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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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•(1310)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Okay, everybody, we have a quorum sufficient for hearing testimony. As always in this committee, we are short of time.

[Translation]

This is the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is June 19, 2012 and this is our 44th meeting.

[English]

We are televised today, so act accordingly.

Today we are discussing what I think will be the final public meeting of our discussions about the human rights situation in Burma.

We are very fortunate indeed today to have with us as our witness Dr. Uddin, director general of the Arakan Rohingya Union. He has come all the way from London, England, to be with us. He is turning around and getting back on a plane after something like 18 hours on the ground to head back to London. For his superhuman efforts, for putting up with airline travel and food alone, we should give him attention, but he also has a very interesting presentation. As I think we'll all agree, this is a very important matter.

Welcome to our subcommittee, Dr. Uddin.

Mr. Parkinson, welcome to you as well.

Dr. Uddin, I invite you to please begin your presentation.

Dr. Wakar Uddin (Chairman, Director General, Arakan Rohingya Union, The Burmese Rohingya Association of North America (BRANA)): Thank you very much for inviting me to give a presentation. I'd like to provide you with information on the current situation of the Rohingya ethnic minority in the Arakan state in Burma. This Rohingya ethnic minority is a vulnerable population minority in western Burma. They have been facing ethnic cleansing for half a century. This situation has worsened, so I'd like to draw your attention to what is happening inside Burma and in our state.

Before I go into that, I would like to introduce our organization, which is known as the Arakan Rohingya Union. I represent this union. This is an umbrella organization composed of 21 individual Rohingya organizations from around the world. That includes our

own organization called BRANA, the Burmese Rohingya Association of North America, which includes Canada and the United States. We are a signatory to that Arakan Rohingya Union, made up of some 25 organizations.

The first mission of this organization is engagement with Burmese entities—governments and other entities—to address the Rohingya issue peacefully through diplomatic means. Our second mission is to improve the living conditions of the Rohingya ethnic minority and others inside Arakan, Burma. The third mission of ARU is the further enhancement of dialogue and the relationship between the Rohingya ethnic minority and other communities, including various ethnic minorities and other communities in Burma.

We have a secretariat for the ARU, headed by me as the director general. We have five departments: international relations, refugees, education, fundraising, and culture and media. We have an 11-member coordinating council and a seven-member advisory board. That's the basic structure of our organization.

Using a couple of slides I wish to present a very brief background of who the Rohingya are. They're an ethnic minority of mixed race in western Burma who have been living in that western part of Burma for many centuries. You can trace this mixed race of Rohingya back to the Middle East, the Caucasus, and South Asia. This Rohingya population is a mixture of various demographic populations that, for various reasons, came to Burma many centuries ago during the Persian and Mughal empires. They were Arab traders and others. This population is in western Burma, and I am one of the descendants of the Rohingya.

The different colours on the map of Burma represent each state. Arakan state is in blue in the red circle, a strip of land along the coastal region. The Rohingya populations are mainly in the northern part of the blue circle, the northern half of Arakan state, but there are also some in the south.

The Rohingya ethnic mixed minority in western Burma is mainly Sunni Muslim who have cultural ties to South Asia. They make up approximately 40% of Arakan state's population. That's a total of about three million, but only about 1.5 million are there now. About 1.5 million are scattered throughout the world, mainly in Asian countries.

Illiteracy is very high because there have been no opportunities for the Rohingya for many years. If you look at the census and at the situation on the ground, you'll see that less than 1% of the Rohingya population has graduated from high school. Most of them have not seen schooling of any kind.

The ethnic cleansing is a serious issue faced by the Rohingya ethnic minority in Burma. It is widespread. It is systematic, as devised by the Burmese military junta, and has been for the last 50 years. It's also systemic and a step-by-step process. It is ongoing. It never stops. It's increasing. It's long-standing. All of these ethnic cleansing operations are well coordinated and are well documented by the international community.

This ethnic cleansing was mainly initiated in 1962 by military dictator General U Ne Win. He took power when he overthrew the civilian government. During that time—in 1962 and prior to it—the Rohingya population had citizenship as an ethnic minority in Burma. After General Ne Win overthrew the civilian government, their citizenship was revoked by General Ne Win's revolutionary council.

