

**A Timeline of Key Events in the Rakhine State Crisis, 2016-2018  
and key remarks from State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, 2012-2015**

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## Developments in the Rakhine State Crisis, 2016-2018

### 2016

**May 2016:** A report from CARE International (*Perspectives on Conflict Sensitivity in Rakhine State*) highlights Western news reporting as increasing tensions between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Rakhine State. The report notes that widespread poverty and unemployment mean Rakhine Buddhists feel as persecuted by a lack of government support and international aid as the Rohingya. While the Rohingya are repeatedly referred to as “one of the world’s most persecuted people” the impact of systemic poverty, unemployment and inter-communal tensions for other communities in the state go unreported. Forced labour, child labour, forced portering for the army and the impact of Rakhine State’s Special Economic Zone on the local population stir rumours that violence has been facilitated by a military attempting to draw attention away from the resource extraction impoverishing the region.

The relationship between resource extraction through operations such as the Shwe gas pipeline and the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Kyauk Phyu to rising tensions and the increasingly challenging conditions shared by all are obscured by accusations of nationalism and conflict arising from religious persecution. Nationalism gains a foothold in part as a consequence of media coverage. In an academic study compiled and edited by Aim Sinpeng and Ross Tapsell in 2021, author Nyi Nyi Kyaw explains that “The Western media coverage of the violence against Rohingyas angered Myanmar’s Buddhist majority, leading to a surge in nationalist and Buddhist narratives online, creating a fertile ground for radical Buddhist nationalist groups to emerge.” (*From Grassroots Activism to Disinformation: Social Media in South East Asia*, Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021).

The narrative of nationalism and religious persecution is echoed in the United Nation’s position, which insists on framing the violence not as inter-communal but as the deliberate systematic persecution of a single minority. The international community begins to demand Aung San Suu Kyi become an explicit champion of Rohingya rights, no matter how inappropriate this would be for a head of state concerned with welfare of both sides.

**May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2016:** The NLD government forms a 27-member Central Committee for the Implementation of Peace, Stability and Development in Rakhine State,

appointing Aung San Suu Kyi as chair. Tasked with preventing future hostilities, the committee is comprised of representatives from national and local levels. With the NLD platform and system of governance steered by the principle of national reconciliation, peace in Rakhine State is understood as part of broader systemic and historical issues, and as a challenge affecting both communities. The committee aims to establish security, peace, stability and rule of law, resettle internally displaced persons and address underlying issues through access to basic infrastructure and long-term socioeconomic development.

On June 1<sup>st</sup>, committee members make their first visit IDP camps. Over the coming year, the committee holds three coordination meetings that address the distribution of aid, investigations into ongoing violence, the implementation of citizenship rights, and numerous other related issues. By July, the committee has established a 142-point agenda for the region. As a result, humanitarian aid is delivered and a citizenship verification process is launched which soon grants an initial 900 displaced persons citizenship.

**August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016:** At the request of Aung San Suu Kyi, the Office of the State Councillor partners with the Kofi Annan Foundation to establish a 9-member Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, staffed by independent scholars and advisers, with local Muslim and Buddhist representatives. Kofi Annan is appointed chair. The commission is given one year to determine conflict-prevention measures before submitting a report that will include recommendations on the development of basic infrastructure and the promotion of long-term development.

Inter-communal tensions created by poor living standards and a lack of development or support often manifest in conflicts of race and religion, and here are exacerbated by increased and destabilising freedoms. The Irrawaddy reports Peter Benyon, Chairman of the British Chamber for Commerce, as saying that conflict in Rakhine could be resolved through increasing the wealth and prosperity of those in the area. When the government proposes the construction of 18 roads and bridges in 16 Rakhine townships in early 2017, Lower House representative U Pe Than comments “[Rakhine] State has resources. It is rich in natural gas, but it is in poverty because of political turmoil. [Rakhine] people are just demanding to share the profits from those resources.”

**October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016:** Only 18 days after Aung San Suu Kyi outlines the government’s plans for tackling conflict in Rakhine State at the United Nations

General Assembly, nine police officers are killed and four wounded when a group of approximately 90 assailants launch a series of attacks on police border posts in Maungdaw Township, Rakhine State, seizing weapons and ammunition. Officials believe the attackers are from the Rohingya community but are unsure of their affiliation with any group or organisation. Some suggest that the disenfranchised group were lured to the lightly defended border posts to incite violence for political gain. The Burma Army begins “clearance operations” and announces that Maungdaw is a military zone, restricting access to journalists and NGOs. It’s a month before aid reaches the area.

**October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016:** The government issues a statement identifying the assailants as members of the Aqa Mul Mujahidin, who call themselves Harakat al-Yaqin (“The Faith Movement”) and who later take responsibility on social media. The army detains 300 suspects and 70 are killed in the clearance operations, while 1,200 civilians are displaced from Dar Gyee Zar village, which is razed to the ground.

Human Rights Watch uses satellite imagery to identify 800 demolished buildings and claims that the military alone are responsible, a finding which is rejected by the Burmese government. Arson is a known tactic of the terror group and is later reported by many witnesses. The ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights warn against “groundless accusations” and the international media begins to attract criticism for publishing rumours from unverified sources.

U Zaw Htay, the President’s Office deputy director-general, states clearly that the attacks are not related to issues of race and religion and warns that individuals and organisations with ties to terrorism and extremism have been supplying the press with false information. He denies accusations of arbitrary arrest and torture as “totally wrong”. When The Arakan State Investigation Committee is formed in December, it suggests the attacks are intentional and perpetrated by elements of the Rohingya diaspora who had training from terrorist organizations abroad.

**December 2016:** Headed by Vice President U Myint Swe, a national investigation committee is formed by the government to look into allegations of crimes committed by security forces in Rakhine State. The 13-member Arakan State Investigation Committee tours Rakhine before publishing a report in

January 2017 in which it claims there is no evidence of widespread abuse committed by either police or soldiers.

Human Rights Watch rightly expresses doubt about this committee's ability to conduct an impartial investigation, but soon after Burmese journalists are invited on a three-day tour of Maungdaw, a Muslim interviewee who reported to journalists that there were no instances of rape, arson or arbitrary arrest by security forces in his village is found beheaded. There are at least 60 of these homicides by September 2017, with village leaders and elders specifically targeted. The NLD government's reticence in allowing foreign journalists to visit the affected areas is based not just on the inherent danger of ongoing conflict but on consequences such as these for the local communities. Nevertheless, international observers will infer that the government has something to hide.

## 2017

**February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017:** The United Nations Office for the High Commissioner of Human Rights releases a report that accuses the army and police of arbitrary detention, mass gang rape, arson and extrajudicial killings in Rakhine State. The Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Home Affairs (both military-controlled) form investigative commissions in response, and a further team of high ranking police officers is assembled to investigate allegations of crimes committed by security forces in Rakhine's Maungdaw Township.

Based on interviews with almost 70,000 Muslim refugees, Human Rights Watch releases a report alleging widespread sexual violence and abuse of girls as young as 13 years old. Aung San Suu Kyi and the government are "deeply concerned" by the findings but request further information. No information is forthcoming, and the anecdotal nature of the reports from traumatised refugees sharing camps with Rohingya terrorists are disseminated without clear acknowledgement of the source.

