

In Briefing on Mission to Bangladesh, Myanmar, Members Describe Mass Rapes, Displacement of Rohingya

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Recounting the haunting stories of Rohingya refugees they met during a recent mission to Bangladesh and Myanmar, Security Council members today described mass rapes, attacks on children and the razing of entire villages, stressing that the visit had “awakened their collective conscience” into robust and concerted action.

The representative of Kuwait — one of the mission’s three co-chairs, along with the representatives of Peru and the United Kingdom — said Council members had arrived in Cox’s Bazaar on 28 April. There, some 670,000 members of the Rohingya community had joined 300,000 already displaced in Bangladesh. In Kutupalong — now the world’s largest refugee camp with some 600,000 inhabitants — the Council met with families and heard first-hand about the horrors they had suffered. Noting, in his national capacity, that the sheer scale of destruction in Rakhine State revealed targeted acts of violence, he added that the sounds of children still calling for parents they had lost had affected him deeply. “Their sobs and their cries will stay with me.”

The United Kingdom’s representative, also reporting on the mission, described a field visit to Rakhine State including a flight over burned out and devastated areas. The Council had met with victims of Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army attacks and Rohingya communities who had had their homes rebuilt. Commenting on the scale of the devastating conditions, she pointed out that the two existing reception centres could accommodate at best 300 refugees per day at a time when 900,000 refugees needed assistance. In addition, little progress had been made on pressing political issues — including settling the citizenship status of Rohingya community members — and citizens had reported attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army forces.

The representative of Peru summarized the Council’s 30 April meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar’s Government leader, in Naypyitaw, saying she had expressed eagerness to see the Rohingya refugees return home but cited delays in the process. Among other things, she had acknowledged the need to revise certain citizenship laws, as well as to create an atmosphere of trust among communities. In a subsequent meeting, the Chief of Myanmar’s Defence Services had described attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army group, emphasizing that the Defence Forces had abided by all its international obligations.

Taking the floor following those briefings, Council members described the mission as disturbing, a “vivid and stark revelation” and having left an “indelible mark”. Kazakhstan’s representative said that standing at the front line of the world’s largest refugee crisis had presented members with a reality that shocked and awakened their conscience, “prompting us to act more robustly and collectively”. He joined other speakers in stressing that no safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees and internally displaced persons to

Myanmar's Rakhine State could take place — and no lasting solution would be found — without addressing the root causes of the crisis. Those included the issues of citizenship for the Rohingya people, restoration of their rights, poverty alleviation and development, access to education, employment and freedom of movement.

France's representative, meanwhile, said the international community must significantly increase humanitarian funding and take measures to prepare the refugees from the coming monsoon rain season. Words and pledges from the Myanmar Government were not enough, she stressed, calling on it to commit to tackling the root causes of the crisis. "The Rohingya are victims of ethnic cleansing — there is no other way to describe it," she said, urging the Government to cooperate with the United Nations fact-finding mission, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to ensure humanitarian access and facilitate the conditions needed for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees.

The representative of Bangladesh reiterated his Government's expectations: Continued action to ensure the safe return of the Rohingya community members; adoption of a Council resolution building on its 2017 presidential statement; prevailing on Myanmar to implement recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State; and ensuring accountability and justice. Among other things, he called for stronger repatriation efforts by the Myanmar Government, noting that the vista of more than 400 burned villages hardly evoked confidence about the prospect of return to Rakhine State. For its part, Bangladesh was helping to prepare for the monsoon season by relocating affected populations and working towards providing safe shelter.

Myanmar's representative, on the other hand, said Bangladesh was making excuses to stall the repatriation process while also distorting facts and vilifying Myanmar. Reiterating his Government's commitment to investigating and acting on all criminal allegations that were supported by evidence, he said the current crisis was a result of attacks by Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army terrorists on border guard posts in northern Rakhine. Those, along with brutal killings and atrocities committed against innocent Hindu, Rakhine Buddhist and other minority tribes, had been ignored by the Western media. Expressing concern that Bangladesh was unwittingly allowing extremism to rear its ugly head in the region, he warned that the discriminatory and one-sided narratives would only lead to further polarization and escalation.

Also speaking were the representatives of China, United States, Sweden, Equatorial Guinea, Russian Federation, Netherlands and Poland.

The meeting began at 3:08 p.m. and ended at 5 p.m.

