

Managing risks in securitisation of refugees

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Questions

What have we learnt on how to manage the risks surrounding the securitisation of refugees? In what situations was the civilian nature of the asylum/refugee space best preserved? What are the risks to registered and unregistered and local populations of a securitisation of the refugee question?

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The K4D helpdesk service provides brief summaries of current research, evidence, and lessons learned. Helpdesk reports are not rigorous or systematic reviews; they are intended to provide an introduction to the most important evidence related to a research question. They draw on a rapid desk-based review of published literature and consultation with subject specialists.

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1. Overview

This rapid review synthesises data from academic, policy and NGO sources on the securitisation of refugees, with a particular focus on Rohingya in Bangladesh. Although not referred to as refugees in Bangladesh, this report refers to Rohingya fleeing Myanmar as refugees. There is limited research on managing the risk of securitisation of refugees, rather the focus tends to be on the securitisation process itself and the provision of security to refugees. However, there are policies mentioned in the various studies examined that somewhat address avoiding securitisation of refugees. As Rohingya refugees have been coming to Bangladesh since the 1970s, there are lessons to be learnt from past experiences of how Bangladesh has dealt with these refugees.

Securitisation in relation to refugees is defined as constructing refugees as a societal threat through political and media rhetoric, which in turn results in stricter policies away from international refugee law. There has been a securitisation of Rohingya in Bangladesh due to a number of factors, including:

- Spread of Islamic extremists in refugee camps;
- The mass of people crossing the border used for arms and drug smuggling;
- Competition for jobs in a poor region in a relatively poor country;
- Competition for limited resources;
- Inflation on food and housing;
- Destruction of forests and plantations;
- A political desire for Rohingya to return to Myanmar, and
- The rhetoric that does not recognise Rohingya as refugees.

The securitisation of Rohingya refugees has previously led to police encouraging them to return to Myanmar. Rohingya refugees face a number of security issues both inside and outside the camps, with the significant number of undocumented refugees being of particular concern. Undocumented refugees are more likely to be harassed and detained outside of camps, as well as being easy targets for criminal activities. However, those with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) photo identification documents are more likely to be released once charged by the police. There have been reports of arrests, harassment, and a pushback of recent arrivals, along with physical abuse in camps in order to persuade refugees to voluntarily depart. It is also argued that camps are harshly policed and refugees seldom get permission to leave (Parnini, 2013).

If refugees are hosted in camps it is recommended that they are away from the border, in wealthier parts of the country, and that camps consist of less than 20,000 people. This makes the security of camps easier and also avoids the securitisation of refugees that is likely to occur as a result of border activities and competition for resources. Aid for refugees has to be tied to a wider development package, as if the host community does not share in the improvements of living standards, resentment towards refugees is likely to form leading to the securitisation of refugees. One of the issues is that the Rohingya are viewed as temporary residents and thus there is no long-term development and processes towards integration. This prevents policies from being formed that deal with the securitisation of refugees.

Community policing has worked in a number of camps, as it ensures the active participation of refugees in their own security and also increases female involvement in security. It also helps to overcome issues such as corruption, distrust of the police, or weak performance of authorities. Community policing takes advantage of local knowledge, customary practices and traditional leadership networks. In order to maintain the civilian nature of camps it is important to ensure that armed groups are not present. In Sierra Leone this was done by forming a separate internment camp for known militants and creating security screenings at the border (UNHCR, 2006b).

It is important that refugees maintain their freedom; it is argued by UNHCR (2006a, 2006b, 2011) that they should be allowed to leave the camps and refugee camps should not become controlled by the military, as this undermines the humanitarian and civilian character of the camp. However, the presence of a well-disciplined and well-equipped military force in the *vicinity* of a camp may enhance security.

2. Securitisation

Securitisation theory

Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, of the Copenhagen School, define securitisation as a successful speech act 'through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat' (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 491). However, Stritzel (2007, p. 377) has suggested going beyond this definition in order to understand the importance and precise patterns of interaction. He suggests working with three layers of securitisation:

- The performative force of an articulated threat text;
- Its embeddedness in existing discourses, and
- The positional power of securitising actors.

