

**Statement of  
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**Before the  
House Foreign Affairs Committee**

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Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, distinguished Members of the Committee, we appreciate the invitation to appear before you today to testify on the devastating human tragedy that has unfolded in Burma's Rakhine State, exacerbating the longstanding suffering of ethnic Rohingya and other minority populations, inflicting a substantial burden on neighboring Bangladesh, and threatening to undermine Burma's substantial gains in recent years on its fragile transition from authoritarian military rule to elected government, including efforts to achieve a long elusive national peace.

We are grateful for the opportunity to update you on the current humanitarian situation facing those affected by the crisis, comment on what the State Department is doing through diplomatic engagement and the targeting of life-saving aid to address this situation, discuss the challenges the international community faces in delivering humanitarian assistance, and discuss what we are doing to move forward.

**Current State of Play:**

Rakhine State, one of the poorest states in Burma, suffers from a history of ethno-religious tensions, political conflict, military violence against civilians, and social and economic underdevelopment. This underlying conflict has resulted in periodic displacement of people within and outside of Rakhine State.

Over the last six weeks, attacks by militants, a disproportionate military response to those attacks, violence perpetuated by local vigilantes, and fear of a lack of protection for local populations has created a renewed crisis in Burma's Rakhine State, and exacerbated challenges for minorities, including the Rohingya people,

who lack most basic rights, including citizenship and even recognition of their identity.

The violence in Rakhine State continues to devastate vulnerable populations within Burma and cause families and unaccompanied minors to flee, particularly to southeastern Bangladesh. Estimates indicate more than half a million people have fled to Bangladesh with an estimated 200,000 internally displaced. This almost unprecedented population movement has worsened a desperate humanitarian situation in Bangladesh, where previous crises in Rakhine State had already forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees to flee. Prior to these attacks, 120,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) had been living in camps in Rakhine State since inter-communal violence in 2012. Approximately 87,000 had fled to Bangladesh following violence in October 2016, joining an estimated 200,000-500,000 undocumented Rohingya and over 33,000 registered Rohingya already living in southeastern Bangladesh for over two decades.

In Burma, the government has reported that the recent violence has emptied at least 175 Rohingya villages—more than one-third of the approximately 470 Muslim villages in northern Rakhine State, while satellite imagery from Human Rights Watch, taken on September 19, identified the burning of nearly 215 Muslim villages. The violence resulted in the suspension of humanitarian activities to affected communities across Rakhine State and further limited already restricted access to populations requiring ongoing assistance.

**Diplomatic Engagement:**

The suffering of so many calls all of us to action. This administration is undertaking all efforts to end the suffering immediately. In the case of this crisis, the State Department’s primary concerns are protection and achieving meaningful durable solutions for those who have been displaced, including the chance to go home again in safety and dignity when conditions permit.

We have made it clear to Burmese civilian and military officials at the highest levels, within the central government and in Rakhine itself, that all stakeholders must end the violence, respect the rule of law, cease displacement, pave a path for the Rohingyas’ return to their homes, and hold accountable those responsible for violations and abuses. We have expressed alarm about continuing reports of violence perpetuated by security forces, despite government assurances that security operations ended on September 5. We have received reports as well of civilians operating outside the rule of law—vigilantes—committing arson attacks on Rohingya homes and blocking humanitarian assistance to many populations.

We have been clear that those who have fled to Bangladesh or are otherwise displaced must be able to return home voluntarily – and we welcomed State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi’s commitment in her September 19 address that Burma would allow them to return. Much depends on the precise way in which people are repatriated. We are encouraging closer communication between Burma and Bangladesh. A senior Burmese delegation traveled to Dhaka earlier this week and the two sides agreed to form a joint working committee on repatriation.

