

Press Releases: Briefing by Deputy Assistant Secretary for Southeast Asia W. Patrick Murphy on Burma

Special Briefing
W. Patrick Murphy

Special Representative and Policy Coordinator for Burma

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MS NAUERT: Thank you, all of you, for coming today. I know a lot of you are interested in the issue of Burma and what is happening with the Rohingya there. We have talked about it a lot from this podium about our level of engagement at the State Department on that issue. We have been proud to have announced \$104 million in 2017 that has gone to both internally and externally displaced people. We've talked quite a bit about the good work that the Government of Bangladesh has done in accepting so many of those refugees.

So because of that, because of the focus on this and I know your intense interest, I brought our Deputy Assistant Secretary Patrick Murphy. He was on the Hill earlier today briefing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee with assessment of our U.S. policy toward Burma. That included the geopolitical, economic, and humanitarian considerations. He's going to join us for just a short briefing. He has a very tight schedule today. He'll take a couple of your questions, and then I'll handle the rest of the briefing from there.

So with that, I'd like to welcome Deputy Assistant Secretary Murphy. Thank you so much for coming on in today, sir. Go right ahead.

MR MURPHY: Thank you very much, Heather. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Indeed, Burma has preoccupied us quite significantly since August 25th when armed attacks took place on security forces, and the ensuing humanitarian crisis is of epic proportions. Many of the challenges in Burma have preoccupied us for decades, but this current crisis has been quite devastating. I had a very good morning joined by colleagues from our refugee bureau and USAID with the members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, as we did a couple of weeks ago with their counterparts on the House side of Congress.

Let me give you a few top lines of our discussion today, where we are with regards to our actions addressing the crisis, and then take your questions. Burma's long struggle defied authoritarian rule to transition to a democratic society. The terrible Rakhine State crisis has exacerbated longstanding suffering of Rohingya and other populations, and threatens this peaceful transition as do other challenges the elected civilian authority inherited just 16 months ago. Our efforts seek to end the violence, support the displaced and their return home, and address the conditions that sparked this colossal population movement. We also want accountability for atrocities.

As we announced here last night, we have identified new and ongoing actions to hold responsible those who have committed violence, including the following measures, and let me share them with you: suspending travel waivers for military leaders; assessing existing authorities to consider options to target individuals responsible for atrocities; finding that all units and officers involved in operations in northern Rakhine State are ineligible for U.S. assistance programs; rescinding invitations for Burmese security leaders to travel to U.S.-sponsored programs; maintaining a longstanding arms embargo; consulting on accountability options at the United Nations, the Human Rights Council, and other venues; and pressing for access for the UN Fact-Finding Mission – a mission that we helped support the establishment of.

There is also a need to address long-term causes of instability in Rakhine State. We support Burma in implementing the recommendations of the Kofi Annan Rakhine Advisory Commission to take on underdevelopment, lack of services, access to justice, and a citizenship process for all people in Rakhine State.

At the same time, Burma's overall success is very important for the peoples of Burma, for the region, indeed, for U.S. national interests. We will continue to work with the democratically-elected civilian leadership, Burma's diverse populations and other stakeholders inside the country, and the region on this crisis and other daunting challenges in the post-military era of that country.

Today, as I said, we testified before the Senate and several weeks ago before the House. There have been many questions there about how best to describe the appalling treatment of the Rohingya. I want to be very clear: We are not shying away from the use of any appropriate terminology. We have a deliberative process to examine facts and a policy to support the pursuit of additional information to make such determinations, thus our support, for example, for the UN Fact-Finding Mission.

In the meantime, as Secretary of State Tillerson said, the violence has been characterized by many as ethnic cleansing. Our Ambassador to the United Nations Haley has said that action – actions appear to be a brutal, sustained campaign to cleanse the country of an ethnic minority.

There is no question in our minds that atrocities have been committed, and we will work with the international community and Burmese stakeholders to pursue all means available to hold accountable those responsible for these acts.

Thank you. With that, I'll take a few questions.

MS NAUERT: Thanks. We'll start with Josh Lederman from AP.

QUESTION: Thank you for being here. You mentioned the considerations about ethnic cleansing terminology. Are you also considering whether the terms "crimes against humanity" or "genocide" are appropriate in this case?

MR MURPHY: I refer in general terms to any terminology to best describe this human tragedy, disaster, and collective set of atrocities. There are a variety of terms. Some of this is legal in assessing the best terminology, so all options are on the table on how best to describe this.

In the meantime, I want to emphasize we're not waiting for any determination on what best to call it to take actions. We see that atrocities have been committed. Accountability is necessary to both end the violence, ensure that responsibility is taken for actions and acts that have been committed, and to forestall future violence in this complicated part of the country.

MS NAUERT: Warren from Reuters.

QUESTION: So if the U.S. Government does decide to use the words "crimes against humanity" or "genocide," does that cause you to have to take certain policy steps? I remember during the debate over Darfur several years ago, there was a debate about whether to use the term "genocide." The U.S. Government eventually did, but I don't think it kind of precipitated necessary policy action.

MR MURPHY: I'm actually not the expert on it. I think there are some legal issues involved with what obligations there might be with any particular determination. What I can say as a matter of policy, we've assessed that atrocities have been committed and we must pursue accountability. And to do so we're working with members of the international community, but equally as important stakeholders inside the country. And I want to emphasize here that there are many stakeholders when it comes to perpetuating violence and taking responsibility to end it. There's the government, the armed forces, local authorities in Rakhine State, and the general population across Burma; all of them have some responsibilities to contribute to ending the violence, helping reveal all of the facts necessary for accountability going forward.

MS NAUERT: Nike, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: And this has to be our last question. Thanks.

QUESTION: Sure. Just to follow up on Warren's question, does the determination of ethnic cleansing give you authorization for new sanctions? And separately, do you know when is the last time Secretary Tillerson called Aung San Suu Kyi? Did they ever talk after October 12th?

MR MURPHY: Listen, I've – over the course of my career, sadly – have encountered many humanitarian crises of a very serious nature around the world, and I understand the frustrations and the emotions in trying to describe them with the strongest terms possible. What I have offered for you,

what we've seen inside Rakhine State, is a collection of serious atrocities. There's no question about that. There has been violence. There have been many individuals and entities contributing to that violence. We don't have all the facts. Security forces have responsibility and they have responded to the initial attacks in August in a disproportionate manner. They also have a responsibility to protect civilians, and we assess they have had some shortcomings.

There are other contributors to violence, including Rohingya militants, local vigilantes, and the like. Our effort now is to stop the violence and to pursue accountability, so the terminology is really not a factor for us. We know that violence has been committed and acts associated with atrocities have been undertaken, and we are pursuing and encouraging voices in the international community and inside Burma to provide the information necessary to come about with the measures leading to accountability. We view that, I think, as our most important priority.

MS NAUERT: Thank you.

QUESTION: Can I have just a follow-up on –

MS NAUERT: We've got to go.

QUESTION: On one thing? Just a really quick follow-up on –

MS NAUERT: Any questions I – Said, any questions, I can collect them and get them for you later. Okay?

MR MURPHY: Thank you very much.

MS NAUERT: And I neglected to say you're East Asia and Pacific Affairs, so.

MR MURPHY: Great. Thank you very much, Heather. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

MS NAUERT: Thank you, sir. Thank you. Great to see you, and thank you, everybody.

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