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MONEY MATTERS

As the saying goes, money makes the world go round. And when it comes to the Myanmar civil war, it could mean the difference between winning and losing as the junta battles the resistance for the soul of the Golden Land.

Just how crucial money is to the combatants in Myanmar is laid out in a new report by the Crisis Group entitled “Crowdfunding a War: The Money behind Myanmar’s Resistance” – a study worth highlighting briefly here.

In a nutshell, the report highlights the challenges, why the issue matters, and what should be done by those keen to once-and-for-all free the country from brutal military rule.

As it outlines, Myanmar’s junta and the forces arrayed against it are locked in a battle over funding, both to raise their own revenue and to deny their opponents access to the same. The resistance has used new technologies alongside traditional mechanisms to get money and bypass regime restrictions on moving it, it notes.

What is crucial to understand is the junta’s financial reserves will play a big part in how the conflict in Myanmar unfolds, as will its adversaries’ ability to keep attracting donations. Regime restrictions designed to cut off funding to

resistance forces are also harming aid groups, thus worsening the country’s humanitarian crisis, with hundreds of thousands displaced and a growing number plunged further into poverty.

As Tom Kean, the Crisis Group’s Senior Consultant for Myanmar and Bangladesh says, the anti-military forces have harnessed the power of social media to successfully raise tens of millions of dollars, possibly hundreds of millions, for their struggle against the junta. The resistance has managed to move this money into and around the country under the nose of the regime, and there is little prospect of the junta being able to stop them.

However, the report notes that the resistance forces need to seek expert advice on the use of new technologies, notably on data security to protect people giving money. Given growing constraints on the delivery of humanitarian aid, donors should deal directly with local partners, potentially adjusting regulations that are unduly burdensome for these groups.

Kean cautions that the regime’s restrictions have had a major impact on humanitarian aid delivery, and as a result of this warns donors to deal directly with local partners as much as possible, and be more flexible in their operating and reporting requirements.

EDITORIAL

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WEEKLY

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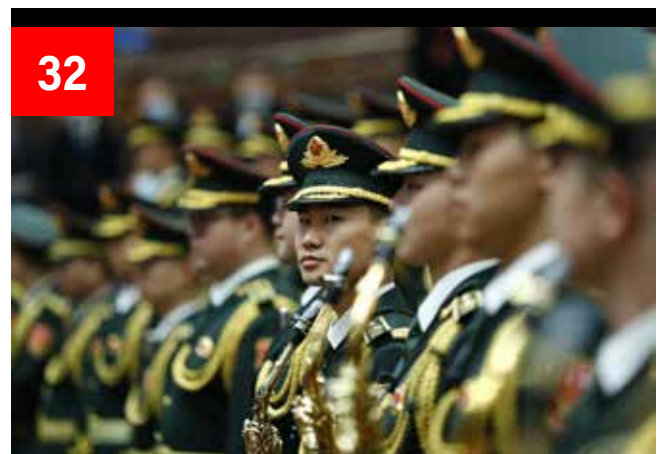
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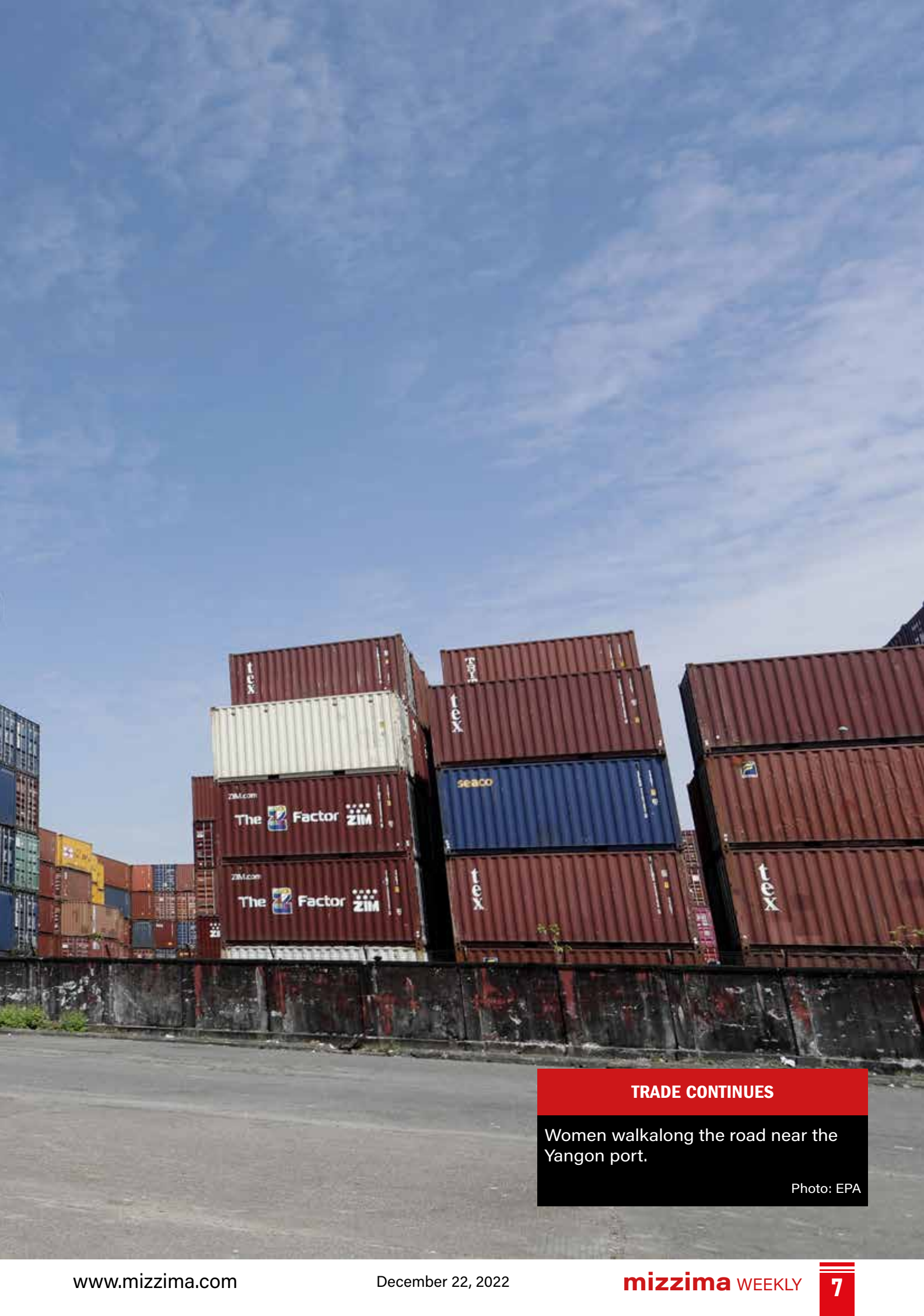
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Women walk along the road near the Yangon port.

Photo: EPA

THOUSANDS FLEE AS MYANMAR JUNTA TROOPS SET FIRE TO HOUSES IN PAUK TOWNSHIP

Military Council troops launched an offensive in Pauk Township in Magway, and an approximately 8,000 residents fled due to soldiers setting fire to houses in the villages, according to local people.

Starting at 8 am on 8 December, 80 soldiers set fire to more than 10 villages in Pauk Township, including

Kyatthike, Lallan, and Tharaphi. "They (junta) started fires in Kyatthike village at 8 am, then Lallan and Tharaphi, and the village of Lallan was almost completely destroyed," a Kyatthike villager told Mizzima.

"Three villages were destroyed in a row, and neighbouring villagers had to flee for safety." Locals estimate that there are approximately 300

houses in Kyatthike and more than 200 houses in Lallan and Tharaphi, respectively.

According to locals, the Military Council's offensive has forced approximately 8,000 villagers from Kyatthike, Lallan, Tharaphi, Ywartharaye, Ywartanshae, Thetyatlaypin, Thaputsu, Myaychar, Theechauk, Taungcho, and Daungtha villages had to flee.

FOUR MYANMAR JUNTA SOLDIERS KILLED IN SAGAING MINE ATTACK

Four junta soldiers were killed and six were injured when the military column they were in was attacked with landmines in Sagaing Region's Kalaywa Township at about 9:30 a.m. on 10 December.

The military column was travelling from Myaung Township in Sagaing Region when they were attacked near Singaung Mountain in Kalaywa Township by a group from

various local defence forces.

An official from one of the groups involved in the attack, the Civil Defense and Security Organization Myaung (CDSOM) said: "We launched an attack with remote-controlled landmines. According to our source, four of them were killed and six were injured. The soldiers in the column fired back with 40 mm mortar shells, but the local joint defense forces

were able to retreat unharmed."

The official also said that the military column has now entered nearby Phwar Saw Village and is still stationed in the village.

The local defence forces involved in the attack were: Tumi Fighter Force, CDSOM, 007 People Defence Army (Myaung), Sagaing District Battalion 6, and Sagaing District Battalion 2.

LGBTQ ACTIVIST RECEIVES 22-YEAR JAIL SENTENCE

LGBTQ activist Sue Sha Shinn Thant was sentenced to 22 years in prison by the Mandalay District Court on 12 December.

The 32-year-old transgender woman was charged under penal code Sections 505(a) and 505(b) for making statements conducive to public mischief, section 50(j) of the counter-terrorism law and section 302/114 for murder,

according to LGBTQ activist Saw Han Ngwe Oo.

"All I know is that she was sentenced to 22 years in prison under all those sections", said Saw Han Ngwe Oo.

Sue Sha Shinn Thant was arrested in downtown Mandalay on 2 October 2021 when the security forces crashed a car into her motorcycle. She is currently serving her sentence at

Mandalay's Obo Prison.

