

Trump urges 'strong and swift' UN action to end Rohingya crisis

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By David Brunnstrom and Tommy Wilkes, Reuters

US President Donald Trump wants the United Nations Security Council to take "strong and swift action" to end violence against Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims, Vice President Mike Pence said on Wednesday, declaring the crisis a threat to world.

Speaking at a Security Council meeting on peacekeeping reform, Pence accused the Myanmar military of responding to militant attacks on government outposts "with terrible savagery, burning villages, driving the Rohingya from their homes."

Pence repeated a US call for the Myanmar military to end the violence and support diplomatic efforts for a long-term solution for the Rohingya, who are denied citizenship in a country where many Buddhists regard them as illegal immigrants.

"President Trump and I also call on the Security Council of the United Nations to take strong and swift action to bring this crisis to an end and bring hope and help to the Rohingya people in their hour of need," he told the 15-member council.

Diplomats said the Security Council could consider adopting a formal statement if the situation does not improve. The 15-member council has met twice behind closed doors since the crisis began on Aug 25 and last week issued an informal statement to the press condemning the situation and urging Myanmar authorities to end the violence.

"Unless this violence is stopped, which justice demands, it will only get worse. And it will sow seeds of hatred and chaos that may well consume the region for generations to come and threaten the peace of us all," Pence said.

It was the strongest US government response yet to the violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state that began on Aug 25 and forced 422,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh, fleeing a military offensive the United Nations has branded ethnic cleansing.

Extremism worries

The violence began when Rohingya insurgents attacked about 30 police posts and an army camp, killing about 12 people. Iran's President Hassan Rouhani told a news conference in New York on Wednesday that "the government should be pressured to end this ethnic cleansing."

French President Emmanuel Macron also condemned "unacceptable ethnic cleaning" on

Tuesday and pushed for UN Security Council action.

In her speech to the UN General Assembly on Wednesday, British Prime Minister Theresa May urged the Myanmar authorities to end the violence and allow full humanitarian aid access.

Pence's stark warning suggested Washington was concerned the crisis could spiral into the kind of sectarian, or religious, conflict plaguing parts of the Middle East and South Asia, where militants like Islamic State and al Qaeda gained a foothold.

It comes at a time when the Trump administration has been seeking to limit refugees entering the United States and to ban travel from six Muslim-majority countries. Trump has argued that the ban is needed to prevent terrorist attacks and to allow the government to put in place more stringent vetting procedures.

Pence said the United States welcomed comments by Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi in a national address on Tuesday that returning refugees have nothing to fear.

But Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh said on Wednesday they took little hope from the 1991 Nobel peace laureate's speech.

"I have no hope to go back. My documents were stripped from my forefathers decades ago," said Shafi Rahman, 45. He said he had arrived in Bangladesh two weeks ago after soldiers and civilian mobs burned his village.

Rights monitors and fleeing Rohingya say the army and Rakhine Buddhist vigilantes responded with violence and arson aimed at driving out the Muslim population.

Myanmar rejects the charge, saying its forces are tackling insurgents of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army who it has accused of setting the fires and attacking civilians.

Smoke could be seen rising from at least two places in Myanmar on Wednesday, a *Reuters* reporter in Bangladesh said. It was not known what was burning but rights groups say almost half of Rohingya villages in the region have been torched.

US aid

In her Tuesday speech, Suu Kyi condemned abuses and said all violators would be punished, adding that she was committed to the restoration of peace and the rule of law. However, she did not address UN accusations of ethnic cleansing by the security forces, drawing a cool international response.

Suu Kyi has for years been feted in the West as a champion of democracy during years of military rule and house arrest but she has faced growing criticism over the plight of the Rohingya.

Western diplomats and aid officials had hoped to see unequivocal condemnation of violence and hate speech in her address.

US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Patrick Murphy is in Myanmar and is due to meet government officials and representatives of different communities in Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine state.

The United States said on Wednesday it would provide an additional US\$32 million in humanitarian assistance, bringing its total assistance in 2017 to US\$95 million.

"We applaud the government of Bangladesh's generosity in responding to this severe humanitarian crisis and appreciate their continued efforts to ensure assistance reaches people in need," the US State Department said in a statement.

Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said she talked to Trump on Monday about Rohingya Muslims flooding into her country, but expected no help from him as he has made clear how he feels about refugees.

China, which has close economic and diplomatic ties with Myanmar and is a competitor to the United States for influence in the strategically important country, has called for understanding of the government's efforts to protect stability.

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