

## **Submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee**

**Inquiry:** The state of democracy and human rights in Myanmar, with specific consideration of the phased elections to be held from December, and the barriers to a return to an inclusive civilian democratic government.

### **Submitted by Australian Baptist Ministries on behalf of:**

- Baptist World Aid Australia (Transform Aid International) and
- Baptist Mission Australia

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### **Executive Summary**

The following submission demonstrates how the Australian Government has practical levers that could be used, in line with wide consensus from various advocacy groups within the aid and development and faith-based sectors, concerning the state of democracy and human rights in Myanmar; these include:

- (1) Non-recognition and principled diplomacy.
- (2) The creation of an official 'Contested Environments' modality in conjunction with a civil-society pooled fund having the capacity to reach people in non-regime-controlled and hard-to-access areas.
- (3) Expanded targeted sanctions and export control mechanisms, and
- (4) Scaled support to protect civic and democratic space.

Myanmar does not currently meet the basic conditions for free, fair and inclusive elections; a wide range of current reports indicate that:

Civic space is severely restricted, and conflict is widespread.

Millions of people are displaced due to conflict, with this number compounded by numerous natural disasters.

The Junta-run 'phased elections' have proceeded under coercive conditions that further entrench military supremacy under a civilian façade.

## Context and Background

Since the 2021 military coup, Myanmar has experienced nationwide conflict, competing administrative structures and a deteriorating humanitarian situation. The operating environment is characterised by violence against civilians, arbitrary detention, shrinking civic space and severe constraints on independent media and civil society—conditions incompatible with meaningful democratic participation.

Our recommendations that follow are supported with significant evidence from both:

The witness of lived experience provided by diaspora members, now more than ten thousand across the Australian Baptist Church, some of whose stories are held within this submission, as well as

Official reports from a variety of sources:

As of 5 January 2026, the United Nations estimated 3.4 million people were internally displaced, with nearly 200,000 displaced in neighbouring countries (not including the 1.26 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh).

OCHA's 2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan prioritises 2.6 million people for life-saving and protection assistance out of 16.2 million people in need, reflecting significant changes in aid funding globally, most significantly the US AID funding cuts made by the Trump administration.

### ***Lived experience # 1 "School under fire" (from a Karen State school Principal)***

*In 2025, repeated airstrikes targeted many civilian sites, including our school and many churches here in Karen State. As the Principle, I relocated students to a riverside camp so they could escape across the border if attacked. Two weeks later, our school took a direct hit, however we had built several makeshift jungle classrooms and dormitories so that learning could continue. With no access to 'official' humanitarian aid, we depended on local networks and cross-border support from small, international faith-based organisations who were decisive in enabling us to continue to operate.*

## State of Democracy and Human Rights Assessment of Military Junta's 'Phased Elections'

Reports from ACFID members and partners indicate sustained patterns of arbitrary detention, crackdowns on peaceful assembly, media censorship and digital repression.

Targeted violence and airstrikes have destroyed civilian infrastructure, with disproportionate impacts on women and children.

Myanmar is a country of vast area, comparable in size to Australia. As such, there continue to be issues with the restriction of access that, combined with mass displacement, compound the challenges of, or simply make impossible the delivery of life-saving assistance. In such settings we know that local responders have frequently assumed frontline roles without commensurate protection or resources.

### **Assessment of Military Junta's 'Phased Elections'**

Australian and international statements and reports in late 2025 underscored that daily civic life in Myanmar falls far short of what is needed for free, fair and inclusive elections. ACFID's Myanmar Community of Practice, of whom Baptist World Aid has been a participant, characterise the exercise as 'an engineered legitimacy-seeking process rather than a pathway to civilian rule.'

Additionally, there have been multiple barriers to both individual registration and documentation for civilians to participate in any kind of process that could be called democratic; these include restrictions on assembly and campaigning and have rendered genuine media participation impossible in many areas.

Furthermore, newly passed repressive legislation has criminalised criticism of the elections with severe penalties, while at the same time, compulsory voting has been enforced in military-controlled booths. Persisting concerns continue to increase about surveillance and electronic voting integrity that further undermine any credibility or legitimacy.

#### ***Lived experience #2: "Din" (Chin State)***

*Here in Chin State there have been many arrests, and the ongoing use of lethal force, even during peaceful protests has sadly killed many. Years later the situation is no better – many of my people have been displaced, and communications blackouts and shuttered schools continue to be normal. Informal community networks, and things like diaspora messaging groups have become the only way that we can provide warnings or let people know about what help might sometimes be available, and where.*

Additionally, entrenched military control and revenue streams continue to sustain coercive capacity and patronage, incentivising status-quo consolidation. For example:

- Legal-institutional constraints (party deregistration, restrictive laws, regime-appointed electoral bodies) structurally exclude key actors and criminalize dissent.
- The collapse of public services, especially health and education continue to escalate; non-government networks continue to operate but remain under-resourced; access is frequently blocked.
- Access and due-diligence friction: rigid compliance can increase partner risk and exclude community-level organisations best placed to reach people, necessitating a fit-for-purpose framework for contested environments (remote monitoring, flexible documentation, calibrated risk).

### **Barriers to a Return to Inclusive Civilian Democratic Government**

The current gap between the present reality, and any model of future administration that that could be called democratic are such that many diaspora members have communicated a complete loss of hope and now utilise any available resources to pursue pathways for family and community members to exit or escape Myanmar, in the hope of eventually finding passage to Australia. These barriers include:

- Entrenched military control including coercive control and forced enslavement.
- The collapse of public services, especially health and education
- NGO networks do, in limited cases, continue to operate but remain under-resourced, with access to registration or re-registration frequently blocked.
- For those still able to operate, geographical access and proportional distribution is hampered by friction with, for example, rigid compliance requirements; this only increases partner risk and exclude community-level organisations best placed to reach people; as will be suggested, this necessitates the need for a fit-for-purpose framework for contested environments such as in Myanmar, where risk could be mitigated by the likes of remote monitoring, flexible documentation requirements, and calibrated risk assessment.

