



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# COUNTRY UPDATE: BURMA

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### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

## A Disintegrating Nation and Adverse Impact on Religious Freedom

### Overview

In 2024, the escalating conflict in Burma continued to negatively affect conditions for freedom of religion or belief. Since the February 2021 coup, the Burmese military and its State Administration Council (SAC) have pursued an aggressive military campaign to maintain authority, which has included targeting religious leaders, communities, and sites and has exacerbated social tensions between ethnoreligious communities. As a result of the conflict, more than three million people remained either internally displaced in Burma or outside the country as refugees.

This country update highlights impact on religious communities as a result of the military and political situation within Burma, and the global response to this conflict.

### Military and Political Situations and Impact on Religious Communities

Independent experts on the situation [assessed](#) that as of March 2024, the Burmese military and SAC lacked stable control of approximately 86 percent of the country's territory and 67 percent of the population. The SAC [continued](#) to lose ground in the following months. Parallel governance models providing public services have emerged in some parts of the territories controlled by resistance actors.

A 2024 research report [showed](#) that the pro-democracy National Unity Government (NUG) received broad popular support for rebuilding Burma as a peaceful, multiethnic nation-state. Meanwhile, many ethnic minorities expressed concern about the NUG as being dominated by members of the Bamar Buddhist majority. The NUG has made some efforts to include minority representation, such as the [appointment](#) of an ethnic Rohingya, Aung Kyaw Moe, to a ministerial post. Moreover, in 2024, the NUG has [continued](#) to appeal for international recognition as the legitimate government of Burma.



### Resistance Groups Consolidating Control of Territory

Since [October 2023](#), resistance groups, including ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), have continued to consolidate control in various states and regions, including at border crossings around the country. At the same time, the military junta's aerial superiority enabled it to target resistance groups, including religious communities that support these groups, even as the resistance has made advances on the ground. In early December 2023, representatives of different Chin communities, which are predominantly Christian, [established](#) a new "Chinland" constitution and governing structure, which pledged secular governance, a change from the Buddhist-nationalist governance model championed by the SAC. However, even in some areas cleared of the Burmese military, stability has remained elusive. In May, tensions [erupted](#) between groups associated with the Chinland Council and other Chin State ethnic organizations such as the Zomi Revolutionary Army. Potential conflict between various ethnic organizations within Chin State could prevent the return of Chin and Zomi peoples who fled, in part, from religious persecution perpetrated by the Burmese military. This situation is similar to certain parts of Kachin State where the Burmese military remains, especially as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) attempts to assert control. The instability in Kachin State has heightened vulnerabilities for Christian minority communities and members of the Buddhist majority in the region whose communities, houses of worship, and religious leaders the Burmese military may target for their support of the resistance.

In Rakhine State, the dominant EAO, the Arakan Army (AA), has continued to consolidate control. The AA is an EAO from the Rakhine ethnic minority community, which is predominantly Buddhist. In early 2024, it resumed incursions into northern Rakhine State territories with significant populations of predominantly Muslim Rohingya. In March, Commander-in-Chief of the AA Twan Mrat Naing made a [post](#) on social media using pejorative language referring to Rohingya as "Bengali." In May, he [claimed](#) members of the Rohingya diaspora were "dragging the struggle into the wrong direction" and wanted to create a "separate Islamic safe zone through foreign interventions." As the AA advanced in April and May, it is unclear whether the Burmese military or the AA were responsible for the destruction of Rohingya villages and towns. For example, unverified [reports](#) from the community indicate the AA was responsible for burning the town of Buthidaung.

### Conscription

Throughout the conflict, the Burmese military has experienced unsustainable personnel losses. [Estimates](#) put the total number of military personnel before the coup at between 300,000 and 400,000, though this number may have been inflated; it currently stands at around 150,000. In response to losses, the military has returned generals from retirement and led massive recruitment plans.

In February 2024, the Burmese military [used](#) a conscription law to replenish its depleted ranks. This law [mandated](#) that all men aged 18–35 and women aged 18–27 are eligible for conscription. The Burmese military

has actively *targeted* Rohingya men for conscription, even though the conscription law specifically requires citizenship. Successive governments in Burma have consistently *denied* Rohingya citizenship since its 1982 Citizenship Law.

Reports *indicate* the Rohingya insurgent group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) has coordinated with the Burmese military on conscription within Rakhine. Another insurgent group, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), has reportedly *forced* Rohingya from refugee camps at Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, to fight for the Burmese military, although RSO *denies* these allegations. Observers have *noted* that the forced or voluntary recruiting of Rohingya into the Burmese military's forces has heightened intercommunal tensions in Rakhine, including between Rohingya and the AA. However, some members of the Rohingya community reported to USCIRF that the AA has also forcibly recruited Rohingya to fight for the group.

