Emergency response to the fire in Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

07 January 2024

A safety unit volunteer battles the early morning blaze in Kutupalong's Camp 5. © Md Kayas, Rohingya site management volunteer

Overview

At 1:00 am on 7 January 2024, a massive and devastating fire broke out in Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Flames blazed for over three hours in Camp 5, a UNHCR-managed camp, until Rohingya refugee safety unit volunteers (SUVs) trained on firefighting, local fire fighters and local authorities managed to contain the fire. 26 three-wheeler mobile firefighting units (MFFUs), provided by UNHCR, were deployed from different camps to the hilly, difficult-to-reach area. IOM was on standby with 18 additional MFFUs. The fire response was challenged by strong winds, scarcity of water in the dry season (the fire hydrants were soon depleted and many adjacent ponds were dry), access issues due to the lack of a road network in the hills, and resistance from households in affected blocks to break their shelters to create fire breaks. The fire spread through blocks A, B, C and D in Camp 5, and was stopped by fire breaks or open corridors between the camps before it could spread into Camps 6 and 8W. No casualties have been reported, and 97 people (34 women) received comprehensive medical treatment for superficial first-degree burns or minor cuts.

According to preliminary assessment:

- Over 5,000 refugees were displaced by the fire and relocated to various camps. A tracker has been activated in coordination with SCCM sector to ensure identification and provision of necessary support to people affected by the fire.

- 842 shelters were affected, including 749 shelters totally destroyed by the fire and 93 partially destroyed.
- 33 communal facilities were damaged including health facilities, learning centres, mosques and a mobile firefighting unit hub.
- 213 WASH facilities (mostly latrines, bathing cubicles and hand washing stations) were damaged. No major damage was reported to the water network.
- 63 solar streetlights were damaged.

Response

An interagency coordination meeting chaired by the ARRRC Mr. Md. Shamsud Douza was held at 11:00 am in Camp 5 to discuss the response. Sector partners and government officials participated.

At the meeting, the ARRRC supported UNHCR's proposal to conduct an on-site participatory exercise in re-planning affected camp/blocks before starting the reconstruction of shelters, WASH facilities, and other public facilities to optimize the site planning. Initial sub-block level site plans addressing priority issues of access, drainage, slope stabilization, and WASH facilities will be provided to the CiC and partners within three days to facilitate an integrated response.

Rohingya volunteer firefighters fought on the frontline to extinguish the fire. © Syed Karim, Rohingya site management volunteer

Site Management, Shelter, Non-Food Items (NFI) and WASH

- 311 safety unit volunteers from various camps (including those not affected) were mobilized to help extinguish the fire, as well as creating fire breaks where possible, using equipment provided by UNHCR.
- Common messages on assistance are being developed for community with emphasis on access to assistance, including timelines for reconstruction of shelters by various partners.
- 26 three-wheeler firefighting vehicles were mobilized to respond to the fire. IOM had an additional 12 vehicles on standby.

- 56 site management volunteers mobilized from IOM camps worked with 292 IOM disaster management units to support the fire response.
- UNHCR and partners (NGOF, BRAC, DSK, IFRC, BDRCS, AFAD, AMAN, PDB) are on standby to deploy personnel including engineers to support WASH, Shelter/NFI partners in affected camps.
- The clearing and transportation of debris and garbage to the landfill have begun, with support from WASH, SMS partners and community volunteers.
- Water delivery is being supported by UNHCR WASH partner BRAC with two trucks (each with a capacity of 10,000 liters) providing clean water for fire-affected households.
- 760 households out of the 842 affected ones are sheltering with relatives or in communal facilities, and the remaining 82 displaced families have not yet been traced. The 760 families who have been located received fortified biscuits from WFP. A displacement tracker has been activated for those hosted in other camps.
- UNHCR and partners BDRCS (PMO), Save the Children, AMAN, AFAD have mobilized non-food items (NFIs) to assist displaced families. The NFI distribution will begin from 9 January.

Health

- Two medical mobile teams (MMTs) were dispatched by UNHCR partner Food for the Hungry and IOM to meet urgent medical needs.
- Two primary healthcare centres (FH and RTMI) located in Camp 5 and two emergency ambulances were on standby from midnight to handle any emergency cases and emergency referrals.
- 97 people (34 women) received comprehensive medical treatment from two MMTs for superficial first-degree burns, minor cuts, acute watery diarrhea, and other health concerns. Six referrals were made to primary healthcare centers by MMTs.
- Two postnatal and seven antenatal consultations were carried out by MMTs, as part of the integration of sexual and reproductive health services into the emergency health response.
- 581 people received mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), including emotional support and psychological first aid at the community level. 32 refugees were provided MHPSS care by the MMTs, and five people were referred for specialized assistance.
- 54 community health workers (CHWs) were mobilized to provided first aid, disseminate messages on do's and don'ts during and after the incident, distribute oral rehydration saline (ORS) and drinking water, provide psychological first aid (PFA), and refer individuals to relevant sectors for further support. The Community Health Working Group (CHWG) is led by UNHCR. Specific support provided by CHWs included:
    - Over 120 individuals provided with basic first aid care;
    - 21 individuals referred to MMTs/health facilities for appropriate care/treatment;
    - 1,236 individuals reached with fire safety messages, including dos and don’ts during and after fire incidents;
    - 190 sachets of ORS and 15 liters of pure drinking water distributed;
    - support to the community to evacuate to safe zones.

