

Bangladesh: A Safe Place to Learn and Grow

(Excerpts from [“Safe in School”](#) and [“Painting Their Story”](#) by Jaime Joyce)



Image by Jaime Joyce for TIME Edge. Bangladesh, 2018.

Just as the last little kid walks single-file out the door, about 30 very eager 7- to 10-year-olds burst in to take their place. Quickly, they claim spots around the perimeter of the lively one-room Golap Child Learning Center.

“Good morning, students!” Muhammad Alam Khan says. All together, the children shout their response: “Good morning, Teacher!”

A similar routine plays out multiple times a day here in southeastern Bangladesh. The students, Rohingya refugees from Myanmar (see “A Dangerous Journey”) attend class in two-hour shifts.

“These children have faced violence in Myanmar,” says co-teacher Muhammad Jaber Ahmed through a translator. “But after three or four months at the learning center, the children have become happy. They have come back to their normal life.”

In the region’s vast refugee camps, now home to some 900,000 people, UNICEF—the United Nations Children’s Fund—and partners run 888 learning centers to teach English, Burmese (Myanmar’s official language), math, and life skills to nearly 95,000 kids ages 4 to 14. The centers are an uplifting and stabilizing force for children who have been touched by tragedy.



In Bangladesh, many Rohingya children are going to school for the first time. Image by Jaime Joyce. Bangladesh, 2018.

COX'S BAZAR, Bangladesh — On a sweltering afternoon in a teeming settlement of more than half a million people, children draw, play games, and rattle tambourines in a lively community center built of bamboo. Vibrant artwork covers nearly every inch of the walls, and decorative constructions dangle from the rafters. Near the open doors, Amena Akter is sitting cross-legged, dabbing a brush into a fresh set of watercolor paints.

"This is me, and this is my mother, and the surrounding area is my village," Amena, 10, tells me through a translator when I ask about her work. The scene is a happy one, with rolling hills and a rising sun in the background.



"It's my homeland, in Myanmar," she says.

The depiction is far different from those made by children arriving as refugees in southern Bangladesh a year ago. When I visited, last month, an aid worker showed me a collection of drawings she keeps in a folder. Certain images reoccur: military helicopters, soldiers, homes on fire, and boats filled with stick-figure people. These are the children's memories of violent attacks on their villages and of their escape from Myanmar to neighboring Bangladesh.

"When they first came to the CFS, they used to draw that type

of picture,” the aid worker explains, using the acronym for Child-Friendly Space. This is a type of kids-only center erected in disaster and emergency situations by UNICEF and partners to support and protect children. “But now their pattern has changed. They are drawing flowers, houses, their family, their smiling faces.”

At this CFS in the Balukhali camp, part of a sprawling network of bamboo and plastic-tarp shelters on a barren hillside once covered by farmland and forest, aid workers use art and play to help uprooted children regain a sense of normality and overcome trauma. UNICEF and partners currently operate 136 of these centers in camps throughout the Cox’s Bazar district, serving thousands of kids and teens each day.

The Power of Art

People are working to help the Rohingya and raise awareness about their situation. One group is Artolution, a community-based public-arts organization headquartered in New York City. Artolution has worked with young people in more than 30 countries. In March, they were commissioned by UNICEF USA to set up a painting studio in the Oculus, a major train station and shopping center in New York City. There, some 200 people collaborated with Artolution cofounders Max Frieder and Joel Bergner to create a mural sending a message of support to Rohingya children.

In May, Frieder and Bergner took the mural to Bangladesh to permanently display it at the Balukhali CFS. Over a two-day period, Frieder and Bergner, along with eight local Rohingya artists and UNICEF USA staff, worked with Amena and other children to create a response mural to send back to New York. For many of the children, painting was a new experience.

“The first day, when the children saw the art materials, they became very interested, and excited too,” Tanzina Nasrin, a teacher at the CFS, tells me.

“So the next day, when they got the chance to use these materials, they became really happy.”

In a phone interview from a project site in Israel, Frieder reflected on the mural-exchange project and its impact. “People need something that can bring joy amidst severe adversity,” he said. The project was, he says, a way of “utilizing the arts to access some of the really difficult experiences and challenges that these kids have been through.”

Likewise, he notes, displaying the children’s artwork in the United States helps Americans relate to the Rohingya refugee crisis. “It’s really important that people be able to see them as kids who are able to tell their stories through painting,” he says. “That’s one of our biggest goals: [to help] Rohingya refugees get their stories out to the world.”

As we sit together on the floor of the CFS, activity swirling around us, I show Amena a photo of the mural hanging in the Oculus, in New York. (It has recently been removed; UNICEF is in talks to install the mural at a new location.) She proudly points out her contribution: A smiling girl in peaceful surroundings. This is her dream for the future.