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Mr. Michael Levitt

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

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•(1310)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. I think all the members of the committee are here.

I would like to begin by welcoming our guest, who will be providing testimony today: U Shwe Maung, who is with us here by video conference.

It is our great pleasure to have you as part of our committee today, and we're looking forward to hearing from you as a former member of the lower house, a former member of parliament in Myanmar in 2010. Then, obviously, you're going to share with us your story about what's happened since then and some of the challenges you've faced, both for yourself and also for the Rohingya people in the area.

With that, we'll begin with Mr. Anderson, please.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Does he have a statement?

The Chair: Sorry; yes.

Would you like to start with your opening statement?

Mr. Shwe Maung (As an Individual): Yes, I want to introduce myself. It will just be a short introduction.

The Chair: Please take as long as you need.

Mr. Shwe Maung: My name is U Shwe Maung, also known as Abdul Razak. I was a member of parliament in Myanmar from 2010 to 2015, but I was barred from the re-election in 2015.

Thank you.

The Chair: Would you like to deliver your opening statement, your remarks?

Mr. Shwe Maung: Yes. I have four pages of notes, so if you allow me, Mr. Chair, I can continue.

The Chair: Yes. We have 10 minutes for an opening statement.

Mr. Shwe Maung: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, first of all, I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak about the current human rights situation of the Rohingya in Myanmar, to testify before the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Let me introduce myself. My name is U Shwe Maung, also known as Abdul Razak, and I am a former member of parliament in

Myanmar, from 2010 to 2015. In my country, there was a historic election on November 8, 2015. The National League for Democracy party, the NLD, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide victory.

Effective from April 1, 2016, the previous USDP government, led by President U Thein Sein, transferred the state power to the NLD. As the NLD was unsuccessful in amending the 2008 constitution in the previous parliamentary term, the core of state power is still in the hands of the Myanmar military. The ministries of home affairs, defence, border affairs, immigration, and religious affairs are under the command of the Myanmar military chief. The region, state, district, and township administrators and the Myanmar Police Force are under the command of the home ministry.

I am trying to say that the core of state power is still in the hands of the military group, although the NLD formed a civilian government. In this situation, NLD submitted a bill for a post of State Counsellor of Myanmar for its chairperson, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, to parliament as she was barred from becoming president, and the bill was approved. Now she is the State Counsellor of Myanmar. She is leading the NLD government and performing duties as if president of Myanmar.

The honourable Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is trying her best to reform the country's old system, bit by bit. We appreciate her correct steps for a new era, but she is still silent about the plight of the Rohingya. She took the side of the oppressor. She and her party have been denying the existence of the Rohingya people in Myanmar.

In the context of Rohingya and Muslim issues, the USD Party and the NLD party have been exercising the same political pattern, although they have a huge number of differences in nationwide politics.

Since 2012, there has been violence against the Rohingya and the Kaman people in Rakhine State, and in 2013 violence in Meikhtila, a township of central Myanmar. Both parties favour the hate speeches of the nationalist Buddhist group Ma Ba Tha directly or indirectly.

In October 2012, there was a second outbreak of violence against Rohingya and Kaman Muslims. In this connection, I submitted an emergency proposal to take action on the violence against the Rohingya and Kaman from Kyauk Pru Township to the Speaker of parliament, Thura U Shwe Mann, through the USD Party. The Speaker asked the chair of the rule of law committee, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, but she denied it.

Finally, the National Unity Party submitted the proposal. Of course, I had the opportunity to discuss it and I called for the Ministry of Home Affairs to reform the police force of Rakhine State, as policemen were involved in the violence, according to Rohingya and Kaman victims. When the 2013 violence broke out in Meikhtila, the NLD MP for Meikhtila, U Win Htein, blamed Muslims instead of the culprits.

