



Revised Operational Note on Terminology

Groups Engaged in Recruitment of Refugees in the Cox's Bazar Camps

September 2026

1. Background

In June 2024, the Protection Sector issued an *Operational Note on Terminology of Groups Engaged in the Recruitment of Refugees in the Camps*, adopting the term “organized group” to describe groups such as ARSA and RSO operating in the Cox's Bazar refugee camps. These actors did not fit neatly within a single category. They were involved in serious criminal and coercive activities within the camps, including killings, abductions, extortion, intimidation, and violent competition for control, largely unrelated to developments in Myanmar, while maintaining varying links to actors and dynamics associated with the non-international armed conflict (NIAC) in Myanmar. These included forcible recruitment and child recruitment, and other activities undertaken in support of, or in connection with, parties to the conflict across the border.

The initial choice of “organized group” reflected this complexity, while taking into consideration the protection, legal and political concerns and sensitivities regarding the use of “armed group” in the Bangladesh context. There was concern that the term could be misunderstood as suggesting that the refugee camps themselves formed part of an armed conflict, or that an international humanitarian law framework applied in Bangladesh. Such a characterization risked contributing to securitization of the refugee response, weakening civilian law-enforcement and rule-of-law approaches, and creating greater space for exceptional or security-driven measures. There were also concerns about how the terminology could be interpreted or instrumentalized within the domestic political context, including during electoral periods, by actors across the border in Myanmar, and by international actors who were reviewing refugee status. There was concern that the use of “armed group” risked contributing to the stigmatization of Rohingya refugees, undermining refugee rights, and creating an environment in which collective restrictions or punitive measures could be justified.

At the same time, experience since 2024 has highlighted significant limitations and implications in the term “organized group.” The term has no established legal or internationally recognized meaning to describe groups bearing arms nor does it contain reference to arms, it can therefore obscure the nature, seriousness, and protection implications of the threats posed by these actors, including concerns around both child and forced recruitment. The term ultimately undermines the measures needed to preserve the humanitarian and civilian character of the camps. The vagueness of the term also resulted in confusion about its meaning, and as a result, different actors across the response adopted different terminology, contributing to inconsistent analysis and uncertainty about how these groups and their activities should be understood.

While questions remain regarding the precise command-and-control structures and relationships between actors operating in Bangladesh and Myanmar, protection monitoring and other information sources have consistently indicated cross-border networks, relationships and activities. Recruitment efforts by these organizations have also continued. The absence of sufficiently clear and consistent terminology has made it more difficult to describe these developments accurately, to support coherent and unified protection analysis and advocacy, and ensure accountability.

To ensure consistency across the response, this note proposes updated terminology that reflects these realities while retaining the safeguards of the 2024 approach.

2. Proposal

A body of evidence drawn from the UN Human Rights Council as well as reports by credible protection monitor actors and UNHCR (including hundreds of interviews with refugees), provides a sound basis for applying the term “armed group” to at least one of the groups operating in the camps. Noting that this is intended as a descriptive rather than a legal definition, the following criteria may be used to identify and refer to specific groups.

Descriptive Definition: In the context of groups operating in the Cox's Bazar camps, “armed group” shall apply only to a group meeting a minimum level of organization, namely: (1) a command structure; (2) a



communicated political objective; (3) bearing of arms; and (4) the capacity to sustain military operations in a location, not necessarily in the territory of Bangladesh.

Armed individuals operating in a group that does not meet this threshold may, depending on the nature of their activities, be referred to as “organized criminal gangs” or, more broadly, as “armed elements”. Section 5 provides a typology distinguishing “armed groups” from “organized criminal gangs”, which in accordance with international refugee framework, has different impacts on the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum (CHCA) and require different responses.

Where it is not clear whether the actor is an armed group or an organized criminal gang, the term “armed group and/or organized criminal gang” may be used.

