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JUNTA'S HOUSE OF CARDS COLLAPSING?

Myanmar's military junta is struggling with the issue of legitimacy. It is clear that Senior General Min Aung Hlaing misread the Myanmar people when he executed his coup on 1 February 2021, believing there might be protest but that the military would once again be able to lord it over the country as happened in the wake of the 1990 protests. Instead, he finds himself fighting a brutal war against the people, and facing a regional and international community by and large unhappy with the state of affairs.

Legitimacy appears to matter to Min Aung Hlaing, in part because the military-written 2008 Constitution requires it. Hence, the charade of promising a national election that he hopes will place a democratic fig-leaf over Myanmar.

The trouble is that the drive for an element of legitimacy appears to be falling apart. Few take seriously the junta leader's claim that the 2020 elections were plagued by fraud or that the cases brought against the former civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi – jailing her for 33 years - were anything more than a bogus political smokescreen.

Now the promise of a national election is uncertain. A recent statement from the junta appears to place a question mark over the publicly-stated plan to hold an election this year. And the strict controls over political parties – and the fact that the popular National League for Democracy will not take part – make a farce of the process.

According to the Immigration and Population minister Myint Kyaing, a census will be taken simultaneously throughout the country from October 1-15, 2024, according

to the Global New Light of Myanmar. Min Aung Hlaing had previously said a national census would be required to ensure voting lists in the country of some 54 million were "accurate", suggesting a census would precede any election. He also said fresh polls could only be held when the country was "stable". In February, the junta announced a six-month extension to the two-year state of emergency, effectively delaying elections it said earlier that it would hold by August this year.

With the extension of the state of emergency and now the suggestion of a census - which we assume would run ahead of an election - the plan for a national – but flawed – poll has been kicked along the road.

Myanmar's junta appears to be playing for time hoping to exhaust and trample the Spring Revolution resistance and try to rustle up more international diplomatic support.

Min Aung Hlaing clearly lives in a strange world in which he meets people with messages he wants to hear, with the Chinese dragon and the Russian bear giving him periodic pats on the back, in lieu of the support he was hoping for from members of the Association of South East Asian Nations, who have been decidedly cold towards him since he sullied the group's reputation.

The junta chief may be coming to realize that his house of cards is collapsing, but is unwilling to face the facts.

All of this is bad news for the people of Myanmar as the civil war continues.

What is clear is the emperor has no clothes. Yet the emperor really does not realize it.

EDITORIAL

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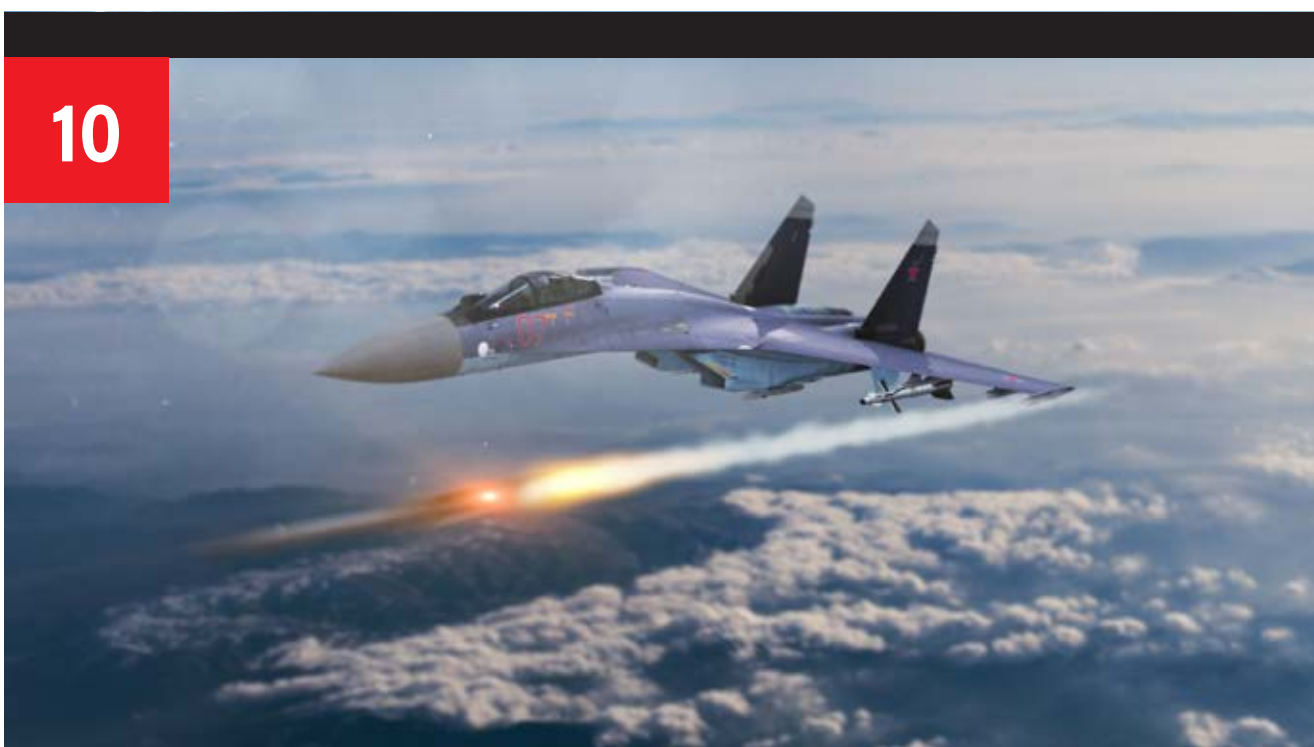
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Cover photo by Steve Portugal

