

Testimony of V. Kate Somvongsiri  
Acting Deputy Assistant Administrator  
Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, USAID  
Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
October 5, 2017, 9:00AM

Chairman Royce, Ranking member Engel, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. As you have seen, the recent escalation in violence in northern Rakhine State, Burma has resulted in massive displacement and humanitarian needs both in Burma and across the border in neighboring Bangladesh. This is a humanitarian crisis that is growing rapidly, and the United States is responding to save lives. Recent events not only imperil the lives of thousands, but also cast a cloud over Burma's recent democratic gains, and threaten to undermine their economic and political reforms.

We are deeply concerned about the humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh and reports of horrific human rights abuses in northern Rakhine State. Our main challenge in responding to the humanitarian crisis in northern Rakhine State is not due to a lack of resources, but a lack of access. This is due to restrictions imposed by Burmese authorities, which prevent UN and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) from providing much-needed humanitarian assistance. Over 50,000 people fleeing the recent violence in Rakhine, most from the Rohingya community, have sought refuge in Bangladesh. For a sense of scale, that's nearly the population of Washington, D.C., leaving the city in the span of little over a month. In addition, there are as many as 200,000 of people from many communities who have been internally displaced – and are in need of assistance – inside Rakhine State.

While the immediate crisis has been triggered by a coordinated attack from the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on Burmese security outposts and disproportionate response by Burmese security forces and militias, the conditions for a large-scale crackdown on Rohingya civilians have been developing for several years.

In response to the latest violence, USAID is responding on both sides of the Burma/Bangladesh border, providing humanitarian assistance where possible, as well as helping host communities cope with the influx of refugees in Bangladesh, and addressing intercommunal tensions in ethnically mixed areas of Rakhine in Burma, including those not directly affected by recent violence.

As a foreign service officer who lived on the Thailand-Burma border sixteen years ago working with migrants and refugees, Burma is for me, as I know many others, a special place that has influenced my path in international human rights and development. In my testimony, I will touch on the issues USAID is responding to in the current crisis, and highlight some of the challenges we face in attempting to provide assistance, and bring a lasting resolution to this crisis.

## **Context/Recent Developments**

In the wake of the most recent violence, conflict-affected populations in central Rakhine, including those in pre-existing IDP camps, are in critical need of food, health, and sanitation assistance. However, humanitarian activities were suspended on August 25, and have only partially resumed. World Food Programme (WFP) food rations are more than a month behind, and the government has not yet authorized delivery of food distributions to IDP camps that would normally have taken place in September.

While local civil society groups and Red Cross organizations are distributing limited assistance to internally displaced communities, UN partners and international NGOs have not been allowed to provide assistance in northern Rakhine State, state, the Rohingya-majority area where abuses are occurring. Burmese officials have instructed local civil society groups that they are not permitted to provide assistance directly to Rohingya communities, and that all assistance to Rohingya will be managed by the government and Red Cross Movement organizations. Burmese officials continue to emphasize that the Government of Burma and Red Cross Movement will lead response efforts and that assistance delivered directly by international groups such as the UN and INGOs is not currently an option in Rakhine State. We continue to call upon the Burmese Government and military to allow unfettered access for humanitarian access to resume across Rakhine State.

As conflict continues in Rakhine, tens of thousands of people continue to flee into Bangladesh. Since August 25, more than 500,000 men, women, and children have fled into Bangladesh from Burma, bringing the current total estimated number of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh to as many as 900,000 people. The new influx of Rohingya is currently encamped in a series of informal settlements and host communities in and around Cox's Bazar in Southeast Bangladesh near the Burmese border.

## **USAID Response**

So far in FY 2017, the United States has provided over \$100 million in humanitarian assistance for vulnerable communities displaced in Burma and the region, including Bangladesh. Through USAID's Offices of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and Food for Peace (FFP), the Agency has provided over \$27 million, and we expect to continue responding to this crisis in FY 2018.

## **Burma**

USAID has been responding to the humanitarian needs of vulnerable populations (including but not limited to Rohingya) in Burma for decades. In the east along the Thailand-Burma border, USAID supports cross-border consortiums and local partners to respond to the humanitarian needs of nearly 400,000 Karen and Karenni IDPs and refugees. In Kachin and northern Shan States, where recent armed conflict has led to further displacement, USAID is supporting nearly 100,000 IDPs in areas with limited humanitarian access, though the

military continues to prevent humanitarian assistance from reaching areas that are administered by ethnic armed groups.

In Rakhine, the international community has faced years of challenges to humanitarian access due to insecurity, restrictions put in place by local and national authorities, and public mistrust of international organizations. USAID has responded to the needs of conflict-affected populations across Burma, including Shan, Kachin, and Karen states, as well as the Rohingya, since an outbreak of intercommunal violence in 2012 displaced over 100,000 people in Rakhine.

In Rakhine State, many of USAID's partners were forced to suspend their work due to the military's security operations since the August 25 attacks and they remain unable to gain access to northern Rakhine State. It's important to note, though, that humanitarian access throughout Rakhine State had become increasingly restricted even before the August 25 attack. However, our partners have maintained a presence in Rakhine and many of our conflict mitigation and intercommunal conflict mitigation programs remain ongoing. Our humanitarian programs are ready to resume activities as Burmese authorities permit access.

