

## Keeping Canadian Policy Promises: Addressing the Myanmar Crisis

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In its November 2022 [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#), Canada identified rising violence in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup d'état as one of the most significant threats to regional peace and prosperity. Positioning itself as an active and engaged partner in the Indo-Pacific, Canada vowed to promote peace, resilience, and security within the region as [a strategic objective](#). Canada also promised to pay particular attention to its engagement with the [Association of Southeast Asian Nations \(ASEAN\) countries](#). Finally, the Strategy affirmed that Canada will implement its [Rohingya Strategy](#), contributing to the alleviation of the Rohingya refugee crisis.

Yet, as of writing, Canada has not appointed a Special Envoy on the Rohingya and Myanmar crises [as promised](#). Despite acknowledging the Myanmar crisis as a serious security threat to the Indo-Pacific region, Canada failed to discuss this crisis in detail, let alone offer a comprehensive response in its Indo-Pacific Strategy. The lacklustre response to the war in Myanmar undermines Canada's commitment to Indo-Pacific peace and security. Canada thus needs to take concrete action addressing the Myanmar crisis to establish itself as a credible ally to the region.

### Background Context

On February 1, 2021, the Burmese military junta overthrew the democratically elected civilian government of Myanmar and detained [President Win Myint](#) along with the country's *de facto* leader and Nobel laureate, [Aung San Suu Kyi](#). The junta, officially known as the State Administration Council (SAC), is led by [Senior General Min Aung Hlaing](#), who is [wanted](#) by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for perpetrating the Rohingya Genocide in 2017. The Burmese military launched [genocidal attacks](#) against the Rohingya population, a Muslim minority group in Myanmar, including mass killings, rape, and arson, forcing many to flee their homes. Many of the forcibly displaced individuals now live in [the world's largest refugee camp](#) in Cox's Bazar district of neighbouring Bangladesh, another Indo-Pacific country. The 2021 coup d'état installed the perpetrators of these crimes against humanity as the ruling authorities of Myanmar.

The coup violently thwarted the budding Southeast Asian democracy into a protracted civil war. In its immediate aftermath, many citizens expressed their dissent against the military regime through [peaceful protests](#) and asked for support from the international community using the hashtag #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar on social media. However, when peaceful protesters bore the brunt of [a lethal crackdown](#), a parallel and interim government was formed in April

2021. This government, called the [National Unity Government \(NUG\) of Myanmar](#), is one of the main players in Myanmar's ongoing struggle for democracy.

Today, the NUG features the [People's Defense Forces \(PDF\)](#) as armed units under its command participating in militant resistance against the SAC across the country. Other prominent actors fighting against the military regime include [Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations \(EROs\)](#), the [Civil Disobedience Movement \(CDM\)](#) that has brought together striking students and civil servants, and pro-democracy activists in Myanmar and the diaspora. A [common goal](#) of these different actors within this broad movement, also known as the [Spring Revolution](#), is to overthrow the junta and to rebuild Myanmar as an inclusive federal democracy.

## War in Myanmar: Security Consequences

There is no conflict without repercussions, and the war in Myanmar is no exception. Four years of protracted political violence and civil war have resulted in an intensifying immigration crisis that endangers the peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific region. The number of refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and stateless persons in and from Myanmar has [risen from 2.6 million in 2021 to 5.1 million in 2024](#). Bangladesh, India, and Thailand bear much of the burden of this immigration crisis. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR), this number is [projected](#) to reach a total of 6.8 million people by the end of 2025, a whopping 1.7 million jump from 2024.

Contributing to this alarming displacement trend and increased insecurity in the region is the extent of violence that Myanmar's military inflicts on its own civilian population. Myanmar is ranked [third](#) globally on the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) list of countries with the most fatalities resulting from political violence in 2024, immediately behind Ukraine and Palestine. It is also the [second](#) most dangerous and violent place in the world, according to ACLED's Conflict Index 2024. Between February 2021 and December 2024, [74,951 people](#) died because of war and political violence in Myanmar. As of March 19, 2025, documentary evidence indicates that the junta has killed [1,474 women and 737 children](#) and arrested [5,971 women and 598 children](#). [170 death penalties](#) were imposed on pro-democracy activists and their civilian supporters. In addition, the junta has been inhumanely bombing schools and universities. Since the military coup in 2021, more than [170 educational institutions](#) have been targeted, especially in air strikes, intentionally killing many children and youths.

## Past and Present Canadian Policies on Myanmar

Canadian policymakers and practitioners have previously considered the consequences of political violence in Myanmar and its resulting immigration crisis in the context of Canadian foreign policy. In 2017, [Ambassador Bob Rae](#) was appointed [Special Envoy](#) to Myanmar, leading Canadian diplomatic efforts to help resolve the Rohingya crisis. The first phase of Canada's Strategy to respond to the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh was launched in 2018 based on the recommendations provided by Ambassador Rae in his 2018 report. In the second phase of [Canada's Strategy to respond to the Rohingya and Myanmar crises](#) (2021-2024), the Government of Canada acknowledged that there is a need for sustained engagement and additional support to help with new challenges that have emerged after the 2021 coup.

The second phase of the Strategy lists [four key objectives](#): (i) support at-risk and crisis-affected populations in Myanmar and Bangladesh, particularly Rohingya refugees, internally displaced persons, and impacted host communities; (ii) intensify efforts to advance an inclusive and sustainable peace in Myanmar; (iii) target support to advance the restoration of democratic rule in Myanmar; and (iv) increase pressure on malign actors, including through continued pursuit of accountability for human rights violations. Canada has also vowed to [increase international cooperation](#), including through the appointment of a Special Envoy, to achieve these objectives.

