

Introduction

On 1 February 2021 Myanmar's democratically elected government was deposed in a military coup and the country's leader Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest alongside other civilian leaders. The coup ended a decade of quasi democracy and sparked an escalation in violence alongside a marked decline in freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) as part of broader grave and unchecked human rights violations.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing rules as head of the military junta's State Administrative Council (SAC), which has ordered violent crackdowns on all forms of dissent and operate with complete impunity. The coup has exacerbated Myanmar's pre-existing religious and ethnic tensions and has had a particularly brutal effect on those communities already shattered by sectarian violence.

This report will initially focus on the broader picture of the deepening violence and civilian attacks nationwide before moving to consider the situation for each of the minority religions in the country and ending with recommendations.

State of Myanmar since the 2021 Coup

The UN's Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM) shared compelling evidence in its report on 8 August 2023 that Myanmar's military and associate militias are increasingly committing war crimes and crimes against humanity.¹ The crimes detailed in the report included the targeting of civilians in aerial bombings, the systematic burning of civilian homes and buildings often leading to the annihilation of entire villages, and an increase in mass executions of civilians and detained combatants. Evidence of torture and mass sexual violence was also found, with a focus on the widespread sexual and gender-based violence used as a military tactic during the 'clearance operations' involving the minority ethnic Rohingya from Myanmar in 2016 and 2017.

The situation in Myanmar is so grave that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, has termed what is happening a 'festering catastrophe'. He also warns that the country is in a 'deadly freefall into even deeper violence and heartbreak'.²

According to the Commissioner's latest report published on 19 September 2023, between 1 April 2022 and 31 July 2023, Myanmar's military (also known as the Tatmadaw) and their affiliates have:

- Caused a minimum of 4,108 deaths.
- Undertaken 687 airstrikes (a marked escalation, doubling the numbers in the 14 months following the coup; it must also be noted that increased use of air power and other advanced and heavy weaponry is a strong indicator of foreign sources continuing to

resource the junta).

- Conducted ground operations resulting in mass killings of 10 or more individuals in 22 documented cases utilising methods including immolation, dismemberment, rape, beheading, bludgeoning, and use of human shields against landmines and attacks.
- Destroyed over 75,000 buildings including homes, food storage and seed bank structures, and livestock.
- Arrested 24,836 people with 19,264 still in detention. 150 individuals have been sentenced to death by military-controlled courts in sham trials that do not abide by the legal principles of due process, independence and fair trial rights. Over 7,368 people have been convicted in ad hoc trials in this manner – in the absence of any defence counsel and most lasting just minutes.³

This immense assault on human life and rights has precipitated a crisis even more destructive than that experienced under previous regimes.

Cyclone Mocha

The arrival of Cyclone Mocha in May 2023 caused devastation across five states and regions – Chin, Kachin, Magway, Rakhine and Sagaing. The UN estimates that 7.9 million people were affected, with 1.6 million⁴ people in urgent need of aid. However, the junta has consistently blocked aid, imposed travel restrictions in Rakhine State and prevented international organisations from intervening - compounding the suffering of the people. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that local aid workers, activists and villagers see the restriction of aid as a way for the junta to tighten its grip on the country.⁵

Cyclone Mocha disproportionately affected those living in Rakhine State. This state is home to the Rohingya people group, a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority group who have faced a systematic campaign of repression over successive decades of military rule. (For more details on the Rohingya, see Muslim Persecution subheading below). With military-imposed travel bans on relief operations in the region and aid being instrumentalised, the suffering of the Rohingya deepened. Medical supplies, food, clean water, and adequate shelter are all desperately needed.

As many as 140,000 Rohingya have lived in poorly constructed shacks in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) since 2012 when communal violence broke out in what some have labelled an apartheid. These flimsy structures could not withstand the force of the cyclone and thus contributed greatly to the death toll.

The Myanmar military state the official death toll from Cyclone Mocha is 145 people⁶ and have acted to control any alternative figure by threatening local authorities and journalists who tried to assess the situation more accurately. The UN reports that on 6 September 2023 a

1 <https://iimm.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/G2312500-1.pdf>

2 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2023/07/myanmar-deadly-freefall-even-deeper-violence-says-turk>

3 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5459-situation-human-rights-myanmar-report-united-nations-high>

4 <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-cyclone-mocha-flash-appeal-may-2023>

5 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/20/myanmar-junta-blocks-lifesaving-cyclone-aid>

6 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-65646054>

local photojournalist was sentenced to 20 years in prison for his coverage of post-cyclone Rakhine State.⁷ Myanmar's government-in-exile, the National Unity Government (NUG, which includes members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) Myanmar's democratically elected government before the coup) assess the Rohingya death toll from the storm to be as high as 400 people.

