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Vice-Chair

Mr. David Sweet

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

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• (1300)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC)): Colleagues and witnesses, thank you for joining us for an update on the crisis in Burma with regard to the Rohingya.

We'll begin the testimony right now. I'm hoping we can try to get everyone to have a five-minute question period if we can get through our witnesses' testimony in a timely fashion.

Before you, you have Ahmed Ramadan, an outreach coordinator for the Burma Task Force; and Anwar Arkani, president of the Rohingya Association of Canada.

Hopefully, joining us soon will be Matthew Smith, the co-founder of Fortify Rights.

We'll begin with Mr. Arkani, and I understand that the clerk has advised you that you have no longer than seven minutes. We'll keep you to that just to make sure we have an opportunity for the members of Parliament to question you.

Please begin, sir.

Mr. Anwar Arkani (President, Rohingya Association of Canada): Thank you very much for calling us here today.

Thank you to the subcommittee and everybody who organized this. We have a chance to give you an update on the current crisis.

Before I jump into what is happening right now, I would like to go back just a little so I can convey that what is happening right now has not popped up all of a sudden and is not accidental. It is well planned and well thought out.

The major influx started in 1978. They thought it was a good plan to push out all the Rohingyas from Rakhine State by any means.

My father was also arrested and died in jail, and we didn't know. I fled to Bangladesh as a refugee. I'm not going to go there. Since they had to accept these people back, initially they thought it was foolproof for them. It didn't turn out to be foolproof.

Then in 1982, they implemented another layer to their well-planned cleansing or wiping out of the Rohingya, the 1982 citizenship act. Immediately overnight, the entire Rohingya minority group became stateless. Then, after that day, they have been acting according to that particular law—or actually there is no law.

Whatever they would like to do, they're just doing. They have been trying for many years.

Again, there was another push out in 1991 and 1992, and another smaller one in 1994. There was still a big chunk left, so they were not satisfied.

In 2012, when this so-called civilian-dress military came into power, President Thein Sein said that they couldn't wait so long and that they needed to find a way to get rid of them as quickly as possible.

Everything is well planned. Every time they have some excuses. They started creating...plundering, kind of letting loose the goons and the monks to attack Muslims in Burma proper as well as in Arakan state.

Soon after, President Thein Sein himself proposed shipping out all the Rohingyas and sending them to a refugee camp, making them all refugees and, if there were third countries willing to take them, they could take them. That was the proposal he gave to Mr. António Guterres, now the UN Secretary-General. At that time, he was the head of UNHCR. He quickly rejected the proposal.

Then in 2012, I think it started on different pretexts. In each area they have different excuses to justify going forward with their attacks. Just to buy time, they have created up to now five different commissions, one after another. The last one was the Kofi Annan commission. He was head of the commission. I do not want to go too long on that.

Things went insane. At the end of his term, when Suu Kyi came, he made sure, along with Suu Kyi, that no Rohingya was allowed to run for the election or vote. That was the first time in Burma's history that no Rohingya was in Parliament or was allowed to vote. It was successfully done because people around the world thought, "Oh, Aung San Suu Kyi: she is the democratically elected government. She is a human rights defender champion, and has collected all these awards around the world." A human rights champion, yes, no problem, but there was a bump in the road when the transition happened.

She had a big excuse and she carried out that. She said, "Okay" and then she went to different countries to lift all the sanctions, including the sanctions on drug-dealing generals. There were individual sanctions. She successfully lifted all of them. She is the iron wall or iron shield for all the generals' crimes. She is shielding everything successfully.

•(1305)

It was not probably enough that a lot of people were in the IDP camps; it was not enough, so they needed to find an excuse. Then they started, on October 9, to attack. They said their outpost security, I suppose, was attacked with slingshots, some sticks, and some rusted knives, kitchen knives or farm knives. It was really ridiculous. They killed a lot of people. Again, this time, it was 30 outposts. Government itself is posting some rusty knives and sticks and some wood stuff. It's 30 outposts, so what comes to my mind is that, okay, were they really meditating 30 outposts, this well-armed, trained army; are they meditating in the camps and counting bits? That is the question that really came to my mind.

In all it is a very systematic well-planned thing. They have all the excuses. They will blame everything on the victims to get rid of them. Even after many years to come, they will go exactly with that.

Now, the people who have already fled, I'm not talking about them. I still have one sister alive, and I have some nieces and nephews who I call every night. The last time I called was yesterday at 10 o'clock Canadian time. They said, "Uncle, if we do not die, if we do not get killed by the army or in the attacks with them, we will die here without food." That is the last talk I had with them. Their village is a big village around the border of Buthidong and Rathidong.

I would like to stop here. Maybe in the questions I will be able to add some—

•(1310)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Absolutely, you can expand then, Mr. Arkani. Thank you very much.

