

Rohingya Crisis: Lot of challenges still there for Bangladesh

Says disaster management expert

Staff Correspondent

Greater level of coordination and accountability are imperative to address the complex humanitarian crisis of the Rohingya, said Dr Alistair Cook, a disaster management expert, yesterday.

He said while Bangladesh has been a champion in managing natural disasters like floods and cyclones, the experience of handling humanitarian emergency created by the massive influx of Rohingyas to Cox's Bazar since August 2017 is new, which has created a lot of new challenges.

Addressing the crisis involved a number of organisations -- local and central, civil and military -- as well as many UN agencies and international and local NGOs, Dr Cook said in a public lecture organised by the Centre for Peace and Justice, Brac University at the Brac Centre Inn in the capital.

Alistair Cook, coordinator of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Programme and research fellow at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, said in the early days of the influx, it was local people and individuals who provided food to the Rohingya, and eventually the government, UN and other actors stepped in.

Over the subsequent months, many of the issues including food, water, health, sanitation and infrastructure were managed. However, a lot of challenges remain in terms of coordination, funding, accountability and localisation.

“Effective coordination between different actors in this emergency response is made more challenging with the high turnover rate of humanitarian staff, military officials and government appointees...,” said Dr Cook.

Military officials and camp in-charges appointed by the public administration ministry are deployed to the camps on short rotations of two to three months at a time, he said.

“This discontinuity is part of the 'humanitarian business' and often disrupts trust-building between coordinators. It can, however, be addressed with smooth handovers and the localisation of coordination roles,” said the expert.

It also happens in the cases of international staff, creating problems in coordination, Alistair added.

In response to the 2017 Rohingya exodus, FD7 clearances (clearance by NGO Affairs Bureau for work in the Rohingya camps) can take anywhere between 72 hours to two months.

“In some sectors such as education and protection, the lack of FD7 approvals continue to hold back available funds, hinder the deployment of new actors and the expansion of programmes by existing actors.”

Visa application procedures are particularly cumbersome for surge capacity staff, who need to enter Bangladesh urgently, he added.

Dr Cook suggested streamlining and revision of approval processes for incoming relief goods, funds, relaxing visas for international staff and developing an approval process for INGOs that augments local capacity.

He also recommended mapping local community organisations to enhance localisation with international organisations, building stronger linkages between Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Commissioner and local governments.

The expert suggested re-establishing camp committees to govern the Rohingya refugee camps to provide greater democratic and equal gender representation in decision-making.

Dr Cook also stressed on integrating humanitarian standards and accountability mechanisms.

Prof Mohammad Tamim, pro-vice chancellor of Brac University, and Muhammad Badiuzzaman, research coordinator at the Centre for Peace and Justice at the university, also spoke at the programme, attended by NGO officials, academics and development partners.