

Mohamad Imran Bin Zohor - USCIRF Testimony

Good morning, and thank you, Chair Hartzler and Vice Chair Mahmood, for giving me the opportunity to speak today. My name is Mohamad Imran Bin Zohor, and I am Rohingya.

The United Nations has recognized the Rohingya as one of the most persecuted people in the world, not because of a single moment in history, but because of decades of systematic oppression, injustice, and the gradual stripping away of our basic human rights. The Rohingya are an indigenous people who have lived for generations in Burma, yet we have been treated as outsiders, as if we never belonged to the very land of our ancestors.

Over time, our identity was denied, our citizenship was taken, and our dignity was eroded piece by piece, largely because of our faith as Muslims. We were not only targeted for who we are, but for what we believe. Our mosques were restricted, our religious practices were monitored, and our ability to live freely as Muslims was constantly under threat.

I was born into a life where I did not exist in the eyes of my own country. In Burma, now called Myanmar, the military government denied us citizenship, education, freedom of movement, and our very identity. As a child, I grew up knowing that I was not seen as human. We were not allowed to travel freely, not allowed to go to proper schools, and not allowed to dream about a future. Soldiers controlled our lives. Fear was part of our daily routine.

We lived in a small bamboo shelter with no electricity, no clean water, and often no food. During the monsoon season, I remember days when my family had nothing to eat. Even a pair of sandals was a luxury, something I desperately wished for because my bare feet were constantly cut by thorns. But the hardest part was not the poverty, it was the feeling that our suffering did not matter to anyone.

When I was 12 years old, my parents made the heartbreaking decision to send me away. They were trying to save my life. I left home as a child, not knowing if I would ever see my family again. I boarded a boat with many others, hoping for safety. But the journey was something no child should ever experience. We were packed tightly together, with almost no food or water. People were crying, praying, and getting sick around me. I saw fear in every face. I remember the silence at times because people were too weak to even speak. Some people did not survive that journey.

As a child, I did not understand everything, but I understood one thing: I might die, and no one would know. When we reached Thailand, I thought the worst was over. But it was only the beginning. I was sold to human traffickers. I was beaten. I was held for ransom. I saw others being tortured. I felt completely alone, like I had been forgotten by the world.

After escaping my abductors, I was captured again by the police and eventually imprisoned in Malaysia. I spent more than two years of my childhood in a detention center. Imagine being a 12-year-old locked behind bars, treated like a criminal, with no school, very little food, and no hope.

I did not understand why I was there. I had committed no offense. My only “crime” was being born Rohingya and trying to survive.

There were many other children like me in that detention center. We shared the same fear, the same confusion, the same pain. We were children growing up without freedom, without education, and without love from our families. I remember wondering if this would be my life forever.

I was constantly ill and did not receive medical attention. My body became so weak I was not able to move. One day, a few UN officials visited the detention center, and that is when everything changed. They saw the conditions I was living in, understood what I must have endured as a Rohingya child, and, somehow, negotiated my release. The UN took my case seriously, and a few months later, I was eventually resettled in the United States, where I was given something I had never had before: a chance.

Today, I am a US citizen. I have earned an Associate Degree and am currently studying at the University of Washington’s Foster School of Business. I am building a future. But I cannot forget where I came from. Because right now, there are still Rohingya children living the life I once lived. In fact, only two weeks ago, The Guardian reported that 250 Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution for safety and a better future were missing after an overcrowded trawler capsized in the Andaman Sea. The few survivors of the tragedy detailed the dangerous conditions they faced and the limited food and water they were given aboard the vessel. Thirteen years after my own experience at sea, Rohingya men, women, and children are still packed into overloaded boats. They are still in detention centers in Malaysia. They are still waiting. Waiting for someone to see them. Waiting for someone to care.

That is why I am here today. The United States has always been a leader in standing up for human rights. And today, I respectfully ask you to continue that leadership. First, the U.S. government must advocate strongly for the immediate release of Rohingya children from detention centers, especially in Malaysia. No child should grow up behind bars simply for seeking safety. Second, the U.S. should expand resettlement opportunities for vulnerable children, especially survivors of trafficking, detention, and persecution. These children need protection, not punishment. Third, we must invest in education, mental health support, and long-term care for Rohingya children. Trauma does not end when a child is freed, it stays with them. They need support to heal and to rebuild their lives. Finally, the U.S. must continue to hold the Myanmar military accountable and support efforts that recognize the identity and rights of the Rohingya people. I stand here today because someone chose to help me. But there are thousands of children still waiting for that same chance. They are not just refugees.

They are people with dreams. They are future leaders, students, and voices if we choose to give them an opportunity. If they are lucky enough to grow up at all, please do not let them grow up forgotten.

Thank you.