Mr. Anwar Arkani: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Our deepest sympathies to your family as well.

Mr. Smith, can you hear me okay? We are not getting any audio from you, unfortunately.

Mr. Matthew Smith (Co-Founder, Chief Executive Officer, Fortify Rights): I can hear you fine. Can you hear me now?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Yes, I can hear you now.

If Mr. Ramadan is okay with it, while we have a good connection—because I know how these things go—we'll let you go ahead with your testimony, Mr. Smith. Please keep it to seven minutes. I will give you a two-minute warning audibly, and then you'll be able to finish on time, because I want to make sure our colleagues have an opportunity to ask questions.

Mr. Matthew Smith: That's excellent. Thank you, sir.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for this opportunity, and thank you for taking the time to focus on the very urgent situation in Rakhine State.

I work with a human rights organization called Fortify Rights. I've been based in Southeast Asia since 2005, working in Myanmar as well as Rakhine State. We're a non-governmental, non-profit human rights organization registered in the United States and Geneva. We are based entirely in Southeast Asia. Today I would like to share with you some information that we've been collecting with regard to

the very serious—as you're well aware—human rights violations taking place in Rakhine State.

As I'm sure you have been following, hundreds of thousands have been displaced since August 25. I spent 10 days on the border. As soon as the attacks on August 25 happened, I was on my way to Bangladesh, where I managed to spend a period of about 10 days. We were conducting an in-depth investigation into the allegations of the violations as they were occurring.

To give you a brief rundown of what we know had happened, and what we've confirmed since August 25, as well as before then, there were of course the militant attacks on the 30 police outposts and one army outpost on August 25. Militants armed with sticks and knives attacked these stations. They killed 12 state security officials, which of course unleashed a ferocious response from the Myanmar military, the Myanmar police force, as well as mobs of civilians, armed mostly with swords and some other weapons as well.

We collected in-depth testimony from eyewitnesses and survivors from 31 different villages in the three townships of northern Rakhine State. That's Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and Rathedaung. We interviewed Rohingya men and women, aid workers, people who are currently trapped in villages, as well as a few fighters fighting with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, also known as al-Yaqin. We documented a variety of killings. Myanmar army soldiers shot and killed men, women, and children of all ages, administered fatal knife wounds, and burned victims alive.

I would like to quickly illustrate three examples since August 25, one from each of the townships of northern Rakhine State. Three massacres have taken place.

One occurred on August 27. Around 10 a.m. Myanmar army soldiers arrived in Maung Nu village in Buthidaung township. Some residents fled immediately, but a large number gathered at what is essentially the largest home in the village. It's a two-storey home owned by a prominent Rohingya family. The residents in this village thought perhaps they would be safe in this home. Each room of the house, which is relatively large, was filled with huddled masses of residents. According to survivors, women and girls were downstairs, and men and boys were upstairs.

The Myanmar army surrounded this home, entered it, corralled women and young girls and took them to the house next door. One eyewitness watched as soldiers dragged the men and boys out of the house, including children as young as 12. Some of the soldiers tied their hands behind their backs. They tore veils off the women, tied them over the eyes of the men and boys, and proceeded to violently interrogate them.

Soldiers started beating the men and boys, screaming at them, and threatening them. After a period of time the detainees were made to lie face down on the ground, and Myanmar army soldiers started executing them. Soldiers shot them and in some cases used knives to inflict fatal wounds to necks. One woman, with whom we spent a period of time, witnessed soldiers shoot dead her father-in-law who was a local mullah, her brother-in-law, and his two sons who were aged 16 and 18.

The killing in this particular village on that particular day lasted for a period of about two hours. The victims ranged in age from 90 to 12. Myanmar army soldiers in some cases wrapped bodies in tarps, dumped them in a military vehicle, and drove toward the local battalion, referred to locally as the Pale Taung battalion. It's Battalion 564 of the Myanmar army.

• (1315)

In other villages in northern Rakhine State—and I want to stress these are just snapshots—soldiers didn't bother to wrap bodies and take them away. They burned them.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Mr. Smith, I'm sorry, just two more minutes. Thank you.

Mr. Matthew Smith: Absolutely.

On August 30, in a village called Min Gyi, soldiers essentially told villagers that they'd be safe. A large group of people gathered by the side of the Purma River, and shortly thereafter, soldiers opened fire. These types of mass killings we are documenting and have been documenting since August 25.

Before I run out of time here, I want to emphasize that these are not the extent of the crimes, unfortunately. The first attacks by Rohingya militants on October 9 also resulted in a very brutal display of force by Myanmar army and other state security officials. From October to December we were documenting mass rape and gang rape of women and girls. We've spoken to and interviewed a number of eyewitnesses, as well as women who survived rape and gang rape who wanted to share information about what they had endured. These types of crimes have been perpetrated with complete impunity.

