

KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Burma continued to decline significantly. Since its February 2021 coup, the country's military—known as the Tatmadaw—has attempted to rule the country through the State Administration Council (SAC) under the leadership of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. The SAC has relied on assistance from abroad, [importing](#) approximately \$1 billion in weapons, the majority from Russia and China. Throughout the year, the SAC continued to pursue what the United Nations (UN) Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar [described](#) as “increasingly brazen” war crimes in its attempt to quell the disparate opposition forces, including through the increasing use of [airstrikes](#). Since 2021, such tactics have [destroyed](#) nearly 200 religious buildings across Burma, including 85 churches in Chin State and 40 Buddhist monasteries, a nunnery, six churches, and three mosques in Sagaing. In 2023, the Tatmadaw continued to target, occupy, and destroy more houses of worship, particularly those belonging to minority religious communities. In November, the army bombed and then [occupied](#) Christ the King Cathedral in Kayah State. These tactics mirror previous [reporting](#) on the army's occupation of Baptist churches in Chin State.

Throughout 2023, the SAC continued its attempts to link its legitimacy to Buddhism, including through [printing](#) new currency to showcase its sponsorship of Theravada Buddhism. In July, the SAC [finished](#) construction on a giant seated Buddha. The project was supervised by Senior General Hlaing and cost around \$26.7 million, which the government financed amid a deteriorating [economy](#). In August, authorities [arrested](#) a Swiss movie director and 13 Burmese actors on blasphemy charges for producing a film that allegedly insulted the virtue of Buddhist monks. The military's sponsorship of Buddhism has not prevented the SAC in 2023 from attacking monasteries or [killing](#) Buddhist monks. [Evidence](#) suggests that members of the Bamar Buddhist majority have largely abandoned support for the Tatmadaw.

As of the end of 2023, hundreds of thousands of people were internally displaced in Burma, [including](#) over 100,000 people in Christian-majority Kayah State. Rohingya refugees from Burma located in Bangladesh continued to face an uncertain future. In October, officials from the SAC [traveled](#) to Bangladesh as part of a pilot repatriation scheme brokered by China. While Rohingya families in refugee camps wish to return to their homeland, the ongoing conflict and absence of guarantees of safety remained a persistent concern. The SAC [continues](#) to block humanitarian aid to all vulnerable populations, including those displaced.

International efforts to hold perpetrators of human rights abuses and atrocities within Burma continued in 2023, [including](#) in the case of *The Gambia vs. Myanmar* at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). In November, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom [filed](#) a joint declaration of intervention in support of *The Gambia*. The Maldives [filed](#) a separate declaration to intervene in support of *The Gambia*. This case would officially determine, according to international law, whether the Burmese authorities committed acts of genocide against Rohingya in 2017. In March 2022, the United States [determined](#) unilaterally that the Burmese authorities committed genocide against Rohingya and has provided evidence in support to *The Gambia*.

The National Unity Government (NUG), a prodemocracy opposition organization that has attempted to organize the various ethnic armies and resistance movements, continued to pledge respect for international human rights standards following a return to democracy. This includes [reiterating](#) its commitment to abolish the 1982 citizenship law that excludes Rohingya from citizenship, as well as any other local laws used to discriminate against Rohingya. Human rights activists continued to [raise](#) the need for a federal system of government in Burma to better empower ethnic and religious minorities at the local and state level as a means for securing religious freedom and other related human rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Burma as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Engage with the prodemocracy Burmese opposition, including the NUG, as well as ethnic organizations as outlined in the Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act (BURMA Act)
- Work with the governments of Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand to assist Rohingya and other refugee communities from Burma, including by identifying solutions within Cox's Bazar to fully scale up livelihood and skills training programs for adults and youth and providing curriculum to ensure a quality education for all children within Cox's Bazar.
- Hold hearings on implementation of the BURMA Act, including justice and accountability mechanisms for Rohingya and other persecuted religious minorities.

The U.S. Congress should:

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Event:** [Rising Authoritarianism in ASEAN Member States](#)
- **Hearing:** [Two Years after the Coup: Religious Freedom in a Contested Burma](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Burma](#)

Background

Burma's [population](#) consists of Buddhists (87.9 percent), Christians (6.2 percent), Muslims (4.3 percent), Animists (0.8 percent), and Hindus (0.5 percent). Although the constitution treats Buddhism as the de facto state religion while recognizing Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism, non-Buddhist religious and ethnic minorities face longstanding persecution. In 2015, Burma [passed](#) race and religion laws with the support of hardline Buddhist nationalist groups such as the Ma Ba Tha. These laws regulate religious conversion, marriage, and births; they also restrict the religious freedom of non-Buddhists, particularly Muslims.

