

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING

BURMA IN TRANSITION:
NEXT STEPS TO ADVANCE RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM AND IMPROVE CONDITIONS
FOR RELIGIOUS VICTIMS

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Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Meir Soloveichik, Vice Chair
Asif Mahmood

C O N T E N T S

	<u>PAGE</u>
Opening Remarks	
Meir Soloveichik, Vice Chair, USCIRF	4
Asif Mahmood, Commissioner, USCIRF	7
Panel	11
Kachin Christian Leader	11
Yasmin Ullah Founder/Executive Director Rohingya Maiyafuino Collaborative Network	18
Salai Za Uk Ling Executive Director Chin Human Rights Organization	27
Jessica Olney Non-resident Advisor on Burma and Bangladesh Preventing and Ending Mass Atrocities (PAEMA)	33
Q&A	50
Adjourn	78

P R O C E E D I N G S

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Good morning, and welcome to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing, Burma in Transition: Next Steps to Advance Religious Freedom and Improve Conditions for Religious Refugees.

My name is Meir Soloveichik, currently the Vice Chair of USCIRF. I want to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us today to provide their expertise.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA.

The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and the U.S. Congress.

Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this very important hearing.

February 1st marked the four-year

anniversary of the coup in which General Min Aung Hlaing seized control and ousted Burma's democratically elected government.

Over the past four years, Burma has sunk into a human rights and humanitarian abyss. Millions of people are either internally displaced in Burma or outside the country as refugees, more than 28,000 have been arrested, and 6,000 have been killed.

The Burmese military had targeted ethnic and religious minorities for more than two decades before the coup, seeking to maintain its grip on power and achieve a Buddhist nationalist vision for Burma.

After the coup, the military and its State Administration Council, or SAC, have violently targeted religious communities with arrests, killings, torching, and airstrikes, and attacked more than 250 religious sites throughout the country.

On January 7, 2024, the military launched airstrikes in Sagaing region, killing 17 civilians,

including nine children, as they gathered to worship at Saint Peter Baptist Church in Kanan village.

In August, the military bombed a Buddhist monastery in the Mandalay region where displaced persons sought shelter. Many were injured, including a seven-year-old girl who had to have both of her legs amputated. These are only a few examples of the military's disregard for human lives and human rights.

USCIRF has monitored conditions in Burma since 2000, consistently recommending its designation as a Country of Particular Concern, or CPC, for systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.

Although the Department of State has yet to announce the 2024 designations, Burma was last redesignated as a CPC under IRFA in December of 2023.

In USCIRF's 2024 Burma Country Update, we noted that the situation in Burma continued to deteriorate as the military junta's control was

reduced and ethnic armed organizations consolidated territory and established parallel government structures.

These escalating conflicts negatively affected conditions for freedom of religion or belief. As Burma continues to fragment, vulnerable religious communities are further exposed to violence, terror and retaliation for their alleged support for pro-democracy groups.

Against this backdrop, USCIRF is holding today's hearing to highlight the challenges of protecting religious freedom amid the devastating civil war in Burma.

With that, I will turn the floor over to my colleague, Commissioner Mahmood, for additional remarks.

COMMISSIONER MAHMOOD: Good morning, everybody, and thank you, Vice Chair Soloveichik.

Indeed, human rights groups and international organizers have thoroughly documented the Burmese military's escalating violence targeting civilians, infringement on human rights,

and systematic persecution of ethno-religious minorities.

The military's indiscriminate airstrikes have claimed numerous lives, destroying the camps of internally displaced persons, places of worship, schools and hospitals.

At a recent USCIRF event highlighting the plight of specific victims, we featured Maung Sawyeddollah, a Rohingya youth. He witnessed firsthand the Burmese military's atrocities against his predominantly Muslim community.

He shared that religious intolerance in Burma have led to a series of violent campaigns against Rohingya, including forced displacement, arbitrary arrest and mass killings.

Rohingya people are targeted, dehumanized, and violently oppressed due to their ethno-religious identity.

Moreover, the military has used similar tactics to go after other religious minorities, such as Protestant Christians and Catholics, aggravating religious freedom conditions and the

current humanitarian crisis.

Our hearing today will provide updates on the ongoing conflict between resistance forces and the Burmese military and its impact on freedom of religion or belief, including in Chin, Kachin, and Rakhine States where many religious minorities reside.

We will shed light on the Burmese military's religious freedom violations, including attacks against religious sites, leaders, and communities, as well as in the forcible conscription of ethno-religious minorities such as Rohingya.

We will also highlight the plight of refugee communities that have fled, specifically how religious persecution has contributed to this aspect of the crisis.

These communities include Rohingya Muslims in Bangladesh and Chin Christians in India, and others who are internally displaced in Burma.

To address these ongoing challenges, we will review existing U.S. efforts and explore

further policy options to coordinate regional and global responses to the conflict and to address religious freedom violations in Burma.

Lastly, we will address the impact of U.S. and other international sanctions on the military's ability to resupply and resume fighting.

We are honored to have several experts who will inform us on the critical topics today. They are prominent representatives of their communities and have been monitoring human rights violations in Burma for years.

We will hear from an ethnic Kachin Christian pastor, whose name and image is being withheld for their protection.

We also will hear from Yasmin Ullah, founder and executive director of Rohingya Maiyafuino Collaborative Network; Salai Za Uk Ling, Executive Director at Chin Human Rights Organization, and Jessica Olney, Non-resident Advisor on Burma and Bangladesh at Preventing and Ending Mass Atrocities.

Thank you all for participating in today's

hearing.

I will just turn now to Vice Chair again to introduce the next speakers.

Or I can ask, we will hear from the pastor whose name is being withheld and who will present off-camera for safety reasons.

You may begin your testimony, Pastor.

KACHIN CHRISTIAN LEADER: First of all, I would like to give my thanks to the commissioners, including all the leaders of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, for giving me such opportunity to share my testimony along with other distinguished fellow panelists at this important event.

Meanwhile, thank you very much for your long-time support in promoting religious freedom including freedom of thought and belief in Burma.

I am a Kachin ethnic Christian from northern part of Burma, which is situated between two big nations: India and China.

Christians are one of the religious minority groups in Burma while majority of people

who practice Buddhism. In my hometown, I have many Buddhist friends and they are good people.

However, we Kachin Christians have been struggling for religious freedom since 1958 U Nu's declaration of Buddhist as the "State-religion."

As a result, thousands of Kachin Christian university students in Kachin State were to protest against this declaration of religious oppression at that time.

According to 2008's Myanmar Constitution, Charter VIII, No. 262, "The Union recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of citizens of Union."

