

Press Releases: Joint Press Availability With Burmese State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi

Press Availability
Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
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MODERATOR: Good afternoon excellencies, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you all for coming to the joint press briefing by the honorable state counsellor and the union minister for foreign affairs of Myanmar, and the honorable country of the United States.

We will start the press briefing with a statement by Her Excellency Aung San Suu Kyi and then a statement by the Honorable Rex Tillerson. Then the two foreign ministers will take questions from the media. We will accept two – four questions, two from the local media and two from the foreign media.

Now, may I invite Her Excellency Aung San Suu Kyi to deliver a statement.

STATE COUNSELLOR AUNG SAN SUU KYI: We're very happy to be able to welcome Secretary Tillerson to Myanmar. We've already met in Manila very, very briefly, but we are able to follow up the discussions that we had there when we met this morning. And I've already told him that as a guest, it is for him to speak first, and we will be very happy for (inaudible). Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Excellency. Now may I invite the Honorable Rex Tillerson to deliver a statement.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Thank you and good afternoon, everyone. I do want to thank the State Counsellor and the people of Myanmar for a warm welcome. My first visit to Myanmar. The United States has stood with the people of Myanmar for many years in their struggle against oppression and their pursuit of a freer, more peaceful, more prosperous, and more democratic society. I'm here today in Naypyidaw to reaffirm our commitment to a successful democratic transition in Myanmar, and that commitment remains strong.

The United States launched the Myanmar-U.S. partnership a year ago to promote cooperation between our two nations. We continue to support the elected government as it strives to make progress on urgently needed reforms, to solidify the democratic gains of recent years, and to bring peace and reconciliation, prosperity, and greater respect for human rights.

The crisis in Rakhine State is one of the greatest challenges Myanmar has faced since the elected government came into office last year. We're deeply concerned by credible reports of widespread atrocities committed by Myanmar's security forces and by vigilantes who are unrestrained by the security forces during the recent violence in Rakhine State. We're also distressed by the fact that hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children have been forced to flee to Bangladesh.

We do condemn the August 25th attacks by the Arakan Rohingya [\[1\]](#) Salvation Army on Myanmar's security forces that initiated this violence and reiterate that there is zero tolerance for such attacks. We express our condolences at the loss of the lives among the Myanmar security forces resulting from this unprovoked attack.

The humanitarian scandal of this crisis is staggering. Over 600,000 Rohingya [\[2\]](#) – mostly men – mostly women and children – have fled to Bangladesh, and an unknown number from multiple ethnic groups remain internally displaced with limited access to food, water, and shelter.

In response to this extremely dire situation, I am announcing today that the United States will provide an additional \$47 million in humanitarian assistance for refugees, bringing the United States response to the Rakhine State crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh to more than \$87 million since August of this year, and total humanitarian assistance for displaced people in and from this region to nearly \$151 million since October of 2016. The United States remains dedicated to humanitarian initiatives the world over, and we're proud to distribute these funds on behalf of the American people as

part of our ongoing efforts to help those who are suffering.

Myanmar's response to this crisis is a – is critical to determining the success of its transition to a more democratic society. The key test of any democracy is how it treats its most vulnerable and marginalized populations. It is the responsibility of a government and its security forces to protect and respect the human rights of all persons within its borders and to hold accountable those who fail to do so.

The United States welcomes the government's commitments to allow refugees to voluntarily return and to implement the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State for creating lasting peace by supporting economic development and respecting the rights of all people in Rakhine State, including those displaced. Such implementation must include a transparent and fully voluntary path to citizenship that is considered credible by all stakeholders. Now is the time to focus on implementation of these commitments.

We also support the government's commitment to create the conditions necessary for all refugees and internally displaced people to return to their homes and land safely and voluntarily. We are encouraged by recent exchanges between the Government of Myanmar and Government of Bangladesh and urge both sides to continue to work together to ensure the safety and security of those who want to return to their homes. We stand ready to support both governments as part of this process.

It is incumbent upon the military and security forces to respect these commitments of the civilian governments, to assist the government in implementing them, and to ensure the safety and security of all people in Rakhine State. It is also incumbent on the people of Myanmar to recognize that all individuals – regardless of their race, religion, or ethnicity – have rights that must be respected and that no democratic society should condone discrimination, incitement, or violence against other human beings.

The recent serious allegations of abuses in Rakhine State demand a credible and impartial investigation, and those who commit human rights abuses or violations must be held accountable. This need for justice and accountability applies not only to Rakhine State but to wherever such abuses or violations occur across Myanmar.

In all of my meetings, I have called on Myanmar's civilian government to lead a full and effective, independent investigation, and for the military to facilitate full access and cooperation. The United States strongly supports such an approach.

While we wait for the findings of a credible, independent investigation to provide an accurate assessment of the events that have occurred, and to ensure accountability, the United States will continue to work with our partners to assure there are consequences for individuals confirmed to have been responsible for atrocities using all available mechanisms, including those available under U.S. law.

