

ASIA - PACIFIC

UK conference stresses responsibility to help Rohingya

Root causes of Rohingya crisis and influx of refugees in Bangladesh among issues analyzed at conference in London

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FILE PHOTO

LONDON

An international conference in London discussed the Rohingya crisis at length and looked at the pertinent issues that continue to plague the world's most persecuted people, from ethnic cleansing in Myanmar to life as refugees in Bangladesh.

The two-day conference, organized by the Institute for Risk and Disaster Reduction at University College London, ended on Friday. It featured sessions on issues such as state-sponsored violence in Myanmar and the role of gender, religion, and ethics as well as many others.

Among the many panelists, which included professors, academics and activists, were chief guests and keynote speakers Saida Muna Tasneem, Bangladesh's high commissioner to the U.K., Ireland, and Liberia, and Chris Sidoti, an international human rights lawyer.

"The world cannot forget that the Rohingya people are the most underrepresented and persecuted," said Tasneem.

"Just because the media does not give them coverage, it does not mean that what is being done to them is not happening, I assure you it is."

She said that the influx of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh is unprecedented and that the Dhaka government is doing everything in its capacity to accommodate them. However, she urged the West to help alleviate the suffering of the Rohingya through supplying aid and international charities and increased cooperation with the government.

"The West have a moral and ethical responsibility in helping out the world's oppressed and persecuted. Often times they talk of morality and principles but now we have a situation where they act upon their words and really make a difference in the lives of those who have

Speaking on the violence by Myanmar's government, Sidoti explained how the security forces used a scorched-earth policy to drive out the Rohingya people from their homes in Rakhine state. The military entered their towns and villages, forcibly removed the inhabitants, often raped the women and young girls, and burned down their houses and businesses to ensure they would never return, he said.

According to Sidoti, in addition to the many killed and who fled, this violent process was aimed at driving fear into the hearts of the Rohingya so that they never return to Rakhine state. Furthermore, by destroying their homes and businesses, the authorities made space for the construction of new home for migrants -- often Buddhist -- from other parts of Myanmar to occupy the land that belongs to the Rohingya, thus erasing any trace of their existence.

"We see often the repeated use of this scorched-earth policy by Myanmar authorities in effectively driving out the Rohingya population from their lands and rebuilding homes and businesses anew for the arrival of migrants to make it look as if the Rohingya never existed in Rakhine state but also to cement the idea that they can never return as they will have nothing to come back to," Sidoti said.

The use of rape as a weapon against the Rohingya was widespread, with many Rohingya women testifying to the horrors they endured when the Myanmar military plundered their towns and villages. With no armed force to protect them and no international intervention to prevent the security services from carrying out these horrific acts, Rohingya women were extremely vulnerable to severe abuse at the hands of the military.

Often many Rohingya families were separated when forcibly removed from their homes. This left the women without the protection of their fathers, brothers, or husbands, vulnerable to being attacked and abused by security services personnel, with many being killed.

The role played by religion and ethnicity is one of the root causes of the genocide of the Rohingya people. As a minority Muslim ethnic group in a majority Buddhist nation, the Rohingya have faced persecution and discrimination for decades. They have been denied citizenship and all the benefits that come with it and thus are restricted in nearly every aspect of life such as acquiring an education, healthcare, setting up a business, voting in an election, and other basic rights.

The Myanmar government has accused them of being foreigners, migrants from Bangladesh who do not belong in Myanmar and has used this rationalization to justify denying basic rights to the Rohingya. Moreover, they are also persecuted over their Islamic faith and viewed as third-class people, below other ethnic groups. This discrimination and persecution has been taking place for decades.

- A persecuted people

The Rohingya, described by the UN as the world's most persecuted people, have faced heightened fears of attack since dozens were killed in communal violence in 2012.

According to Amnesty International, more than 750,000 Rohingya refugees, mostly women and children, have fled Myanmar and crossed into Bangladesh after Myanmar forces launched a crackdown on the minority Muslim community in August 2017.

Since then, nearly 24,000 Rohingya Muslims have been killed by Myanmar's state forces, according to a report by the Ontario International Development Agency (OIDA).

More than 34,000 Rohingya were also thrown into fires, while over 114,000 others were beaten, said the OIDA report, titled "Forced Migration of Rohingya: The Untold Experience."

Some 18,000 Rohingya women and girls were raped by Myanmar's army and police and





children -- brutal beatings and disappearances committed by Myanmar state forces.



In a report, UN investigators said such violations may have constituted crimes against humanity.

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