

### KEY FINDINGS

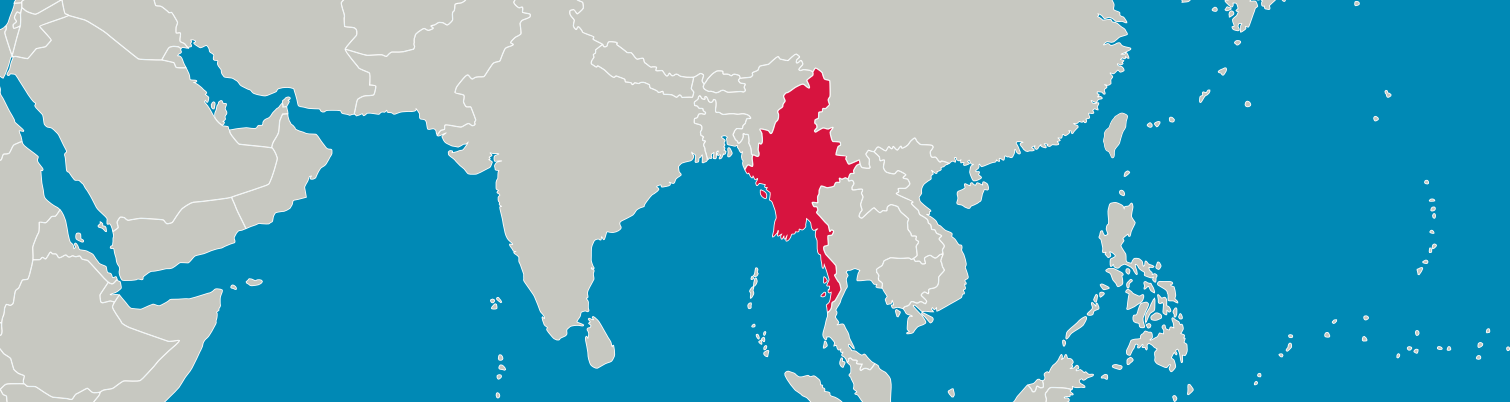
In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Burma trended negatively, particularly for Rohingya Muslims. Despite the fact that Burma's government, military, and nonstate actors have denied responsibility and largely evaded accountability for widespread atrocities, the United States and its allies have imposed a handful of targeted sanctions against military actors "for their involvement in ethnic cleansing in Burma's Rakhine State and other widespread human rights abuses in Burma's Kachin and Shan States." Victims of severe human rights and religious freedom violations have little hope for justice; this includes Rohingya and other Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus, as well as ethnic Kachin, Shan, Karen, Rakhine, and Chin. As of January 2019, just after the reporting period, 911,000 mostly Rohingya Muslims resided in refugee camps in Bangladesh; more than 700,000 of these refugees fled Burma (also known as Myanmar) because of massive military crackdowns in Rakhine State in October 2016 and August 2017. In January 2018, a USCIRF delegation [visited](#) Bangladesh to meet with Rohingya Muslim refugees and discuss their plight with the government of Bangladesh. For the Rohingya Muslims who remained in Burma, their deprivation of rights and ongoing humanitarian crisis has been catastrophic. In November 2017, the United States labeled the atrocities as ethnic cleansing, but only with respect to the crisis in Rakhine State. However, others—including an independent commission created by the United Nations (UN)—who have examined

the available evidence not just in Rakhine State, but also in other areas heavily targeted by Burma's military such as Kachin and northern Shan states, concluded that crimes against humanity and even genocide have occurred. Burma's military and nonstate actors continued to target with discrimination and violence other religious and ethnic minorities in addition to Rohingya Muslims, such as Christians. Moreover, decades of growing suspicion and depleted trust across religious and ethnic groups have in recent years been amplified by the proliferation of social media platforms to spread rumors, cultivate intolerance, and incite violence. In 2018, Burma's government tapped into increasing nationalist fervor by continuing to target critics—both domestically and internationally—including by vilifying both peaceful expression and the media, exemplified by seven-year prison sentences for two Reuters journalists who reported on atrocities against Rohingya Muslims.

