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EDITORIAL

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MIZZIMA MAGAZINE

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THE MAN WHO WANTS TO BE KING

Myanmar Senior General Min Aung Hlaing used Independence Day last week to once again push the fiction of “free and fair” elections for Myanmar.

It would be comical if it wasn't so serious. The general has stamped on democracy in Myanmar – annulling the 2020 election and imprisoning the country's democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi and other members of the National League for Democracy – and now has the audacity to claim his illegal administration will offer the public a chance to choose their government.

Min Aung Hlaing's military junta, which recently wrapped up a series of closed-court trials of Aung San Suu Kyi, says it is preparing for fresh elections later this year that the United States government has said would be a “sham”.

Sham is an appropriate word. The man who wants to put a democratic veneer on his rule is the most hated in the Golden Land, his image thrown on the road during protests and stamped on, his name typically accompanied by swear words.

But while most Myanmar citizens have a long list of derogatory words to label the country's most hated man, we should be careful to recognize that this man who wants to be king has tricks up his sleeve and that he might be a little brighter than many imagine.

As our cover package in Mizzima Weekly this week indicates, Min Aung Hlaing is playing games and the people of Myanmar need to keep their wits about them.

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A woman in a floral shirt and patterned pants is walking on a street, carrying a yellow bag and an orange bag. She is wearing a light blue face mask. In the background, there is a white van with a lion mask on its side. The van has a license plate that reads "YGN 1049". The word "ATOM" is visible on a sign in the background. The text "IN FOCUS" is overlaid in the top right corner.

IN FOCUS

AMNESTY

Released prisoners hold a child and their belonging after exiting the Insein Prison in Yangon on 4 January. The Myanmar junta granted amnesty to over seven thousand people across the country to mark the Independence Day.

Photo: EPA

URBAN GUERRILLA FIGHTERS AND ABBOT ARRESTED IN MANDALAY FOLLOWING 'BOMBING PLOT'

A total of 16 members of Mandalay Young Force (MYF) and Wetlet PDF who allegedly attempted to place bombs in public places in Mandalay on the occasion of the New Year were arrested, according to a report 2 January by the junta mouthpiece, Myanmar News Agency (MNA).

Mandalay Young Force (MYF) members Kyaw Min Khant and Hein Htet Aung (aka) Ko Hein were arrested by regime forces, along with five remote mines, in Aungthaya quarter between 48th and 49th streets and 106th and 107th streets in Chanmyathazi Township, on the evening of 31 December.

The other 12 members of the Mandalay Young Force (MYF) and Wetlet PDF were arrested based on Kyaw Min Khant's confession on 31 December, and another two were arrested on 1 January. In

the incident, a total of 16 suspects, 14 male and two females, were arrested with 11 remote mines made of PVC pipes, four homemade mines made of soft drink bottles, and two China-made grenades, MNA reported.

Seven of those detained by the Military Council are under the age of 18, and one is an abbot.

The security forces searched Malun monastery in Chanayethazan Township and arrested abbot U Indacakka (aka) Aye Ko, together with six homemade mines made of PVC pipes and four other mines made of soft drink bottles, according to MNA.

The military council also stated that the arrests were made after receiving information that the detonation would take place on 31 December during New Year festivities, and that those arrested would face

legal consequences.

"There is absolutely no way to detonate anything that will affect the public; we want to fight the regime, not the public; this arrest is junta propaganda," a person close to the resistance groups said.

A person close to the resistance said that two members of the Mandalay Young Force (MYF) were caught while riding a motorcycle, and others were arrested at their homes and places of work.

According to the information collected by Mizzima, a total of around 1,000 young people, including strike leaders, were arrested in Mandalay last year in 2022, and at least 30 were killed by the Military Council after being arrested.

GROUP OF 39 ROHINGYA ARRESTED IN HINTHADA TOWNSHIP, AYEYARWADDY

A group of 39 Muslim Rohingya were arrested by the Military Council on 2 January at 10:30 am in Hinthada township, Ayeyarwaddy Region.

The Rohingya people were hiding inside a stone-carrying vehicle near Hinthada University Road.

According to a local witness, the vehicle did not stop at a checkpoint and was chased by officials.

A total of 36 Rohingya

men and three women were arrested, but the driver and vehicle attendant escaped.

A source close to the police claimed that the Military Council had taken the 39 Rohingyas to the Hinthada police station, where they will be held in custody in accordance with the Registration Act.

Co-founder of the Free Rohingya Coalition Ro Nay San Lwin claimed that following the coup, security

forces detained Rohingya who crossed into the Ayeyarwaddy Region from the townships of Kyauktaw, Buthidaung, Sittwe, Rathedaung, and Maungdaw in Rakhine State.

According to a source close to the regional police force, this is the first Rohingya arrest case in the Ayeyarwaddy Region in 2023. In 2022, more than 600 Rohingya were detained, and more than 100 of them are currently in prison in Ayeyarwaddy.

TWO PEOPLE SHOT IN A DAY IN MANDALAY

Two people were shot in separate incidents in Mandalay on 2 January.

Local people in Mandalay's Patheingyi Township reported that a Military Council informer was shot on Yayhtwat Road around 1 pm.

"The victim's name was Aung Kyaw Myint, and he was the one who informed the Military Council soldiers about the activities of the Urban Guerrilla Forces. Because of his information, four

members of Generation Z power were brutally arrested and killed a few days ago. He was killed while inspecting pedestrians on Yayhtwat Road with the Military Council," said a local resident.

According to a fighter from Patheingyi's resistance forces, Aung Kyaw Myint, also known as Dalan, suffered serious injuries and it is unclear whether he died or not.

The Mandalay-based Urban Guerrilla Forces have yet to

respond about the incident.

"He (Aung Kyaw Myint) is not in good condition, says our informant. He was seriously hurt as a result of the gunshots," said the resistance force fighter.

In a separate incident, Win Aung, 50, a gem and jewellery broker, was shot dead in front of his house around 8 am in Chanayethazan Township in Mandalay. The exact circumstances surrounding Win Aung's death remain unknown.

FIGHTING FORCES 1,500 RESIDENTS TO FLEE 10 VILLAGES IN TANINTHARYI TOWNSHIP

On 1 January, nearly 1,500 villagers from 10 villages fled due to a clash between local defense forces and Military Council forces in Tanintharyi Township, Myeik District, Tanintharyi Region.

A resistance fighter belonging to Impartial Guerrilla Force said that their group and its joint forces opened fire on a Military Council checkpoint near Baudhikan bridge, Tanintharyi Township on 1 January, killing three soldiers and seizing one rifle.

A fighter from the Impartial Guerrilla Force (Tanintharyi) and its joint forces was also killed during the battle.

The fighting forced an exodus. A Baudhikan villager said they were fleeing to the nearest towns and cities due to the fighting, and some residents are taking shelter with relatives.

The Military Council has also prohibited the export of goods via the Myeik-Tanintharyi road,

suggesting that the junta intends to cut off supplies to local resistance forces, the villager added.

Nearly 1,500 villagers from Nyaungpin kwin, Ngarmile, Chaukmile, Baudhikan, Pyoeaike, Banlaw, Laymile, Banlamout, Nyaungpin Kone, and Yanpho are reportedly fleeing to safety as a result of the ongoing fighting in Tanintharyi Township and the Military Council's artillery fire.

SEVEN MYANMAR SOLDIERS KILLED FOLLOWING RESISTANCE ATTACK ON MYTEL TOWER IN MON STATE

According to a spokesman for the Yebilu Force, on 2 January at around 8:00 am, a Mytel telecommunication tower belonging to the Military Council in Kyonelung village was destroyed by artillery in Ye Township in Mon State.

"Because the Military Council troop planted mines all around the tower, we launched

an artillery attack to destroy it. They recently spent 50 million kyat on tower repairs. We destroyed everything again, including the slingshots and machines," said the spokesman.

Following the attack, a Military Council column of 50 forces that came to inspect the damage to the Mytel tower was ambushed by Yebilu Force,

killing seven junta soldiers around 9 am on 2 January.

The defense forces were able to withdraw without injury.

Local defense forces claim they have destroyed a total of over 2,000 military-owned Mytel telecommunication towers across Myanmar last year.



Myanmar protestors in Bangkok hold banners of Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing. Photo: EPA



PLAYING GAMES

Myanmar junta leader has tricks up his sleeve to out-fox his enemies

Myanmar's coup leader and dictator Min Aung Hlaing might be depicted by his opponents as a dinosaur, a relic of the past, but it is clear he is pulling out the stops in an attempt to out-fox his enemies.

As Myanmar enters 2023, the junta leader is dangling the prospect of a national election in order to slap a fig leaf of legitimacy on military rule, and doing what he does well – pursuing divide-and-rule tactics to deal with his enemies.

In this issue of Mizzima Weekly, we offer two stories that look behind the scenes at the agenda and forces at work.

The first is “Myanmar NUG-EROs alliance under pressure and how to preserve it” by Igor Blazevic that offers a warning over the wily dinosaur. And the second is “ASSESSING THE EAOs IN 2022: Uncertainty as groups fight the junta, sit on the fence or side with the junta” by Sai Wansai, looking at the Ethnic Armed Organizations and the splits in their approach to the junta.

The Spring Revolution may well be picking up pace but it would be wise not to underestimate the tenacity of the man in power.



Protestors offer public support for the Spring Revolution.
Photo: EPA

Myanmar NUG-EROs alliance under pressure and how to preserve it

Igor Blazevic

In this important commentary, human rights campaigner and writer Igor Blazevic offers us an insight into the games being played by the Myanmar junta to divide-and-rule and cause problems for the Spring Revolution opposition as we enter 2023 – and possible solutions.

Understanding the junta's current strategy

In military operations, when one plans an offensive, one often creates a false threat. The purpose is to make the opponent concentrate their own troops at a particular spot where the real attack will not happen. This will create weak spots somewhere else in the opponent's defence lines. False threats and surprise attacks, if done properly, are effective ways to make significant breakthroughs and gains.

Myanmar junta leader
Min Aung Hlaing's criminal gang

in uniform might – or might not – stage a deception with their call for a national election. However, at this point in time, the Myanmar junta's talk about elections could be considered a false threat, which makes many Spring Revolutionary forces concerned and busy. It is like throwing a series of signal and smoke bombs, one after another, to draw our attention and to turn our focus away from the side where the real attack is currently already happening.

