

10 US senators blast Suu Kyi

Say she undermined her credibility by representing Myanmar military's interest at UN top court

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Ten US Senators have lambasted Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi for representing the military's interest before the International Court of Justice and defending the mass atrocities committed against the Rohingyas and other ethnic minorities.

"Representing the Burmese military's interest before The Hague and defending the mass atrocities committed against the Rohingyas and other ethnic minorities would undermine what remaining credibility you have before the international community, including in the US Congress," said a letter to Suu Kyi issued on December 9.

The senators said defending the atrocities of Burmese military at this high-profile international forum is also an affront to the inclusive, multi-cultural and democratic Myanmar that she claims to champion.

When Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar is on the rise, shielding military's criminal acts sends a signal that Suu Kyi stands alongside human rights violators, the senators said.

On December 10, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague began a three-day hearing of the case filed by the Gambia on November 11, accusing Myanmar of genocide against the Rohingyas.

At the hearing, Suu Kyi denied that the Myanmar military had committed genocide, arguing that the crackdown was a response to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army attacks on the police posts in Rakhine and that it was merely an internal conflict.

The Gambia has made strong arguments to prove that Myanmar had committed genocide and sought provisional measures to protect the Rohingyas currently living in Rakhine state.

Myanmar's handling of brutal "clearance operations" that killed thousands and caused more than 740,000 Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh since August 2017 is

inexcusable, said the senators.

"They said while it is eventually up to the court to determine the criminal accountability, evidence of crimes committed by the Burmese military is overwhelming.

"We are also concerned about the estimated 600,000 Rohingyas who remain in Burma, whose living conditions have worsened. They continue to face persecution and are at risk of genocide," the letter said.

The Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar makes it clear that Myanmar government incurs "state responsibility" under the prohibition against genocide and crimes against humanity, which will be important for the ICJ to consider, said the letter.

"We urge you to fully cooperate with the ICJ. This should include moving forward with any provisional actions that might be recommended or discussed at the ICJ.

"Your government must also provide complete and unfettered access throughout the county to the UN Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar so that they may investigate all allegations of crimes under international law and other human rights violations and abuses."

They said they stand ready to support Myanmar if Suu Kyi chooses to take the crucial moment on the international stage to defend the human rights of the Rohingyas and other ethnic minorities in the country.

"However, a failure to do so means we will continue to use instruments of US diplomatic power to bring the Burmese military to account for the injustices committed. A democratic and rights-respecting, inclusive Burma is the only successful path forward," the US Senators said.

The senators are Marsha Blackburn, Richard J Durbin, Todd Young, Tammy Baldwin, Brian Schatz, Jeffrey A Merkley, Chris Van Hollen, Robert P Casey Jr, Benjamin L Cardin and Ron Wyden.

Her silence speaks

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her hair, reports The Guardian.

Later in her closing arguments at the hearing, she urged the UN judges to throw out the genocide case against Myanmar, warning it risked reigniting the crisis that forced nearly three quarters of a million Rohingyas Muslims from their homes.

Suu Kyi also cautioned that allowing The Gambia's case against Myanmar to go ahead could "undermine reconciliation", reports AFP.

The de facto civilian leader even showed pictures of a football match recently played in the area affected by the violence in 2017 as evidence that was peace was returning.

"I pray that the decision you make with the wisdom and vision of justice will help us create unity out of diversity.

"Steps that generate suspicions, sow doubts or create resentments between communities who have just begun to build the fragile foundation of trust could undermine reconciliation," Suu Kyi mentioned in the short six-minute statement.

"Ending the ongoing internal conflict... is of the utmost importance for our country. But it is equally important to avoid any re-ignition of the 2016-17 internal armed conflict in northern Rakhine," she added.

Once regarded as an international rights icon for standing up to Myanmar's brutal junta, Suu Kyi's reputation has been tarnished by her decision to side with the military over the Rohingyas crisis.

She used a dramatic appearance at the court in The Hague on Wednesday to say there was no "genocidal intent" behind the operation that led to some 740,000 Rohingyas fleeing into neighbouring Bangladesh.

She defended Myanmar's actions saying it faced an "internal conflict" and that the military conducted "clearance operations" after an attack by Rohingyas militants in August 2017.

