

Action needed to resolve Rakhine Crisis

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3 December 2016

The ongoing crisis in Rakhine, Myanmar is once again a major concern for neighbouring ASEAN member states. It has been close to two months since the 9 October attacks by suspected militants in Maungdaw and Rathedaung townships against border and security forces. Military operations continue in these areas where a large community of stateless Rohingyas live, some 10,000 of whom have already fled to Bangladesh where they are also not welcome. The NLD government rejected allegations made by international human rights organisations about abuses committed by security forces against the Muslim community in Rakhine since the attacks. As of mid-November, the state media reported that civilian and military casualties reached more than 130, with 102 militants and 32 soldiers killed.

Rallies at the Myanmar embassies in Bangkok, Jakarta, and Kuala Lumpur were held last week to protest the continuing lockdown operations in Rakhine and violence against the stateless Rohingyas. Thus far, Malaysia has taken the strongest stance among ASEAN members in denouncing the Myanmar government's response to the crisis. No less than the Prime Minister of Malaysia is reported to be joining a protest rally in Kuala Lumpur on 4 December where other politicians and NGOs concerned with the plight of the Rohingyas are expected to attend. The Malaysian foreign ministry last week summoned the Myanmar ambassador to Kuala Lumpur over the violence in Rakhine even as the cabinet issued a strong criticism against the NLD government on the issue. A youth minister in particular called for a review of Myanmar's membership in ASEAN in light of allegations made by some UN officials about ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity being committed against the Rohingyas. In Indonesia, calls for stronger ASEAN response against Myanmar were also made by some government officials, civil society organisations, and the media. A scheduled visit this month to Jakarta by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi has been postponed due to the ongoing crisis in Rakhine.

Meanwhile, some 13 political parties in Myanmar that includes the former ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) on 28 November issued a joint statement calling on the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC) dominated by the Tatmadaw (military) to hold an emergency meeting and to intervene in order to solve the various crises in the country, citing primarily the violence in Arakan (Rakhine). Specifically, it blamed the incompetence of the NLD government in handling these problems and alleged that "there is a systematic plan by domestic and overseas elements to cripple the nation's defences and border regions."¹ The statement called for measures that will "effectively counter domestic and overseas threats" and for the NLD to "show some courage" in telling the international

¹ "13 parties call for NDSC intervention," 29 November 2016, from <http://www.dvb.no/news/13-parties-call-ndsc-intervention/72852>, accessed on 1 December 2016.

community that the crisis in western and northern Myanmar were linked to “terrorist organisations” with international connections.²

We join the international community in expressing our deep concern over the continuing crisis in Rakhine where ongoing military operations against militants have severely affected both Muslim and Buddhist communities in the area. We support the call of the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide Adama Dieng for the Myanmar government “to demonstrate its commitment to the rule of law and to the human rights of all its populations.” Specifically, the government and the military in Myanmar should allow access to humanitarian assistance to affected communities in northern Rakhine as well as verification of allegations of human rights violations against the Rohingyas. While recognising the difficult position of the ruling NLD in managing the crisis, the people of Myanmar should be vigilant in supporting its democratically-elected civilian government.

We support calls for ASEAN to be more pro-active in responding to the crisis in Rakhine and use its existing mechanisms in helping the Myanmar government to effectively put a stop to alleged human rights violations against the Rohingyas and other affected communities in the area. In the context of humanitarian crisis and alleged crimes against humanity possibly being committed, ASEAN members should step up and call on the Myanmar government and the military to uphold the primary responsibility of the state to protect its populations from atrocity crimes.

² Ibid.