

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

30 January 2026

Submission from Australian individuals with professional and academic experience in Myanmar to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee inquiry on the state of democracy and human rights in Myanmar

This submission is endorsed by Australian individuals in support of our friends in Myanmar (Burma), consistent with the Australian Government's values of fostering and sustaining long-term regional connections. This includes former Australian scholarship recipients to Myanmar under the Australian Government's New Colombo Plan who lived in-country in the brief window this was possible (2016-2019), and academics who led study tours supported by the program.

The humanitarian disaster in Myanmar is one of the worst in the world currently, with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) reporting in December 2025:

In the first half of 2025, Myanmar ranked second globally for conflict intensity and the fourth most dangerous country for civilians, with more than half of the population exposed to conflict... Overall, an estimated 3.6 million people have been displaced.¹

Credible reporting suggests that as of late 2025, the military retained stable control over just 21 per cent of the country,² while the already incredibly fragile situation has been exacerbated by the 2025 earthquake. In this context, the risk of further deterioration, including fragmentation of authority, heightened displacement pressures and the expansion of transnational crime networks, poses serious implications for regional security and stability in the Indo-Pacific, with flow-on consequences for Australia.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, has stated:

This is not a free, fair nor legitimate election. It is a theatrical performance that has exerted enormous pressure on the people of Myanmar to participate in what has been designed to dupe the international community.³

¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2026* (Report, 10 December 2025) <<https://humanitarianaction.info/plan/1505/document/myanmar-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2026>>.

² Rebecca Henschke et al, 'Soldier-spies in Myanmar help pro-democracy rebels make crucial gains' (BBC News, 20 December 2024) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c390ndrny17o>>; Council on Foreign Relations, 'Civil War in Myanmar' (Global Conflict Tracker, 1 October 2025) <<https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/rohingya-crisis-myanmar>>; Adam Simpson and Nicholas Farrelly, 'As the Myanmar junta's hold on power weakens, could the devastating war be nearing a conclusion?' (The Conversation, 29 January 2025) <<https://theconversation.com/as-the-myanmar-juntas-hold-on-power-weakens-could-the-devastating-war-be-nearing-a-conclusion-247987>>; Chatham House, 'Myanmar's military prioritizes its own survival in earthquake response' (Expert Comment, 1 April 2025) <<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/04/myanmars-military-prioritizes-its-own-survival-earthquake-response>>.

³ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'UN expert: First round of voting in Myanmar exposes junta-orchestrated election as illegitimate' (Press Release, 8 January 2026) <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/01/un-expert-first-round-voting-myanmar-exposes-junta-orchestrated-election>>.

This inquiry provides a timely opportunity for Australia to strengthen its response in a meaningful way. Supporting inclusive civilian governance in Myanmar advances not only humanitarian objectives but is vital to Australia's strategic and security interests.

We provide this submission to express our solidarity with the Myanmar diaspora and urge the Australian Government to progress the actions outlined below as part of its response to the ongoing crisis in Myanmar and the barriers to a return to inclusive civilian democratic government.

1. Substantially strengthen humanitarian aid assistance, prioritising support for cross-border organisations that enable locally led aid delivery and Myanmar migrant networks engaged in this work

It is vital for Australia to strengthen its humanitarian assistance, including by prioritising support for Myanmar networks and individuals at the Thailand-Myanmar border that play a critical role in supporting local organisations to address the dire food insecurity and political and humanitarian crisis. Australia should also continue to implement its stated approach of providing no direct funding to Myanmar's military authorities and taking proactive steps to ensure assistance does not, in the Australian Government's own words 'lend the regime credibility or legitimacy'.⁴

Many of the Myanmar students, academics, activists, NGO workers and policy-makers that Australians engaged with via the Australian Government's New Colombo Plan programs are now in Thailand, having fled conscription and repression. They are often in precarious forms of employment, and many are legally vulnerable due to frequently shifting regulations on their right to remain in Thailand. As International Organization of Migration (IOM) data from January 2025 highlights, the Myanmar diaspora in Southeast Asia has grown substantially since the coup, especially in Thailand.⁵ IOM estimates there are at least 4.1 million Burmese people in Thailand, with a substantial wave of more than 1 million arriving after the introduction of conscription laws in early 2024, many of them young people.