In this sense, its legal special status is obviously superior in order to suppress other religions rather than in an equal position within the state.

After gaining independence from being a British colony in 1948, it is considered that one of the long strategic plans of the predominantly Theravada Buddhist, ethnic Burman Central Government, is that all the different ethnic people

in Burma are to be assimilated and becoming one race, one religion, and one nation: the so-called "Burmanization."

Undeniably, such a policy of Burmanization leads the country of Burma toward the world's longest running civil wars/ethnic armed groups' conflicts until today.

Doubtlessly, this is one of the worst things of human civilization in Southeast Asia that the people of Burma have been living under oppressive culture and system of the world for decades.

If we cannot terminate the activities of human's evil spirit to discriminate and kill other human fellows, the future of ethnic and religious minority groups in Burma is unpredictable.

Sadly speaking, since military coup of 2021, the State Administrative Council led by Min Aung Hlaing has intentionally been targeting civilians, IDP camps, attacking Christian ministers, church buildings, through air-drone strikes, bombing, killing, torturing, arresting in

Kachin State and beyond.

Currently, there are more than 200,000 Kachin civilians have become IDP in Kachin region.

My additional testimony is to highlight the updated story of religious and human rights violations of 2024 and '25.

Firstly, attacking air-drone strikes have targeted civilian and church community and meetings. In Kachin region and beyond, unfortunate consequences could be happening in everyday life because SACs attacking of air-drone strikes on civilians, church communities are taking place every day.

In Phakant region, western part of Kachin State, air-strike bomb attacking Kachin Baptist Churches, especially Zupra Kachin Baptist Church compound, San Kha village, more than six people killed, including children and some injured.

The whole village of Seng Tawng, Phakant region, Kachin State destroyed by air-strike bomb attack. No one knows how many people died.

An air-strike bomb attack on Mai Sac Pa

Kachin Baptist Church close to KIA headquarter of Lai Za and Chinese border. One pregnant woman was injured and a church building was destroyed.

Secondly, Kachin Christian leaders have been arrested, tortured, killed. Reverend Doctor Hkalam Sam Son, current advisor to Kachin Baptist Convention, arrested in 2022. Released by the military council's amnesty 2024, but he was then rearrested and taken back his home by the military council at 9:30 p.m. at the same day.

On July 23, 2024, released from the prison, although he was previously sentenced to six years in prison. He is now living in Myitkyina, the capital city of Kachin State.

He was still restricted to travel outside the country, and he has also been banned from going and preaching at IDP camps in Kachin region.

Father Donald Martin Ye Naing Win was killed on 14 February 2025. We believe that Father Donald is the first Catholic father to be killed in civil war.

Assassination attempt on Father Paul Khwi

Shane Aung, April 12, 2024 at around 2 a.m.

Father Paul, 40 years old, belong to the Catholic Church in Monyin Township, Kachin State. He was shot by two unidentified gunmen, when he was leading his congregation.

Assassination of Hkun Jaw Li. I had known him more than 15 years. He was graduated from Myanmar Institute of Theology. He was a Baptist pastor, 47 years old. March 18, 2024, at around 2 p.m., he was killed by unknown gunman when he was at home.

He is known to be committed speaker among Kachin Christian leaders, who spoke against dictatorship promoting freedom of speech and thought.

It is assumed that the SAC intentionally trying to create the conflict between different ethnic and religious groups, such as between local Shanni ethnic Buddhists and local Kachin Christians in Kachin region.

Thirdly, culture genocide in Kachin region. We are experiencing destruction of

indigenous minority peoples' tradition, culture, national and religious identity in our homeland through building Buddhist pagodas throughout Kachin State like image of the Buddhas at N-hkai Bum area of Kachin State, where there are less Buddhist worshipers around that area.

In my conclusion, religious persecution, discrimination, air-drone strike attacks on civilians, church community, violence are still increasing.

We sincerely ask USCIRF to continue its support in promoting religious freedom that protects ethnic and religious minority groups in Burma.

We strongly believe that U.S. President Donald Trump's government will support resolution to the political crisis that could stop religious and human rights violations and toward sustainable peace in Burma.

Thank you very much.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you very, very much for your courageous testimony.

We'll now hear from Yasmin Ullah, founder and executive director of the Rohingya Maiyafuino Collaborative Network.

MS. ULLAH: Thank you.

Honorable commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today.

I'd like to get right into it. Out of the three million Rohingya population today, only one percent live in freedom, according to Doctors Without Borders.

The majority of that one percent is resettled in various parts of the United States. Our community has faced decades of systemic violence, displacement, and persecution, most recently during the 2017 genocidal campaign by the Burmese military.

As of today, the crisis for the Rohingya people continues, both within Burma and in the refugee camps across Southeast Asia.

We are at a pivotal moment in history, and it is crucial that the United States along with international community take immediate and decisive

action to address our plight.

Over 90 percent of Rohingya population remains displaced, very, very recently, in the past two years, both internally within Burma and externally in the neighboring countries like Bangladesh and Southeast Asia.

This displacement is a direct result of the genocidal campaign waged against us by the Burmese military in 2017, and it continues due to the instability within Burma, exacerbated by the junta and armed groups like the Arakan Army.

The situation is dire, and the recent developments have only worsened our conditions, some of which I will highlight as follows.

The military has launched airstrikes in Kyauk Ni Maw village in the Arakan Army controlled area, killing at least 41 people and injuring 52 people, both Rohingya and Rakhine civilians.

Over 600 homes at that point were destroyed, and it is believed that the military specifically targeted densely populated civilian areas.

In terms of forced conscription, Rohingya men and boys are, particularly those in the IDP camps or in the internment camps, are being forcibly conscripted by both the junta and the Arakan Army to be human shields.

The junta recently transported over 600 Rohingya prisoners from Insein Prison to Sittwe, raising concerns about their forced conscription.

The Arakan Army is forcibly relocating Rohingya from northern Buthidaung Township to the overcrowded refugee camps in the southern Badaga village tract.

Rohingya are being threatened with relocation by February 28, this month, and will not be allowed to return to their homes unless they pay a sum of money to the Arakan Army.

The Arakan Army currently, their actions are part of what some have described within our community as a second wave of genocide against Rohingya, with violence, dispossession, and forced conscription of men and boys in our community.

In Bangladesh, there has been 124 Rohingya

refugees who just crossed the border from Burma fleeing with 94 of them being deported back to Burma, which very much violates the non-refoulement principle.

Although there is a global waiver exemption in place for funding freeze that the current administration has implemented with the funding cuts to the USAID, these, unfortunately, there has been severe impact on health care for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh since the U.S. has contributed 55 percent of the total foreign aid in the past year alone, resulting in shortages of medical supplies, staff layoffs, and reduction in critical maternal and child health services with the backdrop of many Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh to this day.

