

CAMP 5 FIRE INCIDENT

UNHCR Rohingya Response

21 January 2024



Reviewing the new site plan for the fire-affected blocks with the Camp-in-Charge of Camp 5. © Shari Nijman/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. Some 900 households were affected, comprising around 5,000 refugees, including 3,500 children. Due to lack of access roads in the area, strong winds and scarcity of water in the dry winter season, it took several hours for first responders – mainly refugee volunteers trained in fire response – to reach the area and extinguish the flames.

More than 900 shelters were damaged or fully destroyed. Streetlights, WASH facilities, learning centres and other facilities were also damaged. Many households lost their belongings, including identification documents – if not by fire then theft in aftermath of the disaster. Alternative safe shelters and facilities were immediately made available to displaced families whose shelters were lost in the fire. Most families, however, continue to shelter with relatives and neighbours. Some have set up makeshift tents in the fire-affected blocks, while others are in communal facilities. A displacement tracker was activated on 7 January, in coordination with SCCCM Sector, to track where people affected by the fire are temporarily staying, to ensure identification and provision of necessary support. Response and relief efforts have been led by UNHCR Field Site Management and Shelter units, along with Camp Coordination, Shelter-CCCM and Protection Sectors.

On 11 January, the Camp-in-Charge (CiC) of Camp 5 formally approved the new site plan for the area, covering individual family plots for **804** shelters, more than **230** WASH facilities, and consolidated learning centres. Gender, age and disability inclusion is addressed through the new site plan, with inclusive measures such as integrated WASH/Shelter blocks, and handrails, ramps and stairs to ensure access for people with mobility challenges despite the hilly terrain. WASH and Shelter partners will strictly adhere to the site plan, per CiC instruction, and ensure compliance with Sector standards. By the end of the week, around 150 shelters are expected to be completed, with the help of skilled labour engaged through cash-for-work.

2023-2024 fire season and cold spell

During Bangladesh’s winter months of December to February, evenings and early mornings are dewy and brisk with average lows of about 12 °C. Communities burn small fires to warm themselves. The high density of the camps combined with the flammability of the plastic tarp and bamboo shelters creates dangerous conditions for fires to spread, especially during the December to April dry season.

2023-2024 fire season has been unusually active with 103 fires reported in UNHCR camps alone from, 1 December 2023 to 21 January 2024, compared 52 fire incidents over the same period in the previous year – a 100% increase. This rise in incidents coincides with a colder than average winter as more families light fires to keep warm.

To make an annual comparison: There were 529 total fire incidents in 2023, 250 in 2022, and 151 in 2021. In the first three of 2024, already 105 fire incidents have been reported.

Comparison of fire incidents: 1 December-21 January 2022 vs 2023

Area	1 December 2023- 21 January 2024	1 December 2022- 21 January 2023
16 UNHCR camps	103 fire incidents	52 fire incidents
All 33 camps	158 incidents*	70 incidents*

**IOM data taken from ISCG tracker*

Fire preparedness and response

Since 2022, through an interagency intervention, more than 60 mobile firefighting units (MFFUs), positioned across 33 camps, stand ready to respond to fires when the emergency call comes in. MFFUs are CNG-powered three-wheelers modified with water tanks and water pumps, designed to more easily access narrow and hilly camp roads. They are operated by refugee first responders, 2,800 of whom have been rigorously trained and equipped as firefighters. Combined with household-level fire safety training, camp-based fire hotlines, prepositioning of water tanks, pumps, fire extinguishers and other equipment, the Cox Bazar camp’s comprehensive fire response plan is effective at extinguishing most fires before they spread.

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.

Consultations with fire-affected families rough sleeping in the fire zone

In the immediate aftermath of the response, many affected households sought shelters in the homes of relatives and neighbours near the fire zone, while others set up makeshift shelters within their fire-affected blocks. While 200 alternative shelters in other camps were identified and made available to the fire-affected families, these were largely refused, with many families choosing to remain in their makeshift shelters within the fire zone.

This unwillingness to relocate has left those remaining in the fire-affected blocks exposed to unusually cold nighttime winter weather while rough sleeping, dust and ash from the fire zone, a lack of access to facilities including WASH and cooking facilities, as well as threats from thieves and other criminal elements roaming around at night. With reconstruction now in full swing, the area is now a work site – which presents dangers for people in the area, especially children. At the same time, the presence of so many makeshift shelters occupied by families impedes construction work.

