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Aung San Suu Kyi tells UN that the term 'Rohingya' will be avoided

Myanmar leader reiterates her stance that the word, used to describe a persecuted Muslim minority, is 'controversial' and her government won't use it

The Guardian (21.06.2016) - <http://bit.ly/28MJrSo> - Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi has told the UN special rapporteur on human rights that the government will avoid using the term "Rohingya" to describe a persecuted Muslim minority in the country's north-west.

The statement came as the top UN human rights official issued a report saying the Rohingya had been deprived of nationality and undergone systematic discrimination and severe restrictions on movements. They had also suffered executions and torture that together may amount to crimes against humanity, the report said.

Members of the group of about 1.1 million people, who identify themselves by the term Rohingya, are seen by many Myanmar Buddhists as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. The term is a divisive issue.

The UN human rights investigator, Yanghee Lee, met Aung San Suu Kyi in the capital Naypyitaw on her first trip to Myanmar since the Nobel Peace Prize winner took power in April.

"At their meeting here this morning, our foreign minister Daw Aung San Suu Kyi explained our stance on this issue that the controversial terms should be avoided," said Aung Lin, the permanent secretary at the ministry of foreign affairs.

Aung San Suu Kyi is banned from presidency by the military-drafted constitution because her children have British citizenship. She holds offices of the state counsellor and the minister for foreign affairs, but is the de facto leader of the administration.

Feted in the west for her role as champion of Myanmar's democratic opposition during long years of military rule and house arrest, Suu Kyi has been criticised overseas, and by some in Myanmar, for saying little about the abuses faced by the Rohingya.

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, UN high commissioner for human rights said in the report the Rohingya were excluded from a number of professions and needed special paperwork to access hospitals, which has resulted in delays and deaths of babies and their mothers during childbirth.

It was the first time Zeid said these and other long-standing violations could add up to crimes against humanity, an international crime. Crimes against humanity are serious, widespread and systematic violations.

Some 120,000 Rohingya remain displaced in squalid camps since fighting erupted in Rakhine State between Buddhists and Muslims in 2012. Thousands have fled persecution and poverty.

"The new Government has inherited a situation where laws and policies are in place that are designed to deny fundamental rights to minorities, and where impunity for serious violations against such communities has encouraged further violence against them," Zeid said.

Reversing such discrimination must be a priority for the new government "to halt ongoing violations and prevent further ones taking place against Myanmar's ethnic and religious minorities," Zeid said.

Aung San Suu Kyi has formed a committee to "bring peace and development" to the state in May, but its plans are not clear.

Aung San Suu Kyi said during a visit by US secretary of state John Kerry last month that the country needed "space" to deal with the Rohingya issue and cautioned against the use of "emotive terms" that she said were making the situation more difficult.

The previous military-linked government of former junta General Thein Sein referred to the group as "Bengalis", implying they were illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, though many have lived in Myanmar for generations.

Myanmar condemns UN official for using term "Rohingya"

Reuters (04.02.2015) - Myanmar on Wednesday condemned a U.N. official for using the term Rohingya to describe a persecuted minority that the government refers to as Bengali, which implies they are illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh.

Most of Myanmar's 1.1 million ethnic Rohingya Muslims are stateless and live in apartheid-like conditions in Rakhine state in the west of the predominantly Buddhist country.

The government is carrying out a controversial citizenship verification process, which requires Rohingya to list their identities as Bengali. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, said conditions were "abysmal" in camps where almost 140,000 Rohingya remain after being displaced in clashes with ethnic Rakhine Buddhists in 2012.

A "fixation" on the terms Rohingya and Bengali was counterproductive, Lee said in a Jan. 16 statement. She urged people to instead "focus on addressing the urgent humanitarian and human rights needs". Myanmar's Foreign Ministry on Wednesday criticized her

remarks in a press release published in the state-backed Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper.

"Use of such term by the United Nations would certainly draw strong resentment of the people of Myanmar making the government's efforts more difficult in addressing the issue," the ministry said.