The 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) and Cyclone Mocha Flash Appeal remain severely underfunded with a funding gap of 641.4M USD. Currently only 27% of the total requirements have been secured. As the UN explains further, 'This shortfall jeopardizes comprehensive assistance delivery and negatively impacts vulnerable communities. Urgent and substantial funding is essential to alleviate suffering and enhance the resilience of the affected communities amid this multifaceted crisis.'⁸

Internally Displaced Persons

Since the 2021 coup violent conflict and insecurity has caused nearly 1.7 million people to flee their homes. The total figure of all those internally displaced as of September 2023 is closer to 2 million,⁹ since hundreds of thousands were already displaced prior to the current violence.

Northwestern areas are home to the greatest number of new IDPs – in Chin, Magway and Sagaing, where over one million people are displaced. There are also over 500,000 IDPs in the Southeast – eastern Bago, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, southern Shan and Tanintharyi. Many of these regions are home to ethnic and religious minorities who are often targeted with particular intensity and have a long history of conflict with the Myanmar military.¹⁰

The humanitarian NGO Free Burma Rangers (FBR) reports that in Karenni (Kayah) State, all hospitals and clinics have come under aerial bombardment by the Tatmadaw, and many have also suffered mortar attacks on the ground. Often when survivors move and attempt to rebuild, they are targeted again.¹¹

Chan Thar village, a predominantly Catholic village in northwestern Sagaing Region has experienced continual assaults and arson attacks. In a raid on 14 January 2023, it was widely reported that a 129-year-old Catholic church and almost all of the few remaining houses in the village were set alight by regime troops. Myanmar Now recorded an anonymous villager stating: 'They have raided over thirty times now and this is the fourth time our village has been torched...essentially nothing is left...'¹²

Multiple bombardments by the Myanmar military from air or ground cause many people to be displaced multiple times over. The targeting of attack sites in quick succession after

initial attacks have caused utter devastation is also a known tactic of the Tatmadaw and is designed to both increase the death toll and dissuade those individuals who would rush to the aid of initial survivors from acting.

The latest September 2023 report of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights provides grim details of airstrikes and massacres. For example, on 11 April this year, in Pa Zi Gyi village, Kanbalu Township, in Sagaing region, a peaceful gathering of civilians was repeatedly bombed by the military's aircraft, causing the deaths of at least 150 people, including 19 women, 21 girls and 14 boys. One witness told the UN that there were 'people lying on the road, with body parts spread everywhere'. Some people, the UN reported, 'had no head, no arm, no leg' and 'you couldn't put your feet down without stepping on bodies or blood.'¹³

Compounding the tragedy, military helicopters returned for a second round, firing on the rescuers as they tried to carry the bodies to safety. And then, as 'bamboo-frame stretchers were used to transport remains to a field nearby', preparing for cremation, a fighter jet circled again three times, dropping bombs.

Religious Persecution

In June 2023, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) published a report on the state of religious freedom in Myanmar since the coup. It found that the Tatmadaw 'has violated the human rights of religious minorities and destroyed minority religious sites and places of worship in violation of international law and standards.'¹⁴

The ICJ report found that whilst the military initially focused on Buddhist clergy who supported resistance forces and on limiting freedom of expression and speech, the junta's focus has now broadened. Raids and attacks on places of worship and sacred sites, their destruction or military repurposing and their use as killing fields have all been evidenced. Some religious and sacred sites have also been used as detention camps and interrogation centres. The ICJ also notes the rapid acceleration in the number of indiscriminate airstrikes on civilians and religious infrastructure.¹⁵

Between February 2021 and April 2023, the commission found that 190 sites of religious or sacred significance were destroyed or damaged from sustained targeting using a range of methods including artillery shelling, airstrikes, and arson. Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah (Karenni), Mon, Rakhine and Shan States and Bago, Magway, Mandalay, Sagaing, Tanintharyi and Yangon Regions were affected. 'The sites comprised Christian religious buildings, including three convents; six Islamic religious sites, including two madrassas (Islamic schools) and one cemetery; and Buddhist religious

7 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2023/09/myanmar-turk-calls-new-thinking-end-unspeakable-tragedy>

8 <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-update-no-33-2-october-2023>

9 <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-update-no-32-8-september-2023>

10 <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-update-no-33-2-october-2023>

11 <https://www.freeburmarangers.org/2023/08/07/doctors-as-targets-many-killed-in-burma-armys-attacks-on-medical-facilities/>

12 <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/military-destroys-historic-church-more-than-100-houses-in-catholic-village/>

13 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5459-situation-human-rights-myanmar-report-united-nations-high>

14 <https://icj2.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Violations-of-the-right-to-freedom-of-religion-and-belief-since-the-coup-detat-in-Myanmar.pdf>

15 Ibid.

buildings, including stupas and nunneries; two animist shrines and one Metta Brahmaso religious building.¹⁶ The ICJ found that the military junta was directly responsible for at least 158 of these attacks.

