

**Remarks by Ms. Noeleen Heyzer,
Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Myanmar
General Assembly, 13 June 2022**

Madame Vice-President,
Distinguished Delegates,

It is an honour to address the General Assembly in my capacity as the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Myanmar.

The General Assembly has played a critical role in providing comprehensive support to the people of Myanmar, including through the Special Envoy's mandate, which was established in 2018 mainly to address the Rohingya crisis.

The challenges facing the people of Myanmar have both deepened and expanded dramatically since.

Six months ago, I took up this mandate as Myanmar continued to descend into profound and widespread conflict.

On top of one of the world's largest refugee emergencies, I am tasked to help to address this multidimensional crises, with serious regional and international ramifications.

Today, 14.4 million people, or one-quarter of the entire population of Myanmar urgently require humanitarian assistance.

While conflict has plagued Myanmar's border states for decades, the political crisis unleashed on 1 February 2021 has opened new frontlines that had long been at peace.

More than half of the 700,000 people who have been internally displaced since the crisis began come from the central Bamar region. As of 26 May, there are now over one million IDPs across Myanmar.

In the small ethnic state of Kayah, one-third of the population is currently displaced.

In Rakhine, one of Myanmar's poorest states, renewed tensions between the Tatmadaw and Arakan Army (AA) are fueling insecurity for all communities.

In addition to almost one million Rohingya refugees in the camps in Bangladesh, and hundreds of thousands more across the region, more than 140,000 Rohingya people remain displaced and confined in IDP camps for the past 10 years in Rakhine.

This crisis has resulted in collapsing state institutions, significantly disrupting critical social and economic infrastructures such as health, education, banking and finance, food security and employment, while increasing criminality and illicit activities. The people of Myanmar are facing intense suffering from this multidimensional crisis.

The number of people living in poverty has doubled in the past five years to encompass half the population.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and political crisis, according to Save the Children, as of 1 June, school enrolment dropped by up to 80 per cent in the last two years, leaving at least 7.8 million children out of school.

Through my direct contact with the people of Myanmar, I have learned the face of human tragedy behind these figures.

People speak of families whose every possession was burned to ashes. Children have been held at gunpoint in a bid to capture their parents. Youth expressing selfless aspirations for a democratic Myanmar are in hiding, with parents unable to contact their children because of security concerns.

Ethnic and community leaders have told me about military attacks on civilian hideouts, as families flee, constantly seeking shelter but failing to find refuge.

A generation that benefitted from the democratic transition is now disillusioned, facing chronic hardship and, tragically, many feel they have no choice left but to take up arms.

Madame Vice-President,
Distinguished Delegates,

Armed conflict has now become the norm, and distrust among stakeholders has only deepened. In this zero-sum setting, there is a “missing middle” with little space to advocate for the de-escalation of violence or to engage in “talks about talks.”

The military’s violence, including against peaceful protestors has only intensified since 1 February 2021.

The military continues its disproportionate use of force, has intensified its attack on civilians and increased operations against resistance forces, using aerial bombings. Civilian buildings and villages have been destroyed by fire and internally displaced populations have been attacked.

Against this backdrop, armed resistance has proliferated.

There are now reports of 600 armed resistance groups or “people’s defence forces” fighting against the Tatmadaw, some conducting assassinations targeting individuals deemed as “pro-military”.

Nearly 14,000 people have been arrested and dozens have died in detention as spaces for civil society, freedom of expression and assembly, and other human rights have been suppressed.

The Secretary-General has recently expressed alarm over the decision to execute pro-democracy activists.

Madame Vice-President,
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In line with my all-stakeholder approach, I have engaged with hundreds of domestic stakeholders such as the National Unity Government (NUG), the

Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the National League for Democracy (NLD), ethnic armed organizations, civil society, women and youth from communities, including in hard-to-reach areas.

I have continued to engage and listen carefully to key stakeholders to understand their red lines and bottom lines for a durable exit strategy and to ensure an inclusive Myanmar-led process toward return to civilian rule, based on the will of the people. I hope to have the opportunity to similarly engage with the State Administration Council (SAC).

As part of their exit strategy in their Five-Point Road Map, the SAC has pledged to hold new elections in 2023. However, there is little confidence in a process administered by the military-appointed Union Election Commission. Without an inclusive political dialogue and conditions that permit citizens to freely exercise their political rights without fear or intimidation, this will further exacerbate violence and instability.

The Commander-in-Chief has declared 2022 as “the year of peace” and invited ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) to hold peace talks. However, he has excluded key pro-democracy actors including the NUG and armed resistance groups, labeled as “terrorists.” None of the ethnic armed organizations who have joined the talks are parties to active fighting.

Pro-democracy actors, in the meantime, have developed a “Federal Democratic Charter” to move toward a more inclusive democratic future, based on fundamental rights and inclusion of all.

Without an inclusive multipronged approach and effective means to resolve the political crisis, escalating violence and collapsing state institutions, it is the people of Myanmar who continue to suffer.

