

UN condemns Burma's persecution of Rohingya minority

By Oscar Grenfell
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A UN fact-finding panel issued a report on Monday calling for the prosecution of six senior Burmese generals on charges of genocide over their role in the state persecution of the country's Rohingya Muslim ethnic minority. The document is the sharpest rebuke by the international body against the Burmese regime, since it launched wholesale ethnic cleansing last year.

The findings by the UN body follow a series of reports documenting mass killings, the destruction of entire villages and the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya from Rakhine state in the country's north-west.

Since last August, the military has conducted a series of brutal operations across Rakhine, on the pretext of combatting Rohingya insurgents. The Burmese government brands the Rohingya, who have lived in Burma for decades, or even centuries, as "Bengalis" or "illegal immigrants" and has called for their removal to neighbouring Bangladesh.

The UN report condemned the Burmese military's actions as "gross human rights violations," which are "shocking for their horrifying nature and ubiquity," and "undoubtedly amount to the gravest crimes under international law."

The six senior generals named in the report include Min Aung Hlaing, the commander in chief of the army, who plays a key role in the military-backed civilian government. The report recommended that Hlaing be among those investigated and prosecuted for overseeing genocide.

The panel rejected the claims of the army that their actions were a defensive response to "insurgent" attacks, noting that brutal army incursions into Rakhine had been planned at the highest levels of the military prior to small-scale rebel actions in August, 2017.

The report stated that the coordinated character of the

military onslaught was demonstrated by the fact that many of them were "strikingly similar." In different villages, army personnel had arrived and begun firing indiscriminately. The same modus operandi—of rounding up men and boys and sexually abusing women and girls then burning the entire village—was present in many of the cases examined.

According to the UN panel, almost 400 villages have been destroyed and close to three quarters of a million Rohingya have been forced to flee, most of them to squalid refugee camps in Bangladesh. It stated that an estimated death toll of 10,000 was "conservative."

Significantly, the report held Burma's civilian government, including First State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, as responsible for the massacres.

Suu Kyi has been promoted for decades in the West as a heroic fighter for democracy. She played the central role in the stage-managed move from open military dictatorship, to nominal civilian rule in 2011. Freed from a decades-long house arrest, she rapidly assumed the leading role in the new government.

The transition, which maintained the dominant role of the military generals in Burmese politics, was overseen by the US and the major European powers. The holding of stage-managed elections was used as a pretext for normalising relations with Burma.

Washington's aim was to undermine Burma's close ties with China and draw the geo-strategically critical country into the US-led military encirclement of Beijing, in preparation for war against China. It coincided with the Obama administration's 2011 launch of the US "pivot to Asia," a vast military build-up in the Asia-Pacific, which included the strengthening of military alliances strategic partnerships throughout the region against China.

The UN report coincides with mounting concerns in

Washington over Burma's ongoing economic and military ties to China. As is invariably the case, the condemnation of war crimes by the US and the other major powers is entirely selective and always aligned with their own predatory geo-strategic interests.

The UN findings have been accompanied by calls from the US political establishment for tougher action against the Burmese regime, including expanded sanctions targeting the top military generals. This is viewed as a means of ramping up pressure on Burma, to force it out of Beijing's orbit.

An editorial by the *Washington Post*, which has close ties to the US State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency, yesterday called on the Trump administration to replicate the actions of the UN, by labelling the actions of the Burmese military as "genocide."

The White House has previously branded the persecution of the Rohingya as "ethnic cleansing." Explicit use of the term "genocide," however, would provide the grounds for sharp sanctions against the military top brass. Five army commanders and two army units were hit by US Treasury sanctions earlier this year, while broader sanctions legislation has yet to pass the Congress.

The *Washington Post's* posture of outrage over the events in Burma is utterly hypocritical. It has maintained a deafening silence on the US-backed bombardment of Yemen, which has seen the Saudi Arabian regime conduct a genocidal campaign against Houthi minority rebels.

The paper has agitated for ever-more direct US intervention against Syria, as part of the protracted regime-change operation against the government of Bashar al-Assad, and has played a central role in the campaign by sections of the US military and intelligence establishment for an escalation of the US confrontation with Russia.

The real concerns underlying the demands that the Trump administration step up its moves against Burma were spelled out in an accompanying *Washington Post* article that warned about China's growing influence.

The article stated: "Beijing expects to secure access for its companies to a resource-rich neighbor on the Indian Ocean and a strategic partner in efforts to tamp down criticism of China's more muscular exercise of power in the region."

It noted that Burma, "occupies an important role in Chinese President Xi Jinping's signature Belt and Road plan to build infrastructure and deepen trade ties throughout Eurasia." Beijing is seeking to establish a China-Myanmar (Burma) Economic Corridor, including through the development of a massive Indian Ocean port in Kyaukpyu, in Rakhine state.

Washington has been openly hostile to the Belt and Road initiative, which it views as a direct challenge to its attempts to secure unbridled hegemony across the geo-strategically critical Eurasian landmass. If it were to become operational, the plan would facilitate trade relationships that could bypass US-dominated economic trading blocs and regional institutions.

The *Washington Post* article indicated that there are divisions within the US ruling elite over how to respond to China and Burma's deepening ties. These are indicated by the apparent hesitancy of the Trump administration to expand sanctions, and the alleged attempts by Republican Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell, to block the passage of legislation targeting Burma.

Citing prominent strategic analysts at Washington-based think tanks, the article stated that if the US presses ahead too quickly with its escalation of pressure on the Burmese generals and civilian leaders, this would risk "drawing them further into Beijing's orbit" and could "allow China to regain regional prestige befitting an emerging superpower."

In other words, US strategy towards Burma is dictated by its drive to retain hegemony throughout the region, on behalf of the Wall Street banks and corporations that view China's economic rise as a threat to their own predatory interests.

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