

EXCLUSIVE: 'Rohingya issue, not Muslims v/s Buddhist Paradigm'

In an exclusive interaction, Maung Zami said Myanmar was taking advantage of strategic rivalry between China and India

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Maung Zami, 56, scholar and activist, known for his opposition to the violence in Myanmar and his support to the Rohingya population said the Burmese military was taking advantage of strategic rivalry between China and India and blamed genocide of Rohingya to an institutional hate campaign.

EXCLUSIVE: 'Rohingya issue, not Muslims v/s Buddhist paradigm'

Born in a Burmese Buddhist family, Zami said a campaign of ignorance was manufactured in his country through schools, mass media, and Buddhist organizations against Rohingya, which eventually culminated in the genocide.

“The Burmese public has been made ignorant of the facts about Islam and Muslims,” said Zami in an exclusive interaction with Anadolu Agency.

Co-founder of the Free Rohingya Coalition and the Forces of Renewal Southeast Asia, the UK-based scholar said there was no reason for the Burmese government to target Rohingya as they do not demand secession, independence, or even a regional autonomy.

“Rohingya are not fighting with any community or with the government. They want to live in Burma as peacefully as anybody,” he said.

He said it is Rakhine Buddhists who are fighting the central government of ethnic Burmese to reclaim their sovereignty, they have lost 200 years ago.

Zarin said the Rohingya have become sandwiched between the two warring Buddhist parties.

“That is the only conflict there, “he said, adding that the world does not know these facts about Myanmar and tends to focus on Muslims versus the Buddhist paradigm.

The activist further said that the Burmese military was also taking advantage of strategic rivalry between China and India in the region.

“The multi-billion-dollar projects along the Arakan the coastline, or like giving the mineral rights concessions or gas exploration rights, you will see a pattern of the Burmese military, making sure both India and China received something. In other words, while they are playing India and China against each other, to maintain the benefits of being allies with both powers,” he said.

Fear and hate are rooted in ignorance

Anadolu Agency: As an activist, who has been at the forefront against racial discrimination, how you view the present uprising against the brutal killing of George Floyd and its linkage with white supremacy in the US, the UK, and with the old European colonialism? And is there also a paradox with so-called European values of human rights?

Maung Zami (MZ): It triggered what you call uprising. But I think it is more than an uprising as it triggered a new global consciousness among non-black people, that something is fundamentally wrong, and needs to be changed.

White supremacy or what racism is not about the skin color of white people. It is about devastatingly harmful ideology, about institutions, histories, and structures and practices of discrimination, exploitation, looting, and land grab.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade went on for 350 years. All the leading European countries, France, Britain, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, who are champions of human rights and liberalism today, were in the slave trade in the US, Caribbean, and Brazil.

These leading European powers looted Africa of its most precious resources. That is not diamonds, gold, or copper, but its humans.

We today witness the lootings in New York and other places and feel uncomfortable. Leading European nations looted Africa of its humans, making them commodities, chained in the basement of ships. The slave trading was endorsed by the Catholic Church and the rulers of Europe.

The wealth of Europe, all the beautiful cities of Europe, Paris, Amsterdam, Prague were built on the corpses and labor of non-European people.

Therefore, what we are seeing today and the destruction of statues of slave traders goes beyond police brutality.

Q: Hate leads to racism and that leads to exclusion which in turn has led to genocide quite often in history. Rohingya have experienced this all. How much is this phenomenon interlinked to global events happening in Israel, where Palestinians find their backs against the wall. What leads to one community to feel it is superior to others, like whites in the West, Jews in Israel. Colonial powers no longer exist, but why the colonial mindset is still alive and kicking? Who feeds it?

MZ: I think fear and hatred are rooted in ignorance. Ignorance is not something that comes naturally. It is taught in school, promoted by demagogic politicians, propagated by religious leaders, and amplified by mass media.

So, these institutions are involved in making public ignorant.

I am a Burmese Buddhist from Myanmar. I lived there. We were made ignorant of the fact that Rohingya belong to Burma. Burmese Buddhists susceptible to the propaganda of the Burmese military since the 1960s have been made to believe that they do not want Muslim Burmese whether they are Rohingya ethnic, or Gujarati or others who may have migrated to Burma centuries ago.