In terms of recommendations, which I'd be more than happy to say a bit more about, we would strongly urge the Government of Canada to do everything in its power to ensure immediate, urgent action. We are recommending that the UN Security Council urgently convene an open session on the situation in Rakhine State. We're calling for the Security Council to impose a global arms embargo on the Myanmar military. We do feel the time is now to begin discussions about international justice and ways in which perpetrators can be held accountable.

The Government of Myanmar, including Aung San Suu Kyi, and the military have vehemently denied that human rights violations are taking place since August 25. This has of course been one of the more disturbing aspects about what's going on in Myanmar.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Mr. Smith, I'll need to stop you there. Thank you.

Could you submit all the evidence that you've gathered? You've mentioned a couple of incidents, but this committee would be greatly appreciative of all that you've been able to verify and confirm in these atrocities.

Thank you.

Next is Mr. Ramadan for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Ahmed Ramadan (Outreach Coordinator, Canada, Burma Task Force): Thank you for having me here. I'm going to get right into it because I have a lot to say and not a lot of time.

Although Mr. Smith did give you some description of how bad it is there, I want to share with you testimony that was submitted at the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal and is ongoing right now in Malaysia on the situation in Myanmar.

This is one of the testimonies that was submitted. It is very graphic, but I want to show how serious, how bad, and just how horrifying what they're going through is. It states, "My sister had just given birth in her house when the Myanmar soldiers came into the village. We all ran away, but my sister couldn't. I returned and found the dead bodies of my sister and her baby. They had taken off her clothes and cut into her vagina. They had cut off her breasts and put the dead baby on her chest. The baby had been stomped to death. Its stomach had burst open and the intestines had come out. They had put the breasts next to each other on the pillow beside her. She was lying in her bed. They had stuck a rifle in her vagina."

I want to respond now to Aung San Suu Kyi's address that she gave a few days ago.

The Burma Task Force is the organization I work for. We are a non-profit organization registered in Canada under the Task Force for Peace and Justice. We are a coalition of organizations and are accredited in the U.S. by the UN.

The Burma Task Force rejects Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi's speech addressing the ongoing military attacks on Rohingya in Burma. The speech, delivered in English, was clearly meant for the consumption of foreign audiences in order to temper the growing international outrage and condemnation of Myanmar's crimes against humanity targeting Rohingya Muslims.

Suu Kyi's speech boasted ignorance of the well-documented crimes against the Rohingya, claiming "solid evidence" was needed before action could be taken. Over 400,000 Rohingya have been forced to flee to Bangladesh. There are satellite images of 214 burned-down villages. That's about 50% of the villages belonging to the Rohingya, if not more, that have been burned to the ground. What "solid evidence" she's referring to is still for her to answer.

Human rights organizations and the United Nations have documented and presented Suu Kyi's government with facts regarding the ongoing abuses by Myanmar's military. In fact, 52% of female refugees interviewed by the UN in Bangladesh reported having been sexually abused by Myanmar's forces.

Suu Kyi also conceded that 50% of Rohingya Muslim villages are still standing, so then she must recognize that 50% have been destroyed by the Burmese military.

She also claims that there have been no conflicts since September 5, but this has now been documented by many organizations. That's available. I can submit proof to you after the session we have here today. The documentation of the things that are going on is still happening right now.

Finally, she says that the Rohingya will be welcomed back through a verification process. To us, this sounds like a pretext in order to not allow the Rohingya to return, because obviously they are not recognized as citizens right now and they do not have proper verification. This has already been echoed by the spokesperson for Aung San Suu Kyi.

She's also said that three camps were closed. There have already been reports by others who have visited camps that she said were closed and who've said that on Wednesday morning people were still in those camps.

A lot of what she was saying, if not everything, she has either completely misconstrued or are outright lies.

As I've said, nearly half the Rohingya population has been displaced in less than three weeks. In three weeks, over 200 villages were burned. Right now, the Myanmar army is mobilizing troops in downtown Maungdaw and preparing for another onslaught as we speak.

The reports on the mass killings, mass raids, and babies being killed are already done, so I'm not going to go into that.

Additionally, the Myanmar military is laying land mines across the border right now and preventing people from crossing into Bangladesh.

• (1320)

This is where I'm leading to in my discussion now. Yesterday, the French president said that what is going on now appears to be "genocide". Seven Nobel Peace Prize laureates have come out with a joint statement calling what is going on "a textbook case of genocide". Yale University has released a report. Fortify Rights has released a report calling what's going on a genocide. The Prime Minister of Malaysia, the President of Nigeria, the President of Turkey, and the Bangladeshi foreign minister are all calling what's going on right now a genocide.

