

EDITORIAL: Perils of relying on ASEAN to sort out the Myanmar crisis

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PERILS OF RELYING ON ASEAN TO SORT OUT THE MYANMAR CRISIS

We were reminded last week by the Counselor of the US Department of State Mr Derek Chollet of the important role the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) plays in attempting to bring peace and end the crisis in Myanmar.

Chollet, speaking to regional media in an online press conference timed to coincide with the second anniversary of the Myanmar military coup, stressed the support the US government and world partners place in ASEAN and its drive to hold the Myanmar junta accountable under the Five-Point Consensus – signed by the ASEAN members including Naypyitaw.

Washington supported the ASEAN Chair Cambodia in 2022 and supports Indonesia this year noting that ASEAN “deserves a lot of credit for maintaining a very principled and very tough stance to ensure that Myanmar is not represented at a political level at any senior-level meetings.”

Frankly, the game of international politics can be frustrating and there is little doubt the Myanmar people are grinding their teeth over the ASEAN peace process given the noticeable lack of progress. While a host of international players and regional analysts put their trust in the ASEAN consensus and the pressure they feel is being brought to bear on Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and his military cohorts, there is little doubt the junta generals - while miffed in public - are likely laughing behind the scenes.

Even for those who believe the ASEAN process is working, it is not a fast process. No surprises

here. ASEAN mechanisms have been shown to take time. This means we can expect the Myanmar crisis to continue through 2023 and possibly for several more years even in the “best case” scenario.

What this means is that if the US and other countries and donors are going to ask the Myanmar people to play the “long game” under the ASEAN peace process, then they need to be willing to fund the needs of the Myanmar people, including independent media, until that process can play itself out and peace is unveiled at the end of the tunnel.

If the US, EU and other international players are to support the ASEAN crisis-resolving process – one that history shows typically avoids interference in the local affairs of member states – then there will be a need for robust international dialogue, tough sanctions, substantial humanitarian aid, and sufficient funding for Myanmar media and other components of civil society.

As Chollet notes: “We are in constant conversations with our colleagues in ASEAN about their collective approach to this crisis. We strongly support the Five-Point Consensus, and we are very much looking forward to working with Indonesia as this year’s chair in ASEAN just as we worked very closely with Cambodia last year and Brunei the year before in terms of the ASEAN approach to this crisis.”

This is all well and good. But if the US and other international players are to rely on ASEAN’s approach to the Myanmar crisis, they need to be vigilant and supportive in the coming months and years.

EDITORIAL

mizzima WEEKLY

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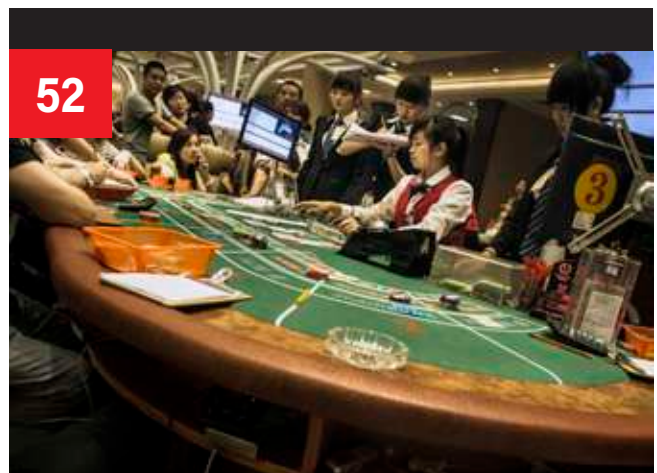
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COVER PHOTO OF PROTESTERS IN YANGON IN 2021 BY AFP



Protest in Bangkok

Myanmar protestors outside the Myanmar Embassy on 1 February 2023, on the second anniversary of the coup, make their feelings known. Photo: AFP



NUG GIVING 1.2 BILLION KYATS SUPPORT TO CDM CIVIL SERVANTS

The National Unity Government in Myanmar has announced it has provided over 1.2 billion Myanmar Kyats to support 40,000 civil servants participating in the non-violent Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).

The funding was provided through relevant departments to address issues of emergency, living conditions, and childbirth, but the NUG is having difficulties supporting all CDM participants, according to NUG spokesperson Nay Bhone Latt.

He said: ““Honestly, we cannot afford to support all CDM staffs sufficiently nationwide.”

Since the February 2021 coup about 185,000 civil servants have joined the CDM, according to the NUG.

“Civil servants from almost every

department are participating in the CDM. There are hardly any departments that have no staff participating in the movement,” said Nay Bhone Latt.

CDM civil servants, who have refused to work for the military regime, face financial difficulties and security issues as the second anniversary of the coup approaches.

The junta has targeted and oppressed CDM staff. Over 13,689 people have been arrested, including CDM participants, and over 2,174 people have been sentenced to prison terms, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

The NUG Ministry of Defence has also called on military soldiers, police, and civil servants unable to join the CDM to help the revolution by becoming whistle-blowers.

NUG AND NORWEGIAN PARLIAMENTARIANS DISCUSS PUNISHMENTS FOR MYANMAR WAR CRIMES

A delegation from the exiled National Unity Government met with Norwegian Parliamentarians at Norway’s parliament, The Storting and discussed punishments for the Burmese junta’s crimes against humanity and war crimes, on 31 January.

The NUG delegation led by Aung Myo Min, the NUG Minister of Human Rights also discussed points such as providing humanitarian aid, food and medicine via Myanmar’s land borders, as well as Norway’s support for the NUG and Myanmar’s democracy movement, according to the official Facebook page of the NUG Representative’s Norway Office.

The NUG delegation also urged Norway to continue supporting Myanmar’s opposition at the UN Security Council.

Further details of the discussions are unknown.

Similarly, on 22 November 2023, NUG

officials held an online meeting with Norwegian parliamentarians.

Myanmar is one of four partner countries in Asia receiving Norwegian development aid, according to the Norwegian Embassy in Yangon.

According to the embassy’s official website: “Globally it [Myanmar] is one out of ten partner countries for long-term development. However, following the 2021 coup, Norway needed to reassess our approach. The Norwegian government froze our direct bilateral projects with the government from 2021.”

According to the NUG it is building stronger diplomatic ties with other countries around the world.

As of 9 September 2022, the NUG had offices in the Czech Republic, England, Norway, France, South Korea, Japan, India, and Australia, according to Than Lwin Times, a Burmese online media outlet.

NE WIN'S GRANDSON'S OFFER FREE BUS RIDES ON COUP ANNIVERSARY

A Yangon bus company owned by the grandsons of former military dictator Ne Win offered free bus rides on 1 February, to celebrate the second anniversary of the Myanmar coup.

The bus company, Omni Focus Bus Lines is owned by Aye Nay Win and Kyaw Nay Win, two of Ne Win's grandsons.

"As usual, when I went to work this morning on the YBS 20 [bus], I put money in the fares box on the bus but today it was shut with tape. I assumed that the driver would collect the money or that I would have to give it to him directly, so I tried giving him the bus fare, but he said that for today only it was free. There was also a message on the bus's front mirror saying that you can ride for free today. The remaining Omni Focus bus lines are also free too", said a commuter.

According to locals, this was an attempt by the Omni Focus Bus company to persuade as many commuters as possible out onto the streets because so many people in Yangon were taking part in the Silent Strike on 1 February to mark the

coup's second anniversary.

A commuter said: "Among the bus lines that run in Yangon city, Omni bus lines are good. Passengers journeys happen without a hitch, even though it is run by grandsons of former Military dictator U Nay Win."

Omni Focus buses have also been attacked by defence forces since the coup.

On 27 October, 2021, an Omni Focus YBS 20 bus was bombed while parked in front of a gas station near the Yoegyi stop in Hlaing Tharyar Township.

Four days later, on 31 October, another YBS 20 bus was set on fire near the Sinmalite stop in Kyimyindaing Township.

Also, two Omni Focus Bus Lines YBS 65 buses were blown up and damaged by two remote-controlled mines, by the Special Task Agency of Burma (STA) on 13 January 2022 .

Omni Focus Bus Lines currently operates more than 300 buses in Yangon.

NUG SELLING MINING RIGHTS FOR MOGOK GEM MINES

The National Unity Government (NUG) in exile has invited investors both at home and abroad to invest in two gem-mining blocks in Mandalay Region's Mogok, as part of its fund-raising efforts for the ongoing Spring Revolution.

The NUG is offering ten-year mining rights for Bawlongyi mining block No. 1 and Dattaw mining block No. 2. for about \$200,000 USD each under a bilateral investment plan, where the investors will own 49% of the blocks and the government will own 51%.

The potential income of the blocks has been estimated at \$10 million, but the investors will only be able to start mining on the plots after the Spring Revolution has succeeded.

The NUG Minister of Planning, Finance and Investments, Tin Tun Naing, emphasised that the gem mining sector has previously only benefited a small group of people under past dictatorships, but the NUG will now work in the interest of the people.

He said that the NUG has reportedly raised over \$100 million from sales of treasury bonds, real estate owned by coup leader, Min Aung Hlaing and planned apartment blocks seized by the military in major cities.

According to the NUG most of the money raised this way has gone to fund the Spring Revolution.

TIGHTENING THE SCREWS

Myanmar junta brings in
new rules for resistance
strongholds





Protesters burn tires on the street in Yangon in this flashback to March 2021 during the initial Spring Revolution protest period. Photo: AFP

Myanmar's junta has introduced tough new measures in resistance strongholds under which people accused of treason and "spreading false news" will be tried by a military court, state media said 3 February.

In the 37 townships affected by the measures, no appeals will be allowed for convictions handed down by military tribunals, with the exception of the death penalty, which must be approved by junta chief Min Aung Hlaing, according to the state-run Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since a 2021 coup ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's government, and a subsequent crackdown on dissent has sparked fighting across swathes of the nation.

The latest announcement signals the junta is looking for new ways to stamp out resistance in areas where anti-coup fighters are active.

The Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper said the expansion was done "to exercise more effective undertakings for ensuring security, the rule of law and local peace and tranquility".

Under the new measures, military tribunals will hear criminal cases ranging from high treason to a ban on "spreading false news" which the army has used to jail dozens of journalists.

The 37 townships lie across eight states and regions - Sagaing, Chin, Magway, Bago, Mon, Karen, Taninthayi, and Kayah.

Junta troops have clashed regularly with anti-coup People's Defence Forces in those areas, as well as established ethnic rebel groups.

At least another 11 townships - six in commercial hub Yangon and five in second city Mandalay - were already under similar laws.

The decision came a day after state media



The town of Thantlang in Chin State on fire after attacks by the Myanmar military in 2021. Photo: AFP



People's Defence Force fighters in Pale, Sagaing. Photo: AFP

announced a six-month extension to a state of emergency, delaying elections the junta had pledged to hold by August.

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing acknowledged that more than a third of the country's townships are not under full military control, in comments reported by state media on Wednesday last week.

More than 2,900 people have been killed in the military's crackdown on dissent and over 17,000 arrested, according to a local monitoring group.

Junta admits does not have full control

Myanmar's military does not "fully control" more than a third of the country's townships, state media on Wednesday last week reported junta chief Min Aung Hlaing as saying, as authorities extended a state of emergency for six months.

Of the total 330 townships, 198 are "100 percent stable," said Min Aung Hlaing, while the remaining 132 require varying degrees of "security attention."

"Although there is no protest at this

moment, violence is still there," he said according to state broadcaster MRTV.

"Terrorists are terrorising, disturbing, killing and destroying" and hampering plans to hold elections, he said.

Following its putsch the military has clashed with established ethnic rebel groups as well as dozens of People's Defence Forces that have sprung up to fight back against the coup.

Analysts say some anti-junta groups have surprised the military with their effectiveness.

Mizzima/AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA EXTENDS STATE OF EMERGENCY, EFFECTIVELY DELAYING POLLS

Myanmar's military authorities announced a six-month extension to a state of emergency on Wednesday last week, effectively delaying elections the junta had pledged to hold by August, as they battle anti-coup fighters across the country.

The Southeast Asian country has been in turmoil since the army's power grab in 2021, and a subsequent crackdown on dissent has sparked fighting across swathes of the nation while tanking the economy.

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing acknowledged that more than a third of the country's townships are not under full military control, in comments reported by state media on Wednesday.

