



Written Testimony of

Most Reverend Joe S. Vásquez  
Bishop of Austin, Texas  
Chair, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration

on

“The Rohingya Crisis: U.S. Response to the Tragedy in Burma”  
House Foreign Affairs Committee

2172 Rayburn  
9 a.m., Thursday, October 5, 2017

Thank you Chairman Royce and Ranking Member Engel for this opportunity to provide this written testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee regarding the forced migration crisis in Burma. I submit it as the Chairman of the Committee on Migration of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) so that we may join our voices with those of other Catholic leaders and others deeply concerned about the fate of these forgotten people.

Our concern about these refugees fleeing from Burma, known as Rohingya, is rooted in Catholic social teaching on migration. Catholics believe that all human beings are created in God's image, including migrants and refugees of all backgrounds. Pope Pius XII reaffirmed the Catholic Church's commitment to care for pilgrims, aliens, exiles, refugees, and migrants of every kind, affirming that all peoples have the right to conditions worthy of human life and, if these conditions are not present, the right to migrate.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, USCCB's Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS) advocates to address the root causes for such poor conditions while also protecting those forced to migrate. In our joint pastoral letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope, A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration*, January 23, 2003, the U.S. and Mexican Catholic bishops call for nations to work toward a "globalization of solidarity." In that document we affirm that "Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection. Those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community" No. 99. We also state that, "because of their heightened vulnerability, unaccompanied minors require special consideration and care" No. 82.

As one of the U.S. resettlement agencies, USCCB/MRS has resettled thousands of refugees from Burma, including many Christians fleeing religious and ethnic persecution and also many Muslims fleeing the same, such as these from Rakhine State. In Appendix 1 attached to this testimony, we provide profiles of two such unaccompanied refugee minors who were resettled by us this year. The level of vulnerability experienced by these two children is similar to many others who are resettled to the United States. Refugees who need resettlement are frequently the most vulnerable, who have a difficult time surviving in neighboring host countries. They illustrate why it is so important for the U.S. to have a robust resettlement program – it saves lives. It is for the sake of children like these and other vulnerable refugees needing resettlement that we are disturbed and deeply disappointed by the recent setting of the Presidential Determination (PD) of refugee admissions for FY2018 at 45,000, the lowest PD in the history of the program. We urge this committee to advocate with a unified, bi-partisan voice to admit at least 75,000 refugees to the U.S. next year. We can and must do better.

We have been in particularly close contact with Catholic leaders and NGOs in Burma for the last several years regarding the protracted refugee situation in the region. We have made two solidarity/assessment trips and have written [a report](#) and [an update](#) about the complex dynamics in which there are the hopes of a new democracy after decades of military rule, but also where there are continued protection challenges facing several hundred thousand forcibly displaced people inside Burma and also those from Burma who are seeking refuge in neighboring countries.

We turn now to the grim situation of those forced to flee from Rakhine State, Burma. Forced out by what the Burmese military<sup>2</sup> reportedly have referred to as a "clearance campaign," an estimated 501,000 people

---

<sup>1</sup> Pope Pius XII, *Exsul Familia* (On the Spiritual Care of Migrants), September, 1952.

<sup>2</sup> "Top Myanmar General defends military's 'clearance operations'," *South China Morning Post*, 9/17/, 2017, available at <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/2111530/top-myanmar-general-defends-militarys-clearance-operations>

have fled from Rakhine State, Burma, to Bangladesh since August 25, 2017.<sup>3</sup> Most are women and children, and the most vulnerable are newborns, pregnant women, and the elderly. Many have only makeshift shelters at best, are struggling to find the mere basics of life, and are trying to avoid debilitating and life-threatening water-borne and air-borne diseases. They are all in our thoughts and prayers as the Catholic Church joins with others to mobilize in response to the horrific situation.

One frustration for many has been that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the human rights icon and de facto democratic leader of Burma, has not been publicly very vocal about the plight of these Muslims from Rakhine State. Also, Christians and others have long been oppressed by the army of Burma in Kachin and Shan States. Despite these serious unresolved political and human rights situations, there continues to be strong efforts at positive change by the recently elected democratic government, the first after over 50 years of military rule. While the Burmese military still maintains substantial political and economic control, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has managed to lead the effort on the so-called Panglong Process, whereby Burma's ethnic groups have an ongoing process for seeking to build a federal, democratic system in which all of Burma's people have access to shared governance and shared resources. As we shed light on the human rights tragedies in Burma, we urge continued U.S. support to resolve these critical situations and to support the democratically elected government in addressing these situations while also supporting their broader efforts to build a new, democratic, inclusive Burma.

Before turning to recommendations, we share three sets of statements from other Catholic leaders. The first two are from Pope Francis and Cardinal Patrick D'Rozario, the Archbishop of Dhaka, Bangladesh, and they are particularly tied to this recent exodus from Rakhine State. The third, by Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, Archbishop of Yangon, speaking in February 2017, concerns other atrocities in Rakhine State, and concludes with remarks that continue to resonate with what we consider sound advice.

