UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency | Bangladesh

# CAMP 5 FIRE INCIDENT

## UNHCR Rohingya Response

14 January 2024

*Makeshift tents occupy about 30% of the site at the fire-affected blocks of Camp 5. © Fahima Tajrin/UNHCR*

# Situation Update

### Overview

At 1:00 am on 7 January 2024, a massive and devastating fire broke out in Camp 5, a UNHCR-managed camp in Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. After three hours, the fire was brought under control by a team of Rohingya refugee safety unit volunteers (SUVs) trained on firefighting, working with local fire fighters and local authorities. The lack of access roads in the area affected response times, while strong winter winds and scarcity of water in the dry winter season further hampered the fire response.

Some 900 households were affected, comprising around 5,000 refugees, including 3,500 children. More than 900 shelters were damaged or fully destroyed. 213 WASH facilities were affected, in addition to 31 communal facilities including learning centres. Many households lost their belongings, including identification documents — either to fire or to theft from unknown persons in the aftermath of the disaster. Alternative safe shelters and facilities were immediately made available to host households whose shelters were lost in the fire. While many affected households are sheltering in the homes of neighbours and relatives or communal facilities, a substantial have set up makeshift structures on their plots in the fire-affected blocks — exposing them to harsh winter weather and health and protection risks, including increased vulnerability to gender-based violence.

A displacement tracker was activated on Day 1, in coordination with Shelter, Camp Coordination and Camp Management (SCCCM) Sector, to track where people affected by the fire are temporarily

staying, to ensure identification and provision of necessary support. The interagency Protection Emergency Response Unit (PERU) was also activated on Day 1 to provide basic first aid and search and rescue.

On 11 January, the Camp-in-Charge (CiC) of Camp 5 formally approved the new site plan for the area, which will include macroplanning improvements such as connection to the camp wide road network, standardized shelter sizes, equitable and rationalized distribution of communal and WASH facilities, in line with sector standards. As of 14 January, all relevant WASH and Shelter partners were on the ground to begin the first phases of the reconstruction.

## Fire preparedness and response in Rohingya camps

In 2022, an interagency intervention introduced water-based firefighting equipment in the camps; these mobile firefighting units (MFFUs) — modified CNGs with water tanks and water pumps — have better access to narrow and hilly camp roads compared to normal firefighting vehicles. UNHCR supported the production and modification of 34 MFFUs for UNHCR-managed camps and an additional 29 units for IOM camps. At the same time, a comprehensive fire preparedness and response plan was developed and implemented, comprising the MFFUs, 2,800 refugee volunteers equipped and trained under a standardized firefighting module (including refresher trainings, monthly fire drills and simulations), a network of 40-50 prepositioned water tanks (1000 litres capacity), portable water pumps, fire hydrants, fire stands (buckets, fire beaters, hooks and small water/sand drums), 4,500 fire extinguishers (1,600 in volunteers' own shelters), wildfire water backpacks for each volunteer, household-level fire safety training, and systematic and timely fire incident reporting in both IOM and UNHCR areas of responsibility. The community can call camp-based fire hotline mobile numbers to report incidents in real-time.

While many fire incidents are reported in Cox's Bazar's dry season (December to April), most are quickly extinguished through the combined efforts of refugee volunteers and the community. Few fires affect more than a single household. However, we are seeing a trend of increasing incidents over the last several years, due to a combination of factors. As of 14 January 2024, already 66 fire incidents have been reported in UNHCR and IOM camps combined (39 of them in UNHCR camps), compared to 529 fire incidents in 2023, 250 in 2022, and 151 in 2021.

## Comparison of fire incidents: 1-14 January 2022, 2023, 2024

| Area | 1-14 January 2024 | 1-14 January 2023 | 1-14 January 2022 |
|---|---|---|---|
| 16 UNHCR camps | 39 fire incidents | 7 fire incidents | 5 incidents |
| All 33 camps | 66 incidents | 15 incidents | 11 incidents |

## Camp 5 site plan

At the time of the fire, Camp 5 was not connected to the camp-wide vehicle road network. As an "island" isolated from the adjacent areas by lack of access roads, MFFUs struggled to reach the area to respond to the fire.