Assessing needs after the fire. © Taer Arman, Rohingya site management volunteer

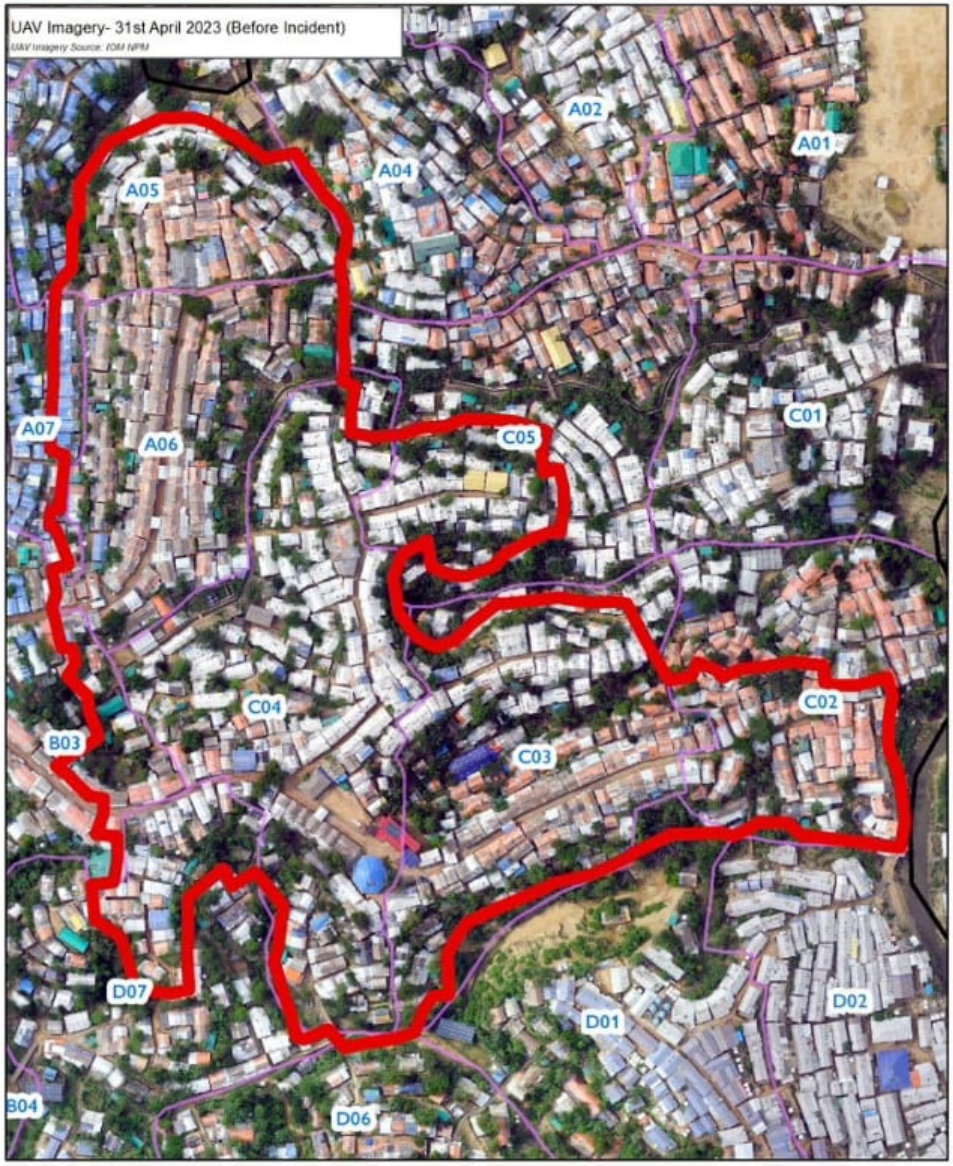
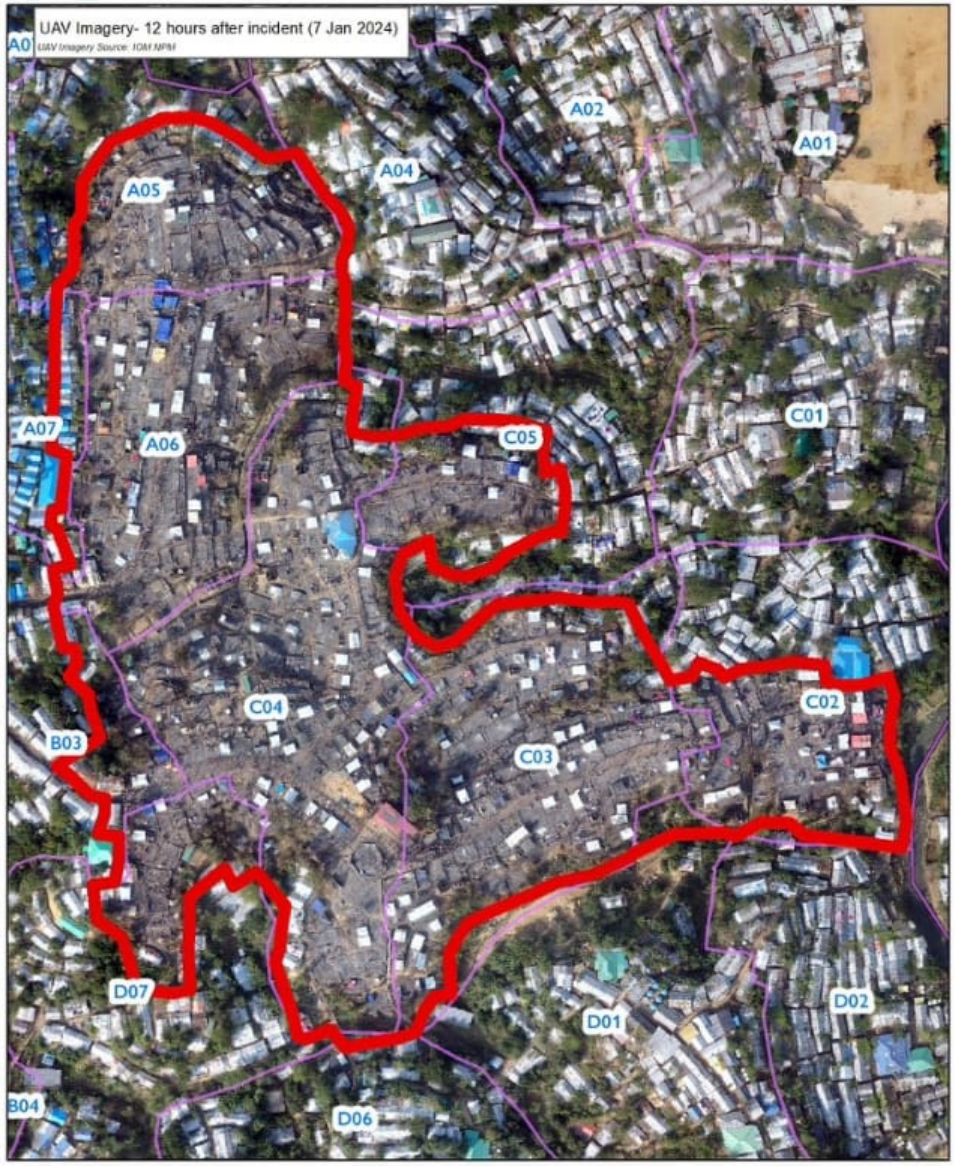
Protection