Despite their shaky circumstances, Myanmar migrant networks in Thailand and Southeast Asia have provided indispensable support for local Myanmar organisations, their importance growing following the withdrawal of most formal cross-border support mechanisms by the United States in 2025. With the exacerbation of the humanitarian crisis, however, the capacity of these networks to continue delivering life-saving assistance is at risk without sustained external support.

We recommend the Australian Government engage and support these cross-border Myanmar migrant networks as part of Australia's democracy and civil society strategy, including through funding for these organisations, and training and scholarship schemes for the individuals, to strengthen their humanitarian work.

⁴ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Cth), 'Development assistance in Myanmar' (Web Page) <<https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/myanmar/development-assistance/development-assistance-in-myanmar>>.

⁵ International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Overview of Myanmar Nationals in Thailand: January 2025* (Report, 1 January 2025) <https://thailand.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1371/files/documents/2025-03/myanmar_migrants_thailand_jan25_final-1.pdf>.

Further to this, we recommend Australia seek to:

- Deliver all humanitarian assistance through independent, vetted partners, including United Nations agencies, multilateral and regional partners, reputable international NGOs, trusted local NGOs and civil society organisations
- Support the establishment of protected humanitarian corridors in cooperation with local organisations and neighbouring countries
- Seek to ensure aid is delivered based on need and inclusive distribution regardless of ethnicity, geography or political affiliation
- Support monitoring and safeguarding mechanisms to prevent assistance being diverted, weaponised or politicised

2. Actively engage with legitimate democratic representatives

The military retains stable control of just over a fifth of the nation. This is a key time for Australia to deepen engagement with Myanmar's diverse pro-democracy and community actors. This should include legitimate democratic representatives, ethnic organisations with demonstrable community support, community networks, local civil society and humanitarian organisations, Myanmar diaspora groups, and individuals with relevant experience. Such engagement should include formal relationships, as well as track II and other informal engagement.

Australia should clearly oppose actions that entrench military rule or confer political legitimacy absent meaningful conditions for a return to democracy. This includes rejecting political processes or settlements that exclude civilian representatives or fail to protect basic rights, supporting ASEAN and international partners in applying consistent diplomatic pressure for progress toward civilian-led governance, and maintaining a clear policy stance that democratic transition requires inclusive participation and international scrutiny.

Engagement should be guided by clear safeguards to avoid conferring legitimacy on entities implicated in serious human rights violations and should prioritise building relationships with those who are committed to inclusive governance, non-discrimination and accountability.

3. Strengthen people-to-people links and support emerging Myanmar leaders

Australia has long benefited from the New Colombo Plan and similar programs that build enduring people-to-people links across the Indo-Pacific. We encourage the Australian Government to continue supporting opportunities for Australians to learn about Myanmar, connect with its people, and maintain long-term relationships with Myanmar communities in the region and in Australia.

In addition to maintaining engagement, Australia should use the diplomatic, educational and program levers available to it to support and reinforce the contributions of young leaders from Myanmar who exemplify values shared by Australia, including respect for democratic traditions, civic participation, inclusive governance and the rule of law. This support can help preserve human capital, sustain reform-oriented networks, and provide a pathway for future recovery and democratic rebuilding.

We also encourage DFAT to strengthen its understanding of how Myanmar's evolving political context has affected those whom Australia has previously supported through scholarships and mobility programs, including Australia Awards alumni and other exchange participants. A targeted survey or structured engagement process would assist in identifying emerging needs, risks and barriers faced by alumni and partners as a result of the anti-democratic turn, and could inform more effective policy, program design and protective support measures going forward.

4. Targeted protection pathways for at-risk Myanmar nationals who assisted Australia

Australia should ensure existing humanitarian and protection pathways offer targeted visas to Myanmar nationals who have directly assisted Australia and now face a credible and immediate risk of persecution or serious harm as a result of that cooperation, including those displaced to border areas such as Thailand and India.

Consistent with the objectives of Australia's offshore Refugee and Humanitarian program and emergency protection practice, this could include a streamlined "emergency rescue" or temporary humanitarian mechanism for locally-engaged staff, civil society partners, fixers, interpreters and human rights defenders who supported Australian diplomatic, development, media or civil-society initiatives in Myanmar, and whose protection cannot be secured in country.

