“Towards Durable Solutions: Addressing Humanitarian Challenges in Bangladesh and Myanmar”

Panel Discussion

DATE
Wednesday, January 12, 2022 at 9:00 a.m. EST

FEATURING
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Elizabeth Hoffman: Thank you so much, Congressman Chabot, for your very important remarks and for the important work that you’re doing on Capitol Hill with respect to Burma. I know that the Burmese people are very grateful for your advocacy.

My name is Ms. Elizabeth Hoffman. I’m the director for government relations and fellow here at CSIS, and it’s my pleasure to moderate the remainder of this panel.

I’d like to start by introducing Dan Sullivan, who will give some remarks, followed by K’nyaw. Dan is the deputy director for Africa, Asia, and the Middle East at Refugees International, an independent humanitarian and nonprofit organization. He focuses on Myanmar, Sudan, South Sudan, and other areas affected by mass displacement. Prior to his work at Refugees International, he was a senior policy analyst and director for policy and government relations with United to End Genocide.

I will introduce K’nyaw after Dan’s remarks. So, please, over to you, Dan.

Daniel P. Sullivan: Thank you, Elizabeth, and thank you to CSIS’s Humanitarian Agenda for hosting this. Also, thank you to Congressman Chabot and to K’nyaw Paw, both who are longtime champions for the people of Myanmar whether in Congress or at the frontlines of advocacy. And I want to thank everyone for tuning in for this very, very timely and important event as we come upon the one-year anniversary of the attempted coup by the Myanmar military.

I want to talk briefly about the – to highlight the situation in Myanmar with a focus on the humanitarian situation, and then briefly on a separate but very much related situation of the Rohingya in Bangladesh.

But first, just as quick way of introduction, my organization, Refugees International, is an independent advocacy group that promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. In my work with Refugees International and prior, I’ve had the opportunity to travel to various places where people displaced from Myanmar have fled. And that’s both in internally displaced camps in Rakhine State and Kachin State, and several trips to Bangladesh to speak with Rohingya refugees. My comments today are informed by that experience as well as recent conversations with humanitarian workers and civil society actors in the region.

Myanmar today is facing what UN experts have described as a multidimensional crisis. So that is to say there - it’s a political crisis, an economic crisis, a health crisis, humanitarian, and human rights.

Congressman Chabot mentioned some of the recent massacres that have happened. These atrocities have been a hallmark of what the junta has done prior and especially since the – since the coup. They amount to – they’re very
serious human rights violations that amount to crimes against humanity. You also have over 1,400 civilians who have been killed as a result of the coup, hundreds of thousands who have been newly forcibly displaced. And as Congressman Chabot mentioned, we went from 1 million people estimated in need of humanitarian aid, to 3 million in the first months following the coup, to now more than 14 million as we look into 2022.

I think it’s, you know, important to note, though, that all of these multidimensional crises contribute to the humanitarian situation, but it’s not just that the humanitarian crisis is a – is a fallout from the coup. The military has taken direct actions to block aid from getting to various areas.

I spoke to a humanitarian worker based in Kachin who said the junta has very much impeded aid provision anywhere they can. This raises obvious concerns with how humanitarians can provide aid to those in need and is a major warning sign for working through the junta. Rather, you know, humanitarians need to learn – try to find ways to work through credible third parties like the Red Cross and UNHCR.

So that’s the dire picture of where we are looking into 2022. So how do we get to what the title of this event is, “Towards Durable Solutions”? Well, I’d suggest three levels of action: one, international pressure; two, steps taken to immediately mitigate humanitarian suffering; and three, continued support for the people who have already fled Myanmar and sought refuge elsewhere.

On the first one, you know, there’s been – there’s a need for the United States and other countries to support the people of Myanmar who continue to protest and resist by taking away the resources that the military has to continue its oppression. So that can be done in three kind of main ways. One is making sure that there is – there are increased targeted sanctions, working with other countries around the world including but not beholden to ASEAN countries on the military, military-owned enterprises including oil and gas revenues. Second, that there’s a global arms embargo put forward, as has been suggested by the UN General Assembly. And then, third, for accountability – supporting accountability.

Refugees International has long been pushing for recognition of the crimes that this military – the same military – committed against the Rohingya in 2017 for what they are, which is genocide. And this is important not just for the legitimacy of calling what the evidence overwhelmingly points to, but also for other groups in Myanmar who are suffering from crimes against humanity to show a strong signal that atrocity crimes will be held accountable.
You'll note that in this first level of action, a lot of this echoes what Congressman Chabot said because a lot of it is contained in the BURMA Act. And so, certainly, you know, would love – recommend and love to see that that be passed quickly.

