



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Burma: Human Rights in the Aftermath of the Coup

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2:30 – 4:30 p.m.

H-313, the Capitol

As prepared for delivery

Good afternoon and welcome to today's hearing on human rights in Burma in the aftermath of the February 1, 2021 coup d' état. I thank our witnesses for taking the time to share their expertise with us, and I look forward to our discussion.

We have convened this hearing because two and a half years after the coup, the human rights situation in Burma has only continued to deteriorate. A return to democracy does not seem to be on the horizon, while the world's attention has shifted to other crises.

We have one question today: whether we in Congress, in the Biden administration and in the international community are doing all we can to be wind at the backs of those fighting for human rights and to restore democracy in Burma.

This Commission has been engaged on human rights in Burma since it was created in 2008. One of the first hearings I led as co-chair was on human rights abuses in Burma, in April 2009, and we've convened several other hearings and briefings since then.

I wish I could say that the human rights situation had improved during these years.

For a brief moment, when the National League for Democracy, or NLD, won a sweeping victory in the 2015 parliamentary elections and went on to form a government led by Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, hopes for a rights-respecting democratic transition were high, after decades of military rule.

But those hopes were quickly tempered by the reality of the Tatmadaw's continued political power -- and then completely undercut by the horrific campaign that forced more than 800,000 Rohingya to flee for their lives in 2016 and 2017.

The government's inability or unwillingness to protect the Rohingya was gut-wrenching, a terrible disillusion -- and did not placate the military. When the November 2020 elections rolled around, the Tatmadaw was simply unwilling to tolerate the NLD's second big victory.

And so the coup, with its devastating consequences: nearly 3,700 people killed, 17,000 still detained, 60,000 homes burned, more than 1.6 million newly displaced. Those democratic leaders not imprisoned are in hiding or exiled, and civil war has spread throughout the country.

According to the State Department's 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights, the military has repeatedly used lethal force against peaceful protestors; waged offensives, including with airstrikes, against ethnic minority militias; and committed a wide range of extremely grave human rights violations, including targeted killings, systematic burning of villages, and sexual violence.

An estimated 17.6 million people, nearly a third of the population, need humanitarian assistance.

To the extent that there is any good news, it's that the military's brutal repression is unifying people across ethnic lines in opposition to military rule.

The Biden Administration has said that "the United States will not waver in its support for the people of Burma as they seek peace, justice, and a genuine democratic future for their country."

Immediately after the coup President Biden issued Executive Order 14014 which authorized sanctions against those who undermine democratic processes or institutions in Burma, and against military leaders of the coup government. As of this month, OFAC has designated 127 persons for sanctions pursuant to E.O. 14014 authority, including 83 individuals and 44 entities. I take this opportunity to express my strong support for these designations.

The U.S. response has not been limited to sanctions.

The Administration has worked to coordinate a multilateral response to the crisis through the UN, and has engaged with ASEAN and regional partners. It has stated clearly that conditions do not exist for free and fair elections next year.

The State Department has made Burma a priority country for its *Strategy to Anticipate, Prevent and Mitigate Atrocities*, in keeping with the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act.

Last December Congress passed the “Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act,” or BURMA Act, as part of the FY 2023 National Defense Authorization Act, and implementation is underway.

So today’s discussion is an opportunity to take stock of what has been done and ask what has been achieved, how we know if we’re making progress, and what more we can do.

During the preparations for this hearing, some recommendations have already come our way: greater emphasis on building civil society capacity for the long run, localization of humanitarian assistance, increasing pressure on the military’s economic base, pursuing accountability through all available channels. I hope we can discuss these ideas and more during the course of the hearing.

I yield now to Co-Chair Smith for his opening remarks.