STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS & SANCTIONS IN MYANMAR

MARCH 2025 REPORT

Summary. This report reviews the March 2025 developments relating to human rights in Myanmar.

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I. Coup, Crackdown on Protests and Civilian Resistance

On March 9, junta leader Min Aung Hlaing told reporters that opposition forces should work with Myanmar's regime to create a multi-party democracy and that Russia and Belarus will send observers to oversee the promised upcoming election. He said rebel armies should focus on what is possible and what should be done, rather than their hopes. Western countries, the civilian National Unity Government ("NUG") and other anti-regime groups say any election will be a sham to maintain the regime's grip on power.

According to local resistance groups, on March 2, approximately 200 regime soldiers attacked Myay Zon Taw Village in the Yay Lel Kyun Island area between the Chindwin and Irrawaddy rivers.⁴ During the attack, regime forces burned down houses for three days, killing five elderly people.⁵ A resident of Myay Zon Taw reported that almost all of the 300 homes in the village were burned down by the regime forces.⁶

On March 9, the Natogyi People's Defense Force ("PDF") claimed that it killed nearly 50 regime troops and detained 14 others in Natogyi Township, Mandalay Region. According to a representative of the PDF, three resistance fighters were killed, and seven others injured.

Between March 15-16, the Katha PDF clashed with junta forces in Katha Township, northern Sagaing Region, resulting in approximately 40 junta soldiers killed and 30 captured. Two resistance fighters were also reportedly killed. A viral video shows detained regime troops saying they were forcibly recruited to fight for the regime. The clash comes as junta troops advance on the Sagaing Region resistance stronghold of Myaung from Yesagyo Township on the Magway-Sagaing border. Supported by artillery battalions from Myingyan and Yesagyo as well as warplanes and warships, junta troops have been raiding villages on the Magway-Sagaing border since February 26, forcing more than 20,000 people from their homes in over 20 villages, according to Nway Oo from the Civil Defense and Security Organization of Myaung.

On March 15 and March 17, junta forces killed at least 41 civilians, including children and novice monks, in an airstrike on a crowded market in Mandalay Region and a monastery, which was serving as a displacement shelter in Shan State. "The junta aircraft flew very low and purposely attacked the monastery, knowing that civilian IDPs were sheltering inside," a local woman told *The Irrawaddy*. The civilian NUG condemned the latest deadly attacks in a statement, accusing the regime of brazenly violating international humanitarian laws, including treaties protecting children.

During the month of March, *The Irrawaddy* estimates that more than 100 civilians were killed by junta airstrikes.¹⁷ *The Irrawaddy* recorded 40 fatalities in Letpanhla village, Singu Township, Mandalay Region, eight in Myaung and Kani townships in Sagaing Region, 55 in Myaing, Pauk, Htilin and Gangaw townships in Magway Region, and 10 in Nawnghkio Township in northern Shan State.¹⁸

The Myanmar regime is reportedly tightening control over major urban centers by bolstering and arming home-front militias. ¹⁹ In Mandalay, the so-called "People's Security and Anti-Terrorism" teams have recently started carrying weapons. ²⁰ Initially deployed for routine tasks like vehicle checks, the blue-uniformed militias are now carrying firearms like G-3 rifles

and carbines, according to locals.²¹ They are tasked with enforcing the junta's writ within the community and consist mostly of men over 35 who are too old for military service.²² Similar militias are reportedly operating in Yangon, Thingangyun, North Dagon, Hlaing Thar Yar, Shwepyithar, Twante, Dala and other townships.²³

The NUG announced a temporary halt to offensive military operations in areas affected by the 7.7-magnitude earthquake that struck northwest of Sagaing on March 28 to allow for humanitarian relief and rescue efforts. The disaster caused widespread destruction and has officially claimed at least 1,644 lives across multiple regions and states including Sagaing, Mandalay, Bago, Naypyitaw, Magway and southern Shan, with the death toll expected to climb dramatically and tens of thousands reported injured. The NUG also urged the United Nations, international relief agencies and humanitarian organizations to provide immediate assistance and medical support to earthquake victims, offering to cooperate with them and guaranteeing security in areas under its control.