The second level of action is on mitigating immediate suffering. There are hundreds of thousands of people who are within the distance of borders reachable through cross-border aid, but that hasn’t happened. Particularly in Thailand along the Thai-Myanmar border, there’s a well-developed network of civil society that can promote that, you know, and that’s something that K’nyaw Paw may speak to a little bit more in a moment. But there’s also a need for countries like Thailand, China, and India to uphold their international standards and not force refugees back.

The third and last course of action is to maintain support for the people who have already been displaced. This includes tens of thousands of people from Myanmar who are in Thailand and Malaysia, and it includes the million Rohingya who remain in Bangladesh.

And so just briefly on Bangladesh, I traveled there before the 2017 mass influx of Rohingya refugees and wrote a report that was titled “Safe But Not Secure.” And that is just as relevant, if not more so, today, where the Rohingya who are in Bangladesh have found refuge, but they’re not safe. They are facing increasing security risks within the camps and increasing restrictions by Bangladeshi authorities. And just in recent days we’ve seen the destruction of hundreds of shops and markets and informal education centers, a fire where barbed wire that was put up by authorities hindered people’s ability to escape. And we see thousands of people being moved to an island in the Bay of Bengal, despite serious questions about voluntariness.

So that – you know, Bangladesh deserves a lot of credit for providing refuge and for providing vaccines for the Rohingya, but there’s a lot more they can do and should do and be pushed to do to provide access to education, livelihood opportunities, and freedom of movement.

A final suggestion is along the lines of the traditional durable solutions: the need for third-country resettlement. This is important to be a part of the solution to the Rohingya crisis, but also we’ll see that other people from Myanmar will continue to need opportunities for asylum as the dire consequences of this coup continue to play out.

Thank you.

Ms. Hoffman:  
Thank you so much, Dan, for your comments.
We now turn to K’nyaw. She’s the general secretary for the Karen Women’s Organization, an indigenous women’s organization working to serve and protect the most vulnerable in their community. KWO promotes women's leadership, gender sensitivity, and community ownership to reach the goal of all communities having gender equality, the protection and promotion of indigenous people’s rights, human rights, and justice in Thailand and Burma.

Please, over to you, K’nyaw, for your opening remarks.

Naw K’nyaw Paw:

Thank you very much for the opportunity to share humanitarian situation in Burma, particularly in the Karen area and to discuss about durable solution.

Even before the coup, as well as the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, there was over 90,000 refugees living in camps in Thailand and many more not living in camps and not recognized as refugees. There was already many thousands of IDPs, as well as the Burma army had been expanding their military control into the ethnic areas for many years. Currently, we have over 100,000 internally displaced peoples in the Karen area alone.

And even before the coup, as we all know, that across Burma and also in the Karen areas, there are countless acts of violence and human rights abuses against the Karen people, and during the recent national cease-fire period, the Burma army greatly increased its military presence in the Karen areas. Burma army road construction, land confiscations increased and also this has caused more conflict. They committed human rights abuses and war crime, but they were not held accountable. And we have raised these problems many times, but we felt like no one have listened to us or no one paid attention to how dangerous the Burma army was.

And also, the Burma army refused to call – like, refused all calls from the peaceful protest by the Karen villagers, local leaders, even including the KNU to leave their territories or demilitarize in the villages area. And in fact, after 2012, many of the international countries started to support Burma army and give them money, trainings, equipment, and those things are now being used against us. And right after the coup, the Burma army launched air attacks in the Karen State in March, the first in almost 30 years. And the air strike continued for six consecutive days, more than 20 civilian dead, and schools and hospital were destroyed by the air attacks, and over 3,000 people fled to Thailand at that time. And also, at that time, 90,000 villagers became displaced. Now we see new airstrike in our land with very sophisticated weapons and planes, and air attacks, it’s – there’s also air attacks in other parts of Karen areas, as well as in other ethnic areas in Chin and in the Karen area.
Just last night, a hospital was airstruck by the Burma army for the second time within a week. In addition to that, there is continued mortar shelling of villages and constant flyovers by planes and drones. So therefore, families are forced to flee, to hide in the forests and, if they’re lucky, to find a cave. So my people are on constant alerts, afraid and unable to return home. And Burma army soldiers, when they entered the villages, they loot it for rice, money, motorbike, farm equipment, anything, and after that they lay down the landmines in their villages, and even in the kitchen and also in the farmlands. They have literally detained hundreds of villagers. They use them as guards through the area or as a human shield. On the ground, there has been fighting between the Burma army, the Karen soldiers, the People’s Defense Force, on a daily basis. So villagers are continue on hiding.

