

**Testimony of Honorable Thomas H. Andrews
President and CEO
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee**

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the United States Congress
Public Hearing: "Human Rights of the Rohingya People"**

March 17, 2017

Chairman McGovern, Chairman Hultgren, Distinguished members of the Commission:

Thank you for conducting this important hearing. It comes at an extremely important time. The lives of the Rohingya ethnic minority who live in northern Rakhine State in Burma are at risk. Untold numbers have perished at the hands of military forces in a horrific scorched earth operation that was launched in October of last year. At least 75,000 have been forced to run for their lives over the border into Bangladesh.

I know, I recently returned from the Bangladesh/Burma border and I am grateful for the opportunity to share with you, through my remarks today and a written report of my trip, what I heard and saw. With your permission, I would like to enter my report into the record.

Mr. Chairman, I interviewed twenty-five Rohingya men and women who had been subjected to what the military has described as "clearance operations" in the Maungdaw Township of northern Rakhine State. It became very clear to me, however, that the actions of the military can more accurately be described as horrific brutality, torture and murder. The inaction and outright denials of the Myanmar government - in light of these horrors - and despite documentation by several credible sources including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights - can best be described as alarming and outrageous.

In interview after interview, survivors described to me how soldiers would surround their village in the early morning hours. Often they would separate men and boys from women and girls. The men and boys were subjected to beatings and often forced to sit for hours shackled, in the hot sun. Women and girls were also subject to beatings. Many became victims of sexual assault by soldiers. Gang rape was common. The military units sought to inflict maximum harm on villagers with what can only be described as psychological and emotional torture. Entire families, and sometimes their village neighbors, were forced to watch sexual assaults, for example. Several of the survivors were forced to watch in horror as family members were assassinated. Some had their throats slit, others were shot at point blank range. Some described helicopter gunships descending on their village, opening fire on their neighbors as they ran.

A mother described having her infant son ripped from her arms and thrown into a fire. Stories of elders, disabled people and young children being burned alive in homes that had been set ablaze by soldiers were repeated. Soldiers, I was told, would often berate villagers as the horror unfolded, telling them that they should leave Myanmar. Many would dance as village homes burned.

The rampant violence in northern Rakhine State comes on the heels of systematic oppression over many years that has included denying the Rohingya their ethnic identity, the stripping of citizenship rights, and inhumane restrictions on movement, marriage, children and employment. Myanmar government authorities continue to deny aid workers, human rights monitors and journalists unfettered access to the affected region. According to UN agencies operating in Burma, the Rohingya are being denied access to adequate humanitarian aid including thousands of children who are now suffering from acute malnutrition.

Mr. Chairman, enough is enough. The United States and the world cannot sit idly by as this horror continues to unfold. We must recognize a grim reality that the government of Myanmar is loath to admit, demand unfettered access to impacted areas that has long been denied, demand that the killing and persecution stop and make clear that those who are responsible for this horror will be held accountable.

With this hearing, you are helping to bring public attention to an issue that for too long has remained in the shadows. From your position in Congress and as members of this distinguished bi-partisan Commission, you can help forge a strong US response. The UN Human Rights Council in Geneva is about to consider options for addressing this crisis. They include authorizing a thorough, impartial investigation through a Commission of Inquiry. We fully support such action as a means of applying pressure to stop the violence and making it clear that those responsible for this horrific brutality will be held fully accountable.

The US, a voting member of the Human Rights Commission, is in an excellent position to make this a reality. While the current administration has yet to take a position on such an inquiry, it is noteworthy that Secretary of State Tillerson made his own view clear during his confirmation process:

“Not only is the mistreatment of the Rohingya a tragedy, but it also threatens to radicalize a generation of young Rohingya. The United States must support regional and international efforts to investigate abuses and pressure the Burmese government and military.”

Mr. Chairman, the Rohingya of Burma have been subjected to unspeakable cruelty and horror not because of anything that they have done, but because of who they are. They deserve justice. Those who have been directing the unspeakable and systematic crimes against them deserve to be held fully accountable. Recognizing the Myanmar government’s failure to provide either, the international community must act. The United States can do so by immediately taking a strong and principled stand at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva and by providing strong and sustained pressure on the government and the military of Burma.

Thank you, again, for holding this important and timely public hearing. I will be happy to answer any questions.