# New chairman appointed to U.N. mission probing Myanmar abuses

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The United Nations' Human Rights Council has replaced the chairwoman of a team investigating allegations of killings and rape by Myanmar's security forces, it said on Thursday, amid concerns over her perceived bias.

Indian Supreme Court advocate Indira Jaising was initially named to chair the fact-finding mission, which has a focus on the western state of Rakhine that is home to the stateless Rohingya Muslim minority.

Council president Joaquín Alexander Maza Martelli had decided to replace Jaising with Marzuki Darusman, a former attorney-general of Indonesia who has previously conducted rights investigations on North Korea, the council said in a statement from its headquarters in Geneva.

Jaising was appointed to lead the panel in May, after a resolution passed by the Human Rights Council in March calling for a team to be sent to look into the abuse claims.

The panel's two other members, Harvard-trained Sri Lankan lawyer Radhika Coomaraswamy and Australian consultant Christopher Dominic Sidoti, remain in place.

Myanmar has said it will refuse visas to the commissioners, arguing the mission would aggravate tension in Rakhine.

"As in all such cases, the mission will make it a priority to reach out to and engage constructively with the government and other relevant interlocutors," the council said.

"The Human Rights Council reiterates its hope that the government of Myanmar will grant the mission unfettered access to affected areas."

The statement did not give any reason for the change of personnel, but a U.N. official told Reuters Jaising agreed to step down after the council president raised concerns about public comments she made that could be seen as indicating bias.

The official requested anonymity, in the absence of authorization to speak to reporters.

The panel was formed after the U.N. High Commissioner on Human Rights said Myanmar security forces probably committed crimes against humanity, and possibly, ethnic cleansing of Rohingya civilians.

Rohingya militants killed nine border guards in October, sparking a response in which the army was accused of raping Rohingya women, shooting villagers on sight and burning down homes, sending an estimated 75,000 people fleeing to Bangladesh.

Many in Myanmar see the Rohingya as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, although about 1.1 million of them live in Rakhine and say their roots in the region go back generations.

'Perceived Bias'

The U.N official and a human rights advocate familiar with discussions around the mission told Reuters that Jaising's comments had stirred concern among U.N. officials in Geneva that she would not be considered impartial.

After her appointment, Jaising was quoted by broadcaster Al Jazeera as saying the Rohingyas' situation in Myanmar "is especially deplorable because they face the risk of genocide".

"If there's any perceived bias...it undermines the credibility of the mission before it has started," said the U.N. official.

Jaising declined to comment when contacted by telephone on Thursday.

The panel will meet in Geneva in August, the statement said, and is expected to give a verbal update on its progress to the Human Rights Council in September before a final report in March.

Darusman is a veteran U.N. human rights investigator, having served as special rapporteur on human rights in North Korea and taken part in a landmark Commission of Inquiry on the North.

He also chaired a U.N. panel of experts on war crimes committed in the final months of Sri Lanka’s long civil war.