



STARTTS

NSW Service for the Treatment
and Rehabilitation of Torture
and Trauma Survivors

Submission to the inquiry into democracy and human rights in Myanmar

30 January 2026

For more information, please contact:



1. About STARTTS

The NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) is a non-profit organisation established in 1988 to assist refugee survivors of torture and other trauma to rebuild their lives in Australia. STARTTS' services form a part of the NSW public health system through its status as an Affiliated Health Organisation (AHO), and are funded by government, non-government and philanthropic organisations, including NSW Health and the Commonwealth Departments of Health, Social Services and Home Affairs. STARTTS is the NSW member of the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT), the network of Australia's eight specialist torture and trauma rehabilitation agencies.¹

STARTTS' clients are survivors of torture and trauma in the context of organised violence and state terrorism, the majority of whom arrived in Australia under the Refugee and Humanitarian Program or sought asylum after arriving. STARTTS' service model incorporates a large range of clinical and psychosocial interventions informed by the latest advances in neuroscience and evidence-based practice. Our service provision philosophy is predicated on a biopsychosocial framework, in recognition of the complex interaction between this essential building block for personal and collective wellbeing, and pre-migration and 'normal life cycle' events post-settlement, which have the potential to impede recovery from traumatic experiences. As such, our service offer is broad in scope and includes counselling and programs for all age groups; psychiatric assessment and interventions; family therapy; body-focused interventions (such as nutrition, massage, physiotherapy, acupuncture and pain management groups); support groups; youth activities; advocacy and policy input; and training for service providers.

Further information about STARTTS' services and programs can be found at <http://www.startts.org.au>.

2. Introduction

STARTTS welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee inquiry into democracy and human rights in Myanmar. We thank the Committee for directing its attention to the situation in Myanmar, including seeking information about the so-called elections being held between December 2025 and January 2026.

We also thank the Australian Government for its stated commitment to international efforts to pursue accountability for war crimes, human rights violations and other atrocities committed in Myanmar, including those committed against ethnic and religious minorities.² This is particularly crucial as the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar continues to worsen due to intensifying conflict and human rights abuses, as well as economic collapse and natural disasters.³ Some 3.4 million people are currently

¹ For more information, see FASSTT's website at <https://www.fasstt.org.au/>.

² Australian Mission to the UN, 'Australian statement on Myanmar' (10 June 2025), *Statement delivered by H.E. Mr James Larsen, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Australia to the United Nations*, https://unmy.mission.gov.au/unmy/250610_Myanmar_Statement.html, accessed 23 January 2026.

³ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'Myanmar humanitarian needs and response plan 2026' (2 December 2025), <https://humanitarianaction.info/plan/1505/document/myanmar-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2026/article/11-crisis-overview-7>, accessed 27 January 2026.

internally displaced, and 198,500 have fled to neighbouring countries.⁴ We are deeply concerned by widespread reports of systematic human rights violations (including torture), extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, indiscriminate airstrikes and attacks on civilians, sexual and gender-based violence, forced conscription (including of children), and discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities.⁵ We note recent media reports that a ‘landslide victory’ for the military’s proxy is expected,⁶ in an election process that has been neither fair nor free.

