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HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
WATCH

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Hon. Marise Payne  
Foreign Minister  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

### Re: Australia's Engagement with Myanmar's Military

Dear Minister Payne,

We write to express our deep concern over Australia's continued engagement with the Myanmar military, including the January 29, 2020 meeting between the Australian ambassador to Myanmar, Andrea Faulkner, and Myanmar's military commander-in-chief, Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing.

We recognize that diplomacy may require meetings with officials from all branches of government, including the military, and that some of those officials will have problematic rights records. Yet great care has to be taken in how such meetings are conducted, including whether they should remain private or are publicized and, if made public, how the meeting should be described and presented.

We note that Australia has already sanctioned five officials named in the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission report released in August 2018 and you have publicly stated "[perpetrators must be held to account](#)." Against this backdrop, it is highly inappropriate for a senior Australian official to publicly meet with, have photos taken and exchange gifts with an individual who may one day be indicted for his role in mass atrocities.

Yet this is what happened in the January 29 meeting with Min Aung Hlaing. As the leader of the Myanmar military, he has been named alongside other senior military officials by the Fact-Finding Mission as a commander who "warrant[s] individual investigation and prosecution" for crimes against humanity and genocide stemming from the military's campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya ethnic minority. As you know, in January the International Court of Justice unanimously ordered Myanmar to implement provisional measures to prevent genocide, including by ensuring its military does "not commit acts of genocide" against the remaining Rohingya in Myanmar.

Min Aung Hlaing has been sanctioned by the United States. Given the voluminous evidence available of grave abuses by forces under his command, Human Rights Watch has called for Australia and other countries to do the same.

One of the risks of meetings such as the one on January 29 is that they get used to enhance the legitimacy of the official or institution involved. Min Aung Hlaing quickly instrumentalized this meeting to bolster his public image, [publishing](#) a photograph of himself with Ambassador Faulkner on his website. He also published an article about the meeting that referenced, among other things, “defence cooperation” between Australia and Myanmar and “sending of more trainees” to Australia.

Participating in a meeting that allowed Min Aung Hlaing to present a picture of “business as usual” between the Australian and Myanmar militaries directly undercuts the efforts by other governments to isolate an individual commander who has been implicated in the most serious human rights violations.

While we [understand](#) that Australia’s training for the Myanmar military is limited to cooperation in non-combat areas, providing training in relation to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, English language training, and peacekeeping, we reiterate our previous [recommendation](#) that Australia should end military ties with Myanmar.

In light of the mass atrocities committed by the Myanmar military against the Rohingya, it would be inappropriate for any Myanmar soldiers to be deployed on UN peacekeeping missions. Indeed, in 2019 the UN cut the last Myanmar soldiers from the United Nations Mission in South Sudan. Training Myanmar soldiers in peacekeeping implies that Australia thinks they should be deployed and lends the Myanmar military legitimacy it does not deserve.

Instead of strengthening ties with Myanmar’s military, the Australian government should focus on pressuring the government and military to immediately implement the provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice, hold perpetrators of abuses to account, and create the conditions for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of Rohingya refugees.

Sincerely,

Elaine Pearson  
Australia Director  
Human Rights Watch

Brad Adams  
Asia Director  
Human Rights Watch