

Dire Consequences: Addressing the Humanitarian Fallout from Myanmar's Coup

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PHOTO CAPTION: Riot police blocks a road during a demonstration against the military coup in Mawlamyine in Mon State on February 12, 2021. (Photo by STR/AFP via Getty Images)

Introduction

Nine months since a military coup, the future of Myanmar remains uncertain. Despite a brutal crackdown, millions of people continue to resist the military junta that seized power, both through civil disobedience and armed resistance. What is certain is that a humanitarian and displacement catastrophe has engulfed the country and is likely to get worse. Myanmar's neighbors and leading donors of humanitarian aid, including the United States, cannot allow the complex domestic, regional, and geo-political dynamics preventing resolution of the ongoing violence to prevent the provision of humanitarian aid to those in need—nor refuge to those fleeing for their lives.

Since February 1, 2021, the military leaders responsible for decades of repression of minority groups and [genocide](#) against the Rohingya have expanded their abuses to target all citizens of Myanmar who oppose their power grab. The junta's actions have resulted in the killing of more than [1,100 civilians](#) and the forcible displacement of more than [200,000 people](#), and have left an estimated [3 million people](#) in need of humanitarian assistance. The junta continues its attacks on civilians, which includes the targeting of health workers and the blocking of aid—in the midst of economic failure and the COVID-19 pandemic—virtually guaranteeing a worsening crisis likely to continue to spill over to countries throughout the region.

The junta's actions have also dissolved any hopes of return for those displaced by previous violence by the military. Some 1 million Rohingya refugees remain in trying conditions in Bangladesh, living in the largest refugee settlement in the world. Hundreds of thousands of other ethnic minorities from Myanmar remain in Malaysia and Thailand, and thousands more have recently fled to India.

The nature of the atrocities committed by the military junta and the trajectory of the humanitarian and displacement crises demand regional and global attention. Yet, torn by competing interests, the UN Security Council and regional powers, led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), have failed to act decisively to address the crisis in Myanmar. Coordinated targeted sanctions, a global arms embargo, and further efforts at accountability are sorely needed. But even as the struggle continues to push actors like China, Russia, and ASEAN countries to address the roots of the crisis, more must be done immediately to mitigate the humanitarian catastrophe engulfing the country and affecting the region.

An effective response must start with Myanmar's neighbors holding up global standards of refugee protection and non-refoulement—permitting access to those fleeing for their lives and not returning them to a country where they would not be safe. With the support of global donors, Myanmar's neighbors must also immediately mobilize and facilitate the delivery of aid across borders in coordination with local organizations and ethnic groups controlling border areas. Coordinated global pressure must also be brought to bear on the military junta in Myanmar to demand an end to atrocities, including attacks on health and aid workers, and to secure unfettered access for humanitarian relief.

The United States should press ASEAN governments and the members of the UN Security Council to take a stronger stance, but not wait to do so itself. It should simultaneously coordinate increased pressure on the junta through a global coalition of like-minded states, including more forward leaning ASEAN countries. Major donor countries must also continue humanitarian support and increase responsibility sharing with countries like Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Thailand that are hosting those who fled previous persecution at the hands of Myanmar's military. This should include ensuring meaningful access to refuge and resettling refugees, while at the same time urging host countries to permit access to those fleeing violence and to change restrictive refugee policies.

The tragedy in Myanmar is far from over. While complex geo-political dynamics may prevent broader measures from being taken to address its root causes, actions to provide humanitarian aid and refuge for those fleeing for their lives need not and must not wait.

Background

Over the past decade, Myanmar experienced a shift from decades of military dictatorship and global isolation toward a quasi-civilian democracy welcomed by the global community. This opening was marked by increased press freedoms, a developing civil society, and the release of thousands of political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, who would become the country's de facto leader in 2015. Yet, even during this time, the military maintained significant influence and continued to wage attacks against ethnic minority groups. In 2017, [genocidal attacks](#) on the Rohingya forced more than 700,000 Rohingya refugees to flee to Bangladesh.

Myanmar's brief experiment with democracy ended abruptly on February 1, 2021, when the military contested the results of the latest round of elections and arrested Aung San Suu Kyi and several other members of her political party. In the years just prior to the coup, the military seemed to benefit from the increased international investment that came with reforms, even while it maintained outsized influence. This included a guarantee of 25 percent of parliamentary seats for the military, an effective veto on any constitutional reform. But ongoing tensions between the military and civilian government and the latest landslide victory by Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party (winning [83 percent](#) of the vote) in the general election in November 2020 changed calculations for the military leadership. The opening of the new parliamentary session on February 1, with all newly elected parliamentarians in one place, presented an opportunity for the military to act.

The military's power grab was met by widespread popular protests, which were largely coordinated by a new, grassroots, pro-democracy Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). The junta has used [brutal force](#) to put down the protests, firing live ammunition into crowds and arresting and torturing protestors and their family members. Continued attacks on civilians led to the formation of People's Defense Forces (PDFs), local groups that have taken up weapons to counter the Myanmar military.

