



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

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

SDIR • NUMBER 006 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, May 5, 2016

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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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•(1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everyone. I'm going to call this meeting to order.

I'd like to thank Chris Lewa for joining us today. She is the co-founder and coordinator of the Arakan Project. She has been engaged in research-based advocacy since 1999, focused on the northern part of Rakhine State as well as the Rohingya refugee situation and migrant movement to Bangladesh, Thailand, and Malaysia.

Ms. Lewa has provided consultancy services to international human rights organizations, UN agencies, and donor governments on Rohingya refugee concerns, and also provided expert testimony in the United Kingdom asylum and immigration tribunal as part of the country guidance case on Myanmar.

Ms. Lewa is a prolific advocate of the Rohingya, and has appeared on CBC Radio, National Public Radio, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Deutsche Welle, and others.

Ms. Lewa, I want to thank you for taking the time to be with us today from Bangkok.

Ms. Chris Lewa (Director, The Arakan Project, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and distinguished members of the committee, for inviting me to speak on the Rohingya human rights situation in Myanmar.

You have already presented my introduction and the work of the Arakan Project, so I will move immediately to a brief overview of the current political situation and challenges in Myanmar, especially with regard to the Rohingya in Rakhine State.

After just one month of government, it would be a bit too early to speculate on the NLD's, the National League for Democracy's, approach to the conflict in Rakhine State, but shortly after the election, the NLD already declared that this will not be a priority. As yet, there is no indication as to whether the NLD will combat anti-Muslim campaigns organized by radical monks in the country, or whether they will challenge the four controversial religious laws promulgated under President Thein Sein. However, the first signs are not very encouraging.

Indeed, the NLD appointed a minister for religious affairs who suggested that Muslims should be no more than associate citizens, and at the same time interfaith activists received additional prison sentences. This week also nationalists amassed outside the U.S.

embassy to protest the use of the term "Rohingya" in a U.S. statement and threatened to organize a much larger rally if the government does not react. The foreign ministry under Daw Aung San Suu Kyi reportedly made a request to the U.S. embassy to refrain from using the term, therefore bowing down to the nationalists' demands.

At the state level in Rakhine State, the NLD leads a minority government and the selection of an NLD chief minister has been strongly contested by the Arakan National Party, which is the Rakhine Party, which won the majority of parliamentary seats in the election in Rakhine State. This has resulted in internal division within the ANP when the hard-line faction declared that they would oppose the NLD. Moreover, armed conflict is now escalating between the Myanmar army and the Arakan army, also forcing Rakhine villagers into displacement. So the NLD leverage in Rakhine State is thus particularly weak, caught between the military and Rakhine nationalists.

I will move on to the human rights situation, but first I would like to make three related points.

First, the conflict in Rakhine State is long-standing, multi-dimensional and also triangular, involving Rakhine Buddhists, Rohingya Muslims, and the Myanmar government, with distrust and tensions on all sides. Rakhine sees the Rohingya as an existential threat and hostility has grown since Burma's independence, while successive governments over several decades have gradually imposed policies of persecution and exclusion against the Rohingya.

Second, the current and ongoing conflict is related to both ethnicity and religion. Constitutionally and legally, discrimination is based on ethnic identity, but religion is used as the mobilizing force on the ground. For example, the Kamans, a small Muslim group from Rakhine State who are recognized as citizens, we also attacked, in 2012, and today remain segregated with the Rohingya in the same displacement camps.

Third, the human rights situation faced by the Rohingya varies in different areas of Rakhine State. For example, in northern Rakhine where the Rohingya constitute 90% of the population, they have experienced little communal unrest and no major displacement since 2012, but abuses were mostly perpetrated by security forces. In the rest of Rakhine, violence was widespread and resulted in forced displacement and segregation brought by the authorities.

I will now analyze the present human rights situation thematically.

