

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Burma: Human Rights in the Aftermath of the Coup

September 13, 2023, 2:30 pm
H-313, the Capitol

STATEMENT SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Submitted by:

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Thank you, co-chairs Smith and McGovern for convening this important hearing on Burma, which is a critical focus for my organization Radio Free Asia (RFA), especially in the last two years since the military coup.

When the Burmese military seized power from the people of Burma in early 2021, it wasted little time in launching an all-out assault on local, independent media and asserting its control on the means by which information was shared. The junta shuttered all local independent outlets and took control of the country's main public broadcaster and telecom companies, undoing a decade of progress when Burma's media controls and restrictions were eased and lifted.

Today, more than two years after the coup, the military's media crackdown continues, compounding the pain and frustration of a people robbed of the right to decide their own fate. As press freedom hangs in the balance, the world cannot afford to waste time sitting on the sidelines. We are seeing Burma continue further down a path common in Asian countries where Radio Free Asia and RFA's digital brands - funded by the U.S. Congress through an annual grant from the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) - operate.

Journalism under Fire and in Exile

The junta's intensified pressure has forced local journalists and media to go into hiding and exile. The Democratic Voice of Burma and Irrawaddy, which had re-established in-country operations over the past decade, have again been forced to move offshore, their journalists - as well as ours -

often reporting on events covertly. Their and other local outlets' reporters are targeted mercilessly, as the regime arrests journalists en masse, including those working for foreign media. According to Reporters Without Borders, 70 reporters are imprisoned in Myanmar, a sad statistic that has earned the country its place among the world's worst jailers of journalists - second only to China¹.

RFA's journalists prior to the coup were more than 50 in Myanmar. Since the coup, RFA has been forced to shutter its physical presence in Naypyidaw and Yangon, but it is still able to make its presence felt. Recently when Cyclone Mocha ravaged the country in June 2023, RFA's timely coverage about the devastating storm and its deadly toll garnered more than 20 million video views on YouTube and Facebook within a 10-day period.

Lack of Information Deepens Crisis

In addition to weaponizing the legal system against voices of dissent and opposition, Burmese authorities have imposed telecom restrictions, prolonged internet outages and high data costs unaffordable to many. Amid this enforced scarcity of information, junta forces and anti-military factions are locked in a brutal civil war that has not only destabilized Burmese civil society, but also the entire ASEAN region.

Enduring continuous hardship, Burma's civilian population has suffered enormously. They have been attacked, their homes burned down, their villages razed, and their loved ones targeted, detained, imprisoned, or killed. Indiscriminate artillery and rocket fire from military raids in cities and towns have left scores of unarmed civilians dead, including children who have been tragically caught in the crossfire². The Burmese people's misery has been made worse by the junta's ceaseless media clampdown and enforced internet outages, preventing even basic communications among a terrified populace. A huge swath of the Burmese population - including the more than 1 million displaced internally and the nearly 100,000³ who have fled to border regions with little or no internet connectivity - face day to day life without accurate knowledge about the important developments and everyday issues, even the weather - as RFA learned when Cyclone Mocha hit Burma last June.

RFA's Impactful Work since the Coup

RFA's on-the-ground reporting has continued uninterrupted since the 2021 coup. During this time, RFA's reports have informed the Burmese people about the military's war crimes and atrocities against civilians, the targeting of dissent and political activists, and the degradation of daily life. In June 2022, RFA's Burmese service produced a three-part investigation into the contents of a soldier's lost cell phone, which contained gruesome images and videos depicting

¹ Reporters Without Borders: <https://rsf.org/en/country/myanmar>

² In 2022, after a spate of attacks in highly populated areas, it was estimated that nearly 160 children had died. RFA: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmar-children-conflict-12312022230150.html>

³ Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/myanmar>

the military's crimes against civilians in the Sagaing region. RFA Burmese also interviewed a former champion gymnast who had represented Myanmar on the world stage, and was living in poverty amid junta restrictions that forced her father out of a job. The story sparked public outrage that led to local authorities offering her employment through a community athletic program.

