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Embassy of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
Yangon, Myanmar.

Ambassador

No. 102

20 February 2006

My dear Foreign Secretary,

Under the arrangement of the UNHCR Headquarters in Yangon, a visit to Northern Rakhain State comprising of Heads of Missions, Diplomats and the Representatives of the UN Agencies in Myanmar took place few days ago. Prior to that the UNHCR Office in Yangon gave a detailed briefing about the activities to be done during the visit. The Rakhine State is in the west of Myanmar having border with the eastern side of Bangladesh, some portion demarcated by the Naaf River and hilly areas. The Rakhine State despite having vast natural resources is the most neglected state of the Myanmar. The main reasons for neglecting Rakhine State is the majority of the people are Rohingya Muslims. As a long term ethnic cleansing process the military junta (Buddhists) has taken steps to rehabilitate Myanmar Buddhists people under "model village project", specially in the Northern Rakhine State to balance the Muslim and Buddhists population eventually to have Buddhists majority in the area. So far the govt. has setup 30 model villages, where thousands of Buddhists from other states have been settled with an attractive package of land and cash donations. They are even given monthly subsistence allowances either in the form of cash or kind as incentive to make them permanent. Notably few days ago under this project some convicted prisoners and surrendered insurgents were rehabilitated in some of the model villages. The UNHCR working in that area apprehends that similar types of clusters of villages might be setup in the near future. This would definitely offset majority Muslim population in the Northern Rakhine State in all aspects. It may be mentioned here that the Muslims in Rakhine state do not have the rights of owning property. Prior permission is needed from the Military authorities at a village level for cultivating the land with a condition to surrender a certain portion of products to the Government kitty. Muslims have to pay under hand money to the concerned Military personnel to obtain permission for cultivating, selling of products, traveling from one village to another village etc. They are often subjected to forced labour, the most heartening and touching to the Muslims are the Mosques, the place of their worship are not allowed to be repaired even at their personal cost, what to talk about receiving Government patronage. During the visit I have personally seen at least dozens of Mosques falling apart and not worthy of having any congressional prayer. Where as new Buddhist Pagodas are being built at a government cost involving forced labour from the Muslim community.

The Rohingas (Muslim) are the third class (stateless) inhabitants in their homeland from time immemorial. The UN General Assembly have so far taken many resolutions on Myanmar political and human rights situation but not a single one could have changed the plights of these distressed and oppressed people caused by the tyranic attitude of the Buddhists rulers as well as the Monks of Myanmar. Following these kinds of tortures in 1992, some 256193 Rohingas crossed the border into Bangladesh and sought shelters. Through bilateral negotiations with Myanmar and later with the UNHCR's intervention resulted return of 236393 in Myanmar till date. But still nearly 20000 Rohingas in Bangladesh territory are afraid to come back to the homeland. Despite our repeated efforts to persuade Myanmar authority to make congenial atmosphere for return of these refugees to their homeland have gone in vain.

According to the UNHCR statistics that the govt. has engaged 1 (one) *Platoon* of NASAKA/army personnel (serving/retired) for every 100 people who enforce curfew at night whenever they feel only for the Muslims who are 97% in the Northern Rakhine State. For 104 hamlets/villages in Northern Rakhine State, there are 58 check posts to harass the Muslim population, out of which 80% of them are illiterate, 65% of children are suffering from malnutrition and mortality rates are 4 times higher than other parts of Myanmar. Northern Rakhine States glittering pagodas in every nook and corner are only for 3% Buddhists/Monks inhabitants. On the contrary, only a handful of Mosques are seen in the road sides, which are in such dilapidated conditions that itself bar the people going to the Mosques. In most of the places, Muslims are not allowed to pray inside the Mosques.

