeing into Bangladesh crossed half a million. More are expected! According to the Inter-



Sectoral Coordination Group (ISCG) estimates, about 713,800 Rohingyas have settled in Ukhia and Teknaf sub-districts of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. These comprise 501,800 new arrivals and about 212,000 who arrived before August 25, 2017, and have been accommodated in two of the biggest registered camps in Kutupalang and Nayapara. Apart from

these, there seem to be a large number of unregistered refugees among those who arrived before August 25, 2017.

In a truly humanitarian gesture, the Government of Bangladesh has come forward to receive those who have fled to Bangladesh after crossing treacherous terrain and stormy waters to escape death. However, this massive influx poses many complex challenges to the Government of Bangladesh, to UN agencies (which have already established a reasonably good coordination mechanism) and to INGOs/NGOs.

The ISGC welcome INGOs/NGOs interventions; but the government has taken a cautious approach, and mandated multiple screening processes. The government controls relief operations through the NGO Bureau. At first sight, what strikes one the most is the large presence of women and children and women carrying newborn babies, squatting on the roadsides waiting for handouts from visitors.



New camp site

Thousands of children just walk around begging for food and water. Many children are traumatized and in despair as they have lost their parents and are living with relatives or acquaintances. Men and women wait in serpentine queues to receive food supplies. There is no medical facility for pregnant women. Malnutrition of children is also a major concern. Except for rice rations and tarpaulin sheets, not much has reached the people. Other relief supplies are slowly trickling in.

People are in need of and are waiting patiently for any possible assistance, be it food and non-food items, shelter, Water-Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), psychosocial support, education and health. Many project applications by NGOs have still not been cleared by the government. Prolonged delay in the response will result in chaos and possible violence.

Yet another question is how long the temporary camps set up by the government will be sustainable. People have occupied private and government lands. Already there is growing resentment among the host community, as the Rohingyas have outnumbered the host population and occupied their lands. Outbreak of communicable diseases like cholera is imminent, due to pouring rains and lack of proper sanitation facilities.

The Army and Border Security Forces have taken control of the refugee registration and of maintaining law and order in the camps. However, many,

without replacements, are already tired of the situation, which could soon get worse, unless viable political, administrative and humanitarian responses are found in the near future. Updated information on the situation which is changing day by day may be accessed at: <https://exbcoordination.org/>

## OUR OBJECTIVE

Stan Fernandes SJ, JRS Regional Director of South Asia, Vinny Joseph SJ, representing Myanmar Jesuit Mission, and Joseph Xavier SJ, JRS Deputy International Director, were deputed to explore opportunities to start a JRS outreach among the Rohingyas, not only during the emergency phase but also with a view to a long-term intervention to work for durable solutions. JRS Asia Pacific is committed to partner future interventions, but was not able to depute a representative to join the exploratory team. The team is most grateful for the solidarity and encouragement received to undertake this exploratory visit and for assurance of committed support for a JRS-Jesuit mission to respond to the unfolding Rohingya crisis.



With Archbishop Moses M. Costa CSC and Mr. Atul Sarker at the camp site

## HOW WE WENT ABOUT

With the support of Fr Joseph Mistri SJ, Mission Superior of Bangladesh, and friends of Caritas in India and Germany, we contacted Mr Francis Atul Sarker, Executive Director of Caritas Bangladesh (CB), who organised our visit to Dhaka, Cox's Bazar and the refugee camp areas. He arranged for our

field support through Mr James Gomes, Regional Director of Caritas, Chittagong. We were happy to have the opportunity to visit the camps together with Archbishop Moses M Costa CSC of Chittagong Diocese. On returning to Dhaka, we shared our experiences and discussed possible responses with the Bangladesh Mission Jesuits; and visited His Eminence Patrick D’Rozario, Cardinal of Bangladesh.

## Plans of Caritas Bangladesh

Caritas Bangladesh, with its headquarters in Dhaka, is a well appreciated NGO, serving local marginalized groups. With 8 Regional offices and about 7,000 regular staff, CB implements over 100 projects among the vulnerable populations all over the country. CB has the necessary expertise and skills to operate in emergencies.



New camp site

CB received approval from the NGO Bureau on 28 September, and will begin the first rollout of relief supplies on 8 October. CB plans to support 10,000 families in the first two months, with food items other than rice and some non-food items. CB also has tentative plans for the next four months, November 2017 to February 2018, to expand its services, which will depend on resource mobilisation and identification of needs. Language will be a big hurdle in the

field operations, as the Rohingyas do not fully understand Bangla. Yet another major challenge is to identify competent female staff, which is quite difficult in the Bangladesh context, to reach out to refugee women. CB considers this a top priority and is taking steps to address it.

To carry out the operations efficiently and effectively, CB has already set up an operational office close to the camp area and plans to have a nodal base with a simple office set up in Cox's Bazar. This nodal office is expected to deal with PR, communications, strengthening partnership with various agencies, attending cluster meetings and rapport building with local government machinery.



Meeting with CB officials and Archbishop Moses M. Costa CSC, and Meeting with UNHCR

September 2017 to February 2018 is considered Phase I, and approvals are being granted for the same to select NGOs by the NGO Bureau. The government monitors the inflow of foreign funds as well as the implementation of projects by NGOs very closely.

Earlier, apart from UN agencies, only CARE, Save the Children, Action Aid and Oxfam proposals were granted approval. BRAC (a local NGO) is very much engaged in relief operations, with local funds – to which the government

has no objections. Some NGOs, who have been working in the old registered camps, are also waiting to get their proposals approved to reach out to the new arrivals. NGOs have to go through a long complex bureaucratic procedure to start relief operations, even though they may have the resources to begin services.

## A CALL THAT BECKONS US

The unfolding tragic situation challenges us to take an urgent first step to reach out to the Rohingyas through a JRS response, with the support of the Bangladesh Jesuits. To start with, we have a window of opportunity to partner CB in reaching out directly to the Rohingyas, serving under their banner. This is a necessary step, even if we plan to have a long term engagement, by registering JRS with the NGO Bureau.



Site of the old camp

UNICEF, which provides overall coordination for the education sector, has already developed a 6-month comprehensive plan till February 2018, in coordination with INGOs/NGOs, who have already received approval, to reach out to about 336,000 children in the age group of 4-14, which includes about 84,000 from the host communities, 50,000 from the prior refugee influx, 120,400 new arrivals, and about 75,600 contingency for further arrivals. The next phase of interventions will be considered after a few months, which are to be implemented from March 2018.

The need is urgent and it is important that we make a decision soon. We can get a foothold locally and begin interventions in the second phase, only by establishing our presence in the field in November 2017. Once we make this

start and begin interventions, we will be in a good position to explore opportunities and discern about our long-term engagement.

## CONCLUSION

Preparing for the visit of Pope Francis to Bangladesh offers us an opportune moment to begin our outreach to the Rohingyas. If we could start this new JRS-Jesuit initiative by November 2017, coinciding with his visit, it would be our tiny gift to our brother Pope Francis, who has been a strong voice globally, in pleading the cause of refugees and migrants.

As we conclude this brief report, we are happy to share that everyone has shown great encouragement, keen interest and welcomed the proposal. Despite the many challenges, we need to find the way to reach out to help restore the dignity and rebuild the lives of the Rohingyas.

We take this opportunity to thank the leaders of Church of Bangladesh, Caritas Bangladesh officials and our Jesuit companions, especially in Bangladesh and Kolkata, for their generous support and cooperation.