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OUR TELNO 185: ROHINGYA REFUGEES

SUMMARY

1. REFUGEES ARE ARRIVING IN LARGER NUMBERS THAN CAN BE ABSORBED: BUT THE ADMINISTRATION, UNHCR AND MAJOR NGOS ARE COPING PRETTY WELL IN THE SHORT TERM. ALL ARE WORRIED ABOUT FINDING MORE LAND FOR CAMPS, AND PREVENTING OUTBREAKS OF DISEASE DURING THE MONSOONS. THE AREA IS CYCLONE PRONE. GOB ARE TRYING TO RESTRICT THE REFUGEES MOSTLY TO THE AREA SOUTH OF COX'S BAZAR. RELATIONS BETWEEN GOB AND NGOS ARE GOOD: BUT GOB IS KEEPING TIGHT GRIP ON NON ISLAMIC NGO ACTIVITIES. SO FAR THE RESULT HAS BEEN EFFECTIVE COORDINATION. ALL INVOLVED ARE EXPECTING THE PROBLEM TO LAST AT LEAST INTO 1993.

DETAIL

2. I VISITED A NUMBER OF THE CAMPS ON 19 MARCH, ACCOMPANIED BY THE DEPUTY COMMISSIONER (SENIOR GOB ADMINISTRATOR) COX'S BAZAR DISTRICT. I ALSO HAD DISCUSSIONS WITH MITCHELL CARLSON, UNHCR REPRESENTATIVE AND DR WAYNE DRAPER, UNHCR MEDICAL COORDINATOR AND THE GOB RELIEF COMMISSIONER AND HIS DEPUTY. I TALKED TO GROUPS OF REFUGEES, SOME ON ARRIVAL, SOME IN TEMPORARY SHACKS, AND SOME IN OFFICIAL CAMPS. MY WIFE SPOKE SEPARATELY IN CHITTAGONG TO MISSIONARIES WHO HAVE WORKED IN MALAMGAT HOSPITAL NEAR COX'S BAZAR FOR 20 YEARS.

3. GEORGE FINLAYSON DESCRIBES THE CONDITIONS OF THE REFUGEES GRAPHICALLY IN HIS TUR. THEY ARE ARRIVING IN LARGER NUMBERS THAN THE GOB, UNHCR, AND NGO ADMINISTRATORS CAN COPE WITH. THE ADMINISTRATION ESTIMATED 7 TO 7,500 CROSSED INTO BANGLADESH ON 18 MARCH, BRINGING THE TOTAL TO 174,000 (BUT SEE PARA 9 BELOW). ON 17 MARCH 59,378 HAD BEEN PROVIDED WITH SHELTER, LEAVING 110,427 STILL



TO BE ACCOMMODATED.

4. THOSE AWAITING TRANSFER TO CAMPS ARE LIVING UNDER RUDIMENTARY COVER (BRANCHES COVERED BY MATTING OR STRAW AND LEAVES). FOR THE MOMENT CONDITIONS ARE PITIABLE, BUT TOLERABLE (SIMILAR TO SHANTIES IN DHAKA, BOMBAY OR CALCUTTA). THE REFUGEES NOW ARRIVING ARE IN RELATIVELY GOOD HEALTH: WATER IS FOR THE MOST PART AVAILABLE FROM STREAMS OR TUBEWELLS AND DEFECATION TAKES PLACE IN OPEN COUNTRY SOME DISTANCE FROM THE LIVING SPACE. BUT FROM MAY (CYCLONE RISK MONTH) THROUGH THE MONSOON (JUNE-SEPTEMBER) CONDITIONS WILL DETERIORATE RAPIDLY - AND THERE WILL BE MAJOR RISKS OF ILLNESS AND DEATHS.

