

# **The Oslo Conference to End the Systematic Persecution of the Rohingyas**

**May 26-27, 2015**

The following are transcripts from various international figures who were unable to attend The Oslo Conference in person, but wished to send their support for the conference and for Rohingya rights.

The Oslo Conference was organized and sponsored by Burma Task Force, Justice for All, Den norske Burmakomit ; International State Crime Initiative (Queen Mary University of London); Harvard Global Equality Initiative; Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative

The speakers are:

- George Soros, Open Society Foundations, Soros Foundation
- Tun Mahathir bin Mohamad, former Prime Minister of Malaysia (1981-2003)
- Jose Ramos-Horta, former President of Timor-Leste (2007-2012), Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (1996)
- Mairead Maguire, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (1976)
- Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (1984)

## **GEORGE SOROS**

Greetings, everybody. I regret I can't be there in person. I have been a supporter of Burma's democracy movement since 1993. For most of that time, the prospect of change seemed remote, and I felt increasingly discouraged. Then, in 2010, quite suddenly, or so it seemed, the ruling military junta decided to abandon absolute authoritarian rule. The world was stunned. My engagement in Burma during those dark days taught me an important lesson. Sometimes it's necessary to support a lost cause for a long time just to keep the flame alive. That way, when the situation changes, groundwork for progress has already been laid. As I speak to you today, I find myself again growing discouraged. Making the transition from military rule to a more open society is not easy, and in many ways the government of Burma has made real progress in its reform efforts. I fear that many of these reforms are not sustainable, because they have not yet been institutionalized.

It's also true that political and economic power remains mostly concentrated in the hands of a privileged few who monopolize the revenue from Burma's abandoned natural resources. The most immediate threat to Burma's transition is the rising anti-Muslim sentiment and officially condoned abuse of the Rohingya people. That has occurred under watch of the current rulers in Naypyidaw. From private conversations with progressive Burmese officials, I know that some in power genuinely want to see a Burma where all are treated equally, but these officials also fear the poten-

tial of extremist violence from the small but powerful group of religious radicals. These extremists have created a tinder box that could blow up the entire reform process. The government must confront these extremists and their financial supporters.

In January when I visited Burma for the 4th time in as many years, I made a short visit to Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State in order to see for myself the situation on the ground. I met with state and local leaders and both Rakhine and Rohingya populations, and also talked to internally displaced persons and those mostly Rohingya living in a section of Sittwe called Aung Mingalar, a part of the city that can only be called a ghetto. In Aung Mingalar, I heard the echoes of my childhood. You see, in 1944, as a Jew in Budapest, I too was a Rohingya. Much like the Jewish ghettos set up by Nazis around Eastern Europe during World War II, Aung Mingalar has become the involuntary home to thousands of families who once had access to healthcare, education, and employment. Now, they are forced to remain segregated in a state of abject deprivation. The parallels to the Nazi genocide are alarming. Fortunately, we have not reached a stage of mass killing.

I feel very strongly that we must speak out before it is too late, individually and collectively. The Burmese government's insistence that they are keeping the Rohingya in the ghetto for their own protection simply is not credible. Government authorities have tried to reassure me. They say things are under control and not as bad as reported by outsiders who they claim don't understand the local culture or the long and complicated history of Rakhine State. I understand that half a century of living in isolation under repression can make a population vulnerable to intermediation and exploitation in all sorts of ways, but I also know that most of the people of Burma are fair-minded and would like their country to be a place where all can live in freedom. 2015 is a crucial year for Burma; a tipping point, in the words of Yanghee Lee, U.S. Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar. With the prospect of democratic changes to the 2008 constitution and the holding of free and fair elections, meaningful reform could take hold.

As a longtime friend and supporter of Burma, I hope for a positive outcome for all the people of the country, but where I once felt a great sense of optimism, I am now filled with trepidation for the future. I hope those in power will immediately take the steps necessary to counter extremism and allow open society to take root. In the lead up to the elections, it's crucial that official acts should be taken to counter the pervasive hate and anti-Rohingya propaganda on social media and the racist public campaigns of the 969 movement. The promise of Burma as a flourishing and vibrant open society is still within reach. It's up to Burma's leaders and people whether this promise is fulfilled.

## **TUN MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD**

I feel much saddened by the events taking place in Myanmar today. I was very instrumental in getting Myanmar to become a member of the ASEAN, the regional grouping of Southeast Asian countries. Myanmar, geographically, is definitely a part of Southeast Asia, and its exclusion would be contrary to the idea of South East Asian unity. But now, we find that Myanmar is not treating its own people the way we treat Myanmar.

