

A “forgotten crisis” escalating in Myanmar: Assessing atrocity risks for 2025 and beyond

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Introduction

In February 2025, The Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (APR2P Centre) marks four years since the military coup in Myanmar with two related reports:

- *Part I: Atrocity risks for 2025 and beyond* presents an analysis of factors and impending issues that may exacerbate the risk of atrocities in the coming months and year;
- *Part II: Strategies for reducing the risk of atrocities* presents options for limiting the capacity of actors to commit atrocities and building the resilience of Myanmar's civil society.

The assessment presented in *Part I* is based on risk factors outlined in the UN Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes,¹ research by international atrocity prevention organisations, and input from stakeholders including country and regional experts, academics, atrocity prevention practitioners, and civil society representatives. The Centre takes a gender-responsive perspective that considers sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as a correlating indicator of atrocity risk as well as constituting, in some cases, an atrocity crime itself. The report focuses attention on risks to the long-persecuted Rohingya community due to their particular vulnerabilities to atrocities.

In addition, *Part I* outlines possible amplifiers of risk, such as natural disasters and a proposed (and widely rejected) election, foreign support and transnational crime that increases perpetrators' capacity to commit atrocities, and the role of forced conscription, including of children.

The APR2P Centre anticipates escalating violence in Myanmar for 2025 and assesses the level of atrocity risk in Myanmar as **extremely high**. This analysis underscores the urgency of concerted and renewed efforts to protect populations in Myanmar, to counteract the situation from becoming a "forgotten crisis", as the UN Special Envoy to the Secretary-General warned in October 2024.²

Background

Atrocity crimes – war crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing - develop over time, influenced by underlying risk factors which may create an environment conducive to atrocity crime commission, as well as by triggering factors or the targeting of specific groups. A complex combination of structural risk factors exists in Myanmar: decades of civil war with ethnic and religious dimensions;³ systematic violations of human rights and repression of civil society and opposition voices;⁴ a history of atrocities and impunity for

¹ All websites in this report were accessed February 6th 2025. *Framework for Analysis of Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention* (United Nations, July 2014), https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/about-us/Doc.3_Framework%20of%20Analysis%20for%20Atrocity%20Crimes_EN.pdf.

² "Briefers Urge Third Committee to Address Unmet Needs of People, Election Concerns in Conflict-Torn Myanmar, Act on Neglected Crisis," United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 29 October 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/gashc4421.doc.htm>.

³ "Identity Crisis: Ethnicity and Conflict in Myanmar," International Crisis Group 28 August 2020, 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/312-identity-crisis-ethnicity-and-conflict-myanmar>.

⁴ A recent example is the annual report on internet freedom by Freedom House, which ranked Myanmar last (along with China) due to the implementation of a new censorship system that restricts virtual private networks (VPNs), Allie Funk, Kian Vesteinsson, and Grant Baker, *The Struggle for Trust Online*, Freedom House (freedomhouse.org, 2024), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2024/struggle-trust-online>.

perpetrators; weak state structures; economic and political crises and coups; humanitarian and natural disasters; and widespread SGBV.⁵

Myanmar entered a violent new chapter when the state military (the 'Tatmadaw') launched a military coup on 1 February 2021, established the State Administration Council (SAC, also referred to as the junta) and declared a state of emergency.⁶ Anti-coup protests erupted across the country, with hundreds of thousands of people engaging in a nationwide civil disobedience movement. In response, the junta increasingly turned to violent repression and atrocities to quell public dissent, with killings, arbitrary arrests, detention, torture, and attacks on civilians including opposition activists and human rights defenders.⁷ In September 2021, the National Unity Government (NUG, a coalition of ousted elected officials and ethnic group leaders who formed a parallel anti-coup government) declared a 'people's defensive war' against the military regime,⁸ fought by the People's Defence Force (PDF)⁹ comprising different armed groups. While some larger groups are under joint command systems by the NUG, several ethnic armed organisations (EAOs)¹⁰ and other smaller militias are operating autonomously.¹¹

According to a September 2024 report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, since the coup, the military has arrested nearly 27,400 people, at least 5350 civilians have been killed, more than 3.3 million displaced, and over half the population is living below the poverty line. Approximately 1,853 people have died in custody including 88 children and 125 women as a result of abusive interrogation, other ill-treatment, and inadequate access to healthcare.¹²

Over the past year, populations in Myanmar have been facing intensifying violence that amounts to war crimes and crimes against humanity. Atrocities are being perpetrated predominantly by the Myanmar military but also by non-state armed groups.¹³

⁵ SGBV has been found to be correlated with atrocity risk, Sarah Teitt, *Centralising Gender in Mass Atrocity Prevention: A Tool for Atrocity in the Asia-Pacific Region*, Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, University of Queensland (<https://r2pasiapacific.org/>, December 2019), <https://appap.group.uq.edu.au/files/1129/APR2P%20Gender%20Report%202019%20FINAL.pdf>.

⁶ Rebecca Ratcliffe, "Myanmar army takes power in coup as Aung San Suu Kyi detained," *The Guardian* ([theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/01/aung-san-suu-kyi-and-other-figures-detained-in-myanmar-raids-says-ruling-party)) 31 January 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/01/aung-san-suu-kyi-and-other-figures-detained-in-myanmar-raids-says-ruling-party>.

⁷ Richard Horsey, "One Year On from the Myanmar Coup," *Crisis Group* ([crisisgroup.org](https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/one-year-myanmar-coup)) 25 January 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/one-year-myanmar-coup>.

