

‘Acts of Genocide’ Suspected Against Rohingya in Myanmar: U.N.



Nearly 700,000 Rohingya have fled Rakhine into Bangladesh since insurgent attacks sparked a security crackdown in August, joining 200,000 refugees from a previous exodus.

GENEVA/YANGON (Reuters) - The United Nations human rights chief said on Wednesday he strongly suspected that “acts of genocide” may have taken place against Muslim Rohingyas in Myanmar’s northern Rakhine state since August.

His comments come as Myanmar’s military published a lengthy response to widespread allegations over its campaign in Rakhine and said its investigations had cleared troops of almost all alleged abuses.

Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein said in a speech to the U.N. Human Rights Council that reports of bulldozing of alleged mass graves showed a “deliberate attempt by the authorities to destroy evidence of potential international crimes, including possible crimes against humanity.”

The United Nations defines genocide as acts meant to destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group in whole or in part. Such a designation is rare under international law, but has been used in contexts including Bosnia, Sudan and Daesh campaign against the Yazidi communities in Iraq and Syria.

Zeid said last December that Myanmar’s security forces may be guilty of committing genocide.

“This Council is aware that my office has strong suspicions that acts of genocide may have taken place in Rakhine State since August,” he said, noting that his office said on Tuesday that it believes ethnic cleansing is still underway in Rakhine.

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attacks sparked a security crackdown in August, joining 200,000 refugees from a previous exodus.

Rohingya are still fleeing because of “systematic” if lower-intensity persecution and violence there, Zeid said.

“Victims have reported killings, rape, torture and abductions by the security forces and local militia, as well as apparently deliberate attempts to force the Rohingya to leave the area through starvation, with officials blocking their access to crops and food supplies,” he said.

The True News Information Team said in a Facebook post containing the army’s position that the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) armed group had “threatened, coerced and persuaded other villagers to flee to Bangladesh”.

The post addressed a letter last month from British lawmakers to Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson calling for Myanmar to be referred to the International Criminal Court – which it said was based on “one-sided accusations” and ignored attacks on civilians by the ARSA - and a European Union decision to prepare sanctions targeted at Myanmar generals.

Zeid said his office had received reports of land inhabited by Rohingya being appropriated and members of other ethnic groups replacing them.

Myanmar’s government must take steps to provide real accountability for violations and respect the rights of Rohingya, including to citizenship, Zeid said.

A fact-finding mission set up by the Council, headed by former Indonesian Attorney-General Marzuki Darusman, is due to report on Monday on its initial findings based on interviews with victims and survivors in Bangladesh and other countries.

U.N. Rights Chief Attacks EU, U.S. Over Migrants, Dreamers



U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein talks to reporters in Jakarta, Indonesia February 7, 2018.

GENEVA (Reuters) - The U.N. human rights chief said on Wednesday he was shocked at repressive policies being pursued in the United States and Europe, especially the increasingly harsh treatment of migrants.

In an annual report to the U.N. Human Rights Council, High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein also took democracies to task for failing to respect basic rights.

“In the United States, I am shocked by reports that many migrants intercepted at the southern borders, including children, are detained in abusive conditions – such as freezing temperatures – and that some young children are being detained separately from

their families,” he said.

“Detentions and deportations of long-standing and law-abiding migrants have sharply increased, tearing families apart and creating enormous hardship.”

The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump had also ended the Central American Minors Refugee and Parole Program, which offered adolescents and children “a lifeline to safety”, and ended Temporary Protected Status for hundreds of thousands of people.

“I deplore the continuing uncertainty about beneficiaries of the DACA program,” Zeid said, referring to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which protects roughly

700,000 “Dreamers” - mostly young Hispanics - from deportation and lets them work.

The protections are due to start phasing out in March under Trump’s move to end DACA, but Congress so far has failed to pass legislation to address the fate of the “Dreamers”.

Zeid also expressed concern about U.S. proposals that could “drastically reduce social protections”, particularly for poorer Americans.

In many European Union (EU) countries the trend towards “racism, xenophobia and incitement to hatred” was now dominating the political landscape, as shown in Italy’s recent election campaign, he said.

“I am deeply concerned about the current overriding focus of EU States on preventing migrants from reaching Europe, and rushing to deport many who do,” Zeid added.