This real attack has several dimensions. One is – the systematic and intentional creation of a huge humanitarian crisis. MAH's murderous army is following the clear script of a Russian military strategy. Russia has applied that strategy in Chechnya. It has applied it in Syria and is applying it now in Ukraine. This strategy instructs, once you cannot defeat your opponent militarily, you should target the civilian population. You should hit the civilian population and civilian infrastructure with disproportionately heavy force. You hit it as hard as you can and indiscriminately. You do that systematically, ruthlessly and on a mass scale. This tactic is pushing a huge number of civilians into a situation of "dramatic humanitarian urgency". Displaced civilians without livelihood and shelter become a burden to the resistance forces, a burden they are not able to carry.

This is what MAH's terrorist army is doing now, intentionally and systematically. This is the "stick" side of the strategy – but there is also a "carrot" side.

The carrot side is not played primarily by junta representatives. That would be too obvious and would not work as effectively. The carrot side is played by international actors such as the Japanese representative Sasakawa and various "dialogue and negotiation mediators and facilitators" funded and supported by Switzerland, Joint Peace Fund, maybe Norwegians and maybe some others as well. Sasakawa is waving the carrot blatantly and unscrupulously. The Swiss embassy, JPF, maybe Norwegians and maybe some others are playing it more low profile, behind the scenes, discreetly.

There is a real danger that the UN Special Envoy and Indonesia as the new ASEAN chair will fall into the same trap and play the role of "carrots" as well. Noeleen Heyzer has achieved absolutely nothing since her appointment. She must be frustrated and eager to make a second try. Indonesia is taking over the ASEAN chairmanship after Cambodia's failure to achieve anything meaningful regarding the Myanmar crisis. Indonesia is a bigger heavyweight and would like to deliver more and better. So, both the UN Special Envoy and Indonesia have a strong desire to "do something" and to do it as soon as possible. Prevailing consensus is that humanitarian aid is the only way to achieve some positive development. This is how the UN and ASEAN can very easily play the "carrot" side of the junta's carrot and stick strategy.

Numerous interlocutors, mediators, consultants,

emissaries, diplomats and aid workers are these days approaching ethnic stakeholders offering humanitarian aid if only they accept a temporary ceasefire and start dialogue with the junta representatives. Even token dialogue is seen as a "positive move in right direction". If this happens, the promise goes that we, the UN agencies and internationals, will be able to deliver aid to IDPs and civilians on "your territory". If only you stop resisting for a while, there is a chance that the junta will allow us to deliver you aid.

This is serious temptation for the Ethnic Revolutionary Organisations or EROs when they have tens of thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands of civilians and IDPs in their yard, without sufficient food, shelter, and medicine, and deeply traumatized and exhausted, strangled by the "Four Cuts" dished out by the junta forces and further terrorized by air bombardments.

What the junta wants is for some EROs to accept this deal. If one will do that, all others will start to recalculate what are their options. If two or three EROs accept this humanitarian lure, this can trigger a domino effect – many more might follow in making their own temporary ceasefires.

As one very knowledgeable and sharp minded insider has observed – the junta does not need to break the alliance between the NUG and EROs. The junta is probably aware that they cannot achieve that – at least not at this point in time. However, they can make the alliance less effective - less

action oriented, less initiative taking and less coordinated. That is enough for the junta at this point.

Any, even very partial ceasefires and dialogue about humanitarian aid will give an opportunity to the junta representatives to also make business offers to the ERO leaders and commanders. What follows after the humanitarian aid promise is a “corruption offer”. MAH emissaries and junta commanders are already reaching out to anybody who is ready to talk with them to offer business licences and enrichment opportunities. The goal is to shift as many political and military actors to the path of “normalization through elections”. One just needs to ask the leader of the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party and commanders of the PNO what business deals and licences they have received to enter into the junta camp.

To the extent in which the junta will be able to achieve temporary de-escalation of fighting in as many as possible frontlines with the EROs, that will give the junta an opportunity to concentrate forces and brutality against the resistance in Magway and Sagaing. This is what the international aid community do not see – or they pretend that they do not see. Temporary ceasefires between the junta and any of EROs will not lead to a gradual de-escalation of violence. It will be just be the opposite – it will lead to an even more fierce and even more brutal onslaught on civilians in the territories of other EROs and on the Sagaing and Magway region.

Let’s be clear – the junta-staged “elections” might or might not happen. However, at this moment the proposal of “elections” is a false flag attack. The real attack is waged with the air force against the civilian population and with a deceptive offer to the EROs to accept temporary ceasefires in exchange for humanitarian aid. The purpose of this attack is to create as much pressure as possible on the alliance between the NUG and EROs. The desired result is making the alliance less effective. An even better result for the junta would be a break-up of the alliance.

In order to effectively counter the junta’s deception with fake elections and to prevent the junta from using once more its traditional “divide and rule” strategy, the actors of the anti-junta alliance, particularly its core actors with real power - those with territory, legitimacy and weapons - need to strengthen their alliance.

Underlying the potential crack in the NUG-EROs alliance

There is one important underlying reason why the alliance between the NUG and EROs might crack under pressure. It is better to be aware of it and to address this underlying problem with political courage, wisdom and resolve.

The primary goal of the popular mass uprising called the Spring Revolution is to reject Min Aung Hlaing’s coup, to prevent the military junta from consolidating power and to remove the military from politics. (So far it has been less clearly articulated, but the Spring Revolution goals

also implicate removal of the military capture of the country’s economy).

The primary goal of the EROs is to secure a high degree of autonomy and self-determination of their own ethnic group in their own territories.

The NUG has grown up from three different sources – from the NLD’s overwhelming electoral victory in the 2020 elections; from the non-violent popular nationwide mass uprising called the Spring Revolution and the Civil Disobedience Movement; and from the decision of some of the EROs to join the anti-coup alliance.

Once the NUG (and the NUCC) have been formed in the midst of the post-coup turmoil and violence, compromise has been agreed between the three groups driving and leading the broad anti-junta uprising (NLD, Spring Revolution and CDM actors and EROs) that the common political goal will be federal democracy.

If we want to anchor the strategy of the revolution against the junta in the real-politics of Myanmar, we need to have a clear understanding that there is a difference in what could be an acceptable outcome of the current struggle for different actors of the broad anti-junta alliance.

The NLD, Spring Revolution actors, CDM-ers and the NUG can achieve its aims only if they defeat the MAH junta and if they remove the military from politics. They do not have other options. It is either – or. Either you remove MAH and the junta from future



Myanmar politics or you will be crushed, defeated and severely punished.

EROs have more options to achieve their core goal of autonomy and self-determination. They can achieve it through the defeat of MAH's junta and through the formation of a federal democratic Myanmar. However, they can achieve their objective also if at some point in time they make a strategic pivot from aligning themselves with the NUG and by making a deal with a significantly weakened military junta. A significantly weakened junta – which exists now - is ready to make (corrupt) compromises with the EROs that are ready to switch to the junta's side. The junta is not ready for any type of compromise with the Bamar resistance and the Spring Revolution. The EROs can have a high degree of autonomy and

self-governing institutions on "their territories" even if the junta remains in control over the Bamar regions of Myanmar.

MAH, the junta and the insidious "facilitators of peace and dialogue" are of course well aware of this underlying difference of core objectives between the NUG and Spring Revolution actors on the one side, and EROs on the other side.

This is the crack in the NUG-EROs alliance on which the junta is putting pressure.

The junta is signalling to the ERO leaders and to all those who have some influence on the EROs' strategic decision-making: "the NUG cannot prevail".

Their message is - we, the junta, have enough military power to achieve final and full victory. We have support from Russia, India, Thailand and China. We have enough

revenues from gas and other natural resources. We can heavily punish your civilian population. We can bomb your schools, concerts and burn your villages. We can take hostage any of your prominent leaders as we have done with Reverend Samson. We can cut food, fuel and medicine coming to your IDPs. But we can also allow aid deliveries to go through. We can give you seats in a future proportional representation parliament. We can give you lucrative business licences and monopolies. We will tolerate any illegal business you might run to make money. We will also give you a better "federal" deal – you will be able to keep your own militia and you will be able to run your own legal and illegal business, and you will be able to have your own self-rule territory. Just make a deal with us, stop supporting PDFs, stop cooperating with the NUG and



PDF fighters receive flowers in a village in Sagaing. Photo: EPA

let us defeat them. Then we can have our own “federation of greed and corruption”.

Wake up call

Actors of the anti-junta alliance have in last few months paralyzed themselves in passionate discussions and disagreements about the future, which might never come. Instead, what is needed now is to re-focus on making this future possible and coming. What is needed is to realign key actors of the Spring Revolution uprising (those who control territory, have legitimacy and guns) in a

firm and active, initiative-taking political and military alliance and what is needed for this alliance is to talk with “synchronized talking point”s with the people of Myanmar and with international actors.

Without such an approach, the future for which the Spring Heroes have sacrificed will never come. Otherwise, the federalist and self-determination dream of Myanmar nationalities will miss the historic opportunity to be fulfilled. Otherwise, the democratic aspirations of the people of Myanmar to live in the country without fear and

repression will be delayed for at least the next 20 years.

Key political stakeholders in the democratic camp and self-determination camp need to meet each other. They need to meet each other in real-time and not online in Zoom meeting calls. And they need to have honest and straightforward political dialogue in which each side will assure the other that if we win together, everybody will get what he or she is striving and struggling for.

Key political stakeholders need to bet on trust and to bet on a positive win-win vision, instead



of a paralyzing and weakening resistance through mistrust and old grievances. Having in mind how enormous is current suffering in Myanmar and how big is the historic opportunity to bring real change, it is sometimes mindboggling how anybody could put more passion into old grievances instead of capturing the opportunity and investing in a better future that is within their reach.

If key actors of the current anti-junta resistance will reaffirm their political alliance and if they will speak with the people in the way President

Zelenskiy is constantly speaking with the Ukrainian people, such an alliance will be able to sustain a nationwide public rejection of the junta and disobedience. Political alliance of key stakeholders will be able to continue to stretch the Myanmar military to breaking point and defeat MAH's criminal junta. Such a political alliance will be able to stand vis-à-vis international players as a true sovereign representing the people of the country, instead of being in a position of weakness and begging.

A political alliance of the key stakeholders will also encourage all others to join it – because everybody wants to be on the side of the winner.

Leaders in the democratic camp must find political courage and make decisive decisions to match the historic opportunity. They need to make a credible, clear and firm promise to the ethnic stakeholders that in the future Myanmar they will have the self-determination they have been striving for since the Panglong Agreement.

Leaders in the self-determination camp need to exit from their safe corner of their own long-standing demands for self-rule of their own ethnic group and they need also to invest in the “broader national project” which could be a “win-win situation” for everybody.

In a future Myanmar that is not repressed and plundered by MAH's uniformed kleptocratic gang and in a Myanmar in which the military is removed from politics and economy, there will be enough space for compromise, and there will be enough wealth for reconstruction and

rehabilitation of shattered lives and for the socio-economic development of everybody, as individuals and as ethnic and religious identity groups.

