Making it matter: international non-governmental organizations and humanitarian intervention in Bangladesh

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MAKING IT MATTER: INTERNATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION IN BANGLADESH

by

Michelle E. Quill

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Anthropology in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

December 2015

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Ellen Lewin
CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

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ABSTRACT

The research outlined in this thesis explores the practice of providing humanitarian aid to refugees and displaced persons in Bangladesh. This aid, offered in a limited way by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) is similar to aid provided to refugees in many other parts of the world, however my research reflects the specificities of research in Bangladesh, the particular conditions of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar (Burma) and the practices of aid work in a Muslim-identified aid organization.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of this kind of aid as a response to protracted refugee situations. Rohingya refugees, the recipients of this aid, fled to Bangladesh in successive waves beginning in the 1970s, leaving villages in Myanmar where they faced extreme levels of persecution, violence and discrimination. Although the government of Bangladesh initially welcomed the Rohingya, in subsequent years, the government has sought to return Rohingya refugees to Myanmar. Approximately 28,000 refugees remain in two camps run by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and another approximately 60,000 refugees (without official refugee status) live in camps run by INGOs.

The bulk of my fieldwork was conducted between June 2011 and September 2012 using participant observation, interviews and focus groups in one of these INGO-run camps.

Other research on humanitarian aid tends to focus on either the practical challenges of aid work or the philosophical and ethical shortcomings of the system. In this thesis, I examine the day-to-day practices of aid workers, the challenges they face, the contributions they make and the conflicts that arise from their work. This dissertation argues that humanitarian intervention,
as it is currently practiced in Bangladesh, while marked by inefficiencies, corruption and conflict, does improve the material lives of the refugees it seeks to assist. I also argue that humanitarian aid, as currently practiced, is fundamentally weakened by the premise that humanitarian crises are short term and by the shared understanding that host countries can set extremely restrictive limits on refugees and aid workers. One key contribution I make is to examine the experiences of expatriate aid workers, situating their work as migrant laborers who cope with precarity and the instability of humanitarian crises.
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the practice of providing humanitarian aid to refugees and displaced persons in Bangladesh. This aid, offered by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), is similar to aid provided to refugees in many other parts of the world, however my research reflects the specificities of research in Bangladesh, the particular conditions of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar (Burma) and the practices of aid work in a Muslim-identified aid organization.

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This dissertation argues that humanitarian intervention, as it is currently practiced in Bangladesh, while marked by inefficiencies, corruption and conflict, does improve the material lives of the refugees it seeks to assist. I also argue that humanitarian aid, as currently practiced, is fundamentally weakened by the premise that humanitarian crises are short term and by the shared understanding that host countries should be allowed to set extremely restrictive limitations on refugees and aid workers.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Flawed Practices of Humanitarian Aid in Bangladesh

This is an ethnography of Islamic Aid’s work in Ukhia, an unofficial camp for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh on the border with Myanmar. Staffed by local Bangladeshis, educated urban elite Bangladeshis and international aid workers, connected to organizational headquarters in Dhaka and London and to funders in Brussels, and with a goal of helping unofficial refugees from Myanmar, Islamic Aid is a cosmopolitan outpost in a part of Bangladesh long characterized as remote and backwards. While the focus of this dissertation is on one organization, I contend that many of the challenges faced by Islamic Aid and outlined here are indicative not only of that organization, but of humanitarianism and aid work in Bangladesh more broadly. I argue that humanitarian intervention for protracted refugee situations in Bangladesh is predicated on a morally weak ground and is further weakened by a number of structural, political and social factors. The weak moral ground of humanitarian aid work in Bangladesh is paradoxically its greatest rhetorical asset: humanitarians pledge themselves to

1 For a number of reasons, mostly related to privacy and politics, I have given pseudonyms to the NGO where I conducted most of my fieldwork (i.e., Islamic Aid), the camp (Ukhia Camp) and most of my interlocutors. For a list of the names of those interlocutors, see Appendix A. For maps of Ukhia Camp and the region, please see Appendix B.

2 This characterization of parts of Chittagong Division as backwards is heard in Bangladesh’s capital Dhaka. In casual conversation and popular culture references, the Chittagonian dialect is derided as unintelligible. Critics sometimes imply this means that speakers are ignorant or backwards.

3 Later in the chapter I situate this argument in some of the key debates in the anthropological literature on NGOs and humanitarianism, including critiques of NGOs and other aid organizations articulated by Bornstein (2012), Bornstein and Redfield (2012); Fassin (2007, 2010); Feldman (2007); Feldman and Ticktin (2010); Redfield (2005; 2008; 2012a) and others.
saving lives. In Bangladesh this strength becomes weakness when the government of Bangladesh (GOB) agrees to allow humanitarian (i.e., life-saving) efforts for un-official refugees, and no more. Aid workers and humanitarian-aid organizations agree to work within this rubric, perhaps not realizing that it allows them to keep people alive, but will prevent them and other aid workers from offering any kind of assistance that would make it possible for refugees to live as autonomous, rights-bearing individuals with the right to work, better themselves, create, become educated, or plan for their futures.

Outline of this Chapter

In the following pages I sketch out how refugees came to live and accept aid on the borders of Bangladesh and Myanmar, the methods with which I collected data, the fieldwork settings of Ukhia Camp, and the Islamic Aid clinic and office. I outline a little of the history of Rohingya and other Muslim people in the Rakhine (formerly Arakan) state of Myanmar (formerly Burma). I describe the bodies of literature that this research engages with: the anthropological concern with expatriates, the anthropology of Bangladesh and South Asian migrations, the academic literature on the Rohingya in Bangladesh. I also trace key anthropological debates about humanitarianism. I conclude by spelling out my argument in this dissertation and briefly describing each chapter that follows.

Just Like Paradise: An Ethnography of Expats

My focus in this dissertation is mostly on the international staff of Ukhia Camp. In the camp office, a small number of non-Bangladeshi professional staff managed the key functions: camp management, the medical clinic, pharmacy, nutrition, provision of water and sanitation.
Most of the time these staff members referred to themselves as expats (short for expatriates) or sometimes as international staff. Throughout this volume I stay with their convention, although one could just as easily refer to them as migrant laborers, guest workers or foreigners. The Bangladeshi staff sometimes referred to them (and me) as *bideshi* (non-Bangladeshi).

I learned that the expats saw their work in Bangladesh as lacking in excitement, amenities and proper support. When I asked the staff what they thought of Ukhia and the Islamic Aid project they were quick to tell me “Boring!” “It’s called a hardship post for good reason!”

Michael, a well-traveled public health staffer, told me, “Some hardship postings are worse, because they are dangerous, but they are also better because there is more excitement and also they are closer to places for shopping and fun.” Another staffer told me that Bangladesh was a bad posting because there was nowhere to go for R&R (rest and relaxation). But the most telling comment came from Dr. Max who told me, “It is just like paradise here, except you are in hell!”

The expatriate project staff of Islamic Aid saw their time in Bangladesh as one step in a career that might involve many one or two year postings. In this, they share some of the ambivalences and un-rootedness of the middle-class Japanese professionals documented by Sawa Kurotani (2004). Like the professionals profiled by Kurotani, the Islamic Aid expats were

---

4 Expatriate, an umbrella term for overseas workers, obscures the wide range of worker experiences. While some live relatively simply, or in constant danger, others occupy luxurious compounds where conditions meet or exceed those they might find in the U.S. or Europe (see Appel 2012 for a description of the compounds where oil company staff lived with their families in Guinea Bissau; Lauring and Selmer 2009 offer a useful glimpse into the compounds inhabited by expat workers in Saudi Arabia). While some of the expatriates (expats) that came to Bangladesh had previously experienced (elsewhere) the kind of lifestyle described by Appel, Lauring and Selmer, this was not at all what they found in Bangladesh.

5 When I probed Dr. Max to find out why he thought the place was both hell and paradise, he waved his arms at the trees and mountains in the distance, and pointed out towards the sea, implying that the natural beauty could easily compare with other spots thought of as paradisical (places like Thailand or Bali).”You see, heaven, right?” Then with the pipe in his other hand he pointed to his laptop (which wasn't working), gestured to the litter on the ground and the peeling paint on the office building and the poor woman squatting in the shade of her falling down thatch roofed hut across the street. He laughed. “You see,” he asked? “Hell!”
interested in making money or getting ahead professionally, but did not seem happy about the work per se.

One focus of this dissertation is on the experiences these mobile cosmopolitans (expats) have with two other groups of mobile people: Bangladeshi NGO staff and Rohingya refugees. In Ukhia Camp, expats and locals mostly got along; however, resentments and miscommunication between the groups made it difficult at times to get the work done. In his survey of expatriate and local INGO staff in Vietnam, John Owen found that INGO work is weakened by the fact that members of each group had low opinions of one another, exacerbated by poor communication and the separate and “parallel lives” lived by different groups (Owen 2010). In NGOs across Bangladesh, this separation between expats and locals is the norm (with, of course, some exceptions). In this, the pattern reflects the colonial history in which Raj civil servants were discouraged and even forbidden from intimate relationships with locals (see Strobel 1991:4 and Jayawardena 2014:3. For a detailed exploration of colonial-era intimacies in other settings see McClintock 1995 and Stoler 2002. My focus on the lives of expatriate technical staff members provides a window into the processes, communications, and experiences that instantiate the NGO. Similarly, Justine Cannon’s work on expatriate mine industry workers “deconstructs the monolithic structures of multinational corporations…to reveal the fragility, indeed the humanity, that exists behind any social organization” (1999:28; see also Cannon 2002). Other anthropologists studying expatriates have found that some relinquish their country of origin after finding new spiritual and material homes. Meena Khandelwal (2007) argues that in the case of foreign swamis who call India home, it is aspects of both the swamis and India itself that makes this particular kind of transmigration possible. By contrast, the expats I worked with had no intention of making Bangladesh their permanent home. They frequently spoke of leaving, of
better jobs, of life after their humanitarian work was over. And yet, some of them, like Khandelwal’s interlocutors, had effectively relinquished their homes. Spending years or even decades abroad, they had become estranged from their families and no longer felt comfortable in their home countries. It was these expats who went from posting to posting, year after year. Instead of returning home in-between postings, they headed for cosmopolitan centers like Istanbul, Cairo, Bangkok or New York.

Carlos Martín Beristain alleges that the nature of NGO-led humanitarian employment as contract-based work means that humanitarian aid workers worry about funding, deadlines and their next job, all of which has detrimental effects on these expat staff members’ health and work (2006:84-85). While I cannot speculate on whether Islamic Aid’s work had a significant impact on expat staff members’ health, I can say that this practice of short-term contracts did affect their work. In Chapter Three, for instance, I document how Islamic Aid’s expat staff struggled to acquire appropriate work visas and spent much of their time trying to arrange new jobs that would follow their time with Islamic Aid. In Chapter Five I argue that the practice of securing grants, spending money and reporting on spending diverted attention and resources from other aspects of aid work. My concern with the connections between humanitarianism and money is paralleled in a recent set of critiques that follows the money-trail of disaster and humanitarian response. Nandini Gunewardena and Mark Schuller’s 2008 edited volume brings together a number of essays that take as their shared starting place the idea of disaster capitalism first articulated by Naomi Klein (2005, 2007). In it, Alex de Waal points out that “calamity accentuates the preexisting gradients of inequality” (2008:i). In a later volume, Schuller documents the architecture of two NGOs as a way of illuminating how status is experienced and reinforced in each organization (2012:76-106).
Expats and other managers at Islamic Aid did not coordinate very much with other NGOs and had virtually no relationship with local government officials. In Chapters Three and Six I argue that this isolation is in part the result of hiring expat staff that have no local networks and the fact that expat staff speak no Bangla. Because many of them do not have proper work visas, expat staff avoid those who might challenge their presence. This sense of suspicion and isolation is also reflected in Alexander Cooley and James Ron’s argument that rather than cooperate, NGOs often compete with one another (2002).

While I was conducting fieldwork with Islamic Aid, a number of expat staff members came and went. Some finished up with Islamic Aid as their contracts stipulated. Others had their time in Bangladesh cut short by other problems (usually visa-related). No matter how their “tour” went, each of the expat staffers I met was matter-of-fact and unsentimental about coming and going. Even the two staffers who had been at Ukhia Camp for years seemed ready to go at a moments’ notice. Ghassan Hage contends that for cosmopolitans, moving to a new city or new country is not fraught with the kind of emotional weight that refugees and some immigrants experience. He writes,

For the international cosmopolitan class, equipped with the best passports money can buy, and a habitus that allows them to feel at home in most international cities, the world is their turf....Moving across national borders is no more significant than moving within one’s own town or even one’s own house….This should make clear that the significance of crossing borders is not some objective experience that defines international migration regardless of who is crossing the border. (2005:470)

Unlike the expats in Kathmandu profiled by Heather Hindman (2009), the expat staffers in Teknaf, Bangladesh expressed no interest in studying local cultures. Instead, they relied on exaggerated ideas of cultural identity in order to define themselves and others. These were, at times, so broad as to be unrecognizable, except insofar as the idea of “culture” might be an acceptable stand-in for race. This idea of shared cultural or racial identity was revealed one
evening, as a few of us expats socialized after an INGO training event. There were five of us, one each from Russia, the United States, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and Spain. One of the men, Sergei, lifted a glass of wine (smuggled into Bangladesh in his suitcase) in a toast, and then smiled, telling us how happy he was to spend time with people who were “the same as him” and “who understood him and his culture.” When I asked him to explain, he waved his arms, gesturing to the food and drink, saying, “You know, because we all have European culture! We think the same.”

Although I do not think all of the expats working for Islamic Aid and other INGOs in the area shared Sergei’s expansive sense of shared “European-ness,” expat workers set themselves apart from the locals. Some observers characterize expats as people who do not fit in anywhere. Roderick Stirrat (2008) challenges the stereotypes of development workers as “mercenaries, missionaries and misfits” and shows that while these stereotypes have some basis in reality, aid workers are much more complex than the stereotypes indicate; often individuals take on characteristics of these stereotypes, but change over time, sometimes switching from one set of stereotyped behavior to another within their careers (or even switching behaviors within a particular day or a week). (See also Chambers 1983).

*Fieldwork in Bangladesh: Setting and Methods*

Anthropologists have long been drawn to the marginal, the exotic and strange. However, their curiosity and interest in “the other” has not always had benign results. Starting in the 1970s and 1980s, anthropologists, particularly feminists and those concerned with narrative, began critically examining the role of anthropologists, the crafting of ethnographic narratives and the ways that anthropology had supported colonialism and other forms of imperialism. For some, this reflexive turn in anthropology was paralyzing. Many of the criticisms of anthropology and
its methods were well founded. For example, Gayatri Spivak (1988) challenges the claim of Western anthropologists to speak for the less privileged. She contends that Western anthropologists are blinded by their own positions of power, and as a result, their claims must be doubted, particularly given the potential for unforeseen consequences for those about whom they write. Other anthropologists, including Sherry Ortner (1995), Michael Taussig (1987), Nancy Schepar-Hughes (1993), Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius Robben (1995) argue persuasively that there is still a place for careful anthropological study and analysis, particularly when it comes to speaking out against injustice.

Hoping to avoid the messy ethical challenges of research that would reify inequality or implicate me in neo-colonial othering, I did my first graduate-level research in the Republic of Ireland. Working in a non-profit that provided aid to asylum seekers and refugees (a “charity” in Irish parlance), I was confident that my work fit into the rubric of “studying sideways” if not “studying up” (see Nader 1972 [1969]). When it came time to plan my doctoral research, I returned to Ireland, confident that I would find an interesting project that would offer me an opportunity to contribute to the growing bodies of anthropological knowledge about non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and refugees. When a colleague at National University of Ireland, Maynooth mentioned a group of 86 refugees that had recently been resettled to Carlow, a small city of 20,000 in the southeastern part of Ireland, I had to investigate further.

The Rohingya refugees who arrived in Ireland spoke almost no English and had no job skills that would easily transfer to the Irish economy. They were Muslim and had been relocated to a mostly Catholic town in Ireland that had little experience of hosting refugees. I was fascinated by the stories of aid workers and journeys that had taken the Rohingya people across
borders and continents and hoped to uncover more about the process that led the small group to be resettled to rural Ireland.

I later learned that these refugees had ended up in a Bangladeshi refugee camp after fleeing persecution in Myanmar. I also learned that approximately 28,000 of their fellow refugees still lived in camps run by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and had been there since the early 1990s; that nearly 60,000 Rohingya lived in unofficial camps aided by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and that hundreds of thousands more were in makeshift\(^6\) camps and Bangladeshi cities and villages with few legal rights and no assistance from the international community.

I returned to the United States and began to map out a plan of research that would include learning the Bengali language, and traveling to Bangladesh where I would investigate how humanitarian organizations provide aid to the Rohingya. I hoped to understand the experience of protracted refugee situations from the perspective of NGO staffers and refugees.

In May 2011, I arrived in Bangladesh for further language study and to begin fieldwork. Initially I hoped to conduct fieldwork with NGOs\(^7\) in both official and unofficial camps, but I

\(^6\) Here I follow local practice, which is to divide camps for refugees into three distinct categories: first, official camps. In these camps, run by UNHCR, residents have official refugee status. While these UNHCR camps have not always been safe, today they are relatively safe; UNHCR, World Food Programme and other agencies provide all residents with education, decent housing, water and sanitation, medical care and basic foodstuff. Second, unofficial camps (including Ukhia Camp). In these unofficial camps, refugees do not have official status, but international NGOs are present and the Bangladeshi government has given tacit permission to these INGOs to work with and provide basic services. While the government of Bangladesh has not given the residents of these unofficial refugee camps the official designation of refugee, there seems to be a shared sense that even without official refugee status, these camp residents will at least tolerated by the government. The third kind of camp are the makeshift camps where refugees create basic shelter in the most marginal spaces out of materials they can scavenge. These camps tend to have the most dire problems with sanitation, disease and malnutrition. Those in the makeshift camps are also most vulnerable to harassment by locals and officials.

\(^7\) In Bangladesh and around the world, there are a wide variety of organizations characterized as non governmental organizations (NGOs). These include local, national and international organizations, giant multi-million dollar projects and tiny start-ups. Here I focus mostly on Islamic Aid, an international non-
quickly learned that rules and regulations set out by the government of Bangladesh would make that nearly impossible.\(^8\)

*Volunteering and Data Collection*

After securing an introduction from staff at ECHO, the EU humanitarian aid agency that funded the Rohingya project, I met with Islamic Aid’s Country Director, and the heads of human resources and programming. Since I had worked for years in non-profits and INGOs in the United States and Ireland, I had some experience and skills to offer Islamic Aid as a volunteer. In exchange, they agreed to let me live with the other expatriate staff and conduct fieldwork in the camp. I remained until September 2012, when political conditions changed and forced my departure. (For more about this, see Chapter Seven.)

Volunteering seemed to be the best (and possibly the only) way for me to gain access to the camp. And yet, I was conscious of the ways this would shape how my interlocutors (expat, Bangladeshi and Rohingya) would see me and what kinds of data I would be able to collect. I knew it might look like I was allied with the expat staff and other managers, but had no other governmental organizations (INGO). When referring in a generic sense to non-governmental organizations, including those that operate solely in Bangladesh, I use the term NGO.

I have changed the names and some details to obscure the identities of individual actors, the INGO where I conducted this research and some other organizations. I have retained the names of few internationally known organizations like Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), however, details about specific staffers have been changed.

\(^8\) At the time of my fieldwork, all non-governmental organizations in Bangladesh had to register with the NGO Affairs Bureau. If an organization took foreign donations, had foreign headquarters or had foreign staff or volunteers, it would automatically be classed as a foreign NGO, a designation that led to more government oversight and more scrutiny than experienced by a national NGO. Even worse, sometimes government officials would refuse foreign NGOs permission to work in particular sectors. So when I asked if I could volunteer with or do research at an NGO in one of the official UNHCR camps, I was told that it would be impossible since my presence would force the organization to shift from being a national NGO to being classed as a foreign NGO, a risk they could not take.

In the end, the NGOs that worked with unofficial camps were more flexible, since they were already designated as foreign entities.
way into the camp. Other anthropologists have taken different approaches. Susan Coutin, for example, worked with a number of different aid organizations for her research on Salvadoran refugees, and avoided being identified to closely with any one organization (2000). Sarah Pink cautions anthropologists to take care because when doing fieldwork in cultures other than their own they are often presumed to be NGO personnel. This means that they must carefully examine their own assumptions about the universality of ideas like “helping” (1998).

Although some humanitarian organizations have opened their processes up for evaluation with the explicit aim of critiquing their own efforts and improving upon them, others remain private, secretive even (see Wood, Apthrorpe and Borton 2001 for an interesting set of program evaluations by humanitarian aid practitioners). In a similar way Mary-Jo DelVeccio Good, Byron Good and Jesse Grayman highlight the challenges of post-conflict humanitarian health assessment. Working in Ache, Indonesia, they sought to develop a comprehensive mental health needs assessment, but feared that their findings would upset the fragile peace-process (2010).

*Islamic Aid*

The structure of Islamic Aid seemed fairly simple: It was an international NGO with regional offices in more than a dozen countries and projects in more fifty countries. The country and regional offices operated semi-independently. Within each country there might be multiple projects, each with its own staff and funding stream. This was the case in Bangladesh, where the Rohingya project was just one of many projects underway or planned across Bangladesh. What set the Rohingya project apart was that it was funded with a generous grant from the European Union. With that grant came expectations: cooperation with EU staff in Bangladesh, regular reporting and hiring some non-Bangladeshis for certain key positions. For the Rohingya project, these positions included the Project Manager, the Chief Medical Officer, the Nutrition Expert
and the Water and Sanitation Expert. (Dhaka staff later added other expat positions, including a Protection Expert).  

Islamic Aid, as its name suggests, is a Muslim organization, a fact that sometimes seemed to matter a great deal, at other times hardly at all. This flexibility is not unlike the organizations profiled by Afshari who sometimes base their charitable work on the Islamic concept of zakat (Afshari 1994; see also Benthall 2003; De Cordier 2009; Karim 2004; Palmer 2011; Salih 2002). Based on her fieldwork in Chad, Mayke Kaag asserts that while all Islamic NGOs have a missionary goal as well as a humanitarian one, they flexibly emphasize or de-emphasize these aspects as the context and audience dictate (2007:91). Similarly, anthropologists have deconstructed the various taxonomies and specialized vocabularies of aid and articulated important differences and similarities in humanitarian aid projects that locate themselves in various religious principles, such as salvation in Christianity (Bornstein 2001a, 2001b, 2005; Ferris 2011; Halvorson 2012), and darshan in Hindu traditions (Bornstein 2012). 

Helga Baitenmann documents the dozens of NGOs deployed to help the more than five million Afghan refugees and internally-displaced refugees in Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan. She argues that “the most serious problems facing the relief effort has been the sometimes unavoidable politicization of the work of the NGOs, resulting from the political interest of Pakistan, the complacency of UNHCR and pressure from the US government” (2007: 65-66).

Research Setting: Ukhia Camp

As noted above, in official parlance, Ukhia Camp is not a refugee camp, because although the residents meet the international standard legal definition of refugee, the

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9 Job titles and descriptions for managerial positions at Islamic Aid largely followed the practices of other international organizations like UNHCR. These included experts in Medicine, Nutrition, WASH (Water and Sanitation) and Protection Officers who are responsible for developing and monitoring plans to ensure the safety and legal rights of refugees.
Government of Bangladesh refuses to recognize them as such. Instead they are called “illegals,” “temporary,” “migrants,” “criminals” and “foreigners.” NGOs and the camp residents themselves refer to Ukhia Camp as an “unofficial camp.” Throughout this volume, I refer to Ukhia Camp (and Kutupalong Makeshift Camp) as an “unofficial camp,” and their residents as either “Ukhia Camp residents” or “unofficial refugees” (in order to differentiate them from the 28,000 Rohingya with official refugee status who reside in the nearby UNHCR-camps of Nayapara and Kutupalong).

Between 2002 and 2007, approximately 10,000 Rohingya had been forced to inhabit a makeshift camp in a marshy area along the Naf River, which separates Bangladesh from Myanmar. The conditions in the makeshift camp were incredibly bad; at one point MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières) reported that in Tal, this makeshift camp, there was more than one preventable death per week. According to MSF it was usually babies, small children, and the elderly who succumbed to waterborne disease, respiratory infection and accidental drowning as the camp flooded with the tides and monsoon rains. When MSF and other organizations raised

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10 Some scholars challenge observers to pay close attention to the power of the organizing metaphors we use when describing and analyzing migration. Malkki (1992) (see also Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Malkki for instance, carefully traces the usage of the related metaphors of trees and roots and soil to describe nations, cultures and peoples. She points out that the corollary or extension of these metaphors leads one to read “transplantation” as orderly and managed, while uprootedness is disorderly and out of place (1992:31-32).

11 The 1951 Refugee Convention defines refugee as a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country."

12 In the United States, some scholars and activists fight against the use of the word illegal to describe people because of the potential such usage has to shape harmful ideas about individuals and groups (for more see the “Drop the I Word” campaign by the Society for Linguistic Anthropology committee on Language and Social Justice http://linguisticanthropology.org/i-word/. In Bangladesh little attention is paid to the impact of using loaded or pejorative words like illegal to describe people.
the situation to the international spotlight, the military caretaker government then ruling the country made it possible for NGOs to construct a camp in the current site of Ukhia.

Built in 2007-2008 with funds from ECHO (the humanitarian aid agency of the European Union), Ukhia Camp occupies fifteen acres of land owned by the Bangladesh Forestry Department and allocated by the military caretaker government that led the country from January 2007 until December 2008. The approximately 2,000 homes house more than 14,000 individuals and are organized into five blocks, which each operate as a semi-autonomous unit, much like a village or hamlet might. Each block has latrines, water distribution points and a community center building (which, by 2011 had all been re-purposed into mosques).

Although frequently described as “squalid” (Physicians for Human Rights 2010), “desperate,” and “the worst conditions anywhere” (Human Rights Watch 2012), when I arrived in Ukhia Camp, it was none of those things. The most noticeable thing about Ukhia Camp is how full of children it is.13 Everywhere you turn, dozens of children play and work.14 The government of Bangladesh has forbidden international organizations from providing education of any sort, and children are not permitted to attend local schools. In some parts of the camp, residents provide the children with a few hours a day of madrasah-style education,15 but most children seem to be unsupervised most of the day.16

13 Until they grew accustomed to my presence, children would frequently yell, “Bye Bye” (in English) at the top of their lungs whenever they saw me or another foreigner. I’m not sure which visitor taught the children this particular greeting, but I would sometimes shake my head when choruses of “Bye Bye” would drown out conversation and make quiet walks through the camp impossible.

14 The work children in Ukhia Camp do mostly includes supervising younger siblings, running errands and collecting water. Boys as young as 10 or 11 sometimes start work as bicycle ricksha pullers. Since there is little call for this work within the camp they sometimes travel to the local towns to work. Around age 11 or 12 girls seem to disappear from view. As they approach puberty, their movement is much more restricted, and they spend more time in and near the family dwelling. Many are married by age 14.

15 The name madrasah comes from the Arabic word for learning and can refer to any kind of school, but in Bangladesh refers to schools where the medium of instruction is Arabic and the instruction focuses on
In the camp there were relatively high rates of malnutrition, as well as high rates of infection, injuries, respiratory illness, and diarrheal disease. But for the most part the children seemed playful, curious and full of life. Older children minded smaller ones, and it was not unusual to see very small toddlers of two or three who seemed to have wandered far from parental supervision.

The 2,000 homes in Ukhia Camp had been built, as required by the government, as impermanent dwellings of locally sourced materials: packed earth floors, bamboo walls and thatched roofs. In some ways, the camp looked like local villages. The uniformity of Ukhia Camp offered a clue that this space had been purpose-built on a foreign or modern design. Although the topography did not permit a precise grid pattern, to the extent that it was possible, the camp housing had been built in neat rows of identical dwellings. Each long block of homes shared walls with next-door neighbors and those in the row behind them. Brick pathways in-between were sloped so that monsoon rains would flow away from alleyways and homes. While the camp architecture appeared to be in pretty good shape, the thatched roofs had not survived the beating they had taken from the hot sun and torrential rain. Designed to be replaced every couple of years, the roofs of each block were a patchwork of thatch and plastic sheeting, mostly held down with bricks “re-purposed” from the camp roadways and footpaths.

Some camp residents participated in a nutrition program that provided them with free seeds and support for creating rooftop gardens. On their homes, over top the thatch and tarp,

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Footnotes:

16 Ukhia Camp houses just over 14,000 people, of which approximately 6,000 are children.

17 This repurposing was a problem that aggravated the Islamic Aid staff. By removing paving stones and the walkway bricks, residents made the roads in and out of the camp more dangerous for motorized vehicles and removing bricks from footpaths made the walkways more muddy, and contributed to flooding.
you could see that residents had planted *shak* (an all-purpose umbrella term for green leafy vegetables like spinach) and some other vegetables like squash. Along each brick footpath, women sat in doorways chatting, nursing babies, bathing children or preparing meals. Men tended to congregate around the small businesses that dotted the camp. In each block there were a few small shops. In some cases camp residents had turned parts of their homes into shops; in other spots, locals had bribed forestry officials to allow them to build restaurants or shops. And along the main road through camp there was an open-air marketplace where locals sold vegetables, staple foods (cooking oil and rice), cheap candy and crunchy snacks, some meat and fish, and other essentials like mobile phone credit. There were a few restaurants and tea stalls, and even one where the owner had tapped into the local electric system in order to run a refrigerator and a television.

*The Islamic Aid Medical Clinic*

The Ukhia Camp medical clinic was a very different sort of space. Surrounded on all sides by a seven-foot high wall, the clinic sat on the southern end of the camp, apart from the housing blocks. There was only one official entrance to the clinic: a steel door with a heavy latch that was manned all day long by at least one guard. Organized around a wide courtyard, the clinic consisted of a series of low-slung concrete buildings that housed the clinic offices, waiting areas and exam rooms. The roofline extended over a walkway that surrounded the courtyard and provided those waiting with some protection from the sun and monsoon rain.

While the living and working spaces of the refugees were made of pliable natural materials, mostly in shades of brown (mud, dirt, bamboo, and thatch), the clinic spaces were hard and artificial: concrete walls and hard benches, industrial steel desks and plastic chairs. Everything was in shades of white, beige, and painted green trim. When they visited the clinic,
refugee and local women wore *burqas*.\(^{18}\) With the exception of the guards, the Islamic Aid staff did not wear uniforms, although the doctors, nurses and lab technician all wore white coats.

*Islamic Aid’s Offices*

Half an hour’s drive from Ukhia Camp, Islamic Aid’s Teknaf office occupied the upper two levels of a three-story building; another NGO occupied the first floor, but we never saw any of their staff coming or going. Nice by Bangladesh standards, the paint was peeling in places and the walls were almost completely bare of adornment. Bangladeshi staff removed their shoes each day when they entered the office, but the expats and a few high status Bangladeshis kept their shoes on. Each day started with a cup of strong, sweet Bangladeshi tea, and some conversation about what was happening in the camp, around town or the work to be done. A few staff members stayed exclusively in the office: the accounting staff, the cleaner, the tea person, guards and those in charge of purchasing. Most of the rest of us moved back and forth between office and camp as needed.

In both work locations the differences between expat staff and national (Bangladeshi) staff were readily apparent. Expat staff were afforded far more leeway when it came to job flexibility; they were also provided with more in the way of material comforts. For instance, expats were given a five-day work week (versus a six-day work week for Bangladeshis), more mobile phone credit, more living space, their own desks at work and laptop computers. Expats got paid on an international scale, and their pay was directly deposited from the London office into bank accounts they held abroad.\(^{19}\) National staff were paid at much lower rates, in local currency and their pay was often late, subject to the whims of government restrictions on money.

\(^{18}\) In Bangladesh, the term *burqa* is used to refer the long garment or robe-like dress that in the Middle East is called an abaya or jilbab.

\(^{19}\) Expats were paid in Euros, on a scale commensurate with European salaries.
transfers and the financial maneuvering of the country office in Dhaka (for more on this see Chapter Two: Power in the Camp).

Most of my data were collected through participant observation. I spent five or six days a week working alongside the other expats, staff and refugees, and lived with INGO staff members all week long, except for occasional trips to Dhaka. At night I wrote up fieldnotes. For my analysis, I also rely on emails and other documents, including news reports. While most of my data were collected in the Islamic Aid refugee camp, office and staff residence, I also spent quite a lot of time in other settings, including INGO/UNHCR meetings, in Islamic Aid’s Dhaka headquarters, and in the offices of other INGOs.

Although I joined Ukhia Camp as a volunteer and had no official standing, it was quickly apparent that I would have both regular duties and a powerful role in the camp. Because NGOs are notorious for being “understaffed and overworked,” I was given responsibility for work in the camp almost immediately. I was also aware that I was accorded respect and offered some opportunities because of who I am (a U.S. citizen, an educated, middle-aged white woman), and because I had already made connections with the staff at ECHO and with Islamic Aid’s Country Director in Dhaka.20

*The Political Economy of Protracted Refugee Situations*

Displaced since 1991, the Rohingya in Bangladesh share with more than two thirds of the refugees around the world the designation of being in a Protracted Refugee Situations (PRS). PRS are situations in which refugees have been displaced for more than five years and in which there is no plan in place for return or relocation. Put another way, there are nearly seven million

20 While I benefited from using Islamic Aid’s work as a data source, it was also clear that Islamic Aid was hoping to benefit from me. For instance, when there were “photo ops” that would be used for official reports to the funder or headquarters, Dr. Shahid, the project manager, insisted I be in all the photographs.
people, mostly living in camps in the less developed world, who have little hope of leaving these camps, returning to their homes or creating new ones.\textsuperscript{21} International aid agencies, academics, practitioners and refugees themselves recognize PRS as a serious problem, yet neither the UN, nor other international bodies nor individual nations have offered any useful durable solutions. UNCHR contends that,

Protracted refugee situations stem from political impasses. They are not inevitable, but are rather the result of political action and inaction, both in the country of origin (the persecution and violence that led to flight) and in the country of asylum. They endure because of ongoing problems in the country of origin, and stagnate and become protracted as a result of responses to refugee inflows, typically involving restrictions on refugee movement and employment possibilities, and confinement to camps. (UNHCR 2004)

\textit{Regional Histories}

Some of the histories that shape contemporary Bangladesh, and that shape humanitarian aid work in the country, are also the shared histories of the Rohingya (and other people of the region). Depending on who you talk to, the roots of the contemporary refugee crisis go back decades or even hundreds of years. Although much of the history is widely debated, a few facts are not contested. During the ninth century, Arab traders arrived in Arakan (the state is now call Rakhine and which is home to Rohingya Muslims, Rakhine Buddhists and other ethnic minorities); some stayed (Ahmed (2010:13; Pittaway 2008). Arakan state was once the center for kingdoms unconnected to what is now the rest of Myanmar. As these kingdoms rose and fell over centuries, their borders moved. One of the most successful of these kingdoms, Mrauk-U, allied itself with the Bengal Sultanate, and by the end of the 15\textsuperscript{th} century had extended its borders to what is now the city of Chittagong (the second largest city in Bangladesh) (Collis and Shwe

\textsuperscript{21} These figures do not include the Palestinians displaced and assisted by the UN through UNRWA, nor do they include the millions who have been displaced but remain within the borders of their home country (IDPs).
Bu 1925). Michael Charney attributes the kingdom’s success to its close ties with Muslim trade networks (1998:3). Mrauk-U was a particularly cosmopolitan kingdom; its coins were printed with Burmese writing on one side and Persian on the other. Mrauk-U had close ties to Bengal, and mandated that coins from Bengal should be accepted throughout the kingdom. Rulers of Mrauk-U and other Arakan kingdoms sought out immigrants from Bengal, Arabia and Persia as craftspeople and scribes. During the 17th century, the Portuguese also brought slaves from Bengal to Arakan. According to historian Moshe Yegar (1972), although most Arakan leaders were Buddhist, many took on the customs of neighboring Islamic sultanates, including titles and dress. Scholars of the region often point to these historic clues to validate claims that Muslims have lived in what is currently known as Rakhine State for centuries (see, for example, Yegar 1972).

_British Colonial Rule_

The British colonial period accelerated intermixing of people in the region. By the end of the First Anglo-Burma War in 1825, the British took control of Arakan, adding to the immense territory already controlled by the British East India Company. By 1885, Britain ruled all of contemporary Myanmar, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan in what was known as “British India.” A lack of political boundaries made migration across the region relatively simple. According to Reneau Egreteau,

(F)rom the mid-1820s, an array of Indian communities of rural labourers, dock workers, but also traders, civil servants, and security forces were imported into the British-ruled province [of Burma]. Whilst temporary migrations of fortune-seekers were the norm, a substantial minority of Indian migrants opted for permanent settlement. (2013:13) So while Muslims from South Asia, Persia and what is now Afghanistan had lived in Arakan for centuries, during British rule, there was another influx of (mostly Hindu) Indians into Burma (Egreteau 2013). Anti-Rohingya scholars, activists and politicians point to evidence from this
period to prove that Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State have no legitimate claim to Myanmar citizenship.

_The Rohingya_

Whether they can trace their ancestry to the 9th century, the 15th or the 19th, by the last decades of the 20th century, more than a million people from Arakan States identified as Muslim and called themselves Rohingya. When I began to search for ethnographic literature on the Rohingya, I found none. In fact, there is little in the way of contemporary cultural anthropological research done in Myanmar" (and published in English). The dearth of scholarly research in Myanmar and more specifically research in Rakhine State is, in part, the result of politics. After the military junta took power in Burma in 1963, much of the country was effectively shut off from most foreign travelers' and there were few investments for infrastructure in Rakhine State. So perhaps it is not surprising that there is no ethnographic record to describe Rohingya life in the 20th century.

From Rohingya men, women and teenagers in Bangladesh (especially, but not exclusively in Ukhia Camp) I learned that Rohingya people in Myanmar live much as other groups in the region do: when not disrupted by ethnic cleansing, the Rohingya have a subsistence economy based on cultivation of rice (paddy), and other vegetables, fishing and some livestock

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22 A few contemporary exceptions include Chika Watanabe, who studies Japanese aid organizations in Myanmar; Monique Skidmore, who works on fear and well being in Myanmar (Burma), Ward Keeler works with Myanmar refugees in the United States and Ingrid Jordt, who works on Buddhism, politics and power in Myanmar.

23 The closed and paranoid nature of the military regime in Myanmar became visible to the world in 2008 when, after Cyclone Nargis struck, the state refused most international aid. Although the UN estimated that one million people had been displaced and millions were without adequate food and water, the military government in Yangon was suspicious of and refused proffered aid from the United States, India, Thailand, France and the U.K (see Ford 2010 for a discussion of how the UN and others responded to Myanmar’s refusal of aid).
(water buffalo, cows, some goats and chickens). Rohingya are also tradespeople and shopkeepers throughout Rakhine State. Most of the Rohingya I met in Bangladesh affirmed that practicing Islam is very important to people in their community. People speak the Rohingya language, although increasing numbers of men and boys in Ukhia Camp are learning other variants of spoken Bangla as they work outside the camp. Among community elders in Ukhia Camp there are a few very learned people, including imams and former teachers. Some men speak, read and write a number of languages including Arabic, Burmese, Arakanese, Rohingya and standard Bangla. Younger Rohingya in Arakan State have lower rates of literacy than elders because, I was told, people from the majority Burmese communities do not want to work as teachers in Rohingya areas, and Rohingya are prevented from traveling outside their communities for secondary education.

The Rohingya women in Ukhia Camp had less education than men, married earlier and had an average of 5 births each. In Myanmar, however, a two child policy for Rohingya families is strictly enforced. Phenotypically Rohingya people more closely resemble Bangladeshis and

24 Some of the Islamic Aid staff told me that the Rohingya are known to be more devout or religiously conservative than people in Bangladesh. While this would be difficult to measure or verify, one thing that is apparent is that Rohingya women as well as Muslim Bangladeshi women in the border communities wear burqas when they leave their homes. Many observers suggest that across Bangladesh it is Islamist forces encouraging more women to adopt the burqa and other forms of hijab, it is unclear to what degree this is the case in Arakan (for a discussion of this shift, see Hussain 2010). I observed that among Bangladeshis, families with direct contact with the Middle East (by making the Hajj or traveling to the Middle East for work) were more likely to adopt the burqa.

25 Rohingya is usually considered a dialect of Bangla, very closely related to the Chittagonian variant spoken on the Bangladeshi side of the border. However low mutual intelligibility between standard Bangla and Chittagonian/ Rohingya leads some to argue they should be considered separate languages. Although there was a high degree of mutual intelligibility between Chittagonian and Rohingya languages, I was told that native speakers could identify differences in vocabulary and accent. In addition, Rohingya write their language differently. While Chittagonian speakers use the Bangla script, Rohingya language is sometimes written using Latin alphabet, sometime written with Arabic, or Burmese characters. In the 1980s a new Rohingya script was developed, but has not been universally adopted (Pandey 2012)

26 Arakanese is a dialect of Burmese.
other people of South Asia than they resemble Burmese majority\(^{27}\) (who are phenotypically associated with other East Asians). However, in Ukhia Camp and across the Rohingya and Chittagonian communities, I observed a range of phenotypes (for instance, light and dark eye colors, and a range of facial features and skin tones).

In Myanmar, the Rakhine (or Arakanese) people share the state with the Rohingya and are a distinct ethnic group, separate from the Burmese. The Rakhine have their own language, history, Buddhist worship practices and cultural traditions that separate them from the Burmese majority. Although the ruling military junta subjected the Rakhine to some of the same “Burmification” processes used to eradicate the Rohingya, the Rakhine have higher status than the Rohingya, in part due to the fact that they have more in common with the dominant group (particularly phenotype and religion) (de Mersan 2009).

The isolation of Myanmar and Rakhine state has changed somewhat in recent years. In 2001, a highway was built, connecting Rakhine State to Yangon, and since 2011, Myanmar has increasingly moved towards more political and economic openness.

**British, Japanese, Rohingya and Rakhine – Colonial Period and WWII**

When asked to explain the contemporary conflict between Muslim Rohingya and Buddhist Rakhine people, some point to the events of World War II, while others blame the colonial or even pre-colonial history. Robert Taylor (2007) suggests that although ethnic identity was acknowledged in the pre-colonial period, it was by no means the most salient factor in social relations. According to Taylor, during British rule, ethnic identity was brought to the fore as the

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\(^{27}\) This phenotypic difference is widely used by Burmese to “prove” that Rohingya should not be considered citizens. In 2009, Ye Myint Aung, Myanmar envoy to Hong Kong, responded to calls for sympathy for Rohingya with a letter to the press describing Rohingya as “ugly as ogres” with complexions unlike the “fair and soft” people of Myanmar (see Dawn 2009; Fuller 2012; Tharoor 2015).
British relied on a divide-and-conquer strategy as a means of keeping the territory under control. He shows how the post-independence conflict, insurgencies, and ethnic cleansing campaigns can be traced, at least in part, to British practices (see also Ahmed 2010:14; Pittaway 2008).

Regardless of the origin of regional ethnic conflict, it is clear that the brutal battles of the Second World War pitted the Buddhist Rakhine and the Muslim Rohingya against one another. During World War II many Rohingya fought alongside the British, who promised them independence. The Rakhine and other Burmese, hoping to end British colonial rule, sided with Japan. As a result, the Rohingya and Rakhine were on opposite ends of some of the bloodiest battles of the war (Ullah 2011; Pittaway 2008:96).

*Independent Burma, Insurgencies and Burma’s 1962 Coup d’Etat*

Great energy is expended on defining and policing the definition of who will count as a "real" member of a nation-state and what kinds of people will count as the ideal of what authentic citizens should look like, think, and do. In postcolonial societies, then, discussions about authenticity typically carry implications concerning belonging. (Boellstorff 2004:182)

Burma achieved independence in 1948, and at least initially, Rohingya were afforded citizenship in the new nation. At the same time, thousands of people of Indian decent fled the country. Many Muslims in Arakan State (now Rakhine) did not want Burmese citizenship, however, and actively lobbied to have the northern part of Arakan State included in the territory of the newly formed nation of Pakistan. Pakistan (and Burma) rejected that request, and the Rohingya territory remained part of Burma. Although Rohingya were initially included in the new nation, many Burmese saw the Rohingya as outsiders, immigrants and illegal residents. Some Rohingya began an armed insurgency to demand independence, but were unsuccessful (Pittway 2008:87). In 1962, a military junta led by General Ne Win toppled the government, a move that started

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28 In 1947, British India was partitioned into India and Pakistan, territory which included East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.
decades of repressive governance by the military. Under this new regime, Rohingya were explicitly excluded from citizenship. Rohingya political and social organizations were outlawed and targeted by the military regime (Ahmed 2010).

In the years since then, the government of Burma (later Myanmar) has waged a number of military campaigns to drive Rohingya from Myanmar: Operation Dragon King in 1978 pushed more than 300,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh. After the 1988 democratic uprising, the military junta was replaced by a new military government, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (Also know by the acronym SLORC, the ruling party was later renamed the State Peace and Development Council [SPDC]). SLORC leaders continued and even accelerated the violence against marginal communities in Myanmar, including the Rohingya. In 1990-91 SLORC launched Operation Pyi Thaya or Operation Clean and Beautiful Nation, forcing approximately 250,000 to flee into Bangladesh. Eileen Pittaway (2008) points out that while the ruling military junta in Burma (now called Myanmar) has targeted many of the ethnic minorities in the country for persecution, the situation is different for the Rohingya than it is for other Burmese ethnic minorities, since it is the Rohingya alone who have been rendered stateless. As a result, they have fewer rights and no recourse to fight for any kinds of rights.

**Systematic Abuse and Discrimination**

Since the military junta came to power in Bangladesh, life has been difficult for the Rohingya in Myanmar. Credible witnesses, including journalists, academics, NGOs, and members of the international UN/legal community have documented appalling conditions. Some of the documented abuses include: ethnic cleansing, systematic rape and sexual harassment, forced labor, arbitrary arrest and detention, extrajudicial killing, forced relocation/dispossession of lands, destruction of places of worship, no freedom to travel within Myanmar. Rohingya in
Myanmar are required to get special permission to marry (often denied or requiring bribes), and lack access to education and livelihood (Ahmed 2004; Ahmed 2010; Bangladeshi News Lifestyle (BDNL) 2010; Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2009; Irish Center for Human Rights 2010; Physicians for Human Rights, et al. 2010; Ramachandra 1981; Tang 2005; Tharoor 2009; United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) 2010).

In response, thousands of Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh, India, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. In Bangladesh alone, there are almost 28,000 official refugees, 40,000 refugees in unofficial camps and an estimated 200,000 to 400,000 living in self-settled makeshift camps and local communities.

**Rohingya in Bangladesh**

The Government of Bangladesh (GOB) has stated forcefully and often that the Rohingya must return to Myanmar. They have insisted that as a poor country, it is too much of a burden for Bangladesh to host so many refugees for so long. Their situation is not unique. In fact, one of the obvious problems of the 20th and 21st century efforts to provide aid to refugees is the fact that most refugees are in the less developed world. In what has been described as a North-South conflict, more developed countries of the global north want to provide aid *in-situ* to refugees in the neighboring countries to which they’ve fled. Frequently those countries are the unhappy hosts for refugees that can number tens or even hundreds of thousands.