II. Political Developments

A. Rohingya Refugee Crisis

The decision by the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump to halt most foreign aid and dismantle the U.S. Agency for International Development ("USAID") has caused turmoil in the humanitarian sector globally and the United Nations ("UN") has warned that it will create dire conditions for refugees. ²⁷ At Bangladesh refugee camps, Rohingya refugees reportedly fear the cuts will compound food and health issues and lead to a surge in crime. ²⁸

The U.S. has been the largest provider of aid to the Rohingya refugees, contributing nearly \$2.4 billion since 2017, according to the State Department.²⁹ The freeze on funds has forced five U.S.-funded hospitals to reduce services, Mohammed Mizanur Rahman, Bangladesh's top official overseeing the refugee camps, said.³⁰ About 48 health facilities, including 11 primary care centers, have also been affected, leaving many refugees without access to essential care, said Hasina Rahman, Bangladesh country director for the International Rescue Committee.³¹ David Bugden, principal coordinator of the Inter-Sector Coordination Group, which oversees NGO efforts at Cox's Bazar, said around 300,000 refugees have been impacted by disruptions in healthcare services.³²

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres visited the border district of Cox's Bazar, after the UN World Food Program ("WFP") announced potential cuts to emergency food supplies following the shutdown of USAID operations.³³ Starting in April, the WFP may be forced to reduce food vouchers for the Rohingya from \$12.50 to just \$6 per month because of a lack of funding, raising fears of rising hunger in the overcrowded camps.³⁴ The UN children's agency UNICEF said children in the camps are experiencing the worst levels of malnutrition since 2017, with admissions for severe malnutrition treatment up 27% in February compared with the same month last year.³⁵

On March 24, the International Organization for Migration ("IOM") with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and partners called on the international community to enhance its support for Rohingya refugees and their hosts in Bangladesh amid rising insecurity in Myanmar and

ongoing forced displacement.³⁶ The 2025-26 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis brings together 113 partners and is jointly launched by IOM and UNHCR under the leadership of the Bangladesh Government.³⁷ This first-ever multi-year funding appeal seeks \$934.5 million in its first year to reach some 1.48 million people, including Rohingya refugees and host communities.³⁸

In March, the European Commission allocated €32.3 million in aid to support Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh.³⁹ Funding will be used for food assistance and nutrition, maintenance of the camps' shelters and other facilities, and provision of essential services such as healthcare, emergency education and access to water and sanitation.⁴⁰

On March 27, the Trump administration said it will provide \$73 million in new financial aid to Rohingya refugees through the WFP.⁴¹

B. Corruption

On March 7, the *Irrawaddy* identified multiple businesspeople with close ties to the junta who joined junta chief Min Aung Hlaing's trip to Russia.⁴² The businesspeople included Aung Myo Min Din, a hotelier with close ties to junta boss Min Aung Hlaing's family and Min Aung Hlaing's son Aung Pyae Sone, whose business interests in Myanmar include solar power plant projects.⁴³ All are reportedly expected to be the beneficiaries of the trip.⁴⁴

On March 22, deputy junta chief Soe Win admitted that the regime has had to grapple with daily cases of corruption in conscription at all levels over the past year. Despite widespread reports of extortion and graft by junta officials in connection with conscriptions, the regime has previously only acknowledged one conscription corruption case when it took action against a police officer and administrators in Shwebo, Sagaing Region in January 2025. This marks the first public acknowledgement by high-ranking junta officials of rampant extortion and corruption in conscription.

