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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): We're just awaiting one of our witnesses who has been delayed. We have a bit of committee business to take care of, so we're going to go in camera for a couple of moments. Can we clear the room of anybody who shouldn't be here to go in camera, please?

Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

• (1300)

(Pause)

• (1320)

[Public proceedings resume]

The Chair: Good afternoon. I would like to welcome our two witnesses, Anwar Arkani, the president of the Rohingya Association of Canada; and Ahmed Ramadan, outreach coordinator for Burma Task Force Canada. I know you had some delays getting here, but we're glad you made it.

To give you some background, this subcommittee has been very engaged and troubled by what's been happening in Myanmar and by the plight of the Rohingya. In fact, we published a report last June, "Sentenced to a Slow Demise: The Plight of Myanmar's Rohingya Minority". We followed that up in November of 2016 with a joint statement expressing alarm over "the ruthless and disproportionate response by Myanmar security forces to the violence in the Maungdaw district".

We continue to be gravely concerned by the plight of the Rohingya. That is why we decided to hold this second emergency hearing on the subject. It is something that we know is of grave concern, not just to Parliament in Canada, but around the world as we speak with other colleagues in other jurisdictions.

With that, if you both could take maybe five or six minutes to give some initial remarks, then we'll have time for questions after.

Mr. Ramadan, if you want to begin, that would be great.

• (1325)

Mr. Ahmed Ramadan (Outreach Coordinator, Canada, Burma Task Force): Thank you. I apologize for the delay and appreciate your understanding.

I would really like to thank the subcommittee for inviting us here to share an update on the Rohingya crisis.

My name, as you said, is Ahmed Ramadan. I'm the outreach coordinator for the Burma Task Force, which is a main project of the Justice for All Coalition. We are a coalition of organizations with the aim of bringing the persecution of the Rohingya to an end, getting the Rohingya their citizenship back, having them live peacefully in their ancestral lands, and bringing to justice the perpetrators. We believe that impunity leads to more violence.

I would like to thank the subcommittee for the report it submitted to the House of Commons. In all honesty, a lot of what you recommended is what we also stand for. We were really happy. We felt that your report was extraordinary. Many of terms used in that are being used widely now by the United Nations and other organizations, like "crimes against humanity" and "ethnic cleansing".

I would like to bring to your attention the UN flash report from February 3, 2017. I'm sure that the subcommittee has already come across it. I would just like to highlight the brutality mentioned in this report: entire villages have been burned, children and babies burned and throats slit, and there have been gang rapes, mass graves, and the list goes on.

This report did set off a series of events. The special rapporteur, Yanghee Lee, who was behind the report, suggested that there could be crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. She said that government policy appears to be aimed at expelling the Rohingya, and cited the dismantling of homes and use of a household survey whereby the absent may be struck off the list, which is their only legal proof of their status. She called on a commission of inquiry to investigate the systematic structural and institutional discrimination in policy, law, and practice, as well as the long-standing persecution of against the Rohingya.

The UN did adopt an inquiry, but it wasn't a commission of inquiry, but an independent investigation, which is not as strong as a commission. She was disappointed by it, but at the same time the international community, all the NGOs and human rights activists, were happy about this independent inquiry. However, they were fearful that words weren't translating into actions, so they wanted to see real action result from the words.

I want to point out a couple of things that were in the report and the response to the report.

In regard to the Kofi Annan commission, he has called on Aung San Suu Kyi to allow for humanitarian access, to allow media access to affected areas, to pursue accountability for alleged human rights violations, and to establish a clear path to citizenship, and to close all displacement camps. There are a few problems, however, with this Kofi Annan commission. As Yanghee Lee points out, it doesn't have an all-encompassing mandate, meaning that it is not there to investigate human rights abuse. This will lead to impunity. There is no Rohingya representation on this commission. Two of the members have made genocidal comments toward the Rohingya, notably Daw Saw Khin Tint, who has been quoted as an apologist for genocide in *News Weekly*.

