



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

ADJOURNMENT

Rohingya Refugees

SPEECH

Wednesday, 29 November 2017

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

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Senator MOORE (Queensland) (19:20): I'm still getting over seeing the look on Senator Abetz's face when he was asked about his going to the beach. That will stay with me for a while!

Last week, I had the opportunity to visit Bangladesh with people from Oxfam and CARE. Before I go any further, I particularly want to thank Helen Szoke, the current CEO of Oxfam Australia, and also Sally Moyle from CARE, who gave the member for Newcastle, Sharon Claydon, and I the opportunity to travel with them to see what is happening on the ground in the area of Cox's Bazar, where since August this year the most amazing and terrifying humanitarian crisis has been developing.

There is a difference between this particular phase of Rohingya people fleeing Myanmar and going to Bangladesh and what has happened in the past—because this is not the first time there has been a stream of people, often Rohingya, who have been forced from their homes in Myanmar because of violence and attacks from local people in Myanmar. It happened in the 1970s and again in the 1990s. There are people still living in Bangladesh who were part of those phases of refugee action. The difference this time is that the eyes of the world are clearly looking at what is happening in this tragic, tragic situation at the moment. We have had regular media coverage of what's going on, and it seems that there is genuine interest in what is happening in what has been called an unprecedented stream of human misery in this region.

Despite all the information that's been available—the TV coverage and the social media coverage—nothing can effectively prepare anyone for being there and being confronted with the sight of thousands and thousands of people living in the most unbelievable conditions. They are vulnerable and afraid and in some cases still suffering trauma from the horrible experiences they had in the violence that surrounded their expulsion from their homes. We were able to go to a number of the camps. At the largest current camp we had the opportunity to see on the ground action from the extraordinary humanitarian workers who have come from across the globe to be part of the support work in Cox's Bazar. When you stand on a small hill in the camp you see for 360 degrees around you, as far as the eye can see, temporary vulnerable shelters that are housing, at last count, over 600,000 newcomers, adding to the existing population of refugees from Myanmar of over 300,000 people. In fact, the statement has been made that as a result of this particular movement there are now more than one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, which means that there are now more Rohingya in Bangladesh than in Myanmar.

The history of these people has been confronting and, in true sense of the word, terrible. For all intents and purposes they are stateless. They have nowhere they can call home. They are living in vulnerable poverty and seeking support from all of us to see what we can do to ensure that there is a response to this misery.

We know that the Australian parliament—the Australian government—has introduced a specific humanitarian assistance process in response to displacement from Rakhine State in Myanmar. A sum of \$30 million has already been donated by the Australian government. This can only be seen as a stepped process. This can only be a step in the way that the response must be funded. Of that \$30 million, \$3 million has been provided to CARE and Oxfam, particularly under the Australian Humanitarian Partnership, for a special program looking for the response to this particular crisis. That funding came through, with the program starting on 1 November.

These two organisations are working with local partners on the ground. They are focusing particularly on having a response for the 75,000 most vulnerable women, men, girls, boys and people with disabilities who have been displaced from Myanmar, so they can meet their emergency immediate needs around basic water, sanitation and hygiene.

In terms of the particular needs, of course shelter is important. I have described these very tiny cave-like shelters, which are replicated for kilometres in the area, housing families who have been displaced. But, certainly, one of the things that we know about any group of humanity is that one of their most important elements automatically

is to look at sanitary and wash needs because, when people are gathered together, not only do they have the trauma of any injuries or suffering that they've had from their movement but they also have real vulnerability to the range of diseases that can occur when people are displaced and living in these temporary situations.

So there is an absolute focus on looking at effective sanitation—this is an area in which both CARE and Oxfam have deep experience—and on working with international experts from around the world who have come together. There has been a mass response to ensure that, in what has been described as an unprecedented crisis, there can be some response to at least provide emergency shelter for these people. That has worked extremely well in terms of cooperation. These people naturally have a history of working together, and certainly the Bangladesh government has worked with IOM as its unit to have coordination. There is a need for people to work together, and that is happening. It's an overwhelming response to the needs of the Rohingya who are there and who need our support. Their own personal resilience is inspirational.

Up to early November 2017, over 618,000 people had crossed. On the days we were there at the camps in the Cox's Bazar region, we saw people walking—streams of people who had arrived that day. When we talked to the people who were doing the registration processes, they said it was a quiet day, yet there were several hundred people coming. The reason it was a quiet day was that, several times during the month of October, 20,000 people came in a couple of days. It is just impossible to visualise that number of people, fearful for their lives, their families and their futures, seeking refuge in their neighbouring country—as I said, not for the first time.

There is a genuine need for ongoing support. The processes I've briefly described this evening are the emergency immediate needs. This will not be a short-term process. The Bangladeshi government must be commended for the welcome they have shown under their Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, who has been so publicly supportive and welcoming of these people into her already densely populated country. Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries on the globe. She has said: 'We will be there. We are opening our borders. We will welcome these people.'

From the Bangladeshi government's point of view, they consistently talk about this being a short-term process where they are going to be focusing on having the Rohingya people return to Myanmar. Only at the end of last week, there was an agreement between the two governments about a repatriation process of moving people back to Myanmar. But this is a very serious issue because, twice before that we know of, people have returned to Myanmar and yet this persecution continues in a cycle. They go back to Myanmar, and then what happened over August and September this year happens again. We cannot allow that desperate cycle to continue.

There will be a need for a further injection of support from Australia in taking its share in what must be an international response. The United Nations has passed a number of statements about its concern about the violence. Only recently there was another statement about how we work cooperatively to respond to the situation, calling upon the Myanmar government to stop the violence, and looking at a way of working together into the future. This will not be short term. The Australian government's initial response of \$30 million should be applauded, but there will be a need for more. There is a desperate need for more.

These people have called on us for support. We have the capacity. We have the skills. Australia is well known for its skills in humanitarian response. We have professional workers, and I want to congratulate Oxfam and CARE on their welcome and on their teams that talked to us about their work on the ground. We know about the appeal that's been sponsored by the Australian government, engaging with six major humanitarian support organisations in Australia. We are calling upon the Australian community to get involved to help fund what will be a long-term need for people who have desperate needs. We must be involved.