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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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● (1310)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Welcome, colleagues, to the 104th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights.

Today we have before us the Honourable Bob Rae, Special Envoy of the Prime Minister to Myanmar.

This subcommittee has done extensive work on the crisis faced by the Rohingya, including two reports, in 2012 and 2016, and we are very interested in hearing your comments on your recent report to the Prime Minister on this issue.

As is our usual custom, we'll begin with introductory remarks and then move straight into questions from members.

Mr. Rae, if you would like to begin, the floor is all yours.

Hon. Bob Rae (Special Envoy of the Prime Minister to Myanmar, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I appreciate the opportunity to meet again with the committee and very much appreciate the opportunity to talk about my report and also the current situation in both Myanmar and Bangladesh.

I can advise the members of the committee—I'm sure they know—that I will be joining Minister Freeland in her travels to Bangladesh and that I will be staying a bit longer in the region. We hope to have an opportunity to discuss the situation with the members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation as well as with the Government of Bangladesh. I'm hoping very much that we'll be able to make another trip to Cox's Bazar, particularly in light of the deteriorating physical conditions in the camp.

That is perhaps where I'll start. I'm confident that the members of this committee will have read my report, so I don't intend to go over it in detail; I don't think it's necessary. I would like to give you the basic thrust of the report and perhaps provide a bit of an update with respect to where things have happened.

The first thing I would say is that this is a very fast-moving situation, not only with respect to the conditions in the camp but also with respect to the other issues I've identified in my report.

First of all with respect to the humanitarian situation in both Bangladesh and Myanmar, the weather conditions have begun to change, and we are now into a rainy season, which means not that it rains 24 hours a day but that when it does rain it rains very hard and has a very dramatic impact on an environment that has already been seriously impacted by the arrival of 700,000 refugees.

The conditions in the camp are very bad. Members will perhaps have noticed that the minister of social welfare of Myanmar paid a visit to the camp a couple of weeks ago and commented on how bad it was and was very moved by what he saw and moved by the circumstances.

I think there will be many reasons that people might choose to focus attention on other aspects of my report, but I want to emphasize that from the point of view of the immediacy of this situation, we need to be fully aware—and this has been my message to the government all the way through—just how serious and life-threatening the conditions in the camp currently are.

We have every reason to believe that because of the weather and other circumstances, they will become even more so in the weeks ahead. There is not only the threat of mudslides; there is also the threat of waterborne diseases. The weather itself makes temporary schools and any buildings that are under risk of collapsing and falling down not available. It will lead to an immediate deterioration in the quality of services in the camp. We have a situation in which the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Office for Migration have together issued an appeal for $951 million U.S., which is well over $1 billion CAD.

The response so far has not been that strong. A good deal of the focus of my report is thus on the extent of that particular aspect of the crisis: the need for us to deal with the health issues, the sanitation issues, and the housing issues, and the need to create conditions that are conducive to learning and to human health. We're far from having those conditions today.

That's a point that I want to continue to emphasize. I hope that we'll continue to have the support of members in pushing the government—I say this to all members of all parties—to do whatever we can to make real progress on Canada stepping up and contributing even more. As members will know, I've called upon the government to up its funding substantially to $150 million a year for four years.

That will include issues other than just the conditions in the camps in Bangladesh, but the majority of that money will certainly go to the camps in Bangladesh. We need to continue to see that level of funding as the appropriate level for Canada, when we look at the severity of the situation and just how bad it is.

Second, with respect to Myanmar, there are still hundreds of thousands of Rohingya in Myanmar living in very vulnerable conditions. Some are in IDP camps. There's a very large IDP camp in Sittwe. There are other camps, but most importantly, there are people living in conditions of lockdown and with very inadequate supplies of food. There's no work available, and it's impossible to get out on the land. There are severe curfews. People feel at risk, and feel that their lives are threatened, which I think contributes to the other news people will have seen recently, which is about the boats that have left and are leaving and the circumstances that are forcing people to take to the water. That has always been a fear, but the fear now seems to be coming true.

I think the key demand Canada has to continue to make with respect to the immediate situation in Myanmar is for the Government of Myanmar to meet certain standards and conditions with respect to international access, humanitarian access, freedom of movement among the population, ability to work, an end to boycotts, and everything possible to create the conditions on the ground that will allow for a possible return of the Rohingya population to Myanmar.

To this point, it is the view of most governments and it is the view of most international organizations that those conditions have not been met and that we're not yet at a point where people can say that it is the time to begin the process of repatriation. The repatriation issue is not about buildings or infrastructure. It's about what the actual human conditions are and what the human relations between people are that would allow for people to actually return without threats to their lives, threats to their security, and threats to their health. Right now, those conditions don't apply and don't exist. There's still very limited international humanitarian access in the north, and this remains a critical issue.

On the subject of impunity and accountability, the report lays out a number of things that need to happen. I think it's encouraging that there is a growing recognition in a number of countries about the severity of the potential crimes against humanity that need to be dealt with and about where we need to deal with the consequences of the situation. I think there are continuing efforts at the United Nations Human Rights Council of which a fact-finding mission is coming to conclusions that are similar to those of many others who've been gathering information. I think in June we'll hear from the Human Rights Council on the fact-finding mission, and we'll hear a final report in September.

I've had the opportunity to speak with members of the committee. I've had a good opportunity to discuss these issues in The Hague. I've had an opportunity to meet with experts on human rights violations and international law. I will continue to urge the Canadian government to lead in this direction and I hope very much this is a recommendation that the government will take up.

Finally, my recommendation focuses on the need for countries to work together. I know that Minister Freeland raised this issue at the G7 as well as at the Commonwealth. I know the Prime Minister had a meeting with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and raised issues around humanitarian access to the camps in Bangladesh and some of the bureaucratic and regulatory problems we're having in getting people into the camps as doctors, nurses, engineers, and other people who need to do their work.

● (1315)

That seems to most of us to be an issue we will have to continue to raise. I know that Minister Freeland and I will be raising these issues when we visit Bangladesh at the end of next week.

I've encouraged the government, as much as possible, to work effectively, together with Parliament and with all departments. It's a constant refrain of mine, based on my experience in government, that getting government departments to work together is essential and not always easy. There are occasionally turf wars and people are not necessarily fully aware of what others are doing, so there really has to be a constant effort to pull things together.

I hope the government will respond positively to the suggestion that there should be a regular report to Parliament and that this is something that needs to be documented and reported on.

I want to say something about the world refugee issue. I think it's important for us, in addition to a number of other contexts in which we have to put this current conflict, to be aware that there are tens of millions of people in refugee camps; that we are experiencing the greatest refugee crisis we've seen in the world since the end of the Second World War; and that the current system is clearly broken in terms of how these camps are being funded, how we're providing for them, the obligation of host countries, and the obligation of other member states to increase the level of funding so that we deal with the extent of the crisis.

On the question of resettlement, I'm always interested in what the response to a report is and I was interested to see that the response of a number of media outlets to my report was to focus on the question of whether we should be resettling the Rohingya refugees in Canada. My recommendation to the government was that of course we should be talking to other countries and talking to ourselves about how this can be done. We regularly take in refugees; we as a country have a refugee policy, and I think it's only natural that we would consider the Rohingya refugees among others whom we would want to admit to the country.

I was frankly troubled by the response from many people on Twitter and on Facebook to that one particular recommendation. I believe the vast majority of Canadians are very generous and understand that we are going to continue to have to be generous if we're going to make a difference.

I've been very pleased and gratified by the response of the Rohingya community in Canada to my report. I've had an opportunity to meet with a number of members of that community in the last several months. It's been a very important part of my experience, and I really appreciate the opportunity.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I hope there have been some discussions among the parties about a guest I brought to the committee.

Mr. Tun Khin is a leading Rohingya activist who has been living in England for the last several years. He has met with the British Parliament and with political leaders in Congress and in Europe as well. When he got in touch with me and said he'd like to talk to me about my report, I said, “Well, I'm going to be in Ottawa on this day, so if you want to come with me to meet with the members of the committee, you're more than welcome to come.”

I would hope that at the end of my comments he might have an opportunity to say a few words. I don't want to eat into anybody's time—I realize the sensitivity of these things, having been in this place for a while—but I look forward to discussing further with Mr. Khin. I know he would welcome the opportunity to say a few words as we get closer to two o'clock.

● (1320)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Rae. Yes, we will carve out some time at the end, after members' questions, to hear from your guest, absolutely.

With that, let's move right to the first round of questions. We're going to be starting with MP Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Rae, for being here.

The people we're talking about, the Rohingya Muslims, have faced a continuous process of delegitimization, persecution, and abuse for decades. The ultimate result of this abuse and dehumanization by Myanmar's military, and, by extension, by the government, has tragically resulted in what can only be described as genocide. Many have described it as crimes against humanity, but I think we've reached the proportion of genocide now. This is not only an affront to their rights as a Muslim minority but also an affront to everything good and pure and civilized and certainly an affront to religious freedom.

We have raised this issue in the House and at this committee on numerous occasions since the last election. We are very grateful for your report and your work on the issue. We remain concerned with the fact that little has been done to bring diplomatic pressure on Myanmar's government and, by extension, the military.

It puzzles me that to date only one person in Myanmar's government has been sanctioned under the Magnitsky law. Where do you think the government has been deficient in addressing the crisis? What more can be done right now to protect the religious and human rights of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar?

● (1325)

Hon. Bob Rae: Mr. Sweet, I appreciate the question. I said in my report that I was in favour. When the government asked me, “What do you think about using the Magnitsky act in the course of our work?” I said, “Go ahead and use it.” The key thing is to make sure you have evidence that will sustain any attack on that measure.

There's a legal process the government has to go through to determine an individual's responsibility. I continue to believe that's something that should continue to happen. It's something that the minister has indicated to me she supports and is keen to do, and I know she is raising it with her fellow foreign ministers.

You'll appreciate that a measure like the one we've taken is really most effective when a number of other governments agree to do the same thing. Right now, there are two governments that have agreed to do that, ours and the Government of the United States. European governments have yet to do it.

We are pushing the Europeans and saying, “Let's try to move here together and move in the same direction at the same time.” There are competing views in other capitals, but I've been very clear that I think applying individual sanctions is appropriate, and it is something that I hope the government can continue to look at.

You ask if in my view they have been deficient. I can't get inside the bowels of the justice department or the legal division of the Department of Global Affairs and ask, “What about this guy? What about that person? What about this person?” I do think, however, that it is important for us to take those steps and to encourage the level of discussion that needs to happen at a very senior level with other governments to see that they're doing the same thing, and I hope that they will.

Mr. David Sweet: You mentioned that you've asked the government for an investment of $150 million per year over a four-year period and that, right now, there's difficulty in raising that money in the international community to top up what's required to make sure that the refugees in Bangladesh are looked after.

My concern really is the fragility of Bangladesh at the moment as well. It concerns me. Particularly in your recommendation 5, you begin to talk about dealing with international partners.

I feel that we're in a position here where we have some moral authority. Aung San Suu Kyi is an honorary citizen of Canada. We've invested millions in the development of democratic institutions in Burma. We also have a history of bringing international pressure against the South African government and making sure that the collapse of apartheid happened.

With Bangladesh being a Commonwealth partner and the investment that we've made in Burma, do you not think that Canada could take the leadership and cobble together an international community that could put enough pressure on the Burmese military and government to make sure that their behaviour is consistent with international democratic norms?

Hon. Bob Rae: Mr. Sweet, the whole thrust of my report is that Canada should take the leadership role; that's what I'm saying. I don't mince words in the report; I make it very clear. In order for us to be a leader, we have to be prepared to take measures ourselves and be prepared to make investments ourselves.

In building that coalition, that group of like-minded countries, we have to recognize that while you say we've invested millions in Burma, we have historically done very little in Burma. For a long time there was virtually no economic or political relationship between our government and the Government of Burma. We didn't have any diplomatic representation; we had no aid program; we had nothing for a very long period of time—for many decades.

During that time when we weren't there, guess who was there? The Chinese, big time, were always present and investing not a few million but billions of dollars into the Myanmar economy. The same thing is true in a different way for the Indian government and for a number of other Asian governments that have invested very heavily in Myanmar. When it comes to leverage, I wish we had more, but I think what we have to do is build up, with Bangladesh and with a number of other countries, a real effort to effect real change in Myanmar.

You're absolutely right. There are basic international standards that, I believe and I say in the report, I don't think by any stretch you can say the Government of Myanmar has lived up to. The fact is that more than 700,000 people left in the space of about four months' time; hundreds of villages were destroyed and thousands of people were killed; there's evidence of the use of rape as a tool of war; there are horrific examples of how people have been, as you said, dehumanized and marginalized over a long period of time. These are all examples of people not just having fallen short; this is a horrendous crime against humanity.

I talk very explicitly in my report about the genocide question, which you have raised with me and raised before—I know Mr. Genuis raised it publicly a few days ago—and provide the definitions and state what the steps are.

The key thing here is that we have to build a process by which a government or a parliament can make a determination. You can't just snap the word out of the air and say, I've read three newspaper articles and this is why I think it's genocide. There has to be a solemn process of determination to get us to the point where we can say that's what it is. I firmly believe this is what should happen. I have no hesitation in saying so. I think what has taken place....

Above all, as I said in my report, a genocide is not a lightning bolt out of the blue that happens in one day; it's a process. There's a terrible process that has been under way inside Myanmar, and it has had terrible consequences for the Rohingya and in my view has had terrible consequences for many other members of the Myanmar political community. Many other groups and people have been very badly affected by what has taken place.

● (1330)

Mr. David Sweet: Mr. Rae, how much do you think the foreign investment that is presently in Burma is impeding the capability to develop this coalition to put pressure on the Myanmar government?

Hon. Bob Rae: I don't think it is. A process of pressure or of persuasion, or increasing the process, would obviously be dramatically assisted if we could persuade China and India to join in the process, but that's a difficult thing to do, and it's something that I think everybody has to think about.

We need to appreciate, however, that there hasn't been a huge amount of foreign investment in Myanmar. It has only very recently emerged from a state of significant political, economic, and social isolation, and the process of development in many parts of the country is very slow. In other parts, it's more rapid. There is still a lot of opportunity for us to do what we can to work with others.

The key, though, is working with others. It's not just what we do; it's what we do with others. That's one of the key messages in my report.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Rae.

We will now move to MP Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr. Rae, for the great work you've done with respect to this very dire situation.

To begin, I want to seek some clarity. I know you've expressed an opinion that there are two governments in Burma or Myanmar, one being the civilian and one being the military, but you've also said that there is resentment and there is discrimination at the very grassroots level against the Rohingya, in the opinion of those who live in Rakhine State. We've also heard some reports of there now being persecution against other minorities, including Christians who live in Burma or Myanmar.

What exactly is the role of this civilian government, in terms of the work they are doing to tackle the grassroots discrimination against minorities, and why do you think there are two governments?

Hon. Bob Rae: The 2008 constitution, which is the constitution of the military dictatorship, which existed between 1962 and 2008, gives to the military control over three key ministries: Border Affairs, Defence, and Home Affairs.

Border Affairs really gives the military complete control over the entire border area of Myanmar, which borders on Bangladesh, India, China, Thailand, Malaysia, and so on. There you have one powerful ministry.

You have the Department of Defence, which is the largest-spending ministry in the country.

You also have the Department of Home Affairs, which is all of the internal affairs of the country, including the administration of local communities.

