



Fault Lines, Foreign Aid, and the Struggle for Democracy

U.S. Engagement in Myanmar Before and After the Coup

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Content

- Myanmar – History and Context
- U.S. Policy (2011-2025)
- Lessons and What Comes Next
- Questions and Discussion



Photo Credit: Alex Albertine, 2019

A Brief History

- Pre-colonial kingdoms and British conquest (1824–1886)
- Independence (1948) and early democracy under U Nu
- 1962 Ne Win coup – 'Burmese Way to Socialism'
- 1988 pro-democracy uprising and military rule (SLORC/SPDC)
- 2008 Constitution enshrining military control
- Partial opening (2010–2015) and NLD victory
- 2017 Rohingya Crisis
- 2021 Coup – Civil War and State Fragmentation



Map No. 4168 Rev. 4 UNITED NATIONS Department of Field Support
January 2016 Geospatial Information Section (formerly Cartographic Section)

Map Credit: UN Geospatial, 2016

Ethnic Diversity

- Diverse ethnic states: Shan, Kachin, Rakhine, Karen, Mon, Chin, Kayah
- 135+ recognized ethnic groups; 88% Theravada Buddhist, 4% Muslim.
- Long-running insurgencies in Kachin, Shan, Karen, Chin, Rakhine.
- Ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) form parallel governance structures.
- Key regions of conflict since 2021: Sagaing, Chin, Kachin, Rakhine



Photo Credit: Alex Albertine 2019

Key Figures and Data

- Pop. \approx 55 million
- Size \approx 261 thousand sq/mi
- GDP \approx \$74 billion (2024)
- IDPs \approx 3.5 million
- Refugees \approx 1.6 million
- Food insecure \approx 16 million
- Strategic Location
- Natural Resource wealth
- US Assistance \approx \$242 m (2024)



U.S. Foreign Policy and Assistance Shifts

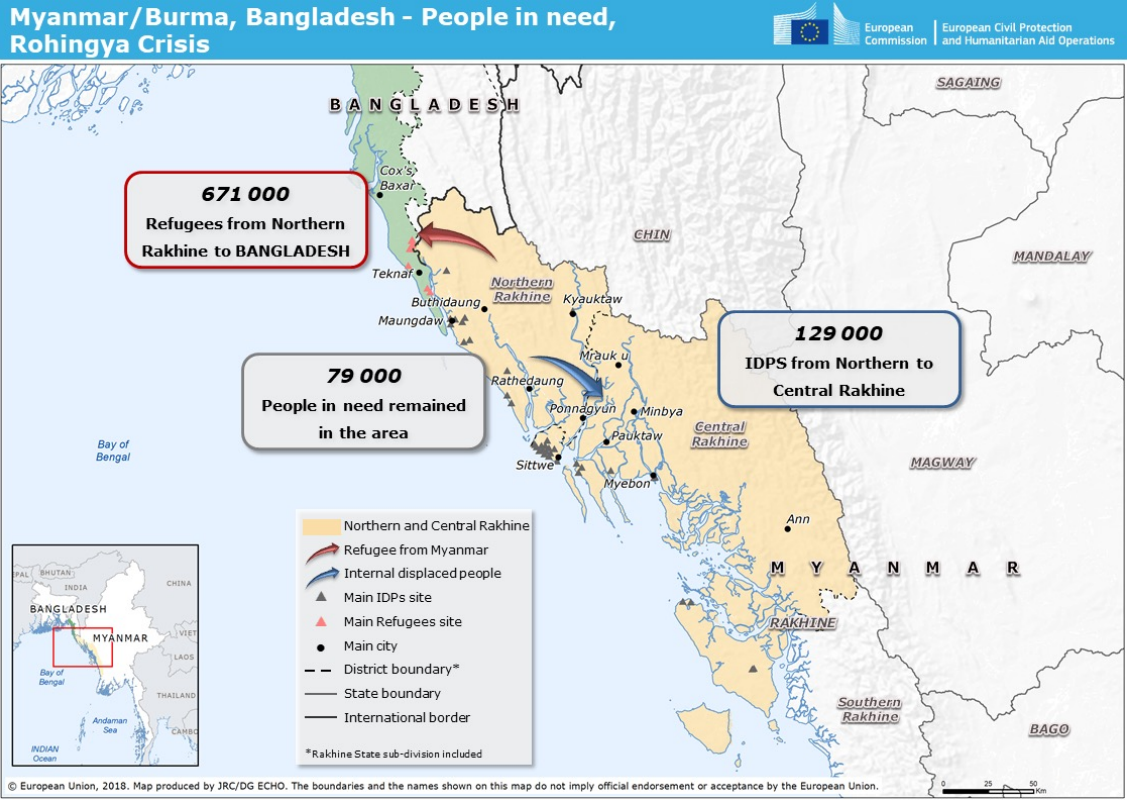
- Apr. 2008 Cyclone Nargis
- 2011–2016 opening: E.O. 13742 ends most sanctions. Surge in development aid (governance, markets, peace process), business investment, the Internet and Facebook
- 2017 Rohingya atrocities → targeted sanctions return.
- Dec. 2019 → Aung San Suu Kyi Defends Myanmar against accusations of genocide at the International Court of Justice (ICJ)
- 2020 - COVID
- Feb. 2021 coup → suspension of direct support to government. New sanctions program targeting military, state corporations, banks, and associates.
- Mar. 2022 → U.S. designates the Rohingya Crisis a genocide.
- Jan. 2025 E.O. 14169 → Dismantling of USAID
- Mar. 2025 7.7 earthquake



