

BANGLADESH- ROHINGYA DOCUMENTATION PROGRAM

CONSORTIUM PARTNERS: Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR), Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR), Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala (FAFG), Humanitarian Law Center (HLC), International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC), Public International Law & Policy Group (PILPG)

LOCAL PARTNERS: Cox's Bazar Arts Club, Social Action of Voluntary Efforts (SAVE)

LOCAL ADVISOR: Liberation War Museum

TIME FRAME: January 2019 – January 2024

PROJECT DETAILS

According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), over 740,000 Rohingya refugees have relocated to Bangladesh since August 2017, fleeing persecution in Myanmar's Rakhine State. The Rohingya – a Muslim ethnic minority with their own language and culture – had been increasingly isolated by state forces for decades. The UNHCR reports that the majority of Rohingya refugees are women and children – with more than 40 percent under the age of 12.

Knowing that in post-conflict settings, documentation is an essential element of accountability and peaceful futures, the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation (GIJTR) began working in Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh in early 2019, training local activists to document human rights abuses in a credible, professional, and standardized manner. While other international agencies have conducted documentation initiatives, they generally did so with local activists working only as interpreters or "fixers." GIJTR's experience in Iraq and elsewhere, however, has shown that training documenters from within the community to lead these efforts is a far more effective approach. Unlike international efforts, locally led and coordinated civil society documentation efforts can build trust among survivors, reach communities outside the scope of efforts led by external international organizations, and lay the groundwork for future transitional justice processes. In short, locally led efforts remain within their communities long after international agencies leave – paving the way for a sustainable peace.



GIJTR Community Consultations in a Rohingya refugee camp near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh in August 2019

OBJECTIVES

The overarching goal for this project is to document and preserve information regarding gross violations of human rights in a standard, internationally credible manner that supports advocacy and future transitional justice efforts. The following objectives are laid out to achieve this goal:

- Create a group of trained local documenters, including both Bangladeshi and Rohingya documenters, able to credibly and professionally collect information about human rights abuses in a manner that supports the dignity of victims, survivors, and witnesses, and can contribute to future transitional justice mechanisms;
- Engage Rohingya survivors and Bangladeshi civil society in processes that promote documentation, accountability and reconciliation, including locally led advocacy for peace and justice, and memory projects that foster civic participation;
- Develop a secure documentation database to archive the information collected;
- Lay the foundation for a pilot genetic database for the relatives of Rohingya Missing and Disappeared Persons (MDPs) in the lead up to longer-term efforts to meet the needs and priorities of the relatives of Rohingya MDPs; and
- Strengthen international and regional advocacy efforts that secure human rights for the Rohingya.

KEY ACTIVITIES TO DATE

- **Needs Assessment on Documentation and Operational Challenges:** GIJTR partners held more than 30 meetings with international and local organizations to assess documenters' experiences and challenges working with the Rohingya in order to map out effective strategies and solutions.
- **Assessment of Current Documentation Efforts:** Through a combination of extensive research and consultations, GIJTR partner PILPG, conducted a preliminary mapping of numerous reports and other publicly available materials about documentation initiatives in Bangladesh, to assess gaps that should be addressed in future documentation efforts.
- **Introductory Psychosocial and Resource Mapping:** To build greater understanding of the psychosocial needs of survivors, which is essential to fostering trust in the documentation process, the GIJTR led a workshop for nine participants, including the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs' Psychosocial and Rape Crisis Centre, to provide an introduction to the project and strategies for supporting victims of human rights violations in the Bangladeshi and Myanmar context.
- **Capacity Building Among Female Facilitators:** Given that women and girls are disproportionately affected by this conflict, the GIJTR identified and trained female leaders within the community to be documenters in preparation for community-led documentation missions. Women and girls are frequently more likely to share their experiences of violations with female facilitators, making this sort of training essential to collect and preserve their stories.
- **Collecting and Sharing Life Stories through Dialogue and Artwork:** GIJTR partners AJAR and ICSC have engaged more than 250 Rohingya women, youths and men in circles of dialogue to share life stories and produce memorialization materials for wide dissemination based on them. Through memorialization initiatives, community participants often develop trust and confidence to support more formal documentation processes.

- **Documentation Trainings and Mentoring:** Six in-person trainings in community-led documentation for accountability have been conducted for 25 Rohingya participants, in addition to staff members of local Bangladeshi NGOs, ensuring that local documenters are skilled at collecting information in a credible manner so it can be used for future transitional justice proceedings. Thirteen organizations received similar, remote mentoring from GIJTR partners during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Trainings:** Eight trainings in mental health and psychosocial support were conducted by GIJTR with Rohingya participants, in addition to local Bangladeshi Coordinators. In addition, GIJTR partner AJAR provided psychosocial support to approximately 90 women, in addition to documenting their life stories.
- **Documentation Training of Regional Civil Society Actors:** To increase regional capacity to support the project, GIJTR partners trained 37 Asian organizations on community-led documentation for accountability, memorialization, advocacy and atrocity prevention in the Bangladeshi and Myanmar context.



