

UN Agency Urges Genocide Probe in Myanmar



The top UN human rights official says Myanmar authorities are “serial deniers of the truth”.

GENEVA (Reuters) -- The top United Nations human rights official called on Friday for allegations of atrocities committed against the Muslim Rohingya minority in Myanmar to be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for prosecution.

Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, also urged Myanmar's government to allow monitors into northern Rakhine state to investigate what he called suspected "acts of genocide" against the Muslim minority.

"What we're saying is...there are strong suspicions, yes, that acts of genocide may well have taken place. But only a court, having heard all the arguments, will confirm this," Zeid told a news conference.

"It wouldn't surprise me in the least if a court would make that finding in the future," he said.

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, and Zeid noted that the threshold is high.

Nearly 700,000 Rohingya have fled Rakhine state into Bangladesh since insurgent attacks sparked a security crackdown in August. Many have provided harrowing testimonies of executions and rapes of civilians by Myanmar security forces.

Myanmar wants to see clear evidence to support accusations of ethnic cleansing or genocide, National Security Adviser Thaung Tun said on Thursday.

Zeid, asked about the remarks, said that Myanmar authorities were "serial deniers of the truth", adding: "To suggest that nothing serious has happened in Rakhine, I mean it's preposterous, ridiculous. How can they say such a thing?"

Myanmar has not allowed Yanghee Lee, the UN investigator on human rights in Myanmar, to visit the country to investigate.

She said on Friday she was "increasingly of the opinion that the events bear the hallmarks of genocide" and said she would press for prosecutions for crimes committed against entire ethnic and religious groups.

"The government leadership who did nothing to intervene, stop, or condemn these acts must also be held accountable," Lee said in a report based on her interviews with survivors in Bangladesh.

U.S., NATO Flex Muscles With 'Largest' Artillery Drill



Local community leaders take pictures of U.S. and German soldiers during exercise Dynamic Front, at Grafenwoehr, Germany, March 5, 2018.

BERLIN (Dispatches) -- The United States and its NATO allies have been conducting an annual drill that is said to be Europe's "largest artillery exercise" since the end of the Cold War in 1991.

More than 3,700 soldiers from 26 NATO countries have been participating in the multinational war games known as Exercise Dynamic Front 18 in Germany.

The number of troops is almost three times the number of those that participated in the drill last year.

The U.S.-led exercise, which kicked off on February 23, will wrap up on Saturday, Pentagon newspaper Stars and Stripes reported. The focus of the drill is to improve communication between artillery units from the different nations, it said.

"I think everybody realizes the importance of readiness, and this is a great readiness-building exercise," said Timothy McGuire, the deputy commanding general of U.S. Army Europe. "Also, units are realizing how much we can do on this training area and the kind of quality experience you get when you work together here."

For the first time, all militaries used a new shared digital communications

software, known as the Artillery Systems Cooperation Activities (ASCA), in the drill, according to McGuire.

The system, which is currently used by the U.S., Germany, France, Italy, and Turkey, would also be used by four more nations this year.

"Up until the late '90s, soldiers would call for artillery fire with radios, and it might take 10 to 15 minutes to get support. Now we do it digitally, and this saves a lot of time," said commanding general of the 7th Army Training Command, Antonio Aguto. "This is a huge asset to our soldiers."

Western countries often brandish the so-called Russia threat to conduct drills and build up forces in Europe and close to Russian borders.

Moscow, which is wary of NATO's military buildup near its western borders, has beefed up its southwestern military capacity. It has deployed missile systems to its Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad bordering Poland and Lithuania.

Relations between Russia and the West have nosedived to their lowest level since the days of the Cold War in recent years, following the eruption of armed conflict in Ukraine in 2014.

Millions Protest Gender Discrimination in Spain



Hundreds of thousands of people march down a street in Madrid on March 8, 2018, to mark International Women's Day.

MADRID (Dispatches) -- Millions of women workers in Spain have taken part in an unprecedented protest march and strike across the country to mark International Women's Day and oppose wage gaps, domestic violence, and sexual discrimination.

Labor unions in Spain estimated that over five million women participated in the first 24-hour nationwide "feminist strike" on Thursday, which was sponsored by 10 unions and some of Spain's top female politicians.

Spain's Workers' Commissions and the Workers' General Union announced on Thursday afternoon that 5.3 million people had taken part in two-hour walkouts, describing the

move as "an unprecedented strike in (the history of) our country's trade union movement."

The leading slogan during the nationwide rallies was "If we stop, the world stops," under which hundreds of thousands of protesters converged on numerous cities, including Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao, Seville, and Pamplona.