First, I will talk about citizenship. The 1982 citizenship law has rendered the Rohingya stateless and they are not among the 135 ethnic groups recognized by the government. Actually, the government and most of the Myanmar public refer to them as Bengali, and claim that they are foreigners from Bangladesh. In the 1990s, the Rohingya were issued with a temporary ID card, which was cancelled by President Thein Sein in 2015. Today, the receipts they hold provide no rights and have no legal basis. The only document they have is a family list.

Since 2014, the government has embarked on a citizenship verification process in which the Rohingya are forced to self-identify as Bengali. About 1,000 of them were granted naturalized citizenship in Myebon, but this has not given them freedom of movement. Elsewhere, the Rohingya refused to even participate in this process, but the few who did have not received any response. This exercise has now completely stalled.

● (1310)

Last January the immigration authorities announced new burdensome regulations for registering Rohingya children in their parents' family list. Most poor families would be unable to meet these requirements and associated costs, and their children are likely to remain completely unregistered. On the other hand, there has been no birth registration at all in all the Rohingya displacement camps elsewhere in Rakhine State. The Rohingya are now undocumented and totally disenfranchised. They were excluded from the population census in 2014 and denied the right to participate in the national election last year.

Second is forced labour and extortion. Forced labour has greatly reduced in recent years, but is still practised by the army for camp maintenance, sentry duty, and portering. Extortion is a really serious and ongoing culture all across the state.

Third is freedom of religion. In northern Rakhine, the 2012 curfew order is still in effect and targets only Muslims, as it prohibits gathering at mosques, but not at monasteries. As a result, mosques, madrasahs, and makhtabs have remained closed for the past four years, and Muslims have been prevented from performing collective prayer and religious ceremonies. The security forces have also recently dismantled two mosques and destroyed a Rohingya graveyard.

Fourth is freedom of movement and residence. Severe restriction of movement is to prevent the Rohingya access to livelihoods. In northern Rakhine, the Rohingya must obtain travel authorization to move even between villages, and cannot, of course, move beyond the two townships over there. In addition, constant demands for bribes and the curfew further restrict the ability to move. Some 110,000 Rohingya and Kamans are strictly confined today in

segregated displacement camps from other parts of Rakhine State. The restriction of movement also applies to those still in their villages as well as about 25,000 internally displaced Rohingya, ostensibly for security reasons.

Fifth is access to services. Access to health care and education is abysmal. In northern Rakhine, the local hospitals are neglected and ill equipped and Buddhist medical practitioners regularly discriminate against Rohingya patients. Moreover, travel permission and bribes at checkpoints further complicate the access to health facilities. Tens of thousands of Rohingya in Sittwe camps have access to only one clinic attended by two medical doctors. Other camps rely on mobile medical teams organized by international NGOs. For emergency referrals, Sittwe hospital has a special ward for Rohingya, but they have to be transferred there under military escort. The situation has led to many preventable deaths, including women with complicated pregnancies.

As for education, learning centres have been established in the displacement camps, but lack qualified teachers, and an estimated 60,000 Rohingya children are deprived of a formal education. In northern Rakhine, many Buddhist teachers did not return to their posts after the 2012 unrest. The shortage of teachers and school materials, overcrowded classrooms, discrimination, and poverty have kept many Rohingya children out of school. In addition, as I already mentioned, Muslim religious education institutions have been closed down.

As far as university education is concerned, that's totally off-limits nowadays to all Rohingya everywhere in Rakhine State. For the displaced Rohingya access to water and sanitation, access to adequate shelter, and of course, livelihood are other issues of concern. Food rations have recently been reduced, apparently due to funding caps. The humanitarian situation in the Rohingya camps is simply totally unacceptable.

Now let me quickly move on to women's rights and children's rights. I have already mentioned some issues. Violence against women is pervasive by state actors, by Rakhine, but also within the Rohingya community. Incidence of rape, especially by security forces, increased after the 2012 unrest. Desperation also has led to the flight of many Rohingya women and children, putting them at great risk of being trafficked.

• (1315)

I know the time is up, so I will very quickly comment on mass migration and responses in the region.