Host countries have many reasons for not wanting refugees. They include fears that armed conflicts will spill over borders and into their country, anxieties that new arrivals will upset local economies, overburdening local natural resources and infrastructure, precipitating conflict between local residents and refugees, and the well-founded fear that short term humanitarian aid might turn to years or even decades long protracted situations.
While a number of international aid organizations including Physicians for Human Rights, Doctors Without Borders, Human Rights Watch and the Irish Center for Human Rights have published extensively about the Rohingya and their situation in Bangladesh and Myanmar, relatively few academics have investigated the Rohingya in Bangladesh.

Victoria Palmer examined the practices of one Islamic organization that worked with Rohingya refugees on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border and questioned whether the shared Islamic faith of the humanitarian aid staff and refugees made a difference (2011). Syeda Naushin Parnini (2012) suggests that resolution of the Rohingya refugee situation in Bangladesh has been made more difficult because Bangladesh and Myanmar have little in trade or other common goals. Neither side wants the Rohingya and there are few incentives to changing their stances. In another study, Imtiaz Ahmed documents the many security challenges faced by Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and asserts that a solution to their situation would have to come from a multi-pronged effort by the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar, UNHCR and international donors (2010).

Similarly, Samuel Cheung (2011) examines the experiences of Rohingya in Bangladesh and Malaysia, and argues that the governments of Asia need to make changes to migration control programs to be more responsive to the needs of migrants. He further suggests that in some ways refugees without international protection are better off than those who have it. Describing self-settled Rohingya, he contends that “refugees have the capacity to carve out their own protection space and achieve a level of de facto integration, even in the face of punitive immigration enforcement measures and sometimes beyond what international actors or the formal refugee framework can offer” (2011:66).

In 2007, a team of researchers descended on the Nayapara and Kutupalong camps in the
Cox’s Bazar area of Bangladesh. They were part of a UNHCR-initiated project designed to “address the protection failures of the camp and ensure refugee input into the provision of durable solutions for the Rohingya people” (Pittaway 2008: 84). According to Pittaway, the lead researcher for the effort, the result was a rich situational analysis, in which residents were able to describe ongoing problems, human rights abuses and identify potential solutions (2008:85).

One surprising outcome of the consultations was that women and girls were quite willing to share stores of sexual abuse and rape, which contradicted the “conventional wisdom that they would be too ashamed to talk about these matters” (Pittaway 2008:85). Seven years later, Shamima Ahkter and Kyoko Kusakabe (2014) conducted interviews at one of the refugee camps and found that Rohingya women in the camps reported ongoing gender violence in the home and in the camp. They maintain that many of the social changes that would be predicted to empower women actually place them at greater risk for violence.29

The Rohingya in Bangladesh represent just a fraction of the millions of refugees30 living in protracted situations, without a durable solution (Milner 2014:151). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the international agency charged with managing and assisting refugees, is responsible for finding these “durable solutions”: repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. When none of these can be implemented, protracted refugee situations become “a care and maintenance situation with no apparent durable solution in sight” (Crisp 2003).

29 Ahkter and Kusakabe argue that programs meant to empower women, particularly livelihood programs, put Rohingya women in harms way both because leaving the camps for work endangers them and because the changing gender roles can exacerbate tensions within families (2014).

30 In 2011-12 when I conducted fieldwork, there were more than 33 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, a number that includes 10.5 million refugees, 6.4 million of whom are in protracted refugee situations. The total number of displaced also includes the more than 4.6 million Palestinians registered with UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency.
Connecting this Work to Other Scholarship

This thesis builds on theoretical and practical insights drawn from a range of anthropological, political and philosophical subfields, including the anthropological study of expatriates, of Bangladesh, development, non-governmental organizations, humanitarian aid and refugees.

**Ethnography of Bangladesh**

Although much of this dissertation focuses on the staff of Islamic Aid, an international NGO, this is also a dissertation about a small slice of Bangladesh. The majority of the 150 staff members at Ukhia Camp are Bangladeshi; vendors, neighbors, border guards and police are all Bangladeshi. More importantly, the NGO practices I examine are shaped and reshaped by Bangladeshi politics and history; thus, this dissertation builds on previous anthropological inquiry into life in Bangladesh.

Except for city-states like Macau and island nations like Singapore and Hong Kong, Bangladesh is the most densely populated country on the planet. With nearly 160 million people, it is also the world’s ninth most populous country (United Nations and Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Population Division 2013). And yet, there has been relatively little sustained anthropological research in Bangladesh.31

Much of the anthropological literature that has been published about Bangladesh seems to fall into a few categories: gender and gendered inequality, women’s reproductive health, health-seeking behavior and disease, migration, and Islam. While it might be tempting to argue that

31 By comparison, other sites have attracted anthropologists in large numbers. For example dozens of anthropologists have worked in and published about Mexico, a country with fewer people and vastly more territory. There may be many reasons that fewer academic researchers have worked in Bangladesh during its relatively short forty-four year history, about which I will not speculate here.
these topics are more likely to reflect anxieties about Bangladesh (rather than concerns expressed within Bangladesh), much of the work published under these headings is well-researched, carefully theorized, and ethnographically grounded. For instance, Sarah White (1992) reveals critical shortcomings of development projects in Bangladesh that relied on oversimplified notions about women, gender, families and class. Sociologist Shelley Feldman has examined a wide range of Bangladeshi social practices, including conflicts between NGO-led development and political Islam (1997); the professionalization of NGOs (2003); and the gendered practices of shame and honor (2010), patriarchy and marriage (Feldman 2001, 2003). Using data collected over more than a decade, Shelley Feldman and Florence McCarthy (1983) describe how for some Bangladeshi Muslim women, the *burqa* represents mobility and freedom, rather than gendered oppression. Katy Gardener’s work in Sylhet, Bangladesh traces the challenges of migration (1995, 2009), development (2012), and aging (2002), as well as the recent transformation wrought by the development of natural gas mines in the area (2012).

Anthropologist David Lewis makes important contributions to the study of Bangladesh, NGOs, development, humanitarian aid and what has been called the third sector (civil society). Co-editing widely cited volumes with Katy Gardner (1996, 2015), and David Mosse (2006), Lewis highlights the importance of studying the organizations as well as the actors.

Jim Wilce carefully documents communicative practices of Bangladeshis in the communities of Matlab, Bangladesh. His work traces the communications that mark madness (2004), lament (2009), and complaint (1995 and 1998). Others like Frank Korom (2006) examine Bangladesh’s rich history of expressive culture and poetry, while Henry Glassie’s work introduces the beauty of Bangladeshi material culture to a wide audience (1997). Bertocci examines the particularly Bangladesh nature of Sufi practices and saint veneration (2006) while
Lisa Knight (2011) shows how Baul (a sect of mystic musicians) women in Bangladesh navigate the contradictory expectations held of them as Bauls and as Bengali women.

More recent ethnographic work includes that of Lotte Hoek (2013) who examines the role of pornographic clips in creating Bangladeshi cinema and class identity. Gazi et al. (2008) examine the changing patterns of human trafficking in Bangladesh. Roy (2012) examines the symbolic role of bidi cigarette smoking in the lives of poor Bangladeshis. Rao and Hossain (2012) also examine the lives of the rural poor, but their work traces the roles of education and aspiration in the changing lives of young men. Suykens and Islam (2013) interrogate contemporary Bangladeshi political practices, particularly the hartal or general strike, which frequently disrupted life during my fieldwork period.

Bangladeshi feminists (and feminist scholars with connections to Bangladesh) from other disciplines have offered a critical perspective on many of these issues, particularly NGO engagements with gender violence, human rights, and development. Elora Halim Chowdhury, for instance, traces the uneasy connections between women activists in Bangladesh and their relationships with international development organizations and overseas feminist groups (2011). In a similar vein, Dina Siddiqi (2006) examines the challenges of transnational solidarity and how feminist activists can engage with progressive politics without flattening and oversimplifying the challenges facing Bangladeshi garment workers.

A number of feminists have documented the mass rape, and the aftermath of the mass rape, perpetrated during the 1971 Bangladesh war for independence. Bina D’Costa (2011) argues that control of women’s bodies is an essential part of nation building. D’Costa and Sara Hossain (2010) carefully map the experience of Bangladeshi women and their efforts to seek public acknowledgement and redress for those war crimes. D’Costa and Hossain encourage the
Bangladeshi War Crimes Tribunal to consider the challenges of prosecuting crimes of sexual violence and to look outside the nation to other tribunals that have done so more successfully.

Elora Shehabuddin’s (2008a, 2008b) work reveals that Islamist political parties like *Jammaat-i-Islami* have evolved over times, adjusting their messages to appeal to women as individuals rather than just as wives and mothers. Others have documented the cultural changes (Uddin and Rahman 2007), human rights violations (Miah et al 1992), and political struggles of tribal people in Bangladesh, particularly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Mohsin 1995, 2003). Amena Mohsin and Meghna Guhathakurta (2007) maintain that many variables, including corruption and an over-dependence on donor-driven development programs, have prevented Bangladesh from realizing its aspirations to democracy, peace and prosperity. Some very good qualitative research (from sociologists, anthropologists and others) also illuminates changing practices and local understandings about health (Molla 2007), women’s health and the ways that women in different social locations understand their bodies (Rashid 2007). They’ve also explored the gendered experiences of the 1971 war for Bangladesh independence and its aftermath; for example, Nayanika Mookherjee (2011) offers an analysis of how memories of wartime rape are strategically erased from the national imaginary.

*Borders and South Asian Migrations*

This project also builds on the growing body of literature on Asian and South Asian migration. Initially focused on the upheavals that occurred after partition and the 1971 war that resulted in the split between Pakistan and Bangladesh, today it also includes much about so-called tribal people who have been subjected to abuse (like the Chakmas in Bangladesh); those who were displaced by the continent’s political schisms (like the Biharis in Bangladesh) and those who’ve been forcibly displaced like Rohingya, Afghanis, Bhutanese Lhotshampa and Sri
Lankans. Willem van Schendel points out that studying borders in South Asia is very difficult because the governments of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar (Burma) create obstacles. He points out, for instance, that accurate maps of the borderlands are not published (2005:12-3). Much of this literature focuses on the security threat posed by displaced people (John 2000). According to van Schendel, “social scientists have tended to marginalize borderland practices, making them appear far more peripheral than they really are” (2005:5). Van Schendel suggests that borderland studies have been “deeply marked by the territorialist epistemology of the social sciences (the tendency to study the world as a patchwork of state-defined societies, economies and cultures) and its corollary, methodological territorialism, (the tendency to analyze spatial forms as self-enclosed geographical units)” (2005:8).

*Histories of Humanitarianism*

Most historians situate the rise of humanitarianism in the context of particular antecedents: enlightenment, abolitionist movements, and shifting ideals about compassion and internationalism. Michael Barnett argues that modern humanitarianism got its start at the turn of the nineteenth century when a new public response to disaster brought together familiar patterns of “charity, compassion and philanthropy” to help strangers in distant places. Describing the historical trajectory of humanitarianism, Kevin Rozario writes, “Most investigations into compassion and philanthropy continue to be governed by the assumptions of early-twentieth-century investigative journalists who believed that compassion was a natural instinct and that publicizing misery was sufficient to goad the conscience of the public and motivate citizens to acts of benevolence” (Rozario 2003:420).

One important shift that helped create modern humanitarianism was a rhetorical one. Since the advent of contemporary mechanisms for responding to human disaster, advocates of
humanitarian intervention have sought to capitalize on certain kinds of subject positions experienced by their audiences, and to create other ones. More specifically, these advocates have played on potential donors’ religious sympathies, racial prejudices, feelings of horror, pity, and compassion and have sought to create listeners who would experience themselves as cosmopolitan citizens of the world, engaged in global events through the amelioration or elimination of suffering.

Historians such as Peter Balakian carefully document how public rhetoric works to create humanitarianism: through the stories of disaster (in this case the Armenian Genocide) advocates mobilize sympathy, support, and resources. Although the hyper-fast news cycles at work today can hardly be compared to those that Balakian describes from 1915, many of the same rhetorical tactics are used. Primary among these is the idea that unless audience members support a cause (through contributions, votes, letter writing, signatures or other actions), people will suffer and die. In this way, audience members are convinced to become participants, activists, humanitarians, cosmopolitan actors with enough power to save lives and morally connected to other activists and disaster victims. As audience members turn into humanitarian actors, they become (or solidify their status as) people motivated by compassion, justice, a desire to alleviate suffering and prevent death.

Thomas Haskell describes a “recipe” for intervention, that is, the preconditions needed for an individual to get involved in humanitarian activities. His thesis is that individuals have to see themselves as at least partly responsible for the conditions, able to make a difference and to see that “the intervention available must be must be sufficiently ordinary, familiar, effectual, and executable so that failing to implement them would constitute a suspension of routine or even an intentional act” (Haskell 1985: 357-358). Armchair humanitarians might be surprised, however,
to find that many of the staffers whose jobs they fund do not share the same motivations for working with disaster “victims.”

Haskell (1985) also situates humanitarianism in relation to the rise of capitalism; he contends that with capitalism came a conceptual shift that led people to think differently about obligations, and about their ability to effect change in faraway places. In a similar vein, Barnett sees geopolitical shifts as essential to the rise of modern humanitarianism. He writes that since World War I “the organization of humanitarian action has largely followed the tremendous internationalization, institutionalization, and rationalization of global affairs” (2011:21).

Barnett and others describe the dramatic ways that humanitarianism was transformed by World War II. Massive wartime displacements, the start of the Cold War, and the end of the colonial era each contributed to geopolitical shifts not only in how wars would be fought but also in how powerful countries and international organizations would respond to war and disaster. A new international legal framework, which included the charter for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees provided justification for reorganizing the institutions of global refugee governance (Barnett 2011).

Since then, humanitarian intervention has continued to evolve. Craig Calhoun’s analysis reveals that contemporary humanitarianism is a particular response developed since the 1980s, as “an ethical response to emergencies just because bad things happen in the world, but also because many people have lost faith in both economic development and political struggle as ways of trying to improve the human lot” (2010:29-30). Calhoun and others reveal that the characterization of disaster and forced displacement through violence conflict as “emergencies” obscures the agents or causes of such upheavals, and in doing so, depoliticizes them (see also Ophir 2010).
Didier Fassin’s examination of the moral basis for humanitarian work provides some important insights into the contradictions and discrepancies between intention and action (2010; see also Fassin 2008). In Fassin’s articulation, “Humanitarian government can be defined in its widest sense as the introduction of moral sentiments into the political sphere” (Fassin 2010:269). Although many of the scholars who write about humanitarianism do so from a critical perspective, it is also clear that many of them care deeply about the suffering and injustice that precipitates humanitarian intervention (Fassin 2010). Interestingly, many practitioners also profess an ethic of care. At the same time, observers describe some humanitarian interventions as controlling, or coercive. According to Slim (2015), humanitarianism has adopted a lot of the practices of the welfare state, albeit shaped by international law and international norms and agreements.

**The Problem of Humanitarian Aid in Bangladesh and Around the World**

As noted above, I contend that there are many problems with the kind of humanitarian\(^{32}\) assistance Islamic Aid seeks to provide the Rohingya. I would categorize these challenges as

\(^{32}\) Humanitarian work can be defined narrowly, as simply a set of particular responses to disaster and displacement, or it can be defined more broadly. One disturbing shift in the political rhetoric of humanitarianism is a move towards broadening the term humanitarian to describe military interventions. As a result, the term frequently elides two very different kinds of projects: military projects that claim a humanitarian justification and efforts to provide life-saving and/or life-sustaining resources to people displaced by disaster or violent conflict (see Calhoun 2008; de Waal 2010; Hoffman et al 1996). Although there may be very good reasons for considering the two together, for the purposes of this dissertation, my focus will be on the humanitarianism indicated by the provision of non-military life-saving resources and technologies.

Although humanitarian intervention as an umbrella term is used to describe both responses to catastrophe and responses to large-scale human displacement brought on by armed conflict, it is important to note that the challenges presented by each kind of emergency are different, the responses to each are somewhat different, and hence the critiques can be articulated as separate strands. Critical evaluation of refugee–related humanitarian interventions have focused on the role of the United Nations (particularly United Nations High Commission for Refugees or UNHCR); diplomacy (Minear and Smith; the role of ethics and history (Bornstein and Redfield 2011; the experiences of aid workers (Rieff 2003); the need of humanitarian practitioners to distance themselves from politics (Médecins Sans Frontières and Weissman
structural, practical, rhetorical and philosophical. For the most part, the structural problems stemmed from restrictions that the government of Bangladesh placed on refugees and aid workers. For instance, the government of Bangladesh (GOB) prevented refugees from working, getting an education or participating in civil society. GOB allowed aid workers to provide basic medical care, emergency feeding for those with life-threatening malnutrition, and a minimum of clean water to limit the number of deaths from water-borne diseases like cholera. Government officials did not, however, allow aid workers to provide food, employment, livelihood training or schooling in any form, or medical care beyond basic primary medicine. Because they agreed to these restrictions, aid workers in Bangladesh were unable to provide care that might have made a real difference in the Rohingya’s lives over the long term. Some argue that this shortcoming is a key feature of humanitarian interventions and is rooted in their present-centered temporal orientation. Because humanitarian aid is designed to be immediate and life-saving, the organizations that provide aid are often not very good at imagining or planning for the future. In many cases, as in Bangladesh, host governments actively prevent aid agencies from crafting programs that would enable refugees to plan for their own futures.

In Ukhia Camp these dicta forced refugee residents to work (illegally) in the worst, least well-paid jobs; they lived in constant fear of abuse and extortion because of their precarious situation and many refugees risked their lives with human traffickers, hoping to make it to

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33 There are also benefits to be gained from humanitarian assistance, see below for more.

34 For this reason they might be compared to UNHCR staffers in Bosnia, who worked hard to evacuate Bosnians, knowing that they were making Serbian led ethnic cleansing possible. (For more on this see Rieff 1996; 2003).
Malaysia where conditions were said to be somewhat better. At the same time, restrictions placed on international aid staff (expats) rendered them unable to successfully advocate for refugees.

Another key structural problem that hampered successful aid work was the professionalization of INGO staff, who quite understandably, sought to preserve their own jobs and ensure the continued success of the organization, efforts which sometimes came at the expense of the refugees they were trying to help. This observation contradicts Michael Barnett’s (2011) claim that humanitarianism has one important characteristic that distinguishes it from empire: “humanitarianism is dedicated to its own destruction” (2011:222).

A number of scholars have illuminated how humanitarianism has come to be understood as an essential part of global governance (Donini 2008; see also Kennedy 2004). One of the most widely articulated sets of criticisms of humanitarianism is predicated on the assumption that humanitarianism is a key part of global governance, and as such seeks to control borders and refugees and maintain the contemporary inequalities that separate the more developed world from the less. John Gledhill contends that, “NGOs are part of the contemporary webs of ‘empire’ as a decentered framework of global governmentality in the Foucault’s sense, even where their activities have genuinely humanitarian consequences that should not be lightly dismissed” (Gledhill 2004:335).

Donini maintains that there are two ways one can characterize humanitarianism’s connection to global governance: humanitarianism is either the response to pathological failure

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35 Rohingya people in Bangladesh have many sources of information about the world: cell phones, newspapers and television (in Ukhia Camp where I did my fieldwork, one open air restaurant/ tea stall had a small black and white television around which men and boys from the camp would gather to watch sports (mostly cricket), news, Islamic religious programming, Bollywood films and the news.) They hear about opportunities to work abroad from those who have gone ahead of them, and to an even greater degree, from those involved in the business of human trafficking.
of development or the requisite mechanism for incorporating peripheries/borderlands into the
global network. While more research is needed to evaluate Donini’s thesis vis-à-vis the
Rohingya, it is clear that the humanitarian aid work at Ukhia Camp is a key part of local and
national governance. In fact the government of Bangladesh as well as local and regional
governments have abdicated all responsibility for the Rohingya and rely on INGOs to provide
nearly all the services a government might be expected to provide: water, sanitation, housing,
security, medical assistance, disease surveillance, dispute mediation and identity documents.

As a result of this kind of governance and social organization, staff and refugees adopt
novel social roles. Michel Agier contends that the camp is a new form of social space in which
new forms of subjectivities arise, and as such, warrants close ethnographic attention (2002:318).
He argues that the massive concentration of refugees in the less-developed world suggests two
things: the creation of “a global space for the ‘humanitarian’ management of the most
unthinkable and undesirable populations of the planet” and the subsequent formation of the
“novel sociospatial form of ‘city-camps’” (2002:320). With ethnographic data that reveals the
creative force of refugees, he asserts that “camps create identity, both ethnic and non-ethnic,
even more so than they reproduce, maintain or reinforce ethnicity” (2002:333).

But, as Agier points out, the result is that people in protracted refugee and refugee-like
situations become undesirables, and as such, chronic problems. He cautions that because the
technologies deployed to keep undesirables out of the developed world are increasingly
sophisticated, increasing numbers of “so-called undesirable people” have no choice but to remain
in camps in the less developed world (2011). Rohingya refugees are the “undesirable people” of
the region, as the governments of Myanmar, Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, India and
Indonesia have rejected solutions that might regularize their status.
Agier suggests out that from this perspective, humanitarians are the agents that keep the privileged and undesirable apart. “Humanitarian intervention borders on policing. There is no care without control. Today NGOs and all those working for humanitarian intervention find themselves caught in a process that is seemingly pragmatic, but far too powerful for humanist goodwill” (2011:4). Agier’s concern is with institutional strategies, and how ethnographic research can make those strategies and their disjunctures visible (2011).

As noted above, the challenges of humanitarian aid work with Rohingya refugees are also rhetorical. In part this stems from the definition of humanitarianism, as a set of practices and responses designed to save lives following an emergency. In Bangladesh, when aid workers agree to “just save lives,” the result is that they are prevented from doing more to enhance refugees’ lives, such as providing them with education, livelihoods, or any benefit that would make the present or future more livable.

Another challenge that stems from public rhetoric or discourse is the idea that humanitarian work is neutral or apolitical, a stance, which demands that humanitarian aid work eschew local or global politics. And yet, humanitarianism has an important discursive role in geopolitics, that is, politicians, policymakers and the staff of international organizations can frequently be heard advocating for particular kinds of humanitarian intervention. Less often, these leaders publicly explain how particular responses to refugees connect back to concerns for national or regional security or stability. Antonio Donini argues, “Some of the more overt metafunctions of humanitarian action are linked to the process of securitization and instrumentalization of aid in general, that is to the processes whereby humanitarian action is used as a tool to advance the security and/or foreign policy objectives of the nations that provide it” (2008:29). Donini asserts that there are also subtle metafunctions of humanitarian aid. For
instance, humanitarianism brings with it a worldview, a set of ideas and practices that change the people and communities that engage with it.

One of the largely theoretical concerns of anthropologists is how humanitarianism intersects with modern and postmodern notions of citizenship, globalization and transnational governance. Barnett describes how “discourses of globalization have shaped the professionalization, bureaucratization and rationalization of the humanitarian ‘firm’” (2008:17). Taking a different perspective, Aihwa Ong contends that citizenship (or presumably, its opposite, statelessness) should not be thought of as a condition at all. She reasons that we should consider citizenship not only as a “bundle of rights—a legal condition” (2003:79) but as a “social process of mediated production of values concerning freedom, autonomy, and security” (2003:xvii). Ilana Feldman points out that these are not new concerns; she argues that “population distinctions have been central to the international regime and, as refugee law developed in the postwar era, citizenship was the normative condition against which the exceptional status of being a refugee was defined” (2007:131).

Scholars have also documented how humanitarian aid workers are sometimes surprised by the ways refugees themselves think about identity, citizenship and their own precarious statuses. Liisa Malkki for instance, points out that for the Hutu refugees she worked among in Tanzania, refugee status was prized, as it conferred a kind of moral high ground, implying exile that would be just temporary (1992:35). Here Malkki invokes Anderson’s idea of imagined community (2006)[1983] to explain how the Hutus imagined themselves as a kind of moral community, the rightful community. By contrast, Malkki describes the practices of those living in the nearby town, who met the technical requirements for the designation but who did not see themselves as refugees. According to Malkki, these migrants did not participate in the creation of
the heroic narratives of exile, homeland and eventual return.

The Rohingya refugees of Ukhia Camp do see themselves as a moral community, yet they are stateless. Their concern with citizenship is less existential and more practical. Rejected by both Myanmar and Bangladesh, there is no government they can turn to for protection or the provision of basic rights and services. I would argue that for the unofficial refugees housed at Ukhia Camp, citizenship was certainly both a condition and a discursive set of social relations. More specifically, I would argue that most of the time the residents of Ukhia Camp thought of themselves as from Myanmar, but lacking the basic protection of that nation state. I would add that this picture of discursive citizenship was also complicated by the fact that Rohingya refugees and most Bangladeshis shared religious tradition and membership in the Ummah or global community of Muslim believers. In fact, one of the most widely used tactics for generating support for Rohingya was to characterize them (in a religious sense) as brothers and sisters who had been mistreated. At the same time, some within Bangladesh were quick to avoid this characterization; and in 2012 new Bangladeshi laws were enacted to prevent Rohingya from getting passports and making the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five pillars of Islam.36

Practical Engagements: Refugees, Camps, and Humanitarian Responses

While some anthropological critiques of humanitarian aid work are concerned with the particulars of day-to-day aid and others consider the metacommunications of humanitarianism, some scholars focus intently on the very real and tragic failures of humanitarianism. In addition to the philosophical problems upon which Islamic Aid’s work was predicated, there were also a number of serious practical problems. These included an organization-wide focus on

36 Making the hajj, or journey to Mecca, is required of all able-bodied Muslims who can afford to make the journey. So when the government of Bangladesh moved to prevent Rohingya from making the journey, some Muslims were critical. At the same time, in Bangladesh there was also a widely shared belief that Rohingya and others use hajj travel as a smokescreen to travel for work abroad.
bureaucratic practices, an inability to adequately respond to gender violence, conflicts between expat and national staff, and ongoing power struggles among staff, locals and refugees. When ethnic violence broke out across the border in Myanmar, Islamic Aid staff were ill prepared to respond; nevertheless, soon after the violence started, the GOB demanded that Islamic Aid and other international humanitarian NGOs leave the region.

While it could be argued that Islamic Aid, as just one relatively small organization working on the Bangladesh Myanmar border could not be expected to be able to respond to the rapidly changing situation, the organization’s inability to find productive ways to respond to emergent disaster is not unique. For instance, Mahmood Mamdani (2014), David Rieff (2003) and others have examined key failures and missteps by UN leaders that contributed to both the genocide in Rwanda and also contributed to the spill-over killing of refugees in Congo. But most of the challenges facing humanitarian aid workers are not so stark. In 2014 Sharon Abramowitz, Meredith Marten, and Catherine Panter-Brick published the results from a survey they had conducted of medical anthropologists working in humanitarian settings. They identify six “thematic priorities” which they say anthropologists who do research on humanitarianism believe should be the foci for future research. These included how humanitarian work engages with Red Cross principles (neutrality of aid organizations, for instance), policy and coordination (with other agencies and with states), access to and adequacy of health care provided in humanitarian settings, financing, the transition from humanitarian intervention to development, and sustainability (2014:7-17).

A final challenge to success in Ukhia Camp is philosophical: the basic premise on which humanitarian is predicated is that refugee crises are short term. In reality, many of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have been there for more than twenty years. The reality is a protracted
refugee situation, to which humanitarian organizations are ill equipped to respond. In Ukhia Camp, one result of the protracted nature of the emergency is the loss of a sense of urgency. Instead, daily life in Ukhia Camp is much less dramatic. Peter Redfield points out that while the publicly shared rhetoric of humanitarian work is predicated on a clear moral imperative, the reality is often far more ambiguous. He writes, “A great deal of actual practice by humanitarian organizations responds less to spectacular forms of suffering and more ambiguous contexts, ones that might or might not represent states of emergency”(2010:173). Working in Uganda, Redfield describes the uncertainty faced by staff of Doctors Without Borders (known around the world by its French name, Médecins Sans Frontières or MSF), as they try to work in situations that might or might not become dire (2010). In the case Redfield describes, some of this uncertainty stems from the shifting role that an NGO like MSF faces as it shifts away from its mission of responding to acute situations or crises to more quotidian problems. The tension between a state of exception (a crisis) and the ordinary status quo of poverty, injustice and poor infrastructure is certainly an important part of what Islamic Aid staff dealt with every day. Although its project was defined as life-saving and humanitarian in grant reports, government documents and other public messages, the staff and refugees themselves saw the state of crisis as ordinary. However, as with the people in Uganda getting assistance from MSF, the unofficial refugees of Ukhia Camp were often on the verge of disaster.

Peter Redfield and Erica Bornstein (2011) note that an important strand of contemporary anthropological engagement with humanitarianisms is work that builds on ideas about life itself, states of exceptionalism, and biopower articulated by Arendt, Agamben, and Foucault.

Although it is difficult to deny the moral imperative inherent in humanitarianism, some scholars offer critiques that uncover troubling dimensions to humanitarian efforts. Lawrence
McFalls, for instance, maintains that some forms of violence are the inadvertent result of humanitarian intervention (2010). Barnett describes aid workers themselves, noting that humanitarian aid workers can be seen as selfish altruists, who “give to others but expect power, esteem, and social status in return” (2008:12).

**What Contribution Does this Dissertation Make?**

Study of refugees can help elucidate ideas and perspectives with a much wider application. Malkki writes,

(E)xamining the place of refugees in the national order of things becomes a clarifying exercise. On the one hand, trying to understand the circumstances of particular groups of refugees illuminates the complexity of the ways in which people construct, remember, and lay claim to particular places as ‘homelands’ or ‘nations.’ On the other, examining how refugees become an object of knowledge and management suggests that the displacement of refugees is constituted differently from other kinds of deterritorialization by those states, organizations, and scholars who are concerned with refugees. Here, the contemporary category of refugees is a particularly informative one in the study of the sociopolitical construction of space and place. (1992:25)

In a similar way, this examination of the day-to-day working of Ukhia Camp provides some insight into notions of responsibility, governance, identity, security and mobility. This dissertation also offers a first-hand look at the processes that constitute aid work. Pierre Minn (2007) points out that one problem with much of the anthropological engagement with humanitarianism is that it is largely theoretical. He argues that theoretical critiques of the practice would benefit from the specificity that ethnographic data would bring (here Minn points to Terry 2002, de Waal 1997; and Prendergast 1996 among others).

Islamic Aid offices and Ukhia Camp are dynamic, often surprising places. Anna Tsing describes how certain ideas and practices, what she calls emergent cultural forms, are “persistent but unpredictable effects of global encounters across difference” (2011:2). I argue that humanitarianism can be understood as an emergent cultural form that structures the encounters
between and among expats, foreign donors, Bangladeshis, refugees, locals and
government officials, these encounters, in turn, create the humanitarian project.

One insight that ethnographically-informed work on humanitarian projects offers is that
the day-to-day practice of aid-giving can often be quite different than the official picture.
Feldman describes how everyday practice can differ from the official: “Although neither AFSC
volunteers nor the people they came to aid had the authority to determine humanitarian policy, in
a discussion of Palestinian refugees in Gaza and the AFSC aid workers who sought to help them,
their on-the-ground negotiations and interactions were crucial for shaping the refugee condition”
(Feldman 2007: 131). Another important insight that anthropologists have offered is that the
recipients of aid shape how it is given, and how it is received. Feldman notes, for example, that
both native Gazans and Palestinian refugees felt that there was a moral danger in accepting aid --
found that aid recipients shaped the aid they were given in a different way; she documented how
recipients of psychosocial counseling services in Kashmir were more interested in care that fit a
formal allopathic/biomedical model than the care offered in what was characterized as a more
locally appropriate style of counseling.

It is clear that one of the important contributions that anthropologists make to the study of
humanitarianism is an obvious one: humanitarianism is practiced by people, individuals with
opinions and habits and strengths and shortcomings. Humanitarian actors are locals from a
variety of backgrounds and international “experts” from all over the world. These actors develop
relationships with one another and those to whom they provide aid. Rieff points out that although
the idea of an “international community” is widely promoted in UN and humanitarian circles,
“the international community is a myth and a way to conceal the bad news about the present in
septic sheets of piety about the future” (2003: 8-9). Contributors to the MSF volume, *In the Shadow of Just Wars: Violence, Politics and Humanitarian Action*, share the belief that the problem with some contemporary humanitarian interventions is the way some politicians and international leaders attempt to use aid to further other political goals (Médicins Sans Frontières and Weissman 2004).

*What are the Benefits of Humanitarianism in Bangladesh and Elsewhere?*

While some scholars and critics believe the project of humanitarianism to be so fundamentally flawed that it can do no good, my observations in Ukhia Camp tell me otherwise. What I noticed in Ukhia Camp is that Islamic aid provides material support (medicine, housing, food, water) that dramatically improves the lives of refugees. At the same time, the presence of NGOs and the commitment of foreign funders draws attention to the plight of people who might otherwise be forgotten. And finally, I believe that Islamic Aid and other NGOs make the Rohingya less vulnerable simply by being present.

Throughout this volume, I provide ethnographic detail to underscore specific ways that Islamic Aid and its humanitarian intervention fall short (and a few where they succeed). In Chapter Two I use two examples to illuminate key problems that stem from the relationship Islamic Aid has with its funder. I document how a donor-mandated program, in this case a program to address gender-based violence, can be poorly thought-out, and ineffective in practice, yet look successful on paper. With a second example, I demonstrate that the INGO’s overarching concern with pleasing donors leads to poor decision-making and greater risk for failure and corruption. Together these examples support my thesis that the processes of reporting and documenting NGO success and failure (or progress) are themselves seriously flawed.
In Chapter Three I outline ways that bureaucratic practices, particularly the need for various kinds of paperwork, regulates life for members of the camp community. Expat staffers struggle to get appropriate work visas, Bangladeshi staff members are required to prove their academic qualifications with original copies of diplomas and certificates, and for Rohingya camp residents, ration books function as identity documents and valuable assets. Chapter Four describes some of the power struggles that consume expats, Bangladeshi staff, and Ukhia Camp residents. In Chapter Five, I show that the business of NGOs is spending money; that is, that more than any other practice, spending money came to be seen as a proxy for effectiveness and accomplishment. Chapter Six describes the communication challenges and practical shortcomings of a system that relies on expatriate technical staff as leaders. In Chapter Seven, I describe the 2012 anti-Rohingya violence that broke out in Myanmar and the impact that had on Rohingya in unofficial camps in Bangladesh. In the conclusion, Chapter Eight, I argue that although there are serious practical and philosophical problems with the practice of humanitarian aid, there are many who benefit from their work.
Chapter 2: Reporting Success: The Flawed Design of Humanitarian Intervention in Bangladesh

Donors and INGOS in Bangladesh

The design of humanitarian intervention in Bangladesh is broken, both in terms of its philosophical underpinnings and its practical application. In particular, aid for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is complex and politically fraught for historical, political, religious and economic reasons. From a philosophical perspective, the flaws stem from the ways that refugee status is determined as well as from the bifurcation of humanitarian aid from development.

In practice the focus on life-saving services means that little or no significant attention is paid to other aspects of refugee life: education, social or economic aspirations, civic or political life, job training, entertainment, artistic, or creative pursuits. In fact these kinds of concerns are frequently relegated to the ‘development’ sphere, and often wholly separate from humanitarian aid. This is particularly difficult for those who, like the Rohingya, are in protracted refugee situations, where they often spend decades in refugee camps, with no access to so called “development” assistance.

And while humanitarian aid does provide some extraordinarily important services to displaced people and disaster victims, there are many ways that the organization and delivery of these forms of aid are deeply flawed. In the Bangladeshi camps where I did my research, humanitarian aid does much good, yet aid often fails to deliver needed assistance. In this chapter, I argue that some of these challenges, including ineffectiveness of donor-initiated Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) programs, poor communication between NGOs and donors,
and unchecked corruption are, at least in part, the result of how international aid is distributed and are therefore, preventable. One of the questions I set out to answer is why is it that some humanitarian aid programs fail to help people improve their lives. One answer is detailed in this chapter: when program failures are erased through the mechanism of report writing, it is impossible to see where change needs to be made. I contend that because INGO staff members have a vested interest in the ongoing success of the programs they work for, these staff members are more likely to document success than failure (see Rondinelli 1982:53; also L. Bornstein 2006). Because there are insufficient incentives for documenting failures (or challenges), the donors’ requests for honest program evaluation go unheeded and needed changes are not made. While this kind of practice could be understood as the work of dishonest or poorly trained individual staff members, I argue that humanitarian aid in Bangladesh is predicated on a set of discursive practices, which include exaggeration and lack of transparency. Alberto Duranti argues that anthropologists can’t always be sure of the truth-telling of their interlocutors. There are different kinds of truths he argues, and while some may be shared across cultures, others are discursively created:

Truth, at least in those cases in which we find people busy at defining it or searching for it, is typically a social matter, something that people must reckon with together. This is so not simply because conventions and public criteria are needed for the assessment of truth, but because truth itself becomes an instrument, a mediating concept living in particular practices, through which important social work gets done. This, at least, is the kind of "truth" that ethnographers are more likely to find. (1993:218; see also Besnier 1994; Blum 2005).

If, as Duranti suggests, anthropologists are likely to encounter instrumental, mediating kinds of truth-telling, it seems reasonable to suppose that international funding agencies like ECHO and their national and international NGO staff might have different truth telling practices and values.

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37 NGO reports form a particular genre and report writing constitutes a particular literary practice. See, for example, Besnier 1995 explores how writing is culturally situated.
More research is needed to determine if and to what degree this is actually the case. Regardless, I argue that report writing practices and the pressure to report success emanates not only from the practices of humanitarianism but also from the political and economic uncertainties of life in Bangladesh.

Donors and INGOs

In 2011-2, Ukhia Camp and the other unofficial camps for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh were managed by different international NGOs, but all supported by the same donor, ECHO, the humanitarian arm of the European Union. As outlined in Chapter One ECHO staffers took a personal interest in the success of the Rohingya project. In fact, some of these staff members (Bangladeshis and Europeans) had been involved with the plight of the Rohingya longer than most of the INGOs (and even longer than all but a few staff members). As a funding organization, ECHO tries to simplify the burden on recipient organizations. The ECHO staffers I met saw their role in the Rohingya project as one of long-term engagement and encouraged Islamic Aid staff to think of them as partners. According to Dr. Max, ECHO staff infrequently made requests or demands of Islamic Aid. ECHO does however, require that recipient organizations\(^{38}\) to use careful accounting practices and submit regular reports using their proprietary reporting system. The funding organization also requires that recipients like Islamic Aid hire non-Bangladeshis in key leadership positions (such as Project Directors and Technical Experts). ECHO also occasionally steers the INGOs it funds toward program they would like to

\(^{38}\) ECHO has a somewhat onerous process that organizations must go through in order to apply for and receive aid. They must become “a partner,” a process that includes signing a Framework Partnership Agreement. This agreement outlines the principles of humanitarianism embraced by ECHO and requires potential partners to agree to uphold them. Once that has been accepted, a partner organization may submit an application for funding. If accepted, the partner and ECHO generally go through a process of negotiating the specific details of the project. During the implementation phase, partner organizations must submit regular reports and ECHO staff frequently visit to monitor progress. At the end of the grant period, the partner organization must submit narrative and financial reports.
fund. For instance in 2011, ECHO staffers let it be known that they would look favorably on a grant proposal that included programming that attended to gender based violence (GBV).

In the end, neither the requirement for Islamic Aid to hire senior staff from outside Bangladesh nor the encouragement for gender-based violence programming seemed to have had the kind of impact ECHO staff hoped for. For many reasons, the expat leaders were often unable to effectively lead. At the same time, some initiatives, like the one to end sexual and gender-based violence were well-meaning, but poorly executed. Another project shortcoming was Islamic Aid staffers’ overarching desire to please ECHO. Rather than treat ECHO staff as partners, as they were repeatedly asked to do, Islamic Aid staff generally tried to impress ECHO staff with evidence of the project’s success and by minimizing their challenges, failures, struggles or mistakes. As a direct result of some of these camouflage efforts, corruption was allowed to thrive.

Humanitarian INGOs in Bangladesh are not the only organizations that struggle with accountability and donor relations. Lisa Bornstein argues that it is precisely the monitoring and evaluation systems set up to ensure accountability that lead to deceit. She writes, “The experience of NGOs in South Africa suggests that widely-used M&E systems have created incentives for deception rather than enhanced accountability, and have contributed little to better project implementation or wider learning” (2006:52).

Many observers point to mission creep and uncertain funding future as two key problems that NGOs and donors face around the world. Mark Schuller (2012) documents important differences in ways that various Haitian organizations respond to donors and their demands. He maintains that the way an organization is structured, their “civic infrastructure,” whether an organization has one funder or many, and the management style of its leaders shape that
organization’s ability to defend itself and its priorities. Similarly, Julie Hemment (2007) documents ways that funders of women’s organizations in the former Soviet Union dictated priorities that shaped the civil society in ways that were not always in line with grassroots concerns. Although donor-driven mandates have been widely criticized in the literature of NGOs, scholars pay less attention to the specific ways these projects can and do fail. In the case of Ukhia Camp, the donors were well meaning, committed and well informed. They tried hard to limit the paperwork and reporting burdens, and seemed only to demand the essentials. Yet their recipient NGO partners were often unable to successfully meet the many challenges they faced.

**Sexual and Gender-Based Violence**

Around the world, refugees, other displaced people and the individuals and organizations that advocate for them have identified gender-based violence (GBV) as a problem of sometimes horrifying proportions in both the situations that precipitate flight and in the camps, cities, and slums that the displaced flee to. Although attention to GBV was not an official part of the humanitarian project until the 1990s (Hynes et al. 2004: 294), since then it has been more broadly incorporated into humanitarian work around the world. Research into the nature and prevalence of GBV in humanitarian situations seems to point to a wide range of experiences; a number of studies describe the highest rates of GBV in conflict and post-conflict situations as primarily consisting of intimate partner violence, threats and unwanted sexual comments (Stark and Agar 2011). A more recent report prepared by MSF researchers indicates that that organization, working in parts of the world where people have been displaced by disaster and violence, treats cases of rape more than any other kind of sexual violence (Duroch and Schulte-Hillen 2015:3). The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women describes GBV as an act of violence
that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (1993)

Initial efforts to address GBV by UN agencies and other aid organizations focused mostly on sexual violence that occurred during conflict; however, more recent efforts favor an expanded definition that also includes other kinds of harm done at least in part as a result of gendered imbalances of power: sex trafficking, partner violence, forced and early marriage, forced sterilization, and female infanticide (Hynes et al 2004:195).

The international media sometimes focuses on rape and other violent acts perpetrated by outsiders, as in reporting on the mass rape that occurred during the Bosnian wars in the 1990s and more recently in the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, research shows that in most situations of war, violence, conflict, flight and its aftermath, women are more likely to suffer intimate partner violence than violence by outsiders (Stark and Agar 2011; Horn 2010; Rothkegel et al. 2008). It has also been widely documented that the social breakdown that occurs with flight and camp life often leads to worsening conditions for women and girls, who are subjected to a wide range of gender-based discrimination, including harassment, threats, physical and sexual violence, coercion, and extortion.

Addressing Sexual and Gender-based Violence at Ukhia Camp

The move by UN agencies and others to take steps to addressing gendered violence has been paralleled by efforts by the same agencies to include gender in the development and humanitarian aid paradigms. For instance ECHO, the funder for Ukhia Camp, requires all recipient organization to agree to

ensure 'zero tolerance' for sexual exploitation and abuse (hereinafter referred to as ‘SEA’) through effective and coordinated prevention, reporting and response mechanisms, in line with the essence of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s Six Core Principles Relating
Although feminist critics point out that many of these efforts have not gone far enough, or have been of the “add women and stir” variety, criticism of gender-focused programs in Bangladesh and other parts of the Muslim world have taken a different tack. In Bangladesh, scholars, politicians, journalists and people on the street criticize international gender-based development and humanitarian programs on the basis of fears of cultural imperialism, of challenges to religious authority and of challenges to “tradition” (Feldman 2003; Karim 2001; Rahman 2006; Rashiduzzaman 1997; Shehabuddin 2008a; The Uncultured Project 2011).

It was in this milieu that the Ukhia Camp project’s funders suggested that Islamic Aid consider opening an office to track and respond to gender based violence. Although none of the Islamic Aid staff had any experience in GBV, they agreed to add this focus to the growing portfolio of project areas they were managing in the camp. In the Ukhia Camp medical clinic, a supply closet next to the laboratory was cleaned out, and two job openings were posted internally. Two staffers were hired from other Islamic Aid departments and relocated to the newly cleaned out closet. Dr. Shahid decided that Mariam, the senior female Bangladeshi staff member, would train and supervise them.

I had read about the high rates of sexual violence experienced by Rohingya in Myanmar, so I was glad to learn about this new initiative and anxious to see how the work fared. As I

39 International organizations are not the only ones advocating for girls and women. Generations of Bangladeshi feminists and other progressives have worked for and advocated many kinds of legal, social and political change, including changes that would improve the lives of women and girls. Many of these advocates face the same kinds of criticism that international aid organizations face. In 2011 the Government of Bangladesh announced a new policy platform titled Women in Development. Although much of this platform was framed in terms of vaguely worded aspirations for women’s betterment and equality, the announcement was met with violent protests by some Islamist groups and a number of hartals (general strikes) were called, bringing the entire country to a standstill. Perhaps as a result, the legal changes that would have been necessary to implement the goals of the Women in Development platform were not made (for more about hartals, see Suykens and Islam 2013).
toured the camp and offices, I saw that “SGBV Office” (short for sexual and gender based violence) had been painted above the doorway. In the months that followed, staffers invariably referred to the office and team members as SGBV, using the English letters as shorthand in a community where most could neither read (in any language) nor speak any English.  

I began spending at least a part of each day in the SGBV office, keen to observe, and if appropriate, offer any assistance I could. I found that the office was a gathering place for Mariam and her friends. Each day they gathered to gossip, share some biscuits (cookies), and tea or juice. For the first two weeks I was there, not much else seemed to happen.

**Encounters with Gendered Violence**

Then, early on a Saturday morning a young refugee woman entered the office. She seemed nervous and was accompanied by a young female “peer educator” (a refugee hired by Islamic Aid to do outreach work in the community). Both were modestly dressed, wearing loosely fitting heavy black polyester robes locally referred to as a *burqa* (also called an *abaya* in much of the Islamic world). Salma, the young peer educator, had a blue *hijab* covering her head and neck while the young Rohingya woman wore her *orna* (a large scarf, also called a *dupatta*).

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40 Although it might have been insensitive, this was not very surprising, since the women’s clinic was regularly referred to as ANC/PNC (following the British English terms ante-natal clinic and post-natal clinic). Contemporary Bangla speech and written language includes numerous borrow words from English as well as words from Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit and Portuguese. The words from English, for instance, include pulish [police], tebil [table], doktar [doctor] and benk [bank]. Use of English language acronyms like ANC/PNC is also common in Bangladesh, as it is in India where scholars argue that for non-English speakers, acronyms are easier to understand and remember (Chu 2008).

41 The Bangladeshi staff for this project were expected to work six days per week, with only Friday off. If, for some reason, work was required on a Friday, they worked seven days without extra compensation. Expat staff, as well as the Bangladeshi staff at the country headquarters in Dhaka, were allowed two days off, Friday and Saturday. However, most of the expats came to work on Saturdays. When I asked about this, Dr. Max sighed “Why not work? What else is there to do?”
pinned carefully to cover her hair and neck. They stood nervously in the doorway and I stood quickly to offer my chair.