Statements

MANSOUR AYYAD SH. A. ALOTAIBI ([Kuwait](#)), speaking in his capacity as one of three co-chairs — along with the representatives of Peru and the United Kingdom — of the Council's mission to Bangladesh and Myanmar from 26 April to 2 May, focused his statement on the portion of the visit to Bangladesh. On 28 April, Council members had arrived in Cox's Bazaar to assess for themselves the plight of the more than 1.2 million Rohingya living there. Noting that more than 670,000 Rohingya had recently joined some 300,000 who

were already displaced in Bangladesh, he recounted the Council's meetings with the United Nations Working Group, as well as with Government ministers. During the latter, it became clear that the conditions for the safe and dignified return of refugees to Myanmar had not yet been met. Noting that the United Nations humanitarian response plan — requiring some \$950 million — remained only 16 per cent funded, he also expressed concern over potential regional repercussions due to the magnitude of the crisis and the upcoming monsoon season. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, for her part, had expressed gratitude to the Council for its support and pledged to continue to support the refugees until their safe return could be ensured, he said.

Visiting a refugee camp on the “zero line” between Bangladesh and Myanmar, the Council had been able to see first-hand the “sorry state” of the refugees, many of whom had lost their homes and families before fleeing Rakhine State. Many refugees arriving at the camp had been injured in bombings and shellings, he continued. The Council also met with local people who had fled Myanmar at an earlier date, who made clear that their rights to free movement and identity cards had been denied. Visiting the Kutupalong — now the world's largest refugee camp with some 600,000 inhabitants — the Council met with refugee families and heard first-hand about the horrors they had suffered. Council members also held two press conferences in Bangladesh, answering questions from local and international journalists, and met with civil society leaders, non-governmental representatives and others.

Speaking in his national capacity, he agreed with the Working Group's findings regarding possible regional repercussions of the crisis. Council members must act, as the crisis may constitute a threat to international peace and security. Emphasizing that he had been personally affected by refugee children who were still calling for their parents, even after having lost them, he stressed: “Their sobs and their cries will stay with me.” The sheer scale of destruction of villages in Rakhine State revealed targeted acts of violence — including the razing of houses and buildings — against a minority that had committed no crime other than being a minority population. Given the scale of the destruction, those acts could amount to ethnic cleansing, he said.

GUSTAVO MEZA-CUARDA ([Peru](#)), also one of the mission's co-chairs and the Council's President for the month of April, briefed about its 30 April meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's Government leader, in Naypyitaw. During the meeting, she had expressed eagerness to see the Rohingya refugees return home, but cited delays in the process. Among other things, she had acknowledged the need to revise certain citizenship laws — also noting those processes would take time — as well as to create an atmosphere of trust among communities. Council members had expressed their support for the refugees, and stressed that Myanmar's Government must respect the rights of all communities. The Council met subsequently with the Chief of Myanmar's Defence Services, who had described attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army group. He also said the Defence Forces, charged with protecting Myanmar, had abided by all its international obligations. Council members had stressed the need to ensure security within Rakhine State, cooperate with the United Nations Special Envoy, establish an independent investigative mechanism into the situation and cooperate with the Government of Bangladesh.

KAREN PIERCE ([United Kingdom](#)), reporting on the mission, said the third day's field visit to Rakhine State had included a flight over burned out and devastated areas, a meeting with victims of Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army attacks and a visit to Rohingya communities who had had their homes rebuilt. Commenting on the sheer breadth of the devastating conditions, she pointed out that the two existing reception centres could accommodate at best 300 refugees per day at a time when 900,000 refugees needed assistance. Indeed, the United Nations was the only entity that could provide assistance on such a broad scale. Noting that risks to financing existed, she said anything distributed should be done with Rohingya participation.

However, she continued, little progress was being made on tackling pressing political issues, including settling the citizenship status of Rohingya community members. In addition, reports from citizens had referred to attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army forces. Struck by the Council's unity during the trip, she expressed hope such unity would remain on consideration of the matter.

MA ZHAOXU ([China](#)) said the visit had played a positive role in seeking a solution, with the Council gaining a deeper understanding of the complex situation in Rakhine State while seeing the sincere efforts of Bangladesh and Myanmar in addressing the key issues. After the visit, the countries concerned had made further efforts to ease the situation, including a pending memorandum of understanding that would soon be signed. Myanmar had built transit and reception centres and had taken other steps to improve conditions. In addition, active efforts of both countries to launch a repatriation programme must be fully recognized. Amid the imminent monsoon season, conditions were poised to worsen and all efforts must be made to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe. He expressed hope that Bangladesh and Myanmar would resolve relevant issues through bilateral dialogue. Going forward, the international community should increase humanitarian assistance to Bangladesh and Myanmar and work towards improving conditions. As a friendly neighbour of both countries, China had been closely following the situation in Rakhine State and had offered support. However, long-term efforts were needed, he said, emphasizing that it was time for action.

