FROM CAMP TO CITY: THE URBANIZATION OF REFUGEE SETTLEMENTS IN COX'S BAZAR

By: Bader SULIMAN
Forced Migration and Urbanization in the ME
Kamel DORAI
April 2025

Abstract

Amid prolonged displacement, the Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazar has undergone rapid urbanization, marked by high population density and complex spatial organization. The essay explores how UNHCR's interventions have shaped its spatial and structural transformation, reflecting emergent urban dynamics.

International Security Program – PSIA, Sciences Po

Table of Contents

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 CONTEXTUALIZATION

Since the violent military crackdown in Myanmar's Rakhine State in August 2017, over 700,000 Rohingya refugees have crossed the border into Bangladesh, settling primarily in the southeastern district of Cox's Bazar. What was initially a humanitarian emergency has evolved into a protracted displacement situation, with the refugee camps—particularly Kutupalong-Balukhali—now forming the largest and most densely populated refugee settlement in the world (UNHCR, 2021)[1]. While these camps were conceived as temporary humanitarian spaces, their physical, social, and economic characteristics have increasingly mirrored those of informal urban settlements. They are marked by dense population clusters, semi-permanent infrastructure, market economies, service networks, and self-organized governance—features commonly associated with urban life (Ahsan & Hossain, 2019[2]; Joarder & Miller, 2013[3]). In this context, Cox's Bazar represents a critical case for rethinking refugee camps not as rural enclaves isolated from urban systems, but as emergent urbanized zones shaped by the dynamics of forced displacement.

1.2 PAPER'S AIMS

This essay examines the refugee settlement process in Cox's Bazar through the lens of urbanization. It considers how the settlement has expanded in density, complexity, and functionality, and how these developments interact with the urban and peri-urban environment surrounding the camps. In doing so, it engages with key debates on "encampment urbanism" (Sanyal, 2011)[4] and "cities from below" (Simone, 2004)[5], arguing that the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar are no longer purely humanitarian spaces but hybrid urban forms in need of durable, inclusive, and urban-sensitive governance.

---

[1] UNHCR. (2021). *Bangladesh: Rohingya refugee crisis response – Factsheet*.

[2] Ahsan, R., & Hossain, M. M. (2019). Environmental and socio-economic aspects of Rohingya migration in Bangladesh. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 62(10), 1671–1688.

[3] Joarder, T., & Miller, L. (2013). Planning for universal health coverage in refugee settings: A case study of Cox's Bazar. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 11(1), 1–8.

[4] Sanyal, R. (2011). Squatting in camps: Displacement, informality and power in protracted refugee situations. *Urban Studies*, 48(5), 877–890.

[5] Simone, A. (2004). People as infrastructure: Intersecting fragments in Johannesburg. *Public Culture*, 16(3), 407–429.

2 URBAN FEATURES OF THE COX'S BAZAR REFUGEE CAMPS

2.1 URBAN DENSITY AND SPATIAL ADAPTATION

Despite their designation as temporary humanitarian spaces, the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar exhibit clear characteristics of urban settlements. Nowhere is this more evident than in the extreme population density of camps such as Kutupalong, where the density exceeds 40,000 people per square kilometer—surpassing that of many of the world's largest megacities (UNHCR, 2020)[6]. This hyper-density necessitates spatial adaptations that go beyond emergency relief provisions. Over time, refugees and aid agencies have constructed complex networks of footpaths, marketplaces, learning centers, and distribution points. Though unplanned in a formal urban planning sense, this spatial expansion has produced a dense, functional built environment that mirrors organic urban growth (Ahsan & Hossain, 2019)[7].

2.2 INFRASTRUCTURE AND SERVICES

In addition to physical layout, the development of basic infrastructure supports the argument that these camps function as urban spaces. Services such as latrines, drainage systems, solar-powered water stations, and localized electricity grids have been established, albeit unevenly across sectors (Joarder & Miller, 2013)[8]. More significantly, informal economies have flourished: makeshift shops line the camp walkways, local vendors trade goods and services, and market spaces operate with their own social rules and micro-governance. According to IOM (2021)[9], these commercial hubs not only serve the refugee population but also attract participants from neighboring host communities, blurring the lines between "camp" and "town".

2.3 "CITIES FROM BELOW"

These transformations resonate with broader urban theory, particularly the work of scholars like Manuel Castells and Saskia Sassen. Castells (1977)[10] introduced the idea of

---

[6] UNHCR. (2020). *Rohingya emergency: Operational update – Bangladesh*.

