



## EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO THE FIRE IN KUTUPALONG BALUKHALI REFUGEE CAMPS ON 22 MARCH 2021

Mobile medical teams supporting volunteer refugee community health workers have reached more than 17,500 refugees so far and continue to refer patients for care.  
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The initial report (24 March 2021) can be accessed [here](#).

## Overview

On the afternoon of 22 March 2021, a devastating fire broke out in Kutupalong Balukhali refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. It lasted until the early hours of 23 March. The fire has left approximately 48,000 refugees displaced, destroyed over 9,500 shelters as well as over 1,600 facilities including hospitals, distribution points, learning centres, and a UNHCR registration centre.

The fire started in Camp 8W, and within a short period spread to Camps 8E, 9 and 10, all of which are IOM-managed camps. Many refugees living in adjacent camps evacuated their shelters temporarily, while many more fled to neighbouring camps seeking safety.

Refugee and members of the host community were the first responders, the local fire department arrived shortly after and the fire was contained in the early hours of the morning. The Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) and law enforcement authorities also quickly mobilized to support the response in the area.

## Coordination

Under the lead of the RRRC, humanitarian partners were onsite from soon after the onset of the fire to assess the damage and establish a coordinated response. The Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) continues to coordinate the humanitarian response through the ten sectors in Cox's Bazar.

## 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. The police deployed an additional 150 personnel.
- While the interagency response to the 22 March fire is ongoing, a number of smaller fires have been reported over the past few days in other camps in Kutupalong and Nayapara. Refugees have managed to put out the fires quickly with only a limited number of families affected. Investigations by the Bangladesh authorities are underway.

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

- 370 trained refugee Safety Unit Volunteers from across the 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. Overall, more than a thousand refugee volunteers contributed to extinguishing the fire and rescuing the victims.
- Two three-wheeler firefighting vehicles were mobilized by UNHCR partner Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS).
- While the fire spread through IOM-managed camps, over 2,600 families totaling some 12,000 individuals initially took shelter with relatives in UNHCR-managed camps. UNHCR liaised with WFP to ensure that these families were provided with water, high energy biscuits (HEB) and hot meals.
- As of 28 March, 1,935 of the above-mentioned 2,600 families remain sheltered in UNHCR-managed camps, totaling 9,021 individuals. The remaining estimated 35,000 displaced refugees are in IOM-managed camps in temporary shelter.
- In coordination with IOM and sectors, UNHCR is supporting initiatives to rebuild ensuring higher quality shelters adhering to minimum standards, including for example 2 story shelters and mezzanine shelters currently being piloted in some camps, as well as ensuring regular fire breaks to reduce the risk of fires spreading.
- So far, UNHCR handed over 3,000 blankets, 20,000 solar lamps, 7,000 kitchen sets and 7,000 mosquito nets to IOM for distribution
- UNHCR has provided 3,200 female hygiene kits through various partners and there is an additional request of 3,150 which will be provided in the coming days.

### Public Health

- UNHCR has been supporting other agencies with the provision of medicines and supplies including IOM for their health partners in the affected camps.
- UNHCR partners Relief International and Food for the Hungry with Medical Teams International deployed mobile medical teams well equipped with supplies normally pre-positioned at facilities within the camps, to provide emergency first aid.
- UNHCR health facilities have provided care to 49 refugees injured by the fire.

- Volunteer community health workers from the refugee community continue to help refer affected refugees to critical support services.
- UNHCR coordinated with over 240 partner volunteer community health workers to reach over 17,500 refugees. Key messages have been distributed for messaging on fire safety, first aid and response.
- Almost 200 mental health and psychosocial support staff have been deployed by UNHCR and our partners to provide psychosocial first aid to affected families as well as frontline workers. Around 4,000 refugees have received psychosocial support.

## Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

- Together with partners OXFAM, NGO Forum and BRAC, more than 130,000L of water and 7,000 jerry cans were distributed to refugee families.
- 500,000 aqua tabs were provided to families to ensure the water collected and stored is safe to drink.
- The construction of 26 emergency latrines and emergency tap stands has been completed.
- Four water tankers are delivering safe water to areas where those displaced by the fire are congregating.
- Desludging teams have removed faecal sludge from affected areas.

## Protection

- UNHCR staff will be deployed at WFP distribution points for the next three weeks to facilitate re-issuance of documents for refugees who lost them in the fire.
- Within the protection sector, UNHCR has extended support to IOM for coordinating the response on the ground and discussions are ongoing in setting the next priority protection interventions, *i.e.* ensuring equitable access to services and ensuring information and assistance reach the elderly and people with disabilities in particular. Furthermore, addressing gender-based violence risks through awareness raising and targeted monitoring. The first priorities were family reunification of separated children, and reinforcement of psychosocial support.
- UNHCR's partners CODEC, Relief International, Save the Children International and Terre des Hommes identified more than 600 separated children. Most have now been reunited with their families, while just 27 separated children remain receiving care.
- Two child protection helplines and 4 re-unification help desks were established by UNHCR's partner Relief International.
- Refugee volunteers continue to actively support refugees in the fire affected camps as well as in other camps where refugees are taking shelter. For example, by taking older refugees, children and pregnant women to safe places, accompanying the affected refugees to health care facilities, assisting in building temporary shelters, and clearing debris, and identifying and referring refugees with specific needs to relevant service providers. They also conducting awareness raising sessions on child protection risks such as child-trafficking and gender-based violence, fire safety and general assistance.
- Coordinated messages on services and support available are being shared through partners, refugee volunteers and refugee leaders covering health, child protection, GBV, and registration. UNHCR's Interactive Voice Response (IVR) has started broadcasting calls with recorded messages. More than 3,700 refugees have been contacted so far, while efforts continue to reach out to more affected refugees.

***UNHCR remains on standby to provide additional support to IOM and other humanitarian partners in the ongoing emergency response.***

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