Government officials were not available for comment.

Dispatches: denying freedom of choice in Burma

Human Rights Watch (14.01.2014) - Buddhist women in Burma should not be stripped of their right to freedom of choice in life-changing matters like marriage. Yet that is precisely what U. Wirathu, a nationalist Buddhist monk, is pushing Burma's parliament to do.

Wirathu is mobilizing about 5,000 monks for a meeting in Mandalay to discuss the proposal. Last year, Wirathu and his followers proposed that the Buddhist marriage law be amended to require that any Buddhist woman who wants to marry a non-Buddhist man get her parents' written permission and prove this to local authorities. The groom should also convert to Buddhism. Failure to comply could spell doom for the couple – the groom could face 10 years in prison and have all his property confiscated. He could also be prosecuted under the Burmese penal code.

The Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement and the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation should denounce the proposal as discriminatory. Article 22 of Burma's constitution guarantees everyone equality before the law without discrimination based on sex, race, or religion.

Burmese should not be fooled by Wirathu's claims that this proposed law is for women's protection. It not only restricts women's rights, but directly targets religious and ethnic minorities as well. And it follows in the wake of the brutal "ethnic cleansing" in Burma's western Arakan State, the so-called 969 nationalist movement to boycott Muslim businesses, and the discriminatory two-child policy imposed on Rohingya in parts of Arakan State.

Women's rights groups in Burma have condemned the proposal. Some groups that did so last year faced threats and intimidation by Wirathu and his camp.

Lower House representative Thein Nyunt is expected to submit the amendment to the marriage law in the parliamentary session that began this week. Burma's parliament, in which only 20 MPs out of 659 are women, hasn't exactly been a bastion of women's rights. But parliament should listen to the women's rights groups, reflect on the anti-discrimination provision of the constitution, and reject this proposal. It would be a lasting setback to adopt Wirathu's scheme to infantilize Buddhist women, curb their right to marry and start a family, and give official imprimatur to his campaign of ethnic and sectarian hate.

International donors and governments building diplomatic and trade relations with Burma should insist that the country respect the basic right of all women and men to choose a partner, marry, and start a family.

Exiled to nowhere: Burma's Rohingya

By Serena Romeo for Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (02.12.2013) - From the 25th to the 29th November, the European Parliament hosted a photo exhibition entitled '*Exiled to Nowhere: Burma's Rohingya*' by the award-winning photographer Greg Constantine. The exhibition was complemented by a panel discussion on the 28th November about the Rohingya situation, hosted by MEP Jean Lambert.

The Rohingya is an ethnic, linguistic and religious minority settled in the North-Arakan State (or Rakhine) in Burma. Rohingya people are Muslims, while the majority of the Burmese population profess Buddhism. The community is recognised as one of the most persecuted in the world, whose basic rights and citizenship are systematically denied.

The 1982 Citizenship Law sets the legal basis for the arbitrary treatment against the Rohingya community, dividing Burma citizens into three classes. Furthermore, in 1989 all the population was provided with colour-coded Citizens Scrutiny Cards (CRCs). Each card has a colour designating the citizenship status of the person: pink for full citizens, blue for associate citizens, green for naturalised citizens and white for foreigners. Rohingya people do not fall under any of these categories, nor do they appear in the list of 135 'national races' settled in the country before 1823. Thereby, Rohingyas are *de facto* stateless. They lack protection from the state and are victims of systematic violation of human rights: forced labour, extortion and restrictions on employment, marriage and movement within the country.

The panel examined the Rohingya situation and discussed EU relations and policy toward Burma. In her opening remarks, Ms Lambert highlighted the horrible situation of up to 200,000 Rohingyas who have escaped to Bangladesh. These are considered illegal migrants rather than refugees, thereby lacking protection from any authority. The European Parliament has passed two resolutions over the past few months on the situation of the Rohingya people, denouncing the violation of their basic rights by the Burmese authorities.

