

**Workshop for the conference on The Rohingya Crisis: What Next?
Hotel Europa, Sarajevo, Bosnia - Herzegovina, 06 - 07 May 2022
SPEAKING NOTES – SEV OZDOWSKI**

1. WELCOME

Excellencies, sponsors, speakers, ladies and gentlemen, all.

Thank you for the invitation to attend the forward-looking “Workshop for the conference on The Rohingya Crisis: What Next?”

My warm thanks go to Mr Kemal Bey, Chair of the Hasene, Mr Metmet Turhan, Chair of the Arakan Commission and to Dr Hla Myint who made my participation possible.

2. INTRODUCTION

This workshop is particularly important as looking for political and practical solutions to the Rohingya crisis become more difficult in 2022 because of a range of reasons including the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, the post COVID limitations, a new wave of Afghan refugees and the war in the Ukraine.

I understand that some of the participants in this workshop are more optimistic that I am and argue that perhaps now it is good time to look for solutions as Burmese government is experiencing significant internal difficulties and lack of legitimacy internationally. I do hope that you are right about the emerging opportunities for change and that our work will bring the desired outcomes for Rohingyas.

By now you are possibly wondering about my accent. I was not born in Australia. I was born in Poland and arrived in Australia as a refugee on German travel document in 1975 when I was 24 years old.

I also need to confess that I am not an expert in Rohingya in Rohingya history or culture and did not visit the Cox Bazar in Bangladesh.

I am human rights expert and former Australian Human Rights Commissioner.

I have authored the influential 2004 “*Children in Immigration Detention Report - The last resort*”. When I started to work on the report some 2,000, mostly Muslim, children were held in mandatory immigration detention centres of Australia. My inquiry and the resulting parliamentary report resulted in the release of all children with their families from detention. I have also authored a mental health services report that resulted, amongst other, in mental health services being paid by the Australian public health system Medicare.

And as former Human Rights Commissioner, I am concerned that situation of Rohingyas breaches every section of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ratified by Bangladesh and of many other international human rights instruments, such as Convention on the Rights of the Child that was ratified by both

Myanmar and Bangladesh. The human rights breaches include ethnic cleansing, genocide, disregard for all civil and political liberties, lack of access to education and health services, and the list goes on. In particular, not enough is being done for secure safe return of Rohingyas to Myanmar or for resettlement of those Rohingya refugees who do not wish to return home.

I am also a multicultural expert. Until a month ago I was Chair of the Australian Multicultural Council – this is a federal advisory body to the Australian government.

Over the last 10 years or so I have worked closely with Dr Hla Myint on Rohingya issues. I have also worked closely with Bosnian community welcoming refugees during the 1992-95 war, worked on bringing the perpetrators of war crimes to justice in International Criminal Court in Hague and participated in commemorations of the Srebrenica genocide.

I certainly will do my best to use my human rights and multicultural expertise to contribute to the workshop's objectives.

I was asked by the organisers that in my opening remarks I focus on Australia's programs to assist Rohingyas.

Unfortunately, when I started to work on my address, I found that the amount of up-to-date, publicly available, information on Australia's assistance in Myanmar and to the Rohingya is limited due to the significant changes to Australia's assistance in Myanmar since the coup and the current caretaker period in place until the upcoming federal election. The data I will quote below about humanitarian assistance for Rohingya and about developmental aid to Myanmar were provided by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

3. ROHINGYAS IN AUSTRALIA

Allow me to start with saying few words about Rohingya community in Australia.

The 2016 Census recorded 32,655 Myanmar-born people in Australia, an increase of 50.1 per cent from the 2011 Census. At the end of June 2020, an estimated 40,630 people from Myanmar were living in Australia.

It is estimated that Rohingya community consist of approximately 3,000 to 4,000 people who settled mainly in Brisbane and in Melbourne.

The Australian community takes an active interest in the Rohingya crisis. For example, on 4 May 2020, the day after I departed, a meeting was organised by the Myanmar Campaign Network and hosted by the University of New South Wales with the representatives of three major parties asking about their policies to deal with the Rohingya crisis. Similar meetings were also organised by Cambodian and Vietnamese communities in early May 2022.

