

Statement of Jonathan Stivers
Assistant Administrator, Bureau for Asia
United States Agency for International Development

Before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific

“Burma’s Challenge: Democracy, Human Rights, Peace, and the Plight of the Rohingya”

Date: Wednesday, Oct. 21, 2015; 10:00 a.m.

Chairman Salmon, Ranking Member Sherman and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the invitation to testify on the role of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in advancing U.S. foreign policy goals in Burma. It is an honor to appear again before the Committee, and a pleasure to be alongside my colleague from the U.S. Department of State Assistant Secretary Daniel Russel.

Burma has embarked on a long and challenging road of political and economic reform. The reforms that began in 2011 have set in motion ongoing transitions that will see important developments over the coming year including the election on November 8th, ongoing ceasefire negotiations with ethnic armed groups, the treatment of Rohingya, and the changing strength and vibrancy of civil society. The United States has a fundamental interest in the success of Burma’s reforms and remains a committed partner to those who seek greater freedom, prosperity and dignity in Burma.

Even before the reestablishment in 2012 of a USAID mission in Burma, the U.S. Government was providing critical support to human rights and democracy activists and victims of conflict including through humanitarian assistance along the Thailand-Burma border, in the Irrawaddy Delta and in central Burma. The USAID mission reopening has enabled the United States to expand our support for Burma’s reforms more effectively as the country emerges from decades of isolation.

Decades of military rule and conflict have prevented the development of well-functioning democratic governance systems and negatively impacted Burma’s economic standing in the region. Today, it is one of the poorest countries in the world with a quarter of the population living below the country’s national poverty line and significant health challenges, including some of the highest HIV, malaria and drug-resistant tuberculosis rates in the region.

To achieve USAID’s mission of ending extreme poverty and promoting resilient, democratic societies, we are focusing the tools of development to help the people of Burma deepen and sustain political and economic reforms. Closely calibrated with U.S. diplomatic efforts, our assistance bolsters the reform process by supporting transparent and inclusive electoral processes, building independent media and civil society, and promoting the rule of law and the protection of human rights. Our assistance also aims to advance national reconciliation and end long-running conflicts in ethnic regions. These interventions reinforce the U.S. Government’s commitment to those suffering from decades of authoritarian governance.

Ultimately, Burma’s future will be determined by its people. That is why support for civil society is at the core of our efforts, from strengthening political reforms and furthering national

reconciliation, to expanding economic opportunity and improving the health and resilience of vulnerable communities. Integral to a democratic society is also the freedom of speech, including speech that discusses the military and other government institutions.

Most recently, democratic freedoms continue to be tested. We're disappointed to hear reports that police have arrested and charged Patrick Khum Jaa Lee, the spouse of International Women of Courage Award recipient and USAID grantee May Sabe Phyu, and Chaw Sandi Tun. Charges made under the 2013 telecommunications law and the electronics law were reportedly in response to Facebook posts. Freedom of speech, including speech that discusses the military and other government institutions, is integral to a democratic society. We call on authorities to release these individuals immediately and unconditionally.

While the people of Burma face many difficult development challenges, my testimony will focus on the upcoming election, the treatment of the Rohingya population, and the peace process.

BURMA ELECTION - NOVEMBER 2015

The November 8th election will be a pivotal moment for the future of the people of Burma. The challenges of administering what could be the first credible nationwide election in Burma in more than a half century are daunting. The Union Election Commission (UEC) has limited administrative capacity, and recent flooding and continued ethnic conflict only further hamper their abilities. Despite this, political participation continues to grow. The people of Burma are actively participating in a vibrant and competitive election season with 93 registered political parties, including 60 parties representing ethnic minority groups.

We knew from the beginning that supporting the mechanics of a democratic election would be a tremendous challenge, but it is a challenge worth accepting because the reformers in Burma asked for and need our involvement. The U.S. Government is providing more than \$18 million in assistance to support Burma's upcoming elections and political processes. This includes assistance relating to election administration, election observation, political party capacity building, civil society, and the media. Our assistance supports all election stakeholders in holding regular dialogues and preparing for the elections. We continue to coordinate our election assistance with other partners including Australia, Denmark, the European Union, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

On election administration, we are working through the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) to increase the capacity of the UEC on international standards, voter registration, polling procedures, and the electoral legal framework. We have provided training to help the UEC work to increase confidence and partnership between civil society, political parties and the public, and have taken steps so the media has better access to and the ability to disseminate election-related information.

The UEC has made significant efforts to engage with civil society on election preparations, diversify membership on the election commission to include ethnic representatives, and improve the technical aspects of election preparations. It is important to note that Burma has invited election observers to observe this electoral cycle, a key component of electoral transparency.

USAID is supporting both domestic and international observation through The Carter Center, National Democratic Institute (NDI), and local non-governmental organizations.

Despite the positive steps taken by the UEC, challenges remain. The UEC recently disqualified 75 candidates, including a number of Muslims, through an opaque and potentially discriminatory process. The government also disenfranchised former white card holders, including hundreds of thousands of Rohingya. Steps that limit political participation run counter to the Government of Burma's commitment to democratic principles, and raise questions about the inclusivity of the elections. Questions continue to surround advance voting for the military, the voter list, as well as various other electoral administrative issues.

USAID recognizes that political competition is at the heart of a healthy democracy. To this end, we support a broad range of institutional development activities for all of Burma's political parties to improve their ability to represent the people of the country. Through our partner, the International Republican Institute (IRI), we are training political parties on establishing and managing effective party offices and ensuring their party policies are representative and inclusive. Training promotes political parties' outreach to their constituents to strengthen the link between the people and their representatives, with the goal of making sure all voices are heard. Thus far, our assistance has trained more than 8,850 political party members from 83 political parties.

