



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Human Rights of the Rohingya People

Friday, March 17, 2017

10:30 AM – 11:45 PM

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning, and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's hearing on the human rights of the Rohingya people in Burma.

I would like to welcome our witnesses and thank them for sharing their expertise with us today. It is always a pleasure to see my former colleague from the House of Representatives, Tom Andrews. And I especially want to recognize Mohamed Naeem, who has traveled from Yangon to join us.

Rep. Joe Crowley, member of the Commission and a long-time advocate for democracy and human rights in Burma, expected to be present for this hearing, but a last-minute schedule change got in the way. I want to take this opportunity to recognize his commitment to Burma and to say that I look forward to continuing to work with him on this and other issues.

The Rohingya people are a predominately Sunni Muslim ethnic group that has lived for centuries in Burma's Rakhine State and in eastern Bangladesh. They are one of the most vulnerable and marginalized populations in Burma – they have been subjected to severe legal, economic and social discrimination, including limitations on travel, access to education, employment and their right to marry. More than 800,000 Rohingya have become stateless since Burma, under military rule, adopted a restrictive citizenship law in 1982.

This Commission has long expressed concern about the unjust and untenable situation of the Rohingya. We held our first hearing on this issue back in 2009, and have continued to pay

attention ever since. We are here today because not only have things not improved, but they have gotten much, much worse during the last several months.

Last October, after attacks by an unknown group of assailants on three outposts along the Burmese-Bangladesh border in which nine police officers were killed, the Burmese security forces undertook a “clearance operation” that lasted until mid-February of this year. During that action, as many as 1,000 Rohingya were reportedly killed. More than a dozen villages were destroyed; as many as 24,000 Rohingya may have been internally displaced; and between 65,000 and 73,000 fled into Bangladesh, in response to the violence that was unleashed.

As the operation unfolded, there were many reports that the security forces were committing grave human rights abuses. As early as November, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees described the action of the security forces in Rakhine State as “ethnic cleansing” and possible “crimes against humanity.” In February, the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, based on interviews with Rohingya in Bangladesh, documented gang-rapes, extrajudicial killings (including babies and young children), brutal beatings and disappearances by the security forces in a sealed-off area in the north of the state.

It should come as no surprise that military officials and the government, led by Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, have denied that any systematic human rights abuses occurred during the operation. An Investigation Commission set up by President Kyaw in December did not find sufficient evidence to take legal action.

But as we will hear today from our witnesses who have been on the ground in the region, the reports of human rights violations are very credible – so much so that the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar has called for the creation of a Commission of Inquiry.

This most recent wave of violence comes on top of an existing humanitarian crisis in Burma and Bangladesh. In December 2016, U.N. OCHA estimated that there were 218,000 internally displaced people in Burma, of whom 120,000 were Rohingya. In Rakhine State alone, some 400,000 people need humanitarian and protection assistance, and nearly a million are stateless. In Bangladesh, there may be as many as half a million Rohingya living in squalid conditions without documentation.

Yet in Burma there are consistent reports that the government is limiting humanitarian access, while in Bangladesh there is talk of relocating the entire Rohingya population to an island in the Bay of Bengal.

What we have here is another example of a man-made human rights and humanitarian crisis. The Rohingya have lived in Burma for centuries, yet they are denied their most basic,

fundamental rights – the same rights that Congress and administrations of both parties have sought to protect and improve over many years, using bipartisan legislation and sanctions.

But in recent years, we've seen a trend toward easing many sanctions. Last fall, as the clearance operation was underway, President Obama ended a number of restrictions on bilateral assistance to Burma. To do so, he had to certify that Burma had made “measurable and substantial progress in improving human rights practices and implementing democratic government.” This was surely a nod to the 2015 elections that brought the current government to power. But what about the risk of ethnic cleansing or even genocide against the Rohingya people?

And, as of yesterday, we have the additional problem that U.S. humanitarian assistance to the people of Burma -- \$50 million in FY2016 – may be drastically cut or eliminated. We would be unable even to offset the consequences of the horrible abuses that the Rohingya are suffering.

In this very unhappy context, I look forward to hearing our witnesses' testimonies and their recommendations as to the next steps the Congress should take on Burma. What can we do – what must we do -- to support the human dignity of the Rohingya people?