The Rohingya boat arrivals in Southeast Asia also very much provides us with a very worrying trend. In Southeast Asia, heightened trends of online misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech against Rohingya, as researched by my network, has resulted in real-life violence

against Rohingya refugees, and especially in the following forced deportation and detainment of Rohingya.

These survivors that have fled to Southeast Asia, 75 percent of them are actually women and children.

In the past month alone, January onward, Malaysian police have detained 196 Rohingya, including 57 women, 71 children, after their boat arrived at the shore of Malaysia, and Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency increased patrols and pushed these boats back.

The MMEA have intercepted also the two boats with nearly 300 Rohingya off the coast and expelled them from Malaysian water.

On top of that, there were two boats carrying 264 Rohingya, including 147 women, arriving near the western area of Aceh. One boat sank offshore in the past month, but all the passengers made it ashore.

Unfortunately, the Indonesian authorities initially rejected the boat.

There was also an incident of Thai police detaining 49 Rohingya found along the beach of Phuket. Originally, the 75 passengers had departed from Bangladesh. The group was held in temporary shelters and planned to be sent to third country.

This is constantly happening in the past month alone. A boat with 75 Rohingya, including 32 women, four toddlers, land in East Aceh area. Local authorities unfortunately initially prevented them from landing and later on allowing it.

Unfortunately, the Indonesian authorities have claimed that these are smugglers, and they have intentions to come into Indonesia for various malicious reasons.

These alone are a constant, constant, constant instances of Rohingya fleeing from violence, from both Burma and Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Unfortunately, because of the conditions in the refugee camps in Bangladesh, people are deciding to take their chances in the ocean. The conditions in Bangladesh, Rohingya refugees in

Bangladesh camps are deteriorating, and there has been increasing instances of armed robberies and violence.

These worrying trends we've witnessed may seem isolated, but they are all violence stemmed from the foundation of discriminatory practices by predominantly Buddhist forces, like the junta and Arakan Army.

With the rise of hate rhetoric against Rohingya rampant in Southeast Asia, especially Malaysian Indonesia, Rohingya religious beliefs were called into question, where some adopt Rohingya faith Muslims to absolve the need for the Muslim majority countries like Malaysia and Indonesia from helping the survivors.

These are very much byproducts of the prolonging of the Rohingya genocide by both the Burmese military and regional actors.

While the United States and its allies have shown support for the Rohingya in various ways, there is significant gaps in addressing the ongoing crisis, and I present the following action

items for immediate action and continuing pressure:

The Arakan Army, like the military junta, must be held accountable for the violence against civilians.

The Arakan Army has used Rohingya civilians as pawns in their conflicts, increasing sexual and gender-based violence against Rohingya women and girls, and forced displacement.

The National Unity Government and the National Unity Consultative Council must set an example of no tolerance for impunity, especially within the resistance movement.

The U.S. stakeholders should continue to apply a pressure on the NUG and the Rakhine political entities to demonstrate genuine commitment to human rights and to hold the Arakan Army accountable for its actions.

Regional actors also have a role to play in this. The United States must continue to push ASEAN to step up its response ensuring countries like Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand provide protections to Rohingya refugees.

The U.S. should also push ASEAN to end complicity of the regional governments that support or ignore the actions of the military junta and armed troops like the Arakan Army.

It is critical that the countries that Rohingya are fleeing to establish safe onboarding processes and not only punishing us for fleeing genocide.

Lastly, there must be continued support to advocate for a meaningful transitional justice process for Rohingya people. Support for the international mechanisms, like the International Criminal Court, International Court of Justice, and universal jurisdiction cases, are very critical to ensure accountability for crimes against humanity and genocide committed by the Burmese military.

But also there needs to be highlight to how armed groups are currently operating with impunity.

We are at a crossroads, and time to act is now. The Rohingya community stands firm in our demand for justice, peace, and a place at the table

in Burma's future.

Thank you so much for your continued support and listening to our plea for action.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you so much for your testimony.

We'll now hear from Salai Za Uk Ling, the executive director at Chin Human Rights Organization.

MR. LING: Thank you.

Vice Chair Soloveichik, Commissioner Asif Mahmood, and esteemed members of the Commission, I thank you for holding this important hearing and for inviting me to speak before you today.

My name is Salai Za Uk Ling, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Chin Human Rights Organization.

I'm honored to speak before you, particularly as someone whose grandfather was among the first Chins to be converted to Christianity by American Baptist missionaries 119 years ago.

This conversion laid the foundation of our faith and Christianity remains deeply rooted in our

community to this day.

Since the military coup in Burma four years ago, we have witnessed a systematic campaign of religious persecution, particularly targeting the Christian population in Chin State.

The ruling military junta State Administration Council has carried out violent and discriminatory actions aimed at dismantling religious freedom and destroying the cultural identity of the Chin people.

These actions include the destruction of churches, the unlawful killing and enforced disappearance of pastors, the arrest of religious leaders, and severe restrictions on free worship and assembly.

One of the most heinous examples of these atrocities occurred in my hometown, Thantlang, where Pastor Cung Biak Hum was brutally killed and mutilated by SAC troops as he tried to extinguish fires caused by military arson.

Between October 2021 and May 2022, all churches in Thantlang were razed to the ground.

Since the coup, CHRO has documented 124 cases of intentional attacks on religious buildings, 78 of which were churches.

These attacks are not collateral damage but part of a deliberate strategy to erase the religious and cultural identity of the Chin people as Christian.

Churches in Chin State are more than places of worship. They serve as vital community hubs providing health care, education, shelter and humanitarian assistance.

The SAC target these structures precisely because they are essential to the survival of our community. By destroying these vital institutions, the military seeks to destabilize the social fabric of the Chin people and crush their resistance to its oppressive rule.

In late 2021, the military launched full-scale attacks, code name "Operation Anawratha," targeting all major townships in Chin State.

Defectors have confirmed that SAC troops were ordered to occupy churches, knowing that local

defense forces would hesitate to attack these sacred spaces.

Inside the church, troops looted, desecrated, and often set buildings on fire, flagrant violations of the Geneva Conventions, amounting to war crimes.

As [?] resorted to air strikes. Since May 2023, we have documented 37 separate airstrikes on churches alone with the most recent occurring just two weeks ago on February 6, 2025, when a Catholic Church in Mindat Township was severely damaged by airstrike.

In total, 482 civilians have been killed in the conflict, including 116 civilians in air strikes and nearly 4,000 homes, and 124 religious buildings have been destroyed and burned.