Keeping the alliance alive and strong

As I have tried to describe, the NUG and EROs alliance is coming under pressure from various sides. The junta is relatively skilfully applying its carrot-and-stick, divide-and-rule strategy.

Be warned - numerous self-interested domestic players who did not have the courage to join the Spring Revolution now see the opportunity for themselves if the NUG, Spring Revolution and the NLD are marginalized and removed from the political future of Myanmar. They see opportunity for themselves if the domestic political dynamic is brought back to the “three sides” negotiations between the military, EROs and non-NLD Bamar “democratic” and “national” political parties. That is why they may be ready to join MAH's deception with elections.

Some international players are currently actively assisting the junta - Russia, India, China, Thailand, and Sasakawa. It can be argued that other important international players – namely, the UN Special Envoy, Indonesia and ASEAN, EU, Switzerland, Norway, and the overwhelming majority of diplomats based in Yangon - are not enemies of the people of Myanmar, but they are not sincere friends either. They do not believe in the victory of the Spring Revolution. They do not see as their aim to contribute to the victory of the Spring Revolution. They strongly

A political alliance of the key stakeholders will also encourage all others to join it – because everybody wants to be on the side of the winner.

believe that the only solution for current situation is to bring all “stakeholders” to the negotiating table and to facilitate some deal with the junta and military. They want to “stabilize” and “normalize” the situation in Myanmar.

They are completely ignoring the fact that MAH does not want any negotiations with the NUG and that his primary goal in this moment is to crush the PDF resistance in Sagaing and Magway. Internationals wrongly believe that if they achieve a temporary ceasefire and negotiations between the junta and EROs, and if they start to deliver humanitarian aid to ERO controlled areas, that this will be the beginning of a gradual de-escalation of the war. They do not understand (or they pretend that they do not understand) that this will only mean stronger offensives

against Sagaing and Magway and – marginalization of the NUG. This is how also well-intentioned international players are contributing to the potential weakening of the alliance of anti-junta forces.

Action points

It is not probable that the anti-junta alliance will be broken under this pressure, but it can be weakened and made ineffective. In order to prevent that and to regain strength for struggle against the junta, a few things are needed:

Firstly, it is important not to forget that MAH’s junta is very vulnerable and weak. The anti-junta alliance might have been under pressure, but the junta is under even bigger pressure and is cracking and bleeding even more. The junta and military are hated and

rejected by the majority of the people of the country. The will of the people of Myanmar is standing against the junta.

Instead of accepting MAH’s offer to join a “federation of greed and corruption”, there is much bigger win-win possibility for all Myanmar ethnic groups in a future federal and democratic country, which will not be built upon military repression and exploitative, predatory, kleptocratic rule by a narrow circle of military families and their business associates.

Secondly, some key NUG members should as soon as possible have informal but substantial, real life and not Zoom meeting talks with key ERO actors (K3C – Karen, Kachin, Karenni and Chin). The purpose is to re-align the key political and military actors who are actively participating in the anti-junta resistance. This would be to revive trust, to clarify who wants what and to assure each other that if they together win over the junta, everybody will get what they want.

This is the most important step. In this moment we do not have full commitment of all key stakeholders (who have real power) to actively participate in the common struggle. A mutual political deal is needed to revive an active and full alliance, instead of remaining in the current partial and not fully active alliance.

Thirdly, parallel with the process described above, there is a need for the NUG plus key EROs to form a team to deal with foreign affairs. It will be needed to deal in a mutually-coordinated manner with

the opportunities offered by the NDAA and with ASEAN under Indonesian chairmanship. They need a common understanding between the NUG and key EROs over what are the joint talking points with internationals, what they say and “what to demand”.

Once they have that, there is a need for a delegation of the NUG + K3C going together to Jakarta, Washington, New York, London, Brussels, Tokyo, and New Delhi.

If internationals manage to get anti-junta actors in situations in which they talk with the NUG and EROs separately, the alliance will be on the losing side. Internationals will be able to manipulate stakeholders away from the goal of victory of the Spring Revolution over the junta.

Always have in mind that the majority of internationals do not want victory of the Spring Revolution because they do not think it is possible and because they do not know “what comes after”. That is why they want to bring everybody – including the junta and military – to the negotiating table. The danger is that in the end, the junta and military will be at that table, many EROs and political parties as well, but not the NUG and not the Spring Revolution.

There are already signals that some international players and some domestic “mediators” are opening channels for international engagement to the K3C without the NUG. It seems to me very dangerous to step on this slippery slope. It looks to me much better to have the NUG + K3C together and talking together with international

players. This format NUG + K3C should be open to include other stakeholders, but we first need to strengthen and align “the core”.

Fourthly, we need another team which will make a clear strategy between the NUG + EROs and anti-junta civil society how they will collectively bargain with the international aid community.

The international aid community is not playing a fair game. They have their own interests. They have their biases. Many of them are hostages of the junta by continuing to keep offices in Yangon and by being dependent on the junta issuing them entry visas. For that reason, they have strong tendencies to play the junta’s cards. It is important not to assume that the international aid community is a benign, well-minded partner. They have their own interests, which do not correspond with the aims and interests of the Spring Revolution.

For that reason, the anti-junta forces need to bargain with them, not to treat them as a genuine and trusted partner.

To be able to deal with the aid community effectively and in the interest of the Spring Revolution, there is a need to have a common strategy and a coordinating working team, which will include NUG representatives, EROs but also civil society actors. Otherwise, aid donors and the international aid community will simply divide them and implement aid policies in a way that serves their interests, not the potential recipients’ interests.

They have advantages. They have better information. They have better access and better relations with donors. They have financial resources to pay teams writing project proposals and doing aid management. They can travel around and meet the groups separately one by one.

However, if the NUG, EROs and anti-junta CSOs are able to collectively bargain with the international aid community, the anti-junta forces are in relatively strong negotiating position as well. UN agencies and INGOs cannot deliver aid without local actors. They have no mandate to provide aid without the involvement of local actors. They have no chance to access budgets for Myanmar without partnering with local CSOs.

If the various parties are negotiating one-by-one with them, it will be easy for the UN agencies and INGOs to pick up partner from the local CSOs which will be in a junior and subordinate position to them. If the groups coordinate, share information and if they act collectively and bargain, they can be an equal partner co-deciding how aid is delivered and how aid money is allocated.

Igor Blazevic for Mizzima.

The views expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of Mizzima.



ASSESSING THE EAOS IN 2022

**Uncertainty as groups
fight the junta, sit on the
fence or side with the
junta**

Sai Wansai

There are questions over where EAOs stand regarding relations with the Myanmar junta.
Photo: EPA

In many ways, the future of the Myanmar military junta may well lie in the decisions made by the Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) as 2022 ends and the two-year anniversary of the coup comes into view.

As the Spring Revolution picked up pace in 2022, eyes were focused on the response of the EAOs as they considered their options – to fight the junta, to sit on the fence, or to side with the junta.

So, what should we be aware of when assessing the EAOs behaviour in 2022?

The main EAOs involved in the armed conflict, directly and indirectly are: Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), Chin National Front (CNF), Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), Kachin Independence Organization/Army (KIO/KIA), Karenni National Progressive Party/Karenni Army (KNPP/KA), Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA), Karen National Liberation Army- Peace Council (KNLA-PC), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) or Kokang, National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) or Mongla, New Mon State Party (NMSP), Pa-O National Liberation Organization (PNLO), Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), Shan State Progress Party (SSPP), Palaung State Liberation Party/Ta'ang National Liberation Army (PSLP/TNLA), United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA), United Wa State Party/Army (UWSAP/UWSA).

Generally four types of EAOs could be categorized: Those who sympathized with the Bamar and democratic opposition groups and also helped train and partly equip them with weapons; those that are indifferent and see it as a National League for Democracy (NLD)-SAC Bamar conflict and

won't have anything to do with it; those that take the opportunity to broaden their territories to be in a better bargaining position when the time comes for political settlement or negotiation, with a "make hay while the sun shines" sort of attitude; and those that signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in October 2015 and cling to it arguing that they signed the truce to be engaged in political dialogue and peaceful settlement and not war and thus refuse to be drawn into the armed conflict.

Arakan (Rakhine) State

Since the February coup 2021 the informal ceasefire reached between the AA and the junta, which was agreed in October 2020 before the general election, was gearing to breakdown.

In the aftermath of the coup until the end of 2021 no armed conflict was registered. But a few minor clashes occurred in February, April and May 2022 between the junta, mainly due to the fact that the junta was not happy with the AA's administration expansion and saw it as a rivalry to replace its system of military supremacy rule, including the AA's military recruitment and build-up. There were also continuous frictions because AA and junta were arresting each other's functionaries, backers and sympathizers, in a tit-for-tat manner at the ground level, as the rivalry became intense.

Large-scale war erupted when on 4 July 2022, the junta shelled one of the AA's outposts with two fighter jets in Karen State on the Salween River in Mutraw (Hpapun) District, an area controlled by the Karen National Liberation Army's (KNLA) Brigade 5. Several buildings, including a clinic, were destroyed, the AA said in a statement reported by Myanmar Now the following day. During the

bombing spree, six AA members were killed and seven wounded. The AA vowed to take revenge for the unprovoked killings.

On 18 July 2022, the AA attacked the junta's Border Guard Force (BGF) twice in Maungdaw Township killing a number of them and capturing 14 junta personnel.

AA spokesman Khaing Thuka confirmed the attack on the junta-backed BGF was a retaliation for the killing of six AA troops in airstrikes carried out by the junta in Karen State's Mutraw (Hpapun) District earlier.

From then on, the fighting spread to Maungdaw, Rathedaung, Buthidaung, and Mrauk-U townships in Rakhine State and in Paletwa Township in Chin State.

But the reignited armed conflict from July to the last week of November were short but quite intensive, with nearly 50 armed clashes registered, 25 civilians killed and over a hundred wounded as collateral damage only within the time span of September 20 to November 27, according to AA spokesman Khaing Thuka to the media. But he didn't mention either the SAC or AA casualty figures.

ISP-Myanmar, ISP Data Matters Report Number 37 (b) on 22 November 2022 stated 48 armed clashes in Arakan State within the time span from 1 February 2021 to 15 November 2022.

On 26 November, AA and the SAC reached an informal humanitarian ceasefire agreement mediated by the Nippon Foundation Chairman Mr Sasakawa. However, how

long this truce will hold is not clear as there is no time frame attached to it and the conditions are vague.

Since the ceasefire the junta has opened some waterways and roads and the bombardment of the civilian residence have ceased.

