

## Key Messages: Security Situation in the Rohingya Refugee Camps (For SEG Co-Chairs)

26 February 2023

Cox's Bazar

### Key messages

- **General:** Acknowledge the efforts that the Government is making to ensure the security of the refugee and host communities in and around the camps, as well as humanitarian staff. Underscore the need for relevant authorities to, within the boundaries of the law, prevent and respond to incidents of violence, criminality and other illegal activities with balanced and proportional measures to address the threat of a limited number of individuals engaging in violence and criminal activity rather than the whole community.
- **Potential impact:** If the precarious security situation in the camps continues, it may potentially:
  - amplify the negative rhetoric around Rohingya refugees in the run up to the General Elections;
  - reinforce Myanmar's negative perceptions of the Rohingya, and potentially hinder discussions around voluntary repatriation;
  - reduce the humanitarian organizations' ability to deliver critical services in the camps;
  - reinforce a negative perception by the international community of the Government security services;
  - negatively impact the number of high-profile visits to the camps, which is critical in ensuring that the Rohingya issue remains high on the international agenda and continues to receive funding.
- **Staff Security measures:** While security protocols for humanitarian workers have been strengthened, note the importance of the Government allowing the import of radio towers and radio handsets and other security hardware that is necessary for the UN to operate in the camps; as well as Government support to staff emergency medical response (including facilities and medical evacuation procedures).
- **Enhancing Government capacity:** Seek advice on what measures the Government is taking to ensure comprehensive response capacity, including inter alia infrastructure enhancement for faster deployment and an integrated emergency communication system for Government departments – between the Camps-in-Charge (CiCs), the Upazila Officers (UNOs), the RRRC, the APBn, fire services and others. Propose additional support for law and order personnel, possibly through capacity building and in undertaking joint risk and threat analysis, heat mapping, enhanced patrolling etc.
- **Alternatives to security measures:** Continue investing in education, skills development and livelihoods opportunities for refugees that bolster self-reliance, reduce the risk to fall prey to criminality and prepare for sustainable reintegration in Myanmar when it will be safe to return. Explore additional avenues such as financial transactions using bKash, which has demonstrated positive impact in support of vulnerable communities; as well as suggest a better refugee leadership selection process that is more inclusive and representative.

### Background

- **General and potential impact:** There are several intelligence and security bodies in Cox's Bazar, including different branches of the police, several intelligence services and the military. Specific to the camps, the Government has deployed three Armed Police Battalions (APBn) to ensure the safety and security of the refugees. The UN and humanitarian community have a strong working relationship with them all.

UNDSS reports suggest that security incidents have increased in the last weeks, including in daytime. Some of the incidents from end of December 2022 to February 2023 include several shooting incidents and exchange of gunfire between armed groups in the camps; Majhis shot or stabbed to death, including in daytime; an incident where a Majhi took shelter in an NGO office to escape from an armed group searching for him; and the abduction of a refugee volunteer who later managed to escape.

Majhis – appointed in the majority of cases initially by the Bangladesh Army without the participation of the community – may be targeted as they are suspected of working with the Government or supporting other groups, but the armed groups are reportedly also engaging in activities such as in extortion, kidnap for ransom, sexual abuse, etc.. Many refugees have expressed fear of armed groups operating in the camps.

The security concerns largely relate to specific armed groups operating inside and outside the camps. It is essential that any action targets them rather than broader security measures that places restrictions on the refugee community as a whole, as was done following the assassination of Mohibullah in September 2021 with limited impact.

- **Staff Security measures:** In January 2023, the UN Area Security Coordinator in consultation with the Area Security Management Team has put in place various measures to enhance staff security. Collaboration between the UN and NGOs is also ongoing through the Saving Lives Together (SLT) initiative. The NGO Platform is currently managing the NGO security WhatsApp group; UNDSS with the NGO Platform will explore the necessity of additional security measures.

The Emergency Telecommunications Sector (ETS), operated by WFP, has been working closely with UNDSS to expand the radio networks in Ukhiya and Teknaf. ETS has been prevented from importing radio towers, and UN agencies have been restricted from importing radio handsets and SatPhones.

- **Enhancing Government capacity:** There is no emergency communication mechanism for the CiCs to communicate with the fire services, the APBn, the RRRRC and others in the event that the internet and telephone services are disrupted. This is important not just in cases of security incidents but also during floods and fires.

While there are several intelligence and security agencies in Cox's Bazar, there is a clear need to coordinate efforts more effectively. The UN is working closely with the police, especially the APBn, in building their capacity in relation to refugee protection, humanitarian principles, gender- and child-protection issues, judicial processes, etc. They have also been provided with some equipment such as vehicles. However, the humanitarian community is not mandated or equipped to provide security-related training and does not participate in any security-coordination discussions of the Government.

- **Alternatives to security measures:** Refugees remain entirely dependent on humanitarian assistance and have limited access to income-generating activities. Providing support to livelihoods and skills development opportunities creates meaningful engagement for the community and mitigates risk of resorting to negative coping mechanisms. In addition, building on the success of financial transactions using bKash in other vulnerable communities in Bangladesh, providing a cash alternative to the refugee community enhances their ability to meet their needs in dignity as well as prepares them for return to Myanmar. Finally, a more inclusive selection process for refugee leaders/Majhis would strengthen their legitimacy within the community, increase their neutrality, and ultimately increase their safety.

END