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**Statement on community cohesion in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, by Asif Saleh,  
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Let me start by reaffirming our position that the ultimate solution to the crisis lies in a peaceful, voluntary and dignified return of the refugees to their homeland. Bangladesh, particularly, the host community of Cox's Bazar has continued to take the brunt of the socio-economic and environmental imbalances caused by this mass displacement.

While the journey towards that ultimate goal takes place through international diplomacy, and, given that the refugees now constitute around a third of Cox's Bazar's population, it's absolutely critical to have peaceful coexistence between the refugees and the host community for sustainable socio-economic development of the region as a whole.

We are all familiar with the context. The initially welcoming locals gradually lost sympathy, seeing a significant impact in their day-to-day lives. Inequality rose, affecting the poorest the hardest, in a district already plagued by economic challenges. Additionally, the social and political structure of the district was destabilised, which created anxiety among the local community.

We must first recognise that the key to this peaceful coexistence lies in rebuilding trust and empathy between these two communities, and in an equitable distribution of resources.

We must recognise that the context is a humanitarian-development nexus and groups are not homogeneous. In the beginning, we were saving lives, but now we are transforming the communities of Cox's Bazar as a whole towards a path of human development embedded upon the tenants of universal human rights.

Everyone affected by the crisis has an equal right to services, but they all have their specific needs. And, services should be delivered in that manner -- humanitarian-development nexus needs to be codified, in practical terms and interventions. Together with our UN and other Bi-lateral partners,

- We are working on initiatives as varied as the Ultra Poor Economic Graduation Programme for women in the host communities, to Humanitarian Play Labs for children up to 6 years old both in the camps and the host community.

- Women from the host community and the camps are producing clothing and masks, leading to economic empowerment and dignity.
- With our protection work being at the centre of humanitarian work, slow but steady progress is also being made in their long-term development.

We need to continue to focus on the economic empowerment and development of everyone in the region, as there lies the root of most of the challenges. As both the communities are sharing a common pool of natural resources, effort to separate development needs and intervention can be a futile exercise. Hence, an integrated development plan, such as the one being worked on with the Cox's Bazar District Administration, may offer a better solution.

The other challenge of building trust and empathy can only be done by more interaction and dialogues between the communities. As part of our effort to build trust, wherever it made sense, we tried to ensure this interaction. We have paired a Rohingya volunteer teacher with a local teacher in the learning centres of the camp — a local birth assistant with a Rohingya birth assistant at the camp-based health centres. These touchpoints brought members of the two communities together based on shared value and interest. In the past, we have organised social events such as sports tournaments, to create a platform to interact.

We are now facilitating and seeing a greater need for dialogues, even within each of the communities, to tackle the misinformation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We can do a lot more. But there are significant roadblocks.

- Due to missed opportunities and mistrust, there is strong rejection in the host community now about inter-community cohesion building initiatives. Government's current regulations also reinforce that notion. Hence, inter-community interventions (between host and camp) are almost non-existent now.
- Highly centralised structure in humanitarian response mechanisms abandoned the local government institutions. This hinders local ownership, responsiveness, and accountability. The local government needs to be part of the conversation and the solution.
- Taking advantage of the mistrust, multi-faceted vested interest groups make the socio-political situation more complex, spreading hate and misinformation

both online and offline.

- Lack of common understanding and ownership of social cohesion across the humanitarian actors, followed by lack of resources and interests for social cohesion and peacebuilding initiatives, also does not help.

The solution lies not in building walls but in building trust.

- Due to the lack of it, safety and security also have become a common challenge. Thus, local administration, host community leaders, representatives from the refugees, and civil society organisations need to work together to develop an integrated plan to improve and uphold the law and order -- both inside and outside of the camp in a climate of trust, keeping in mind the independent human rights of each of the community.
- If there is one learning that COVID-19 has taught the world -- it is that no one is safe until everyone is safe. I still remember the first few weeks of the Rohingya crisis in 2017, when I spoke to the community in Teknaf who opened their arms to support the refugees. There were countless stories of sacrifices and empathy.

Those days are long gone now. But we need to nurture the core bond of humanity that is there.

- As I hold this mask made by a displaced Rohingya woman that protects me from the virus, my call to action is that let us identify our mistakes and take collective action to bring in enduring peace and cohesion in the region.

I hope we, including all the regional players, can work together to keep the affected community's hope alive until we, the world, are able to find a solution for permanent settlement. BRAC stands ready to support. Our deepest gratitude to all our partners and the Government of Bangladesh.