

Speech: Let Us Act for the Sake of Humanity

The plight of the Rohingya community is one of the largest refugee crises in recent history. And it is one of the most pressing humanitarian and human rights crises facing this Council, our Council, today.

A year on the Rohingya population of Rakhine State were subjected to a campaign of the most truly horrific violence, resulting in grave violations of their human rights and indeed expulsion and deportation from their homes. It is this Council which has a duty to ensure they receive justice and the prospect of a peaceful future.

The report issued yesterday by the UN Fact-Finding Mission is the most authoritative account yet of the crimes committed against the Rohingya community. The report details widespread rape and murder committed by the Burmese military; the systematic oppression and persecution they have suffered for many years; and the patterns of violence and violations committed elsewhere in the country.

This Council is charged by the international community with the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. Crimes against humanity such as those detailed in the Fact-Finding Mission's report threaten international peace and threaten security. Forced deportations across borders, such as the Rohingya suffered into Bangladesh, are unfriendly acts, but also threaten international peace and security. So it is incumbent the Council should consider the report in depth once the Fact-Finding Mission have made their final presentation to the Human Rights Council in September.

But let us be clear, those most affected by this crisis now reside in Bangladesh. As we have already heard, over 700,000 Rohingya refugees, joining more than 300,000 displaced people in previous rounds of violence. Bangladesh, together with the UN and other humanitarian organisations, has indeed saved many thousands of lives. Bangladesh have also, working with the UN and international NGOs have taken significant steps in recent months to mitigate the worst effects of the monsoon season.

As we have already heard, indeed so movingly from Ms Blanchett, the Rohingya need our continued support. Their needs range from food, shelter, clean water to education, livelihoods, and specialised assistance – and we must not forget this -they need specialised support and assistance for those victims of sexual violence.

The UN's Joint Response Plan remains desperately underfunded and it is imperative that we all step up and play our part.

But the solution to this crisis – let us be clear – lies in Burma. The Rohingya deserve justice. The Fact-Finding Mission has concluded that what

happened in Rakhine last year warrants “the investigation and prosecution of senior officials in the Tatmadaw chain of command, so that a competent court can determine their liability for genocide in relation to the situation in Rakhine State.” With so much at stake, it this Council has a duty to ensure there is no impunity for such acts.

As our Prime Minister’s Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict, let me assure this Council, let me assure Rohingya community: this is a key priority for our Prime Minister, our Government, and for myself.

And the Rohingya must be able to return home to Rakhine safely, voluntarily and importantly, with dignity. That means more than returning to IDP camps on the Burmese side of the border, but real progress towards a more just long-term solution and state of affairs in Rakhine.

As a result of this Council’s concerted action, though we have seen some steps forward.

The Burmese government has engaged with Special Envoy Christine Schraner Burgener whose diplomatic work we support. They have signed an MoU with UNHCR and UNDP. They have established a Commission of Inquiry to look into reports of human rights violations.

These steps are welcome. They have not been easy for the civilian government, whose action remains constrained by the military, but more needs to be done. The steps taken are not enough.

The Burmese authorities need to provide UNHCR and the UNDP unconditional and unqualified access to northern Rakhine. Until these UN agencies can operate effectively, it is impossible to argue that conditions in Rakhine are anywhere near what is required for the safe, voluntary, and dignified repatriation that this Council has called for.

There is an urgent need for domestic acceptance and accountability in Burma. It is essential that the Burmese government sets out how its Commission of Inquiry will be able to investigate these crimes with full impartiality, how it will access UN information, and how it will be linked to a judicial process to hold accountable those responsible and let us be clear—particularly those in the military.

It is far from clear that any mechanism established by the Burmese authorities can do this, which is why the UK supports keeping open the option of justice delivered through international mechanisms.

We need to see practical progress on implementing the Rakhine Advisory Commission’s recommendations. That includes recommendations on economic development, which are part of the solution, but it also includes those related to the rights of the Rohingya, including a pathway to citizenship.

These recommendations taken comprehensively, as they were set out by the revered and respected late Kofi Annan, remain the best blueprint for a long-term solution in Rakhine.

So what does it mean for us? What does it mean for the Security Council? It means, in our view, that the Council should do three things:

Firstly, continue to assist Bangladesh and the UN in providing protection and assistance to the Rohingya population and their host communities.

Second, take concerted action to push for justice and the prospect of a peaceful future that the Rohingya community deserve. This includes holding a serious discussion on the conclusions of the Fact-Finding Mission's report.

And, thirdly, support those in Burma who are pushing for progress. But we should also be prepared to use the full range of tools at this Council's disposal to apply pressure against those – including the Burmese military – who obstruct it. The United Kingdom has done this within the European Union where we have sanctioned seven senior Burmese military officials.

But we all accept that this crisis is complex and has deep roots. It will not be solved overnight. But let us also be clear, it will not be solved without continued engagement and action from this Council.

So as we mark one year on from the violence of August 2017, this Council should shoulder its responsibility and do justice to the gravity of the attacks on the Rohingya community.

We should not be just discussing and debating. We need to be acting, acting to bring an end to the appalling ethnic cleansing, to help those suffering refugees, and bring justice for the victims of appalling crimes.

And I appeal to all fellow members, let us put aside our differences. Let us act on the principles of our Charter and on our obligations in front of us. Let us act in the interests of Leila, let us act in the interests of Youssef, let us act in the interests of tens of thousands of Leilas and Youssefs. Let us act for the sake of humanity.