The use of “armed group” to describe the characteristics, affiliations or activities of a particular actor should not be understood as determining that an armed conflict exists in Bangladesh or that international humanitarian law applies to the situation in the camps. Nor should it diminish the refugee protection framework applicable to the Rohingya population, who remain the primary victims of the violence, coercion and criminality associated with these groups.

Rather, it should enable the adoption of measures, in line with international refugee and human rights frameworks, that support accountability and reinforce the humanitarian and civilian character of asylum and that of the camps.

The terminology adopted is intended as descriptive rather than a legal definition and should enable protection actors to describe these groups and their activities with greater precision while maintaining a clear distinction between the conflict in Myanmar and the situation in Bangladesh, preserving applicable international human rights and refugee protection frameworks, and avoiding language that could contribute to securitization, stigmatization or collective punishment. It should also recognize the coercive nature of many of these groups’ activities and avoid assumptions that all individuals associated, or perceived to be associated, with them are willing participants or share responsibility for the groups’ conduct. The use of “armed group” does not alter the characterization of the situation in Bangladesh as “generalized violence” or “armed conflict”.

3. Legal Framework

Given UNHCR/ICRC global collaboration and guidance notes on the civilian and humanitarian character of sites,¹ ICRC Bangladesh was consulted. ICRC confirmed that “non-state armed group” has a defined meaning under international humanitarian law (IHL), whereas “armed group” permits a more flexible approach: it is not legally defined and there are no legal criteria for who qualifies, therefore it may be used broadly to encompass both non-state armed groups within the strict IHL definition and other groups bearing arms.

UNHCR’s *Guidance Note on Maintaining the Civilian and Humanitarian Character of Asylum* (2018) defines the term as follows:

“‘Armed group’ (or ‘organized armed group’) refers to the armed or military wing of a non-State party to an armed conflict, namely its armed forces in a functional sense, which displays a minimum level of organization; is not within the formal military structures of a State, State-alliance or intergovernmental organization; and is not under the control of the State(s) in which it operates. Outside the context of armed conflict, this may also include organized gangs.”

Notably, the definition does not require the group to be a party to an armed conflict in the territory where its members reside (i.e. Bangladesh); it may therefore encompass a group that is party to a conflict in a neighbouring State (i.e. Myanmar). It is also broad enough to include organized gangs² “outside the context of armed conflict”, indicating that “armed group” may be used in the absence of armed conflict in the host territory.

¹ See UNHCR and ICRC, “Aide Memoire: Operational Guidance on Maintaining the Civilian and Humanitarian Character of Sites and Settlements” (July 2018), available from https://emergency.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/unhcr_icrc_aide_memoire_on_maintaining_the_civilian_and_humanitarian_character_2018.pdf.

² See UNHCR, “Guidance Note on Refugee Claims Related to Victims of Organized Gangs” (2010), available from <https://www.refworld.org/policy/legalguidance/unhcr/2010/72812>, defining a gang broadly as a group of two or more members carrying out criminal activities as a primary or secondary objective.

The Protection Sector's Operational Note similarly affirms that, beyond IHL, "armed groups" are not defined under international law and no universally accepted criteria exist; the term has been applied in diverse contexts, including Haiti and Mexico, which are not in a state of non-international armed conflict (NIAC.)

4. Rationale

There is strong evidence that at least one group operating in the Cox's Bazar camps meets the criteria for designation as an "armed group". In September 2018, the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar concluded that the violence between the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Myanmar security forces constituted a non-international armed conflict (NIAC), at least since 25 August 2017.³ As a party to that conflict, ARSA meets the above-mentioned criteria for an "armed group" with respect to its operations in Myanmar.

