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THE ROHINGYA:
INSIDE THE CONFLICT IN MYANMAR'S RAKHINE STATE

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. BUSH: Good morning. My name is Richard Bush. I'm Director of the Center for East Asia Policy Studies here at Brookings. It is my pleasure to welcome you to our program today, The Rohingya: Inside the Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State.

Our speaker is Azeem Ibrahim, who is the author of this book. I highly recommend it. It is very clearly argued, clearly written, and quite disturbing.

Dr. Ibrahim has his Doctorate from the University of Cambridge. He is an RAI Fellow at Mansfield College, University of Oxford, and Research Professor at the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, and a lot of other things. Finally, he jumps out of airplanes, so he's to be taken very seriously.

One of the newspaper articles that I read this year was in the New York Times, and it described an encounter between Aung San Suu Kyi and our Ambassador to Myanmar, Scott Marciel. I know Scott. He is a diplomat's diplomat. He does his job, but he does it in a non-provocative and inoffensive way.

Aung San Suu Kyi had a request of him, and that was to not use the word "Rohingya." Don't use the word. This is a bit mysterious, perplexing, but today, we have the answer to the mystery and to the perplexity. Dr. Ibrahim is going to explain this all and why we need to take it seriously.

Azeem?

MR. IBRAHIM: Thank you so much for that kind introduction, Richard. It's a great honor for me to be at this great institution.

Let me start off with a historical quote. Naturally, the common people don't want war, but it's the leaders of that country who determine policy, and it's quite a

simple matter to take the people along with you, all you have to do is tell them that they are being attacked, and it works the same in every country.

Now, as a sophisticated audience, you know that quote is from Hermann Goering, Hitler's Vice Chancellor. Today, these words may seem like the echoes of a bygone era, an era that was marked by persecution and genocide, and we instinctively feel this is something we have left behind, but how we would react to this kind of barbarism today?

Imagine we started hearing reports of a mid-sized European country where there are tensions between the majority Christian population and a minority that lives within its borders. Just like the Jews of the 1930s, this minority is different, they look different, they have a different religion, they even speak a different language, and the initial reports start off with discrimination. Bus stations refusing to sell them tickets. Boycotts of their businesses.

As time goes on, the persecution gets more and more sinister. This minority is already undereducated but then they are barred from schools and then they are barred from hospitals. Then eventually they are barred from standing for election, and then barred from even voting.

There are some in public life that start to say that only Christians of this country can be loyal citizens, and others start to say well, these people, they were never citizens at all, they were never citizens in the first place, and this narrative starts to harden into conventional wisdom.

Even the diplomats of this country start to say this minority is actually physically inferior, and this minority is underrepresented internationally, so their voice is barely heard, and their story is hardly told.

Then the regional government starts to detain them in permanent camps and doesn't allow them to work. Then the clergy, the church, starts to incite hatred against them, and that is when the problems start, which then turn into massacres.

Imagine this country has an autocratic military government and there is hope, and that hope rests in a great democratic leader, and soon this great democratic leader is released from house arrest, and at last, there is going to be change, the democrats have won, and then there is nothing.

The discrimination and the violence continue. Any hope that democracy that will bring change has no feeding. If this was a European country, we would shake our heads, we would lobby our representatives. Journalists would write shocking reports. They would ask tough questions.

There would be petitions, protests, and parliament and Congress at the U.N. and elsewhere, but this is happening today, and there is hardly any criticism. It is happening not in Europe, it is happening to the Rohingya in Myanmar.

Let me just step back and tell you how I got involved in all of this. I first heard of the Rohingya many years ago. When I tried to find out more about them, I realized there was a paucity of information about them. I knew they were a persecuted people living in a remote part of the world, and compared to other groups, they received very little attention in the media and amongst - from human rights groups and agencies.

When I went and visited the region and went to the camps, I realized why. The Rohingya really are the lowest of the low of many of the persecuted groups that you can see. There is nobody of Rohingya origin working in Silicon Valley who can say, you know, I will put $5 million of my money into a public awareness campaign. There is nobody of Rohingya origin working for CNN or the BBC that can say I am going

to make this my pet project. These people literally are the lowest of the low that you will ever come across.

They can't advocate for themselves in Myanmar let alone internationally. So soon I realized that if I wanted to read anything of substance about them, anything authoritative, I would probably have to write it myself. So, I wrote a number of op-eds in various publications trying to raise awareness of the issue, and then I made a trip. I even wrote this memo that went to parliamentarians in the U.K. and to the European parliament trying to highlight the persecution that is going on.

I then made a trip out to the region. My first trip was to Bangladesh, to the camps in Bangladesh, where there are hundreds of thousands of Rohingya. This is from the actual camps. And you can see the conditions that these people stay in are quite horrific and rudimentary.

I took testimonials from people like this, from Fatima, whose husband was killed, he got a gash on his knee from a machete and died with an infection. People like Zubeida who hasn't seen her three children for years.

I also went to Myanmar itself and visited the Rohingya villages that have been completely emptied. This is a Rohingya village that has now been completely emptied and inhabitants in internal displacement camps.

To get into the camps, you have to be smuggled, so this was my guide smuggling me into the camps, it costs about $200. And the camps, the conditions, as you can see, those are the kind of conditions that people have to live in. When it rains, it rains all the time. You are literally knee high in human sewage and garbage. There is no escape from the rain. This was my guide who smuggled me into the camps.

This is police patrolling the camps to make sure nobody gets out, and

these are sites of mass graves. This one here, for example, when one house was burned down, all nine members of one family were burned alive, the authorities literally piled them all into the back of a pick-up truck and dropped them off in the camp into a pile, and the villagers in the camp buried them in this mass grave.

I did this research. I put together this book over the last two and a half years, and I now believe that sooner or later, we will wake up to a situation similar to the scale of Rwanda in 1994.

Now some say that the word “genocide” is very far-fetched, but I want to take the next few minutes to try to explain to you what I have learned and the real risk these people are facing.

Before we do that, we have to take a step back and look at where all this animosity actually came from. Myanmar is a country of 51 million people in Southeast Asia, sandwiched between China, Laos, Thailand, and Bangladesh.

The trading links with India brought Islam to the region. Buddhism arrived about 800 A.D. Much of the history is multi-confessional with Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, all living side by side. Today, it is about 80 percent Buddhists, 8 percent Christians, and 4 percent Muslim.

Now the Rohingya are at about one million in the Rakhine District, which is in the Northwest, and some historians say their roots go back to 3000 B.C., and in Myanmar, they are the largest minority. They look different, they have darker skin, and they live today as they have always lived, principally as fishermen and farmers.

Now one of the main accusations despite the fact that these people have such strong roots in the region, is these people are actually from Burma, they are not actually from Myanmar. For example, this is a newspaper cutting that the government

does not recognize the term Rohingya – that is a manufactured term.

