

3 Questions: Dr Eliza Cheung on providing urgent psychosocial support to refugees in Bangladesh



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Dr Eliza Cheung specialises in disaster mental health and psychological first aid for her clinical practice, field work, and research. She now works as a full-time clinical psychologist at the Red Cross. Over the years, Cheung has also coordinated emergency mental health and psychosocial response and preparedness programmes in Hong Kong, Liberia, Nepal, Bhutan, Singapore, and various provinces of China. In 2015, in recognition of her unremitting contributions to the promotion of mental health in the community, she was honoured as one of the Hong Kong Ten Outstanding Young Persons.

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Bangladesh has experienced several cyclones and floods since May this year – including the deadly cyclone “Mora”, which brought high winds and torrential rain, 150,000 homes had been destroyed or damaged by the storm in Cox’s Bazar.



What makes this worse is an influx of people crossing the border to Bangladesh due to the violence in Rakhine State of Myanmar. Till now, the border area with Myanmar has accumulated 700,000 of people from Myanmar, and the number is still going up.



Over 70,000 displaced people are living at the Mainerghona makeshift settlement housing at Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. Photo credit: Hong Kong Red Cross

All these disasters and issues lead to shortage of resources and rising humanitarian needs. People are in urgent need of relief service and materials, including temporary shelters, food, water, sanitations, daily necessities, medical service and psychosocial support.

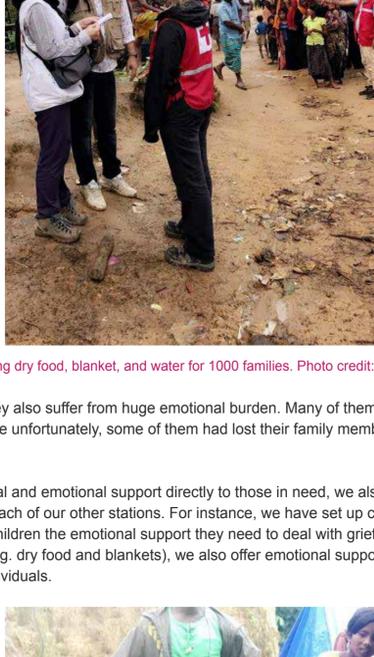
Dr Eliza Cheung, clinical psychologist of Hong Kong Red Cross, has been deployed to Bangladesh on 23 September. To get the latest updates on this critical situation, we speak to her over the phone in this ‘3 Questions’ interview series.

(The Hong Kong Red Cross appeals for donations to support our humanitarian relief service. The donations will be used for emergency relief, reconstruction or disaster preparedness for people in Bangladesh who are affected by floods, cyclones and violence, as well as people in Myanmar who are affected by violence. Please click here to donate online. For inquiry, please email to relief@redcross.org.hk)

MIMS: Can you describe your work at Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh?

Cheung: My primary mission is to coordinate and provide psychosocial and emotional support service to those in urgent need.

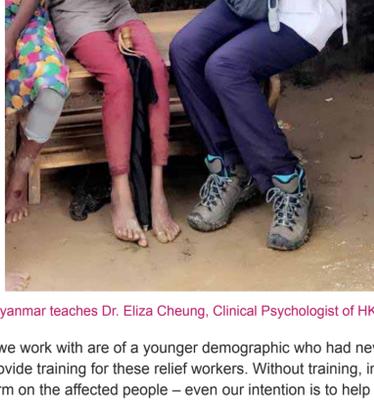
Since the new round of violence broke out in the Rakhine State of Myanmar at the end of August this year, a large number of people has been fleeing from Myanmar to Bangladesh’s border area Cox’s Bazar. Because of the urgency of the move and the long journey of crossing the border, these people could not bring much materials from their home. Hence, they are in urgent need of basic necessities.



Red Cross is distributing dry food, blanket, and water for 1000 families. Photo credit: Hong Kong Red Cross

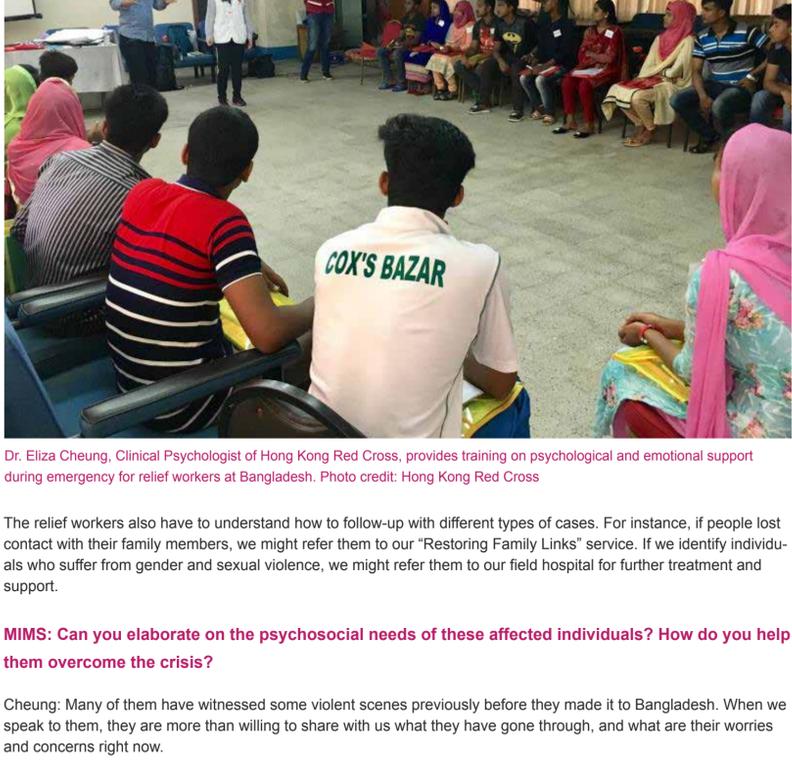
Apart from physical needs, they also suffer from huge emotional burden. Many of them have lost contacts with their families during the chaos. More unfortunately, some of them had lost their family members before they successfully made it to Bangladesh.