Recently, I visited the Thai border area where I engaged many local actors working on cross-border humanitarian assistance. Their message was the urgent need to build stronger and more equal partnership with local humanitarian networks, to ensure that aid reaches those in need without discrimination through greater access, stronger security measures and more localised and flexible funding.

In an unpredictable context like Myanmar, flexible support is imperative including for protection. The multiple vulnerabilities facing affected communities requires safe and unimpeded access for the delivery of aid through all existing channels and without discrimination.

My consultations with EAOs have also highlighted the need for the international community to be better aligned with ground realities. I have been informed that barriers to humanitarian support are the result of deliberate regime policies aimed at constraining the ability of communities to assist affected civilians in areas of active conflict.

To fully and effectively respond to the suffering of the people, all existing governance structures need to be used including at the local level. Greater acknowledgement and support need to be given to the role of those ethnic administrations providing services to the populations under their control.

We must put women at the center of all our efforts. Despite the violence, women have built tightly knit communities with great capacity for resilience. It is these structures that need more international support. Together with the Indonesian Foreign Minister, I will co-chair a Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Platform on Myanmar to support women community leaders as agents of change.

We must amplify the voices of the most vulnerable and utilise the expertise of those on the ground, listen to them to understand the daily realities, and discuss how women and youth can play leading roles in bringing about positive change to their communities and country.

Reflective of the unity forming across ethnic and democratic lines, key ethnic armed organizations and the NUG have also come together in an appeal for me to establish an inclusive platform for engagement and problem solving, focusing initially on the emergency humanitarian situation that is a direct result of the political crisis.

They have asked me to work with “ASEAN Plus” to bring together all stakeholders including local organizations for discussions on humanitarian intervention based on the norms and principles of international humanitarian law and best practice.

I will continue to play a bridging role and actively engage with key stakeholders in Myanmar, in the region, and the international community to address the protection needs and suffering of the most vulnerable, and to support the will of the people for a future federal democratic union based on peace, stability and shared prosperity.

Madam Vice-President,
Distinguished Delegates,

The widening impact of the Myanmar crisis on regional peace and security has underlined the need to reinforce efforts to de-escalate hostilities.

I continue to work closely with ASEAN, which has a crucial role in defusing this crisis.

A year has passed since the adoption of ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus calling for a cessation of violence, and constructive dialogue, including with all parties.

Yet, continued differences, regionally and more broadly among UN Member States, have left the people of Myanmar feeling abandoned in their time of need.

The General Assembly, the Security Council and ASEAN have all emphasized the importance of UN-ASEAN complementarity, most recently at the US-ASEAN Special Summit in May.

I will continue my efforts to ensure complementarity as I bring insights and perspectives from on the ground into discussions. Despite technical issues raised by the SAC, I remain committed to exploring my first visit to Myanmar to engage.

Madame Vice-President,
Distinguished Delegates,

Amid this complex crisis, the Rohingya must remain high on the agenda of the international community.

Per the request in the GA Resolution mandating my role, I have been developing a workplan on addressing the Rohingya issue. This is part of my broader multi-track strategy to deal with the multidimensional crises in Myanmar, focusing on four areas: (1) humanitarian and protection needs, (2) return to civilian rule, (3) effective and democratic governance and, (4) durable solutions for the Rohingya.

I take this opportunity to thank the Government of Bangladesh and host communities in particular for the generosity towards Rohingya refugees, who were forcibly uprooted from their homes almost five years ago.

In my recent consultation with Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, Malaysia and India, Rohingya youth told me how they continue to be denied opportunities for education in host countries and fear becoming a lost generation.

While they are grateful for the assistance they have received, they feel they have become dependent on donor funds to merely exist. They believe that without education they will never achieve their dreams or even become self-reliant.

Rohingya refugee women shared with me the ways in which prolonged displacement in the camps has affected their daily lives – how they are forced to stay in their shelters to care for their families and to avoid the insecurity in camps; and the limited opportunities available to them for skill building and livelihoods.

In addition, they mentioned that shops and community-run learning centres in the camp have been closed down. Movement restrictions have an impact on daily life and create additional difficulties in accessing emergency medical services.

Women also told me of the many protection risks that face women and girls, including trafficking, child marriage and sexual violence. They described how the lack of accountability has normalised violence against women and girls in the camps.

Refugees spoke of the presence of armed groups in the camps, which has made life very insecure in what should be a safe sanctuary. Youth in particular feel targeted by these groups, and many have faced pressure to join them.

Throughout the region, the continued lack of legal status puts Rohingya at risk of arrest, prolonged detention and even, in some cases, deportation.

In spite of these risks, Rohingya continue to take dangerous journeys for the hope of survival, family reunification and a better future. Most are exploited and subjected to more violence along their journeys and transnational criminal networks are preying on the vulnerability of the Rohingya community.

While conditions in Myanmar are currently not conducive to the repatriation of Rohingya refugees, there are important steps that can be taken in Rakhine State itself to create the political, social and economic environment that will support sustainable return.

