

Obama heads to Myanmar as ethnic and religious tensions percolate

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SITTWE, Myanmar (RNS) Ousman Gani, 28, used to be a kindergarten teacher. But after Buddhist mobs destroyed his village during the ethnic and religious violence that tore through Sittwe in 2012, he has been confined to a displaced persons camp.

"I cannot work," said Gani, a minority Rohingya Muslim. "I cannot send my children to school. I cannot think about the future."

As Myanmar steps into the spotlight this week with President Obama and other world leaders arriving for a pair of regional summits starting Wednesday (November 12), the worsening plight of the Rohingya minority is casting a shadow over the country's hopes for democratic reforms.

Obama's 2012 visit to Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, was buoyed by the country's surprise announcement that it would open up and begin a transition to democracy. Those changes have developed slowly, however, and ethnic conflicts persist.

Obama is expected to address the plight of the Rohingya during his meeting Thursday with President Thein Sein. The White House said Obama stressed Myanmar's need to support the civil and political rights of the Rohingya population during an October 31 call with Thein Sein.

National security adviser Susan Rice has emphasized the U.S. commitment to human rights in Myanmar. "We have real concerns; we've expressed them repeatedly about conditions in Rakhine state," she said Friday. "We will raise those concerns very directly."

Around 140,000 displaced Rohingya live behind barbed wire and under armed watch in camps and villages, unable to move freely and in many cases unable to farm, fish

or find employment.

Up to 1 million Rohingya have been denied full citizenship, and at least 100,000 have fled by boat for neighboring countries. Human Rights Watch condemned the 2012 coordinated attacks on the Rohingya as ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

“The problems facing the Rohingya are among the most desperate human crises in Asia today,” said Murray Hiebert, deputy director of Southeast Asia Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “With thousands of Rohingya fleeing on boats for Thailand and Malaysia, this problem stretches far beyond the borders of Myanmar.”

In Baw Du Pha, the camp where Gani is confined, families share 10-by-10-foot rooms and subsist almost entirely on rations of rice, chickpeas, salt and palm oil delivered by the United Nations World Food Program. Health care is at a crisis level ever since the Myanmar government expelled the aid group Doctors Without Borders in February, accusing it of favoring Muslims.

Death and illness have become grimly commonplace around the Baw Du Pha camp. Noor Jahar, a widow, showed visitors empty medicine packets and photos of her daughter, Sham Sida, who died in April after treatment for her tuberculosis ran out. Others in the camp said 11 children have died in the past month from diarrhea caused by lack of sanitation and clean drinking water.

The deteriorating situation in the camps along with increasing reports of arbitrary arrests and detainment in northern parts of Rakhine have led to a rapid increase in Rohingya fleeing the country, according to Chris Lewa, director of the advocacy group Arakan Project.

Lewa said that more than 15,000 have fled since October 15. The exodus by boat is one of the largest in Asia since the end of the Vietnam War.

“The situation is getting worse and worse, degenerating all the time,” Lewa said.

Some Rohingya who flee Myanmar encounter situations worse than those back home. An extensive human-trafficking ring emerged to exploit the desperate migrants, and many who do arrive safely to Thailand or Malaysia report that finding steady work and fair pay is becoming harder.

Muhammad Enous, 26, fled to Malaysia about a year ago, enduring an 11-day journey on an overcrowded boat that lacked shelter and ran out of drinking water two days before landfall. He found a construction job in Johor Baru, Malaysia, and was able to send money back to his wife and four children in the village of Thae Chaung, but his pay was arbitrarily withheld or skipped entirely.

Enous returned to Myanmar three weeks ago and said he is warning others of his experiences in Malaysia. "The situation (in Sittwe) is very bad. People think they have no future here, so they leave for Thailand and Malaysia. But when they arrive, they're not getting paid," he said.

After more than two years since the Rohingya crisis erupted, humanitarian aid groups are fighting to stay one step ahead of catastrophe.

"The enormous challenges faced in Rakhine state can only be resolved with a political solution which addresses underlying human rights concerns," said Pierre Peron, spokesman for the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. "As humanitarians, our responsibility is to respond to emergency needs with lifesaving aid as best as we can until a political solution is found."

Few will be watching Obama this week as closely as the Rohingya. For many, his visit is a thread of hope in their unraveling situation.

Muhammad Hussein, 42, who operates a market in Thae Chaung, said the upcoming visit was a hot topic among everyone in the village.

"Our dream is that Obama will improve our condition," he said. "Obama is the leader of the world community. We hope that the government will listen to his advice for transforming the country's policies for the Rohingya."