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Burma: Conditions grim for Rohingya

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A U.S. delegation gives a bleak report after gauging conditions under which the stateless Rohingya live in Burma and Bangladesh.



A group of Rohingya refugees fleeing violence in Burma's Rakhine state attempt to cross the Naf river into Bangladesh, June 13, 2012. AFP

Three months after communal violence rocked western Burma's Rakhine state, the living conditions of Rohingyas there and in refugee camps in neighboring Bangladesh are grim, according to a U.S. delegation tasked with assessing conditions in the areas.

U.S. officials, speaking for the first time after being given rare access to Rakhine state and Rohingya refugee centers in Bangladesh, said the long-term solution to the Rohingya plight is for the tens of thousands of refugees living in Bangladesh to eventually return to Burma.

"I look forward to the day when the situation in Burma is such that the refugees voluntarily, freely, safely, will want to go home," said U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh Dan Mozena, based on a press conference transcript provided to RFA this week by the State Department.

The press conference was held last week in Bangladesh's capital Dhaka by the officials at the end of the mission to Sittwe and Maungdaw – the areas of Rakhine state worst hit by the violence – and Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar district which houses tens of thousands of Rohingya refugees.

The mission was aimed at determining the conditions in the two areas following the June violence between Muslim Rohingyas and Buddhist Rakhines in Rakhine that left more than 80 people dead and tens of thousands displaced.

Conditions for return

The U.S. officials said more needs to be done to make conditions safe for the Rohingya in Rakhine before refugees can return.

"The extreme emotions that drove some of the events earlier this year are still very much in place," said Kelly Clements, Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.

Members of the delegation discussed with local officials how enhancing economic development in Rakhine could be "a key element in creating the conditions that will enable the refugees to go home," Mozena said.

Assurances must also be put in place for better protection of people's rights, the officials said.

The Rohingya, whom the U.N. considers one of the world's most persecuted minorities, are not recognized as an ethnic group in Burma even though they have lived in the country for decades.

Many of the country's 800,000 Rohingyas are denied citizenship even though their families have lived there for generations.

"Certainly some of the deprivations that have caused people to feel insecure will need to be addressed," said Dan Baer, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

Tensions between the Rakhine and Rohingya groups are still "very real and threatening," Mozena said.

Burma-Bangladesh Dialogue

He said that dialogue between Bangladesh and Burma on the Rohingya was encouraging but that further talks are needed to resolve the "very difficult situation."

"It is most, most and most encouraging to see the development of dialogue between Bangladesh and Burma," he said.

Thein Sein was scheduled to visit Bangladesh in July, following a visit to Burma by Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in December, but he canceled his trip after the violence erupted in Rakhine.

Reconciliation

Clements said the long-term priority in the region should be reconciliation and the reintegration of Rohingya and Rakhine communities.

"The Burmese government is well aware that there are some deep-seated issues that need to be addressed between the communities in order for there to be a long-term solution," Clements said.

"Obviously ... our hope and wish [is] for people to be able to go home," she said.

In the aftermath of the clashes, Burmese President Thein Sein suggested that the U.N.'s refugee agency take responsibility for many of the country's Rohingyas and that they should be deported.

His proposal was swiftly rejected by the agency, but thousands of Buddhist monks took to the streets to back his call and protest against the Rohingyas, saying they do not belong in Burma.

Cox's Bazar

But in the meantime, the urgent humanitarian needs of those displaced by the violence remain a top priority, the officials said.

For the thousands who fled by boat to Cox's Bazar and are living in refugee camps, nutrition, water, sanitation, are serious concerns, said Mozena, who joined the delegation for the Bangladesh part of its tour.

Bangladesh must continue to keep its borders open to the refugees, Mozena said, stressing the urgent need for food and health care for the Rohingyas there.

Some 300,000 Rohingyas live in Bangladesh, which in August told aid groups to stop providing assistance in the camps because it encouraged more Rohingyas to come. Bangladesh recognizes only about 29,000 of the Rohingyas in its borders as refugees.

The U.S. will support resettlement to a third country for some "extremely vulnerable" individuals in the camps, Clements said.

Between 2006 and 2010, about 1,000 Rohingyas from the camps in Cox's Bazar were resettled in third countries.

A 24-member delegation appointed by the Burmese government and one from the 57-nation Organization for Islamic Cooperation, the world's largest Muslim body, have also visited Rakhine state to assess conditions in the aftermath of the clashes.

Reported by Rachel Vandenbrink.

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