C. International Community / Sanctions

On March 4, Myanmar's junta chief, Min Aung Hlaing, met with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin, completing his fourth visit to Russia since the 2021 coup. ⁴⁸ During the meeting, the two countries signed 10 Memorandums of Understanding covering sectors including nuclear energy, education, sport, trade and investment, and others. ⁴⁹ This visit was the junta chief's first official visit to Moscow at the invitation of President Putin and was the first time that any country had extended a presidential invitation to the junta leader. ⁵⁰

Following the meeting with President Putin, the junta chief attended the Myanmar-Russia Business Forum and met with Russian Defense Minister Andrey Belousov on March 5. ⁵¹ During his remarks at the forum, the junta chief encouraged Russian business owners to bring their wealth and technologies to the Asia region, particularly Myanmar. ⁵²

On March 7, the Canadian government announced additional sanctions against Myanmar for "undermining the peace, security and stability of the country and contributing to gross human rights violations." ⁵³ Among those sanctioned were 13 Myanmar senior government officials and

three entities accused of "gross systematic human rights violations" and for taking part in "the entrenched violence, repression, instability and overall worsening crisis in Myanmar."⁵⁴

The junta chief met with China's Special Envoy for Asian Affairs, Deng Xijun, in Naypyitaw on March 11 to discuss China's support for the junta's planned election, their joint crackdown on cyber scams and border trade. ⁵⁵ The Chinese envoy further met with junta Foreign Minister Than Swe to discuss enhancing bilateral ties, stabilizing the Myanmar-China border, boosting cooperation to combat cyber-fraud, and progress in Myanmar's peace and national reconciliation process. ⁵⁶

On March 14, the UN's World Food Program said that it would be forced to cut-off one million people in Myanmar from its food aid program due to critical funding shortfalls. ⁵⁷ The announcement follows the United States' cuts to international aid funding, which had previously provided the World Food Program with US\$4.4 billion of its US\$9.7 billion budget in 2024. ⁵⁸

On March 17, the UN's special rapporteur on Myanmar, Tom Andrews, said that the "sudden, chaotic withdrawal of support, principally by the government of the United States, [was] already having a crushing impact on the people of Myanmar." ⁵⁹ He further lamented that the funding cuts enacted by the United States was not about "efficiency and effectiveness of aid programs" but was instead "about making politically motivated and demonstrably false declaration about corruption, waste and abuse that will cause immense suffering and cost untold numbers of lives." ⁶⁰

On March 18, 290 civil society organizations from Myanmar and around the world "issued an open letter to United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the UN General Assembly, urging an immediate investigation into potential conflicts of interest involving UN Special Envoy for Myanmar, Julie Bishop." ⁶¹ The letter followed human rights group Justice for Myanmar's March 9 report that Bishop was an advisor for a mining company that had partnered with two Chinese state-owned companies that are "reportedly active in Myanmar [projects that] help fund Myanmar's military." ⁶² The open letter "also demanded the immediate termination of Bishop's mandate" due to these alleged ties. ⁶³

During the 353rd session of the International Labor Organization ("ILO") Governing Body from March 10-20, the ILO moved to impose sanctions on the Myanmar junta. ⁶⁴ On March 19, the ILO Governing Body drafted a resolution which is expected to be formally adopted at the ILO conference in June and encompasses cooperation with the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar to "ensure the safety of trade unionists and human rights defenders."

Following the earthquake that struck Myanmar on March 28, each of South Korea, New Zealand, China, Hong Kong, Russia, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States have pledged assistance to Myanmar. ⁶⁶

III. Civil and Political Rights

A. Freedom of Speech, Assembly and Association

Parents are now reportedly forced to compel their children to appear for conscription and will be held responsible if their children do not show.⁶⁷ One mother from Pyigyitagun Township said that she was summoned to the conscription office to state her son's location.⁶⁸ The officials allegedly threatened to imprison her if she cannot locate and turn him in to the office.⁶⁹ In other areas, coalitions of officials, soldiers, police, and militias have reportedly taken family members hostage if they cannot produce their family members to be conscripted.⁷⁰ According to other reports, authorities have also "threatened to seal off houses if eligible individuals fail to report" for conscription.⁷¹ One source reports that these threats against the families of conscripted individuals are in response to alleged bribery that helped some families evade conscription.⁷²