The USDP proposed an amendment of the constitution referendum bill and parliamentary electoral bills to exclude the voting rights of 1.3 million Rohingya, even though Rohingya were allowed to vote in all previous elections. Neither Daw Aung San Suu Kyi nor any single NLD MP objected to those bills. This was a conspiracy of Thura U Shwe Mann and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to disenfranchise the Rohingya from the November 2015 election. Both parties did not nominate a single candidate to run for the election. The Rakhine State election commission and the Union Election Commission denied my right to run for office in the November 8, 2015, election even though I was a sitting MP.

I was denied the right to contest the election because the immigration department and the election commission falsely claimed my parents were not citizens of Myanmar when I was born, but in the 2010 election, the same immigration department and election commission approved my paperwork for candidacy and I was elected in the Buthidaung constituency of Rakhine State.

● (1315)

I would like to say that this is the most laughable joke in the 21st century. I am not the only one: all Rohingya candidates were targeted for exclusion. Dozens of Burmese Muslim candidates had also been rejected by election authorities. Make no mistake: it was because of our ethnicity and religion.

During a press conference just before the election, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi described the persecution of the Rohingya as an exaggeration. She also publicly said, during a visit to Europe in 2013, that she was a politician, not a human rights defender. She also told the media several times that the Rohingya issue is an immigration issue, a rule of law issue, and the responsibility of the government.

Mr. Chair, now honourable Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is foreign minister, president's office minister, and State Counsellor. She is leading the government.

Let me highlight what the NLD government did so far in the first month of its term. A lot of political prisoners were released by order of the NLD president and State Counsellor, but Rohingya and Burmese Muslim political prisoners were excluded. Approximately 1,000 Rohingya were imprisoned on false charges after the 2012 violence, which caused 140,000 internally displaced persons. Religious affairs minister Thura U Aung Ko accused all Muslims of Myanmar as "associate citizens" or so-called "guest citizens" during an interview with RFA Burmese.

According to the 1982 citizenship law, the rights of associate citizens are not so different from those of foreigners. In practice, associate citizens are viewed and treated as foreigners by government agencies in my country. Although Muslim organizations urged the NLD government to release a statement to show its policy

towards Muslims in Myanmar, the NLD and the honourable State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi were silent.

Then about 20 Kaman and Rohingya IDPs drowned after a boat capsized off the coast near Sittwe, Rakhine State. The NLD government did not help any victims and did not release any statement of condolences, but the U.S. embassy in Rangoon released a statement of condolences, and it used the term "Rohingya". After that, the nationalist Buddhist Ma Ba Tha group provided hate speeches, insulting not only the Rohingya but also the U.S. embassy in Rangoon, the U.S. ambassador, Mr. Scot Marciel, and the U.S. government. Then Ma Ba Tha and the Myanmar National Network organized a demonstration in front of the U.S. embassy in Rangoon on April 28, 2016. During the demonstration, the Ma Ba Tha chief sent a communication that insulted Rohingya, the U.S. embassy, and the U.S. government as well.

The Myanmar Police Force issued a permit to demonstrate, and the police are accomplices. Probably the permit was issued with the agreement of the home minister, but the NLD kept quiet as if nothing was happening in the country.

The National Democratic Force party, the NDF—this is another party in Myanmar—released a statement criticizing the U.S. embassy statement and the U.S. ambassador for the usage of "Rohingya" but did not show any sympathy for the victims. The NDF party is a nationalist party that always blames and insults Rohingya in co-operation with extremist Rakhine politicians.

In their statement, the NDF urged the NLD government to release a statement on the issue of the usage of "Rohingya" by the U.S. embassy. In this connection, RFA Burmese interviewed NLD patron U Tin Oo, and he said it was the previous government that had decided about the term used for these people. The NLD government will not tell anything, and there are no Rohingya.

Mr. Chair, now it is crystal clear that the NLD party and the NLD-led government are not recognizing the Rohingya and are not willing to solve the Rohingya IDP camps problem. There are still 120,000 Rohingya IDPs due to the 2012 violence. I saw with my own eyes from a helicopter Rohingya houses being burnt by the Rakhine Buddhist extremists in Sittwe on June 10, 2012.

