



ODI-TCF High-level Roundtable on the Crisis in Rakhine State, Myanmar

13th September 2012 – ODI Offices, London

INTRODUCTION

On 13 September 2012, the Humanitarian Policy Group of the Overseas Development Institute (HPG/ODI), in partnership with The Cordoba Foundation (TCF), held a closed-door high-level roundtable on the crisis in Rakhine State, Myanmar. The aim of the roundtable was to provide forum for the sharing of information, analysis and strategies, and to enhance coordination between the Government of Myanmar, the United Nations agencies, humanitarian agencies working or planning to work in Rakhine State, and regional organisations. The roundtable brought together representatives of the United Nations and humanitarian community in Myanmar, representatives of the diplomatic and donor community in London, representatives of regional organisations, and senior analysts from the Southeast Asian region.

Managing Crisis in the Context of Transition and Reform

The roundtable opened with remarks that underlined the international community's support for the transformations taking place in Myanmar under President Thein Sein's political and economic reform agenda. These included the historic cease-fires and the emerging political settlement processes with non-state armed actors that have ended some of Myanmar's most enduring conflicts – among the world's longest civil wars, as well as the Government of Myanmar's commitment to national reconciliation, judicial and bureaucratic reform, and pro-poor economic development.

Participants noted, however, that even with the deeply committed leadership of the Government of Myanmar, a transition as ambitious as the one being taken on by Myanmar will necessarily take time, and that Government and people of Myanmar will require the sustained support of neighbours, friends, and partners in the regional and international community. This support will be important in supporting the Government and the wider society in learning how to respond to, manage, transform and prevent crises, including humanitarian crises and inter-communal conflict, such as the crisis in Rakhine State.

Background of the Crisis

Participants in the roundtable described how the international aid community has been active in Myanmar for nearly twenty years but the recent crisis in the Rakhine State has put a strain on their resources in the country and their relationship with the Government and population. Recently, there have been tremendous changes in Myanmar. However, there are concerns that this humanitarian crisis is a result of decades of neglecting the issues of national identity, status and positioning.

In May 2012, a young Buddhist woman was found murdered and this sparked a series of communal violent clashes. Since the violence escalated in June, Government figures indicate that 88 people have lost their lives and over 70,000 people were displaced as a result of the violence. As well as the

impact on human lives, some 200 homes have been destroyed and 17 mosques and 3 schools were burned to the ground. The displaced population has been accommodated in 50 camps in Sittwe, Kyauktaw and Maungdaw. Additional security forces were deployed and a curfew was imposed since early June. Although in August and September conditions were relatively calm, sporadic incidents continue and tensions remain high.

Humanitarian Conditions and Access to Affected Population

The Government of Myanmar has been working in collaboration with the humanitarian community in Myanmar to assess and address humanitarian needs. An inter-agency rapid assessment was conducted in June-July, leading to the elaboration of the Rakhine Response Plan which appeals for USD 32.5 million for humanitarian needs til the end of the year for up to 80,000 people directly affected by the violence, the majority of them IDPs. Immediate requirements include food, shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene, health and other non-food items. However, while the Government of Myanmar and all humanitarian partners have been redoubling efforts to provide assistance to affected populations, the assessment of humanitarian needs and access to aid remains uneven.

The aid community used to provide assistance to 80,000 people in Rakhine State before the crisis started, including through food distribution parcels, and these people have not been reached. In particular, there are also concerns about sanitation and water-related health risks. 3,000 non-food kits are still required in the IDP camps. The government needs to take into account the requirements of livelihoods and housing. It needs a longer term strategy for reconciliation as well as looking at longer-term needs such as livelihoods and education for those living in the camps.

Participants highlighted that acute humanitarian conditions remain in Rakhine. Indeed, one problem is that the **current definition of who is affected is too limited**, referring only to the estimated 75,000 displaced, but excluding the **resident population**, many of whom have had little or no access to humanitarian assistance since the outbreak of violence in June.

In the IDP camps, many were affected by malnutrition, malaria and diarrhea due to poor water and sanitation conditions. Assessments by agencies in July had found a **6-7% rate of severe acute malnutrition (SAM)** and **25% rate of global acute malnutrition (GAM) in camps around Sittwe**. Agencies have been treating cases of malnutrition but are concerned that the “at-risk” group (34% of all children assessed) are slipping into worsening conditions.

Agencies stated, however, that they were even more concerned about the situation of resident populations to whom humanitarian agencies do not yet have safe or consistent access. Currently, in areas such as Maungdaw and Buthidaung, only a few thousand people are defined as being part of the “affected population”, but humanitarian agencies know that a **chronic health and humanitarian emergency existed in most parts of these townships even before the outbreak of violence in June**. Prior to the current crisis, these townships had some of the **highest maternal mortality rates in the country** (380/100,000 births according to UNHCR/UNFPA 2006), and there was a real danger that the number of maternal deaths would increase unnecessarily. Some agencies had received anecdotal reports of women dying due to obstructed labour.

Since June, livelihoods have been even more disrupted and residents have been cut off from food supplies and from accessing any form of primary and secondary health care. Markets and trade have been disrupted by the crisis in areas which already suffered from chronic food insecurity and high levels of malnutrition (**7% SAM and 20% GAM on an ongoing basis**) before the violence. Without access, especially in the current rainy season, the nutritional situation will inevitably have deteriorated. Planting has also been disrupted, meaning increased food insecurity for many months to come.

