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Myanmar: Tentative steps towards Rohingya rehabilitation

YANGON, 24 February 2010 (IRIN) - UN agencies and NGOs are working to address the urgent humanitarian needs of the Rohingya in Myanmar, even as the government considers changes to their status, the UN says.

Officially referred to as Muslims, the Rohingya are de jure stateless in accordance with the laws of Myanmar.

In its draft stage, the Common Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP) will for the first time consolidate humanitarian aid efforts for all residents in Northern Rakhine State (NRS), where the Rohingya live.

"The humanitarian needs in northern Rakhine State are quite significant, so we need to work together, all the stakeholders," Bhairaja Panday, country representative for the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Myanmar, the lead agency in NRS, told IRIN.

"It's a one-year plan to begin with, but if it works it could be replicated in the years to come," he said.

The move comes amid a possible shift in government policy that may see the Rohingya - an ethnic, linguistic and religious minority - given legal status, and therefore accorded more rights.

"I think the government is looking sympathetically at their legal position, and seeing how to improve it," Panday said.

A review of their legal status is under way, against a backdrop of preparations for this year's upcoming elections.

"We are confident that the situation will improve [for them] in some measure; we don't know exactly how much," Panday said.

Urgent needs

Myanmar's Rohingya population was effectively made stateless in 1982 after the country passed a citizenship law requiring everyone to trace Burmese ancestry to 1823 to be considered a citizen.

They face severe discrimination, say human rights groups. Confined to just three townships in NRS, which restricts their economic opportunities, they need permission to travel from one village to another.

They also need official permission to marry and couples are restricted to having only two children, while common-law couples are vulnerable to prosecution.

At the same time, communal tensions exist between the Rohingya and Rakhine population.

Although hundreds of thousands of [Rohingya have fled the country](#), most to squalid conditions in neighbouring Bangladesh, according to UN agencies, some 735,000 still live in NRS.

The region ranks below national and Rakhine State averages on most demographic and socio-economic indicators. Meanwhile, humanitarian needs are critical in agriculture and food security, education, health and nutrition, infrastructure, and water and sanitation.

"All the five sectors need urgent intervention," said Panday.

These areas have been identified by the government and will be addressed by the CHAP, which agencies aim to finalize with the approval of the government before April. No budget has been set.

Alarming indicators

In NRS, most of the population is landless and relies on daily labour, fishing or subsistence farming on leased land.

There has been chronic food insecurity for years, with an average 84 percent of household spending going on food alone, according to UN agencies.

In rural areas, access to health services is extremely limited, with public health structures open only one day a week.

In Buthidaung Township, for example, there are just two government doctors for 300,000 people, one nurse for every 18,400 people - the national average is one nurse for 3,280 - and one midwife for every 5,500 people.

An assessment of 600 children in August and September 2009 found that only about 55 percent had satisfactory nutritional status. It also found that there was a global acute malnutrition (GAM) rate of 16.3 percent among them; the World Health Organization's (WHO) emergency threshold is 15 percent.

Myanmar has been widely criticized for the treatment of the Muslim population in NRS, and Panday said there now seemed to be some political commitment to tackle the situation.

"I think the government feels they need to address the problem now, and they do not want it to linger like this for a long time," he said.

The development of the CHAP is also an indication that the government is more open to international humanitarian assistance, he said.

"There is a general positive outlook towards solutions," said Panday.

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