⁸ Helen Regan and Kocha Olarn, "Myanmar's shadow government launches 'people's defensive war' against the military junta," *CNN* ([edition.cnn.org](https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/07/asia/myanmar-nug-peoples-war-intl-hnk/index.html)) 7 September 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/07/asia/myanmar-nug-peoples-war-intl-hnk/index.html>.

⁹ Umbrella term for different armed groups that have emerged since the coup, "#KYR: Myanmar – Military," *The Cove* (cove.army.gov.au) 21 June 2024, <https://cove.army.gov.au/article/kyr-myanmar-military>.

¹⁰ Eg, Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Arakan Army (AA), "Myanmar's Urban Residents Hope Resistance Offensive Will Spread to Cities," *The Irrawaddy* ([irrawaddy.com](https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-urban-residents-hope-resistance-offensive-will-spread-to-cities.html)) 17 November 2023, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-urban-residents-hope-resistance-offensive-will-spread-to-cities.html>.

¹¹ "Understanding the People's Defense Forces in Myanmar," United States Institute for Peace, 3 November 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/11/understanding-peoples-defense-forces-myanmar>.

¹² "A/HRC/57/56: Situation of human rights in Myanmar - Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights - Advance unedited version," Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 17 September 2024, <https://myanmar.un.org/en/278834-ahrc5756-situation-human-rights-myanmar-report-united-nations-high-commissioner-human-rights>. (See Press Briefing Notes: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2024/09/report-human-rights-situation-myanmar>)

¹³ "Evidence of an escalation in brutal atrocities committed by Myanmar military – Myanmar Mechanism Annual Report," Mechanism for Myanmar, 14 August 2024, <https://iimm.un.org/en/evidence-escalation-brutal-atrocities-committed-myanmar-military-myanmar-mechanism-annual-report>. ; Patrick Martin, "Myanmar rebel

According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's (USHMM) Early Warning Project Statistical Risk Assessment for 2024-25,¹⁴ Myanmar was found to have the third highest risk (10.1 percent) of a *new onset of mass killing*.¹⁵ It is important to note that this early warning relates to the likelihood of a different civilian group being targeted and/or a new perpetrator group emerging, as opposed to the continuation of ongoing episodes. The model shows Myanmar exhibits many characteristics common among countries that experience new mass killings.

Alongside the USHMM statistical analysis for risk of new onset mass killing, a range of current and impending factors may exacerbate the risk of crimes against humanity, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and genocide in Myanmar:

1. Increased attacks against civilian populations
2. Persecution of the Rohingya and refugee crisis
3. Forced conscription and use of child soldiers
4. 2025 military-led election
5. Lack of agreement among opposition groups
6. Natural and humanitarian disasters
7. Foreign interventions and transnational crime

Analysis of risk factors for 2025

1. Increased attacks against civilian populations

Atrocities are more likely to occur during armed conflict, and fighting has spread to at least 321 of 330 townships since the coup.¹⁶ Since late 2023, the Myanmar military has suffered a series of defeats, losing control of territory, strategic bases, and Myanmar's borders to a range of non-state armed groups.¹⁷

The military, in turn, escalated its aerial bombardments including scorched earth tactics that have killed civilians as well as fighters, and caused mass displacement.¹⁸ It is supported by a number of pro-junta militias including the Pyu Saw Htee militia which has been responsible for some of the most brutal raids on civilian villages.¹⁹ Other armed pro-junta groups include

group Arakan Army admits to beheading two prisoners of war in Rakhine state," *ABC* (abc.net.au) 29 January 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-01-30/myanmar-arakan-army-admit-killing-prisoners-of-war/104869846>.

¹⁴ *Countries at Risk for Intrastate Mass Killing 2024–25: Early Warning Project Statistical Risk Assessment Results*, Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide (earlywarningproject.ushmm.org, December 2024), <https://earlywarningproject.ushmm.org/storage/resources/3186/Early%20Warning%20Project%20Statistical%20Risk%20Assessment%202024-25.pdf>.

¹⁵ Based on the following factors: it experienced a coup in the past five years, political killings are frequently approved of or incited by top leaders of government, and its history of mass killing.

¹⁶ Su Mon, "Between cooperation and competition: The struggle of resistance groups in Myanmar," *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data*, 26 November 2024, <https://acleddata.com/2024/11/26/between-cooperation-and-competition-the-struggle-of-resistance-groups-in-myanmar/>.

¹⁷ Joint offensive launched on 27 October 2023 by the Brotherhood Alliance - the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)

¹⁸ *Myanmar: The Death Throes of Min Aung Hlaing's Regime*, International Crisis Group (crisisgroup.org, 15 October 2024), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/myanmar-death-throes-min-aung-hlaings-regime>. Pp.3

¹⁹ RFA Burmese, "Pro-junta 'Blood Comrades' resurface in Myanmar with April killings," *Radio Free Asia* (rfa.org) 9 May 2023, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/comrades-05092023094008.html>.