● (1320)

Since then, I have been advocating for the victims to be resettled and for the culprits and the policemen who were involved in the violence to be punished. No member of parliament listened to me, and no minister cared about my questions or proposals.

I compiled a book of facts on the existence of the Rohingya and a solution of peaceful coexistence and handed it to the Speaker, Thura U Shwe Mann, and NLD chair Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and all union MPs in 2013, but neither Thura U Shwe Mann nor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi have responded to me yet. Both of them are politically unwilling to solve Rohingya issues. They are using "silent diplomacy".

If this is the case, the plight of the Rohingya will be doubled in the near future. We are not illegal immigrants. We don't need to be naturalized. We have been demanding restoration of our rights, including citizenship and political rights.

For Rohingya, conditions remain grave as of today. I myself visited IDP camps in Sittwe on August 31, 2015. Their situation was so dire. Children are suffering from malnutrition. Elders are suffering from disease. Sittwe General Hospital is like a Nazi hospital for Rohingyas. Most of the in-patients were reportedly killed by Buddhist nurses. Rohingyas are scared to go to the General Hospital. Medical clinics in the camps are not equipped for all kinds of treatments. Thus, most Rohingya patients want to be hospitalized in Rangoon instead of in Sittwe. In this case, officials charge huge amounts of money, and most of the patients are unable to pay.

● (1325)

The Chair: I am sorry to interrupt. We have about another 30 seconds left, but what you can do is come back to some of this, perhaps, in your answers. I know you have some recommendations at the end as well.

If you could wrap it up, I thank you.

Mr. Shwe Maung: Okay.

Finally, they remain in the camps and are waiting for death. Some try to go to Bangladesh for better medical treatment. When they return, they are charged with illegal border crossing and imprisoned for one to two years. Most of the patients are women and children. Some of my cousins are victims in this case. Rohingyas are not allowed to move freely and they are also facing a lot of problems today.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm going to ask the members of the committee if we can adopt having the balance of this included in the minutes, as read.

We'll now move to questions for the witness and start with Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson: Hello, sir. It is good to see you again.

The chair has your document, but we do not have it. I understand you have some recommendations, so I'm wondering if you would like to take a couple of minutes to lay out some of the recommendations you've made. Your presentation suggests that peaceful coexistence is possible, and there are some other suggestions you made. I'll sacrifice my time if you would be willing to lay out the recommendations that you would have in place for your situation.

Mr. Shwe Maung: Thank you, Mr. David.

Let me continue. Rohingyas are facing problems, and as of today they are denial of full-fledged citizenship, treatment of Rohingyas as if foreigners, uncertainty of citizenship processing, denial of Rohingya ethnicity, accusation as illegal immigrants, no freedom of movement, lack of access to higher education, uncertain life at IDP camps, and restriction of marriage.

The worst thing is the restriction of freedom of movement within our own country. Every town in Rakhine State for Rohingyas is like an open prison.

Therefore, on behalf of the Rohingya in Myanmar, I would like to request the Parliament of Canada and the Government of Canada, through the chair of this committee, to urge or press Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and Myanmar military commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing to implement the following immediately.

Here are my recommendations:

Stop all abuses against the Rohingya in Rakhine State.

Make a road map to deal with the Rohingya crisis.

Allow freedom of movement.

Allow access to higher education and build enough primary schools.

Resettle Rohingya IDPs to houses on their original lands.

Dismantle the partition fence between Rakhine and the Rohingya community in Sittwe, Rakhine State.

Recognize Rohingya ethnicity officially.

Grant or restore full-fledged citizenship and political rights to Rohingya.

Include and invite Rohingya representatives to the forthcoming 21st century pinlon conference of national reconciliation.

Mr. Chairman, let me stop my presentation here and thank you so much for your time. Also, thank you, Mr. David.

The Chair: David, you still have another four and a half minutes.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a question for you.

