

Save us from destruction

Rohingya rights activist urges UNSC

PORIMOL PALMA

As a delegation of UN Security Council arrives in Bangladesh today, a Rohingya lawyer and rights activist has urged the UN body to save the ethnic community from the "endless genocide".

"Still, there is time to save us [Rohingyas]. I urge the UN Security Council to do everything that needs to be done to save us from destruction," said Razia Sultana, a coordinator of the Free Rohingya Coalition and senior researcher at Kaladan Press, a news portal of Rohingya.

She fled to Bangladesh in the 1980s and became a lawyer with a mission to fight for rights of her community in Myanmar. Recently, she has made a presentation at the UN, showing how rape was used as a weapon of war in Rakhine since late August.

The atrocities by Myanmar security forces have caused an influx of around 700,000 Rohingyas into Bangladesh. They have been entering Bangladesh since the 80s to escape persecution,



Razia Sultana

but the latest one is the largest that reportedly left thousands of Rohingyas killed.

There is no guarantee of their citizenship until now despite huge global criticism. The UNSC also failed to take any concrete action to address the decades-old Rohingya crisis.

As the UNSC delegation visits Bangladesh and Myanmar to see on the ground the situation of the Rohingyas, Razia said it is high time the Council acted.

In a telephone interview with The Daily Star from Chittagong, Razia said Arakan (now Rakhine) is their motherland where they were born and grew up and that their identity is Rohingya, not Bangalee.

"Despite that, the Myanmar authorities have been branding us as Bangalees and migrants from Bangladesh. Is it just because we are Muslims and have some similarities with those of the Bangalees?" she posed a question.

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A new settlement is being built to accommodate around 300 Rohingya refugees after cutting a hillock in Kutupalong of Cox's Bazar. The labourers engaged in the work could not say which agency or department was supervising the construction. No official was found at the site on the weekend yesterday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Myanmar playing tricks on UN too

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Moreover, many Rohingyas to be repatriated will not be able to return to their homes in their villages as those have been burnt down by security forces.

They will be kept in camps built by the Myanmar government, according to the agreement. The camps would be guarded by the security forces that had launched a violent crackdown on the Rohingyas in August last year forcing them to flee their homes.

Yet, Myanmar may show the UNSC the camps as part of its sincere efforts to take back Rohingyas.

What the Myanmar government has done for repatriating the refugees and resolving the crisis match little with its assurances and promises made to the UNSC.

Hot on the heels of growing global condemnations and call for action against Myanmar for the violent military crackdown on the Rohingyas, the country in September last year assured the UN Security Council that it was prepared to start the repatriation any time.

At a meeting of the UNSC on September 28, Myanmar's National Security Advisor U Thaung Tun made the assurance as his country was facing strong criticisms from all the 15 members of the UN body.

He also promised to start the repatriation by using the framework signed in 1992 between Bangladesh and Myanmar on Rohingyas' return, says a UN document on the meeting.

But seven months down the line, the repatriation could not begin because of Myanmar's tricky strategy, frustrating the process.

Even in the agreement signed with Bangladesh November last year, Myanmar tightened the criteria for verification of Rohingyas which made the repatriation of all who have crossed into Bangladesh extremely difficult.

After the September UNSC meeting, Myanmar proceeded with its strategy and signed two memorandums of understanding with Bangladesh in October through which both the countries agreed to cooperate on the repatriation of Rohingya refugees.

Both countries also agreed to stop outflow of Rohingyas into Bangladesh. But again, more than one lakh Rohingya crossed into Bangladesh in less than two weeks after the signing of the memorandum.

Before the MoU was inked, Myanmar also had established the so-called "Union Enterprise Mechanism" for humanitarian assistance, resettlement of Rohingyas who will be repatriated.

Myanmar used these efforts as fresh weapons to ease criticism at the UNSC and garner the council's support in favour of its strategies to deal with the Rohingya issue as well as the UNSC.

The strategy worked well. On November 6 last year, in a presidential statement, the Security Council

welcomed the developments -- signing of the memorandum and formation of the Union Enterprise Mechanism.

The Security Council, however, urged the Myanmar government to work with Bangladesh and the UN to allow voluntary return of refugees in conditions of safety and dignity to their homes on the basis of the MoU signed between the two countries in October, according to a document on the meeting.

The Myanmar representative who was present at the UNSC meeting where the presidential statement was read out also assured the UN body that his government would continue to work with the international community, including the UN, towards peace and development in Rakhine.

The call made by the UNSC matters little to Myanmar. And it did not stop playing the trick.

Its reluctance to take back their nationals was once again exposed in the agreement Myanmar signed with Bangladesh on November 23 on the repatriation of the Rohingyas. It tightened both the eligibility criteria for the Rohingyas' return and the verification process, making the prospect of the repatriation almost impossible. The criteria were not so strict in the 1992 agreement.

When the November 23 agreement was signed, international rights bodies voiced their concern over the absence of an atmosphere conducive to repatriation as Myanmar did not

take any significant measure to improve the situation.

It was clear to all that Myanmar did not obey any suggestions and call made by the UNSC in its two meetings in September and November.

