

Insider Views: Bridging the Gap on the Rakhine Issue

Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai, Chairman of the Advisory Board to the Committee on the Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State, explains the Advisory Board's mandate and its efforts to bridge the gap of perception and help affected people on the ground.

AF: *What is the main function of the Advisory Board for the Committee for Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State? Why would the Board matter or make a difference given the failure of other past attempts?*

SURAKIART: The Advisory Board is tasked to report to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi with advice and recommendations through the Implementation Committee led by the Minister for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, Dr. Win Myat Aye, on how the recommendations in the 2017 Report of the Kofi Annan Commission concerning the situation in Rakhine can be implemented.

It is not the intention of the Advisory Board to become another investigative or fact-finding mission. We aim to come up with practical advice on how things on the ground can be improved and how implementation of the recommendations of the Kofi Annan report can be sustainable. We have identified five areas, as contained in our Press Statement of 25 January 2018, that we believe the Myanmar Government should address.

Our advice has been well received, not only by the international community on the whole, but also by the Myanmar Government which seems to have started implementing some of the advice. The manner in which advice is given can often be important, including by whom. The composition of the Advisory Board with its wealth of experience and expertise puts it in a unique position to reach out to the various stakeholders – the groups on the ground, the UN agencies, international non-governmental organisations (iNGOs) and interested nations. We will try through open and honest conversations to help bridge the gap in perception among the various stakeholders. We will look to the future, not the past.

AF: *How were the 10 members of the Advisory Board selected, and what is the modus operandi of the Board?*

SURAKIART: The members of the Advisory Board were personally selected by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The Advisory Board is composed of four international members – from South Africa, Sweden, Thailand and the United Kingdom – and five distinguished and well-qualified Myanmar members. We work on the basis of consensus although each member can express their views freely, but not in a manner that would affect the efficacy of the work

of the Advisory Board. We operate through a process of consultations with all relevant stakeholders before presenting our recommendations to the Implementation Committee and the Myanmar Government.

AF: *The Advisory Board has been under greater scrutiny after former New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson resigned from the Board with negative remarks about the Board as well as the Myanmar Government and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. What brought about this public airing of his criticisms and how has this incident affected the Board's work?*

SURAKIART: It was unfortunate that Governor Richardson had to be asked by the Myanmar Government to no longer serve on the Advisory Board due to seemingly different agendas that did not focus on the situation of Rakhine, the Muslim minority, and the Kofi Annan recommendations. His departure took place only after the second day of Advisory Board meetings with activities in Nay Pyi Taw. The Advisory Board continued with our meetings in Nay Pyi Taw, our trip to Rakhine State, especially Maungtau township where major conflicts erupted in August 2017 and visited a reception site and transit camp for refugees. The Advisory Board also had a meeting on 25 January which led to our preliminary advice as contained in the Press Release on 25 January.

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AF: *How do you plan to sustain the cooperation and support from the Myanmar Government while keeping the impartiality and credibility of the Advisory Board in navigating this emotionally charged and deeply polarising issue?*

SURAKIART: I can assure you that the Advisory Board will be objective and unbiased in our approach to the problem. We want to have open and honest conversations with all relevant stakeholders. We believe that we can play



Dr. Surakiart and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi at the Meeting of the Advisory Board to the Committee on the Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State

an important role as a bridge builder helping to narrow the gap in perception of the situation and encouraging the key players to re-engage with each other in a constructive manner. The Chairman and Advisory Board members met regularly with Myanmar's relevant Ministers responsible for Rakhine State, including with the State Counsellor.

AF: *You mentioned that the Advisory Board is not a fact-finding committee, but you also stressed the need to enhance transparency through improved media access. How could the Board tackle the problem of “fake news” and its negative impact on the issue?*

SURAKIART: One of the big challenges in the Rakhine problem is the huge gap in perception and interpretation of the situation there. The problem lies in the fact that different and often conflicting narratives coming from various sources are causing misunderstanding. The Advisory Board is therefore in favour of improving access for the international media so that people can understand what is really happening there and thereby counteract the “fake news.” We are also in favour of and have proposed a national initiative for an investigation commission regarding what has happened since August 2017.

AF: *Is the repatriation plan feasible considering the refugees in Bangladesh are reluctant to return to Myanmar, and the local government in Rakhine seems resistant to the Annan Commission’s recommendations?*

SURAKIART: The lack of progress on repatriation is a cause for concern. Clearly it is an enormous and complex undertaking. There are many difficulties, some of which appear to be technical such as the problem with the verification forms, while others are more complicated such as improving the conditions, especially security, inside Myanmar. We believe this requires the need to draw on the expertise and resources of the UN agencies and the international community. The Implementation Committee has implemented a lot of the recommendations but international dialogue is needed for it to be sustainable.