According to Development Media Group October report, the AA said it already controlled 60% of northern Rakhine and overran or captured 36 military outposts in Rakhine including positions along the Rakhine-Bangladesh border. Reportedly around 30 were in Maungdaw Township and six were in Paletwa Township, Chin State, which borders Rakhine State, according to observers.

AA leader Twan Mrat Naing told Asia Times in January 2022 that his army now fielded some 30,000 well-trained troops, with approximately 5,000 to 6,000 deployed to “allied areas,” representing a formidable force.

Chin State

Since the February military coup on February 2021 Chin resistance forces have been actively resisting the SAC rule, which is headed by the Chinland Defence Force (CDF) and the Chin National Defence Force (CNDP), to bolster the protection offered to the state by the more well-established military force that has been present in Chin since 1988, the Chin National Army (CNA), armed wing of the CNF.

In 30 September 2021, Chinland Joint Defence Committee (CJDC) was formed which included 18 group members. On 5 December 2021, it was officially agreed that

Chinland Defence Force (CDF) will be changed to CJDC.

According to The Guardian report of 24 January 2022, “The aim of the CJDC is not only to quell the Tatmadaw’s recent onslaught but to help put an end to the regime’s decades of violence across the whole of Myanmar, and to replace it with a federal democracy in which Chin, along with the country’s other territories, would enjoy the freedoms of self-governance similar to that practised in the 50 states of the US.”

Fighting which started out shortly after the military coup in February 2021 continued all throughout the nine townships of Chin State. The Chin resistance groups were able to deny the control of their state to the junta and as a result



Photo: EPA

has only been able to hold up its presence in urban areas, but still being constantly breached and harassed by the resistance forces.

In a report by Burma News International on 22 November, spokesman for CNF Salai Htet Ni said: "When it comes to territorial control, we've to talk about the popular support at the same time. First of all, we can say that we've the full support of the people. More people in Chin State live in rural areas than in urban areas. In such a situation, the public is on our side. The forces of the CNA and CDF operate mainly in the rural areas of all nine townships up to the Sagaing Region. We're mainly active in the nine townships of Chin State. We've brought more than 70 percent of the land under our control. The proof of this is the fact that we're already operating our own health and education facilities in the rural areas."

He said more than 70 percent of Chin State's territory is under their control, with the SAC's administrative system almost completely paralysed.

Regarding the armed conflict situation, he said: "Compared to last year, the number of clashes in Chin State has decreased. This is true for the southern part of the state compared to the northern part. In previous years, the regime's troops came from different directions in large numbers from both the south and the north to the strategic areas of Matupi and Hakha. But this year they've made no such advance. Right now, they're mainly focused on the north. In general, their fighting intensity has slowed down."

Kachin State

The KIA and SAC clashes that started in 2009 continue after the military coup in February 2021 until today, which the former cooperating with anti-junta forces by providing sanctuary to the pro-democracy activists and ousted parliamentary members. It even goes so far to train and arm the opposition anti-junta forces from all over the country, especially from Sagaing, Magway and Mandalay regions.

Ever since then, the KIO has operated in northern part of Sagaing Region by cooperating with the local PDFs which it has helped trained and largely equip, primarily in order to cut the supply lines of the SAC troops. Additionally, it has full command control of the no less than 5,000 Kachin People's Defence Forces (KPDF), which it helped create. The KIA is said to field about 20,000 troops, which includes militias.

Thus the KIA is involved in the civil war and continue to do so in clashes in Katha, Indaw, Homlin, Pinlebu, Kawlin, Wuntho and Tigyaing of the upper Sagaing Region, including attacking the SAC's riverine vessels, carrying troops and weapons up the Ayeyarwaddy River, together with the PDF forces in northern Sagaing, according to analyst Ye Myo Hein.

Another area outside Kachin State which the KIA operates is the northern Shan State of Namkham-Muse and Kutkai areas, of which the latter was where the Kachin revolution or KIA first come into existence in 1961.

The KIA presence in northern Shan State is in the southern part of the Lashio-Muse Road with the 4th Brigade; in the northern part of the Kukai-Muse Road with the 6th Brigade; and perches along the Hseni-Kunlong road with the 10th Brigade.

The 1st Brigade of the KIA is based in Putao, Sumprabum, the 7th Brigade in Chipwi, Hpunre, the 2nd Brigade in Tanai, Shingbuiyang, the 9th Brigade in Hpakant, the 8th Brigade in Mohnyin, Namsi Awng, the 3rd Brigade in Bhamo and the 5th Brigade in Sadon. It also maintains a Light Infantry Brigade and Central Guard Brigade, and the total number of battalions under the twelve brigades is 52, according to Ye Myo Hein. According to the ISP-Myanmar statistics for the time span 1 February 2021 to 15 November 2022, the total armed clashes within the Kachin State was 213 and ranked 8th in countrywide armed engagement count. However, no casualty figures were released from either KIA or the SAC as is always the case.

After the A Nan Pa airstrikes killed some 70 civilians and KIA combatants during a concert in October, the KIA is more determined to fight and recently on 15 December General Gun Maw, vice-chairman of the KIO in an interview with RFA said that the Kachin people are with the NUG, cooperating with its Ministry of Defence and the Central Command and Coordination Committee (C3C) militarily in trying to uproot the military dictatorship and establish a federal democratic union.

Shan State

The Shan war theatre is perhaps the most sophisticated and complicated compared to the other conflict areas.

The non-Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement-EAOs (non-NCA-EAOs) UWSA, NDAA, MNDAA, TNLA, SSPP, and KIA operate in the Shan State's north and northeast. From these groups TNLA, MNDAA and KIA battled with the SAC on-and-off, although the SSPP also fought occasionally in the second half of the year with the SAC, due to its demand to withdraw from three of its positions in southern Shan State.

In addition, there were also on-and-off firefights between the two Shan armies RCSS and the SSPP. The former withdrew from the northern Shan State completely at the end of 2021, which it had encroached upon after the signing of NCA in October 2015. However, the SSPP intruded further into the RCSS stomping ground in the south, said to be with the help of UWSA, which the SSPP denied.

Some said that the RCSS asked the SAC to help evict the SSPP from its former operational territories which might have prompted the SAC to ask for the withdrawal of the three military positions in southern Shan State, which the SSPP rejected.

Perhaps in a bid to stem the tide of armed confrontation, the RCSS in 10 October 2022 released a statement proposing calling for dialogue with all concerned parties.

But this initiative that will end on 10 February 2023 so far has received no response from EAOs in Shan State.

Another flash point and fierce conflict zone is the southern tip of Shan State bordering Karenni or Kayah State, which are Pekon and Moebye towns in Pekon Township, Taunggyi District, adjacent to Demoso and Loikaw townships in Karenni State.

Nawngkhio Township, northern Shan State also saw armed clashes between the Mandalay PDF, sometimes in collaboration with TNLA, against the SAC troops.

Almost all EAOs in Shan State are not in league with the NUG unlike the other ethnic states in fighting the SAC but stay aloof and more inclined to advance their political interests and agendas of acquiring more territories and self-rule, although TNLA and MNDAA stated their sympathy of the NUG and the Spring Revolution in the media.

Karenni (Kayah) State

During the year Karenni State has been experiencing heavy airstrikes and aerial

bombardment, coupled with continuous artillery attacks, including a scorched earth campaign by the SAC. But the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF) claimed that 90 percent of the junta's administration has ceased to function. The KNPP also confirmed that the junta's troops mostly did not venture out from their barracks, even in big towns that they claim to control.

The main actors prominently featuring in the media are the KA, the armed wing of KNPP and KNDF, although numerous assorted PDFs and LDFs are also participating in the resistance. For instance, on 6 April 2022, the Karenni Revolution Union (KRU) was formed with six revolutionary forces which emerged after the coup, namely the Karenni Generation-Z (KGZ), the Karenni Democratic Front (KDF), the Fight for Justice (JPDF), the GZ-21 (Loikaw), Medic Unit and the Southern Shan People Defence Force (SSPDF), according to the Kantarawaddy Times.



Myanmar soldiers in Laiza in Kachin State. Photo: Mizzima

Karenni State Deputy Minister of Defence Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) Secretary-1 Khu Daniel on 5 December told Myanmar Now that 75 to 80 percent that emerged from the Spring Revolution considered KA chief of staff as their own. A few PDFs are under the NUG, but the KNPP cooperates with any organization that is against the SAC. The Karenni State Consultative Council (KSCC) includes the Kayah State Democratic Party (KYSDP), the Kayan National Party (KNP), the National League for Democracy (NLD), five ethnic armed organisations, and the KNDF, an armed group formed after the coup, according to the Myanmar Now report of 30 April. The NPP criticised the parallel National Unity Government (NUG) for announcing plans on April 24 to reform its administrative processes without properly consulting local EAOs.

The conflict zones are mainly in Demoso, Hpruso, Loikaw in Karenni and adjacent Pekon, and Moby in southern Shan State, even though sporadic clashes took place across the whole of Karenni State.

Karen State

Even prior to the February 2021 military coup, part of the KNU, particularly the KNU Brigade 5 area has been a hotbed of armed clashes, due to the Myanmar military's expansion into its area through road-building or upgrading the existing roads. The KNU protested this but the military never considered to scale back, thus armed conflict in this area has never stopped. Even then the KNU leadership led by General Muto Say Poe was trying to stick

to the NCA-based peace negotiation process.

However, the military coup changed the situation at first reluctantly by providing sanctuary to those who fled the cities, many of whom are young generation and NLD members, and also providing military training by the KNU to fight back the military junta, primarily in their homesteads.

But in December 2021, the junta attacked Lay Kay Kaw village, which had sheltered pro-democratic dissidents, leading to the escalation of armed conflict and thereby forcing the reluctant KNU to enter the civil war fray and morphed into a full-blown conflict in 2022 that covered almost the whole Karen State, part of Mon State, part of Bago and even the Tanintharyi Region.

According to Ye Myo Hein, "The Sit-Tat (SAC) has deployed over fifty battalions of the 11th Light Infantry Division, the 22nd, the 44th, the 66th, Military Operations Command (MOC) No. 6, 8, 13, 19 and 20, in addition to battalions from South East Regional Command, Coastal Regional Command, and its controlled Border Guard Forces."

It is believed that the KNU fields 20,000 troops and the PDF amounts to 10,000 fighters.

On 13 September 2022 KNU General Headquarters released a battle statistics statement for the time span of the 20 months from January 2021 to August 2022 as follows:

The military wing of KNU, Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) in Nyaung Lay Pin District Brigade (3) and Muttaw District

Brigade (5), including Karen National Defence Force (KNDO) troops, clashed with junta troops and Border Guard Force (BGF) troops frequently on a daily basis since the military coup.