Any information coming from local villages—all of that information—comes in to the home affairs department. They're responsible for all internal security matters, all surveillance issues. Anything to do with what's going on in terms of cellphone use and anything else is the Department of Home Affairs. They have complete control over that.

When people talk about Aung San Suu Kyi and say, “She's the de facto leader: she can do this. She can snap her fingers”, you say no. What happened after 2008 was that eventually, over a period of many years, Aung San Suu Kyi, having been for a long time under house arrest, came out from house arrest and was allowed to participate in politics and to lead a political party, the National League for Democracy, which was her father's party and which was given the ability to run.

She can't be the president of the country; the constitution discriminates against her because of the fact that her children have British passports. She is Minister of Foreign Affairs and she has a position called "State Counsellor". There's no reference to a state counsellor in the constitution of Myanmar. The military controls 25% of the seats in the lower house of the Parliament of Myanmar, and they can block any further constitutional change.

That's the status quo; that's the situation.

The NLD have their own policies and their own politics. Certainly, Aung San Suu Kyi has made a couple of statements over time, in the last six months, indicating that she's very concerned that the peace process be maintained and keep going. There is still extensive conflict going on in the north of the country, in the area called Kachin State, in Chin State, and in Shan State, among the Mon people.

Even in Karen there's still fighting going on. It's not just little fighting; it's bombs dropping on houses. I have text messages from people, because of the age in which we're living, telling me that this is what's happening in my country at this point, at this moment in time.

I think we need to understand that the notion that this is automatically a sort of democracy in transition.... There's nothing automatic about it at all. It's a military government with civilian participation, in which the leader of the civilian participation is Aung San Suu Kyi. I think we have to develop a greater degree of understanding of what the situation is inside the country before we conclude that certain people are responsible for certain things. I don't think we entirely know the answers to those questions.

● (1335)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: It makes it a little difficult to really understand the internal situation when a lot of NGOs and governments are kind of banned from going into the country, but you were able to go in, to talk to people, and to see first-hand what is going on.

We talk about resettling Rohingya around the world in countries such as Canada, which I know will be happy to welcome refugees, but ultimately, having spoken to refugees from anywhere in the world myself, I have heard that their ultimate wish is just to go home. We're talking about hundreds and thousands of people, their resettlement and their reintegration back into Myanmar.

Is that a possibility in the lifetime of these refugees? In my opinion it's really a question of how we work at reintegrating at the grassroots level and eliminating the hatred between the people of Myanmar. How do we as a country go about tackling that?

● (1340)

Hon. Bob Rae: I think the key thing we should do is, in a sense, something we should continue to do, as many members will know. Many members will be familiar with a number of NGOs that are working hard in different parts of the country and doing good work, encouraging dialogue, encouraging understanding, and encouraging deeper conversations with people.

I, myself, had an opportunity in Yangon a few months ago to spend the morning with 10 people from the Rakhine Buddhist population and 10 people from the Rohingya community. They were flown in from Rakhine State to participate in a seminar that the Government of Canada supported through its aid program. We were allowed to stay and listen to the dialogue and the conversation that went on.

There were no media and no public. Nobody wanted to have their pictures taken. They didn't want to be on Myanmar television because they would be attacked by other people if they were seen doing it. They probably would not have been able to have that conversation in Rakhine itself, although there are a number of efforts being made now to broaden that conversation in Rakhine.

There are lots of examples around the world where people have lived together for hundreds of years, and then suddenly things have fallen apart, and there's huge conflict. Then the conflict is over, and people get back and slowly but surely begin the dialogue.

It's not what we do; it's what we support. We're not coming in and saying, "Get together and do this." That doesn't work. What we're doing is working with groups that understand that this kind of dialogue is essential because of the plural nature of Myanmar society.

Myanmar is not a monolithic society. It is a complex, diverse country with a majority community, yes, but with many minorities. There are 135 minorities that are explicitly recognized in the Myanmar constitution. Unfortunately, the Rohingya are not one of them. There's a particular issue around the status that has been taken away from the Rohingya population. It is a very tough issue.