**March 2017:** In light of increasing tensions in the region, the Kofi Annan-led Advisory Commission on Rakhine State releases an interim report and recommendations. The recommendations include granting access to aid organisations and the media, that perpetrators of serious human rights violations be held accountable, an assessment of how the Special Economic Zone affects local communities, that police and security forces should receive comprehensive training

with the help of international donors, and that citizens should work with the government to revitalise the citizenship verification process. The Office of State Counsellor releases the statement “The Government concurs with the recommendations set forth in the report and believes that these will have a positive impact on the process of the national reconciliation and development. The large majority of the recommendations will be implemented promptly with a view to maximum effectiveness.”

**March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017:** After concluding that the activities of security forces in Rakhine State may amount to crimes against humanity, the UN resolves on an independent fact-finding mission aiming to uncover evidence of abuse in Rakhine, Shan and Kachin states. The Foreign Affairs Ministry raises objections to the one-sidedness of the UN resolution, and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing warns that political intervention under the guise of assisting refugees would harm the country’s sovereignty. The state-run newspaper, Global New Light of Myanmar, claims all these accusations are either incorrect or completely fabricated.

In February, Cardinal Charles Bo called on the government to allow unfettered access to Rakhine, Shan and Kachin states, but agreed that the term “genocide” was unwarranted. In April, 23 international organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, call on the Burmese government to cooperate fully.

International pressure continues to be dominated by the narrative of a single persecuted minority and accusations of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Aung San Suu Kyi and her government also reject the mission, saying that it is not “in keeping with what is happening on the ground.” The failure of the State Counsellor to capitulate to the UN’s framing of the violence is the origin of criticisms of her “silence.” Speaking at the European Commission, Aung San Suu Kyi says that the government would accept recommendations “in keeping with the real needs of the region” but that “recommendations which will divide further the two communities in Rakhine we will not accept, because it will not help to resolve the problems that are arising all the time.”

Aung San Suu Kyi says that the government has in no way ignored accusations of human rights abuses, and that they have in fact asked for time in order that “these cases may be brought to court and tried.” In a telephone call to the UN Commissioner for Human Rights, Aung San Suu Kyi says the government will take necessary measures in dealing with any evidence of abuse

by security forces. Kofi Annan will later point out that international coverage has become increasingly “heated and confrontational”, further widening the gap between the communities in effected areas.

In response to continued criticism that she had not “spoken out”, Aung San Suu Kyi tells the BBC “What do you mean by speaking out? ... This question has been asked since 2013 when the last round of troubles broke out in Rakhine. And they would ask me questions and I would answer them, and people would say I said nothing. Simply because I didn’t make a kind of statement which they thought I should make, which is to condemn one community or the other.” She goes on to say of critics “have they considered the fact that one of the first things we started to do after we took over the administration was to go through the national verification process to give citizenship to all those who are entitled to it, and we had started engaging in other development activities to try to bring about stability and harmony, because I think a lot of the problems in the Rakhine State are due to the fact that resources are limited and both communities are anxious about how their lives are going to pan out.” She notes the importance of the ongoing development of infrastructure and of job creation in the peace process.

UN rapporteur Yanghee Lee states that the government may be using bureaucratic means to expel the Muslim minority from the country. The NLD government reiterates that “ethnic cleansing” is too strong a term, and a senior official is reported in the Irrawaddy as saying “It is a matter of people on different sides of the divide and the government is striving to overcome the situation and close the gap.” Burma’s UN ambassador, U Htin Lynn, claims the accusations are too one sided.

In May, 50 civil society organisations petition the government to allow full access. China and India distance themselves from the UN resolution. The Irrawaddy reports that 18 local and international journalists have begun a tour of Rakhine’s Maungdaw Township, and that a 13-member EU delegation visits Rakhine State to inspect projects implemented with EU funds.

**June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017:** Aung San Suu Kyi meets with Sweden’s Prime Minister Stefan Lofven, taking the opportunity to tell reporters that a UN fact finding mission would “create greater hostility between the different communities.” The Irrawaddy quotes her as saying “I think we should really give the commission a chance to show whether or not they have done their work properly instead of condemning from the beginning.”

**August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017:** The secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announces that the government will send a special envoy to the UN, to be stationed in New York with the remit of explaining the crisis in Rakhine State to the international community in an attempt to elicit cooperation and understanding on all sides.

**August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017:** The Kofi Annan-led Advisory Commission on Rakhine State releases its final report, detailing comprehensive long-term solutions to inter-communal tensions that build on those set out in the March Interim Report. Key recommendations include revitalising the citizenship verification process, granting humanitarian aid, and taking steps to monitor the performance of security forces, including measures such as installing CCTV at checkpoints in Rakhine.

The Annan report states “In the wake of the fatal attack on the Border Guard Police on 9 October 2016 and the subsequent military operations carried out in northern Rakhine State, allegations have been made of serious human rights violations by the security forces during these operations. In light of such allegations, the Commission reiterates the recommendation in its interim report that the Government should ensure – based on independent and impartial investigation – that perpetrators of serious human rights violations are held accountable.”

The Annan Commission’s website states “Several recommendations focus specifically on citizenship verification, rights and equality before the law, documentation, the situation of the internally displaced and freedom of movement, which affect the Muslim population disproportionately” but also recognises that “The vast potential of the state remains largely unexploited for the benefit and welfare of the people of Rakhine.” Vast reserves of oil are funnelled to China through the state’s Special Economic Zone, and an uber-rich consortium of military cronies siphons off the profits.

The State Counsellor’s Office releases a statement announcing the formation of an Implementation Committee for Recommendations on Rakhine State. Delivering the final report, Kofi Annan expresses his “deep appreciation to the State Counsellor, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi for her leadership in setting up the Commission and her readiness to meet and consult with me whenever needed.”



**August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017:** Only hours after the Advisory Commission's comprehensive report, the Aqa Mul Mujahidin, or Harakat al-Yaqin, simultaneously attacks 30 police stations and an army post in Rakhine State, sparking a new wave of violence. Now calling themselves the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), 300 members launch the attacks in the early hours using home-made weapons and improvised explosives in well-planned terrorist attack. Sources indicate that an initial plan to attack 100 outposts was moved forward in response to the Annan report. In the ensuing military response, 2,600 houses in Rohingya-majority areas are razed to the ground, and there are reports of security forces murdering civilians and burning homes. The military counters that the ARSA terrorists are burning homes to trigger mass migration and that they are using civilians as human shields.

Kofi Annan condemns the “worrying escalation of violence” and controversy surrounding Aung San Suu Kyi's perceived silence once more dominates the headlines of the international press. Journalist George Monbiot, of the Guardian, leads the call for the de-facto leaders Nobel Peace Prize to be revoked and a petition on Change.org gathers almost half a million signatures. Malala Yousafzai becomes the latest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize to express frustration and disappointment with Aung San Suu Kyi, calling for an end to violence and the implementation of citizenship rights for the stateless Rohingya. She says on Twitter, “I have repeatedly condemned this tragic and shameful treatment. I am still waiting for my fellow Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi to do the same”.

Aung San Suu Kyi pledges to implement the recommendations of the Advisory Commission as soon as possible and calls an urgent meeting with union ministers of Defence, Border Affairs and Home Affairs, the military's three strongest parliamentary divisions. Humanitarian assistance is delivered from 27<sup>th</sup> onward.

The Irrawaddy's Kyaw Zwa Moe later reports that “Emphasis of the international community and its media on the exodus of refugees and destruction alone is not helping this complex and volatile situation. Instead, it will prove to be counterproductive.” Aung San Suu Kyi's position has not changed since 2012, when she said, “they want strong and colorful condemnation, which I won't do, because I don't think it helps.”