During this period, the KNLA, KNDO troops and junta plus Border Guard Force (BGF) troops fought and clashed 6,356 times, with 5,125 troops of the junta side killed and 4,174 wounded. 137 of the KNLA and KNDO troopers were killed and 352 were injured. The KNLA and KNDO forces also attacked and destroyed nine major military bases of the junta or SAC.

A total of 4,456 intentional shootings were fired at the people. A total of 117 targeted air raids jet fighters and helicopters were used in attacking the KNLA, KNDO and the villages.

The intentional firing with heavy guns and airstrikes killed 131 innocent people and injured 294. A total of 412 innocent people were arrested without reason by the junta and threatened with interrogation. They were also used as porters and human shields.

As a result of the intentional firing of heavy weapons and airstrikes on the villages and people, 37,1958 people have fled their homes and businesses to safer areas. Most of them were children, students, elderly people and disabled persons.

Mon State

Mon State political and military can be generally categorized into three groups, namely: the junta's political ally; those engaging in NCA-based peace talks; and those politically and militarily resisting the military junta.

The first category of junta allies includes: Mon Unity Party (MUP) that practically works with the junta or SAC; and Mon Peace Defense Force (MPDF) that left NMSP in 2010 and became local pro-junta militias.

The second one which is involved in NCA-based peace talks is the NMSP. It was a bit reluctant after the first peace talks meeting, which was initiated by the junta, due to Mon public pressure to reject it. But nevertheless it opted for the second meeting during the year, which angered many Mon people.

The third category those politically and militarily resisting the military junta includes: Mon State Interim Coordination Committee (MSICC), a member of the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), which is part of parallel NUG setup; the Mon State Defence Force (MDSF), operating under NUG command. The MDSF (North) is active in Thaton Township while MDSF (South) operates in Ye Township.

Other local resistance groups which are said to number about nine according to the ISP-Myanmar count last year fighting the junta, including Ye Belu and the Mon State Revolutionary Organization.

Most Mon local resistance groups owe their existence to KNU whose territories are adjacent to the Karen State and thus are natural allies.

On 3 October, a resistance coalition has been formed led by KNU's Brigade 1 based in Thaton District with 24 PDFs. They are PDFs from Paung, Bilin, Thaton and Theinzayat towns in Mon State operating under the direct command of KNU Brigade 1.

Another new resistance group is said to be in the making with a base in Mudon and Thanphyuzayat with the help of the Three Brotherhood Alliance, consisting of the AA, TNLA and MNDAA, according to the media reports.

In Mon State, Bilin, Kyaikto, Thaton, Kyaikmaraw, Mudon and Ye townships are main conflict areas with clashes also going on in other townships.

Outlook and Perspective

2022 demonstrated that the resistance against the military

junta rule is widespread in all states and regions, except for the Shan State and Arakan State. Even then, pockets of areas in the northern and southern Shan State armed clashes were reported on-and-off throughout the year, with the junta's massive offensives conducted against the TNLA in December before the year end. During the end of November and beginning of December the junta also tried to dislodge the MNDAA or Kokang from its positions in northern Shan State close to the Chinese border,



Kachin fighters. Photo: EPA

without success. The KIA routinely clashed with the junta on-and-off also. The southern part of Shan State, close to the Karenni border in Pekon and Moebye areas are also active conflict war zones between the junta and local PDFs, LDFs and sometimes in collaboration with the Karenni PDFs.

The Chin, Kachin, Karenni and Karen states' EAOs and their respective local PDFs are solidly behind the battle cry of "no negotiation and uprooting the military dictatorship" as a top

priority so that federal democratic union can be established. Thus, they are working in collaboration with the NUG and this trend is gaining momentum.

In Mon State, the NMSP, the main EAO within the state, is keen to negotiate peace with the junta and thus is left out of the resistance fray. But numerous local PDFs and KNU Brigade 1 are nevertheless engaged in the fight against the junta on Mon State soil.

As for the seven regions, the epicentre for Bamar ethnic

resistance is Anyar or the Dry Zone, which includes Sagaing, Magway and Mandalay. However, Bago and Tanintharyi regions are beefing up their resistance movements, both with the help of KNLA as they are adjacent to its operational areas.

While it can be claimed that most of Myanmar is resisting junta rule, questions remain over the stance of several EAOs who are sat on the fence or siding with the SAC.



MYANMAR JUNTA MARKS 75TH YEAR OF INDEPENDENCE WITH SHOW OF FORCE IN NAYPYIDAW

Myanmar troops and weaponry paraded through the military-built capital Naypyidaw to mark the country's independence day on 4 January, days after the junta jailed democracy figurehead Aung San Suu Kyi for 33 years.

Swathes of the country have been engulfed by fighting between junta troops and anti-coup rebels since the military seized power almost two years ago.

The junta, which recently wrapped up a series of closed-court trials of Aung San Suu Kyi, says it is preparing for fresh elections later this year that the United States has said would be a "sham."

Tanks, missile launchers and armoured cars rolled through the dawn air to a parade ground in the capital, AFP correspondents said, kicking off a military parade marking 75 years since Myanmar gained independence from Britain.

Civil servants and high school students followed the troops, accompanied by a military band.

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing was greeted by a 21-gun salute as he arrived at the parade ground.

Russian President Vladimir Putin sent "sincere greetings" and anticipated the "further development" of relations, according to state-run newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar.

Russia is a major ally and arms supplier of the isolated junta, which has said Moscow's invasion of Ukraine was "justified".

Myanmar declared independence from British colonial rule on January 4, 1948 after a long fight championed by General Aung San, the father of ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Independence Day is normally marked with festive street games, marches and gatherings in public parks and spaces.

But since the putsch, celebrations of public holidays have been largely muted as people stay at home in protest against the junta.

AFP correspondents said there was an increased security presence in commercial hub Yangon, which has been hit by a string of bomb attacks in recent months.

The US embassy warned of a "potential increases in attacks, targeted shootings, or explosions" on Wednesday.

The military has cited massive alleged voter fraud during elections in November 2020, which were won resoundingly by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, as a reason for its coup.

International observers said at the time the polls were largely free and fair.

AFP/Mizzima

FIREBRAND BUDDHIST MONK WIRATHU FETED BY MYANMAR JUNTA CHIEF

Firebrand monk U Wirathu dubbed the “Buddhist bin Laden” for his role in stirring up religious hatred in Myanmar received a national award on 3 January, with the junta saluting his work in the country.

Wirathu - who received the moniker from Time Magazine in 2013 following deadly communal riots - was awarded the title of “Thiri Pyanchi”, the military’s information team said.

The award for “outstanding work for the good of the Union of Myanmar” was presented by junta chief Min Aung Hlaing, it added.

Wirathu is one of hundreds of people receiving awards and honorary titles as the junta prepares to mark the 75th anniversary of Myanmar’s independence from Britain on 4 January.

Wirathu has long been known for his nationalist anti-Islamic rhetoric - particularly

against the Rohingya Muslim minority.

In 2013, he appeared on the cover of Time Magazine, controversially dubbed as “The Face of Buddhist Terror”.

He had called for boycotts of Muslim-owned businesses and restrictions on marriages between Buddhists and Muslims.

Rights groups said these helped whip up animosity towards the community, laying the foundations for a military crackdown in 2017 that forced about 740,000 Rohingya to flee over the border to Bangladesh.

Wirathu was later jailed by Aung San Suu Kyi’s government on sedition charges.

In September 2021, the junta announced it had released Wirathu after all charges against him had been dropped.

AFP



JOURNALISTS RELEASED IN MYANMAR INDEPENDENCE DAY AMNESTY

Local reports indicate at least nine journalists were released this week in a junta amnesty to mark Myanmar Independence Day but at least 50 journalists remain incarcerated.

A family member told Mizzima that freelance journalist Thuzar (Ah Hla Lay Thuzar) was released from Insein Prison on 4 January.

One of the family members said: “We brought her from the No. (133) Ward Police Station because she was sent to the respective township police station after release from prison. So, we waited for her at the police station and brought her back home.”

On 22 November, Ah Hla Lay Thuzar, also known as Thuzar, was sentenced to two years in prison by Insein special court under Section 505 (a) of the penal code for incitement.

On 1 September, 2021, she was arrested near Pyi Yeik Mon housing in Kamayut Township, Yangon, and held in pre-trial detention for 15 months under Section 505 (a) of the Penal Code.

Other journalists are reported to have been freed to mark the 75th anniversary of Burma or

Myanmar independence.

Those confirmed to have been released include freelance journalist Thuzar, TV reporter Lway M Phuong for Shwe Phi Myay News Agency, reporter Pyae Phyo Aung for Zayar Times News Agency, former 7 Day News reporter Sai Ko Ko Tun, and freelance reporter Ye Tun Oo (aka) Maung Kaung.

According to Order No.1/2023 issued by the SAC on 4 January, a total of 7,012 people serving prison terms in various prisons across Myanmar have been released under a pardon from the State Administration Council (SAC).

Myanmar ranks poorly as the third-worst jailer of journalists globally, ranking only behind Iran and China for the number of reporters imprisoned for their work, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

A CPJ reported released in December said many journalists in Myanmar are detained on accusations of “incitement” or “false news” as the junta “doubled down on its efforts to mute reporters.”



Insein Prison from the air.
Photo: Supplied

MYANMAR MASS PARDONS INCLUDED 300 POLITICAL PRISONERS, CLAIMS UN



Families and friends greet released prisoners. Photo: EPA

Among more than 7,000 prisoners granted amnesty by Myanmar's junta this week were about 300 political prisoners, the United Nations said Friday last week.

The military junta, which seized power nearly two years ago, announced on Wednesday it would free 7,012 prisoners to mark the 75th anniversary of Myanmar gaining independence.

It did not specify whether the amnesty covered those jailed as part of its brutal crackdown on dissent, but the UN rights office said political prisoners were among those released.

"It's about 300 who were political prisoners," spokesman Jeremy Laurence told reporters, citing "credible sources".

He said that so far, 195 of those cases had been verified.

Local monitoring group AAPP also said it understood 300 political prisoners had been released. It had identified 223 of them and was working to verify other cases.

"The release of political prisoners in Myanmar is not only a relief to those unfairly

detained, but also their families," Laurence said.

While welcoming the amnesty, Laurence pointed out that "on the very day that these political prisoners were released, another 22 were detained.

"So the situation continues."

And many of the people being detained for opposing military rule, he said, "have been subjected to torture and ill-treatment".

"Such detentions are not only intended to silence the junta's critics, but are also designed to instil fear."