5. ALTHOUGH GOB AUTHORITIES CLAIM THAT THE REFUGEES ARE MALNOURISHED AND WEAK, UNHCR SAY THAT THE INCIDENCE OF MALNUTRITION AMONGST CHILDREN VARIES FROM 6-30%. THIS IS LOWER THAN IN THE EQUIVALENT BANGLADESH POPULATION. A MSF DOCTOR TOLD ME THAT IT WAS 7% IN HER CAMP. THERE ARE FEW CASES OF MEASLES (THERE HAS BEEN A RECENT EPIDEMIC IN SOME PARTS OF BURMA THAT WILL HAVE GIVEN A DEGREE OF IMMUNITY), AND GOB AND UNICEF ARE ORGANISING AN EFFECTIVE IMMUNISATION DRIVE FOR CHILDREN UNDER 10. SOME REFUGEES HAVE TB, SCABIES, CHICKENPOX - BUT NOT DISPROPORTIONATELY. MOST OF THE PATIENTS SEEKING MEDICINE HAVE DIARRHOEAL COMPLAINTS - BUT THIS IS FAR FROM EPIDEMIC PROPORTIONS SO FAR. MALARIA IS LIKELY TO BECOME A PROBLEM.

6. THE UNHCR AND GOB PUT THEIR PRIORITIES AS MORE LAND FOR SETTLEMENT, SHELTER (MORE CI AND PLASTIC SHEETING), BOWSERS TO BRING WATER TO CAMPS WHERE TUBEWELLS AND RING WELLS ARE NOT PRACTICAL. SANITATION IS ANOTHER MAJOR PROBLEM. EVEN WHEN LATRINES ARE PROVIDED, THE REFUGEES HAVE TO BE EDUCATED TO USE THEM - AND WHEN THIS HAS BEEN SUCCESSFUL, THE TRENCHES HAVE TO BE SHIFTED FREQUENTLY. THERE ARE OBVIOUS IMPLICATIONS FOR DYSENTERY TYPE DISEASES AND CHOLERA OVER TIME AND IN THE RAINS.

7. UNHCR ARE CONCERNED THAT THE LATEST CAMP TO BE DEVELOPED SOUTH OF TEKNAF IS TOTALLY EXPOSED TO CYCLONES. THE DC AT FIRST DENIED THIS (AND DID NOT HAVE TIME TO SHOW ME THE SITE) BUT LATER HE ADMITTED TO THE UNHCR WHO HAD VISITED THAT THE EXPECTED 20,000 REFUGEES TO BE LOCATED THERE WOULD BE AT RISK. THE REFUGEE ADMINISTRATION HAS REQUISITIONED FORESTRY LANDS, BUT SO FAR HAS RESISTED SUGGESTIONS FROM UNHCR THAT MORE CAMPS SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED NORTH OF COX'S BAZAR AND IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS. THERE IS ONE CAMP NEAR BANDERBAN, BUT THIS IS JUST FOR THE SMALLER



NUMBERS OF REFUGEES THAT CROSS OVER THERE.

8. THE ADMINISTRATION ARE ALSO STRONGLY RESISTING SUGGESTIONS FROM UNHCR THAT THE ARMY BE ASKED TO HELP WITH THE ADMINISTRATION - EVEN IN TRANSPORTING WATER. I SAW TROOPS MOVING SOUTH OF COX'S BAZAR, BUT IN SMALL NUMBERS - ALSO A NEW CAMP 20 MILES TO THE NORTH BUT 5 MILES FROM THE BORDER. HOWEVER, THE ARMY'S ROLE IS PURELY MILITARY.

9. UNHCR HAVE NOT YET CONDUCTED THEIR OWN CENSUS OF REFUGEES, AND AGREED WITH ME THAT THE NUMBERS SEEM TO BE SOMEWHAT EXAGGERATED. INFORMALLY THEY PUT THE FIGURE OF DOUBLE REGISTRATION AT A MINIMUM OF 10%. BUT EVEN IF THE PRECISE FIGURES ARE EXAGGERATED THERE ARE FAR MORE REFUGEES THAN CAN BE ABSORBED - AND THEY ARE STILL COMING.

