

United States Senate

November 30, 2022

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

The Honorable Samantha Power
Administrator
United States Agency for International Development
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Secretary Blinken and Administrator Power,

We are writing to urge the United States to work with the government of Bangladesh and humanitarian providers to ensure that all Rohingya children living in refugee camps in Bangladesh have access to formal educational opportunities. Rohingya children living in refugee camps in Bangladesh are facing undue restrictions on access to education. We appreciate that the Government of Bangladesh has accommodated thousands of Rohingya refugees, while other governments in the region have been unwilling to do so. However, as the humanitarian crisis continues in Burma, the United States must take steps to ensure that all Rohingya children in Bangladesh have access to a formally recognized and accredited education.

In August 2017, more than 750,000 Rohingya refugees fled Burma to Bangladesh to escape a brutal campaign of atrocities perpetrated by Burma's military and security forces.¹ Five years later, the number of refugees has grown to more than 926,000, over half of which are children.² In March 2022, Secretary Blinken declared that the Burmese army committed genocide and crimes against humanity against Rohingya in Burma,³ a finding that drew on the testimony of many Rohingya refugees living in camps in Bangladesh.⁴

Rohingya refugees suffered immeasurable harm while escaping violence in Burma. They continue to face considerable challenges in host countries such as India and Malaysia, but especially in Bangladesh, which hosts more Rohingya refugees than any other country.⁵

Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh continue to raise concerns about the lack of education in the camps — with human rights groups, non-governmental organizations, and the United Nations (U.N.) High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). In November 2021, the U.N. International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and its partners launched a program called the Myanmar Curriculum Pilot, establishing thousands of learning

¹ 2022 Joint Response Plan Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis (Jan.-Dec. 2022), https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/bangladesh_2022_jrp_en.pdf.

² UNHCR Bangladesh - Operational Update (July 2022), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/95177>.

³ Jennifer Hansler, *Blinken declares Myanmar's military committed genocide against Rohingya*, CNN (Mar. 21, 2022), <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/21/politics/blinken-myanmar-genocide-designation/index.html>.

⁴ Press Release, U.S. Department of State, Secretary Antony J. Blinken on the Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity in Burma (Mar. 21, 2022), <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-the-united-states-holocaust-memorial-museum/>.

⁵ Adem Carroll, *Let Rohingya Learn: Confronting the Need for Rohingya Education*, Justice For All (June 21, 2021), https://www.burmataskforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/LetRohingyaLearn_BTFRReport_06232021.pdf.

The Honorable Antony Blinken
The Honorable Samantha Power
November 30, 2022

centers in the refugee camps in Bangladesh.⁶ While an important step in the right direction, the pilot program's limits mean that nearly 100,000 refugee children still do not have access to sufficient basic education.⁷ The United States must work with the Bangladesh government and humanitarian organizations to improve educational opportunities and increase enrollment and participation for Rohingya students—including by allowing community-led schools to operate, taking steps to overcome cultural barriers to female education, and protecting the safety of students and teachers—to ensure that all Rohingya children in Bangladesh are able to secure an accredited education.

In 2020, Bangladesh permitted on-the-ground humanitarian organizations to provide support to schools in refugee camps, which Rohingya teachers operated. Those teachers had stepped in to instruct Rohingya children using the Myanmar national curriculum; at the time, few other educational opportunities were available to refugee children inside or outside the refugee camps.⁸ But in 2021, Bangladesh authorities reversed that decision, banning Rohingya-led schools and closing thirty of them, a decision that affected nearly 32,000 refugee students.⁹ Teachers have attempted to offer private lessons to refugee children, only to be threatened by Bangladesh officials overseeing camp operations.¹⁰ Moreover, according to reports, Bangladesh government officials have retaliated against refugees who have participated in informal education efforts, stripping them of their identification cards and threatening to relocate them to the remote, flood-prone island of Bhasan Char.¹¹

We'd like to better understand the Bangladesh government's justifications for closing the Rohingya-run schools. The government claims that Rohingya community leaders failed to secure permission to open and operate the schools. But no process even exists for Rohingya to make such a request.¹² The government has also expressed concern with the schools' curriculum. But the thirty closed schools had been using the Myanmar national curriculum for years, the same curriculum that humanitarian organizations now filling the camps' educational void are beginning to use.¹³

Without the Rohingya-led schools, many of the Rohingya children living in the camps lack access to safe, quality education. Seventy-five percent of children in the camps place the lack of quality education among their top three concerns.¹⁴ The problem is serious and far-reaching, as many of the 450,000 Rohingya

⁶ Press Release, UNICEF, Education milestone for Rohingya refugee children as Myanmar curriculum pilot reaches first 10,000 children (May 1, 2022), <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-education-milestone-rohingya-refugee-children-myanmar-curriculum-pilot>.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Bangladesh: Rohingya Refugee Schools Face Closure*, Human Rights Watch (Dec. 18, 2021), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/18/bangladesh-rohingya-refugee-schools-face-closure>.