USAID partners have been able to resume limited life-saving assistance to people in central Rakhine State located in camps for internally displaced persons in Sittwe and Pauktaw. This includes nutrition, protection against trafficking and other human rights abuses, and water, sanitation, and hygiene services, largely managed by local staff. However, the security forces continue to prevent full humanitarian access to northern Rakhine state and full resumption of activities in other parts of the state. Additionally, insecurity, government restrictions, and local communities' enmity towards UN and NGO staff, including local staff further inhibit access. False and misleading rumors about the Rohingya, the level of threat presented by ARSA, and the role of the international community spread amongst local communities and fanned by official government and military information channels have contributed to the volatility of the present environment.

Reports of atrocities against civilians are extremely troubling, and further demonstrate that humanitarian assistance and protection from further violence is urgently needed. We continue to call upon all parties to allow unfettered humanitarian access to people in need and we urge the authorities to allow media and human rights monitors access to the afflicted areas. We also urge Burmese security forces to follow the lead of the elected government in implementing the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State's recommendations.

USAID's Mission in Burma is closely coordinating with other agencies in Burma and the regional international organizations, and other donors, to address the situation in Rakhine State. Together with our colleagues at the State Department, along with the international community, we have reiterated our strong concerns to the Burmese Government, and have called on them to end violence, provide immediate, unfettered humanitarian access, and ensure the dignified, safe, and voluntary return of all those displaced from their homes.

The Red Cross Movement has begun an initial humanitarian response to reach 150,000 people in the next three months, as requested by the Burmese Government until broader access is possible. Even this initial response will stretch the capacity of the Red Cross in Myanmar. The Red Cross Movement as well as diplomatic missions continue to advocate for access and support from other humanitarian agencies.

Additionally, USAID continues to support civil society in Rakhine State and across Burma to prevent further escalation of violent conflict and counter hate speech and rumors. Peace networks, made up of diverse civil society organizations throughout Burma, have actively combated misinformation on the Rakhine conflict, as well as worked to prevent the narrative from spreading into a larger conflict targeting all Muslims, like was seen in 2012 and 2013. These efforts, along with our work with local government officials on conflict mitigation trainings, have been complemented by our partners working on Facebook, developing online platforms that counter fake news by fact-checking local reporting and online rumors.

### **Bangladesh**

The speed and volume of people fleeing over the border from Burma to Bangladesh has been staggering. We have seen more people flee, over 500,000, in the span of less than two months, a truly unprecedented rate, faster than even the movement out of Mosul, Iraq, or South Sudan into Uganda, within the past year. I don't like to use the term 'unprecedented' lightly, but it seems to be the most fitting term in this situation.

Given the enormity of this influx, stark challenges remain in order to adequately address the scale and speed of the response effort needed. The people fleeing to Bangladesh arrive with little to no possessions, and have settled in existing makeshift settlements, newly established sites, as well as in host communities. They are in immediate need of access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities, emergency food assistance, and sufficient shelter, health, and nutrition services. Conditions in displacement sites raise very real concerns about the risk of disease outbreaks.

We applaud the Government of Bangladesh's generosity in responding to this severe humanitarian crisis and appreciate their continued efforts to ensure assistance reaches people in need. The Government of Bangladesh has set aside approximately 2,000 acres of land adjacent to the Kutupalong makeshift camp for the new arrivals. The Government has also committed resources to provide health services and started biometric documentation for new arrivals.

The international humanitarian community has also mobilized, with many UN agencies making Level 3 – the highest level – declarations including the World Food Program, UNHCR, and UNICEF. We are working alongside our State Department colleagues and other donors, to support UN agencies and NGOs on an effective response. I would like to point out

that declaring this a Level 3 crisis, along with places such as Syria, South Sudan, and Yemen, should underscore the severity of the situation.

The USAID Mission in Bangladesh is actively engaged in responding to the crisis, leading several donor coordination meetings with international agencies and Chiefs of Mission from several countries. Over this past weekend, U.S. Ambassador Marcia Bernicat and our Mission Director, Janina Jaruzelski, visited the formal and informal refugee camps to further assess the needs and determine how the U.S. Government can be most helpful.

USAID's Office of Food for Peace recently contributed \$6 million to WFP for their response to the influx of refugees into Bangladesh, in addition to \$1 million provided to WFP earlier this year. This funding complements assistance announced by the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration on September 20, which included \$28 million in assistance to Rohingya refugees and host communities in Bangladesh. In addition to providing life-saving food assistance, USAID's contribution supports essential coordination efforts needed to manage the massive influx of new arrivals and need for immediate scale-up. Given these needs, FFP has also deployed a senior FFP Officer and Communications Officer to augment the Mission's humanitarian response efforts.

USAID recognizes that host communities are stretching their own scarce resources to provide support to this sudden and massive influx of refugees, and have had their normal livelihoods disrupted. USAID maintains a robust program of regular development assistance to Bangladesh, providing more than \$212 million in 2017. Programs in the Cox's Bazar region, housing the influx of Rohingya, support efforts to expand economic opportunity, advance health and education, and ensure best practices are used to foster human rights.

## **Conclusion**

USAID will continue efforts to foster national peace and reconciliation, maintain momentum for democratic and economic reforms, and improve the lives of the people of Burma. However, we must be honest and forthright in our assessment of the situation, and clear on what we expect as humanitarians, and as Americans. The latest violence and continued conflict in Rakhine has exacerbated the existing human rights situation and humanitarian crisis, imperiling the lives of hundreds of thousands. In the long-term, our development efforts must continue to address the underlying drivers of the violence. But in the immediate-term, until the conflict is resolved, we shall remain resolute in our efforts to assist Rohingya and all affected communities within Burma and Bangladesh.