This violence has displaced approximately 180,000 people within Chin State and forced nearly 80,000 to flee to India.

Religious leaders are also being systematically targeted. Eight pastors have been killed since the coup, the most recent on Christmas

Eve in 2024. These attacks underscore the military's recognition of the critical role religious figures play in maintaining community cohesion and resistance to oppression.

Beyond this physical destruction, the SAC has imposed severe restrictions on free assembly and worship, martial law, curfews, and emergency orders are used to suppress religious gatherings.

In 2023, the SAC required Christians to report their intent to attend Sunday services a week in advance. This level of monitoring is designed to intimidate worshipers and stifle the last remaining spaces for community solidarity.

As the conflict drags on, parts of Chin State are gradually being liberated and local administrations are working to facilitate the return of displaced people.

However, the constant threat of air strikes has made this is a slow and dangerous process. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Chin refugees in India and Malaysia face severe challenges, including arrest and detention due to

their lack of legal status.

In December 2024, 69 Chin Christians were arrested at a pre-Christmas gathering in Malaysia highlighting the ongoing vulnerability of those who have fled persecution.

In light of these brave challenges, I respectfully offer the following recommendations to the U.S. government:

Reinstate U.S. Refugee Admission Program and increase funding for UNHCR and local refugee organizations to support Chin refugees in India and Malaysia;

Expand funding for protection and humanitarian aid for internally displaced persons in Burma, focusing on cross-border assistance in ethnic areas;

Support the establishment of early warning systems and bomb shelters to protect civilians from air strikes;

Impose targeted sanctions on SAC leaders responsible for atrocities and push for international aviation fuel embargo to limit their

capacity for air strikes;

Increase support for documenting human rights abuses, especially against religious minorities; and back efforts to hold the military accountable under universal jurisdiction.

In conclusion, the ongoing assault on religious freedoms in Chin State is part of a broader strategy by the SAC to destroy the identity of the Chin people.

The U.S. must stand with us, not only to uphold the principles of religious freedom and human rights, but also to ensure commitment to this issue.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHNIK: Thank you so much for your testimony.

We'll now hear from Jessica Olney, Non-resident Advisor on Burma and Bangladesh at Preventing and Ending Mass Atrocities.

Ms. Olney, please.

MS. OLNEY: Thank you. Thank you all for giving me the opportunity to join today.

I'm a researcher. I focus on documenting

the voices of displaced communities to support decision-making by the humanitarian community.

My colleagues here today are far more knowledgeable than I am on the issues we are addressing today, but I'll try to contribute something by sharing a snapshot of findings of recent research conducted over the last few weeks to understand the current perspectives of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, as well as those Rohingya in Rakhine, and other ethnic and religious minority civilians in Rakhine State in Burma.

So, in Bangladesh, a million displaced Rohingya are living in very dire situation, and while the government has shown incredible generosity by hosting the million refugees, the situation is very difficult.

The refugees live in overcrowded shelters made of bamboo and tarpaulin, and have done so for years.

In the monsoon season, there are heavy rains that lead to landslides and flooding, and at other times massive fires break out and affect

thousands of families.

Access to clean water, sanitation and health care is limited. And refugees are highly vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking, with women, young people particularly, at risk.

The lack of legal status for refugees in Bangladesh means they don't have the ability to have formal employment, to hold bank accounts, pursue education, or even just venture outside of the camps.

So this gives you a glimpse of the plight that displaced people continue to face, fleeing persecution in Burma. As survivors, their struggle doesn't end after they escape immediate violence.

So, in this context of displacement, aid plays an absolutely critical role. UN agencies and NGOs have been providing basic assistance over the years, but the refugee needs are vast, and the resources have always been limited.

For example, the value of food rations on which refugees depend amounts to just \$12 per person per month. This is scarcely enough to meet

someone's minimal caloric needs, but it is likely to be reduced very soon.

So an environment of fear and chaos has taken hold in recent weeks, and we're still trying to understand all the impact of the cuts.

Many clinics have closed, cutting off people's access to lifesaving medical treatment, and they tell us they are terrified of not receiving food rations in March.

They say sanitation services have been affected, and that there are terrible smells and they feel much more vulnerable to disease outbreaks.

Bangladesh has already been under pressure and now faces even greater social, political and security challenges without the stabilizing effect of having adequate aid.

As my colleague Yasmin described, human trafficking and smuggling increase as the camp situation deteriorates, and this is because people figure that their only hope for a better life is to engage with these criminal syndicates to bring them

on very dangerous boat journeys to countries such as Malaysia where they hope to find better conditions, but many, many thousands have disappeared and died on the way, and their families never hear what's happened to them.

And like other youth, minority religious youth from Burma, young Rohingya are growing up in a state of limbo. They don't have adequate education or vocational training, and they're becoming a lost generation.

Hundreds or perhaps thousands of refugee youth have recently been laid off from NGO volunteer jobs for which they were receiving a small stipend.

This was only a couple hundred dollars a month, but it was a truly crucial lifeline for these families, and, moreover, a sense of dignity.

So we are really concerned to see our Rohingya refugee friends facing yet another layer of difficulty.

I also want to call your attention to the humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State across the

border from Bangladesh in Burma.

So there are Rohingya Rakhine people and other ethnic and religious minority groups that include Hindus and Christians have been trapped in the crosshairs of fighting, and hundreds of people have been killed, as my colleagues have described, and hundreds of thousands are internally displaced.

The Myanmar military has a decades-long "Four cuts" doctrine, which means targeting civilians along with combatants, cutting off access to food, funding, and communications.

So, in 2024, UNDP reported that the region was seeing, quote, "a famine in the making," though very serious but hard to do at a quick needs assessments, given the blockade and lack of humanitarian access.

We do know that in recent weeks, thousands of Rohingya and Hindus and others have been able to return home, which is a somewhat encouraging sign, although many more remain displaced.

Those who return have very limited access to liquidity and markets and are very strapped for

cash.

Farmers were unable to cultivate paddy, rice paddy, and other crops last year, while displaced. So it's unclear if the supply of rice will be adequate after the next harvest.

There is still no humanitarian corridor to allow cross-border aid to enter from Bangladesh although this is possible.

Bangladesh's interim government, which is led by the Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohamed Yunus, is reportedly open to this. But there are huge security challenges, also which my colleagues have alluded to, such as the risk of air strikes, and heavy, heavy presence of land mines, and threat of ambushes by armed groups.

So the circumstances are honestly still dire, but there are always rays of hope. Some local youth have been collaborating across ethnic and religious divisions on humanitarian and community support projects.