Furthermore, RFA first reported the regime's use of the popular social networking app Telegram to entrap pro-democracy supporters - a tactic that has been employed by autocrats in Belarus and Russia. We worked with partners at *The Washington Post* to produce a follow-up investigation⁴ as part of its "Annals of Autocracy" series.

Along with its digital brand BenarNews, RFA also closely covers the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar and Bangladesh - a situation which has become more severe under the military's rule. Marking the fifth anniversary of the Rohingya crisis, when an estimated 700,000 Rohingya were expelled from Burma's Rakhine State as their villages and homes were torched, RFA published a unique project on exiled Rohingya. RFA witnessed an evolution in perspective after the coup among some of our audience, many of whom had been critical of our coverage of the Rohingya. As one Burmese man put it in a 2023 survey, "[RFA] were the only news agency talking about the Rohingya and the people thought RFA was biased. Eventually they realized RFA stands up for the minority people."

RFA's Audience Robust, Despite Obstacles

While digital conditions have changed considerably since the coup, RFA employs a number of different channels and methods to successfully deliver news to its audiences. In addition to maintaining a strong presence online and on social media, heavily promoting the use of VPNs, RFA Burmese utilizes shortwave radio - which is invaluable to reaching listeners in refugee camps and the remotest provinces - and the USAGM's satellite link. Amid the challenging media environment, RFA's audience remains robust. A 2023 audience survey found nearly one in five adults surveyed (19.6%) accessed RFA in the previous week, despite internet blackouts and threats from the ruling junta. Our social media engagement, which saw record-breaking numbers during the early days of the coup⁵, has remained high, with tens of millions combined video views on Facebook and YouTube. As the crisis in Burma continues, RFA remains a trustworthy source of news - and one of the few remaining news outlets still standing in the country.

⁴ The Washington Post:
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/28/myanmar-junta-telegram-resistance-snitch/>

⁵ In the week of Feb. 1-7, 2021, RFA's Burmese Service videos on YouTube and Facebook were viewed a quarter of a billion times.

Recommendations for Consideration

This prolonged crisis demands action. In terms of protecting press freedom and the access to accurate information in Myanmar, it is important to consider the following recommendations today and in future dialogues about the crisis.

First, the United States should do everything in its power to support journalists in exile, encouraging allies and other countries that support a free press to expedite the visa process for reporters, editors, and producers forced to flee persecution. Recent legislation enacted in the United States and similar allowances in other countries have enabled reporters from Hong Kong to migrate and resume journalistic work. RFA has managed to relocate reporters from Hong Kong to Europe, Taiwan, Canada, and the United States - who continue to file news stories for us thanks to these programs.

Second, it is important to ensure the Burmese people have unfettered access to information on digital and non-digital platforms alike. This means supporting groups like RFA's sister organization the Open Technology Fund, which has been instrumental in developing digital technology and ways by which people in Myanmar and those living in closed societies can securely and freely access the internet. Access to information also means supporting the transmission of RFA and outside programming via satellite (while continuing to utilize shortwave and medium wave radio broadcasting) as an "insurance" by which we can reach people in remote areas where internet connectivity is poor or nonexistent and satellite dishes are unavailable.

Third, it is critical that journalists who have been forced to leave the country can find viable employment as a journalist or in a related field. These displaced journalists would benefit from a coordinated global "head hunting" effort to connect them with job opportunities and fellowships at news organizations, universities, think tanks, and research institutes. It is important that these individuals, should they wish to return to Myanmar if conditions improve, stay engaged and continue their professional growth so they one day can rebuild the country's media industry.

Last and perhaps most important is for all of us, especially those with a public voice, to advocate unceasingly for imprisoned journalists in all official and international forums. Human history has taught us repeatedly that silence in the face of brutality is never a good option, and that access to information is the foundation for democracy and freedom. Our voice can make a difference, especially for those whose speech is silenced as they try to regain control of their destiny.