The Burmese military systematically engaged in propagating Islamophobia: Muslims are bad and evil and Islam is invasive and a conquering ideology. And they will destroy a Buddhist country and Buddha's way of life.

Therefore, we, the Burmese public has been made ignorant of the facts about Islam and Muslims. Muslims want peace as much as any other, Christian or Buddhist or Hindu. Because of this manufactured ignorance, Burmese think to get rid of the Rohingya and discriminate and persecute other Muslims.

There are also economic gains that accrue in the Rohingya genocide. Every genocide benefits the killers, the perpetrators. If you look at Nazi Germany, when the Nazis mass-exterminated the German Jews everything that belonged to the victims was confiscated by the killers – land, building, treasures of all kinds including jewelry, gold, art objects, even shoes!

Likewise, the Burmese military and the political state took the abandoned land, warehouses, paddy, un-destroyed buildings, etc.

Rohingya not fighting with government or any community

Q: Out of 14 provinces in Myanmar 11 are embroiled in some or other forms of strife. Rakhine is the only province where the conflict has attained communal proportions. Why is it so?

MZ: Concerning the Rohingya, there is no conflict. Because genocides are no conflicts. Rohingya are not fighting with any community or with the government. Rohingya wants to live in Burma as peacefully as anybody. They even do not demand independence or regional autonomy – only basic rights, civil rights, and equal citizenship which they had lost at the hands of the Burmese state.

So, the conflict in Rakhine is actually between Rakhine Buddhists who lost their old kingdom 200 years ago and the Burmese Buddhists who rule the center. That is the only conflict there. Rakhine Buddhists are fighting through armed struggle against the Burmese Buddhists.

Q: This is something news. But the question is why the world does not know that there are other armed resistance movements and conflicts in Myanmar?

MZ: Because the western media wants to focus on Muslims versus the Buddhist paradigm. They want to use this narrative of religious conflict – or “the clash of civilization”, if you want, which fits the larger Islamophobia which seeps through western media being that whenever there is Islam, there is a war, conflict, and suicide bombing.

But in the case of Burma, in the case of Rohingya, the violence is perpetrated not by the Muslims, but by the Burmese military and Buddhist majority.

Q: Almost one-quarter of Myanmar hosts one or more ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and most of them practice Buddhism. Why does the central government's axe only fall on Rohingya in Rakhine state?

MZ: Rakhine has a triangular colonial situation. On one hand, Rohingya Muslims share the Rakhine region as co-residents with Rakhine Buddhists. The entire coastline of the ancient Arakan kingdom is a colony of the Burmese Buddhists. The Rohingya have got sandwiched between the Burmese Buddhists at the center and Rakhine Buddhists. The center has made sure that these regional Muslims and Buddhist communities remain divided. So, this is a classic colonial policy by the Burmese Buddhist and the military against two communities who are equally colonized by the Burmese. Therefore, this horizontal or communal conflict in Rakhine has been actively fanned from the colonial Burmese center.

Just about every single ethnic community, who has a the pocket of land that they call their ancestral land or region, has taken up and revolted against the central, ethnically Burmese control, military or civilian the government since independence from Britain in 1948. The main reason for widespread armed ethnic rebellion or revolt against the central government in Burma is because of the violation of the principle of ethnic equality, within what was promised to be a federation of different ethnic communities?

That is what triggered widespread ethnic armed rebellions in all non-Burmese regions. And remember, Burma is a multi-ethnic country with borders with about five different countries like big ones like China, India, or smaller ones like Bangladesh, Thailand, Laos. All these borderland areas belong to ethnic minorities. More importantly, these borderlands are militarily

strategic for the Burmese military. And being used as buffers, these regions are rich in teak, agricultural land and above ground and underground minerals like gold, titanium, jade, copper.

Rakhine coast region also has one of the 10th largest natural gas deposits in the world. So, there are economic elements and military elements that motivate the Burmese military to treat these ethnic communities as if they were colonies of the Burmese military and by extension colonies of the Burmese majority of people like myself.

