



Quaker Peace & Legislation Committee

WATCHING BRIEF 24-6: MYANMAR

As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government, we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.

March 2024

This Brief outlines recent developments in Myanmar, and responses to the ongoing conflict there. It draws on a recent webinar arranged by Queensland Friends on 11 February 2024, at which Friends from USA, Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Burma and Australia shared information and insights. It also includes (a) an article by Emily Aung (A Myanmar national who is in the support group for the National Unity Government of Myanmar), (b) comments by Kwi Kwih a peaceworker in Karenland about what is happening in border regions, and (c) notes on a recent meeting in Melbourne about the crisis. Suggested action is highlighted in the first article.

The Situation in Myanmar Three Years after the Coup d'État (by Emily Aung)

On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar military, also known as Tatmadaw, violently overthrew the democratically elected government, imprisoning the democratic leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, arresting lawmakers, trade unionists, journalists, and peaceful protestors. Recently the Tatmadaw began implementing conscription for all individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 million people nationwide have since risen up in opposition to the junta with the aim of finally rooting out this notoriously brutal group, which has terrorized its own people for decades. Since its failed coup on 1 February 2021, the Junta has killed 4613 people, including children, the elderly, and women. Furthermore, over 1.95 million people are displaced within Myanmar and humanitarian access for them is not predictable. In recent months, the junta has escalated its use of airstrikes to terrorize and murder Myanmar civilians throughout the country including people in IDP camps. From May to December 2023 alone, the junta launched 1,022 airstrikes, amounting to at least six airstrikes per day. As a result, 321 civilians were killed, 583 were injured, and numerous schools, medical facilities, and religious buildings were damaged.

Recently, the Australian government imposed further targeted sanctions on five entities in Myanmar, designed to limit the regime's access to the funds and military materiel that enable

it to continue to commit atrocities against its own people. Additionally, the military junta received condemnation from the Members of the United Nations Security Council due to their atrocities and disregard for the international norms. On August 24, 2023, the council members once again urged the military to cease the violence and refrain from killing civilians. In a more recent development, five European countries and Canada have joined Gambia's lawsuit against the Myanmar military for its genocide against the Rohingya at the United Nations' highest court.

We often simplify conflicts, presenting them in black and white terms; however, since February 2021 there has been a key line of conflict between the military junta on the one hand and on the other hand, the resistance which includes the Civil Disobedience Movement, ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), and Peoples Defence Forces (PDFs), all of them fighting a just cause, for democracy, rule of law, human rights, and an equitable, inclusive society. The people in Myanmar are fighting for their human rights with unshakable determination against all odds and the risk of violent death. The world should acknowledge and celebrate this courage and do anything they can to help the people of Myanmar succeed, so that they can join the world as a democratic nation.

Now is the time to support the democratic revolution in Myanmar. Recently, the military has lost a lot of ground in the face of coordinated attacks by EAOs and PDFs. Towns and regions have finally been liberated from the junta's war of terror against its own people. See below for suggested actions.

"Voices from the Border: Early Impacts of Conscription in Burma" Kwi Kwih

While mainstream news outlets have been reporting on the enforcement of conscription laws in Myanmar, the reality on the ground tells a more complex story. Primarily affecting young Burmese between the ages of 18 to 35 for males and 18 to 27 for females, families with the means to do so have resorted to sending their children out of the country. Others have sought refuge in the countryside, further swelling the ranks of internally displaced persons within the nation. In rural areas, word has spread of indiscriminate kidnappings and roundups of the youth, with little regard for the specified age limits. As of now, the impact seems concentrated in urban centers and major townships, leading some families to cease sending their children to school altogether.

Even those who sought refuge in migrant schools along the Thai border find themselves ensnared in this crisis. With the upcoming three-month school holiday in March, students typically return to their villages to reunite with family and assist with chores. However, the journey back home has become perilous, forcing families to grapple with the expensive choice of either keeping their children at the Thai border or arranging for their relocation to the Burmese border.

(Note: Kwi, a dedicated peace worker and leader within the IDP (Internally Displaced People) camps along the border, has been inundated with pleas from parents urging their children to "come home to the border." He reflects on the dwindling options, torn between the desire to offer refuge to all and the stark reality of limited resources. "Our hearts long to welcome everyone," he laments, "but how do we feed them all?" Each incoming call fills him with dread, fearing yet another parent's desperate plea to shelter their children).

