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Without Accountability Rohingya Repatriation is a Potential Trap

On 7th June, 2018 the Burmese Government and United Nations agencies signed a Memorandum of Understanding regarding the voluntary repatriation of 700,000 Rohingya refugees who were displaced following a military offensive against the civilian population last summer. While on its face this agreement could be is a positive step, the Burma Human Rights Network urges further scrutiny and vigilance about this agreement and its implementation over the coming years.

It should be noted that Burma and the UN previously coordinated on repatriation efforts of the Rohingya following mass exoduses from military crackdowns in 1978 and 1991-92. Witnesses to these repatriations still speak of gross human rights abuses that have continued and worsened over the years. Precedents have been set to question Burma's seriousness regarding the repatriation of the Rohingya and the UN's ability to oversee such events on Burma's terms. Previous attempts at repatriation have not included any mechanism for accountability and have almost certainly emboldened the Burmese Government and Military to repeat their offenses time and time again. Any plan moving forward now must contain such mechanisms in order to be successful, and to ensure the military does not consider itself to be acting with impunity.

The details of memorandum itself are unknown and current information comes from a vague statement by the Office of the State Counsellor. The specifics of the plan have not been released to the public. However, there is no indication that the existing discriminative laws and regulation would be abolished. Under such discriminatory laws and regulations the repatriation is a trap rather than a solution. The Office said there would be coordination regarding the safety and dignity of returnees, but fails to explain how they will achieve this with the same security forces who had driven these refugees from the country in the first place.

"While coordination with UN agencies in resettlement is a positive step, but many concerns remain that need to be addressed. Based on past experiences, lack of accountability encouraged the perpetrators to commit crimes again, whereas the population who experienced the atrocities need concrete assurance of safety, which is not the case here," said BHRN Executive Director Kyaw Win.

He also said, "Returning the victims of such a genocidal campaign without proper mechanisms to assure their safety to return is not only irresponsible but would be unethical of the international community to support as well."

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Any plan involving the resettlement of the Rohingya must first include and take steps for these 120,000 who've been trapped in open air prisons for the past 6 years if Burma wants their intentions to be taken seriously.

BHRN calls on the international community including UN to seek justice on behalf of Rohingya minorities and insist on accountability for the crimes the Burmese military have committed with the complicity of the Burmese government. Finally, BHRN also calls on the UN and its relevant agencies to have a plan of consequences for the Burmese Government if they fail their obligations to this memorandum or if any other human rights violations continue.

Background on the Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN)
Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) is based in London and operates across Burma/Myanmar 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.

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