

# New difficulties and despair: Rohingya people share their concerns following the tragic fire of 22 March 2021

“ Big smoke flaring up. Scared people panicking all around, running, screaming, and calling out, ‘Fire! Fire!’ Many rushing to save their own lives, their families lives and whatever belongings they could put their hands on. ”

*Source:* To understand the concerns of the Rohingya community after the devastating fires at three camps (Camp 9, 8W and 8E) BBC Media Action conducted four focus-group discussions (FGDs) at Camp 8E and Camp 11 on 31 March 2021. The FGDs included ten males, 19-60 years old and ten females, 20-50 years old from the Rohingya community. Researchers from the Centre for Peace and Justice, Brac University (CPJ) conducted one focus group discussion on March 31 with 35 Rohingya youth who work as CPJ volunteers and are also members of community-based organisations that helped respond to the fire. This article is a joint publication, written by BBC Media Action, Translators without Borders in collaboration with CPJ.

Such was the scenario described by FGD participants. Most said that it was the time of *johor* (early afternoon prayer) when they saw or heard about the fire. Female participants were preparing or were already praying in their houses and most male participants were out of home for work, collecting relief items or praying at the mosque.

“ We only saw fire around us and there was no scope to fight against that. It spread and burnt everything within a blink of the eye.”

– Rohingya male, age 22, Camp 09

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the Post-fire Situation

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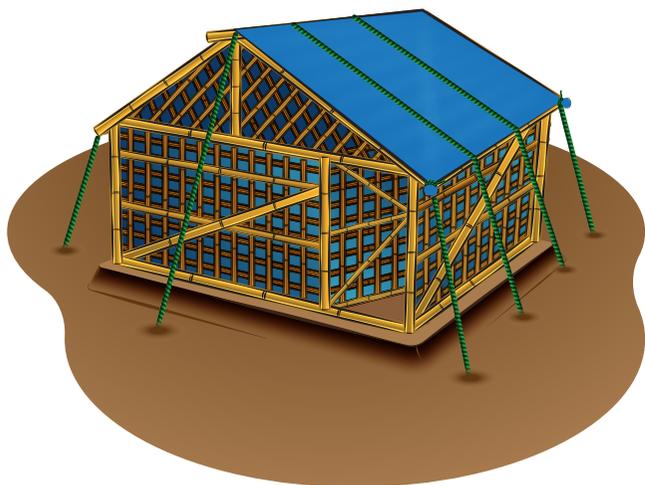
Wednesday, April 7, 2021



While some female participants at first thought the fire was not near their own houses, they soon realised how rapidly it was spreading. They felt the heat coming from all sides and rushed out of their homes with their family members to run to a safer space. Some couldn't get out of their homes as the fire surrounded them from all sides. Their neighbours helped to evacuate them. Some male participants said the fire spread fast because of the windy weather and because, at first, there were no firefighting teams.

As the participants interviewed were themselves victims of the fire so they were able to describe the difficulties they are facing.

## Urgent need for shelter materials due to upcoming monsoon season and Ramadan



A major concern highlighted by the participants was the condition of their shelters, some of which were reduced to ashes. Some have lost all their household belongings to the fire: money, beds, blankets, pillows, cooking utensils, relief items, solar batteries, lights, fans, gas cylinders, clothes, and SIM cards.

Both male and female participants said they are currently living in temporary settings. They said they initially found shelter with neighbours. Later they received support from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) including bamboo, tarpaulins, ropes, blankets and mats. However, the participants said there is not enough space for their families to live in these temporary settings and it is difficult to share space. Female participants said they feel unsafe sleeping in temporary shelters at night.

“ We need information about how long it will take to build us a new shelter.”

– Rohingya female, age 50, Camp 8E



They all emphasised the critical need for shelter and said materials in sufficient quantities are needed to rebuild their houses, such as bamboo, tarpaulins, polythene, ropes, hammers, saws and other related items. They said they need safe, well-built places to stay.

As Ramadan is around the corner they are worried about not being able to pray and fast properly as they do not have homes. Male participants said mosques needed to be rebuilt as soon as possible as they need space to pray properly. Additionally, they were worried about staying in temporary shelters during monsoon season which is also arriving soon.

“ Ramadan is coming, what will we do? It will be good if we can have our houses rebuilt where we can pray and fast.”