Mariam waved me back down and waved her biscuit at the young women, vaguely gesturing to a broken chair and footstool in the back corner of the room. Shyly taking their seats, the two waited for Mariam to finish the story she was telling her visitors. As she dramatically wrapped up the story up with a flourish, I was unsure of what message Mariam and her audience were conveying by so pointedly ignoring the young women. Eventually, the story ended, the visiting staff members left and Mariam and the members of the SGBV office turned their attention to the two young women. From the start, aspects of the interview that followed violated what I knew of best practices for working with gendered violence. As noted above, neither Mariam nor her colleagues made an effort to make the victim feel comfortable or safe. No efforts were made to protect her privacy as the office door was left wide open; curious children and nosy neighbors leaned in the doorway. The SGBV team’s male member stayed in the office, slouched at his desk. When I later asked Mariam and Bina, the other female SGBV staffer, why they allowed him to stay, since it would be an insult social norms to have a male stranger listen to possibly intimate details of gendered violence. I was told that he stayed because he was the only one who knew how to fill out the paperwork (hard copy and electronic). And, as far as I could tell, no staff members were asked to sign statements affirming their commitment to respect and maintain the confidentiality of SGBV survivors. Bina, the female staff member, did ask a series of questions about what the young woman had experienced, but seemed unsympathetic and vaguely irritated that the tea break had been interrupted. Mariam punctuated the interview with loudly whispered asides to me (which I tried to ignore), commenting on the young woman’s answers and giggling occasionally. Once the interview had concluded, the woman was told that
Imran, the male SGBV staff member, would speak to her husband and encourage him not to beat her.

Later I asked some questions: why had she not been referred for medical evaluation? Was this a typical case? Did staff members usually go out into the community to discuss the events with those who perpetrated the violence? Would the SGBV team ever call the police? Had the SGBV team done any outreach in the community to build trust and convince those who experienced violence to talk to them? Did they do any work on education or prevention?

I was told that the girl hadn’t looked injured, but that if she had been, she would have been sent to the clinic. Mariam told me that Imran usually went into the community to confront violent family members, but that he couldn’t always be trusted (later I heard rumors that he took drugs and was a sometimes violent person himself). She told me that they never called the police, but were really there to listen and to document cases. She explained that they had not done any outreach, education or prevention work, but were hoping for some training so they could do some in the future.

**Making a Difference?**

From my perspective, the office of sexual and gender based violence was not doing much for the community, especially when I saw similar kinds of disrespectful treatment on multiple occasions. I resolved to observe for a while, ask questions, and hopefully help steer the team in a

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42 Islamic Aid staff members enthusiastically embraced opportunities for training, which were usually held in a hotel conference room and sometimes meant staying overnight in a hotel and eating in hotel restaurants. Trainings were thought of as a perk, a short holiday. Staffers also valued the opportunity to gain credentials that might help them secure better jobs in the future. Senior staff members also liked to arrange trainings, because they provided evidence (to funders) of program success in two ways: the training itself could be written about and the spending these required would also demonstrate their progress. I document the challenges of reporting and spending in greater detail later this chapter.
more positive direction. A short time later, I thought perhaps my opportunity had come: the grant year was ending and all of the Bangladeshi staff would be required to reapply for their jobs, which would be posted both internally and externally. The day after this announcement was made, I visited the project manager, Dr. Shahid. I told him that I knew faculty members in the Department of Women’s Studies at Dhaka University and at the newly formed Asian University for Women in Chittagong. I suggested that if he wanted staff for the SGBV office with a background and interest in the subject that he might allow me to reach out to them for potential job candidates.

“Thank you for the suggestion, Misha,” Dr. Shahid responded, “but there are many factors here you don’t understand. Bangladesh is a backwards place. And this place is even more backwards. It is very far away and not too safe. People will not let their daughters or wives come here.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that,” I responded carefully, “but perhaps it would be worth trying?”

“I’ll let you know. For now, I think we will leave it to the Dhaka staff to advertise the positions,” Dr. Shahid said, ending the conversation.

**Appropriate Hiring**

In the months that followed, I occasionally suggested that we reach out to find female physicians, or trained gender based violence staff, but Dr. Shahid and the other managers invariably ignored my suggestions. When it came time to interview candidates for the three positions in gender-based violence, I offered to develop a few questions that we might pose to determine the candidates’ interest in and suitability for the position. During those interviews I learned that none of the candidates were interested in gendered violence, and none had much interest in helping women or in changing the situations that led to violence, yet the positions
were quickly filled. The female SGBV staffer, Bina, had a degree in Islamic studies, and little interest in gendered violence. An unmarried, and seemingly very devout young woman,\textsuperscript{43} it seemed doubtful that many of women residents would approach her with the intimate details of physical and sexual violence or harassment they experienced. Imran, the young man accused of being on drugs was replaced by Hasan, another young man. Although Hasan was clearly more alert and able than his predecessor, he was not interested in gendered violence. A local, he was known to have good contacts in the refugee community, and was more often seen doing other kinds of surveillance and information gathering than work on gendered violence.

From my perspective, Mariam bombed her interview. She demonstrated no interest in or knowledge about gendered violence, or women’s health concerns (the two departments under her supervision). She avoided difficult questions and could not or would not articulate any plans for the future. Yet, since she had no real competition (there was only one other internal candidate), she was rehired easily. A few months later, I gained some insight into how this kind of dismal performance might be allowed to continue. Mariam had been asked to draft a report on the activities of the SGBV office. Because her command of written English was not strong, she asked for my help during her draft into a final report. What I got from her and the rest of the

\textsuperscript{43} Unlike the rest of the Bangladeshi staff, Bina came to work each day in a burqa, her headcovering tightly pinned under her chin. This outward sign of religiosity made her a target of gossip among fellow staffers.

Although most of the staff at Islamic Aid were Muslim, there was some religious tension among the Ukhia Camp staff. While none of the staff wanted to appear to be bad Muslims, there was a sense among some of the younger staff that being seen as too devout (as indicated by dress, manner, social relations or workday prayers) might mark one as ultra conservative. While some staff members were quite comfortable appearing somewhat conservative and some allied themselves with the more religious BNP party (Bangladesh National Party) as opposed to the more secular –left leaning Awami League, no staff members were willing to admit a connection to Jammat-e-Islami, the most conservative political party. At the time (2011-12), a number of Jammat-e-Islami leaders were being tried for war crimes committed during the Bangladesh war of independence against Pakistan. More importantly, it seemed that Jammat’s message of religious conservatism was fundamentally at odds with the cosmopolitan international humanitarianism espoused by Islamic Aid.
team was a list of cases they had “resolved” with details about selected ones. At Mariam’s urging, I edited her report. Later I noticed that once the information was written up in standard English, and a few charts and tables were added, it had became evidence of a successful and helpful program. The shortcomings of the project, its staff and lack of institutional support had been erased. While the problems of Islamic Aid’s SGBV office were very real, the process of turning messy reality into neat reports is emblematic of NGO work all over the world. Bina Desai, for instance, describes a similar process by which dissent is repackaged into consent and the messiness of multiple perspectives transformed into unanimity for donors (2006:174)

Over time I came to believe that while many, if not most, individuals were well meaning, there was no organizational commitment to promoting and supporting interventions that would make a significant difference in people’s lives. In the case of gendered violence, the problem was complicated by poor staffing, no training, inadequate supervision, a lack of vision and an inability or unwillingness to talk to community women about their concerns. As a result, it was unclear whether the SGBV office was doing any good. In fact, they may have inadvertently made things worse for some women. In a similar setting, Anita Ho and Carol Pavlish question whether the informal mechanisms by which those who perpetrate domestic violence and other forms of gender violence are punished is “creating or maintaining a climate of tolerance and even normalizing such violent behaviors” (2011:94).

**Impressions of SGBV Work in Ukhia Camp**

Similarly to the cases Pavlish and Ho describe, in Ukhia Camp, neither the staff in the SGBV Office, nor the security guards or any other staff members pursue any formal legal or

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44 In this case, the shortcomings of the program were erased with my help. I got the impression that had I not been available to do that work, others would have stepped in to edit the document and perform the same kind of erasure.
justice mechanisms. When I questioned staff about this, I got a variety of answers. “The police
won’t help. They might arrest the women,” explained one long time staff member, outlining the
commonly held belief that the police were looking for reasons to arrest and detain Rohingya
people, perhaps to elicit bribes or even to deport them.

“It’s better if we handle it. If we involve the police too much it looks bad and might be a
problem for the camp,” said Yousuf, another staffer, reiterating a fear that many shared. Since
neither local officials nor the national government had given explicit permission for the camp to
operate, there was an ever present fear that calling attention to the work would cause authorities
to shut things down.

“These are not such serious cases. We might go to the police for maybe kidnapping or
worse,” said Bina, who argued that domestic violence and harassment were normal parts of life,
but that rape or kidnapping might be good reasons to involve the authorities. Ho and Pavlish
assert that defining and enforcing norms for accountability would improve the ways that NGOs
respond to GBV in refugee camp situations (2011:90). In Ukhia Camp, there was little sense of
accountability. Staff members were not called upon to give appropriate attention to cases, and
there was no follow up in the community. Over time I began to suspect that some of the women
who did come into the office did so under duress. I asked Hamida, one of the young peer
educators, how the women she brought to the office generally approached her.

“We (Hamida and other peer educators) are in our Blocks45 every day. And sometimes
we hear about a problem. So we find the girl and tell her she must come to the SGBV Office to
make a report.” I asked what would happen if the girl or woman did not want to make a report.

“We tell them they must come, or there will be problems.”

45 As outlined in Chapter One, the camp is divided into six residential blocks that operate as semi-
autonomous villages.
“What kind of problems?” I asked.

Hamida shrugged shyly and would not answer.

“What kind of problems?” I asked.

Hamida shrugged shyly and would not answer.

“Do women ever come to you to tell their problems or do you always find them?”

Hamida could not or would not answer.

I was unsure if relying on rumor and gossip was really the best way to capture information about or address gendered violence. Yet the SGBV staff seemed content to allow the peer educators to bring cases to their attention on the basis of rumor. Certainly the close physical proximity of the refugees’ homes to one another and general lack of privacy meant that certain kinds of violence were on public display. Women in the camp talked to one another about the violence they saw and occasionally reported it to peer educators who would then try to convince women to come to the SGBV office. Yet as Hamida indicated, women who experienced gendered violence were unlikely to voluntarily seek the assistance of Islamic Aid’s SGBV office. Although Islamic Aid’s SGBV staffers knew their office was unpopular, neither they nor the managers of the Ukhia Camp attempted to find out why.

**Women of Ukhia Camp: Everyday Concerns**

Months later, as I got to know more of the refugee women, I began holding regular women’s groups as a way of learning more about the ways that camp life was gendered. I asked women to tell me about their frustrations with camp life, their hopes and what they thought

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46 In one way, these kinds of camp communication could be seen to fit closely with Max Gluckman’s thesis that gossip helps maintain social cohesion and marks some behaviors as outside the realm of acceptable action (1963). In this case, one might argue that the gossip marks domestic violence as inappropriate. However, given the widespread nature of violence in Ukhia Camp homes, it seems more likely that gossip occupied a different kind of role. Merry points out that gossip is just one part of larger social processes, and whether the practice leads to harm, diffuses conflict or fosters it really depends on the social makeup of the community in question as well as other forms of power being deployed (1997:48). According to Besnier, understanding the role of this kind of communication requires “minute analysis of actual samples of naturally occurring gossip” (See also Brenneis 1992; Goodwin 1980).
NGOs could or should do to help make their lives better. The group consisted of 18 women, three from each block and included young women as well as older ones. Although women were told the group was for them only, a few brought their children. Men and teenage boys from the camp were very curious about the women’s group and often made excuses for hanging out in the conference room as we were about to get started. It became a running joke that I would have to shoo them away each week.

Through those conversations, I began to document what women camp residents wanted (or at least what they were willing to discuss with me and their peers). Although the kinds of domestic violence cases that were reported to the SGBV office did come up, the women who attended the group did not seem to think these were particularly important. Far more pressing to these women were the kinds of everyday violence that never got reported; for instance, many felt that it was unsafe to use the toilets because the doors were broken and would not shut properly. Boys and men would watch women and girls as they tried to use the toilets, making them uncomfortable and afraid. One middle-aged mother of five grew very upset as she described how her adolescent daughter had tried to use the toilet, but was surrounded by a group of young men who tried to touch her and see her.

Some women reported that when they went out into the forest and surrounding community to cut wood for cooking, they risked harassment, beatings, robbery, and extortion from forestry officials and members of neighboring communities. Women worried a lot for their adolescent daughters, sometimes even to the point of sending them away to relatives where it might be safer. “Eve teasing,” as verbal and sometimes physical sexual harassment is called in public places, … the public bullying of girls and women by boys and men, where boys intercept girls on public transport, the street and at workplaces and shout obscenities at them, laugh at them, force them to talk, verbally abuse them, threaten them with abduction, and even touch them inappropriately” (2013:79).
South Asia, was a constant problem, especially for young women. Women in the group told me that they wished their daughters could have an education, could get good job and not have to marry so young.\footnote{The legal age for women to marry in Bangladesh is eighteen. So in semi-formal settings like the antenatal clinic where newly married girls might be asked their age, almost all said they were 18. However, in this more informal conversational setting, when I asked women, the average age of first marriage was 14.7 and the average age of women having a first child was just under 16.}

Women also told me that there was a lot of violence between women in households, between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, and sometimes between co-wives. Most of the women reported having co-wives and being somewhat or very unhappy about the situation. Begum Alam, a well-respected leader in her block, told me that her husband had taken a young second wife just before leaving for Malaysia to work. Since then, she explained, he sends money only to the new wife, but none to Begum Alam, who has four children to feed and no way to make a living. Women also told me that they were afraid to venture out to markets in the surrounding communities because they would be harassed for being Rohingya. As a result, they were forced to make do with the higher prices of goods sold inside the camp and just outside its borders. And women told me that they were concerned that there were not appropriate facilities for women who returned to the camp after doing sex work to ritually bathe. As a result, other women worried about the pollution that would occur as a result of contact with them. I heard whispers that some of those doing sex work to support their families were young unmarried girls.

So while the SGBV Office undoubtedly raised the profile of domestic violence, their response seemed ill-designed to combat the phenomenon. At the same time, the staff of Islamic Aid and

\footnote{Geetanjali Gangoli argues that the term, which originates with the idea of Eve, the first temptress in the Bible, “normalize and trivializes” the practice (2012:63). For historical perspective on sexual harassment of women in India and use of the term eve-teasing, see Padma Anagol-McGinn 1994.}
the SGBV office missed the opportunity to attend to and intervene on the other kinds of violence women experienced every day.

It was not only donor-driven mandates that were so poorly managed. Sometimes projects seem to fail because the staff had little sensitivity to or awareness of the fact that what they were doing could or would make a difference. This was clearly the case for the members of SGBV team, and it was also the case for the small psychology team. Led by Zahid, a young and eager-to-please recently graduated psychologist, the psychology team did little to address the mental health of camp residents. In Ukhia Camp it was clear that many camp residents had experienced very traumatic events that prompted their flight to Bangladesh, while others had experienced a great deal of loss and long term separation from family members. Some camp residents had experienced abusive and violent treatment while in Bangladesh, and a surprising number of camp residents had become permanently disabled, mostly as a result of work-related injuries. A few residents expressed to me feelings of hopelessness about the future that I imagined were shared

49 I asked some of the Ukhia Camp residents as well as the physiotherapist in the camp clinic why there were so many injuries and what had caused them. I was told that the high rate of injury was the result of the dangerous work that men and boys did, work for which there was never appropriate protection. Rohingya men and boys work on fishing vessels, as cycle rickshaw pullers, dock workers and in the ship scrapping (breaking) industry. Men and boys from Ukhia camp, like other poor Bangladeshis, rode to work on the roofs of trucks and buses (a cheaper option than paying for a seat inside). Given the Bangladesh roads are also notoriously dangerous, with high rates of traffic accidents, it was not surprising that camp residents were occasionally injured while traveling to work. (Note: many women and some girls in Ukhia Camp worked as well, but fewer of them left the camp to do so. The injuries women suffered were more likely to be burns from cooking fires and injuries from domestic abuse or other violence). Hossain et al describe the kinds of workplace dangers that low status workers in Bangladesh face:

The main causes of accidents in ship scrapping yards are due to sudden fall of steel beam, burning and detonation of gas, suffocation by inhaling CO2 and other obnoxious gases trapped in ships’ chambers. Deep cut; burning; breaking and fracture of bones of hands, legs, fingers and head; fainting and loss of limb are the most common accidents. Most of the workers were found to suffer from multiple diseases and health hazards. Poor safety systems, hazardous working conditions, use of traditional methods of cutting giant ships, absence of appropriate emergency response and lack of precautionary measures are the main reasons for accidents and casualties” (2008:370).
by many of their neighbors. And yet, day after day, the Ukhia Camp Counseling office was almost always empty. Like the staff of the SGBV office, the Counseling office staff spent long hours chatting with each other and drinking tea. When I asked Zahid why so few residents took advantage of the services his office could provide, he shrugged and told me that they (the refugees) were ignorant and stubborn. Zahid and others planned “outreach” activities, but these rarely came to pass. Instead, the few cases he treated (and wrote about in his reports to ECHO) were those obvious and tragic cases of profound psychosis or clinical depression that interfered with camp life and led family members and neighbors to bring those who suffered to the Counseling office in hopes of some return to normalcy.50

At the same time, these Islamic Aid staff members were very eager to make a good impression on the staff at the donor agency. Because of this concern, they were loath to report any activity that would reflect negatively on the project. So the challenges faced by the SGBV office, the Counseling office and their equivalents across Ukhia Camp were never reported to ECHO. In one case, documented below this resistance to reporting problems led directly to a situation that allowed corruption to flourish.

Donors, NGOs and Aid Recipients

One of the complaints heard from non-profits and NGOs is that donations (particularly large ones) frequently come with strings attached. In the ideal world wished for by non-profit leaders, donors would eschew micromanagement and trust recipient organizations to set priorities, hire staff, and determine which approaches to pursue. These arguments are predicated

50 One of these cases was of a young woman who seemed to have profound postpartum depression. Her family brought her to the clinic because she could not or would not nurse her newborn son. Another patient was frequently disoriented and shouted nonsensical utterances, which disturbed her neighbors. In both cases Zahid confided to me that he did not have access to the medications that would most effectively treat these women.
on the assumption that NGO staff are the experts. Some reason that because they have evolved from grassroots organizations or local necessity and have the expertise, contextual understanding and contacts to effect the kind of social change they’ve outlined, donors should just trust them.

Funders, however, frequently see their own role as more than just writing checks. Some see their organizations as activists, partners, and as experts (sometimes with decades of experience). Larger donors may see a particular local contribution as just one part in a larger strategy to effect change (for example, the Gates Foundation’s work with the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria or the Ford Foundation’s support for civil rights in the 1960s (for more about this kind of philanthropic activism, see Zunz 2011).

At Ukhia Camp, for instance, ECHO, the funder, had had a consistent presence in the area since 2006-2007, far longer than any of the INGOs or NGOs. In fact, as NGOs came and went, ECHO stayed. As a result, ECHO seemed to have a better grasp of the challenges of running the camp than some of the NGOs did. This long-term commitment, coupled with expertise, put them squarely among the funders that saw themselves as engaged partners. And yet, the various INGOS that had worked on the project did not seem to treat them as partners. Partnership (as described by one ECHO staffer) would mean the grant recipients (INGOs) would include them in decision making, and consult with ECHO staff when faced with challenges. However, Islamic Aid staff seemed determined to keep ECHO at arms’ length. Reports were formal and great efforts were made to create “photo ops” and other situations designed to impress ECHO staff. In 2012 when there were problems procuring roofing materials (detailed later in this chapter), instead of postponing the project, Islamic Aid managers insisted that the work be partially completed in such a way as to provide opportunities for taking photographs and reporting on the project’s success.
The lack of transparency on the part of Islamic Aid seemed to stem from fears that revealing challenges might have a negative impact on future grant applications. Islamic Aid staffers also seemed to have a general sense of distrust of those outside the organization. Although one might imagine that humanitarian aid work would be characterized by the feel-good ethos so effectively deployed in fundraising campaigns, in fact humanitarian aid work itself can be filled with conflict (for more on this kind of conflict, see Schuller 2012:110). Aid organizations compete with one another. Aid workers sometimes distrust their colleagues from other religious, political, regional, or national backgrounds. Foreign staff and national staff mistrust one another. Aid organizations suspect that refugees and locals will try to cheat them at every turn. Refugees and locals suspect that international funds earmarked for them will not get to them.

Conflict and Corruption

Some investigators have characterized these kinds of conflict as rooted in corruption and fears about corruption (De Cordier 2009b; Pfeiffer 2004). However, in this chapter and the chapter that follows, I argue that mistrust and lack of partnership can actually lead to practices that might be characterized as corruption. I also contend that these conflicts are the logical result of inequality, precarity, lack of transparency, divergent goals and values, and problems of translation (literal and figurative). The problems of mistrust between aid workers and refugees is not confined to Bangladesh (for more on this, see Chapter Five, where I outline some of the key conflicts and power struggles in the camp. For a description of similar kinds of conflict between aid workers in Vietnam, see Owen 2010).

I started to hear about NGO corruption in Bangladesh long before I set foot in the country. So I was not particularly surprised, once I got to Bangladesh, to find that many Bangladeshi interlocutors believed that NGOs were corrupt. What did surprise me, however, was
that many saw international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) as a separate category from national or local NGOs. I was told that these international organizations were “less corruptible.” One informant told me that this was because Americans and Europeans were “used to following rules and laws.” Others observed that because “everything in Bangladesh is corrupt, NGOs are no different.” There was a prevailing sense that because corruption was endemic to the very highest levels of Bangladeshi business and government, it was not surprising to find it in everyday practices of smaller organizations. And yet, for many young Bangladeshis, NGO work was seen as an attractive career path, though slightly less attractive than work in the government, telecommunications, banking, and export (ready-make garments) sectors.

Transparency (Transparency International 2012) International Bangladesh says that in 2006, the NGO sector was “the second largest employer after the government, (and) employed 93,843 people as of June 2006” (2012:1).

Public perceptions of corruption were sometimes mirrored in official reports. In fact, international observers from the World Bank and other organizations estimate that 30% of international aid worldwide is regularly lost to corruption (UN News Centre 2012). Some characterize this as just the price of doing business. So in 2012, when the World Bank announced that it was pulling out of the agreement to finance the multibillion dollar Padma Bridge project in Bangladesh, there was a sense, both in Bangladesh and among international observers, that the “credible evidence of corruption” that the World Bank reported must have been much more than the 30% that might routinely be expected. As news of the canceled project spread across Bangladesh, news articles, ordinary observers and those “in the know” speculated about the stolen money, imagining that hundreds of millions of dollars, even a billion dollars, had been stolen (The Guardian 2012; World Bank 2012). Later that year, a Transparency International
study reported that more than 65% of Bangladeshis had experienced corruption, especially requests for bribes, threats and demands for sexual favors, in their dealings with government, police, private sector and NGOs (TIB 2012).

International funders also shared the concern that corruption in Bangladesh posed a serious problem for development work, investment and humanitarian aid. Given both the breadth and scale of reported corruption, it was not surprising that donors of humanitarian aid demanded that recipient organizations maintain strict accounting practices in order to try to prevent or minimize loss. They frequently made other demands as well. For instance, at the NGO where I volunteered, the funders had stipulated that the project be managed by non-Bangladeshis. This was understood by Bangladeshis and foreigners as an attempt to prevent corruption. Rashid, a smart young office worker with a university degree in business told me, “It is the only way. You cannot trust Bangladesh people. Corruption is too much. Foreigners do it [manage money] right.”

Corruption or Business as Usual? The Case of Roofing Materials

One of the clearest examples of the complexity of the interrelationships between donors, expats, national staff, locals, and refugees occurred when I had been in the camp for about seven months. At that time Islamic Aid staff began to discuss a problem faced by many Rohingya camp residents: the roofs of their homes needed to be replaced. Bangladesh has a tropical monsoon weather pattern. The hottest season falls roughly during the period that North America and Europe experience as spring: March or April to June. The monsoon rains begin in June and generally continue to September. So those involved with humanitarian interventions in Bangladesh know that an approaching rainy season brings with it concerns about flooding, the

51 Although climate change experts warn that this pattern is changing, to date, Bangladesh continues to experience this predictable annual pattern of a warm dry season, hot season, and hot rainy season (divided locally into six seasons).
water-tightness of dwellings, the integrity of roads, ditches and bridges. In the refugee camp, concerns about the water-tightness of dwellings were well-founded.

When Ukhia Camp was built in 2007, the government gave tacit permission for construction on the condition that homes not be permanent and that they be built of locally available materials. At the time of the camp construction, donors, builders and NGO staff readily agreed to these stipulations. According to Jonathan, a senior staff member at ECHO, it was assumed that the dwellings would be maintained regularly and re-roofed in 3 or 4 years.

When I arrived in 2011, it was clear that this maintenance had not been done and many roofs were in serious need of replacement. As I got to know the camp, I frequently walked around, chatting (as best I could, given my initial lack of facility with the local dialect) with staff and residents as they went about their day. I also conducted a survey of the structures that had been erected as community centers and schools (later turned into mosques). One common theme emerged: people were concerned about the roofs, specifically whether they would be water-tight during the coming monsoon. Although some camp residents patched these roofs as best they could, and others covered their roofs with plastic tarps (held down with bricks pinched from the driveways and footpaths), it was unclear whether the most badly damaged houses would make it through the rainy season. I later learned that Islamic Aid’s staff had requested extra funds from ECHO to rebuild these homes, but their budget had been vague (and possibly inflated). ECHO had pushed back, asking for more information on how it would be accomplished and a precise budget breakdown. Although Islamic Aid had very competent young Bangladeshi engineer on staff, another expat staffer and I were dispatched to the UNHCR headquarters to discuss the matter with the housing specialist there. We arrived at UNHCR headquarters on a hot afternoon in May. Although it was nice to have a day away from the field (going to Cox’s Bazar meant a
chance to eat out, enjoy air-conditioning, see new faces, walk on the beach, drink coffee, and sometimes stay in a nice hotel), it bothered us to have been selected for this particular mission. Although I was interested in improving the housing problems faced by many of the refugees, I wondered if I was the best choice of emissary. As an anthropologist, I had little experience with building, roofing or large-scale procurement of building materials. Although my colleague Max had a little more experience, he is a medical doctor and had little interest in this particular aspect of camp life.

When we arrived at the UNHCR compound, and made our way back to the office of Philip, the UNCHR housing expert, it was clear that he was very busy. Piles of notebooks and documents littered his desk, he stood rummaging through a file cabinet as a phone rang seemingly without end. He greeted us with little enthusiasm as I thanked him for making time to see us. It turned out that Philip had been asked to be ready to deploy to the Turkey/Syria border to assist with a shelter crisis there as tens of thousands of Syrians crossed the border each week. He wasn’t sure if he would be sent or when, but had to be ready. Quickly we sketched our problem, and showed him the revised budget and building plan for re-roofing the houses at Ukhia Camp. He saw right away that Islamic Aid’s engineer had over-budgeted for some supplies and under-budgeted for the larger bamboo poles that would be needed for the roofs. He said that bamboo prices had gone up dramatically in the local area, and that this particular bamboo in the quantity we would need might have to be brought in from elsewhere.

I asked if he would draft an email with his recommendations for housing design and materials that would be affordable and would meet our requirements of impermanence and local sourcing. He agreed to get back to us soon and we left him to make his preparations for Turkey.
Making Plans in Ukhia Camp

A week passed and we had heard nothing, but in the meantime, I had advised Dr. Shahid, the project director, that it would probably be a good idea to adjust the budget to reflect the building material pricing Philip had provided. He told me that the donor would not agree to a spending increase like that one. When I suggested he discuss the inflation with them, he refused. His reticence to discuss the budget with the funders was initially confusing. Surely the funding agency staff, who lived in Bangladesh, would understand that there were frequent price fluctuations. Over the next few weeks, Dr. Shahid, Islamic Aid’s Dhaka staff and the ECHO staff went back and forth over the original budget, but failed to agree on a sound plan.

By the first week of June, it was clear that no agreement would be reached before the monsoon began. Instead, Rashid, the young Islamic Aid engineer, was asked to write up an RFP (request for proposals) and secure bids for plastic tarps and mechanisms to affix these tarps on top of the thatch and tattered plastic sheeting already in place. Rashid was told to only accept bids from contractors who would guarantee that they could deliver the materials before June 20, World Refugee Day. The RFP was sent out quickly, but only a few bids came back. The lowest bid came from Mr. Ali, a powerful local businessman, known as much for extra-legal dealing, political maneuvering, violence, and threats as he was for business. He promised to deliver the materials by June 14. The contract he signed stipulated that if all the materials were not delivered by June 20, he would incur financial penalties.

June 14 arrived and no materials had been delivered. When Rashid, the Islamic Aid engineer, called to check on the status, Mr. Ali reported that his supplier was weeks behind, and he could only supply a small portion of the total before June 20. At a quickly organized meeting to discuss the situation, a few of us strongly suggested that we should wait to begin distribution until all the materials had been delivered. My colleague Nurul Mohammed noted that
distributing a small amount of roofing materials might cause discord in the camp and other problems. Better, we argued, to wait until we could follow the usual distribution procedures and provide materials to every household. Dr. Shahid quickly overruled us. “No,” he said. “It is better to distribute some. The donor will want to see that we are moving quickly because the rainy season is starting. And they will want to see pictures for World Refugee Day and when they visit, we must show them the new roofing materials in place.”

Another staffer, Partha, and I were instructed to begin distributing the materials as soon as they were delivered. A few days later, in the pouring rain, the contractor’s men began unloading packets of plastic sheeting tied with twine and small packets of rope and hooks with which to secure the tarps. Before we could begin to distribute these, we had to count each one, ensuring that the contractor did not short us.

_Distributing the Roofing Materials_

We directed the men to pile the tarps in the one semi-dry place that could accommodate them, a cement storage building that was also the temporary dwelling place of a large group of laborers brought in to dig wells on the opposite side of the camp. But it soon became clear that we could not work around these men as they slept, ate, cooked and bathed in the space. It fell to me to request their eviction and request they take up other, less desirable, space. Once we finished counting, we put the word out that only residents of A block could come the next day to collect their roofing materials. Early the next morning, we headed to camp where the health promotion team was getting set up for the distribution. A couple of laborers, health promoters, block leaders and I gathered in the muddy garage, standing on rocks to try stay a little less

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52 This concern about the danger of poorly-planned distribution was later validated when Red Crescent Turkey arrived in the area to distribute food to refugees for the Eid holiday. They had not consulted with the NGOs working in the area, and instead began distributing food from the back of a truck. In the resulting chaos, a riot broke out. Two refugees ended up in the hospital and many more were injured.
muddy. The wind blew hard, and it was easy to see that in the downpour, we wouldn’t stay dry for long.

Much less fortunate were the refugees, who stood in line just outside the garage, prevented from entering by metal gates and the guards who stood in the doorway. As we got organized inside, it was clear that it was going to be a long morning for those outside. Working through the day, with hardly a stop for lunch, we finished distribution of roofing materials for almost everyone on A Block. As requested by Dr. Shahid, we took dozens of photographs of camp residents being given their roofing material. It was almost a week later when the next batch of roofing materials were delivered. Again, we hired laborers to help with counting and distribution, which would start the next day. This time we began with B Block. As usual, I was asked to take many photographs to document the successful distribution.

There’s a Problem

More tarps were delivered that night, so the next day, we began the distribution for C Block, but this time, one of my Bangladeshi informants pulled me aside. “Misha auntie, there is something you should know.” My informant whispered, “Mr. Ali’s men are buying the roofing materials and then delivering them to you.” “What do you mean?” I asked. “Around the corner, his men are buying the materials (from the camp residents) right after they get them from you.” I walked out into the pouring rain and down the lane that led way from the storage building where we were distributing the materials, past the small shops and the NGO hospital to the edge of the first housing block. People seemed to be waiting around for something, rather than hurrying back towards shelter as one would expect. I walked on and saw an overloaded ricksha coming towards me, filled with tarps folded and tied in the exact manner of those that were being given to residents back in the garage. The risksha puller did not acknowledge me or even look at me as I
waved for him to slow down, but he pedaled on, so I turned around and followed him back to the garage. There I found workers unloading the same ricksha and Islamic Aid staffer Partha checking off the delivery. I asked him to delegate the receiving duties and come talk to me.

“Partha,” I asked, “did you know that these are the exact same tarps we have just given away?”

“No miss, no,” he said with a laugh.

“Yes, they are, we should find out what is going on,” I responded.

“Miss,” he replied, “there is nothing.”

It was clear that as soon as we gave away the tarps, residents were selling them back to Mr. Ali’s men, who turned around and delivered them back to us. I was outraged, but also wondered about my own culturally-informed tendency to follow the rules. Was I being ethnocentric? Were Partha and others operating in a culturally appropriate way? In a grey area? A.F (Sandy) Robertson argue that

Every office drudge knows that it's the “grey area,” not the rules, which actually makes bureaucracy work, for better and for worse. Cognitive dissonance about the discrepancies between the normative framework and real behavior is the mind-set of the “good” bureaucrat. With the rule book in hand, it's not so hard to spot misconduct, but every manager worth her salt knows that if you are over-zealous in trying to constrict pragmatic behavior you will bring everything to a standstill. (2006:9)

Frustrated by Partha’s lack of concern, I turned to other staff members and asked them what was happening. One young man stepped forward. “Ali’s men are buying the roofing materials and then delivering them back here,” he explained. “How much are they paying people for them?” I asked. Hamid agreed to find out. The following day he reported back. In the beginning people were getting 600 taka for their materials, but soon everyone was rushing to sell them, and the price went to 300 taka. I checked with our engineering and procurement staff, and learned that Islamic Aid was paying about 1100 taka per unit. But in the goldfish bowl of the refugee camp,
residents had no power to ask for market price, so they were settling for a fraction of what the materials were worth on the open market. Mr. Ali, the contractor, was making far more from this situation than he would have made buying all the tarps wholesale and delivering them at once.

That week, Dr. Shahid was away from Ukhia Camp, and didn’t take my phone call. I emailed him about what I had learned and asked that we be allowed to suspend the project until some agreement would be made with Mr. Ali about what was acceptable.

*No Problem, Nothing Wrong!*

My request to suspend distribution was turned down. Instead, Dr. Shahid told me to confront Mr. Ali; Dr. Shahid instructed me to tell Mr. Ali that if all of the remainder of the tarps were not delivered the next day, he would be in violation of his contract and would be subject to a fine. As I delivered this message, I told Mr. Ali that Islamic Aid staff knew what he was doing and were not happy. At this point, he started shouting at me and stormed off. Partha started laughing. “There is nothing to do.” He said. “The people will sell everything. He is just doing business. The people could bring them [the tarps] to town to sell, but this is easier. You can’t stop it. There is no problem.”

Frustrated, I walked away. Certainly, camp residents could decide to sell whatever assets they had at their disposal, and make the best choices they could for themselves and their families. But I didn’t trust Mr. Ali. He was a powerful man who seemed rule the area with violence and coercion (see Chapter 3 for more about Mr. Ali and violence). I had heard that he had successfully subverted numerous attempts by NGO staff to avoid paying him bribes and other kinds of kickbacks or tribute. The expat staff didn’t like doing business with him, and many of the locals were afraid of him. Yet here we were again. Mr. Ali had somehow subverted the bidding process. One of the Islamic Aid staffers I spoke with suspected he did so by coercing
the wholesalers, another thought he had someone inside Islamic Aid who fed him information about the sealed bids so he could beat the competition every time. In any event, as I described the situation to both foreign and national staff, it was easy to see that at least for some people, Mr. Ali’s skill at managing the system was eroding what little faith they had that they or the organization could make much of a difference. “Those guys, they always win, they are too strong,” said Fatima, a community outreach worker. Laughing grimly, Ahmed, the assistant office manager, said “You see, this is why nothing ever changes here. Everything is corrupt. No one can stop these guys. Except maybe the bigger guys and then we just have to pay them.”

**The Impact of Corrupted Practice**

Interestingly, as I spoke to Islamic Aid staffers (expat and national staff), not a single person seemed concerned about or even mentioned the probability that camp residents would suffer because they (the camp residents) sold the materials that would have kept them dry through the monsoon season. Although the staff did not speculate about how this would play out in camp life, when I specifically asked them about it, experienced staffers explained that leaky roofs would lead to a wide variety of social and health problems: discomfort, overcrowding (as people tried to shift themselves and their belongings to the relatively drier parts of the houses), domestic violence (as frustrations mounted), social stigma, and illness, especially diarrheal disease, respiratory infection and skin infections to which infants, children and the elderly were particularly susceptible. In extreme cases, homes could be made uninhabitable, both because of the leaky roofs and because excessive water could turn the packed earth floors into mudpits that were unlikely to dry out until long after the rainy season ended.

I also learned that Islamic Aid staffers could have easily anticipated that residents might sell their roofing materials. One long-time staff member confided that camp residents were
frequently caught selling assets distributed by NGOs. These assets had included parts of their homes (doors and splash guards designed to keep monsoon rains out), mosquito nets (distributed to reduce the incidence of malaria, particularly among children and infants) and blankets (only needed during the coldest part of the year, usually December and January). I heard from some residents that people sold these “luxuries” because they needed to feed their children. But some women complained that it was men who sold them and men who drank the money. They told me that men didn’t care as much about keeping the home dry and the children healthy, perhaps because some of them have other places to sleep, in homes with other wives, or in the places where they travel for work.

In the end, Mr. Ali was not fined, but distribution was halted until the remainder of the roofing materials was delivered. Some staffers suggested that refugees should be told that there would be an inspection and that all who had received tarps would be required to show that they were using them appropriately, or they would face some sort of punishment. An announcement to this effect was made, but no inspections were carried out. It seemed that staff had no real desire to know the minutiae of camp life. They had a job to do, and that was to procure and distribute tarps. Once this had been accomplished, documented through photographs, and reported on, their job and interest in the matter was done.

While the case of Mr. Ali getting Islamic Aid to pay for the exact same tarps two or three times each does not fit squarely into the World Bank’s definition of corruption, it was, in many ways, precisely the kind of practice that erodes the social and economic gains promised by the significant investments of time, money, and other resources made by the donor, the NGO and staff members. Dieter Haller and Cris Shore observe that social scientists have approached corruption in one of two ways: structuralist approaches that highlight institutional structures and
deficits that lead to corruption and interactionalist approaches that focus on individual behaviors (2005:3-4). Here I want to argue that both macro structures and individual behaviors contribute to corruption. Although the top-down structure of this NGO did little to establish a culture of accountability and responsibility, the practices here can best be understood as an interlinked series of actions, attitudes and communicative practices. More specifically, this situation was the result of discursive practices and perspectives that included the extreme poverty of the recipients; gender inequality; a rigged bidding process; a clever businessman; NGO leaders and staff that care more for the appearance of success than success itself; and a lack of care on the part of NGO staff.

**Conclusion**

The two examples outlined in this chapter, the failure of gendered violence programs and the corruption of efforts to improve the livability of refugees’ homes, can be read in a number of important ways. On one level, they both demonstrate the fundamental gaps between reporting and reality, between project goals and actual outcomes, and between donors’ demands and NGO actions. They also reveal an important flaw in the execution of humanitarian aid work--caring is not a measurable task. In the case of the SGBV Office, staff members did not seem to care much about the refugees, improving their lives, or actually reducing the kinds of violence women experienced. In the case of the roofing materials, staff members knew they would be judged on whether tarps were procured and distributed, not on whether people used them. So in the end, the staff, quite logically, worked to accomplish the things they could be judged by--the documentation of effort that became proxy for the work itself.
Chapter Three: The Tyranny of Paperwork

One of the most widely articulated criticisms of the humanitarian aid system is that it is a vehicle for global governance practices that reinforce systems of inequity. While this may be true from a global perspective, from a micro or ethnographic perspective, the reality is messier and more complex. Some of the messy practices of global governance in humanitarian NGOs in Bangladesh involve documentation and the generation of paperwork. In this chapter, I outline the multiple ways that paperwork (in various forms) rules the lives of individuals in and around the refugee camp.

Although in many ways the lives and circumstances of expatriate professional staff, Bangladeshi staff, and refugees were profoundly different from one another, one type of shared experience shaped all of their lives to varying degrees: the need to acquire and circulate certain kinds of identity documents. Interestingly, the disparate exigencies that required staff and refugees to acquire and present these various documents obscured the similarities of their experiences. As described in Chapter One, one way to understand the lives of people around the refugee camp would be to examine overlapping circles of daily experience: different modes of sociality, communication, work, religious practice, and family meant that the lives of many NGO staffers and refugees barely intersected. Individual staff members might rarely, or never, speak to a refugee. Even more striking were the large numbers of refugees, who, although dependent on the NGO, might never speak to an NGO staff member, or more commonly, they might only speak to some of the low status NGO staffers drawn from surrounding villages and towns.

While the daily lives of these individuals rarely overlapped, the same forces shaped the lives of members of each of these social groups in divergent but sometime surprisingly parallel ways. For instance, each was ruled by the need to produce the right kinds of documents. For
foreigners, there was an ever-present battle to secure the right kind of visa. For Bangladeshi staff, the right to work for the INGO was contingent on producing the right kinds of educational documents. And for the Rohingya, flimsy papers known as “family books” served as all-purpose identity documents for whole families. In this chapter I document the ways that paperwork ruled the lives of these actors and the impact it had on people’s lives and the organization. I argue that although the demands for paperwork reflected the bureaucratic nature of Islamic Aid practices, rather than offer staffers and refugees a sense of predictability, safety or comfort, these practices led to an increased sense of isolation and precarity.

**Control, Surveillance, Legibility and the Humanitarian Actor**

Although anthropologists and other scholars have been deeply engaged with questions about citizenship, transnationalism, national borders, border crossings, statecraft and governing, few have examined the role of identity documents, particularly the unofficial documents created by NGOs. Today, there are more than 10 million official refugees around the world, and millions more displaced people (both within and outside their nation of origin) who are not formally designated as refugees, but experience many of the same kinds of dangers and hardships. Many of them have no official paperwork or identity documents. Some refugees have destroyed official documents as a way of obscuring their identities to avoid persecution or attempt to improve their chances of securing a safe place to migrate to; others lost important documents when they fled their homes; still others never had any identity documents to start with. Although the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees explicitly grants refugees the right to be issued international travel documents, the duty to issue these falls to host nations and in practice this right is often not extended to refugees. In many places, NGOs and international organizations like UNHCR have issued documents like ration cards and family books that become de facto
identity documents. In other places, NGOs have begun issuing unofficial identity documents as a service to the migrants they work with.

A few scholars have examined the role of these unofficial kinds of documents. Ilana Feldman claims that for Palestinians, identity papers serve to document their existence and provide evidence for their claims for recognition (2008:499). About et al. emphasize the linkages between the study of surveillance and the study of identity documents (2013:1). Tobias Kelly, however, argues that these same documents are an “unpredictable and unstable technique of governance, producing fear and uncertainty for all those subject to their use” (2006:90). Kelly also points out that identity documents themselves are “inherently unstable” for two reasons—they are based on law, which is never absolutely precise, and because the connection between an identity document and the person to whom it is supposed to refer can be questioned. One important insight about the role of identity documents is the way they can shape subjectivities. As Kelly explains, “People can only act in certain ways and have access to particular resources because of the documents that they hold” (2006:92). It is clear that the ability to act, to take a job, to get married, to live in a particular place is often contingent not only on one’s right to claim those entitlements, but also on one’s ability to prove that one has these rights. Moreover, identity documents can shape the less tangible aspects of one’s subjectivity—feelings of security or precarity, the confidence to challenge authority, one’s sense of personal and shared history. Feldman describes how identity documents, created for the purpose of managing distribution of resources to refugees, were used by Palestinians to make claims about their own identity and continued existence. In this way, documents can be used in creative ways that were not planned for by those who issued them. She contends that those who manipulated their legal identity
through the acquisition of different documents in Palestine were not rejecting their ethnic identity, but instead trying to “make a living” (2007: 99).

In some ways, the strategic choices made by Palestinians might be likened to the “flexible citizenship” described by Ong (1999) in a study of globalized Chinese business people. The examination of these practices can be understood as connected to other kinds of scholarly investigation, into governance, bureaucratic practice, NGO practices, and surveillance. The focus on identity documents in particular reveals some of the tensions of globalization. Susan Coutin observes that the difficulties faced by non-citizens in the United States, particularly as they relate to identity documents, challenge the claim that the world is becoming “post-national” or deterritorialized (for more on this idea, see Basch et al. 1994). “Papers,” Coutin writes, “and the right kinds of papers, are becoming more important than ever” (2011:290). In Bangladesh, we can also see them in historical context as connected to colonial practice and the challenges of state-building. In many ways, Bangladeshi systems of governance can be seen as the heirs to their colonial pasts. Pierce and Rao describe “postcolonial forms of governance … [as] mimick[ing] their colonial predecessors even while discourses of development and national self determination have often occluded colonial culpability and the distinctive violence of postcolonial rule (Rao and Pierce 2006:18).

As I examine the practice of NGO-created identity documents, I also attend to the ways that these are just one of the many kinds of documents that NGOs produce. Some scholars have argued that as NGOs become more professionalized, these bureaucratic practices take precedence over other activities (Alvarez 1999; Markowitz and Tice 2002). Höhn, extends Arjun Appadurai’s focus on the social life of things (Appadurai 1986) to argue for the social life of documents. Appadurai challenges the notion that things and people occupy very different
categories, Höhn does not go quite so far, but does show how documents and the process of documenting are central to the activities of any NGO. Appadurai describes the life courses of things revealing how, as things circulate, the meaning and values we ascribe to them changes. Like people, the social roles inhabited by particular things change. Höhn asserts that documents not only have a social role, but that attending to these documents “demonstrates the agency of things” (2013:99); that is, that the things that people engage with have an impact on the work and the lives they touch.

In the refugee camp, these things--the identity documents--were filled with complexities and contradictions. Although each type could be read as having a specific purpose--visa, diploma, ration card/family book--each was also seen as a sign of status, rights, histories, and relationships. Hull suggests that this multifaceted quality of documents makes it possible for them to be used as vehicles through which various actors can fight for rights (in his account, land rights). Documents can be also tampered with and are thus malleable. He argues that these are more than pieces of paper, they are bureaucratic semiotic technologies and are key to understanding governance (Hull 2008: 502).

Another way of understanding the role of documents in camp life might be through James Scott’s idea of legibility. Scott also points to the interconnections between observation and coercion.

Each undertaking... exemplified a pattern of relations between local knowledge and practices on one hand and state administrative routines on the other.... In each case, local practices of measurement and landholding were “illegible” to the state in their raw form. They exhibited a diversity and intricacy that reflected a great variety of purely local, not state, interests. That is to say, they could not be assimilated into an administrative grid without being either transformed or reduced to convenient, if partly fictional, shorthand. The logic behind the required shorthand was provided... by the pressing material requirements of rulers: fiscal receipts, military manpower, and state security. In turn, this shorthand functioned... as not just a description, however inadequate. Backed by state power through records, courts, and ultimately coercion, these state fictions transformed
the reality they presumed to observe, although never so thoroughly as to precisely fit the grid. (1998:24)

Scott’s formulation also acknowledges what I experienced in the refugee camp: the official record was sometimes a largely fictional description of the local reality. In fact, it sometimes seems that record-keeping efforts do little to advance the project of legibility. Hull maintains that in Islamabad, Pakistan, where he works, “illegibility and opacity have been produced by the very instruments of legibility” (Hull 2008:503; see also Hull 2012). Similarly, in the case of the Bangladeshi refugee camp, the technologies designed to surveil, make legible, and control the various actors frequently did not work as planned.

