

Executive summary: recent trends in Rohingya cross-border displacement and outlook for 2025

OVERVIEW

In 2024, escalating conflict and humanitarian needs in Rakhine state, Myanmar, prompted a significant rise in Rohingya cross-border displacement (UNGA 25/10/2024; UNHCR accessed 21/03/2025). While many Rohingya people have fled Rakhine state for camps in Cox's Bazar district in Bangladesh, rising insecurity in these camps is also driving Rohingya people to leave Bangladesh for Malaysia, Indonesia, and other regional destinations (KII 29/01/2025; KII 17/02/2025 a; KII 17/02/2025 b).

In total, UNHCR documented a 130% increase (4,400 to 9,200) in Rohingya people making sea or river journeys from both Myanmar and Bangladesh between 2023–2024, along with 2,100 people making land journeys. High rates of documented journeys have continued into 2025, with around 1,200 sea or river journeys alone documented until 22 March, representing a 25% increase from the same period in 2024 (970 sea or river journeys) (UNHCR accessed 07/04/2025).

Actual movement rates are likely far higher, as humanitarian access constraints, covert movements (often controlled by smugglers), and increasing use of mixed overland and maritime routes limit collection of accurate data (UNHCR 07/03/2025; KII 27/02/2025 a). There are also a high number of unsuccessful movements, ending in arrest and detention, refoulement, and deaths while travelling (KII 10/02/2025 b; KII 17/02/2025 c; KII 03/02/2025; KII 27/02/2025 b; Protection Cluster 20/02/2025).

About this report

Aim: this report examines trends in Rohingya cross-border displacement in 2024 and early 2025, along with humanitarian needs during the displacement process and upon arrival in Bangladesh specifically. It identifies the drivers of movements and variables that may influence the outlook for displacement throughout the remainder of 2025, including the next 'sailing season', which begins in November.

Methodology: this report is based on a review of primary and secondary datasets and sources, along with key informant interviews with 22 humanitarian responders working on the Rohingya refugee response and related crises in Myanmar and Bangladesh, other regional destinations, and at the regional level.

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KEY FACTS AND FIGURES

Trends

- **In 2024 and early 2025, Bangladesh remained the primary destination for Rohingya** based on documented movement and other data. Around 95,000 recent Rohingya arrivals in Cox's Bazar were biometrically identified between May 2022 and April 2025, with most arriving in 2024 (KII 07/04/2025; KII 17/02/2025 c; KII 27/02/2025 b).
- **Thousands of Rohingya refugees have also moved, often undetected, to Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and other regional destinations** (KII 03/02/2025; KII 06/02/2025; UNHCR 07/03/2025). In 2024, Rohingya people increasingly used mixed maritime and overland routes to reach these countries, which complicates the documentation of journeys (KII 03/02/2025; KII 06/02/2025; UNHCR 07/11/2024; Sultana and Maung 12/2024).
- **The proportion of women and children on documented sea or river journeys increased to 74% (43% children, 31% women) in 2024**, compared with 66% in 2023 (UNHCR accessed 19/03/2025). While there are some unaccompanied children and women travelling alone, there is also an increase in family units travelling to join husbands, fathers, and other male relatives who fled Myanmar in late 2023 or early 2024 in response to escalating conflict and conscription (KII 06/02/2025; KII 03/02/2025).
- **While in transit, Rohingya continue to face severe protection risks.** Most journeys are characterised by repeated extortion and exploitation, with many Rohingya people detained and mistreated until they or their relatives pay ransoms to allow for onward movement (KII 17/02/2025 a; KII 17/02/2025 c; KII 17/02/2025 b; KII 20/02/2025). Human trafficking for labour and sexual exploitation, violence (including gender-based violence), deaths, disappearances, and denial of access to services are frequently reported (Sultana and Maung 12/2024; KII 06/02/2025; KII 10/02/2025 b; UNHCR 07/03/2025).
- **Recent Rohingya arrivals to Cox's Bazar camps in Bangladesh lack access to adequate assistance, services, and shelter.** Shelters are increasingly overcrowded as new arrivals stay with relatives and friends or rent from existing Rohingya inhabitants in the camps, often paying large upfront deposits and high rent (KII 29/01/2025; KII 17/02/2025 a; KII 17/02/2025 b; KII 17/02/2025 c). This raises the risk of social tension and violence, including GBV, along with eviction and secondary displacement within camps.

Outlook

- While Myanmar's November–March 'sailing season', when weather is calmer between the region's two monsoon seasons, has come to an end, maritime journeys have continued as far into the monsoon season as possible in recent years. Although rainfall makes roads less passable, overland movements are generally less affected by the rainy season and can be expected to continue at high rates (UNHCR 04/11/2024 and 08/01/2025; KII 17/02/2025 c; Sultana and Maung 12/2024).
- **Any increase in conflict and intercommunal violence in Rakhine state in the coming months may drive increased Rohingya cross-border movement.** The escalation in fighting between the Arakan Army (AA) and Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) in and around Sittwe township is unlikely to drive a large-scale increase in displacement because of Sittwe's island geography, movement restrictions that prevent Rohingya from using the one open road out of town, and landmines planted in the ocean around the island (KII 21/03/2025; KII 25/03/2025; KII 06/02/2025; RFA 18/02/2025). Increased Rohingya armed group activity and engagement with the AA in northern Rakhine state may drive rising violence and fuel intercommunal tensions, which are already escalating in some AA-controlled areas (KII 06/02/2025; KII 10/02/2025 b; ; KII 27/02/2025 b).
- Intercommunal tensions, a lack of services and assistance, and landmine and explosive remnant of war contamination will likely prevent any large-scale returns of Rohingya people from Bangladesh to AA-controlled areas of Rakhine state (KII 21/03/2025; KII 30/01/2025 b; KII 21/03/2025; CASS 03/2025).
- **Increased insecurity in Cox's Bazar camps, including abductions and forced recruitment drives, may prompt rising displacement out of Bangladesh to other regional destinations** in the coming months. The pressure on and coercion of individuals and families to provide recruits to Rohingya organised groups in Cox's Bazar, along with the increased public presence of these groups, is creating a pervasive environment of fear (KII 17/02/2025 a; KII 17/02/2025 b; KII 17/02/2025 c; KII 20/02/2025; KII 27/02/2025 b).
- **The US funding cuts are highly likely to drive a spike in displacement from both Myanmar and Bangladesh**, given significant reliance on humanitarian assistance in both locations. Recent Rohingya arrivals to Cox's Bazar are particularly likely to attempt to move to Malaysia, Indonesia, and other regional destinations, given their lack of access to services and assistance in Cox's Bazar camps (MSF 13/03/2025; WFP 02/2025; KII 27/02/2025 a). The March 2025 earthquake in northwest and central Myanmar may temporarily divert resources and capacity from Rakhine state, further limiting the already minimal levels of humanitarian assistance there.