[7] Ahsan, R., & Hossain, M. M. (2019). Environmental and socio-economic aspects of Rohingya migration in Bangladesh. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 62(10), 1671–1688.

[8] Joarder, T., & Miller, L. (2013). Planning for universal health coverage in refugee settings: A case study of Cox's Bazar. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 11(1), 1–8.

[9] IOM. (2021). *Rohingya crisis response situation report*. International Organization for Migration.

[10] Castells, M. (1977). *The urban question: A Marxist approach*. MIT Press.

urbanization as a social process in which marginal populations actively construct urban life, while Sassen (2001)[11] later theorized the emergence of "cities from below", where informal networks and infrastructure produce urban forms in the absence of formal governance. Applying these frameworks to Cox's Bazar reveals the extent to which the camps have become urbanized through both necessity and agency. Refugees are not passive recipients of aid but active participants in shaping spatial, economic, and social life, effectively creating a form of refugee urbanism from the ground up.

3 REFUGEES AS URBAN ACTORS

3.1 INFORMAL URBANIZATION

The transformation of Cox's Bazar's camps into urban-like settlements is not solely the result of humanitarian planning, it is also driven from within by refugees themselves. Through processes of self-settlement and informal adaptation, refugees actively shape the physical and social landscapes of the camps. As observed by Crisp (2010)[12] and Harrell-Bond (1986)[13], displaced populations often exhibit considerable resourcefulness, reorganizing shelters, modifying the camp terrain, and establishing informal economies to meet their needs beyond the limited scope of humanitarian aid. In Cox's Bazar, this phenomenon is particularly visible in the proliferation of home-based businesses (small shops, food stalls, and tailoring services) along with the creation of informal educational and religious spaces, all of which contribute to the camps' urban character. Governance within these settlements also reflects bottom-up organization. Refugee committees, known as *shuras*, have emerged to manage daily life in the camps. These bodies, supported but not wholly controlled by international agencies, play a role in local dispute resolution, coordination of communal maintenance, and communication between refugees and humanitarian actors (UNHCR, 2020)[14]. While they operate within constraints imposed by the host government and aid organizations, *shuras* exemplify forms of local governance typically found in informal urban neighborhoods, where state presence is minimal or mediated through non-state actors.

---

[11] Sassen, S. (2001). *The global city: New York, London, Tokyo* (2nd ed.). Princeton University Press.

[12] Crisp, J. (2010). Forced displacement in Africa: Dimensions, difficulties, and policy directions. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 29(3), 1–27.

[13] Harrell-Bond, B. E. (1986). *Imposing aid: Emergency assistance to refugees*. Oxford University Press.

[14] UNHCR. (2020). *Rohingya emergency: Operational update – Bangladesh*.

3.2 "PEOPLE AS INFRASTRUCTURE"

These dynamics are aptly captured by Simone's (2004)[15] concept of "people as infrastructure", in which the rhythms of urban life are produced not only by physical structures, but also by the practices and relationships of ordinary residents. In Cox's Bazar, refugees themselves constitute the operational core of the camp-as-city, creating systems of trade, care, communication, and governance that animate the physical environment. This reframing of refugees as urban actors challenges the narrative of passive dependency and highlights the agency of displaced populations in shaping their own spatial and social futures.

4 CAMP–CITY INTERFACE

4.1 URBAN PERIPHERY TRANSFORMATION

The refugee camps in Cox's Bazar do not exist in isolation: they are deeply entangled with the urban and peri-urban dynamics of the surrounding region. Host villages such as Ukhiya and Teknaf, once primarily rural in character, have experienced rapid transformation due to the demographic and economic spillovers from the camps. The influx of over 900,000 Rohingya refugees has significantly altered local settlement patterns, with humanitarian operations injecting capital into nearby towns and informal labor markets expanding to absorb refugee and host community participation alike (World Bank, 2021)[16]. Public infrastructure, including roads, healthcare facilities, and educational services, now serves a population far beyond its intended capacity, leading to overcrowding, shortages, and delays that affect both refugees and Bangladeshi citizens (UNDP, 2018)[17].

4.2 LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL STRAIN

These interactions have also placed considerable strain on the region's environment. The clearing of more than 6,800 acres of forest to accommodate shelters and provide fuel has

---

[15] Simone, A. (2004). People as infrastructure: Intersecting fragments in Johannesburg. *Public Culture*, 16(3), 407–429.

[16] World Bank. (2021). *Bangladesh development update: Toward faster, sustainable and inclusive growth*.

