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OFFICE OF THE RESIDENT & HUMANITARIAN COORDINATOR, YANGON, REPUBLIC OF THE UNION OF MYANMAR

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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REMARKS AT OPEN DEBATE OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON MYANMAR

New York, 28 September 2017

[as delivered]

I welcome this opportunity to brief you on the crisis in Myanmar.

On September 2nd, I wrote to this Council urging concerted efforts to prevent further escalation of the crisis in northern Rakhine state.

I am encouraged that the Council has discussed the situation four times in less than a month.

The reality on the ground demands action -- swift action -- to protect people, alleviate suffering, prevent further instability, address the root causes of the situation and forge, at long last, a durable solution.

The following briefing is based on our reporting from the ground, and is our best sense of what has happened, what is still happening, and what needs to be done.

The current crisis has steadily deteriorated since the August 25 attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army on the Myanmar security forces. I repeat my condemnation of those attacks today.

Since then, the situation has spiraled into the world's fastest developing refugee emergency and a humanitarian and human rights nightmare.

I continue to call on the Myanmar authorities to take three immediate steps:

First, to end the military operations;

Second, to allow unfettered access for humanitarian support;

And third, to ensure the safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable return of the refugees to their areas of origin.

Let me now review what we know about the military operations that have taken place since August 25th.

While there have been competing narratives in a highly complex environment, certain elements are clear.

At least 500,000 civilians have fled their homes and sought safety in Bangladesh.

Although the total number of those displaced is unknown, it is estimated that 94 per cent of them are Rohingya.

The devastating humanitarian situation is not only a breeding ground for radicalization, it also puts vulnerable people -- including young children --

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at risk of criminal elements including trafficking.

We have received bone-chilling accounts from those who fled -- mainly women, children and the elderly.

These testimonies point to excessive violence and serious violations of human rights, including indiscriminate firing of weapons, the presence of landmines and sexual violence.

This is unacceptable and must end immediately.

International human rights law and standards are clear: any use of force by the authorities must respect Myanmar's human rights obligations under international law and comply with well-established human rights standards. Above all, these actions must fully respect the human rights of those affected, regardless of ethnicity or religion.

The use of lethal force, even in situations of emergency, must be commensurate with the threat to the public order and utmost care must be taken to minimize loss of life and injury, especially for unarmed people and communities.

The authorities have claimed that security operations ended on September 5th, following major displacements in northern Rakhine, where Rohingya were the majority.

However, displacement appears to have continued, with reports of the burning of Muslim villages, as well as looting and acts of intimidation.

Myanmar authorities themselves have indicated that at least 176 of 471 Muslim villages in northern Rakhine have been totally abandoned.

In Rathedaung Township, three quarters of the Rohingya population has fled. Most villages and all three of the former internally displaced persons camps have been burnt to the ground. Just five isolated Muslim communities remain in Rathedaung.

Elsewhere too, a majority of the abandoned villages were majority Muslim.

There seems to be a deeply disturbing pattern to the violence and ensuing large movements of an ethnic group from their homes.

The failure to address this systematic violence could result in a spill-over into central Rakhine, where an additional 250,000 Muslims could potentially face displacement. They are outnumbered by Rakhine communities, some of whom have engaged in violent acts of vigilantism against their Muslim neighbours.

The violence in Rakhine . whether by the military or radical elements within communities . must end.

The Myanmar authorities must fulfil their fundamental obligation of ensuring the safety and security of all communities and upholding the rule of law without discrimination.

Let me now turn to the question of humanitarian access.

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It is imperative that UN agencies and our non-governmental partners be granted immediate and safe access to all affected communities.

I am deeply concerned by the current climate of antagonism towards the United Nations and non-governmental organizations. Indeed, this can lead to unacceptable violence, such as the recent attacks against the ICRC by Rakhine villagers in Sittwe.

The Myanmar authorities have said repeatedly in the past few days that this was not the time for unhindered access to resume.

Given the enormous needs, this position is deeply regrettable. The United Nations and its partners should be allowed to reach the affected areas without delay.

I would also like to address the issue of safe return of refugees to their places of origin.

I ask members of the Security Council to join me in urging that all those who have fled to Bangladesh be able to exercise their right to a safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable return to their homes.

Myanmar authorities have committed to use the framework established in the 1993 Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministers of Bangladesh and Myanmar to facilitate these returns.