Burmese military targets Rohingya

Q: But again, the question is why they single out Rohingya if they have issues with other communities as well?

MZ: There are two reasons. Rohingya happen to be Muslims and are living next to one of the largest Muslim countries in the world, Bangladesh. And through the eyes of the Burmese military, Bangladesh is a smaller country in landmass compared to Burma. And yet, Bangladesh's population is three times as many as Burma. Burma's population is 53 million in total, including the Rohingya. Bangladesh's population is about 160 million.

For that reason, the Burmese military fears that the larger Muslim country of Bangladesh would push the Muslim population into Arakan or Rakhine. And they would take over the land, using Rohingyas as a proxy. Although the earlier generation of Burmese military leaders, including my great uncle had accepted the Rohingya as our ethnic people. In the mid-1960s, Gen. Ne Win and his deputies in the military decided that they must get rid of Rohingya first, to make sure that the Rohingya in Rakhine state could not become proxies that would advance the interest of the then East Pakistan that was the name of Bangladesh before 1971. Rohingya have been singled out for this genocidal policy by the Burmese military since.

Q: What about other Muslim communities living in another part of Myanmar?

MZ: We have a total of about 16 different types of Muslim populations, but only Rohingya are confronted or subject to this textbook example of genocide. There is no such thing as a textbook example of ethnic cleansing because there are no textbooks written on ethnic cleansing, only genocide. Rohingya have a strategic pocket of geography that they legitimately call their ancestral land, which is right in between Burma and Bangladesh.

If you have been to the Rohingya area on the Bangladeshi side, Chittagong or Cox's Bazar, the largest refugee camp of Rohingya in the world, you will notice geography is seamless. The mountain ranges and rivers are seamlessly connected with the Arakan. Besides, that area at one point was a single cultural and demographic and economic community.

Q: Like in other regions, India and China are battling for strategic supremacy in Myanmar. India is desperate to complete the ambitious US\$ 484 million Kaladan Multimodal Project which ends at Rakhine port, so is China also involved in a big way. Does this war of interests also affect Rohingya in the region?

MZ: Of course, yes. Because of this strategic rivalry, the Burmese military particularly has been able to play China and India against each other. The multi-million or multi-billion-dollar projects along the Arakan coastline, or like the giving the mineral rights concessions or gas exploration rights, you will see a pattern of the Burmese military, making sure both India and China received something. Yeah. So, in other words, while they are playing India and China against each other, they are also trying to maintain the benefits of being friends or allies with both powers.

Western countries competing in the Arakan region

Q: Which are other countries competing for natural resources in the country?

MZ: There are also western countries that are competing in the Arakan region. If you look at the largest top five investors, there are hundreds of millions of dollars invested by each country. You will find rich Asian countries, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, some from Hong Kong, definitely China, and then India.

And then you will also find these western governments that are talking up human rights violations and even expressing concerns about the genocide, such as the United Kingdom that you know, or Norway, which presents itself as peace exporting or peaceful country. But Norway is also competing in Arakan offshore gas exploration.

So, in Arakan itself, if you focus on just the mineral rights exploration like gas and oil offshore, you will find about 15 different national investors competing to stay friendly to the Burmese government.

Because the Burmese military and Aung San Suu Kyi government control these multi-billion-dollar projects. They control who would get what.

So, I think we cannot talk about the Rohingya genocide or this persecution of Muslims in Burma without talking about western and Asian investors coming in investing in infrastructure projects or investing in industrial agricultural development or multimodal port projects.

We cannot simply focus on talking about Burmese military troops killing Muslims, killing Rohingya, driving one million Rohingya out of the country over the past 10 years. We have to talk about this capitalist competition. So, therefore, I do not see the virtue in the UK or the USA or the European Union when they say that they are concerned about the well-being of Rohingya people or refugees' humanitarian crisis.

They too have blood on their hand through their investment in Rakhine in particular, and in Burma as a whole. We cannot separate the two. This is the same situation we had in the 1930s and 40s in Nazi Germany.

