

The Curriculum Project

Learning with The Irrawaddy, No 47

To accompany the **September 2010** issue of The Irrawaddy magazine

Selected article: **The Unwelcoming Committee**



A. Activities before reading

1. The Unwelcoming Committee

- Look at the men in the picture. Who do you think they are?
- What can you guess about them?
- What do they have to do with the article?
- Who is the article about?
- What does the title of the article mean?

2. The Rohingya people

- What do you know about Rohingya people?
- What problems do they face?
- Compare their situation with other groups from Burma.

3. Predictions

Make a sentence (or two) to try and predict what the article says using these words: *unwelcoming committee; Rohingya; refugees; Bangladesh; refugee camps; Burma*

4. Discussion

What problems do Rohingya people face in ...

Burma?

Bangladesh?

5. Vocabulary

Choose the meaning that best suits the words:

1. smartly dressed
a. clever
b. wearing good clothes
c. dressed inappropriately
2. grievance
a. grief
b. complaint
c. enthusiasm
3. repatriate
a. love your country
b. run away from your country
c. send people back to their country
4. asylum
a. opposition to religious persecution
b. send back to their country by force
c. permission to stay in a country officially as a refugee
5. domestic pressure
a. you have high blood pressure
b. your house is about to fall down
c. people in a country try to make their government do something
6. slums
a. refugee camp
b. neighbourhood with very poor housing
c. a very messy house
7. food shortage
a. not enough food
b. the road is too short
c. the food does not taste good
8. meager
a. too strong
b. not enough
c. very expensive
9. malnutrition
a. nutritious food
b. eating healthy food
c. when you don't get enough food
10. involuntary pushback
a. volunteering to push something
b. pushing people to become refugees
c. forcing people to return to their country
11. forcible repatriation
a. volunteering to push something
b. pushing people to become refugees
c. forcing people to return to their country

B. Activities as you read

6. Grammar: present perfect

Fill in the blanks with the words from the box in the correct form

| |
|---|
| evolve have settle bring over create have |
|---|

1. Two things have _____ this group of men together.
2. Over the last year they _____ formed the Anti-Rohingya Resistance Committee.
3. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees have fled to Bangladesh _____ the last three decades to seek asylum.

4. Since then, the Bangladeshi government _____ allowed the UNHCR, to register 28,000 Rohingya who fled before 1992.
5. Kutupalong and Leda camps have _____ into slums of the official camps.
6. The attacks on refugees are becoming more frequent and this has _____ a climate of fear among the refugees.

7. Grammar: passive

Change the passive sentences into active:

1. Later arrivals are not permitted to receive humanitarian assistance.

2. He was ambushed by five local Bangladeshi men armed with knives.

3. His meager earnings were taken from him, and he had no money to feed his family.

4. When we are sent back, we are tortured by the Burmese army.

5. Elections were postponed because of allegations that some candidates had registered Rohingyas as voters.

6. Undocumented people are easily singled out, targeted and taken advantage of by the police.

8. Who said this?

Find who made these statements in the article:

1. “Those bloody naughty people, they destroy the environment, upset local law and order and sell drugs...”
2. “They told me I should not be here, that we were taking all the local jobs,”
3. “Our area is so poor already, we cannot look after more people...”
4. “The Rohingya issue is still used for propaganda purposes among candidates and for their electorate...”
5. “If they do take matters into their own hands, we are very concerned because increased restrictions would mean more and more deaths from starvation...”

9. Opposing positions

List the arguments made by the anti-Rohingya group in the left column of the table and those made by Rohingya people or their advocates in the right column.

| Arguments made by the anti-Rohingya group | Arguments made by Rohingya people or their advocates. |
|---|---|
| | |

10. True or false

Mark the statements below as true or false according to the article.

