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# Moving on the edge: climate change-induced hazards and the politics of (im)mobility in Rohingya refugee camps

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## ABSTRACT

Climate change-induced hazards are increasingly shaping the vulnerabilities of refugee populations. However, the interplay between disaster governance and (im)mobility in camp-based settings remains underexplored. Through ethnographic engagement and interviews with refugees and humanitarian workers in the Rohingya refugee camps of Bangladesh, this study reveals how site selection on fragile slopes, restrictions on durable infrastructure, and exclusion from protective infrastructures amplify hazard risks. Exacerbating these are securitization approaches, manifesting through fencing, surveillance, and restrictions on movement, mimicking forms of carceral humanitarianism. These practices immobilize refugees and constrain their ability to respond while failing to mitigate the very risks they are designed to address. Despite these barriers, refugees negotiate limited mobilities through kinship networks and volunteer-led evacuations, which provide temporary relief but also redistribute risks unevenly. Camps, therefore, institutionalize complex risk, where multiple vulnerabilities intersect with structural violence. Challenging the notion of camps as temporary solutions to be policed, the study calls for a more meaningful and equitable inclusion of refugees in host states' disaster governance frameworks, National Adaptation Plans, and national and international climate finance strategies, and a reimagining of refugee protection in an era of climate crisis, where mobility and immobility are both politicized and precarious.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Refugee camps in disasters

Forced displacement is on the rise, as persecution, conflicts, political instability, human rights violations, economic hardship, disasters, and other events that affect public order grow. By the end of 2023, 117.3 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, a steep increase of 8% in forcibly displaced people compared to the end of 2022, sustaining the year-on-year trend over the last decade (UNHCR, 2023a). 43.4 million of this population were refugees.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of these refugees seek protection near their countries of origin, which are often low or middle-income countries (Fransen & De Haas, 2022; UNHCR, 2023a). As of 2021, a quarter of refugees live in camp-based settings, designed as temporary facilities built to offer immediate humanitarian assistance, protection, and emergency services, such as food, water, clothing, hygiene kits, shelter, and legal aid (UNHCR, 2021).

The expectation that refugee camps are temporary in nature affects the way in which they are planned and designed. Camps, or camp-like spaces, have been the subject of intrigue by geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, historians, and architects because they serve as spaces of sovereign exclusion and inherited extensions of colonial

structures of population management, contemporary modes of humanitarian aid, and thanatopolitical institutions produced as a result of precarious exclusionary policies (Weima & Brankamp, 2022). As such, camps challenge the socio-spatial imaginations of practitioners and academics. The form and execution of camps are shaped by 'the different ways in which camps are created, altered, and managed by multiple and changing actors and sovereignties' (Katz, 2017, p. 2), as well as their interactions with the natural environment that hosts them, including the impacts of climate change (Ashour et al., 2023).

Countries that host refugees are also usually some of the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. 40% of refugees live in countries that are among the most vulnerable to and least ready to adapt (UNHCR, 2024). A recent study (Fransen et al., 2024) of the 20 largest refugee settlements globally confirms these risks empirically. Refugee camps are consistently located in areas that experience above-average exposure to slow-onset events like high temperatures and low rainfall, as well as rapid-onset hazards like extreme rainfall and heatwaves. In another study of 17 refugee camps in East Africa, seven camps hosting 600,000 refugees were found to be highly vulnerable to extreme climate and weather conditions, including increases in surface temperature and pluvial flooding (Owen et al., 2023). Similarly, Syrian refugees

resettled in informal camps experience 9–11 times greater risks of landslides compared to those assimilated in urban populations due to the poor standard of shelters in the camps (Pollock et al., 2019). Far from coincidental, scholars (Fransen et al., 2024) have noted how environmental and political logics converge in camp placement decisions, privileging land that is cheap, remote, and unthreatening to domestic political orders. As climate change intensifies, regions like East Africa and South Asia, already classified by the IPCC as ‘global hot-spots of high human vulnerability’, will experience more frequent and intense hazard events (IPCC, 2022). The dual exposure of refugee camps to sociolegal marginality as well as environmental shocks creates a compound risk profile (see, for example, Simpson et al., 2021, 2023) that is still under-acknowledged in both humanitarian and disaster management frameworks.

The prominence of disasters in camp-based settings is due to their lack of consideration in many refugee conventions and compacts, as well as in climate action and disaster risk reduction (DRR) policies, at least until recently. Many host governments remain reluctant to formally include refugees in national governance frameworks, including those related to disasters, fearing it would imply permanence or citizenship claims (Arnold-Fernández, 2019), a reluctance rooted in a longer political economy of exclusion. For instance, over 15 million refugees (and other persons in need of international protection) are settled in countries whose National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) do not consider the needs of refugees in the face of disaster risks (Huckstep et al., 2024). NAPs serve not only as guiding tools for adaptation programming but also, alongside Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), draw large proportions of climate financing. This means that refugees, whose considerations are absent from these policies and plans, may not receive the necessary support. This is exacerbated by the fact that climate financing remains significantly unequal, with most financing being channelled to their developed counterparts, despite the impact of climate change-induced hazards producing 15 times more victims in developing countries (IPCC, 2022). Although COP28 marked the successful inauguration of the Loss and Damage fund, only \$700 million was pledged (Lakhani, 2023), whereas developing nations have an annual investment need of \$387 billion throughout this decade to effectively address and mitigate the impacts of climate change (UNEP, 2023). For refugee-hosting nations, the climate action budgeting needed for humanitarian causes alone in 2024 was \$1.074 billion (UNHCR, 2024).

