

'UPHOLD THE RULE OF LAW'

UN CHIEF: ETHNIC CLEANSING OF ROHINGYA MUST END

UN Security Council calls for immediate steps to end violence in Myanmar

NEW YORK

THE United Nations Security Council broke its weeks-long silence on the crisis in Myanmar and called for an end to the violence as UN chief Antonio Guterres said the military campaign amounted to ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims.

After a closed-door meeting, the 15-member council, including China, a supporter of Myanmar's former ruling junta, expressed concern about excessive force during security operations in Rakhine state and called for "immediate steps" to end the violence.

It was the first time the council agreed on a united response to the crisis sparked by a military crackdown that followed attacks by Rohingya militants last month.

Some 380,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh and there were growing appeals for Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi to speak out in defence of the Rohingya.

Her spokesman said the Nobel laureate and long-time human rights champion would deliver an address next week on peace and reconciliation in Myanmar.

Guterres called for a halt to the military campaign in Rakhine and said the mass displacement of Rohingya amounted to ethnic cleansing.

"I call on the Myanmar authorities to suspend military action, end the violence, uphold the rule



Rohingya refugees reaching for aid distributed by local organisations at the Balukhali makeshift refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, yesterday. REUTERS PIC

of law and recognise the right of return of all those who had to leave the country."

Asked if he agreed the Rohingya was being ethnically cleansed, he said: "When one-third of the Rohingya population has got to flee the country, can you find a better word to describe it?"

The 1.1 million-strong Rohingya have suffered years of discrimination in Myanmar, where they are denied citizenship even though many have longstanding roots in the country.

Guterres said Myanmar should grant the Rohingya nationality or legal status that allow them to live a normal life.

Condemning the violence, the council also called for humanitarian aid workers to be able to reach those in need in Rakhine.

But China blocked a proposal from Egypt to add language on

ensuring the right of return to the Rohingya sheltering in Bangladesh, diplomats said.

Still, British ambassador to the UN Matthew Rycroft stressed that it was the first time in nine years that the council agreed on a common stance on Myanmar.

"We were united in our concern about the situation" after hearing from UN officials who briefed the council on "the catastrophe that is befalling Rakhine state and the Rohingya there," he said.

Rights groups had urged the council to meet in open session and send a clear message to Myanmar that the world was watching.

"Today was a baby step forward, and it's admittedly rare that the council finds a way to agree on Burma, but it's far less than what's needed in the face of the unfolding tragedy," said Akshaya Kumar, Human Rights

Watch's deputy UN director.

In northern Rakhine, 176 out of 471 Rohingya villages now stand empty after "the whole village fled", government spokesman Zaw Htay said in Yangon, adding that others were partly deserted or intact.

Suu Kyi, who will deliver a nationwide address on Tuesday, has been condemned for a lack of moral leadership and compassion in the face of a crisis that has shocked the world.

Her spokesman said she would not attend next week's annual meeting of world leaders at the UN, where the plight of the Rohingya would be in the spotlight.

On the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, Turkey is planning a meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation on Myanmar and Britain is planning a ministerial-level meeting. **AFP**