



SPRF.IN

# Houses of Tarp and Bamboo:

## Exploring the Fires in Rohingya Refugee Camps

01  
22

---

| Riya Singh Rathore



Discussion Paper

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Abstract	03
2. Introduction	04
3. Understanding Rohingya Settlements in India: A Background	05
4. How many fires have there been and why are they so frequent?: A Literature Review	06
5. Does Poor Urban Planning Cause Fires?	08
6. Does Arson Cause Fires?	11
7. Understanding Refugee Perspectives on the Fires: Field Survey	13
8. Conclusion	15
9. Bibliography	17

*If you have any suggestions, or would like to contribute, please write to us at [contact@sprf.in](mailto:contact@sprf.in)*

© Social and Political Research Foundation™

January 2022

Discussion Paper

# Houses of Tarp and Bamboo:

## Exploring the Fires in Rohingya Refugee Camps

| Riya Singh Rathore

### ABSTRACT

Rohingya refugee camps in India witnessed the highest number of fires in 2021 than any other year prior. Most refugee-camp fires demonstrated a peculiar trend of beginning at midnight, often on a disputed property, preceded by threats of eviction or bigotry but said to be the result of bad urban planning. With refugee settlement fires increasing 25-fold internationally, this paper seeks to understand why Rohingya camps burn down so frequently. Carefully looking at poor urban planning and motivated arson as potential causes, followed by a field survey, the research concurs that it's likely the latter that is more responsible.

**Keywords:** Rohingya Refugees, fires, refugee camps, arson, urban planning

## INTRODUCTION

---

Mehreen recounts rushing out of the tent at midnight in a state of panic. She escaped her tent through a narrow lane before the fire blazed its way into her jhuggi. “Everyone had important things in their houses, but we weren’t able to save anything. We just grabbed our children and saved our lives.” (Mehreen, personal communication, 22 October 2021). She presents the arm of her youngest daughter, almost four, who sustained third-degree burns from the fire. Mohsin, the community head in the same camp, mentions the standard protocol he has established with his two adolescent sons: “hum toh ghar mein bolke rakte hain: jo bhi cheez hai, sabh chhodh do. Jaan bachalena. Mein hoon ya na hoon” (I’ve told my kids at home: whatever is there, leave everything. Save your life. Even if I’m not there.) (Mohsin, personal communication, 22 October 2021). The aforementioned fire gutted 55 homes in June of 2021. Delhi Police cited a short circuit as the cause. However, residents suspected the camp could have been “deliberately torched” by right-wing groups (Aafaq 2021).

Globally, for the first time since the post-World War II era, the number of refugees has exceeded 8.24 crores. Eleven lakhs hail from Myanmar alone (UNHCR n.d.). Among the total number of refugees globally, developing nations host a whopping 86%. Most of them live in makeshift accommodations surrounded by fire hazards and are constantly at risk of anti-refugee violence, the combination of which routinely burns their homes down. Between 1990 and 2015, there has been a 25-fold increase in the rate of refugee settlement fires (Kazerooni et al., 2016).

Even non-refugee slums in developing countries, especially ones in Asia since it’s home to the largest number of slum dwellers globally, are at a higher risk of catching fire (Westwell 2011). Furthermore, 95% of burn injuries happen in low to middle-income countries. The burn victims are almost always the “poorest and most vulnerable”, who are the least equipped to recover from fires and their economic consequences (World Health Organization 2011).

Providing refugees with habitable planned homes resistant to fire and facilitating a dignified life is pertinent. However, despite conflict or persecution displacing nearly 20 people every minute (Atiyeh and Gunn 2017), many nations like India have not developed a system of adequate accommodation. Refugee life is already riddled with the worries of fleeing conflict, facing discrimination, always being at the risk of re foulment or arbitrary arrest in the hosting country, searching for stable employment, assimilating into the host culture, and building a new life up from scratch. Atop all that, fires in camps serve as an added but constant stressor.

This research explores the causes behind the fires in India’s Rohingya refugee camps. It seeks to deduce whether it’s poor urban planning or deliberate arson, which is behind the frequency of the conflagrations. The paper first uses data collected in a systematic search of all the Rohingya camp fires reported in popular media and academia, followed by a brief analysis of qualitative interviews with refugees and civil society stakeholders on the ground, conducted in New Delhi’s Rohingya settlement in October 2021. The paper concludes with a few policy recommendations in the spirit of understanding and therefore avoiding fires in refugee homes.

## UNDERSTANDING ROHINGYA SETTLEMENTS IN INDIA: A BACKGROUND

---

2021 marked a seismic shift in the Rohingya refugee crisis in the subcontinent. In February, Myanmar witnessed the military junta detain Aung San Suu Kyi's democratically-elected government in a coup, implementing an emergency that will be a year old by this February. In March 2021, Bangladesh struggled with taming one of the largest fires in refugee camps that blazed through Cox's Bazar camp, injuring 575 people and displacing nearly 45,000 (Doctors Without Borders 2021). Meanwhile, in India, 2021 witnessed the highest number of fires in refugee camps within a year.

Most Rohingya refugees in India today arrived after a surge in ethnic cleansing in 2012 (Shwe, Field, and Brinham 2021). The numbers vary, depending on how many Rohingya refugees have found a home in India, but a recent estimation settles on 40,000 people (Human Rights Watch 2021). Currently, the main settlements of Rohingya in India are in Delhi, Haryana, Hyderabad, and Jammu. They often live in makeshift jhuggis on the outskirts of big cities and earn their livelihood through ad-hoc and informal labour (Field, Tiwari, and Mookherjee 2017).

As a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] mandated refugee group, Rohingya refugees are entitled to refugee certificates and long-term visas in theory. While such documents legally guarantee homes and jobs, they rarely deliver on the promises and are dismissed as illegitimate (ibid.). The natural question arises, do the responsible authorities have any plans for the diaspora "who are significant contributors to the economy and yet are forced to give up a huge portion of their income as rent for accommodation that is substandard and risky?" (The Straits Times 2021).

The answer to which is likely no. At its core, UNHCR-provided status is temporary. The hope is to either integrate, repatriate, or resettle (Atiyeh and Gunn 2017). The provisional nature of refugee settlements discourages countries and their subsequent authorities from developing a durable plan for refugee accommodation. In India's case, the demand for habitable camps is muddled by the rising tide of repugnant religious nationalism and the absence of any national legislation on refugees.

