

Press Releases: Acting Assistant Secretary Simon Henshaw and Department Spokesperson Heather Nauert on Recent Visit to Burma and Bangladesh

Special Briefing
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MS NAUERT: Hi, everybody. How are you?

QUESTION: Hello.

MS NAUERT: Good to see you. Nice to be back with you again. I brought a visitor and a colleague of mine here today. Simon, have you ever briefed up here before?

MR HENSHAW: Only once, and that was a while ago.

MS NAUERT: Just once before? Okay, well, welcome back. Actually, Simon is going to do the whole briefing today; he's just not aware of this.

MR HENSHAW: (Laughter.) I don't think so.

MS NAUERT: No? No, you don't think so. Okay. Well, as many of you may know already, Population, Refugees, and Migration, our bureau here at the State Department, which is led by our Acting Assistant Secretary Simon Henshaw, went to Burma and also to Bangladesh last week. Simon led a delegation there. I was fortunate enough to be able to join them. He was there from the 29th of October to the 4th of November, in which he had a series of meetings, was able to assess the situation on the ground, speak with some government officials, also aid groups, some human rights workers who are taking a lot of reports from the Rohingya refugees.

And so Simon is going to give a readout and take a few of your questions, and then, sorry, Simon, I'll take over the briefing after that.

MR HENSHAW: Okay, good.

MS NAUERT: So you're off the hook. Okay. Let me get this out of your way. Go right ahead.

MR HENSHAW: Thank you very much, Heather. Good afternoon. I recently led a delegation to Burma and Bangladesh to see firsthand what is happening with regard to the humanitarian situation and the impact of our assistance. The delegation included Deputy Assistant Secretary Scott Busby of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor; Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Tom Vajda of the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs; and Office Director Patricia Mahoney of the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Also, thanks to Heather. As she mentioned, she joined us for the final leg of the trip to visit Cox's Bazar, Dhaka, and refugee camps in Bangladesh.

In Burma, we met with government officials and Rohingya and ethnic Rakhine community leaders, including a visit to a camp for people who have been internally displaced inside Burma. We urge the Burmese Government to act to restore the rule of law, protect local populations, investigate alleged human rights abuses and violations, and to hold those responsible accountable. We welcome the government's plans for repatriation and encourage them to implement these plans as soon as possible, emphasizing the importance of creating safe conditions that would allow refugees to voluntarily return to their villages and land.

We then traveled to Bangladesh where we met with government officials, international organizations, and NGOs, and visited refugee camps near Cox's

Bazar. What we saw in the camps was shocking. The scale of the refugee crisis is immense: more than 600,000 displaced from their homes since August 25th. The conditions are tough. People are suffering. Many refugees told us, through tears, accounts of seeing their villages burned, their relatives killed in front of them. It was tough to take. Some recalled being shot as they fled. Despite the trauma, many expressed a strong desire to return to their homes in Burma, provided their safety, security, and rights could be guaranteed.

I want to underline our appreciation for the generosity and commitment from the Government of and people of Bangladesh and our humanitarian partners, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, the Organization for Migration, the UN World Food Program, and the United Nations Children's Fund, who are all working together to provide emergency assistance to these individuals. But the situation requires a lot more work. The U.S. was one of the first to pledge funds to support international organizations in the crisis, and our commitment has been followed by generous contributions from other donors. However, more is needed.

The U.S. remains committed to addressing the needs of those impacted by the crisis and calls on others, including in the region, to join us in our response.

I'd be happy to take a few questions. Thank you.

QUESTION: I just –

MS NAUERT: Matt, would you like to start?

QUESTION: Yes, please. Thank you. Is what you saw enough to make a determination on whether this is – meets a legal – legal definition of ethnic cleansing or of – or similar?

MR HENSHAW: That's not my job to make that determination. That would be –

QUESTION: No, no, no. I'm not asking if you made it. Have you seen enough to make that determination – to make a determination?

MR HENSHAW: I'm not an expert. What I saw was shocking. I saw evidence of atrocities.

QUESTION: But it doesn't rise up to the level of ethnic cleansing?

MR HENSHAW: That's not my call to make. The department will review –

QUESTION: You must have some sort of –

MR HENSHAW: – this and other – my reports and others, and will make a determination.

Mm-hmm?

MS NAUERT: Arshad?

QUESTION: PRM was, I think, supposed to submit reports in September on the costs associated with admitting refugees to the United States versus housing them in third countries closer to their original country. Have you yet completed those reports? If so, when do you expect them to become public, if ever? If you haven't completed them, do you have a sense of when they're going to be out?

