

Burma Briefing



Beyond the 'ballot': The crisis in Burma and what the British government should do about it

December 2025

Current situation

- Burma is in the midst of a human rights and humanitarian crisis following the latest military coup in 2021.
- At the same time as escalating attacks against civilians and keeping around 20,000 political prisoners in jail, the Burmese military are preparing for sham elections on 28th December 2025.
- Despite the need for urgent action, the British government has gone from leader to laggard, falling behind allies in imposing sanctions to stop arms and revenue to the Burmese military, and may impose more cuts in aid next year.

What should the British government be doing?

- In addition to rejecting the sham election which begins on 28th December 2025, the British government should not engage with or be fooled by the sham so-called reform process which follows it.
- Resume ongoing systematic identification and sanctioning of sources of revenue and arms to the Burmese military, including state-owned banks used to facilitate arms purchases, Mytel, and sources of jet fuel.
- Aid cuts must be reversed, current levels of aid must not just be maintained, but also increased.
- Support for refugees from Burma should be increased.
- New approaches to raising Burma at the UN Security Council should be initiated.
- Expel the Burmese military attaché from the UK.

Current situation

Burma is in the midst of a human rights and humanitarian crisis following the latest military coup in 2021. Facing unprecedented armed and peaceful resistance, the Burmese military has been fighting for its survival.

Key to the survival of the Burmese military has been airpower, especially jets and other aircraft purchased during the so-called reform period

when sanctions were lifted. The Burmese military also uses helicopters, drones and motorised paragliders to carry out airstrikes. The Burmese military has commissioned 15 rounds of new aircraft since the last sham election in 2010 led to sanctions being lifted.

It is a deliberate tactic of the Burmese military to target civilians in order to create a humanitarian crisis which soaks up the capacity of the resistance, and to demoralise the population.

Aid cuts from many international donors have therefore not only had an impact on people in need of lifesaving aid, but have also had a broader political and human rights impact, benefiting the Burmese military.

Schools, hospitals and religious buildings are deliberately targeted in this campaign of terror.

Airstrikes often take place at night, when people are sleeping in homes in order to maximise casualties.

The United Nations estimates that 3.6 million people are internally displaced (IDPs), but they have limited or no access to large parts of the country. Civil society organisations assisting IDPs on the ground put the figure much higher, possibly around 5 million.

There are now around 20,000 political prisoners in Burma, compared to around 2,100 under the previous military dictatorship which ruled until 2011. They live in appalling conditions, facing torture and denial of medical care.

There is no freedom of speech, no free media, restricted access to the internet, no right of assembly, no fair justice system.

In Rakhine State, where most Rohingya live, the Arakha Army is now mostly in control, and has continued genocidal policies against the Rohingya population, meaning Rohingya now have two oppressors.

The Burmese military has imposed an aid and trade embargo on areas under Arakha Army control, leading to warnings of famine in the state and reports of Rohingya starving to death.



In other parts of Burma where resistance forces have taken control, they are setting up local administrations, providing health and education services, and consulting on local constitutions to decide how those areas should be governed.

This is the first time in the history of Burma that this has happened. This localised bottom-up democracy building is an unusual model but one which has more chance of success than imposed structures from a central government without input from local people. It should be supported.

Elections

The Burmese military love elections. It's an opportunity to rebrand and present false narratives of reform.

The Burmese military's planned elections in December are effectively intended as a 'Get Out of Jail Free card', which they have repeatedly played when they are in trouble. It is a rebranding exercise, not a reforming exercise.

They know the British government and many others will reject the elections as having no legitimacy. They don't care. What they care about is what comes after the election, when they will likely install a front 'civilian' government, controlled by the military, and straightjacketed by the undemocratic 2008 constitution. It is a belt and braces approach to ensuring their continued power and wealth.