We did not want Myanmar to be excluded but Myanmar today is taking action to expel the Rohingyas, the Muslim part of this population who have been there for the past 800 years or so. They have always been regarded as citizens of Burma before, and since Myanmar is a continuation of Burma it should accept these people as its citizens.

Now Malaysia also has a lot of people from other countries who have settled here in the last 200 years or so. We decided that they have a right to be citizens of Malaysia, to be given political rights, and to be allowed to train and carry out business in Malaysia. We regard them as our citizens.

Unlike Malaysia, we find that Myanmar does not even want to recognize the Rohingyas who have been there all this while as its citizens. This is grossly unjust on the part of the government of Myanmar. I had expected that those who benefited from our struggle to get Myanmar to release (for example Aung San Suu Kyi) that they would realize that oppression by the government is something that is intolerable; and yet few people from Myanmar have risen to the occasion to defend the rights of the Rohingyas who after all are citizens of Myanmar.

I hope that the international community would focus its attention on the problem of the Rohingyas who are Muslims, but they are citizens of this Buddhist dominated country. They should live and be allowed to live in Myanmar without oppression. There should be tolerance of peoples of other religions.

Again I would like to mention that in Malaysia, although the majority of the people are Muslims, we have treated people with other faiths with consideration and we have given them rights to become citizens of Malaysia and to benefit from the laws of this country. I hope that the international community would focus on the problem of the Rohingyas who today are being forced to flee in ships to other countries and many of them drown in the sea because they were not able to get good ships to carry them to other countries.

This is a human tragedy and I do hope that the international community would help these unfortunate people of Myanmar who have been discriminated against in a way that is not becoming of a country that aspires to become a democratic country. I thank you.

## JOSE RAMOS-HORTA

Hello. This is Jose Ramos-Horta speaking from New York. I regret not being able to be in Oslo at this time of this very timely, extremely important gathering as Myanmar moves towards elections and hopefully consolidation of democracy, freedoms, rule of law.

I'm very familiar with Myanmar, although I could not claim to be an expert. For those of you who might not know much about my past activities or background, I first went to Burma then when hardly anyone paid much attention to Myanmar in July of 1994. I went there crossing the border from Chiang Mai and I went to Manipur. There with some colleagues I conducted an international human rights and diplomacy training program for students, activists, many of whom I know today are back in their home country in Yangon, very much engaged in this process in Myanmar.

If today we can talk about one of the most neglected people in the world, one of the most forgotten, I would say it would be the Rohingya of Myanmar. We are all human beings in this planet. Myanmar is a mosaic of ethnic groups. It is a mosaic of cultures, of values, of different experiences. A crossroad from Asia, with many influences.

The Rohingyas seem to have the least of rights, the least of privileges as citizens of Myanmar, as human beings. There have been extraordinary abuses, humiliation, killings, expulsion of Rohingyas from their ancestral land. Whether they have been there for thousands of years or a few hundred years or if they were there only some generations ago, they still have rights as people of Myanmar because they were born there in Myanmar. They have been living there for generations regardless of how long; thousands of centuries they have been there.

I do not wish to lecture any group in Myanmar. I do not wish to lecture authorities in Myanmar. I know the process of transition from dictatorship to democracy is a complex, tortuous, unpredictable long one. We must all contribute to create a climate of dialogue, mutual acceptance, and maybe move towards a road map leading to a Myanmar that is politically open, pluralistic, and that is embracing of all its ethnic and religious communities.

However, I know that this is easier said than done because there are suspicions, there are prejudices. That's what leaders are all about. Leaders at the community level, leaders at the national level who must embrace each other; who must act with compassion, with wisdom; who embrace everyone including the Rohingyas so that Myanmar can be a shining example in Southeast Asia and in Asia in general.

Again, I wish to pay tribute to all those in Myanmar who for generations have struggled for freedom, for democracy, until today when you are on the eve of free general elections. I'm hopeful that all will be able to participate; the Rohingyas, the Muslim communities and everyone, in an atmosphere of freedom, of no question, of no threats. When the election results

come it will be a new promising beginning for Myanmar, a further step in the consolidation of democracy in your beautiful country.

I wish you all success in this conference and as always I pray to God Almighty and the Merciful to continue to bless the great people of Myanmar with wisdom, happiness, and prosperity.

## **MAIREAD MAGUIRE**

I would like to send a message of solidarity and support for the Rohingya people of Myanmar. Rohingyas are indigenous people of Burma, living in their ancestral homes. All they ask is to restore their citizenship that was taken away by the military government. It is morally wrong to treat them as non-citizens on their own lands.