I urge the committee to stop using the term "ethnic cleansing". It is a term that was put forward by Milosevic to cover his crimes in Bosnia. We should be using the word "genocide", which urges and forces the international community to take direct action. We also ask Canada to bring up the possibility of putting in UN peacekeepers and creating a safe zone for the remaining villages and the Rohingya people until we can figure out the long-term solution to this crisis.

I'll stop there. I'll leave the rest for questions.

• (1325)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Thank you very much, Mr. Ramadan.

Thank you to all the witnesses. I know that this kind of testimony must be very difficult, considering the consequences to the individual Rohingya that you're reporting on.

Colleagues, I'm going to try to give everybody five minutes, and we'll start with Mr. Anderson for five minutes.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): I want to thank our witnesses for being with us today on short notice. We appreciate it. The committee felt seized of this issue, and we felt we needed to have this hearing as quickly as we could.

I had a chance to go to Myanmar last summer with a multinational, multi-faith group that went there specifically to try to address this issue. At the time when talking to people, we didn't think it could get much worse than it was, but it obviously has gotten far worse.

I want to ask about something you touched on at the start, Mr. Arkani. Is this an attempt to solve a long-lasting problem? Is the government committed to seeing this through to the end? Is that what's going on? Is it a conflict that has kind of surged up, which some people have decided to take advantage of, or is there a decision behind the scenes that they're going to solve this situation once and for all?

Could you comment on that?

Mr. Anwar Arkani: To me, this is not a problem, because it is one-sided. There is nothing to solve. As long as the government stops abusing, killing, and murdering these people, the problem will be resolved there. There is actually nothing else to negotiate or talk about, although the government...or the Buddhist community is portraying as communal...some other things popped up recently—insurgents, terrorists, or whatever term they are using. To me, those are all made up by the government. The government has resources and manpower. I have evidence that they're teaching our language to prisoners. There is a good reason they're teaching it. What is the reason?

Also, under government sponsorship, they're bringing Buddhist Rakhine from Bangladesh to settle on the Rohingya's land. Those people speak our language, more or less. I don't know what they're doing with all the resources. If the government wants, it can stop right now, right there.

Mr. David Anderson: Okay. I didn't mean to imply that I thought it was a problem. That's the government's perspective, was the way I was intending that to be meant.

To the other gentlemen, do you have any thoughts on that?

I would actually like some comments on what the support level is for this within Myanmar, because these things don't happen without local support. We know it was a big deal when they tightened down on one Buddhist monk who was making the extremist comments. We know how much reaction there was to that.

Can you tell us what's going on in Myanmar?

Mr. Ahmed Ramadan: Sure. The way we look at it, this is a government operation, and they have used propaganda. They have radicalized a large part of the country, although there are some sympathizers, even some who have tried to help the Rohingya who have been persecuted by the majority who have been radicalized.

As a majority, they've been under propaganda from the government and the military. The major one was started in 1988. Unfortunately, it's very widespread and very systematic. We see the source as a government that is trying to implement a specific plan in order to either remove the Rohingya from their land or just wipe them out completely. We're not looking at it as just the Buddhists' own mentality that has risen up and is forcing the government. It's the other way around. It's the government's plan.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Smith, do you have a comment?

Mr. Matthew Smith: Yes. It's an excellent question. From our observations and documentation, it's very clear to us at this point that the Myanmar state security forces, and to a certain extent the civilian government, are using the context of counterinsurgency to, as my colleague said, either drive the Rohingya out of Rakhine State or destroy segments of the population. The introduction of Rohingya militancy has really been a context that the authorities have seized on in a very brutal way.

In terms of support in Myanmar, certainly in Rakhine State the environment is extremely hostile right now, and we have documented civilian perpetrators. The state security forces have armed civilians in Rakhine State—Buddhist civilians, non-Muslim civilians—who have then subsequently inflicted lethal force and killed masses of people.

In the wider context of Myanmar, there are voices of hope. Some segments of Myanmar civil society have been outspoken to a certain extent on this, but there is, of course, a very deep level of discrimination from people in Myanmar. It should be noted that most of the people with the most vehement opinions about the Rohingya in Myanmar have actually never met or spent any time with Rohingya people.

• (1330)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Thank you, Mr. Smith. I'm sorry, but time is always our enemy here.

Mr. Tabbara, you have five minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you all for being here on short notice.

I want to talk about two specific areas. The first one is about humanitarian aid, and maybe, Mr. Smith, you can reply to this. One of the things I've been reading is an Al Jazeera article which says that in Myanmar, a mob blocked aid to Rakhine State, and for the Rohingya refugees, there was a Red Cross truck that crashed, and unfortunately, international humanitarian aid was not able to reach them.

Can you comment on some of the challenges right now in terms of all these individuals who need this aid, whether it's in Rakhine State or refugees? I know Mr. Arkani mentioned that his relatives have said that without having food they might die. Can you tell us about the urgency of this?

