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Chair

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld

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

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• (1300)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.)): Welcome, everybody.

I'm very pleased today that we are doing an update on our study of the situation with the Rohingya. I'm also very pleased that we have a number of Rohingya witnesses here today to talk to us.

We will start with the video conference, just to make sure the technology works.

We have with us Shwe Maung, who is the president of the Arakan Institute for Peace and Development. He was also a member of the parliament in Myanmar, representing the Buthidaung Township in the Rakhine State from 2010 to 2015.

I'll give you 10 minutes, if you'd like to start your testimony, and then we'll follow with other testimony and questions.

Welcome, Mr. Maung.

Mr. Shwe Maung (President and Chief Executive Officer, Arakan Institute for Peace and Development): Dear Madam 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 before the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development—

The Chair: Can you hear us?

Mr. Shwe Maung: Yes, I can hear you, but I also hear some echo.

The Chair: I believe there's some repetition and a delay in what I am saying. I think the problem, sir, is that you have your streaming on. Could you turn your streaming off because you're getting what we're saying twice? If you could turn the streaming off, we won't be hearing the same thing twice.

Mr. Shwe Maung: Yes, I'm hearing it twice. Where is that? I didn't do anything.

The Chair: I'm going to start with the other witnesses, who are present here. We'll get our technical people to work through that and make sure the technology works, and then we'll come back to you. Thank you so much for your patience with this.

I would like to welcome our other witnesses, who are here in person. We have Zainab Arkani, who is a settlement worker at

Reception House in Waterloo. We have Raiss Tinmaung from the Rohingya Association of Canada. Also, we have Slone Phan from the Karen Canadian Community and Yasmin Ullah from the Rohingya Human Rights Network from Vancouver.

Welcome, all of you. Again, between the four of you, you have 16 minutes, so four minutes each, unless you'd like to divide that up between you.

I'd like to start with Yasmin.

• (1305)

Ms. Yasmin Ullah (President, Rohingya Human Rights Network): Madam Chair, my name is Yasmin. I am a Rohingya.

Rohingya has been part of Myanmar's ethnic minorities for many generations before the country declared independence in 1948. During that time, the Burmese parliament crafted the very first constitution, and the question of whether Rohingya are Burmese never appeared once.

During the British colonial era, many who were considered foreigners had to obtain national verification cards, or NVCs, in order to become naturalized Burmese citizens after a specific waiting period. Under the British, Rohingya were never questioned about their origin. It was understood that we were part of a larger mix of various minority groups who were local to the land that became Burma, or Myanmar as it is known today.

However, in the 1970s, the military took control of the government and slowly changed the law that protected our citizenship rights. In 1982, they implemented legislation that revoked Rohingya citizenship, using the claim that the treaty of Burmese unification that was signed didn't mention the word "Rohingya" to include Rohingya in the 135 ethnic minorities. The treaty itself acknowledged the existence of minority groups, but it was never passed in any motion in the Burmese parliament. As a result, Rohingya were no longer able to obtain national registration cards, which is the accepted form of Burmese identification.

Fast-forwarding to recent years, Rohingya are now subjected to restriction of movement, restriction of education and access to health care facilities, and restriction to jobs in the government, unless they can provide proof of identification with special permits, which are incredibly complicated, time-consuming and expensive to obtain. In case of an emergency, if a Rohingya needs access to health care, for example, they would not only have to obtain a permit, which would possibly cost more than the household income for an entire year, but time would not be on their side either. It takes many days to obtain these permits.

This is a major problem within the Rohingya community, especially for women. When women are faced with difficult deliveries or pregnancies, they have to seek medical help from Rakhine doctors. With the kind of hate rhetoric that is prevalent in Rakhine State at this moment in time, most of the women who seek medical help end up dead after visiting the hospital, and their newborn babies as well. This is reportedly done with lethal injections that are given to these women prior to their discharge.

I would like to point out that this also affects children. I will tell you about a 16-year-old boy named Abu Talek. On November 6, 2018, he died in Buthidaung prison. He was arrested in 2016 because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he was sentenced to seven years without a trial. There were no documents to support his charge. There were no lawyers for his defence. During his imprisonment, he was severely tortured by the military. He died as a result of injuries from the torture a few weeks ago.

The Rohingya would need their own homeland to be protected. It is the only viable solution that would end the genocide. This is part of our mandate on the adoption of “responsibility to protect”, which says:

The international community, through the United Nations, also has the responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means, in accordance with Chapters VI and VIII of the Charter, to help protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.

