

**Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) Submission to
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee on
Democracy and Human Rights in Myanmar**

January 2026

The Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) is a network of over 300 civil society organizations and individuals from 28 countries. We are committed to protecting and promoting the rights of refugees and other vulnerable groups on the move in the Asia Pacific.

Executive Summary

Myanmar is experiencing one of the gravest human rights and humanitarian crises in the Asia-Pacific region. Since the 2021 military coup, widespread atrocities, mass displacement, economic collapse and political repression have intensified. With almost 20 million people, a third of the population, facing food insecurity and nearly four million internally displaced and millions more displaced across borders, at risk of forced conscription if returned, Myanmar now represents the nearest large-scale displacement crisis to Australia.

Australia has taken some positive steps, but its response remains cautious and fragmented. There is significant scope for stronger leadership in funding, humanitarian assistance, diplomacy, refugee protection and regional coordination. Australia's national interest lies in a stable, democratic and rights-respecting region. This submission outlines practical actions Australia should start doing, do more of, and do differently to support democracy and human rights in Myanmar.

1. Context: Democracy and Human Rights in Myanmar

The military regime's actions since the coup on 1 February 2021—including airstrikes on civilians, mass arrests, torture, forced conscription, village burnings and sexual violence—are the primary cause of displacement and human suffering in Myanmar. These abuses have driven millions into internal displacement and forced hundreds of thousands into neighbouring countries, particularly Thailand, Malaysia, Bangladesh and India.

Civil society organisations, community-based humanitarian actors, ethnic resistance organisations, and emerging federal democratic institutions have stepped in to provide governance, services and humanitarian aid in areas beyond junta control. These actors represent critical foundations for a future federal democratic union.

Across APRRN's regional network, members report that these locally rooted actors are often the only providers able to deliver life-saving assistance in conflict-affected and hard-to-reach areas.

2. Australia's Strategic Interest

Myanmar's crisis directly affects regional stability, migration patterns, transnational crime, and humanitarian needs in Southeast Asia. Australia's interests are served by:

- *Preventing further large-scale displacement in the region*
- *Supporting democratic and inclusive governance*
- *Upholding international humanitarian and human rights law*
- *Strengthening ASEAN and regional cooperation*

Australia should recognise Myanmar as a priority, large-scale displacement and human rights crisis in the region, requiring stronger political, financial and diplomatic engagement.

3. Funding and Humanitarian Assistance

Gaps

Limited direct funding to local and cross-border civil society organisations including to Refugee Led Organisations in the refugee camps, in the neighbouring countries and inside the Myanmar. We feel there is limited transparency on the proportion of Australian humanitarian funding reaching local and refugee-led-actors.

- *Insufficient support to undocumented displaced people in Thailand*
- *Overreliance on large international agencies, with limited flexibility*

What Australia Should Do

1. **Australia is well placed to scale up cross-border assistance** through trusted local and regional organisations operating from Thailand and other neighbouring countries, including community-based providers and RLOs with strong credentials.
2. Implement Australia's 2023 commitments at the GRF: **Fund community-led humanitarian work** that builds local resilience, particularly in conflict zones, including health, food security, shelter, education and protection.
3. **Provide direct funding to local NGOs** along the Thai-Myanmar border, following models used by Japan and Ireland, which support multiple grassroots organisations in Mae Sot and surrounding areas. These models demonstrate that direct funding can be delivered in a manner consistent with humanitarian principles, fiduciary accountability and risk management.
4. **Support humanitarian coordination mechanisms** that respect humanitarian principles and build trust among diverse actors.
5. **Increase assistance to refugees and urban displaced persons** in neighbouring countries, including those outside formal camps.

4. Refugees, Displacement and Protection

Myanmar's crisis has created multiple categories of displaced people: camp-based refugees, urban refugees, undocumented displaced persons and internally displaced people.

Priority Issues

- Lack of work rights, with some positive steps taken by Thailand for refugees in camps, protecting refugee workers' labour rights will be essential to ensure this succeeds
- Undocumented displaced people denied legal status
- Forced returns (refoulement) from Thailand
- Rohingya statelessness and insecurity

What Australia Should Do

6. *Advocate for the **right to work** for refugees in camps and urban areas, particularly support new openness and initiatives in Thailand.*
7. *Support documentation and legal recognition for displaced persons who fled after 2021 to prevent arrest and detention while enabling access to services and protection.*
8. *Provide humanitarian assistance and protection to undocumented displaced persons, including those excluded from camps.*
9. *Advocate strongly against **refoulement**, including forced returns at border points such as Ranong–Kawthaung. Credible reports indicate thousands have been returned since 2024, many ending up in forced conscription.*
10. *Support durable solutions, including resettlement pathways and complementary migration options, particularly for highly vulnerable refugees.*

5. Civil Society and Local Governance

Civil society and emerging federal democratic institutions are essential to long-term peace and democracy.