Discrimination doesn't happen when societies don't prevent it. I guess I would be interested in knowing what needs to happen in Myanmar society. Is there a role that Canadians can play in making some of those changes? What needs to take place in order for your people to be able to live fully as citizens in Myanmar?

•(1330)

Mr. Shwe Maung: In fact, the Rohingya people are an indigenous group in Myanmar, so without the amendment of the citizenship law.... With the existing law, if the government is politically willing, they can grant all Rohingya full-fledged citizenship, but the biggest obstacle is that the government—the previous government as well as the current NLD government—has not shown any political willingness to solve this problem.

Mr. David Anderson: Tell us a little bit about how the change in the application of the citizenship law has affected you. You were a member of parliament. You were not even allowed to put your name in as a candidate this time. Is that correct? Could you just tell us a little bit about how that came about, how the government felt that they would have any right to do that to you and to others?

Mr. Shwe Maung: Thank you, Mr. Anderson.

I was elected in two government elections. When I submitted the same paperwork to the election commission and officials in Rakhine State as well as the union election commission, they dismissed and denied my paperwork by claiming falsely that my parents were not citizens when I was born. This is ridiculous, because after independence, all Myanmar citizens, including my father, even all the speakers of parliament, even the former General Ne Win, all held the same card. But after the adoption of the 1982 citizenship law, they just blindly accused the Rohingya of not being citizens, and they don't recognize the card that the previous government issued.

If there's a will, they can recognize the Rohingya immediately, without the amendment of a single article of the existing citizenship law.

Mr. David Anderson: How can the Canadian government encourage Canadian businesses to make a difference there? We're talking about investments, and talking to your country about removing sanctions, those kinds of things. How can Canadian businesses help as they come into your country and invest in it?

Mr. Shwe Maung: I would like to request that Canadian businessmen, through the Canadian Parliament and government, not do any business with the Myanmar government. If they are willing, they need to talk to the authorities, especially State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, to solve the Rohingya issue and grant citizenship to the Rohingya so that they can enjoy equal rights together with other people. I think in this way Canadian businessmen, and of course the Canadian government, can take measures to solve this problem.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move right along to Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you very much for your presentation.

I found the recommendations that you outlined very interesting. I'm of the strong belief that we can't force a country to collaborate or force them to receive the help that we're willing to offer at this point.

Now, a few months ago, I believe, on BBC News, Aung San Suu Kyi had a bit of a spat with a reporter when she was asked to condemn the plight of the Rohingya and the atrocities that were being committed against them. She was quoted as saying, "No one

told me I was going to be interviewed by a Muslim." It's not conclusive, but it does perhaps lead to a thought that maybe the government at this time doesn't want to really help the plight of the Rohingya.

What is your opinion on that?

Mr. Shwe Maung: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Let me answer the member's comments and questions.

Let me compare before and after the election. Before the election we had a similar way of thinking. They thought they may have a problem winning the election, so since nationalist Buddhist groups are giving hate speeches, they may worry about losing the majority of the votes in the country. Although it looks like a good idea, I don't agree with it, because if the NLD or any party is afraid of losing votes in the 2015 election, what about the 2020 election? There will be more elections in the future, so if they follow that course, they will never be able to solve their problem.

This is why Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was saying that she would not have done the interview if she had known that Mishal Husain is a Muslim, but I'm pretty sure Daw Aung San Suu Kyi would know that BBC correspondent Mishal Husain is a Muslim, because she has a Muslim name. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi also went to Oxford University.

She talks that way to show she supports the Buddhist majority. She's pro-Buddhist and indirectly she's anti-Muslim. If this happened in the 2015 election, who will guarantee it will not happen in the 2020 election? It is very dangerous for our country.

Aung San Suu Kyi is talking about freedom from fear to the people of Myanmar, but now she is feeling fear—fear of not winning the election. Therefore, I would like to also ask our State Counsellor to be brave enough to tell the truth to the people of Myanmar about the banning of diversity and the value of a pluralistic society. If they are still exercising this policy in the remainder of this parliamentary session, they will not try to solve any Rohingya problem.