Thway Thitsar, or “Loyal Bloods”, in the capital Naypyidaw, the Yangon Castigators, the Patriotic Coalition in Bago region’s Pyay township, and the Soon Ye (Kite Force) in Tanintharyi region.²⁰

The post-coup period has also seen the resurgence of the “Four Cuts strategy”, or “Pya Ley Pya”, a policy that began in the 1960s with the aim of cutting off sources of food, funds, information and recruits from armed opposition groups, and intentionally targeting civilian populations to deter their support for such opposition.²¹ In addition to tactics of killing, displacement, torture and sexual violence, arbitrary arrests and disappearances, and destruction of civilian infrastructure,²² the junta has modernised the four cuts strategy to apply to technology and communications (e.g., internet shutdowns, surveillance, and spreading of disinformation). The military uses internet restrictions as a cloak to hide its atrocities, and to impede efforts to collect evidence of human rights violations. Further, internet restrictions compound the atrocity risks, especially for those seeking safety from attack or civilians trying to access humanitarian relief.²³

Reports of atrocities by the Tatmadaw are increasingly frequent, with the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM) reporting in August 2024 that crimes against humanity and war crimes have escalated at an alarming rate, and there is evidence of systematic torture, rape and abuses against children.²⁴ In just one of many incidents in the latter half of 2024, parts of Shan, Magway, and Chin State²⁵ were hit with airstrikes targeting civilian infrastructure and killing and injuring dozens, including children.²⁶ Civilian infrastructure continued to be attacked throughout October and November. Just a few examples include an IDP camp in Mandalay; markets, schools and a temple in Northern Shan State; and a wedding reception in Sagaing.²⁷ In an especially egregious incident, the ‘Budalin Massacre’ of October 2024 involved the torching of villages, and killing and mutilating of civilians by the military junta.²⁸ Banned landmines continue to be used, and Myanmar now has

²⁰ Burmese, "Pro-junta 'Blood Comrades' resurface in Myanmar with April killings."

²¹ "The brutal 'Four Cuts' strategy is causing untold suffering in Myanmar, yet the international community remains slow to react," *FoRB in Full: Freedom of Religion or Belief in Full, FoRB*, 4 September 2023, <https://forbinfull.org/2023/09/04/the-brutal-four-cuts-strategy-is-causing-untold-suffering-in-myanmar-yet-the-international-community-remains-slow-to-react/>.

²² "Military's 'four cuts' doctrine drives perpetual human rights crisis in Myanmar, says UN report," news release, 3 March 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/03/militarys-four-cuts-doctrine-drives-perpetual-human-rights-crisis-myanmar>.

²³ "Myanmar: UN experts condemn military's "digital dictatorship"," news release, 7 June 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/06/myanmar-un-experts-condemn-militarys-digital-dictatorship>.

²⁴ "Evidence of an escalation in brutal atrocities committed by Myanmar military – Myanmar Mechanism Annual Report", Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, 13 August 2024, <https://iimm.un.org/en/evidence-escalation-brutal-atrocities-committed-myanmar-military-myanmar-mechanism-annual-report>

²⁵ Richard Horsey, "Inside Chinland: Picturing the Struggle for a Free Chin State," *International Crisis Group*, 7 October 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/inside-chinland-picturing-struggle-free-chin-state>.

²⁶ June Kunugi, "At least 10 children killed in less than a week as deadly attacks continue in Myanmar," news release, 12 September 2024, <https://www.unicef.org/eap/press-releases/least-10-children-killed-less-week-deadly-attacks-continue-myanmar>.

²⁷ 79th Session of the Third Committee of the General Assembly Body: Statement by Nicholas Koumjian, Head of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, 29 October 2024.

²⁸ "Budalin Tragedy and Further Atrocities Committed by the SAC," Institute for Strategy and Policy, 24 October 2024, <https://ispmyanmar.com/mp-71/>.

the highest number of landmine victims in the world.²⁹ There have been over 65 civilian massacres since the 2021 coup, resulting in over 1307 civilian deaths.³⁰

SGBV continues to be committed against women in conflict zones, in detention and at SAC-controlled checkpoints. It is widespread and often characterised by dehumanising and brutal forms of violence.³¹ SGBV has historically and systematically been employed by the Tatmadaw as a tool of humiliation, intimidation, punishment, and persecution of minorities. There is also evidence of sexual violence being perpetrated by armed opposition groups.³²

The level of atrocity risk is closely correlated with the prevalence of SGBV and a culture of impunity for perpetrators.³³ In addition to endemic conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), other forms of violence against women have risen since the coup, including online abuse, trafficking, sexual exploitation, early marriage, forced marriage, and domestic violence.³⁴ The ability for victims to access support or to seek justice is near impossible, due to the shutting down of civil society organisations and services, lack of international assistance, and structural barriers to reporting to police. The risk of SGBV for women human rights defenders and for those involved in opposition movements or in detention is particularly high, as it is for members of ethnic and religious minorities.

2. Persecution of the Rohingya and refugee crisis

The Rohingya minority, victims of decades of oppression and discrimination that culminated in ethnic cleansing and genocide in 2017, is at especially high risk of atrocities. This legacy can be seen in the continuing refugee crisis, ongoing denial of Rohingya citizenship rights, forced recruitment of Rohingya to the military, and attacks on Rohingya communities by various armed actors.

Rohingya civilians have been targeted both by the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army (AA), which now has control of Rakhine State. The AA has committed atrocities that amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity, such as looting and burning Rohingya homes in Buthidaung town.³⁵ In August 2024, dozens of Rohingya civilians were killed in drone strikes by the AA.³⁶

²⁹ Agence France-Presse, "Myanmar led world in landmine victims in 2023: monitor," *Voice of America* (voanews.com) 20 November 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/myanmar-led-world-in-landmine-victims-in-2023-monitor/7870273.html>.

³⁰ "Budalin Tragedy and Further Atrocities Committed by the SAC."