So one of the things I wanted to do with this book is to explore this idea of why this term is not recognized. During my research for the book, I dug up some ancient historical documents, principally from the Indian National Archive in New Delhi. This is one, for example, from 1799. One early explorer, Francis Buchanan, who referred to the Rohingya living in Arakan, in the Arakan State. Twelve years later the classical journal – so you see here the term 'Roinga' from 1799 – Twelve years later the classical journal refers to the Rohingya as well. That is 1811.

In 1815, the German Compodium of Languages also talks of the Rohingya as a distinct ethnic group. The most interesting document I came across is this one here. In 1824, the British colonized what was at that time Burma and referred to the whole region as Rohaing, and then inhabitants were referred to as Rovinga, Rohingya or Rooinga.

In 1825, the British commissioned this one individual, Charles Patton, to undertake a survey of that whole region. This is an original document that I dug up from New Delhi. You can see here, it's very clear, the original text on the left-hand side and the translation on the right, it says three-tenths of every soul is a Muslim in that region, which is the exact same proportion today, about 30,000. The peasantry spoke the language of Rohingya.

Where does this animosity come from? There is clear historical evidence these people have deep roots from multiple sources in that region, whereas you have extremists saying these people have absolutely no relation to this country at all and they are all illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, and then from the 1920s.

We have to look back at where this animosity actually started. It actually

started in World War II when the Japanese invaded Burma at that time. The Burmese nationalists, the majority, biggest population, decided to side with the Japanese invaders because they thought that would get them independence from the British much quicker, whereas the Rohingya supported the British colonial masters.

Two years later when the war ended, many of the Rohingya wanted to join East Pakistan, which was at that time Bangladesh, and that led to violence between the two groups. By 1948, Myanmar had become independent, but there was still a legacy of bad blood between the Buddhists and the Rohingya. From 1948, for about 15 years, there was quite some peace, and there was a relatively functioning democracy.

A tipping point really came in 1962 when General Ne Win organized a military coup and the country became an autocratic military dictatorship up until the 21st century. Since then, the anti-Rohingya sentiment has become very ugly.

In 1974, the regime wrote a constitution describing the Rohingya as foreigners. One of the things that General Ne Win tried to do, he tried to implement an economic plan called the Burmese Way to Socialism, which was a complete economic disaster.

And he did what almost all military dictators do, when things don't go well, you start blaming somebody else, you start blaming the enemy within, and the Rohingya were the target of choice, because they looked different and they speak a different language. So he did essentially - he started to do very similar to what many Middle Eastern leaders do when things start going wrong, they start to don the cloak of religiosity, just like Saddam did after the first Gulf War, changed the flag, started becoming more religious, and this is what he did.

He essentially started to fund monasteries, started to become much

more Buddhist, and started to create Buddhist identity with being Burmese.

In 1974, they wrote this constitution that displayed the Rohingyas all as foreigners, and violence followed. Many tried to leave during that time, and that created a huge refugee crisis.

Then the main difficulty came in 1982 with the new citizenship law of Burma, which essentially said there have been no Rohingya in the entire history of Burma. This regime continuously repeated this lie until now it is widely believed.

By 1988, six years later, there was a popular revolt which forced General Ne Win to stand down. But his regime stayed intact, stayed in power, and it became even more ethnocentric and they began to say that only Buddhists can be loyal citizens of this country.

This deadly cocktail of historical grievances and officially sanctioned religious ethnic discrimination proved murderous for the Rohingya.

By the 1990s, the generals allowed a general election, which they lost, so they ignored the results. By 1991 to 1992, there were more military attacks with 250,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh and Malaysia.

By 2012, there was a more sustained period of violence, and the last year elections, which we all saw on our TV screens, the generals competed as politicians, and elections were seriously flawed.

It was still a step in the right direction, but it was seriously flawed, because the military still controls a quarter of all the seats in parliament, there was an inaccurate voting list, and five percent of the population, including one million Rohingya, were not allowed to vote, and the military controls the most powerful ministries, the Interior Ministry and the Defense Ministry, and they have an ability to dissolve parliament

whenever they want.

Nevertheless, the elections brought Aung San Suu Kyi to power, and this heralded a new dawn, a new change. For the Rohingya, it changed nothing. One Rohingya member of parliament, former member of parliament, who was essentially forbidden to stand again, told me, “If people are in hell, Rohingya are at the bottom of hell. The Myanmar government made policy by using race, religion, nationality, and almost all Myanmar ethnic have hatred against Rohingya and hatred against Islam, and accusing collectively these people are illegal immigrants.”

The most sustained period of violence was 2012 to 2013, and this was when it really did reach really high levels of killing of the Rohingya. This is a story of untold brutality. In spring 2012, one Rakhine woman was raped and murdered, and the Rohingya were blamed for this. So the extremists – extremist Buddhists - stopped a bus and killed ten random Rohingya on the bus.

Weeks afterwards, the entire region descended into violence. Human Rights Watch reported mobs, arson, and murder. And soon local security forces also joined in the attacks, and in some areas, the mobs were actually joined by the army itself.

The state refused to help or even investigate what was going on. And President Thein Sein at the time said Rohingya should therefore be sent to a third country in order to protect them, and this is now part of the anti-Rohingya sentiment, that they should all be sent to a third country.

And this hate was fanned by the Buddhist extremists. Individuals like this, Wirathu, who described himself as a Buddhist bin Laden. The Buddhists exert extreme influence in this region. This entire region is dominated by religious organizations. The monks and monastery exert considerable influence.

Now one of the questions I get asked all the time is Buddhism, as we know, is a very peaceful religion, these are people that don't even kill insects, so how could they possibly perpetuate and flame such violence.

This is a different form of Buddhism. This is what they call Theravada Buddhism. They don't actually recognize the Dali Lama. When the Dali Lama visited Myanmar, he was actually given a cold shoulder by many of the monks.

So this form of Buddhism is very different in that they believe that in order for Buddhism to be safe, all other ideologies and ethnicities have to be kept in check and have to be kept a close eye on, and Buddhism will only thrive and be safe when all of them are kept in check.

And there are other extreme ethnocentric groups in the Rakhine District that are spreading violence. One name that continuously came up was of this individual here, Dr. Aye Maung, from the Arakan National Party. His name continuously came up with almost every person I spoke to.

Along with extreme Buddhist organizations, like the 969 Movement, the Patriotic Association of Myanmar, these organizations are responsible for almost all the religious education in that region. They act as power brokers for the big national parties, and they use that power and influence against the Rohingya.

So the main national parties like Aung San Suu Kyi's party, for example, has almost no traction in the Rakhine District. This small region is dominated just by local parties. For them to try to make some sort of headway in that region, they have to make deals with the local parties.

