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AS TILLERSON VISITS BURMA INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE AND ACTION ARE ESSENTIAL

As the US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visits Burma he arrives at a time where his influence and the pressure of the international community is vital to address the situation in Burma's western Rakhine State. To date over 600, 000 Rohingya have fled from the country following a ruthless campaign by the Burmese Military that included murder, torture, forced starvation and rape. At the time of this writing reports of arbitrary arrests persist and video continues to emerge of Rohingya villages being burnt to the ground by vigilante mobs and security forces, despite the outcry of the international community. Those Rohingya remaining in Burma have faced severe shortages of food and aid as restrictions have blocked nearly all INGOs from accessing them and the access recently given to the Red Cross appears to still be extremely limited. The situation as it currently stands cannot be allowed to continue and it is apparent now that the assistance of Secretary of State Tillerson and the international community is the only avenue to alter its course for the better.

Recent moves by the international community have successfully created an atmosphere of pressure on the Burmese Government to address the issues in Rakhine State, but further pressure remains necessary to create meaningful actions and restore equity and calm. The Burmese Military recently issued a report detailing an investigation into its own actions and has predictably made the argument that no wrongdoing was committed. This report, while hard to take seriously, is also meant to create the illusion that something is being done and to waste the time of the international community while avoiding concrete actions.

Firm responses, like the recent comments by UK Prime Minister Theresa May, which identified the problem and its sources, are the best answer to these distractions. Yet, while Theresa May's words are helpful, ultimately they will need to be followed with concrete actions to have an effect. Similarly, the words of Indonesian President Jokowi have not strayed from addressing the issue directly, nor does it avoid identifying those responsible during his speech at ASEAN summit.

An unhelpful strategy is that of the ASEAN Summit's recent draft statement which completely and intentionally ignored the issue, catering to sensitivities of Burmese leadership. Similarly, the EU Foreign Ministers meeting which took place this week avoided any concrete call to action, which could clearly identify the problem and lay an effective course of action to address its root causes and culpable actors.

As we speak there is a significant portion of the Rohingya population left in the country, despite over 600, 000 Rohingya having already fled, who are under constant threat of attack or starvation. Many of the remaining population have been left stranded on the beaches in Maungdaw Township unable to flee to Bangladesh because of the river and ocean separating them.



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“The international community can not continue to fail the Rohingya, nor can they ignore the gross human rights violations elsewhere in the country, especially as Burmese Muslims throughout Burma appear to be the next major target of the military’s systematic campaign against minorities,” Said Kyaw Win, Executive Director of the Burma Human Rights Network.

Going forward, the international community must support the repatriation of the Rohingya but on very firm conditions, including the assurance that attacks against the civilian population will cease, that Rohingya will not be sent to camps or segregated model villages, that rights and citizenship for the Rohingya will be restored and that there is a concrete plan for reintegration and rehabilitation with mechanisms in place for security and protection of all civilians. Any plan for repatriation must not jeopardize the UN mandated fact-finding mission into crimes in the region, as such an investigation is essential to peace and reconciliation. Repatriation must also be done swiftly, without delay and the Burmese plan to allow 150 Rohingya to re-enter the country per a day must be dismissed as a stalling tactic to drag out the process.

With this information in mind we strongly urge Secretary Tillerson to remain firm in the stance that the Rohingya should be allowed to return but must not be sent camps or segregated model villages. He must insist on sanctions against Rakhine’s Special Economic Zones, as well as targeted sanctions and travel restrictions against the Burmese Military and their cronies. On these same lines, it is vital he ensures cooperation and action by the international community to provide aid and assistance to those Rohingya most in need and vulnerable in Bangladesh, including the 4000 children who are unaccompanied, 2000 children suffering severe acute malnutrition, victims of trauma and women who faced sexual violence in Burma.

Note for Editor

On August 25th an insurgent group called the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army attacked 30 police posts and killed 12 security officers and one soldier. In response the Burmese Authorities have unleashed a brutal campaign against the civilian population, which has caused half of the Rohingya population in Northern Rakhine State to flee.

Security forces have been monitored burning down Rohingya villages systematically and driving the population into neighboring Bangladesh. These actions by the Burmese army have widely been described as ethnic cleansing, with the UN even evoking the term when they said the military’s actions “seemed like a textbook case of ethnic cleansing.”

The military operations have caused a humanitarian crisis in neighboring Bangladesh which many nations have stepped up to address. Those remaining inside of Myanmar have not been given the same response as Myanmar has limited how much access NGOs have to the region and currently only the International Committee of the Red Cross has been given limited access in the north of the state.



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Background on the Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN)

Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) works for human rights, minority rights and religious freedom in Burma. BHRN has played a crucial role advocating for human rights and religious freedom with politicians and world leaders.

Media Enquiries

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