³¹ Courage amid crisis: gendered impacts of the coup and the pursuit of gender equality in Myanmar, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, A/HRC/56/CRP.8 (Human Rights Council: Fifty-sixth session, 2 July 2024), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session56/a-hrc-56-crp-8.pdf>: 17-18, and ALTSEAN Burma Coupwatch, 23 December 2024, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zw2eYBFM1PQRf2whlzdBXGJQD3BWqILG/view>

³² Courage amid crisis: A/HRC/56/CRP.8.

³³ https://r2pasiapacific.org/files/7493/2021_Gender-based_atrocity_crime_prevention.pdf

³⁴ Courage amid crisis: A/HRC/56/CRP.8. Situation of human rights in Myanmar, A/HRC/57/56 (United Nations, 4 September 2024).

³⁵ "Myanmar: Armies Target Ethnic Rohingya, Rakhine," Human Rights Watch, 12 August 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/08/12/myanmar-armies-target-ethnic-rohingya-rakhine>. ; Nathan Ruser, *They left a trail of ash: decoding the Arakan Army's arson attacks in the Rohingya heartland*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (aspistrategist.org, 13 June 2024), <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/they-left-a-trail-of-ash-decoding-the-arakan-armys-arson-attacks-in-the-rohingya-heartland/>.

³⁶ Iftekharul Bashar, *Rohingya Crisis Escalates as The Arakan Army Expands Its Control*, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University (rsis.edu.sg, 25 January 2025), <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/rohingya-crisis-escalates-as-the-arakan-army-expands-its-control/>.

Such attacks against the Rohingya along with forced displacement from villages may point to an increasing risk of genocide.³⁷

Amid the violence, and as the Rohingya have been caught between the junta and the AA,³⁸ Rohingya men and boys have been targeted for forced conscription, despite being denied citizenship under the 1982 Citizenship Law. In April 2024, it was reported that thousands of Rohingya men and boys were abducted from Rakhine State and subjected to abusive training before being sent to the frontlines to fight against the AA.³⁹ Meanwhile, Rohingya armed groups who are active in northern Rakhine State and refugee camps in Bangladesh have forced Rohingya civilians to join the fighting on their side.⁴⁰

Academic research has found that forced conscription of members of marginalised groups has in some cases been used as a tool of genocide, whereby recruitment to the military during armed conflict “becomes a vehicle to kill and kill off unwanted men.”⁴¹ In the case of Myanmar and the Tatmadaw’s exploitation of Rohingya men, the context of the 2017 genocide of the Rohingya is relevant. The tactic of “genocide by wastage”, whereby marginalised and disenfranchised Rohingya civilians are being forced to fight as part of a weakened army, may indicate a continuation of the Tatmadaw’s intent to eliminate the Rohingya community.

The military continues to systematically deny access to humanitarian aid to Rohingya civilians.⁴² In October 2024, the Special Rapporteur on Myanmar warned that, “Hundreds of thousands of people in Rakhine State are completely cut off from humanitarian assistance and threatened by exposure, starvation and disease.”⁴³ Facing these threats,⁴⁴ thousands attempted to flee to Bangladesh,⁴⁵ with many falling victim to human traffickers. Those who made it into Bangladesh face extremely challenging conditions. Nearly one million Rohingya reside in the Cox’s Bazar camps in southeastern Bangladesh.⁴⁶ The humanitarian situation in

³⁷ "Genocide Emergency: Rohingya in Maungdaw, Myanmar," Genocide Watch, 30 December 2024, <https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/genocide-emergency-rohingya-in-maungdaw-rakhine-state-myanmar>.

³⁸ "Myanmar: Armies Target Ethnic Rohingya, Rakhine."

³⁹ "Myanmar: Military Forcibly Recruiting Rohingya," Human Rights Watch, 9 April 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/10/myanmar-military-forcibly-recruiting-rohingya>.

⁴⁰ *Myanmar: The Death Throes of Min Aung Hlaing's Regime*.

⁴¹ "Book Review: Genocidal Conscription: Drafting Victims and Perpetrators under the Guise of War," Australian Institute of International Affairs, 19 November 2024, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/book-review-genocidal-conscription-drafting-victims-and-perpetrators-under-the-guise-of-war/>.

⁴² "Myanmar: Military Abuses Against Civilians Intensify," Human Rights Watch, 30 January 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/30/myanmar-military-abuses-against-civilians-intensify>. ; "Myanmar military in 'systematic denial' of humanitarian aid: UN," *Al Jazeera* (aljazeera.com) 7 July 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/7/myanmar-military-in-systematic-denial-of-humanitarian-aid-un>.

⁴³ Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, A/79/550 (25 October 2024).

⁴⁴ Shafiur Rahman, "Drones, Desperation, and Displacement: Rohingya Flee Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State," *The Diplomat* (thediplomat.com) 17 December 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/drones-desperation-and-displacement-rohingya-flee-violence-in-myanmars-rakhine-state/>.

⁴⁵ "Myanmar/Bangladesh: Rohingya community facing gravest threats since 2017," Amnesty International, 24 October 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/10/myanmar-bangladesh-rohingya-community-facing-gravest-threats-since-2017/>.

⁴⁶ Sarah Nandi, "Hope on the horizon? What Bangladesh's regime change could mean for Rohingya refugees," *The Conversation* 19 November 2024, <https://theconversation.com/hope-on-the-horizon-what-bangladeshs-regime-change-could-mean-for-rohingya-refugees-236472>.

the camps is dire, with overcrowding, supply shortages, crime and human trafficking, and power struggles between Rohingya groups.⁴⁷

Others who have attempted to flee Myanmar have been turned back at the border,⁴⁸ as Bangladesh's own internal socio-political unrest affects its ability and willingness to offer safe haven.⁴⁹ Rohingya refugees living in other Asian states also face entrenched discrimination and hate speech. Urgent protection for Rohingya refugees is needed; and longer-term planning for a post-coup Myanmar requires policy agreement on the citizenship and civil rights of the Rohingya, along with a plan for repatriation once it is safe.

