

## **Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and Nonproliferation**

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**August 9, 2020**

Thank you, Chair Bera, Ranking Member Yoho and members of the subcommittee for inviting me to update you on the Rohingya crisis. I am particularly grateful to the House of Representatives for your overwhelming bipartisan support in passing the BURMA Act last year. Even though the BURMA Act has stalled in the Senate and has yet to become law, I want to thank the U.S. House of Representatives for demonstrating a strong commitment to ending human rights abuses and mass atrocities in Burma.

### **My Story and the Background of Ethnic Persecution**

Honorable Members, I was just 18 years old when Myanmar's military dictatorship put me and my family in prison in 2005. My father was a political leader allied with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi during the freedom and democracy movement, but unlike other politicians, my father was targeted because he is Rohingya. My entire adult life has been dedicated to fighting this persecution. I knew from an early age that we were targeted because of our ethnicity and religion. Imagine our excitement and hope, when after seven years in prison, we were able to join our country in beginning a democratic transition in 2012.

But our hopes were quickly shattered when the Myanmar military ravaged Rakhine State that same year, burning villages to the ground and displacing tens of thousands of my people. Many of whom still live in destitute camps today. The intentions of the government towards the Rohingya were clear: remove us from our land, strip our basic freedoms, including the right to marry, have children, and access education, basic health care and food and destroy us as a group and people. Our very existence as a people, Rohingya itself was removed- with denials of our history, our removal from the census and subsequent disenfranchisement.

And yet, the violence didn't stop. In August 2017 the military unleashed a campaign of "clearance operations" which resulted in mass destruction and forced over 850,000 of my Rohingya brothers and sisters to flee across the border to Bangladesh. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum determined this violent purge to be a genocide. So too, the UN Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (FFM) concluded that this treatment "constituted crimes against humanity, war crimes and underlying acts of genocide."

Sexual violence, primarily against women and girls, but also men and boys was used as a weapon and left a trail of trauma that will last generations. Now I work with many survivors of these mass atrocities - among them a 24-year-old woman told me how her child and husband were murdered in front of her eyes, and how she was taken to a house raped and mutilated by

soldiers. She literally busted through the bamboo wall to escape this torture and flee to Bangladesh. Her injuries, including a broken backbone, now prevent her from working and her life is forever changed. This is one story of many women I know. As they look for reasons as to why this happened to them, they can only conclude, like I did after seven years in prison for no reason, that this happened purely because they are Rohingya.

### **Suffering on both sides of the border**

Now, three years on, as if being victims and survivors of genocide is not bad enough, over a million Rohingya people are living in limbo, in squalid refugee camps in Bangladesh, barely surviving with three donation items from NGOs such as rice, beans and oil. The Internet, essential for access to information at any time and a life-saving necessity during the COVID pandemic, has been cut off and there is no future. People seeking a better situation on rickety boats sail towards Malaysia or Indonesia but often become prey for human traffickers or arrive at further persecution and alienation in foreign lands.

Rohingyas who have fled Burma now face serious risks in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Thailand, India, and elsewhere, where they face online hate campaigns and fear of deportation - and all of this was preventable. It was the failure to address the root causes of persecution against the Rohingya that led to the genocide, and the ongoing risks my community continues to face. It is also a reminder that the problem is not bi-national. Likewise, this committee should be reminded that a long term solution cannot be unilateral.

In Burma, the NLD continues the practice of restriction on freedom of movement, discriminatory policies on livelihoods, and our people suffer tragically on a daily basis. Those who make the difficult and expensive choice of trying to flee to other parts of the country face arbitrary detention - detained for trying to survive. Hundreds of thousands remain displaced or caught in a war zone, and those that flee are arbitrarily detained and arrested.

Similar tactics have been used against ethnic minorities in Burma for decades, and continue today as the military inflicts abuse on civilians in its conflict with ethnic armed groups in Rakhine, Shan, and Karen states. These ongoing crimes against humanity and systemic discrimination of Burma's many ethnic and religious minorities, deserve your attention, and they require your protection.