The military has also clashed with ethnic armed groups (EAGs), well-established groups that have been contesting the military for decades. EAGs like the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and Karen National Union (KNU) have vowed to defend civilians, and many people have fled cities to areas controlled by EAGs. In March 2021, the military used aerial assaults to attack fleeing civilians in Karen state, leading to the displacement of tens of thousands. In all, more than 1,100 civilians have been killed by the junta since February 1, and more than [7,000 people](#) have been arbitrarily detained.

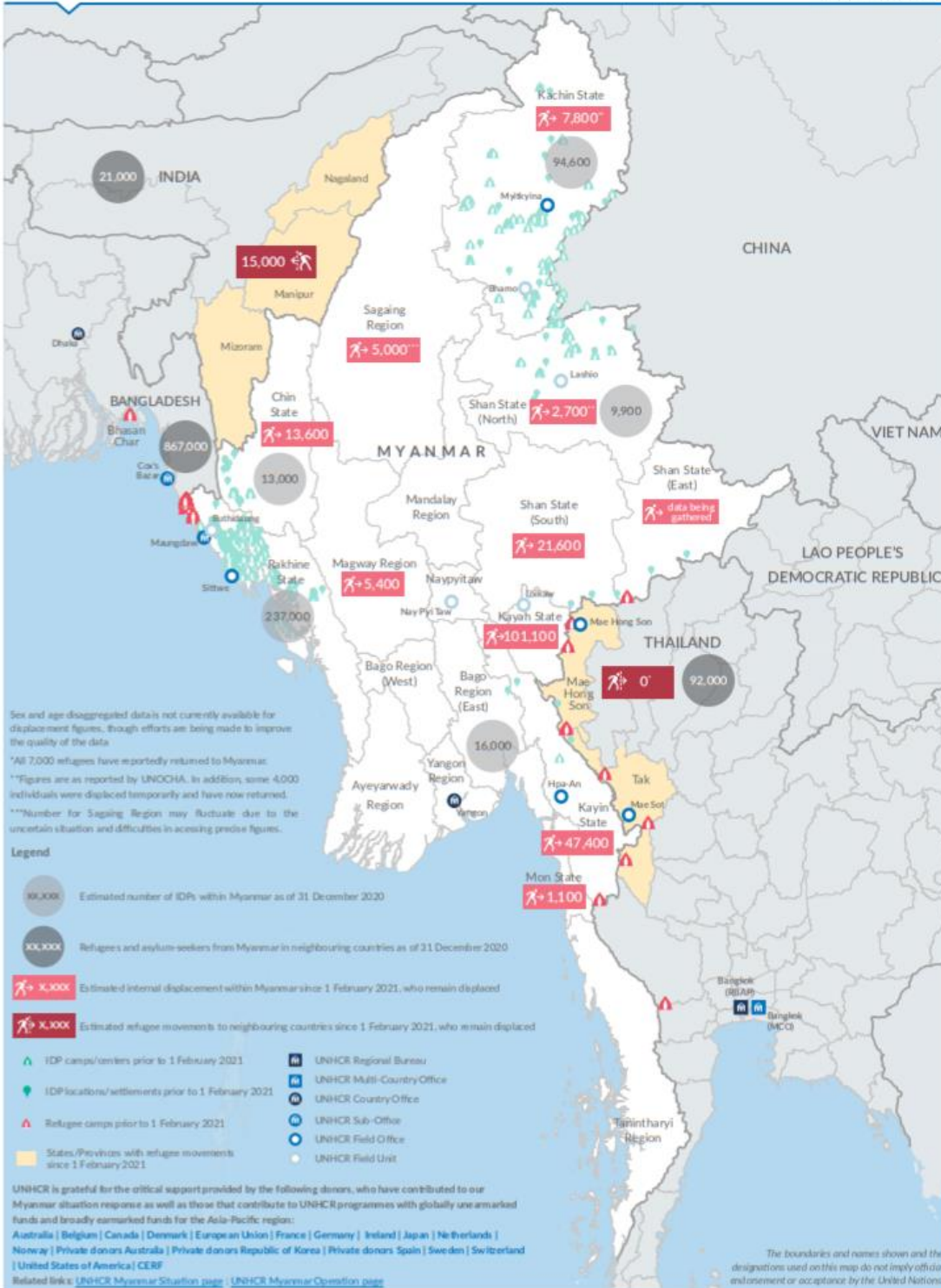
A group of previously elected officials formed a committee in opposition to the coup and later a National Unity Government (NUG), which has contested the legitimacy of the military junta. In September 2021, the NUG's acting president called for a ["defensive war"](#) against the junta, sparking further localized attacks on the military. As these attacks and brutal retaliations increase, the future of Myanmar remains in question. But an end to violence or a clear victory by any side is unlikely in the near term. This trajectory is likely to have dire consequences for the already trying humanitarian situation across the country.