The UN refugee agency reports that 270,000 Rohingya flee the violence, heading for Bangladesh, while no figures are given for the number of displaced Buddhist or minorities such as the Hindu community, who receive no news

coverage at all. Neither is coverage given to the military's firm control over these three key ministries and affairs relating to national security, regardless of NLD policy. Western press continues to blame Aung San Suu Kyi for actions neither she nor her civilian government have control over, suggesting Rohingya rights should take priority over a transition to democracy. Long-time observer and expert Bertil Lintner becomes one of the few voices to acknowledge that atrocities are a daily occurrence in Burma, especially in Shan and Kachin State, with no international outcry.

Twitter becomes ablaze with conflicting and fabricated reports, with the wide circulation of images from decades old conflicts constituting fake news which Aung San Suu Kyi states is the tip of an "iceberg of misinformation" designed by the terrorists for political gain. The government continues to restrict access to the area for media and aid organisations, and critics claim that Aung San Suu Kyi has sidled up to the military and is complicit in the persecution of the Rohingya.

The Washington Post and other astute news outlets report concerns of a looming power gap in the 2020 elections, where the military could easily take back the country if Aung San Suu Kyi is deemed ineffective and an on-going national security crisis legitimises the military's control. Insiders consider whether the military has had a plan to discredit Aung San Suu Kyi all along.

**September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017:** In a telephone conversation with President Erdogan of Turkey, Aung San Suu Kyi says, "We make sure that all the people in our country are entitled to protection of their rights as well as the right to not just political but social and humanitarian defence." The Office of State Councillor states "the Government has already started defending all the people in Rakhine in the best way possible and expressed that there should be no misinformation to create trouble between the two countries which have good friendly relations for a long time."

**September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017:** Archbishop Desmond Tutu comes out of retirement and breaks his silence on public affairs with an open letter to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi expressing his concern over the treatment of the Rohingya. "My dear sister," he writes, "If the political price of your ascension to the highest office in Myanmar is your silence, the price is surely too steep. A country that is not at peace with itself, that fails to acknowledge and protect the dignity and worth of

all its people, is not a free country. It is incongruous for a symbol of righteousness to lead such a country; it is adding to our pain.”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu seems to have fallen under the spell of the first democratic elections in 60 years, assuming the barbarity and oppression at the hands of the military to be a thing of the past. Myanmar is still in a tenuous transition to democracy fraught with complexities, has not been a free country for decades, was not a free country when Aung San Suu Kyi took office, and will not be a free country without significant changes and the development of robust democratic institutions. While Tutu joins ranks with notables such as Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama in penning open letters calling for an end to violence, these noble sentiments are without practical advice or application, and the Guardian headlines the letter as “condemning her silence.”

“Aung San Suu Kyi’s biographer,” Peter Popham, pens a glaring declaration that Aung San Suu Kyi should resign in what appears to be a mounting Western smear campaign. The disappointment of ideologues far removed from both the causes and conditions of the crisis, and faced with tedious, uncomfortable and uninspiring realpolitik, dominates the coverage. It is as if the icon Aung San Suu Kyi had come to represent Western values and aspirations during the very real silence imposed by her 17 years of house arrest. Archbishop Tutu’s statement is revealing; rather than consider the needs and the complex nature of the challenges in Burma, he emphasises “our pain”, as if the feelings of the international community are the priority.

As Alan Clements notes, “Aung San Suu Kyi is a nonviolent revolutionary, not a villain colluding with violence, undertaking the (nearly) impossible: making peace with everyone in her country, the oppressors and the oppressed alike. This is unprecedented emotional territory, and not easy for the ‘us and them’ dynamic that dominates mainstream politics, and spirituality as well. It is easy to understand how hard it is to make sense of this situation precisely because the “dharma of reconciliation” is the new edge of human transformation on our beleaguered planet.”

In an interview published by Republic World, Aung San Suu Kyi says “this is one of the biggest challenges that we’ve had to face, because... the situation in the Rakhine has been difficult for many decades, and in fact it goes right back to pre-colonial times. And I think it’s a little unreasonable to expect us to resolve everything in 18 months. As you know, we have been in administration only 18 months. We’re trying to progress as quickly as possible on the development front, because one of the biggest problems is the matter of very

limited resources. And also, we're going to be implementing some of the recommendations of Kofi Annan as quickly as possible. The others we'll have to take time over. Everything can't be done at the same time. But the recommendations that are aimed at bringing about harmony and peace and rapid development we shall be addressing as quickly as possible. We have already started putting together an implementation team.”

**September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017:** The Arakan Rohigya Salvation Army declares a month-long ceasefire to enable aid to reach those affected by the recent conflict. The United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights calls the situation in Rakhine State “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.”

**September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2017:** In response to the circulation of misinformation supplied by terrorists, the sensationalized news coverage of the Western press and the UN taking a stance that could exacerbate tensions in the region, Aung San Suu Kyi cancels her trip to the UN General Assembly in favour of giving a State of the Union address on the crisis in Rakhine State on September 19<sup>th</sup>.

U Zaw Htay, spokesman for the Office of State Counsellor, says that Aung San Suu Kyi cannot attend the UN General Assembly because “there are people inciting riots in some areas. We are trying to take care of the security issue in many other places... we are hearing that there will be terrorist attacks and we are trying to address this issue.”

The 88 Generation Peace and Open Society holds a press conference in which it says it stands by Aung San Suu Kyi, saying “The government is working hard for democratic transition, it would be wrong to criticise or weaken them.” Min Ko Naing echoes the NLD’s position on the crisis, stating that it has arisen not from tensions of race and religion but from terrorism and poor immigration laws.

Attending the UN General Assembly, permanent representative to the UN U Htin Lynn once more objects to use of the terms ‘crimes against humanity’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’, saying “They can only be used in the most responsible manner and founded on legal and judicial determinations... Using such terms imprudently without concrete evidence will tarnish the credibility of the office, fan the flames on the ground, widen polarization between relevant communities and mislead the international community.”

Coverage of the crisis now puts the figure of refugees at as many as 400,000. Spokesman for the Office of State Counsellor Htay Zaw says 176

Rohingya villages are now empty. A report from the Government Information Committee claims 6,845 houses in 60 villages have been burned down.

**September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017:** The President's Office forms a 15-member Implementation Committee for Recommendations on Rakhine State to carry out the work recommended by the Kofi Annan-led advisory commission. The committee will ensure "equal access to education and access to health services regardless of religion, race, citizenship or gender" and work to eliminate drugs in the region, once more pointing to the socio-economic causes of the conflict.

The Irrawaddy runs a story describing growing unease among Burmese journalists, who feel international coverage is "biased and disproportionate", with a headline that reads "Myanmar journalists, observers and general public are unhappy about what they see as one-sided and oversimplified reporting." UN representative U Htin Lynn says of the sensationalized stories "They treat the stories like commercial products, aiming for what readers would like to read more about."