[17] UNDP. (2018). *Impacts of the Rohingya refugee influx on host communities*. United Nations Development Programme.

led to severe deforestation and habitat loss (FAO, 2020)[18]. This environmental degradation is exacerbated by soil erosion and the destabilization of hilly terrain, conditions that increase the risk of landslides and compromise the ecological integrity of Cox's Bazar's urban periphery (ICIMOD, 2019)[19]. In effect, the rapid growth of refugee settlements has reshaped the environmental and spatial logic of the region, pushing the boundaries of what were previously low-density, agrarian landscapes toward urbanized stress zones.

4.3   SOCIO-SPATIAL TENSIONS

These transformations have fueled growing socio-spatial tensions between refugees and host communities. Testimonies collected in the *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2019)[20] reveal a sense of frustration among local residents, who report being priced out of markets, excluded from aid programs, and burdened by overused public services. While some benefit from employment opportunities and expanded commerce, many perceive the refugee presence as a direct challenge to their quality of life. This complex relationship illustrates that refugee camps, far from being self-contained humanitarian enclaves, actively interact with and reshape surrounding urban systems.

4.4   URBAN-REFUGEE NEXUS

Scholars such as Fawaz (2017)[21] and Martin, Mielke, and Schapendonk (2018)[22] argue that refugee settlements like those in Cox's Bazar must be understood as extensions of urban systems—neither fully integrated nor wholly separate. These "urban refuges", they contend, produce new spatialities that defy the binary of camp versus city. In Cox's Bazar, the refugee settlement process has effectively urbanized parts of the region, creating a hybrid landscape in which humanitarian, political, environmental, and economic forces converge.

---

[18] FAO. (2020). *Environmental impact of Rohingya influx in Cox's Bazar and mitigation measures*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

[19] ICIMOD. (2019). *Land use and risk mapping in Rohingya refugee camps, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh*. International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development.

[20] Journal of Refugee Studies. (2019). *Special issue: Voices from Cox's Bazar*. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 32(4).

[21] Fawaz, M. (2017). Planning and the refugee crisis: Informality as a framework of analysis and reflection. *Urban Planning*, 2(4), 1–5

[22] Martin, D., Mielke, K., & Schapendonk, J. (2018). Engaging with urban displacement: The view from below. *Geoforum*, 101, 203–206.

5   URBAN REALITY VS. HUMANITARIAN PLANNING

5.1   CAMP GOVERNANCE LIMITATIONS

Despite the increasingly urban character of the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, their governance remains rooted in a humanitarian logic designed for short-term, emergency contexts. The administrative model (centered around international agencies and the Government of Bangladesh's Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC)) treats the camps as temporary spaces, tightly controlled and heavily securitized. In fact, the majority of shelters in the Kutupalong refugee camp are constructed using bamboo and tarpaulin, materials that are both affordable and locally sourced. While bamboo offers a quick and flexible building solution, its use also reflects the temporary—and often precarious—nature of the settlement's infrastructure.

As Holliday (2014)[23] and Amnesty International (2019)[24] observe, refugees are denied the right to work legally, move freely, or participate meaningfully in local governance, even as they navigate and contribute to what has effectively become a dense, urbanized environment. This disconnect between camp governance and everyday reality leads to forms of exclusion where refugees inhabit the city but are denied the rights and services that urban citizenship typically confers. Moreover, the planning frameworks in place remain poorly adapted to the long-term complexities of such urbanized humanitarian settlements. As the settlement has grown in size and complexity, this emergency-driven approach has struggled to address systemic issues such as infrastructure upgrading, spatial planning, and sustainable land use. At the same time, there is minimal collaboration between humanitarian actors and national urban planning institutions.

5.2   "ENCAMPMENT URBANISM"

This disjunction is emblematic of what Sanyal (2011)[25] terms "encampment urbanism," a condition in which refugee camps gradually assume the form and function of cities but remain excluded from formal planning frameworks and legal recognition. In such contexts, the settlement exists in a paradox: it is too large and complex to be governed as a

---

[23] Holliday, I. (2014). Addressing Myanmar's citizenship crisis. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 44(3), 404–421.

[24] Amnesty International. (2019). *Caged without a roof: Rohingya lives in limbo*.

[25] Sanyal, R. (2011). Squatting in camps: Displacement, informality and power in protracted refugee situations. *Urban Studies*, 48(5), 877–890.

temporary emergency space, yet it is not granted the status or resources of a recognized urban area. The result is a form of institutional limbo: **an urban space without urban rights**, sustained by humanitarian systems ill-equipped to address the structural and spatial realities of long-term displacement.

