

Scale of displacement across Myanmar 'very difficult to gauge', says UN refugee agency

Concern over escalating violence in Myanmar's Chin and Rakhine states continues to grow, with civilians reportedly forced to flee both internally, and across the border into Bangladesh, where hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have already sought shelter.

Andrej Mahecic, spokesperson for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)) expressed deep concern over the humanitarian impact of the continuing violence and the "potential for both further internal displacement and the outflow of refugees".

"As part of inter-agency efforts, UNHCR stands ready to support the humanitarian response in the affected areas in Myanmar", he stated, noting that more than 720,000 mostly-Muslim Rohingya had fled a 2017 military operation in Rakhine state, which was condemned at the time as being tantamount to genocide, by the then UN [High Commissioner for Human Rights](#).

UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie visits Rohingya refugee camps in Chakmarkul camp, Cox's Bazar, south-east Bangladesh, while on mission with the UN Refugee Agency., by © UNHCR/Santiago Escobar-Jaramillo

"The scale of it is very difficult to gauge", said Mr. Mahecic. "We understand from some of the reports that say 200 people have sought shelter", but "without effective access in Rakhine, and without effective access in other parts, we can't assess the scope of the current internal displacement as a result of the violence which flared up some time in December last year."

The refugee agency has called on the Government of Bangladesh to continue its policy of offering shelter and support and offered to assess and respond to the needs of civilians who have arrived in the past few weeks, seeking safety from violence in Myanmar.

Since August 2017, nearly 700,000 minority Muslim Rohingyas have fled violence in Myanmar across the border into Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar, joining several hundred thousand more that were already settled there in overcrowded camps.

"UNHCR is grateful to the Government of Bangladesh for its generosity and the leadership it has shown", Mr. Mahecic said.

During a visit early in the week to the world's largest refugee camp, Kutupalong camp in Bangladesh, UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie said that it was "deeply upsetting" to meet the families who "have only known

persecution and statelessness their whole lives, who speak of being ‘treated like cattle’”.

She also met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen in the capital of Dhaka, where she expressed UNHCR’s gratitude to the Government and the people of Bangladesh, for their kindness.

[In Tanzania, UN refugee chief praises ‘regional peacemaker’ role, and efforts to welcome neighbours on the run](#)

The head of the UN Refugee Agency ([UNHCR](#)) has praised Tanzania for the long-standing welcome it offers hundreds of thousands of refugees, describing it as a “regional peacemaker” in an unstable part of Africa, that deserves more international support.

Speaking at the end of a four-day visit to the east African nation, Filippo Grandi called for greater investment in the north-west region of Tanzania, where some 300,000 refugees are being hosted, and pledged to mobilize more support for humanitarian efforts, local community development, improved camp security, and environmental projects.

In a meeting with Tanzanian President John Joseph Magafuli, Mr. Grandi commended the country’s tradition of welcoming refugees fleeing conflict and persecution in neighbouring countries, and said Tanzania deserved greater international recognition for its role as “one of the most important refugee asylum countries in Africa.”



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The common market where Burundi and DRC refugees can interact with Tanzanian host community at Nyarugusu Refugee Camp in Kasulu District, western Tanzania, February 7, 2019.

However, Mr. Grandi also impressed upon government officials the importance of not forcing refugees to go back to their countries of origin. Over 57,000 refugees from Burundi have been assisted to voluntarily leave Tanzania and return home in the last two years, but some refugees report their decision was partly based on perceived pressure from the authorities, restrictions on freedom of movement and a lack of access to jobs, so they can support themselves.

“It is important that nobody is forced back, that repatriation remains a voluntary exercise,” Mr. Grandi told reporters, after visiting the Nyarugusu Refugee Camp in Kasulu, home to around 15,000 Burundian and Congolese refugees. He noted that some refugees are volunteering to go back to their countries of origin, despite uncertain conditions in both the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi, and said that sustainable refugee return happens when refugees feel confident that it is safe to go back, and receive the necessary support to do so. Nearly three-quarters of Tanzania’s refugees are from Burundi, and the other 26 per cent are from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or DRC.

Mr. Grandi praised Tanzania for supporting the UN’s [Global Compact on Refugees](#), which calls for greater international support to host countries and more refugee self-reliance which, he said, stimulates local economies and provides opportunities for host communities.

'End the ongoing atrocities' against people with albinism in Malawi, say UN rights experts

After a recent "[savage](#)" killing and the abduction of a one-year-old baby in Malawi, United Nations experts have urged the Government to take immediate action to protect people with albinism and "end the ongoing atrocities".

