



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

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

SDIR • NUMBER 003 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, April 21, 2016

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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): I want to welcome our first witness for our first committee report. We're honoured to have her lead, not just this study but actually this committee in general.

With that, I want to introduce Evelyn Puxley from Global Affairs Canada. Evelyn is the director of the Southeast Asia and Oceania relations division.

We're pleased to have you here. If you like, you can lead off.

Ms. Evelyn Puxley (Director, Southeast Asia and Oceania Relations Division, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

[Translation]

I am really delighted to be here for this meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[English]

Today, particularly, I am pleased to address you on the situation of Rohingyas in Myanmar.

I have what I hope will be a very brief opening statement and then, of course, I'd be happy to answer your questions.

I think it's fair to say that since 2010 and the previous government in Myanmar, there have been truly remarkable changes in this country, remarkable both for Myanmar and, frankly, for the region as a whole. There has been a remarkable process of transitioning from a military junta to a fledgling democracy, capped by the elections last November, which returned a majority NLD government, NLD being the party of the honorary Canadian citizen and Nobel Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. This election resulted in the first elected civilian president in Myanmar in over 50 years; the last president was elected in 1962.

There are still, however, enormous challenges in Myanmar, not the least of which is the unreconciled armed groups. There was an effort, under the previous government, to sign a nationwide ceasefire. That made some progress, but certainly not all of the armed groups are reconciled. I would say, particularly given the interest of this committee with regard to the situation of ethnic and religious minorities, particularly the Rohingya, Canada still has very grave concerns.

If I may, Mr. Chairman, I'll turn now specifically to the Rohingya.

I'm sure members of the committee are aware that the Rohingya are a Muslim ethnic minority group living in the state of Rakhine, also known as Arakan State, where most of the population is Buddhist and ethnic Rakhine.

This state in Myanmar is one of the poorest. The vast majority of the Rohingya are not officially recognized by the Burmese government as citizens of the country, and most Burmese, unfortunately, would agree with this approach to the Rohingya. They are widely seen as economic migrants from Bangladesh, even though many have lived with their families in Myanmar for generations. Most of them are stateless, and indeed, according to the UN resident coordinator in Rakhine, the Rohingya represent the largest group of stateless persons in the world. In addition, their universal human rights are severely constrained by the Burmese government, and they are the object of widespread racial discrimination.

Between June and October 2012, long-simmering tensions between Rakhine Buddhists and the Rohingya resulted in inter-communal violence forcing hundreds of thousands to flee their homes. Some 140,000 were displaced, and today 120,000 Muslims remain in camps for internally displaced persons across the state.

As well, in the far north, near the border with Bangladesh, where the majority of the Rohingya are located, people do not live in camps but are, nonetheless, segregated, subject to tightened restrictions on their movement. This makes it extremely difficult for them to find jobs to sustain their families. In many cases, it also constrains their ability to access education and medical care.

Maybe I could just mention that earlier this week there was a report of a number of Muslims primarily drowning in a boat accident. These were people who were travelling to seek medical care when the boat capsized. That's just indicative of some of the challenges they face.

I think it's also important to note that while the November elections were considered free and fair generally, most of the Rohingya were disenfranchised. Many of them were able to vote in previous elections, but following protests from Buddhist monks, particularly in 2015, and from other nationalists, this right was stripped from most of them.

This very challenging difficult situation for the Rohingya in Rakhine has forced many to contemplate exile. Some have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh, where they reside in official and unofficial refugee camps. Others have undertaken perilous sea journeys that would take them to Malaysia and Thailand. Those were very much in the news last year. This year we have seen less of this due to a crackdown by the Thai government, but there are still hundreds who will be looking to find better prospects elsewhere.

● (1310)

At the time of the migrants fleeing last year Canada worked very closely with a number of like-minded governments to address the plight of these pilgrims, but obviously the underlying concerns are still there and are still very real today.

The previous government of Myanmar under President Thein Sein made some efforts to try to address the Rohingya issue. I think it's fair to say the efforts met with limited success. They tried to implement a citizenship verification process, a pilot for this, and devised a Rakhine State action plan to deal with a broader set of political, security and development issues.

