Appendix IV: Human Rights Watch Letter to HR
Wallingford

May 13, 2021

Bruce Tomlinson
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Re: Human Rights Watch report on conditions for refugees on Bhasan Char island

Dear Mr. Tomlinson,

We write to seek HR Wallingford’s perspectives to help inform a forthcoming Human Rights Watch report documenting conditions for the nearly 20,000 Rohingya refugees who have been relocated to Bhasan Char island in Bangladesh 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 following and reporting on Bangladesh for over two decades.

With monsoon season fast approaching, Rohingya refugees and humanitarian groups providing services and protection are concerned that those confined on the island in cyclone-prone waters are at considerable risk.

According to the Bangladesh government, HR Wallingford has reportedly advised the government on Bhasan Char’s “coastal stabilisation and flood protection measures.”¹ According to recent reporting, the

approximately 12.1 kilometer-long embankments are currently 3 meters high, but are reportedly being increased to 5.75 meters.\(^2\)

However, even at the Bangladesh Navy’s projected embankment height of 5.75 meters, experts have questioned whether the levee would protect the island in the Bay of Bengal, which is the center of the world’s highest storm surges.\(^3\) Experts have documented that the waters near Bhasan Char have a tidal range of up to 6 meters and storm surges in the bay have often exceeded 6 meters, with one even reaching 13.7 meters.\(^4\) There have been 27 storms in the Bay of Bengal in the last 60 years with storm surges greater than 5 meters.\(^5\) Most recently, Cyclone Amphan in May 2020 had a storm surge of approximately 5 meters.\(^6\) Before that, Cyclone Odisha had a storm surge of approximately 8 meters.\(^7\) According to records of more than 700 surge events from 1880-2015, the Bay of Bengal averages five surges of at least 5 meters per decade.\(^8\)

Against this backdrop, the Bangladesh government has already relocated 20,000 refugees to Bhasan Char ahead of the monsoon season with plans to relocate 80,000 more. We hope you will provide us with more information on the nature of HR Wallingford’s involvement in the development of storm and flood protection measures on the island as well as the company’s expert assessments of these measures.

As part of our work and in the interests of thorough and objective reporting, we would like to learn more about the company’s work and views on flood protection measures in Bhasan Char. Below are a set of questions requesting additional information, which would be reflected in our reporting. We would also be grateful for any additional information you think we should take into consideration.


1. What is the nature of HR Wallingford's involvement in the developments on Bhasan Char? Please outline the terms of reference as agreed upon with the Bangladesh authorities.

2. Could you describe in detail the embankments and other natural disaster protection measures that the company is involved with building on the island?

3. In your assessment, is a 5.75-meter-high embankment sufficient to protect the island against storm surges in the Bay of Bengal, especially storm surges that exceed 5 meters and tidal ranges above 6 meters? Could you please provide copies of all relevant studies?

4. Could you describe in detail the construction design and materials of these embankments?

5. What measures have been put in place to drain floodwater from Bhasan Char?

6. Are you aware of any measures in place to ensure food, water, and medical equipment are safely stored on the island in case of a cyclone and/or storm surge? If yes, could you please describe these measures?

7. Has the company been involved in the construction or design of Bhasan Char's cyclone shelters? If yes, please provide additional information about these shelters, including number of shelters, their location, water storage measures, and the number of people each shelter can accommodate.

8. What measures have been designed or implemented to protect against flooding during the monsoon season?

9. In your opinion, are the current storm and flood protection measures on the island sufficient to ensure the safety of over 20,000 refugees during monsoon season in the Bay of Bengal?

10. In your opinion, is Bhasan Char suitable for habitation for 100,000 people?

Thank you for your attention to these questions. We look forward to your written response to our questions and any other relevant information by May 26, 2021, via email to Seashia Vong at vongsph@hmv.org. All responses received may be reflected in our forthcoming reporting on this subject.

Please do not hesitate to contact us for any clarification, to provide the information requested, or to coordinate a conference call with us.

Sincerely,

Brad Adams
Asl Executive Director

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