



Legislation Text

File #: Res 0896-2019, **Version:** *

Res. No. 896

Resolution calling on Congress to pass and the President to sign S.1186 - Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act of 2019.

By Council Members Miller and Barron

Whereas, On April 11, 2019, Senator Benjamin Cardin from Maryland introduced S.1186, the Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act of 2019; and

Whereas, The bill, which is currently co-sponsored by fifteen Democrats and three Republicans, outlines numerous ways that the United States can act to support democracy and promote human rights within Burma; and

Whereas, New York City has already provided some assistance to Burmese refugees; and,

Whereas, In the 2018 fiscal year, New York City and Long Island resettled 11% of the state's refugees and 21% of the state's Special Immigrant Visa holders (SIV), according to the Bureau of Refugee Services;

Whereas, After the Democratic Republic of Congo and Afghanistan, Burma represents the country with the highest level of refugees and SIV holders resettled in New York State; and

Whereas, People from Bangladesh now represent the fifth-highest Asian population in New York City and the City's population from Burma has also increased substantially, according to the 2010 Census Bureau data; and

Whereas, As a sanctuary city, New York City openly welcomes and protects displaced people, immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers; and,

Whereas, However, the City also recognizes the trauma of forced displacement and supports the

humanitarian efforts that allow people to live safely and peacefully in their home countries, if they choose; and
Whereas, After decades of military rule, Burma finally celebrated a transition to democracy in 2015; a move that was initially seen as a positive step to ensuring lasting peace and broad human rights protections; and,

Whereas, However, recent violence against ethnic minorities and attacks on journalists have spurred doubts about the progress of the country; and

Whereas, For the sponsors of the Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act of 2019 this bill is both a clear statement against the recent human rights abuses occurring in Burma, and a roadmap for moving the country back to a democracy; and

Whereas, The provisions of S.1186 include appropriations for humanitarian assistance, a visa ban and economic sanctions against senior officials in the military of Burma, and the reinstatement of import restrictions; and

Whereas, The crisis in Burma that spurred the introduction of S.1186 has been simmering for many years;

Whereas, For example, a 1982 citizenship law saw the majority Muslim Rohingya ethnic group classified as “illegal foreigners, ineligible for citizenship or even naturalization in the country of their birth”, according to the Washington Post; and,

Whereas, In 2014 the Rohingya were further excluded from the census; and

Whereas, According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), for decades the Rohingya people in Burma have faced “systematic discrimination, statelessness and targeted violence”; and

Whereas, However, the tipping point for the most recent and devastating attacks was August 25, 2017; and

Whereas, On this day a group of Rohingya militants attacked a series of police posts resulting in the deaths of 12 police; and

Whereas, In retaliation, the Burmese military began burning down Rohingya villages, killing civilians and raping women and young girls;

Whereas, Satellite images taken of Burma show that more than 280 Rohingya villages were destroyed after August 2017; and

Whereas, According to Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF - Doctors Without Borders), over 6,700 people were killed between August 25, 2017 and September 24, 2017 alone; and,

Whereas, At least 730 of these were children under the age of five; and

Whereas, The violent attacks also triggered a wave of migration into neighboring Bangladesh; and,

Whereas, It is estimated that nearly 750,000 Rohingya refugees fled to Bangladesh in August 2017, according to OCHA; and

Whereas, A 2018 investigation by the Department of State concluded that ethnic cleansing was perpetrated in Burma against the Rohingya people during 2017; and

Whereas, As of April 2019, more than 900,000 Rohingya refugees, about sixty percent of whom are children, are still in makeshift camps in Bangladesh according to UNICEF; and

Whereas, An independent fact-finding mission in Burma, headed by the United Nations Human Rights Council, determined that there was sufficient evidence to prosecute senior officials within the Burmese military for crimes against humanity, genocide, and war crimes; and

Whereas, The complete dismantling of basic humanitarian protections for the residents of Burma is of grave concern; and

Whereas, Democracy in Burma cannot begin to be satisfied until all forcibly displaced people can safely

return to their homes; and

Whereas, In addition to the human rights atrocities, the crackdown on journalists within Burma is also of great concern; and

Whereas, After reporting on the killing of ten Rohingya by the military as part of the August, 2017 retaliation, two Reuters journalists, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, were prosecuted and imprisoned by Burmese authorities; and

Whereas, The pair spent nearly eighteen months behind bars before international pressure aided their release; and

Whereas, While this was a cause for celebration, more than forty journalists have been arrested since the country's first democratic election in 2015; and

Whereas, The Burmese government's failure to guarantee freedom of the press is of serious concern for many United States' senators; and,

Whereas, In January of this year, Senator Merkley, along with 22 co-sponsors, introduced S. Res.34 condemning the human rights abuses in Burma, expressing concern on the crackdown on journalists and reasserting the vital role that an independent press plays in building democracy; and

Whereas, S.1186 further calls for the repeal of Burma's Official Secrets Act, which has been used to arrest and imprison Wa Lone, Kyaw Soe Oo, and numerous other journalists; and

Whereas, A free press, fair, free and inclusive elections, civilian control of government, and the protection of human rights are fundamental elements of all democracies; and

Whereas, Therefore, in order for Burma to truly fulfill its move towards democratic rule, it needs to guarantee these central elements; and

Whereas, S.1186 provides both guiding principles and specific partnership proposals to support the

genuine establishment of democracy in Burma; now, therefore be it

Resolved, That Congress pass and the President signs S.1186 - Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act of 2019.

LS #10782
5/21/19
LMS