– Rohingya female, age 23, Camp 8E

“ We are tense as monsoon and Ramadan are coming soon and we need shelter as soon as possible.”

– Rohingya male, age 42, Camp 11

Some female participants, who do not have any young men in their households, said they need help to rebuild their houses reiterating the need for humanitarian agencies to assist in the re-building effort. They said they do not know when they will receive full shelter kits to rebuild their homes.

Moreover, people expressed concern that agencies are planning to send them to Bhasanchar (an offshore location set up by the Government of Bangladesh) since they have not seen evidence that their previous shelters are being re-built. Some participants said people from the host community blame the Rohingya community for the fire and consequently, want them to move to Bhasanchar.

“ We do not want to move to Bhashanchar. We want our shelter to be rebuilt on the same block.”

– Rohingya female, age 50, Camp 8E.



## Concerns raised about latrines, sanitation and environmental issues related to drainage systems

Participants said they are facing difficulties with using latrines, especially women. They said they must walk around half an hour to defecate.

Female participants said there are no shower spaces for women so they are going to the village pond to bathe on alternative days. Some male participants said they have tried to build temporary latrines by using tarpaulins to create walls around toilets inside the camps which were burnt. But for women, there is inadequate privacy as the temporary toilets don't have roofs. Female participants said they feel very uncomfortable using these latrines during the day.

Male participants said drains were getting clogged in their blocks as burnt household items and waste fell into the drains during the fire and continue to do so. Also, they said rotten food packets are being thrown into the drains and the environment is getting filthier by the day. Agencies are said to have cleaned some small drains around the camps, but bigger drains have not been cleaned.

Not only did they lose their shelter and personal belongings, a female participant said their source of income was also destroyed.

“ My husband had a chicken shop, which has been destroyed in the fire and we lost around one lakh taka (about \$1,200) of capital in the fire. Now how we will feed our children?”

– Rohingya female, age 30, Camp 8E

## Essential documents destroyed

Participants said that although some of them could save some cards/documents from burning as they were kept near the door, most lost all their important documents such as health cards, vaccine cards, data cards, food cards, token cards for receiving LPG, cards for receiving maternal healthcare (e.g. ANC, PNC), and documents of land ownership in Myanmar. Participants were particularly upset about the loss of documents from Myanmar since these cannot be replaced.

They said they could go to information desks to reissue cards lost due to the fire or reach out to CiCs (Camp in Charge: Official from the Bangladesh's Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission), service providers, mahji (Rohingya community leaders, selected by CiC and camp authorities) or NGOs such as The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) to complain about lost documents.

“ I was at home. I finished my johor prayer and then heard of a fire. Immediately, I took my two sons and the smart card and ran out from home, running for a safer place.”

– Rohingya female, age 23, Camp 8E



## Cooked food is not good quality, need for cooking facilities

Participants said the quality of food they are receiving is not good most of the time and they do not like the taste. They complained about receiving rotten food cooked up to seven hours before, which is spoiled due to the heat. They also said the quantity of food provided is not enough for all family members. They also said they are not receiving food on time. Two meals are provided, but they report that they receive lunch at 4 p.m. and dinner at 10 p.m.

People have no choice but to eat the food provided because they don't have any other options. Some participants raised concerns about their children getting diarrhoea because of the food. They are requesting cooking facilities and food so that they can cook themselves.

“ We do not need ready food. Give us relief items like before and make cooking arrangements for us. We can cook ourselves.”

– Rohingya female, age 27, Camp 8E

“ The cooked food gets rotten due to warm weather and we need to throw it in the drains. Eating the food, many of us have become sick. Rather than this, if we are provided rice, lentils, potatoes, oil, salt and other items we could have cooked food for us to survive without being sick.”

– Rohingya male, age 26, Camp 11

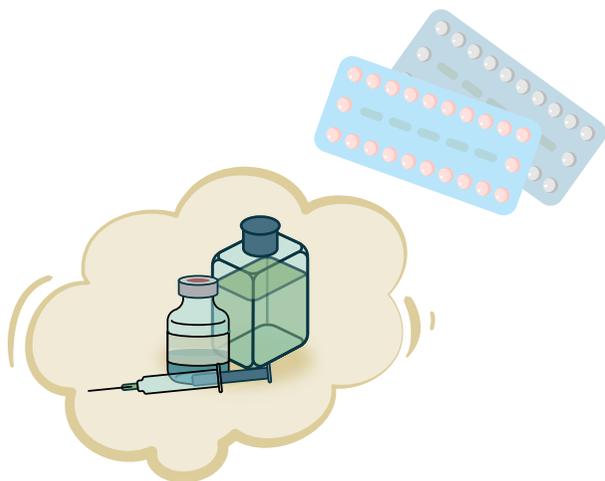
## People said they are provided general rather than specific medication