Sue Sha Shinn Thant was crowned Miss Trans Grand International Myanmar 2018 and was the Yangon Region's representative on the Myanmar Youth Policy drafting committee.

Since the February 2021 coup she was actively involved in the Spring Revolution campaign for democracy and fought against the military dictatorship.

JUNTA'S SAGAING REGION ARSON ATTACK DESTROYS 100 HOUSES AND KILLS ONE

Junta troops burned down about 100 houses and killed an old man when they started fires in Mae Oh Village in the east of Sagaing Region's Depayin Township on 10 and 11 December, according to locals.

A resident of the village said: "As far as I know, an old man was caught up in the fire in Mae Oh Village.

There were about 100 houses in that village and now only 10 houses are left. They burned down almost the whole village."

The junta soldiers also wrote a publicly visible message on a whiteboard that said: "The more you support the PDFs the more disasters will befall you and the more ashes there will be."

Previously, also in Depayin Township, the military also set fire to Thapyathar Village and Nyaung Hla Village destroying about 200 houses.

Since 1 December this year, Myanmar junta troops have been setting fire to villages in Depayin Township. Between 1 and 12 December they set fire to more than 20 villages in the township destroying more than 1,000 houses.

112,000 DISPLACED FROM 13 VILLAGES ON MONYWA TO PATHEIN HIGHWAY

Approximately 12,000 people have been evacuated from 13 villages along the Monywa to Patheingyi Highway in Sagaing Region since junta soldiers started entering the villages on 14 December.

The junta soldiers entered the villages in the middle of the night at about 2:30 a.m. on 14 December, causing locals to flee.

Amongst the villages entered by the junta soldiers were Layhtankone, Phaungkar,

Gonetaw, Donetaw, Shan kine and Tayar, all of which are on the Monywa to Patheingyi Highway.

Ko Thet Oo, a member of the Yinmarbin-Salingyi Multi-Village Strike Committee said to Mizzima: "Until now, the military council troops have raided the villages along the Monywa to Patheingyi Highway.

There have been no clashes between local defense forces and military soldiers as of yet. The junta soldiers stormed the villages, destroying houses

and stealing valuables."

According to locals the junta army deployed about 200 soldiers in the villages of Layhtankone, Phaungkar, Gonetaw, and Donetaw. "Because a terrorist military column entered the village people fled in cars and carts in the early morning.

The column has recently entered the villages near the Yamar Bridge and And they are also firing continuously along the Patheingyi-Monywa highway", said a local.

MYANMAR PILGRIMS RETURN

Religious tourists flock to Bodh Gaya again but India must look beyond tourism revenue

Subir Bhaumik

A former Burmese army chief visiting India once insisted that Delhi must include a two-day back- and -forth trip to Bodh Gaya in Bihar as part of his official itinerary. When interviewed by this writer for the BBC in Shillong, General Maung Aye said unambiguously: “When we want weapons or money, we go to China, but when we want to pray for salvation, we have to come to India.” For a devout Buddhist like Maung Aye, Bodh Gaya is the ultimate pilgrimage — like Mecca is for Muslims.

After a lull of two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Bodh Gaya in Bihar is buzzing again. International flights that were banned due to the pandemic have been landing at the airport in the town regularly with pilgrims from several countries including



Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. Additionally, domestic tourists too are arriving in significant numbers. The fact that the Dalai Lama will make a comeback to Bodh Gaya after two years has added to the lure of the pilgrimage site for Buddhists across the world.

For all practical purposes, Bodh Gaya is a cosmopolitan city. Not merely because most visiting monks and pilgrims are from outside the country



Indian monks pray at Bodh Gaya. Photo: AFP

but also because there are a large number of foreign temples where monks from senior clergy to the young ones — hailing from Buddhist-dominant countries, live and pray.

This unique aspect of Bodh Gaya presents a huge opportunity for India that goes beyond just capitalising on tourism. Bodh Gaya offers the potential to diplomatically leverage its historical-spiritual connect to the Buddhist world and meaningfully

operationalise India’s ‘Act East’ foreign policy and use it to augment its soft power.

Experts believe converting Bodh Gaya into an international city is a possible first step. Venerated Buddhist figures from East, Southeast Asia and elsewhere must find a place in the city’s governance structure, alongside representatives of the central and the Bihar state government.

The demand to leverage Bodh Gaya’s lure for

Buddhists globally is, however, not new.

“Years ago, I had suggested India should turn Buddha Purnima celebrations in the country into a global event to augment its soft power,” says Baladas Ghoshal, India’s leading expert on Southeast Asia.

“It is time to leverage India’s spiritual-historical connect to Buddhism to boost our profile in East and Southeast Asia,” Ghoshal said.

FLASHBACK



The former Burmese leader Than Shwe with his wife on a visit to Bodh Gaya in 2010. Photo: AFP

Perhaps, an international authority in Bodh Gaya can take the lead in organising such celebrations in what is Buddhism's holiest site. The government should develop the site as the spiritual capital of the world and use it to strengthen the civilisational bond between India and the Buddhist world.

Turning Bodh Gaya into a Buddhist Vatican will boost India's soft power at a time PM Narendra Modi has pitched strongly for peace diplomacy to end the Ukraine War.

The Buddhist Vatican

Among the four places held most sacred by Buddhists, the Mahabodhi temple complex in Bodh Gaya, located 111 km south of Patna, is the most visited and venerated. The other three, Lumbini in Nepal, where Buddha was born; Kusinagar, where he attained Mahaparinirvana; and Sarnath, where he gave his first sermon, are equally important. But Bodh Gaya is special.

It is here that Prince Siddharth from the Sakya

Kingdom, in what is now Nepal, turned Lord Buddha after attaining Enlightenment.

The Bodhi tree (*figus religiosa* or peepal) under which Buddha is believed to have meditated and attained enlightenment is located within the Sri Mahabodhi Temple complex and is carefully preserved. The Indian government has ambitious plans to develop a Buddhist tourist circuit centered around Bodh Gaya with World Bank funding. A large network of roads, flyovers and bridges are currently under-construction along the 500-km stretch from Kolkata to Bodh Gaya and then from there to other sites such as Nalanda and Vaishali. The Bihar government has completed — and loudly advertised — a major drinking water project for Bodh Gaya and some other towns around it.

“Soon we should have a decent physical infrastructure in place to handle a sharp rise in tourist arrivals which has begun to pick up after two years of Covid pandemic,” says Mrinal Chakma, director of Buddhahumi Parikrama, which handles Buddhist tourists mainly from outside India.

“Bodh Gaya and the Buddhist sites around it would have a totally different look within two years when the infrastructure projects are completed,” Chakma told The Federal.



Bodh Gaya by AFP

Tourist bonanza

In 2019, tourist arrivals at Bodh Gaya had crossed the half a million mark. However, when the Covid pandemic struck and governments started introducing lockdowns, the pilgrims stopped coming. But hopes of tourist arrivals soon touching pre-Covid levels have soared with tens of thousands of pilgrims starting to land in Bodh Gaya again.

The World Bank estimates an annual tourist business potential of \$6 billion (Rs 48,960 crore) for Bodh Gaya and the Buddhist Circuit around it.

“For Bihar’s economy, this would be nothing short of a boom if the government cuts down on needless bureaucratic red tape and handles the incoming Buddhist tourists with imagination,” RN Rai, who filed a public interest litigation to expedite the opening of a museum in Vaishali on Buddha’s life, said.

“It is not enough to build roads and flyovers. The focus should be as much on the ease of movement as on preservation of heritage which attracts Buddhist pilgrims from countries where Buddhism is still the dominant religion or widely practised,” Rai said.

Myanmar monks pray for peace

Most pilgrims and monks who come are from countries such as Japan and South Korea, Myanmar and Thailand, Bhutan and Bangladesh, Mongolia and Sri Lanka.

During a visit to Bodh Gaya in late November, this writer saw long queues at the Mahabodhi Temple and multiple groups of monks holding separate prayer sessions and religious discourses on the many grounds in the temple complex. A large group of Burmese monks present there said they were praying for peace in Myanmar.

Of the 52 temples in Bodh Gaya, only two are managed and run by Indian Buddhists. The rest are well endowed and run by foreign monks, some of whom are religious celebrities in their native countries. The temples proudly announce the countries that run them on the signboards so a visitor to Bodh Gaya can find the Nipponji Japanese temple, Wat Thai Temple and the Bangladesh Buddhist monastery among several others.