I even heard of a case of an organization wanting to undertake cleft lip surgeries for children in that region, but you have to get permission from the monasteries,

and when the charity told them we are going to treat everyone equally, the monasteries refused, they said if you treat the Rohingya, we don't want our children treated either.

There is a campaign to ensure that the Rohingya don't have access to health care, education, or travel, and if they want access to such facilities, they have to convert to Buddhism. And these extreme Buddhists are continuously distributing pamphlets to stop trading with the Rohingya, an echo of the Nazi race laws is quite obvious.

In October 2012, there was a new wave of violence which was much more organized and systematic. Houses and local community centers were burnt, and in one day, there was a coordinated attack in five districts when even Buddhists were killed.

One of the worse incidents was in the village of Yanti, this one here. One of the survivors told me that local police told us to go back to the village and took sticks from our hands, told us don't do anything, we will protect you, so we trusted them, but they broke that promise. Arakanese beat us - beat and killed us very easily.

Some survivors say the police opened fire on them. Amongst the dead were 28 children, 13 of them were under 5 years old, hacked to death. And in some places, the police prevented the violence and in other places the police actually participated in the violence.

So since that time, in April 2014, the U.N. Special Rapporteur to the Secretary General said there has been no improvement in the human rights situation, and there is a lack of clear action at the state and national level to address the widespread discrimination and human rights violation. No state official has ever been held to account, and Aung San Suu Kyi's party has been silent, and the result has been another refugee crisis.

Since then, the violence has occasionally flared up, like in the village of Du Chee Yar Tan, where 4,000 Rohingya have been killed, raped, arrested, or simply missing. The media attention has been very sparse as well. The regime revokes the NGO access, access to any NGOs which speak out, and this violence has left many Rohingya in refugee camps with no education, health care, or work.

There is evidence that the regime has decided to make these IDP camps permanent. They have even organized a census, and if you refuse to participate in that census, you are either detained or you are deported. The catch is if you register, you have to declare you are Bengali, and not Rohingya, therefore renouncing your own citizenship, meaning that you can actually be deported.

Today, there's 140,000 of them in camps like this with no official documentation and restrictions on travel and restrictions on family size. Hospitals refuse to treat them, and if you try to flee, the only way you can do so is through rickety boats like this, through people smugglers, who then sell them to the slave trade in Thailand and in the prawn industry.

In the first six months of 2015, 31,000 Rohingya fled such conditions. The UNHCR estimates that between October 2012 and April 2013, 13,000 arrived in Malaysia and 6,000 arrived in Thailand. Thai officials have been known to be complicit, collecting Rohingya from traffickers and transporting them to the camps to be sold.

One individual told me, "They told me I was going to work in a pineapple factory, but when I saw the fishing boats, I realized I'd been sold. I was sold, I wanted to die."

There have been moves to help them. The Indonesian Navy, for example, agreed to help the boats stuck in troubled waters. Myanmar did try to stop the

boats from leaving because so many of them were sinking, but neither action gets to the root of the problem, which is the discrimination and the denial of citizenship.

Muhammad Yunus, the Nobel Laureate who kindly wrote the introduction to my book said rejection of citizenship, denial of freedom of movement, eviction campaigns, violence against women, forced labor, expulsion from their lands and property have made the Rohingya the most persecuted minority in the world. These words have been echoed by the United Nations.

Finally, what can actually be done? First of all, this isn't a problem without a solution. The demands are very clear. You have to shut down the camps and allow the Rohingya to return home. Outsiders have to stand up to the regime, but above all, these are people that are citizens of Myanmar and have to be treated accordingly.

N some organizations will say and some diplomats I met say this is a localized problem within the borders of a sovereign state, there is nothing much we can do about it. And I would say that's wrong, because it is only outsiders that can actually make a difference. The Rohingya are never going to be a majority in their own country.

There are essentially five things that I think we can do to help. First of all, we have to change how we think about Myanmar. When we hear the words Palestine, Tibet, Kyrgyzstan, Crimea, these are countries with fundamental issues still to be resolved. We have to add Myanmar to that list.

The story of Myanmar is of a small, brave country opening up its market, opening up to democracy, hides the religious discrimination, the violence, and the massacres. That is also part of the story of Myanmar, and we can't let the government buy the silence with this good narrative that they are trying to promote. Those politicians who don't criticize it, don't set deadlines, they are failing in their duty in international law.

Secondly, we can raise the profile of the issue. Some UN agencies and NGOs are monitoring the situation, but the internal affairs of a small country – little known country – hardly captures the global imagination, global attention. Even the crisis in 2015 when they were all stuck on the boats which became headline news, even that was portrayed as a Southeast Asian migration crisis, and the cause of the crisis was barely mentioned.

This is what is needed to change. We have to put the plight of the Rohingya on the map. Journalists have to write articles about this. Photographers and newspapers must try to put this on the front page and documentaries must explain the situation.

Campaigners have to take the story to campuses, streets, and parliament. When a minority group like the Rohingya are hated so much, sometimes the only thing that is preventing mass killing is international opinion.

An organization like, for example, Queen Mary University, State Claim Initiative, have said the Rohingya are now at the final stages of genocide. This is an academic paper. This is the same as Yale University's study that said that what the Rohingya are experiencing is technically a genocide.

And this actually has received some attention. Former Prime Minister David Cameron and President Obama made some short mentions of the issues in speeches. The Dali Lama, the Pope, the U.N. Secretary General also mentioned it. There is still a long way to go.

Another thing we could do is petition politicians in Myanmar directly, because the central demand is very simple: the Rohingya were born in Myanmar, they live in Myanmar, and they have a right to citizenship in Myanmar. And we have to call

upon the government of Myanmar to grant it.

Myanmar is after all a U.N. member. Citizenship is a right, it is not a privilege. And the U.N. Convention on citizenship is very clear, that no state can render stateless people without being born within its territory.

In the short term, it is unlikely that a foreign state or international body is going to force Myanmar to change its position, but that is certainly not a reason not to start, and the pressure has to be maintained.

In the first year of election, Aung San Suu Kyi, when she became leader, when she's pressed upon the situation of the Rohingya, she gives boilerplate responses, which is simply not an appropriate way to talk about massacres that are happening in your country.

Worst - even worse - when she is talking to a home audience, she simply does not challenge the extremist narrative that the Rohingya are all foreigners. She does not even use the word "Rohingya" and refers to them as Bengali's, meaning that they can all essentially be deported. Francis Buchanan from 1799 would be totally baffled by this position.

Aung San Suu Kyi, of course, knows her political capital comes from an international reputation that she has built as a democracy icon, as a Nobel Laureate. The task of campaigners is to try to persuade her to change her position and ensure her evasiveness carries a political price.