1. The title of the article means that the men in the picture are against Rohingya people coming to Bangladesh. **T/F**
2. The Burmese government doesn't want Rohingya people to leave Burma. **T/F**
3. None of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are given any humanitarian assistance. **T/F**
4. Rohingya refugees fear arrest in Bangladesh more than being forced back to Burma. **T/F**
5. Local people don't want Rohingya people to stay in Bangladesh because they are Muslim. **T/F**
6. Rohingya refugees never leave their camps. **T/F**
7. Some local people threaten Rohingyas with violence. **T/F**
8. UNHCR promised to provide aid to the local population in Bangladesh **T/F**

11. Questions

Make up 5 questions about the article. Exchange with your partner. Answer each other's questions. Check each other's answers together.

12. Comprehension

Answer the questions:

1. What is the role of the Anti-Rohingya Resistance Committee?
2. Why do Rohingya people flee Burma?
3. How many Rohingya refugees did Bangladeshi government allow UNHCR to register?
4. Did that solve the problem?
5. Why are unregistered refugees facing problems when they leave the camp to find food and work?
6. What problems do residents of Cox's Bazar face?
7. What do the 'unwelcoming committee' men accuse the refugees of?
8. How is the 'Rohingya issue' used as propaganda in Bangladeshi elections?
9. How will issuing IDs to Bangladeshi people affect Rohingya refugees?

C. Activities after reading

13. Summary

Complete the summary of the article. The first paragraph has been done for you.

Background:

Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people from Burma have fled to Bangladesh in the past 30 years because of religious persecution. UNHCR only recognizes a small portion of these refugees, and only the registered refugees can get assistance. All the other Rohingya refugees have to support themselves in Bangladesh but are finding their situation extremely difficult.

Current situation and difficulties:

Future outlook:

14. Discussion

Compare the situation for Rohingya with other ethnic groups from Burma

15. Role play

Use opinions outlined in activity 7 to have a role play debate between the Arakan Group and the Rohingya Resistance Committee.

16. Extension

Discuss: In your opinion, how will the elections in Burma affect the situation of Rohingya people?

The Unwelcoming Committee

By Alex Ellgee

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Resentment of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is giving rise to highly organized and increasingly vocal resistance to their presence

1. Sitting on a dusty balcony outside the local district office in Ukhia in southern Bangladesh, a group of smartly dressed men take turns speaking their mind. One man, taller than the average Bangladeshi, stands up. Throwing his fist in the air, he states the group's objective. "Those bloody naughty people, they destroy the environment, upset local law and order and sell drugs," he says. "They must all go back to Burma."

2. The rest of the group nod their heads and wave their hands to compete for the next opportunity to speak. Two things have brought this group of men together: grievances against Rohingya refugees who have settled in the area, and their powerful positions in the local community.

3. Together they have formed the Anti-Rohingya Resistance Committee, which has taken on the role of pressuring the government to repatriate Rohingya refugees to Burma. Despite their dedication to their cause, however, their goal remains highly ambitious and controversial.

4. Citing religious oppression in Burma, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees have fled to Bangladesh over the last three decades to seek asylum. Several times the Burmese government has made major pushes to flush the Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority, out of Burma's Arakan State—the last one being in 1992.

5. Since then, the Bangladeshi government has allowed the United Nation's refugee agency, the UNHCR, to register 28,000 Rohingya who fled before 1992 and provide them with shelter in two official camps. Despite growing domestic pressure to force them out of the country, a government official told *The Irrawaddy*,

6. A far larger problem is the status of a growing population of unregistered refugees who arrived after 1992. Settling in two camps—Kutupalong and Leda—which have evolved into slums of the official camps, these later arrivals are not permitted to receive humanitarian assistance. But as local communities intensify calls for their repatriation, the unrecognized refugees say it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to leave the camps to find food and work.

7. Crouched on the floor of her small mud hut, Aatika, a 27-year-old mother of four, described how she was recently beaten and robbed by locals as she was coming back to the camp after working outside for three days. "They told me I should not be here, that we were taking all the local jobs," she said as she tried to calm her crying child. "Then they beat me and took my money. It was terrible. We do not receive any rations, so I have to go outside to make money to feed my children."