Do I say it's possible? Of course it's possible. Let no one have any doubt at all; the areas in Rakhine State where the Rohingya have lived for hundreds of years are the areas they consider to be their home. They don't consider Bangladesh to be their home. They don't consider themselves to be Bengalis, as they're often described by other Myanmar citizens. They're not Bengalis. They're people from Rakhine State. That has been their home.

I think that has to be more clearly understood. Our government has been very clear about the nature of the Rohingya community and why it needs to be supported and sustained by others.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will move right along to MP Hardcastle, please.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Rae for your work and for your report.

I would like to ask you to expand a little on some of the work that you did lay out in your report. Given your proximity to the government, you must be able to tell us right now where you think there are some opportunities for immediate action. I don't know if that would be in the area of capacity building in Myanmar or addressing conditions in Bangladesh.

I think it would be good for us to hear those things, and then if we have a chance, that would be something your guests would probably like to weigh in on as well.

Hon. Bob Rae: Thank you for the question.

I'm glad to hear your view that I'm so close in proximity to the government. There are some days when I think that's true and other days when I'm not so sure. I'm not really worried about it.

What I always tell the government about—anyone who asks me—is this. I say you need to think about what the big risks are. What keeps you up at night? What do you worry about, in terms of the safety and security of people? For me, there are two big risks right now. One is the conditions in the camps in Bangladesh.

Again I say to members, imagine for a moment 700,000 people all of a sudden arriving in a very small territory, cutting down everything that's there so that they can build shelter for themselves. Even in the best of conditions, even if it were perfectly flat land and there was a perfectly mild temperature and everything was okay from all those points of view, it would still be horrendously difficult.

It's hilly land. It goes up and down. When the rain comes, every valley becomes a river. Every river is full of bacteria. Every river will be.... There are the most fundamental things. Talk to the people in the camps about what we have to worry about. We have to de-sludge latrines. We have teams of people, volunteers, who are doing the most basic kind of work to save lives, so that people don't get sick from drinking the water.

People get sick from drinking the water every day. We have a diphtheria outbreak. The world thought there would never more be diphtheria outbreaks. The World Health Organization thought that was something that was coming to a conclusion. It's terrible. There are attacks of measles. There's an expectation that there will be a cholera outbreak.

People ask, what do you think the big risk is? That's the big risk. It's going to get worse. With the weather deteriorating, it gets worse.

So there has to be a response, and I have talked to the government very directly and told them that every conceivable kind of response has to be imagined by the world community. It may be that just the traditional forms in which we deliver aid are not enough.

My second big fear is the continuing marginalization of the population in Rakhine State in northwestern Myanmar, where people are living in a very vulnerable condition. They're vulnerable in terms of health, in terms of their ability to learn, but most importantly, they're vulnerable because of the restrictions on their movement, restrictions on their ability to work, and on their ability to be themselves. That is worrisome, because we know that you can reach a tipping point in these situations at which conflicts suddenly go over the edge and hate speech takes over.

I'm sure you've seen the commentary by Mr. Zuckerberg admitting that Facebook has been used as a vehicle for hate speech in Myanmar. It has, very extensively, and it's a very worrisome thing.

I worry about that. I tell the government that we need to be aware, need to be alert, and need to be ready to respond. The thing that is frustrating—again, a little bit from the outside—is that government is sometimes a slow beast to move, and they have to be ready to respond quickly to the severity of the crisis.

I don't underestimate at all the importance of the impunity issue and the accountability issues, but I believe that those are going to take time and a lot of perseverance and patience in gathering the evidence. It's painstaking work. It took us over a decade to bring Milosevic to trial, and we shouldn't assume that just because we give a speech or say something or identify a person, this is going to be the instant response. We need to understand that these things are the product of a lot of work and effort. On that side of the ledger, then, this is going to take a lot of time to build up, and I think we should be building it up as effectively we can.

