Advocating for the Protection of Human Dignity

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- Giving Hope to Marawi’s Displaced
- Understanding the Rohingya Refugee Crisis

UNHCR Advocate Atom Araullo visits families displaced by fighting in Marawi City, which broke out in May 2017. Here, he talks to 100-year-old Moreg Sarakan, who is among the vulnerable elderly forced to flee the armed conflict. (© UNHCR/V. Villafranca)
The Spirit of Generosity, Compassion, and Inclusion

Over the last nine months of 2017, we have witnessed the continuous displacement of families due to war, conflict, and persecution. In emergency hotspots in various parts of the globe, families face threats and heightened vulnerabilities as they make dangerous journeys to safety.

But one does not have to look far to get a picture of what displacement is.

Here in the Philippines, the fighting between government forces and pro-ISIS militants in Marawi has uprooted hundreds of thousands of people from the city and from their homes in neighboring communities. Some of them have even been displaced multiple times in the past.

As of the end of September, an estimated 360,000 people remain displaced, about 94% of whom live as home-based IDPs (internally displaced persons) while the remaining 6% live in evacuation centers and community-based evacuation camps.

Another crisis recently erupted just near our shores: The new outbreak of violence in Myanmar’s Rakhine state has forced nearly 400,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh for several days to escape persecution and violence.

The Rohingya are a stateless Muslim minority in Myanmar. As a consequence they have faced discrimination and extreme poverty for decades.

One of our colleagues who has been doing humanitarian work for decades has described the recent displacement as “the most desperate and devastating thing” she has witnessed.

Many of the new Rohingya refugees are staying in the makeshift settlements or among local Bangladeshi host communities who generously share whatever resources they have. These spontaneous sites require proper planning to ensure basic shelter, safety and hygiene standards.

Against this backdrop, I encourage you to reach out to your family and friends to build solidarity for the families you support as a donor of UNHCR. There’s no perfect time than now to show generosity and compassion, and to promote inclusion to support displaced families here in the Philippines and in emergency hotspots across the world.

Thank you for heeding our call, through your committed donation.

We are grateful that you continue to stand with us and with the vulnerable families under our care.

Yours sincerely,

Yasser Saad
Head of Office
UNHCR Philippines
Hope Over Despair
as Marawi’s Families Dream of Peace

“I cry every night wondering where my children are. One of them is just a 10-year-old boy, and sometimes I dream of him calling my name for help,”

-Fatima Lumabao, one of the hundreds who found refuge at the Buru-un Evacuation Center in the outskirts of Iligan City.

Fatima, 49, sat in silence as she described life in the evacuation camp months since pro-ISIS militants laid siege to Marawi City. Of her eight children, four have gone missing. To date, she is still seeking help from authorities in search of her lost children.

While she waits for her family to be reunited, she tries to be resilient with the help of families she has met at the evacuation center. “A lot of people here care for me while I try to cope. I may be smiling now but at nightfall, when everyone is asleep, that’s when I yearn for my family to be complete again,” she said.

Fatima is among the mothers who shared with UNHCR Advocate Atom Araullo stories of their harrowing journey to safety, as well as challenges while living in displacement. Last July, as conflict in Marawi stretched past its second month, Araullo met with families residing in evacuation camps in Iligan City and the Lanao provinces to listen to their plight.

According to government estimates as of the end of September 2017, as many as 359,680 persons have been displaced as a result of the conflict. Of these, just six percent reside in government-managed evacuation centers in Iligan City and in neighboring municipalities. The majority are home-based or are in community-managed evacuation camps across seven regions.

Most displaced persons fled their homes with just the clothes on their back and the few belongings they could carry.

Among them is 100-year-old Moreg Sarakan, who walked by foot to reach Buru-un, which is approximately 40 kilometers away from home. Despite her age, Babo Moreg vividly recounted the long and tough slog away from the sound of airstrikes pummeling their homes.

Atom Araullo visits evacuation camps

Through this visit, Araullo hoped to draw attention to the prevailing concerns resulting from more than two months of displacement.

“At this point, it’s really more of a day-to-day survival in evacuation centers. I hope the conflict does not drag on for years, and while families are temporarily displaced here, how are they going to live? They cannot rely on dole-outs all the time. When the crisis is over and when they return to their homes, how will they rebuild after they have lost all their belongings and their homes have been destroyed?” he pondered.

“Providing support goes beyond the basic needs like food, shelter, and emergency aid. It also entails assisting them when they go back to their respective communities,”

-Atom Araullo, UNHCR Advocate

Araullo concluded his mission with a visit to an evacuation center in Saguarian, Lanao del Sur.