NIKKI R. HALEY ([United States](#)) said international support for humanitarian assistance for refugees in Bangladesh was ever more critical and the Council must muster the will to act now. The Council must also continue to work with parties ahead of monsoon season. The ultimate solution was for the refugees to return to their homes in their own land. Pleased with the cooperative efforts of Myanmar and Bangladesh, she said initiatives must focus on creating the conditions on the ground to support a dignified, voluntary and safe return of refugees. Emphasizing that perpetrators must be held accountable, she said Myanmar must address the root causes of the crisis by comprehensively implementing the Advisory Commission's recommendations on Rakhine State. The United States stood ready to help. Myanmar should immediately sign the memorandum of understanding with the United Nations aid agencies, she said, calling on that country to release the two Associated Press journalists being held by authorities. For its part, the Council should move quickly to adopt a resolution, despite resistance from some members on its provisions.

CARL ORRENIUS SKAU ([Sweden](#)) said that what the Council had witnessed during its visit had left an indelible mark: Shock at the stories of brutality suffered by the Rohingya,

appreciation for the open and generous reception that refugees had received in Bangladesh, as well as alarm at the scale of the crisis. The Council must urgently respond to the needs of refugees, while also ensuring that the conditions for voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable returns were created. Stressing that United Nations access and engagement was essential, he said it was time for Myanmar to grant the United Nations and other domestic and international non-governmental organizations, full and unhindered access to Rakhine State.

ANNE GUEGUEN ([France](#)), describing the mission as a “troubling experience”, said Council members had also been able to witness the admirable generosity and hospitality of the Government and people of Bangladesh. The international community must significantly increase humanitarian funding and take measures to prepare the refugees from the coming monsoon rains; support local actors to make living conditions as bearable as possible; and pay special attention to the needs of women and children who had suffered acts of violence. In Myanmar, the Council had reiterated its demands to the Government, as first laid out in a 6 November 2017 presidential statement. However, she stressed, words and pledges from the Government were not enough. Myanmar must commit to tackling the root causes of the crisis, including by implementing the recommendations of the Anand Report, granting citizenship to the Rohingya and holding those responsible for violence, and atrocities and other crimes to account. “The Rohingya are victims of ethnic cleansing — there is no other way to describe it,” she said, urging the Government of Myanmar to cooperate with the United Nations fact finding mission, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to ensure humanitarian access and ensure the conditions for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees, which were not currently in place.

DIDAR TEMENOV ([Kazakhstan](#)), describing the mission as a “vivid and stark revelation”, said standing at the front line of the world’s largest refugee crisis had presented Council members with a glaring reality that shocked and awakened their conscience, “prompting us to act more robustly and collectively”. Describing the severe humanitarian catastrophe encountered in Cox’s Bazaar, he expressed hope that the Government of Bangladesh — as well as the United Nations and other partners — would continue to undertake monsoon preparedness measures to mitigate the rains’ effects on the refugees and prevent loss of human life. Noting the Myanmar Government’s efforts to find a solution to the situation and prepare for their repatriation, he said that arduous process would not take place overnight and would require the active participation of all stakeholders. On the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes in Rakhine State, he said no lasting solution would be found without addressing the root causes of the crisis. Those primarily included the issues of citizenship for the Rohingya people, restoration of their rights and freedoms, poverty alleviation and development, access to education, employment and freedom of movement. He hoped the Council’s visit would pave the way for close cooperation and work to seek long-term solutions.

ANATOLIO NDONG MBA ([Equatorial Guinea](#)), alarmed at the dire conditions in camps for refugees, who had been crammed like sardines in tins, said the international community must answer the calls of Bangladesh for help in providing critical services ahead of the

expected monsoon season. For its part, the Council must find suitable solutions that would improve the situation on the ground. Such approaches must be pursued — with both Governments — to work towards establishing agreements, memoranda of understanding, relevant mechanisms and necessary processes to ensure the safe return of refugees. He expressed hope that the Government of Myanmar would cooperate with the Special Envoy and grant access to United Nations aid agencies in all regions of the country.

DMITRY A. POLYANSKIY (Russian Federation), noting that the situation continued to be complex yet under control, said Bangladesh had opened their doors and hearts to hundreds of thousands of refugees, and Myanmar had demonstrated complete transparency during the visit. Since then, initiatives had been made to further improve conditions. As a separate issue, the memorandum of understanding with UNDP was of utmost importance. The international community must now play its part in tackling the humanitarian crisis, including support for Myanmar to ensure the safe return of refugees. For its part, the Russian Federation would provide assistance to both countries through the World Food Programme (WFP). While it was difficult to imagine a swift solution, the only way forward was through dialogue and the international community must focus on helping the Governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh to find effective solutions. Also critical were both Governments' effective responses to sexual crimes with a view to combating impunity. The Council's unity was critical, he said, adding that members had, during the visit, established a good foundation to provide assistance to Bangladesh and Myanmar in tackling pressing challenges. Now, efforts must be made to consolidate the Council's unity.