Protesters in the autonomous Catalonia region blocked a railway line and disrupted traffic in central Barcelona.

Elsewhere, students and demonstrators picketed at universities, and many female journalists decided against showing up for work at

newsrooms and studios.

The strike was also supported by some of the country's well-known female politicians, including Madrid's Mayor Manuela Carmena and Barcelona's Mayor Ada Colau.

Official statistics reported in the local media indicate that 49 women were killed by their partners or ex-partners in Spain last year, compared with 44 in 2016.

Government statistics also point to rising reports of violent abuse against women. There were 129,193 reports in 2015 and 142,893 in 2016. Complete annual figures for last year were not yet available, but by the end of September 2017, 125,769 reports had already been registered.

In Turkey, thousands of women also took part in a protest march in central Istanbul to demand an end to violence and greater equality with men in the country.

Women's Day has had a chaotic recent past in Turkey, where rallies faced bans for security reasons and attacks by mobs of angry men. This year, governors in a handful of provinces outlawed rallies, citing an emergency rule ban imposed in the wake of the 2016 military coup attempt.

On Sunday, police in the capital of Ankara arrested 15 people and used tear gas to disperse a march by women on Women's Day.

Extremist Buddhists Torch Muslim Homes in Sri Lanka



Sri Lanka's army soldiers stand guard near a burnt house after a clash between two communities in Digana, central district of Kandy, March 6, 2018.

COLOMBO (AFP) -- Soldiers and police guarded mosques across Sri Lanka during Friday prayers amid fears of new anti-Muslim attacks after four days of riots that have left at least three dead.

Most Muslim-owned businesses in the island nation remained shut in protest at attacks by mainly Buddhist Sinhalese groups concentrated around the central city of Kandy.

Armed troops and constables patrolled outside mosques while in Kandy, prayers were said in open grounds in many places because mosques had been burnt or vandalized.

"There were no incidents during the Friday prayers," a police official in Colombo said, adding that investigators had stepped up the search for those who took part in the violence.

At least 140 people, including the main instigator, have been arrested over the unrest, police said. They named the main suspect as Amith Weerasinghe, a Sinhalese known for anti-Muslim activism and outspoken social media posts. He was held Thursday.

The riots, which began Monday after a man from the Sinhalese majority died from injuries sustained in an attack by Muslims last week, have left nearly 200 Muslim businesses and homes destroyed. Eleven mosques were attacked.

Nine of the damaged mosques were in the picturesque tea-growing Kandy district, a draw for international tourists now suffering

widespread cancellations.

Kandy residents said shops and offices were open on Friday and life was slowly returning to normal. Muslims were seen inspecting the damage to their burnt-out businesses.

Troops guarded every junction while security personnel carried out patrols on motorcycles and in armored personnel carriers.

Internet services, which were blocked across Kandy, were restored on Friday, but access to social media sites such as Facebook remained blocked across Sri Lanka.

Police said Sinhalese extremists were using social media sites and messaging applications to spread hate speech and instigate attacks on the Muslim minority.

The government declared a state of emergency on Tuesday as the unrest escalated when a Muslim man was found dead in a burnt out building.

Army chief Mahesh Senanayake visited Kandy on Thursday and promised an increased military presence near mosques.

Despite a security alert across the country, three boats belonging to a Muslim businessman just outside the Kandy district were torched early Friday, police said. There were no casualties.

There have been several communal clashes in recent years in Sri Lanka. Sinhalese Buddhists make up 75% of the country's 21 million people, and 10% are Muslims.

Russia Ready to Help UK Probe Poisoning of Ex-Spy

LONDON (AP) -- Russia's foreign minister said Friday that Moscow was willing to help Britain investigate the nerve-agent poisoning of a former spy - but expressed resentment at suggestions Russia was behind the attack.

Sergey Lavrov said "whether it's poisoning of some British subjects, whether it's rumors about interference in the U.S. election campaign, if assistance really is needed, then we are ready to consider its possibility."

"But in order to conduct such cases, it is necessary not to immediately run out on TV screens with unfounded allegations," Lavrov was quoted as

saying by Russian state news agency Tass in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

British investigators are scrambling to trace the nerve agent that has left former spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter in critical condition.

Skripal, a former Russian military intelligence officer, was convicted in 2006 of spying for Britain and released in 2010 as part of a spy swap.

He had been living in the quiet English city of Salisbury, where he and his daughter Yulia were found unconscious on a bench Sunday. They are in critical but stable condition in a hospital in the city, 140 kilometers

southwest of London.

A police officer who treated them at the scene is in serious condition, and a total of 21 people have received medical treatment.