We have failed as a global community to protect Rohingya from this ongoing genocide. We failed to recognize the problem back in 1982, 1991, 1992, 2012, and 2015, and that has led to the full-fledged massacre we have witnessed in 2017.

• (1310)

We cannot keep showing our condolences and uttering the word “genocide” without doing something to stop it from happening. It is time that Canada led the world in ending genocide, not just for Rohingya but for other minorities in Myanmar. It is time we pressed the Myanmar military and civilian government to act in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Myanmar voted in favour of in 1948, and which Canada has helped author and co-sign.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll move on to Mr. Phan.

Mr. Slone Phan (Chair, Karen Community of Canada): Thank you. It is an honour for me to be here today.

My name is Slone Phan. I was born in Karen State, Burma.

When I was 12, my village was attacked by the Burmese military, which is the same military that attacked other ethnic minorities in Burma, including the Rohingya. I fled my village. I fled to the jungle for many months. I had no safe place to run in Burma, in Karen State. Finally, my parents took us to Thailand. We crossed to Thailand illegally. Fortunately, Thai authorities didn't kill us. They let us in and we survived in refugee camps for nine years. Basically, I grew up in refugee camps in Thailand. In 2004, I came to Canada with the student refugee sponsorship program run by WUSC, the World University Service of Canada.

When I came here, I joined the Karen community of Canada, to represent the Karen people in Canada. We try to raise awareness about the Karen people's suffering and the human rights violations in Burma. We stand in solidarity with the Rohingya people, who are facing the same brutal treatment that the Karen people have suffered for more than seven decades.

The horrific attacks against the Rohingya are not isolated incidents, but rather exemplify the ongoing patterns of military violence in Burma. The Kachin State and northern Shan State also face escalated attacks and probably war crimes, including obstruction of humanitarian aid by the military and the central government.

From 1949 to 2012, our homeland of Karen State was ravaged by nearly continuous armed conflict and widespread atrocities. The Burmese military violations of the 2015 nationwide ceasefire agreement now threaten to plunge Karen State into renewed civil war.

The ceasefire area has seen a marked increase in land confiscations and development-related displacement. Recently passed legislation could make the problem much worse. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Karen refugees and internally displaced persons face severe cuts in international aid.

The complex and shifting situation in Burma requires a comprehensive response to ensure that Canadian policy continues to uphold human rights and support peace-building efforts in Karen State, and by extension in Burma as a whole.

Thank you.

The Chair: We will have more time in the questions and answers for you to elaborate on some of the points you wanted to make.

We'll move to Raïss Tinmaung now, for four minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raïss Tinmaung (Director, Rohingya Association of Canada): Thank you very much.

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. I want to thank you, on behalf of my colleagues and I, for inviting us to this hallowed place, to appear before the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, often described as the conscience of Parliament.

My name is Raïss Tinmaung, and I am Rohingya. My parents are from Zolda Khana and Amla Phara. The small villages around Akyab no longer exist, having been burned to the ground during the 2012 massacre.

I want to thank you, as parliamentarians, and the federal government for last week's statement expressing concern over the forced repatriation of my people.

I would also like to thank all the members of Parliament for adopting a unanimous motion declaring the violence against the Rohingya a genocide, shortly after the Rohingya Human Rights Network organized rallies in 10 cities across the country and sent the Prime Minister a strongly worded letter signed by more than 125 Canadian academics and recognized activists. If you wish to see it, I have it here.

Finally, I would like to thank all the members of Parliament for unanimously voting to revoke the honorary citizenship bestowed on Aung San Suu Kyi, further to our petition signed by more than 65,000 people.

•(1315)

[English]

Canada has pledged a generous \$300 million in humanitarian aid. Let us make sure this money is well utilized to programs that help my sisters and brothers—my sisters specifically, at the camps, in getting the post-rape trauma treatment they deserve—and that it is used to fund programs that help them become capable of earning a living by themselves and feeding their children with dignity and pride, as any mother would want to do. Let us make sure that the funds are used to curb the sex trafficking and drug trafficking that are rampant in the camps, and that the situation in the camps does not foster the creation of a new extremist group in Southeast Asia.

Canada has recognized the situation in Myanmar as a genocide. This is a legal term with legal implications, and the next step in such a recognition is invoking the 1948 genocide convention, following World War II and the Holocaust, to which both Canada and Myanmar are signatories.