It is one year after the regional maritime crisis of late 2015, and today, still more than 340 Rohingya in Malaysia, and another 300 Rohingya in Thailand remain in prolonged immigration detention, with little hope to be released. Only in Aceh, Indonesia, rescued boat people from last year have been accommodated in camps and assisted more or less properly, but of course many of them have already fled the camps in Indonesia in order to join family or friends or whomever in Malaysia.

Since May 2015, maritime movement has virtually stopped after Thailand and other countries in the region disrupted smuggling networks, but somehow Rohingya are now trapped in Rakhine State.

I would have liked to talk more about my recommendations, but I have provided them in writing. In so far as the recommendations to the Canadian government are concerned, just let me say that the Arakan Project fully endorses the set of recommendations put forward to the new government in Myanmar by Ms. Yanghee Lee, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar.

I am now ready to answer any questions you may have.

• (1320)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Lewa. I'm sure somebody on the panel may ask you for your recommendations, which will allow you to go through them at some point.

With that, I think we'll begin the first round of questions, leading off with MP Sweet, for seven minutes.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Ms. Lewa, thank you very much. It was a little difficult to hear you, so I apologize if I need to confirm a couple of things, simply because of the kind of connection that we have, no doubt because of the distance that you are away.

Did you say that there are 135 groups that are recognized as citizens and the Rohingya are not one of them?

Ms. Chris Lewa: Yes, that's correct.

Mr. David Sweet: Could you give us an idea about how often or when the last time was that you were on the ground and saw the kind of condition that these camps are in?

Ms. Chris Lewa: I haven't actually been there this year. I have been in Yangon many times. I go regularly to keep in contact with the international humanitarian agencies, the Rohingya activists based in Yangon, and the politicians, as well as of course the diplomatic community. One of the reasons I did not go—actually I was in Myanmar in March—is that there is now restrictions on foreigners visiting the camps. Permission is now required, and since I am not

directly associated with any organization in the country, I cannot apply with a tourist visa for permission to visit the camps. I've been at least once every year since 2012. I'm of course in direct contact also with several people in the camps, for example, my guide, who has become a friend. When I call him, he gives me updates on whatever is the situation there. A lot of my presentation on access to services is also based on the recent conversation I had with basically all the major humanitarian agencies, those from the UN, as well as UNICEF, Action against Hunger, Solidarités International, the Danish Refugee Council, which actually provide me [*Inaudible—Editor*].

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you. Your testimony is consistent with what we heard from Human Rights Watch, that although there is a kind of pseudo freedom for people to visit the camps, they require that you jump through many, many hoops in order to get there. I'm thankful for your answer.

I wanted to ask you if you knew of any report of the condition of the camp. On Tuesday, there was a fire that destroyed one of the camps. I'm wondering if you are privy to any information about that and could give us an update in that regard.

Ms. Chris Lewa: Yes, and actually I've been interviewed by quite a few journalists about that.

It's accidental sometimes and it is quite common, of course, not only in the camps but also in the villages. It is very hot and dry, and people live in wood or bamboo houses, and in the camp, of course, they are in bamboo shelters, which have very little fire prevention. Especially when the wind is blowing it can lead to a lot of destruction.

I have to mention just one more thing which I believe may not have been made clear. Actually, I have a team of researchers. In addition to visiting the camps, I have a team of researchers, Rohingya and Bangladeshi researchers, and they are based at the border with northern Rakhine State. They have daily contact by phone with a number of sources there. We actually have a special [*Inaudible—Editor*] to focus, even though we don't have direct access. We document as credibly as possible also the situation in northern Rakhine. That's why I made the distinction in my presentation, because that situation is often ignored. You talk about the fires, and there have been several fires there as well, recently destroying an entire market. I just wanted to mention that.

I mean perhaps luckily, [*Inaudible—Editor*] the district camps will receive some support from international agencies and the government to rebuild the shelters. Of course, people will have lost whatever belongings they had. When a fire happens in villages in northern Rakhine, often there is no assistance or support at all, and the villages have to rebuild everything by themselves.