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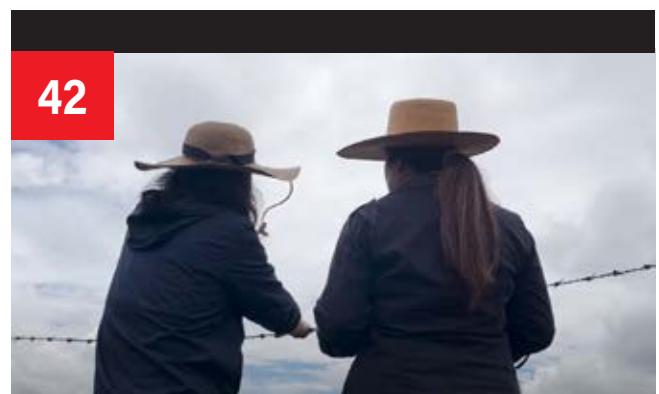
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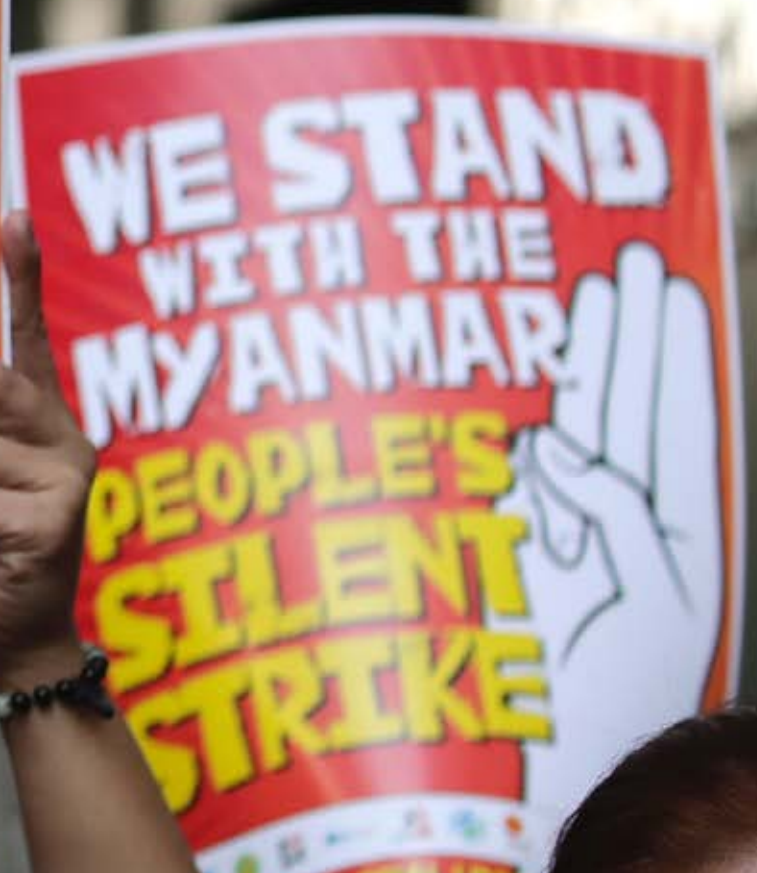


**WE STAND
WITH THE
MYANMAR
PEOPLE'S
SILENT
STRIKE**


COUNCIL OF GLOBAL UNIONS

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PROTEST IN MANILA

Filipino supporters take to the streets of Manila to protest against the Myanmar military junta illegal grabbing of power. "People Power" is important to the people of the Philippines who have had their own struggles with democracy.

