

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

<b>Bilagsnr.:</b>	<b>352</b>
Land:	Myanmar
Kilde:	UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (ONHCR)
Titel:	Oral statement by Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
Udgivet:	6. juli 2021
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	26. august 2021

## 47th session of the Human Rights Council

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## Statement by Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

6 July 2021

Distinguished President,

Excellencies,

In recent months, the situation in Myanmar has evolved from a political crisis to a multi-dimensional human rights catastrophe. Suffering and violence throughout the country are devastating prospects for sustainable development, and raise the possibility of state failure or a broader civil war.

What began as a coup by the Myanmar military has rapidly morphed into an attack against the civilian population that has become increasingly widespread and systematic. Nearly 900 people have been killed. Some 200,000 people have been forced to flee their homes as a result of violent military raids on neighbourhoods and villages.

This crisis has compounded the already disastrous impact of COVID-19 on an economy that relied on remittances, the garment industry and other sectors shattered by global recession. The World Food Programme **estimates** that over 6 million people are severely in need of food aid. UNDP **forecasts** that nearly half the population could be forced into poverty by early 2022. A void has been opened for the most harmful – and criminal – forms of illicit economy to flourish.

A countrywide general strike, combined with the widespread dismissal of civil servants – including educators and medical personnel – have incapacitated many essential services in the country. Since 1 February, **at least 240 attacks** on health-care facilities, medical personnel, ambulances and patients have seriously disabled COVID-19 testing, treatment and vaccination. Meanwhile, mass displacement and continued protests heighten the risk of contagion.

The coup has exacerbated a number of long-running conflicts in Myanmar's borderlands. Fighting has resumed in Kachin, Kayah and northern Shan States, as well as other areas such as Chin and Kayah States that had been largely peaceful in recent years. Military forces have repeatedly conducted indiscriminate airstrikes and artillery shelling, killing civilians, displacing tens of thousands of people and destroying protected civilian structures such as schools and places of worship. Thousands of people have sought refuge in neighbouring countries.

Laws have been instrumentalized to stifle freedom of expression; curb independent media as well as social media; and arbitrarily detain at least 5,200 people. Over 90 journalists have been arrested and eight major media outlets have been closed. We have also received multiple reports of enforced disappearances; brutal torture and deaths in custody; and the arrest of relatives or children in lieu of the person being sought.

I welcome the release of 2,200 prisoners last week as a first step, but this should be unconditional and followed quickly by the many thousands still arbitrarily detained, including

political leaders.

Despite these levels of repression, the military leadership has not successfully secured control of Myanmar, nor the international recognition it seeks. On the contrary, its brutal tactics have triggered a national uprising that has changed the political equation.

People across the country continue peaceful protests despite the massive use of lethal force against them, including heavy weaponry. A civil disobedience movement has brought many military-controlled government structures to a standstill.

At the same time, Myanmar's people have shown incredible resilience in organising systems of mutual solidarity and support. Transformative discussions of the future have begun which cross Myanmar's ethnic, religious and social divides and hold promise for reconciliation.

But despair is rising. Some people, in many parts of Myanmar, have taken up arms and formed self-protection groups. These newly formed armed opposition groups have launched attacks in several locations, to which the security forces have responded with disproportionate force.

I am concerned that this escalation in violence could have horrific consequences for civilians. All armed actors must respect and protect human rights and ensure that civilians and civilian structures such as health centres and schools are protected.

Excellencies,

To find a path out of this crisis and to foster a new future for Myanmar, free from military impunity and control, it is essential that the National Unity Government and democratic civil society stakeholders be brought into any political process. Myanmar youth and women should be given a leading role as well.

I also emphasise the continuing need to address the situation of the Rohingya, both inside and outside the country. Despite a tenuous ceasefire in Rakhine State, there has been no material change in the conditions that would be needed for any safe or sustainable return of refugees. I welcome the National Unity Government's recent policy statement on Rohingya and citizenship issues, which is an important commitment to a future in which all people will have the right to their own identity, full citizenship and equality.

Madam President,

The catastrophic developments in Myanmar since the coup have had severe and wide-ranging impact on human rights, peace and security, and sustainable development. They are generating clear potential for massive insecurity, with fallout for the wider region.

As the 2019 review of UN action in Myanmar by Gert Rosenthal made clear, the United Nations and its principal organs must not fail the country and its people a second time.

It is incumbent on the international community to stand united in pressuring the military to halt its continuing attacks on the people of Myanmar and return the country to democracy, reflecting the clear will of the people.

ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus is an important starting point for the way forward, but I urge swift action to advance this process before the human rights situation in the country deteriorates further. This should be reinforced by Security Council action. I urge all States to act immediately to give effect to the [General Assembly's call](#) to prevent the flow of arms into Myanmar. I also encourage ASEAN to seek a monitoring presence on the ground to track progress and build confidence in the process. My Office stands ready to play any role that may be required.

To ensure a peaceful solution to the crisis, and tackle its root causes, there must be a national dialogue with all stakeholders – including the military regime, the National Unity Government, ethnic armed organizations, civil society organizations, and resistance movements such as civil disobedience groups, trade unions and strike committees.

While a political process is needed, ultimate accountability cannot be avoided. Continued impunity will only undermine any future democracy, reconciliation, sustainable development or progress towards stability and peace. Any future democratic government in Myanmar must have the authority to exercise effective civilian control over the military. The international community should build upon the range of international accountability mechanisms already engaged, until transitional justice measures also become genuinely possible at the national level.

I urge the Council to stand with the Myanmar people at this time, and to give careful attention to the views that will be expressed by or on behalf of Myanmar civil society during our dialogue today.

Thank you, Madam President

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