

Lack of access to Rakhine State unacceptable: UN

Survival instinct: Villagers are seen preparing to cross a river in the Rakhine. AP

The lack of humanitarian access granted by Myanmar's government to Rakhine State, where more than half a million Rohingya Muslims have fled violence, is "unacceptable", the UN said on Friday.

"The access we have in northern Rakhine State is unacceptable", the head of the United Nations humanitarian office, Mark Lowcock, told reporters in Geneva.

A small UN team visited the crisis-wracked region in majority Buddhist Myanmar in recent days and described witnessing "unimaginable" suffering.

Myanmar has tightly controlled access to the State since last month when attacks by Rohingya militants prompted an army crackdown that has sent about 5,15,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh.

Scores of Rohingya villages have been torched.

Mr. Lowcock said he believed a "high-level" UN team would be able to visit the area "in the next few days."

'Unfettered' access

He repeated the UN's call for the government to allow "unhindered [and] unfettered" access.

"Half a million people do not pick up sticks and flee their country on a whim," Mr. Lowcock added, stressing that the scale of the exodus was evidence of a severe crisis in northern Rakhine.

The UN has "substantial capacity" in Myanmar, which can be quickly deployed to northern Rakhine once clearance is granted he added.

Actual death toll

A Myanmar official tally says hundreds of people died as violence consumed remote communities, including Rohingya.

Hindus and ethnic Rakhine were also among the dead — allegedly killed by Rohingya militants.

Rights groups say the real death toll is likely to be much higher, especially among the Rohingya, while the UN has labelled army operations as "ethnic cleansing" against the Muslim group.

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