

The crisis in Myanmar (Burma)

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) presents the following backgrounder on the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, or Burma, as of July 30, 2021. Information and maps are from various sources and not the original work of USCRI. All information is subject to change.

Quick Overview

A military coup on February 1, 2021, has stalled both Myanmar's economy and its slow progress toward democratization. It is also worsening displacement trends in a country that was already the source of one of the most serious refugee crises in the world. Since the coup, thousands have fled their homes as the Tatmadaw military clashes with armed ethnic groups and other resistance organizations. Close to one million Rohingya Muslims remain in refugee camps across the border in Bangladesh, after the military began a campaign in 2017 that the United Nations has equated with ethnic cleansing. As the military continues to suppress dissent to its rule and detain the upper echelons of the country's duly elected government, Myanmar faces an uncertain future as an international pariah whose societal and economic stability is undermined by mass displacement and a dangerous new turn in the coronavirus pandemic.

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WHO WE ARE

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) is a nongovernmental, not-for-profit international organization that responds to the needs and advocates for the rights of refugees and immigrants worldwide.

Basic Information

Country name: The military government changed the country's name to "Myanmar" in 1989, but the U.S. government continues to use the name "Burma."¹ The military regime argues Myanmar is more inclusive to the country's myriad ethnic groups than "Burma," which refers to the Burman ethnic majority.² But the U.S. and others do not recognize the name change as legitimate, arguing it was made without the consent of the people.³ This report refers to the country as Myanmar.



Demographic data⁴:

Population: 57 million

Population ages 0-14: 26%

Population ages 15-64: 68%

Life expectancy: 69.6 years

Gross Domestic Product (GDP), per capita: \$5,142

Origins of the Crisis

With more than 130 different religious and ethnic groups, Myanmar is one of the most diverse countries of Southeast Asia.⁵ Several minority ethnic groups have long maintained independent armies and controlled territory in defiance of the central government—a trend that continues to this day.⁶ Rivalries between ethnic groups and between ethnic armed organizations and the central military have been recurring sources of violence and tension in Myanmar for decades.

The Rakhine are the largest ethnic group in the Rakhine state, which is in western Myanmar bordering Bangladesh.⁷ Rakhine's next largest ethnic group is the Rohingya, a predominately Sunni Muslim community. While the Rohingya Muslims claim their ancestors have lived in what is now northern Rakhine state since at least the 9th century, military and political leaders push a narrative that the Rohingya are Bengali migrants who do not belong in Myanmar society.⁸ Elsewhere in Myanmar, rebels from the Karen group have long opposed the central authority of the military and security forces, called the Tatmadaw, in the Kayah state of southeastern Burma.

Colonialism, independence, and military rule

Between 1824 and 1886, the British conquered Burma and incorporated all its groups into the Indian Empire.⁹ Burma was governed as a province of India until 1937 when it became a separate, self-governing colony. Burma was the site of numerous battles during World War II between the Japanese and the British. Split loyalties led to communal violence in the Rakhine state between pro-British Rohingya Muslims and pro-Japanese Rakhine Buddhists during the war.¹⁰

Burma gained independence in 1948. The Union of Burma was initially a parliamentary democracy, but a coup led by General U Ne Win in 1962 initiated decades of military rule.¹¹ Ne Win veered the country in an isolationist and socialist direction. Burma also increasingly cracked down on some of its ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya. In 1978, Burma's military conducted an operation sweeping across northern Rakhine state to drive Rohingya Muslims into Bangladesh.¹² A 1982 citizenship law drafted by the military also barred the Rohingya from being full citizens.¹³

Military rule of the country ultimately survived a series of widespread student-led protests in 1988. Aung San Suu Kyi rose to prominence during the 1988 protests and helped form the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy or NLD. She was detained under house arrest by the military for most of the next two decades before her release in 2010.¹⁴

In 2011, Myanmar's military—the Tatmadaw—officially handed power over to a hybrid civilian-military Union government. However, under a 2008 constitution largely written by the Tatmadaw, the military's Commander-in-Chief was granted the authority to appoint 25% of the members of both parliamentary chambers, as well as several key minister positions.¹⁵ The civilian side of the government was also limited in its ability to control or oversee Myanmar's military and security activities.

Parliamentary elections in 2015 resulted in a victory for the NLD. The new legislature created the position of state counsellor, allowing Suu Kyi a formal role in government that made her the de facto head of state.¹⁶

Current situation

Violence and discrimination against the Rohingya, fueled by the narrative that they are a relatively recent, distinctive social group that do not belong in the modern Myanmar state, has been frequent in recent years.¹⁷ But the current refugee crisis took a horrific turn in late August and early September 2017.

