Remarks by Ms. Christine Schraner Burgener, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Myanmar  
General Assembly, 23 October 2019

Mr. President, Distinguished delegates,

1. The Secretary-General highlights in his Report A/74/311, both urgency and opportunities ahead of the 2020 general elections.

2. Overall, against the backdrop of continued communal tensions and ethnic strife throughout the country, greater action is needed towards addressing the root causes of violence and institutionalized discrimination.

3. In Rakhine State and elsewhere, the Government of Myanmar has committed to the effective implementation of critical steps toward this, including the recommendations of the Advisory Commission headed by the late Mr. Kofi Annan and most recently, a national strategy on the closure of camps for internally displaced persons.

4. Such commitments were a promising first step. But after two years, it is high time for Myanmar’s affected communities to see from their government, concrete steps and genuine political will in building an inclusive and vibrant democracy. This requires durable solutions based on a consultative/right-based approach.

5. An essential step in this direction will be for civilian and military authorities to take a resounding unified stance against incitement and hatred. This should go together with promoting an electoral process that is widely inclusive, transparent and accessible so that it can serve as a nationally unifying event.

Distinguished delegates,

6. Myanmar has repeatedly stated its cooperation with the United Nations will remain cornerstone of its foreign policy. Since the publication of the Secretary-General’s Report, I visited Myanmar once more and plan on my ninth visit in November.

7. Through these visits, I will continue to engage with State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other leaders in conveying my first-hand observations in affected areas and the deep grievances I continue to hear in my interactions with all communities affected by violence, including those in Rakhine and refugees in Bangladesh, among others.

8. Just last week, the State media reported that the Committee for Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State met on 10 October and discussed suggestions I had provided during my latest field visit to Rakhine State. The space for dialogue exists.
9. My latest efforts, in close cooperation with UNICEF and other key stakeholders, continue to focus on access to Burmese curriculum in the refugee camps and improving education opportunities in Rakhine State. This is key in guarding against a generation lost.

10. Considerable international and regional support to domestic efforts will be important in helping ensure international standards and principles are upheld.

Distinguished delegates,

11. Access for the UN and its partners remains problematic, especially in areas affected by violence, like in the western and northeast peripheries. But it is important also to recognize progress and help build on any positive momentum.

12. Myanmar signing the 6 June 2018 MoU with UNDP and UNHCR aimed at creating conditions conducive for the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable repatriation of refugees to their places of origin or choosing was an important step.

13. Since then, there has been improvement in terms of access to more locations covered under the MoU for Quick Impact Projects (QIPS), aimed at supporting recovery and resilience-based development for the benefit of all communities in Rakhine. We hope even more access for the UN and its partners will be granted without further delay.

Distinguished delegates,

14. I will remain in close dialogue with ASEAN officials, whose regional support will be crucial. ASEAN members including Myanmar highlighted the importance of coordinating regional efforts with the UN and supplementing our engagement, including on the tripartite MoU.

15. In addition to the recent preliminary engagement by the ASEAN emergency response and assistance team, regional leaders stressed the need to assist Myanmar to address the root causes of the conflict and to create a conducive environment so that affected communities could rebuild their lives.

Distinguished delegates,

16. To that end, there is no question that more steps are needed towards ensuring the rights, dignity and security of all communities in Rakhine State. This requires freedom of movement and the equal access of displaced persons to livelihoods and non-segregated basic services, including to mainstream education, jobs and health services. This is required not only for IDPs in camps but others.
17. The underlying issues must be addressed. Again, the Advisory Commission on Rakhine has also provided relevant recommendations as a guiding framework, which consider the needs of the victims and address root causes, including discrimination, persecution and the lack of legal status and of credible process for citizenship.

Distinguished delegates,

18. I welcome that the Government has positively moved on proposals to simplify and expedite the citizenship verification application and decision-making process that have to be materialized now. But this remains predicated on the 1982 Citizenship Law, which will require reforms as it does not meet international standards in key areas related to non-discrimination and prevention and reduction of statelessness.

19. Authorities have also taken measures to distribute a fact-sheet to refugees in Bangladesh for greater transparency in the repatriation process and established a public complaints mechanism.

