
MYANMAR LURES BANGLADESH BUDDHISTS TO TAKE OVER ROHINGYA LAND: OFFICIALS

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Myanmar authorities have lured dozens of mainly Buddhist Bangladeshi tribal families to cross the border and resettle on land abandoned by fleeing Muslim Rohingya, officials said on Monday (Apr 2).

About 50 families from remote hill and forest areas on the Bangladesh side, attracted by offers of free land and food, have moved to Rakhine state in mainly Buddhist Myanmar - the scene of a brutal army crackdown which prompted hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee.

The families from the ethnic Marma and Mro tribes have left their homes in the Bandarban hill district, local councillor Muing Swi Thwee told AFP.

He said 22 families departed from their villages in the Sangu forest reserve last month.

The families, mainly Buddhist but with some Christians, were being "lured by Myanmar" to Rakhine where they were given free land, citizenship and free food for five years, Muing Swi Thwee said.

"They are going there to fill up the land vacated by the Rohingya who have left Burma (Myanmar). They are extremely poor."

Nearly 700,000 Rohingya have fled Rakhine for camps in mainly Muslim Bangladesh since Myanmar last August launched a crackdown which US and UN officials have described as ethnic cleansing.

An agreement to repatriate Rohingya has yet to see a single refugee returned. Rohingya leaders have said the refugees will not return unless they are allowed back to their villages, many of which have been torched by security forces, rather than to supposedly temporary resettlement camps.

Two government officials in the region confirmed the migration, saying up to 55 tribal families had left for Myanmar.

"They are being lured by some people in Myanmar in return for free homes, free food for five-seven years. Some families have shifted there after being attracted by these offers," Jahangir Alam, a government district administrator, told AFP.

He said some of the tribal groups have family in Rakhine and these relatives are being used to woo the Bangladeshi tribals.

"These people have religious and linguistic similarities with Myanmar. Some of their ancestors

have settled there in the past," he said.

Al Kaiser, another government official, said a tribal man was killed and several family members were injured in a mine blast when they were crossing into Myanmar from the town of Ali Kadam.

Officials said they suspect political motives behind the migration.

"We think perhaps they (Myanmar) want to make some news using these people, that Buddhists are being tortured and repressed in Bangladesh and that's why they have left the country," said one official on condition of anonymity.

A Bangladeshi security officer told AFP that Myanmar had resettled thousands of Buddhists in Rakhine by using a resettlement scheme which offers free food, homes, cows and cash.

Muing Swi Thwee said more than 100 tribal families had left his area for Myanmar in the past three years.

Observers say Myanmar authorities are carrying out methodical social engineering schemes in northern Rakhine in the absence of many of the Rohingya.

A series of development projects, either government and army-sponsored or privately funded, are transforming the area, which the military sees as the frontline of its fight against encroaching Islam.

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