Through invoking the genocide convention, Myanmar can be taken to the International Court of Justice as a state, where its government as a whole would be held responsible for reparations for the consequences of genocide, to give back the land to the people who had to flee, give them the citizenship rights that they inherently deserve and re-enact laws that will grant them their fundamental human rights.

Canada does not need to invoke the convention by itself. It can do so with like-minded allied nations that have also taken a strong stance against Myanmar for its appalling record of human rights violations.

This has been advocated by well-known Canadian human rights think tanks, including Professor John Packer from the University of Ottawa's Human Rights Research and Education Centre, as well as experts at the Raoul Wallenberg Centre, led by the Honourable Irwin Cotler, former chair of the SDIR, this very prestigious subcommittee.

I would like to conclude by saying as a proud Canadian that, while our country's stance on addressing the human rights situation in

Myanmar so far is highly commendable, we must realize that we are still very far from reaching the desired end state. Canada and the international community are yet to take concrete measures that will see changes on the ground in Myanmar, a country that continues to target ethnic minorities by bombing Kachin, Karen, Shan and Chin villages; continues to keep 127,000 Rohingyas in concentration camps; and insists on making more camps during its proposed repatriation plans, because the Rohingya villages have not just been burned to the ground but also bulldozed flat, as per Human Rights Watch satellite images.

It does not only deny them access to humanitarian aid and human rights investigators, but also convicts and sentences journalists for reporting the openly known massacre of civilians.

This is why the UN fact-finding mission to Myanmar said, last month, "It is an ongoing genocide that is taking place at the moment."

The Chair: Okay, thank you very much. We will have more time in the questions.

Now I'd like to go to Ms. Arkani, for four minutes.

Ms. Zainab Arkani (As an Individual): Thank you, members of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, for inviting me to testify here today.

I was born in a town called Buthidaung, in Arakan State, Burma, but raised in various other cities as my parents were transferred from town to town as government service holders. My mother was a high school teacher her whole life, and my father was a government bureaucrat until 1995, when the Burmese government dismissed nearly all non-Buddhist officers from every government service.

I came to Canada in 2007, and since then, I have been living in Kitchener, Ontario. Since the very first week of my arrival in Canada, I have been engaged in community work, helping the newly resettled Rohingya brought from Bangladesh refugee camps under government sponsorship. They share with me the painful experiences they have been through, both in Burma and Bangladesh, and they live and relive them.

One particular issue I would like to address here today is about the faulty repatriation process. Repatriation of Rohingya refugees always brings flashbacks of horrors and nightmares. Many of my close relatives and neighbours, as well as my husband and in-laws, were survivors of the 1978 refugee crisis and were repatriated in 1979. The situation for Rohingya inside Burma did not change. Many Rohingya I have helped in Kitchener were tortured by the Bangladeshi authorities during forceful repatriation of the 1990s. Many had broken bones from beatings, while some lost their loved ones.

A man named Mohammed Ayub lost his right eye when authorities fired at the crowd with live bullets. In another incident, a bullet pierced through the body of a woman and hit a child behind her. The child died on the spot. Luckily, that woman is one of the government-sponsored refugees who were brought to Canada in 2007, and she now lives in Vancouver.

Refugees were coerced to go back days and nights and weeks and months. Similar to the 1978 crisis, the real issues were not addressed, nor were security and safety concerns taken into consideration in the 1990s repatriation scheme. The process was carried out in such a brutal way that many a time returnees were chased, loaded into trucks and sent back without even checking if the entire family was together. Many, many parents and young children were separated forever as a result.

Now, again, the refugees are being haunted by the repatriation nightmare. Although the Bangladeshi government has been saying that there is no forceful repatriation and no one would be sent back against their will, many shed leaders, *majhis*, have been called on and tortured for not being able to provide a list of returnees. There are several instances of family members taking poison with distress, saying they would rather die in the camp than be repatriated. My own niece told me, "If I have to go back, I will take poison, rat-killer."

The following points prove that Burma is not honest in repatriation talk. All those displaced since 2012 in Sittwe, Kyauktaw, and Minbya are still in concentration camps.

I would like to conclude with a quote from Professor Yanghee Lee, the UN special rapporteur:

Myanmar...failed to provide guarantees they would not suffer the same persecution and horrific violence all over again.

Thank you.

•(1320)

The Chair: Thank you very much, all of you, for your testimony.

We're now going to try again the video conference with Mr. Shwe Maung.

