



## **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**

### **Burma in Transition: Next Steps to Advance Religious Freedom and Improve Conditions for Religious Refugees**

**Thursday, February 27, 2025  
10:30 AM – 12:00 PM**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

#### **Meir Soloveichik, USCIRF Vice Chair**

Good morning and welcome to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing *Burma in Transition: Next Steps to Advance Religious Freedom and Improve Conditions for Religious Refugees*. My name is Meir Soloveichik, currently the Vice Chair of USCIRF. I want to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us today to provide their expertise.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes

policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and the U.S. Congress. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this important hearing.

February 1st marked the four-year anniversary of the coup in which General Min Aung Hlaing seized control and ousted Burma's democratically elected government. Over the past four years, Burma has sunk into a human rights and humanitarian abyss. Millions of people are either internally displaced in Burma or outside the country as refugees, more than 28,000 have been arrested, and 6,000 [killed](#).

The Burmese military had targeted ethnic and religious minorities for more than two decades before the coup, seeking to maintain its grip on power and achieve a Buddhist nationalist vision for Burma. After the coup, the military and its State Administration Council, or SAC, have violently targeted religious communities with arrests, killings, torching, and airstrikes; and [attacked](#) more than 240 religious sites throughout the country. On January 7, 2024, the military launched airstrikes in Sagaing region, killing 17 civilians – including nine children – as they gathered to worship at Saint Peter Baptist Church in Kanan village. The severity of the offense prompted human rights watchdog Amnesty International to call for the attacks to be investigated as war crimes. In August, the military bombed a

Buddhist monastery in the Mandalay region where displaced persons sought shelter. Many were injured, including a 7-year-old girl who had to have both of her legs amputated. These are only a few examples of the military's disregard for human lives and human rights.

USCIRF has monitored conditions in Burma since 2000, consistently recommending its designation as a Country of Particular Concern, or CPC, for systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. Although the Department of State has yet to announce the 2024 designations, Burma was last [redesignated](#) as a CPC under IRFA in December 2023.

In USCIRF's 2024 [Burma Country Update](#), we noted that the situation in Burma continued to deteriorate as the military junta's control was reduced and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) consolidated territory and established parallel government structures. These escalating conflicts negatively affected conditions for freedom of religion or belief. As Burma continues to fragment, vulnerable religious communities are further exposed to violence, terror, and retaliation for their alleged support for pro-democracy groups.

Against this backdrop, USCIRF is holding today's hearing to highlight the challenges of protecting religious freedom amid the devastating civil war in Burma. With that, I will turn the floor over to Commissioner Mahmood for

additional remarks.

**Asif Mahmood, USCIRF Commissioner**

Thank you, Vice Chair Soloveichik.

Indeed, human rights groups and international organizers have thoroughly documented the Burmese military's escalating violence targeting civilians, infringement on human rights, and systematic persecution of ethno-religious minorities. The military's indiscriminate airstrikes have claimed numerous lives, destroying the camps of internally displaced persons, places of worship, schools, and hospitals.

At a recent USCIRF [event](#) highlighting the plight of specific victims, we featured Maung Sawyeddollah, a Rohingya youth. He witnessed firsthand the Burmese military's atrocities against his predominantly Muslim community. He shared that religious intolerance in Burma has led to a series of violent campaigns against Rohingya including forced displacement, arbitrary arrests, and mass killings. Rohingya people are targeted, dehumanized, and violently oppressed due to their ethno-religious identity. Moreover, the military has used similar tactics to go after other religious minorities—such as Protestant Christians and Catholics—aggravating religious freedom conditions and the current humanitarian crisis.

Our hearing today will provide updates on the ongoing conflict between resistance forces and the Burmese military and its impact on freedom of religion or belief, including in Chin, Kachin, and Rakhine States where many religious minorities reside. We will shed light on the Burmese military's religious freedom violations, including attacks against religious sites, leaders, and communities, as well as its forcible conscription of ethnoreligious minorities such as Rohingya. We will also highlight the plight of refugee communities that have fled, specifically how religious persecution has contributed to this aspect of the crisis. These communities include Rohingya Muslims in Bangladesh, Chin Christians in India, and others who are internally displaced in Burma. To address these ongoing challenges, we will review existing 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. Lastly, we will assess the impact of U.S. and other international sanctions on the military's ability to resupply and resume fighting.

We are honored to have several experts who will inform us on these critical topics today. They are prominent representatives of their communities and have been monitoring human rights violations in Burma for years. We will hear from an ethnic Kachin Christian pastor whose name and image is being withheld for their protection. We also will hear from Yasmin Ullah, founder and executive

director of Rohingya Maïyafuïnor Collaborative Network; Salai Za Uk Ling, Executive Director at Chin Human Rights Organization, and Jessica Olney, Non-resident Advisor on Burma and Bangladesh at Preventing and Ending Mass Atrocities.

Thank you all for participating in today's hearing.

We will now hear from the pastor whose name is being withheld and who will present off-camera for safety reasons. You may begin your testimony.