For the first time, the figure for the number of displaced ethnic Arakanese is given as 30,000, many of whom are fleeing the threat of violence from Muslims in Rohingya majority areas. The Irrawaddy notes that "When six Buddhists were killed, presumably by Muslim militants, in an Aug. 4 story, Reuters included that fact that the victims may be linked to methamphetamine trafficking, which was perceived by some as a move to downplay their deaths." Reuters could not confirm the link to drug trafficking but ran the story nevertheless. Similarly, a BBC timeline of key events in the Rohingya crisis published in 2018 carries the entry "Six Muslims are jailed [for crimes committed during the Meiktila riots in 2013]. No Buddhists are convicted" for May 2013, despite the conviction of 32 Buddhists in July. These Buddhists received sentences as lengthy as 15 years and as severe as hard labour.

Having previously distanced themselves from the UN's fact-finding resolution, China and India back Burma's counter-terrorist operations. The Irrawaddy reports that if Aung San Suu Kyi were to heed the words of her Nobel critics, if she "amends the 1982 Citizenship Law and embraces the self-identified Rohingya, the price would not only be a drop in popularity but also a likely return to military rule. International media calling for UN intervention in Rakhine make this scenario more likely," echoing former Australian prime minister David Rudd's comment that Aung San Suu Kyi was "providing a positive way forward for the Rohingya on the one hand, while not providing the

military the pretext for ending Myanmar’s fledgling democracy on the other.” The Irrawaddy quotes Rudd on in a report that notes “The situation of the self-identified Rohingya and Myanmar’s 50 million people will not improve “if we care more about censoring and abandoning the only democratic government the country has had in half a century.””

Quoted in TIME Magazine, once more refuting claims of ethnic cleansing and genocide, Cardinal Charles Bo remarks “Already dark forces are clamouring for return to army rule... Stigmatizing Aung San Suu Kyi and attacking her through media is not a long term solution... A false step will see her out of government and that would be the end of any dream of democracy. We should always remember the army took back democracy three times in the history of Myanmar.”

**September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017:** In her State of the Union Address on Rakhine State in Naypyidaw, Aung San Suu Kyi reiterates that 18 months is a short time in which to address historic challenges, and that during that time the government has done all that can be done to promote peace, stability and development in the troubled state. She says “It is not the intention of the Myanmar government to apportion blame or to abnegate responsibility... We are committed to the restoration of peace, stability and rule of law throughout the state...Human rights violations and all other acts that impair stability and harmony and undermine the rule of law will be addressed in accordance with strict norms of justice.”

Re-affirming the government’s commitment to implementing the recommendations of the Kofi Annan-led Advisory Commission, Aung San Suu Kyi invites international observers to talk with the Rohingya community to discover not just the causes of their exodus, but the reasons that the majority have stayed behind. She emphasises ongoing long-term development and the governments socio-economic programs in Rakhine. In providing examples, Aung San Suu Kyi marries the long-term socio-economic development necessary for a sustainable transition to democracy with promotion of peace and stability in an area of conflict generated by entrenched poverty. She says:

“The Rakhine State Socio-Economic Development Plan 2017 - 2021 has been drafted to boost regional development in various sectors. Hundreds of new jobs and opportunities have been created for local people through private-public partnerships. The viability of a new special economic zone to bring new jobs and businesses has been assessed. In terms of

infrastructure development, electrification has been expanded, with new roads and bridges built, including a new highway connecting remote areas previously only accessible by boat. All people living in Rakhine State have access to education and healthcare services without discrimination. Healthcare services are being provided throughout the state, including hard to reach areas with new mobile clinics. The government has upgraded 300 schools in Rakhine. The vocational and technical training programs have begun. Muslim students also have access to higher education without any discrimination. Humanitarian aid reached all communities in 95 per cent of the effected areas before the recent attacks on August 25th. We are now starting another round of humanitarian aid endeavour which we hope will take care of all the peoples in the region.

With regard to IDPs, three camps have been closed and the necessary assistance provided, including the building of new houses. There is more to do in that area. We are aware of the challenges and we are facing them. With regard to citizenship, a strategy with a specific timeline has been developed to move forward the national verification process. But this is a process which needs cooperation from all communities. In some Muslim communities, their leaders have decided that they are not to join in the verification process. We would appreciate it if all friends could persuade them to join in the process, because they have nothing to lose by it.”

Aung San Suu Kyi confirms that all Rohingya verified as refugees will receive full security and humanitarian assistance in returning to Myanmar. To the international community she says “I would also like to take the opportunity to remind you that there are problems as serious for us as what is happening in the west of our country...We would like you to think of our country as a whole, not just as little afflicted areas. It is as a whole only that we can make progress...We are a young and fragile democracy facing many problems...I would like you to join us in finding new ways, new answers, more constructive, more positive, more innovative, and possibly more daring.”

Aung San Suu Kyi concludes by reaffirming her commitment to the ideals of the UN, but asks for international observers to be understanding of the country’s complexities and warned against conflicts of words that could threaten to stall the peace process. To some, the biggest threat to establishing democracy

in Burma now comes from outside the country, as a bitter propaganda war threatens to obscure the causes and remedies of decades of conflict.

**October 15, 2017:** President Htin Kyaw creates the Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development in Rakhine State (UEHRD), appointing Aung San Suu Kyi as chair. At the anniversary gathering of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, members of Burma’s business elite approach Aung San Suu Kyi to offer their support in the redevelopment of Rakhine State. Nearly two dozen business leaders pledge 17.7 billion kyat (USD12.8million) at a formal meeting arranged by Aung San Suu Kyi the following day. “We will do our business by realizing the country’s long-term strategy,” Aung Moe Kyaw, chairman of International Beverages Trading Company Group, said. The plan to construct two purpose-built centres to process returning refugees falls under the UEHRDs remit and by the end of the month the government has issued 7,000 of a projected 400,000 National Verification Cards.

Aung San Suu Kyi’s efforts at reconciliation are reciprocated by the armed forces in November, when Vice Snr-Gen Soe Win pledges to take an active role in its realization. Rallying the country to lift Rakhine State out of turmoil, Aung San Suu Kyi addresses the public on national television: “Big businesspeople are the strength of the country. The government is also the strength of the country, and so are the people. I assume that the sound foundation of the Union’s project for Rakhine State was laid today with these three strengths.” She goes on to say, “Rather than financial help or material support, we are asking for mental help—both from your head and heart. I would call it goodwill. I would urge cooperation for the country.” She later initiates a youth initiative called “20 Days for People”, which will see groups of 20 volunteers distribute aid and help with the alleviation of trauma. A further four billion kyat is released from government emergency funds to carry out the work.

On October 16<sup>th</sup>, Jeffrey Feltman, the UN’s under-secretary-general for political affairs, met with the chief minister of Rakhine State and other officials to discuss implementing the recommendations of the Annan commission. On

October 21<sup>st</sup>, The Union of Myanmar Federation of Chamber of Commerce announces plans to set up nine private sector task forces, including the Construction of Infrastructure Task Force, Job Creation Task Force, as well as forces for agricultural development, healthcare and communication.

The building of infrastructure begins in the week starting October 30<sup>th</sup>, with the Constructions and Infrastructure Task Force’s Zaygabar Khin Shwe saying, “We must start the construction of reception buildings for receiving those who will come back from Bangladesh as the number one priority. We shall



repair these buildings first and other damaged buildings. Secondly we will go to the construction sector to provide electricity and running water.”

There is an emphasis on providing jobs for repatriated Rohingya, many of whom fled not the threat of violence but the devastation of their livelihoods. This ties into the broader mandate of ensuring adequate education and healthcare with the long-term goal of establishing Burma as an upper-middle-income country with universal healthcare by 2030, initiated with a national health plan (2017-21) that will provide basic care universally by 2020. The Oxford Business Group’s 2017 report notes that investment in education has tripled since 2010, with 8,000 new schools built and an ongoing redevelopment of the education sector to ensure that the country’s “looming unemployment” problem doesn’t threaten the transition to democracy.

