



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Online Hate Speech and Disinformation **Targeting Religious Communities**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Anurima Bhargava, USCIRF Vice Chair

Thank you very much, Vice Chair Perkins.

On August 25, 2017, the Burmese military launched a genocidal campaign against the Rohingya people, who are predominately Muslim. Burmese military units have been involved in indiscriminate killings of civilians, mass rape, and arbitrary detentions and arrests. More than 740,000 Rohingya refugees fled to camps in Bangladesh, while another 120,000 are displaced internally.

In Burma, Facebook is preinstalled on mobile phones, which has allowed users to access the Internet, but also fed a misperception that “Facebook is the Internet.” This has enabled hate speech and disinformation to go viral rapidly. The United Nations Fact-Finding Mission for Myanmar concluded that Facebook enabled Buddhist nationalists and military officials to spread “hateful and divisive rhetoric” targeting the Rohingya.

In August 2018, Facebook blocked and removed the accounts of 20 Burmese individuals and organizations, including General Min Aung Hlaing and the Buddhist monk U Wirathu. Despite these efforts, Facebook [admitted](#) in 2018 that it “can and should do more,” specifically noting its failure to prevent the platform’s use to “foment division and incite offline violence.”

During the first half of 2020, Facebook claimed it took action against more than 331,000 pieces of content in Burma. However, there are reports that intolerant groups continue to use the platform, while the Burmese military reopened a Facebook page in June.

While USCIRF commends social media companies for increasingly taking down content that contains hate speech or disinformation, this practice is potentially preventing that information from being used in criminal investigations. The reliance on AI to remove content can mean that evidence of violent crimes remains hidden even in the midst of criminal proceedings that could bring perpetrators to justice. Facebook recently rejected a request by The Gambia to provide information relevant to the pending case against Burma for genocidal charges at the International Court of Justice, or ICJ. Facebook has asserted that it has shared evidence with the UN investigatory mechanism for use in potential criminal prosecutions, but the head of that body has said that Facebook has not yet released evidence of serious international crimes.

It is unacceptable that Facebook is sitting on evidence that could be used to hold responsible Burmese officials who committed alleged genocide against the Rohingya. Facebook's inaction is not only a disservice to Rohingya victims demanding justice; it also fosters wider impunity. Those who spew hate online, whether governments or non-state actors, may think twice if they know that social media companies are prepared to share their statements for use in future criminal proceedings.

Thank you, and I look forward to hearing our witnesses' views on these topics. I will now turn the floor back to Chair Manchin.