⁹ *Bangladesh: Officials Threaten Rohingya for Setting Up Schools*, Human Rights Watch (Mar. 21, 2021), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/21/bangladesh-officials-threaten-rohingya-setting-schools>; *Bangladesh: Restore and strengthen capacity of community-led schools in Rohingya camps*, Amnesty Int'l (Apr. 28, 2021), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/04/bangladesh-restore-and-strengthen-capacity-of-community-led-schools-in-rohingya-camps/>.

¹⁰ *Bangladesh: Officials Threaten Rohingya for Setting Up Schools*, Human Rights Watch (Mar. 21, 2021), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/21/bangladesh-officials-threaten-rohingya-setting-schools>.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Saif Hasnat & Sameer Yasir, *Bangladesh Shuttles Dozens of Schools Set Up by Rohingya in Camps*, N.Y. Times (May 2, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/02/world/asia/rohingya-bangladesh-school-closings.html>.

¹³ Karen Reidy, *Expanding education for Rohingya refugee children in Bangladesh*, UNICEF (Feb. 10, 2020), <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/stories/expanding-education-rohingya-refugee-children-bangladesh>.

¹⁴ Press Release, Save the Children, Five Years after Rohingya Exodus, Two-Thirds of Children in Refugee Camps Do Not Feel Safer than When They Arrived in Bangladesh (Aug. 23, 2022), <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2022-press-releases/rohingya-refugee-children-do-not-feel-safer-in-bangladesh>.

The Honorable Antony Blinken
The Honorable Samantha Power
November 30, 2022

children in Bangladesh still lack access to a formal education.¹⁵ As Rashad Hussain, U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, has said about the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh: “We fear losing a whole generation of youth because they haven’t gotten access to education.”¹⁶

Accordingly, the Department of State, in coordination with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), should urge the government of Bangladesh to:

1. end any policies that limit the right to education of Rohingya children in refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar and on Bhasan Char;
2. take all necessary steps to ensure that all Rohingya children in Bangladesh have fair and equitable access to quality, formal, and accredited education, including by providing, or allowing others to provide, sufficient teachers and infrastructure;
3. ensure that Rohingya teachers are given equitable opportunities and salaries for teaching positions in the camps;
4. establish a process for Rohingya community-led schools to request legal status and operate as a certified, accredited, and integrated part of the official Bangladesh- government-approved educational system for the camps;
5. work with UNICEF to identify additional facilities that may be used, even on a temporary basis, to hold classes in order to expand access to the Myanmar Curriculum;
6. work with UNICEF and other humanitarian organizations, in consultation with Rohingya teachers and community leaders, to start a teacher training program within the refugee camps so that more Rohingya community members can be trained and brought on as full-time teachers to support the program; and
7. expand the Myanmar Curriculum Pilot in coordination with UNICEF, with the ultimate goal of including all school-age Rohingya children.

At the same time, USAID and the State Department should support the Bangladesh government in these efforts by increasing funding for education in the refugee camps and by providing additional technical support to these crucial programs. This should include a USAID-led assessment of educational progress in the camps, with recommendations for how U.S. and international funding can better serve the educational needs of the Rohingya refugee population in Bangladesh.

We look forward to hearing from you and engaging on future opportunities to support the Rohingya refugees’ right to a basic education. We must do all we can to avoid a lost generation of Rohingya children and youth.

¹⁵ Press Release, UNICEF, Education milestone for Rohingya refugee children as Myanmar curriculum pilot reaches first 10,000 children, (May 1, 2022), <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-education-milestone-rohingya-refugee-children-myanmar-curriculum-pilot>.

¹⁶ Announcement, Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, Discrimination and Persecution Against Muslims Worldwide (June 30, 2022), <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/events/hearings/discrimination-and-persecution-against-muslims-worldwide>.

The Honorable Antony Blinken
The Honorable Samantha Power
November 30, 2022

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



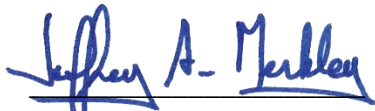
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator