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‘EVERYONE IS THE ENEMY’

In our heart of hearts, we all understand that the Myanmar junta has failed the people. It goes without saying. But there is one segment of the population under particular threat.

As one young Yangon resident said recently in a media interview, the soldiers on the streets view everyone as the enemy, particularly young people who it is assumed oppose the military junta.

And here lies a serious problem. The events of the last three years – the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and the 2021 military coup – have hit young people in Myanmar hard.

When it comes to Generation Z and the Spring Revolution, there is no going back and all to some degree or other are caught up in this atmosphere of fear.

As Insight Myanmar noted in a podcast recently, young people face the daily challenge of adjusting to this new normal. As the podcast notes, amidst the turmoil and conflict in Myanmar, the media often portrays the country as a place of constant suffering and despair. This is true up to a point. However, in reality, the daily lives of its citizens are much more nuanced. Though the situation is dire and the military is ever-present, with guns pointed at citizens and constant surveillance, people still find ways to live their lives and find joy amidst the chaos.

Young people are the ones who bear the brunt of suspicion.

And they are the ones who are having to adapt to the uncertainty and make the best of things, living life on the edge.

The threat is real. Soldiers, policemen and regime officials see everyone as a potential enemy, and even those who are not involved in politics are targeted and subjected to harassment, arrest, and even torture. The use of technology is also heavily restricted, and having a mobile phone or posting something on social media can result in arrest.

Nobody is safe, whether on the streets or at home, which makes for sleepless nights. One young Yangon citizen Insight Myanmar interviewed described how she was forced to use different phones every few days and how she was unable to sleep due to the constant fear of arrest and torture. Noise outside in the depth of the night prompted her to remain alert.

While the media may highlight the conflict in Myanmar for a brief period, the suffering of its citizens continues long after the spotlight has moved on, the podcast notes.

When representatives of the junta view everyone as the enemy, tension and fear permeate everyday life.

All of which begs the question – how will this impact Gen Z and what will be the lasting effect for the country?

This is an important question as the Spring Revolution continues.

EDITORIAL

mizzima
WEEKLY

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MIZZIMA MAGAZINE

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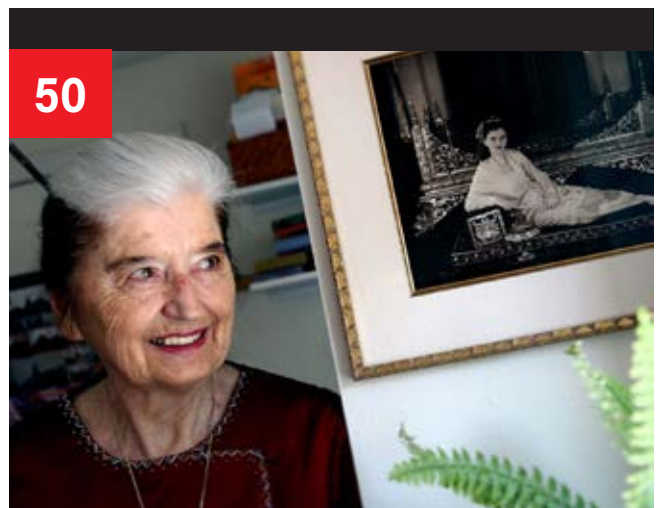
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BACK TO NORMAL?

Traffic returns and life returns to normal in Yangon after the "silent protest" held on 1 February against the military coup.

Photo: AFP

IN FOCUS



JUNTA TO BUILD MORE ELECTRIC VEHICLE CHARGING STATIONS

Electric vehicle (EV) charging points will be installed on busy roads and in urban areas in Myanmar, according to the junta leader, Min Aung Hlaing.

He made the claim at meeting of Yangon industrialists and bosses of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) at the Hlaing Tharyar Industrial Zone on 5 February.

“To enable the import of electric vehicles, we have reduced the tax rate, and we are starting to establish charging stations for EVs. We will increase the number of charging stations so that they cover busy streets and urban areas,” Min Aung Hlaing said.

He added that electrically powered public transport will be introduced if sufficient electricity can be produced.

To help with that he said that the regime is working on solar and wind power generation projects to provide sufficient electricity to cities.

Unfortunately, there is currently not even enough electricity to cover demand in the upcoming summer months. U Thaung Han, the junta Minister of Electricity and Energy said that electricity will have to be rationed over the summer.

Min Aung Hlaing also has to frequently call on the public to conserve electricity, water, and fuel in the face of frequent power outages in Myanmar.

To boost its EV sector, in June 2022 the Myanmar junta established the National-level Leading Committee on Development of Electric Vehicles and Related Business which is made up of five working committees. It will focus on importing EVs, manufacturing EVs in Myanmar and building more charging stations throughout the country.

As part of this effort, ten imported Chinese BYD e2 cars will be used as electric taxis in Yangon, and another ten will be used as taxis in the capital, Napyitaw.

VILLAGE ADMINISTRATOR AND TWO OTHERS ABDUCTED BY UNKNOWN ARMED GROUP

Three men, including a junta-appointed village administrator, were abducted by an unknown armed group on the morning of 5 February 2023 near Htin Mal Village, in Tanintharyi Region’s Bokepyin Township.

The abducted men were named as U Maung Maung, 60, the Chaung Kaphae Village administrator, Thaung Nyut, 50, a former Pyu Saw Htee militia member, and another man whose identity is unknown.

According to locals, U Maung Maung was previously the chief of the Pyi Gyi Ma Naing Police Station in Bokepyin Township and Thaung Nyut was a former member of the Pyu Saw Htee militia living in Taung Ngal Village.

They said that all three men were known as junta informants.

“Three people were taken by unknown gunmen. We know that two of them were released later that evening. However, the village administrator remains in custody. I have no idea why they were arrested”, said a resident of Pyi Gyi Ma Naing Village.

According to local news sources, the abduction was carried out by an unidentified armed organisation. At the time of writing junta troops are currently conducting a comprehensive search of Htin Mal Village and the surrounding area.

FIRE AT YANGON MPT EXCHANGE CUTS PHONE AND INTERNET SERVICES

A fire broke out at a Myanmar Post and Telecommunications phone exchange in Yangon's Mayangone Township on 7 February.

According to the Myanmar Fire Services Department, the fire broke out at the MPT exchange on Kabar Aye Pagoda Road, in Mayangone Township's Ward No. 5 at about 10:23 a.m. Fire trucks from the Fire Services Department were immediately dispatched and the fire was under control by 10:37 a.m. and completely extinguished by 10:45 a.m.

"The fire was burning in the internet server room. It broke out above the ceiling, then the ceiling fell down.

We assume that the fire was caused by faulty wiring", said the chairman of a philanthropic

youth association who helped extinguish the fire.

Because of the fire, MPT customers had their communications disrupted. Users of MPT SIM cards had no internet or voice calls from 10:30 a.m. until 8:00 p.m. on 7 February.

"At first, I wondered if the junta had cut off internet access again because I could not use the internet or send messages. I could not make a call as well. Later on, I found out about the fire," said an MPT user in Yangon.

At the time of reporting, some MPT customers were still having difficulties contacting the MPT call centre and some still had no fibre or mobile internet service. Apparently, MPT employees are working to restore the service as soon as possible.

TWO BODIES WITH STAB WOUNDS FOUND IN PYIN OO LWIN TOWN

The bodies of two men were found with stab wounds in Mandalay Region's Pyin Oo Lwin Town on the morning of 7 February, according to locals.

They were found near the Pan Cherry Hotel at the top of Cherry Street and 17th Street in Pyin Oo Lwin Town at around 7:00 am on 7 February.

"The deceased were men around the age of 30. The bodies were found near the Pan Cherry Hotel. I saw stab wounds in their necks and abdomens. I think it is possible they were killed somewhere else and dumped here", said a local resident who witnessed the discovery of the bodies.

"One body was found on the road and

the other was found by the side of the road. Both bodies were of men aged about 30 years old and had stab wounds to the abdomen. The bodies were taken to the Pyin Oo Lwin hospital morgue by our association's ambulance", said a volunteer from the Tani Thukha Philanthropic Association.

According to reports the Tani Thukha Philanthropic Association responded after being called to the scene by members of the public.

No soldiers or junta personnel have attended the scene or carried out any investigations, according to locals.

Previously, on 18 September 2022, five people were murdered in Pyin Oo Lwin.

MYANMAR JUNTA SOLDIERS MURDER TWO AFTER FINDING HUNTING MUSKET

Junta soldiers arrested three men and shot two of them dead after they discovered a hunting musket, in Dawei District on 7 February.

At around 7:00 a.m. about 20 junta soldiers arrived at a rubber farm in Yange Village, Thayetchaung Township. They searched the farmhouse and discovered a Tumee rifle, a common type of single-shot musket for hunting, that some people have also used against the junta.

On discovering the Tumee rifle the junta soldiers beat three men, then arrested them and took them away.

Two were shot in the head and killed at

the side of the road near the rubber farm and the third was released.

A Yange villager said: "They were apprehended after a Tumee rifle was discovered in the house. The owner of the house, Ko Paing Soe, was also arrested. Soon after, gunshots were heard and we discovered the two dead bodies."

The two killed men were reported to be the house owner, Ko Paing Soe, age 30 and Ko Phyo Ngal Zaw, age 23.

Residents said they were cremated by family members at 1:00 p.m. on 8 February.



CRITICALLY WEAK

Uncertainty weighs on
Myanmar's economy,
says World Bank



● The downturn in the economy has hit the Myanmar people hard. Photo: AFP



A woman takes her goods to trade in a market in Yangon. Photo: AFP

Call it a double-whammy. When assessing the current dire state of the Myanmar economy, two factors stand out. Firstly, close to three years of response to the COVID-19 pandemic saw a combination of lockdowns, social distancing, masking and travel restrictions hammer the economy, particularly small to medium businesses, and the livelihood of day workers. Secondly, the 2021 military coup and its aftermath rattled people's daily lives and added to the uncertainty.