3. Forced conscription and use of child soldiers

The SAC enacted a Conscription Law in February 2024 that requires all men aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27 to join the military. The introduction of the legislation saw people flooding to embassies to seek visas for Thailand and other countries.⁵⁰ Some young women quickly got married to avoid being conscripted.⁵¹ The military subsequently implemented new rules for passport holders to prevent young people from leaving Yangon airport on visitor visas.⁵² In October 2024, approximately 200 people were arrested by the military when they tried to cross the border into Thailand, with more than half likely to have been forcibly conscripted.⁵³ The Thai government also reportedly repatriated dozens of young people to Myanmar,⁵⁴ many of whom were at risk not only of being conscripted but also of persecution and punishment for avoiding military service.

The June 2024 UN Secretary General's report on Children and Armed Conflict recorded the recruitment of over 1,000 children by the Myanmar military and related forces, as well as by armed opposition groups.⁵⁵ Children have been used as human shields, and in support roles in combat settings,⁵⁶ continuing a longstanding practice in Myanmar⁵⁷ despite this being

⁴⁷ Eg, Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO);

"Myanmar/Bangladesh: Rohingya community facing gravest threats since 2017."

⁴⁸ Nandi Hope on the horizon? What Bangladesh's regime change could mean for Rohingya refugees.

⁴⁹ "Bangladesh: Prime Minister Hasina Resigns amid Mass Protests," Human Rights Watch, 6 August 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/08/06/bangladesh-prime-minister-hasina-resigns-amid-mass-protests>.

⁵⁰ Rebecca Ratcliffe and Aung Naing Soe, "They have lists of everyone's names': Myanmar conscription law unleashes wave of fear," *The Guardian* (theguardian.com) 28 February 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/feb/28/myanmar-military-conscription-law-details>.

⁵¹ *Burma Coup Watch for the Month of June 2024*, Altsean Burma (12 July 2024), https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kBwpxsOf-MQ_s1o-nRIK-R-Pk2F_lSk/view.

⁵² Brian Wei, "Myanmar Junta Intensifies Crackdown on People Leaving the Country," *The Irrawaddy* (irrawaddy.com) 4 October 2024, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-intensifies-crackdown-on-people-leaving-the-country.html>.

⁵³ Hein Htoo Zan, "Myanmar Military Steps Up Conscription of Would-Be Migrant Workers," *The Irrawaddy* (irrawaddy.com) 17 October 2024, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-military-steps-up-conscription-of-would-be-migrant-workers.html>.

⁵⁴ "29 young men escape Myanmar junta's conscription," *Radio Free Asia* (rfa.org) 11 September 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmar-thailand-forced-recruitment-escape-09112024161128.html>.

⁵⁵ Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, A/78/842-S/2024/384, 3 June 2024, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/095/07/pdf/n2409507.pdf>.

⁵⁶ "Myanmar military recruits nearly 2,000 child soldiers since 2021 coup," *Mizzima* (eng.mizzima.com) 24 November 2024, <https://eng.mizzima.com/2024/11/24/16609>.

⁵⁷ "The child soldiers of Myanmar," *The Upstream Journal*, 10 January 2024, <https://upstreamjournal.org/myanmar-child-soldiers/>.

prohibited by international humanitarian law.⁵⁸ The use of child soldiers is a war crime, and contravenes the 2000 UNGA Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.⁵⁹ The UN also reports that some have been killed, maimed, or subjected to sexual abuse.

Connections have also been established between forced conscription, abduction and the prevalence of CRSV. In particular, literature has shown how armed groups use CRSV as a bonding mechanism for soldiers, creating complicity and loyalty among the group's members.⁶⁰ Further, armed groups engaged in recruitment of child soldiers have been found to use CRSV to facilitate socialisation of new members into an existing group. As a coercive factor in the recruitment of children, it can lead to a pattern of using sexual violence to build solidarity among fighters.⁶¹ Forced recruitment, especially of children, may therefore present a heightened risk of attacks against civilians, especially SGBV, that may constitute atrocity crimes.

4. 2025 military-led election

A current critical risk factor is the military-led election proposed for 2025. Such a process would not be conducted in a free and fair manner, nor would it be considered legitimate either by internal or external stakeholders. Opposition groups have explicitly rejected the proposal. Only a third of the electorate would be able to access polling stations,⁶² and members of the historically disenfranchised Rohingya minority would not be given the right to vote.

China has publicly backed the proposed election as a solution to the conflict in Myanmar and exerted pressure on ASEAN nations to do the same for "peace and reconciliation."⁶³ While Cambodia's government agreed to send observers to monitor the election,⁶⁴ ASEAN has now given some indication that it would not support the holding of elections in 2025.⁶⁵

Since election periods can act as a trigger for violence, the prospect of holding of an election while intense armed conflict is occurring would significantly raise the risk of atrocity crimes. It is likely to motivate non-state armed groups to stage attacks with the aim of preventing voting, especially in EAO controlled areas. Moreover, there are concerns that while a military-led

⁵⁸ "Child Soldiers," International Committee of the Red Cross, https://casebook.icrc.org/a_to_z/glossary/child-soldiers.