The Displacement and Humanitarian Crises within Myanmar

The humanitarian situation across Myanmar has greatly deteriorated since February 1, 2021. A combination of fighting, displacement, the COVID-19 pandemic, banking restrictions, a failing economy, and the junta's blatant blocking of aid has hampered the humanitarian response even as needs have grown exponentially. The World Bank [estimates](#) that 1 million people could lose their jobs in 2021 and that poverty rates are set to double compared to two years ago. Humanitarian workers in Myanmar with whom Refugees International has spoken have cited spiking needs for psychosocial support and dwindling food supplies. Six months after the coup, the International Federation of the Red Cross [described](#) the humanitarian impacts of ongoing unrest as "now intensified and protracted." Three months later, the situation has only grown worse. Some [3 million people](#) are now in need of humanitarian assistance.

Displacement Across Myanmar

Among those in critical need of aid are hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people. Already, some [370,000](#) people were displaced before the coup; since February 1, 2021, another [200,000 people](#) have been forcibly displaced. The new displacement in Myanmar has been driven by both credible fears of persecution and blatant military attacks. The largest number of newly displaced persons, some [132,000](#), are in Kayah and Kayin states in southeastern Myanmar near the Thailand border, where EAGs have clashed with the Myanmar military. The military has conducted hundreds of airstrikes in these states.



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Photo Credit: UNHCR

But displacement and related humanitarian challenges are affecting people across the entire country. In Chin state, in the northwest of the country, entire villages have been cleared out due to clashes between local resistance groups and the military. In September 2021, nearly all of the population of the town of Thantlang, some [10,000 people](#), fled, including some into India. Local groups [report](#) that the military has blocked aid from reaching those who fled. This has also driven flows of refugees into India, to which UNHCR reports [15,000 refugees](#) have fled since February 1.

Tens of thousands more people have been displaced in Kachin state to the north, as fighting between the military and the KIA has intensified. The newly displaced join some 100,000 people who have been living in IDP sites there for more than a decade (as illustrated in an earlier Refugees International [report](#)). More recently, fighting in Sagaing and Magway states, including burning of homes and airstrikes, temporarily displaced some [63,000 and 12,000 people](#) respectively in September.

Rakhine state, home to the Rohingya and Rakhine ethnic groups, has been comparatively quiet in terms of fighting and displacement in 2021. But the military's past attacks on the Rohingya and fighting between the military and the Arakan Army (AA), the ethnic Rakhine armed group, have displaced tens of thousands of people from the Rakhine, Rohingya, and other ethnic groups in recent years. Brutal fighting between the military and the AA in 2020 left more than 80,000 mostly Rakhine people internally displaced. More than 120,000 Rohingya have been living in IDP sites described as [open-air prisons](#) since 2012, and the rest of the 600,000 Rohingya estimated to remain in the country face severe restrictions on their freedom of movement and access to health care and education.

Thousands more IDPs are scattered and dependent on aid in southern Myanmar. Humanitarian needs in urban areas like Yangon and Mandalay have also skyrocketed as the economy reels and banking restrictions imposed by the junta limit access to cash. Ultimately, new displacement has only increased an already significant need for humanitarian aid.

Rising Needs

The junta's actions, combined with large-scale civilian boycotts and strikes undertaken in protest, have driven down the value of Myanmar's currency and driven up the cost of food items, fuel, and other basic goods, even as unemployment is rising. The COVID-19 pandemic was already [straining the economy](#) in 2020, but the junta's retaliation for the protests—including attacking health workers and confiscating testing kits and oxygen

tanks—amid a third wave of COVID-19 infections in mid-2021 have hamstrung any efforts to tackle the pandemic and greatly exacerbated its economic fallout. In July 2021, the [World Bank warned](#) that Myanmar’s economy would contract by around 18 percent in 2021, with the poverty rate doubling from 2019 levels by 2022.

In its [Humanitarian Response Plan for Myanmar](#) developed prior to the coup, the UN estimated it would need \$276 million to assist close to 945,000 people. In July 2021, it issued an [emergency addendum](#) requesting \$109 million to provide prioritized emergency humanitarian response for an additional 2 million people estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance since February 1. [According to the UN](#), as of September 2021, only 48 percent of the original request and just 15 percent of the addendum had been provided by donors.

Humanitarian Access Constraints

Even where aid is available, it too often does not reach those who need it most. The coup and boycotts and strikes have not only worsened general economic conditions, but also disrupted humanitarian logistical supply chains. Banking restrictions imposed by the junta, including daily withdrawal limits and transfer delays, have made it harder for aid agencies to pay staff salaries or get cash assistance to those in need. Increased scrutiny of foreign transfers to INGOs by the junta also raise serious privacy and security concerns for local staff. Some humanitarian agencies have resorted to engaging local cash traders, though they charge higher fees and create due diligence challenges.¹

The junta has also shut down phone lines and forced [internet blackouts](#) at various times in different parts of the country. This both complicates local coordination of humanitarian aid and further [restricts individuals’ ability to access resources](#) through mobile banking and remote health care. Humanitarian workers have also raised concerns about forced recruitment of IDPs and the increased use of landmines both by the junta and local resistance groups.