My organization, Karen Women’s Organization, together with other community-based organizations, are helping most of the IDPs and refugees that fled to Thailand, and this is not done without a problem. Access to IDPs for delivery of humanitarian assistance, like food and supply, is a big challenge. We must tread very carefully. The Burma army posts are everywhere. They stop you. They shoot your boats, the truck, motorbike. They arrest the people traveling with supplies or hurt them and even kill them. And along the Thai-Burma border, the Thai authorities also not very cooperative. Anyway, like, because of our strong network and we work with local people and our experience over 20 years of helping other people, we can find ways to help people on the ground. But, of course, it’s slower and it’s not as smooth as we want – it should be.

In March 2021, over 3,000 people crossed to Thailand for their safety and they were pushed back to Burma by the Thai army, and also, last month in December, over 5,000 people fled again to the Thai side and most of them are now forced to return to Burma, and many more became IDPs. So we have to, like, try to help both refugees and IDPs with limitations by the Thai army as well as the Burma army.

When we try to send humanitarian assistance to these IDPs, it is often blocked or difficult. So, it would be better if Thailand allow IDPs to cross over to Thai side and get temporary shelter. It also would be much easier and safer and more efficient to provide humanitarian assistance to people who are collected together in the camps, instead of spreading out in the forest along the border.

We also – when we talk about the recent refugees that fled to Thai side or become internally displaced people, we also need to keep in mind all of the refugees who have been living in the closed camps for 30 years along the Thai border. Now the refugees receive less than $10 per month to buy food
for one adult, and we know that it is impossible to survive on that. But they are also not allowed to leave the camps to find work or to earn income.

So I think in the short term we really want the U.S. government to provide direct funding to the local community-based organizations so they can deliver emergency humanitarian aid cross-border in a low-profile way. And also, because there are so many people that are still in need of the support – to so many of them it’s the only way to reach them through the cross-border – we also would like to ask the U.S. government to help influence the Thai government to allow refugees to stay on the Thai soil until the situation in the homeland is better and people are feeling safe to return; as well as to ask the Thai government to allow humanitarian agency to access even a small number of refugees who have crossed to Thailand to be allowed to stay in a couple of temporary camps because it’s hard to get to help those people if they are not in a camp; and of course, to allow the cross-border aids to flow so that we will be able to help those who are in the internally displaced people camp. And we would like the governments to increase the part of the food aid to the refugees in the Thai border to $30 per month so that refugees will have enough and can live in dignity and to also – country government to encourage the Thai government to allow refugees to leave the camps, to work to earn incomes, and also to be able to have access to Thai education and health care in Thailand.

Of course, in the long term, we need to bring down this military dictatorship and end this coup because they are the main cause of humanitarian crisis and they are the main cause for the refugees to flee to the neighboring countries or people become internally displaced. And the international community can support us – you know? – by stop arming the military – stop funding the military, deny legitimacy to the military, ensure justice and accountability, and provide political and humanitarian support to the people of Burma.

We are making – I mean, the people of Burma, we are making huge sacrifice to resist military rules. We do not buy goods and services from the military companies. And a lot of people boycott, you know? They don’t buy lottery ticket or pay electricity bills to the military. So these are having an impact on the military. There’s continued peaceful protest every day, and local people’s local defense force have taken arms against the military regime, and the ethnic resistance movement groups are fighting the military regime as well. The pressure from the people is having an effect. And of course, the people of Burma, we win. We will win our freedom. But we need international community. They must – they can and they must do more to support us because international companies are the ones who provide arms, and equipment, and funds to the Burma army. And we know that Western countries have already brought into several run of sanctions, but the
international community has much more leverage it can use to weaken the military and support our struggle for human rights and democracy. So we asked international to bring in a new round of targeted sanctions because the military we reduced their even – to reduce the military revenue and also to reduce the capacity to operate and purchase new military equipment.

And particularly, we really, really want the U.S. government to place sanctions on the Myanmar oil and gas enterprise, which is also providing the single largest source of foreign revenue to the military regime. Governments around the world, they need to provide – to apply economic pressure and arm embargos. And more countries need to support international justice mechanism, like the ICC, who are also prosecuting the Burmese military. And much more is needed both political and humanitarian for the people in Burma, as well as to resist the military rules.