To better understand the reasons that families have refused temporary relocation to alternative shelters, UNHCR undertook a series of community consultations with these families on 16-17 January. The findings will inform ongoing response efforts, and guide a community engagement plan for the fire-affected blocks. With many families reporting that they are afraid to lose their shelter plots while also stating safety, security and wellbeing concerns, UNHCR and other actors are swiftly taking action to prioritize robust and timely two-way communication with the affected refugees that is responsive to their concerns, questions and needs.

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



Shelter partners engaged skilled labour for the rebuild. © Shari Nijman/UNHCR



Site Management, Shelter, Non-Food Items & WASH

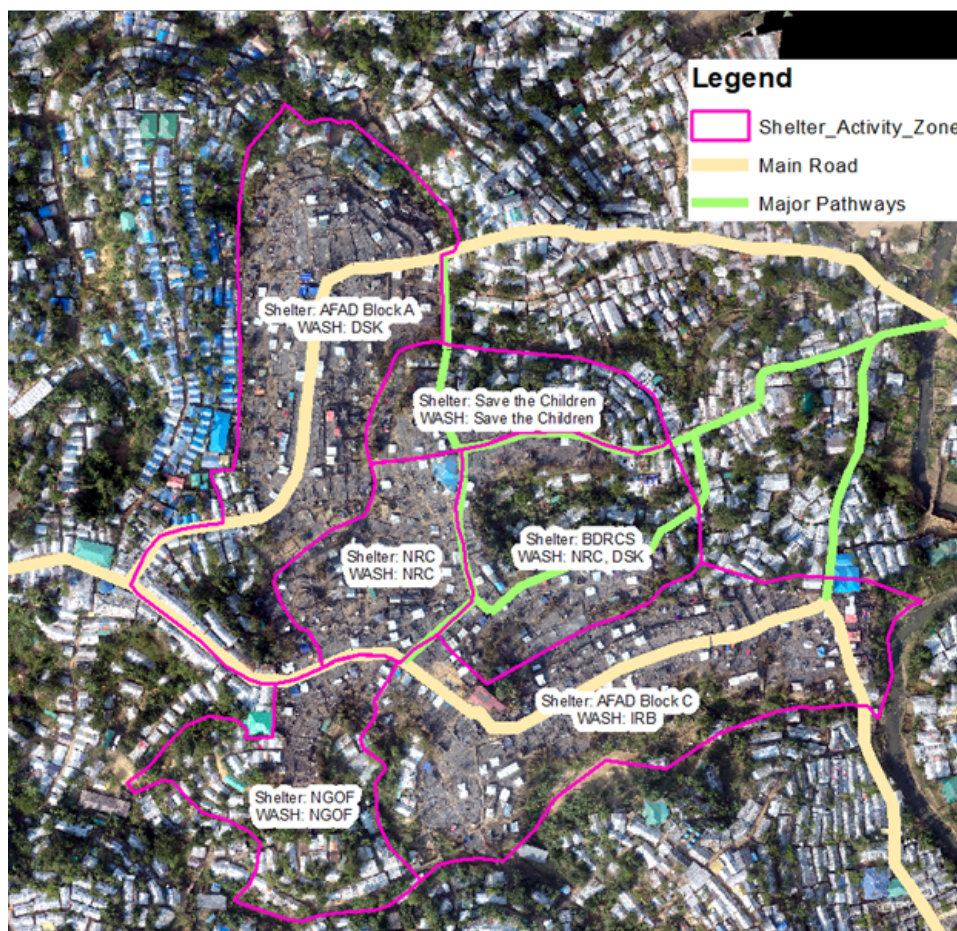
Impact:

- 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 distribution:** Affected families continued to receive assorted non-food items including winter clothing, additional blankets and mats and hygiene items.
 - As of 21 January, 813 of 835 targeted households HHs have been reached with NFIs (soap, jerrycans, warm wool blankets, sleeping mats, mosquito nets and assorted clothe). Distributions will continue through the week for remaining households.
 - All women and girls of reproductive age received dignity kits.
 - To facilitate cooking, some 111 families received between 20-40 kgs of compressed rice husk (CRH), based on family size, while the distribution will continue throughout the week.