**Pope Francis Statement.** "Sad news has reached us of the persecution of our Rohingya brothers and sisters, a religious minority. I would like to express my full closeness to them — and let all of us ask the Lord to save them, and to raise up men and women of good will to help them, who shall give them their full rights."<sup>4</sup>

**Cardinal Patrick D'Rozario, Archbishop of Dhaka, Bangladesh.** "It is very good that Bangladesh has opened its doors for the Rohingya, who have suffered all kinds of atrocities."<sup>5</sup>

"Bangladesh has not only opened the borders but also opened their hearts with love and compassion to the children, women, old, the sick, the wounded and even the thousands who are unborn... Bangladesh out of her poverty is sharing her richness of human values..."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, "Rohingya Emergency," 9/28/2017, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/rohingya-emergency.html>

<sup>4</sup>"Pope Francis: Appeal for End to Violence Against Rohingya," *Vatican Radio*, August 27, 2017, available at [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2017/08/27/pope\\_francis\\_appeal\\_for\\_end\\_to\\_violence\\_against\\_rohingya/1333091](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2017/08/27/pope_francis_appeal_for_end_to_violence_against_rohingya/1333091)

<sup>5</sup> Nirmala Carvalho, "Catholic Church in Asia Responds to Rohingya Refugee Crisis," *Crux*, September 15, 2017, available at <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2017/09/15/catholic-church-asia-responds-rohingya-refugee-crisis/>

<sup>6</sup> "Cardinal D'Rozario: The Church can be a Field Hospital," *Vatican Radio*, September 28, 2017, available at [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2017/09/28/card\\_d'rozario\\_the\\_church\\_can\\_be\\_a\\_field\\_hospital\\_/1339551](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2017/09/28/card_d'rozario_the_church_can_be_a_field_hospital_/1339551)

**Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, Archbishop of Yangon, Myanmar.** “Myanmar needs the world community to extend all support to the present democratic government with clear understanding that violence against any population is not acceptable. I offer my prayers and solidarity to everyone in Myanmar – and especially at this time in Rakhine State, Kachin State and northern Shan State – who is bereaved, vulnerable, fearful, homeless, hungry, sick and to all the orphans and widows, the victims of rape and torture....Let us work together to end violence and terror in our country, and to build a Myanmar where every man, woman and child of every race and religion born on Myanmar soil is recognised both as our fellow citizen and as our brother and sister in humanity.”<sup>7</sup>

**Recommendations:**

We condemn the horrific violence toward the group known as the Rohingya, and strongly urge the United States government:

To work with the Burma government and the international community

- to continue stabilizing the situation in Rakhine State and in Bangladesh,
- to provide needed protection and humanitarian assistance for those displaced in Burma and those who have fled to Bangladesh,
- to work toward safe, humane, and voluntary durable solutions for those who are displaced, including third country resettlement when appropriate;
- to work for long term, communal peace and address the root causes for displacement and flight, including the widespread statelessness of the Rohingya and the lack of integral human development in Rakhine State.

To support Bangladesh and other host countries in the region and to urge other nations to also share the responsibility of protecting those fleeing from Rakhine State.

---

<sup>7</sup>Nirmala Carvalho, “Myanmar Cardinal Warns “Merchants of Hatred” are Stirring,” *CruX*, 2/19/17, available at <https://cruXnow.com/global-church/2017/02/19/myanmar-cardinal-warns-merchants-hatred-stirring/>

## Appendix 1

Many have been forced to flee from Rakhine State, Burma, in the past. The USCCB, through its Migration and Refugee Services, works with local Catholic Charities around the country to welcome these refugees. Among them are unaccompanied refugee children such as these two described below (the names are changed to protect the children's privacy):

**Mia.** Mia is a 13-year-old girl born in Malaysia, the country to which her parents had fled. After her parents divorced, her mother got married and the stepfather sexually abused Mia. Although her mother was aware of the incidents, she failed to prevent and protect the child. The mother was arrested for committing child neglect and the child lived temporarily with her biological father. Later, the child moved to a protection home as she feared being re-victimized by her mother, who was released from prison. Reunification couldn't be pursued as the mother was found to be abusive. Resettlement was the only option to help the child live a bright life. She was referred to the U.S. refugee admissions program and was resettled through the USCCB on 7/21/2017.

**Mio.** Mio is a 14-year-old boy who lost both parents. The child fled to Malaysia in 2012 to escape forced labor. He had been forced by Burmese soldiers to do road construction for about six months before fleeing Myanmar. He lived for a short period of time with his uncle where he faced physical abuse. He then moved to live at a refugee organization office. While living in Malaysia, he was stopped and harassed by local police authorities several times and was told that if he remained there, he would continuously face harassment and/or arrest. Reunification with his grandmother couldn't be pursued as the minor did not have any kind of contact information and attempts to find her had not been successful. Since he could not continue living in Malaysia due to these unfavorable conditions, the only available option was resettlement in a third country. He was accepted by the U.S. refugee admissions program and was resettled through the USCCB foster care, arriving on 9/19/2017.