So they give us hope, but there's a long way to go, and affected communities want to become

independent of aid handouts, but they still need international support to help them get there.

All displaced people have the right to go home, and international supporters must advocate for the safe and voluntary return of refugees when conditions allow.

Human rights abuses against religious minorities by the junta's forces, as well as other armed groups, must never be tolerated, and victims' demands for justice must be heard.

At the community level, the roots of inter-communal conflict must be addressed so that all ethnic and religious communities can live without fear of persecution.

And all the while, Bangladesh absolutely must be supported in managing the refugee crisis to ensure the survival and a decent life for the Rohingya refugees.

So that's all from me, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to brief you on the situation.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you very

much, Ms. Olney, and thank you very much to all of our witnesses.

We'll now turn to questions and discussion amongst the witnesses. I'll just begin with a question for all of you, which is what do you think the United States can actually do in terms of its foreign policy to address the critical religious freedom issues that are faced by so many in Burma?

Of course, Burma has been designated a CPC, as I mentioned. This Commission recommended, called on the U.S. government and State Department in 2024 to continue to designate Burma as a Country of Particular Concern.

But beyond that, what can, what can practically be done? I know, Ms. Ullah, you addressed that a bit, I believe, in your testimony. Is it engaging the Burmese opposition parties?

Is it, is it other means? Are there other means by which we can actually practically ease the suffering, help put a stop to the religious oppression and persecution that is taking place in Burma at this moment?

So maybe we'll again turn to our first witness, the Kachin Christian leader, that is testifying for us, and then we'd really love to hear from all of you, please.

KACHIN CHRISTIAN LEADER: Thank you very much for such a opportunity to reflect and to have questions.

Especially we are really hoping that the International Commission on Religious Freedom, that my concern, especially the current situation in Myanmar, it's a ground situation is very important that I think I would like you to keep and closely watch human rights violation, especially should be working with the local, local organizations, and also current NUG and NUCC, and also the current ethnic state council.

That's really important because now Burma is, we are really hoping for the new chapter of Myanmar, that we are really concerned about the new constitution, as well. So that we would like you to encourage, to consider about new constitution to include all the ethnic minority and religious

minority as well.

That's my concern. Thank you very much.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you.

Ms. Ullah, would you like to expand on your own testimony regarding what the United States can actually do in terms of foreign policy?

MS. ULLAH: Absolutely. Thank you so much for that question.

I think that there needs to be continued support and advocacy for protection and aid for victims and survivors. And this is not only to address the immediate needs, but also to signal to the junta as well as the resistance government the importance of protection, to also model for these, these entities, that there needs to be an end to the cycle of genocidal violence, and any kind of reproduction within outside of Burma/Myanmar.

On top of that, I think there needs to be an addressing of the root cause of impunity, and unfortunately, there are many various layers in how this all came about, and the violence that ensue, but engaging with the resistance groups to not only

implement but put in place the recognition of the Rohingya ethnic nationality status will be a very, very important step.

The need for this is not only to, you know, recognize Rohingya as citizens of Burma/Myanmar, because citizenship is so volatile, but ethnic nationality status is something that was also stripped in the process of stripping of citizenship, and it actually becomes a bargaining power for Rohingya groups to be able to not only assert themselves into the larger narratives of the nation building, of liberation movement, but also it creates a position for Rohingya to be able to advocate for what is needed for their community to be rebuilt.

With the same token, I think that armed groups, wherever they may be, whichever group they might be, whichever religious affiliation they might have, meet to abide by the international human rights standards, and unfortunately we are seeing a trend of following the junta's footsteps by some of these armed groups, you know, fighting in

terms of joining the resistance movement, but at the same time waging wars and leaving a trail of blood in their path.

And the kind of impunity that is practiced among armed groups need to end. So there needs to be more emphasis on armed groups not only allowing them to just do whatever they need to do to gain territorial control, but also call into question how they actually operate and what kind of practices they follow.

These would be really, really important step to end impunity at large and, you know, later on, we can have a conversation about reconciliation process and transitional justice and disarmament.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHNIK: Thank you.

Mr. Salai Za Uk Ling, thoughts on American foreign policy, including the state of religious liberty inside Burma?

MR. LING: Thank you very much.

I think it has to begin, given the situation that we are in now, that it has to begin

with the restoring of U.S. aid because this is not just an aid handout.

It empowers local communities who are suffering from oppression, particularly religious and ethnic minorities who have been targeted by the regime for so long.

So it's not just giving them food to eat. It's a lifeline for them because it enables these people to protect minority groups to protect themselves against the military aggression.

And, secondly, I think the U.S. should make Burma a priority in its foreign policy in that supporting the pro-democracy movement at this time is probably at its best moment if we are to talk about eventual freeing this country from the clutches of the military regime.

So the military is increasingly now weakened, and if only the balance can be tilted in favor of the democratic opposition, all of these troubles that we have for generations will be solved.

And, thirdly, I think Congress should

provide leadership in pushing for this support for democracy in Burma because Congress already has legal framework within which to work, push for this agenda, and the Burma Act provides a very good opportunity for Congress to push for this.

And the new administration has also issued extended Executive Order 14014, which designates Burma to be, you know, basically a threat to the United States' interests.

So within all of this legal framework, Congress can really push out for this, and the Secretary of State also has the opportunity to provide leadership in framing the U.S. foreign policy.

After all, this helping Burma does two things for the U.S. It not just promotes human rights and tolerance and democracy in a country that has long been oppressed by the military regime, but it also provides an opportunity for the U.S. to curb Chinese, growing Chinese influence in the region.

And I think America security and economic

interests are best served by promoting democracy and supporting those who are fighting against the military regime. And there's no better time than providing the support than now.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you very much.

Ms. Olney, would you like to add to this question?

MS. OLNEY: Yeah. Thank you.

My colleagues have covered the key issues. I would add that the other side of supporting the resistance and democratic government is not supporting the junta, not engaging. The people of Myanmar, of Burma, don't see this as a legitimate institution that can be reformed, the Myanmar armed forces, the junta's forces. It needs to be overhauled, dismantled.

This isn't a reformable institution, and when international stakeholders engage, this is really disheartening to people because it legitimizes it.

So it's important to support the National Unity Government, NUG, the government. That's the central government.

But the U.S. also needs to recognize that there is going to be a patchwork of governance, as ethnic resistance movements in territory across the country, and if there's de facto governance, these groups are consolidating control, and this is likely to be the scenario for the foreseeable future.

For example, in Rakhine State, the Rohingya's home, the Arakan Army now controls most of the territory.

So it's time to think about diplomatic relations with these groups, recognizing reality, and those groups are pressurable. They're engageable on human rights, democracy, and development issues.

