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The State of the World's Human Rights; Myanmar 2025

Five years after the military coup, armed conflict escalated further. A powerful earthquake and US aid cuts exacerbated the suffering of civilians. A record number of air strikes were carried out during military offensives, with several major attacks on schools killing dozens of students. Hospitals, religious buildings and other civilian infrastructure were also targeted. Forced labour was used by the military and armed groups, and in scam compounds where people were at risk of human trafficking and torture. Military authorities invoked laws to crack down on freedom of expression, especially any criticism of junta-organized elections that started in December. Torture and other ill-treatment in prisons continued, including the denial of adequate healthcare, causing deaths in custody. While most violations were carried out by the military, armed groups also violated the rights of civilians, using forced labour, forced recruitment, beatings and attacks on informants.

Background

The military, recovering from a year of battlefield losses in 2024, made substantial political, territorial and diplomatic gains, while continuing to erode human rights. The death toll of civilians climbed past 7,000, while ousted civilian leaders Aung San Suu Kyi, Win Myint and others remained in arbitrary detention. More than 3.5 million people remained displaced. An earthquake in March killed nearly 4,000 people according to the military's figures, hitting Sagaing Region and other parts of central Myanmar hardest. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing travelled to Thailand, attending his first meetings in an ASEAN country since the coup, even as his military violated the ceasefire in place after the earthquake. Min Aung Hlaing remained the junta's de facto leader, following the death of acting president Myint Swe in August, and the earlier dissolution of the country's state of emergency, paving the way for the December elections. While the junta's State Administration Council was formally abolished, martial law continued in many areas, and the council rebranded as the State Security and Peace Commission, with Min Aung Hlaing as acting president. Min Aung Hlaing also made high-level visits to Belarus, China and Russia. China and Russia backed the military's election plans, while China pressured two powerful armed groups to agree to ceasefires with the military, resulting in territory being handed back to junta control. Opposition political and armed groups condemned the planned poll and urged the international community not to recognize the results. ASEAN stated it would not send observers to the poll.

Unlawful attacks

Aerial attacks far exceeded the number in 2024, making 2025 the deadliest year for civilians since the coup. According to OHCHR, the UN human rights office, air strikes increased by more than 50% compared to 2024. Central Myanmar experienced the most air strikes against civilians.

Unlawful attacks continued after the earthquake, particularly in areas where armed groups opposing the military were active, including Sagaing and Mandalay Regions. Aerial attacks by the military were conducted on Sagaing Region's Chaung-U township, including several on 1 April and one on the day of the earthquake.¹ Aid was blocked to areas where resistance groups were active, hindering post-earthquake humanitarian relief efforts that were allowed to operate more freely in areas under the control of the military.

High-casualty unlawful air strikes continued to target schools. In May, less than two months after the earthquake hit Sagaing Region, an air strike in Ohe Htein Twin village killed at least 20 students. The attack occurred amid an earthquake-related ceasefire, which the military repeatedly violated. In September, the military launched an air strike in Rakhine State that killed at least 19 students at a boarding school in Kyauktaw township. In December, a military air strike also hit a hospital in Rakhine State's Mrauk-U township, killing dozens.² Days before, a separate strike in Sagaing Region's Tabayin township reportedly killed 18 people in an attack that hit a tea shop where people had gathered.

Air strikes killed, injured or displaced civilians in almost every state and region in the country. The strikes intensified after the military's State Administration Council formally disbanded in July, after which election planning for December picked up pace. It became more routine for attacks to be carried out using manned motorized paragliders, referred to locally as "paramotor" attacks, often carrying 120mm mortars. This was a new tactic used by the military, particularly in central Myanmar, requiring fewer resources such as jet fuel. On 6 October, during a candlelit protest on the Buddhist holiday of Thadingyut, a paraglider attack killed at least 18 people, including children as young as two years, and injured dozens in Sagaing Region's Chaung-U township.³

Forced labour

Scamming compounds

A highly publicized crackdown took place on scamming compounds in the southeast of the country, coordinated by the militaries and officials from China, Myanmar and Thailand. Inside these compounds, estimated to hold tens of thousands of people, those in charge forced people to carry out online fraud against victims abroad and used torture as a method of punishment.

The US Treasury Department adopted multiple rounds of sanctions in May and September, targeting the owners and operators of compounds within the Shwe Kokko development project in Myawaddy township. In May, the USA designated the Karen National Army (KNA), the militia that controls the Shwe Kokko development, as a transnational criminal

organization. It also sanctioned KNA leader Saw Chit Thu and two of his sons for their roles in human trafficking and cross-border smuggling. In September, the USA expanded its sanctions to cover additional figures in the KNA, as well as joint venture, holding and energy companies tied to operations in Shwe Kokko. This included Yatai International Holding Group and its owner She Zhijiang, who was arrested by Thai officials in 2022. After an October court ruling in Thailand, upheld on appeal in November, She Zhijiang was expected to face extradition to China, where those convicted of involvement in scamming compounds have been sentenced to death.

In November, the USA expanded sanctions to another armed group called the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, or DKBA, and four of its leaders, for supporting scamming compounds in Myanmar.