On November 7<sup>th</sup>, the NLD government provides the health sector with its first R&D fund since Independence in 1948. Already, 10 new hospitals have been built and Burma’s ranking on a global index of the fight against tuberculosis, malaria and HIV has risen from the bottom to near the top, with cases of Malaria reduced by 85 percent from 2012. Since the NLD took office, 46 laws have been passed and 29 new bills discussed. The new laws focus on revoking the state apparatus for stifling political activism and include laws on childcare and development and anti-hate speech.

**November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017:** Remarks by Aung San Suu Kyi given at the ASEM Foreign Ministers Meeting in Naypyidaw are seriously misquoted and misrepresent the State Counsellor. The Associated Press releases a widely circulated report that appears to deliberately portray her as a nationalist who blames illegal immigration for terrorism. While her original words were “Conflicts around the world are giving rise to new threats and emergencies; illegal migration, spread of terrorism and violent extremism, social disharmony and even the threat of nuclear war”, AP reported her as saying “...the world is facing instability and conflict in part because illegal immigration spreads terrorism.” The article goes on to directly quote her as saying “illegal immigration’s spread of terrorism and violent extremism, social disharmony and even the threat of nuclear war.” As the Irrawaddy points out in its coverage, the problems listed by Aung San Suu Kyi are “discrete problems, not linked by cause and effect.”

The AP report is picked up and shared by numerous Western outlets, including The New York Times and The Washington Post. The Myanmar Press Council condemns the report as sensationalized, the tip of an iceberg of biased, unethical reporting. The report leads to a flurry of headlines such as “Aung San Suu Kyi blames world conflicts on illegal immigration” (USAToday) and director of Burma Campaign UK Mark Farmaner tweets that Aung San Suu Kyi “equates illegal immigration and terrorism to try to deflect criticism over human

rights violations.”

Bertil Lintner remarks in the Irrawaddy’s report, “This kind of misrepresentation of the situation, and ignorance of the realities on the ground, is very damaging to any attempt to widen the civilian space in Burma’s current military-dominated power structure.” Two days later, AP issues a correction, admitting that “In a Nov. 20 story from Naypyitaw, Myanmar, The Associated Press wrongly transcribed remarks by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi at a meeting of foreign ministers.”

Aung San Suu Kyi continues to meet with numerous officials to discuss the situation in Rakhine, including UN Secretary-General Antonia Guterres during the ASEAN summit in Manila.

**November 15, 2017:** During a visit to Burma, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson meets with Aung San Suu Kyi and Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing separately, discussing the Rakhine crisis with each. While he expresses concern over allegations of atrocities, he commends Aung San Suu Kyi for being very forthcoming in her discussion with him, a sentiment the EU’s foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, also expresses. Tillerson continues to press for a credible probe of atrocities but endeavours to maintain diplomatic ties, explaining that sanctions will be avoided “because we want the country to succeed.” During the joint press conference with Aung San Suu Kyi, Tillerson avoids using the term ‘Rohingya.’ The US pledges a further \$47 million in humanitarian assistance

At the conference, Tillerson reaffirms support for the NLD government, saying, “The United States has stood with the people of Myanmar for many years in their struggle against oppression ... we continue to support the elected government as it strives to make progress on urgently needed reforms ... to bring peace and reconciliation, prosperity, and greater respect for human rights.” Aung San Suu Kyi in turn reaffirms the position of the NLD government, thanking Tillerson for his understanding and saying, “We have discussed the matter in some detail, and we agree that it is most important that we should bring peace and stability to this country, and that can only be done on the basis of the rule of law.”

Also during the press conference, Aung San Suu Kyi is asked again about her perceived silence, to which she says “What I say is not supposed to be exciting, it’s meant to be accurate. And it’s aimed at creating more harmony and a better future for everybody, not for setting people against each other.” She continues, “We mustn’t forget that there are many different communities in Rakhine, and if they are to live together in peace and harmony in the long-term we can’t set them against each other now. We cannot make the kind of statements that drive them further apart. This is the reason we are very careful about what is said.” The NLD has prioritised rule of law as a central pillar of its platform, and Aung San Suu Kyi says “It’s important to bring peace and

stability to this country and that can only be done on the basis of rule of law and everybody should understand that the role of theirs is to protect peace and stability, not to punish people.”

Over the next month, Western media begins to equate her accused silence with a denial that military has committed any crimes. Nevertheless, the DVB is one of a number of Burmese news sources covering stories like, “Earlier in February, the leadership of the police and armed forces also initiated two parallel investigations into the death of Rohingya prisoners in custody and a video showing police officers brutally beating handcuffed men. The investigation led to the demotion and imprisonment of six officers and privates.”

In the Irrawaddy, Ko Ko Gyi says that the US and UK need to refrain from “diplomatic efforts affected by internal politics in their own respective countries,” rightly alluding to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Muslim civilians in their own wars and warning that “foreign policies should take into account the political realities of the countries in which they have relations.” The Director of Myanmar CSO Genuine People’s Servants, U Thwin Lin Aung, says that “Any solutions imposed to solve [the Rakhine] crisis should not be allowed to obstruct the country’s unfinished democratic transition.” Russia’s ambassador to Myanmar states that accusations of ethnic cleansing will not help the situation, citing “excessive external intervention” that can “aggravate the situation, throw more fuel ... Just pressure and blaming and accusing—it simply won’t work.” Spokesman for the Office of State Counsellor U Zaw Htay says of the accusation that it is “unhelpful for Myanmar [which is] trying to find long-term solutions. We found that the statement failed to mention the killings of Hindus and innocent civilians by ARSA, and its conclusions were reached without any proven facts.”

Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing states after meeting Tillerson that “Preparations are being made to re-accept the Bengali’s who left Myanmar, under the law.” The Arakan National Party states that the Rohingya fled en masse to leverage international pressure in establishing a new territory in Rakhine.

**December 27, 2017:** Six nationalist monks are sentenced to 18 months in prison with hard labour for their role in an anti-government protest.

## 2018

**January 2, 2018:** The Union Enterprise of Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development head, accompanied by Minister for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Dr. Win Myat Aye, tours Rakhine State in preparation for repatriation. Dr. Win Myat Aye emphasises that measures to ensure refugees a livelihood are being put into place in accord with Aung San

Suu Kyi's mandate to the UEHRD of utilising a public and private sector partnership to initiate sustainable development. "We will implement the practical matters with on-the-ground conditions as a priority and the programme needs to be beneficial for local people," he said, "We also invite all private sector organizations and businessmen to take part in the projects where they have expertise. This project is led by the government and private sectors have contributed enormously to it, as a whole. That's why we can prove that the businessmen from private sectors can turn this region into a developed state. We will invite all businesspersons and people across the country for taking part in this noble work."

In a detailed interview with RFA, Dr. Win Myat Aye talks about the NLD's ongoing efforts to close down IDP camps in the country, saying, "[the NLD] has planned to close these camps because people's access to education and health care and their participation in the economy have been blocked because they are residing in these camps." He goes on to say that "There are many development plans and projects in Rakhine State ... so there will be many job opportunities available under it. We will create jobs in the fishing industry and in industrial zones. Something important for them is to be able to travel freely. According to law, they will be recognised as people who live in Myanmar if they hold national verification cards." He will later claim that national verification cards will be issued as part of repatriation, and that this will lead the way for all those holding them to secure citizenship "within five years," noting that "We already have many people who became citizens within five months." Travel restrictions are then lifted on those in possession of NVC cards.

