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Considerations”
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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. Burma has come a long way in its transition to a free and democratic society, seeking to take its place in the global community. Initial steps to embrace reform are welcome, and we are committed to working with the people of Burma to create lasting economic, social, and democratic gains that benefit all. However, the ongoing humanitarian plight of the Rohingya casts a cloud over Burma’s recent gains, and threatens to undermine the successes it has demonstrated.

As you have seen, the recent escalation in violence in northern Rakhine State has resulted in massive displacement and humanitarian needs both in Burma and across the border in neighboring Bangladesh. This is a rapidly growing humanitarian crisis, and the United States is responding to save lives. Recent events not only imperil the lives of thousands, but also mark a decision point for Burma’s political and military leadership, with the world watching.

In response to the latest violence, USAID is responding on both sides of the Burma/Bangladesh border, providing humanitarian assistance where possible, helping host communities in Bangladesh cope with the influx of refugees and addressing intercommunal tensions in ethnically mixed areas of Rakhine in Burma, including areas not directly affected by recent violence. This humanitarian relief is in addition to our ongoing development assistance to the people of Burma, which includes support for civil society, good governance, economic development, and support for the country’s challenging peace process. Through this work, we seek to address the underlying conditions and fragility that helped create this cycle of violence and the most recent crisis.

As a foreign service officer who lived on the Thailand-Burma border sixteen years ago working with migrants and refugees, Burma is for me, as I know many others, a special place that has influenced my path in international human rights and development. In my testimony, I will touch on how USAID is responding to in the current crisis, highlight some of the challenges we face in providing humanitarian assistance, and touch on the role of USAID’s broader assistance to Burma.

Recent Developments

We are deeply concerned about the reports of horrific human rights abuses in northern Rakhine State and the resulting crisis developing across the border in Bangladesh. More than 600,000 people fleeing the recent violence in Rakhine, most from the Rohingya community, have sought refuge in Bangladesh. The pace of displacement is even faster than those fleeing Mosul, Iraq, or South Sudan over the past year. This population – many of them women and children, who came with little to no possessions and traveled for days to reach Bangladesh – are extremely vulnerable and require urgent, lifesaving assistance. There are also an unknown number of people from many communities who have been internally displaced – and are in need of assistance – inside Rakhine State, including 120,000 people who have been displaced since 2012. I don't use the term 'unprecedented' lightly, but it is fitting in this case.

While the immediate crisis has been triggered by a coordinated attack from the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on Burmese security outposts and disproportionate response by Burmese security forces and militias, the conditions for a large-scale crackdown on Rohingya have been developing for several years.

Our main challenge in responding to the humanitarian crisis in northern Rakhine State is not due to a lack of resources, but a lack of access. This is due to restrictions imposed by Burmese authorities, which prevent UN and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) from providing much-needed humanitarian assistance. UN partners and international NGOs have not been allowed to provide assistance in the north, where abuses are occurring. Burmese officials have instructed local civil society groups that they are not permitted to provide assistance directly to Rohingya communities, and that all assistance to Rohingya will be managed by the government and Red Cross Movement organizations. Assistance delivered directly by international groups, including the UN and INGOs, is not currently an option in Northern Rakhine State. We continue to call upon the Burmese Government and military to allow unhindered access for humanitarian access to resume across Rakhine State.

Burma

In Rakhine State, many of USAID's partners were forced to suspend their work due to the military's security operations since the August 25 attacks and they remain unable to gain access to northern Rakhine State. It's important to note, though, that humanitarian access throughout Rakhine State had become increasingly restricted even before the August 25 attack. Nevertheless, our partners have maintained a presence in Rakhine and many of our conflict mitigation and intercommunal conflict mitigation programs continue in areas outside of Northern Rakhine. Our humanitarian programs are ready to scale up activities when Burmese authorities permit access.

USAID partners have been able to resume limited life-saving assistance to people in central Rakhine State located in camps for internally displaced persons in Sittwe and Pauktaw. This includes nutrition, food, protection support for people vulnerable to trafficking and other human rights abuses, and water, sanitation, and hygiene services, which are largely managed by local staff. However, the security forces continue to prevent full humanitarian access to northern Rakhine state and full resumption of activities in other parts of the state. Some communities – such as internally displaced people (IDPs) dependent on humanitarian assistance – have missed more than two months of food distributions. The UN World Food Programme (WFP) is only now able to resume distributions, at a smaller scale and under heightened tensions. Additionally, insecurity, government restrictions, and local communities' enmity towards UN and NGO staff, including local staff, further inhibit access. False and misleading rumors about Rohingya, the level of threat presented by ARSA, and the role of the international community spread amongst local communities and fanned by official government and military information channels have contributed to the volatility of the present environment.

Rohingya in northern Rakhine State have long faced a history of violence, abuse and exploitation, and the humanitarian situation in Rakhine is routinely referred to as a protection crisis. Reports of atrocities are extremely troubling, and further demonstrate that humanitarian assistance and protection from further violence is urgently needed. We continue to call upon all parties to allow unhindered humanitarian access to people in need and we urge the authorities to allow media and human rights monitors access to the afflicted areas. We also urge Burmese security forces to follow the lead of the elected government in committing to implement the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State's recommendations.

Humanitarian Response

Given the enormity of this influx, stark challenges remain to adequately respond. The people fleeing to Bangladesh arrive with what they could carry. They are in immediate need of safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, emergency food assistance, shelter, healthcare, and nutrition services. Poor conditions in displacement sites increase the risk of disease outbreaks.