So in conclusion, I just would like to emphasize that. We would like – change will come from the people inside the country, but international community can play an important role to support us. The international community and companies are the one who are sustaining the military, keep them going. So we need international community to reject the military and instead choose to support the people. And this is what we need to be successful in bringing down the dictatorship and for us to establish genuine federal unity in Burma. And we need the U.S., to take maximal action against the military regime. Thank you very much.

Ms. Hoffman: Thank you, Dan and K’nyaw, for that comprehensive overview, although rather bleak. I want to start by asking both of you a question. You know, Dan, in your report that was released in October of 2021, which I commend to you all if you haven’t seen it on the Refugees International website, and K’nyaw, you just alluded to this as well, you both argue for increased economic and diplomatic pressure on the junta. Some argue that economic – further economic and diplomatic pressure would simply drive the junta further into China’s sphere of influence. Do you agree with this assessment? And could you explain why or why not? Dan, would you like to start off?

Mr. Sullivan: Sure. Yeah, I mean, I don’t agree with that assessment. I mean, I think it harkens back to similar conversations that were happening before the coup that prevented a stronger stance against what happened to the Rohingya, which is a genocide. And so I think the military coup – I think everyone kind of knew their true colors, and that was really shown with the coup. I think that, you know, if the coup kind of – the military showed that it is definitely leaning towards China and not towards the United States. And I don’t think that there’s, you know, small things that the U.S. does to hold back pressure is going to turn that military back over to wanting to work with the U.S.
And then, to K’nyaw’s point, and she can – she can fill this in better than I – but I think just, you know, the people of Myanmar, they’re not looking at China, if China is going to be supporting the military. So I think it’s important for the U.S. and others to show solidarity with the people of Myanmar. And then the final thing I’ll say is that it’s not a set thing that China wants the military to be in charge. They’re trying to play both sides and see where things – how things play out. So, yeah, I don’t think that there’s a reason that the U.S. wanting to not push the military closer to China is a reason not to put pressure on them.

Ms. Hoffman: K’nyaw.

Ms. Paw: Yes. I also think that China, because of their investment, they do need stability, you know? Under the military dictatorship, under this coup, you know, the people will fight in every way. So it will not create stability in Burma, and you will not have the economic – you cannot invest in countries that are having conflicts. And also I think, as Dan mentioned, China is playing, you know. And they are the one also who are like creating – how do you say that – supporting different groups in Burma. So I think it’s very important that the U.S. government, as a democratic government, not to compare – you know - themselves to – with the Chinese government, because China at the end, they will also – of course, they will need the stability. But also they may also play, and to see who they will support, so they can benefit from this conflict.

Ms. Hoffman: Thank you. And I should add, before we turn to the next question, that if anybody in our audience would like to ask a question there is a Q&A function at the bottom of your screen. And please feel free to type a question for either Dan or K’nyaw, and I will try to get to as many as possible in the – in the short amount of time that we have.

K’nyaw, I want to turn back to you and ask, you know, armed conflict – as you pointed out, armed conflict and displacement is not a new phenomenon for the ethnic region since the coup in 2021. Even during the 10 years of political opening in Myanmar, the relative freedom and opening experienced in major urban areas was not realized in many of the ethnic areas. Has the nature of the conflict in the ethnic areas changed since the coup? And if so, could you explain how? And, Dan, feel free to jump in after K’nyaw, if you’d like.

Ms. Paw: Actually, if you think about the Burma army operation in the north and in the west of Burma before the coup, the operation against the Rohingya and the nature of the Burma army attacks are the same, the abuses, the threats that they use are the same. But after the coup, I would say that it spread out more into the other ethnic areas, such as in the Karen, in the state, in the Chin as
well as down to many of the current areas, where there was a lot of big fighting for years. So since now it’s across ethnic area, there is more displacements and, you know, people livelihood and security are disturbed by the Burma army. And under the – I see that under the SAC they’re more cruel and you can see that those people who got arrested, they’ve been tortured to death. And I can’t even, you know, watch the image of the people that have been tortured.

So I would say that they’re even bolder in killing and torturing the people after the coup. I think – again, I think this is linked to the – how do you call it – the impunity that they enjoyed, because no one hold them accountable. Of course not in Burma, but international community is very weak in holding the Burma army accountable to the abuses they commit. So we really need international community to support – you know, to refer the situation to ICC, and also to support the current, like, ICC case, and more country need to come out and speak out, you know, in support of accountability, and support the victims in Burma, and to hold the Burma army accountable.