Mr. David Sweet: You had mentioned that they lack proper nutrition. There is no sanitation. They have limited access, if any, to education because they don't even have qualified teachers. There's no health care. There's no freedom of movement. I mean these people are basically sentenced to a slow demise, certainly a cycle of poverty, and left to the elements there in regard to anything, whether it's fire or their health or their ability of even getting a job if they can't get an education.

• (1325)

Ms. Chris Lewa: I didn't have time to talk about the actual life in the camp. It's almost impossible. Even in the villages it's so restricted and the clear policy of the government so far to encourage Rohingya to flee is to cut the access to livelihood, and of course the restriction also goes to all other services as well. But in the camps basically the situation, as I qualified, is absolutely unacceptable. Everyone who works on the ground has been telling me this.

Mr. David Sweet: There's really no place for them to flee anyway, with the neighbouring countries treating them the way they are, and their lack of freedom of movement, I mean they're very much stuck.

I want to clarify something for our researchers. Human Rights Watch mentioned about the complexity of having, really, two governments, one the new elected NLD government, and the other the military, that there's this push-pull on authority. But there's really a third element here as well. The Rakhine State government is also playing a part in this, complicating things and making life more difficult for the Rohingya.

Ms. Chris Lewa: Oh, absolutely. That's why this conflict is so complex and also challenging. So far I see very little movement toward any possible solution. It seems like the previous government, and perhaps even the NLD, is trying to be content just to keep the status quo, but I think that's also not acceptable. I mean it's already four years now, and I don't see much movement at all.

Mr. David Sweet: If our diplomats were able to put some quiet diplomacy in regard to pressure for them to fulfill their promise to President Obama and open up a United Nations human rights office there, do you think that would be of benefit to the situation for the Rohingya?

Ms. Chris Lewa: Oh, it would certainly be of benefit for sure, but whether that would resolve the issue, most likely it would not, I think. The real solution has to be the government. That's why I also focused on the anti-Muslim campaign in the country. Without addressing that first and [*Inaudible—Editor*] empowering the nationalist Rakhine will continue the abuse against the Rohingya. At the same time I think it is important that the NLD make some sense on this. Of course, they have mentioned several times in the past that a key issue in Rakhine State is the rule of law. Now I would like, and I think we all would like, to see this happen in Rakhine State. If the rule of law is restored or improved, I think it would probably be more safe to find some solution and to try to talk to the groups. But it's true that it's extremely complex. It's not one side. It's

also the Rakhine, the army, the NLD. And the international community, of course, I hope will urge and continue consistently to put pressure on the [*Inaudible—Editor*] government to address this issue.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lewa.

We're going to move to the second questioner, MP Miller.

Mr. Marc Miller (Ville-Marie—Le Sud-Ouest—Île-des-Sœurs, Lib.): Thank you, Ms. Lewa, for your testimony. Perhaps my question will allow you to get into your recommendations.

We've heard from many witnesses, at least one of whom has asked that no trade be undertaken with the government until there is improvement in the human rights situation of the Rohingya. Obviously, with a fledgling democracy, that may have an inverse effect on the situation that is faced by those people. Another witness mentioned that certain trade/aid—and those are obviously two distinct groups—be targeted, if we were to undertake sanctions.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on increasing trade and obviously increasing aid, and how to perhaps leverage or link it to improvement in the human rights situation and legal status of the Rohingya.

Thank you.

Ms. Chris Lewa: That is a difficult question because I'm not personally [*Inaudible—Editor*] to the point of pushing for trade sanctions, but definitely increase humanitarian assistance. That's for sure. That would be one of my main concerns at the moment, because during my recent trip to Myanmar, I understand that the international community seems to have, and the donor community, as well, some fatigue about the situation, and of course I'm looking for a way to try to get things moving.

One of the discussions I have heard of is about trying to move a bit away from simple humanitarian assistance, like blanket humanitarian assistance, and to move to early recovery and then development assistance. I question how development assistance can benefit the Rohingya if they cannot move and go anywhere. I still feel it is important that the Canadian government as well as other donor countries continue to guarantee that, at the minimum, humanitarian assistance will continue to be directed to the Rohingya in the camps and elsewhere, where it's needed.