This ambiguity around suitable housing makes refugee camps dangerous for settling. They are built to provide temporary, not safe, accommodation to their inhabitants. Usually constructed and managed by the host country, governments purposefully avoid making refugee housing "look or feel more permanent" (ibid.). Since refugees are a highly controversial point of discussion, improving shelter conditions becomes highly political (ibid.). An example of this was seen on 23 July 2021, when the Central government slammed the Delhi administration's move for providing "Rohingya infiltrators" with basic ration, electricity, and cash following a fire outbreak, alleging that Delhi's citizens didn't have any ration or electricity<sup>1</sup> (Mehta 2021).

Regardless of how unsafe they are, only camps house displaced persons. Such settlements crop up in a disordered and need-based manner. Because of the low investment and poverty of resources, such homes are made of flammable materials. Aside from the ever-present risk of fire, internationally, such shanties put nearly "700 refugee camps worldwide at high risk of disease, child soldier and terrorist recruitment, and physical and sexual violence" (Atiyeh and Gunn 2017: 215). More specifically, in India, hazards range from polluted water bodies flooding and destroying homes, giving

---

<sup>1</sup> A claim debunked later.

severe skin conditions (Shwe, Field, and Brinham 2021) to snake bites taking the lives of 5-6 kids every few years (Mohsin, personal communication, 22 October 2021).

## HOW MANY FIRES HAVE THERE BEEN AND WHY ARE THEY SO FREQUENT?: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Davis (2006) writes, “the urban poor do not lose much sleep at night worrying about earthquakes or even floods. Their chief anxiety is a more frequent and omnipresent threat: fire.” as confirmed by all the refugees interviewed during the course of this study. Fires across refugee camps are a worryingly widespread occurrence, making displaced persons “more vulnerable to burn injuries than their non-displaced counterparts” (Kazerooni et al., 2016).

India witnessed 5,391 fire accidents in residential and dwelling buildings in 2020. This figure was an 18% markdown from 2019, which saw 6,364 fire incidents (National Crime Records Bureau 2020). According to state data, fires seem to be declining. Yet somehow, their frequency in refugee dwellings has only increased in recent years. The following table tabulates all the fires recorded in Rohingya refugee camps in India to date.

**Table 1:** Fires in Rohingya Refugee Camps Across India 2016-2021

No.	When	Where	Cause	Time	Details
1	2016	Haryana	-	-	Recollection of community
2	26 November 2016	Narwal, Jammu	-	12:30 am	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 children and 1 woman died</li> <li>• 80 homes burnt</li> </ul> Source: <a href="#">Red Cross</a>
3	12 April 2017	Nangali, Haryana	-	Night time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 person severely burnt</li> <li>• 5 huts, 1 school, 1 Madrasa, and 1 mosque burnt</li> </ul> Source: <a href="#">Two Circles</a>
4	13 April 2017	Bhagwati Nagar, Jammu	Electric short circuit/ Possible arson*	3:00 am	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No loss of life</li> <li>• 8 jhuggis burnt</li> <li>• *The fire followed four days after unidentified people beat some Rohingya refugees up and torched the scrap they collected to earn a livelihood. The case was registered but no one was arrested.</li> </ul> Source: <a href="#">Indian Express</a>
5	15 April 2018	Kalindi Kunj, Delhi	Short circuit in a toilet in the corner of the plot Possible arson*	3:00 am	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No loss of life but some refugees suffered serious burn injuries</li> <li>• 230 residents of the camp lost their shelter, valuables, identity cards, and UNHCR visas</li> <li>• *A right-wing youth leader tweeted, confessing he had set the fire; the toilet didn't have any electricity access.</li> </ul> Source: <a href="#">Times of India</a>

6	22 May 2018	Nuh, Haryana	Short-circuit	3:00 pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No loss of life</li> <li>Houses of at least 55 families razed</li> </ul> <b>Source:</b> <a href="#">Hindustan Times</a>
7	3 June 2019	Maratha mohalla, Jammu		Night time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>150 houses burnt</li> </ul> <b>Source:</b> <a href="#">ANI</a>
8	4 Feb 2020	Narwal, Jammu	-	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5 huts burnt</li> </ul> <b>Source:</b> <a href="#">AA</a>
9	5 April 2021	Jammu, India	Unknown/ Possible arson*	1:00 am	<p>No loss of life 16 tents burnt, displacing 64 people, including 37 children.</p> <p>*Rohingya residents allege that an unknown person had deliberately started the fire. However, no witness saw a person lighting the fire.</p> <p>Sources: <a href="#">ROHringya</a>, <a href="#">The Wire</a></p>
10	May 2021	Kalindi Kunj, Delhi	Possible arson*	-	<p>Not a major fire Used fire extinguisher</p> <p>* "Some people reported that some people came in a micro bus and ran away after torching the camp" (Najia, personal communication, 22 October 2021).</p> <p>Source: Field Survey</p>
11	12 June 2021	Okhla, New Delhi	Short circuit/ Possible arson*	11:30pm	<p>No loss of life 56 homes burnt</p> <p>* The fire began in an abandoned shanty. Mosque was also demolished, it was likely an act of communal violence.</p> <p>Source: <a href="#">Al Jazeera</a></p>
12	15 December 2021	Nuh, Haryana	Short circuit	8:00 pm	<p>No loss of life 30 shanties burnt which housed at least 100 people</p> <p>Source: <a href="#">The Quint</a></p>

**Source:** Author provided

There are many variables that keep slum fires mysterious but frequent at the same time. Bromfield (2013) concentrates them in five categories that follow.

- Political considerations, such as alignment of political and private interests against slums or corruption.
- Economic variables such as unequal access to essential public utilities and housing deficits that lead to a booming informal housing market.
- Land tenure and legal recourse meaning that land ownership is often contested, and fires are used as a violent eviction method.
- The inherent fire risk in slums because of ever-present hazards such as gas stoves, unsafe electrical conduits, wood houses, etc.
- And finally, investigative capacity refers to compromised probes for political or private reasons.

However, in the Indian context, the reported causes in media and the reasons refugees believe fall in two broad categories, poor urban planning and arson. Therefore, this paper predominantly surveys the literature on these two causes.