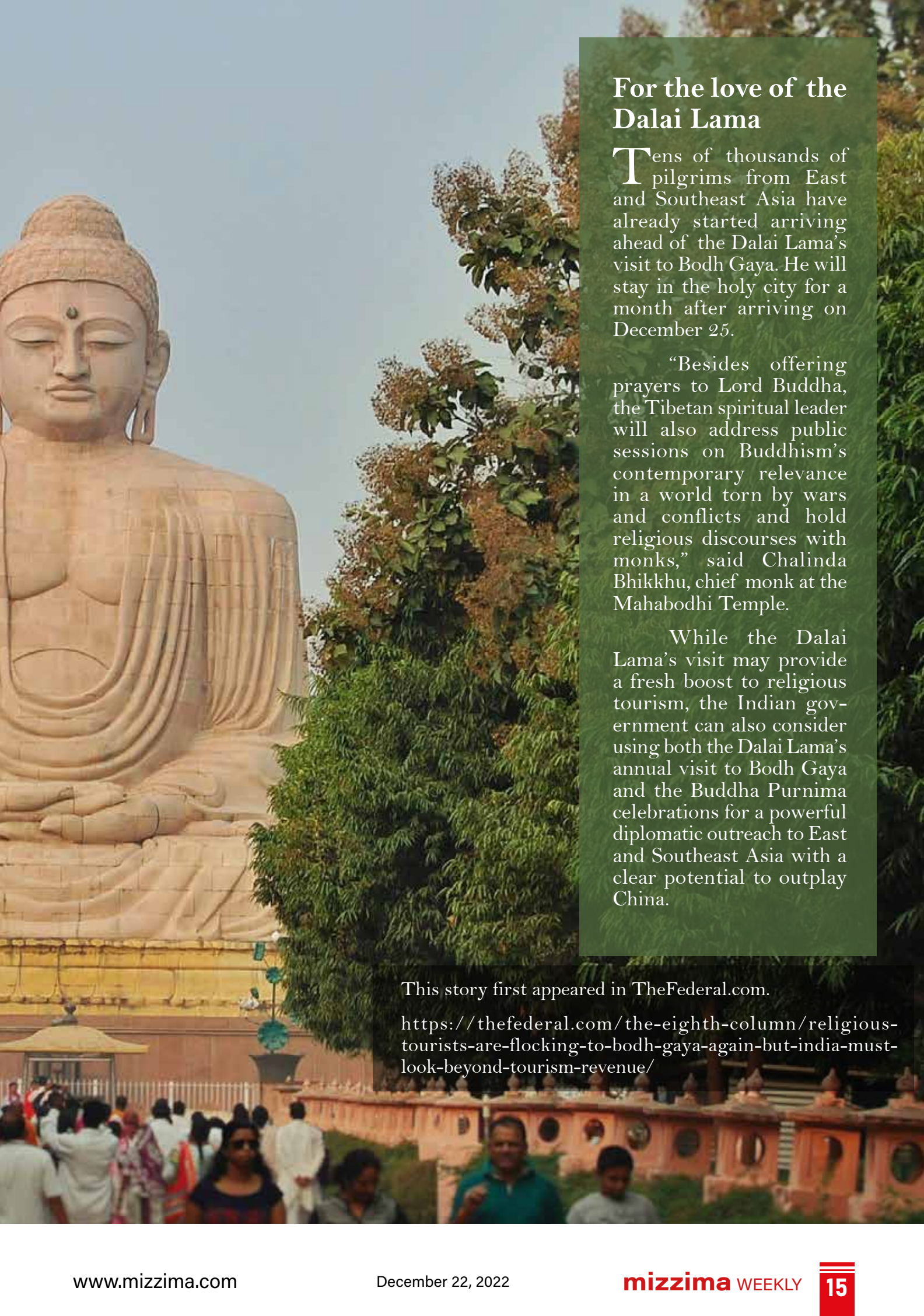
Even senior ministers from Communist Vietnam regularly visit the Vietnamese temple run by a Sorbonne-educated Buddhist scholar monk and offer prayers at the Mahabodhi Temple. The Thais run four temples in Bodh Gaya and a total of 37 in other key locations in the Buddhist circuit like Nalanda and Vaishali.

The 289-kgs pure gold dome atop the Mahabodhi Temple was made possible by donations received from Thai devotees. Thai and Japanese restaurants, even Bhutanese-Tibetan eateries and markets dot the holy town's landscape. Thai monk Dr Mahapran, running one of the temples, said that his precinct houses and serves more than 50,000 pilgrims from Thailand every year.

“But I want to request the Indian government not to charge high visa fees from visiting monks because they don't earn. One should not forget every monk brings hundreds of disciples, which means more tourists and business for the local economy,” Dr Mahapran said.



Bodh Gaya by AFP



For the love of the Dalai Lama

Tens of thousands of pilgrims from East and Southeast Asia have already started arriving ahead of the Dalai Lama's visit to Bodh Gaya. He will stay in the holy city for a month after arriving on December 25.

"Besides offering prayers to Lord Buddha, the Tibetan spiritual leader will also address public sessions on Buddhism's contemporary relevance in a world torn by wars and conflicts and hold religious discourses with monks," said Chalinda Bhikkhu, chief monk at the Mahabodhi Temple.

While the Dalai Lama's visit may provide a fresh boost to religious tourism, the Indian government can also consider using both the Dalai Lama's annual visit to Bodh Gaya and the Buddha Purnima celebrations for a powerful diplomatic outreach to East and Southeast Asia with a clear potential to outplay China.

This story first appeared in TheFederal.com.

<https://thefederal.com/the-eighth-column/religious-tourists-are-flocking-to-bodh-gaya-again-but-india-must-look-beyond-tourism-revenue/>

NUG REPRESENTATIVE TO UN ACCEPTED, MYANMAR JUNTA NOMINEE REJECTED

The United Nations (UN) has rejected the Myanmar junta's nomination for ambassador to the UN and instead it has decided to continue letting the National Unity Government representative, Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun continue as Myanmar's representative to the UN.

Kyaw Moe Tun was appointed in 2020 to represent Myanmar at the UN prior to the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar. The junta tried to fire him but he refused to leave the job and the UN General Assembly Credentials Committee refused to recognize the military's appointee.

On hearing that the UN had agreed to Kyaw Moe Tun's re-appointment, the director of the civil society organisation (CSO) the Myanmar Accountability Project (MAP), Chris Gunness said: "General Min Aung Hlaing has inflicted on the people of Myanmar violence of a scale not seen in southeast Asia since Pol Pot unleashed the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror on Cambodia.

"The junta's murderous campaign against its own people reached a new low in July with the execution of four prominent prisoners of conscience which was widely condemned by the international community and led to further diplomatic isolation.

"To highlight this barbarity, we projected the image of Ko Jimmy onto the UK Houses of Parliament."

According to General Assembly Resolution 396(V) (1950), when the question of a State's representation at the UN "becomes the subject of controversy ... the attitude adopted by the General Assembly [...] should be taken into account in other organs of the United Nations and in the specialised agencies".

"We urge the UN to ensure that Ambassador, Kyaw Moe Tun is afforded 'all rights and privileges and that the NUG is allowed to represent Myanmar in all UN bodies," said MAP's Protection Director, Damian Lilly.

He explained that: "At present, there are glaring inconsistencies, with the NUG Ambassador sitting in the General Assembly, the junta's agents at the International Court of Justice and Myanmar's seat



In accordance with Resolution 396(V) MAP demands that the NUG's representation is implemented across the UN system. MAP believes that the people of Myanmar have suffered enough injustice and being deprived of the right to representation at the UN by their legitimate government deepens this injustice.

left empty at the UN Human Rights Council. This latest move must pave the way to resolving these anomalies which are depriving 55 million people in Myanmar of the opportunity to be represented at the UN by the government which they elected by a landslide in 2020."

RSF CALLS FOR RELEASE OF MYANMAR REPORTER SITHU AUNG MYINT

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) expressed concern this week over the fate of Myanmar reporter Sithu Aung Myint over his lengthy sentence, calling for his release.

RSF says it is appalled to learn that the Burmese reporter and political columnist has been given an additional seven-year jail term, bringing his combined sentence to 12 years in prison.

RSF demands his release and sounds the alarm about the shocking recent increase in the severity of the sentences being passed on journalists in Myanmar.

As the NGO says, there seems to be no limit to how far Myanmar's military junta is ready to go in order to crush press freedom. After being sentenced to three years in prison on 7 October, and then another two years on 24 November, Sithu Aung Myint, was given a further seven years on 9 December on a charge of sedition under Section 124 (a) of the criminal code.

"The severity of the sentences imposed in a totally arbitrary manner on journalists such as Sithu Aung Myint is obscene," said Daniel Bastard, the head of RSF's Asia-Pacific desk. "The world cannot watch Myanmar sink deeper into terror in this way without doing anything. We call on Tom Andrews, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, to take action to toughen the international sanctions targeting

Myanmar's generals."

Ever since his first conviction for "inciting crime" on 7 October, RSF has denounced the Kafkaesque nature of the charges being brought against Sithu Aung Myint, who was arrested on 15 August 2021.

His latest sentence came just nine days after freelance reporter Myo San Soe was sentenced to 15 years in prison on 30 November on charges of "terrorism" and "funding terrorism". This is longest prison sentence that any journalist has received since the military retook power in Myanmar in a coup in February 2021.

Two weeks before that, two journalists working for reportedly pro-junta online media – Win Oo and Zaw Min Oo

were jailed for asking difficult questions during an information ministry press conference.

Since the military takeover, Myanmar has become the world's biggest jailer of journalists relative to population size, according to RSF's press freedom barometer. It is ranked 176th out of 180 countries in RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index, 36 places lower than in 2021.



Sithu Aung Myint

CSO CALLS ON COUNTRIES NOT TO FORGE TIES WITH MYANMAR JUNTA

Civil society organisation (CSO) Progressive Voice has issued a statement reminding other countries not to forge ties with the Myanmar junta.

It says that the only way to forge real ties with the Myanmar people and its government, is through the National Unity Government, ethnic revolutionary organisations and civil society groups.

Amongst those singled out for criticism are longtime friend of the Myanmar military and Japanese Special Envoy to Myanmar, Yohei Sasakawa, who has been in the headlines again, as



his outfit, the Nippon Foundation, took credit for brokering the recent ceasefire agreed between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar military junta.

The Nippon Foundation was set up by Yohei Sasakawa's father, Ryoichi, who was deemed a Class A War Criminal for his exploits during World War II.

Yohei Sasakawa had close ties with previous dictator, Than Shwe, enjoying hours-long dinner parties with him.

While lauded for brokering ceasefires and playing a behind-the-scenes role among ethnic armed organizations, his involvement in Myanmar's affairs has never contributed to meaningful change. Rather, they have served to appease the Myanmar military and to stymie opposition.