We can anticipate promises of democratic transition, the release of many political prisoners in stages to maximise the public relations benefit, a revived 'peace process' (during the last peace process the Burmese military modernised their armed forces which they use to attack civilians today, and they committed genocide) and other 'reforms'. It will all be carefully calculated to relieve pressure while maintaining ultimate control, and with no possibility to further fundamental reforms.

With the scale of suffering in Burma, the humanitarian crisis, and multiple other international crises around the world, they are counting on empty promises being enough to

persuade the British government and others that something is better than nothing, and to go along with the sham process. It worked for them after the 2010 election, and they expect it to work again.

One of the greatest fears we hear from ethnic and civil society organisations is that, as happened after the 2010 elections, the international community will pressure them to enter into dialogue with their oppressor from a position of weakness, and in the process ultimately entrench military power, undermining hope for genuine democracy, self-determination and human rights.



If the British government and other countries relax international pressure on the Burmese military and whatever front regime it installs after the election, there may be a small period of opening and improvement for some, but no long-term genuine reforms.

At the high point of the last so-called reform process between 2011-2021, genocide against the Rohingya took place and the military budget increased by \$100 million annually year after year. The jets that budget increase paid for are bombing schools and hospitals today.

The Burmese military is a racist, Buddhist nationalist, corrupt, nepotistic, criminal organisation. They have undermined human rights, democracy and economic development in Burma for decades. They believe anyone who is not Buddhist and ethnic Bamar are not truly Burmese, and are a threat. There are no soft-liners waiting in lower ranks.

The Burmese military will never reform. Any dialogue that forces the people of Burma into compromise with the Burmese military is simply starting the countdown to another coup.

Even if the goal of the British government approach ultimately is to encourage some kind of dialogue, expecting genuine concessions from the Burmese military when they still have such significant revenue and airpower is unrealistic.

Sanctions

Targeted sanctions are an integral part of an overall strategy to reduce human rights violations in Burma.

Following the latest coup, the British government adopted a smart sanctions strategy, to systematically identify and sanction sources of revenue, arms and equipment to the Burmese military. New sanctions were brought in every few months, targeting arms and revenue.

This systematic approach weakened the Burmese military, impacted their capacity to commit human rights violations, and has a psychological impact in letting the Burmese military and their business allies know that pressure is going to increase relentlessly. Limiting the capacity of the Burmese military to carry out attacks, for example through drones and airstrikes, can also have a significant humanitarian impact, as airstrikes are a major cause of displacement.

Unfortunately, in the past two years, the British government has not been implementing its own strategy. It is more than a year since the British government took any steps to reduce revenue,

arms and equipment to the Burmese military. The British government has also stopped cooperating with allies, no longer joining the USA and EU when they have sanctioned entities and individuals not yet sanctioned by the UK.

The British government have gone from leaders to laggards in efforts to reduce the capacity of the Burmese military to commit human rights violations, at the same time as we are seeing an escalation in the targeting of schools.

The British government must lead again and be bolder in applying sanctions cutting off sources of revenue, arms and equipment to the Burmese military. This should include action against state-owned banks used to provide foreign exchange and facilitate the purchase of arms and equipment. Mytel, the mobile network co-owned by the military and used for monitoring and targeting activists for arrest, should be sanctioned.

Sanctions must also be expanded to third countries, as has happened with sanctions on Russian suppliers, and for example, Chinese companies regarding Ukraine. The UK has sanctioned Russian companies supplying spare parts for helicopters, but not Chinese companies supplying entire jets being used to bomb schools and medical centres.

The British government has not applied jet fuel sanctions despite overwhelming support for them within Burma. Drone suppliers internationally must also be targeted.

The EU and USA have imposed sanctions on the military-controlled Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE). The UK has not. The British government must sanction MOGE but also go beyond EU and US sanctions, ensuring British companies cannot provide services such as drilling and insurance to the gas sector in Burma, which EU and US companies still do despite MOGE sanctions.

The State Security and Peace Commission is the latest brand name the Burmese military is using for its administration. The previous brand

name, the State Administrative Council, was sanctioned, and the State Security and Peace Commission should also be sanctioned. There is no logic in sanctioning one and not the other.

