

Timor-Leste opens unprecedented legal proceedings against Myanmar junta

Camilio de Sousa

DILI, 03 february 2026 (TATOLI) – The judicial authorities in Timor-Leste have opened legal proceedings against the Myanmar junta, including dictator, Min Aung Hlaing, for war crimes and crimes against humanity. This is the first time a member of the Association of South East Asia Nations (ASEAN), has initiated such action against a fellow ASEAN member state.

A senior Timorese prosecutor has been appointed to look into the criminal file presented two weeks ago in Dili by the Chin Human Rights Organisation (CHRO).

“I welcome the move”, said Salai Za Uk, Executive Director of CHRO, “and we look forward to working with the Timorese authorities, as well as civil society groups in Timor-Leste, on pursuing justice for the Chin People and all people in Myanmar. Given Timor Leste’s history, and the indignities the Timorese people suffered in their struggle for independence, there is a real sense of solidarity with the people of Myanmar, against whom the junta is inflicting appalling barbarities on an almost hourly basis”.

The opening of proceedings in Dili comes amid widespread international condemnation of the recent “sham” election in Myanmar, including from ASEAN, which refused to send election observers, and confer any legitimacy on the poll. It also comes as Myanmar marks the fifth anniversary of the failed coup, in which the self-appointed Senior-General, Min Aung Hlaing, attempted to seize power from the democratically elected government. Today, after what the UN calls a “reign of terror” on the Burmese people, his isolated clique controls, a mere forty per cent of the country and has lost control of hundreds of kilometers of Myanmar’s international borders.

“The rule of law is a priority issue for Timor Leste”, said Jose Teixeira, from the Timorese law firm Da Silva Teixeira & Associados Lda, representing CHRO, “and it is vital that the independence of the Timorese judiciary is respected and that the legal process runs its course. We firmly reject any outside interference, particularly from the Myanmar junta, in Timor Leste’s court system”.

The criminal file presented to the Timorese Prosecutor includes irrefutable evidence of the gang rape of a seven-month pregnant woman in front of her husband; the massacre of ten people, including a journalist and a 13-year-old boy, who was among eight people who had their hands tied behind their backs and their throats slit; the deliberate killing of a Christian Pastor and three Deacons; a disproportionate and indiscriminate aerial attack on a hospital, which killed four medical staff and four patients, and a series of attacks on Christian churches, civilian infrastructure protected under international law.

Chris Gunness, Director of the Myanmar Accountability Project (MAP), which supports legal cases against the Myanmar junta said “this is a significant milestone on the Burmese people’s long march to justice, freedom and dignity. The road ahead will be fraught with obstacles, but this case sends a powerful signal. The Burmese people are saying loud and clear that justice and accountability are an indispensable part of their struggle against dictatorship and tyranny”.

Massacre victims from Myanmar appeal to the Timorese People in the search for justice

By Salai Za Uk, Executive Director of the Chin Human Rights Organisation. 13 Jan 2026. in Tatoli

Today a group representing victims of atrocity crimes committed by the Myanmar junta against the country's Christian Chin People presented a criminal complaint to the Ministério Público (Public Prosecutor's Office) in Timor-Leste. I led that group, which is requesting an investigation into war crimes and crimes against humanity. Having been denied accountability for decades in our own country, we have come to Dili in search of solidarity and support in our quest for justice.

The criminal file we presented to the Prosecutor includes evidence of the gang rape of a pregnant woman; the massacre of ten people, including a journalist and a 13-year-old boy, who was among eight people who had their throats slit; the deliberate killing of one Christian Pastor and three Deacons; a disproportionate and indiscriminate aerial attack on a hospital which killed four medical staff and four patients, and finally a series of attacks on Christian churches, civilian infrastructure protected under international law.

As Christians we appeal for support

Accountability for these crimes is permissible in Timor-Leste under the principle of universal jurisdiction, which allows state authorities to take action regardless of where the crimes took place or the nationality of the victims and perpetrators. As a Christian, passionately committed to human rights, dignity and the rule of law, I appeal for action.

I pray our case will resonate powerfully with the Timorese people, given our similar modern histories. Like Timor-Leste, Myanmar was ruled for generations by Western colonials and, like Timor-Leste, Myanmar's post-independence period saw vicious atrocity crimes perpetrated against innocent people demanding freedom and justice.