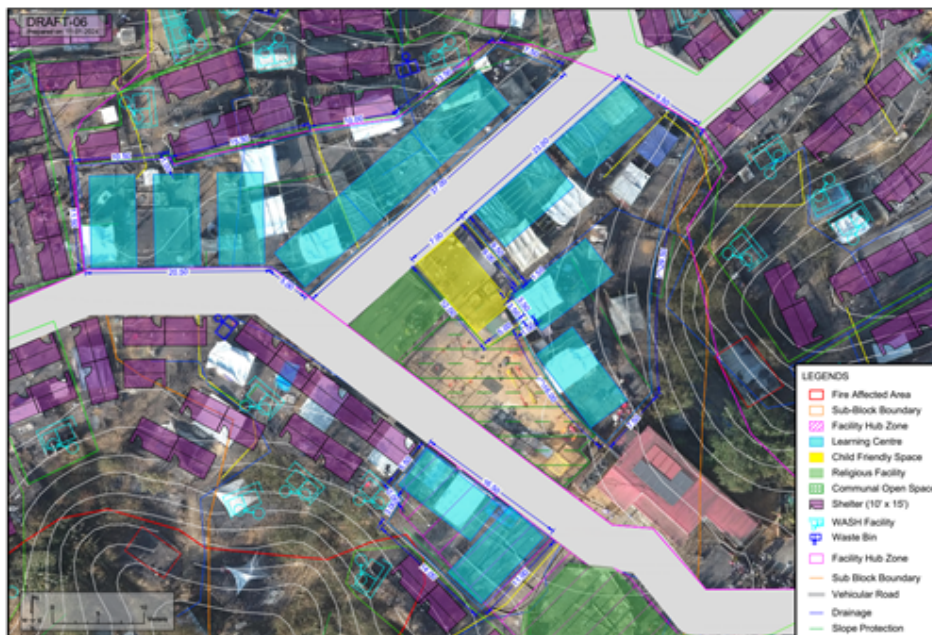
- **Community engagement:** Community consultation conducted by community-based protection partners found communication gaps resulting in confusion and stress for affected families, and not enough information to make decisions. A new strategy to effectively communicate the new site plan, reconstruction timeline, and long-term vision, as well as respond to community concerns and questions is being developed. It will include:
 - Awareness raising through Rohingya volunteers, including community health workers, community outreach members, site management volunteers etc. Person-to-person communication through community volunteers is the preferred method of communication for the Rohingya.
 - Townhalls with staff so all units at all levels can contribute to community engagement and awareness raising.
 - Distribution of ‘shelter plot’ tokens to fire-affected families for their current plots.
 - ICE materials, such as videos and handouts in the Rohingya language.



Camp 5 access map and assignment of WASH and Shelter partners



Facility Hub, Block A



Facility Hub, Block C

- Shelter and WASH:** The updated site plans were shared with all WASH and Shelter partners on the ground as well as the with the Camp-in-Charge for reference during the reconstruction. UNHCR WASH and Shelter teams are deployed at camp-level, providing essential technical support to partners and addressing community concerns. As of 21 January, the following progress can be reported:
 - The comprehensive site plan for the fire-affected area covers individual family plots for **804** shelters, more than **230** WASH facilities and consolidated learning centres, has been finalized and is currently being implemented. So far, partners assigned for

reconstruction have demarcated all WASH facilities as well as **194 shelters**. The consolidated learning centres are also demarcated on the ground.

