

Press Releases: Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Southeast Asia Patrick Murphy on the Situation in Burma

Special Briefing
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MS NAUERT: All right, thank you very much. Good afternoon, everyone, and thanks so much for joining us for today's call on the situation in Burma. I know there's a lot of interest in this subject. Today we're joined by Patrick Murphy, who is the deputy assistant secretary of state for Southeast Asia in the Bureau of EAP, East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Today's call will be on the record. It will be embargoed until the conclusion of the call. And with that, I will turn it over to Deputy Assistant Secretary Murphy. Great to see you again.

MR MURPHY: Thank you very much, Heather, and good afternoon to all. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to talk to you today a little bit about Burma, a country that has great importance for the United States. With regards to the situation in northern Rakhine State, we continue to be very focused on a couple of key objectives. First and foremost, restoring humanitarian assistance so that those in need can be assisted by the international community and by Burmese authorities. That restoration of access would also allow accurate assessments of those needs. This is a complicated part of the country, and more specifically, a complicated part of Rakhine State itself, and there are some knowns about actual needs and conditions.

We're very keen to see access restored for the media as well so that journalists can help tell us a more accurate picture of developments there – again, a very complicated part of the country. We continue to condemn attacks of a variety of nature – attacks on security forces; attacks on civilians; attacks by civilians – and we're very concerned about the sustained allegations of abuses being committed that is resulting in the displacement

of many people. We're urging all parties to take steps to calm tensions. And on a parallel basis, for authorities and partners of the Burmese authorities to continue to address the underlying challenges that are behind the most recent eruption of violence.

There have been a few developments since Heather had an opportunity to talk with you all yesterday. UN and related agencies are getting a better assessment of those people who have crossed the border from Burma into Bangladesh, and indeed, it looks like numbers are even higher than has been discussed in the last few days. So the movement since August 25th is quite significant, and we don't have any reason to doubt, in fact, that the movements are probably well over 200,000 people.

What is less well known are the numbers of internally displaced persons, IDPs, and that would encompass a variety of populations – not just the Rohingya, but ethnic Rakhine and other minorities who habitate inside Rakhine State.

We continue ongoing discussions, primarily through our ambassador, Ambassador Scot Marciel, and his team in Rangoon, with the government – both the civilian authorities and military authorities. We're also discussing with other donors and partners, the Red Cross entities, primarily focused on a humanitarian operation to restore a presence and assistance for humanitarian needs in northern Rakhine State.

We continue ongoing discussions with neighboring countries, including Bangladesh, which is among several countries in the region who have hosted Rohingya over many, many years, and we're quite grateful for that hospitality and that safe haven.

With that, please, I'd like to answer any questions that you have.

MS NAUERT: Okay, go ahead. And with that, we'll take your first question.

OPERATOR: Thank you. And for questions, you may queue up by pressing *1. Once again, *1. And first in queue is Dave Clark with AFP. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Oh, hi. Thanks for taking this call. Obviously, the Burma Government is a recent convert to partially elected rule. Who is responsible for security in Rakhine? Obviously, the government, but is it under military command? Is it under command of the civilian government? And who should be held responsible for any security force massacres there or any failure to protect the civilians from non-security force attack?

MR MURPHY: Thank you for that question, Dave. I think you pointed to one of the complexities of Burma. Well, in the bigger picture we are very appreciative of the fact that the country's undergone a transition to elected civilian government – in fact, the first civilian government in half a century. This represents the country's best opportunity for progress in several generations. The reality is that that elected government inherited a constitution which accords the armed forces of Burma considerable authorities. And among those authorities is a preeminent role in northern

Rakhine State.

So our discussions are both with the elected civilian government, which has overall responsibility for the country, but as well with military and other security force leaders. And our messaging is quite consistent. There needs to be a responsible reaction to the attacks on security forces that began this crisis on August 25th. Security forces, in fact, need to be there to protect civilian populations and to address the threats posed to the governing structure. At the same time, they have a responsibility to carry out those activities in accordance with rule of law and international human rights.