In their study of reports on fire incidents in displaced persons' settlements across 31 countries, Kazerooni et al. (2016) found that 33% had an unknown cause, 27% were unintentional, 20% were intentional, 20% of the news did not mention a reason. Interestingly, however, intentional fires caused the most harm. They were responsible for 68% of the reported deaths in refugee camps, 45% burn injuries, 32% destroyed shelters, and 36% displaced persons.

However, even in Kazerooni et al.'s (2016) comprehensive research, 53% of fires had an unknown or unreported cause which draws out a critical note in this research: data on fires in refugee camps is abysmal. There are no publicly available government reports on refugee-camp fires.

Murti (2021) confirms that fires in refugee camps are frequently underreported, especially when they occur on the outskirts of a big city. She posits that such misreporting makes actual fire casualties nearly six times higher than otherwise reported. Westwell (2011: 18) backs this claim in his comprehensive study on slum fires in India. He notes that statistical data and records are not only difficult to obtain in India but are often inconsistent and incomplete.

Furthermore, even in reported cases of fire-related injuries or deaths, authorities don't follow up on patients after recording the initial injury (Kazerooni et al., 2016). This practice limits the understanding of the event or the extent of the fire's impact on human life. Lack of clarity around data makes it impossible to understand how many fires broke out and why.

## DOES POOR URBAN PLANNING CAUSE FIRES?

---

That refugees live in poor conditions is a widely accepted fact. Many from the Rohingya community have attempted to change this through protests and legal efforts. In June 2021, Rohingya families in Bangladesh observed a hunger strike demanding better living conditions<sup>2</sup>. The demonstration followed 6-7 fires that razed upwards of 700-800 homes and flash floods shortly after, further displacing 21,000 refugees (Ahmed 2021).

Similarly, in India, two Rohingya refugees called to attention the inhumane living conditions in Delhi's and Haryana's refugee camps through a petition to the Supreme Court in 2013. The hearing took place in 2018, where the apex court asked the state to investigate basic amenities in the settlements, or lack thereof, since the conditions were negatively impacting the refugees' health. The government mentioned that the Rohingya had access to "national standards" of living and shouldn't expect much more (Shwe, Field, and Brinham 2021).

However, upon entering refugee homes in New Delhi<sup>3</sup>, it is evident that this evaluation is untrue. All houses have open stoves with no gas cylinder covering and are kept in one corner of the tent, which is extremely close to the flammable cotton and plastic sheet walls. Aside from cooking, all electricity

---

<sup>2</sup> A strike organiser told the author that police beat 8 women involved in the strike and threatened organisers.

<sup>3</sup> One of the more sought after camp locations since it's in the capital and offers easier access to livelihood and resources than camps in other cities.



comes through naked wires that coil around the tent and lay in the open. The collection of shanties made of bamboo, tarp, and cloth are home to nearly 200-250 people. The refugee camp's community head expresses, "these are not proper living conditions. Covid has been around for two years, but here, ten people live in the same tent. The living conditions are not humane." (Mohsin, personal communication, 22 October 2021). Atiyeh and Gunn (2017) note that "poorly planned, densely packed refugee settlements are one of the most pathogenic environments possible", indicating a high chance for both fires and diseases to spread quicker than they would in properly built houses.

Literature establishes that congestion contributes to both the frequency and the severity of fires (Field, Tiwari, and Mookherjee 2017; Kazerooni et al., 2016; Murti 2021; Westwell 2011). Frequency, since the higher the population density and disordered occupancy, the higher the chances of someone accidentally igniting a fire (Westwell 2011). Severity because living in tightly packed spaces increases the number of things that catch blaze, narrows the exit routes, and leaves families with "a lot less time to escape" (Murti 2021).

Such poor urban planning manifests in two distinct ways: unsafe shelters, where refugees live, and constant fire hazards, which refugees use in those shelters.

Refugee shelters are unsafe from fire since they're made of inexpensive and highly flammable materials like bamboo, tarpaulin, plastic sheets, cloth, and canvas. Unlike properly built housing, refugee shelters do not have firebreaks, circuit breakers, regular access to water, or any inbuilt fire fighting capacity (Atiyeh and Gunn 2017) in the likely event that a fire breaks out. This modest investment in accommodation may be because of a myriad of reasons such as responsible authorities not allocating proper funds for refugee housing, underfunding of civil society and NGOs, easier accessibility to materials like plastic, cardboard, and tarp for building homes, and so forth. Furthermore, with frequent demolition of refugee homes, COVID-19 reducing the presence of aid organisations (Ahmed 2021), and a gross reduction in charity, it is impossible to repeatedly buy durable materials. With a high and constant demand for rebuilding homes but no supply of steady financial resources, resorting to cheaper materials, albeit less safe, is the only option.

Alternatively, constant fire hazards such as open fires, stoves, candles, smokers' materials, and naked wires double as daily needs of the refugees. Kazerooni et al. (2016) found that most fires in their study were unintentional, resulting mainly from "cooking, fuel explosions, heat sources, electrical malfunctions". For instance, stoves in refugee camps are simply open fires. In comparison to proper stoves, open fires require more wood, have a longer burning duration, require long travel hours to collect wood, primarily by women, and increase the risk of fire (ibid.). This trend isn't limited to refugee camps. Informal settlements worldwide see "leaking gas cylinders, knocked over kerosene lamps, unattended candles, electrical wiring" as recurrent causes of fires (Westwell 2011). For instance, fires in Brazil's Sao Paulo favelas<sup>4</sup> are often a result of cooking liquefied petroleum gas cylinder misuse.