One aspect of this plan was, however, very controversial. It involved moving people to new settlements. It also would have maintained some restrictions on freedom of movement of the Rohingya, exacerbating the problems they already have in establishing livelihoods and accessing services, be they educational or medical.

The next section of my statement is headlined "Democracy May Not Help". I think on this I had some discussions with some members of the committee before the formal session began.

I think it's important to point out that improving the situation in Rakhine will not necessarily be easier under the new government of Aung San Suu Kyi, which, after all, is only three weeks old.

The previous government designated an ethnic Bamar, in other words Burmese, ex-general as a chief minister of Rakhine State from 2014 to 2015. You might think this was a negative decision, but in fact because he was military, he was empowered to do things that maybe other governors wouldn't, given that the military still controlled many aspects of life in Myanmar. He was able to stop mass violence and bring some small improvements in living standards to all communities. Indeed, I think that in the last year and a half there had been some improvement in the situation in Rakhine State.

However, the general election of last November, which led Aung San Suu Kyi to power, also resulted in the Arakan National Party—Arakan being another name for Rakhine State—a party of Rakhine Buddhist nationalists, winning the majority of seats in Rakhine's regional legislature. This party to date appears to be unwilling to cooperate with Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the ruling National League for Democracy, and indeed had walked out when Aung San Suu Kyi appointed an NLD, National League for Democracy, chief minister for their state. We'll have to see whether or not both sides, the Arakan National Party and the NLD, will be able to work together to improve conditions in Rakhine.

I think it's also fair to say the Government of Myanmar has repeatedly pointed out that the situation in Rakhine is only one of the

many ethnic minority problems it must contend with. In Myanmar's modern history, there has rarely been a time when there hasn't been one ethnic conflict or another. Difficult conditions elsewhere, in Kachin State for example or in the Kokang region, also require attention.

As I indicated at the outset, it's important to acknowledge that the newly elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi, the first democratic one in more than 50 years, has no governing experience and little capacity to run a large, complex bureaucracy. It faces entrenched anti-Rohingya prejudice. It will need time to resolve this issue—time and, I would say, support from governments like ours.

That leads me to the final section, "What is Canada doing?"

Until 2013, we had no resident diplomatic presence in Myanmar, but followed developments from Bangkok. Now we have an embassy, which officially opened in August 2014, which has allowed us not only to gain a much better understanding of local conditions but also to make a more effective contribution to the development of the country.

Our ambassador and our embassy meet regularly with local government representatives, the UN, NGOs, foreign embassies, to consult and exchange views, including and specifically on the situation in Rakhine. Canadian officials regularly raise Canada's human rights concerns in meetings with government officials. We've also visited displaced persons camps, and Muslim and Buddhist villages in Rakhine. In fact, embassy officials have been to Rakhine five times since the embassy opened in August 2014. We regularly hold meetings with Rohingya representatives, Rakhine politicians, as well as other ethnic and religious leaders.

● (1315)

As I'm sure the committee is aware, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister Dion, visited Myanmar April 6 to 8. Human rights were front and centre of his visit. He raised this theme with Aung San Suu Kyi and the president, among others. He held discussions with human rights defenders and groups whom we have been working with since the embassy opened and who have all been very active in promoting freedom of religion, pluralism, freedom of conscience, interfaith dialogue, LGBT rights, as well as civic and voter education.

I'd be happy to give you a few examples. Equality Myanmar, for example, led the opposition to the four religious laws that were passed just prior to the November elections, which were widely considered to be particularly prejudicial to the Rohingya community and other Muslim communities in Myanmar. PEN Myanmar is also active in the promotion of freedom of expression in non-Bamar, non-Burmese languages. Many of the filmmakers with whom the embassy has worked on the human rights film festival are ethnic minorities and very active in seeking to document and publicly raise issues of violence against Muslims and inter-ethnic conflicts. Here I refer to Muslims both in the broader Myanmar and particularly in Rakhine.

In 2015, Canada provided \$6.4 million in humanitarian assistance, including for the Rohingya in Rakhine and those who are particularly affected by the flooding. We also remain engaged on the Rohingya issue in Bangladesh through our high commission in Dhaka.

