**Remarks by Tom Andrews**

**UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar**

**to the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission of the**

**Organization of Islamic Cooperation**

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It is an honor to be invited to address and engage with you during this important session of your Human Rights Commission.

You are engaged in the critically important work of advancing universally recognized human rights as well as the Islamic principles of justice and equality. And you do so not only within OIC Member States but also in non-Member States particularly with respect to the fundamental rights of Muslim communities within those states.

This is particularly relevant with regard to Myanmar and the brutal assaults on the lives and fundamental rights of the Rohingya ethnic Muslim minority of Myanmar. The Rohingya have been described as the most persecuted minority on earth. They have been the subjects of discrimination, bigotry and violence in Myanmar not because of anything that they have done, but because of who they are and the God who they pray to.

So your work to defend and give voice to the rights of this persecuted minority, who have suffered so immeasurably, is immensely important.

I have witnessed this advocacy directly at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva and it was there that I had the pleasure of meeting with members of this Commission, including your Chairperson, to discuss how we can most effectively work together. This led to the invitation to address you at this Commission meeting and it includes the drafting of a joint statement regarding the crisis facing the Rohingya, that I look forward to releasing with you as a Commission.

It also includes addressing a crisis that is impacting the lives of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya who are living in the largest refugee camp in the world, over the border in Bangladesh where they literally ran for the lives from the genocidal attacks of the Myanmar military under the command of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who in 2021 lead an illegal coup and now leads a military junta that is effectively at war with the people of Myanmar.

Since the coup:

* + More than 3,500 civilians have been killed by junta forces;
  + More than 60,000 civilian homes, schools, clinics and other community structures have been destroyed – most of them were burned to the ground;
  + More than 1.5 million people have been displaced;
  + Nearly half the population has fallen into poverty; and
  + Over 17.6 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance.

Unable to secure control on the ground, the junta has significantly increased its attacks from the air – indiscriminately killing civilians with attacks on villages, hospitals, schools and public events such as concerts.

These military attacks include the targeting of IDP camps. I will never forget the conversation I had with a father who, just two days before we spoke, lost his only children. His two daughters, ages 12 and 15 were killed when their IDP camp was attacked by junta forces.

The attack on Pazigyi village, Sagaing Region, on 11 April is another example of the junta’s brutality. A military jet dropped bombs on an opening ceremony of an administrative office affiliated with National Unity Government. After the jets dropped their bombs, attack helicopters swooped in and began firing on survivors and emergency workers who had rushed to the horrible scene. At least 170 were killed, including approximately 40 children.

I have been urging a stronger international response to this brutality and what are probable war crimes and crimes against humanity. There needs to be a coordinated and strategic approach to deny the junta the three things it needs to continue what is effectively a war against the people of Myanmar:

* + Weapons;
  + Money; and
  + Legitimacy.

I have issued reports on all three and have detailed how Member States can effectively cut the junta’s access to them.

The situation of the Rohingya in Myanmar and in Bangladesh is increasingly desperate and in need of a strong, principled response by the international community.

The have endured:

* Decades of discrimination and violence;
* The denial of citizenship;
* Severe restrictions on movement in Rakhine State;
* Being forced to live in what is essentially an apartheid state; and
* Genocidal attacks in 2016 and 2017, when untold numbers were murdered and forced to run for their lives into neighboring Bangladesh.

Today more Rohingya are living outside of Myanmar than inside. About 600,000 Rohingya remain in Rakhine State and continue to suffer severe restrictions. They include more than 135,000 Rohingya who are forced to live in de facto internment camps, because they can’t leave. I have seen them firsthand and they were horrible even before being hit by last week’s cyclone.

More than 1 million Rohingya are living in camps in Bangladesh and entirely dependent on food rations, with few educational opportunities for their children. Hundreds of thousands have fled to Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, India, and elsewhere.

Last year there were more than 3,500 people who put their lives into the hands of smugglers and traffickers and attempted to escape in largely unseaworthy boats – a 350% increase over the previous year. Approximately 350 are believed to have died. Many thousands attempted equally dangerous overland trips – risking arrest, death, sexual violence, kidnapping, and exploitation by traffickers.

Now, in addition to all of the immense suffering the Rohingya people have had to endure, they are suffering from the failure of the international community to provide adequate levels of humanitarian support.