8. According to refugees in the unofficial camps, the attacks are becoming more frequent as resentment of their presence grows in Bangladesh. This has created a climate of fear among the refugees, who risk losing their earnings every time they return to the camp.

9. Before Aatika had finished speaking, a man began recalling his ordeal. Faced with severe food shortages in the camps, he traveled to work in a rubber plantation. After three weeks, he returned to the camp to give the money he had earned to his large family. Knowing that he might have problems going through local communities on the way back, he hid the money in his shirt collar.

10. But this did not help him when, as he approached the entrance to the camp, he was ambushed by five local Bangladeshi men armed with knives. They ordered him to hand over his money, ignoring his protestations that he didn't have any. They searched him until they found it, and then beat him up for "wasting their time."

11. His meager earnings taken from him, he had no money to feed his family or buy medicine for his sick second youngest child, who died soon afterward. Death among the weak has become a common occurrence in the unofficial camps, where a local leader said that at least six people die every day from malnutrition.

12. In February, the relief agency Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and other groups highlighted the effects of involuntary pushbacks by the Bangladeshi government, resulting in a dramatic reduction of cases of forcible repatriation. Now, however, refugees report that arrests and imprisonment are becoming more common—something many say they fear more than being forced back across the border.

13. "When we are sent back, we are tortured by the Burmese army, but at least we can come back here when they're finished with us. But if we're sent to prison, we could be there forever," said one refugee.

14. Despite the conditions reported by the refugees, Hamil Chowdury, the secretary of the Anti-Rohingya Resistance Committee, expressed little sympathy. He said the Rohingya receive too much assistance, while locals receive nothing.

15. Cox's Bazar, the district where the refugee camps are located, is one of Bangladesh's poorest areas. Resources are scarce in this extremely overpopulated region, and many locals struggle to find jobs themselves, said Chowdury, who described the refugees as nothing more than a burden.

16. "Our area is so poor already, we cannot look after more people, especially when they are involved in crime," said Chowdury who has strong links with the ruling Awami League party.

17. According to Chris Lewa, the coordinator of the Arakan Project, a group that advocates for Rohingya rights, politics is fueling much of the current anti-refugee sentiment, as local politicians gear up for promised elections postponed since last year because of allegations that some candidates had registered Rohingyas as voters.

18. "The Rohingya issue is still used for propaganda purposes among candidates and for their electorate," said Lewa, who added that most of the Rohingya have since been purged from voter lists.

19. Leaders of the Anti-Rohingya Resistance Committee, which recently submitted a petition to the government calling for the closure of all camps, said the group will take action if its demands are not met. They warned of demonstrations and hunger strikes, and threatened to block roads to prevent refugees leaving the camps.

20. “If they do take matters into their own hands, we are very concerned because increased restrictions would mean more and more deaths from starvation,” said one refugee leader.

21. Another issue that could add to the problems of undocumented refugees is a proposed plan to issue national ID cards to Bangladeshi citizens. Anti-Rohingya groups support the move, which they say would make it easier to determine “who should be sent back.”

22. Lewa said this is now one of the biggest problems facing the unofficial refugees, who often hide in local communities when conditions in the camps become unbearable.

23. “Undocumented people are easily singled out, targeted and taken advantage of by the police,” Lewa said. “My recommendation would be that the government register them, either as refugees or, at the very least, by giving them temporary stay or work permits.”

24. Meanwhile, the Anti-Rohingya Resistance Committee said that their efforts are gaining momentum and that local communities would soon rise up to get rid of the unwanted refugees.

25. It remains unclear, however, if this surge in anti-Rohingya feeling will pass after the elections, or if the UNHCR’s plan to provide US \$33 million in aid for the local population will help to ease tensions. But in the meantime, the Rohingya refugees continue to face food shortages and endure the burden of being stateless and unwelcome in both Bangladesh and Burma.