

Honour the Promises: One year on from the Rohingya pledging conference

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Cover image: Children enjoy clean drinking water in Block-D of Camp 15, Cox's Bazar. Christian Aid has provided deep tube wells around the camp to ensure people have access to safe water. Credit: Christian Aid/ Faysal Ahmad.

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Honour the promises

A year ago, Christian Aid welcomed the 36 pledges made at the Rohingya pledging conference on 23 October 2017¹ as a “good start”.² The commitments included an additional £12 million pledged by the UK, and €30 million pledged by the EU, to meet the \$328 million gap in required funding that had been identified previously by the UN. However, we noted at the time that additional funding commitments would be required following further assessments of the needs of those displaced, and to ensure full implementation of the World Humanitarian Summit commitments in the Rohingya response.

In the first seven months after the escalation of violence in Myanmar’s Rakhine State in August 2017, some 671,000 people – most of them women and children – fled their homes, leading to what the UN described as “one of the fastest growing refugee crises in the world”.³ Christian Aid called for the initial pledges made at the donor conference to be the first step towards a comprehensive and long-range plan for the protection of all those displaced by the violence.

A long-term plan is needed because a range of factors will dictate whether the more than 1.3 million people affected by the violence – including Rohingya refugees who fled to Bangladesh, those displaced within Myanmar, and host communities in Bangladesh – will be able to find safety and assistance in Myanmar and Bangladesh, adequately recover from the crisis, and rebuild their lives safely. As last year’s conference co-host, EU Commissioner Christos Stylianides, noted, the Rohingya – a “stateless people who have suffered for too long” – deserve “nothing less than every other human being in the world. They deserve a future.”⁴ It’s time to honour the promises. Unless donors deliver fully on their commitments and all relevant parties adhere to international law, that future holds little promise for the Rohingya.

1. The 36 pledges totalling \$360 million that were made in October 2017 largely covered the initial funding gap in the fast-expanding response. While the initial pledges were relatively generous, UN officials stated at the time that the total pledged did not meet the target, and that without additional funding commitments, thousands would be left without food, healthcare and shelter.⁵ Christian Aid called for the October 2017 pledges to be honoured in full, and for donors to make further funding commitments, predicting that the humanitarian needs would continue to rise once access to the affected communities was strengthened. This forecast has been confirmed as humanitarian need has outpaced funding, and the recent monsoon and floods have led to “a crisis within the crisis”, with spiralling needs. As the crisis continues, life-saving support is still critical, but support for livelihoods is also needed to help those affected start to move towards recovery, and humanitarian actors must work together across sectors to address the “protection void”.⁶

2. \$434 million was sought to respond to the initial crisis in October 2017. Additional funding requirements doubled within three months of the pledging conference, to over \$950 million. Less than 50% of total funding requirements for the 2018 response have been met.⁷

‘A long-range and comprehensive plan is needed: a plan that aligns with the aspirations for a more effective humanitarian response to crises such as these, as outlined at last year’s World Humanitarian Summit.’ - Christian Aid’s response to the Rohingya pledging conference, October 2017.

“The urgency of the current situation – including the risk of large scale casualties and the likelihood of protracted and multi-dimensional threats to regional development – demands immediate support”

(2018 Joint Response Plan for Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis, March - December 2018, p. 8)

3. How humanitarian assistance is authorised and allocated is also instrumental to an effective response. In Cox’s Bazar, the administrative processes required by authorities before humanitarian assistance can be provided still slow down and impede timely humanitarian access.

At the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, more than 30 donors and aid providers signed onto the Grand Bargain, committing to providing at least 25% of their humanitarian funding to national and local actors by 2020, as part of the localisation agenda. However, in December 2017, national and local Bangladeshi NGOs supporting the Rohingya refugees were only receiving an estimated 4% of humanitarian funds.⁸ They also still do not have the same access to decision-making processes as international NGOs, and their contributions do not get the same visibility. This is not yet localisation in practice. Direct support for local organisations who have access to populations most affected by the crisis, and can thus best tailor the humanitarian response to their needs, must be ensured and increased as the response moves forward.

