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U.S. Congress Starlink investigation threatens internet access in Myanmar

A U.S. Congressional investigation into the use of Starlink by scam centres in Myanmar risks a blunt and disproportionate response that would further undermine the rights of a vulnerable population already suffering from repression, conflict, and poverty.

Military's digital blackouts and Starlink's role

Since the 2021 coup, the military has systematically weaponised internet shutdowns, website blocks, and digital interception, leaving large areas without secure connectivity for extended periods. This policy of creating a digital dictatorship is designed to provide cover for military atrocities and silence dissent, denying people access to life-saving information.

Reports claiming Starlink is one of Myanmar's biggest internet providers are based on misleading data. Starlink is, however, an undeniably vital dual-use technology in specific areas. In conflict zones and resistance-held areas, Starlink provides the primary, and often only, means of accessing the internet. It is a tool used by journalists, human rights defenders, humanitarian groups, and the resistance to bypass military control, document atrocities, and coordinate aid. Starlink enables many people to exercise their right to freedom of expression and access to information.

Risk of disproportionate and untargeted international response

The U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee's investigation into transnational criminal syndicates operating scam centres in Southeast Asia is an attempt to address serious human rights violations, including people trafficking. Committee member Maggie Hassan wrote to Elon Musk, the CEO of SpaceX, which operates the Starlink brand, raising concerns about the scammers' use of Starlink services and asking for due diligence information.

Although the Committee's investigation has a legitimate aim, there is a risk that it will force or encourage a disproportionate, sweeping end to the Starlink service, adversely affecting the rights of many people across Myanmar. Similar disproportionate responses have harmed people in countries such as Sudan. Evidence suggests this may already be happening, as widespread

Starlink outages were reported in October 2025, days after the investigation was made public.

A similar concern of a disproportionate international response is seen regionally. The Thai authorities have detained people and confiscated Starlink devices in Thailand under the justification that they are unlawfully imported and could be destined for scam centres. A default assumption that all Starlink devices heading to Myanmar are intended for scam centres prevents vital communication technology from reaching the country. The military is actively encouraging this assumption, with the aim of encouraging Starlink to withdraw all services.

SpaceX's obligations under international standards

Under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), Starlink's owner, SpaceX, has a responsibility to respect human rights. Although Starlink falls under U.S. jurisdiction and the service is not officially licensed in Myanmar, SpaceX still has a responsibility to its users in the country. These users are legitimate, paying customers who have purchased the service in another country and use its official "global roaming" service, which is designed to provide connectivity worldwide.

The UNGPs expect companies like SpaceX to continuously conduct due diligence to identify and mitigate the actual and potential human rights risks associated with their services. As Myanmar is a conflict-affected and high-risk area, SpaceX should conduct heightened due diligence. This means understanding both the negative impacts (enabling scam centres) and the positive, protective impacts (providing internet to those in conflict zones). Based on this assessment, SpaceX should then take appropriate and proportional action to prevent and mitigate adverse impacts. The principle of proportionality is key: the action taken must not create a greater human rights harm.

Crucially, this due diligence also applies to the process of ending a service. A company should consider the foreseeable human rights impacts of ceasing its operations or business relationships. A sudden, blanket withdrawal of the Starlink

service from Myanmar would aid the military's internet shutdowns and foreseeably endanger the lives of civilians, journalists, and human rights defenders, representing a failure of this responsibility. If SpaceX was ever to consider closing down access to users in Myanmar, a responsible approach would require the mitigation of these harms.

Why a blunt ban would be ineffective

A “ban” urged by the U.S. Congress or a technological block unilaterally imposed by SpaceX would not only be disproportionate but also ineffective against the stated objective. The transnational criminal syndicates running the scam centres are multi-billion-dollar enterprises with the financial resources to adapt to bans by either relocating their operations to other lawless areas in Myanmar or neighbouring countries or by switching to alternative technologies from other satellite internet providers.

In contrast, Myanmar communities, including the pro-democracy movement, have no viable, low-cost, portable alternative to Starlink. A blunt ban would therefore primarily punish the vulnerable while only temporarily inconveniencing the criminals.

A standards-compliant approach balances the human rights abuses in scam centres with the fundamental rights of the people of Myanmar. Under the UNGPs, SpaceX has a responsibility to find the narrowest means to meet its obligations. This requires a thorough and conflict-sensitive human rights due diligence process to assess all potential actions and their impacts before a decision is made. This process must evaluate all available tools, including technical options like targeted geofencing, to determine the most proportional response.

Focus on the military coup, not technology

The only sustainable way to address transnational criminal syndicates in Myanmar is to restore the rule of law by ending the military coup. The U.S. Congress has already authorised the Burma Act, a framework to support this goal. However, the legislation remains poorly implemented, and the U.S. Government has instead made massive and sweeping cuts to USAID funding. This has de-funded the very journalists and civil society organisations who are essential for exposing criminal activity and restoring the rule of law in the country. This withdrawal of support deepens the economic crisis, making a desperate public poorer and more vulnerable to being drawn into illicit economies, such as scam centres or the drug trade, simply to survive.

This policy incoherence is a far greater strategic problem than the misuse of a single communications service. A consistent US policy that empowers the democratic movement is the most effective way to combat the criminality that thrives under military rule.

Recommendations

- International diplomatic efforts should focus on addressing the root cause of the transnational criminal syndicates in Myanmar, shifting from blocking communications technology to ending the military coup, which provides the lawless environment and protection for these criminal syndicates to operate.
- The U.S. Congress, and key senators such as Senator Maggie Hassan, should demand a narrow, proportional, and standards-compliant response from SpaceX, targeting criminal actors without causing widespread harm to the rights of the Myanmar people or the pro-democracy movement. This includes calling for the full implementation of the Burma Act and the restoration of USAID funding for Myanmar's civil society and independent media, which are essential for restoring the rule of law.
- SpaceX should cease disproportionate actions, halting any sweeping, non-targeted service shutdowns in Myanmar, and conduct a transparent human rights due diligence assessment in accordance with the UNGPs. This process must lead to the implementation of a narrow, targeted solution that mitigates criminal misuse while protecting legitimate users.

- Other States, including Thailand, should end policies that indiscriminately block the flow of communications technology to Myanmar, and work with civil society to establish safe corridors for legitimate humanitarian and civilian access to technology, while focusing enforcement on confirmed criminal supply chains.

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