[Translation]

In conclusion, I must say that although much has improved in Myanmar over the last six years, much also remains to be done. Our embassy in Yangon will continue to monitor the situation and work with international and Burmese partners to promote freedom, democracy, human rights and rule of law in Myanmar.

We will continue to advocate for the rights of all citizens, including those of the Rohingya and other minorities. The recent past gives us grounds to be optimistic about the future, and we are hopeful that over time, as Myanmar's democracy develops and its civil society continues to grow, our efforts will contribute to creating a more inclusive society for all.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will be pleased to answer your questions.

•(1320)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much for that presentation. I think you've raised a number of issues. We can get right down to the first round of questioning.

Mr. Sweet is first.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you very much for your presentation, Ms. Puxley, with regard to the broader situation in Burma, particularly for the Rohingya.

I'm particularly focusing on the Human Rights Watch study published in January 2015, which illuminated a couple of points. Have things changed in that situation? The UN special rapporteur for human rights in Burma visited the country in July 2014 and reported that "despite some progress, the human rights landscape remained serious, particularly in regards to the Rohingya." The then president of Myanmar did not follow up on his pledge to the U.S. president, Barack Obama, to permit the formal establishment of an office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: Mr. Chair, I think a resident office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has not yet been established in Myanmar, but, as I said, the new government has been set up and running only for three weeks, essentially. The previous government

was very resistant to having that office established. I think it is fair to say that they felt there was too much international scrutiny of the human rights situation in Myanmar. There had been some difficulties with particular international NGOs. The sense was that these were focused exclusively on the Rohingya, leaving aside all the other minorities—ethnic and religious groups—including in states other than Rakhine. That had created a bit of a challenge.

As I mentioned before the session began, I think the situation was quite tense in 2012, after the violence broke out in Rakhine. It took enormous efforts on the part of the then Burmese government and the NGO community in Burma/Myanmar, as well as the UN agencies, to calm that situation down. Frankly, since 2012, there has not been an upsurge of violence on that scale in Rakhine State.

I think what we witnessed in 2015 was an upsurge of anti-Muslim sentiment, generally, in Myanmar in the lead-up to the elections in November 2015. To some extent, the question of adherence to the Muslim faith, and the particular issue in Rakhine State involving Rohingya, became very highly politicized, such that I think the international community had initially imagined that the four laws on religion that I mentioned would have prejudiced particularly Muslims, obviously including Rohingya.

There had been an anticipation that those would not pass the legislature, or if they did pass they would be so watered-down that they would have little impact. It was somewhat of a surprise, I think, to the international community when all four laws actually passed. I think there was a dynamic in the run-up to the November elections that probably explains that fact. It is very unfortunate, because now we have laws on the books that will be very prejudicial to the Muslim community. Whether or not they are implemented obviously remains to be seen. As I said, it is three weeks into the new government.

As I mentioned, when Minister Dion was in Yangon and Naypyitaw, two weeks ago now, these were issues that he certainly raised with the Aung San Suu Kyi and the president.

Mr. David Sweet: I am glad you mentioned that, because one of the things I was going to ask you about was the kinds of things that were raised in that regard. I hope one of the things that were raised was the constitution and the 25% of seats that are reserved for the military. I don't think this situation is going to get substantially better without those kinds of core issues being dealt with. They go right to the heart of what causes and permits the prejudice to continue, particularly against the Rohingya. In that regard, I hope we are pressing very strongly, with the kind of investment that we have made, to make sure that those are on the top priority list to be dealt with, albeit I don't know whether this new government has the substantive majority required in order to be able to deal with the constitution.

Finally, I'll just include this in my questioning. There were a number of releases of child soldiers. I guess this is a positive thing. Could you tell me if any were Rohingya, and whether Canada is considering any of the investment that we have made in Burma to at least champion some sort of regime to rehabilitate these child soldiers? It is a significant issue trying to have them re-assimilated into a culture where all they know is violence.

•(1325)

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: If I may, Mr. Chairman, I do not know if any of the child soldiers who were released were Rohingya. I'll certainly ask our embassy to follow up, and I can get back to you through the chair.