6 RETHINKING HUMANITARIANISM

6.1 POLICY IMPERATIVES

As the protracted nature and urban complexity of refugee camps like those in Cox's Bazar become increasingly evident, there is a growing imperative to rethink humanitarianism through an urban planning and development lens. Global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG 11 on "Sustainable Cities and Communities"—and the *Global Compact on Refugees* (UNGA, 2018)[26] emphasize the need for inclusive, resilient, and integrated urban systems. These agendas call on both host states and humanitarian actors to move beyond short-term crisis management and toward long-term urban planning that incorporates the displaced into broader systems of infrastructure, governance, and economic participation.

UN-Habitat (2020)[27] has taken this one step further by advocating for an "urban humanitarianism" approach, which acknowledges that many refugee camps have evolved into dense, semi-permanent urban spaces. This perspective demands that refugee settlements be treated not as anomalies or temporary outposts, but as cities in formation—deserving of the same strategic investment, policy attention, and urban services as formal towns. In Cox's Bazar, this means recognizing the need for planned road systems, stormwater management, housing upgrades, and inclusive land use planning, rather than limiting interventions to temporary fixes under the humanitarian umbrella. Scholars such as Betts and Collier (2017)[28] argue that the future of refugee response lies in "development-based solutions" that frame displacement not as a humanitarian anomaly, but as a structural issue requiring economic and spatial inclusion.

---

[26] UN General Assembly. (2018). *Global Compact on Refugees*. A/73/12 (Part II).

[27] UN-Habitat. (2020). *Urban resilience global programme: Progress report*.

[28] Betts, A., & Collier, P. (2017). *Refuge: Transforming a broken refugee system*. Allen Lane.

6.2 INNOVATIVE PRACTICES AND GAPS

Some innovative practices already reflect this shift in thinking. Pilot projects in Cox's Bazar include the implementation of reforestation belts to combat deforestation, the distribution of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) stoves to reduce reliance on firewood, and community-led WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) programs that empower refugees to maintain sanitation systems (FAO, 2020; Shelter Cluster, 2021)[29]. However, these initiatives often remain isolated and poorly integrated into a broader urban development framework.

7 CONCLUSION

7.1 SUMMARY

The refugee camps in Cox's Bazar have evolved far beyond their initial function as emergency shelters. Today, they exhibit the spatial density, economic dynamism, and infrastructural complexity characteristic of emergent urban settlements. This transformation has been shaped not only by the efforts of humanitarian agencies, but also—and perhaps more significantly—by the agency of refugees themselves, who have built informal economies, adapted their living environments, and established governance mechanisms to sustain life under extraordinary constraints.

7.2 IMPLICATION

Yet, the persistence of a humanitarian framework that treats these spaces as temporary anomalies has led to a disconnect between lived reality and policy response. By failing to acknowledge the camps' urban character, governance remains fragmented, infrastructure development remains piecemeal, and the social inclusion of both refugees and host communities remains limited. Environmental degradation strained local services, and unresolved legal status further reinforce a cycle of vulnerability that cannot be addressed through short-term aid alone. Therefore, recognizing the urban-refugee nexus is essential for crafting policies that address both immediate needs and long-term coexistence between displaced populations and their host communities.

---

[29] FAO. (2020). *Environmental impact of Rohingya influx in Cox's Bazar and mitigation measures*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

8 REFERENCES

Books

Betts, A., & Collier, P. (2017). *Refuge: Transforming a broken refugee system*. Allen Lane.

Castells, M. (1977). *The urban question: A Marxist approach*. MIT Press.

Harrell-Bond, B. E. (1986). *Imposing aid: Emergency assistance to refugees*. Oxford Press.

Sassen, S. (2001). *The global city: New York, London, Tokyo* (2nd ed.). Princeton University Press.