Greg Constantine started the project *Nowhere People* in 2005, working with several stateless communities. He observed and interviewed Rohingya people on the ground, and his work exposes how the community has been 'denied of any right to have rights'. Although Burma's government does not consider them Burmese, Rohingyas feel like they belong to the country. Over the last two years, the number of Rohingyas who leave for Bangladesh, often putting their lives in the hands of traffickers, has increased significantly. Although most want to go back to Burma, the campaign of ethnic cleansing initiated by the government in Rakhine State was disastrous for the region, leaving nothing for Rohingyas to go back to.

Lotte Leicht, EU Director of Human Rights Watch (HRW), and a representative of the Commission Directorate General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO) discussed the role of EU institutions in addressing the Rohingyas' situation. The European Parliament has led the way in keeping the situation in the public eye, but it has to go beyond rhetoric, said Leicht. The climate of total impunity in Burma documented by HRW needs to be addressed both by improving humanitarian assistance and by taking concrete political actions.

Tun Khin, President of the Burmese Rohingya Organisation in the UK, gave a key intervention, calling for an international investigation to document the crimes against humanity and to stop the apartheid-like segregation imposed by the Burmese government. Tun Khin also pointed out the importance of establishing dialogue between the Rohingya and Burmese community as a critical step toward national reconciliation.

Interview with Ko Ko Gyi from the 88 Generation Movement

By Zsuzsa-Anna Ferenczy* for *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l*

Hrwf (24.09.2013) - On 24th July 2013, the author of this article interviewed Ko Ko Gyi from the 88 Generation movement in Yangon. Iconic student leader, he was among hundreds of political prisoners released in a far-reaching amnesty on 13 January 2012. The activist, a founder of the 88 Generation Students - a Burmese pro-democracy movement known for their activism against the country's military junta - and a pivotal figure in both the 1988 and 2007 uprising, had spent four and a half years of a 65-year sentence in prison prior to his latest release. In total he spent 18 years in prison in the past 25 years.

Q: What is the origin of the 88 Generation Movement and who are its activists?

A: We are all former student leaders of the 1988 uprising. I was first arrested in 1989, stayed in custody for two months and then I was put in prison from 1991 to 2005. In 2004 and 2005, when a lot of us were released from prison, we tried to reorganize ourselves and formed the 88 Generation Movement in March 2005. In August 2007 I was arrested again. Last year in January, we were all released.

Q: What kept you alive in prison? Did you face torture?

A: I mainly went through mental torture and stress. While in detention, we tried to keep ourselves mentally sane. In 1999 we had the chance to read religious books and sports journals. We tried to learn English too, so we read the Bible. Last time I was jailed in far Eastern Shan state, far away from home, I couldn't get regular papers. My parents couldn't visit me either, but they sent me some English books.

Q: Now that you are free again and we can sit here and talk, you must admit this is a big step in comparison with what it was before. Do you see the opening an indication that the situation is moving ahead despite the challenges? How do you see your work in the future?

A: We now face a lot of changes that we appreciate for our country, but we should not forget that we are living under the leaders of a former military regime. In order to get international legitimacy, they now try to change at least the appearance of the government: from a military government to a quasi civilian one. Many members of the parliament are nominated by the former military and not elected. So the international community has to know what is really happening. The President and Speaker of the House are talking about change, change and more change - but the Parliament is an old institution. In appearance, there are many changes, but in essence nothing has really changed. The authorities don't engage with the ordinary people. Most people don't even know that they should have voted.

Q: Aung San Suu Kyi has been criticized for working too closely with the government. What is your policy concerning the current government? Opposition? Dialogue? Co-operation?

A: We are facing confusing times. We are political activists, and the people are our constituency. On the one hand we try to gain the trust of the authorities, but on the other hand we have to consolidate our trust with our constituency. This is a priority. Whenever we approach the authorities, we first have to convince our constituency,

explain why we engage with them and how we will do this, all this for the sake of transparency. We need to build a network between social activists, former political prisoners, NGOs etc. If we lose trust from our people, nothing will work. But I always try to look at the bright side of things, and am ready for genuine cooperation with the authorities.

