



SIX YEARS OF SOLIDARITY  
**Development and Peace —  
Caritas Canada's response  
to the Rohingya crisis**



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and Peace**  
CARITAS CANADA

In partnership with Caritas Bangladesh, Development and Peace — Caritas Canada has been responding to the Rohingya refugee crisis since it began in 2017. The complex, protracted crisis has left nearly a million people languishing in crowded refugee camps and over 1.4 million people in need of aid.

## *A persecuted people*

The Rohingya are a Muslim people from the Rakhine State of Burma (Myanmar). Like many of the country's minorities, they "have faced systematic disenfranchisement, discrimination, and targeted persecution... for decades."<sup>1</sup> On August 25, 2017, after an alleged attack by a Rohingya militia, Burmese armed forces reportedly unleashed a slew of mass killings, rapes, arson and immolations.<sup>2</sup>

To UN Human Rights Commissioner, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, this situation had seemed "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing."<sup>3</sup> In 2018, Canada became the first country to recognize this oppression as genocide.<sup>4</sup> This matter is the subject of a case at the International Court of Justice<sup>5</sup> in which Canada will intervene.<sup>6</sup>

## *An unprecedented exodus*

Fleeing the violence, over 700,000 Rohingyas entered Bangladesh within weeks. Bangladesh had previously absorbed smaller streams of Rohingya refugees, but this was a flood. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said her country could have chosen "to save their lives or to close the border and let them face ethnic cleansing." She said they chose the former "for the sake of humanity."<sup>7</sup>

Many Bangladeshis, themselves often desperately poor, opened their homes and hearts, providing the refugees lifesaving shelter and food. Pope Francis characterized this response as embodying "the spirit of generosity and solidarity which is a distinguishing mark of Bangladeshi society."<sup>8</sup>

*"We were happy to welcome the refugees. First, they stayed in our homes. Then, we even used our own bamboo and felled our own trees to build shelters for them."*

— **Mumtaz Begum, 45,  
Palong Khali Union,  
Cox's Bazar District**



*"Every time we reached what we thought was a safe place, the army attacked, and we'd have to run again. I gave the last of my savings to a boatman who brought me into Bangladesh."*

— **Salim Ullah, 35, Majhi (Rohingya leader),  
Kutupalong Refugee Camp**

## Density and deprivation

The Rohingya refugees now live in 33 camps across Cox's Bazar District and on Bhasan Char Island. Of these, the Kutupalong-Balukhali camp is now the single largest refugee settlement in the world. As of June 2023, there were 961,729 refugees in the camps. Over half of them are children.<sup>9</sup>

Around 44% of the people are in the usually economically active 18-to-59 age range, but most of them cannot work. Intent on repatriating the refugees, the Bangladeshi government does not want to lend the camps any air of permanence. So, it restricts working rights and movement; forbids the use of durable construction materials; and does not permit formal schooling beyond Grade 3. The shelters also lack power and plumbing. This leaves the refugees wholly dependant on humanitarian aid for survival.

*“I love playing football with my friends in the camp, but I wish I could go to school,”* said 10-year-old Irfan, whose most prized possession is his red Manchester United soccer jersey. *“I would like to see the world some day.”*



*“A refugee camp is not a place where children can thrive. They are traumatized, they have almost no schooling, they are cut off from the world.”*

— **Mosharraf Hossain,**  
**protection services manager,**  
**Caritas Bangladesh**



## *A sustained, multifaceted, holistic response*

Canada has followed up its early moral stand on the Rohingya crisis with substantial commitments.<sup>10</sup> As its long-trusted partner, Development and Peace — Caritas Canada has received **\$5.35 million in funding from Global Affairs Canada**. We have invested an **additional \$840,000, thanks to generous Canadians**.

This money has allowed us to sustain 11 broad-spectrum projects by Caritas Bangladesh, which was among the first organizations to respond to the crisis. Over the years, these projects have **served 99,600 people** in the refugee and host communities.

### With Global Affairs Canada grants, we have provided:



**Shelter; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services; and non-food items** (including 25,000 stoves and cooking gas cylinders) to **34,625 refugees** in the early phase of the crisis



**Shelter and site improvements** (including solar streetlamps) to **40,366 refugees** through four one-year projects



**Food, non-food items, shelter and WASH services** to **18,126 refugees** in the early phase



**Cash-for-work opportunities and skills training** to **1,286 people** in the host community

### Donations from generous Canadians have permitted the provision of:



**Healthcare** to **3,327 people** in the Rohingya and host communities



**Cash assistance** to **1,500 refugees** during the COVID-19 pandemic



**Education and protection services** to **664 Rohingya minors** and **456 parents** through two multipurpose child and adolescent centres

## Some examples of our impact



### Roofs over heads

Flimsy tarpaulin and bamboo being the only materials permitted in construction, shelters must be built and maintained to high standards. With Global Affairs Canada funding, Caritas Bangladesh has trained hundreds of refugees in assembling engineer-designed shelters with enhanced ventilation, more stable frames, better weather-resistance and improved privacy and accessibility.

