



## EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO THE FIRE IN KUTUPALONG BALUKHALI REFUGEE CAMPS ON 22 MARCH 2021

*877,710 Rohingya refugees reside in 34 extremely congested camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf Upazilas of Cox's Bazar District. Over 700,000 of these refugees arrived in the weeks following violence in the northern part of Myanmar's Rakhine State in August 2017.*

*Under the leadership of the Government of Bangladesh, Rohingya refugees and the most vulnerable among the host community continue to receive protection and assistance through the humanitarian response, while synergies are built with wider development assistance efforts ongoing in Cox's Bazar District.*

## Overview

In the afternoon of 22 March 2021, a devastating fire broke out in Kutupalong Balukhali refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. It lasted until the early hours of 23 March. Assessments so far have found:

- 11 confirmed refugee deaths, 102 currently injured (medical assistance provided to 400 others so far), 339 unaccounted for.
- Some 45,000 refugees displaced.
- Over 9,500 shelters destroyed or damaged.
- Over 1,500 facilities damaged including hospitals, distribution points, and learning centres.
- One UNHCR registration centre destroyed.

The fire started in Camp 8W, and within a short period spread to Camps 8E, 9 and 10, all of which are IOM-managed camps. Many refugees living in adjacent camps evacuated their shelters temporarily.

Refugee and members of the host community were the first responders, the local fire department arrived shortly after and the fire was contained in the early hours of the morning. The Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) and law enforcement authorities also quickly mobilized to support the response in the area.

## Coordination

Under the lead of the RRRC, humanitarian partners were onsite from soon after the onset of the fire to assess the damage and establish a coordinated response. The Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) is coordinating the humanitarian response through the ten sectors in Cox's Bazar.

On 23 March, the Secretary of the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR) visited the affected camps with the RRRC, leadership from the local administration, and security agencies. Following this, a meeting took place in the camps with representatives from UN agencies and NGOs to discuss coordination.

## Response

### Security

The Government of Bangladesh's law enforcement and security forces, Armed Police Battalion (APBn) and Army, deployed personnel to maintain public order, ensure crowd control and protect the possessions of people living in the area impacted by the fire from potential theft and looting during and after the fire. The police deployed additional 150 personnel.

### Site Management, Shelter and Non-Food Items (NFI)

- 370 trained refugee Safety Unit Volunteers from across the camps (including those not affected) were mobilized to help extinguish the fire as well as creating fire breaks where possible, using equipment provided by UNHCR.
- Two three-wheeler firefighting vehicles were mobilized by UNHCR partner BDRCS.
- While the fire spread through IOM-managed camps, over 2,600 families totalling some 12,000 individuals took shelter with relatives in UNHCR-managed camps. UNHCR liaised with WFP to ensure that these families were provided with water, high energy biscuits (HEB) and hot meals.
- As of 24 March, only 2,229 of the above-mentioned 2,600 families remain sheltered in UNHCR-managed camps, totaling 9,431 individuals. The remaining estimated 35,000 displaced refugees are in IOM-managed camps in temporary shelter.
- So far, UNHCR handed over 3,000 blankets, 14,500 solar lamps, 7,000 kitchen sets and 7,000 mosquito nets to IOM for distribution
- UNHCR partners will deploy over sixty personnel including engineers to support the Shelter/NFI sector in the affected camps.

### Medical

- Through ICRC, medical supplies were provided to treat burn patients.
- UNHCR partners Relief International and Food for the Hungry with Medical Teams International deployed mobile medical teams well equipped with supplies normally pre-positioned at facilities within the camps, to provide emergency first aid.
- UNHCR health facilities have provided care to 36 refugees injured by the fire.
- Volunteer community health workers from the refugee community are helping to refer affected refugees to critical support services.
- Over 1,000 refugees have received psychosocial first aid. Mental health and psychosocial support staff were deployed to support those affected by the fire. Staff are also available to support frontline responders.

## Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

UNHCR supported the response through partners OXFAM, NGO Forum and BRAC who:

- Distributed 49,000L water and 7,000 jerry cans to refugee families.
- Constructed 20 emergency latrines in affected areas.
- Constructed emergency tap stands in public places to provide clean and safe water to thousands of victims.
- Repaired water networks to bring safe water to affected families, which is ongoing.
- Distributed 500,000 aqua tabs among families to ensure the water collected and stored is safe to drink.
- Operated four water tankers to deliver safe water to areas where displaced persons are congregating.

## Protection

- UNHCR partners identified 669 lost children; 647 have been reunified with their caregivers while 22 remain in family-care.
- Refugee volunteer groups have been mobilized to assist affected families. Community Outreach Members (COMS) have been fully engaged in the relief work. In addition, UNHCR supported female religious teachers' groups and other community groups to provide shelter to those affected.
- Protection focal points are present in the camp to monitor refugees' safety and security, to identify needs and gaps and to provide protection by presence.
- UNHCR shared population statistics for the affected camps, age group and gender disaggregated data, with other actors including IOM and the government assisting in planning and reporting on the response.
- UNHCR is preparing the reissuance of registration documents to those who lost them in the fire. Temporarily aid items are being distributed to all affected refugees including those without documentation.
- 28 Multi-Purpose Centers are used as safe shelters. Child protection help desk are being set up at the same location.
- Coordinated messages from sectors on available support services are being disseminated in the affected and surrounding camps through partners, refugee volunteers and refugee leaders (Imams and members of Community Based Organizations) using messages as developed for the Interactive Voice Response (IVR) mechanism. The messages cover health, child protection, GBV, PSEA and registration. IVR has started broadcasting calls with recorded messages.

***UNHCR remains on standby to provide additional support to IOM and other humanitarian partners in the ongoing emergency response.***

## CONTACT

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