With the Burmese military being supported by powerful neighbours, it is easy to dismiss each individual sanction as potentially having a limited impact. That is not the approach the UK and others are taking towards Russia. There is an understanding that it is the combination of numerous sanctions applied on an ongoing basis which is impactful. This strategy must be applied against the Burmese military.

Critics of sanctions often exaggerate the expected impact of sanctions as a tactic to undermine arguments for sanctions. Sanctions are not going to bring down the Burmese military by themselves. Targeted sanctions imposed systematically on an ongoing basis have a critical role to play in limiting access to revenue and arms, and making it more difficult, slower and more expensive for the Burmese military to secure the money and equipment it needs for its survival. They are one tool in the box, and every tool should be fully utilised.

Aid and support for the new ground level bottom-up democracy building

It was extremely disappointing that the British government imposed massive overall aid cuts to Burma following the 2021 coup, at a time when humanitarian need dramatically increased. Under the current government Burma has not faced further cuts and in fact there have been some increases. However, the planned overall cuts in the UK aid budget could lead to further cuts in aid to Burma.

Aid to Burma must be protected, and in fact increased. The UK is the lead country on Burma internationally and we have a responsibility to show leadership in providing assistance.

The Burmese military have been celebrating recent aid cuts, gloating publicly about them. They deliberately create humanitarian crises to weaken and soak up the capacity of resistance to their rule.

British aid saves lives. Cuts in British aid cost lives and benefit the Burmese military. At a time when the British government is doing little to cut revenue and arms to the Burmese military, the least it can do is assist those displaced and impoverished by their attacks.

Across the country in areas free of Burmese military occupation, local administrations are consulting on and building bottom-up democracy in a way that has never happened in the country before. Local communities are being empowered to make decisions about their lives, local laws, and services. This model has the potential to be a much more sustainable way of building a peaceful nation than the central government-imposed approach that has been tried and has failed since independence.

The Burmese military weaponises hunger and uses humanitarian access as a diplomatic tool to blackmail UN agencies, aid agencies and donors into silence. Being more willing to use informal and cross border mechanisms to provide aid helps prevent the Burmese military effectively having veto power over who can and cannot receive British aid. This applies across the country.

The British government must do much more to engage and support these local administrations, assisting in the installation of principles of human rights, equality and rule of law at the critical early stage.

Refugees

In Bangladesh

Rohingya refugees in camps in Bangladesh have had their lack of freedom, appalling living conditions and lack of security compounded by cuts in aid, causing even greater suffering. UK aid to Rohingya refugees has fallen significantly in the past five years, and small recent increases are insufficient.

The British government, as penholder on Burma at the UN Security Council, failed to act on warnings to try to prevent genocide of the Rohingya and is now failing to provide adequate support to victims of genocide.

The British government should also do more to persuade the government of Bangladesh to allow refugees to engage in livelihood activities and thereby decrease their dependence on aid.

In Thailand

The recent announcement by the government of Thailand that many of the refugees in camps in Thailand will be allowed to work is welcome. At a time of shrinking aid budgets and growing demands, it may be tempting to consider cutting or ending aid to refugees in the camps. This would be catastrophic.

Refugees will still have to live in cramped conditions where the government of Thailand has deliberately enforced rules preventing permanent structures and the provision of sanitation and electricity. Basic services provided to citizens of Thailand are not provided to these refugees, leaving them still dependent on international support even if they can work.

Landmines

It is unsustainable for the British government not to fund demining in one of the countries most impacted by landmines anywhere in the world. Of course there are enormous challenges, but that demands the British government rise to that challenge and find a way, not step back.



In large parts of Burma not under Burmese military occupation there are administrations and local people calling for demining. Demining will not only help avoid deaths and injuries but also help address the humanitarian crisis by enabling people to return to homes, farms and villages to work and grow food, rather than being dependent on aid.