Subsequent OHCHR reporting refers in the plural to "Rohingya armed groups and armed elements" involved in hostilities in Rakhine State (May 2025),⁴ and contains six references to "Rohingya armed groups" operating there, including "fighting between the Arakan Army and Rohingya armed groups near Bangladesh" (September 2025).⁵ OHCHR has not, however, explicitly referred to Rohingya armed groups operating within Bangladesh. Reputable international NGOs have done so: Amnesty International reports that the Myanmar junta and Rohingya armed groups have unlawfully conscripted Rohingya in both Bangladesh and Myanmar,⁶ and the International Crisis Group has described ARSA and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) as engaged in "turf wars" in the camps in 2024.⁷

Above incidents and the serious violations of rights affecting Rohingya communities have been documented across different reports, including those issued by OHCHR, UNHCR and protection monitoring actors.⁸ This body of reporting supports the use of "armed group" as a broad descriptive term where the relevant operational criteria are met. The term is used in the context of a situation of violence, without attributing responsibility for any particular incident or assigning legal status to any group.

Reported concerns include the recruitment or use of children, abduction, intimidation and other coercive or criminal activities affecting camp residents, including children. These allegations highlight the need for continued monitoring, verification, and appropriate protection response, particularly for affected children and their families.

5. Criteria for Designation as an "Armed Group"

Given the flexibility of the term, clear criteria adapted to the Cox's Bazar context are required. Under the proposed criteria, an "armed group" must display a "minimum level of organization", which excludes loosely organized gangs — such as some of those in Teknaf, whose leadership is highly fluid, and which espouse no political motivation. It also excludes political groups that may have relations or links to armed groups but are not themselves armed. There is a need to include political groups within this typology to provide clarity on the status of the many entities operating in the camps. It is noted that the classification

³Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, A/HRC/39/64, 12 September 2018, para. 87, available from https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFM-Myanmar/A_HRC_39_64.pdf.

⁴OHCHR, "Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar: update", A/HRC/59/57, 26 May 2025, available from https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/a-hrc-59-57-myanmar-report-auv_0.pdf.

⁵OHCHR, "Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar: update", 26 September 2025 (High-Level Conference on the Rohingya, New York), available from <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/form/crp-ny-high-level-conference-myanmar.pdf>.

⁶Amnesty International, "8 years on: accountability needed for Myanmar atrocities against Rohingya", 25 August 2025, available from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/08/8-years-on-accountability-needed-for-myanmar-atrocities-against-rohingya/>.

⁷International Crisis Group, "Crisis mounts for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh", Asia Report No. 355, available from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/bangladesh/355-crisis-mounts-rohingya-refugees-bangladesh>.

⁸Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, A/HRC/39/64, 12 September 2018, para. 87, available from https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFM-Myanmar/A_HRC_39_64.pdf; OHCHR, "Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar: update", A/HRC/59/57, 26 May 2025, available from https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/a-hrc-59-57-myanmar-report-auv_0.pdf; OHCHR, "Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar: update", 26 September 2025 (High-Level Conference on the Rohingya, New York), available from <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/form/crp-ny-high-level-conference-myanmar.pdf>; Amnesty International, "8 years on: accountability needed for Myanmar atrocities against Rohingya", 25 August 2025, available from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/08/8-years-on-accountability-needed-for-myanmar-atrocities-against-rohingya/>; International Crisis Group, "Crisis mounts for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh", Asia Report No. 355, available from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/bangladesh/355-crisis-mounts-rohingya-refugees-bangladesh>.

of the groups may change as the activities of groups change (e.g. some groups may become inactive in fighting, or some political groups could at some point become armed groups). Further, agencies may vary in how specific groups are classified, but the overall typology provides a common framework for describing threats to the civilian and humanitarian character of the camps, while distinguishing groups that do not necessarily pose such risks. The following framework is proposed:

Classification	Criteria
Armed group	1. Command structure (e.g. ranks; capacity to participate in coordination mechanisms). ⁹ 2. Communicated political objective(s) (e.g. social media messaging; ¹⁰ does not preclude criminal involvement). 3. Bearing of arms. ¹¹ 4. Capacity to sustain military operations in a location, not necessarily in Bangladesh. ¹²
Organized criminal gang	No command structure, or a highly fluid one; no stated political motivation. Although there is no universally recognized definition of a “gang”, the term is commonly used to denote a group of two or more members which carries out criminal activities as its primary or secondary objective. For the purpose of this Note, the term “gang” refers to the relatively groups operating in the camps for whom crime and violence is integral to the group’s identity. The term is also used to refer to <i>organized criminal groups</i> of individuals for whom involvement in crime is for personal gain (financial or otherwise) and their primary “occupation.”
Group affiliated with armed groups	May have links with armed group members and may facilitate coordination among them, but not itself an armed group; does not engage in fighting.
Political group	Minimum level of organization and a stated political motivation; no direct link to armed groups, members not generally armed, does not engage in fighting.