Nearly 17,000 people have been arrested since the military coup in February 2021, and over 13,000 remain in detention, Laurence said, adding that the UN rights chief Volker Turk was preparing a report about the situation in Myanmar.

"The pathway out of Myanmar's crisis is not by locking people up, it is by allowing them to freely, fully and effectively participate in political life," he said.

AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA CHIEF SAYS WILL HOLD 'FREE AND FAIR' ELECTIONS



Senior General Min Aung Hlaing votes in the 2020 election. Photo: EPA

Myanmar's junta said it would hold "free and fair" multiparty elections as it marked Independence Day last week, days after increasing democracy figurehead Aung San Suu Kyi's jail term to 33 years.

The junta, which recently wrapped up a series of closed-court trials of Suu Kyi, is preparing for fresh elections later this year that the United States has said would be a "sham".

"Upon accomplishing the provisions of the state of emergency, free and fair elections will be held in line with the 2008 constitution," junta chief Min Aung Hlaing told troops and supporters in Naypyidaw.

The junta-imposed state of emergency is due to expire at the end of January, after which the constitution states authorities must set in motion plans to hold fresh elections.

The junta chief gave no timetable for any election.

Earlier suggestions were made that the poll would be held in August 2023.

Myanmar's military has made unsubstantiated allegations of massive voter fraud during elections in November 2020, which were won resoundingly by Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, as a reason for its coup.

International observers said at the time the polls were largely free and fair.

The junta-appointed election commission was meeting with political parties for discussions on "the proportional representation electoral system", Min Aung Hlaing said, without giving further details.

Analysts say the junta may scrap the first-past-the-post system that saw Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy win sweeping majorities in 2020 and 2015.

AFP/Mizzima

MYANMAR MILITARY HOLDS ELECTION TALKS WITH ETHNIC REBELS

Myanmar's junta is holding talks with three ethnic rebel groups on staging elections in areas they control, a rebel spokesman said Friday last week, as the military prepares for polls the US has said will be a "sham."

The Southeast Asian country has about 20 ethnic rebel armies that have fought each other and the military for decades over autonomy and control of the drugs trade and natural resources in its borderlands.

Some have condemned the ouster of Aung San Suu Kyi's government when the military staged a February 2021 coup, and offered shelter and weapons training to the "People's Defence Forces" (PDF) that sprung up as resistance against the junta.

Leaders from the Shan State Progress Party, United Wa State Party and National Democratic Alliance Army -- which have largely stayed out of the post-coup conflict -- are holding three days of talks in capital Naypyidaw, state media said Friday.

The three groups control swathes of territory that have been relatively calm since the coup, which has plunged much of the country into turmoil.

They and the junta discussed on Thursday the "political needs of the groups and... building a Union based on democracy and the federal system", according to the Global New Light of Myanmar.



Photo: Myanmar state media

The military "asked us to let them hold free and fair elections in our area", a spokesman for SSPP, which controls territory in northern Shan state, told AFP.

"For us, we will not oppose their election."

A spokesman for the UWSP did not respond to AFP's request for comment.

With a standing force of around 25,000, the UWSA is one of the world's largest non-state militaries, conscripting a member from each household in its autonomous enclave on Myanmar's northern border with China.

China remains a major ally of the Myanmar junta and has refused to label the military's power grab a coup.

The military met with five smaller ethnic rebel groups last month, who later released a joint statement supporting the junta's plans to hold polls.

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing on Tuesday repeated the military's plans to hold polls during a speech to mark Myanmar's Independence Day, though he gave no details about when they would be held.

Across Myanmar, there are regular clashes, with almost daily reports of killings of low-level junta officials, though details are often murky and reprisals follow swiftly.

The junta on Wednesday said its troops had repelled an attack in Kyainseikgyi township near the Thai border by PDF fighters and troops from the Karen National Union -- another major rebel group.

A spokesman from the KNU's armed wing later told AFP the military had called in air and artillery strikes and that eight of its fighters had been killed.

AFP

PRISONER KILLED, DOZENS WOUNDED IN MYANMAR JAIL RIOT: JUNTA



A prisoner was killed and more than 60 wounded after a riot broke out at a Myanmar prison west of Yangon, the junta said on Saturday.

The riot at the prison in Patheingyi started after guards confiscated a mobile phone from an inmate on Thursday night and took disciplinary action, the junta said in a statement.

About 70 prisoners escaped from their cells and damaged property on Friday morning.

Prisoners used sticks, bricks and pieces of cement to attack security forces, the junta said.

Authorities tried to bring the situation under control but negotiations failed and they resorted to force.

“The authorities fired guns to break up the crowd and bring the riot under control,” the statement said.

The junta said one prisoner was killed “amid fighting” and 63 inmates were wounded along with two police and nine guards.

Local media described the dead inmate as

a political prisoner and BBC Burmese said he was on terrorism charges.

The junta flagged the launch of an investigation into the incident.

Last week, the junta announced it would free more than 7,000 prisoners to mark the 75th anniversary of Myanmar’s independence from Britain.

More than 2,700 people have been killed since the military seized power and more than 13,000 people are detained as part of a crackdown on dissent, according to a local monitoring group.

In July last year the regime executed four prisoners including former lawmaker Phyo Zeya Thaw and democracy activist Kyaw Min Yu -- better known as “Jimmy”.

It was the first use of the death penalty by the Myanmar state in around 30 years and sparked worldwide condemnation.

Human Rights Watch says Myanmar prisons are notorious for harsh conditions and their alleged use of torture.

AFP

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CHINA SLAMS 'UNACCEPTABLE' COVID CURBS ON TRAVELLERS FROM ITS TERRITORY



Air travellers in China.
Photo: EPA

China called the mounting international restrictions on travellers from its territory “unacceptable” on 3 January after more than a dozen countries placed fresh Covid curbs on visitors from the world’s most populous nation.

The United States, Canada, Japan and France are among the countries insisting all travellers from China provide negative Covid tests before arrival, as concerns grow over a surge in cases.

China’s steep rise in infections comes after Beijing abruptly lifted years of hardline restrictions last month, with hospitals and crematoriums quickly overwhelmed.

But Beijing has pushed ahead with a long-awaited re-opening, last week announcing an end

to mandatory quarantines on arrival in a move that prompted Chinese people to plan trips abroad.

“Some countries have taken entry restrictions targeting China,” foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told a regular briefing.

“This lacks scientific basis and some practices are unacceptable,” she added, warning China could “take countermeasures based on the principle of reciprocity”.

Asked about China’s reaction, France’s Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne defended the new rules.

“I think we’re performing our duty in asking for tests,” Borne told franceinfo radio.

“We will continue to do it.”

The rules imposed affect all travellers coming from China -- not just Chinese nationals -- while Beijing continues to restrict inbound visitors and not issue visas for tourists or international students.

Countries including the United States have also cited Beijing's lack of transparency around infection data and the risk of new variants as a reason to restrict travellers.

China has only recorded 22 Covid deaths since December and has dramatically narrowed the criteria for classifying such deaths -- meaning that Beijing's own statistics about the unprecedented wave are now widely seen as not reflecting reality.

Shanghai overwhelmed

As health workers nationwide battle a surge in cases, a senior doctor at one of Shanghai's top hospitals said 70 percent of the megacity's population may now have been infected with Covid-19, state media reported Tuesday.

Chen Erzhen, vice president at Ruijin Hospital and a member of Shanghai's Covid expert advisory panel, estimated that the majority of the city's 25 million people may have been infected.

“Now the spread of the epidemic in Shanghai is very wide, and it may have reached 70 percent of the population, which is 20 to 30 times more than (in April and May),” he told Dajiangdong Studio, owned by the Communist Party mouthpiece People's Daily.

Shanghai suffered a gruelling two-month lockdown from April, during which more than 600,000 residents were infected and many were hauled to mass quarantine centres.

But now the Omicron variant is spreading rampantly across the city.

In other major cities, including Beijing, Tianjin, Chongqing and Guangzhou, Chinese health officials have suggested that the wave has already peaked.

In neighbouring Zhejiang province, disease control authorities said Tuesday that there had

been one million new Covid infections in recent days and that the province was entering a peak plateau.

Chen added that his Shanghai hospital was seeing 1,600 emergency admissions daily - double the number prior to restrictions being lifted - with 80 percent of them Covid patients.

“More than 100 ambulances arrive at the hospital every day,” he was quoted as saying, adding that around half of emergency admissions were vulnerable people aged over 65.

At Tongren Hospital in downtown Shanghai, AFP reporters saw patients receiving emergency medical attention outside the entrance of the overcrowded emergency ward on Tuesday.

The corridors overflowed with dozens of elderly patients lying on beds crammed together, hooked up to IV drips.

At another hospital, AFP witnessed an exchange between a woman and an older man, both jostling for a drip.

“I was here first,” she said. “I’m here to get a needle too.”

‘Enormous challenge’

Chinese officials are now readying for a virus wave to hit the country's underresourced rural interior, as millions of people prepare to travel to their hometowns for the week-long Lunar New Year public holiday beginning January 21.

National Health Commission official Jiao Yahui admitted that dealing with the expected surge in rural areas would be an “enormous challenge”.

“What we are most worried about is in the past three years nobody has returned home for Lunar New Year but they finally can this year,” Jiao told state broadcaster CCTV on Monday.

“As a result, there may be a retaliatory surge of urban residents into the countryside to visit their relatives, so we are even more worried about the rural epidemic.”

AFP

NEW INDONESIA CAPITAL IMPERILS ANCIENT EDEN WITH 'ECOLOGICAL DISASTER'



The twisting road that leads to Indonesia's future capital is lined with dense rainforest and pockets of plantations, punctuated every so often with monkeys enjoying a laze out on the tarmac.

Located in eastern Borneo - the world's third-largest island - Nusantara is set to replace sinking and polluted Jakarta as Indonesia's political centre by late 2024.

But the two-hour drive from Balikpapan city to the sweeping green expanse of Nusantara's "Point Zero" reveals the scale of the new capital's potential impact on a biodiverse area that is home to thousands of animal and plant species.

With construction set to ramp up this year, environmentalists warn building a metropolis will speed up deforestation in one of the world's largest and oldest stretches of tropical rainforest, estimated to be more than 100 million years old.

"It's going to be a massive ecological disaster," Uli Arta Siagian, forest campaigner for environmental group Walhi, told AFP.

The island that Indonesians call the "lungs of the world" - shared with Malaysia and Brunei - is home to long-nosed monkeys, clouded leopards, pig-tailed macaques, flying fox-bats and the smallest rhinos on the planet.

But by 2045, the Indonesian government says Nusantara will host 1.9 million residents, more than twice Balikpapan's population, importing a wave of human and industrial activity into the heart of Borneo.

