

Speech

Andrew Broad

Member for Mallee

Monday 5th February 2018

A speech given in the Australian Parliament today

CONTENT WARNING: Please note some of this content may be distressing to readers

Elie Wiesel, the great Jewish writer who survived Auschwitz and wrote the book *Night*, quoted:

When adults wage war, children perish.

I was, I guess, a witness to some of that a few weeks ago when I was in Cox's Bazar at the Rohingya refugee camps. The striking thing that confronts us firstly is the number of children there—children with smiles on their face but dirt on their face, barefoot and running around, at risk of a major disease outbreak in 60 days when the monsoon season comes—who are the victims of this trauma.

People might say to me, 'Why would a member for regional Victoria be interested in the children in the refugee camp at Cox's Bazar?' I say to them that we are the beneficiaries of a very robust and prosperous country and that very robust and prosperous country affords us great opportunity but also great responsibility, and that is to ensure that the values that we hold dear are reflected in other parts of the world.

It is warming to my heart to know that Australia is the third-largest donor to the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. I was able to go there with Senator Lisa Singh from the Australian Labor Party to see the work that took place. Senator Lisa Singh and I co-chair the Parliamentary Friends of UNICEF. I want to reflect on what I saw—a story of what is the worst of humanity, coupled with some of the best of humanity.

The worst of humanity, which is quite confronting, was to hear the stories of women who were raped by soldiers whilst they watched their husbands being hung. They didn't want to take their eyes away from their husbands as they died because they wanted to at least give some sort of support. Rape was used as an act of terror. It is not the case that 600,000 or 700,000 people shift for small atrocities; they shift because they are fleeing for their life.

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We heard stories of the unfolding crisis of 40,000 babies that could be born. Those women are carrying those babies not knowing if they were fathered by their now dead husbands or if they were fathered as a result of rape. The aid organisations have to think through how they will deal with the issues of abandonment if those babies turn out to be fathered as a result of rape.

Standing on a hill, looking as far as the eye could see, you could see a bamboo and tent city that essentially was forest six months ago, showing the rapidness with which people had arrived—people who had arrived basically starving after trekking up to eight days. We were told how, with 60 days before the monsoon season, they needed to shift 80,000 people from areas where they are at risk of landslide when the rain starts. We heard that drainage needs to be put in place in order to ensure that disease doesn't perpetrate through that group of people.

But we also saw the compassion of our aid workers. Can I just say on the record: I saw no waste—the great criticism that Australians make is: 'The waste that's in the aid program'—but I saw no waste. I saw hardworking, diligent people. A lady said to me—she's from Perth and been involved in the aid program work for a long time—that she cries at a Kleenex tissue ad, but she said, 'I can't cry here because that doesn't help these people. I'm here to work. I'm here to make people's lives better.' They are doing a tremendous job. Things like sanitation—100 people to a toilet—and like water supply. I have to say the farmer in me, who set up water supplies on my own farm; we got talking about bar pressure and pumps and how to set water up. We saw medicine and we saw also education.

The challenge, of course, is: what is the future for those people? People without hope cannot be left to stagnate. And this is the challenge, because the Myanmar government doesn't want to take them back. They don't want to go back in a hurry. The Bangladesh government doesn't want to absorb them, and I think there is probably a real discussion to be had about the way the World Bank and the countries of the world create trading zones, investment and opportunities. I don't think that these people are going to be going back to Myanmar in a hurry. It's simply not safe. Ultimately, we need to create hope for these people because, otherwise, it does sadly become a breeding ground for disenchanting young men and women.

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I say we should be proud of Australia's contribution, but, of course, we will need to do more. It was a privilege to go with such hardworking people. We saw the worst of humanity, but we also saw the best of it.

-ENDS-

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