In 2022, the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis Joint Response Plan, which is the main vehicle for funding humanitarian assistance by UN and humanitarian agencies, was only 63 percent funded – $558 million out of $881 million total budget. This has meant that life-saving programs were unable to be implemented due to a lack of funds. The failure to provide adequate food rations through the World Food Program has meant that more than 40 percent of children have stunted growth. More than half of Rohingya children in the camps in Bangladesh are anemic, as are over 40 percent of pregnant or breastfeeding women.

I spoke to Rohingya parents in the camps who described the painful process of deciding what food they could not provide for their children. In March, life became even more difficult as a 17 percent cut in food rations was implemented. Now, an additional 20 percent cut is being planned for June. This means that everyone in these camps will be forced to live on food rations worth $0.27 per day.

A mother of five explained to me that these cuts in food rations was not just about hunger and malnutrition – that these cuts were making the camps more dangerous as people become increasingly desperate. She described how more and more were looking for ways to escape.

Now there has been news that the repatriation of Rohingya back to Myanmar could begin starting with a pilot program. But, there is no indication that basic human rights would be respected, including the basic right to citizenship or even to basic movement. In fact, the person who would be responsible for the safety of those Rohingya returning to Myanmar would be the very General who commanded the forces that were responsible for genocidal attacks that forced them to run to Bangladesh in the first place.

But, given the desperate situation that they find themselves in, in the camps in Bangladesh, including hunger, malnutrition and increasing violence, some may feel that they have an impossible choice – starve in Bangladesh, or try their luck in Myanmar from where they had escaped genocidal attacks.

To make things even worse, millions suffered the impact of one of strongest cyclones ever in the Indian Ocean that hit Rakhine State on Sunday, 14 May. Luckily, the camps in Bangladesh were not hit directly but, nevertheless, there was extensive damage. Many structures were destroyed as they were not constructed to withstand anything close to cyclone force winds.

Now we are facing the prospect of even more suffering including deaths from lack of food, water, shelter, and sanitation facilities than from the storm itself. We have seen the junta making things worse, not better, by inhibiting aid delivery through the withholding of travel authorization for humanitarian organizations.

In short, the Rohingya of Myanmar have had to deal with a “Triple-whammy”: Historic discrimination and violence, a failed international response and now a powerful cyclone.

**There is a compelling NEED for a stronger, principled international response to the crisis facing the Rohingya.**

I have been asking all Member States to do what they can, including during trips to Geneva, Brussels, and Japan, as well as in the US; but I want to talk to you about what the OIC and OIC Member States can do.

OIC and OIC Member States have been among the most vocal supporters of the Rohingya, regularly demanding accountability for the Rohingya in international fora. They coordinate an annual Human Rights Council resolution on the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities in Myanmar. In 2019, the Gambia brought a case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice on behalf of the OIC alleging violations of the Genocide Convention in relation to Myanmar’s persecution of the Rohingya.

However, OIC’s voice of support for the rights of the Rohingya has not been matched by a commitment of critically necessary financial support.

Last year, only one of the 57 OIC member states contributed financial support to the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis Joint Response Plan (United Arab Emirates - $1 million). Now there might have been contributions made to charitable efforts, but this JRP is what funds the food rations that have been systematically cut – and are facing yet more disastrous cuts.

To date, I am not aware of any OIC member contributing to the 2023 JRP. The Rohingya families who are facing a catastrophe – need and deserve a stronger, more humane level of support from the international community, including the OIC and OIC member states.

That is why this Commission, with its commitment to human rights and its responsibility to advance human rights, particularly of those Muslims who are facing the level of persecution and attacks that the Rohingya are facing, has such an important role to play.

Your call for support for the Rohingya will be critical. I urge you to make a direct appeal to OIC member states to make a strong financial commitment to the WFP and the Joint Response Plan. The stakes could not be greater and because of this I plan to travel to OIC member capitals to personally make such an appeal. I urge you to issue a strong and principled Commission statement on the crisis. This could include a joint statement that I would be honored to issue with you.

Thank you for the invitation to join you today, for your commitment to human rights, and for being a voice of conscience on behalf of the Rohingya. I look forward to working closely with you as a friend, an ally and an advocate for human rights in the months and years to come.