

The ongoing violence and forced removal of Rohingya communities from Rakhine state in Burma/Myanmar has rightly prompted outcry from the United Kingdom's Government, Parliament, and civil society. The crisis has also prompted urgent scrutiny of the UK's current approach to predicting identity-based mass violence and how it responds to the risks of such atrocities. In December 2017 the UK Foreign Affairs Select Committee Inquiry into the violence in Rakhine State and the UK's response, citing evidence from Protection Approaches, concluded that the ongoing crisis in Myanmar was 'sadly predictable and predicted' but that the Foreign Office warning system 'did not raise enough alarm. There was too much focus by the UK and others in recent years in supporting the 'democratic transition' and not enough on atrocity prevention'. Foreign Office Minister Mark Field has conceded that 'the FCO must now learn lessons on atrocity prevention from the crisis to apply to Burma and elsewhere'. Recent parliamentary debate on the plight of the Rohingya has meanwhile highlighted the political will across all parties for the UK to play a role in bringing an end to the violence.

In response, on 15 December 2017 Protection Approaches convened a day-long event at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) with representatives from the Government, Parliament, and civil society to explore how the UK could strengthen its contribution to the prediction and prevention of mass atrocities.

A closed meeting in the morning discussed the UK Government's past, current, and future policy towards Myanmar before reflecting upon the various roles and responsibilities of the UK regarding the prediction and prevention of mass atrocities in Myanmar and elsewhere. This session was followed in the afternoon with a public panel and Q&A exploring lessons to be learnt from the UK's response to warning signs from Myanmar and considered opportunities for the UK to strengthen its contribution to the prevention mass atrocities and identity-based violence around the world.

This bulletin provides a summary of the key themes and recommendations to emerge from these discussions.

## Recommendations

While the challenge of preventing mass atrocity crimes is a complex one, simple but effective measures were raised that could enhance the UK Government's prediction of and increase its contribution to the prevention of identity-based mass violence, including mass atrocity crimes:

- Acknowledge the prevention of identity-based violence and mass atrocities as a distinct global challenge and UK national security priority
- Acknowledge the UK's responsibility to contribute to the prediction and prevention of mass atrocities extends beyond its United Nations activities
- Integrate mass atrocity prevention into UK national policy commitments and decision-making processes
- Move from words to deeds and institutionalise the UK's rhetorical commitments:
  - Create a ministerial portfolio or cross party special advisor with a mandate to raise early warnings and make recommendations for action
  - Ensure that FCO and DfID prediction models, early warning systems, and policy documents incorporate relevant indicators of identity-based violence

- Develop an inter-departmental approaches to prevention and response that facilitate communication between relevant FCO, DfID, and MoD partners
- Elevate and enhance the role of the UK Focal Point on the Responsibility to Protect and/or develop relevant civilian expertise within the office
- Promote greater civil society-Government dialogue on issues of atrocity prevention and engage with the UK Working Group on Atrocity Prevention, coordinated by Protection Approaches

## Roundtable Themes

**A political consensus exists concerning the UK's responsibility to assist the Rohingya however anxiety over 'what to do next' has stalled responses so far:** The nature of the violence against the Rohingya has disabused the assumption that the UK contributes to mass atrocity prevention through its conflict prevention activities but there is a continued reluctance among UK decision makers to view the crisis as a political one. Any palliative humanitarian response should be supplemented by ongoing political engagement and sustained involvement of the FCO is therefore vital alongside DfID. Several participants emphasised the importance of recognising that the situation in Myanmar not only presents a chronic and protracted humanitarian emergency, it is symptomatic of an underlying political crisis that requires a more fundamental resolution. Participants noted the importance of continuing to push for accountability, with the UK supporting documentation of atrocities and the development of appropriate transitional justice measures.

**The UK's narrow focus on democratisation and economic growth in Myanmar ignored the rising risk of mass atrocities during a time of political transition:** Government representatives shared how the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office persistently raised the status and plight of the Rohingya with Burmese authorities for many years, since before the 2012 violence. DFID has invested over £30m in Rakhine State since 2012 focused on humanitarian, development and community reconciliation programming, all of which is informed by conflict sensitivity and political economy analysis. The UK's approach has looked to sought to address drivers of conflict more generally in Rakhine State and Myanmar generally. These efforts did not prevent the recent violence, but Government representatives stress, this was not due to lack of attention to a highly complex and deeply engrained problem.

UK Government objectives in Myanmar over the past decade have prioritised the transition to democracy, supported development, and promoted 'inclusive' economic growth. However, participants discussed how without an atrocity prevention strategy or 'lens' being applied to UK policy making, the adverse effects of many political developments within Myanmar were neglected and the UK's approach remained narrowly circumscribed. The UK's early and continued promotion of bilateral trade relations with Myanmar was inconsistent with its commitment to the Responsibility to Protect and to UK overtures at the UN to raise concerns regarding Rohingya safety. A clear need was identified for the FCO, DfID, and other Government departments to address the specific institutional gaps through which atrocity prevention currently falls.

