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Myanmar: Meet immediate humanitarian needs and address systemic discrimination

As the situation in northern Rakhine State remains very tense, Myanmar authorities should ensure full and unfettered humanitarian access to displaced people, and conduct an independent and impartial investigation into recent communal violence, Amnesty International said in a statement today.

The Myanmar government should also aim to replace the state of emergency in Rakhine State at the earliest opportunity, facilitate international monitors, and address decades of systemic discrimination against ethnic minority Rohingyas.

The widespread violence in at least eight areas that began on 8 June has reduced considerably, but human rights abuses continue to take place among the Buddhist Rakhine, Muslim Rakhine, and Muslim Rohingya communities, as well as by state security forces. This is especially the case in Maungdaw and Rathidaung.

According to the government, at least 50 people have been killed, and over 30,000 displaced by the violence. Several thousand homes have been destroyed.

The basic humanitarian needs of these people must be met immediately, as many still lack adequate food, water, shelter, and medical attention. The Myanmar authorities should allow local and international aid agencies full and unhindered access to all displaced persons—including an estimated 1,500 persons illegally denied refuge across the border last week by Bangladesh.

Yesterday, Bangladesh border guards similarly detained at least 150 Rohingya men who were trying to enter Bangladesh in small boats on the Naf River. They were fleeing a wave of mostly arbitrary arrests by Myanmar border forces and the army since 15 June in Maungdaw.

The immediate causes of the violence should be thoroughly, independently, and impartially investigated, and perpetrators of human rights violations—including among the security forces—held accountable.

Amnesty International further noted that the underlying causes of the violence are as critical as its effects, and should be addressed with equal commitment by the Myanmar authorities.

Amnesty International's work around the world has shown that states of emergency, though sometimes necessary, suspend certain rights even while protecting others. The state of emergency in Rakhine State should be lifted at the earliest opportunity, and a team of international monitors, possibly made up of ASEAN nationals, deployed to the relevant areas.

Given that the conflicting Rakhine and Rohingya communities are also divided on religious lines, monitors should endeavor to ensure that religious freedom is not restricted in the name of achieving inter-ethnic peace.

Amnesty International emphasized that restoring the pre-violence status quo is not sufficient, however, as systemic discrimination against the Rohingya characterizes decades of state policy in Myanmar. Tens of thousands of Rohingyas were forcibly displaced by security forces in 1991-1992. Despite being a state party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Myanmar continues to deny Rohingya children the right to a nationality. Refused citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Act,

the ethnic and religious minority is restricted to various degrees in their rights to study, work, travel, marry, practice their religion, and receive health services.

As evidenced by recent statements by former political prisoners in Myanmar, this discrimination stems from and further contributes to prejudice against the Rohingya.

Myanmar authorities must grant Rohingyas the citizenship to which they have right and rescind all discriminatory policies and practices against them.

Background

On 28 May, a 27-year-old Buddhist Rakhine woman was raped and killed in Maungdaw. The next day police reportedly detained three Muslim suspects. On 3 June, a crowd of some 300 Rakhines in Toungup township stopped a Yangon-bound bus, and reportedly believing that the perpetrators were on-board, beat to death 10 Muslim passengers. Intensive inter-ethnic and religious violence ensued and continued through 14 June, despite the government declaring a state of emergency in Rakhine State on 10 June, and the situation has remained tense.