

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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An Open Letter from the Asian Human Rights Commission to the President of Myanmar (Burma) and the Prime Minister of Bangladesh

U Thein Sein
President
President's Office
Office No.18
Naypyitaw
MYANMAR

Honourable Mrs. Sheikh Hasina
Prime Minister
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
Office of the Prime Minister
Tejgaon, Dhaka
BANGLADESH
Fax: +880 2 811 3244 / 3243 / 1015 / 1490
Tel: +880 2 882 816 079 / 988 8677
E-mail: pm@pmo.gov.bd or psecy@pmo.gov.bd

Dear President and Prime Minister

MYANMAR / BANGLADESH: Victims of communal violence in Rakhine State require shelter and relief

The Asian Human Rights Commission is taking the unusual step of writing to you jointly today with regards to the ongoing communal violence in the Rakhine State of Myanmar, which borders Bangladesh; violence that has been the subject of growing international concern in recent days. Reports from a wide range of sources indicate that a large number of people have been victims of this violence, although to date the information suffers from a lack of reliable details on the numbers of casualties, scale of damage and its precise circumstances. Nonetheless, it is clear that many people have been killed, and many more have been sexually or otherwise physically assaulted, while houses, shops and religious premises have been damaged or destroyed by fire or other forms of destruction. Thousands of people are presently in need of shelter, medical assistance and food.

We note with concern that in response to these events your two countries have sealed your shared border. In the opinion of the AHRC, by sealing the border you have needlessly put the victims of violence seeking shelter in further danger. Presently, according to information available to the AHRC, many people, including large numbers of women and children, are floating on boats in the Bay of Bengal in search of shelter, fearing to land on the shoreline of Myanmar lest they become victims of attacks, but also facing the prospect of gunfire from the border security forces of Bangladesh if they try to cross over into the neighbouring territory.

Similar movements of people out of the violence-affected areas have occurred in recent decades, and unfortunately in the past your governments have not demonstrated either a strong or shared commitment to the humanitarian needs of these persons, but rather have at times shown a flagrant

disregard for them. The current events present you with an opportunity to distinguish yourselves by first and foremost taking a cooperative and humanitarian approach to the violence, rather than leading with a militarised, security-oriented mindset.

Accordingly, the AHRC strongly urges you to communicate with one another so as to open the border immediately to allow for the movement of people seeking shelter from the violence, and to make appropriate arrangements for the temporary settlement of persons fleeing the parts of Myanmar affected by violence. Furthermore, in order to enable the provision of adequate food and health services to the affected populations, both of your governments are requested to cooperate with one another so as to provide complete, unimpeded, secure access to international agencies at the earliest possible opportunity, in order that these agencies can assess the situation and make arrangements for the necessary provision of emergency relief supplies.

The process of redress and recovery from the violence of the last two weeks will be a long one; however, it must begin with cooperative actions aimed at meeting the immediate humanitarian needs of all persons affected. We look forward to your prompt collaborative interventions to this end.

Yours sincerely,

Wong Kai Shing
Executive Director
Asian Human Rights Commission, Hong Kong

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Asian Human Rights Commission
#701A Westley Square,
48 Hoi Yuen Road, Kwun Tong, Kowloon,
Hongkong S.A.R.
Tel: +(852) 2698-6339
Fax: +(852) 2698-6367
Web: humanrights.asia
twitter/youtube/facebook: humanrightsasia