

**93<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the UNHCR Standing Committee**  
**Mission Report of the Executive Committee Chairperson**  
**Ambassador Marcelo Vázquez-Bermúdez (Ecuador)**  
17 June 2025

*Introduction*

From 21 to 29 March 2025, I visited UNHCR's operations in Bangladesh and Thailand in my capacity as Chairperson of the Executive Committee. I was accompanied from Geneva by Mercedes Jakupi, Chief of the ExCom Secretariat.

From the outset, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to the Governments of Bangladesh and Thailand for the warm welcome with which I was received and to the Permanent Representative of Bangladesh in Geneva, His Excellency Ambassador Tareq Md. Ariful ISLAM, and the Permanent Representative of Thailand to the United Nations in Geneva, H.E. Ambassador Usana BERANANDA – both of whom graciously took the time to brief me prior to my visit and to discuss my observations upon return.

Thanks are also due to the UNHCR colleagues in Bangladesh and Thailand, who ensured the success of my mission, particularly the Representative in Bangladesh, Ms. Sumbul Rizvi (who has since taken up her retirement), the Representative in Thailand, Ms. Tammi Sharp, the Director of the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, Ms. Hai Kyung Jun, and their wonderful colleagues in Dhaka, Cox's Bazar and Bangkok. These teams in Bangladesh and Thailand have been doing outstanding work, against great odds, and I wish to take the opportunity to recognize their commitment and service.

With this in mind, the objectives of the mission were to:

*In Bangladesh*

- Demonstrate solidarity with the Government for generously hosting over 1 million Rohingya refugees, eight years into the crisis.
- Gain appreciation for the complex situation in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, including protection risks and the impact of climate threats on the vulnerability of the refugee population and host communities.
- Maintain global attention on what is both a large protracted and underfunded refugee situation and advocate continued support for Bangladesh in its response.

*And in Thailand*

- Gain further insights into the complexity and scale of the Myanmar crisis through discussions with refugees of Karen ethnicity, some of whom have been in the camps in Thailand for decades.
- Convey support for the Thai Government's bold moves to tackle statelessness in the country, including by joining the Global Alliance to End Statelessness.

*Visit to Bangladesh*

I chose to visit Bangladesh because the situation exemplifies a microcosm of challenges related to forced displacement, including the impact of extreme weather events. However, I use the term "micro" lightly, as the challenges are anything but small. They are in fact dramatic – for the Government of Bangladesh, for the aid community and, most importantly, for the Rohingya refugees themselves. And the response needs to remain equally dramatic.

Uncertainty over the funding situation was at the forefront of the discussions I had in Bangladesh. Anxiety among the staff working on the frontlines, UNHCR's partners and refugees was palpable. Will there be sufficient food and water? Will reductions in fuel for cooking lead to deforestation, reversing greening efforts and contributing to tensions with the host community? Will vital protection services and health care be deprioritized? For a population of over 1 million people who are extremely vulnerable and entirely dependent on humanitarian aid, every action is lifesaving. In a situation like this, how does one even begin to prioritize? "Doing less with less" is a lot to ask in such circumstances. As the UN Secretary-General said during his Ramadan solidarity visit to Cox's Bazar, this place represents "ground zero" for the funding crisis. In other words, it is where the consequences will be felt most.

With mounting insecurity in the camps and growing tensions with the host community, the situation was described by one interlocutor with whom I met as a "pressure cooker" that is constantly steaming. These factors, together with limited opportunity for education and livelihoods, and continuous exposure to climate threats, are leading to desperation, negative coping mechanisms and dangerous onward movements. Women and children, who comprise 75 per cent of the refugee population, face continuous risk of gender-based violence, abuse, exploitation and trafficking, while incidents of forced recruitment of men and boys are on the rise. This context requires a holistic, protection-oriented response, which we cannot afford to abandon.

During my visit to the camps, I had an opportunity to speak to refugees who had recently arrived from Myanmar, one of whom had come eight days prior. A man who fled Maungdaw had tears in his eyes as he described violent attacks and killings by the Arakan Army. Others recounted incidents of forced recruitment, disappearances, threats and the burning of villages and shops. I also met separately with a group of six refugee women, some of whom had arrived in 2017 and others more recently. They – and in fact all of the refugees with whom I spoke – dream of returning to their homeland but said they would only do so when there was peace in Myanmar, when their rights were restored and when they did not have to worry about fleeing again. And as the UNHCR Representative recalled, the fact that the Rohingya are stateless tends to be forgotten, and resolving this is a key condition for return.

Walking through the camps, I was deeply moved by what I witnessed and was able to appreciate the immense challenges. As one of the UNHCR colleagues said to me during my visit: "For a brief moment, you are able to walk in their shoes and see the struggles they face every day". I learned how nearly every month of the year presents a different risk, from monsoons and cyclones that cause flooding and disease outbreak to extreme heat that leads to fires and reduces the availability of surface water, leading to a water crisis. During the dry season, water needs to be trucked into the camp – which is extremely costly. I witnessed measures taken to prevent landslides and flooding, including by dredging the canals between the refugee shelters. Much of this work is being done by refugee volunteers, who earn a small stipend. I would also like to commend the Government of Bangladesh for supporting UNHCR's Safer Shelter Programme, which aims to improve the structural integrity of the refugee housing, reducing susceptibility to landslides and floods. This reflects the commitment of the Government to helping the Rohingya refugees, despite its own challenges. As the then Foreign Secretary told me: "These are human beings, and we need to take care of them."