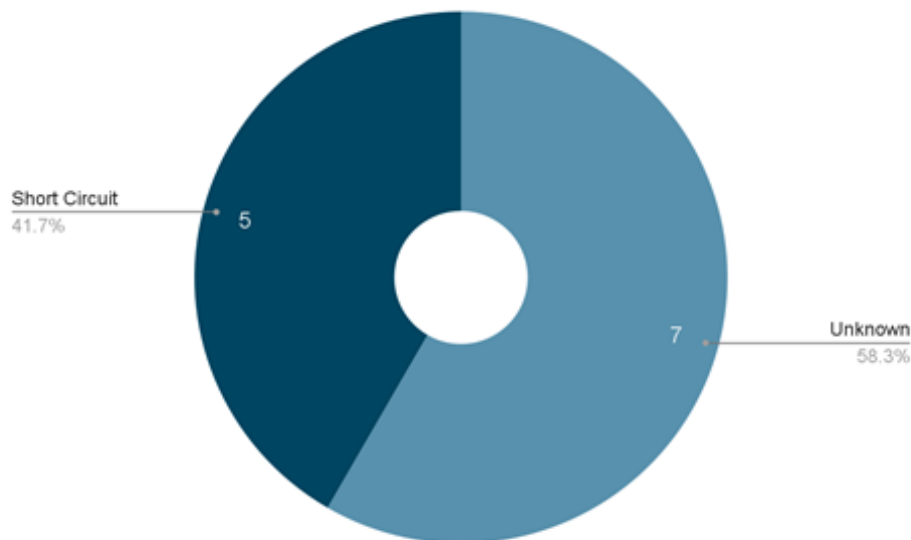
Short circuits are a prevalent cause of fires in South Asia. Researchers determined that 34% of fires in Dhaka were due to electrical faults (Westwell 2011). Similarly, of all the possible fire hazards, short circuits are officially the leading cause of fires in India. The 11 recorded fires, all of whose causes are known, are said to have started because of short circuits. However, as mentioned earlier, the lack of follow up from authorities shrinks the scope of understanding why there are so many short circuits. International studies on refugee campfires don't address short-circuiting as much of an issue, only

---

<sup>4</sup> Favela is Portuguese for the word 'slum' and refers to shanties that crop up in big Brazilian cities.

briefly mentioning defective electric equipment or shoddy wiring (Atiyeh and Gun 2017; Kazerooni et al., 2016).

**Figure 1:** Official Causes of Rohingya Refugee Camp Fires



**Source:** Author provided

When combined, above mentioned poor urban planning shortcomings are a recipe for frequent and massive fires that displace already displaced people. Davis (2006) summarises, “mixture of inflammable dwellings, extraordinary density, and dependence upon open fires for heat and cooking is a superlative recipe for spontaneous combustion”.

Even fire combative gear such as fire extinguishers are ineffective. A camp resident told Bhardwaj (2018) that refugees didn’t have much to fight fires aside from five small fire extinguishers. Being so sought after, sometimes extinguishers are stolen from each other’s houses (Najia, personal communication, 22 October 2021). Similarly, Ayan (personal communication, 10 November 2021) mentioned that the organisation he worked for provided extinguishers in New Delhi, but it was futile because people didn’t even have the time to use them, the houses caught fire that quickly.

Kazerooni et al. (2016) deem these poor urban planning fires unintentional. They suggest that residents can prevent such fires if they “store fuels more safely, routinely examine the electrical wiring, and not leave fires or stoves unattended extinguish flames and embers after use”.

However, this outlook entirely blames refugees for the fires. In refugee camps, unsafe shelters and constant fire hazards interact daily only out of necessity. Refugees only have houses of tarp and plastic to live in, as flammable as they might be, and have to use electricity and open flames for day to day tasks, no matter how unsafe.

## DOES ARSON CAUSE FIRES?

---

Rohingya refugees face violence because they are both ‘outsiders’ and Muslims. In a socio-political sense, the Rohingya exist in a painfully complicated nexus of rising Islamophobia, tides of religious nationalism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and India’s non-existent refugee laws, which put the matter of refoulement solely on the country’s bilateral relations with Myanmar (Field, Tiwari, and Mookherjee 2017). The general disdain for the community is melded with an anti-immigrant attitude wherein the Rohingya are seen as “a community of lawbreakers and illegal migrants” who steal jobs from locals (Reliefweb 2017). Often, the Rohingya are hounded, evicted, detained, or even imprisoned under the Public Safety Act, under the guise of “local job protection” (Ibid.). Currently, 248 people are in immigration detention in India (UNHCR 2021).

Internationally, arson results from hostile host communities or armed groups that use it as an eviction tool. For instance, in Sudan, refugees from five separate camps saw hundreds of shelters burn down in one night. They mentioned that the authorities were doing it to “force us to return to our places of origin” (Dabanga 2015). Rohingya refugees across India feel similarly, and it’s evident why.

In 2019, West Bengal saw protests and violence against the Rohingya and many Indians threatened to “burn their homes if they did not leave India” (Shwe, Field, and Brinham 2021: 9). A few years before, in 2017, then-Minister of State (Home Affairs), Kiren Rijiju, mentioned in the parliament that Rohingya should be identified, detained, and deported. The same year, Rakesh Gupta, President of the Jammu Chamber of Commerce and Industry, declared in a press conference that he would “identify and kill” the Rohingya (ibid.). In light of the ongoing wave of hatred towards Rohingya refugees, the role of arson in fires is worth exploring.

When discussing arson, the two main motivations that come up the most are anti-refugee ‘leave-India’ sentiment or fire’s use as a land eviction policy by landlords or authorities.

During this research, one of the first indicators of the fires being arson is that most started mysteriously around midnight. Out of the 11 fires that India has witnessed in the last few years, 8 began in the night. Westwell (2011: 55) also noted in his interview with Doctors Without Borders that “most fire casualties were caused by fires which occur during the night time”. Night fires are deadlier, simply because people are asleep and only find out when the flames are beyond control. Furthermore, requesting firefighting aid during the night is more difficult than in the morning.

Worldwide, slums are built on “illegal land, land with an ambiguous legal status or land that is often hazardous for building and living on” (ibid.: 29). Rohingya in India also live in urban peripheries or in rural areas where the land is not commercially viable. Often, they end up settling in homes assembled on undeveloped or disputed land on city outskirts (Shwe, Field, and Brinham 2021). While some of the grounds are either donated by charitable foundations or are unsuitable for housing complex development (Field, Tiwari, and Mookherjee 2017), they present a problem, since such locations are often far away from the city centres. Due to the distance between the main city and outskirts, in addition to the traffic in between, firefighters are late to the site, making fires much more dangerous (Murti 2021). Even when they reach, it is difficult for fire-fighting vehicles and personnel to navigate narrow slum lanes to put out the fires on time (Davis 2006).

The inconsistency between the authorities' investigation and refugee account of the fires serve as the second indicator that fires may be motivated. As aforementioned, of all the 11 reported fires in refugee camps, all with known causes were said to be a result of short circuits. The first recorded instance was in Jammu's Bhagwati Nagar in 2017. Sub-Inspector Neelam Saini posited that a short circuit caused the fire. However, there was no electricity at the time of the short circuit (Sharma 2017). Furthermore, the Rohingya families living there recounted that unidentified persons beat the refugees only four days before the fire and proceeded to torch the scrap that families collected for livelihood. Though the police registered the case, no one was arrested at the time of reporting (ibid.).