Mr. Matthew Smith: Humanitarian aid right now is a very serious problem, and it has been for some time. I don't know if it was discussed yet, but in Myanmar, there are more than 120,000 Rohingya who are confined to internment camps by the government. They survived similar violence in 2012.

Humanitarian aid in those camps has been very difficult for several years. Right now, food is not getting into some of these camps. In northern Rakhine State, where the recent violence has been taking place, the government has effectively ousted all the major humanitarian groups that were on the ground providing life-saving aid. The World Food Programme is not able to deliver food to northern Rakhine State. There are tens of thousands of children who are suffering from severe acute malnutrition. Without humanitarian intervention they will die. This is an area that the government has

completely sealed off, with the one exception of the ICRC, and it would appear to us that the government is content with local civilians preventing the ICRC from delivering aid.

In Bangladesh, the needs are massive. There is an enormous influx of people, I would say upwards of 500,000 people since August 25, and the needs there are dramatic. Food and health care are greatly needed.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: What would you suggest to Canada? What can we do in talking with our international partners? How do we get our international aid to reach there? What are some suggestions you can provide to the committee that we can take back?

Mr. Matthew Smith: There are organizations operational in the camps in Bangladesh that are working with the Bangladesh authorities to provide aid. In the past, the Government of Bangladesh has, in our view, made the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Rohingya actually very difficult. The sentiment has changed a little, but I think there would be opportunity for Canada to support humanitarian provisions on the Bangladesh side.

On the Myanmar side, that is where we start talking about governments creating conditions of life that are designed to be destructive. There's really no other objective to denying the remaining Rohingya access to humanitarian aid other than to create destructive conditions. This is where there has to be urgent intervention. There has to be urgent pressure on Myanmar. Whatever the Government of Canada can do to join with the international community, the UN Security Council, and others to encourage swift action there would be very important.

• (1335)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you.

The additional \$2.2 million was just announced by our minister. It's good, but we need to ensure that it is getting to the people on the ground and it is getting to the people in Rakhine State.

Mr. Ramadan, you mentioned about sympathizers in Myanmar. Are there mobilization groups among Myanmar citizens who are speaking out against the government? Is there some kind of mobilization on the ground? We know neighbouring countries have these groups, but what about Myanmar specifically?

Mr. Ahmed Ramadan: I'll be very brief.

In regard to actual mobilization, I don't believe that would be even safe for them, but there was a letter that was released before this massacre started, and it was signed by many groups that are there in support of the Rohingya, but not in a mobilizing way where they'll put themselves out there.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Thank you very much, Mr. Ramadan.

Now we'll go to Madam Hardcastle for five minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): I'm going to get quickly to my questions, because it's taking a lot of my energy just to contain my emotion on this. I want this meeting to be impactful and I want all of us here to be able to come away with some real language and something really tangible in terms of a forceful recommendation, because we know that what we've done so far is obviously not enough.

In terms of collecting and documenting evidence, I want to clarify what the important role has been for the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal on Myanmar. Has that been helpful in documenting evidence or not? Is there some way our government can assist in amassing the documentation that's needed, ultimately, for the UN Security Council? I'll ask you that, and all of you can think about that. That's one question.

Then the other one is this. What other diplomatic force can you see that we can be part of or we should be instilling in terms of the support going to the internment camps and food? Do we need UN peacekeepers to actually escort this stuff? Is that what you were saying, Mr. Smith?

I'll take the rest of my time to let all of you expand on that. I don't know who wants to go first.

Mr. Ahmed Ramadan: Thank you for the questions. They are two very important questions. Actually, on the way here I was on the phone with the chair of the Burma Task Force. He's at the Bangladesh border himself right now documenting some of what's going on.

He specifically asked me to ask this committee if it can help with documenting what's going on there. There are people there who have names, who have villages, who have houses; everything's been destroyed, and they need more people to be able to document this. This is definitely somewhere that we can not only help with evidence but also go back and maybe get some of these people justice for what they've gone through.

We in the Burma Task Force believe the only solution right now is a peacekeeping force in there and creating a safe zone. I can't see any other option that will work right now.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Mr. Smith, do you want to respond?

Mr. Matthew Smith: Yes, unfortunately, I was unable to attend the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal, but I do think these initiatives are helpful. We at Fortify Rights document human rights violations, and another side of our work is that we provide technical support to communities that are under attack or local civil society organizations or individuals. We try to ensure that these communities become part of the solution, particularly in the area of documentation. Right now, we're trying to ramp up our efforts so that members of the Rohingya community themselves can credibly document incidents of human rights violations in a way that will be useful for things such as the UN mandated fact-finding mission on Myanmar and other efforts that may come forward in the future towards justice and accountability.

