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MEDIA RELEASE

Edging Closer Towards a Crisis Within a Crisis

Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration concludes its ninth meeting, held in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

The ninth meeting of the Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM) was held in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 19-20 February 2020. The support and assistance of Government of Bangladesh (GoB) officials, the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) at the University of Dhaka, IOM and UNHCR is gratefully acknowledged.

Prior to the meeting, a group of ADFM participants paid a second visit to the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Our first visit, in October 2018, enabled us to assess the risks of trafficking, smuggling and related exploitation arising from the mass displacement of Rohingya the previous year, which led to the ADFM publishing [Avoiding a Crisis Within a Crisis](#) in March 2019. Our second visit enabled us to update this assessment and report to the ninth ADFM Meeting.

The Rohingya displacement

While conditions in the camps in Cox's Bazar are now much improved—thanks to the GoB, generous donors and humanitarian agencies—the risks of further people movement, trafficking and the prospect of loss of life, remain high, and are likely to grow with time.

Boat movements have resumed in the past 18 months and may be intensifying. Refugees indicate that agents continue to recruit prospective passengers in the camps. In-country people movements also appear to be occurring, with refugees being used in domestic help, agriculture and fisheries, and the sex industry. Abuse, harassment and exploitation of women and children are of particular concern.

Over time, conditions and sentiment in the already over-crowded camps are likely to deteriorate. While the joint GoB-UNHCR registration exercise places the total refugee population at 854,704 individuals and 185,903 families¹, this is estimated to be rising by approximately 29,000 live births each year. Tensions between host community and previously registered refugees, with more recent arrivals, have contributed to the GoB decision to construct fences around the camps with the stated intention of maintaining security. Tube wells are being dug deeper, indicating a falling water table and greater water scarcity.

Overlying all of this are minimal livelihood, educational and recreational opportunities with which to occupy time. As the ADFM Secretariat found 18 months ago, providing education and opportunities for skills-building and livelihoods remain critical to combatting idleness and diminishing hope, preparing the Rohingya for repatriation, and reducing vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation.

Removal or substantial mitigation of these risks continues to lie in the voluntary, safe and dignified return and repatriation of Rohingya to their homes in Myanmar, a process plagued by serious security, political, policy and procedural problems. Until and unless these are addressed the lives of 850,000 or more displaced in Bangladesh will hang in precarious balance.

¹ as at 31 December 2019

On a positive note, the January announcement of the GoB of a Myanmar curriculum education pilot for Rohingya children in the camps is very welcome and provides an excellent opportunity both for their protection and for brighter futures. Also, the safe, orderly and sustainable dismantlement of internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Rakhine State can build confidence among refugees that conditions may be conducive for repatriation in time.

At the ADFM's ninth meeting, a number of proposals for action were identified, particularly on advancing voluntary repatriation, mitigating the risks of trafficking in persons, and responding to the short and medium term development needs of all populations in Cox's Bazar and the Rakhine. These include:

- Concrete support to the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return and reintegration of those displaced, within the framework of existing agreements, including by using the implementation of the national IDP camp closures and a mapping of independent returns as litmus tests to build trust, confidence and credibility. A third party presence, such as one provided by ASEAN, could increase confidence in the conduciveness of conditions for return in time;
- Building a comprehensive picture of trafficking related activity emanating from Cox's Bazar and Rakhine State, assessing and boosting anti-trafficking law enforcement capability, and prioritising cross-border initiatives to address human trafficking and drug smuggling;
- Collaboration between the Education Ministries of Bangladesh and Myanmar to support the implementation of the Myanmar curriculum education pilot in the camps in Cox's Bazar;
- Developing opportunities for building the camp-based economy, including and benefiting host communities, and linking to export markets where appropriate; and
- Conducting a feasibility study of opportunities for cross-border economic cooperation, investment and development focussed on Cox's Bazar and Rakhine State.

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the weeks since the ADFM's meeting in Dhaka and time in Cox's Bazar only amplifies the importance of ADFM ideas and recommendations, both broad and specific, such as access to clear and accurate information online. We join others in stressing the importance of the international community keeping the Rohingya and other displaced populations front of mind as they scale up and coordinate the COVID-19 response.

Climate-related displacement

By its very nature, climate change is multi-faceted, inter-linked and transcends national boundaries. Global warming leads to rising sea levels, desertification and extreme weather conditions, changes ecosystems and affects all aspects of human settlement. While the issue of climate-related displacement is regarded as an imminent threat by some countries, for many others, including Bangladesh, it is already an existential reality.

It is essential that regional stakeholders be brought together to reach collective understandings and take cooperative action, rather than confine themselves to national policies and plans of action, most of which do not take sufficient account of displacement. The 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) has identified climate as a driver of migration and encourages countries to work together to resolve the issue.

The ADFM joins other organisations in suggesting a proactive and practical approach to addressing climate-related displacement and migration. As a starting point, IOM, in partnership with the ADFM Secretariat, could convene a series of conversations to improve mapping of hotspots and risk scenarios in the region for climate-related displacement. These conversations would apply a climate-vulnerability lens to displaced populations and conduct table-top exercises on key case studies and hypotheticals. This process could better inform national plans and responses of regional institutions such as the Bali Process, APEC and ASEAN.

Role of the Bali Process

In order to respond more effectively to displacement crises and other forced migration issues in the region, the ADFM Secretariat believes the Bali Process must revitalise and sharpen its strategy in time for its 20th anniversary in 2022. The ADFM Secretariat will propose to Bali Process Co-Chairs that, at their Ministerial Conference later in 2020, Bali Process Ministers commission an assessment of future regional priorities for forced migration responses, including analysis of progress of Bali Process initiatives since the 2016 Bali Declaration.

The agenda and participant list of the ninth ADFM meeting are available on the CPD website (www.cpd.org.au).

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