The immediate issue we face, however, is that people are going to die if we don't.... People are going to die in any event because of the extent of the illnesses that are prevalent, but we want to make sure that more people don't die, and that's what we have to deal with.

Just to give you a sense of it, Chair, when I was speaking to a meeting of aid workers in Cox's Bazar, which is the town closest to the camps, one of the people sitting in the room—I can remember it very vividly— looked at me, and she said, “Mr. Rae, you need to understand something.” She said, “It's not about whether people are going to die. It's about how many people are going to die.”

● (1345)

I'm reporting that to you, members, because I want you to be aware that this is not something that just comes out of the air; it's a real thing. It's halfway around the world, but it is happening, and we have to be able to respond to it.

The Chair: We have about 10 minutes left. I want to get a sense from members whether we can now hear from Mr. Khin. Is that okay?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Mr. Khin, we invite you to please come up to the table.

I want to welcome Mr. Khin. He is from the Burmese Rohingya Organisation of the United Kingdom.

It would be our pleasure to have you speak for about five to seven minutes.

Thank you.

● (1350)

Mr. Tun Khin (President, Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK): Honourable Chair, honourable special envoy, and all members of Parliament, thank you for giving me an opportunity to speak today.

I'm Rohingya. I was born and brought up in Arakan state in the western part of Burma. I left when I was about 17. Actually, my grandfather was a member of Parliament and Deputy Minister from 1952 to the 1960s. My mother's grandfather was the first judge in northern Arakan state.

Today I'm not a citizen of Burma. We Rohingya people have lived from time immemorial in Arakan State. They stripped us of our ethnic rights when, in 1962, General Ne Win took power. Then they stopped the Rohingya-language program from 1961 to 1965. There had been a Rohingya-language program in Burma—a radio broadcasting program—but they stopped it to strip us of our ethnic rights. Today they say Rohingya does not exist.

They stepped up: in 1978 there was Operation King Dragon, during which 250,000 Rohingya fled. When international pressure mounted, the Rohingya were repatriated, in 1978, from Bangladesh. That is when the first exodus happened, and then, because of pressure, they repatriated these people.

The Burmese military implemented the 1982 citizenship law. That law deprived the Rohingya of basic fundamental rights. Because of that law, today I'm not a citizen of Burma, even though my grandfather was a member of Parliament and my father worked in government service for more than 20 years. Because of that law, I couldn't go to university. When I was in Arakan state, I couldn't go to university and I saw many of my friends sentenced, and my brother's friend sentenced to jail because they were not allowed to marry, and they married secretly.

When we want to get married, we need to get a pass, and it takes three to five years.

Tun Knin When we need to travel from, say, Ottawa to Toronto, we need to get a pass. It takes two to three days. Even if your grandfather or mother is feeling seriously ill, you cannot go.

Our land has been confiscated by the military. They brought non-Rohingyas to our land, and we have to provide food. My father's land has been taken away by the Burmese military, and they brought non-Rohingyas there. That is what I saw when I was in Arakan state until the age of 17.

I couldn't go to the university but I wanted to study. Fortunately, my family was kind of prominent, so I was able to leave the country. I am lucky to be here today. Like me, more than one million Rohingya students cannot study, and their lives are being destroyed.

That is what happened from 1962 to 2010. After 2010, when so-called democracy came to Burma, hate speech spread, and because of that hate speech, 140,000 Rohingyas became IDPs in Sittwe. Rohingyas were excluded from the 2014 census. In 2015, for the first time in an election, Rohingyas were not able to vote, and their right to vote and right to be a member of Parliament were taken away.

What else has happened? In 2016, during the Rohingya attacks, they burned down Rohingya houses and villages, and in October 2017, we saw the largest crisis. At that time I was in Bangladesh, where I spent four weeks. I met some of my friends, some of whom were childhood friends, and I met a lot of my relatives. They told me the Burmese government burned down the houses very systematically.