In addition to absence of access roads, Camp 5 has lacked Sector-standard slope stabilization and drainage as much of the hill cutting and draining work was done by the refuge community, without oversight by local authorities or the Sectors, at the very beginning of the response in 2017. After households had already established their shelters and communities, replanning, reconstructing and connecting to the wider road network would have required destruction of shelters and facilities, and temporarily relocation of the households. This was a challenge.

After the 7 January fire, the Camp 5 CiC, UNHCR and partners made the decision to develop a new site plan addressing critical issues, in order to create a more resilient camp environment. The new plan will also bring shelters and WASH infrastructure in line with Sector standards and ensure that shared facilities are equitably and rationally distributed. Implementation of the plan, approved by the CiC as of 11 January, is estimated to be completed by partners by the end of February.

## Timeline for site planning and reconstruction

- **7-9 January:** Debris and site clearance completed by WASH partner.
- **7-9 January:** An interagency and multisectoral response team, led by UNHCR, developed a comprehensive site plan for the affected blocks to address critical gaps and improve macro conditions.
- **11 January:** Site plan formally approved by CiC, and decisions made on division of labour between WASH and shelter partners and assigned zones of responsibility based on partners' capacities. CiC requested humanitarian actors to temporarily pause or relocate activities in the affected blocks to facilitate quick reconstruction. All partners were instructed to adhere to the plan during the implementation phase.
- **12 January:** Under supervision of CiC, partners begin demarcating plots as per the new site plan.
- **14 January:** All WASH and Shelter partners on the ground to begin work, including plot demarcation, labour and material mobilization, etc.
- **15 January-14 February:** Approximately 30 days for NGO Forum, NRC, Save the Children, BDRCS/IFRC to complete reconstruction work in Zone 1
- **15 January-29 February:** Approximately 45 days for partner AFAD and TDV working with other Turkish NGOs, to complete reconstruction work in Zone 2.

## Critical challenges

While the revised site plan will result in an improved macroenvironment for the community, the affected households face ongoing risks and challenges. While 200 empty shelters are available for displaced households in different camps (including 25 shelters available in Camp 5), not a single family has agreed to temporarily relocate. Many households are reluctant to leave their plots, choosing instead to shelter in makeshift structures in the fire-ravaged blocks. They may fear that their plots might be usurped by other families, or that they will be forced to permanently relocate — thus losing the social support communities they have established in their blocks. Some community members said they would relocate only if their entire block could be relocated together. Some households may also have buried valuables in their plots and fear theft.

The presence of so many makeshift structures in the area (they occupy around 30% of the fire-affected blocks) complicates reconstruction efforts, as the structures must be cleared for rebuilding to proceed. A community engagement plan has been developed by the site management team to inform the community of the site plan and next steps, and will commence on 16 January. Also starting on 16 January, community-based protection partners will begin consultations with households sleeping in makeshift arrangements in Camp 5 to better understand and address their fears, concerns and needs.

Families in makeshifts shelters risk exposure to the elements, with a cold wave sweeping the country, according to a weather bulletin issued from Bangladesh Meteorological Department (BMD). As of 14 January, the majority of affected families have received distributions of warm winter blankets and sleeping mats, along with other core relief items. Additional distributions of winter items are planned in the coming days. However, health and protection partners have observed and increase in respiratory ailments in the affected blocks, resulting from the cold weather and particulates from the fire lingering in the air.

While critical WASH infrastructure — including the water network, intermediate fecal sludge transfer network, toilet pits, etc — remain intact, sanitation superstructure has been damaged, leading to access challenges particularly for women and girls. WASH partner BRAC provided clean water via water trucks for 2 days following the fire. However, with households now having received jerry cans (two cans per households) and buckets they are now able to collect clean water from functioning water points. Desludging of filled up latrines is in process in adjacent areas where the temporary relocation of affected households has increased pressure on existing WASH facilities.

