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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Christian Solidarity Worldwide, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 August 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



The Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar

1. CSW (Christian Solidarity Worldwide) is a human rights organisation specialising in the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for all. This submission seeks to bring the Council's attention to the ongoing human rights situation in Myanmar.

2. Since the Myanmar military, also known as the Tatmadaw, seized power in a coup in February 2021. Since then, the country has been plunged into an appalling political, economic, humanitarian, and human rights crisis. CSW remains alarmed by the ongoing arrest, detention and even execution of protestors and political prisoners, attacks and displacement of civilians, as well as attacks on places of worship and religious leaders. The humanitarian crisis continues, further escalated by the military coup of February 2021.

Political Prisoners

3. The Myanmar army announced on 25 July that it had executed four democracy activists who were accused of helping to carry out "terror acts". The judicial executions are the first to take place in the country since 1990.

4. Former MP Phyo Zeya Thaw and activist Kyaw Min Yu, also known as Ko Jimmy, were initially sentenced to death in January 2022, and their appeals were rejected in June. Activists Hla Myo Aung and Aung Thura Zaw were also executed.

5. The executions have drawn widespread international condemnation, including from Tom Andrews, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, who wrote in a statement: "These depraved acts must be a turning point for the international community. What more must the junta do before the international community is willing to take strong action? The widespread and systematic murders of protesters, indiscriminate attacks against entire villages, and now the execution of opposition leaders, demands an immediate and firm response by member states of the United Nations. The status quo of international inaction must be firmly rejected."¹

6. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners in Burma (AAPP), which has been documenting events since the military took power in a coup in February 2021, 2,227 people had been killed, 15,161 had been arrested, and 12,064 people remained detained as of 19 August 2022.²

7. On 15 August the ousted leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, was sentenced on further corruption charges, adding six years to her earlier 11-year prison sentence, following a trial that was held behind closed doors without due process.

Attacks against civilians

8. CSW is deeply concerned by the use of air strikes against civilians, particularly in Chin State, Kayah (Karenni) State, Karen State and Sagaing and Magway Divisions, in violation of both international law and Myanmar's own laws. Such attacks have been accompanied by atrocities, including murder, torture, sexual violence, rape, arson, and the destruction of property.

9. While the military has attacked all persons, severe attacks have occurred in border areas where ethnic minorities live. Three main areas of attack, Chin, Kayah and Karen State, have significant Christian populations.

10. For example, civilian areas in Kayah and Chin States have faced an onslaught of rocket attacks and deliberate arson by soldiers, destroying homes, businesses, churches, and even an IDP camp.

11. Kayah State has been particularly targeted by the military. At least half of the state's population has been forced to flee their homes, including more than two-thirds of the Catholic population. At least 35 civilians were burned alive on 24 December 2021 in Kayah State. Civilians have been used as human shields and landmines have been placed in residential areas.

12. There have also been reports of the use of civilians for forced labour.³

Displacement of civilians

13. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are approximately 810,000 internally displaced persons in Myanmar, and 600,000 stateless Rohingya, of which 148,000 remain displaced. The UNHCR estimates that at least 330,600 people have been internally displaced since the coup alone.

14. Official UNHCR numbers (as of 4 July 2022) show a slight decrease in IDPs in Kayah and Karen State, with an increase in Tanintharyi District.⁴ In Kayah State alone, over half the population have been displaced.

Attacks on places of worship/religious leaders

15. The situation for human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief, remains highly concerning in light of the military coup of February 2021.

16. CSW has received more than 35 documented reports of attacks on churches and other places of worship and people of faith. Religious leaders have been arrested and places of worship have been damaged or destroyed in airstrikes and targeted attacks. The army has used Buddhist temples and Christian churches as barracks for soldiers.

17. For example, at least five pastors have been murdered and four others jailed, in Chin State alone since the coup, and several churches in Kayah and Chin states have been shelled and destroyed.

