



**The plight of the Rohingya must not be allowed to slip from public consciousness**

**By Alice Wairimu Nderitu**  
**United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide**  
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No right to education. No right to work. No right to citizenship. Consistent attacks on the basis of identity. No hope for the future. Two years since I visited the Rohingya sheltering in the Cox Bazar camp in Bangladesh, and seven years since the extreme violence that broke out in Myanmar, which forced over a million of members of this community into exile out of the country, the plight of a community which remains vulnerable and for which there is no sunrise in the horizon continues calling out for help. A child born in a refugee camp seven years ago has only experienced life within temporary shelters that have become permanent, with no vision for the future beyond the contours of the camp itself. This child's parents, as many of the refugees in the camps, know all too well that their old homes have been flattened. For them, the right to return may exist in principle, but they know that it will never be fully exercised. They cannot return to their homes, because their homes are no longer there.

For the Rohingya community, signs of risk of commission of serious crimes under international human rights and humanitarian law continue to be present for the world to see. Provisional measures issued by the International Court of Justice four years ago, requiring the government and the military in Myanmar to not commit acts of genocide and to preserve evidence of crimes, pending the hearing of the case filed by The Gambia, have not been fully upheld. According to credible reports, in Myanmar, the Rohingya continue to suffer targeted killings and indiscriminate violence, including by airstrikes, shelling, burning, landmines, and unexploded ordnance. Today, as in 2017, the Rohingya are being discriminated because of their religion. They are being targeted because of who they are. Risk factors and indicators for the potential commission of the crime of genocide, which clearly existed in the 2017 violence against members of this community in Rakhine State, are still present.

Rohingya who flee the violence and brave the oceans with very fragile handmade rafts, seeking a place to call home, are being turned away when they reach foreign shores. The discrimination they suffer at home accompanies them in their perilous journey through the seas. Today, the Rohingya continues to be one of the most vulnerable communities in the world.

This vulnerability was not new seven years ago and is not new now. The Rohingya have suffered decades of discrimination, dehumanization, deprivation of their identity and of their basic rights. The extreme violence witnessed in 2017 against members of this community, in which many of them were killed, tortured, raped and burnt alive, was preceded by decades of dehumanization, by actions aimed at humiliating them and by hate speech as a triggering factor for violence. Indeed, violence with words has preceded and continues to precede the commission of physical violence. Many of the refugees I spoke to in my April 2022 visit to Cox Bazar's camp, in Bangladesh, described to me the continuum between long-lasting discrimination, hate speech and commission of widespread violence against their community.

Today, hate speech has resurged and is being used to stoke ethnic tensions between Rohingya and Arakhan community, with a view to exacerbating interethnic polarization. There have been serious allegations of targeted violence against the Rohingya, by both the Arakan Army and the Myanmar armed forces, including beheadings, burning of villages as people sleep, drone attacks, killings of unarmed people fleeing, and issuance of evacuation orders with nowhere to go. The situation has seriously deteriorated, and, today, we continue facing disturbing reports indicating that displaced civilians, many of whom are Rohingya, are being used as human shields.

The Myanmar military should refrain from using hate speech and should take steps to address and to counter it. The government of Myanmar must uphold its international obligation, under the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, to protect the entire civilian population from the risk of genocide and of all other international crimes, regardless of religion, ethnicity, origin, gender or political affiliation. But this is only the peak of the iceberg. Serious efforts are also essential to prevent incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence against minorities.

Although there have been important efforts to advance accountability from the serious allegation of commission of international crimes, such as in the ongoing proceeding at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), as well as through the work being carried out by the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), established by the United Nations Human Rights Council, collective action remains urgent to ensure that there is judicial redress for the crimes that have been committed. When advanced, justice is an essential component of prevention and a direct contributor to peace. Restoring the rule of law, ensuring criminal accountability and advancing transitional justice, truth-seeking and reconciliation initiatives should remain an important priority in global efforts aimed at ensuring that the suffering of the Rohingya comes to an end.

We all know that, at the end, a solid political solution in Myanmar is essential for strengthening the protection of the rights of all people across the country, which in itself is critical for strengthening resilience against the risk of genocide or other international crimes. This would need to involve sustained efforts towards sustainable peace based on the full respect of the rights of all citizens, regardless of their religion, ethnicity, origin, gender, age, and political affiliation. Strengthening the rule of law and permitting, encouraging and facilitating active democratic participation by all citizens is also instrumental for the prevention of the gravest crimes. Particularly, by those who have experienced decades of stigmatization and discrimination, and who have been victims of such crimes, as is the case with the Rohingya.

Designing and advancing an inclusive and comprehensive national political dialogue and reconciliation process, with the full participation of all ethnic groups, can unearth the root causes in need of addressing, including guaranteeing definite citizenship and other rights to the Rohingya community in Myanmar, as well as ensuring accountability for the crimes they have suffered. The Association of Southeastern Asia Nations (ASEAN) needs to renew urgent and commensurate efforts towards a political solution that offers full protection of civilians, taking into account the ongoing serious deterioration of the situation, which has continued occurring on a daily basis throughout this year. Building a national and regional prevention strategy aimed at advancing a strategic transformation towards sustainable peace through the strengthening of a culture of peaceful management of conflicts, integral respect of human rights and constructive management of diversity, remains urgent and imperative.

This is all essential, and steps in this direction must start to be taken now, but these lofty goals will not be achieved overnight. Before all of this can happen, immediate needs must be addressed now. It remains essential that the Rohingya refugees currently in Bangladesh continue being provided support and protection. This includes addressing instances of reported increase in negative rhetoric and hate speech against them, as well as working to improve the volatile security and safety situation in the camps. Our United Nations colleagues in the country, under the most challenging circumstances, will continue providing all possible support in assistance of civilians who deserve to live in peace and dignity, and whose plight must continue being heard.

In response to this plight, Bangladesh's interim Prime Minister, Muhammad Yunus, has made a welcome commitment to continue to support the Rohingya refugee population in his country. I encourage that these commendable efforts continue, including with providing the necessary livelihood opportunities, education and skills training for the sustainable return of these refugees to their country in the future

Ultimately, all the Rohingya refugees desire to return to their country of origin, but they can only do so in a safe and dignified manner, with access to equal rights, including to citizenship. For such voluntary and sustainable return to Myanmar to happen, safety and security needs to be established, with accountability for the crimes committed remaining crucial. Only peace, with the full respect for and recognition of human rights, can provide lasting protection for the Rohingya minority. While many will never be able to return to their homes, simply because they no longer exist, their right to build a life in peace and dignity in the country where they were born remains intact and must be honored.

The time to end the fighting and the suffering is now. The time for accountability is now. The time to strengthen protection mechanisms for the prevention of the gravest international crime is now. No effort should be spared in prioritizing these actions as a matter of utmost urgency.

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For media queries please contact:

Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect

<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention>

Email: [osapg@un.org](mailto:osapg@un.org)