10. THE PERMANENT POPULATION IN THE AREA HAS SO FAR BEEN TOLERANT OF THE INFLUX OF REFUGEES. THEY HAVE SYMPATHISED WITH THEIR PLIGHT. BUT THE REFUGEES ARE MAKING AN INCREASING IMPACT ON THE NEIGHBOURHOOD. THEY ARE TAKING WOOD FOR THEIR FIRES AND THEIR TEMPORARY SHELTERS: POLLUTING THE STREAMS, AND HAVE BEGUN TO COMPETE ON THE LABOUR MARKET. THE ASSISTANT DC TOLD ME THAT THE GOING DAILY RATE FOR LABOUR IS NORMALLY 50 TAKE PER DAY (1 POUND = 66 TAKA). REFUGEES WILL WORK FOR 20 TAKA, AND THE AVERAGE HAS NOW DROPPED TO 30 PER DAY. THE REFUGEES ARE SUPPLIED WITH FREE FOOD AND MEDICAL CARE, AND AT THE INSTIGATION OF UNICEF, PRIMARY SCHOOLING IS TO BE PROVIDED. UNHCR ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE LONG TERM IMPLICATIONS ON RELATIONSHIPS, AND HOPE THAT FUNDS CAN BE FOUND TO DO THINGS FOR THE NEIGHBOURHOOD, AS UNBRO HAS DONE IN THAILAND. THE MUSLIM NGOS ARE VERY ACTIVE, WITH STRONG SUPPORT FROM THE LOCAL RABITA MOSQUE AND HEALTH COMPLEX. THIS IS WORRYING BUDDHISTS IN THE AREA.

11. I ASKED REFUGEES WHY THEY WERE FLEEING. ALL SAID THAT THE BURMESE ARMY WERE MAKING LIFE INTOLERABLE, TAKING MEN FOR FORCED LABOUR, ABUSING AND OFTEN RAPING WOMEN IN THEIR ABSENCE, AND LOOTING THEIR POSSESSIONS. MOST HAD TRAVELLED 3-10 DAYS WITH SOME UTENSILS AND FOOD, PAYING 10 TAKA PER HEAD FOR SOLDIERS AND 40 TAKA PER HEAD FOR THE FERRY BOAT. THESE ARE MOSTLY ROWING BOATS WHICH TAKE 30-100 PASSENGERS ACROSS THE 2 MILE RIVER NAF. MOST TRAVEL IN THE EVENINGS BUT I SAW 3 BOATS CROSSING IN THE MORNING. THE REFUGEES TO WHOM I SPOKE ALL SAID THAT THEY WOULD NOT RETURN UNTIL THEIR SECURITY COULD BE GUARANTEED - AND THAT PROBABLY MEANT NOT UNTIL THERE WAS A CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT. SOME DECLARED THEMSELVES READY TO GO BACK TO FIGHT THE PRESENT REGIME. LESS THAN ONE THIRD



CARRY DOCUMENTS. SOME SAID THAT THE BURMESE HAD TAKEN THEM, OTHERS CLAIMED TO HAVE JUST LOST THEM.

12. UNHCR HOPE TO BRING IN WOMEN INTERROGATORS TO GET A BETTER IDEA OF THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN REFUGEES. THE FEMALE MALAYSIAN HIGH COMMISSIONER CONFIRMED THAT SOME HAD CERTAINLY BEEN RAPED, BUT HAS COMMENTED THAT THE MOST RECENT REFUGEES ARE MOSTLY IN RELATIVELY GOOD CONDITION (AS I MYSELF THOUGHT). THE REFUGEES SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE/DIALECT AS IN THE COX'S BAZAR DISTRICT, AND LOOK EXACTLY LIKE THE BANGLADESHIS THEY ARE JOINING. MISSIONARIES IN THE AREA SAY THAT THE ROHINGYAS HAVE FOR MANY YEARS MOVED FREQUENTLY ACROSS THE BORDERS, AND HAVE CLOSE ASSOCIATIONS ON BOTH SIDES. MANY ARE POOR PEOPLE WHO MOVE TO WHICHEVER AREAS OFFER THE BEST CHANCE OF A LIVELIHOOD.