We support the Government of Myanmar's goals of developing its military into a professional and respected institution. As I've told Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing, the military support for Myanmar's ongoing transition to a federal, democratic state is crucial. As part of that process, the military and government must work together to address the grievances of civilians throughout Myanmar and build strong, credible institutions. It cannot do so without acknowledging, addressing, and bringing to an end the tactics and practices that led to abuse and suffering.

We recognize the military's responsibility to respond to terrorist or other insurgent attacks. Any response, however, must be disciplined and avoid to the maximum extent possible harming innocent civilians. We will be following up with the Myanmar Government to explore opportunities to collaborate on areas of counter violent extremism and counterterrorism.

While many are currently focused on Rakhine State, we must remember that there are other ongoing violent conflicts in Kachin, Shan State, and elsewhere. These conflicts have also included serious human rights abuses and violations which have led to the suffering of many ethnic communities. We support efforts to find a resolution to these conflicts, and to seek peace, justice, and national reconciliation. A just and durable peace is needed for Myanmar to move forward in its transition to democracy.

The United States and friends from around the region are committed to helping the Government of Myanmar and its people work through this crisis with urgency, sensitivity, and openness. We remain dedicated to Myanmar's successful transition, which we are confident will bring peace and prosperity to this rich and beautiful land.

Thank you.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Excellency. Now it's time for the questions. Before –

STATE COUNSELLOR AUNG SAN SUU KYI: Well, just let me briefly thank Secretary Tillerson for his understanding of the situation. We have discussed the matter in some detail, and we agree that it most important that we should bring peace and stability to this country, and that can only be done on the basis of rule of law. And everybody should understand that the rule of (inaudible) is to protect peace and stability, not to punish people. If we all understand, then I think we can cooperate on these issues, which are of great concern to the United States as well as to other members of the international community.

As Secretary Tillerson said, we have been friends for many years ever since we became independent. Our relationship with the United States has been strong, and we believe that this relationship will endure the test of time in circumstances, and that although there may be obstacles that we have to overcome with understanding and friendship on both sides, I'm sure it could be overcome without too much difficulty. But I hope you recognize the existing challenges are very great indeed and multifaceted. It's not a one-dimensional Rakhine problem, it's a multidimensional problem that applies to the whole of the country, which is why we are all involved in its

resolution.

The Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement, and Reconstruction of the Rakhine is something that belongs to all our people, and this has to start with the building of understanding, with taking up the responsibility for harmony between (inaudible) communities. It is the duty of each and every citizen of this country, and we hope that we'll all be able to carry it out as fully as possible with the help of our friends. Thank you.

MODERATOR: Before asking your questions, please identify yourself and the media organization you represent and to whom you are addressing the question.

The first question, please.

QUESTION: Richard Sargent, Agence France-Presse. Mr. Tillerson, following your conversations with the state counsellor and the commander-in-chief, and given the horrific scenes of the (inaudible), to what extent are you satisfied that it's urgency with which they need to act, and what it is it they actually need to do?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I think clearly, as you point out, the scenes of what occurred up there are just horrific, and the commander-in-chief shared certain parts of their own internal investigation with me. However, as I indicated in my remarks, I think there still is more that we need to understand about what happened, and that's why we believe an independent investigation would be helpful to everyone to understand what transpired and who should be held to account.

I am encouraged by the ongoing discussions that we know are underway between Myanmar and Bangladesh to enter into a new memorandum of understanding that will facilitate a quick return of those individuals who most recently left who want to come back home. So I think there's a lot of effort on that front. Obviously, this is something that has to be worked out with the Bangladesh Government as well. Then I think in terms of the need to create a secure environment so that people want to come home, they feel secure to come home – there is some need to reconstruct certain villages that were destroyed so they have shelter to come home to. What most of these people want is simply to return to the life they had before, which was a fairly simple life, a lot of fishing and farming.

So there's a lot of work to do, and I think people need to recognize this is not an easy situation that hone can deal with quickly, but it does need to be dealt with in a very deliberate way.

MS NAUERT: Serafin Gomez, Fox News.

QUESTION: Yes, sir, Serafin Gomez, Fox News. I have a question for each of you. Specifically, Madam Counsellor, you – in 2014 when President Obama was here, you were largely heralded as this beacon of open democracy – a change for this country. Since the humanitarian crisis, you've received a lot of criticism from being largely silent on this crisis. Ma'am, why have you been silent on this crisis? And also, Mr. Secretary, specifically you talked about

consequences concerning this crisis. Largely the UK and you have both called the situation a humanitarian crisis here a case of ethnic cleansing. And I'm wondering why the United States has not used that term yet. And also, can you be more specific of some of the consequences the United States is considering if the crisis doesn't end?

STATE COUNSELLOR AUNG SAN SUU KYI: I don't know why people say that I've been silent. I haven't been silent. Actually, we've been sending out a lot of statements from my office, and I've also made statements of my own. But I think what people mean is that what I say is not interesting enough. But what I say is not meant to be exciting, it's meant to be accurate. And it's aimed at creating more harmony and a better future for everybody, not for setting people against each other.