NLD spokesman Monywa Aung Shin says, "The Rakhine situation is a national cause and, similarly, the cause of the ethnic Rakhine is synonymous with that of the whole nation. The situation in northern Rakhine State is a challenge to national sovereignty and dignity."

**February 2, 2018:** The US State Department issues a statement in which it says it is "deeply concerned" by the discovery of the Associated Press of five mass graves containing hundreds of bodies in Gu Dar Pyin village, saying, "We remain focused on helping to ensure the accountability for those responsible for human rights violations."

The NLD government's Information Committee, part of the Office of State Counsellor, reports on Facebook that a ground team was immediately dispatched to Gu Dar Pyin to investigate and found no evidence. AP had gathered their information through interviews in refugee camps, yet when the investigation team dispatched to Gu Dar Pyin met with local Muslims elders and villagers, they were told that nothing of the sort had occurred. Members within the NLD seek the legal capacity to sue AP for false reporting.

The Irrawaddy reports, "The State Secretary accused the AP of deliberately publishing a report based on hearsay and rumours in order to

pressure Myanmar into allowing an international fact-finding mission in northern Rakhine's Maungdaw district." It is the second time in a couple of years that the AP has released a false report of mass graves in Myanmar, and the insubstantial nature of the interviews strengthens doubt about the "talking stories" of other refugees in camps.

The Western press continues in its narrative of "no smoke without fire" while U Tin Maung Swe, the government Secretary for Rakhine State, reminds journalists that parts of the village were set alight by ARSA militants, who had the cooperation of 500 villagers in their campaign of terror in this one village alone. A short while later, satellite images of bulldozers clearing razed Rohingya villages are seized upon by Human Rights Watch as a clear indication of an attempt to destroy evidence of crimes against humanity.

While Human Rights Watch insists that the razed villages should be treated as crime scenes, Dr. Win Myat Aye says, "With refugees returning, we have to build houses, schools, religious buildings, markets and government offices according to a township plan... Because we are implementing this plan according to [the United Nations Human Settlements Programme's] guidelines, we need to clear the burned buildings."

Tin Maung Swe announces the arrest of seven soldiers, three policemen and six civilians in relation to the Inn Din massacre. Former special rapporteur Yanghee Lee reports on Twitter that the seven soldiers have already been released. There was no release of these soldiers, however, and in the cumbersome time it took Yanghee Lee to remove the post it was shared widely by rights groups and media outlets.

**February 14, 2018:** In an interview with The Irrawaddy, head of the Advisory Board on Rakhine State Surakiart Sathirathai addresses the "big gap between the international and Myanmar government narratives of the situation in Rakhine," saying that Aung San Suu Kyi is still Myanmar's best hope. Challenging Bill Richardson's earlier damning of the board as a "cheerleading squad" designed to "whitewash" atrocities, Sathirathai notes that "Aung San Suu Kyi gives the advisory board a free hand. She never interferes or tells us not to speak about this or that issue to the international community. We are not a spokesman for the Myanmar government."

Sathirathai goes on to say, "It is good for Ms. Suu Kyi to decide to work with all stakeholders in Myanmar to solve the problem. She wants to work with government officials, the military, police and all ethnic minority groups to tackle the problem." In closing he once more addresses the disparity between narratives, saying, "The board recommends that UN agencies participate very closely and maintain close consultation, rather than set its own agenda." The Irrawaddy picks up on this a day later, reporting:

Many so-called international experts have drawn the conclusion that Muslims are discriminated against and targeted in Buddhist-majority

countries, and that Rohingya are being victimized because of their racial and religious background. The Myanmar government, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, has been accused of not speaking out on behalf of the minority group because it fears losing the political support of the Buddhist majority. This is a fundamentally flawed and misleading conclusion, but it might explain the international community's misjudged response to recent events in Myanmar ... All factors point to a development crisis, political crisis and, in part, a human rights crisis as well."

On February 15<sup>th</sup>, UN and UNICEF officials, as well as ambassadors from 10 different countries, tour Maungdaw township, accompanied by Rakhine State chief minister Nyi Pu. Nyi Pu expresses his hope that these officials "share [their] experiences from this trip with other countries, so that they will know the true situation in Rakhine." Government officials at both regional and national levels have been arranging tours of repatriation facilities to demonstrate the country's willingness to accept the Rohingya back, and the government begins verifying the names of 8,000 refugees who want to voluntarily return.

Rohingya continue to flee Myanmar but in much smaller numbers, and government spokesman U Zaw Htay comments that refugees are continuing to receive death threats from ARSA if they stay in the country. In Bangladesh, camp leaders continue to be killed, and there are reports of factions within the refugee community attempting to destabilise repatriation efforts.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson chides Aung San Suu Kyi for 'not really understanding the full (Rohingya) horror,' and Zaw Htay counters that "Making a conclusion on Myanmar by reading international news outlets coverage could be misleading. It could result in a mismatch with the situation on the ground." A total of 100 British MPs had collectively written to Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson requesting that he seek a UN Security Council referral to the International Criminal Court, a move that is condemned by 21 political parties in Burma.

**On February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021, the army violently seizes control of the country through a coup d'état, imprisons Aung San Suu Kyi for 135 years on inflated charges, arrests 20,000 political opponents, routinely tortures, rapes and murders with impunity, and begins countrywide massacres of civilians of all faiths.**

## **Chronology of Aung San Suu Kyi's Responses to the Rakhine State Crisis, 2012-2015**

**2012**

### **How can the inter-communal violence in Rakhine state be addressed?**

It all started with a criminal act, and if action had been taken quickly, if justice had been done and seen to be done, it would not have escalated in the kind of almost full-scale violence that it did. We believe as a National League for democracy that human rights must be protected by the rule of law, and there can never be occasions where human rights can be neglected or ignored or the rule of law set aside. (*Scott Stearns, VOA, 9/18/2012*)

I think we have to concentrate on rule of law. I know that there have been communal difficulties in that region for a long time. Religious differences, cultural difference are not resolved in a day. They take time. We will need time to bring true harmony between the Muslims and the Buddhists in the Rakhine state, but what is most important at the moment is that we should establish rule of law. There are two aspects to this in the Rakhine. There are the citizenship laws; we need to make sure that these citizenship laws are in line with international standards and that these are applied fairly and efficiently. This is why I'm talking about rule of law. One of the great problems is that there are many disputes as to who are citizens of Burma and who are now, and this can be decided only by citizenship laws and the way in which they are implemented. The corruption of the civil service is a big problem. The immigration department is known to be corrupt, which means that there is a lot of crossing of the border, so both countries can claim that people are in their country that do not actually belong there. If the civil service were more efficient, and if laws were implemented more effectively, then it would reduce some of the tensions and some of the immediate problems. But I'm sure you understand that communal problems are never resolved overnight. We will have to take time, and it's only when the people feel that they have access to justice that they will

be more reasonable about resolving communal differences. *(DVB/BurmaCB, 6/26/2012)*

This is a huge international tragedy and this is why I keep saying that the government must have a policy about the citizenship laws. We do have a citizenship law and all those who are entitled to citizenship under the law must be given citizenship. We have said this very clearly. Now there are quarrels about whether people are true citizens under the law or they will come over as migrants later from Bangladesh. One of the very interesting and rather disturbing facets of this whole problem is that most people seem to think, and still there was one country involved in this world issue, there are two countries on the one side and there is Burma on the other and the security of the border surely is the responsibility of both countries. And at the moment it just seems that everybody thinks that the border is totally the responsibility of Burma.