⁵⁹ "Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict," ed. United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/54/263 (Adopted and opened for signature 25th May 2000, entry into force 12th February 2002).

⁶⁰ Eg, Dara Kay Cohen, "The ties that bind: How armed groups use violence to socialize fighters," *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 5 (2017).

⁶¹ Changwook Ju, "Coercive Recruitment and Combatant Socialization: Reanalyzing the Role of Child Soldiering on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 20, no. 3 (2024).

⁶² "The Prospect of Junta-led Elections in an Uncertain Myanmar," Stimson, 21 November 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/the-prospect-of-junta-led-elections-in-an-uncertain-myanmar/>.

⁶³ Nyein Chan Aye, "China-backed election raises fears of 'negative peace' in Myanmar," *Voice of America* (voanews.com) 1 January 2025, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-backed-election-raises-fears-of-negative-peace-in-myanmar/7921313.html>.

⁶⁴ "Cambodia's Authoritarian Ruling Party to Monitor Myanmar Junta's Planned Election," *The Irrawaddy* (irrawaddy.com) 25 November 2024, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/myanmars-crisis-the-world/cambodias-authoritarian-ruling-party-to-monitor-myanmar-juntas-planned-election.html>.

⁶⁵ Daniel Azhar, "ASEAN tells Myanmar junta peace, not election, is priority," *Reuters* (reuters.com) 19 January 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/malaysia-takes-asean-mantle-tempers-expectations-myanmar-south-china-sea-2025-01-18/>.

election may produce a fragile, short-term ceasefire, it would leave lingering tensions that will lead to further conflict.

Ostensibly in preparation for an election, the SAC initiated a population census in late 2024.⁶⁶ The way in which it occurred and was received by the population provides a harbinger for how a 2025 election could play out. Myanmar's Ministry of Information announced the provisional results in January 2025, finding a population of 51.3 million people, but conceding that there were areas that were inaccessible and that the population data for those areas was "estimated using census data, remote sensing technology, international expert estimates, and departmental records".⁶⁷

Widespread concerns about the legitimacy of the census included personal information being collected to increase surveillance of civilians for forced conscription purposes, crack down on opposition groups, and scrutinise the citizenship rights of ethnic minority groups.⁶⁸ In light of shrunken civic space and crackdowns on human rights defenders in the country, there were fears that the census could fuel persecution and intimidation, and push civil actors further into hiding. The process also led to violence, with opposition groups attacking census takers, and killing soldiers, police, administrative staff and teachers.⁶⁹

There is an extremely high risk that a 2025 election, led by the SAC and carried out during armed conflict, with opposition parties unable to stand or campaign and a large portion of the population unable to vote, would lead to both increased violence around the election time, and a result that would be broadly considered invalid. This would set Myanmar's potential for peace back further.

5. Lack of agreement among opposition groups

In addition to EAOs and the PDFs, the latter of which mainly operate under joint command systems established by the NUG, there are large numbers of local independent militias.⁷⁰ Over 2,600 new non-state actors since April 2021 have been recorded.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Maung Kavi, "Myanmar Junta Wraps Up Failed Population Census," *The Irrawaddy* (irrawaddy.com) 15 October 2024, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-wraps-up-failed-population-census.html>. ; "Myanmar Junta Boss Promises General Election in 2025," *The Irrawaddy* (irrawaddy.com) 13 February 2024, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/analysis/will-myanmar-junta-hold-elections-in-2025.html>.

⁶⁷ "Myanmar's 2024 Census Provisional Results: Population at 51.3M," The Republic of the Union of Myanmar Ministry of Information, 1 January 2025, <https://www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng/news/16583#:~:text=Thus%2C%20the%20total%20population%20of,and%2053>.

⁶⁸ "Digital dictatorship in Myanmar: Biometric data collection sparks fear among activists," EngageMedia, 28 July 2023, <https://engagemedia.org/2023/myanmar-biometric-data-collection/>.

⁶⁹ "Regime nationwide census faces deadly consequences," Democratic Voice of Burma, 8 November 2024, <https://english.dvb.no/regime-nationwide-census-faces-deadly-consequences/>.

⁷⁰ Hein, "Understanding the People's Defense Forces in Myanmar."; Eg, Karenni Army, Karenni Nationalities Defence Force, Karen National Liberation Army, Kachin Independent Army, United Wa State Army, The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, Arakan Army, Karen National Union, The Chin National Front/Chin National Army (CNF/CNA).

⁷¹ Between cooperation and competition: The struggle of resistance groups in Myanmar, 26 November 2024, <https://acleddata.com/2024/11/26/between-cooperation-and-competition-the-struggle-of-resistance-groups-in-myanmar/>

Despite widespread support for the NUG among Myanmar's population,⁷² aside from a shared goal of defeating the current regime, there are divergent views about the long-term aims for the country among opposition groups,⁷³ which poses a significant obstacle to a unified force to oust the junta, and to prospects for inclusive and democratic rule in a post-coup era. Some groups, including those aligned with the NUG, see a federal system with a common leadership structure as the preferred option, while others believe that states should be controlled autonomously according to their ethnic character and leadership.⁷⁴ The AA for example, rejects federalism, saying it aims for a "confederal" status for Rakhine State, modelled on the enclave controlled by the United Wa State Army on the Chinese border.⁷⁵ In June 2024, the AA requested NUG to limit its interference in Rakhine.⁷⁶

The lack of consensus on the future political system and power distribution in Myanmar is an impediment to resilience against the military junta, including posing a barrier to international political recognition. Without a plan for governance, further social and political upheaval could ensue even after a possible defeat of the military regime.⁷⁷