Mr. Sullivan: Yeah. And I would just echo that. I mean - I think it’s a lot of the same tactics and brutality that the junta has used for years but just intensified, and in areas where it hadn’t been for a number of years. And obviously the increased displacement and humanitarian situation we see as a result of that.

But the one other thing I would point out in terms of the ethnic dynamics in Myanmar since the coup is previous to the coup there was – a lot of other groups were listening to the military about the denials of abuse against the Rohingya. And since the coup, you’ve seen a lot more solidarity amongst other ethnic groups, recognizing that, yes, this – the military very likely has done the same things that they’re now doing to other groups, and which they have done to ethnic minority groups over – over decades.

Ms. Hoffman K’nyaw, you mentioned the ICC referral. This was something that was often brought up by activist communities in regard to the Rohingya situation. And it seems that the perception in Burma was that the military leaders were truly afraid of being referred to the ICC, and that was something that could act as a deterrent. Do you think that that’s still the case? Would ICC referral impede or prevent them from doing some of the actions? Or at this point, do you think that it’s too late for that to have an impact?

Ms. Paw: I do think the Burma army are afraid of being referred to the ICC, because right now a lot of, how do you call that, documentations on the abuses that they committed. And they do afraid. And I think right now – I think they need to see in actions when more countries are coming up to support the referral of the situation to the ICC, they will be more afraid. Like, for me, right now,
because there is still a weak in, you know, many countries that are not coming up and supporting, like, even the ICC case.

So I think it give the Burma army a sense that they could continue, you know, and enjoy the impunity. I think once more countries are coming up and supporting of ICC case they would be more afraid, and then their actions would be – they would be more careful about their action. I would say that, yeah. And I think that’s the only way to hold them accountable, because we know that under the military dictatorship you couldn’t do anything. You know, you couldn’t do – hold them accountable, even under the democratic government, you know? The Burma army still enjoy, how do you call that, impunities. And they are above the civilian government. So we really need a true civilian government, and we really need to litany their actions, and we really need the international community to hold them accountable. Only that I think it will stop the military from continuing committing abuses against the people.

Ms. Hoffman: I want to turn back to the humanitarian situation, and humanitarian relief efforts. K’nyaw, as you mentioned, you know, a lot of these efforts are best led by local civil society organizations that really know the situation on the ground, have the trust of the people, and are embedded in the communities. However, local civil society may not have the capacity to distribute the aid that is needed at this time. As Dan mentioned, the rather staggering figure of 3 million people in need of humanitarian assistance when the coup started. Now that’s at 14 million people.

So how do – and then, in addition, you know, large international organizations that do have the capacity to distribute aid often need permission and cooperation with the military junta, which could – which could in turn legitimize their rule. So how does the international community and how do donors think about how to balance this paradox while really wanting to help the Burmese people? And please, I invite both Dan and K’nyaw to chime in on this question.

Ms. Paw: I do believe that we have enough civil society community-based groups across Burma who will be able – people on the ground. I think in the last five years when the country opened up a little bit many of the community-based organizations had built up their capacities, and so they are able to do – to help the people. And I think international community, they should work with National Unity Government and together with the community-based organization, because they are based across Burma, whether be it inside Burma or on the border.

I think, like, the assistance needs to go through them because they will be the ones who are able to, like, support people on the ground. And I think for me,
it would really want the government to support – to give legitimacies to the people like that, you know? The government, the unity government, so that they could also work together with the community base. Yeah. I still believe they would be able to deliver aid to most needy people if we worked together with, you know, NUG and also all the civil society across Burma.

Mr. Sullivan: Yeah. And it – just before I answer that I wanted to, just going back to K’nyaw’s point, to reiterate the importance of going after impunity. And want to point out again that there’s an immediate step that the United States can take to show solidarity and to support that fight against impunity. And that is to recognize what happened to the Rohingya as genocide. The State Department’s already done a very thorough collection of evidence, they just need to – need to say it publicly. And that’s important not just for the Rohingya, again, it’s – that does not preclude further atrocity determinations for other groups. In fact, I think it strengthens the ability to do that in the future.

On the – on the humanitarian question, I think, you know, it’s a really difficult one for the operational humanitarian groups on the ground, for UN agencies. You know, you want to – there is that need. And the reality is that most of the aid, you won’t be able to get it in through cross-border. Most of it’s going to have to come in somehow centrally – be either allowed or acquiesced by the military junta. But as I mentioned before, I think it’s really important to avoid going directly through the military junta because, you know, if you’re giving aid that’s being denied to certain groups and being confiscated in use, then you’re violating that humanitarian principle of do no harm. So it’s really important to try to find ways to get around to work through credible third parties, whether it’s the – you know, the Red Cross or having monitoring by the UN Refugee Agency.