McGahan (2009: 3) ties the theory of securitisation to immigration, and argues that the Copenhagen School of securitisation 'offers a lens through which to highlight certain actors and processes in analysing immigration policies, particularly how societal threats are constructed and defended.' However, he highlights that 'ordinary citizens – in addition to elites – are routinely involved in routine practices that shape the securitisation of migration and contribute to a general culture of fear' (McGahan, 2009: 3). According to McGahan's analysis the dynamics of the host country must be taken into account when analysing the securitisation of refugees and migrants. For example, the political, economic, and social dynamics of the country impact on how and what issues are securitised. The securitisation of refugees transfers directly into how they are treated, particularly from a security/policing perspective, which makes it important to examine here.

The discursive practices of politicians and the media construct the identity of asylum seekers, and thus make policy options more or less available. When asylum seekers are portrayed as genuine refugees, policies are often consistent with international laws. However, when media coverage and politicians' rhetoric construct asylum seekers as a threat to the state, harsh border

control policies that undermine principles of international refugee laws become more acceptable (Watson, 2007).

The rise of xenophobia towards asylum seekers has led to a view of refugees as perpetrators of insecurity, rather than as victims. Long-term state security has become intrinsically linked to the security provided to refugees, and thus the securitisation of refugees has infringed on their freedom (UNHCR, 2006a).

Securitisation of Rohingya

Rahman (2010, p. 234) examines the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh through the lens of being a security concern, and argues that they are a 'potential threat to Bangladesh's internal stability and a source of interstate tension between Myanmar and Bangladesh'. One of the main issues is the spread of Islamic militants, as Rohingya refugee camps have previously been fertile grounds for recruitment by extremists. Moreover, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) is said to be training Islamic militants across Bangladesh and have expanded their own operations into Bangladesh. Rohingya refugees crossing the border from Myanmar are also used by arms and drug smugglers to traffic across the border, with the large numbers helping to evade detection (Rahman, 2010). From an economic perspective, Bangladesh is a relatively poor country facing chronic poverty and high population density and the influx of Rohingya refugees, mainly to the poorest areas in Bangladesh, willing to work for lower wages has a negative impact on the labour market and creates tensions between the local population and the refugees. A situation exacerbated by many Rohingya leaving refugee camps, or being denied access, and working illegally (Parnini, Othman, & Ghazali, 2013). Table 1 demonstrates the significant number of Rohingya in Bangladesh, with the scale adding to the securitisation of refugees as they compete for resources and employment.

With the extremely high number of refugees that cross the border at one time, there is a competition for the limited resources available. This also leads to the destruction of forests and plantations, which creates tension between the local and refugee populations (Rahman, 2010). Additionally, the significant number of Rohingya refugees leads to inflation in food and housing in an already impoverished area, as there is not enough of either available for the larger population (Yee, 2017). Finally, there is the dynamic where the host country does not want the Rohingya to settle and integrate, but rather want them to eventually be repatriated to Myanmar, as happened in the early 2000s, which adds to the securitisation of the refugees (Rahman, 2010).¹ In Bangladesh the main political parties compete with each other in arguing for tough refugee and asylum policies, whilst the host community thinks that refugees in the camps are provided with better services and take locals' jobs (UNHCR, 2011).

Moreover, those fleeing to Bangladesh from conflict in Myanmar are not considered as refugees and thus are not protected under international refugee law. In the broader region, under ASEAN and the Bali Process refugees are framed within a security\border control paradigm. Focusing on 'securitising' migration through eliminating human smuggling and trafficking they encourage states to consider refugees as the responsibility of the developed world. The 'irregular migrant' label is used by states to avoid their obligations to displaced persons such as with the Rohingya, and also makes the securitisation of refugees an easier process (Kneebone, 2016).

¹ Rohingyas have been repatriated in deals with Myanmar before, but have then returned to Bangladesh as tensions in Myanmar rise.

Unrecognised as refugees in Bangladesh, Rohingya's statelessness and lack of recognition as citizens either in Myanmar or Bangladesh makes it difficult to address their plight as refugees (Cheung, 2012).

