D.2 India - 1971 - Conflict - Refugees

Case study: First camp planning guidelines

Project type:
Distribution of building materials with training support

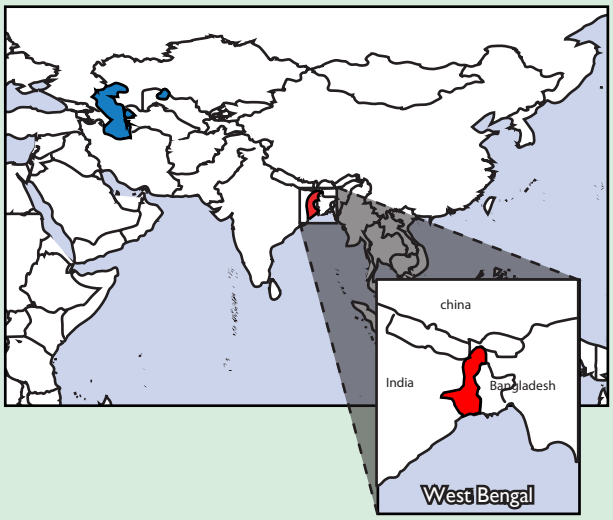
Disaster:
Civil war in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan)

No. of people displaced:
10 million people

Project target population:
Seven camps, each with 15,000 to 20,000 people, with one camp designed to be extended for up to 300,000 people

Occupancy rate on handover:
100%

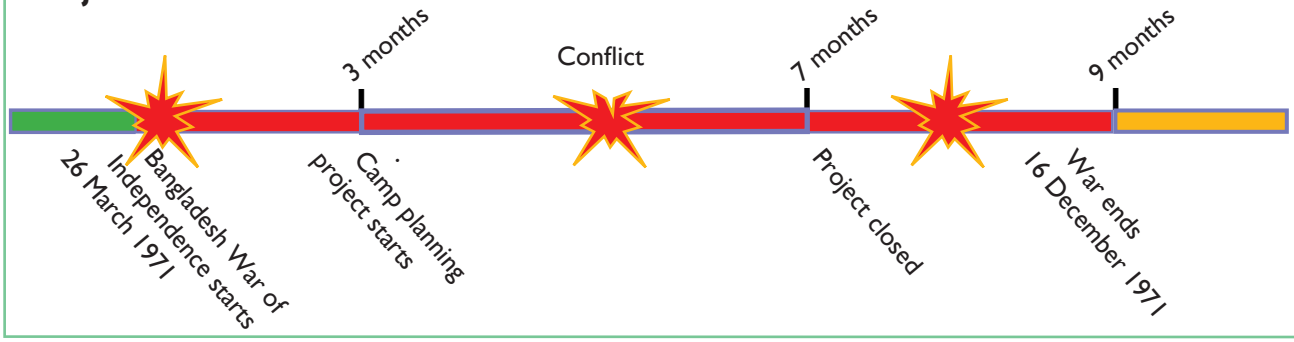
Shelter size
Various



Summary

Refugee camps were designed in decentralised 'village' groupings. Construction and upgrading was undertaken in three phases: meeting basic needs, sustainable upgrading and maintenance of the camps. Emphasis was given first to sanitation and public health issues, and then to the emotional and social well-being of the inhabitants. From the lessons learned in this response, the first-ever humanitarian camp planning guidelines were developed.

Project timeline



Strengths and weaknesses

X Camp construction is a process. Life-and-death issues should be addressed first, but other issues should not be ignored in later phases of construction or upgrading.

X Standardisation of shelter types in later phases of camp development facilitated the development of the land grids and road systems.

X The decentralised 'villages' design allowed for the provision of services with less effort by staff, as well as adaptation to land contours, organisation of refugee adminstrative groups, protection of minorities and use of areas between villages for agricultural activities.

X Describing the construction of camps over a timeline of 'phases' allowed the camps to be planned for an indeterminate and potentially long-term existence.

- The majority of sanitation and public health issues were caused by the poor choice of land for the camp in the beginning.

W Poorly supervised construction contractors created an exploitative (and illegal) black market for refugee labour.

W In open camps near large cities, it was sometimes impossible to stop local non-refugees from posing as refugees in order to receive shelter and food that was more than they could have expected to receive as members of the homeless population back in Calcutta.

Case study credits: Cuny Center

Before the war

Smaller refugee flows into West Bengal from what was then called East Pakistan had been continuous since the initial partition period of 1948-49. Many of the refugees were of the Hindu minority in East Pakistan. However, from 1949 to 1970, resentments over discrimination by the West Pakistan government continued to rise. They came to a head in the aftermath of the Bhola Cyclone of 12 November 1970, where the West Pakistan government was accused of mismanaging the relief effort and neglecting the affected populations, despite the fact that an estimated 500,000 people were killed. This resulted in an East Pakistan political party (the Awami League) gaining a landslide majority in December 1970.