**The absence of identity-based indicators in UK risk assessment and decision-making inhibited effective short and long term protective or preventive responses in Myanmar:** Although numerous early warning signs of pervasive identity-based violence were readily apparent over the last decade, the UK and other international actors failed to recognise clear evidence of exclusionary and at times violent processes at both the regional and national levels. This gave inadvertent licence to the Myanmar authorities to engage in further repression of the Rohingya. As highlighted by the recent Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry, and emphasised by a number of roundtable participants, the crisis in Myanmar was both predictable and predicted; despite this, both the FCO warning system and DfID emergency response framework did not raise sufficient alarm. This highlights the need for an prediction mechanism and set of prevention contingencies to assist to UK decision making

The Myanmar government drew several key lessons of their own regarding incentives and disincentives to action: Many participants emphasised the deliberate and political nature of the campaigns against Rohingya and other minorities in Myanmar and provides evidence of their escalation in the face of non-action from the international community. The dehumanisation and repression of the Rohingya within Myanmar has served to increase government domestic popularity. Aung San Suu Kyi has meanwhile usefully served as a lightning rod for international attention and now criticism, diverting focus away from those more actively responsible for the commission of atrocities. As a result, Burmese military leaders have themselves paid no discernible price internationally for both their immediate and longer-term campaigns against the Rohingya. Continued emphasis by some in Government on Suu Kyi's capacity to act as broker was criticised by several civil society experts.

UK leadership at the international level is not an option, but a responsibility: While it was acknowledged that at the present moment the UK has limited political influence on the ground in Myanmar, this fact should not preclude continued bilateral and multilateral engagement in the region in addition to its activities at the United Nations. A number of participants highlighted that the UK has in the past relied heavily upon the ability and/or willingness of Aung San Suu Kyi to influence events either a potential (human rights) broker or as a power holder. At the UN, it was suggested that continued long-term advocacy for targeted sanctions and referral to the International Criminal Court will be extremely difficult and should be supplemented by leading conversation at both the Security Council and General Assembly on possible alternative options for future accountability. It was noted that the UK enjoyed a closer relationship with the Myanmar state and missed opportunities during the past five years to address the risks facing Rohingya and other minorities in the country.

Valuable lessons for the UK can be drawn from elsewhere, notably the US experience of institutionalising national commitment to predicting and preventing mass atrocities: The UK, unlike the United States and others, has no national strategy of atrocity prevention. In recognising atrocity prevention as a core national security issue and strategic priority, and explicitly acknowledge its responsibility to protect civilians from mass atrocity crimes. Several participants emphasised the import of bureaucracies, stressing that repeated verbal commitments facilitate institutional commitments. The US Atrocity Prevention Board was discussed as a model that offers lessons for the UK government, and while the effectiveness of the APB can be overstated it holds particular value in facilitating state-level process and decision-making, such as earmarking of funds for prevention. The broader US experience also demonstrates the importance of providing appropriate training for international development staff, the opening of early warning communication channels, and development of tactical guidance for military response operations.

## Public Panel

A public discussion was held in the afternoon session, framed around the ongoing crisis in Myanmar and addressing the need for broader discussion of the gaps in current UK approaches to the prediction and prevention of identity-based mass violence.

<b>Ewan Lawson, (Chair)</b>	Senior Research Fellow, RUSI
<b>Francis Wade</b>	author of Myanmar's Enemy Within
<b>Dr. Kate Ferguson</b>	Director of Research & Policy, Protection Approaches)
<b>Rosy Cave</b>	Head of the Gender Equality Unit, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Head of the Office of the Prime Minister's Special Representative on the Prevention of Sexual Violence in Conflict
<b>Savita Pawnday</b>	Deputy Director, Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect

Myanmar represents an unparalleled modern example of the bleak contrast between forewarning and lack of response. The long-standing marginalisation of the Rohingya within Myanmar was highlighted by **Francis Wade** who outlined how the 2017 crisis was preceded by a number of incremental but identifiable processes. The Rohingya have been increasingly portrayed as an overarching national 'threat' due to fears of regional breakaway and/or Islamisation of Rakhine State, and there has been no-one within the Myanmar government willing to counter predominant anti-Rohingya narratives or challenge the use of discriminate violence by authorities. Events in June 2012 marked a significant turning point, and numerous indicators of potential atrocity crimes were readily apparent in recent years, notably the increased ghettoisation of the Rohingya, a lack of state protection, and widespread immunity. Enabling conditions for the present crisis were therefore extremely well-documented by journalists and NGOs – yet, while early warning signs were easily identifiable, these were neglected. Francis Wade also warned that there is still a significant chance that the violence in Myanmar could mutate further and called upon the UK Government to pay particular attention to this dimension of the crisis.