### **1.2. The politics of disaster management in camp-based settings: producing trapped populations**

Environmental change, including climate variability and extreme weather events, is increasingly central to the production and reproduction of camp geographies. Decades of critical disaster scholarship argue that disasters are never ‘natural’, materializing when hazards, vulnerabilities, and power relations intersect (Blaikie et al., 2014; Cannon, 1993; Gaillard, 2021; Kelman, 2020; Pelling, 2001). Hazards only become disasters when governance decisions, such as about land use, settlement planning, infrastructure, access to

resources, and citizenship, expose some populations more than others. Refugee camps exemplify this dynamic, as their siting on marginal land, reliance on temporary shelters, and exclusion from national frameworks collectively generate acute vulnerability. This exclusion means that predictable hazards translate into recurring crises. As scholars (for example, Dewan, 2021, 2023; Paprocki, 2018) have warned, framing vulnerability as primarily climate change-driven risks obscures these political processes of dispossession and containment. For instance, Paprocki (2018) demonstrates how ‘adaptation regimes’ in Bangladesh produce ‘threatening dystopias’, in which climate change is used to justify interventions that displace and discipline vulnerable populations. Similarly, Dewan (2023) critiques the framing of women as ‘climate refugees’, arguing that such reductive translations erase the structural and economic contexts shaping mobility. These insights resonate with the camp context, where state and humanitarian actors not only respond to disasters but also participate in producing the geographies of risk through settlement design, resource control, and restrictions on mobility.

Such choices align with what Kelman (2020) terms ‘disasters by choice’, where vulnerability is entrenched through political decisions. Camps thus become biopolitical spaces where disaster governance can be used to regulate life, thereby managing populations through both care and containment (Collier & Lakoff, 2015). This governance is also temporal, where camps are governed as if displacement is temporary, even as displacement persists for decades (Hyndman & Giles, 2016). Humanitarian standards and programmes are designed for short-term stays, ensuring that infrastructures remain fragile and endlessly replaceable. This ‘permanent temporariness’ (Ramadan, 2013) intersects with cyclical hazards, creating a state of normalized crisis where seasonal monsoons, flooding, and landslides are expected but, nevertheless, devastating, producing a state of punctuated humanitarianism which leads to both fatigue and improvisation among humanitarian actors and the refugees (Feldman, 2016).

This has direct implications for mobility. With migration being recognized as a climate change adaptation strategy (Black et al., 2011), migration scholarships have revealed how mobility decisions are guided by multiple, intersecting demographic, social, economic, political, and environmental factors (Mallick & Schanze, 2020; Schewel, 2020). Importantly, non-migration or immobility can be as political as migration itself. While the Foresight report (UK Government Office for Science, 2011) first conceptualized ‘trapped populations’ as those unable to migrate due to a lack of necessary resources, subsequent research shows that immobility is produced through a combination of structural inequalities, legal exclusions, and governance regimes (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2018; Zickgraf, 2019, 2021). For instance, Etzold et al. (2014) and Bernzen et al. (2019) demonstrate in the Bangladeshi context how migration decisions are embedded in local histories, power relations, and livelihood systems. Refugees in camps, such as the Rohingya refugees, embody this condition because they are actively contained in spaces where movement, rights, livelihoods, and access to protective infrastructure are restricted (Thalheimer et al., 2025).

### 1.3. Study objective

This study critically examines how (im)mobility in response to climate change-induced hazards is produced, governed, and negotiated in camp-based refugee settings, using the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh as a case study. It asks: How do camp governance structures shape refugees' ability to move in response to disaster risks? How do these structures produce 'trapped populations', and what are the implications for DRR? Finally, how do refugees themselves negotiate these constraints? In line with critiques of climate determinism, this study explores the political dimensions of disaster governance to show that climate immobility in the refugee camps is a product of deliberate policy choices that prioritize containment over protection. In doing so, it highlights the tension between a humanitarian regime that ostensibly seeks to protect refugees and a securitized governance framework that systematically exposes them to hazard risks.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 . Case study

Rohingyas are an Indo-Aryan ethnic and predominantly Muslim minority group in Myanmar, who, as a result of a discriminatory nationality law in 1982, as well as the subsequent intentional exclusions of Rohingyas by successive governments, have been rendered stateless and subject to systematic denial of rights (Kyaw, 2017; Uddin, 2022). While Rohingya statelessness has been a significant issue of displacement and refugee crisis from the late 1970s to the 2000s, more recently, a 'clearance operation', bearing genocidal intent, launched by the Myanmar military junta in 2017 (Human Rights Council, 2018), resulted in the forced displacement of more than 750,000 Rohingya to neighbouring Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2023b). Today, over a million Rohingyas have been settled in 33 camps in Cox's Bazar (CXB) and Bhasan Char island (UNHCR, 2025), located in areas which are inherently vulnerable to natural hazards such as extreme rainfall, landslides, flash floods, and tropical cyclones (Ahmed et al., 2018).