But Paul Reichler, another of the Gambia's lawyers, said that those killed included "infants beaten to death or torn from their mothers' arms and thrown into rivers to drown.

Rajshahi, Khulna seal

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against Dhaka Platoon and subsequently deny two of the country's biggest stars -- Mashrafe Bin Mortaza and Tamim Iqbal -- a happy return to competitive cricket.

Bangladesh ODI skipper Mashrafe, who had last played in a competitive fixture during the Tigers last World Cup match at Lord's on July 5, contributed with the bat during his unbeaten 10-ball 18 but it was not good enough to see his side post a challenging total as Dhaka managed only 134 runs. Tamim, who was unavailable ever since he led the Tigers in their ODI tour of Sri Lanka, was dismissed for five runs.

In the second game, another Afghan took charge to confirm a comfortable 8-wicket win for Khulna Tigers against Chattogram Challengers. In chase of 144, Khulna lost a wicket early when Najmul Hossain Shanto was dismissed for four, however, right-hander Rahmanullah Gurbaz then put the opposition bowlers to the sword during his 19-ball 50, featuring four boundaries and five sixes.

South Africa's Rilee Rossouw then finished the job in style with a 38-ball 64 that saw seven fours and two sixes being hit as Khulna chased down the target with eight wickets and 37 balls to spare.



Family members of Alam, who had died of burn injuries, waiting at the burnt-down factory yesterday. Alam's brother Razzak, also a worker of the factory, is struggling for life with 100 percent burns. Inset, a man looking at charred raw materials.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

It was a death trap

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Abul was seconded by security guard of the factory Shakil Ahmed. He said, "I saw many running out of the gate entirely in flames. Skin of several burnt people were coming off."

Locals alleged that the authorities concerned turned a blind eye to the lack of safety measures at the factory even though it had been producing disposable plastic cups and plates for around 10 years and had witnessed two other fire incidents this year alone.

The fire service team inspected the factory in June and gave three-months' time to install safety measures but no follow-up inspection was made, according to sources.

KM Ali Azam, secretary to the labour and employment ministry, said an inspection team of his ministry visited the factory on November 5 and filed a case against it for non-compliance.

During a visit, The Daily Star correspondent found the heat of the fire had bent and caved the corrugated-iron sheet roof. All the machinery there were charred along with plastic products and raw materials.

Burnt gas cylinders and sandals of the ill-fated workers were scattered on the floor as officials from the fire service and other government bodies inspected.

Workers who survived said the fire was fuelled by gas leaking from one of the eight cylinders inside a room.

Fire officials were yet to ascertain

the cause of the fire. But the one thing they were sure of was that flammable plastic and other objects fed the flames.

The factory was near a four-storey residential building but only the building owner lived there. Nobody wanted to lease flats near the noisy and smelly factory, locals said.

"The air was always filled with the smell of chemicals and we had difficulties breathing in the area ...," said Shamima, a resident of a nearby building. She said they had been planning to sell off their land and move elsewhere because of this factory.

After the news of death of so many workers spread, locals yesterday staged demonstrations in front of the factory demanding immediate ban on such factories in residential areas.

They alleged that different government regulatory organisations aided factory owner Nazrul Islam in running the factory by taking bribes.

Nazrul is on the run, police said. When the locals were chanting slogans, a group of ruling-party men led by Mirazur Rahman Suman, president of South Keraniganj unit of Swetchhasebak League, drove them away.

Suman even threatened a youth who had defied his instruction to disperse.

Suman told The Daily Star that they drove the demonstrators away to stop "BNP-Jamaat men creating chaos".

"Factory owner Nazrul is a powerful

man with links to local influential people. We cannot speak against him," said a local youth.

Meanwhile, the labour and employment ministry yesterday formed a five-member committee to investigate the fire. It said it would give Tk 1 lakh to the family of each deceased and Tk 50,000 to each injured worker.

Yesterday, doctors at DMCH conducted autopsies on bodies of 10 victims and those were later handed over to their families.

The relatives of the dead had staged demonstrations near the morgue protesting delays in conducting the autopsies.

MD Jahangir, brother of deceased factory worker Alam, filed a murder case with Keraniganj South Police Station accusing factory owner Nazrul and 12 unnamed people last night in connection with the incident.