We believe very much in the importance of documentation. Right now is a very key moment for this, because the crimes are still being perpetrated. Right now, for example, we're trying to locate the mass graves and other areas where there would be a large amount of evidence.

I think, in short, civil society is key for this, and Myanmar does have civil society organizations and individuals. The Rohingya community does not have as developed a civil society as other ethnic groups in Myanmar, and that's largely due to the amount of repression they've faced over the years, but we are certainly more

than happy to work with partners from Canada and others who are committed to human rights documentation in this context. In terms of peacekeepers—

• (1340)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Thank you, Mr. Smith. I just want to give Mr. Arkani an opportunity to respond to this.

Mr. Anwar Arkani: On the documentation collection, I think these two gentlemen have said enough.

I would like to add that if Canada supports the organizations in the field on the Bangladesh border that are collecting documentation, if they get more financial support, I think they will have more volunteers or paid employees, Rohingya, who can collect the documentation that is needed.

As far as the peacekeeping forces are concerned, I have been screaming for a while. Some of my siblings are dead. They did not die normally. They were burned alive. Two of my brothers-in-law were slaughtered in front of their young children at home. This is absolutely worse than any horror movie that I can imagine. That is how bad the situation is. Immediate intervention is needed.

I have two nieces in one village and a nephew in another village. My youngest sister is still alive. She has six kids. The biggest one also has a wife and two kids. The area is surrounded by the army. They are aided by the Buddhists wielding machetes. They said, "They don't need to do anything. They don't need to kill us. We will die here." There are no green leaves left inside the compound. They ate the banana plants and all the leaves that were there, mango leaves and other things. There is absolutely nothing to eat, so they will die unless there is an immediate intervention.

Create a safe zone and send a peacekeeping force. Those are the immediate things needed. Then maybe we can get some time to breathe and go for a long-term plan.

This is my request.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): I want to ask about Aung San Suu Kyi. Many across the world would have expected more from someone of her stature—a Nobel Prize winner and someone who has advocated for democracy in Burma throughout her life. However, this is not the case now.

My question is for Mr. Smith and Mr. Ramadan.

What explains the deafening silence? Now, where she has spoken about it, her words have not been helpful at all. She is permitting the violence to take place with her particular stand on the issue. What are the reasons? Is it for political reasons? Is there a prevailing sense of Buddhist nationalism in the country that she is worried about offending which would have political ramifications for her and the National League for Democracy?

There are reports of a prevailing sense—irrational—of fear of Islam within Burmese society and she is mindful of that and does not want to do anything that would make it seem as if she is siding with those in the state that people are fearful of, Muslims, whom people are fearful of, again irrationally, but the sentiment is there. What explanations can you offer?

Mr. Matthew Smith: That is an excellent question on an important issue.

Prior to the October 9 attacks, Aung San Suu Kyi was largely equivocal, but since then we have seen her and her office perpetuating this propaganda campaign. It's a very deadly propaganda campaign. It's getting people in the country riled up against Rohingya, and it will most likely result in more violence and more killing. That is a problem.

I think there are a number of theories. We can't get into Aung San Suu Kyi's head, but from our perspective, it is a difficult political environment. She doesn't control the military. However, her actively taking part and basically walking in lockstep with the military on this brutal campaign is problematic. We have heard dispatches from people meeting with her privately. What we're hearing about the way Aung San Suu Kyi speaks about the situation in Rakhine State is very disturbing.

It's worth noting that members of the various ethnic nationalities throughout Myanmar—and there are civil wars taking place in other parts of the country—have always had very little trust in Aung San Suu Kyi. For myself and others in the international community, it has been difficult to understand why over the years, but now, sadly, their logic makes a little bit more sense. We're not totally sure what's happening in the mind of Aung San Suu Kyi, but we do know that the outcomes are, frankly, disastrous.

● (1345)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Mr. Ramadan.

Mr. Ahmed Ramadan: It's a very good question. I was hoping that we would get to address this.

From the beginning until now, Burma Task Force actually did put forward a memo discussing what happened in her first 100 days. She has not been silent from the beginning until now. She has been very vocal. She's been denying, and a lot of people were saying this is due to her just coming into power and trying to work out the details.

The fact of the matter is that she has been able to do what the military was never able to do, including not having any Muslims in parliament, not having Muslims voting, asking the international community not to use the word "Rohingya", and the list goes on. Beyond that, the military, as I said, needs her. She's been able to open up the country in a way that they haven't and at the same time been able to crack down and destroy the Rohingya community, with her as their defence.