Since then, anybody who is born is not given a birth certificate; they are denied birth certificates. Rohingya couples have not been and are still not given permits to marry. The Rohingya ethnic minority is the only ethnic minority in the country required by the government to obtain a permit if a couple wants to get married—the only ethnic minority in the country out of 147 ethnic minorities. Only one ethnic minority is required to obtain a permit from the government if a couple wants to get married, yet the denials are widespread. If there is a sporadic issue, it takes enormous amounts of bribes to the authorities to resolve it.

There are severe travel restrictions imposed on the Rohingya. The Rohingya people cannot travel within the state, between villages, across the country, or globally. Their movement is restricted. The authorities will take money—bribes—to give limited permits for local movement, or travel from town to town or village to village.

They are denied education. I was one of the fortunate ones who received education in Burma. I was born in Burma. I received education in Burma because initially when I was growing up, the military had just started ethnic cleansing. That was in 1962. I was seven years old. It increasingly became a problem for us to go to school, but during my time, we were given limited access to college, so I was one of the fortunate ones in Burma. I was able to go to college during that time, although we had to carry a permit, a licence, to travel to college campuses. Still, we were able to go. Now we are banned from all of that: no Rohingya student can go to college or even to high school. They can barely go to school.

There is confiscation of lands. The Rohingya society is an agrarian one of mainly farmers and fishermen. They have owned land for many, many centuries. Their lands have now been confiscated by the Burmese government and have been given to translocated families of another ethnicity, who are brought in from central Burma. They are brought into Rohingya land. Lands are confiscated and given to them, and they build settlements. The Rohingya have been replaced by them. It is going on as I speak.

●(1315)

Forced labour is widespread. An international conference took place on that recently. I can provide the report later on. There's child labour. Children aged five, six, or seven years have been taken for labour. Family members, from fathers to youngsters, are taken as forced labour.

There are arbitrary arrests. Police officers can arrest Rohingya without any charge. There's imprisonment without due process. They can be in prison for unlimited time periods without due process.

Arbitrary taxation is imposed on Rohingya people, as well as widespread extortion.

Government forces have created extremely harsh conditions in the Rohingya areas. The austerity means that it is becoming very difficult for people to live on a day-to-day basis. They have been directly or indirectly expelled to different parts of the country. You may have seen in the recent news that Rohingya boat people have been travelling to Malaysia and Thailand because they have nowhere to go. They get on these rickety boats to travel, and many have drowned, as we all know. It has been documented in the international media. This is all part of the expulsion process.

I want to bring to your kind attention the most urgent thing, which is the current violence and carnage taking place as we speak in Arakan state in Burma. This carnage and violence is coordinated. The organizing of this violence began in 2010, prior to the election. Basically the racially motivated violence was organized to purposefully transform religious violence in order to mobilize the vast majority of the population in the country, which is 89% Buddhist. Ethnic cleansing has been turned into religious violence. It's like any other religious extremist people around the world would do; they're following the same ideology of religious extremism.

There was a gruesome killing of ten Muslim pilgrims, who were not even Rohingya, who came to Arakan from central Burma for a pilgrimage. They were brought down last week from the bus. They had been slaughtered. Gruesome pictures have been released. It is humanly unthinkable to see those pictures of how they were murdered in this century, in this day and age.

That was a triggering point. Coordinated rioting since then has spread throughout the state. Many, many, many people were killed. We do not have the figures because when the government forces shot at unarmed Rohingya, the bodies were taken away in trucks right away and could not be recovered. The bodies were taken to an unknown destination. We know it is in the thousands, but we cannot give you a figure. We do not have the dead bodies. But we do have missing people. We suspect that most of these people who are missing have been killed. I'm afraid they have been taken.

Many villages have been burned. This morning I spoke with local residents in the provincial capital of Sittwe, formerly Akyab, who say that villages are still being burned despite the fact the government has imposed martial law, a curfew, a state of emergency. It's just not working on the ground, where the situation is very different.

●(1320)

Another unfortunate thing is that there have been false media campaigns taking place against the Rohingya in several international media. Unfortunately, the international media don't have any other source, to be truthful, than the Burmese information ministry. That ministry has been giving them accounts of this violence based on their Burmese officials on the ground. The information is highly distorted and false. Indeed, the international community and the media have not been able to get access to both sides of the story, the Rohingya side as well as the Rakhine side. This has been a problem for the last week or so, not knowing the real casualties, real deaths, and real carnage. The government says that 17 people have died, but I can assure you that each day it's hundreds, maybe thousands. The Burmese government is downplaying the loss of life and loss of property.

