

OpEd

Adama Dieng - United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide

June 2016

“The power of identity”

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and the new Myanmar Government have cautioned the international community against using “emotionally charged” terms that could make the situation in Myanmar more difficult to address (they are!) when talking about the use of the term “rohingya” to refer to the minority Muslim population who have been living for generations in Myanmar’s majority Buddhist Myanmar, over-terminology in this case matter because it symbolizes the recognition of a community that has long been oppressed. Denying anyone’s identity is a serious form of discrimination and neither the international community nor the government of Myanmar should compromise when it comes to recognizing people’s fundamental rights.

Our identity is what defines each of us as an individual or as a group. Identity tends to be associated with race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and

(The Rohingyas in Myanmar have been denied a national identity' (they have been treated) of their citizens) they are 'stateless'; for many years they have been 'subject to these practices and policies of discrimination and restriction to some of their most fundamental rights - including the right to freedom of movement and the right to marry and found a family' (though and displaced by the 2012 violence have been living- segregated- in 2. P camps) and though more have been compelled to flee by land or sea' Many have been caught by networks of human traffickers or have died while trying to reach other countries in the region' In Myanmar- a campaign of dangerous anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya "hate speech" by extremists has the potential to lead to further violence'

< In the use of the term "Rohingya" to describe this religious and ethnic group has become 'ethnic' and highly politicized' In fact- the Rohingyas are not allowed to exercise their right to self-identification- a right that is recognized by international human rights law and in the 'jurisprudence of human rights treaty committee' Instead- derogatory terms have been used to label them as 'outsider'- 'foreigner' and- well- as 'undesirable'

(The new President and Government of Myanmar are in a difficult position' (they have to manage the expectations both of those who want to pursue and most probably strengthen exclusionary policies against the Rohingyas- as well as those who expect them to reverse this trend' Most notably- they have to find a way to unite the diverse population of Myanmar so that they live alongside each other in peace and without prejudice' In order to succeed- they will have to address the root cause of the tension between different communities and longstanding grievances- and that will be challenging' But when we deny 1 or a \$ someone else to deny = an important aspect of an individual or community's identity- this is tantamount to rejecting who those people are as human beings' (this is not acceptable'

I sincerely hope the new President and Government of Myanmar will look to Mandela as a role model'