

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
[Burma]

Month September, 13th - 2:30pm
2255 Rayburn House building

Statement of Lucky Karim
on the Rohingya situation, after the coup for 2 years.

My name is Lucky Karim and I am a Rohingya refugee from Myanmar. I was forced to flee my home in August 2017 after genocide and crimes against humanity and against us Rohingya by the Myanmar military in Rakhine State. My whole family fled to Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, where one million Rohingya refugees now live in impoverished camps.

The Myanmar military regime has been persecuting the Rohingyas in Myanmar for decades to people like myself. Since the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, the political, economic, and humanitarian crisis in the country has only grown more dire for the Rohingya as well as other ethnic minorities in Burma. Dictatorship is a notorious problem in many countries. Dictators take away the freedom of the people in the name of their own power. They attack people's hopes and dreams.

My family and I had to live in the Bangladesh refugee camps for more than six years before we had an incredible opportunity to resettle in the U.S. During our time in the Cox's Bazar camp in Bangladesh, conditions steadily worsened. Rohingya children and youth have extremely limited access to formal education and no livelihood opportunities at all. People lack clean water, a healthy environment, and more than half of the Rohingya refugee are not safe in camps including community leaders and educated women, so far we learned from the daily update of my people at least 300 Rohingya individuals were killed by the non-state-actors and many more have been kidnapped or taken away in camps. And now, the donor funding for the humanitarian response is decreasing. Recent food ration cuts by the World Food Program are having devastating consequences.

The unlivable condition in the camps and the reduction in food allowance has pushed many vulnerable Rohingya families to embark on dangerous boat journeys in search of a better future. Most intend to reach Malaysia by sea, where there are much better conditions for refugees and more rights. But this means risking their lives on tiny boats for weeks. Unknown numbers of people have not survived the journey. The refugees in Bangladesh are also being compelled into engaging in illegal activities, and vulnerable Rohingya women are being kidnapped and taking risks by themselves to travel to neighboring countries like Malaysia.

The people of the Rohingya community live vulnerable and stateless in many countries all over the world. Families have been separated for decades, and many live with no identity documents in the countries where they reside. Our risky journeys out of Myanmar in pursuit of better lives did not start when the genocide against us peaked in 2017. People have been fleeing persecution since at least the 1970s, forced to be refugees in Bangladesh or elsewhere.

These dire circumstances are forcing a few impoverished families to consider going back to Myanmar under the pilot repatriation project that is now being mediated by China. Repatriation to unchanged, unsafe conditions in Myanmar where we still have no rights is not a real solution. Our people understand this and must be consulted in every decision-making process about repatriation and our collective future. Shockingly, no Rohingya person has ever been involved at a political level in ongoing repatriation discussions between Myanmar, Bangladesh, the UN, China, and other actors.

Refugees should have their own right to choose when to go home. The decision to repatriate cannot be left in someone else's hands. We, as people of Myanmar, know our situation better than anyone else. We know that repatriation isn't possible, safe, or sustainable as long as the people who still live in Myanmar are not safe there. The Rohingya community always wants to be repatriated. In fact, nearly every one of us is desperate to go home.

But we can only return when everything is stable. We must be able to return to our original land and ancestral villages. We must be recognized as rightful citizens of Myanmar. Our identity and rights must be respected. But today, these needs are not at all fulfilled. The military junta still avoids recognizing the Rohingya and has said clearly that returnees will be forced to live in encampments, not real homes. These places are nothing more than concentration camps. In this moment, we are so grateful to the U.S for recognizing Rohingya as genocide survivors, But

that recognition was only the beginning of a journey toward real progress. We want the U.S. to continue working on our issue, and to feel responsible for the betterment of the stateless Rohingya community.

In the short-term, we see that the international community is not reacting appropriately to the Rohingyas' situations in the Bangladesh camps. We need your involvement to make sure we can live peacefully while displaced. The humanitarian response needs sustained funding to ensure life-saving assistance including food, health, education, and safety in the Cox's Bazar camps. Looking toward long-term solutions, any dialogue and actions taken about our issues should not be led only by China. We want more participation from the U.S., the United Nations, Bangladesh, and influential countries who care about human rights. Most of all, like any people, we Rohingya need a voice and a role in making decisions about our own future.