Thank you.

•(1335)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: We understand it is a very new government, and new governments transitioning into a democratic way of governing themselves need assistance. Do you think that Canada can offer mentorship that would allow the government to learn how Canada has embraced democracy and how we celebrate it? Do you think that Myanmar would be able to learn from those lessons of Canadian government in an open and inclusive way?

Mr. Shwe Maung: Yes, I think that would be a very good idea. Therefore, I'm asking the Canadian Parliament and government, in collaboration with the international community, to advocate by showing examples of diversity in Canada so that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi will have a chance to explain to her people in Myanmar and the majority of the people will understand diversity, the value of religion, and what freedom of religion and human rights are. Most people in Myanmar, the nationalists, think human rights and freedom are only for them, not for the Muslim or the Christian.

Recently there were a lot of problems with the Christian church. A monk was trying to build a monastery, and near a Muslim mosque, a monk was trying to build a pagoda. The nationalists think the Buddhist religion is the super-religion and others are not important.

Therefore, if Canadian businessmen or the Canadian Parliament could do that, that would be a very good idea. I fully agree with that.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We'll move along to the third questioner. Go ahead, Ms. Hardcastle.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to ask our guest to maybe talk a little about some of the prospects for co-operation and the role you think the Canadian government could play. Do you know right now if there are discussions taking place among the new governing party with regard to easing up on the restrictions you mentioned earlier, and the laws that discriminate against religious minorities? Where would some of the prospects for co-operation be?

• (1340)

Mr. Shwe Maung: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me answer the question of the honourable member. As of today, I don't see any hint that the new government, even the NLD Party, is ready to talk with our Rohingya representative inside our country. Although a lot of political parties, representatives, and politicians tried to approach even Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, her party was unwilling to meet with them.

This is why I call in my recommendation for an invitation to include Rohingya representatives in the forthcoming pinlon conference of national reconciliation. In these days, in an interview, NLD patron U Tin Oo asked where Rohingya was in connection with the demonstration in front of the U.S. embassy in Rangoon.

Before the election, in 2014 and 2011 a high-ranking NLD official mentioned the Rohingya several times, but now they are not using the word. Even now they are very reluctant to meet with Rohingya representatives.

Let me give you another example. During the previous session, I tried to talk to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi three times, but she didn't give me time. The first time she gave me three seconds, with a smile and a "How are you?" The second time there was a small smile. The third time she just left.

Also I submitted a fact book on the Rohingya, "A Truthful Rohingya Solution", and it was handed over to her and also to the previous speaker, Thura U Shwe Mann, but they didn't reply at all.

If I include all these things, we can say they are still not ready to talk or discuss. Therefore, maybe the Canadian Parliament and the government can ask our State Counsellor to discuss it in the very near future.

The Chair: You still have 45 seconds.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Then you'd like to see Canadian businesses implementing some kind of sanctions or Canada taking a stand so that there would be movement. You don't see any prospect for co-operation right now, and you think we would be able to play a role. Is that what I'm hearing?

Mr. Shwe Maung: Yes. In fact, I didn't want to say that, but the situation has forced me to say so, because I am also repeating the idea of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

When she was denied by the rebel military regime, she called on the U.S. government and all industrial countries for sanctions. We believe these sanctions worked a lot for democratic changes in our country. Similarly, I am expecting that some sort of other sanction may help solve this Rohingya crisis.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm now going to ask Mr. Miller to have his five minutes.

Mr. Marc Miller (Ville-Marie—Le Sud-Ouest—Île-des-Sœurs, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Razak, for your testimony, and more importantly for your courage.

The test of a young democracy, or any democracy, is how they treat their minorities or those most vulnerable, and obviously you've identified a number of failings in respect of the Rohingya.

I want to go into a little more detail as to what you think the genesis is of the silence of the current government. Obviously, you've touched on religious or quasi-religious tension, but I'd like you to develop in more detail what you think the basis is for the inertia or lack of movement that exists in the current government.

