

Introduction

On 1 February 2021 the Myanmar/Burma army seized power in a coup. In the year since, Myanmar has been plunged into an appalling political, economic, humanitarian and human rights crisis.

The coup brought an end to a decade of civilian quasi-democratic rule which saw some limited positive political developments. Political power is now held by the commander-in-chief of the Burmese army, Min Aung Hlaing. Myanmar's elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the country's elected President Win Myint remain in jail and have received the first sentences from a range of charges levied at them, with more to come. Aung San Suu Kyi was initially sentenced to four years in prison, later reduced to two, but faces at least a dozen charges in total and is likely to be held in detention indefinitely.

The coup sparked widespread [national protests](#), marches and walk-outs, with hundreds of thousands of people [demanding](#) a return to democracy. They have been met with a heavy-handed and violent response from the army and police, involving water cannons, rubber bullets and live ammunition.

In the year since the coup, the situation of human rights has deteriorated across the country. The Myanmar army, also known as the Tatmadaw, have carried out at least 7,053 attacks on civilians, which represents an increase of 664% from 2020. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), at least 330,600 people have been internally displaced since the coup, although this figure is likely to be a serious underestimate. In Karenni State alone, at least 156,935 people – over half the population – has been displaced.

At least 11,776 people have been arrested, and 1,494 people killed, according to the [Assistance Association for Political Prisoners](#). Among the dead are at least 94 women and 100 children, and among those arrested are at least 573 NLD members, of whom 432 remain in detention. Twelve have died in custody, including seven tortured to death during interrogation. It has also been reported that at least 92 people have received the death sentence.

Most shocking has been the military's use of air strikes against civilians, particularly in Chin State, Karenni State, Karen State and Sagaing and Magway Divisions, breaking both international law and Myanmar's own laws. These attacks have been accompanied by appalling atrocities, including murder, torture, sexual violence, rape and the destruction of property.

Economic devastation from the coup combined with the COVID-19 pandemic has caused scarcity and increased prices in food and medicine. However, humanitarian aid access and distribution has been [severely constrained](#) and [intentionally hindered](#) by the regime. Military forces have arrested and killed church leaders and local volunteers providing humanitarian support, in addition to blocking access to areas in need by destroying bridges and blocking

roads.

At the beginning of the coup, implications for the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) included the arrest of at least three Buddhist monks within hours of the coup. Since then, there have been more than 35 documented reports of attacks on churches and other places of worship and people of faith.

Attacks on faith leaders and places of worship

Everyone in Myanmar is suffering the consequences of the coup, but it does seem that Christians have been targeted with particular intensity. At least five pastors have been murdered and four others jailed in Chin State alone, and several churches in Karenni and Chin States have been shelled and destroyed.

Meanwhile, Muslims throughout the country, and especially Rohingyas, continue to face grinding persecution at the hands of a military regime driven by extreme Burman Buddhist nationalism.

Attacks by the military with potential implications for the right to FoRB began during the first hours of the coup and have continued and worsened one year later. Religious leaders have been arrested and places of worship have been damaged or destroyed in airstrikes and targeted attacks. The army has used Buddhist temples and Christian churches as barracks for soldiers.

The following are only a sampling of the attacks that the military have mounted over the past year.

Arrests

- On 1 February 2021 three Buddhist monks were arrested: Ashin Ariya Vansa Bivansa, known as "Myawaddy Sayadaw," Ashin Sobitha, and Shwe Nya. On 3 February, it was reported that Ashin Sobitha had been sentenced to two years in prison. Myawaddy Sayadaw, a prominent Buddhist leader and vocal critic of both the military and the extremist Buddhist nationalist movement, was disrobed as a monk and spent 6 months in jail.
- On 13 May Father Columban Labang Lar Di of the Banmaw Diocese in Kachin State was [arrested](#) by military forces as he was travelling from Banmaw to Myitkyina. He was [released](#) on 17 May after repeated appeals from church leaders and members of the international community.
- On 16 September a Baptist pastor, Thian Lian Sang, was arrested in Mandalay.
- On 11 December a Church of Christ pastor, Om Ki, was arrested and later [shot in the head](#) by the army in Chin State.

Targeted attacks and killings of civilians

- On 1 April at least 14 people were killed and 40 more were injured, including women and children, in [airstrikes](#) in Dwe Lo Townshi, Karen State.
- On 18 September Baptist Pastor Cung Biak Hum was [shot dead](#) in Thantlang, Chin State, as he tried to help

extinguish a blaze caused by artillery fire. The Chin Human Rights Organization [reported](#) that soldiers proceeded to remove the pastor's finger and steal his wedding ring.