The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) does not recognize the Rohingya who arrived after 2017 as 'refugees', instead designating them as Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs). This contrasts with around 43,000 'registered refugees' from earlier influxes, who remain in two official camps (Nayapara and Kutupalong). Bangladesh, like many refugee-hosting nations (Janmyr, 2021), is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol and lacks a domestic refugee framework. Moreover, there is a blatant exclusion of refugees from Bangladesh's NAPs. Despite remaining a critical guiding document in responding to the worsening impacts of climate change, at no point in the NAP preparation were refugees involved (Huckstep et al., 2024; Ober et al., 2023). Refugees, therefore, live in legal limbo, governed by a fragmented humanitarian system led by the Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, and supported by the Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) and over 100 humanitarian partners (ISCG et al., 2024). The governance framework is built on an

assumption of eventual repatriation, leaving policies reactive, shifting, and highly politicized.

### 2.2. Method

#### 2.2.1. Methodological approach

This article draws on a larger research project examining disaster governance and refugee agency in the camps, for which I employed a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1999) that integrates ethnography, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. For this paper, I specifically focus on insights related to carceral measures and climate (im)mobility in the camps. Grounded theory facilitates an iterative research process, allowing emergent themes to shape data collection and analysis as fieldwork progresses (Emerson et al., 2011). Moreover, rather than seeking statistical generalizability, this approach privileges depth and contextual richness, aligning with the principle of 'information power' in qualitative research, where sample adequacy is determined by data quality and thematic saturation (Malterud et al., 2016).

#### 2.2.2. Research site and duration

The fieldwork for the research was conducted in sporadic episodes over ten months (October 2023-August 2024) across multiple refugee camps in CXB, with a particular focus on the Ukhia sub-district, which hosts the world's largest refugee settlement (ISCG et al., 2024). Site selection was guided by hazard risk assessments from previous studies (e.g. Kamal, Ahmed et al., 2022) and consultations with refugee community members, prioritizing camps in landslide – and flood-prone areas. Twelve camps and multiple blocks were visited, enabling spatial variation, while rotating sites ensured I could avoid security risks as a woman researcher, particularly studying a highly politicized space (Ammann, 2019; Thummapol et al., 2019).

#### 2.2.3. Participants and data collection

A total of 78 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 66 refugee participants, including residents of high-risk areas (e.g. flood- and landslide-prone shelters) ( $N = 60$ ), *majhis* (camp leaders) mediating between refugees and humanitarian actors ( $N = 2$ ), and refugee volunteers<sup>2</sup> engaged in disaster response ( $N = 4$ ). Interviews with refugees lasted between 60 and 100 min and were conducted in Rohingya/Chatgaiyya (with translation support from three trained Rohingya research assistants; see more below). Where consent was granted, interviews were audio-recorded; otherwise, detailed notes were taken. Interviews were designed as open-ended conversations to elicit participants' lived experiences and interpretations of disasters and humanitarian interventions. Rather than seeking objective or 'accurate' accounts, the interviews were moments of knowledge co-production, shaped by participants' perspectives and my positionality as a host-community researcher (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1997). Moreover, some household interviews often became collective discussions, with multiple family members contributing, enriching the narratives.

Importantly, due to the unstructured style and interactions of participant observation, during which I exchanged hundreds of informal conversations with and conducted observations of interactions between refugees, *majhis*, Camp-in-Charge (CiC) officers, and humanitarian workers, as well as the wider camp life, fieldwork in the camps, amounting to more than 1,000 h of ethnographic engagement and producing several hundred pages of fieldnotes, gave me richer and far deeper insights, giving me the kind of ‘backstage access’ (Spradley, 1980) that often remain filtered in formal interviews.

Eight additional interviews were conducted with humanitarian workers affiliated with UN agencies ( $N=5$ ) and other organizations working in DRR and the wider Rohingya response ( $N=2$ ), and a GoB representative ( $N=1$ ), which lasted between 45 and 60 min. These primarily took place in English and via a mix of in-person and virtual (Zoom/Teams) formats (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014) and focused on institutional priorities, operational constraints, and perceptions of disaster risks and vulnerabilities.

#### 2.2.4. Researcher positionality and ethical consideration

I conducted the fieldwork with the support of three Rohingya research assistants, whose cultural and linguistic familiarity facilitated trust building, improved data quality, and mitigated power asymmetries between the researcher and the researched (Ahmed et al., 2022; Marlowe et al., 2015; Miller, 2004; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2013). They also served as local guides within the camps and helped me locate participants in particularly vulnerable zones. As a co-ethnic speaker of Chatgaiyya, I could converse directly with participants with little interjections from the research assistants, but my positionality as a Bangladeshi citizen and a researcher affiliated with a Global North institution required continuous reflexivity, which I continuously sought to address by reflecting on my fieldnotes (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1997). Ethical approval was granted by my department’s review board (May 2023), with verbal rather than written consent used to minimize bureaucratic intimidation. No personal identifiers (e.g. names, shelter numbers) were recorded, and participants could withdraw at any stage without consequence.