• (1345)

Mr. Shwe Maung: Could you please repeat? I didn't get the main point. Could you do it again?

Mr. Marc Miller: I'd like you to touch a little more on what you believe are the current reasons for the lack of movement of the current government, or the inertia in the government in treating this issue head-on, and the challenge that a young democracy faces in defending your rights or at least giving you some very basic rights to exist in Burma.

Mr. Shwe Maung: I understand that the democracy is very young, and also that the government is, let's say, favouring the wrong men, but any government could at least take steps. They could speak up. The problem is that they are totally silent.

What I am saying is not based only on this one-month period. I have been closely monitoring the political patterns and ideas of the NLD Party since 2012, when they came to parliament by election, and they have not shown anything, so they are not trying to solve this problem.

In other areas, of course they are trying. They face so many challenges. There may be another issue, a hidden issue. Although, as I said earlier, the NLD has formed a civilian government, still the main power is in the hands of the military group, so the Rohingya issue becomes a political tool for political gain. If somebody tries to solve the Rohingya issue, another group may take advantage of them. That kind of situation worsens the plight of the Rohingya.

Mr. Marc Miller: Thank you.

You briefly mentioned the role of the military. Could you just touch as well on its role in the current government and the influence you think it is playing?

Mr. Shwe Maung: Yes, but let me say out loud that the government is... We can call it a sugar-coated democracy, because when we go deeper, we see that the main authority of the country is in the hands of the home ministry and the defence ministry. In their everyday lives, grassroots people have to face the local administrator. These local administrators are not elected personnel; they are appointed directly by the Minister of Home Affairs, so they are faithful in principle to the home ministry.

At the grassroots level all of Myanmar, including the Rohingya, is still facing a military-like administration. Because of the constitution, the home minister, the defence minister, and the border affairs minister are not allowed to be appointed by the president but are nominated by the military chief. Moreover, the immigration minister is not mentioned in the constitution, but is also appointed in a compromise between the NLD and the military group.

A former general was appointed as the new immigration minister. The immigration ministry is very important for this issue, so there's a political game between these two groups.

Mr. Marc Miller: Thank you.

The Chair: Now, Mr. Sweet, it's your five minutes.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you very much, Mr. Shwe Maung, for your testimony, your bravery, and your courage.

Can I ask you how many Rohingya applied to run in the 2015 election, and how many were permitted to do so?

Mr. Shwe Maung: More than 25 Rohingya applied; all of them were denied.

Mr. David Sweet: You mentioned earlier that every member of the NLD voted in favour of the bill that disenfranchised Rohingya from being citizens of Burma. Is that correct?

Mr. Shwe Maung: Yes. When the bill was initiated by the USD Party MPs, no NLD MP objected to that abuse. If they didn't object, logically we have to say they accepted it. They didn't argue anything.

• (1350)

Mr. David Sweet: They didn't argue against the bill, but they didn't necessarily vote for the bill. Is that what you're saying?

Mr. Shwe Maung: Yes, they didn't necessarily vote for the bill. Therefore, with a majority of votes the bill would have passed.

Mr. David Sweet: Okay.

You've been speaking out quite courageously. Have you paid any price personally for your courage to speak out?

Mr. Shwe Maung: I have paid a big price because of my voice for the persecuted Rohingya people.

I'm now living in the United States of America. As Mr. David knows very well, I came to the United States of America to attend an IPPForB conference and a number of meetings with the State Department and, of course, to attend the U.S. Congress.

After that, the President of Myanmar, the Speaker of the parliament, the USD Party and the military group co-operatively created a trap for me. The trap is that if I return home, they will arrest me at the airport. Then they can charge me, as of May 1, I believe, with the Duchiradan fire, the blaze of 2014.

