

# CYCLONE MOCHA HIGHLIGHTS ROHINGYA CRISIS AND MYANMAR'S MILITARY CAMPAIGN

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A member of the Red Crescent Society carries relief material in Teknaf on May 14, 2023, after cyclone Mocha's landfall. Cyclone Mocha began to crash ashore at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border on May 14, Bangladesh's weather office said, uprooting trees and bringing driving rain to a region home to hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees. | Photo Credit: AFP

Sunday's landfall of the dangerous Cyclone Mocha near Sittwe port in Myanmar's conflict-torn Rakhine province has once again highlighted the need to resolve the Rohingya refugee crisis that started in 2017 when the community was forced to take shelter across the Naf river in Cox's Bazar.

The full impact of the storm is yet to be assessed but reports suggest that it has caused extensive damage to private and public property in the region starting from Saint Martin's island of Bangladesh to the city of Sittwe that experienced high storm surge. Together with the natural calamity, people are concerned about Myanmar government's actions that may imperil rescue operations after the storm.

"Mocha has made landfall. Two million people at risk. Damage and losses are expected to be extensive. We are ready to respond and will need unhindered access to all affected communities," said Titon Mitra, United Nations Development Programme's Resident Representative in Myanmar, soon after the storm hit the coastline of Myanmar and Bangladesh.

In preparation for the storm, World Food Programme stocked supplies in its warehouses in the Rakhine province and authorities in Bangladesh relocated thousands of people from Saint Martin's Island which is located nearly nine km south of Cox's Bazar. The United Nations Development Programme in coordination with the Bangladesh government mobilised 1,600 Rohingya refugees to prepare the camp in Kutu Palong to prevent loss of lives though the exact extent of the material damage can be ascertained only after the subsidence of the storm. According to Al Jazeera, the main Rohingya camp in Kutu Palong was spared the brunt of the killer force of the storm.

The crisis has come just days after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina addressed the Indian Ocean Conference in Dhaka and said her country gave "temporary shelter" to the Rohingyas despite many challenges. "This gesture avoided a major humanitarian catastrophe in the region. Now, we seek active support of the global community to repatriate the Rohingya people to their

homeland in a safe and sustainable manner,” she said, highlighting the urgency of the situation. India which has an active Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief policy is yet to announce its response to the disaster that has hit the strategically important region which is expected to serve as the gateway of Northeastern Indian States to the Bay of Bengal.

The powerful storm has shed light on the condition of the Rohingyas who live in temporary structures made of bamboo and plastic sheets that are not built to survive near category 5 storm wind. The vulnerability of the Rohingya community is particularly acute as they are facing the double brunt of displacement and an anti-terror campaign that has been ongoing in the Rakhine and neighbouring regions of Myanmar.

The Myanmar government has opened pagodas and schools to ensure safety of the people in Rakhine but Opposition figures have criticised the military junta for not pausing campaign against political opponents in the region. Apart from Sittwe, Kyaukpyu and Gwa towns, the storm has also battered the Coco Islands in the Bay of Bengal.

Opposition forces in Myanmar, however, said that preparation for disaster mitigation was affected as the military junta had degraded communication channels in the Rakhine and Sagaing provinces that are in the path of Cyclone Mocha. They have said the Myanmar government is hindering “information accessibility”. The spokesperson of the Opposition’s National Unity Government (NUG) has further stated that nearly 13,000 people fled from Kani township of Sagaing region just hours before Cyclone Mocha made landfall. The NUG has stated that at least 48 townships that fall on the path of Mocha are facing “military imposed shutdowns” making it difficult for normal evacuation. “Across Rakhine state and the northwest of Myanmar about 6 million people were already in need of humanitarian assistance, while 1.2 million have been displaced,” the spokesperson of the NUG President’s Office said on Sunday evening.

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