But that said, even as you work through that very difficult problem, there is that immediate ability to provide aid to at least hundreds of thousands through cross-border aid. And as K'nyaw mentioned, there’s those networks that are already there that are ready that can do that. And so that – there’s no reason to be still waiting on that a year in. That’s something that needs to happen very quickly.

Ms. Hoffman: I’m going to turn to a question now from the audience.

Christina Fink asks K’nyaw: How would you evaluate the parallel National Unity Government’s roles in coordinating humanitarian assistance and in coordinating the resistance movement? For those of you that are unaware, the National Unity Government is a parallel government set up by elected members of the parliament before it was overturned by the coup.
K’nyaw.

Ms. Paw: The National Unity Government, they do have the – like, the department, the Ministry of Human Interior and Emergency Ministry. And they do have a policy. And they do work with the ethnic people and ethnic, how do you call that, departments, like health or education. So I believe that, like, through – like, together with National Unity Government and ethnic social service or departments, we will be able, like, to support the people on the ground who are in need. And also, I believe – I also believe that the National Unity Government also have a network and, you know, the people that on the ground, not in ethnic area as well. So and they got support from the people on the ground as well, civil society or many religious organization, or many organizations. So believe that they will be able to work well with different ethnic agency as well as the people in Burma.

Ms. Hoffman: Dan, anything you wanted to add?

Mr. Sullivan: No, I think K’nyaw covered that pretty well.

Ms. Hoffman: So on the topic of the National Unity Government, would international recognition by major democracies help legitimize the resistance and provide assistance to the NUG? And what are – what are the pros and cons of recognizing the NUG? And I invite both K’nyaw and Dan to respond to that question.

Ms. Paw: Well, I think the National Unity Government are coming from the people, and we need to respect, you know, the wish of the people and the choice of the people, because the military dictatorship that is currently set, it’s the one who are taking power over and abusing the people. So if we are respecting the people’s choice, we need to support the National Unity Government.

And can you repeat the second part of the question?

Ms. Hoffman: Just if there are any drawbacks to the international community recognizing the NUG, and what the pros and cons are.

Ms. Paw: OK. And we need to – if we wanted to – like, to bring – like, to support democracy and the restoration of democracy or a new federal union, we need to recognize the NUG as the government because they are also the one who also committed themselves to work together with everyone to establish towards the building of the federal union, to abolish the military
dictatorship, to write a new constitution that are, like, building up a federal union and to work together with the other ethnic people.

And they already have that commitment. As you can see, even in their government that they formed they already invited ethnic people to join them. And, of course, you know, in every government there’s, like, things that you could do to make it better and I think NUG government is doing that and so we need to support the – to legitimize the NUG government so that they have more power and they work with the people on the ground and the people supporting them, and it’s very important that we choose to support the people in Burma to bring – to end this military coup. Yeah.

**Mr. Sullivan:** Yeah, and I’d just add, I mean, I think that, you know, the key is to deny legitimacy to the military junta and to work with the people who – the people of Myanmar, supporting. And I think that, you know, the one area of caution or thing that needs to be done in working with the NUG, I think, is just making sure that it’s inclusive and, particularly, thinking – they have made overtures and statements towards including the Rohingya, for example, but there are also people who are involved with the NUG who were involved with the previous government who had less than welcoming views towards the Rohingya.

So I think, you know, there needs to be that working with the government that the people have put themselves behind but making sure that, you know, they continue to make inroads and making sure that they are truly inclusive towards, you know, a more truly democratic government in the future.

**Ms. Hoffman:** So I now want to turn to a question from a CSIS affiliate and former CRS researcher, Mike Martin, who asks if you all could comment about the refugee and IDP situation in Chin and Sagaing and the Modi government’s resistance to the provision of international humanitarian assistance in Mizoram.

And I kind of want to expand on that question a little bit and add that, you know, Burma has – borders quite a few countries – India, China, Thailand, Bangladesh – and where are there opportunities for the U.S. to increase pressure or to further cooperation on providing humanitarian IDP refugee assistance in cooperation with some of these countries? It’s not a terribly friendly neighborhood but we have seen progress in some places, and where is there opportunity for more progress?

