Myanmar's Unfolding Humanitarian Tragedy

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On February 1, 2021, the civilian government of Myanmar was overthrown in a military coup led by General Min Aung Hlaing. The military, known as the Tatmadaw, has dominated Burmese politics since the 1960s, leading a dictatorship that has consistently suppressed the country's numerous ethnic minorities seeking autonomy. After decades of hard authoritarian rule, the 2000s and 2010s saw the Tatmadaw implement limited democratisation, creating a political system that allowed partial liberalisation while preserving military dominance. This so-called "disciplined democracy" brought modest improvements to living standards, drew in foreign

investment, and signalled the movement towards liberalisation to the international community. However, a large motivating factor was the long-term interest in maintaining military influence.

That period of opening was decisively reversed after the 2021 coup d'état. The military's proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, suffered a major defeat in 2020, and the military moved to secure their power. With the ousting of Aung San Suu Kyi's government, the Tatmadaw once again consolidated total control. Civil liberties won in the previous decade were rolled back, opposition movements were violently suppressed, and repression against ethnic minorities intensified. The return to military rule triggered nationwide protests and the emergence of an armed resistance spearheaded by the National Unity Government and local militias, which consequently led to civil war.

The civil war has escalated into a large-scale humanitarian catastrophe. As the Tatmadaw escalated its military campaign, reports of widespread war crimes grew increasingly systematic. These crimes include extrajudicial killings, mass executions, sexual violence, torture, and arbitrary detentions, often carried out to intimidate communities suspected of harbouring rebel sympathies. The violence has generated a massive internal displacement crisis, with an estimated 3.5 million people forced from their homes.

Conflict has also devastated Myanmar's already fragile food system. Agricultural production has been disrupted both by direct violence and by the displacement of farmers, while imports of foodstuffs have been curtailed by instability. Rising prices and dwindling availability have pushed millions into hunger. By 2025, an estimated 15 million people were facing food insecurity, up from 13 million the previous year (World Food Programme, 2025). The northern states of Chin, Kachin, and Rakhine have been particularly hard hit, where shortages have reached alarming levels. In some areas, conditions have approached what observers have called "famine warfare", as the military deliberately obstructs access to food and aid.

The international community has responded unevenly. Multilateral organisations, such as the UN and its agencies, have spearheaded efforts to deliver food, housing, and medical assistance, often in extremely difficult circumstances. Many countries have contributed to these relief operations, but the scale of need far outpaces available resources. Western governments, led by the U.S. and the EU, have also imposed sweeping sanctions targeting the Tatmadaw leadership and military-linked organisations. These measures are designed to isolate the Burmese government politically and economically, but critics note that the sanctions have also had the effect of constraining financial channels for humanitarian organisations.

A particularly alarming dimension of Myanmar's crisis is the deliberate obstruction of humanitarian relief by the Tatmadaw. The Tatmadaw has blocked or restricted the flow of supplies into contested areas, ensuring that assistance is funnelled instead into government-controlled zones rather than letting it end up in the hands of the rebels. These blockades have left

displaced populations in resistance-held regions dangerously cut off from food and medical care.

The repression against international aid efforts extends beyond logistical restrictions. Humanitarian workers and medical staff have repeatedly been targeted, with evidence of airstrikes and artillery bombardments deliberately hitting aid convoys, warehouses, and clinics. Such actions not only deepen the humanitarian crisis but also undermine trust between international organisations and the Burmese authorities, further limiting aid access. As a result, the international relief effort has become fragmented, improvised, and largely dependent on clandestine networks that risk reprisal from the Tatmadaw.

Since the 2021 coup, numerous incidents have been documented that illustrate the scale and nature of Tatmadaw abuses. In December 2021, government troops killed at least 35 civilians in Kayah State, including women and children. After intercepting their vehicles, the victims were burned along with their belongings in what later became known as the Christmas Eve Massacre.

Furthermore, the conflict has been characterised by the devastating capabilities of air power. In April 2023, a military airstrike on Pa Zi Gyi village in Sagaing killed more than 160 people who had gathered for a local event, one of the deadliest single attacks since the coup. Similarly, in 2024, the repeated bombings in Karenni State struck displacement camps, killing civilians who had fled from previous battles.