13. AS REPORTED IN TUR THE GOB, UNHCR, AND RED CRESCENT ARE ADMINISTERING THE CAMPS EFFICIENTLY. THE RELIEF COMMISSIONER AND HIS DEPUTY ARE BOTH COMPETENT OFFICERS, WITH WHOM I HAD DEALINGS

DURING THE CYCLONE RELIEF OPERATIONS, AND WHO HAVE BEEN BROUGHT BACK TO THE DISTRICT TO HANDLE THE PRESENT EMERGENCY. THEY ARE USING THE SAME COMMAND CENTRE TECHNIQUES AND REPORTING PROCEDURES AS WERE DEVELOPED FOR THE CYCLONE. THEY ARE SETTLING REFUGEES IN CAMPS AS FAST AS POSSIBLE - BUT CANNOT ABSORB THEM AT THE RATE AT WHICH THEY ARE ARRIVING. THE FACILITIES IN THE CAMPS FOR WATER, SANITATION AND MEDICAL CARE ARE RELATIVELY GOOD. THERE IS ENOUGH FOOD (WFP IS TAKING OVER RESPONSIBILITY FOR PROVIDING THIS FROM 1 APRIL). IT IS DISTRIBUTED BY RED CRESCENT. BUT EACH FAMILY (ABOUT 40,000 UNITS) COOK THEIR OWN FOOD DAILY. THIS CONSUMES A GREAT DEAL OF FIREWOOD AND WILL BE DIFFICULT DURING THE RAINS. I WAS TOLD IT IS IMPRACTICAL TO COOK CENTRALLY: BUT IN THE LONG TERM THIS MAY BECOME NECESSARY.

14. GOB HAVE ALLOCATED RESPONSIBILITIES TO NGOS AS FOLLOWS: RED CRESCENT, ALL CAMPS - FOOD DISTRIBUTION. WORLD VISION, 2 CAMPS: SHELTER, AND SOME FOOD. CONCERN 1 CAMP, SHELTER. MSF 3 CAMPS HEALTH AND NUTRITION. GK 2 CAMPS HEALTH AND NUTRITION. MAKU IE ISLAM 1 CAMP SHELTER. CARE, OXFAM AND SCF HAVE NOW BEEN ASKED TO CONTRIBUTE. IN ADDITION I SAW VARIOUS ISLAMIC NGOS PROVIDING HEALTH AND RELIGIOUS FACILITIES, WORKING THROUGH RABITA. THE PRESENT DC WAS UNHELPFUL TO NGOS DURING THE CYCLONE: BUT HE HAS CLEARLY BEEN TOLD TO COOPERATE. RELIEF COMMISSIONER HAS BEEN BROUGHT IN OVER HIM, AND HE IS BEING TRANSFERRED TO DHAKA AFTER EID.



## COMMENT

15. ALTHOUGH SO FAR GOB HAVE COPEd BETTER THAN EXPECTED, THERE ARE GRAVE PROBLEMS AHEAD IN FINDING ACCOMMODATION FOR THE CONTINUING FLOOD OF NEW REFUGEES, AND IN AVOIDING EPIDEMICS DURING THE MONSOON PERIOD. THE REFUGEES WILL ALSO BE EXPOSED TO THE RISK OF CYCLONES. FEW OF THEM WILL BE WILLING TO RETURN TO MYANMAR UNTIL THE GOVERNMENT THERE CHANGES AND GUARANTEES CAN BE GIVEN OF THEIR SECURITY (ALTHOUGH SOME WILL WANT TO TAKE UP GUERILLA ACTIVITIES). THEIR RELUCTANCE WILL BE STRENGTHENED IF THE INTERNATIONAL AID COMMUNITY PROVIDE FOOD AND SHELTER TO THE STANDARDS THEY NORMALLY EXPECT IN MYANMAR: AND BETTER THAN MANY BANGLADESHIS IN THE AREA. IT LOOKS LIKE BEING A LONG HAUL. GOB WILL TRY HARD TO KEEP THE REFUGEES TO THE SOUTH OF COX'S BAZAR.

16. AS A NOT ENTIRELY IRRELEVANT FOOTNOTE - INDIA HAS AN EVEN LARGER NUMBER OF BANGLADESHI ECONOMIC REFUGEES CROSSING ITS BORDER EVERY YEAR (HENCE OCCASIONAL DEMANDS FOR AN ELECTRIFIED BOUNDARY FENCE.). THERE IS ALWAYS A SHARP INCREASE AFTER COMMUNAL TROUBLES IN WHICH HINDUS ARE TARGETTED.

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