A year later, a fire in Delhi's Kalindi Kunj ravaged the homes of 230 residents. Officials said it was because of a short circuit in a toilet which then spread to the houses. However, on the day of the fire, Manish Chandela, a BJP youth wing leader, had tweeted, "Yes, we did it and we do again #ROHINGYA QUIT INDIA. [...] Well done by our heroes. Yes we burnt the houses of Rohingya terrorists." (Express Web Desk 2021). It's also worth noting that the camp's bathrooms at the time were "toilets on wheels and didn't require electricity" (Samarth, personal communication, 20 October 2021). Furthermore, camps don't get a regular electricity supply, especially not during the night.

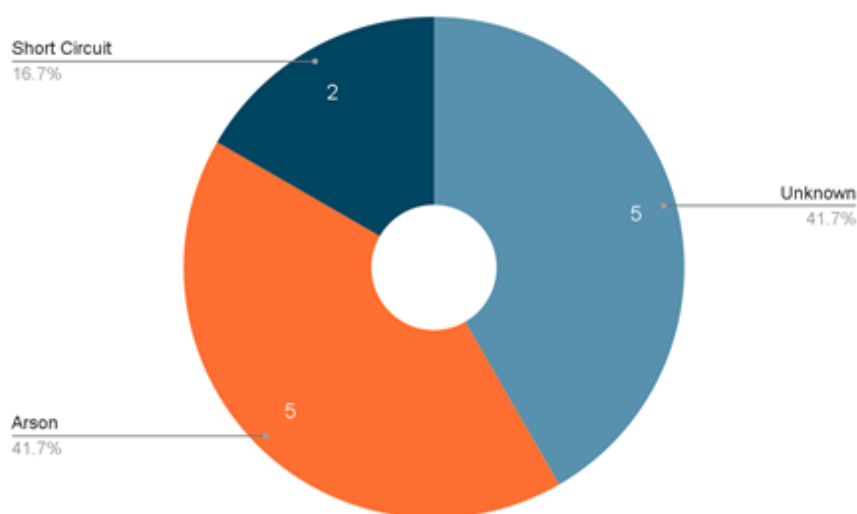
A second reason behind arson may be its usage as a means to evict refugees from the land on which they have settled. In their analysis, Westwell (2011) and Bromfield (2013) identify arson as an eviction tool that property developers often use to evacuate people from their houses. Davis' (2006) work confirms this in explaining that slum fires are rarely accidental. They are a quick and easy way for landlords or developers to sidestep undertaking expensive court procedures and waiting for a legal demolition order.

For instance, in the Philippines, Filipino landlords use a method called "hot demolition", wherein they set a rat or a cat on fire and release it in an "annoying settlement". Before the animal passes away, it usually sets several houses on fire<sup>5</sup> (ibid.: 128). Such fires are set partly by "political party-affiliated gangs to clear 'unwelcome' categories of the urban poor; partly by private landowners who want their land cleared in an easy way from (illegal) squatters and have it 'developed'." (Schenk 2001 as cited in Davis 2006).

Perhaps the most apparent case of arson in service of eviction would be 2021's June fire in New Delhi's Kalindi Kunj. A Delhi Police investigative officer reported that the cause was a short circuit. However, the shanty where the fire was said to have originated was an abandoned hut with no electricity supply or cables. A resident who narrowly escaped the fire mentioned that only a few hours before the burning, masked men threatened the refugees to vacate the land (Aafaq 2021). Anwar's (2021) interview with the refugee ascertains that the refugees were camped on the land owned by the Uttar Pradesh Irrigation Department. The same government officials had previously threatened the residents to vacate. The fire blazed only a few hours after the threats. A month later, on July 22, the Uttar Pradesh government bulldozed newly built Rohingya homes at 4 am (Mehta 2021). Mahendra Singh, the Minister of Jal Shakti from the Uttar Pradesh government, tweeted that the department demolished Rohingya camps due to the "illegal occupation of land" (Singh 2021).

Naturally, residents of the camp feel that it was motivated arson. The local political leader, Minnatullah Khan, agrees in stating that such fires are called accidental, but their frequency appears to be well-planned and aimed to scare residents into leaving (ibid.). It's worth noting that UP government officials didn't allow the refugees to resettle on the land.

<sup>5</sup> "In Bangalore, a person who tried to voice his opinion was beaten up by supporters of a local councillor directly in front of police officers." (Ibid.)

**Figure 2:** Causes of Rohingya Refugee Camp Fires (Possibility of Arson included)

Source: Author provided

## UNDERSTANDING REFUGEE PERSPECTIVES ON THE FIRES: FIELD SURVEY

This field survey constitutes semi-structured and qualitative interviews with five individuals. These included Mohsin, the community head in the camp; Mehreen, a mother of 3, who works as a ragpicker; Najia, a 15-year-old student; Ayan, founder of a human rights initiative for Rohingya; and Samarth, a member of an NGO that aids refugees<sup>6</sup>. Aside from Samarth, who has been working in rebuilding refugee camps after they burn down, all the respondents are Rohingya refugees themselves and recount first-hand experiences with fires. Ayan and Samarth actively work in post-fire aid and reconstruction of refugee housing. The interviews aimed to understand refugees' personal experiences and beliefs around fires and their causes. Interviews with Mohsin, Mehreen, and Najia were done in person in a refugee camp in New Delhi. Interviews with Ayan and Samarth were done on call.

### *Fire as a constant threat*

The first enquiry was whether fires were a daily concern in the camp, and all the refugees vehemently agreed that they were. Between the five respondents, on average, each has seen six fires<sup>7</sup>. Mehreen said that she lived in "constant fear" that there would be another fire, and Ayan iterated that the crowdedness and lack of humane accommodation in tandem with no access to subsidised gas and poor wiring at camps made fires a daily concern. This response confirms Davis' (2006) claim that fire is the chief anxiety in refugee camps. However, a topic otherwise not addressed in the literature on camp fires was refugees' fear or indifference to rebuilding post-fires. They believe that what they rebuild is likely to go up in flames again. For instance, in one of the fires, Mohsin lost a decade's worth of savings along with his corner shop and bike. Though he mentioned wanting to rebuild his

<sup>6</sup> Please note that the names of the respondents have been changed to preserve their privacy.

