



Scenes from the camps in India, pix courtesy r4rstories

A word from us...

Hi and welcome to Rohingya Stories Volume 6! It's been a tough month for the Rohingya in the sub-continent. The camps in Bangladesh continue to experience a food crisis after the World Food Program reduced their per capita food rations from USD 12 to USD 8. In Uttar Pradesh, India, 74 Rohingya were detained on 24th July 2023 for having "illegally" entered the country. With **World Humanitarian Day** (19 August) and **International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances** (29 August) round the corner, perhaps it is time to walk in their shoes...

The **Art Garden Rohingya**, the online platform where Rohingya poets and artists express their feelings and shared memories, is a good place to start. Ishrat Bibi, 22, who contributes her poetry here says, "writing poetry has given me a voice..." The **Rohingya Genocide Archive** is an attempt to preserve videos of the genocide posted on social media, with the ultimate aim of using the visual evidence to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Some good news: the good folk at **EnglishBolo** read *Rohingya Stories* and decided to offer their three-month spoken English program free to learners between 14 and 25 in the Kalindi Kunj camp. This is important, as one of the learners, Mufti Mohammadullah, says, "people only listen to you if you speak in English..." Warm thanks to Atharva

Tewari, our volunteer who has reported this story! Meanwhile, residents of a camp in Haryana, mainly daily wage construction workers, are trying to gather funds to construct their own **nature-based solution to waterlogging**. We must celebrate, and facilitate, this spirit of resilience and ingenuity -- instead of leaving refugees solely dependent on humanitarian aid.

Rohingya Stories is a monthly newsletter from the Rohingya Human Rights Initiative. It aims to showcase our people's resilience, and great potential to become economically, socially and culturally productive members of our host country, India. Rohingya Stories will humanize the Rohingya to a world that has seen them as nameless victims for too long.

YOU CAN HELP!!

Friends in the media, please help us amplify these inspirational faces, voices and stories.

We can help you **access** the camps, **interview** respondents and share our **photos** too!

Contact us
r4rstories@gmail.com



Ishrat Fori Imran, pix courtesy Ishrat Fori Imran, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

The Rohingya art garden

“I used to feel like no one really knew me; that I was just a young Rohingya girl, invisible in a forgotten part of the world,” says **Ishrat Fori Imran**, 22. “Poetry has given me a voice...” Ishrat is among the many Rohingya in Bangladesh and across the world who have found great solace in the power of words to express their anguish. She was in the 2017 exodus from Myanmar, in which over 700,000 Rohingya villagers fled to neighbouring Bangladesh, haunted by stories of gang rape, mass killings and arson attacks. One of the hidden fallouts of this exodus, she says, was the loss of their art and culture.

Historical accounts of the country, especially of Arakan, the Rohingya's motherland, say that poetry was the most cherished form of expression for the Rohingya. “Since we came to live in the camps in Bangladesh, all this was vanishing,” Ishrat says. In 2019, Ishrat, along with other Rohingya, turned to art and poetry as a way to heal and also preserve their culture through The **Art Garden Rohingya**, the first Rohingya online art website and Facebook page. Since then, it has published over 543 poems in English and Burmese. Some are about pain of displacement; others about sufferings caused by the genocide and many are paeans to their lost motherland – but they have one thing in common. They are all affirmations of Rohingya rights, heritage and identity.

For more, see <http://www.theartgardenrohingya.com>

"Heartbeats of the Rohingya"

I Still Smile

*I'm tortured everywhere,
Nowhere is safe for me,
My heart cries for peace
But I still smile
Like everything okay with me.*

-- Sirajul Islam --

Where is peace?

*I am a Rohingya.
I feel like a helpless silent bird _
soaring in the sky.
Sometimes I am a refugee.
Sometimes I am a migrant.
Always hopeless, I am.
I ask the world,
"Where is my peace?"
A helpless silent bird _
soaring in the sky.*

-- Mohammad Erfun Amin --



Mohd Noor and the Rohingya Genocide Archive at work, pix courtesy Mohd Noor

Archiving memories of a genocide

In 2022, the United States acknowledged that the Burmese military has committed genocide against Rohingya. Since the holocaust, this is the eighth time that the US has reached this conclusion. While the wheels of justice grind slowly, Rohingya survivors have been sharing videos and photographs documenting this violence. But this visual evidence is at risk of being taken down, becoming unfindable, or being lost. **Mohd Noor** of the **Rohingya Project** in Malaysia is trying to prevent this from happening. His **Rohingya Genocide Archive** is compiling authenticated visual media evidence of genocidal crimes perpetrated against the Rohingya. Most of these are social media videos showing villages being burned, dead bodies, and people leaving their homes, which run the risk of being taken down because of their graphic content. “This way, we can ensure that they are not lost, removed or simply rendered unfindable” Noor says. His colleagues and he are also digitising pre-genocide documents that have survived the violence and displacement – passports, IDs, photographs etc which are hard to preserve in refugee camps. The loss of these artefacts and the collective forgetting of their heritage is not just because of the insecurity of the displaced life. It is, Noor says, a deliberate erasure of Rohingya identity by the ruling dispensation in Myanmar. “By archiving all possible cultural artefacts from our lives in Burma we can keep these memories alive,” he says.

