

Myanmar Risk: Very High/Ongoing

Three years after the February 2021 coup, the junta in Myanmar continue to commit atrocities amidst widespread and intensifying armed resistance across the country. The Myanmar military appears to be suffering more casualties and reportedly losing more bases following the well-coordinated attacks in October 2023 by the Brotherhood Alliance against security forces. In the meantime, the humanitarian crisis in the country has turned for the worse with more than 2.6 million people internally displaced nationwide, of which 2.1 million were displaced since the coup as of end of December 2023.¹ An estimated 628,000 people were forced to flee their homes since the intensification of the conflict between the junta forces and anti-coup resistance groups in October last year. The delivery of humanitarian assistance continues to be hampered by bureaucratic impediments according the UN OCHA, with over 142 aid workers arrested and/or detained by parties to the ongoing conflict in the country.²

As of 9 February 2024, there were over 4,500 people confirmed killed in Myanmar since the 2021 coup that includes pro-democracy activists and civilians.³ They were killed by junta forces and pro-military groups in the country. On top of this, some 1,000 deceased persons remain unidentified. Over 26,000 people have been arrested and more than 20,000 were detained, while over 8,700 are serving sentences. Between 1 January to 9 February 2024, junta forces killed 157 men and 25 boys. Of these, 46 were from Sagaing Region and 30 from Rakhine State. Among those killed during this period, 45 people were killed by the junta's air strikes—the highest number of deaths—while another 44 died under detention.⁴

Meanwhile, Amnesty International has called for war crimes investigation following an air attack by military forces in Sagaing on 7 January this year, which killed 17 civilians including 9 children who were attending a church service.⁵ Two anti-junta fighters in their 20s were reported to have been burned alive three months ago by soldiers and pro-military militias in Magwe Region. The young fighters were reported to have been arrested by junta forces on 7 November 2023. A video of the atrocity crime was uploaded recently and widely circulated in social media.⁶

Amidst intensifying attacks from resistance forces and ethnic armed groups, the junta on 10 February enforced a military service law following battlefield loses. The law requires all men aged 18 to 35 and women aged 18 to 27 to render military service for at least two years.⁷ The junta has also started conducting training of professors and students from four universities in Patheingyi in Ayeyarwady Region as auxiliary forces to compensate for its loses and inability to recruit young people into the military.⁸ The Myanmar military has lost major towns and bases across the country following Operation 1027 in October last year in Shan, Rakhine, Kayah, and Chin States.⁹ Anti-junta resistance forces have claimed that they have already downed seven military aircraft since the February 2021 coup, three of which happened in January of this year.¹⁰

In Rakhine State, intense fighting between the Arakan Army and junta forces since November 2023 has resulted in continuing displacement of over 100,000 people who were already displaced by previous violence in the area. AA fighters have occupied Rohingya villages in Buthidaung township since January of this year. Between 12 and 24 Rohingya people were killed in continuing armed clashes between AA and junta forces, which also injured more than 100. Some homes in the township were destroyed or damaged by the encounter, including air attacks by the military.¹¹

Meanwhile, the State Administrative Council (SAC) continued to defy ASEAN's calls for a halt to violent attacks against civilians and has not implemented the group's Five Point Consensus (FPC) as agreed in April 2021. As Laos took over the ASEAN Chairmanship from Indonesia, Vientiane is unlikely to break

the current impasse in ending the Myanmar crisis and in pushing for ASEAN to do more in addressing the humanitarian crisis in the country. Thailand appears to be continuing with its independent policy towards Myanmar by initiating the creation of a humanitarian corridor between the neighbouring countries. The main centre will be in Mae Sot, which will start in March this year. The initiative was approved by ASEAN foreign ministers in their recent meeting in Luang Prabang in Laos in January. The delivery of humanitarian aid will be coursed through the respective Red Cross groups of Myanmar and Thailand under observation by the ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance (AHA) Centre.¹² The government-to-government initiative, however, is unlikely to effectively alleviate the suffering of over 2.6 million displaced people in Myanmar even as many civil society groups expressed doubts that the junta would be impartial in the delivery such aid.

