August 19, 2020

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
Biden for President

Dear Vice President Biden:

As we approach August 25, 2020—the third anniversary of the start of the mass expulsion of Rohingya from Myanmar—I write to let you know about a broad campaign to secure a U.S. government declaration that the Rohingya have been subjected to genocide and crimes against humanity, and to request that the Biden campaign publicly endorse this request on or before August 25.

Refugees International is sending a similar note to the Republican presidential nominee, with a similar request of support for this effort, which has been endorsed by more than 10,000 individuals to date, by more than 80 non-governmental organizations, by dozens of distinguished specialists in international human rights and humanitarian law, and by leaders of U.S. faith-based organizations.

As indicated in a July 16 open letter to Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and as reflected in our own organization’s statement on the issue, the evidence of genocide and crimes against humanity is clear and convincing and has been amply documented. In making such a determination, the United States would help lead the world in holding the state of Myanmar accountable for grave abuses and in preventing further atrocities. (For your information, I am also including a copy of a letter to Secretary Pompeo from the aforementioned specialists in human rights and humanitarian law.)

Beyond enhancing international accountability efforts, a U.S. government determination of genocide and crimes against humanity would subject Myanmar and its military to much needed international scrutiny at a time when the military continues to target Rohingya and other civilians in Myanmar. In the midst of a COVID-19 pandemic that is the predominant focus of governments around the world, a determination would also help to ensure continued international attention to the plight of the Rohingya, while enabling the United States to mobilize additional diplomatic and economic pressure on Myanmar to shift its behavior. This attention could offer a measure of protection for the Rohingya and others in Myanmar. It would also represent an expression of solidarity with the governments of Bangladesh and other refugee hosting countries, signaling that the United States is committed both to accountability and supporting conditions for safe and voluntary return when conditions so permit.
A determination that the state of Myanmar is responsible for genocide and crimes against humanity would be wholly consistent with findings of the Department of State, which concluded that the attacks on the Rohingya were “well-planned and coordinated” and that they were “extreme, large-scale, widespread, and seemingly geared toward both terrorizing the population and driving out the Rohingya residents.” In addition, the law group engaged by the State Department to investigate atrocities against the Rohingya conducted its own legal analysis and found reasonable grounds to believe that genocide was committed. A UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission similarly found “a pattern of conduct that infers genocidal intent on the part of the State to destroy the Rohingya, in whole or in part, as a group.” The fact finding mission further warned that “[t]he State of Myanmar continues to harbour genocidal intent and the Rohingya remain under serious risk of genocide.”

We note that the Biden Campaign has indicated that “systematic discrimination and atrocities against Burma’s Rohingya Muslim minority is abhorrent and undermines peace and stability,” but we believe that now is the time to use the words that fit the crimes. Your support for a determination that the Rohingya have been subjected to genocide and crimes against humanity would represent a powerful commitment to U.S. support for the rights and well-being of the Rohingya and for the principle of accountability. Perhaps most importantly, it would convey solidarity with the Rohingya people.

Many thanks for your consideration of this request, and we look forward to hearing from you or members of your campaign team.

Sincerely,

Eric Schwartz
President
Refugees International

Attachment
Letter from specialists in international human rights and humanitarian law