There's also one minor point I would like to point out about the subcommittee's report, just as a clarification. It mentioned that there was violence between the Muslim and Buddhist communities and that the Buddhists were influencing the policy of the government, when in reality, from all the reports that we've studied and looked at, the people we've interviewed, and other members of the Rohingya community, and other activists, it is the government that is influencing the Buddhist extremism. So this is a state-sanctioned aggression by the government toward the Rohingya, and they are using the emotions of the Buddhist majority, and the extremists among them, in order to accomplish their goal. I just wanted to point that out, because it's important to realize that this is institutionalized within the Myanmar government, which has repeatedly denied the existence of the Rohingya, yet its policies all correlate with the aggression I have mentioned.

I would just like to quickly discuss Aung San Suu Kyi. Aung San Suu Kyi's government reacts with crude denials, the censoring of its independent press, and the barring of human rights activists entering the country. Early in 2016, she demanded that foreign governments refrain from using the term "Rohingya", and the Myanmar government's public statements continued to simultaneously demonize and deny the existence of Rohingya identity. Neither she nor her president has taken the trouble to visit to Rakhine State during the current crisis.

• (1330)

As a report on her rule notes:

Aung San Suu Kyi, as the country's de-facto leader, must be seen as ultimately responsible for the atrocities being perpetrated against the Rohingya. The evidence of genocide is now irrefutable. The Rohingya need strong advocates—they need the world to understand that the persecution they face is genocidal and that only enormous pressure on the Myanmar government will succeed in halting the devastation.

This report was done by the International State Crime Initiative at London's Queen Mary University. These are the results they came up with.

Although I have a lot more to say, I'm going to end it here to give time for questions. I'll pass it over to Anwar to see if he wants to add anything.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Arkani, you now have the floor.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Anwar Arkani (President, Rohingya Association of Canada): I would like to thank you very much for allowing us to update you on the current situation. I am a Rohingya and although some of my siblings are still alive, I have lost almost 60 of my nieces and nephews. As an extended family member said, 2012 was an "active massacre", or "active genocide", as I call it.

My mother was a survivor of a big massacre that took place in 1942 when Burma was still a British colony. During that period, half of the entire Rohingya population was massacred. My father was arrested by the government and killed in jail in 1978 when there was an influx of refugees to Bangladesh from Burma. At that time I was just a grade 4 student.

I have gone through the report that you produced. My MP, Mr. Tabbara, is here, and I am happy to see him. I live very close to him.

I have gone through the research done by the subcommittee, and it was very impressive, although it is not 100% complete. As a native Rohingya, there are a lot of hidden things there that are not known to the rest of the world.

Before I address the current situation, I want to point out that I helped rescue boat people in 2006 and 2007. I was at the Thai-Burma border in a town called Mae Sot. I was there for about two years and rescued a lot of boat people who were stranded at the Thai-Burma border and exploited by the Burmese as well as Thai authorities. It was known to the Canadian embassy in Bangkok. I was the first person to help and rescue any boat people. Since then, the Thai government has prevented that.

Why I bring up these things here is that there are numerous, I don't know how many tons of, systemic plans by the Burmese government to completely cleanse the Rohingya community from the soil of Burma. They will do everything and anything. They will intimidate and they will kill. They will arrest you, and you disappear, or they will come and shoot in front of the villagers. Those things are now widely circulated on the Internet as well as various media. There are still hidden plans that the Burmese government makes every single day to either kill you or make you disappear. The only way you can survive is to get out of Burma.

Unfortunately, the international community, although they have belatedly come forward with strong words in reporting the violence, have fallen short action-wise on the ground. Active killing is still taking place. There is forceful disappearance, rape, the taking of Rohingya land, and the burning of them in their houses while they are still alive.