In the camp and among NGO staff, documents functioned as mechanisms of surveillance because each document holder knew that his or her activities were (or could be) tracked and that, based on the data gathered, privileges could be withheld or punishments meted out. In some ways, this use of the technology evokes the Foucauldian Panopticon. In a widely-cited description of the discipline built into social organizations like factories, schools, monasteries, camps, and the military, Foucault writes, “The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible” (1995:170-1).

In the case of Islamic Aid, actors also knew (rightly or wrongly) that these surveillance technologies were partial and could be evaded or manipulated. Zachary Whyte (2011) characterizes a similarly incomplete surveillance model, the Danish asylum system, as a “myopticon,” a chronically nearsighted technology that enables a strategic avoidance of careful knowledge, resulting in greater uncertainty for individual asylum seekers. Whyte argues that for asylum seekers, knowing that the bureaucratic system so frequently gets the details of their cases
wrong leads a greater sense of precariousness. “As documents constantly shift between determinacy and indeterminacy, they produce particular types of subjects, not through coercion or discipline, but as a result of the uncertainties and fears that they create” (Kelly 2006:92; see also Das and Poole 2004).

So while refugees and Islamic Aid staff members shared a preoccupation with identity documents, members of both groups acted as if this kind of surveillance could be evaded and manipulated. Their evasions revealed what Seyla Benhabib has argued, that identification documents are sometimes just as much about excluding the unwanted as they are about including and circumscribing those that belong (2004:66-68)

I am not arguing, however, that actors categorically reject these documents. David Lyon points out that an ID card may be carried with pride, indifference or reluctance, depending on the political conditions and the history of using such documents in the country in question. Whether they are compulsory or voluntary, required to be carried at all times or not, or valid for non-government purposes like banking, also depends on local circumstances. In some countries, IDs are vital for upholding human rights (Lyon 2009:3). The histories of identity documents also reflect these complexities. Sociologist John Torpey describes some of the earliest European laws that indicated the need for travel passes in England (14th and 16th century), Prussia (17th century) and Russia (18th century) (2000:18-19). While we think of passports as a feature of international travel, what is particularly notable about each of these cases is that their initial purpose was to prevent (mostly poor) people from leaving their place of residence or country. These documents tied serfs, peasants and potential soldiers to particular places so that those who demanded their labor might more easily find them. Torpey contends that it was not until the rise of the nation-state that documents for crossing national borders became necessary (2000:20).
These geopolitical shifts not only changed the restrictions on travel and identity documents, but also the very definitions of citizen and foreigner. Although the French Revolution initially eliminated the need for passports both for travel within France and across its borders, questions of security and sovereignty soon forced the new French authorities to reinstate the requirement for passports when crossing its border. With “little steps such as this, the definition of the ‘foreigner’ slowly drifted towards the notion which nowadays has come to be taken for granted, that is, a foreigner is someone from another country whose trustworthiness is questionable” (Torpey 2000:30-31). This distinction between citizen and foreigner, and the resultant complications of border crossing, intensified during the French Revolution and wars of the Napoleonic era. Officials in the United States and the Great Britain began to make the same kinds of distinctions, with the English Aliens Bill (1793) and the Aliens Act (1798) in the United States.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the legal requirements for passports and other identity documents largely focused on control and surveillance of certain kinds of workers: in the United States, the Chinese (with the Chinese Exclusion Acts) and in Germany, where laws targeting Polish workers required foreigners to carry identity cards. Torpey contends that these technologies of control, surveillance and the resulting distinction between citizen and non-citizen helped make the horrors of the Holocaust possible.

The dozen years of existence of the “thousand-year Reich” would generate a proliferation of censuses, statistical investigations, registers of foreigners, identity cards, and residence lists that ultimately constituted the administrative foundation for the deportations to Auschwitz and the other death camps. Over time, these diverse methods of “embracing” the German population, and especially certain “negatively privileged status groups” within it became intimately linked to the passport system. (Torpey 2000:132)

Neither Bangladesh nor Myanmar shares the specificities of Nazi preoccupation with ethnicity, surveillance and paperwork. Instead, both share a history of British colonial preoccupations with
the same. Matthew Hull explains that contemporary bureaucratic practices in South Asia are the legacy of Raj-era practices created in response to a fundamental distrust between British rulers and the South Asians who worked alongside them. He writes,

British officers in India were frequently transferred among different posts. They lacked knowledge of the locales they administered and of the permanently posted native functionaries on whom they helplessly depended. In response to these uncertain loyalties, the British, building on the elaborate written procedures of the Mughals and nascent European commercial practices, fashioned a graphic regime of surveillance and control. This solution took form within the horizon of the empiricist metaphysics prevalent in Britain: a practical attack on the problem of words and things, an attempt to make discourse part of a more trustworthy material order (2008:505).

In Bangladesh today, as in India and perhaps other postcolonial heirs to British paranoia, bureaucrats and middle managers of every sort continue to replicate elaborate reliance on documentation, paper, stamps, and copies. Hull contends that for the British, this kind of practice was a way of establishing and solidifying official discourse, which he says “was anchored in people, places, times, and artifacts through an elaborate use of signatures, dates, and stamps” (Hull 2008:504). He asserts that a full understanding of bureaucratic documents or graphic signs, as he calls them, requires not only attending to their visibility and durability, but also to their qualities such as “the size, qualities, costliness of the paper; whether it is handwritten, printed, or typed; the typeface of the text; pencil vs. ink; organization of graphic space; the structure of the artifact—what is placed relative to what, how are they attached or enclosed; uniqueness and quantity; age and wear” (Hull 2003:292). These and other qualities help shape the ways that documents are viewed and valued.

In the refugee camp where I worked, documents for each kind of agent (expat, Bangladeshi staff member and refugee) were scrutinized, challenged and sometimes authenticated. As I detail below, those in possession of identity documents (especially refugees), saw them as valuable assets. At the same time, refugees were well aware of the potential harm
that might result from being closely surveilled. Their concerns reflected many of the criticisms raised by anthropologists and other scholars as they document the coercive surveillance of various refugee management systems around the world (see Chapter One for a more in-depth description of this critique).

Ilana Feldman (2007) notes the technology of ration cards was used in the late 1940s by staff of American Friends Service Committee to define eligibility. That is, eligibility for rations marked one as a refugee, in this instance as Palestinian. Gastón Gordillo (2006) offers the example of some indigenous people in Argentina, long denied the rights and protections of citizenship, who came to fetishize their identity documents as powerful objects. In similar fashion, Sarah Lund (2001) maintains that the physical steps traced to acquire identity documents in Cuzco, Peru create a physical experience of the state.

One important but under-theorized interconnection is that which exists (or is presumed to exist) between identities and identity documents. As James Scott and others have argued, identity documents are mechanisms of control, generated by states with interests in tracking individuals for the purposes of conscription, taxation, and so on. Since 9/11, this notion of tracking individuals rather than groups has gained traction, as the immense technical, scientific and political resources of the United States and other nations of the global north have been brought to bear on the problem of tracking all seven billion people on the planet at once. Roger Rouse (1995) points out the ways that these technologies simultaneously mark people as individuals and as members of groups. Another way to think about identity documents is that they represent technologies of power. Those who can grant, confer or reject these instruments demonstrate the control they wield over movement, the right to work, participation in civil and political life, education, and even essentials like food and water. Much has been written about how
technologies of power supported colonialism. Anthropologist Bernard Cohn (Cohn 1996) long contended that it was these technologies, as much as brute force, that enabled British colonial administrators to manage and transform India. More recent work by Sanjay Srivastava (2012) points to the generation of fake documents in a Delhi slum as both an extension of popular forms of trickery and as a means by which people create communities outside the state. Willem van Schendel asserts that in the 1970s, because neither India nor Bangladesh had high rates of registering births nor systematic means of verifying identity, other documents like ration cards could be used as proof of citizenship on one side of the border or other. He also states that ongoing efforts to issue identity cards have been undermined by the ease with which forgeries are produced (2005:221).

The power that comes with controlling these technologies is never absolute. Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie (2013) explains that the systems set up to exclude Indians from South Africa in the first part of the twentieth century sometimes backfired as people found ways to manipulate identification documentation and their own life histories. Similarly, Hull (2008) illuminates the role of lists and other documents in conflicts between the state and urban slum dwellers in Islamabad. Jane Caplan and John Torpey (2001) also highlight the many ways that individuals evade scrutiny, playing a kind of a cat-and-mouse game with officials.

**Class, Status, Academic Qualifications and Employment**

In the time I spent working alongside the staff of Islamic Aid, a fairly large (hundreds of staff on a dozen projects) transnational NGO in Bangladesh, one of the most surprising things to me was the great emphasis placed on what were referred to each person’s “qualifications,” that
is, his/her academic accomplishments.\textsuperscript{53} Indeed, although I was not technically part of the staff, questions about my educational attainments frequently came up in casual and formal settings. I also began to notice that Bangladeshi friends, colleagues and acquaintances put a great deal of emphasis on educational qualifications, whether their own and or those belonging to people around them. Unlike places where experience, a record of accomplishment, and recommendations are important prerequisites for most positions, in Bangladesh, these are not nearly as important as academic credentials. As I grew to know colleagues in my field site, I saw many instances when hard-working, smart people were passed over for promotions because they lacked the right “qualifications.” There were also more than a few cases in which individuals were hired or promoted, despite poor work habits, lack of ability or bad attitude, seemingly on the basis of their educational qualifications.

In Bangladesh, the word qualification (borrowed from English) follows the usage of the term in the United Kingdom, where the process for standardizing educational achievements across disciplines groups different degrees that require a similar effort or are similarly difficult into particular levels. In Bangladesh, as in the UK, completion of programs at the primary, secondary and tertiary school levels result in qualifications (often accompanied by diplomas or other certificate of completion). In Bangladeshi NGOs, the most important aspect of one’s qualifications was the level of education achieved, not the specific subject matter of one’s studies. This meant that in the NGO where I worked, a person with a master’s degree in engineering would be more likely to be hired as a mental health counselor than a person with a bachelor’s degree in psychology. A degree in Islamic Studies was more valuable in the hiring of

\textsuperscript{53} Bangladesh retains many systems and practices that reflect the country’s history as a former British colony. One of these is the system of primary, secondary and tertiary education, which categorizes educational and vocational attainment in various levels of difficulty, referred to as qualifications.
someone for the gender violence office than a combination of experience, subject matter interest, and a lower-level degree.

Some of my interlocutors explained the emphasis on “qualifications” was a modernist anti-corruption measure, designed to prevent nepotism, patronage, and other practices that might inhibit development and economic growth. Viewed from another angle, the emphasis on qualifications can be a conservative mechanism for preserving class distinctions. One’s formal qualifications very often (but not always) signaled one’s class status. In Bangladesh the ultra poor were often unschooled and illiterate; the poor might have very little education, often just couple of years of grammar school. Few students from the poorest classes made it to lower secondary school. Those who came from the lower middle class might get a lower or higher secondary degree while upper middle class and elites could secure a university degree. A firm or hiring manager could set job requirements at a particular level of education, thereby signaling and even determining what class successful applicants might come from.

Equally important, a reliance on “qualifications” offered the illusion that hiring practices were objective: you either have the qualification or you do not. In a country where corruption, real and imagined, is ever-present, the illusion of objectivity can provide hiring managers with a cover, a way to justify the decisions they make.

For high status workers, appropriate educational qualifications and good connections equaled job security. From the very start of my time at Islamic Aid, I would hear from staffers

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54 According to a 1999 analysis by Filmer and Pritchett, the median number of years of education for fifteen- to nineteen-year-old from poor families in Bangladesh is zero, while the median number of years of education for fifteen to nineteen year old from non-poor families is six years of education. In 1993 a food for education program was initiated to provide free food as an incentive for school attendance, but there are still large numbers of poor and low income children who do not attend school or only attend for a couple of years. One high-ranking staffer at a large international NGO known for child advocacy explained to me that the challenge is to convince parents that the investment of time and energy to get their children in school is worthwhile. He explained that most thought that their children would be better off going to work at a young age, particularly if they could learn a trade.
that one particular Bangladeshi colleague made them crazy. Partha was a middle-aged Bangladeshi man with an affable demeanor. He had one of the best-paid and most responsible jobs in the project, and yet, as his colleagues put it, “He does nothing!” In fact, his lack of work ethic was a frequent complaint made by expats. “He does nothing,” one exclaimed. “He sits there every day and just reads the paper.” Another said, “Sadiq [Partha’s second in command] does all the work.”

Max, the medical officer, told me one day, “That guy he makes me crazy! You ask him for something, he smiles, ‘Yes, yes.’ And then he never does it! One day I was literally screaming in my office. And he just smiles. I think he is stupid. Or maybe he is on drugs!”

Max turned to me intently, “Do you think he could be on drugs? Is that why he just smiles and does nothing? Or is he stupid?”

I responded, “I don’t know, do you think it could be his English, does he understand you?”

“No, no,” Max responded, “I think his English is fine, I think he is purposely trying to drive me crazy!”

While I doubted that Partha was purposely trying to drive Max crazy, it was not entirely outside the realm of possibility. In fact, I began to see a pattern of foot-dragging among some staff that looked suspiciously similar to what James Scott would have referred to as an “everyday form of resistance,” one of the “weapons of the weak” (1985). Partha had a high-paying position, and a master’s degree. He seemed to have job security and did not seem to experience many consequences for not working. In Islamic Aid, like many Bangladeshi workplaces, there were neither incentives for successful work performance nor disincentives for poor performance. Although the Rohingya project, because of its connection to European funders, boasted a modern
set of hiring practices based on skill rather than connections and project-based hiring rather than lifetime employment, in practice there were many who seemed to be hired solely on the basis of their connections, education and social position.

The expat staff members’ frustrations with staff members like Partha often spilled over into their after-work hours. Each night, the expats would wrap up work sometime between five and six pm. One would peek out the window to see if the van that would shuttle us to the guesthouse was available. If it was there, the most senior expat present (usually Dr. Max) would shout, “Come, let us go!” and everyone would scurry for the door. If the van was not there, Dr. Max would shout for Sadiq or one of the other staffers to find out where the van was and when it would return. After returning to the guesthouse, we’d have a couple of hours of downtime. Mostly the expat staff napped or connected with family by phone (or if by some luck the internet connection was strong enough, by Skype). Sometime after seven, we gathered for dinner, usually prepared by one of the Bangladeshi cooks. Dr. Shahid, the project manager, would take his meal on a tray in his room, but after dinner, he would often emerge, refreshed and ready to chat. He would join us at the table, more comfortable in his *kameez* than the western dress shirt, shoes and slacks that were his workday office attire. He would lounge across the low banquette and tell us about his experiences with NGOs and other international organizations in Bangladesh, Pakistan and elsewhere.

Dr. Shahid knew that Partha, who came from a powerful and well-connected family, was protected by his status and credentials. But one night, after a long work day, he told a story that let everyone know that he had not been oblivious to their complaints.

It started with a question from Max “Why,” he grumbled, “can’t we just fire the guy? He is so stupid and he drives me crazy!”
“Max, Max, Max.” The project manager shook his head in affectionate disapproval. “When will you learn, that is not the way to work? If you do that here, you cannot imagine the problems. If you fire this guy, the family, everyone will be unhappy and they will make big problems.”

“When I worked at UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Here Dr. Shahid is referring to a posting in Afghanistan),” he continued, “there was a guy like this and he always made problems. He was transporting drugs, but we couldn’t prove it. Sometimes he just wouldn’t show up for work. But he was very well connected, so what did I do? What could I do?” At this moment, we could all see that the PM had a twinkle in his eye, which clued us in that he had outsmarted the guy and the system.

“What did I do? Well, when we came to the end of the contract, I reposted all of the jobs. I knew this guy just had a lower secondary degree, so I made the position require higher secondary. When he applied,” (here, the Dr. Shahid started to laugh as he sat up to mimic his customarily formal office demeanor) “I said, no, I am very sorry, you do not have the qualifications. And then, when his uncle, a very powerful guy, a big guy, called, I said, 'Brother, what can I do? He doesn’t have the qualifications!' This is the only way to work. Otherwise you will have problems.”

A few weeks later on a warm January afternoon, I returned from a meeting in the city to find a buzz in the office. I did not know quite what was going on, but I could see that something was up. Staff members were dressed a little more formally than usual and chatted excitedly. It had been announced the day before that there would be an all-staff meeting in the restaurant of a local hotel. Extra vans were borrowed from another project to help shuttle staff to the meeting, just a few miles away. When I reached the hotel, most of the staff had taken seats at long rows of
tables covered in white tablecloths. Although the tables were set with some formality, the hotel had the air of abandonment, perhaps due to the fact that the electricity was off and yet no one had bothered to start up the generator. At each spot was a small bottle of water, and all along the tables were plates of bananas and oranges alternating with plates of biscuits (cookies).

Everyone was chattering nervously, mostly in Bengali. A number of staff members asked if I knew the purpose of the meeting. I had to confess that I did not. The Project Director arrived and chatted with his fellow expats for a few minutes before signaling to the hotel staff that they could begin serving the hot appetizers (fried samosas and chicken). The Islamic Aid staff seemed pleased with the luxury of being served by waiters and the mood was festive when the Project Director stood up to talk. First he began by reintroducing me to the staff, since some of them had only met me briefly. I knew that some of the staff present spoke little or no English, so I made my remarks in Bangla. But when Dr. Shahid began to speak, I noticed his remarks were almost entirely in English.

He began by thanking everyone for their hard work, and the successful year that they had had. He explained that the funder had been happy with all they had accomplished. Dr. Shahid then explained that this project was coming to an end and a new project would begin. “It is a new project, you understand. So we have new goals and we will have different positions. So all of your jobs will end when we complete this phase at the end of the month, as per your contracts. And if you would like to be part of the new project, you will have to apply for the jobs. You must fill out applications, and you must provide us with the original [copy] of your qualifications. We need to see that. We will be conducting interviews for all positions in February.”
At this, the relaxed atmosphere in the room began to shift. People began talking rapidly, and the din increased as many staffers tried to explain what Dr. Shahid said to colleagues who hadn’t been able to follow his English-language speech. A few people raised their hands, asking questions about why they should have to reapply if they were doing a good job or why they should have to show their qualifications if they had been working for the project for years. Dr. Shahid responded in a jovial tone, but there was an edge to his voice as he explained that he and the other managers knew that some of them had falsified their qualifications and provided phony documents and that this would no longer be tolerated. After answering just a few of the staff members' nervous queries, he cut things off, told people to eat their food, and asked for a short meeting of the senior medical staff before everyone went home for the night. The rest of the staff clumped together, whispering and excited; some seemed agitated, while others expressed confidence that they would have no problem when jobs were reposted. A small minority laughingly suggested that maybe they would get an even better job.

A few weeks later, job openings for the new project year were posted in the office. Staff members seemed stressed as they sought time off to go home (sometimes many days’ journey) to collect original diplomas and certificates that had been secured years before. Sadiq, the assistant office manager, was charged with collecting all of the piles of documents and making lists of who wanted to apply for each of the open positions.

In a few cases, Sadiq later reported, individuals wanted to apply for jobs for which they lacked the proper qualifications, but for the most part, people refused to challenge the system. Almost everyone applied for virtually the same job that they had done the year before. But before long, another twist was added. Not only would diplomas and certificates be collected, but also that each would be authenticated by phone. Almost at once, some staff began explaining,
mostly to each other, why it might be impossible to verify their credentials. The boss was unmoved. Soon word began to circulate that some staff members had “decided” not to apply for their jobs. Fellow staffers seemed unsurprised by a few of these disappearances as most were the low status workers who had been accused of forging their documents months earlier. But there were some surprises. The first was Mariam, the only high status female staff member. She was known to hold a master’s degree from a prestigious university. She was from a successful family and had held a relatively senior position at another international NGO. For months leading up to the deadline, Mariam complained to anyone who would listen that she should not have to supply the boss with documents.

“Oh, I have known him a long time. I remember when he worked for the UN office,” she reminded everyone, pointing out that the boss had once been a regular employee. “He knows me long time. He doesn’t need this for me.” At this she giggled girlishly and clapped her hands for the office assistant to bring tea. From inside her large purse, she retrieved some biscuits and a small notebook filled with love poetry she had been working on.

Day after day, there were similar scenes. Sometimes Dr. Shahid or Sadiq demand that Mariam bring in her documents, other days she would reassure everyone that she would be exempted from the requirement. A few weeks later, when the interviewing process began, it seemed that she had been correct. Unlike her colleagues, Mariam was allowed to interview for her job without handing in an application or supplying any proof of her educational qualifications.

When it was time to interview staff members for the jobs, two of the most senior Dhaka Islamic Aid staff came to our offices near the refugee camp. With Ali’s help, they divided the applicants into two groups of approximately seventy candidates each, and then asked the three
expat staffers and me to join them in the conference room. They explained that the six of us
would be interviewing all of the candidates in teams of three. We were instructed to look at the
candidates’ qualifications, performance review scores, ask them questions about their interest in
the position, and score each candidate on a scale of 1-5.

We then embarked on a strange marathon session of interviewing, which took most of
two whole days and evenings. The interviews were supposed to be conducted in English;
however, very few candidates were able to speak English comfortably, so nearly all the
interviews quickly shifted back into Bangla. What this meant in practice was that the presence
of the four expat staff members was basically window dressing, since only the project manager
and I spoke any Bangla (and neither of us spoke the local dialect with a great deal of fluency). As
a result, the interviews were largely conducted by the Dhaka staff members. Since the Dhaka
staff did not know the applicants personally or anything about the positions for which they
applied, they looked solely to educational qualifications and performance evaluations.

As we went through the long days of interviews, I began to notice that the scores on
performance evaluations were virtually all the same. Not one had been given a score of excellent
and none were scored below a “good.” Later, I looked over all the applications and confirmed
that 90% of the staff members who had been reviewed the previous year had been given an
identical score. The few outliers had been given scores that were just a few points higher or
lower. When I asked about this, my informants (both expats and Bangladeshis) shrugged. "It isn't
our way," one Bangladeshi manager told me, "No one would give a bad mark, because there
might be problems later." So, in effect, the job interviews were entirely pro forma. If the person
had the correct educational qualifications, he or she would be hired for the job. This was true for
staff members who had excelled in their jobs as well as those who seemed to do their jobs less competently.

As he had explained to us in that story a few months earlier, Dr. Shahid’s real goal with this exercise was to eliminate a few staff members, promote a few and demote a few others. One of those on his list was Partha. Disqualifying him was impossible, since Partha had the highest possible qualification (a Master’s degree); getting rid of him wouldn’t be as simple as changing the required qualifications as he had done in the past. So the Dr. Shahid just eliminated Partha’s position. But unlike some other staffers whose jobs had been eliminated, Partha refused to interview for a lesser position. Instead, he abruptly took his leave and headed to his family home across Bangladesh in the city of Rajshahi. I was interested to see his apparent equanimity and good cheer, as I assumed that losing a job would create some distress or financial insecurity.

Nevertheless, I was surprised a few weeks later when I got a call from Dr. Shahid. Partha had been hired by the Dhaka office, and, I was told, he was going to report to me. I tried to protest. I was not a staff member, I reminded him. I was a researcher. I was observing, not supervising troublesome staff. Not too gently, the Dr. Shahid reminded me that I had been allowed to volunteer and observe, but in order to keep doing what I wanted, there were a few things Islamic Aid would need me to do. This was one of them. He said, "He is a Community Service Officer, same job as you, so you can help him."

I sighed and wandered into Dr. Max's office to tell him the unbelievable news. The staff member he thought he had gotten rid of was on his way back and would be working for me! Max laughed out loud when I told him. "The idiot! He is smarter than I thought. He is outsmarting us! He is tricky. You will see. He will come here and do nothing. He will drive you crazy." We laughed and Max did his best impression of Partha's vacant stare. A few hours later Dr. Max
called me aside, “Misha, I want to tell you seriously, do not count on this guy. He will do nothing. Maybe you can find some job for him that does not matter. Then when he sits every day and drinks his tea and does nothing, you will not go crazy. That is a good solution!” Max exclaimed as he laughed at his own cleverness.

A few days later, I came in with a list of jobs that were important, but not pressing. I figured that if Partha could get started on them, it would be great, but if little was done right away, the consequences would be minimal. I showed the list to Max, who agreed and encouraged me to send the list to Dr. Shahid, the Project Manager. When I did so, I got a crabby note back. "The Dhaka office," I was told, "has given Partha a LOU (Letter of Understanding) which spells out precisely what his duties will be.” Although I would be his supervisor, it was not my place to tell him what to do.

How, I wondered, could senior staff in a faraway office with little or no understanding of the day-to-day activities of the project decide on specific job duties? Why did they bother to concern themselves with such minutiae? Why not delegate responsibilities to the staff charged with managing the day-to-day running of the project? As the months unfolded, I began to see that bureaucratic processes like hiring and firing staff; managing paperwork and generating reports were important sources of power for the Dhaka office staff. (In Chapter Three I further highlight the connections between power and control over another bureaucratic process: spending money).

This was particularly important in the unspoken but clear rivalry between the expats on the project and the senior staff in the Dhaka office. Although the Dhaka-based Bangladeshi staff knew that the foreign workers on the Ukhia Camp project made more money than they did and had access to many kinds of external power, within the workplace itself, it was the Dhaka staff
who were able to exercise the most authority. When it came to stipulating job duties for Partha and other staff, the Dhaka officers exercised their power to create and sustain relationships and retain control over these through the production of documents. The benefit to the Dhaka staff was multifold: they demonstrated for staffers and expats who was "in charge," they retained control over the act of hiring (for more on this kind of control, and how it followed a patron-client model, see Chapter Seven), and they provided themselves with political "cover." More simply, to some extent, the job descriptions were fiction, an understanding that was shared by staff and managers alike. However, if a person or situation became a problem, not performing the fictive duties might constitute grounds for actual dismissal.

Precarity of Another Sort: Expats and Work Visas

While the expats I worked with expressed frustration about the tight control the Dhaka staff exerted over the project, most had other concerns that trumped political wrangling. Like most large transnational NGOs in Bangladesh, at any given time Islamic Aid employed a handful of foreign (expat) “technical experts.” These few staff members were in key positions, managing the hospital, the water, sanitation, nutrition, community service, protection, and overall running of the camp. In essence, each important area of Ukhia Camp life was supervised and managed by an expat. But if one were to visit the camp at any given time, at least a third of these expat staffers would be gone.

While some of these absences could be attributed to meetings, personal leave, and training, much of the time staffers had left their posts to secure new visas. For days, weeks or even months, these senior staff members would travel to Bangladeshi embassy offices abroad, usually, but not always, in nearby Nepal or Thailand, to get new visas. In fact, Islamic Aid staffers were not the only expats who spent significant time away from their posts in this way.
Although the government of Bangladesh was well aware that hundreds, if not thousands, of foreigners, were in the country for some work-related project, very few work visas were given, except in the case of embassy and UN staff. Unable to secure work permits, international organizations regularly advise their staffers to apply for tourist visas, which are relatively easy to get.

Most of the expat Islamic Aid staff applied for and received tourist visas, some of which only authorized one month in the country. The length of these visas varied depending on a number of variables including one’s country of origin, and where the staffer had applied for the visa. These documents were sometimes hard to come by and as a result, days, weeks and even months of work were lost. Perhaps more importantly, the preoccupation with paperwork lowered morale and generated ill will.

Working on tourist visas means that these internationals were working illegally in Bangladesh and could technically only stay in the country for the duration of their short visa. However, most expats, and the transnational NGOs that employed them, quickly learned that the short tourist visas could be extended for a few weeks and that overstaying by a week or two was usually possible with few consequences. However, the extra time granted by these stalling tactics generally only added weeks to the time the staffer was allowed to stay in the country. So every few months, almost all the foreign INGO staff members leave the country, heading for Kathmandu or Bangkok for what they hope will be quick trips to renew their paperwork. Not surprisingly, these constitute huge expenses for international NGOs; trips to Nepal and Thailand (or occasionally Europe, Africa, North America and other parts of Asia) are a waste of time and money. While I was working with Islamic Aid, four of the five regular expat staff ran into major
problems with their visa paperwork. (I had a research visa and did not face these particular challenges).

One of the most costly was that of Dr. Max, medical doctor from Eastern Europe and the chief medical officer for the project. At the start of his employment on the Ukhia Camp project, Max was told to wait at home for the proper work visa to be secured. When, after six months, no work visa had been approved, Dr. Max and his bosses in London decided he should proceed to Bangladesh on a tourist visa with the hope that a work visa would be granted soon thereafter. According to Dr. Max, a work visa had been granted in December of that year, nearly a year after his initial application, but it was invalidated by his presence inside Bangladesh – apparently a common occurrence. Dr. Max arrived on a tourist visa, but with assurances from Islamic Aid staff that they would arrange for proper documents. Instead, he was given a series of three-month visas, which he regularly overstayed. When I asked why he overstayed, Max explained, “The whole thing is stupid, that guy in the office, he does nothing. He says he will get an extension, what does he get? Two weeks maybe. When you have a protocol officer, they [sic] are supposed to have connections, they are supposed to know how to do this. Do you know what he does? He says, ‘Oh yes, I have connections,’ but then when I go to Dhaka and go with him to the immigration office, he waits on line like an idiot. He has no connections. When they tell him “no,” what does he do? He says ‘Okay, brother’ and goes away! So I get nothing, just this fucking short visa and I have so much work to do, I cannot just leave here every month.”

A few times when Dr. Max overstayed, he got a slap on the wrist, but eventually, the immigration officials grew tired of his law-breaking and stamped his passport with an Exit Visa. This meant that he would have to leave the country, and could not reapply for a tourist visa from
any of the usual spots, since they would automatically reject anyone with an Exit Visa stamped on their passport.

With only a few days to plan, Max had to return to Europe, via Karachi and Istanbul. Before leaving, he packed all of belongings, leading many staffers to assume he would not be back. When I asked him directly, he shrugged his massive shoulders and laughed, “I do not know, will they give me visa or no? Impossible to say. If yes, I come back. If no, then [here he laughs] some vacation, some vodka, maybe I will travel and see some friends.” In the end, Max was gone for more than a month. He agreed to count some of the time as his PTO (paid time off), although technically, he did not have to, since it was the responsibility of the organization to provide him with proper work paperwork.

Nasir, another staffer, had a different kind of problem. A talented African water and sanitation specialist, he had also arrived on a tourist visa. After just two months, that visa expired and as directed, he headed to Kathmandu. From the southeastern tip of Bangladesh, international travel was quite an ordeal--three hours in the van to the seaside city of Cox’s Bazar, then a flight to Dhaka. Although the flights were short, the journey often was not. Flights were rarely on time and were often cancelled. Arriving in Dhaka was fairly simple if one had a car and driver waiting at the airport; otherwise, it sometimes required a harrowing negotiation to get a taxi and travel across the city. Depending on the time of day (and time of year) traffic in Dhaka was unpredictable; getting just a few miles across town could (and often would) take hours. If they arrived during the workday, staffers like Nasir would then head to the Islamic Aid office, where they were expected to spend hours chatting with staff, having tea and meetings. Flights out of the country were booked for the following day or the day after that. Flights to and from Dhaka were
often late, thus even a short journey from Teknaf to Nepal to secure a visa might take more than forty hours in travel time each way.

When Nasir arrived in Kathmandu, he was told that they would not renew his visa. After a few days of shuttling back and forth to the Bangladesh Embassy, he was told to return to Dhaka, where the Bangladesh immigration authorities would have the power to approve his paperwork. Instead, upon arrival in the Dhaka airport, he was given an Exit Visa stamp, and was prevented from leaving the airport. Unsure of what to do, Nasir called the Islamic Aid office. A few hours later he was on a plane bound for Dubai and then Cairo, where other staffers had been successful in securing visas. After spending weeks there with no success, Dr. Shahid insisted that Nasir travel to Nairobi, where there were more expat workers and where embassy staff might be more accustomed to supplying visas to foreigners.

In Nairobi, he visited the Bangladesh Embassy numerous times, before hitting on the combination of plausible story and bribe that would secure him reentry into Bangladesh. In the end, he told the Embassy officials that he wanted to return because he was interested in setting up some kind of import-export business, possibly in the garment sector. A bribe of a hundred euros and numerous phone calls and office visits later, he was on his way back.

What happened when he arrived provides a window into the relationship between documents, expat workers’ status in the country, at least those who worked on unpopular project like Ukhia Camp, and the surveillance we assumed was happening but rarely saw direct evidence of. Upon arriving back in the country, Nasir presented his passport with new visa to the immigration officials at the airport. Instead of stamping it and letting him through, the official examined his documents suspiciously, looked him over with what Nasir perceived as disgust, and called for a superior. When that superior arrived with two armed guards, Nasir say he knew
he was “in for it.” They took him to a windowless room in another part of the airport and questioned him for nearly eight hours. As they questioned him, the officials revealed that they knew much more about him than he would have imagined was possible after his earlier six-week stay. They said, “We know you work for Islamic Aid, why do you lie and say you are here on export business?” “You work with those refugees, we know all about it.” After hours of questioning along these lines, Nasir stuck to his story, that he had visited colleagues with Islamic Aid to do some observation, but his real business in the country was commercial. Eventually, Nasir said, “They got tired and wanted to go home and have their suppers, so they let me go. I think it was just a display. If they had really wanted to, they could have sent me back, or made me disappear and no one would have ever known.”

Both Nasir and Dr. Max blamed the visa problems (which had cost them each more than a month away from work) on the Islamic Aid staffer (the protocol officer) whose job it was to handle these kinds of things. As a group, the expats spent hours and hours speculating about why a large transnational NGO would do so little to make proper arrangements for their staff. They often posited that Anwar Hossein, the staffer whose job it was to secure visas was just an incompetent and lazy relative of someone important, implying that nepotism explained his incompetence.

But although foreign staffers loved to complain about Anwar Hossein’s poor work ethic and lack of connections, the conversations revealed a deeper sense of frustration and a shared belief that although Islamic Aid was a fairly large INGO, it did not act like one. Foreign staffers felt as if they were working for a second-rate outfit, one that did not do what an international organization should. The expats compared working in Bangladesh to other postings they had had in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Haiti, the Sudan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Darfur, and along
the Kenyan border with Somalia. Although they agreed that working in Bangladesh was far safer than many other places they had been posted, it was also less desirable. There was a lot of hassle, there was little sense of camaraderie, and foreigners found Bangladesh lacking diversions and opportunities for "R&R" (rest and relaxation).

So instead of welcoming the frequent trips to renew their paperwork, expat staffers saw the visa trips as a nuisance, a waste of time that prevented them from getting their work done, and as evidence that working at Islamic Aid specifically, or perhaps more generally in Bangladesh, was undesirable. As Nasir said to me when I characterized his month of visa time as extra vacation, he said, “Well not really. For a vacation, I want to be able to plan my time. This year I was going to take my PTO (paid time off) and do some advanced training in The Netherlands. I was already accepted to the course, and now I don’t think I can go. Shahid (the boss) is pressuring me to count this as time off; if I do that, I won’t have any PTO left. If they don’t count it as PTO, I still was not accruing hours on the job and in the country, so I was not accruing any PTO, so I might not have the time anyway, which is very frustrating, because I was trying to work, it’s just that there was not much I could do from Kathmandu, Nairobi or Cairo, where I was trying to check in from internet cafes. And to be honest, there is so much work to do; I don’t know if I can take any time at all. We are under-spending by so much, I have no idea how I am going to catch up.”

These sentiments, particularly the latter, were echoed by Dr. Max, who said, “if I take time off now, how will I do my job? We still have to make reports to ECHO [the funder] even if I am stuck in Istanbul waiting for my visa. I have to report to them and we haven’t even spent twenty percent of our budget. Who is going to do my job? Dr. Khalid - that idiot? Do you think
he will do my job? No, all he wants to do is collect his paycheck. He doesn’t want this headache.”

Dr. Shahid, the project manager for the refugee camp, was irritated and frustrated by the frequent disappearances of staff on these visa renewal trips. However, he also expressed a great deal of frustration with how the expat staff members handled the delicate negotiations. When Nasir was in Cairo, Dr. Shahid said, "This is stupid, Cairo is not the place. I do not know why he went there. Maybe he has a brother or a cousin there. Maybe it is closer to his wife and family. But I told him, to get a visa, you go to Nairobi. And why did he just take the 2-month tourist visa in the first place? I will tell you how it should be done," moving into his favorite storytelling mode.

"When I began work with Islamic Aid, my UN work visa was no longer valid so I had to go for a tourist visa. They said there is a long wait, but into my visa application, I put $100. The visa is only $30. So I said to the fellow, ‘Brother, this is for you. Can I come back this afternoon?’ He looked at the application, and said, ‘Yes brother, come back later.’ When I came back, he said, ‘Brother, you know, my son is sick and my family is large. Do you need me to give you some change?’ ‘No, no, brother, that is for you, thank you for all of your help.’ From then on, he would look out for me. One time I went and he was not there. They wanted to give me a one-month visa. I said ‘No, I need 6 months.’ They said ‘What will you do?’ I said ‘I am a tourist, I just want to visit.’ They said, ‘It is a small country, you can visit all in on one month.’ I said, ‘No, I have many friends and I want to go here and there and see them all, so please I need six months.’ And it was done. But I think maybe Nasir does not know how to have these conversations.”
The fact that securing visas was a perpetual concern of expat staff is just one indication of their importance and the kinds of impacts they had on individuals and the NGO. Without proper paperwork, expat staff were far less efficient than they should have been. Visa trips took time away from work, and using these trips to replace well-earned R&R meant that staff were more stressed and less rested. The hassles over securing visas probably meant that some NGOs did not bother to hire expats. For expats, not having legal paperwork meant living in a constant state of insecurity. This uncertainty affected them and the work they were able to do. In a similar way, Katy Gardner describes the uncertainty of her status in her field site when questions she asked led Bangladeshi villagers to suspect that she was a spy from the British Immigration service who had come to check up on them (1999: 64-66). Gardner describes the anxiety she experienced as she attempted to convince locals that she was merely an academic researcher.

Working on tourist visas, the Islamic Aid expats, like irregular migrants in other parts of the world, had become “criminals.” Some were clearly uncomfortable with being forced into this position: as ambitious, hard-working, well-educated individuals, this law-breaker subject position was one that some of my expat colleagues were unaccustomed to inhabiting. At the same time they acknowledged that Bangladesh was not the only country to make things difficult for foreign NGO staff; a few of my expat colleagues had stories of being expelled from various countries as part of their NGO work. Some kept a “go bag” packed at all times for just such occasions. Others traveled light and carried cash, never knowing when they might have to evacuate.

Although most of the expats I worked with at Islamic Aid seemed to think that breaking Bangladeshi law was trivial, the precarity that it generated affected these staffers and their work. In other settings anthropologists have examined the ways that precarity impinges on the lives of
refugees (Harney 2013), migrant farmworkers (McLaughlin and Hennebry 2013), displaced shanty dwellers in Rio (Millar 2014), call center workers (Matos 2014), transnational labor advocates in Spain (Casas-Cortés 2014), and poor urban workers in Bangkok (Endo 2014). In most of these cases, the idea of precarity is used to describe multiple ways that labor insecurity and poverty make people’s lives incredibly insecure. By contrast, the precarity experienced by expat workers at Islamic Aid did not put their actual lives at risk. Instead, it affected their work, their commitment to the organization and their day-to-day experience of living and working in Bangladesh.

One of the ways that the lack of legal status and proper paperwork had a clear impact was reflected in the unwillingness or perhaps inability of expat staff to advocate for the project with local officials. Because they were not in the country legally, the Islamic Aid expat staff avoided local officials whenever possible. It was not exactly that they were trying to hide, as we all believed that we were under surveillance. This was apparent to everyone as each day our movements were tracked as we passed through checkpoints managed by the Bangladeshi border guards. We also suspected that our activities were being reported on to powerful locals, secret police, and members of the government. However, staffers believed that it was one thing for officials to know of the work they were doing and another to have evidence of this work placed right in front of them. By avoiding any situation that might explicitly reveal their undocumented status, staffers sought to protect themselves, their work, and the organization by providing local officials with a kind of plausible deniability.

This was important to the project for a couple of reasons. As already mentioned, staffers were well aware that they were in the country illegally. While they usually joked and expressed frustration with the system, in private, the expressed a kind of fatalism since they knew they
could be kicked out of the country at any time. When leaving the project site for a meeting in Dhaka, or especially when leaving the country, expats were never sure if or when they would return. And although they knew that the government could ask them to go at any moment, expat staff seemed to feel that making themselves visible, and especially making trouble, would antagonize officials or jeopardize the project. Similarly, the expats and Bangladeshi staff were aware that neither the refugees nor the refugee camp itself had permission to be in the country. While everyone might rely on the tacit approval that was implied by the fact that there had been no evictions by the police or military, there was also an awareness that this tacit approval could evaporate at a moment's notice.

So expats avoided contact with officials. On a few occasions, as the political climate changed, more negative attention was focused on foreign staffers and their avoidance of officials became more explicit. Once such moment occurred in the summer of 2012 when Islamic Aid and other NGOs received the first of a series of letters from government officials ordering them to cease work with refugees. At the same time, a member of one of Bangladesh’s intelligence bureaus (NSI) began coming to the Islamic Aid office, demanding to see my visa and those of other foreigners.

Initially Dr. Shahid and other Islamic Aid staffers seemed to see these requests and demands as a part of a game. They responded to each request with legalistic tactics, for instance, demanding that requests be placed in writing and delivered to the headquarters in Dhaka. For the most part, expat workers responded with a kind of dark humor, making jokes about disappearances and being followed. But behind those jokes was a real sense of unease. One day Dr. Max called from Cox’s Bazar where he had just finished a meeting. Although he had planned to spend the night there, and despite the fact that the trip back would take three hours over
dangerous roads (a trip which was said to be unsafe at night and forbidden by company policy), he was calling to tell me he was on his way back.

“Misha, has anyone been to the office asking any questions? When I got to the hotel my guy told me that the NSI [National Security Intelligence] guy – you know, the one that rides the motorcycle – he has been here asking about me. They said he came back this afternoon to wait for me. He wants to see my passport. I will get kicked out for sure. So we’ll come back. Ha, ha, ha, if we make it!”

While the unease experienced by Dr. Max and other foreign staff clearly affected their day-to-day lives, the precarity of their situation was particularly troublesome when it would have been appropriate for expats to seek official redress or protection. As described in the account of roofing materials and corruption in Chapter Two, a few powerful local actors frequently caused trouble for the Ukhia Camp project. At times these troubles became acute. Yet the expats remained reticent, refusing to step forward, to complain, or to take any kind of public stance in defense of the project, the refugees or their local staffers. Their precarious legal status prevented Islamic Aid expats from asserting themselves with troublesome locals and discouraging them from alerting authorities to problems experienced at Ukhia Camp.

One of the most difficult locals was Mr. Ali, local politician turned businessman who found frequent opportunities to demand huge sums of money or other benefits from Islamic Aid. Too smart to be caught directly asking for bribes, he instead demanded payment for a range of local resources and services including water and use of a road. While Islamic Aid staff had conceded that paying him for water (that was not his) was a worthwhile proposition, they drew the line at paying him for use of a road that did not belong to him either. When he tried to
enforce his demands with violence, instead of speaking out, Islamic Aid staffers stayed quiet, a response shaped by the precarity they experienced every day.

This particular conflict began at the beginning of the monsoon season and involved the roadways that led into Ukhia Camp. The camp was located about a mile in from the main road. From that main road two roughly parallel dirt roads lead into camp. One was maintained by Islamic Aid and the other by local residents and those with business interests in the camp. Each of the roads was dirt in some places, brick in others. As the monsoon rains began in 2012, it was clear that the road maintained by Islamic Aid would require a good deal of work if it was to remain passible. Rashid, the cheerful young engineer on the project, reported what we could all see--where the road traversed a dam between two rice paddies, the sides were caving in. Soon it would be barely passable by foot, and impossible (or at the very least extremely dangerous) by passenger van (the regular form of transportation for expats and high status Bangladeshis working on the project). After some heated discussion, it was decided that the vans would have to cease travel in and out of camp, especially when it was raining hard.

Since Islamic Aid had refused to pay a tariff for the other road, the order was given that Islamic Aid vehicles had to wait out on the main road. For a few months we walked in and out of camp. For the expats, this should not have been much of a problem; most of us were able to walk with ease and some even welcomed the opportunity. But it did complicate life. Instead of working until the end of the day when transportation would arrive, expats and Bangladeshi medical doctors would try to time their departure to meet the passenger vans out on the main road with a minimum of waiting. Since it was monsoon season, there were many days when we would be caught in torrential downpours that demonstrated the basic uselessness of an umbrella.
There were also more serious problems with the arrangement. The first was status-related. It is almost unheard of for a high status Bangladeshi to walk. When the project manager or another high status staff member from Dhaka would visit, there was an awkward negotiation. We were forbidden to drive into camp, but since they could not or would not walk, the vans would be ordered down the dangerously eroding road. When that was impossible, sometimes the van would be ordered down the forbidden alternate road. Similarly, there was one expat staffer with some mobility issues (issues that were easily apparent in person, but which he had not disclosed in his electronic job application). As a result, he could not or would not walk the mile into camp, and usually just stayed back in the office, unable to do his job. Occasionally he would absolutely need to go into camp and would order the driver to proceed down one of the roads.

Although drivers knew that they would be held personally liable for any damage to the vans, their low status made it virtually impossible for them to refuse this risky driving. Perhaps the most pressing road-related negotiations occurred when there was a medical emergency. Islamic Aid had an ambulance, which was used to transport desperately ill or badly injured patients to hospitals in the region. There were limited funds to cover these kinds of external medical expenses, so it was rarely done, but still the sight of the Islamic Aid ambulance bringing a difficult case to Cox’s Bazar (3 hours away) or even Chittagong (8-12 hours away) was not unusual. This posed a problem for the ambulance driver. Clearly, if the patient needed more serious medical care that the camp clinic could offer, he or she was often not in condition to walk a mile. The Islamic Aid road was dangerous and sometimes impassible, and Dr. Shahid had forbidden all of us to use the other road.

When the Islamic Aid road became completely impassible, the ambulance driver, the expat staff and the medical doctors each sometimes made the decision to use the forbidden road.
We knew that driving on it could trigger some kind of conflict: demands for payment, blockades, strikes or even physical violence. But sometimes it seemed worth the risk. One day the ambulance driver made this calculation and, as he was driving out, Mr. Ali, the big man who had demanded payment for use of the road, stood in his way, blocking his exit. Mr. Ali demanded that Abdul get out of the ambulance, which he did. At that point, the Mr. Ali physically and verbally attacked him, beating him on the head, arms, chest, and back with a stick. No bones were broken, but Abdul was hurt and seriously shaken by the episode. Fellow employees brought him to the Islamic Aid office, where he was given first aid, a cup of tea and a few days leave.

Staff were outraged and fearful. They hoped that Islamic Aid as an organization or individual expat staff leaders would take steps to demand justice and prevent the same thing from happening to any other coworkers. But the expat staff were discouraged from making formal complaints by their own illegal status. After some discussion, a lower-status Bangladeshi staff member was sent to file a complaint. That complaint was never investigated, perhaps because the local officials presumed that it was not particularly important, since it had been lodged by a low-status person.

