

Attacks on Rohingya people condemned as inhumane, threats to religious freedom



Anwar Arkani, a Rohingya refugee in Canada.

Anwar Arkani, a Rohingya Muslim, is desperately sharing videos and photos of his people fleeing through the jungle from Myanmar to Bangladesh in the wake of military violence against them.

Children hide in wetlands infested with millions of mosquitoes. A crowd of thousands, including breastfeeding women, elderly people and the sick, sits stranded on a mountain range.

They are among over 500,000 Rohingya Muslims who have been forced to flee Myanmar and take refuge in neighbouring Bangladesh since August. That was when the Myanmar military began attacking villages in retaliation for attacks on government posts by a Rohingya insurgent group.

Myanmar (also known as Burma) is a southeast Asian country populated by a Buddhist majority. The Rohingya are an ethnic minority of Muslim people whose roots date back to the eighth century but who are not recognized as citizens.

“It is religious persecution; that is the ultimate truth,” said Arkani, president of the Rohingya Association of Canada. “I know that is not the politically correct thing to say, but if the (individual Rohingya) converted to Buddhism, there would be no problem for him.”

Until then, Arkani said, the government attacks “will continue until not one Muslim is left in Burma.”



Sadiq Pathan, outreach imam at Edmonton's Al-Rashid Mosque.

In light of the crisis, members of Edmonton's faith communities met on Sept. 30 at the Al-Rashid Mosque to raise awareness of the plight of Rohingya Muslims and financial support for the refugees.

“I'm here first and foremost as a human being, and I am grieving not as a Muslim person first but as a human first,” said Sadiq Pathan, the outreach imam at the Al-Rashid Mosque, as he fought back tears.

“As a person who has parents alive and well. As a husband that can call and know that his wife and children are well. The plight of the Rohingya reminds us that when we breathe, we breathe the same.”

The Government of Canada has pledged \$6.63 million in humanitarian assistance funding to Myanmar and Bangladesh, including the Rohingya. Islamic Relief Canada and the UN Refugee Agency have been providing emergency humanitarian assistance to the refugees and are accepting donations.

Caritas Internationalis, the umbrella organization for Catholic development and relief agencies, is assisting through its affiliates in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Development and Peace – Caritas Canada contributed \$50,000 to that effort, and has joined a long list of Canadian organizations and individuals who are calling on the Canadian government to do more to end the violence in Myanmar.

Pope Francis is expected to raise the issue of human rights when he visits Myanmar next month.



Bob McKeon, local social justice activist and Newman Theological College professor.

“Catholic leaders around the world are raising their voices and Pope Francis has spoken out several times against the persecution of the Rohingya people,” said Bob McKeon, a social justice activist and professor at Newman Theological College.

He called the violence in Myanmar an attack on religious freedom.



Momin Saeed, spokesman for Islamic Relief Canada.

Momin Saeed, a spokesman for Islamic Relief Canada, said helping refugees is not about their religious affiliation.

“What’s important and what matters the most to me is that this is a human (rights) issue, and it starts there and it ends there.”

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has written a letter to Aung San Suu Kyi, the Myanmar leader who is a Nobel Peace Prize winner and honorary Canadian, urging her to end the attacks on Rohingya Muslims in her country.

But Edmonton’s faith community wants Canada to go further, by sanctioning the government of Myanmar.

“There are children and women who have been taken out of their homes, who have been burned alive, who have been gang raped, and you have a government that is supposed to be protecting its people,” Saeed said.

Arkani, who has organized Rohingya awareness campaigns since 2007, said his own father was detained and killed in jail when he was a child. In this latest attack, most of the Rohingya villages in Myanmar have been burned down.

“The entire population is now at the verge of extinction and running, escaping,” Arkani said.

“The situation is extremely, extremely dire. One day means a lot of lives we are talking about, so we need to do something urgently. We need to do everything and anything.”