Australia's humanitarian and foreign policy moment – the Myanmar dilemma

Rohingya refugee Zahida lives alone with her child after her husband abandoned them in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, October 2023
Photo Credit: MSF / Sahat Zia Hero

by Arunn Jegan

23 March 2026

In January 2026, landmark hearings began at the International Court of Justice in the case concerning genocide against the Rohingya people. For one of the world's most persecuted communities, this moment carried deep symbolic weight. Years of advocacy, documentation and persistence culminated in a global forum finally taking the crime seriously. Yet the hearings also posed a harder question: *what will change for the Rohingya if Myanmar itself does not change?*

Over the past year, Rohingya advocates achieved some of their highest levels of diplomatic representation to date. Rohingya women participated in a UN High-Level Conference, community-led cultural and advocacy initiatives reached global audiences. These moments mattered. Successful representation is not cosmetic; it humanises the issues, it determines whose futures are imaginable and whose genocide claims are taken seriously.

Australia has played a meaningful role in this shift. Over the past five years, successive governments have recognised the Rohingya crisis as a priority within Australia's humanitarian and foreign policy agenda. This has included expanded resettlement pathways, sustained humanitarian funding including a recent A$370 million commitment over three years, and explicit inclusion of the Rohingya in DFAT's humanitarian strategies through case studies and visual representation. In 2025, Australia supported the participation of Noor Azizah, a trailblazing Rohingya advocate, at the United Nations General Assembly High-Level Leaders Week — a subtle but important signal about women's voices who should be heard in international spaces.

Beyond government, civil society partnerships also evolved. In Sydney and globally, the Creative Advocacy Partnership — involving Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) and others — launched the Taro Leaf initiative, a community-led symbol developed by over 200 contributors, which reached more than 15 million people online. The Meeras Pavilion — an interactive expression of

Rohingya art, culture and identity — drew over 35,000 attendees in Sydney alone. It marked a move away from awareness of the plight of the Rohingya towards meaningful forms of solidarity grounded in relationships, agency and dignity.

Taken together, 2025 felt like a moment. A community long stripped of agency made its mark. And yet, the central constraint remains unchanged: the structural violence rooted in Myanmar. Over the last 18 months, fighting primarily between the Arakan Army and Myanmar Armed Forces has caused more than 100,000 Rohingya to flee.

Today, more than 1.2 million Rohingya struggle to survive in camps in Bangladesh, locked into a system of aid dependency and indefinite containment. MSF continues to observe a spiralling deterioration in mental and physical health, alongside the resurgence of preventable infectious diseases — not anomalies, but predictable outcomes of prolonged confinement and statelessness. Living in bamboo and tarpaulin tents for over eight years will have that effect. Across the region, Rohingya people continue to undertake increasingly perilous boat journeys through a more militarised maritime space, driven less by hope than by absolute desperation and exhaustion.

For Australia, Myanmar has become a foreign policy impasse — marked by condemnation, humanitarian commitment and a reliance on regional frameworks, but limited by the absence of pathways that can alter humanitarian conditions for people inside the country. It is often referred to in diplomatic and NGO circles as a foreign policy “blind spot”.

Since the military overthrew the elected government in 2021, a once necessary non-engagement policy with military authorities has hardened into something else: an absence of political imagination about how change might still be pursued. This matters not just for the Rohingya but for other disenfranchised groups existing in Myanmar’s diverse union who are systematically affected through air attacks, forced displacement and violent discrimination linked to their religious and ethnic identity.

Myanmar today represents one of the world’s largest and most complex humanitarian crises, with over 3.6 million people internally displaced, over 20 million people — close to a third of the population — in need of humanitarian assistance, and profound regional consequences unfolding just beyond Australia’s immediate neighbourhood. It is clear to us that civilians are not being spared from the violence and that meaningful efforts to protect them remain gravely insufficient. Severe restrictions on humanitarian assistance, including on the movement of medical supplies, continue to cut people off from essential care, in a context that receives little international security.

The current approach, which relies heavily on ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus, reflects an understandable commitment to regional leadership and multilateral process. Yet five years on, the consensus has not altered conditions on the ground for civilians in Myanmar, nor created meaningful space for accountability or dialogue. Reliance on it alone risks mistaking process for progress.

The challenge ahead is not whether Australia should engage with the Myanmar military or not. The challenge is whether Australia can develop credible ways of engaging *around* Myanmar: supporting civilian protection, accountability and future humanitarian conditions without conferring legitimacy on those responsible for atrocity.

There are no settled answers. This is uncharted territory. But if the past year demonstrated anything, it is that progress is possible when governments, humanitarian organisations and communities invest in inclusive representation, building agency and inspiring positive long-term thinking. The next phase will require similar investment — in independent analysis, academic and policy spaces, grassroots diplomacy through civil society and new frameworks for engagement.

For humanitarian organisations, this shift matters deeply. Aid can alleviate suffering, stabilise health systems and preserve life, but it cannot deliver durable solutions, substitute for change inside Myanmar or alter the conditions that continue to drive displacement.

Humanitarian assistance has bought time, often at great cost, but time alone does not produce rights, safety or return. Without parallel investment in political pathways, civilian protection and future conditions inside Myanmar, humanitarian aid risks becoming a mechanism for managing the consequences of violence, building long-term aid dependency and reinforcing containment policies.

Recognition of the Rohingya crisis is necessary, but it is not sufficient. If the Rohingya crisis is to move from visibility to viability, the international community — Australia included — will need to confront the challenging question they have long deferred: how to shape change when the state at the centre of the crisis refuses to change at all.

Disclosures:

This article is published as part of a partnership between the Development Policy Centre and Médecins Sans Frontières / Doctors Without Borders (MSF) Australia. MSF provides medical assistance to people affected by conflict, epidemics, disasters or exclusion from healthcare. Their actions are guided by medical ethics and the principles of impartiality, independence and neutrality. MSF Australia does not receive public institutional funding.

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