

Discussion paper

**Prepared by
the United Against Inhumanity
Myanmar Task Team**

**Workshop on an alternative
strategy for Rohingya refugees**

**London and online
Friday 5 September 2025**

Introduction

This paper is intended to provide a framework for discussion at a forthcoming workshop convened by United Against Inhumanity (UAI) and the United Nations Association - UK (UNAUK) in preparation for an international conference on the situation of the Rohingya and other minorities in Myanmar, to be held at the UN General Assembly on 30 September 2025. The workshop will focus primarily on the plight of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and other Asian countries.

This paper provides an indicative list of issues for discussion. Participants are welcome to raise any other pertinent questions in the course of the workshop and to comment on the brief analysis provided in this paper, which does not purport to represent the views of UAI or UNAUK.

Refugee repatriation and Rakhine State

The international community's approach to the Rohingya refugee situation in Bangladesh has for the past decade been based on the assumption that an early return of the exiled population will be possible. For now, that assumption now has to be reconsidered. While the refugees have expressed a consistent determination to return to their homes in Myanmar's Rakhine State, the conditions for them to do so safely and in a voluntary manner do not exist. Recent repatriation initiatives have come to nothing. Rakhine State has been seriously affected by the armed conflict in Myanmar, provoking a humanitarian emergency there. Much of Rakhine State has come under the control of the Arakan Army, a well-organized group that has established its own administrative

structures but which is also accused of inflicting serious human rights violations on the Rohingya who remain in Myanmar. Most fundamentally, there is a need to ask whether repatriation can realistically take place while a military junta remains in place and the question of Rohingya citizenship goes unresolved.

Some questions for discussion:

- given the deteriorating situation in Rakhine State and in Myanmar generally, can prospects for the early, safe and voluntary return of Rohingya refugees now be entirely discounted?
- can any progress be anticipated in terms of replacing Myanmar's military junta, establishing an alternative and civilian administration, and resolving the issue of Rohingya citizenship?
- is there any risk of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh being subjected to forced repatriation, as has happened in the past, and if so, how can that scenario be averted?
- what position should UNHCR take in relation to the prospect of Rohingya refugee repatriation, and what messages should it be communicating on that issue to the authorities in Bangladesh and Myanmar, as well as other governments in the region and the donor community?
- in the context of Myanmar, what does the UNHCR notion of 'creating conditions amenable to return' imply in terms of citizenship, human rights and economic activity, and what role do the UN, ASEAN and other relevant actors have to play in that process?
- given that the Rohingya form a minority within Rakhine State, what perspectives do other residents have on the issue of Rohingya refugee return, and what can be done to foster good relations between the different communities?
- what role should the Arakan Army, the de facto authority in potential areas of return, play in discussions concerning the repatriation and reintegration of the refugee population?
- what practical measures can be taken to ensure a steady flow of relief goods between Bangladesh and Myanmar, as well as a resumption of trade between the two?

Improving conditions for refugees and local communities

The situation of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh has become increasingly precarious. Their camps are overcrowded, vulnerable to fires and extreme weather events. They are highly insecure, rife with gender-based violence, the trafficking of people and drugs, as well as targeted persecution by a number of armed and criminal groups, some of which have links with the military junta in Myanmar. The refugees are largely confined to the camps, deprived of freedom of movement, as well as education and livelihoods opportunities. A number of different organizations claim to represent the refugee population. In recent months, aid reductions by the US and other major donors have threatened to cut the rations and other assistance provided to the refugees. Local communities in refugee impacted areas of Cox's Bazar also experience high levels of poverty. Their livelihood opportunities are negatively affected both by the refugee presence and the economic restrictions placed on the camps. The resulting discontent is further aggravated by the higher degree of attention and support provided to the refugees by the international community. Recent cuts in international aid have also affected local Bangladeshi teachers who had been working in the camps, but who have now lost their jobs.

Some questions for discussion:

- could the government of Bangladesh be incentivized to lift the restrictions currently placed on Rohingya refugees, especially those relating to freedom of movement, access to education, training and livelihoods?
- what could be done to upgrade the camps in Bangladesh, with particular reference to issues such as shelter, water and sanitation, waste disposal, environmental management and fire prevention?
- how can the needs, abilities and aspirations of Rohingya women and girl refugees be addressed more effectively, and what can be done to ensure that they and other specific groups within the refugee population play a full part in decisions that affect their lives?
- how is the issue of refugee representation in the camps currently managed, and how might it be strengthened?
- what can be done to ensure that the rations and other relief items provided to Rohingya refugees are not reduced as a result of international aid cuts, and to

what extent - and with what advantages for refugees and local communities - could this form of assistance be replaced by the provision of cash payments?

- to what extent could assistance programmes currently implemented by international aid agencies be revised and made more efficient by scaling up the activities of government agencies as well as local and refugee-led associations?
- what does the future hold for those Rohingya refugees who have been relocated to Bhasan Char - an island in the Bay of Bengal – and how might their rights and welfare be protected most effectively?

Prospects for a sustainable and medium-term approach

It has become increasingly clear that the established approach to the Rohingya refugee situation in Bangladesh is not a viable one. The refugees have not been able to return to Myanmar as previously anticipated and seem highly unlikely to do so in the months or even years to come. Their quality of life in the camps is deteriorating, and their presence is having adverse consequences for local communities. Bangladesh continues to insist that the refugees should return to Myanmar at the earliest possible opportunity and has consequently been reluctant to consider any interventions that might imply that they will remain in the country for a prolonged period of time.

Some questions for discussion:

- are there any indications to suggest that Bangladesh is prepared to consider an alternative strategy in relation to Rohingya refugees, based on a recognition that the existing 'relief and repatriation' approach is no longer viable?
- what incentives could be provided that might encourage Bangladesh to adopt a sustainable, medium-term and livelihoods-oriented strategy towards the refugees, without compromising the prospects for their eventual and voluntary return to Myanmar?
- is concessionary financing available to support such an alternative strategy, where might funding for it be found and what level of resources will be needed to implement it?
- what role could organizations such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, UNDP, UNHCR and IOM play in the formulation and implementation of this

alternative strategy?

- what specific types of infrastructural, livelihoods, trade and other initiatives should be undertaken in order to bring tangible improvements to the welfare of both Rohingya refugees and local communities in Bangladesh?
- are there other ways in which local communities in Bangladesh could be incentivized to regard the longer-term presence of Rohingya refugees in beneficial terms, rather than as a threat to their interests?

Beyond Bangladesh

In addition to the refugees in Bangladesh, a substantial number of Rohingya are to be found in other Asian countries, including India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan. While they are not living in camps, they generally have a precarious legal status, are obliged to work in low-paid and exploitative jobs in the informal sector and are at risk of eviction, detention and deportation. Rohingya refugees attempting to reach such countries by boat often find themselves adrift at sea after being refused permission to disembark in the region's coastal states.

Some questions for discussion:

- what steps can be taken to strengthen the protection available to Rohingya refugees in Asian countries and what role can UNHCR and its partners play in that process?
- can those countries be incentivized to recognize that Rohingya refugees will be unlikely to opt for repatriation in the near future and should consequently be offered more secure rights in relation to their residence, labour market entitlements and access to public services?
- are there any risks involved in drawing international attention to the situation of Rohingya refugees in these countries, and how can they be mitigated?
- what can be done to ensure that Rohingya refugees travelling to Asian countries by boat are rescued at sea, promptly disembarked and have access to humane reception arrangements?

- how can the wider Rohingya diaspora be most effectively engaged in initiatives relating to the future of their compatriots in Bangladesh and other Asian countries?