

Statement to Parliament: Minister for Asia makes a statement to the House on the Rakhine crisis in Myanmar

I am grateful to the Hon Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for chairing this debate, and I pay tribute to all her industry and patience as Chair of the petitions committee.

Today's debate has been inspired by a number of petitions which attracted hundreds of thousands of signatures, demonstrating the British public's heartfelt concern at the desperate plight of the Rohingya.

The intensity of this domestic concern was something I saw for myself last month. I met representatives from the British Rohingya community and the British Bangladeshi community, at an exhibition of photographs from the refugee camps held in Spitalfields. Some of those present had family in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Others had themselves been brought up as refugees from previous waves of Rohingya flight over the decades. They were close to despair.

As I reassured them that night, I reassure Parliament today:

Our Foreign Office and Department for International Development will not forget your plight.

I shall set out what action we have taken so far in response to this crisis, and what we plan to do from here.

Many of the petitions called for an end to the violence. Needless to say, this is what we want to see too.

I have been personally horrified by the survivors' accounts of what they experienced at the hands of the Burmese military in Rakhine State. This unspeakable violence including rape and savage assault is appalling and must end.

It is also obvious that while the violence continues, there can be no hope of reassuring the Rohingya that they would be able to return safely, voluntarily, or with dignity.

As I said in my statement to the House last month, the violence that broke out in August 2017 was only the latest episode in a long-running cycle of persecution suffered by the Rohingya in Rakhine.

We have been urging the Burmese civilian government to take action to stop the situation deteriorating since it took office two years ago.

The UN estimates that since last August, more than 680,000 people have fled from Rakhine into Bangladesh.

The UK Government has repeatedly condemned the violence, as have the British people.

We shall and we must continue to work tirelessly with our international partners to seek a lasting solution to this terrible situation.

Last September the Foreign Secretary convened a meeting of Foreign Ministers in New York, calling on the Burmese authorities to end the violence against the Rohingya community.

In November the UK proposed and secured a UN Security Council Presidential Statement on Burma, which called on the Burmese authorities urgently to stop the violence, create the necessary conditions for refugee returns and hold to account those responsible for acts of violence.

I continue to discuss the crisis with counterparts across Asia, including in Malaysia and Japan last week.

Tomorrow the Foreign Secretary will co-chair a meeting on the Rohingya crisis with fellow Commonwealth Foreign Ministers. We shall explore how to support Bangladesh, and how to ensure Burma responds to international concerns.

The Foreign Secretary will then discuss the crisis at next Sunday's G7 Foreign Ministers meeting, which I expect will send a strong and united message to the Burmese authorities.

At the end of this month, the UK will be co-leading the visit of the UN Security Council to Burma and Bangladesh. We are confident that visiting the camps in Bangladesh, and seeing the situation in Rakhine, will further strengthen Council members' resolve to find a solution to this crisis.

I also hope the visit will prompt the Burmese authorities to accelerate the implementation of the Presidential Statement's call for action.

A number of the petitions referred to the violence as genocide.

The UK Government has recognised that there has been ethnic cleansing, and indeed that what occurred may amount to genocide or crimes against humanity.

However, genocide is a legal definition that can only be declared by a court of law, not by politicians or governments.

As Burma is not a party to the Rome Statute, the International Criminal Court would only be able to consider a case of genocide if Burma refers itself to the ICC or the UN Security Council refers Burma to the ICC.

The UK has, with EU partners, already called on Burma to refer itself to the ICC. So far it has not.

We continue to judge there to be insufficient support amongst Security Council members for an ICC referral – though we keep this judgement under review.

However, I can report today that there is some movement on accountability.

Bangladesh has ratified the Rome Statute. The ICC Prosecutor last week asked the Court to rule on whether it would have jurisdiction over the forced displacement of Rohingya from Burma into Bangladesh, which if proven would constitute a crime against humanity.

We await the International Criminal Court's ruling with keen interest. The UK stands ready to support the Court should it decide it has jurisdiction.

Also last week, the Burmese military announced the conviction of seven of its soldiers for killing Rohingya villagers at Inn Din. They have been sentenced to ten years' imprisonment.

The Burmese military do not have a good record of prosecuting and convicting their own. I believe this judgement shows that international pressure for accountability is having some effect.

We have been clear with the Burmese authorities that they must do more. The international community needs to see a full, independent and transparent investigation into all of the human rights violations in Rakhine.

In the meantime, we shall continue to support efforts to collate and collect evidence for use in any future prosecution, and continue to press for the release of the two Burmese Reuters journalists facing trial for investigating the Inn Din massacre.

Ultimately, we want the Rohingya to return to their homes voluntarily, safely, and in a dignified manner. This was one of the issues the Foreign Secretary raised with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi when he visited Burma in February.

He also called on Burma to allow the involvement of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in this process.

Since then I can report some further progress: the Burmese Government has proposed a Memorandum of Understanding, to agree how UNHCR will be involved. UNHCR are preparing their response. If and when it is finalised, the UK will push for the swift implementation of this agreement once finalised.

We shall also be examining in detail how we can support the longer-term change in Burma that the Rohingya and other persecuted minorities so desperately need to see.

I am overseeing a review of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office's Conflict, Stability & Security Fund for Burma. We are planning to launch new pilot projects this year to help catalyse the democratic transition and strengthen the laws and protections the Rohingya and other minorities in Burma so urgently require.

Turning to the question of sanctions, another issue raised in the petitions: we have not advocated sanctions on particular sectors or entities in the Burmese economy and its financial system. It can be difficult to predict or

control the effect of financial sanctions on other parts of the economy.

We do not want inadvertently to make the lives of ordinary Burmese people more difficult.

However, this does not mean that we should rule out sanctions altogether: far from it.

We have been proactive in advocating sanctions that restrict the finances and freedom of movement of senior military commanders who were directly involved in the atrocities in Rakhine last August and September.

We have secured agreement on this from all EU member states, and expect implementation over the next month.

We should remember that this crisis is above all a human catastrophe. Once again I commend the generosity of the Government and people of Bangladesh in providing refuge for so many people in desperate need.

The UK is, and will remain, a leading donor to the humanitarian effort in Bangladesh. We have committed an additional £59 million since last August, including matching £5 million of public donations to the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal.

With the monsoon and cyclone season nearly upon us, we are doing everything we can to support Bangladesh's efforts to improve their disaster preparedness and protect the refugees.

My Right Honourable Friends the Foreign Secretary and International Development Secretary last month wrote to Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, to reiterate the UK's offer to help, and call on her as a matter of urgent priority to release more land for refugees.

The UK is supplying:

We continue a dialogue with the Bangladeshi authorities to ensure that aid can get through during the rainy season, by improving drainage, maintaining access roads, and reinforcing embankments and walkways.

We are working with UN agencies to make site improvements to the refugee camps, in preparation for heavy rainfall.

We also actively engaged in vaccination campaigns against cholera, measles and diphtheria, and UK aid is training healthcare workers to vaccinate as many children as possible before the rainy season.

To conclude, the petitions have demonstrated the strength of feeling of the British people about the plight of the Rohingya. I hope this debate and my response have provided some reassurance to petitioners that their MPs, their Parliament and the Government feel equally strongly.

We are doing everything we can to keep the refugees safe in the camps, while also keeping up the pressure on the Burmese authorities to end the violence,

hold perpetrators to account and enable the safe return of the Rohingya to their homes.

I cannot deny that progress is much slower than any of us would like, but the British public – and indeed the Burmese authorities – should be in no doubt of our determination to stay the course.

- Note that this version has not been checked against delivery. The full statement and debate can be viewed on [Hansard](#)