

**The Australian National University, Myanmar Research Centre submission to: members of the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, in response to question on notice from the inquiry on Democracy and Human Rights in Myanmar**

Canberra, 25 February 2026

**I. Question on Notice**

*Proof Committee Hansard, 13 February 2026, Senator Shoebridge (Pages 20-21)*

“If any of the witnesses want to add some additional detail about what Australia could be doing, particularly in terms of supporting Cox's Bazar and the one million refugees there given what's happened with the withdrawal of USAID and the withdrawal of education programs, they can do so on notice. It's just we haven't got a lot of time. If you would like to add anything to that, please do so. Don't feel limited to Cox's Bazar. Also displaced persons and refugees on the Thai peninsula—”

**II. Response**

**A. Cox's Bazar**

1. **Australia could support stronger civil registration processes in the Cox's Bazar Rohingya camps and beyond.** The intelligence concerns raised before the national election on 12 February 2026, including illegal voter-list inclusion, political mobilisation and the presence of armed groups, highlight the need for secure, transparent and protection-focused registration systems. UNHCR leads civil registration documentation, but Australia has significant expertise in identity governance, digital verification and safeguarding vulnerable populations. Australia could provide targeted technical assistance to improve data integrity, strengthen verification processes and reinforce accountability.
2. **Australia could help develop rights-based registration systems that protect refugees from coercion, prevent political manipulation and maintain a clear separation between humanitarian documentation and national electoral processes.** This support would also enhance access to essential services and contribute to more stable and credible camp governance, in cooperation with trusted partners like the UNHCR. By contributing its technical strengths and diplomatic engagement, Australia can help reduce security risks and support a more humane and effective civil registration framework for Rohingya communities.
3. **Australia could adopt a more assertive diplomatic stance to address the worsening conditions in Cox's Bazar.** This includes urging Bangladesh and international organisations to halt threats of *refoulement* and instead prioritise protection, mobility, and rights-based approaches. Australia's longstanding development partnership with BRAC positions it well to push for stronger camp-level services in education and health, improved accountability, and humanitarian responses that remain grounded in safety and dignity.
4. **Australia could expand targeted support for gender-responsive education, child-protection systems, and mental-health services.** These are areas where ANU research identifies acute and persistent vulnerabilities. Women and young people face heightened risks of exploitation, trafficking, and violence, while suicide rates in the camps remain alarmingly high. Research further shows that Rohingya refugees resettled in third countries continue to struggle with mental-health challenges and community-level violence, underscoring the depth of intergenerational trauma. By

directing funding and diplomatic pressure toward programs that address these gendered and psychosocial harms, Australia can help stabilise conditions in Cox's Bazar and reinforce its regional leadership on humanitarian protection.

**B. Other Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons and Cross-border Assistance**

5. **Australia could work directly with political authorities in Myanmar that are building parallel state structures and delivering emergency relief, as well as basic social services to people in areas outside of military state control.** These include long-established para-states like the Karen National Union, and new groups like the Karenni Interim Executive Council, Chinland Council, and the Sagaing or Magway Federal Unit Interim Governments. They are delivering health and education services, but in areas are overwhelmed due to staff shortages and destruction caused by military state air attacks. In response to these they are building air raid shelters and early warning systems for airstrikes in schools, hospitals, and IDP camps. The Committee's attention has been drawn to the grave dangers posed to civilians by air attacks, and Australia could play a part not only by attempting to cut supplies of jet fuel and taking other actions to prevent attacks from occurring but also by supporting infrastructural efforts to keep civilians alive and unharmed when attacks do occur.
6. **Australia could enhance emergency healthcare capacity and build resilience in conflict-affected areas by supporting innovative collaborations between experts in Australia and collaborators abroad and in Myanmar.** Preliminary dialogues between Australian experts and healthcare providers in Myanmar have identified training and outreach with frontline medical workers; immunisation coverage and bottom-up cooperation between external experts, service providers, the National Unity Government and other credible actors as priorities, in line with Australia's Development Plans for Myanmar and its region. In Myanmar greater flexibility is required to do this than in other settings. In 2023-24, approximately 63% of Australia's ODA was delivered through UN/multilateral organisations and major commercial contractors. While these partners play important roles, international intermediaries are traditionally given far too much financial control and decision-making authority to be effective in the conflict-affected areas of Myanmar. As Australia has formally committed to locally-led development, and evidence indicates that strengthening local leadership and partner ownership improves sustainability and effectiveness, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, Myanmar presents an opportunity to put this commitment into practice. Mechanisms could include targeted pilot funding for direct local partnerships in fragile settings, with risk-proportionate accountability arrangements; emphasis on projects co-designed and co-delivered with local partners, with mandatory KPIs on the proportion of funding reaching local actors and their level of decision-making authority; and, internal DFAT mechanisms to support innovation and localisation.