On behalf of the worldwide Rohingya community, I would like to appeal to the international community to pressure or convince, whichever way may be suitable, the Burmese government to immediately halt the ongoing violence through effective law enforcement on the ground. I ask because despite the state of emergency, lootings and killings are taking place. Not a single Rohingya is employed in the armed forces, the police force, or any other security force, and these forces are allied with their ethnic kind. So they are helping their own ethnic groups and fighting against the Rohingya. That's why these forces are Rakhine. Buddhist forces are not implementing and following their own law on the ground and we are not sure whether the president, who is staying in the capital city, is aware of this situation with an accurate account of what's going on on the ground.

We are asking the international community to intervene by pressuring or convincing the Burmese government to enforce the law effectively, rather than just announcing that there's a curfew. The curfew has to be respected by both sides. The Rakhine side is not respecting the curfew; police and other forces are allowing them to go out and loot and shoot people.

We ask the international community, including the governments in western countries such as Canada and others, to pressure the Burmese government and convince the government that it must agree to immediately appoint members of international peacekeeping forces in Arakan. This is of the utmost urgency. I do not have stronger words to express our concern about the immediate need for an international peacekeeping force on the ground to enforce the rule of law, return to peace, and stop the anarchy.

The Burmese government has been shown to be ineffective, as we have seen that that Burmese forces are unable able to stop this violence. We need the international community to intervene immediately. With the monsoon season under way, the aid groups and other international relief organizations need to be there. Right now, the refugees are internally displaced. They cannot cross over to Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government has sealed the border to refugees, to the people whose houses have been burned and destroyed. They are internally displaced. From the cities they have moved out to the forested areas, under the trees, under plastic sheets. We don't know exactly how they are living, but we know a monsoon rain, torrential rain, is very heavy. I don't know how long they can survive in the rural areas without a liveable structure.

This is why there is the urgent need for international aid groups. The Burmese government must give access to international aid groups to supply materials, food, water, and medicine. Waterborne diseases will be widespread. Even if the carnage stops now, we have another danger coming: these waterborne diseases. There is no sanitation there, so to speak. This is an urgent need.

We ask the international community to provide moral and material support. Basically we want long-term support for education and other infrastructure in that isolated region, which is one of the least developed areas in the world. Literacy, by which I mean high school graduation rates, is less than 1%.

●(1325)

It is critical that human rights be respected by the Burmese government, since the government has proclaimed that it is proceeding to democracy via democratic reform, in which human rights is a strong component.

I think there is a ray of hope, provided that the international community intervenes. Arakan state is very rich in resources, and we do have infrastructure. Once peace returns to our country through international development agencies, we can thrive very well economically, education-wise, and infrastructure-wise using our own resources if we can get some help initially from international communities.

To wrap up, I appeal to you with urgency. I'm begging the international community on behalf of the Rohingya community. We urgently need humanitarian help in Arakan so that people will not face starvation, disease, waterborne diseases, and lack of shelter.

With that, I want to thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to come here and appeal to you for support. Thank you very much.

●(1330)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Uddin.

We will go to five-minute question-and-answer rounds. We'll start, as usual, with Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Having listened to you speak, I would say there is quite a substantive difference between the situations in Kachin state and Arakan state. It's an entirely different situation, isn't it?

The Rohingya have never formed any kind of defence force for themselves or anything, have they?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: I will answer that question from an historical perspective. At present we do not have anything like that, and 20 or 30 years ago there were some groups in a remote region of Arakan and part of Bangladesh. There were some armed groups then. It was, I believe, 15 or 20 years ago while I was in college in Burma.

They were various small gangs, but they were disbanded. I think they did not get enough support from anywhere so they did not exist very long. At present we do not have anything like any armed Rohingya anywhere in the country or outside the country.

Mr. David Sweet: You mentioned the flare-up of the violence recently with those 10 who were pulled from the bus. Apparently up to 300 people were involved in the taking of these people from the bus and beating them to death. But this persecution began back in 1962. Do you have any numbers with you as far as deaths, “misplaced” people, or those who have been casualties of this from 1962 until now go?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: I do not have the figures. These operations are very secretive. They are carried out by the Burmese government. We know that in some families, youngsters were taken, fathers were taken by Burmese forces, and they never returned home. So there are a number in towns, but there are no statistics available to claim that such and such numbers of people have been killed.

