

## Myanmar: “A textbook example of ethnic cleansing”

How the UK can avoid a textbook response

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When a state fails to protect their populations from mass atrocity crimes the responsibility to ensure the safety of groups at risk falls to the international community. This includes the United Kingdom. The responsibility to protect people from all forms of identity-based violence begins at home but extends around the world; it is a shared issue of conscience, not of politics.

In Myanmar, the state military and its auxiliaries are committing what has been described by the United Nations as “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing” of a Muslim minority group known as the Rohingya. Witnesses and survivors of the military operation have recounted stories of torture, mass rape, arson, and massacre against the Rohingya population across the Rakhine province.

The Myanmar government claim their military is responding to an insurgency by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army and the threat of Islamist terrorism. This is not borne out by the facts. Efforts by the Myanmar elite to create obscurity and confusion regarding where responsibility for the violence lies should not impede efforts to bring about an immediate end to the violence, the prevention of further atrocities, and justice for the Rohingya community.

The UK government stands as one of the largest aid donors to Myanmar and already has been effective in raising the agenda at the UN Security Council. However, condemnation alone is not sufficient to prevent further atrocities.

**284**

Rohingya villages have been  
torched and over

**90 percent**

of the structures in each village  
have been damaged

More than

**half a million**

Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh,  
amounting to the largest  
displacement of people  
in such a short period of time since  
the Rwandan genocide

An average of

**2,000**

Rohingya are crossing into  
Bangladesh each day. Some days in  
recent weeks have seen as many as

**11,000**

Rohingya flee

### Immediate recommendations for Her Majesty's Government:

- Urge the UN Security Council to call upon Myanmar's State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and Commander of Myanmar Security Forces Sr. Gen. Min Aung to put an end to the violence and facilitate full, unfettered access to humanitarian aid and international observers
- Support the UN Security Council and the European Union in imposing a comprehensive arms embargo and targeted travel bans, asset freezes, and sanctions against key figures of Myanmar's military and political elite
- Work with regional partners and ASEAN in building multilateral support at the UN with nations and international organisations that have a vested interest in the economic and social welfare of Myanmar and in maintaining international peace and security in the region
- Apply a whole of government holistic approach to all future engagement with Myanmar, including in its diplomatic and trade relations, refugee policy, Brexit negotiations, and in referring the situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court

## Tackling the identity-based divisions

Widespread anti-Muslim prejudice is at the heart of the crisis. The discrimination, persecution, and violent attack on Muslims is now widely perceived in Myanmar as being acceptable. This atmosphere of impunity aids and abets further escalations of identity-based violence. At the same time, there are medium and longterm risks of resentment and radicalisation within the Rohingya population. While the recruitment among the displaced to violent extremist groups should not be exaggerated, ongoing violence against Muslims does increase the risk of reprisals.

An atrocity prevention lens on aid delivery in Myanmar would ensure that the UK government is prioritising tackling the root processes that facilitate and perpetuate identity-based violence. This should include:

- Implementing an inter-communal dialogue initiative
- Increased international development programmes aimed at addressing underlying identity-based tensions

## Could the UK have done more?

It is often said that the responsibility to protect people from mass atrocities is first and foremost a responsibility to prevent. Mass atrocity crimes do not occur over night; ongoing atrocities against the Rohingya represent the violent expression of decades long efforts to stigmatise, delegitimise, and dehumanise Muslims in Myanmar. This crisis was predictable and indeed was predicted.

While the responsibility to protect is a shared one, the failure of the UK government to apply an atrocity prevention lens to its Myanmar policy led to an incoherent and ineffectual protective response. Concern expressed by the UK office at the UN was not matched in the UK's trade policy, in its international development focus, or in its wider diplomatic efforts. This hindered earlier, more effective protective interventions.

***This recent crisis is a reminder that the UK, unlike the USA and other states, has no clear policy on atrocity prevention.***

Unchecked hate speech, lack of government control over security forces, presence of non-state and pseudo-non-state armed groups, growing nationalist support of the military and increased incidences of identity-based attack, were all indicators of the escalating violence against the Rohingya. By enhancing early warning signs, the UK would have been more alert to these indicators and therefore have been able to better predict and perhaps prevent the latest episode of identity-based mass violence.

## Institutionalising atrocity prevention

The UK can make the following simple but effective changes to strengthen its ability to prevent mass atrocity crimes:

- Acknowledge the prevention of identity-based violence and mass atrocities is a cross-party issue of conscience and a national priority
- Adopt a whole of government approach to the global challenge of identity-based violence
- Integrate mass atrocity prevention into existing policy commitments and decision-making processes, on the party level and across government
- Create a cabinet portfolio or cross party special advisor with a mandate to raise early warning signs and make recommendations for action
- Increase cross-party cooperation within parliament
- Engage with the UK Working Group on Atrocity Prevention, coordinated by Protection Approaches