In addition to the above, 64 raids on religious sites and buildings of worship were reported in the same time period across the country. Most were Buddhist sites, 15 were churches, five were Islamic places of worship and one was a Hindu temple. Military camps were set up in 110 religious buildings in 12 states and regions. The Tatmadaw violated these sites by conducting interrogations, detentions and even using these locations as killing fields.

Buddhist Nationalism

Whilst General Hlaing's regime seeks to silence opposition from any quarter of society, Hlaing and the military have a history of supporting the Buddhist nationalist agenda and have linked the domestic legitimacy of their rule with the protection of Buddhism in an attempt to give the coup an air of moral authority. Close to 90% of Myanmar's people are Buddhist and the junta characterises Myanmar as a Buddhist nation, striving to crush non-Burman, non-Buddhist ethnic and religious communities in particular.

Even though Article 34 of Myanmar's 2008 constitution guarantees the right to freedom of conscience and the profession and practice of religion, conditions are placed on these freedoms through the particular protection of Buddhism over and above other religions or beliefs in Article 361. The 'special status' given to Buddhism in the constitution leaves room for the discrimination against religious minorities in the name of defending Buddhism.

According to the US Institute of Peace, the military regime's public displays of support for Buddhism, including raising pagodas and statues of Buddha and visiting high-profile monks, have increased almost four-fold since the coup.¹⁷ The September 2021 release of Ashin Wirathu, a monk known for his Buddhist nationalist views, and particularly for intolerance towards Muslims, as well as the dropping of his sedition charges, alongside bestowing him with a prestigious national award in 2023, demonstrates the regime's desire to keep hard-line Buddhist factions on the junta's side in a context where they face significant opposition from many sectors of society. General Hlaing's actions have been widely criticised as an attempt to use religion to bolster his grip on power.

In July 2022 Major General Zaw Min Tun, incumbent Deputy Minister of Information, promised any verbal or written opposition to Buddhism, online or in the real world, would be punished according to the law.

Buddhists who speak out against the regime are targeted as part of the broader military crackdown on dissent. Many

Buddhist monks have remained neutral since the coup, but the Tatmadaw detained several monks who were prominent supporters of Aung San Suu Kyi and the democratic transition on the morning of the 2021 coup and have subsequently imprisoned the small minority of monks who have spoken out against the present autocracy. International Crisis Group reports some 60 monks are thought to have been detained since the coup (as of March 2023) and many others have been forcibly disrobed or have had to flee.¹⁸ The destruction of numerous Buddhist monasteries has also been reported – on 13 March 2023, the BBC reported 28 people, including three monks, were shot inside a monastery in Shan State following heavy shelling and burning of the local village.¹⁹

Muslim Persecution

Approximately 4.3% of the population of Myanmar is Muslim. Sporadic violence against Muslims has occurred throughout Myanmar since 2012. The Tatmadaw has stirred up anti-Muslim hatred through a broad campaign of discrimination, hate speech and violence against Muslims. This is separate from, although related to, the crisis facing the Rohingyas in Rakhine state. Violations have included the closure of mosques, the demolition of homes and schools, discrimination in the judicial system and within society, and mob violence.

Since the coup, the Tatmadaw have destroyed a number of mosques and killed or imprisoned Muslim leaders. In April 2021 the U.S. Office of International Religious Freedom detailed the horrific treatment of one Muslim muezzin who was found hanging, with his body desecrated as an insult to Islam, in a mosque in Yangon region. Locals stated he was likely killed by the regime's security forces.²⁰

The Rohingya, a predominantly Muslim people from Rakhine State, and other ethnic and religious minorities are denied citizenship due to discrimination and so lack any formal protections through Myanmar's constitution, which provides only for citizens.

The violent military operations in 2017 (where massacres, rape and arson were widespread military tactics) have been categorised as genocide by the US Department of State.²¹ The UN, US and numerous CSOs have identified these attacks as ethnic cleansing, genocide and crimes against humanity.

It has been over six years since the start of 'clearance operations' against the Rohingya yet their situation remains grave, and no justice is in sight. The same military units implicated in the 2017 atrocities have been redeployed in operations around the country.