Yesterday, the factory's senior engineer Salauddin, 32; and workers Mahbulul Haque, 25; Zinurul Silam, 32; Md Imran, 18; Rayhan, 16; Abdul Khalek, 35; Babul, 26; Alam, 35; Omar Faruque, 35; Sujon, 19; Jahangir, 55; and Mehedi Hasan, 30, died in hospital.

Fire incidents at factories and warehouses in residential areas are common in the country. Safety measures are often poor there. In February 20, a devastating fire in Chawkbazar area of Old Dhaka claimed the lives of 70 and injured dozens.

Cop firing kills two

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College Hospital, said two people had died from gunshot wounds and 11 others injured, also with bullet wounds.

Indian news channel NDTV said the police firing caused the death of the protesters.

Earlier yesterday, the government had extended the suspension of internet services in 10 districts of Assam for another 48 hours, and deployed army personnel in four areas where clashes between protesters and police were witnessed.

Internet has been suspended in Tripura since Tuesday. A curfew was also to be imposed in parts of the capital city of the neighbouring state of Meghalaya, a government official said, because of fears of the law and order situation deteriorating.

Five columns of the Army were conducting flag marches in Guwahati, Tinsukia, Jorhat and Dibrugarh, officials said. Several flights and trains to and from Assam have also been cancelled.

Asom Gana Parishad headquarters in Guwahati's Ambari area was attacked by protesters and vehicles parked outside were vandalised, police said.

Police said they had to open fire in Lalung Gaon area in Guwahati when stones were hurled by protesters opposed to the bill.

Powerful All Assam Students Union, which had spearheaded prolonged violent agitation against illegal immigrants in late 1970s till 1985, and peasants' outfit Kisan Mukti Sangarsha Samiti called a gathering at Latashil playground in the city, which

was attended by hundreds of people.

Notwithstanding the curfew, several prominent personalities from Assam's film and music industry, including icon Zubeen Garg, joined the gathering along with college and university students.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal have betrayed the people of Assam by ensuring passage of the bill," AASU advisor Samujjal Bhattacharya said at the meet.

Leaders of the AASU and the North East Students' Organization (NESO) said they will observe December 12 as 'Black Day' every year in protest against the passage of the bill in parliament.

Modi yesterday took to the twitter to assure that he and his government were "totally committed to constitutionally safeguard the political, linguistic, cultural and land rights of Assamese people as per the spirit of Clause 6" of the 1985 Assam Peace accord. He also posted the comments in Assamese language.

A complete shutdown hit Assam's Kamrup district yesterday with offices, schools, colleges and shops shut and no transport plying as all major roads.

Tea garden workers stopped work in Lakhimpur and Charaideo districts and also at Numaligarh in Golaghat district and some areas in Tinsukia district.

Protesters vandalised four railway stations in Assam and tried to set fire to them, a railway spokesman said. Train services were suspended, stranding scores of passengers. IndiGo said it had cancelled flights because of the unrest.

In a major reshuffle, the Assam

government yesterday replaced Guwahati Police Commissioner Deepak Kumar and Additional Director General of Police (Law and Order) Mukesh Agrawal in the state.

Former Assam Chief Minister and Asom Gana Parishad leader Prafulla Kumar Mahanta said the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill is a "divisive tool" that will damage the composite culture of the northeast and must be immediately scrapped.

The two-time Assam chief minister alleged the bill has been brought in to create a Hindu-Muslim divide.

He said Assam will continue to "burn" if the Narendra Modi government does not realise the seriousness of the situation and respect the sentiments of the people.

Mahanta also cautioned the Central government that the situation in Assam may take a "dangerous turn" and any delay in taking the right decision may cause unimaginable harm to the region.

According to Mahanta, the current situation in Assam is worse than the early 1980s when the Assam movement led by him was at its peak. Over 600 student leaders lost their lives during the agitation between 1979 and 1985.

The Aligarh Muslim University Teachers Association (AMUTA) dubbed the day of passage of the bill by the parliament as "one of the darkest days" in the history of independent India.

The AMUTA passed a resolution stating that the passing of the bill marks a "defeat for justice by the use of numbers game by the ruling party".

Requiem for dreams

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Gulzar went to his village home in Rangpur a few days ago. He last talked to his son from there.