Here, he met mothers whose families have been displaced multiple times since 2008. Though he expressed concern about the impact of protracted displacement to families, he underscored the need to restore hope among them.

“Providing support goes beyond the basic needs like food, shelter, and emergency aid. It also entails assisting them when they go back to their respective communities,”

-Atom Araullo, UNHCR Advocate
Saving Lives, Restoring Hopes, Rebuilding Futures

More than four months since fighting erupted in Marawi City, hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children continue to live in displacement. Families yearn for homes and a life away from fear and conflict. With you by our side, we can continue addressing their most urgent protection needs and be with them every step of the way as they try to rebuild their lives.

When fighting broke out in Marawi on 23 May, its residents had no idea that the armed conflict would drag on for several months—leaving their lives hanging in the balance.

Massive civilian displacement occurred as a result of the clashes between the military and pro-Islamic militants. In its report to the Department of Social Welfare and Development as of end-September, it estimated that 150,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Marawi City and neighboring communities. This number includes more than 30,000 IDPs from Marawi City and its neighboring communities. The support will not just help us protect their rights, it will also assist them in their fight so as they can resume living their lives in safety and dignity after displacement.

The nature of the response has already transitioned from emergency assistance to early recovery and rehabilitation. UNHCR is on the forefront of advocating for displaced families’ greater participation and in shaping the national plan of the government-led Task Force Bangon Marawi.

We thank you for your committed donation, which will help us respond the hopes and dreams of our displaced brothers and sisters in Marawi City and neighboring communities. Your support will not just help us protect their rights, but also assist them in their fight so as they can resume living their lives in safety and dignity after displacement.

How UNHCR was able to respond, thanks to you

Distribution of Core Relief Items

In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, UNHCR delivered core items like blankets, bed covers, and mats for emergency shelter, plastic sheets, and kitchen sets to evacuee centers and communities affected by displacement.

Capacity Building

UNHCR was able to conduct training for local social welfare officers, evaluation camp managers, and volunteers to establish and implement a system for protecting internally displaced persons (IDPs), safeguarding IDPs’ rights, protection monitoring, and case management.

Protection Monitoring

UNHCR conducted visits to IDPs residing in evacuation centers, community-based evacuation centers, and home-based IDPs. UNHCR maintained their protection concerns to help local authorities determine the proper location of IDPs.

Information Management Support

UNHCR provided technical support to local stakeholders in the IDPM and Regional Offices to develop a database recording the details of the IDPs and the delivery of services.

Advocacy and Coordination

With other members of the Mindanao Protection Cluster, UNHCR solicits for advocacy support to be extended to home-based IDPs, strengthening of Family Ties and Reintegration protocols, proper verification and registration of IDPs, and the recognition of community-based evacuation centers as official evacuation centers.

Where are displaced families staying?

Evacuation Centers

Community-Based Evacuation Centers

Most Families

Giving Displaced Families a Voice

Harith Azaad is one of the hundreds of thousands of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Marawi City. He has been living in an evacuation center since the war broke out.

"I told my cousins, Safi’s volunteer. Anyway, we are IDPs ourselves and we know what the needs of the IDPs are," Harith said.

Some 14,000 IDPs participated in the survey. Initial results showed gaps in humanitarian assistance and protection needs. UNHCR will further study the survey results to Task Force Bangon Marawi and help shape the government’s planning for the recovery and rehabilitation of Marawi City.
How is it like being on the front lines of providing aid and protection to families who have just fled fighting and left everything behind? Get to know Cliff Alvarico, one of the hardworking humanitarians at UNHCR.

CLIFF ALVARICO
Program Officer, UNHCR Philippines

Please introduce yourself briefly.

I am Cliff Winston Alvarico and I serve as the Program Officer of UNHCR’s Philippine office. Since the conflict in Marawi broke out nearly three months ago, I concurrently headed our satellite office in Iligan City.

How long have you been with UNHCR and why do you find your work fulfilling?

Being a humanitarian connects directly to me, as a human being. Perhaps nothing can be more fulfilling than being able to demonstrate compassion to the people we serve. This must have been why I have been a humanitarian worker for nearly two decades now, the last seven years of which have been with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency.

What is a typical day like?

Whenever we do Protection Monitoring in evacuation camps in Iligan City and other municipalities neighboring Marawi City, we provide a listening ear to families who have fled the fighting. We capture what they say and elevate their concerns to the proper forum.

