

Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state could amount to crimes against humanity – UN special adviser

6 February 2017 – The scale of violence against the Rohingya community in Myanmar's Rakhine state documented in a recent United Nations human rights report is a level of dehumanization and cruelty that is "revolting and unacceptable," the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide said today, underlining the Government's responsibility to ensure that populations are protected.

In a statement, Special Adviser Adama Dieng said the flash report issued last week by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) gave further credibility to allegations that security forces were committing serious human rights violations against civilians in northern Rakhine state from the very beginning of the recent escalation of violence, which was precipitated by attacks on border posts in early October 2016 and the ensuing operations by those forces.

According to the findings contained in the OHCHR report, human rights violations committed by the security forces include mass gang-rape, extra-judicial killings "including of babies and young children, brutal beatings and disappearances.

"If people are being persecuted based on their identity and killed, tortured, raped and forcibly transferred in a widespread or systematic manner, this could amount to crimes against humanity, and in fact be the precursor of other egregious international crimes," said Mr. Dieng.

"This must stop right now!" he declared.

Current panel not a credible option to undertake new investigation

Mr. Dieng also expressed concern that the commission previously appointed by the Government to investigate the allegations and which, despite having unhindered access to the region, found no evidence, or insufficient evidence, of any wrongdoing by Government forces.

"[However,] OHCHR, which was not given access to the area, found an overwhelming number of testimonies and other forms of evidence through interviews with refugees who had fled to a neighbouring country," the Special Adviser added. "The existing Commission is not a credible option to undertake the new investigation."

"I urge that any investigation be conducted by a truly independent and impartial body that includes international observers," he noted, welcoming the Government's commitment to open an immediate probe.

“If the Government wants the international community and regional actors to believe in their willingness to resolve the matter, they must act responsibly and demonstrate their sincerity,” Mr. Dieng said.

“There is no more time to wait. All of this is happening against the background of very deeply rooted and long-standing discriminatory practices and policies against the Rohingya Muslims and a failure to put in place conditions that would support peaceful coexistence among the different communities in Rakhine state,” he concluded.

Civilians face ‘dire’ situation amid ongoing hostilities in eastern Ukraine, UN warns

3 February 2017 – An immediate pause in fighting is needed in Ukraine to prevent more people dying and repair essential services, the United Nations human rights office said today following another night of shelling in the east of the country.

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres also expressed deep concern about the ongoing tensions and intensification of the fighting in eastern Ukraine, according to the UN chief’s spokesperson, who said he appealed to all parties to fully observe the ceasefire and allow for immediate humanitarian access.

In the last week, aerial attacks have killed seven people and injured at least 40 more in heavily populated areas, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

“Reports suggest that two hospitals, a polyclinic, a dental clinic, three schools, and a kindergarten were damaged by shelling in Makiivka and Donetsk city, which are controlled by armed groups,” OHCHR spokesperson Liz Throssell told reporters at the regular bi-weekly news briefing in Geneva.

She said OHCHR staff in Donetsk heard explosions over five days, from 29 January through the night of 2 February, and on 2 February, “saw a clearly marked ambulance in Donetsk that had been damaged by shrapnel.”

Latest data shows that at least 9,800 civilians and members of armed forces have been killed since the conflict began in mid-April 2014 according to the UN Human Rights Office.

It also warns that sub-zero temperatures have also left civilians even more vulnerable amid the destruction of power lines and disruption to water, electricity and heating networks.

Ms. Throssell explained that critical civilian infrastructure has been damaged, including near Avdiivka, where power lines have been destroyed, disrupting water, electricity and heating supplies. Gas and electricity supplies were also reported to have been affected in Makiivka and other areas under the control of armed groups, including Irmino and parts of Donetsk.

“Both Government forces and armed groups must take all feasible measures to protect the civilian population in the areas under their control, she said, adding: “We remind them that the protection of civilians must be considered the utmost priority and those committing violations of human rights law and international humanitarian law must be held accountable.”

Fresh violence in Central African Republic's western town displaces thousands, UN office says

3 February 2017 – Condemning attacks on civilians and non-governmental organizations in a town in Central African Republic (CAR)'s Ouham-Pendé province, a senior United Nations humanitarian official has called for protecting civilians as well as for unhindered relief access to the affected areas.

According to the office of the Humanitarian Coordinator in CAR, outbreak of violence between two armed groups in the town of Bocaranga reportedly killed and injured civilians as well as displacing some 9,000 people are sheltering in forests about 15-20 kilometres away from the town.

In the clashes, international non-governmental organization compounds were attacked and pillaged and at-least one office was burnt down. Moreover, shops and markets were “systematically pillaged,” as was one church.

“I urge all parties to the conflict to respect international humanitarian law and to ensure the protection of civilians,” said Michel Yao, the Acting Humanitarian Coordinator in the country.

“Attack against aid workers is a crime against humanity,” he added.

Prior to the latest flare-up of violence there were already 15,000 persons from Kouï (located about 35 kilometres east of Bocaranga) who were displaced the town due to the violence that occurred there last September.

These displacements come on the back of already more than 400,000 persons displaced due to conflict.

The humanitarian needs in CAR are increasing while financial resources remain

scarce.

In January, together with the Government, the humanitarian community in CAR launched a \$400 million response plan for the 2017-2019 period to meet the basic needs of 2.2 million people.

