ASIA 20.12.2017 | Neena Gill

Europe is turning its back on the Rohingya

If we don't act, we risk complicity in genocide

Read this article in German

While we Europeans squabble over internal divisions, our inaction in Myanmar risks making us complicit in genocide. Mass shootings and cut-throat executions at home have forced 625,000 Rohingya to flee their homes.

Most have moved to neighbouring Bangladesh, which has taken the burden in a way that puts most European nations' to shame, after our own handling of the Syrian refugee crisis. Yet despite Bangladesh's vast efforts, there is the need for a linked-up, European response.

While aid organisations have made it clear that more financial support is vital, money alone will not buy us a clear conscience. The EU Foreign Affairs Council's failure yet again to adopt - or even discuss - decisive measures to increase pressure on the authorities and military in Myanmar reflects badly on us all.

The UN has referred to the crisis as potential 'genocide', but let's not be in doubt, there is no ambiguity here. The former UN general Romeo Dallaire has now gone as far as to describe the crisis as 'very deliberate genocide'. Now there is not just a moral, but a legal obligation for the international community to act.

It's vital that we learn lessons from past displacements of Rohingya to Bangladesh, including opposing forced relocation. This means taking a stand against the repatriation deal that is explicitly based on the 1992-1993 repatriation pact, until the right conditions are in place.

According to the UN Special Rapporteur at the time, internal relocation was responsible for 'a systematic pattern of torture (including rape) cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, disappearance or arbitrary execution of ... Rakhine ethnic minorities'.

Sanna Johnson, Director of Asia Region at the International Rescue Committee, has told me of her deep concern about the prospect of relocating refugees from the Cox's Bazaar camps. 'Repatriation is at best premature,' she says.

Each time these 'return pacts' are made, the Myanmar military and government are able to further reduce the space available to Rohingya in Rakhine State. Aung San Suu Kyi's assurances that this is not happening are undermined by the land grabbing techniques openly espoused by members of the Rakhine state government.

'According to the law, burnt land becomes government-managed land,' Minister Win Myat Aye said in a public meeting.

Of course, it is not only the Rohingya under the threat of violence in Myanmar. Many members of the Kachin community in the North of Myanmar are also being displaced. We must protect them all.

We must make bold decisions to solve this crisis, including bringing back sanctions against those responsible for violence - as I wrote about in Euractiv - and pressing for the implementation of the Annan Recommendations. As agreed in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, responsibility for displaced people must be shared on a global scale.

It's not acceptable that just over 9,000 refugees were resettled in Britain in 2016, from a global need of 1.15 million.

Following Prime Minister Theresa May's statement, the UK and its European partners need to ramp up the political pressure on Myanmar. Writing cheques may go some of the way to treat the symptoms, but to cure the problem more courageous action is required.



Neena Gill
Brussels

Neena Gill is a Labour Member of the European Parliament for the West Midlands, UK. In January 2017 she was made a Commander of the British Empire (CBE) by the Queen for parliamentary and political service. Later that month, she was awarded a Pravasi Bharatiya Samman - the highest award given to non-Indians - for her contribution in the field of public service.

Ms Gill was the first woman of Asian origin to be elected to the European Parliament. Her work there covers economic and monetary affairs, tax, and foreign affairs.