

## **Suu Kyi visits Myanmar's Rakhine state torn by Rohingya conflict**

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**Yangon (Myanmar):** Aung San Suu Kyi made her first visit as Myanmar's leader on Thursday to the conflict-torn region where more than half a million Rohingya Muslims have fled state-led violence that has spiraled into Asia's worst refugee crisis in decades.

**Suu Kyi greets supporters of her National League for Democracy party upon her arrival for a campaign rally at Thandwe in Rakhine state, Myanmar.**

Her visit to northern Rakhine state comes as Suu Kyi is under intense international scrutiny for her response to the exodus, which the UN has called ethnic cleansing, and as her government said it is working on a plan to repatriate those who fled to Bangladesh.

Suu Kyi arrived in the state capital Sittwe in the morning and headed to restive northern Rakhine where many Rohingya villages were located. During a 2015 election campaign, she visited southern Rakhine, where there hasn't been much conflict.

"The state counselor just arrived but she is heading to Maungdaw, northern Rakhine, with the state officials," said Tin Maung Swe, a deputy director of the Rakhine government, using Suu Kyi's official title.

Government spokesman Zaw Htay would not release Suu Kyi's plans for the trip until later because of security concerns.

More than 600,000 Rohingya from northern Rakhine have fled to Bangladesh since Aug. 25, when Myanmar security forces began what they called a "clearance operations" in response to deadly attacks on police outposts by insurgents. The campaign has included the burning of Rohingya villages and accusations of widespread rights violations.

Fleeing Rohingya have described arson, rape and shootings by Myanmar soldiers and Buddhist mobs that left them no option but to make the dangerous and sometimes deadly journey through jungles and then by sea to Bangladesh.

The Nobel Peace laureate's global image has been damaged by the crisis and she has come under intense criticism to do more to end the violence and condemn those responsible. Several fellow peace prize winners have publicly condemned Suu Kyi for what they see as her apparent indifference to the plight of the Rohingya.

Though Suu Kyi has been the de facto head of Myanmar's civilian government since her party swept elections in 2015, the former political prisoner is limited in her control of the country by a constitution written by the junta that ruled Myanmar for decades. The military has effective veto power over all legislation and controls key ministries including those overseeing security and defense.

The military is in charge of operations in northern Rakhine and ending them is not up to Suu Kyi.

Even when Suu Kyi has spoken on the issue, she has drawn criticism. In a September speech, her first comments after the current crisis began, she asked for patience from the international community and suggested the refugees were partly responsible, saying more than half of the Rohingya villages had not been destroyed by the violence.

Suu Kyi faces potential domestic backlash if she speaks on behalf of the Rohingya, who have been the target of anti-Muslim rhetoric in the Buddhist-majority nation. Many among the general public agree with the official government stance that there is no such ethnicity as Rohingya and those in the country have illegally migrated from Bangladesh.

Though Rohingya first arrived generations ago, they were stripped of their citizenship in 1982, denying them almost all rights and rendering them stateless. They cannot travel freely, practice their religion, or work as teachers or doctors, and they have little access to medical care, food or education.

Myanmar's backers globally have also had to tread carefully, not wanting to undermine Suu Kyi's weak civilian government at a time when the country is just emerging from decades of authoritarian rule. Still countries like the U.S. have warned Myanmar about potential repercussions it faces if it doesn't address the crisis, including the risk of attracting international terrorists, scaring off investment, and ultimately stunting its transition to democracy.

The government said Tuesday that it was ready to repatriate Rohingya who had fled, but it blamed Bangladesh for slowing the process.

"We are ready to accept the refugees and to start verification and scrutiny process, but we have not reach to an agreement with the Bangladeshi authorities for repatriation," said Zaw Htay, the government spokesman.

It was not clear under what conditions the Rohingya would be allowed to return to Myanmar.

- AP