

# HUMANS OF BLOCK B



In a series of camps hosting nearly 900,000 people, the border between Bangladesh and Myanmar became the site of the world's fastest growing refugee crisis since August last year. Over 670,000 refugees made the perilous journey from neighboring Rakhine State in Myanmar into Bangladesh in just six months. The concentration of refugees is now among the densest in the world. Out of those who fled, about 22,000 live in Potibonia, one of the many settlements that have formed in the past months and is managed by CARE. But what are the stories of the individuals?

This collection of photos and stories aims to highlight the stories of a few refugees and their families who fled from violence and sought safety in or around Block B of Potibonia camp. Although their stories are unique, the essence of their hardship, hopes and little victories applies to hundreds and thousands of others.



## HAMIDA'S\* SECRET: A STORY OF HORROR AND PAIN

She told no one about it. The only person was her eldest son, who was killed shortly after he got to know. His last memories were of his mother screaming his name after armed men had entered their home. "I sent my children away into the jungle and just went back to lock the door. But I was too late, two men pushed in the door and grabbed me," Hamida says with tears running down her face. The words thereafter do not leave her lips easily. "They raped me," she whispers.



This was about six months ago, just after Hamida and her husband fled with their remaining children to Bangladesh to seek safety from mass killings and persecution in their village. But her life in the overcrowded camps is not the safe haven she had hoped for. Her husband left her for his other wife and she now looks after her five children by herself. Afraid of the threats she received if she dares to speak ill of him, she keeps quiet.



"I regret the day I called my Sohidul," Hamida says. "My son came running back looking for me. I heard him shout "oh Ammu, what is happening" just before I heard the shot. I tried to fight the man who was holding me back but his grip around my throat was too strong and I was too weak. If it wasn't for me, my son would still be alive," she says, thumping her chest. Her eldest son was the one who brought food back home. Now, Hamida depends on aid provided in the camp to feed her family.



Her children kept asking what happened to her. She anxiously ran into the jungle to find them, moments after she fell to her perpetrators feet, begging them to spare her. "Since no one else witnessed what happened to me, they let me go," she says. She took her four children and started following other villagers towards Bangladesh. On their way, she was told that some of her old neighbors found Sohidul's body and buried it.



"I find peace at the women center where I'm able to speak to other women," says Hamida. CARE has been setting up several women-friendly spaces in the camps for women and girls to have access to information, awareness, psychosocial support, recreational activities, and other support. Being in close vicinity to her tent, this is the only space Hamida feels safe and at ease. Something she does not take for granted anymore.

\*name changed

## YASMIN'S STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE IN THE FACE OF HUNGER AND LOSS

"She cries often and I have to wake up 10 or 15 times at night. It's as if she is scared and is searching for someone or something that does not even exist," Rohima says. Her little niece, Yasmin, will never get to know her parents. Her mother died shortly after she was born. Her father was killed during one of the many times violence broke out in their village. That was about one year ago when she was five months old. It is hard to believe that the little girl is that old given her tiny wrists and small feet.

Rohima is now the one looking after Yasmin and her 5-year-old brother Mohammed, in addition to her own son, who is 2 years old. "It was my sister's last wish," she says. "When she died she asked me to take care of her children." Before they were forced to flee to Bangladesh, moments after their house was looted and burnt, Rohima said she had the means to look after her niece and nephew. But having had to leave everything behind, she is concerned how to feed the three hungry mouths now. Back in Myanmar her husband used to work as a guard, but in Bangladesh they have no possibility to generate an income.

A few days ago one of the many community volunteers in the camps came by her little, dark tent. After seeing Yasmin, she asked Rohima to bring her to a center for malnourished children just down the hill. Concerned for Yasmin's health, Rohima decided to go and admit the weak toddler to the center in which CARE has supported the screening of over 180,000 children.

Yasmin's health condition is concerning. Not only is she severely malnourished, but also regularly suffers from fever and diarrhea. "About half of the month she is sick," Rohima says. But despite her malnourishment, Yasmin does not eat enough. Her mother was extremely underweight herself and the lack of breast milk resulted in Yasmin missing out on some of the nutrients she needed to grow up healthy. "We buy milk for her but she does not like it," Rohima says.

"We would have never given Yasmin or her brother away. They have become our own children now", Rohima says while helping to feed Yasmin with a package of plumpy nut, a therapeutic paste for malnourished children. "I want us to live well as a family. I dream of my children to receive an education so they can build a future," she says.





## SOMIRA'S DETERMINATION: "I DON'T WANT TO GET MARRIED, I WANT TO BECOME A TEACHER"

"Dad", she whispers into her sister's ear. "Say dad," she reiterates and tries to hide a smile, knowing that she is prompting her sister's reply. When Asia is asked what she misses most about Myanmar, her little sister, Somira, cannot stop answering on behalf of her. The 9-year old is a bundle of joy; she smiles like a sunrise and her cheekiness is refreshing in a camp full of sad stories. At first sight, it would be impossible to tell that she carries one on her little shoulders herself.



