

The Rohingya crisis and the failure of the UK and rest of the international community to act effectively

Current situation

- A military offensive by the military in Burma/Myanmar, targeting the Rohingya Muslim minority in the country, began on August 25th, using as a pretext attacks on police stations by a small armed Rohingya group.
- The United Nations has stated that the attacks were well organised, co-ordinated and systematic, 'not only to drive out the population in droves but to prevent the fleeing Rohingya victims from returning to their homes.'
- Children and elderly have been burnt in their homes.
- Civilians shot as they flee.
- Mass use of gang-rape, including soldiers gang-raping girls as young as five.
- Children deliberately targeted and killed.
- Babies snatched from their parent's arms and thrown alive into fires.
- More than 600,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh since the offensive began.
- Thousands of homes have been destroyed.
- A pregnant woman raped, her stomach cut open and her baby killed, and her nipples cut off.
- Victims, including children, forced to watch relatives and loved ones tortured and killed.
- Starvation is also being used to drive Rohingya out of Burma, caused by restrictions on aid, movement and lack of security.
- Ethnic Rakhine mobs and military are looting property & livestock of remaining Rohingya.
- The United Nations has described what is taking place as a 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing'.

Longstanding repression

- The Rohingya have long been persecuted, with the military dictatorship that ruled for decades and subsequent governments using twin tactics of human rights violations and deliberate impoverishment to drive the Rohingya out of Burma.
- Rohingya people have been denied citizenship, leaving them stateless.
- Rohingya have been denied the right to travel within Burma and face restrictions on travel even within the parts of Rakhine State where they predominantly live.
- Rohingya children are denied access to higher education.
- The majority of Rohingya cannot vote and have been barred from forming political parties or standing in elections.
- Rohingya are subject to constant extortion and arbitrary taxation by authorities.
- Rohingya need permission to marry, which can be delayed for years.
- 140,000 Rohingya live in squalid prison camps with severe restrictions on aid they can receive.

A long history of failing to defend Rohingya rights

On Monday 16th October EU Foreign Ministers effectively said 'Yes on our watch' to ethnic cleansing of Rohingya, deciding that the only action they would take is the suspension of invitations to senior military officers to visit the EU. They failed even to use the words ethnic cleansing.

This lack of action continues a long history of standing by while rights of the Rohingya are violated, including:

- The suspension of EU sanctions in early 2012 despite repression of the Rohingya.
- A condition of EU sanctions being permanently lifted was an improvement of the situation of the Rohingya. In 2012 there were two waves of violence against the Rohingya displacing 140,000

- Severe restrictions were imposed on the delivery of aid to Rohingya in camps for those internally displaced during attacks in 2012. The camps were described by senior United Nations officials as the worst or most squalid they had ever seen, yet the restrictions were, in effect, accepted. Raising the issue became a tick box exercise.
- When the military launched its offensive against Rohingya in October 2016, forcing more than 100,000 Rohingya to flee, employing mass use of rape and killing civilians, there was no change in the approach by the British government or the European Union. Min Aung Hlaing was invited to speak at a prestigious meeting of EU military heads in Brussels even as his soldiers were raping and killing Rohingya in Rakhine State. Italy, Germany and Austria all subsequently gave him red carpet tours of their countries, including visiting military suppliers. The UK kept providing training.

What practical action has been taken to date to pressure the military to stop their offensive and pressure the government of Burma to end persecution of the Rohingya?

- The UK has suspended a training programme for the Burmese military.
- The EU has suspended invitations to senior military officers to visit Europe.

That's it.

Practical things the British government can do

- Provide more aid to more than 600,000 Rohingya who have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh.
- Support a referral of the situation to the International Criminal Court. (Burma/Myanmar is not a signatory of the Rome Statute so the UN Security Council must make a referral.
- State clearly that what is happening is ethnic cleansing and that there must be accountability.
- Support a UN mandated global arms embargo against Burma.
- EU end all training and co-operation with the Burmese military (the EU is only reviewing co-operation).
- Support reinstating the UN General Assembly Resolution on human rights in Burma.
- Ban investment and business with military owned companies.
- EU ban on sale of all equipment (not just weapons) to the military.
- A complete visa ban on all members of the military.
- Explore opportunities using the principle of universal jurisdiction to hold Burma's general to account.

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