Besides providing psychosocial and emotional support directly to those in need, we also have to think of how we can incorporate these support to each of our other stations. For instance, we have set up child-friendly spaces at our mobile health clinics to offer children the emotional support they need to deal with grief and loss. At stations where we distribute emergency items (e.g. dry food and blankets), we also offer emotional support to take care of the psychosocial needs of the impacted individuals.



A 7-year old girl from Myanmar teaches Dr. Eliza Cheung, Clinical Psychologist of HKRC a game from home.

Since the all the volunteers we train with are of a younger demographic who had never dealt with these scenarios prior – I would also need to provide training for these relief workers. Without training, inappropriate psychosocial interventions can easily do harm on the affected people – even our intention is to help them.



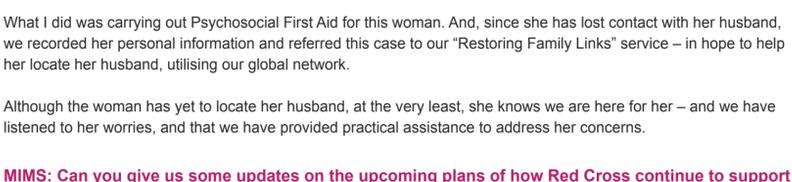
Dr. Eliza Cheung, Clinical Psychologist of Hong Kong Red Cross, provides training on psychological and emotional support during emergency for relief workers at Bangladesh. Photo credit: Hong Kong Red Cross

The relief workers also have to understand how to follow-up with different types of cases. For instance, if people lost contact with their family members, we might refer them to our “Restoring Family Links” service. If we identify individuals who suffer from gender and sexual violence, we might refer them to our field hospital for further treatment and support.

MIMS: Can you elaborate on the psychosocial needs of these affected individuals? How do you help them overcome the crisis?

Cheung: Many of them have witnessed some violent scenes previously before they made it to Bangladesh. When we speak to them, they are more than willing to share with us what they have gone through, and what are their worries and concerns right now.

I remember one case, in particular, whereby a woman proactively approached us for help. She, along with her two children, have come to Bangladesh around half-a-month ago. However, she has lost contact with her husband. She knew her brother had died in Myanmar, but she wasn’t sure if her husband had survived.



A mother of two who fled Myanmar 2 weeks ago with her children and her mother safely, despite suffering from some physical illness since arrival, including fever and weight loss. However, she is not sure about her husband’s situation at Myanmar. Red Cross Restore Family Link team collects her information and follow up the case. Photo credit: Hong Kong Red Cross

What I did was carrying out Psychosocial First Aid for this woman. And, since she has lost contact with her husband, we recorded her personal information and referred this case to our “Restoring Family Links” service – in hope to help her locate her husband, utilising our global network.

Although the woman has yet to locate her husband, at the very least, she knows we are here for her – and we have listened to her worries, and that we have provided practical assistance to address her concerns.

MIMS: Can you give us some updates on the upcoming plans of how Red Cross continue to support these affected individuals?

Cheung: Red Cross has been closely monitoring the situation in Bangladesh, even before the outbreak of violence in Myanmar. As of today, we are still one of the very few organisations that provide humanitarian services in both Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Regarding our upcoming plans, we will continue to distribute emergency items. These include food, water, kitchen set and other daily necessities.

Another action is to ensure proper sanitation, including water sanitation. We have been conducting water tests to check if the water quality is fine and not contaminated. We are also building toilets and water facilities, since women rarely have chance to bathe due to the lack of facilities.

We are also working with the local healthcare professionals to build a field hospital. This hospital is equipped with X-Ray equipment, as well as having the capacity to carry out surgical operations. Along with this hospital, our medical teams will continue to provide services at our mobile health clinics. We observe there are signs of malnutrition among the children who just came to Bangladesh, so we will put more time on this too.



Dr. Eliza Cheung, Clinical Psychologist of Hong Kong Red Cross visited a family of 11 people who fled from Myanmar and has been suffering from nightmares, insomnia, and constant fear. Photo credit: Hong Kong Red Cross

Providing psychosocial and emotional support remains one of our most important missions. We conduct community education to inform the public that they can come to us if they encounter any situations. Also, we will continue to provide our “Restoring Family Links service, with higher priority in helping children who lost contact with their family members. MIMS

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