These are the key elements of the latest World Bank report entitled "Myanmar Economic Monitor: Navigating Uncertainty" – published on 30 January - that looks into the Myanmar economy and business over the last year.

The Myanmar Economic Monitor is published twice a year.

In simple terms, the economy could be 30 per cent larger with the absence of the coup and the response to the Covid pandemic. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is expected to grow just 1 per cent after last year's 18 per cent contraction.

To some extent, the World Bank tends to tip-toe around the elephant in the room, namely the Myanmar crisis prompted by the generals seizing power on 1 February 2021 from Aung San Suu Kyi's elected civilian government, though the effects are there for all to see in the worsening of poverty, a growing downturn in business and foreign investment, worsening unemployment and a

spike in the numbers of post-Covid legal and illegal exits by migrant workers seeking income abroad.

Myanmar's economy remains subject to significant uncertainty, with ongoing conflict disrupting business operations, the report notes, including significant macroeconomic volatility over the past six months, the report summary notes.

Naturally, certain areas of the country – such as Sagaing, Magway and Chin State – have been more negatively affected by fighting, with the resulting negative effects on the local economies.

While some firms are showing signs of resilience, household incomes remain weak, and Myanmar's potential for inclusive growth has been severely weakened by the recent shocks.

Gradual economic recovery is expected in the near term and growth is estimated at 3 per cent for the fiscal year ending September 2023, the report says. Even so, economic activity continues to be adversely affected by conflict, electricity shortages, and changing rules and regulations, with per capita GDP expected to remain about 13 percent below its pre-COVID-19 level.

The depreciating kyat, combined with high global prices and ongoing logistics constraints, has caused import costs to rise sharply – all this happening, it should be noted, against a backdrop of increasing US and other international sanctions.

The cumulative impact of these shocks fuels inflation and further reduces real incomes. In July and August 2022, almost half of all households in the country reported income losses. Families have been reducing food and non-food consumption in response.

The number of people living below the poverty level is on the increase.

As the report indicates, the situation is mixed.

“Although business conditions improved toward the end of 2022, the recent economic indicators are mixed,” said World Bank Country Director for Myanmar, Cambodia, and the Lao PDR, Mariam Sherman. “While conflict remains, families suffer from insecurity and violence. Firms, particularly those in the agriculture sector, are experiencing higher costs and delays. Funding for critical health and education services is falling, and lack of trust in public services is increasing. These problems will hinder Myanmar’s long-term economic prosperity.”

What is happening globally also matters to Myanmar. Economic recovery from the shocks of COVID-19 and the military coup is likely to be constrained by macroeconomic and regulatory uncertainty. The gloomy global economic outlook, which affects Myanmar’s major trading partners including the United States, the European Union, and China, will further weigh on the country’s growth prospects.

Frequent changes to rules and regulations have led to greater uncertainty around access to foreign exchange and imports, reducing confidence in payment systems and delaying customs processes. Some businesses are finding ways to cope with the challenging conditions, through access to favorable exchange rates or exemptions from regulatory requirements. Others have switched to informal channels for payments and goods trade.

The World Bank, while not getting into the specifics of the conflict, notes the coming months could be problematic.

In the absence of more shocks, the economy is expected to expand slowly beyond 2023, but at rates well below those observed before the pandemic. Downside risks include the possibility

that conflict may intensify in 2023, while geopolitical tensions could escalate. Growth is likely to suffer in the medium to long term as resources are taken from competitive and export-oriented areas.

The Covid pandemic and the ongoing civil war have hammered many people, particularly the young generation – or Generation Z – many of whom are unemployed or have joined the armed ranks of the resistance.

As the report notes, lost months of education, with rapid increases in unemployment and internal displacement, will reduce already low levels of human capital and productive capacity over the long term.

Myanmar junta mismanagement of the economy and regulations is having a negative effect.

As the World Bank notes, Myanmar could strengthen economic growth by reconsidering its exchange rate policy, which causes high inflation, fiscal deficits, weak exports and low growth rates. The report recommends a more unified and market-oriented exchange rate system, which would help stabilize the economy, reduce inflation, boost trade, and minimize market distortions.

The World Bank publishes the Myanmar Economic Monitor twice a year.



MYANMAR JUNTA MAKES PLANS FOR ELECTIONS

The Myanmar junta propaganda leader General Zaw Min Tun said that it is still too early to say whether the election will be held or not.

It has been a controversial topic among the public. Some are wondering if the military junta is really going to back out of the elections because of the disapproval of the people, revolutionary forces and international organisations.

But, junta leader Min Aung Hlaing is committed to election preparations.

On 23 January, he met with U Thein Soe, the Chair of the junta Union Election Commission (UEC), and legal experts. Reportedly, he focused the discussion on the implementation of the election and the transfer of power to the winning party.

He also gave instructions related to the Political Parties Registration Law, which has been recently amended. He also told the UEC that registration should not be granted to any political

parties that violate the 2008 Constitution.

He talked about the nationwide appointment of UEC staff and voter list validation, saying that the election would be held later in the year.

At the same meeting, he also claimed that he had come to an agreement with some ethnic organisations to strengthen the multi-party system, and build a union based on democracy and federalism.

It seems clear that he has already chosen his own path.

In order to legitimise the military coup, Min Aung Hlaing seems to have already made election plans a long time ago.

He referred to the 2008 Constitution to justify his coup, reasoning that he was just protecting it.

After the coup, he reformed the UEC that had been installed by the civilian government and



Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing appears to be moving forward with plans for national elections later this year. Photo: AFP/Myanmar Military Information Team

replaced its nominees with ones who would obey him.

Then, he made them annul the result of the 2020 General Election.

According to existing laws, the UEC does not have the authority to cancel election results. Nevertheless, the junta- Chair of the UEC, U Thein Soe, not only annulled the whole election result but also made arrangements for future elections to be conducted under a PR System.

When he was previously the UEC Chair, U Thein Soe played a variety of tricks to help the military proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) win the 2010 General Election.

Using proportional representation, the military proxy USDP is sure to win at least 26% of the seats in the parliament. When that is added to the mandatory 25% of seats automatically given to the military, Min Aung Hlaing's presidential dream will surely come true.

Min Aung Hlaing replaced the former USDP Chair, U Than Htay with his right-hand man U Khin Yi and has installed his allies in all the important USDP positions.

To further stifle other political parties' election chances the junta amended and adopted some laws.

In December the junta issued the Peaceful Gathering and Peaceful Procession Law, which could hinder political parties' election campaigns.

According to junta laws, if people want to assemble they have to first inform the township police about the assembly and obtain permission for it in advance. This will seriously impact election campaigning because it seems that political parties will have to seek permission for any kind of rally or public meeting they want to hold.

But it seems that the rules will be different for the USDP, as the party has already started its election campaigning, even though the election has not yet been announced.

In areas such as Naypyitaw, Yangon, Bago, Mandalay and Southern Shan State, the USDP Chair U Khin Yi met with current and former party members and local organisations.

On 21 January, Bulat Hla Swe, the chair of the USDP Naypyitaw Branch, met with social

organisations at Pinyinmanar Township Office. He told them to cast votes for the USDP and help them win the election. There have been similar activities in other areas of Naypyitaw Union Territory.

Under functioning democratic systems, political parties should only be allowed to carry out election campaigns within a fixed period prior to the election and all parties should be allowed to campaign within that period.

Recently, the military junta released a new law governing the registration of political parties. According to the law, all the political parties have to re-register within 60 days. Any that fail to do so will be automatically removed from the list of political parties.

Political parties that wish to contest at a national level must prove that they have 100,000 members within 90 days of their registration being approved and have branch offices in at least 150 townships, half the total number in the country. They must also deposit at least 100 million kyats of party funds in the state-owned open Myanmar Economic Bank. Each party will also have to stand a candidate in at least half of all constituencies nationwide.

Political parties that wish to contest in state or regional elections must have 1,000 members within 90 days of being approved and have funding of at least one million kyats. They must also have offices in at least five townships in the states or regions where they are standing candidates.

According to the military junta, political parties that fail to follow these regulations will be shut down and banned from competing.

This law will pose barriers to all parties that want to participate in the elections except for the military-backed USDP. It may even affect the three or four of the more disorganised parties that met with Min Aung Hlaing.

Judging from this, it is clear that Min Aung Hlaing is paving the way for a biased, undemocratic elections that will keep him in power.

HURFOM WANTS MYANMAR JUNTA TO FACE ICC HAVING DOCUMENTED ITS ABUSES



In this file photograph taken on September 7, 2017, a house is engulfed by fire in Gawdu Tharya village near Maungdaw in Rakhine state in northern Myanmar. Photo: AFP

The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) is calling for a referral of the Myanmar military to the International Criminal Court (ICC) to ensure that there is an end to military rule.

Whilst the new sanctions announced by the United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom to mark

the second anniversary of the February 2021 coup were welcome, according to HURFOM these actions came too little too late for the thousands of people killed by the Burma Army.

HURFOM has been documenting severe violations against the rights and freedoms of civilians in southeastern Myanmar committed by the

junta since the February 2021 coup.

In the over 730 days since 1 February 2021, HURFOM has reported that nearly 25,000 people have been forced to flee their homes in Southeastern Burma due to conflict between the junta and armed revolutionary organisations.

After they've left, villages

are often scorched, belongings looted, and livestock shot and killed. In addition, more than 3,000 innocent civilians have been arrested and detained.



The numbers of those killed are likely much higher than HURFOM, and other documentation organizations can report safely.

HURFOM condemns the ongoing human rights violations and calls for immediate international intervention and for global actors to pursue accountability mechanisms at

the highest level, which put an end to military impunity at last.

Military affairs observers have also said that the junta's declaration of martial law in many townships across the country has signalled more brutal oppression of pro-democracy groups, civilians, and local resistance armed forces strongholds.

One example of ongoing random violence against civilians in southeastern Myanmar was reported by HURFOM.

