

**U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Foreign Affairs**

**“No Exit Strategy: Burma's Endless Crisis and America's Limited Options”**

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**Testimony of Kelley E. Currie**

Thank you Chairwoman Kim, Chairman Huizenga, Ranking Members Bera and Kamlager-Dove, and other members of the Committee, for convening this hearing at a time when the world largely ignores Burma's spiraling poly-crisis. As someone who has worked in support of democracy and human rights in Burma for three decades, I deeply appreciate the opportunity to testify today. My remarks solely represent my personal views and not those of any of the institutions with which I am affiliated.

Since Min Aung Hlaing and the Burma army launched their illegal coup in February 2021, the country has descended into state failure, economic collapse, widespread criminality, and unspeakable violence. Burma's neighbors have either profited off this disaster or hidden their heads in the sand, even when their citizens bear the negative consequences of the junta's misrule. As the regime moves ahead with sham elections in a bid to institutionalize its illegitimate rule, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) continues to stand by inertly. Russia and China keep the junta flush with weapons at a cost that includes mortgaging the country's resources and its future. India has attempted to follow China's strategy of playing all sides but lacks the leverage and moral flexibility to do it effectively. Bangladesh and other Muslim-majority countries in the region push the UN and international community to address the ongoing Rohingya crisis with unrealistic solutions, even as they ratchet up pressure on refugees within their borders.

Since the coup, U.S. policy on Burma has also been adrift. The Biden administration largely deferred to ASEAN's failed “Five Point Consensus” while refusing to implement the Burma Act passed by Congress in 2022. The Trump administration has been “reviewing” Burma policy since coming into office. This ‘review’ seems to have consisted primarily of loose talk about Burma's critical minerals, some half-measures to address the scam center epidemic, and dramatically cutting funding to programs for civil society, media, and vulnerable communities. Recent pledges to support Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are welcome but do not replace the failure of leadership overall. That humanitarian assistance is also undercut by termination of support for and engagement with the Independent Investigative Mission on Myanmar (IIMM) and the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar, despite strong support for these efforts during the previous Trump administration.

Despite this international apathy and predation, Burma's “Spring Revolution” has continued its unprecedented fight against the military regime. The revolutionary forces have been scrappy and largely self-sufficient. The flexible tactics of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) keep frustrating the junta's ability to retain effective control of the country, and likely will play a major role in disrupting the planned sham elections. While the People's Defense Forces (PDFs)

and ethnic revolutionary forces have lost ground recently as China expands its role as the regime's decisive enabler, these under-resourced forces continue to innovate and build their own capacity. Despite decades of mistrust and broken promises—and continued use of divide and rule tactics by the military regime—the Bamar majority and ethnic nationalities continue fighting together on the frontlines while working to protect civilians and develop grassroots federalism in areas liberated from military rule. They struggle with the downstream consequences of genocide and geopolitics, framed by decades of military-dominated misrule, chauvinism, and autarky. None of it is easy but they keep working at it. Their DIY revolution keeps going.

As this conflict shows no sign of abating, the Burmese people continue to suffer. Meanwhile, from the scam centers of Myawaddy to the dirty rare earths mines of Chipwe to the drug dens of Tachilek to the refugee camps of Kutapalong—Burma's extractive neighbor keeps finding a way to prosper from its crises. I will leave the last of these issues to my co-panelists and focus on the other three.

1. Scam centers: The scam centers that operate out of Burma are a major node in an estimated \$35 billion a year business enterprise. Chinese transnational criminal organizations provide the backbone for this network, working with the junta and allied ethnic border guard forces. In addition to defrauding innocent victims of their life savings, these scam centers are a major source of an extremely abusive form of human trafficking and facilitate global money laundering networks used by Mexican drug cartels and other bad actors. These scam centers rely on energy and telecommunications resources that are vulnerable to cut offs by Thai authorities, and the operators continue to use Thai and Singaporean banking services.
2. Critical minerals: China sources nearly all of the terbium and dysprosium it processes from mines in Kachin state, in upper Burma. The extraction at these sites is carried out in the most environmentally damaging way possible, destroying fragile ecosystems and poisoning waterways that communities depend on for their survival. Since the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) seized control of key mining areas earlier this year, they have attempted to end some of the most destructive practices and bring the largely unregulated Chinese mining under control, with limited success. In return, the Chinese government has increased its pressure on the KIA, cutting them and Kachin state off from fuel, food and other critical supplies, and expanding support to the regime's efforts to retake territory the KIA had controlled together with People's Defense Forces, especially in the Bhamo area.
3. Methamphetamines: As documented in an exhaustively reported story in the *Washington Post* last week, the drug trade out of Burma has exploded since the coup, fueled by a massive influx of cheap Chinese industrial chemicals. These precursor chemicals are used to produce to make highly addictive methamphetamine compounds that are sold across Asia. The United Wa State Army (UWSA), the largest and most well-armed non-state military in Burma, is the primary manufacturer and trafficker of these illicit drugs. The UWSA grew out of the Chinese-backed wing of the old Burmese Communist Party, and its leaders maintain close ties to the CCP. These ties have facilitated their connections to the web of Chinese chemical manufacturers and exporters—some of whom are state

owned enterprises—that are driving the crystal meth epidemic in Asia. Many of these same chemical companies provide precursors to Mexican cartels that produce synthetic opiates such as fentanyl, and the Post reports growing signs of cooperation and learning across these criminal syndicates.