Prioritising this at-risk cohort would align with Australia's longstanding protection obligations under the Refugee Convention, contemporary humanitarian policy settings and the Government's stated commitment to support democracy and human rights in Myanmar, while also advancing Australia's national interest in being seen as a reliable partner that does not abandon those who assist its missions in situations of conflict and authoritarian repression.

5. Frame Myanmar policy as both a humanitarian and strategic priority

Australia should recognise that Myanmar's crisis is not only a humanitarian issue but also poses significant risks to regional stability and security.

The UN Refugee Agency reported that the number of displaced people within Myanmar was estimated to be 3.5 million in 2024, an increase of 35 per cent from the previous year⁶. With mass displacement a major casualty of the military airstrikes on civilian populated areas,⁷ this is also placing sustained pressure on neighbouring countries and increasing humanitarian needs in the region.⁸

⁶ UNHCR, 'Myanmar Situation' (Situation Summary, 2024) <<https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/Myanmar%20GR2024%20Situation%20Summary%20v3.pdf>>.

⁷ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Myanmar: Four years after coup, leaders ramp up violations to unprecedented levels — UN' (Press Release, 31 January 2025) <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/01/myanmar-four-years-coup-leaders-ramp-violations-unprecedented-levels-un>>.

⁸ UNHCR, 'Myanmar Situation' (Situation Summary, 2024) <<https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/Myanmar%20GR2024%20Situation%20Summary%20v3.pdf>>.

The crisis has also contributed to a permissive environment for transnational organised crime, including drug production and trafficking in the Golden Triangle region and the expansion of cyber-enabled fraud networks operating across multiple jurisdictions.⁹ Myanmar is ranked as the highest-risk jurisdiction globally for money laundering and related financial crime by Switzerland's Basel Institute of Governance in its Basel AML Index 2025,¹⁰ underscoring the link between state instability and weak governance to illicit finance.

These developments highlight the need for stronger regional cooperation for a strategy that supports a return to accountable civilian governance and rule of law to protect the stability and security of the region Australia is a part of.

This submission is endorsed by the following Australians with experience in and connections to Myanmar:

Sean Turnell, Professor of Economics at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. Professor Turnell is also a Senior Fellow at the Lowy Institute and has had a distinguished career in government, banking and academia. Since the early 2000s, he has worked tirelessly on Myanmar economic and banking issues to bring to the table the best possible practices to help Myanmar with economic reforms and growth.

Jonathan Liljeblad, Assistant Professor at the College of Law, the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia. He is an international law researcher and led Australian Government New Colombo Plan-supported study trips to Myanmar with the Australian National University in 2019 and 2020, with Swinburne University of Technology in 2018 and 2019, and with the University of New England in 2016. He was born a member of the Pa'Oh Indigenous peoples of Shan State, Myanmar.

Tilini Rajapaksa, Australian Government New Colombo Plan Myanmar Fellow 2018. Tilini studied at the University of Yangon Faculty of Law and learnt Burmese as part of her time in Myanmar.

James Barklamb, Australian Government New Colombo Plan Myanmar Scholar 2016. James lived and studied on campus at the University of Yangon and studied Burmese as part of his time in Myanmar.

Gerard McCarthy, Assistant Professor at the International Institute of Social Studies (Erasmus University Rotterdam), The Hague, Netherlands. He was previously Associate Director of the Myanmar Research Centre at the Australian National University. He led New Colombo Plan-supported study trips to Myanmar in 2017 and 2018 and was Visiting Fellow at the University of Yangon under the Australian Government Endeavour Award in 2015 and 2016.

Several individuals, both Myanmar and Australian, contributed to this submission and are not named for safety and practical reasons.

Contact person: Tilini Rajapaksa [REDACTED]

⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Inflection Point: Global Implications of Scam Centres, Underground Banking and Illicit Online Marketplaces in Southeast Asia* (Report, 2025) <https://www.unodc.org/roseap/uploads/documents/Publications/2025/Inflection_Point_2025.pdf>.

¹⁰ Basel Institute on Governance, *Basel AML Index 2025: 14th Public Edition* (Report, December 2025) <<https://baselgovernance.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/Basel%20AML%20Index%202025.pdf>>.