Q: How do you see China's influence in Burma at the moment, apart from their investment projects in infrastructure, for example. We consider their engagement to be mostly business oriented to the benefit of China first of all and less to the benefit of local communities in Burma, similar to their approach seen in Africa. When Western states offer development aid, it is meant to actually *develop* the country to the benefit of the local people and the country.

A: Sometimes there are disputes between us concerning Chinese investment and how to deal with China. But we agree that our country is strategic, whether we like it or not, we can't move our country somewhere else. And we need to be familiar with our neighbors, but we also need to talk about principles, such as human rights norms, labor rights etc in the case of every potential investment project, Chinese or of any other kind. The problem is that there is no monitoring mechanism once a contract is signed. All contracts are discussed, but the Parliament should be more transparent.

Q: How do you see European institutions' influence and work and contacts with civil society?

A: When I was released from prison a year and a half ago, I met a lot of EU representatives at that time. We just talked and there was no follow up. To put it kindly, we lack experience in how to deal with international organizations. There is a growing NGO business in our country now – everyone has some sort of an NGO. This is my concern for the coming years.

Q: So you mean that beyond discussing, you need to acquire experience via exchanges with European partners on how to set up a technically well functioning civil society. What are concretely your expectations?

A: First I will have to admit our weaknesses – most of us lack language skills. We can't go abroad to testify because few activists know English. Another obstacle is funding. In our Burmese tradition, we don't like to talk about money, but the lack of funds is a big problem. Election monitoring is coming up, but there is no help in sight from abroad. Organizing music concerts is one source of raising funds. Many donations can also come unexpectedly from longstanding contacts. Another problem is that current laws are such that international media often go only to registered organizations for information. Our 88 Generation is not yet registered and cannot open a bank account in Burma. We have to pay rent for this office, quite a lot of money, but fortunately the owner is a sympathizer of our organization.

Q: Yesterday I read an article in Myanmar Times about the difficulty that political prisoners face in reintegrating into society, once released.

A: Sure, there are so many difficulties and challenges we will have to deal with in the future.

**Zsuzsa-Anna Ferenczy is an assistant to László Tóké MEP in the European Parliament.*

Persecution against Chin Christians continues in Burma

By Martin Banks for Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (10.07.2013) - The Burmese government has recently introduced democratic reforms aimed at bringing the country back into the international fold. But, as a debate in the European parliament heard, racial discrimination against at least one ethnic group remains widespread.

The half-day conference was told that the EU has a key role to play improving the plight of the half-million Chin people living in NW Burma.

Maintaining a "constant vigilance" on violations of religious and other rights in the country will be crucial, the debate was told.

That was the keynote message of Romania MEP Laszlo Tökes who, opening the discussion on 9 July, said the country still "has a long road ahead" when it comes to meeting international standards on human rights.

The debate, he said, would focus on the problems facing the estimated 500,000 ethnic Chin people living in Burma, many of whom are Christians.

The deputy, the EPP coordinator on Parliament's Human Rights Sub-committee, pointed to recently adopted new EU guidelines which commit the 27-member bloc to the promotion of religious rights and freedoms everywhere in the world.

He said that while EU sanctions against Burma had been in place for some years, the EU had never completely severed its links with Burma.

"Less attention has been paid than might have been the case to discrimination against Christians and the Chin people in Burma and the onus is on all of us to put pressure on EU institutions to ensure that this issue remains on the political agenda," he said.

The status of religious freedom for Chin Christians was taken up by another speaker, Za Uk Ling, programme director at the Chin Human Rights Organisation, who agreed that the issue of violations against his people should continue to be promoted in the EU and elsewhere.

Thanking Tökes for his support in highlighting equality for ethnic Chins, he said that while there had been some improvements in Burma in recent times, which were "positive", discrimination remained.