At another UNSC meeting on December 12, Myanmar again faced severe criticism from senior UN officials and other members of the councils for its atrocities against Rohingyas.

Again, Myanmar had a fresh weapon to defuse the criticism and it obtained the UNSC's support and sympathy. This time it used the November 23 agreement.

"Myanmar and Bangladesh had signed an agreement on arranging the voluntary, safe and dignified return of persons displaced from Rakhine State," Myanmar envoy Hau Do Tuan told the UNSC. He also assured the UN body that the repatriation process would begin within two months from the deal-signing.

According to the deal, the repatriation was supposed to begin on January 22 this year. But Myanmar set a precondition at the eleventh hour holding up the process. In another trick, during a meeting on January 16, Myanmar demanded a family-wise list of Rohingyas and Dhaka agreed to provide it.

Bangladesh's passport department has been conducting biometric registration of the refugees as individuals since the early days of influx in late August, but that was not done family-

wise.

After the January 16 meeting, the office of Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner began preparing the family-wise list based on the UN Refugee Agency's data and photos of Rohingya families and the biometric registration of the Rohingyas. That would require a substantial time.

By frustrating the beginning of the repatriation, Myanmar launched a campaign against Bangladesh. On January 23 in a news briefing, Myanmar's minister of international cooperation, Kyaw Tin, claimed they were ready to welcome the refugees and blamed Bangladesh for the delay.

In all the meetings of the UNSC mentioned above, almost all its members, excepting China and Russia, strongly denounced Myanmar for the systematic atrocities against Rohingyas which the UN rights chief described as a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing."

Some of the member countries in the UNSC demanded that the Security Council take action against Myanmar.

But, Myanmar was nonchalant with the threat because of wholehearted support from China and Russia -- two permanent members of the Security Council. The two countries enjoy veto power to kill any proposal against Myanmar.

Documents on the UNSC meetings show envoys of China and Russia have always opposed any involve-

ment of the international community in resolving the Rohingya crisis. They continuously pursued for resolving the issue through bilateral means between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

In the September 28 meeting, the other three permanent members of the UNSC -- the US, the UK and France -- demanded an end to "ethnic cleansing" of Rohingyas. But China and Russia prevented the UN body from making any decision.

The Security Council can resort to imposing sanctions or even authorise the use of force to maintain or restore international peace and security. But for this it needs to unanimously pass a resolution with no negative vote by any of its permanent members.

The UNSC has never been able to take any action against Myanmar due to opposition by China and Russia. The two permanent members have been backing Myanmar for their economic interests.

For example, in 2007, China and Russia also opposed the UNSC's first draft resolution on Myanmar which called on the then military junta of the country to stop persecution of minority and opposition groups. Their negative votes killed the measure at the UNSC. They killed another draft resolution in 2009.

The support of China and Russia seems to have put the Myanmar regime above the law. And with their support Myanmar has been bluffing the UNSC for the last seven months over the Rohingya crisis.

Air pollution

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suffer from high levels of pollution and crime, researchers say.

Experts from the London School of Economics and Political Science found that a ten point rise of the air pollution measure, the Air Quality Index (AQI), correlated with an increase in the crime rate of 0.9 percent.

This means that the crime rate in London is 8.4 percent higher on the most polluted day, with an AQI of 103.6, compared to the days with the lowest level of pollution, an AQI of 9.3.

An AQI of over 35, which happens in one out of four days on average, leads to 2.8 percent more crimes -- equivalent to a nine percent reduction in policing, researchers say.

Dr Sefi Roth, assistant professor of environmental economics and co-author of the paper, said: "Our research suggests that reducing air pollution in urban areas could be a cost effective way to reduce crime, in addition to the health benefits it would bring."

"We did not find that London's ongoing spate of knife crime would be affected by improved air quality."

"However, if the number of less serious crimes could be reduced, the police could potentially be freed up to allocate more resources to these types of very serious incidents."

"The effect of air pollution on crime occurs at levels which are well below current regulatory standards in the UK and the US which suggests that it could be beneficial to lower these existing guidelines."

London's wealthiest neighbourhoods, which are also its most polluted, were most heavily affected by the link.

The full findings of the study were published by the Institute of Labor Economics.

Situation in Rakhine still concerning

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reports of departures from northern Rakhine, and some reports of threats and extortion against Muslim communities," Spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General Stéphane Dujarric told a press briefing on Thursday in New York.

A 15-member UNSC delegation is due to arrive in Cox's Bazar this afternoon for a firsthand look at the plight of over 700,000 Rohingyas, who had begun to arrive in the district, fleeing Myanmar since August 25 last year amid a military crackdown.

The delegation will also visit the several hundred thousand Rohingyas who remain in the northern Rakhine State.

Referring to humanitarian colleagues in Myanmar, the spokesperson said the bulldozing of burned or abandoned villages remained evident, and the movement restrictions placed on Rohingya communities remained in place, including for those trapped in camps for the last six years in central Rakhine.

Around 500,000 Rohingyas are still living in Rakhine, facing continued discrimination and marginalisation, Stéphane said.