Can you hear us?

Mr. Shwe Maung: Yes, madam.

The Chair: Go ahead, please.

Mr. Shwe Maung: Thank you.

Dear Madam 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 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'm a former Rohingya member of parliament in Myanmar, from 2010 to 2015. I'm also president of the Arakan Institute for Peace and Development, a board member of ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, and a founding member of the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief, or IPPFoRB.

Madam Chair, the Rohingya were disenfranchised from the 2015 general election by the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party government. I was not allowed to run for re-election because my parents were accused of not being citizens of Myanmar, although I was a sitting member of parliament.

On September 12, 2015, I came to the United States to give a briefing on the human rights situation of the Rohingya in Myanmar at the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the U.S. Congress in my capacity as a sitting member of parliament, and to attend IPPFoRB's second annual conference in New York. Since then, I have been in exile in the U.S.A.

I also briefed this committee on May 3, 2016 about the human rights situation of the Rohingya. I highlighted policies of the USDP and NLD parties toward the Rohingya and Muslims in Myanmar. During my statement, I said, "If this is the case, the plight of the Rohingya will be doubled in the near future." After two and a half years now, it is much more than double.

It has been three years that the National League for Democracy party has ruled Myanmar, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, state counsellor and foreign minister. The human rights situation of the Rohingya in Kachin State and Shan State under civilian government is worse than under the previous military governments. Although the Rohingya have been discriminated against and persecuted since 1942, the situation in the era of Aung San Suu Kyi's administration is the worst in the history of Myanmar.

In the first week of August 2017, Myanmar's security forces launched a persecution campaign in northern Rakhine State. According to satellite images from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, more than 300 Rohingya villages were razed systematically. Approximately 35,000 Rohingya men, women and children were killed. Hundreds of women were gang-raped. Children were thrown away into their burning houses by the security forces and local vigilantes. The local vigilantes were trained by local police and were equipped with guns and swords before the security forces started operations to persecute and kill innocent Rohingyas. This is very interesting. Within a few weeks, more than 700,000 Rohingyas were deported to Bangladesh by force. It is crystal clear to call this genocide against the Rohingya.

As I have regular contact with the people on the ground, I have all the information about what is going on every day in my homeland, Arakan. As innocent Rohingyas were killed and houses were burned down every day, I requested, via my Facebook Live video on August 27, 2017, that the Myanmar government leaders in Naypyidaw protect innocent people from being killed. In response, the Myanmar police force filed a lawsuit against me and released an arrest warrant on September 1, 2017. I was really shocked.

The whole world was shocked as a million Rohingya were forced to flee and live in the world's largest refugee camp in Bangladesh. The UN, the United States, Canada, the European Union and the whole world showed their highest concern to stop the atrocities, the crimes against humanity and the war crimes, and to make the perpetrators accountable.

• (1325)

I would like to thank especially the House of Commons of Canada for its motion to call the situation in Myanmar a genocide and for the Canadian government's efforts to find a sustainable solution for the Rohingya, as well as the \$300 million in humanitarian aid for this crisis.

Madam Chair, the current situation of the Rohingya inside Arakan State is still so dire, as the Myanmar government has been consistently denying not only the massacre against the Rohingya but also the existence of Rohingya ethnicity, despite international pressure. The worst thing is that the genocide against Rohingya is ongoing. Myanmar and Bangladesh agreed to the repatriation of 2,200 Rohingya refugees out of a million. Both countries reportedly agreed to start on November 15, 2018. Myanmar looks more serious than Bangladesh about bringing this handful of refugees back, but no refugee is ready to go back to Myanmar without concrete evidence of safety and fundamental rights, including full-fledged citizenship, freedom of movement and freedom of religion.

On that, we have a question. Does the Myanmar government really want this repatriation? I don't think so. This so-called repatriation is not genuine. Although the Myanmar government is saying that it is "ready for repatriation", it is still denying the fundamental rights of Rohingya. Myanmar easily commits when pressure is mounted, but it breaks commitments systematically. We learned a lot of lessons from the 1978 and 1994 repatriations. I think this is to puncture international pressure and detour the UN's path to find a sustainable solution for the Rohingya.

Myanmar is still accusing the Rohingya of being illegal immigrants. Almost all villages of refugees were bulldozed and destroyed completely. All crops and cattle were looted. The same local security forces and vigilantes are still reportedly threatening Rohingya to expel them if they are resettled, especially in the Maungdaw south area.