#### 2.2.5. Data analysis

Interview transcripts and ethnographic field notes were coded and analyzed using NVivo, following a thematic analysis (Watson & Till, 2010). Initial coding categories were derived from research objectives, but were adapted iteratively in line with grounded theory principles (Emerson et al., 2011). Themes included disaster governance practices, camp-level vulnerabilities, community-based DRR, and refugee strategies. Data interpretation was guided by an interpretivist approach that situated participants’ narratives within the broader social, cultural, and historical context of the Rohingya crisis. This meant reading interview accounts and fieldnotes for what they both directly and implicitly revealed about governance structures, displacement histories, and power relations in the camps. This reflexive process ensured that thematic analysis did not decontextualize participants’ voices but traced how they were shaped by overlapping structures of humanitarian governance,

security regulation, and protracted displacement (Feldman, 2015).

#### 2.2.6. Limitations

This study does not aim to represent the experiences of all of the Rohingya refugees in CXB but instead provide analytically deep and contextually rich insights afforded by extended engagement across multiple camps. At the same time, a critical limitation of the study had been the reliance on sporadic periods of fieldwork, owing to unforeseeable disruptions. For instance, extended field engagement was interrupted at various points due to fire outbreaks (e.g. March 2024), during episodes of violence and activities of gangs and insurgent groups (March 2024 onwards), as well as national-level protests in July 2024, a period when both disaster risks had heightened and humanitarian responses were disrupted. These interruptions constrained the ability to observe key hazard events as they unfolded and meant that the most acute moments of crisis are underrepresented in the data. The findings should therefore be read as illustrative of lived experiences and governance dynamics rather than exhaustive or generalizable accounts, which is a reminder that ethnography, by design, privileges situated understanding over representational totality (Emerson et al., 2011).

### 3. Findings and discussion

This section examines how the governance of the Rohingya refugee camps produces and sustains immobility under the guise of security and humanitarian relief, ultimately failing to provide meaningful protection. The analysis proceeds in five parts. First, I examine the political foundations of the camp system, showing how site selection and the state’s vision of eventual repatriation have entrenched spatial and infrastructural precarity. Second, I trace how securitization and carceral humanitarianism manifest in governance, turning protection into a form of surveillance. Third, I demonstrate the limitations of securitization, where, despite extensive security infrastructure, violence and insecurity persist. Fourth, I highlight how these conditions produce climate immobility, trapping refugees in hazard-prone areas with limited options for evacuation or relocation. Finally, I briefly discuss the constrained mobilities that persist within and beyond the camps, showing how they reinforce rather than disrupt containment.

#### 3.1. Site selection and repatriation vision

The rapid establishment of the camps in CXB following the 2017 influx was driven by urgency rather than hazard-informed planning. Nearly one million refugees arrived within months, and the GoB, together with humanitarian agencies, hastily erected shelters on steeply sloped, deforested terrain in Teknaf and Ukhiya (Ahmed et al., 2020; Kamal, Hossain et al., 2022, Kamal, Ahmed et al., 2022). The decision to settle refugees in these ecologically fragile areas (Hassan et al., 2023) was not guided by risk assessments (interview with humanitarian worker, 2024) but by a mix of logistical pragmatism and political calculation. Proximity to the Myanmar border facilitated relief delivery and symbolically reinforced the GoB’s

position that the Rohingya presence was temporary, pending eventual repatriation (interview with GoB representative, 2023; fieldnotes, 2023-2024). Land scarcity in one of the world's most densely populated countries further constrained options, as one official explained:

We are overpopulated and a land-hungry country. We cannot give anymore – we had to destroy our hills and forest for the settlement. We do not have enough plain land for this settlement. [interview with GoB representative, 2023]

Similarly, another humanitarian worker noted:

The bigger challenge right now in the refugee camps ... [is that] the camps are very dense- highly populated [see Figure 1 below], and there is no space at all. So whatever space the government could provide, they have already shared with us. [interview with humanitarian worker, 2024]

Bamboo-and-tarpaulin shelters mushroomed across slopes with inclinations of up to 87 degrees, leaving the refugees acutely vulnerable to monsoon-triggered landslides (Kamal, Ahmed et al., 2022, Kamal, Hossain, Rahman et al., 2022; see an example in Figure 2 below). This settlement pattern caused massive deforestation, with over 3,000 ha of ecologically critical forested land cleared, deepening environmental fragility (Hasan et al., 2021; Mukul et al., 2019). These settlement decisions were therefore deeply political, involving clearing hills, sidestepping Sphere standards for shelters, and prioritizing speed over safety. As the GoB representative observed, '[prescribed humanitarian guidelines have to be] compromised because of land constraints'.

What began as an emergency improvisation soon hardened into governance. The GoB prohibited the use of 'permanent' materials such as brick, steel, or concrete, ensuring that camp infrastructure would remain fragile and continuously replaceable (Bashar & Sletto, 2025). Proposals for double-story shelters, which would ease some of the pressures caused by horizontal expansion but needed metal footing, were rejected on the grounds that they would symbolize permanence [interview with humanitarian worker, 2024]. The institutional architecture reinforced this framing. The RRRC is situated under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, and the early deployment of the Bangladesh Army further positioned the crisis within a disaster response paradigm (Cook & Foo, 2019). While coordination through the ISCG has improved seasonal hazard preparedness (Campbell et al., 2024), it has also entrenched a short-term, risk-centric apparatus where impermanence is operationalized as governance.