He said, "The government is complicit in much of this and that is why it is so important for forums like this to continue to raise the issue in the public arena."

He pointed to the 2012 annual report by his own organisation which said that the right to religious freedom is "still routinely violated."

He adds, "There is a long road to ensure that the rights of the country's ethnic and religious minorities are at the heart of the democrat transition."

Mr Ling added, "The consequences of such human rights violations against the Chin are far reaching."

This was a theme echoed by Ms Chhachhai Mapaw, of the Chin Human Rights Organisation Office, based in New Delhi, who said there are about 50,000 Chin refugees

and asylum seekers in Malaysia, 12,000 in New Delhi and as many as 100,000 Chin living in north east India.

Portraying what she called a "grim situation," she said that many of the Chin refugees living in poor conditions and were denied access to a decent education and healthcare.

Many suffered sexual violence, she said, and were given little or no legal protection by the authorities in countries to where they have fled.

"India, for example, deals with them in a very ad-hoc way," she said.

"Many of the Chin refugees are reluctant to return to Burma because they are either mistrustful of the ruling government there or will not have the support to start their lives again," she added.

Another speaker, Ceu Bik Thawng, general secretary of the Chin National Party, spoke on the challenges facing political parties in the rebuilding of Burma.

There are currently 56 political parties in Burma, including five ethnic-based Chin parties, who have 21 national parliamentarians.

However, Mr Thawng said that most parties were "not functioning well", something he said that was of some concern given the fact that the 2015 national elections were fast on the horizon.

Most parties, he told the debate, suffered from "weak" cooperation among their leaders and other issues, such as financial constraints and "weak" democratic practices.

He called on the EU to provide training to "strengthen" political parties in Burma, capacity building for party leaders and also wants to see the EU monitor the 2015 elections.

Bringing the lively debate to a close, Mark Barwick, of Human Rights Without Frontiers, picked up on this, saying European institutions had a role to play in raising awareness of abuses in Burma.

He said, "This is an important issue, not only for the Chin people but for the future of religious rights and freedoms throughout Burma."

The debate was organised by the EPP with the collaboration of the Chin Human Rights Organisation and Human Rights Without Frontiers.

CSW releases new report on Burma detailing severe human rights abuses

CSW (13.05.2013) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) today released a new report on human rights in Burma following a four-week fact-finding visit to the country. The report welcomes signs of political change in the country, including "significantly increased freedom" for media, civil society and political actors, and improvements in freedom of expression in some areas, but warns against "premature euphoria" and highlights "many very grave challenges and concerns, particularly in respect to the protection of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief".

In addition to visiting the capital, Naypidaw, and Rangoon, Burma's major city, CSW visited Kachin State, in northern Burma, where a conflict has continued for almost two

years, resulting in the displacement of at least 100,000 civilians. CSW also visited a Muslim community near Naypyidaw, three days after an attack by a militant Buddhist mob.

Noting a new "climate of openness" in Rangoon and other cities, the report also notes that "the testimonies provided by internally displaced Kachin people during the visit included some of the worst accounts of human rights violations CSW has ever documented".

One Kachin former prisoner described the torture he endured during interrogation, including being hung upside down for a day and a night, beaten and attacked with knives. "They put a hand grenade in my mouth and threatened to pull the pin ... then they put a plastic bag over my face and poured water over it," he told CSW.

The wife of one current Kachin prisoner described seeing her husband after he had been tortured. She told CSW: "He was covered in blood, and his nose was broken...An iron bar was rubbed along his legs. He was forced to engage in homosexual sex ...He was told that as he was a Christian, he should kneel on very sharp stones with his arms outstretched like Christ on the cross...He was beaten on his hands and arms."

CSW was accompanied for part of the visit by Lord Alton of Liverpool, a member of the House of Lords in the British Parliament. Lord Alton and CSW visited Ayeyar, where a Muslim community had been attacked on 22 March. The madrassa had been completely burned down, and the mosque severely desecrated and damaged. "We Muslims have lived here for 200 years with no problems," a representative of the community said. "But now there is absolutely no communication with our Buddhist neighbours. We don't dare greet each other on the street."

