

Statement Marking the First Anniversary of the Genocide Against the Rohingya

This Saturday, 25 August, will mark one year since security forces in Myanmar (Burma) initiated so-called “clearance operations” against the Rohingya population in Rakhine State. During the operations the security forces committed widespread and systematic attacks against the Rohingya, including the unlawful killing of civilians, torture, sexual violence, arson attacks and the destruction of more than 350 villages. During the first month of the operations alone an estimated 6,700 Rohingya, including at least 730 children, were killed. Between August and December more than 720,000 ethnic Rohingya civilians were also forced to flee to Bangladesh.

Atrocities committed since 25 August 2017 appear to have been undertaken with intent to target and destroy the Rohingya as a group, based upon their ethnic and religious identity. The Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect - as well as a number of governments, UN officials and human rights organizations - have recognized that the crimes committed against the Rohingya may constitute genocide under international law.

The Myanmar authorities continue to deny that these atrocities have taken place. In particular, the military insists that it only carried out counter-insurgency operations after the so-called Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army armed group attacked police posts and an army base. However, there is compelling evidence that the military made extensive preparations to attack the Rohingya population long before 25 August. These preparations included the deployment of additional troops to Rakhine State, arming local non-Rohingya villagers and blocking the flow of crucial humanitarian aid to Rohingya communities. Since then Myanmar’s authorities have also made deliberate attempts to conceal evidence of atrocities by bulldozing the remains of burned villages and denying access to Rakhine State for members of the UN-mandated Fact-Finding Mission, independent investigators and the media.

Atrocities committed against the Rohingya are the culmination of decades of institutionalized persecution of this distinct Muslim ethnic minority group of over 1 million people. This includes the denial of citizenship as a result of discriminatory laws, involuntary confinement to displacement camps, and severe restrictions on their freedom of movement, marriage and reproductive rights, as well as access to employment and education. Before August 2017 Rohingya civilians already experienced lives of intense segregation, exclusion and apartheid.

Despite this history of persecution and overwhelming evidence of atrocities, in the past year the UN Security Council has not passed a single binding resolution on the situation in Myanmar.

The UN Security Council should immediately refer the situation in Rakhine State to the International Criminal Court for investigation. The Council should also impose an arms embargo on Myanmar and targeted sanctions on all senior officers with command responsibility for atrocities committed since 25 August 2017. These measures should remain in place until the government of Myanmar demonstrates progress on a number of key issues, including restoring a path to citizenship for the Rohingya, amending or repealing all discriminatory laws and policies that violate their fundamental human rights, and holding those responsible for atrocities accountable in a court that meets international standards.

The broader international community must also uphold their responsibility to protect the Rohingya. Individual governments and regional organizations should suspend all cooperation and training programs with Myanmar's armed forces and impose targeted sanctions on all senior officers with command responsibility for mass atrocity crimes in Rakhine State, including Commander-in-Chief General Min Aung Hlaing. All international trade and development programs in Rakhine State should be scrupulously reviewed to ensure that they do not reinforce discriminatory structures. The international community should also support ongoing efforts to protect Rohingya refugees and ensure that any repatriation is conducted on a strictly voluntary basis, in accordance with the 1951 Refugee Convention and the principle of non-refoulement.

Last year the international community failed to prevent a genocide from being committed in Myanmar. But it is not too late to protect the Rohingya from further persecution and violence and ensure that the perpetrators face justice.