One of the things that came out from the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal, which Burma Task Force did sponsor, is that her differences with the military are not based on including ethnicities and trying to be more inclusive or marginalizing. Her differences with the military are about implementation of government processes: how fast, how slow, what needs to be done, and in what way. But when it comes to her treatment of minorities and specifically the Rohingya, they're on the same page. There is no difference between Aung San Suu Kyi and the military itself.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): That's all the time, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Smith, I saw you nodding as Mr. Ramadan was testifying just now. Would you agree with the last portion of what he said?

Mr. Matthew Smith: I would. The situation, certainly dating back to when Aung San Suu Kyi took office, has been problematic. I was in the internment camps in Rakhine State when the national elections were held. There was a great amount of hope for Aung San Suu Kyi and for her government, even despite the fact that Rohingya were denied the right to vote, and of course that has not come to fruition in any way, shape, or form.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Thank you. I have one more question and then I'll give the rest of my time to my colleague, if there's anything else.

Mr. Smith, Mr. Ramadan mentioned that we should use the word "genocide". I have the United Nations website here in front of me. There are two main components. One is that there needs to be an "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group".

The second part is physical:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Would your organization also use the term, in this case, in Myanmar, of genocide against the Rohingya?

Mr. Matthew Smith: Thank you, sir. Back in 2015, we gave a team of people from Yale Law School several years' worth of documentation and asked them to approach this question about whether the crime of genocide may have been perpetrated in Rakhine State. This was before the current wave of violence. Their conclusion was that the elements of genocide do appear to be in place in Rakhine State and may be in place in Rakhine State. From our perspective, there would have to be and should be a credible international independent investigation that would ideally lead to some aspect of accountability. An investigation such as this in a court could and should help us understand what specific international crimes have been perpetrated and by whom.

My personal view is that I do see evidence on the ground that would support the crime of genocide. Particularly, you mentioned the prohibited acts. Essentially, we know the Rohingya represent a protected group under the genocide convention, which is the first element. The second element is that some of these prohibited acts would have to have occurred, which of course they have. The third is of course the intent to destroy, in whole or in part. In some of these places, given the totality of the context right now, it's very difficult to come to conclusions other than the fact that there are perpetrators who are intending to destroy at least part of the Rohingya community.

● (1350)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Thank you, Mr. Smith. I think there's time for one question, Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson: I want to acknowledge Peter's question, because I think it was a critical one. I wanted to get there myself, but I'm glad that we were able to cover that a bit more fully.

One thing we haven't talked much about is the radicalization, outside funding, of armed Rohingya resistance forces, and I am just wondering. Mr. Smith, you're probably closest on the ground there, or perhaps Mr. Ramadan. We've read some articles about that. I don't know how accurate they are. Could you tell us a bit about those three or four groups? Who are they? How are they tied together? What strength do they have? We realize there's an international public relations campaign going on here on areas of this, but who are they? What are they? Do they have any strength? Tell us a bit about them.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): As briefly as possible, Mr. Smith.

Mr. Matthew Smith: I assume you're referring to the northern Rakhine Rohingya militants.

Mr. David Anderson: Yes.

Mr. Matthew Smith: From what we know about this group they were armed mostly with sticks and knives. They don't appear at all to be a well-armed terrorist organization by any stretch. We documented several cells in villages all throughout northern Rakhine State. Their recruitment increased dramatically after the first clearance operations in October and November. People who survived that joined up.

We have noted that this organization was threatening and intimidating local Rohingya to join their effort. They were threatening men and boys with beheadings if they didn't join. We also know that this organization has killed Rohingya men who they thought were informants to the Government of Myanmar. This has happened. We documented several cases. People have also disappeared, and we do presume those individuals were killed as well.

In terms of the means of communication, they're using social media. There were some articles suggesting that this group was only communicating with foot runners. That's not the case. They're using two-way radios. They're using mobile phones.

I should say that certainly among any group of people who have endured human rights violations the way in which the Rohingya have, we are surprised that this type of militancy actually didn't appear sooner. I think the jury's still out on whether or not—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Thank you, Mr. Smith, I appreciate it.

Madam Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you to our witnesses for their testimony today.

I have one question, and I would like both Mr. Smith and Mr. Ramadan to comment on this. Earlier this year, when Aung San Suu Kyi came to Canada, I had the opportunity, along with the chair of our committee, Mr. Levitt, to meet with her along with our foreign affairs minister, and ask her directly about what was happening in Rakhine State, and what she is willing to do with the issue of the Rohingya. She, in her response, had shown favour to the advisory

committee that was created and chaired by Kofi Annan, and the recommendations.

Can both of you speak to the recommendations that were from that committee, and whether it would be favourable for if not a short-term solution then perhaps a long-term solution to the issue?

Also, with respect to the 1982 citizenship act that Mr. Arkani referred to, can you comment on what specific changes could be made to that act to allow the Rohingya to come back in and resettle into Rakhine State?

I would like Mr. Smith to go first. Thank you.