This is a series of messages that we carry both to the civilian government and to the security leaders there.

MS NAUERT: Okay, next question please.

OPERATOR: Thank you very much. The next question is from Matthew Pennington with the Associated Press. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hello, Patrick, and thanks for doing this call. Do you feel that the U.S. has much leverage with the Burmese authorities, particularly with the military in this situation? Because there's been a lot of international condemnation, but it seems that the flood of Rohingya from the country continues, and the violence continues. And would the U.S. consider re-imposing sanctions on some entities in Burma, such as the military, for implication in rights abuses?

MR MURPHY: Matt, I don't think we have approached the relationship with Burma in terms of leverage. It is, in fact, a partnership. And since the transition to elected government, we have a dialogue and a conversation that is very comprehensive. And as partners, we are looking to help this transition to democracy succeed. As I mentioned earlier, this is the best opportunity in generations for Burma to get on the right track, and the new government inherited a host of enormous challenges – national reconciliation and peace that has eluded Burma since independence in the 1940s, communal conflicts, and the particular case of Rakhine State. This is a longstanding problem, many, many years, and the new government has been grappling with it from day one.

So our approach as a partnership is to help them build their capacity to have the tools to address the underlying problems. Now, that doesn't mean that we withhold our concerns and our criticism when warranted. And indeed, now we are calling for a cessation of the violence and tensions that tend to lead to violence.

In terms of sanctions, our sanctions were in place for the better part of two decades, primarily designed to facilitate the transition to democracy and improve human rights. The decision to lift the vast majority of those sanctions was based on the successful election and the early actions of the new government to address human rights concerns. That doesn't mean they have resolved all of their work; a lot of room for improvement. But as partners now, we can encourage, we can facilitate, we can assist. And even in a very

complex situation like Rakhine State, that's what we're trying to do.

There are some shortcomings, the Government of Burma and the armed forces, and we are pointing them out, and focused on the very immediate needs, and that is primarily ending tensions, restoring humanitarian access, and beginning this difficult process of the underlying challenges that lead to these tensions.

MS NAUERT: Okay, thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Thank you. That will come from David Brunnstrom with Reuters. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes, thank you very much. You've mentioned the security forces should be doing more. Do you think that Aung San Suu Kyi, as a civilian leader, should be speaking out more, expressing concerns about the treatment of the Muslim minority? Many thanks.

MR MURPHY: I think, first and foremost, it's important to point out that Burma is a very diverse country with hundreds of ethnic groups, a long, complicated history both to achieve independence and to find its way in the modern era. There is discrimination against many ethnic minorities. And in Rakhine State, the plight of the Rohingya in particular is one of the greatest human tragedies anywhere in the region. They're not the only ethnic minority facing challenges even in that area. I mentioned earlier the ethnic Rakhine, themselves a minority population, suffering from underdevelopment and limited rights over many, many years. But the Rohingya certainly stand out, and the fact that over a million of them inside the country have been devoid of basic rights for generations has been a longstanding issue and a longstanding concern for us in the United States. It needs to be addressed.

I think in positive terms what the Government of Burma has done is to acknowledge and accept the fact that they need to address the challenges in Rakhine State. It was a year ago that Aung San Suu Kyi and her government established the Rakhine Commission under the leadership of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. On August 25th, the very same day of these attacks which appeared to be timed with this development, the Rakhine Commission released its final report and recommendations.

Aung San Suu Kyi and her government have embraced those recommendations, and now we encourage the full implementation. It won't be easy. There are over 80 recommendations, but many of them address the underlying conditions in Rakhine State that cause so much friction and challenge. We want to work with the government, ensure they are focused on this task, have the capacity to address it. But as I say, it was Aung San Suu Kyi who established the commission and in turn has embraced their recommendations. That's encouraging. That's a process that we want to be behind and partner with.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Thank you. That will come from Kylie Atwood with CBS News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you for doing this. I am curious. You mentioned that you have been talking with the government about the shortcomings of their army and security forces. Could you detail any of those shortcomings that you've actually pointed out thus far? And I just want to clarify that at this point you do not think that Muslims are being targeted specifically; you think it's anyone in the Rakhine region? Thank you.