Table 1: Rohingya population in Bangladesh as of October 2017

New Arrivals reported by location, Pre-existing and total Rohingyas

Location	Population prior to Aug Influx	Total Influx (individual)	Total Population (combined)
Makeshift Settlement / Refugee Camps			
Kutupalong Expansion ¹	99,495	211,725	311,220
Kutupalong RC	13,901	20,000	33,901
Leda MS	14,240	11,859	26,099
Nayapara RC	19,230	15,000	34,230
Shamlapur	8,433	27,742	36,175
Grand Total	155,299	286,326	441,625
New Spontaneous Settlements			
Hakimpara	140	52,412	52,552
Burma para / Tasnimarkhola	100	27,841	27,941
Roikhong / Unchiprang	-	28,556	28,556
Jamtoli / Thangkhali	72	32,273	32,345
Baggoha/Potibonia	50	20,642	20,692
Grand Total	362	161,724	162,086
Host Community			
Cox's Bazar Sadar	12,485	2,805	15,290
Ramu	1,600	1,395	2,995
Teknaf	34,437	37,920	71,607
Ukhia	8,160	31,107	39,559
Naikhongchhari (Bandarbhan)	-	16,200	16,200
	56,682	89,427	145,651
TOTAL Rohingyas	212,343	537,477	749,820

Source: ISCG (2017)

As a result of the securitisation of Rohingya refugees as a threat to the population, as discussed above, a number of security aspects have been developed to police and encourage them to return to Myanmar. For instance, there have been reports of arrests, harassment, and a pushback of recent arrivals, along with physical abuse in camps in order to persuade refugees to voluntarily depart. Moreover, a number of refugees were forced to return to Myanmar, with women and children often targeted (Ullah, 2011). Previously the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh have been harshly policed with no one allowed to leave without signed permission, with police harassment and beatings often the result for those caught. However, according to Parnini (2013) camps are favoured as through donors and international aid organisations, the Bangladeshi government and citizens have gained finances and employment.

3. Avoiding Securitisation

Although encampment of refugees is not recommended, it often cannot be avoided in the first instance; however, planning is imperative to maintain security. Size and location are important factors in security and protecting vulnerable groups. Large camps are difficult to manage properly and UNHCR (2006a) recommends camps with less than 20,000 refugees and with at least 45 square metres of space per person. Additionally, it is advised that refugee camps should be placed (or relocated) a significant distance from borders in order to improve security. For example, in 2003 refugees in Guinea were relocated from the south to more central locations, reducing the threat of combatants infiltrating the camps. However, host governments are often reluctant to have camps in locations away from the border for fear it will make it harder to return them. To avoid the securitisation of refugees it is also important that camps are not placed in the poorest areas of the country, where competition for resources is likely to be higher (UNHCR, 2006a). In Bangladesh camps are larger with more than 20,000 people, close to the border, and in one of the poorest parts of the country, thus making the security of refugees harder and adding to the securitisation of refugees (Cheung, 2012). The positioning and size of Rohingya refugee sites in Bangladesh is demonstrated in Map 1.