LISE GREGOIRE VAN HAAREN (Netherlands) said that the mission had left a deep impression on all, stressing: "The scale of the crisis cannot be denied by anyone." Swift action was required to prepare the camps for the imminent possibility of floods, she said, lamenting that the outlook for a swift solution to the crisis remained bleak. More needed to be done before the Rohingya could return safely, and in a voluntary and dignified manner. She called on the Myanmar authorities to allow full access to United Nations and humanitarian organizations. Without addressing the crimes against the Rohingya, the decades-old cycle of violence and discrimination could not be broken, and in that context, she called on Myanmar to allow access to the fact-finding mission, as well as the Special Rapporteur.

JOANNA WRONECKA (Poland), Council President for May, spoke in her national capacity, saying the horrifying scale of conditions called for robust Council action. Financial and material support for Bangladesh was also needed to better serve refugees ahead of the monsoon season. To alleviate the many needs, she called on Myanmar's authorities to grant complete humanitarian access, especially to Rakhine State.

HAU DO SUAN (Myanmar), calling for collective engagement and cooperation based on the principles of objectivity, mutual respect and understanding, said his Government had demonstrated its readiness to begin the repatriation of displaced persons before the monsoon season. However, the forms used by Bangladesh in that process had been the wrong ones, and did not contain the signatures, fingerprints and photographs needed for proper verification. Moreover, having met with displaced persons in Cox's Bazaar camps before the Council's visit, Myanmar officials had been surprised to find that Bangladesh had

provided residents with no information about the repatriation process. It was regrettable that, instead of fulfilling its commitments as laid out in bilateral agreements, Bangladesh had instead been making deliberate excuses to stall the repatriation process. It was also distorting facts and vilifying the Government of Myanmar in order to solicit international condemnation and exert maximum pressure, he said.

Addressing some remarks made by the representative of Kuwait, he recalled that the establishment of any human habitations within 150 feet of the international border between Myanmar and Bangladesh was prohibited. Myanmar had therefore filed complaints about Bangladesh's construction of structures there, he said, adding that the latter was also helping illegal occupants on the Myanmar side to build structures near the border in violation of the country's sovereignty. On the issue of accountability, he recalled that Myanmar had committed to investigating and taking action on all criminal allegations that were supported by evidence. The current humanitarian problem was a result of attacks by Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army terrorists on 30 border guard posts near northern Rakhine State, he stressed, adding that the root causes of the crisis — along with brutal killings and atrocities committed against innocent Hindu, Rakhine Buddhist and other minority tribes — had been ignored by the Western media.

Expressing concern that Bangladesh was unwittingly allowing extremism to rear its ugly head in the region, he said the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army already had a foothold in the displaced persons camps, which would soon become a stronghold of terrorism. Myanmar had made every effort to prepare the environment for the safe, dignified and voluntary return of displaced persons, and was currently engaging in active discussions on a memorandum of understanding with UNDP and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). It was also working to address the root causes of violence, including by nearing the implementation of 57 of the Annan Commission's recommendations and processing another 31. Since the report's publication, three internally displaced persons camps had been relocated and another four would soon be closed. Warning against hateful narratives that promoted deep-rooted mistrust, he said the present hostile attitude towards Myanmar's Government would not contribute to peace and harmony, while discriminatory and one-sided support would only lead to further polarization and escalation.

MASUD BIN MOMEN (Bangladesh) reiterated his Government's expectations: Continued action to ensure the safe return of the Rohingya community members; adoption of a Council resolution building on its 2017 presidential statement; prevailing on Myanmar to implement Advisory Commission recommendations; and ensuring accountability and justice. While the Council's post-visit press statement contained some of those elements, he said it was difficult to explain the dynamics of intergovernmental consultations to the hundreds of thousands of refugees that had collectively voiced their concerns to visiting Council members.

Raising several points for the Council to consider during its informal consultations, he said safe return must be ensured beyond erecting reception centres. The Rohingya community needed answers to pressing questions of citizenship, freedom of movement, human rights and socioeconomic development. The vista of more than 400 burned villages hardly evoked confidence about the prospect of return to Rakhine State. Unfortunately, his

counterpart from Myanmar had referred to false narratives, including the presence of terrorists along the border, he said. For its part in preparing for the forthcoming monsoon season, Bangladesh was relocating affected populations and working towards providing safe shelter for them.

Turning to the issues of accountability, he said Bangladesh was following developments regarding the International Criminal Court request for a ruling on its jurisdiction over the forced deportation of the Rohingya peoples to a State party to the Rome Statute. It was high time for the Council to consider a resolution on the situation in Myanmar. The way the crisis had evolved made it abundantly clear that the Council should remain engaged with the issue on a regular basis. As Myanmar had underscored the need for time to address the causes of the crisis in Rakhine State, the Council would certainly recognize the importance of having a resolution to accompany Myanmar in that process.