

Speech: The Rohingya people of Rakhine State: UK government actions update, 28 November 2017

I am grateful to the Honourable Member for the City of Durham (Roberta Blackman-Woods) for securing this debate.

Having visited Burma last week for the second time inside 7 weeks, I welcome this opportunity to update the House on the heartbreakingly appalling situation facing the Rohingya people of Rakhine State and the active work of the UK government in both Burma and Bangladesh to help address it.

Latest situation

Since military operations began in Rakhine State on 25 August, more than 620,000 Rohingya have fled over the border into Bangladesh. Many have given heart-wrenching accounts of human rights abuses, including sexual violence, they have suffered or witnessed in Rakhine. Up to a 1,000 people are still crossing the border every day. This is a movement of people on a colossal scale, with few parallels in recent times.

I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute once again to the support that the Government of Bangladesh has offered the Rohingya. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's decision to open the border and allow the refugees to enter has without doubt saved countless lives.

Last Thursday, Bangladesh and Burma signed a memorandum of understanding on the return of refugees to Rakhine State. We understand that a joint working group will be set up within 3 weeks, with the aim of the process of returns commencing within 2 months. The UK government will press for quick progress on implementation of this bilateral agreement. But we will be clear that any returns must be safe, voluntary and dignified. And there must be appropriate international oversight.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has underlined that conditions in Rakhine "are not in place to enable safe and sustainable returns". A recent Amnesty International report described the pre-existing situation in Rakhine as one of 'apartheid'.

The Burmese authorities have a lot to do before they can offer genuine reassurance to the Rohingya that they will be safe if they return to Rakhine.

UK action

The government has concluded that the inexcusable violence perpetrated on the Rohingya by Burmese military and ethnic Rakhine militia appears to be ethnic cleansing. The UK has been leading the international response,

diplomatically, politically, and in terms of humanitarian support.

Political/multilateral

On 6 November, [we proposed and secured with unanimous support the first UN Security Council Presidential Statement on Burma](#) in a decade.

With this, the Security Council has made clear its expectations of the Burmese authorities:

- no further use of excessive military force
- immediate UN humanitarian access
- mechanisms to allow voluntary return of refugees; and
- an investigation into human rights violations including allegations of sexual violence

The UN Secretary-General will report progress to the Security Council after 30 days.

I do not want to prejudge the Secretary-General's report; but I will say that the UK stands ready to convene the Security Council again, to consider further steps, if Burma has not taken the necessary action.

Elsewhere in the UN we are co-sponsoring a UN General Assembly resolution on the human rights situation in Burma. This resolution received the support of 135 member states at the Third Committee.

The strong international support for this resolution and the Security Council's Presidential Statement sends a powerful message to the Burmese authorities about the military's conduct and the damage to its international reputation.

Bilateral engagement

I attended the [Asia-Europe Foreign Ministers Meeting](#) in Naypyidaw last week, and had meetings with Minister of Defence Sein Win, Deputy Foreign Minister Kyaw Tin and Aung Sang Suu Kyi's Chief of Staff Kyaw Tin Swe. I underlined with all the importance of Burma responding to the UN's calls.

Any long-term resolution must also address the issue of citizenship in Burma. The [report of the Kofi Annan-led Rakhine Advisory Commission](#) remains central to this, and I welcome Aung San Suu Kyi's recent establishment of an International Advisory Board on its implementation.

Aung San Suu Kyi is publicly committed to implementing the Commission's recommendations, which include reviewing the controversial 1982 Citizenship Law, and making progress on citizenship through the existing legal framework.

Humanitarian

The main current impetus continues to be the urgent humanitarian needs of the Rohingya refugees.

The UK is one of the largest bilateral donors to the crisis in Bangladesh. We have contributed £59 million – the [most recent tranche of £12 million](#) announced by my Rt Hon Friend the member for Portsmouth North during her visit to Bangladesh over the weekend. This includes £5 million as part of an aid matching arrangement with the Disasters Emergency Committee.

UK aid is making a material difference. It is providing over 170,000 people with food, 140,000 people with safe water and sanitation, and emergency nutritional support to more than 60,000 vulnerable children under the age of 5.

We have also been working to encourage others to contribute. On 23 October, I represented the UK at the UN-organised pledging conference in Geneva, where through UK leadership and lobbying we were able to secure a further £260 million from a range of donors. However, the international humanitarian response is only funded until February. More will be needed, from us and others. The UK will sustain its international leadership role on the humanitarian response to ensure this happens.

Sexual violence

I have already mentioned the horrifying accounts provided by some Rohingya refugees about sexual and gender-based violence. Earlier this month, the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence, Pramila Patten, visited Bangladesh, accompanied by the Head of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative.

They heard consistent reports of the widespread and systematic use of [sexual violence against Rohingya women and girls](#). It appears they had been deliberately targeted on account of their ethnicity and religion. The Special Representative's view is that the sexual violence had been overwhelmingly "ordered, planned and perpetrated by the Armed Forces of Burma".

These are extremely serious conclusions. We have deployed 2 civilian experts to Bangladesh to assess the current levels of investigation and documentation of these abhorrent crimes. They will provide advice on where the UK government can further support this critical work.

The UK government is committed to ensuring there is support for the victims and witnesses of these crimes. That is why we are funding the provision of medical services, counselling and psychological support to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, who are survivors or witnesses of sexual violence,

DFID has also pledged to help increase protection for Rohingya women and girls against sexual violence and exploitation, as part of a global package of measures supported by an additional commitment of £12 million.

Accountability

We are determined that those who have committed human rights violations including crimes of sexual violence against the Rohingya are held to account.

We co-sponsored the UN resolution in March 2017 which established the UN Fact-Finding Mission and we stand ready to act, together with the wider international community, when the Mission reports to the Human Rights Council in March. Establishing an impartial account of the facts is imperative if we are going to bring those responsible to justice.

Conclusion

To sum up, the UK government will maintain a full range of humanitarian, political and diplomatic efforts, leading the international community's response to this ongoing catastrophe, and pressing Burma to meet urgently the expectations set out in the UN Security Council's Presidential statement.

The FCO is and will remain steadfastly determined to ensure the safety of the Rohingya people, to secure access for humanitarian aid, and to hold to account those who are responsible for the harrowing crimes we have witnessed in Rakhine State.