

Humanitarian community supports Government of Bangladesh in COVID-19 prevention and response in Cox's Bazar

Cox's Bazar, 29 March 2020:

The Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) partners – UN agencies, and local, national and international NGOs – are working together with Bangladeshi and Rohingya communities in full support of the Government of Bangladesh in its efforts to prepare and respond to COVID-19 in Cox's Bazar District.

No cases of COVID-19 have been reported so far in the refugee camps, while there is currently one confirmed case in the local community in Cox's Bazar, of a Bangladeshi returnee from overseas. The Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC), Civil Surgeon Office, District Administration, and humanitarian community in Cox's Bazar are moving decisively and implementing all measures to reduce the spread of the virus.

ISCG partners fully support the [National Response Plan for COVID-19](#) of the Government of Bangladesh, which includes the refugee population. The COVID-19 response requires an inclusive and coordinated approach that is essential to ensure everyone's health and well-being.

The Health Sector is stepping up support to the Government of Bangladesh to increase the isolation and treatment capacities in Cox's Bazar District, as well as striving to boost stocks of medical supplies and protective equipment for an adequate health response and to keep frontline health workers safe.

To curb the spread of COVID-19 and support the health and well-being of all people, protection and assistance activities have been scaled down to essential life-saving services only including food, health, nutrition, water, sanitation, hygiene, information, cooking fuel and some protection services. Movements to the camps have been limited in an effort to decrease the risk of infection amongst the refugee population, while maintaining essential work. The humanitarian community is strictly following Government of Bangladesh advisories concerning COVID-19 as they are issued, as well as UN guidelines, such as those issued by the World Health Organization (WHO). We are taking all precautions to keep everyone as safe as possible and limit the spread of COVID-19 including, importantly, ensuring the mandatory quarantine of staff arriving from overseas for 14 days.

Awareness raising and the sharing of reliable and accurate information is a key priority. The Communication with Communities (CwC) Working Group and development partners have produced key messages on COVID-19 in Rohingya, Bengali and Burmese languages, as well as materials and communication tools, including information, education and communication services dedicated to people with disabilities. In the past weeks, volunteers in both the Rohingya settlements and nearby Bangladesh communities through public service announcements, radio spots, video, posters, leaflets and messages have explained how the virus spreads, how people can protect themselves and their families, symptoms and care-seeking. Misinformation about COVID-19 can put people's lives at risk. Individuals and communities should rely on verified websites and social media accounts of WHO and the Government of Bangladesh.

Hygiene promotion has been stepped up in the camps and Bangladeshi communities across the District, as well as at key government offices in Cox's Bazar District, and all partners are working to ensure that water and soap for hand washing is readily available to all. Additional measures, including increasing the number of hand washing facilities in distribution centres, health points, nutrition centres, community centres, government offices and other places where there is service delivery are underway.

“We will face challenges ahead as we work to contain this virus but our duty of care for each other, our kindness, and our shared humanity must not be defeated. While we fully understand fears associated with the spreading of the virus, discrimination cannot be the answer. COVID-19 does not discriminate between communities due to ethnicity, race, religion or language. The risk of getting infected by COVID-19 is the same for everyone,” explains Nicole Epting, ISCG Senior Coordinator.

Cox’s Bazar District has extremely limited capacities to provide intensive care treatment, including complicated COVID-19 cases. The United Nations agencies and other humanitarian and development partners are supporting the Government’s efforts to expand existing treatment capacities, as well as the possibilities for treatment in the Rohingya settlements and nearby Bangladeshi communities. Work is also underway to expand testing capacities for COVID-19 in the District by the national Institute of Epidemiology, Diseases Control and Research (IEDCR).

Another major challenge is the limited mobile and internet connectivity in the Rohingya settlements and adjacent areas. Communication is essential to preparedness and to saving lives, should the COVID-19 pandemic reach the camps and with cyclone and monsoon season approaching. Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi people living in the host communities alike require adequate access to information online, as well as the possibility to communicate with families and loved ones.

Finally, the humanitarian community calls for more international support to Bangladesh who are generously hosting Rohingya refugees, in order to step up services both for both the refugee and local communities at this critical time. The ISCG encourages support to partners that are scaling up to respond to COVID-19 in Cox’s Bazar through an initial appeal that will be released in the coming week, as well as sustaining core support to the [2020 Joint Response Plan for Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis](#). The Cox’s Bazar response strategy is aligned to the Bangladesh Country Preparedness and Response Plan, with a separate appeal amount.

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