6. Risk Analysis and Proposed Mitigation

Risk	Mitigation
Humanitarian agencies are accused of implying that Bangladesh is harboring armed groups	Protection Sector and some UN agencies have already used this terminology in external documents without significant backlash. Informal acknowledgement by some authorities of the presence of such groups in the camp. Sanitized alternatives (e.g. “armed elements”) may be used in direct correspondence with Government.

⁹The participation of ARSA, RSO, ARA and Rohingya Islami Mahaaz (RIM) in a truce brokered in November 2024, and largely maintained through 2025, indicates a certain level of organization.

¹⁰Unlike criminal gangs, these groups maintain social media accounts espousing their political goals and have mobilized supporters — for example, ARSA demonstrations in support of its detained commander-in-chief, and RSO demonstrations in 2024 following the detention of certain commanders.

¹¹From 2023 to 2026, protection monitoring documented hundreds of incidents of armed members using firearms or weapons; law-enforcement raids have recovered military-grade weapons. See Joint Protection Monitoring Reports at <https://rohingyaresponse.org/sectors/coxs-bazar/protection/>.

¹²Protection monitoring documented fighters leaving the camps for Myanmar and returning after combat against the Arakan Army (e.g. individuals detained crossing at Whykong, January 2026);

Myanmar's de facto authorities or relevant ethnic armed groups may point to the presence of armed groups in the camps as an excuse to deny repatriation of Rohingya from Bangladesh	Arakan Army has repeatedly raised concern with armed groups allegedly on Bangladesh territory; UN acknowledgement of this changes little. Conversely, UN can point to the presence of armed groups as an obstacle to voluntary repatriation, which would emphasize the importance of authorities' actions in line with the civilian and humanitarian character of camps (screening and identification, disarmament, separation, and detection of vulnerable individuals/groups). UN may also highlight armed groups' impact on provoking continuing displacement from Myanmar to Bangladesh, which would similarly incentivize authorities' action against them. UN should sensitize that only a small minority of the camp is associated with armed groups, and they do not enjoy broad support.
Use of "armed group" terminology by UN provokes a more securitized, militarized approach to law enforcement in the camps	UN advocacy should emphasize that concerns regarding armed groups are best addressed through targeted, evidence-based law-enforcement measures consistent with the rule of law and international refugee framework, rather than approaches that risk affecting the wider refugee population. This should include individual screening during registration procedures by the Government of Bangladesh and UNHCR with possibility to appeal, meaningful access to justice and due process, and where applicable, referral to relevant criminal justice mechanisms on an individual basis and supported by credible evidence recognizing that association may be alleged, coerced or otherwise contested. Safeguards against arbitrary arrest, collective measures or disproportionate responses must be maintained. Protection actors should continue, through routine protection monitoring and established coordination mechanisms, to assess the protection implications of evolving law-enforcement and security approaches in the camps and, where appropriate, raise relevant concerns through constructive dialogue with the Government of Bangladesh.
Terminology feeds negative stereotypes against Rohingya in the host community	UN messaging should consistently distinguish between armed groups and the wider refugee population, emphasizing that responsibility rests with specific actors and individuals rather than with communities. Communications and advocacy should highlight/reinforce the fact that Rohingya refugees are themselves subject to recruitment, coercion, intimidation, extortion, violence and other abuses by these groups. Engagement with Government, media and other stakeholders should therefore promote careful, evidence-based characterization of incidents and avoid language that could contribute to stigmatization, collective attribution of responsibility or broader restrictions on refugees
Terminology leads to a hyperbolic narrative that exaggerates the risk level for humanitarian workers and programmes, implications for UNDSS	UN clearly establishes facts on the ground and corrects false narratives; the presence of armed groups is <u>not</u> synonymous with increased risks for humanitarian access, nor does it imply any loss of territorial control by the government; Current monitoring has not established a particular pattern that humanitarian actors are targeted. Continued engagement of UNHCR and the Protection Sector with donors and UNDSS is recommended to indicate the reality of the security situation.
Terminology obscures responsibility of some actors who support the groups	"Armed Groups" does not require a level of autonomy, only a minimum command structure, and does not preclude the groups being supported by other entities. If armed groups are instrumentalized to coerce refugee repatriation, clear terminology describing these groups will assist in accountability.