I can show you my phone as evidence. Every single day, I receive calls at any time. Even at 2, 3, or 4 o'clock in the morning, the phone keeps ringing. When I cannot tolerate it anymore, I just hang up the phone. It is not their fault. They are just asking for some advice, to find out what they can do, or what we can do. They are here. They took out my younger sister. They slaughtered... They slit the throat of my father, and my big brother was killed. What do I do now?

• (1335)

Is there anything you can tell your government or the people around the world who have power and can do things to prevent these things? Those are the real calls, if they are coming every day—night, morning, evening, and afternoon.

I just would like to end there, honestly. This is how my life is.

I am honestly very grateful to Canada that Canada brought me here. I came as a refugee from Thailand. Until I came to Canada I was not considered a human. I was born a crime, I was born unwanted, and I only became human in 1998 when I came to Canada and landed at the Toronto airport.

That's where I would like to end. Thank you very much for your time.

The Chair: Thank you very much to both of you gentlemen for sharing your experiences, and Mr. Arkani, particularly for your last comment. Canada welcomes you here, and we're honoured to have you testifying before us on this important and necessary issue of the treatment of the Rohingya in Myanmar.

With that, we're going to open the meeting for questions. We're probably only going to have time for one round of questions.

MP Anderson, would you lead it off?

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being with us here today.

I would like to ask you what you would like to see from the Government of Canada. The Canadian government has committed money to Myanmar and its development, and I understand that the High Commissioner of Canada to Bangladesh joined the American and Australian high commissioners to Bangladesh and met with Rohingyas in registered and unregistered camps. We have heard nothing from the government about this, however. The only comment they've made over the last several months, I think, was in response to a question that was asked in the House of Commons in question period.

What would you like to see from the Government of Canada by way of speaking up on this issue? Do you expect more than you have seen to this point?

Mr. Ahmed Ramadan: Thank you for the question. It's an important one.

We saw the previous Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Honourable Stéphane Dion, send out tweets mentioning the Rohingya and his concerns.

I have a few suggestions for our government that I feel might be useful. For example, ASEAN point out:

Both ASEAN and Canada have been committed to addressing common traditional and non-traditional challenges, upholding international law, and maintaining peace and security in the region.

This would be a good time to urge their partners to speak up about the plight of the Rohingya.

One problem is that during the Security Council session, many of the countries in the area refused to support country-specific mandates. While other countries such as Ireland, Spain, and France, to name a few, were very vocal about what they want to see happen specifically with Myanmar and voiced their concern, countries in the area that might have more influence have been very reluctant to speak out.

Specifically China, and Russia backing it, were two countries that opposed an independent inquiry. From everything I've seen, Canada has good ties with China and great ties with ASEAN. They need to use these. That is one point.

The second one is that they need to be more vocal on the world stage. We've seen comments from many different countries. I'm looking at news and searching specifically for what Canada is saying about this specific issue. We have seen nothing publicly. Incidents from around the world that are much smaller... Obviously any violence is sad and horrific, and we condemn all of it, but this is something very drastic on the world stage, and Canada has been extremely silent about it, except for the tweet by the former minister.

There has been nothing from the Ambassador to Burma, Karen MacArthur. Although the previous ambassador visited a number of times, I haven't seen anything from her. I have tried emailing her a few times, with no responses from the embassy there. We just need them to be more vocal on the world stage also.

• (1340)

Mr. David Anderson: I'm going to have to cut you off. If you have an important point to make, please make it.

Mr. Ahmed Ramadan: Okay.

Mr. David Anderson: The International Crisis Group has attributed the October and November attacks to a well-organized, well-financed group led by Rohingyas who were living in Saudi Arabia, were funded and trained there, came back, and were responsible for those initial attacks.

Are you familiar with the group? Do you accept this interpretation of what happened there?

If you are familiar with them, can you provide this subcommittee with some information about what level of support they have in that area, particularly as the military has, I think we would all believe, over-reacted to the situation? Do they have support in the community? Are they well funded, or are they seen as outsiders who should be pushed back and eliminated from the area?