Based on the systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom occurring in the country, in 2019 USCIRF again finds that Burma merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State has designated Burma as a CPC since 1999, most recently in November 2018. USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate Burma as a CPC under IRFA and maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1 of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Reinstating the designation of a National Emergency with respect to Burma—terminated by [executive order](#) in October 2016—pursuant to the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, [50 U.S.C. 1701-1706](#), in response to the ongoing and severe atrocities and multiple humanitarian crises occurring in the country, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom, and refocus efforts to definitively and publicly conclude whether such atrocities meet the legal definition of crimes against humanity and/or genocide;
- Support efforts to collect, preserve, and analyze evidence of the crimes and atrocities committed in Rakhine State, Kachin State, northern Shan State, and other areas, and to hold perpetrators accountable by:
  - Continuing to impose targeted sanctions on members of Burma's military, security forces, and nonstate actors for severe human rights and religious freedom violations;
  - Actively supporting and cooperating with the UN's Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar;
  - Pursuing with international partners a tribunal for both state and nonstate actors accused of serious crimes under international humanitarian and human rights law; and
- Bringing a case before the International Court of Justice based on Burma's violations of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide; and
- Working with the government of Burma, representatives from all religious communities (including leaders and laypersons), and other relevant stakeholders to combat intolerance and promote inclusivity and nondiscrimination in the spirit of the [Rabat Plan of Action](#) on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence.



## COUNTRY FACTS

### FULL NAME

Union of Burma, also known as Myanmar, or the Union of Myanmar

### GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary Republic

### POPULATION

55,622,506

### GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism

### RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

87.9% Buddhist  
 6.2% Christian  
 4.3% Muslim (mostly Sunni)  
 0.8% Animist  
 0.5% Hindu  
 0.2% Other (including traditional Chinese and indigenous religions, Jews, and others)  
 0.1% None

\*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook and the U.S. Department of State

## BACKGROUND

In 2018, Burma's government continued to perpetrate, tolerate, and deny its role in religious- and ethnic-based discrimination and violence against vulnerable communities. The country's democratic form of government is aspirational, with a constitution that advances Buddhism as the de facto state religion and longstanding institutionalized discrimination against anyone not belonging to the majority Bamar ethnic group or the majority Buddhist faith.

The ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) government faced mounting criticism in 2018 not only for its silence and inaction about multiple human rights and humanitarian crises, including against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, but also for its actions in Kachin and northern Shan states. For de facto leader State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, the criticism came to a head during the year when several organizations within the international community rescinded awards and honors previously bestowed upon her, including the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Its complex relationship with the military—which still controls many important governing levers—is often misunderstood. Some observers characterized the NLD's win of only seven of 13 seats contested in the November 2018 by-elections as a harbinger of the party's chances in

the upcoming 2020 general elections. While political considerations alone do not explain the calculations that the NLD, the opposition Union Solidarity and Development Party, and the military make in response to human rights concerns, they do contribute to their posturing vis-à-vis one another.

During the year, there were reports that the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture issued orders restricting the instruction of Islam and Christianity to government-approved houses of worship and limiting such instruction to the Burmese language, which is not the first language of many religious and ethnic minorities. Additional reports suggested that the General Administration Department (GAD), the body within the military-controlled Ministry of Home Affairs in charge of the vast civil service apparatus, similarly ordered restrictions on Islamic teaching.

In addition to examining conditions in Rakhine State, the UN actively monitored developments countrywide throughout 2018. In her February 2018 [end-of-mission statement](#), UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar Yanghee Lee stressed the themes of belonging and equality for ethnic minorities and noted the military's history of attacks on places of worship. In April 2018, the UN secretary-general [appointed](#) Swiss diplomat Christine Schraner Burgener

as special envoy on Myanmar; she made her first visits to Burma and Bangladesh in that role in June. The UN's Independent [International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar](#)—whose mission included Kachin, Rakhine, and Shan states—released preliminary findings in August 2018 and its full report in September, concluding that Burma's top military leaders should be investigated and prosecuted for genocide, noting circumstances suggesting their "genocidal intent."