By pushing migrants back from its borders, the EU risked “subcontracting their protection” to states such as Libya, where they faced a real risk of torture, sexual violence and other serious violations, he said.

He attacked Austria’s planned crackdown on Muslim schools and mosques and expulsions of irregular migrants, and Hungary’s plans to restrict non-profits that sought to help migrants.

He decried discrimination against the Roma minority in the Czech Republic and its program of surgically castrating sex offenders.

“I am disturbed... by the extraordinary recent legislation which could lead to up to three years’ imprisonment for those who refer to the Nazi concentration camps in Poland as ‘Polish,’” Zeid told the Council.

Volcanologists Warn World Unprepared for Next Major Eruption

NEW YORK (Nature) - The world needs to do more to prepare for the next huge volcanic eruption, a team of leading scientists says.

The devastating Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 and the T’hoku earthquake in Japan in 2011 highlighted some of the worst-case scenarios for natural disasters.

But humanity has not had to deal with a cataclysmic volcanic disaster since at least 1815, when the eruption of Tambora in Indonesia killed tens of thousands of people and led to a ‘year without a summer’ in Europe and North America. Such world-altering blasts rank at 7 or more on the Volcanic Explosivity Index (VEI) scale of eruptions, which goes to 8.

“The next VEI-7 eruption could occur within our lifetimes, or it could be hundreds of years down the road,” says Chris Newhall, a volcanologist with the Mirisbiris Garden and Nature Center in Santo Domingo, Philippines. But the time to have this discussion is now, he says, so that researchers and government officials can plan and prepare before an emergency strikes.

Those events killed dozens to hundreds of people and disrupted entire regions. Pinatubo even spewed enough sulfur dioxide into the stratosphere to cause global cooling. But a VEI-7 eruption would be of an entirely different scale. In 1257, a VEI-7 eruption in what is now Indonesia

probably cooled the planet down enough to kick off a centuries-long cold snap called the Little Ice Age, Robock says. “These things are hugely important for the planet, but the next one will take place in quite a different environment,” he adds.

Agriculture, health care, financial systems and other aspects of modern life are much more globally interconnected than they were just a few decades ago, the scientists say. Eight years ago, an eruption that ranked at just VEI 3 — Eyjafjallajökull, in Iceland — grounded European air traffic for days because of the danger of flying through volcanic ash. The event caused an estimated US\$5 billion in economic losses.

Buddhist Mobs Target Sri Lanka’s Muslims Despite State of Emergency



COLOMBO (Reuters) - Buddhist mobs attacked mosques and businesses belonging to Sri Lanka’s minority Muslims overnight, police said on Wednesday, despite the imposition of a state of emergency to restore peace in the bitterly divided island.

Police imposed an indefinite curfew in the central highlands district of Kandy where the violence has been centered since Sunday night following the death of a Buddhist youth in an altercation with a group of Muslims.

But police spokesman Ruwan Gunasekara said there had been “several incidents” throughout Tuesday night in the Kandy area, popular with tourists for its tea gardens.

“The police arrested seven people. Three police officers were injured from the incidents,” Gunasekara told media. There was no information about how many civilians had been injured in the attacks, he said.

Tension has been growing between the

two communities in Sri Lanka over the past year, with some hardline Buddhist groups accusing Muslims of forcing people to convert to Islam and vandalizing Buddhist archaeological sites.

Some Buddhist nationalists have also protested against the presence in Sri Lanka of Muslim Rohingya asylum-seekers from mostly Buddhist Myanmar, where Buddhist nationalism has also been on the rise.

President Maithripala Sirisena imposed a state of emergency for seven days on Tuesday, aiming to stop the violence from spreading to other parts of the country still healing from a 26-year civil war against Tamil separatists that ended in 2009.

A government minister said the latest violence in Kandy had been whipped up by people from outside the area. “There is an organized conspiracy behind these incidents,” Sarath Amunugama, a senior minister told reporters in Colombo.

EU Doesn’t Want a ‘Wall’ With Britain: Tusk



EU President Donald Tusk said the bloc does not want to “build a wall” with Britain.

LUXEMBOURG (AFP) - EU President Donald Tusk said Wednesday the bloc does not want to “build a wall” with Britain as it leaves the bloc but warned in new guidelines for trade talks of a negative economic impact.

