

Letter from 125 Faith Leaders, Urging Senators to Oppose Increased Embrace of Burmese Military by Co-Sponsoring SA 607 to the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2018

September 6, 2017

Dear Senator,

As leaders of diverse religious denominations, congregations, and faith-based organizations, we write to express our unified strong opposition to a provision in the Senate's current draft of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that would increase U.S. military engagement with Burma. **We urge you to co-sponsor a bipartisan amendment (SA 607) to strike this language.**

Over the past year, the Burmese military has been implicated in egregious abuses in several regions of the country. According to the State Department's [latest International Religious Freedom Report](#), following an attack on security forces that killed dozens in the northern Rakhine State, "the Burmese military and police forces conducted 'security operations' that suspended access to humanitarian aid, independent media, and human rights monitors over a broad area." Their violent operations displaced approximately 93,000 civilians, with about 70,000 fleeing to neighboring Bangladesh.

Based on interviews with those who fled, Human Rights Watch believes that "Burmese security forces burned at least 1500 buildings in predominantly Rohingya areas, raped or sexually assaulted dozens of women, and committed extrajudicial executions." The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights found that crimes against the ethnic Rohingya community in northern Rakhine State "seem to have been widespread as well as systematic, indicating the very likely commission of crimes against humanity."

In March the UN High Commission of Human Rights launched a fact-finding mission to substantiate or disprove this allegation, but neither the government nor the Burmese military has cooperated. Their refusal puts Burma in league with Syria and North Korea – other countries that deny the UN access.

Amnesty International found a similar pattern in the Army's targeting of other ethnic minorities in Burma's Northern Shan State, where the military stands accused of forcibly disappearing Kachin Baptist ministers who were witness to the military's bombing of a Catholic church. Two ministers led journalists to the scene of the damaged church in December 2016 and were last seen traveling towards the Byuha Gon military base. Despite repeated inquiries from representatives of the Kachin Baptist Convention to local government authorities, nothing has been heard of the Baptist ministers and the Government of Burma denies its military had anything to do with their disappearance.

According to the [Trafficking in Persons report](#) issued in 2017, "The military continued to subject civilians to forced labor.... Ethnic minority groups in Burma—particularly internally displaced Rohingya, Rakhine, Shan, and Kachin communities—continued to be at elevated risk of forced labor as a result of ongoing military incursions, and the government remained largely inactive on this longstanding issue."

Our shared commitment to faith and moral teachings commit us to support policies and practices that sustain our collective humanity and to speak out when our brothers and sisters are being oppressed. We do not believe that the record of abuse and impunity by the military in Burma over the past year merits closer U.S. support at this time.

We thank Senators Gardner, Markey and Cardin for their leadership on SA 607 and urge all Senators to support this amendment to strike an embrace of this military at this time.

Respectfully,

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