20. Furthermore, in July Nay Pyi Taw officials engaged refugees in Cox’s Bazar together with Bangladesh and ASEAN representatives.

21. In addition to supporting durable solutions in Rakhine, including for IDPs currently restricted to camps, the UN will continue to urge Myanmar to build on its recent efforts to facilitate dialogue with the refugees and pursue forging greater trust between both sides through other confidence building measures.

22. Let us be clear, it is ultimately the responsibility of Myanmar to create sustainable conditions conducive for return, so that refugees can return voluntarily, in safety and in dignity to their homes. Authorities in Myanmar should sustain a dialogue with them and help ensure their voices are central to real solutions.

23. There have been recent reports of around 300 refugees who returned to Rakhine of their own volition. Their treatment and whether they can live in their places origin or choosing and under more dignified conditions will be a key indicator.

24. What I have sensed first-hand from my field visits to Rakhine is the prevailing strong sense of communal tensions on the ground. This will require greater interfaith and intercommunal dialogue, which will remain a key focus for the work of my Office. It is critical for the Government to help expand space for this.

Distinguished delegates,

25. Security developments linked to clashes between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Tatmadaw have exacerbated the precarious situation in Rakhine, one of the nation’s poorest regions.
26. This has shed light on the long-standing grievances of Rakhine Buddhists towards Bamar-majority center, in addition to the disenfranchisement of the Rohingya.

27. Yet, there has been minimal international condemnation on the suffering of Rakhine civilians. We also need to be a voice for them not least in the wake of increasing casualties, restriction of access to information and burning of homes belonging to ethnic Rakhine.

28. Meanwhile, Rohingya and others continue to suffer and more so due to the latest violence. Some killed and homes also burned, sparking haunting recent memory. This does not bode well.

29. As I urged this General Assembly in July, it is crucial that our advocacy highlights the well-being of all affected communities and that our engagements and support help promote social cohesion.

Distinguished delegates,

30. Whether in Rakhine or other ethnic areas, including in Kachin and Northern Shan, where fighting has resumed, we need to collectively advocate all sides to ensure the protection of civilians and uphold their responsibilities under International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law.

31. It is regrettable that mistrust between the military and ethnic armed organizations continue as reflected in the Tatmadaw’s September announcement that the latest Unilateral Ceasefire Declaration (UCD) in many affected areas would not be extended.

32. All sides are responsible for exercising restraint and avoiding actions that can reverse the gains of the peace while providing protection and access to those in need. This will be paramount for greater efforts towards a more inclusive peace process.

Distinguished delegates,

33. As highlighted in the Secretary-General’s Report, the military has demonstrated some openness in engaging constructively with the United Nations, especially SRSG Patten and SRSG Gamba on sexual violence in conflict and children in armed conflict issues. Earlier this month, Myanmar ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

34. I will continue to work closely with various UN partners to promote system-wide coherence that is principled and constructive.
Distinguished delegates,

35. Yesterday, you heard from two important independent mandates holders on accountability and I have continued to urge Nay Pyi Taw's cooperation with all UN human rights entities as effective international cooperation will be critical to ensuring that national accountability mechanisms are credible, independent and effective in delivering justice for victims.

36. A critical component of accountability measures, including from the vantage point of the victims, is national ownership and the responsibility to conduct credible investigations and prosecutions, which is why a credible, transparent process and effective outcome of Myanmar's Independent Commission of Enquiry will be vital.

Distinguished delegates,

37. The preponderant political role of the military in Myanmar remains an obstacle to the ongoing democratic transition. We are already witnessing hardening positions ahead of the 2020 polls.

38. This is immensely challenging for the civilian leadership, which is forging ahead with democratic reforms, including amending the Constitution.

39. We must be mindful of the already precarious domestic tensions and engage in a manner that helps empower voices and action for progress, including the many civil society organizations and some religious leaders courageously campaigning for tolerance, genuine representation and strength in diversity.

40. This is where a prosperous and secure future for Myanmar and all communities within the country resides.

Thank you.