

**Testimony to the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and Nonproliferation
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Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Yoho, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Rohingya crisis. Since our founding more than 100 years ago, Save the Children's work has changed the lives of more than one billion children in the United States and around the world. We strive to ensure children have a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn, and protection from harm. Specific to the Rohingya crisis, we support the needs of children and their families in both the refugee camps and the host community in Bangladesh as well as in the camps for displaced communities in the central part of Myanmar's Rakhine State. This testimony speaks to the humanitarian needs and challenges across both of these contexts.

First, I want to express appreciation for the work of this subcommittee, the full House Foreign Affairs Committee, and all those throughout Congress and the Executive Branch who have remained committed to addressing the needs, rights, and protection of the Rohingya. At the end of this month, the world will mark the solemn three-year anniversary of the atrocities that occurred against the Rohingya and other Muslim minorities in Rakhine State. The generosity and engagement of the U.S. Government has been and continues to be important and necessary.

This moment now – three years after the initial crisis – presents significant challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic is threatening lives in and around the camps in Bangladesh and has made the provision of humanitarian assistance more difficult. In Myanmar, ongoing conflict in areas of Rakhine and Chin States has continued to result in civilian casualties and displacement. Further, increasing stress factors have led hundreds, including higher percentages of children, to take dangerous journeys by sea to seek refuge in countries throughout the region.

That said, much of the overall political and humanitarian needs remain the same. To move toward resolving longstanding challenges, Save the Children continues to call for the following:

1. **The Government of Myanmar must make sustainable progress to guarantee the rights and freedoms of the Rohingya in Myanmar.** Work must be done to address the root causes of violence against the Rohingya, meaningfully improve their situation, and create an enabling environment for the voluntary, safe, and dignified return of refugees to the country. In part, this should include implementation of all the recommendations of the Rakhine Advisory Commission in the spirit in which they were intended.
2. **The Government of Bangladesh should continue to support the humanitarian needs and safety of the refugees in Bangladesh until such time as they are able to safely and voluntarily return to Myanmar.** This should include working with local, national, and international humanitarian agencies to identify and remove any and all impediments that hinder the humanitarian response and the subsequent delivery of essential, lifesaving services.
3. **Regional governments – including Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand – must end blanket policies to push boats back to sea.** Instead, refugees should be allowed to disembark, respecting the principle of non-refoulement. In all cases, the rights of refugees should be protected, and at no time should they be criminalized or arbitrarily detained after disembarking.
4. Recognizing the contributions made thus far, **the United States should continue efforts to prioritize the immediate needs and long-term interests of the Rohingya by:**
 - **Taking additional action to hold the perpetrators of the violence against the Rohingya to account.** This should include additional targeted sanctions on both individuals complicit in

- atrocities as well as military-owned companies. The U.S. Government should also work with like-minded countries to move forward complementary measures.
- **Building on diplomatic engagement with the Governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh and other regional actors** to support improved conditions on the ground in Rakhine State and Cox's Bazar, and to ensure safety and protection for Rohingya at sea.
 - **Maintaining its generosity in supporting humanitarian assistance** on both sides of the border. Further, Congress should fully invest in the international COVID-19 response by providing no less than \$20 billion in the next legislative package to address the pandemic.

Bangladesh

One of the most notable things I heard when I was on the ground in Bangladesh in December was that the current situation in the camp “could be the best things get.” This already was an unacceptable scenario, but with the spread of COVID-19 the situation has predictably deteriorated.

It is a credit to the Government of Bangladesh that they welcomed nearly 750,000 refugees, including 400,000 children, in 2017 on top of earlier refugee flows. There are now over one million Rohingya living in the Cox's Bazar area, making it the largest and most densely populated refugee camp complex in the world. While there have been massive and laudable efforts to build up the camps and provide services, opportunities for education and livelihoods are sparse to non-existent; protection risks are ongoing; tensions with the host community remain challenging; and no progress has been made to enable safe returns to Myanmar. Of the Rohingya I spoke with, safety, education, and livelihood opportunities were priority concerns. And, the overwhelming majority of the Rohingya want to be able to return home.

Boys and girls are vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking, and sexual abuse. Worryingly, as of September 2019, there were nearly 9,000 unaccompanied and separated children registered in the camps. There has also been an uptick in the numbers of unaccompanied minors attempting to leave Bangladesh by boat to seek refuge in other countries. We routinely come across forced marriages, and cases of domestic violence and abuse. We often hear about instances of trafficking, child labor, and exploitation. Many children live with the effects of their exposure to rights violations in Myanmar, but are unable to access the mental health and psychosocial support they need to achieve a sense of wellbeing. Further, challenges specific to life in a refugee camp setting both compound children's distress and make it more difficult to heal from past trauma. It is estimated that nearly 70 percent of Rohingya children in the camps require access to mental health support. Of those identified, less than 40 percent were expected to receive such support in 2020 even before the outbreak of COVID-19.