Q: The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has ordered measures to prevent the genocide of Rohingya. What is the significance of the ICJ order for the Rohingya community?

MZ: There is an assumption that at the end of this legal proceeding, there will be enough evidence to show that Myanmar has commissioned the crime of genocide. I think the most significant gain is that ICJ has established that Rohingya people qualify as a protected group under international law.

The ICJ has established in its January provisional measures that Rohingya qualify as a protected group under the Genocide Convention. And the other significance is that Myanmar is forced to appear in the court in Hague. Aung San Suu Kyi herself and top senior officials had to answer to the ICJ. The international court does not have the army or the power to enforce any ruling it may come up at the end of this trial. When a country is being tried, it enables human rights activists, particularly Rohingya refugees themselves, to campaign for the end of this genocide.

So, there are three major benefits or maybe progress that have been accomplished by having this ICJ case.

ICJ order will prevent future mass killings

Q: But what next now? I mean, how far these measures can mitigate the pain of these people?

MZ: You know Myanmar has submitted the report that was required as part of the provisional measures. By the end of the first 4 months, Myanmar was ordered to submit the report to the ICJ laying out or spelling out concrete measures that Myanmar has undertaken in compliance with the provisional measures. Provisional measures have two different types of orders. One was the preservation of what we will call a crime scene in a vast area. That concerns the preservation of evidence, the land, the property.

And the other one is the protection of the Rohingya who remain in the country that is estimated to be about half a million.

Q: The question, again arises whether these measures will mitigate and end future violence?

MZ: I will say it has the potential to mitigate future mass killings. Myanmar has killed a large number of Rohingya people in different waves of organized violence by the military and not by the Rakhine people. Rakhine people have partaken or joined the Burmese troops, but the primary killings and disruptions and rape and loot were done by the government. So, when the government is being challenged at the ICJ, its troops will not be in a position like they were before to organize another wave of killing.

It is true, that they have not rolled back their policies and these policies have been made into law, for instance, citizenship law. So, I think we still have a long way to go. But in terms of the immediate future, I do not see Myanmar government troops organizing another mass killing as they did in 2017.

Q: You are a Buddhist but you support the Rohingya Muslims. But why not many people like you in Myanmar have come forward to help the persecuted people?

MZ: I am Buddhist culturally and my philosophical orientation is Buddhist mindfulness. But I am not supporting Rohingya as Muslims, I am supporting them as fellow Burmese, and more importantly, as fellow humans. Of course, I also support the

Palestinians, I also support the Uighurs openly. And I actively support other oppressed communities. Because I identified myself with them as a fellow human.

Q: Why there is no sympathy left for Rohingya within Myanmar civil society?

MZ: There is a growing number of young Burmese Buddhists and even monks, who support the Rohingya. Some of them are afraid. You know that they do not want to be targeted by violent racists. So, it is the fear that is holding these more open-minded Buddhists. I was involved in creating this network of a Buddhist and other non-Rohingya Muslims, as well as Christians and Hindus to stand up for the Rohingya. We have a network or networks of multi-faith activists who say Rohingya belong here. But their voices are being drowned out by famous people like Aung San Suu Kyi and powerful military generals or influential monks. That's why we are not hearing their voices as much as we hear the voices of the killers.

Death threats and character assassination

Q: What has been your experience since you took up the cause of supporting Rohingya? We have heard that you were fired from Brunei University which came under pressure from the Myanmar government.

MZ: I started writing about this issue from November 2011, which was about six months before the first bout of mass organized violence against Rohingya took place in Rakhine. I saw what scholars would call racist mobilization of public opinion against the minority group. So, I started talking about the dangers of this mobilization, because I monitor the Burmese through chat rooms and social media.

Naturally, I received negative reactions from Burmese institutions. I also voluntarily resigned from the University Brunei Darussalam, in January 2013 when the university administration told me to shut up, to not talk to the media, to not appear on television in Singapore or other places.

They declined my request for leave to go and give lectures on the genocide of Rohingya. I started talking about the Rohingya issue using the genocide framework as early as 2013. So, when they censored me, I broke the contract and then went to Malaysia, where I was given a senior research fellowship at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. I only lasted there for a year and a half although the University and the Malaysian government were very supportive.