In Myanmar side, the UNHCR has established some income-generated projects for the returnees with the help of some NGOs receiving very nominal support from the government. So far, UNHCR and few NGOs from Japan, France and Germany have built 200 km of track/pebble roads and nearly 200 bridges/culverts which are helping people to make their day to day activities little easier. The other programmes include healthcare, food for education, micro-credit support, distribution of agriculture inputs, teaching of Myanmar language etc. The northern Rakhine State is highly infested with TB, Malaria and diarrhea where UNHCR and NGO sponsored programmes are immensely serving people. It is reported that UNHCR has so far spent approx. \$100 million for the operations in Northern Rakhine State, although budgetary allocation has been reduced recently. There may be questions of proportioned development against those expenditure. It has been noted that at least the Rohingas are settled in their homestead and mentally strong due to the presence of UNHCR and NGOs. *Local* UNHCR officials are always in touch with the local authorities to pursue the legitimate right of Rohingas such as citizenship and human rights. These days government provides them a document called "Residence Document", for those who can fulfill some conditions. These are : a) speak in Myanmar Language, b) Marriage Registration, c) birth registration. Currently, UNHCR with the help of

other NGOs imparting language course to Rohingas. Moreover, Rohingas are now sending their wards to school to learn Myanmar language. Most striking problem remain with the marriage and birth registration. Permission for marriage and registration costs are so high that many marriageable couples find it difficult to arrange finance. In some cases birth is not registered unless a pregnant mother allows taking the photograph of her lower abdomen, which is very much unethical to a Muslim female. Rohingas often forced to shave their beards and same is applied as preconditions to their marriages.

During the diplomatic trip some of the Rohingas told me that lately Myanmar students are not given higher education certificates from their institutions even they have passed examinations like matric, intermediate and graduation. They are not allowed to go to Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine to enroll themselves in the colleges or in Universities to pursue further education. They are told to do on a correspondence basis. It may be mentioned here that most of the Rohingas are concentrated in Monghdue, Buthidong and Rathedong, district of Rakhine State.

In the 21st century hardly instances to be found that any government/nation could suppress physically and mentally depriving their subjects from the basic need of having full stomach of food, receiving education, healthcare, follow own religion and other basic human rights, when a nation could provide such amenities of life easily or else permit individuals on the self help basis. Western countries, the champions of democracy who advocate the democratization of Myanmar having full knowledge of such inhuman treatments of the Rohingas have not taken any strong measures to galvanize the issue at any international level as well as with the Myanmar authority. Their first priority to release Aung San Su Kyi, the leader of NLD, who has no agenda (officially) in her political manifests to look into these issues of Rohingas. In fact, she has openly said to the armed forces authority that she has no agenda of giving any concession to Rohingas. Therefore, question remains whether in future change of regime will bring any hope for the Rohingas.

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Bangladesh being a close neighbour of Myanmar having lots of common interests and transactions on business matters may cautiously take up the issue with the Myanmar authorities stating that if the living conditions of the Rohingas are improved and also a kind of queasy status given perhaps then exodus of Rohingas from Myanmar to Bangladesh could be reduced to an great extent. Meanwhile, Bangladesh side should implement the project of establishing Astro Turf Hockey field in the city of Yangon, which was repeatedly committed to them by our concerned Minister. Hon'ble Prime Minister also gave consent for the completion of the project at the earliest. The stalled road link project between Bangladesh and Myanmar should be revamped for our greater interest. As regards Tri-Nation Gas Pipe line project, Myanmar side is patiently awaiting the outcome of negotiations between Bangladesh and India on the issue of Bangladesh's

proposal to India for granting duty free access of certain products of Bangladesh to India, ~~to draw a bottom line~~. To draw a bottom line, I fully agree and share on the existing policy of the government to deal separately the Rohingya issue in the context of our growing friendly relations with Myanmar. However, Bangladesh being a Muslim majority country and Islam being the state religion and considering the sentiments of our Muslim population, we should be concerned to address the plights of the Rohingya (Muslim) when they are ~~residing~~ ^{residing} in our immediate neighbourhood. I feel Bangladesh alongwith other Muslim countries through the OIC should sensitize the issue to pursue the Myanmar authorities to give Rohingas citizenship status in their homeland and subsequently take necessary steps to improve their living conditions.

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Yours sincerely,


(M. Khairuzzamn)

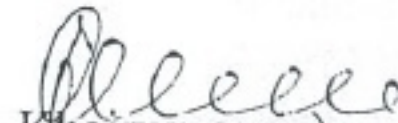
Mr. Hemayetuddin
Foreign Secretary
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(M. Khairuzzamn)
Ambassador

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