The same governance architecture that frames the refugee response as temporary also shapes decisions about infrastructure, systematically denying refugees access to durable shelter and protective systems such as cyclone shelters and early warning mechanisms. For instance, Bangladesh's reputation as a global leader in disaster preparedness, through the Cyclone Preparedness Programme (CPP), early warning systems, and robust cyclone shelters (Haque et al., 2022; Zaman et al., 2022), is unevenly extended to the camps. Despite predictable monsoon hazards, permanent cyclone shelters have not been constructed for refugees. A government official gave the rationale:

There is no cyclone shelter, but since [the Rohingyas are not living] in a building ... there will be no casualty. At least, you can take the open road. [interview with GoB representative, 2023]

Early warning systems further illustrate this exclusion. The recently introduced Landslide Early Warning System (LEWS) relies on SMS and email alerts (USAID & NetHope, 2020), but refugees face legal barriers to SIM card ownership, frequent internet shutdowns, and financial constraints (Hussain et al., 2020, June). Most rely on word-of-mouth or CPP flag signals (see Figure 3 below) disseminated by under-resourced volunteers, and many reported receiving no warnings at all. These omissions reveal that risk exposure is also produced through exclusion from national protective systems.

### 3.2. Securitization in practice

While temporariness produces infrastructural fragility, securitization enforces immobility. The GoB's approach to the Rohingya crisis has increasingly been shaped by a logic of suspicion that frames refugees not as rights-bearing persons but as potential security threats. Securitization efforts can be traced back to the 1990s, when stalled repatriation efforts and the emergence of armed groups prompted a securitized turn in camp governance (Rana & Riaz, 2023). These dynamics intensified after the Ramu violence of 2012, when radical Rohingyas were suspected of attacks on Buddhist monasteries and homes. Since then, political elites, media outlets, and even academic literature have repeatedly linked the Rohingya to drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and militancy (Ashraf, 2021; Manzur & Prova, 2023; Nilsen, 2022; Sakib, 2023). This securitization has been enacted through both discursive and material practices. Politicians have labelled Rohingyas as 'illegal immigrants', a 'burden', and a 'threat to national security', legitimizing increasingly coercive measures (Rana & Riaz, 2023). These include militarization of borders and camps, mandatory biometric registration for aid access, communication blackouts, and relocation schemes such as Bhasan Char. In 2019, for example, the Ministry of Home Affairs instructed the Bangladesh Army to construct 'watch towers', install CCTV cameras, and fence the camps with barbed wire 'so that no one can come out of the camps and no one can enter inside the camps' (Human Rights Watch, 2019). While presented as necessary for maintaining order, these measures effectively transformed the camps into fortified enclaves. Humanitarian workers I spoke to on the field noted that fencing sometimes obstructed evacuation during fires and floods, exacerbating rather than mitigating risk (fieldnotes, 2023-2024).

Securitization has also permeated bureaucratic practices. Biometric registration, iris scans, and digital ID cards are prerequisites for food, shelter, and medical care, leaving refugees with little choice but to comply. However, in a startling example of unethical data use and exchange, in 2021, UNHCR's data was shared with the GoB, without informed consent from the refugees, and subsequently provided to Myanmar for repatriation verification (Human Rights Watch, 2021a). Therefore, it is no surprise that suspicion of humanitarian actors and their interventions is pervasive in the camps, and it is this mistrust in authorities that also



**Figure 1.** A view of one of the Rohingya refugee camps.

affects DRR and response (Campbell et al., 2024). As scholars note, such ‘datafied humanitarianism’ blurs the lines between protection and surveillance, eroding neutrality and turning aid into an apparatus of control (Madianou, 2019). This convergence of security and humanitarian logics has been described as carceral humanitarianism, whereby humanitarian aid and protection for refugees have become entangled with practices of surveillance, restriction, and control (Oliver, 2017). Worsening the crisis are restrictive policies in the camps, especially related to movement, approved shelter materials, and the ability to undertake income-generating activities to build capacities, which affect the effectiveness of DRR interventions in the camps (Zaman et al., 2020).

These policies extend beyond CXB. The Bhasan Char relocation project, designed to accommodate 100,000 refugees on a remote island in the Bay of Bengal, illustrates another form of securitized containment. Officially described as ‘voluntary’ and ‘secure’, it has been widely criticized as coercive and isolating (Human Rights Watch, 2021b; Uddin, 2024). Its remoteness, requiring a two-hour boat journey to the mainland, complicates emergency response and humanitarian monitoring. The island is geologically unstable, vulnerable to cyclones, and reliant on embankments to prevent flooding (Gazi et al., 2022; Mallick, 2024). Refugees I interacted with expressed fear of being sent there against their will, with some deliberately avoiding NGO contact to reduce the risk of being selected for relocation. Although the GoB highlights the presence of



**Figure 2.** Shelters are built on top of uneven and risky slopes.



**Figure 3.** Warning flags hoisted by refugee volunteers in the camps for an incoming cyclone, according to the guidelines of the CPP, with each flag denoting the associated signal or intensity of the cyclone.

brick houses and cyclone shelters as evidence of improved conditions (Mallick, 2024; Bashar & Sletto, 2025), many from the international humanitarian community describe it as a ‘jail in the sea’ (Human Rights Watch, 2021b), citing restrictions on movement, limited services, and social isolation. The CXB camps and Bhasan Char thus exemplify spatial strategies of confinement (Mountz, 2013; Tazzioli, 2018), where mobility is controlled and channelled into bounded, surveilled spaces, displacing security risks inwards.