Demonstrations for independence were met with a severe crackdown by West Pakistan military forces, leading to the declaration of independence on 26 March 1971 and the resulting war. The war only ended once India, fearing further destabilisation from mass influxes of refugees, intervened on the side of East Pakistan between 3 and 16 December 1971.

After war breaks out

An estimated 10 million families, at a peak rate of tens of thousands per day, fled into West Bengal in India. Many arrived in self-settled camps in the vicinity of Calcutta. The Government of India and the Corporation of the City of Calcutta assigned land for camps, and the Indian Army provided basic supplies and administration.

A number of the camps were spontaneously self-settled. Both categories of camps were often on marginal lands and in low-lying areas prone to flooding.

The NGO had been involved in public health and water and sanitation projects in the camps, and had asked a consultant team to develop a more comprehensive strategy for camp planning and camp development. The consultancy worked directly on the implementation of various projects in the camps, ranging from the setting up of materials workshops to drainage excavation. They also implemented camp layout strategies from which a set of guidelines of basic camp planning principles was written later that year.

Because of the continuous influx of refugees over a number of months and the sheer size of the displacement, many of the camps quickly became overcrowded. Matters were made worse by cholera outbreaks and the major flooding of many of the camps during the rainy season in September. Repatriation of the majority of the refugees started after the end of the war.

Selection of beneficiaries (and assessment)

In the larger camps, the 'villages' layout was used to advocate the separation of Hindu and Muslim groups within the same camp. There were concerns about ensuring equal support for both groups.

The inhabitants of some of the smaller and more basic Phase I and Phase II camps were selected to be moved to the larger Phase III camps when the first camps were closed down.

Land rights / ownership

Later reports stated that the Indian government had been at pains to insist upon the non-permanent nature of the camps, and had restricted the use of 'permanent' construction materials in the camps. After the end of the war, and the establishment of independence by Bangladesh, the great majority of the refugees were repatriated voluntarily. However, more than 1 million refugees (mainly Hindus) chose to remain in India. A few of the old camps have since been incorporated into the expanding local cities, although the inhabitants' housing rights are unclear.

Technical solutions

The construction, upgrading and maintenance of the camps were divided into three phases, with the following emphases:

- Phase I: These were described as being the first emergency camps built at the start of the influx, with little prior thought given to siting or facilities. Sanitation was often poor, shelters were very basic and facilities were inadequate. The most pressing issues were the construction of drainage, the upgrading of shelters and the need for more space and sanitation facilities.
- Phase II: These were camps with more stable populations. They had more rational designs. Shelter materials were distributed, basic drainage and sanitation were constructed, and roadways and public facilities were improved. Attention was also given to providing opportunities for both livelihoods and social activities.
- Phase III: With well laid-out roads and better drainage, focus moved to higher-standard public facilities and the considerations of creating more permanent settlements, if required. With a more stable camp population, different village areas could be used for cooperative experiments on different types of shelter or shelter groupings, to best adapt to the residents' needs.

In all phases, the design aimed to have the shelters grouped into small decentralised villages in order to support the refugees' self-administration, as well as to aid drainage and construction over uneven land. The decentralisation of services also meant that the refugees had greater access to those services, resulting in less unrest and greater health benefits.

This was also the first time that the clustering of shelter layouts in this way had been advocated.

Implementation

The camp construction and administration was undertaken by the Indian authorities and much of the work was done by Indian Army engineers.

A process was eventually initiated to close down smaller Phase I and Phase II camps in flooded areas.

In the Phase III camps, workshops were set up to make bamboo matting for use in shelter construction – enough for 8,000 shelters in less than one month in one camp. Some of the works were done by paid contractors, but much of the local construction and upgrading was done by labour teams organised around the villages.

Materials

The first shelters were made from thatch, bamboo and recovered materials. Later phases of shelters included polythene sheeting and some corrugated tin roofing sheets, as well as

Clustered camp plan

the bamboo matting. These were used for roofing, partitions and flooring in the shelters and latrines, and for the lining of drainage canals.

Logistics

The construction of the larger Phase III camp benefited from its proximity to Calcutta in terms of the procurement of its construction materials. The ability of that camp to develop rapidly was attributed to the authorities' willingness to commit full-time professional technicians and army engineers. Imported materials were later augmented by the bamboo matting made in the camp workshops.