18. On 8 April an estimate of 40 soldiers from the Myanmar army forcibly occupied the Sacred Heart Cathedral during a Lenten prayer service, detaining the congregation for approximately three hours and placing the Archbishop of Mandalay, his staff, and around 20 diocesan priests under temporary house arrest. The soldiers claimed that they were searching for weapons after an informant alleged that the Archbishop was supplying weapons to rebels throughout the country. However, no weapons were found on the premises.

19. Just days later, on 10 April, 13 people were arrested during a raid on the St. Joseph Catholic Church in Sharge village, Hinthada township.

20. One of the detainees, Father Richard Nay Zaw Aung, was held until 19 April, while the others were all released after being questioned for several hours.

21. Meanwhile Muslims throughout the country, and especially Rohingyas, continue to face grinding persecution at the hands of a military regime driven by extreme Buddhist nationalism.

22. The arrest of three Buddhist monks, Ashin Sobitha and Ashin Ariya Vansa Bivansa, known as “Myawaddy Sayadaw,” a prominent Buddhist leader and vocal critic of both the military and the extremist Buddhist nationalist movement, in Mandalay, and Shwe Nya War’s detention in Rangoon, on 1 February 2021, within hours of the start of the military coup, was indicative of the military’s long history of weaponising religious nationalism and repressing FoRB.

23. Such cases are indicative of the continued antagonism of the Myanmar army towards religious groups in the country.

Humanitarian crisis

24. Humanitarian aid access and distribution has been severely constrained and intentionally hindered by the regime. In addition, the coup has had a devastating impact on the economy, and the military has cut off food supplies to civilians as part of its four cuts policy, causing cases of extreme malnutrition, especially in Kayah state.

25. CSW is also concerned by reports of military forces have arrested and killed church leaders and local volunteers providing humanitarian support, in addition to blocking access to areas in need by destroying bridges and blocking roads.

26. At the 49th session of the Human Rights Council, High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet, said of situation in Myanmar, “The economy is on the brink of collapse. Over 14.4 million individuals are now assessed as being in humanitarian need”. She predicted that “food scarcity will sharply increase over the coming months”.

Recommendations to the Human Rights Council

27. Call for a global arms embargo on Myanmar and continue to impose robust, targeted sanctions against the Myanmar military and military-owned enterprises.

28. Take a coordinated approach with other UN member states, agencies, international institutions including the EU, and Special Envoys, to ensure that in all dialogues and exchanges with Myanmar human rights are raised and demands made that Myanmar fulfils its human rights obligations.

29. Urge member states, including Japan, India, Thailand and Viet Nam, to cease all training of the Myanmar military.

30. Increase international pressure on the Myanmar military to remove blocks to humanitarian access in the ethnic states.

31. Provide cross-border humanitarian aid to those in most need in the ethnic conflict areas and refugee camps.

32. Urge the Indian, Bangladeshi and Thai governments not to deport Myanmar refugees back to Myanmar.

33. Support efforts to strengthen and better resource the UNHCR to accelerate applications for Myanmar nationals in countries where they are at risk of deportation to Myanmar.

34. Support initiatives by civil society organisations and legal experts seeking to analyse evidence indicating crimes against humanity.

35. Consider funding support for Myanmar’s National Unity Government and the diaspora community to advocate for a return to democratic rule in Myanmar.

1. Twitter, Tom Andrews, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, 25 July 2022 <https://twitter.com/RapporteurUn/status/1551409495817048065>

2. Twitter, Assistance Association for Political Prisoners in Burma, 19 August 2022, https://twitter.com/aapp_burma/status/1560624905128796160

3. Karen Human Rights Group, ‘Statement in condemnation of escalation of violence in Southeast Burma’, 19 July 2022 https://khrg.org/2022/07/statement-condemnation-escalation-violence-southeast-burma?mc_cid=4408408a4e&mc_eid=901b2d3852

4. UN High Commission for Refugees, Myanmar Emergency Overview Map, 4 July 2021 <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/2851>