

The solution they seek is voluntary repatriation

[Steven Corliss](#) > Published at 08:06 pm July 3rd, 2020



They deserve to go home / REUTERS

The following speech was delivered at the Liberation War Museum at the inaugural event for the Thread Exhibition on June 29, 2020

Honourable Foreign Secretary; Mr Sarwar Ali, Trustee of the Liberation War Museum; Mr Mofidul Hoque, Trustee of the Museum and Director of the Centre for the Study of Genocide and Justice; distinguished participants; ladies and Gentlemen.

Let me begin by thanking the Liberation War Museum for allowing me to join this morning's event on the occasion of World Refugee Day and to launch the "Thread Exhibit." When the Liberation War Museum reached out to me, I did not hesitate. UNHCR has had a very long and historic partnership with the museum.

It's also an honour to be part of such a distinguished panel and to be together, once again, with the Foreign Secretary, Ambassador Masud Bin Momen, who leads the Rohingya response in Bangladesh and stands at the very centre of our cooperation with the government to meet this challenge.

After working for UNHCR for more than three decades, I retain the same energy, commitment, and optimism that I had on my first day in 1987. Refugees are the source of my motivation, but the engagement of young people around the world -- the next generation of humanitarians -- are an inspiration.

The Thread Exhibition shows the different ways that people can connect and communicate about the refugee experience and show solidarity. I want to thank the students -- from Harvard University, Dhaka University, South Asian University, and others -- who have worked across continents and also across generations, with the honoured veterans of the Liberation War -- to make this exhibition happen.

The Thread Exhibition helps us understand that the Rohingya refugee crisis is about more than endless lines or undifferentiated masses of traumatized people who flooded into Bangladesh in late 2017 and spread across the hills of Ukhiya and Teknaf.

The Rohingya story is about individuals. Each refugee has a story to tell and has hopes and aspirations for the future. The Thread Exhibition makes us confront that human dimension by sharing with us work from the hands of the Rohingya refugees.

It also makes the Rohingya refugees visible and lets their voices be heard on the global level in a very special way.

Through the Exhibition, the Rohingya are expressing a personal and individual worldview. But they are also creating and conveying a view of their culture and identity as a people. The decades-long history of Rohingya refugees, at its roots, results from the denial of the Rohingya identity, culture, and language.

Most Bangladeshis and Rohingya refugees share a common religion. This does create a sense of solidarity. But I believe it is also the denial of identity, culture, and language that also resonates so strongly with the Bangladeshi people who see the parallels in their own history and Liberation in 1971.

Becoming a refugee is nothing to celebrate. But on World Refugee Day, we do celebrate refugees -- their courage, tenacity, and hopes for the future. This year, on World Refugee Day, I sent a message to the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. I told them that we hear many people say that the Rohingya refugees are vulnerable, but I said that we know them and know that they are strong.

They were strong enough to reach safety. They are strong enough to overcome the challenges and hardships of life in the camps. They will be strong enough to go home voluntarily in conditions of safety and dignity and rebuild their lives.

That is all they want. UNHCR's World Refugee Day theme in 2020 is "Everyone Can Make a Difference, Every Action Counts." In August 2017, the Bangladeshi people in Cox's Bazar District -- among them the poorest of the poor -- showed us all the truth of this maxim.

They opened their homes. They shared the little food they had with the desperate people who flooded across the border. As I said on World Refugee Day last week, these Bangladeshis were a bright light in the history of the country and of humanity.

We owe our deepest commitment to finding solutions for the Rohingya refugees, not only to them but also to the Bangladeshi people who have hosted them so generously for decades. They look forward to the day when Rohingya people will be able to go home and live as good neighbours across the border.

Please be inspired by their example. The Threads Exhibition highlights the ways that people can act and make a difference. In the United States, where some will watch our event, this could include donating to causes that support refugees or expressing that support to political decision-makers who set policies and provide financial support for international humanitarian action.

Of course, I hope that many people will be able to view the exhibition in person when it launches physically in 2021.

World Refugee Day is also a moment to reflect on UNHCR's long and important partnership with the Liberation War Museum. That partnership is built on the foundation of our work with the government and people of Bangladesh that began in 1971, while the struggle continued and when 10 million Bangladeshis became refugees in India.

For those of you viewing this event from far away, I urge you to come to Dhaka and visit the Liberation War Museum. It is a privilege, particularly if you have the opportunity, as I did, to experience living history through a tour guided by the honoured veterans.

The museum presents powerfully the events of 1971 and shows the sacrifices that so many Bangladeshis made to achieve independence. The museum tells a story of unspeakable persecution and violence that forced millions to flee across the border to India between April and December 1971.

