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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 February 2014]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Situation of the Rohingya in Myanmar

At the time when Myanmar is coming out from fifty years of isolation and military rule, the rise of anti-Muslim ideology and violence against the Rohingya Muslim minority is threatening to derail the democratization process and the stability of the same country.

Society for Threatened Peoples is deeply concerned about the treatment of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar's internally displaced camps and about the rise and spread of religious hatred feelings across the country. So far, the government of Myanmar has turned a blind eye on the plight of the Rohingya and rather than intervene and foster a reconciliation process between Buddhists and Muslims it has tolerated and encouraged discrimination and religious fundamentalism.

In Myanmar, the 969 Movement led by the nationalist monk U. Wirathu is playing a major role in inciting hate and widespread Buddhist anxieties about Muslims, who only make up for 4 per cent of the country's population. Wirathu and the 969 Movement are inciting violence not only with fiery sermons but also by using a systematically discriminate against Muslims: stickers with the 969 logo are worn by supporters or posted on Buddhist-owned shops to encourage Buddhists to conduct business only with other Buddhists. Audio recordings with the voice of Wirathu are played in restaurant and shops all across the country and social media such as Facebook and Twitter are used to spread hate rhetoric worldwide. Those who buy, speak, befriend or love a Muslim are condemned by the 969 Movement for not having defended their religion against the "imminent" Muslim invasion. The 969 Movement respects the teaching of "ahimsa", non violence, but believes also that brutality against Muslim people is an act of self-defense and, if it is perpetrated with the pure thoughts of defending Buddhism, helps people to gain karmic merit.

The 969 Movement's demonstrations against the Rohingya and Muslims in general were soon followed by violence against the Rohingya. The undeniable link between the two is not acknowledged by the Government of Myanmar which in opposite to its regular behaviour of committing censorship tolerates and downplays the dangerous activities of the 969 movement and its leader, Wirathu. The lack of measures against the spread of religious hate-speech and the unwillingness to promote reconciliation between Buddhists and Muslims result in chaos instead of peace and are endangering the stability of the country as well as its credibility with regards to matters of human rights. The demonization of the Rohingya and Muslims in general leads to sectarian violence and persecution in Myanmar and is spreading also in the neighbouring countries, where extremist Buddhism groups are emerging.

The violence that has erupted since June 2012 in the Rakhine State has forced up to 60,000 Rohingya to flee the country and has displaced more than 145,000 to internally displaced camps.

The displaced Rohingya are living in registered and unregistered IDP camps or camp-like settings across Rakhine State. The living conditions in IDP camps are seriously compromised by a lack of food. People living in registered camps receive small rations of oil, rice, salt and chickpeas, which are enough for just one meal a day. At least registered IDPs who live in government-run camps, receive aid and support from national and international non-governmental organizations while people living in unregistered camps receive neither international nor government aid.

Unregistered IDPs survive thanks to the help of other communities such as Muslims from Yangon and even Buddhists. According to some humanitarian aid organizations the most vulnerable groups in the displaced camps are children under the age of six and pregnant women. Malnutrition has led to a serious number of diseases and early deaths among them.

The lack of food is accompanied by a lack of water and proper shelters. During the dry season which runs from November to May, access to clear water is hard to come by for the displaced who living in the camps. Water shortage can lead to cases of acute watery diarrhoea and dysentery while drinking contaminated water from the rain collections ponds can cause skin infections, diseases of the alimentary system and hepatitis A.

However, during the rainy season the excess of water causes even more problems, since most of the IDP camps are located on dry paddy fields or in areas that will flood when the Burma's monsoon season begins. The longhouses built by the government in the registered IDP camps have no chance to survive the fury of the rains as much as those made with mud, bamboo thatch, iron sheets, reeds and torn tarpaulin.

Beyond malnutrition, diseases and precarious living conditions, the Rohingya are also dealing with severe restriction imposed by the Government of Myanmar which introduced a Citizenship law denying to Rohingya a legal status. The lack of citizenship fundamentally affects the lives of the Rohingya: they cannot move freely and they have no rights. Rohingya IDPs are not allowed to leave the camps; they cannot go to hospitals or buy food and medicaments from the nearest market. Some of the Rohingya who were forcefully moved in camps for security reasons are now locked in; they are not allowed to go back to their properties. What at first was considered as an interim situation is now becoming a permanent one. The Rohingya are segregated and isolated from the rest of the country. The police who was appointed to guarantee security is in reality just guarding them. Once in an IDP camp the chance to go out are minimal, the Rohingya can rely only on corrupted police which, under the payment of a bribe let them out of the camps for a short time.

The government of Myanmar allows only a few international aid agencies to work in the displaced camps. These are providing medical assistance, schooling programme and professional training to the IDP. Despite the great efforts, aid workers have reported enormous difficulties in distributing help to the Rohingya because they face continued hostility from the local population. Many Rakhine have accused the NGOs of bias because they are focusing on the needs of the Rohingya.

Security is another big issue inside camps. The police who is supposed to grant safety is taking big advantages on the Rohingya plight. They are not only asking money in return of favours but they are also mistreating physically and psychologically the IDP. It is not a secret, according to reports and press agencies, that the police and the army were involved in the destruction and fire of Rohingya's villages and that they did not intervene to stop the violence.

In this context, Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to urge the government of Myanmar to:

- End immediately human rights violations and resolve the grievous situation of Muslim minorities in the country with particular emphasis on the Rohingya religious community.
- Revise legislation as necessary, in particular laws that discriminate against particular groups.
- Redraft the 1982 Citizenship Law and ensure that state policies regarding children, women and family reflect Myanmar's international obligations.
- Lead a public information campaign promoting tolerance and religious non-discrimination.
- Condemn and dispel hate speeches and propagandas against all ethnic and religious groups.
- Fully, impartially and fairly investigate and persecute those responsible for serious abuses and human rights violations against the Rohingya.
- Take action against the 969 movement and other organizations that may be implicated in anti-Muslim violence.
- Allow the access of UN agencies and international and national organizations to all those in need, with special focus to internally displaced person camps.