But I would confidently say that they are in the thousands. Unfortunately we do not have the number because of the nature of the operations they are conducting.

Mr. David Sweet: You're saying there are thousands who are missing without any explanation.

Dr. Wakar Uddin: There are, without any explanation.

Mr. David Sweet: So there is either some secret place where they're incarcerated, or there are likely mass graves somewhere.

Dr. Wakar Uddin: I am afraid so.

Mr. David Sweet: That's disappointing and very troubling.

Dr. Wakar Uddin: May I add something?

Mr. David Sweet: Yes.

Dr. Wakar Uddin: Right now there are over 1,000 Rohingya who were arrested arbitrarily by the government just after the election because they were part of the election campaign. They had been campaigning for such and such parties, and they were picked up by police. Some of my relatives were among those arrested. Of all the political prisoners released recently during this democratic process, as a symbolic gesture by this government, not a single Rohingya was released, except for one in Rangoon.

Mr. David Sweet: Well that's good, because we made some conjectures in just the last statement. But do we know where these 1,000 are incarcerated? Were they incarcerated in Rangoon? Were they taken from Arakan state and incarcerated there?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: They have been mainly in Arakan state, but spread out. They are not in one place. They are in groups of 100, 50, or 70—whatever the number may be—in many prisons throughout Arakan state. I have information that they have also moved some to central Burma, so they have been scattered.

Mr. David Sweet: One of the lines of questioning that my colleague had for the witnesses we had from Kachin state was that there seemed to be.... You mentioned that you don't think that the president knows about what's going on, so is this really the Burmese military acting on its own with impunity and meting this out? Or do you think there's some government knowledge and control behind this?

• (1335)

Dr. Wakar Uddin: I would think so. I would think that somewhere in upper level of government they are maybe well aware of the current situation, because, as you know, although there is an elected government, these are former military officers. There

are a lot of hardliners. President Thein Sein is reportedly a little open-minded, a little moderate, but in the government there are hardliners. As for knowledge of this lawlessness and anarchy, I'm confident that they have been well aware of it higher up in the military.

Mr. David Sweet: Well, I—

The Chair: Unfortunately, that's the end of your time.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'm sorry about that.

Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Doctor. I appreciate your being here and I appreciate the passion you bring to this. Oftentimes we get reports when we're studying a situation in a country, but to have somebody with the on-the-ground experience is really important in helping us to understand it.

One of the questions that comes to mind follows on what Mr. Sweet was talking about. This began in 1962. There was a military aspect throughout. These hardliners you referred to who are in government, what are their ages? Are they in their fifties or sixties? Is this part of the initial 1962 group? Is this a secondary group? Or is it even worse, with a third set setting in?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: It's a very, very important question that you have asked, Your Excellency.

I think there are all ages, various ages, in the army group. Not many of the 1962 revolutionary council members are still living. One of them is in the NLD now. That is General Tin Oo, who was an architect of this ethnic cleansing in Arakan state.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Well, the point I was getting to, then, is that this has become systemic. It's not a group of people with a grudge or a bitterness working through. That may to some extent explain why it went from race-based to religion-based.... There was an evolution —

Dr. Wakar Uddin: Yes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: —a very distorted evolution.

From your testimony, you're saying that it's still the military who are behind much of what's happening. They foment the problem, and then the people run with it and do the terrible deeds.

Canada recently lifted a lot of its sanctions. As far as I can recall, there are still sanctions on weapons and arms, but the rest have been lifted. Do you think that was a good idea?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: I may want to present two different perspectives. I think that lifting sanctions.... I will not use the word “lifting”, but will say that “a relaxation” of sanctions may be a good way to go, but done carefully, quid pro quo.

Because President Thein Sein is saying that they are truthfully and sincerely moving toward democratic reform, I think western countries need to give some incentives without giving away too much—

Mr. Wayne Marston: I tend to agree with you, sir, and that's why I'm interrupting. I'm short on time, so when we have agreement, I think I'll move on.

Dr. Wakar Uddin: Yes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: The president declared a state of emergency fairly recently. He purported to do this because of the violence. Is that state of emergency genuinely supported by the military? Are they really trying to intervene to prevent more atrocities?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: I don't believe so. I don't believe so—

Mr. Wayne Marston: I'm sorry, sir. I didn't understand you. Did you say "I do believe so"?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: I do not believe so. I think it is partially orchestrated by the government, which is mainly controlled by the military.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I guess that takes us to a point: what is the end game here? Is it to wipe out these people completely?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: That's their objective. That's their objective.