*A proposal outlining how some of this could be done in Myanmar through hybrid and on-the-ground training, needs assessment and curricula development; research and a scoping mission, prepared in April 2025 by the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the ANU, is available and can be tabled confidentially if requested by the Committee.*

7. **Australia could work jointly with Thailand and India for greater cross-border access to better support social protection mechanisms and essential service delivery in conflict-affected areas.** Australia is delivering humanitarian assistance, but as noted above it needs to be more innovative in its approaches to bypass military state-controlled channels to reach people in conflict-affected areas through cross-

border, locally-led initiatives. These necessarily will involve the establishment and maintenance of humanitarian corridors from multiple points, with cooperation of neighbouring countries, in particular, Thailand and India. While Thailand has long been a site of cross-border assistance, India presents an alternative to Bangladesh on the western border that would reduce dependence on blocked internal roads and help reach people in areas where access from central Myanmar is no longer possible. Opening corridors from India could ease shortages of food and medicine and prevent further displacement. In addition, in terms of educational needs, there are many new community-led schools and colleges on both Thailand and India borders, but support is scanty, especially on the India-Myanmar border, and Australia could do more to fund new initiatives there.

8. **Australia could work with Thailand to improve healthcare access for thousands of undocumented Myanmar migrants along the border and within refugee camps.** Currently, these migrants have very limited access to healthcare options and are facing a rising mental health crisis, especially in the camps after USAID cuts. Obstacles include up-front costs for access to care and legal barriers to travel and be admitted for treatment. Policy changes are possible. Thailand demonstrates willingness to support these populations' right to health—provided they receive some funding support to do so from partners. There is hesitancy to share any more health system resources without additional funding, with officials citing concerns over sustainability. Targeted support from Australia could be both effective and value for money. It could strengthen the longstanding cooperative relationship between Australia and Thailand. Such initiatives could also lead to meaningful policy shifts, as Thailand recognizes the importance of protecting the health of illegal migrants under the broader framework of health security.

*A draft research paper prepared by a visiting fellow at the ANU on how this could be done is available and can be tabled confidentially if requested by the Committee.*

9. **Australia could promote a multilateral humanitarian forum on Myanmar – perhaps a UN-led “Group of Friends”.** As indicated in our oral statement, a group involving traditional donors like Australia, the EU, the UN, and the international development banks, as well as ASEAN and Myanmar's immediate neighbours (Thailand, China, India, Bangladesh) would be well placed to negotiate more effective ways to deliver humanitarian aid.

***For further analysis supporting these options we submit to the Committee for consideration to be tabled electronic copies of the following public documents:***

D'Costa, Bina, “Displacement of Children in Humanitarian Emergencies: Reflections from the Frontline”. *Critical Studies on Security* (2025) 13.2: 288–291

Morten B. Pedersen, “Myanmar requires a radically new aid paradigm”. *Devpolicy Blog*, Crawford Achool of Public Policy, ANU, 11 June 2024

Morten B. Pedersen, *Outrage is not a policy: Coming to terms with Myanmar's fragmented state*. *Lowy Institute Analysis*, May 2024

***Submission prepared by Associate Professor Nick Cheesman***, Director, Myanmar Research Centre (MRC), with input from witnesses Dr Morten Pedersen and Ms Sophia Htwe; and MRC staff, board members and associates, including Professor Bina D'Costa, Professor Esperanza Martinez, and Dr Phyu Phyu Thin Zaw

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