<sup>7</sup> This figure is not counting the most recent one in December 2021 since it occurred post-interview.

shop and house, he was scared that all the hard work would be futile when there was another fire.

### ***Fires as a result of poor urban planning***

On the topic of fires resulting from poor urban planning, all respondents mentioned that it only exacerbated a fire but rarely ever caused it. Mohsin, Mehreen, and Ayan had only seen one “small fire” catch because of a gas stove pipe leak in 2018. Mohsin elaborated that it didn’t grow big because “NGOs and UNHCR trained us how to fight [small] fires” and that the camp residents managed to extinguish it themselves. Samarth and Najia had never seen a fire arise from poor urban planning.

Consequently, all the respondents mentioned that better urban planning may decrease the intensity of the fires but may not influence the frequency of fires. However, one notable point that came up when discussing fire hazards was that poor urban planning threatens life at camp in general and not just in the capacity of a fire hazard. Najia detailed an accident that occurred only a few hours before the interview. “Bad urban planning is a hazard. Just a day before, one of our neighbours who is a little girl, got an electric shock because she was playing and a wire was laying out in the open. She fainted, we had to take her to the hospital. Her hands are completely black now.” In addition, she brought up how the new camp her family had shifted to post-fire, didn’t have any washrooms and that it made it tougher for women in the camp to maintain not just hygiene but menstrual hygiene. Mohsin, the community leader, elaborated on the matter of no washrooms, adding, “There are no toilets here, all 200-250 of us have to go to the forests. There are snakes there. At least 5-6 kids have died because of snake bites.”

### ***Fires as a result of arson***

When asked if anti-refugee groups could be responsible for some of the fires, all the respondents confirmed that they thought so. Mehreen concurred, “majority times it is people, maybe a few times it could be short circuit”. Najia also mentioned that some *patwaris*<sup>8</sup> had threatened the refugees to leave 6-7 days before the June fire. “But since they do it so often, people overlooked, but then the fire happened.”

Four out of five respondents thought it could be a slum eviction policy. Ayan cited the case of the June fire where the shanties were burnt down, and refugees weren’t allowed to resettle on that plot again. Mehreen added, “a few times the owner of the property asked us to leave. But it was lock-down. How would we leave? We’re not even legally allowed to leave. Then they came quietly during the night and set our settlements on fire.”

Three respondents had personally faced threats of eviction. Mohsin outlined how in the camp’s previous location, “the *nahar*<sup>9</sup> people routinely came and asked us to vacate the land. They used to break the shanties, toilets, and kitchen gardens.” Mehreen also received similar threats of breaking her tent. She mentioned how the authorities routinely declared that the land didn’t belong to the refugees. The June 2021 fire forced the residents to shift to an adjacent plot where they now live on a street leading to a small residential society. “Now we live on the street. The people of the society are inconvenienced. They curse us.” Mohsin adds disheartedly.

<sup>8</sup> A government official who keeps records regarding the ownership of land.

<sup>9</sup> Nahar here refers to the UP government’s irrigation department. As mentioned earlier, they were the owners of the land and used fire and bulldozers to vacate the place.

## ***Response of authorities post-fire***

When asked if these threats and subsequent fires are ever adequately investigated, all respondents said no. Two themes emerged: the authorities in charge rarely ever came, and when they did, they too asked the refugees to vacate the land. Samarth, a member of the NGO providing relief post-fire, mentioned, “Authorities don’t come. That’s the biggest problem. We asked the police to come, investigate, and find the culprit, but they were just enjoying their day. When the police came, they only cared about how to evacuate that land, and not so much the well being of the refugees. They did not even allow journalists to meet refugees.” Mehreen, Najia, and Ayan confirmed the apathetic nature of administration in such times of crisis. Mohsin adds that when the issue cools down in the press, the authorities “don’t follow through with the investigation”. However, in general, “crime branch, CID, Police, FRRO come every 20-30 day to double-check there are no Bengalis living here, that we all have refugee cards, that there are no deserters, that we’re committing no crime.” The only other authority mentioned that visited the site was the local MLA, who helped during the rebuilding. According to Mehreen and Najia, he gave families some money to recover post-fire.

## ***Reconstruction post-fire***

Upon being asked what reconstruction looked like post-fire, those working in NGOs outlined the aid process. In contrast, the refugees described how they built on the basic edifice that charities provided them. Samarth and Ayan elaborated that NGOs and civil society on the ground first look for a safe land where it’s legal to stay. They then work on providing temporary shelter and food. Next is finding materials to rebuild the more long term tents and providing daily resources like foldable beds, utensils, stoves, and fans during the summer. After providing the basic amenities such as tents, food, water, and sanitation, Ayan mentions that organisations “crowdfund for rebuilding the camps. We work on providing them with their livelihood, such as lost bikes, rickshaws, shops and so forth. The refugees are resilient and do 60-70% of the rebuilding on their own.” Confirming this, Najia specifies, “foundations help us build a basic shelter and the rest we do ourselves. We build our own houses.”

In comparison to his previous shelter, Mohsin said he now lives in an even more crowded place where “everything is flammable”. Najia added, “at least our house earlier was made of plywood. Now it’s just cloth”. She noted that wiring in the new camp was more dangerous than the previous camp’s. The final interview question inquired whether the new shelters built post-fire are more or less prone to catching fire than the last shelter. All respondents said that the new homes were more prone to go up in flames again.

## **CONCLUSION**

---

Fires in Rohingya camps across the country are unsettling not just because they rob basic shelter from refugees fleeing violence but also because they demonstrate an alarming disregard for the right to life and protection for those living in India. This paper sought to understand the leading cause behind the frequent fires in refugee camps in India. In analysing the available literature and field survey, the research finds that arson is most likely the foremost cause of fires in India. Most on-ground reporting, refugees’ first-hand accounts, inconsistent official investigations, and incriminating tweets attest to arson being the main reason.

The second cause in contention, poor urban planning, is found to worsen fires but rarely ever catalyses them. Fires that start because of it, if ever, are easily put out by the camp residents themselves. The refugees' recount that they have only seen one small fire catch because of a poor urban planning mishap. This statement opens an interesting discussion on how almost all official reports on fires are said to be a result of poor urban planning.