At the same time, I also have been told that the World Food Programme, for example, is experiencing funding cuts, and as a result they have now decided to shift their blanket food assistance to more targeted assistance to vulnerable people. I didn't mention this in my testimony, but there are also a number of internally displaced persons—IDPs, as we call them—in the camps. They have not been assisted by the authorities for several reasons, including because they arrived later than others. For these people, of course, there was the sharing of rations already, which has been reduced, as I mentioned.

The situation of the Rohingya, displaced, and others has definitely reached the brink already. Cutting humanitarian assistance to them, also threats to try to push the government to find some solution, to me, are definitely not appropriate. I have very particular concerns about that. I want to make sure that assistance from the international community will continue. I know there are a lot of cuts nowadays because of the many crises in the global arena, but I'm trying to find a solution for the crisis.

My last discussion was about the head of mission group that was set up in Yangon. It included the Swedish ambassador. I think it was led by the Danish ambassador, but also there was very strong participation by the U.S. ambassador as well as a European representative, the U.K., if I remember well, and Turkey. I didn't see Canada as part of that. They seem to be pushing a plan now, which unfortunately, they did not release to me, but which included short-term, mid-term, and long-term steps to reach a solution. The key message they did reveal [*Inaudible—Editor*] is coordination in addressing the issue of freedom of movement and access to services as a priority.

Nevertheless, I have some comments on that, because obviously freedom of movement and access to [*Inaudible—Editor*] are intrinsically related to citizenship. Seeing that the citizenship issue, as I also described in my testimony, really is stalled and stuck at the moment, I do not want to see the international community actually forget about the citizenship issue just because it seems an intractable issue.

Yes, that's why pressure is needed, and I think constant pressure. I assume also that the NLD government will probably be able to get some more support in terms of business contracts and other things. I think that foreign governments should definitely not forget the situation in Rakhine State. It should remain high on the agenda.

• (1330)

Mr. Marc Miller: Thank you.

Mr. Raj Saini (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Ms. Lewa, Myanmar has granted the UN special rapporteur on the the situation of human rights in Myanmar access to Rakhine State since 2010. There must have been some recommendations that were given at that time.

Has the government followed any recommendations, and has there been any request to have any thematic rapporteurs to come into the country to deal with specific situations?

• (1335)

Ms. Chris Lewa: It's true that in 2010 was the first time the government granted access to the special rapporteur, who at the time was Mr. Quintana, to Rakhine State. However, this access has been stopped at different points. Even Mr. Quintana himself was not able

to return in 2011. But since the violence [*Inaudible—Editor*], Ms. Yanghee Lee has been given access. Also, Ms. Lee herself—both of them actually have had problems during their visits—during her last trip asked the government if she could return to Rakhine and the government denied her access. We have to remember that she does not have free access to Rakhine State nowadays.

As far as thematic special rapporteurs, I agree, a number of them have already made a request to government. I am also doing a lot of advocacy myself in Geneva with different thematic rapporteurs. So far, the government has not granted access to any other thematic UN special rapporteurs on human rights.

Another issue I want to mention—

The Chair: Ms. Lewa, I'm going to wrap up that particular round so that we can get Ms. Hardcastle's question in. We'll have some more questions coming up right away.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): I'd like to thank you, Ms. Lewa, for staying up so late so that you could participate with us tonight. I know it's late for you and we appreciate it.

I am interested in hearing more about your recommendations though. I know that through your answers to my colleagues you've given us some of your recommendations, but I wonder if you could be a little bit more clear, especially with what our interest would be for the Government of Canada. You did mention earlier that you don't think it's a good idea to pressure with sanctions; that is how I understood it. There is a little bit of an audibility issue here, so I may not have heard you right. You also mentioned that there is a mission group that you believe Canada needs to be part of. I'd like to hear some more about your recommendations.