"He told me to bring honey from home. I was supposed to meet him tomorrow [today]," Gulzar told this correspondent.

He learnt about the fire at the plastic factory around 5:45pm on Wednesday.

"I could not reach him over the phone. I came to the hospital around 9:30pm. But he was not among the injured. Then I went to the mortuary, but the officials didn't let me in."

After a sleepless night, Gulzar was able to take a look at a charred body at the mortuary.

"Nothing was identifiable. I just saw the bronze bracelet on his left hand and realised that that was my son."

The DMCH authorities, however, will not hand over the body before they verify DNA samples.

Mahbul was the eldest among three siblings.

"HIS WHOLE BODY WAS BURNING" Two brothers Alam and Razzak lived near the Keraniganj factory.

Alam, 35, and his wife Ruma had their lunch at home on Wednesday.

Hearing an explosion and screams for help in the afternoon, Ruma came out the house and saw her husband, engulfed in flames, running out of the factory.

"I poured water and more water on him," she said.

Alam died a few hours later.

Alam's brother Razzak also worked in the factory. He is struggling for life with 100 percent burns.

Around 300 people worked in two shifts at Prime Pet and Plastic Industries. Around 150 people, including many women, were working when the fire broke out on Wednesday afternoon.

ROHINGYA GENOCIDE

Of a lawyer and his about-turn

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

PROFESSOR

William Schabas,

a globally

acclaimed

lawyer hired by

Myanmar, comes

under spotlight

for denying

that there was

genocidal intent

during the violence

perpetrated

against the Rohingyas

people

in

Rakhine state.

He made the argument at the

International Court of Justice in the

Hague on Wednesday. The Gambia,

which filed a case against Myanmar on

November 11, accusing it of genocide

against Rohingyas Muslims in 2016

and 2017, presented its arguments on

December 10.

The denial by Prof Schabas, a

global expert on international and

criminal laws and genocide, is said to

be a shift from his remarks in 2013

when he told Al Jazeera that there

were elements of genocide in how

Myanmar was treating the Rohingyas.

Some 750,000 Rohingyas fled a

brutal crackdown by Myanmar

military after August 2017 in Rakhine

state. The Muslim community has

been denied of citizenship, basic

rights including education, health,

and freedom of movement. They also

faced restrictions on marriage.

UN investigators and other rights

bodies accused Myanmar of genocide,

but Myanmar has been refuting the

allegations consistently, including at

the ICJ last week.

In an interview with Al Jazeera, Prof

Schabas in 2013, said: "We're moving

into a zone where the word [genocide]

can be used [in the case of the

Rohingya]. When you see measures

preventing births, trying to deny the

identity of the people, hoping to see

that they really are eventually, that

they no longer exist, denying their

history, denying the legitimacy of the

right to live where they live, these are

all warning signs that mean that it is

not frivolous to envisage the use of the

term genocide."

Making reference of Schabas' comment in Al Jazeera, Prof Philippe

Sands, legal counsellor for The

Gambia, said, "Of course, everyone is

allowed to change their mind, but the

obvious question is: how could that

which was "not frivolous" in 2013,

before the "clearance operations",

before the killings, before the rapes,

somehow become implausible in

2019?

"The path to implausibility is eased,

of course, if you simply take certain

categories of acts out of the equation:

Myanmar has been conspicuously

silent, for example, about all the

sexual violence that has occurred on

a wide and systematic basis, a clear

reflection, we say, as do the UN bodies

that have considered the matter, of

genocidal intent."

Yesterday was the third and final

round of the three-day hearing of the

case. In the final round, Prof Schabas

said his answer to Al Jazeera was in

response to a hypothetical question.

"I refused to say because it was a

hypothetically question. I answered

'no'. If the copy of the entire interview

is available, it could be found," he

told the judges at the ICJ yesterday.

'Drug peddler' killed in 'gunfight'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

A suspected drug peddler was killed

in a "gunfight" with police in Sarhail

village of Mymensingh's Ishwarganj

upazila early yesterday.

The deceased, Abdur Rashid,

40, was from Ghagra village in the

upazila.

Acting on a tip-off that some drug

dealers were trading drugs in Sarhail

village, a team of detectives raided the

area to arrest them, said Shah Kamal

Akanda, officer-in-charge of Detective

Branch (DB) of Police