In December 2018, the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly approved a [resolution](#) regarding human rights in Burma, which noted the situation of minority communities and the "statelessness, disenfranchisement, economic dispossession, marginalization, deprivation of livelihood and restrictions on freedom of movement for persons belonging to the Rohingya community, including the confinement of approximately 120,000 people in camps for internally displaced persons, the majority of whom rely entirely on foreign aid." (Several thousand of those interned in Rakhine State are believed to be ethnic Kaman Muslims, one of the country's 135 officially recognized ethnic groups.)

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018

### The Rakhine State Crisis—Rohingya Muslims and Others

August 2018 marked one year since authorities in Burma began their second brutal campaign terrorizing, sexually assaulting, and killing mainly Rohingya Muslims. Since the violence began—including the clearance operations that Burma's security forces first launched in October 2016—more than 700,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled to Bangladesh, whose refugee population in Cox's Bazar totaled 911,000 as of January 2019. In January 2018, a USCIRF delegation visited the Kutupalong and Nayapara refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. In a poignant characterization of how Rohingya Muslims' plight has evolved, one refugee told USCIRF that whereas previously the authorities in Rakhine State restricted Rohingya Muslims' freedoms, since the October 2016 and August

2017 waves of violence "the authorities rape, burn, and kill them." Some of the refugees showed USCIRF their freshly healed wounds—from gunshots and burns—inflicted by Burma's military and security forces.

In June 2018, rainy season landslides proved deadly in the crowded refugee camps of Bangladesh; in one incident, at least a dozen women and children died and, [according to the UN](#), monsoon rains washed away at least 9,000 refugees' shelters. Refugees

also continued to battle malnutrition, unsanitary conditions, and disease. Conditions for Rohingya Muslims who remained in Burma continued to be dire, such as: blocked humanitarian aid resulting in shortages of food and medical supplies; restricted movement; and perpetual statelessness, including for those internally displaced in camps. What were once Rohingya villages in Rakhine State were bulldozed and replaced with military installations and, in some cases, makeshift camps to intern any returning Rohingya Muslim refugees. Thousands of Rohingya Muslims reportedly fled to a "no-man's land" along the border, trapped between a small canal on the Bangladesh side and barbed wire fencing on the Burma side. When in April 2018 a family of five Rohingya Muslims was reportedly repatriated back to Burma, the government of Bangladesh accused Burma of propaganda, alleging that the individuals hailed from no-man's land and had never left Burma. These conditions continued to prompt some Rohingya Muslims to attempt to flee Burma by boat.

Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims and other victims uprooted from their homes, families, and communities also faced lifelong damage, including post-traumatic stress, the stigma of giving birth to or being a child conceived by rape, the disadvantage of undereducation, and diminishing cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions. This includes the scores of Rohingya Muslim women and girls whom international groups have thoroughly documented as victims of systematic mass rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence. Their ongoing vulnerability to

*[A UN-commissioned report concluded] that Burma's top military leaders should be investigated and prosecuted for genocide, noting circumstances suggesting their "genocidal intent."*

exploitation includes trafficking, human smuggling, and forced labor—including prostitution; Burma’s military has long used these tactics as “weapons of war” against multiple religious and ethnic communities.

When in March 2018 Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein, then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, called for the perpetrators of atrocities against Rohingya Muslims to be brought before the International Criminal Court (ICC),

Burma’s national security

advisor claimed that what

happened in Rakhine

State could not possibly

be genocide because

Rohingya Muslims still

lived there. After the Bur-

mesese government initially

blocked a visit by represen-

tatives from the UN Security Council in February 2018,

in late April and early May the representatives [visited](#)

Burma and met with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi

and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and also traveled

to Rakhine State and the refugee camps in Bangladesh.