Many children are out of school due to a variety of factors, including an inability to access formal education, the need to accommodate multiple two-hour classroom shifts due to space constraints, and limited availability of the approved learning curriculum. However, the loss of education is more profound for girls whose school attendance drops off significantly as they get older. In fact, by the time girls enter puberty-age they are often kept at home. We have been able to pilot some girls-only, in-home learning centers, but the needs are great and long-standing challenges related to girls' access to education makes finding female instructors difficult. Limited access to education and a lack of opportunities connect directly to risks of child marriage and adolescent pregnancies, which in turn can have significant health consequences and further disadvantages girls.

This was the reality before the COVID-19 pandemic struck and required a shutdown of 80 percent of the services in the camps, including the closure of temporary learning centers, and child- and girl-friendly spaces. A key sign of hope before the pandemic had been the approval by Bangladesh authorities of a

pilot program utilizing the Myanmar educational curriculum to expand opportunities and prepare students for the day when they might return to home. However, that, too, had to be placed on hold.

Rohingya children are now not only at risk from the virus, but will have to face this pandemic – and the associated emotional distress – without access to their regular support systems or safe spaces to play. Since the beginning of the lockdown in the camps, our child protection team has reported a marked increase in reports of children facing violence and abuse in their homes and children going missing in the camps. The reduced access to child-friendly services, coupled with reduction in humanitarian personnel on the ground due to COVID-19 has created an environment where children are at constant risk. The physical and mental burden this places on children and their parents is immense.

Working across seven different sectors, including child protection and health, Save the Children has had to adapt our program models and make new investments. In fact, several weeks ago we opened a 60-bed isolation and treatment center for those with COVID-19. We continue to provide essential health services and support the distribution of food to more than half of the camp. Our teams have done a remarkable job of addressing new needs and developing workarounds, but the situation is less than ideal. There is limited testing capacity, and limited access to critical supplies like personal protective equipment, oxygen, and ventilators. We are also dealing with a context that has four times the population density of New York City, where sanitation and hygiene facilities are shared, and where respiratory illnesses already top the list of the most common conditions we encounter. Support from the U.S. and others to address and treat the spread of COVID-19 is imperative, and any and all efforts must be undertaken to reduce undue restrictions – like the shutdown of telecommunications networks and Internet access dating back to September 2019 – as this further hinders the response.

Even as humanitarian actors work to support needs in the midst of the pandemic, there is a crucial opportunity for the U.S. and broader international community to ensure that the post-COVID-19 environment is built back better and is not a return to the status quo or worse.

Myanmar

Save the Children works in various areas throughout Myanmar, including in central Rakhine State where we support nearly 230,000 people from different communities. This includes the provision of essential services to 125,000 displaced people across 21 camps, the vast majority of whom are Rohingya.

August of 2017 was marked by mass atrocities against the Rohingya, but it's important to remember that persecution and violence have been ongoing for decades. We have seen an exodus of refugees to Bangladesh in 1978, from 1991-1992, and again in 2016-17. The ongoing inability to hold perpetrators accountable and make sustainable progress to address Rohingya rights and freedoms, increases the risk of future atrocities and refugee movements.

The consequences of discriminatory policies and ongoing marginalization of the Rohingya continue to have severe negative consequences, not least of all for children. The lack of freedom of movement and access to effective pathways to citizenship and documentation, segregated and confined living conditions, and the denial of other rights, including access to basic services such as health care and education, make life very hard on children and their families. This impact is felt in their daily lives, but also when it comes to the longer-term outlook for these families and their hopes for a better future.

At the end of November, I traveled to the large set of displacement camps outside Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State, as well as a camp in nearby Pauktaw Township. The primary concerns of the Rohingya with whom I spoke were basic rights like freedom of movement and citizenship, security, and justice and

accountability for the atrocities committed. Education was also a key concern. Children want to learn and parents want their children to have the opportunity. While access to primary school is much more readily available, secondary school is limited, and tertiary education is nearly impossible. The absence of opportunities for higher education is discriminatory and structurally disadvantages the Rohingya, leaving them unable to invest in their own futures or improve their socio-economic situation through schooling.

Specific to COVID-19, the health-related impacts of the pandemic have been much less significant in Myanmar thus far. However, limited access to healthcare and the ongoing restrictions on the Rohingya and other Muslim minorities living in camp settings is a reminder of the continued risks. The only tertiary hospital available in Rakhine State is Sittwe General. Freedom of movement restrictions, traveling distance, limited availability of transportation, and other factors make accessing emergency care next to impossible for many. Further, internet access has been restricted in eight townships since last year, severely impacting the population and making information sharing related to the virus more challenging. Hopefully, we will not see a significant rise in COVID-19 cases, but the dangers of ongoing restrictions and unequal access to services are clear. It is also important to note the significant socio-economic impact of the pandemic and the impact on education due to school closures.