## Attacks on Religious Communities

### Targeting Religious Leaders

The Burmese military has targeted leaders to intimidate ethnoreligious minorities. In April 2023, the military sentenced *Reverend Dr. Hkalam Samson*, a Kachin Baptist Convention leader, to six years' imprisonment on manufactured charges of terrorism, unlawful association, and inciting opposition to the regime. In April 2024, the regime released Reverend Samson alongside 3,300 prisoners but within 24 hours rearrested him. Members of his religious community attribute the detention of leaders such as Reverend Samson as the military's effort to intimidate and coerce the Kachin Baptist Convention and the KIA. The authorities again *released* Reverend Samson in July 2024. Attacks on religious leaders committed by unknown assailants are not investigated. On March 18, 2024, gunmen *shot* a Kachin Baptist pastor in Mogaung Township. On April 12, two masked individuals *shot* a Catholic priest during Mass at St. Patrick's Church in Mohnyin village in Kachin State. On June 19, the military *shot* and killed Bhaddanta Muninda Bhivamsa, a senior Buddhist monk, in Mandalay Region, allegedly mistaking his vehicle as belonging to resistance forces. It is unclear whether the monk was intentionally targeted.

### Religious Sites

The SAC continues its policy of Bamar-Buddhist nationalism. For example, in February, Chairman of the SAC Senior General Min Aung Hlaing *met* with a Buddhist youth organization and stressed the need to protect the Bamar race and Buddhist religion. This nationalism has historically targeted ethnoreligious minorities such as Chin and Kachin Protestants and other Christians, Karenni Catholics, and the predominantly Muslim Rohingya. In the past, the military pursued as part of this "Bamarization" a policy of constructing Buddhist pagodas in prominent places and wherever it established military outposts. Reports from those associated with EAOs in Christian-majority areas express confusion on how best to manage these Buddhist structures, particularly in the absence of a local Buddhist population.

The SAC has *targeted* churches and other religious sites, including Buddhist monasteries, in its attacks. From 2021 to December 2023, observers *estimated* that the conflict has led to the destruction of over 220 churches nationwide, including potentially up to 100 Catholic churches in Kayah State. Attacks on houses of worship continued in 2024. For example, in January, the military *burned* down a Catholic church in Ye-U Township, Sagaing Region. Military airstrikes on February 5 *struck* a village church and damaged other buildings, including a school in Demoso Township, Kayah State. On May 11 and 12, military airstrikes *destroyed* homes and both a Catholic and a Baptist church in Tonzang Township in Chin State. On June 8, military airstrikes *targeted* a Buddhist monastery in Sagaing Township, Sagaing Region, killing 13 people, including three Buddhist monks. On August 15, a SAC airstrike targeting a church *killed* 11 civilians, including two children, and severely injured 11 others in Kyeintali Town, Gwa Township, Rakhine State.

### Refugee Communities

The continued violence since 2021 has led to an increase in internal displacement. As of September 2024, at least 3.4 million people are internally *displaced* across Burma. The violence also has pushed more Burmese to flee the country and prevented the repatriation of refugees who fled before the coup. Rohingya refugees, no matter where they reside, remain vulnerable to exploitation, including from human traffickers who abuse and torture them. The conflict has sparked new waves of refugees, including from other ethnic and religious minority communities such as Chin, Kachin, and Karenni communities.

## Bangladesh

In 2024, insecurity has continued to spread in Cox's Bazar, which already hosts over [958,000](#) Rohingya as a result of the 2016 to 2017 genocide against them by the Burma military. Since the Bangladeshi authorities [refuse](#) to permit the construction of concrete homes for refugees, the camps are [exposed](#) to climate disasters and fire. In January 2024, a fire [destroyed](#) around 800 shelters, leaving nearly 7,000 homeless. In addition, funding cuts in recent years have [impacted](#) food and healthcare access. Rohingya refugees do not have legal status to work, [exposing](#) them to exploitation such as human trafficking, child labor, and other abuses. [Moreover, violent clashes](#) between RSO and ARSA have continued in certain parts of Cox's Bazar.

## India

Reports [indicate](#) there may be as many as 40,000 Burmese nationals residing in Mizoram State, India, over 8,000 in Manipur, and over 5,000 in New Delhi. The majority are [Chin and Zomi](#) Christian communities who have fled, in part, because of religious persecution from the Burmese military. While the Indian government has refused to allow the United Nations' (UN) refugee agency, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), access into eastern states, it has allowed for some Burmese refugees to resettle in third countries.

## Southeast Asia

Beside Bangladesh and India, the largest concentrations of those who sought refuge or asylum from Burma are in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. These countries are not parties to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.

As of February 2024, 89 percent of the 188,210 refugees [registered](#) with the UNHCR in Malaysia were from Burma, including over 108,000 Rohingya. However, Malaysia remains a restrictive place for those seeking refugee or asylum status who are unregistered with the UNHCR. Rohingya girls and women are particularly [vulnerable](#) to human trafficking and exposure to violence and child marriages. Reports from members of the Chin and Zomi communities in Malaysia—many of whom fled Burma due to the military's targeting of their religious community—indicate the authorities prevent those unable to receive refugee registration from accessing public services such as education.

