

UNHCR's Position on the Establishment of Temporary Camps in the northern part of Rakhine State

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Introduction

On 8 September 2017, the Government of Myanmar's Information Committee posted on its Facebook page an announcement regarding the establishment of seven temporary camps in the northern part of Rakhine State, in the following locations:

- Maungdaw North - 3 Locations: Taung Pyo Let Yar, Wai Lar Taung and Hlaing Thi
- Maungdaw Central - 2 Locations: Dar Gyi Zar and Kyauk Hle Kar
- Maungdaw South - 2 Locations: Thin Baw Kwe and Tha Win Chaung

The Facebook post also indicated that the provision of assistance would be carried out through the Red Cross Movement and recommended people recently displaced to join the temporary camps closest to them.¹

On 19 September 2017, an article published by IRIN referred to a conversation with U Zaw Htay where the President's Spokesperson stated that the seven new camps would be a temporary solution for Muslims who are still in Rakhine as well as for any refugees returning from Bangladesh.²

The Government's plan to establish camps in the northern part of Rakhine State was further confirmed through informal talks with the General Administration Department (GAD) in Maungdaw.

While the objectives and precise plans of the Government are still very unclear, drawing on past experiences, in particular the situation in the central part of Rakhine State, UNHCR is concerned about the potential implications that such an approach, if it were to be implemented, would have on affected communities in Rakhine State. This note highlights some key protection risks of the establishment of camps and recommends some key messages to the international community.

This note builds on the Secretary General's remarks delivered at the open debate of the Security Council on Myanmar on 28 September 2017 that those who fled should be able to return to their homes in peace – not to yet another cycle of violence and that it will be especially important to avoid re-locating those displaced yet again to camp-like conditions.

Protection risks

Potential for further restrictions on freedom of movement: The establishment of camps in an environment such as the one prevailing in northern Rakhine where one community's freedom of movement is already severely restricted as a result of the local orders, could result in returnees and displaced persons being confined to camps. Their movements out of the camps are likely to be very restricted. Such camps could also further constrain their access to basic services as well as livelihoods.

¹ https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=791894004317041&id=639456206227489.

² <http://www.irinnews.org/news/2017/09/19/internment-fears-myanmar-plans-new-camps-scattered-rohingya>

Inter-communal tensions: The establishment of camps would contribute to further segregation of one community and severely reduce their potential for interaction with other communities thus limiting the potential for peaceful coexistence and fuelling inter-communal tensions.

From temporary to permanent camps: As illustrated by the situation in central Rakhine, the likelihood of “temporary camps” to become permanent is quite high. Once camps are established, all efforts towards solutions to displacement, and sustainable return in particular, are extremely challenging.

Critical protection risks: The establishment of camps in northern Rakhine could lead people to resort to negative coping strategies and increase critical protection risks, including sexual and gender-based violence, violence against children and human trafficking. Forced labour and extortion are also among key protection risks. Based on the previous experience of the model villages, local villagers may be forced to build the camps. A camp setting, in a context of restricted freedom of movement and hindered access to livelihood opportunities, would be conducive to incidents of extortion as already widely reported in central Rakhine.

Overcrowding: The allocation of plots within camps may not give due consideration to the size and number of families and thus not reflect the actual needs. Families may be allocated plots that are consolidated onto one household list rather than have their own. The authorities have historically not allowed the splitting of household lists, not added new born babies and struck off those not present at the time that checking took place. Similar concerns were raised in late 2016 with the so called model villages.

Arbitrary confiscation of land: The creation of camps may lead to the confiscation and reallocation of land in the assigned sites, and of original plots owned by those who are displaced being confiscated with no proper land restitution and compensation mechanisms in place.

Dependency on humanitarian aid: Living in camps often engenders dependency and weakens the ability of displaced persons to manage their own lives. Camps do not provide sustainable solutions and fuel dependency on relief assistance, especially in a context of restrictions on freedom of movement which prevent people from accessing livelihoods opportunities and essential services, including education and health.

Restrictions on humanitarian access: As a result of encampment, authorities could restrict humanitarian and development aid to a large number of beneficiaries as illustrated by the situation in central Rakhine where access by UN and INGOs has become more difficult.

UNHCR’s position on the establishment of camps in the northern part of Rakhine State – Key messages

1. **Avoid camps:** The establishment of camps or camp-like situations in northern Rakhine would carry considerable political, ethical, humanitarian, human rights and financial risks and should be strongly advocated against, regardless of their alleged temporary nature.
2. **Give priority to return to place of origin:** Return movements should be voluntary and to the place of origin. Return to the place of origin will help ensure livelihoods and self-reliance prospects of the communities. Priority should be to support returnees to reintegrate back into normal life as quickly as possible.
3. **Envisage alternative to camps:** Should return to the place of origin not be allowed by the Government, call for alternative viable options to be identified through transparent

consultation with the communities, sufficient space allocated, and livelihood options ensured. Relocation of returnees cannot be punitive and exploitative in nature, aggravate communal tensions and/or consolidate segregation.

4. **Consult with affected communities:** In the aftermath of the 9 October 2016 events, IDPs strongly opposed the set-up of “model villages” and expressed their desire to rebuild their shelters and resume their livelihood activities in their places of origin. Affected populations should be duly informed and consulted on the Government’s plan. A forced relocation to camps would not progress stabilization and would only create further tensions between communities and put undue pressure on the affected communities.
5. **Do no harm:** The need to respond to immediate humanitarian needs should not make the international community lose sight of the longer-term consequences of today’s actions on the future of affected communities. These consequences should be considered from the start.
6. **Restore humanitarian access:** The call for urgent and unimpeded access, including for international staff is crucial. This will allow humanitarian and development agencies to assess and assist affected communities, to support their return and reintegration and complement the Government of Myanmar’ and Red Cross Movement’s efforts.
7. **Promote sustainable future plans:** The future plan should use the recommendations of the Rakhine Advisory Commission as a framework to ensure the root causes are finally addressed and that humanitarian, human rights, recovery and development components are integrated.
8. **Emphasize importance to promote peaceful co-existence/ confidence building measures:** Peaceful co-existence programs with all communities throughout northern Rakhine needs to be strengthened urgently. As stated by the Secretary General at the open debate of the Security Council on Myanmar on 28 September 2017 improving inter-communal relations is a critical part of a sustainable resolution to the crisis and one of the essential recommendations of the Rakhine Advisory Commission.

*UNHCR
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