The Irrawaddy reports that over 40,000 migrant workers have been trapped in Myanmar since January, when the military regime banned civilians selected for conscription from leaving the country.⁷³ Under a bylaw introduced on January 23, men selected for mandatory military service who have passed medicals and are on waiting lists for training are barred from travelling.⁷⁴ The new rule has forced over 40,000 documented male workers, who were ready to leave the country for overseas jobs, to cancel travel plans.⁷⁵

The junta recently admitted to certain misconduct in its conscription system. Gen. Soe Win, Vice-Senior General and Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Defense Services, said "Some recruitment committees have not followed legal procedures, leading to financial corruption and difficulties for some conscripts." He called on military personnel to "report any misconduct by recruitment committees to the relevant authorities."

The junta arrested numerous people who are allegedly "aiding and abetting a junior doctor who joined the nationwide Civil Disobedience Movement" who tried to travel and study in Dubai using a certificate from a school run by the NUG's Ministry of Education. The junta considers the school to be an "illegal medical university." Four notary service providers were arrested for simply notarizing the certificate. The arrests also reached to some of the highest levels of government—the deputy director of the Foreign Ministry's Yangon notary division was taken into custody.

B. Freedom of the Press and Censorship

Addressing the "Forum on Myanmar Beyond 2025: Challenges and Opportunities in the Multipolar World" in Naypyitaw on March 21, junta boss Min Aung Hlaing accused local and international media of distorting the truth about post-coup Myanmar.⁸³ The forum was organized by the Ministry of Information to "inform the world about the true situation in Myanmar and encourage their cooperation with the regime based on understanding and sympathy, counter accusations against the regime, and enhance the image of the country."⁸⁴ Min Aung Hlaing suggested that reports of indiscriminate regime airstrikes and other atrocities were fake news, branding media who published them as bogus.⁸⁵

On March 13, *Mizzima* published "Journalism and Media Safety in Myanmar, Fourth Quarter and Annual Report 2024," detailing the continuing challenges faced by journalists and media workers since the military coup.⁸⁶ Junta arrests of journalists decreased in 2024, compared to 2021 to 2023. ⁸⁷ However, Myanmar continues to be one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist.⁸⁸ Approximately 209 journalists and news workers have been arrested since the 2021 coup, and 55 remain in detention.⁸⁹ In addition to targeting journalists, the junta shut down four publishing and printing houses during the last quarter of 2024.⁹⁰

On March 15, the Trump Administration announced it was terminating funding for the U.S. Agency for Global Media ("USAGM") and placing journalists at *Voice of America, Radio Free Asia*, and other U.S.-funded outlets on unpaid leave.⁹¹ According to Reporters Without Borders ("RSF"), the move directly endangers USAGM journalists around the world, including Burmese reporters in Myanmar and Thailand.⁹² A *Radio Free Asia* employee said, of the funding cuts, "[w]iping us out with the strike of a pen is just terrible."⁹³ The chief editor of *Democratic Voice of Burma* ("DVB") said, "[i]t reminded me of February 1, 2021 when the Burma military seized power, they immediately shut down DVB, and [our signal] suddenly disappeared."⁹⁴

On March 30, the military junta announced that foreign journalists would be denied permission to enter Myanmar to cover the deadly March 28 earthquake. The junta's spokesperson Major General Zaw Min Tun cited security concerns, such as widespread destruction, lack of electricity and water shortages, as reasons for the ban. According to a local journalist, the regime is using the ban to control the media coverage of its disaster response. In the aftermath of the earthquake, the junta has continued airstrikes on civilians, and has allegedly blocked emergency aid supplies from reaching emergency workers in Sagaing and Magway.