I came under the serious death threat from the Burmese thugs, that Malaysian Special Branch established as having links with the Burmese embassy in Kuala Lumpur. Therefore, I relocated, with my family back to the UK where my wife and researcher colleague is from. Since then there have been a series of campaigns against me labeling me as a national traitor and enemy of the state.

Because I say what my country is doing to the Rohingya is genocide. The fear of my life is real. But it does not stop me. There have also been relentless attempts at the assassination of my character, saying that I received millions of dollars from Saudi Arabia, or rich Muslims and whatnot. And none of that is true. There is also an attack on my professional credentials. Like, there's a campaign that I do not have a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. That I am a fake scholar.

One of the grandsons of the late dictator Gen. Ne Win openly called on the Burmese military intelligence to run a special operation like the Israeli Mossad operation against Adolf Eichmann to hit me. Eichmann was captured in Latin America brought to Jerusalem and tried and hanged in 1962. So that's the kind of threat I have received.

Q: There have been many UN missions to address the Rohingya issue. Why so far, they have not been able to put any pressure on the Myanmar government?

MZ: UN has been concerned about three things in Burma since 1992-93 when it decided that Myanmar must have a special human rights investigator. The formal term is UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar. It was mandated to report on the military's political repression against Aung San Suu Kyi and Burmese opposition movements, the democrats.

The other one was Myanmar's treatment of ethnic communities in the non-Rohingya ethnic regions particularly Shan state, Karen state, and Karenni state along the Thai Burmese and Chinese Burmese borders. And the third, but not the least important one, was the persecution of Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine, including forced labor and different types of crimes against humanity. The genocide was not the language that the UN uses or used in those days.

That was 1993. UN has been engaged in this issue for over 25 years. Hundreds of reports have been released and numerous meetings have been held. And then there is another one -- UN special envoy. They go and attempt to mediate the conflict in Burma. But they are not concerned about the human rights situation primarily.

UNSC can only bring pressure on Myanmar

Q: What is the correct approach to bring pressure on the Myanmar government?

MZ: The real pressure that the Burmese military would feel is the activation of Chapter Seven - the threat to use the political and military intervention in a situation that can be deemed the de-stabilizing.

Only the Security Council can bring real pressure on the Burmese military. But the Burmese military is more than persuaded or convinced by the assurances it has received from China and to a lesser extent, Russia.

China has used its veto power. So, Burma enjoys double protection at the institution that can end the genocide. Russia frames the Burmese treatment of Rohingya as an anti or counter-terrorist operation. China has repeatedly framed this issue of Rohingya persecution as an internal affair.

Of course, China can only be expected to take this position because China is at a pre-genocidal stage concerning its treatment on the persecution of Muslim Uighurs.

So, as long as the Security Council remains divided among the veto powers on the Burmese genocide of Rohingya cannot expect any concrete pressure from the UN as a whole.

Bangladesh cannot do much except complain that there is not enough pressure coming from the international community.

As a result of this situation, Bangladesh has chosen not to play hardball with the Burmese. Bangladesh knows without the Security Council, without the powerful regional government or a military backing Dhaka, Bangladesh cannot do much.

Turkey extremely supportive

Q: Which are the countries, you think who have shown a spine and helped Rohingya in political and financial terms. What has been the role of Turkey in supporting the Rohingya?

MZ: In terms of the funding, if we count the dollars, the US and Canada are number one and number two contributors to address the humanitarian situation of the Rohingya, both inside Myanmar and in the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Britain has also made a sizable financial contribution.

That is followed by countries like Turkey, which is an extremely supportive government concerning the Rohingya. But Turkey has also faced some pushback.

My understanding is that it wanted to build better physical infrastructures, in terms of the refugee accommodation in Cox's Bazar. But the Bangladesh government does not want the living conditions to become too comfortable for the Rohingya. Their goal is to make sure that one million Rohingya refugees return to Arakan or Rakhine.

