Shelter has been a critical need for over 825,000 refugees. At the beginning of the influx, new arrivals often stayed in the open or lived with other refugees and among local communities or formed new settlements. UNHCR responded to their needs for shelter by distributing Emergency Shelter Kits, followed with other materials to assist refugees upgrade their shelters as well as tie-down kits in preparation for the monsoon season. Overcrowding and lack of space still remains a key challenge.

Many of the settlement areas are prone to flooding and landslides due to their hilly locations in Cox’s Bazar. UNHCR is collaborating with IOM and WFP through an engineering platform called the Site Maintenance Engineering Project (SMEP) to develop land and infrastructure across all refugee settlements. SMEP is working on heavier engineering projects across all camps. UNHCR and partners have constructed over 700km of roads, footpaths, stairs, drainages, and slope stabilization structures to mitigate risks and designed and built stronger and better-built shelters. Additionally, UNHCR and partner agencies continue to construct facilities and improved infrastructure in the settlements. The Government of Bangladesh has approved a mid-term shelter strategy (MTS strategy), as assistance in the refugee settlements is shifting to medium-term planning. As part of the MTS strategy, UNHCR is advocating for the construction of transitional shelters. With innovative shelter alternatives to address spatial constraints and congestion in the settlements. These shelters would need to be built with specific site plans, in which UNHCR is engaging the authorities. UNHCR and BRAC established plants to treat bamboo which is used for mid-term shelters. Treated bamboo may last for 10-12 years by protecting it from fungi, insects and other biological and physical elements. The Shelter and Site planning team is continuously working to improve the living condition of the households, neighborhoods, blocks and camp levels with civil infrastructure and communal building projects.

Highly congested settlements and limited options for relocation to safer areas pose health and protection risks;

Site management needs to be strengthened to ensure protection is fully integrated in its approach at all levels;

The settlements and their infrastructure are extremely fragile and need more disaster-proofing, especially for cyclone preparedness.

UNHCR’s Transitional Shelter incorporates disaster risk reduction elements in its basic design with a steel frame structure that can withstand high winds. It meets the minimum SPHERE standard for covered shelter space and therefore contributes to better safety, privacy and dignity of life. UNHCR and others will continue to advocate for a sustainable mid-term shelter strategy, more land to decongest overcrowded settlements and relocate refugees from areas with natural hazards, as well as improve the areas already provided by the Government of Bangladesh. UNHCR and other actors are honing coordination and developing wider partnerships to improve shelters and living conditions.
UNHCR is sincerely grateful for the additional support received from many individuals, foundations, and companies worldwide including the United States of America.

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