On the constitutional issue, indeed, Myanmar has a constitutional provision that assures that the military will have 25% of the seats in the legislature. I might point out that this isn't actually all that unusual in Southeast Asia. What I think is very unusual, and the reason I mentioned our cautious optimism at the end of my statement, is that, of course, under the previous government under Thein Sein—Thein Sein was a former general—they had taken a number of steps in the direction of democracy. That is unusual and very promising. They allowed elections to proceed in November, and they also ensured that there would be a peaceful transition of authority from the previous government to Aung San Suu Kyi's government. This is really unheard of in the recent history of Myanmar and, frankly, an example, I think, for the region where there a number of countries that are tempted to go the military-only route.

Constitutional change is, as we know, a very difficult issue in many countries, including in Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi, I think, understood very much the importance of working closely with the military in the time between the elections in November and the actual swearing in of her new government at the beginning of April. It's important that those discussions continue because, I think, while eventually everyone understands that the constitution will need to be revised, it's probably politically a bridge too far at this moment. Indeed, a democracy that reserves 25% of the seats of the legislature for the military is a fledgling democracy, not a full democracy as I explained.

Finally, I would just like to say, with regard to Minister Dion's interventions when he was there, his emphasis was very much on supporting the democratic transition of Myanmar, supporting a more decentralized state, providing information on federal systems that might be pertinent for Myanmar to respect ethnic minorities and religious minorities, and building the capacity of the newly elected legislature to actually function as a parliament. Those were certainly the highlights of the messaging that he would have given to officials.

He also had a series of discussions with NGOs and what we used to call "Burma watchers", who focus very much on human rights and the situation in Rakhine.

The Chair: We'll move on to Marc Miller now.

Mr. Marc Miller (Ville-Marie—Le Sud-Ouest—Île-des-Sœurs, Lib.): I want to touch on the point made about a fledgling democracy. As countries in that situation transition to more pluralist-types of democratic governance, they face the inevitable challenge of developing their economies. The question really is, to what extent are the projects that are being pushed in the Rakhine region—the land grabs or the hydroelectric projects—exacerbating the situation? To what extent are the abuses being used as a proxy to displace people, in your opinion?

The second question is related to the assistance of refugees, particularly in Bangladesh. What type of assistance do you feel is

most useful in those regions to assist countries that aren't wealthy and are having a large influx of these people?

•(1330)

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: With respect to the kind of assistance that would be most useful in Rakhine, and perhaps the economic development in Rohingya, I think it's fair to say that the previous government of Myanmar took a decision that was quite unprecedented, stopping the development of a hydroelectric project that would have displaced thousands, though not necessarily so much in Rakhine. Nonetheless, I think that was a testament to their sensitivity to the impact of this sort of economic development on the people of the country. It was a very popular decision throughout Burma.

The current government has yet to outline the plan of its development programs throughout the country. I think that's definitely going to be a big priority for them. The foreign minister and chief minister, Aung San Suu Kyi, has made clear that she is very much involved in the coordination of international development assistance in Rakhine. I'm sure we will have some information on what they propose to focus on in the near term. I think it's also fair to say that she will make sure this development benefits not just Rakhine State but all of the border areas where there have been long-standing ethnic conflicts.

I can't tell you specifically what options are on the table for the Myanmar government. For the Canadian government, I think you might have noticed the announcement that was made when Minister Dion was in Myanmar. Some of the projects had been long in the works but not actually announced and not yet implemented. There was \$44 million for new development focused on empowering women entrepreneurs and on making sure communities in the border regions and the ethnic minority areas, including Rakhine, actually participated in the civic process and were empowered to make sure that their voices were heard. Obviously, that is important in making sure that international development assistance reaches the most disadvantaged communities.

I think it's also fair to say that following the minister's first visit to Myanmar, we are looking at a number of different options for additional development assistance. Whether under the previous Myanmar government or the current government, it's understood that the people in the outlying regions—and 80% of the people of Burma or Myanmar do not live in the cities but are agricultural people—need to see some concrete results from the transition from a military junta system to a democracy.

At the moment, I wouldn't want to talk of new projects, because they're still under development. Certainly, however, the focus of our assistance in the recent past has very much been on empowering local communities both to have a voice in democratic development, and particularly in empowering women to be able to participate in the selling of agricultural goods to produce locally what would in turn have a broader market.

