

“Two Years On”

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August 2017. Many of us were here on this very spot. And now it is two years on and we are back.

For many Rohingya it is three years on. From October 2016

For many Rohingya it is 27 years on. From 1992

For all Rohingya this has been a lifetime.

And we gather here today, on this somber anniversary, marking the eruption of the brutal, devastating campaign by the Myanmar military two years ago – village after village attacked and burned & razed to the ground, Rohingya women & girls raped, escaping refugees shot & killed.

Thousands, tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands of Rohingya forced to flee. And even as they fled – towards the Naf river and the border with Bangladesh, the only direction in which safety lay – security forces had laid land mines along the way – to maximize the terror, the suffering and the death.

I sat with Rohingya refugees in the camps in Bangladesh earlier this year – some who had arrived only 18 months earlier, others who had been born and lived their entire lives in such camps as Kutupalong and Nayapara.

I spoke with Ali, now well into his seventies.

He told me he had watched as family and friends fled from the earlier waves of violence and human rights abuse that devastated so many Rohingya communities in Rakhine State. But he always stayed. He stayed, he told me, because this was home and home is where he was meant to be.

But this time it was different. The scale, the ferocity, the anger, the hatred of the attacks by Myanmar soldiers made it absolutely clear he said: none of us were safe any more; not one single Rohingya could be safe any more in the villages that have been our homes for generations. In my heart I prayed that we would be able to return home, but I knew that we had to flee.

The exodus was staggering.

Almost overnight Kutupalong Refugee Camp become the largest in the world. No envious honour in that.

And suddenly, Bangladesh, which already faces enormous challenges of overcrowding and environmental harm and degradation, was home to one million Rohingya.

Two years on. Has the world brought pressure to bear on Myanmar? To relent, reform, change and recognize the full and equal rights of the Rohingya.

Far from it. No moves to grant Rohingya citizenship. No moves to provide freedom and safety to the more than 100,000 Rohingya who remain imprisoned in IDP camps. No moves to demonstrate that hatred and racism will give way to inclusion and equality.

Two years on have there been meaningful efforts to respond to the grim conclusions of the UN Human Rights Council's Fact Finding Mission, which has documented staggering levels of human rights violations and has pointed to genocide?

Not in the slightest. Still talking and thinking about it, but nothing that would assure Ali that the soldiers, generals and political leaders who unleashed this terror are being held to account.

Two years on, can we at least be certain that refugees in Bangladesh are living in dignity, security and with full regard for their rights?

Unfortunately not. Bangladesh does deserve gratitude and praise for keeping its border open in the face of this mass influx – not all governments would, particularly in this time of closing doors and punitive refugee policies around the world.

But Bangladesh has also made it clear that it expects refugees to return to Myanmar soon, as soon as possible, as soon as now. We saw that again this past week, when another supposed “voluntary” repatriation effort went nowhere in the end, because refugees are not prepared to volunteer to return to the danger and hardship that would await them in Myanmar.

And thus, life remains harsh and cruel in the overcrowded refugee camps, as the Bangladesh government believes that if rights are too well protected, refugees will decide they want to remain rather than return home.

But human rights are not a bargaining chip and are not to be held hostage to political schemes and machinations.

Perhaps the most heartbreaking example of this is a refusal to allow full and proper schools in the camps. Day in day out, week in week out, months go by; and hundreds of thousands of Rohingya youth have nothing to look forward to other than glorified play schools where they do some art, sing some song and learn basic math.

This has to change.

Rohingya refugees do want to return home. Of course they do. I heard that in painful, hopeful, angry, sorrowful terms from every refugee I interviewed. Home when it is safe. Home when rights will be respected.

Meanwhile, refugee rights must be fully upheld and respected in Bangladesh.

And Canada and the rest of the international community must step up and show true solidarity and share the responsibility.

So much more is needed.

For two years on, this crisis is not about to end.

And we are all here this afternoon because we know in our hearts, and we shout out to the world, this is a crisis that cannot be forgotten.