MR HENSHAW: My understanding is that work on those reports continues. I don't have a sense of when they'll be done, and I don't know whether our intention is to make them public or not.

QUESTION: And can you give us any sense of what you've found so far?

MR HENSHAW: No, I can't. Sorry.

QUESTION: Why not?

MS NAUERT: Let's try to stick to this important issue of Burma and Rohingya. I'm sure a lot of people have questions about that. (Inaudible.)

QUESTION: Have you been granted full access, or there are still parts of the region you can't go to? And the second point is: Have you got some assurances on when the program to repatriate Rohingyas will be implemented?

MR HENSHAW: So for the first part of your question, full access has not been granted to press and international NGOs in northern Rakhine State. We urge the government to do so. And the second question was?

QUESTION: About guarantees on the implementation of the repatriation program.

MR HENSHAW: The Burmese Government appear committed to start a repatriation program, but it was in the early stages. And it's very important to us that that program not only creates safe conditions so that refugees will want to return voluntarily, but also assure that refugees go back to their villages and land, that their houses be restored in the areas where the villages were burned, and that political reconciliation take place.

MS NAUERT: Dave.

QUESTION: The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, as you probably know, has said that in addition to being allowed home they should be granted full Burmese citizenship. Is that a view that the United States shares?

MR HENSHAW: We believe that the Annan recommendations should be implemented, and they include a path to citizenship.

MS NAUERT: Conor, and then we're at the final question.

QUESTION: Simon, thanks for being here. Given your meetings with Burmese officials, is it your view – the department's view – that it's better to work with the Burmese Government to find a solution to this, or do you believe

that more pressure, including sanctions, are appropriate at this time?

MR HENSHAW: We absolutely believe that we have to work with the Burmese Government to find a solution here. We support the democratic transition process in Burma and want to work with the civilian government in making sure that policies are implemented to bring about a solution.

QUESTION: So the bill currently being considered in the Senate for more sanctions on the government, is that – would that be an impediment, then?

MR HENSHAW: No. We have a lot of options as we move ahead, and we'll continually evaluate the situation and decide what steps to take.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Simon has to get going, everybody. Thank you so much. If you have additional questions, I can certainly take them and direct them to Simon and his team as well.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Are you sure you don't want to stay?

MR HENSHAW: Thank you very much.

MS NAUERT: Simon, do you want to take over the rest of the briefing?
(Laughter.) Thank you.

MR HENSHAW: Good luck.

MS NAUERT: Thank you so much.

MS NAUERT: On that note, I just want to express my gratitude to our entire team there and our embassy in Dhaka. That was my first experience as a State Department employee spending time at one of our embassies. I'd been there as a journalist, as a regular civilian before, but actually going there as an employee and spending time with our people and the situations, the difficult circumstances that they sometimes serve in, was really very eye-opening. So I wanted to just give my heartfelt thanks to Ambassador Bernicat and her entire team for taking such good care of us while we were over there.

And I just have to say, seeing some of the refugees who had crossed the border firsthand – we went to the border one day, saw the area where they had walked from Bangladesh over to Burma.[\[1\]](#) The day that we were there, we were told about 2,000 crossed the border earlier in the day. There were aid groups that then picked up some of those who were considered or appeared to be the most physically vulnerable. They were then brought to a smaller refugee camp – I believe it held a few thousand people – and I watched as some of these women, elderly men, and children climbed off the bus, and literally the most vulnerable. Some of them had no shoes, just a pot where they would put water once they could get water. There was a very, very small child, maybe a month old or so, who looked close to death; elderly men and women who had to be literally carried off the bus.

And we watched as our colleagues, our partners at the International Committee

of the Red Cross, took incredible care of them with such compassion. And I think that baby ended up being okay. They were able to get that baby over to a makeshift hospital of sorts. But I just wanted to – you all know this as journalists from having been in the field and seen these things firsthand, but how important it was to have seen what those people are going through and then have had the chance to hear from the Government of Bangladesh about the importance that they put themselves on taking care of their neighbors.

And they really have done that; they have opened their hearts; they have opened their wallets and allowed – imagine that, 600,000, more than 600,000 to cross their borders, putting them in camps. It's not where these people want to be, of course, in their camps. They'd rather be home, but at least they're safe for now. So it was an incredible opportunity to see what is really going on and to work with my colleagues in the embassy. So I just wanted to pass that along to you all.

[\[1\]](#) Burma over to Bangladesh.

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