MR MURPHY: Thank you, Kylie. We have a very robust dialogue with the Government of Burma that covers many facets of our relationship and the challenges in the country. In fact, we have a formal partnership. I joined Ambassador Marciel a year ago November to launch that partnership in the capital Nay Pyi Taw, and some 22 Burmese ministries were represented at the table – both civilians and military entities, and the government and the military acknowledged many of their shortcomings and challenges.

I think when we talk about the shortcomings of the armed forces in particular, this is one that the government has identified. The constitution affords the armed forces of Burma, also known as the Tatmadaw, considerable authorities: control over three key ministries, 25 percent of parliamentary seats, one of the vice president slots. And it's the government that hopes and aspires to some constitutional reform so that democracy can be fully consolidated. That's an inspirational but an admirable one, and to the extent that we can, we want to support it.

Inside Rakhine State, this is a particular case where the security forces have the majority of authorities. Now, I've been there. I've been to northern Rakhine State. This is a challenge for the new government. As I mentioned earlier, there has been longstanding discrimination against ethnic minorities throughout Burma, and it's very, very much present in the case inside Rakhine State for a number of different populations. This is a country that has challenges with religion, but many religions operate and are active in the country, not just the majority Buddhist, but there's substantial Christian organizations, and Muslims are present in virtually every major town and city across the country, plus some other religions like Hinduism and animus groups.

Primarily this is an ethnic issue in Rakhine State. The Rohingya have been treated separately; they're not acknowledged as a recognized nationality, and as I mentioned earlier have been devoid of basic rights for many, many years.

The commission on Rakhine State that the government established and has now produced recommendations gets at a lot of these basic rights like the path to citizenship, efforts to improve development. This is one of the most impoverished part of a country that is already quite poor. The government has embraced these recommendations, and now it's all about implementation. And I think that's what we want to be focused on.

MS NAUERT: And the last question, please.

OPERATOR: Thank you. That will come from Michelle Kosinski with CNN. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you. I understand that this is a longstanding conversation and a long process, but in this latest escalation and the violence that we see out there, in these multiple conversations that the U.S. has had with that government, how receptive are they to doing something more quickly?

And oh, there was something else I was going to ask you. I'm doing too many things at once here. I guess just about their level of receptivity to these conversations, and have they committed to doing anything in the short term even if it's just allowing more access to, say, journalists there? Thanks.

MR MURPHY: I will reiterate in addition to the challenges here being longstanding, they're very complex and there are some new, troubling dimensions. On August 25th, the attacks on security forces were quite substantial, quite coordinated. This is relatively new. And there were casualties. That creates a lot of concern, a lot of fear, and a requirement for security forces to respond.

Obviously, in the response is where we're focused. It needs to be in accordance with rule of law and respect for human rights and in ways that protect local populations. With the movement of large number of people both across the border and internally it's quite clear that they are fearful of their security. So what we are doing with the government is not only seeking instant and very urgent reaccess for humanitarian assistance and the media but also efforts to calm tensions, that security forces act responsibly, and indeed that civilians act responsibly, because another complex, new dimension is there are local militia among local populations who are attacking civilians that adds to this cauldron and hotspot nature of northern Rakhine state.

We are finding the discussions with the government to be productive. Naturally, when humanitarian access and media access is restored we'll be able to say those discussions have produced results. But they are productive, they are ongoing, and we are identifying very willing partners within the government who understand the situation and indeed would like to see access restored for humanitarian organizations, for the media, and efforts to calm tensions.

That's our immediate focus. As I also noted, on a parallel basis it's not too early to start with implementing the recommendations of the Annan commission. Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Thanks, everyone, for joining us, and thank you, DAS Murphy, for your expertise. The embargo has now been lifted, and have a great weekend. As a reminder, that was on the record. Thank you.

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