The admission came on the second anniversary of the putsch, as the National Defence and Security Council agreed to prolong the state of emergency declared when the generals toppled Aung San Suu Kyi's government.

The "state of emergency will be extended for another six months starting from February 1", Acting President Myint Swe was quoted as saying by state media.

Extending the state of emergency pushes back the date by which elections must be held, according to the country's constitution.

The army ruled Myanmar for decades after independence from Britain in 1948, and dominated the country's economy and politics even before the coup.

And while Min Aung Hlaing reiterated a pledge to work towards nationwide elections, he made it clear the military would maintain its prominent role.

The military will always be the "guardian of the interests of the state and people... under whichever government comes," he said, according to MRTV.



PDF fighters carry a home-made mortar in Sagaing. Photo: AFP

Deserted streets

The announcement came as streets emptied and shops closed across Myanmar in protest on the anniversary, with Western powers launching a fresh broadside of sanctions against the generals.

Streets in the commercial hub Yangon were largely deserted from late morning, AFP correspondents said, after activists called for people across the country to close businesses and stay indoors.

Roads leading to the famous Shwedagon pagoda - a Buddhist shrine that dominates Yangon's skyline and is usually thronged by worshippers - were largely deserted.

Around 200 supporters of the military marched through Yangon's historic downtown in the early afternoon, while in Bangkok some 400 anti-junta protesters staged a noisy rally outside the Myanmar embassy.

The empty roads were in contrast to the huge protests seen in the weeks after the coup in 2021, which petered out in the face of a bloody crackdown by security forces.

Min Aung Hlaing said that while the street demonstrations were gone, "violence is still here", accusing anti-junta groups of hampering election plans.

"Terrorists are terrorising, disturbing, killing and destroying," he said, according to MRTV.

'Unrest and violence'

Phil Robertson of Human Rights Watch told AFP the extension shows "Min Aung Hlaing only cares about holding tight to power, and the rights and suffering of the Burmese people be damned."

"A clear admission of the SAC's failure to contain the civil war their coup ignited," independent analyst David Mathieson told AFP, using an acronym for the junta's official name.

The military justified its February 1, 2021, power grab with unsubstantiated claims of widespread fraud in elections that democracy figurehead Suu Kyi's party won in a landslide.

The state of emergency was due to expire

at the end of January and the military had been widely expected to announce on Wednesday that it would prepare for the polls.

The United States, Canada and Britain announced a new round of sanctions on the anniversary, targeting members of the junta and junta-backed entities.

Myanmar's former colonial ruler Britain targeted companies supplying aviation fuel to the military and enabling its "barbaric air raiding campaign in an attempt to maintain power".

Australia also announced its first sanctions, aimed at 16 members of the junta "responsible for egregious human rights abuses" and two sprawling, military-controlled conglomerates.

More than 2,900 people have been killed in the military's crackdown on dissent since it seized power and more than 18,000 have been arrested, according to a local monitoring group.

The junta recently wrapped up a series of closed-court trials of Suu Kyi, jailing its longtime enemy for a total of 33 years in a process rights groups have slammed as a sham.

"It is clear that the junta's goal is for her to die in prison," French lawyers Francois Zimeray and Jessica Finelle, who represent Suu Kyi, said in a statement.

"The main wish for 2023 is we want freedom and to go back home," Thet Naung, an activist in northern Sagaing region, where the military and anti-coup fighters have regularly clashed, told AFP.

"We have gone through many difficulties. We wanted to be happy and live freely but we lost everything. We have spent most of our time in jungles and stayed away from cities."

AFP

US SAYS MYANMAR EMERGENCY EXTENSION PROLONGS 'ILLEGITIMATE RULE'



US State Department counsellor Derek Chollet, one of the US officials speaking out on the Myanmar crisis. Photo: AFP

The United States on Wednesday last week denounced the Myanmar junta's extension of a state of emergency, saying it prolonged suffering two years after a coup toppled an elected government.

"The United States strongly opposes the Burma military regime's decision to extend the state of emergency, prolonging the military's illegitimate rule and the suffering it inflicts upon the country," State Department spokesman Ned Price said, using Myanmar's former name.

The junta on the coup anniversary said it was extending the emergency by six months, pushing back the date for elections under the constitution.

Price said the United States was determined to work with other countries to "deny the regime international credibility."

He also denounced the junta's version of "so-called elections, which will exacerbate violence and instability and will not be representative of the country's people."

The United States earlier announced targeted sanctions against Myanmar's energy sector leadership as part of efforts to pressure the junta further.

AFP

MYANMAR SECOND LEAST DEMOCRATIC COUNTRY IN THE WORLD

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) has rated Myanmar as the second least democratic country in the world in 2022, with only Afghanistan being judged less democratic, in a report issued on 2 February.

Even isolated North Korea, which came third from bottom in the survey was deemed more democratic in 2022.

The three most democratic countries were judged to be Norway, New Zealand and Iceland.

According to the EIU democratic standards worldwide improved slightly in 2022 after the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions, but plummeted further in Russia following its invasion of Ukraine.

Overall, less than half - 45.3 percent - of the world's population is living in a democracy, the London-based analysis group said.

"More than a third of the world's population - 36.9 percent - live under authoritarian rule, a large share of which are in China and Russia," the EIU said, as it published its annual Democracy Index.

A little under eight percent live in a "full democracy" in a group of more than 20 countries such as Canada, Sweden and Uruguay.

"Following its invasion of Ukraine, Russia's score showed the most dramatic drop of any country in the world," the analysis group said.

Russian authorities have been waging

an unprecedented media and opposition crack-down since President Vladimir Putin sent troops to Ukraine in February 2022.

"Russia has been on a trajectory away from democracy for a long time and is now acquiring many of the features of a dictatorship," the EIU said.

Burkina Faso, which witnessed two military coups last year and has been losing ground to a jihadist insurgency, also fell in the ranking.

Haiti, which has been gripped by a worsening political and economic crisis since the July 2021 assassination of president Jovenel Moise, was another country to drop in the index.

In positive trends, Chile, France and Spain were upgraded from the "flawed democracy" to "full democracy" category, mainly because of a reversal of pandemic measures that had infringed citizens' freedoms in 2020-21, the EIU said.

But "from a global perspective the year 2022 was a disappointing one for democracy," it added.

The global average score scarcely improved from 5.28 in 2021 to 5.29.

Despite expectations that there might be a rebound as coronavirus-related prohibitions were lifted, these advances were cancelled out by other negative developments globally, it said.

AFP

MYANMAR'S MILITARY MADNESS CONTINUES UNCHECKED

Phil Thornton

Airstrikes ordered against civilian targets, destruction of thousands of buildings, millions displaced, nearly 3,000 civilians murdered, over 13,000 jailed, the country's independent media banished, and the country locked in a deadly nationwide civil war. Myanmar civilians now ask what else must happen before they receive international support in line with Ukraine, writes Phil Thornton for the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ).

In the two years since Myanmar's military seized power from the country's elected lawmakers it has waged a war of terror against its citizens - members of the Civil Disobedience Movement, artists, poets, actors, politicians, health workers, student leaders, public servants, workers, and journalists.

The military-appointed State Administration Council (SAC) amended laws to punish anyone critical of its illegal coup or the military. International standards of freedoms - speech, expression, assembly, and association were now 'criminalised'. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), reported as of 30 January 2023, the military killed 2,901 people and arrested another 17,492 (of which 282 were children), with 13,719 people still in detention. 143 people have been sentenced to death and four have been executed since the military's coup on 1 February 2021. Of those arrested, 176 were journalists and as many as 62 are still in jail or police detention.

The Committee to Protect Journalists ranks Myanmar as the world's second-highest jailers of journalists. Fear of attacks, harassment, intimidation, censorship, detainment, and threats of assassination for their reporting has driven journalists and media workers underground or to try to reach safety in neighbouring countries.

Journalist Ye Htun Oo has been arrested,

tortured, received death threats, and is now forced to seek safety outside of Myanmar. Ye Htun spoke to IFJ of his torture, jailing and why he felt he had no choice, but to leave Myanmar for the insecurity of being a journalist in exile.

They came for me in the morning

"I started as a journalist in 2007 but quit after two years because of the difficulty of working under the military. I continued to work, writing stories and poetry. In 2009 I restarted work as a freelance video and documentary maker."

Ye Htu said making money from journalism in Myanmar has never been easy.

"I was lucky if I made 300,000 kyat a month (around US\$300) - it was a lot of work, writing, editing, interviewing and filming."

Ye Htun's hands, fingers and thin frame twist and turn as he takes time to return to the darkness of the early morning when woken by police and military knocking on his front door.

"It was 2 am, the morning of 9 October 2021. We were all asleep. The knocking on the door was firm but gentle. I opened the door. Men from the police and the military's special media investigation unit stood there - no uniforms. They'd come to arrest me."

Ye Htun links the visit of the police and army to his friend's arrest the day before.

"He had my number on his phone and when questioned told them I was a journalist. I hadn't written anything for a while. The only reason they arrested me was because I was identified as a journalist - it was enough for them. The military unit has a list of journalists who they want to control, arrest, jail or contain."

Ye Htun explains how easy it is for journalists to be arrested.

"When they arrest people...if they find a reference to a journalist or a phone number it's enough to put you on their list."

After the coup, Ye Htun continued to report.

"I was not being paid, moving around, staying in different places, following the protests. I was taking photos. I took a photo of citizens arresting police and it was published. This causes problems for the people in the photo. It also caused some people to regard me and journalists as informers – we were now in a hard place, not knowing what or who we could photograph. I decided to stop reporting and made the decision to move home. That's when they came and arrested me."

In the early morning before sunrise, the police and military removed Ye Htun from his home and family and took him to a detention cell inside a military barracks.

"They took all my equipment – computer, cameras, phone, and hard disks. The men who arrested and took me to the barracks left and others took over. Their tone changed. I was accused of being a PDF (People's Defence Force militia). Ye Htun describes how the 'politeness' of his captors soon evaporated, and the danger soon became a brutal reality. They started to beat me with kicks, fists, sticks and rubber batons. They just kept beating me, no questions. I was put in foot chains – ankle braces."

The beating of Ye Htun would continue for 25 days and the uncertainty and hurt still shows in his eyes, as he drags up the details he's now determined to share.

"I was interrogated by an army captain who ordered me to show all my articles – there was little to show. They made me kneel on small stones and beat me on the body – never the head as they said, 'they needed it intact for me to answer their questions'."

Ye Htun explained it wasn't just his assigned interrogators who beat or tortured him.

"Drunk soldiers came regularly to spit, insult or threaten me with their guns or knives."

Ye Htun is quick to acknowledge he was scared and feared for his life.

"I was terrified. No one knew where I was. I knew my family would be worried. Everyone knows of people being arrested and then their

dead, broken bodies, missing vital organs, being returned to grieving families."

After 25 days of torture, Ye Htun was transferred to a police jail.

"They accused me of sending messages they had 'faked' and placed on my phone. I was sentenced to two years jail on 3rd November – I had no lawyer, no representative."

Ye Htun spoke to political prisoners during his time in jail and concluded many were behind bars on false charges.

"Most political prisoners are there because of fake accusations. There's no proper rule of law – the military has turned the whole country into a prison."

Ye Htun served over a year and five months of his sentence and was one of six journalists released in an amnesty from Pyay Jail on 4 January 2023.

Any respite Ye Htun or his family received from his release was short-lived, as it became apparent the military was not yet finished torturing him. He was forced to sign a declaration that if he was rearrested he would be expected to serve his existing sentence plus any new ones, and he received death threats. Soon after his release, the threats to his family were made.

"I was messaged on Facebook and on other social media apps. The messages said, 'don't go out alone...keep your family and wife away from us...' their threats continued every two or three days."

Ye Htun and his family have good cause to be concerned about the threats made against them. Several pro-military militias have openly declared on social media their intentions against those opposed to the military's control of the country. A pro-military militia, Thwe Thauk Apwe (Blood Brothers), specialise in violent killings designed to terrorise. Frontier Magazine reported in May 2022, that Thwe Thauk Apwe had murdered 14 members of the National League of Democracy political party in two weeks. The militia uses social media to boast of its gruesome killings and to threaten its targets – those opposed to military rule - PDF units, members of political parties, CDM members, independent media outlets and journalists.

Ye Htun said fears for his wife and children's safety forced him to leave Myanmar.

