

Testimony of
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Voice of America
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Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about Myanmar and the Rohingya refugee crisis. As you know, I am a journalist, and my job is simply to tell the truth—unbiased, accurate, and objective. I’m here today with the Voice of America, the largest of five media networks under the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), formerly known as the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). VOA connects the world to the United States through news and information and provides an independent voice in international media. Its mission is to serve as a reliable source of news, to represent America to international audiences, and present the policies of the United States, including responsible discussion of these policies.

As requested by the Committee, I will be sharing my personal observations of the conflict, which have been informed by my on-the-ground reporting, and the work of VOA to report the facts on this crisis and support access to information in the affected areas. My observations should not be construed as official positions of the Administration. I volunteer to host a weekly foreign affairs news program at VOA.

I have made four trips to investigate what is going on in Myanmar and the surrounding region. My first trip to the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh was in December 2017 in my own capacity, and I returned with VOA Director Amanda Bennett in June 2018. In this June visit, I saw breathtakingly worse conditions because of the monsoon season. Continuous rains had devastated the camps—with shelters slipping away in mudslides, walls collapsing around huts and people, and attempts at basic sanitation obliterated.

This is pure human suffering, measured not by the few but by the hundreds of thousands of people seeking safety and dignity. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that some 800,000 Rohingya refugees from Myanmar are now living in the camps. These people are forgotten—stateless, homeless, nameless. In Myanmar, the government has rejected use of the term “Rohingya,” refusing to recognize them. This attitude was evident in nearly

every interaction I've had with people in Myanmar—from government officials to taxi drivers. The Rohingya are non-people to them; they have been dehumanized.

The trauma of the refugees' violent departure from Myanmar is fresh. Pregnant women carry their babies not knowing if that child was conceived through their marriage or as a result of a gang rape by the Myanmar military. They are shunned in the community. Children have witnessed unspeakable brutality and live with those memories. One young boy proudly showed me a drawing he produced in an NGO-sponsored art program. I asked him to explain his artwork to me, and at one point said, "What is that?" He replied that it was a drawing of a severed bloody hand that he saw on the ground near his village home in Myanmar as he fled with his mother. I heard many people in the refugee camp speak about the Myanmar military's use of machetes to kill or maim.

The Rohingya people may look different from us, espouse a different culture, and practice a different religion. But fundamentally, they just want to live their lives and raise their children in a secure, peaceful home. They want to be healthy. They want to be educated. They want to work. These refugees in the camps are considered to be the lucky ones because they escaped. But the challenges for them are formidable, as you'll see in this short video:

[Insert video]

What do we do now? The international community is aware and concerned, but gaining traction with Myanmar officials has been difficult. In August 2018, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) issued a report documenting atrocities against the Rohingya people, detailing the military's mass killings of villagers, raping of women and girls, and torching of villages. The report recommended that senior military leadership in Myanmar be investigated and prosecuted for genocide against the Rohingya. U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations (UN) Nikki Haley confirmed that the State Department's own fact-finding report was "consistent" with the UN report. She was right when she said, "The whole world is watching what we do next and if we act."

As reporters, the Voice of America is already acting by covering the crisis from the start for its international audiences, including those in Myanmar. It's risky for VOA reporters in Myanmar to do this, as we have seen with the prosecution of Reuters reporters Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo. Our reporters have faced pressure to stop using the term "Rohingya" in their work, but they have resisted and are bravely covering the facts as they unfold.

In the very early days of the crisis in August 2017, reporters were barred from Rakhine State by the Myanmar military. VOA's NewsCenter in coordination with its Bangla and Burmese Services worked to piece together what had happened, and the Bangla service was able to get a stringer to the refugee camps in and around Cox's Bazar in the first days. Since then, VOA reporters have continued to cover the story in multiple languages, including interviews with representatives from the Myanmar and Bangladesh governments, UN officials, human rights organizations, reactions from the U.S. State Department, and congressional comments and hearings.

VOA is also working to directly reach the refugees. Director Bennett's visit with me to Bangladesh in June was not just to observe the conditions in the camp; it was to assess how VOA can better report on and broadcast to refugees. UNHCR representatives and other NGOs in the field were highly supportive, as were representatives from the Government of Bangladesh. VOA has had a Bangladeshi language service since 1958, and has strong brand recognition and credibility in the country. The assessment visit identified multiple options for delivering content, including radio and "listening groups" already established by NGOs where people gather regularly to listen and discuss content—mostly public service announcements—provided on thumb drives.

Director Bennett and her team also spoke with people living in the camp to investigate their news habits and issue preferences. Without exception, every group they talked to was extremely interested in news and information, across male and female groups. They wanted more than public service announcements about how to tie down their tarp in a monsoon. Rather, the groups exhibited self-awareness of how isolated they are from the rest of the world, and are especially eager to hear news from Myanmar and what the international community is saying about them. Some refugees with prior education recognized the VOA brand. They were also interested in learning English. In April 2018, VOA started transmitting thirty minutes of "Learning English" language instruction programming across AM and shortwave radio. This existing program for other areas has been extremely popular both in giving people a marketable skill, but also in building the VOA brand. VOA is also planning to start limited broadcasting in the Rohingya dialect.

The value of bringing news and information to these isolated, traumatized people cannot be underscored. Left in these camps long-term, with no viable future, they will lack economic opportunity, be targets for human trafficking or exploitation, or worse—violent extremism. VOA news can make a difference. And I believe that

this type of work is directly related to the VOA mission. I'm extremely passionate about this project because I see it as contributing to what I hope will be a strong, decisive response by the U.S. government to seek a long-term, peaceful solution for the Rohingya people.

In closing, I must acknowledge the efforts of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley. I know they have been forceful about this crisis.

I must also thank the many NGOs that rushed to help the Rohingya people fleeing from Myanmar last year, who work day-in-and-day-out in unthinkable conditions. From Doctors Without Borders to Samaritans Purse to the World Food Program, and many more. Their work is daunting, but their commitment is firm.

And finally, thank you, Chairman Royce and Ranking Member Engel, for convening this hearing. Reporters must bear witness, especially in documenting atrocities as they occur and using objective news to accurately inform policymakers. I firmly believe this is a pivotal moment for the United States and for being on the right side of history. When we say, "never again," we must mean it.