The relocation to the 2,560-square-kilometre (990-square-mile) area follows capital moves by Brazil to Brasilia - considered an urban utopia failure - and Myanmar to the ghost town of Naypyidaw.

Drastic changes to the

land's topography and the man-made disasters that could follow "will be severe and far more difficult to mitigate compared to natural disasters", said Siagian.

Indonesia also has one of the world's highest rates of deforestation linked to mining, farming and logging, and is accused of allowing firms to operate in Borneo with little oversight.

The government, however, says it wants to spread economic development - long centred on densely populated Java - around the vast archipelago nation, and to move away from Jakarta before the city sinks due to excessive groundwater extraction.

'Working with nature'

Indonesian President Joko Widodo has pitched a utopian vision of a "green" city four times the size of Jakarta where residents would commute on electric buses.

His city authority chief, Bambang Susantono, presented the initial plan to journalists in mid-December, pledging carbon neutrality by 2045 in what he dubbed the world's first-ever sustainable forest city.

Architect Sofian Sibarani is in charge of creating a master plan for the new city, outlining everything from road maps to a transit system. He insisted that his plan envisaged "minimum changes to the environment".

Sibarani spoke of a metropolis that appears out of the jungle, rather than replaces it.

“We are trying to create (a city that is) working with nature instead of working against it,” he said.

Initial projects include a parliament, workers’ homes, a dam, a grand mosque and a presidential palace shaped as the towering mythical bird Garuda.

Experts, including Sibarani, however have warned authorities against breakneck building.

“My concern is if you rush this, we may compromise,” he said.

‘Erased our traces’

Nusantara could also displace generations-old Indigenous communities.

Sibukdin, a local Indigenous Balik tribe leader who goes by one name, sat in a wooden house on land marked for the city as he expressed fears the development will drive away his people.

Like other Indigenous groups in Borneo, thousands of Balik tribe members rely on the forest to meet their daily needs.

More than 90 percent of the forest the tribe uses for hunting and foraging has already been lost to commercial activity since the 1970s, Sibukdin said.

A nearby tribal cemetery was demolished because of the dam project, leaving him “heartbroken”.

“It erased our traces,” he said.

While officials have vowed to respect Indigenous rights and compensate those affected by Nusantara, provincial officials said they would verify all land claims and only accept ownership proof.

Sibukdin said not all Balik tribe areas had been formally recognised.

“When the new capital comes, where else can we go?” he asked.

Threat to animals

While Susantono said the first stage would be finished by next year, the city will not be completed for decades.

The project will cost 466 trillion rupiah (\$30 billion), with taxpayer money expected to cover about 20 percent, according to a government estimate.

Jakarta has been wooing potential investors, including Saudi Arabia and China, with hefty tax breaks to cover the cost.

It has secured the backing of three property developers to fund housing worth 41 trillion rupiah (\$2.6 billion), Nusantara authority secretary Achmad Adiwijaya told AFP.

But funding has proven elusive, with few commitments announced. Japanese tech conglomerate SoftBank pulled its backing for the project in March without elaborating.

That left Indonesia with an uphill battle to swiftly relocate and find the money to open Nusantara’s doors by

the time Widodo leaves office, raising fears Jakarta could cut corners.

Eka Permanasari, urban design professor at Monash University Indonesia, warned that there was still a lot of “homework that needs to be done”.

Life is already changing for the worse for some of the area’s animal inhabitants.

At an orangutan sanctuary home to around 120 apes on land marked for Nusantara’s future expansion, illegal encroachments have intensified since the capital’s location was announced.

“Mines, land speculators, they encroach on our place,” said Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation (BOSF) chief executive Jamartin Sihite.

Around 40 percent of the BOSF-run sanctuary’s 1,800-hectare reforested area has been damaged in recent years, including by an illicit mine built there, Sihite said.

The rise in activity threatens all sorts of animals and vegetation in this ancient forest.

Agus Bei, who runs a mangrove reserve, warned cutting down these green stretches for profit would leave an indelible mark.

“The next generation will only be able to hear about their stories,” he said, standing in the shade of the mangrove trees he protects.

AFP

UN RIGHTS CHIEF ON MYANMAR REFUGEES AND A FUTURE OF 'KINDNESS, EMPATHY AND UNITY'

Days after the latest sea rescue of Rohingya refugees by Indonesian fishing crews, UN human rights chief Volker Türk appealed at the end of December for greater regional protections.

Expressing deep sadness that more than 200 Rohingya – who fled military persecution in Myanmar in 2017 – have died trying to cross the Andaman Sea from Bangladesh this year, Mr. Türk said that the boats used to make the crossings are not only “overcrowded and unsafe” but also “left to drift for days on end without any help”.

Heartfelt appeal

This year alone, more than 2,400 Rohingya have attempted the sea journey.

And with no sign in sight of the crisis ending, the UN rights chief urged more countries to assist in their safekeeping.

Specifically, Mr. Türk urged States to coordinate proactive search and rescue operations, disembark Rohingya refugees on their territories, and ensure their protection.

He also called on regional and countries globally to help Bangladesh support the over one million Rohingya refugees who have sought protection there since 2017.

“An urgent solution must

be found to enable the voluntary return of all Rohingya, with full respect of their dignity and human rights as full and equal citizens of Myanmar”, underscored the High Commissioner.

Turning the page to a new year

At the close of 2022, the senior UN official reflected on “the story we’d like to write for our future”.

“My hope for next year is that we lead our lives, individually and collectively, with kindness, empathy, and unity. In how we relate to each other. In our homes, neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, [and] online”, he said in his look ahead message for 2023.

‘Story of hope and unity’

Mr. Türk reminded recalled that if human rights are not protected “in the little places”, they lack meaning anywhere.

He argued for the protection of women’s rights at home and in public, saying that women and girls must have “full equality and freedom from discrimination”.

Children’s eyes must also be opened to the mistakes of the past, so they can “write a story of hope and unity” to create a better world in which “we celebrate diversity, convinced that we are stronger together than we are

apart”, added the UN right chief.

Guided by humanity

He hoped for a future of online expression, protected from hatred and disinformation with consideration for other viewpoints; respectful disagreements; and embraced diversity.

“Think of the person on the other side of the screen”,



urged the High Commissioner, reminding that “there is no place for dehumanizing the other by using reductionist labels or identity politics”.

“I hope our shared humanity will be our guide”.

Unified forces

Mr. Türk regarded human rights as “the force that come in and unify us”, bringing everyone “back to the fundamentals of who we are, of human dignity and to what connects us all with each

other”.

He argued that one person’s pain ultimately hurts everyone and underscored the importance of safeguarding the rights of current and future generations.

“Let’s treat our planet with the kindness and the humility it deserves. And let’s make sure that actions to safeguard our environment are grounded in the human rights of all”.

According to the senior UN official, this requires bravery and

the courage to listen and speak up when others are being wronged, to live in a space in which everyone can safely exercise their rights in justice and dignity.

“As we approach the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights next year, let us strive to make the world more dignified”, concluded the High Commissioner. “A world where everyone’s rights are respected”.

Courtesy of UN News



Rohingya picked up on the coast of Indonesia. Photo: AFP



Photo: Mizzima

KAREN STATE

KNLA joint forces overrun two Myanmar junta bases in Karen State's Kyainseikgyi Town. Local news source said that the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and resistance forces in Karen State attacked and occupied the Military Council's Infantry Battalion 283rd and Infantry Battalion 32nd based in Kyainseikgyi Town on 4 January in the early morning. Locals also reported that soldiers from the junta's Infantry Battalion 283rd, Infantry Battalion 32nd, and Infantry Battalion 284th are conducting military operations at front-line camps in Wallay, Myawaddy District, and Phayarthonezu, Kawkareik District, while the KNLA and resistance forces attacked the battalions at the same time. Although the KNLA joint forces attacked and occupied the Infantry Battalion 283rd and Infantry Battalion 32nd, a fierce battle continues at Infantry Battalion 284th base, according to the KNLA. "There are many casualties on the side of the Military Council. We also captured lots of soldiers and their relatives. We also seized the arsenal of the Infantry Battalion 32nd," a local source told Mizzima. According to a KNLA soldier, Daw Thiri Wai, the wife of Major Kyaw Zin Oo, the battalion commander of the 32nd Infantry Battalion, and many junta soldiers were detained. The Military Council is carrying out airstrikes around Kyainseikgyi, and the fighting is intensifying. The Karen National Union (KNU) has yet to issue a statement about the battles at Kyainseikgyi, and Mizzima is still investigating and monitoring the situation. Similarly, KNU Brigade (6th) control area of Phayarthonezu town in Kawkareik District, KNLA joint forces have occupied two Border Guard Force (BGF) camps under the Military Council in Taungzun village since 31 December, and fighting is still raging there.



THREE EAOS MEET JUNTA'S PEACEMAKING COMMITTEE

Three ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) attended a meeting with the Union Peacemaking Committee (UPC) of the junta on 5 and 6 January, according to state media.

The three EAOs are the United Wa State Party (UWSP), the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) and the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP).

The meeting started a few days after Deng Xijun, new Chinese special envoy to Myanmar, met the junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. The new Chinese special envoy also recently met representatives of seven EAOs the UWSA, the NDAA, the SSPP, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Arakan Army (AA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) before he met Min Aung Hlaing in late December.

Political analysts said that China's involvement is related to China's business interests. The three EAOs are based in northern Myanmar near the border with the Asian giant. So, conflicts in northern Myanmar can also impact China's national security and business interests.

But SSPP said that their meeting with the peacemaking committee is not related to the recent visit of the new Chinese special envoy to Nay Pyi Taw. They are just continuing discussions with the junta's committee, said the group.

Details of the discussion are not yet known.

The state media said, "they discussed the issues of amending the basic articles of the Constitution (2008) in building a Union based on democracy and the federal system."

MYANMAR ALLOCATES 170 BILLION KYAT FOR SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES

Military junta's Deputy Union Minister of Planning and Finance Maung Maung Win said that his government granted allocation of 170 billion kyat for establishing a MSME (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises) Development Fund from its supplementary budget for 2022-23 financial year.

The junta has already approved this fund and it would be used for development of micro, small and medium enterprises in the country and also for holding exhibitions, giving short-term and long-term soft loans with low interest rate for these MSMEs as a priority, he added.

The Military Council established the Fund for Uplifting of National Economy with 400 billion kyat and now they added a new fund of MSME Development Fund for micro, small and medium enterprises in the country.

The Military Council chief said that the allocation of MSME Development Fund and COVID-19 Special Loans Fund was their attempt to uplift and bring recovery to the national economy, which was declined during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Myanmar's national economy encountered the worst ever decline and slowdown after COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup and people are facing severe economic hardships.



