



# Creating Digital Identity for Stateless Rohingya

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The [UNHCR – the United Nations Refugee Agency](#) – has announced that a six-month project has commenced that is designed to create digital identity cards for the displaced Rohingya population currently residing in Bangladesh. Having begun at the end of June 2018, the United Nations-led initiative is designed to create a digital identity for these stateless people – an identity that may create better opportunities in the future for benefits assistance, health care, education, and employment. This project is also a tool for population management since an estimated 900,000 Rohingya are currently living in makeshift camps within the borders of Bangladesh.

The [Rohingya people are of the Islamic faith and as such are regarded as an undesirable minority](#) group within their native country, Myanmar. Efforts by the World Bank and the United Nations are aimed at the eventual repatriation of these people who began fleeing their homeland in August of 2017 after a concerted campaign of violence against them by the government and local military. However, even in their current location within refugee camps, they are regarded by the Bangladeshi people as illegal immigrants. A July 2018 article in the New Indian Express noted that the assistance of

refugee relief agencies helps the [Prime Minister of Bangladesh](#) continue the current humane approach of sheltering the Rohingya until it is safe for them to return to Myanmar.

Jointly commissioned by the UNHCR and the government of Bangladesh, the laminated [plastic ID cards](#) will be the size of a credit card, and will contain fingerprints, retinal scans, and photos. Due to changes in appearance during childhood, these cards will be only be issued to those over the age of 12.

Identity cards will be produced through a [5-step blockchain-based verification](#) process created by the [Swiss company Proquivis](#).

It is important to acknowledge that although this is generally celebrated as a breakthrough, the push to create digital records of identity is not universally accepted as a good idea. On the contrary, several analysts including scholars from the Harvard Kennedy School and the [International Institute for Development](#), have noted that there could be a need for strong safety measures regarding the storage of such data to be enacted before these cards are produced. The primary objections to this well-intentioned gathering of information and documentation of everything from name, age, and photo to their parents' names, the place of birth, and religious affiliation are as follows.

1. The Rohingya may find themselves displaced again and repatriated to Myanmar [whether they want to be returned or not](#). The Prime Minister of Bangladesh has made it clear that humanitarian relief for the Rohingya is a temporary measure. The country is actively participating in the formalising of digital identity documents to ensure that this refugee population is eventually returned to the country that they fled. This directly contradicts the United Nations position that under the rules of international law, the Rohingya must be regarded as refugees.
2. [Errors in the way information is entered for the new digital identities](#) is already creating headaches for administrators on both sides of the border of Myanmar. The order of entry varies between Bangladesh and Myanmar and placing the items in the wrong order could endanger the person's ability to go back to Myanmar in the future. The correct order of entry for Bangladesh is Name, Village Name, Post Office, Police Station, District. But the correct order of entry for Myanmar differs — Name, Village/ward Name, Village Track Name, Township, District. Negotiations are ongoing between the two governments, but the Myanmar side has made it clear that if the order of entry is incorrect on documents that are presented, they have the right to turn the re-entering Rohingya away at the border.
3. [Assigning cards that specify ethnicity and religious beliefs can backfire](#) if the data is stolen or manipulated. Historical evidence exists that demonstrates that the assignment of labels such as ethnic background or religion has created follow-on atrocities. Recent data losses by governments and large agencies make this an area of potential concern.