First of all, they've got to do something about law and order. We've got to stop violence from breaking out again, which means adequate security measures and then I think the citizenship law really must be looked in to. And those who are entitled to citizenship, must be not only given the citizenship but given the full rights of citizens. And then I think they have also to look to the immigration issue. There's a lot of illegal crossing of the border still going on that they have got to put a stop to, otherwise there will not be an end to the problem, because Bangladesh will say all these people have come over from Burma and the Burmese say all these people have come over from Bangladesh. And where is the proof either way? *(Barkha Dutt, NDTV, 11/15/2012)*

**That's clear. Your position is that rule of law is the fundamental prerequisite for lasting, meaningful peace. That said, you have been criticized for remaining silent on the issue.**

I don't know what their accusation is based on. I have met with both Professor Quintana and Mr. Gutters (both of UNACR) and the Turkish Foreign Minister and we discussed the events in detail and talked about the importance of human rights. Human rights and rule of law are inseparably connected. In the preamble of the International Human Rights Declaration it says that human rights must be defended by the rule of law. At the moment the Government is trying to bring peace to the area. We don't want to negatively affect the activities of the



Government. If there is something we can effectively do, we will do it. We will not criticize the Government without being able to do anything ourselves. We also want to avoid making comments that would heighten the hatred between the two sides. If we are blamed for not taking sides, we are ready to bear that blame. When I was in London a Kachin youth criticized me for not condemning the Burmese military for their offensive in Kachin State. I answered “condemnation is not the solution.” We want to build reconciliation, not condemnation. Likewise we will look equally at both sides in terms of human rights and rule of law. We won’t take sides just for our own political benefit. Taking sides cannot bring peace and balance. We do not want to undermine the Government’s attempts to bring peace. What we can do, we are helping the victims as much as we can. As you know, the NLD is not a rich party. If either the Government or any of the other sides needs our help we are willing to give it. *(Kyaw Zan Tha, VOA, 9/18/2012)*

I’ve always spoken out against human rights abuses but not against a particular community. That I’m totally against and I know that people want me to, they want strong and colorful condemnation, which I won’t do, because I don’t think it helps. If you condemn one community that makes the other community more hostile towards that community, not towards to me. People forget that when they condemn one community that community gets very resentful. This has actually taken place in Rakhine. Some Buddhists there feel resentment because they feel so much sympathy has been given to the Muslim community when they too are poor and underprivileged. And of course in the recent troubles violence is committed by both sides. So how am I supposed to condemn one side when violence was committed by both? *(Bill Keller, New York Times, 9/30/2012)*

These communal problems have been going on for decades and we’re not going to be able to reconcile them in one night. This is why I concentrate on rule of law. Because you have to bring down tensions. The present round of problems started with a case of rape as you may have heard. If action had been taken promptly, if justice had been shown to be done, I think it would not have escalated to this extent. Because it was perceived that justice was not done people wanted to take justice into their own hand, which is not justice at all. And this led to an escalation of violence, it was tit for tat. So we keep

emphasizing the need for the rule of law. (*Bill Keller, New York Times, 9/30/2012*)

I think in many ways the situation has been mishandled. For years I have been insisting, and the National League for Democracy also, that we have to do something about the porous border with Bangladesh because it is going to lead some day or the other to grave problems. But nobody, of course, paid attention because the problems were not there yet. Also we have emphasized the need for law and order, the rule of law. And again, the perception was these were communal problems.

I emphasize rule of law, one has to emphasize rule of law because communal differences are not settled overnight. In fact, they often take years to sort out. In the meantime, if they had concentrated on rule of law, they could have prevented violence and human rights violations breaking out, and that would at least have kept tensions under control. And until tensions are under control, how can we try to bring about communal harmony? You can't. When people are committing arson, rape and murder, you can hardly ask them to sit together and talk, sort out their differences. It's not practical. So we have to make sure these kind of troubles should not erupt in the first place, which is why I emphasize the rule of law.

There were those who were not pleased, because they wanted me to condemn one community or the other. Both communities have suffered human rights violations, and have also violated human rights. And human rights have been grossly mishandled in the Rakhine by the government for many decades. (*Nirupama Subramanian, The Hindu, 11/14/2012*)

## 2013

**Certain elements of the international press continue to criticise what they perceive as your silence on the issue of the Rohingya crisis. Why haven't you spoken out more decisively on their plight?**

I have not been silent. It's just that they have not been hearing what they want to hear from me. But I cannot doctor my answers to please everybody. I have to say what I believe in, and I believe that rule of law is the first step towards any

kind of solution to the situation in Rakhine State and other parts of this country. And of course that's not an exciting answer, so people would rather think that I was not saying anything than that I was saying something so boring that they'd rather not share. *(Nic Gowing, BBC, 6/7/2013)*

I do not want to aggravate the situation by saying that one community is wrong or the other community is wrong, and what it does is to aggravate the more extremist elements in these communities. If they feel that they are being targeted, if they feel that they do not enjoy the sympathy of politicians or influential groups, then it makes them more extremist. That is what I'm afraid of; that instead of helping the situation we will aggravate it further. I want to target actions rather than communities, which means accountability. That again goes back to rule of law. The government must make sure that those who have committed crimes are punished in accordance with the law. *(World Economic Forum, 6/6/2013)*

These communal clashes are in fact playing into the hands of those who would like to go in for divide and rule, who do not want real unity between the peoples of the country, and I would like to ask you to be aware of this. We need to build up trust and unity, and at this time we need the help and understanding of the international community. We want our country to be united. There are many problems we have to overcome and we should not play into the hands of those who would like to see division and disunity and lack of harmony. So please help us by point out how much more need there is for reconciliation and harmony than for condemnation and greater and greater division. *(Ivana Stefkova, Forum 2000 Foundation, 9/17/2013)*

Tension is caused by fear. There is mutually fear between the communities, and we've got to bring down this fear. We've got to lessen the fear. And I keep emphasising rule of law, and people do not seem to understand why rule of law is necessary. Without rule of law our people can't feel secure. I tried to put it very simply: if somebody is afraid of being attacked by people from another community, you can't expect them to sit down and talk to one another and try to work out their problems. I'm a very practical person, so I want to start with providing our people with enough security so that they can look at the situation objectively and not through the lenses of fear. I think fear and hatred are very,

very closely linked together. You always end up hating people that you fear. *(Ivana Stefkova, Forum 2000 Foundation, 9/17/2013)*

I think what we need is more transparency, more interaction, more engagements between different communities, between the government and the people, between the media and the government, local government as well as central government, so that we are more and more aware of what is going on. The more we know about the actually situation, the more transparency there is, the fewer speculations there will be. *(World Economic Forum, 6/6/2013)*

I'm unhappy about the fact that there's so much focus on these troubles that it's difficult for us to resolve them calmly. With so much attention focussed on the tension, the violence, the disagreements, it is very difficult for us to work out a peaceful and happy solution for all sides. This is a great worry for us in this world today. Nothing can be sorted out peacefully because anything that happens anywhere becomes the focus of tremendous global attention, and sometimes I think we do need a bit of quiet, and a bit of space, in which to resolve our very, very complicated problems. *(Talk to Al Jazeera, 12/28/2013)*