Mr. Wayne Marston: It's very depressing to deal with, and I'm sure it's very, very difficult to be in the position you find yourself in.

Mr. Chair, how is my time?

The Chair: You have another minute.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Another minute? That's fine.

What I am concerned about, when you ask for international intervention, is that we're really talking two levels here. One is humanitarian aid. With the monsoon season coming, you're absolutely correct; the possibility of disease is a horrendous thought.

As far as military intervention goes, I suspect that's very problematic to have happen by the international community. I mean, when we see what's happening in Syria, with the blatant, visible things that are televised, the situation happening in Burma is quite hidden from the public, relative to that...and we're not getting the action on Syria.

But certainly pressing for humanitarian aid is something that's essential.

Thanks, Mr. Chair.

• (1340)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Marston.

We'll go next to Mr. Hiebert.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Thank you, Dr. Uddin, for being with us today. I appreciate your testimony. It's been a fascinating study that we've had on Burma. This is a great way to round out some of the other aspects to the nation that we've been discussing.

I've heard a little bit about the Rohingya and their history, but it's still not particularly clear to me. My questions relate to how things got to this place.

First, are there any indications that the violence you cited in Arakan state has been orchestrated by the Burmese government? You said it was coordinated in two places, starting around the 2010

election, and the riots were coordinated. Do you know who's doing the coordination?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: Yes. We have corroborated reports, substantive reports, that a significant component of the state government, the Burmese government in Arakan, is controlled by the Rakhine ethnic minority, which has been using violence against the Rohingya.

The coordination or the orchestration by the Burmese government is mainly by these Rakhine officials who have reached very, very high levels in the government system.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: So it's the state government officials.

Dr. Wakar Uddin: The state government, and they have reached the central government as well.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Okay.

Has there been any dialogue whatsoever between the Rohingya leaders and the Burmese leaders?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: There has not been dialogue between Burmese leaders and Rohingya leaders except during the election....

This is a very important point you have asked about, I must say. This has confused the international community as well.

On the one hand, the Burmese government itself has been doing ethnic cleansing and depriving the Rohingya of rights, violating human rights. On the other hand, they have picked up three Rohingya MPs. So while they are saying that these people are not citizens, that they don't belong to Arakan in Burma, they have three Rohingya MPs in the military-run, militarist USDP ruling party.

So the military has been using these three MPs for dialogue. Basically, these MPs are good MPs. They all care about Rohingya. But they are also under pressure from the military government about what to say and what not to say. Any discussion or talk going on between the military-run government and the Rohingya is through these three MPs and nobody else.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: So the Rohingya actually have elected representatives.

Dr. Wakar Uddin: Elected representatives.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: In the national government.

Dr. Wakar Uddin: In the national government.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Which party are they in?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: The USDP.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Is there a dialogue between them and the National League for Democracy?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: No. To my knowledge, there is no dialogue.

In fact U Soe Myint, a former MP not from the military, who was part of the NLD during Aung San Suu Kyi's 1988 landslide victory, tried to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi in Rangoon after she was released. He was not given access.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: I'm wondering why. I see in the news reports that Aung San Suu Kyi has been asked to comment on this issue, the state of the Rohingya, and from what I can tell, she has never commented. Do you have any idea why?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: I think she believes that it is a sensitive issue. The military and the Burmese government have brainwashed, so to speak, the Burmese population and the majority of the Burmese population who are not in favour of the Rohingya.

Aung San Suu Kyi appears to be walking a fine line, because she may feel that it is a sensitive issue, and she will not get support from the general Burmese population or the military government if she says anything that might imply justice for the Rohingya. They would think it is favoured.

• (1345)

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Why has the government taken this position regarding the Rohingya minority? I've heard statements that they believe that the Rohingya were not present during the colonial period. Is that the primary issue? Is it that they have not had enough history in the country?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: That is what they say. That's a pretext.

They must know, if they are intellectuals and historians and would base their knowledge, that the Rohingya have been living there for centuries and centuries, as I showed on the slide. It is an ethnic cleansing issue and a racial intolerance issue.

The Rohingya being Muslim does not help. Although they are turning to religion and religious violence, it started from ethnic cleansing.