"Severe restrictions on their freedom of movement persist, grossly restricting their access to health care, education and livelihoods."

"Our humanitarian colleagues stress that refugees from Bangladesh

cannot be expected to safely, voluntarily and sustainably return."

The United Nations is ready to work with the government of Myanmar in implementing the recommendations of the Rakhine Advisory Commission, Stéphane added.

AP reports, Britain's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Karen Pierce, on the eve of the UNSC delegation's arrival, said the most important thing was that the body charged with maintaining international peace and security "can see for itself the situation on the ground in a very desperate case of alleged human rights violations and abuses and crimes against humanity."

The council will also be able "to

draw attention to what it considers are the most flagrant human rights abuses and violations, and what needs to be done next to help Myanmar develop as a modern political and economic entity, and to help create the conditions where the refugees can go home in safety and security and dignity," she said.

The UNSC delegation left New York late Thursday. After visiting the Rohingyas living in makeshift camps in Cox's Bazar, they will visit Dhaka for a meeting with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Monday morning and talks with other high government officials before leaving for Myanmar.

The delegation will visit Myanmar's capital, Naypyitaw and talk with gov-

ernment high ups before travelling to Rakhine on Tuesday.

The team members would include the permanent representative of the UK and the deputy permanent representatives of the USA, Russia, France and China. The five countries are the permanent members of the council.

The other members would be permanent representatives from Bolivia, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, the Netherlands, Peru, Poland, Sweden and deputy permanent representative from Ivory Coast.

Foreign diplomats in Dhaka told The Daily Star that major UN efforts were underway to help Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

Dhaka hopeful

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call on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and meet refugees and local officials in Cox's Bazar.

The delegation will also go to Myanmar and expected to hold talks with Aung San Suu Kyi on Monday and visit violence-torn villages in Rakhine State the next day.

The Rohingyas have been facing persecutions since the 1980s and fled to Bangladesh in various waves from Rakhine where they are denied of citizenship. Dhaka wants a safe and sustainable repatriation of over a million refugees, including those who arrived since August.

"Earlier, the Security Council members could not reach any consensus on the Rohingya issue. This time we hope that their visit to the camps and interaction with the Rohingyas will help them be convinced," said Shahriar Alam, state minister for foreign affairs.

Dhaka hopes that the members of the delegation, including those who

earlier opposed strong actions against Myanmar, will realise the magnitude of the problem and persuade their respective governments to go for concrete steps, he said.

"We want Myanmar to take steps to repatriate Rohingyas immediately without any further delay and also implement the agreements signed between the two countries," Shahriar told The Daily Star.

"Our focus will be on safe and sustainable repatriation of the Rohingyas."

Though Myanmar and Bangladesh signed a repatriation deal, the UN said the situation in Rakhine is not conducive to a safe and sustainable return of the Rohingyas.

The refugees themselves are fearful of the return to Rakhine where the security forces allegedly raped Rohingya women, killed thousands of people of the community and burnt and looted their houses.

while rights groups called it genocide and crimes against humanity and urged the UNSC to refer Myanmar to the International Criminal Court.

The UNSC has failed to take any concrete actions against Myanmar so far mostly because of oppositions from China and Russia.

Bangladesh's Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner Abul Kalam said after the delegation's visit to the refugee camps, he would brief them about the overall refugee situation here.

"I will mainly focus on the repatriation issue while the deputy commissioner of Cox's Bazar will talk about the government response," Kalam told The Daily Star.

BGB 34 Battalion Commanding Officer Lt Col Monzurul Hassan Khan said he would brief the delegation on the plight of Rohingyas, based on what they witnessed during the peak of the influx.

Kamal Hossain, deputy commissioner of Cox's Bazar, said he will brief

the delegation about the government response on humanitarian assistance - how the government, along with other aid agencies, has prevented disease outbreaks among refugees.

'SITUATION IS NOT ACCEPTABLE' AFP reports Kuwait's Ambassador Mansour al-Otaibi said the visit was not about "naming and shaming" Myanmar, but that "the message will be very clear for them: the international community is following the situation and has great interest in resolving it."

"We are coming to see how can we help, how can we push things forward," he said, stressing that the current situation was "not acceptable."

"700,000 people have fled their country and they cannot go back. It's a humanitarian disaster."

British Ambassador Karen Pierce said it was "incredibly important" for the council to see the situation on the ground as it considers "what needs to be done next to help Myanmar develop as a modern, political and economic

entity."

Akhaya Kumar, UN deputy director for Human Rights Watch, said, "This trip represents an opportunity for the council to press the reset button."

"They have taken almost no action," she said.

The AP adds that Lord Nazir Ahmed, the United Kingdom's minister of state for the Commonwealth and the United Nations, told reporters earlier this week that Myanmar's agreement to the council visit and a previous visit by the UN special envoy for sexual violence in conflict "demonstrates the glimmer of hope in what has been a very dark chapter in human history in that part of the region."

He stressed the importance of direct engagement, which "sends a very strong signal to those in Myanmar, both the civilian but more importantly military authorities who have been responsible largely for what we've seen, which has been ethnic cleansing and nothing short of that."