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**Before the  
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations  
Assessing U.S. Policy Towards Burma: Geopolitical, Economic, and  
Humanitarian Considerations**

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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, distinguished Members of the Committee, we appreciate the invitation to appear before you today to testify on the devastating human tragedy that continues to unfold in Burma's troubled and complicated Rakhine State. Violence and insecurity have exacerbated the longstanding suffering of ethnic Rohingya and other minority populations, created a massive displacement of populations internally and across the border, led to a humanitarian crisis in neighboring Bangladesh, and threatened to undermine Burma's substantial gains in recent years on its fragile transition from a half century of authoritarian military rule to elected government, including efforts to end multiple armed conflicts and achieve a long elusive national peace.

We are grateful for the opportunity to update you on the current humanitarian situation facing those affected by the crisis, describe what the U.S. Government is doing through diplomatic engagement and the targeting of life-saving aid to address this situation, discuss the challenges the international community faces in delivering humanitarian assistance, and discuss next steps to achieve an end to the violence and restoration of security for affected populations.

**Current State of Play:**

We'd like to start by highlighting the latest developments since our testimonies to the House Foreign Affairs Committee on October 5. First, current estimates indicate some 589,000 people, mostly ethnic Rohingya, have fled to Bangladesh since the crisis began. These movements reflect a slowing rate of displacement, but nonetheless the continued flight of vulnerable populations. Refugees continue to cross into Bangladesh, and we continue to receive credible reports of sporadic

violence in northern Rakhine State, including vigilante action such as arson and threats of physical harm to ethnic Rohingya. Reputable international NGOs have reported new satellite images that reveal nearly 300 villages were partially or completely destroyed by fire since August 25—more than half of the approximately 470 Muslim villages in northern Rakhine State. We have all seen the heart wrenching coverage of those refugees arriving in Bangladesh, having lost all their property and in some cases family members, and having suffered great insecurity, fear, indignity, and abuses as they fled for their lives.

Although some population movements continue and security has not been fully re-established in northern Rakhine State, most reports indicate that our efforts, working with others in the international community, to communicate our concerns directly with Burmese civilian and military authorities and at the United Nations and other fora have helped to decrease the scope of violence in recent weeks. On October 12, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi gave a second public address on the crisis. She laid out three goals for Rakhine State: (1) repatriation of those who have crossed over to Bangladesh and providing humanitarian assistance effectively; (2) resettlement of displaced populations; and (3) economic development and durable peace. Burma has created a funding mechanism to pursue these goals with World Bank support. The Burmese government also implemented a mechanism to coordinate its cooperation with the international community to address challenges in Rakhine State. Aung San Suu Kyi will chair this effort, but at the current time humanitarian and media access to affected areas of northern Rakhine State remains limited. At the same time, Bangladesh and Burma have entered into bilateral discussions on how to facilitate safe and voluntary return of refugees to Burma, a dialogue that we fully support.

The sources of renewed crisis this year in Burma's Rakhine State include coordinated August 25 attacks on security forces and other violent acts carried out by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, a group of Rohingya militants; a disproportionate Burmese military response to those attacks; violence perpetrated by local vigilantes, often acting in concert with security forces; and insecurity for local populations. These developments have taken place against a backdrop of broad discrimination, repression, and violence against ethnic minorities in Rakhine State over many decades. The current crisis, now underway for two non-stop months, has exacerbated longstanding challenges for these vulnerable minorities, including, most acutely, members of the Rohingya community who lack basic rights, including recognition as a nationality and, for many, even citizenship.

