

Speech: “Today’s conditions in the Rakhine state do not yet allow for the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of refugees to their homes”

Thank you Mr President.

And I’d like to begin by thanking our briefers, and if I might particularly say to Special Representative Patten what a profound and incredibly moving testimony you have given this Council. And your final words that inaction must not be allowed to take place is vital for us all. I think you’ve brought to life a truly horrifying picture, so I commend you for that.

And I’d like to thank Undersecretary-General Feltman for his update on the situation one month after this Council adopted an important Presidential Statement, which included calls for an end to the violence, a safe returns process, humanitarian access, and for the root causes of the crisis to be addressed. I am grateful to you for your continued engagement on this crisis. It is vital that the UN continues to remain engaged.

Because the stark reminder, if anyone needed it, that Special Representative Patten has given us is of the horrors that these Rohingya refugees have suffered, a stark reminder that this is first and foremost a human tragedy, and which this Council must keep its attention.

Over the past month, we have seen some initial steps in response to this Council’s Presidential Statement, which we welcome.

In particular, the recent agreement concerning the voluntary repatriation of refugees, signed by the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh on 23 November.

The Government of Myanmar’s continued commitment to the Annan Commission recommendations and to the development of Rakhine State through the Union Enterprise mechanism are also worth highlighting. And we welcome the announcement of the new Advisory committee. We support initiatives that promise to build a better future for all communities in Rakhine, without discrimination and regardless of religion or ethnicity. The Commission’s recommendations remain a particularly important blueprint for the future given their wide support.

However, Mr President, there remains much more to be done and it is right that the situation remains on our agenda.

I want to draw particular attention to the agreement concerning voluntary repatriation of refugees. Now, this is a step in the right direction, but today’s conditions in the Rakhine state do not yet allow for the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of refugees to their homes that this Council

called for last month.

1,000 to 3,000 people are still fleeing in fear from the Rakhine state into Bangladesh every week. There are continued reports of intercommunal tensions and arson attacks, as Undersecretary-General Feltman set out. As we have said many times before the violence and human rights violations must stop.

While we recognise the desire to move forward quickly, we can only support returns which are safe, voluntary and dignified. This will require independent, international monitoring to ensure the conditions are met.

The rights of the Rohingya must be respected by the Burmese Government, including freedom of movement and access to basic services and livelihoods. They must be allowed to return home, not to prolonged stays in IDP camps, and be given a pathway to citizenship.

The responsibility for making progress lies primarily with the government and security forces of Myanmar. And the actions they must take are already set out in the Presidential Statement agreed unanimously by this Council.

Mr President, let us recall that in that statement, this Council called for the UNHCR to be invited to be a full participant in the returns process. Myanmar recognises UNHCR's expertise but so far has resisted giving them the necessary role.

In that statement, we called for transparent investigations into allegations of serious human rights abuses and violations. Not just because those responsible must be held accountable, but also so that refugees have confidence in their eventual return. So far, all we have seen is a whitewash by the military.

In that statement, we called for full and unhindered access to Rakhine state for UN agencies, their humanitarian partners, and the media. But the government continues to severely limit access to Rakhine, making it impossible to deliver vital humanitarian assistance or verify the situation on the ground.

Mr President, the situation regrettably means that we must continue supporting refugees where they are right now.

The Government of Bangladesh, along with UN agencies and other humanitarian partners, continues to play a vital role, providing life-saving shelter and assistance. Unfortunately, it is likely that Bangladesh will need to play this role for longer than any of us would like.

It is critical, therefore, that longer-term plans are put in place to protect and provide for refugees in Bangladesh and internally displaced people in Rakhine state. And it is critical, too, that these plans are properly funded.

On top of an annual program of \$210 million to Bangladesh, the UK has contributed \$79 million to the UN's current Humanitarian Response Plan, providing life-saving assistance and protection to the refugees and Bangladeshi host communities. But the plan is still only partially funded and

in any case, it runs out in February 2018. We encourage the international community to step up its contributions.

Mr President, I want to turn briefly before concluding to the Secretary-General's appointment of a Special Envoy. It will be an important, sensitive role, so we support the Secretary-General in deliberating over the appointment carefully. When he or she is appointed, we call on Myanmar to engage with them openly and in good faith.

Mr President, I said at the beginning that SRSR Patten's briefing was a stark reminder that this is a human tragedy that the Council must not turn its attention from. We cannot change the horrors, the crimes that have already been committed. But that is all the more reason, then, that this Council must remain engaged, must remain seized of the situation, and must be ready to take further action if necessary to ensure the protection, justice, and progress.

Thank you.