Rohingya Report puts Myanmar on Rights Abuse Radar

The UN report on human rights violations on the Rohingyas—which documents mass gang rape, killings, including of babies and young children, brutal beatings and disappearances has put immense international pressure on the Myanmar government. The question now is whether the Myanmar government will accept the allegations and do something to address the crisis?

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The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), in its report released on February 3 detailed the widespread human rights violations against the Rohingya population by Myanmar’s security forces in the country’s northern Rakhine state, some of which it claims may amount to crimes against humanity.

The OHCHR report was based on interviews with people who fled Myanmar after attacks on a border post in October last year, the ensuing counter military operations and a lockdown in north Maungdaw. The report documents mass gang-rape, killings, including of babies and young children, brutal beatings, disappearances and other serious human rights violations.

Undoubtedly, the report sends a strong message and puts tremendous pressure on Myanmar. After the report was released, the Myanmar government said it is “deeply concerned” about the “very serious” allegations of atrocities against the Rohingya Muslims.

Myanmar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a statement released on February 8 said that the government was investigating the allegations and would take legal action against the perpetrators if there is a clear evidence of human rights abuses.

The home ministry, controlled by the military, has set up a team of five high-ranking police officials to investigate allegations of widespread human rights abuses committed by the security forces. The military has also said that five policemen have been sentenced to two months’ detention and three senior offi-
cers had been demoted over the incident of a self-style footage of police kicking and beating Rohingya in Koe Tan Kauk village of Rathedaung township in November last year.

The military has also said that the man believed to have led the Maungdaw border outpost attacks, which killed nine policemen, was sentenced to death on February 10. The man, named Uruma, was charged under Section 302(1)(c) of Myanmar’s penal code for escorting the attackers to the police targets in Maungdaw. If convicted, it carries a punishment of a fine, a term of imprisonment of up to seven years, or death penalty in the most severe case.

Though the National League for Democracy (NLD) government has not officially accepted the serious allegations, it has come under intense pressure by the report. Aung San Suu Kyi is likely to handle the matter cautiously and while the NLD government initiates its own investigation, Suu Kyi will probably reach out to the military commander-in-chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing for his intervention.

However, it is important to note that Myanmar’s democratization is still incomplete, which means there is a hybrid political system whereby the civilian government and the military share power.

While criticizing her, one should also recognize what she has done within her limited capacity. For example, she created the Kofi Annan-led commission to get the international perspective (or unbiased assessment) on the sensitive issue, despite opposition from several political parties, including the Union Solidarity and Development Party, which governed the country for five years under President Than Sein.

The NLD government constituted a commission led by the country’s military-backed Vice President Myint Swe. Moreover, the NLD government sent a high-level delegation to Bangladesh in its attempt to resolve the Rohingya conundrum. The Myanmar government has also formed a leading body to accelerate the process of issuing National Verification Cards to Rohingya awaiting citizenship verification under the 1982 Citizenship Law, which classifies citizenship into three categories — full citizen, associate citizen and naturalized citizen.

But what Suu Kyi and her NLD government could and should do is instead of denying human rights violations against the Rohingya population, especially in light of the OHCHR report, it must work together with the military leadership to end atrocities and provide adequate humanitarian assistance to the affected population. Befitting punishment should be given to human rights violators.

Suu Kyi and her NLD government also needs to lay out a concrete and systematic policies and plans for addressing the fundamental problems of the Rohingya, such as identity or nomenclature and citizenship issues.

The report is also likely to put Bangladesh on the spotlight. The Bangladeshi government is seeking the international community’s assistance in developing the Thengar Char island and in transporting the refugees there. The island in the Bay of Bengal is lashed by high tides year-round and submerged during the monsoon season. It is a largely uninhabitable marshland and several hours by boat from the mainland.

The plan has drawn criticism from around the world. The relocation plan was last proposed in 2015, but the government suspended it after international aid groups and rights activists criticized it. The plan was reinstated following the arrival of about 65,000 Rohingya from Myanmar in October and November last year.

While the Myanmar government is conducting its own verification process, the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation should extend all possible assistance to the Myanmar government in its attempt to address the problem. This should include providing aids and logistical support, as well as the possibility of resettling some of the most vulnerable Rohingya population into their own or other willing third countries, like any other refugee populations of the world.

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