

Written Testimony  
**Michael Schiffer, USAID Bureau for Asia Assistant Administrator**  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission  
***“Burma: Human Rights in the Aftermath of the Coup”***  
September 13, 2023

Introduction

Co-Chair McGovern, Co-Chair Smith, Distinguished Commission Members: Thank you for inviting me to testify on how USAID is working to ensure we are supporting the people of Burma in their efforts to find a peaceful and just resolution to the current crisis, rooted in the will of the people of Burma and their on-going struggle for an inclusive, democratic federalist future.

Over two and a half years ago, the military seized power in Burma in a bloody coup. The regime has left Burma in ruins, with four out of five townships in Burma affected by armed clashes between the military and those that oppose its rule. Today, due to the military’s brutality, there are now over 1.9 million people displaced in Burma, and more than one million refugees in Bangladesh and the rest of the region. The internally displaced communities are facing increased threats of violence from the military, and facing on-going trauma due to conflict, bungled COVID response, epic mismanagement of the economy, high food prices, and frequent displacement that has severely impacted their coping capacity. Their vulnerability is further exacerbated by exposure to high risk natural hazards like the recent Cyclone Mocha that only compounded humanitarian needs.

To respond to this humanitarian crisis, USAID the United States has led the international community’s humanitarian response to Burma and the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh and the region by providing nearly \$2.1 billion since the military’s genocide and crimes against humanity towards the Rohingya that led 740,000 Rohingya to flee to neighboring Bangladesh in 2017. We deliver humanitarian assistance to the displaced conflict-affected and other vulnerable groups (including Rohingya) by leveraging partnerships with humanitarian organizations that deliver assistance to beneficiaries based on verifiable needs. And although at times this work has required engagement with governing authorities in Burma, we do so with humanitarian principles first and foremost in mind. In Bangladesh, USAID supports UN agencies and an NGO partner to strengthen emergency preparedness and response capacity of host communities in Cox’s Bazar District, including funding for humanitarian coordination, nutrition, protection and risk management. Additionally, USAID supports WFP and UNICEF to provide emergency food and nutrition assistance to refugees from Burma in Bangladesh.

In addition to these efforts to support the people of Burma through our humanitarian assistance programs, immediately after the coup, USAID’s bilateral democracy assistance program pivoted to provide emergency support to pro-democracy activists and ethnic support organizations, civil society leaders, journalists, and human rights defenders. This ongoing assistance provides a critical safety net and includes temporary safe houses, subsistence living

expenses, emergency medical needs, digital and physical security, legal aid, and psychosocial support, enabling individuals and entities to continue their work for an inclusive, federal and democratic future for their country.

USAID has also identified priorities that, with additional resources from Congress, would further meet immediate needs and support the enabling environment for a future inclusive, federal and democratic Burma. These priorities are: supporting the growth of federal and administrative governance structures for the pro-democracy movement and ethnic groups, alternative justice and governance systems, strengthening independent media to counter misinformation, and working with grassroots organizations in Rakhine and other ethnic communities to support social cohesion and inclusion.

Since the passing of the BURMA Act, USAID has further aligned and accelerated programs to support a wide array of actors in Burma. This consists of democracy activists, ethnic support groups, human rights defenders, the civil disobedience movement, civil society actors, women and youth groups, the “National Unity Government”, and the National Unity Consultative Council. Our support of these crucial groups has greatly benefitted from consultations with Congress, both immediately after the coup and in the development and implementation of the BURMA Act.

We have leveraged our democracy and governance budget as the focal point of our aid for these groups, while also using economic development and health programs to deliver basic services and humanitarian aid in order to sustain the resilience of vulnerable, conflict-affected communities. USAID/Burma has provided this assistance mainly via local civil society and ethnic service delivery organizations. This work also bolsters the enabling environment necessary for a future inclusive democracy.

We are, moreover, moving forward with additional interventions to provide non-lethal atrocity prevention and civil protection efforts consistent with the BURMA Act. As I am sure members of this commission can appreciate, given the sensitivity of this work and the need to protect our partners, we would be happy to discuss it further in a different setting. While USAID's work in Burma is uniquely designed for the operating context, USAID is redoubling efforts to identify lessons learned from recent operations in Sudan, Iraq and other countries which presented similar conflict zone operational challenges.

I wish that I was joining you today to provide a clear road-map ahead for Burma – one in which the fundamental human rights of all the people of Burma are fully respected. That goal is one that USAID shares with members of this Commission. But as you know well, the road ahead remains challenging. Nevertheless, USAID remains committed to provide the people of Burma with the support they need during this crisis, prioritizing humanitarian assistance; civilian protection, including early warning and early response and support for the development and growth of governance institutions to advance U.S. policy objectives of a just, peaceful, inclusive, federal and democratic Burma.