The community has reported fears of increased GBV risks for women and girls affected by the fire. Many say they feel unsafe in relatives' homes or communal facilities, while sheltering in makeshifts structures also leaves them highly exposed. There have been reports of groups unknown males roaming the fire-affected blocks — including criminal groups and opportunistic thieves. Distributions of dignity kits, jerry cans and other materials should address some of women and girls' WASH needs resulting from displacement, though affected women still may not have places to privately dry their menstrual clothes.

The fire and resulting displacement also have a mental health impact on the community. Fire-affected individuals previously identified with anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges may find themselves at risk of relapse. MHPSS partners have reached out to these individuals to ensure they have access to medicine and counselling. Blanket psychological first aid (PFA) coverage has been provided to all fire-affected households. However, we may see an increase in nightmares, flashbacks, and other symptoms of distress as a result of the fire — which may trigger and reactivate memories of the community's violent displacement from their homes in Myanmar in 2017, when many were burnt out of their villages.

### Other incidents

Several unrelated incidents resulting from different hazards were reported in the last two months, including a biogas fire on 1 December 2023 injuring three children in Nayapara Registered Camp (NRC), and the explosion of a septic tank on 12 January 2024 injuring seven children in NRC. Both incidents involved children playing with fire unattended, and facilities that had been modified or altered in some way. In the biogas incident, an unidentified person had broken the pipe connecting the burner to the biogas plant. In the septic tank incident, the PVC ventilation pipe had been removed by the partner due to widespread theft of the pipes. The affected children in both incidents have received medical support, and follow-up is ongoing. UNHCR is reviewing safety measures, messages and referral mechanisms for such incidents.

## Impact and Response in Cox's Bazar

**976**
Shelters partially damaged or destroyed.

**213**
Latrines, bathing facilities, tube well and tap stand partially damaged or destroyed.

**31**
Community facilities damaged or partially destroyed.

**887**
Households temporary displaced

*Day 8. Rebuilding fire-damaged facilities. © Fahima Tajrin/UNHCR*

## Site Management, Shelter, Non-Food Items & WASH

**Impact:**

- Some 900 refugee households (comprising 5,000 individuals) were displaced by the fire and are sheltering across various camps.
- 976 shelters were affected, including 816 shelters totally destroyed and 160 partially destroyed.
- 31 communal facilities were damaged including:
  - 1 health facility
  - 2 child-friendly spaces
  - 13 mosques/religious schools
  - 14 learning centers
- 1 mobile firefighting unit (MFFU) hub was damaged.
- 213 WASH facilities (mostly latrines, bathing cubicles and hand washing stations) were damaged.
- No major damage was reported to the water and fecal sludge transfer pipe networks.
- 55 solar streetlights were damaged.

**Response:**

- NFI response: On 11 and 14 January, distributions continued, covering the majority of affected households. Distributions will continue through the week for households who could not be reached in previous days.
  - 230 households received basic winterization, hygiene and other core items (soap, jerrycans, blankets, sleeping mats and assorted clothes), bringing the total to 780 households who have received NFI support. Warm wool blankets and sleeping mats were delivered to each person in affected households (3,801 individuals), while jerry cans, mosquito nets, bathing soap, laundry soap, and other items were delivered at a standard quantity per households.
  - 208 households received dignity kits over the same period, taking the total to 703 households (comprising 1,035 individual women and girls) who have received dignity kits.