Ms. Chris Lewa: Sorry, I didn't understand fully the last part of your question. Could you please repeat the last part?

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: You mentioned that there is a mission group that you think Canada needs to be a part of. I would like you to expand on your recommendations for us, please.

Ms. Chris Lewa: Yes. First of all, I mentioned this group of ambassadors in Yangon, which is called the head of mission group. It includes ambassadors from a number of countries. The group includes also a couple of NGOs, such as Save the Children and the Danish Refugee Council. It seems to me it would be a good idea for the international community that's there to actually try to have a concerted and coordinated response, and act as a messenger to [*Inaudible—Editor*] the government. That's what I wanted to say.

In terms of recommendations specifically for the Canadian government, it would be really difficult for me to say exactly, but I definitely would recommend that the Canadian government continue to closely monitor the human rights situation, the humanitarian situation, the political situation in Rakhine State, and to engage proactively and consistently with the Myanmar government in addressing issues.

I also think that the Canadian government should condemn in a public statement when there are incidents of violence against religious and ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya. Obviously, I think that in terms of support and funding, I know that the Canadian government already participated in the humanitarian effort, but I'm sure there are ways to step it up as well, and at least continue it.

Another issue, too, is in terms of refugees. Canada was the first country to actually do resettlement for Rohingya, initially from the Bangladesh refugee camp. As you know, Bangladesh has now closed totally the resettlement program from the camp, but Malaysia is still doing resettlement, and actually has increased the quota of resettlement of Rohingya refugees, mostly to the United States. Perhaps Canada could also contribute to these efforts and provide a more durable solution, and resettlement would be one of them, to people who are already in exile, and especially vulnerable people. That's also a reason why Rohingya are moving sometimes from refugee camp to refugee camp, from one country to another; they are frustrated and are trying to find a solution.

I haven't had the time to talk much about the refugee situation in the region, but as you know, none of the countries there have signed the refugee convention, and basically see them as illegal migrants. For the Rohingya who are stateless, I think there's almost no hope of returning to Myanmar one day. They are hopeful, but in talking already about the trouble inside the country, expecting that the refugees will be able to return in the short term, I think, is totally unrealistic. Children are born in exile to families year after year, so I would suggest that Canada review the resettlement of Rohingya refugees as well.

Those are some of the main recommendations I can think of. Those were in my original list that I was unable to put in my statement.

• (1340)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Lewa.

We're now going to move to Mr. Saini, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Raj Saini: Ms. Lewa, I want to talk to you a little bit about the constitution, because I think the citizenship act of 1982 seems to be causing a problem. On March 31, 2015, I'm sure you're aware that the white cards were cancelled for the Rohingya people, and so now they are not only stateless, but there's difficulty in receiving services.

If we go back to that position and look at the constitution, what would your recommendation be to the government, to change whatever the requirements are to at least give identification to the Rohingya people, that would be a beginning, a first step, in recognizing them and making sure they get the delivery of services, especially health care services?

Ms. Chris Lewa: Yes, and it's not only the constitution itself. Actually the constitution basically made no reference to people who

are not recognized as citizens in the country. I think there is an absolute need for legislative reform and to review all the laws that are discriminatory and bring them in line with international human rights. One of these would be the 1982 citizenship law. As you know, it puts people into three categories. Also there is the fact that the Rohingya are not recognized as an ethnic group and because of their ethnicity they have no access to citizenship. Actually, the law does provide some access but it's very limited. For example, section 6 claims that everyone who was recognized as a citizen before the law came into effect would remain a citizen. The other issue related to that law is basically how it is used in practice. That is, of course, the main problem, because the government nowadays does not even accept that the Rohingya did at one point at least receive the same [Inaudible—Editor] as other citizens in Myanmar.

On top of this, of course, they try to promote naturalized citizenship as one avenue, but they have opposed that in a way because first of all it offers fewer rights, with respect to elections for example, but mainly to apply for that citizenship, the Rohingya need to speak fluently....

