Context:

Bangladesh is racing to turn an uninhabited and muddy Bay of Bengal island into home for 100,000 Rohingya Muslims who have fled a military crackdown in Myanmar, amid conflicting signals from top Bangladeshi officials about whether the refugees would end up being stranded there.

News:

- Bhansan Char island would be a “temporary arrangement” to ease congestion at the camps in Cox’s Bazar, refuge for nearly 700,000 who have crossed from the north of Myanmar’s Rakhine state.
- Rohingyas would only be able to leave the island if they wanted to go back to Myanmar or were selected for asylum by a third country.
- It’s not a concentration camp, but there may be some restrictions. We are not giving them a Bangladeshi passport or ID card.
- British and Chinese engineers are helping prepare the island to receive refugees before the onset of monsoon rains, which could bring disastrous flooding to ramshackle camps further south that now teem with about 1 million Rohingya.
- Selection of Rohingyas to be rehabilitated here would be on lottery-basis or on a volunteer-basis.
- The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said in a statement: “We would emphasise that any relocation plan involving refugees would need to be based on and implemented through voluntary and informed decisions.”

Issues:

- The silt island is vulnerable to frequent cyclones and cannot sustain livelihoods for thousands of people.
- Pirates roam the nearby waters to kidnap fishermen for ransom, residents of nearby islands say.
- Residents of nearby Sandwip island, which is larger and less remote, say monsoon storms regularly kill people, destroy homes and cut contact with the mainland.
- Many Rohingya also reject the idea of moving to an island even further from Myanmar, which many of them have called home for generations.
About Bhansan Char:

- Bhasan Char - whose name means “floating island” - there were no roads, buildings or people.
- Floating Island, which emerged from the silt only about 20 years ago, is about 30 km (21 miles) from the mainland.
- Flat and shape-shifting, it regularly floods during June-September.
- The latest unrest in Myanmar’s Rakhine state began on Aug. 25, when Rohingya insurgents attacked dozens of police posts and an army base, prompting an army counter-offensive that forced entire villages to flee. They joined about 300,000 Rohingya already in Bangladesh, one of the world’s poorest and most crowded nations, who had fled previous bouts of violence.
- Myanmar denies that ethnic cleansing has taken place and says it has been conducting legitimate operations against terrorists in northern Rakhine.

Chinese and British companies are working to build this Island:

- Chinese construction company Sinohydro - better known for building China’s Three Gorges Dam - has begun work on a 13-km (8-mile) flood-defence embankment for the $280-million project.
- HR Wallingford, a British engineering and environmental hydraulics consultancy, is advising the project on “coastal stabilization and flood protection measures
- The coastal infrastructure design is expected to include a flood defense embankment protecting the development area to international standards, set back from the shoreline.
- This is a silt island that only emerged into view recently.
- The government was building cyclone shelters on the island.
- There were salt-tolerant paddies and people living there could fish or graze cows and buffalo.