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CRAIG FOSTER JOINS MISSION TO COX’S BAZAR TO HIGHLIGHT ROHINGYA CRISIS

A high-profile Australian delegation organised by the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), in collaboration with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Save the Children, and UNHCR, will travel to the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, this week. The visit is aimed at drawing international attention to one of the world’s most prolonged humanitarian emergencies, while calling for urgent action and long-term solutions for Rohingya refugees.

The delegation includes prominent human rights advocate and former Socceroo Craig Foster AM; co-founder of the Rohingya Maiyafuino Collaborative Network and NSW Young Woman of the Year 2024, Noor Azizah; and RCOA’s Advocacy Coordinator Graham Thom. The visit will involve direct engagement with refugees and humanitarian workers, as well

as community-based sport and education initiatives.

Craig Foster, who will take part in football activities in the camps, emphasised the powerful role sport can play in refugee communities.

“Sport plays a critical role in places like Cox’s Bazar, where people, especially young people have few opportunities and little control over their futures. It builds physical and mental health, brings communities together across ethnic lines, and provides a platform for education, skills training, and personal development. We can, and must, do more to give refugee children a chance to grow, thrive and hope.

“Cox’s Bazar is the largest refugee settlement in the world, but we can’t let its scale make us numb. We need a global wake-up call, because refugee camps are not a solution. Australians are rightly

proud of our resettlement program, but we must expand our humanitarian intake and ensure our support services reach the people who need them most. What’s happening in Cox’s Bazar is not sustainable, and the time to act is now.” For Noor Azizah, a Rohingya advocate and former refugee, the visit carries personal and political weight.

“Even though I’ve never lived in the camps, Cox’s Bazar is close to my heart. It’s where hundreds of thousands of my people sought safety after fleeing the same violence my family escaped. I’m going to listen, especially to women and young people, and carry their voices with me. We can’t afford silence, because our people are still waiting for justice, for dignity, for freedom.” The visit will build on years of advocacy, calling on the Australian Government to take a stronger leadership role in responding to the crisis.

■ Source: refugeecouncil.org.au

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ROHINGYA FACING RISKS EVERYWHERE, AT ALL TIMES

Dawood is 19 years old and living in a crowded Rohingya refugee settlement in Bangladesh. He says his life is shattered.

In February 2024, the Myanmar military conscripted Dawood and other Rohingya men and boys to fight the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed group, in Rakhine State. They received little or no training, and dozens were killed or injured. Dawood spent a month in the hospital before being redeployed to the front lines. In May, with his unit besieged, he deserted, returning to his home village in Buthidaung township.

Home provided no sanctuary from the fighting. Neither the military nor the Arakan Army cared much for protecting Rohingya civilians, and before long, Dawood and other villagers were on the move again, this time fleeing shelling and gunfire. Local observers estimate that hundreds are dead or missing. The Arakan Army corralled the survivors and detained about 80 men, including Dawood, whom they accused of being former Myanmar soldiers. He was able to escape, hiding in the forest before making the long and perilous journey to Bangladesh. Bangladesh was already home to a million Rohingya



refugees who had fled Myanmar military atrocities, when Dawood and tens of thousands of others started arriving. The Bangladesh government said it was unable to support these new arrivals. “We are working very hard to make sure that we can repatriate those people,” Muhammad Yunus, head of the interim government said recently, adding that US government funding cuts had depleted humanitarian assistance.

United Nations rights experts have been clear that Rohingya cannot safely return to Myanmar. The ongoing fighting is not their only threat, as the community remains at risk of ethnic persecution by both the Myanmar military, responsible for crimes against humanity and acts of genocide against the Rohingya, and the abusive Arakan Army, which now

controls most of Rakhine State. In September, the UN will convene to discuss the future of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar. But later this month, countries at the UN Human Rights Council will consider its annual resolution that highlights the dire situation facing the Rohingya. This resolution is a crucial opportunity for states to urge host countries to end any pushbacks and coerced returns. They should call for Myanmar’s junta to cease its abuses and permit humanitarian aid. Countries should strengthen and expand existing sanctions, particularly on arms transfers, jet fuel, and oil and gas revenues. Most crucially, countries should work to deliver justice and reparations for the abuses that Dawood, and refugees like him, have endured.

■ Source: hrw.org