The British government should convene a meeting of demining organisations, partners, and local civil society organisations to develop a pilot project to begin demining programmes in areas such as Karenni State, Chin State and Karen State with a view to expanding them across the country in areas not under Burmese military control.

United Nations Security Council

The right kind of diplomatic pressure has an important role to play but there has always been a disconnect whereby what may be seen as a significant success in diplomatic circles is not seen as significant by the Burmese military and has no impact on the ground.

What the Burmese military fear is action with potential legal consequences.

With the Burmese military and Arakha Army both blatantly violating the provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice to prevent ongoing genocide of the Rohingya, convening a meeting of the UNSC on this issue would be an effective way to keep the spotlight on this issue, would apply a focus on legal consequences, potentially draw support from members which might otherwise side with Russia and China, and send a strong and important message to the Burmese military and Arakha Army, eroding their sense of impunity.

Another opportunity would be to convene a meeting specifically on past resolutions of the United Nations Security Council and how the Burmese military are violating them.

Examples of such meetings could be:

- **Resolution 2417** on starving civilians as a method of warfare.
- **Resolution 2669** on Burma, and lack of progress in implementing its demands.

- **Resolution 1265** on protection of civilians in armed conflict.
- **Resolution 1296** on protection of civilians in armed conflict.
- **Resolution 2286** on attacks on medical facilities and workers.
- **Resolution 1325** on women, peace and security.

The Burmese military is violating these and other UN Security Council Resolutions with impunity.

An approach of convening a series of meetings on specific resolutions and Burma, rather than the current approach of more general briefings, would draw attention to how the Burmese military are violating numerous UN Security Council Resolutions and have a cumulative diplomatic impact with potential allies while also focusing on an area, UNSC Resolutions, about which the Burmese military is very sensitive.

Rohingya

Little is being done about ongoing Burmese military atrocities against the Rohingya, including deliberate starvation in violation of international law, and no concrete action at all has been taken against the Arakha Army, which is replicating all the genocidal policies and actions of the Burmese military, and policies against the Rohingya implemented by the National League for Democracy led government.



The Arakha Army is documented by the United Nations and numerous other organisations of committing multiple violations of international law, in particular against the Rohingya.

It appears that lessons have not been learnt from the Rohingya genocide, whereby warnings and calls for action were ignored for years, allowing the Burmese military to build a growing sense of impunity that encouraged the 2016 and 2017 military offensives.

Just as happened with the Burmese military, the Arakha Army has faced no consequences for its human rights violations against the Rohingya, encouraging a sense of impunity. Just like the Burmese military, the Arakha Army uses publicity stunts, such as the opening of a mosque, while at the same time applying the same discriminatory policies which are part of the genocide of the Rohingya.

The Arakha Army is also acting in a discriminatory way against other minorities, including ethnic Chin. It limits freedom of speech, censors access to international media and communications, censors media, arrests journalists, threatens civil society organisations about public criticism, conducts mass arbitrary detention and extortion. The Arakha Army and its leadership should face sanctions as part of a process of eroding their sense of impunity.

In addition to previously mentioned recommendations of convening a UNSC meeting specifically on violations of the ICJ provisional measures, other relevant UNSC Resolutions, and sanctioning the Arakha Army, the British government should provide funding to the International Criminal Court to increase its capacity to investigate and prosecute violations of international law against the Rohingya.

Nine years on from the 2016 military offensive against the Rohingya not a single ICC arrest warrant has been issued. This reinforces the sense of impunity enjoyed by the Burmese military and encourages others, such as the Arakha Army, to believe they can also act with impunity.

There is a small window of opportunity with the current government of Bangladesh to see improvements in its Burma policy. The British government should support Bangladesh in reaching solutions despite opposition and interference from neighbouring countries allied to the Burmese military.