Members of the Security Council reportedly requested to investigate human rights abuses in Rakhine State, but the military denied there was anything to investigate. In July

2018, UN Secretary-General António Guterres publicly [recounted](#) his experience meeting with Rohingya Muslim

refugees in Bangladesh, calling their suffering a “pattern of persecution” and “ethnic cleansing.”

In June 2018, the European Union (EU) and Canada imposed sanctions on seven military officials and one police commander for their role in committing crimes and atrocities against Rohingya Muslims. Australia sanctioned five military officials in October. Several of the individuals also appeared on the United States’ list for sanctions and in the UN-commissioned report. Also in June, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) signed a memorandum of understanding ([MOU](#)) with the governments of Burma and Bangladesh about the return of Rohingya Muslims to Burma. The full details of the MOU were never made public—something Rohingya advocacy groups criticized along with the fact that the process did not include any Rohingya Muslim representatives in the negotiations and it also failed to address the root causes of the crisis.

During 2018, both governmental and nongovernmental actors researched and reported the atrocities in Rakhine State; several of them concluded that the attacks on Rohingya Muslims were not a spontaneous response to insurgency violence, but rather were planned in advance. USCIRF [learned](#) during a November 2017 visit to Burma and a January 2018 [visit](#) to Rohingya Muslim refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar,

Bangladesh, that mosques

had been closed or

burned in Rakhine State,

children were unable to

attend madrassas, and

the military interfered

with religious practices,

including by threaten-

ing Rohingya Muslims

with arrest or physical assault to prevent them from worshipping in their homes. Echoing many of USCIRF’s findings, in September 2018, the State Department publicly issued [documentation](#) concerning atrocities in Rakhine State based on more than 1,000 interviews, but made no legal determinations beyond its 2017 announcement of ethnic cleansing. (For more information about the State Department’s report, see the U.S. Policy section below.)

Burma’s government and military, though broadly denying and distorting the facts of the Rakhine crisis, displayed some nuance in their responses. In a rare admission of responsibility, in January 2018 the military acknowledged that security forces and civilians massacred 10 Rohingya Muslims in Inn Din in September 2017. In April 2018, seven members of the military were sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment with hard labor. Ironically, it was the investigative reporting about the Inn Din massacre by Reuters journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo that resulted in their imprisonment. During the year, the government again attempted to quell international requests to properly investigate crimes and atrocities in Rakhine State by assigning another commission. However, this latest effort was criticized by international rights advocates for its lack of transparency and credibility, and by Burmese nationalists for the inclusion of foreigners on the panel. On the one hand, the government failed to provide safe and dignified conditions to which Rohingya Muslims could

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safely return, including by attempting to force Rohingya Muslims to accept ID cards that neither recognize them as Rohingya nor grant them citizenship; on the other, it facilitated the resettlement of some Hindu families in Rakhine State. Hindu civilians were among the many other communities ensnared in the violence that gripped Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017.

On September 6, 2018, the ICC—specifically the Pre-Trial Chamber I—decided that it “may exercise jurisdiction over the alleged deportation of the Rohingya people from Myanmar to Bangladesh,” after which ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda [opened](#) a preliminary examination. Unsurprisingly, Burma’s government rejected the ICC’s ruling.

Although discrimination and violence against Rohingya and other Muslims is not always religious in nature, it has impacted their ability to teach and practice their faith. Five years after the March 2013 violence between Buddhists and Muslims in Meiktila, several of the mosques that were closed in the aftermath remained shuttered. Over three days in 2013, armed mobs, which included some Buddhist monks, burned more than 1,500 Muslim homes, damaged or destroyed three Islamic schools and more than a dozen mosques, displaced thousands of people, and killed more than 100 people. Following a 2017 incident in which police apprehended several Muslims for organizing prayers outside after authorities closed two madrassas in Thaketa Township, in April 2018 a court sentenced seven Muslim men to three-month prison terms. In January 2019, after the reporting period, USCIRF received reports that officials closed madrassas and a mosque in Ayeyarwady Region.

