

# Bridging views in the Rakhine crisis

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For The Straits Times

In recognition of the complex nature of the current crisis in Myanmar's Rakhine state, and the impact it can have for the region, the Singapore Management University (SMU) hosted a symposium recently on the Rakhine crisis.

Several practical, forward-looking ideas emerged that could help us rethink our approaches to move the Rakhine crisis in the right direction. This is timely as the United Nations Security Council recently sent a team to Bangladesh and Myanmar for a ground feel of the situation, and is expected to refocus attention on finding solutions.

The refugees from the Rakhine state are a Muslim minority in Buddhist majority Myanmar. Hundreds of thousands have fled sectarian violence into neighbouring Bangladesh, sparking a humanitarian crisis.

Resolving this crisis calls for a mix of measures that deal with both the immediate needs of refugees

who require shelter and security as well as a longer term bridging of views for a sustainable peace.

## MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE

First, there has to be a proper exchange of views between Myanmar and the international community. Many people in Myanmar, including in government, feel that the country has been the subject of strong criticism with a lack of real dialogue to understand the realities of the situation.

Meanwhile, there is some feeling internationally that Myanmar has failed to recognise the gravity and scale of the crisis the Rohingya have faced, and a perception that it has not been open to advice and assistance from the international community. It is important to bridge these perspectives if there is to be progress on the crisis. Deeper and more sustained dialogue is indispensable.

## PROTECT AND SUPPORT

Second, more needs to be done to support the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. It is unlikely that many refugees will be able to return to the Rakhine state in Myanmar in the short to medium term.

This means that support for the refugees in Bangladesh, in particular as the cyclone season and monsoon rains approach, is an urgent priority.

Beyond immediate humanitarian needs, it is important to protect the refugees – more than half of whom are children and young people – from trafficking and sexual abuse as well as to provide them with education and other skills that will give them greater agency and hope. The support given can help steer the young from going down the path of radicalisation and also represents an investment in the human capital of Rakhine state, should there be an eventual repatriation.

Major development investment in the refugee area around the Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh is vital in order to ease the pressure of the refugee arrivals on the host community in one of the poorest parts of Bangladesh, and where refugees now make up one-third of the population.

The Rohingya influx, the fastest refugee flow creating the largest refugee camp in the world, has increased food prices, demand on drinking water and pressures on

already poor sanitation, infrastructure and land, leading to food insecurity and severe health and security concerns among the local communities. The camps are also close to the most ecologically sensitive part of Bangladesh, the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

## SUSTAINABLE PEACE

Longer term, there is a need to stabilise the situation in Rakhine state and move towards the ultimate goal of sustainable peace.

The recommendations of the Rakhine Advisory Commission headed by Dr Kofi Annan remain vital towards these ends, and are key to providing the conditions which will encourage the refugees to return voluntarily.

Some of the measures include coming up with an accelerated process to allow freedom of movement even for non-citizens, and a process to verify citizens among the refugees, which can help stabilise the Muslim population and improve the prospects for eventual return.

Steps are also needed to improve the lot of some 150,000 Rohingya remaining in northern Rakhine state, including lifting the curfew and ending arbitrary impositions on freedom of movement, which have hindered their access to services and ability to find a means of livelihood.

Beyond this, trust building measures between communities and with government are essential. This can only happen if segregation is broken down and more common spaces beyond just markets are created. The ethnic Rakhine community feel their voices and concerns are not being heard – neither by the central government nor the international community.

Providing platforms for expression of views is important, as are rumour management mechanisms.

Ultimately, the authorities need to demonstrate that Muslim populations remaining in Rakhine state can have a peaceful, safe and viable future, before the refugees would voluntarily return.

## RELOOKING THE PAST

Finally, there is the thorny issue of transcending narrow historical views and re-envisioning the past.

As with many other conflicts, history is contested and different historical narratives have been deployed to apportion blame and bolster contemporary agendas.

But Rakhine also has a rich, positive history of diversity and prosperity – for example, the Rakhine kingdom with its capital at Mrauk-U was a cosmopolitan city. It was the capital of the Arakan kingdom in the 15th to 18th centuries. Its desire to be accepted as a major Indian Ocean power meant that it was tolerant of other peoples and faiths, and was a frequent stopover for Dutch and Portuguese traders.

Teaching history in the right way can help build cultures of tolerance.

This is important not just in Rakhine state, but also Myanmar as a whole: Without progress on tolerance for diversity and good governance across Myanmar, there is unlikely to be sustainable progress on these issues in Rakhine state. A better understanding of the past can also help people to re-imagine the future.

What will Rakhine state look like 20 or 50 years in the future? It is important to get people excited about the future. The state is likely to be more prosperous, more urbanised but also great at risk of

continued instability if ethnic conflict cannot be addressed and other challenges – such as climate change, to which it is highly susceptible – be addressed.

Rakhine state is part of many other people's grand plans (the China's One Belt, One Road initiative; the China-Myanmar economic corridor; India's Kaladan project) but the state does not have any grand plans of its own. Inclusive discussions about how to ensure equitable economic growth can themselves be peace building.

Identity politics and the tendency to view everything through a single lens of ethnicity is partly a legacy of colonial rule fixing ethnic categories linked to language or religion. But this tends to obscure other, more important divides such as between the rich and poor. It supposes that identities are immutable, rather than contingent, constructed, shifting and ambiguous as they really are.

No category, including American, Bengali, Rakhine or Rohingya means the same thing today as it did 20 or 200 years ago. And in the 21st Century, linking citizenship or rights to ethnicity is unhelpful and anachronistic.

Myanmar and the Rakhine state need to reach for a more pluralistic view of citizenship and belonging. Bridging the gaps in historical vision and trust are crucial for them to forge a common peaceful future.

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Major development investment in the refugee area around the Cox's Bazar district (left) is vital to mitigate the negative impact of refugee arrivals on the host community in one of the poorest parts of Bangladesh, and where refugees now make up one-third of the population. PHOTO: REUTERS