Most worrisome is that the junta has actively blocked aid delivery. Humanitarian access was already a challenge before the coup—the military often cited insecurity as an excuse to deny aid delivery to certain areas, and aid groups faced bureaucratic obstacles like delayed visas and travel authorizations. But the level of restrictions since the coup has greatly increased even as humanitarian needs have surged. As one

¹ Interviews with humanitarian workers based in Myanmar September and October 2021.

humanitarian official working in Kachin told Refugees International, the junta “has very much impeded [aid provision] anywhere they can.”

An August 2021 [joint statement](#) from NGOs operating in Myanmar stated, “lockdown measures, travel restrictions, bureaucratic impediments and insecurity are hampering humanitarian service delivery.” The statement warned that these restrictions, combined with the COVID-19 surge, threatened a “spiraling humanitarian catastrophe.”

The junta has also targeted aid workers, including those dedicated to the health response. In May 2021, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) [reported](#) that security forces had told staff at one of its clinics that they could not treat protesters, and had raided other organizations that treated protestors, even destroying their supplies. Since February 1, the World Health Organization (WHO) has tracked [260 incidences](#) of attacks on health care workers or facilities in Myanmar.

These actions have decimated an already underdeveloped health system even as a third wave of COVID-19 infections spreads throughout the country. Positivity rates have decreased from a [peak near 40 percent](#) in mid-2021, but still hover around eight percent. Importantly, humanitarian workers with whom Refugees International spoke indicated that rates are much higher among some of the most vulnerable populations, including those in IDP camps.

Cross-border Aid

Even as diplomatic efforts are made to eliminate the obstacles to humanitarian access and delivery of aid within Myanmar, readily available alternatives for delivery must be mobilized. One of the most straightforward solutions is to provide aid from across borders. At the Thailand-Myanmar border, in particular, a well-established network of [local groups](#) has effectively provided aid in the past. Those networks remain largely intact and, importantly in this context, have relationships with the medical wings of EAGs in Kayin state.

Yet Thai authorities have neither allowed cross-border aid to flow nor allowed international NGOs or UN agencies [regular access](#) to the border. This is important because even just the presence of international actors at the border would force the Myanmar military to be more cautious about attacks near the border and would provide some modicum of protection to those close by within Myanmar.

Facilitating cross-border aid is also in the interest of Myanmar's neighbors, as it would help manage the spread of COVID-19. A more formalized system for receiving, testing, quarantining, and treating people at the border could help to prevent unmonitored cases from spreading. Given the instability in Myanmar, the Thai government has been working with UNHCR to develop [contingency plans](#), including prepositioning of aid, in anticipation of increased inflows of refugees. But NGOs in Thailand that would be at the front lines of any such response report that these plans have not been communicated to them.

Cross-border aid would not immediately reach the majority of those in need, who live farther inland. However, tens of thousands of displaced people live within EAG-controlled areas within a few miles of the border and would benefit from the aid. Further, as people increasingly turn to underground trade from border areas to cope with the deteriorating economy, cross-border aid would likely make it farther into Myanmar to assist the many people facing increased food prices and rising unemployment. A long-time humanitarian worker involved with past cross-border efforts highlighted this trend for Refugees International, noting how this had occurred in past years.

Any cross-border aid efforts will face legal and ethical challenges, as the Myanmar junta is unlikely to consent to them and might in turn further block humanitarian access in areas it controls. But the nature of the situation and the urgency of humanitarian need make such efforts worth pursuing. Moreover, the junta's opposition is not necessarily sufficient grounds for foregoing such an approach. As explored in depth in a recent [policy paper commissioned by the UN](#) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA)—titled "Cross-border Relief Operations-A Legal Perspective"—while international humanitarian law may impose the requirement of state consent for cross-border assistance (that is, consent of the state in the country receiving such aid), states are also obliged to not "arbitrarily withhold consent" for such aid where it is clearly necessary and where efforts are clearly humanitarian in nature. This is clearly the case in Myanmar. The fact that the junta was not popularly elected only weakens the legitimacy of any effort to resist such aid and withhold consent when that effort is fairly deemed to be arbitrary.

The OCHA paper and [past studies](#) also raise key ethical considerations about the use of cross-border aid, including the urgency of the need for aid, the feasibility and safety of conducting cross-border operations, and the likely impact of unauthorized operations on humanitarian activities in the rest of the state. In the case of Myanmar, the urgency is

clear, and the existing community-based networks and past practice make operations feasible and relatively safe. The biggest obstacle, then, is the risk that the junta further restricts humanitarian access elsewhere, whether through increased bureaucratic barriers or outright banning of humanitarian actors from areas it controls. But supplying aid solely through a military junta that is already heavily restricting aid and likely to misuse or deny aid based on recipients' identity raises its own ethical questions regarding the humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality.

