

BANGLADESH

# The Wretched and the Earth

by Gabriele Cecconi







(2018), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. Degraded land in the Teknaf natural reserve. This area has been deforested in order to extend the Kutupalong-Balukhali mega camp and host new refugees, especially those who live in the side of the camp where the risk of landslides is high.



(2022), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. A view of one of the largest ponds in Camp 20 Extension. This camp is located at the border area of the mega camp and is one of the newest and less densely populated. Construction began in 2018, one year after the influx, and it was created to relocate refugees at risk of landslides living in different areas or camps.

*The two pictures show approximately the same area four years apart.*



## ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS: THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF A MASS MIGRATION

**According to the UNHCR 2022 statistical report *Mid-Year Trends*, there are now in excess of 100 million forcibly displaced people around the world, the highest figure ever. In August 2017, in order to escape persecution in their country of origin, Myanmar, hundreds of thousands of people of the Rohingya ethnic group fled to the region of Cox's Bazar in neighbouring Bangladesh.**

---

Kutupalong refugee camp is now the largest in the world in terms of inhabitant numbers: 600,000, a figure that increases to 860,000 if we consider the wider site that also includes the Balukhali camp. Five years on from the initial influx, one million refugees still reside in this region. Living conditions remain precarious and the future of these families is uncertain. During a mass migration an enormous number of people concentrate in an area that is relatively small, all with primary

needs that must be met. Especially during the emergency phase of a crisis, as happened in southern Bangladesh, the pressure on already fragile ecosystems can become unsustainable. In the space of a few months, water resources rapidly deteriorated and the Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary shrank by more than 3,000 hectares due to the creation of the refugee camps and the demand for firewood for cooking. Problems have arisen with the local wildlife, the management of waste, the risk of fires in the dry season and landslides and floods during the monsoons.

Five years on there is little hope of Bangladesh and Myanmar reaching any repatriation agreement. In spite of the critical humanitarian and environmental situation, the populations' living conditions have been largely improved thanks to international development organizations. The camps are now better organized, reforestation programmes have been launched and infrastructure developed for

managing essential services. The current environmental crisis and its management in Bangladesh – in a region particularly fragile like Cox's Bazar and in one of the countries that is most vulnerable to climate change – represents a unique case study and a striking example of the challenges of mass migration.

This photojournalism project aims to document the short and long-term environmental impact of a mass migration in order to comprehend the indissoluble relationship between human beings and the environment. The project follows two main narrative threads: the people fighting to survive with few precious resources and the impact of the refugee crisis on an ecosystem that was already under substantial pressure.

Usually environmental migration is understood as an exodus caused by the effects of climate change, what is it like then in the case of a mass migration that is actually causing a huge impact on the environment and the ecosystems?





(2018), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. Bamboo shelters in Kutupalong refugee camp. All the shelters were built using bamboo, which is grown in the surrounding areas. Especially during the emergency phase of the crisis, the overexploitation of this important resource has caused a severe impact on the local environment.



(2018), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. Rohingya refugees build a tube well in Balukhali refugee camp. During the first dry season after the influx, water shortage was a huge problem in the camps. Despite a large amount of the population having access to water, the quality was often not safe. Much of the water was contaminated and soon many wells became unusable.





(2022), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. Two young Rohingya women collect flowers in front of the fences of Camp 20 Extension.





(2018), Unchiprang refugee camp, Teknaf subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. A tree stands alone in the middle of the camp. The deforestation and exploitation of the environment is massive all around the area. This tree was cut down one year after this shot was taken. A large part of the forest heritage in the Ukhia and Teknaf subdistricts has been lost forever.



(2018), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. Some Rohingya children shelter from the wind and the sand in a makeshift tent, in Balhukali camp. During the first months of the influx, the massive deforestation exposed the land to the elements, causing severe erosion which increased the risk of landslides.





(2018), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. Rohingya refugees carry bamboo that will be used to reinforce their shelters.



(2022), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. A reforestation and land stabilization project implemented in Camp 20 Extension. Stabilization projects consist of reinforcing hillsides with terracing and through reforestation activities on the slopes at risk of landslides.





(2022), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. Rubena (18) suffering from dengue fever, lies in her shelter. The number of dengue patients has increased in the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar with nearly 2,000 being affected in six months. Overpopulation and the terrible hygiene conditions in some areas favour the spread of disease.





(2022), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. Rohingya refugees gathered for the funeral prayer of Mullah Taher, one of the community's leading Islamic scholars. The Rohingya camps are overcrowded and the population density is too high: in some camps it is as high as 12.6 people per square metre.





(2022), Chakmarkul refugee camp, Teknaf subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. A building contains compost produced from part of the daily waste collected at the camp. The Rohingya camps generate 119.8 tons of waste per day and while upcycling is one of the possible solutions, creating compost is another practice implemented in the camps.