Alleged attacks by a little-known Rohingya nationalist group prompted a swift response by Myanmar's military billed as a "clearance operation" in northern Rakhine state.¹⁸ The United Nations, media outlets, human rights groups, and humanitarian organizations all accused security forces of serious human rights abuses that could rise to the level of ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and possibly even genocide. Within days of the August 2017 "clearance operation," the UN received reports of the Tatmadaw burning Rohingya villages and killing civilians who were fleeing the carnage. Within only two months, more than 600,000 Rohingya had fled to eastern Bangladesh.¹⁹

In 2019, with many Rohingya still taking refuge in Bangladesh, Myanmar faced accusations of violating the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.²⁰ In early 2020, the International Court of Justice issued "provisional measures" for the Union government and the Tatmadaw to stop acts of genocide and preserve evidence for future prosecution. Human rights groups believe that both the Union government and the Tatmadaw have failed to abide by these measures through continuing acts of violence against the Rohingya and destroying evidence.

During parliamentary elections in November 2020, Suu Kyi's NLD won more than 80% of the contested seats in the country's Union Parliament while the pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party won fewer seats than it had in the 2015 elections.²¹ The results meant another five years in power for Suu Kyi and her NLD allies.

On February 1, 2021, the Tatmadaw carried out a coup against the government—detaining civilian leaders including Suu Kyi, naming replacement ministers, instituting a curfew, and declaring a one-year state of emergency. International condemnation of the coup was swift, as was domestic fury against the military's actions. Pro-democracy protests in major cities were immediately met with force by security personnel. Military leaders defended their actions, citing accusations of voting irregularities during the election that observers have largely rejected.

Almost overnight, the coup left Myanmar heavily sanctioned and isolated by the international community. An opposition shadow government continues to operate and rally pressure against the Tatmadaw. Instability has increased across the country—from economic fallout from the coup to armed conflict on Myanmar's fringes leading to even more displacement.

Refugees and displaced persons

By mid-2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) registered almost 1 million Rohingya as refugees and asylum seekers—with about 860,000 in Bangladesh and another 101,000 in Malaysia.²² An estimated 600,000 Rohingya were remaining in Myanmar's Rakhine state, with 142,000 of those internally displaced.²³

Roughly 884,041 forcibly displaced Rohingya and other refugees from Myanmar live in the Cox's Bazar district of eastern Bangladesh.²⁴ Shortly after the Rohingya arrived in 2017, authorities established Kutupalong, which is now considered the world's largest refugee camp.²⁵ Crammed into 13 square kilometers, the sheer density of the camp quickly led to concerns about a lack of adequate shelter, water and sanitation; access to basic services; and safety for women and girls. Monsoons have also caused periodic bouts of flooding in Kutupalong—and a massive fire in March 2021 killed 11 refugees, left 10,100 households without shelter, and destroyed the belongings of tens of thousands more.²⁶

Parts of the Bangladeshi and United Nations response to the Rohingya refugee crisis have drawn scrutiny. While Bangladesh has been praised for its generosity in hosting such a large refugee population for so long, some groups worry Bangladesh has not prioritized long-term planning beyond Rohingya repatriation back to Myanmar and has gotten too stringent on restricting refugees' freedom of movement.²⁷ Groups like Human Rights Watch have also criticized unsafe conditions on Bhashan Char, a remote island in the Bay of Bengal where Bangladeshi authorities have resettled thousands of Rohingya refugees.²⁸ Human Rights Watch also accused the UN of sharing Rohingya refugee data with the Myanmar government without proper informed consent protocols.²⁹ UNHCR has defended its registration processes for the Rohingya refugee population.³⁰

While the displacement challenges remain steep in eastern Bangladesh and western Myanmar, a "volatile" security situation in southeastern Myanmar after the coup has displaced more than 160,000 people within and from that part of the country since February 1. As of mid-June, an estimated 200,000 people have been displaced within all of Myanmar since the February 1 coup.³¹ UNHCR reported that tens of thousands of people have been newly displaced within the country in recent weeks by fighting between security forces and local armed groups, particularly in the Kayah, Shan, and Chin states.

According to one report, more than 25 percent of the residents of the Kayah, or Karenni, state had been forced from their homes by fighting between the military and resistance groups.³² Many of these people are taking refuge in other communities or in forests across the Kayah state and the southern part of the Shan state.³³ Thousands of people have tried to cross the Myanmar-Thai border—with humanitarian organizations raising alarms about reports of Thai authorities driving some refugees back into Myanmar.³⁴ Thailand was already hosting tens of thousands of refugees from Myanmar in its border provinces before the coup.