**Mr. Sullivan:** Yeah, I’m happy to start on that. I mean, I think the short answer is that there’s been a lot more displacements. There have been attacks on – you know, destruction of hundreds of homes in Kachin State and increased
violence there, and there have – we have seen that’s where the most refugees have fled across the country into India. In my last report, I went to – I explored this a little bit, where in India you do have local authorities who have welcomed in refugees, although the government of India does not recognize them as refugees, but have provided aid to those who have sought refuge.

This has not been reflected by the national government but it shows that there are some opportunities there, at least at the local level. I’d say, you know, there’s – in my comments at the opening, I kind of narrowed in on Thailand because I think the Thai border provides the most immediate opportunity. But I think that the U.S. and others should continue to push – work with India and push India and as well as China.

I mean, China has provided, at least, vaccines – COVID vaccines – into ethnic-controlled areas across the border. I think that there – that could be a possible opening, continuing to engage China towards also allowing humanitarian aid and in all of these countries, I think, fundamentally, there needs to be a push for them not to violate that international standard of non-refoulement. So if people come across the border they shouldn’t be forced back – excuse me – and we’ve seen that in all of those countries and I think, again, maybe with Thailand there’s the most kind of leverage to try to make sure that that happens and also to make sure that the UN Refugee Agency and international NGOs can get access to those people when they do come across.

Ms. Hoffman: K’nyaw, I know you’re particularly focused on the Thai-Burma border. So is there anything you’d like to add about Thailand specifically?

Ms. Paw: Yes. I already mentioned in my, I think, speech that we really need the Thai government to allow refugees – let people to flee to Thai side, to stay safely and also not to push them back, and allow humanitarian agency to reach out to the refugees that are fleeing in Thai side because right now even they fled to Thailand, it’s the Thai military that are in control of those who are fleeing, and humanitarian agency have difficulties reaching out to people, and we have to work with the local people to provide support.

And it’s not impossible but it’s difficult and challenges. The same to the cross-border. So, yeah, we really need the U.S. government, you know, to talk to the Thai government to allow humanitarian to flow – to cross-border to the conflict-affected area to the people who are in need because right now, I mean, we could deliver the support but it’s much harder. If it allowed – and officially allowed by the Thai government then we could do much more effective, you know. So we really need the Thai government to allow – to
open up that opportunities for refugees as well as for the people – like, for us to be able to support cross-border aid.

Mr. Sullivan: And I’d just add that there – you know, there were some positive indications on the allowing of cross-border from Thailand when the State Department counselor, Derek Chollet, traveled there in the fall. But we really haven’t seen movement on that sense. So it needs to be continually raised and, as I said, you know, we’re almost a year in. There’s no reason to wait any longer.

Ms. Paw: Yeah. Also, I would like to highlight, again, there for – we are talking about the recent refugees that are fleeing but we also need to think about the – those who are living in refugee camps for over 30 years. You know, the amount of support that they get is very little. I mentioned already it’s less than 10 U.S. dollars per month per adult. And we know that it’s not practical, you know, to survive on that amount of money. And so we need the increased support, humanitarian aid, food aid, to the refugees, or we really need, like, the durable solutions, you know, like, the integration, even for the Thai government to open opportunity for the refugees to leave the camp to be able to work and support, like, their families or also have their children to be able to continue their education outside the refugee camps.

Otherwise, you know, they have been there for over 30 years and a lot of children are born there or they grew up there. They have no future. So we really need also to think about that solution, you know. And, yeah, right now with the continued conflict and people fleeing and, of course, the resettlement to that country, you know, another durable solution also need to be opened up and the Thai government should be able also to open up that opportunity as well.

Ms. Hoffman: Thank you.

Ms. Paw: K’nyaw, I want to ask you, particularly, in your role as general secretary of the Karen Women’s Organization, you know, women often bear the burden of political instability and conflict. How has this played out and manifested in the current situation in Burma and how does your organization and the many other women’s organizations that have existed for so long help to support women facing these difficult circumstances?

Ms. Paw: Yes. Yeah. Of course, apart from the brutality and torture that the Burma army committed to everyone regardless of their gender, of course, women are also suffering from sexual violence and sexual harassment and also are fleeing the conflicts, particularly, like, pregnant woman, newborn mothers, they face even, I don’t know, double or triple difficulties. Because of the displacement, they do not get enough nutrition food and, therefore, have
negative impact on their pregnancy. And some women, they will have difficulties in deliveries, the baby, and some of them, you know, have died because of, you know, this issue because there’s not health care, health center that are near that could help them. And, yeah, and because of the poor nutrition some do not have good, you know, breast milk to feed the baby.