With the fires only increasing in frequency, it's imperative to hold authorities responsible for upholding refugee rights. It's the state's inherent duty to deliver a life of dignity and fulfilment through ensuring decent homes, access to water, electricity, and sanitation. As Advocate Chander Uday Singh mentioned, one cannot interpret acts of humanity for a community in need as an injustice against another. He pointed out that Article 21 assures everyone the right to the basic necessities of life "not from citizenship or nationality but primordial principles of humanity [...] which applies to all human beings." (Mehta 2021).

Properly habilitating camps would not only mitigate the risk of fire for the refugees themselves but also the host community residents who live in nearby areas. For this, the authorities in charge must make investigating fires appropriately an unwavering priority. As Westwell (2011: 25) noted during his research in India, "root causes of these accidents or disasters are not taken seriously nor investigated appropriately". Something the refugees themselves confirm. The lack of clarity around data makes it impossible to understand the scope of the problem and, therefore, impossible to fight. The imprecise nature of data robs policymakers of the opportunity to address the fires.

Secondly, the state must enforce the legislation uniformly when it finds those responsible for arson, in order to communicate that its priority is to uphold the law (Westwell 2011). From personally motivated individuals to government ministries, the state must uniformly subject everyone to the rule of law. Moreover, actions should be taken against persons exercising hate speech online, further threatening the lives of the refugees.

Finally, to combat the impact of poor urban planning in fires, the state must begin by considering providing refugees with legal and undisputed land to build their houses on. During interviews, all refugees communicated the desire to merely live on undisputed land so that they did not have to constantly fear being evicted or displaced every few months. As Samarth (personal communication, 20 October 2021) noted, "they're just asking for a piece of land with proper washrooms and liveable conditions". Aside from the clear benefits of dignified housing, proper residences will make installing fire breaks such as short circuit breakers and fire extinguishers more effective.

In the meantime, the authorities in charge must address that fires are a growing issue in refugee camps. As Kazerooni et al. (2016) point out, developing and disseminating fire prevention and management guidelines can only go so far. A comprehensive dialogue around protecting camps from arson must occur between the authorities and the refugees themselves. As discussed, with every fire, refugee homes become less safe and more susceptible to fires. Combating arson in refugee camps is the need of the hour.