### **Priorities for the community**

There are key demands echoed throughout Rohingya communities in Myanmar, Bangladesh and among the diaspora.

Firstly, my people want to return to our homeland, with the restoration of our full citizenship, equal rights and restitution for the damage to our lands and livelihoods. The Myanmar government has provided no assurance of returning what once belonged to the Rohingya

community nor providing compensation for their losses. In fact, the land is being bulldozed, confiscated, and given up to business interests and non-Rohingya Burmese.

Second, for the voluntary, dignified, safe and sustainable return of refugees to take place, the Rohingya must not be relocated to internment camps or 'segregated' Muslim zones. They must not be coerced into Rohingya accepting a national identification card that only confers second-class citizenship status. Full citizenry rights must be granted to the Rohingya for a just return.

Third, Rohingya people must take their rightful place at the table for any and all conversations that determine our fate. As the UN, Myanmar and Bangladesh negotiate for our return, we are currently left out of the conversation. This is unacceptable and will never result in a successful or safe repatriation process.

Fourth, like the US, Myanmar has less than 100 days until an important national election. As in 2015 in Burma, Rohingya people are still being denied the right to vote or the ability to run for our office, despite our long history of political participation in Myanmar. We ask that our right to vote be restored, and be made available for others displaced by violence in the country.

Lastly, to solve the myriad problems facing my people, the root causes must be addressed. Racist government policies are interwoven with social discrimination and stigmatization. My organization, Women Peace Network, and many civil society groups in Myanmar have been working to address these deep seeded issues through youth education and social cohesion. Our work and a real democratic Myanmar will only become a reality when the government stops suppressing civil society. The United States plays a critical role in pushing for a free society in Myanmar.

### **Recommendations:**

Despite the dire situation of the Rohingya people, I have been deeply inspired by the sheer resilience and the unwavering spirit of my people. We must act together to respond to their calls for justice and accountability. Your leadership and interest in Burma is critical to our success. To achieve that, here are 5 ways in which you can support us:

1. The U.S. must continue targeted Global Magnitsky sanctions and visa denials for the Myanmar military officials who are the key perpetrators of the gross violations of human rights against the Rohingya people and other ethnic and religious minorities. It is also crucial to impose financial sanctions on military-owned businesses since the income generated from these businesses enables the military to continue its brutal acts of gross human rights violations and genocide.
2. The U.S. Congress must ensure that the BURMA Act is passed in both chambers and signed into law. This powerful legislation will take meaningful action against perpetrators

of crimes against the Rohingya people through targeted sanctions, visa denials and increased humanitarian assistance and accountability mechanisms.

3. The U.S. Congress must strongly urge the Myanmar government to hold free, fair, transparent, participatory, and fully inclusive elections on November 8, 2020. Without the participation of the currently disenfranchised Rohingya people, these elections will not be credible and cannot pass as a democratic act.
4. We need US leadership to ensure that Rohingya are protected in and outside their country. They have suffered enough and face daily persecution and protection issues in multiple countries. One necessary step is to call the crimes what they are and legitimize the experience of the Rohingya people, who are survivors of the genocide. Another step is to press the Myanmar government to dismantle the long-standing policies of persecution that the Rohingya have long faced. While the military is the primary perpetrator of atrocities, the civilian government has perpetuated the institutions and laws that allow the risk of genocide to persist.
5. Finally, as you did today by inviting me here, always consult Rohingya people in every conversation that will impact the lives of Rohingya people. It is critical that Rohingya people have a seat at the table, whether that conversation is happening in Myanmar, in Bangladesh, at the UN and others.

I would like to thank Chair Bera, Ranking Member Yoho and members of the subcommittee one more time for giving me this opportunity to brief you all and I look forward to your questions.

Thank you.