Mr. Ahmed Ramadan: I know that Anwar has a take on this also, but I'm going to tell you that from the research that we've done, they are not connected to any no funding from the outside world. That's one. Second of all, as an organization we condemn any use of violence. We believe in their non-violent struggle, and actually, this is why the Burma Task Force takes up their cause, because they are the only non-violent minority that is being persecuted in Burma. This is our stance on the situation.

However, there appears now to be an actual group there. We are skeptical about how real they are in their representation of the Rohingya. We've heard that other Rohingyas are scared of this group. People have been saying that they might not be real Rohingyas, but just a group that was put together to appear to represent the Rohingya, but they're not really Rohingyas.

As for their receiving outside support, I have not seen any evidence of that anywhere yet, but they did come out with a statement just the other day that what they want is UN troops on the ground and that they're not trying to harm any civilians—that kind of thing. Regardless, we still condemn violence. We believe in a non-violent struggle.

Mr. David Anderson: Can you tell us a bit about the heart of the people? You see the attacks. You see the retaliation. You see the villages that are being destroyed. Is there increasing radicalization, or have people been suppressed for so long that this is just one more wave of this? How are they reacting to this?

Mr. Ahmed Ramadan: We've talked with Rohingya and human rights organizations from around the world. From all the communication that we've had, all the Rohingya whom we've been in contact with have said that they do not agree with this group's formation, its goals, and the way it wants to proceed. However, I think it would be silly to think that after so long, there is not the chance that people might possibly, I don't know if you could say radicalize, but start defending themselves in a way that maybe we might not agree with. For now, I know that, in general, the community there fears this group and that the people on the outside working to help the Rohingya are not in support of them at all.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Arkani, did you have something to add?

Mr. Anwar Arkani: Yes. Given the history and the record, we are the only major ethnic group in Burma that is not taking up arms or guns in fighting against the government. That's absolutely true—it's proven. We are the only ones. All the other groups—Mon, Kachin, Shan, Chin, Rakhine—have armed people fighting against the government.

This is absolutely made up to me. I cannot prove it, and they also cannot prove they are Rohingya. Let's say, these people are all of a sudden organized, and there are others who are unorganized, who got mad because we've been suppressed for so many years, and retaliated. Why is there no next time? There is not another time, a third time, a fourth time, or a continuation after that.

Hundreds of thousands of women were raped in public. They cordoned off the village. They brought out everybody. They took off all their clothing and made them pray naked. They raped the womenfolk in front of their husbands, sons, daughters; and they would rape a daughter in front of the father. This is known to the UNHCR, the human rights commission; Human Rights Watch; and Amnesty International. I have family members who were raped and killed—my sister.

Now, why is there no protection? Okay, they are killing there. Let's go and protect them. We will die there. Why is there no such thing? They disappear for about a month and a half or so—for 20 days, 12 or 15 days—and when the issue is a little harder, when the international community is talking, all of a sudden there is an interview with the *Dhaka Tribune*. They say, "Okay, this happened, that happened," and things go quiet again. About 15 days later there is another interview by the *Bangkok Post* or somebody else. This is a systematic plan, the handiwork of the Burmese government. I have proof.

Unfortunately, I have a picture that the Burmese government posted on their website saying that Bengali-language training was held on January 9, 2017, at the Sittwe prison, in the capital of the Rakhine state.

If they don't like us, and they don't even want to hear our name, why are they training some of their own people to speak our language if they do not have a hidden agenda?

• (1345)

The Chair: I'm now going to pass the floor over to MP Khalid, please.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you, gentlemen, for your very compelling testimony today.

As you know, our committee is very engaged with this issue.