This has given many, including women like 24-year-old Jigar, a source of income and a sense of purpose. *“As a skilled labourer, I build up to 100 shelters a month,”* she said. *“People are very thankful and respect me for the work I do.”*



### A contagion contained

Despite cramped conditions, heavy rains and the suspension of regular aid activities, there were no catastrophic outbreaks of COVID-19 in the camps. This was thanks to timely action by agencies like Caritas Bangladesh, whose efforts we supported with a special allocation from our COVID-19 Solidarity Fund.

We supported the installation of handwashing stations; the distribution of 114,080 health information leaflets to 225,000 people; the deployment of isolation facilities; and the disbursal of cash grants to 1,500 people in the host community.



### Smiles on faces

In the safe spaces of two multipurpose child and adolescent centres, children express themselves and receive basic instruction and health information through play, art and song. Counselling is also offered. An instructor reported that the children’s drawings had become cheerier, and they were becoming more responsive and receptive.

*“It’s nice and clean here, better than outside,”* said Mohammed Yaris (left), 10, and Razia Akter, 12. He loves reading; she loves singing. Both were rooting for Neymar’s Brazil during the 2022 soccer World Cup. Their verdict on the centre was unequivocal. *“This is a joyful place!”*



### Helping the hosts

Initially welcoming, many poor local Bangladeshis lost precarious work to the influx of cheaper labour. The expropriation of their lands for the camps, also fuelled resentment.

We therefore supported host families with cash-for-work initiatives; agriculture and gardening training; and small business training and support. This helped improve incomes and food security; restore the environment; and repair community relations.

Until these programs boosted his income, Mohammed Alam, 45, of Dhuliagona Village, felt that refugees were unfairly favoured. *“Now, I have ten goats and five cows,”* he reported proudly.

## *A focus on women*

Caritas Bangladesh makes special efforts to reach the most vulnerable subgroups, including exceptionally impoverished families; women-headed households; and households with elderly or handicapped people. In keeping with Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy,<sup>11</sup> an additional focus has been on empowering women. This has included applying a gender lens to planning; adequately targeting women; involving and training women in leadership, technical and decision-making roles; offering protection services to women and girls; and privileging women's security and privacy needs in designing shelters.

In particular, the transitional shelter assistance program funded by Global Affairs Canada has been found to have increased women's and girls' participation in shelter construction/rehabilitation; improved their skills, knowledge and self-reliance; enabled them to voice their needs with respect to shelter design; enhanced their sense of privacy, especially in bathing spaces; made them feel safer; and addressed the needs of female-headed households, elderly women, women with disabilities and adolescent girls.



## *Lessons and recommendations*

Over the past six years, we have learned that community-based approaches should always be prioritized. Early in the pilot phase of a shelter project, a participatory approach resulted in better use of people's skills; more cohesion; and improved community ownership and pride. Attentiveness to cultural norms also helped counter women's and girls' vulnerabilities sensitively; tailor communications effectively; and make all programming culture- and gender-sensitive.

Remaining deeply concerned for the refugees and their hosts, Caritas Bangladesh and its international partners including Development and Peace — Caritas Canada recommend<sup>12</sup> that:

- **The Rohingya crisis remain a priority even amid other urgencies, including the war in Ukraine**
- **Countries, including Canada, sustain and increase funding for the Rohingya crisis**
- **The Government of Bangladesh allow the refugees wider access to work, formal education, the right to movement and durable shelters**
- **Bangladesh maintain its admirable support to the Rohingya refugees and those who serve them**
- **The international community secure Burma's cooperation for the safe, voluntary repatriation of Rohingya refugees**

## A vote of thanks

Development and Peace — Caritas Canada, Caritas Bangladesh, and the Rohingya and Bangladeshi people we serve are deeply grateful to our untiringly generous donors, Global Affairs Canada and the Government of Canada. With the UNHCR's latest Joint Response Plan calling for \$876 million<sup>13</sup> in funding, the need for support and solidarity remains great.

*“Caritas Bangladesh is doing a lot that is highly appreciated. And this is possible only because of international support, especially from Canada’s government and people. Please continue supporting us. I thank you and pray for you all.”*

— **The Most Rev. Lawrence Subrato Howlader,**  
**Archbishop of Chattogram**



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