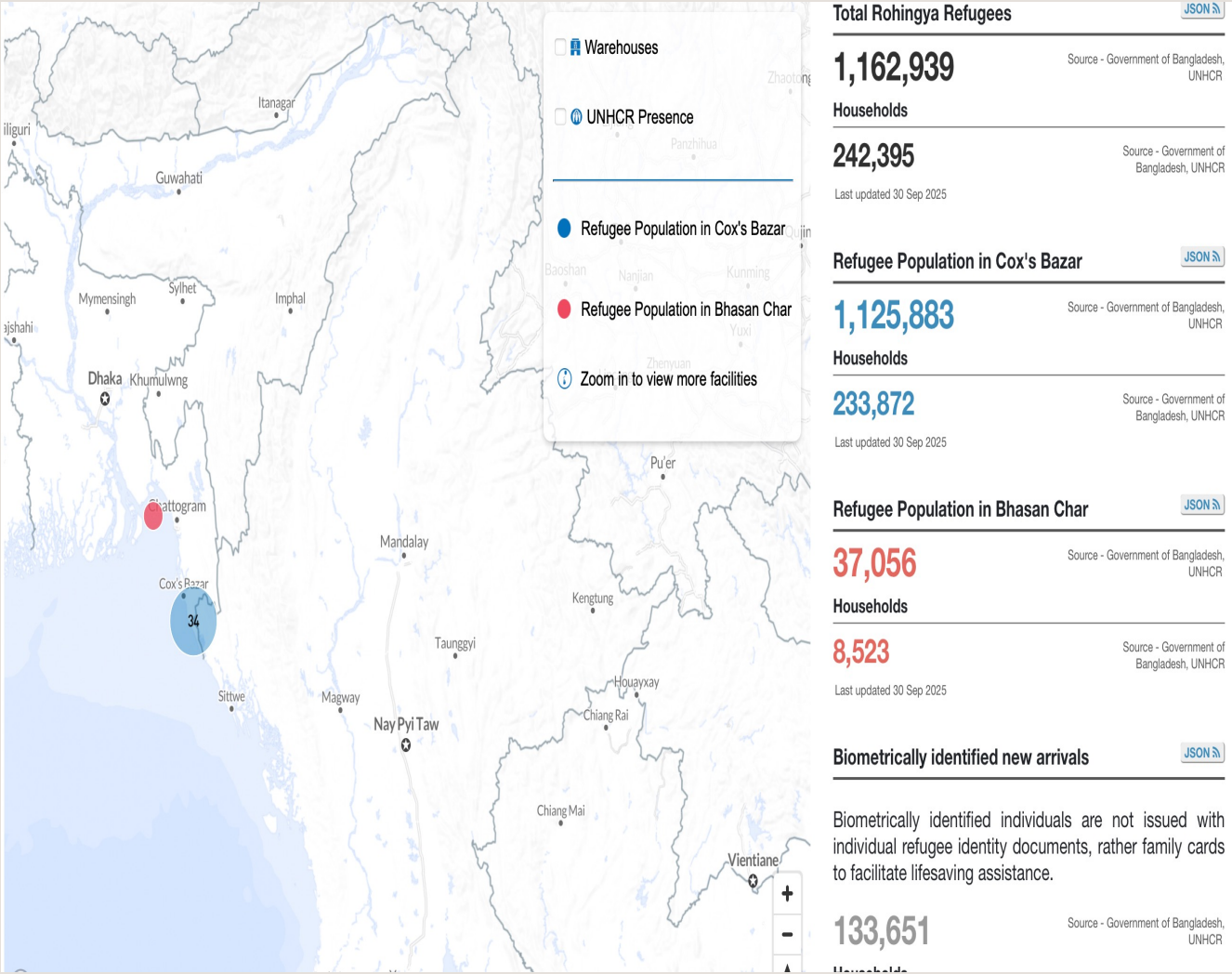
Photo Credit: U.S. State Department

“The best way to help Burma is to empower the people of Burma, to help us have enough self-confidence to obtain what we want for ourselves.” - *Aung San Suu Kyi (2016)*

