I would like to first thank the Government of Bangladesh for allowing me to undertake a visit to the country, particularly to Cox’s Bazar. I had initially hoped to undertake this mission immediately after my last visit to Myanmar in January but for various reasons, it had to be delayed until now. As such, findings from this visit have not been included in the written report being presented to the Human Rights Council as I had to complete that report prior to this visit. I will raise key points from this visit during my oral presentation to the Human Rights Council on 13 March.

As I highlighted in my statement at the end of my last visit to Myanmar, reprisals were a major concern for me. While I did have the opportunity to meet and talk to Rohingya villagers in my visit to the north of Rakhine State in January, I was mindful of the possible retaliation against those speaking with me in Myanmar.  Therefore, it was important for me to seek the opportunity to meet the Rohingya population who fled to Bangladesh from the post 9 October violence.

I would like to thank specifically the Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the International Organization for Migration as well as the Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Bangladesh for their assistance and support in facilitating my visit. My deep appreciation also goes to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as well as other international and local actors on the ground for their support and cooperation.

I must acknowledge and pay tribute to the generosity and compassion of the host communities in Cox’s Bazar in providing shelter and sharing their personal – in many cases limited – resources to help the Rohingya population who fled from Myanmar in fear. Most of all, I am grateful and humbled by the resilience and strength shown by the members of the Rohingya population whom I met in Cox’s Bazar. I met several groups of Rohingya women and men, and their children including one with a disability, from several of the villages most affected by the security operations which ensued after the attacks against the Myanmar Border Guard Police facilities on 9 October 2016.

Hearing personal accounts of what they endured before making the difficult decision to cross into Bangladesh helped to complete the picture. And I am saddened to report that what I heard during my visit to Bangladesh was worse than I had anticipated. The magnitude of violence that these families witnessed and experienced was far more extensive than I had originally speculated.

Previously I had expressed my incredulity over the official reasons given for the burning down of houses. I refused to accept Government arguments that the Rohingya people were willing to burn down their own houses to be without a home and potentially displaced for five years or more, like those in Sittwe, for the sake of propaganda or in the hope that international actors would help build them better houses when the Government has hindered these actors from fully discharging their respective mandates, including in the delivery of food and provision of medical assistance.

This visit, I am unable to believe that women with very young children or who were heavily pregnant would have made the journey across from Myanmar into Bangladesh without very compelling reasons. To go without the guarantees and familiarity of their own homes as well as support of familial and social networks under such circumstances can only mean an enormous upheaval in their lives.

There was not a single account I heard which was not harrowing. I was especially affected by a mother who repeatedly expressed regret for mistakenly thinking that her son had been brought out from their burning house. She heard him screaming for her and managed to save his life but burn scars have been seared onto him - scars which I saw with my own eyes. One woman lost sight in both eyes due to the fire caused by the security forces personnel and had to rely on the help of others to be able to flee to Bangladesh in search of refuge. Destitute and having recently lost the use of her eyes, she fears what the future may hold for her.

A boy with a hearing impairment was desperately making gestures to tell me how both his parents died in front of him, first beaten, stamped on, and then shot to death. One man who had hidden himself when news spread that the security forces were arbitrarily arresting male villagers was left guilt-ridden for his mistaken belief that the women left behind would be spared from harm. His wife, who was seven-months’ pregnant, had been at his sister-in-law’s home as the latter was giving birth. When the security forces were unable to find male members of the village, they apparently raided all the houses looking for them. Seven members from that family were fatally shot including his wife, sister-in-law and a four-year old girl. Fortunately, the newborn survived.

I heard allegation after allegation of horrific events like these – slitting of throats, indiscriminate shootings, setting alight houses with people tied up inside and throwing very young children into the fire, as well as gang rapes and other sexual violence.

When men, young and old, broke down and cried in front of me, I could feel that the terrible things that had happened to them, had broken their spirit, and shattered their hope in the world.

Yet in spite of what they experienced, over and again I heard that what they want is to be accepted as Rohingya, to be able to go back to their home country, to be treated equally, **to be treated as human beings**. There are some who said they want justice, and when I probed what they meant by justice, most said they want their homes returned to them and to be able to live in peace. One said, “I want justice for those who were murdered and raped; I want those who murdered and raped brought to justice.”

In my report to the Human Rights Council which I will present in March, and which should be available online in the next two weeks, I highlight - in addition to the alleged human rights violations occurring within the context of the security operations that followed the 9 October attacks - how the Government of Myanmar appears to have taken, and continues to take, actions which discriminate against the Rohingya and make their lives even more difficult.

They instructed the Rohingya people to dismantle their own homes arguing that the structures had been built without permission; yet did not offer any alternative housing or forms of redress nor the opportunity to challenge such orders. They made the Rohingya villagers remove the fencing around their homes arguing security reasons, causing women particularly to feel more vulnerable as bathing facilities are normally hidden behind these fences.

It appears that the regular conduct of the household list survey was moved up from the period of the year it is normally done, possibly to hold it at a time they knew many Rohingya people, who had fled the country in fear, would not be at home during the survey. Reportedly, in several cases when a Rohingya resident has been found not to be at home, s/he has been struck off the list which also means losing the only remaining legal link to Myanmar for many of the Rohingya people in northern Rakhine.

