Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today.

So the quotation chosen by the organisers as the theme for today’s commemoration is this:

"The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting."

I agree that memory is a powerful tool. I believe that public articulations of memory are necessary and useful. In both Myanmar and in Bangladesh there are very many powerful interests and very many self-serving versions of historical events pertaining to the Rohingya and this makes memory a challenge to the powers that be. They want to decide how a particular episode of history is or should be written.

And so when the Rohingya try to assert their memory and their living history in their continuing struggle for justice, they face problems. The sad reality is that it is not just in Myanmar but also in Bangladesh that any assertion of their collective memory amounts to a form of challenge.

Two years ago today there was an emotional offering of prayers in the Rohingya refugee camps of Bangladesh to remember all those killed in the clearance operations of 2017. Tens of thousands of Rohingya gathered. They did not speak against Bangladesh. They spoke of gratitude to Bangladesh. They did not stake a claim in Bangladesh. Indeed they wanted to go back to Myanmar but only if the conditions were right. They correctly sought and obtained permission to hold the remembrance meeting from the authorities. Yet overnight, Rohingya became enemy No1. The entire body politic of Bangladesh perceived the remembrance event as some kind of threat. There followed measure after draconian measure starting with mobile sim confiscation, a ban on 3G and 4G internet, barbed wire fencing, and threats of removal to Bhasan Char. All added to the existing threat to reduce their “comfort”, as one Bangladesh minister put it, that Rohingya were apparently enjoying.

The successive so-called clearance operations by the Myanmar military are not only a part of Myanmar’s past but also the past of other nations especially its neighbours.
and of course Bangladesh. Yet today in Bangladesh, there are not going to be any academic discussions or public meetings concerning one million Rohingya living in south eastern Bangladesh. There will be no attempt to grasp what it means to be a refugee as a common, indeed shared, human experience. There will be no discussion about Bangladesh’s indifference to the past, its forced and unsustainable repatriation of refugees, or its inability to imagine a future for refugees and its own people. Yet for Bangladesh, allowing the commemoration of August 25th could have been about comprehending its own experience of genocide, its values and its history.

Instead, in the refugee camps, a stern warning has gone out in the last couple of days threatening severe penalties for people who hold any kind of commemoration or demonstration marking Genocide Day. Not only that, there is yet another announcement going around that those who wish to be repatriated will be helped by UNHCR and that they will not be forced and that it will be voluntary. The struggle of memory against forgetting is particularly acute around this concept of “voluntary” repatriation. UNHCR has always presented this notion of “voluntary repatriation” in a deceptive way. In the case of Bangladesh, perhaps it is to eradicate the shameful memory of the 1990s, confer legitimacy to the process and to gloss over the fact that a decision to return is always dictated by a complex bundle of factors including physical and psychological pressures and material needs. It also completely ignores what the refugees will be going back to.

For those of us who are not Rohingya, memory must be a matter of identity and solidarity - that is to engage empathetically with Rohingya who are living in Myanmar, in IDP camps or the refugee camps - trying to imagine their struggles, mourning their suffering and deaths and celebrating their triumphs. Yes, there are triumphs. While brutality and terror lie at the heart of the Rohingya story, so do struggle, courage, endurance, love and the instinct and tenacity to survive. These are monumental triumphs. More so than the fact that their case is at the International Criminal Court and at the International Court of Justice. Thank you.