



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Victims' Rights in Burma

Wednesday, July 25, 2018

10:00 – 11:30 a.m.

2200 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning, and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on victims' rights in Burma.

I would like to extend a special welcome to our witnesses and thank them for their presence today. The Commission could not do its work without the support of human rights organizations and brave individuals like you in the United States and around the world. We deeply appreciate all that you do.

Burma, a multi-ethnic state, has been in the news for months for a terrible reason: over the last two years, the Burmese military, the Tatmadaw, has waged a brutal scorched earth campaign against the Rohingya minority in Rakhine state.

A new civilian government took power in Burma in March 2016. A few short months later, a Tatmadaw campaign displaced tens of thousands of Rohingya into Bangladesh. A second campaign began in August 2017 and has forced some 700,000 more people to flee to Bangladesh.

Villages have been razed to the ground, women and girls gang-raped, men executed. The whole Rohingya population has been demonized by the authorities, some Buddhist leaders and far too many of the Burmese people.

Aung San Suu Kyi, State Counsellor and once a revered human rights figure, has been unable, unwilling or both to do anything to stop the criminal violence – “criminal” because it is

hugely disproportionate to the assaults by an armed insurgent group used to justify it, and because the Tatmadaw targets civilians.

But here's the thing: there is little that is new, except perhaps the scale, in the "clearance campaign" perpetrated against the Rohingya in Burma. The Burmese military has used the same tactics for decades against other ethnic populations in Burma.

The infamous "Four Cuts" counter-insurgency strategy seeks to deprive ethnic armed organizations of food, funds, intelligence and recruits by terrorizing civilians and driving them out of their villages.

The Burmese military directly attacks villages, murders unarmed civilians, rapes women and girls, sets landmines in fields and roads, and destroys crops, markets, homes and property.

A brutal campaign in Karen state during the 1980s forced tens of thousands to flee to Thailand. Over 300,000 people were driven from their homes in central Shan state between 1996-1998, and another 100,000 fled Kachin and northern Shan state in 2011.

The Tatmadaw has never been held accountable for its abuses. In fact, Burma's 2008 constitution shields them from accountability for past crimes.

And now in 2018, in spite of a government peace initiative begun by the civilian government, fighting in Kachin and Shan states has intensified and there are new allegations of serious human rights abuses by the military.

We will hear today that the same tactics used against the Rohingya over the last two years have been and continue to be deployed in several of Burma's ethnic states.

I believe the entrenched impunity of the Burmese military contributes to the unending cycle of violence in Burma. It is time to recognize that what has happened to the Rohingya is not an aberration. It is the *modus operandi* of the Burmese military, and it must end.

Today we will hear recommendations for ways to advance accountability for an institution that has been out of control for far too long.

I want to note that the House has acted on this issue when it approved bipartisan language for the National Defense Authorization Act to impose targeted sanctions on Burmese military officials implicated in gross human rights abuses and other atrocities against ethnic minorities.

Unfortunately, that provision did not make it through the NDAA conference, so we need to find a new way forward.

But accountability for past crimes is not enough. It is necessary but not sufficient.

We say that victims have rights, and one of those **is** the right to justice.

But there are other rights: to truth, to reparations, and to the guarantee of non-recurrence – meaning that violence will not be repeated, that it will end once and for all. The guarantee of non-recurrence is about prevention.

How do we stop the ongoing violence **and** keep it from starting up again?

This is where issues like citizenship, resolving land disputes, and ensuring real civilian control over security forces come into play. This is why reforming laws and policies that lead to gross human rights violations is essential.

A permanent end to the violence requires addressing the underlying sources of conflict that are tearing the country apart. I hope we will also hear recommendations along these lines this morning.

Let me close with one more comment.

The government of Burma has consistently denied that its forces have committed the crimes you will hear about today, calling the allegations “fake news.” But the information the witnesses will share with you is well-documented, it is credible, and it has been verified.

So the Burmese government is lying, while imposing a huge humanitarian crisis on neighboring countries and the rest of the world. This is simply outrageous.

No government has the right to do what Burma has done. Sovereignty does not extend to genocide, nor to ethnic cleansing, nor to the commission of any human rights abuses. Governments do not have the right to crush whole populations.

We need to emphatically reiterate this message every single day to every single rogue government around the world.

Let me turn now to my colleagues for their opening remarks.