IV. Economic Development

A. Economic Development—Legal Framework, Foreign Investment

Executives from Chinese state-owned firm CITIC met with junta officials, namely Investment and Foreign Economic Relations Minister Kan Zaw, Commerce Minister Tun Ohn and the Rakhine State chief minister, on February 28 to press for speedy implementation of the planned Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone and deep-sea port under Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. ⁹⁹ The meeting focused on how to expedite the project even though significant portions of Rakhine State are not under Myanmar regime control. ¹⁰⁰

On February 18, the Myanmar junta enacted the Private Security Service Law, which effectively enables Chinese private security organizations to be stationed in Myanmar to protect Beijing's interests in the country, including Belt and Road Initiative-related projects. Belt and Road Initiative projects, first announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013, seek to strengthen infrastructure connectivity between China, the rest of Asia, Europe and Africa. However, critics allege that Belt and Road Initiative projects are often financed through loans that recipient countries struggle to repay, creating economic dependencies that evolve into security dependencies. In Myanmar, resistance to Chinese infrastructure has reportedly been

widespread, with communities objecting to environmental damage, land seizures and minimal economic benefits to local residents. 104

B. Economic Development—Infrastructure, Major Projects

Myanmar's junta is trying to revive development of the Dawei Mega-Project with Russian funds, which was formerly to be developed in cooperation with Japan and Thailand. The project, which was set to include a deep-sea port, airport and various other developments, has faced multiple delays and allegations of human rights violations. Russia's minister for economic development recently signed a memorandum on investment cooperation to kickstart the project.

Myanmar is reportedly attempting to build a small-scale nuclear power plant in the next few years. Although the regime insists that the plant is intended only to address current energy needs, critics allege that the planned development is part of a broader agenda of developing nuclear energy for military purposes, including the production of nuclear weapons. During a meeting between Russian President Putin and junta boss Min Aung Hlaing in Moscow in March, President Putin supported Myanmar's ambition to build nuclear power plant.

The already failing infrastructure across Myanmar has been severely impacted by the strong Myanmar earthquake that hit Myanmar on March 28.¹¹¹

C. Land Seizure

As of March 22, more than 200 homes belonging to Rohingya families in the Kyain Taing neighborhood of Maungdaw have been seized by the Arakan Army ("AA"), as the armed group has intensified its campaign of property confiscation across the northern Rakhine State. 112 According to local sources, the AA accused these homeowners of allegedly having links to the military council and have marked their properties with red signboards, effectively sealing them off. 113 The move has reportedly left dozens of families homeless and deepened fears of targeted discrimination against the Rohingya population.¹¹⁴ Many of these residents had already been displaced in August 2024 when AA drone strikes in the neighborhood in Maungdaw forced families to flee to nearby areas. 115 Those who remained were later relocated under AA orders to IDP zones in northern and southern Maungdaw. 116 Locals report that these recent confiscations follow a broader trend in which AA forces have been systematically seizing Rohingya properties —particularly homes and businesses—while sparing those belonging to individuals from the majority Rakhine population, even when they are known to have close ties with the military council. 117 A Rohingya activist who spoke to *Rohingya Khobor* described the seizures as part of a larger, calculated strategy. 118 The activist further warned that the situation is part of a longstanding pattern of land confiscation and collective punishment, which has escalated since the AA took control of Maungdaw in December 2024. 119

V. Peace Talks and Ethnic Violence

A. Ethnic Violence

The AA has renewed its offensive on the Danyawaddy naval base and surrounding military outposts in Kyaukphyu Township, Rakhine State after over a year without attacks. ¹²⁰

Junta airstrikes targeted about 10 villages in the area, displacing residents. The AA also advanced towards the Rakhine State capital, Sittwe, attacking a naval base north of the city. In response the regime bombed nearby Ponnagyun, Pauktaw and Rathedaung townships with airstrikes and shelling. The AA is further attacking a junta base in Nyaungyo, Padaung Township in Bago Region and escalating conflict with the junta across three townships in Ayeyarwady Region near the border with Rakhine State, displacing civilians. The combined forces of the AA and regional PDFs reportedly seized several villages in Ayeyarwady's Lemyethna Township after clashes during the week of March 17. The clashes have forced more than 1,000 people from a dozen villages to flee their homes, but some remain trapped, according to locals.