Rohingya Crisis



Source: DG ECHO / ReliefWeb

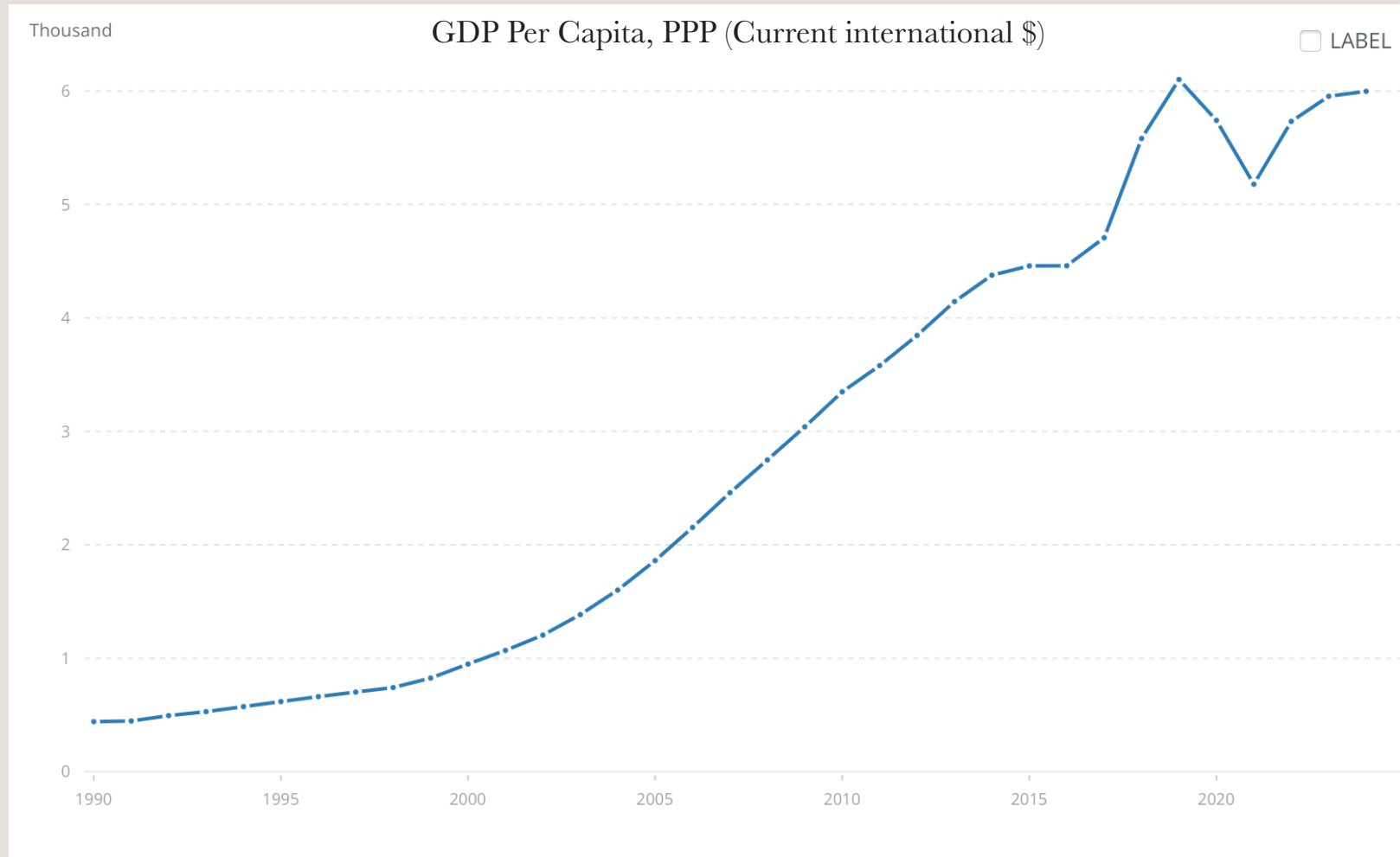


Source: UNHCR

The 2021 Coup

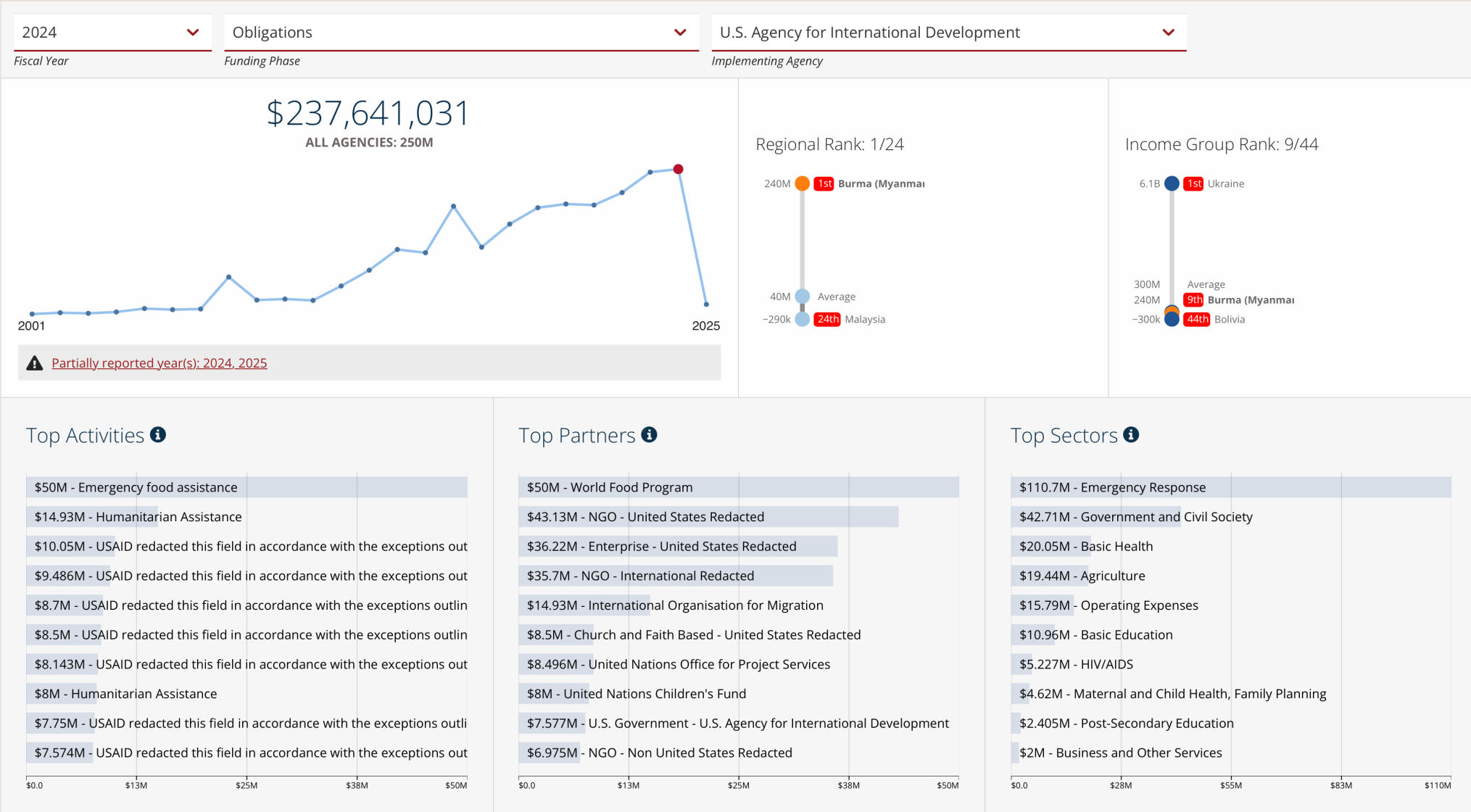
- 8 Nov NLD wins 82% of contested seats in the general election. USDP wins 6% of seats. Tatmadaw begins unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud. Failed negotiation
- 29 Jan Tatmadaw positions tanks and armored vehicles across major cities in Burma.
- 1 Feb Tatmadaw asserts state of emergency, stages coup in Naypyidaw, and illegally detains Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and other NLD party leaders. Min Aung Hlaing declares himself leader of Burma. Internet shut down. Banks close.
- 2 Feb Tatmadaw puts over 400 elected members of parliament under house arrest. **Hundreds of thousands take to the streets to protest coup.** Festive environment at protests. The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) is formed by health workers and civil society. Min Aung Hlaing establishes the State Administration Council (SAC).
- 4 Feb Tatmadaw-controlled communications enterprise Myanma Posts and Telecommunications blocks access to Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter for 3 days. Social Media blocks extended indefinitely. Widespread use of VPNs. Regular internet blackouts. Banks unable to re-open due to lack of staff.
- 9 Feb Over 300 MPs-elect join the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). Tatmadaw drafts Cyber Security Law. Tatmadaw begins trial of Aung San Suu Kyi.
- 16 Feb T-Bill Auction sells less than a percent of offer. Bank withdrawal limitations imposed.
- 19 Feb DICA data breach. Government websites shut down. Fuel imports stop. China - “it’s an internal affair”
- 25 Feb Toyota delays opening. Port and SEZ closures.
- 28 Feb **Tatmadaw increases brutality, killing 18 protesters in a single day.**
- 1 Mar CRPH declared a “terrorist organization” by Tatmadaw. CRPH appoints cabinet ministers.
- 2 Mar ASEAN Foreign Ministers meet. Limited action regionally.
- 3 Mar Increased violence across country in crackdown of protests. At least 24 killed. Nightly patrols begin. Use of flash bangs, teargas, and rubber bullets widespread. Continues nightly.
- 8 Mar Military set up camp in schools and hospitals while policing neighborhoods in Yangon. License to 5 media houses revoked.
- 10 Mar Third Round of US Sanctions - Family members and family businesses

