

Refugees Fleeing Violence In Myanmar Have A New Worry: Elephants

Elephants have killed an estimated 13 Rohingya in Bangladesh's largest refugee camp.

By Wudan Yan | 04/07/2018 08:02 am ET

KUTUPALONG, Bangladesh — Around midnight on Jan. 19, a heavy sound jolted Anwar Begum out of her sleep. Something was breaking down the bamboo beams holding up her makeshift hut in a refugee camp for displaced Rohingya in southeastern Bangladesh. Her husband, Yakub Ali, thought it was someone trying to break in.

Suddenly, the central pillar broke, hitting Begum in the head.

Dazed, she pulled herself out from under the collapsed hut. Once outside, she realized that it wasn't a person destroying their house but an elephant. As the massive animal lunged again, Begum squeezed between its legs and ran to safety. Her screams had woken up the neighbors, who helped save Begum's two young children from the rubble.

Her husband wasn't as lucky. When Begum looked back inside her demolished home, there were splinters of bamboo sticking out of his body. "Blood was flowing everywhere," she said in a recent interview.

Begum, 40, is one of more than 688,000 Rohingya who have been forced out of Myanmar's western Rakhine State and into neighboring Bangladesh since Aug. 25, 2017. Although the Rohingya, a predominantly Muslim ethnic group, have lived in Rakhine for centuries, the Myanmar government does not recognize them as citizens, and the violence against them has escalated over the last eight months. Many Rohingya have sought shelter in Bangladesh.



TOP PHOTO: Anwar Begum shows a water pot smashed by an elephant that trampled her family's hut in Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh. Her husband, Yakub Ali, died in the incident. ABOVE: More of the smashed pots at Begum's hut.

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But living in Bangladesh brings new threats — including encounters with elephants. Kutupalong, the largest and oldest camp in the Rohingya refugee district, sits squarely within one of the most traveled corridors of the endangered Asian elephant. Approximately 5.4 square miles of forest have been cleared to make room for new settlements, and the land-clearing continues as humanitarian and government agencies prepare to move some refugees elsewhere in preparation for monsoon season.

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—Jahid Hossain

Because elephants tend to follow known routes, they plough through any obstacles they encounter. Elephants have killed an estimated 13 Rohingya refugees in the area around Kutupalong, a number that includes children as young as 12, as well as Begum’s husband. They’ve injured many more refugees and destroyed hundreds of the makeshift tarpaulin-and-bamboo homes.

“In Myanmar, we could not sleep because we feared the military. Here, elephants are the reason we cannot sleep,” said Jahid Hossain, 32, a Rohingya refugee living in Kutupalong.

Begum had never encountered an elephant up close, even though they also live in Myanmar. “I knew there would be elephants in Bangladesh because there’s also forest there,” she said. “But I wasn’t so worried about that when I left [Myanmar], because my priority was to save our lives.”

Although the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, is helping to rebuild homes and providing counseling for the victims, Begum’s trauma is still very fresh.

“I cannot express how depressed I am,” she said. “My husband is no longer here. If there’s a chance that we can go back to Myanmar, who will carry me again? Who will look after me?”



