

P R E S S R E L E A S E

Risk of “potentially catastrophic” water-borne disease outbreak grows by the day as malnutrition rises among displaced Rohingya

27 September 2017 – Poor access to clean drinking water and basic health services, coupled with frequent monsoon rains, has sparked growing concern of an outbreak of water-borne diseases like cholera among Rohingyas who fled persecution and violence in Myanmar.

Reducing the risk of an outbreak, which could spread rapidly through crowded camps and informal settlements, requires a rapid scale up of basic health services, alongside improved access to latrines, clean drinking water and basic hygiene items, Save the Children is warning.

According to IOM and government figures from ISCG the number of new arrivals is now 480,000. More than 4,500 newly arrived Rohingya in the Bangladesh district of Cox’s Bazar have already been treated for diarrhea and many others for dehydration, while the World Health Organisation this week warned of a “very high” risk of a cholera outbreak.

At least 14,000 cases of malnutrition have also been reported amongst children, who are significantly more vulnerable to contracting and dying from disease.

“Right now we’re seeing the absolute perfect breeding ground for a major health crisis. There are tens of thousands of people still sleeping out in the open or under makeshift shelters, there is dirty, contaminated water everywhere, and poor nutrition and hygiene levels,” Director of Save the Children’s Emergency Health Unit, Dr Unni Krishnan said from Dhaka.

“Most have also witnessed some level of violence as well as a frightening escape from their homes and are in need of emotional care and support.

“And while Bangladeshi authorities and aid agencies are working around the clock to meet the needs, the speed and scale of the influx of Rohingya and the ongoing rains have meant we’re playing catch up.”

Save the Children is preparing to dispatch up to nine health teams in Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazar district, where more than 430,000 Rohingya have fled to in just over a month.

The aid agency’s Emergency Health Unit team, which deploys to the frontline of major emergencies around the world, has been carrying out a rapid health assessment with newly arrived Rohingya while working in close collaboration with local authorities, the Ministry of Health and relief agencies.

Save the Children has also been speeding up its distributions, including basic hygiene items like soaps, nappies and buckets to help people keep clean, as well as handing out food, water purification tablets, basic kitchen utensils and tarpaulins for shelter, but needs remain great.

“Any outbreak of disease in these fragile conditions, where people are staying in cramped spaces close to one another, could spread quickly and would be potentially catastrophic,” Dr Krishnan said.

“We’re extremely concerned about the health of children, particularly those under five years of age who are still in their earliest stages of development, as well as pregnant and nursing mothers. We will continue collaborating with the government in our work to reach these extremely vulnerable groups.”

The mass displacement follows an alarming escalation of violence since August 25 in Myanmar’s northern Rakhine State, where there have been disturbing reports of homes being burned and hundreds of people, including children, being killed.

Notes to editor:

- Save the Children has been supporting the long-term needs of displaced Rohingya families in and around Cox's Bazar prior to the outbreak of violence on August 25. The aid agency is now scaling up its relief work, and has distributed hundreds of shelter kits, set up 'child friendly spaces' to support children's emotional wellbeing and provide a safe space to play, and is running child protection services and providing support to unaccompanied children. It is working to expand these operations significantly.
- In Rakhine State, Myanmar, Save the Children provides assistance to both Rohingya living in camps for internally placed people in Sittwe and in Pauktaw, and for Rakhine communities in Pauktaw. Save the Children does not have access to the areas of northern Rakhine State which are affected by conflict.

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Save the Children believes every child deserves a future. Around the world, we work every day to give children a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn and protection from harm. When crisis strikes, and children are most vulnerable, we are always among the first to respond and the last to leave. We ensure children's unique needs are met and their voices are heard. We deliver lasting results for millions of children, including those hardest to reach.

We do whatever it takes for children – every day and in times of crisis – transforming their lives and the future we share.