- Identified access facilities, including major pathways (**10 feet wide**) and vehicle access (**15 feet wide**), have been demarcated on site and ready for construction.
 - Over **15 WASH facilities** (bathing facilities and toilets) were completed with several WASH blocks in progress. All WASH and Shelter partners, including AFAD, have mobilized the necessary materials and manpower to expedite the reconstruction process.
 - By 21 January, **two** shelters were completed and ready for handover to the affected households. Construction of **111** shelters continues this week by different partners. With the full-time staff deployment, skilled labours and construction materials mobilized, significant progress is expected in the coming days. Completed shelters will be handed over to the assigned families in coordination with the CiC's office and site management partners.
 - Assessments for required site development activities have been finalized for 2,839 meters, with 120 meters of slope protection already completed. Ongoing initiatives include schemes for slope protection, stairs, and drains. These site development activities, coupled with WASH facility restoration, will continue at the household level as shelter construction progresses.
 - In addition, UNHCR has taken proactive measures by mobilizing additional WASH and shelter materials, including precast shelter footings, steel frames, tarpaulins, treated *borak* bamboo, and rope. This support will assist assigned partners to expedite the reconstruction process. Notably, 100 precast pillars have been prepared, and 15,000 steel footings have been prepositioned for immediate deployment to partners in need.
 - An integrated WASH/Shelter model, piloted by UNHCR in Camp 17, is now being implemented at the reconstruction site to increase accessibility for elderly, women and girls, people with disabilities and other special needs. The model integrates one WASH facility for every 3-5 households within a shelter block – enhancing user comfort, mitigating GBV and protection risks, promoting health, dignity and ownership, while reducing exposure to unsanitary practices within living spaces.
 - Ramps, stairs and handrails are also being constructed to ensure inclusive access to individual shelters, WASH facilities and other communal service points located in challenging terrain.
- **Food distribution:**
 - As of 21 January, the majority of fire-affected households had resumed accessing food vouchers from the WFP outlet and were cooking with relatives.
 - 72 households requested hot meals through 22 January, to allow them time to find alternate cooking options. The CIC has requested an assessment for these families and WFP will continue to provide hot meals for any household in need.
 - UNHCR has facilitated access to LPG refills to eligible households as well as distribution of compressed rice husks (CRH) to enable families cook their food.

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 as cyclones, monsoons, fires and landslides. Several improved shelter designs have been proposed with a 'Building Back Better' approach.



Camp 5's water network was not damaged by the fire. Clean water remains accessible. © 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 has been provided to affected refugees to listen to their needs, provide basic emotional support, and inform them about available service providers. Refugees with previous specific needs at risk of relapse and exacerbation have been reached out to.
- 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):** Community health workers continued to provide psychological first aid and basic first aid to affected refugees and disseminate fire safety messages.

Challenges:

- Psychologists reported detection of more and more cases in need of focused psychological counselling, not only in Camp 5 but other camps.
- MHPSS activities must also be upscaled for children affected by the fire.
- There have been reports of CHWs requesting fire response training, as the numbers of fire incidents in the camps in the recent weeks has put much of the community on high alert.
- A rise in respiratory issues has been reported via community health workers and health facilities, with a notable increase in people coughing and complaining about breathing difficulties. This is a seasonal trend, with poor air quality and cold weather resulting in a general increase in respiratory ailments across camps. However, the trend in Camp 5 is quite high, likely due to lingering particulate matter, which can remain in the air for several weeks following a fire. UNHCR is monitoring the trend.



Many families lost everything. Partners distributed warm blankets, clothing, sleeping mats, and other essential household items. © Shari Nijman/UNHCR



Protection

Impact:

- Some 900 displaced households are sheltering in the homes of relatives, friends, and community facilities in various camps neighboring Camp 5, while others are rough sleeping in the fire-affected blocks in makeshift tents constructed on their shelter plots. Displacement heightens vulnerability, exposing families to increased protection risks.
- More than 1,300 children lost their homes and belongings, including winter clothes. No child was reported severely injured.
- Two child-friendly spaces (CFSs) operated by BRAC were destroyed, while six CFSs remain functioning.
- 14 learning facilities were destroyed (11 operated by JcF and three operated by Mukti),
- Among the affected, 47 pregnant women and 31 women who had recently given birth were displaced by the fire.

Response:

- **Registration:** Most households who lost their documents in the fire have already received assistance replacing burnt documents, including reprints of factsheets and family attestations. To date, 64 fire-affected households have been supported with reprints of 59 documents. One or two families continue to be referred per day.
- **Protection monitoring:** The Protection Emergency Response Unit (PERU) team protection was convened on 7 January to support monitoring, identification and referral of vulnerable cases in the aftermath of the fire. From 22 January, **PERU will be deactivated**, as all Protection partners have now resumed regular activities in Camp 5, and refugees indicated awareness of all service points. UNHCR's Camp 5 protection focal point will continue monitoring activities.
 - From 15-21 January, 34 refugees were referred by PERU for services including health, nutrition, food and family reunification. 124 refugees received Psychosocial First Aid (PFA).
 - PERU continue to conduct awareness raising on services through community outreach, reaching 63 households. Messages included how and where refugees could report family separation incidents, incidents of lost and missing children, lost/burnt registration documents as well as the information on health, GBV, persons with disabilities and food services. UNHCR's Helpline number has also been disseminated to the refugees.
 - PERU team members reported that community members raised concerns about delays in shelter construction, and said they were struggling to keep warm during the cold spell. In response to these concerns (echoed by multiple teams across units), UNHCR has developed a community engagement plan to share timely and regular information about reconstruction progress and timeline, benefits of the new site plan, and seek community understanding and support for the long-term vision for the fire zone.
- **Education:**
 - Children from affected learned centres (LCs) are being absorbed in neighbouring LCs, operated by UNICEF education partner JCF. JCF is also exploring possibilities of additional shifts in the receiving LCs to ensure that all learners can be