The United States and other international donors should utilize the already existing network of local actors across the border from Thailand, which are well-versed in providing aid. Donors should grant appropriate flexibility around reporting requirements to reflect the unique challenges of the crisis. To make such cross-border aid possible, donors must push Thailand to recognize both the necessity and advantages of such efforts, both in terms of mitigating the spread of COVID-19 and addressing the humanitarian needs that might drive more displacement. Ideally, the UN Security Council would authorize the cross-border aid, as it did in the case of Syria. But short of that, donors should engage Thailand, in coordination with local community-based organizations along the border, to begin cross-border aid delivery.

Similar efforts should be made with India and China. China has already supplied COVID-19 vaccines to some areas controlled by EAGs along its border. According to the KIA, China has provided [10,000 Chinese vaccines](#) with assistance from the Chinese Red Cross. Creating a buffer of vaccinated populations on its border is in China's interest. China would also benefit by facilitating broader humanitarian assistance, which would prevent greater suffering, enable people to remain in Myanmar as their needs are met, and foster good will with groups on its border.

Providing Refuge to Those Fleeing Violence

At a more fundamental level, Myanmar's neighbors—including India, Thailand, and China—can mitigate the humanitarian and displacement crises in Myanmar by meeting their obligations under international law to permit access to their countries to those fleeing persecution, torture, or other serious human rights violations. Thus far, they have officially kept their borders closed. Still, thousands of people have managed to cross borders fleeing the coup and its aftermath—particularly to India and temporarily to Thailand. Many refugees have, however, already returned amid troubling reports of

host countries pressuring them to leave, actions that would violate the principle of [non-refoulement](#).

Countries including India and Malaysia have also threatened to return Myanmar nationals who had fled the country prior to the coup, despite the dangerous new reality to which they would return. Moreover, the neighboring countries have restricted access for UNHCR and INGOs to assist newly arriving refugees in their territories.

The greatest refugee flows from Myanmar since the coup have been to India and Thailand. According to [UNHCR](#), an estimated 15,000 people had entered India as of September 2021. Within one week that month, [5,500](#) arrived in the state of Mizoram bordering Myanmar's Chin state, fleeing fighting between the Myanmar military and Chin Defense Forces. While Indian border guards have not forced people fleeing Myanmar to return, the national government has sought to arrest and detain asylum seekers. And while local leaders and civil society groups have offered welcome and assistance, the national government has not. India's government has also denied UNHCR access to new arrivals, leaving them, as [noted](#) by Human Rights Watch, "vulnerable to arrest, detention, and possible return to Myanmar." Despite the 2017 genocidal attacks, Indian officials have repeatedly threatened to return Rohingya to Myanmar, including [dozens of Rohingya](#) detained after the coup.

Thailand received an estimated [7,000 refugees](#) fleeing airstrikes in March and April 2021. Thai officials initially allowed people to seek refuge but [reportedly](#) soon after pressured them to return. This is in line with a long-standing, unstated, informal practice in which Thai authorities allow people from Myanmar to stay for a few days before pressuring them to return. Thailand has also prevented UNHCR and international NGOs from accessing newly arrived refugees. Beyond immediate border crossings, Thailand has also [threatened](#) to arrest those protesting the coup.

China, citing public health concerns amid the pandemic, has kept its border with Myanmar closed both to refugee flows and to trade. It has constructed several hundred miles of [barbed wire fencing](#). It also has a history of forcing those fleeing violence in Myanmar to return.

Compared to other parts of Myanmar, the western border with Bangladesh has been relatively quiet. This is likely due to both an [informal ceasefire](#) in place between the AA and the military and the fact that the majority of Rohingya in Rakhine state had already fled the country. Since the genocidal violence against the Rohingya in 2017, nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees have been living in difficult conditions in the largest refugee

settlement in the world in Bangladesh. Still, observers with whom Refugees International spoke warn that the AA's relationship with the Tatmadaw remains fraught and fighting could resume, quickly leading to large displacements internally and possibly across the border.

Like China, every country has legitimate concerns about public health risks due to the pandemic. But such concerns can be addressed while meeting a responsibility to provide refuge to those fleeing persecution and fearing for their lives. Responsible, practical measures can be taken to house and test, and—where necessary—quarantine asylum seekers without forcing them back into danger. Such measures can also help to better monitor and control the spread of COVID-19.

All of Myanmar's neighbors should take measures to safely permit access to those seeking refuge. They should allow assistance and access to international protection mechanisms through UNHCR and work with local groups to provide aid and transparently develop contingency plans for potential future displacement.