All discussants agreed that the well-documented nature of the fragile socio-political situation in Rakhine State underlined that the problem was not one of early warning, but one of early response. **Savita Pawnday** suggested the collective failure of the international community to effectively protect Rohingya populations was born out of a lack of perceived self-interest to protect but also because the correct analytical lens was not used to understand the crisis. Instead, the crisis was viewed through the lens of democracy promotion, which led to a policy protecting Aung San Suu Ki's position within the government. As a result, the response to Myanmar and other atrocity situations is still typically fractured and ad hoc. This limits the effectiveness of any potential international engagement.

**Rosy Cave** discussed lessons learnt from the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative (PVSII), praising the leadership of former Foreign Secretary William Hague and underlining the value of norm entrepreneurship. The UK's leadership in preventing sexual violence in conflict is a positive example of Government commitment to preventing identity-based violence and provides an example of cross-departmental strategy.

Our Director of Research & Policy **Kate Ferguson** examined how the absence of a UK atrocity prevention strategy continues to leave it ill-prepared to address crises through national mechanisms. This is despite its various material and institutional advantages, its political commitments to R2P, and the quality of work that it conducts on related issues such as PSVI and in other areas of international development. There are ongoing structural and conceptual problems in how the UK approaches atrocity prevention and its responsibility to protect. As a result, responsibilities to predict, prevent, and protect continue to fall between the gaps of conflict prevention, development, countering violent extremism, and other policy agendas.

UK strategy on mass atrocities, such as it exists, is typically passed up to the UN level and is not matched in the UK's national level activities. Failures too often occur because the prevention of mass atrocities is not recognised as a national priority, with their occurrence understood as exceptional rather than commonplace. Atrocity prevention is mistakenly seen as a narrow agenda rather than a joined up, holistic approach to a global challenge.

The call to mainstream atrocity prevention is therefore not simply a response to the crisis in Myanmar, but has long been noted as a missing element in UK foreign policy. An appropriate atrocity prevention mechanism would, for example, have also assisted with earlier response in Syria and better informed post-intervention planning on Libya. Structural reform is not about replacing other policy mechanisms, however, but supplementing these; current UK conflict prevention and prediction models are not fit for the purpose of atrocity prevention and prediction. Rather than advocating wholesale change, there should be a realistic expectation that appropriate measures can be taken to strengthen the UK prediction, prevention, and response architecture.

Where atrocity prevention is a necessary analytical lens to be applied, R2P does go further in providing an existing framework and explicit commitment to act. The conversation ended with discussion of ways in which the UK Government could integrate into national mechanisms its existing commitments to the responsibility to protect populations from atrocities. Drawing on examples of best practice elsewhere in the world, it was suggested that the UK could strengthen its office of the R2P focal point, which currently sits within the Foreign Office, by elevating the role to a public or political position and/or by working more closely with the atrocity prevention working group (convened by Protection Approaches) and making use of other external resources. Fulfilment of the UK's responsibility to protect does not begin and end with its work via the United Nations.

## Protection Approaches

Protection Approaches is the only organisation with a Research & Policy programme designed to assist the UK in better predicting and to enhance its contribution to the prevention of mass atrocities. For further information regarding this event or Protection Approaches' work please contact [policy@protectionapproaches.org](mailto:policy@protectionapproaches.org) | +44 (0) 20 3488 2996

## Roundtable Participants

### Chair:

**Emily Winterbotham**, Senior Research Fellow, RUSI

### Participants:

**Rosy Cave**, Head of the FCO Gender Equality Unit and Head of the Office of the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict

**Fred Carver**, Head of Policy, United Nations Association-UK

**Mark Farmaner**, Director, Burma Campaign

**Kate Ferguson**, Managing Director, Protection Approaches

**Lord Hannay**, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on the United Nations

**Lucy Hovil**, Senior Research Associate, International Refugee Rights Initiative

**Rosena Allin-Khan MP**, Labour, Tooting

**Tun Khin**, President of Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK

**Naomi Kikoler**, Deputy Director of the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, US Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Jennifer Larbie**, Head of International Policy, Labour Party

**Ewan Lawson**, Senior Research Fellow, RUSI

**Nick Martlew**, UK Director, Crisis Action

**Savita Pawnday**, Deputy Executive Director, Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect

**Fergus Reid**, Chief Clerk, International Development Select Committee

**Cristina Stefan**, Co-Director, European Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, University of Leeds

**Fiona Tod**, Foreign Policy Adviser, Liberal Democrats

**Sidridur Tulinius**, Foreign and Defence Policy Researcher, SNP Westminster Group

**Saul Walker**, Head of the Country Liaison and Policy Team in the Asia, Caribbean and Overseas Territories Division, DfID

### Observers:

**Ella Crine**, Aide to Alison McGovern MP, Chair of the APPG for the Prevention of Genocide

**Kate Forbes**, Aide to Rosena Allin-Khan MP

**Nicole Piché**, Secretariat, All Party Parliamentary Group on Human Rights

**Albert Souza Mulli**, Conflict & Stabilisation Adviser, MENA & Asia Team, Stabilisation Unit, FCO

**Ben Willis**, (Rapporteur) Research Assistant, Protection Approaches

*We sincerely thank our partners at RUSI for hosting the event and all participants in the day's activities.*