Humanitarian agencies are extremely concerned about the humanitarian conditions in these areas and have been continuously denied access to some of the places of greatest concern. The initial reason for the suspension of activities was **insecurity**, followed by **intimidation**, but currently the main thing preventing a scale up of health care provision is **permission** from the authorities. Agencies underlined that **immediate access is critical** to address urgent health and food security needs of the displaced and **resident populations** is critical and thus **permission to access areas outside Maungdaw and Buthidaung towns is essential.**

Regional Concerns and Responses

Humanitarian agencies working in Myanmar are encouraged by offers of support from governments of Muslim countries and inter-governmental organisations. It was underlined, however, that it was necessary to ensure that this support be broad-based to reach all those in need.

For many countries in the ASEAN region, the Rakhine crisis has been dramatic and highly emotional. The crisis might have its roots in internal issues within Myanmar, but the implications are regional and the concern is international, as it is not just an issue of inter-communal relations but fundamentally an issue of human security, human rights, plural citizenship and democratisation. Further, several participants underlined that the **crisis was already triggering responses from radical elements within the ASEAN region and throughout the Muslim world.** Thus, it is important that the problem be dealt with from the right perspective and that there be transparency, accountability and engagement in the management of the crisis. All actors must be comprehensively engaged and all must work in concert.

Concerns were expressed that information published around the violence has often been controversial, unverified and, at times, highly inaccurate. In particular, the incidents have been exaggerated by misleading photographs published on social media sites that have inflamed emotions around the violence.

Participants also expressed that while it is positive that OIC has been welcomed to deliver humanitarian assistance, there were concerns about the implications that this might have on the already **difficult environment where humanitarian assistance is being instrumentalised, where aid organisations who have had a long-standing presence in the state are already facing very significant problems in terms of how what they provide is perceived, where aid is often accused of being biased towards one side.** Careful thought was needed about how all actors can most effectively act coherently and sensitively in this context to change these misperceptions, and this must be done through dialogue with the communities affected by the crisis. **Sharing information on**

how all actors understand the dynamics at play and the people affected should be a first step towards the development of a proper outreach and advocacy plan.

Need for Shared Analysis, Coordinated Communication and Engagement of Global Communities of Concern

Participants acknowledged that in response to the violence and humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State many actions had already been taken nationally, regionally and internationally to address the crisis. In particular, the humanitarian community is encouraged by the Government of Myanmar's cooperation with aid organisations and welcomes the establishment by President Thein Sein of 27-member investigation commission tasked with identifying causes of the recent violence as well as to give recommendations on conflict resolution, reconciliation and promoting peaceful co-existence between the communities. The humanitarian community was also encouraged by the Government of Myanmar's agreement to the suggestion of the Humanitarian Coordinator to organise a meeting with communities from Rakhine and international development partners with the objective of starting a wider discussion of key issues and develop a roadmap for achieving sustainable solutions.

However, it was noted that there continues to be a **significant disconnect in the sharing of accurate information, credible analysis and constructive strategies and approaches among actors at different levels**. In order to reduce tensions and to arrive at a sustainable solution, the voices from both communities must be well balanced. At the moment, there are perceptions on both sides that the other is receiving a greater amount of aid and this is helping to fuel discontent. The humanitarian community is ready to help the Government of Myanmar facilitate a genuine and transparent dialogue between the two communities in a balanced and fair manner. Without the right understanding of the situation, there is danger that this could put stress and strain on the communities towards healing the rift. Following the opening of this dialogue, development needs to go beyond the humanitarian response.

Participants expressed the need for a **platform for regular sharing and dialogue among different stakeholders to work towards a more coordinated and accountable approach to the crisis in Rakhine State in a way that links national, regional and international actors, supports principled humanitarian action and the development of durable solutions to this crisis, and coordinates communication to and engagement with a diverse range of stakeholders, including concerned constituencies in the wider international community**. The communications strategy of humanitarian actors to date has been reactive rather than proactive, and a coordinated effort to generate and disseminate common key messages is urgently needed.

Participants highlighted that one important constituency with which engagement must be built is the Muslim public, who have a special concern for the crisis and the situation of the Muslim Rohingya. Many in the global Muslim community are deeply concerned not only at the humanitarian situation, but also at the reality that the humanitarian crisis has been brought about not simply by recent incidents of violence, but also years of denial of basic rights and underdevelopment. Alarm has spread across the Muslim world, and many Muslim groups have mobilised in solidarity for the Muslims of Rakhine, including in Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey, Egypt, Palestine, Kuwait, and the

United Kingdom. Some of these groups adhere to humanitarian principles, such as agencies working under the umbrella of the OIC, but for others it is a highly emotional issue too easily cast in religious terms, and **the risk of religious radicalisation around the Rohingya as a human rights cause is very real**. This situation makes it even more critical to ensure that accurate information and informed analysis is shared with the wider international community, and the Muslim public in particular.

It is clear from the discussions that the two main issues that should be addressed quickly are **access** and the **communications strategy**. There needs to be a **consistent definition of access** so that all affected sections of the population can be offered assistance. **With regards to communication, we must remember to create the communications strategy in the cultural context of how rumours can spread in the Muslim world**. There is opportunity to put these rumours straight by using the correct channels. The international community must ensure that the people receiving assistance have **clear, collective messages** from them, but this also applies to the government. As the government tries to reach a settlement we need to be coordinated with communications from the governments. The root causes are national reconciliation and citizenship for Myanmar. But human rights are the issue for the international community. Participants expressed that while it was understood that discussions and decisions on issues of national reconciliation, citizenship, and the status of Rohingya ultimately rest with the Government and people of Myanmar, it is critical that Myanmar show its willingness to be responsive to international concern, to handle the issue with full transparency and in adherence to universally accepted principles of human rights, and engages partners in promoting cultures of tolerance and peaceful co-existence.