"I couldn't keep putting them at risk because I'm a journalist. I will continue to work, but I know I can't do it in Myanmar until this military regime is removed."

Air strikes target civilians – where's the UN?

Award winning documentary maker and artist, Sai Kyaw Khaing, dismayed at the lack of coverage by international and regional media on the impacts of Myanmar's military aerial strikes on civilian targets, decided to make the arduous trip to the country's northwest to find out.

In the two years since the military regime took illegal control of the country's political infrastructure, Myanmar is now engaged in a brutal, countrywide civil war. Civilian and political opposition to the military coup saw the formation of People Defence Force units under the banner of the National Unity Government established in April 2021 by members of parliament elected at the 2020 elections and outlawed by the military after its coup.

Thousands of young people took up arms and joined PDF units, trained by Ethnic Armed Organisations, to defend villages and civilians and fight the military regime. The regime vastly outnumbered and outmuscled the PDFs and EAOs with its military hardware – tanks, heavy artillery, helicopter gunships and fighter jets.

Sai Kyaw contacted a number of international media outlets with his plans to travel deep inside the conflict zone to document how displaced people were coping with the airstrikes and burning of their villages and crops. Sai Kyaw said it is telling that he is yet to receive a single response of interest from any of the media he approached.

"What's happening in Myanmar is being ignored, unlike the conflict in Ukraine. Most of the international media, if they do report on Myanmar, want an 'expert' to front their stories, even better if it's one of their own, a Westerner."

Sai Kyaw explains why what is happening on the ground needs to be explained – the impacts of the deadly airstrikes on the lives of unarmed villagers.

"My objective is to talk to local people. How can they plant or harvest their crops during the intense fighting? How can they educate their kids or get medical help? Thousands of houses, schools, hospitals, churches, temples, and mosques have been targeted and destroyed – how are the people managing to live?"

Sai Kyaw put up his own money to finance his trip to a neighbouring country where he then made contact with people prepared to help him get to northwestern Myanmar, which was under intense attacks from the military regime.

"It took four days by motorbike on unlit mountain dirt tracks that turned to deep mud when it rained. We also had to avoid numerous military checkpoints, military informers, and spies."

Sai Kyaw said after reaching his destination, meeting with villagers, and witnessing their response to the constant artillery and aerial bombardments, their resilience astounded him.

"These people rely on each other, when they're bombed from their homes, people who still have a house rally around and offer shelter. They don't have weapons to fight back, but they organise checkpoints managed by men and women."

Sai Kyaw said being unable to predict when an airstrike will happen took its toll on villagers.

"You don't know when they're going to attack – day or night – clinics, schools, places of worship – are bombed. These are not military targets – they don't care who they kill."

Sai Kyaw witnessed an aerial bombing and has the before and after film footage that shows the destruction. Rows of neat houses, complete with walls intact before the air strike are left after the attack with holes a car could drive through.

"The unpredictable and indiscriminate attacks mean villagers are unable to harvest their crops or plant next season's rice paddies."

Sai Kyaw is concerned that the lack of aid getting to the people in need of shelter, clothing, food, and medicine will cause a large-scale humanitarian crisis.

"There's no sign of international aid getting to the people. If there's a genuine desire to help the people, international aid groups can do it by

making contact with local community groups. It seems some of these big international aid donors are reluctant to move from their city bases in case they upset the military's SAC [State Administration Council]."

At the time of writing Sai Kyaw Khaing is still to receive a reply from any of the international media he contacted.

It's the economy, stupid

A veteran Myanmar journalist, Kyaw Kyaw*, covered a wide range of stories for more than 15 years, including business, investment, and trade. He told IFJ he is concerned the ban on independent media, arrests of journalists, gags and access restrictions on sources mean many important stories go unreported.

"The military banning of independent media is a serious threat to our freedom of speech. The military-controlled state media can't be relied on. It's well documented, it's mainly no news or fake news overseen by the military's department of propaganda."

Kyaw lists the stories that he explains are in critical need of being reported – the cost of consumer goods, the collapse of the local currency, impact on wages, lack of education and health care, brain drain as people flee the country, crops destroyed and unharvested and impact on next year's yield. Kyaw is quick to add details to his list.

"People can't leave the country fast enough. There are more sellers than buyers of cars and houses. Crime is on the rise as workers' real wages fall below the poverty line. Garment workers earned 4,800 kyat, the minimum daily rate before the military's coup. The kyat was around 1,200 to the US dollar – about four dollars. Two years after the coup the kyat is around 2,800 - workers' daily wage has dropped to half, about US\$2 a day."

Kyaw Kyaw's critique is compelling as he explains the cost of everyday consumer goods and the impact on households.

"Before the coup in 2021, rice cost a household, 32,000 kyat for around 45kg. It is now selling at 65,000 kyat and rising. Cooking oil sold at 3,000 kyat for 1.6kg now sells for over double, 8,000kyat. It's the same with fish, chicken, fuel, and medicine - family planning implants have almost

doubled in cost from 25,000 kyat to now selling at 45,000 kyat."

Kyaw is dismayed that the media outside the country are not covering stories that have a huge impact on people's daily struggle to feed and care for their families and have the real potential for a massive humanitarian crisis in the near future.

"The focus is on the revolution, tallies of dead soldiers, politics – all important, but journalists and local and international media need to report on the hidden costs of the military's coup. Local media outlets need to find solutions to better cover these issues."

Kyaw stresses international governments and institutions – ASEAN, UK, US, China, and India - need to stop talking and take real steps to remove and curb the military's destruction of the country.

"In two years, they displaced over a million people, destroyed thousands of houses and religious buildings, attacked schools and hospitals – killing students and civilians – what is the UNSC waiting for?"

An independent think tank, the Institute for Strategy and Policy – Myanmar, and the UN agency for refugees confirm Kyaw's claims. The Institute for Strategy and Policy reports "at least 28,419 homes and buildings were torched or destroyed...in the aftermath of the coup between February 1, 2021, and July 15, 2022."

The UN agency responsible for refugees, the UNHCR, estimates the number of displaced people in Myanmar is a staggering 1,574,400. Since the military coup and up to 23 January 23, the number is 1,244,000 people displaced.

While the world's media and governments focus their attention and military aid on Ukraine, Myanmar's people continue to ask why their plight continues to be ignored.

Phil Thornton is a journalist and senior adviser to the International Federation of Journalists in South East Asia.

**Name has been changed as requested for security concerns.*

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MYANMAR JUNTA BURN DOWN 680 HOUSES IN SAGAING'S KHIN-U TOWNSHIP



Myanmar junta troops killed an elderly man and destroyed roughly 680 homes in three villages in Sagaing Region's Khin-U Township on 31 January, according to locals and defence forces.

At around 1:00 p.m. on 31 January about 150 junta troops carrying out operations in the southwest of Khin-U Township, set fire to houses in the villages of Byaingkyaing, Yonesu, and Nyaung Pin Gyi Su.

The troops stayed the night in Nyaung Pin Gyi Su Village before leaving on 1 February. Defence forces moved in on 2 February to help clear up the area.

According to a resident who was compiling a list of homes that had been burned down in the three villages, over 100 homes in Byaingkyaing Village, 430 homes in Yonesu Village, and 150 homes in Nyaung Pin Gyi Su Village had been burned down.

"Military Council troops torched houses in three villages, one after the other. Then they were stationed in Nyaung Pin Gyi Su Village for the night. After the Military Council soldiers left

Nyaung Pin Gyi Su Village we went there to carry out a cleaning-up operation. We found an old man who had been killed and houses burnt to ashes", said a local defence force fighter.

According to locals the dead man was an elder from Nyaung Pin Gyi Su Village who had been shot by junta troops.

A local people's defence force (PDF) fighter was also killed in the attack, according to reports.

There was extensive damage to the villages. A woman from Byaingkyaing Village said: "When I returned to our village I could not recognise it because of the damage. When I saw that my house had been burned down my heart began to suffocate."

Despite the callous attack residents are determined to support the revolution against the junta. "We cannot accept the Military Council army," said a Byaingkyaing villager, "We'll carry on the revolution with what we have."

OVER 600 BURMESE REPATRIATED FROM RANONG IN THAILAND



Photo: Tomas Malik

Over 600 Myanmar migrant workers detained in a Ranong detention centre in Thailand were released and repatriated on 2 February, according to reports.

According to some of the repatriated, the Thai authorities returned them across the Kra Buri River, which is the border between Ranong in Thailand and Kawthoung in Myanmar.

According to the Ranong based Meiktathahaya Association, a group that helps Myanmar migrant workers, 670 people were deported, of which 534 were men and 136 were women.

“Officials from Myanmar came with navy boats this morning. They brought back everyone. We don’t yet know any further details,” said Ko Thar Kyaw from the Meiktathahaya Association.

Mizzima has contacted the Ranong-based Myanmar Labor Attach Office for more details of the repatriation, but as of yet has not received a reply.

The workers had been arrested by Thai authorities for illegal migration and were temporarily held in the Ranong detention centre.

They had staged consecutive protests on 28 and 29 January, calling for their repatriation due to uncomfortable living conditions they were suffering in the detention centre.

JFM WELCOMES TARGETED MYANMAR JUNTA SANCTIONS TWO YEARS AFTER ILLEGAL COUP

Campaign group Justice for Myanmar welcomes sanctions imposed by Australia, Canada, the UK and USA on members of the terrorist Myanmar military junta, its businesses and jet fuel suppliers to mark the second anniversary of the military's illegal coup attempt.

The group says that the new sanctions come as the people of Myanmar continue to courageously resist the junta in the face of its nationwide campaign of terror, ensuring its attempted coup is failing.

The junta's response to mass resistance has been the continued commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity, murdering over 2,900 people, arbitrarily arresting over 17,000 more, displacing 1.1 million people and carrying out indiscriminate air strikes across Myanmar, enabled by the supply of funds, arms and jet fuel.

Canada and the UK have both responded to a grassroots and international campaign to stop jet fuel sales to the military.

Canada is the first jurisdiction in the world to ban the supply of jet fuel to the junta, while the UK has sanctioned crony companies Asia Sun Trading Company Limited and Cargo Link Company Limited, both part of Asia Sun Group, which broker the supply of jet fuel to the junta and stand complicit in its international crimes.

In November, Amnesty International released *Deadly Cargo*, a report into the Myanmar military's jet fuel

supply chain with research supported by Justice For Myanmar. The report named Asia Sun Trading and Cargo Link.

At the time, Justice For Myanmar also published a list of Asia Sun Group companies, directors and shareholder for targeted sanctions.

The US has sanctioned the illegal junta's energy minister and the managing director and deputy managing director of Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), responsible for the junta's biggest source of foreign revenue. But the US has disappointingly failed to sanction MOGE.

The US has also sanctioned Mining Enterprise No. 1 and Mining Enterprise No. 2, lucrative state agencies illegally controlled by the junta.

Australia has sanctioned military conglomerates Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), Myanma Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and 16 junta members, including war criminals Min Aung Hlaing and Soe Win, after refusing to sanction them in response to their role in the military's genocide against the Rohingya.

Justice For Myanmar spokesperson Yadanar Maung says: "We welcome the latest round of sanctions from Australia, Canada, the UK and USA, which target military conglomerates, state-owned enterprises illegally controlled by the junta, and the military's jet fuel supply chain.

"The people of Myanmar have sustained mass resistance to the military's

brutal and illegal coup attempt and its campaign of terror, ensuring that the coup and the junta's sham so-called 'elections' will not succeed.

"The military junta's ongoing war crimes and crimes against humanity are enabled by the flow of funds, arms and jet fuel.

"While these latest sanctions are a positive step in cutting the junta's access to resources, far more needs to be done to coordinate sanctions that systematically target the junta's sources of revenue, arms and jet fuel.

"So far, only the EU has sanctioned MOGE, which bankrolls the junta. We call on the US, UK, Canada and Australia to follow the EU and also sanction MOGE.

"We call on the US, UK, EU and Australia to follow Canada in imposing a complete ban on the supply of jet fuel to the junta.

"Democracies in the region, including Japan, South Korea and India, must also urgently step up and sanction the junta, its businesses and arms brokers.

"The international community must take concerted action against the junta, a terrorist organisation, hold perpetrators of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity to account, and stand with the people of Myanmar.

"The Spring Revolution will prevail."

