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For immediate release

Joint Statement by Alice Wairimu Nderitu, United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, and Michelle Bachelet, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, on the situation in Myanmar

NEW YORK/GENEVA (28 March 2021) – The UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Alice Wairimu Nderitu, and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, on Sunday issued a clear warning of a heightened risk of atrocity crimes in Myanmar, following another day of widespread bloodshed by the Myanmar military.

The two senior UN officials strongly condemned the Myanmar military’s widespread, lethal, increasingly systematic attacks against peaceful protesters, as well as other serious violations of human rights since it seized power on 1 February 2021. Thousands of people have also been arbitrarily arrested – many subjected to enforced disappearance. Saturday witnessed the bloodiest day since the demonstrations against the coup began, with security forces killing at least 107 individuals – including 7 children – according to multiple credible reports, with the number of deaths expected to rise as reports are confirmed. Hundreds more were wounded and detained during these seemingly coordinated attacks in over 40 locations throughout the country.

Bachelet and Nderitu called on the military to immediately stop killing the very people it has the duty to serve and protect.

“The shameful, cowardly, brutal actions of the military and police – who have been filmed shooting at protesters as they flee, and who have not even spared young children – must be halted immediately. The international community has a responsibility to protect the people of Myanmar from atrocity crimes,” Bachelet and Nderitu said.

The Special Adviser and the High Commissioner called on the Security Council to take further steps, building on its statement of 10 March 2021, and for ASEAN and the wider international community to act promptly to uphold the responsibility to protect the people of Myanmar from atrocity crimes. While the State has the primary responsibility to protect its population, the international community shares that responsibility, and in cases where the State is manifestly failing, the international community “should take timely and collective action in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations to protect civilian populations that are at risk of atrocity crimes.”

Nderitu and Bachelet called for an end to systemic impunity in Myanmar. “We must ensure accountability for past crimes and deter the most serious international crimes from being committed,” the two officials stated. “The failure to address the atrocity crimes the military has committed in the past, including against Rohingya and other minorities, has brought Myanmar to this terrible pass. There is no way forward without accountability and fundamental reform of the military.”

The senior officials urged all parties – including defecting officials, police and military officers – to cooperate with international mechanisms, including the International Criminal Court and the Human Rights Council’s Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, in fighting impunity in the country.

This situation has also put at further risk the already vulnerable ethnic and religious minorities in Myanmar, including the Rohingya. This population has long suffered horrific violence at the hands of the Myanmar military with impunity, as documented by the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar established by the Human Rights Council.

“We are deeply concerned about the impact that the current situation may have on these populations and are closely monitoring developments. The rights of minority groups, including the Rohingya population must be fully respected,” the two UN officials stated. They noted the diversity of the protest movement, and encouraged the newfound sense of unity across ethnic and religious divides, as well as the growing recognition of past crimes against minorities, including Rohingya.

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