The violence in Rakhine State has devastated vulnerable populations and caused families and unaccompanied minors to flee. This almost unprecedented population movement has worsened a desperate humanitarian situation in Bangladesh, which already provides safe haven for hundreds of thousands of Rohingya who fled previous crises in Rakhine State. Approximately 87,000 had fled there in 2016 following separate violence last year, joining an estimated 200,000-500,000 undocumented Rohingya and over 33,000 registered Rohingya already living in southeastern Bangladesh for over two decades. With this last round of displacement, the Rohingya population in southeastern Bangladesh is now estimated to be between 800,000 and one million persons. There is a similar population crisis inside Rakhine State, where the precise number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) remains unknown due to ongoing population movements, limited humanitarian access, and a lack of official estimates. In September, the Rakhine State Government estimated the current crisis had created approximately 200,000 new IDPs; however, many of those displaced persons have since crossed into Bangladesh. Prior to the August attacks, 120,000 IDPs from various ethnic populations, including Rohingya as well as ethnic Rakhine, had already been living in camps following inter-communal violence in 2012.

**Diplomatic Engagement:**

The suffering of so many calls all of us to action. Secretary of State Tillerson stated last week that “the world can’t stand idly by and be witness to the atrocities that are being reported.” This administration is undertaking all efforts to end the violence and suffering immediately. Our most pressing objectives are achieving protection for all local populations and meaningful, durable solutions for those who have been displaced, including the chance to go home again voluntarily, in safety, and with dignity when conditions permit.

We have made it clear to Burmese civilian and military officials at the highest levels, within the central government and in Rakhine State itself, that all stakeholders must end the violence, respect the rule of law, cease displacement, pave a path for Rohingya and others to return voluntarily to their homes, and hold accountable those responsible for violations and abuses. We have expressed alarm about continuing reports of violence perpetrated by security forces, as well as of civilian vigilantes operating outside the rule of law in committing arson attacks on Rohingya homes and blocking humanitarian assistance to many populations. Secretary Tillerson observed last week that “someone will be held responsible” for these acts.

We have communicated to relevant authorities that those who have fled to Bangladesh or are otherwise internally displaced in Burma must be able to return home voluntarily – and we welcomed State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi’s re-affirmed commitment in her October 12 speech that Burma would allow them to return. Much depends on how quickly it will be possible to establish conditions that make repatriation possible and safe and the precise way in which people are repatriated. We cannot ignore that vulnerable people fled to Bangladesh because they felt it was unsafe for them to stay in Burma. Unless Burmese security forces create a secure environment for all populations, it would be unreasonable and unwise to expect or facilitate their return. We are encouraging closer communication between Burma and Bangladesh. A senior Burmese delegation traveled to Dhaka on October 2 and the two sides agreed to form a joint working committee on repatriation.

Principals in our government have been strongly engaged on this issue. President Trump has discussed the situation with multiple leaders from Southeast Asia. Secretary of State Tillerson called Aung San Suu Kyi to urgent action. Vice President Pence denounced the Burmese military’s disproportionate response in his remarks at the United Nations. USUN Ambassador Haley spoke at an open Security Council meeting and called for an international role in ending the violence. National Security Advisor McMaster and other officials spoke with the Burmese National Security Advisor. Our Ambassador in Burma has actively engaged top Burmese government and military leaders throughout this crisis. In September, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Murphy visited Burma, including Rakhine State, and met with Aung San Suu Kyi as well with other national and state government and military figures. All U.S. officials have urged authorities and stakeholders in Burma to protect civilians, pursue accountability, and cooperate with the international community, and made clear that this crisis has implications far beyond Rakhine State. We are also engaging and consulting with ASEAN member states, the European Union, international organizations, and many others on the crisis.

### **Rakhine State Crisis Humanitarian Challenges:**

The humanitarian challenges before us are many. Our focus is on: (1) gaining access for assistance in Rakhine State; (2) working with host governments in the region to ensure refugees are offered safe haven and treated with respect, and that host countries have what they need to help the refugees; (3) specific contributions made by the State Department in coordination with USAID; and (4) ensuring that UN and other humanitarian agencies have the support they need to respond.

