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Reimpose sanctions against Myanmar

PM's adviser tells int'l conference on Rohingya crisis; Dhaka Declaration calls for safe, dignified repatriation of refugees

Staff Correspondent

Prime Minister's Foreign Affairs Adviser Gowher Rizvi has called for re-imposition of sanctions against Myanmar as a way to put pressure on the Southeast Asian country accused of genocide.

“We have to re-impose the sanction because the sanction was removed as a good will and a gesture of good behaviour to come from Myanmar,” he said.

He said the sanctions against Myanmar's military regime were withdrawn following the emergence of democracy in the country.

Eventually, it resulted in the end of Myanmar's isolation from the rest of the world. Foreign investment was also made in the country.

Rizvi said he wondered why mass killings, genocide and ethnic cleansing took place at a time when the world was supporting Myanmar.

“So there is no longer time to debate if sanctions work or not,” he said at the conclusion of a two-day international conference yesterday.

BRAC University, Centre for Genocide Studies of Dhaka University and ActionAid Bangladesh, an NGO, jointly organised the conference on “Rohingya Refugee Crisis: Towards Sustainable Solutions” at the Nabab Nawab Ali Chowdhury Senate Hall of Dhaka University.

The conference adopted a 16-point Dhaka Declaration, calling upon the international community to ensure voluntary, dignified and safe return of the Rohingyas, who fled atrocities, including killings, rapes and burning of houses, in Myanmar's Rakhine state.

Rizvi said EU's travel ban on Myanmar's military leaders had been a useful start and now it was the need of the day to revisit the question of market access and investment in Myanmar.

“Without pressure, nothing will happen. Myanmar won't be secure for the Rohingyas. If Myanmar is not secure, Rohingyas will not go back,” Rizvi said.

Repatriation of the Rohingyas seems uncertain though Myanmar signed a deal with Bangladesh in this regard in November last year.

Bangladesh sent a list of over 8,000 Rohingyas, but Myanmar provided one with some 600 verified names only.

The international community has been critical of the security situation in Rakhine where Rohingya houses were burnt and the vegetation cleared. Security installations were also being built. There are reports of ethnic Rakhines being rehabilitated in lands once owned by the Rohingyas.

Myanmar said it has built temporary camps for the returnee Rohingyas before they are rehabilitated to their own homes.

The minority community though has demanded citizenship, recognition as an ethnic Rohingya community and a UN-controlled safe zone in Rakhine.

He said the current Rohingya crisis is not a result of attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army and subsequent violence only, but it is a well-planned strategy devised by Myanmar.

Rohingyas were listed as citizens in Myanmar's 1948 constitution but their citizenship was invalidated in the 1982 citizenship law, which led to several waves of violence and exodus.

Bangladesh had no alternative to accepting the Rohingyas under such a humanitarian crisis. Then, in good faith, they went ahead bilaterally with Myanmar for a solution, but Myanmar hardly made any concessions, he said.

“We didn't create the problem, but Myanmar [did]. So the solution lies with Myanmar,” Rizvi told the international audience, adding that every Rohingya wants to go back to Myanmar but only if their citizenship and legitimate rights are guaranteed.

“If Myanmar can get away, there will be no security of minorities anywhere in the world. So, we really need to wake up,” he said and called for “extraordinary international support” for the Rohingyas.

The participants in the discussion called upon the UN and other members of the international community so diplomatic channels for sufficient humanitarian assistance are used and the rights of Rohingya women, children and other vulnerable groups in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar are protected.

The diplomats, academics, foreign relations experts from 11 countries, including India, Thailand, US, UK, Sweden, Singapore, Malaysia and Bangladesh, also called upon the international community to comprehensively investigate the ongoing acts of genocide, mass atrocities, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing in Myanmar.

In the Dhaka Declaration -- read out by Prof Imtiaz Ahmed, director of the Centre for Genocide Studies at Dhaka University -- they demanded prosecution and punishment of those responsible.

It also called upon Myanmar and international community to address the issues of loss and damages caused by the exodus of the Rohingya.

The Dhaka Declaration emphasised on Myanmar's responsibility in restoring and protecting citizenship rights and human dignity for the Rohingya.

Professor Imtiaz Ahmed said while Bangladesh goes on with bilateral negotiation with Myanmar, it is crucial to deeply engage the international community.

“Rohingya crisis is not a bilateral issue; it is very much an international one. So, it has to be addressed internationally,” he said.

Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque said he saw progress in the repatriation process. Initially, Myanmar refused to engage the UN Refugee Agency in the process but they did so later.

A Myanmar delegation, which is visiting Bangladesh in the middle of April, agreed to visit Rohingya camps.

“This is surely progress,” Haque said.

Manzoor Hasan, executive director of the Centre for Peace and Justice, BRAC University and Farah Kabir, country director of ActionAid Bangladesh, also spoke at the concluding ceremony.