



In the early hours of 14 January 2020, a devastating fire broke out in Nayapara Registered Refugee Camp in Teknaf, Cox's Bazar. Over 3,492 persons lost their homes and belongings, as the fire completely gutted 600 shelters (including two belonging to Bangladeshi families in the host community), 150 shops and an NGO facility. An additional 122 shelters were dismantled to stop the fire.

The local fire department was at the scene and able to control and contain the fire within two hours. The Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC), the Camp-in-Charge (CiC) of Nayapara Registered Camp, and law enforcement authorities also quickly mobilized to support the response in the area. Fortunately, no deaths or serious injuries were reported, and the few people with minor injuries have been released after treatment.

In addition to the investigation put in place by the security agencies, the RRRC has formed a committee made up of engineering staff, camp administration and UNHCR to determine the cause of the fire. In its preliminary stage, the investigation has concluded that the fire started in an individual family shelter and quickly spread throughout the block due to the highly flammable nature of the construction materials used in the camps, where many of the shelters have been in place since the 1990s. The cause of the fire is unknown with the investigation ongoing.

Coordination

Under the lead of the RRRC and CiC in Nayapara Registered Refugee Camp, UNHCR, partner NGOs, WFP and other Operational Partners of the Humanitarian Response were onsite from early morning on 14 January to assess the damage and establish a coordinated response. The Government and humanitarian partners acted quickly and efficiently to meet the urgent needs of the families affected within hours of the fire.

Refugee and host community volunteers trained and equipped for emergency response to disasters caused by monsoon winds and rain, landslides, fires and other calamities played a key role in the response, working together on the frontline to help clear debris, support vulnerable people in the affected community, and rebuild shelters.

Response

Security

The Government of Bangladesh's law enforcement and security forces, Armed Police Battalion (APBn) and Army, deployed personnel to maintain public order, ensure crowd control and protect the possessions of people living in the area impacted by the fire from potential theft and looting during and after the fire. Additional forces were also deployed to provide increased security presence following the fire.

Site Management

UNHCR's partner Action Aid Bangladesh (AAB), a site management NGO, assisted the joint coordination effort following the incident. They mobilised 100 volunteers to collect data from affected households, conducted the initial damage assessment and needs of households for shelter, non-food items and other support.

Through AAB, UNHCR ensured working streetlights for the affected areas that will be in place until the electrical grid is working again.

Medical

Community health workers from the RRRC's Refugee Health Unit (RHU) and Research, Training and Management International (RTMI), UNHCR's partner for health services, were on the scene immediately after the disaster to provide first aid and referred those injured for care and treatment. As noted above, despite the scale of destruction caused by the fire, no deaths or serious injuries were reported, and the few people with minor injuries were released after being treated.

BRAC, Humanity and Inclusion, RHU and Technical Assistance Inc. have been providing psychosocial support to affected individuals and families since the incident. Refugees who lost medical cards for vaccination and long-term treatment records are approaching health facilities in the camp to replace these documents and to medicines for those on long-term treatment programs.

Food and Nutrition

World Food Programme's (WFP) partner BRAC started distributing High Energy Biscuits in the early hours of Thursday morning, and Action Contre la Faim provided a hot meal to all affected households. Following that, WFP's partner BRAC began serving hot meals, and this will continue until the families are able to begin cooking for themselves once again.

Shelter

UNHCR's partner BRAC, has distributed full shelter kits to all affected households. Each kit includes bamboo, tarpaulin, rope, wire and other items for shelter construction.

BRAC has assisted 40 families with individuals with specific needs to rebuild their shelters, while refugee volunteers and partner staff continue to be onsite to coordinate and support the reconstruction process. Getting people back into family shelters is an essential step to normalise the situation and reduces risks of COVID-19 spreading within the community.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

UNHCR's partner NGO Forum (NGOF), responded quickly and comprehensively, undertaking emergency repairs of damaged WASH infrastructure and restoring access to safe water and sanitation services, which the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic makes even more essential.

Ninety-two percent of the 180 latrines in the block are now functioning, while 72 percent of the 46 bathing spaces damaged in the fire have already been repaired, 13 are being reconstructed. All hand washing devices are now operating again. Some 3000 cubic feet of waste has been collected and disposed in a safe place outside of the camp; NGOF and Solidarities International provided trucks to remove the debris. In order to secure the water supply within the impacted area, minor damages to the existing water network were fixed immediately and a daily distribution of bottled water to the affected families is taking place. More than 100 WASH volunteers have been engaged daily.

Legal

As many as 90 percent of refugee households may have lost their identify documents in the fire, and UNHCR is currently working to identify those who need replacement documents.

Core Relief and Non-Food Items

UNHCR's partner, Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS), has distributed core relief and non-food items to the affected households, including compressed rice husk as a temporary source of fuel for cooking, sleeping mats, jerry cans, kitchen sets, buckets, solar lamps, blankets, female hygiene kits and WASH hygiene kits. In addition, winter clothes have been distributed to all affected persons. Furthermore, Humanity and Inclusion provided additional kitchen items.

Observations & Recommendations

- Rapid mobilization of the local fire department, RRRC/CiC staff, Army and APBn as well as their close coordination with UNHCR, its partners and other agencies, prevented the spread of fire to other blocks of the camps, the avoidance of loss of life and serious injuries, and the delivery of immediate relief to the affected community members. Refugee and host community volunteers have been and remain the first line responders and essential support during and in the aftermath of the fire.
- The preliminary investigation indicates that the fire had a vast and devastating impact because of the use of flammable materials in the camp and inadequate distance between refugee shelters. Walkways between the shelters are also covered in tarpaulin and bamboo shades that allowed the fire to spread rapidly. Fire safety precautions will be an important consideration in rebuilding the damaged shelters and ensuring the walkways are clear of any flammable materials.
- UNHCR will continue to work with its Government and NGO partners, and Rohingya and Bangladeshi communities, to enhance preparedness and response capacity to emergency incidents in and around refugee camps, including through necessary training and awareness raising.

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