In early March, the AA froze assets valued at least US\$6 million belonging to Rakhine businessman Kyauk Taung in Rakhine State's Taungup town. The reason for the asset seizure is not known, but observers have speculated it was prompted by the businessman's alleged close ties to the Myanmar military junta. Kyauk Taung is a leading businessman in Taungup, operating a ferry service with a fleet of vessels that operates in coastal Rakhine. He is also engaged in cross-border trade with Bangladesh. He is the vice chair of Myanmar Kyauk Phyu Special Economic Zone Holding Public Co. Ltd., an umbrella group of Myanmar companies that are jointly developing the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone ("SEZ") in Rakhine State with China's state-owned China International Trust and Investment Group Corporation.

On March 5, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army ("MNDAA") reportedly opened fire on approximately 40 protestors opposing its gold mining operation in Kutkai Township, northern Shan State, killing six villagers and injuring six others. The MNDAA plans to mine on the Namt Lane river near Pyein Kham village. Residents say gold mining will harm the environment and their ability to earn a living as they are dependent on the waterway for drinking water and irrigation.

A heated altercation broke out on March 7 when more than 100 Kachin Independence Army ("KIA") troops entered Kutkai town, which is controlled by the Ta'ang National Liberation Army ("TNLA"). The KIA reportedly failed to notify the TNLA in advance. After negotiation between local commanders the KIA troops left without further incident. However, the TNLA subsequently removed the KIA's liaison office and approximately 30 KIA troops stationed in Kutkai.

Myanmar regime troops seized Melpote village and tourist destination Shwe Ayeyar resort in northern Shan State, sparking concerns of a possible offensive on nearby TNLA-controlled Nawnghiko town. 140

The TNLA faced protests in Mogoke, northern Mandalay Region, after trying to conscript men aged 18 to 45 from each household to form an armed force to protect the town. ¹⁴¹ TNLA-appointed ward administrators have reportedly resigned in protest and the group is also accused of forcibly recruiting women. ¹⁴²

The Karen National Liberation Army ("KNLA"), the armed wing of the Karen National Union ("KNU"), and its allies seized the junta military's Pulutu base near the Thai border in

Hpa-an District, Karen State on March $14.^{143}$ The Karen Information Center reported that two regime soldiers were killed during the raid. 144

B. Peace Talks

The MNDAA resumed talks with the military regime in Kunming on March 22, focusing on territorial control of the northern Shan State capital Lashio. China is reportedly leaning on both sides to resume border trade halted by fighting in northern Shan State, threatening to close border crossings with MNDAA-controlled areas again unless an agreement is reached. However, the talks ended in an impasse as junta representatives reportedly demanded the return of the whole of Lashio Township, while the MNDAA only proposed handing over some wards in Lashio city. Residents of Lashio have been urged to stay alert for possible junta airstrikes following the collapse of the three-day China-brokered peace talks.

During peace talks held in Naypyitaw from March 24 to 26 between the Myanmar regime and representatives of some ethnic armed groups and political parties, Myanmar's border security minister, Lieutenant General Yar Pyae, said that the military would not withdraw from politics as part of any peace settlement. "We have no preconditions. Other groups, however, have conditions such as the military exiting politics, disbanding the military, forming a transitional government and so on. These are unrealistic demands," he said. 150

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 <sup>59</sup> The Irrawaddy, March 18, 2025: <a href="https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-faces-untold-suffering-due-to-us-aid-betrayal-">https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-faces-untold-suffering-due-to-us-aid-betrayal-</a>
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