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The Ongoing Rohingya Crisis: Worsening Humanitarian Emergency and Canada's Response

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It is a pleasure and an honour to contribute to this evening's event in support of the long-suffering Rohingya people. I regret I am unable to be present in-person to share some of my thoughts. Thank you nonetheless for this opportunity.

Despite being unaware of the existence of the Rohingya people for the first half of my life, in fact they have been suffering for my entire life. In 1992, as a United Nations Human Rights Officer, I was assigned to assist the first UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Burma/Myanmar and so I traveled in early 1993 to that country including to Rakhine/Arakan State in the North-East where I met with Rohingya who had been forcibly repatriated from Bangladesh following their mass exodus in 1992. That wasn't their first or last mass exodus. Already then, they had been subjected to [decades of systematic persecution](#), in effect stripped of their nationality and rendered stateless, and having already earned the moniker as "[the world's most persecuted minority](#)". At the time, the majority of Rohingya still lived in their homeland and managed somehow to endure the manifold violations of their human rights and of systematic persecution. Today, perhaps half a million Rohingya remain in Rakhine/Arakan while the great majority (80% or more) of Rohingya have been forced to flee, dispersed throughout the world, many clinging to life in Bangladesh. Also

today in Rakhine/Arakan, the unrelenting persecution continues with new forms such as [forced conscription](#) and rapid deployment of young Rohingya men in effect to be used as human shields in the civil war between the Myanmar Armed Forces and the Arakan Army. The destruction of Rohingya as a group and of their homeland continues every day.

Burma became independent as a State and admitted immediately to the United Nations on 4 January 1948, including Rakhine/Arakan and the whole population there (i.e. including Rohingya), whereafter Burma proudly voted on 10 December 1948 in favour of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the next day, on 9 December 1948, adoption of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide which Burma subsequently signed in 1949 and ratified in 1956. Its persecution of Rohingya began not many years later.

The catalogue of human rights violations and other forms of oppression of the Rohingya has been abundantly reported and recorded for most of our lives and increasingly, as technology permitted, by all sorts of actors and entities not least by the United Nations over decades. Since that first report by the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar (which I drafted), the Genocide Convention has been repeatedly invoked. Yet little action was taken. Only after the most recent mass exodus, in August/September 2017, which we witnessed live on our TVs, did, eventually, a little and poor African country, The Gambia, have the temerity to bring a complaint against Myanmar by submitting an application to the International Court of Justice to commence action for breaches of the Genocide Convention. Canada heralded this and, with The Netherlands, pledged support and followed with a [short public statement that it would \(without specification\) intervene in the case](#). Over four years later... that is pretty much where things remain. For its part, Canada has contributed substantially – almost two-thirds of a Billion Dollars for mainly humanitarian assistance... meaning, essentially, writing large cheques to the UN agencies, some humanitarian actors and substantially to defray costs of the Government of Bangladesh. The Rohingya continue to suffer. And the men in black robes in The Hague plod along... Worse, following the February 2022 *coup d'état* in Burma – as the current military junta removed the legitimate authorities and began its reign of terror against the people of Myanmar – in The Hague, stunningly, the junta [unlawfully took the seats of the Government of Myanmar](#) and have been confirmed and granted every courtesy, privilege and immunity in the now perverse

charade of a legal theatre about and without the Rohingya themselves given voice or recognition. Canada has remained silent.

In sum, the “Rohingya crisis” has been “ongoing” for most of our entire lives... and for all of theirs. The “humanitarian emergency” we talk about this evening is only the latest and now acute manifestation of an inter-generational oppression. There is little new, and nothing we do not immediately recognise. What has always been striking to me is that the Rohingya are – and never have been – a threat to anyone. Essentially a small, agrarian and fisher-folk people seeking only to live in peace in their small corner of the world – in peace with themselves and with their neighbours. Yet they have been denied this and, instead, targeted, dehumanized, even demonized... simply for existing.

I am glad that, in 2017, the Government of Canada responded clearly and substantially in their support – both materially and, initially, in pursuit of justice. The very few Rohingya who have been allowed to resettle in Canada (just a thousand, so I understand) have integrated quickly and well – even exemplary as individuals and as a small community, despite many challenges. I know they are grateful to Canada.

But I am disappointed that we – Canada – have not done much more... in terms of what was needed and, especially, what we could have done and could still do. In fact, we have not acted with vigour or even obviously in taking available steps at the International Court of Justice or otherwise (notably in terms of sanctions, counter-measures, and diplomatic pressure) much less creatively. Briefly, for a handful of months several years ago, we chaired a group of States on the Rohingya situation, before our interest waned and ceased. PM Trudeau appointed a special envoy, Bob Rae, who eventually issued a well-received [report](#)... but few of his 17 recommendations have been implemented – including putting the Rohingya first in policy terms. And once Rae got a new appointment as Ambassador to the UN, the special envoy role simply died. More concretely, to my knowledge there has been hardly if any at all direct support for Rohingya leadership either abroad or even within Canada – despite their remarkable progress and great merit. And there is still today no dedicated programme or effort to facilitate the resettlement of Rohingya to Canada – much less something like a tailored programme with support for Rohingya youth together with higher education and training – where Canada could really lead,

especially for Rohingya young women. Whither Canada's vaunted Feminist Foreign Policy? Neither the Rohingya nor I know.

In conclusion, yes, the Rohingya crisis goes on, and the humanitarian emergency is real and urgent, and Canada's response is... well, modest. Indeed, it has recently been announced that the budget for Rohingya assistance will be cut. So what then remains?

I believe Canada can do better – even with limited funds. And I know the Rohingya need and merit better. After this evening, I hope you will agree and help ensure that the Government of Canada reconsiders its response and takes available steps to do better.

Thank you.

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