We mustn't forget that there are many different communities in the Rakhine, and if they are to live together in peace and harmony in the long-term, we can't set them against each other now. We cannot make the kind of statements that drives them further apart. This is the reason why we are very careful about what is said. But if you check, you will see that I've not been silent. I'm not been making very incendiary statements or very exciting statements, but we have always kept the public informed for what has been going on and what we are trying to do to make the situation better.

MODERATOR: (Inaudible.)

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I think clearly what we know occurred in Rakhine State that led to so many people fleeing the area has a number of characteristics of certainly crimes against humanity. Whether it meets all of the criteria for ethnic cleansing, I think we continue to evaluate that ourselves. I think this is the reason why an independent investigation would be very useful to help us understand not just who – who to hold accountable – but also why – what were the motivations behind what occurred.

On the heels of – again, I'll remind you this started with an attack by the Arakan against Myanmar security forces, and then it was in the response that things seemed to have gotten out of control. So I think an independent investigation would help all of us understand a number of aspects of what's a very, I think, complex situation.

In terms of consequences, if the crisis doesn't end, I'm not sure how to exactly understand your question even. You don't – you can't will a crisis to end. You can't just pass a law and say, therefore, the crisis is over. You can't just impose sanctions and say, therefore, the crisis is over. Maybe those types of actions will motivate certain actions on the part of people who have to address the crisis, but that doesn't end the crisis.

And I would say that – and I've learned a lot from this trip, and that was one of the reasons I came here was because I wanted to hear – I wanted to listen as much as anything else. And I have a much greater appreciation for the complexities of the crisis that Myanmar is dealing with, and it's not one that is going to be quickly resolved. I think what we all want to see resolved quickly is the human suffering. We really want to see the human

suffering relieved, because what people are enduring today is intolerable for any of us to watch. And we just – it's hard to watch what's happening. And so that's the sense of urgency is we want to see the human suffering relieved. The crisis itself won't end until a lot of very deep issues are addressed, and that will take time.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

QUESTION: Myint Myint Khine from Voice of America. (Inaudible). You come to the country, and yet, your government is deciding whether to (inaudible) economic sanctions (inaudible) and also (inaudible) in Congress are preparing a sanctions bill on Burma. So my question to you is that has the U.S. done any impact assessment if the sanctions were to be imposed? And do you really believe that sanctions will bring the positive effect on a country, which is making very important democratic (inaudible)? And also I would like to ask a question to Aung San Suu Kyi, and I would like to ask it in Burmese. (*In Burmese.*)

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, there are various sanction bills that are being drafted and considered, and I've been trying to follow those as best I can while I've been on the road for a couple of weeks, but I will be looking carefully at those when I return to Washington tomorrow night. I think broad-based economic sanctions against the entire country is not something that I would think would be advisable at this time. I think we want to see Myanmar succeed. The United States views this as an important relationship. We're here to support Myanmar. We want Myanmar to succeed. We want its democracy to succeed. And so actions that sets back the ability to provide economic activity, jobs for people, I have a hard time seeing how that helps resolve this crisis.

In terms of targeted individuals, I think, again, all of that has to be evidence based. If we have credible information, and that's as I said in my remarks, if we have credible information that we believe to be very reliable that certain individuals were responsible for certain acts that we find unacceptable, then targeted sanctions on individuals very well may be appropriate.

Again, I think the reason these things happen, the reasons people are motivated to want to talk about sanctions, is from their perception they're just not seeing enough happening yet. And it is difficult when you're sitting half-way around the world and you see the images from the refugee camps in Bangladesh to not want to just rush to do something. And so I think every – all of these efforts, whether sanctions bills or others, they're all well intended. They're all well intended. These are people who care about what's happening over here. They care about the human tragedy that they're seeing happen. They care about Myanmar, and they're looking for some way to help. And some people feel that putting pressure on the situation sometimes helps motivate action. So I think it's something that we'll be considering carefully when I return to Washington, and I look forward to sharing with others what I've learned on this trip. It's been very useful to me to understand the situation better.

STATE COUNSELLOR AUNG SAN SUU KYI: *(In Burmese.)*

MS NAUERT: Ma'am, can you share that in English?

STATE COUNSELLOR AUNG SAN SUU KYI: I think it's a bit complicated because the question is not asked in English. I think you can ask your reporter to translate it later.

MS NAUERT: If you would, please, for the record.

MODERATOR: One and final question, please.

QUESTION: Esther from the Associated Press. My question is to Mr. Tillerson. I believe that the U.S. – the United States Congress was – originally recommended the State Department to use the term ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya. What has the State Department decided on that?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, as I said, we're evaluating the criteria and the information available to us, and we'll make a determination on that probably after I return.

MODERATOR: Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, the joint press briefing is now concluded.

STATE COUNSELLOR AUNG SAN SUU KYI: Could I just very briefly thank Secretary Tillerson for the open mind with which he came here, and I think an open mind is something very rare these days. And we appreciate it very much. Our exchanges have been very, very useful for both of us.

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[\[1\]](#) Rohingya

[\[2\]](#) Rohingya

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