- From 29-31 October in Thantlang, Chin State, a combination of rocket attacks and [deliberate arson](#) by soldiers on foot caused devastating damage to at least 164 homes, businesses and other buildings, including multiple churches and an orphanage. The attack followed another assault on the town in September which destroyed 19 homes and caused nearly all of the 10,000-person population to become internally displaced or to seek refuge in India.
- On 24 December at least 35 civilians were [burned alive](#) by the Myanmar army in the Mo So village of Hpruso town in Kayah (Karenni) State. According to the Karen Human Rights Group at least 651 houses, 6 churches and at least one clinic were destroyed in Kayah State between 21 May and 20 December 2021.

Attacks on places of worship

- On 22 May military forces [raided](#) a Karen Baptist Church in Insein, Yangon. The church pastor and two other young men were violently beaten and detained, the church was ransacked and its property destroyed.
- On 24 May four civilians were killed and eight more were injured in an [attack](#) by the Myanmar army on a Catholic church in Kayan Thar Yar village in Kayah (Karenni) State. At approximately 1am military forces fired a heavy artillery shell at the church where elderly people and children were reportedly hiding after fleeing their homes following earlier attacks on their village.
- In June three mosques were [raided](#) in Yangon and in Mohnhyin city. A custodian of one of the mosques was arbitrarily detained.
- From 30-31 December in Ya Thit Ku Village in Karen State the army [fired heavy machine guns](#) at a Buddhist monastery while villagers hid underneath to escape the shooting. They also fired a mortar at a church compound in the same village, damaging part of the church.
- On 8 January 2022 the army [fired mortar shells](#) at a Buddhist monastery in Peh Tha Raw Doo village while the monks hid under a building next to the monastery.

Displacement of religious adherents

- As of 17 January 2022 hundreds of [Buddhist monks have fled](#) and more than 30 monasteries have been abandoned in Loikaw and Demoso towns in Kayah (Karenni) State because "it was impossible for us to stay there" according to one monk.
- Fifteen Christian priests have also fled Loikaw. According to a policeman "resistance fighters have taken over churches and homes in the town [of Loikaw]."
- In January 2022 at least 30 [Buddhist monks sought refuge](#) in Taunggyi township in Shan State.

Humanitarian crisis

A year on from the coup, Myanmar faces a humanitarian emergency, compounded by COVID-19 and by the regime's [deliberate blocking of aid](#). The military has stolen, looted or obstructed humanitarian assistance, leaving hundreds of thousands without food, medicines, or shelter.

The military attacks have forced people to leave their villages where COVID-19 did not exist, and caused them to congregate with other internally displaced people where COVID-19 is easily spread and where medical care is not available or not affordable.

The coup has had a devastating impact on the economy, and the military has [cut off food supplies](#) to civilians as part of its four cuts policy. This has caused cases of extreme malnutrition, especially in Kayah (Karenni) State.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has warned that 46.3% of the population will be living in poverty in 2022. It is estimated that 14.4 million people – including 5 million children – will need humanitarian assistance this year. According to the [Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma \(ALTSEAN\)](#), this represents a dramatic increase of 1340% over estimates before the coup of one million people needing aid.

Concerns for ethnic communities

While the army has attacked all of the people of the country, severe attacks have occurred in border areas where ethnic minorities live. Three main areas of attack, Chin, Karenni (Kayah) and Karen State, have significant Christian populations.

The United States Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has raised concerns in the coup's aftermath, with the Commission's Vice-Chair Anurima Bhargava issuing a [statement](#) which said: "Given the history of brutal atrocities by the Burmese military, our fear is that violence could quickly escalate, especially towards religious and ethnic communities, such as the Rohingya and other Muslims. We urge the Burmese military to honor the faith and will of the Burmese people and restore democratic civilian rule as soon as possible."

On 8 February the Joint Strategy Team, a group of local humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) providing assistance to people affected by armed conflict in Kachin and northern Shan States, said that "the military coup is severely affecting the IDPs communities in Kachin and Northern Shan States. The military are taking more positions with armed troops and artillery, even in towns; and it has impacted on the transportation and movement of local people including IDPs. The civilian population is very worried, fearing that armed clashes will occur."

Crackdown on anti-coup protesters

The coup sparked widespread national protests and civil disobedience including strikes. The military has met them with violence.

On 28 February police and military forces used lethal force against protesters in locations across the country, resulting in the deaths of at least 20 people, with hundreds more beaten, arrested and injured.

On 8 March UCA News reported that at least four protesters had been shot and two had died after being struck in the head as security forces dispersed protesters with live ammunition, tear gas and rubber bullets in Myitkyina, the capital city of Kachin State. Sister Ann Rosa Nu Tawng, who earned international acclaim after kneeling in the road to plead with security forces not to shoot protesters on 28 February, repeated her brave act on 8 March in Myitkyina.

On the same day, security forces in Yangon cornered approximately 200 protesters in a four-street area in Sanchaung district. The BBC reports that at least 40 people were arrested and taken away, but others managed to escape as police numbers dwindled overnight.