The United States has raised the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar directly with Thailand, including in high-level visits by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman in [June 2021](#) and by U.S. Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield in [August 2021](#). Presumably these officials also raised concerns with Thailand's refugee policies in private. But clearly the message has not yet been heard. It is unclear whether U.S. officials have had similar discussions with Indian and Chinese officials. The United States should redouble its efforts to mobilize cross-border aid and ensure neighboring countries provide access to refuge. Future high-level visits to Thailand and other neighbors must be used to send a clear message that these issues are a priority.

Supporting Those Who Fled Past Military Abuses

Even as efforts are made to ensure the provision of aid to and protection of those recently or likely soon to be displaced, the world cannot forget those displaced by past abuses by the same military responsible for the coup. Given the situation inside Myanmar, this means host countries must refrain from returning Myanmar nationals, regardless of when they fled the country.

As mentioned earlier, India has repeatedly threatened to return Rohingya refugees. Similarly, Malaysia, which hosts some 150,000 refugees from Myanmar (including more than 100,000 Rohingya), [deported](#) more than 1,000 Myanmar nationals back to Myanmar in the first weeks of the coup. An outcry from both domestic and international advocacy groups helped lead to a moratorium on returns since. However, as in India, (and as covered in earlier Refugees International [reports](#)) refugees in Malaysia face daily threats of arrest and indefinite detention in centers inaccessible to UNHCR or NGOs, both of which could help with release or asylum claims. Rohingya in Malaysia were also increasingly the targets of hate speech during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Malaysian government, with the help of donors, must invest in efforts to counter such threats.

In Thailand, nearly 100,000 refugees from Myanmar have been living in camps for three decades. Funding cuts in recent years and waning international attention have [exacerbated conditions](#) in the camps, contributing to an increase in incidences of suicide and domestic violence. Access to education and livelihoods are also restricted.

Asylum Seekers at Sea

Countries in the region must also be ready to support the large number of people who take to the sea to seek refuge. A July 2021 UNHCR [report](#) stated that 2020 was the deadliest year on record for refugee journeys in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, with the highest number of refugees stranded at sea since the [2015 boat crisis](#). The report further found that two-thirds of those attempting the sea voyages were women and children. The numbers have thus far decreased in 2021, but thousands are still believed to have attempted the crossing, some becoming stranded for several months and pushed back from the shores of Malaysia and India. To address this, states in the region should commit to a regional mechanism for search and rescue and safe disembarkation of refugees found at sea.

Rohingya in Bangladesh

Nor can the world forget the nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. With the support of international donors and aid organizations, Bangladesh has provided refuge to those displaced. But its policies toward refugees have become increasingly securitized and restrictive. As Refugees International [reported](#) earlier this year, humanitarian space is shrinking in Bangladesh, and Rohingya refugees remain without access to livelihood opportunities and formal education. The movement of nearly 20,000 refugees—and plans to relocate 80,000 more—to an isolated island in the Bay of

Bengal has been heavily criticized, and the attempted escape of dozens of those taken to the island seriously calls into question the voluntary nature of the moves.

The United States and other major donors must sustain support for the humanitarian response in Bangladesh while also urging the government of Bangladesh to adopt less restrictive and more constructive policies toward refugees.

ASEAN's Role

ASEAN, the regional group including Myanmar as a member, has been placed at the forefront of efforts to negotiate political and humanitarian solutions to the crisis in Myanmar. The UN Security Council has backed this leading role and the United States has repeatedly reinforced it. But by any measure, ASEAN has failed miserably.

ASEAN did not have its first meeting on the situation in Myanmar until one month after the coup. In April 2021, ASEAN reached a [five-point consensus](#) on Myanmar calling for: (1) an immediate cessation of violence; (2) constructive dialogue among all parties; (3) the appointment of an ASEAN special envoy; (4) the provision of humanitarian assistance; and (5) a visit by the envoy to Myanmar. Though many observers noted the lack of a call for release of political prisoners, the agreement was generally well received. But little has happened since. Internal wrangling delayed the appointment of an ASEAN special envoy until August 2021. The envoy, Brunei's second foreign minister, Erywan Yusof, has yet to visit Myanmar and has not met with the NUG or EAGs. When he announced a four-month humanitarian ceasefire was in place, the NUG called for its "people's defensive war" and the military quickly reneged.

The one substantive effort by ASEAN to date has been the delivery of [\\$1.1 million-worth](#) of medical supplies and equipment to the Myanmar Red Cross Society to support the COVID-19 response. ASEAN hopes that this can be an opening to further vaccinations and broader aid via ASEAN's Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre). But [critics](#) consider the AHA center ill-equipped to deal with the military junta and already largely compromised. They also remain wary of any aid flowing directly through the military junta, as there is a high risk that the junta will misuse it. These are valid concerns. Any aid negotiated through the junta should come with conditions, including that it be distributed and monitored by credible interlocutors like the International Federation of the Red Cross and UNHCR.

