

**Panel discussion on the measures necessary to find durable solutions to the Rohingya crisis and to end all forms of human rights violations and abuses against Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar**

**Panellist's statement**

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Many thanks for inviting me to speak on this important panel.

A permanent solution for the Rohingya to live peacefully in Myanmar would guarantee a sustainable return to their homeland. This has been their long-standing demand. However, restrictions and persecution have increased over the years; violence in 2012 displaced 150,000 to internment camps in Central Rakhine; and atrocities perpetrated by the military triggered a mass exodus of 740,000 to Bangladesh in 2017. Moreover, from late 2018, Rohingya villagers have been trapped in armed clashes between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military. Last month, Cyclone Mocha caused devastation, destroying shelters and livelihoods of many Rohingya, including IDPs, and, until now, the military has restricted humanitarian access.

Despite numerous UN resolutions raising serious concerns and strongly condemning human rights violations against the Rohingya, no progress has been made. Following the coup in February 2021, the same generals responsible for mass atrocities against the Rohingya are now de-facto authorities.

**In this context, insistence on “expediting Rohingya repatriation” is particularly disturbing as conditions for a voluntary return in safety and dignity are not in place:**

- 1) Citizenship and other root causes have not been addressed. Restrictions on movement have increased and, since the coup, the junta have arrested and sentenced more than 3,500 Rohingya for unauthorised travel.
- 2) Rohingya IDPs in Central Rakhine have been confined to segregated camps since 2012. In northern Rakhine, displaced Rohingya who rebuilt houses in their burnt villages, were ordered to dismantle them. Durable solutions for IDPs in Myanmar should be a precondition before any repatriation starts from Bangladesh.
- 3) The temporary truce brokered between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military in November is still holding, but tensions remain high. Meanwhile, the military brought in more troops and hardware, suggesting that armed conflict could resume at any time.
- 4) The bilateral pilot repatriation plan for about 1,100 Rohingya involves resettlement to 15 relocation sites, all situated in North Maungdaw. In March, Myanmar officials interviewed families cleared for return. Some were from Buthidaung, not Maungdaw, therefore without option to go back to their village of origin. In May, 20 refugees were taken to a ‘go and see’ visit, and expressed dissatisfaction and unwillingness to return under those conditions.

Attempts at repatriation already failed twice in 2018 and 2019. UNHCR reaffirmed that conditions are not conducive for a return in safety and dignity.

The Rohingya's right to return to their homeland should also be safeguarded, but only with free and informed consent. UNHCR must be able to assess the voluntariness of refugees' decisions.

### **Positive developments in Myanmar**

In 2021, the National Unity Government (NUG), established by elected MPs, issued a policy statement recognising the Rohingya's entitlement to Myanmar's citizenship, and appointed a Rohingya adviser. This is a breakthrough, even though Rohingya question whether this policy is a genuine commitment, or a campaign tool to attain international recognition.

The Arakan Army and its political wing have also altered their rhetoric with regard to the Rohingya and promote inclusiveness. During the ceasefire, they developed their own administration systems in rural areas under their control, and formed Rohingya Village Committees with mixed results.

Such developments nevertheless require follow-through, and should be monitored and supported. All stakeholders, including the Rohingya themselves, should be engaged in finding solutions.

### **Improving conditions in host countries**

With remote prospects for voluntary repatriation, short and medium term needs of Rohingya refugees must be attended to in host countries. In Bangladesh camps, overcrowding, restrictions on movement, lack of access to livelihood and education, and insecurity are drivers for onward movements in the region, and should be addressed. In August, Bangladesh granted permission for skills development activities, a step in the right direction.

But it is deeply worrisome that funding shortfalls have forced the World Food Program (WFP) to reduce monthly food rations from US\$12 to US\$10 per person in March, and further down to US\$8 in June. Even before these food cuts, 12% of children were already severely malnourished.

Under the principle of responsibility-sharing, the international community should urgently come forward with adequate funding to meet Rohingya refugees' basic humanitarian needs.

### **Recommendations**

1. The international community should prioritize the Rohingya amid global challenges, advocating for their human rights and supporting international accountability.
2. Member States and the international community should ensure meaningful participation of the Rohingya, and actively engage with all stakeholders, including the NUG and the Arakan Army.
3. Repatriation to Myanmar must be truly voluntary, based on informed consent, and should not be promoted until root causes are addressed and conditions for return in safety and

dignity are in place. Returnees should not be confined to 'relocation' sites. Their right to return should also be guaranteed.

4. Efforts should also focus on improving conditions for Rohingya refugees in host countries by adhering to the principle of responsibility-sharing. Adequate funding should be urgently provided for critical humanitarian assistance and food aid. Moreover, a robust regional protection framework should be developed. Practices of push-backs at sea, and of indefinite immigration detention, should cease.
5. Alternative durable solutions such as resettlement to third countries, and complementary pathways, should be vigorously pursued.