In April 2024, Thailand [announced](#) it was ready to accept 100,000 additional refugees from Burma as members of the resistance took over Burma's border regions. As of September, Thailand already [hosts](#) at least 81,035 refugees from Burma.

Rohingya fleeing Cox's Bazar through the Andaman Sea typically land in Indonesia's Aceh or North Sumatra provinces. Indonesian authorities are reluctant to allow these ships to come ashore, and there is popular resentment against Rohingya. At the end of 2023, protests [erupted](#) against the presence of Rohingya refugees in Aceh. In March 2024, a boat carrying a reported total of 151 Rohingya [capsized](#) off the coast of Aceh, with only 75 making it to shore. From November 2023 to May 2024, around 2,300 Rohingya [arrived](#) in Aceh and North Sumatra.

## Global Context

### Regional Response

Observers have [noted](#) that the Burmese military benefited from a weak international [response](#) to its genocide of Rohingyas and atrocities of other religious communities, including crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other human rights abuses. Since resistance advances in October 2023, Russia has remained a supporter of the Burmese military and the SAC even as China's support for the regime has [sourred](#). In pursuit of its own economic, security, and geostrategic interests, China [continued](#) engagement with both the SAC and with certain EAOs, even as the two groups competed for territory. Advances by EAOs such as the AA may also [prompt](#) India and Bangladesh to consider engagement with the EAOs due to the countries' [economic](#) and [security](#) interests.

Regional approaches to solving the crisis, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) [Five-Point Consensus](#), have been ineffective. Agreed upon between ASEAN member states and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in April 2021, the Five-Point Consensus outlined five steps toward addressing the conflict. These steps were: an immediate end to violence in the country, dialogue among all parties, the appointment of a special envoy, humanitarian assistance by ASEAN, and the special envoy's visit to Burma to meet with all parties. In March 2024, a representative of the SAC [attended](#) an ASEAN meeting in Laos for the first time. On July 27, ASEAN again [condemned](#) the violence in Burma and called for the safe and transparent delivery of humanitarian assistance. These different,

uncoordinated, and lackluster approaches have been ineffective in addressing the conflict as Burma continues to disintegrate into separate territories and EAOs consolidate territory and establish parallel governance structures. This will further jeopardize religious freedom, particularly for internally displaced refugees and ethnoreligious minority communities.

### **International Efforts toward Accountability for Rohingya**

Individuals and countries are pursuing legal actions against the Burmese military to seek accountability for genocide and crimes against humanity targeting the Rohingya community in multilateral courts such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and in criminal courts in Argentina and the [Philippines](#). In May 2024, former UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar (Burma) Tomas Ojea Quintana [reported](#) that the Argentine case was moving forward and receiving evidence from the testimonies of survivors. In July, the ICJ [permitted](#) Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Britain, and the Maldives to intervene in the genocide case against Burma brought forward by The Gambia in 2017.

### **United Nations**

UN human rights agencies and officials continued to raise concerns about the situation in Burma. In April, the UN Human Rights Council [adopted](#) a resolution calling for restrictions on the military's access to jet fuel, but China and Russia's support for the junta prevented further action at the UN Security Council. In July, the Human Rights Council [adopted](#) another resolution on Burma, condemning all violations of human rights in the country. The resolution also raised other aspects of the conflict, including calling for the Burmese government to combat incitement to hatred and hate speech against Rohingya and other minorities, an investigation into allegations of sexual and gender-based violence and abuses against women and children and alleged war crimes, and the elimination of statelessness and institutionalized discrimination against members of ethnic and religious minorities, particularly the Rohingya. In August, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk [expressed](#) grave concerns about the deteriorating situation across Burma, particularly in Rakhine State where hundreds of civilians have reportedly been killed while trying to flee the fighting. A month later, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights Nada Al-Nashif also [warned](#) that the crisis in Burma "continues to sink into an abyss of human suffering."

### **Conclusion**

The situation in Burma continues to deteriorate as certain EAOs are consolidating territory and establishing parallel government structures. As Burma continues to fragment, vulnerable religious communities are further exposed to violence. In its [2024 Annual Report](#), USCIRF continued to call on the U.S. Department of State to designate Burma as a Country of Particular Concern for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. USCIRF recommends the U.S. government engage with the Burmese opposition, including the NUG and EAOs, to prioritize religious freedom issues—such as voluntary repatriation and restored citizenship for the Rohingya community—as a prerequisite for recognition and/or ongoing and substantial engagement. USCIRF also recommends the U.S. government work with regional governments of Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand to assist Rohingya and other refugee communities from Burma.



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