STARTTS works closely with people from Myanmar who have sought safety in Australia, including those who arrived through the offshore humanitarian program and those who sought asylum after arriving. Between 2020 and 2025, STARTTS provided support to 723 clients from Myanmar. Through this work, we have seen the ongoing effects of conflict, repression, and persecution on individuals and families from Myanmar. These effects are reflected by markedly higher levels of moderate to severe mental health distress among STARTTS clients from Myanmar compared to the overall STARTTS client population. The STARTTS symptom checklist was used to obtain data on the top presenting symptoms among clients from Myanmar, which include anxiety, traumatic stress, traumatic grief, and depression. The data shows that 76 per cent of clients from Myanmar experience moderate to severe anxiety compared to 64 per cent for the overall STARTTS client population, and 73 per cent experience moderate to severe traumatic stress (compared to 58 per cent of the overall STARTTS population). In addition, 71 per cent of clients from Myanmar report experiencing moderate to severe depression and 64 per cent traumatic grief (compared to 54 per cent and 48 per cent respectively). As a specialist service that provides culturally relevant services and interventions to people and communities to heal from torture and refugee trauma, STARTTS works actively to support a positive recovery and settlement environment for the diverse Myanmar diaspora communities in Australia. Although this data shows that the effects of torture and other refugee trauma on people from Myanmar are profound, targeted support can make a tangible difference, with WHO-5 wellbeing scores⁷ for the clients from Myanmar increasing from an average of 71 to 88 between 2020-2025 following support from STARTTS. However, as specialist support alone cannot fully mitigate the distress caused by the ongoing crisis, we believe it remains important to consider the effects of the situation in Myanmar on these communities and the role that the Australian Government can play in working to help reduce these impacts. As many people from Myanmar living in Australia remain closely connected to relatives and communities overseas and often carry deep anxiety about their safety, Australia’s position and actions are often closely watched and can either help alleviate or compound this distress.

Our submission does not seek to provide a detailed analysis of the political environment in Myanmar, but rather seeks to elevate the voices of communities from Myanmar who are living in Australia. We encourage the Australian Government to continue its advocacy and diplomacy on these issues, to liaise

⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, ‘Number of people displaced since Feb 2021 and remain displaced as of 05 Jan 2026’ (5 January 2026), <https://reliefweb.int/attachments/850cff4c-dcba-5d9b-b3d9-456b99dde51b/260105%20Myanmar%20displacement%20overview.pdf>, accessed 23 January 2026.

⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘Situation of human rights in Myanmar’ (May 2025), *Human Rights Council fifty-ninth session 16 June – 11 July 2025*, <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/report/auto-draft/a-hrc-59-57-auv.pdf>, accessed 22 January 2026; Human Rights Watch, ‘Myanmar’ (2025), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/myanmar>, accessed 22 January 2026.

⁶ The Guardian, ‘Myanmar military proxy expected to win landslide in widely denounced election’ (25 January 2026), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/25/myanmar-election-enters-final-stage-amid-airstrikes-and-exclusions>, accessed 27 January 2026.

⁷ The WHO-5 is a self-report instrument that measures mental wellbeing. For more information, see <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/WHO-UCN-MSD-MHE-2024.01>.

with Myanmar community members and diaspora organisations, and to maintain a strong protection framework for people from Myanmar who have sought safety in Australia. In particular, we call on the Australian Government to:

1. Act to protect Myanmar nationals seeking asylum in Australia.
2. Provide support to Myanmar-born communities in Australia.
3. Proactively engage and communicate with Myanmar-born communities in Australia, giving full consideration to the recommendations they put forward.
4. Consider coordinating the use of increased targeted sanctions.
5. Deny legitimacy to the Myanmar military's election process.

3. Australia's position on Myanmar and engagement with Myanmar diaspora communities

STARTTS acknowledges the Australian Government's ongoing advocacy and support regarding the crisis in Myanmar, including public recognition of the deterioration of democratic governance since the military coup⁸ and its commitment to over \$352 million in humanitarian aid since 2017.⁹ Continued attention to this issue can help reassure affected communities that their experiences and concerns are recognised and that Australia is willing to take a principled stance against human rights violations.

Myanmar diaspora communities and organisations in Australia have played an important role in advocating for the restoration of democracy in Myanmar, accountability for human rights abuses, additional targeted sanctions, and protection for those displaced in Australia since the military coup. We note that a coalition of civil society and diaspora organisations wrote to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator the Hon. Penny Wong, on 22 December 2025 expressing concern about the elections and calling for the Australian Government to:

- Enact a package of targeted sanctions
- Strongly denounce the sham elections
- Expand humanitarian support and ensure that funding is delivered to and by civil society organisations which can maintain and strengthen civic and democratic space in Myanmar
- Coordinate with international partners to maximise pressure on the regime, including encouraging non-recognition of the sham elections.¹⁰

We draw the Committee's attention to these recommendations and ask that the government gives them full consideration and continues to engage directly with diaspora communities from Myanmar.