  - NFI items were mobilized by UNHCR and partners, including UNFPA, BDRCS (PMO), Save the Children, AMAN and AFAD.
- Community engagement: UNHCR and partners continued with community engagement and common messaging, developed by the Sectors, to affected families regarding planned assistance and response modalities. New messages regarding the approved site plan and reconstruction timeline have been developed, and a community engagement plan will commence on 16 January to inform the community of the site plan, next steps, and options for food as discussed and agreed with WFP/RRRC.
- Site planning: On 11 January, the plan to rebuild the fire-affected blocks received formal endorsement and approval from the CiC. The proposed site plan is the collaborative effort of an interagency and multisectoral response team, led by UNHCR. The CiC requested all relevant sectors to adhere to the approved plan. Shelter partners received the site plan of their respective areas on 11 January, and the WASH partners received the site plan of their respective areas on 14 January.
- Shelter and WASH: Mobilizations of shelter materials and labour, plot demarcation and setting out are ongoing. While, in other emergency situations, shelters kits have been distributed to households to rebuild themselves, Camp 5 reconstruction will be implemented by partners, in a fully planned and systemized way. Thus, at the direction of the CiC, no shelters have yet been rebuilt (the structures visible on the site are makeshift ones). It is expected that shelter constructions will be completed between 30-45 days. On 14 January, the CiC reviewed the decisions made in the previous week and, after receiving updates from all partners, confirmed the following decisions:
  - UNHCR and Shelter partner NGO Forum will lead the reconstruction of 326 shelters, including associated household level site development works in collaboration with NRC, IFRC/BDRCS and Save the Children.
  - AFAD, in collaboration with other Turkish NGOs, will be responsible for the reconstruction of 490 shelters and minor site development.
  - Meanwhile, WASH partners NGO Forum, NRC, Save the Children, and BRAC/DSK will reconstruct essential WASH facilities following the site plan with strict adherence to sector standards and government-approved designs.
  - As part of improved site planning, and with the aim of mitigating GBV and security risks while enhancing access to dignified WASH services, UNHCR and partners are building two additional women's hygiene centres in fire-affected Camp 5 and will strive to provide more gender-sensitive WASH facilities that support women and girls.
- Hot meals: While standard SOPs allow for provision of hot meals for three days following an emergency, the CiC has requested WFP to continue to provide hot meals for around 200 households living in makeshift arrangements in the fire-affected blocks who do not have a place to cook.

**Challenges:**

- Many households whose shelters were gutted in the fire have been reluctant to leave the affected area. Rather than relocate to temporary safe shelters, they have constructed makeshift tents with NFI materials to safeguard their plots and remaining belongings. Rough sleeping increases protection risks, especially for women and girls, while also creating challenges for reconstruction as about 30% of the site is covered by makeshift shelters.
- The devastating fire in Camp 5 is yet another reminder of the critical need to build more resilient shelters, improved site planning and WASH facilities that can better withstand the ever-present disaster risks such cyclones, monsoons, fires and landslides. Several improved shelter designs have been proposed with a 'Building Back Better' approach.

*Clearing debris. © Mir Mosharaf Hussain/UNHCR*

*Stabilizing the land after the fire. © Fahima Tajrin/UNHCR*

## Health

**Impact:**

- One health facility was damaged by the fire.
- No casualties or major injuries have been reported.

**Response:**

- Healthcare facilities: To continue providing essential healthcare services to the beneficiaries impacted by the recent Camp 5 fire, two primary healthcare centers (by FH and RTMI), and one health post (by FH) remained operational and accessible. The healthcare facilities ensured both inpatient and outpatient services, including 24/7 ambulance support and services such as consultations, vaccinations, sexual and reproductive health services, and MHPSS.
- Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS): The MHPSS response was integrated with the emergency health response through psychologists, community health workers, community para-counsellors, and community psychosocial volunteers.
    - Psychological first aid was provided to affected refugees to listen to their needs, provide basic emotional support, and inform them about the available service providers. Refugees with previous specific needs at risk of relapse and exacerbation were reached out to. 83 of whom were directly affected by the fire and thus provided with the needed specialized counselling along with their families.
    - UNHCR and partner (FH) continue to provide blanket psychological first aid services at the community-level, and specialized services at the facility level. FH will continue to monitor the impact of the fire and provide community awareness on problem solving skills, better parenting, signs and symptoms that need closer monitoring, early detection of mental health illnesses, and other topics.
- Community health workers (CHWs): The impacted community continued to receive fire safety messages from the community health workers. 114 people received psychological first aid, while one person received basic first aid.
- Sexual and reproductive health: Midwives in healthcare facilities ensured services related to sexual and reproductive health. Identifying high-risk mothers and children from fire-affected areas through integration with community health workers was also ensured.