While that may be a useful starting point, it is not sufficient in the present circumstances. Notably, the framework does not refer to resolving the root cause of displacement. Moreover, it requires documents that the fleeing Rohingya may not be able to provide.

The United Nations is committed to a plan for voluntary return and calls upon the international community to support such an effort. This should include development assistance to the villages of those who return home, and the implementation of the Rakhine Advisory Commission recommendations regarding verification and citizenship.

Voluntary repatriation also requires, as a critical first step, the registration of refugees in Bangladesh using internationally accepted standards.

The United Nations is ready to support Myanmar and Bangladesh in all stages of this important process.

Ensuring the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees to Rakhine . in line with international refugee law . will require the restoration of mutual trust among the communities.

Improving inter-communal relations is a critical part of a sustainable resolution to the crisis and one of the essential recommendations of the Rakhine Advisory Commission, led by Kofi Annan.

In this highly complex environment, the Myanmar authorities must work to defuse tensions and uphold and protect the rights of all communities, including respect for property rights.

Those who fled should be able to return to their homes in peace . not to yet another cycle of

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violence.

It will be especially important to avoid re-locating those displaced yet again to camp-like conditions.

In Bangladesh, the United Nations continues to step up our humanitarian response.

The High Commissioner for Refugees visited just days ago.

In the next two weeks, the World Food Programme, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the International Organization for Migration and UNICEF will visit the Bangladesh border area.

On October 9th, UNHCR, OCHA and IOM will convene a donor conference.

In my meeting last week with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, I expressed great appreciation for the care being provided to refugees. I commend those countries that are supporting Bangladesh in its response.

Let me also stress the need for strengthened cooperation between Myanmar and Bangladesh and I welcome the upcoming high-level visit of Myanmar officials to Bangladesh.

The crisis has generated multiple implications for neighbouring States and the larger region, including the risk of inter-communal strife.

We should not be surprised if decades of discrimination and double standards in treatment of the Rohingya create openings for radicalization.

In moving forward, we need an effective partnership with the Myanmar authorities, especially the military. All involved should refrain from any actions that could exacerbate the precarious situation on the ground.

I welcome the participation here today of National Security Adviser U Thaung Tun, as well as the Permanent Representative of Bangladesh, Masud Bin Momen.

I appreciate the National Security Adviser's efforts to engage in dialogue with various stakeholders

during the high-level week of the General Assembly.

In addition to discussions with the United Nations Secretariat on future cooperation, the Myanmar delegation has reached out to Bangladesh to revive dialogue.

Myanmar has also engaged the Association of Southeast Asian Nations for desperately needed humanitarian assistance.

I look forward to effective and credible follow-up to the authorities' stated commitment to greater access, including for the international community, the media and humanitarian actors.

The regional cooperation with Myanmar will also be essential, and the United Nations fully stands behind this.

I welcome the important role played by Foreign Minister Retno [Marsudi] of Indonesia in this

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respect. She has been advocating for an approach that echoes the three steps I have been emphasizing and is also what many countries have been seeking.

The crisis has underlined an urgent need for a political solution to the root causes of the violence.

The core of the problem is protracted statelessness and its associated discrimination.

The recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine provide a blueprint for the longer-term future.

The Muslims of Rakhine State should be granted nationality. The present Myanmar citizenship legislation only allows it partially. We encourage Myanmar to revise it in line with international standards.

In the interim, an effective verification exercise as previously foreseen should allow those entitled to be granted citizenship according to the present laws.

All others must be able to obtain a legal status that allows them to lead a normal life, including freedom of movement and access to labour markets, education and health services.

I appeal to the leaders of Myanmar, including military leaders, to condemn incitement to racial hatred and violence, and take all measures to defuse tensions between communities.

We have taken good note of declarations by Myanmar authorities that no one is above the law. There is a clear need to ensure accountability for perpetrators of human rights violations, to curb the current violence and to prevent future abuses.

The United Nations will remain a close partner to Myanmar to address these urgent issues.

We have no agenda other than to help Myanmar advance the well-being of all the country's people.

We have no interest other than to see all communities enjoying peace, security, prosperity and mutual respect.

And we are committed to nothing less than easing the heart-breaking suffering of so many vulnerable people while forging a lasting solution that affirms shared values, promotes mutual respect and upholds human dignity.

I call on the Security Council to stand united and to support efforts to urgently end this tragedy.

Thank you very much, Mr. President.