Since the coup, civil society groups like the one I head, have documented numerous attacks by the Myanmar junta on unarmed demonstrators in which thousands have been killed. They bring to mind the infamous Santa Cruz Massacre in Dili in 1991 in which over 250 demonstrators were murdered in cold blood. Similar massacres have been committed against the Myanmar people on an almost monthly basis since the coup in 2021.

Indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on Christians

The crimes we investigated are part of a deliberate, systematic, widespread, disproportionate and indiscriminate campaign of violence against civilians in Myanmar's predominantly Christian Chin State. Since July 2022, the military junta has carried out around 1,000 documented air strikes in the state. More than 4,600 homes have been destroyed by airstrikes or deliberately burnt down. 478 civilians have been killed, including 91 women and 79 children. At least 19 medical facilities, 25 schools and 127 religious buildings, including 78 churches, have been damaged or destroyed.

Since the coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021, approximately 200,000 people – nearly half the population of Chin State – have been forcibly displaced. Over 100,000 have fled to other areas of Myanmar, while tens of thousands of Chin are currently seeking refuge in India.

Chin State atrocities part of a nationwide picture

Beyond the situation in Chin State, our delegation has also come to Dili to highlight the plight of Myanmar's embattled population more generally. Since the coup, the junta has increased its disproportionate and indiscriminate aerial, drone and artillery attacks on civilians.

According to the latest data from the UN and other credible sources, as of 31 March 2025, at least 6,473 civilians have been killed by junta forces, including 1,487 women and 748 children. Over 30,000 have been detained and over 22,000 remain in detention. According to the UN, nearly 2,000 people have died in military detention, with well documented cases of dozens being tortured to death. 172 people have been sentenced to death by military-controlled courts.

Violence in Myanmar has displaced more than 3.5 million people – over 5 per cent of the population – and although nearly 20 million are in need of assistance, according to the UN, the military has consistently blocked humanitarian access, even after natural disasters, including the earthquake in March 2025. Best estimates indicate that more than 1.5 million Myanmar people have crossed international borders by land or sea in search of safety, through regular and irregular channels, a regional refugee crisis that has created dire human rights and humanitarian challenges.

Compounding this regional crisis, Myanmar remains a centre for transnational crime. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, the country is a leading producer of opium and heroin. Moreover, the proliferation of scam centres risks the problem spilling over into Timor-Leste.

The sham election will lead to more violence

Myanmar's ongoing sham elections—designed to legitimize an illegitimate dictatorship—further highlight the urgent need for international accountability. I previously brought this concern to the global stage during the 60th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in September 2025. At that time, I warned that the military was actively attempting to cloak its brutality in the guise of electoral legitimacy.

I stated then, and I repeat now: violence and human suffering will only increase if the military is permitted to hold these elections. It is a fundamental violation of justice that a regime engaged in the massacre of thousands of its own citizens should have any role in a democratic process.

Since that testimony, the situation has only darkened. The junta has ruthlessly employed the Political Party Registration Law of 2023 and the Election Protection Law of 2025 to stifle all dissent. Hundreds have been detained and tortured simply for voicing opposition to the poll, and over 40 political parties—including the National League for Democracy—have been dissolved.

The partial nature of this exercise is clear: the junta has only been able to compile voter lists in 145 out of 330 townships. Rather than producing the stability some of Myanmar's neighbors had hoped for, these sham elections are fueling a new wave of violence and criminality.

In short, rather than producing stability, as some of Myanmar neighbours argued, the sham elections will become another source of violence, instability, criminality and widespread human suffering.

We ask for Timorese Solidarity with Myanmar

And so we have come to Dili, pleading for an investigation to be opened. Our case will place minimal pressure on Timor-Leste's judicial system. All the evidence being presented to the Prosecutor's Office in Dili has been meticulously documented and reconfirmed by my organization, the Chin Human Rights Organisation. In addition, the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, (IIMM) established by the UN, has a large body of verified evidence which can be made available to the Timorese authorities as part of their investigation.

If the authorities in Timor-Leste took the simple step of opening an investigation it would send a powerful message, widely accepted across the ASEAN: that the situation in Myanmar is unsustainable and must change.

We pray for justice

The Timorese know what the people of Myanmar are suffering through lived experience. After its own painful transition, Timor-Leste understands the meaning of freedom from fear and the price a nation must pay for collective dignity. Our legal case in Dili offers an opportunity for solidarity with some of the most marginalized and isolated people in the ASEAN region.

