

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Joint EAP/SCA Subcommittee

Hearing on Burma
Burma's Endless Crisis and America's Limited Option.

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2170 Rayburn House Office Building

Statement by Lucky Karim
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My name is Lucky Karim, I am a member of the Rohingya community from Burma. I would like to start by thanking the committee for holding this Hearing and for passing the Burma Genocide Accountability and Protection Act (or Burma GAP Act) out of committee.

I was forced to flee my home at the age of 14 in August 2017 when the Burmese military waged a genocidal attack against the Rohingya people in Rakhine State. As a child, I lived in the world's largest refugee settlement in Cox's Bazar Bangladesh for six years. The Burmese military regime has been persecuting the Rohingya in Myanmar for decades. Since the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, the political, economic, and humanitarian crisis in the country has only grown more dire for the Rohingya as well as other ethnic minorities in Burma. The remaining members of the Rohingya community in Rakhine State are dying from hunger. Internally displaced people have zero access to humanitarian aid, and the genocidal violence continues even to this day. As a result, tens of thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes since 2023, bringing the total population of people languishing in the Cox's Bazar camps to more than 1.3 million.

Dictatorship is a notorious problem in many countries. Dictators take away the freedom of the people in the name of their own power. They attack people's hopes and dreams. Despite the reality on the ground, Burma's military regime is planning a sham election next month. This election will never be free or fair. It is only a way for the military regime to seek international legitimacy. Our risky journeys out of Myanmar in pursuit of better lives did not start when the genocide against us peaked in 2017. People have been fleeing persecution since at least the 1970s, forced to be refugees in neighboring countries like Bangladesh or elsewhere. The people of the Rohingya community live vulnerable and stateless in many countries all over the world. Families have been separated for decades, and many live with no identity documents in the countries where they reside.

I traveled back to the Bangladesh refugee camps two times this year. When I was there in February, the World Food Program was preparing to announce cuts to food rations for refugees to go down from \$12 to just \$6 per month for each individual, a cut that would have had devastating consequences. Thankfully, the United States has stepped up to continue funding. But that funding will only last a few more months. Meanwhile, the closing of USAID and broader cuts have forced health clinics, learning centers, and other programs to close. People in the Cox's Bazar camps are fully dependent on the food ration that they receive once a month because the majority of them have zero earnings. There are no livelihood opportunities for families in the camps. These circumstances have pushed many vulnerable Rohingya women and children to embark on dangerous boat journeys in search of a better future to nearby countries, including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Those who reach those countries often face a lack of basic rights, arbitrary detention, and even forced return back to Burma.

The future of the Rohingya starts with our youth. The majority of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are below the age of eighteen. If there is to be a bright future for the Rohingya, it begins with access to quality education. It also means building self reliance. That will require access to training and livelihood opportunities. The government of Bangladesh – long a generous host to Rohingya refugees – has done much for my community. But expanding access to livelihoods and education would do perhaps more than any other policy to ensure a safe and sustainable future for the Rohingya back in our homeland.

Most urgently, there can be no bright future for the Rohingya without Rohingya. Too many of our people continue to die due to violence and hunger. The international community and the U.S government must act now to pressure the Myanmar military to stop its attacks and to allow aid into Rakhine and other areas around the country facing high levels of food insecurity. As we consider the future of my community, there are more questions than the simple answer. But within the answers lies the future of the Rohingya. Repatriation to our ancestral homeland is the ultimate solution. It has been said before by myself and so many Rohingya, but bears repeating: we the Rohingya community want to go back to our homeland in Rakhine State when it is safe to do so.

With abuses against the Rohingya by the military junta and Arakan Army, it is not currently safe for returns. Much would need to happen to create safe conditions, but there is a path. First, Rohingya displaced inside Rakhine State should be allowed to return to their original homes and villages. The Rohingya community must be part of any dialogue on returns. Some kind of international monitoring mechanism must be involved to provide some level of guaranteed safety. And there must be accountability for those who have committed atrocities against the Rohingya people.

We ask the United States to continue working on these issues, and to help advance the betterment of the Rohingya refugees.

Here is what the U.S. Government can do:

In March of 2022, the U.S. made a determination that “members of the Burmese military committed genocide and crimes against humanity against Rohingya.” But three and a half years have passed since the determination, and the U.S. has failed to reveal a comprehensive strategy or policy to address the genocide. The complete lack of policy action could send a signal of impunity to perpetrators of atrocity crimes, not only in Burma but across the world.

A comprehensive plan is needed to ensure accountability for those responsible for the genocide and crimes against humanity, and to address the immediate and long-term needs of Rohingya. Until the junta is held accountable, all civilians throughout Burma will continue to suffer, not only Rohingya but all marginalized and persecuted communities.

I am grateful to the members of this Committee who introduced the Burma Genocide Accountability and Protection Act, or the Burma GAP Act, in June of this year and passed it out of Committee with strong bipartisan support in July. The Burma GAP Act finally lays out a comprehensive policy for addressing the many crises affecting our country. It would support refugees and internally displaced people, support increased humanitarian aid and protection, and promote accountability for the military’s crimes. It would also promote long-term solutions for the Rohingya such as citizenship rights, safe and voluntary return, and inclusion in a future federal democratic system.

The bill also authorizes the creation of a U.S. Special Representative for Burma and calls on the administration to refuse to recognize the Burmese military as the country's legitimate government. This is important ahead of the sham elections scheduled for next month.

Congress should pass the bill because it does what both this and the past administrations have not yet done: create a holistic strategy to address the impunity of the junta, which it has enjoyed for far too long. This is critical as conflict continues and millions of people in Burma face displacement, insecurity, and denial of their basic rights.

Congress should also call for the immediate restoration of the U.S. refugee resettlement program. I am one of a few who have benefitted from the kindness of the American people and America’s rich history of resettling refugees. It has given me and many others the opportunity to speak on the world stage in support of my community.

And the United States should continue to engage the Bangladesh government towards providing education and livelihood opportunities for Rohingya refugees.

I would like to end here with a question for you: What will it take for my people to be able to live freely and securely in our home in Burma? And when future generations of Rohingya look back, will they still be asking the same questions? Or will they be home at last, asking simply: what took so long?