Myanmar is still among the poorest of countries. It has been a country of focus for development only since 2013. We have a very small embassy there. We are to some extent catching up with other donors.

• (1335)

You mentioned what we should and might do in Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh formed a task force to curb human trafficking and migrant smuggling. We have contributed to some extent to this through our humanitarian programming—the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are heavily dependent on humanitarian assistance. In 2015, we provided \$750,000 in humanitarian assistance through UN agencies to provide food and to develop some employment opportunities for the refugees living in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is also a country of focus for development. Some of that development and humanitarian assistance, which amounted to \$70 million in the last fiscal year, obviously goes to support the Rohingya refugees who are resident in Bangladesh.

The Chair: Ms. Hardcastle.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): I'd like to ask our guest a couple of questions, but first I wanted to make a comment, or just an observation, on the response to my friend's questions with regard to what assistance would be most useful.

My experience is very limited. I would humbly suggest, though, that if this is a new democracy, there needs to be bureaucratic mentorship, if I can call it that. It's very informal, but it's key. I was one of the mentors who worked post-apartheid in the country of Namibia, in the city of Tsumeb. They didn't even understand how to do practical things like administering waste management and a landfill. They didn't understand the concept of nursing homes or women's and children's centres.

It wasn't about the ideology of it; it was about “how do we do it?” They'd say, “Yes, that's a good idea, but how do we do it?” As all of us in this room know, we have a lot of strengths, and I would suggest that there needs to be a similar project.

That project was through the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the federal government in the 1990s, obviously post-apartheid, in 1996. So much of the accomplishments and the work done were because of Canadians sharing information. In this day and age, you don't even have to go there physically.

We had people coming here. We taught them a host of things. I don't want to go on, but I think that bureaucratic mentorship, with senior bureaucrats and senior administration, is huge, including just the example of how to roll something out, how to do it. Otherwise, you're stuck with the stability of a military junta; even though it wasn't desirable, it's stability versus instability, and that's huge.

That gets back to the instability issue. I wanted to get a better feel for this. I know that we're moving forward in a positive direction with democracy, but do we really see some headway being made there in how they'll eventually address the Rohingya? I know that right now, Aung San Suu Kyi is not even using the term. Mind you, I'm sensitive to the fact that the government has only been in office for three weeks, but in the past there has been a dilemma known as “can't leave, can't stay”.

I'm just wondering what you're hearing in the wind. Do you think that not even broaching the subject or not even using the phrase is political? It's not just because they're unsympathetic to the plight of these people, right?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: As I said, there are a number of challenges the new government faces.

We spoke about the particular political situation in Rakhine State where the party that won the most votes, not least because I think the Rohingya were largely disenfranchised, is really a nationalist party. They are very concerned about what they perceive as possible growth of the Muslim community, such that it would challenge the Rakhine ethnic majority in Rakhine. This is not a situation that is unheard of in many other places, but it's particularly acute in a place like Myanmar.

There is also the use of the name by Aung San Suu Kyi. As you know, she was before her party even won the election for her relative silence on the issue of Rohingya, including the use of the name. I think that reflects political realities in Myanmar, to be honest, and Aung San Suu Kyi is a reflection of those political realities unfortunately. I've tried to describe some of the interventions that the Canadian embassy has made since it was established in 2014 and the focus of Minister Dion's discussions when he was in Naypyidaw and Yangon. I think these will continue to be difficult issues. To some extent, the very name, “Rohingya”, has become politicized. I think Aung San Suu Kyi herself feels that the focus on their plight has perhaps overshadowed the other unresolved difficulties Myanmar has in reconciling ethnic and religious minorities. She has pledged to continue the peace process. As I say, it's three weeks in, and we're not exactly sure what that will mean. The short answer to your question is that I think there will be ongoing issues there, and it will take ongoing advocacy to make sure these are addressed.

In terms of bureaucratic mentoring, the military has run Burma since 1962 basically. One of their biggest problems, as I think I mentioned, is the lack of a civil administrative capacity. They simply don't have the civil servants to help the government implement its policies. The other thing they very much lack is a capable legislature. That issue was addressed in several meetings that the minister had with the chairs and members of the international relations committee. That's something the previous government had worked on during parliamentary exchanges with Burma's parliament. I think there is also an area where a lot of mentoring and support to the parliament is required to make this fledgling democracy work. Yes, training for a civil service, and mentoring and training for the parliament, will certainly help. The bigger issues, particularly the situation of the Rohingya that we're addressing today, will take a lot of time, along with outside support and continuing advocacy.