In December, video footage emerged which depicted the military driving a vehicle into a group of protestors in Yangon, possibly killing five of the 20 people who were marching in the street.

Background

The years leading up to the coup had already seen very grave setbacks, with the fragile democratisation process increasingly undermined. There is evidence of significant regression in some areas, particularly freedom of the press, freedom of expression and FoRB.

Meanwhile, a movement of militant Buddhist nationalism has arisen which preaches hatred, principally of Muslims, but also threatens Christians and other non-Buddhists, and indeed affects Buddhists who attempt to oppose it.

Prior to the coup the Rohingyas experienced decades of severe persecution. An August 2017 attack by the Myanmar army on Rohingya villages and civilians resulted in over 700,000 people fleeing to Bangladesh, thousands killed, and hundreds of villages burned. Reports of the atrocities of mass violence perpetrated during this period include the burning of homes, schools and mosques, the deliberate burning of people to death inside their homes, mass rape, torture, execution without trial, and the blocking of aid. The state has continued to deny Rohingyas their citizenship rights, rendering them stateless, as the 1982 Citizenship Law remains in force even though the Rohingyas have existed in Myanmar for several centuries, and certainly many generations. The law has a very serious impact on the country's Rohingya population who continue to live in the country without citizenship rights such as the right to vote, to move freely, or to access basic services.

In recent years violations of FoRB and other human rights have also been observed in several states in northern Myanmar, notably in Kachin and northern Shan States, perpetrated against the majority Christian Kachin and Chin ethnic groups. Widespread conflict between the Myanmar Army and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) has led to

thousands of civilian deaths, and the displacement of over 120,000 people. In September 2018 the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar declared that the violations documented in Kachin and Shan States amounted to crimes against humanity and war crimes.

International response

The coup has drawn international condemnation but there has been limited tangible response to the continuing attacks on democracy, increasing human rights violations, and worsening humanitarian conditions.

In the immediate aftermath of the coup US Secretary of State Anthony J. Blinken [called](#) on the Myanmar army to reverse their actions “immediately” and “to release all government officials and civil society leaders and respect the will of the people of Burma as expressed in democratic elections on November 8.” The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres issued a [statement](#) in which he described the developments as “a serious blow to democratic reforms in Myanmar.” The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, condemned the coup in a [tweet](#), calling for the military to release all those who have been detained unlawfully and for the restoration of the democratic process. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson also [condemned](#) the coup and the unlawful imprisonment of civilians.

On 26 March 2021 the UK government [announced](#) sanctions against Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd (MEHL), owned by the military junta in Myanmar, for its involvement in serious human rights violations against the Rohingya minority and its association with senior military figures in 2017. It is hoped that sanctions targeting individual officers and sources of funding such as MEHL will help to curb the military's power to repress civilians that has continued against all segments of society since the coup. In July 2020, the UK [announced](#) further sanctions against two high ranking members of the Burmese military under the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime

In May 2021, CSW joined over 200 international and Myanmar-based human rights organisations in [calling](#) for a global arms embargo on the country.

On 18 June the UN General Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) condemning the use of lethal force and violence by the Myanmar army in the aftermath of the coup. The resolution, adopted by a vote of 119 to one with 36 abstentions, calls on the army to “end the state of emergency, to respect all human rights of the people of Myanmar and to allow the sustained democratic transition of Myanmar.” It also notably urges UN Member States to ensure that they are not responsible for the flow of arms into Myanmar.

Recommendations

To the Myanmar army:

- Release Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners, including religious leaders, immediately and without condition, taking steps to establish a path to dialogue and reconciliation.

- End violent and forceful crackdowns on anti-coup protesters, instead ensuring the fundamental freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly are fully upheld.
- Cease military attacks on civilians, including on places of worship, religious leaders, and people delivering humanitarian assistance.
- Remove blocks to humanitarian aid and allow unhindered access to the country for international humanitarian aid agencies, human rights monitors, media, UN representatives, and the UN Special Rapporteur for human rights in Myanmar.

To the international community:

- Seek a UN Security Council resolution imposing a global arms embargo on the Myanmar army, with targeted sanctions against Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.
- Continue to impose robust, targeted sanctions against the Myanmar military and military-owned enterprises.
- Take a coordinated approach to ensure that in all dialogues and exchanges with Myanmar human rights are raised and demands made that Myanmar fulfils its human rights obligations.
- Increase international pressure on the Myanmar military to remove blocks to humanitarian access in the ethnic states.
- Provide cross-border humanitarian aid to those in most need in the ethnic conflict areas.
- Support efforts to strengthen and better resource the UNHCR to accelerate applications for Myanmar nationals in countries where they are at risk of deportation to Myanmar.
- Engage with and consider supporting initiatives driven by civil society organisations and legal experts that seek to analyse evidence indicating crimes against humanity.
- Call for a nationwide ceasefire in Myanmar, especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

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