### Discrimination and Abuses Targeting Christian Minorities

While some Christians in Burma have little to no trouble practicing their faith, others are targeted with discrimination and violence because of their religious beliefs. For

example, beginning in late 2017 and continuing into 2018, intensified fighting between Burma’s military and ethnic armed organizations in parts of Kachin and

northern Shan states displaced thousands of civilians, many of whom were Christians. These fresh displacements were in addition to the more than 100,000 people internally displaced in camps in Kachin State and northern Shan State, triggered by the collapsed 2011 ceasefire agreement between the military and Kachin Independence Army; some of these individuals have been displaced multiple times. The longstanding conflicts, while not religious in nature, have deeply impacted Christian and other faith communities, and the military’s blockades on humanitarian assistance continued to restrict civilians’ access to food, shelter, health care, and other basic necessities for long periods of time. In 2018, USCIRF received information that the military targeted houses of worship and religious leaders, accusing them of working with ethnic armed organizations. In 2018, two examples of religious structures damaged by military gunfire and explosives included May attacks on a Baptist mission school in Sumpra Bum Township and a Roman Catholic church in Hpakant Township, both in Kachin State. Moreover, the military blocked humanitarian aid, held civilians hostage in their villages, and blocked journalists from entering conflict zones.

Furthermore, USCIRF received information that in recent years, more than 30 churches were destroyed in Kachin State, most by heavy weapons attacks. By some estimates, there are more than 100 churches in Kachin State at which parishioners can no longer worship. In 2018, USCIRF also received reports that local mobs, which included some Buddhist monks, physically assaulted Christian pastors and parishioners in Rakhine State; in at least one instance, Christians were too afraid for their safety to attend church services.

Ethnic armed organizations were not blameless in the protracted conflict. Beginning in September 2018, the China-backed United Wa State Army (UWSA), considered Burma’s most powerful ethnic armed organization, tar-

geted religious institutions and leaders in Wa-controlled territory in northern Shan State. Under the guise of rooting out alleged “religious extremism,” particularly

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among missionaries, UWSA soldiers interrogated and detained clergy, closed religious schools, destroyed unauthorized churches and banned new church construction, and forcibly recruited Bible students to join their ranks. The UWSA held hostage 100 ethnic Wa Christians and approximately 100 ethnic Lahu Christians; both groups were released by the end of 2018, and churches in the area were allowed to reopen.

Christians beyond Kachin and northern Shan states similarly experienced threats. In June 2018, UNHCR announced that Chin refugees from Burma were no longer in need of international protection, a decision that could rescind their refugee status. The decision affected tens of thousands of Chin refugees and asylum-seekers residing in Malaysia and India. UNHCR contended that Chin are no longer fleeing Burma, but they are also not returning to their homes. (In March 2019, after the reporting period, UNCHR [announced](#) that “Chin refugees may still have ongoing international protection needs” and that it would be “maintaining their refugee status.”) International human rights advocates remain concerned about ongoing human rights violations in Burma; for instance, USCIRF received reports that both state and nonstate actors continued in 2018 to intimidate and harass Chin Christians—including to compel them to convert to Buddhism under threat of eviction—and various administrative discriminations prevented them from obtaining land to use for religious purposes. Also, during 2018 and early 2019 the ongoing conflict between the military and the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed organization, prompted some Chin to flee and deterred others who were internally displaced—primarily Buddhists and Christians—from returning to their home villages. The situation in and around Chin State remained precarious enough that in January 2019, shortly after the reporting period, the U.S. Embassy in Burma updated its [travel advisory](#), recommending, among other things, that individuals not travel to Paletwa Township in Chin State “due to civil unrest and armed conflict” and noting overall civil unrest in Chin State.

