Aung San Suu Kyi defends Myanmar military's crimes

Peter Symonds
16 December 2019

Aung San Suu Kyi, de facto head of the government in Myanmar [Burma], appeared in the International Court of Justice in The Hague last week as a crass apologist for the country's military against charges of gross human rights abuses, including genocide, against the mostly Muslim Rohingya minority.

Since 2017, the military in Myanmar has engaged in brutal operations to terrorise the Rohingya population forcing hundreds of thousands to flee to neighbouring Bangladesh where they live in squalid refugee camps.

A UN fact-finding mission last year found that military forces had destroyed almost 400 villages and driven close to three quarters of a million Rohingya out of their homes. It stated that the estimated death toll of 10,000 was "conservative" and called for the indictment of six senior generals, including Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief of the army, on charges of genocide.

Suu Kyi, who was touted by the US and its allies as "an icon of democracy" and given a Nobel Peace Prize, dismissed the charge of genocide and accused Gambia, which brought the charges before the court, of presenting an "incomplete and misleading factual picture of the situation." The Gambian case is being backed by the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation, as well as Canada and the Netherlands.

Suu Kyi claimed that the exodus of Rohingya from north-western state of Rakhine was simply the result of the conflict between the military and armed Rohingya separatist groups, not a conscious policy of ethnic cleansing by the military. While acknowledging that individual members and units of the military might have carried out crimes, she insisted that these would be dealt with by the country's military courts and, in any case, did not constitute genocide.

The attempt to blame Rohingya militants for the turmoil has been the standard pretext used by the military to defend its crimes. The UN fact-finding mission last year dismissed the excuse, noting that the army incursions into Rakhine had been planned at the highest levels of the military prior to small-scale rebel actions in August 2017. It also noted the coordinated character of the military operations, which has involved the round-up of men and boys, the sexual abuse of women and the torching of entire villages.

Suu Kyi also ignored the systematic denial of basic democratic rights, including citizenship, to the Rohingya, who are treated as "illegal immigrants" despite have lived in Myanmar for decades or longer. Her government has done nothing to address the issue and leading members of her party, the National League for Democracy, are deeply imbued with Buddhist supremacism and hostile to the Muslim minority.

Suu Kyi also claimed that it was "still not easy to establish clear patterns of events." Her claim of ignorance is simply not believable. She and the military have sought to block journalists and human rights activists from entering Rakhine state to gather firsthand evidence. Nevertheless, satellite imagery, along with eyewitness accounts from refugees who have fled Myanmar, all corroborate allegations of systematic human rights abuses.

Suu Kyi's told the court: "Can there be genocidal intent on the part of a state that actively investigates, prosecutes and punishes soldiers and officers who are accused of wrongdoing?" However, her evidence that soldiers and officers have been prosecuted and found guilty of human rights abuses is flawed.

She cited in particular the conviction of seven soldiers for summarily executing 10 Rohingya men in the village of Inn Din in 2017. However, as the *Financial Times* explained: "She did not mention that

© World Socialist Web Site

the killings only came to light because they were exposed by two Reuters reporters who were then arrested for allegedly obtaining state secrets and jailed for more than 16 months—longer than the soldiers responsible for the massacre."

Much of the coverage of Suu Kyi's court appearance reeks of rank hypocrisy. Many of the organisations, governments and so-called human rights organisations that are now condemning her, were, up until quite recently, hailing her as a courageous defender of democratic rights. Their promotion of Suu Kyi, as well as their about-face, is bound up with geo-politics, in particular Washington's aggressive confrontation with China, rather than concerns about democracy in Myanmar.

Suu Kyi and her NLD represented layers of the ruling class who regarded the military's domination, including over important sections of the economy, as a barrier to their interests and looked to the West for support. Suu Kyi backed tough sanctions by the US and Europe in the aftermath of brutal military crackdown on mass protests and strikes in 1988 as a means to force concessions from the junta.

US pressure on the military regime intensified under the Obama administration as it sought to undermine China throughout the region as part of its "pivot to Asia." In the case of Myanmar, Washington was determined to force the military to shift the focus of foreign policy from China to the US. Suu Kyi's release from house arrest and the holding of closely controlled elections that elevated her to de-facto head of government were bound up with a reorientation towards Washington.

The military, however, remains in control of key ministries, including defence and home affairs, and can effectively veto legislation as a quarter of parliamentary seats are appointed by the armed forces. Suu Kyi has provided the threadbare façade of democracy and acted as the roving ambassador for the military-dominated regime, at the time touting for foreign investment.

The failure of Myanmar to attract significant foreign investment, along with growing international criticism of the treatment of the Rohingya, has compelled Suu Kyi, her government and the military to increasingly turn back to Beijing for financial and diplomatic assistance. In 2017, for instance, China used its veto to block a UN Security Council statement expressing concern about the treatment of the Rohingya.

Just prior to her departure for The Hague, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi visited Myanmar and met with Suu Kyi in what was obviously a show of support in the case in the International Court of Justice. Wang urged her government to press ahead with infrastructure projects under the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, which is part of Beijing's massive Belt and Road Initiative aimed to linking the Eurasian landmass and countering US efforts to encircle China militarily.

The closer relations between Myanmar and China are behind the international campaign to once again put pressure on the regime to toe Washington's line. If Suu Kyi and the generals do not heed the warning, Myanmar could once again be branded as a "rogue state" and subjected to economic sanctions on the basis of human rights abuses.

After three days of hearings, the International Court of Justice last Saturday authorised the prosecutor to proceed with investigations into alleged crimes against Rohingya people from Myanmar. It declared that there existed "a reasonable basis to believe widespread and/or systematic acts of violence may have been committed that could qualify as the crimes against humanity."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site