The cumulative impact of these episodes--staff members getting beaten, expats being refused proper visas, power grabs by Dhaka staff--for expats was that they felt alone and unsupported. They knew that if they got into trouble, the organization would not support them. As a result, they were unwilling to take risks. Max would laugh sometimes and say, “Oh it’s all right for you. If something happens to you, your country will send the Marines. One American girl in trouble, maybe they will send a whole battalion. But for us, nothing. We have no Marines, we have no security. We are on our own.” This sense of being on one’s own was exacerbated by the fact that none of the expats felt they could go to the Bangladeshi government if they ran into
trouble. This experience of being unprotected and vulnerable was one that I saw echoed across Bangladesh, as people struggled for a sense of security and stability. (For more on these issues, see Chapter Eight, in which I document some of the ways that fear and violence structure life in Bangladesh.)

In this way, the expats who worked for Islamic Aid (and those who worked for many of the other INGOs in the country) became certain kinds of governed subjects: subjects who lived in fear and believed that they were on their own. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that expats and transnational NGOs showed little loyalty when it came to working for refugees. Neither was it a surprise that there was little sense of camaraderie among the expats or between the expats and Bangladeshi staff.

**Refugee “Family Books”**

The Bangladesh and expat staff members were not the only actors governed by their documents, or lack thereof. Like refugees around the world, the Rohingya in Bangladesh had long been refused any kind of identity documents that would have regularized their status in the country. At the same time, like refugees in many parts of the world, many Rohingya also lacked identity documents from their native country. For Rohingya born in Bangladesh, this was even more complicated because they were stateless. In order to address this gap, and more importantly, in order to meet their own administrative and governance needs, various NGOs that had provided services at Ukhia Camp had issued identity documents, called family books, for use within the camp.

In the camp, these family books were used to prove residency and eligibility for the various distributions that occurred almost every month. Generated by another INGO that had done similar work in the camp, these booklets were laminated paper documents that featured a
photo of the head of household on the front, a photo of the whole family inside, the names and ages of all family members and the house number where they resided in the camp. Inside were pages on which to document participation in important camp activities like immunizations, public health campaigns, trainings and savings schemes. More importantly, these documents were also used by residents to prove they had the right to live in the camp and receive whatever distribution of free goods and services were provided. NGO staff marked these distributions in each family book and required residents to “sign” after each distribution with a thumbprint.

The documents were also useful outside the camp. Because the camps had been at least tolerated by officials and governmental offices, proof that one was a resident of the camp, and not a newly arrived refugee or migrant, was useful in many situations. For instance, while Rohingya are not legally allowed to work in Bangladesh, thousands do work, in construction, pulling rickshas, ship breaking, and doing household and day labor. However, the police frequently pick them up, jail them and sometimes threaten to deport them. A few Ukhia Camp residents told me that proving one had residence in Ukhia Camp by producing a family book (and sometimes with payment of a bribe or fine) would be enough to secure one’s release.

This is not quite as simple a process as it might sound. Those arrested can spend months in jail before seeing a judge. During this time, there is no opportunity to demonstrate one’s legal or quasi-legal status. Sometimes the workers are jailed far from the camp, making it difficult to get copies of the documents. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the jailed individuals are sometimes the primary or only earners in a household. Families in this situation might be unable to raise the fine or bribe money to secure the release of their jailed family member.

Although I heard tales of abuse suffered at the hands of police and other officials, sometimes judges and others involved in the courts or jails were surprisingly helpful. One
afternoon, Sadiq, the office manager, came into the office I shared with other staffers. He held a formal looking letter from a judge in Chittagong (8-12 hours away by bus). It seemed that a resident of Ukhia Camp had been jailed months earlier for working illegally. Someone in the judge’s office had written to say that if we provided documentation of the worker’s residence at Ukhia Camp, he would be released. What surprised me was that the courts took the time to request our assistance and that the simple family book could be used to provide documentation of one’s status as a semi-recognized refugee.

Because these family books were a valuable asset, it should not have surprised anyone that they were sometimes sold, complicating administrative life in the camp. On their face, the family books identified members of a household who were deemed to be Rohingya residents of Ukhia Camp. The book served as documentation of this fact and in most cases, also connected household members to a particular house. The value of the books therefore could be seen as three-part: 1. Right of residence; 2. Proof of residence, which could be useful when dealing with outside authorities; 3. Status as aid recipient, i.e., the rightful recipient of any goods distributed by NGOs. Most of the time, when a book was sold, it was sold as a whole; the right of residence, the identity document and the right to distribution of goods would transfer to the purchaser. But there were other cases in which families tried to separate these functions, for instance, cases where families continued to reside in the camp, but were selling the physical book to an outsider. In other cases, families might try to separate the constituent parts of the book and the rights each afforded.

Begum Ali's husband literally tore her family book apart, selling the inside pages to a local family, who understood the transaction to mean that they would thenceforth be the rightful recipients of any largess distributed by INGOs in the camp, while Begum Ali and her six
children would continue to reside in the camp. Not surprisingly, this kind of transaction was not sanctioned by any of the NGO staff. In Begum Ali’s case, her situation came to the attention of Islamic Aid staff when she produced just the outer cover of her book in an attempt to collect roofing materials that were being distributed to each household in the camp. After standing in line in a pouring monsoon downpour for more than two hours, Begum Ali reached the distribution point and handed over her torn book. Kazi, the young staffer checking the books, loudly asked ‘What is this?’ (eta ki?) and threw the book in rough manner towards Mehurun, whose job it was to affix thumbprint of each recipient into his or her booklet, acknowledging receipt of whatever good had been distributed.

Meherun looked at the torn book dismissively and asked Begum Ali why she was handing over a “broken” book. Begum Ali explained that the rest of the book had been lost. Meherun, who seemed not to believe this explanation, grabbed the book and set it onto a pile of books that were being held or confiscated for various reasons. Begum Ali began to protest, but Meherun waved her away and the team assistant, in charge of crowd control, demanded that she leave. She angrily turned and pushed her way through the crowd. A short time later she was back, this time with a community leader. He leaned in to the table where I was sitting with Meherun and Kazi. I rose and gave him my seat and he began to explain that the woman did live in the camp and it had been her husband who broke apart the book in order to get money to pay the agent who would smuggle him to Malaysia. He had been gone for months and had not been heard from. He urged us to provide Begum Ali with her housing materials like everyone else.

Kazi shook his head. “No, this is improper. She has destroyed her book. And what if the others come and they want to get something too?” Here he was referring to the purchasers of the other half of the book. When pressed further, Kazi looked to me for a decision, one I felt
unqualified to make. But in my role as (volunteer) community service officer, I was expected to make these kinds of decisions. So I suggested to Kazi and Meherun. "She lives here, correct? As a refugee? Yes? And the distribution is for all residents, for all refugee people from the camp. We cannot give to local people this time. So she qualifies and we must give her a distribution today. But there will need to be a decision made about these improper books. We will discuss with Brother Shahid (the director of the project). That way, we will know for next time." You can give her back her book, but make a note on the distribution log and she should mark it (give her thumbprint) and uncle (the community leader) should also."

Without a word, Begum Ali pushed up to the table. Meherun roughly grabbed Begum Ali’s thumb, pushed it into the ink pad and onto the laminated inside cover of the family book. Knowing that thumbprint and any writing would smear on the laminated surface, Meherun sighed as she tried to make note of the transaction and handed Begum Ali her book. Tucking the book back into the old plastic sack under her burqa, Begum Ali turned and the laborers handed her muddy plastic tarp and ropes with which she could keep the monsoon rain from her home. I was curious to see if the owners of the other half of the book would show up with a similar demand, but they never came, perhaps warned that the staffers would be looking for them.

Because sales of family books were largely undocumented and not sanctioned by NGO staff, they made the distribution of goods much more fraught. Sometimes a family sold their book, but continued to reside in the camp. When distribution of goods would be announced, sometimes both parties would show up to collect. Adding to the contested nature of distribution was the fact that the books were at least four years old. In many cases, the family had changed; members were added through marriage, birth, and new arrivals. Other members were lost to
death, out-migration, divorce and out-marriage. But the NGO staff insisted that only those pictured in the book could be present for to take a distribution.

They also insisted that only adult family members be allowed to officially receive goods or services. One hot summer day, I noticed that some children were lined up with the women to receive donations of clothing. Some of these small children were there as place-holders, standing in line until it was their turn, at which time a parent or grandparent might step in. But in other cases, there was no parent or grandparent. In order to get rid of the children, NGO staff would announce, ‘no small children!’ (chotto chele meye na!). But in truth, what constituted a small child was subjective at best, since frequently neither the staff nor the children themselves knew how old they were. So the children hoping to take charge of their family distribution were sized up by the staff. Some were deemed responsible or big enough, and others rejected out of hand.

When I asked about the logic of their decisions, Hamid, one of the staffers, explained, gesturing to a few small boys waiting in line. “Those kids are too small to leave fingerprints, if we allow it, there could be trouble. They might take the distribution, but not give it to the family. Then the father would come and complain. He would say, that is not mine [referring to the thumbprint].” Hamid said this all in a knowing way, seeming to imply that families would do this on purpose, hoping to catch Islamic Aid staffers breaking the rules so they might exploit the lapse for their own benefit.

The family books were relatively fragile objects, and the Ukhia Camp residents took great care of them. The women would carefully wrap their booklets in plastic sacks and tuck them away into their clothing for safekeeping. In fact, one shared characteristic of a person deemed to be not of sound mind (pagol or crazy) was that he or she would be careless with his or her family book.
While these objects were important assets for individual Ukhia Camp residents, they were essential for the NGO staff trying to run the camp. Because they had no legal status in Bangladesh, Ukhia Camp refugees were largely denied access to public institutions (hospitals, schools, courts etc). While Islamic Aid (like the INGOs that ran Ukhia Camp before it) was willing and able to manage the small camp hospital and emergency nutrition services for the camp, over time the organization was pulled into providing some of the many services that the government refused to provide: courts, police protection, schools, maternal and infant health programs, family planning, and public safety programs, like protection from cyclones. In essence, it became the government for a community of 15,000. (For more on this practice, see Chapter 6, in which I outline the ways that Islamic Aid acted as a surveillance arm of the government.)

In order to administer this small territory, Islamic Aid needed, in James Scott’s (1998) formulation, to make the population legible. Since most senior Islamic Aid staff (including the expats) had little familiarity with the individuals and families that resided in Ukhia Camp, the identity documents (i.e., Family Books) were essential for tracking participation (read compliance) in all sorts of activities: vaccinations, public health information sessions, vocational training, and savings programs.

Denied Bangladeshi citizenship and given no legal opportunity to regularize their status or secure identity documents that would allow them to travel, work or open a bank account, Rohingya residents relied on these informal identity documents. Although being denied many basic rights of citizenship did create hardship, some would argue that Rohingya refugees face problems not unlike poor and ultra poor Bangladeshis, millions of whom also lack identity documents and birth certificates.
In fact, the Government of Bangladesh acknowledged the problems faced by those without identity documents when, in 2012, it announced a new program to issue photo ID to all Bangladeshi citizens. Indeed, a World Bank project aims to complete this monumental task by 2016. Critics allege that providing poor Bangladeshis with these documents will deepen the gap between legal and illegal, leading to worse conditions for the Rohingya. Perhaps not coincidentally, there was a great deal of public handwringing in the Bangladeshi press at this time about Rohingya who might have traveled abroad for work on false Bangladeshi passports. Working alongside poor Bangladeshis in Middle Eastern construction projects, Rohingya had been subjected to brutal working conditions. However, politicians accused them of committing crimes abroad, tarnishing the reputation of Bangladesh. Such accusations were frequently repeated in news reports. Some accused Rohingya of taking international labor jobs from Bangladeshis in Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Abu Dhabi.

During the Hajj season of 2011, the Bangladeshi government announced a crackdown designed to prevent Rohingya from making the Hajj and potentially creating problems that would embarrass Bangladesh on the international stage. Although Bangladesh, as an Islamic state, explicitly supported the hajjis in making their obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca, Rohingya were an easy target for xenophobic accusations. A local landowner, Mostafizur Rahman, told me that these rules were flexible. “You know,” he said, “they [referring to powerful local leaders] give those Rohingya voter cards when it comes time for election. They can buy the votes and then the Rohingya has the card. He can sell it or maybe get a passport. Everyone knows.”

Although these Rohingya voters and the expats on tourist visas might have exemplified a kind of flexibility and creativity (Ong 1999), there were also human costs to a reliance on these documents. Some of the cost was emotional, as staff members, expats and refugees experienced
the anxiety and stress of having to procure and manage documents that would reflect a particular identity. Jansen describes the “humiliating entrapment” that citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia suffered, particularly when their less valuable passport was held up against the coveted EU version (2009:815).

Bruno Latour describes paperwork and files like these as “the most despised of all ethnographic objects” (1988:54). Yet Latour asserts that “’paper shuffling’ is the source of an essential power, (one) that constantly escapes attention since its materiality is ignored” (1988:54). In the case of the Islamic Aid office and refugee camp, the power to create, manage, acquire and validate identity documents was certainly a source of very real power. At the same time the governmentality hinted at by these varied technical regimes created particular kinds of subjects: expats afraid to rock the boat, Bangladeshi workers who relinquished ambition, and refugees with almost no recourse to improving their lives.

The particular bureaucratic practices outlined here: tracking refugees with family books, defining employees according to the educational paperwork they can produce and requiring expat to secure work visas that are seemingly impossible to acquire are not the only bureaucratic practices that help define NGOs, humanitarian aid work and government oversight of foreigners. Report writing, in particular, has been widely criticized as a onerous burden that governments and funders place on NGOs and grassroots aid recipients.

Bureaucracies of all kinds are widely criticized for generating red tape and burdensome administrative work, wastefulness, and imperialism (growth without concern for the impact of programs). NGOs often become more bureaucratic as they grow. Alvarez 1999, for instance, documents how, during the 1990s, neoliberal shifts away from providing aid to governments and
toward NGOs resulted in increased professionalization as grassroots organizations were forced to spending increasing amounts of time and energy writing grant applications and reports.

Although there are some key difference between identity documents like family books and year-end reports, there are also important similarities. Both kinds of documents reflect a Weberian scientific, modern approach to governance based in rationality and order. In practice, however, management of personal identity documents in Ukhia camp was far messier: documents could be sold or manipulated; some workers failed to secure the kinds of visas they were instructed to carry; and efforts to control Bangladeshi staff based on their educational qualifications often resulted in poorly selected staffers and low expectations. The tyranny of paperwork was omnipresent but its impact was uncertain.
Chapter Four: Power Struggles

In Bangladesh today, violence and conflicts over power are omnipresent.\textsuperscript{55} Fueled by political, economic, social and religious uncertainty, as well as desperate poverty, income disparity and population density, individuals and groups battle one another to gain the upper hand in conflicts large and small. Across Bangladesh every day people fight for jobs, fight to get enough to eat, fight through horrible traffic jams. For the poor, violence is a constant threat; the daily papers are filled with reports documenting ways that those with institutional power use violence, threats, coercion, manipulation, and extortion, particularly when dealing with the less powerful. Daily reports of industrial accidents, fires, traffic accidents, floods, boats capsizing and mudslides provide ample evidence of the many ways that structural violence shapes people’s lives.

My fieldwork reveals that Ukhia Camp and Islamic Aid are not free from the physical violence, structural violence and power struggles that characterize both Bangladesh and Myanmar. However, it is also evident that power in the camp is negotiated in sometimes surprising ways. Over the course of my fieldwork period with Islamic Aid, evidence of various loci of power began to emerge. It soon became evident that although the high-status Bangladeshi managers and expats did wield a great deal of power, there were other kinds of power that people who were part of the camp community employed. In this chapter, I argue that an important way to understand the function and dysfunction of Ukhia Camp is through the various conflicts and power struggles that play out in the course of a year. I also posit that these provide a window into the larger social struggles underway in Bangladesh and across the region.

\textsuperscript{55} For an examination of the ubiquity and historical trajectory of violence in contemporary Bangladesh, see Braithwaite and D’Costa 2012.
NGOs are powerful in myriad ways. Individual staff members make decisions that have profound impacts on the lives of their fellow staff members and on the lives of aid recipients. In this chapter, I document many kinds of action, communication and decision-making by those connected to the humanitarian intervention by Islamic Aid in Bangladesh. The sum of these might be understood as the work of the NGO or as evidence of the power of the NGO. However, as Pandolfi and others have pointed out, the influence of humanitarian aid is more than the sum of these locally visible actions. Pandolfi suggests that in places where humanitarian aid is arranged parallel with local rule, this “migrant sovereignty serve[s] to link transnational forms of domination over local political practices” (2003:369). In this way, we might see each international NGO (or local NGO funded with international money) as interconnected parts of a larger system of domination. Together, they challenge local norms and values related to language, gender roles, work, subjectivity, consumption, globalism, temporality, religiosity and development. But international organizations originating in the global north are not the only transnational forms of domination at work in Bangladesh. Other, competing influences include the various strains of political Islam (these include Saudi-style Wahhabism, Islamist forces and political factions sympathetic to Pakistan) and financial investments by China and others (including the Asian Development Bank).

**Micropolitics of Camp Life**

When I started work with Islamic Aid in one of their Chittagong sites, I was introduced to dozens of staffers nearly all at once. Struggling to learn their names and roles and make myself understood in Bengali, at first the staff seemed to be an undifferentiated mass. As I quickly got to know people, I could see that there were real divisions based on national origin (foreigners versus Bangladeshis); education and class (these were overlapping domains but not mutually
inclusive); gender; religiosity; ethnicity and religion (again, two domains with a great deal of overlap) and, for Bangladeshi staff, whether they were from local communities or if they were career NGO workers drawn from other parts of Bangladesh (this distinction also partially mapped onto the class/education divide, but revealed other differences, outlined below).

These differences helped shape the various factions at work in the camp. Not surprisingly, staff and refugees have complex identities, each reflecting an amalgamation of experiences, subjectivities and social roles (see Grewal and Kaplan 1994). So although there were factions in the camps, membership in the factions was fluid, as members privileged different aspects of their identities depending on the situation. Anna Tsing describes a similar kind of fluidity, asserting that

To understand even momentary successes of this kind of motley coalition, analysts must attend to the changing definitions of interests and identity that both allow and result from collaborative activities. They must focus on the historical specificity of the events that resulted in alliance and the open-ended indeterminacy of the regional processes stimulated by that alliance. These are useful reminders in rethinking transnational interactions. (Tsing 2000:348-9)

Perhaps as a result of this dynamism, I sometimes wondered to myself, who is in charge here? The question was more than rhetorical. At first glance, the workplace seemed to reflect the official hierarchy indicated on the organizational chart, which was supported by cultural norms that apportioned status differentially on the basis of religion, political party affiliation, ethnicity, gender, class, education, age and national origin. However, in the quotidian workings of office and camp, there were frequent hints that the answer to the question of who is in charge was not to be found in organizational charts. In this chapter I outline a few of the ways that bids for power were made and responded to. These bids for power and influence were sometimes predicated on structural power; at other times, actors used knowledge to consolidate power, or relied on physical violence, verbal threats, economic manipulation, or surveillance. Some
conflicts resulted in dramatic shifts, others led to more subtle ones. Both had an impact on the
day-to-day functioning of the camp, and the effectiveness of Islamic Aid.

During my time in the field, I began to see that one way to understand the working of the
NGO was as a set of tensions, relationships and sometimes shifting alliances. More specifically, I
argue that although the Dhaka-based NGO managers and the projects’ expat managers held
virtually all of the institutional power of the organization, there were other sources of power in
the camp. The tensions between these kinds of power helped shape the organization and the kind
of work it was able to do. As I had seen in Dhaka, social status and class were correlated with
much of the expression of institutionalized power. Higher status, more educated staff members
(particularly foreigners) had more control (at least officially) over hiring, firing, schedules,
budgets and day-to-day operations. And yet, those without access to officially sanctioned
institutional power sometimes exerted a surprising amount of control over their own lives and the
workplace.

**Expats Versus Bangladeshi Managers**

One of the clearest and most obvious power struggles took place between expat staff
members on the Ukhia Camp project and managers in the Dhaka office, which was also the
country headquarters for Islamic Aid. As described in Chapter 1, Islamic Aid is a transnational
non-governmental organization based in London. Islamic Aid UK has offices and projects
around the world; each has some autonomy but ultimately reports back to the UK headquarters.
Within Bangladesh, this system of semi-autonomous projects reporting to a central office is
replicated. Across the country, there are development and humanitarian projects that focus on
health, nutrition and economic development. Each reports to the Dhaka office, especially in
matters relating to policy, budgets, and hiring. Although the refugee project in Ukhia Camp was
sometimes described as just another of these projects, in reality, it was quite different. Unlike the other projects, the Rohingya refugee project had foreign staff members, a big grant from a very engaged foreign donor, and was in both the international and national spotlights.

It is important to note that these expat staff and their connections (real and imagined) to powerful foreigners automatically raised the stature of the organization. This phenomenon is not surprising in Bangladesh, where a shared sense of low national self-esteem\(^{56}\) leads Bangladeshis, low- and high-status alike, to look outside the country for ideas, goods and experiences they would characterize as valuable.

Prestige and international contacts notwithstanding, Islamic Aid managers in Dhaka sought to treat the Rohingya project as just one of the many projects it managed across Bangladesh. This led to ongoing conflicts and power struggles, but most of these existed just below the surface, arising as the staff from the Dhaka office and expatriate staff of the refugee project each sought to assert some control over both the day-to-day and long-range plans for the organization. Conflicts between Dhaka staff and the expatriate staff of the refugee project were most evident in their frequent disagreements over staffing and hiring, conflicts over paperwork, and conflicts over money.

\(^{56}\) By shared sense of low self-esteem, I mean that many Bangladeshis, while proud of their country and its history, seem to feel that Bangladesh is at the bottom in terms of international competitions (as measured by social indicators, economics, sports, arts, cosmopolitanism etc). I frequently heard Bangladeshi colleagues apologize for problems like corruption or inadequate infrastructure by citing the fact that UN categorizes Bangladesh as a LDC (using the English language acronym for Least Developed Country). I also noticed that many of the Bangladeshis I met thought that goods produced elsewhere (usually China) were automatically superior to those produced in Bangladesh. This mirrors Arturo Escobar’s argument that focusing on discourse allows one to see the domination in development. He writes, “To see development as a historically produced discourse entails an examination of why so many countries started to see themselves as underdeveloped in the early post– World War II period, how “to develop” became a fundamental problem for them, and how, finally, they embarked upon the task of “un-underdeveloping” themselves by subjecting their societies to increasingly systematic, detailed, and comprehensive interventions” (1994:5).
In other chapters, I have documented a few of the other ways that Dhaka staff sought to exert control over the project and its expat staff. In Chapter Three I outline how Dhaka staff dominated the hiring and firing process for refugee project staff and how they kept a tight grip on the seemingly impossible task of securing work visas for expat staff. Chapter Five reveals some of the ways that the Dhaka staff tightly regulated all spending that project staff did. Dhaka staff also held the passports of expat staff and arranged all their travel, creating a kind of dependency, as well as shaping their experiences of Bangladesh. In this way, the expats of Islamic Aid follow a well-documented (and often critiqued) pattern: aid workers cut off from the realities of their duty stations through the real and metaphoric insulation of white SUVs and expat compounds. While the impact of this isolation on the surrounding communities has been documented (Ron and Golan 2010, Smirl 2008), less well documented is the impact this segregation has on the expat aid workers themselves. I contend that Bangladeshi managers in the Dhaka office sought to consolidate their influence over expats and the project by controlling their movement. For expats, this was experienced as both luxury and limitation. On one hand, expats enjoyed being able to delegate much of the minutiae of their lives; travel can be a headache in the developing world. There are security and safety concerns as well as the sometimes significant inconvenience of canceled flights, washed-out roads, flat tires and other breakdowns in the transportation system. And yet ceding control over when, how, and where they would travel ensured that expat staffers had little autonomy and virtually no experience of Bangladesh unmediated by their Islamic Aid colleagues.

These examples demonstrate that while the Dhaka staff might recognize (and begrudge) the privileges that expatriate staff enjoyed (higher pay, travel abroad, access to jobs and resources outside Bangladesh), inside the country and within the NGO, the Dhaka managers
were determined to, and often did, exert whatever control they could over their foreign colleagues and the organization.

No Carrots, No Sticks

Another arena for conflict between Dhaka staff and expats was related to managing the Bangladeshi staffers in the refugee camp. Although the expatriates who managed the refugee project were well-respected professionals with internationally recognized credentials and experience, in reality they had little control over many day-to-day aspects of running the camp. When it came to hiring, firing and managing staff, the expats were nominally in charge, but in reality the Dhaka staff was in control. For one example of this imbalance, see Chapter 3, where I document how expats were invited to help conduct job interviews, but because they did not speak the local language, were unable to actually participate in the process. Another example, detailed here, arose during a winter 2011 staffing crisis.

When I arrived at the refugee camp, one of the most enthusiastic welcomes I got was from Famida, an educated, middle-aged Bangladeshi woman who spoke terrific English and had lived in the United States. Separated from her husband, she had been working on the refugee project for a few months and eagerly sought my company. I quickly observed, however, that her professional life was filled with conflict and I began to wonder why. Was it due to the challenges she faced as one of the few women working on the project? Because of her anomalous status as a western-oriented woman living apart from her husband? Or other factors that were less obvious?

Along with some of her male colleagues, Famida regularly made statements to me valorizing the United States and denigrating Bangladeshi ways. “Misha,” she asked, “why would you come here? Everything is so backward. People here are ignorant and stupid. As soon as my daughter is a little older I am going to leave.” Unsure of what made her articulate these
sentiments, and unwilling to be implicated in Bangladesh-bashing, I tried to steer the conversation to more neutral topics. A few weeks after these awkward conversations, I gave in and decided just to listen. Soon after I had to leave the refugee camp for some meetings in Dhaka. When I returned, Famida was gone.

While some of the staff were hesitant to explain her absence, Dr. Max quickly filled me in. Famida, who had frequently expressed her unhappiness with her position in the organization, had open defied her direct supervisor, and when challenged, had begun a campaign of racist criticism against him.

I had learned that at Islamic Aid, jobs were ranked and categorized into four tiers: expat staff, Bangladeshi professional staff, low-status Bangladeshi staff and refugees. Expats were paid in foreign currency and their salaries were (somewhat) competitive with those at other INGOs around the world. In essence, these salaries were on a European standard. They included paid vacation, hardship pay, health benefits, and other perks.

Bangladeshi staff were paid far less, and had fewer benefits. The Bangladeshi staff at Islamic Aid ranged from guards and cleaners with little or no education to medical doctors. At the lowest end, staffers made 8,000 taka per month (about $105). At the highest end, some earned 45,000 taka (about $600). Refugees were paid almost nothing. In fact, NGOs (like other local employers) were not officially allowed to hire refugees, but in practice Islamic Aid managers did occasionally hire refugees as day laborers. For this each refugee would be paid 100 taka for the day ($1.30). Islamic Aid also hired some young Rohingya as peer community health workers; they were paid 1100 taka ($14) per month for nearly full-time work.

While the average Bangladeshi staff person did not have access to accurate details about expats’ salaries (unlike those of their Bangladeshi colleagues, which were common knowledge),
it was quite obvious to all that there was a large pay differential. Although they rarely discussed it in front of expats, some of the Bangladeshi staff resented the different pay scales and the privileges that expats took for granted. One of the most vocal critics was Famida. When she applied for the job with Islamic Aid, she knew that the position, as a nutrition assistant, had been designated as an in-country job for Bangladeshi nationals. Yet one of Famida’s chief complaints was that she thought she should have been hired as an expat (with expat pay and benefits). Perhaps because of this frustration, she refused to work cooperatively with her supervisor, Omar.

An easy-going Ethiopian nutritionist, with work experience in both Africa and South Asia, Omar had never before worked in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, he seemed comfortable and worked hard. Because he spoke no Bangla and most of the nutrition team spoke no English, a key part of Famida’s job was to convey Omar’s instructions and relay information back and forth. As Famida’s resentment grew, this mediated communication began to break down. Frustrated, Omar spoke to some of us, asking advice on what to do.

“To my face she says ‘Yes, Brother, we’ll take care of that,’ but when I return nothing is done, and the helpers don’t even know what they should be doing. Do you think she is misunderstanding me?”

New to the organization, I didn’t know what to say. I later learned that Omar had first tried to be friendly, and when those efforts failed, he tried to be stern. When that seemed to have no effect, he spoke to Dr. Shahid, head of the project. Soon after, word began to trickle back that Famida was not only openly defying Omar, she had also begun to refer to him using racist terms and lobbying her Bangladeshi colleagues to also disrespect him.

When Dr. Shahid learned of this, he called her into the office. Openly defiant, she refused to apologize, so he fired her. More specifically, he tried to fire her. After telling her to pack her
things, Dr. Shahid sent an email to the Dhaka office, outlining what had happened. At the same
time, Famida was calling the private cell phone of the country director. Soon, Dr. Shahid got an
email from the Islamic Aid country director. He was told that he could not fire Famida, and that
the situation would be reviewed by the central office. Dr. Max later described the situation to me,
“Oh man, was he pissed. I mean, the situation is fucked. She was actually calling Omar a nigger.
Everyone knows it, and we can’t fire her? Jesus!”

While the central office “investigated,” Famida was placed on leave and only rarely came
into the office. After two months, she was given her old job back. Dr. Max and Dr. Shahid were
angry, while Omar was more philosophical. He pointed out to both of them that he was still in
charge of the nutrition department, not her.

Over time, I came to see that control over hiring and firing was a valuable asset, carefully
guarded by the central office. Jobs were like gifts, handed out for a variety of reasons.
Sometimes, but not always, those reasons included factors like whether or not the person was
actually qualified for the position.

The situation with Famida was not the only staffing problem at the refugee camp. In fact,
the many staffing problems took up most of Dr. Shahid’s time. These staff-related problems,
included nurses who refused to work particular shifts, doctors who told patients that they would
only give good care to those who came to the after-hours clinic down the street (where a
premium would be charged for services which should have been rendered for free), staff
members who didn’t bother showing up but had others sign time cards for them, staff members
who broke rules against hiring close relatives and even staff members who were accused of
falsifying academic credentials to get jobs they didn’t deserve. The problem, according to Dr.
Shahid, was that he had “inherited” most of the staffers from the NGO that ran the Ukhia Camp
project before Islamic Aid, and had no real power to shed the troublemakers or hire effective replacements.

**Biopower/ Disinterested Power**

One of the key theoretical concerns that arises in both analyses of the treatment of refugees and investigations of humanitarian interventions is the notion of sovereignty. Pandolfi explains that anthropologists engage with the notion of sovereignty through the constructs of biopolitics (see Foucault 1988, 2008); and bare life (see Agamben 1995, 1998; Pandolfi 2003:373). Pandolfi (2003) and others have pointed out that biopolitical control over the totality of certain lives and bodies is, paradoxically, both a feature of horrors like concentration camps and of seemingly benign practices like humanitarianism. In both kinds of situations, individuals are reduced to physical bodies.

Applying the notion of biopolitics to the management of refugees in Bangladesh, it is easy to see how government agents (politicians, bureaucrats and other officials) and INGOs have been, and continue to be, deeply concerned with the bodies of displaced people. INGOs like Islamic Aid, and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, also known as Doctors Without Borders), donors like ECHO and international organizations like UNHCR justify their commitments to the Rohingya as “life-saving” work. Reports from NGOs to donors enumerate lives saved, bodies inoculated, latrines built and water supplies maintained. But these international actors pay virtually no attention to individual refugees and their struggles or aspirations. This situation is amplified by the dicta of the Bangladeshi government, which forbids refugees to work or attend school and forbids NGOs and international aid organizations from providing food aid, education
and anything but the most basic health services. Instead, the NGOs working with refugees in Bangladesh, like humanitarian organizations elsewhere around the world, are enjoined to keep the refugee person’s body alive, but not to assist him or her beyond this minimal level.

In fact, in Islamic Aid and other organizations, I regularly saw what I would best describe as indifference, sometimes outright hostility, to the suffering (or perceived suffering) of the aid recipients. Among the expats, this indifference was mostly evident in the day-to-day work they each did. The expat jobs were largely technical and supervisory: they oversaw the medical, nutrition, housing, water, and sanitation services that made up the core of Islamic Aid’s mandate in the camp. In each of these areas, expat staffers supervised a team of Bangladeshis who carried out the specific tasks needed to achieve the organization’s goals and obligations in that sector. The expats each had responsibility for managing staff, conducting trainings, creating reports for funders, and helping secure future grants that would enable them to continue to perform these tasks.

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57 As described in Chapter One, the Government of Bangladesh forbids NGOs from providing food to the unofficial refugees housed in Ukhaia camp and elsewhere. At the same time, these unofficial refugees are forbidden from working. Yet they are able to feed themselves (sometimes just barely). Many work in Bangladesh illegally, doing the most difficult and dangerous jobs for the lowest wages, a practice that earns them the resentment of the poor Bangladeshis with whom they compete. Some observers point out that local business owners rely on this low wage labor, especially in the construction and ship-breaking businesses, and it has been argued that these powerful actors might even fight efforts to regularize Rohingya status to preserve the pool of low wage labor. Many small businesses thrive in the camp, mostly tiny shops, vendors in the open air market, a few tea stalls and barbers. Some women in the camp acknowledge that there were some doing sex work, and it was a poorly kept secret that some unmarried adolescent girls from the camp were regularly traveling to larger urban centers in the region for sex work. Some Rohingya travel overseas (Thailand, Malaysia or the Middle East) where they work as manual laborers and hope to send some remittances back to Bangladesh once traffickers and other agents have been paid off. As detailed in Chapters Three and Eight, efforts to travel overseas are often stymied by corrupt traffickers who hold migrants for ransom. International observers have also documented cases where Rohingya have been left adrift to die on the open sea, other cases when they are forced to work without wages on fishing vessels and cases where women and girls are sold into sex work or sold as brides to laborers overseas.
At the same time, expat staffers spend much of their energy preoccupied with personal matters. This preoccupation was quite understandable. For instance, most expat staffers were concerned with finding jobs. Since their contracts (like those offered expat workers in other organizations and other settings) only extended for a year or two, expats spend a good deal of time thinking about or planning for what would come next. Another important preoccupation was the well-being of their family members, left thousands of miles away. This was particularly troubling for the many workers who had advanced to expat status after successful careers as national staff in countries which had significant NGO presences: Sudan (and South Sudan), Kenya, Pakistan, the former Yugoslavia, Libya, Nepal, and Indonesia. In some cases, the situations family members faced at home were relatively safe and stable, for others, more precarious.

Expats were also physically absent from the refugee camp much of the time. As outlined in Chapter Three, expat staffers had to leave the country multiple times a year to renew their visas. And many times each month, one or more expat staffers were away for days at time for meetings with staff from other international aid organizations, or with Islamic Aid Dhaka staff, the funders or other important stakeholders. With all of these demands on their time and attention, it was perhaps not surprising that expat staffers seemed to have almost no connection with the refugees they were there to help.

Most of the expat staff I met at Islamic Aid and other organizations did seem to be well-intentioned professionals with extensive experience and solid training. Most were ambitious mid-career men58 who had parlayed success at NGO work in their home countries into international professional training and eventually, into international aid jobs. But as a group, the expats of

58 All of the expats I met at Islamic Aid were men, but other INGOs operating in the region, like MSF or Action Against Hunger, did regularly hire women expats.
Islamic Aid and other organizations had little investment in working in Bangladesh per se. They often knew little about the country or its history, didn’t speak the language, and had little investment in the fate of the refugees. Instead they were contract workers getting a job done. Some had a very clear plan to work internationally for a set period of time, which would enable them to return to wives, children and the responsibilities of extended family with considerable savings and the international connections that would ensure them lucrative and prestigious posts upon their return. Nasir, for instance, is a 30-something-year-old Egyptian nutrition expert who had worked in a number of humanitarian aid settings, and was using his salary to purchase land adjacent to his father’s property. He planned to rent these properties and eventually return to Cairo for work with an international NGO (once the political situation stabilized). In contrast, a few staffers had become accustomed to the life of an expat and seemed to have only vague plans to return to homelands and family.

Although as staff members for a humanitarian organization, these workers were obviously easy to classify as “humanitarians,” in another sense they were completely removed from idea of humanitarianism characterized as sentiments mobilized by suffering. Obviously, it is difficult to give examples of the absence of something--in this case sentiment). But it was clear that expats rarely spoke with individual refugees, and knew little about their day-to-day lives. Similarly, expats displayed little concern for individuals who were suffering acutely, or for those who died, except as matters to be reported, or sometimes investigated. Similarly, when it came to policies around sexual violence (GBV), the concern was with documentation, but not on making the camp safer. When it was revealed that some savings belonging to refugees had possibly been stolen, the expat staffers I spoke with expressed no sympathy or acknowledgement of how
significant the loss of a few thousand taka might have been for the refugees, and little effort was made to rectify the situation.

So instead of running the operation based on humanitarian values, the driving force that animated the activities of the expat staff seemed to be a desire to minimize conflict, meet goals, and please the funders, as well as to get a better job after their time with Islamic Aid’s Rohingya project had ended. While expats and Bangladeshi managers might be moved to act on a problem, they were almost never engaged the specificities of individual human suffering. Seen from the perspective of biopolitics, Islamic Aid staffers mostly saw refugees in the aggregate. Staffers did not learn the names of individual refugees, nor the experiences that had prompted their flights from Myanmar.

As a result, I came to see many of the powerful staff members as wielding a kind of disinterested power. Some of these staffers literally held the keys to life and death; others controlled whether people might suffer or prosper. But all of their decisions were made without acknowledgement of the profundity of that power. Whether or not it was intended, this disinterest was easy to read as callousness or indifference.

A Losing Battle: Fighting With Nurses

One of the most visible conflicts in the camp was between nurses and the (mostly expat) Islamic Aid senior managers (who were also medical doctors\(^59\)). After a series of discussions about maternal mortality and management of difficult labor and delivery with ECHO (the funder), Islamic Aid managers ordered the nursing staff to rearrange their schedules in order to

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\(^59\) Conflict between nurses and medical doctors is not unique to Bangladesh or refugee camps; the phenomenon has been widely observed in allopathic (Western/biomedical) medical settings around the world. For a review of the literature on these conflicts see Corser 2000.
start covering overnight shifts. The nurses refused to comply and used a variety of tactics to ensure that they wouldn’t have to follow this mandate.

At the Islamic Aid-run clinic at Ukhia Camp, the doctors and nurses occupied what were almost completely separate spheres. As noted in Chapter One, the camp and camp clinic could be read as a set of physical and social spaces organized by gender, and by status. The female nursing staff at Ukhia Camp occupied a part of the clinic known as ANC/PNC, (the ante-natal clinic and post-natal clinic). As the name suggests, the nurses saw female patients for prenatal, postnatal and well-baby clinics. They also provided birth control and were supposed to be available for exams when women experienced sexual violence.\(^6\) Attached to the ANC/PNC clinic was the small, windowless outbuilding that served as an inpatient clinic, where seriously ill patients could be kept overnight. Within the dark, airless clinic, just one curtained-off room functioned as a space for labor and delivery. The room was sparsely furnished with a steel exam table, a couple of hard plastic chairs and low rope cot that nurses and other visitors could rest on.

While the rates of maternal mortality and morbidity were dramatically better for Ukhia Camp residents and the other local women who used the Islamic Aid clinic than had been documented for the group before NGOs began assisting them, they were not as low as the project’s donor (ECHO) would have liked. In an effort to please the ECHO staffers, Islamic Aid managers began to consider changes that would improve their numbers. There were a number of challenges to keeping maternal mortality and morbidity rates low. Some of these were connected to the characteristics of the patient population: local women and camp residents married young and had their first pregnancies at early ages (some as young as thirteen or fourteen), women in

\(^6\) Unfortunately female nurses told me they had no training in this area and would not be comfortable doing exams for women who had experienced sexual violence. As mentioned earlier, there were no female medical doctors at the Ukhia Camp medical clinic.
the camp were often malnourished, there were very high fertility rates (women in the camp averaged five pregnancies each; some had far more). Other problems were more directly connected to the care that Islamic Aid provided; there were no female medical doctors on staff, and the local hospital was unwilling to see patients from the Rohingya community. Ideally, women with particularly difficult labor would be brought by Islamic Aid’s private ambulance to the hospital in Cox’s Bazar two to three hours away over rough roads. Islamic Aid allocated funds to pay the hospital bills for such emergencies, but the fund was small, and so only the most obviously life-threatening cases were transferred. Possibly more critical was the fact that nurses, who managed most of the labor and delivery cases, only worked during the day. Patients who went into labor at night usually stayed in their homes, relying on the handful of traditional birth attendants (TBAs) who lived and worked in the camp for a small stipend. While the TBAs were experienced and thought to be competent, they had little training and few resources for dealing with any complications that might arise.

When Islamic Aid managers decided to have nurses on duty around the clock, they first communicated this message to the head nurse, Rehana. A few days later, Rehana reported back to Dr. Shahid that there were problems. The female nurses were complaining bitterly and refused to take the evening or overnight shifts. She had scheduled the two male nurses to work those shifts, but she noted, this did not help with the problem of care for labor and delivery patients who would refuse to be examined by a male nurse or doctor. Dr. Shahid listened politely at first, but then grew irritated and demanded that she just make the schedule and then they (the nurses) would have to work the shifts they were assigned. In the weeks that followed, the female nurses continued to face challenges.

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61 There were eight traditional birth attendants in camp, all grandmothers, who had been given training by the nursing staff. Most were already experienced birth attendants or midwives before the training.
nurses steadfastly refused to work nights, often reducing Rehana to tears. They tore up the schedule, refused to show up and tried to enlist the clinic doctors to support their cause.

Dr. Shahid and Dr. Max grew increasingly frustrated and angry. At one meeting I attended, Dr. Max shouted at the nurses for more than an hour, threatening to fire them all if they did not comply. A few days later, with the intercession of a few senior staffers, the nurses met with Dr. Shahid. They explained that they could not work nights because it was too dangerous and there was no transportation to help them get safely from their homes to the camp and back. In response, Dr. Shahid changed the Islamic Aid drivers’ hours, so that they would take the nurses to the clinic and bring them home again. For a few weeks the nurses seemed to comply, but soon Rehana returned to the office, at a loss to know what to do with the nurses who once again were refusing to work nights. According to Rehana, part of the problem was that she was the only ethnic Bengali nurse on staff. The rest of the nurses, all members of tribal communities, had joined forces to oppose her and the new orders.

The situation was complicated by a number of social, gender, and historical factors. For instance, although it was not discussed in the workplace, most of the nurses had come from tribal communities in the nearby Chittagong Hill Tract. As linguistic, religious and cultural minorities in Bangladesh, the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts had experienced state-sanctioned violence, displacement and discrimination since the days of partition. As a result, relations between ethnic Bengalis and members of tribal communities were often strained.

62 As a result of state sanctioned violence and displacement, thousands of members of Chittagong Hill Tract tribes had fled to India as refugees in the 1990s. Since that time, the government of Bangladesh had allowed resettlement of large numbers of ethnic Bengalis in the region, dramatically changing the demographics of the area. In response to the violence and loss of land, and with the covert support of India, members of various hill tribes waged an armed insurgency against the government of Bangladesh. Although a Peace Accord was signed in 1997, scholars like Amena Mohsin (2003) have documented ongoing violence as well as social, political and economic discrimination in the region. In my visits, it was quickly apparent that the Chittagong Hill Tract remains a heavily militarized area.
Another factor that complicated interpersonal relations in Ukhia Camp was the fact that culturally, religiously, and linguistically many tribal communities saw themselves as closely related to the Rakhine Buddhists in Myanmar, that is, the very people that had been in conflict with the Rohingya. So although there had been no incidents of violence committed by refugees against staff in the camp, female members of the nursing staff refused to work at night, citing fears for their safety. It was unclear whether they really believed themselves to be in danger, or whether implying fears of sexual violence was a rhetorical technique.63

In their day-to-day interactions with Rohingya patients, the nurses varied quite a lot. Some were warm and friendly, others were hostile, but overall their attitude towards the women they treated seemed to be one of indifference. Each day as female camp residents (and other poor local women) lined up in the heat or monsoon rain for their visits with nurses, the nurses themselves seemed detached from the suffering experienced by the Rohingya women. When Dr. Shahid and Dr. Max sought to secure the nurses’ agreement to work nights by capitalizing on their sense of sympathy, fair play and professional ethics when asking them to work nights, the nurses refused to budge.

When Dr. Max had threatened to fire all the nurses, it was unclear whether he actually had the power to do so. Had he been successful, his efforts might have made real problems for Ukhia Camp. According to Dr. Shahid, there were few female nurses in the area. He and other Islamic Aid managers believed that it would be difficult to recruit new female nurses (especially ethnic Bengalis) to a place as dangerous and remote as Ukhia Camp. In the end, the managers,

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63 When I asked nurses privately, they insisted that their fears were real. Some of their colleagues however, insisted that the fears were less about actual physical violence and more about the potential damage to their reputations that working at night might cause. Still others argued that there was a single powerful female nurses who did not want the inconvenience of working nights and who had enlisted her fellows in a campaign to avoid the nuisance.
including Dr. Shahid, Dr. Max and Rehana gave up. They scheduled male nurses to work in the early evening, and reported to ECHO that without additional funding for security, and more staffing, it would not be possible to have nurses on duty around the clock. The female nurses, with the assistance of a few doctor allies, had successfully refused a series of direct orders, demonstrating that there were different kinds of power and influence at work in Ukhia Camp.

_Nurses and Refugees: Indifference, Caution or Hostility?_

As described above, the managers of Ukhia Camp often seemed to operate with little thought about the well-being of camp residents themselves. But expats and Bangladeshi medical doctors were not the only staffers to wield this kind of disinterested power. The nurses at the Islamic Aid clinic acted in a similar fashion. I noticed, for instance, that when the nurses were fighting orders to work at night, they expressed no concern for the well-being of the women who might need assistance in the late hours. At the same time, nurses grew irritated that mothers, mothers-in-law and even sisters or grandmothers would sometimes crowd into the small inpatient wing that also served as labor and delivery area. The nurses argued that these women were a disruption and an impediment to the provision of modern birthing services, and successfully had all the relatives banned from the labor and delivery room. Women in the camp were outraged, and rightfully so; as Zaman (2013) and others have argued, in Bangladesh, family members provide essential care work for hospitalized family members; care work like toileting, bathing and feeding patients that nurses sometimes cannot or will not do. In this case, nurses, like the doctors and expats, showed that the work in Ukhia Camp was just “a job.” They were able to wield power to demand certain hours and working conditions without showing concern for how these would affect patients and their families. Thus the nurses’ attitudes, their primary concern with their own well being and their own careers and their seeming indifference to the well-being
of camp residents mirrored the concerns of the expatriates, further complicating the idea of humanitarianism.