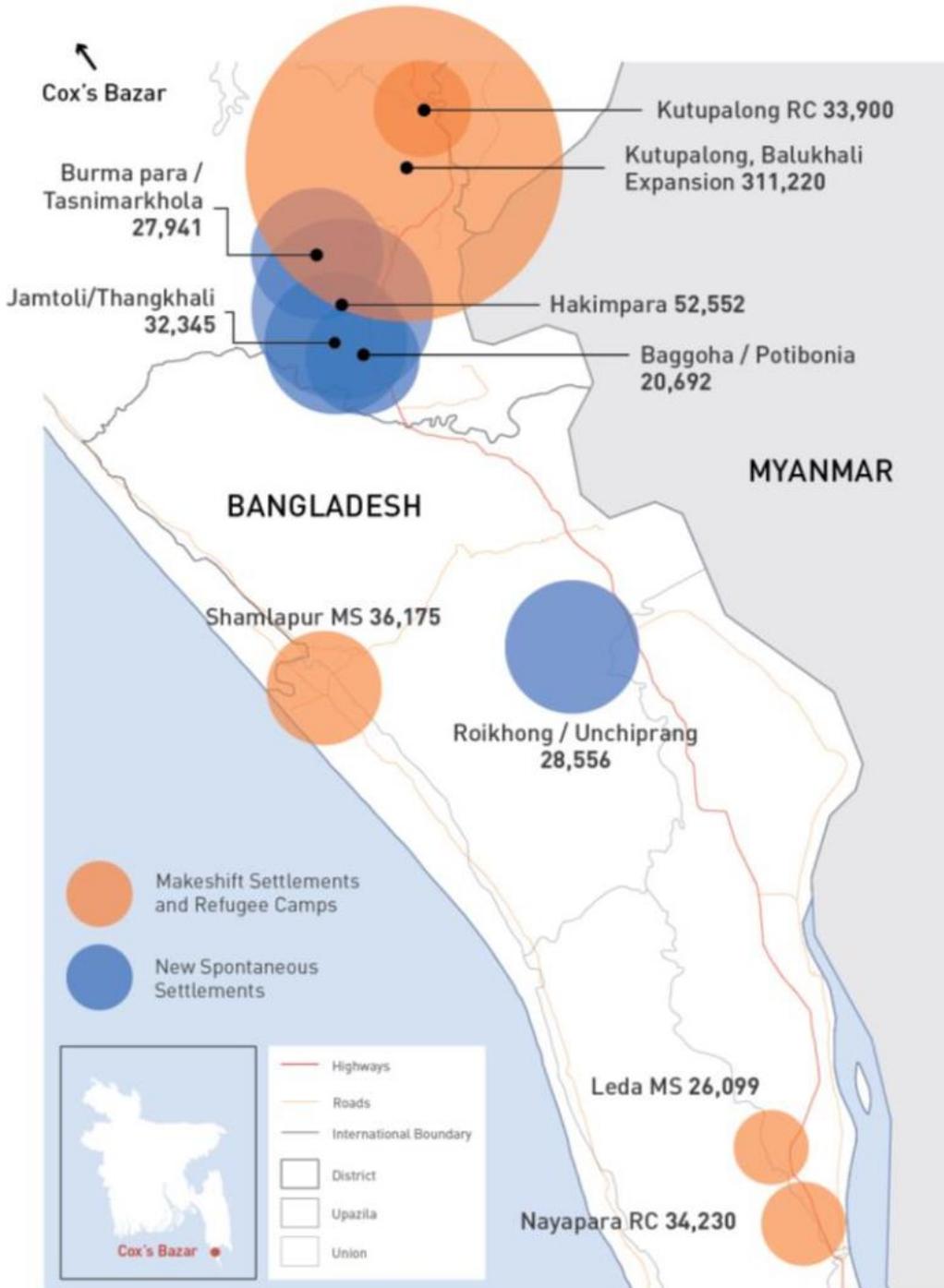
Refugee protection needs to address the relationship between refugees and their hosts. In developing countries this means ensuring that the standards of living of refugees and host populations are as similar as possible. Improvements must benefit the entire local community and there must not be a perception that refugees have higher living standards. The mutual advances for both communities should be communicated to the host population, along with lessons on co-existence. Mutual benefits include programmes that help stimulate the local economy and minimise the impact of refugees on the environment. For instance, firewood collection and access to water are a source of conflict between Rohingya and the local population around the camps, which often lead to assaults (UNHCR, 2011). Therefore, firewood should be harvested from sustainable sources or purchased from local contractors and supplied to the camps, thus ensuring the local population is not negatively impacted by the refugees and in turn avoiding friction (UNHCR, 2006a).

According to Berti (2015) the issue with treating refugees as “temporary guests” is that it results in no long-term development and integration. Rather there should be a shift in legal frameworks, allowing refugees to obtain work permits, with a key priority being livelihood and income generation, lending geared to fostering micro-enterprise, and vocational training. Refugees are often analysed through the humanitarian lens, which creates an artificial separation between regional and human security concerns. However, successfully tackling the emergency and boosting the long-term resilience of both refugee and host communities should be a priority in order to prevent long-term destabilisation and the securitisation of refugees (Berti, 2015).