Additionally, there are two challenges that will be important to follow now and in the weeks ahead. The first is the ongoing fighting between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar army, also known as the Tatmadaw, that continues to kill, wound, and displace mostly ethnic Rakhine children and their families in both Rakhine and southern Chin States. There are documented incidents of schools, homes, and entire villages being burned. Over the first three months of 2020, the numbers of children killed or maimed was six times the number from the preceding three months.

We are deeply concerned about growing numbers of civilian casualties, and the continued limitations on humanitarian access in northern Rakhine State where significant fighting has been ongoing. The use of heavy artillery, airstrikes, and landmines in or near populated areas puts children at severe risk, and contravenes International Humanitarian Law. Alongside other humanitarian agencies, we have been calling on the Government of Myanmar and other armed actors to implement a ceasefire in light of the pandemic and in accordance with the United Nations Security Council global ceasefire resolution. They should also agree to refrain from attacks on and use of schools, as provided for by the international Safe Schools Declaration, to better protect students and their access to education.

The second challenge is the election on November 8. As it stands now, the Rohingya do not have the ability to vote despite being able to do so as recently as 2010. Some groups have expressed concerns that there could be an uptick in fighting, and that the rights and ability of individuals to access the polls could be further impeded. A scenario where the Rohingya and other minority groups are unable to exercise their right to vote will undoubtedly have a negative impact on this emerging democracy, and will further entrench inequality. The absence of viable options to channel political demands could set the scene for more conflict in the coming years.

Finally, during my visit, it was clear that significant progress could be made in central Rakhine State, but that these opportunities were not being utilized. There are places where Rakhine, Rohingya and other ethnic minorities still live in close proximity, and where people from different communities felt it would be possible to begin healing inter-group tensions. I was told that the process of building lasting peace could take place with the removal of restrictions like those on freedom of movement. The Government of Myanmar could begin by fully implementing the recommendations of the Rakhine Advisory Commission, which it has already accepted. These include significant and meaningful recommendations that, if carried forward in the spirit they were intended, would begin to improve conditions and

demonstrate to the Rohingya in Bangladesh that there may be a future when they can return to their country.

Region

Events on the Andaman Sea and in the Bay of Bengal since the start of the year highlight the desperation of many Rohingya to build a life of dignity elsewhere. Some 2,000 mainly Rohingya refugees are believed to have taken to boats on dangerous sea journeys to reach third countries. Unfortunately, several states – including Malaysia and Thailand – have at times refused to allow refugees to disembark and instead have pushed boats back to sea, in violation of international human rights and other laws. In Malaysia, authorities have arbitrarily detained and imprisoned some Rohingya refugees for “illegal entry.”

Bangladesh is one of the only countries to have allowed the Rohingya from these most recent boats to disembark. However, the government has instituted a new policy of placing arrivals to Bangladesh on the island of Bhashun Char. There are now 306 Rohingya refugees – including at least 15 children – who have been on the island since early May. The government has been solely responsible for providing services and assistance. At present, no United Nations or humanitarian agency has assessed the conditions nor conducted wider technical assessments of the safety and sustainability of delivering aid on Bhashun Char.

Conditions for those stranded on boats have been appalling. Refugees, including children, have suffered from a lack of food and water, exposure to the elements, the trauma of seeing loved ones die, and abuse by human traffickers. Human rights groups estimate that more than 100 people have perished at sea this year. We urge the U.S. Government and the international community to support countries in the region, including through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to better share responsibility for refugees and collectively aid those at sea through search and rescue efforts.

Conclusion

Ultimately, life in a refugee or displaced persons camp should never be considered an acceptable long-term solution, especially for children. There are approximately 75,000 Rohingya babies who have been born as refugees since August 2017. Similarly, we estimate that 32,000 children have been born in displacement settings in Rakhine State since 2012. An entire generation of Rohingya children risks growing up confined in camps, be it in Rakhine State or Cox’s Bazar. We must challenge perceptions that because the Rohingya in Cox’s Bazar escaped Myanmar with their lives, they are safe. In Myanmar, we must also recognize the lack of progress on the ground for the Rohingya, the damage caused by continued violence, and the risks posed by the upcoming election. If anything, the coronavirus has demonstrated that we don’t have endless time to resolve the issues in Myanmar and finally allow the Rohingya to live in peace and the refugees to return home safely.

There are immediate opportunities for the U.S. Government to ensure that the basic needs of the Rohingya are met by increasing funding for the international COVID-19 response – the NGO community calls for no less than \$20 billion for work around the world – and continuing to support humanitarian funding on both sides of the border. In order to maximize these crucial investments, diplomatic pressure is also warranted to support sustained progress on the rights and freedoms of the Rohingya in Myanmar, and to improve the situation for the refugees in Bangladesh. With your continued attention, it is our hope that by this time next year much will have been improved. For the children who deserve a healthy start to life, access to education, and freedom from violence and other forms of harm, every day matters.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to answering your questions.