



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on January 27, 2023

## Myanmar Junta Burns Down Historic Catholic Church and Convent, Faces Charges of War Crimes

Soldiers from Myanmar's military razed to the ground the historic Catholic Church of the Assumption in Chan Thar, a village inhabited by Catholics in the Sagaing region, as well as the nearby convent of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Mary, the *Vatican Fides* news agency reported.

The nuns were forced to escape with some 3,000 villagers, whose homes, numbering around 500, were also ruined. Ultimately, the village was completely destroyed, with merely rubble remaining.

Confrontations persisted in the area, and local sources told *Vatican Fides* that the region is regarded as a bastion of the People's Defense Forces rebels, who objected to the Burmese military junta that seized power with the February 2021 *coup d'etat*.

Following the attacks, Archbishop Marco Tin Win of Mandalay lamented that the people of Myanmar are "living in a time of great suffering."

"Half of the territory of the Archdiocese of Mandalay is affected by the clashes and this worries us greatly. We are helping thousands of internally displaced persons, in five centers set up in five Catholic parishes: we are doing what we can."

"The violence rages especially in some areas," the archbishop said, and "we do not lose hope because we know we have the Lord with us."

In response, Pope Francis also lamented the attack, pointing out that the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption was "one of the oldest and most important places of worship in the country," having been built in 1894.

"I am close to the defenseless civilian population, which is sorely tried in many cities," the pontiff said after his weekly Angelus address. "May God grant that this conflict may soon end and a new time of forgiveness, love and peace may follow."

Subsequently, the pope led the 15,000 assembled in Saint Peter's Square in the Hail Mary prayer for the situation in Myanmar.

According to Sister Rita, one of the religious sisters forced to escape from her torched convent, she and the other sisters encouraged local residents to flee from their homes, and "not to oppose the soldiers and not to resist, to avoid massacres and brutality."

"The soldiers," she said, "want to crush any resistance from the civilians. They enter the villages,



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occupy buildings like schools and churches and camp there. From there, they carry out raids from house to house to flush out the rebels. They stayed in our church for three days and when they left they set fire to the church and our convent.”

“By a miracle, the chapel of adoration of the church was not affected by the flames. We see there a sign from the Most High: even in this brutal and senseless violence, the Lord is always with us. Our region was known to be one of the most peaceful and harmonious in the country. Now it’s a place of devastation and rubble. It’s terrible,” the nun added.

In the 19th century, French religious of the Foreign Missions of Paris settled in the affected region, giving rise to many religious vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life. Seminaries, training institutes for catechists, church building, and pastoral work thrived for decades.

A priest from Chan Thar, Father Joseph, voiced his regret to *Vatican Fides* that “the Burmese military are no longer the professional soldiers of a state army, with an ethic or mission of defending the nation.”

“They have become armed groups without control, committing all kinds of crimes, abuses and misdeeds.”

The bellicosity of the attack clearly mirrored the hostility of the military toward the minority Catholic population in the area. This month’s attack by the junta on the Assumption Church was not the first assault of Myanmar’s military on minority religions such as Catholicism in the country.

In 2021, the junta also burned down St. Nicholas Catholic Church in the remote town of Thantlang in western Myanmar’s Chin state, local media reports said.

For some time, Christian-majority Chin state has been at the front lines of opposition to the junta and has experienced ferocious assaults including air strikes, heavy artillery, and indiscriminate attacks on civilians. Hundreds of residents have been arbitrarily detained and dozens killed.

2021 also saw Bishop Peter Hla of Pekhon Diocese in Myanmar’s southern Shan state urging the military to refrain from attacking cathedrals and other religious buildings.

The prelate’s call came after the shelling of Sacred Heart Cathedral in Pekhon town by the military three times in five months.

“Attacking the cathedral is like attacking the hearts of each of the faithful and all the faithful feel sad due to attacks,” Bishop Hla said in a letter.

Due to the brutal assaults conducted by Myanmar’s junta on its people, *Radio Free Asia* reported on January 25 that Southeast Asian rights group Fortify Rights and 16 Myanmar nationals filed a criminal complaint with Germany’s federal public prosecutor general against the junta for atrocities committed against ethnic Rohingya and other groups.

The 215-page complaint, with over 1,000 pages of annexes, was filed on January 20 under the principle of “universal jurisdiction” and urged the prosecution of individuals guilty of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

Additionally, the complaint also demanded accountability for atrocities perpetrated by the junta against other groups since the military seized power in 2021.

Matthew Smith, chief executive officer for Fortify Rights, said that the aim of the complaint was for German authorities to begin an investigation, gather and preserve evidence for future cases, and



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eventually arrest those guilty.

“In the event that happens, things such as extradition to Germany become very real,” Smith said during an event held at the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Thailand in Bangkok by Fortify Rights to announce the filing of its complaint.

“Of course, there are a lot of unknowns at this moment, but certainly this will send a message to members of the Myanmar military junta and others that are responsible for crimes in Myanmar that they’re not safe,” he said. “They’re not safe to travel in our world.”

Fortify Rights said its filing would not replace or duplicate any of the efforts currently underway, such as the 2019 cases at the International Court of Justice and another universal jurisdiction case in Argentina for crimes committed against the Rohingya.

Rather, Fortify Rights stated that the ongoing efforts either fail to include the scope of crimes purported in the new filing or would not hold individuals criminally responsible for atrocity crimes.

“German authorities are well-placed to fill present gaps left by the currently pending accountability mechanisms,” the group declared in a statement.

Universal jurisdiction is a legal principle empowering a state to prosecute individuals guilty of mass atrocity crimes regardless of where they were committed or the nationality of the perpetrator or victims. The principle is usually applied in cases of crimes regarded so grave that they reflect affronts against the entire international community.

To boot, Fortify Rights also highlighted that investigations by German authorities into international crimes can possibly be used for cases in venues and jurisdictions outside Germany.

Christians have weathered the brunt of the decades-old civil war and faced persecution at the hands of the Myanmar military, which previously ruled for more than five decades.



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