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## Intolerance, Nationalism, and the Role of Social Media

In 2018, some governmental and societal actors continued to push back against the discriminatory, intolerant words and actions of nationalists and chauvinists who directed their vitriol at religious and ethnic minorities. In February 2018, Minister of Religious Affairs and Culture U Aung Ko recommended to the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee—Ma Ha Na, the official monk-led association that manages Burma’s Buddhist clergy—that it monitor and discipline Buddhist monks’ behavior so as not to malign Buddhism. In August 2018, Buddhist nationalists protested in Rangoon following Ma Ha Na’s July decision to ban the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation (once called Ma Ba Tha, but in May 2017 Ma Ha Na ordered it to cease using that name and remove all signage).

Despite these encouraging actions, Burma’s longstanding challenges with hatred and violence directed at religious and ethnic minorities continued in 2018. Over the last decade in Burma, the rapid rise of internet penetration, mobile phone usage, and in particular the ubiquity of Facebook as the primary source of news and information—as well as other social media platforms—catapulted the country into the digital age. At a time when Burma itself was also rapidly opening, the influx of information not choreographed by state propaganda was overwhelming, on the one hand creating new communication channels, and on the other providing

people the tools to quickly spread rumors that had deadly consequences. In Burma, some observers have noted that the rapid dissemination of false information through social media may be a precursor to genocide.

In March 2018 remarks at the UN Human Rights Council, Marzuki Darusman, chairperson of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission (IFFM) on Myanmar, [stated](#), “Hate speech and incitement to violence on social media is rampant, particularly on Facebook. To a large extent, it goes unchecked.” The IFFM’s [detailed findings](#) released in September 2018 also noted that nationalists used Facebook and other materials in hate campaigns that incited anti-Muslim,

in particular anti-Rohingya, sentiment, and the military used Facebook to make unsupported claims about alleged insurgent-led violence in Rakhine State. (The FFM paid particular attention to Facebook, noting that it “is clearly by far the most common social media platform in use in Myanmar.”) Moreover, Burma’s government has used Facebook—and state-run media—in ways that violated human rights:

in January 2018, the government’s Information Committee, created in 2016 purportedly to release news about Rakhine State, posted on its Facebook page the names and photos of more than 1,300 Rohingya Muslims it deemed “terrorists”; [according to the chair of the FFM](#), the post included children and was done “without any form of due process.”

In the past, the government of Burma has blocked Facebook in an attempt to stop the spread of false information that could lead to violence. However, government and military authorities and offices regularly use Facebook accounts in an official capacity to disseminate information that is discriminatory and even factually incorrect, often to the detriment of religious and ethnic minorities, particularly Rohingya Muslims. At multiple times during 2018, Facebook banned Ma Ba Tha’s presence on the site and blocked pages run by nationalist monks and members of the military—including fire-brand monk U Wirathu and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, respectively; several of the individuals whose pages were removed were also sanctioned by the United States, the EU, Canada, and Australia. In an October 2018 human rights impact assessment commissioned by Facebook, nonprofit Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) reported that Facebook removed accounts “to prevent [the account holders] from using Facebook to further inflame ethnic and religious tension.”

### Arrests and Imprisonments

As of December 2018, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) calculated 327 political prisoners in the country, including those currently serving sentences and those awaiting trial both inside and outside prison, a 39 percent increase from December 2017.

During the year, various forms of arbitrary arrest and detention continued, particularly in Rakhine, Kachin, and Shan states, and some detainees have described ill treatment at the hands of the military based on their religious and ethnic identity.

In September 2018, a court sentenced two Reuters reporters from Burma—Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo—to

*... some detainees have described ill treatment at the hands of the military based on their religious and ethnic identity.*

seven years in prison with hard labor under the colonial-era Official Secrets Act for their groundbreaking investigation into the December 2017 massacre of 10 Rohingya Muslims in Inn Din Village in Rakhine State.

Lawyers filed appeals on their behalf, but at the end of the reporting period, both remained in prison. A former police captain was released from prison in January 2019, just after the reporting period, after being sentenced to a year in prison following his admission in court that the Reuters journalists were framed; he subsequently lost his job and his family was evicted from their home.