Principals in our government have been strongly engaged on this issue. President Trump has discussed the situation with leaders from Southeast Asia. Secretary of State Tillerson called Aung San Suu Kyi on September 19 to urgent action. Vice President Pence denounced the Burmese military’s disproportionate response in his remarks at the United Nations on September 20. USUN Ambassador Haley spoke at an open Security Council meeting on September 28 and called for an international role in ending the violence. National Security Advisor McMaster has spoken with his Burmese National Security Advisor counterpart. All have made clear that this crisis has implications far beyond Rakhine State. We are also engaging ASEAN member states on the crisis.

### **Rakhine State Crisis Humanitarian Challenges:**

The challenges before us are many. We will focus on: (1) gaining humanitarian access in Rakhine State; (2) the need to work with host governments in the region to ensure refugees are offered safety and treated with respect, and that host governments have what they need to help the refugees; (3) specific contributions made by the State Department in coordination with USAID; and (4) ensuring that UN and other humanitarian agencies have the support they need to respond.

### Humanitarian Access:

The number one humanitarian priority is gaining access to those in need in Rakhine State. Relief agency access to most of the affected areas remains severely limited. Humanitarian activities remain suspended in northern Rakhine State and severely disrupted in central Rakhine as of mid-September. Although some relief activities have resumed in central Rakhine through local or camp-based staff, travel restrictions—primarily the lack of government travel authorizations and threats from local ethnic Rakhine groups—prevent international staff of UN agencies and INGOs from accessing IDP camps and affected communities across Rakhine State. In addition, safety concerns prevent many Burmese staff from accessing those in need.

We take every opportunity to emphasize to Burmese officials at all levels of government the need to allow humanitarian assistance to those in need. The White House, State Department, and the U.S. Mission to the United Nations have issued statements calling for immediate unfettered humanitarian access to all affected populations. The State Department has urged the government of Burma to grant immediate humanitarian access to northern Rakhine State, and find the government's commitment to do so encouraging.

We are working with international partners and stakeholders inside Burma to overcome challenges that have precluded humanitarian agencies and NGOs from reaching affected areas of northern Rakhine State. We have succeeded in securing Burmese government cooperation for the Red Cross Movement (RCM) to deliver assistance, but they alone cannot assess or meet all of the humanitarian needs in Rakhine State. Specifically, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) are working with the Myanmar Red Cross Society to develop and implement a response plan as the situation continues to evolve. ICRC has stressed to the Burmese government that the RCM will not be able to address all needs and the UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations will also need operational space. We are also pressing for unfettered media access to this isolated part of Burma.

#### Working with Host Governments:

We recognize the huge strain that the influx of refugees is currently placing on Bangladesh, as well as the concerns of other countries such as India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. We have seen reports of statements from the Governments of India and Thailand's efforts to keep Rohingya refugees from entering their countries. It is essential that neighboring countries keep their borders open for those fleeing violence in Burma, and we will continue to emphasize this to those in the region, along with seeking ways to support governments hosting refugees.

Bangladesh has kept its border open, though it is concerned about its capacity to absorb so many refugees, in addition to security concerns related to the influx of so many vulnerable people in such a short period of time. We appreciate the generosity of the Government of Bangladesh to those fleeing the violence, many of whom arrived after walking for days and in need of food, water, and medical care. They found official and makeshift camps already overstretched by previous influxes. International aid agencies are working to scale up operations and provide basic life-saving assistance to the new arrivals. The majority of those in need have little access to food, water, health care, and proper shelter. The monsoon season

has exacerbated the situation, as flooding and poor infrastructure have made aid delivery even more challenging. The UN estimated \$200 million is needed for emergency response in Bangladesh to meet needs through February 2018.

The Government of Bangladesh is working with UN agencies and the international community to provide temporary shelter and protection. Bangladesh recently donated 2,000 acres of land and is working with UN agencies to build shelter for up to 200,000 refugees. The government has also initiated a registration process to document the Rohingya population in southeastern Bangladesh and provide individuals with identification documents that we hope will facilitate access to services and protection. In every meeting with Bangladesh officials, we thank them for allowing refugees to cross and discuss ways to support them as they uphold humanitarian principles while balancing their own security concerns.