### Humanitarian Access:

The number one humanitarian priority is gaining access to those in need in Rakhine State. Relief agency access to many of the affected areas remains severely limited. As of October 10, the Government of Burma (GoB) had granted travel authorizations in northern Rakhine State only to Red Cross agencies. Although the GoB has granted some international NGOs travel authorizations to work in central Rakhine State, other government regulations and procedures are hindering INGOs from accessing all IDP camps and affected communities. In addition, safety concerns, a local climate of intimidation, and restrictions on movements prevent many local Burmese staff of these organizations from accessing those in need.

We take every opportunity to emphasize to Burmese officials at all levels of government the need to allow humanitarian assistance to those in need. The White House, State Department, and the U.S. Mission to the United Nations have issued statements calling for immediate unhindered humanitarian access to all affected populations, including northern Rakhine State. The government's commitment to do so is encouraging, but we seek further implementation on the ground.

We are working with international partners and stakeholders inside Burma to overcome challenges that have precluded humanitarian agencies and NGOs from reaching affected areas of northern Rakhine State. We have succeeded in securing Burmese government cooperation for the Red Cross Movement (RCM) to deliver assistance, but they alone cannot assess or meet all of the humanitarian needs in Rakhine State. Specifically, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) are working with the Myanmar Red Cross Society to implement a response plan as the situation continues to evolve. ICRC has stressed to the Burmese government that the RCM will not be able to address all needs and the UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations will also need operational space. We are also pressing for unfettered access for the UN Fact Finding Mission and other UN officials, media, and human rights organizations to this isolated part of Burma.

### Working with Host Governments:

We recognize the huge strain that the influx of refugees is currently placing on Bangladesh, as well as the concerns of other countries in the region such as India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand where displaced Rohingya and other Burmese minorities have fled in the past. It is essential that neighboring countries keep their borders open for those fleeing violence in Burma, and we will continue to emphasize this

to those in the region, along with seeking ways to support governments hosting refugees.

Bangladesh has kept its border open, though it is concerned about its capacity to absorb so many refugees, in addition to security concerns related to the influx of so many vulnerable people in such a short period of time. We appreciate the generosity of the Government of Bangladesh to those fleeing the violence, many of whom arrived after walking for days and are in need of food, water, and medical care. They found official and makeshift camps already overstretched by previous influxes of refugees. International aid agencies are working to scale up operations and provide basic life-saving assistance to the new arrivals. The majority of those in need have little access to food, water, health care, and proper shelter. The ongoing monsoon season has exacerbated the situation, as flooding and poor infrastructure make aid delivery even more challenging. The UN issued a revised appeal with an estimated \$434 million required for emergency response in Bangladesh to meet needs through February 2018.

The Government of Bangladesh is working with UN agencies and the international community to provide temporary shelter and protection. Bangladesh has now donated 3,000 acres of land and is working with UN agencies to establish needed infrastructure to support the refugee population. The government has also initiated a registration process to document the Rohingya population in southeastern Bangladesh and provide individuals with identification documents that we hope will facilitate access to services and protection. Since September 11, the Ministry of Home Affairs has conducted biometric registration of over 100,000 refugees with UNHCR's assistance. In every meeting with Bangladesh officials, we thank them for allowing refugees to cross and we discuss ways to support Bangladesh as the government upholds humanitarian principles while balancing its own security concerns. We also urge Bangladesh to provide the necessary access to humanitarian organizations so that they can provide life-saving aid.

#### Humanitarian Assistance:

In addition to our diplomatic engagement, the United States is providing humanitarian assistance through our UN and international organization partners to help vulnerable populations affected by the Rakhine State violence. The United States continues to be the global leader in providing assistance to people in need in Burma and throughout the region. Thanks to support from Congress, in FY 2017, the United States contributed nearly \$104 million in assistance to displaced populations in Burma and for refugees from Burma in the region. Of this funding,

the State Department's contributions totaled nearly \$76 million, including nearly \$34 million in emergency assistance to respond to this latest crisis.

This funding provides life-saving assistance to meet critical humanitarian needs, such as food, non-food items, shelter, water, sanitation, and health both inside Burma and in host countries through trusted humanitarian partners including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), and international non-governmental organizations, among others. These agencies are a key part of the international humanitarian system that is governed by humanitarian principles and brings technical expertise and operational capacity to respond quickly and effectively to large-scale crises such as this.