Recommendations:

The Myanmar junta should:

- Immediately cease all violations of international humanitarian law.
- Ensure that those responsible for violations are held accountable.
- Take tangible steps to return authority to the democratic government.
- Fully comply and implement the FPC agreement with ASEAN leaders without preconditions.
- Allow the unrestricted delivery of and access to international humanitarian assistance to IDPs and other affected communities in conflict affected areas in Myanmar.

ASEAN and its members should:

- Impose more stringent measures on the military regime for its non-compliance with the FPC. These should include suspending Myanmar's membership of ASEAN and considering the recognition of the NUG as Myanmar's legitimate government.
- Uphold their commitment to the FPC even as they also explore alternative pathways in resolving the Myanmar crisis.
- Engage directly with the NUG and other democratic forces in Myanmar.
- Ensure protection of refugees from Myanmar, including the Rohingyas, who are fleeing violence in Myanmar and who are victims of human trafficking.
- Refrain from forcibly repatriating refugees, victims of human trafficking, and anti-coup activists back to Myanmar.
- Oppose plans by the junta to hold general elections that excludes the participation the NLD and other democratic parties who are opposed to the coup.
- Expand the delivery of humanitarian assistance by expanding the mandate of the ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance (AHA) Centre and coordinating humanitarian response with independent humanitarian organisations within Myanmar.
- Encourage the participation of community-based stakeholders in the delivery of humanitarian aid to Myanmar people on both sides of the Myanmar-Thai border areas under the humanitarian corridor initiative of Thailand as approved by ASEAN Foreign Minister in January 2024.

All UN Member States should:

- Increase humanitarian support, in coordination with ASEAN and other independent humanitarian organisations working within Myanmar, to civilians suffering as a result of ongoing atrocity crimes and conflict.

- The UN Secretary General should immediately name a new Special Envoy to Myanmar who will work closely with ASEAN in implementing the FPC and explore other pathways in responding to the Myanmar crisis.
- Increase humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees.
- Expand and implement targeted sanctions against the Myanmar military and its business holdings in Myanmar and call on other UN member states including those in ASEAN that continue to do so.
- Support the establishment of a process to investigate alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity.

¹ Myanmar Humanitarian Update No. 35 | 2023 Year in Review, 12 January 2024, from <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-update-no-35-2023-year-review>, accessed on 12 February 2024.

² Ibid.

³ Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) Burma Daily Briefing, 9 February 2024, from <https://www.facebook.com/burmapoliticalprisoners>, accessed on 12 February 2024.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Amnesty calls for war crimes probe over Myanmar military bombing of church,” Al Jazeera online, 9 February 2024, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/8/amnesty-calls-for-war-crimes-probe-over-myanmar-military-bombing-of-church>, accessed on 12 February 2024.

⁶ “Burning Alive in Myanmar: Two Resistance Fighters Executed in Public.” The Irrawaddy online, 7 February 2024, from <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/burning-alive-in-myanmar-two-resistance-fighters-executed-in-public.html>, accessed on 12 February 2024.

⁷ “Myanmar Junta Enforces Military Service Law Following Battlefield Losses.” The Irrawaddy online, 11 February 2024, from <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-enforces-military-service-law-following-battlefield-losses.html>, accessed on 12 February 2024.

⁸ Brian Wei, “Myanmar’s Depleted Military Takes Aim at Professors, Students to Beef Up,” The Irrawaddy online, 8 February 2024, from <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-depleted-military-takes-aim-at-professors-students-to-beef-up.html>, accessed on 12 February 2024.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Anti-junta forces claim to have downed 7 military aircraft since coup,” Radio Free Asia online, 6 February 2024, from <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/aircraft-02062024165418.html>, accessed on 12 February 2024.

¹¹ “Myanmar: Rohingya at Risk in Rakhine Fighting,” Human Rights Watch, 9 February 2024, from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/09/myanmar-rohingya-risk-rakhine-fighting>, accessed on 12 February 2024.

¹² Sebastian Stragio, “Myanmar Humanitarian Corridor to Be Established Soon, Thai FM Says,” The Diplomat online, 9 February 2024, from <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/myanmar-humanitarian-corridor-to-be-established-soon-thai-fm-says/>, accessed on 12 February 2024.