They don't want this population of Indian or South Asian appearance or descent because of racial intolerance. They may have a paranoid idea that this population will grow and grow and will eventually take over and dominate the Arakan state. It's basically ethnic cleansing.

The Rohingya are unwanted people in their view. So by any means, they want the population eliminated through a gradual reduction, a rapid reduction, or a semi-rapid reduction. They have several strategies. They have driven out people before, hundreds of thousands, as you know, during the Bangladesh refugee crisis.

This is basically an ethnic cleansing, racially motivated, violent campaign.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hiebert.

We'll go to Mr. Eyking, please.

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for coming.

I'm new on this committee, and I am very new to the situation happening in Burma. It's an eye-opener for me. It's a tragic thing in the history of mankind when a society almost makes another group of society subhuman or non-citizens. We saw this in the United States before the Civil War.

You are suggesting that it's not necessarily religion. It's an attack on your people, similar to maybe an attack on the Jewish people in World War II or the gypsies in Europe. The rest of the country sees no place for you being there. So they're diminishing you and diminishing you as a citizen, technically.

We see this a bit in Indonesia right now. In northern Indonesia, they're doing it with the Christians. You're saying that it's not totally based on religion. It's based on a group of people they don't want in their country.

The United States Department of State says that it is more religion based. But I don't think it really matters what the reason is, because the reality is that your people are being ostracized, your people are being pushed around.

It was mentioned or alluded to that you have a new leader. She's held in quite good regard in the rest of the world. We are thinking that it's an inspiration for not only Burma but also for the region. But you don't have too much optimism about your change of command or change of leadership in Burma. You don't see that your people are going to be all of a sudden.... She is not the Abraham Lincoln who's going to make you equal. Is that the way you sense it?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: Yes.

Hon. Mark Eyking: She's not going to be the Abraham Lincoln of Burma.

Dr. Wakar Uddin: No.

• (1350)

Hon. Mark Eyking: She's not going to say, "Look, we have people in our country who are being downtrodden, and we're all equal".

Dr. Wakar Uddin: I must say this. Aung San Suu Kyi was mainly raised and educated in western countries, and her sensitivity to humanity is great. We can see that. We can hear that. We can sense that.

I think she could not be Abraham Lincoln, because society is very different in Burma. It is not a society like Abraham Lincoln had here. She would have to come to power completely, not just with 47 members in Parliament.

Hon. Mark Eyking: That being said, if it's not going to come from within the country, it's got to come from outside. If your people are to have any sort of peace or freedom, it has to come from the international community. You don't see it, no matter who's going to be running your country because it's a minority and it's not going to be recognized.

What can our committee do here, and what can the international community do to put pressure on...?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: Western countries, western alliances—NATO, the Europeans, Americans, Canadians—should sustain the pressure. I do not believe that military intervention is an option, at least at this stage. Exert pressure on the Burmese government through sanctions and other things, and don't relax sanctions so quickly and significantly, but give them some incentive to move forward and in the right direction. I think the international community can do a lot through the United Nations.

Again, I'm going to emphasize the word "sustain". Once pressure is put on the Burmese government, it should remain. I think the international community needs to be persistent. I know there's a lot of distraction around the world with Syria and many other places, but despite these other distractions, I think the Rohingya issue needs to stay up in the profile. With continued pressure on the Burmese government, I believe that they will eventually respond because they do want to develop relationships with the west via trade and other ways, and open up.

So if this new leader, Thein Sein, is a moderate, I think you will see some changes despite some opposition from his hardliners. I think a coalition, as you have done in many countries—Libya, Iraq, and many other parts of the world—but a non-military coalition at this point, with just economic.... Here I must say that I think the best approach is...I don't know what kind of policy the Canadian government has for sending Canadian teams, Canadian humanitarian groups, to Burma, or going through the United Nations.

Hon. Mark Eyking: If your leader is going around the world and the average person thinks Burma has finally seen the light, that it's looking like a better, more democratic country, are you suggesting that we should push back and say, that's fine, but there's a fly in the ointment, that something is not transforming in your country? So should we be pushing for monitoring at elections, for people from the UN or from Canada and various other countries to monitor the situation on human rights right in the country? That would be a big step.

