

Three Years On: Prospects for Durable Solutions and Justice Remain Elusive for Rohingya

August 24, 2020

Tomorrow marks three years since the mass atrocities in Rakhine State forced more than 700,000 Rohingya civilians to flee their homes. Three years on, the vast majority remain in overcrowded refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. For many of these refugees, returning to Myanmar is not an option until guarantees are provided by the Myanmar government for their safety and protection of their rights. An estimated 600,000 Rohingya remaining in Myanmar continue to be denied freedom of movement, equal access to citizenship and access to essential services, including 130,000 living in confined camps in Rakhine State.

The escalation of conflict between the Myanmar Armed Forces and the Arakan Army since December 2018 has impacted all communities in Rakhine, including Rohingya. The conflict has displaced more than 100,000 Rakhine and other ethnic groups and resulted in the killing and maiming of civilians, including children and damage to infrastructure. For Rohingya in Rakhine State, they have been impacted in particularly critical ways given discriminatory policies that limit their movement and their consequent ability to flee from violence or access essential services. Access for humanitarian partners remains severely constrained, unpredictable and limited to certain locations only. A ceasefire that includes all parties to the conflict, including the Arakan Army, is urgently needed to support the protection of all communities in Rakhine.

In response to the recent emergence of COVID-19 cases, a ceasefire will further enable all stakeholders to focus efforts to curtail and respond to the pandemic. Rakhine State has some of the most severe rates of poverty and malnutrition among children in Myanmar, and is home to large numbers of vulnerable populations. Rohingya IDPs in Rakhine are particularly vulnerable to a Coronavirus outbreak due to overcrowding in cramped shelters, movement restrictions and poor access to services. Until recently, a shutdown of mobile data across Rakhine and Chin States has prevented hundreds of thousands of civilians in accessing information, including those in relation to COVID-19 preparedness and prevention measures. The current internet restrictions on 3G and 4G services in effect in Buthidaung, Rathedaung, Ponnagyun, Kyauktaw, Mrauk U, Minbya, Myebon and Paletwa further constrain the delivery of lifesaving assistance. The combination of these factors makes the prevention of a widespread COVID-19 outbreak in Rakhine State an urgent concern. The Myanmar government, frontline health workers, humanitarian staff, and other key workers are working hard to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Every measure must be employed to protect all communities in Rakhine state, and support frontline workers to end this pandemic and ensure no person in Myanmar is left behind.

Three years on, durable solutions for displaced Rohingya remain elusive. In a welcome step, the Myanmar government launched its *National Strategy on Resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Closure of IDP Camps* in November 2019. However, despite commitment by the Government to offer sustainable solutions for those displaced, reports from the ground indicate the authorities continue to follow an approach focused on the construction of permanent housing without any change to existing movement restrictions, denying IDPs the right to choose where they wish to relocate or return to. This approach risks leading to the continued encampment and permanent segregation of displaced communities. IDPs in Kyauk Ta Lone IDP camp in Kyaukpyu township are the first to experience an IDP camp closure process initiated after finalization of the National Strategy. They have reported being pressured to relocate to a substandard and isolated flood-prone area. IDPs have protested the relocation; however, plans for construction are ongoing at the new site.

As reflected in the National Strategy of the Government of Myanmar and the Rakhine Advisory Commission's (RAC) final recommendations endorsed by the Government, the closure of an IDP camp should be the result of meaningful community consultation and offer sustainable solutions for those displaced that allow them to resume lives free of dependency. Achieving durable solutions requires that the Myanmar government address the fundamental issues of equal rights and ensure that all communities in Rakhine State can live in safety, access basic services and pursue livelihoods opportunities.

In response to the current crisis, we, the undersigned organizations in Myanmar, remain committed to supporting a principled response and protecting the rights of stateless groups, internally displaced persons, host communities, and other ethnic minorities in Myanmar. We call on the Government of Myanmar to:

- Immediately implement an inclusive ceasefire in Rakhine and address the root causes of the crisis in the State by implementing the Rakhine Advisory Commission (RAC) recommendations, aimed at creating the conditions necessary to end Rohingya's displacement and support the rights of all communities. In line with the RAC recommendations and calls from Rohingya communities, these efforts to address the root causes of the crisis must support freedom of movement, equal access to citizenship, protection from violence and justice and accountability;
- Ensure meaningful participation of Rohingya and other displaced populations in any discussions and decision making about their future, including in relation to durable solutions for refugees and IDPs, through an inclusive process involving children, youth, women, elderly and persons with disabilities;
- Immediately reinstate full access to internet services to support information sharing and economic activity for all residents of Rakhine and Chin states. Refrain from internet access and bandwidth restrictions in the future, either in these currently affected areas or elsewhere in Myanmar.

We call on all warring parties to:

- Immediately cease all hostilities, in line with the recent UN Security Council resolution;
- Adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian law at all times to ensure the protection of civilians, humanitarian workers, and structures indispensable to the survival of the civilian population;
- Ensure full and unimpeded humanitarian access – for both national and international staff – to all areas in which people need humanitarian assistance, especially those in rural areas unable to travel to urban downtowns to access services and assistance and populations most vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19.

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