

BURMA, 1962-PRESENT

Amidst decades of conflict, one of the world's most oppressive military regimes is accused of ethnic cleansing against minorities.



Where?

Burma, officially the Union of Myanmar, is approximately the size of Texas with an estimated population of 48 million. After decades of conflict, more than 2 million Burmese have been forced to seek refuge abroad, particularly in Thailand.

When?

In 1962, Burma's post-colonial democracy was overthrown in a military coup. Since then, the military has kept tight control over any pro-democracy movements and has engaged in a brutal counterinsurgency campaign aimed at denying rebels food, funding, information, and recruits.

In 1988, unrest over political oppression by the government led to widespread pro-democracy demonstrations and security forces arrested thousands of demonstrators, tortured detainees, and further reduced political space for any opposition. In 1990, the government held the first free elections in almost 30 years. The National League for Democracy (NLD) won 392 out of a total of 489 seats but election results were later annulled by the government.

In 2010, Burma's ruling junta stated that they won the country's most recent elections with 80 percent of the votes. This claim is widely disputed by pro-democracy groups who assert that the military regime engaged in rampant election fraud.

Since the 1970s, the government increased civilian attacks in ethnic minority areas, resettling residents in sites guarded by the military. The militarized government developed plans to eliminate those who do not fit "Burmese" ideals, and they target the Karen, a primarily Christian ethnic group in southern Burma. Many Karen accuse the Burmese government of ethnic cleansing due to mass atrocities against the Karen people such as summary execution, severe torture and rape, forced labor, extortion, and displacement. As recently as 2010, reports state that the government continues to burn Karen villages, indiscriminately bomb villages, and engage in forced labor in attempts to terrorize civilians.



How?

The Burmese army moves through the region and destroys Karen villages, specifically targeting crops and resources in order to starve people out and kill them without drawing international attention. Many Karen are routinely subjected to sex trafficking and forced labor. The government uses rape as part of a campaign of "Burmanization" through forced pregnancy. The government designated much of east Burma as a "free fire" zone, meaning that they can indiscriminately use violence there.

After a cyclone in 2008, the government redistributed humanitarian assistance, blocking aid distribution to many of the minority areas that were hit the hardest. The Karen state was one of the areas denied much-needed aid.

The Aftermath

The country's foreign relations, particularly with Western nations, had been severely strained due to these human rights abuses. The United States and European Union have placed bans on new investment, an import ban, and an arms embargo on the country. Asian countries, particularly India and China, remain willing to invest in Burma, particularly in natural resource extraction. Despite recent noteworthy reforms, Burma's human rights situation remains poor. Democratic elections occurred in 2012 and the President welcomed back exiles and released 400 political prisoners, but hundreds are still imprisoned. Some laws were amended, but repressive laws remain. The army continues targeting civilians in the Karen, Kachin, and Rohingya Muslim minority groups. Recent attacks against the Rohingya Muslims have been particularly horrific and have generated much international attention. It remains to be seen if the new government will address these issues.