

ACTIVISTS SEEK CORPORATE HELP FOR MYANMAR'S ROHINGYAS

BANGKOK: Activists are urging Unilever, a major investor in Myanmar, to speak out against the country's treatment of its Rohingya minority, which the UN has said may be "crimes against humanity." More than 10,000 people have joined the Facebook group for the campaign, known by the hashtag #WeAreAllRohingyaNow, and hundreds have signed on. A letter sent this week to Unilever CEO Paul Polman asked the company to clarify its stance on the Rohingya. "Silence in the face of genocide, whilst doing business, is simply not an option," said Britain based campaign organizer Jamila Hanan.

"Multinational corporations must start to speak out. They must be obliged to use their power and influence to help bring about a more just society in the regions in which they operate." Unilever did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Rights groups accuse the Myanmar army of burning homes, mass killings and rape in their sweeping counterinsurgency campaign in Rakhine state, where most of the estimated 1 million Rohingya live. The Muslim Rohingya have long faced systematic discrimination in Myanmar, a majority-Buddhist country.

Most do not have citizenship and are considered illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, even when they've lived in Myanmar for generations. The #WeAreAllRohingyaNow group is seeking a restoration of citizenship rights denied to the Rohingya by a military government in 1982. Hanan says the group chose to target Unilever because it has been responsive to activists in the past. Unilever, with some \$55 billion in revenue last year, is one of the world's largest consumer goods companies. Billions across the world buy Unilever-made Dove soap, Lipton tea, and Hellmann's mayonnaise.

The company's first factory in Myanmar opened in 2013. It now manufactures food and shampoo near Yangon. Polman is a major advocate for corporate social responsibility and has won dozens of awards in eight years at Unilever's helm. He recently signed an open letter to the UN citing concerns about Myanmar's military offensives in Rakhine State - but not on behalf of Unilever, which has kept silent on the country's politics. "We're not asking for great things," Hanan said. "We're hoping that it will lead to a statement of concern. That would be a huge step forward. It's something corporations don't do."

She said the group is waiting until next week to see if Unilever responds and if it doesn't it will start contacting members of the board of directors and shareholders directly. They plan to target other companies. "We're not going away," she said. Myanmar recently emerged from decades of isolationist military rule, holding landmark elections in 2015. Foreign investors rushed in, putting billions of dollars into one of Asia's fastest growing economies. Persecution of the Rohingya has intensified after deadly communal conflict with Rakhine Buddhists broke out in 2012. The latest bout of violence flared in October after an attack on a guard post left nine officers dead. It has displaced hundreds of thousands of people since then.—AP



RAKHINE: In this file photo, Rohingya children gather at the Dar Paing camp for Muslim refugees, north of Sittwe, western Rakhine state, Myanmar.—AP



LAHORE: Pakistani security officials examine the site after a bomb attack in Lahore yesterday.—AFP

PAKISTAN ON EDGE; 6 DIE IN LAHORE BOMB BLAST

PANIC UNDERSCORES NERVOUSNESS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

LAHORE: At least six people were killed and 30 injured after a bomb ripped through Pakistan's Lahore yesterday, officials said, the tenth attack in just under a fortnight pointing to resurgence in Islamist violence. The blast, the second to hit the provincial capital this month, crumpled cars and sent panic rippling through the city after the wave of attacks across Pakistan killed more than 130 people. "My God, my God, I saw so many bodies," said Imtiaz Ali, a barber in a Tony and Guy hair salon opposite the blast site in the posh Defense Housing Authority suburb of the city, replete with upscale boutiques and cafes.

The building where the bomb went off was under construction in a market crowded with people, including children, the 34-year-old said. "When I came out I first just saw smoke and dust... Bikes upturned. Cars destroyed. My own colleague's car windows were blown out. My clients' cars were blown out. I was close to fainting." Police and administration officials confirmed it was a bomb attack, as rescuers supplied the casualty toll. No group has immediately claimed responsibility.

Just over an hour later rumors of a second blast in another affluent area nearby sent ambulances racing to the scene, though authorities later said the reports were false. The panic underscored growing nervousness across the country as a series of assaults shook what had been a growing sense of security during a prolonged lull in violence. They included a previous bomb blast in Lahore on Feb 13 which killed 15 people, and a devastating suicide attack at a Sufi shrine in Sindh province that left 90 devotees dead.

The attacks, most of which were

claimed by the Islamic State group or the Pakistani Taliban, have dented growing optimism over the country's security after it appeared to be making strong gains in its decade-and-a-half long war on militancy. The emergence of IS and a Taliban resurgence would be a major blow to Pakistan. Analysts have said the apparently coordinated nature of the attacks suggested militants were regrouping

Military launches new operation
Islamabad launched a crackdown in the wake of the attacks, saying it has killed dozens of "terrorists" in recent days and carried out airstrikes on militant hideouts along the Afghan border. On Wednesday the military announced a nationwide anti-terrorist operation. Analysts said the military was seeking to limit militants' movements from one place to another.—AFP

GERMANY DEPORTS THIRD BATCH OF AFGHAN MIGRANTS TO KABUL

KABUL: Eighteen Afghans deported from Germany arrived in Kabul yesterday after their asylum pleas were rejected, the third batch to be sent back in recent months as Berlin speeds up the expulsions. Germany Chancellor Angela Merkel's cabinet approved new measures on Wednesday to expedite the repatriations even as controversy rages over sending people back to strife-torn Afghanistan. "An elderly man was among the deportees and the rest were young Afghans who arrived in a charter plane from Munich," Kabul airport official Taimoor Shah Hamidi said.

They were part of a third wave of repatriations of Afghans from Germany since December under a disputed Afghan-European Union deal aimed at curbing the influx of migrants. Nearly 80 Afghans, all men, have so far been sent back after their asylum applications were rejected by the German government. Berlin is under pressure to act as the migrant influx has boosted a right-wing populist and anti-immigration movement,

and the number of far-right hate crimes against foreigners has soared.

Under new measures to speed up repatriations, German immigration officials will be allowed to access smartphones and other digital devices of asylum seekers to help determine their identity and country of origin if they claim to have lost their passport. While Germany granted safe haven to most people from war-torn Syria, the government has argued that it can safely repatriate people to Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan, where German troops are part of NATO forces seeking to create stability.

But the government has faced increasing opposition at the state level against sending Afghan nationals back home to an increasingly dangerous environment. In early Feb, 23-year-old Atiqullah Akbari suffered shrapnel injuries in a militant attack in Kabul, two weeks after he was deported from Germany. Akbari was picked up by German police in January from his home in Bavaria where he had sought refuge.—AFP