**For Years, U.N. Was Warned of Threat to Rohingya in Myanmar**

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The flight of Myanmar’s Rohingya to Bangladesh should have come as no surprise to the United Nations.

For more than three years, a chorus of voices from within the U.N. community have warned that the country’s minority Muslims faced a grim reckoning that the U.N. was ill prepared to handle and called for pressing the government of Myanmar, which is often referred to as Burma, to halt its abuses.

“It has always been a question of when rather than if,” said Charles Petrie, a former U.N. representative in Myanmar, who has emerged as one the institution’s most prominent critics.

But at every step of the way these critics have faced fierce resistance from some of the most senior U.N. officials, who feared that publicly shaming Myanmar’s rulers would complicate efforts to steer the country through a delicate political transition from military rule to democracy and jeopardize the U.N.’s development and humanitarian relief efforts in the country.

Today, more than half a million Muslims have fled the country for Bangladesh in a brutally efficient spasm of ethnic cleansing by Myanmar security forces, who consider the Rohingya to be foreigners. Some U.N. officials are straining to figure out how and why their policies fell short, and to plot out what, if anything, they can do to stem a human tide.

Others say it may be too late, that Myanmar security forces have effectively rewritten the ethnic boundaries of the Rohingyas’ heartland in northern Rakhine state with little likelihood that they will ever return.

The refugee crisis has its roots in a long history of Burmese discrimination against the Rohingya. But some of the U.N.’s shortcomings in responding to the crisis are self-made: a product of long-standing interagency squabbles over turf and policy, compounded by a bureaucratic decision taken in December 1977 that empowered the U.N. Development Program to appoint the senior U.N. official, or resident coordinator, presiding over most of the international body’s duty stations around the world.

As an agency that relies on governments’ cooperation to do its work, UNDP has historically shied away from tackling thorny political matters or confronting those governments when they commit abuses, according to the critics. That, they claimed, fed a culture of silence that has pervaded many duty stations, subjecting the U.N. to allegations that it has been complicit in atrocities, from Myanmar to Sri Lanka.

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres has been pressing for a key reform that would end the development agency’s role in appointing the top official, or resident coordinator, in U.N. field offices, and transfer that authority to his own office.

The reform, according to advocates, would give the U.N. chief greater power to rally the U.N.’s fractious agencies behind a single policy and to swap out top U.N. field officials who may lack the requisite skills to respond when their duty station descends into chaos.

In his first meeting with top advisors, Guterres outlined a plan to place the top U.N. official, or resident coordinator, in the more than 130 U.N. duty stations under the authority of the U.N. Development Group, which is headed by his own deputy secretary-general, Amina Mohammed, a former Nigerian environment minister.

“There is overwhelming consensus that the Resident Coordinator system needs to change,” Erik Solheim, the executive director of the U.N. Environment Program, wrote in a memo to his staff describing the meeting. “It needs to separate from the Development Programme, to allow better representation of all parts of the United Nations.”

But the effort has faced internal resistance from U.N. agencies, including UNDP and the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which fret it could weaken their standing in the field, according to a senior diplomatic source.

It has also been received with some trepidation by developing countries, as well as China and Russia, which suspect the reform would place too much power in the hands of the U.N. chief, who may one day use it to interfere in their domestic affairs or to lecture them on their human rights conduct.

“I fear that if the secretary-general’s attempt to reform the U.N. representation on the ground does not succeed, many more Myanmars can be foreseen,” said Petrie, who was expelled from Myanmar in October 2007 for criticizing the military government.

In many ways, Guterres waded into a policy vacuum on Myanmar when he was elected last year. The U.N. General Assembly had just eliminated the post of U.N. special representative to Myanmar, a sign of the international community’s views that Myanmar’s democratic transition, now led by the Nobel Peace Prize-winning leader Aung San Suu Kyi, was on track and the need for foreign intervention in the country’s politics had passed.

The Myanmar government made it clear to the new U.N. chief during his first months in office that it would not accept a new special representative. Guterres’s proposal this summer to replace the U.N.’s resident coordinator, Renata Lok-Dessallien, with a more senior successor to grapple with the deteriorating political and human rights situation was also rejected by the government, which has repeatedly denied there is any human rights problem in Myanmar.

Frustrated with the failure to move Myanmar’s leaders through quiet diplomacy, Guterres in early September took the rare step of directly requesting the U.N. Security Council press for restraint and calm, warning that Myanmar was facing a “humanitarian catastrophe.”

But the crisis has only worsened.

On Oct. 9, 2016, a previously unknown armed group called Harakat al-Yaqin, since renamed the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, mounted an attack on three police stations in the townships of Maungdaw and Rathedaung, killing nine officers. The military retaliated with even greater force, setting Rohingya villages on fire and forcing tens of thousands to flee to Bangladesh. By late January, nearly 70,000 Rohingya had crossed the border into Bangladesh.

“The current crisis in Rakhine, which at this moment in time is quite possibly the most acute human rights crisis in the world, may have been triggered by attacks by Muslim militants,” Andrew Gilmour, the U.N. assistant secretary-general told U.N. Security Council members Friday. “But it has been decades in the making, through the systematic discrimination against the Rohingya population.”

In April, a consultant hired by the U.N. office in Yangon warned in an internal report that it was only a matter of time before a new wave of violence occurred. “All indications,” the consultant, Richard Horsey, wrote in his confidential report, are that Muslim insurgents would launch an attack on Myanmar security forces in the next six months, triggering a “heavy-handed and indiscriminate” army assault on the region’s long-discriminated-against Rohingya Muslims.