**Lived experience #3 - “Bay Klay” (Karen diaspora member)**

*The displacement that many of my community have experienced is a result of repeated military attacks, and life in refugee camps is incredibly challenging, with many services no longer existing due to aid cuts. We have seen increased drones and airstrikes used to continue a reign of terror. In some areas it is only local churches who provide any kind of assistance, if it is available.*

**Implications for Australia**

The Baptist community continues the broad messaging of its advocacy for the people of Myanmar - as it has done through multiple campaigns for several years, and we urge the Australian Government to fulfill its capacity to show genuine global leadership for this regional neighbour through:

- Foreign policy adjustment and significantly increased regional diplomacy
- Serving significant Australian-value interests, such as the desire for regional stability, human rights, and the rule of law that could be better served through more definitive action, i.e. the non-recognition of sham polls and further coordinated regional engagement holding the genuine potential to expand humanitarian access and protect civic space.
- Adjusting the current funding model for aid delivery and development in humanitarian settings:
- Scaling cross-border and locally-led delivery, supported with greater protection for affected people is essential to reach civilians in non-regime-controlled areas and to preserve the foundations for future democratic recovery.
- Sanctions and export controls: Continuing to increase coordinated, targeted measures that close evasion gaps for the military Junta (such as aviation fuel supply chains) are essential to further limit the Junta’s ongoing operations that have caused such significant civilian harm.

**Recommendations**

Australian Baptist Ministries, on behalf of our two agencies who work internationally, Baptist World Aid and Baptist Mission Australia, recommend that the Australian Government commit to the following:

### **1) Non-recognition of election legitimacy, and principled diplomacy**

- The Foreign Minister should coordinate a joint statement on the lack of credibility on the outcome of the Junta's 'phased elections,' coordinated among global partners.
- Lead and resource regional diplomacy (ASEAN-plus) focused on humanitarian access, civilian protection and inclusive political dialogue that centres on assistance for civil society (women, youth, ethnic and faith-based organisations).

### **2) Instruct DFAT to develop and pilot a 'Contested Environments' modality & matrix, along with civil-society pooled fund within 6 months**

- Pilot a fit-for-purpose due diligence framework for contested environments; to be piloted in Myanmar, the purpose being to safely reach non-regime-controlled and hard-to-access areas; considerations regarding remote monitoring, flexible documentation, calibrated risk tolerance and clear escalation protocols to be codesigned with NGO sector.
- Create a dedicated DFAT civil-society pooled fund for the above, providing core, multi-year support to local NGOs and trusted networks (including ethnic health systems and faith-based actors), enabling proportionate, conflict-sensitive delivery with strong safeguarding.
- Track localisation and protection outcomes (e.g., % ODA to local actors; participation of women's/youth-led groups; feedback utilisation; conflict-sensitivity compliance).

### **3) Expand targeted sanctions and export controls with humanitarian safeguards**

- Broaden current sanctions to state-owned revenue streams (e.g., oil and gas, timber), as appropriate, as well as entities within aviation fuel supply chains
- Coordinate enforcement with partners; publish due-diligence expectations for Australian companies and financiers engaging in high-risk sectors. [3]

### **4) Protect civic and democratic space**

- Fund independent media, secure communications and community-based early warning/early action networks tied to local CSOs and diaspora.

- Ring-fence support for women's and youth leadership, educators and human rights defenders, including protection visas and fast-tracked pathways for those at acute risk.
- Publish operational engagement principles for unavoidable interactions with de-facto authorities (e.g., MoUs, travel permits) to avoid inadvertent legitimisation and protect partners.

#### **5) Increase humanitarian refugee visa access for Myanmar diaspora members**

- Increase the quota of refugee and family sponsored visas granted to Myanmar nationals.
- Work with current local diaspora leaders in Australia for the purposes of proportionality, offering transitional resettlement support.

#### **Conclusion**

The suffering of the people of Myanmar and their diaspora continues to exemplify an ongoing humanitarian disaster; with current 'phased elections' are a most recent example of escalating human rights abuses, and obstructed humanitarian access. Simply put, while the military Junta remain in administrative control of Myanmar, there is no legitimate pathway for the country back to inclusive civilian democratic government

Whilst infrequently a "headline news" issue in Australia (and much of the west) this situation presents an unmistakable opportunity for the Australian Government to demonstrate genuine global leadership. It can and should act now, through:

Refusing to legitimise sham processes

- Resourcing local civic resilience
- Targeting the regime's coercive enablers
- Providing genuine pathways to open humanitarian channels that reach people where they are by adjust DFAT's due diligence framework.

These steps are grounded in sector consensus, prior Committee evidence, and lived experience, holding the capacity to save lives today and preserve foundations for a credible democratic future in Myanmar.

## References

1. Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), Myanmar Community of Practice. Submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: State of Democracy and Human Rights in Myanmar, January 2026.
2. Baptist World Aid Australia & Act for Peace. Submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee on the Efficacy of DFAT Due Diligence Frameworks, 11 November 2023.
3. Open Letter to Senator the Hon. Penny Wong, Minister for Foreign Affairs: Enact Additional Sanctions Ahead of the Myanmar Elections, 22 December 2025.
4. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Myanmar Emergency Overview Map, January 2026.
5. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2026.
6. Diaspora testimonies provided to Australian Baptist Ministries, January 2026 (on file with author).