Life in an open-air prison camp

My family's journey to the camp began in 1991, when Burma's military launched an exclusionary operation known as Operation Pyi Thaya, or 'Clean and Beautiful Nation'. They crossed into Bangladesh as refugees. In 1993, under an agreement involving UNHCR, Bangladesh and Burma, now known as Myanmar, a process called 'Operation Hope' promised protection and voluntary repatriation. More than three decades later, that hope remains unfulfilled. I am Forid Alam and this is my story.

6-minute read

Forid Alam, born in Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh, where he continues to live as part of a generation growing up in long-term displacement and statelessness.

I was born a refugee in Kutupalong camp in Bangladesh in December 1998. The camp became my first sky, my first road, my first prison. I inherited confinement. I was born into a refugee-hood that for my parents has lasted more than three decades. My story is of a people trapped between survival and rejection, between memory and uncertainty.

People often call the camps 'shelters', but it is an open-air prison in its true sense. The fences may not always be made of unbreakable iron, but they exist in every part of our lives. We have been denied freedom of movement and expression, proper education, livelihood, dignity, equal treatment and, for many families, unity itself.

We grew up watching roads that we could see but could not walk. The outside world felt physically close yet unreachable. A refugee born in the camp can spend decades living within a few kilometres of land without ever experiencing freedom. Restriction became normalised, as if movement itself were a privilege rather than a human right. Checkpoints, surveillance and the threat of arrest shaped ordinary life. A Rohingya asking for rights was often treated as ungrateful; one demanding justice could be seen as dangerous.

The camps themselves were overcrowded and suffocating. Families of six, eight, sometimes ten people lived in tiny 12-by-10-foot shelters made from bamboo, tarpaulin and mud. During monsoon seasons rainwater entered homes and destroyed belongings. In summer, the heat became unbearable. Fires regularly turned entire blocks into ashes within hours.

Camp residents gather around a tube well for water and daily washing. Shared facilities and overcrowding are part of everyday life in Kutupalong.

Education was one of the cruellest forms of deprivation. For decades, formal education was heavily restricted. We were allowed only limited learning up to primary, often without recognised curricula, proper certificates, or opportunities for higher studies. A refugee child could dream of becoming a doctor, engineer, teacher, or writer, but the system reminded us every day that such dreams were not meant for us. Those of us who tried to study beyond the permitted limits had to do so secretly, sometimes by hiding our identity within the host community.

I remember studying under difficult conditions, fighting against the darkness of refugee-hood, hiding my identity, studying with few books, little electricity and almost no opportunity. Yet education became our resistance. Many Rohingya students studied in secret like me, borrowed books from others, and taught younger children voluntarily inside the camps, even though such efforts were often discouraged or restricted. We believed that knowledge was the only thing the fences could not fully imprison.

Despite restrictions on formal education, many Rohingya students continue to pursue learning as a path toward dignity, opportunity and self-determination.

But even educated Rohingya refugees faced another painful reality: there was no future waiting for us. We were not allowed meaningful employment. Seeking livelihood was often portrayed as a burden on the host country's economy. Those who tried to work outside the camps risked harassment, detention, or exploitation. We became dependent on humanitarian aid, not because we wanted dependency, but because policies denied our self-reliance. Poverty inside the camps was not accidental; it was manufactured by restriction.

This dependency slowly destroys human dignity. Imagine growing up knowing your food, movement, education, and future depend on decisions made by others. Imagine being treated not as a human being with rights, but as a problem to be managed. That is what concentrated refugee-hood feels like in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention, and its government often presents its role as a humanitarian burden carried on behalf of the world. For those of us inside the camps, this does not answer the deeper question: what is the plan for a life beyond dependency, restriction and indefinite waiting?

Rice supplied to refugees bears the label "Origin: Myanmar", a reminder of the country many Rohingya were forced to flee but remain unable to return to safely.

Asking for justice, fair treatment, or protection was interpreted as ingratitude. Inside the camps, justice was never equal. Power belonged to host administrators, security forces and systems beyond our control. A refugee's voice carried little weight. Complaints often disappeared into silence. Abuse, exploitation, and discrimination became things many endured quietly because speaking out could bring punishment. Back in 2002, my father raised his voice against a government plan for 'forced repatriation' and was jailed three times as a result. My father struggled quietly to preserve our dignity while having almost nothing.

Growing up in the camp also meant growing up stateless. Statelessness, for me, is not only the absence of citizenship. It is the absence of protection, belonging and recognition. It means watching illness, death and hardship pass through a family without the security that others take for granted.

Perhaps the most painful denial has been family unity. Refugee resettlement programmes, while lifesaving for some, also created invisible divisions inside my family. Some were split across continents, leaving behind emotional fractures that never healed. My family carries this wound across generations. Years ago, through a resettlement scheme to the United Kingdom, my grandmother and three of my father's brothers, along with around twenty family members, were resettled abroad. My father, however, remained trapped in the refugee camp with his children. From that moment, an invisible line separated our family into two worlds, those allowed to live with dignity and opportunity, and those left behind in confinement.

My father spent the rest of his life in the camp without seeing his mother again. He watched others rebuild their lives abroad while he remained with the same restrictions, poverty and uncertainty. He died in the camp, separated not by love, but by systems and borders.

Years of displacement and overseas resettlement have separated many Rohingya families, leaving relatives divided across countries and generations.

Today, I am living through the same experience. After my father's death, two of my elder sisters, who had become the heads of our family, were resettled in Canada. Again, part of the family escaped the camp while the rest remained trapped inside it. I live with my younger siblings in uncertainty, somewhere between hope and abandonment.

This division is not only physical; it is psychological. One family member speaks of university, work, healthcare and freedom; another speaks of food rations, checkpoints, camp violence and survival. Even love struggles to bridge such unequal worlds. Refugee-hood slowly creates emotional distances that geography alone cannot explain.

I grew up with trauma inherited from parents who fled massacre, rape and persecution in Myanmar, only to face confinement in Bangladesh. For my family, hope itself has become a 35-year refugee experience. We have lived generation after generation inside temporary shelters that became permanent prisons. Without rights, my younger siblings and I fear ending our lives in the camp, as my parents and grandparents did.

I constantly struggle with one question: what does it mean to be human if your humanity is always questioned? A child who cannot study. A mother who loses hope. A father who cannot provide. A student whose talent remains trapped behind fences. These are not abstractions. They are the lives around me.

No human being deserves to spend their entire life inside an open-air prison. I do not ask for luxury. I ask for what every human deserves: dignity, freedom, education, safety, justice and the right to live as human beings, not as permanent outsiders to the world.

Forid Alam was born in Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh and continues to live there despite having found a way to gain a university education.