

Risks of Mass Atrocities in Burma Post-Coup

Summary

Since 2013, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has sounded the alarm about the risk of genocide against the Rohingya, an ethnic and religious minority in Burma. In 2018 the Museum found that there is compelling evidence that the Burmese military, known as the Tatmadaw, committed ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and genocide against the Rohingya.¹

The Rohingya remain at heightened risk of genocide and mass atrocities.² Other vulnerable groups include ethnic and religious minorities in areas where armed groups are fighting the Tatmadaw. In particular, an increased military offensive in Chin State in northwestern Burma is raising red flags of potential mass atrocities.

Background

On February 1, 2021, the Tatmadaw seized power in a military coup. Now, genocide perpetrators are leading the country and civilians are again under attack. Since the coup, the Tatmadaw has continued its pattern of brutal attacks on civilians. As of this writing, the Tatmadaw has killed approximately 1250 people and arrested over 7000³ in an escalating crackdown on pro-democracy protesters and unarmed civilians. Those targeted include children, journalists, health workers, and human rights defenders. Experts have said that this violence has risen to the level of crimes against humanity and war crimes.⁴ The coup has increased risks for particular minority communities, notably the Rohingya, given their unique vulnerability including a history of mass atrocities.

Risk of Future Mass Atrocities to the Rohingya Population

The Rohingya survivors of genocide remain at risk. The ethnic and religious minority group, located primarily in Rakhine State in western Burma, has experienced persecution, systematic discrimination, and waves of physical violence by the Tatmadaw, government officials, and other civilians for decades. In August 2017 the Tatmadaw escalated its genocidal campaign against the Rohingya which included mass killings,

¹ “Museum Finds Compelling Evidence Genocide was Committed Against Rohingya, Warns of Continued Threat,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, December 3, 2018, <https://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-releases/museum-finds-compelling-evidence-genocide-was-committed-against-rohingya-wa>.

² For the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide’s longer policy brief that details the scenarios of potential mass atrocities against the Rohingya after the coup, see “Risk of Mass Atrocities Against the Rohingya Post-Coup,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, August 2021, https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/The_Risk_of_Mass_Atrocities_against_the_Rohingya_Post-coup.pdf.

³ “Daily Briefing in Relation to the Military Coup,” Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, <https://aappb.org/>.

⁴ “Myanmar junta crackdown likely crimes against humanity requiring coordinated international response - UN expert,” United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, March 11, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26885>; “Mass Murder of Civilians in Myanmar’s Sagaing Region Amounts to ‘War Crime,’ Says Rights Lawyer,” *Radio Free Asia*, July 13, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/crime-07132021185617.html>; and “BHRN releases newest report documenting crimes against humanity committed by the Tatmadaw,” Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN), July 29, 2021, <https://www.bhrn.org.uk/en/report/1176-bhrn-releases-newest-report-documenting-crimes-against-humanity-committed-by-the-tatmadaw.html>.

sexual violence, and the forced displacement of over 700,000 people. The military officials responsible for these crimes have not been prosecuted, and now sit at the helm of the country.

The Rohingya who have fled to refugee camps in Bangladesh face serious dangers from armed groups yet cannot safely return home to Burma. In Burma, the approximate 600,000 Rohingya who remain continue to be denied citizenship, freedom of movement, basic services, and accountability. Approximately 130,000 Rohingya who fled violence in 2012 continue to live in internally displaced persons camps in central Rakhine State that resemble open-air prisons.⁵

The Tatmadaw appears increasingly unconcerned with seeking international legitimacy, and the lack of effective deterrents leaves the Rohingya at serious risk of genocide or mass atrocities in the future.

Risk of Future Mass Atrocities to Other Civilians

Other groups in Burma at risk of mass atrocities include ethnic and religious minority groups in areas where ethnic armed organizations and/or People's Defense Forces are fighting the Tatmadaw. The Tatmadaw has historically committed crimes against humanity and war crimes against ethnic and religious minority groups in areas where it is fighting ethnic armed organizations.⁶ Since the coup, the Tatmadaw has resumed its "Four Cuts" strategy, in which it targets civilians in order to deprive ethnic armed organizations of support.⁷ The Tatmadaw's strategy of viewing civilians as the enemy could lead to mass atrocities.

In October 2021, the Tatmadaw attacked villages in Chin State, in northwestern Burma, causing thousands to flee.⁸ UN Special Rapporteur Tom Andrews warned the UN General Assembly that the massing of troops and the Tatmadaw's tactics against civilians in the area "are ominously reminiscent of those employed by the military before its genocidal attacks against the Rohingya in Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017...We should all be prepared...for even more mass atrocity crimes."⁹

⁵ "Myanmar: Mass Detention of Rohingya in Squalid Camps," Human Rights Watch, October 8, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/08/myanmar-mass-detention-rohingya-squalid-camps>.

⁶ "Myanmar: UN Fact-Finding Mission releases its full account of massive violations by military in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan States," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, September 18, 2018, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=23575>.

⁷ Emily Fishbein, Nu Nu Lusan and Vahpual, "Myanmar military adopts 'four cuts' to stamp out coup opponents," *Al Jazeera*, July 5, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/5/the-people-hate-them-more-indiscriminate-attacks-on-civilians>.

⁸ UNHCR, Myanmar Emergency Update, November 1, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Myanmar%20Emergency%20Update%20-%20%201%20Nov.pdf>.

⁹ OHCHR, Myanmar: UN expert fears spike in atrocities amid reports of troops massing in north, October 22, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27693&LangID=E>.