The Myanmar government issued permits for demonstrations again Rohingya repatriation and resettlement in Maungdaw south. President U Thein Sein's government created the national verification cards to alienate the majority of the Rohingya population. It doesn't guarantee citizenship. If a person applies for this so-called national verification card, he or she will be confessing to being a foreigner, according to the description on the card. It is also inconsistent with the 1982 citizenship law.

More than 100,000 Rohingya in the Sittwe area are still living in internally displaced persons camps with uncertain future. They have not yet been resettled in their original places. They are not allowed to go outside the camp. They feel hopeless, as they have been kept in prison-like camps for six years. In this situation, how can the Rohingya come back? If they do, in this given situation, they will remain in a vicious circle of discrimination and persecution forever,

and there may be another episode of genocide to uproot the whole population from their ancestral land.

Therefore, Madam Chair, the international community should double its efforts and find a mechanism so that the Myanmar government agrees to make perpetrators accountable, accept the existence of the Rohingya and restore their civil rights with dignity, safety and security.

Let me stop my statement here. Thank you so much for your time, Madam Chair.

• (1330)

The Chair: Thank you very much, and thank you for being here once again to testify before this committee.

We will have time for one round of questions. We're going to start with Mr. Anderson for seven minutes.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here with us today.

I'll share my time with Mr. Sweet, so I'll ask for your answers to be fairly succinct.

Mr. Maung, when we first met, in 2014, you were a member of parliament who had come to sign on to the IPPFoRB network. By 2015, your citizenship was threatened and you lost the right to run again. By 2016, your citizenship was gone, and when you came to the United States, the military government had put out an arrest warrant for you. What is your present situation?

Mr. Shwe Maung: My situation is that I'm in exile. I sought political asylum in the United States of America, because the situation doesn't favour me. I cannot go back to my country. Therefore, I remain in America, although I have regular contact with my fellow Rohingyas from Arakan, as well as the Bangladesh camps.

Mr. David Anderson: Do you have a concern that the camps are going to become the acceptable compromise solution for the international community? We've had lots of words spoken, but there hasn't been a lot of real pressure put on the Myanmar government. Interest seems to be lessening to some degree.

Do you have concerns, and what can we do to make sure that those concerns are addressed?

Mr. Shwe Maung: Yes, I am very concerned with the issues in the camps, especially as the Bangladeshi government is thinking of sending 100,000 refugees to an island that is sinking day by day. It is extremely dangerous. That could be another genocide against Rohingya. It is very worrisome.

Also, according to the bilateral agreement between the Myanmar and the Bangladesh governments, a couple of thousand refugees are supposed to go back to Myanmar, but in this situation my concern is that without addressing the issue... This is not the first time. We have learned lessons from 1978 and 1992. Before repatriation, the Myanmar government always gives a promise.

Let me give you an example. In one of the Dhaka meetings, Myanmar's immigration director general said that upon their return they will be given a citizenship card. In fact, they never got a citizenship card, just a so-called "white card". Now again the same story is repeating, this year, with the national verification card, which is not consistent with the 1982 law. It is a card just for foreigners, not for citizens of Myanmar.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you.

I have one last question before I turn it over to Mr. Sweet.

The Rohingya were basically forced out of the country. That allowed the military to move into some other areas. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about the conflict that is taking place in other areas. Maybe Mr. Phan can best answer this, or others. Has it allowed the military to strengthen its capacity to deal with other conflicts and move its resources around? Have you seen that as a result of the Rohingya being forced out?

• (1335)

Mr. Shwe Maung: Mr. Anderson, could you repeat the question?

Mr. David Anderson: I'll have one of the other panellists here answer that question.

Mr. Slone Phan: Sorry, can you say that again?

Mr. David Anderson: The military has forced the Rohingya out of Myanmar. That allows them to free up resources to move into other areas. Have you seen that happen? Is that what you're seeing, that they're strengthened in the other areas, in the Kachin and Karen areas? Could you talk a bit about that?

I think Ms. Ullah would also like to say something.

Mr. Slone Phan: Yes, the military has the policy of Burmanization. It is not only in one ethnic area, but it's across Burma. In the Kachin, Karen, Shan and Arakan states, human rights violations have been going on. It's getting worse and worse. Burma is going backwards now, in 2018.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you.

Ms. Yasmin Ullah: May I add to that?

