



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

Nury Turkel, USCIRF Chair

Good morning and thank you for joining the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing on religious freedom in Burma, two years after the military junta seized power in a coup.

My name is Nury Turkel, and I am the current Chair at USCIRF. For those of you not familiar, USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government body created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, or IRFA. USCIRF's mandate is to monitor religious freedom abroad and to make policy

recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress. Our work is led by nine Commissioners appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the House of Representatives and the Senate and is supported by a professional staff of about 20 people. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this important hearing.

As many of you know, Burma's military, known as the Tatmadaw, seized control over the institutions of the state in February 2021, ending the country's near decade of experimentation with quasi-democracy. It subsequently set up a façade of government through the State Administration Council, or SAC. This military coup came just a few months after the November 2020 elections, in which military-aligned parties had faced a crushing defeat. Because the Tatmadaw could not tolerate the will of the Burmese people, its leadership decided to unilaterally seize power, placing General Min Aung Hlaing as Prime Minister.

As USCIRF has consistently reported for many years, the Burmese military is the primary perpetrator of violence against the country's ethnic and religious minorities, including the Rohingya community. It was the main force responsible for atrocities against Rohingya in 2017, which the administration of President Joseph R. Biden determined last year to have constituted genocide and crimes against humanity. The Tatmadaw has also been responsible for repeating the same

tactics it has used against the Rohingya community to target all dissenters and religious minorities, including Christian communities in Chin, Kachin, and Karen states.

I am joined today by USCIRF Vice Chair Rabbi Abraham Cooper and Commissioner Stephen Schneck. We will begin with opening remarks from Vice Chair Cooper and Commissioner Schneck. We will then hear from our four witnesses: Priscilla A. Clapp, Senior Advisor, United States Institute of Peace; Kyaw Zeyar Win, Burma Technical Specialist, International Republican Institute; Zo Tum Hmung, Executive Director, Chin Association of Maryland; and Wai Wai Nu, prominent Rohingya Burmese activist on Rohingya and women's issues.

Afterwards, I will moderate a brief conversation among the speakers with some opening questions.

It is now my pleasure to turn the floor over to Vice Chair Cooper