#### Humanitarian Coordination:

In addition to funding levels, the region's capacity to handle the humanitarian crisis is dependent on the capacity of the UN-led humanitarian response, including deployment of emergency response experts and adequate staffing levels. In Bangladesh, we continue to advocate with UN coordinating agencies to increase expert technical staff on the ground and strengthen the coordination structure supporting implementation of the response plan. In a refugee crisis such as this, UNHCR holds the global protection mandate; however, in Cox's Bazar, UNHCR's role to date has been limited by the government. The government has recently increased cooperation with UNHCR and approved its role in leading protection services. This will help improve conditions in Cox's Bazar, including through increased information on the number and needs of refugees and coordination in responding to the most vulnerable individuals. Government constraints on funding to experienced international NGOs and delays in approving their permit applications have limited the INGOs' ability to access emergency funds and assist all those in need. In some displacement sites, strained water collection points, lack of adequate sanitation facilities, and high population density have raised concerns regarding the increased risks of disease outbreaks. Humanitarian partners are engaging in disease prevention activities and diligently treating cholera patients in coordination with government authorities. We will keep up pressure to ensure seamless coordination and strategic vision for the response in Bangladesh.

#### **Long-Term Challenges:**

In addition to pressing for immediate action to end violence and meet humanitarian needs, we are also supporting the Burmese elected government's efforts to address inherited challenges in Rakhine State. The government established the Rakhine Advisory Commission, led by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, which in

August produced a set of recommendations for addressing the complex issues in Rakhine State that have ignited many crises over past decades. Kofi Annan urged the UN Security Council on October 13 to push for the return to Burma of Rohingya refugees, reiterating that world powers must work with the country's military and civilian leaders to end the refugee crisis. The Commission's recommendations provide valuable ways forward in addressing underdevelopment, shortcomings in government services, access to justice, and ensuring a credible, transparent citizenship process for all people in Rakhine State. The government of Burma has committed to implementing the recommendations, and established mechanisms to do so. We must support and encourage these efforts, and in particular press the Burmese armed forces to support its civilian elected governments in implementing all of the recommendations.

The U.S. government's overarching policy response also includes efforts to discourage the serious human rights abuses we have seen, identify potential means to hold accountable those responsible for such abuses, increase appreciation inside Burma for tolerance and human dignity, encourage the fragile democratization and processes in Burma, and further support economic development in Rakhine State and throughout the country. We will not do this alone. We are consulting with regional partners, members of the international community in international bodies like the United Nations, and courageous voices inside Burma who want human dignity for all who reside in that country and a peaceful and stable future.

**Conclusion:**

For decades, Congress and the U.S. Government have worked closely together on Burma as partners. In particular, we thank this Committee for its leadership and bipartisan collaboration. Together, we supported Burma's democracy movement through the dark days of repressive military rule, and together we supported a military reform government's transition toward democracy.

It is in our interests, and those of the diverse populations of Burma, including Rohingya, to see the new, elected government succeed. The current crisis in Rakhine State has exposed the fragility of that democratic transition. Greater civilian control over, and professionalization of, the armed forces is needed, as are reforms that will bring an end to the military's heavy-handed tactics that have fueled violence across Burma since independence. The democratically-elected government, security forces, local community leaders, and populations across the country all must calm tensions, end the violence, and secure the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of all those displaced. Only then will there be a chance for lasting peace and change in Rakhine State and across the country as a whole.



In conclusion, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, we are strongly engaged to bring an end to this major crisis and to find lasting solutions to the long-standing challenges in Burma's Rakhine State and beyond. U.S. government humanitarian assistance provides an important lifeline until this possibility becomes reality. We are grateful for the generosity of Congress and the American people who make our assistance possible. We will look to Congress, as we always have, as an essential partner in these efforts.

Thank you. We are ready to answer any questions you have.