Another thing we could do is ask our leaders and diplomats and the government to give backing to the ASEAN Initiative. The ASEAN has traditionally never got involved in internal affairs of a country, but the Rohingya issue is so serious that it abandoned its policy and demanded the Rohingya be given full rights. ASEAN

parliamentarians have put the issue of the Rohingya as a permanent item on their agenda.

Malaysia, Indonesia, and others know that the suppression of the Rohingya has created a refugee crisis which they simply cannot manage, and as long as the international community stays silent, this nod of approval, the refugees will continue to flow.

This cartoon, for example, shows what the situation was like in 2015 when the Rohingya were all stuck out in boats, which nobody wanted.

And the ASEAN demand is very simple. They want internal observers to be placed in Myanmar. And that sends a very powerful message to the next mob that wants to instigate violence, that the eyes and the ears of the world are upon you.

It is a powerful way to challenge some of the rumors and to send a strong message that your era of impunity is over.

Another thing we could do is move direct. There is only a handful of people who can have a direct impact more so than anybody else, and that is prosecutors at the ICC, which is the only body that can prosecute individuals for these kinds of crimes. Prosecutors can initiate an investigation against individuals responsible for building up this kind of hatred. They could face charges for preparing and inciting genocide and crimes against humanity.

The threat of legal action – just the threat – sends a very powerful statement that you are not immune from prosecution, and it is a wider lesson to the local Rakhine parties that domestic national politics is not going to protect you from accountability. This change must focus attention on individuals like Dr. Aye Maung, who I mentioned earlier.

So in conclusion, the story of the Rohingyas is a story that is replete with the echoes of history. When I started off with the quote that naturally, common people don't want war, but it is easy to take them along, all you have to do is tell them that they are victims and they are being attacked, I started off with the words of Hermann Goering because there is an uncanny resonance with what is happening today, and when we look back, history shows that we were right to stand up to the Nazi's, and it is obvious that we should have stood up in Rwanda in 1994.

But history shows that we now know enough about genocides and how they happen. They don't happen in a vacuum. It takes years and years to build up that kind of hatred, so we know also how to prevent them.

And the lesson I take from all of this is when internal political constraints of mass killing have all gone, the only final check on full scale genocide is usually international opinion. And I am determined that in the future we do not all say to ourselves that we should have acted much sooner.

Thank you so much for listening. (Applause)

MR. BUSH: Thank you, Azeem, for that very powerful statement. I have a couple of questions more of background and context, and then we will open it up.

First of all, you explain in your book, and I'd like you to explain for the audience, the way in which the Rohingya issue is in a way a legacy of the way the British drew borders.

MR. IBRAHIM: Yes. It was very interesting for me because when I was digging up some of the archival documents that the British had from the National Archives in New Delhi, there was a number of things that struck me. First of all, the most important thing that struck me that really surprised me was how organized the British

were when it came to colonizing some of these countries. It was absolutely astonishing.

Back in the 18th century, this entire region was just a jungle, and they sent expert civil servants down there to figure out exactly what the makeup of this region is, who is actually living there, who are the clan chiefs, who are the tribes, and what is their lineage and where did they come from before they actually sent in the colonizers.

That really explains why they were so effective, why over a quarter of the world came under the British rule, the Brits were extremely, extremely effective in colonizing a lot of these unknown kind of regions.

One of the things with the British is they were very expert, when they moved into these regions, they usually put a minority population, gave them the reins of power, so that minority population is completely reliant on the support of the British to stay in power. You can see some of that in the world today, you can see it with the Alawites in Syria, for example, that they know that if they step down, there is going to be some real trouble for them. And they did the same thing in Burma as well. They put a lot of administrators in India as well, and Burma, they put the Muslims in charge, which was a minority, and the Muslims were much better at administration.

For them, it was a complete cold calculation in terms of how to get the maximum utility in terms of focusing and establishing the colonial kind of power.

But one thing they weren't interested in – one thing the Brits weren't interested in was actually creating ethnic strife -- they were much more interested in creating an effective administration. The legacy of the Brits when drawing up borders between various countries is well known to us today. One just has to look at the Middle East and Africa, they literally drew lines between ethnic groups without giving any consideration to them at all, and many of those lines aren't recognized, whether it's in

Rakhine District, in Myanmar, or East Bangladesh, or in Afghanistan, is a classic example. You go to Afghanistan, the Durand Line is completely unknown to the Pashtos. Pashtos live on both sides, so it's completely unknown. So much of the problems do come down to the inability of the British, the colonial masters, to fully appreciate the importance of ethnicity over nationality.

You go to these regions, whether it is Burma or elsewhere, people who still identify themselves according to the tribe, or according to the clan, because that has been their identity for thousands of years, whereas these borders, colonial borders, were only drawn up by foreigners, which they simply don't recognize today and they don't intend to.

MR. BUSH: Let me ask another question about minorities more broadly. The Rohingya obviously are not the only minority in Myanmar, and there are lots of other ones, but it seems the Rohingya are a special case in the way the Burman majority deals with its minority populations.

MR. IBRAHIM: The Rohingya are the largest of the minorities. There are multiple minorities in Myanmar. And the Rohingya are also not the only Muslim minority as well. There are also other actual ethnic Burmese, minority Muslim population, who aren't discriminated against to the same extent, but almost all minorities, whether it's a Sikh – they also have a Christian population, Sikh, Hindus – they all get some sort of discrimination.

The fundamental problem with the Rohingya is they are from the Rakhine District. The Rakhine District is essentially the poorest district in Myanmar itself, and so it's already backward, it is already underdeveloped, so in a situation like this, they're looked down by the rest of the Burmese, so they are already in a situation, the

Rakhines in general, that they are being discriminated against, so in a situation like that, it is very easy to say the roots of your problem are not because of you being in Rakhine, it is basically these foreigners that look different that are the roots of all your problems.

So it is very easy to discriminate against them because they look different, they are already from an impoverished region, and you can easily make them a target of choice, which is what has happened.

MR. BUSH: Let's open it up. We will have a mike, so wait for the mike, identify yourself, and pose your question. Who would like to go first?

QUESTIONER: Hi, my name is Louie Ghandan. I'm a high school student here, a junior at the School for Ethics and Global Leadership. You talked about how many Rohingyas are refugees fleeing persecution, and given that the persecution is unlikely to end soon, in a couple of years, I was wondering if you could give us a window into the minds of many of these refugees, what is their goal? Do they want to return? Do they want to leave Myanmar and never return? Is there a country that they are specifically trying to get to? What is the make up? Are they more young men, are they families? Thank you.

MR. IBRAHIM: Great question. Thank you very much. When I was in Myanmar, actually I was offered the opportunity to join one of the boats, to actually see the boats the traffickers were using. When I saw the boats, I clearly declined; that boat was not going to get very far, it was just complete junk.