Tusk’s draft plans rebuffed many of the demands that Prime Minister Theresa May made in a long-awaited speech on the post-Brexit relationship between Britain and the EU after 2019.

The former Polish premier said he wanted a standard free-trade deal with Britain after 2019, insisting that Britain could not “pick and mix” the benefits of EU membership.

“My proposal shows that we don’t want to build a wall between the EU and Britain. On the contrary, the UK will be our closest neighbor and we want to remain friends and partners,” Tusk told a press conference in Luxembourg.

Tusk, who met May last week, said the EU would aim for an agreement “covering all sectors and with zero tariffs on goods”, but said it must include access for EU fishing boats to British waters -- a highly sensitive issue for hardline Brexit supporters.

And on services -- vital to Britain’s crucial financial sector -- Tusk simply indicated the deal should “address” the issue.

But he said the red lines laid down by London -- that Britain must leave the EU’s

single market and customs union, and no longer submit to rulings by the European Court of Justice -- meant a free-trade deal was the only option.

“Because of Brexit we will be drifting apart. In fact, this will be the first FTA in history that loosens economic ties, instead of strengthening them,” the former Polish premier added.

Luxembourg Prime Minister Xavier Bettel insisted there could be “no cherry-picking” by Britain, adding that “Brexit is a damage limitation exercise”.

Tusk’s guidelines, which are expected to be adopted by leaders of the remaining 27 member states at a summit on March 22, said that Britain’s own red lines “will inevitably lead to frictions.”

“This will unfortunately have negative economic consequences,” they said, adding however that the EU would be ready to “reconsider” its offer if Britain’s positions were to “evolve.”

May’s spokesman said Britain hoped the final guidelines “will provide the flexibility to allow the EU to think creatively and imaginatively about our future economic partnership.”

May used her speech last week to call for an EU-UK deal that worked “more fully than any free-trade agreement anywhere in the world today”, while acknowledging it was time to face “hard facts” about the economic consequences of Britain’s shock 2016 vote to leave.



TOKYO (Dispatches) - The Japanese government on Wednesday insisted the U.S. military report cases of mishaps and accidents more promptly following a serious delay in it being informed of a part falling off a F-15 fighter jet during a flight.

On Feb. 27, an antenna-like object weighing 1.4 kg fell off the jet which was stationed at the U.S. Kadena Air Base in Okinawa.

But Japan’s Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera said the government was only informed of the mishap on Monday.

CARACAS (Dispatches) - Five candidates, including incumbent President Nicolas Maduro, will compete in Venezuela’s presidential elections on May 20, the National Electoral Council (CNE) has announced.

Following the registration deadline, CNE President Socorro Hernandez released the candidates’ names in an interview with a local radio station.

Maduro will be running for re-election as the candidate of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela.

Former Lara State Governor Henri Falcon, an ex-Chavista (a follower of former President Hugo Chavez) opposed to Maduro’s administration, will run as the candidate of the Progressive Advance and Movement Towards Socialism parties.

WASHINGTON (AFP) - Wreckage from the USS Lexington, a U.S. aircraft carrier which sank during World War II, has been found in the Coral Sea, a search team led by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen said.

The wreckage was found by the team’s research vessel, the R/V Petrel, some 3,000 meters (two miles) below the surface more than 500 miles (800 kilometers) off the eastern coast of Australia.

The search team released pictures and video of the wreckage of the Lexington, one of the first ever US aircraft carriers, and some of the planes which went down with the ship.

KIEV (Dispatches) - Ukraine is looking forward to receiving at least one billion euro (1.24 billion U.S. dollars) from the European Union (EU) under the new macro-financial assistance program, Ukrainian Finance Minister Oleksandr Danylyuk said on Wednesday.

“The program of one billion euros has been preliminarily approved, but we will continue consultations with the European Commission in order to find a way to increase this sum,” Danylyuk said in an interview with the RBC-Ukraine online media outlet.

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) - Mexican left-wing presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador extended his lead to 14 points in an opinion poll completed last week, with a fight between his opponents over accusations of financial wrongdoing weighing on their support.

Lopez Obrador has 35 percent support ahead of the July 1 vote according to the survey by polling firm Parametria, published by Reuters on Wednesday ahead of wider publication.