Because the Rakhine state is one of the most deforested areas in Burma, even though the entire area is already gone and the resources have already been extracted, it's still being used as a route to smuggle timber and teak from other areas, such as Shan State, Karen State and Kachin State, to be sold in Bangladesh and other countries.

You see the same thing happening with the pipeline being built from Kyaukpyu township right through Yunnan Province. That's to basically move around the oil from the Middle Eastern countries. These are not just built along Rakhine State, but crossing over many other areas. What we see in Rakhine State specifically is that they've destroyed a lot of mountains and natural resources with a lot of mining involved. These cause a lot of environmental havoc. It destroyed a lot of the coastal area and made cyclones and other environmental problems quite a bit worse.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): I have only 45 seconds, but let me say that you're champions. I'm certain everybody here feels the same way. What you've survived is extraordinary.

You are to be commended not only for that, but for spending your time defending your people, rather than just taking relief in a free country like Canada. I just want to say thank you very much for that.

Unfortunately, that is all I have the opportunity to do, so I appreciate your testimony.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move on to Mr. Tabbara for seven minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you very much to all the witnesses here. Thank you very much for your advocacy. I've been at some of the meetings in and around Kitchener-Waterloo, and your strength continues on.

I have two questions, and I'll be splitting my time with Ms. Khalid.

It's two parts: the conditions of the Rohingya returning to Rakhine State, and the states in and around Myanmar. The Indonesian president, Joko Widodo, was quoted as saying that "Indonesia is ready...to help the Myanmar government to create a conducive condition in the Rakhine State".

There have been individuals leaving Bangladesh and going back to Myanmar. There were 100 arrested off a boat just off Yangon. With other governments saying that they're there to help and to assist, are the conditions for the Rohingya any better at all?

I will start with Ms. Arkani.

• (1340)

Ms. Zainab Arkani: I would like to say that we have regular contact with my relatives. They are still in Buthidaung in Arakan State, and also some of them are in camps. What we hear from them is that the government is building concentration camps. What we mean by concentration camps is that they're building houses surrounded by an iron fence with guards. What does that mean? If we can't go back safely, then.... Does living inside an iron fence mean we can really go there? What is the guarantee?

The other thing you mentioned was the 106 people going by boat. They were fleeing to Malaysia, but the government arrested them in Yangon, in Kyauktan, and gave them NVCs. This is the other thing. What choice do they have? They have to accept the NVC, or they have to go jail.

Also, all the Rohingya people in Arakan State are very afraid, because the military comes and burns down their houses in the village. Some of them didn't leave the country. They built a hut, a small bamboo shed, and they lived there. However, now the government is trying to send them to those camps. What is the purpose?

These people are there. They should build a house. This is their land. They should stay there, but the government didn't allow that. They want to put them in the camps. This is saying that it's not honest.

We welcome the international governments for coming forward to help them, but we can't trust the Burmese government.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Do you feel hopeful now that other neighbouring states have mentioned that they are there to help the Rohingyas, or is there not much...?

Ms. Zainab Arkani: There's not much inside the....

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I'll pass it on to my colleague.

Mr. Raïss Tinmaung: If I may, I'll just add a few comments to what my colleague Ms. Arkani mentioned.

The plight of my people has happened for decades, as you are very well aware. Every time there is a massacre, after the massacre finishes you have what is called the "intermediate phase", where human trafficking, sex trafficking and all these horrible things happen.

The boats that left are very much a product of human trafficking that happens through the jungles of Thailand and all the way into Malaysia. The people who left, they come from the intermittent camps—the IDP camps that are out there.

The 127,000 people Mr. Shwe Maung mentioned, which I also alluded to in my talk, have nowhere to escape. The moment those who are in the camps in Bangladesh hear that there is repatriation happening, they are trying to escape.

The very people who are in the boats... It has been just three weeks since I finished some translations of interviews conducted by the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. I invite you all to attend the opening ceremony of the first-ever Rohingya exhibition, which will happen there. Some of the people who have been interviewed are in these trafficking camps. The survivors have talked about how, when they enter these boats, they are faced with the same Burmese authorities. It's the Burmese authorities who are doing this trafficking, and that is the product of it. There is no safety happening there.

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

How much time do I have?

The Chair: You have two minutes.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Fantastic.

First, I want to echo the voice of my colleagues and thank you for your advocacy and for your courage in coming forward and speaking for those who don't have a voice right now. Really, thank you.