And so we appeal for support to Timorese civil society, the Catholic Church and all Timorese people of conscience. Given the position on human rights and accountability taken by leading politicians and other influential voices in Timor-Leste, the Chin People earnestly believe that our call for accountability will be heard. And we fervently hope that our prayers for justice, peace and dignity, on behalf of all the people of Myanmar, will be answered.



Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, head of Myanmar's military junta. Aung Shine Oo/AP

With international law at a 'breaking point', a tiny country goes after Myanmar's junta on its own

Published: February 5, 2026 7:44pm EST

Emma Palmer

Lecturer in International Law, Griffith University

<https://doi.org/10.64628/AA.3ng46r4nd>

<https://theconversation.com/with-international-law-at-a-breaking-point-a-tiny-country-goes-after-myanmars-junta-on-its-own-275089>

Just four months ago, Timor-Leste formally became a member of the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN).

This week, the tiny country took an unprecedented step: its judicial authorities appointed a prosecutor to examine the Myanmar military's responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity. It's believed to be the first time an ASEAN state has taken such an action against another member.

The case resulted from the persistence of a victims' group, the Chin Human Rights Organisation, in pursuing justice for the Chin people, a minority group in Myanmar. In submitting the complaint, the head of the organisation expressed solidarity with Timor-Leste's own historic efforts to secure justice and independence.

Timor-Leste authorities will now assess whether to bring charges against Myanmar's military leaders, including junta chief Min Aung Hlaing.

Any prosecutions would be on the basis of “universal jurisdiction”. This is a legal principle that allows domestic courts to hear cases alleging international crimes, regardless of where the crimes occurred, or the nationality of the victims or perpetrators.

Limitations of international courts

This week, a major study of 23 conflicts around the globe said the international legal system designed to protect civilians is at a “breaking point”. Observers are also asking whether the United Nations has any future at all.

It has long been clear that international courts have limited efficacy in prosecuting cases of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Critics argue the International Criminal Court (ICC) has engaged in selective prosecutions, is too slow and has weak enforcement powers. In the past 20 years, the court has heard 34 cases and issued just 13 convictions.

However, proponents of the court say it has been unfairly maligned and targeted, including by the Trump administration, which imposed sanctions on it last year.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ), meanwhile, can hold states accountable for crimes, but not individuals.

Both the ICC and ICJ have investigations underway on Myanmar, but they deal with crimes allegedly committed against the Rohingya minority group before the coup. The ICC case covers incidents committed partly in Bangladesh.

The ICC’s chief prosecutor asked the court’s judges to issue an arrest warrant for Min Aung Hlang in November 2024. More than a year later, a decision has yet to be made.

Challenges for domestic courts

In this environment, universal jurisdiction could play a more important role. The United Nations has implicitly recognised this by establishing investigative mechanisms for Syria and Myanmar that gather evidence for future prosecutions in domestic, regional or international courts.

Many states have laws that allow them to prosecute international crimes like torture, genocide or war crimes. What is lacking are resources to fund investigations and transparent criteria or guidelines for how to undertake them.

There are other challenges once cases are underway, too. For one, domestic courts have limited reach. Arrests are difficult, as high-level officials can rely on diplomatic immunity or just avoid the countries where they believe they could face prosecution or extradition.

Prosecuting even lower-level or mid-level perpetrators can be politically awkward. Cases can be expensive and practically difficult, especially when witnesses and evidence are mostly overseas.

The scale and complex nature of these crimes can also be challenging for domestic criminal courts that have limited experience with them.

And if trials go ahead, victims can still find justice elusive, even if the cases have broader strategic or symbolic aims.

Still, there have been successes. Nearly 10 years ago, the former president of Chad, Hissène Habré, was convicted of international crimes in Senegal. The case was tried using universal jurisdiction, driven by civil society networks.

More countries need to step up

This latest initiative in Timor-Leste comes after victim groups have tried many different countries to seek justice for the people of Myanmar. This includes Argentina, where arrest warrants were issued for Myanmar's leaders, Turkey, and Germany.

In the Asia-Pacific, lawyers have also attempted to bring cases in Indonesia and the Philippines.

While European countries are increasingly using universal jurisdiction to prosecute crimes, other countries have been less keen to take these cases on. For instance, some suggest Canada and Australia could do more to investigate war crimes cases, even though they both have the laws in place to do so.

This just leaves the heavy lifting of prosecutions to others, possibly in courts with more limited resources.

With atrocities continuing to be committed around the world, it's become more vital than ever for governments to not just back international justice with strong words, but show a real commitment to investigating them at home.