

Congressional Testimony
“An Unclear Roadmap: Burma’s Fragile Political Reforms and Growing Ethnic Strife”
Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific
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Oral Statement by Ralph L. Cwerman, President, The Humpty Dumpty Institute

Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Faleomavaega, Representative Bera, and Members of the Subcommittee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am very grateful for your continued interest in how U.S. policies and assistance can help the government and people of Burma build a peaceful, strong and stable democracy in which freedom and prosperity is available to all.

I am the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Humpty Dumpty Institute, a private non-profit organization engaged in humanitarian activities around the world. We implement large-scale agricultural development programs, organize school-feeding programs, deliver health-care to women and children in very remote areas of the world through mobile medical clinics, and provide opportunities for the most vulnerable people – single women who head households, ethnic minorities, and the disabled – to pull themselves up from despair through unique livelihood assistance programs. Our signature program around the world, however, remains our landmine and UXO clearance programs, as well as our Mine Victim Assistance and Mine Risk Education programs. We build schools, provide medicine, construct clinics, feed children, clear landmines and UXO, dig wells, put up latrines, plant gardens, grow fruit orchards and organize local businesses. As the tagline of the Humpty Dumpty Institute indicates, we work hard to “put the pieces back together”.

Today, I am delighted to add my views on Burma to those of the expert witnesses who are present here. My perspective on Burma comes from “boots on the ground” —from the actual development work in which we have engaged, from our partners who are helping us with these projects, and from the many people across the country with whom I have talked and who are extraordinarily thrilled by the speed and substance with which change and reform continues to take place in Burma.

The Humpty Dumpty Institute was the first American NGO to begin a Mine Victims Assistance and a Mine Risk Education Program in Burma that was funded by the State Department. And through this program, we also became the first American NGO to develop an official and close partnership with one of the most important humanitarian Buddhist organizations in Burma, the Sitagu Association. Under its influential leader, the Venerable Sitagu Sayadaw, this Buddhist

organization has provided humanitarian support to millions of people throughout Burma. The Association's network of 20 eye clinics around the country, its disaster relief work, and its national food deliveries serves all Burmese, regardless of ethnic group or religion. And the Sitagu Sayadaw's interfaith work is very well known around the country and region.

The Humpty Dumpty Institute, with the support of the Sitagu Association, selected Kachin State in Burma's far north to set up its landmine programs. Bordering China, and with a Christian majority, Kachin State is one of Burma's most troubled provinces and today remains the only State where fighting is currently taking place, as is the displacement of large numbers of people. The landmine problem in Kachin is considered to be one of the fastest spreading problems in the country. And there is little or no assistance available for the people of Kachin. Very little, if any, international support is reaching this area. Our organization chose this place to begin our work because this is where the need was greatest. And no other international landmine organization was working in that area.

On my last trip to Burma, Monsignor Francis, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Kachin, Sitagu Sayadaw and I spent the better part of an evening talking about Burma and its future. This conversation continues to be a deep source of optimism for me. We were 15 kilometers away from the frontline of fighting between Government and Kachin Forces. You could hear the mortar shells. But despite these rather dire circumstances, both religious leaders are enthusiastic about the future and strongly believe that Burma is heading in the right direction. There may be serious and painful bumps and bruises along the way, but the incredible progress made over the past two years has opened the doors to freedom and democracy for the people of Burma. It has infused the population with hope and optimism for a better life for them and their children. This process is irreversible and these religious leaders, both of whom met with President Obama during his visit to Yangon earlier this year, have come to rely on the United States as a strong partner and leader to help guide their country along the path to democracy and rule of law.

In terms of the sectarian violence between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim minority, the situation remains serious and tense. Approximately 250 people have died since June 2012 and more than 200,000 people are still displaced by last year's violence. The vast majority of these victims are Muslim. The displacement of these people and the violence directed towards them must stop. And the perpetrators of this violence must be brought to justice. At the end of the day, religious tolerance and the pursuit of interfaith cooperation must be a priority in Burma.