That was the situation, so many are leaving on a large scale. You saw the photo I put up, they're literally crammed in. Many of the Rohingya I spoke to, including in Bangladesh and Malaysia, they all want to go back to their country, when the situation improves, which is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future.

The majority of them did actually a makeup, there are many families, many females, many males. All of them face a very, very difficult future because countries like Malaysia, Bangladesh, Thailand, and so on, simply do not have the infrastructure or the desire to support them in any way.

So as I mentioned in my presentation, they are literally sold into the slave trade. The entirety of the Thai prawn trade is almost run on the back of the Rohingya slaves, they are literally kept as slaves in the boats. With a lot of the females, they are literally sold into prostitution and sold as domestic slaves. You see that very widespread in Thailand and Malaysia.

In terms of the numbers, there is no precise number because the actual number of Rohingya is estimated between 1.4 to 2 million, and because they are not even recognized as being citizens, there is no way of actually determining how many there are.

In the camps itself, in the camps I visited, there's about 140,000 of them, and almost everyone I came across wanted to leave one way or another, and it was just a question of trying to pay the traffickers to try to help them leave that situation.

MR. BUSH: Has UNHCR tried to get access to Rohingya in order to screen them for refugee status?

MR. IBRAHIM: As far as I am aware, when I was there, the UNHCR – only the ones that actually made it to abroad, so the ones that actually made it to Malaysia, some of them were given refugee status, through an extensive process, and then some European countries and even the United States, there's a Rohingya center in Chicago, which I visited, so some of those that made it to Thailand, Malaysia, and so on.

Obviously, the ones that are still internally displaced in the camps in

Myanmar, they are not recognized as refugees.

MR. BUSH: Okay. Lots of questions. Let's start in the back and move towards the front.

QUESTIONER: Hi. My name is Alison Gregg. I am with the Government Accountability Project. I think you have a very sound analysis in terms of situating what's going on in terms of ethnic strife, but I was surprised that you didn't talk about the role of the Sittwe deep-sea port and how clearing out the Rohingya basically gave access to the interests who were wanting to build that port for oil and gas and other mineral exploitation.

Don't you think that in addition to the five points and five things and areas of responsibility shouldn't there be a responsibility for the multinational corporations who are benefitting from that port that was only constructed after the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya, and particularly the role of not only China and India, but even U.S. companies who are benefitting? Thank you.

MR. IBRAHIM: Thank you so much, Alison. Another good question. You're absolutely right. Some of the villages I visited were completely cleansed, completely everybody was moved out, and in many cases, some of the villages were demolished, and in other cases, actual Buddhists moved in and starting occupying -- occupied the houses.

A very interesting case I came across, and this was back in 2013 or 2012, in which they moved the Rohingya into camps and then from the camps they moved them into an area which is on the coast. It was very interesting they did that because this was when the hurricane was coming, and they decided to move all the Rohingya directly into the path of the hurricane in the hope they would be wiped out. So

that's the calculation of the thinking in Sittwe.

One of the questions I get asked quite often is the role of the United States. President Obama visited Myanmar just a couple of years ago, and for any country to get a visit from the President of the United States, it is quite a big deal, and even Aung San Suu Kyi, she visited the U.S. and the U.N. recently.

I get asked what is the role of the United States. The narrative of Aung San Suu Kyi is a very attractive one, and this is what I've found speaking on this topic. It's a very attractive narrative. you have a lady here who is the daughter of one of the founding generals of Myanmar, who is one of the leaders of Myanmar. She was placed under house arrest for decades by this brutal military dictatorship. She is a Novel Laureate, Oxford educated, very beautiful, very articulate.

Now she is opening up her country to democracy, human rights, becoming an internationalist and international icon. People don't want that narrative to be contaminated when you start mentioning things like the Rohingya. People like to have their stories very, very clean. They like to have the fairy tales essentially.

You start mentioning the Rohingya, the persecution, the massacres, and she is not doing anything about it, she's silent, people just don't like that at all.

In terms of the role of the United States, the U.S. is focusing on much larger geopolitical machinations. Myanmar, even when it was a military dictatorship, was a very closed society, they were extremely suspicious of foreigners. As it opens up, one thing the U.S. is quite concerned about is it comes in the sphere of influence of China. Chinese are the biggest investors in Myanmar by far. The entire Southeast Asia has never been economically developed for that main purpose to meet Chinese insatiable demand for resources.

You go to Pakistan, as I have, you see the highways and the bridges and the ports they are building, and it is all just to meet Chinese demand, and exactly the same thing in Myanmar as well.

So there is a much larger geopolitical story here, and there's much larger economic interests as well, and then you start mentioning the Rohingya, this small minority that has been persecuted and so on, people just don't want to hear that at all. They just don't want the narrative to be contaminated, and certainly they don't want their larger geopolitical interests to be diluted in any shape or form.

MR. BUSH: As I understood the question, it is there is a connection between the treatment of the Rohingya and a specific oil and gas project. Is that the case?

MR. IBRAHIM: I have heard of that oil and gas project. I couldn't find too much information about it, if it was directly related. I can't make that claim that it is directly related to the evacuation of the Rohingya from that particular region. I couldn't find any direct correlation.

But I am aware there is considerable investment coming in from China in that region.

MR. BUSH: Question there on the aisle.

QUESTIONER: Hi, my name is Tanya Burnoff. I'm an independent consultant, but I worked in Myanmar with the Rohingya with Medecins Sans Frontieres in 2013. I had a couple of questions for you.

I wondered if you had a chance to speak with any of the Rakhine people, not necessarily the leaders, but like just the local population, and do you see working with them as part of the solution also? That is one of my questions.

Also, in 2013 and after the 2012 violence, Human Rights Watch, I think, they had so many reports, public reports. The U.N. had a lot of public reports. And somehow, it didn't feel like it had an impact. Organizations as you mentioned in your talk, organizations like Medecins Sans Frontieres and others always, I guess, planned to speak out more but were afraid to because they felt that they would get kicked out.

I just wondered from your perspective, do you think it is worth for organizations that are working there because they actually have a lot of credibility because they are working there, which is different from like Human Rights Watch, which comes in for a short period, does research, and leaves, and you can challenge some of their findings and so forth, do you think it is worth the organizations working there to gather evidence and speak out and risk the chance of being kicked out and then not be able to support the Rohingya better there?

Those are my two questions. Thanks.

MR. IBRAHIM: In terms of the local Rakhine's, I didn't speak to many of them when I was there simply because as I mentioned I had to be smuggled into the camps, the government wouldn't give me a journalist Visa to actually do so, so I couldn't jeopardize my own position to do so.

But I did speak to a number of journalists there who were quite embedded. One of the interesting things I found when I was in the capital, I spoke to a couple of Western journalists who were actually based there for some quite prominent publications.