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NUG STATEMENT ON SECOND ANNIVERSARY OF COUP

The National Unity Government (NUG) in Exile issued a statement on the second anniversary of the military coup on 1 February 2023.

Below is the statement in full.

1st February 2023 marks

the second anniversary of Myanmar's Spring Revolution. For two years, the people of Myanmar have stood together, their heads held high, and steadfastly resisted Min Aung Hlaing and the Myanmar military's attempt to overthrow the elected Government.

In staging a coup, the military misread our people. Myanmar has already suffered more than seventy years of military rule. We refuse to return to the dark days of the past. Over the past two years the determination, courage, and tenacity of our people has prevented the military from



Protestor with picture of Aung San Suu Kyi.
Photo: AFP

imposing its rule on Myanmar. Against the odds, the people of Myanmar have financed, organized, and sustained the Spring Revolution. Now, after two years, we have the initiative. Our political momentum cannot be overturned.

The National Unity Government together with our ethnic allies, who have opposed the military for decades, will end the military's illegal power grab. We will seek justice for the atrocities committed by them

against innocent civilians. We will build a federal democracy and bring an end to Myanmar's 70 years of political crisis. On this common ground, with this common goal, we will end the dictatorship of the terrorist army once and for all.

The National Unity Government and civil society organizations have documented the atrocities of the Myanmar military in its attempt to crush civilian resistance. These include 2,894"" dead, including 279"" children, 447"" women and 70"" healthcare workers. 62,399"" of houses and dwellings have been torched by the fascist army that also included 163"" religious buildings that were destroyed. Targeting of innocent civilians have also resulted in 1.5 million people internally displaced. In this two-year period of the Spring Revolution, there has been 654"" air raids by the terrorist fascist army that has resulted in 288"" number of innocent civilians killed and 377"" injured.

On 2021 March 1, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) declared the Myanmar military a terrorist organisation based on its perpetration of mass killings and other crimes against humanity. The terrorist military council's attempt to hold a sham election is to hold onto power illegally. As Myanmar's lawful government, the National Unity Government will make every effort to ensure that all perpetrators, guilty of treason, are brought to justice and that those who have suffered at their hands are legally recompensed.

In addition, the National Unity Government reaffirms its commitment to the people's ultimate goal of building a Federal Democratic Union, as declared in our joint New Year statement. The National Unity Consultative Council and National Unity Government, together with all other revolutionary forces, have pledged themselves to follow together the political Road Map laid out in the Federal Democracy Charter.

Myanmar's Spring Revolution is not to satisfy the immediate needs of the country. Brought on by the courage and participation of the whole population, it is a systematic, unified struggle for our future. Our people are determined to build a Myanmar free of the military dictatorship which has oppressed our country for generations. The Spring Revolution is the springboard for future political change in Myanmar. We appeal to all and urge that by understanding the true nature and aim of the Spring Revolution together with the decisive public opinion, we can undoubtedly stand steadfast as the unified front.



MYANMAR ON CRISIS GROUP'S 2023 WATCH LIST

Myanmar has been included in the International Crisis Group's 2023 Watch List of ten countries and regions facing deadly conflict, humanitarian emergency or other crises in 2023.

The International Crisis Group is an independent organisation working to prevent wars and shape policies that will build a more peaceful world.

Crisis Group says that it sounds the alarm to prevent deadly conflict by building support for good governance and inclusive politics that enable societies to flourish. It engages directly with a range of conflict actors to seek and share information, and to encourage intelligent action for peace.

In the Myanmar section of the Watch List, Myanmar: Post-Coup Crisis and a Flawed Election, Crisis Group says Two years after the 1 February 2021 coup d'état, Myanmar remains in deep crisis, with the economy moribund and millions in need of humanitarian assistance.

Despite the security forces' brutal repression of dissent, widespread popular resistance to the regime continues, by non-violent and violent means, across much of the country.

Conflict has also escalated in several of the country's ethnic areas where armed groups have confronted the security forces, and in the current environment there remains no realistic prospect of repatriating more than one million ethnic Rohingya who fled violence in Rakhine State and have taken refuge in neighbouring Bangladesh.

While Crisis Group research and macro-economic indicators show the economy exhibiting signs of stabilisation, it remains some 20 per cent smaller than before the coup, and poverty rates have surged, compounding an already dire humanitarian situation.

Health and education systems remain in disarray, and more than 1.5 million people are internally displaced, the vast majority due to post-coup conflict.

Also contributing to the severe humanitarian crisis are new restrictions on non-governmental organisations that are likely to curtail even further

their already very limited access to those most in need.

Against this backdrop, the regime is gearing up to hold elections – likely in mid-2023 – that it presents as a return to civilian rule although its objective seems to be to consolidate its control by making a transition from emergency rule to a longer-term military-backed government.

In the current circumstances, there is no prospect that these polls will be credible, and the risk that they will be marked by considerable violence is very high.

The Crisis Group believes that the European Union (EU) and its member states can help address the crisis in Myanmar by:

Making very clear that the junta has not created the conditions for credible elections in the coming year, and working with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other allies in the region to build an international consensus and common messaging in this regard;

Using all available channels to avert election-related violence, including by working through actors with greater capacity to influence the junta, such as the UN Security Council, ASEAN, India, Japan and China, and by pressing the National Unity Government to issue a set of principles – well ahead of the polls – opposing violence against electoral targets;

Maintaining and expanding targeted sanctions on the regime, the military and their business interests, while avoiding actions that would mainly affect ordinary people. In particular, Myanmar's access to the Everything but Arms trade preferences scheme, which supports the jobs of hundreds of thousands of mainly female garment workers but provides little benefit to the regime, should not be revoked;

Continuing to engage closely with the National Unity Government as well as other key stakeholders, including ethnic armed groups and civil society, who will continue to shape the country's internal dynamics;

Channelling aid to address both the current humanitarian emergencies and longer-term

needs relating to health, education and livelihoods, through the mechanisms and partners that can most effectively reach those in need – including working more closely with local NGOs, providing cross-border assistance where appropriate, and potentially supporting the service delivery wings of the better established ethnic armed groups.

The Crisis Group believes that there is no likely pathway back to civilian rule and that Myanmar's post-coup crisis shows no sign of being resolved in the near term.

The junta continues to deploy extreme levels of political repression and violence to maintain its grip on power, while much of the country continues its determined resistance to military rule by both violent and non-violent means.

With both sides intent on prevailing by force, there is so far no prospect of a negotiated settlement.

The regime has indicated that it will hold elections in 2023, likely before the 1 August deadline imposed by the constitution – which the military claims to be adhering to, despite the manifest unconstitutionality of the coup itself.

The regime has presented the coming elections as a return to civilian rule and therefore a pathway out of the current crisis, but in reality, they appear intended to entrench a military-backed administration. The National League for Democracy (NLD), which won a landslide in the 2020 elections, only to be ousted from power months later, will not be willing (or even likely allowed) to participate and the military is reinvigorating the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) as its electoral vehicle.

With the vast majority of the population unwilling to participate in these polls, and with opposition forces intent on disrupting them, the elections are becoming a flashpoint for further violence, while further entrenching older ex-military men in positions of power, at a time when broader social shifts triggered by the coup have opened space for younger leaders, especially women, to emerge.

The Crisis Group believes that the regime is likely to ratchet up repression ahead of the polls, as it pressures parties, candidates and voters to participate in a fraudulent election, punishes those who refuse to do so, and deploys the military to try pacifying insecure areas so that polling can proceed there.

The election will also be a target for resistance forces, some of which are already violently

opposing it. Improvised explosive device attacks and assassinations of administrative officials and alleged regime informants have become common resistance tactics over the last two years, and some groups are likely to deploy them against candidates, polling stations, poll workers, political parties and voters, among other targets.

There have already been deadly attacks on teams collecting civil data for voter lists. Schools could become a particular focus of violence if, as in previous elections, most polling stations are located in schools with schoolteachers serving as the majority of the poll workers.

Post-coup repression, violence and conflict, along with economic decline, have triggered a major humanitarian crisis in Myanmar. Some 1.1 million people have been displaced since the coup, bringing the country's total internally displaced population to 1.5 million. Millions more have plunged into poverty.

To make things worse, as it seeks to control civic space, the regime has increasingly restricted the activities of international and local humanitarian organisations, limiting their access to banking services, severely constraining their access to parts of the country affected by conflict and insecurity and, more recently, imposing onerous registration requirements that will make it even more difficult to operate.

Meanwhile, the over one million Rohingya refugees who in 2017 and before fled waves of mass violence in Rakhine State and now live in Bangladesh – primarily in camps in the coastal district of Cox's Bazar – continue to face an uncertain future.

With the military now running Myanmar, and a fraught humanitarian and conflict situation in Rakhine State, there is no realistic prospect of mass returns in the foreseeable future. The prevailing sense of despair in the camps is prompting thousands to undertake dangerous sea journeys at the hands of human traffickers to try to reach South East Asia. Increasing numbers of Rohingya boys and young men are also joining armed groups running the illicit economy of the camps.

Meanwhile, donor fatigue is making it increasingly difficult to raise the funds to provide for their essential needs (the UN humanitarian appeal was only 49 per cent funded in 2022, compared with 72 per cent the previous year), and Bangladeshi authorities are growing more and more impatient at the lack of any prospect of repatriation or other durable solutions.

MYANMAR ECONOMY IN TAILSPIN, 2 YEARS AFTER THE MILITARY COUP

Miemie Byrd



Myanmar, also known as Burma, has been in an economic freefall since the failed military coup of February 2021. The coup, led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, has resulted in widespread conflict, unrest, and international condemnation. The military junta's incompetence and mismanagement[1] have led to many economic problems for the country, including a devaluation of the currency and a brain drain of the working-age population. After a decade of steady growth, the economy contracted by 18% in 2021[2], with little projected improvement in 2023. In addition, international sanctions and the blacklisting of Myanmar by the international Financial Action Task Force[3] have deterred foreign investment.

One of the major issues facing Myanmar's economy is the devaluation of its currency, the kyat. The kyat has lost approximately half its value[4]. This devaluation increased inflation to as much as 16% in 2022,[5] making it more expensive for citizens to purchase goods and services. As a result, purchasing power has been greatly reduced, and many citizens are struggling to afford even basic necessities. The World Food Programme estimates that 14.4 million people[6], more than 25% of the population, face food insecurity. The devaluation has also hurt businesses, making imported goods and raw materials more expensive and leading to decreased economic activity. Additionally, the depreciation has made it more difficult for

Myanmar to attract foreign investment, as the currency's instability deters investors. The overall economic situation in Myanmar has become increasingly dire due to the devaluation of the kyat, and it will likely take significant time and effort to restore stability to the economy.

Another major problem is the brain drain of the working-age population, with thousands estimated to be leaving the country every month. Since the coup, many young professionals and skilled workers who remained have been jailed and killed. This has resulted in a shortage of skilled labor in Myanmar, further hindering economic growth. Additionally, the ongoing civil unrest has made it difficult for businesses to operate, leading

to job losses and decreased economic activity.

Since Myanmar's economy has become dominated by the military and its cronies, international sanctions have made it difficult for it to trade with other countries and have further weakened its economy. International sanctions have been targeted at the military junta and its businesses as well as individuals and companies that support the regime. In addition to the economic sanctions imposed by the international community, the ongoing political and human rights crisis in Myanmar has also led to the departure of many international businesses. Many of the most prominent multinational companies[8] have left the country, including Telenor, Kirin, Woodside Petroleum, Chevron, TotalEnergies, Voltalia, and

British American Tobacco, due to concerns over the military's role in the government, human rights abuses, and the unstable political situation.

This departure of international businesses has led to a significant loss of jobs and income for the people of Myanmar and a decrease in overall economic activity. It has also further limited the country's access to foreign investment and technology, hindering its ability to develop and modernize its economy. A critical degradation of infrastructure, such as energy and communication, has made it impossible for businesses to operate reliably. Furthermore, the sanctions and business departures have also decreased the country's foreign currency reserves and increased inflation, making it even harder for

the country to import goods and services and pay off its debts.

Myanmar's economy has been in a tailspin since the failed military coup in February 2021. The junta's incompetence and mismanagement caused the devaluation of the currency, a brain drain of the working-age population, and economic sanctions. As long as the junta manages the economy, it is unlikely to recover. Therefore, it is crucial for the international community to continue to put pressure on the junta to restore democracy and to allow a qualified civilian government to address the country's economic problems.

