

Speech: Addressing the Rohingya refugee crisis

Thank you very much indeed, Mr President. Thank you to the Special Envoy – and it's very good to know that your office in Myanmar is up and running. Could I say at the start, Mr President I apologise if I may have to slip away before the Council session is over. I am hosting an event for Brian Urquhart who turned 100 today. Colleagues will know that Brian Urquhart was one of the original officials in the United Nations – working closely with very many Secretaries General and indeed was instrumental in setting up peacekeeping and also the IAEA. So please forgive me if I need to step away for this event.

I think there has been such attention by this Council on the events in Myanmar and particularly of the Rohingya. And I think it's fair to say Mr President it remains one of the most pressing issues before us. The displacement – the forced displacement – of several hundreds of thousands of people across an international border is bound to be something the Council needs to keep before it. And the alleged crimes against humanity committed against the Rohingya also deserve the most serious attention of the Council. And I'm also very grateful to the Special Envoy for setting out the situation across the country, which I think we also need to have regard to in the Council.

I wanted to start if I may Mr President on political developments. We as the United Kingdom: we are a long standing supporter of the Burmese people's efforts to emerge from many decades of military rule and to transition to democratic civilian government. As – did the Special Envoy- we recognise that Burmese democracy is still young and it's fragile. But the upcoming elections next year are an important moment and that efforts to consolidate the democratic transition are ongoing. This is why it was very good to hear about the constitutional amendments. As I said: we recognise that conflict continues across Myanmar and the loss of life and displaced people that we've seen is also of great concern. And I think it's beyond doubt that a nationwide peace settlement which guarantees rights and security for all the peoples of Myanmar is also a very high priority.

I think we should be clear, Mr President, about two particular things. It is the Burmese military who are the root cause of these longstanding problems. And in our pronouncements I think it's very important that the Council make very clear: that we united are on the side of all those in Myanmar who want peace and democratic change and that we will help them in that.

But just to concentrate on the Rohingya if I may, Mr President, for the reasons I outlined. I think we're very disappointed that more hasn't been possible that there hasn't been more progress on getting the refugees back – and that obviously includes creating the conditions where the refugees feel able to go back – which is why the proposal that the Rakhine Advisory Commission became so important. I want to be clear Mr President, we as the

United Kingdom are not ideological about the refugees returning home. They need to return home but they can only do so on the basis of the UNHCR established principles that returns are safe that they are voluntary and that they are dignified and that they are secure. And we really want those principles to be upheld. We know that ASEAN has taken a very strong interest in returns and this is welcome. Possibly the Indonesian Ambassador will be able to say more. We know that the AHA center has been involved. We know that the Chinese Envoy has been making strenuous efforts. I repeat Mr. President, we don't mind from our perspective; we are not dogmatic about who helps the refugees to get back but we do want to see the UNHCR principles adhered to because they are there for a reason. They're to ensure the safety of ordinary people.

I also want to pay tribute in the presence of his excellency the Minister – to the generous support that Bangladesh has given and continues to give to the Rohingya in Cox's Bazar and on their territory. And they have made enormous efforts to help the Rohingya people and we believe that the international community should continue to support Bangladesh in this.

The Rakhine Advisory Commission recommendations – still to our mind – remain the best blueprint for Rakhine. We will be very interested to see the Myanmar government take three initial steps.

We would like the UN coordinators offer to develop a transparent Joint Implementation Plan to be accepted. We would like UNHCR and UNDP to have unconditional and widespread access in Rakhine. They have had some. But it isn't enough, Mr President, to make the proper assessments of conditions on the ground that could encourage refugee return. And we would like to see freedom of movement granted to those Rohingya who do remain in Rakhine. This would be a good start and enable the international community to have a platform to offer support and there is a clear will among the international community to do that, as I've said.

The Special Envoy touched also on accountability – I think this really goes to the heart of everything Mr President. Firstly it's essential for the refugees to have confidence that they can go home and that they will be secure. It is also essential though because it's important to uphold the norms of international justice. I know this is a difficult concept for some on the Council. But the scale of what has been done to the Rohingya Muslims and the allegations of crimes against humanity really mark this out as one of the most terrible events of this century so far. I think we need to keep that in mind.

I'm very grateful to the Special Envoy for all her efforts to encourage complementarity between the different UN instruments and the Independent Commission of Inquiry. I think the more the ICoE and Rosario Manalo can work with the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the better outcomes we will see there. But I just want to conclude if I may by saying we remain committed to finding the way forward – as the United Kingdom – and we can remain committed to working with our partners on the Council with Myanmar and Bangladesh, with the Special Envoy. Thank you.