We amplify their voice; protection is all about that. If I were to summarize what protection is without being too technical and legalistic, it’s a matter of listening to displaced families’ pleas. In doing so, we are able to understand what rights are at stake and what their vulnerabilities are. They may not be aware that their rights are being compromised, but we do. We do not confront if they think they are violated. We simply ask them, “How are you now? What are the difficulties you encounter? How are these being addressed? What are your observations? Are you being discriminated against?”

Every issue, we try to understand how and where we can effectively respond.

What are some of the threats you face on the job?

Every day, aid workers put their lives on the line to provide life-saving assistance to underserved families affected by conflict. However, humanitarians worldwide are increasingly being targeted. In 2016, for example, there were attacks against health workers and facilities in 20 conflict-affected countries, resulting in 863 medical personnel being killed or injured.

When I joined UNHCR’s Emergency Response Team after civil war broke out in South Sudan in 2013, I learned first-hand that humanitarian work is fraught with real threats to life, especially when you come face to face with armed actors. You are serving a displaced community or population that could be perceived as a problem. When you negotiate for access to reach them, you are being accused of siding with one party by both parties. Even if you position yourself as a humanitarian worker, you are still being threatened.

“Whoever saves one life saves the world entire.” This Oscar Schindler quote keeps me going as we humanitarians rise to the challenge of supporting people affected by humanitarian crises.

What makes being a humanitarian worthwhile?

Despite the challenges that we encounter, being a humanitarian worker brings me contentment and fulfillment that no other job would.
Understanding the Rohingya Emergency Crisis

This is not how Mabia Khatun, 75, imagined she would spend her old age: as a refugee, cocooned in a blanket and carried for 17 days through the jungle, fleeing devastating violence in Myanmar.

As Bangladeshi fishermen pass the blanket by on the way to their boats, a weak hand emerges to beg for water. Slowly, Mabia’s dusty face emerges as her sons lower the bamboo stick that the blanket is hanging from.

“I didn’t know what was happening because I was in the blanket,” she wheezes. She is sick, and thirsty. It is hours since she last drank, and sweating heavily in the blanket, she is wilting. “I am unable to walk, but to live, I have to fight.”

Mabia is among the estimated 430,000 Rohingya who have fled the latest bout of violence in Myanmar’s Rakhine state since August 2017.

Arriving by foot and boat, they are in urgent need of shelter, food and medical care, and are stretching Bangladesh’s ability to cope.

This latest outbreak of violence has made the their displacement one of the fastest growing refugee crises of recent years, creating enormous humanitarian needs in an area of Bangladesh already affected by earlier refugee influxes, recent floods and not equipped to cope with large number of new arrivals.

**UNHCR’s Response**

Kutapalong and Nayapara, the two official, established UNHCR refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh are now completely overcrowded and families are spilling into makeshift sites on the side of the road. UNHCR is fully functional on the ground in the two camps and have already been distributing shelter and life-saving assistance.

In response to the unfolding crisis during the first two weeks of September, UNHCR has emptied its warehouses in Bangladesh to assist the newly arrived stateless Rohingya refugees.

Priority in distribution is given to shelter materials and basic aid items as thousands of new arrivals are struggling to find even rudimentary protection from the elements.

Many Rohingya refugee families are sleeping rough on roadsides and riverbanks. UNHCR has also witnessed remarkable generosity of Bangladeshi communities in Teknaf and elsewhere who have been welcoming refugees into their homes and sharing resources with them.

UNHCR continues to deploy additional emergency staff.

Based on the numbers of arrivals and needs assessments made by field staff, UNHCR urgently requires additional funds to meet the immediate needs of new arrivals and to provide protection and life-saving assistance.

With the influx increasing daily, UNHCR is appealing for an initial amount of USD 24 million for the emergency humanitarian response in Bangladesh until the end of year.

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**Rohingya Displacement**

430,000 **forced to flee to Bangladesh** since August 2017

Nayapara & Kutapalong are official and established UNHCR camps

Shelter materials and basic aid items are being distributed by UNHCR on-ground staff
EMERGENCY APPEAL

Shelter and life-saving assistance needed for thousands of Rohingya refugee families

Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees have been forced to flee to Bangladesh escaping violence since August 2017. Most are women and children.

Much more needs to be done to respond to the emergency needs of children, women and men fleeing conflict. Please donate now to provide emergency shelter and a Rescue Kit that includes sleeping mats, blankets, solar lamps, jerry cans, kitchen sets, and mosquito nets.

[Donate Here]

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