News



Exxon Mobil Chairman and CEO Rex Tillerson speaks during the IHS CERAWeek 2015 energy conference in Houston on April 21, 2015. (RNS courtesy of Reuters/Daniel Kramer)

Matthew Pennington

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The Trump administration moved toward a condemnation of "ethnic cleansing" against Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims, as officials were preparing a recommendation for Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to unequivocally use the term for the first time.

Angry lawmakers on Tuesday (Oct. 24) demanded an immediate denunciation as they explored a new, tougher U.S. policy.

"My bosses have said it appears to be ethnic cleansing. I'm of that view as well," said Patrick Murphy, a senior U.S. diplomat for Southeast Asia, while adding that the final call wasn't his to make.

Tillerson could receive the recommendation to adopt such terminology as a matter of policy as early as this week, officials familiar with the process told The Associated Press.

He would then decide whether to follow the advice of his agency's policy experts and lawyers, which would raise pressure on the U.S. government to consider new sanctions on a country that had been lauded for its democratic transition.

At a Senate hearing Tuesday, lawmakers pressed Murphy and other administration officials to hastily clarify their view of the brutal crackdown on Muslims in Rakhine State that has caused more than 600,000 refugees to flee to Bangladesh. But U.S. officials have been weighing several factors for their policy toward the country also known as Burma, including concerns about undermining the civilian government led by Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi for the last 18 months.

Democratic Sen. Tim Kaine was among those calling for a clear determination "with dispatch." Republican Sen. Bob Corker, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, emphasized it "may be time for a policy readjustment." Other lawmakers in both houses of Congress have proposed new U.S. penalties on the military, which retains significant power in Myanmar and is blamed for the violence.

The U.S. officials, who weren't authorized to speak publicly on the internal process and requested anonymity, told AP the State Department won't make a call yet on whether crimes against humanity have occurred in Myanmar. Such a determination would be even more detrimental to Myanmar's military, as it could force the U.S. to push harder for legal accountability.

According to the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention, "ethnic cleansing" isn't recognized as an independent crime under international law, unlike crimes against humanity and genocide. It surfaced in the context of the 1990s conflict in the former Yugoslavia, when a U.N. commission defined it as "rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups from the area."

Nevertheless, Murphy stressed that "a determination of ethnic cleansing will not change our pursuit of full accountability." The issue also is sensitive because President Trump will make his first official trip to Asia next month and hasn't spoken about the crisis.

Human rights groups accuse security forces of launching a scorched-earth campaign in late August as they responded to Rohingya insurgent attacks. Amnesty International alleges that hundreds of Rohingya men, women and children have been systematically killed.

Senators of both parties expressed outrage over the atrocities — and frustration at Washington's inability to stop them. They questioned whether former President Obama prematurely lifted sanctions against the armed forces as a reward for an end to decades of direct military rule.

"The military control Burma today," Sen. Ben Cardin, the panel's top Democrat, said. "That's unacceptable, that's why we imposed sanctions, because of military control. Sanction relief was given for what? So people can be ethnically cleansed?"

Murphy said the U.S. has limited leverage with Myanmar's military. He described broad sanctions and more targeted measures as under consideration, but worried about hurting Myanmar's vulnerable citizens. Administration officials also fret that punishing Myanmar too forcefully could undermine Suu Kyi's government and push her country away from the United States and toward China.

Before the latest refugee exodus, roughly 1 million Rohingya lived in Myanmar. The Buddhist majority believes they migrated illegally from Bangladesh, although many Rohingya families have lived in Myanmar for generations. They were stripped of their citizenship in 1982.

Calls for a U.S. determination of "ethnic cleansing" have intensified, as the United Nations and leading Western governments have used the term. Six weeks ago, U.N. human rights chief Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein said it "seems a textbook example of ethnic cleansing." French President Emmanuel Macron echoed that opinion, as have leaders of many in the Muslim world.

U.S. officials have been more reticent. Tillerson, who last week said that perpetrators will be held to account for atrocities, has referred to the violence as "characterized by many as ethnic cleansing." U.N. envoy Nikki Haley told the Security Council last month it was "a brutal, sustained campaign to cleanse the country of an ethnic minority."

"We are not shying from the use of any appropriate terminology," Murphy told reporters later Tuesday, without revealing what the formal review would conclude.

The recent violence already has prompted Washington to curtail already restricted ties with Myanmar's military. Two months ago, the U.S. stopped waiving visa restrictions to allow members of Myanmar's military to visit — a policy that Murphy said would also apply to commander in chief Gen. Min Aung Hlaing. The State Department announced Monday that units and officers involved in Rakhine operations are ineligible for U.S. assistance, and rescinded invitations for senior security forces to attend U.S.-sponsored events.

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Some Democratic and Republican lawmakers want tougher action, such as financial sanctions against military officials complicit in rights abuses. Restrictions on military-

owned businesses that hold large stakes in Myanmar's economy are also a possibility.

"Here we have this horrific instance, and we have virtually no voice, no pressure," said Democratic Sen. Jeff Merkley, who is set to travel to Myanmar soon.

(Associated Press writer Josh Lederman contributed to this report.)