



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

April 2025

### **BURMA IN TRANSITION: NEXT STEPS TO ADVANCE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

Stephen Schneck  
*Chair*

Meir Soloveichik  
*Vice Chair*

#### **Commissioners**

Ariela Dubler

Mohamed Elsanousi

Maureen Ferguson

Susie Gelman

Vicky Hartzler

Asif Mahmood

Erin D. Singhsinsuk  
*Executive Director*

#### **USCIRF's Mission**

*To advance international  
freedom of religion or  
belief, by independently  
assessing and unflinchingly  
confronting threats to this  
fundamental right.*

On February 27, 2025, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a virtual hearing on [\*Burma in Transition: Next Steps to Advance Religious Freedom and Improve Conditions for Religious Refugees\*](#). Vice Chair Meir Soloveichik and Commissioner Asif Mahmood led the hearing and convened the panelists.

[\*Vice Chair Soloveichik\*](#) opened the hearing by noting the human rights and humanitarian abyss Burma has sunk into—four years after the Burmese military, under General Min Aung Hlaing, ousted Burma's democratically elected government and seized control in a coup. Millions of people have been either internally displaced in Burma or outside the country as refugees, while more than 28,000 have been arrested, and 6,000 killed. He also gave recent examples of the long-standing crackdown by the Burmese military and its State Administration Council (SAC) against ethnic and religious minorities, including an airstrike in January 2024 in the Sagaing region that killed 17 worshippers at Saint Peter Baptist Church.

[\*Commissioner Asif Mahmood\*](#) highlighted the Burmese military's escalating violence targeting civilians, infringement on human rights, and systematic persecution of ethno-religious minorities. He shared the story of Maung Sawyeddollah—a Rohingya youth who testified at a recent USCIRF [\*event\*](#)—about how his predominantly Muslim community has been subjected to violent campaigns including forced displacement, arbitrary arrests, and mass killings by the Burmese military. Additionally, the military has used similar tactics to target other religious minorities, such as Burma's Protestant Christian and Catholic communities. Commissioner Mahmood noted that in addition to shedding light on the Burmese military's religious freedom violations, the hearing would highlight the situation of refugee communities such as Rohingya Muslims in Bangladesh and Chin Christians in India. He concluded by noting that the panel would review U.S. efforts and explore further policy options to coordinate regional and global responses to the conflict and to address religious freedom violations in Burma.

[\*Kachin Christian Leader\*](#)\* began his testimony by emphasizing the religious oppression the Kachin people have endured since Buddhism was declared as the state religion in 1958. After Burma gained independence from British rule, Burma's predominantly Theravada Buddhist, ethnically Burman government instituted "Burmanization" to assimilate other ethnoreligious groups in the country. He shared that since the coup, the SAC has been targeting civilians and internally displaced people (IDP) camps, as well as attacking church buildings through airstrikes and bombings. Christian ministers have been arrested, tortured, or killed in Kachin State and beyond.

The Christian leader highlighted a few cases of airstrikes against churches in Kachin in 2024 and this year, such as the January airstrikes targeting Zup-ra Kachin Baptist Church compound which killed more than six people. He also made reference to several Christian leaders who were detained, injured, or killed, including Rev. [Hkalam Samson](#), who was detained, and Hkun Jaw Li, who was assassinated. He asked USCIRF to continue its support in promoting religious freedom that protects ethnic and religious minority groups in Burma.

[Yasmin Ullah](#), Executive Director of Rohingya Maiyafuinor Collaborative network, noted that over 90 percent of the Rohingya population remains displaced, both internally within Burma and externally in neighboring countries like Bangladesh, due to the genocide waged against them by the Burmese military in 2017, as well as armed groups such as the Arakan Army (AA). Mass destruction of homes and airstrikes in Rakhine State continue to force Rohingya people to flee. In January 2025 alone, nearly a thousand of them sought refuge in nearby countries like Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia. Those who remain in Burma face forced conscription, relocation, and armed robberies in refugee camps. She called for accountability for political entities and armed groups, including the AA. She also specifically asked the U.S. government to work with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and neighboring countries to end the atrocities, to continue advocating for a meaningful transitional justice process for the Rohingya people, and to support international mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court.

[Salai Za Uk Ling](#), Executive Director of the Chin Human Rights Organization, emphasized that Christianity remains a cornerstone of the Chin people's identity, and, tragically, the Burmese military uses systematic violence and repression to target them. These include the willful destruction, looting, and occupation of churches and church compounds, instances of unlawful killing and enforced disappearance of pastors, the arrest and detention of pastors and church leaders, and ongoing violations of the right to free worship and assembly of the Christian population at large. As a result, he noted that currently approximately 50,000 Chin people reside in India, and more than 80,000 Chin asylum seekers are in Malaysia. Other areas where Christians have significant presence, such as Kachin, Karen, and Karenni States in Burma, also suffer at the hands of the SAC. He

recommended several measures for the U.S. government to take, such as reinstating the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, increasing funding for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and local refugee organizations, and cutting the SAC's access to aviation fuel.

[Jessica Olney](#), Non-resident Advisor on Burma and Bangladesh, Preventing and Ending Mass Atrocities, shared an update about the humanitarian crisis affecting the Rohingya and other groups in Bangladesh and Rakhine State in Burma. The Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh face severe hardships, living in overcrowded shelters that offer little protection against monsoon rains, landslides, and fires. Limited access to clean water, sanitation, and healthcare leads to illness and malnutrition, while the lack of legal status makes them vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking, and denial of basic rights. Women and children are particularly at risk, with reports of sexual violence and human trafficking further compounding their dire situation. She emphasized that the recent cuts to USAID funds are severely impacting the lives of the Rohingya refugees, rendering the prospects for education and future opportunities for the Rohingya youth bleak. Likewise, the U.S. refugee resettlement freeze is also having an immediate impact on community morale. She highlighted the need for sustained humanitarian aid to address the needs of the most vulnerable.

Following the witnesses' testimony, Vice Chair Soloveichik and Commissioner Mahmood ran an interactive question-and-answer session focused on the United States government's foreign policy options to address the critical religious freedom issues in Burma. The witnesses emphasized the need for continued backing for democracy, protection and aid for victims and survivors, accountability for perpetrators, restoration of U.S. aid funds, and engagement with the National Unity Government and other pro-democracy groups. The panelists also emphasized the importance of countering hate campaigns and misinformation against Rohingya, and their concerns for forced conscription targeting Rohingya men. Lastly, the witnesses mentioned the capabilities of refugees in Southeast Asia to be self-sufficient given the reduction of aid and prospects of their return to Burma with the help of neighboring countries.

Vice Chair Soloveichik closed the hearing by thanking the witnesses for their testimonies.

*\*Name withheld for security reasons.*



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

### Professional Staff

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**Michael Ardovino**

*Policy Analyst*

**Susan Bishai**

*Senior Policy Analyst*

**Mollie Blum**

*Policy Analyst*

**Guillermo Cantor**

*Director of Research and Policy*

**Mingzhi Chen**

*Supervisory Policy Advisor*

**Andrew Hamm**

*Public Affairs Associate*

**Sema Hasan**

*Senior Policy Analyst*

**Thomas Kraemer**

*Chief Administrative Officer*

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*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

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*Public Affairs Specialist*

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**Scott Weiner**

*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Kurt Werthmuller**

*Deputy Director of Research and Policy*

**Nathan Wineinger**

*Chief of Public Affairs*

**Jean Wu**

*Policy Analyst*

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