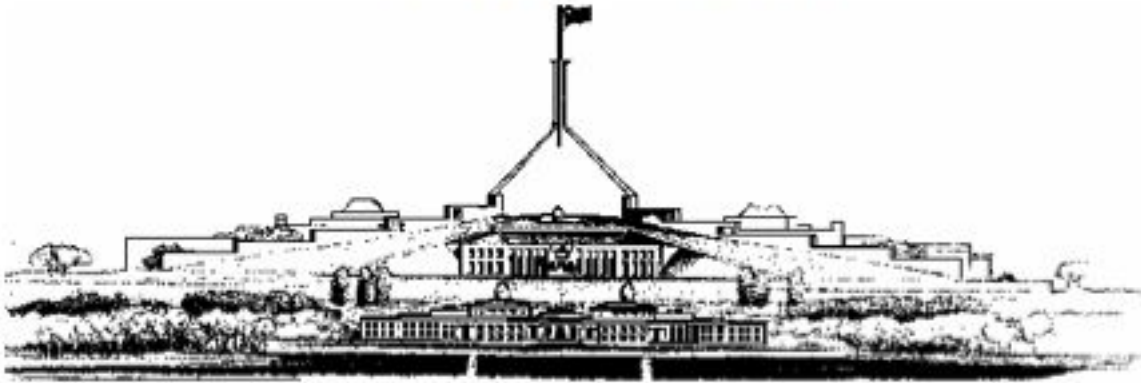




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Myanmar: Rakhine State

SPEECH

Monday, 5 February 2018

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Monday, 5 February 2018
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Questioner
Speaker Swan, Wayne, MP

Source House
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Responder
Question No.

Mr SWAN (Lilley) (11:27): This is a massive humanitarian crisis. When it comes to humanitarian crises, they don't get much bigger than this. It is occurring with great speed. Some 688,000 Rohingyas have been forced to flee to refugee camps in Bangladesh since August 2017, and those who remain are subject to ethnic cleansing. I think we've all seen the pictures of villages on fire and people being tortured, and we know that there are reports of rapes, killings and executions. This is a massive tragedy.

In the area in which I live, we have something like five per cent of Australia's Rohingya population. I've had the privilege to meet with members of the Rohingya community and their advocates, both in my electorate and here in parliament. I've heard, time and time again, the harrowing stories from a people who have been denied their identity and denied their statehood. These are people who have escaped persecution and terror but whose fear for their lives and the lives of their families is seared into their brows. Last year, I met with Mohammed Sadek, a young Rohingya refugee living in my local area. He spoke about the escalation of violence in Myanmar, the killing of his people and the systemic burning of villages. He urged this parliament to take quick and decisive action before, as he put it, the Rohingya as a people are exterminated in Myanmar. I also went to a rally outside Parliament House, a year or so ago, organised by Nor Zaman, another impressive local young Rohingya leader. He spent 15 years in a refugee camp before he managed to come to Australia. He's currently in his early 30s, and he's fighting the fight for his people and his family who have been left behind.

That activity and that activism from Rohingya in this country are vital in informing the Australian people and, most particularly, the people in this parliament of the urgency before us to do something to assist the refugees and, more importantly, to do something for those who are left behind, and then, of course, a plan for the future if these people are to be dealt with in a decent way outside the borders of modern Myanmar.

In 1948, when Myanmar gained independence from the British, the Rohingya people were promised an autonomous state, but they were rebuffed by the new leadership. The persecution of the Rohingya people continued through subsequent decades. Rohingya social and political organisations were closed, privately-owned Rohingya businesses were transferred to the government and Rohingya people were subject of forced labour, arbitrary detention and physical assault. So there have been concerted policies of discrimination against the Rohingya people for decades, and there are now more than one million of them. They are subject to a health crisis. Harvard University researchers have described a vicious cycle that begins with poor health in infancy that then feeds into malnutrition, waterborne illnesses and so on. And Rohingya children are denied a public education, which exposes an entire generation of Rohingya to the risk of illiteracy.

The recent escalation is of a different order to all of that past discrimination, because in August last year—described in testimony to the UN Human Rights Council as the assault, torture, rape and murder of innocent Rohingya people—there was a huge escalation of persecution of Rohingya in that country. In a horrifying example of disproportionate response, after a series of small attacks on police and army posts in August, Myanmar's military launched a catastrophic wave of so-called clearance operations. Of course, we now know what that means.

The task before the Australian government and the task before the United Nations is urgent—the violence continues. Our government, and I know they are working on this, has a responsibility to do everything they possibly can to change the behaviour of the authorities in Myanmar and to participate in developing a plan for the future for a group of people who've been excluded, persecuted and who are now the subject of ethnic cleansing. The task before us is urgent.

Debate adjourned.