

We have no soil under our feet

Kristy Crabtree

In the muddy setting of an overcrowded camp in Bangladesh, Jhora Shama tells me her story. Jhora is an unregistered refugee, a Rohingya, who has been living illegally in Bangladesh for 16 years.

She fled to Bangladesh from Arakan [Rakhine] State in Burma after her family's farm was ransacked, their livestock confiscated and her husband tortured. He now works in Malaysia and sends money to her but it is never enough and her family often goes to bed fighting hunger pains. Because she lives in Bangladesh illegally,

she cannot work and must go out to beg for money. She hopes to find a family to take her children as housekeepers because there is no food here.

Conditions in this unregistered refugee camp are far below the minimal international standards for protection, and those living in the registered camps are only recently starting to see improvements after living in dismal conditions for 17 years.

They live in a state of uncertainty, without hope for any real solution to their displacement and without the tools to become self-reliant. Another refugee, Abu Khatul,

lamented: "Here, in Bangladesh, we are just passing time. This is life? We have no soil under our feet. Nothing is ours. It's an uncertain life. We can't go back [to Burma] but here we're not living, not working, we have no resources, and not all our needs are met. I am hoping for another future, for another country."

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The names of refugees interviewed by the author have been changed to protect their identity.

Rohingya refugees in Teknaf camp in Bangladesh.

