

MEDIA RELEASE

Regional response critical to address the crisis within a crisis unfolding in Myanmar and Bangladesh

Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration assessment finds high risk of human trafficking, migrant smuggling and related exploitation affecting Rohingya and Bangladeshi populations

A new assessment from the Secretariat of the Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM) highlights the significant and intensifying risks of Rohingya displaced in Cox's Bazar, and Bangladeshi nationals living in the area, falling victim to human trafficking, migrant smuggling and related exploitation.

"Bangladesh and its international partners should be commended for their generous and effective humanitarian response to the crisis to date," said Steve Wong, Deputy Chief Executive of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia and ADFM Co-Convenor, "but more needs to be done to support them, particularly in addressing protection concerns."

Violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar, in August 2017 caused an unprecedented number of Rohingya residents to flee to safety in Cox's Bazar; with 500,000 arriving within one month. It is now estimated that around one million Rohingya are living in the camps in Bangladesh. As with any large displaced population faced with few alternatives, people are already beginning to take risks to seek a better future elsewhere. Movements are increasing - including by boat - and they are, and will continue to, affect the whole region.

The ADFM assessment, *Avoiding A Crisis Within A Crisis*, identifies risk factors affecting the likelihood of human trafficking, migrant smuggling and related exploitation. The risk factors and vulnerabilities are already affecting movement, and will only intensify unless steps are taken.

Human trafficking has long been a challenge facing Bangladesh and its citizens, including those living in the Cox's Bazar area. The August 2017 refugee influx to the area greatly increased the size of the population that criminal networks can target.

The most effective way to reduce the risk of trafficking among refugee communities is to provide a long-term solution to their situation. "All eyes are now on Myanmar," Travers McLeod, CEO of the Centre for Policy Development and ADFM Co-Convenor. "The Government needs to work harder towards the safe, dignified, voluntary and sustainable repatriation of the Rohingya to Rakhine State. What's more, sustained regional action will bolster the response on the ground and the safety of those who have fled."

The assessment makes several recommendations to avoid a crisis within a crisis. Sriprapha Petchamesree from the Institute for Human Rights and Peace Studies at Mahidol University, and ADFM Co-Convenor, explained: "Supporting inclusive development and strengthening counter-trafficking efforts on both sides of the Myanmar-Bangladesh border are important. Similarly, improving coordination of data and information on trafficking risks and incidents among protection actors on the ground, and providing livelihood and education opportunities for refugees while they are displaced, would significantly help."

Taking up these ideas would both mitigate risks related to exploitation and onward movement, and also improve conditions for everyone in Cox's Bazar in the medium term. It would also assist in preparing the Rohingya for repatriation, when conditions are conducive. "Active involvement and coordination of regional actors, such as ASEAN and the Bali Process, as well as key regional countries, will make a critical difference" said Tri Nuke Pudjiastuti, Deputy Chair for Social Sciences and Humanities at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, and ADFM Co-Convenor.

The assessment is the result of desk and field research conducted by the ADFM Secretariat between March and November 2018. The research team spoke with approximately 180 individuals, including members of the Bangladesh national government and local administration, police and coast guard; international and national non-government organisations; and Bangladeshi and Rohingya individuals living in and around the camps in Teknaf and Ukhia sub-districts of Cox's Bazar.

The ADFM is a Track II regional forum for independent and inclusive policy development on forced migration issues, formed in 2015. The ADFM has met seven times in the region; its next meeting is scheduled to be held in Jakarta, Indonesia in June 2019.

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