1 <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesian-minister-tells-myanmar-to-let-qualified-people-run-govt>

2 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/01/26/economic-activity-in-myanmar-to-remain-at-low-levels-with-the-overall-outlook-bleak>

3 <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Myanmar-Crisis/Myanmar-blacklisted-by-FATF-for-terrorism-and-crime-finance>

4 <https://fulcrum.sg/searching-for-keys-as-the-kyat-goes-out-of-kilter>

5 <https://www.adb.org/countries/myanmar/economy>

6 <https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/myanmar-emergency>

7 <https://southeastasiaglobe.com/after-a-year-of-dreams-deferred-myanmars-displaced-youth-try-to-start-over>

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Link to original story: <https://dkiapcss.edu/myanmar-economy-in-tailspin-2-years-after-the-military-coup>

THE IMPORTANCE OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN THE BATTLE FOR MYANMAR



Journalists on the frontline. Photo: EPA

February 1, 2023, marks two years since the Myanmar military launched its latest coup to thwart the democratic aspirations of the people of Myanmar. It has been a period of sustained confrontation, with hostilities documented in

a vast majority of townships across the country. Hostilities pitting the junta against a range of opponents – from ousted National League for Democracy (NLD) patrons and the newly formed National Unity Government (NUG) to the

nationwide Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), to locally established People's Defense Forces (PDFs) and a range of Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs). The conflict has uprooted millions from their homes, wreaked havoc on

the economy and engulfed the country in an atmosphere of fear and oppression.

Yet throughout these two years, Myanmar's



independent media have continued to report and broadcast from inside the country on a daily basis. Those providing this invaluable service do so with the threat of arrest or worse stalking their daily existence. They are not only putting their

own lives at stake, but those of their family members as well.

Independent media groups, such as Mizzima, found themselves directly in the cross-hairs of the post-coup junta. It is no exaggeration to say that 1 February 2021 was supposed to spell the end for independent media in Myanmar. But rather than capitulate in the face of threats and hostilities, independent Myanmar media groups have instead significantly grown their reach and even diversified their platforms to adapt to the needs of the Myanmar people. The coup has proven to highlight the importance of independent media to the people of Myanmar, providing a counter narrative to that of the junta's propaganda machine and offering a vision for a federal, democratic Myanmar free from the diktats of the Tatmadaw.

Within this highly restrictive and complex media environment, there is no question that donor funding has contributed to the ability of Myanmar's independent media to sustain, and even grow, their operations. However, the conflict in Myanmar has also proven to highlight significant shortfalls in support for Myanmar's independent media. This shortfall has several underlying causes, including differing appreciations of the Myanmar conflict as well as conflicting priorities on the part of donor agencies and Myanmar's media community.

Ideally, the international community (or significant portions thereof) would come to see an investment in a post-junta federal, democratic

Myanmar as intrinsic to national interests. Tellingly, despite coverage of the Myanmar conflict dominating Myanmar media, the conflict has been waged largely away from the screens and pages of the international community. And despite the fact that Myanmar's independent media maintain networks throughout the country able to supply the requisite material to an international audience. This lack of coverage with regard to Myanmar is in stark contrast to the coverage afforded the Ukraine crisis, which has dominated Western media from its onset almost exactly one year after the junta's coup in Myanmar.

It must be said that Myanmar's independent media stand firmly with the people of Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression, but this does not obfuscate the fact that Western countries rushed to the support of Ukraine in their perceived self-interest, while largely leaving the people of Myanmar to fend for themselves. A similar reaction is seen with the donor community. But this should not come as a surprise. As it should be clear by now to everyone in the anti-junta opposition that Myanmar is not a top priority of the international community. This is something the Tatmadaw understood from the onset, and one of the reasons it felt secure in launching its coup.

On the other hand, it is countries like Thailand and India which must bear the burden of the crisis in Myanmar with thousands and thousands of people from Myanmar being sheltered by these countries.

The post-coup support from these two countries to Myanmar's independent media is remarkable and stands in stark contrast to the support provided by certain Western countries. And this support exists despite the tendency for illiberal legislation throughout much of the region.

From a donor perspective, then, investing in Myanmar independent media is enabling freedom of speech in a region, Southeast Asia, where there is little incentive to protect freedom of expression domestically. There are few resources available to defend freedom of expression across the region and independent media's critical voices are essential for free speech to flourish. Under the circumstances, Myanmar independent media is one of a few exceptions in the region that can exercise freedom of speech without being marred by restrictive legislation.

Despite months of foreshadowing of a potential coup, most governments and observers were largely unprepared for the events of 1 February 2021. This includes almost all donor organizations supporting Myanmar's independent media, even though many were working in Myanmar for nearly a decade. There seemed to be a general feeling that the military was posturing itself to emasculate the civilian politicians and force a compromise from elected officials. But some semblance of democratic governance would surely prevail. It

did not, in short, make "sense" for the Tatmadaw to launch a coup.

What these assessments failed to account for was an understanding of the Myanmar military from both a personal and institutional standpoint. Moreover, many governments and international organizations had significant investments in the democratic process in Myanmar. These investments tended to act as blinders to the steadily deteriorating domestic environment. There was, for example, the well-funded peace process with little to nothing to show for it. But people wanted to see a success story and valued their relationships with authorities. Additionally, the impunity with which the Tatmadaw could attack the Rohingya population failed to impress upon the international community the fragility of the NLD-led government.

Similarly, a lack of appreciation for the current Myanmar situation hinders donors from providing the full necessary support for the country's independent media. The support that is given, for which the Myanmar media community is truly grateful, demonstrates an understanding on the part of the donor community of the basic need to support Myanmar's independent media. But the support falls well short of the overall needs of the media community, as donors – with their own interests in mind – are sensitive to upsetting the junta and host countries. This dynamic of donor funding, it should be

stressed, is not unique to the situation of Myanmar. And something similar was also witnessed in post-1988 Myanmar.

Having been caught off guard by the 2021 coup, some donors took six months or more to commence their support to Myanmar independent media. The response was, and continues to be, hampered by stringent guidelines for funding and accountability which do not account for the reality of the Myanmar situation, along with significant delays in the approval of available funds from back donors. Rules, in short, assuming some semblance of normalcy regarding the theatre of operation continue to hold sway. A situation which clearly does not hold true in the case of Myanmar. While donors have by in large politely listened to calls by the Myanmar media sector to relax rules that guide their funding, some of which have been made obsolete in the wake of the coup, the response from the donor community with respect to such an appeal has been at best a mixed bag.

To provide one example of funding failing to account for the dynamics of the situation in Myanmar, one independent media outlet – already stretched for resources – had to quickly relocate from inside Myanmar to Thailand after they faced charges filed by the regime relating to their content. But there was no timely support available for the media group. While donors were reviewing the request for funding,

which was said to take two to five months, the media group could not stop their work. As a result, they had to manage with whatever scant resources were available for their relocation costs and could provide only a meagre monthly salary to staff in Thailand, while they awaited the machinations of the donor community to run their course.

On the other hand, other funding is being awarded in the absence of a long-term vision. Some support organizations continue to provide small grants (ranging from USD 1,000 to 5,000) at an individual level with little or no coordination with media organizations or without any proper strategy. As a result, the support money has not been effectively utilized. This is an example of the tendency of some support organizations to provide short-term support with an eye to maximizing the number of individuals and organizations supported, rather than investing in independent media in Myanmar with a long-term strategy. This has the effect of creating donor dependence for many independent media organizations. Media organizations thus become “do-dependent” rather than “independent.”

As a result, donor agencies are failing to effectively support Myanmar’s independent media. Though they regularly profess their support for Myanmar’s anti-junta opposition and the country’s independent media, they routinely prioritize organizational interests and agendas in the

provision of any support. The result is a drastic shortfall in much needed funding.

To be fair, many donor organizations supporting independent media themselves lack sufficient resources. This can lead to an information deficit as well as an inability to best identify where to focus their actions and/or whom their actions should support. Faced with this lack of resources, the organizations opt to continue with operations as in a normal situation, unable (or unwilling) to look at and dissect Myanmar’s current needs and the ground situation. Such an approach to “normalcy” also too often implies that the international community and donors maintain a country strategy that includes the present incarnation of the Myanmar military as a principal stakeholder.

This appeasement of the Myanmar military highlights the conflict of interests between donor countries and organizations and the anti-junta alliance, including Myanmar’s independent media. The latter do not envision a Myanmar that incorporates any progeny of the current junta. This can create a dilemma for the donor community, as they attempt to cultivate ties with both Myanmar’s independent media and the Myanmar military.

In conclusion, we ask that investing in independent Myanmar media come to be seen as investing in the future democratic orientation of the

people and the country. Media must be seen as a bridging tool between opposition interests to help build trust and articulate a common vision for the future. The message for the future to be conveyed to all anti-junta components, and especially ethnic groups, is that their best interests lay in the realization of a federal, democratic Myanmar. And that vision is simultaneously in the best interests of the international and donor communities.

To achieve this vision, closer coordination is needed between donors and Myanmar’s independent media so as to identify means to provide adequate and time sensitive funding that remains cognizant of the need for accountability. And donors must be willing to adapt their approaches to fit the realities of the Myanmar situation. Lip service in the backing of Myanmar’s independent media must be matched with actual support. It is, in short, time for international supporters to invest in independent media in Myanmar for a common vision of national reconciliation, democratization, federalization, and social equity.

ASEAN MINISTERS URGE MYANMAR JUNTA TO IMPLEMENT AGREED PEACE PLAN



Photo: AFP

Southeast Asian ministers at the end of two-day talks in Indonesia on Saturday urged Myanmar's junta to implement a five-point peace plan agreed two years ago to create a path towards ending the country's political crisis.

Indonesia -- Southeast Asia's biggest economy -- is the chair of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for 2023 and will host the bloc's annual leaders' meetings later this year.

But the ministerial meeting in Jakarta has been overshadowed by the situation in Myanmar, which has been in turmoil since the army seized power in February 2021.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said Jakarta proposed an

implementation plan to ASEAN members for the "five-point consensus" agreed with the junta in April 2021 that called for an end to violence and dialogue between the military and rebels.

"Broad support was received from all member states to this plan," she told reporters at the end of talks, without providing details of when and how they hoped the agreement would be implemented.

"This plan is very important for ASEAN, in particular the chair, as a guidance to address the situation in Myanmar in a united manner. It shows a strong unity of ASEAN members to implement the 5PC."

The junta remains an ASEAN member but the bloc barred it from top-level

summits over its failure to implement the plan that aims to achieve peace between the military and Myanmar's anti-coup movement.

Myanmar's foreign minister Than Swe -- appointed this week -- was not present at the ASEAN talks Friday, the bloc having declined to invite a junta member and only requesting a "non-political representative" -- an offer rejected by Naypyidaw.

Indonesian officials have said the lack of progress by Myanmar's junta tests the bloc's credibility and are working to find solutions to the crisis.

Jakarta has announced plans to set up a special envoy's office under the foreign ministry to establish low-level dialogue with the junta.

AFP

CHINA TO FULLY REOPEN BORDERS WITH HONG KONG, MACAU

China said on Friday last week it will fully restore travel across its borders with Hong Kong and Macau next week, dropping Covid testing requirements and daily quotas after a lengthy pandemic separation.

The semi-autonomous cities have both stuck to Beijing's zero-Covid strategy for nearly three years, splitting families, cutting off tourism and suffocating businesses.

The State Council's Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office said on Friday that all remaining restrictions would be dropped starting midnight on February 6, with group tours allowed to resume.

Limited travel across the border between Hong Kong and mainland China resumed in January after Beijing abruptly axed its isolationist policy.

Initially, only 60,000 people were allowed to cross each day in either direction and they were required to show a negative PCR test.

Hong Kong leader John Lee said on Friday that the partial reopening had been "orderly, safe and smooth".

Hong Kong's lengthy separation from its biggest source of growth inflicted a heavy toll, with some estimating it cost the financial hub \$27 billion.

Mainlanders have long made up the vast majority of visitors to Hong Kong, with around 51 million arriving in 2018, nearly seven times the city's population.

City officials are hoping an influx of visitors will revitalise the recession-hit economy, injecting cash into the once-vibrant tourism and retail sectors.