In addition, international support for Myanmar's opposition is limited by the failures in adherence to, and oversight of, human rights and the rules of war by armed groups. Opposition forces have perpetrated guerilla tactics, used drones and landmines, and committed attacks against civilians, including SGBV. The IIMM has reported enforced disappearances, as well as summary executions of civilians suspected of being informers or collaborators with the military.⁷⁸ Despite the NUG developing a code of conduct for groups fighting the junta, and its encouragement of an investigations system for atrocities,⁷⁹ NUG leaders have limited control. The lack of cooperation between opposition groups also contributes to restricted access to humanitarian aid by the civilian population.⁸⁰

6. Natural and humanitarian disasters

Further compounding the existing vulnerability of civilians to atrocities and lack of humanitarian assistance is Myanmar's propensity for natural disasters, such as Cyclone Mocha in May 2023 and the September 2024 Yagi Typhoon. The latter affected over 600,000 people.⁸¹ Natural disasters can reduce access to emergency shelters, limit the ability of civilians to escape

⁷² "Myanmar: New Data Show Wide Support for Unity Government," United States Institute of Peace, 29 February 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/02/myanmar-new-data-show-wide-support-unity-government>.

⁷³ Tucker and Kennedy, "The Prospect of Junta-led Elections in an Uncertain Myanmar."

⁷⁴ "Myanmar's Civil War Is Heading Toward Stalemate, Not Regime Change," World Politics Review, 11 December 2024, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/myanmar-civil-war-junta/>.

⁷⁵ *Ethnic Autonomy and its Consequences in Post-Coup Myanmar*, International Crisis Group (crisisgroup.org, 30 May 2024), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b180-ethnic-autonomy-and-its-consequences-post-coup-myanmar>.

⁷⁶ "AA Urges NUG to Limit Intervention in Rakhine Affairs," *Burma News International* (bnionline.net) 5 June 2024, <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/aa-urges-nug-limit-intervention-rakhine-affairs>.

⁷⁷ Hart, "Myanmar's Civil War Is Heading Toward Stalemate, Not Regime Change."

⁷⁸ Report of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, A/HRC/57/18 (imm.un.org: United Nations 11 July 2024).

⁷⁹ Report of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, Short.

⁸⁰ Mon Between cooperation and competition: The struggle of resistance groups in Myanmar.

⁸¹ "Typhoon Yagi deaths in South-East Asia hit 500 with at least 226 killed in floods and landslides in Myanmar," ABC (abc.net.au) 18 September 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-09-18/myanmar-thailand-laos-vietnam-typhoon-yagi-deaths-top-500/104363402>.

fighting and bombings,⁸² and increase the need for humanitarian aid while simultaneously reducing access to it.

Myanmar's regular monsoon weather, as well as potential climate change effects that could increase the frequency and intensity of events, may pose a significant risk. Climate and environmental issues are further linked to the conflict in that both the Tatmadaw and armed opposition groups have accelerated natural resource exploitation in order to finance their military campaigns,⁸³ and because of the immense destruction to the environment caused by bombardments and scorched earth tactics.

In addition, environmental activists working towards building disaster resilience and reducing environmental exploitation were among those targeted by the junta's post-coup crackdowns, with some arrested, fleeing the country, going into hiding or abandoning their work.⁸⁴ Efforts towards disaster risk reduction, resilience and anticipatory action have therefore been significantly reduced.

7. Foreign interventions and transnational crime

The capacity of the Tatmadaw to commit atrocities is assisted greatly by arms and equipment supplies from foreign nations, despite sanctions on Myanmar by mainly Western countries (China in particular has blocked UN Security Council action). Russia and China are the major providers of military assistance, providing US\$276 million and US\$156 million respectively, during 2021-22.⁸⁵ In addition, Russian commercial entities transferred US\$406 million in defence supplies to Myanmar during the same period, while China provided US\$267 million.⁸⁶

Military supplies (and crude oil) from Russia have been used in aerial bombardments in the latter part of 2024, destroying civilian infrastructure.⁸⁷ The military also uses Russian

⁸² "Myanmar: Flood Situation Report #3, 27 September 2024," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 27 September 2024, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/myanmar/myanmar-flood-situation-report-3-27-september-2024>.

⁸³ Emily Fishbein and Nu Nu Lusan, "'Afraid of the gun': Military coup fuels Myanmar resource grab," *Al Jazeera* (aljazeera.com) 14 December 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/14/afraid-of-the-gun-military-coup-fuels-myanmar-resource-grab>., Groups have produced rudimentary weapons in over 70 workshops across the country, serving about 30 percent of local arms requirements, and EAOs have increased mining activity to fund their military activity, see eg. Hein, "Understanding the People's Defense Forces in Myanmar." ; *Ethnic Autonomy and its Consequences in Post-Coup Myanmar*.

⁸⁴ Alex Lo and Shar Thae Hoy, "Conflicts intensify climate change risks in Myanmar," *East Asia Forum* (eastasiaforum.org) 9 November 2023, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/11/09/conflicts-intensify-climate-change-risks-in-myanmar/>.

⁸⁵ Ian Storey, "Myanmar-Russia Relations Since the Coup: An Ever Tighter Embrace," *Fulcrum* (fulcrum.sg) 30 November 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/myanmar-russia-relations-since-the-coup-an-ever-tighter-embrace/>.

⁸⁶ Storey, "Myanmar-Russia Relations Since the Coup: An Ever Tighter Embrace."