Rohingya women gather together during a GIJTR workshop

KEY IMPACT TO DATE

- **Launched Locally Led Documentation Project with Rohingya Community:** More than 25 Rohingya community members in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar received trainings from the GIJTR on the principles and methodologies to conduct community-led documentation initiatives for accountability, memorialization, advocacy and atrocity prevention. Access to the refugee camps was restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic after these initial trainings, but work continued remotely, with an increased focus on supporting a locally based professional training team. Trained Rohingya documenters have collected over 320 testimonies.
- **Development and Training of a Local Operative Team in Cox's Bazar:** Through a partnership established with Bangladeshi NGOs established in Cox's Bazar, the GIJTR hired and trained a professional team consisting of a female and male coordinator to support project activities on the ground, which is central to ensuring the project's sustainability after 2024, when the GIJTR will conclude its activities. The GIJTR has also supported health and sanitary programs as well as biosecurity protocols related to COVID-19 prevention to successfully ensure the local team is permitted to operate in the camps despite COVID-19 related access restrictions.
- **Artistic and Cultural Community Activities to Support Memorialization Initiatives:** The GIJTR, in collaboration with a group of local Bangladeshi artists, identified artistic and cultural activities within the Rohingya community in preparation for a truth-telling and memorialization program that launched in 2021. Led by the GIJTR, the program works with men, women and youth in the camps to collect community narratives and develop artistic and cultural products for dissemination within the camps and among host communities, both in Cox's Bazar and in other regions of Bangladesh. Similar GIJTR programs in Colombia and elsewhere have shown that such inter-generational community activities effectively encourage a large number of survivors to participate more actively in truth-telling processes at a broader level.

- **Increased Regional Awareness of GIJTR's Rohingya Documentation Project and the Importance of Locally Led Efforts:** A four-day virtual conference on documentation for accountability, memorialization and advocacy was conducted in December 2020 with the support of GIJTR partner the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, and local advisor the Liberation War Museum. The GIJTR trained participants from 12 countries in Asia in community-led documentation techniques, primarily focused on accountability and atrocity prevention, and were introduced to the Rohingya Documentation Initiative as a first step in developing a network of regional support for the project, which is crucial to its sustainability.
- **Strengthened Relationships Between Local and International Actors:** The GIJTR has laid the groundwork for local actors to build vital partnerships with key international actors, which will allow local partners to more effectively advocate for accountability and atrocity prevention in this context. The GIJTR has facilitated 30 meetings between local and international actors in Dhaka, Cox's Bazar, and the Rohingya refugee camps, including with the Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Liberation War Museum of Bangladesh, US Embassy in Dhaka, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC), 18 Rohingya CSOs based in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, and Cox's Bazar Arts Club. GIJTR partners have also reached out to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM) to explore the possibility of future collaboration.

UPCOMING ACTIVITIES

To sustain and grow the project, the GIJTR will conduct the following activities:

- Build off previous trainings by offering Rohingya documenters an additional seven trainings in the documentation of human rights abuses for accountability and justice purposes, including training on the collection of oral histories and psychosocial support to prepare them to conduct pilot documentation missions in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar in a secure and professional way;
- Support ten missions of Rohingya documenters per year for a third consecutive year in the collection of testimonies in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar about past violations of human rights;
- Finalize a secure database for the storage and analysis of the documentation of human rights violations for future transitional justice processes and train an additional group of 25 Rohingya documenters on digital and personal security when documenting and storing victim and witness statements, and on using the database of collected documentation for accountability and justice purposes;
- Map mental health and psychosocial support services in Cox's Bazar refugee camps to identify the challenges of those supporting survivors and the most effective ways to solve them;
- Lead three transitional justice workshops for Rohingya organizations and Bangladeshi organizations working with Rohingya communities to build awareness around formal and informal truth, justice and reconciliation processes;

- Develop Rohingya arts and culture-based truth-telling projects and exhibitions with the support of Bangladeshi artists and institutions to foster the community's willingness to speak openly about human rights violations and actualize other means of self-expression;
- Support educational programs on the experiences of Rohingya communities in Bangladeshi host communities to foster empathy and social cohesion;
- Develop a road map for sustained, locally-led documentation efforts to ensure that the project's future goals are reasonable and attainable;
- Conduct a digital security assessment with the support of Bangladeshi institutions to ensure that local documenters can safely preserve survivors' experiences, which is crucial to sustainability and building trust in future transitional justice mechanisms;
- Create a database for the storage and analysis of documentation of human rights violations for future transitional justice processes;
- Develop human rights educational materials and a training manual for and about accountability, victim's rights and gender justice for the Rohingya community to allow them to better engage in discussions and to be better informed when making decisions about their transitional justice needs and priorities and other key issues affecting their daily lives;
- Support regional exposure and learning exchanges between Bangladesh, Indonesia, Timor Leste, and other countries in Asia, to share best practices and strategies for supporting survivors and advocates in the region;
- Develop partnerships with local and international organizations for collaboration in future forensic efforts, including the development of a pilot family reference database with 500-1,500 samples to support Families of the Missing and Disappeared, which can promote healing and reconciliation;
- Conduct regional trainings and orientation workshops for eight Bangladeshi fieldworkers in the area of documentation and psychosocial support and seven Rohingya leaders not living in the camps in Cox's Bazar on best documentation practices for accountability, truth-telling, and advocacy, including rapid response documentation techniques to provide ongoing support for Rohingya documenters in the camps throughout the span of the project; and
- Establish an internship program that enables 16 Bangladeshi university graduates to learn more about human rights and transitional justice approaches in Asia, focusing on research and work within the refugee camps to gain practical experience.



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