Regarding healthcare, participants said they know where burn victims are being treated and that health facilities provide support to burn victims and patients without asking for their health cards. Some male participants think they are being provided with an inadequate quantity of medicine and that their health concerns are not being met. Participants said they get paracetamol and oral rehydration salts (ORS) which do not solve gastric problems, blood pressure and diabetes, and that people with chronic conditions are struggling to get proper treatment.

Additionally, they said that these general medications are being given to burn victims as well.

“ We think that the health service providers lack medicines and they give some common medicines like napa for fever, tablets for gastric, painkiller to all and no specific medicines are provided to the fire victims to cure the burns.”

– Rohingya male, age 30, Camp 11



## Difficulties faced by people with disabilities, elderly people, pregnant mothers

Participants said many people are suffering from injuries from the fire, and many have died. They also said people who are more vulnerable in the community, such as children, pregnant mothers, elderly people and people with disabilities do not have safe shelter and are not receiving nutritious food. Female participants said they think many children were affected, more young boys than girls. One participant said she heard a boy died after being stuck in a sewage tank during the fire. Another female participant said that due to living in their current condition children are becoming sick and may catch pneumonia.

While trying to escape from the fire, participants said many people were injured trying to cross the fence, including pregnant women. One female participant heard that a mother and new-born baby died during delivery as the doctor left because of the fire. Many pregnant mothers and children have been relocated to houses of relatives at nearby camps.

Women in general are facing many difficulties. They cannot sleep properly and are in fear of being kidnapped as there are rumours that three women were kidnapped, although it is not clear who carried out the kidnapping.

Male participants said that during the fire there was a huge rush and, amidst the crowd, many people with disabilities and elder people got burnt and some lost their lives. Survivors have been taken to health facilities and some have been shifted to relatives' houses in other camps. But in most cases, the community are providing support for these people. Participants added that people with disabilities and elderly people should be provided with medicine, wheelchairs, necessary support devices or equipment, treatment for burn injuries. It was also suggested that everyone be provided with information about how to support and care for fire victims, especially those who are vulnerable, including the medicines which should be provided.

## Concerns about the future

Participants expressed their wishes and shared their needs for the immediate future.

They said they want to receive shelter and food support immediately because they need to pray and prepare for Ramadan. They also said they urgently need safe drinking water as well as water for shower and latrine use.

Female participants want to cook their own food and need kitchen items such as gas burners and cooking utensils. They also expressed the need for clothes, burqas, sanitary pads, undergarments, hijabs and shoes.

Most male participants expressed the need for a package of necessary commodities in order to survive and start fresh including shelter kits, raw/uncooked food, LPG cylinders, lights, fans solar batteries, water reservoirs such as big jars/pots, radios, and financial support.

“ We do not want to fall into a situation like this. In the future, the government must take necessary actions (to prevent this).”

– Rohingya female, age 27

Some female participants also expressed concern about their children's education.

“ We are also worried for the education of our children, most of the learning centres got burnt.”

– Rohingya female, age 40, Camp 8E

They said that if humanitarian organisations help them rebuild their shelters, mosques and latrines, provide water, raw food items and cooking kits, they will survive.

# Recent fires emphasise the need for clear, trusted and timely information

Last month's devastating fires in the Cox's Bazar camps caused widespread destruction, destroying the homes and impacting the lives of tens of thousands of Rohingya refugees. To understand camp residents' information and communication needs and experiences in the aftermath of these fires TWB interviewed 17 members of the Rohingya community who lost their homes in the fires. All the respondents are still living in the wreckage of their burnt-out homes, using tarpaulins supported by bamboo for shelter.

## Fellow community members were the first source of information

When the fires broke out, most interviewees report that they were alerted to the fires by friends, family, neighbours, and other community members. All ten male respondents said they had not received any information from official sources when the fires broke out. Some witnessed the fires breaking out; some were informed by others in the community. Five of the seven women interviewed also said that they found out about the approaching fires through friends, family, or neighbours, whilst two were informed directly by NGO and CIC volunteers to leave their homes. Two women reported having previously received training from NGOs on how to respond to a fire, although one said she forgot all her training when the fire started.

