

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Victim's Rights in Burma

July 25, 2018 - 10:00 a.m.
2200 Rayburn House Office Building

Statement of Tun Khin
President
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Honourable Chairmen, colleagues from civil society,

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to speak before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. The Rohingya people need friends in the international community today more than ever, and forums like this one are a crucial opportunity to highlight the very serious issues facing our community. I appreciate the effort that has gone into bringing us all together today and for providing me with this platform.

Since August 2017, when the Myanmar security forces and their proxies launched their “clearance operation” in Rakhine State, headlines across the world have been dominated by the horrific abuse inflicted on the Rohingya people. Thousands of people have been killed, hundreds of villages burned to the ground and almost 800,000 women, men and children forced to flee into Bangladesh. There is an abundance of credible evidence that the Tatmadaw have been responsible for crimes against humanity.

While we in the Rohingya community to some extent appreciate that our suffering has finally reached the global consciousness, the events of the past year have hardly come as a surprise. For decades, the Myanmar authorities have been engaged in a systematic effort to, at best, make the lives of Rohingya in Myanmar so unbearable that we see no option but to flee, or, at worst, to violently exterminate us. The only fitting way to describe this is “genocide”.

In 1978, the Myanmar security forces launched what they called “Operation Dragon King” across Rakhine State. What was ostensibly an effort to identify “illegal immigrants” ahead of a national census turned into a vicious military effort marked by widespread human rights violations against Rohingya. Hundreds of thousands of people were forced to flee into Bangladesh. Among them were my parents, who spent several months in refugee camps in Bangladesh before returning to their homes. In the early 1990s, I witnessed similar abuses myself

when another military operation was launched in Rakhine State, again leading to more than 200,000 refugees fleeing into Bangladesh. The atrocities that took place in Rakhine State from August 2017 merely represent the latest chapter in a long tale of abuse.

It is not just the threat of violence that is a daily reality for Rohingya in Myanmar, it is also the debilitating and state-led discrimination and segregation. For Rohingya in Rakhine State, life resembles an open-air prison. Every aspect of our lives is controlled as the Myanmar authorities have in effect denied us citizenship and the rights associated with it, while imposing severe restrictions on our freedom of movement. These make it exceedingly difficult to access basic services, livelihood opportunities, to travel to hospitals, or to gain an education. There is a prevailing sense of hopelessness and despair among Rohingya in Rakhine State. Indeed, I myself decided to flee Myanmar in the 1990s when authorities barred me from attending university, simply because I was a Rohingya.

This wider perspective is important to keep in mind when discussing what can be done. Accountability is crucial to breaking this cycle of abuse, and to not embolden perpetrators to commit the same crimes again. Myanmar has time and again shown that it is both unwilling and unable to investigate itself. The commission of inquiry established by the Myanmar government in 2018 will without a doubt lead to no genuine accountability. The international community must play a role in providing justice, and we urge members of the UN Security Council to refer the situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court as soon as possible. We further urge all international states to support Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee's calls for an international accountability mechanism to build on the work done by the UN Fact-Finding Mission into human rights violations in Myanmar.

This accountability will be important not just for Rohingya, but also for communities in other ethnic areas of Myanmar, including in Kachin and Northern Shan States. The Tatmadaw has in these areas committed war crimes and displaced tens of thousands of people with impunity.

Finally, a word on the proposed repatriation process of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar. This process must not begin until the safe and dignified return of Rohingya is guaranteed. This must include addressing the root causes of the crisis, including dismantling the systematic discrimination against Rohingya. It must also involve international guarantees for the protection of Rohingya inside Rakhine State so that we are not, once again, left at the mercy of the Myanmar security forces. The exact nature of such protection will need to be negotiated but could involve the deployment of a UN Peacekeeping Force. We are also deeply disappointed that Rohingya representatives have been wholly excluded from the negotiation process between various UN bodies and the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar. Rohingya must be allowed a seat at the table to determine our own future.

Thank you for your time.