Clashes between the mainly Muslim Séléka rebel coalition and anti-Balaka militia, which are mostly Christian, plunged the country of 4.5 million people into civil conflict in 2013. Despite significant progress and successful elections, CAR has remained in the grip of instability and sporadic unrest.

Refugees fleeing danger are 'not dangerous themselves' – UN agency chief

3 February 2017 – The head of the United Nations refugee agency today warned developed countries against politicizing the issue of refugees, stressing that the move risked undermining the principle of international solidarity with those fleeing war and persecution.

"These are people that flee from danger, they're not dangerous themselves," UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi told reporters in Lebanon's capital, Beirut following a four-day visit to Syria, where he witnessed first-hand the massive destruction caused by nearly six years of conflict.

"We have serious concerns, and these are not new concerns, we've had them for some time, that the refugee issue in the industrialized world – in Europe, the US, Australia – is very politicized. It shouldn't be," Mr. Grandi said, urging rich countries to show generosity to refugees, rather than regarding them as a threat.

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Mr. Grandi is the first senior UN official to visit Syria since Turkey and Russia brokered a ceasefire last month.

Mr. Grandi said that the recent decision by the United States to suspend its refugee resettlement programme would negatively impact the most vulnerable individuals.

"Resettlement means taking refugees from places like Lebanon, where they are already refugees, selecting the most vulnerable and taking them to other places," he said. "If we weaken that programme, as has been done in the United States, this is a very dangerous weakening of the international solidarity for refugees."

UNHCR estimates that 20,000 refugees in precarious circumstances might have been resettled to the US in the 120 days covered by the suspension set out in an Executive Order signed one week ago by President Donald Trump.

Mr. Grandi expressed his hope that the US would resume resettlements following its internal review of the programme.

As for the situation in Syria, he described progress in his discussions with the Government on humanitarian access in hard-to-reach areas, and expressed hope that some aid convoys could reach parts of Homs in the coming days.

On the issue of refugees returning to Syria, the High Commissioner said that while many were keen to go home, the political and security situation in the country currently made it impossible for large numbers to do so.

"People need to return eventually to Syria, and we all agree that that's the ideal solution. But we need to be patient," Mr. Grandi said. "More progress needs to be made politically, then economically and infrastructure-wise in order for conditions to be there to have large returns."

[Adhere to safeguards, avoid measures that push back refugees, UNICEF, UN rights experts urge Europe](#)

3 February 2017 – As Europe Union leaders gather today in Malta to discuss new measures on migration, including increased cooperation with Libya, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and UN rights experts underlined the need to ensure that children are protected and that migrants should not be pushed back to places where their safety is at risk.

Emphasizing the need to prevent exploitation and trafficking of children, UNICEF called on the European Union (EU) and its member States to "adhere fully to the principle of *non-refoulement* as sending children back into harm's way or returning boats to Libya without a proper plan to protect them, would only add to their hardship."

It also called for committing resources to strengthen child protection programmes in Libya and for investment in reception and care centres in the country.

"These centres should provide education and health services, and should never be used to detain children based on their migration status," the agency added.

It also called for additional support to credible resettlement and family

reunification programmes so that desperate refugees and migrants do not have to turn to smugglers and risk their lives.

According to the UN agency, a record number of refugee and migrant deaths in the Mediterranean have been reported over the past three months, including an estimated 190 children.



Tripoli Red Crescent teams salvage another body of a migrant, found floating in the sea water in Libya. Photo: Mohamed Ben Khalifa/IRIN

“The growing number of children lost at sea underscores the acute danger of the journey from North Africa to Italy, as well as the pressing need for governments on both sides of the Mediterranean to do more to keep them safe,” said UNICEF Deputy Executive Director Justin Forsyth.

“The decisions taken at the summit could literally mean the difference between life and death for thousands of children transiting or stranded in Libya. They need urgent action now.”

Also today, a group of human rights experts cautioned the EU against supporting a system in which migrants are pushed back to places where they may be at risk of torture, and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

In a news release issued by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), François Crépeau, Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants; Nils Melzer, Special Rapporteur on torture; Urmila Bhoola, Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery; and Sètondji Roland Adjovi, Chair of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, stressed that any engagement with third countries needs to be in line with international human rights standards.

“The EU member States cannot balk from their responsibility and are accountable for any human rights violation under such an agreement,” noted the release.

While the experts commended the EU for any action directed at saving lives, they, however, expressed concern that “by agreeing to a deal with Libya, whereby migrants trying to flee human rights violations are being pushed back to those same conditions, the principle of *non-refoulement* will be violated.”

They raised the concern that limiting departures from Libyan coasts meant “accepting and legitimizing” the human suffering prevailing there and pushing people back to conditions where migrants suffer arbitrary detention, torture, ill-treatment, unlawful killings, trafficking and enforced disappearance. Migrants are also at a risk of labour exploitation and vulnerable to other forms of contemporary slavery, migrant women, in particular, remain at high risk of rape and other sexual violence.

The rights experts further noted measures must allow migrants to disembark immediately at the nearest port where their lives and freedoms would not be

threatened, providing them with information, offering care and support, processing their asylum claims equitably.

“From what we know on the conditions in Libya, this country cannot be a port of disembarkation,” they stressed.

Independent experts and Special Rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva based UN Human Rights Council – an inter-governmental body responsible for promoting and protecting human rights around the world – to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.