Photo: EPA

CHINA-MYANMAR BORDER TRADE GATES TO REOPEN 8 JANUARY AFTER 3-YEAR COVID CLOSURE

Border trade merchants said that Sino-Myanmar border trade gates would be reopened on 8 January after closure for three years because of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Man Wein gate, Nandaw (palace) gate, Sinphyu (white elephant) gate, Pangsai gate in Muse-Jiegong trade zone will be reopened after being closed for three years.

Currently only the Kyinsankyawt gate is open and border trade is being conducted through this gate.

Chinese officials have given the green light to reopening of these gates.

Kyinsankyawt gate has been operating under strict restrictions and conditions.

At these border-trade gates reopened by China, the traders can cross freely from 8 am to 11:30 pm China standard time daily and they can export their commodities with prescribed regulations.

A border trade merchant said that after reopening of these border-trade gates people

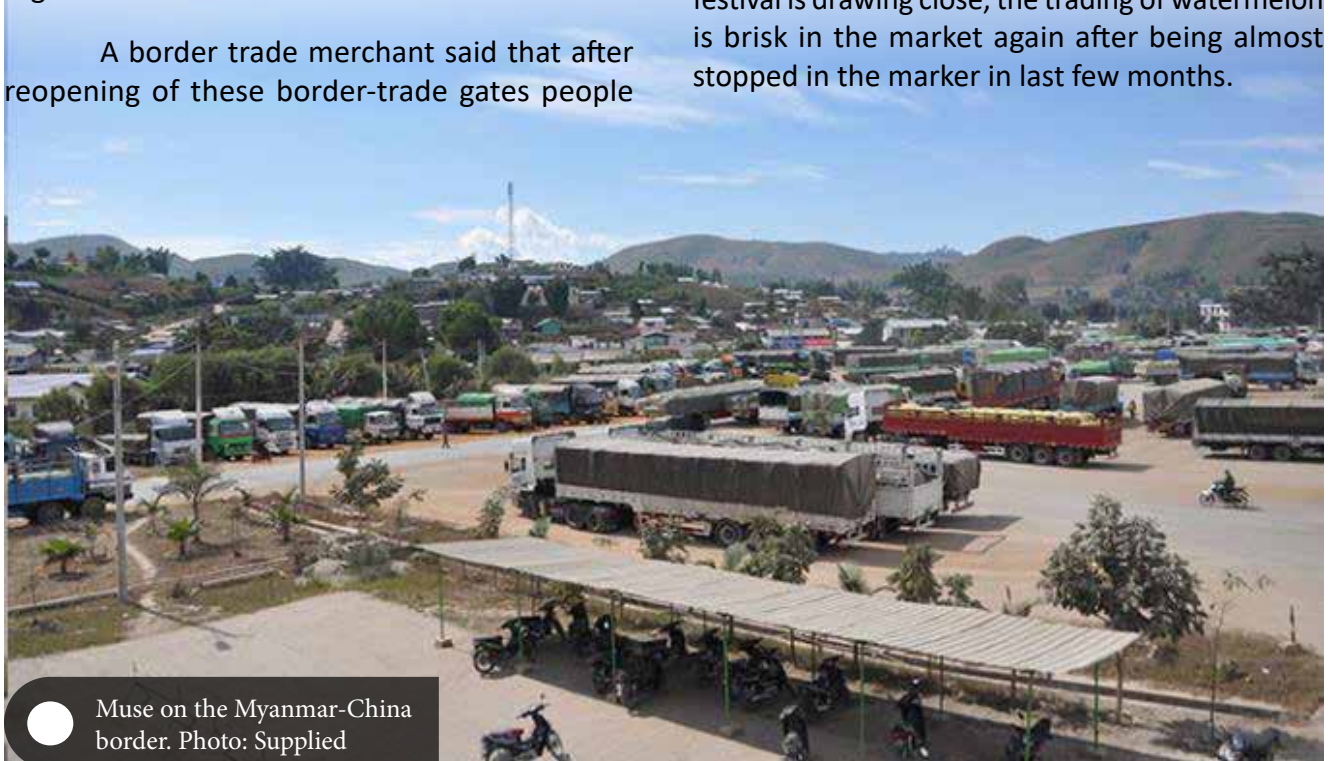
could move freely through them and costs for trading would fall too which would make the commodity prices fall.

After China closed all of these gates because of COVID outbreak, the border trade between two countries fell by nearly 65% and in some months, trade was almost stopped.

Currently only Kyinsankyawt gate was opened in Muse, the border town, so that only 130 trucks could move through this gate daily for trading and after reopening of all of these gates, thousands of trucks will be able to move, the border trade merchants said.

Among these gates which will be reopened, Manwein gate which had the highest flow of trucks and goods with 500 trucks daily is included so that trading between two countries will be better and the local residents will get more job opportunities too.

Currently as the Chinese lunar New Year festival is drawing close, the trading of watermelon is brisk in the market again after being almost stopped in the marker in last few months.



Muse on the Myanmar-China border. Photo: Supplied

TRUE MONEY SEVERS TIES WITH AGD AND JOINS HANDS WITH MAB



Thai Company True Money announced they have severed ties with Asia Green Development (AGD) bank owned by Tay Za's son and will stop money transfer services with this bank.

True Money Myanmar officially announced that they had started working with Money Apex Bank (MAB) since 16 December 2022 instead of AGD, which is subject to economic sanctions by West and owned by the son of Myanmar crony Tay Za who allegedly has acted as an arms dealer and broker for the Myanmar military.

Thailand-based True Corporation started money transfer and banking services in Myanmar with AGD Bank in 2015.

True Money is the leading non-banking financial services company in Myanmar providing money transfer services.

True Corporation established True Money Company in 2003 in Thailand and True Money Myanmar in Myanmar in November 2014.

True Money is providing money transfer services in Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines.

Similarly, American financial service company VISA International announced in February 2022 that they had ceased working with AGD Bank.

The EU imposed economic sanctions on the Htoo Company group on 22 February 2022 for providing arms dealer services to the Myanmar Military Council. The UK imposed economic sanctions on the Htoo Company group on 2 September 2021.

Moreover, the US, UK and Canada imposed economic sanctions on Tay Za and his two sons Pyae Phyo Tay Za and Htoo Htet Tay Za on 31 January 2022.

Penrose Thitsa

RESIDENTIAL REAL ESTATE MARKET SIZE IN MYANMAR ESTIMATED TO INCREASE

The residential real estate market size in Myanmar is estimated to increase by US\$ 181.3 million from last year to 2027, according to a research of Technavio published in December. The market is estimated to grow at a CAGR of 3.97 percent during the forecast period.

Technavio is a leading market research company with global coverage.

“The growing residential sector in Myanmar is the key factor driving the residential real estate market growth in Myanmar. An increase in the number of residential buildings is a driving force in the residential real estate market in Myanmar,” said the research.

“The construction of residential spaces such as single-family homes, condos, cooperatives, duplexes, townhouses, and multifamily residences is on the rise in Myanmar. The residential construction industry is expected to witness robust growth during the forecast period, driven by growing urbanization and the standard of living in Myanmar.”

“Moreover, the concept of integrated living is rapidly growing in the residential sector, as home buyers have started investing heavily in residential projects with modern facilities, including shopping malls with multiplexes, schools, hospitals, leisure clubs, office blocks, and parks as home buyers are now looking to lead a more peaceful life that is self-sufficient and secure,” said the research.

The research said that technology adoption in the real estate sector was a key growth trend in Myanmar’s residential real estate market growth. “The adoption of technology is one of the growing trends in Myanmar’s housing market. The growing adoption of technology is improving residential properties,” said the research.

A resident in Yangon recently told Mizzima that as the value of the Myanmar currency has weakened, many people have bought real estate because they fear that their Myanmar currency Kyat will depreciate over time.

AT SUNSET

A woman runs on U Bein Bridge in Mandalay. Photo: AFP





ANCIENT BELIEFS

Myanmar military trumpets white elephant as right to rule



White elephants are rare and considered good luck. Photo: AFP

Though it is a pariah on the world stage and battling fierce domestic opposition to its rule, Myanmar's junta has found grounds for optimism — the birth of a rare albino elephant.

Since seizing power, the junta has crushed democracy protests, jailed ousted leader

Aung San Suu Kyi and been accused of committing war crimes in its bid to quell dissent.

But the birth of the elephant -- more milky-grey than white -- in western Rakine state last year is being portrayed by junta-controlled media as fortuitous.

Ancient rulers regarded

white elephants as extremely auspicious, and their appearance was taken as a symbol of righteous political power.

The pale pachyderm will feature on a special postage stamp released this week to mark the 75th anniversary of Myanmar's independence from Britain, state media said on Tuesday.

A set of gold commemorative coins bearing the animal's image is also already being cast for the occasion, another report said.



The tusker tot's highest-profile engagement so far was a meeting with junta chief Min Aung Hlaing in October, when the senior general bestowed it a name at a televised ceremony.

"Rattha Nandaka" comes from the ancient Pali words for "country" and "happiness."

To bolster the credentials of its newfound good omen, state media has insisted the beast has an almost impeccable pedigree.

According to the experts quoted, it possesses seven of the eight standard characteristics for an albino elephant, including "pearl-coloured eyes" and a "plantain branch-shaped back".

- 'The Powers of Nature' -

In Myanmar, where astrological charts are drawn at birth and fortune-tellers consulted for both daily and political decisions -- the craze for white elephants goes back hundreds of years.

Traditional chronicles tell of kings in Thailand, Laos and Myanmar -- then known as Burma -- warring to capture the beasts from rivals.

The ruinous cost of keeping them in appropriately lavish style gave rise to the modern expression in which a "white elephant" is a useless, if beautiful, possession.

One creature inherited by a 19th century Burmese king was waited on by thirty servants and dressed in a "fine red cloth plentifully studded" with rubies and diamonds, according to a visiting British official.

The king, who had usurped his brother, "would gladly hail the capture of a real white elephant in his own day as an assent from the Powers of Nature to his own legitimate royalty," the envoy added.

But the fortunes of the creatures are tied up with the ruler under whom they were captured.

Two elephants, once feted by a former junta, are now confined to a damp, out-of-the-way compound in commercial hub Yangon where they receive few visitors.

"Rattha Nandaka" will spend its days in a special compound for white elephants in military-built capital Naypyidaw.

But with swathes of the country still ravaged by fighting and the junta widely reviled, his birth has been met with public scepticism and scorn.

"It seems like they forgot to put suncream on," one social media user wrote about the baby elephant's more grey than albino appearance.

"Now it's black."

Black or white, another wrote, the baby was "now a prisoner".

AFP



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