Photo: AFP

Another Japanese diplomatic effort is revealing about Japan's priorities-commercial interests.

Another Japanese diplomatic effort is revealing about Japan's priorities – commercial interests.

A former lawmaker for Japan's ruling, Liberal Democratic Party, Hideo Watanabe, met with the military's proxy party – the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) – new Chair, Khin Yi, as well as one of the junta leaders, Soe Win in the past few weeks. Crucially, Watanabe heads the Japan-Myanmar Friendship Association, which seeks to exploit business opportunities in the country, despite the damage the military is doing.

Progressive Voice contrasts these actions with those of the Japanese filmmaker, Toru Kubota, who was illegally imprisoned for three and a half months on trumped-up charges by the junta after attending and filming an anti-junta demonstration.

Upon his recent release he urged the Japanese Government to do more, and to “take a strong proactive approach to human rights violations in Myanmar and also to more proactively criticize Myanmar for that.”

He also reminded Japan of its close economic ties with Myanmar, and the need “to scrutinize very strictly whether such funds are being used by the military and are essentially being used to kill people.”

Kubota has seen and experienced first-hand the terrible violence the junta is inflicting upon the country, and his rebuttal of Japan's softly-softly approach is telling, says Progressive Voice.

The Progressive Voice statement also criticises the Chinese.

It says that a series of diplomatic engagements have also occurred with various Chinese dignitaries. These include the political consul at the Chinese Embassy visiting the USDP-head, Khin Yi, while the Chinese ambassador to Myanmar met with junta officials, Yar Pyae, and Ko Ko Hlaing, donating money for Myanmar's peace process.

What Myanmar's peace process does not need is money. It needs the junta to stop committing war crimes and crimes against humanity against the people of Myanmar. This includes ending airstrikes which are killing, maiming, and displacing whole communities, such as the airstrikes that were launched in Karen State or the bombs that were dropped on schools and monasteries in Sagaing and Magwe Regions, both in the past week.

Incredulously, rather than urging the junta to stop these atrocities, China has sold the Myanmar military six fighter jets which it will surely use to cause more death and destruction for Myanmar people.

Progressive Voice also says that China is not the only neighbor that prioritizes profit over the tragic violence and killings.

It points out that On the heels of the Sasakawa-brokered ceasefire, outlined above, the Indian consul met with the Junta's Rakhine Chief Minister to finalise the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project.

Another of the junta's allies is Russia, which is engaged in its own slaughter of civilians in Ukraine.

This comes after the Indian Foreign Minister visited Naypyidaw earlier in November to meet with Min Aung Hlaing, urging the revival of this major infrastructure and transport corridor project. In return India has offered to support Min Aung Hlaing's planned farce 'elections' which the junta does not have the legitimacy to conduct.

Closer ties between India and the junta are not lost on Myanmar's resistance forces. A people's defence force (PDF) attack on a junta convoy from India, allegedly transporting weapons, was launched on the weekend of 26-27 November.

Another of the junta's allies is Russia, which is engaged in its own slaughter of civilians in Ukraine.

The Myanmar military has long been a major buyer of Russian arms and military equipment, and this has increased since the coup attempt – the two countries seeing eye-to-eye on the acceptability of committing atrocities and putting a whole country into crisis.

Most recently, these ties have extended to pledging cooperation on the building of nuclear power plants while a Russian military

delegation also met with Min Aung Hlaing at the end of November, agreeing to more cooperation on 'anti-terrorism.'

The junta is continuously trying to succeed with its 'illegal and brutal attempt to grab power through deepening military, commercial, economic, and diplomatic ties with powerful regional neighbors, according to Progressive Voice. It believes that these countries are backing the wrong horse.

It says that not only is it morally reprehensible to lend any type of support to the junta, but the military does not have control of large swathes of the country, is destroying the economy, losing on the battlefield, and facing increased defections from a demoralized military.

The Myanmar people will not forget who its friends are when the revolution succeeds, and who supported their fight for a federal democratic future.

According to Progressive Voice this is of course, not limited to states, and perhaps this shows more than ever who are the allies in this fight. It is not businesses, states, or multilateral institutions, all of which have been ineffective at taking concrete actions or worse, supporting the illegal junta, but the people-to-people solidarity, such as that shown by filmmaker Kubota, that provide the moral, political, and material support for Myanmar's Spring Revolution.

CPJ SAYS JAILING OF MYANMAR JOURNALISTS HAS ENTERED A HARSH PHASE

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has warned that journalists in Myanmar are under increasing attack. In the following commentary by Shawn Crispin, the CPJ Senior Southeast Asia Representative, CPJ assesses the difficulties faced by journalists.

Myanmar's military regime has doubled down on its repression of journalists as it tightens its grip on the country following its democracy-crushing coup on February 1, 2021. After arresting scores of journalists to block coverage of its abuses and resistance to the takeover, its second year in power saw the handing down of harsh prison sentences in a bid to silence and eliminate the country's few remaining independent media outlets.

The Committee to Protect Journalists' annual prison census has found that at least 42 journalists were imprisoned in Myanmar for their reporting as of December 1, a repressive 40% rise on the number recorded by CPJ on the same date in 2021 and making it the world's third-worst jailer of journalists behind Iran and China.

Nearly half of those detained were sentenced in 2022, most under Article 505(a) of the penal code, an anti-state provision that



broadly penalizes “incitement” and “false news”, both ill-defined terms in law and arbitrarily interpreted by military-influenced courts to hand down two- and three-year sentences. Others were given harsher, longer sentences on terrorism and other anti-state charges, often for contacting or reporting on the activities of anti-military armed resistance groups, including newly formed “people’s defense forces”, or PDFs, which the junta deems as terrorist organizations, as well as decades-old ethnic armies fighting for autonomy and rights.

Myanmar's figure could be much higher. Many news organizations remain reluctant to identify their detained staff and freelancers to avoid the harsher sentences often meted out to journalists, particularly those who work undercover for military-banned media or who claimed to stop working

for their news organizations after the coup but continued to report secretly.

Since the coup, the regime has periodically released journalists held in pre-trial detention or serving sentences as part of broad prisoner amnesties. That included a November 17 release in which at least eight journalists were freed, including Japanese documentary filmmaker Toru Kubota, who was serving a 10-year jail sentence on sedition, immigration and other charges.

The releases, where certain news organizations' journalists are shown lenience while others are forced to serve their full sentences in severe prison conditions, appear to be aimed strategically to obscure the number of journalists the junta held at any given time and sow divisions among independent media groups, editors at news organizations with

jailed journalists said in interviews with CPJ.

“The independent media has been targeted since day one after the coup. It’s as if they prepared a list of editors and reporters to go after,” said Aung Zaw, founder and editor-in-chief of the independent The Irrawaddy. “Some were released [while] some were charged with high treason, terrorism, electronic crimes – all sorts of allegations that don’t make sense at all,” he added, noting three of his organization’s reporters were behind bars as of December 1.

Police arrest Myanmar Now journalist Kay Zon Nwe in Yangon on February 27, 2021, as protesters were taking part in a demonstration against the military coup. (Photo by Ye Aung THU / AFP) Aung Zaw, a former CPJ International Press Freedom Award recipient whose publication was banned just weeks after the coup, said the regime seeks to “divide and rule” the independent media, claiming that certain news organizations are allowed to operate unperturbed in de facto exchange for publishing “pimping propaganda” and “echoing what the regime says.”

Indeed, independent news groups that report from the conflict’s frontlines have been singled out for harsh harassment. Mekong News, a Shan State-based online news outfit covering crime, politics, war, and ethnic issues, has borne the brunt of the junta’s repression

with three of its journalists, namely Maung Maung Myo, Toe Aung and Htun Than Aung, now behind bars.

“Obviously, the junta’s campaign of jailing journalists aims to stop independent news reporting on its abuses and activities,” said Mekong News managing editor Nyan Linn Htet, who is currently in hiding from an arrest warrant issued in March and whose reporters now live and operate in exile or from underground inside the country. “But, in my opinion, it is not succeeding because independent reporting hasn’t stopped and has even become stronger than before the coup.”

In an early September show of solidarity, 33 independent local news groups issued a statement condemning a new press council formed since the coup, which they jointly accused of “spreading misinformation” and “propaganda messages” about Myanmar’s independent media while noting 140 journalists had by then been arrested since the military seized power. (CPJ emailed Myanmar’s Ministry of Information for comment but did not receive a response.)

The statement, which said that 11 independent media groups have had their publishing licenses revoked since the putsch, also said: “The military council is suppressing independent media groups and journalists in Myanmar in many different ways, impeding the right to

information and hinder freedom of the press and freedom of expression throughout the country.” Some have found other ways to continue publishing, from exile and underground bureaus inside the country.

Several of the state’s signatories, CPJ’s 2022 census shows, are among the outlets that have reporters languishing behind bars or were previously held and released.

“Imprisonment is routine for military regimes [but] this action represents severe suppression of freedom of the press,” said Kanbawza Tai News editor-in-chief Zay Tai, who told CPJ two of his released reporters, both freed in early October, plan soon to resume their news reporting. “The military can try but will never be able to stop our independent journalists.”

By Shawn Crispin for the CPJ

MYANMAR: SECRETIVE MILITARY COURTS SENTENCE SCORES OF PEOPLE TO DEATH



Since last year's military coup in Myanmar, military courts have sentenced more than 130 people to death behind closed doors, the UN human rights chief said on Friday, following the latest convictions announced this week.

"The military continues to hold proceedings in secretive courts in violation of basic principles of fair trial and contrary to core judicial guarantees of independence and impartiality", Volker Türk added, calling for the suspension of all executions and a return to a moratorium on death penalty.