⁸ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Statement on Myanmar' (10 December 2025), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/news/media-release/statement-myanmar>, accessed 12 January 2026; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Joint Statement on Myanmar' (1 February 2025), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/news/media-release/joint-statement-myanmar>, accessed 12 January 2026; Senator the Hon. Penny Wong, 'Joint statement – marking three years since the military coup in Myanmar' (1 February 2024), <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/joint-statement-marking-three-years-military-coup-myanmar>, accessed 14 January 2026.

⁹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Humanitarian support to Myanmar and Bangladesh,' <https://www.dfat.gov.au/development/topics/development-issues/building-resilience/humanitarian-preparedness-and-response/humanitarian-support-myanmar-and-bangladesh>, accessed 15 January 2026.

¹⁰ Myanmar Campaign Network, Australian Council of Trade Unions, Australia Myanmar Institute & Australian Karen Organisation et al., 'Open letter to Penny Wong' (22 December 2025), <https://apheda.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Open-letter-to-Penny-Wong.pdf>, accessed 12 January 2026.

Such engagement can help ensure that Australia's approach is informed by lived experience and firsthand knowledge and remains responsive to the concerns of those most affected.

4. Protection for people seeking asylum from Myanmar

The certainty of protection plays an important role in supporting the recovery and settlement outcomes for people from refugee backgrounds. STARTTS notes that the grant rate for Subclass 866 Protection Visas is currently high for applicants from Myanmar, varying between approximately 90 to 98 per cent over the last six months,¹¹ and 99.4 per cent in 2023-24.¹² We extend our acknowledgement to the Australian Government for recognising that people from Myanmar who have sought asylum in Australia are unable to return due to the atrocities being perpetrated by the Myanmar military. Protection is particularly important in this context due to the military's systematic use of torture and arbitrary detention (including electrocution, sexual slavery and mutilation, and deprivation of sleep, food, and water);¹³ the targeting of religious and ethnic minorities;¹⁴ indiscriminate airstrikes against civilians and civilian infrastructure;¹⁵ forced and abusive conscription tactics (including abduction);¹⁶ violent crackdowns on political dissent; and summary executions. To uphold human rights in the face of these horrific violations, we strongly encourage the Government to continue granting protection to applicants from Myanmar. This includes ensuring that people seeking asylum from Myanmar are not forcibly returned to circumstances where they are likely to face a real risk of serious persecution and harm.

¹¹ For example, see the monthly onshore protection visa program statistics available at Department of Home Affairs, 'Humanitarian program statistics,' <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/statistics/visa-statistics/live/humanitarian-program>.

¹² Department of Home Affairs, 'Onshore Humanitarian Program 2023-24' (July 2024), <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/ohp-june-24.pdf>, accessed 15 January 2026.

¹³ Human Rights Watch, 'Myanmar', <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/myanmar>, accessed 30 January 2026; Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, 'Report of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar', Human Rights Council sixtieth session (8 September-3 October 2025), https://iimm.un.org/sites/default/files/2025/08/IIMM%20Annual%20Report%202025%20EN.pdf?_gl=1*1sb4xac*_ga*Nzc3Mjc0MDQ1LjE3Njk3MjU0MzQ.*_ga_TK9BQL5X7Z*cZ3Njk3MjU0MzQkbzEkZzEkdDE3Njk3MjU1MzkkajYwJGwwJGgw*_ga_S5EKZKS878*cZ3Njk3MjU0MzQkbzEkZzEkdDE3Njk3MjU1NDMkajYwJGwwJGgw, accessed 30 January 2026.

¹⁴ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities' (September 2025), https://bangkok.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/2025-09/FACTSHEET_HRC60_OHCHR%20Myanmar.pdf, accessed 30 January 2026.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

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