

Myanmar's Displacement Crisis Deepens Amid Illegitimate Elections, Leaving Millions with Nowhere to Flee

Bangkok | 1 February 2026 — Jesuit Refugee Service Asia Pacific (JRS Asia Pacific) and the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) raise serious concerns over illegitimate elections held in Myanmar amid mass displacement and widespread human rights violations, as the country enters its fifth year of a deepening forgotten crisis.

Five years after the February 2021 military takeover, Myanmar remains under entrenched repression, with civilian harm continuing to escalate. The military has concluded an election process that lacks legitimacy, carried out amid active conflict, widespread insecurity, and the absence of conditions for the free expression of the Myanmar people's political will. At the same time, the military has intensified coercive measures, including repeated rounds of forced conscription of young people. These actions have gone hand in hand with increased airstrikes, rising civilian casualties, and mass displacement. The collapse of civilian protection mechanisms, combined with severe restrictions on fundamental freedoms, economic breakdown, and worsening food insecurity, is driving an expanding humanitarian crisis. As protection and essential services are dismantled, millions are being pushed into life-threatening conditions, with no means of safety or relief.

As of January 2026, Myanmar's displacement crisis has reached an estimated 3.6 million internally displaced persons. In parallel, at least 204,300 people have fled to neighbouring countries since February 2021, including approximately 62,400 people displaced to India and an estimated 141,900 people displaced to Bangladesh, alongside continued displacement to Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

““Since the election timeline was announced, many camp residents have said that the junta's organised election is just a political act without real meaning.”

— Humanitarian worker supporting refugees in Thailand

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“The election does not represent my political will at all. There are no genuinely competitive candidates or independent political parties. It feels like the election is only among SAC and SAC-backed individuals or parties. If the SAC gains legitimacy through this election, they will continue to hold power and create even more problems for civilians.

I am deeply worried that our displacement will last even longer. Displaced people are already exhausted. This situation has continued for five years now. Many of us are tired of living in uncertainty. We want to go home. I want to go home and live in peace.”

— **Person displaced within Myanmar**

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Since the military takeover, widespread and systematic violations of international human rights and humanitarian law have been documented across Myanmar. According to the Institute for Strategy and Policy–Myanmar (ISP Myanmar), data last updated in May 2025 shows that since the 2021 coup, the State Administration Council (SAC) has carried out at least 11,916 airstrikes nationwide. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) reports more than 30,351 arrests and at least 7,736 verified civilian deaths, including 1000 children and 2,033 women.

Education has been severely impacted by the conflict. Schools have been damaged or destroyed, and the use of landmines and other explosive ordnance has put children at heightened risk. According to UNICEF Myanmar, data shows that during the first half of 2025, at least 357 casualties from landmines and other explosive ordnance were recorded nationwide, including 96 children. Health care has also been deliberately targeted. Insecurity Insight documented at least 1,820 incidents of violence against health care in Myanmar between 1 February 2021 and 11 November 2025.

The enforcement of the People’s Military Service Law has become a significant driver of forced displacement. By 10 February 2026, the law will have been in effect for two years, during which the military has opened 20 training batches of an estimated 5,000 recruits each, amounting to an estimated 100,000 individuals forcibly conscripted as of December 2025. The threat and implementation of compulsory military service have triggered widespread flight, particularly among young people, as civilians seek to evade recruitment, further intensifying displacement.

The electoral process was deliberately engineered as a managed electoral exercise that excludes meaningful participation and cannot confer democratic legitimacy. As of January 2026, the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar (SAC-M) reported that, based on the junta's own projections, at least 7.5 million people have been excluded from the electoral process due to the junta's limited territorial control. The exclusion of millions of internally displaced persons and refugees was compounded by the dissolution of opposition political parties and the crackdown on freedom of expression. Over 400 people have been prosecuted under the junta's Election Protection Law, further entrenching an environment in which no electoral outcome can reflect genuine political participation.

Recommendations

1. **ASEAN Member States** must move beyond declaratory commitments under the Five-Point Consensus by supporting verifiable measures to secure an immediate ceasefire. ASEAN's engagement must be grounded in direct consultation with local civil society organisations, exclude the military junta from all ASEAN mechanisms and forums, ensure that dialogue on humanitarian action is shaped by voices from affected communities, and further facilitate an inclusive political consultation aimed at sustainable resolution of the Myanmar crisis.
2. **Thailand** should strengthen the implementation of its existing refugee and asylum frameworks to expand equitable access for refugees residing in the nine temporary shelters along the Thai-Myanmar border. Access to the right to work remains constrained by procedural and administrative barriers. This effort should be accompanied by targeted support for safe and sustainable transitions to lawful employment, including labour rights orientation, skills development, and language training. The government should also address persistent protection gaps affecting the most vulnerable groups and mitigate heightened risks resulting from reduced humanitarian assistance and growing reliance on external aid. This must also include newly arrived asylum seekers residing outside formal camp settings, ensuring access to humanitarian assistance and protection services.
3. **ASEAN Member States, including the Philippines**, are urged to refrain from engagement with Myanmar's military in all forms, including in relation to electoral processes, and to ensure that all bilateral and multilateral engagement does not legitimize military rule. Such engagement undermines accountability efforts and contributes to impunity for ongoing and future human rights violations.

4. **ASEAN Member States** should strengthen regional cooperation to prevent and respond to trafficking in persons, including exploitation in scam operations, through a human rights-based and victim-centred approach. States should ensure, through appropriate legal and procedural safeguards, that victims of trafficking are not subject to criminal liability for acts committed as a direct consequence of their exploitation.
5. **ASEAN Member States** must address transnational repression linked to Myanmar, including forced return, expulsion, deportation, abduction, enforced disappearance, arbitrary arrest or detention, as well as threats, intimidation, coercion, and reprisals against refugees, asylum seekers, and members of diaspora communities. States must uphold the principle of non-refoulement and refrain from any conduct that would expose individuals to a real risk of torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, or violations of the rights to life, liberty, and security of a person, with particular attention to the protection needs and best interests of children.
6. **UN Member States** must take concrete action to end impunity for war crimes in Myanmar by supporting accountability mechanisms, including the International Criminal Court (ICC), International Court of Justice (ICJ), and Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), through information-sharing, facilitating investigations, backing the ICC's ongoing proceedings, supporting the ICJ case under the Genocide Convention, enabling universal jurisdiction, and considering Article 14 referrals and interventions in The Gambia's case, while scaling up sustained support for human rights monitoring and documentation, including civil society and community-led efforts, and strengthening enabling conditions and access at all levels.
7. **All States, including UN Member States and international and regional actors,** should neither recognise nor engage, directly or indirectly, with any military-controlled electoral process or staged event in Myanmar, nor with any outcome, successor authority, or related mechanism arising from such processes. Electoral processes conducted amid violence, mass displacement, and restrictions on fundamental freedoms cannot be considered free, fair, or representative. Participation under such conditions is systematically constrained by fear and coercion, including the effective disenfranchisement of displaced and conflict-affected populations.