

**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE  
FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND AID SUB-COMMITTEE**

To the Chair,

The Steering Committee of the Myanmar Research Network (MRN) based at the University of Melbourne is honoured to provide input to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, on the occasion of the Public Hearing on Myanmar on 13 April 2021.

MRN includes over 60 members, including academics, practitioners and students working on and/or interested in Myanmar. Many of our members are Myanmar nationals. MRN also works very closely with the Unimelb Myanmar Students Association and Myanmar Students' Association Australia.

The points we raise below are based on our executive team's extensive experience working on political, development and humanitarian issues in Myanmar, as well as our close working relationships with Myanmar communities on the ground as well as Myanmar students and other nationals in Australia.

We will not dwell on the background to the military takeover on 1 February 2021, or the tragic details of escalating military violence and oppression in urban centres and ethnic states since this takeover took place.

We note, however, that we can provide advice on the key conditions that interacted to enable and instigate the military takeover, including the electoral dominance of the National League for Democracy, which was linked to the electoral system itself, the control by the military of the state security sector and its role in governance, and the lack of progress on federalism and the associated peace process. Reform to each of these areas will be essential to the establishment of a stable democracy. These and other issues relating to some of the Committee's questions on the background and potential solutions to the political situation in Myanmar are notably addressed in articles recently published by some of our members<sup>1</sup>.

In writing this brief submission, we wish to focus on a number of recommendations for urgent action by the Australian Government, in order to assist civilians in and from Myanmar and to support the restoration of democratic and peaceful processes.

We emphasise that Australia needs to step forward as a key international player and follow the example set by other countries like the United Kingdom or the United States in presenting a strong and visible response to the military takeover in Myanmar and in assisting Myanmar citizens in their struggle for the restoration of democracy and the rule of law. We urge the Australian Government to listen to the voices and opinions of Australia's large Myanmar diaspora and of other Australians who share Myanmar nationals' concerns for the rights and welfare of Myanmar's diverse and vibrant population.

As such, we make the following specific recommendations:

- **Support civil society and the restoration of democracy and rule of law:** We urge the Australian Government to join with other key players in the international community and collaborate with Myanmar's neighbours and regional partners, including ASEAN, to support Myanmar civil society in working towards the restoration of democracy and the rule of law. In particular, we recommend that, in collaboration with other key international players, the Australian Government:

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<sup>1</sup> "Is the military coup in Myanmar the death knell of democracy and federalism?" <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/is-the-military-coup-in-myanmar-the-death-knell-of-democracy-and-federalism/>

"Myanmar – Yesterday, today and a new tomorrow" [https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/insights/myanmar-yesterday,-today-and-a-new-tomorrow/\\_recache](https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/insights/myanmar-yesterday,-today-and-a-new-tomorrow/_recache)

- Work closely with the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) and the interim National Unity Government (NUG), as well as representatives from civil society and ethnic communities in Myanmar;
  - Exert pressure on the military to end all violence targeting civilians and all violations of civil and political rights, and release all political prisoners;
  - Support the maintenance of free speech and media in Myanmar.
- **Cut military ties, impose targeted sanctions and terminate business partnerships with the Myanmar military:** We also recommend that the Australian Government:
    - Invoke an immediate, comprehensive and internationally monitored arms embargo on the Myanmar military and security agencies;
    - Impose strong and immediate targeted sanctions against senior military figures and their families' economic interests, including access to foreign assets, travel and other communications;
    - Urge the termination of all activities by Australian companies in Myanmar and which involve partnerships with and ties to military-owned companies, and demand that any Australian companies in Myanmar provide clear and transparent information on their dealings with the military and cronies.
- **Provide essential humanitarian aid to Myanmar:** Given the dual crises of urban military violence and escalating military offensives in Myanmar's ethnic states, we urge the Australian Government to:
    - Suspend immediately all further aid cooperation with the Myanmar Government;
    - Significantly expand humanitarian aid to Myanmar in ways that strengthen civil society, by working with and through decentralised civil society and community-based organisations as well as ethnic service providers and by supporting cross-border aid;
    - Provide financial and technical assistance to India and Thailand, to assist in their readiness to receive and safely accommodate current and expected flows of Myanmar refugees across their borders.
- **Protection for Myanmar citizens:** We strongly recommend that the Australian Government protect the human rights of Myanmar nationals currently residing in Australia under temporary visas, by implementing amnesties and extending asylum to them and their immediate families while the military regime remains in power. While we welcome the Australian Government's recent statements to Myanmar nationals in Australia that it won't force them to return when their visas expire, we note that greater reassurance is needed through across-the-board measures such as those implemented for citizens from Hong Kong, and that Myanmar nationals should be offered a pathway to permanent residency as the crisis in Myanmar shows no signs of ending.

Our Myanmar Research Network is fully prepared to work with the Australian Parliament and DFAT in order to bring these recommendations to fruition, and we respectfully request that MRN be recognised and accepted as a trusted partner in progressing this work.

Yours sincerely,

MRN Steering Committee

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*Note: names of Myanmar nationals on Steering Committee withheld to protect their security*