Vatican



by Joshua J. McElwee

View Author Profile

## Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — November 22, 2017
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Pope Francis will meet the head of Myanmar's armed forces during his trip to the country next week, in a last-minute addition to a visit that comes as global attention has been drawn to the Myanmar military's persecution of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims.

Vatican spokesman Greg Burke said Nov. 22 that the pontiff will meet Senior General Min Aung Hlaing privately Nov. 30, shortly before leaving Myanmar that day to visit neighboring country Bangladesh, which the U.N. says is hosting some 537,000 Rohingya feeling violence in Myanmar's western state of Rakhine.

Burke, who was briefing reporters in advance of the papal trip, also announced that Francis would be meeting "a small group" of Rohinhgya during an inter-religious gathering in Bangladesh Dec. 1.

Francis is traveling to Myanmar and Bangladesh Nov. 26-Dec. 2. Both the meeting with the general and the Rohingya had been previously unannounced.

Myanmar, also known as Burma, began a process of democratic reforms in 2015 to emerge from a half-century of military rule. While Nobel peace prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi acts as the country's de facto Prime Minister, the military still retains significant power in the country and is seen as the ultimate political authority.

Francis' schedule during his visit to Myanmar has included a meeting with Suu Kyi since it was announced. Burke said the pontiff decided to add a meeting with Aung Hlaing following the advice of Yangon Cardinal Charles Bo, who recently met with Francis in Rome.

"Cardinal Bo was here on a visit and made some suggestions to the Holy Father, which were taken into account," said the spokesman.

The Myanmar military says it launched operations against the Rohingya earlier in the year following insurgent attacks in Rakhine. The top U.N. human rights official, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, said in September that the military operations were "clearly disproportionate" to the original insurgent attacks and had resulted in "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing."

Francis has referred in the past to Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya as a "persecution," asking crowds in St. Peter's Square for his weekly Angelus address Aug. 27 for prayer that the minority group would be "given their full rights."

But Bo has advised Francis to refrain from specifically using the word "Rohingya" while in Myanmar because it is viewed as inflammatory by the government. Asked if Francis would follow Bo's advice on the matter, Burke responded that "the pope takes this counsel very seriously, but we will see" what he decides to say.

The spokesman also said the word Rohingya is "not a prohibited word" in the official lexicon of the Vatican's diplomatic language.

Francis will be the first pope to visit Myanmar. In a Nov. 17 video message to people in the country in advance of his trip, Francis said he hopes to encourage all efforts "to build harmony and cooperation" among people of all religions during the visit.

[Joshua J. McElwee is NCR Vatican correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]

Advertisement

This story appears in the **Francis in Myanmar and Bangladesh** feature series. View the full series.