“Humanitarian assistance is not just about food and medicine it is also about psychosocial support and protection.”

Navigating the muddy paths and hills of the Kutupalong settlement is a daily activity for 25 year old Bangladesh Red Crescent volunteer, Tamjid Hossen Naim. He and a group of two dozen other youth volunteers provide psychosocial support to newly arriving People from Rakhine State in northern Myanmar.

People from Rakhine State have been arriving in a mass displacement in Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazar district for several decades due to violence occurring in Myanmar. Since October 2016 a surge in violence has led to over 70,000 newly displaced people arriving and having to shelter in makeshift
settlements in extremely difficult circumstances. Nearly sixty per cent of the displaced are girls and boys under the age of 18 years.

The Bangladesh Red Crescent has responded by providing humanitarian assistance that includes shelter, health, and water and sanitation. However, as Naim observes, “Humanitarian assistance is not just about food and medicine it is also about psychosocial support and protection.” He explains that the Red Crescent volunteers are provided psychosocial training, “We are taught to listen, listen, and listen.”

As part of their engagement with communities Red Crescent volunteers organize dialogues with local children to listen and understand their needs. As one girl emphasizes, “It is good you come. People ask adults what they need and what is happening but no one asks us children.”

During the dialogues children highlight their perspectives about life in the settlements and what needs to be improved. A common theme is the severe psychosocial distress children are experiencing. This comes from the conflict they have witnessed and the attacks directed against them in Myanmar. Worsening this has been the stress from fleeing their homes, losing their daily routines, living in unhygienic environments, and having their education disrupted.

A young girl in the Kutupalong settlement shares, “We cannot go to school because in the morning we have to do our chores to help our families.” Another child adds, “During the day we collect leaves, play with coconut shells, and look after our sisters and brothers.”

As such, the Red Crescent reaches out to children through psychosocial activities to engage them in expressing their feelings, learning skills to build their resilience and access local resources, and to create opportunities to play together in safe environments.

Another pressing problem is the number of unaccompanied and separated children. A sample survey by the Red Crescent shows that a significant number of children arriving in Bangladesh are alone or separated from their parents. This is a pressing problem because of the high vulnerabilities to physical, sexual and psychological violence, discrimination, and social exclusion. An eight year boy confides, “Both of my parents died from the fighting. I saw it happen to them. I ran from the fighting and a man rescued me. He was helping many people cross the river to escape the danger. He took me with the other people and left me here in this place.”

The Red Crescent is leading efforts in the makeshift settlements to reunite unaccompanied and separated children with their parents and families. It also provides services to help girls and boys to trace the location of their families in Myanmar and to send them messages. “I am now able to talk to my mother and sister sometimes,” says one boy who has arrived in the past one month.

When asked what has brought him to the Red Crescent, Naim explains, “There are many things to do. However, I am motivated by how proud my parents are of me. They see that I am trying to help others who have arrived in our country. Volunteering here is an opportunity to put into practice my own personal faith.”