

WESTMINSTER FOUNDATION FOR DEMOCRACY BOARD MEETING, 12 OCTOBER 2017

MYANMAR

Present:

Sir Henry Bellingham MP (Chair)
Dame Margaret Hodge MP
Patrick Grady MP
Sue English
Simon Walker
Anthony Smith (CEO)

Apologies:

Rushanara Ali MP
Andrew Rosindell MP
Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP
Thomas Hughes

1. The Board met to discuss the implications for WFD programmes of the actions taken against the Rohingya population in Rakhine State since the terrorist attacks by the ARSA on 25 August. Some of the Governors that were unable to attend the meeting had participated in a briefing call with the British Embassy in Myanmar earlier on 12 October and communicated their views about the events in Rakhine and the implications for the WFD programmes¹; and two Governors had sent in comments by e-mail.
2. All Governors had followed with great concern the reports of the suffering caused by the military actions that had led to at least 500,000 Rohingya fleeing Rakhine and the destruction of hundreds of Rohingya villages, which they condemned. They recognised that Myanmar was at the beginning of a long transition to a fully democratic society and that WFD's engagement would need to be long-term in order to help contribute to the strengthening of Myanmar's democratic institutions. The events in Rakhine had not changed that but they had illustrated how difficult the transition was, especially while the constitutional and executive role of the military remained so strong. In those circumstances, WFD could not ignore those events but instead had the responsibility to respond to them.
3. The Board noted that the DFID-funded WFD programme provided a range of support to the parliament in Naypyitaw. None of this had any direct involvement

¹ Rushanara Ali in particular said that the slight optimism that she had felt when she visited Myanmar in February had been shattered by the actions taken by the military. It would be morally indefensible for WFD to carry on with business as usual in these circumstances. We needed to reflect and review our programme or else we would be complicit with the ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya.

with Rakhine State or with the military authorities. The Board agreed that the programme team should urgently consider ways in which the programme with the parliament might be adjusted in order to support the parliament in addressing more directly some of the issues arising from the events in Rakhine, for example related to Women and Children's Rights, or the issues of diversity and tolerance that the State Counsellor had been addressing, or the issues arising from the report of the Rakhine Commission (the Government had committed to implement the recommendations). Addressing these issues would fit with the overall aim of the work with the parliament which is aiming to enable the parliament to be as effective as possible in its functions of representing all the people of Myanmar, conducting high quality policy work and holding the government to account.

4. In addition, the Board asked the programme team to consider additional activities, eg working with civil society, that the WFD programme might be able to include that would support tolerance and diversity in Myanmar. Such activities would be able to respond to the State Counsellor's call for support for implementation of the recommendations of the Rakhine Commission.
5. While understanding the importance of ensuring that WFD had clear understanding of the developments in Myanmar and a clear position on the rationale for its programmes, the strong view in the meeting was that WFD should not make a statement.
6. The Board confirmed that the team should consult closely with all other stakeholders and asked Anthony to report to the next meeting on progress.
7. The main conclusions of the meeting were:
 - We should review the DFID-funded programme with the parliament in order to see how it could be adjusted in order to address more directly some of the issues that have been raised by the military actions taken against the Rohingya. The proposals from the review should be ready for the next Board meeting on 29 November and the presentation to the parliament of the 2018 work plan in January.
 - We should also develop proposals to add to the programme, eg by supporting one or more civil society organisations that were addressing issues related to the treatment of the Rohingya.
 - Anthony should report back to the Board on the practicality of delaying any elements of the programme that could have a damaging impact on the work.