The Power of Translation – Translation, Mediation and Bridging

Returning to the central question of who is in charge of the refugee camp, there were some staff members who particularly skilled at establishing themselves as essential to the running of the camp. In the following pages, I outline the work of three of these staff members and argue that their facility with English and their willingness and skill in working closely with expat managers gave them each far more power than their positions alone would have dictated. At the same time, these positions of relative power were not entirely protected; being perceived by expats as overstepping the bounds of their positions sometimes led to negative repercussions and loss of status. This analysis parallels some of the insights made by Bierschenk et al (2013) on the role of brokers in NGO work as well as Mosse and Lewis’ 2006 volume, which tries to capture not only the role of brokering but also the process of (social) translation

As described in Chapters One and Six, Bangladeshi staffers, particularly those who worked in senior positions or the in the office, were expected to speak English. Bangladeshi staff members with no English skills were at a huge disadvantage.\textsuperscript{64} This aspect of work at Islamic

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\item[64] Bangla language plays an essential role in Bangladeshi identity. During British occupation of South Asia (1757-1947) English was privileged as the language of governance, commerce and elite education (Chowdhury and Kabir 2014:13). Following the 1947 Partition British India, the Dominion of Pakistan (territory which included contemporary Pakistan and Bangladesh), made Urdu and English the official languages, even though Bangla was spoken by the largest number of people in the new country.

Each year the entire nation of Bangladesh solemnly celebrates \textit{Ekushey} (February 21), (also known as \textit{Shahid Dibosh, Language Martyr Day}), memorializing the 1952 day when Pakistani military forcefully put down protesters advocating for inclusion of Bangla as a national language. Five people were killed, including four students. Bangladeshis proudly point to this commemoration as the inspiration for International Mother Language Day inaugurated by UNESCO in 1999. The deaths of these language martyrs exacerbated tensions between East and West Pakistan, tensions that eventually led to civil war and Bangladeshi Independence in 1971.
Aid (and many international NGOs in Bangladesh and elsewhere) is of course informed by language ideologies that privilege English. Judith Irvine defines language ideology as the “the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests” (Irvine 2012; see also Gal 1989; Kroskrity 2000; Silverstein 1979; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994, 1998). In this case, there were clear ideas circulating about English being the most appropriate vehicle for communication in the organization, as well as an unspoken claim that use of English was pragmatic rather than political and therefore not weighted or fraught. Of course, as Irvine’s definition implies, the dominance of English in the Islamic Aid workplace was not merely a pragmatic choice, but was the product of many

After independence, Bangla language was promoted, while English was suppressed in the new nation. Rahela Banu and Roland Sussex argues that although the new nation sought to promote Bangla (Bengali) in all spheres, progress toward this goal has been uneven (2001:126-7).

English-medium schools at the primary and secondary level were abolished in 1972 (private English language medium schools were later reestablished for the children of elites). In the years that followed, English language courses were added back into the primary and secondary school curricula, but unevenly (Chowdhury and Kabir 2014:5). As a result, many Bangladeshis, particularly those who attended school after 1972, speak little or no English (Sussex 2001:130). Private universities (and some public ones) have relied on English as a medium of instruction, however, some observers argue that Bangladeshi university students are insufficiently skilled in English, and as a result, standards of tertiary education are poor (Chowdhury and Kabir 2014:5). Nevertheless, for many English continues to be associated with higher prestige (Sussex 2001:129).

In what has been characterized as fragmented and contradictory policies, the government of Bangladesh has sometimes sought to promote English language in schools, and as a link language with other nations, but has continued to emphasize Bangla as essential to national identity. Although public rhetorics still characterize English as both a remnant of the colonial past and a neocolonizing force in the present, there is a shared sense that for Bangladeshis to be successful globally, its citizens will need to be proficient in English (Chowdhury and Kabir 2014:13-14).

While staff members appeared to endorse the idea that speaking English was a pragmatic choice, in some contexts they rebelled. For instance, many staff members spent time traveling together by minivan from office to camp or even to Cox’s Bazar (2-3 hours away). In the van Bangladeshi staff and expats would bounce back and forth between conversations about work and more casual chatting and joking. Frequently, as the conversations turned toward the casual, Bangladeshi staffers would switch to Bangla, effectively shutting the expats out of the conversation.
individual, organizational, national and transnational language ideologies meeting in a particular historical moment.\(^{66}\)

At Ukhia Camp, but many staff members were uncomfortable expressing themselves in English. Still, most of the professional and semi-professional staff had at least some English. \(^{67}\)

At times it seemed that the expat staff members only spoke to the small handful of Bangladeshi staffers who were fluent in English. As a result, each of these fluent English speakers had a great deal of power over his or her particular domain. Desai describes a similar situation for agricultural extension workers, for whom knowledge becomes an essential resource (2006:173).

Some bilingual staffers were constantly overworked, frequently sought out as translators, interpreters and interlocutors, all of which made it difficult for them to get their other work done.

Three of these English-speaking staffers in particular were able to capitalize on their language skills with varying degrees of success. In addition to English, each spoke a standard form of Bangla,\(^{68}\) most often associated with Bangladeshi elites and communication in Dhaka, the capital. Each of the three bridged the gap between expat staffers and some aspect of camp life. Khalid, a round-faced, cheerful but nervous, young medical doctor was head of the medical staff; Sadiq was an office manager with a great deal of responsibility; and Yousuf was a

\(^{66}\) Much has been written about the global dominance of English, it’s role in globalization and neocolonial domination (see for instance, Pennycook 2014; Phillipson 2001; Skuttnab-Kangas 2000). Some analysis of English language dominance attends to ways that language choice and language ideologies can be seen as emblematic of the cultural imperialism described by Said (1993; see also Philipson 1997).

\(^{67}\) See Talal Asad 1986 for a discussion of how the idea of translation was expanded upon by early anthropologists and came to be understood as key to the transmission of culture.

\(^{68}\) Although Bangla is held up as emblematic of Bengali and Bangladeshi identity, there is much research to suggest that what currently passes as the standard form of the language was the product of the colonial interventionists uncomfortable with the heteroglossia of the region (see Wilce 2010). Further, an emphasis on an unitary, shared Bangla obscures not only the significant differences in dialect spoken across the nation, but also the “linguistically indexed social inequality” (Wilce 2010: 142) made evident in the many ways that various forms of Bangla (as well as English, Arabic, Hindi and Urdu) are used to calibrate social standing.
communications liaison with far-reaching connections and influence. Together, these three made it possible for a couple of expats with no local knowledge and little in the way of language skills to run the office and camp somewhat successfully.

In the office, expats and the Dhaka staff alike turned to Sadiq, an exceedingly competent manager with good English skills and a calm, responsible demeanor. Virtually any request, large or small, went through Sadiq. Requests for more tea, a change in staffing, rearranging the office, organizing vehicles, working with purchasing, or managing the house where expats lived, all fell to Sadiq. Working six days a week, and sometimes seven, the expats counted on Sadiq, but took him for granted, failing to promote him, or even offer him praise or incentives. Like an administrative assistant at their beck and call, Sadiq also had wide ranging responsibilities and aspirations to move into a more lucrative position closer to home.69 Although Sadiq seemed incredibly hard working and scrupulous, his overburdened role was eventually his downfall. Juggling too many projects at once, Sadiq began to assume the authority to make decisions about some of the many things for which he was expected to be responsible. After one such incident, in which Sadiq arranged for some contractors to do work that had already been approved by the project managers, Dr. Shahid grew angry, accusing Sadiq of overstepping his role. In the months that followed, Dr. Shahid made Sadiq’s life difficult, micromanaging him, challenging his judgment and refusing to acknowledge his hard work. It seemed that Sadiq had grown too powerful. As the senior Bangladeshi in the office, he had begun to exert power in his own right, and frequently lower-status staff would approach him, rather than Dr. Shahid or the other expat

69 Like all of the other Bangladeshi professional staff working on the project, Sadiq had attended university, had gotten a job and later had an arranged marriage. His wife lived with his parents in his home village (bari in Bangla). Most years he saw her only once, when he returned home for the Eid holidays. Sadiq hoped he could find a way to live closer to his family, but told me he would never want to live in the village, at least not until he retired.
staff, with requests and questions. Eventually Sadiq’s power, his sphere of influence, diminished dramatically and he began to more overtly look for jobs at other international organizations in Bangladesh.

Sadiq’s downfall was his over-confidence and willingness to take responsibility. Yousuf, another senior Bangladeshi staff member with good English language skills, was more successful at negotiating the perils of work with expats. A well-educated, savvy and experienced NGO staffer, Yousuf’s domain was information. His job was to know what was happening in the camp, in the town and the neighboring villages. Smooth and well-spoken, Yousuf gave the impression that he was not afraid of getting his hands dirty. If there were problems in the camp, whether it was unrest, conflict or criminal activities, it was Yousuf’s job to know. He was also responsible for managing Islamic Aid’s informal relationships with powerful locals including police, Border Guards, landowners, business men and politicians. When a problem arose, Yousuf was often dispatched to carry messages or collect information. Unlike Sadiq, who was overtly pious, and who stopped work to pray each day, Yousuf never prayed at work. He smoked cigarettes and it was rumored that he drank alcohol (illegal in Bangladesh and haram [a sin] for Muslims). He knew many of the locals, even those deemed to be “bad guys.”

In many different ways Yousuf made himself indispensible, but he was always careful to avoid revealing the real scope of his influence. In the office with expats, Yousef was mindful of asking expats’ advice, and quick to show deference. For instance, although he was fluent in English, each time he would write a report, he would ask one of the expats to look it over and improve on his work. “Please read this, sister,” he asked me one afternoon, “I know my English needs work and what I hope for most is to learn from you. It is such an advantage to have you hear to teach us.”
This apparent deference did not mean that Yousef always did as instructed. Frequently, he would head off to collect information and virtually disappear. Sometimes he would completely disregard a direct order and handle situations as he saw fit, possibly resolving them to his own advantage. After I was in the camp a few weeks, I began attending meetings that Dr. Max had with camp residents and staff. Although my Bangla was not perfect, I quickly saw that Yousef frequently mistranslated things Dr. Max said. At first I wondered if Yousef had difficulty understanding Dr. Max’s English, but I soon concluded that Yousef understood Dr. Max, and was using his own discretion to decide what to communicate. This situation perfectly captures the risk inherent in relying on translators. Laura Graham explains

The disadvantage of using a translator… is that speakers necessarily lose control over the semantico-referential content of their message. The presupposition of translation is that the value of a proposition will remain constant across languages. Yet unless speakers are sufficiently proficient in the target language, they have no way of knowing whether or not their message is faithfully converted. The speakers are dependent upon the translator and must assume that the translator will accurately convey their speech (2002:194; see also Alarcon 1989 and Ramos 1994 for historical and anthropological examples of the perils and power of translation).

What I noticed was that Yousef sometimes mischaracterized Dr. Max’s statements, and at other times he (Yousef) seemed to be editorializing, providing his own direction to staff and residents. Knowing that Dr. Max was in just the position of non-knowing that Graham describes, I tried to broach the subject.

“You know, it seems like sometimes Yousef isn’t translating everything exactly as you say it” I offered tentatively.

“Fucking Yousef!” Max said with a laugh.

Surprised, I laughed along with him. “What will you do?”

“What can I do?” Dr. Max replied with a question.
Dr. Max was not surprised when I told him that he had been mistranslated. But he trusted that enough of his message was relayed and felt that nothing could or should be done to change the way things were arranged with Yousuf. Graham argues “translators wield tremendous power” (2002:201). In Ukhia Camp, this was true. Yousuf’s power far exceeded his job title. As a translator and as a bridge, Yousuf had made himself invaluable. His work gathering information, interpreting for Dr. Max and above all, serving as a bridge between Bangladeshis and expats had allowed him to navigate the INGO office politics and position himself as an indispensible part of the organization. Dr. Max and Dr. Shahid would have had a much more difficult time managing the camp without him. Perhaps as a result, they appeared to look the other way when Yousuf’s work did not conform to their explicit orders or expectations.

In similar ways, Dr. Khalid made himself valuable. Dr. Khalid was the only Bangladeshi medical doctor whose English was very good and who was willing to work closely with the expats. So although he was the youngest, least experienced doctor in the clinic, he was made chief medical officer. Once given the title, he was expected to report to Dr. Max about the clinic, the doctors, nurses, nutritional staff, pharmacy and lab. This surveillance was critical for Dr. Max and Dr. Shahid, who each wanted to know what was happening behind the scenes: as staff unrest, sloppy work habits, rule breaking and other problems would contribute to the success or failure of the project. Dr. Khalid was also expected to side with the expats, not only providing them with information, but also carrying out their instructions and managing much of the day-to-day work of the hospital. Much less savvy than Sadiq or Yousuf, Dr. Khalid seemed naïve and eager to please. Although his loyalty earned him a title and a slightly better salary than his fellow doctors, it also meant far more work and more headaches. His colleagues began to avoid him and he looked more and more to Dr. Max for the friendly collegiality he had previously had with the
other Bangladeshi professional staff. But Dr. Max was not looking for friends, and Dr. Khalid was often alone with his long hours and heavy responsibilities.

Yousef, Sadiq and Khalid were successful translators, mediators and cultural brokers. They each effectively bridged the linguistic and cultural divide between foreigners, local Bangladeshis and Rohingya refugees. But for Sadiq and Dr. Khalid, however, this privileged role came at a cost--more work, loss of friendships, and a higher level of scrutiny and precariousness. I argue that these staffers occupied an important role similar to the activists described by Merry who sees NGOs as intermediaries between international organizations (especially those which impact human rights) and locals.

The division between transnational elites and local actors is based less on culture or tradition than on tensions between a transnational community that envisions a unified modernity and national and local actors for whom particular histories and contexts are important. Intermediaries such as NGOs and social movement activists play a critical role in interpreting the cultural world of transnational modernity for local claimants. They appropriate, translate, and remake transnational discourses into the vernacular. At the same time, they take local stories and frame them in national and international human rights language. Activists often participate in two cultural spheres at the same time, translating between them with a kind of double consciousness. (Merry 2006:3)

While Yousef, Sadiq and Khalid made sacrifices in order to perform this intermediary role, these rarely resulted in personal success. In a number of important ways, their experiences parallel those of the data-entry workers in Jamaica profiled by Freeman. Freeman argues that the infomatics industry reinscribes racialized and gendered assumptions about competency and skill through the designation of most jobs as unskilled and low-paid (2000:151). Similarly, the Bangladeshi staff could make themselves invaluable, but the structural inequalities that characterize NGO work (and Bangladeshi workplaces more broadly) meant that there was little they could do to materially improve their positions. Yousef, however, made himself even more valuable by not giving everything to the job. Although the expat staff didn’t entirely trust Yousef, they relied on him.
Camp Residents Use Their Power

It was not only expats who relied on Yousef. Camp residents also turned to him when they wanted to get things done, for Yousef was the bridge between refugees and powerful INGO managers. But some camp residents had influence and power of their own. In 2004, when Ukhia Camp was built and the residents from the makeshift Tal camp moved over, NGO staff made a conscious effort to avoid some of the problems that affected the official UNHCR camps. One of the worst of these was the way power was apportioned among refugees and local leaders in the camps. In what was referred to as the maji\textsuperscript{70} system, the leadership of the UNHCR camp attempted to empower refugees by giving control over key camp resources like food distribution to Rohingya leaders under the supervision of local officials, a situation which ultimately led to exploitation, extortion, and high rates of sexual violence.\textsuperscript{71} To avoid this, the NGOs staffers at Ukhia Camp set up a system of self-governance in which each of the camp’s six blocks would have some autonomy and operate like a village. Each block elected three members (two men and one woman\textsuperscript{72}). Together these members formed the Ukhia Camp Organizing Committee. The basic idea was that if camp residents had a problem, they would bring it to the Organizing

\textsuperscript{70} Neither NGO staffers nor refugees could tell me why the power sharing was referred to as the maji system. A similar term, majhi, is the Bangla (and Rohingya) word for boatman. Some suggested that this was the word’s origin, since these were important figures in the Rohingya community. Others suggested that this was a term that originated in the Rohingya community.

\textsuperscript{71} Reports by observers and UNHCR staffers alike describe the violence and exploitation of this system as well as the reduction in these when the maji system was eliminated in 2008 (Irin News 2008).

\textsuperscript{72} It was hard to tell if the inclusion of women on the Ukhia Camp Organizing Committee had much of a positive material impact on the lives of the women elected or if their participation improved the status of women and girls in any way. From my vantage point, it looked like the women on the Committee had little say in collective decision making. They literally said nothing during most meetings and invariably voted along with the leaders of their block. But women on the Committee seemed to be well respected and had access to information and Islamic Aid staff and other Ukhia Camp leaders.
Committee, which would make collective decisions and take action; however, serious problems were supposed to be brought to Islamic Aid staffers like Yousef.

One afternoon one of the members of the women’s group I had organized asked me what we (the expats) were going to do about “that girl.” I had no idea what she was talking about and probed further. It seemed that a young widow had recently arrived in camp and it was rumored that there were problems. I asked Yousef to find out what was happening and what, if anything, needed to be done. The next day Yousef arrived in the office with a dramatic flourish. It seemed that the young woman had caught the eye of one of the members of the Ukhia Camp Organizing Committee, and he had taken up with her romantically. It was unclear whether she had any say in the matter. Complicating matters, Kemal, the Committee Member, was son-in-law to Saleh Uddin, one of the most powerful, and certainly the most intimidating, Rohingya men in the camp. Saleh Uddin’s daughter was unhappy that her husband had a new girlfriend, and became even unhappier when he offered to take the girl as a second wife. To make matters worse, it was rumored that Saleh Uddin had threatened the girl’s life. Without any male relatives to stand up for her, the young woman was in grave danger.

Yousef and a few of the other Bangladeshi staffers were sent back to camp to tell Kemal, Saleh Uddin and others that they must come to an amicable solution. They were told that if the girl were harmed, there would be trouble. Later that afternoon, I went to check on the negotiations. A couple of dozen men crowded into the conference room, arguing heatedly. Yousef told me that they were close to resolving things. Soon after, he came out with a big grin. He proudly told me he had worked it out.

“What was the solution?” I asked.

“We will give her to the Cox’s chief [of police] to be his servant.”
“You will give her?” I was alarmed, wondering if she would be safe, and if she would have any say in the matter. I also wondered who would be benefiting from this “gift.”

“Yes, it’s a good solution. Everyone is happy,” Yousef explained.

“Please wait,” I said, “before you do anything, we should discuss this in the office.”

Back at the office, I anxiously approached Dr. Shahid and Dr. Max\textsuperscript{73} and expressed my concern about the situation. I suggested that young woman might be in danger and that the reputation of Islamic Aid could suffer if became known that vulnerable girls were treated in such a un-humanitarian way. I asked if there might be another way to handle the situation, perhaps one which might allow this young woman some say in the decision-making about her future.

Dr. Shahid agreed that the staff should learn more before allowing the Ukhia Organizing Committee to make this decision. It turned out that the young woman was terrified at the prospect of being given to the police chief. After a few more days of negotiation, a new solution was found. The young woman would move in with and care for an elderly widow on the other side of Ukhia Camp. Islamic Aid would pay the widow a small stipend for taking in the stranger.

Although I had stepped in to block their maneuvering, a group of male camp residents had almost been successful in their efforts to rid the camp of someone they found objectionable, an action that quite possibly would have put a young woman’s well being in jeopardy. I had the sense that most of the time, these camp leaders would get their way, as long as they did not openly defy Islamic Aid senior staff members.

Another example of power leveraged by camp residents had to do with their use of shared community resources. When Ukhia Camp was built, the grant money (from ECHO) that paid for

\footnote{In this and a few other instances, I was acutely aware of using the privilege that I had as a white, educated foreigner and troubled by the reality of my privilege. I was somewhat troubled by the shift I was making from participant observer to advocate, but in this case those qualms were counterbalanced by what felt like an important opportunity to prevent real harm.}
construction explicitly banned use of the funds for religious purposes. So no mosques or other religious institutions were part of the design. Instead, in each of the six blocks of the camp a community center was built. These spaces were designated for educational programming, women’s groups, community government gatherings, adult education, meetings with NGO staff and other activities as decided by camp residents. Larger than the individual homes, these community buildings were similarly constructed of thatch, bamboo, and packed earth floors.

When I was in Ukhia Camp just a few weeks, Dr. Shahid asked if I would survey the camp, asking residents how these spaces were being used and checking to see if they needed any repairs (in particular, the thatched roofs often needed repair). As I moved around the camp, I was initially confused. Residents at first denied that community center buildings existed. I soon realized why: all had been converted into mosques. Although lower status Bangladeshi staff knew that this had been done, none of them had communicated this fact to Islamic Aid managers.74

Even more surprising, a couple of months later, one of my Rohingya interlocutors mentioned to me that they were almost done with construction on the D block masjid (mosque). I didn’t know what he was talking about and asked him to show me. We walked across camp to the spot were the D block community center/ mosque had stood. In its place was a nearly complete pukka (cement block) mosque. Ali Jamal proudly told me that it had been constructed by camp residents with money from other residents who were working in Dubai and some small donations from people right there in Ukhia Camp.

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74 As noted in Chapter One, the Islamic Aid Bangladeshi staff identified work in the camp outside the medical clinic and office as undesirable. Hence only the lowest status staffers (and Yousef) spent any time in the residential blocks of the camp. As a result, these low status staffers knew a lot more about the day-to-day life of the camp and camp residents than did the higher status manager or expats.
I was surprised by the tidy new construction in the midst of dilapidated thatch and bamboo houses, and curious to see if and how the Islamic Aid staff would respond, for the government charter which had allowed construction of Ukhia Camp had explicitly forbidden any permanent construction (other than the Medical Clinic/Office compound). When I asked Dr. Shahid about refugee autonomy in the camp, he told me that they were not allowed to make decisions that contradicted the NGO’s plans, nor could they contravene government dicta. “No, no, Misha, they don’t have the right to make these community centers into mosques or to do construction on their own. We are responsible. We must report to the government and report to ECHO. They don’t understand these things and they don’t care.”

Although Dr. Shahid insisted that the camp residents were not allowed to do these things, the community centers remained mosques. Camp residents finished building their new mosque with no interference from Islamic Aid.

One way to understand the power of Ukhia Camp residents is to examine how they leverage their role as clients of NGO patrons. Although in most ways the refugees have far less power than Islamic Aid, as a group they could either “behave” or “create problems.” Among NGOs in the region, the Rohingya were known to “create problems,” that is, they would resist NGO projects they disliked, and demand assistance for things they wanted.\(^{75}\) It was implied that although no Rohingya had been accused of violence against aid workers in Ukhia Camp, it could happen. More salient was the fact that without the cooperation of refugees, Islamic Aid could not get the grants and keep the contracts that ensured their future survival. So they largely allowed

\(^{75}\) Before Islamic Aid, a number of different NGOs had been in charge of running Ukhia Camp. at least one of these had left the project abruptly, citing local working conditions (including the refugees themselves) as impossible to work with.
Rohingya refugees to do as they wanted, except when their actions would negatively impact Islamic Aid or its senior staffers.

**The Big Man: Power, Fear and Violence**

Camp residents were not the only actors who seemed to do as they pleased. Local business leaders wielded a great deal of power and seemed, at least in some areas, to operate above the law. Soon after I started at Islamic Aid, I heard stories of Mr. Ali, the local big man who was known for violent reprisals. According to one story, before Islamic Aid had arrived at Ukhia Camp, another international NGO had secured the contracts to provide the medical aid, water and sanitation at the camp. When some staff members of this NGO came into conflict with Mr. Ali, he beat them. Apparently he had tied one of them to a tree and beat him badly before walking away in a rage. As staff whispered about the story, it seemed ludicrous to me that a local businessman would beat up staff of an international organization and face no repercussions. It was rumored that some NGOs had given up working at Ukhia Camp in part because of Mr. Ali and the violence and control he represented.

A few months later, I learned that such scenarios had not been relegated to the distant past, but were part of the contemporary situation in which we were operating. At that time, (early 2012), a second NGO had been invited into Ukhia Camp to dig a couple of exploratory wells to see if the chronic water shortage problem in the camp could be solved. Each day teams of young laborers worked long hours in the hot sun with no success. At the end of one of the hottest of these days, one of the Islamic Aid’s Bangladeshi staff members rushed into the office. A young man working on the well-digging project had just been beaten up. Dr. Max was in charge that day, and he quickly pulled out his mobile phone to call one of the doctors on duty in the clinic. It turned out that Mr. Ali, the local big man who had beaten staff of the previous NGO, was angry
about some problems he had with local forestry officials, had taken his *lathi* (a cane-like stick) and beat a young man, knocking him down and possibly giving him a concussion.

According to Dr. Khalid, Sayed, the injured staff member, just sixteen-years-old, feared for his life and had asked to go home to his family in Jessore, on the other side of Bangladesh. I suggested that first we bring Sayed to be checked out in a local hospital that could better assess his condition. My suggestion was easily ignored, as managers and staffers came together in a heated discussion about the events. There was much talk about what should be done, but in the end, a complaint was filed, not by the staff member who had been beaten, nor by his employer. Instead, Yousef was dispatched to the local police station to register a complaint that people should not beat NGO staff members. No criminal charges were leveled and there were no repercussions for Mr. Ali.

I was surprised to learn that an international NGO staff member could be beaten with impunity. I noticed that although the situation made my Bangladeshi colleagues nervous, they were not particularly outraged. Tariq, the smart young office assistant, shrugged,

“Sister, you must be careful of such people. He (Mr. Ali) was angry about his shop being broken.”

I asked “But why beat this youth?”

Tariq shook his head. “He was just very angry. A mistake.”

It turned out that the Mr. Ali had illegally built a couple of shops on land adjacent to the refugee camp, land that belonged to the forestry department. A forestry official had warned him to take down the buildings and vacate. When Mr. Ali refused, the forestry official ordered men into the camp with sledgehammers. Protected by machine gun-wielding forestry guards, the

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76 I was a little surprised to know that a sixteen year old was working far from home under dangerous conditions. I asked if NGOs were expected to follow child labor laws. At this my colleagues shrugged.
laborers had set about destroying the illegal shops. It was later that day, perhaps mistaking Sayed for one of those who had been hired to demolish his shop, that Mr. Ali administered the beating.

I had been on site that morning when the forestry men with sledgehammers and machine guns arrived. As they walked across the camp, their presence created a rupture in the otherwise quiet morning. As the men began smashing their sledgehammers and crowbars into the small concrete shop, a crowd gathered. Most were camp residents and NGO staffers who stood far enough back to avoid direct engagement with either side. This fight was one between two opposing factions of local Bangladeshis; camp residents and NGO staff wanted to stay well out of it.

These performances of violence—the smashing of the shop and the beating of Sayed—were designed to send messages about who was in charge. In the bright light of the workday morning, the forestry official seemed to win the day. With armed men, crowbars and official documents on his side, he had prevailed. But when the workday ended, Mr. Ali beat a low-status young worker, reminding all of the observers that official paperwork was not the only way to get things done. The beating that day solidified Mr. Ali’s reputation for brutal reprisal. It seemed unlikely that staff or camp residents would cross him in the near future. (See Chapter Three for description of another episode of violence with Mr. Ali.)

_Ukhia Camp and Contemporary Bangladesh_

Although observers have described the camps that house the Rohingya as some of the worst places imaginable (Physicians for Human Rights 2010), in reality Ukhia Camp doesn’t feel much different from other poor villages or slum neighborhoods in Bangladesh. Residents work hard doing manual labor (as construction workers and cycle ricksha pullers) and struggle to feed their families. If anything, the presence of Islamic Aid, the self governance of Ukhia Camp
Organizing Committee, the NGO-constructed homes, latrines and water supplies all contributed to the sense that Ukhia Camp was at least on par with other poor communities, if not better off in some ways.

Like other poor communities in Bangladesh, residents of Ukhia Camp know that they might experience violence at the hands of more powerful actors at any point. Ukhia Camp residents also live with the understanding that their patrons (in this case the NGO and its funder) are able to make sometime arbitrary decisions that will affect their lives in important ways. They know that they can disrupt these projects, but may risk their patronage if they do.

**Conclusion**

There were many other examples of these kinds of conflicts and power struggles, some documented elsewhere in this dissertation (for example, the conflicts over spending outlined in the Chapter Five and the problems that arose because expatriate staff were told to leave Ukhia Camp in Chapter Seven). What each of these reveals is that in a camp like Ukhia Camp, there are many kinds of power, and many ways to wield influence. While physical violence and threats of violence were used, more frequently those who lived and worked in and around the camp relied on other tactics like manipulation, gossip, coercion, and subterfuge. Overall, expat and Bangladeshi staff alike seemed to care little for the specificities of refugee suffering, focusing instead on minimizing hassle, and documenting measurable outcomes. What was particularly striking was how much time and attention was spent attending to relatively minor concerns and in conflicts between various factions of camp staff, locals and refugees. As a direct result of these conflicts, as well as the structural conditions that fostered them, humanitarian aid work at Ukhia Camp was less successful than it might have been. Similarly, the conditions under which expats worked (far from home, no work visas, short term contracts, no investment in Bangladesh,
no local language skills) prevented them from making a real contribution to the project or to improving the lives and conditions of the refugees.
Chapter Five: The Business of NGOs is Spending

Before leaving for my first trip to Bangladesh, I spent time with a number of Bangladeshi graduate students and Bangladeshi-Americans living in the US. Some of them tutored me in Bangla, others helped provide contacts and important cultural perspectives. One cold March afternoon I visited some of those Bangladeshi friends in Iowa City, IA. I was getting excited about my upcoming trip to Dhaka and asked if my friend if he could help me with making contact with NGOs in Bangladesh. He frowned and said, “No, no, those are not good people. NGOs are all crooks!”

A little surprised, I asked, “Really? All of them? You know I am interested in how NGOs are doing humanitarian work, and work with refugees and migrants.” “Yes,” Rahim answered, “they’re really all no good. They just make money and don’t do anything.” At this, Nazia, his soft-spoken wife spoke up, “Well, they’re not all bad, not a hundred percent.” When I tried to probe both of my friends for more information, they were not willing to give me specific examples of NGOs doing bad things, but Rahim did tell me that when I was in Dhaka, I should watch out for “guys driving around in their big cars, talking on the phone but doing nothing.” They also told me that the worst offenders were Bangladeshis who saw starting an NGO as a path to easy money. Rahim admitted that there were a few international NGOs that were okay, and that they probably meant well and tried to do good work, even if they were not always successful.

As an academic researcher, I was well aware of the many criticisms that had been leveled at NGOs, and as a former NGO staffer myself, I had seen many of their shortcomings first hand, but I was surprised by the vehemence of Rahim’s criticism and his dislike for and distrust of organizations that were purportedly set up to do good. In the following pages, I
describe some of the challenges and shortcomings of Islamic Aid’s day-to-day work. I argue that the focus of some transnational humanitarian NGOs in Bangladesh is on self-replication, and on bureaucratic practices, notably spending money, reporting, managing staff and fund raising. This means that little energy is spent on what might be thought of as actual humanitarian work.

**NGOs in Bangladesh**

**NGO work: Just another job?**

When I arrived in Dhaka, Rahim’s direction for me to watch out for "guys driving new cars, talking on the phone and doing nothing" stuck with me. But as I got to know students, expats and young professionals in Bangladesh’s capital, it seemed that not everyone shared his skepticism. In fact, for ambitious, educated Bangladeshis, the most popular (and lucrative) career paths include banking, telecommunications, the garment industry, government work and the NGO sector. Unlike the stereotypical “do-gooder” non-profit staffer in the United States who might expect a not-for-profit job to offer lower pay but more in the way of a sense of purpose, my young Bangladeshi interlocutors seemed to approach NGO work as just another job. In fact, they reported that jobs with transnational NGOs sometimes paid better than work in banking or telecomm. Perhaps more importantly, those jobs also offered some Bangladeshis the opportunity to work with foreigners, to gain international credentials and, for the ambitious few, prestigious work abroad.

Once I got to know my way around Dhaka, I began to see some of what Rahim had described, individuals who seemed to epitomize the worst side of the dramatically growing divide between rich and poor in Bangladesh. Some of these wealthy young people seemed to live a life of casual excess: they stayed out late, drove recklessly, spent time in the exclusive social clubs in Dhaka (where, unlike the rest of the country, alcohol could legally be served). Although
these were not the circles I traveled in, I asked friends and colleagues about this small but privileged minority. While it seemed that some had gotten rich by creating NGOs and accessing international aid, most of my interlocutors guessed that these playboys had garment-sector money, or perhaps, had a hand in one of the lucrative international building projects being funded by the World Bank or other international organizations. But for every flashy playboy in Dhaka, there were thousands of NGO staffers and projects with much lower profiles. In fact, NGOs in Bangladesh employ more than 98,000 workers (Transparency International Bangladesh 2007 (TIB) 2007)). These men and women do everything from serving tea to running multi-million dollar programs. It seemed naïve to try to characterize them as all one way or another.

Islamic Aid, where I did my fieldwork, was not unusual. Like other NGOs, it ran a variety of projects, and juggled a portfolio of funding sources that each had different requirements and expectations. Like other organizations, Islamic Aid hired a variety of staffs that included foreigners, educated Bangladeshis from the city, and less privileged locals. Doing fieldwork with this transnational NGO, I paid close attention to the everyday practices of the organization, its accomplishments and failures. I was particularly interested in whether the organization and its staff were actually making a difference or if they were “just driving around talking on phones, doing nothing.” What I found was that while Islamic Aid staffers bore little resemblance to the caricature of ostentatious privilege my friend had described, many of the practices of quotidian humanitarian aid had little to do with the life-saving work that was their mandate.
NGO as a Self-Replicating Machine

In this chapter I contend that in contrast to the rhetorics that valorize INGOs--as heroic, compassionate, life saving--or demonize them--as imperialistic, neo-colonial, predatory--the day-to-day work of some humanitarian organizations is neither malicious nor generous. Instead, the NGOs I encountered seemed almost entirely focused on the task of self-replication. While others have documented phenomena of NGO self-replication, what is particularly striking here is the form self-replication efforts take. Other research has documented NGOs that emphasize proposal writing (Crewe and Harrison 1998), reporting (Hyndman 2000; Mosse 2005), and shifting foci or mission creep (Martin and Miller 2003; Terry 2002), in fact staff at Islamic Aid’s Ukhia Camp project struggled to balance a desire to work “under the radar” (and thus avoid official scrutiny) and demonstrate effectiveness to their funder.

While much of this analysis reveals important flaws that can hinder or even render NGO work impossible, I suggest that one of challenges faced by Islamic Aid was much more prosaic: spending money. In fact, I would argue that the key concern for Islamic Aid staffers was spending. This may seem counter-intuitive. There is a common sense understanding (bolstered by donor appeals) that, given the global scale of desperate human tragedy, the need far outstrips available resources. Islamic Aid, UNHCR, Doctors Without Borders and the American Refugee Committee actively solicit the public for funds, as do other organizations that do humanitarian work.

The idea that spending was the Islamic Aid refugee project's most important "job" came to me slowly. But the evidence was overwhelming. Islamic Aid staff demonstrated that this was their top priority in weekly meetings, through their lack of concern for the actual hardship experienced by refugees, in reports to funders, and in their focus on the mechanics of reporting. This meant that little energy was devoted to what seemed like more urgent matters, namely
preventing or ending practices in Islamic Aid that signaled corruption. As mentioned earlier, the managers of Islamic Aid's national office allowed me to conduct fieldwork at their site. In exchange, I offered my services free of charge. As an experienced non-profit staffer, I was confident that I had useful skills to offer. Islamic Aid’s managers agreed and gave me the title of Community Service Officer, a position that allowed me access to most of the day-to-day activities of the refugee camp and offices. One kind of day-to-day activity I participated in was the Islamic Aid staff meetings, including regular weekly and monthly meetings as well as special annual meetings.

What I noticed about the monthly managers' meetings was that their focus was almost entirely on spending. These were not budget meetings per se, but in fact “Program” meetings in which senior staff members were asked to report on the progress they had made in achieving goals related to their program area. Yet there was little discussion of activities and much attention on the related spending, or lack thereof. Each month, the meeting followed a similar format. An agenda and a monthly budget report were handed out to each manager. Staff members jostled for good seats and the start of each meeting was often slowed by calls for tea to be served, and the late arrival of particular supervisors. There was often a lot of joking and good spirits at the start of these meetings, in part because they represented a break from the everyday routine, and a chance for some to spend time in the relative comfort of the office. Tea and biscuits were offered. Sometimes there would be electricity for air conditioning; occasionally, a boxed lunch would be provided. Then as the meeting came to order and each manager was called to report, the holiday atmosphere would die down. The serious tone of most meetings stemmed from the fact that individual program areas were underspending. As Dr. Shahid, the Program
Manager, reviewed each line of the budget report, he grilled the responsible manager: “Why did you not spend your funds this month?”

Sometimes staff members had to report that they had failed to accomplish their goals that month. In other cases, staff members reported that their work had been accomplished much more cheaply than expected. In either case, it seemed that underspending itself was the problem. During some meetings, it was clear that underspending revealed other, more serious organizational problems, for instance, when it was reported that medications were not being procured in a timely fashion, deep problems with both the pharmacy staff and the staff in charge of purchasing and procurement were revealed as well as potentially dangerous shortages of medication that might be needed by sick patients.

**Spending Problems at Ukhia Camp**

*Underspending on Medication*

One spring day, I returned from a short visit to Dhaka to find the camp staff in something of an uproar. There was apparently a huge problem with the acquisition, storage and inventory control of medication. An internal audit had revealed the very serious magnitude of the problem. In the weeks that followed, I spoke to Dr. Max about the problems with medications on a number of occasions. At first, he was deeply concerned about the sloppy, perhaps negligent, or even criminal, way that medications were being handled in the camp. As mentioned in the Chapter One description of the Ukhia Camp clinic, there was a small pharmacy on the clinic grounds, staffed by three pharmacy technicians. These staff members were tasked with keeping track of and filling individual orders, knowing which medications needed special care (like refrigeration), and tracking inventory. Although the clinic stocked a limited number of items, there was a lively business at the pharmacy. Dr. Khalid, Islamic Aid’s head physician had the
task of working with the pharmacy to monitor supplies and with the purchasing department to make sure new medications were ordered in a timely way. Dr. Max, as chief medical officer, had ultimate responsibility for both areas.

During the reporting period that spring, Dr. Max and the other clinic management staff had learned that there were huge problems with the inventory. These problems fell into three main categories: expired stock, missing stock, and unfilled orders. At first, Dr. Max seemed most concerned with the missing and expired stock. “Every week I tell them, you must count the inventory, and report it. You must give me reports of what is expiring. I cannot be there every day, counting the stock. I have my own job. If I cannot trust them, then I will get rid of them and hire someone who I can trust, someone who understands the job and does not need me to hold their hand.”

During this period, Dr. Max raged around the office, the camp, the expat living quarters and the pharmacy, insisting to anyone who would listen that he would have to get rid of the staff and get new people who would do their jobs. It seemed that he was most concerned that people not blame him for the failings of his staff. “Should I stop doing my own work and spend all my time in the pharmacy now?” he would ask rhetorically. But it soon became clear that the biggest problem was not mismanagement or theft per se. Instead, what Max and others were concerned about was how to report the problem to ECHO, the funder, and how ECHO would respond.

Although Dr. Max and other Islamic Aid managers initially said that all the staff would be fired, instead the medical team (including Dr. Max) conducted an investigation, gave pharmacy staffers a slap on the wrist, and demoted two individuals. Afterwards, work in the pharmacy continued pretty much as usual. A more pressing concern soon arose: because dozens of medications had not been purchased, Islamic Aid's refugee project was seriously
underspending its medication budget, which was one of the biggest project line items after staffing expenses. In order to meet strict UK accounting regulations and ECHO reporting requirements, Islamic Aid followed a tendering system in which purchasing was supposed to be initiated by a manager, approved by a supervisor and the Project Manager. An RFP (request for proposals) would then be written up and reviewed by an internal committee; when approved, bids would be solicited. Once the bidding period was over, the best bid would be selected.

Although I have some experience in non-profit financial management, purchasing and accounting were outside my direct purview at Islamic Aid. As a result I was not offered access to “the books” or to this bidding process. From what I could gather from my limited vantage point, there was only one obvious loophole that might afford corrupt staff a way of profiting from not purchasing: duplicate purchase orders. After managers submitted requests for items that never materialized, they would eventually become angry, irritated, frustrated or concerned. In one case, I was the irritated staffer. I had been asked by Dr. Shahid to order a powerful and expensive fan for the office. I had filled out all the paperwork, secured the correct signatures, and yet month after month, there was no fan. After many inquiries, I was told by one of the staff members in the purchasing department, “Sister, I am sorry, I don’t know what has happened. But if you will need this fan, you should make a new order.”

I realized that this advice might be an innocent suggestion, but it might also reveal a loophole through which staffers might profit from a dysfunctional system. More specifically, I realized that if I made a new order, and collected a new round of signatures, then the purchasing department could acquire two fans. They could supply us with one and sell the other. Or perhaps with the right connections, they could just avoid the extra steps of acquisition and resale, and get cash from a vendor willing to go along. When I described this rather problematic loophole to my
colleagues, those in charge did not seem very distressed. What seemed to matter most was that the procedure had been followed, so the reports could be written.

Unfortunately, this rarely happened so smoothly in practice. Sometimes items would be held up for lack of a signature or approval, slowed down to respond to cash flow problems, or sometimes no good bids would be received and thus no purchases made. But most of the time, the purchasing system fell apart for more mysterious reasons. In fact, it was so consistently messed up that I began to suspect that there might be malfeasance. But while it was easy to see what staffers might gain from directing spending to one vendor or another, it was harder to see the advantage in not spending.

_Focus on Spending_

In the case of underspending on medication, what seemed to worry my colleagues was that they had not spent enough money, so they would be unable to show adequate progress on the grant. At no time was there a discussion of the impact these shortages would have on the refugees who would be given inadequate medical care. This lack of concern about the impact of underspending (or underperforming) on refugees was evidenced by the fact that it was never discussed. In each monthly meeting, managers would defend their progress, make plans to spend in the future and justify their records. At no time did any of them reflect on how underspending might have an impact on life in the camp. This was particularly surprising because much of that spending was to have been on goods and services that would have very real and immediate impacts. Some of these areas of underspending included not only medication, but also birth

77 I experienced this impact myself. Soon after the medication shortages became evident, I came down with what one of my colleagues suggested might be an infection. The antibiotic of choice was unavailable, and he assured me that the second (or third) choice antibiotic that was in stock would be just as good. Instead I got violently ill from an antibiotic that was much more powerful than what the situation warranted.
control, emergency nutrition, potable water, and supplies for patching leaky roofs as the monsoon was starting. So while individual staffers might have had concerns that failing to meet program and spending goals might have terrible consequences for the lives of refugees, in staff meetings and other official fora, these were not expressed.

NGOs and the Work of Report Writing

Observers and staff at NGOs have long complained that the burdens of reporting take significant time and resources away from what is sometimes characterized as the real work of these organizations (be it education, disaster relief, civil society programs or development) (Hashemi 1996). Funders, government agencies, international bodies and other stakeholders regularly ask for financial reports, narrative descriptions of progress made on programmatic goals as well as reports that capture other kinds of localized data collected by the NGO staff. Critiques of these approaches highlight the fact that onerous reporting requirements sometimes lead NGOs to report data that are quantifiable and easily collected, leaving out the harder-to-quantify but equally important data (Edwards and Hulme 1996). Others have pointed out that reports to donors sometimes ignore the moral thrust of the work and its impact on aid recipients (Ferguson 1990) and even lead NGOs to abandon some of their most important projects (Fisher 1997:454). At the same time, some observers and practitioners question whether strict accounting practices provide the kind of assurances they purport to provide (O’Dwyer and Unerman 2008). Still others have argued that the normative rhetoric of accountability serves to obscure the power dynamics that structure relationships between donor, NGO and aid recipient (Ebrahim 2009:7).

Although some of these critiques have been around for decades, more recent accounting scandals in both the corporate and non-profit worlds (see Gibelman and Gelman 2001) and
geopolitical shifts (including fears about international terrorism and religious fundamentalism) (see Aufhauser 2003) have led to increasingly burdensome accounting and auditing practices.\textsuperscript{78}

*Spending as Proxy for Progress*

Perhaps in response to decades of criticism that NGOs spend too much time on reporting and not enough time on making change, ECHO (Islamic Aid refugee project's funder), like many big funders, had reduced the paperwork burden and simplified reporting with standardized templates that provided fields to fill in with details of progress on program goals and a simplified budget-reporting template.\textsuperscript{79} And yet, perhaps as an unfortunate and possibly inevitable consequence, spending money became understood as a proxy for making progress on those goals.

In an ongoing project like the one at Ukhia Camp, there are probably many reasons for this slippage, but a few jump out: First, NGOs don’t like to admit they asked for more money than is actually necessary. So rather than respond to underspending by offering to give money back (which many funders would not welcome anyway), NGOs like Islamic Aid explain underspending in terms of goals “yet to be achieved.” A second reason for the disconnect was that an ongoing project, by nature concerned with maintaining the status quo, sometimes has

\textsuperscript{78} After 9/11/2001, the United States government issued a series of “Anti-Terrorist Financing Guidelines: Voluntary Best Practices for US-Based Charities.” These were mirrored by similar recommendations published in the United Kingdom and European Union. While these guidelines were voluntary, in practice, many donors require NGOs to adhere to a similar set of rules.

\textsuperscript{79} While some of the reporting forms required by ECHO, the funder, had been simplified, Islamic Aid was still required to practice careful double-entry bookkeeping. Following standard accounting practice, the organization required receipts for all expenses. This created particular problems in Bangladesh, where many small vendors generally do not provide receipts. Staff at the refugee camp regularly selected vendors who could provide good receipts, regardless of whether they were more expensive or lower quality. These rules also created difficulties for expat staff, who could not read Bangla writing nor understand the numbers on their receipts, and hence could not really perform the fiduciary oversight they were charged with.
little in the way of new “deliverables.” Without clear achievements to brag about, NGOs and funders point to money spent as proof that the work was being done.

So when medicines were unpurchased, Dr. Max was not at all concerned about what would happen to the refugees who might suffer as a result of medicines not being available. Instead, he worried that the low spending would reflect poorly on him as a manager and the project as a whole. He understood that it was his job to spend money. As mentioned above, ECHO, the funder that supported Islamic Aid, had instituted a drastically simplified reporting process. At the same time, more stringent financial reporting requirements have become an international norm. The unintended consequence of these two shifts was that reports were almost entirely focused on spending. Islamic Aid staff referred to spending as a way of marking progress in the grant, of “proving” that they had done what they said they were going to do.

Compared to humanitarian interventions in other parts of the world, the Bangladesh border with Myanmar was relatively safe and stable. While there were few diversions and many staff members mentioned feeling isolated, the primary stressors workers experienced were work-related. Before coming to Bangladesh, I had hypothesized that the work in these camps might be discouraging: thousands and thousands of refugees living in terrible conditions with no hope of improvement or change might be stressful for staff members who sought to help them. What I found instead was that staff stress was familial, financial and work-related, but none of the staff seemed particularly concerned with the situation of the refugees.

The family stresses reported by the Bangladeshi staff were the result of the fact that many of them were supporting large extended families on relatively small incomes. These staff were also stressed because many of them spent 50 weeks a year away from their families. More surprising was the fact that these staff members actually cited spending-related
concerns (purchasing, spending, budgeting and reporting) as the most important thing they worried about and the part of work they wished would change. As outlined elsewhere, one of my jobs at Islamic Aid was to help interview all of the staff members of the project, in preparation for re-hiring them under the auspices of a different grant. As part of this process, I asked each staffer what they liked and disliked about their job, what they would change and what Islamic Aid could do to support them to do their jobs better. Surprisingly, the most frequently mentioned thing staff members reported wanting was for Islamic Aid to fix the purchasing system.