Huysmans (1998) argues that a desecuritisation narrative should also be formed to counteract the securitisation of refugees. This should provide an alternative concept demonstrating what is good and bad, right and wrong, and how to develop an alternative method of integrating individuals into the political community on the basis of particular values. In short, he argues for a counter campaign against the securitisation of refugees, demonstrating how they can make a positive impact and focusing on how it is good and right.

Map 1: Influx of Rohingya into Bangladesh as of October 2017

REFUGEE SITES BY POPULATION AND LOCATION TYPE



Source: ISCG (2017)

4. Security issues

Inside camps

Inside the refugee camps Rohingya face a number of threats from authorities and other refugees. According to UNHCR (2011) these include:

- Domestic violence;
- Rape, and a lack of safe shelters for the victims of rape;
- Early and forced marriage;
- Child labour and trafficking;
- Detention;
- Restrictions on freedom of movement, and
- Extortion and exploitation.

When refugees are prevented from leaving the camps these issues are exacerbated. Furthermore, local police often fail in providing refugees with adequate security in the camps and do not have the same understanding of the community (UNHCR, 2011).

Outside camps

As Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh do not have proper documentation due to their status of not being recognised as refugees they face a number of issues such as being harassed and arrested outside of the camps. The UNHCR has given photo identification cards to a number of camp refugees above the age of five, but they are not officially endorsed by the government and do not prevent refugees from being detained. However, refugees with valid UNHCR identity cards have better chances of being released once charged. In order to leave camps refugees need an official pass, which they often have to buy illegally (UNHCR, 2011). Ticktin (2006) argues that undocumented asylum seekers often turn to desperate measures in order to survive and are easily taken advantage of. However, on the other hand they find it easier to find work on the illegal market. Documented asylum seekers without work permits are often stuck in a limbo where they do not have permission to work and are reliant on the system, which prevents them from becoming normal citizens and integrating into society.

Outside the camps many of the 200,000 self-settled refugees who have been in Bangladesh since the earlier waves of refugees have achieved a degree of integration due to their cultural, linguistic, and religious similarities. However, their irregular status does pose a constant threat and those both inside and outside the camps face corruption, exploitation and crime. For instance, in 2009 local authorities forcibly removed self-settled refugees from the periphery of Kutupalong camp, and in 2010 self-settled refugees fled to the camps for protection after a campaign of violent arrests, detentions and forced repatriation by the local authorities (Cheung, 2012).

5. Policing Refugees

Community Policing

The protection of refugees in camps needs refugees' own active participation to be a success. To overcome corruption, distrust of the police, or weak performance of authorities, community policing is often used. By making use of local knowledge, customary practices and traditional leadership networks an alternative policing system to deliver justice can be formed. This involves exchanging information, mediation, crowd control, and a physical presence in the camp through foot patrols. Community policing of refugee camps demonstrates refugee ownership of the security process. In Nyarugusu refugee camp in western Tanzania, refugee guards have been successfully involved in policing since the early 2000s. Through community policing in refugee camps concerns over outside intervention is overcome (Brankamp, 2016).

Neighbourhood-watch programmes have been installed in camps in Zambia and have led to a reduction in crime, the identification of armed elements, and improvements in aid distribution. In Sierra Leone, Liberian refugee wardens work with the local police leading to an improvement in camp security. Refugee security mechanisms work well if they complement the law-enforcement system in the host country. However, they must be monitored properly to avoid vigilantism and harassment (UNHCR 2006a).

In Buduburam Refugee Camp, Ghana, a neighbourhood-watch scheme was implemented. Prior to this the security situation in Buduburam settlement was frail and the number of police personnel limited, so the refugees volunteered to patrol the settlement at night to enhance their own security. The UNHCR supported the initiative by:

- Requesting the Ghanaian police to screen volunteers;
- Assisting the neighbourhood-watch to draft Statutes of conduct and operation together with the camp management and the police;
- Training the neighbourhood-watch members;
- Supporting the creation of a female wing and encouraging women to join;
- Equipping the neighbourhood-watch teams with uniforms, boots, whistles, bicycles, walkie-talkies, first aid kits etc.);
- Providing free medical assistance, and
- Monitoring and helping to improve their work.

As a result of the neighbourhood-watch, security in the camp has been greatly enhanced and common crime has been drastically reduced. The female participation in security has also increased and the relationship between refugees and the local police has also improved (UNHCR, 2006b).