### 3.3. The limitations of securitization

The GoB justifies securitization measures as necessary to maintain law and order. Officials regularly cite gang rivalries, drug trafficking, and murders to argue for fencing, surveillance, and relocation schemes (Ashraf, 2021; Manzur & Prova, 2023; Nilsen, 2022; Sakib, 2025). Admittedly, these concerns are not unfounded. For instance, police and humanitarian reports confirm that at least 14 gangs operate across the camps, engaging in extortion, kidnapping, and territorial disputes (cited in Das, 2023). Moreover, fires that devastate shelters are frequently linked to deliberate arson related to these rivalries (interview with GoB representative, 2023). Trafficking networks targeting women and youth also continue to flourish, with victims coerced into marriage, sex work, or risky migration routes (fieldnotes, 2024). Insurgency further complicates the security landscape. Groups such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Arakan Army (AA) recruit inside the camps, often coercively, with such cases having increased in the past year linked to political instabilities in Myanmar. Reuters reported that between 3,000 and 5,000 Rohingyas joined Myanmar’s civil conflict in 2024, many under threat (Ghoshal & Mcpherson, 2024). My own fieldwork corroborates these reports: March to May 2024 was one of the most volatile periods for me to conduct fieldwork, with participants warning me against visiting certain camps. Many of my male respondents and their acquaintances temporarily went off the radar, some leaving the camps

to avoid forced recruitment (fieldnotes, 2024). For women and girls, the risks of harassment, abduction, and trafficking have made everyday mobility dangerous, compelling families to restrict movements voluntarily (fieldnotes, 2023-2024). Indeed, camps can foster wariness and suspicion about belonging, safety, and trust (Feldman, 2018), giving rise to a feeling of ‘both deep attachment to and alienation from the camp’ (Feldman, 2015, p. 249). This is probably why one of my participants cautioned how ‘not every Rohingya here is [a] friend’ (refugee, interview, January 2024).

Paradoxically, while refugees’ daily lives are tightly regulated, the camps remain porous to illicit networks. Local politicians, police, and border security officials have been implicated in profiting from trafficking and smuggling, revealing that these networks are sustained through complicity rather than merely refugee criminality (Rana & Riaz, 2023). The assassination of Major (ret’d) Sinha Md Rashed Khan in 2020 exposed the involvement of Teknaf police officials in the cross-border drug trade, underscoring how state actors are themselves embedded in the economies they claim to combat (Dhaka Tribune, 2022). Indeed, previous studies have also demonstrated how such carceral logics tend to fail to mitigate security risks in camp-based settings (see, for example, Davis, 2021; Kimathi, 2019; Pasha, 2021). Therefore, securitization has created a hybrid governance environment where gangs, insurgents, and state forces coexist in uneasy tension. Refugees are caught between multiple authorities, each demanding compliance and extracting resources. As a result, many participants described a constant state of fear, including fear of state punishment if they leave the camps, fear of gang retribution if they refuse extortion or recruitment, and fear of disaster risk from which they cannot escape. This layered insecurity generates what several respondents called a ‘life in prison’ (fieldnotes, 2024, common verbatim from various participants). This illustrates the shortcomings of the securitization approach undertaken by the GoB in the camps, despite which, crime and insurgent activity continue unabated, and refugees remain the most exposed to its consequences.

Securitization instead has deepened vulnerability by constraining safe mobility, obstructing disaster evacuation routes, and producing an atmosphere of collective punishment. The camps thus become both hyper-policed and profoundly unsafe spaces.

### 3.4. Climate im(mobility) as a political outcome

With securitization transforming the camps into spaces of confinement, they quickly become spaces of immobility during disasters, with refugees structurally prevented from moving. In a study released by the Danish Refugee Council, 84% of respondents identified government containment policies as a key barrier to moving out of the camps, whether temporarily or permanently (Danish Refugee Council, 2024). For many of my participants, this created a deep sense of entrapment. One refugee explained:

We would be very happy if the government and NGOs evacuate us from here to another place where we will be able to prevent [disaster risks]. Sometimes, we feel like death would be better than living in fear of dying every day. [refugee, interview, February 2024]

Another humanitarian worker noted:

The persistence of the disaster risks has to do with the fact that the Rohingya communities are contained in that geographic space ... [If] there are flood risks [and other disaster risks], how can you move people if there's nowhere to move? [interview with humanitarian worker, 2024]