Bangladesh has a reputation for being a place where corruption thrives. So it was not surprising that concerns about spending were matched with concerns about strict accounting practices. Corruption and malfeasance were a worry, but not exactly in the way that one might imagine. Instead of outright theft, the result of a focus on accounting and spending meant that staffers would value quick transactions that yielded receipts over careful fiduciary oversight (see Chapter 4 for a more detailed look at how one kind of corruption was allowed to happen in Ukhia Camp).

*Spending as Evidence*

As noted above, some observers have claimed that the key task of NGOs is writing grant proposals and reports. And yet, that is only part of the story. Narratives can explain away unmet goals, reframe events and outcomes, and put a positive spin on negative results. But without spending, an NGO has little evidence of having accomplished its goals. This is not to say that other “deliverables” are trivial. NGOs strive to document, measure and report on their accomplishments. However, these are frequently difficult to measure and, given the lack of external validation, suspect. Money spent, recorded, accounted for and reported on therefore becomes a seemingly more reliable yardstick by which to measure NGO progress.
There are, however, some key assumptions inherent in this logic: that grant budgets accurately reflect the cost of activities needed to meet project goals; that the planned activities (and related spending) spelled out in grant proposals will continue to reflect the most effective means of achieving project goals; and that organizations will spend the money on the activities outlined in proposal plans and budgets.

*How can it be difficult to spend money?*

After concluding that spending money was a key concern for Islamic Aid staffers, I began to wonder why. How difficult could it be to spend money? I concluded that efforts to spend money according to grant budget goals were hampered by a number of factors:

1. To an important degree, the Islamic Aid national office in Dhaka controlled all spending for the refugee project.
2. The Government of Bangladesh placed restrictions on the flow of funds within NGOs. Without access to funds, Ukhia Camp managers could not spend money on much-needed supplies and activities.
3. Inaccurate budgets had overstated how much items would cost.
4. Inefficiencies in hiring and procurement processes; slow hiring meant spending could not happen in a timely fashion.
5. Islamic Aid staff were frequently out of the field, which meant that spending could not or would not happen.
6. Donations from other organizations eliminated the need for Islamic Aid to spend on some goods.

*Struggling to Spend*

In December 2011, the senior staff of the refugee camp project held a number of rather stressful meetings to discuss the fact that they had dramatically underspent their grant budget for that year. As is common for NGOs in this situation, Islamic Aid staffers knew they had three
choices: they could quickly try to spend down the grant before the end of the year; they could ask for an extension, or they could give back some of the money. After some discussion, it became clear that asking for an extension was the only acceptable option. Staff members saw that quick spending was not possible, particularly given that some of the unspent funds were to have covered salaries for positions that had not yet been filled. And since spending so clearly served as a proxy for accomplishment, to admit underspending would be tantamount to admitting project failure.

Islamic Aid requested an extension, and staff held their breath until it was granted. In the two months that followed, staffers tried to quickly spend enough so that in 14 months they would spend the annual (12-month) budget. At the same time, they worked on a proposal that would fund the remaining 10 months of 2012. During that time, I sat in weekly progress meetings for senior staffers on the project. What quickly became clear was that staffers were not asked to account for how they spent their time, how they managed their staff, or whether they were meeting project goals (deliverables). Instead, each week, staff members would each be given a printed copy of an Excel spreadsheet, which tracked the year-to-date spending. Most staffers would be asked to explain why their particular budget line (actual spending) failed to match the target (budget).

In many months of meetings, I never witnessed a single instance in which a staff member was scolded for over-spending. These meetings frequently featured episodes of scolding, harassment, and even threats of firing because of under-spending. Yet for all the public angst about lack of spending, little attention was given to what that underspending might reveal: faulty budgets, understaffing, unrealistic goals and most importantly, a failure to provide essential services for refugees.
**Structural Barriers to Spending**

As mentioned above, there were many reasons why spending was so difficult. The first was that Dhaka headquarters would not give any staff member permission to spend more than 10,000 taka per day (about US$150 at the time of my fieldwork). Although prices for most goods and services in Bangladesh were very low, there were many items and projects that could cost more than 10,000 taka. This seemingly arbitrarily low spending limit served to underscore the fact that in Bangladesh spending equals power.\(^{80}\) As a result, purchasing for any big-ticket items had to be approved by the head office. In many, if not most cases, the headquarters staff would not approve spending by field staff, even by the expat managers (Dr. Shahid or Dr. Max) instead offering instead to purchase these items on their behalf. Loss of control over the spending process would sometimes mean loss of the item altogether, and at other times the procurement was done in such a way as to render it useless or untimely. While I observed this phenomenon many times, a couple of examples are particularly illustrative.

The first example was the seemingly straightforward procurement of a generator. Senior staff had budgeted for a large generator for the home occupied by expat staff. Electricity in Bangladesh is notoriously unreliable. In rural Chittagong (Teknaf) where we stayed, electricity from the grid was sometimes on for just hours a day.\(^{81}\) Expat staff members demanded regular (if not constant) electricity to power lights, fans, computers, and other electronic devices. But what

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\(^{80}\) The equation of spending = power was manifested in interesting ways: purchasing from a particular vendor confers status on the spender and forges or improves the relationship with that vendor. In some cases, control over spending might mean that the spender could reallocate resources, benefiting themselves, or projects they favored.

\(^{81}\) The availability of electricity varied by time of year, and the grid was most taxed during the hot summer months. Every day there were periods of time when the electricity would be cut off for load shedding (a kind of rolling blackout).
precipitated the purchase of a new generator was the need for more air conditioning. As the refugee project grew, more expats were hired. These senior staffers wanted air conditioning for their sleeping rooms. Some, unused to the Bangladeshi heat and humidity, could barely function without air conditioning. So the budget had been arranged to include new air conditioners and a generator powerful enough to run them all. One expat, who had some experience with generator technology, offered to solicit the bids and arrange the purchase. But he was told that the Dhaka office would handle procurement. Months went by with no sign of a generator. Expat staffers sent weekly messages to the Dhaka office, complaining about the delay.

More than six months after the original purchase request had been approved, a generator was finally delivered. Excited staff members arranged to have air conditioners installed and stayed home to direct the activities that such a large installation would surely entail. But, after months of waiting, they were disappointed to learn that the generator, although plenty powerful enough for their needs, had not been purchased with the appropriate installation package and thus could not be wired to the house. So it sat in the garden, unused. Outraged and frustrated staffers began calling the Dhaka office to complain, but they got no response. It was unclear whether the purchase price should have included the installation package and if so, whether parties on either side of the transaction had benefited from leaving it out.

After months of waiting (and complaining), expats sought to take matters into their own hands and have a local electrician make the needed adjustments. However, they were told that to do so would void the warranty, a liability they could not afford. So the generator sat for an

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82 Bangladeshis recognize six seasons: spring, summer, monsoon, autumn, late autumn and winter. Spring and summer (late February to early June) precede the monsoon rains, and are often the hottest times of year.
additional five months, as the summer heat came and went. Midway through the monsoon season, the generator was finally installed, just one year late.

_The Politics of Spending_

Being prevented from spending money was not unique to the refugee project. In 2009, the UN joint fund announced that it would grant $30 million to a variety of projects in the Ukhia/Teknaf/Cox’s Bazar region of Bangladesh, one of the nation’s most impoverished areas. Afraid that this kind of spending would tip the local balance of power too much in favor of UN agencies, the government of Bangladesh announced that it would reject the investment.\(^{83}\)

Although the generators, air-conditioners and the much contested installation package were eventually purchased, the delay did affect the budget. Each week that the generator sat idle, gasoline to run it went un-purchased. Although the funds were eventually reallocated to other budget lines, in the short term, this kind of under-spending did concern staffers. However, it was the lack of spending on activities that directly impacted refugees that worried management most. Each week as staffers were scolded for not spending, the complexity of the process became more evident. As mentioned above, one challenge to spending was that expensive items needed approval from the Dhaka office. Similarly, less expensive items required the signature of the project manager. As described earlier, Dr. Shahid and the other expat staffers were absent from the project site more than thirty percent of the time. When present, his days were filled with

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\(^{83}\) The public rhetorical justification for rejecting such a large investment centered on the fact that the government of Bangladesh was refusing the money because it would entail some obligations on their part vis-à-vis the Rohingya refugees. It was a very public snub to the UN agencies and an assertion of independence on the part of Bangladesh. However, insiders pointed to other reasons for the failure: the proposal by the UN joint fund was hastily put together and not carefully negotiated. In addition, some observers argued that the rejection was a strategic gamble on the part of officials who did not want such largess to land in the lap of the Chittagonian officials. Instead they gambled that if the investment was rejected, the UN agencies would redirect the funds to other parts of Bangladesh.
meetings, such that even the most ambitious staff member might find it difficult to secure his approval.

**Flawed Budgeting**

But more telling than either of these roadblocks were challenges created by the budgeting system itself. As is common in many NGOs, grant proposal budgets were organized with a few large “buckets.” Within these, there was little specific detail about how goals should be accomplished or monies allocated. This lack of detail made it possible for Dhaka staff and senior project staff to wield considerable control over how money was spent. From my limited vantage point, it looked as if a significant percentage of the project budget was going toward expenses incurred by the Dhaka staff (rather than the refugee project). But if fuzzy, inexact fund allocation was one part of the problem created by this kind of big picture budgeting, others were much more immediate.

One problem that was mostly outside the control of Bangladeshi staff at the refugee project were over- and under-budgeting. Of these, over-budgeting seemed to be the most common problem. Low wages in almost every sector mean that throughout Bangladesh there are extremely low prices on many goods and services. Some of these were so low, that it might seem understandable to find a newly arrived foreigner unable to accurately budget for anything. These low prices, coupled with padded, murky budgets, make spending enough difficult. It’s hard to spend a lot when things don’t cost much. While it might be expected that some expat staffers would be ill equipped to develop accurate budgets, these staffers did have assistance of skilled local staff that could accurately predict how much things would cost.

**Donations that Replaced Spending**

One unexpected barrier to spending (i.e., barrier to success) was the generosity or good
will of other organizations. As I got involved with a variety of Islamic Aid projects, I often found that other organizations happily donated items Islamic Aid had planned to purchase. In my discussions with staff at Islamic Aid and other organizations, I learned that this is commonplace. While big donations can be a boon for the recipient organization and its constituents, they can also create a spending gap. In one case, when we proposed starting a soccer league for the more than 6,000 children and youths in Ukhia Camp, staff at UNHCR were quick to connect us to FIFA (the international football association) who gladly offered to give us balls, nets and other supplies. Later, when we proposed starting a library, UNICEF and other organizations offered to donate all the books.

**Conclusion**

Spending and reporting on that spending were the central concerns of the Islamic Aid refugee project. In this they are not alone. As has been well described elsewhere, NGOs spend a great deal of time and energy applying for funding and reporting on their work. The system of securing funding, spending, and reporting exerts a powerful kind of social control. Reporting must be done in English (which, until recently, was not a part of most school curricula in Bangladesh), and the reporting system itself forces people into a temporal orientation that divides time into grant periods marked by reporting deadlines. The focus on spending sends powerful cues to staff members and other actors about the meaning of humanitarian work.

Although in the Islamic Aid refugee project, I did not see the fast cars and flashy young executives my friend Rahim had told me to watch out for, I did see that the NGO sometimes fell short of some of the humanitarian goals that were central to its rhetorical appeal. Instead of focusing on activities that would improve the lives of Ukhia Camp residents, many key staffers were led to believe that spending was their most important job and the primary work of Islamic
Aid.
Chapter Six: INGO and Camp Communication

One fundamental set of problems in the Ukhia Camp was the result of communication difficulties. These stemmed from the multilingual, multicultural nature of the workplace as well as the organizational culture of Islamic Aid and the nature of humanitarian aid work. Foreign experts are hired to lead humanitarian interventions, but it is unclear whether they make a lasting contribution. I argue that expat humanitarian aid workers see themselves as part of special group of people, an imagined community of experts and leaders. In fact, humanitarian aid workers in Bangladesh seem isolated, their communities fragmented. Many of the aid workers I saw were able to provide technical expertise, but because they didn’t speak the local language and didn’t learn local cultural norms for social interaction, including communication practices, their technical solutions were far less effective than they might have been.

Expats as Imagined Community

In 1983 Benedict Anderson hypothesized that the modern nation-state had coalesced as a result of new technologies that made printed material in local vernacular languages available. As formerly unconnected individual consumed the same materials, “imagined communities” developed. That is, he claimed, the printing press made it possible for people reading the same materials (particularly newspapers) to begin to think of themselves as connected to one another, and therefore, a nation. In some ways, in the contemporary world of humanitarian INGOs, career aid workers are much like Anderson’s formerly unconnected individuals. Set apart from their country of origin and unrooted, they read and produce the same kinds of manuals and reports, and recognize one another as having the same kinds of experiences. Together, these form the basis of a shared identity. In the humanitarian world, a form of international English is the lingua
franca of aid work and along with technical skills and an affinity for the peripatetic lifestyle, marks humanitarian expats as members of a special class or community. While membership in this imagined community might contribute to positive self-image of aid workers or the cohesiveness of aid international organizations, it did not improve the humanitarian aid being delivered in Bangladesh. In fact, I came to see reliance on English, international technical skills, short term postings and even the camaraderie of aid work as key shortcomings in the composition of aid organizations, particularly Islamic Aid, where I did my fieldwork.

**Language Use and Language Choice**

One of the things I noticed right away was that all the expats spoke English, but only one spoke any Bangla. As a result, all staff members, not just the foreigners, were expected to speak English. Reliance on English had many consequences. Bangladeshi staffers who spoke English were sought after, privileged and more highly valued. Some bilingual staffers were constantly overworked. They were frequently sought out as translators, interpreters and interlocutors, all of which made it difficult for them to get their other work done.

Most of the Bangladeshi professional and semi-professional staff were able to speak at least some English. Staff members with no English skills were at a huge disadvantage. With few exceptions, expat staff did not try to learn any Bangla, not even greetings or the names of things they needed every day, like food items, words for transportation, time or weather. Interestingly,

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84 This staffer, who could speak some Bangla (but did not read it) was fluent in Hindi, which is in the same language family and shares some of its lexicon and many of its roots.

85 Debates over the role of English worldwide take many forms, most of which are outside the purview of this project. A few of the related concerns include work that focuses on English as a lingua franca (see for instance Canagarajah 2007; Firth 1996; Jenkins 2006; Mauranen 2007). Another important debate centers on the role of English, its form and means of instruction in school curricula where English is not the primary language (see for instance, Appleby 2010; Canagarajah1999).
none of the expat staff spoke English as a first language. So their versions of English were idiosyncratic and often did not conform to rules of standard grammar or usage. Complicating matters, the Chittagonian and Rohingya dialects spoken by refugees (and by the local Bangladeshis) have only partial mutual intelligibility with the standard form of the Bangla language, spoken by educated Bangladeshis, particularly those in Dhaka. So a successful staff member would need to be at least tri-lingual (Bangla/English/Chittagonian). Many Bangladeshi staffers also spoke Urdu/Hindi, mostly acquired through media, but also through cross border work, extended families that crossed national borders and sometime madrassa education (Faquire 2010).

Arabic was not widely used as a lingua franca, even though some of expat staff came from African nations with large Muslim populations and more than half had worked in the Middle East and approximately 90% of the Bangladeshi staff were Muslim. Finally, there was also a mix of other languages used by staffers, particularly members of Rakhine (Burman origin) communities and various Hill Tribes (these included Chakma, Marma and Khyang). Some of these languages (like Chakma) are in the same language family as Bangla and shared parts of the lexicon but most of the other tribal languages are of Tibeto-Burman origin (Faquire 2010).

Bangladesh and Islamic Aid are obviously not the only sites where global English(es) dominate. In corporations, popular media of many kinds, international NGOs, international governmental organizations and many industries like tourism, English dominates. Joseph Sung-Yul Park and Lionel Wee argue that how language choices are made and evaluated are always connected to regimes of power. They write, “Different constraints imposed upon different mobile populations remind us that linguistic competence and repertoire of social groups are always
evaluated in the context of power, demanding greater sensitivity to the structure of inequalities that condition mobility” (2015:55). In Ukhia Camp, all of the actors: expat, Bangladeshi and Rohingya are global citizens whose lives, subjectivities and language choices are shaped by global, regional and local forces. Jan Blommaert argues that these reveal other important distinctions. He writes, “A critical historical questioning of issues of resources and competence will compel us to consider the actual forms of inequality that characterize language in the era of globalization” (2010:21). Without digging very deeply, it is easy to see that many kinds of inequalities at work in Ukhia Camp privilege the foreign or expat staff most and refugee least.

So expats relied on English. Not surprisingly, this led to frequent miscommunication, work slowdowns, resentment and division. It also meant that the English used in the office was often not the standard form; speakers frequently used the simplest constructions and vocabularies, as with a pidgin. Exchange of nouns was common, as it allowed speakers to avoid the complication of conjugating verbs. So it was not uncommon to hear short exchanges that went something like:

Expat: Car? Vehicle? (said with rising intonation. Meaning, Where is the car?)

Bangladeshi: Guesthouse. (It’s at the guesthouse already)

Expats also frequently used imperatives; “bring” was most common command:

Bring tea
Bring car
Bring laptop, guesthouse
Bring Doctor Mohammed
Bring nurses
Bring cigarettes
Go
Although somewhat adequate for some of the expats’ basic needs, this abrupt style of communication violated the Bangladeshi staff members’ sense of appropriate interaction, which would normally include polite chatting (*adda*) over tea before getting to the business at hand. Most of the expats didn’t seem to know they were insulting their fellow staff members when they issued commands or shouted abruptly worded queries, or perhaps they just didn’t give it too much thought.

For instance, one of the expats was very amused to tell me that when he arrived in Bangladesh, it irritated him that everyone wanted to chat. He was also bothered by the fact that they would call him “brother” (in Bangladesh it is considered rude to call someone by their given name, so people address each other using honorifics or by appending the honorific to the person’s name. To many friends I was “sister” or to younger staffers, *misha-apa* (Misha/older sister), whereas a male colleague, friend or neighbor might be addressed using the word *bhai* (brother) or *mama* (maternal uncle), or sometimes the English words “brother” or “uncle.”

My expat colleague explained that when addressed by Bangladeshi colleagues using the term “brother,” he would blow up. “Who are you calling ‘brother’? I’m not your fucking brother!” After doing this a couple of times, word got out, and I rarely heard anyone address him as “brother” or “*bhai*.” In describing this to me, the expat staffer made it clear that he did not trust his Bangladeshi colleagues and felt that when they used such terms of familiarity, they must be “up to something.” Unfortunately, the loss of goodwill and respect had an impact on the project.
Performing Anger

Dr. Max is a large barrel-chested bearded European man with a loud voice and a ready laugh. Experienced in running field hospitals in disaster and war zones, Dr. Max is more administrator than humanitarian. He is, however, easily frustrated and quick to anger. One day in April 2012, as we arrived in the office, Dr. Max got word that some of the Rohingya camp residents, upset about changes in their access to drinking water, were protesting in the camp and had threatened to blockade the clinic.

From out in the hall where I was chatting with other staff members, I heard his voice, loud and agitated. When I poked my head into his office, he waved me in. “Listen how fucked up this is,” he said, and waved his hand for the staff member, Ahmed, to re-tell what he had just explained.

“Sister,” Ahmed explain, “some camp residents are not happy. Stupid people, they have made a blockade in front of the clinic. They say that until they get water delivery, no one will be allowed to go into the clinic.”

“What about people who are sick? Do they see that the only people they are hurting are their fellow camp residents?” I asked.

“They don’t care,” said Ahmed.

“What is everyone doing? Where are the doctors? Are they seeing patients?” asked Max.

“No, I don’t think so.”

At this point, Dr. Max’s face grew red and he stood, “Get the vehicle, we’re going now.”

Max, and Ahmed and I piled into the car. As usual, Max sat up front, but turned towards the middle row of seats so he could talk to us.
“These people are so stupid. Don’t they see, they will get nothing with a protest like this? Why do they not talk to us? We are here every day. They say nothing, and now they want to keep my doctors out? No way. We’ll leave. Their people will die. See how they like that. Idiots!” By the time we got to the camp, nearly half an hour later, I half expected Dr. Max’s anger to have worn itself out. Instead, getting to the camp seemed to only aggravate him more. At the entrance to the camp, there were a few young men blocking the road; it was easy to assume they were part of whatever protest was starting. As the driver slowed the van to approach them, Max shouted, “Do not stop. Just go. Go! Go!” The driver accelerated and the men had to jump out of the way.

As we headed up the narrow dirt lane to the medical clinic entrance, the driver sped along, women, children and livestock hastening to get out of the way. When we pulled up in front of the clinic, we could see that a crowd had gathered and they were indeed blocking the gate to the clinic. Dr. Max bolted from the van and moved quickly to a spot in front of the clinic door. I could see that the clinic doctors and male medical assistants had taken refuge in the shade of the tea stand that stood almost directly across from the hospital. They watched with interest as Max began shouting at the gathered refugees. He shouted in English, of which only a handful of camp residents had rudimentary knowledge. As he yelled he waved his arms violently, frightening children (even accidentally hitting one), and forcing men and women to retreat in order to avoid being hit by his powerful arms.

“Get away. Go home!” he shouted as he paced, arms waving. “You can’t close my hospital,” “You think you’re tough, threatening my staff - come talk to me! Go home, all of you! Get! Go! If you don’t like this, we’ll just leave.” After this outburst, the crowd did start to disperse (although many of the young men lingered, perhaps hoping for a fight or at least more drama). Most people began moving slowly to their homes or other parts of camp. A few of the
Bangladeshi staff stood to one side, shaking their heads. Some were grinning, I didn’t know if they were amused at the spectacle Dr. Max had made, or if they were glad that the Rohingya had been told they were not allowed to protest, or something completely different.

Dr. Max shouted towards where we stood, “Where is Dr. Khalid? Where is Yousef?” He shouted, naming two of the staffers (both fluent in English) that he relied on every day. As Yousef, Khalid and the other medical doctors stepped forward, it was clear that Dr. Max was still angry.

“Why did you let them do this?” he asked.

“Did you know this was going to happen?” He asked Yousef.

Not stopping to listen to any responses, he yelled, “Why did you not tell me? We cannot let this happen here. If the funders find out, or the police, there will be trouble.”

In the end, there was no trouble, and the dispute was resolved. The incident, however, is illustrative of two important points. First, Dr. Max’s mode of communicating with refugees was a physical and verbal performance of threats and shouting. At the same time, the camp residents’ mode of communicating with Islamic Aid staff was also quite physical (blocking the clinic door) and involved threats (give us what we want or we will shut you down). This example highlights a few different kinds of concerns: the role of physical size, strength and auditory volume in performative communications meant to establish and maintain power; the form that this kind of “conflict talk” takes and how it is understood within a speech community and how it may be

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86 Residents who protested were unhappy that Islamic Aid had ceased trucking water into the refugee camp. Islamic Aid had begun this expensive and difficult measure a few years earlier when they took over management of the camp. The NGO that had preceded them had left abruptly. In the process, existing water filtration systems were badly damaged and Ukhia Camp’s access to potable water had shrunk almost overnight. When Islamic Aid stopped trucking water, it was in preparation for the resumption of the supply of filtered water. Once this was explained to residents, they agreed to cooperate.
interpreted by outsiders. Don Kulick contends that conflict talk is often not systematically studied because Western researchers have seen it as deviant or of low value.

It was particularly interesting to see how Dr. Max used his body as part of this communicative performance. Much of the anthropological work on human bodies focuses on the theoretical analysis of how bodies are controlled, disciplined, and surveilled, as well as how experiences like illness, motherhood or death are embodied cultural performances (for examples, see Frankenberg 1986; Lock 1993; Martin 2001; Strathern 1992; Wilce 2004). At the same time, anthropological research on communication strategies that rely on size, strength, and sound to reinforce messages builds on work that reveals the cultural specificities of emotional registers and emotional vocabularies (Abu-Lughod 1986; Briggs 1970; Lutz 1988; Myers 1986; Rosaldo 1980; Wilce 2009). John Haviland, for instance, claims that the performative aspects of Tzotzil marital squabbles mirrors the social, creating an iconic relationship between the verbal performance and the marriage itself (1988:396).

The performance of rage that Dr. Max demonstrated could be seen as a good example of what Rosaldo calls “embodied thought” (1984:143; see also Csordas 1990; Good and Good 1988). Rosaldo posits that emotion can be understood as a particular kind of thinking that relies on the body. In this way, Dr. Max’s emotion (rage) might be seen as a kind of cognition and his outburst, a way of communicating those embodied thoughts to the assembled crowd. Like the women described by Kulick, Dr. Max saw himself as forced to take this dramatic stance by others who had wronged him (and wronged Islamic Aid). Although most of his audience was unable to grasp the semantic content of his message, the referential message (his anger and frustration) were obvious to all (see Lutz and Abu Lughod 1990 for more on emotion and communication).
Linguistic anthropologists assert that study of communicative processes requires attending not only to what is said but how it is said (see for example, Gumpertz and Hymes 1972; Hymes 1974, also Jakobson 1990; Lutz and Abu Lughod 1990; Silverstein 1993). Briggs points out that observers must also attend to ways that participants may use the discursive practice to try to change the social order (see also Bauman and Briggs 1990). For instance, among the Warao, Briggs asserts that scolding can be seen as a subset of counseling speech which elders use to discipline adult community members who are experiencing conflict and potentially inappropriate (communicative) behavior (1992). Kulik argues scolding, like any other speech genre, takes a particular form, which of course, varies from one speech community to another. In the case of Dr. Max and the Ukhia Camp residents, it was unclear to me how residents understood his scolding and the way it deviated from local practice.

John Comaroff and Simon Roberts argue that “It is in the context of confrontation—when persons negotiate their social universe and enter discourse around it—that the character of that system is revealed” (1981: 249). In this case, the confrontation seemed to reveal the absence of shared communicative resources that would have made it a relatively simple matter for the Islamic Aid to communicate with Ukhia Camp residents what they planned for water distribution, or for the Ukhia Camp residents to express their concern for what would happen with the water supply. Instead Dr. Max used his voice and physical body to disperse the crowd, end the protest and get what he wanted, which was the resumption of business as usual. He seemed to make it clear that he was not interested in talking with the camp residents or responding to their concerns (unless it was on his terms).
Revealing or Withholding: Information as Power

Before this protest, Yousef, the Islamic Aid staff member charged with communicating with the Ukhia Camp Management Committee (and therefore the person whose official duty it was to know what was happening in the camp) had neglected to report that unrest was brewing, possibly for reasons of his own. In the camp and in the local community, knowledge was power. Charged with learning all the camp secrets, Yousef was a powerful man. Educated, connected to ruling party Awami League student politics, Yousef seemed to easily cross the borders between semi-legal and legitimate enterprises (commercial, political, etc.). He was known to smoke and drink alcohol, which endeared him to some of the expats who were uncomfortable with Islamic teaching that makes drinking alcohol a sin (haram). At the same time, it set him apart from the more religiously observant Muslim staffers. Faced with a direct order from Dr. Max or Dr. Shahid, Yousef often disappeared, pleaded ignorance, dragged his feet or just did not do as instructed. When caught, he elaborately apologized, feigned shamefaced abjection and promised to do better next time. Frequently, his apologies were so long and drawn out that Dr. Max got impatient and waved him off, unwilling to hear the rest. Faced with angry questioning about the protest, he claimed not to really have known about the unrest in time to report and prevent it.

After the crowd dispersed, he tried to placate Dr. Max. “Max, you know, yesterday this was not a problem. I spoke to the Ukhia Camp Committee, they are not unhappy. The protest was just a few bad ones, complainers. Some from outside the camp, you know, troublemakers! How did I know what was happening? Don’t worry. We will find out, get to the bottom.”

Max grumbled and refused to be placated. He stormed around the clinic, half a dozen of us trailing behind as he shouted orders for everyone to get to work. He ordered Yousef to gather members of the Ukhia Camp Management Committee for a meeting the following day. A few minutes later we were speeding back to the office. Max was angry that camp residents had
chosen to blockade the clinic as a form of protest, angry that his staff had not warned him of the impending protest and frustrated that he was left to deal with issues of water and camp safety, since there should have been other senior staff members on hand to address those concerns.

Once in the van, he ranted a little, but just to me. “Fucking Yousef. Who does he think he is? Why doesn’t he do his job? Lazy bastard!”

Trying to avoid taking sides, I did agree that Yousef’s job was to know what was happening in the camp. I agreed that he should have known about the protest and communicated about it before it started. Interestingly, Dr. Max did not see Yousef’s failure as intentional. Instead, he described it as part of a larger pattern of “laziness” and a “poor work ethic.”

In the end, each of the key players achieved partial victory in the ongoing fight for power in the camp. Dr. Max ended the protest and got the clinic back up and running. Yousef managed to protect his position as go-between and power broker, without actually sharing information with either side. The Rohingya refugee protesters had demonstrated that they could assert some power over what happened in the camp.

A career medical aid worker, with little concern for Bangladeshi (or Rohingya) communicative or cultural norms, Dr. Max was only peripherally aware of the local practices of power and communication, yet his actions were read by both staff and refugees as a demonstration of power and privilege similar to those they encountered every day: a powerful man angrily demanding that the less powerful around him concede to his wishes. Nowhere in the interaction did Dr. Max or any other staff member stop to really ask why the camp residents were protesting, nor did they seriously consider whether changes should be made in response to the protests. Instead, the camp residents’ protest was defined as an illegitimate exercise of power. By offering to meet with the Ukhia Camp Management Committee rather than the protesters, Dr.
Max reinforced the notion that power could only be legitimately wielded through sanctioned structures.

Although this kind of outburst would seem to violate the ethic of caring upon which humanitarianism is often rhetorically grounded, no one involved in the episode (or in any of the many similar episodes that took place as part of running the Islamic Aid project) seemed surprised or even particularly bothered by Dr. Max’s rage. Instead, I think that for many Bangladeshis, class privilege was frequently expressed as disrespectful and even violent treatment of the lowest status people. Dr. Max’s outburst, entirely in English, was a performance of his identity as a cosmopolitan humanitarian aid worker, unconcerned that the content of his speech would be unintelligible to many around him. He was confident that it was the job of Bangladeshi staffers and refugees to figure out what he was saying.

*Technical Fixes?*

As outlined in Chapter One, expats working on humanitarian aid projects were expected to perform a number of interconnected functions: their presence was intended to provide an assurance of fiduciary anti-corruption responsibility; as outsiders, they were expected to avoid publicly taking sides in the paralyzing local and national political conflicts; and they were expected to provide international technical expertise. However, expats’ disinclination to ask questions and inability to communicate with locals meant that in key situations, the technical solutions they offered were not always useful.

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87 There are many Bangladeshis who care deeply about the ultra-poor, about the low-status women and children working as day laborers, sex workers and in RMG (ready-made garment factories) and about men working as rickshaw pullers, overseas laborers and ship breakers. However, it is not uncommon to see a prosperous man casually punch an exhausted rickshaw puller, a business person backhand a child beggar who got too close, or a Bangladeshi friend might shout at servants for neglecting a small chore.
The most striking of these situations was revealed early in the monsoon season of 2012. Office staff in charge of medical surveillance reported that there was a larger than expected uptick in the number of cases of watery diarrhea. Islamic Aid medical and technical staff suspected cholera, but could not be sure of the diagnosis because Islamic Aid’s laboratory lacked the proper supplies to conduct the test (see Chapter Five for other examples in which procurement of key medical supplies broke down). As a result, and following internationally accepted guidelines, they increased the amount of chlorine in the water supply. Yet the number of cases continued to rise.

It is important to note here that water had been a key problem in Ukhia since the camp was built in 2007. Since that time, access to clean water had been a problem. A number of different NGOs had attempted a variety of solutions, including trucking water in, drilling wells (unsuccessful) and the current solution which was to purchase water rights from a local businessman who claimed to own a stream that came past the camp from the mountains behind it.

Once water rights had been purchased, the water was pumped into camp through a canal and into large holding tanks where it was treated with chlorine and other chemicals that would promote sedimentation. Ideally most of the particulate matter would then settle to the bottom of the tanks before the daily water pumping time. Each daylong lines of metal water pots snaked through the camp. Young girls of seven or eight or nine would play nearby, each keeping an eye on her family water pot and her place in line. The Islamic Aid team (and the other local NGOs that helped with water and sanitation) congratulated themselves on having found a solution (pumping in water) that was less costly than trucking it in, but hoped to find other means of providing water, like a catchment for monsoon rain or a well. But in 2012, they were pumping
water and treating it with chlorine, and the number of diarrhea cases was on the rise. Staff ordered that yet more chlorine be added to the water.

The error of this strategy was revealed almost accidentally. In July 2012, so much was happening in and around the camp, I was only peripherally aware of the concerns about diarrhea. But each week, I had been meeting with women from different parts of the camp, one thing I always asked was about their health and the well-being of their children. In July, I began asking more detailed questions about their experience with diarrheal disease. The women told me that small children always got sick during the monsoon. I asked them about their food and drinking water, and was surprised to learn that although their daughters waited hours each day for the pumped water, many of the women in my group thought this water was unfit to drink. They used it for cleaning and cooking. When I asked why, Begum Rahan, an outspoken mother of five, told me that water at the pump smelled bad, too bad to drink. One of her neighbors, Shahida, gestured excitedly, explaining that the water at the pump is from the canal, and not ok for drinking.

Surprised at what I thought I was hearing, I conducted a quick mini-survey of some women I knew in the camp. It turned out that many of them had the same concerns as Begum Rahan and Shahida: they thought the water tasted unfit to drink (probably due to the high level of chlorine) and, perhaps just as importantly, they had been told years before to avoid drinking surface water (including water from the canal) that might be contaminated with parasites, bacteria and other hazards. They suspected that Islamic Aid was supplying them with water that was unfit to drink. When I reported this information back to the medical and technical staff, they were unimpressed and seemed not to believe that the water they spent so much money to pump and treat was being used for bathing. I later learned from camp residents that many of the women and girls went early in the morning to pumps located on the outskirts of Ukhia Camp,
and frequently had to pay locals for the privilege of filling their buckets. I hypothesized that the cases of watery diarrhea might be a connected to one or more of the pumps, but before I had a chance to convince my Islamic Aid colleagues to test the pumps and collect more data about what women thought about the water and illness, Islamic Aid was ordered to cease operations in Ukhia Camp (for more about this order, see Chapter Seven).

**Complex Problems**

Another set of challenges exacerbated by poor communication was the fact that expats and senior Bangladeshi staff seemed to have a simplistic notion of who the camp residents were, what they wanted, and what challenges they faced. As a result, the solutions provided by Islamic Aid were frequently inadequate. For instance, as documented in Chapter Two, Islamic Aid created an office for sexual and gender based violence. But when I spoke to women in the camp, many of them explained that that much of the violence they experienced came from outside the camp. At the same time, they experienced high levels of violence from other women in their own households, sometimes mothers-in-law, but more frequently from co-wives.

In many ways, I was sympathetic to the challenges faced by the Bangladeshi and expat managers who ran the camp. Restrictions on what kinds of assistance they were allowed to offer made many kinds of humanitarian outreach impossible. For instance, the government of Bangladesh had stipulated that NGOs were not allowed to provide food for these “unofficial” refugees, unless there was imminent danger of death or a serious health crisis. Severely malnourished children and pregnant and lactating women could be offered short-term life-saving nutritional support. But many other individuals and families went hungry, particularly those without kin networks. Most at risk were widows, the elderly and some families with multiple wives and many small children.
There were many abandoned women in the camp. Some had husbands who went abroad to the Middle East, Malaysia, India, or Thailand for work and never returned. Others had husbands who took a second or third wife from the local Bangladeshi community. Sometimes these men left Ukhia Camp, left their Rohingya wives and children, and were able to leave behind the stigma of refugee identity. Simply by relocating to the new wife’s family home, these men essentially became Bangladeshi. While some worked to maintain two (or more) households, others simply abandoned their refugee wives and children. I heard about a few who took the step of actually divorcing their wives, but others didn’t bother.

Women were rarely able to take advantage of intermarrying with locals to improve their status. This was largely because of the local dowry system. Refugee families were frequently unable to provide dowry for their daughters. As a result, many young refugee women became the second or third wives of refugee men. Families of local men, even poor ones, could demand dowry that refugee families could not afford. In the refugee camp there were also rumors of very young girls doing sex work in Cox’s Bazar, the beach town and tourist hub that was a couple of hours drive up the coast. It was said that some girls were trying to support their families while others might be trying to raise money for dowry (for themselves or sisters).

Although poverty, hunger and concerns for their future well-being were serious concerns for these women, having husbands who disappeared was not universally thought of as a bad thing. Mehraj Begum, a 49-year-old Rohingya grandmother, smiled when she told me her husband was gone and that she had not heard from him in almost a year. When I asked why, she

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88 Women in the camp identified polygamy as a serious problem (increasing violence, crowding and hunger). They explained to me that they knew Islamic text required men to be able to support each wife equally (and the women insisted, separately). Instead, men took multiple wives knowing they would be unable to support additional wives or more children. When I asked whether the women might consult camp imams about this, they laughed bitterly and told me that the imams were the worst, since they (the imams) had each taken four wives.
smiled when she told me about it, she said that with him gone, she no longer had to sleep next to the young second wife he had taken, nor did she have to put up with the stress of domestic violence. Her neighbor, Farida Begum, had a similar story to tell, but she was more ambivalent. Her husband was sending money from Malaysia to the second wife, but she got nothing.

**Getting it Right: Solar Lights**

Sometimes Islamic Aid and other NGOs got it right: they proposed or implemented solutions that had the intended positive impact on those they sought to help. In Ukhia Camp, one such project was the solar lights. As detailed in Chapter Two, when Islamic Aid took over the management of the refugee camp, attention to gender-based violence was not part of its normal set of priorities; as an organization, it had virtually no expertise in this area. However, pressure from ECHO, the project’s main funder pushed project leaders to do two things: install solar lighting in the camp and open an office for Gender Based Violence (see more about the office of Gender Based Violence in Chapter Two).

Like rural and marginalized communities in many parts of the world, lack of electricity in the camp meant that family life was largely ordered by available daylight. As night approached women, girls and small children moved out of public spaces and into the private space of home and lane. However, retreating to safer spaces was not a strategy that could be employed at all times. Women reported to me that they sometimes had to walk through the dark when returning from the market, and even more dangerously, when they had to use the latrines. A few months before the solar lights were installed, I gathered groups of women together to ask them what their concerns about camp life were. One of the most frequently voiced concerns was the danger women and girls faced as they moved through camp, particularly at night and early morning. Bathing and using the latrines were often cited as examples of activities in which women faced
harassment, humiliation and even assault.

Farida Begum, an imposing refugee woman, is tall and broad shouldered. Unlike many of the women in the camp, she publicly disagrees with some of the men and stands her ground when challenged. But in our conversations, she revealed how difficult it was to deal with life in the camp. “When we go to wash or go to the toilet, we have to wait in line, sometimes there is not enough for everyone. But if you go in the morning or at night, then the youth [male] look at you through the broken doors. Sometimes they push the doors in or try to grab you. I do not like it. I don’t want my daughter to go there.”

Months later, when solar lights were installed, the Bangladeshi and expat men who ran the camp held a ceremony to celebrate the accomplishment (and document it for funders). In their speeches and reports to funders, they asserted that these lights would make the camp safer for vulnerable people, particularly women, the elderly, and disabled. When I spoke to the women soon after, I asked them what they thought of these lights. While they universally praised the lights and said they liked them, some though it would be only a matter of time before the lights were gone (i.e., stolen or broken). Knowing that Islamic Aid had spent a great deal of money on the project, I was surprised that residents expected them to only work for a short time. When I questioned the women about this, they shrugged. Without offering any explanation, one older woman merely offered, “it happens.” A couple of later conversations helped explain what the women couldn’t, or wouldn’t say about technology in the camp.

The Exigencies of Extreme Poverty

The first of these was a conversation with Nazrul Islam, a staff member from ECHO, who had taken a particular interest in the project. During a meeting with camp leaders to assess the need for repairs to their homes, Nazrul Islam took the opportunity to scold them. “You
mustn’t let these things (tarps, new bamboo) be taken and sold in the market. We give them to you to make the camp better and safer.”

When I asked him about this he said that he and the other staffers who helped organize the camp from the beginning had learned the hard way. “When we built the camp, we included all kinds of things to make the place better. But anything that could be taken apart and sold would disappear.” Surprised, I asked for examples. “Well, you know the design for the homes had to be temporary and we could only build with local materials. So we had compressed mud floors and thatch for the roof and bamboo for the walls. We knew there would be problems in the monsoon, so all along the bottom part of each house was a metal flashing, (here he held his hands about 18 inches apart) to keep the water out.” Nazrul Islam sighed, “But they sold all that. And then of course, the water gets in. It happens with everything. The houses, the mosquito nets, small equipment like sewing machines we gave them for the new livelihoods program.”

At yet another meeting with members of the Ukhia Camp Organizing Committee, ECHO and staffers (Bangladeshi and expat), residents were questioned about the state of bio-gas cookers that had been installed years earlier. When first questioned, residents in the meeting fell silent. “There are no cookers,” offered one male leader of the group. A few of the women behind him muttered and he turned to consult them. “There is one.” At this Dr. Shahid grew irritated. In a mixture of English and Bengali, he shouted, “There were cookers in every block. What we want to know is how many do you use? Are they working?” Sabir, one of the young Bangladeshis assistants quickly translated his question into Rohingya and the women began talking among themselves.

Sabir listened, and then said, “It’s two, no three.” Frustrated, Dr. Shahid asked again, “Ok, who lives in Section A? How many of these cookers are there? Do any work? Do you use
them?” Residents of each section were asked to comment. In the end, it seemed that while three of twenty-four cookers had worked sometime in the last few years, none were currently working. Some had never worked. When pressed, the residents denied knowing how to maintain or repair the cookers. Nazrul Islam from ECHO jumped in, explaining to Dr. Shahid and the rest of us. “When we funded these, the proposal said they would be maintained by the community. Now I see it is just a waste of money.”

I understood then that the women I had spoken to about the solar lights had not been overly pessimistic, they had shared their experience of hope and disappointment with technologies that could have improved their lives but were ultimately unsustainable. Just few months later, we got word that Islamic Aid would have to abandon its work at the camp. As Islamic Aid staff were preparing to end operations, Rashid, one of the project engineers, grimly remarked, “There go the solar lights.” I knew he had worked hard on getting the lights purchased and installed and would be disappointed to see the project fail. When I asked what he meant by this, he explained, “I’ve been a little surprised they haven’t been stolen already. But when our guards leave, there will be nothing to stop them.” I ask him to say more. He shook his head. “They’ll be sold.” I asked if it would make sense to take the lights down, in hopes of being able to reinstall them in the future. He shook his head again, a little sadly and didn’t bother to answer.

In each of these cases, technologies were proposed, approved, purchased and deployed without a plan for how to protect and maintain them for long-term use. Each of these technologies had the potential to dramatically improve women’s lives. Many women reported that they were regularly assaulted or robbed if they went into the forest to collect wood for cooking. Biogas cookers (if they worked and had been widely adopted) would have meant that women would not have to struggle to secure cooking fuel. Similarly, the flashing to keep
monsoon rains out of their homes would have meant less work trying to keep packed earth flooring from turning to muck. More protection from floods would also mean that meager food supplies and other belongings would be less susceptible to rot. And finally, a drier home might mean that children would experience fewer of the illnesses associated with monsoon floods: diarrheal diseases, skin infections, and respiratory illnesses.

The expat staffers and high-status Bangladeshi staffers believed that the technical solutions they proposed were appropriate remedies. They believed that their fixes failed because the Rohingya camp residents were ignorant, lazy, shortsighted and ungrateful. Although each of these solutions seemed to have the potential to improve lives, from another perspective, each was a simple solution to complex problems of poverty, powerlessness and injustice. Because expat staff, Bangladeshi staff and Rohingya refugees struggled to effectively communicate with one another, little was done to investigate why these solutions failed or to find more productive ways to address the very real challenges people of Ukhia Camp faced.
Chapter Seven: Violence Old and New

When I arrived at Ukhia Camp in 2011 and began work with Islamic Aid, both staff and refugees seemed more comfortable discussing the flights from Myanmar that occurred in the distant past than they were discussing more recent arrivals. The 1978-9 and 1990-1 persecutions that led to hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing to Bangladesh were well-documented human rights crises that afforded refugees the moral high ground. As the victims of documented abuses, the refugees who arrived during those crises could argue that they had a legitimate claim for aid and protection.

However, it was well known in Bangladesh and among international aid workers that in the years that followed those crises, and following the large-scale repatriation of refugees back to Myanmar in the mid-1990s, the abuses in Myanmar had continued. One organization, the Irish Centre for Human Rights documented numerous examples of forced labor, deportation, forcible transfer, rape and sexual violence, as well as other kinds of persecution (laws, for example, that prohibited Rohingya from working, free travel, access to education, and even laws that required Rohingya to get permission to marry). These as well as many other forms of persecution led the organization to conclude that the systematic and ongoing mistreatment met the legal definition of crimes against humanity (Irish Centre for Human Rights 2010).

As a result of the kinds of abuse documented by the Irish Centre for Human Rights, in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fled from Myanmar across the border, settling in Bangladeshi towns, villages, cities and makeshift camps. Some of these newly arrived Rohingya had fled to Bangladesh in the earlier waves of 1979 or 1990-91, and had been repatriated (either voluntarily or forcibly) to Myanmar. Finding the ongoing abuse there intolerable, they returned to Bangladesh. Unfortunately, Bangladeshi policy
was to deny anyone arriving after 1991 the opportunity to seek refugee status, instead preferring to class them all as “illegal economic migrants” or “undocumented Burmese nationals.” So Ukhia Camp residents, most of whom had arrived in (or returned to Bangladesh) after 1991, had no official refugee status. Because of this, most tried to carefully tread the path of claiming long-term tenure in Bangladesh, avoiding mention of “illegal” or “undocumented” status, while pointing to the ongoing abuses that made return to Myanmar impossible, or at the least very unattractive.

*Ethnic Violence Across the Border in Myanmar*

This situation changed in May 2012 when a series of events on the Myanmar side of the border led to increased violence targeted at Rohingya Muslims. In the days and weeks that followed the June 2012 rape of a young woman from the Rakhine Buddhist community in Myanmar, ten Muslim pilgrims (not Rohingya and not in any way connected to the rape) were burned to death, Rakhine and Rohingya homes and businesses were burned, more than 150,000 people (mostly Rohingya) were forced into IDP camps within Myanmar. While conditions in Myanmar were terrible, there was also a general worsening of conditions for Rohingya on the Bangladesh side of the border.

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89 The challenges of negotiating the particulars of legal status, citizenship and cross border identity is, of course, not unique to the Rohingya. In most contemporary nation states, laws differentiate between citizens and non-citizens, differently apportioning rights and obligations based on this distinction. In the United States, much public debate and academic inquiry has focused on the non-citizen, with particular emphasis on those categorized as “illegal” or “undocumented.” A number of scholars have examined how immigration law shapes subjectivities (Coutin 1996; DeJaeghere and McCleary 2010; Martin 2011). Another important area of focus is the discourse of illegality, criminality and undocumented statuses (Brettell 2000; Chavez 1994; Coutin and Chock 1996; Heyman 2004; Martinez and Slack 2013; Mehan 1997; Ngai 2014; Thomas and Galemba 2013).