Although the situation remains fragile, there has been a gradual improvement of intercommunal relationships and economic and social integration of Rohingya in Rakhine State. In these limited instances, communities stand to gain from social and economic interaction.

Politically, too, there have been some positive signs. In a departure from negative rhetoric towards the Rohingya, AA has publicly committed to a peaceful state for all ethnic groups. The NUG has also recognized the Rohingya's suffering and the importance of integrating their voices in the national dialogue.

In spite of some reasons for cautious optimism, the situation on the ground remains grim. Local orders established after 1 February 2021 pose additional challenges for Rohingya travelling within townships in Rakhine State and in Myanmar, impeding livelihoods and access to healthcare and basic services. Deaths of children from acute diarrhea in Sittwe IDP camps and maternal deaths could have been avoided had there been unimpeded access to healthcare, as well as water, sanitation and hygiene services.

Ultimately, better conditions for the Rohingya in Rakhine State and the sustainable repatriation of refugees from the region will not be possible until the key issues of citizenship, structural discrimination, security, civil registration, land ownership, political participation, freedom of movement, the right to family life and access to basic services are resolved.

Thus, I call on the General Assembly to prioritise addressing root causes in Myanmar as the foundation for resolving the Myanmar crisis.

Madame Vice-President,
Distinguished Delegates,

My work on durable solutions includes strengthening rights and services and supporting Rohingya in recovery and resilience through integrated and inclusive humanitarian, peace and development action. In this regard, it is essential we continue to be guided by the recommendations of the Rakhine Advisory Commission.

Drawing on these and my extensive consultations, the workplan aims to improve the conditions in Rakhine State by supporting positive changes at both the vertical and horizontal levels.

The vertical level involves key actors including the de-facto authorities, pro-democracy actors and the Arakan Army, among others.

Against competing pressures and tensions, I have continued a multi-stakeholder approach by engaging with all vertical actors towards structural transformation.

The horizontal level involves supporting grassroots initiatives that promote inclusivity, peaceful co-existence and equality for all.

The people of Myanmar, including the Rohingya, know best the ground realities, and when and how to push boundaries effectively. The Rohingya I spoke to have made it clear they want to be engaged directly. They feel that their exclusion from discussions and decisions about their future has entrenched their marginalisation.

They also want a recognition of their diversity and for their participation to be meaningful and broad-based, including women and youth.

Madame Vice-President,
Distinguished Delegates,

It is ultimately Myanmar's responsibility to address underlying issues.

In August, we mark the fifth year since the beginning of the Rohingya crisis. In the absence of foreseeable solutions, the Rohingya crisis will remain a regional problem with the largest burden shouldered by the Government of Bangladesh and host communities.

Under the leadership of the Government of Bangladesh, a comprehensive response to the COVID-19 pandemic for Rohingya refugees and affected host communities has prevented a catastrophe in the densely populated camps.

My workplan will focus on strengthening partnerships and initiatives that can improve Rohingya access to protection, services and opportunities for empowerment, including the use of the Myanmar Women, Peace and Security Platform, that I initiated. This will include the women, peace and security platform that I have established and am co-chairing with the Foreign Minister of Indonesia.

I will continue to advocate for greater leadership of countries in the region in supporting Bangladesh and leveraging their influence with Myanmar to create conducive conditions for the voluntary and dignified return of refugees.

Meanwhile, regional countries could do more to demonstrate better treatment of Rohingya refugees.

Desperate circumstances have continued to drive irregular movements by sea across the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. In the first five months of this year alone, sixty-five people have died or gone missing.

I welcome ASEAN's continuing efforts to highlight the situation of the Rohingya and I encourage ASEAN to advocate to address the root causes and continue to work with all stakeholders to identify specific areas for ASEAN to support.

Generations could be affected if we fail in our obligation to protect the people of Myanmar, their fundamental rights and dignity.

As I discussed last week with Permanent Representatives of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's (OIC) Contact Group on the Rohingya Crisis, we need swift measures to prevent a lost generation, by providing Rohingya and others education opportunities, including abroad. I hope that these issues will be discussed during the upcoming Summit on Education.

Madame Vice-President,
Distinguished Delegates,

From the tragedy of this conflict, new dynamics have emerged – an unprecedented solidarity among youth across all communities to reimagine Myanmar's future democracy, human rights and governance.

Inclusion of the Rohingya is a part of this new dynamic in ways we have not seen before. The wider political crisis has united people beyond ethnic and religious divides.

I ask for your continued commitment, as the people in Myanmar are looking to the international community for support of their aspirations of a new Federal Democratic Union that resets Myanmar's democracy, human rights and governance deficit, and realizes the strength in its diversity.

Sustainable solutions for the Rohingya people must be built into the design of a peaceful, inclusive and democratic Myanmar.

Despite emerging crises in the world, I know that this General Assembly will send a strong message that the aspiration of the people of Myanmar, including the Rohingya, will never be forgotten.

Thank you.