

# Repatriation with dignity

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**The Rohingya in Bangladesh and Syrians in Lebanon have different expectations of what repatriation 'with dignity' would entail.**

The requirement for voluntary repatriation to be conducted 'with dignity' has appeared consistently in humanitarian policies and guidelines since the late 1980s. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement launched in 1998, for example, state that internally displaced persons (IDPs) should be allowed 'to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence'. In its 2004 *Handbook for repatriation and reintegration activities*, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) gives the definition of voluntary

repatriation as 'the free and voluntary return of refugees to their country of origin in safety and dignity'. Neither document, however, explicitly states what repatriation with dignity means in practice, and debates continue over the conditions needed for a dignified return.

Dignity is shaped not only by culture but also by people's experiences and expectations both prior to and during displacement. Repatriation of affected populations who fled warfare, such as Syrians in Lebanon, and those who fled persecution and

discrimination, such as the Rohingya in Bangladesh, will necessarily look different.

Over the past year, repatriation has been increasingly promoted as a solution to the refugee situations of both Rohingya and Syrians. Based on fieldwork undertaken in two principal host countries, Bangladesh and Lebanon, between March and August 2018,<sup>1</sup> it would appear that there are four main conditions that need to be in place for repatriation to take place in dignity. Repatriation must be culturally and contextually specific; it must not be the result of a false choice between an undignified displacement or an undignified return; it must not lead to further internal displacement once people return; and it must involve the displaced in every stage of the process. Research by the ODI found that all four conditions are currently lacking in the proposed repatriations of the Rohingya and Syrians.

### Culturally and contextually specific

For the Rohingya in Bangladesh, dignity was overwhelmingly a social concept grounded in mutual respect, whereas for Syrians in Lebanon dignity was more often an individual concept centred on individual rights.

For Rohingya interviewees in Bangladesh, repatriation with dignity must include citizenship and mean having the same rights as other citizens in Myanmar – neither of which they had previously enjoyed. As a 40-year-old man stated: “Our dignity is our ability to be free in our home and have the citizenship card. Without it, how can we feel dignity?”

Displaced Syrians in Lebanon who fled civil war, however, rarely mentioned citizenship, rights or access to services. Many of the Syrians interviewed said that prior to their displacement they had led comfortable lives enjoying political participation and free health care and education. Despite currently being denied the same rights as Lebanese citizens and having no access to free health care or education, these issues were rarely mentioned when speaking about repatriation. Instead, the aspect that mattered the most to them was security, with more than four



Rohingya refugees make their way down a footpath during a heavy monsoon downpour in Kutupalong refugee settlement, Cox's Bazar district, Bangladesh.

out of five people saying they would not return until it was safe to do so. Many also mentioned the need for guarantees that returnees would not face retribution for fleeing, for refusing to fight, or for failing to support the winning side. As one man explained: “The most important condition for dignified repatriation is security. I want to see security for me and my family.”

Dignified repatriation, then, must be highly contextualised. Indeed, in these two cases, Rohingya interviewees often stated that they felt dignified repatriation did not exist, as they did not expect Myanmar would ever agree to give them citizenship, whereas Syrian interviewees were more hopeful and anticipated returning to their country of origin – but only once the war is over and it is safe to do so.

### Dignified displacement

People should not face the false choice of ‘choosing’ to return home as their only escape from an undignified situation. Many Syrians described this dilemma, noting that their dignity would be reinstated only when they return home. One man explained that if there



was safety in Syria, he would be “ready to live in a tent on the dirt” in order to leave Lebanon and no longer be treated unjustly.

By contrast, although they do not have freedom of movement, education or work, a number of Rohingya in Bangladesh explained that they preferred to live in camps in Bangladesh instead of returning to Myanmar because they are free to practise their religion – one of the main ways they conceptualise dignity.

At least in Bangladesh, they said, they are safe from religious persecution and would get a Muslim burial. However, if the Bangladesh government’s proposal to relocate them to Bhasan Char (a small silt island off the coast of Bangladesh) goes ahead, the Rohingya, like the Syrians, will also be presented with a false choice; neither return to Myanmar nor relocation to an isolated island will uphold their dignity.

Aid agencies and human rights advocates must strive to create and maintain dignified conditions in displacement, through listening to what displaced people need and want and through partnering with others in the development, peacebuilding and advocacy sectors to encourage host governments to create and maintain an enabling environment for refugees.

### Further displacement

For repatriation to be dignified, acceptable social, political and economic conditions must exist in the country of origin, and the status of IDPs from these populations should be resolved. Otherwise, those returning to destroyed homes or to continued persecution, for example, may find themselves internally displaced and thus unable to secure the

desired return with dignity. In Myanmar, approximately 125,000 Rohingya IDPs remain in Central Rakhine, displaced since fleeing violence in 2012 and forced to live in 36 camps or camp-like settings, surrounded by barbed-wire fences with no freedom of movement or access to basic services. In Syria, there are approximately 6.2 million IDPs living in collective sites and makeshift settlements.

Understanding the conditions of IDPs in the country of origin and communicating those conditions accurately and impartially to refugees contemplating return would allow them to make a more informed decision about the likelihood of being able to return in dignity.

### Involving the displaced

Finally, and most importantly, the affected population must be consulted and involved in their own repatriation. Rather than the current tripartite commissions involving UNHCR and the governments of the countries of refuge and origin, there are those who advocate for quadripartite commissions, which would also include representatives from the displaced population to help judge whether return is both safe and voluntary.<sup>2</sup> In the case of both Rohingya and Syrians, the necessary conditions for repatriation, as expressed by the displaced population, are inherently political. For the Rohingya, meeting those conditions would require changes to citizenship laws; for the Syrians, it would involve a peace process and, for many of them, changing the political regime. Quadripartite commissions could communicate with the displaced populations, confirming the conditions necessary for dignified return, and work with the government in the country of origin to ensure these conditions are in place.

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1. HPG’s Dignity in displacement project [www.odi.org/projects/2916-dignity-displacement-rhetoric-reality](http://www.odi.org/projects/2916-dignity-displacement-rhetoric-reality)
2. Crisp J and Long K (2016) ‘Safe and voluntary refugee repatriation: from principle to practice’, *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 4(3): 141–147.  
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