- UNHCR activated the tracking system to ensure identification and provision of necessary support to the fire-affected population. This will help family members reunite in case of separation.
- The interagency Protection Emergency Response Unit (PERU) has been activated. This is a multipurpose team trained and prepared to provide basic first aid and search and rescue.
- UNHCR's child protection (CP) partner TdH mobilized ten trained CP volunteers to identify affected children in the area and assess child protection cases. No cases of unaccompanied or separated children due to the fire incident have been reported. Six lost children (three girls) have been reunited with their families on the same day and one child's family is still being traced. 15 children (seven girls) were referred for medical treatment.
- Two child-friendly spaces (CFSs) operated by BRAC were destroyed, while six CFSs remain functioning. Psychosocial support (PSS) and psychosocial first aid (PFA) services were provided to 180 affected refugees (16 women, 16 men, one disabled man, 68 girls, 79 boys).
- Approximately 1,600 children were affected by the fire incident, and 30 children were referred for medical treatment for burns. Partner SCI has offered to provide winter clothing to fire-affected children.
- 16 cases were referred for medical, registration and family reunification assistance, including seven refugees (four women, two boys, one girl) referred for medical issues, seven families for lost registration documents, and two for family reunification.

- Ten displaced families (comprising 38 people) are sheltering in a UNHCR community-based protection centre, and five displaced individuals are sheltering in a TdH multi-purpose centre.
- Over 100 CBP volunteers from Camp 5 and adjacent Camps 6, 8W and 10 were mobilized to identify affected families and link them to essential services.
- Major protection concerns identified include lack of WASH facilities, especially for females; lack of drinking water; increased risk of GBV; missing children, and theft concerns since many families no longer have shelters. In addition, a large number of strangers have been reported roaming around the fire-affected area and filming the refugees.
- The camp protection focal point participated in an Emergency Response Team (ERT) meeting convened by the Camp-in-Charge where they shared the protection response plan.

Assessing needs after the fire. © Abdur Shukkur, UNHCR protection volunteer

CAMP 05 FIRE AFFECTED AREA

UAV IMAGERY INCIDENT BEFORE AFTER COMPARISON

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