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SPEAKING FREELY

Silence as Myanmar 'genocide' unfolds

By Nancy Hudson-Rodd

Speaking Freely is an Asia Times Online feature that allows guest writers to have their say. [Please click here](#) if you are interested in contributing.

On January 23, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar and humanitarian chiefs voiced "deep concern" on reports of "alarming levels of violence" against ethnic Rohingya in Myanmar's western Rakhine State. When their houses were being robbed in DuChiraDan village, Maungdaw, the Rohingya residents called for help, according to reports. The villagers fled the site when they realized that the robbers included police and ethnic Rakhine extremists.

At 3am that morning, a group of military, other security forces, and police raided the village, blocked the entrance, and fired indiscriminately on escaping men, women, and children. At least 40 people were killed and many more injured. The remaining villagers were rounded up, put into two trucks, and carried off to an unknown location. Authorities later declared the village a "no-entry zone".

The UN Rapporteur demanded the government immediately investigate the reports of violence. This call was ignored, as have been all the other "urgent" calls for action by various international groups. Instead, the Ministry of Information announced that journalists responsible for reporting the story would be held accountable for any "unrest" in Rakhine State supposedly caused by their reports.

The government's media mouthpiece, New Light of Myanmar, ran an article claiming false reports of violence, citing a Maungdaw policeman who denied any incidents occurred. The article concluded that "reports of killings caused by racial and religious conflicts seemed to instigate unrest".

Ethnic Rohingya are not recognized as one of Myanmar's 135 "official national races". According to the UN, they are one of the world's most persecuted minority groups. The UN refused a Myanmar minister's request in 2011 to resettle to second countries all of the estimated 800,000 Rohingya now resident in Myanmar.

President Thein Sein, meanwhile, refuses to amend the 1982 law which stripped all Rohingya of their citizenship. He recently asserted: "the law is meant to protect the country and the government has no plans to revise it". A census to be completed in 2014 has no category for the Rohingya, only Bengali, an exercise that will effectively erase the minority group's existence from the country.

The Rohingya's lack of legal status effectively gives state approval to endemic discrimination. Thein Sein claims sectarian, religious or ethnic tensions are an "unwelcome by-product" of political liberalization. Such official deflections deny the state's involvement in the unfolding genocide now taking place in Myanmar.

They also build upon dangerous psychological and ideological factors that have induced violent grassroots reactions to racist rumors and claims against Rohingya. Progress Magazine, the official journal of the Rakhine Nationalities and Development Party, openly wrote (November 2012) of ridding Myanmar of its Rohingya population. The magazine wrote:

[Adolf] Hitler and [Adolf] Eichmann were the enemy of the Jews, but were probably heroes to the Germans. ... In order for a country's survival, the survival of a race, or in defense of national sovereignty, crimes against humanity or in-human acts may justifiably be committed as Hitler and the Holocaust.. If that survival principle or justification is applied or permitted equally (in our Myanmar case) our endeavors to protect our Rakhine race and defend the sovereignty and longevity of the Union of Myanmar cannot be labelled as "crimes against humanity", or "inhuman" or "in-humane". ... We no longer wish to hold permanent concerns about the Bengali in our midst. We just want to get it over and done with, once and for all.

Along that editorial line, Myanmar has witnessed unprecedented pogroms and riots against Rohingya since the summer of 2012. They have been systematically uprooted, with 140,000 held in internal displacement camps and unknown thousands have taken to sea as refugees. Their homes, businesses, and mosques have been destroyed. Amid the destruction, many Rohingya have been unfairly imprisoned, with some tortured to death while behind bars.

The UN Rapporteur has urged Thein Sein to release two prominent Rohingya prisoners of conscience, community

leaders Dr Tun Aung and Kyaw Hla Aung. Both have been falsely charged, denied lawyers, refused medical care, held incommunicado, and referred to in racist terms. Instead, Thein Sein has denied the UN's and other groups' claims of widespread, systemic, and state-supported acts of violence against Rohingya. He has conducted no independent investigation into the spreading violence, held no person accountable for the deaths and destruction, and denied holding prisoners of conscience.

Gregory Stanton, president of Genocide Watch, a nongovernmental organization, describes genocide as a process that develops in 10 not necessarily sequential stages, with many occurring at the same time. As defined by this 10-point metric and determined by the Toronto-based Project for Genocide Prevention, Myanmar is at extremely high risk of full-blown genocide.

For instance, there is a proliferation of internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Rakhine State. Sealed off ghettos within urban areas constitute by some definitions genocide by isolation, starvation, and deprivation of the necessities of life, if done with the intent to destroy the group. The Rohingya are being systematically purged from towns, villages, and cities throughout Rakhine State and elsewhere across the country.

This purge is being hidden from the outside world. The government asks for and receives international funds under the guise of humanitarian help for Rohingya, yet does not allow aid workers to visit all the IDP camps. In November 2013, when the European Commission promised to increase humanitarian support to Myanmar, they issued a statement likening conditions for Rohingya held in IDP camps in Rakhine State, to those of Jewish people in ghettos established by Nazi-run Germany. Australia is the largest funder, giving US\$8,410,411 of humanitarian assistance as of January 2014.

In his book *Genocide: A Critical Bibliographical Review*, Leo Kuper explains that nations will continue to express their optimism about certain government's reforms despite abundant evidence about continued systematic repression. Thein Sein's abusive policies, cloaked in terms of democratization and political reform, are openly supported by many Western governments.

The term "bystander nation" was originally used to describe Allied governments' lack of response to early knowledge of the unfolding destruction of European Jews, the reluctance to believe allegations of genocide, and the refusal to adopt policies for action. Today, genocide is an unfolding reality in Myanmar and the complicit silence of Western donor nations is deafening.

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