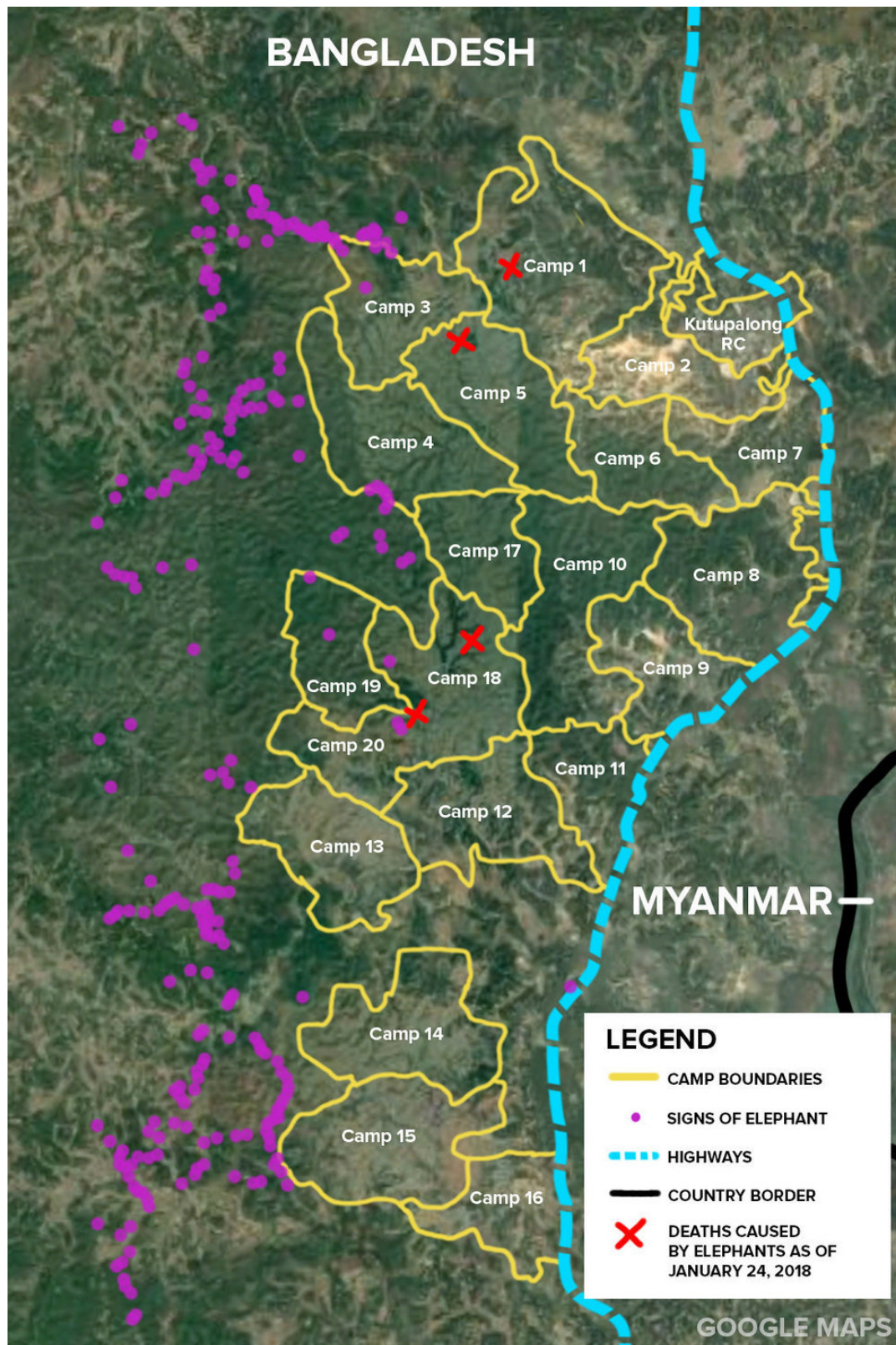
Kutupalong refugee camp, pictured in March, is the largest and oldest in southeastern Bangladesh.

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Researchers estimate that more than 100,000 Asian elephants existed at the beginning of the 20th century, but the animals' population has since plummeted to just 40,000. The elephants' range is now 15 percent of what it once was due to habitat destruction for development, highways and industrial agriculture. And because adult elephants need approximately 330 pounds of food and water daily, they're constantly on the move.

As of 2017, Bangladesh was home to approximately 268 Asian elephants. A recent survey by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, or IUCN, found evidence of up to 45 elephants living near Kutupalong. Although elephants are known to keep to past migratory routes, researchers still don't know much about when and how frequently they move.

"There's very little research on the migration patterns of elephants in this region, which makes it hard to predict when their movements from east to west, and vice versa, are likely to take place," said Caroline Gluck, a spokeswoman for UNHCR. "However, we are aware that there will be more elephant movements into the settlement areas before the monsoon season begins, as the animals move in search of food and water."



ISABELLA CARAPELLA/IUCN/UNHCR

The U.N. agency announced in February that it was partnering with the IUCN to establish a “tusk force” to protect both refugees and elephants. The group will be made up of scientists and program officers from the conservation union, and will work closely with the Rohingya community, the Bangladesh Forest Department and the nation’s Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission.