What Australia Should Support

- *Community-based humanitarian and human rights organisations*
- *Education, rule of law and civic participation initiatives*
- *Invest in the development fund beyond humanitarian aid to build the capacities and enhance the resilience of the displaced communities*
- *Gender equality and women's leadership, including models such as the Karenni Interim Executive Council's 30% women's leadership policy*
- *Economic justice initiatives addressing junta-created economic collapse*

Australia should formally engage with legitimate stakeholders, including:

- *National Unity Government (NUG)*
 - *National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC)*
 - *Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH)*
 - *Ethnic Resistance Organisations (EROs)*
 - *State and federal units and bottom-up governance initiatives*
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6. Human Rights and Accountability

Human rights violations are primarily committed by the military regime, but abuses also occur in resistance-controlled areas.

What Australia Should Do

11. *Speak out consistently and at the highest level against gross human rights violations and mass atrocity crimes, including war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.*
12. *Support independent human rights documentation and education for frontline actors, including:*
 - *Human rights training for resistance groups and local authorities*
 - *Support to independent human rights bodies THIS IS DUPLICATED OF POINT 12*
 - *Development of practical guidance materials and courses*
 - *Support initiatives that pursue accountability for mass atrocity crimes, including The Gambia's current case in the International Court of Justice; the application by the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) for a warrant for the arrest of General Min Aung Hlaing; universal jurisdiction cases filed in various jurisdictions such as Argentina, Turkey, the Philippines and most recently Timor-Leste against Myanmar; and exercise its right under Article 14 of the Rome Statute to refer Myanmar to the ICC*

13. *Support anti-corruption initiatives and accountability mechanisms in emerging governance structures.*

7. Diplomacy and Political Leadership

There is currently limited effective diplomacy addressing Myanmar's crisis.

What Australia Should Do

14. *Appoint a **Special Envoy on Myanmar** to coordinate with ASEAN, the UN, the United Kingdom as the penholder on Myanmar at the UN Security Council, the European Union, Japan and other like-minded countries.*
15. *Establish an **Australian Parliamentary Friends of Myanmar** group to raise parliamentary awareness.*
16. *Lead diplomatic efforts toward inclusive dialogue, negotiated political settlement, and restoration of democracy, including the meaningful participation of women ethnic minorities and displaced communities*
17. *Advocate for a global arms embargo and its effective implementation and enforcement, aviation fuel embargoes and targeted sanctions on those supporting airstrikes.*
18. *Work regionally to strengthen humanitarian access and political coordination.*

8. Elections and Political Legitimacy

The military's proposed election is widely regarded as neither free, fair, legitimate nor inclusive. It risks entrenching military rule and blocking aspirations for a federal democratic union.

What Australia Should Do

19. *Publicly state that the proposed election does not meet international standards for free, fair, inclusive and credible elections.*
20. *Work with regional and international partners to reject legitimacy of any sham electoral process.*
21. *Support alternative democratic processes emerging from the people of Myanmar.*

9. Key Recommendations: What Australia Should Start, Do More of, and Do Differently

Start Doing

- *Appoint a Special Envoy on Myanmar*
- *Engage formally with democratic and ethnic stakeholders*
- *Fund local cross-border organisations directly*
- *Advocate for refugee work rights*

Do More Of

- *Humanitarian funding, especially community-led including the funding for the emergency /disaster responses*
- *Regional diplomacy and leadership*

- *Support to civil society and women's leadership*
- *Resettlement and protection pathways including labour mobility and expanding complementary pathways*

Do Differently

- *Shift from cautious diplomacy to proactive leadership*
- *Move funding closer to affected communities*
- *Balance humanitarian response with political accountability*
- *Treat Myanmar as a priority regional crisis*

Conclusion

Myanmar's crisis is not distant—it is the nearest large-scale displacement, humanitarian and human rights crisis in our region. Australia has the capacity and strategic interest to play a far stronger role. By scaling up humanitarian support, protecting refugees, backing civil society, and leading diplomatic efforts for democracy and accountability, Australia can make a meaningful contribution to peace, stability and human rights in Myanmar and the wider region.