Unvaccinated overseas travellers will be allowed to visit Hong Kong starting Monday, but Lee said pre-arrival rapid antigen tests will still be required.

"As the full reopening of the border with mainland China will bring a large surge in travel, to ensure risks are manageable we will keep the testing requirement for overseas travellers for a period of observation," he said.

The full relaunch of travel with the mainland comes a day after Lee rolled out a rebranding campaign to woo overseas tourists, pledging more than half a million free flights and "no isolation, no quarantine and no restrictions".

Outdoor masking remains compulsory in Hong Kong, though Lee has said the policy could be scrapped after the winter flu surge.

AFP



Macau. Photo: Supplied

HONG KONG'S LARGEST NATIONAL SECURITY TRIAL BEGINS WITH 47 IN DOCK

The trial of 47 of Hong Kong's most prominent pro-democracy figures began on Monday, in the largest prosecution under a national security law that has crushed dissent in the city.

The proceedings are expected to last more than four months, and the defendants face sentences of up to life imprisonment if convicted.

Authorities have accused the 47 of trying to topple Hong Kong's China-approved government.

The defendants say they have been targeted for normal opposition politics, with observers saying the trial illustrates how little room there is left to criticise China's rule since huge pro-democracy protests in 2019 were stamped out.

Those on trial represent a cross-section of Hong Kong's opposition -- from prominent legal scholar Benny Tai, to former lawmakers such as Claudia Mo, Au Nok-hin and Leung Kwok-hung, to

younger democracy activists such as Joshua Wong and Lester Shum.

The group were jointly charged in March 2021 with "conspiracy to commit subversion" for organising an unofficial primary a year earlier to select opposition candidates for a legislature election.

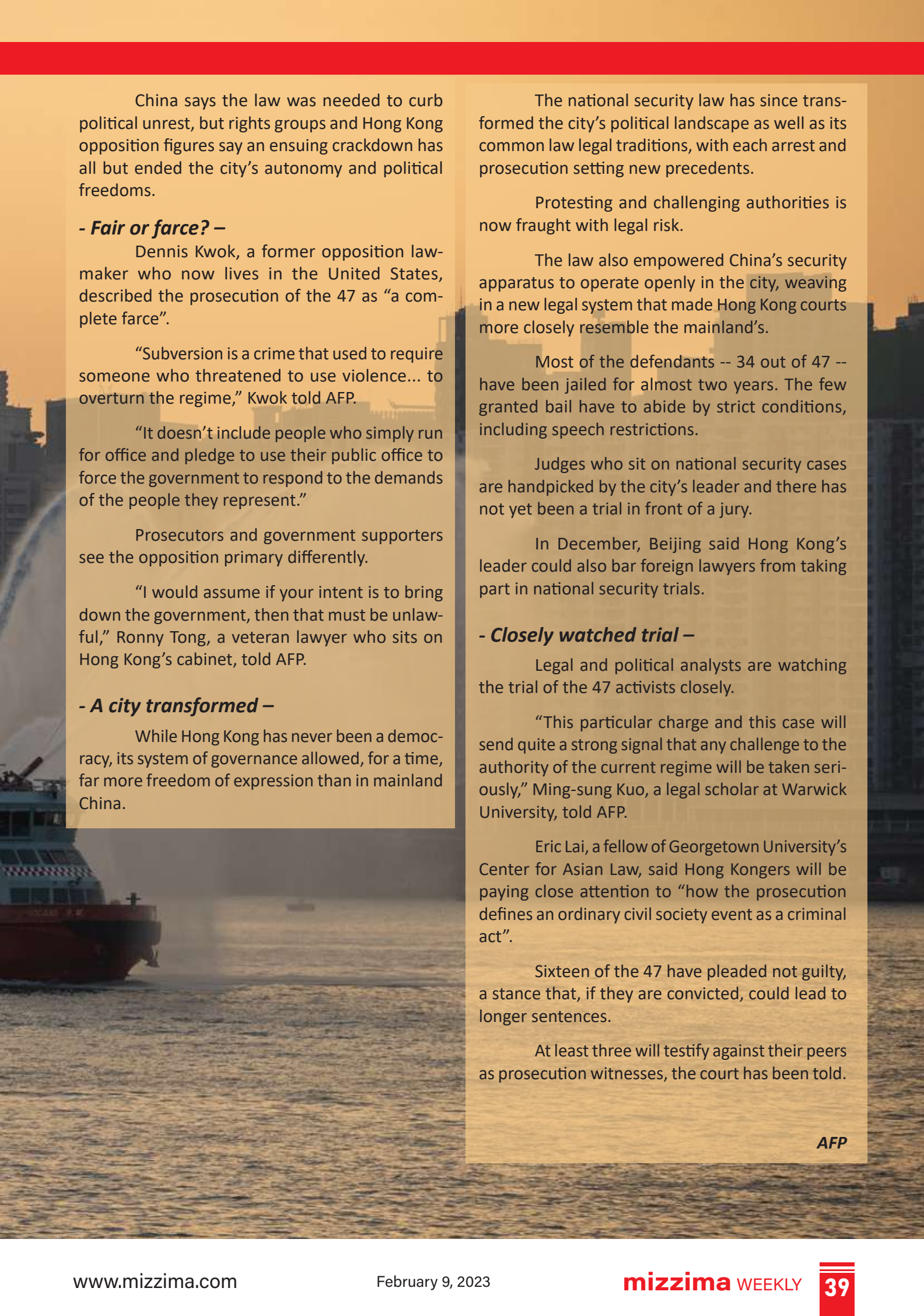
Their stated aim was to win a majority in the city's partially elected legislature, which would allow the bloc to veto budgets and potentially force the resignation of Hong Kong's leader.

That election was ultimately scrapped by authorities and Beijing brought in a new political system that strictly vetted who could stand for office.

The group was charged en masse under the national security law that China imposed on Hong Kong in 2020.



Photo: Victor He



China says the law was needed to curb political unrest, but rights groups and Hong Kong opposition figures say an ensuing crackdown has all but ended the city's autonomy and political freedoms.

- Fair or farce? –

Dennis Kwok, a former opposition lawmaker who now lives in the United States, described the prosecution of the 47 as “a complete farce”.

“Subversion is a crime that used to require someone who threatened to use violence... to overturn the regime,” Kwok told AFP.

“It doesn't include people who simply run for office and pledge to use their public office to force the government to respond to the demands of the people they represent.”

Prosecutors and government supporters see the opposition primary differently.

“I would assume if your intent is to bring down the government, then that must be unlawful,” Ronny Tong, a veteran lawyer who sits on Hong Kong's cabinet, told AFP.

- A city transformed –

While Hong Kong has never been a democracy, its system of governance allowed, for a time, far more freedom of expression than in mainland China.

The national security law has since transformed the city's political landscape as well as its common law legal traditions, with each arrest and prosecution setting new precedents.

Protesting and challenging authorities is now fraught with legal risk.

The law also empowered China's security apparatus to operate openly in the city, weaving in a new legal system that made Hong Kong courts more closely resemble the mainland's.

Most of the defendants -- 34 out of 47 -- have been jailed for almost two years. The few granted bail have to abide by strict conditions, including speech restrictions.

Judges who sit on national security cases are handpicked by the city's leader and there has not yet been a trial in front of a jury.

In December, Beijing said Hong Kong's leader could also bar foreign lawyers from taking part in national security trials.

- Closely watched trial –

Legal and political analysts are watching the trial of the 47 activists closely.

“This particular charge and this case will send quite a strong signal that any challenge to the authority of the current regime will be taken seriously,” Ming-sung Kuo, a legal scholar at Warwick University, told AFP.

Eric Lai, a fellow of Georgetown University's Center for Asian Law, said Hong Kongers will be paying close attention to “how the prosecution defines an ordinary civil society event as a criminal act”.

Sixteen of the 47 have pleaded not guilty, a stance that, if they are convicted, could lead to longer sentences.

At least three will testify against their peers as prosecution witnesses, the court has been told.

AFP

DENY LEGITIMACY OF MYANMAR'S MILITARY JUNTA, UN EXPERT URGES

The international community must promptly deny the legitimacy of Myanmar's military junta, the UN-appointed independent expert on the situation of human rights in the country said briefing at UN Headquarters in New York on Tuesday, launching a critical report as the coup enters its third year on Wednesday last week.

The State Administration Council (SAC) is illegal and illegitimate, Special Rapporteur Thomas Andrews said at the launch, co-hosted by the democracy and electoral assistance body, International IDEA.

He called on the international community to stand firm against military rule, create a coalition of Member States to enforce strong, coordinated sanctions, and support the democratic National Unity Government, which has a stronger claim to legitimacy.

"Two years ago, the military deposed a democratically elected government in an unconstitutional coup," the Special Rapporteur said, presenting his new report *Illegal and Illegitimate: Examining the Myanmar Military's Claim as the Government of Myanmar and the International Response*.

"The unrelenting violence that it unleashed on the people of Myanmar has created a widespread human rights, humanitarian, and economic crisis and galvanized nationwide opposition."

Sanctions, aid sorely needed

The conclusion is clear, he said, "the SAC's military coup was illegal and its claim as Myanmar's Government is illegitimate." Indeed, a new, coordinated international response to the crisis is imperative ahead of the "sham elections" being planned, he



continued.

He urged all Member States, particularly those that have already imposed costs on the junta, to initiate a strategic approach to strengthen, coordinate and enforce economic sanctions and an arms embargo on the SAC and provide more robust humanitarian aid to the millions in desperate need.”

At the launch, International IDEA presented its latest policy paper Elections at a crossing point: Considerations for electoral design in post-coup Myanmar.

It outlines key areas to consider for genuine democratic elections in the emerging new constitutional context, including the overall electoral legal framework, voter registration, and electoral dispute resolution.



Photo: UN News

‘Devastating’ situation on ground

Other top UN officials had issued urgent calls, including the UN Secretary-General.

In an interview with UN News, the Secretary-General’s Special Envoy on Myanmar Noeleen Heyzer outlined the current situation on the ground. Citing recent reports, she said 17.5 million people require humanitarian aid in 2023, compared with 1 million before the takeover.

“The impacts on both the country and the people have been devastating,” she said. “The people on the ground are very clear that the humanitarian crisis is due to a political crisis.”

The World Bank reported that 40 per cent of the population lives under the poverty line, she said. In addition, 15.2 million people were currently food insecure and more than 34,000 civilian structures had been burned in the past two years.

Catastrophic human suffering

“It is a catastrophe in terms of human suffering, and this has regional and international implications,” the Special Envoy said.

Noting that the recent adoption of the Security Council resolution 2669 (2022) marked the first time the organ recognized Myanmar since its independence, she said it also reflected unprecedented international unity and support around extremely urgent issues.

Calls for urgent action

The Special Envoy called for greater unity and commitment among the international community in three key areas: scaling up aid efforts among partners; forging a unified position on possible elections and the implementation of civilian protection measures.

“It is inconceivable any form of peaceful and democratic transition can be initiated by those perpetrating harm on their own citizens,” she said. “The violence has to stop, including the aerial bombings and burning of civilian infrastructure along with military’s ongoing arrests of political leaders, civil society actors and journalists.”

