Our responsibility to protect the Rohingya

Much has been made of the Rohingya being stateless. But how they are being treated is utterly heartless. The almost 1 million Rohingya Muslims displaced from Myanmar’s Rakhine State to Bangladesh are housed in squalid camps quickly becoming reservoirs of disease and despair. A new outbreak of diphtheria comes on the heels of cholera and measles outbreaks. Insufficient food, shelter, health care, and hope add to the almost unimaginable suffering of these most disenfranchised refugees.

Alarming new evidence illuminates the horror from which the Rohingya have fled. Médecins Sans Frontières reported on Dec 14 that at least 6700 Rohingya were murdered in the month following the Aug 25 “clearance operations” by Myanmar’s security forces. The majority of the dead were shot, others were burned or beaten to death, and some were killed after sexual violation. An estimated 730 young children were murdered during that month alone. This adds to testimony of organised, coordinated, and systematic burning, killing, and mass rape; activity suggesting ethnic cleansing that the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has called “acts of appalling barbarity committed against the Rohingya”.

There is a new agreement to repatriate the Rohingya to Myanmar, but why expect these people to return to a land of persecution and violence? There is no assurance that the Rohingya would be given safety, dignity, and freedom. In fact, there is now indisputable evidence that the Rohingya’s lives and mere existence are at risk.

The horrific images and accounts of destruction and desolation are almost unbearable. But that acts of such atrocity could be afflicted on fellow human beings is not something we can look away from. If this is genocide, our only resolution now is to immediately accelerate the responsibility to protect. The UN Security Council, with the full support and obligations of member states, must investigate these apparent crimes against humanity, impose appropriate sanctions against military forces in Rakhine, and invoke their considerable resources to protect the Rohingya before these people are destroyed. Could we bear to live with the alternative? ■ The Lancet

Dangerous words

Medicine is underpinned by both art and science. Art that relies upon strong therapeutic relationships with patients and populations. And science that brings statistical rigour to clinical and public health practice. If allegations reported in The Washington Post on Dec 15 are credible, the Trump administration has seriously undermined both foundations by banning the words “vulnerable”, “entitlement”, “diversity”, “transgender”, “fetus”, “evidence-based”, and “science-based” from government documents for the US$7 billion budget discussions about the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Another phrase allegedly forbidden is “health equity”. A spokesperson for Health and Human Services told The Lancet that “science should always drive the narrative” and that “recent media reports appear to be based on confusion that arose when employees misconstrued guidelines”. If true, the administration’s Orwellian diktat is both absurd and sinister. As the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine observed: “such a directive would be unprecedented and contrary to the spirit of scientific integrity”. With individuals and science censored, how would the CDC realise its mission to protect people from diseases? Improve maternal and child health without making the fetus central? Control the opioid epidemic without addressing vulnerability? This interference is a crime against intelligence and insults the diversity and freedom of speech that the USA espouses.

The disenfranchisement of people and perversion of science undermines trust in government and places the health of Americans at risk. The administration needs to provide a full account and explanation of the circumstances around the “misconstrued guidelines”. Failure to do so—or confirmation of the ban—would demand a forceful response, not only from within the USA, but also from her friends and from health leaders around the globe, particularly from WHO, whose constitution specifies a government’s responsibility for the health of its people, recognises the importance of research, and calls for all necessary action to attain the objective of the organisation. Only with loud and united condemnation can this foolishness be overcome; with silence, it will spread. ■ The Lancet