The World Bank has also offered grants I think like \$500 million. I do not have the exact numbers.

Out of that 1 million Rohingya refugees, about 300,000 of them, are school-aged children. So, the World Bank is rightly concerned about making sure that new generations of Rohingya are equipped with the skill to think for themselves or to have a vocational skill. That is also in the interest of Bangladesh, as well as other Rohingya concerned countries.

If the goal of the international community, starting with Bangladesh is to send Rohingya back to their country, we have to ask the questions.

Do you want Rohingya people, particularly younger generations to return to their country with no education, no skills, with no leadership capacity?

I think this is a similar situation that we had in Cambodia, where Khmer Rouge destroyed leaders, artists, journalists, and doctors. So, it is so crucial we give them opportunities, so they develop themselves individually as a community. When the time comes for their return to their places of origin, they will be able to develop their community.

Therefore, Turkey should undertake all the efforts in terms of education m for instance, increase the number of students it helps within Bangladesh or on its Turkish soil.

Arakan Buddhists showing willingness to reconcile with Rohingya

Q: Since you are in touch with people on the ground, what is the condition right now inside Rakhine state as Myanmar government says, there is no more violence?

MZ: There is escalating military conflict between the Arakan Buddhists operating under the name of the Arakan Army and the Burmese central government troops. Arakan army has been very effective as a military unit. I want to make readers and audiences understand that the Arakan Army is led by Rakhine Buddhists who do not see the Rohingya people as their enemy. Their leadership has shown the will to reconcile with the Rohingyas.

And also, within the Rakhine younger generation there is an awareness that they have been made to hate Rohingya Muslims through propaganda by the Burmese colonizers. So that some positive things are happening as well. When the Burmese military, uses heavy artillery and airstrikes against the Arakan Army in the Rakhine villages, of course, the Rohingya are also affected, literally and psychologically.

Q: There are reports in some local media that Rohingya are returning from Bangladesh in recent weeks and four of them test positive for Coronavirus. Is it possible for them to return to Myanmar?

MZ: But in terms of the Rohingya from the Cox's Bazar or the nearby Teknaf in Bangladesh, I must say the borders between Chittagong or Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh and the Arakan or Rakhine on the Burma side is heavily monitored and heavily securitized by the Burmese military border troops.

So, if the Rohingya are coming in from the Bangladeshi the side they come in with the knowledge of the Burmese military.

It is like the West Bank in Israel. The Palestinians have to go through checkpoints to get to the Israeli side to go and work in menial labor conditions. This applies to the Burmese situation as well. So, maybe the The Burmese military is allowing a small number of Rohingya to come in and then using them as a propaganda tool to say that Rohingya are coming back with Coronavirus.

That is also in line with the Burmese military portrayal of Rohingya people, as a whole, as a threat to Buddhist's way of life now as a threat to Burmese public health conditions. In the old European Jews were portrayed genocidally as "disease carriers."

Civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi equally responsible

Q: You have watched Aung San Suu Kyi so closely. She was perceived as a democrat, who will ensure reforms and reconciliation. Why she became instrumental in persecuting Rohingya?

MZ: I supported Aung San Suu Kyi for 15 years since the uprising in 1988 until around 2004 and 2005. In the Rohingya genocide, she is instrumental at the ideological level. She does not control the military. That is under the direct control of the commander in chief. But what she controls is the civilian line ministries that are also involved in the persecution of Rohingya Muslims.

The genocide is not simply how many people the Burmese military kill, or how many Rohingya women are raped or how many villages were burned to the ground by the military. Genocide is essentially about the destruction of a Rohingya community including its religious and ethnic identity, in multiple ways.

So, therefore, the destruction of the Rohingya as a community involves denial of access to life's health services and education. Rohingya have no access to primary medicine, preventive medicine, emergency medicine. Rohingya have no access to proper education. Over 100,000 Rohingya have been put in what the New York Times called the concentration camps in Rakhine State. I am not talking about the refugees in Bangladesh, I am talking about those on the Burmese soil, that Aung San Suu Kyi controls.