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*In April 2023, The UN exhibition, **Stories of Survival and Remembrance**, displayed everyday objects that defined the lives of their one-time owners - tattered scarves, faded teddy bears, sepia tinted photos and old documents. These seemingly ordinary objects, away from their original contexts, transformed into storytellers, telling tales of how these lives were altered by war, trauma, displacement and exile. The exhibition focused on the Holocaust, and conflict zones of Cambodia, Srebrenica and Rwanda.*

*The Rohingya people did not feature in this exhibition, in spite of having faced successive waves of genocidal violence since the 1990s and now ranked as one of the world's largest stateless communities. The **Rohingya Genocide Archive** is preserving evidence, acknowledging the trauma, raising awareness about genocide and hopefully, one day, bring the perpetrators to justice.*



Waterlogging in the Rohingya camp in Nuh, Haryana, pix courtesy Abdullah

Monsoon woes and solutions from within

North India is experiencing an unusually intense monsoon, and the Rohingya in Haryana, possibly among the least resilient, to extreme weather in their makeshift bamboo and plastic covered shanties, are facing the brunt of it. Rohingya camps in Mewat, Haryana, are particularly badly affected this time. On July 29, 2023, an 11-year-old tragically drowned in rainwater.

“Most of our camp is underwater,” says resident and community leader **Abdullah Qureshi** “And even after the rain stops, the water has nowhere to go...” Every monsoon, water stagnates for weeks on end. “But this year is worse,” Abdullah reports. “The stagnant water levels are so high that we fear our clean water tank might get contaminated.” Every year, the **waterlogging** brings with it, attendant problems of dengue, malaria and skin problems. It also floods their makeshift toilets and shallow septic tanks, leading to stomach ailments like gastroenteritis, diarrhea and typhoid.

Fed up of the unsafe, reeking mess which has compounded their discomfort of living in a temporary camp with no civic infrastructure, the community, which consists mainly of daily wage construction workers, is trying to devise their own solutions. “The simplest, we feel, would be to dig drains across the camp which would allow rainwater to drain naturally,” says Abdullah. “However, we’re surrounded by semi-urban settlements with little or no drainage of their

Nature-based solutions possible in refugee camps

- *Develop water reservoirs near refugee camps to reduce flooding and ensure water in dry months*
- *Facilitate climate-smart farming and the plantation of fruit trees in camps to bolster food security improve microclimate, and create income.*
- *Compost waste to improve camp hygiene and enrich soil*
- *Restore hilly streams to ensure easy passing of flood waters*

own.” Instead, they have devised a better plan. “We plan to bore holes in the ground to allow the rainwater to recharge the groundwater. This could take care of waterlogging and improve the water table,” Abdullah says.

The community is trying to raise funds to implement this. “I hope we can make it happen,” Abdullah says. “It could help us, and the area we inhabit.”

Contact us r4rstories@gmail.com



Rohingya students using the app, pix courtesy r4rstories

A new language of hope

by Atharva Tewari

"Now if I go somewhere and someone speaks to me in English, I can at least understand some of it and even try to speak it," **Mohammad Ayaz**, a 10th grader from the Kalindi Rohingya Kunj camp. Ayaz has been using an app, English Bolo, to improve his spoken English.

English Bolo is an AI-based English learning application that combines 100 self-learning modules and 10 live online classes to improve learners' spoken English skills. English Helper, the company behind the application, has provided access to youth in the camp for free, and the current enrollment stands at around 10 students. **Mizan**, a 21-year-old youth leader at the same camp, has been using the English Bolo app for the past two months and has just over a month to go before completing the program. With English Bolo's in-built translation services and plenty of visual aids,

Mizan has been able to make significant improvements in her English proficiency that had not been possible through the plethora of in-person and online English learning programs she had tried previously. Consequently, she is able to better assist the volunteer English teachers who come to the camp to teach younger children. **Mufti Mohammadullah**, who teaches Urdu and Arabic to students in the camp, is also using EnglishBolo. "I like the fact that if there's a word you don't understand, you can see its meaning in Urdu, Hindi and even in

Check out the app on
<https://www.englishbolo.com>

pictures!" he says. "Learning English is crucial, these days, people only listen to you if you speak in English..." According to a Refugees International and Azaadi Project report, Rohingya students have faced difficulties enrolling in schools since the Indian government downgraded the status of UNHCR-issued cards as valid proof of identity. Like Mizan and Ayaz, most enroll in the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS). Attending classes can be challenging amidst the constant flux of camp life and the distance between the learning centers from the camp. English Bolo has thus provided an accessible avenue of learning for youth in the camp as the learners can flexibly choose their own pace and timing, and only need a mobile device to access the application.



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Pitch them to your editors! We know refugee stories are often hard to research as their camps are not easily accessed, but we've got you covered with contact details of respondents, a lovely photo bank (free to use with attributions) and even a list of subject matter experts. Contact us on r4rstories@gmail.com for details...

Write and tell us what you'd like to know more about the Rohingya. We'd love for this to be a conversation!

Check out the back issues of ROHINGYA STORIES here:
<https://www.linkedin.com/company/rohingya-stories/>

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