⁸⁷ Rebecca Ratcliffe, "Myanmar is a failing state, led by a junta fuelled by Russian arms, says UN rights envoy," *The Guardian* (theguardian.com) 15 March 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/16/myanmar-is-a-failing-state-led-by-a-junta-fuelled-by-russian-arms-says-un-rights-envoy>.

surveillance and attack drones,⁸⁸ as well as Chinese-made unmanned aerial vehicles that the Tatmadaw arms with explosives,⁸⁹ all of which are implicated in atrocity crimes.⁹⁰

China's concerns about advances by EAOs in northern Shan, along with a refugee influx, drug and human trafficking, cyber scam centres along the border, and a reduction in bilateral border trade, have led to a change in tactics.⁹¹ In addition to increasing support for the junta,⁹² China has increased pressure on EAOs to cease fighting, and held military exercises along the border.⁹³ Uncontrolled transnational crime complicates the risk level in Myanmar. Some non-state armed actors have been working with organised crime groups in China to smuggle fuel, drugs, and other supplies, and to conduct online scam activity.⁹⁴ There are reports of human trafficking and torture, as well as forced labour.⁹⁵ Giving a sense of the scale of scam centres in Myanmar was the release in February 2025 of more than 250 people from 20 different nationalities, having been held in an EAO-run telecom fraud centre on Thailand's border.⁹⁶

There is also a risk that the weakened state of the junta may see Chinese private security troops on the ground,⁹⁷ and the establishment of a joint security company with Myanmar's military,⁹⁸ which will reportedly handle the import of weapons and other equipment including communication devices. Finally, the SAC has sought to join the BRICS grouping in an attempt to gain international legitimacy.⁹⁹

⁸⁸ Rebecca Tan, Caleb Quinley, and Yan Naing, "Myanmar military unleashes drones to counter rebel advances," *The Washington Post* (washingtonpost.com) 12 October 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/10/12/myanmar-civil-war-drones/>.

⁸⁹ "Insight: Learning from Myanmar's rebels, junta builds new Chinese drone fleet," *Reuters* (reuters.com) 13 June 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/learning-myanmars-rebels-junta-builds-new-chinese-drone-fleet-2024-06-13/>.

⁹⁰ "Atrocities in Myanmar: Documenting the Junta's Attacks on Civilians," United States Institute of Peace, 1 March 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/atrocities-myanmar-documenting-juntas-attacks-civilians>.

⁹¹ Jonathan Head and Lulu Luo, "China repatriates hundreds of scam factory workers from Myanmar," *BBC* (bbc.com) 1 March 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68444058>.

⁹² Aung Zaw, "Min Aung Hlaing Goes to China: From Pariah to Legitimacy... For Now," *The Irrawaddy* (irrawaddy.com) 6 November 2024, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/min-aung-hlaing-goes-to-china-from-pariah-to-legitimacy-for-now.html>. ; Kyi Sin, "Securing the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor: Navigating Conflicts and Public Scepticism," *Fulcrum* (fulcrum.sg) 24 October 2024, <https://fulcrum.sg/securing-the-china-myanmar-economic-corridor-navigating-conflicts-and-public-scepticism/>.

⁹³ Karen National Army (KNA) ; Tucker and Kennedy, "The Prospect of Junta-led Elections in an Uncertain Myanmar."

⁹⁴ "Myanmar Scam Hubs Revive Fast After China Eases Pressure on Junta," United States Institute of Peace, 26 September 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/09/myanmar-scam-hubs-revive-fast-after-china-eases-pressure-junta>.

⁹⁵ *2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Burma*, United States Department of State (state.gov, 2024), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/burma/>.

⁹⁶ Jonathan Head, Hundreds of foreigners freed from Myanmar's scam centres, 13 February 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c2d3w90x86po>

⁹⁷ Aye, "China-backed election raises fears of 'negative peace' in Myanmar."

⁹⁸ Nyein Chan Aye, "China's joint security proposal sparks controversy in Myanmar," *Voice of America* (voanews.com) 20 November 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-s-joint-security-proposal-sparks-controversy-in-myanmar/7870325.html>.

⁹⁹ "Myanmar junta eager to join growing BRICS 'alternative forum'," *Mizzima: News from Myanmar* (eng.mizzima.com) 4 November 2024, <https://eng.mizzima.com/2024/11/04/15867>.

Conclusion

The issues examined in this report are interpreted as contributing to an *extremely high risk* of atrocity crimes being committed by a range of actors in Myanmar in 2025.

Overlaying the structural risk factors in the country are exacerbating factors and potential triggers for increased or new onsets of violence which could involve or lead to atrocities. The escalating attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure by actors in the conflict over the past year are themselves likely to have constituted war crimes and crimes against humanity. The lack of accountability or will to enforce international humanitarian law means such atrocities can continue to be perpetrated with impunity. Since other nations continue to provide military materiel for the junta, and sanctions are limited, the capacity of the Tatmadaw to commit atrocities remains strong.

The Rohingya community in Rakhine are particularly at risk, with attacks from both the military and ethnic armed groups, forced conscription, and limited access to refuge in Bangladesh or elsewhere. The possibility of a military-led election in 2025 may be a trigger for immediate election-related violence but also for longer-term instability given its lack of legitimacy and transparency.

With these challenges in mind, the APR2P Centre will be releasing *Part II of Fours years of atrocities in Myanmar: Strategies for reducing the risk of atrocities*, to offer a range of actions for local, national and international actors that could mitigate the risk of atrocity crimes in Myanmar.