In terms of U.S. policy toward displacement in the country, the Department of Homeland Security on March 12, 2021, announced it would designate Burma for Temporary Protected Status for 18 months because of the coup and subsequent violence.³⁵ The TPS designation allows Burmese nationals living in the United States to file initial applications through U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services for protected status if they meet certain requirements.³⁶ Through a Federal Register notice, the designation went into effect on May 25.³⁷

Human security and sexual violence

Due to restricted or limited access to the Rakhine state, it is unclear how many Rohingya have been killed since the “clearance operation” of August 2017 was carried out against the local population. Through interviews with survivors and refugees, one estimate found that at least 6,700 Rohingya were killed in the month after the crisis began in 2017.³⁸ Some Tatmadaw soldiers admitted that their units indiscriminately killed dozens of Rohingya civilians.³⁹ The Tatmadaw also routinely raped and sexually assaulted Rohingya women and girls in a targeted campaign of sexual violence confirmed by evidence from human rights groups and monitors.⁴⁰

The Tatmadaw responded violently to pro-democracy demonstrations in Myanmar after the coup. At least 873 protestors had been killed by security forces by June 2021.⁴¹ Roughly 6,971 people have been detained by the Tatmadaw since the coup, with 5,425 still detained as of July 29, 2021, according to the Assistant Association for Political Prisoners.⁴² The UN has noted disturbing “patterns of sexual violence perpetuated by the Tatmadaw against women from ethnic and religious minority groups, as well as against individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity” in the military’s detention facilities.⁴³

In January 2021, days before the coup, the UN reported that about 1 million people in conflict-affected areas of Myanmar needed some form of humanitarian assistance.⁴⁴ The need for emergency shelter and non-food items rose particularly in the southeast with increasing conflict and displacement in that part of the country.⁴⁵ However, many of the internally displaced within Myanmar are hard to reach due to the ongoing conflict, travel restrictions imposed by security forces, and poor road conditions delaying or restricting the delivery of aid and supplies. Essential medicines, first-aid kits, shelters, non-food items, food, and hygiene and sanitation items remain critically important for displaced persons in Myanmar.⁴⁶

Economy, trade, and infrastructure

Myanmar had been making progress to establishing a nascent market-oriented economy, with economic reforms and trade deregulation since 2011 resulting “in rapid growth at an annual average of 7 percent, among the fastest in the East Asia-Pacific region and globally.”⁴⁷ With that, Myanmar made remarkable gains toward reducing poverty—from a poverty rate of 48.2 percent in 2005 to 24.8 percent in 2017.⁴⁸

Much of these economic gains are in jeopardy after the February 1, 2021, coup. The coup immediately caused fractured supply chains, communication and transportation system

disruptions, and shortages of cash due to limits on banking services.⁴⁹ In the spring, the World Bank projected that Myanmar would see a 10 percent drop in gross domestic product in 2021.⁵⁰ A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report estimated that Myanmar's poverty rate could double if the political crisis persists under a worst case scenario, essentially wiping out almost all poverty gains made since 2005.

Trade also appears to have cratered after the coup. The UNDP estimated that trade volume in Myanmar's ports dropped between 55 and 64 percent in the two months since the military takeover.⁵¹ Bank closures and a lack of labor at ports during the protests stopped companies from shipping their products to Myanmar.⁵² The country's infrastructure has also been strained by the instability—with roads closed and cross-border infrastructure projects halted.⁵³

These deteriorating economic conditions are poised to continue fueling conflict and subsequent displacement trends in Myanmar. For armed groups, there are now greater incentives to secure sources of revenue amid "national economic collapse, widespread poverty, and deprivation," which could contribute to some of the emergent armed groups after the coup becoming more sustained and permanent fixtures in Myanmar.⁵⁴

Health Care

The sheer density of the Kutupalong refugee camp has made health care and sanitation needs critical due to the potential for disease outbreaks. Refugees in the camp have been treated for infections and diseases including diphtheria, acute respiratory infection, and acute watery diarrhea. Key health care priorities for non-governmental organizations, UN agencies, and international partners have included epidemiology, community health, sexual and reproductive health, case management, and mental health and psychosocial support.⁵⁵

Myanmar's health care sector has long been characterized by wide disparities between urban and rural populations, as well as ethnic groups on the country's periphery administering their own systems separate from the central government.⁵⁶ Instability from the coup also exacerbated the country's health care challenges that were already present during the coronavirus pandemic. The military reportedly occupied hospitals across Myanmar, limiting access to critical life-saving care.⁵⁷

Children

Like their parents and guardians, Rohingya children were targeted in the Tatmadaw's August 2017 "clearance operation." At least 730 children below the age of five were reportedly killed in the first month of the crisis in 2017.⁵⁸ At least 51 percent of the population in the Kutupalong camp are children under the age of 18.

