

Report expert meeting 'Rohingya Alert'

Another Goma in the Making?



22 February 2018

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Cover photo: "A Lonesome Voice From Myanmar"

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Ed Schenkenberg, director of HERE-Geneva (Humanitarian Exchange and Research Centre), visited Bangladesh from January 17 to January 27 to review the Rohingya response. This review was commissioned by the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) in the United Kingdom. Schenkenberg's findings were alarming. KUNO therefore organized an expert meeting for senior humanitarian policy-makers and field officers in the Netherlands a month before his report¹ was scheduled for release. At this meeting Schenkenberg did not represent DEC. The views and observations he shared, and that are included in the report, are his own.

Zia Choudhury, country director for CARE Bangladesh, was visiting the Netherlands. KUNO was pleased he could also share his insights at the expert meeting.

KUNO is the Platform for Humanitarian Knowledge Exchange in the Netherlands, an initiative of ten Dutch humanitarian NGOs and five knowledge institutes, supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (www.kuno-platform.nl).

¹ <http://here-geneva.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/DEC-Rohingya-Crisis-Appeal-Response-Review-Report270318.pdf>

1. Another Goma?

Ed Schenkenberg was not the messenger of good news, as he said himself. The title of the event, 'Another Goma in the making?!', is admittedly provocative, but it was exactly what he thought after spending two days in the camps in Bangladesh. He felt as if he were back in the early nineties. Ed Schenkenberg felt a need to reflect seriously, to understand what he was seeing, and to verify if he was seeing it correctly. There are currently 1.2 million people in direct need of assistance. Cox's Bazar is one of the main places where aid is needed.

Schenkenberg explained that, in the humanitarian response, the two layers are inextricably linked: the operational layer and the coordination layer. He found that even while some organizations were delivering good assistance, there is a risk that this is invisible in the bigger (gloomy) picture. Factors that contribute to this bigger and gloomier picture include the speed at which the refugees arrived; an unhelpful government; and the range of informal aid groups, such as the Bangladeshi military. He sketched a chaotic picture: the situation shows an uneven pattern, with some services lacking quality. There are hardly any roads in the camps. The Bangladeshi host communities are involved on too small a scale.

This uneven pattern does not add up. Schenkenberg saw that every organization was busy delivering services, but without much cohesion among their projects. This was particularly visible in the case of water and sanitation activities, where projects located too close to each other have led to contaminated water instead of the provision of clean water and good waste management. There was one area in one camp that was well done. It has seen an upgrading, but this was not demonstrated to others as a 'model', which would have been very helpful. There is no lighting in the camps, and the standard of shelter materials is very low.

Not meeting basic humanitarian standards reflected by the poorly equipped and trained local organizations. Here we are paying the price for localization, Schenkenberg argued: 'Many of these local organizations do not have a clue what humanitarian work is about.'

Bottom line: there is an uneven distribution and there are serious gaps in the service delivery. The biggest gap of all must be the social care and mental health gap, he argued. There are so many traumatized people there, and there is hardly any social care. He is very worried about this overlooked problem.

2. Failing coordination

Schenkenberg called for better coordination. Coordination is problematic in every humanitarian response. However, this is the first time that the lack of coordination is costing lives, according to several people. The camps are situated in a very small area, and they are packed. Coordination is even more important in a small, densely populated area. In Bangladesh, everybody is looking at each other in disbelief: who is coordinating?

The United Nations normally works according to a cluster approach, with one lead agency. Since the Rohingya response is a refugee response, UNHCR should take the lead. But in reality, they are not in the lead, and the IOM is also present and coordinating some activities. The senior coordinator reports to different parties: UNHCR, IOM, Dhaka. The coordination level is therefore utterly confused and confusing. INGOs should demand clarity about the coordination, argued Schenkenberg, because coordination is clearly and obviously needed. It is unacceptable that a lack of coordination is costing lives. UNHCR has the mandate; they should take the lead.

Another element makes the response less effective. Most operations on the ground approach the situation as a natural disaster. It is true that some rain – never mind a monsoon! - in the coming rainy season will lead to a deteriorating situation, costing many lives. However, before anything else, this is a refugee situation and should therefore be approached as such. Humanitarian space and access should be created, and the humanitarian principles should be defended. This is not happening at the moment. Refugee law, refugee rights and refugee protection do not play a role. INGOs should put a response in place that is related to the context.

3. Chaotic

Zia Choudhury agreed with the insights of Schenkenberg. He stressed that it is indeed a suboptimal environment: the largest and most densely packed refugee crisis in the world, with the rainy season coming. It is incredibly fragile and a better-quality response is needed. Even without the rains, there are so many hazards in this small area, such as fires.

The quality of the overall response is not good, Choudhury states. There are standards for humanitarian assistance, including accountability standards, but it seems like they are not applied in this particular situation. Conditions are poor, and it is apparently difficult to reach the technical standards. This should be acknowledged, explained and countered with an action plan. The early days of the crisis were so chaotic: a flooded place with small and large organizations. Neither IOM, the government, nor the agencies coordinated from the start. 65 per cent of the water sources are contaminated. The Bangladeshi government has vast experience in natural disaster management, not in refugee crises. The government did coordinate for some very small helpers.

A little bit of order was established when the military came in action. However, especially in the early days, this was quite frightening. A great weakness, according to Zia Choudhury, was that the UN did not speak up. Every agency on the ground was too busy with its own business and was tiptoeing around the Bangladeshi government. The borders were not closed: 10.000 people a day cannot be stopped. Bangladesh has a history of sending refugees back quickly, and NGOs therefore mistrust the government. The UN says that the returning of refugees is going to happen; the NGOs are sure that it is not possible.

Choudhury disagreed somewhat with Schenkenberg about the lack of social care and mental health care. He argued that there was quite a lot of social care, but that it was not of good quality. Everything can be put under the label 'social care', there is no clear standard. If we do not want to have three generations traumatized we have to act much faster, better, and with higher quality care. The high turnover rates of staff do not help either.

4. Act!

Ed Schenkenberg and Zia Choudhury argued for better coordination in the Rohingya response and called for these issues to be raised within organizations and with others. Schenkenberg did ask INGOs to pick up some straightforward advocacy. International NGOs should put pressure on their donors to arrange coordination properly. Otherwise the humanitarian community will be held to account for a failure on a large scale - and rightly so.