It's not ethnic cleansing. It's a new problem, and yet it's linked to old problems as well. I would like to make the point that there are many moderate Muslims in Burma who have been well-integrated into our society, but these problems arose last year and I think it is due to problems on both sides. This is what the world needs to understand, that the fear is not just on the side of the Muslims but on the side of the Buddhists as well. *(BBC, 10/24/2013)*

Don't forget that my father was a politician and his assassination was arranged by another politician, so I've never had illusions about politics. I didn't come into politics to be popular. Now, if I were to take sides in the situation, for example, in the Rakhine, to which I think you're referring, it would create more animosity between the two communities. Violence has been committed by both sides. *(Kirsty Young, BBC Radio 4, 2/1/2013)*

[Democracy is] best form of government that human beings have been able to think up. We need rule of law in order that we may achieve peace. In those areas where people are insecure, in those places where there's fighting going on, where people are under threat, their lives are under threat all the time, we can't

expect them to sit down and talk to one another and sort out their differences. And so, we need rule of law. We need people to feel secure, we need them to feel that they are protected by the law, that the law is there to protect them and to keep them from harming one another, rather than to oppress them and to make sure that they do what the government wants them to do. That is what law has been in our country for a long time. So, we want rule of law as a positive force that will help us to bring about inner peace, put an end to conflict within our society. And for that, we also need amendments to the constitution to make sure that our society becomes truly democratic. (*Leslie Wilcox, PBS Hawaii, 4/30/2013*)

## 2014

### **How do you intend to resolve the intercommunal violence?**

The National League for Democracy always has been against violence of any kind, either on the racial grounds, or religious grounds, or ideological grounds.

Our struggle for democracy has been carried out with a strong grasp on the principle of nonviolence. And also, we believe in the rule of law. So if you ask how do we propose to resolve all of these problems of violence between communities, between different ethnic groups, we've got to start with rule of law. People have to feel secure before they can start talking to one another. We cannot achieve harmony without security. People who feel threatened are not going to sit down and sort out their problems.

So I would like to recommend, as the chair of the Rule of Law and Tranquility Committee -- don't forget that tranquility is also included -- that the government should look to rule of law. It is the duty of the government to make all our people feel secure, and it is the duty of our people to learn to live in harmony with one another.

If we want democracy, we have to be prepared to live by the principles of democracy. We have to dare to live according to the principles of democracy. I think we'll get there, but it will take us some time. But we will remain fully committed to the principle of nonviolence. (*Whitehouse.gov, 11/14/2014*)

## 2015

**You continue to be criticized in the international press and by various NGO's for your refusal to condemn the persecution of the Rohingya and now your office has requested that foreign diplomats refrain from using the term itself. Could you explain your reasoning?**

I have condemned persecution. I've always condemned violations of human rights, persecution by the government of ordinary people, by individuals against one another. I've always condemned that, but perhaps I don't use the kind of pyrotechnic language that people would like. (*Channel 4 News, 6/18/2015*)

In the interests of national reconciliation, I have never condemned either the Rakhine or the Muslims of Rakhine state because I've always said that the tensions are based on fear. Each community is frightened of the other for different reasons and people don't like that. They want to feel that only one side is frightened. The Muslims are a minority in the Rakhine, but the Buddhists feel they are a minority in the world, that there's a huge Muslim world community which is against their Rakhine Buddhists. It's a perception, and those who criticize me for not condemning one side or the other, they've never said exactly what they hope will come out of such a condemnation. You're just taking the high moral ground just for the sake of sounding good. It sounds a little irresponsible. (*Nathan Vanderklippe, The Globe and Mail, 4/10/2015*)

I have talked about it but people are not interested because what they want me to do is to condemn the Rakhine. I can't condemn the Rakhine for the simple fact that the Rakhine have many grievances as well, which are a result of the policies which were pursued by the military authorities for decades, and I don't want to set more flames alight. My role is not to set one community against another but to try to bring reconciliation between them. I cannot do that by condemning either community. What people would like to hear are flaming words of condemnation, and I'm not out for condemnation. What I'm trying to achieve is reconciliation, and we've got to keep to that path because there's a long future ahead of us. Our people must learn to live together in peace, in harmony, within the security provided for them by the right kind of political framework. (*Karan Thapar, India Today (To The Point), 10/7/2015*)

Fear, of course, is fundamental to many things that go wrong in our world. I've said very often that fear is the foundation of hatred. When people say they hate

somebody, basically they fear that person. There is no need for you to hate somebody that you don't fear. You may dislike him or her - that's perfectly alright. For example, we may dislike sour fruits but people don't say 'I'm frightened of oranges'. You just say 'I don't like oranges.' But people will say things like 'I hate snakes', which usually means they're frightened of snakes. Or 'I hate insects', which usually means they're frightened by insects. So I think hatred and fear are very, very closely linked, and if we want to eliminate fear we have to try to get at the roots of hatred. (*Eszter Cseke and Andras S. Takacs, On The Spot, 11/9/2015*)

I wasn't talking about one particular term. I was talking about all the terms that are incendiary and which create greater divisions between our peoples in the Rakhine and, of course, elsewhere too.

Now, the reason why I say that we've got to be very firm about not using emotive terms is because emotive terms make it very difficult for us to find a peaceful and sensible resolution of our problems. There are two terms which are emotive, and we've got to face them fairly and squarely. The Rakhine Buddhists object to the term "Rohingya," just as much as the Muslims object to the term Bengali, because these have all kinds of political and emotional implications which are unacceptable to the opposing parties. All we are asking is that people should be aware of the difficulties that we are facing and to give us enough space to sort out our problems. If there is an insistence on other part – either on the part of the Rakhine Buddhists or on the part of the Muslims to insist on particular terms, knowing full well that these will create more animosity, this does not help to our finding a resolution to the problem at all.

What we want is to find a practical resolution. We are not interested in rhetoric. We are not trying to outtalk anybody. We are not trying to say that any particular stand with regard to nomenclature is better than another. What we are saying – saying is that there are more important things for us to cope with than just the issue of nomenclature. I know that is important because it has to do with identity, and identity is of extreme importance to peoples all over the world. We are not in any way undermining people's desire to establish their own identity. What we are asking for is that those who really wish us well should be aware of the implications of terms that they use quite, perhaps, unwittingly, not knowing

what the implications are for those of us who have to cope with the actual problems that arise from this disagreement over what name to use

We are trying to find a solution to this problem, and while we are trying to find that solution, we would like our friends to be helpful in this – to understand that we are not trying to (inaudible) down any particular group, but we are trying to find something, some way forward that would be acceptable to both. That is very difficult. I'm not denying that. And if our well-wishers are not ready to cooperate with us, it will make our task that much more difficult, which is not to say that we're going to back away from it. We will still accept it as our responsibility and we will try to do the best we can to resolve the problem to the benefit of both communities. ([www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov), 5/22/2016)

I wonder why they think there are no other problems in this country. It is a very skewed view of the situation — to look at it as if this is the only problem our country has to cope with. We were talking about the cease-fire agreement earlier. Seventeen groups need to sign the cease-fire, and only eight so far have signed. I would have thought that was a problem, too. (*Lally Weymouth, Washington Post, 11/19/2015*)

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