

## THE PLIGHT OF THE BURMESE MUSLIMS

**Some hid in rice fields, others ate only leaves while making the long journey by foot across the border into Bangladesh.**

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**Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh** - Outside this town by the Bay of Bengal, we kept bumping into fresh arrivals when we visited the camps for Rohingya refugees fleeing a security crackdown in neighbouring Myanmar.

Many of them said they were from the village of Kearipara in Myanmar. From the sounds of it, that village has been utterly devastated.

All of them shared similar stories: watching family members get murdered, hiding without eating for days, and having their homes burned down.

Several told us about having to sell their valuables - rings, piercings, earrings, whatever they had on them - to facilitate a safe passage into Bangladesh.

The route, which was always difficult and deadly, has become even more problematic.

After thousands of Rohingya were found stranded and starving off the coast of southern Thailand in the middle of last year, widespread international coverage forced the hands of governments of the region to crack down on a network of human traffickers who were exploiting the desperate refugees for cash.

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But those very traffickers were also paradoxically the Muslim Rohingya's only hope to make it out of predominantly Buddhist Myanmar and get on the circuitous trek that would take them through Bangladesh and Thailand into the relatively safe haven of Malaysia.

Now, just getting across the border to Bangladesh is a tough proposition for the Rohingya.

The refugees we met described hiding in rice fields for days. Some didn't eat. Others ate only leaves they found in the forests on the hills surrounding the border.

They advanced a few minutes at a time, taking care to stop and check every few hundred metres to make sure the Myanmar army or border guards weren't lying in wait - making a long journey by foot even longer.

Arriving in Bangladesh didn't mean the ordeal was over. If they were caught by the authorities, some would be allowed through by the border guards, others would be turned back.

Every few hundred metres there were checkpoints manned by armed patrols. Next to each of them would be one or two Rohingya families who'd been caught.

Would the soldiers show clemency? Or would they be returned to the heart of the violence they were fleeing? They sat by the side of the road, unsure of their fate.

Tens of thousands have managed to get into Bangladesh. Many of them are in the unofficial Rohingya refugee camps near the tourist town of Cox's Bazar.

Their hosts are refugees themselves with little to offer in terms of food or shelter.

But the community was pulling together to do what they could, faced with the suffering of their

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fellow Rohingya.

The new arrivals were grateful for whatever support they could find, but seething with resentment at the lack of action by the international community.

### **Ethnic cleansing proof**

As far as they are concerned, the world has decided that the Rohingya are expendable.

From the Bangladesh side of the border, the evidence of what the UN has called a campaign of ethnic cleansing in Myanmar seems strong.

Aung San Suu Kyi, in response, has said that blame shouldn't be cast until all the facts are known.

That's fair enough.

But one of the known facts is that the Myanmar government won't let journalists or independent observers enter the areas where large-scale violence is believed to be taking place.

Why keep journalists out if Myanmar authorities have nothing to hide?

Source: Al Jazeera News

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