When I asked them what is the local people's attitude, you know, whether it is in Rakhine or elsewhere about what is happening to the Rohingya, they told me essentially the local people have no idea what's going on. They hear about some of

the situations that are going on, but especially in the capital, they don't have really much of an idea in terms of the level of persecution that's going on.

All the heat is about foreigners coming into the country, you know, basically trying to create chaos, and they get kicked out. But they don't know because information is so tightly controlled or simply they don't care, they don't have much interest in that topic.

In terms of your second question about these agencies, I think that's a decision the agencies will have to make themselves. Some of them are doing great work on the ground. They would have to essentially give that up if they started to speak out against the regime and against the atrocities that are going on. They would probably have to make that decision themselves.

What I find distasteful sometimes is that when agencies and organizations really, and diplomats and politicians, who really don't have a stake in Myanmar, refuse to speak out. They refuse to speak out because of much larger kinds of interests or because, as I mentioned, they don't want this narrative to be contaminated.

This is particularly true in the U.K., which has a long history in Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi, she was at Oxford, and she was actually in the same class as many cabinet ministers from Margaret Thatcher's government, so she knows them personally, and they advocated for her for decades, and they don't want to hear about any of this stuff.

I gave a presentation at Oxford, and she's a graduate from Oxford, she received an honorary doctorate from Oxford, she is a huge icon, there are buildings named after her, and one of the former trustees of Oxford University came to my presentation and he said I had no idea about any of this stuff at all, that was going on.

There is stuff they don't know about and there is stuff that a lot of them don't want to hear about either.

MR. BUSH: A question here.

QUESTIONER: Hi, I'm Priyanka Vakil. I am a research associate at the Public International Law & Policy Group. And my question is regarding the Panglong conference that just happened, I think, about a month ago, and how former Secretary General Kofi Annan began the commission specifically in the Rakhine State, and I wanted to hear your thoughts about it because I guess this is one of the first visible ways that the international community has come in to create a commission to talk about the issues happening in the Rakhine State, and also the fact that it happened simultaneously during the Panglong conference where the Rohingya were not involved or included for obvious reasons.

So, what are your thoughts about it, especially since the composition seems to be started by a lot of international actors who again may not know -- I know one of the criticisms was they're not super aware of what is happening in Myanmar. Thank you.

MR. IBRAHIM: Thank you so much. In terms of the Panglong conference, so this was a convention that was brought together by the new government of Myanmar to end the long running civil war between multiple factions in the country. The Rohingya weren't included in that actually because they are not a violent group.

The Panglong conference was specifically for groups that are involved in violence by engaging a civil war against the regime for decades, and some of them are quite embedded.

Apart from that, it wasn't the international community. It was actually

Aung San Suu Kyi who commissioned Kofi Annan to come into the Rakhine District and give his recommendations in terms of how to solve the problem.

So I've been in touch with Kofi Annan's office to try to give them my analysis of the situation in terms of some of the confidence building measures that they should be able to undertake.

I think this is a great initiative. I think it should be welcomed. Any sort of initiative of this sort should really be welcomed.

The only issue I have is that essentially that Kofi Annan, he's been instructed very clearly not to mention any human rights violations first of all. Secondly, his commission will only make recommendations, it has no power to actually enforce anything. It's not an official commission. It has only been instigated by Aung San Suu Kyi herself, so it is at her discretion.

Thirdly, the cynic in me will say, well, look, one of the things that came about with this commission is she asked for this commission literally about a week since she made a trip to the United States, and almost all the sanctions against Myanmar were lifted, which essentially gives the U.S. no leverage at all to force the government to improve its human rights situation or any other democratic -- to enforce more irreversible democratic kind of policies.

So this could be interpreted, not that I am interpreting it, but it could be interpreted as a cynical maneuver by Aung San Suu Kyi to demonstrate to the U.S. Administration, and to demonstrate to the world, look, we are doing what we can.

Despite that, as the New York Times mentioned, she refused to use the word "Rohingya," even when pressed upon it, she refused to physically use that word "Rohingya." She referred to them as Bengali's.

Even in this commission, which she instigated, she refers to them as Muslims from Rakhine and not as Rohingya, because it is such a loaded term, which I think is quite unhelpful when you are denying an ethnic group's identity on such a large platform. I think that is quite unhelpful.

QUESTIONER: In one of your photos up there, it showed a doctor, and I think the last name started with an "A." I understood he was a member of the parliament, although he's a Rohingya. How in the world did he ever make it through education and become a member of the parliament?

I understand you say they came from Bengali, which is part of India. Was that part of the cutting up of the British empire that pushed them out? When you talk about they want them to go to another country, do they mean go back to India?

MR. IBRAHIM: The individual that I showed a picture of is actually not a Rohingya, that is Dr. Aye Maung, and he is the leader of the Arakan National Party in the Rakhine District. He was one of the individuals that was instigating the violence whose name came up constantly.

The rare Rohingya members of parliament, they were previously part of the government that was in power, but since 2010, they have all been barred from standing, and a lot of them have actually sought asylum in Canada and elsewhere. They are essentially not recognized as citizens, so there is absolutely no way they could stand for parliament again.

The educational level of the Rohingya, it really is extremely, extremely poor. Some of the camps I visited, only three percent of the children are in education. Three percent. The rest are just wandering around in the camps. The ones that are in schools, these schools are being built by the NGOs, from the U.N., from Norway and

Sweden and so on.

The situation is literally the fourth grade students teach the third grade students, the third grade students teach the second grade students. That is how they operate. There is literally almost nobody amongst them with a college level education.

There was one lady I remember who had a college education which was killed, and it was such huge news because she was like the only one amongst hundreds who had actually been to college.

They really are, as I mentioned, the lowest of the low, there are hardly any amongst them that are educated, and there are hardly any amongst them that have any professional kind of training in any capacity, so they are completely unable to advocate for themselves.

MR. BUSH: A couple of points of historical clarification. Bengal was part of British India. Bengal was part of independent India until 1971. There was a war with. No --

MR. IBRAHIM: It was part of Pakistan.

MR. BUSH: It was East Pakistan. Sorry for that. In 1971, it split off as a separate country, Bangladesh. The way the British drew the boundary between the Burma part of British India and the India part of British India sort of put the Rakhine State or what became the Rakhine State with Burma rather than with the Bengali part of British India. Did I get that right?

MR. IBRAHIM: Yes. The important thing to remember, irrespective of the borders and irrespective of the countries or how the British drew the map, is that these people have been there in that region for thousands of years.

One of the thing I tried to provide in my book is cast iron proof, at least it

goes back to 1799. Most ethnicities will never have documentation to prove they are from that region, but I've tried to provide multiple sources to show these people have actually been in that particular region, irrespective of what you may call it, whether it is part of Bangladesh, part of Rakhine, part of Burma, part of the kingdom of Myanmar, irrespective of that is that region, they have been there and they have a right to be there.