Rohingya and Other Refugees and Displaced Peoples

The Tatmadaw's violent repression of Burma's ethnic and religious minorities, including its 2017 [genocide](#) against Rohingya, has led to their mass displacement. In January 2023, a military-backed court [sentenced](#) 112 Rohingya to jail for traveling without documents within Burma. Over 18 million Burmese, [constituting](#) a third of the total population, require humanitarian aid due to the conflict. The SAC has [restricted](#) access to and coopted the flow of humanitarian aid and particularly targeted religious organizations that have become the primary source of aid to vulnerable, disconnected communities.

The situation for Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh remains dire. In March, a fire in the camps destroyed almost 2,000 shelters, [leaving](#) 12,000 Rohingya refugees homeless. Additionally, throughout 2023, thousands of Rohingya risked their lives attempting to leave the refugee camps. In November, Indonesian authorities and residents of Aceh repeatedly [refused](#) entry to around 200 Rohingya refugees who had traveled from Bangladesh. By December, some 1,500 Rohingya [arrived](#) in Aceh, [including](#) 465 children. By the end of December, hundreds were still stranded at sea, as Indonesia and Malaysia refused them entry. Once ashore, conditions for Rohingya in Malaysia and Indonesia are not stable. For example, in Malaysia, Rohingya girls have been [forced](#) into risky marriages in order for them and their families to raise money to survive. In Indonesia, anti-refugee protesters [stormed](#) a shelter temporarily housing Rohingya, demanding their deportation.

International Efforts toward Accountability

In January, Burmese activists and 16 alleged victims of abuse [filed](#) a criminal complaint through universal jurisdiction in Germany against the SAC's generals for instigating genocide against Rohingya Muslims and other atrocities. In June, an Argentine court [heard](#) testimony in a case concerning allegations of genocide and crimes against humanity committed by Burmese officials against Rohingya Muslims. In October, relatives of victims of alleged war crimes committed by the Burmese army [filed](#) a criminal complaint in the Philippines naming Senior General Hlaing, eight other military commanders, and a state

minister as responsible for attacks that occurred against Christians. These cases are occurring simultaneously as the ICJ and the International Criminal Court pursue allegations concerning human rights abuses, including religious freedom violations, perpetrated by the Burmese authorities against the predominantly Muslim Rohingya.

In March, Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, noted the expanding humanitarian emergency in Burma, observing that persons belonging to ethnic or religious minorities bore the brunt of the conflict. In August, 13 of the 15 UN Security Council members [released](#) a joint statement reiterating support for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) efforts to resolve the conflict in Burma, as well as highlighting the demands of [Resolution 2669](#).

Key U.S. Policy

Throughout 2023, the BURMA Act, as included in the [2023 National Defense Authorization Act, continued](#) to guide the United States' engagement with Burma, and in particular with opposition and resistance forces. In February, President Joseph R. Biden [extended](#) Executive Order 14014, declaring the Tatmadaw as a national emergency threat to the United States for another year. The U.S. government led efforts with international partners to sanction the SAC. In January, the United States [coordinated](#) with Canada and the United Kingdom to sanction several agencies within Burma, including the Union Election Commission and the Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE). MOGE is a primary source of revenue for the SAC, and the January sanctions were the United States' first against the state energy company. In October, the U.S. government further [sanctioned](#) MOGE. Throughout 2023, the United States [continued](#) to sanction individuals and agencies of the SAC and to [level](#) targeted sanctions against jet fuel suppliers.

In July, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [traveled](#) to Indonesia to urge ASEAN foreign ministers to take tougher action in response to the conflict in Burma. In September, Vice President Kamala Harris attended the U.S.-ASEAN Summit where she [discussed](#) the situation in Burma with ASEAN members. In September, Acting U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Erin Barclay noted in a congressional [hearing](#) that since the 2021 coup, the U.S. Department of State has provided financial assistance to over 1,000 human rights defenders and activists in Burma and provided The Gambia with information in its pursuit of justice and accountability at the ICJ. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$233 million for programs in Burma. The United States has [contributed](#) \$2.1 billion to the humanitarian response to the Rohingya refugee crisis.

In December, the U.S. government [committed](#) to expanding the number of Rohingya resettled in the United States. On December 29, 2023, the State Department [redesignated](#) Burma as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed as the relevant presidential action existing ongoing restrictions referenced in 22 CFR 126.1, pursuant to Section 402(c)(5).