The world can no longer afford to defer to ASEAN to lead. Of course, other global actors should support efforts by the special envoy and the AHA Centre to pursue openings for increasing humanitarian access throughout the country. Moreover, ASEAN support for—or at least engagement in—longer term solutions could be very important. But ASEAN is unlikely to drive such outcomes.

A Global Response

Part of the reason states have resorted to relying on ASEAN to lead on the Myanmar crisis is that the UN Security Council has been hamstrung by the threat of vetoes by permanent members Russia and China. The Security Council has met [seven times](#) on Myanmar since the coup and released four statements but has taken no substantive action. The motivations of Russia and China are complex, but generally driven by geopolitical and economic interests. China has invested large amounts of money in developing an economic trade and oil and gas corridor across Myanmar as part of its larger [Belt and Road Initiative](#). It is also concerned about countering U.S. influence throughout the region. Russia has been second only to China in weapons sales to Myanmar and has sought [closer military relations](#) since the coup. It also has similar concerns about countering U.S. influence.

The UN General Assembly has taken a stronger stance by passing a [resolution](#) calling for the prevention of the flow of arms into Myanmar. But the resolution has already been flouted by several countries, including Russia and Ukraine. The strongest actions have been taken by individual states, with some coordination among them. This includes targeted sanctions placed on military leaders and military-owned enterprises by the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and European Union.

There is also hope that a [new UN Special Envoy to Myanmar](#) from the region might be the focal point for more concerted efforts. The current UN Special Envoy is finishing out her term with the [observation](#) that, “all-inclusive dialogue in the interest of the people were not welcomed by the military.”

There have also been notable humanitarian efforts, but with similar results. The visit of OCHA Acting Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator Ramesh Rajasingham to Myanmar in September was a welcome effort to address the challenges affecting aid provision, but the junta’s response was less than positive. The junta reportedly [rebuffed](#) requests to grant greater humanitarian access for COVID-19 relief.

Diplomatic engagement to shift Russian and Chinese stances will be important and remains feasible. China, for example, has shown mixed reactions to the coup, and many [analysts](#) believe it preferred the previous government. One potential opening was presented with the [unofficial agreement](#) at the 2021 UN General Assembly session to postpone a decision on the permanent representative of Myanmar to the United Nations. The standing representative, Ambassador U Kyaw Moe Tun, famously defected to the NUG in a very public way, at a February 2021 UNGA session in the early days of the coup. The military junta demanded that he no longer be recognized as Myanmar's representative, but the UN Credentials Committee responsible for making the decision will not do so until December. As part of the reported agreement, the Ambassador agreed to be silent during the September 2021 UNGA session. While the NUG would have preferred outright recognition and the ability to speak out forcefully, the decision was much more of a blow to the military junta, showing that the outcome of the coup attempt and backing of world powers remains uncertain.

A stronger global response is sorely needed to bring pressure to bear on the junta. Russia and China must be engaged, but if they continue to block action at the UN Security Council, the United States and like-minded countries should work with more forward leaning ASEAN member states to form an international contact group on Myanmar dedicated to taking substantive action. Such action should include implementing additional targeted sanctions, including on Myanmar's oil and gas sector; enforcing a global arms embargo; and supporting ongoing accountability efforts.

To enhance these efforts, the United States should appoint a high-level presidential envoy with deep diplomatic experience and knowledge of the region. Such an official could be a "Special Coordinator for Burmese Democracy" within the U.S. State Department, as envisioned in the recently introduced [Burma Act of 2021](#). But the official should have sufficient backing and access to the President to signal the Myanmar crisis as a priority and to press for concrete action both on the humanitarian front in the immediate term and on the political front in the longer term.

Resettlement and Refuge

One other way for the international community to address Myanmar's humanitarian and displacement crises and show solidarity with refugee-hosting countries in the region is to increase offers of refuge and resettlement. Several people have already been offered

refugee in various countries that have worked quietly with Thai authorities. The United States took an important first step by offering [Temporary Protected Status](#) to any Myanmar citizens already in the United States at the time of the coup. Several other countries have since provided similar measures.

The Biden administration has now [announced](#) its intention to resettle up to 125,000 refugees from around the globe for the U.S. fiscal year 2022 (October 2021 through September 2022). This is a welcome increase from the record low numbers of the previous Trump administration, but insufficient. Given the level of displacement around the world, including as a result of recent developments in Afghanistan, Refugees International [has urged](#) a ceiling of at least 200,000 refugees. The current Biden plan does include priority resettlement consideration for “Burmese dissidents” and Burmese Rohingya but designates only 15,000 places for people from the East Asia region.

