

Speech: UK briefs Security Council on mission to Bangladesh and Burma

Thank you very much indeed Madame President, and as it's the first time I personally take the floor, allow me to congratulate you on assuming your new role. I'd like to join my Peruvian colleague in particular in thanking the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh, but also our Kuwaiti colleague for all the excellent arrangements. Without that, we would not have been able to cover so much in our trip. And like my Kuwaiti and Peruvian colleagues, we really did appreciate everything we saw from the UN teams on the ground and the help we had from the Secretariat. And I think, if I can speak for all the Council, I think all Council members found it a very productive and interesting, if difficult, visit.

Madame Chairman, I will speak about what we did on the third day with our field visit to Northern Rakhine. We had a briefing on one made by the Chief Minister of Rakhine state and we took a helicopter trip over Northern Rakhine. We were accompanied by the Union Minister for International Cooperation U Kyaw Tin and the Chief Coordinator of the Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development, which is known as the UEHRD, and that was Dr Aung Htun Thet.

The members of the Security Council on that trip flew over an area that showed widespread devastation of land and villages and it was clear Madame President that these had been burned out. We saw physical arrangements for return being prepared by the Myanmar government. This included a reception center and a transit center at Talaat. This was intended to accommodate up to 30,000 people.

We met members of local communities in Northern Rakhine. We had a town hall meeting with Rakhine Muslim and Hindu groups. We met community members who had seen their families be victims of ARSA attacks, and we met a Rohingya community whose homes have been rebuilt by the authorities. We were also able to have a meeting with members of civil society at Sittwe airport, though our time was unfortunately brief.

In line with my colleagues, I'd like to offer the Council some reflections on what we saw. I think the first reflection I have is the sheer scale of the devastation. I have only ever seen one camp like it in my professional life before and I was very struck by the magnitude of what the refugees face and what the governments face and what the UN faces as they try to get the people home. We did see widespread devastation from the air and this is obviously one reason for the scale of the refugee camps in Bangladesh.

I think the second reflection would be the need for the Burmese authorities to increase the scale of their response and to allow the UN in with unconditional access to assist them. Only the UN has the technical expertise and know-how to deal with an event of this magnitude.

Myanmar has two reception centres. Together they can receive at best 300 people a day.

There are some 90,000 refugees, Madame President, so nowhere near the scale that would be required to bring so many refugees home. And as I said, the UN needs to be involved because it is the only institution in the world that has the ability to provide assistance at the scale required.

My third reflection would be that we didn't receive enough information about the prospect for long-term solutions. Council members heard that refugees would be housed only temporarily in the transit centre, but there was no convincing explanation about how they would actually get back to their villages and on what timeframe. And we did note, I think the Council was struck by the fact that the IDP camps in Sittwe have been there since 2012.

My fourth reflection: an emphasis on the physical arrangements and development as opposed to the underlying political issues. Council members heard about UEHRD development plans which are privately financed and about the physical arrangements for repatriation. But two points, if I may, on that Madame President: there are risks to private financing, and anything delivered without Rohingya participation risk reinforcing displacement, not resolving it. I think we accept that the Myanmar authorities have a very deep concern about development issues in Rakhine state as a whole and I think the Council believes that that is one aspect that will need to be addressed. But it is not the foremost aspect in getting the Rohingya to start going back to their homes in safety and security, Madame President, and I think I was particularly struck again by the contrast between what is being offered on the ground in Myanmar and the scale of the problem.

There is little progress on tackling the political issues, as my two colleagues noted in the meetings they described. Many of these political issues were raised in the Annan Commission recommendations. They centre around community reconciliation, around regularising citizenship status of Rohingya, around human rights such as freedom of movement and access to education and livelihoods, and holding the perpetrators of violence to account. Again Madame President, we heard from some of the other villagers and officials about attacks on them from the ARSA. So it is clear to me speaking nationally that there does need to be an accountability mechanism for all the alleged violations of human rights committed, violations and abuses of human rights committed in Northern Rakhine. But again I start from the point that it is the Rohingya that the Council went to examine and it is the Rohingya that is overwhelmingly the largest part of the problem.

And lastly, Madame President, we have in recent days been very concerned by reports that Myanmar security forces have threatened Rohingya villages not to talk openly with the Security Council delegation and that the people who did so are being looked for by security forces now. It's obviously unacceptable that anyone should feel intimidated from talking to the Security Council who after all undertakes these missions on behalf of the international community. And I would be most grateful if the Myanmar authorities could clarify that as a matter of urgency.

Thank you very much indeed, Madame President.

I would like to just make one last point if I may. I was struck by the unity of the Council throughout the trip, and I think my colleagues were as well. And I think we all would like to find a way to preserve that unity as under your direction, Madame President, we go forward.