The emerging findings of the Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream mission to Bangladesh in September 2018 point to similar conclusions. Direct support to local and national humanitarian actors should include: investment in their overhead costs, as well as targeted investments in protection and camp management; a transition period which strengthens the role of local and national actors in decision-making mechanisms such as the Inter-Sector Coordination Group, and in directly managing and delivering the response; and supporting their own direct resource mobilisation. Christian Aid is committed to building the humanitarian response capacities of local agencies, and ensuring that they play a larger leadership role as the crisis and the response to it continue.

4. The “participation revolution” which donors and aid providers committed to in the Grand Bargain has also been slow in taking off. Community representatives interviewed by Christian Aid earlier this year in Cox’s Bazar said that while they appreciated the humanitarian assistance they were receiving, they did not consider themselves to be in the driving seat of local humanitarian decision making.⁹ Addressing this requires urgent investment in improved implementation of the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability, and ensuring that feedback mechanisms strengthen the accountability of humanitarian actors towards the communities they serve. It requires mechanisms that: use the local language; are face-to-face (rather than complaint boxes or phone/SMS hotlines); are located in places and include approaches that address the barriers to access faced by the elderly, disabled, women, children and especially girls; and are accompanied by awareness-raising about rights relating to humanitarian assistance and information on where and how to access feedback and complaints mechanisms.



Above: Demands displayed by a Rohingya group. Photo: Christian Aid.

Upholding safety and dignity through international law

1. Discussions continue in the background about moving some of the refugees back to Myanmar, or to other areas in Bangladesh. The Government of Myanmar, with the support of the Government of Bangladesh, must ensure that any return is safe, voluntary and dignified. This would not be possible without full implementation of the August 2017 recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine,¹⁰ led by the late Kofi Annan, including freedom of movement and citizenship rights for the Rohingya, whether they are returning refugees or among some 100,000 people internally displaced in Rakhine State, Myanmar.¹¹ Making this a reality requires the implementation of the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, including the advancement of the GP20 Plan of Action for the prevention of further displacement,¹² and strengthening the protection of those displaced internally and their choice of durable solution(s). This would also respond to the appeals made by global faith leaders and faith-based organisations who recently partnered with Christian Aid in this 20th anniversary year of the UN Guiding Principles.¹³

2. Last year, Christian Aid called for the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission to be given full, safe and unhindered access without delay. Nearly a year later, the Mission delivered its report identifying those in Myanmar responsible for crimes under international law, and some of the evidence leading to the attribution of responsibility for crimes including genocide, acts committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack on the Rohingya civilian population (crimes against humanity), and war crimes.¹⁴ Now is the time to demonstrate the collective will to act against impunity and pursue the criminal investigation and prosecution of those responsible.

It is also imperative that affected communities and local organisations are able to participate safely in the independent collection of evidence. This should form part of urgent investment in the comprehensive protection framework underpinning the 2018 Joint Response Plan so that protection is at the heart of all humanitarian response. This includes legal advice which supports access to judicial mechanisms, without there is a risk that perpetrators could be “recycled within the system”.¹⁵

Christian Aid supports implementation of all the Mission’s recommendations, including the creation of a second fact-finding mission and the use of independent judicial mechanisms to ensure accountability. We also continue to call on all parties to the conflict to end the violence and fully adhere to international humanitarian and human rights law, including special efforts to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure against attack.

A year ago, Christian Aid called for a long-range plan to provide protection for all those displaced. Unfortunately, that long-range plan is not yet in sight and is still desperately needed. It’s time for a comprehensive plan that better addresses the massive humanitarian needs and continued funding gaps, ensures improved humanitarian access, allows local NGOs and populations to drive the provision of humanitarian assistance, and includes a collective approach to tackle impunity. It’s time to honour the promises.

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Providing relief to conflict-affected communities

Christian Aid has been working in Bangladesh since 1971, and has been present in Cox's Bazar for six years implementing disaster risk reduction, early recovery, preparedness and emergency humanitarian responses. Christian Aid scaled this up to meet the escalating humanitarian needs of the Rohingya people arriving in August 2017. In partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Christian Aid is managing one of the new camps under the authority of the Bangladesh Government's Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner: Camp 15 (Jamtoli), which is home some 49,300 people, including more than 11,000 families. Christian Aid also operates in camps 12, 13, 16 and 19 focusing on site management, water, sanitation, health, shelter and non-food items, energy, food security, livelihoods, and protection.

