

Respect the rights of all groups, pope tells Myanmar's leaders

NAYPYITAW, Myanmar — The plight of the ethnic Muslim minority in Myanmar's Rakhine state was front and center in speeches by Pope Francis and Aung San Suu Kyi, but neither publicly used the word Rohingya.

After private meetings Nov. 28 with Myanmar's President Htin Kyaw and Suu Kyi, the state counselor and de facto head of government, the pope and Suu Kyi gave formal speeches to government officials and diplomats gathered at the convention center in Naypyitaw, the nation's capital.

Suu Kyi, leader of the process to bring democracy to Myanmar and winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, publicly acknowledged, "Of the many challenges that our government has been facing, the situation in Rakhine has most strongly captured the attention of the world. As we address long-standing issues — social, economic and political — that have eroded trust and understanding, harmony and cooperation between different communities in Rakhine, the support of our people and of good friends who only wish to see us succeed in our endeavors has been invaluable."

"The road to peace is not always smooth," she told the pope, "but it is the only way that will lead our people to their dream of a just and prosperous land that will be their refuge, their pride, their joy."

In his speech, Pope Francis was even less specific, although he repeatedly insisted that the rights of each member of society and each ethnic group must be respected. He praised the role of the United Nations and the international community in supporting peace efforts, presumably also in their condemnations of the discrimination and persecution of the Rohingya, a Muslim minority.

"The future of Myanmar must be peace, a peace based on respect for the dignity and rights of each member of society, respect for each ethnic group and its identity, respect for the rule of law, and respect for a democratic order that enables each individual and every group — none excluded — to offer its legitimate contribution to

the common good,” Pope Francis said.

The pope said he wanted to visit the country to strengthen the small Catholic community and “to offer a word of encouragement to all those who are working to build a just, reconciled and inclusive social order.”

Myanmar’s “greatest treasure,” he insisted, “is its people, who have suffered greatly, and continue to suffer, from civil conflict and hostilities that have lasted all too long and created deep divisions.”

Pope Francis praised Suu Kyi for convoking the “21st Century Panglong Union Peace Conference,” a series of meetings that began in 2016 between the government and militant groups from more than a dozen ethnic groups in Myanmar.

The Rohingya are not included in the peace process since the government does not consider them to be a Myanmar ethnic group, but rather foreigners.

Pope Francis insisted, “The future of Myanmar must be peace, a peace based on respect for the dignity and rights of each member of society, respect for each ethnic group and its identity, respect for the rule of law, and respect for a democratic order that enables each individual and every group — none excluded — to offer its legitimate contribution to the common good.”

Religious communities must play a role in the process of reconciliation and integration, he said. “Religious differences need not be a source of division and distrust, but rather a force for unity, forgiveness, tolerance and wise nation building.”

In addition to helping heal “the emotional, spiritual and psychological wounds of those who have suffered in the years of conflict,” he said all religions “can help to uproot the causes of conflict, build bridges of dialogue, seek justice and be a prophetic voice for all who suffer.”

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