At that time I criticized the Myanmar Police Force. As my constituents informed me, the police were involved in the blaze, but at the same time the Myanmar government accused the Rohingya people. They said they burned it themselves. I said, "No, it's not true. According to the people, the police burned their houses." For that the president, Thein Sein, sent a letter to the Speaker to issue an arrest warrant. This is a grudge against me.

After that, I resigned from the UNDP. It's another grudge. The main thing is that I have been repeatedly advocating for the Rohingya people. Therefore, they don't want me to go back to my country because they want to use me as a symbol. Who will speak for the Rohingya? Who will speak on the part of these people? He or she will be punished. This is the idea. For these reasons, although I am very willing to go home, I can't, because in collaboration with the police they have already issued an arrest warrant against me.

I think this is the price I pay because I raised my voice for the persecuted people.

Mr. David Sweet: Let me change topics, and thank you for your courage.

You mentioned 120 camps for displaced people. Is there any singular leadership to look after the housing and care of the Rohingya in those camps?

Mr. Shwe Maung: In fact, there are some camp leaders appointed by the Myanmar government, but they don't have any power. The situation in all the camps is very bad. A huge number of families share a very small space. They don't have proper water, they don't receive proper food, most of the children are suffering from malnutrition, and most of the elders are suffering from chronic diseases. If they try to go a hospital, their relatives always find them dead. It becomes like a Nazi hospital, so people are now afraid to go there.

In the camps I don't see any systematic management to treat these Rohingya as human beings. It's a mess there.

The Chair: Thank you.

We've have a very short amount of time left, but I'm going to give an opportunity to Mr. Saini for a very short question. It has to be short, because we still have an item of business to deal with at the end.

Mr. Raj Saini (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Maung, for presenting yourself today.

I have a quick question for you. The last constitution was drafted by the military, and that constitution was put to a referendum. According to reports, 92% of the public accepted that constitution. However, within that constitution, 25% of those seats were guaranteed for the military. Is that true?

• (1355)

Mr. Shwe Maung: That is true.

Mr. Raj Saini: It's true.

I'm wondering, now that you have a new government in power and there is going to be tension to some extent between the military and the civilian government, do you not think that now is the time to start changing the constitution again or have another referendum to remove the 25% seat requirement for the military?

Mr. Shwe Maung: Personally, I fully agree with your idea because we don't want to see any unelected member of parliament in the house of parliament because they don't know what they should do.

Members of parliament should be elected according to the 2008 constitution. It's very difficult to amend this. We wish to amend it, but it's totally up to the wishes of the Myanmar military chief, because all MPs in parliament are talking, proposing, and asking questions under the direct instruction of the Myanmar military chief.

If these military MPs are not willing, it's not possible to amend the constitution, because it requires more than 75%.

Mr. Raj Saini: In your 2008 constitution, from what I understand, certain states, where there was a smaller proportion of ethnic groups, would be given an ethnic minister. Is that something that has been helpful to the states to represent the ethnic minorities, or do you think that's just something the government has done just to appease the people?

Mr. Shwe Maung: Legally, it is helpful. It is a good idea, but the main idea of the previous military regime is to play the divide and rule policy. For example, in Shan State they created many self-administered zones. Since then, they have had a number of arguments in Shan. In some areas it is helpful, but in Shan State, it created more problems.

Appointing ethnic ministers is not so important, in my view. The most important thing is equal treatment for all Myanmar people with one standard. That is more important.

Mr. Raj Saini: Thank you very much.

Mr. Shwe Maung: You're welcome.

The Chair: Thank you.

I want to echo the sentiments that have been expressed by everybody on this committee. We really thank you for making yourself available today.

Thank you for being a human rights defender and ensuring the plight of the Rohingya is known around the world. This was so important for us to hear directly from you.

Your courage and persistence in being a voice for the Rohingya is incredibly valuable. I thank you for taking the time to testify before us here today.

Mr. Shwe Maung: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair, for giving me a great opportunity to be a witness and testify on the plight of the Rohingya and their human rights issues.

Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to go in camera for literally three minutes. We have some budget details to deal with.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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