Dr. Wakar Uddin: Absolutely. That is the key. I must emphasize that I cannot see a better way to handle the situation without monitoring and sending in various international groups—humanitarian groups, aid groups, monitoring groups, human rights groups—from the United Nations and individual countries. It must be a significant undertaking. If one or two UN officials go to one or two cities and come back, it's not going to work. It has to be persistent. They have to hit the ground. They have to have a regular office, and it has to be systematic, because the problem is systematic. It is widespread; it is not a small thing. I can assure you, sitting here and testifying, that it is very significant and that this has to be coordinated by the international community, just as the Burmese ethnic cleansing is coordinated.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Eyking, your time ran out about two minutes ago. But you had good questions, so I wanted to let the answer go on.

Ms. Grewal, please.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr. Uddin, for your time and your presentation.

The U.S. State Department report on human rights practices for 2011 has stated that the Rohingya minority has experienced legal, economic, and social discrimination, as well as denial of citizenship, restrictions on movement and travel, and denial of higher education or employment, as you stated in your presentation. In your opinion, besides the ethnic cleansing, what are the other underlying reasons the Rohingya population is treated differently from other ethnic and religious minorities?

● (1355)

Dr. Wakar Uddin: What you have stated is the primary reason, the ethnic cleansing, the ethnic intolerance—and being Muslim did not help the Rohingya people, which is also a factor.

But I must assure you that if these Rohingya people did not happen to be Muslim—because of the Mughal empire's reach, they took their religion from it—they would have been Hindu. Or if the Christian missionaries went there, as they did in Karen state or in Kachin state, they would have been Christian. If these Rohingya were Christians or Hindus or any other religion, their genetic identity would remain the same, their race would remain the same.

If they were not Muslim and they were another religion, the Burmese would not have spared them. I assure you of that, because the anti-South Asian and anti-Indian sentiment is very high. This is a systemic issue. So that's why the Rohingya happen to be targeted at this point. We should remember that the people of the subcontinent, from India and Pakistan and Bangladesh, who went to Burma during the British time as business people were deported by the hundreds of thousands in the sixties.

So that sentiment has been there. But the Rohingya people are unlike folks from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh who went to Burma during the British time for trade purposes, just as they went to Kenya and other countries. The Rohingya are an ethnic minority, an indigenous population that was living there before that. So after the Indians had left, the Rohingya became more of a target, because they think there is a remaining legacy of people of Indian culture, or South Asian I should say.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: In regard to taking steps towards improving conditions for the Rohingya minority, has there been any increase in communication or dialogue between the Burmese government and the Rohingya leaders?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: No, the dialogue was only between the USDP and the Burmese government, the military parties, through Rohingya MPs. But they had to be yes-men, because they were under the military and in their party. Naturally, they will not have an independent voice.

So through the ARU, we have proposed to the Burmese government that the Rohingya overseas, like us, the diaspora, want to talk to the Burmese government and initiate a dialogue. We want to be part of the process so we can be a moderate voice coming from outside of the country, and the Burmese government has not responded. So I ask the Canadian government and the international community if there is any way you can facilitate that approach to have the Burmese government talk to us. Maybe that will allay their fear of the unknown. They don't want to talk to us because they have a fear of the unknown.

Once we can start a dialogue, I am confident that we can talk. If we don't talk, they will never know. So that's something for which I want to ask for your help. You can play a role in initiating a dialogue with the Burmese government.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: The U.S. Department of State's 2010 report on international religious freedom stated that there was evidence that the Burmese authorities were trying to force non-Buddhists into converting to Buddhism. There were even reports in which local authorities were operating in the high schools and ensuring that only Buddhist students could have the opportunity of obtaining government jobs after graduation. So in order for Christian individuals to attend these opportunity high schools, they must first convert to Buddhism.

In your view, are these reports accurate and does the Burmese government truly restrict job opportunities and economic privileges for young students based on ethnicity and religion? If this is truly the case, have these pressured conversions had an apparent impact on these religious and minority communities?

Dr. Wakar Uddin: Yes, in my view, that was the case. There was evidence and there were reports that in many cities and in many places they were selectively picking students for high schools and colleges; and religious preference, although they don't say it in the book, has been a big part of how they make selections. They are Buddhism-based selections. Burma is 89% Buddhist.

So a great religion has been hijacked by these extremists in the Burmese military and government. We all know the theology of Buddha says that you cannot kill one ant or insect. A great religion of peace has been hijacked and used like many other religions. We have seen that in our own religion too. So it's been hijacked and this religious preference is an ongoing thing and part of the ethnic cleansing.

• (1400)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Grewal.

