

A Rohingya refugee in Palong Khali refugee camp, near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Shelters, temporary housing and other amenities are being prepared for Rohingya who may wish to return to Rakhine. Larger Myanmar businesses have also contributed to infrastructure development in the state.
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A broader lens on Myanmar's problems

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It seems so long ago that people talked about Myanmar in terms of a triumph of democracy and a "frontier economy" of golden promise. Current headlines about the country instead focus overwhelmingly on a single issue, and very negatively. That issue concerns the minority Muslims in Rakhine state whom many foreigners – but almost none inside the country – call "Rohingya".

Reports estimate that more than 700,000 Rohingya have crossed the border to Bangladesh. There is little doubt that the most recent wave of this exodus was triggered by a crackdown led by the military, which claims it was reacting to terrorist attacks by separatist groups embedded in the villages. Acts of violence have created an atmosphere of distrust and reprisals between communities.

It is in this context that United Nations Security Council ambassadors are visiting those seeking refuge at Cox's Bazar in

Bangladesh. When they cross into Rakhine, the gaze of the global community will again focus on the humanitarian situation. The immediate needs are very real and cooperation from all sides is needed for the secure and voluntary return of displaced persons. This was recognised at the Asean Summit hosted by Singapore, where the Myanmar government, represented by recently installed President Win Myint, briefed the leaders on the situation.

While not well publicised, Myanmar has made preparations for both short-term amelioration and long-term development to address the Rakhine situation. The Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development, formed in October last year, is a high-level public-private enterprise tasked to coordinate responses across development partners and key ministries.

With the help of international donors, shelters, temporary housing and other amenities are being prepared for those who may wish to return. Larger Myanmar businesses have also contributed to infrastructure development, such as roads to help ease connections in the remote and difficult corners of

the Rakhine state.

Beyond humanitarian relief, there is every danger that tensions can recur and indeed spike. In coming months, the monsoon will return in full force and conditions will be increasingly difficult and even perilous for those encamped in the border areas.

There is also the real possibility of more attacks that can provoke the Myanmar security forces and for more intra-community conflicts between Buddhist and Muslims in the state.

In this context, the Asean Summit wisely stressed the need for a comprehensive and durable solution so that the affected communities can rebuild their lives. Looking beyond the present UN visit, the Myanmar government can be expected to reach out to other bodies such as the UN Refugee Agency and the UN Development Programme in the coming weeks.

There is merit in engaging these UN bodies that possess both knowledge and expertise, and can help coordinate efforts and smooth over differences at the border. While Myanmar and Bangladesh reached an agreement on the terms of repatriation in December last year, efforts are currently delayed, with each side blaming the other.

Critics say this is too little and too late, and want to hold the Myanmar military forces to account. Ties with Europe and the United States have notably cooled and some have called for sanctions to be reintroduced. Some also point fingers at Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi – in contrast to the reverence she once enjoyed as the long-time icon for

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democracy in the country.

Looking forward, there will be a need for a fair and full fact-finding effort. But it may be both wrong and self-defeating to rush to blame.

The outside world would do better to realise the deep-seated nature of the problem, rooted in the British colonial days with the integration and treatment of a once autonomous entity.

There have been longstanding tensions between the Buddhist majority and Muslim minority in Rakhine, as well as a lack of trust between the local community and the central government. Even before this current exodus, the previous Thein Sein government, too, had to deal with violent clashes that accelerated in 2012.

Expectations of the current National League for Democracy government and Ms Suu Kyi, the State Counsellor, should not be unrealistic. Control of key ministries and institutions – defence, home affairs and border affairs – remain with the military.

Moreover, the majority of the population has shown scant sympathy for Rakhine's Muslim minority and many reject the idea that the Rohingya might deserve citizenship.

To date, responses from Myanmar have tended towards defensiveness and denial, and this has fed suspicion and accusations. But during our recent visit to Myanmar, it was clear that concerns about Rakhine have risen on the domestic agenda. As

Myanmar ramps up ground efforts and begins to engage the UN, we are optimistic that a change of tone and attitude will follow.

Yet, while critical, there are many reasons to recognise that the Rakhine issue should not be the only lens for the international community to see the country.

The need for political reform and a wider peace process remains real, and the recent armed conflict between Myanmar military forces and the Kachin ethnic insurgents along the border with China shows that stability cannot be taken for granted.

There is also considerable need for financial stability and economic development. The economy is still growing but has markedly slowed, with a visible drop in foreign investments. Further reform is needed to create a stable and predictable investment climate with strategic priorities.

These needs may not capture the headlines like the immediate needs in Rakhine. But these steps will be essential to lay a stable foundation for durable peace and prosperity for the country and the population as a whole.

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