The four sisters had to flee to Bangladesh all by themselves. The night they all still vividly remember is when armed men had entered their home and dragged their parents out. That was the last time they saw them. Having escaped through the backdoor in panic and rush, they hid in the nearby jungle for the night, hoping patiently that their parents would join them. They never came. When the sisters went back home, the only thing they found were the remnants of the burnt village they once called home.



Four months into living in a new, crowded and terrifying environment in Bangladesh, Somira and her sisters found their uncle in the camp. "We now call him our dad," 11-year-old Asia says. "But if our parents were here we could lead a better life," she adds. Now, they rely on each other. From making their bed, going to school, fetching water and eating together, they do everything together. Some of their friends from back home have also sought refuge in Bangladesh. But in a camp of over nearly 900,000 people in total, most of them live too far away.



Access to education in Myanmar was limited. Restricted movement, barred attendance and overcrowding due to the limited amount of schools available for Muslim minority children seriously compromised educational opportunities for girls like Somira. Even here in the camps in Bangladesh, she is only taught few of the major subjects: English, Burmese, Math, Science and Arts. But against all odds, Somira says "I don't want to get married, I want to become a teacher."



The memories of her old life back home are still fresh. "My mother used to cuddle with me and kiss me on my cheeks," Somira recalls. "She used to get food for us and we used to go for walks. I miss home," she adds looking far into the distance. Although life will never return to what it used to be, CARE helped Somira and 22,000 other refugees in the camp build a temporary home by providing bamboo, plastic and tools. Determined and strong-minded, Somira wants to turn this hardship into a bright future when she grows up.



## MOHAMMED'S DREAM: REBUILDING HIS LIFE ONE BRICK AT A TIME

Mohammed is sitting in a pile of small bricks with big dreams; he wants to rebuild his home. The previous day he helped breaking the clay blocks into pieces in the hopes to receive some pocket money he can bring home. About six months ago his village in Myanmar was burnt and with it, his beloved home came tumbling down. This was the turning point that led to his family and hundreds of thousands of others to seek refuge in neighboring Bangladesh.



Knowing that breaking bricks will not bring back his home, Mohammed studies as much as he can in his spare time. "I want to become a teacher," the 10-year-old says. "A Burmese teacher," he specifies. This is not a coincidence. Many children of the Muslim minority were not allowed to learn their own language at school in Myanmar. Children like Mohammed were taught Burmese and English but not his mother tongue.



When not at school or trying to look for work, Mohammed helps with the daily chores at home. His mother is suffering from mental illness and Mohammed's father died from tuberculosis about one month ago in the camp. He had no possibility to receive the necessary treatment to stay alive. Back in Myanmar, entire villages were cut off from health care. And even now in the camps in Bangladesh, emergency medical services provided by CARE and other organizations, remain limited in scope.



Mohammed's serious face lightens up during the art and singing classes. The 10-year-old enjoys the joint activities and company of his classmates, about 25 of them. His school in the camp is just on the opposite side of the little tent he shares with his mother and three siblings. Apart from being a space for learning, Mohammed considers his classroom a safe haven distracting him from the hardship he has faced ever since fleeing.



"I want to go back home," Mohammed says. "I like it more in Myanmar." Despite all of the adversity he experienced there, he still longs for the life he had to leave behind. He does not know when he will be able to return in safety and rebuilt the home he had lost. Until then, Mohammed may continue to break bricks but not his dreams.





## FATIMA'S BIGGEST LOSS: "NO AID IN THE WORLD CAN GIVE ME BACK MY HUSBAND"

"All of our lives we were told we are not from Myanmar. But we are also not from Bangladesh. So where are we from?," says Fatima. She had fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh about six months ago, when violence erupted and pushed over 680,000 people across the border. Her husband was killed in the attacks and shortly thereafter their house was burnt. Fatima and her mother are now two in over 900,000 refugees who live in the camps.



"It was so hard to climb over the mountains and we had to carry our old mother because she can't walk," Fatima says. She had fled with her son, brother and 60-year-old mother Gulbahar. "Look at my feet. I had lost my toe nails as we were climbing," she adds. Their journey took three days. With their last savings, they paid a boat man about US\$75 to cross the river finally bringing them to Bangladesh.



Back in Myanmar, Fatima and her husband used to raise livestock and sell fish at a local market. Now she prepares meals with the food aid she receives. "But no aid in the world can give me back my husband," Fatima says jokingly with a sad undertone. Gulbahar helps her occasionally, chopping onions and betel nuts that grow in the forests at the edge of the camp.