Every time there is a special operation against Rohingya, there are about 10 different non-security sector ministries involved. These are under the control of Aung San Suu Kyi. She is the most powerful civilian political leader. She controls the party completely like an autocrat. More importantly, she is the most influential public opinion maker. The entire Buddhist

population calls her “Mother”. So, when she says that the Burmese public is afraid of Muslims like the rest of the non-Muslim world are afraid of Muslims, she validates the Buddhist fear of Muslims without offering any insight empirical reason why we should be afraid of Muslims.

She did not mention that Muslims are also victims of western powers. If you look at the Middle East. You know, even under Obama [administration in the US], seven different Muslim countries were concurrently attacked. So, when Suu Kyi validates this popular Islamophobia held by the Burmese public, she reinforces the Burmese military's propaganda that Muslims, particularly Rohingya Muslims are a threat to national security, a threat to the Buddhist way of life, and now a threat to Burmese public health.

In that regard domestically, Aung San Suu Kyi is so culpable criminally responsible for the genocide. That is why she is named in the lawsuit filed -- by the Rohingya group based in the UK called Burmese Rohingya Organization UK -- in Argentina.

Someone like me -- a small person, activists on the street -- was saying this is genocide, no one was paying attention. But when Aung San Suu Kyi said, well, look, this is not genocide then the New York Times would publish it on the front page and say she denies this is genocide. So, in that sense, internationally, she became a denier of the genocide, and defender of the killers.

Expectations from neighboring countries

Q: How do you assess the role of neighboring countries like India and Bangladesh in addressing the Rohingya issue, as both countries have been hosting refugees. In India, often Hindu hardline elements create raucous against them?

MZ: In India, the number of refugees is insignificant. India has a population of over one billion. India is home to a large diaspora of Tibetans. India has essentially allowed Tibetans to set up their city, Dharamshala, where Dalai Lama is based. So, the Indian population as a whole is not hostile to refugees. In 1971 almost 10 million East Bengalis or Bangladeshis took refuge in India for a year until they could return to their country.

A total of less than 40,000 Rohingya have taken refuge in different parts of India. But no less than a person like Home Minister of India called them “termites”. It is like [Adolf] Hitler, [Joseph] Goebbels, calling the Jews viruses or cockroaches. So, we have that situation in India. On top of that, Prime Minister Modi went to [Myanmar capital] Naypyidaw in 2017, shared a press conference with Aung San Suu Kyi where she described the Rohingya situation as an anti-terrorist operation by the military of Burma.

Under the Modi government, India is de-registering several million Muslims in Assam who was born in India. And then say India would welcome Buddhists from Nepal, Bhutan, and other places to come and become Indian citizens.

Q: What are your expectations from Bangladesh?

MZ: I have my criticism about Bangladesh. But there is no other country in the world where one million Rohingya are hosted. My only critique and my only request to the Bangladeshi authorities is they should recognize Rohingya by their name, and as refugees with certain rights that ought to be respected. And then finally, Bangladesh should lift the internet ban [in Rohingya camps].

There might be some criminal Rohingya that is just unavoidable. But the overwhelming majority of Rohingya are peaceful, and they are grateful to and appreciative of Bangladesh, both the society and the government, and the leadership of Sheikh Hasina.

I think Bangladesh should treat the Rohingya as partners to address drug trafficking human trafficking and the spread of Coronavirus in the camps. The refugee should not be seen as a potential threat to Bangladesh.

Q: What has been the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries?

MZ: The ASEAN has failed in every single atrocity crime that is committed by its member state or within his backyard, starting with the Cambodian genocide. I asked the Malaysian Foreign Minister [Saifuddin Abdullah] in a meeting in Kuala Lumpur a year ago: ‘Why do you want to support the Rohingya and why do you want to champion the end of genocide?’

He said: ‘As ASEAN we feel for Cambodian people when one-third of the Cambodian population died or was murdered by Khmer Rouge in less than four years, starting in 1975. We do not want to repeat the mistake of letting another genocide

happen.' So, therefore, I think ASEAN should not fail, in the case of another genocide committed by its member within its sphere. But so far it has failed in its duty towards Rohingya.

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