MR. BUSH: Let's go to the gentleman on the aisle.

QUESTIONER: Thank you, sir. Thank you for your talk. My name is Crawford. I'm an intern at the US-ASEAN Business Council.

One other explanation I've heard for --

MR. BUSH: Could you hold the mike a little closer to your mouth, please?

QUESTIONER: One other explanation I've heard for the general lack of silence is that Aung San Suu Kyi is relatively uncertain about how much control she has over the country at this point. The military still has sufficient power. If you construct this narrative where the military has built up this hatred, and increasing information about the direness of the situation could disturb the military and could wreak political conflict in the country, I think that has been mentioned as a reason why she wants to proceed slowly.

Do you buy that, and if so, could you comment on if there were to be greater awareness about this, do you think the general populous would swing towards Aung San Suu Kyi or swing towards the military, or how do you think the populace would play a role in that conversation?

MR. IBRAHIM: Excellent question. That's one of the things I've heard from a number of people about Aung San Suu Kyi, her power is so fragile that there is simply nothing she can do at this particular stage.

As I made it clear in my presentation, the military still have -- even though there have been elections, they still have considerable power. They are essentially running the show. They control the most powerful ministries, they have the ability to dissolve parliament whenever they want. They are essentially calling the shots.

If Aung San Suu Kyi steps out of line, then her power will be diluted quite considerably. And I understand that, you know, I'm a realist as well. However, as a Nobel Laureate, as an international peace icon, when there is genocide and massacres going on in your country, and you are completely silent or you try to brush over it or if you say well, look, both sides are to blame, that is the moral equivalent to me of saying both sides in the Holocaust are to blame, both the Jews and the Nazi's, or apartheid in South Africa, or both sides were to blame for what happened. That to me is moral bankruptcy, and it is simply not good enough for you to be in that position irrespective of whether it would dilute your power or not. That is my interpretation.

MR. BUSH: The woman in the back row.

QUESTIONER: Hi. My name is Katherine Southwick. I'm an independent researcher, and I've done some work on the Rohingya. I'm sorry I missed the presentation because I was delayed, but and I apologize.

I just wanted to know if you could speak a little bit more about the impact of the label of genocide on the discourse and the politics in how the international setting but also domestically.

I have been somewhat surprised and disappointed that I have not seen U.N. agencies that have a mandate to look into these questions, like the Special Representative on genocide or the responsibility to portect, who didn't really say anything about this situation, and given that a number of academic institutions have been doing

extensive studies, finding strong evidence of genocide in this case, it is striking to me that it is not penetrating or seems to be having much impact. Thanks.

MR. IBRAHIM: The term “genocide” has two different interpretations. There is an academic definition and there is a legal definition. Most of the academic institutions and experts have looked at the term “genocide,” I mentioned some of them in my presentation, Yale University, Queen Mary University, and a number of other academics and institutions, a number of professors I interviewed for my book, almost half a dozen of them, experts in international law, very prominent individuals. They all basically said this meets the classic definition of a “genocide.”

There is also a legal definition, which is a little bit different, and that is really at the discretion of member states of the U.N. For example, Rwanda wasn’t that classified as a genocide – because what that means is it automatically triggers a particular course of action, which at that time the U.S. simply didn’t want to do in 1994, so Rwanda was never classified as an actual genocide.

I describe the situation that the Rohingya are facing as a slow motion genocide. But let me just read to you very quickly the definition that Queen Mary University put. They basically said there are five stages to a genocide.

Genocides do not happen in a vacuum, it doesn’t happen overnight. We think we woke up to an event that was happening overnight. It takes decades upon decades for the dehumanization process to occur. It takes decades upon decades to do that, for the animosity to build up, then there is usually a trigger that has it.

The first stage is usually stigmatization of an entire population, so in the case of the Rohingyas, it was when they were denied citizenship, they were completely stigmatized. The second stage is harassment, discrimination in jobs, and boycotts of

their businesses, religious persecution, and then it's isolation, isolation when they are herded off to camps and then they are completely cut off from the rest of society.

The fourth stage is systematic weakening, they have all their identities removed, they are given white cards that they have to show at all times, they can't travel, they can't move, they can't have children, they can't get married without a license. They can't vote. They can't do anything essentially, and the fifth stage is usually mass annihilation.

I believe the situation of what is happening in Myanmar is completion of almost all five of the stages, and what is happening is a slow motion genocide that is going on. That is the description I give in my book.

But I also believe it will only take a trigger, a small trigger now, for it to descend into a mass killing, to large scale massacres. We have seen a taste of those in 2012 and 2013, but to have it on a much larger scale, I think, it really is just going to take a trigger to do that.

MR. BUSH: Right here.

QUESTIONER: Hi. My name is Kate Flicker, and I'm also a high school student at the School for Ethics and Global Leadership. I was just wondering, in terms of pursuing legal action for the Rohingya under the ICC, Myanmar is actually not a signatory country under the ICC. Although certain exceptions do exist regarding the jurisdiction, it would be extremely difficult to pursue a legal case.

My question is even if there was a legal case that was pursued under the ICC or perhaps the ICJ, how would that benefit the Rohingya in the end?

MR. IBRAHIM: You're absolutely right. One of the things the International Criminal Court can't do unless you are a signatory to the Rome statute or

unless you refer yourself, a country refers itself to be investigated. What the ICC can do, and I actually spoke to -- one of my friends works at ICC. They can initiate an investigation where they are actually taking the necessary legal action against the individual, they can initiate an investigation.

I think that would be a very positive course of action. Simply because the government of Myanmar actually reacts very well to pressure, they actually react unlike a lot of other governments that engage in this kind of behavior.

As soon as there is something going on in the country and there is international pressure from journalists and activists and so on, they actually react quite quickly. I think any sort of an investigation initiated by the ICC against particular individuals who initiate violence would certainly have quite a strong deterrent effect, and essentially that is the logic behind it.

I don't anticipate the ICC -- they have no mandate, to actually undertake a prosecution of these individuals. They have no mandate to do that. They can initiate an investigation and highlight what is actually going on in the country. I think that would actually be quite effective, and there have been a number of precedents for that.

MR. BUSH: Over here.

QUESTIONER: Hello. Thank you for your presentation. I am here at Brookings. In your field research, did you come across any evidence to substantiate neighboring countries' claims that the Rohingya have ties to terrorism? They cite many reasons why they don't want to take the Rohingya, but that seems to be one of the ones.

MR. IBRAHIM: This is one of the main accusations made against the Rohingya, that these people are terrorists, they have designs on the state of Myanmar. It was very interesting, during the rise of ISIS in Syria, that is one of the things that the

government of Myanmar tried to promote, that these people are actually ISIS sympathizers.