"We urge the authorities to step up their investigations into these incidents and bring the [perpetrators to justice](#)," the experts said in a statement on Friday.

People with albinism are born with lighter than normal skin, hair and eye colour, making them sensitive to the sun and bright light. In some communities they are attacked or even killed for their body parts which are erroneously believed to possess magical powers.

Since 2014, 150 cases of killings, attacks and other human rights violations against persons with albinism have been reported in the southeast African nation.

Ritual killings and egregious human rights violations of the worst kind are instigated specifically against persons with albinism – *UN experts*

Despite various moves to support people with albinism, "the recent attacks demonstrate that the Government needs to redouble its efforts to end the ongoing atrocities," according to the experts.

"We call on the Government to urgently address the root causes of these attacks and to strengthen nationwide campaigns to raise awareness, conduct robust investigations and prosecutions in all cases, increase protection for victims, and finance and implement all necessary measures," stressed the experts.

UN experts fear that presidential and legislative elections due to take place in late May, could further aggravate the situation for persons with albinism. Killings and attacks often spike during election periods "because of false beliefs that their body parts can bring good luck and political power when used in witchcraft-related rituals," the UN human rights experts said.

Some witchcraft practices result in "serious human rights violations", such as torture, murder, discrimination and exclusion, including banishment from communities, they added.

"These two incidents are part of a larger disturbing pattern in Malawi where

ritual killings and egregious human rights violations of the worst kind are instigated specifically against persons with albinism,” they underscored. “The attacks and violations are astonishing in their brutality.”

“We call on the authorities to ensure the deployment of adequate police and law enforcement personnel to protect persons with albinism where they live,” the experts concluded.

The pattern of attacks prompted the [Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism](#), Ikponwosa Ero, to reiterate the need to follow the concrete recommendations she made, following her 2016 [visit to the country](#).

The experts also expressed concern at the reported backlog of cases of human rights violations and crimes against persons with albinism (WHERE, ACROSS AFRICA, IN MALAWI?? WE NEED TO MAKE IT CLEARER), noting that to date, there have been very few prosecutions, giving the impression of impunity.

The statement was issued by Ms. Ero; Catalina Devandas, [Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities](#); Agnes Callamard, [Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions](#); and Nils Melzer, [Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment](#).

[UN ready to rise above political fray and help Venezuelans based ‘on need, and need alone’](#)

The situation for ordinary Venezuelans is increasingly critical but the United Nations remains committed to providing humanitarian support, based on “need, and need alone”, said a senior aid official on Friday.

Speaking to journalists in Geneva, the UN’s aid coordinating branch, [OCHA](#), underlined that it was observing developments at Venezuela’s border with Colombia, where an aid convoy arrived on Thursday.

“On the situation at the border, the UN is monitoring that situation closely,” said Jens Laerke from the [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA). “The ideal scenario is that humanitarian aid is provided, independent of any political or other considerations than the pure humanitarian, and that is based on need and need alone.”

'People were coming, starving' to Colombia

At the border, the [World Food Programme \(WFP\)](#) confirmed that needs are at "crisis"-like levels inside Venezuela, where opposition politician Juan Guaido declared himself interim President last month, amid deepening economic and political uncertainty.

"How can we know if people are starving or not? Just stay at the border with Colombia, and look who is coming into Colombia," said WFP senior spokesperson Hervé Verhoosel. He said 1.2 million people had come, "starving, in Colombia with no money, no food, no medicine...Yes of course there's a crisis in the country."

WFP has been providing emergency food assistance at the Colombian border since early 2018.

From April to December last year, the agency provided emergency food assistance to 290,000 people in the country's border departments of Arauca, La Guajira, Norte de Santander and Nariño.

Venezuelan migrants, Colombian returnees and host communities have been assisted, Mr Verhoosel explained, adding that the flow of migrants into Colombia is expected to rise.

Several resident UN agencies work inside Venezuela including [UN Children's Fund \(UNICEF\)](#), and the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) in partnership with the Pan-American health Organization, [UNAIDS](#), the UN refugee agency ([UNHCR](#)), [UN Population Fund \(UNFPA\)](#) and the UN Development Programme ([UNDP](#)).

In a bid to help 3.6m Venezuelans including two million children, OCHA has appealed for nearly \$110 million.