The Chinese leadership has made it clear that they do not wish to see a victory by the democratic forces in Burma. At key moments over the past two years, Beijing has put its thumb on the scale to ensure its interests are served by events inside Burma. Whether providing diplomatic and economic lifelines to the junta, or cutting off resources for key ethnic armed groups, Beijing has set itself up as the decisive enabler of the junta's war on its own people, much as it serves the same purpose in Russia's war on Ukraine. But because of the complicated and obscure nature of what is happening in Burma, and the fecklessness and apathy of other countries, China has paid little cost for its complicity in the junta's ruinous coup and subsequent war on the Burmese people or its enablement of the ecosystem of harmful illicit activities that support that war.

It is not too late for the United States to have a positive impact on the situation in Burma, but it would require a degree of subtlety and willingness to confront vested interests in the region that has not been evident up to now. Because Burma is a “seam” issue that cuts across not only two regional bureaus at the State Department, but also involves a complex matrix of technical, law enforcement, and financial issues, it is ripe for the appointment of a presidential special envoy who is equipped to understand these challenges and empowered to act on them. The BRAVE Act recognizes the need for a higher-level coordination function, and recommends the creation of such a position.

In addition, the US and its allies should:

- Designate terbium, dysprosium, and other minerals mined by the junta and its proxies as conflict minerals and enforce sanctions on exporters and processors until a more transparent and accountable system of developing these resources is in place. This was done with cobalt mining in Congo, and there are models from other regions where resource extraction has exacerbated conflict and/or severely harmed local communities. Any proceeds from subsequent mining should be placed into a trust fund to remediate the impacts of past destructive mining practices and support communities that have suffered harm.
- Expand cooperation and co-investigation with Thailand and Singapore to more quickly identify and prosecute (1) scam center operators and beneficiaries; (2) groups and individuals involved with human trafficking, the transport of precursor chemicals into Burma, and the drug traffic in the region; and (3) money laundering networks related to these crimes. Restore U.S. funding to projects that track financial networks connected to the junta, its proxy armed groups, and external actors in order to provide actionable financial intelligence to the Treasury Department and allied governments.
- Work with partners to cut off scam centers' access to banking services, Starlink, and other critical operational systems.
- Refuse to recognize any elections organized by the illegal military junta, and block *agrement* for any new junta-appointed diplomats. Expel and declare *persona non grata* Burmese military attaches who are acting as junta enforcers within embassies and

committing transnational repression, including those operating out of the Burmese embassy in Washington and the permanent mission to the UN in New York.

- Work bilaterally and through UN agencies and international financial institutions (IFIs) to expand parallel mechanisms for humanitarian assistance to conflict affected communities inside Burma, including by working with civil society, existing ethnic nationalities systems, and other cross-border pathways.
- Consider placing frozen Burmese foreign exchange funds into a managed account and using the interest to support humanitarian and governance assistance. Require countries that receive humanitarian assistance for Burmese refugees to permit them to be registered with UNHCR, have minimum legal protections to deter exploitation, and be given opportunities to work, access education and other services.

Burma is again at a crossroads. Its people are fighting hard for a peaceful, prosperous and democratic future, while the regime is fighting to protect its self-declared prerogative to continue its brutal and extractive rule. The United States has remained largely aloof from this fight, while our adversaries in Beijing have become major beneficiaries of the chaos and instability it has generated. There are relatively low-cost ways the United States can engage that will improve our own security, while also backstopping our partners in the region who are suffering the downstream consequences of Burma's lawlessness and state failure. Burma may not be a frontline state for the United States, but we cannot afford to let it become a Chinese cat's paw in a critical region. Beijing has already weaponized Burma's chaos against Thailand, our oldest treaty ally in the region and the pillar of U.S. security infrastructure in southeast Asia. The path out of this current morass will not be found in a race to the bottom with Beijing, but rather in working with partners to bring about a sovereign, stable and democratic Burma that is at peace with itself and contributing positively to its neighborhood. Stability and prosperity are the best bulwarks against a Chinese takeover of Burma, but they will not be achieved under a military dominated regime forced on an unwilling populace. We should help Burma to realize a different future, and with consistent, smart policy we can do this in ways that make sense against the broader backdrop of our national security priorities in the region.

I look forward to your questions and am again grateful for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing.

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