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "Our findings show that while there are some very welcome reforms in Burma, which should be acknowledged and encouraged, there remains a culture of impunity which needs to be addressed. There is an urgent need for protection for religious and ethnic minorities, inter-religious dialogue and peace-building, humanitarian assistance for those displaced by conflict and violence and a meaningful process for political dialogue involving all the ethnic nationalities to end decades of war. The Government of Burma must address these grave concerns as a priority and the international community should develop a clear strategy to promote human rights and genuine democratic reform, counter religious intolerance, promote reconciliation and advocate protection of freedom of religion or belief in Burma. Failure to do so will result in hopes dashed, and further instability, conflict, fear, death and destruction."

Displacement tops 1,000 in Meiktila

IRIN (22.03.2013) - More than 1,000 people have been displaced following sectarian violence in central Myanmar this week, government officials tell IRIN.

"The numbers are still unclear, however, between 1,000 and 2,000 have been displaced," Ye Htut, Myanmar's presidential spokesman, said on 22 March. Many of the displaced are now staying in a local football stadium in the town of Meiktila, where they are receiving relief assistance, while others are staying with family and friends.

The comments follow two days of violence in Meiktila, in Mandalay Division - the worst communal unrest to shake Myanmar since clashes between ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and

Rohingya Muslims in western Rakhine State in 2012. That earlier violence left 167 dead, hundreds injured and over 120,000 people displaced. More than 10,000 homes were burned or destroyed.

The current conflict erupted after an argument broke out between a Muslim gold shop owner and his Buddhist customers. A Buddhist monk was reportedly among the first killed, leading a Buddhist mob to set fire to Muslim homes and at least five mosques, local media reports say.

Government reports suggest at least five people have been killed, but unconfirmed reports say the number is much higher.

Potential to spread

"This is an extremely worrisome situation," Phil Robertson, deputy director of Human Rights Watch in Asia, said. "The government is not doing enough to head this off, and further sectarian violence in Myanmar is a real risk."

The government must promote reconciliation and tolerance in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious society, while at the same time holding those responsible for the violence accountable, he explained.

"What happened in one place could easily happen in another," Basil Fernando, director of policy and programmes for the Asian Human Rights, said from Hong Kong. "It's imperative the government takes action against those responsible."

But according to Ye Htut, action is already being taken.

"We take this very seriously and will hold accountable those responsible," he said, noting 13 people were arrested on the morning of 22 March alone.

"At the moment, the situation is under control. However, there are still small groups of people trying to incite trouble. It's important we have the full cooperation of local residents," he said.

"This is quite unusual. People are being manipulated," said one local journalist who used to live in the area. He cited extremist views, such as anti-Muslim sentiment by some groups, as a possible underlying factor in the violence.

Myanmar's Muslims account for approximately 4 percent of the country's roughly 55 million inhabitants, however, the last nationwide census was conducted in 1983. The government lists 135 ethnic groups, which are grouped into eight national races: Burman, Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan.

Condolences

On 21 March, Vijay Nambiar, the UN Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Myanmar, arrived in Yangon, where he expressed sorrow over the loss of lives and destruction in Meiktila.

"While firm action by the authorities was needed to prevent further loss of life or spread of violence, the continued fostering of communal harmony and preservation of peace and tranquillity among the people was the most urgent priority, and this was the responsibility of all sections of society. Religious leaders and other community leaders must also publicly call on their followers to abjure violence, respect the law and promote peace," he said.

In a brief statement on 21 March, the US embassy said it was closely monitoring the situation and extended its "deepest condolences to the families of those who lost their lives and property in the violence."

The latest violence is seen as yet another test for Myanmar's reform-minded President Thein Sein, who has been praised for opening up and liberalizing the once-pariah Myanmar, also known as Burma, since taking office in March 2011.