### Gap in the Canadian Policy Response

Despite understanding the war in Myanmar and its consequences as a real security threat that affects the Indo-Pacific region, Canada's promises remain unfulfilled. Not outlining specific action items about how Canada would address the Myanmar crisis and its resulting immigration crisis in the Indo-Pacific Strategy suggests that Canada might have been giving lip service to communities in Myanmar it intends to help. Adding salt to the wound is the Indo-Pacific Strategy's mention that Canada will fully implement the second phase of its [Rohingya Strategy](#), which concluded in December 2024. However, as of March 2025, there has been no appointment of a Special Envoy on the Rohingya and Myanmar crises. When asked about the appointment of a Special Envoy in November 2024, a Global Affairs Canada representative [responded](#) that there was no expectation that a special envoy would be immediately named.

Regarding international cooperation to address the Myanmar crisis, Canada has reiterated its [support](#) for the ASEAN's efforts to resolve the humanitarian situation in Myanmar. However, merely following ASEAN's lead and backing its inefficient policy efforts does not suffice, as ASEAN has not only continued but also increased its [engagement with the junta](#) despite its war crimes. The implementation of [ASEAN's five-point consensus](#), a road map established in April 2021 for peace in Myanmar backed by Canada, has failed in the face of regime intransigence. Thus, Canada needs to explore additional ways to address the Myanmar crisis through diplomatic channels beyond bilateral Canadian-ASEAN relations to support peacebuilding in Myanmar, a goal outlined in the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

### Why Canada Should Step Up in Its Response to Myanmar

A possible reason for the gap in Canadian policy response to Myanmar is the small size of the Myanmar diaspora in Canada. After all, there are only [9,235 immigrants from Myanmar](#) in Canada, according to the 2021 Census. To echo the [Asia Pacific Foundation \(APF\)](#), there seems to be a disparity in the Canadian resettlement of people fleeing violent conflicts worldwide, as [298,128 Ukrainian nationals](#) have arrived in Canada between March 17, 2022, and April 1, 2024. In contrast, the number of refugees resettled in Canada from non-Western countries remains much lower, with [44,620 refugees](#) admitted through the Syrian refugee resettlement initiative, [55,195 Afghan nationals](#) arriving in Canada after the 2021 Taliban takeover, and a total of only [5,675 refugees from Myanmar](#) residing in Canada as of 2021.

What is surprising is that only 1,000 Rohingya refugees have been resettled in Canada since 2006, a very low figure considering Canadian policymakers tend to highlight how committed they are to assisting Rohingya refugees quite often. With recent [funding reductions](#) from the United States, humanitarian aid efforts for Rohingya refugees are in jeopardy. The United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres' [recent visit](#) to Cox's Bazar highlights the direness of the immigration crisis, and Canada needs to follow through on its promises to provide additional support to the Rohingya refugees

in accordance with emerging challenges. Rohingya advocates [remain frustrated](#) as they see little impact from the [purported Canadian funds](#) allocated for displacement support, compounded with having no Special Envoy.

Canada's increased attention to Myanmar is becoming more critical now than ever following recent political and policy changes in the United States under the Trump administration. President Trump is [considering a visa ban](#) that is similar to the one implemented under his first presidency. Myanmar was affected by his [first visa ban](#) and will likely be [impacted again](#) if the second goes into effect. President Trump has also [blocked \\$45 million](#) that funds the Development and Inclusive Scholarship Program through which marginalized students from Myanmar are enrolled in universities across Asia. These changes in U.S. foreign policy concerning Myanmar mean that the [Temporary Protected Status \(TPS\)](#) designated to Myanmar nationals under the Biden administration is unlikely to be renewed after it expires in November 2025. These changes also present an excellent opportunity for Canada to fill the North American leadership gap in the Myanmar crisis and reaffirm Canadian commitment to human rights, peace, and prosperity in Myanmar and the Indo-Pacific region.

## Policy Recommendations

### ***Appoint a Special Envoy to Myanmar as Promised***

Canada must appoint a Special Envoy to Myanmar as soon as possible who will actively build on Ambassador Bob Rae's work and legacy. Having a Special Envoy dedicated to the war in Myanmar and the resulting immigration crisis will cement Canada's role as an ally committed to better human rights and sustained stability in the Indo-Pacific region. The Special Envoy can also serve as a bridge between Canadian practitioners unfamiliar with what is happening at the frontlines in Myanmar and the marginalized populations Canada has promised to help.

### ***Implement Localization in Humanitarian Aid Practices***

To support communities affected by the war in Myanmar more effectively, Canada needs to take their lead in deciding how to distribute humanitarian aid. Priority must be given to small local organizations working directly with grassroots populations in Myanmar and the border regions rather than large international organizations and agencies that charge exorbitant overhead. There is also a need for transparency regarding how Canadian aid is distributed to build trust between Canadian policymakers and the communities they aim to support.

### ***Collaborate with Leaders and Civil Society in the ASEAN Member States***

Canada should work closely with leaders and civil society in ASEAN member states to address the war in Myanmar. This recommendation aligns with Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy as it will increase engagement between Canada and different ASEAN countries. ASEAN countries that Canada should prioritize in its diplomatic efforts to alleviate the Myanmar crisis are Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, as they [host most refugees and asylum seekers](#) in Southeast Asia.