The international response to Myanmar's humanitarian catastrophe has been marked by hesitation, fragmentation, and competing interests. Despite the scale of the crisis, no unified or effective strategy has emerged. This paralysis reveals not only geopolitical rivalries but also the deeper limitations of the international humanitarian system when confronted with state-engineered violence.

At the global level, the United Nations has remained the most visible yet least effective actor. While the General Assembly has repeatedly condemned the Tatmadaw's repression, these resolutions carry no binding force. Within the Security Council, China and Russia have consistently blocked efforts to impose sanctions or accountability mechanisms, invoking the principle of non-interference. As a result, the UN has been confined to a reactive posture, issuing statements of concern without leverage. Agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) continue to provide aid under extremely constrained conditions, relying on clandestine border routes from Thailand or India. The UN Human Rights Council has documented atrocities in detail, but without enforcement mechanisms, its reports remain largely symbolic. As multilateral diplomacy falters, the crisis has shifted towards a regional stage – yet here too, divisions and contradictions have neutralised action.

Within Southeast Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was initially seen as the organisation best positioned to mediate. In April 2021, it brokered the "Five-Point Consensus", calling for dialogue, cessation of violence, and humanitarian access. Four years later, none of these objectives have materialised. The Tatmadaw ignored ASEAN envoys, blocked humanitarian visits, and intensified its campaign of repression. ASEAN's internal divisions have made coordinated pressure impossible. Indonesia and Malaysia have urged engagement with the opposition National Unity Government, while Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos have prioritised border stability and economic cooperation with the junta. Thailand's heavy reliance on cross-border trade and energy imports has made it reluctant to antagonise Naypyidaw. These contradictions have undermined ASEAN's credibility and demonstrated the weakness of its consensus-based approach. The principle of non-interference – once central to regional stability – has become a straitjacket, preventing effective humanitarian diplomacy.

As ASEAN falters, Western powers have attempted to fill the void through sanctions and isolation measures. Since 2021, the United States, the European Union, and their partners have imposed successive rounds of sanctions targeting Myanmar's military leaders and state-owned enterprises involved in gas, jade, and timber. These measures sought to weaken the junta's finances and signal moral condemnation, but their humanitarian impact has been complex. Sanctions have restricted access to international financial systems, making it increasingly difficult for humanitarian organisations to move funds into the country. Banks, fearing secondary sanctions, often block even legitimate transactions, producing a chilling effect that hinders aid operations. This "over-compliance" has deepened suffering for civilians while leaving the Tatmadaw's core networks intact. Moreover, the junta continues to exploit alternative revenue streams through border trade with China and black-market exports. The result is a paradox: sanctions designed to punish perpetrators have inadvertently constrained relief efforts and failed to alter the regime's behaviour.

Meanwhile, regional powers such as China and India have pursued pragmatic policies that prioritise strategic and economic interests over humanitarian concerns. China, Myanmar's largest trading partner and arms supplier, has maintained an ambiguous position—calling for "stability" while quietly backing the junta to protect infrastructure projects like the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Beijing views a predictable authoritarian regime as preferable to a fragmented or democratic alternative that could jeopardise its investments. India, seeking to balance against China and secure its northeastern frontier, has followed a similar path. New Delhi has prioritised border security and limited engagement, avoiding direct criticism of the military regime. Together, these stances undermine international pressure and expose the limits of moral diplomacy in a region where realpolitik dominates.

As official diplomacy stagnates, humanitarian relief increasingly depends on informal and local networks. With formal aid channels restricted, ethnic organisations, community groups, and religious associations have become the main providers of assistance. Cross-border routes from Thailand and India serve as lifelines for hundreds of thousands trapped in resistance-held territories. These actors, however, operate under constant threat. Aid convoys have been bombed, medical clinics destroyed, and humanitarian workers detained or executed. The traditional humanitarian principle of neutrality is almost impossible to uphold in a context where the junta equates assistance in rebel areas with enemy collaboration. This has left international donors facing an acute dilemma: how to deliver aid effectively without legitimising the regime or exposing civilians to retaliation. Supporting local responders remains essential, but it requires flexible funding mechanisms and robust protection systems to ensure their safety.

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