Dealing out death

On Wednesday, a military court sentenced at least seven university students to death.

"Military courts have consistently failed to uphold any degree of transparency contrary to the most basic due process or fair trial guarantees", underscored Mr. Türk.

Meanwhile, on Thursday, reports revealed that as many as four additional death sentences were being issued against youth activists.

The UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) is currently

seeking clarification on those cases.

No justice

In July, the military carried out four State executions – the first in approximately 30 years.

Despite calls from the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the international community to desist, a former lawmaker, a democracy activist, and two others, were put to death.

Close to 1,700 detainees out of the nearly 16,500 who have been arrested for opposing last year's military's coup have been tried and convicted in secret by ad hoc

tribunals, sometimes lasting just minutes.

They have frequently been denied access to lawyers or their families and none have been acquitted.

The latest convictions would bring the total number of people sentenced to capital punishment since 1 February 2021 to 139 individuals.

Unaligned with ASEAN

Mr. Türk reminded that the military's actions are not in keeping with the ASEAN peace plan, known as the five-point consensus – that includes the “immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar” – which the regional bloc had re-committed to upholding last month during the ASEAN summit.

At the summit, Secretary-General António Guterres had warned that the political, security, human rights and humanitarian situation in Myanmar was “sliding ever deeper into catastrophe”, condemning the escalating violence, disproportionate use of force, and “appalling human rights situation” in the country.

Military courts have consistently failed to uphold any degree of transparency – UN rights chief

“By resorting to use death sentences as a political tool to crush opposition, the military confirms its disdain for the efforts by ASEAN and the international community at large to end violence and create the conditions for a political dialogue to lead

Myanmar out of a human rights crisis created by the military” the UN human rights chief spelled out.

Forced evictions

At the same time, the Myanmar military is forcibly evicting over 50,000 people from informal settlements and systematically destroying homes in what two UN-appointed independent human rights experts called a fundamental violation of core human rights obligations.

Without providing alternative housing or land, last month more than 40,000 residents living in informal settlements throughout Mingaladon, a township in northern Yangon, were evicted – with most given only a few days to dismantle the homes that they had lived in for decades.

After receiving eviction notices, the lack of options swayed some residents to remain while two reportedly committed suicide out of desperation.

“Forced evictions from Mingaladon are only part of the story. Violent arbitrary housing demolitions continue across the country”, the Special Rapporteurs on the right to adequate housing, Balakrishnan Rajagopal, and situation of human rights in Myanmar, Thomas Andrews, said in a statement.

‘Scorched earth’ policy

According to the experts, not only those living

in informal settlements in Myanmar's cities were subjected to forced evictions and housing demolitions.

“Homes continued to be systematically destroyed, bombed and burned down in orchestrated attacks on villages by the Myanmar security forces and junta-backed militias”, they said.

Since the military coup last year, more than 38,000 houses have been destroyed, triggering the widespread displacement of over 1.1 million people.

On 23 November, 95 of 130 houses in the Kyunhla Township were burned down when the Myanmar military set fire to the settlement.

These incidents follow patterns of violence used against Rohingya villages during genocidal attacks in 2017.

“The policies of scorched earth in Myanmar are widespread and follow a systematic pattern,” the experts said.

Special Rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not paid for their work.

Courtesy of UN News

EU SUPPORTS WFP'S FOOD INSECURITY EFFORTS IN MYANMAR



The European Union (EU) has contributed EUR 6.5 million to the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) towards its humanitarian assistance in Myanmar, where some 15 million people are facing moderate or severe food insecurity, according to a recent press release.

As the EU reports, the high costs of fuel and food – the latter has risen by 62 percent year-on-year – are putting staples like rice and cooking oil increasingly out of reach for many. Disruptions to supply chains and markets due to continuing conflict and displacement in parts of the country are threatening the day-to-day food security of millions more.

Working with communities and local non-governmental organizations on the ground, WFP will provide life-saving food, cash and nutrition support for the most vulnerable families, including those in areas affected by conflict. More than 800,000 people in the southeast, north-west and border areas, as well as impoverished peri-urban Yangon, will be reached thanks to the continued EU humanitarian support. The funding

was made through the EU's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, also known as DG ECHO.

"Conflict and food insecurity unfortunately always go hand in hand," said Stephen Anderson, WFP Country Director and Representative in Myanmar. "This timely EU humanitarian funding will help WFP sustain our assistance to families uncertain of where their next meal will come from. WFP food has been a lifeline for millions of people and will remain to be in the foreseeable future."

Since the start of 2022, WFP has reached nearly 3 million people with food, nutrition and livelihood support across the country. With access to populations in greatest need remaining largely constrained, the EU and WFP call for uninterrupted and sustained access, particularly to those uprooted by recent violence in Chin, Kayah, Magway, and Sagaing. It is imperative that the international community further steps up its financial support for the people of Myanmar.

U.S. ANNOUNCES ROHINGYA RESETTLEMENT PROGRAMME



The United States has announced the establishment of a resettlement program for vulnerable Rohingya refugees in collaboration with the Government of Bangladesh and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The programme, which will be part of the global U.S. Refugee Admissions Program is, according to a U.S. Department of State press release, one element of a broader comprehensive response to the Rohingya refugee crisis with the main focus on preparing the Rohingya for voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable return.

The United States will consider for resettlement referrals submitted by the UNHCR.

According to the press release the United States is proud of its long-standing support for displaced Rohingya, who have suffered genocide and crimes against humanity at the hands of Burma's military, and the U.S. has provided more than \$1.9 billion in humanitarian assistance for Rohingya refugees from Burma in Bangladesh and the region, those affected by ongoing violence in Burma, and communities hosting refugees from Burma.

It also says that in addition to supporting immediate basic needs, U.S. humanitarian assistance strengthens the resilience, economic security, and dignity of refugees and host communities by improving education and livelihood opportunities.

The United States is also supporting efforts to hold the perpetrators of the genocide and crimes against humanity against Rohingya accountable and to ensure justice for the victims of these atrocities.

According to the press release, the resettlement of the most vulnerable Rohingya from Bangladesh reflects the United States 'long-standing leadership on refugee resettlement in the face of an unprecedented displacement crisis as record numbers of people around the world have been forced to flee war, persecution, and instability.

The U.S. also thanked the Government of Bangladesh for being a generous host of refugees and for its support of this important resettlement initiative.

WHEN INDIAN AND CHINESE TROOPS BRAWL, WE ALL NEED TO WORRY

When troops clash from Asia's two principal powers, both with large nuclear arsenals, we all have cause for concern. The details of the border incident between Indian and Chinese soldiers earlier this month are sketchy and come more from Delhi than Beijing. It seems no one was killed. But the violence is a reminder of the deep tension and distrust between the world's two most populous nations, which extends not simply to differences about several sections of their shared international boundary but to regional influence as well.

The confrontation occurred mid-winter in a mountainous area of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which is sometimes referred to by the Chinese as South Tibet. India's defence minister accused the Chinese army of seeking to 'unilaterally change the status quo' by transgressing across what's known as the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the line which divides areas under Delhi's and Beijing's authority pending a full agreement on the border. A spokesperson for the People's Liberation Army riposted that a Chinese routine patrol was blocked by Indian forces 'illegally crossing the line'. As ever, both sides say the other started it.

According to Indian media reports, as many as 200 Chinese soldiers armed with

spiked clubs and taser guns – though not using firearms to limit the danger of escalation – fought hand-to-hand with Indian troops and some injuries were sustained. Indian Air Force planes are reported to have been scrambled in response to alleged violations by Chinese drones.

widely separated sectors – for sixty years China and India have been trying, and failing, to sort out where their border runs, and to add to the difficulties in many places the LAC is not fully delineated. The clash on 9 December occurred on a peak overlooking Tawang, a small Indian town with a historic



Indian police on guard outside the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi during a protest. Photo: EPA

Sometimes these border encounters are a result of accidents or misunderstandings; more often they are result of one side, and the general perception is more often the Chinese, pushing and probing and keeping the other on edge. The LAC stretches over more than 3,000 kilometres in three

monastery which has particular importance to Tibetan Buddhism. The sixth Dalai Lama was born there, and when the current Dalai Lama – who of course is based in India – visited the town and monastery five years ago, Beijing made clear its displeasure. Tawang has historically been part of

Tibet and in 1962, during a border war, the town briefly fell under Chinese control before its troops withdrew.

A nasty brawl between rival groups of soldiers based in inhospitable terrain might not seem a big deal. But it's part of a pattern. In 2020, there was a similar – but much more serious – clash between the two armies in the high altitude Galwan valley in Ladakh, more than a thousand kilometres west of Tawang and sometimes



described as Indian Tibet. This is in the western sector of the LAC. Again, no shots were fired, but a face-to-face encounter with improvised weapons - and reports of soldiers being shoved off narrow mountain ridges into the river below - left at least twenty Indian soldiers and four Chinese troops dead.

The incident deeply alarmed the Indian government and shocked public opinion there. A few months later shots were fired across the LAC in this sector for the first time in decades. While the immediate military stand-off was defused and talks initiated, the situation there is said to remain tense and both nations have deployed tens of thousands of troops in the area.

Further back, in 2017, there was major stand-off between the Indian and Chinese armies on the Doklam plateau, in (or near, depending on your view of where the borders run) Bhutan, a small nation which has close links to India. The spark was a dispute over China's construction of a road. Indian troops were deployed to stop the road building and eventually troops from both sides pulled back.