*Rohingya women and girls feel unsafe in their makeshift tents. © Mir Mosharaf Hossain/UNHCR*

## Protection

**Impact:**

- Some 900 displaced households are sheltering in the homes of relatives, friends, and community facilities.
- 200 children lost their homes and all their belongings. No child was reported severely injured.
- Two child-friendly spaces (CFSs) operated by BRAC were destroyed, while six CFSs remain functioning.
- Among the affected, 47 pregnant women and 31 women who had recently given birth were displaced by the fire.

**Response:**

- Registration: UNHCR's Registration teams received on average 50 families per day for the first few days after the fire. UNHCR and its partners supported with replacing burnt documents, including ID card and family attestations. This week, the number of referrals have significantly reduced, with two families referred to Registration on 14 January.
- Protection monitoring: UNHCR's Camp 5 protection focal point (PFP), together with the Protection Emergency Response Unit (PERU) team, continues protection monitoring, identification and referral of vulnerable cases and addressing the protection needs and concerns to the respective service providers.
    - PERU reached 38 refugees (seven boys, six girls, six men, 11 women) with PFA.
    - PERU team referred ten refugees for food assistance.
    - PERU team members continue to conduct awareness raising on available services, reaching 25 heads of household. Messaging includes how and where refugees could

report family separation incidents, lost and missing children, lost/burnt registration documents as well as the information on accessing health, GBV, services for persons with disabilities and food services. In addition, UNHCR's Helpline number was disseminated to the refugees.

- Child protection:
  - No new child protection cases were reported.
  - 12 children who were missing as a result of the fire have since been reunified with caregivers, however one child with a disability is still missing and the family tracing efforts and support to the family are ongoing.
  - UNHCR and partners continued to provide psycho-social support and psychological first aid to children and their caregivers, reaching 801 people last week. Child Protection teams also carried out protection-focused awareness raising, referrals to other services, and case management.
- Persons with disabilities:
  - UNHCR's partner Handicap International (HI) manages a disability support static point in Camp 5 which fortunately avoided damage in the fire. HI assessed and supported 80 persons with disabilities (PWD) to respond to their urgent needs arising from the fire. The services include direct rehabilitation support to 38 PWDs as well as psychosocial support.
- Community-based protection:
  - Six families who were being housed in the BRAC community centre have now been relocated to temporary shelters while reconstruction plans for the damaged shelters get underway.
  - 15 community outreach members (COMs) volunteers continue to monitor affected families, especially those who have chosen to remain in makeshift tents close to the sites of their burned shelters.
  - BRAC staff continue to operate a helpdesk at the camp community centre, receiving feedback from affected persons and facilitating referrals to relevant service providers. Between 7-14 January, 182 cases related to the fire have been supported via the helpdesk with information on services, identification of specific needs and referrals to appropriate services.

**Challenges:**

- Some families are unwilling to leave the fire-affected area and are living in a temporary by covering their shelter space with tarpaulins. These families have been offered relocation to vacant shelters in other camps but declined, citing the reason they wish to stay near their relatives who are living in nearby blocks unaffected by the fire. Protection volunteers have also reported that the volatile security situation in other camps could be another reason why relocation outside Camp 5 was refused by some families, despite the offers of vacant shelters.
- Many individual agencies are conducting protection assessments and activities within the camps, and protection coordination is essential.
- The cold weather, coupled with lingering ash and dust, are seemingly resulting in a rise in respiratory issues amongst affected people. Volunteers report a noticeable rise in people coughing and complaining about their breathing being affected by the situation.

**Building Back Better:**

- The devastating fire in Camp 5 is yet another reminder of the critical need to build more resilient shelters, improved site planning and WASH facilities that can better withstand the ever-present disaster risks such cyclones, monsoons, fires and landslides. Several improved shelter designs have been proposed with a 'Building Back Better' approach.

**Contacts**: **Amy Jo Davies**, External Relations Officer, Cox's Bazar, **daviesa@unhcr.org**,
**Romain Desclous**, Senior External Relations Officer, Dhaka, **desclous@unhcr.org**.