Myanmar Peoples Summit

This was held in Melbourne on 4 March, at the beginning of the ASEAN Forum hosted by Australia. Tasneem Roc, manager of the Myanmar Campaign Network, introduced the various speakers, who included Xanana Gusmao (Prime Minister of Timor-Leste), Dr Tun Aung Shwe (NUG Representative to Australia), Saw Lwin Oo (Australian Karen Organisation), Kasit Piromya (former Thai foreign Minister), Rev Tim Costello AO (Australian Baptists), Debbie Stothard (ASEAN Network on Burma), Alison Tate (International Trade Union Confederation), Joseph Mitchell (ACTU), Wai Wai Nu (Women Peace Network). It was clear from the presentations that Australia is being insufficiently engaged with the urgency of working with ASEAN and the United Nations towards a resolution of the war in Myanmar. This will involve sanctions against aid to the military, and devising avenues for dialogue about the way towards a democratic restoration. The consensus is that the conflict is at a stalemate because the military has tried to militarise the country but has failed to bring stability and peace. The civil war that has resulted involves many different groups, not just ethnic minorities, in conflict with the military.

National Unity Government (NUG)

This is the group formed after the coup to coordinate resistance and to seek recognition as the legitimate government. Its leaders include Aung San Suu Kyi as State Counsellor and Mahn Winn Kiang Thann as Prime Minister. It is recognized by the European Parliament, and has representatives in several countries including the US, UK, Norway, France, Czech Republic, Australia and South Korea. Its 'peoples defence force' has initiated a defensive war and nationwide revolution against the military junta. It controls significant territory and has the loyalty of a large proportion of the people. Russia is supporting the junta with arms. The National Unity Government (NUG) has an official presence in Canberra through its representative Dr Tun-Aung Shwe, who keeps contact with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and offers moral support for protests organized by pro-democracy groups in Australia. He has also welcomed the interest of Friends Peace Teams in Myanmar.

United Nations Response

The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres spoke on 31 January 2024 urging a path towards a democratic transition, and condemned all violence. He called for the protection of civilians and cessation of hostilities. He is working with stakeholders to ensure humanitarian aid, and with ASEAN for a peaceful outcome. Agencies such as UNICEF and UNDP are active in supporting those working to relieve suffering and achieve sustainable development in Myanmar. However, there is no whole-of-UN response. The UN Security Council has deferred a request for recognition of the National Unity Government as the legitimate representative of Myanmar, and has so far refused to impose an arms embargo.

Australia's Response

The official approach is reflected on the website of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). It says "Australia continues to call on the military to end violence against civilians, engage in dialogue, release those unjustly detained, allow unimpeded access for humanitarian assistance, and return Myanmar to the path of democracy. Other significant human rights challenges also remain. Australia continues to stress the importance of resolving the humanitarian crisis facing the Rohingya, the situation in Rakhine State, and protracted conflicts elsewhere in Myanmar, as well as the need to protect the rights of all people living in the country".

Quaker Perspectives

At the webinar organized by Queensland Friends on 11 February, the Asia-West Pacific Coordinator for Friends Peace Teams (FPT), Kins Aparece, reported on a visit to Karenland to gauge the possibility of FPT becoming involved in peace and justice work. This led to Australian Quakers funding three peace workers from Karenland to attend Cultures of Peace training in the Philippines in July 2023, and then two facilitators to run the same training in Karenland and Chiang Mai in November. Kwi Kwih from Karenland gave graphic details of Lukas Nagel and Emily Aung spoke to the webinar about their work in support of the NUG and as part of the Myanmar diaspora in Australia. Participants identified a range of ways to support the people of Myanmar – through humanitarian aid, publicizing what is happening there, lobbying for greater sanctions especially against military aid. Brisbane Quakers hope to form an ongoing group to maintain the efforts to raise awareness of the crisis and ways to offer support.

The **Quaker United Nations Office** (QUNO) has a focus on Myanmar and arranges informal meetings between people from the country with UBN diplomats to give space for exploring ways to support the people. Participants at the Brisbane meeting identified ways to offer practical support in food and medicine, lobby for greater international recognition of NUG, and increase awareness through rallies and publicity. Contact is being made with the official NUG representatives in Australia.

Action

Emily Aung has identified the following demands are made by National Unity Government's Representative office in Australian which in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2669 on Myanmar (December 2022).

- *Demand the immediate release of political prisoners by the Myanmar military, including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Ky*
- *Urge the end of all forms of violence in Myanmar.*
- *Encourage the Australian public and the government to support the pro-democratic movement in Myanmar in every way possible.*
- *Ask the Australian government to recognise and work with Myanmar's legitimate government, the National Unity Government (NUG), and its official representative in Canberra, Dr. Tun Aung Shwe*
- *Ask the Australian government to collaborate with the Civil Disobedience Movement, the National Unity Government, and Ethnic Resistance organizations to ensure effective distribution of humanitarian assistance to people living in conflict areas.*
- *Ask the Australian government, in coordination with the international community, to urge the Myanmar Military to cease all violence against the Myanmar people.*

QPLC will continue to be in touch with Queensland Friends and Friends Peace Teams about other options. Friends are also encouraged to support greater coverage of Myanmar in the Australian media.

Canberra
March 2024