● (1355)

Mr. Matthew Smith: Thank you.

We had a high level of hope when Mr. Annan publicized his final recommendations of the commission he was heading. They are comprehensive and they cover everything from freedom of movement to recommendations to investigate allegations of serious human rights violations. Mr. Annan referred to the situation as a human rights crisis before this latest round of attacks, and so we do feel there is value.

It should be noted, however, that the Government of Myanmar, and actually, Aung San Suu Kyi's spokesperson, said publicly that they were using the Annan commission as a shield—he used that term, “shield”—and he said that whenever the government faces pressure on Rakhine State, they can invoke the Annan commission as a way to attempt to alleviate that pressure. In other words, to us it's a suggestion that they're just using this and have no intention of actually acting on it. We hope that's not the case.

Those recommendations are sound. I think the international community has some strong content there to work with in terms of moving forward. The 1982 citizenship law is a problem. The Annan commission does recommend that the government revisit it. We would go far further and suggest the Government of Myanmar really needs to amend the citizenship law. There are a number of reasons why that law is problematic, which I won't get into now, but suffice it to say that the Rohingya are effectively denied citizenship. They were collectively stripped of citizenship, and that is a root problem.

Mr. Ahmed Ramadan: I don't really have much to add to what Mr. Smith said, but I will say that they have been using this as a shield. I think one of the problems was that, because of what happened in October, there was no accountability. This was one thing about the Kofi Annan report, that he really was not given the mandate to deal with accountability specifically. This is something that needs to be addressed, because without that it will keep happening.

What happened was that from October to the few months after that, there was no accountability from the international community. The situation just continued as is. They rejected the UN fact-finding mission. Nothing happened to them and they became emboldened. Although all these countries' presidents are releasing statements, they're realizing that nothing is going to happen and that nothing has happened in terms of real action. From what I see, the Myanmar government has said that nobody's going to hold them accountable, so they'll do whatever they want. And that's what it looks like they're doing. It's actually made it worse, in some respects, and it's been undermined also....

It's really odd; we know that the government and the military are in complete control of the Rohingya areas. The Rohingya community itself, the leadership, and all the people inside the Rohingya, even Mr. Arkani here and the community that he represents, have entirely rejected violence even until now, and this group is killing Rohingyas in order to get members onto it. It is just very suspicious that there has to be that much force to get Rohingyas to join a group. They appear to show up when their best chance to move forward, the Kofi Annan commission, comes out. That's when they choose to do their attacks. It's very bizarre. The crackdown now has completely undermined what is going on, especially the Kofi Annan commission. It's basically just thrown it off its rails. It's very suspicious in terms of whose purpose this group is really serving. We obviously can't say for sure and for real, but these are questions we have to ask. We can't just take it at face value.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Do I have time for one more question?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): You're over time, but you can ask one if it's brief.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Well, actually, it's not brief, so I will pass. Thank you.

Thank you very much, gentlemen.

•(1400)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): I do have one quick question that hasn't been mentioned.

How is the Bangladesh government responding in all this?

Ms. Iqra Khalid: That was my question.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): There you go. So this is actually Ms. Khalid's question.

Mr. Smith.

Mr. Matthew Smith: The Government of Bangladesh right now is responding in a better way. When the attacks first started, we saw the government essentially preventing Rohingyas from entering Bangladesh. We documented some preventable deaths because of that. Some people who essentially were waiting and were without food for several days died. Some infant children died.

They are allowing people in. I did see, on the ground, Bangladesh border guards assisting Rohingyas to get to places of safety. I also witnessed average Bangladeshi citizens assisting Rohingyas who were coming and who needed help. I think moving forward, though, there are some concerns. The Government of Bangladesh and the military have announced that they will construct a refugee camp and that the Rohingyas will be denied freedom of movement. This would essentially be an internment camp. I think it's unconscionable that the authorities in Bangladesh would consider interning Rohingyas after they've survived these massacres and atrocities. I think there will need to be pressure put on the Bangladesh authorities to recognize refugee rights and to recognize the fact that refugees have rights.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Thank you very much, Mr. Smith.

Mr. Ramadan, just quickly.

Mr. Ahmed Ramadan: The Bangladesh border was being sealed off prior to August 25, while the Myanmar military was building up troops in the area. I just wanted to point that out, because it appears that both the Bangladeshi side and the Myanmar government were aware and were planning something that was coming. We did actually send out letters to the Canadian government and other governments as well.

I know that they've opened it up now, but they were prepared for what was going on. This was not just a reaction to the coordinated attacks, as they are calling it.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Sweet): Mr. Arkani, Mr. Ramadan, and Mr. Smith, thank you very much for your testimony. We greatly appreciate it.

Colleagues, forgive me. We are about two minutes over.

Enjoy question period.

The meeting is adjourned.

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