And, of course, humanitarian aid is the key bargaining chip with which to exert influence over these groups because they have to rebuild these very broken, war-torn territories that they

now control.

So these things are all very inter-linked.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you.

And just to follow up on that, before I turn the questions over to my colleague, just to, Ms. Olney, so with, if the Arakan Army does achieve full control of the Rakhine State, so what do you see proceeding from there and how does that play out then for the state of diverting the refugees in Burma in the future?

MS. OLNEY: The Arakan Army has not been very clear about its plan to address the root causes of intercommunal problems with Rohingya. There have been some good times and some very bad times, like my colleague Yasmin described, abuses against Rohingya civilians.

So we really need clarity on the position. The humanitarian community and diplomatic community should really be pushing for a clear plan for the assistance of humanitarian delivery and rebuilding support that ensures equitable support, engagement and participation of all groups that reside in that

region.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you.

Commissioner Mahmood, a question from you?

COMMISSIONER MAHMOOD: Thank you so much, all of you. Really admire and appreciate your work. It is not an easy work, and it's not a short-term work. You have spent decades on this work, and a lot of hardship, a lot of resources, a lot of sacrifices. Really, really admire you doing what you're doing.

What I'm going to do is my question is going to be multifaceted so that we can cover many things, and it will be for everybody.

I'm just going to move on a little bit more. We know that most of the Rohingya people who are displaced out of their country, it's been many years now, and at one point, Rohingya used to be, or Burma used to be the central focus for the whole world, and ever since this crisis started, there have been so many different conflicts brewed up all over the world, and world attention divides.

And NGO work divides, and the resources

and help available would also be divided.

So I'm pretty sure you'll be facing—I'll wait to hear from your response on that. What we have learned, especially Rohingya Muslims, a large majority is in Bangladesh, and most of Kachins are Christians in India and other places, but most of the people are in Bangladesh and India, some in Malaysia.

We know that India, we have recommended as a CPC country, which is not a good place, great place, for other religious minorities.

Bangladesh, the risk of religious persecution is rising by the day, and we are aware of that, and what you have seen over the period of years, all these displaced people, have they gotten anything better?

Have their life improved over the period of years? Have their religious freedom and freedom of belief improved? Number one.

If not, what else could be done because that is the basic fight they have?

Number two, many Rohingyans, not many, but

some Rohingyans, have returned back to Burma and to their communities. And do you have access or do you have any knowledge, is it better now than the time they left?

If they came back and they have the same oppression and same harm's way, that what can be done to improve that?

And number three, the armed groups, different armed groups who are fighting in Burma, and many of their factions are displaced in other countries like India and Bangladesh, have they had direct contact with them, and is there a way they can connect to each other, and then they can be on international forum to talk? Because I personally believe that we are running out of time, and with the geopolitical situation is changing worldwide, we don't know what's going to happen, what's going to be available.

And millions of people are not only going to be in jeopardy for their freedom of religion or belief but for their existence, and this genocide is going to get worse.

So I thought I'd put in many questions. I'll ask follow-up questions as it comes up, but I would want anybody to take the lead on this thing because I have touched all the communities and all the different factions and things.

And, again, thank you for sharing your work. Whoever wants to take the lead? Maybe Yasmin, you can start it because I think you are covering the bigger portion, Rohingya Muslims, which are millions.

MS. ULLAH: Thank you so much. Thank you so much, commissioner.

It's really difficult to be able to answer all of those very, very difficult questions, but we've been at it for years. But in my humble opinion, for, in terms of the displacement of the Rohingya, I think that there needs to be a shift towards a more stabilizing approach, and I think that this very much covers the Southeast Asia and Bangladesh, and basically the entire Asia Pacific region, but specifically in these, in these key countries.

I think that as the U.S. has, you know, very, very clearly advocated for Rohingya in the past, there has been an improvement of Rohingya treatment in the region as a whole.

And I think there needs to be a renewal of that, especially in Southeast Asia where hate campaigns, which is very, very much a part, a stage of genocidal violence, is now rising again, en masse, you know, by a lot of different groups of people, especially these insults and misinformation and disinformation are being trolled online on different platforms at TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram.

And so we're worried that this will actually lead us to another kind of violence that basically reproduce the genocide that the Rohingya already suffered through, and that basically becomes, you know, the center focus of our network.

In terms of religious freedom, because of these different misinformation and disinformation that's being spewed online, a lot of the groups of people across Malaysia and Indonesia are starting

to question Rohingya identity and Muslim faith.

And that is very interesting because it also is becoming part of policies and response by the government, and governments in Malaysia and Indonesia and local authorities are starting to treat Rohingya as if they're not Muslims because of these online hate campaigns.

So any sort of pressure and advocacy that the U.S. can do in preventing further exacerbation of this process would be really helpful.

Beyond that, I think that there needs to be a safeguarding of, you know, the Rohingya community as a whole, and this is, you know, through education and through dialogues with faith leaders in the local communities.

And that's something that the network is currently doing through arts, through various different means, through film, through creating and understanding a narrative change of the Rohingya crisis.

But this also needs an investment into the community to educate them to actually help them,

you know, be able to communicate their needs in displacement.

Beyond this, the returning of the Rohingya is still abysmal. I have had a lot of interactions with people who have reported from the ground that, you know, they, a lot of men and boys are being forcefully conscripted, and again I've highlighted that freed prisoners from Insein Prison in the last month were now at the risk of, are now at the risk of being forcefully conscripted to be fighting at the front line, being forced by both the junta and the Arakan Army.

So at the end of the day, it's Rohingya fighting Rohingya, and Rohingya losing lives. And I think that beyond bringing the armed groups' leaders to have dialogues, to instill understanding, for them to abide by human rights standards, it is also important to not legitimize their support or their involvement in the, you know, in the liberation movement until they can actually prove that they have a process in place or a mechanism in place in their own organization to

not harm civilians.

These are very, very low bar that we're aiming for, but unfortunately groups like Arakan Army has not really achieved it. And so I hope that that would be a continued pressure, a pressure point for the U.S. government.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER MAHMOOD: Thank you. Thank you.

Anybody else has any comment to add to this?

MS. OLNEY: I would add that in Bangladesh the religious practices of the Rohingya and the host communities adjacent to the camps are quite similar in many ways.

But this doesn't stop Rohingya from being "other" ethnically, and so there's a lot of tension between the first community and the Rohingya. This is a very poor part of Bangladesh, which is a poor country overall.

There was already scarcity of resources, water, you name it, high levels of poverty. And

that's put pressure on the host communities the whole time, and so this is all propped up with humanitarian assistance to make sure that all communities receive some support to deal with this.

