



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 Statement by Rep. Edward R. Royce, Chairman, House Foreign Affairs Committee

I thank the co-chairs of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, Rep. McGovern and Rep. Hultgren, for holding this important hearing today. The Rohingya Muslims in Burma are perhaps the most persecuted minority group in the world.

For over three decades, the Rohingya minority in Burma has been denied even the most basic of human rights. In 2012, the world witnessed nearly 200 Rohingya killed and 140,000 displaced by devastating violence. Most of these victims were forced to remain in squalid displacement camps.

Even more disturbing was a U.N. report last month which said Burma's police and army forces carried out military operations in these camps in October 2016, committing what can be considered crimes against humanity in a campaign of rape and sexual abuse against ethnic Rohingya Muslim women and girls.

Some survivors of these attacks were reportedly as young as thirteen years old. It is estimated that 1,000 Rohingyas may have been killed in this most recent wave of violence, with 70,000 fleeing to Bangladesh in the aftermath.

Today, more than one million Rohingya living in Burma face continued restrictions on their fundamental rights to move freely, marry, or have children. They have no access to healthcare and education, and without freedom of movement, they are unable to obtain meaningful employment. It is no wonder that the Rohingyas have been risking their lives to leave by the thousands, many ending up vulnerable and falling prey to human traffickers.

I raised the issue of the Rohingya's plight with Aung Sang Suu Kyi when she was in Washington last year, but I remain disappointed by the continued persecution of this minority group with impunity under her watch.

The Kofi Annan-led Arakan State Advisory Commission has done admirable work in its investigation, but had experienced difficulties in fulfilling its mandate because of resistance from the Tatmadaw and local government officials in Rakhine State.

The Commission's initial recommendations includes the call for unfettered access for humanitarian aid organizations and the media to areas of northern Arakan State; closure of all internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps; and the return or relocation of IDPs to a place where they feel safe. These are certainly a good start.

Aung Sang Suu Kyi has publically agreed to the commission's recommendations, and said that she intends to carry out prompt implementation. The international community is waiting.

We should be calling for further international inquiry into the violence which occurred last October through a formal Commission of Inquiry at the U.N. Human Rights Council.

We must find a way forward to improve the living conditions of the Rohingya, and call for reforming Burma's 1982 Citizenship Law to create a path toward citizenship.

Without this, how can the new government claim progress toward true democracy and reform? The cruel mistreatment of the Rohingya Muslims must end today, and the United States must prioritize the protection of human rights in its relationship with Burma.