By August 2018, Christian Aid had supported 111,920 people through water, sanitation and health activities, including construction of gender-disaggregated latrines, bathing spaces and handwashing points; five health centres and seven pop-up medical centres had treated 150,854 cases; and shelter upgrades had been carried out for 15,500 homes, ensuring better quality shelter for 75,000 people. In the first two months of the response, 6,259 emergency shelters were provided for 31,295 people.

In keeping with Christian Aid's commitment to the World Humanitarian Summit's "participation revolution" and implementation of the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability, Christian Aid set up Community-Based Governance Mechanisms (Block Development Committees) that ensure a paradigm shift in participation levels from those in the camps, from that of beneficiaries with limited or filtered voices to broader and more active participation in decision making. Accountability and feedback mechanisms are also being strengthened, and outreach, including through psycho-social care, has been increased to support greater inclusion of women and others who have cultural restrictions on free movement to access the meeting spaces.

Christian Aid is running a crisis appeal to help all communities displaced by violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State, and Rohingya Muslims who have crossed the border into Bangladesh as refugees.

For more information visit: www.caid.org.uk/rohingya.

For further details about the contents of this paper, please email Deborah Hyams: dhyams@christian-aid.org

¹ *Pledging Conference for the Rohingya Refugee Crisis*, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 23 October 2017, unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/Pledge%20announcements%20Bangladesh%20Pledging%20Conference%2023%20Oct.pdf

² *Humanitarian policy statement: Christian Aid's response to the Rohingya pledging conference*, Jane Backhurst, Christian Aid, November 2017.

³ "Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya crisis requests US\$915M to provide life-saving assistance to 1.3M people", OCHA, 18 March 2018, unocha.org/story/joint-response-plan-rohingya-crisis-requests-us951m-provide-life-saving-assistance-13m-people

⁴ "Donors pledge over US\$344 million in response to Rohingya refugee crisis", UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 23 October 2017, unhcr.org/uk/news/press/2017/10/59ee1c494/donors-pledge-us344-million-response-rohingya-refugee-crisis.html

⁵ Ibid

⁶ *UNHCR Protection Support Mission, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh*, UNHCR, 18-25 June 2018, p. 2, <https://data2.unhcr.org/fr/documents/download/66347>

⁷ OCHA Financial Tracking Service, <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/656/summary>, accessed October 2018.

⁸ "Local aid groups want more of a say in the Rohingya refugee response", Kaamil Ahmed, IRIN, 18 September 2018, <http://www.irinnews.org/news-feature/2018/09/18/local-aid-groups-want-more-say-rohingya-refugee-response>

⁹ *Accountability Assessment Rohingya Response - Bangladesh*, Christian Aid and Gana Unnayan Kendra (GUK), February 2018, christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-03/Response-Accountability-Assessment-Feb-2018.pdf

¹⁰ *Towards a Peaceful, Fair and Prosperous Future for the People of Rakhine: Final Report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State*, August 2017, http://www.rakhinecommission.org/app/uploads/2017/08/FinalReport_Eng.pdf; "Violence in Rakhine State and the UK's response", International Development Committee, UK Parliament, 11 December 2017, and the UK Government's response, 20 February 2018, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfaif/868/86802.htm>

¹¹ "One Year On: Meaningful progress needed to end impunity, discrimination and segregation in Rakhine State, say international agencies", 25 August 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/one-year-meaningful-progress-needed-end-impunity-discrimination-and-segregation>

¹² *20th Anniversary of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement: A Plan of Action for Advancing Prevention, Protection and Solutions for Internally Displaced People 2018-2020*, 23 May 2018, <https://crowd360.org/gp20-plan-of-action/>

¹³ "Global faith leaders urge action over 'ignored millions' displaced by conflict", Harriet Sherwood, *The Guardian*, 19 September 2018, [theguardian.com/global-development/2018/sep/19/global-faith-leaders-urge-action-over-ignored-millions-displaced-by-conflict](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/sep/19/global-faith-leaders-urge-action-over-ignored-millions-displaced-by-conflict)

¹⁴ *Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar*, A/HRC/39/CRP.2, UN Human Rights Council, 17 September 2018, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFM-Myanmar/A_HRC_39_CRP.2.pdf

¹⁵ *UNHCR Protection Support Mission, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh*, UNHCR, 18-25 June 2018, p. 6, <https://data2.unhcr.org/fr/documents/download/66347>