“Armed Groups” implies recognition of a political objective which could risk legitimizing these groups	“Armed Group” has no connotation of legitimate political purpose. Recognition that a group has a political goal does not equate to legitimizing or endorsing that goal, nor does it preclude the group having other non-political (i.e. criminal) objectives.
“Armed Groups” draws attention away from organized criminal gangs	It is advisable to distinguish these groups as advocacy objectives are different: countering armed groups can be achieved with a relatively simple policy decision (withdrawing and prohibiting support), while countering organized gangs requires a complex whole-of-society approach.
Donor community raises concerns about aid diversion if armed groups are present in the camps	Available info suggests that armed group membership in Cox's Bazar camps represents a small fraction of the overall camp population (estimated less than 0.4% of the refugee population). Donor community has been aware of armed actors in the camps since mid-2024 as humanitarian actors regularly raise these issues with them. RRRC and UNHCR are initiating a Civilian Character of Asylum screening process during biometric identification/registration of refugees and for those known to UNHCR as being active fighters, in Q3/Q4 of 2026, which will itself bring attention to this issue with the authorities and raise awareness among the refugee population.

7. Suggested Narratives

- The term "armed group" is a technical, descriptive classification applied to specific actors operating in the camps; it is not a legal category. It does not imply any loss of governmental control of territory, nor does it increase the risk of targeting humanitarian actors beyond its currently assessed level.
- The term is a factual designation, not a political one: it carries no endorsement of that group's objectives and does not exclude parallel criminal conduct. Some armed groups operating in the camps also conduct criminal activities.
- The presence of armed groups in the camps may be a driver of continued displacement in Myanmar, if fighters cross to Myanmar to contribute to armed clashes. This displacement may lead to more population inflows to Bangladesh. The presence of these groups may generate difficulties to reach an agreement on safe and voluntary return under conducive conditions.
- Only a small minority of camp residents are believed to be members of armed groups and engage in active fighting in Myanmar, some under coerced conditions. The overwhelming majority of the Rohingya community do not support these groups and are instead their most frequent victims. Law enforcement action against these groups' leaders will be most effective, not broad-based targeting of the refugee community.
- Armed groups and organized criminal gangs are distinct phenomena requiring different responses. The political objective of armed groups renders them more easily instrumentalized for specific goals, which requires heightened vigilance.
- Armed group members are believed to constitute only a very small percentage of the camp population. RRRC and UNHCR are taking steps to implement Civilian Character of Asylum (CCA) screening, integrated into biometric registration, to further reinforce existing safeguards against misuse of humanitarian aid. The screening process will adhere to strict standards of confidentiality, data protection, and due process, ensuring that information is handled securely and only for authorized purposes. Screening outcomes will be determined through individual assessment and accountability.

Annexes:

1. UNHCR's *Guidance Note on Maintaining the Civilian and Humanitarian Character of Asylum* (2018)
2. UNHCR and ICRC, *"Aide Memoire: Operational Guidance On Maintaining The Civilian And Humanitarian Character Of Sites And Settlements"* (July 2018)