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NEWS

Do more to address Rohingya and Myanmar crises, say advocates, as Bangladesh's calls for repatriation grow louder

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Amid a democratic crisis in Myanmar following the 2021 coup, Canada needs to do more to help address the Rohingya refugee crisis, say advocates and a diplomat.

Since 2017, around 900,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled Myanmar's Rakhine State into Bangladesh amidst a genocide being carried out by the military.

That same military has ruled the country after a coup in February 2021 deposed Myanmar's president and state counselor.

In June, the Canadian government announced it was starting the second phase of its strategy to address the Myanmar and Rohingya crises, which will be backed by \$283-million over three years—as previously set out in the 2021 budget. Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly (Ahuntsic-Cartierville, Que.) announced the government's intention to appoint a special envoy for Myanmar and the Rohingya. Now-UN

Ambassador Bob Rae was previously Canada's special envoy to Myanmar.

According to Global Affairs, the strategy will shift from “immediate crisis response” to “helping advance durable solutions in Myanmar and addressing the medium-and longer-term needs of refugees and other crisis-affected populations.”

The department said Canada will push for restoration of democracy in Myanmar and accountability for actions taken against the Rohingya.

Canada played a leading role in the early days of the Rohingya crisis, previously committing \$300-million over three years following a visit from then-foreign affairs minister Chrystia Freeland (University-Rosedale, Ont.) to a refugee camp in Bangladesh and trumpeting support for the Rohingya at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's Council of Foreign Ministers in 2018.

After the junta's execution of four pro-democracy activists and opposition

Around 900,000 Rohingya refugees are in camps in Bangladesh. U.K. Department for International Development photograph by Russell Watkins

leaders, Joly joined a couple of international statements denouncing the murders.

With around 900,000 Rohingya in Bangladesh, mainly at Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladeshi High Commissioner to Canada Khalilur Rahman is urging Canada to do more to help with repatriation of the refugees back to Myanmar.

He said Canada's support for the Rohingya is focused on humanitarian needs, which will result in keeping the Rohingya in Bangladesh in refugee camps.

“That is not a real solution. The solution lies in their repatriation to their homeland,” Rahman told The Hill Times during a July 29 interview. “I think Canada needs to do more in that.”

He said repatriation should be taking place as “early as possible,” adding that keeping the Rohingya in refugee camps in Bangladesh is leading to radicalization, as well as deforestation, given the land that was cleared to establish the camps.

However, with the military junta in control of the country, options to return across the border may be very limited.

Rahman said Canada also needs to do more to support accountability for those who committed crimes against the Rohingya.

Gambia has brought forward a case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Myanmar. The UN court ruled last month that it can go forward after Myanmar brought a challenge that Gambia didn’t have standing to bring the case.

“We need Canada to support the case,” he said. “Canada and western countries need to support Gambia ... because it’s a huge cost.”

Canada, along with the Netherlands, has declared an intention to intervene in the case.

Chris Lewa, director of the Arakan Project, which monitors the Rohingya crisis, said it is unclear what Canada is doing to support Gambia’s case at the International Court of Justice.

“[Canada] should join the case at the ICJ so Gambia is not alone,” she said, noting that there is a need for funding for the legal case that Canada could assist. “It would be good if more countries—it’s not only Canada—can join the case.”

But, she said, it must be done with co-

ordination with Gambia, as it would be disruptive to have multiple cases against Myanmar occurring at the same time.

A 2021 report from the House Subcommittee on International Human Rights recommended that the Canadian government should “more vigorously engage international allies and multilateral organizations to end the persecution of Rohingya in Myanmar.”

Lewa said Canada’s budgetary commitment to address the Rohingya and Myanmar crises is “very low,” especially given the number of refugees and internally displaced peoples that need assistance.

“It seems to me that this amount is quite small and definitely some increased support could be provided by Canada,” she said.

On the other hand, Lewa praised the announcement of a new special envoy to address the crises.

“It’s important to have someone liaising more directly,” she said, noting that is especially needed as attention on the Rohingya has dissipated after the coup and the international focus on Ukraine.

While Bangladesh continues to push for repatriation, Lewa said the conditions in Myanmar are not “conducive” for repatriation.

“The military who are the perpetrators for the violence, killings, and the rape against the Rohingya in 2017 are mostly in control,” she said. “So, this is not a time for repatriation.”

She said with elections approaching in Bangladesh, there has been increased pressure to move on repatriation, which

brings concerns that repatriation may be non-voluntary.

With few options for repatriation, that could point to the need for increased resettlement. But with Bangladesh weary about issuing exit permits, it brings increased issues.

Lewa said resettlement will never be a solution with the sheer number of refugees in camps in Bangladesh.

“Resettlement will never be a solution for one million people. At least it can help a small number of people who really have special vulnerabilities,” she said, but she added that resettlement still should be a lever to be pulled.

University of Ottawa professor John Packer, director of the Human Rights Research and Education Centre, said the Canadian government should be looking into creative solutions to address the crises.

He said resettlement is an area where Canada can play a positive role, as Bangladesh is increasingly favourable to issuing exit permits.

Although he expects the number of refugees Canada will accept will be a small number, it is still meaningful.

“Even if it was 1,000, for education purposes, that would be significant and that would be meaningful and the kind of thing that we should have and could have been doing for a long time,” he said.

Packer said repatriation of the Rohingya back to Myanmar has never been a solution given the legal requirements of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which include

conditions of safety, security, and a willingness to return.

“Everyone has acknowledged that the conditions in Myanmar since 2017 have not been such to permit that,” he said, remarking that efforts to push the Rohingya back have been resisted.

He said if there isn’t a prompt return, then the refugee situation traditionally becomes long term, with refugee camps lasting decades.

At the same time, Packer said negotiation for repatriation can occur at the same time as work on resettlement.

He said there is a lot that Canada can do to address the crises, but it requires a strategy and a “robust engagement” to do so. Moving it forward requires “competency and creativity,” he said.

“Where are the ideas?” “What we hear is condemnation,” he said. “Condemnation is only one of the tools in the toolbox and isn’t the first tool in the diplomatic toolbox. Where are all the other things we should be doing beyond chequebook diplomacy?” nmoss@hill-times.com The Hill Times Bangladeshi High Commissioner Khalilur Rahman says Canada needs to step it up to repatriate the Rohingya back to Myanmar, but that may not be possible due to the grim safety and security situation.

Figure:

Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly announced in June that she intends to appoint a special envoy for Myanmar and the Rohingya. The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade

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