This year's crisis marked by the coup, the counterprotests, and the Tatmadaw's subsequent crackdown is taking a "devastating toll on children" in Myanmar. At protests, "children are being killed, wounded, detained, exposed to tear gas and stun grenades, and are witnessing terrifying scenes of violence."⁵⁹ As of a June 21, 2021, estimate, 59 children had been killed from violence since the coup.⁶⁰ Child poverty is also poised to soar in 2021, according to the UNDP.

Security forces reportedly occupied more than 60 schools and university campuses in 13 states and regions by March 19, according to UNICEF. The UN warned that learning has already been disrupted for almost 12 million children in Myanmar due to widespread closures since March 2020 from the pandemic.⁶¹ These prolonged breaks from learning already threaten to create more out-of-school children when schools eventually do reopen on a consistent basis.

COVID-19 pandemic

Since the beginning of the pandemic, authorities worried about the spread of COVID-19 in the tight quarters of the Kutupalong camp that houses hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees. From the beginning of the outbreak to March 2021, 34,224 COVID-19 tests were conducted among Rohingya refugees—with 438 testing positive.⁶² The camp's health sector has a total operational and stand-by bed capacity for 917 people. The COVID-19 vaccination program for the Rohingya community was planned to kick off in late March of 2021 for about 130,000 people over the age of 40 and for front-line workers.⁶³ However, that campaign goal was disrupted when the Bangladeshi government did not receive its supply of vaccines when it was expected through the COVAX initiative.⁶⁴

Like other countries, Myanmar reported its first confirmed COVID-19 case in the spring of 2020. With cases rising last summer, Myanmar eventually reached a peak of about 1,500 cases per day in October 2020.⁶⁵ This trend represented a turn in the pandemic from when Myanmar had some of the lowest infection rates in the East Asia and Pacific region, although those rates could have been from modest testing capacity.⁶⁶

Understanding the true toll of the pandemic is more difficult since testing has become more limited in Myanmar since the coup. Around 20,000 tests were being conducted per day before February 2021, but fewer than 2,000 daily tests were held on average in February and March.⁶⁷ The country's National Vaccine Deployment Plan was developed prior to the military takeover and had begun to vaccinate front-line workers with their first doses. However, in the spring the program was reportedly run by the "de facto authorities without any involvement of partners" or "prioritization by age or associated risk factors."⁶⁸ Facilities to contain COVID-19 have also been targeted by the Tatmadaw. The military attacked two screening facilities run by organizations within the Karen ethnic group as part of their campaign of violence in the southeastern part of Myanmar.⁶⁹

Now, Myanmar appears to be in the middle of its gravest and most devastating stretch of the pandemic. The country's total official death toll from COVID-19 rose by at least 50 percent through the first three weeks of July 2021 alone.⁷⁰ Officials are seeing a positivity rate at an "alarming" 26 percent, which Special Rapporteur Tom Andrews warned could make Myanmar a "super-spreader state."⁷¹ Many doctors protested the coup and needed to go into hiding to avoid attacks and arrests from the Tatmadaw.⁷² With the combined pressures of civic unrest, a shattered economy, and the country's crippled pandemic response, Myanmar's "entire public health system and social welfare system has utterly collapsed."⁷³ Through July 29, 2021, there have been 289,333 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 8,552 deaths in Myanmar, according to the World Health Organization.⁷⁴

Prospects for the Future

It remains unclear how these present crises—the Rohingya diaspora, the elected government’s removal, or the surge in COVID-19 infections and deaths—will be resolved in the short- to medium-term. While Suu Kyi became an icon for democracy promotion, she was repeatedly criticized for tacitly or explicitly defending the Tatmadaw’s campaign against the Rohingya.⁷⁵ Prospects for the Rohingya safely returning to Myanmar also seem slim under military rule— as the junta leader Min Aung Hlaing recently cast doubt on their repatriation while reiterating the view that they are not one of Myanmar’s domestic ethnic groups.⁷⁶ International measures to hold Myanmar accountable for its campaign against the Rohingya have also failed to prompt reversals or acknowledgements by the government.

There also does not appear to be a clear-cut resolution to who will govern the country with legitimacy and sufficient state capacity moving forward. Myanmar’s duly elected leaders remain in custody—with Suu Kyi currently on trial for charges that many believe are an attempt to permanently bar her from holding office in the future. Experts also believe Western sanctions likely will not hold enough leverage over Tatmadaw leaders, particularly as Myanmar’s largest trading partners have rejected that approach.⁷⁷ Myanmar’s shadow government also reportedly “no longer has faith” that the regional bloc, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, will effectively help the country navigate and end its political crisis.⁷⁸ With regional, Western, and international outside actors unable to make sufficient headway on the Rohingya and political crises, it is unclear what would prompt the Tatmadaw to change its policies. With that in mind, the country’s prospects remain uncertain as the economy falters and the pandemic deepens while civilians flee their homes and conflict rages to the farthest stretches of Myanmar.

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