• (1340)

The Chair: Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): It's very difficult for a country to transition into democracy. It can take decades and decades and, unfortunately, there are so many people who suffer during the transition period.

What role are the surrounding neighbouring countries playing, if any, to help the situation, specifically for the Rohingya?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: That's a very good question. I think we've spoken a little bit about the situation of the Rohingya in Bangladesh, both refugees and people who were born there. I think the Bangladeshi government has not been very welcoming. They don't want to encourage other refugees to come to Bangladesh. You may have heard at one point in the recent past that there was a proposal by some in the Bangladeshi government to put all of the Rohingya on an island off the coast. It was basically a desert island. This has not proceeded, but I think it's indicative of some of the challenges of having Bangladesh provide for the basic human rights of the Rohingya refugees who are in Bangladesh.

Apart from the humanitarian assistance that Bangladesh itself provides, after the wave of migrants left Rakhine State and both Myanmar and Bangladesh last summer, there was more effort between the two governments to work collaboratively, first to identify where the people rescued from the boats were actually from, whether they were from Myanmar or from Bangladesh. About 2,500 I think were repatriated to Myanmar.

It's a very challenging situation. There had been efforts on the part of Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia to agree on how to confront the particular problem last year of those who were on the boats in the Andaman Sea. Generally, I think, with some outside support, they did find a temporary solution—in other words, not sending them back to Myanmar or to Bangladesh immediately. They made it clear this was only a temporary solution, and they were looking for outside support from the international community to provide for their sustenance in the refugee camps, or, frankly, to resettle them elsewhere.

It's a mixed picture, I would say. I think the region as a whole recognizes that obviously trying to provide sustenance for refugees is the moral thing to do, the right thing to do, and an obligation under international humanitarian law, but it doesn't address the fundamental issue—that is, the discrimination that the Rohingya in particular face in Myanmar. Until that is addressed, obviously there will still be a push factor in terms of propelling Rohingya to take drastic measures to try to leave Myanmar.

The pull factor, of course, is also the economies in Malaysia and in some of the gulf states that are offering economic opportunities that don't exist in Myanmar. To some extent, the pull factor has also declined recently because of difficulties in the Malaysian economy. The economies of the gulf states are also not as prosperous as they once were.

As I say, I think it's a very mixed picture. So far this year we haven't seen so many refugees on the boats, partly due to a crackdown by Thailand on the migrant smuggling rings, and partly due to economic reasons. The pull factor isn't there anymore.

Thank you.

• (1345)

The Chair: Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): I guess we've been reminded of the kind of situation these folks are in, as I think in the last few days, another boat capsized with almost 100 people in it. Most of them are missing. Again, these folks are trying to deal with a situation in camp where starvation is taking place and

they can't leave the camp. The only option is to go out on the river, and then they find themselves in a dangerous situation. It isn't getting better for them

What are the consequences of the revocation of citizenship that's taken place in the last year?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: I think the immediate consequence of what's occurred is that most of the Rohingya couldn't vote. That situation developed in advance of the November election, apparently in response to an upsurge of what I would call “Buddhist nationalism”, which made it politically unpalatable for the previous government of Myanmar to take courageous decisions on that issue.

Obviously, when you have up to 1.3 million residents of your country who are effectively disenfranchised, you have, as you mentioned, great difficulty accessing basic human services and moving about the country. This is not a situation that is sustainable over the long term without an upsurge of violence or worse.

As I say, there haven't been recent incidents of violence, and that in itself is a positive development. I do think, though, that there will be a requirement, including under the new government, for continued international attention to be focused on this issue and for international support of concrete measures to be taken to address the discrimination against this particular group.

I might mention that there are other ethnic minorities in Myanmar that are also not recognized as ethnic minorities. There are eight major ethnic groups, and within those, there are 135 distinct ethnic minorities. Rohingya is one that is not officially recognized. As I say, I think there are three others that are also not able to access citizenship, so it's an extremely complex religious ethnic minority map.

