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Plan to move Rohingya to remote island prompts fears of human catastrophe

Rights groups have warned that a Bangladesh government proposal to move Rohingya refugees to a flood-prone island could have fatal consequences

[](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/feb/02/bangladesh-government-plan-move-rohingya-remote-island-human-catastrophe%22%20%5Cl%20%22img-1)

 Rohingya at a refugee camp in Teknaf, near Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh, watch a news bulletin about government plans to relocate them to the island of Thengar Char. Photograph: A.M.

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The Bangladeshi government’s revised proposals to relocate tens of thousands of [Rohingya](https://www.theguardian.com/world/rohingya) refugees to a remote island that appeared only eight years ago, and floods at high tide, threaten to trigger a humanitarian catastrophe, rights groups have warned.

Members of the Rohingya Muslim community, who fled from Myanmar to neighbouring [Bangladesh](https://www.theguardian.com/world/bangladesh) to escape persecution, said they were so fearful of the planned relocation they would consider returning to their homeland.

Government officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, have described the low-lying island of Thengar Char, in south-eastern Bangladesh, as uninhabitable.

The proposed relocation of the Rohingya to the island – [first mooted by the government in 2015](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/14/un-concern-at-bangladesh-plan-to-move-thousands-of-rohingya-to-flooded-island), when the UN said the scheme would be logistically challenging – was resurrected last weekend, when plans appeared in a circular on a government website. The statement made no mention of what might be done to prepare the island for habitation or any potential timing.

On Wednesday, the Bangladesh foreign minister Shahriar Alam said Rohingya refugees were being relocated to Thengar Char to help them access “improved humanitarian services”.

Having [fled Myanmar in the face of persecution](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/10/65000-rohingya-flee-from-myanmar-to-bangladesh-following-crackdown-un) by its military and majority Buddhists, an estimated 400,000 Rohingya Muslims have lived in Bangladesh for decades. An [additional 65,000 Rohingya](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/10/65000-rohingya-flee-from-myanmar-to-bangladesh-following-crackdown-un) have arrived since October, according to the UN, fleeing violent retaliation after the [killings of nine Myanmar border police](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/10/myanmar-nine-police-killed-insurgents-bangladesh-border).

About 33,000 Rohingya live in two official camps in the southern coastal district of Cox’s Bazar, a tourist resort with a beach that stretches for 120 miles, making it the world’s longest.

Abdul Korim, who fled to Bangladesh in 2007, said he would go back to [Myanmar](https://www.theguardian.com/world/myanmar)if the proposed relocation went through. He said he would be at the mercy of cyclones and floods and have no means to support his family.

“For the Rohingya, Myanmar is extremely unsafe,” said Korim, a construction worker who lives in Cox’s Bazar. “Anyone can be murdered or raped or arrested just because he or she is Rohingya. Still, with my four children and wife I will decide to go back to Myanmar if the Bangladesh government wants to forcibly relocate us to the island.

“I work as a day wage construction worker in Cox’s bazar and somehow I manage to support my family of seven members here. [On] Thengar Char, where even arable land does not exist, life will be very hard for us. Also, I know that the island is vulnerable to storms and tidal waves. In no situation will we go to that unsafe place.”

With no support from the local government or the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN refugee agency, most Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh do menial jobs, have no access to basic amenities, and are forced to live hand-to-mouth.

Zafor Alom, 45, who has lived in Nayapara refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar for nine years, said: “With my family I will take a boat from Bangladesh, aiming to go to Malaysia and Indonesia, where we will surely not be rejected. We know the [illegal] sea route is fraught with life threatening risks. I am ready to take such risks, yet we will not go to Thengar Char.”

Kurban Ali, 41, a rickshaw puller, who fled in 2012, said: “No Rohingya is willing to move to that island. But, as refugees, we do not have a choice … We have been caught between the devil and the deep sea.”

A committee including government officials from Cox’s Bazar has been established to advance the relocation plans before repatriating the refugees. The committee will help identify the refugees and organise their transfer to Thengar Char.

The government order, issued on 26 January, said Rohingya Muslims would be relocated to the island to prevent them from “intermingling” with Bangladeshi citizens. It said they should be arrested or forcibly sent to Thengar Char iffound outside the assigned area.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, government officials from Noakhali district, where the 30,000-hectare island is located, said the area around the estuary of river Meghna becomes completely flooded during rainy season. They said the island is vulnerable to cyclones and high tides and described it as uninhabitable.

“During the high tide the whole island goes under several feet of water. The land is extremely unstable. It’s impossible for the Rohingyas to set up any type of shack or house and live here,” said one land department officer.

Phil Robertson, deputy director of the Asia division of Human Rights Watch, said the plan threatened a human rights catastrophe and a humanitarian disaster.

“Bangladesh should be looking for ways to better protect the Rohingya rather than coming up with punitive plans that will put their lives at risk,” said Robertson. “Imagine if they are moved en masse to that low-lying island, with its mud flats and sodden plains, and a typhoon hits? One really has to wonder, where is the sense of compassion in Dhaka for the Rohingya, who remain one of the most oppressed peoples in Asia?

“UN agencies and government donors assisting Bangladesh with the latest wave of Rohingya refugees should tell PM Sheikh Hasina that this proposal to move them to Thengar Char island is absolutely unacceptable and they will not support it.”

The Bangladesh government blames Rohingya refugees for deteriorating law and order in the country’s south-east, claims rejected by Professor Chowdhury Rafiqul Abrar, who directs the Dhaka-based Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit.

“The authorities have not provided any compelling evidence,” said Abrar. “Like any other group, some wayward elements may exist within the Rohingya community who are involved in crime. But it is unfair to label the entire community as criminal.”

Alam said the Rohingya would be sent back to Myanmar as soon as possible: “The Rohingya refugees live in extremely congested colonies now. Our army has been tasked to make Thengar Char livable. Once they have finished their work and set up the camps in the island, the refugees will be relocated there.”