Courtesy of UN News

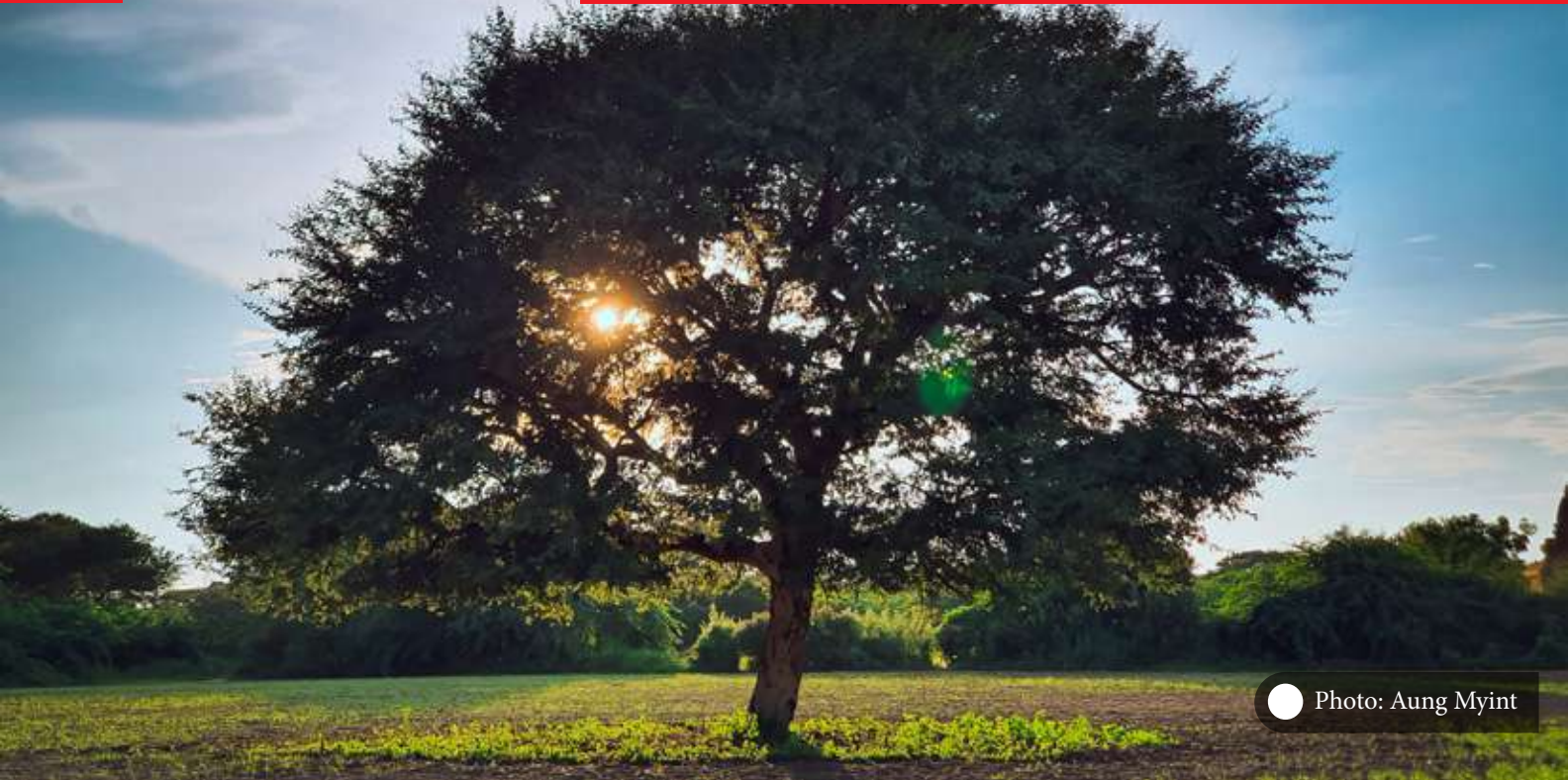


Photo: Aung Myint

KAREN STATE

The Chairperson of the Karen National Union (KNU), General Saw Mutu Say Poe, said that Burma's constitution needs to be changed to become a federal democracy that guarantees freedom, justice, equality and self-determination to all, reports DVB.

He made these remarks during an event commemorating the 74th Karen Revolution Day on 31 January.

The KNU General Saw Mutu Say Poe urged the people to ensure the victory of the Karen Revolution by fighting together rather than individually.



EXPLOSION ROCKS NAY PYI TAW HOME OF JUNTA-APPOINTED WARD ADMINISTRATOR, GUERRILLA GROUP CLAIMS RESPONSIBILITY

A bomb exploded near the house of a junta-appointed administrator of Shwekyarpin Ward, Zabuthiri Township in Nay Pyi Taw on 4 February, according to local news outlets.

The blast took place in the ditch in front of the home of 40-something administrator, Tin Khaing. Despite the explosion, no significant injury or damage was reported in the surrounding area.

The junta's troops arrived shortly after the explosion to investigate the incident and checked the CCTV footage installed at Tin Khaing's home and the surrounding area. The Sittaung Urban Guerrilla Force (Nay Pyi Taw) which is fighting against the military junta claimed responsibility for the attack.

Tin Khaing was involved in the census for the junta's planned superficial election and was accused by the guerrilla groups of suppressing those who support the anti-junta movement. This is the second time that his home has been targeted, as a package containing a bomb was discovered outside his home in November 2022, according to local residents.



Photo: AFP



MYANMAR UNEMPLOYMENT RATE RISING AS A RESULT OF THE COUP

Workers' groups claim 2023 will see a significant rise in unemployment in Myanmar as factories and businesses suffer as a result of the 2021 military coup.

These factories and industries are facing power outages, rising costs for petrol and diesel, and the pressures are leading to business closures and layoffs.

The Federation of General Workers Myanmar (FGWM) said in last October that nearly 200 factories and industries in Yangon Region alone had submitted for closure of their businesses.

A labour activist said that these factories and industries had to close and stop their businesses because of rising input costs and general crises besides facing difficulty in getting enough electrical power for their businesses.

On the other hand, the workers were facing problems of exploitation of their wages, not getting overtime wages, losing labour rights and many other difficulties, a spokesman for FGWM said.

The workers are facing difficulties in finding jobs and rising commodity prices so that they have to work odd and menial jobs for their livelihood.

According to the surveys conducted by FGWM, most of the factories and industries in Hlaingtharyar, Shwepyithar and Mingladon industrial zones had applied for closure of their businesses in 2023.

According to the figures released by the International Labour Organization (ILO), 1.6 million people were unemployed after the coup, with over 300,000 being garment industry workers.

International Organization of Migration (IOM) report issued on 28 December 2022 said that the military took power in a coup while the country was in economic downturn due to COVID-19 pandemic and then the country faced unrest elsewhere due to armed conflicts and then the economic situation was worsened amid instability in the country which caused the scarcity of employment.

IOM estimates that approximately 40,000 Myanmar nationals are leaving the country monthly due to conflict-related issues but also due to economic and other reasons.



CHINA'S MEGA-RICH MOVE THEIR WEALTH, AND PARTYING, TO SINGAPORE

Singapore is seeing an influx of ultra-wealthy families from China looking to protect their wealth from a Communist Party that increasingly views them with suspicion.

Beijing's recent crackdowns on tech billionaires and tax-shy celebrities, as well as three years of zero-Covid, have led many rich Chinese to look for a safe haven.

Nervous over the fate of their fortunes, some of the country's mega-rich have since booked tickets to Singapore, insiders told AFP.

The key Asian financial hub ticks all the boxes for relocating tycoons.

Singapore has been ruled by one party for the past six decades, and labour strikes and street protests are banned. Taxes are comparatively low and the population is predominantly ethnic Chinese.

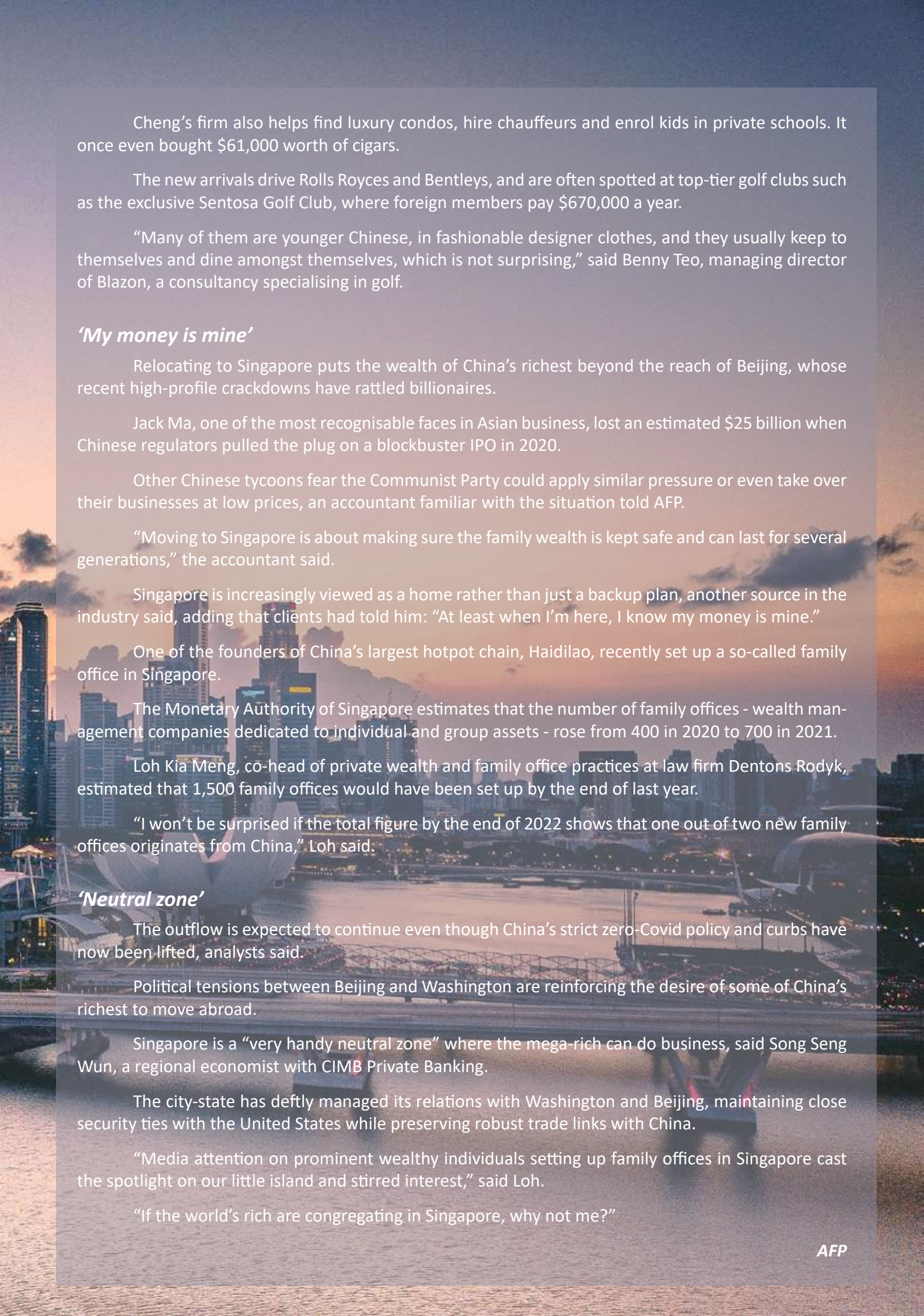
The presence of recent Chinese arrivals is keenly felt in Singapore, with some relocating to luxury homes with waterfront views on Sentosa Island, which also houses a theme park, a casino and a prestigious golf club.

"You cannot imagine the way they spend money. It's crazy," said Pearce Cheng, CEO of AIMS, a firm providing immigration and relocation services.

He recalled attending a client's party where a rare Japanese "Yamazaki 55" whisky, worth around \$800,000 a bottle, was served.



Photo: Swapnil
Bapat



Cheng's firm also helps find luxury condos, hire chauffeurs and enrol kids in private schools. It once even bought \$61,000 worth of cigars.

The new arrivals drive Rolls Royces and Bentleys, and are often spotted at top-tier golf clubs such as the exclusive Sentosa Golf Club, where foreign members pay \$670,000 a year.

"Many of them are younger Chinese, in fashionable designer clothes, and they usually keep to themselves and dine amongst themselves, which is not surprising," said Benny Teo, managing director of Blazon, a consultancy specialising in golf.

'My money is mine'

Relocating to Singapore puts the wealth of China's richest beyond the reach of Beijing, whose recent high-profile crackdowns have rattled billionaires.

Jack Ma, one of the most recognisable faces in Asian business, lost an estimated \$25 billion when Chinese regulators pulled the plug on a blockbuster IPO in 2020.

Other Chinese tycoons fear the Communist Party could apply similar pressure or even take over their businesses at low prices, an accountant familiar with the situation told AFP.

"Moving to Singapore is about making sure the family wealth is kept safe and can last for several generations," the accountant said.

Singapore is increasingly viewed as a home rather than just a backup plan, another source in the industry said, adding that clients had told him: "At least when I'm here, I know my money is mine."

One of the founders of China's largest hotpot chain, Haidilao, recently set up a so-called family office in Singapore.

The Monetary Authority of Singapore estimates that the number of family offices - wealth management companies dedicated to individual and group assets - rose from 400 in 2020 to 700 in 2021.

Loh Kia Meng, co-head of private wealth and family office practices at law firm Dentons Rodyk, estimated that 1,500 family offices would have been set up by the end of last year.