On support for civil society and the media, USAID is providing grants to civil society groups and support to voter education activities to improve voter education and voter turnout on Election Day. USAID works with more than 200 organizations on voter education activities across the country. These organizations conduct workshops and get-out-the-vote campaigns — both door-to-door and on social media — and distribute voter education materials. Our support for voter education has reached some 18 million mobile phone users with election-related SMS messages.

In addition to this assistance, we continue to promote press freedom, freedom of expression, nondiscrimination and the protection of human rights. U.S.-supported media training, in particular, helps ensure that voters have access to accurate, impartial and reliable information on the electoral process and tries to lessen hate speech and inflammatory language.

TREATMENT OF THE ROHINGYA

The United States remains deeply concerned about the humanitarian and human rights situation in Rakhine State and the treatment of minorities, including the ethnic Rohingya population. More than 143,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain in camps, with limited access to basic services and restrictions on movement. Recent assessments also highlight the tremendous levels of poverty, malnutrition, underdevelopment and lack of access to basic services among many non-displaced populations, including ethnic Rakhine in Rakhine State. The devastation from the recent floods and Cyclone Komen in July 2015 have exacerbated the grim humanitarian situation in Rakhine State.

The U.S. Government has repeatedly urged the Burmese government to allow unimpeded humanitarian access for all those in need in Rakhine State; the voluntary return of internally displaced Rohingya to their places of origin; a path to citizenship for stateless persons in Rakhine

State and elsewhere that allows individuals to self-identify as Rohingya; and to reinforce the rule of law by protecting vulnerable populations and holding to account those who commit violence against any person in Burma.

U.S. government efforts in FY 2015 alone have included the provision of more than \$50 million in humanitarian assistance to vulnerable people, including Rohingya, in Burma and the region. Assistance includes USAID's Office for Foreign Disaster Assistance support for sustainable access to safe drinking water, rehabilitation and construction of new sanitation facilities, and the administration of hygiene promotion activities for displaced populations in camps in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan states.

The funding also includes USAID's Office of Food for Peace support to the UN World Food Programme for the distribution of locally and regionally procured food to conflict-displaced and other vulnerable persons in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan states.

In response to the recent floods, USAID is providing more than \$5 million in flood relief and recovery assistance to people affected by the disaster in Rakhine, Sagaing, Magway, Chin and other areas, reaching over 250,000 people with emergency food and supplies. USAID rapidly deployed disaster assessment teams to the hardest hit regions and quickly reprogrammed existing resources to deliver food, water, rice seed for replanting, and other emergency support.

USAID has also provided funding in small grant activities to increase participation and inclusion in reform and peace processes, counter hate speech, mitigate intercommunal violence, and strengthen conflict prevention mechanisms in Rohingya and Rakhine communities in northern Rakhine State. We are deeply concerned about the proliferation of hate speech while human rights activists are being arrested.

Additionally, USAID is addressing the root causes that increase vulnerability to human trafficking — a major concern for the entire Asia region — as well as supporting efforts to reduce poverty in Rakhine State. Through a conflict mitigation program in northern Rakhine State, USAID works to strengthen conflict prevention mechanisms in Rohingya and neighboring Rakhine communities. Not only does USAID promote interactions and economic growth between these Rohingya and Rakhine communities, but we also identify emerging opportunities to foster interaction and peaceful co-existence between Rohingya and Rakhine communities.

We encourage the Government of Burma to continue to return internally displaced persons in Rakhine State to their villages of origin. Support for these ongoing efforts is critical to help returnees phase out of humanitarian assistance and into sustainable livelihoods. To that end, USAID is working to create an environment in which returns proceed smoothly, lead to additional returns, and build trust and stability in mixed Rakhine and Rohingya communities.

USAID is currently developing a program to promote reconciliation and reintegration of IDPs through the safe, voluntary return or relocation of internally displaced households. The response will support families of both returning IDPs and surrounding impoverished villages in order to decrease tensions or perceptions of inequities. The successful return of IDPs could build confidence among communities in Rakhine State and mitigate irregular migration.

THE PEACE PROCESS

The long-term stability of Burma and the success of reforms hinge on national reconciliation and the end to 65 years of armed conflict. By promoting inclusivity and bringing communities together, U.S. assistance is playing a vital role in building the capacity of civil society and government to engage in the peace process effectively. Our assistance in Burma promotes greater participation in decision-making, increases transparency, and provides space for greater choice and opportunity — priorities shared and valued by communities in the largely Burman center and those in ethnic states.

In close coordination with the Department of State, USAID has provided \$8.5 million for activities that support the peace process by building trust among key stakeholders; facilitating and ensuring civil society and women’s participation in the peace process; providing training and support for civilian ceasefire monitoring; and raising public awareness of peace and peace-related issues. USAID also provides support to civil society, ethnic armed groups and government for the formal peace process, including the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement negotiations and its forthcoming implementation, as well as the anticipated National Political Dialogue.

USAID assistance since the mission’s reopening in 2012 includes more than \$100 million to conflict-affected communities through the provision of food, education, healthcare, protection and other life-saving services that helped sustain these communities through the years of conflict.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, we are clear-eyed about the numerous challenges related to these elections, the humanitarian and human rights situation in Rakhine State, and the peace process. As the events unfold over the coming months, we will reassess the context and nature of our assistance to Burma in close consultation with the State Department and Congress.

Once the new government takes office, there is much to be done to ensure that the full promise of human rights, development, justice and democracy extends to all people of Burma.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to your counsel and questions.

###