These accounts demonstrate how immobility is politically produced due to deliberate and calculated decisions about camp siting and management. The refugee camps, thus, became (semi)permanent tools of control and containment 'of a mass of individuals that governments believe cannot be treated otherwise' (Martin et al., 2020, p. 752). The makeshift camps in the previously forested land become spaces of 'containment beyond detention' enacted to keep 'migrants on the move [...] as modes of government that frantically try to regain control over their autonomous movements' (Tazzioli & Garelli, 2020, p. 1012). Consequently, refugees are kept 'trapped' in place until hazards arrive, at which point they are expected to take shelter in fragile bamboo structures. Such policies transform ordinary seasonal hazards into catastrophic events by denying the very capacities that could reduce risk. Kelman (2020)'s argument that 'disasters are by choice' is especially relevant here. The hazards facing the Rohingya are not exceptional. They only become disastrous because of where and how refugees are made to live. The state's refusal to recognize the protracted nature of displacement, combined with its security-focused governance, has manufactured conditions of permanent risk. Aijazi (2024)'s notion of 'atmospheric violence' is also helpful in capturing the pervasiveness of this condition. Like militarized Kashmir, the camps are suffused with a form of chronic, structural violence, where containment, surveillance, exposure to hazards, and denial of safe infrastructure produce an environment where risk is ambient, ubiquitous, and lived in the body. This immobilization also has what Weima and Brankamp (2022) call 'thanatopolitical' dimensions, where camps emerge as spaces of governance that manage both life and exposure to death. For instance, just last year, three refugees were killed in heavy-triggered landslides (Reuters, 2024), just a

few months after the death of at least ten refugees, two of whom were children (Save the Children, 2024). These infrastructures normalize vulnerability and slow death through cycles of exposure to preventable hazards and inadequate shelter. Subsequently, the camps function as a holding zone where death is administratively deferred but never entirely averted, rather than humanitarian spaces that offer refuge.

### 3.5. Securitization, community, and contained mobilities during disasters

Although the overarching effect of securitization is to immobilize refugees, mobility is not entirely absent. Rather, it is transformed into what Tazzioli (2018) calls 'governed mobility', which becomes most visible in hazard events, when evacuation is permitted, organized, and monitored through humanitarian infrastructures and refugee intermediaries. For instance, temporary movements during floods, landslides, or cyclones are facilitated by refugee volunteers (see Figure 4 below), who help households relocate either to relatives' or neighbours' shelter in safer zones, or to temporary communal shelters (TCSs), such as learning centres, NGO offices, and some other communal facilities. However, these mobilities are highly conditional, with stays in TCSs are capped at 72 h, with rationed food offered by the World Food Programme (WFP). This reinforces the regulated and provisional character of such movement.

Social networks play a central role in navigating these constraints. For instance, many refugees prefer relocating to relatives' shelters, where their stay is more flexible and socially acceptable. Others rely on neighbours to host vulnerable family members (children, the elderly, or persons with disabilities), while some stay behind to protect shelters and possessions. As Adger (2003a, 2003b) notes, these arrangements demonstrate the adaptive functions of social capital, where networks of reciprocity and trust enable collective survival under environmental stress, facilitating information sharing, pooling resources for transport, and organizing community responses during hazards. As one refugee explained:

... [My] husband took the children and our mother-in-law to a relative's place ... while I stayed back to guard our shelter. [refugee, interview, December 2023]

However, such strategies also illustrate how mobility often redistributes risks unevenly between and within households. Those who evacuate encounter overcrowding and a lack of privacy in TCSs and/or the risks of theft of vital assets like solar panels and LPG cylinders, while those who remain are directly exposed to hazard events. Indeed, this also reveals how multiple decisions can exist in the bounded camp settings due to the existence of various intersecting factors (see, for example, Dewan, 2023; Nabong et al., 2023; Sobczak-Szelc, 2024). One humanitarian worker who complained of how common non-evacuation is within households noted:

[Mostly,] we found ... [the refugees] actually came [to the TCSs during] the daytime and at night time they again [went back home] ... [Even] after high awareness, after high alarms, the families remain unbothered. They want to sleep ... [and] feel comfortable on their [own] beds. [interview with humanitarian worker, 2024]



**Figure 4.** Volunteers helping a household relocate to their relative's shelter by assisting an elderly woman and carrying possessions like their LPG cylinder.

When I inquired about this, many of them gave varied reasons for their non-evacuation decisions despite the risks this may pose. Some did not take the warnings seriously because their locations previously did not experience landslides, and so, they felt it was a ‘hassle’ to constantly have to relocate to the TCS with their properties:

It is such a waste of time and effort to always go to the TCS with our children and things ... such a hassle ... At the end, nothing happens ... *Allahr shokr* [thanks to Allah], our shelter is in a better location than others, so we have never faced it. [female refugee, interview, May 2024]

Indeed, previous experiences of landslides play an important role in shaping refugees’ risk perception, as reported in another study (Kamal et al., 2023) conducted in the camps. However, one of the most frequently cited deterrents to evacuation was the fear of theft and burglary (see also Saha & Pittock, 2021; and Alam, 2024, who have reported similar findings in Bangladesh). Shoji and Murata (2021) find that trust driven by strong social capital and bonding encourages disaster evacuation in Bangladesh by reducing fear of theft of properties, illustrating how the opposite is occurring in the camps, where a lot of the non-evacuation decisions are caused by poor trust and social cohesion within refugee households, despite attempts to resettle extended families and acquaintances together (interview with GoB representative, 2023). With deprivation running deep among several households, thefts, especially for assets like LPG cylinders, solar panels, food, bedding, jute mattresses, utensils, stools, and other household items, are common. One participant mentioned how they always stay back with their brother because their solar panel was stolen back in 2022 when their family had evacuated to the TCS for two days. They had relied on it for indoor lighting and running a fan (see

also Rafa et al., 2024), but had to save up for months to buy another.