Human Rights Watch reports over 730,000 Rohingya fled these brutal acts for flood-prone camps in an increasingly hostile Bangladesh. Approximately 600,000 remain under oppressive rule in Myanmar.²²

16 Ibid., pp. 9-10

17 <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/12/myanmar-coup-military-regime-seeks-weaponize-religion>

18 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/330-silent-sangha-buddhist-monks-post-coup-myanmar>

19 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-64935833>

20 <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/burma/>

21 <https://www.state.gov/burma-genocide/>

22 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/20/future-bleak-rohingya-bangladesh-myanmar>

The junta have imposed new movement restrictions and aid blockages on Rohingya villages and camps, increasing food and water shortages, disease and malnutrition. Rohingya arrests and arbitrary detentions have also increased in frequency. The blockade of aid and arbitrary detentions are more breaches in an already extensive list of atrocity crimes.

Christian Persecution

Christians make up between 6-8 percent of Myanmar's population and are mostly from ethnic minorities concentrated along the country's borders in Chin, Kachin and Kayah states where their experiences of marginalisation and forced assimilation have contributed to decades-long armed struggles for self-determination.

Since the coup there has been a marked escalation in the targeting of ethnic and religious minorities including in the aerial bombardment of villages implementing a 'scorched earth policy' through the systematic and widespread total destruction of villages. Christians seem to be targeted with particular intensity – both for their religion and their ethnicity. Many Christian-majority villages have been subjected to continual raids and attacks, leaving Christians in a constant state of fear for their lives.

From 1 February 2021 until the end of 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has documented an increase of over 33,000 internally displaced persons in Chin state, 4,100 in Kachin State and 76,000 in Kayah state.²³

The military has bombed, mined and torched churches of all Christian denominations. According to a 2022 report by Radio Free Asia, 66 churches in Chin State alone have been destroyed.²⁴ That figure is ever-increasing as more churches were targeted at the start of 2023 including the setting fire to an historic Catholic church, convent and local village of almost 500 homes which were all destroyed in Chan Thar, an area with a large Catholic population. Around 3,000 people were forced to flee as a result. A local man reports that this is the 30th time the village has been raided and the fourth time it has been torched in approximately 8 months – they have nothing left but ashes.²⁵

Christian leaders have also been arrested or kidnapped and imprisoned on vague charges. Prominent Kachin Baptist leader Rev. Hkalam Samson, who is internationally known for his humanitarian and community work, was arrested in December 2022 and was sentenced to six years in prison on charges of terrorism and inciting opposition to the military junta. The boldness shown by Hlaing's regime in detaining even internationally well-known figures demonstrates a trampling of international code and a total lack of impunity.

Recommendations

To the government of the United Kingdom:

- At every possible opportunity, in public and private, condemn the atrocities perpetrated by the junta on its people and raise the profile of this crisis through international influence and deprive the regime of international legitimacy through diplomatic efforts.
- Increase the speed and breadth of targeted sanctions designed to cut off the junta's supply of funds, military hardware, and resources, and follow the EU's lead in sanctioning Myanmar's state-owned oil and gas company, Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) and other revenues Myanmar still receives from gas resources.
- Work with those countries in the region that are receiving refugees from Myanmar - including Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, and Thailand - to encourage the principle of non-refoulement.
- Provide public support for the fact that the voluntary, safe, and dignified return of refugees, in particular the Rohingya, is currently not possible during the current crisis.
- Act to ensure that the Tatmadaw are held to account for the atrocities they are committing and have committed in the past, using the UK's influence as the UNSC's 'penholder' to refer Myanmar to the International Criminal Court. The case already brought against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice also requires greater support.
- Conduct an urgent public review into UK aid spending in Myanmar to ensure no funds are reaching either the State Administration Council (SAC) or the military and pursue cross-border humanitarian aid working with local civil society to help ensure aid is not instrumentalised by the Myanmar military or diverted for their own ends.
- The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)'s Five-Point Consensus (5PC) - a peace plan agreed by ASEAN in April 2021, calls for an end to violence in Myanmar and dialogue among all parties. This plan was agreed with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and yet the plan has been a catastrophic failure. We call upon the UK government to encourage ASEAN member states to move beyond the 5PC, towards developing greater accountability mechanisms and increasing pressure through coordinated action by member states to stop resourcing the junta and enforce existing sanctions in their region.

23 <https://reporting.unhcr.org/myanmar-emergency-displacement-overview-map-2851>

24 <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/religiousbuildings-07082022181759.html>

25 <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/military-destroys-historic-church-more-than-100-houses-in-catholic-village/>