They're also planning to build new watchtowers around the perimeter of the camp to help spot elephants. And they're training Rohingya refugees to form elephant response teams, or ERTs, that will keep watch over the camp at night.



Rohingya refugees attend a training session on responding to elephants at Kutupalong in late March.

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Mohammed Yahea, 28, was one of 25 volunteers who filed into a pink building in the Kutupalong Extension camp for an ERT training one morning in late March. After fleeing Myanmar last August and arriving in Kutupalong, Yahea had noticed elephant footprints at the edge of the new settlement, where he planned to build his home. There had been elephants near his village in Myanmar, and he recalled a number of deadly encounters. But his options for building a house in the camp were limited.

“I built my house on top of the elephant footprints here because I didn’t find any other place for it,” he said. “Because I saw the footprints, I was sure that elephants would come here.”

He had formed an informal elephant response group before, recruiting young boys to search for elephants at night with flashlights. But he was eager to learn better ways to deal with the intruders.

A few more volunteers trickled in after the session's intended start time of 10 a.m. Mohammed Abdul Motaleb, a project manager at IUCN running the training, gave the latecomers a stern warning: "If you're late to your volunteer shift and there are elephants, there will be problems."

Motaleb and his colleagues handed out blue T-shirts with an ERT logo and black pants, which the volunteers pulled on underneath their longyis, the traditional wrap skirts commonly worn in Myanmar.

First explaining why the elephants enter the camps, the instructors said some of the methods people have used to scare them away, such as lighting sticks on fire and throwing them, are dangerous. Elephants don't like chaos, Motaleb and his colleagues said — it can make the animals more violent.

Instead, they equipped the teams with loudspeakers, whistles and spotlights, and taught the trainees to surround the elephants in a semicircle while leaving the creatures an escape path.

The volunteers then got a chance to practice what they'd learned. Three got on their hands and knees, pretending to be a group of elephants. Yahea and a few others gamed out the response, blowing their whistles and attempting to scare the elephants away.



Volunteers take part in a patrolling drill during elephant response training at Kutupalong refugee camp in March.

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“We’re doing our duty! We’re doing our best to drive away the elephants! Please stay inside! Let us do our work!” a volunteer yelled into a megaphone as the others surrounded the “elephants” and shined flashlights at them.

Motaleb believes engaging with the local community and providing logistical support will help reduce human-elephant conflicts. “It’s not necessary to engage experts to deter elephants,” he said.

Response team members will earn 300 taka — approximately \$3.75 — per night they are on patrol. So far, the agencies have recruited 250 volunteers, and are hoping to add more.

The ERTs’ strategies are similar to those used in Bangladesh’s Sundarbans, a mangrove forest in the southwestern part of the country, where the more common conflicts are between humans and tigers. As there, the goal is to make interactions between wild animals and humans less dangerous by moving the animals safely away from the camps, said Haseeb Irfanullah, a spokesman for IUCN-Bangladesh.



Elephant response team volunteers Jahid Hossain (left) and Mohammed Yahea (right) with equipment given to them by IUCN.

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But Pruthu Fernando, an Asian elephant expert at the Centre for Conservation and Research in Sri Lanka, said driving elephants away with loud noises and light is still confrontational. He believes that the ERTs could cause more intense and widespread conflict with the elephants, since the animals will eventually learn to see humans as threats.

“Elephants respond aggressively to confrontation and become resistant to whatever method used,” Fernando said. “So you get into an ‘arms race’ with the elephants.”

He believes the only long-term solution is to construct an electric fence at the edge of the camp.

Yet the camp's boundaries continue to expand as families at risk of landslides and flooding in some areas relocate. Monsoon season starts in June, which will likely increase the elephants' movements. And there are no signs that the Rohingya will be able to return to Myanmar any time soon.

On March 29, another elephant entered Kutupalong, destroying about 20 bamboo shelters. The response teams in that section of the camp had not yet been trained, and the watchtowers have yet to be built. There were no reported injuries this time.

But Begum is still terrified that they will strike again. She tosses and turns in her sleep, trying to predict where an elephant might step, constantly shifting her sleeping position.

"I keep thinking that the elephants are coming," she said. "Still, this is the safest place for us."

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