While in the camps, I visited a skills development centre, where I witnessed young Rohingya learning various trades, such as electricity, plumbing, agriculture, sewing, small engine mechanics, masonry and solar system installation and repair. They were full of hope and expressed their desire to contribute positively to their community through the skills they were

learning – but they asked me to tell you that the only obstacle is the lack of opportunity. The 2025–26 Joint Response Plan (JRP) for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis in Bangladesh, launched on 24 March 2025 while I was in the camps, emphasizes livelihoods and self-reliance as crucial components for fostering dignity, reducing aid dependency and preparing for voluntary repatriation when the conditions permit. As discussed with the Government, I hope that small openings to expand in this direction will be possible.

I also visited an integrated primary health centre – and I am pleased to report that a UNHCR colleague working in the camps underscored the importance of ExCom conclusion no. 116 on mental health and psychosocial support. She explained how the conclusion positively shaped the development of the programme in Cox’s Bazar, which is helping to prevent and treat a range of mental health conditions linked to trauma, displacement, hopelessness and loss.

Despite the enormous challenges I have outlined, the Government, UNHCR and partners expressed concern that the Rohingya situation was falling off the radar and not getting the attention it deserves. I hope my visit helped and I urge you to please do everything possible to support Bangladesh and the Rohingya refugees in order to avert a humanitarian disaster.

### *Visit to Thailand*

Turning to Thailand, as you will have seen from the video, over 81,000 refugees are hosted in nine “temporary shelters” along the border with Myanmar. I had the opportunity to visit Tham Hin, which hosts 4,900 refugees, the majority of Karen ethnicity. The camp is located in Ratchaburi Province, west of Bangkok and about 10 km from the border. Unlike the situation in Cox’s Bazar, the camp is fairly isolated and without access to the internet. Some refugees have never set foot outside the camp since they arrived in 1997.

I met with the leadership committee and – like in Bangladesh – sensed deep concern over the funding situation, which would lead to reduced food rations and other forms of assistance, including health care. But above all, the committee members underscored the importance of giving more opportunity to the youth, including through the recognition of high school diplomas, a chance to pursue higher education in Thailand and vocational skills development. This was enthusiastically supported by the youth cabinet, with whom I also met, who conveyed their dreams of becoming dancers, singers and doctors. I was struck by their self-confidence and how they believe in themselves. They are curious to learn, have a lot of energy and are proud of their identity.

I also conducted house visits and met three families – all of whom hoped to be resettled. None spoke about return to Myanmar – as they clearly saw their future elsewhere. One girl of 17 years old had a heart condition and was hoping to be resettled so she could seek medical care abroad. Another refugee appealed for the right to work, saying: “We want to stand on our own feet instead of relying on others”.

In Bangkok, I met with Foreign Secretary. In light of the funding situation, we discussed the importance of finding new approaches that could foster self-reliance. We also discussed the need to find a political solution inside Myanmar in order to bring about a solution to the conflict. I am grateful for her expressions of support in this regard.

## *Conclusion*

I would be remiss if I did not mention one aspect from my visits to both Bangladesh and Thailand that made me very proud, as Chairperson of UNHCR's Executive Committee. In my discussions – whether with the Government, the diplomatic community, UNHCR's partners or the refugees – there was enormous appreciation for the contributions of UNHCR and its leadership, especially on protection, which were seen as critical to addressing the current challenges.

This visit was a life-changing experience for me. I was deeply moved by the refugees I met in both countries – despite their struggles, they rise above the challenges. They are resilient. They are hopeful. They are proud. And they are determined. They want to work, they want to take care of themselves, they do not want to be aid dependent. They just need opportunity. And this opportunity can be managed in such a way that it becomes a win-win situation for the refugees and for the host communities.

And a final word of appreciation to the host countries – Bangladesh and Thailand.

- Bangladesh deserves to be recognized for the enormous burden it shoulders in hosting over a million refugees, despite its own challenges. And it does so with empathy and with compassion. A million refugees is a city on its own. And this represents a staggering responsibility in a country that is already struggling to take care of its own citizens. To undertake this responsibility is an act of international service and demonstrates moral leadership. But eight years into this protracted situation, things have not gotten any easier – and the funding situation is adding an additional layer of complexity to its efforts. We cannot abandon Bangladesh – the needs are huge and the situation is complex, requiring collective efforts and a collective response that supports localization.
- And Thailand, which has been a long and steadfast partner of UNHCR, has demonstrated enduring commitment to protecting the refugees it has generously hosted since the 1980s. This is in addition to urban refugees and asylum-seekers from more than 40 countries. UNHCR remains committed to supporting your Government with the protection needs of these individuals. Thailand also has a pivotal regional role to play in helping to find a political solution to the conflict in Myanmar, as a neighbouring country and member of ASEAN.

And I would also like to take this opportunity to commend the decisive measures being taken by the Government on statelessness, which I learned about during my visit. I am pleased to learn that Thailand had joined the Global Alliance to End Statelessness, which provides an opportunity for the Government to showcase its good practices in this area.

In both countries, the youth represent the future. We need to invest in them, to give them perspective and to help them thrive. There is simply too much at stake to fail.

Thank you.