Currently, a citizenship verification exercise under the discriminatory 1982 Citizenship Law is underway; and despite the understanding that the process should be a voluntary one, I have reports of the Rohingya people being forced to apply for the National Verification Cards; as otherwise, they are not allowed to receive food assistance, to move from one point to another within a restricted and demarcated area, to fish for their livelihood, or to carry out work as a national staff member of an international organization.

In the meantime, a strict curfew (albeit of a recently shortened duration) is still applied in the areas that the majority of the Rohingya live; their freedom of movement is restricted; they have limited access to their rights to education, healthcare, and livelihoods. They continue to be kept segregated from the Rakhine community in many areas while anti-Muslim sentiments and rhetoric are left mostly unchecked by the authorities and in some instances emboldened.

After decades of systematic and institutionalized discrimination, and long-standing persecution, no one should be surprised that some could turn to radical measures. More so after the general Rohingya population is collectively punished through the security forces’ operations for the actions potentially committed by a small fraction of the population.

It is a tragic irony that after implementing policies, laws and rules that discriminate and persecute this population, giving the pretext for some extreme elements to attack the security forces, more cruel actions are taken against this population generally in the name of national security and protection of state sovereignty. In other words, the 9 October attacks appear to have given the security forces the perfect cover to amplify and accelerate actions they had previously carried out through policies, rules and laws – with the apparent objective of expelling the Rohingya population from Myanmar altogether.

After almost five months, the Government finally announced the withdrawal of the military presence in the north of Rakhine State. Only after months of having been cautioned and warned by the international community of the increasing number of serious allegations of human rights violations occurring in these areas consequent to the security operations. And only after months of the Government defending their position with few reservations, denying and dismissing these allegations as fabrications.

Yet a video was circulated in late December and early January of Myanmar Police Force personnel beating up those rounded up for questioning. Even then, the authorities claimed this was an isolated event which I still doubt very much. Now it seems an investigation has been opened into several cases of custodial deaths. I had in fact raised such cases during my visit to Myanmar and the response which was given – that the deaths were related to their pre-existing medical conditions – appears now to be called into question. And despite the Myanmar Government’s announcement that the security operations have ceased in northern Rakhine, I am informed that there is still heavy presence of military there.

I have also received allegations of reprisals related to the interaction of the Rohingya villagers with either the foreign delegations, the UN/diplomatic mission and journalists, or the Government appointed commissions. One male villager told me how he tried to approach the UN/diplomatic mission and was stopped and detained by the military, and only released after a member of that delegation asked that he and others detained alongside him be released. He nonetheless fled Myanmar fearing he would be blacklisted.

In another instance, a female villager reportedly fled Myanmar after being pursued by the authorities after informing visiting journalists that she had been raped. In yet another case, someone who responded to questions posed by the military investigating team was instead apparently accused of being a suspected attacker. In fear of being arrested, this person also fled. Generally, I also heard how the military would warn villagers against coming out or approaching visiting dignitaries.

I was made aware during my visit to Bangladesh of how there had been previous phases of large numbers of the Rohingya population fleeing Myanmar, and that there are about 33,000 registered Rohingya refugees from the ‘91-92’ phase who are located in two registered camps, in Nayapara and Kutupalong. In addition to these registered refugees, there are reportedly about 300-500,000 undocumented Rohingya people of which tens of thousands are located in two makeshift settlements in Leda and Kutupalong. I have also visited Balukhali where temporary shelters have started to emerge and where many so-called new arrivals reportedly have tended to gravitate towards. As had been previously reported, about 70,000 more Rohingya appear to have crossed into Bangladesh since the 9 October attacks.

I understand that the Government of Bangladesh has concerns about creating conditions that may become a “pull factor” and that its position has always been for the Myanmar Government to take responsibility for the Rohingya population. I agree that the root causes of the situation of the Rohingya population lie with the Government of Myanmar. And, for these new groups of undocumented Rohingya to arrive in such a large number over a brief period of time in recent months and in dire circumstances – many with just the clothes on their backs, bearing violence-related injuries – this clearly indicates a “push factor” at hand.

I appreciate that this new caseload has caused additional stress and burden on the existing system in Bangladesh already providing humanitarian assistance to the earlier registered and undocumented Rohingya population in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Government’s extension of humanitarian assistance to the recent arrivals should also be commended.

However, I am compelled to advocate on behalf of the Rohingya that I met and whose homes and living quarters I visited in Balukhali, Leda, Nayapara and Kutupalong for the Government of Bangladesh to take greater efforts to improve their living conditions and for the international community to support such efforts.

More can, should and must be done to end the continued suffering of the Rohingya population. In particular, I urge for the Government of Myanmar to immediately cease the discrimination that the community continues to face in the country, to act to prevent any further serious rights violations and to conduct prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigations into those already alleged to have occurred. We all owe it to those I have met and their fellow community members to do everything in our power to ensure this is done and to give the Rohingya people reason to hope again.

**Annex – List of Meetings**

**Government Officials**

* Minister for Foreign Affairs, Foreign Secretary, and MOFA Director-Generals for United Nations, International Organizations and South-East Asia
* Home Secretary
* Cox’s Bazar Deputy Commissioner
* Cox’s Bazar Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner

**Others**

* UN, INGOs & NGOs providing support and assistance in Cox’s Bazar
* Representatives of the diplomatic community

**Camps & Settlements visited**

* Balukhali
* Leda makeshift settlement
* Nayapara refugee camp
* Kutupalong refugee camp and makeshift settlement