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## Myanmar: Sanctions will only slow down democratic Transition

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In his one day stop at the capital of Myanmar on 15 November 2017, US Secretary of State Tillerson ruled out the much expected announcement of general sanctions against Myanmar. Instead, he called for an independent investigation into credible reports of the army initiated violence against the Rohingyas. He was wise enough to point out that by imposing sanctions alone the crisis cannot be expected to be considered to be over.

Prior to his visit there were speculations that US would go ahead with the sanctions. A bi-partisan group of law makers had already introduced a legislation in the House and the Senate to re impose US sanctions in Myanmar. A tough message was proposed to be delivered to the Army to stop atrocities on the Rohingyas.

There were many reports in US media and outside that targeted sanctions against Myanmar will be imposed. There was also speculation that individuals associated with the Army operations would be singled out for sanctions, little realising that such sanctions as in the past would have little impact on the Myanmar Army - the Tatmadaw or its operations.

Tillerson had met the Army Chief and it is not known what transpired in the meeting. The Army Chief in his face book said that he had explained the situation in Rakhine State and how the Army had been cooperating with the government to deliver aid and on the progress made for repatriation process agreed upon with Bangladesh.

An internal investigation by the Army is supposed to have cleared the Army of any atrocity and this has only provoked further the Amnesty international and other human rights organizations who were pushing for an independent investigation.

This internal investigation was conducted by a committee headed by Lt. General Aye Win on October 13,2017 to examine whether the troops had followed the military code of conduct during the security operations launched after the August 25 attacks. The Army should have known that such investigations by an in house Army commission will have little credibility outside.

The Army operations against Rohingyas have however evoked a strong and favourable response from the public. There was a big turnout at a pro Army rally in Yangon on 29 October 2017 when thousands assembled to cheer the Army. The Army was seen as the saviour of the nation!

The State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi who attended the press conference along with Tilleren said that she was not silent on the Rohingya crisis and that she was speaking in a way that would not further inflame sectarian tensions.

In the face of calls for punitive sanctions against Myanmar, the Brussels-based International Crisis Group while pointing out that re-imposing sanctions may not be helpful in solving the crisis said that Suu Kyi's position as the greatest moral and political authority "gives her the power to sway public opinion and considerable ability to influence the security forces." They would know more than anyone else that Suu Kyi however popular she may be has certain structural limitations in dealing with a crisis that has a historical baggage.

Perhaps, the Irrawaddy explains the predicament of Suu Kyi and how she has to tread carefully in dealing with the Army on one hand and at the same time take care not to allow any roll back on the democratic gains made so far. The points made in the Irrawaddy (06 November 2017) are very relevant. These include

- \* The magnitude of the exodus of refugees does not indicate any restraint on the part of the Army to follow the code of conduct in carrying out security operations.
- \* The civilian government failed to provide enough information on the crisis and should at least hence forth keep both its people and the international community updated on the situation.
- \* It is the government's duty to accelerate the repatriation process, ensure the safety of the returnees and rightly grant citizenship under due National Verification Card process.

\* Western countries, the UN and other international organizations must understand that the Rakhine issue is much more complicated and sensitive and must be made aware that the instability poses a potential threat to the fragile state of Myanmar's democratic transition.

\* One cannot rule out the possibility of a return to military rule if the military leadership feels that the Rakhine conflict is endangering the country's stability.

\* Understanding that the government is still in the early stages of dealing with issues spawned under decades long military rule is also crucial.

\* The international community must also know that relations between the government and the military are not stable.

\* This crisis calls for international help and a deep understanding of the country's history and a vision of the bigger picture.

To me, it looks that Suu Kyi despite the constraints placed on her and the government has done her best in dealing with the situation. Consider the following-

\* She has visited the troubled Rakhine State and had met the Arakenese and the Rohingyas and assured all help.

\* She has met the UN Chief and explained her sincere efforts to find a solution and for repatriation of the refugees.

\* She has without delay announced the steps to be taken to implement Kofi Annan's report.

\* She has taken the initiative to set up a new humanitarian project to aid the refugees both financially and other wise.

\* She has stood her ground and not declared martial law in the Rakhine despite pressure from the Army.

\* She has successfully prevented any resolution against Myanmar or on the Rohingya crisis in the recent ASEAN Conference. Even President Trump made no mention of the Rohingyas though he is said to have discussed it with the Philippines President Duterte.

\* She has managed to maintain a proper relationship with the most affected neighbour- Bangladesh in agreeing to the repatriation of the refugees in a phased manner. The Army whose co-operation is indeed essential for repatriation of refugees has also been involved as a vital stake holder.

\* The Army is said to have completed its operations by September 5 of this year though the exodus out of fear and insecurity continues. This needs to be attended to. The number of troops stationed in the region has been reduced though the exact number is not known. The Army

commander who was in charge of the security operations in the Rakhine area has also been transferred. To some extent these moves were the result of not only international outcry against the excessive force used by but also of efforts of Suu Kyi's government.

Meanwhile chilling details of the activities of the ARSA whose surprise attacks triggered the crisis are coming out.

The Ex intelligence Chief of India in a conference on security organised recently at Yangon by the Kolkata based think tank mentioned in detail of Pakistani LET's operations in tandem with the HUJI of Arakan and the role played by a Rohingya LET weapons trainer. He also revealed that a part of the consignment seized in Chittagong of huge stock of weapons years earlier was meant for Rohingyas.

The Irrawaddy of 15 November 2017 gives more details about the recent activities of the ARSA.

### **Conclusion:**

Suu Kyi needs time. Given her constraints, the 2008 constitution, her popularity among the Bamar community and more urgent attention needed to issues like ethnic reconciliation, economic empowerment and amendment of constitution, the international community should realise that rushing to impose punitive sanctions would only retard the progress towards real democracy as we know. As Irrawaddy says- Look at the broader Picture.

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