The persistence of these flare-ups points to a lack of political will in resolving issues about where the border runs. China may well feel that it has nothing to gain from making the concessions that would almost be certainly necessary for a full border agreement; but India has conspicuously failed to solve border problems on its other flank, with Pakistan.

Part of the problem is the legacy of the brief but bitter border war fought in 1962, a conflict that China won and cast a deep shadow over the closing years of Nehru's time as India's prime minister. Ever since then, China has held control of Aksai Chin, an area of almost forty-thousand square kilometres adjoining Ladakh,

which is desolately remote and has barely any inhabitants. India wants this region back, and the issue has been a big irritant in relations between the two countries.

That defeat in 1962 still inflects Indian diplomacy. While many would see India's main rival as Pakistan, the view within the Indian establishment is that while it can meet any Pakistani military challenge, the more potent threat comes from China. There is a deep unease in India about a more strident, prosperous and better armed China and what that might mean for the regional balance of power.

That has been heightened by China's more muscular regional policy as part of the 'Belt and Road' initiative. The enmity between India and Pakistan is so deep that Delhi would never imagine its western neighbour to be within its sphere of influence. But the development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, including about sixty-billion dollars of infrastructure projects, has underlined how deeply Pakistan is now dependent on China. Other nations in the region – including Sri Lanka and Myanmar – which India would like to regard as in its sphere of influence have also become closer to Beijing.

There is a real concern in Delhi that India will be encircled and constrained by China and its allies, and the punch-up in the heights above Tawang has added to that anxiety.

Andrew Whitehead is a former BBC India correspondent

CHINA RETAIL SALES PLUNGE IN NOVEMBER ON COVID WOES

China's retail sales plunged last month, official data showed last week, as Covid restrictions and a property market crisis hammered the world's second-largest economy.

The figures highlight the work ahead for the government as it moves away from almost three years of strict containment measures that have whittled growth and sent shudders through supply chains.

November retail sales sank 5.9 percent on-year, marking the second successive contraction, according to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS).

The figure was also much worse than the four percent shrinkage forecast in a survey by Bloomberg News.

The data also showed industrial production grew 2.2 percent on-year last month, less than half October's rate, while unemployment rose 0.1 percentage point to 5.6 percent.

China was the last major economy persisting with a zero-Covid strategy through harsh lockdowns and mass testing,

with authorities effectively abandoning the policy only last week after suffering an economic slowdown and mounting public anger.

November saw some of the highest infection numbers ever recorded in China, with as much as a quarter of the population under some form of lockdown by the end of the month, according to analysts' estimates.



“In November, local outbreaks spread to most provinces across the country, residents’ travel decreased and consumption scenarios were restricted,” NBS statistician Fu Jiaqi said in a statement.

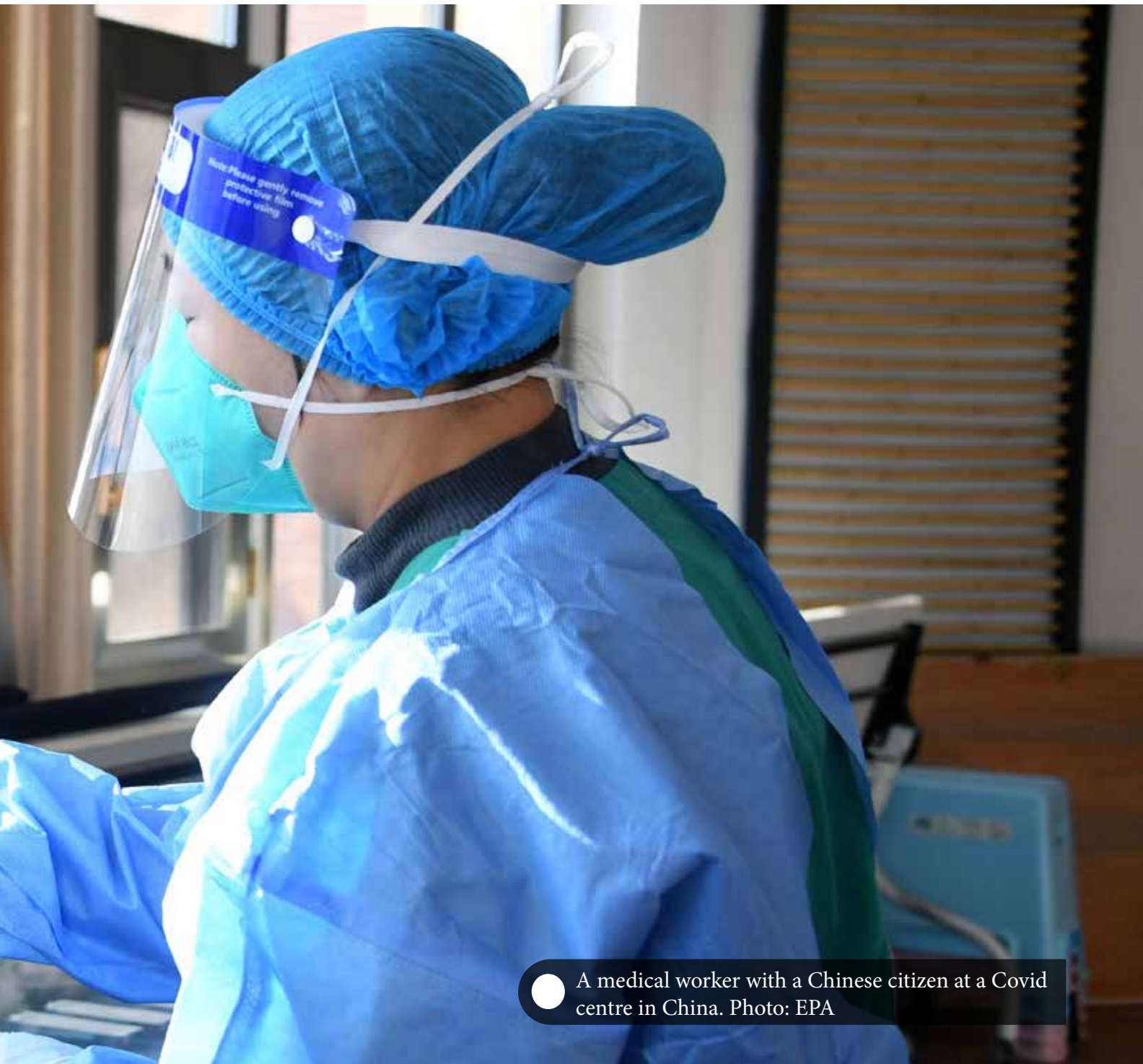
“The sales of non-essential goods and gathering-based consumption were significantly affected,” Fu said.

Chinese leaders have set an annual economic growth target of about 5.5 percent, but many observers think the country will struggle to hit it, despite announcing a better-than-expected 3.9 percent expansion in the third quarter.

A crisis rippling through China’s massive property sector has also weighed on

the economy, with developers defaulting on loans and struggling to raise cash after Beijing imposed widespread lending curbs in 2020.

AFP



● A medical worker with a Chinese citizen at a Covid centre in China. Photo: EPA

CHINA'S HEGEMONIC AMBITIONS FOR THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

Recently, the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) and the People's Government of Yunnan province hosted the China-Indian Ocean Region Forum on Development Cooperation in the Yunnan capital Kunming, on 21 November 2022. The forum's theme was 'Shared Development: Theory and Practice from

the Perspective of the Blue Economy'. It was chaired by Luo Zhaohui, the Chairman of CIDCA who was also the former Chinese Ambassador to India between 2016 to 2019.

According to the Chinese government, representatives of 17 states and three international organisations attended the meeting virtually. The countries included Indonesia,

Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan, Iran, Oman, South Africa, Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania, Seychelles, Madagascar, Mauritius, and Djibouti. Australia and the Maldives, which had received invitations from China preferred not to attend the meeting, though China claimed that representatives of both countries attended the meeting. Subsequently,



● EPA

however these countries issued press statements clarifying that their representation at the meeting was not official.

Needless to mention, India was not part of the meeting, though Beijing claimed that New Delhi was invited too. Addressing the forum, Luo underlined that “the Indian Ocean connects Asia, Africa and Oceania and serves as an important window and route that connects China and countries in the region to the rest of the world.” He added that China will strengthen cooperation with countries in the Indian Ocean region to grow the blue economy, and advance the implementation of the Global Development Initiative in the region.

Against the backdrop of recent setbacks that China has received in the region including in Sri Lanka and Pakistan, this China-Indian Ocean Region Forum is a clear attempt by Beijing to reclaim some of the lost ground. Given the history of Chinese investments in the region, this meeting can be perceived as another expansionist attempt by China to amplify its presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) by investing in ports and infrastructure in the IOR countries, especially in South Asia.

The CIDCA, which is an official Chinese agency, it seems has been established with a view to counter the strong influence that India holds in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) – an organisation with 23 member states and is well entrenched in the region. China

is expected to roll out more such initiatives in the future. Even though China is far from having the full capacity to steer moves against perceived adversaries in a conflict-like situation in IOR, its relentless efforts to enhance its operational capabilities have grabbed the attention of the key players in the region. This attention is inevitable as China is expecting to yield huge economic and strategic advantage through these growing military operational capabilities.

CIDCA can also be seen as trying to compete with the United States Aid with a special focus on littoral states. Since countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Pakistan are already suffering from the Chinese debt trap courtesy of the Belt and Road Initiative, it is possible that these countries may be looking at CIDCA hoping for further loans. The scope of this initiative is not just economic as media reports suggest that the People’s Liberation Army Navy is already mapping the IOR using its Yuan Wang series of space-tracking ships for a strategic survey. Sri Lanka is believed to be providing the essential logistical support for the growing Chinese naval footprint in the region through Hambantota port, leased to Beijing for 99 years. In addition, the PLA Navy already has a full-pledged naval base in Djibouti.