While many victims of human trafficking were freed as a result of the crackdown on scamming compounds, and many of the leading figures responsible for the abuses were sanctioned, the crisis persisted. Reports indicated that the industry remained intact at the end of the year, especially in south-eastern Myanmar, and that perpetrators there had not been held to account.

Armed conflict

In January, the Myanmar military expanded its forced recruitment drive by adding new restrictions. These made it harder for those eligible to leave the country without additional layers of approval, and outlined punishments for those evading military service. Military defectors reported that new recruits were often sent to frontline areas, where many were killed or captured. There was no widely known alternative option of civilian service, and no opportunity to be exempt from military service whether from conscientious objection or religious belief.

The military, the Arakan Army, and Rohingya armed groups all carried out forced labour and forced recruitment in Rakhine State. Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh faced the threat of being forcibly taken to Myanmar to fight in the conflict there. The Arakan Army used Rohingya who were internally displaced within the northern Rakhine State as forced labourers and beat those who did not comply. The Arakan Army said that it did not practise forced labour against civilians, but that prisoners of war or criminal convicts would sometimes be put to work either as a means of exercise or as part of their sentence. They also disputed testimony about discriminatory bans on livelihood options and freedom of movement.

Freedom of expression

Restrictive laws, notably on cybersecurity and election interference, came into effect and further restricted freedom of expression. Some of the new legislation, particularly on elections, led to arbitrary arrests and detention of those who criticized the military or December elections. According to analysis by Human Rights Myanmar, the cybersecurity law contained overly broad language that could be deployed to criminalize dissent. This included

sentences of up to six months in prison for sharing information “unsuitable for public viewing”. It also created additional requirements for social media platforms to remove objectionable content under broad categories, potentially fuelling censorship.

The Law on the Protection of Multiparty Democratic General Elections from Obstruction, Disruption, and Destruction, which entered into force in July, added to the chilling effect. It was ostensibly aimed at preventing interference and protecting those employed to run the junta-managed elections. The law set out punishments including prison terms ranging from three years to life for offences such as disrupting the process, threatening or hurting those involved (including voters), and damaging election equipment. It also provided for use of the death penalty if these actions result in loss of life. The law’s impact on freedom of expression was evident within months of its passage. In September, a blogger was sentenced to seven years in prison for posts considered to be critical of the election. Furthermore, two young men were detained for posting anti-election stickers in Yangon. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, more than 150 people were arrested or charged under the election law by the end of the year.

Torture and other ill-treatment

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention determined that the post-coup arrest of Linn Htut, the former chief minister of Shan State, was unlawful. The working group reported that his confession in 2021 was extracted through torture, including sleep deprivation. Human rights groups called for his immediate and unconditional release, as well as all others arbitrarily detained under the coup.⁴

The military’s failure to provide access to adequate healthcare to people deprived of their liberty persisted. Deaths in custody also persisted, many due to a systematic denial of healthcare, including untreated injuries sustained during abusive interrogations following their arrest. Independent media and prison monitoring groups reported deaths in separate detention places in July. Student activist Ma Wutt Yee Aung, arrested in September 2021 over alleged terrorism and incitement charges, died in Insein Prison in Yangon city on or around 19 July. The Dagon University Students Union expressed concern that her death may have been the result of head injuries sustained during interrogations while in detention and prison authorities’ denial of adequate treatment.

On the same day, 44-year-old Ko Pyae Sone Aung, a representative of the National League for Democracy party chapter in Mon State’s Belin township, died in the state’s Thaton Prison after being violently beaten. Research released in July by the UN Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar revealed cruel treatment of detainees, including sexual assault, beatings, electrocutions, strangulations and “denailing”.

Economic, social and cultural rights

Economic conditions worsened. Young people fled the country, and hunger and the price of food staples rose in areas of armed conflict. The US government’s abrupt and sweeping

freeze on foreign aid early in the year severely imperilled the rights of refugees from Myanmar, civilians in armed conflict areas and other individuals fleeing persecution. Human rights and humanitarian groups warned that lives could be lost unless the decision was reversed. In some cases, waivers were granted, but foreign aid was reduced to a fraction of former levels. The cuts impacted health, education and humanitarian aid, stranding students and putting human rights defenders both in Myanmar and overseas at risk. They led to the shutdown of hospitals in refugee camps and threatened programmes helping to prevent atrocities caused by the armed conflict in the country.

Funding to Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh continued but at lower levels, leaving Rohingya children exposed to violence, forced recruitment and child labour. The drop in funding for humanitarian aid for camps along the Thai-Myanmar border meant a lack of access to healthcare and food. A new Thai policy permitting the right to work for tens of thousands of refugees provided a degree of hope to mitigate the impact of the aid cuts.

1. ["Myanmar: Inhumane military attacks in earthquake areas hindering relief efforts", 1 April ↩](#)
2. ["Myanmar: Deadly military air strike on hospital shows vicious disregard for right to life", 11 December ↩](#)
3. ["Myanmar: 'Deadly attack' on festival highlights paraglider threat to civilians", 7 October ↩](#)
4. ["Myanmar: Grave concerns for tortured ex-politician: Linn Htut", 22 August ↩](#)