Mr. Ramadan, you had made a point of clarification on the reports by the subcommittee with respect to the nature of the conflict. You noted that it was not between the Buddhists and the Rohingya, but was more institutionalized on the part of the government. We know that Myanmar is a very new, fresh democracy and it is still trying to stabilize itself. Can I get your comments on the nature of the democracy there and the military involvement as well? Does that have a role to play in the plight of the Rohingya?

Mr. Ahmed Ramadan: Thank you. That's a really important question.

How fair and inclusive is an election if an entire indigenous community of over 1 million people is not allowed to vote, despite the Rohingya having voted in each of the country's previous elections? How democratic is a country with a constitution that reserves 25% of the seats in Parliament for military nominees, as well as key positions in the cabinet, thereby investing the military with veto powers on constitutional amendments?

Alexander Lambsdorff, head of the European Union's election observation mission has said:

The vote cannot be considered truly democratic because 25% of the seats were not contested. He voiced concern that the Rohingya Muslims were largely absent from voting rolls and candidate lists...[reflecting] their disenfranchisement.

Moreover, Mary Robinson, the former president of Ireland, has said that she would not call the election "free and fair". Robinson represented the Carter Center as an election observer. She was quoted as saying:

And I wouldn't tend to use that expression anyway, if you've got 25 percent of both houses (of parliament) to the military, problems with the constitution, people excluded because they're Muslim or the Rohingya.

The point of these quotes and these questions is to say that, yes, they have been moving in a positive direction, but to pretend that they have a democracy.... Over and over again in response to the report by the House of Commons, our government had said that it's a democracy. They're happy. However, the reality is that we really have to approach it with a lot of skepticism. Even Aung San Suu Kyi has been portrayed as using authoritarian type of rule. She's been very authoritarian in the way that she's dealing with people who are working with and under her.

Therefore, we have to approach it with a bit more skepticism. Just because we want to believe it's a democracy, doesn't make it so. We need to be more careful with that.

• (1350)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

I think my colleague here has a question as well.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, including for your tireless advocacy on this very important issue.

I think it's fair to say that what's happening in Myanmar with the Rohingya is beyond description. It's very difficult to capture in words what is taking place. We can read reports, hear testimony, and it creates a certain image in our minds, a very difficult one, but the plight of the Rohingya really defies description.

With that in mind, I wonder if you could comment on some of the ideas put forward by the special rapporteur to Myanmar, Ms. Lee. Looking at the human rights situation, she has said that a commission of inquiry is required. Obviously, it would have some teeth. It wouldn't be able to find a solution to this situation, but it would be a meaningful step. At the same time, Aung San Suu Kyi has resisted this, saying that it would make the situation worse on the ground. It would upset whatever delicate balance exists now by inflaming a very bad situation. Could you comment on that?

Also, I think the European Union has said something along the same lines. They're worried that if a commission of inquiry was set up, it might actually worsen the situation, by inflaming, let's say, nationalist tensions and the military, in particular.

Mr. Ahmed Ramadan: Thank you for the question.

For us to be forced to operate in a way that's going to appease the military and an extreme Buddhist majority, to make them happy and to infringe on the rights of minorities, I don't think is the proper way to move forward, nor is letting them force, basically, the UN or international community's hand. The EU did adopt a resolution, which was passed, for an independent inquiry, which is moving forward now. As you said, Myanmar did oppose that.

The irony here is that they keep denying and keep downplaying anything that's going on. They keep saying, "Why don't you come and see what's happening for yourself? What people are reporting isn't reflective of what's on the ground." So we say, "Okay, let's do an independent inquiry" but they say they're opposed to that.

What are they trying to hide? It's pretty clear. The reports that have been coming out have supported what the international... Human Rights Watch used satellite imagery to show how the military forces were moving and entire villages were being burned down just in November 2016.

Yanghee Lee did use strong words. She wanted to put those forward to the commission of inquiry. She didn't get what she wanted. She was disappointed. She was kind of frustrated that there was resistance even to that, for something that was so clear. We did get something out of it, which is an independent inquiry. Now it's up to Myanmar to accept it and up to the rest of the world to put some pressure on them to accept it.

