

Rohingya crisis top of pope's agenda during upcoming visit

As hundreds of thousands flee violence in Rakhine State, Pope Francis prepares to visit Myanmar and Bangladesh Rohingya crisis top of pope's agenda during upcoming visit



Rohingya refugees stranded on the Bangladesh side of the border at Bandarban district after fleeing deadly violence in Rakhine State of Myanmar on Aug. 25. (ucanews.com photo)

As the refugee crisis of ethnic Muslim Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh rapidly escalates, church officials say the crisis will be part of the top items of the agenda when Pope Francis visits Myanmar and Bangladesh later this year.

Church officials believe it is unlikely to overshadow the trip, despite global media strongly connecting the visit with the crisis of the Muslim minority group of some 1.3 million, close to half of whom may have fled from their homeland in Myanmar's Rakhine State to neighboring Bangladesh. Latest reports say some 123,000 people fled in just 12 days.

Officials spoke with ucanews.com about the pope's upcoming trip as Myanmar's leader Aung San Suu Kyi chose to ignore the Rohingya and focus on terrorist violence.

Suu Kyi denied multiple reports from aid organizations that the Myanmar military was wiping out villages and killing people. She denied that what was occurring was a campaign of ethnic cleansing.

"I think ethnic cleansing is too strong a term," Suu Kyi told the BBC.

Several Nobel Prize laureates including Pakistan's Malala Yusafzai and Muslim-majority countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Turkey, Malaysia, Maldives and Iran have strongly condemned the violence and criticized Suu Kyi for failing to curb the violence.

The pope and the Rohingya

Pope Francis is to visit Myanmar and Bangladesh Nov. 27-Dec. 2 and already Myanmar bishops have issued warnings that he should not use the term Rohingya as it is sensitive in their country.

Myanmar's government and military — along with many Myanmar citizens — instead refer to the Rohingya as "Bengalis" claiming they hail from neighboring Bangladesh.

Bishop Gervas Rozario of Rajshahi, chairman of the Bangladeshi Catholic bishops' Justice and Peace Commission, told ucanews.com that the Rohingya crisis would surely be discussed with government leaders in private, more than it being made a public issue.

"I think the Rohingya issue will be highlighted but won't overshadow the trip," said Bishop Rozario.

"Pope Francis is right about the Rohingya, and I presume the bishops of Myanmar are under pressure, so they requested that the pope not to use the term 'Rohingya,'" said Bishop Rozario.

"The Vatican has effective relations with the governments and I think the Vatican embassy will advise what the pope can or cannot say," he said

Conditions in Myanmar continue to deteriorate

Persecuted for decades, Rohingya Muslims have come under a deadly military crackdown in Myanmar's Rakhine State following Rohingya militant attacks on police and military posts on Aug. 25.

Violence has left more than 1,000 people, mostly Rohingya, dead, according to the U.N.

Despite denial of entry by border guards, more than 300,000 Rohingyas have poured into Bangladesh over the past two weeks.

The recent upsurge of refugees into Bangladesh is an addition to the over 87,000 refugees who fled there following an earlier Myanmar military crackdown in northern Rakhine State after Rohingya militant attacks Oct. 9 last year.

The existing makeshift settlements and camps in Rakhine State for registered refugees are overcrowded. Schools, community centers, religious buildings and local families are now hosting new arrivals according to a Sept. 4 U.N. report.

Over 12,000 ethnic Buddhist Rakhine people have been internally displaced by the ongoing violence. Many of them are being sheltered in public buildings and are receiving assistance from the government.

Aid groups have expressed concerns for the estimated 400,000 people trapped in active conflict zones without access to humanitarian assistance according to a Sept. 4 European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations report.

Human rights focus

Bishop Rozario said the pope will talk with governments in both Bangladesh and Myanmar with a human rights focus.

"The pope is likely to try and convince them from a human rights and humanitarian perspective, to be more charitable by saying they too are human beings," Bishop Rozario said.

The bishop said that the Bangladeshi government will attempt to explain to the pope its perspective of the crisis.

Pope Francis will also touch on peaceful and harmonious co-existence and interfaith dialogue in Bangladesh as well as recognizing church's contributions in education, health and development activities, he said.

Father Kamal Corraya, convener of a media committee for the papal visit to Bangladesh told ucanews.com. that the pope will highlight Bangladesh's longstanding "culture of peace and harmony" despite some setbacks in recent years.

The pope is likely to speak positively on issues related to Rana Plaza, a multi-story garment factory that collapsed in 2013 killing more than 1,100 people, and recognize that some improvements have taken place in the ready-made garment sector since then, he added.

"He will acknowledge Bangladesh's initiatives in combating the country's climate change vulnerability and appeal to the world to be more sympathetic and supportive to Bangladesh and other victim countries," Father Corraya said.

Rock Ronald Rozario, - UCAN