
MYANMAR TO GIVE UN ACCESS OVER RETURN OF ROHINGYA REFUGEES

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The United Nations said Myanmar's government agreed on Thursday (May 31) to grant it access to crisis-hit Rakhine state after months of wrangling over how to repatriate hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslim refugees.

The western state has been largely sealed off after a bloody military-led campaign last year that has forced some 700,000 Rohingya to flee to neighbouring Bangladesh into what is now the largest refugee camp in the world.

The UN and US have labelled the crackdown as "ethnic cleansing", while the army says it was fighting Rohingya militants.

Myanmar and Bangladesh signed a repatriation deal in November but so far only a few dozen refugees have returned, with the vast majority of the long-persecuted and stateless minority refusing to come back unless their safety and citizenship are secured.

The UN has said conditions on the ground in Rakhine are not ripe for a safe, voluntary and dignified return, but Thursday's draft agreement would allow its agencies to gain access to Rakhine, "including to refugees' places of origin and areas of potential return that has not been permitted since violence broke out in August 2017," according to its statement.

The access would allow the UN refugee agency to "assess conditions on the ground and carry out protection activities," it added, without elaborating.

Myanmar has said it is ready to take back the Rohingya and has traded accusations with Bangladesh over who is responsible for the delay.

But critics question the sincerity and reach of the new deal.

The draft agreement is an "opportunity to help stem the pernicious consequences of the Myanmar government's persistent denials of independent access to UN agencies," Human Rights Watch Myanmar researcher Rich Weir said.

"But the agreement will not be worth the paper it is written on if the Myanmar government does not demonstrate through actions that it is willing to open Rakhine state to independent monitors."

The Myanmar government also said it would set up an "independent" probe to "investigate the violation of human rights and related issues following the terrorist attacks by ARSA," referring to the Rohingya militant group that attacked in August and killed around a dozen border guard police.

The military used the operation as a pretext for starting the crackdown in northern Rakhine.

Myanmar has refused to allow a fact-finding mission set up by the UN Human Rights Council to enter the country, and has barred UN rights expert Yanghee Lee, rejecting nearly all allegations that its security forces committed atrocities in Rakhine.

It has also dismissed an attempt at the ICC to open a probe into the crisis, saying the court has no jurisdiction.

New UN envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener is due to pay a first visit to the country in June for talks on the Rohingya refugee crisis following a Security Council visit.

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