(2018), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. Rohingya women shelter from the wind in one of the new parts of Kutupalong-Balukhali refugee camp, Camp 4 Extension. The international community worked for months with Rohingya labourers after the influx to extend the mega camp, trying to reduce density and relocate people at risk of landslides. Today this area of the camp is one of the best in terms of living conditions.





(2018), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. Rohingya labourers at the end of the morning shift in Zone OO (now Camp 4 Extension) of Balhukali camp. IOM, UNHCR and WFP hired hundreds Rohingya refugees every day to flatten hills in the new area of the camp to relocate and house new refugees. Work has been done for months to extend the camp and relocate people at risk from landslides.



(2018), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. A man holds a young plant in his arms. One year on from the initial influx, some international organizations began to distribute fast-growing seeds and plants to the refugees to try to reduce soil erosion and encourage the planting of trees around the camp. Today, four years later, reforestation programs have had a positive impact on the huge refugee camp.





(2018), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. Refugees play football in Camp 20 Extension, one of the newest areas of the mega camp.





(2018), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. Rohingya workers cross a canal flooded by rains in one of the new areas of the camp, now Camp 4 Extension. Widespread deforestation has had a devastating impact, increasing soil erosion and the risk of landslides and floods during the monsoon season.



(2018), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. Noor Hossain, a 30 year-old Rohingya man, was attacked and injured in the chest by an elephant in Lambaja. "I was walking on the main road when I saw an elephant in front of me. There were about 15 of us in the area. I tried to run away but the elephant hit me. He was scared and angry, having got lost in the middle of the camp."





(2018), Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary, Cox's Bazar. An elephant in its natural habitat, about 10 km away from Kutupalong-Balukhali refugee camp. Balukhali camp, the biggest in the world, is located inside the Teknaf reserve along the main migration paths for Asian elephants. During the first month of the influx many people were injured or killed by elephants that, accustomed to living in the Wildlife Sanctuary, suddenly found themselves surrounded by the camp. Frightened, they attacked people and shelters.



(2022), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. A Rohingya man works to stack LPG canisters at the distribution point near the entrance of the camp. To reduce the impact of the refugees on the local forest, nowadays, three years since the initiation of the project, 100 per cent of refugee households use LPG. Since its uptake, refugees (often women and children) do not have to make long, dangerous treks into the forest to collect firewood. Furthermore, families no longer cook in smoky conditions.





(2018), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. Kutupalong refugee camp at sunrise, six months after the influx. The camp with the new extensions is now the world's largest refugee camp with more than 600,000 people living in the area.





(2018), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. A girl looks from above at the new sector – Camp 4 Extension – of the Balukhali refugee camp.





(2018), Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. A Rohingya woman collects leaves. During the first months of the influx, all of the Rohingya refugees depended on the forest where they went everyday to fetch various natural resources. In addition to firewood, leaves and roots were gathered both for fuel and for food. A UN report released in September 2018 estimated that the refugees collected nearly seven thousand tonnes of firewood every month.



(2022), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. In an area of the camp, a man plants a seed provided by an NGO. Vegetation was cleared to make way for shelters and infrastructure. After three years, the refugees have replanted an area of more than 600 hectares (almost twice the size of Central Park in New York).





(2022), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. A group of Rohingya refugees build a bamboo watchtower along the boundary of Camp 4 Extension. The watchtowers are used to monitor the possible arrival of elephants.



(2022), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. A young refugee bathes in a pond filled by the monsoon rain. According to MOAS (Migrant Offshore Aid Station), almost every month a Rohingya refugee child dies by drowning in Bangladesh's overcrowded camps. Most drowning fatalities are associated with males and occur in ponds, and are caused by the rainy monsoon season, fewer daylight hours, inadequate supervision.





(2022), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. A Rohingya man picks spinach from his garden. The seeds were provided to him by NGOs so that he could grow vegetables and use it as part of his daily diet. Reforestation and gardening projects have improved living conditions in the camp and the quality of the soil.



(2022), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. A storage centre for bricks and work equipment. During the last four years, the road network in the camp has grown impressively.





(2018), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. Refugees wait on the bus to be transferred to other camps. During the emergency phase of the crisis, refugees were often moved to safer camps in order to prevent a possible environmental catastrophe.





(2018), Unchiprang refugee camp, Teknaf subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. A child comes out of a huge water well. The camp suffered a severe water crisis during the dry season. As the area has a stone substructure, access to water is difficult for the 22,000 people living in the camp. The well was built using a local method to store and filter water from the soil, but according to the population it dried up after only one week. It has now been removed and a school has been built on the site.



(2018), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar. A woman walks along the main road of the camp. Some trees have just been planted to reinforce the soil.





(2022), Balukhali-Kutupalong refugee camp, Ukhia subdistrict, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. A child takes shelter from the rain near the largest drainage channel of the camp, located along Army road, the main road of the camp. Five years after the influx, despite the work of NGO's and volunteers to build and clean the sewers, sanitary conditions remain poor as the sewers are exposed, increasing the risk of disease among refugees.