For example, there are several requirements and criteria for fluency in the national language, and obviously since the Rohingya are not recognized as an ethnic group, neither is their language recognized as a national language which means that [Inaudible—Editor] exercise I mentioned led to 1,000 receiving citizenship. These are people in different situations [Inaudible—Editor] in northern Rakhine [Inaudible—Editor] people that have been living a long time. They are a very small minority but they must speak Rakhine, which is the national language. In northern Rakhine, 80% of the Rohingya do not speak it, so they would automatically be rejected from naturalized citizenship.

I think the solution in terms of citizenship is to find a way—I'm not a lawyer myself—to provide equal access to everyone on a group basis to citizenship rights.

I know the Rohingya are very strongly advocating to have the name "Rohingya" recognized. I understand why they want that, because in Myanmar if you are not a member of an ethnic group, and with the constitution and legislative system as well, there's no way you can access people's rights. At the same time [Inaudible—Editor] about the Rakhine especially who see that as a demand also for future territorial claim.

Perhaps to me the most important thing is that the Rohingya have access to citizenship of Myanmar [Inaudible—Editor] for the time being whether it will be a demand for recognition on an ethnic basis. Based on their long-standing history of staying in Myanmar, they should have access somehow to citizenship. How that actually would be applied in practice I don't have a ready-made solution, unfortunately.

• (1345)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

At this point, we're going to go MP Anderson, please.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): My name is David Anderson, and we're very happy to be able to speak with you today.

I have a couple of questions, so I'm going to ask if you could keep your answers fairly succinct so I can get to the second and third parts.

I'm very interested in understanding a little bit more about what the religious components of this situation are. When we see the religious affairs minister going and meeting with one of the extremist groups and basically bowing down before one of the monks and giving them donations, that activity seems to be much at odds with what we would expect from that particular religious sector.

Can you tell us a little bit about how much of what's going on here is religious and how much of it is cultural and nationalistic in nature?

Then I have a couple of specific questions about some of the effects of the laws on the Rohingya.

Ms. Chris Lewa: As you know, anti-Muslim tragedies have always been rather widespread in Myanmar, not just now. I have been already more than 20 years here in Thailand and in the past have had a lot of contact also with pro-democracy activists. We were generally [*Inaudible—Editor*] tragedies that come out and they had been [*Inaudible—Editor*] in the past through anti-Muslim violence.

What is extremely worrying today, and to me it's like a cancer in society, is the fact that the monks themselves are leading this movement as the country opens up a bit more to freedom of expression and freedom of participation. It's not just the monks, but it's also [*Inaudible—Editor*] society [*Inaudible—Editor*] extremely crucial. That's why I really cannot talk about the regime without really hoping that the NLD-led government will take a really strong and vigorous plan to try to stop the activities of anti-Muslim groups, especially the monks. I do hope so. Perpetrators of hate [*Inaudible—Editor*]. Otherwise, you just empower the activists to continue their actions.

Mr. David Anderson: Could I just interrupt?

Ms. Chris Lewa: When you look at the violence, monks were absolutely involved in this. Of course they were driving people out of their villages and they would not tolerate the message of monks. So as long as the [*Inaudible—Editor*] I think they give them hope.

Mr. David Anderson: Okay. I wanted to ask specifically then, it's not just the monks, because in September 2015, the parliament adopted four race and religion protection laws. There was the population control law, the Buddhist women's special marriage law, the religious conversion law, and the monogamy law. I'm just wondering, could you tell us a bit about what are the effects of those laws on the Rohingya population? Do they discriminate and violate religious freedom? What is the likelihood of the new government to repeal or to amend those laws?

• (1350)

Ms. Chris Lewa: As you know, this religious law was promoted by the monk-led movement in Ma Ba Tha.