4. REFUGEE INTAKE

For more than a decade, Myanmar has been one of the top three countries of origin for Australia's resettlement program for refugees. Since 2006, Australia has resettled more than 27,000 Myanmar refugees, including under the Special Humanitarian Program.

More recently, COVID-19 has contributed to lower intake of refugees. In 2020-21 only 4,558 refugees were accepted for settlement in Australia. This is a quarter of what was accepted in 2016-2017.

In addition, Australia's refugee intake cap has been reduced to 13,750 people in 2020-2021, down from 18,750 places in 2018-19.

On the positive, recently the Australian government reassured the Myanmar nationals in Australia (who mostly arrived after the February 2021 military coup), that it won't force them to return when their visas expire. According to government figures, there were 3,366 visa holders from Myanmar in Australia at the end of February 2022, about half of them students. However, the number of Rohingyas impacted by this decision would constitute only a small proportion of the Myanmar nationals in Australia.

Should the Labor opposition win the government on 21 May 2022, it may increase the number of refugee places for those fleeing conflicts in Myanmar, Ethiopia, Syria, Iraq, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Yemen, and Venezuela. The government has also announced a special intake of refugees from Ukraine.

5. AUSTRALIAN HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE FOR ROHINGYAS

Australia is providing substantial lifesaving assistance to Rohingya in Bangladesh and Myanmar, and host communities in Cox's Bazar.

In fact, within the Indo-Pacific region, Australia consistently ranks as one of the top humanitarian donor countries in Myanmar and Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, where over 2.3 million people need humanitarian assistance.

In 2020–21 Australia provided \$79.7 million to Rohingya and host communities in Cox's Bazar and more than \$35 million to crisis-affected communities across Myanmar and on the Thailand–Myanmar border.

Australia's flexible funding mechanisms mean that Australia's partners (multilateral organisations and international and local NGOs) can quickly respond to urgent crises. The 2020 "Review of Australia Assistance Support for the Rohingya Crisis 2017-2020" indicated that the most objectives of the program were met.

6. DEVELOPMENT AID

In addition, Australia provides development aid that impact on Rohingyas. Despite the 2021 coup, Australia's commitment to Myanmar's development and to supporting the people of Myanmar remains steadfast. In 2021-22 financial year Australia will deliver an estimated \$95.5 million of assistance to the people of Myanmar, including to the Rohingya.

This continues Australia's longstanding commitment to supporting the people of Myanmar and prioritises the needs of the most poor and vulnerable with an emphasis on women and girls.

But Australia does not provide any direct funding to the military regime, and it takes pro-active steps to ensure that Australian assistance to Myanmar does not legitimise or give credibility to the military regime.

7. INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW

Australia has consistently called for, and remains committed to, accountability for war crimes, human rights violations and abuses, and other violations of international law committed throughout Myanmar, including justice for the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities.

At the United Nations Human Rights Council, including in the session in February-April 2022, Australia has delivered multiple statements expressing our concerns over ongoing human rights violations against the Rohingya and other minorities.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The objectives defined for the 2023 Conference as (1) seeking a roadmap for political solutions, (2) stress on implementation of accountabilities for the genocide, and (3) removal or root causes of Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and safe repatriation are the correct objectives.

Because of my background I would argue that the human rights – right to citizenship, civil and political rights, right to education – should be in the centre of the Conference program.

It is also important to stress that any repatriation must be voluntary. There could be some Rohingyas who may prefer resettlement rather than a return home to Myanmar. Such choices need to be respected and the conference would need to advance also resettlement opportunities for those who would seek them.

I also would like to see a set of initiatives to support emerging leaders in Rohingya communities both in Myanmar and in countries of their temporary refuge. Rohingya people need to have an authentic grass-root voice to express their aspirations and demands. A voice that will be listened to in the international community.

Finally, I would like the 2023 Conference to develop a list of practical initiatives/projects for immediate implementation. Such a list would provide a menu for activist like us to lobby governments for funding. An example of such a project would be a proposal to build a high school at Cox Bazar or establishment of up to standard hospital.

I am looking forward to learning more about your ideas how to secure an effective and influential 2023 Conference.

Thank you.