In FY 2017, the United States provided nearly \$104 million in humanitarian assistance for vulnerable communities displaced in Burma and the region, including Bangladesh. Through USAID's Offices of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and Food for Peace (FFP), the Agency provided nearly \$28 million, and we expect to continue responding to this crisis in FY 2018.

In Bangladesh, FFP provided \$7 million to WFP to provide life-saving food assistance to the refugees in Bangladesh. These resources also support the essential coordination and logistics efforts needed to manage the massive influx of people and scale up assistance, in concert with our State partners.

We are also working with our international partners to step up the humanitarian response where possible. We applaud the Government of Bangladesh's generosity in responding to this severe humanitarian crisis. USAID recognizes that host communities are stretching their own scarce resources to take in their neighbors, and we are committed to supporting them as well. USG funding in Bangladesh includes assistance for host communities who are bearing a large burden themselves to shelter and support the massive influx of people.

USAID's Mission in Burma is closely coordinating with other agencies in Burma and the regional international organizations, and other donors, to address the situation in Rakhine State. Together with our colleagues at the State Department, and along with the international community, we have reiterated our strong concerns to the Burmese Government, and have called on them to end violence, provide immediate, unhindered humanitarian access, and ensure the dignified, safe, and voluntary return of all those displaced from their homes.

Broader Burma

Decades of military rule and control of large portions of the economy, rampant corruption, and internal conflict have prevented the development of well-functioning democratic governance systems. As we see playing out in the current crisis, this has further entrenched historic ethnic divides, hurt Burma's economy, and severed social services.

USAID continues to support civil society in Rakhine State and across Burma to prevent further escalation of violence and counter hate speech and rumors. Peace networks, made up of diverse civil society organizations throughout Burma, have actively combated misinformation on the [violence in Rakhine State][situation in Rakhine State], as well as worked to prevent the narrative from spreading into a larger crisis targeting all Muslims, like was seen in 2012 and 2013. These efforts, along with our work with local government officials on conflict mitigation trainings, have been complemented by our partners working to develop online platforms that fact-check local reporting and online rumors.

In addition, ongoing inter-communal tension and violence outside of Rakhine State remain a serious threat to the political transition process in Burma. USAID assistance continues to support an inclusive peace process, including the implementation of the nation-wide and bilateral ceasefire agreements and enabling participation in formal and informal political

dialogues from all stakeholders, particularly those from underrepresented groups such as women.

USAID also strengthens resilience among vulnerable communities in conflict-prone areas, including but not limited to Kachin and Shan States in the northeast and areas of central Burma, to address the drivers of communal level violence. Programs support local decision-making models centered on diverse community participation to ensure historically-marginalized and vulnerable populations have a voice in shaping their future and to mitigate the risk of marginalized groups resorting to violence and extremist ideologies. As we have seen with the most recent attacks on Rohingya, the hate speech towards and demonization of minority ethnic groups have been key drivers of the spread of violence in Rakhine, and targeting those factors can help stave off future violence.

The United States has stood by vulnerable communities in Burma for decades. This includes the provision of humanitarian assistance along the Thailand-Burma border, in the delta region of southern Burma and in central Burma. In the east along the Thailand-Burma border, USAID supports cross-border consortiums and local partners to respond to the humanitarian needs of nearly 400,000 Karen and Karenni IDPs and refugees. In Kachin and northern Shan States, where recent violence has led to further displacement, USAID is supporting nearly 100,000 IDPs in areas with limited humanitarian access, though the military continues to prevent humanitarian assistance from reaching areas that are administered by ethnic armed groups.

This recent human rights and humanitarian crisis, in many ways, highlights the ongoing and underlying challenges facing Burma. Addressing the root causes of violence is more important than ever. To that end, USAID works to strengthen democratic institutions, including the parliament, the judiciary and civil society; foster national reconciliation and peace; and improve the lives of the people of Burma by increasing access to better health services and creating economic opportunities. This support is critical to helping the civilian government of Burma sustain this transition, address the underlying causes of violence, and deliver on the dividends of democracy that the people of Burma expect.

Burma emerged from decades of isolation over the past ten years. The establishment of a formal USAID Burma Mission in 2012 allowed us to expand our development program to more effectively support those in Burma who seek greater freedom, prosperity and dignity. During this period of crisis, it remains in the U.S. Government's interest to support Burma's democratic transition. It represents the most significant opportunity in decades to engage with the people of Burma in pursuit of democracy, human rights, peace and prosperity, and ending the cycle of violence.

Conclusion

USAID will continue efforts to foster national peace and reconciliation, maintain momentum for democratic and economic reforms, and improve the lives of the people of Burma. However, we must be honest and forthright in our assessment of the situation, and clear on what we expect as humanitarians, and as Americans. We know it's a tough road ahead. The military controls the power ministries, as well as sectors of the economy. Indeed, the latest violence in Rakhine reflects the power of the security forces and has exacerbated the existing human rights situation and humanitarian crisis, imperiling the lives of hundreds of thousands. In the long-term, our development efforts must continue to address the underlying drivers of the violence, some deeply rooted in history, and others an obvious outgrowth of decades of military rule. But in the immediate-term, until the violence and abuses abate, we shall remain resolute in our efforts to alleviate the immeasurable suffering of Rohingya and all affected communities within Burma and Bangladesh.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I look forward to your questions.