I looked into all the laws and I think many of them do not necessarily apply to the Rohingya. For example, I actually have never come across a mixed marriage between a Rohingya and a non-Rohingya, although it's not totally unusual. Of course on monogamy, it's not the first time; that's always been there, the fact that [*Inaudible—Editor*] is forbidden. The main one that I am extremely concerned about is the one on population health. It is called the population health control bill. Now the government has made it a policy to actually impose a three-year birth spacing in some regions of the country. It could be used to replace, or even complement—who knows—the previous policy that was imposed in northern Rakhine. That was not in Sittwe, only in northern Rakhine, where married persons ask permission.... Permission is only required of Rohingya to get married, not other groups. They would have to sign a statement that they would not have more than two children. This seems to have been, in practice, no longer implemented, but actually the order for these two checkpoints has never been repealed, and now with this new law on population health control, it is truly dangerous that it could be [*Inaudible—Editor*] with the intention to [*Inaudible—Editor*] Rohingya in the future.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. David Sweet: Mr. Chair, what was it? A three year—

Mr. David Anderson: She made reference to a three-year something, but I didn't hear it either.

The Chair: Ms. Lewa, could you repeat what you said about a three year....

Ms. Chris Lewa: The law states, just off my head, because I don't have text in front of me, that the government can impose in any region of the country where it deems necessary, a 36-month birth spacing between children. How it could ever implement that in [*Inaudible—Editor*] that women have to wait 36 months before getting pregnant again, I don't know, but this is the fact of the law. There is no penalty attached to it, but the fact that it is in law is worrying.

The Chair: Thank you for that clarification.

Ms. Lewa, we have time for one more short question from MP May. We're going to keep this, if we can, to a total of three minutes.

Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.): Thank you for joining us today, Ms. Lewa.

We know that the situation there is horrible. We know that human trafficking is continuing. Just last week there were reports of 12 Rohingya refugees being found in a Thai jungle. We know this type of human trafficking is continuing. Our Minister of Foreign Affairs recently announced that \$44 million will be provided to strengthen democratic institutions in Myanmar. We had a witness at this committee not that long ago, John Sifton, who mentioned the importance of co-operation between countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Bangladesh.

Through programs like this \$44 million, what can be done to promote the political inclusion of the Rohingya people, in your opinion?

Ms. Chris Lewa: That is a difficult question, but just looking at perhaps the issue of the regional aspect, yes I think there has been a lot of push. As you know, I have also been participating together with UNHCR and I tried to get countries in the region to coordinate a regional response which would include of course addressing the protection needs of the Rohingya when they flee the country, but also to address together the issue of root causes in Myanmar which of course is the reason these people are fleeing in the first place. The only progress I've seen so far is the last Bali process meeting when apparently the people in affected countries agreed that if there was another crisis, they would take over coordinating a response.

• (1355)

Mr. Bryan May: Ms. Lewa, could you repeat that last part? I didn't catch that, and I'm looking at the analysts and they were kind of nodding as well. You said the only progress you've seen has been which?

Ms. Chris Lewa: It was at the Bali process meeting in March, the ministerial meeting that took place in mid March, and I can't remember the exact date. Apparently additional members of the Bali

process agreed if there was a future crisis, the Bali process will become basically the regional platform to discuss coordinating a response. The problem is that, of course, the Bali process is mostly looking at combatting trafficking and protecting borders, but so far, there is little burning sense of improving protection of the people who speak. Anyway that's the first step. The problem also is that they have this principle of not interfering in each other's internal affairs so expecting at the end to be a strong voice to push the Myanmar government to address the root causes is probably not going to happen. How to spend the \$44 million is perhaps a bit beyond my expertise especially when you seek to promote a democratic institution. Dialogue of course is important. That is clear.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lewa. We're out of time here. I want to thank you again for your contribution to the committee on this very important topic today. You've touched on a number of areas that I know were instructive and enlightening for this subcommittee, and especially given your sacrifice to call in at midnight.

Thank you very much and we appreciate the time that you've taken.

Ms. Chris Lewa: You are welcome.

The Chair: The only other issue we have on the docket distributed electronically was a press release regarding the events coming up the week after next around accountability week, just to notify people in case they want to come to the committee or participate.

Shall we go in camera?

An hon. member: Sure.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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