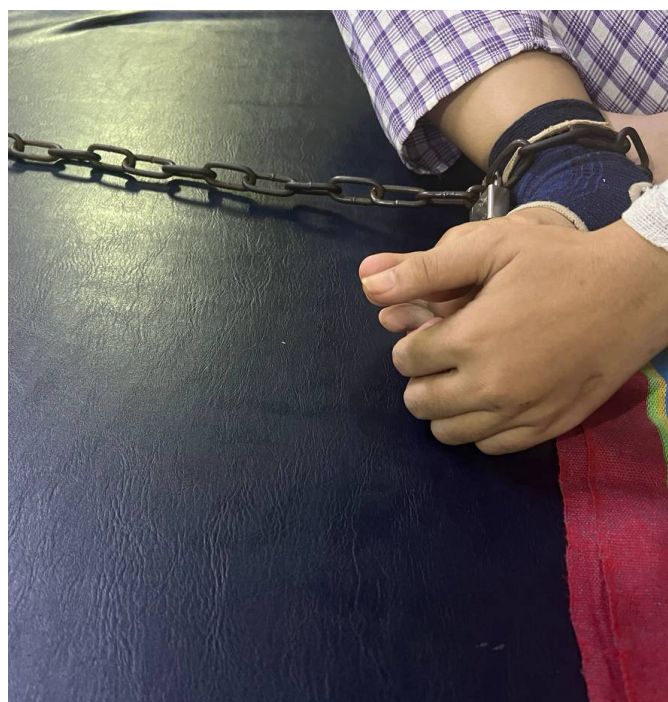
A priority should be the government of Bangladesh allowing livelihood opportunities for refugees so that they can earn a living and not be as dependent on dwindling aid.

Other measures should include relaxing border rules to allow more cross border aid and trade into areas of Rakhine State not under Burmese military control, in the face of the aid and trade blockade by the Burmese military which has led to famine conditions.

Political Prisoners

The pre 2010 military dictatorship had an average of around 2,000 political prisoners. The current military regime has around 20,000 political prisoners.

After the 2010 sham elections, the Burmese military used the repeated strategic release of political prisoners for public relations purposes, trying to create a false narrative of reform. They have already started using the same tactic ahead of the planned 28th December 2025 elections.



There must be pressure for the release of all political prisoners, along with an understanding that political prisoner releases do not signify change or reform. Releases are a tactical tool used by the military.

Prisoners should be released without conditions. Repressive laws, which remained during both the Thein Sein military-backed regime and the National League for Democracy led government era, must be repealed.

Under the last sham 'reform' process the British government ignored the fact that repressive laws were not repealed and were still being used. They must not make the same mistake again.

Engagement with people and organisations from Burma

The British government already engages with a wide range of political, civil society, ethnic and other organisations and people from Burma, which is very welcome, but there are gaps in the level of engagement, and Yangon-based diplomats face a lot of restrictions on travel around the country.

Even before the coup it was not possible to meet and engage with organisations and activists across the country, and it is far less possible now. Yangon is a bubble and unrepresentative of Burma as a whole.

It is vital that British diplomats make regular visits to neighbouring countries where they will have more opportunities to meet people from across the country and gain a broader understanding of the situation on the ground.

Burmese military attaché in London

A member of the Burmese military is allowed to live and work in the UK. It is astonishing that the Burmese military, which have committed genocide and violate international law, are allowed to have a serving member living in the UK. It sends entirely the wrong signal to the Burmese military that we allow a member of the Burmese military to remain in the UK while many other countries have not.

His presence is also of deep concern to members of communities from Burma living in the UK, who fear he is monitoring their communities.

The military attaché should be expelled.

British leadership needed again

Repeatedly over the past three decades we have seen that at times when the British government has the political will, it can lead the international community to promote human rights and democracy in Burma.

At this critical moment, with another round of sham elections on the way and another round of sham reforms likely to follow, British international leadership is needed again.

More information



Our Burma Briefing about the military's sham elections, 'The Burmese Military's 'Elections': New Date, New Danger, Same Sham' is available here:

www.burmacampaign.org.uk/burma-briefing

All Burma Briefings are available here:
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