I want to share with you a story that one woman told me. When the military entered her village, they rounded up the villagers, and first a seven-year-old boy was knifed to death. Then a military member raped the lady, and another military member tried to, but she was able to run away. Her husband was slaughtered in front of her by the military.

In one village, Tula Toli, thousands of Rohingya have been killed. The military told them they would not to do anything to them, and to just get out of their houses. When three trucks from the military rounded them up, they just shot them. That is what I heard when I was in Bangladesh, and I was in Bangladesh three times—in February and two weeks ago. I met them. They told me these unbearable and inexpressible stories. I do not know how to express their stories. All of you know.

I want to highlight what the Burmese government is doing to our community. We are a people. We are a manageable minority. We have our land. We have our culture and our civilization. What they've done is to take away everything. We only had land, and what they did in August 2017 was to burn down all the villages. They've already driven us out of our country. That is final. This is very systematic, intentionally destroying our community. It is a genocide. That is what I can say as a Rohingya myself.

We really appreciate the Canadian government's continued support. I would like to express many thanks to honourable envoy Bob Rae for his wonderful report.

What do the Rohingya need for the short term? We are a people. We do not want to see our community face exploitation in refugee camps for many years. The Burmese government and the military bulldozed the villages, so I do not see that many Rohingya will return in five or 10 years. They told me they wanted to return, but the Burmese military and the government created an impossible situation for them to return to their villages. They bulldozed, and they burned things down. Of the people who are remaining now, one to 10 families are fleeing every week.

● (1355)

Three days ago I received a call. Some people are trying to flee this weekend again. That is what I'm hearing every week, every time, from my relatives, from my friends.

For the short term, then, we need support to protect these Rohingya refugees. The monsoon rainy season is coming, and according to an IOM officer whom I met, the more than 200,000 Rohingya refugees can directly affect flooding and landslides. These always happen there, every year. I worry that we will see much more disaster in the rainy season.

I would like to request that the Canadian government and international community protect refugees and also build up capacity building.

We Rohingyas do not want to see the exploitation of our community. They want to study; that's what a refugee told me a few days ago when I was in a camp. They want to send their children to study, so they want to build up capacity building for the refugees.

Resettlement is not easy for 700,000. We would like a few hundred or a few thousand, whoever is able, to be well educated. We need Rohingyas at the grassroots level to bring up the leadership. It is important to resettle and to integrate them into Canadian universities or others. There are many students who couldn't go to university. They just stopped, and their lives are destroyed because of the exploitation they will face.

For the longer term, what we are demanding here is.... As we have seen, in this situation in Burma, Buddhist monks, institutions, the military, security forces, the NLD, and the USDP are all saying that Rohingyas are illegal immigrants. We can't see any protection in our country. We are therefore demanding a protected homeland, a protected return to that homeland in Myanmar. We are not asking for any separate state; we are just demanding our citizenship and our rights, but we need protection by the international community in our homeland in our country. Otherwise, we will face another mass atrocity. It could happen at any time.

That is why before repatriation we need to see the situation change. Before repatriation, we want to get protection in our country, where at least 450,000 Rohingya are left, in Burma. These people are fleeing every day.

My dear friends, I'm very pleased for your concern, for your wonderful support for our community. We are a people in the 21st century facing genocide. Sometimes we feel hopeless for our community. When I saw the refugee camps, my brothers and sisters told me, please raise your voice; please support us; we are a people facing genocide. We need your help, your support, to end this genocide. We want to return to our homeland. Please help us. How? With protection to return to us our homeland. That is what I want to request from all of you.

Thank you so much. I really appreciate all your wonderful support. I'm sure you all will continue your wonderful work to save the lives of the Rohingya. Thank you so much.

● (1400)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Khin, for those impassioned remarks.

Mr. Rae, thank you for being here and for engaging with us on the topic of the Rohingya.

You've given us a lot to think about in those closing remarks, Mr. Khin.

With that, thank you all.

The meeting is adjourned.

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