Help for local institutions in Venezuela

The UN has already helped local institutions by providing medical kits for women and children, and aid teams are also delivering 100,000 treatments for severe acute malnutrition. Six temporary shelters have also been set up in the western border states to house 1,600 people and offer them protection and information, as well as family kits containing food and clothing.

"Since November, UN agencies have been scaling up existing activities inside Venezuela to meet urgent health, nutrition and protection needs," Mr Laerke said. "This highly prioritized plan requires \$109.5 million. Up to now we only \$49.1 million received against that plan."

Tackling measles and diphtheria

Also in Geneva, the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed that it is continuing to work with the authorities through the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), notably to prevent and control communicable and non-communicable diseases.

In 2018, around 50 tons of medicines and supplies were delivered to Venezuela by PAHO, WHO spokesperson Tarik Jasarevic said.

Since measles was first reported in July 2017, there have been 6,395 confirmed cases, including 76 deaths as of December 2018.

This led to the re-launch of the vaccination campaign in August 2018, with coverage rate reaching 95 per cent of children aged up to 15. Reported cases of measles appear to be declining, Mr Jasarevic explained.

Immunization campaigns have also been launched to successfully halt a diphtheria outbreak which began in July 2016 and has claimed 270 lives to date.

Although reported diphtheria cases have been declining among children under 15 years of age, transmission among adults persists, WHO warned.

'Ongoing harassment' of 60 parliamentarians

In addition to food and medical shortages inside the oil-rich country, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) noted that dozens of opposition politicians continue to face ongoing harassment there.

"The most information that we have is on the situation of the speaker of the National Assembly Mr Guaido," said Rogier Huizenga, Human Rights Manager and Secretary of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians.

"We also know for instance that Ms. Delsa Solorzano, also a prominent member of opposition in Parliament in Venezuela, has been accused of having been involved in some kind of incitement to violence," he added, "through what appears to be a doctored WhatsApp exchange. So she is accused as a result of that, she had to go into hiding for a couple of days."

The IPU official explained that its human rights panel had looked at cases of 60 opposition Members of Parliament in Venezuela who are facing "different kinds of intimidation".

More than 40 MPs had faced physical attacks and six had fled abroad, he said, noting also that the former Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly was still sheltering in the Chilean embassy in the Venezuelan capital, Caracas.

'Antagonistic gestures and accusations' drown out Kosovo dialogue

hopes, Security Council hears

Prospects for a “swift resumption” of substantive talks between the leaderships of Kosovo and Serbia have been put on the back burner in recent months, by a tendency to resort instead to “antagonistic gestures and accusations” said the head of the UN Mission in Kosovo.

Zahir Tanin, the head of the [UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo](#) (UNMIK), was briefing the UN [Security Council](#) on Thursday via video link, telling members that antagonism and accusations “continue to be far more prominent than efforts to return to a new phase of dialogue”.

Kosovo, which has an ethnic-Albanian majority, broke away from Serbia in a bloody conflict which began in 1998, with the Security Council authorizing temporary administrative powers to the UN, in 1999. Kosovo unilaterally declared independence a decade later, backed by the United States and United Kingdom, among others. But Serbia, backed diplomatically by Russia, has never accepted the split, and Kosovo has not achieved full member status at the United Nations.

Mr. Tanin, delivering his first report of the year to the Council on the state of relations, said the lack “of a unified stance” in the Kosovar capital Pristina, on how to resume talks with Belgrade, “has reached a critical point in the days since the close of the reporting period, raising concerns about the continued viability of the current Government coalition in Kosovo”.

Among specific flash points, Kosovo announced a new 100 per cent tariff on goods from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in November last year, and Serbia has said that talks are off the table until the hike is reversed.

Kosovo heightened tensions further by declaring its right to build its national Security Force, into a professional army – a move condemned by Serbia as an act of “political aggression”.

Special Representative Tanin said that UNMIK was focusing on “people-to-people engagement” in Kosovo, collaborating with the UN Kosovo team, and leveraging its “limited resources” with international partners.

He said important progress had been made in the work of the “Working Group on missing persons”, adding that it should be kept clear of political influence “in order to maintain the momentum on this issue, which is vital to long-term reconciliation”.

“Let me underline the importance of the support by all members of this Council for the engagement between Belgrade and Pristina” he concluded, adding that “reducing tensions, enhancing mutual trust, and removing obstacles to the dialogue, are crucial to stability in the region”.

You can read more from Mr. Tanin, and remarks made to the Council from both

Kosovo and Serbia, [here](#), on our UN Meetings Coverage page online.