Buddhism is, of course, the religion of the majority of the people of Burma. But there are Roman Catholics, Baptists, Mormons, Muslims and Hindus as well. Freedom of worship is guaranteed by law and in practice. In major cities, pagodas, churches, mosques and Hindu temples are often side by side, affirming that religious tolerance has a strong foundation in Burma. There is even a long established functioning synagogue in Yangon. Many of Burma's religious leaders believe that the Buddhist-Muslim violence has been stirred up by only a handful of Burma's 500,000 monks and that the overwhelming majority of monks support interfaith cooperation. In addition, there are three very recent events that give cause for hope.

1. Recent news reports from Burma indicate that religious leaders from the Buddhist and Muslim communities have signed a "peace" agreement.
2. Senior leaders from both communities are also engaged in a series of on-going meetings since May to promote interfaith cooperation.
3. A government-appointed body that oversees Burma's Buddhist monks has issued a directive intended to end a monk-led movement accused directing the violence against minority Muslims.

US assistance to Burma has begun. USAID has opened an office in Yangon and is evaluating different sectors of the Burmese economy. The organization has a plan and it seems to be working. USDA has announced that it is working with the private sector, academic institutions, and civil society to expand collaboration in the following priority areas -- democracy, human rights, and rule of law; transparent governance; peace and reconciliation; health; economic opportunity and food security. USAID has spent nearly \$200 million so far, but much more is needed and is well worth the investment. At the same time, other departments within the executive branch must also join the effort. I make three personal recommendations here:

1. **Landmines:** The relevant Congressional Committees might want to consider some additional funding for the State Department's Weapons Removal and Abatement office. Burma faces one of the most severe landmine problems in the world today. Altogether, ten of Burma's 14 states suffer from some degree of mine contamination, primarily from antipersonnel mines. The most recent figures available (2008) suggest that mine accident rates in Burma are in fact amongst the highest in the world, only surpassed by Afghanistan and Colombia. It has been reported that millions of people live in 34 mine-contaminated townships and more than 10,000 survivors are in need of immediate rehabilitative care. There are huge challenges here. Unfortunately, a particularly

difficult period of violence in Kachin State a few months ago led to a suspension of U.S. funded assistance for this State. With a more stable environment taking hold, I hope this assistance can be restarted soon.

2. **Agriculture:** The US Department of Agriculture should place Burma on the eligibility list for both “Food For Progress” and “Food for Education” programs as soon as possible. Both programs could do very well in Burma and there is a strong propensity among local civil society organizations to initiate large scale agricultural development immediately.
3. **Religious Tolerance:** And finally, there are many interesting opportunities for efforts, led by the State Department’s Office of Religious Freedom, to bring the different religious communities of Burma together in common cause to advance the nation’s march to full freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. Buddhist, Christian and Muslim communities could all benefit by working together to solve problems through stronger collaboration and cooperation.

For its part, the Humpty Dumpty Institute will continue to assist Burma through a series of development and assistance programs. Our Institute recently organized a shipment of vital medicines, valued at a quarter million dollars, to the Kachin State Hospital and other clinics. We are also continuing our relationship with the Sitagu Association and planning a major medical assistance program in which American physicians will work hand-in-hand with Burmese doctors to carry out special eye-care surgeries throughout the country to all segments the population. We also hope to restart our mine victims’ assistance project in Kachin State.

In conclusion, a successful transition to democracy and freedom in Burma will be a very long and hard journey. And the Burmese nation faces massive and critical challenges in the years ahead. The democratic government in Burma is just two years old. And the political and economic reforms that have already taken place have been quite extraordinary. Still, Burma has much to learn and do in order to overcome the challenges ahead. It is a very poor country. There are very few job opportunities. It has little experience with democratic practice, norms or values. Burma today is at a critical stage in its history. It is making relentless efforts to achieve social and economic progress. At this juncture, when it comes to U.S. support and assistance for Burma, the prescription is “full speed ahead”. Strategically, Burma can become a significant ally to the United States in a volatile region of the world. Burma needs the understanding and cooperation of the United States and the international community now more than ever. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