"I won't be surprised if the total figure by the end of 2022 shows that one out of two new family offices originates from China," Loh said.

'Neutral zone'

The outflow is expected to continue even though China's strict zero-Covid policy and curbs have now been lifted, analysts said.

Political tensions between Beijing and Washington are reinforcing the desire of some of China's richest to move abroad.

Singapore is a "very handy neutral zone" where the mega-rich can do business, said Song Seng Wun, a regional economist with CIMB Private Banking.

The city-state has deftly managed its relations with Washington and Beijing, maintaining close security ties with the United States while preserving robust trade links with China.

"Media attention on prominent wealthy individuals setting up family offices in Singapore cast the spotlight on our little island and stirred interest," said Loh.

"If the world's rich are congregating in Singapore, why not me?"

INDIAN REGULATOR REASSURES INVESTORS AFTER ADANI ROUT

India's securities regulator said Saturday that markets were stable and protected from further volatility, following a phenomenal share rout that hit the business empire of tycoon Gautam Adani.

The combined market cap of Adani Group's listed companies has collapsed by around \$120 billion - about half of the conglomerate's value - since US short-seller Hindenburg Research released an explosive report in late January.

It accused Adani of accounting fraud and artificially boosting its share prices, calling it a "brazen stock manipulation and accounting fraud scheme" and "the largest con in corporate history".

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) said in a statement that India's financial market had "demonstrated ongoing stability and is continuing to function in a transparent, fair and efficient manner".

It added that it had "put in place a set of well defined, publicly available surveillance measures" for addressing excessive volatility in specific stocks, without naming the Adani conglomerate.

Adani dismissed the allegations in the Hindenburg report as a "maliciously mischievous" reputational attack and issued a 413-page statement asserting its claims were "nothing but a lie".

Hindenburg said in response Adani had failed to answer most of the questions raised in its report.

The group's founder has seen his fortune plummet sharply, dumping him from third to 17th on the real-time Forbes rich list.

His operations have expanded at breakneck speed, with Adani Enterprises shares soaring more than 1,000 percent over the past five years.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Friday insisted Indian markets were well regulated and that the controversy would not affect investor confidence.

Earlier this week Adani cancelled a \$2.5 billion stock sale meant to help reduce debt levels -- long a concern -- restore confidence and broaden its shareholder base.

Big banks including Credit Suisse and Citigroup have stopped accepting Adani bonds as collateral for loans to private clients, according to Bloomberg News, fuelling worries about how the conglomerate will raise fresh funds.

AFP

Penrose Thitsa

BURMESE JUNTA LAUNCHES ONE-YEAR PILOT PROJECT FOR ELECTRIC VEHICLES

Myanmar has launched a one-year pilot project for electric vehicles (EVs) starting 1 January and ending 31 December this year, Xinhua reported citing a relevant official.

The military-ruled country imported 40 Chinese-made electric cars in January this year, with 10 being used as electric taxis in Yangon and 10 as taxis in Nay Pyi Taw, said an official at the National-level Leading Committee on Development of Electric Vehicles and Related Business established in June last year.

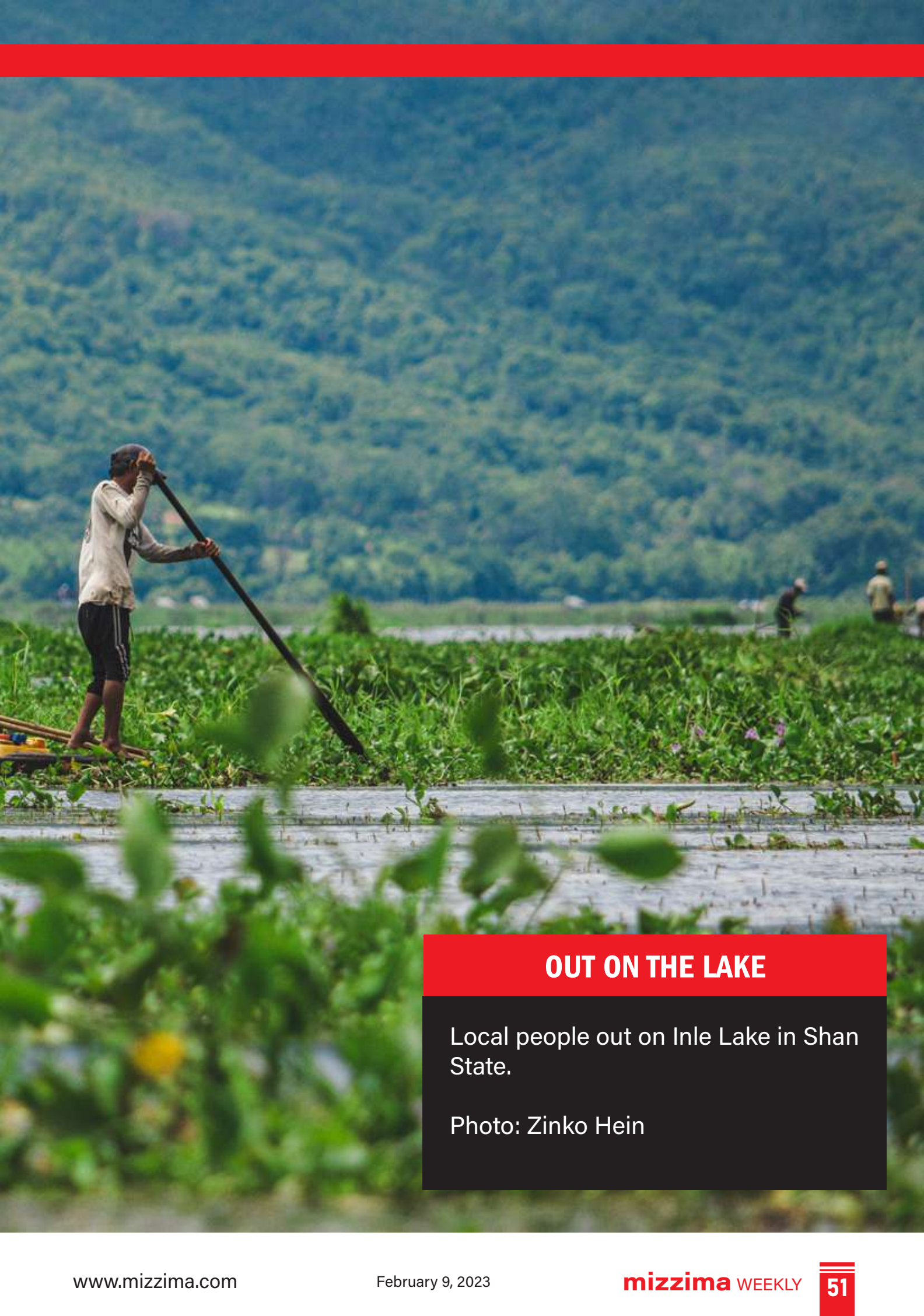
Despite the project based on electric energy, Myanmar has faced severe power cuts across the country since the military coup in February 2021.

The country also offered zero-tariff treatment for imported EVs from 2 November last year to 31 March this year.

The national committee is working on importing EVs, producing them locally, and building charging stations to grow the EV sector.

Recently, the committee and related organizations held a knowledge-sharing program on EVs in Yangon, attracting more than 200 participants.





OUT ON THE LAKE

Local people out on Inle Lake in Shan State.

Photo: Zinko Hein



A Buddha statue looks out over Mongla. Photo: Nicholas Nugent



A CORNER OF MYANMAR THAT IS FOREVER CHINESE

NICHOLAS NUGENT

We are so used to national states having clearly defined borders with associated immigration officials that it was a surprise to discover a corner of Myanmar that appears, for all intents and purposes, to be part of China. Nicholas Nugent reports from the border town of Mong La.

Mong La is a crossing point between China and Myanmar in northern Shan State adjacent to China's Yunnan province. I had reached there by road, a two-hour drive north east from Kengtung in the heart of what used to be known as the Golden Triangle, famed for its growing of opium and production of heroin.

Mong La resembles any modestly sized town in Yunnan in its architectural style and 'Chinese-ness' whereas it actually lies on the Myanmar side of the international frontier, not withstanding the Buddha figure that lords over the town. From a high point I could see the international border post to the north.



Mongla serves Chinese visitors who wish to gamble. Photo: Minzayar Oo

A visit to Mong La's market seems to confirm that you are actually in China. Foods including poultry on sale is aimed at the Chinese palette and – the biggest shock of all – the trading currency is the yuan rather than the kyat. Even electricity and communications networks in Mong La come from China.

Check the local time and you will find that, like all of China, you are now on Beijing time, an hour and a half ahead of Myanmar's clocks. The hotel I checked into was most definitely Chinese, indeed the citizens of Mong La speak Chinese rather than the Burmese language or Bama, though many would regard themselves as Wa, a Myanmar minority, rather than Han Chinese. If you speak only Burmese and carry only kyats you will not get far in Mong La.

Mong La gained its autonomy under an agreement with Myanmar's central government in 1989 following one of several ceasefires agreed between local militias and the Tatmadaw. Unlike Wa, Kokang and Kachin ethnic armies involved the 'special district' created for Mong La was not ethnically based despite being in a predominantly Wa region. Its basis is more political since its special status

came into being around the time of the dissolution of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB).

A leading figure in the negotiations was a former CPB functionary known in China as Lin Mingxian and in Myanmar as Sai Leun or Sai Lin. He once operated as a Chinese Red Guard from the Yunnan capital Kunming. The militia that took control of Mong La – or Special Region 4 to give its formal title – was the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA).

Many of Myanmar's border crossings with China are associated with the country's booming production of methamphetamines while that at Muse in western Shan State is renowned for its trade in jade and other gemstone. Mong La's niche business is gambling. Chinese citizens prohibited from gambling in China (other than in Macau or in the official national lottery) cross the border to play at casinos operating in the dark areas around the city to where they were pushed back from the border after objections from the Chinese authorities. Mong La is a gamblers' paradise. If not on the scale of Las Vegas in the US, it is busy all year round with Chinese visitors and highly profitable for casino owners.

Other cross-border activity in the town is said to include the trade in rare animal species such as the pangolin as Chinese culinary delicacies or ingredients in Chinese medicine. Such activities take place in the open because neither the Chinese nor Myanmar authorities hold sway in the special region, which continues to be 'ruled' by the NDAA.

According to British historian Martin Smith, Mong La is "a symptom of state failure and long-running, almost forgotten-about, conflicts" resulting in an absence of central authority. He says this unusual status continues "because it is not troubling anybody". It suits the governments of both countries because it is providing services that are in demand, notably a gambling facility, but is also a centre of cross-border trade in a range of 'goods' - including 'marriageable women' of whom there is said to be a shortage in Yunnan.

The seizure of power in Myanmar by the Tatmadaw in February 2021 has not threatened the status quo in Mong La. The army continues to battle ethnic armed organisations in border regions as well now as pro-democracy campaigners in all parts of the country and has no desire to stir up another 'hornets' nest' by clamping down on Mong La's gambling industry.

However, attitudes may be changing in China where President Xi Jinping has expressed concern that the yuan equivalent of US \$144bn is being drained from the Chinese economy

through 'offshore' gambling centres like Mong La. Last September Chinese media reported the conviction and jailing in Shanghai of eight Chinese citizens accused of running casinos including one in Mong La.

One Chinese businessman linked to a Mong La casino, Zhao Wei, has opened another 'offshore' gambling facility in the region, the classically styled and named 'Kings Roman Casino' on the Thailand-Laos border which, like casinos in Cambodia, the Philippines and Singapore, mainly serves Chinese visitors. The Economist magazine estimates that as many as 340 casinos in South East Asia target visitors from China, calling China's ban on gambling "a cash gift to the rest of Asia". The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Organisation claims casinos like Kings Roman and those at Mong La are used to launder money, the proceeds of the trafficking of drugs.

Myanmar already has a dubious reputation is the main Asian producer of chemically-based methamphetamines, which are shipped illicitly to Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and Bangladesh and as far as Australia, Europe and the United States, as heroin was once. Now this 'Golden Triangle' region is feeding a different addiction, that of gambling, which has until now been of less concern to governments than the traffic in drugs.



Pangolin for sale on the streets in Mongla. Tiger skins and rhino horn can also be found here. Photo: Minzayar Oo



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