At about 10:00 a.m. on 31 January a 71-year-old villager lost one of his legs when he stepped on a landmine while repairing a water pipe near a bridge in Baykalwe Village, in Mon State's Ye Township.

He was initially taken to Lamai Hospital before being transferred by a local support team to the 300-bed hospital in Mawlamyine City.

Apparently, junta troops often lay mines close to bridges near to their camps to prevent their adversaries from approaching the camps.

A source who wishes to remain anonymous said: "In many cases, the soldiers put the landmines just outside their camp's fence for protection. We must be cautious about these unseen dangers while working near the battalions."

Another person said: "It is speculated that mines are often planted near military bases. Three of our villagers previously suffered serious injuries. All were disabled in attacks by Light Infantry Battalion No. 586. No group or authorities ever confesses to these crimes."

According to HURFOM there are four junta military bases in Tanintharyi Township.

Its researchers estimated that in the last week of January, in Tanintharyi Region, at least two residents were killed, 17 more were injured, and more than 4,000 people fled indiscriminate shelling by junta soldiers from the four bases.

A resident of Banlamut Village in Tanintharyi Township said: "From 24 January to 31 January, the junta perpetrated war crimes against local civilians. The fighting led to at least five injuries from my village [Banlamut] and four victims from our neighboring village, BawDeekam, three from Mawtone, another three from Uyinkam and at least two from Thamoke Chone village."

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY MUST SUPPORT MYANMAR'S INDEPENDENT MEDIA



The International Press institute (IPI) global network calls on the international community to renew its support for press freedom in Myanmar.

Two years since the military took power in a violent coup d'état, and despite extraordinary resilience and courage by the country's media, the state of press freedom remains in peril, the IPI says in a recent report.

The international community must act with urgency to support the country's remaining independent media outlets and pressure the military junta to end its deadly assault on journalists and democracy.

Following its democracy-crushing coup on 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military has carried out an unrelenting media crackdown to silence journalists and restrict access to information. The military junta has shuttered multiple independent outlets, repeatedly blocked access to the internet and mobile data, and restricted content on websites and social media platforms.

Numerous journalists have been forced to work in exile, and those who remain in Myanmar risk their lives and safety to report the news. Journalists face daily harassment and prosecution and face

the risk of military searches and raids, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention, torture, and imprisonment.

Myanmar has become the third-worst jailer of journalists globally, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). According to the IPI Database of Killed Journalists, four journalists in Myanmar have been killed since February 2021, all suspectedly at the hands of the junta.

In a media briefing on 7 February 2023, organized by IPI, Soe Myint, the founding Editor In-Chief and Managing Director of Mizzima Media Group, said that despite the

ongoing violence and limited international support, independent media in Myanmar will continue to figure out ways to operate and report what is occurring in Myanmar to the world.

‘Myanmar’s independent media has not only survived the coup, but we now see audience numbers far higher than before the coup, with a strong network of operations across the country’, said Soe Myint, who underscored that the junta only controls part of the country’s territory.

“Independent media and independent journalists are supposed to disappear, supposed to be killed, and supposed to stop... but two years after, we are able to do more than what we did even before the coup. This is resilience”, he added.

The military junta’s reliance on economic and military support from China and Russia, including surveillance tech, is well-documented. But freelance journalist Thin Lei Win highlighted fears that European technology that was sold to the Myanmar Ministry of Home Affairs prior to the coup is now being deployed by the military junta for surveillance purposes.

“That is where the international community can come in to make sure that countries that supposedly adhere to human rights standards actually do something about it and make sure that even if they have sold these technologies to the Myanmar government, they are no longer operable”, Thin Lei Win said.

“It’s not just the states that we would normally associate these things with, but democratic states as well. When it comes to money and profit, they are equally culpable.”

“Two years after the military coup that abruptly derailed Myanmar’s democratic progress, the country’s media, operating both in the country and in exile, are continuing to deliver the news with incredible resilience”, IPI Deputy Director Scott Griffen said.

“But they do so at immense risk as the military regime continues its violent crackdown, including on journalists and independent media. What we are witnessing is not just an attack on press freedom, but an attack on democracy. The international community must renew its commitment to Myanmar and protect and defend the courageous journalists who are risking their lives to report on the regime’s ongoing human rights abuses”, he explained.

The military coup on 1 February 2021 ended nearly a decade of economic and political reforms to introduce a civilian government after a half-century of domination by the military.

“That ten year period of time showed Myanmar people what is possible”, Thin Lei Win said. “The younger generation who grew up during those ten years realized the possibilities [and] the future they could have... journalists saw the possibility and what it could be and they tasted it, no matter how flawed it was, and realized what

they would be giving up. That is the big difference now.”

By Lena Dal Santo for The International Press institute (IPI), a global network of editors, media executives and leading journalists who promote the conditions that allow journalism to fulfill its public function, most importantly the media’s ability to operate free from interference and without fear of retaliation. Its mission is to defend media freedom and the free flow of news wherever they are threatened.

LUXEMBOURG PLEDGES SUPPORT TO TRAIN MYANMAR JOURNALISTS

Luxembourg, a founding member of the European Union, is stepping up its engagement to promote freedom of expression in Myanmar. The Embassy of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg in Bangkok is helping to shoulder the cost of training 20 young journalists, thereby contributing to strengthening independent media in military-ruled Myanmar.

The support from Luxembourg is for the journalism training of Mizzima Media Training Institute (MMTI), a unique resource for Myanmar's independent media and journalists following the February 2021 coup. While at MMTI,

trainees study several aspects of journalism under seasoned Burmese professionals as well as distinguished foreign guests.

Many may not be aware of the role Luxembourg has played for nearly a century in pioneering freedom of the airwaves. One of the first private broadcast companies in the world, Radio Luxembourg became a voice of freedom for many Europeans in the 20th century, especially those living behind the Iron Curtain. Broadcasting a mix of music, news, and cultural programming in different languages, RTL (Radio Television Luxembourg) catered to a more progressive, international audience

and facilitated communication across Europe.

Regarding MMTI, Mizzima and the government of Luxembourg believe that the development of journalism skills will allow Myanmar youth from different ethnic backgrounds to draw international attention to the crimes committed in Myanmar, combat misinformation and tell the story of Myanmar people within its borders and beyond.

The 60-day training supported by Luxembourg started this month, with trainees from different states and regions across Myanmar. MMTI formally opened its doors in August 2022.



BURMESE ACTIVIST MEETS WITH KING CHARLES III



Zoya Phan, an ethnic Karen and long-time political activist, briefly met with King Charles III of the United Kingdom on 1 February.

The exchange took place as the King and Queen Consort hosted a reception at Buckingham Palace to celebrate the contribution of East and Southeast Asian communities to the United Kingdom.

At the event, Charles III was quick to recognize Zoya as Karen from her ethnic dress. "The King seems to have a keen interest in Burma," Zoya told Mizzima. "At one point he wants to visit Burma if there are genuine democratic reforms."

As for Zoya, she thanked the King for his support for Burma and told him about ongoing junta attacks targeting civilians and how people in Burma are desperate for help.

During the period of British rule in Burma, many Karen worked closely with the British administration and military. Shortly after Burma gained independence in 1948, the country was plunged into what some refer to as the world's longest ongoing civil war. The conflict has seen several ethnic groups, including the Karen, fighting for political, economic, and cultural rights.

"Karen and many other ethnic people suffered great cruelties and exploitation under the rule of the Burman Kings," explains Zoya. "For the Karen and many ethnics in Burma, things improved under British rule. As Karen we don't want to be ruled by the British or the Burman. We want autonomy and control over our own lives, land, and natural resources."

The meeting at the start of the month was not the first between Charles and Zoya. The then Prince of Wales recalled meeting Zoya several years previously, at which time he shared how he learned about Burma and the Karen from Earl Mountbatten of Burma.

Burma became a colony of Britain with the fall of the Konbaung dynasty in 1885.

LGBTQ PEOPLE CLAIM ABUSE AND TORTURE IN MYANMAR INTERROGATION CENTRES

YMO

Since the 1 February 2021 coup, thousands of protestors including LGBTQ+ people in different cities across Myanmar have been calling for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and a return to civilian democracy. Myanmar's military have

responded by arresting more than 17,710 people according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP).

Zenith, a 22-year-old gay man, is one of them. He was arrested on 7 May 2021

alongside other protestors, accused of being one of the leaders of anti-coup protests. When the police checked his phone, which was confiscated at the time of his arrest, they found photos and videos taken with his male partner.



LGBTQ activists calling for rights and democracy. Photo: YMO for Mizzima

“The police called me ‘fucking gay.’ They said, ‘you gays are everywhere’. Police insulted my sexual identity,” Zenith said.

Zenith was detained at Tarmwe police station, notorious for arresting LGBTQ+ people accused of loitering, then beating them up. Behind the police station, there is a private cell for interrogation. That’s where Zenith was taken, singled out from the group he was arrested with.



“A soldier held my left hand. Another soldier held my right hand. One held my hair from behind. They slapped me a lot. When they kicked me and I fell, they stamped on my face with their feet. I thought, I’m gone.”

The next day Zenith was sent to Shwe Pyitha Interrogation Center where people are routinely detained and tortured for resisting the coup. There, he was handcuffed and forced to kneel for an hour. At midnight, the soldiers handcuffed him from behind, blindfolded him and took him into a room for interrogation.

“They burned my thighs with a cigarette,” Zenith said. “They told me that the death of a gay like me is not important. They slapped me and said that no one would be sad if I died.”

With the junta singling out members of the LGBTQ+ community, many people across Myanmar face serious human rights violations. The National Unity Government (NUG) said in a report on 17 May 2022 that 17 LGBTQ+ people were killed and at least 85 people were detained since February 2021. Although this list is the only official information available, experts believe that many more have been tortured and killed as a result of the junta’s violence against gay people.

The NUG report noted that gay and transgender people who have been arrested have experienced different forms of sexual harassment while in police custody, or when being held in detention by regime forces, because of their visible identity.