Economic Impact & Poverty

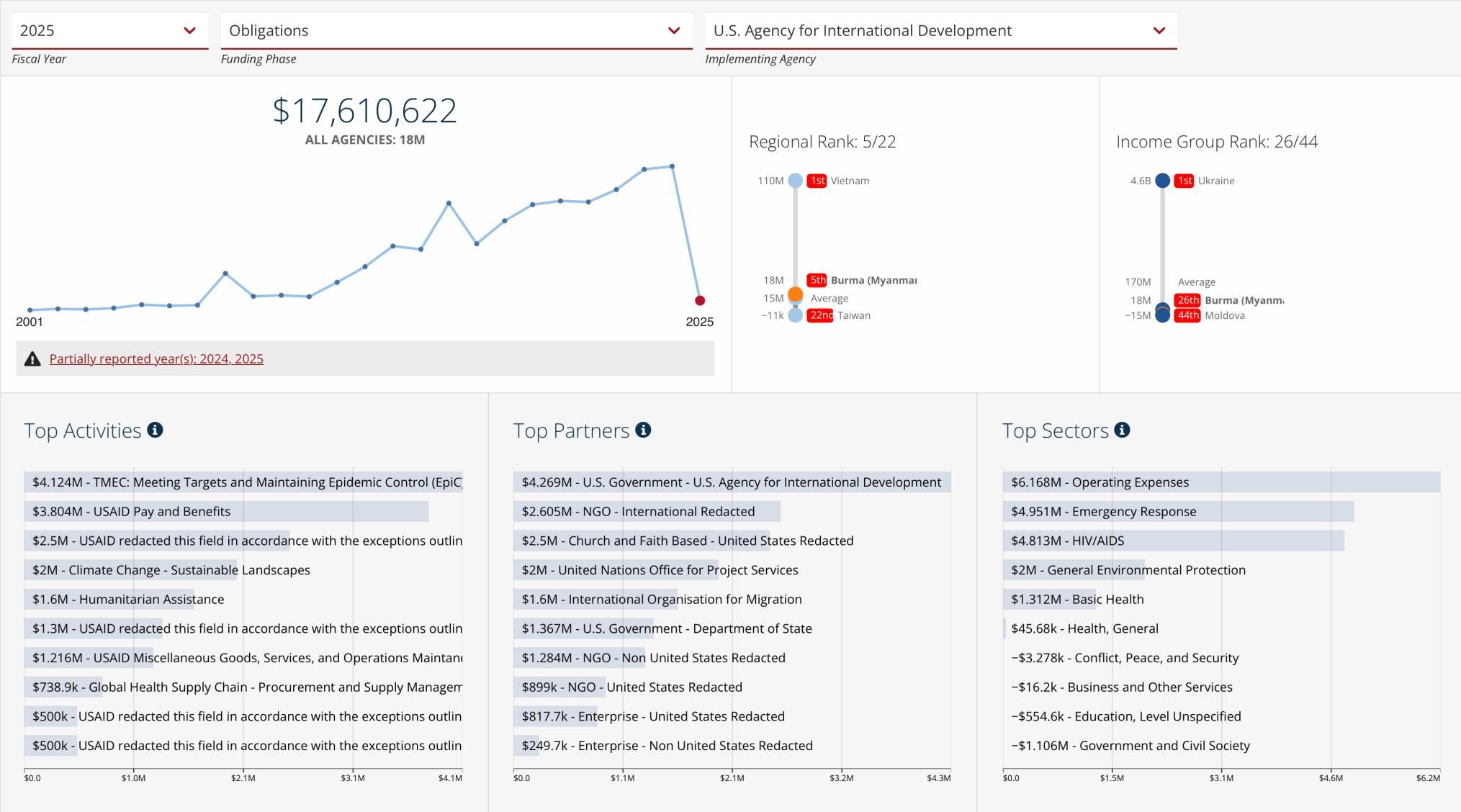


Source: World Bank

U.S. Foreign Assistance Trends



U.S. Foreign Assistance Trends



Post-Coup Developments and Civil War 2021-present

- Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) and the National Unity Government (NUG)
- The Federal Democracy Charter and the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC)
- Operations 1027, 1107, 1111 and Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO) Resistance
- People's Defense Forces (PDFs)
- Chinese-brokered Ceasefires and Failures
- State Administrative Council (SAC) announced new elections on December 28, 2025



Territorial Control
Source: SAC-Myanmar, March 2025.