90 See Appendix D for a chronology of the recent violence.
At the same time, NGOs and other international aid organizations on both sides of the border came under attack for providing services to Rohingya. In riots on the Myanmar side of the border, aid organization offices were looted, international aid workers (and journalists) ordered out of the country, and local staff members jailed. On the Bangladesh side of the border, aid organizations were also ordered to cease work. Although no staff members on the Bangladesh side were arrested, a campaign of rumors about the foreign staff members of international NGOs (the expats) forced some to leave the region and made it increasingly difficult for others to do their work successfully.

**Blame the Victim**

News reports and statements by politicians in both Myanmar and Bangladesh blamed the violence and resulting crackdowns on the Rohingya themselves. However, some observers in the region suggested that the initial burst of violence had been orchestrated (or fomented) in order to provide some necessary cover for political maneuvering that had started long before. There were whispers about some of these activities before the violence began. For instance, while in the Teknaf and Cox’s Bazar area, I heard about American contractors secretly working in the area south of the refugee camps. There was talk that they were consulting on the construction of a border wall being built to prevent refugees and other migrants from entering Bangladesh and also rumors of a camp where refugees might be held against their will.\(^9\) I could not substantiate any of these rumors, but will note that soon after the violence in Myanmar erupted in May 2012, the

\(^9\) Across the region, border disputes are common. Many of these international borders were created in the partition of India by the British in 1947 (or in the case of the Bangladesh/Myanmar, the border was created half a century earlier, during British rule). These sometimes arbitrarily drawn borders divide communities and even families and households. Armed conflict, border guard skirmishes and concerns about illegal entry of non-citizens, smugglers, terrorists and those supporting ethnic insurrections have led to the militarization of thousands of miles of the borders India shares with Pakistan, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. Much of these borderlands are also divided by fences, walls or lit by floodlights. Thousands of additional miles of fencing are planned.
road that led south from Teknaf to the tip of the peninsula and the edge of Bangladesh was closed by military border guards (Border Guards Bangladesh or BGB).

On the Myanmar side of the border, the violence that started in 2012 was described by politicians and in the media as result of the rape\(^\text{92}\) detailed above and an extension of anti-Muslim/anti-Rohingya sentiment and animosity between Rohingya and Rakhine Buddhists that had been brewing for decades. However, some observers were careful to point out that while the military junta government had been targeting the Rohingya since the early 1960s, in earlier times, Muslim communities had lived peacefully side by side with their Rakhine Buddhist neighbors. As noted in the introduction, this history is complicated by colonial histories, borders that moved over time, and nationalist historical revision by Bangladeshis, Myanmar officials, Rakhine Buddhists and the Rohingya themselves. Cynical observers suggested that by fomenting virulent anti Muslim/anti Rohingya sentiment among Rakhine people, the government was able to accelerate the forced displacement of Rohingya that had begun years earlier. Some of the reasons for this displacement are described below.

Communicating Violence

At Ukhia Camp, the word of the violence in Myanmar arrived in different ways. Senior staff members received phone calls from staff members at UNHCR and at the same time camp residents heard directly from friends and relatives who called them during the emergency. For both groups, messages were upsetting, confusing and contradictory. In a volume examining the experience of anthropologists during times of violence, Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius

\[^{92}\text{In June 2012 a 28 year old Rakhine Buddhist woman was raped. She later died as a result of her injuries. Three Rohingya men were arrested, convicted and sentenced to death. Before the trial, one of the accused committed suicide, and the other two were sentence to death.}\]
Robben highlight the ways that wartime communication is both confusing and full of anguish (1995:1).

Before the violence began in June 2012, many Rohingya in Bangladesh stayed in close contact with family members, friends and business associates in Myanmar. Although the border between Bangladesh and Myanmar was militarized and mostly closed, there were a couple of points where merchants could cross and where individuals could pay a small bribe to cross for shopping and family visits. It was rumored that local fishing boats would illegally transport people and goods that could not make it through the official border checkpoints, and although there were many checkpoints and guards on both sides of the hilly border, illegal crossing was not uncommon.

As a result of this permeable border, Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh were able to remain in close contact with family and friends in Myanmar. In fact, many families in Ukhia Camp had two sim cards for their phones, switching back and forth between a Bangladeshi phone number and a Myanmar number depending on who they were talking to. When the violence began in Myanmar, news spread very quickly in Ukhia Camp and other Rohingya settlements in Bangladesh. However, as the crisis dragged on, their communication became less regular. This was due in part to the fact that large numbers of Rohinyga in Myanmar that had been displaced from their homes; mobile phone reception was poor in some Myanmar IDP (internally displaced persons) camps.

One Ukhia Camp resident explained that his grandmother and maternal uncle were among the thousands who had lost everything. He described his worry when he learned that they were struggling to feed themselves and was concerned that when their mobile phone credit ran out, there would be no way to buy more. On the Bangladesh side of the border, phone credit for
prepaid Myanmar mobile phones was also increasingly difficult to obtain, as the cross-border trade virtually ceased.

Soon after the violence began, I began to notice the parallel streams of information that made their way into Ukhia Camp. When the first reports of violence started to trickle in, senior NGO staffers (particularly the expats) began having intense, private conversations amongst themselves and by phone with UNHCR staff in Cox’s Bazar. Then, a few days after rioting in Myanmar began, three of us traveled to UNHCR headquarters for meetings with UN and NGO staff. In those meetings we learned about the expulsion of journalists, UN and INGO staff, and the jailing of local NGO staff across the border in Myanmar. We also heard in a general way about the violence experienced by Rohingya and Rakhine villagers and their relocation to IDP camps. We were cautioned to be on the lookout for violence on the Bangladesh side and asked to be ready to evacuate quickly if it became necessary.

Islamic Aid’s Bangladeshi staff, particularly the locals, came to work each day with gossip and news of new violence, border crackdowns and speculation about the unrest spreading. Bangladeshi staff were also avidly tracking the news in the Bangladeshi press. Some of these outlets regularly published inflammatory stories denigrating the Rohingya and blaming them for piracy, drug smuggling, human trafficking and Islamist activities. As the violence continued in Myanmar, these newspapers and online news sources reported what seemed like wildly exaggerated tales of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya that had just arrived in Bangladeshi cities and were creating dramatic social problems. Other news outlets seemed to offer more balanced reporting.

Camp residents heard a very different story. They learned firsthand about family members who had been displaced, beaten, or killed. They heard from friends and loved ones who
had fled from mobs that had burned their villages and prevented them from returning to salvage their belongings, cultivate crops or care for livestock. Some heard nothing, and spent weeks worrying about their families, homes and businesses.

**Tragedy Across the River**

In those first days, many camp residents walked around in a daze. One hot June afternoon, I sat waiting for the traditional birth attendants (TBAs) to gather for their regular weekly meeting. It was immediately clear that this was not a regular day. One of the elderly women was late, and her fellow TBAs whispered that she had gotten bad news. When she arrived, clutching her phone and wiping her eyes with the corner of her shawl, she wept as she told the gathered women that a younger son and a granddaughter had been among those killed the night before. She was hoping to get a call confirming that other family members had made it to safety. As things boiled in Myanmar, staff and residents of the camp alike were afraid that the violence in Myanmar would spill over into Bangladesh. In the Islamic Aid office some staffers publicly pledged their friendship with a well-liked fellow staffer who was from a Bangladeshi Buddhist community related to the Rakhine. This staffer later confided in me that his family in Cox’s Bazar was urging him to leave the camp and Islamic Aid. He also told me that some members of his extended family were fleeing to Myanmar.

**Militarizing the Border**

As the violence in Myanmar escalated, the area on the Bangladesh side of the border became increasingly militarized. For a few weeks, each day as we rode to the camp, I saw

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93 These fears about spill-over violence were not entirely unfounded. In September 2012 twenty-two Bangladeshi Buddhist temples in nearby towns were burned in supposed retaliation for an image of a desecrated Koran posted on Facebook. But some observers noted that the tensions between the Muslim and Buddhist communities had been growing since the violence in Myanmar had started the previous June.
truckloads of BGB (Border Guards Bangladesh) soldiers. New lookout posts were organized along the riverbanks and the cliffs that overlooked the Naf River that separates Bangladesh from Myanmar. A few times I asked our driver to slow down or stop so we could see what was happening. Each time BGB soldiers roughly instructed us to move on. There were also days that we could see smoke in the hilly forest across the river in Myanmar. My Bangladeshi colleague told me in a solemn whisper that the smoke was all that remained of villages that had burned the night before.

This state of emergency made everyone anxious, a state that was exacerbated by the increased surveillance we experienced, particularly in and around the camp. Before the ethnic conflict began, it was pretty clear that we were under surveillance. Shopkeepers, local residents, police, and even refugees kept track of what was happening in the camp and reported it back to local politicians, businessmen, and the border guards. But as the violence escalated, surveillance in the camp took on a new intensity. Uniformed soldiers sat outside the camp. I also frequently saw members of the intelligence services, often sitting drinking tea at one of the stalls at the entrance to Ukhia Camp. While no crimes were being committed, the presence of these agents seemed to make everyone a little anxious.

But rather quickly this state of emergency became the new normal. Staff and camp residents grew accustomed to being watched, and living with a greater level of uncertainty and fear became the norm. Around the camp, children played and the small businesses continued to operate. But most days there were news reports and rumors of Rohingya attempting to flee Myanmar and being pushed back, sometimes violently. International news outlets and bloggers

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94 Some of these intelligence officers identified themselves to us (as staff of NSI, the National Security Office), others were pointed out by Bangladeshi colleagues. It became easy to spot these outsiders: they dressed, spoke and traveled in ways unlike the locals, the NGO workers or the Rohingya.
reported Rohingya refugees in pitiful conditions, and the deaths of some including hundreds of Rohingya who drowned after being pushed back by Bangladesh border guards. But the local news was filled with stories of refugees flooding Bangladesh, overcrowding, lawlessness, and unsanitary conditions. There were also a couple of “feel good” stories in the news about soft-hearted (or pious) Bangladeshi border guards who offered food or water to women and children before pushing them back or rounding them up for detention. It was these stories that Bangladeshi staff members at Islamic Aid seized on, gladly repeating stories of caring or courageous countrymen, and avoiding the ones that might reveal Bangladeshi officials doing harm to the refugees.

**Surveillance, Resistance and Cooperation**

A week after the initial violence began, a young Bangladeshi staffer came to get me. He whispered intensely that Dr. Max needed me right away. When I got to the clinic, two NGO staffers were standing guard at the door. They moved aside to motion me into the hot, crowded examination room where six Islamic Aid staffers were gathered around a young man prone on the table. He had been shot multiple times and had just made it across the river. Sympathetic locals had directed him and his father to the Islamic Aid clinic.

I was startled to be asked into the room until Dr. Max asked urgently if I had a camera and if I could photograph the young man’s wounds. I quickly did so and the Islamic Aid staff set out to remove the bullets. They were nervous about doing so because they had no sterile space, no operating room, no anesthesia. Dr. Max said, “If we don’t help him, he will die. The local hospital will not help.” I stood watching as they began extracting the bullets, until there was a commotion at the door. As the least useful person in the room, I moved quickly to see what was

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95 See, for example, reports aired on BBC News (Ethirajan 2012).
happening. The commander of the new BGB unit stationed a few miles away had arrived, and was demanding to see the patient. I told him no, that the doctors would discuss everything with him after they were done. He demanded to be allowed inside and I promised that Dr. Max would come out and talk to him in a short while. I urged him to sit in the office where there was a fan, and he agreed. When the procedure was over, the young patient was moved to the small inpatient wing of the clinic. Dr. Max spoke to the BGB commander, promising him that the young man would be in recuperation until the next morning. The commander grumbled, but agreed to return the next day to interrogate the patient.

*Resist or Cooperate?*

Afterwards, the staff was very concerned about what to do. Dr. Max worried that we could not refuse a direct order from the military. At the same time, it was clear that the BGB had been rounding up any newly arrived refugees they could find, detaining some and expelling others (in violation of international law). After some discussion, Dr. Max and other Islamic Aid manager decided that the best course would be to do nothing. They would not prevent the BGB from conducting any surveillance in the camp, neither would they prevent the young patient (or anyone else) from leaving. Word quickly traveled to the relatives of the young patient that if the young man stayed in the hospital all night, it was likely he would be arrested in the morning. Sometime in the night the young gunshot victim disappeared and was never seen in the camp again.

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96 The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees outlined the principle of non-refoulement, that is the idea that refugees have the right to be protected from forcible return. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, this principle is accepted as customary international law, which means that even countries that have not acceded to the Refugee Convention (like Bangladesh) must respect the principle of non-refoulement.
The next morning when the BGB commander returned to conduct his investigation, he was furious to learn that the patient had slipped away. The nurses and doctors shrugged, “He was here. We have no idea where he would go!” Later that day, Islamic Aid staffers received orders from the commander that they would have to report any newly arrived refugees to the Border Guards immediately. The orders also stipulated that no newly arrived person could be given any medical care. In another afterhours meeting of medical staff and other Islamic Aid managers, we discussed what to do. Knowing that he might be under surveillance by his own staff, Dr. Max verbalized his anger about the new rule, but grudgingly agreed to go along with it.

That evening, behind closed doors with only expats in attendance, our conversation continued, “What would it do to the reputation of Islamic Aid, to the relationships we had with camp residents, with patients, if word got out that Islamic Aid was collaborating with the BGB? What would it say about the kind of medicine Islamic Aid practiced? What would the donors and other NGOs think?” Dr. Max and Ismael, a kind yet savvy Sudanese staffer, came up with a plan. Islamic Aid staffers would be asked to spread the word among refugees that the camp was not a safe place: that all newcomers would have to be reported. We hoped this information would travel fast, and it did. Even when violence spiked again later in the summer and again in the fall, there were no new arrivals to report.

The End of an Era

There were other big changes underway for Islamic Aid. The first came a month later in the shape of a letter from the Bangladesh government Ministry of Disaster and Relief revoking permission for Islamic Aid to operate Ukhia Camp. The letter asserted that the presence of INGOs encouraged people to cross the border into Bangladesh. It didn’t seem to matter that conditions in Bangladesh were so terrible that only the truly desperate would choose them;
government wanted Islamic Aid and the other INGOs, including Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF or Doctors Without Borders) to leave.

After a few weeks of unsuccessful negotiation, it was announced that camp was closing. In one desperate Hail Mary play, the managers of the organization decided to approach a local political leader who was said to have initiated not only the camp closing but also a series of newspaper attacks against the international staffers of Islamic Aid and other INGOs that offered aid to the Rohingya. Some of these reports were so ludicrous they might have been funny, but local Bangladeshis and the INGOs took them very seriously. Journalists (with prompting from this local political leader) had reported that INGO staffers were illegally proselytizing Christianity, spying for Pakistan, and working for the Indian secret service. The net effect of these accusations was to inhibit the actions of INGO leaders who sought a way to avoid the expulsion orders they’d been given. Some couldn’t travel freely and one Islamic Aid staffer left the country. When he returned, it was only to do his job from the relative safety of the Dhaka office. A few others left Bangladesh altogether.

Suspecting that the false news reports as well as the expulsion order had been instigated by Abdur Rahman Bodi, a Member of Parliament (MP), Islamic Aid managers asked me to try to secure a meeting with him in his Cox’s Bazar office, a two-and-a-half or three hour drive from the refugee camp. Surprised that they would ask me, I asked if one of the other staffers might be better suited, but Dr. Shahid, the Project Manager insisted. I was just to be his emissary, and shouldn’t worry. So in August 2012, I traveled to Cox’s Bazar along with Rizwan, one of our office assistants. Our first job was to meet an Islamic Aid staffer from another project. He had a friend in the MP’s office who might be able to secure us a meeting. He gave me the phone
number of his contact and I began to try to set up the meeting. It took dozens of phone calls, but finally we were told to come the following day.

The MP’s offices in the government complex were on a tree-lined street up a hill and a short distance from a busy commercial section of the beach town. Noticing how anxious my companions were, I became a little nervous, and hoped to avoid making any serious faux pas. Walking up the stairs and into the building, I noticed that on the stairs and around the building many Bangladeshi citizens waited. Some gave the impression of having waited a long time, others seemed nervous and still others frustrated.

Perhaps taking advantage of the privilege afforded me as a white person and a foreigner, our contact waved us ahead of the long line snaking through the building. At the top of the stairs and down a long corridor there was a waiting area that seemed reserved for higher status visitors. Around the large room, Bangladeshi men in Western-style suits lounged and spoke loudly on their mobile phones. I guessed that most of these men worked for the MP. The staffer who had brought us in waved to a small couch and asked us to wait. I sat, but Rizwan, the young Islamic Aid administrative assistant, stood awkwardly next to me. I asked him to sit and he looked nervously around at the other men in the room and shook his head. Knowing it might be a long wait, I insisted.

As we waited, I reflected on the fact that we had not been offered tea or water: a sure sign our visit was not welcome. After a few hours, a young staff member came to tell us that the MP would not be able to meet us that day, and that the next day would be impossible too. As politely as possible, I asked whether there was any way the MP could see us, even for just 10 minutes. After another long wait, we were told to come back the next day.
When we arrived in the morning, it was clear that it was going to be a long day. Men went in and out of the MP’s office, but we were hardly acknowledged. Finally, our young contact came out and told us that the MP would talk to us while he had his lunch. When we entered the MP’s office, I could see it was a large dark room; the shades were drawn to keep the room cool. A fan blew and there were half a dozen men around the room. It was unclear what their functions were, but the effect of their presence was intimidating. The MP motioned us to a couple of oversized chairs opposite the giant desk at which he sat. Without any of the usual pleasantries, the MP demanded to know why we had come. I told him that Islamic Aid hoped to get his support to keep the camps open, that poor people from both the camps and the surrounding communities would suffer if the clinic was forced to close.

Instead of responding to my arguments, he began accusing me and Islamic Aid of some kind of trickery. He was particularly upset that none of the Islamic Aid staff had come to see him or ask his opinion before this crisis. He told me that we were in violation of the law for not registering as foreigners with his office and that even if he wished to help, he could not, because NGOs caused too many problems. Although I tried to salvage the interview and bring the conversation around to safer ground, it was clear that my time was up as MP Bodi turned his attention to another colleague sitting beside him.

Wrapping it Up

Dr. Shahid and the other Islamic Aid staffers seemed disappointed but not surprised that my visit had failed. When I returned to the camp, plans were already underway to shut things down. In the month that followed, the managers of different project areas began making lists of supplies and exit plans. As staff became aware that efforts to forestall closure had failed, their anxiety escalated. I had dozens of conversations with staff who asked if I had contacts at other
NGOs, and those who worried about whether they would be given any kind of severance pay. In turn, I had numerous conversations, emails and phone calls with Islamic Aid leaders in the camp and in the Dhaka offices, asking them to find a way to provide at least a little severance to employees who had worked hard for them for years.

In response, the Islamic Aid Human Resources Senior Manager Ishfaqur Rahman traveled from Dhaka to the camp. In a meeting with nearly all the clinic and office staff, Ishfaqur Rahman told the staff that they would be given two weeks’ pay. He explained they would be expected to work for those two weeks, and at the end, their service would be over. Some staff grew argumentative while others worriedly looked on. “This means no severance! That is inhuman! How will I care for my family? MSF gives two or three extra weeks!” one middle manager complained.

Ishfaqur Rahman listened politely for a while, then grew angry. “Are you all ignorant?” he asked. “Did you not read your contracts? There is no severance. You get paid only for working. Why do you expect money for nothing? Our hands are tied. You signed the contracts and you should know, there are proper rules for the funder. If you make trouble with this, be careful or you will not get a good reference.”

Some of the staff were angry that this senior manager from Dhaka would treat them so poorly and then insult them, but most were ashamed. They had not read their employment contracts, because those contracts were written in English, a language most did not read with much facility.

In this way, Ishfaqur Rahman skillfully shifted

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97 In this setting, a reference from an International NGO like Islamic Aid was essential for staffers who hoped to secure new jobs with other INGOS. Most wanted to continue working with international organizations, since the pay scale for work with INGOs was known to be better (sometimes much better) than national organizations.

98 Another example of the English language dominance described in Chapters 2, 4 and 6.
the blame onto low status staffers and the foreign funder.\textsuperscript{99} He explained to me and other managers that Islamic Aid would have to return unspent funds, but I knew from our conversations that he and other senior managers hoped to persuade ECHO to let them use the unspent funds on another humanitarian project.\textsuperscript{100}

\textit{Ramadan in the Camp}

The meeting ended abruptly and the sullen and worried crowd dispersed. The weeks that followed were difficult ones. Refugee camp residents were anxious, Bangladeshi staff members worried about their futures and spent much of their time trying to find work elsewhere. Some staff found other work and left immediately. It was still monsoon season and exceptionally hot and humid. Camp residents and most staff were fasting for Ramadan.

During Ramadan the pace of life in Bangladesh slows considerably. Many people across the country shift their hours, staying up late to eat after sunset, rising before dawn for a quick meal before prayers, then sleeping again. For many, work hours are shortened. For refugees (and other poor people) Ramadan fasting was made more difficult by their living circumstances. They lived in such uncomfortable dwellings, for most, sleeping more during Ramadan was not possible. And while middle-class and wealthy Muslims broke their fast each day with special (calorie rich) holiday foods and fresh juice, camp residents made do with their regular meal of rice, possibly a little \textit{shutki mach} (spicy dried fish) or \textit{dal} (lentils).

\textsuperscript{99} It seemed quite unlikely that the ECHO, the funder, would have prohibited the payment of severance pay, since they also funded Doctors Without Borders, an organization know to offer generous severance to even low status employees.

\textsuperscript{100} Monsoon rains had caused a mudslide outside Banderban in the nearby Chittagong Hill Tract. Islamic Aid staff in Dhaka hoped that if forced to close Ukhia Camp, they could repurpose funds and work on rebuilding homes and schools that had been destroyed.
As some of the work in the camp drew to a close, the expat and Bangladeshi staff seemed mostly concerned about the impact that closing Ukhia Camp would have on their lives and careers. Only a few seemed even a little concerned with what would happen to the refugees. One notable exception was Ismael, the Sudanese water and sanitation expert. When a few of us traveled to Dhaka for a last meeting with all of the Islamic Aid managers, he made an impassioned plea to keep minimum services going at the camp, reminding the other staffers that it was Ramadan, and surely a sin to leave these poor and suffering people without even clean water to drink. Surprisingly, Islamic Aid agreed to keep some of the most basic services going, but stipulated that no foreigners could be in the camp. The clinic would stay open on a limited basis. Emergency feeding, water and sanitation would continue, but the offices would close and all non-essential services would be shut down ASAP. The expat staff and I were told to quickly pack our things and leave the camp, lest our presence would jeopardize this new plan to continue work under the radar. We soon learned that the other INGOs working with the Rohingya had also decided to ignore the directive to close, at least until they were forced to.

Afterwards

Islamic Aid’s Bangladeshi managers were clear: the presence of expats (including me) made their work in Ukhia camp more of a target for government officials who wanted to shut them down. So, along with most of the expat staff, I left Islamic Aid, Ukhia Camp and Bangladesh in September 2012.101 As the Islamic Aid operation at Ukhia Camp shrank,102 many of the Bangladeshi staff lost their jobs. Some moved quickly to new positions, others struggled to find comparable work.

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101 After leaving Islamic Aid, I was able to stay in touch with some of the Bangladeshis who had worked at Ukhia Camp through social media.
102 Islamic Aid’s work at Ukhia Camp shrank, but did not close completely until 2014.
For the Rohingya on both sides of the border, the three years that followed have been increasingly difficult. In fall of 2012, there was another series of violent attacks against Rohingya on the Myanmar side of the border, and in 2013 sporadic violence and anti-Muslim riots were coupled with local crackdowns that limited the aid that NGOs in Myanmar could provide Rohingya. As a result, tens of thousand more Rohingya were displaced, and thousands of Rohingya left Myanmar in small boats, hoping to make it Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, or Indonesia. Numerous reports by UN agencies, journalists and humanitarian aid organizations have documented the horrific conditions faced by Rohingya migrants, including crowded boats full of desperate Rohingya, set adrift by smugglers without fuel, food or water. At least one of these vessels carrying 300 refugees disappeared, presumably sunk in the Bay of Bengal after being turned away by Thai authorities. Other reports have credibly documented smuggling operations that took Rohingya refugees to Thai jungles where they were held in pens until ransoms had been paid. Those who could not pay were sometimes sold as slave labor on Thai fishing vessels, others were left to die. Those who could pay would be put on fishing vessels bound for Malaysia or Indonesia. In 2014 Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand implemented programs to reduce human trafficking. The unintended result was that traffickers abandoned an estimated 6,000 Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants at sea.

In October 2014 the Myanmar government announced a new process for documenting Rohingya and ostensibly granting them a kind of citizenship. This process, however, demanded that they accept an official identity as “Bengali.” As noted in Chapter One of this volume,

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103 Chris Lewa, a leading expert on the situation of the Rohingya and director of the Arakan Project, estimated that by the end of October 2014, 100,000 Rohingya had fled Myanmar (McDowell 2014). See also Amnesty International 2015 for a detailed report on the current crisis.

104 For reports documenting these violations of human rights, see for instance, Human Rights Watch 2012, Human Rights Watch 2013; Goodman 2014.
Rohingya activists have long rejected the being identified as Bengali, a designation that implies recent arrival in Myanmar and which might preclude them from all the rights and obligations of full citizenship in Myanmar. As part of the 2014 edict, the Myanmar government announced that Rohingya who refused to register under the designation of Bengali would be placed in detention camps indefinitely.

On the Bangladesh side of the border, conditions were marginally better. In November 2014, the Bangladeshi Prime Minister, Sheik Hasina, announced a new program to document and repatriate Rohingya back to Myanmar. Soon afterwards, one of the makeshift camps (not Ukhia) that was home to 35,000 recently arrived Rohingya refugees was demolished, forcing families to gather their meager belongings and flee to yet another location, where they might construct basic shelter from plastic tarps, scavenged materials, sticks and thatch. In 2014 the government of Bangladesh also forced Islamic Aid to stop work at Ukhia Camp completely (other NGOs doing similar work nearby were also forced to stop).

In 2015 Sheik Hasina, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, announced that the 32,000 Rohingya in the UNHCR-run camps would be relocated to a small island at the mouth of the Meghna River, across the Bay of Bengal. Observers quickly pointed out that the island that had been selected was a char (an island that is sometimes totally underwater, and which sometimes dissolves altogether and might reappear elsewhere) and thus, a completely inappropriate spot for relocating thousands of people. Nevertheless, Sheik Hasina’s government insists that the plan to move people will move forward. Although political leaders argue that the changes will lead to an improvement, the Rohingya speaking out (online and in news reports) do not seem hopeful.
Chapter Eight: Conclusion

Who Benefits from Humanitarianism in Bangladesh? The Political Economy of Aid, Displacement and Ethnic Cleansing

Before addressing the question of who benefits from humanitarian aid in Bangladesh, it is important to pair that question with a few others: Who benefits from displacing the Rohingya? Who benefits from keeping Rohingya in a state of protracted displacement? Who benefits from allowing aid to refugees in Bangladesh? Who benefits from denying aid to refugees?

Understanding who stands to gain from humanitarian aid and the circumstances that precipitate it requires an examination of the history that preceded these developments. As I outlined in the introduction, the history of this region is fraught with complexity, the layered histories of kingdoms, empires, invasions, migrations, colonialism, independence movements, ethnic, linguistic and religious difference, and the violence of war all challenge understanding. In the fifty plus years since the military junta first came into power, the governments of Burma (and later as Myanmar) have sought to expel the Rohingya and pacify (or eliminate) ethnic minority groups along each of its borders and hill areas as part of efforts “Burmify” the state. For more than 20 years, the NaSaKa, a special border guard unit, has patrolled Rakhine State (of Myanmar), home to the Rohingya, ensuring that the punitive laws that govern the minority group are held firmly in place.

As described in Chapter One, much of the public rhetoric from politicians, journalists and ordinary citizens in Myanmar about the Rohingya focus on the group’s religion, language, phenotype and sociocultural practices to demonize them and categorize them as non-citizens. This ethno-religious difference is used to justify ongoing persecution and discrimination.
Targeting Rohingya is not only advantageous from the perspective of a state focused on achieving racial, religious and social homogeneity, these forms of discrimination also pay material dividends for those in power. Across Myanmar, forced relocation has been frequently used as a tactic to further military goals and undermine ethnic minorities. In Rakhine state, these tactics have been used against the Rohingya, often coupled with forced labor practices requiring Rohingya to work without pay on road building and other projects initiated by the military. According to a number of carefully researched reports, the persecution of Rohingya in Myanmar has also led directly to personal gain for some elites. Forced labor eliminates the need for paying laborers, while evicting Rohingya may benefit well-placed soldiers or other Rakhine Buddhists.

**Directions for Future Research**

Burmification, ethnic and religious discrimination and the potential for individual gain may not be the only factors precipitating ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya from Myanmar. There are also large scale economic development projects that may benefit those in power. More research is needed, for instance, to into the new infrastructure and resource extraction projects underway in Rakhine State to see if and how these may be connected to anti-Rohingya violence. The construction projects include three large hydropower projects underway in Rakhine and Chin states in Myanmar and a Sino-Burma pipeline that will bring oil and gas from the Bay of Bengal through Rakhine State to China. And a widely publicized new transportation corridor will move goods from Kolkata across the Bay of Bengal through the Rohingya part of Rakhine state, and up into India’s Northeast states of Tripura and Assam. At the same time, the territory occupied by the Rohingya has been identified for resource extraction, including open-pit strip mining for aluminum and titanium on the beaches and riverbanks in precisely the area from which Rohingya have recently been displaced. Future research into the connections between
these projects, the communal violence and forced displacement of Rohingya would be a useful addition to the literature on displacement and statelessness.

Who Benefits from Keeping Rohingya in State of Protracted Displacement?

One of the fundamental problems underpinning the obstacles, failures and challenges outlined in the volume is the distinction made between humanitarian aid and development aid. Since humanitarian aid and the entire legal and social apparatus for aiding refugees was (and is) conceptualized as a short term, temporary assistance for people temporarily displaced by war or disaster, it lacks mechanisms for adequately responding to protracted refugee situations like the one experienced by the Rohingya. At the same time, this system of humanitarian aid is dependent on the voluntary cooperation of host nations. While Bangladesh has tacitly allowed Rohingya refugees, the government has refused to allow international aid organizations to do anything but the minimal work of keeping Rohingya alive. Since the mid-1990s, the government of Bangladesh has repeatedly argued that Bangladesh is too poor to allow refugees to stay. They have explained that improving conditions for refugees or even allowing international organizations to relocate some to the more developed world would create “pull factors” that would draw new refugees into Bangladesh. They contend that this would swamp already fragile local economies and would be a drag on the national economy. Government officials argue that the laws that forbid Rohingya refugees from working, going to school, voting, securing travel documents or receiving aid are designed to avoid creating these pull factors. Yet keeping Rohingya in these precarious positions does serve some interests. For instance, Rohingya provide cheap labor and, it is rumored, easily purchased votes.105

105 Although Rohingya are not legally allowed to work or vote, in practice they do both. Local Bangladeshi informants told me that political parties would sometimes gather groups of Rohingya and
Who Benefits from Humanitarian Aid in Bangladesh?

As with other forms of international legal compliance, nation-states can sometimes have their humanitarian cake and eat it too. That is, they can publicly commit to programs and embrace policies that put them in line with international norms and, at the same time, their actual practices might not lead to the promised changes. Some of the intangible benefits that accrue to countries that allow aid refugees are increased status, and the rhetorical advantage of being an aid provider rather than a recipient. Governments and local economies can also experience tangible material benefits from allowing aid work. As aid flows in, some portion gets diverted to other programs, and to fees, surcharges, taxes and overhead that can enrich the government (or individuals). Aid work can bolster local economies, particularly when aid workers are spending money on food, transportation and housing and when the materials needed to do aid work (medicines, food, construction supplies) must be purchased in the local market.

In Bangladesh, political leaders have expressed a great deal of ambivalence about the role of aiding refugees. On the one hand, the Prime Minister and other leaders frequently point to the generous support the nation has offered refugees in the past, and at the same time, official communications have stated emphatically that the Rohingya refugees currently in Bangladesh represent an unfair burden and must go. Complicating the situation are UNHCR and other UN agencies (like the World Food Program, WFP) that have sought to help the refugees. While UNCHR has remained committed to feed, house, protect, and educate the 28,000+ residents of the official refugee camps, they have been forbidden from offering any assistance to the 200,000—500,000 refugees without official status. As outlined in Chapter Three, a 2010 effort to other ultra poor laborers and bring them to the polling place, where they would receive food or a small payment in exchange for a vote.
change the refugee situation backfired: The UN Joint Commission had announced that it would invest $33 million in the regions where refugees had settled. The investment would be earmarked for roads, hospitals, schools and other infrastructure needs in one of the poorest parts of Bangladesh. The announcement praised Bangladeshi efforts and characterized the investment as a reward for nineteen years of aiding refugees.

The government of Bangladesh rejected the offer, claiming that the UN was trying to manipulate them into accepting more refugees. UN insiders privately admitted their surprise at the rejection, but noted that the offer had not been as carefully crafted as it should have been. The clear message: Bangladesh would continue to tolerate refugees, but on its own terms.

But humanitarian aid is not just about national and international politics. In Bangladesh, aid is also an important part of local economies. Migrants and displaced people are often discussed in terms of their impact as a burden on host communities, but the presence of refugees and displaced people can be an economic benefit to communities since spending by INGOs as well as the economic contributions of new arrivals can make important contributions to local economies.

Humanitarian NGOs add an estimated $87 million to the Bangladeshi economy (Global Humanitarian Assistance 2014). In Teknaf and Ukhia, the areas where the refugee camps and unofficial camps were located, INGOs contributed to the local economies in a number of important ways, especially through spending and hiring. Between 1992 and 2013, ECHO, the EU Humanitarian Agency, allocated EUR 31.4 million to the NGOs that supported Rohingya refugees in the unofficial camps. Much of this was spent on salaries. Most of the 150 staff members were from the area around Teknaf and Ukhia. Their salaries sometimes supported large extended families, covering household expenses, food, school expenses, clothing, and
entertainment. Even the project staff who sent remittances to their families at home in other parts of Bangladesh were still spending locally each month for rent, food, transportation and other miscellaneous expenses (like mobile phone credit). Of the non-salary expenses, much of what remained was spent in the local area. In fact, there were rules that encouraged spending in local markets. Everything from building supplies, food and medicines were purchased locally. The NGO also spent liberally to house and provide daily transportation for staffers.

The third set of tangible benefits provided by the presence of INGOs was the provision of quality health care and medicines for free to members of the villages that surrounded the refugee camps. One of the ways that Islamic Aid sought to make its work more politically palatable to local officials was to open its free clinic to Bangladeshi villagers nearby.

Although there were government clinics and hospitals in the larger local towns in the region, the quality of care was low; Islamic Aid staffers explained to me that government doctors were frequently absent and that patients might wait all day without being seen. So while poor villagers could go to a free public hospital or clinic, they might not see a doctor or get the best medicine. For many, getting to the government hospital also required an expensive ride on a bus or motorized rickshaw. By contrast, the medical clinic at Ukhia Camp was an excellent alternative to those who lived nearby. The Ukhia Camp clinic was always staffed with trained medical doctors and nurses, and medications were free. By providing these services to local villagers, Islamic Aid also alleviated much of the burden that would have fallen to the Teknaf hospital.

For Bangladeshi authorities, the benefit of allowing humanitarian aid by international NGOs does not stop there. An important contribution made by these organizations is their surveillance of refugees. This surveillance is largely built into the basic charter of the INGO and
includes organizing camps, providing clean water and basic sanitation, vaccinating children and monitoring infectious disease to ensure that the refugee communities do not become vectors for disease. By keeping track of individual refugees and any social problems that arise, Islamic Aid and other NGOs doing similar work also make it easier for the government to keep track of criminal or unwanted political activity.

As outlined elsewhere in this dissertation, one of the criticisms of NGOs is that they are self-perpetuating, even when they are not as effective as they could be. This seems to be as characteristic of Bangladeshi NGOs as it is elsewhere. I did not see or hear of any Islamic Aid officers stopping to ask whether their work with refugees was making a difference. Instead, the organization pursed projects that would appeal to funders. High payroll, expensive office space and other regular expenses forced Islamic Aid managers to always be on the lookout for new sources of funding. Grants that funded projects like Ukhia Camp were useful not only for the specific project they were earmarked for, but also for helping to support other facets of the organization. A significant portion of the annual budget of the Ukhia Camp project was allocated to expenses in the Dhaka office, such as human resources, accounting, IT, telecommunications, management, and overhead. So big grants like the one secured for Ukhia Camp were necessary to keep the Dhaka office and the office staff afloat.

More developed countries and regional governments (like the United States or the EU) also benefit from providing humanitarian aid (and keeping refugees in camps). In 2014, UNHCR reported that approximately 700,000 of the 14.4 million refugees worldwide were in need of resettlement. That is, there were 700,000 refugees who were living in situations that were particularly dangerous or where there was no hope of resolution. The United States and other nations offered new homes to approximately 103,000 of these people. In other words, the
number of refugees resettled in more developed countries represents just 14% of the refugees that desperately need to be resettled and less than 1% of the total number refugees worldwide. One mechanism for keeping this system afloat, and preventing even more massive movements of people seeking refuge in North America, Europe, Australia or Japan, is to provide humanitarian aid in the first host country location where refugees land (usually other less developed nations\textsuperscript{106}). Some observers point out that while the ostensible purpose of humanitarian aid is to reduce suffering and keep people alive, another very real purpose is to hold refugees in place. Doing so has far reaching implications for security, population flows, the political (in)stability of particular regions and international development.\textsuperscript{107}

Humanitarian organizations and the more developed countries that fund them can run into serious obstacles when it comes to negotiating the size and shape of aid programs with host counties, which often insist that spending occur within their borders and which sometimes also insist that aid organizations can only provide minimum living conditions to refugees, keeping them alive but nothing else. Determined to manage refugees, aid organizations agree to this “bare life” proposition, and in doing so acquiesce to demands to that deny refugees their most fundamental human rights.

\textsuperscript{106} In 2014, the nations hosting the largest number of refugees were Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, Jordan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Chad and Uganda (UNHCR 2014).

\textsuperscript{107} In addition to the refugees in need of UNHCR-supported resettlement, in 2015 more than 750,000 asylum seekers (most from Syria, but also from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq) entered Europe on their own and claimed asylum, hoping to be granted refugee status by one of the European nations. This record number of refugees entering Europe is in part due to the sheer numbers of displaced people (more than 4 million Syrians alone have become refugees between 2012 and 2015). The large number of displaced persons was more than the infrastructure in Turkey and Jordan could accommodate (even as Europe pledged billions of Euros in aid and to expedite Turkey’s application to join the EU (Traynor 2015).
Directions for Future Research

My fieldwork with Islamic Aid raised almost as many questions as it answered. Some of these were practical, and could potentially be answered with focused data collection and analysis. One strand of inquiry would investigate what might be some unintended consequences of humanitarian aid in Bangladesh. One research question along this line would investigate whether policies that provide nutritional supplements for pregnant and lactating women actually encourage women and their partners to have more children. A second would investigate whether INGO policies that designate women as heads of households lead to higher rates of polygamous marriage, as men attempt to increase their economic status by adding wives.

During the time of my field research, I heard about many self-settled Rohingya living in Bangladeshi cities, towns and villages. With no protection from international aid organizations, these self-settled Rohingya were in particularly precarious positions because they had virtually no legal protections. Because of their insecure positions, it seemed inadvisable to conduct research among the self-settled, since such a project would call attention to people who hoped to pass unnoticed. However, if the political climate in Bangladesh were to change, I would suggest that research that investigates the differences in economic status, well-being, social integration, education, and family life for camp-dwelling and self-settled Rohingya would help us understand how impact of humanitarian aid and how self-settled refugees fare differently.

As described in Chapter One, this project began with Rohingya that had been settled in the Republic of Ireland. In the near future I hope to return to Ireland for more fieldwork among the Rohingya settled there. I am particularly interested in how the Irish and UK Rohingya communities have joined with other Myanmar refugees, and asylum seekers to advocate for change in Myanmar, Ireland, the UK and Europe. Their collaborations may reveal interesting
ways that exiled groups may help those who remain in their country of origin overcome ethnic tension and communal conflict.

Although ECHO staff members infrequently visited Ukhia Camp and Kutupalong Makeshift Camp, the European funder had a significant presence in these projects. More research is needed on how funders like ECHO sometimes make long-term investments in a community or project, what they gain from such commitments and how they hope to engage with NGOs who execute most of the day-to-day work.

With this dissertation I began the work of extending the idea of precarity to the experience of higher-status workers as a way of understanding how a lack of professional security destabilizes the presumed connections between status, privilege and the ability to take risks or effect change. More work is needed to understand how precarity affects professional choices. This work also raises questions about the extent to which governments and other powerful institutions create precariousness (or exploit it) in order to limit challenges to their authority.

*Is it Worthwhile? Evaluating the Impact of Humanitarian NGOs*

The bare life proposition is at the heart of the framework that shapes life in the unofficial Rohingya refugee settlements like Ukhia Camp. In the preceding chapters I have documented some of the key challenges to effective humanitarian work in Bangladesh. These include the many ways that bureaucratic practices, particularly a focus on paperwork, occupies the time and attention of aid workers, preventing NGO staffers from spending more time on activities necessary to improving the lot of refugees. A reliance on spending as a proxy measurement for accomplishing goals has shifted the focus away from the day-to-day work of aiding refugees and towards budgets and spending as benchmarks of success. Structural problems, in particular the
NGO’s inability to secure official permission to provide aid to refugees and an inability to obtain proper work visas for expatriate staff, means that the organization and its leadership operate from a precarious position, which prevents them from strenuously advocating for refugees. Donor-led mandates, coupled with poor staffing and a lack of organizational commitment, mean that programs intended to respond to and reduce gender-based violence are poorly conceived and ineffective. Power struggles, language barriers, class division, and expat privilege led to resentment, poor communication, lack of cohesion, and fragmentation of the NGO’s efforts. These problems were exacerbated by local corruption, antagonism towards refugees evidenced by local Bangladeshis, politicians nationwide and the majority of Bangladeshi news reports.

Although these shortcomings seem to point squarely to a pattern of missed opportunities and failure, I would argue that the work of humanitarian aid workers in Bangladesh, while flawed, does help refugees in important ways. The most obvious ways this aid is helpful can be seen through the work that humanitarian INGOs do every day: providing primary medical care to thousands of desperately poor refugees. Each day I saw NGO staff administer vaccines, treat infections and wounds and provide basic prenatal, labor and delivery, and antenatal care. At the same time, the NGO worked hard to provide clean water and sanitation and treat global acute malnutrition (GAM). Each of these efforts contributed to the health and wellbeing of individuals and the community as a whole. But arguably, the most meaningful impacts made by the INGOs are less easily quantifiable. In both Myanmar and Bangladesh, Rohingya are targeted by neighboring communities for extortion, physical attacks, and exploitation. These patterns of mistreatment reflect the prevailing attitudes towards Rohingya, attitudes that not only vilify them, but also deny their rights to exist, to work, to have families, and make a home for themselves. The presence of INGOs provides a counter-narrative, one that says not only are
Rohingya deserving of respect and decent treatment, but also that they should be cared for in the larger international arena.

INGOs lend refugees some security. Because the high-status Bangladeshis and foreign aid workers are sometimes able to use their privilege and status to advocate for refugees, it seems that refugees are spared some of the worst kinds of mistreatment by Bangladeshi officials and locals. While it would be impossible to prove this, I base my assertion on three facts: (1) in 2009, when refugees in makeshift camps were being exploited and targeted by Bangladeshi police, they fled to the relatively safer spaces adjacent to INGO offices. (2) My informal survey of Rohingya in the region revealed that refugees in the unofficial camps run by INGOs experienced less violence and exploitation than those on their own in makeshift camps. (3) After the 2014 announcement forcing INGOs to end their work with Rohingya refugees, there was an increase in reports of violence in the camps (personal communication 2015).

For each of these reasons and many more, it is not my intention to advocate for the elimination of humanitarian aid in Bangladesh or anywhere else. Instead I suggest that aid organizations examine their motives and practices. I believe that INGOs can begin to address the systems that lead to failure and the organizational cultures that reward ineffective work. Most importantly, I contend that systems of international aid that differentiate between development and humanitarianism do those in protracted refugee situations a profound disservice. By limiting the goals of humanitarian aid to merely keeping people alive, they neglect the things that make life worth living and are themselves in violation of both common sense and international human rights norms.
Appendix A- List of named participants

As noted in Footnote 1, participants mentioned by name have all been given pseudonyms. Those described in this dissertation include (in alphabetical order):

- Abdur Rahman Bodi, a Member of Parliament (MP)
- Ahmed, Islamic Aid office manager
- Mr. Ali, a powerful local businessman
- Anwar Hossein, Islamic Aid Dhaka staff in charge of securing expat visas
- Abdul, Islamic Aid ambulance driver
- Begum Ali, Rohingya woman, Ukhia Camp resident
- Begum Alam, Rohingya woman, Ukhia Camp resident
- Begum Rahan, Rohingya woman, Ukhia Camp resident
- Bina, Islamic Aid SGBV office
- Famida, Islamic Aid nutrition staff member
- Farida Begum, Rohingya woman, Ukhia Camp resident
- Fatima, Islamic Aid staff member, health outreach programs
- Hamid, Islamic Aid staff, camp guard
- Hamida, Islamic Aid staff member, women’s health programs
- Hasan, Islamic Aid SGBV office
- Imran, Islamic Aid SGBV office
- Ishfaqur Rahman, Islamic Aid Human Resources Senior Manager
- Ismael, the Sudanese water and sanitation expert
- Jonathan, ECHO staff member
- Kazi, Islamic Aid staff member, health outreach programs
- Dr. Khalid, Lead medical officer
- Dr. Max, Islamic Aid expat staff member in charge of the medical clinic
- Mariam, Islamic Aid staffer in charge or SGBV and women’s health programs
- Mehurun, Islamic Aid staff member, health outreach programs
- Nasir, Expat, Islamic Aid Water and Sanitation expert
- Nazia, Bangladeshi friend in Iowa City, IA
- Nazrul Islam, a staff member from ECHO
Nurul Mohammed, Islamic Aid staff member in charge of health outreach programs
Partha, Islamic Aid staff member often criticized for not getting much work done
Philip, UNHCR housing specialist
Rahim, Bangladeshi friend in Iowa City, IA
Rashid, Islamic Aid staff engineer
Rizwan, Islamic Aid office assistant
Rehana, Islamic Aid head nurse
Sabir, Islamic Aid clinic staffer
Sadiq - Islamic Aid assistant office manager
Saleh Uddin, Rohingya man, Ukhia Camp resident
Salma, Islamic Aid staff member, health outreach programs
Dr. Shahid, Islamic Aid expat Project Director for Ukhia Camp
Shahida Begum, Rohingya woman, Ukhia Camp resident
Sayed, teenage well-digger for another NGO at Ukhia Camp
Tariq, Islamic Aid office assistant
Yousuf, Islamic Aid communications liaison
Zahid, Islamic Aid staff psychologist
Appendix B – Maps of Ukhia Camp and the region

Figure 1.
Map of Bangladesh. Ukhia Camp on the Bangladesh / Myanmar border noted in blue.

Figure 2.
Map of the Chittagong Division of Bangladesh. Ukhia Camp on the Bangladesh / Myanmar border noted in blue. UNHCR camps noted in red.
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