“Some children near my house saw the fire and they were shouting. Then I came out of my home and saw the big fire and lots of smoke. I did not receive any information from anywhere except from those children.”

– Rohingya man, 50 years old



## Rumours spread when reliable information is lacking

Community members were able to quickly pass on lifesaving information to others when the fires broke out. At the same time, other less helpful information, particularly rumours, can also spread quickly during a crisis. Seven of the ten men interviewed said they had not received any information regarding how the fires started. Two others had heard rumours that the fires were started deliberately and one heard that the fires started from an accidental house fire which spread. Five of the seven women interviewed said they were told that the fires were deliberately lit. This information was neither confirmed nor sourced through official channels: most received it from other community members and some online. However, the community would prefer to get this information from trusted official sources. The most commonly reported trusted sources of information on the causes of the fires were NGOs, the Government and CiCs. Some interviewees also mentioned the fire department as a trusted source.

Source: To understand current community perspectives and experiences in the camps after the recent fires, Translators without Borders interviewed ten men and seven women from the Rohingya community from camps who have been directly impacted by the fires. The interviews took place in early April.

## Women have less access to information and the internet

Due to restrictions on movement, women often rely on others (particularly men) for information. Some women respondents observed that as women, and therefore less mobile, they had less access to information during the fires and had to rely on men in their families or neighbours for information. All respondents, men and women, own or have access to a mobile phone, but only men have internet access. Seven of the men have their own smartphones with internet access, whilst the three others have analogue/button phones with no internet access. None of the female respondents have internet access. Only 2 (both males) of the 17 respondents used their phones to access the internet to get information about the fires. One received information about what to do through a WhatsApp group of an NGO where he volunteers, whilst another found basic information about the locations of the fires and the number of people affected through YouTube.

“Till now I am getting the information from our neighbour. As I'm a woman, I cannot go outside to get information.”

– Rohingya woman, 35 years old

## People received some information in the days following the fires

In the 3 days immediately following the fires, interviewees reported receiving information and support from different sources. This included information on emergency medical support, advice on finding lost children and instructions on erecting temporary shelters, as well as advice on accessing essentials such as food, clothes, and water. With the exception of two male interviewees, all respondents indicated that they received information regarding support available to them in the days following the fires. The primary source of this information for all respondents was NGOs, either face-to-face from NGO volunteers or via miking. Other key sources included majhis and CIC volunteers.



## People want information about new housing and want to receive this information from NGOs

In the days following the fire, CIC volunteers, majhis and particularly NGOs remain the most common and trusted sources of information. The most commonly stated information need stated by respondents was information about housing and when their homes will be rebuilt. Many interviewees also want information about protecting themselves and their homes from fires in the future. Most respondents want to receive information face-to-face from NGO or CIC volunteers or in audio format over loudspeaker announcements from trusted sources, again particularly NGOs and CICs.

The community response to the fires demonstrates the value of community communication and information sharing in times of crisis whilst at the same time highlighting the importance of community members having quick access to the information they need, from reliable and trusted sources, and in formats they understand. Community members have preferences for how and from whom they receive information. Responding to these needs before, during and after crises is a simple and effective way of increasing the ability of both the Rohingya and humanitarian communities to prepare for and respond to emergencies such as the recent fires. In preparation for the possibility of future fires in the camps, the community requires clear, understandable and actionable instructions on how to reduce the risk of fires and how to respond quickly when they do occur. When there is a fire, responders should make use of existing and proven communication channels, such as loudspeakers and miking, to pass on key information and, where needed, to dispel rumours or misinformation.

BBC Media Action and Translators without Borders and Centre for Peace and Justice are working together to collect and collate feedback from communities affected by the Rohingya crisis. This summary aims to provide a snapshot of feedback received from Rohingya and host communities, to assist sectors to better plan and implement relief activities with communities' needs and preferences in mind.

This work is delivered in partnership with the International Rescue Committee with funding from the United States Government.

If you have any comments, questions or suggestions regarding *What Matters?*, you are welcome to get in touch with the team by emailing [info@cxbfeedback.org](mailto:info@cxbfeedback.org)