

Press release

Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Myanmar

“Dialogue will make Myanmar stronger”

The Special Envoy visited Myanmar from 18 to 29 January. During that time, she oversaw the installation of her new office in Nay Pyi Taw, where she also met with Union-level ministers and with the Chairperson of the Independent Commission of Enquiry. She travelled to Sittwe, where she engaged with relevant government ministers at the state level, as well as with humanitarian agencies, political parties, civil society and displacement affected communities. The Special Envoy also met with the United Nations agencies, international non-governmental organisations and with the diplomatic community in Yangon.

Her visit to Sittwe focused on the obstacles and potential solutions for freedom of movement, which is restricted for many people in Rakhine state for different reasons. “Freedom of movement is key for all people and their access to livelihoods. Without freedom of movement, children cannot go to local schools, and people still cannot access hospitals,” she said. “It is important to rebuild trust.”

The Special Envoy welcomed efforts by the Union Government draft a national strategy on “Closure of IDP Camps – Rebuilding Lives of IDPs in Safety and Dignity without Dependency” aimed at addressing and ending forced displacement that so many people all over Myanmar face. She encouraged the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement to implement the strategy through concrete action plans as soon as possible, while adhering to international principles and standards and offering her assistance.

The Special Envoy lauded the drafting of an information sheet for the refugees in Cox’s Bazar that would help explain the process for their potential repatriation to Rakhine State, once the conditions there had become conducive for voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable returns. She promised to request the Government of Bangladesh to help with its distribution during her next visit to Dhaka.

The Special Envoy understood that the current security situation in Northern Rakhine State made humanitarian access and the return of refugees to affected areas more difficult. She nevertheless underlined the importance of allowing humanitarian organisations, international and local, to assist the civilian population in that area, and encouraged all sides to cease hostilities as soon as possible.

While expressing her condolences for the loss of life and displacement caused by the Arakan Army (AA) recent attacks by AA and the response by the Tatmadaw, the Special Envoy welcomed efforts by the parties to engage advocated for an inclusive negotiation process through dialogue. When meeting representatives of the Tatmadaw, she welcomed the unilateral ceasefire declaration announced by the Commander in Chief on 21 December 2018, and urged them to reach out to all the ethnic armed organisations to invite them to dialogue. She acknowledged that it was difficult to talk while fighting was on-going. Despite ongoing security challenges, the Special Envoy invited the army leadersto keep the door open for negotiations. “Now it is even more important to talk,” she urged. In that context, she also welcomed the recent transfer of the General Administration Department to the Union

Ministry of Government as a potential first step towards decentralisation and federalism, two key points in the peace process.

“Dialogue will make Myanmar stronger,” the Special Envoy told leaders of the Arakan National Party during her visit to Rakhine. The Special Envoy encouraged them and ministers to publicly stand against discrimination and hate speech, and to embrace Myanmar’s diversity as an asset rather than a weakness. She welcomed the stated willingness of the Rakhine leaders to accept the refugees’ return. In light of recent assurances that the new NVC cards will no longer contain mentions of religion or ethnicity, she also encouraged the internally displaced people she met to consider applying for registration, so that they can move around within the country. The Special Envoy was satisfied to hear the Rakhine State Minister explain in her presence to the internally displaced persons that the “NVC cards are not for foreigners, but for people residing in Myanmar. It is a first step towards citizenship. It applies to the whole country, even in the eastern part close to the Myanmar-Thai border, not just to Rakhine,” the Minister said. She welcomed the recent creation of a Committee of the Pyithu Hluttaw to receive complaints related to on-going citizenship applications as an important step towards transparency in the process.

The Special Envoy hopes that the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and Bangladesh can further strengthen their cooperation on the issue of repatriation and intends to travel to Dhaka in February. She will also return to New York in February for internal consultations.

Contrary to certain media reports, the Special Envoy was not denied access to Northern Rakhine state by the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Her travel plans were established in December, and had not included Northern Rakhine state, as she had chosen to focus on restrictions on freedom of movement and spend substantive time with the people affected by this in and around Sittwe in a first instance.

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*For clarification:*

*The title of Special Envoy is reserved for persons mandated to carry out Good Offices on behalf of the Secretary General and is not linked to other United Nations agencies or bodies.*

Nay Pyi Taw, 29 January 2019