And so the religious similarities don't stop the fact that Rohingya have been persecuted because of their religion, and even though they're in a more religiously supported environment, they're still experiencing the fallout of past displacement.

COMMISSIONER MAHMOOD: Thank you.

I just have one more follow-up question, and actually that question is targeted towards or geared towards Mr. Ling.

I want to bring your attention on this issue, why Burmese military targeting and arresting Chin religious leaders, such as Chin Baptist pastor Thian Lian Sang, who is on USCIRF's Victims List, too.

I just wanted to mention one thing over here. Although we are not just talking on that point, there's a lot of, a lot of work being done

at this point on anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, but we, and more and more I study and do things, really there's an equal hate going against Christians, and I think we should not ignore that, in several parts of the world.

And over here also after Muslims, Christians are the biggest group being targeted. So is there real threat they're feeling, a threat they're feeling of why they're going after that, a small group?

And I'm pretty sure you have people who you have are in major contact who must be under threat or under hardship.

MR. LING: Thank you, Commissioner.

That's a very good question. All of this is policy and institutions that have been around since Burma's independence. It's rooted in the institutional and the legal structures.

The difference is that when a democratic or civilian government takes over power, this is less visible. When the military comes into the picture, it becomes more violent.

And if you look at the history of Burma itself, all the religious and ethnic minorities, including Rohingyas, have been targeted specifically because Christianity, for example, is viewed as a foreign religion, and so we are accused of not being loyal to their version of, of the state of Burma, which is defined by race, religion, and ethnic identity, religious—sorry—language.

So for years, we've been targeted for, specifically targeted for these kind of violations, and pastors and religious leaders often become the primary target because they command such level of respect in the community, and they represent that communities.

The very foundation of those communities are represented by religious leaders. And naturally they become the target whenever the military sees it's convenient. They would be the first one to be targeted, and this all goes back to the structural and the policy and legal framework of the country, which has been pursued by different regimes over the years.

So, of course, a lot of religious minority people are targeted, but on top of that, religious leaders are also community leaders whom the Burmese military see as a threat, a direct threat to their rule.

So, yes, and because there's also a very close connection between ethnicity and religion so minority groups are the target of the persecution.

COMMISSIONER MAHMOOD: Thank you.

And I have one final question, and that is toward Jessica. Jessica, we see that Arakan Army seems to be getting almost full control of Rakhine State.

And that might look like a big threat to overall Burma, Myanmar, and how when they complete, get the full control, how it's going to be taken as after post-junta Burma, and how are they going to be since the international aid is, as I said, draining?

Maybe you might have a better view about that. How are they going to be able to survive and sustain, and how they're going to be able to

protect people? What is this whole situation, which is now changing the dynamics, going to play in next months and years?

Thank you.

MS. OLNEY: Thank you.

I think that question has a lot to do with trade and economic stabilization as well as aid. There's a great need to rebuild.

So the blockade from the Myanmar interior imposed by the junta is likely to continue. The junta is losing ground across the country, but it's not going to collapse imminently.

So that means that the Arakan Army and anyone who is supporting Rakhine State needs to look in the other direction. So Bangladesh is sharing a border and also India, and so looking at trade routes from India overland, those actually go through Paletwa in southern Chin State.

But those are very rugged roads, very difficult to transport much, and then across Bangladesh, it's much easier. But the bilateral relations are not really there yet.

So those are needed for any goods to come in and for the area to start rebuilding.

So the relationship building with Arakan Army and its political counterpart, the ULA, the United League of Arakan, is very important, and they need those relationships.

There's also a lot—it's a very fertile region so there is a lot of just basics, basic food that's produced internally in the region, but it remains to be seen the level of self-sufficiency that they really could pursue without that international support.

So I hope that answers your question.

COMMISSIONER MAHMOOD: Thank you.

Vice Chair, back to you.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHNIK: Thank you, Commissioner Mahmood.

So, maybe I'll just build on some of what you all just said. Many of you have spoken about U.S. aid, and then, Ms. Olney, you spoke about a possible sources of self-sufficiency emerging in the future.

Can you speak to the state of possible regional sources of support, whether the U.S. can find regional partners or ways in which it could better coordinate with regional partners, to assist, to assist refugees, whether refugees in the immediate area or Chin refugees in India and Malaysia, or Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh?

There is, of course, U.S. aid itself; there is self-sufficiency that Ms. Olney spoke about. Is there a middle ground, and is there a way that the United States can help facilitate that in a way that would both increase the actual physical helping of refugees as well, and perhaps assist with better religious freedom as well?

Perhaps Ms. Ullah will begin and then everyone else after that.

MS. ULLAH: Thank you so much for that question.

I immediately thought of our very own mandate, which is to help Rohingya remain and sustain themselves within the region as long as possible.

I know because of the resettlement percentage is very, very low, across the board, not just for the Rohingya or for those from Burma, but we understand that it is not sustainable to actually think about a solution of resettlement of all Rohingya refugees or all refugees from Burma.

So we've begun our work to actually advocate for overall protection of Rohingya in Southeast Asia. We haven't really touched Bangladesh yet because of the volatility of the situation, and, you know, their social conditions.

But in Southeast Asia, there is a lot more that we can actually push, and there are entry points.

For example, Malaysia and Thailand are actually entering into labor shortage because of their society becoming aging society, and the Rohingya, in Malaysia, for example, have already contributed to the labor force, especially in building those, you know, beautiful tall buildings in Potrajaya and in KLCC. Those are actually our labor even though it's exploited, even though it's

without any real protection.

So we are trying to use this aspect of contributions to the society as a way for the current administration in the future, you know, people in positions of power to actually understand that there is more that the region can gain from actually housing and hosting Rohingya while they're waiting to go home because inevitably the Rohingya want to go home, even the 200,000 of them that are in Malaysia, even the 40,000 of them that are in Thailand, and, you know, many thousands in Indonesia.

Resettlement is not the final and end game in this case, and we're trying to use the stories of the Rohingya women in the network to actually highlight these contributions.

For example, myself, I was actually a refugee in Thailand for about 16 years, without real protection, with no access to basic needs, but this, you know, after resettlement to Canada, I have gotten access to education and other aspects of livelihood.

I was able to make something for myself, and, you know, sustain myself in that sense, and we're using these kind of stories to actually push further the inclusion of Rohingya and the shifting from securitization, from detainment, of Rohingya as a response while they're using Rohingya as labor force, but also as human resources, as people who will actually inevitably contribute to the society.