Ms. Arkani, you spoke about repatriation. We know that the Rohingya faced violence not only from the military but from local communities, their neighbours and friends within them. When you talk about repatriation, I think the challenge is not just coming back into a land and being accepted by the government; it's also being accepted by the people. Perhaps you can touch on how you think repatriation should actually be happening.

Second, Mr. Phan or Ms. Ullah, perhaps you can speak about other minorities who are also facing violence at the hands of the military. Do they also face violence from their neighbours in local communities?

Ms. Arkani, go ahead.

Ms. Zainab Arkani: I left my country when I was 24 years old. I was raised there. I graduated over there, and only less than 1% do. I'm very lucky to have had that chance.

I have various friends. Actually, Burma is a very diverse country. We have various ethnicities. We go to school together, Christian and Nepali. It's a very beautiful country. The problem is racism. The government uses religion as a profit base. Whenever they want to do something, they use religion. They put religion in front of them and put hatred in people. I experienced hatred when I was young. Even my very close friends, Buddhist friends, used slurs towards us. I know they didn't mean it, but in the community it was happening like that. Even some religious figures would use hatred.

I would like to see peaceful reunification. Perhaps our government, the Canadian government, could provide some workshops over there on the peace process. That would bring people together. They don't hate each other. They just get used by the Burmese government. There is beauty at the core of people. You just can't see it because of all the hatred and racism.

●(1345)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Mr. Phan, go ahead.

The Chair: Actually, that's it for time. We might have a couple of minutes at the end to perhaps come back to that.

Next is Ms. Hardcastle.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you very much.

I'll get right to it so that we use our time wisely.

Yasmin, I remember when you came the last time and you didn't have an opportunity to speak. My understanding is that you came at your own expense because you felt so strongly about advocating. I can't tell you how inspiring that is.

Mr. Tinmaung said earlier that we need to take some concrete action, and that we want to make sure the conditions don't foster new extremist groups in the camps. I'm wondering what your thoughts are on that. Is it about concrete actions? How does that foster extremism? I'm maybe going back to some of the racism Zainab was talking about.

Ms. Yasmin Ullah: We have been subjected to the kinds of conditions that have taught us we have to find a way to survive, however we can.

Most of the time, people in the refugee camps right now are in limbo. They don't know what their future might be. They don't know what they're going to eat tomorrow. At best, they will be able to eat rice once a day, rice that was perhaps brought from Burma, which is ironic in a way.

I hear heartbreaking stories from people reporting about it, that when young children fled from the massacre last year in Myanmar, the only thing they took with them was a book from the school they were not allowed to attend. These are the kinds of things the Rohingya would need: libraries, things that would keep us occupied and that would broaden our horizons and help us educate ourselves and be able to voice our concerns to the global community.

I believe that education has a lot of power, not only to stop radicalization but to broaden our ways of seeking provisions in general. We would be able to find more things to do and more ways to improve ourselves. That only comes under the condition that the Bangladeshi government would allow it, because they don't allow education further than grade 6, I believe. Mr. Tinmaung would probably be able to elaborate on that.

It's the same way we're dealt with in Burma. Most of our schools would be segregated from the rest of the Rakhine community. It probably echoes a lot of things that happened down south a few years back, before the civil rights movement. Segregation is happening in a way where the students are not only segregated in school depending on their race and ethnicity, but also taunted for being Rohingya. Sometimes teachers won't even show up at their school.

These children are stuck in limbo as well. They have nowhere to go. They don't know what else is out there waiting for them. I experienced a little of that when I was in Thailand as a refugee. I was illegal there. That was hard, because when you're not quite sure what your future might look like, it fosters this feeling of being a foreigner in this land, not able to achieve anything, not able to be successful.

I think generally that's how the Rohingya feel, that they're not given the kind of resources they would need to succeed. I think there are things we could do. There are things that \$300 million could create, and those are opportunities.

• (1350)

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Do you think we should come out and very succinctly denounce the repatriation right now?

Ms. Yasmin Ullah: I think so, yes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: How about you, Zainab?

Ms. Zainab Arkani: Yes, I think so. Absolutely.

Until Burma has given us full citizenship or safety, and until international peacekeeping forces or other international governments are there, we must denounce it because there will be another genocide, as my colleague said.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm going to go to very quick questions, 30 seconds each.

I'll start with Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet: Do our witnesses have anything else they'd like to submit in writing?

I'd like to know, in particular, whether they're aware of any kind of network developing within the Rohingya community as far as the leadership is concerned, so that when successful repatriation happens, there would be a structure developed for policing, government, etc.