Humanitarian Access

MYANMAR Aid workers security incidents Jan 2020 – Mar 2025

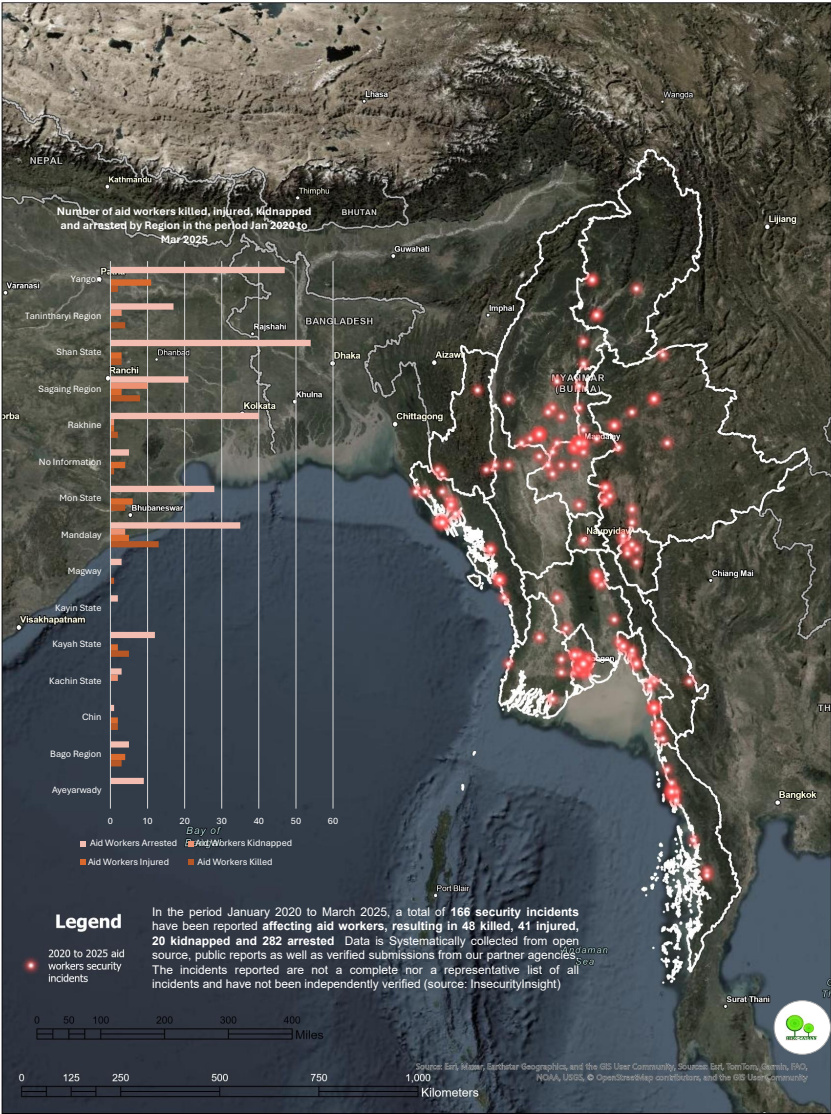


Photo: Moei River, Alex Albertine, 2023

Map: GCC, Insecurity Insight, UNOSAT

Regional Implications

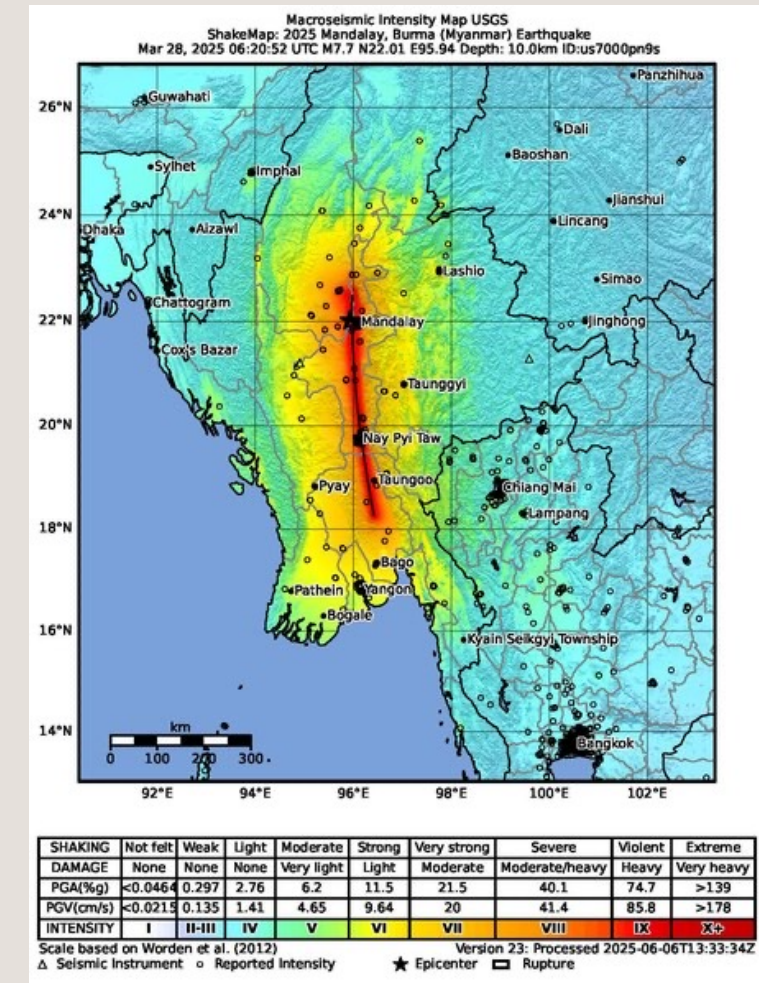
- ASEAN divided (Non-intervention Principle)
- Bangladesh, India, China, and Thailand Border and Security Interests shape the conflict and will shape future outcomes
- Overlay of regional-power and great-power competition
- U.S. needs pragmatic regional strategy



Photo: Mae Sot, Alex Albertine, 2023

Strategic Lessons, Conclusions & Outlook

- Avoid over-reliance on reform narratives; backsliding patterns
- Build resilient local aid delivery systems early
- Keep sanctions flexible for rapid re-imposition, but know limits
- Invest in independent media, data and accountability
- Coordinate multilateral pressure and cross-border access
- Complication of competing ideology overlayed on historic ethnic division
- Momentum driven by youth and their resilience
- The value of robust foreign assistance programming in support of U.S. foreign policy objectives, and consequences of its absence



Credit: USGS



Thank You

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