“LGBTQ+ people protesting from early on were arrested like everyone else. But LGBTQ+ people are more persecuted,” said Aung Myo Min. Aung Myo Min is the first openly gay male minister of the parallel government in the country. He has received seven international awards for work in human and LGBTQ+ rights. He said that they are being subjected to hate-based persecution in our community.

The case for torture

Nawarat Aung Aung is a transgender, activist who posts videos of himself dancing in drag on Facebook every night. When the army staged the coup, Nawarat started publishing anti-coup content on Facebook and speaking out about the coup on Facebook Live.

On the evening of 18 May, he was arrested by a large number of soldiers. He was held at gunpoint, blindfolded, and taken to a military compound for interrogation. He was tortured for almost 36 hours.

“Being a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I was targeted more than others. It wasn’t just one policeman but a whole group,” he said.

“They looked at me naked. I look like a man, but I have breasts. They poked my breasts with iron rods. They hit my nipples with a stick and burned me with cigarettes. They made me kneel down with my arms in the air while they got drunk. It was like they were being entertained. They drank and tortured me all night.”

Torture methods are

**“The policeman
hit me three
times in the face
and punched me
in the ribs. They
beat my friend
saying ‘Did you
want to be gay?
You gays are
useless’.**

used by the military and police in interrogation centres across the country to obtain information and forced confessions. According to Outright International, which deals with human rights abuses and violations of LGBTQ+ people, bullying by the police and military for being LGBTQ+ have tripled since the coup.

Criticism of gay people

Ko Myat, a 33-year-old gay man, was arrested during a protest and spent a number of weeks in a prison. He says the police knew he was gay from his mannerisms and the way he looked. He was sexually abused and tortured alongside his friend; a male school teacher named Ko Aye Win who at the

time of his arrest was dressed in feminine clothes. His friend, Ko Myat says, is still being held in the detention centre.

“The policeman hit me three times in the face and punched me in the ribs. They beat my friend saying ‘Did you want to be gay? You gays are useless’. They beat me up and said ‘your parents raised you and you dare to live like this.’ Because of the beatings, my friend could not walk when he was transferred from the police station to Insein Prison,” said Ko Myat.

Ko Myat and his friends are sending food weekly to the inmates including LGBTQ+ people who were arrested and charged for taking part in the

anti-coup protests. Ko Myat said that it is not easy to do this in the long run. For these LGBTQ+ people, only a few people are willing to help.

Striving for change

In Myanmar, which was ruled by the military from 1962 to 2011 and again from 2021 until today, discriminatory laws and policies against people from the LGBTQ+ community are rife. Discrimination against these same people is deeply rooted in Myanmar culture, as most Buddhists believe that their sexuality is the result of past moral transgressions. But things have got worse since the 2021 coup. Nawarat has been detained many times under the so-called “shadow law”, which allows police to arrest after sunset anyone they believe is acting suspiciously.

“Being gay is seen as being in hell”, says Facebook activist Nawarat. “Looking down on LGBTQ+ people exists even now. Despite awareness-raising of the issues, those views cannot be changed.”

There is no law to protect the rights of the LGBT and instead, they are still being discriminated against and laughed at in society. When the political situation changed and there is some freedom in Myanmar in 2010, LGBT rights are rights people started asking for loudly. However, this has not been achieved so far.

Not discriminating against LGBTQ+ people and amending the law that threatens those people are the biggest issues. The LGBTQ+ organizations have requested

every government to amend Article 377 which discriminates against the LGBT. But these calls have been ignored.

“In order to be able to propose these things through the parliament, we are trying through the legal staff to have the legal action,” said Daw Zarli Aye, an LGBT+ advocate. “But when we talk about LGBTQ+ people, they have kind of become silent.”

“Not only with this LGBT, but there is also still lacking. We are still trying very hard to have the very basic facts of fundamental human rights. So that LGBT rights, we cannot just achieve it. Have to try a lot more,” said a former senior official in the National League for Democracy-led government.

“They don’t see gay people as human. If a man loves another man, they look down on them,” said Ko Myat. “Among them, the authorities are the worst. They beat them and ask for money.”

A retired police officer, who worked for 20 years at East District police station said that he and his colleagues used to single out gay and trans people for extortion. “They’re easy to bully,” he said.

“When the police officers need something to do, they grab a gay person. That’s what the situation was like in the past, but it’s even worse for a gay person who is being arrested for politics. Nobody gets in trouble for beating up a gay person,” he said under condition of anonymity.

“Gay people are already fighting for social justice,” says Daw Zarli Aye. “Now they have to fight for

democracy too.”

The Spring Revolution is not only against the military dictatorship but many ideas that are ingrained in our social community. It is a revolution that breaks old traditions. Aung Myo Min said that LGBTQ+ people who participated in the revolution changed the stereotype that LGBTQ+ people are only interested in sex.

“Some people’s views have changed. This is what we have been fighting for 20 years, and the demand for equality has been polished by the Spring Revolution. We need to continue to strive for change,” he said.

Thet Thet, a gay person who was arrested and charged under Section 505 of the Penal Code for “defamation of the military,” spent 720 days in Insein prison. She described her lesbian friends who prefer to wear t-shirts, trousers and Longyi, a form of dress usually worn by Myanmar men.

“Since it’s a women’s dormitory, lesbians arrived here. Their difficulty is having to wear Htmain, which is a traditional sarong, and not allowing them to wear longyi style. They kicked their genitalia saying women don’t behave like women. Those things happened at Insein Prison and also at interrogation centres.”

Detainees allege they were psychologically tortured with death and rape threats to force confessions or extract information about anti-coup activities. Zenith, a gay person, said he was also repeatedly pressed for details of his sex life.

“They did it to kill me. I fell because of the beating and put the gun in my mouth. The soldiers said that just bend a finger and believe me, no one feels sorry for a gay like you. The guys who touched my ass told me that we can do what we want even rape me. And they held my breasts and my sex organ. At that moment, I don’t think I’m human anymore and not worth even a dog,” Zenith said.

SUICIDE RISK RISES IN MYANMAR DUE TO COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS AND COUP FALLOUT

Nat Ye Hla



The danger that a person might commit suicide is often brushed under the carpet or given little attention in Myanmar.

But in the wake of the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions and following the 2021 military coup, there are signs that an increased number of people are under stress due to a range of issues, including lack of security, leading to a risk of suicide.

Mizzima talked to Ko Min, 42, who works for the NGO Suicide Prevention Myanmar (SPM) to attempt to assess the situation.

Q: Has Myanmar seen an increase in suicides in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 military coup?

I agree with the point that suicide rate has been increasing in Myanmar. Joblessness, pay cuts, the failure of big and small businesses have become a global problem. Myanmar suffers more as a developing country with very low average individual income. Major family financial problems are very common, and the current political uncertainties have deepened the crises even further. The last 20 months have resulted in an undoubtedly major decrease in the general mental health wellbeing of the people of Myanmar.

Also, more people reached out to SPM in recent months. The numbers vary of course but

in the past only about two or three people per week contacted us to open up and talk. Recently, the numbers went up. For instance, we received seven people in the last four days. This is SPM's experience only. We are certain that more people than usual have contacted other organizations like ours in the past few months.

We can outline the types of people who might become suicidal as follows. Firstly, young people who seemed to have lost their way and hope, in education or work, during this time of uncertainty which started at the very first outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Secondly, people – young and old – with underlying mental health conditions who are facing various unfavourable issues, namely family problems, marital issues, and certain major changes in their life.

Thirdly, financial issues are major contributing factors in this too as Myanmar, like most countries, suffers the same fate since the start of the pandemic.

However, more and more support groups, Facebook pages and services have sprung up as a direct result of this, which has brought an understanding of mental health education we have not seen before now. From professionally qualified mental health practitioners offering online courses and counselling services, free weekly and monthly zoom webinars on how to cope and

face the day, more Facebook messaging services, telephone support call lines, wellness Facebook encouragement groups, and general information sharing memes and posts on social media, we can see support and information on social media offered everywhere. This in itself can only be a force for good, even if it has come sadly from a desperate need for help.

Q: Could you tell the current challenges of Suicide Prevention Myanmar (SPM) as the number of people suffering from mental health disorders is increasing?

SPM is one of the organizations giving care to people with mental disorders, although our team's focus is mainly on suicide. A lot of such organizations or groups have emerged in recent years which is very encouraging but there is still a lot of work to be done.

The organizations would not be able to help unless people with issues reach out. There are many suffering from mental illnesses yet are reluctant to seek help due to two main reasons.

Firstly, due to the stigma associated with mental illnesses there is "fear" of shaming, discrimination, rejection and so forth which might occur when they open up about their mental health problems.

Secondly, there is a lack of awareness of the presence and benefits of such organizations. Until people seek help, they will not get the required help and support. Many suicides could have been avoided if the victims had asked for help from any reputable group or trained and experienced caregivers.

So, the main challenge is to be able to connect people in need with organizations like SPM in order for them to get suitable support which will improve their mental condition. Educational activities are growing but there are a lot of negative views from many people when mental illnesses and suicide are discussed and written about, which is also a challenge.

Mental health is still very much seen as a taboo topic. But with so many people willing and trying to help, it is slowly changing.

Q: What should the international community be aware of in helping with suicide prevention in

Myanmar?

Suicide prevention awareness is growing in Myanmar as was evident in numerous activities, events and trainings held recently.

September 10th is World Suicide Prevention Day.

All these things are a definite step in the right direction, but there is still a lot more that can be done. Medication has been dominant when treating people with mental illnesses. But the trend is slowly changing with increased availability of counselling and other therapeutic treatments on offer.

The key requirements are to firstly educate people suffering from mental illnesses that seeking help is not a sign of weakness but strength. Secondly, there is a need for mental health professionals, caregivers and various groups who are eager to support people in need in order for them to get up-to-date information and techniques on how to cope.

