

Building a world community



The Rae Rohingya Report: R2P Missing in Inaction by Simon Rosenblum

Last year the Canadian government appointed former Ontario Premier and former federal Liberal party interim leader Bob Rae as its Special Envoy to Myanmar [Burma]. His mission was to report on how Ottawa should deal with the present crisis in which over 700,000 Rohingya have been forced to flee the country and another half million remain internally displaced inside Myanmar.

His report, titled "Tell them We're Human," was delivered in early April and called upon Canada to "signal a willingness" to welcome Rohingya refugees and to encourage other countries to do so as well. Rae wrote that "the lesson of history is that genocide is not an event like a thunderbolt" and called upon the international community to pursue justice against those responsible. It is difficult to take exception to most of what is in his report. What is not in Rae's report is however more troublesome.

The speculation on whether the situation of the Rohingya can be called a genocide is, I believe, somewhat of a diversion. What we know beyond a shadow of a doubt is that a state-sponsored ethnic cleansing - accompanied by killings and rapes - has happened. Hundreds of Rohingya villages were razed to the ground and most of the Rohingya refugees now barely subsist in Bangladeshi refugee camps. While what UN Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Hussein called "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing" was taking place, the international community for all intents and purposes stood idly by.

None of the global powers showed the slightest interest in stepping in to prevent or remedy this as required under the Responsibility To Protect (R2P) UN-based international norm, which was developed to deal with such massive crimes against humanity. Bob Rae was notably silent in pressing home this point. Nor is what passes these days for an international community ready now to take any serious action. Instead, as Human Rights Watch points out, "Everyone goes and sees the horrible situation and expresses sympathy, but nothing conclusive is happening ... the international community has to stop engaging in disaster tourism and start doing something about it." Strong words to be sure, but necessary ones.

So what now? It seems clear that most of the Rohingya refugees would like to safely return to their Rakhine state inside Myanmar. But as the UN Commissioner for Refugees - somewhat stating the obvious - has said, the conditions in Myanmar are not yet "conducive for the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return of refugees." But that surely does not suggest paralysis is the order of the day. My question is: so where is the discussion among the international community about beginning to take up its responsibilities and immediately creating and protecting a safe haven along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border for these people to return to as an interim step to their full resettlement in their homeland? A rhetorical question?

It would clearly seem so as, sad to say, the international R2P doctrine has little traction in today's world. This uncomfortable truth should not be ignored and Bob Rae is not particularly helpful in this regard. Somewhat surprisingly, he has warned against further "isolating" or "pressuring" Myanmar as if somehow traditional diplomacy is going to get the regime in Myanmar to permit/guarantee the resettlement of the refugees and to safeguard the lives of those Rohingya who still live there.

If Mr. Rae has reason to believe Myanmar can be manoeuvred to behave without coercive measures by the international community, then it would have been enlightening to read it in his report. Or has Bob Rae simply written off the international community as a failed community and therefore chosen not to include recommendations regarding its responsibilities? That, while somewhat understandable, is surely premature.

Addendum:

As *Mondial* went to press, Canada has just announced that it will be imposing sanctions on seven senior Myanmar military officials involved in the crimes against the Rohingya. The sanctions will prohibit Canadians from doing business with these military officials and will also impose asset freezes on any funds or property that these military leaders may own or control in Canada.

This is a step - albeit a very small one - in the right direction. Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland's language was most forceful: "Canada and the international community cannot be silent. This is ethnic cleansing. These are crimes against humanity." One hopes more actions will follow.