Given the magnitude of the Rohingya population in Bangladesh and the unlikelihood of returns in the near future, it is clear that resettlement should be an option for some number of this population. This is true both on humanitarian grounds of wanting to help some portion of those most vulnerable and for the objective of responsibility sharing with the government of Bangladesh. There is little likelihood that all or even most of the refugees would be resettled but offering a significant number of spots could incentivize Bangladesh both to re-open long-closed paths to resettlement and to pursue more constructive policies—including freedom of movement and access to basic rights and services—for the refugees remaining in the country until safe repatriation to Myanmar might be realized. Offers of resettlement should be coordinated among a number of states, including the United States, Australia, and Canada in conjunction with complementary measures from Bangladesh’s regional neighbors that might include temporary access to education, skills training, and livelihood opportunities.

The United States should aim to resettle at least 50,000 Rohingya over the next few years. This is an attainable number and high enough to reasonably gain the attention and support of Bangladesh and other countries that might also offer resettlement. Resettlement has always been a relatively minute part of the solution to any displacement crisis, but by offering safety to the most vulnerable, it eases pressure on host countries. More importantly, resettlement saves lives. Resettlement will be a small but essential part to any effective global response to the crisis in Myanmar and one with an outsized effect.

Conclusion

With half a million people displaced and 3 million in need of humanitarian assistance, the military junta continues to attack and block aid to civilians. With a failing economy, the ongoing threat of COVID-19, and fighting between the military and opposition groups throughout the country, the situation in Myanmar is growing worse by the day. The United States should lead the UN Security Council and press ASEAN to ensure unfettered delivery of humanitarian aid within Myanmar, delivery of cross-border aid, starting from Thailand, and safe reception and access to humanitarian aid for those who flee to neighboring countries like China, India, and Thailand. While there are complex geo-political dynamics preventing broader measures from being taken, actions to provide humanitarian aid and refuge for those fleeing for their lives cannot wait.

Recommendations:

Myanmar's neighbors, including China, India, and Thailand, should:

- Permit refuge to those fleeing violence—while taking appropriate COVID-19 safety measures—and refrain from refoulement of those fleeing attacks and persecution in Myanmar;
- Allow cross-border delivery of aid into Myanmar;
- Support local groups likely to be at the front lines of cross-border aid delivery and reception of refugees, including communicating and coordinating contingency plans for rapid arrivals of people from Myanmar;
- Allow access for the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and aid groups to newly arrived populations as well as to detention centers holding people who arrived from Myanmar both before and after the coup;

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and other regional neighbors should:

- Press for a visit to Myanmar by ASEAN's Special Envoy on Myanmar and pursue openings for ceasefires, humanitarian corridors, or other humanitarian access throughout the country;

- Commit to a regional mechanism for search and rescue and safe disembarkation of refugees found at sea, including access for new arrivals to asylum procedures, protection, and assistance, as well as access for UNHCR to individuals in need.

Donor countries should:

- Press the junta to allow unfettered delivery of humanitarian aid, including COVID-19 vaccines, while establishing safeguards to prevent the military usurping aid and avoiding legitimization of the junta. Such safeguards should include distribution through credible interlocutors like the International Federation of the Red Cross and access for UN agencies to monitor and assess aid delivery;
- Support local civil society networks in Myanmar and along its borders to deliver humanitarian aid, including across borders. This is particularly true for well-established networks along the Thai-Myanmar border. Donors should allow more flexibility around reporting requirements to facilitate the work of these groups in recognition of capacity constraints and the complexity of the situation.
- Increase levels of humanitarian aid to address the crisis, including by fully funding the Humanitarian Response Plan and Emergency Addendum, as well as supplemental measures likely to arise as the situation deteriorates;
- Maintain humanitarian support for refugee populations who fled attacks by the Myanmar military prior to the coup, including the Rohingya in Bangladesh and Malaysia and other ethnic minority groups now living in Thailand.

The United States, specifically, should:

- Engage Myanmar's neighbors to allow for cross-border aid to reach those in need in Myanmar;
- Step up diplomatic efforts to urge action by the UN Security Council and ASEAN, while simultaneously working with a global coalition such as an international contact group on Myanmar, to pressure the junta to end atrocities and allow unfettered aid. Such actions should include:
 - Further targeted sanctions on the military and military-owned enterprises, including oil and gas revenues;
 - A global arms embargo on Myanmar;
 - Support of accountability efforts including the case before the International Court of Justice, referral of the junta's atrocity crimes against Rohingya and other groups to the International Criminal Court, and recognition of the attacks on the Rohingya as [genocide](#).

- Appoint a high-level presidential envoy to coordinate diplomatic and humanitarian actions with relevant actors, including Security Council members, regional powers, and Myanmar’s immediate neighbors. Such an official could be a “Special Coordinator for Burmese Democracy” as envisioned in the recently introduced Burma Act of 2021. However, the official should have sufficient backing and access to the U.S. President—and deep diplomatic experience and knowledge of the region—to signal the Myanmar crisis as a priority and to press for concrete action both on the humanitarian front in the immediate term and on the political front in the longer term;
- Increase resettlement numbers for refugees facing persecution by the military junta, including Rohingya in Bangladesh, as part of a larger effort to press for resettlement with global partners.