Thirdly, the general public need to become aware that suffering from mental illnesses, talking about it and seeking help are nothing to be ashamed of.

Suicide Prevention Myanmar (SPM) is a non-profit online support group, and as the name suggests, mainly caters to people who feel suicidal due to various triggers.

It was founded in 2017 by one young man who felt the loneliness and despair shared by those who contact us for support today. His aim was to attempt to provide the help he so desperately needed in his time of need. He is no longer involved in the day to day running of our services as he focuses on his own personal struggles. We have since been led and guided by people who are passionate about helping those with mental fitness issues and that strive to raise awareness of mental health in our country.

Our group is comprised of people who share the same passion and vision. Some of our own members have gone through mental health issues themselves, giving them the burning desire to assist. The members are well-trained and striving to improve themselves even more in order to contribute more to the society, while having an insight into the minds of those who feel life's struggles more adeptly.

JUSTICE FOR MYANMAR CALLS ON CANADA AND UK TO SANCTION MOGE

Justice For Myanmar has called for Canadian and UK sanctions on MOGE following MTI Energy's investment in the Yadana Gas Project

US oil major Chevron is selling its 41.1% stake in the Yadana Gas Project to a subsidiary of the Canadian oil company MTI Energy. Chevron first disclosed the deal to the Guardian.

Yadana is the biggest gas project in Myanmar, within

an industry that is the largest source of foreign revenue for the illegal military junta. Gas revenue bankrolls the junta's ongoing war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The Yadana project was formerly operated by TotalEnergies, which withdrew in 2022, increasing Chevron's stake to 41.1%, the largest in the consortium. Other stakeholders in the project are PTTEP, the

current operator, and Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), a state agency illegally controlled by the junta.

Through the sale, MTI Energy and Chevron will ensure funds continue to flow to the junta, making them complicit in the junta's international crimes.

Who is MTI Energy?

MTI Energy Inc, based in Edmonton, Alberta, is an



Photo: Supplied

offshoot of oilfield equipment manufacturer Mitey Titan Industries and located at the same address. MTI Energy CEO Mehtab (Tab) Khehra has been described as heading "a whole galaxy of service companies active in Cameroon, Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and especially Nigeria."

An Alberta registry search shows that the company has four directors, including Toronto corporate lawyer, Ralph Lean, and Adewale Olorunsola (AKA Wale Sola), who heads the Nigerian-Canadian merchant bank, Rein Capital. Rein Capital subsidiary, Rein Energy, is a shareholder in MTI subsidiaries

Shibah Energy and Caxes Energy, according to data from the Dutch corporate registry.

In 2021, Shibah Energy and Caxes Energy took over Chevron's stake in Brazil's Papa-Terra field. MTI Energy also secured four blocks in 2021 in Angola.

MTI Energy is registered as having no shareholders and it is unclear who the company's profits are distributed to.

MTI Energy is purchasing Chevron's stake through its Bermuda subsidiary, Et Martem Holdings. Bermuda is a tax haven and secrecy jurisdiction.

As a UK overseas territory, Bermuda has implemented UK sanctions on Myanmar under the territory's International Sanctions Regulations 2013.

However, with MOGE unsanctioned in either jurisdiction, Canadian and UK sanctions appear insufficient in preventing the transaction.

Justice For Myanmar spokesperson Yadanar Maung says: "Chevron's irresponsible sale of its stake in the Yadana Project to MTI Energy will ensure that gas funds keep flowing to the illegal Myanmar junta, bankrolling their campaign of terror in response to two years of mass resistance that has prevented the junta from gaining control of Myanmar.

"MTI Energy's investment will make the company complicit in the junta's ongoing war crimes and crimes against humanity."

"We condemn MTI Energy's total disregard for the

lives and democratic will of the people of Myanmar, and its blatant breach of the company's obligations under the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises and UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights."

"This sale is the result of failures of the Canadian and UK governments to sanction Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE)."

"Is the Canadian government willing to stand by while a Canadian company takes over the largest stake in such a significant gas project that enriches the murderous, illegal junta?"

"We call on the Canadian and UK governments to immediately sanction MOGE and prevent companies in their territories from financing the junta's international crimes."



OVER 20 INTERNATIONAL OILFIELD SERVICES COMPANIES ACTIVE IN MYANMAR SINCE COUP

A Justice For Myanmar investigation using open source and leaked documents has identified 22 international oilfield services companies active in Myanmar since the military's illegal coup.

The oil and gas sector in Myanmar is illegally controlled by the junta and is its biggest source of foreign revenue, bankrolling the military's ongoing war crimes and crimes against humanity.

These oilfield services companies provide critical support and equipment to the sector, from drilling to maintenance to supply. By doing so, they help to keep the gas revenues flowing to the junta, making them complicit in its international crimes.

Eight of the companies identified are either fully or partially based in the USA, including the biggest companies in the sector: Halliburton, Schlumberger and Baker Hughes, which have branch offices in Myanmar that remain active.

Tax filings for the first year of the military's coup attempt, provided by Distributed Denial of Secrets, show earnings in the millions of US dollars.

The activities of US oilfield services companies have been encouraged by the failure of the US government to sanction Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), an agency illegally controlled by the junta.

While the US sanctioned

the junta's energy minister and MOGE managing director and deputy managing director to mark the second anniversary of the military's illegal coup attempt, it stopped short of designating MOGE the entity.

MOGE regulates the sector and acts as both a state revenue collector and commercial partner in oil and gas projects, ensuring the junta gets lucrative tax and royalty payments, as well as a vast share of profits.

Concerningly, the continued presence of US companies has been encouraged by the US Department of Commerce's International Trade Administration, which lists the oil and gas industry in Myanmar as a "best prospect industry"

Photo: Arvind Vallabh

and encourages US companies to seek opportunities, including applying for junta tenders.

With the National Defense Authorization Act signed into law in December, the US must act now and impose sanction on MOGE, in coordination with its allies the UK, Canada and Australia.

Oilfield services companies outside the EU, where sanctions on MOGE are already in place, must uphold their international law and due diligence responsibilities and stop their activities in Myanmar unless the projects they are working on suspend payments to the junta, and withhold them

in protected accounts.

Justice For Myanmar spokesperson Yadanar Maung said: "Oilfield services companies in Myanmar have blood on their hands for operating in an industry that bankrolls the illegal Myanmar military junta, as it wages a campaign of terror against the people.

"It is deplorable that giants such as Halliburton, Diamond Offshore Drilling and Schlumberger that are listed on US stock exchanges have maintained operations in Myanmar, helping to keep oil and gas revenue flowing to the junta. Their business has helped the junta purchase the bullets, bombs and jet fuel that it needs for its indiscriminate attacks.

"These companies have breached their international legal responsibilities and are complicit in the junta's war crimes and crimes against humanity by knowingly servicing oil and gas projects that fund

the junta's atrocities.

"We call on all oilfield services companies to suspend operations on projects that are funding the junta.

"The activities of US oilfield services companies following the military's coup attempt demonstrates a failure of the US Government to take decisive action against the junta and its terror campaign by sanctioning MOGE.

"The Biden Administration's contradictory approach to Myanmar has allowed US oil and gas corporations to continue business as usual in Myanmar, enabling the junta's international crimes."

"While the Department of State has warned that dealing with MOGE risks money laundering, furthering corruption and contributing to serious human rights violations, the US Department of Commerce is advising US companies to seek profits in the oil and gas sectors in Myanmar and to compete for MOGE tenders.

"We call on the US and its allies Australia, Canada and the UK to stand with the people of Myanmar by imposing sanctions on MOGE and helping to cut the flow of funds to the junta."



UN CHIEF: UKRAINE WAR AND CONFLICTS LIKE MYANMAR THREATEN WORLD PEACE

UN chief Antonio Guterres warned nations Monday that he fears the likelihood of further escalation in the Russia-Ukraine conflict means the world is heading towards a “wider war.”

Guterres referenced other threats to peace, from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to Afghanistan, Myanmar, the Sahel and Haiti.

Top of the list was Russia’s war in Ukraine, which is approaching its one-year anniversary.

“The prospects for peace keep diminishing. The chances of further escalation and bloodshed keep growing,” he said.

“I fear the world is not sleepwalking into a wider war. I fear it is doing so with its eyes wide open.”

“If every country fulfilled its obligations under the (UN) Charter, the right to peace would be guaranteed,” he said,

He added it is “time to transform our approach to peace by recommitting to the Charter -- putting human rights and dignity first, with prevention at the heart.”

The secretary-general laid out his priorities for the year in a gloomy speech to the United Nations General Assembly that focused on Russia’s invasion, the climate crisis and extreme poverty.

“We have started 2023 staring down the barrel of a confluence of challenges unlike any in

our lifetimes,” he told diplomats in New York.

Guterres noted that top scientists and security experts had moved the “Doomsday Clock” to just 90 seconds to midnight last month, the closest it has ever been to signaling the annihilation of humanity.

The secretary-general said he was taking it as a warning sign.

“We need to wake up - and get to work,” he implored, as he listed his urgent issues.

More broadly, Guterres denounced a lack of “strategic vision” and a “bias” of political and business decision-makers towards the short term.

“The next poll. The next tactical political maneuver to cling to power. But also the next business cycle -- or even the next day’s stock price.

“This near-term thinking is not only deeply irresponsible -- it is immoral,” he added.

Stressing the need to act with future generations in mind, the secretary-general repeated his call for a “radical transformation” of global finance.

Climate ‘ambition’

“Something is fundamentally wrong with our economic and financial system,” Guterres said, blaming it for the increase in poverty and hunger, the growing gap between rich and poor, and the debt burden of developing countries.

“Without fundamental reforms, the richest countries and individuals will continue to pile up wealth, leaving crumbs for the communities and countries of the Global South,” he added.

The UN Development Program estimates



that the world has gone back five years in terms of human development, including health, education, and living standards.

The UN's sustainable development goals are "disappearing in the rearview mirror," Guterres lamented.

