

Aung San Suu Kyi should speak out for Rohingya

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Aung San Suu Kyi should speak out for Rohingya - but stigmatising her needs to stop, says Cardinal Bo. Cardinal Charles Mayng Bo, Archbishop of Yangon, has urged Aung San Suu Kyi to speak out in defence of the tens of thousands of Rohingya Muslims fleeing Myanmar, but at the same time he condemned the “stigmatising” of the country’s de facto leader.

In an email interview with TIME magazine, he said: “The people in Rakhine state (from where the Rohingya are fleeing to Bangladesh) face “immense” suffering. “The world looks at Aung San Suu Kyi with the same lens with which it looked at her during her struggle for democracy,” Cardinal Bo told TIME. “Now she is part of the Government, she is a political leader. Surely she should have spoken out.”

However he pointed out that democracy is still very fragile in Myanmar and stigmatising the Nobel laureate – Aung San Suu Kyi has faced a global wave of criticism for not standing up for the Rohingya – will not solve anything. “Aung San Suu Kyi is walking a tight rope walk,” Cardinal Bo said. “Already dark forces are clamouring for return to army rule.

“Stigmatising Aung San Suu Kyi and attacking her through media is not a long term solution. A false step will see her out of government and that would be the end of any dream of democracy. We should always remember the army took back democracy three times in the history of Myanmar.”

More than 300,000 Muslims have fled to Bangladesh from Rakhine as the Myanmar army has cracked down on militant activity.

Even though Aung San Suu Kyi was elected in a democratic election in 2015, the military still controls key government ministries, including Defence, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs.

Cardinal Bo said the international community should be wary of describing what is happening as genocide. “In this context, it is advisable at this time not to qualify the situation as genocide or ethnic cleansing against the Muslim community - which the government does not recognise as an ethnic nationality but as a group of interlopers from Bangladesh,” Cardinal Bo told TIME. “It is important to

try to defuse the tension and anger in the region, and use language that will not rile either side.”

He added that Myanmar has problems not just in Rakhine State, but in Karen, Kachin, and Shan. “All these conflicts threw out thousands as IDPs and refugees,” Cardinal Bo pointed out.

Aung San Suu Kyi has cancelled a planned trip to the UN in New York next week, and has blamed “fake news” for fuelling the crisis.

Pope Francis is to visit Myanmar and Bangladesh in November. He has spoken out repeatedly in support of the Rohingya Muslims. The day before the Vatican announced his trip, Francis appealed for the end of “the persecution of the religious minority, our Rohingya brothers and sisters,” and asked for them to be given “their full rights.”

PICTURE: Rohingya Muslims pictured in Bangladesh on 12 September as they flee from ongoing military operations in Myanmar's Rakhine state

James Roberts-The Tablet