From one of the nearby water pumps, Fatima usually fetches water in the evenings. Since she is the head of household, she has to do most of the work by herself. CARE provides her with safe drinking water and washing facilities, critical for the 22,000 people in Fatima's camp. But she is scared that the upcoming rains will turn the walkways leading to them into muddy waterfalls again, as was the case when she first arrived.



Fatima's biggest wish is for her son to receive education. Back in Myanmar, Robi was not able to go to school because access was limited to only a few lucky children in his town. Although life is tough for Fatima as a widow and single mother, she does not want to return to Myanmar until their house is rebuilt and she can live in safety. CARE helped Fatima built her bamboo and plastic shelter in Potibonia camp to provide her with a temporary home until she can rebuild her life.

## MUMTAZ'S GREATEST CONCERN: "THERE ARE SO MANY PEOPLE HERE, HOW IS THE WORLD GOING TO PAY ATTENTION TO MY FAMILY?"

Little did Mumtaz know how long it would take to bring back food for her hungry children this morning. Desperate for a warm meal, she decided to walk to a neighboring camp, 5 km away from her tent. Some of her neighbors had told her about the food distributions. After having walked for almost two hours with her 11-year-old son, she finally arrived at what seemed to be a never-ending line in the daily melee. It takes five more hours until she receives a bowl of rice, lentils and some chicken.

Mumtaz's house is deep inside Balukhali camp, which in recent months has become part of the world's largest refugee camp. Her husband has been sick for the past year and was admitted to the hospital with typhoid. "What are we going to do when he dies," she says with a worrying look on her face. Mumtaz has four children left and is 4-months pregnant. She lost two of her children in Myanmar, who were shot while playing outside when armed men had raided their village and burnt their house. "I remember how they used to call me Ammu [mum]," she says.

"There are so many people here, how is the world going to pay attention to my family?" Mumtaz says as she weeps. Not knowing where to go for help and assistance she started begging for money. But although life is difficult in the camps, she does not want to return to Myanmar. "Even if they kill me, I will not go back," she says while recalling how her family ran into the jungle when armed men had tried to enter her home. They stayed there for eight days before making their way to Bangladesh.

"It tastes good, no?," she asks her children, visibly happy that they do not have to go hungry today. Although the journey took more than eight hours, she says it was worth it. Back in Myanmar, Mumtaz and her husband used to own some livestock and earn a small living. But in order to cross the Naf river to Bangladesh, they had to sell all of their belongings and savings. "I even had to sell my nose ring," Mumtaz says and points to the empty hole where once a stud adorned her nose.

"How will I raise my children, how will we give them a house, how will they be able to get married, how can we rebuild our home?" These are some of the questions that keep Mumtaz awake at night. She knows that the assistance she receives in the camps from aid agencies like CARE will not be enough to provide support for a lifetime. But as long as her future remains uncertain, she will continue walking for hours to get food for her children.







## AROB'S ISOLATION: ALONE IN AN OVERCROWDED CAMP

Arob is sitting in her dark and humid tent by herself. For the 17-year old, the four thin plastic and iron walls have become the boundaries of her new home and freedom. She is only allowed to leave these 8 sqm for about one hour a day. "Women are supposed to stay inside. My husband does not want me to go outside, where other men could see me," Arob says quietly. She is not the only one in the camp of over 300,000 newly arrived women in Bangladesh facing such limitations.



Women and girls are generally expected to stay at home and care for their families, whereas men and boys are more present outside. These conservative cultural norms not only limit Arob's freedom of movement but also have detrimental effects on her health. Despite Arob being 9-months pregnant, she is not allowed to go to any of the health clinics CARE supports in the camps. She does not know where her child will be born.



To help pass time and earn a bit of money on the side, Arob borrowed a sewing machine for about US\$10 per month. With the profit of \$2-3 per month, she used to buy food for her husband and in-laws. Now they mostly rely on the assistance they receive from aid organizations like CARE. Her own parents are still in Myanmar; she had to leave them behind. "I miss them a lot. I feel like seeing my mother every single moment," she says with tears in her eyes.



Arob has not worked in the past couple of weeks, unable to sit on the only plastic chair in her tent for too long with her pregnant belly. She uses the only hour she is allowed to go outside in the evenings to walk to the end of their narrow alley and fetch water. Back at her parent's place in Myanmar, she was more free. But once married, women of the Muslim minority generally become the responsibility of the husband's family and have to follow his rules.



Cooking is the only activity that keeps Arob busy, at least for a few hours a day. Security concerns exacerbate the confinement of women and girls to protect them from harassment and other forms of gender-based violence. CARE has built women-friendly spaces in the camps to provide female refugees with a safe space to engage with each other and receive vital information and services. But for women like Arob, the thought of reclaiming a life of freedom and dignity remains a distant dream.





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