At the same time, gendered norms and securitized restrictions intensify immobility for many women. Movement after dark, or unaccompanied relocation, is seen as unsafe or socially inappropriate due to the maintenance of *purdah*<sup>3</sup>, particularly in households without adult male members. Women described reluctance to stay in crowded TCSs where privacy and *purdah* could not be maintained, while others were compelled to remain in hazardous shelters rather than risk harassment en route (see Ayeb-Karlsson, 2020a, Ayeb-Karlsson, 2020b; Tripathy Furlong et al., 2022 for discussions on how women’s mobility decisions are emotionally loaded and culturally determined). These dynamics expose the limits of community solidarity in the face of disasters, where, while kinship and community ties enable certain forms of protection, they also reproduce patriarchal divisions of labour, leaving some to shoulder heightened risks associated with staying back to guard shelters and assets (mostly adult men) or family honour (mostly women) (fieldnotes, 2023–2024). Indeed, all communities, or social networks, bring their own politics of power, which can perpetuate structures of social exclusion and marginalization during disasters (Meyer, 2018; Uekusa et al., 2022). Thus, mobility in disasters does not negate securitization. It is instead tolerated, monitored, and deeply uneven, operating within and through the securitization.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have set out to examine how governance structures in the Rohingya refugee camps in CXB shape (im)mobility in the face of disaster risks, how these arrangements produce trapped populations, and how refugees themselves

negotiate these constraints. The findings demonstrate that hazards become disasters in the camps because of political and institutional choices, including the choice to place camps on steep, deforested slopes, keep shelters deliberately temporary, and exclude refugees from protective systems such as cyclone shelters, early warning networks, and national adaptation planning. These decisions normalize structural violence by ensuring that recurring hazards translate into recurring crises, rendering refugees in a constant state of precarity. Therefore, the camps are quickly transformed into thanatopolitical institutions that normalize slow exposure to harm and death.

Securitization deepens this vulnerability by shaping camps into infrastructures of immobility. Policies such as fencing, biometric registration, and restrictions on movement signal carceral humanitarianism. While justified as necessary for crime prevention, these measures obstruct evacuation, exacerbate risks, and fail to eliminate insecurity, as trafficking, arson, and insurgency continue to persist in camps. Nevertheless, mobility is not completely absent, as refugees face constrained mobility choices so long as they are temporary and closely monitored. They relocate temporarily within camps or rely on kin networks for support, demonstrating how resilience emerges from social networks under constraint. However, they also reveal the uneven burdens of risks, with households being divided between those who evacuate and those who stay behind. These dynamics generate complex risks, compounding vulnerabilities emerging from the intersection of hazards with entrenched exclusions. Refugees are trapped between ecological fragility, restrictive governance, and cycles of crisis. The camps, thus, embody a form of punctuated humanitarianism, where acute emergencies and chronic neglect repeatedly collide.

Addressing these risks in the camps, including wider securitized camp-based settings, demands collective action from host states and the international community and a decisive move beyond carceral logics. Other countries have demonstrated how inclusive policies can coexist with state interests and local development. For instance, while not perfect, Uganda and Kenya have adopted more progressive policies; Uganda allows refugees freedom of movement, the right to work, and access to land (Betts et al., 2019), which has been shown to improve refugees' capacities to respond to crises. Similarly, Kenya's Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement (Betts et al., 2020) presents a hybrid model blending humanitarian response with development planning, emphasizing self-reliance and integration with host communities to space for critical shared infrastructure. Other alternatives include the meaningful and equitable inclusion of refugees as rights-bearing actors in host states' disaster governance frameworks, national adaptation plans, and climate finance mechanisms, thereby unlocking resources that remain otherwise inaccessible to the humanitarian sector. International humanitarian actors also bear responsibility for disentangling their interventions from state security agendas and aligning them with broader climate action, including DRR and adaptation, with an explicit focus on refugee protection rather than mere sustainability as a 'green' branding exercise (see Siddique, 2022). Otherwise, the camps will remain carceral spaces, producing

climate-immobile populations who are trapped in perpetual precarity.

## Notes

1. This article utilizes the definition of a refugee put forth by the 1951 Refugee Convention, referring to a person who 'owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country'.
2. Members of the refugee population who are recruited by humanitarian organizations to assist with day-to-day humanitarian operations in the camps. They are generally individuals who have obtained a tertiary degree while in Myanmar and have been recruited for humanitarian work due to their educational qualifications.
3. A religious and social practice of gender partition prevalent among some Muslim and Hindu communities.

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## Data availability statement

None of the data/codes generated and/or analyzed during the current study are publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of the research participants. This confidentiality is being maintained as stipulated by the institutional ethical review committee. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Cambridge on May 18, 2023.

## Notes on contributor

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