AF: *The 88 recommendations of the Annan Commission comprise both long-term and immediate-term measures. In the current political landscape of Myanmar, which recommendations need to be prioritised, in your view?*

SURAKIART: After our first meeting in Nay Pyi Taw on 25 January 2018, the Board issued five recommendations which included (i) consultations with all local, regional and national stakeholders in Rakhine State, and with the international community, during the implementation; (ii) inviting UN agencies to involve in the return and resettlement of the displaced persons; (iii) full humanitarian access at the soonest; (iv) establishing an independent fact-finding commission on the situation in Rakhine State after August 2017; and (v) wider media access to all affected areas in Rakhine State.

AF: *The Advisory Board has visited Rakhine State and the transit camps there. What is your assessment of the situation on the ground from the visit? From your vantage point, how does the Rakhine issue look across the border in Bangladesh?*

SURAKIART: The Myanmar Government has made great efforts to prepare for the repatriation. But conditions on the ground can still be improved so that the refugees can have the confidence to return. Some of our staff were recently in Cox's Bazar and saw the very difficult conditions in the camps. This is a continuing cause for concern, especially with the approaching monsoon season. It was also clear that perceptions of the problems with the repatriation process are different on the two sides of the border.

AF: *What are the relevant stakeholders that the Advisory Board has engaged in dialogue or plan to engage in the future? What are your key take-aways from the dialogue with them?*

SURAKIART: The Advisory Board has been engaged in discussions with a wide range of stakeholders, including those in the affected countries, the various groups on the ground, UN agencies and other international organisations and representatives of several Western countries. It is a continuing process. I believe there is goodwill amongst all the parties to try to resolve the problems in Rakhine State. Once again, we see the need to bridge the gap of perceptions among the stakeholders, and we hope to act as sincere and honest brokers in that regard.

AF: *In the final analysis, what would you qualify as “success” for the Advisory Board? Is there any timeframe for the Board?*

SURAKIART: The mandate of the Advisory Board runs for one year and may be renewed for another year. We have to recognise that the situation in Rakhine State is very complicated and will take some time to resolve, far beyond the mandate of the Board. Ultimately, success will lie in the hands of the people and Government of Myanmar.

AF: *The situation in Rakhine State has heightened regional concerns over the threat of extremism and terrorism, which are also being felt in Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines. Will Rakhine turn into another Marawi?*

SURAKIART: So far there is nothing to indicate that the Marawi scenario might be replicated in Rakhine. Nonetheless, we cannot discount the threat of extremism and terrorism and need to remain vigilant at all times. We know from experience in other regions that there are extremist groups that are ready to exploit situations of unrest and despair. It would be in all our interests to work together to ensure that this does not happen in Rakhine.

AF: *You have said that “the international community cannot be helpful if it is not inclusive” when it comes to the situation in Rakhine State. Can you elaborate further on this?*

SURAKIART: The situation in Rakhine State is highly complex and needs to be addressed in all of its various dimensions – political, security, economic development, humanitarian, etc. The expertise and resources of the

international community could make an important contribution to resolving these problems. The Advisory Board has therefore advocated for improving access to Rakhine State for UN agencies, humanitarian INGOs, the press and the diplomatic corps. We all can play a part to make things better, and should be given the opportunity to do so.

AF: *What is your assessment of ASEAN’s involvement thus far in helping address the situation in Rakhine State? Do you see any role for ASEAN in implementing the Annan Commission’s recommendations? Where would ASEAN’s contributions be most helpful and impactful?*

SURAKIART: Reports from the recent ASEAN-Australia Summit in Sydney showed that ASEAN is engaged on the issue of Rakhine. In early April, the Advisory Board is meeting with the Singapore Foreign Minister as the current Chair of ASEAN to discuss what role ASEAN can play. We believe there is room for ASEAN to make a positive contribution, for instance, in the area of public health. Individual ASEAN members have been conducting assistance projects. Perhaps a more consolidated, collective effort by ASEAN would be well-received in Rakhine. There is the idea of implementing a model township project in Rakhine for the integrated and comprehensive development for all communities.

AF: *Given your time-honoured and distinguished career as a diplomat and political leader, what are your best assets that could help you deliver in this important mission?*

SURAKIART: I believe that my ability to reach out to all the stakeholders, to act as a bridge-builder to narrow the gap in perception, and to bring the key players together to work to resolve the situation in Rakhine State in a discreet and non-judgmental manner, are best assets for this particular mission. In short, these are the essence of the ASEAN Way. ☸

Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai is Chairman of the Asian Peace and Reconciliation Council (APRC), and the Chairman of the Advisory Board to the Committee on the Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State. He was Thailand’s Deputy Prime Minister overseeing Foreign Affairs, Education and Culture (March 2005-September 2006), Minister of Foreign Affairs (February 2001-March 2005), and Minister of Finance (1995-1996). Dr Surakiart has held many chairmanship positions in the business sector, universities, and charitable organisations in Thailand and abroad. He was also Advisor to the Truth for Reconciliation Commission of Thailand (September 2011-July 2012).