



## **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**

### **Two Years after the Coup: Religious Freedom in a Contested Burma**

**Wednesday, February 8, 2023**

**10:30 AM-12:00 PM ET**

**Virtual**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

#### **Abraham Cooper, USCIRF Vice Chair**

Thank you, Chair Turkel, and thanks to all those who have joined us today for this important discussion. The United States government has been active—if too slow at times, from USCIRF’s perspective—in calling out atrocities and other violations of human rights in Burma. In March of last year, as my colleague mentioned, the Biden administration designated as genocide and crimes against humanity the atrocities that Burmese authorities, including the Tatmadaw, perpetrated against the Rohingya community in August 2017. USCIRF had recommended this

designation since 2019, as we argued that this designation would aid international

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efforts to hold the Burmese authorities and the Tatmadaw accountable for gross violations of human rights, including religious freedom. USCIRF has consistently advocate that the U.S. government intervene in support of the ongoing court case at the International Court of Justice and the investigation at the International Criminal Court. USCIRF has also been monitoring the progress of the case in Argentina and recently in Germany under the principle of universal jurisdiction.

Since the time of the coup, the U.S. government has sought to coordinate with international partners in holding the Burmese authorities accountable. For example, it has pushed for regional organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, known as ASEAN, to take the lead in finding a regionally driven answer to what has essentially been a decades-long problem: the intervention and indeed domination of Burma's military in civilian affairs. The U.S. has also targeted various officials, agencies, and industries who are responsible for human rights violations and for the country's civil conflict itself. However, USCIRF has taken note of the glaring omission of reference to religious freedom violations in the various U.S. sanctions against Burmese authorities. At the beginning of this month, our government took the first step in targeting revenue sources for the military, such as the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, by sanctioning energy officials such as Myo Myint Oo, Aung Min, and Than Min. However, the United States have yet to coordinate with regional partners such as Japan to close investment

opportunities feeding the authoritarian regime. Nonetheless, the U.S. government has demonstrated a sincere and meaningful commitment to the democratic cause in Burma and advocating for respect for the freedom of religion or belief in the country.

As Burma has now entered its third year following the military coup, there appears no end in sight to the conflict, particularly as the SAC continues to block any genuine democratic transition or peacebuilding initiatives. Therefore, the efforts of the U.S. government and its like-minded partners to pursue justice and accountability for the horrors that Burma's military junta have visited upon Burma's people represent a crucial step to ensuring that any succeeding government must recognize and support justice for the Rohingya people.

It is, however, just a step. Additional steps must be taken. These must include recognizing the atrocities that the SAC has committed every day since the coup, the *raison d'être* for the various ethnic armies, and the way ethnic and religious minorities have been impacted. The path toward a democratic Burma and a peaceful end to the current conflict must finally secure the fundamental right of freedom of religion or belief for all Burmese, whether Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, atheist, or any other religious identity. With that, I would like to turn the

floor over to my colleague, Commissioner Schneck who would like to say a few words as well.