

Religious minorities continue to be targeted in Burma

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Myanmar—historically known as Burma—is “a disintegrating nation” where leaders of religious minorities continue to be targeted by the military, a report from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom stated.

“In 2024, the escalating conflict in Burma continued to negatively affect conditions for freedom of religion or belief,” an [update from the commission](#) released Oct. 31 stated.

“Since the February 2021 coup, the Burmese military and its State Administration Council (SAC) have pursued an aggressive military campaign to maintain authority, which has included targeting religious leaders, communities, and sites and has exacerbated social tensions between ethnoreligious communities.”

More than 3 million people displaced

Because of the violence in Myanmar, more than 3 million people continue to be internally displaced within the nation’s border or living as refugees away from their homeland, the update noted.

In March, independent experts assessed the Burmese military and its State Administration Council lacked stable control of 86 percent of Myanmar’s territory and 67 percent of the population. In the months that followed, it continued to lose ground, the commission update reported.

In the past year, resistance groups—including ethnic armed

organizations—consolidated control in some regions, including border crossings, the commission update noted.

“The instability in the Kachin State has heightened vulnerabilities for Christian minority communities and members of the Buddhist majority in the region whose communities, houses of worship, and religious leaders the Burmese military may target for their support of the resistance,” the report stated.

Leaders of religious and ethnic minorities targeted



Hkalam Samson, former president and general secretary of the Kachin Baptist Convention in Myanmar, was released from Myitkyina Prison in Burma's Kachin State on April 17 one year after receiving a six-year prison sentence. A few hours later, he was taken back into custody (CSW Photo)

The commission update also points to examples of the Burmese military

targeting the leaders of ethnoreligious minorities, such as Hkalam Samson, former president and general secretary of the Kachin Baptist Convention.

In April, he was [released briefly](#) after 16 months in prison but was then taken into custody again for questioning. Samson eventually was [released from detention in July](#).

The report also noted the [violent death](#) in March of Nammye Hkun Jaw Li, a Baptist minister in Kachin State's Magaung township, as well as the shooting of a Catholic priest while he was conducting Mass in Mohnyin village.

The military has targeted churches and other religious sites, including both a Baptist church and a Catholic church in mid-May in Tonzang Township in Chin State, the commission update reported.

[Tera Kouba](#), minister of international/Asian ministries at First Baptist Church in San Antonio, confirmed the targeting of religious institutions.

Young people forcibly conscripted into military



Tera Kouba, who was born in Burma and grew up there, points to a map of her homeland. (Photo by

Ken Camp)

Kouba, who grew up in Myanmar as the daughter of a Karen Baptist pastor, still has family and friends in her homeland. From them, she learned about a Bible school in Karen State that had to relocate from an urban area to a remote location.

"They had to move the school to a safe place in the jungle," she said.

The Burmese military has experienced significant personnel losses in the past four years. So, in February, a conscription law went into effect to replenish its depleted ranks, the commission report noted. It makes men ages 18 to 35 and women ages 18 to 27 subject to being drafted into military service.

As a result, many churches in Myanmar have lost a generation who either fled the country, were arrested or involuntarily were pressed into military service, Kouba said.

From family and friends in Myanmar, she has heard reports of young people being taken from their homes in the middle of the night—either to be forced into military service or placed under arrest.

"It happens all the time," Kouba said.

Recently, she met with a group of about a dozen Burmese students at San Angelo State University who expressed gratitude for the opportunity to leave their homeland to study in the United States.

"They say they are not safe there. They have no freedom. They have no choices," Kouba said.

Refugee crisis continues

The already-existing refugee crisis continued in recent months, with “new waves of refugees, including from other ethnic and religious minority communities such as Chin, Kachin, and Karen communities,” the commission update stated.

More than 958,000 Rohingya refugees fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh several years ago, and India has received about 53,000 Burmese nationals—mostly from Chin and Zomi Christian communities.

“Beside Bangladesh and India, the largest concentrations of those who sought refuge or asylum from Burma are in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia,” the commission update states.

In the October update, the commission recommended the U.S. government to engage the pro-democracy National Unity Government in Myanmar, as well as ethnic armed organizations in the country, to prioritize religious freedom issues as a prerequisite for official recognition and substantial engagement.

The commission also recommended the U.S. government work with regional governments in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand to assist Burmese refugee communities.

The commission in its 2024 Annual Report called on the U.S. Department of State to [designate Burma as a Country of Particular Concern](#), citing its “systemic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom.”