The 17 goals set in 2015 aim to eliminate poverty, provided food security for all, and access to clean and affordable energy by 2030.

"We have opportunities before us to rescue (them)," said Guterres, who is organizing a summit on the subject in New York in September.

The fight against global warming and "climate ambition" will be at the heart of another summit in September where he invited world leaders, but "with a condition."

"Show us accelerated action in this decade and renewed ambitious net zero plans - or please don't show up," he said, before again attacking fossil fuel producers.

"If you cannot set a credible course for net-zero, with 2025 and 2030 targets covering all your operations, you should not be in business."

AFP



UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. Photo: UN News

NO NEW VARIANTS IN WEEKS AFTER CHINA ENDED ZERO-COVID

No new variants of COVID-19 emerged in Beijing in the weeks after China ended its zero-Covid policy late last year, a new study said on Wednesday.

China saw an explosion of infections after starting to lift its strict pandemic measures from early December, sparking fears the world's most populous country could become a fertile breeding ground for new, more transmissible or severe strains.

More than a dozen countries promptly imposed fresh restrictions on travellers from China, also citing a lack of transparency about the scale of the outbreak, sparking Beijing's ire.

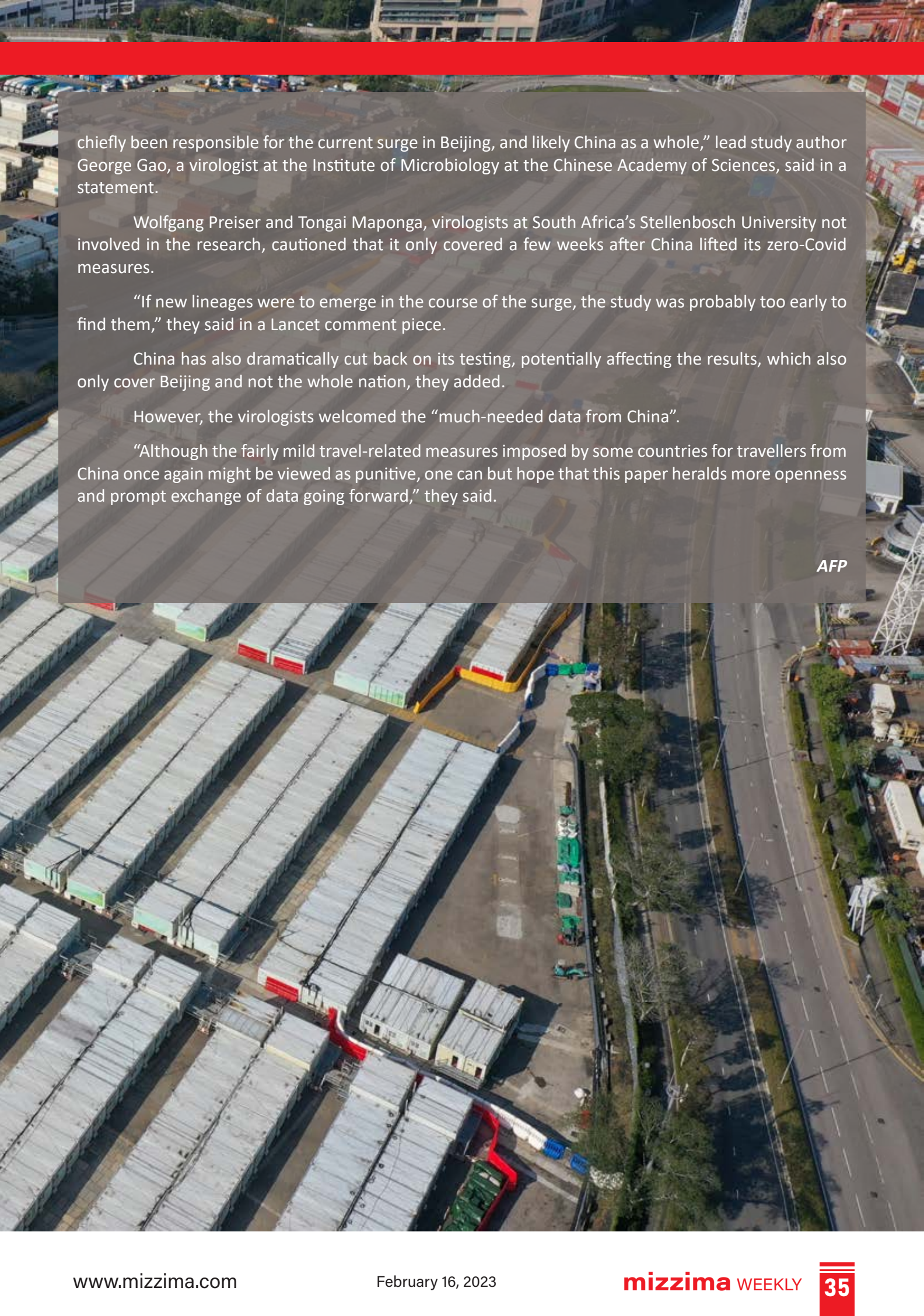
But the new study by Chinese researchers, which analysed 413 samples from Beijing sequenced between November 14 and December 20, said "there is no evidence that novel variants emerged" during that time.

Instead, more than 90 percent of the cases were BF.7 and BA5.2, Omicron subvariants which were already present in China and have been overtaken by more transmissible subvariants in Western nations.

BF.7 accounted for three quarters of the samples, while more than 15 percent were BA5.2, according to the study published in The Lancet journal.

"Our analysis suggests two known Omicron sub-variants - rather than any new variants - have

An aerial view shows Tsing Yi Covid Isolation camp in Hong Kong on January 24, 2023. Photo: AFP



chiefly been responsible for the current surge in Beijing, and likely China as a whole,” lead study author George Gao, a virologist at the Institute of Microbiology at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, said in a statement.

Wolfgang Preiser and Tongai Maponga, virologists at South Africa’s Stellenbosch University not involved in the research, cautioned that it only covered a few weeks after China lifted its zero-Covid measures.

“If new lineages were to emerge in the course of the surge, the study was probably too early to find them,” they said in a Lancet comment piece.

China has also dramatically cut back on its testing, potentially affecting the results, which also only cover Beijing and not the whole nation, they added.

However, the virologists welcomed the “much-needed data from China”.

“Although the fairly mild travel-related measures imposed by some countries for travellers from China once again might be viewed as punitive, one can but hope that this paper heralds more openness and prompt exchange of data going forward,” they said.

AFP

EXILED TIBETANS STRUGGLE WITH THEIR AUTONOMY OR INDEPENDENCE CONUNDRUM



Penpa Tsering was elected in 2021 as the second-ever leader, or *sikyong*, of the Tibetan government-in-exile in India, part of a plan by the now 87-year-old Dalai Lama - the globally recognizable face of Tibet - to pass the baton. Photo: AFP

As China shows no compromise and the Dalai Lama ages, the elected leader of Tibetans in exile is looking to history as he plans for the future.

Penpa Tsering was elected in 2021 as the second-ever leader, or *Sikyong*, of the Tibetan government-in-exile in India, part of a plan by the now 87-year-old Dalai Lama - the globally recognizable face of Tibet - to pass the baton.

On a visit to Washington, Tsering met lawmakers about a bill that would recognize that Tibet - ruled with an iron fist by China since the 1950s - was historically an independent country and that its current status is “unresolved.”

“We have adopted a different tactic to gain the right leverage,” Tsering, who has spent his whole life in exile since his birth in 1967 in India, told AFP in an interview.

Tsering insists he is not seeking independence for Tibet, in line with the “Middle Way” of the Dalai Lama who believes that pushing demands

beyond autonomy would be suicidal against a vastly more powerful China.

But the Dalai Lama has also rejected Beijing’s longstanding demands to say that Tibet was historically part of China, a refusal cited by Beijing in declining dialogue with his representatives since 2010.

An independent Tibet, Tsering explained, would have been an occupied country when it formalized Chinese rule in 1951, making the agreement “null and void.”

“We tell governments that if you keep repeating the statement that Tibet is part of People’s Republic of China, then you’re going against international law,” Tsering said.

Tsering hoped more countries would follow the United States on the historical position. Britain, which reached a 1911 accord with Chinese and Tibetan envoys when it ruled India, had uniquely said that China had “suzerainty” over Tibet but in 2008 joined the rest of the world in

recognizing Beijing's sovereignty.

China's embassy in Washington denounced the legislation, which has been introduced with bipartisan support, saying, "Tibet is part of China."

"We urge the US side to take concrete actions to honor its commitment of recognizing Tibet as part of China, not supporting 'Tibetan independence,' and stop using Tibet-related issues to interfere in China's internal affairs," an embassy spokesperson said.

China 'is going to change'

Tsering acknowledged it was "difficult" to see a resumption soon of talks with China but did not give up hope.

"As Buddhists we don't believe in permanence. Change is the only constant," he said.

"China is definitely going to change. But the issue is how long will it take."

China, however, has increasingly brushed off criticism. It has clamped down on Hong Kong, carried out major military drills off Taiwan and has been accused by the United States of "genocide" against the Uyghur people in its northwest.

Many observers believe China shut off the Tibet dialogue in anticipation that the cause would shrivel away without the Dalai Lama, the charismatic Nobel Peace Prize-winning monk whose once frenetic international travel schedule has slowed down in recent years.

Tsering quipped that the Dalai Lama has spoken of living another 30 years. But he also credited the monk with creating one of the few successful examples of a democracy in exile.

The Dalai Lama's initiatives will help "make sure that our struggle will have the strength to continue for another few decades, if need be."

Exiled Tibetans have also started to speak, gently, of coordination with Western governments once the 14th Dalai Lama dies. The United States has already said it would not recognize any choice by Beijing of the next Dalai Lama.

The Dalai Lama has spoken of breaking tradition by choosing a reincarnation, possibly a girl, before dying or even of declaring the institution

over – though the reference to girl is not taken seriously in the Tibetan community.