This was the largest single displacement of refugees in the second half of the 20th century. UNHCR was here in Dhaka. UNHCR was with the Bangladeshi refugees in India. Secretary-General U Thant called upon UNHCR to act as Focal Point for the coordination of all UN assistance for refugees in more than 300 camps in India.

This was the first time that UNHCR played this overall coordinating role in a humanitarian crisis, which we have done many times over the decades since that time. We also led the humanitarian airlift that brought 116,000 new Bangladeshis stranded in Pakistan home to their new country during 1973 and 1974.

At the time, this was the largest humanitarian airlift of people that had ever taken place. These are the historical ties that bind UNHCR to the government and people of Bangladesh and to the Liberation War Museum.

We are looking forward to marking the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh and to commemorating UNHCR's small contributions together with the museum next year on World Refugee Day.

On World Refugee Day, UNHCR releases a report on the Global Trends in Forced Displacement. Every year since 2012, we have reported new record numbers of refugees, internally displaced persons and other forcibly displaced people -- nearly 80 million people, or more than 1% of humanity -- this year.

At the same time, as this number of uprooted people continues to grow, fewer are finding solutions. While we work together to overcome the Covid-19 pandemic, let us also stay focused on the critical need to secure solutions.

For the Rohingya refugees, the solution they seek is voluntary repatriation to Myanmar. This is a hugely challenging task that is now complicated by the growing conflict between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar armed forces, the Tatmadaw.

But we must continue seeking to move forward. UNHCR has made very concrete proposals to the government of Myanmar.

We have proposed to intensify contacts between the Myanmar authorities and the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

Together with UNDP, we are implementing projects in Rakhine State to improve conditions for return. We are calling for the Myanmar government to make progress in areas that would send a positive signal to the refugees: Freedom of movement, a meaningful pathway to citizenship, and finding solutions for internally displaced people.

Let me conclude with a thought about our struggle against the Covid-19 pandemic and the importance of Bangladesh continuing to shelter and protect the Rohingya. When Bangladesh achieved its hard-won independence, the refugees came home. Some nine million people flooded back into the country in 10 weeks.

But they left behind the many who were lost to illness, such as cholera, in the camps of India. Those people, many children, never had the chance to see an independent Bangladesh. They did not grow up and contribute to the country's development. Their children and grandchildren were never born.

They are missing from today's society. They would have been about my or the Foreign Secretary's age. Think for a moment about what Bangladesh lost. What we all lost.

We say that saving a life saves a future and future generations. Humanitarian action is about easing suffering today, but protecting refugees has a more profound meaning. When the government and people of Bangladesh allowed the Rohingya to cross the border and gave them shelter and protection, you saved hundreds of thousands of lives -- you preserved futures and future generations and all the contributions to humanity that those people will make.

We have to do our very best to ensure that the Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi people living nearby receive the treatment and care they need for Covid-19. And we must continue to ensure that Bangladesh is supported and is not left to bear the responsibility for this crisis alone, which it had no role in creating. We must use all our forces toward this goal.

Thank you. *Steven Corliss is the UNHCR Representative in Bangladesh.*

Tags: Rohingya, Refugee, UNHCR, UNDP, Liberation War Museum, World Refugee Day

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Editorial: A long-overdue resolution

[Tribune Editorial](#) > Published at 08:30 pm June 23rd, 2020



Photo: REUTERS

We must remember that humanity comes first, not politics or profit

The UN's response to the Rohingya crisis at our borders has not been swift. The ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya community in Myanmar is, without a doubt, one of the worst human rights disasters of our time, and it is unfortunate that it has dragged on for so long without decisive action from the world community.

However, it is good to see that the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has adopted a resolution which calls upon Myanmar to create conditions conducive to the voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable return of all Rohingya refugees and forcibly displaced persons.

This resolution, therefore, puts the onus where it belongs, which is Myanmar. Myanmar claimed in the past that the country was ready for safe repatriation. Such claims, of course, were and continue to be disingenuous, because the military-backed government continues to be notoriously closed up, and is always dodging prospects of international oversight.

To that end, it is a positive sign that the UNHRC has urged Myanmar to give full and unhindered access to the diplomatic corps, independent observers, as well as representatives of national and international media in the country. A free flow of information is needed to properly monitor that Myanmar is indeed keeping its word.

To that end, the internet shutdown in Rakhine and Chin states also need to be lifted. These shutdowns serve no purpose but to rob the Rohingya of the power of communicating with the larger world.

For too long have Myanmar's denials delayed the world community doing the right thing. No more: As we deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, we must remember that humanity comes first, not politics or profit.

Source: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/editorial/2020/06/23/ed-a-long-overdue-resolution>