#### Humanitarian Assistance:

In addition to our diplomatic engagement, the United States is providing humanitarian assistance through our UN and international organization partners to help vulnerable populations affected by the Rakhine State violence. The U.S. continues to be the global leader in providing assistance to people in need in Burma and throughout the region. In FY 2017, thanks to support from Congress, the United States contributed nearly \$104 million in assistance to displaced populations in Burma and for refugees from Burma in the region. Of this funding, the State Department's contributions totaled nearly \$76 million. This included nearly \$32 million in emergency assistance announced at the UN General Assembly in response to the needs of those affected by the latest outbreak of violence. Our contributions provide life-saving assistance to meet critical humanitarian needs, such as food, non-food items, shelter, water, sanitation, and health both inside Burma and in host countries.

Department support in FY17 funded key humanitarian partners including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), and international non-governmental organizations, among others. These agencies are a key part of the international humanitarian system that is governed by humanitarian principles and brings technical expertise and operational capacity to respond quickly and effectively to large-scale crises such as this.

#### Humanitarian Coordination:

In addition to funding levels, the region's capacity to handle the humanitarian crisis is dependent on the capacity of the UN-led humanitarian response, including

deployment of emergency response experts and adequate staffing levels. In Bangladesh, we continue to advocate with UN coordinating agencies to increase expert technical staff on the ground and strengthen the coordination structure supporting implementation of the response plan. In a refugee crisis such as this, UNHCR holds the global protection mandate; however, in Cox's Bazar, UNHCR's role to date has been limited by government restrictions. The government has recently increased cooperation with UNHCR and recently approved its role in leading protection services. This will help improve conditions in Cox's Bazar, including through increased information on the number and needs of refugees and coordination in responding to the most vulnerable individuals. Government constraints on funding to experienced international NGOs have limited donors' ability to assist all those in need, though we are seeing improvements in these processes. We will keep up pressure to ensure seamless coordination and strategic vision for the response in Bangladesh.

### **Long-Term Challenges:**

In addition to pressing for immediate action to end violence and meet humanitarian needs, we are also supporting the elected government's efforts to address inherited challenges in Rakhine State. The government established the Rakhine Advisory Commission, led by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, which in August produced a set of recommendations for addressing the complex issues in Rakhine State that have ignited many crises over past decades. The Commission's recommendations on addressing underdevelopment, shortcomings in government services and access to justice and ensuring a credible, transparent citizenship process for all people in Rakhine, all provide valuable ways forward. The government of Burma has committed to implementing the recommendations.

The U.S. government is developing an overarching policy response that includes ways to discourage the serious human rights abuses we have seen and further encourage the democratization process and economic development in Rakhine State and throughout the country. We will not do this alone. We are consulting with regional partners, members of the international community in international bodies like the United Nations, and courageous voices inside Burma who want human dignity for all who reside in that country and a peaceful and stable future.

### **Conclusion:**

For decades, Congress and the U.S. Government have worked closely together on Burma as partners. In particular, we thank this Committee for its leadership and bipartisan collaboration. Together, we supported Burma's democracy movement

through the dark days of repressive military rule, and together we supported a military reform government's transition toward democracy.

It is in our interests, and those of the diverse populations of Burma, including the Rohingya, to see the new, elected government succeed. The current crisis in Rakhine State has exposed the fragility of that democratic transition. Greater civilian control over, and professionalization of, the armed forces is needed, as are reforms that will bring an end to the military's heavy-handed tactics that have fueled violence across Burma since independence in 1947. The democratically-elected government, security forces, community leaders, and populations across the country all must calm tensions, end the violence, and secure the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of all those displaced. Only then will there be a chance for lasting peace and change in Rakhine State and across the country as a whole.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, we are strongly engaged to bring an end to this major crisis and to find lasting solutions to the long-standing challenges in Burma's Rakhine State and beyond. U.S. government humanitarian assistance provides an important lifeline until this possibility becomes reality. We are grateful for the generosity of Congress and the American people who make our assistance possible. We will look to Congress, as we always have, as an essential partner in these efforts.

Thank you. We are ready to answer any questions you have.