The report, which was obtained by Foreign Policy, was first reported on by the Guardian, which said its distribution within the U.N. was suppressed by Lok-Dessallien.

But Horsey wasn’t the first to raise concerns about the Rohingya.

Back in 2015, Liam Mahony, a consultant to the U.N. high commissioner for human rights, wrote a pointed critique of the organization’s role in Myanmar that painted a picture of deep dysfunction. U.N. humanitarian agencies based in Myanmar squabbled over turf, withheld information from one another, and soft-pedaled the regime’s abuses.

He reserved some of his sharpest criticism for Lok-Dessallien, claiming she had failed to speak up publicly in the face of discriminatory policies that sentenced the Rohingya to an apartheid-like existence and the placement of thousands of civilians in internment camps supported by U.N. aid.

Mahony argued that Myanmar relies on the U.N.’s stamp of approval for a successful transition, but the international body has been reluctant to use that influence to press for better treatment of the Rohingya.

“The U.N.’s overall approach fails to take adequate advantage of the unique historical moment in which Myanmar finds itself,” he wrote. “It needs the international community, it wants to reap the huge financial rewards that this new relationship brings; and it understands it must make trade-offs to reap them.”

Instead, he said, the U.N. and other international agencies have been “frightened” into a “level of silence that tends to support or facilitate the state’s ongoing strategies of discrimination.”

The mission’s tread-softly approach has been challenged by some other senior officials, principally U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein and former Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson, who were tasked with implementing the former U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s U.N. Human Rights Up Front Initiative, which called for placing the promotion of human rights at the center of the U.N.’s work in the field.

But they faced stiff resistance from UNDP’s former executive director, Helen Clark, and the former special envoy, Vijay Nambiar, according to former U.N. officials and internal U.N. documents reviewed by FP. In private meetings, Clark and Nambiar repeatedly argued that frank criticism of Myanmar’s human rights conduct would be counterproductive and that the government was doing its best to improve, the officials said.

As early as late 2015, Eliasson pressed to have Lok-Dessallien replaced with a successor with more experience in crisis zones and a willingness to press the government more forcefully on human rights. But the effort was blocked by Clark, according to two former senior U.N. official.

In response to a request for comment, Clark told FP that there was “discussion from time to time as to whether” Lok-Dessallien should continue running the U.N. mission in Myanmar, “but in the absence of compelling reasons to withdraw her she stayed in her post.”

Clark recalled no “sharp policy disputes” at the highest levels of the U.N. and that there “was a general appreciation” that the U.N. had to simultaneously promote human rights while advancing political, humanitarian, and development goals in Myanmar. “That was certainly my view,” she wrote in response to questions from FP.

“I considered then and consider now the human rights issues impacting on the Rohingya to be serious, and first raised them with Aung San Suu Kyi directly myself when I called on her in Naypyidaw in 2013,” she said. “Senior officials regularly wrestled with the issue of how to have an impact on serious human rights issues in Myanmar. To portray me as indifferent or hostile to that cause is not only wrong, but constitutes a calculated smear which I would hope Foreign Policy would not perpetrate.”

For his part, Nambiar acknowledged that the depiction of high-level differences at U.N. headquarters “is not essentially incorrect,” in a lengthy written response to questions. But he said that his private messages to Myanmar’s leaders “were as forthright and and direct as I could make them.”

“I believed that publicly upbraiding the government on the Rohingya issue and the use of expressions like ‘genocide’ were likely to be counterproductive and could further weaken the hands of the incoming government of [Aung San Suu Kyi] in tackling the issue,” he wrote.

Nambiar said that he raised concern about “institutionalized discrimination” against the Rohingya and other minority groups in “almost every” meeting he held with then-President U Thein Sein.

“It is factually incorrect and misleading to suggest that my office was disproportionately focused only on the peace process and that it did not pay sufficient attention to the Rakhine issue,” he said. “The sad fact was that despite the many-pronged efforts of the U.N., on many critical points, the Thein Sein government proved unwilling or politically unable to take a strong stand on this issue against the Buddhist clerics or the army.”

Nambiar said he initially held high hopes that Aung San Suu Kyi would take a more sympathetic approach to the plight of the Rohingya. But her position hardened after the emergence of Rohingya militants in October 2016. “I pleaded to her to listen to her own ‘inner voice’ as well as to personally visit Northern Rakhine to signal her concern for the security and dignity of the local population there,” he recalled. “Her sharp reaction was an indication of a change in her stand.”

But those sharp policy differences at U.N. headquarters were never resolved, fueling a similar battle among the various U.N. agencies in the field over the wisdom of pressing the government to improve its treatment of the Rohingya and other minorities. Lok-Dessallien carried out the policy favored by Clark and Nambiar, steering clear of tough talk on the need for political reforms or better human rights, and focusing on areas where the U.N. and the government could work together to promote development.

The approach fueled deep divisions within the U.N.’s field office, with officials from U.N. agencies, including the office of the U.N. emergency relief coordinator and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, in open dissent.

Lok-Dessallien declined through a spokesman to comment. But one senior U.N. official came to her defense, saying that she was a principled international civil servant who may have lacked the experience and the skills to adjust to Myanmar’s descent into crisis.

But “if you think that had she had taken a much harder line a year ago then none of this would have happened you’re delusional,” the official said.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, added that the U.N. could pay a high price for speaking out without achieving results: “We are not an NGO. If Human Rights Watch gets kicked out of the country for speaking out it’s a badge of honor, If we get kicked out, what happens to the humanitarian and development programs?”

“I think Renata got a bum deal,” the official said. “The fault is more with the system as a whole.”