May 8, 2021

Johannes van der Klauw
UNHCR Country Representative
Dhaka
Bangladesh

Re: Upcoming Human Rights Watch report on Refugees on Bhasan Char

Dear Mr. Klauw,

We write to share with you that Human Rights Watch is preparing a report documenting conditions on Bhasan Char Island, Bangladesh, for the nearly 20,000 refugees who have been relocated there since May 2020.

Human Rights Watch is an international nongovernmental organization working on a range of human rights issues in over 90 countries worldwide. We have been monitoring and reporting on Bangladesh for over two decades.

From May 2020 to April 2021, Human Rights Watch interviewed scores of refugees on Bhasan Char Island and in Cox’s Bazar. We also interviewed humanitarian aid workers and journalists and held informal consultations with United Nations officials and diplomats.

Based on these meetings, we found that while many refugees agreed that the shelters and other conditions are superior to those in the camps in Cox’s Bazar, and that there is plenty of open space, they also reported food shortages, inadequate health and education services, onerous restrictions on movement, and a lack of livelihood opportunities. Some described being compelled to relocate without informed consent and lured with unmet promises of cash incentives.

Some refugees alleged that their relatives were arbitrarily detained and beaten for attempting to leave the island, contrary to Bangladesh government claims that all relocations are voluntary. Refugees also said they were beaten for moving outside their compound. In April, witnesses
said a Bangladeshi sailor beat a group of children with a PVC pipe for crossing into another block to play with other children.1

With monsoon season fast approaching, refugees are concerned that those confined on the island in cyclone-prone waters are at risk of disaster. Refugees, Bangladeshi security personnel, and other officials, as well as humanitarian workers could all end up isolated without food, water, or medical care when transportation access will be limited due to weather conditions. It is additionally concerning that as of April 1, 2021, the Island’s embankments are reportedly three meters high when storm surges in the Bay of Bengal frequently exceed five meters.2

We are aware of the UN visit to the island between March 17 to 20 by an 18-member UN team organized by the Bangladesh government. Following this visit, we were surprised when the UN recommended that “any future relocations are undertaken in a gradual and phased manner,” contradicting previous statements that had stressed to the Bangladesh government that no refugees should relocated to Bhasan Char until there had been an independent expert technical assessment of its habitability and protection capacities.3

This is particularly concerning considering that refugees on Bhasan Char told Human Rights Watch that they were only allowed to speak to UN officials in the presence of Bangladesh government officials, and that they were seemingly coerced to provide testimony to make it appear as though there were no problems on the island.

We are concerned that this highly controlled visit has been used by the Bangladesh government to bypass an independent technical and protection assessment. We are additionally concerned that the Bangladesh government has yet to allow an independent UNHCR protection mission for the 306 refugees rescued at sea in May 2020. We note that we informed your office in May 2020 that at least one member of this group said she had been gang-raped when she was being transported to Bhasan Char and needed urgent medical and psychosocial care. To our knowledge, this care has not been received.

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We recognize that UNHCR is mandated to ensure the humanitarian and protection needs of all refugees, including those on Bhasan Char.

We would be grateful for your response to the above findings and for any additional information you think we should take into consideration in preparing our report. Additionally, we would appreciate your response to the following questions:

Questions:
1. What measures does your team take to ensure that its interviews with refugees on Bhasan Char are confidential and not subject to Bangladeshi government interference?
2. Have you been granted access to privately and confidentially talk to the refugees rescued at sea during May 2020? On what dates?
3. What have the UN and the Bangladesh government agreed to regarding UN support to refugees on Bhasan Char, including plans for implementation of humanitarian programming?
4. What have the UN and donors agreed to regarding supporting UN implementation of programs for refugees on Bhasan Char?
5. Which UN agency is leading the discussions with the Bangladesh government? Is UNHCR representing all UN agencies considering implementing programming on Bhasan Char or are separate agencies in separate discussions?
6. Is the UN actively seeking funding for programming for refugees on Bhasan Char?
7. Is the UN currently responding remotely or practically to any urgent humanitarian needs on Bhasan Char, including emergency protection cases such as gender-based violence and child protection case management?
8. Is UNHCR or any other UN agency currently including Bhasan Char in its sector response and planning?
9. Are there any current plans with the Bangladesh government for UNHCR to conduct a mission to carry out emergency protection services, including an expert to respond to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence?
10. Will the UN require an independent technical assessment before beginning any operations on Bhasan Char?
11. Has UNHCR raised concerns about fencing being built around Bhasan Char? Have concerns been raised in light of the impact of fencing on emergency rescue operations during the fires at Cox’s Bazar?
12. Has UNHCR observed a detailed government emergency response plan for Bhasan Char? If so, is it sufficient to ensure the security of 100,000 refugees in the event of
a severe cyclone, flooding, and monsoons? What measures are in place to ensure those on the island will have adequate access to potable food, water, and medical care prior to, during, and in the aftermath of an emergency weather event?

13. Can UNHCR confirm if the government of Bangladesh will facilitate the return to the mainland for any refugees who no longer want to remain on Bhasan Char?

14. There have been reports of deaths of refugees on Bhasan Char due to lack of healthcare facilities. Does UNHCR consider the current health capacity sufficient to support 100,000 refugees? Do you consider the government’s current emergency medical response system of transporting patients by boat or helicopter to Noakhali to be adequate and sustainable?

15. Several Rohingya women complained about the lack of maintaining menstrual hygiene on Bhasan Char because of a lack of sanitary products. Has UNHCR found this to be a problem? What other complaints have been made regarding reproductive health services?

16. There have been repeated complaints from refugees on Bhasan Char about insufficient food rations, especially for children with special nutrition needs. Is UNHCR aware of these complaints? Has any action been taken?

Thank you for your attention to these questions. We look forward to your response by May 21, 2021, so that your answers can be reflected in our upcoming reporting. We would also be happy to meet with you virtually to discuss our findings.

Sincerely,

Meenakshi Ganguly
South Asia Director
Human Rights Watch