However, previous experiences with community policing of Rohingya in camps under Bangladeshi authority have come under some criticism. Refugees International (2005) reported abuse and intimidation in camps at the hands of Bangladeshi authorities and Rohingya volunteers who are picked by the Bangladeshi camp manager. Moreover they argue that the Rohingya volunteers acted as an arm of the government and played a major role in forcing refugees to repatriate.

Maintaining Civilian Nature

Refugees face threats from organised crime, errant military and police forces, anti-government militants, local populations, and fellow refugees. Their vulnerability is magnified as they often have limited resources and broken family and community structures. Crimes such as theft, assault and domestic violence to child abuse, rape, and human trafficking are common against refugees (UNCHR, 2006a).

Security in refugee camps is linked to the maintenance of its civilian character and thus the presence of armed elements, incursions by militias, cross-border raids, and recruitment from the camp prevents the establishment of a neutral and secure refugee environment. Refugee camps should have an exclusively civilian character, and all actors have an obligation to maintain it. However, states have the primary responsibility and should make efforts to locate refugee camps at a reasonable distance from the border – this often does require international support and technical assistance (UNHCR, 2006b).

Armed groups in refugee situations often take control of aid for their own purposes. Camps are also seen as prime recruitment locations, especially when the refugees in them do not have access to the labour market and education. This is further exacerbated if the refugees are prevented from leaving the camp. Therefore, wherever armed elements are present, the host country must assure the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum by disarming and demobilizing armed exiles, preventing the flow of arms between refugees, protecting refugees from attack and intimidation, and separating combatants or war criminals from refugees (UNCHR, 2006a).

In Sierra Leone, strategies were needed to separate ex-combatants entering the country from Liberia. Thus, ex-combatants were separated and kept in a special internment camp with rehabilitation facilities. UNHCR took responsibility for the internees' civilian family members and represented their interests – including family visits from the refugee camps to the internment camp. As part of this process security screenings were conducted by the police at main entry points to ensure the civilian character of Liberians crossing into Sierra Leone and refugee relocation convoys. Identified combatants were not repatriated but rather transported to the internment camp. As a result of this process, hundreds of ex-combatants have been separated at border crossings and interned and the refugee camps have generally maintained their civilian character (UNHCR, 2006b).

Refugees International (2005) has claimed that in Rohingya camps in Bangladesh in the early 2000s Rohingya refugees were not allowed to form refugee committees or even to hold meetings in the camps. Additionally, they argue that Rohingya refugees were prevented from establishing their own management committees to oversee service delivery in key sectors like food management, water, sanitation, health and education. These elements of denying the Rohingya to represent their own community go against maintaining the civilian nature of the camps, as they deny them basic rights.

Heavily Policed Camps

If national legislation ignores the rights of refugees it limits their ability to become self-reliant. For example, Kenya and Tanzania do not allow refugees to leave camps and as a result most

refugees remain dependent on humanitarian aid. This puts a financial burden on the international community and leads to idleness and apathy in the camps, which in turn may push refugees into crime or military activity.

The ladder approach is an assessment-and-response tool to deal with escalating threats to the civilian and humanitarian character of refugee camps and to security in camps. Measures are ranked in order of their 'soft' or 'hard' nature. Soft measures include preventive steps that build cooperation with national law-enforcement mechanisms. Intermediate measures include international support for national security forces and the deployment of international missions and observers. Hard methods involve the use of regional or international military forces and include activities such as monitoring, intelligence-gathering, reconnaissance, situation assessment, disarmament and demobilization of combatants, border control, camp-perimeter security, and the training of national military forces (UNHCR, 2006a).

The presence of military forces in a refugee camp undermines the humanitarian and civilian character of the camp, but the presence of a well-disciplined and well-equipped military force in the *vicinity* of a camp may enhance security by preventing armed groups from infiltrating or recruiting in camps (UNHCR, 2006a).

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Key websites

- IOM Bangladesh: <https://iom.org.bd>
- UNHCR Bangladesh: <http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2539>
- Humanitarian Response Bangladesh: <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/bangladesh>

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