During my research, I saw absolutely no evidence at all they were engaged in any sort of violent activity, simply because these people are so disenfranchised, they probably don't have access to anything that can be used for terrorist purposes.

I think they also know that they would be essentially wiped out if they started engaging in a violent campaign, then that would give the government of Myanmar, the military regime, the exact justification that they need for a much larger and more brutal repressive clampdown.

During my visit to the camps in Bangladesh, I did hear, and I only heard it from one source, I did hear that there were some extremist groups that were trying to penetrate the camps in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, there is one group from Pakistan called Lashkar-e-Toiba, and I heard -- once again, it is not confirmed -- that they were trying to penetrate some of the camps to try to encourage the Rohingya to get involved in some sort of armed struggle. They didn't receive much traction at all, didn't receive much sympathy.

I think the Rohingya know they have absolutely zero ability to actually do it and they have zero effect, it would be completely counterproductive. In terms of actual violence, no evidence at all for any of that at all.

MR. BUSH: Other questions? Yes?

QUESTIONER: Hi, my name is Chelsea Brenner, I work at the U.S. State Department in the Office of International Religious Freedom. Thank you very much for your presentation and for your book.

I have two questions. Depending on when your research was conducted, this may or may not have come up, but if you could speak about conversations you had related to the citizenship verification process, the pilot program under USDP, and what is currently going on.

And then also, we are well aware of the restrictions on their ability to exercise their religious freedom rights, with the violence, the mosques that were damaged, inabilities to either renovate them or rebuild them, but if you could talk about specific examples of religious freedom rights violations that you encountered in your research, that would be very helpful. Thank you.

MR. IBRAHIM: In terms of the citizenship law, I'm aware there were a number of initiatives that were initiated not just by the U.S. Government but also by the European Union in terms of trying to reintegrate the Rohingya into citizenship.

The main problem, as I mentioned in my presentation, is the 1982 citizenship law which has to be reversed. I am also aware this can't happen overnight, it can't happen suddenly. One of the things I mentioned to Kofi Annan's team is there has to be a number of confidence building measures before something like this can happen because the prejudice is so now inbred in society, so deep in society, that a sudden change like this will probably lead to mass riots.

I recommended a number of confidence building measures, freedom of movement, freedom of having children, without having to get a license. Right now, they are restricted, that before they can get married, they need to get a license, and they can only have two children, and they don't have the ability or access to go get education.

So some of those measures to try to ease the situation before the citizenship law is actually looked at in its entirety.

In terms of religious persecution, even during my trips, I seen there were a number of areas that were completely closed off, where all the mosques and schools had actually been burned down, simply because they didn't allow them, the Buddhist extremists simply didn't want them.

One of the areas I couldn't go to, and there was an entire village which had a school, and a high school, a school and a mosque, and so on. It was completely burned down. I was told by my guide there is no way they would let you into that.

In many cases, extreme Buddhist organizations, they would only allow the Rohingya, even the ones in the most desperate situations, access to health care, to a hospital, if they actually convert on the spot. That is the most blatant example of religious prosecution, religious discrimination.

MR. BUSH: Yes, sir?

QUESTIONER: What in the geopolitics of that part of the world keep two Muslim states, Malaysia and Indonesia, from taking a strong position about this?

MR. IBRAHIM: Both of these countries, like Malaysia -- Indonesia is the most populous Muslim country in the world, it's the biggest Muslim country in the world, and Malaysia. Both of these countries have taken dozens, thousands of refugees, in the hundreds of thousands most recently, and there is only a certain amount they can absorb.

It is a question I get asked often, why don't these countries step in and take more refugees. This is exactly what the government of Myanmar want, they want all the Rohingya to leave and go into a third country, and that is not getting the crux of the problem.

As I mentioned, these people have been here for thousands of years,

and they deserve to remain where they are from. It is not the responsibility of any other country to take them in. It is the responsibility of the international community to ensure that the persecution stops and these people are full citizens of their own country.

Malaysia has got many of its own problems. There is only so much they can do, so much they can absorb.

Another factor, as I met some of the Rohingya in Pakistan and Malaysia and so on, these people really are -- I have said this a number of times, they really are the lowest of the low. There is literally very little interest in their well-being, in the kind of jobs they have and the kind of ghettos they create wherever they go. They really have absolutely nothing. There is not much interest in them.

Bangladesh took hundreds of thousands of these refugees and they created camps for them. They built camps for them. Even recently, the government of Bangladesh has turned their back on them and wants them to go back. The camps in Bangladesh are almost just as bad as the ones in Myanmar itself.

But the government of Bangladesh, it is not a wealthy country, it simply can't cater for them. It can't provide for them, and there's also a lot of animosity locally in areas like Cox Bazar and so on, where the refugees are located, that they are coming and taking local jobs. The local jobs are just manual labor jobs, but they are taking local jobs, which is creating tension between them and local populations.

But the responsibility is on the government of Myanmar to reverse the discrimination, and it is not the responsibility of any other country to take in the refugees or try to solve the refugee crisis.

QUESTIONER: (Inaudible)

MR. IBRAHIM: As I mentioned, the ASEAN countries, all these countries

are members of the ASEAN initiative. They have tried to put as much pressure as possible on the government of Myanmar to take the initiative to stop the flow of refugees, but the refugees continue to flow.

I don't think there is much they could actually do. I'm not sure what initiatives they could actually undertake to force the government even more, when the government is hell bent on trying to expel some of these people.

MR. BUSH: It does seem that if anybody has an incentive to put pressure on the government of Myanmar, it is these countries that don't have – are the countries of first asylum.

MR. IBRAHIM: Yes.

MR. BUSH: One last question. OK. In the back.

QUESTIONER: Just to end on a more positive trajectory, what do you think is the way forward in terms of where advocacy, effective advocacy for the Rohingya could go? Is it through this U.N. commission? Is it through increased international attention? And so forth.

MR. IBRAHIM: I think raising awareness is absolutely critical. As I've said, I've given this presentation a number of times. And people have absolutely no idea. Prominent people have told me I had absolutely no idea about the Rohingya, I never heard the word, had no idea this was going on.

A key factor is raising awareness, it is critical. It is also critical to put pressure on the government of Myanmar. And they do react to pressure. They react quite effectively to pressure, unlike many other governments around the globe.

Unfortunately, the U.S. has lifted all sanctions on Myanmar, so it has very little leverage in terms of trying to force the government of Myanmar to reverse some

of its discriminatory policies.

But I think the critical thing is just to try to raise awareness as best you can. As I said, in many cases, that is the final check on mass killing, international opinion, of journalists and advocates, and human rights advocates, and campaigners that are raising the issue continuously. And that's sometimes the only check on a mass killing. I think that is very important.

MR. BUSH: I think you have raised awareness here, so thank you very much. (Applause)

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