- absorbed. However, JCF reports that most children have been asked by their families to stay and play near their former shelters.
- JCF is issuing new learning materials and supplies for children who lost theirs in the fire.
 - The new site plan includes consolidation of the LCs from their former locations into single compound. Reconstruction of LCs will be managed by UNICEF, pending further discussions on use of fire- and weather-resistant materials.
 - **Child protection:**
 - Five new child protection cases were identified and referred for case management.
 - UNHCR and partner TdH continued to provide psycho-social support and psychological first aid to children and their caregivers, reaching 265 people last week. Child Protection teams also carried out protection-focused awareness raising and referrals to other services: 68 children were referred for food support, two for medical services, and clothing was distributed to five children.
 - One multi-purpose centre, operated by TdH, continues to be used as a temporary emergency shelter for fire-affected families.
 - TdH, with support from DSS, continues efforts to trace one boy with disability reported missing by his family after the fire.
 - Children continued to express fear and distress – of lack of adequate clothing and shelter for the winter weather, lack of privacy at WASH facilities and emergency shelters, sexual harassment while rough sleeping, and not wanting to leave their homes unprotected. Many children or adolescents said they had been instructed by their caregivers or partners to guard their plots.
 - Child protection partners BRAC, DSS, SCI and TdH are working together to ensure that all children affected by the fire have access to services, including recreational materials.
 - **Community-based protection:** On 16-17 January, CBP partners held discussions with fire-affected households to better understand why they are choosing to sleep in makeshift shelters in the fire-affected area instead of relocating to emergency shelters in safer areas. Three focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with mixed groups of CBP volunteers (one FDG of 20 people, two FDGs of 12 people) followed by semi-structured discussions with 70 people within the fire-affected blocks. Some key findings:
 - 70% of respondents (80 of 114) reported that they had not received information on the availability of emergency shelters outside the fire-affected blocks.
 - A messaging campaign by education partner JCF contributed to anxiety that displaced families would be forced out of their plots. The message, broadcast by loudspeaker/hand mike in the fire-affected blocks, announced that the locations of some refugee shelters would be swapped with locations of learning centres as part of the new site plan.
 - Refugee respondents requested clear, concise and regular communication by UNHCR and other key actors including:
 - a clear explanation of the relocation process;
 - where families would be relocated;
 - how they would be assigned emergency shelters;
 - what the logistical arrangements would be;
 - timelines for reconstruction.

- When the above information is provided, together with satisfactory assurance that no one would be forced to give up current shelter locations, respondents almost unanimously agreed they would be willing to temporarily relocate to emergency shelters to better support reconstruction and site planning activities.

In response to these findings, key actions are being taken, including distribution of 'shelter tokens' to households for their existing plots, and other robust community engagement measures.

- **Disability inclusion:** Since 7 January, disability partner Humanity & Inclusion (HI) has assessed hundreds of affected persons and supported over 40 persons with disabilities (PwDs) within the fire-affected area, before halting ground activities at the instruction of the CiC last week. The new site plan will increase accessibility for PwDs in shelters, WASH facilities, and communal facilities. Stairs, ramps, railings and wider pathways will enhance PwD mobility across the area's challenging terrain.

Challenges:

- Camp 5's CiC halted the work of disability partner HI, stating that only limited assistance activities would be allowed within the affected zone until reconstruction as completed.
- 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. UNHCR is following up with partners and the Protection Sector.

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.

Annex:

- Community Consultation Report, Post-Fire Situation, Camp 05, 18 January 2024

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