

Treatment of the Rohingya in Myanmar

I have been asked to prepare a statement on behalf of Lawyers Rights Watch Canada, a Vancouver based NGO. LRWC is a committee of Canadian lawyers who promote human rights and the rule of law by providing support internationally to human rights defenders in danger. I am the Burma Monitor for LRWC. I was asked to speak at the May 5 event but unfortunately I have a family event that must take priority for me.

At the end of this statement I will outline the significant involvement I have had in Burma democracy issues since shortly after I first visited Burma in the winter of 1988.

I have been reading about and following the issues concerning the Rohingya for many years. What follows is my view of the situation as it exists in Rakine (Arakan) State in western Myanmar. There is significant controversy over many aspects regarding the Rohingya and I expect that some people will disagree with how I describe what has happened to the Rohingya.

THE ROHINGYA

The Rohingya, as they prefer to be called, are approximately one million people living in Rakine (Arakan) State. There are questions as to whether the Rohingya are indigenous people in western Myanmar or whether, after the British Raj expanded in 1826 from what is now India, Pakistan and Bangladesh into Burma, many thousands of Muslims from what is now Bangladesh were brought into western Burma as agricultural workers to help work the land there.

Whichever view is correct, they have been there for a minimum of almost 200 years. In my opinion they are entitled to full citizenship and equal rights as all other people, whether Burman or ethnic minority, who are living in Myanmar.

In the 1930s, the hero of the independence movement, Aung San and his thirty comrades, starting working for the independence of Burma. Independence was achieved in 1948, but unfortunately Aung San and a number of his colleagues had been murdered shortly before independence was achieved.

Burma was a democracy from 1948 to 1962 under Prime Minister U Nu.

In the years following independence, the central government, specifically the Ministry of Defence, sought to embrace the people who now call themselves the Rohingya as a bona fide ethnic minority in the new Union of Burma, with equal and full citizenship rights, along with multiple other minorities with armed revolts against the ethnically Burmese central government. When a peace agreement was signed in July 1961 those now self described as Rohingya were promised absolutely no religious or ethnic discrimination and were guaranteed equal protection under Law for all those who abide by the law and live in peace.

In 1962 General Ne Win staged a coup against the U Nu government. His military government sought to change Burma into a mainly Buddhist vision. In 1978 Ne Win launched a violent operation against the Muslims of Rakine State and started the process of stripping the Rohingya

of their citizenship. The infamous 1982 Citizenship Act speaks of 135 ethnic minorities in Burma and excludes those who now call themselves Rohingya. Even today the government of Myanmar, including Daw Suu, objects to the use of that name and persists in calling them Bengalis.

The Rohingya had the education of their children limited, and were restricted as to the number of children they could have. The repression of the Rohingya continued after the military regime started the slow process of moving to a semblance of a democracy. The new constitution brought in by the military barred Daw Suu from the presidency and gave the military 25 % of the seats in both the Lower and Upper Houses of Parliament.

The NLD led by Daw Suu did not participate in the 2010 election but participated in the 2015 election and won a substantial victory . Unfortunately during that election campaign Daw Suu did not call for improvement to the situation for the Rohingya. She only spoke of the need for the rule of law.

In 2012 there was very serious violence initiated against the Rohingya in Rakine State. Many people were killed and approximately 100,000 Rohingya were forced into IDP (Internally Displaced Person) camps. They were very restricted in those camps and were deprived of needed medical care. They are still in those camps.

There have been U.N. committees looking into the situation of the Rohingya. Kofi Annan led a group doing a report on the situation.

In November of last year it is reported that 9 soldiers were killed by a group of Rohingyas. That prompted a severe attack on many Rohingya villages. Many men, women and children were killed by the military. Many women were raped. Many thousands of Rohingya have fled Myanmar to escape the military violence.

Since 1988, Aung San Suu Kyi was the leader of the democracy movement in Burma. She in effect was separated from her husband Michael Aris and her two sons, Alexander and Kim, while she remained in Rangoon, mostly under house arrest, for more than twenty years. While she was probably free to leave Burma, she doubted she would be allowed to return.

International pressure on and criticism of Aung San Suu Kyi, has been increasing. In my view she has not taken a proper leadership role in trying to deal with the humanitarian disaster in Rakine (Arakan) State..

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF MY INVOLVEMENT IN THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY IN BURMA

I first went to Burma in the winter of 1988. In the summer of 1988 there were huge pro-democracy demonstrations (known as the 8-8-88). Daw Suu, who lived in Oxford with her family, was visiting her mother. She became a leader of the pro-democracy movement.

As a result of contacts I had made in Thailand, I became involved in organizing in Canada to help the pro-democracy movement. Canadian Friends of Burma (CFOB) was formed and we attempted to lobby the government of Canada to help the struggle for democracy in Burma. I went back to Burma in 1993, in 2003, in 2011 and in 2014. I met with activists and politicians there and in Canada I worked with the elected members of Parliament from the 1990 election who had not been allowed to take office. They had formed a government in exile called the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB). I was also involved with the Toronto Burma Roundtable and the Canadian Campaign to Free Burma (CCFB). The CFOB fell apart as a result of disputes over how we should react to the repression of the Rohingya.

I continue to have a strong interest in developments in Myanmar.

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