Such musings have outraged Beijing which, while officially atheist, has insisted that the Dalai Lama reincarnate in line with Buddhist tradition but under Beijing's oversight.

In 1995, Beijing selected its own child as the Panchen Lama, another influential Tibetan religious figure, and detained a Dalai Lama-recognized six-year-old, described by rights groups as the world's youngest political prisoner.

Tsering said that the decision on reincarnation would be left solely to the Dalai Lama.

"China has all the resources, both human and financial, and they are very good at propaganda and forcing countries to take positions," Tsering said.

"But they cannot handle uncertainty. So right now, His Holiness' decision of not disclosing all the processes is, I think, very wise."

AFP and Mizzima

‘THE BEST-SELLING BRAND TODAY IS FEAR’: UN CHIEF HIGHLIGHTS URGENT NEED TO ADDRESS GLOBAL ‘DEFICIT OF TRUST’

Warning against the dangers of widespread fear and mistrust in our planet, the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, told journalists on Friday he wants to reaffirm the UN as a “platform for action to repair broken trust in a broken world.”

“The best-selling brand in our world today is indeed fear,” stated Mr. Guterres. “It gets ratings. It wins votes. It generates clicks,” he added, during the press conference, held at UN headquarters in New York.

“I believe the biggest challenge that governments and institutions face today is to show that we care – and to mobilize solutions that respond to people’s fears and anxieties with answers, with concrete answers,” he explained.

The Secretary-General was speaking two days after presenting his areas of action for the UN for 2019 to the 193 Member States, who, he said, widely responded to his remarks by highlighting the importance of multilateralism.

“As we look to the challenges we face – from climate change to migration to terrorism to the downsides of globalisation – there is no doubt in my mind that global challenges require global solutions,” he noted. “No country can do it alone. We need multilateralism more than ever.”

Hate speech and hate crimes are direct threats to human rights, sustainable development and peace and security - UN chief Guterres

The UN chief noted that “dismissing or vilifying the doubters of multilateralism will lead nowhere,” and insisted on the importance of understanding why “many people around the world are not convinced of the power and purpose of international cooperation.”

Citing the fact that, in the process of globalisation and technological progress, many people, sectors, and entire regions were left behind, he explained the UN needs to focus on addressing the

root causes of this widespread mistrust, anxiety, anger and fear, over three key areas of work: accelerating sustainable development, strengthening the added value of the United Nations through reform, and engaging societies to put an end to the rise of hate speech, xenophobia and intolerance.

“We hear troubling, hateful echoes of eras long past. Poisonous views are penetrating political debates and polluting the mainstream,” warned Mr. Guterres, as he stressed the need to remember the lessons of the 1930s and the Second World War.

“Hate speech and hate crimes are direct threats to human rights, sustainable development and peace and security,” he said.

Stressing that “words are not enough,” the UN Secretary-General announced he has tasked his Special Adviser for the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng, to bring together a team to develop a UN-wide strategy and urgent global plan of action against hate speech and hate crimes.

Mr. Guterres stated that his “absolute priority for 2019” is to make sure the United Nations is a “platform for action to repair broken trust in a broken world and deliver for people”.

Following his opening remarks, the Secretary-General answered questions from members of press on various issues handled by the UN, including the situation in Venezuela, in Syria, and in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the plight of migrants and refugees worldwide, recent uncertainty around the elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as UN funding challenges.

Courtesy of UN News

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Photo: Thet Khine

MON STATE

Myanmar junta army captain captured in Mon State. A junta army captain was arrested when the car he and four other junta soldiers were travelling in was attacked by the Ye Guerrilla Force (YGF) in Mon State on 4 February. The attack took place between the villages of Kaninkamawt and Aungtharyar in Lamaing Township at about 4:00 p.m. The YGF had set up a roadblock between Kaninkamawt and Aungtharyar Villages on the Asia Highway between the cities of Ye and Mawlamyine. When they tried to stop a car carrying five junta soldiers in civilian clothes the junta soldiers started firing their weapons and tried to drive away. The two groups fought for about 30 minutes before the car plunged into a ditch and the junta soldiers ran away. Four of them escaped, but one, who confessed to being a junta army captain, was captured by the YGF and arrested. “All five of them were soldiers, they shot at us with their weapons. The one we arrested confessed to being a captain, but at the moment we have no more information. The other four [soldiers] escaped,” said Saw Khit Thit, a YGF public relations officer. Mizzima has been unable to independently confirm if the arrested man is an army captain. According to Saw Khit Thit the junta’s 317th infantry battalion based in Lamaing Township fired three rounds of artillery into the area and sent in soldiers to try and rescue their comrade, so the YGF set the soldier’s car on fire and retreated. The YGF then posted a video of the burning car on its social media page. Previously, on 3 February, the YGF reportedly destroyed a Mytel tower and related equipment in Sakhangyi Village in Mon State’s Thanbyuzayat Township.



76TH UNION DAY CELEBRATION BY JUNTA LACKS SUBSTANCE AMIDST ONGOING HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

The 76th Union Day celebration was held by the junta on 12 February at the City Hall in Nay Pyi Taw. The flag-raising ceremony was held early in the morning at 5:30.

At the ceremony, Deputy Prime Minister and Vice Senior General Soe Win read a message from junta leader Prime Minister Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

The Union Day marks the 76th anniversary of the Panglong Agreement, reached between the Burmese government and the Shan, Kachin, and Chin people on 12 February, 1947 in Panglong, southern Shan State. The agreement aimed for full autonomy in internal administration for the Frontier Areas and the creation of a Kachin State by the Constituent Assembly.

However, despite the original Panglong Agreement, and the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference under the ousted National League for Democracy (NLD) government, ethnic minorities in Myanmar still lack autonomy, equal rights and federal democracy.

The recent coup d'état has further stripped away human rights from ethnic groups, with many villages being burned down by the junta's army.

As a result, political analysts have deemed the Union Day celebration held by the junta to have no substance.

MYANMAR MINERAL EXPORTS WORTH \$230 MILLION THIS FINANCIAL YEAR

The value of mineral exports from Myanmar from 1 April 2022 until 31 January 2023, the first ten months of the financial year, was \$234.477 million USD, according to the junta's Ministry of Economy and Commerce.

Of those exports, \$23.43 million USD worth were sold by the government and 212.04 million were sold by the private sector.

This was a fall of about \$360 million USD over the value of mineral exports

For the same period the previous year's sales were \$564 million USD, meaning that this year's sales were \$330 million USD less for the same period.

Mineral exports from Myanmar include gems, jewelry gold, jade, pearl, diamond, tungsten, tin, silver, copper, zinc, coal and other minerals and metals.

The junta is targeting total exports of \$15.5 billion USD and \$14 billion in exports for the 2022 to 2023 financial year, according to the objectives of the official National Planning Law.

Due to the protests and unrest since the junta took power in the February 2021 coup the country is close to economic collapse and unlikely to hit such ambitious targets and the junta will be forced to sell more natural resources to neighbouring countries like Thailand and China to survive economically.

MYANMAR EXPORTS AVOCADO TO MALAYSIA ONLY

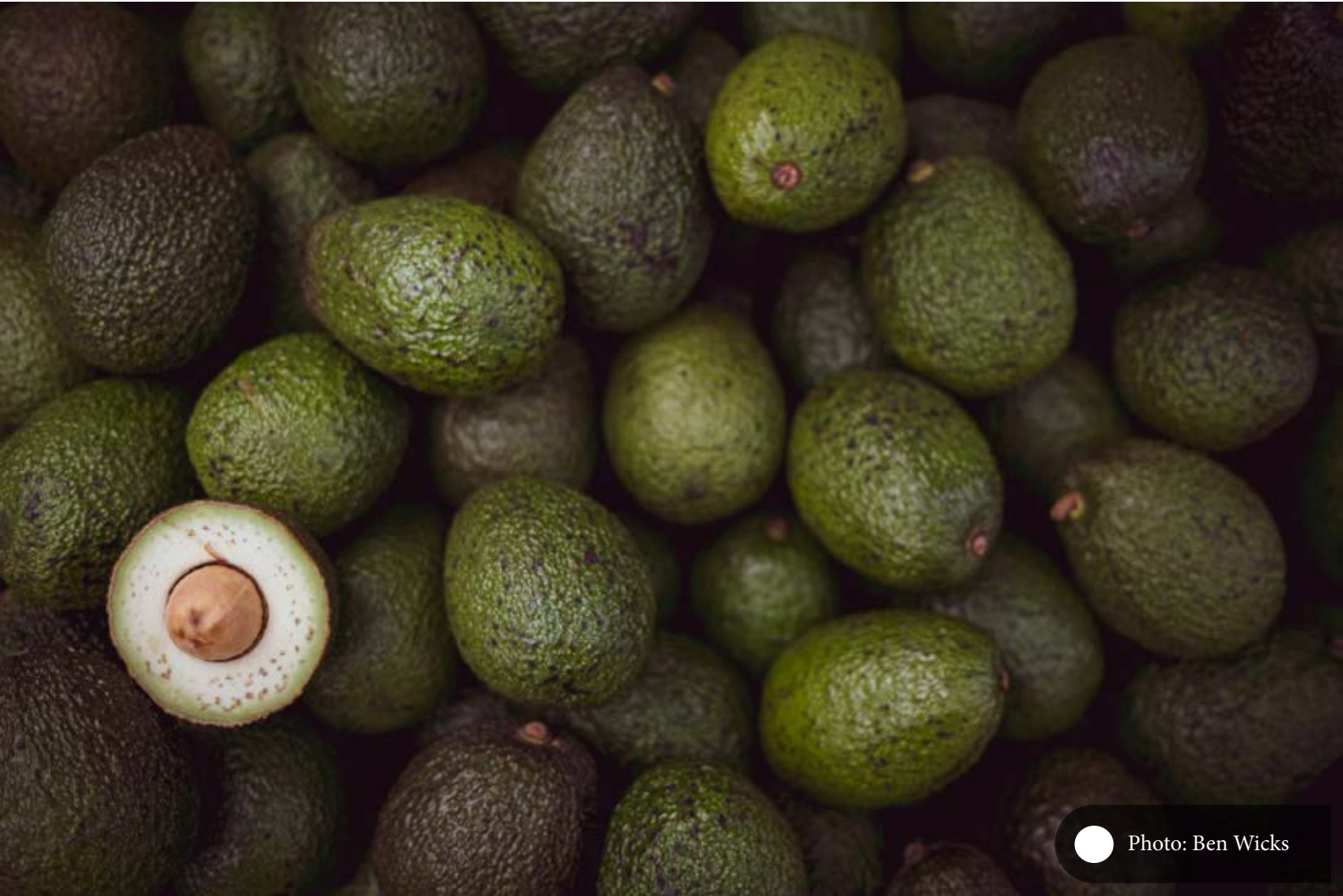


Photo: Ben Wicks

The Myanmar Avocado Producer and Exporter Association (MAPEA) says that avocados produced in Myanmar were being exported only to Malaysia under an MOU.