And even though we're not doing this in a very, very traditional sense, and it's very, very difficult to actually push against the hate campaigns that are currently ongoing but also the sentiment of discrimination that takes place in these countries. It has been really helpful to actually instill these in young people and in religious leaders and in other groups of people in the society.

And we're really hoping that more investment can go into this to maintain the Rohingya that are currently in the region with protection, to maintain the refugees from Burma, and those who have actually fled because they're

being forcefully conscripted, to actually maintain themselves and sustain themselves within the region with protection.

And there is a lot of movement towards alternative to detention that's being, that's becoming quite successful in Thailand that, you know, I can speak to later on.

But it is, it is a very, very important aspect of work that I think need a lot more support and investment from the U.S. government.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you very much.

Mr. Ling, regional partners that could help improve state of Chin refugees in India and Malaysia and state of refugees in general?

MR. LING: I think there needs to be continued dialogue with these countries that are hosting refugees to find an acceptable solution that works for everybody.

As my colleagues have mentioned, refugees do not choose to be refugees. They want to return

to their home country.

And the best way to deal with the refugee issue is to go at its root cause and find a way for them to be able to return, and there is no better time than now to push for that, and we need the full diplomatic and political weight of the United States.

Even in the absence of any kind of monetary assistance, the U.S. can still exert influence on the outcomes of the, you know, the eventual outcome for Burma, and I think that's really important when talking about what we're facing all across the Burma border.

It's a burden for everybody, and we cannot solve each of the problems country by country, but, you know, those who are hosting refugees, they have their own priorities, but also there are entry points whereby the U.S. can have dialogue with these countries and make sure that, first of all, it's protection that they need, that they not be returned back to a country where they will face the same kind of fate that they fled from.

So continuing dialogue with these countries, and I think countries around the region are receptive and willing to be partners in this.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you.

Ms. Olney, I know you spoke about this a bit, and I think Ms. Ullah had something else to add. So we'll go back to her after that as well.

MS. ULLAH: I'm so sorry to do this, but I think--

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: No, not at all. Go ahead.

MS. ULLAH: I just remembered that I just came back from the Philippines, and the central government or, you know, the partners that we have in the Philippines in Manila have been really, really supportive of the Rohingya issues, and I know that the government actually enacted on a plan of complementary pathways.

Actually, there are 40 Rohingya students that are currently studying about five hours from Manila in a new university.

And that's also a very, very, a very important highlight, to, you know, what a success story can look like in Southeast Asia, in hosting Rohingya within the region, waiting for them to go home, while investing in the human resources.

On top of that, we've had conversation with the BARMM government, so the Muslim Mindanao government in the South, and they're looking into actually hosting, you know, Rohingya and looking into pathways to actually resettle Rohingya or hosting the Rohingya in the meantime while they're waiting to go home.

So that, I think, would be a really key area to also explore.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you very much for that important addition.

Ms. Olney, and then we'll hear from the guest, the Kachin Christian leader.

MS. OLNEY: Yeah, no, thanks.

That's really interesting to hear about that developments in the Philippines. I think

there's so much room for creative approaches.

A complex crisis like this requires multi-pronged approaches and solutions, and just to add a little bit more detail or an idea on the Bangladesh. For many years, there was a real constraint on the types of creative and preventions that could be proposed under Sheikh Hasina's regime.

Then she was overthrown last year, and the interim government, as I mentioned in my remarks, is led by Mohamed Yunus, who is the pioneer of microfinance and won the Nobel Peace Prize.

One idea that had been floated, maybe prematurely, and could be brought up again, is integrating Rohingya as workers in Bangladesh's industries.

Bangladesh has a massive garment industry, and Rohingya can completely contribute to economic development in Bangladesh in a way that doesn't compete with local labor but enhances local economic development.

And that should be a win-win. Rohingya

refugee friends that I know are constantly desperate to work. They want nothing more than a job so they can have dignity and earn money to feed their feed families like anyone else, and I'm sure that's true in all the other countries hosting Rohingya in the region.

So pressing on avenues for formal employment would be very, very helpful.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you so much.

And now perhaps we could hear from our witness, the Kachin Christian leader, about regional partners that could help the state of Kachin Christians and the way in which aid can reach them beyond U.S. aid itself.

KACHIN CHRISTIAN LEADER: Yeah.

As observed, currently, the geopolitics of Kachin regions are really hard time to assess anything about like humanitarian aid, Internet, everything, and also, you know, among the Kachin, among the Kachin young people, the impact of increasing drug dealers and using among the young

people.

So, unfortunately, you know, drawing support from USAID to prevent drug education, it's a negative impact on this issue as well. That's my, my concern, really concern about that.

So I think because of geography, we are really having difficulty to assess humanitarian aid elsewhere so that we are really kindly ask you that should be approaching regional, any regional contacts, especially religious community, to work with them, and then to help humanitarian, to assess humanitarian access well.

So my kind request also that currently additionally China expansion, especially the economics and political power over through China, let this talk between ethnic groups and SAC in northern part. People worry about SAC agreement with China for joint-with the community in Burma.

So I especially is intention is to protect China investment, you know, millions of dollars in Kachin State in Burma.

So I'm really concerned about that. So

that we really want you to encourage local organization, local religious organizations, to keep closely working with them.

Thank you very much.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you so much.

I think we have time for one more question.

Commissioner Mahmood, would you like to ask something of one of our witnesses?

COMMISSIONER MAHMOOD: Yes. Thank you so much.

I just want to put for the current situation a brief response from all of you, whoever wants to pitch in. We know the present situation that USAID is being diminished significantly, probably being [?] right now, how it's going to impact crises over there.

Are there any alternatives, other organizations at other states filling in the shoes while this is still a crisis?

What is your thought process? How nervous

you are about that? And what else we should do to help you on that?

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you, Commissioner Mahmood.

Very brief answers from those who want to address the question.

MS. OLNEY: I'd like to answer. There's no words that can express how alarmed and worried me and all my colleagues are. We can't even guess yet the level of harm and suffering and preventable death this could cause.

Other donors I'm sure are looking to see what they can do to fill gaps, other government donors, but there's been no time for that. These things take time to plan and execute appropriately.

And, yeah, it's uncharted testimony given the level of reliance on aid that the world's most vulnerable people face, and so the impacts will be massive, and they will be the most intense on the people who already have the least.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Ms. Olney, thank you. I want to thank all the witnesses for

testifying about this very, very, very important issue, and I want to thank the staff of USCIRF for their incredibly hard work, which made this hearing possible.

If you want to learn more about USCIRF's work, please visit our website at uscirf.gov.

Thank you for joining. This hearing is now adjourned.

COMMISSIONER MAHMOOD: Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 12:00 o'clock noon ET, the hearing was adjourned.]