The Chair: I'll let Mr. Fragiskatos have a very quick 30 seconds as well.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all of you, from London, Ontario. We have an emerging Rohingya community, and your heroic advocacy matches theirs. I just wanted to put that on the record.

The Guardian newspaper wrote an editorial just a few weeks ago, saying the following:

The Rohingya must have the right to return home. But they must be able to do so safely and of their own volition. That is not the case now. Until that time comes, Bangladesh must be given all the support it needs to host them; and forced repatriations must be opposed as unconscionable and unacceptable.

Do you agree with that point of view?

The Chair: We have about five minutes. There have been a number of questions, and some that you didn't get to, so I'm going to allow those of you who really want to answer any of the questions you didn't get to answer, and have something really significant to say in those five minutes, to be very succinct. I'll give you the opportunity to do that, including Mr. Maung, who is on video conference.

Who would like to go first?

Mr. Raïss Tinmaung: I can start, sir. Are you talking about Mr. Garnett Genus's article?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: This was in the U.K., The Guardian.

Mr. Raïss Tinmaung: Oh, it's The Guardian. I'm sorry.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: It's their editorial.

Mr. Raïss Tinmaung: I misheard. I thought you said "Garnett".

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Oh, no, I said "Guardian". I like Garnett Genus and everything, but it's The Guardian.

Mr. Raïss Tinmaung: Regarding repatriation and the policing force that Mr. Sweet talked about, etc., we have to be very clear that we are not talking about repatriating into a different nation that belongs to the Rohingya. We are indigenous to Myanmar. We are from Myanmar. Our people, the people over there at the camps, whom I lived with for one month, should be able to go back to their own homeland.

It has to be accepted by the Myanmar government: from full citizenship rights to full rights for education and work, to being treated as human beings. Madam Khalid's point on whether it's the government or the people, Zainab answered that very well.

However, wherever there are good people.... When the genocide took place, when the massacres took place, there was and there continues to be a group of mobsters who are extremist Buddhists, who are out there and who are conducting this massacre. I'll refer you to a report by Fortify Rights called "They Gave Them Long Swords". The swords were not carried by the military. The swords were carried by the civilians who were conducting the massacre, and it's everywhere. It's the same thing in the Karen and the Kachin villages.

So until a change of situation happens on the ground, we cannot... As Canadians, we need to gauge our actions based on how our policies impact changes on the ground in Myanmar, the attitude of the Burmese government and its entities. You see, that's the gauging point on how we have successfully given a voice for the very people who are at the camps to be able to come back to their own homeland. They're not going to be living forever in these refugee camps, in these dire conditions, but they will only return when situations on the ground change, and this is what we are asking for.

I have some of my colleagues over here. If they want to add anything, Madam Chair, will you permit?

• (1355)

The Chair: We would welcome written briefs. Unfortunately, time doesn't allow them to speak.

I did want to ask Mr. Maung if he has any final words, in one minute or so.

Mr. Shwe Maung: Yes, Madam Chair, thank you.

As I mentioned in my opening statement, at this time it is not safe for the Rohingya to be repatriated, because the Myanmar government has not shown anything to suggest that it will ensure the security and safety of the people, and the Myanmar government is still accusing the Rohingya of being illegal immigrants. One the one hand, they are saying to the media that they are ready for repatriation, and on the other, they are encouraging the local people who are opposing repatriation of the Rohingya and resettlement on their ancestral lands.

So in this limbo, if the Rohingya are willing to go back, the situation will not be different from the situation in 1978 and 1994. During those repatriations, the Myanmar government promised a lot, but nothing was implemented. Now, we cannot see anything concrete to show that Myanmar will take measures to reintegrate these people again on their own land, to grant or to restore the Rohingya's civil rights.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

I want to thank all of you for being here and for your very compelling, very informative testimony. We will be having another session on this one week from today, on the 29th. For those who are interested, those who are watching on television, we'll have one more hour to discuss this issue.

Thanks to those who came from far away.

Just before we adjourn, I want to remind the committee that next Tuesday morning, the 27th, at 8:30, KAIROS' Women of Courage is going to be bringing women human rights defenders for a breakfast. That is women from South Sudan, Palestine, Congo, Colombia and the Philippines. The invitation has been distributed to all of you, and I hope that you'll be able to attend that breakfast.

Once again, thank you very much to our witnesses.

The meeting is adjourned.

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