An immediate improvement, I think, is not in the cards, which is why the embassy and representatives of the current and the previous governments, every time they visit or they meet with officials, make a point of mentioning this issue.

• (1350)

Mr. David Anderson: I want to make a point that I was disappointed at our response and the minister's communications not mentioning that this is a specific issue of religious freedom and an attack on a specific group because of their religious background. As I mentioned, I don't think it's going to get better. It sounds like the present government has taken spokesmen from the previous government. Their present minister of religious affairs has talked about how there are real citizens and associate citizens, which can't possibly help the situation. I think the minister was aware of that.

I would encourage the government to speak clearly on these things. We can make these general statements about human rights, which are helpful, but when you find a situation as specific as this, I think we have to address it and speak clearly about it. I don't know if you want to make a comment on that. I'm putting you in a spot. You probably don't have the capacity to answer.

Is there still a role for sanctions? There's been a discussion in the United States about this, and I'm just wondering what our government's position is on that.

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: As you know, at one point Canada had very extensive sanctions on Myanmar, and most of those were lifted in 2012 after the changes brought in by the Thein Sein government. We still have sanctions on specific individuals and specific entities that were associated with the military regime and particularly with the crackdown on civil disturbances. We, like many other countries, still control the export of military goods. I think it's fair to say that, after the November elections and now with the installation of the new government, obviously we are looking at that issue as to whether or not we think they're still effective. I think it's fair to say we obviously haven't come to a decision yet on that issue.

Canada, like the States and the European Union, still has some sanctions, I think, in that case. Probably it's a question of governments catching up with developments on the ground.

The Chair: It looks like we have Mr. Tabbara.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): I will try to be brief here. We talked about the Rohingya here and how, because of their Islamic faith, many are confined to displacement camps with no possibility of movement or ability to move freely.

A few days ago in Myanmar, state councillor Aung San Suu Kyi pledged to amend the constitution as she reached out to minority ethnic groups. Do you think that her recent pledge for democracy will have a significant impact on the plight of the Rohingya in the foreseeable future?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: One of the first things that Aung San Suu Kyi did was to announce the liberation of political prisoners, which indeed is a positive step. I think the second thing was that she managed to get a bill through the legislature that named her a state councillor, which is equivalent to a prime minister. That was because she couldn't become president.

That won't have an impact on the situation of the Rohingya, other than formally giving her overall authority for the direction of the new government. She has been very clear, both before and after the creation of the position of state councillor, that she will actually be the power behind the throne. To the extent that she's essentially the prime minister or, as Minister Dion said, the de facto leader, of course she does have the responsibility to address all manner of issues facing the country.

With regard to whether or not her position as state councillor will have any impact in the immediate future on the situation of the Rohingya, I wouldn't say immediately.

As I mentioned, one of the challenges is that the Arakan State, in which the Rohingya predominantly live, elected a nationalist party that is very reluctant to co-operate with Aung San Suu Kyi on any issue, particularly with regard to giving any recognition to the Rohingya. I don't anticipate in the near term there will be any major change in that, which is where the international community comes in, both in terms of its support and its advocacy.

I would say that the good news, the optimistic news, is that there is now a democratic system in Myanmar, which in principle gives all communities an opportunity to voice their concerns through Parliament, through NGOs, and through civic society. One of the most remarkable things in Myanmar in the last five years, frankly, has been the creation of a free press, probably the freest press anywhere in Southeast Asia, as well as the ability of NGOs and civic groups to organize.

Does that mean things will change overnight for the Rohingya? No. It will be a very long process.

• (1355)

The Chair: Ms. Hardcastle, we have about three minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: No, thank you.

The Chair: All right.

With that, Ms. Puxley, I want to thank you. The range and scope of your knowledge has been a great resource as we begin our study. I want to thank you for being here today and both overviewing and then digging down deeper on some of these issues during the questioning.

On behalf of the entire international human rights subcommittee, thank you very much for your presence.

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: Thank you for the invitation.

Mr. David Sweet: Before we adjourn, can we go in camera for 60 seconds for committee business?

The Chair: Sure.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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