China is keen to retain its influence as the growing influence of Quad especially in terms of infrastructure financing seems to have unsettled Beijing. Therefore, it is keen

to raise alternative platforms or groupings which will help it to counter the United States and its partners in the region. China has repeatedly stressed that the Indian Ocean is not India’s ocean. It is clearly aiming to reap the vast strategic benefits that the IOR has to offer. The Chinese Communist Party is keen to enhance China’s military capabilities with a view to undertaking a series of military missions in the IOR.

Considering all the developments in recent months, it is quite clear that Beijing is determined to expand its economic, military and political influence in the region. However, it is not as easy as it looks. Its assertive attitude has driven away and in fact antagonised many of its allies and neighbours. These countries are finding value and are benefitting from the evolving cooperation of the Quad and also the existing institutions like IORA. In these circumstances, dominating the region will not be an easy task for China. Moreover, the US through a host of initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework is seeking to closely integrate itself in the region. So, clearly China will need to rethink its approach of not just luring its neighbours and smaller countries in the region but also shed its hostile outlook when it comes to other actors in the region.

This commentary was written for Mizzima by an independent analyst who wishes to remain anonymous.

INDIA-MYANMAR KALADAN PROJECT TO RESTART AFTER CEASEFIRE IN RAKHINE STATE

India's Kaladan project in Rakhine State will be restarted soon after it was suspended in the wake of the war that broke out in the state two years ago.

The Rakhine State Administrative Council or state government said that Myanmar has had a bilateral agreement with the Indian government to upgrade the existing Sittway port, revamping it from a port that is used for trade between the two countries to an international trading port as a part of their strategic Kaladan project.

This new port will be opened soon and the remaining parts of this project will be developed.

The Kaladan project started in 2011 with the building of ports and a waterway in Rakhine State capital city Sittway and Paletwa in Chin State and also the road connecting Paletwa and Mizoram State in India is being built as a part of this project.

Under this project, the agricultural produce and sea-food from Rakhine State will be transported to India by sea-going vessels from this port and the new roads will be built so that it will benefit Myanmar and also it can create job opportunities for the local people.

However, some local residents are worrying about losing their livelihoods after completion of the project as they are using small boats and vessels in this Kaladan River – which will see the movement of large vessels and restrictions on passage - besides the concern over the impact on the environment including fish stocks.

Currently the project of building Sittway and Paletwa deep-sea ports have been completed but the 109.2 Km-road connecting Paletwa and Myeikwa on the Indo-Myanmar border is still under construction.

Rakhine Administrative Council spokesman and State

Advocate General Hla Thein said that the upgrading of Sittway port in this Kaladan project to international port from the current bilateral trading port was to enable trade with regional countries.

A local businessman said that the State could enjoy many benefits if the Sittway port became an international trading port and hub but they had to wait and see how much this port could handle the international trade effectively.

India media reported that according to the India intelligence reports the Arakan Army (AA) had foothold along the border in Mizoram State of India with some of their bases.

But some opined that the project road connecting Mizoram State in India through Chin State would be subject to security problems as the situation in Chin State had been drastically changed after the coup by the junta, though there was an agreement for a temporary ceasefire with the AA.



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DRAMATIC INCREASE IN ANDAMAN SEA CROSSINGS, WARNS UN REFUGEE AGENCY

Unrefugee agency, UNHCR, on Friday, issued an alert over the dramatic increase in the number of people attempting to cross the Andaman Sea, from Bangladesh and Myanmar.

The Southeast Asia waterway is one of the deadliest in the world and more than 1,900 people have already made the journey since January - six times more than in 2020.

'Grave risks' at sea

"UNHCR warns that attempts at these journeys are exposing people to grave risks and fatal consequences, said UNHCR spokesperson Shabia Mantoo. "Tragically, 119 people have been reported dead or missing on these journeys, this year alone."

Most of those risking their lives are Rohingya refugees, who fled Myanmar in their hundreds of thousands in 2017, to escape military persecution.

In an appeal for help from Governments in the region, UNHCR said that the most recent arrivals included more than 200 people in North Aceh, Indonesia, where the authorities allowed them to disembark and provided shelter. Ms. Mantoo said the agency welcomed and appreciated their efforts.

UN support

Refugees who safely disembarked on the Indonesian coast from the two boats, a fortnight ago, are currently hosted, somewhat ironically, in a former immigration office in Lhokseumawe.

UNHCR, with UN migration agency, IOM and partners, is on the ground, the Spokesperson said.

"We are working closely with the local authorities to help support the refugees, including through registration, providing for their basic needs and working to ensure secure and adequate accommodation for the two groups."



Many more adrift

UNHCR has also received unverified reports of more boats with desperate individuals, adrift at sea, who require life-saving rescue and attention, she said.

With increasing levels of desperation and vulnerability forcing more refugees to make these deadly journeys, UNHCR and humanitarian partners continue to stress the need for increased regional and international cooperation to save lives and share responsibility.

Indonesia currently hosts nearly 13,000 refugees and asylum-seekers mostly from

Afghanistan, Somalia and Myanmar and should not be alone in rescuing and disembarking people adrift at sea, Ms. Mantoo added.

“It is imperative that States in the region uphold their commitments made in 2005 under the Bali Process to collectively find solutions for these desperate journeys”.

In 2016, Asia-Pacific governments pledged to do more to prevent people dying on such journeys, after 5,000 men, women and children were abandoned by people-smugglers in the Andaman Sea, and left adrift, starving and sick, for months.

Courtesy of UN News



Photo: UN News



Photo: Vlada

KARENNI STATE

Karenni Revolution Union battles Myanmar junta troops in Karenni State's Demoso Township. The Karenni Revolution Union (KRU) clashed with Myanmar junta troops near Konetha village, Demoso Township, Karenni State on 9 December. Military tensions have been building on both sides. On 6 December, Military Council troops launched a military offensive with three columns on the approach to Konetha village. This led to a battle between KRU and its ally Karenni generation Z (KGZ) on one side and the junta troops on the other. According to the KRU, the fighting between the two sides was intense that day, and four junta soldiers were killed or injured as a result of landmines planted by the KRU and KGZ forces. "One soldier from our joint forces was killed and another was missing as a result of the fierce battle. We then withdrew due to a lack of manpower and weapons. As the fighting may resume, please provide ammunition and weapons as soon as possible" a KRU official said, calling for support. Similarly, fighting continues in Dawkamee village, Demoso Township, between the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF) and its ally, the Karenni Army, and the Military Council troops.

KAREN STATE

Myanmar junta fires mortars into Karen State village. The Myanmar junta army fired mortars into Taung Kyar Inn Village in Karen State's Kawkaik Township at 7:30 p.m. on 11 December. Fortunately, no one was injured by the 120mm mortar shells the army fired into the village, but two houses in the west of the village were damaged in the attack, according to initial reports. A local resident said to Mizzima: "There were no civilian casualties. They [the junta] fired mortars even though there was no fighting between people's defence forces (PDFs) and junta soldiers at the time. The junta soldiers have closed Haung Tha Yaw Bridge, which connects Taung Kyar Inn Village to Myaunt Kyar Inn Village in Kawkaik Township, according to locals. They also said that there are currently 160 soldiers from Infantry Battalions 215 and 545 stationed at Taung Kyar Inn Basic Education School.

SHAN STATE

Village residents flee TNLA and junta fighting in northern Shan State. Residents of Manlong village, northern Shan State, have fled to Namsang Township due to the intensity of fighting between the Taung Kyar Inn National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Military Council army. At around 6 pm on 8 December, more than 50 Manlong residents fled to the Zayangyi Monastery in Namsang township. The elderly, a child, and a male patient were among those who fled, according to Sayadaw U Pyinnya Siri of Zayangyi Monastery. "Only Manlong villagers have fled to the monastery, including a month-old baby and many children under the age of ten, and there are also people who come to help with the food for the IDPs," Sayadaw U Pyinnya Siri said. According to local people, villagers from Pain Long, Manlong, and Sanyam villages in Namsang Township have also fled to nearby areas and the nearest city for safety. A day prior to the exodus, fighting took place near the TNLA base camp, which is also near Manlong village. The military council stationed in Namsang township also fired at least 20 times with heavy weapons and bombarded the base camp with helicopters. Local media report the junta forces were still firing heavy weapons at the TNLA base camp on 9 December.



Photo: Hong Sar for Mizzima

JUNTA PREVENTS ANTI-NUG DEMONSTRATION FOR UNKNOWN REASON

The junta prevented an anti-NUG and anti-PDF demonstration in Zabu Thiri Township, Nay Pyi Taw Council Area on the morning of 12 December, according to local news outlets.

Shortly before the planned demonstration in Nay Pyi Taw, a group of junta soldiers arrived at that place and prevented the group from staging the protest, according to a resident.

Although the junta has declared the exiled National Unity Government and armed resistance groups PDFs illegal and terrorist organizations, it prevented the planned demonstration of the nationalists. The reason for the junta's prevention was still unclear.

A group led by Naung Taw Lay from the pro-junta Myanmar National Post news outlet planned to stage the anti-NUG protest over the 'Tamu Incident' in which a female civilian was shot dead allegedly by PDF members in the town on 2 December. The video footage of the killing went viral on the internet.

The NUG said on 5 December that it had investigated in order to know whether PDF members were really involved in the case of the woman being killed in Tamu.