The plight of the Rohingyas in Myanmar has worsened since 2012. Right now they feel they have 2 equally risky options- to stay and die in Myanmar or leave by boat. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Approximately 53,000 Rohingyas including women and children left Myanmar and Bangladesh by boats bound for Thailand and Malaysia in 2014.

The international community needs to support the delivery of basic humanitarian aid to the Rohingyas. Right now, that humanitarian aid is not reaching them. The Rohingyas are the only ethnic group in Burma whose struggle is peaceful, without any arms, and it's time the international community recognized and supported their nonviolence struggle for their basic human rights.

We want the European Union, ASEAN, and the International Community to recognize the suffering of the Rohingya people, and the fact that they're experiencing crimes against humanity at the hands of their own government. We want the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people to end. This is an important basis for any real peace talks and engagement with the Myanmar government.

I am joining with other leaders in making this call, including my dear friend and colleague Archbishop Desmond Tutu. We as the International Community have a responsibility to stand for the rights of the Rohingya people and to speak out to save their lives. We hope that action will be taken so that they can find their place in their country, in their society and that Burma will move forward to find real peace for all its people.

Thank you very much. Mairead Maguire. Thank you.

## ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU

Hello peace lovers, colleagues, and friends. I'm sorry to have to address you electronically. One of the pitfalls of old age is that travel becomes somewhat tricky. Thank you for the opportunity to say a few words of encouragement and solidarity as you settle down to apply your minds to solving one of the most enduring human rights crises on earth.

The credit that is due to the government of Myanmar for reforms undertaken over the past couple of years does not blind us to the ongoing disavowal and repression of its ethnic minorities, the Rohingya population in particular. A country that is not at peace with itself, that fails to acknowledge and protect the dignity and worth of all its people, is not a free country. Freedom is indivisible. All must be invited. All, a part.

The Rohingya people were not consulted when the British drew the Burmese border on the map. With those strokes of a pen, they became a borderland people; people whose ancestral land traverses political boundaries. Burma's post colonial government elected in 1948 officially recognized the Rohingya as an indigenous community, as did its first military government that ruled from 1962 to 1974.

Manipulation by the military of ethnic minorities in the west of the country dates back to the late 1950s. At first, the military sought to co-opt the Muslim Rohingya to quell the Buddhist Rakhine after Rakhine separatists had been crushed. The military turned only Rohingya. In 1978, the Far Eastern Economic review described the Rohingya as the victims of Burmese apartheid.

A few years later, a citizenship law left the Rohingya off the list of indigenous people, describing them as Muslim immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh. In the context of rising anti-Muslim sentiment in Myanmar, many Buddhists, particularly in Rakhine State regard the Rohingya as illegal immigrants. More than 100,000 Rohingya are trapped in internment camps. They may not leave "for their own protection." They hold only temporary identity cards. In February, they lost all voting rights.

The government of Myanmar has sought to absolve itself of responsibility for the conflict between the Rakhine and the Rohingya, projecting it as sectarian or communal violence. I would be more inclined to heed the warnings of eminent scholars and researchers including Amartya Sen, the Nobel laureate in economics, who say this is a deliberately false narrative to camouflage the slow genocide being committed against the Rohingya people. There's evidence they say that anti-Rohingya sentiment has been carefully cultivated by the government itself.

Human beings may look and behave differently to one another, but ultimately none of us can claim any kind of supremacy. We are all the same. There are no natural differences between Buddhists and Muslims. It is possible to transplant a Christian heart into a Hindu chest and for a citizen of Israel to donate a kidney to a Palestinian. We're born to love-- without

prejudice, without distrust. Members of one family, the human family--made for each other and for goodness. All of us!

We are taught to discriminate, to dislike, and to hate. As lovers of peace and believers in the right of all members of the family to dignity and security, we have particular responsibilities to the Rohingya.

2015 is a big year for Myanmar with both a referendum on its constitution and a general election on its calendar. Even as we seek to encourage the country to build on the reforms it has started, we have a responsibility to ensure that the plight of the Rohingya is not lost. We have a responsibility to hold to account those of our governments and corporations that seek to profit from new relationships with Myanmar to ensure their relationships are established on sound ethical basis.

We have a responsibility to persuade our international and regional aid and grant making institutions, including the European Union, to adopt a common position making funding the development of Myanmar conditional on the restoration of citizenship, nationality, and basic human rights to the Rohingya.

Over to you. Thank you and God bless you all.