In this avocado season, 50 tons of avocados were exported to Malaysia by air freight in two batches and the last batch will be exported in the coming week.

Myanmar avocados were reportedly exported to Malaysia as samples and they were exported by air freight between last December and January.

MAPEA Joint Secretary said: "Dubai, Hong Kong, Taiwan, India, Thailand, and Malaysia in Asia are primary countries interested in Myanmar avocado. The main problem is the falling world price in the market. The local price is higher than the world market so we cannot export them."

MAPEA and Shan Avocado jointly exported avocado to Malaysia at the price of US\$3.7 per kilogramme. Shan Avocado is the organization representing avocado farmers in Shan State.

Avocado is mainly grown in northern and southern Shan State and the Mandalay Region including Mogoke.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF THE MYANMAR COUP IN TANINTHARYI REGION



Photo: Mizzima

According to Southern Monitor, the widespread conflict across Tanintharyi Region has caused serious socio-economic impacts on the population.

Increased junta troop reinforcements and offensives have disrupted the local populations' housing conditions, health, security, livelihood and education.

Since the junta forces continued to commit some of the most visceral and obscene acts towards children and they are suffering in horrific situations where their security is not guaranteed and their basic rights are being denied.

Furthermore, the children's right to education has been put "on hold" as hundreds of thousands of children lack access to formal education and alternative methods of schooling due to the impacts of the 2021 coup.

While some children in urban settings with adequate internet access have been able to be part of online learning hubs supported by the National Unity Government (NUG) and other independent organisations, many children, especially those in rural settings and conflict-affected areas have been

left behind in terms of access to education.

It is a difficult decision for parents to make, whether to send their children to state-run basic education schools despite their safety concerns.

Also, there have been several accounts of junta forces occupying schools and using them as barracks for soldiers. This increases the risks of violations against children and interferes with education.

Also, the junta's restrictions on medical supplies have significantly strained access to healthcare services in Tanintharyi Region. Aid workers face severe shortages of medical supplies they urgently need to provide treatment to local populations and internally displaced populations in camp-like settings.

Junta forces have tried to arrest individuals who they suspect are providing medical treatment and supplies to the local PDFs. Those carrying or transporting medicines, food, and clothing in bulk have been interrogated and intimidated by the junta forces at the checkpoints along major highway roads.

The junta forces continue to enforce bans

on the bulk transportation of dry rations (rice, instant noodle, etc) and medicines and other medical items (anticoagulant drugs, gauze, bandages, etc.).

A local aid worker also reported that the local PDFs have interrogated and intimidated aid workers who were transporting patients and assisting the bereaved families with funeral services in Palaw Township.

Both the junta forces and the local PDFs have restricted the use of the major roads from Myeik to Palaw and from Dawei to Hteekhee, which has disrupted the healthcare and funeral services provided by local aid organisations.

An increase in junta forces, security checks and their restrictions on food items have also continued to strain the livelihoods of the local populations across Tanintharyi Region, according to Southern Monitor.

The junta forces have established checkpoints to conduct security checks on vehicles and passengers and often demand money in the form of arbitrary taxation, meaning that local businessmen and traders are unable to make profits from their goods.

According to local betel nut farmers and traders, at each checkpoint along their route money is demanded for them to be allowed to transport their betel nuts.

In addition, Betel nut harvesting in the conflict-affected areas such as Wa Kone and nearby villages in Dawei District has had to be abandoned because of the intensification of fighting in the area.

The flow of goods in and out of Dawei Town to the region has also been restricted because junta troops are monitoring all the entrances and exits to the town.

As the state of emergency has continued, the severity of the socio-economic impacts has surged to unprecedented levels and Southern Monitor believes that the resistance movements face a looming threat of losing adequate support.

The local populations have been bearing the brunt of the severe socio-economic impacts

of the 2021 coup as well as the increasing sense of insecurity bought on by the atrocities, threats and intimidation of the junta forces.

The woes of the economic crisis and soaring rates of unemployment will likely weaken the local populations' support towards the revolution.

Southern Monitor believes there remains the need to address the socio-economic impacts of the coup such as lack of access to education and healthcare as well as protection of vulnerable groups, including women, children, and the internally displaced communities. The lack of access to formal education and alternative methods of schooling have become protracted with little hope for a solution.

The junta troops' strong presence, as well as the intensified clashes across the region, resulted in increased displacement of local populations in January 2023. Also, the junta's widespread ban on the transport of relief items across all townships in the region, to curtail all the local PDFs' access to supplies, have deprived displaced populations of adequate food, medicines, and shelter.

Local aid organisation 'endeavour to fulfill the needs of IDPs and the host communities have been largely and continuously hampered by restrictions and other acts by the junta forces that have involved confiscation of aid items in bulk (e.g. medicines, warm clothing, food), interrogation of local aid workers, threats, and intimidation.

As the local PDFs have also increasingly placed restrictions on the use of certain roads in the conflict areas, the local aid workers are facing additional threats on this front.

Southern Monitor says that both the junta and PDFs must allow unfettered humanitarian access to displaced populations.

As the current conflict trajectory features intensified armed clashes, civilian houses burnt down, the flight of thousands of people, and the loss of economic development and income, the junta's efforts to project an image of Tanintharyi Region as a stable and prosperous region have been in vain.

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Penrose Thitsa

CHEVRON SELLS MYANMAR ASSETS TO CANADIAN COMPANY AMID HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS

Chevron Corporation, an American oil company, has announced that it has sold its assets in Myanmar to a Canadian company named MTI, reported Reuters.

This move comes after a year of the military coup in Myanmar in 2021 and the decision of Chevron and other oil companies to leave the country due to ongoing human rights violations by the Burmese junta.

Chevron's 41.1% interest in the Yadana Project, which produces natural gas for domestic use and export to Thailand, was sold to MTI's subsidiary for an undisclosed amount. The U.S. company had been working to minimize the proceeds from the sale that would end up with the military government.

French oil company TotalEnergies had previously sold its assets and left Myanmar in July 2022.

Before selling its Yadana stake, Chevron temporarily boosted its involvement in the project from 28% to 41% by taking over TotalEnergies' interest. This move was aimed at securing more control over the joint venture and reducing the potential profits that junta-controlled businesses Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise could make from the sale or from the asset in the future.





QUIET AFTERNOON

Women walk past statues of Buddhist monk at Kyaik Par pagoda in Twantay township near Yangon on February 11.

Photo: AFP



AUSTRIAN SHAN PRINCESS, THE LAST QUEEN CONSORT OF HSIPAW, DIES

Inge Sargent, also known as Sao Nang Thu Sandi, the last Queen Consort of the Shan state of Hsipaw died at her home in Boulder, Colorado at the age of 90, on 5 February.

She was born in Austria on 23 February 1932.

In 1951 she went to study at Colorado Women's College after winning a Fulbright scholarship.

Whilst studying there she met and fell in love with a Burmese engineering student named Sao Kya Seng and they were married in Colorado on 7 March 1953.

After Sao Kya Seng graduated they returned to Burma. It was only on seeing all the people waiting to greet them in Yangon as they disembarked from their ship that Inge Sargent discovered that her new husband was the Saopha of Hsipaw or Prince of Hsipaw and she became the Mahadevi or Queen Consort of Hsipaw.

The couple went to live in Hsipaw where Inge Sargent became Sao Nang Thu Sandi and learnt to speak Burmese and Shan. She was a dedicated philanthropist, working to improve the lives of people in Hsipaw through various projects like birthing clinics, nutrition education, and a trilingual school.

She was soon accepted by the people of Hsipaw and the royal couple became very popular because of their altruistic work.

They also had two daughters, Sao Mayari and Sao Kennari.



Sao Nang Thu Sandi and Sao Kya Seng. Photo: Mizzima Archive

But, in 1962 General Ne Win led a coup that overthrew the Burmese government and both Sao Kya Seng and Inge Sargent were arrested in 1962.

Sao Kya Seng was never seen again and it is assumed that Ne Win had him extrajudicially executed in prison. He was the last Saopha of Hsipaw.

Inga Sargent and her two daughters were held under house arrest for two years accused of being CIA spies. On their release they moved to Austria for two years before settling in the US in Boulder, Colorado where Inge Sargent became a high school German teacher and spent the rest of her life.

In 1968 she married Howard "Tad" Sargent, but she continued to work helping people in Myanmar and in 1995 she set up the Burma Lifeline Foundation with Tad to help Burmese refugees in countries surrounding Myanmar. In 2000 she was awarded the International Human Rights Award for her tireless efforts to support ethnic minorities and refugees.

Tad also encouraged her to write her biography and her memoir *Twilight over Burma* was published in 1994. All profits from the book were donated to refugees who had fled Myanmar and were still living in the border areas. It was also adapted into a film in 2015, also called *Twilight over Burma*, which was banned in both Myanmar and Thailand.



Inge Sargent or Sao Nang Thu Sandi. Photo: Facebook



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