

UNHCR and UNDP complete first assessments in Myanmar's northern Rakhine

This is a summary of what was said by UNHCR spokesperson Andrej Mahecic – to whom quoted text may be attributed – at today's press briefing at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

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UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, and UNDP, the UN development agency, carried out in September initial assessments in 23 villages and three village tracts in Myanmar's Rakhine State. It had been more than a year since UNHCR had been able to engage with affected communities in the northern areas of Rakhine State, following the flight of more than 720,000 Rohingya refugees to neighboring Bangladesh in 2017.

In the course of these initial assessments in Rakhine UNHCR and UNDP noted the efforts of authorities to facilitate these first steps, though they were limited in scope and in the locations visited. While they do not allow for broader conclusions, the field visits have given UNHCR and UNDP an initial understanding of the challenges facing those living there. Our teams assessed immediate community needs and priorities for our short-term actions. The rapid assessments also help to identify community initiatives that could support Government's efforts to improve the lives of all affected populations, build trust and promote social cohesion among all communities.

Over the past weeks the teams observed the serious effects. These include those on the local economy and diminishing livelihoods, significantly increasing the vulnerabilities of all communities remaining in Rakhine.

Communities also spoke of the cumulative effect of restrictions on movements, further shrinking their access to livelihood and basic services. While some self-restrict their movement for real or perceived sense of insecurity or fear of neighboring communities, others – particularly the Muslim communities - are not allowed to move freely. Fear and mistrust, has an impact on access to education, health and other basic services. It also limits interactions between communities, hindering prospects for confidence-building and social cohesion. The communities we visited frequently spoke of challenges in getting to health services as well as restrictions on the Muslim population in accessing education.

Mistrust, fear of neighbouring communities and a sense of insecurity are prevalent in many areas. Communities often live in isolation, lowering the prospects for contacts, mutual understanding and inter-communal cohesion. This is notable for relations between the Muslim community and other communities.

Assessment teams also observed that some communities, particularly those living in close proximity to each other, have maintained or restarted interactions. Encouragingly, most of those we spoke to expressed hope for peace in Rakhine and a number of them indicated

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willingness to incrementally strengthen or restore relations. Building confidence and improving conditions among remaining communities will be essential to bring people together, to alleviate poverty, and to address health and education disparities alongside making tangible progress to address root causes.

All the communities visited welcomed the assessment teams and were eager to engage with them and to discuss their issues. There were no signs of animosity.

As of Friday morning, UNHCR and UNDP teams are starting a second phase of assessments in the townships of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung based on travel authorisations received in the past 24 hours. We also look to have more predictable and broader access and rapid expansion of assessments and discussions continue on the modalities of “effective access” to all areas in Rakhine covered by the Memorandum of Understanding. Crucial next steps will include follow-up visits to already assessed locations in order to continue engaging with communities and facilitate design and implementation of pre-identified community-based initiatives.

UNHCR and UNDP remain committed to the implementation of the MoU, and to supporting the Government of Myanmar’s efforts to find comprehensive and durable solutions to the crisis in Rakhine State. The Myanmar government’s leadership in the implementation of this agreement is critical to creating conditions conducive for the voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable return of Rohingya refugees.

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