The UK has vowed to take strong action against whoever was responsible for the "brazen and reckless" attack.

British authorities say it's too soon to lay blame, but suspicions have fallen on Russia.

Russian media have mocked suggestions of Moscow involvement in the attack - but also noted that those who betray Russian seem to come to a bad end.



BARCELONA (AFP) -- Catalonia's deposed leader Carles Puigdemont refused Friday to rule out fresh elections in the Spanish region if the jailed candidate chosen by Catalan separatist parties to form a new government is not allowed to be sworn in. "It is no tragedy if there are new elections, although it is not the priority and no one desires it," he said in an interview published in Catalan nationalist newspaper El Punt Avui. Puigdemont moved to Belgium after the Catalan parliament unilaterally declared independence on October 27 following a banned referendum on secession and faces arrest if he returns to Spain over his role in Catalonia's separatist push. He formally abandoned his bid to be re-appointed Catalan president last week and proposed Jordi Sanchez, as a candidate, with the Catalan parliament set to convene on Monday to appoint a new regional president. But Sanchez is considered to have little chance of taking up the post since he is remanded in custody pending accusations of sedition over last year's Catalan independence crisis.

KANO, Nigeria (AFP) -- Rural communities in Taraba state, eastern Nigeria, were Friday on indefinite lockdown as the authorities tried to contain mounting violence between cattle herders and farmers. Police spokesman David Misal said a round-the-clock curfew has been imposed in affected areas "due to the escalation of violence between Fulani and Mambilla ethnic groups". Nigeria has been gripped since the start of the year with an increase in clashes between the largely nomadic herders and farmers over land, water and grazing rights. At least 10 people were killed in several days of violence in Taraba last week into the weekend, while some 24 lost their lives in the central state of Benue in the last few days. Misal said there were reports that the violence was spreading but gave no further details. Last year, the cattle herders union claimed more than 700 people were killed in violence, although the authorities gave a much lower death toll. The herders are Muslim and the farmers are largely Christian, which adds an ethnic and religious dimension to the tensions. Many herders have fled to northern Cameroon.

KIEV (Dispatches) -- Ukraine Friday charged a prisoner swap negotiator with plotting to assassinate President Petro Poroshenko and other senior officials by attacking their homes and offices with mortar fire and grenades. Volodymyr Ruban was detained Thursday with a haul of firearms and ammunition in his vehicle while crossing the "grey zone" splitting Russian-backed eastern insurgents from the rest of Ukraine. The 50-year-old Ukrainian national is known to have organized several prisoner exchanges between the two sides during four years of fighting, in which more than 10,000 have died. "Ruban is suspected of preparing armed attacks against senior government officials," the presiding judge in Kiev was quoted as saying by Interfax-Ukraine news agency. The charge sheet accused Ruban of planning to use "mortar guns, grenade launchers, light weapons and explosive devices" to attack the homes of Poroshenko and other officials.

GENEVA (Reuters) -- More than 2 million children in the Democratic Republic of Congo are estimated to be at risk of dying from severe acute malnutrition if they do not get the aid they need, the United Nations warned Friday. UN humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock will meet donors next week in the country where conditions in many areas are worsening, UN spokesman Jens Luerke told a Geneva briefing. "We have a great responsibility in the DRC...now is the time to stay the course," Luerke said. The 2 million children at risk of starvation include some 300,000 children in the Kasai region, Bettina Luescher of the UN's World Food Program said.

SYDNEY (Reuters) -- Floods swamped parts of the Australian state of Queensland on Friday, covering pastureland and cutting off towns as swollen rivers inundated about 200 homes. "There's water as far as the eye can see," said James Wyld by phone from the bar of the Julia Creek Hotel in western Queensland's grazing country. A disaster was declared further east in the coastal cane-farming towns of Ingham and Halifax, where television pictures showed the swollen Herbert River rushing over the main highway. No injuries were reported though 225 homes around Ingham were flooded, authorities said, and 72 children on a school camp north of Ingham were isolated by the rising water, Queensland state premier Annastacia Palaszczuk told reporters in Brisbane. "They are safe, they are in good spirits," she said.

SYDNEY (AFP) -- The death toll from an earthquake that hit Papua New Guinea last month has topped 100 with thousands injured, Prime Minister Peter O'Neill said Friday, warning it will take years for the region to recover. The Pacific nation's mountainous interior was struck by a 7.5-magnitude tremor on Feb 26, triggering landslides that blocked roads, caused power outages and cut off villages. Communities have also been rattled by strong aftershocks, sparking fears among disenchanted and suspicious residents that the shaking was somehow caused by oil and gas operations in the area.