



Burma: recent political and security developments

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Burma's international rehabilitation continues. However, critics argue that the pace of this rehabilitation is too fast because the outcome of the current Constitutional review process is not yet clear; a durable peace deal with the country's ethnic insurgencies has not been achieved; and inter-communal violence between Buddhists and Muslims persists. There has been criticism of the UK Government for providing some training for the Burmese military.

Since the beginning of 2013, the Burmese Government has continued to try and bring the remaining ethnic insurgencies in the country to an end, using a mix of military force and political negotiations to do so. There was heavy fighting with forces of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) at the start of 2013. Thousands were displaced and many killed. However, in May 2013 a ceasefire was agreed with the KIO, potentially bringing the last major ethnic insurgency to an end. The KIO rejected an offer from Aung San Suu Kyi to act as a mediator; many of Burma's ethnic minorities have viewed her as insufficiently sympathetic to their cause. The ceasefire in Shan State was often shaky during 2013, with periodic clashes between the security forces and rebels. The Burmese Government has now proposed that all armed groups should sign a '[National Ceasefire Accord](#)'. There are hopes that this will happen in March 2014, but it has been postponed before. Meanwhile, [small-scale clashes](#) between several insurgent groups and the military continue on the ground.

Having previously been confined to Rakhine State, inter-communal violence broke out in central Burma in March 2013. Buddhist mobs attacked Rohingya Muslims, leaving over 12,000 displaced. In April 2013, Human Rights Watch published a [report](#) alleging that the security forces had been complicit in what it termed the 'ethnic cleansing' of Muslims in Rakhine State in 2012. In July 2013, over 20 Buddhists were convicted in connection with the violence in central Burma. There has continued to be [violence](#) in Rakhine State but not on the scale seen in 2012. Following anti-Muslim violence in the town of Thandwe in October 2013, the authorities charged 93 people. There was [another incident](#) in January 2014.

In March 2013, an investigation chaired by Aung San Suu Kyi into the controversial Letpadaung copper mine project and the police response to local protests against it in 2012, which had included the use of white phosphorous smoke grenades, published its report. While critical of the police, the panel did not recommend that the plant should be closed and work there has resumed. In late 2013 there were [reports](#) of further local protests.

During 2013, the Burmese Government took further steps towards political liberalisation – for example, lifting a ban on public gatherings in January, releasing more political prisoners (at least 33 reportedly remain) and establishing a constitutional commission to review the 2008 Constitution, which guarantees the military representation in parliament and, as it stands, rules out Aung San Suu Kyi standing as a candidate for the presidency in 2015 because she is the mother of children who are citizens of a foreign country. However, human rights groups

continued to express concerns about continuing “[serious problems](#)”. In January 2014, there were [reports of the arrest](#) of at least three peaceful protestors in the capital, Yangon.

The constitutional commission reported in January 2014 and an ‘implementation committee’ has now been set up. Critics argue that it skirted around many sensitive issues. There remain fears that the bar to Aung San Suu Kyi’s standing for the presidency [may not ultimately be removed](#). The likely candidate for the ruling Union Development and Solidarity Party, Shwe Mann – currently the speaker of parliament – has [called](#) for her to be allowed to stand. Aung San Suu Kyi cannot rely on the political representatives of ethnic minority groups to prioritise this issue. Their main objective is a [fully federal political system](#).

In April 2013, the European Union (EU) lifted most of the [restrictive measures](#) in force against Burma (only the arms embargo remains in place), describing the process of reform in the country as “remarkable”, while acknowledging that major challenges remained to be overcome. The US has also relaxed its [sanctions](#) significantly, although less extensively than the EU. Bans on the importation of jade and rubies, and financial sanctions against specific individuals implicated in past human rights abuses, remain in force. In the months that followed, President Thein Sein began a series of official visits to Western countries (including the [UK](#) in July 2013), as did Aung San Suu Kyi (her recent [visit](#) to the UK was in October 2013). Levels of inward investment by Western multinationals, mainly in the extractive sector, increased markedly during the course of 2013. Burma took up the [presidency of ASEAN](#) in January 2014.

The UK Government has overall been upbeat about the progress being made in Burma, although it remains a “[country of concern](#)” on human rights. A decision to give military training to 30 Burmese military officers through a course conducted in January 2014 by the Defence Academy of the UK has proven [controversial](#). The US Government has begun to re-establish defence ties with the Burmese military, carrying out in-country human rights training during 2013. More generally, there have been claims that Western countries have been [too quick](#) to welcome Burma back into the international fold, in doing so ignoring their own benchmarks for measuring progress.

Background

[“UK official talks development aid, military ties in Burma”](#), *Irrawaddy*, 30 January 2014

[“Foreign office minister visits Burma’s Kachin state”](#), FCO press release, 29 January 2014

John Bercow, [“Until Aung San Suu Kyi can run for president, Burma is no democracy”](#), *Independent*, 16 January 2014

[“Sexual violence in Burma ‘deeply troubling’ says Hague”](#), Burma Campaign UK, 29 October 2013

UK Government’s Development Tracker [webpage](#) on Burma

The International Development Committee is currently carrying out an inquiry into [‘Democracy and Development in Burma’](#)

Child soldiers International’s [webpage](#) on Myanmar

International Crisis Group’s [webpage](#) on Myanmar

[Burma – the beginning of a new era?](#) (House of Commons Library briefing SN06287, 4 April 2012)

[Burma](#) (House of Commons Library research paper 04/16. 23 February 2004)