

Testimony before the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
“Two Years after the Coup: Religious Freedom in Contested Burma” (February 8, 2023)

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Thank you to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for inviting me to testify before you today. I am grateful for this opportunity to share my remarks, alongside my fellow panelists, following my participation in the commission’s previous hearing about the U.S.’s genocide determinations and their potential to prevent atrocities across the world.

Through our focus on Burma’s religious freedom violations today, I hope that the U.S. will be encouraged to effectively address the ongoing human rights and humanitarian catastrophe in the country.

Ethnic and religious minorities in Burma have long believed in the U.S.’s potential to help bring them justice and accountability. This is because we have been persecuted for decades by being in a country dominated by Buddhism and the Bamar ethnic group. The Burmese military manipulated these differences to pit us against each other and justify its brutal attempts to control us by committing war crimes, crimes against humanity, and – against Rohingya – genocide. Due to these decades of impunity, the Burmese military launched an attempted coup over two years ago, and has since committed more mass atrocities that amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes according to the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, and other United Nations and international expert bodies. Ethnic and religious minorities are now facing such atrocities at an escalating level; this includes a heightened risk of recurrence of genocidal attacks against Rohingya.

I, myself, join you today, after facing years of persecution as a Rohingya and Muslim woman in Burma. Due to my identity, the military imprisoned me and my family as political prisoners for seven years. My experience as an ethnic and religious minority in Burma and my time with women detainees have since fueled my activism to end all forms of injustice in the country.

Today, many more members of the pro-democracy movement are risking everything to ensure that Burma’s federal democracy will be far from the so-called democratic transition of the past.

We must never forget that during that decade-long period, Rohingya Muslims were denied their citizenship and voting rights, and instead targeted with widespread hate speech, waves of state-sponsored violence, and the military's genocidal attacks.

While we reflect and change, the Burmese military continues to intensify its brutal practices across the country. Since its attempted coup, the military has intensified its airstrikes and shelling in areas primarily resided by ethnic and religious minorities. The military is arbitrarily arresting and murdering pastors and other clergy members from communities such as Chin and Kachin. The military is also destroying churches and convents with heavy weapons in Karen and other areas. After releasing the notorious anti-Muslim monk Wirathu from prison, the military awarded him with an honorary title. The military and its supporters are now spreading hate speech and disinformation against Muslims and Rohingya, as well as women human rights defenders, on online platforms such as Facebook, Tiktok and Telegram.

The military is also issuing past and new policies to further confine the over 600,000 Rohingya in Burma, who include the over 140,000 Rohingya in internally displaced persons' camps in Rakhine State. These apartheid-like policies include restrictions on Rohingya's freedom of movement; more requirements for the use of the discriminatory National Verification Cards; and frequent administration of the *SweTinSit*, or abusive family check-in process. These policies are restricting Rohingya's access to healthcare, education, mosques, livelihood, and other basic needs. The military is fundamentally using these policies as arbitrary grounds to arrest and detain Rohingya. According to my organization, the Women's Peace Network, the military has arbitrarily arrested at least 2,700 Rohingya since the attempted coup. The clashes between the military and the Arakan Army in Rakhine State, despite their so-called "ceasefire," will also continue to pose life-threatening risks to Rohingya in Burma.

Millions of people in Burma have thus been forced to flee their homes as IDPs and refugees over the past two years. All of them are denied reliable access to basic needs and services, as well as safety and protection.

In Bangladesh and other countries in South and Southeast Asia, the over one million Rohingya refugees are facing increasing securitization and surveillance from the squalid camps to Bhashan Char. Among them, women and girls are at particular risk of sexual violence and sexual exploitations from members of their community and the local authorities. In countries that include India and Malaysia, Rohingya refugees risk forced deportation to Burma. None of these communities are granted access to justice mechanisms.

These deteriorating conditions, both in Burma and Bangladesh, are leaving Rohingya with no option but to escape by perilous journeys that endanger them with human trafficking and deadly sea crossings. This was most recently demonstrated in the end of 2022, when hundreds of Rohingya fled by at least 12 boats, one of which carrying 180 people went missing.

After these decades of the military's mass atrocities, it is devastating that the international community is still failing to protect Rohingya and all people in Burma. These delays in bringing justice and accountability to Burma has only emboldened the military to commit more atrocities against us. We feel disappointed because we know that under the U.S.'s leadership, the international community can have the political will to pursue these actions. We were reminded of this potential in the international community's immediate response to the war in Ukraine.

While we appreciate the State Department's official determination of the Burmese military's atrocities and Rohingya genocide, as well as the Congress' passage of the BURMA Act, these momentous acts require further measures to end the human rights and humanitarian catastrophe in Burma.

Therefore, today, I urge the U.S. to bolster the measures that it has taken with a comprehensive, sustainable strategy beyond ASEAN's failed Five-Point Consensus. These measures must address both the short and long-term needs of Rohingya and other ethnic and religious minorities in the country.

First, the U.S. government must provide greater financial and material assistance to empower ethnic and religious minorities in Burma, and those displaced in Bangladesh and other countries

in South and Southeast Asia. This assistance should also be delivered to these communities' civil society, especially women's groups and youth groups.

Second, the U.S. must implement more measures to protect these ethnic and religious minorities. Such protection mechanisms should include support for these communities' resettlement in third countries over their arrest, detention, and deportation by their host countries. These mechanisms should also include actions to hold the Burmese military accountable for its international crimes. Specifically, the U.S. should curb the military's weapons and financial flows by imposing economic sanctions against the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, as well as a ban on the military's aviation fuel supply.

For Rohingya, the U.S. Congress should include these measures in a legislation aimed at bringing the community out of genocide. This is one practical step to effectuate last year's atrocity determination, and to fill a major shortcoming of the BURMA Act. This legislation should ensure the U.S.'s coordination with governments in ASEAN and other regional countries to deploy search-and-rescue missions for Rohingya stranded on boats in their respective jurisdictions. It should also include measures for Rohingya in the period after the attempted coup. These measures should involve the U.S.'s support for an effective transitional justice process for Rohingya's justice, reparations, reconciliation and rehabilitation in the country.

As Secretary Blinken shared in his speech when announcing the genocide determination, *"ultimately, the path out of genocide also leads home."* A safe, dignified, and voluntary return to their ancestral homes in Burma – Arakan – is what the Rohingya community indeed want and deserve.

In this context, the U.S. must support the Burmese political leadership in their efforts to protect religious freedom and belief in our federally democratic future. This process should no longer repeat Burma's historical patterns of excluding Rohingya and Muslims. The National Unity Government and the National Unity Consultative Council should thus actively involve these groups in their governance, administration, and leadership. Special measures to protect the

identity and existence of Rohingya, such as by granting them a “protected status,” in Burma’s federal democratic future should also be considered.

Lastly, the U.S. must lead the way for the international community to meaningfully engage with ethnic and religious minorities, especially women and youths, in all discussions and mechanisms about Burma’s federally democratic future.

Over two years since the Burmese military’s attempted coup, and after decades of its atrocities, the U.S. should not betray our people’s hope for justice, democracy, and freedom. Only through acting for these values, and ending impunity in Burma, can Rohingya and other ethnic and religious minorities finally live in peace and harmony.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to your questions.