Do you want to add anything to that?

Mr. Anwar Arkani: The word "democracy" is, I think, only for the government-minded or racist Buddhists. There are good Buddhists; there are good Burman; and there are good Rakhine who are Buddhists, but democracy is not for them. Democracy is also not for the Mon, Shan, Kachin, or Karen, whom they are killing every day. They are also killing other minorities closer to the

Chinese and Thai border. Democracy doesn't bring anything for them. Even Buddhists, if they utter anything against the government, will be dealt with right away. Against the Chinese multinational companies, if you see anything, if you raise your finger, it could be chopped off.

So how can we really say it is a democratization? It is taking time for them to come up or stabilize the situation. I get a lot of these things, but I would like to add just one more thing.

I get a lot of things: the Burmese troops are not trained, the police are not trained, to handle these things. This is sort of a major mass mobilization; they cannot control them. That is absolutely wrong. In 1988, there was a nationwide demonstration against the government. The police, army, naval forces, infantry, teachers, regular people, and everybody was involved. It was suppressed within 15 days, two weeks.

In 2007, the Saffron Revolution started the same day I flew back to Canada, when I was helping boat people. They suppressed it within one week. It depends on their will what they are going to do. This is a good excuse for them to bring the nationalists, or to show the fear. They want to portray themselves as a saviour of the country.

• (1355)

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Garrison.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for their personal testimony and their testimony on behalf of the Rohingya people today.

In the interest of time, I'll just try to ask a very brief question.

It seems peculiar to me that despite the work of this committee and the leadership of some MPs, the Canadian Government remains reluctant to make direct and forthright statements on the situation on the Rohingya people.

Do you believe that more direct statements from the Canadian Government and more involvement at the diplomatic level could help bring an end to violence against the Rohingya and help bring recognition of Rohingya rights in Burma?

Mr. Ahmed Ramadan: Absolutely. I believe that Canada should be taking a more public and involved role. I believe Canada is probably best suited to this with our commitment to human rights and the respect that Canada commands around the world. I think any other country looks at Canada with a lot of respect, and they would be more likely to listen when Canada speaks.

I feel this is an opportunity for us to rise and show the world what we stand for and protect the rights of a minority and a persecuted people. I definitely agree with that point that we should be more vocal both publicly and within the institutions that are available for them like the UN and others.

I would also add one comment in response to the question about the commission of inquiry. There is also a human rights chief, Zeid Ra'ad Al-Husseini, who said that the treatment of the Rohingya merits a UN commission of inquiry and a review by the International Criminal Court.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Chair, just before we close I have two requests if I may.

The first would be under the rubric of requests for documents, and would be to Mr. Benoît-Pierre Laramée. He apparently met with Rohingya in Bangladesh. I would ask that the clerk send a note to him asking for his observations to be presented to the committee. We don't necessarily need to call him as a witness, but he had interviewed those Rohingya who had escaped. I think that would be good for us to have.

The second, Chair, is regarding a concern that our witnesses raised. It's the ICG. I know they do good work and are relied upon in most cases. I went to their website to check the particular report on the faith insurgency group, and they said they had found a video about these wealthy émigrés from Saudi Arabia that seemed to be credible. That concerned me. They said there was some compelling evidence, but they had none on their site.

I would ask that we do a little more digging in that regard to further understand this testimony. We have other newsfeeds that indicate there is collaboration between Bangladeshis and some Rohingya from local communities who are reacting to the violence against them.

The Chair: Thank you.

Yes, I was curious about that as well. We will follow up on that point.

To both witnesses, thank you very much for your heartfelt testimony here today. As I said at the beginning, this subcommittee is seized with this issue. In talking to other parliamentarians from all parties who aren't in the room today, I know that we take this issue very seriously and that we will continue working on it and advocating for the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar.

Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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