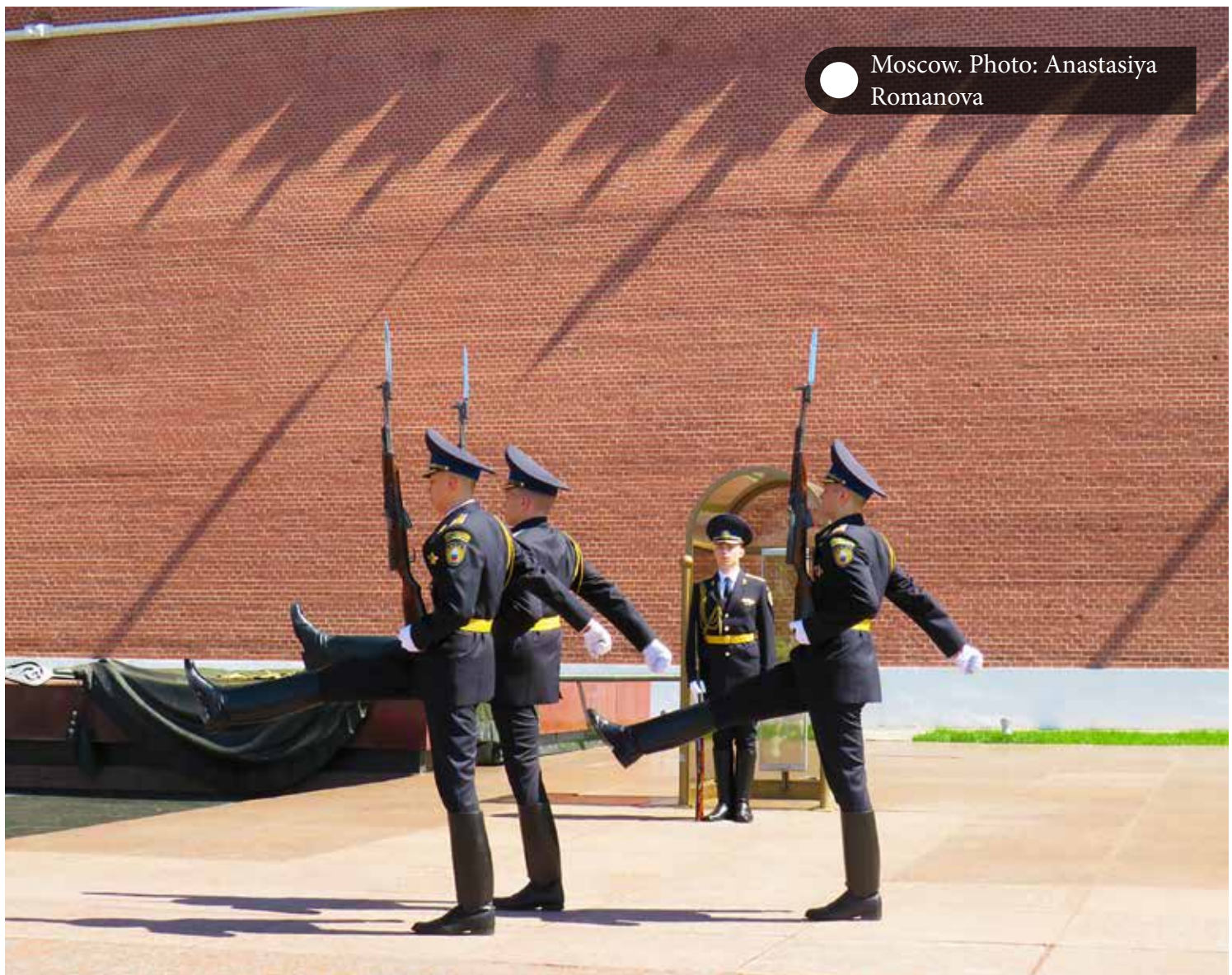
MYANMAR JUNTA HOLDS CEREMONY TO MARK NUCLEAR PROJECT WITH RUSSIAN OFFICIALS

The Myanmar junta held an event in Naypyidaw to celebrate its agreement with Russia's Rosatom State Nuclear Energy Corporation on 11 December, reports DVB.

According to regime media, the Russians will help establish a nuclear power plant in Myanmar.

The junta's Ministry of Electric Power and Ministry of Science and Technology signed a memorandum of understanding with Rosatom last July after Min Aung Hlaing met with Russian officials.

Russia and Myanmar have grown closer since last year's coup. Obtaining nuclear technology has long been an ambition of Burma's previous military juntas and was the subject of a 2010 DVB documentary film called "Burma's Nuclear Ambitions."



Moscow. Photo: Anastasiya Romanova

MYANMAR RAILWAY STAFF AND POLICE SELLING TRAIN TICKETS FOR INFLATED PRICES



Photo: Hakan Nural

Myanmar rail officials are saying that Mawlamyine to Yangon train tickets are sold out and then selling them on the black market for up to three times their face value.

The official price of a Mawlamyine to Yangon train ticket is 7,050 kyats but passengers are having to buy them on the black market from railway police and railway staff at up to 20,000 kyats.

On the same line ordinary tickets that officially cost 3,550 kyats are being sold for 7,500 kyats.

Currently, many people are choosing to travel by train between Mawlamyine and Yangon by train because people doing the journey by road face very long delays at the Nyaunkharshay X-ray checkpoint, said a train passenger forced to pay over the odds on the black market for a ticket between Mawlamyine and Yangon because there were no tickets available at the box office

After waiting in long queues to buy tickets most passengers were told that the upper-class tickets were sold out and they could only buy ordinary-class tickets. But, those upper-class tickets could still be bought from railway staff on the black market at increased rates.

A passenger said that because railway police and railway staff were selling tickets on the black market it was making it hard for passengers to buy tickets at their face value from the ticket office. Tickets go on sale three days before the day of departure, but passengers were finding that even when they tried to buy tickets three days in advance they were sold out.

Advance tickets are more expensive on the black market but if a passenger wants to travel that day, they are forced to pay an exorbitant price to buy their tickets on the black market.

CHINESE FIRMS' DELISTING RISK EASES WITH US AUDIT DATA ACCESS



● AFP

A US watchdog said last week that it secured “complete access” to inspect Chinese audit firms for the first time, temporarily easing delisting fears for many Chinese companies on American stock exchanges.

The Public Company Accounting Oversight Board’s announcement came amid worries that Chinese firms could be taken off United States stock exchanges if they did not comply with audit requirements -- a demand that places around 200 businesses at risk.

The statement marks a breakthrough in a longstanding dispute.

Congress in 2020 passed a law targeting Chinese companies, under which the US audit watchdog must be able to inspect audits of foreign firms listed on US markets.

While many foreign companies conform to the standard, this has not been the case for mainland China and Hong Kong firms.

China has long cited national security and confidentiality concerns for denying foreign regulators access to local accounting firms.

“For the first time in history, the (board) has secured complete access to inspect and investigate registered public accounting firms headquartered in mainland China and Hong Kong,” the oversight board’s Chair Erica Williams said in a statement on Thursday.

But she cautioned that the announcement “should not be misconstrued in any way as a clean

bill of health for firms.”

“This is the beginning of our work to inspect and investigate firms in China, not the end,” said Williams, adding that it will reconsider its determination if China obstructs access at any time.

The oversight board is continuing to demand complete access in China and Hong Kong moving forward, with teams making plans to resume regular inspections early next year, she said.

The China Securities Regulatory Commission said on Friday it looked forward to “carrying out audit oversight cooperation with our US counterparts in the years to come with enhanced mutual respect and trust”.

US regulators have accessed audit documents and taken testimony from accounting firm personnel, the CSRC said.

It was earlier reported that China had asked to redact certain details in the audit work papers.

Williams said inspectors were able to view the papers “with no redactions”, while the CSRC said it had made “proper treatment” to some data such as personally identifiable information.

Prominent US-listed Chinese firms include e-commerce heavyweight Alibaba, rival JD.com, internet giant Baidu and video platform Bilibili.

AFP

Norway's largest wealth fund GPFG removes Thailand's PTT over human rights concerns

Norway's sovereign wealth fund Norwegian Government Pension Fund Global (GPFG) has excluded the Thai oil and gas company PTT PCL (PTT) and its subsidiary PTT Oil and Retail Business PCL (PTTOR) from its portfolio due to concerns that the Thai companies' activities in the junta-ruled Myanmar could fund human-rights violations, according to Reuters and the official statement published on the website of the GPFG. Norway's \$1.3-trillion sovereign wealth fund has also axed Israel-based Cognyte Software Ltd due to "unacceptable risk" of human rights violations. PTTOR is a partner in a joint venture with the military-owned conglomerate Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) for the construction and operation of an oil terminal and a liquid natural gas (LNG) filling facility, said the statement of the GPFG. "In February 2021, the armed forces in Myanmar staged a coup d'état, after which the military intensified its extremely serious abuses of civilians. Through their activities in the country, PTT and PTTOR provide the armed forces with substantial revenue streams that can finance military operations and abuses," said the statement. The wealth fund said that the Thai companies' business partnerships with MOGE and MEC represents "an unacceptable risk of contributing to extremely serious norm abuses in the future". Another PTT unit, PTT Exploration and Production (PTTEP), said in March this year that it "recognises that equitable access to energy is a fundamental human right that all people are entitled to".





MAKING MERIT

A mother walks with her child in Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon.

Photo: San Htun

WOMEN OF SHAN STATE PHOTO EXHIBITION





*A photo exhibition
"Through Eyes
of Leadership:
Women of Shan
State" took place
at the beginning
of December
at the Bangkok
Art and Culture
Center.*

In addition, another Myanmar-related photo exhibition took place at the center entitled: "KNOWLEDGE MARKETPLACE- Bangkok 2022: Exchanging Ideas for a Democratic Myanmar".



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