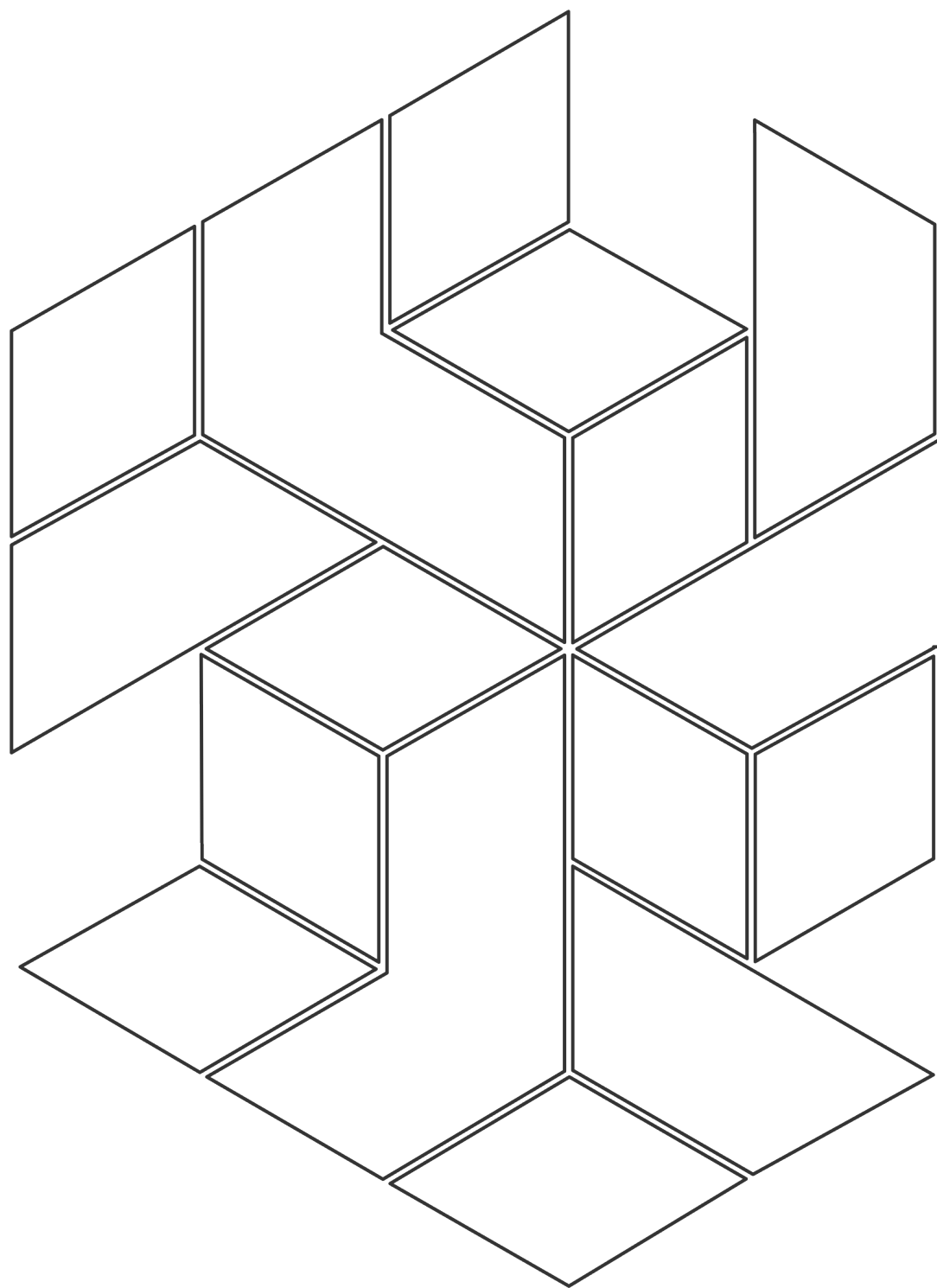


## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aafaq, Zafar. (2021). "India: Fire rips through Rohingya camp, leaving hundreds homeless". *Al Jazeera*, 13 June 2021. Accessed 31 October 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/13/lost-everything-fire-engulfs-rohingya-camp-in-delhi>.
- Ahmed, Kaamil. (2021). "A sample of hell: Rohingya forced to rebuild camps again after deadly floods". *The Guardian*, 7 August 2021. Accessed 10 December 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/aug/07/rohingya-rebuild-camps-again-21000-displaced-floods-bangladesh-coxs-bazar>.
- Anwar, Tarique. (2021). "Massive Fire Destroys Delhi's Only Rohingya Camp". *News Click*, 13 June 2021. Accessed 2 January 2022, <https://www.newsclick.in/massive-fire-destroys-delhis-only-rohingya-camp>.
- Atiyeh, B. S., and S. W. A. Gunn. (2017). "Refugee camps, fire disasters and burn injuries". *Annals of burns and fire disasters* 30(3): 214-217.
- Bhardwaj, Sidharth. (2018). "Major fire guts Rohingya refugee camp in Delhi, all IDs charred". *Time of India*, 16 April 2018. Accessed 11 January 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/major-fire-guts-rohingya-refugee-camp-in-delhi-all-ids-charred/articleshow/63776328.cms>.
- Bromfield, Heather. (2013). "Suspicious Fires in Slums: A Comparison Across Cities". Accessed 10 December 2021, [https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=showcase\\_posters](https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=showcase_posters).
- Dabanga. (2015). "Displaced blame Darfur camp fires on arson". *Dabanga Sudan*, 8 March 2015. Accessed 26 December 2021, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/fires-in-darfur-camps-result-of-arson-displaced>.
- Davis, Mike. (2006). *Planet of Slums*. London, United Kingdom: Verso Books.
- Doctors Without Borders. (2021). "Devastating fire tears through Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh". *Doctors Without Borders*, 23 March 2021. Accessed 20 December 2021, [doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/story/devastating-fire-tears-through-rohingya-refugee-camp-bangladesh](https://doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/story/devastating-fire-tears-through-rohingya-refugee-camp-bangladesh).
- Express Web Desk. (2021). "Rohingya camp fire in Delhi: BJP youth wing leader tweets he did it, Prashant Bhushan files complaint". *The Indian Express*, 20 April 2018. Accessed 2 January 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/bjp-youth-wing-leader-accepts-to-burning-rohingya-camp-in-delhi-prashant-bhushan-files-complaint-5144747/>.
- Field, Jessica, Anubhav Dutt Tiwari, and Yamini Mookherjee. (2017). "Urban refugees in Delhi: Identity, entitlements and well-being". Working paper, International Institute for Environment and Development.

- Human Rights Watch. (2021). "India: Halt All Forced Returns to Myanmar". *Human Rights Watch*, 10 March 2021. Access date 14 September 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/10/india-halt-all-forced-returns-myanmar>.
- Kazerooni, Yasaman, Adam Gyedu, Gilbert Burnham, Benedict Nwomeh, Anthony Charles, Brijesh Mishra, Solomon S Kuah, Adam L Kushner, and Barclay T Stewart. (2016). "Fires in refugee and displaced persons settlements: the current situation and opportunities to improve fire prevention and control". *Burns* 42(5): 1036-1046.
- Mehta, Archit. (2021). "Misleading claim by BJP leaders about facilities provided by AAP to Rohingyas". *Alt News*, 17 August 2021. Accessed 24 December 2021, <https://www.altnews.in/misleading-claim-by-bjp-leaders-about-facilities-provided-by-aap-to-rohingyas/>.
- Murti, Aditi. (2021). "Delhi's Rohingya Camp Fire Has Displaced Several Families. Why Are Refugee Camps Vulnerable to Hazards?". *The Swaddle*, 14 June 2021. Accessed 19 December 2021, <https://theswaddle.com/delhis-rohingya-camp-fire-displaced-several-families-why-are-refugee-camps-vulnerable-to-hazards/>.
- National Crime Records Bureau. (2020). *Place of Occurrence-wise Number of Fire Accidents, Persons Injured and Died during 2020*. New Delhi, India: National Crime Records Bureau. Accessed 18 November 2021, [https://ncrb.gov.in/sites/default/files/adsi\\_reports\\_previous\\_year/Table%201.11%20all%20india.pdf](https://ncrb.gov.in/sites/default/files/adsi_reports_previous_year/Table%201.11%20all%20india.pdf).
- Rana, Chahat. (2021). "Rohingya refugees in fire-gutted Delhi camp say concerted effort to render them homeless". *The Caravan*, 15 June 2021. Accessed 31 October 2021, <https://caravan-magazine.in/communities/rohingya-in-delhi-camp-gutted-by-fire-say-concerted-effort-to-render-them-homeless>.
- Reliefweb. (2017). "APRRN Statement: Stop the Eviction of Rohingyas in Jammu". *Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network*, 17 March 2017. Accessed 10 December 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/india/aprrn-statement-stop-eviction-rohingyas-jammu>.
- Rohringya. (2021). "Urgent Humanitarian Aid for Refugee Fire Victims in Jammu and Kashmir". Accessed 31 October 2021, <https://www.rohringya.org/work-detail.php?wID=93>.
- Sharma, Arun. (2017). "Jammu: 5 Rohingya Muslim homes gutted, police blame it on short circuit". *The Indian Express*, 15 April 2017. Accessed 2 January 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/jammu/jammu-rohingya-jhuggis-slums-set-ablaze-under-mysterious-circumstances-4612626/>.
- Shwe, Maung Thein, Jessica Field, and Natalie Brinham. (2021). "Failure to Protect: The Denial of Status, Detention and Refoulment of Rohingya Refugees in India". Briefing paper, Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion.
- Singh, Mahendra. (2021). "दिल्ली में फरि से चला योगी का बुल्डोजर..." [Twitter], 22 July. Accessed 15 January 2021, <https://twitter.com/bjpdmahendra/status/1418099064164388864>.

- The Straits Times. (2021). "Recurring slum fires a cause of concern: Daily Star". *The Straits Times*, 9 June 2021. Accessed 20 December 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/recurring-slum-fires-a-cause-of-concern-daily-star>.
- UNHCR. (n.d.). "Figures at a Glance". Accessed 10 January 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-in/figures-at-a-glance.html>.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR]. (2021). *India Factsheet*, 31 June 2021. Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR. Accessed 7 September 2021, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/India%20factsheet%20June%202021.pdf>.
- Westwell, Christopher. (2011). "Fires in Informal Settlements in India and the Philippines". Masters dissertation, Loughborough University.
- World Health Organization. (2011). *Burn prevention: success stories and lessons learned*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization.



SPRF.IN