Monsieur Jacob, s'il vous plaît.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Uddin, thank you for your testimony about the discrimination in your country.

In a 2010 report on freedom of religion around the world, the State Department suggests that the government of Burma tends to think that freedom of religion is a potential threat to national unity or to the central authority. What do you think of that view?

[English]

Dr. Wakar Uddin: Religious tolerance is not something that is existing in Burma. The majority of the Burmese population, 89%, are Buddhist. They have been using the campaign of Burmanization—as you will see in some literature or books—of all ethnic minorities. They want them to convert to Buddhism.

That's why there have been serious clashes in Christian areas—Kachin and Chin and Karen. The Burmese government has been launching campaigns there to convert them back to Christianity, and the same thing with the Muslims. So religious tolerance is not there, and a multi-religion based society in Burma is not in the picture right now.

However, if that democratic transformation process goes smoothly, that will hopefully guarantee some coexistence of religion, and a multi-religion based society could be possible in Burma.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Why do you think the Burmese government is so afraid of that kind of co-existence? Has the situation changed since the recent reforms were implemented, since the civilian government came to power?

[English]

Dr. Wakar Uddin: Yes. This Burmese government, Burmese society, is very nationalist. It's religion-based Buddhist, religion-based nationalist. They do not have tolerance for other religions, despite this democratic reform. Since 1962 that has been one of the government's foundations, the Buddhism-based society.

That's why the philosophy of ultranationalist Buddhism has taken roots in the society. It will be very difficult for them to moderate their philosophy of coexistence so soon, but with the democratic process, with Aung San Suu Kyi hopefully coming to power, it is a hope that we can coexist as a multi-religious society over time.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Here is my final question. In terms of democratic principles, what are the main steps that the international community should take to ensure that real progress is made and that measurable results are achieved in the fight against religious discrimination in Burma?

[English]

Dr. Wakar Uddin: Thank you very much for asking me that question.

Again, this is the key. This democratic reform in Burma is right now mainly targeted toward the economy, trade, and investment. They want to have military capitalism. They are interested in military capitalism. They have opened up all this trade. But addressing the ethnic minority issue is not part of the equation. They want to lure the international community, showing all this trade opening and others, while they are putting a blanket on the ethnic minority issue.

In order to address the issue, again I want to emphasize that the international community, including a country like Canada, individually or in coalition—not with a European and American NATO-type intervention, not militarily—should send monitoring groups, aid groups, human rights groups, immediately. I must emphasize immediately. We are running out of time.

While the bureaucracy is working, they are sending all these orders from Naypyidaw, the capital city, to the ground. It takes days and days and days, and in the meantime we're losing time. They are buying time, basically to finish some of the Rohingya people.

The international community must sustain its efforts, without losing momentum, to intervene with humanitarian groups and aid and a UN peacekeeping force, and all of that. You in the international community will also have a better picture of what is happening on the ground, if the international community is present in Arakan state.

•(1405)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Uddin.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Jacob.

[*English*]

Mr. Sweet indicated he had something else he wanted to say.

Mr. David Sweet: Mr. Chair, you know how diligent I am about trying to get studies done. In this case, because we have heard such troubling testimony about Kachin state, and now Arakan state, and the Rohingya, and since the Union of Myanmar has a full ambassador here, I think we should call the ambassador to answer to some of these very serious claims. We're talking about ethnic cleansing here. Have them come to the committee.

The Chair: Okay—

Mr. Wayne Marston: Do we want to consider a special meeting?

The Chair: We could.

May I suggest that we thank and excuse our witness, and then we'll proceed to a discussion of this sort of thing?

Let me stop now.

Thank you, Dr. Uddin. I very much appreciate, as we all do, your testimony today. I think everybody found it as compelling as I did. We're very grateful to you for inconveniencing yourself as much as

you did in order to come here to present us such a thorough presentation.

We're thankful to you as well, Mr. Parkinson.

Dr. Wakar Uddin: Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to present our case, and again, I beg you, I appeal to you, to take action immediately. We are losing time. I don't know if you feel this matter could even be brought up to the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council, because its extent is very deep and wide. The width and depth of the problem is very large. It is almost similar to Srebrenica in the former Yugoslavia.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Colleagues, if we're going to discuss future business, it might be appropriate to go in camera. I would ask anyone who agrees with me to move a motion to that effect and we could do that.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I so move.

The Chair: Mr. Marston.

Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay, we'll just suspend for a moment and go in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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