Academic Journal Articles

Ahsan, R., & Hossain, M. M. (2019). Environmental and socio-economic aspects of Rohingya migration in Bangladesh. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 62(10), 1671–1688. https://doi.org/10.1080/09640568.2018.1513834

Crisp, J. (2003). No solutions in sight: The problem of protracted refugee situations in Africa. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 22(4), 114–150. https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/22.4.114

Crisp, J. (2010). Forced displacement in Africa: Dimensions, difficulties, and policy directions. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 29(3), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdq019

Crisp, J. (2018). Forms and Sources of Conflict in Refugee-Hosting Communities: The Case of the Rohingya in Bangladesh. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 31(3), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fex042

Fawaz, M. (2017). Planning and the refugee crisis: Informality as a framework of analysis and reflection. *Urban Planning*, 2(4), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v2i4.1018

Holliday, I. (2014). Addressing Myanmar's citizenship crisis. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 44(3), 404–421. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2014.902932

Joarder, T., & Miller, L. (2013). Planning for universal health coverage in refugee settings: A case study of Cox's Bazar. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 11(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1186/1478-4505-11-18

Martin, D., Mielke, K., & Schapendonk, J. (2018). Engaging with urban displacement: The view from below. *Geoforum*, 101, 203–206. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.01.009

Rahman, U. (2010). The Rohingya Refugee: A Security Dilemma for Bangladesh. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 8(2), 233–239. https://doi.org/10.1080/15562941003792135

Sanyal, R. (2011). Squatting in camps: Displacement, informality and power in protracted refugee situations. *Urban Studies*, 48(5), 877–890. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098010363521

Simone, A. (2004). People as infrastructure: Intersecting fragments in Johannesburg. *Public Culture*, 16(3), 407–429. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-16-3-407

Ullah, A. A. (2011). Rohingya Refugees to Bangladesh: Historical Exclusions and Contemporary Marginalization. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 9(2), 139–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2011.567149

Journal of Refugee Studies. (2019). Special issue: Voices from Cox's Bazar. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 32(4).

Reports and Institutional Publications

Amnesty International. (2019). *Caged without a roof: Rohingya lives in limbo*. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/7484/2019/en/

FAO. (2020). *Environmental impact of Rohingya influx in Cox's Bazar and mitigation measures*. http://www.fao.org/bangladesh/news/detail-events/en/c/1198678/

ICIMOD. (2019). *Land use and risk mapping in Rohingya refugee camps, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh*.

IOM. (2021). *Rohingya crisis response situation report*. https://bangladesh.iom.int

Shelter Cluster. (2021). *Shelter and NFI sector: Cox's Bazar strategy and response plan*. https://sheltercluster.org/response/bangladesh

UNDP. (2018). *Impacts of the Rohingya refugee influx on host communities*. https://www.undp.org/bangladesh/publications/impacts-rohingya-refugee-influx-host-communities

UN General Assembly. (2018). *Global Compact on Refugees*. A/73/12 (Part II). https://www.unhcr.org/gcr/GCR_English.pdf

UN-Habitat. (2020). *Urban resilience global programme: Progress report*. https://unhabitat.org

UNHCR. (2020). *Rohingya emergency: Operational update – Bangladesh*. https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/myanmar_refugees

UNHCR. (2021). *Bangladesh: Rohingya refugee crisis response – Factsheet*. https://data.unhcr.org

World Bank. (2021). *Bangladesh development update: Toward faster, sustainable and inclusive growth*. https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bangladesh/publication/bangladesh-development-update

9 ANNEXES

The Al Jazeera article offers a very interesting visual and descriptive account of the built environment within the Kutupalong camp. It highlights the camp's tightly packed layout, with shelters made predominantly from bamboo and tarpaulin, arranged across hilly terrain. The piece illustrates how, over time, the camp has taken on characteristics of a dense, improvised city—complete with footpaths, staircases, latrines, market stalls, and communal areas—despite being constructed as a temporary settlement. The article underscores the fragility and impermanence of the housing, which remains highly vulnerable to fires, floods, and landslides. [What is life like inside the world's biggest refugee camp in Bangladesh? | Rohingya News | Al Jazeera](#)

I also gathered a few pictures related to the environmental degradation of the camps as well as their structure.

[Photos: This is life in the world's largest refugee camp, as seen by their own | WUSF](#)

The fire that tore through the Bangladesh refugee camp in March 2021 killed 15 people and displaced some 45,000. Pictured, a woman looks on at her ruined shelter while fire still rages.

© Sahat Zia Hero

A Rohingya woman stands in chest-deep water during a 2021 flood. The refugee camp in Bangladesh is prone to natural disasters including floods, fires and landslides.

© Shahida Win

This aerial image shows how the Kutupalong refugee camp has developed into a dense, urban-like settlement. The tightly packed shelters, arranged across hilly terrain, highlight how a temporary camp has taken on the structure of a sprawling city.

https://www.alamy.com/stock-image-aerial-picture-showing-the-kutupalong-refugee-camp-in-bangladesh-19-165716693.html