

For immediate release

Proposed Repatriation to Myanmar for Rohingya Refugees is far too Premature

Bangkok, 19 January 2018, 15:00: On Tuesday 16 January, the Myanmar and Bangladesh governments reached agreement around the repatriation of Rohingya refugees who fled military violence earlier last year. Whilst exact timelines are yet to be articulated, Myanmar officials have publicly commented that the process is expected to take two years and will commence as early as 23 January 2018. This troubling announcement comes at a time when violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State remains on-going and conditions are far from conducive for safe and voluntary returns to occur.

Since August 2017, more than 655,500 Rohingya refugees have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh in search of safety. This mass exodus was primarily the result of large-scale military clearance operations by the Myanmar authorities and has been described by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights as "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing". More than three quarters of the Rohingya population from Northern Rakhine State, including women, children and the elderly, have been forcibly displaced from their homes. This makes it one of the largest and most pressing refugee crises of our time.

Reports and eyewitness accounts gathered from refugees inside Bangladesh attest to horrific human rights abuses including killings, systematic razing of villages, and rape. Unfortunately, the recent persecution against the Rohingya is not new. Stripped of citizenship in 1982, the Rohingya have been subject to decades of harassment, discrimination and persecution. Renowned human rights advocate and APRRN Chair Yiombi Thona describes the ongoing persecution as "a situation that the world has turned a blind-eye to for far too long". In addition, he highlights the "proposed repatriation is fundamentally problematic as conditions of safety and security inside Myanmar for Rohingya simply do not exist."

Adding to security concerns, access for humanitarian actors to affected communities also remains extremely limited inside Myanmar's Northern Rakhine State. Under orders of the Myanmar government, food distribution remains limited which has resulted in a desperate humanitarian situation whereby communities are not able to access the fundamental necessities required for a dignified existence.

For any repatriation to occur, there must first be a complete end to any violence, or the prospect thereof, inside Rakhine State. In addition, the root causes of persecution, including the ability to acquire Myanmar citizenship must also be thoroughly addressed. Lastly, aid agencies and other actors including UNHCR must have unfettered access to returnees to conduct monitoring and to provide assistance. Julia Mayerhofer, Secretary General of the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network added "repatriation must be voluntary and must meet international human rights standards. Refugees should also be central to any discussions and should not be forced to return if they do not feel safe to do so."

About APRRN:

The Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network is a vibrant network of over 320 civil society organisations and individuals from 28 countries in the Asia Pacific region committed to advancing the rights of refugees, through joint advocacy, capacity-strengthening, resource sharing and outreach.

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