And but what we do is because KWO is a community-based organization so KWO on the ground are – we work with the community and also we work with the health clinic. We try to support nutrition food needs to the mothers as well as provide newborn babies and their mother if they need milk and provide support, and not just to the newborn baby and pregnant women, also to the most vulnerable people, particularly, the elderly and the sick and people with disabilities, because during the displacements and conflict time these are the people that are facing the hardship – you know, the hardship.

And just last year in 2021 we were able to provide, you know, yeah, a lot to these women and, of course, we also need to work with the Thai authorities here for the refer of the – especially women with difficulties of – giving pregnant woman to be able to access to the Thai hospital, you know, crossing the border as well.

So, yes, KWO, and not just KWO, also together are other organizations and we work together with the health centers in helping those women. Yeah.

Ms. Hoffman: Thank you. So I want to ask one final question and invite you to also include any kind of concluding thoughts that you have in your response to this. You know, the international donor community and policymakers are often focused on the crisis at hand, which right now in Burma is very large and very massive and complex.

However, it’s clear that the Burmese people have rejected military rule and at some point there will be a transition because what’s happening just is not sustainable. So what should the international community be thinking about to prepare for an eventual transition of rule? What investments can be made? What types of activities should be happening to make sure that when that day does come that Burma and the Burmese people will be prepared and set up for success?

Mr. Sullivan: Sure. I can try to tackle that first. It’s a big question. I mean, obviously, the – there’s a need to create the conditions that are conducive for people to come home safely and for people just to stop the atrocities that are happening right now. So that needs to continue to be the focus.

But, yeah, it’s very important to start thinking also further down the road and part of that is, like I said, just making sure that the next government that
comes in is truly inclusive and can be more of a democratic voice for the
people of Myanmar.

And then, you know, I think a lot of the discussions and explorations were
already happening from development groups like the World Bank, you know,
looking at ways that they can get in and try to help with the building of the
health infrastructure and different things. The big caution is – and we saw
this happening in Rakhine State before the coup – was that if you start doing
those development projects while people who have already been displaced
from certain areas you’re, effectively just reinforcing the effects of ethnic
cleansing.

And, you know, so I think in different parts of Myanmar you’ll have similar
questions of people who have been forced from their homes, making sure
that any kind of development projects are equal and inclusive, and then that
that’s echoed in the government that comes forward.

And then just as a kind of final word from me, I’ll say we’ve painted a pretty
dire picture here. But I do think there’s a lot of things – there’s a lot of
actions that can be taken. I set out a lot of those. I mean, support the BURMA
Act and, you know, continue to support with humanitarian aid the people
who you can reach, starting with the cross-border aid.

I think there’s a lot more that can be done internationally. I just hope – we
have a lot of these sort of dire anniversaries and I – we have this one coming
up from the coup. But I hope that the attention that that brings in the press
and internationally can help disperse some of these positive actions because
there are a lot that can be taken. Thanks.

Ms. Paw:

I also wanted to support Dan’s report on Burma. Inclusiveness – you know,
it’s very important because Burma is diverse and people need to own – need
to feel like they’re a part of the process in rebuilding their country. And we
need to make sure that, you know, everyone feel that they can participate
freely, equally, on equal ground, you know, and so that is very important.
And also, the recognitions of the ethnic identities, it’s very important
because the ethnic people, we feel like our voice is not being heard, our
identity is not respected, our administration is not recognized at all.

And so I think there’s a huge capacity in Burma that we need to build on. And
we have to be careful not to repeat the mistake of, you know – how do you
call that – supporting the centralized government and the democratic
government, its taking over into the ethnic areas and impose their policies or
their – how do you call it – into the ethnic area. That is very important. And
as a woman, I have to say that in the case of Burma, like, we have three fight,
right? Other people, like the Burma themselves, we have to fight for
democracy. The ethnic people, we fight for democracy and ethnic rights. As the women, we also fight for women rights.

So in all the process we also need women participation – a genuine one – not just the token or, you know, just a number. But we really need genuine participation in the process. So we really need everyone that are supporting and Burma to keep this in mind, yeah, that Burma is diverse and everyone need to be – like, need to feel like they’re part of the process and that also women also – women rights need to be considered at the same time when we are fighting for this and not to be left out.

Ms. Hoffman: Thank you. Well, thank you very much to the CSIS Humanitarian Agenda for hosting this important event, to Congressman Chabot for his opening remarks, and to Dan and K’nyaw for both your important insights and the important work that you do and continue to do on behalf of the Burmese people.

So thank you very much, and we hope everybody has a good rest of your day.

Ms. Paw: Thank you.