In December 2018, a court sentenced Kachin activists Lum Zawng, Nang Pu, and Zau Jat to six months in prison for allegedly defaming the military while peacefully protesting the military’s actions earlier in the year trapping civilians—many of them Christians—in a conflict zone and cutting them off from humanitarian assistance during ongoing fighting with the Kachin Independence Army.

In a positive development, on April 17, 2018, Burma’s president granted amnesty to more than 8,500 prisoners, several of whom were political and religious prisoners, including two Kachin Baptist leaders. Dumdaw Nawng Lat and Lang Jaw Gam Seng—both members of the Kachin Baptist Convention—were serving prison sentences for allegedly supporting the Kachin Independence Army after they assisted local journalists following a 2016 military airstrike on St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Mong Ko.

### U.S. POLICY

The U.S. government provides financial aid to Burma on a number of fronts; since the August 2017 violence in Rakhine State, the amount of humanitarian assistance

reached new levels. In September 2018, then Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley [announced](#) \$185 million in additional funding, the majority for Rohingya Muslim refugees and host communities in Bangladesh. The influx of aid brought total U.S. assistance in addressing the Rakhine State crisis to nearly \$389 million since 2017. In April 2018, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel D. Brownback [visited](#) Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, to meet with Rohingya Muslim refugees and Bangladeshi officials, and in May 2018, U.S. Agency for International Development administrator Mark Green [traveled](#) to Burma and Bangladesh to meet with stakeholders impacted by the crisis. At the July 2018 [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#) held in Washington, DC, participating delegations issued a [Statement on Burma](#) about the discrimination that religious minorities “including Muslims, Christians, and Hindus” face because of their beliefs.

In August 2018, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) four Burmese commanders and two military units “for their involvement in ethnic cleansing in Burma’s Rakhine State and other widespread human rights abuses in Burma’s Kachin and Shan States.” The sanctions, pursuant to Executive Order 13818, are in addition to the December 2017 sanctioning of Burmese general Maung Maung Soe—who was subsequently fired—and came two months after Canada and the EU sanctioned eight military, police, and border guard commanders.

In September 2018, the State Department released a [report](#) documenting atrocities in northern Rakhine State. The report revealed systematic abuses against Rohingya Muslims—including a pattern of violence leading up to the October 2016 and August 2017 crackdowns—and stated that the military’s operations in Rakhine State were “well-planned and coordinated” and “explicitly targeted Rohingya, [leaving] neighboring non-Rohingya sites (e.g., Buddhist stupas)” untouched.

The State Department’s interviews with Rohingya Muslims indicated that “perpetrators of the violence singled out community or religious leaders as their targets in some areas,” and some respondents described “the military’s desecration of sacred texts” and “soldiers burning or urinating on [Qur’ans].” Military personnel raped women and girls in mosques and madrassas, as well as in other structures. To the dismay of many human rights advocates, the State Department did not label the abuses against Rohingya Muslims as genocide or crimes against humanity despite robust supporting evidence.

In November 2018, Vice President Michael R. Pence met with Burma’s state counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, in Singapore and [said](#) that the “violence and persecution by military and vigilantes that resulted in driving 700,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh is without excuse.”

In 2018, both chambers of Congress advanced legislation that would have sanctioned Burma’s military for abuses against Rohingya Muslims, but that language ultimately was removed from the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for FY2019 ([P.L. 115-232](#)). However, the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018 ([P.L. 115-409](#)) restricted U.S. funds from being used for military education and training and military financing programs in Burma. Also, the House of Representatives in December 2018 passed a resolution ([H.Res.1091](#)) that labeled the atrocities against Rohingya Muslims as both crimes against humanity and genocide, supported additional targeted sanctions on the perpetrators, and called for the release of the two Reuters journalists.

The State Department last redesignated Burma as a CPC in November 2018. In lieu of prescribing sanctions specific to the CPC designation, the State Department again applied “double-hatted” sanctions against Burma, in this case extending the existing arms embargo restrictions referenced in 22 CFR 126.1.