Photo: EPA

THAI VISITORS HESITANT DESPITE OPENING OF THAI-MYANMAR BORDER BRIDGES

Tour operators in Myanmar say few Thai travellers appear willing to visit Myanmar by land despite the opening of the Myanmar-Thailand border bridges due to security concerns.

A spokesperson for the Myanmar Hospitality and Tourism Association said that once the situation in Myanmar returned to normal and stable, then Thai visitors might return.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were many Thai travellers who visited Myanmar through border entry ports but currently they only enter Myanmar by air.

The Thai Tourism Association said that Thai travellers had an interest in visiting Myanmar and the number of Thai travellers visiting Myanmar would increase when the security situation was good for them.

Those who are helping Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand said that there were no travellers entering Myanmar en masse because of security concerns and even the Myanmar migrant workers on MOU were planning to go to Thailand by air.

The Mae Sot-Myawaddy Friendship Bridge, which was closed for nearly three years after COVID-19 outbreak and volatile situation on the border, was reopened on 12 January and similarly the Mae Sai- Tachileik Bridge was reopened on 20 February.

The officials from Myanmar Hospitality and Tourism Association said that in the current tourism sector in Myanmar, the number of foreign travellers was almost nil and the tourism industry has to rely on domestic travellers.

Myanmar's tourism industry could not expect a rapid recovery to a pre-COVID level like other countries and in the current situation it is still struggling for survival, hoteliers and tourism operators say.

After Myanmar's reopening of commercial flight operations to and from Myanmar the travellers entering Myanmar are mostly from Thailand and China and the tour operators predict that the number of domestic travellers would greatly increase during the forthcoming Thingyan water festival holidays in April.

BURMESE WOMEN'S UNION RECORDS JUNTA ABUSE OF WOMEN

The Myanmar junta killed 15 women and arrested at least 35 other according to a statement by the Burmese Women's Union.

It said that eight of the women were killed when junta soldiers fired artillery into villages and three of the women were burned alive.

The statement said that there had been a significant increase in the number of women arrested in February.

Ma Zuzu, the Joint Secretary of the Burmese Women's Union said: "The Military Council allegedly arrested the 35 women because they posted and shared about politics and PDFs [people's defence forces] on social media and supported and helped PDFs. Also, we found that women who participated in the CDM [Civil Disobedience Movement] were also arrested."

The 35 arrested women were from Tanintharyi, Nay Pyi Taw, Mandalay,

Yangon, Sagaing and Bago regions, and Shan and Mon States.

Ma Zuzu also said that women in prisons lack access to adequate health care and face torture during interrogations, sexual abuse, threats, coercion and exploitation.

According to the Burmese Women's Union in the two years since the February 2021 coup until 25 February 2023, more than 3,125 women have been arrested and 570 of them are still imprisoned. A further 420 were killed in the same period.

The Burmese Women's Union said that collecting accurate data in the field was hard and that the real figures for abuses against women might be far higher.

CHILD KILLED BY UNEXPLODED GRENADE IN SAGAING REGION'S KHIN-U TOWNSHIP

A 12-year-old boy was killed when an unexploded grenade that he had picked up exploded in Sagaing Region's Khin U Township on 5 March.

12-year-old Maung Chit Yin Htoo discovered the grenade when he was tending grazing cattle near to Ahlalsho Village, where he lived. He picked it up and was carrying the grenade home when it exploded near to the village pond at about 2:00 p.m. on 5 March.

"He was a cowherd and he found the bomb [grenade] whilst he was on his way home. Before he got home he put the bomb down near the pond

and it accidentally exploded. The child died on the spot. Several bombs and grenades remain near the village after the Military Council raided the village in February", said a local.

According to locals the grenade had been left by junta soldiers when they raided the village and carried out military operations in the area, however this claim has not been independently verified.

Last year a woman from Ngartingyi Village in Sagaing Region's Khin u Township was killed when a 60mm grenade that she had picked up exploded.

JAPAN GIVES \$60 MILLION TO MYANMAR AS HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

The Japanese Foreign Ministry said that Japan would give over US\$60 million to Myanmar as additional humanitarian assistance.

The people in most of the areas in the country have been experiencing violence since the Myanmar military staged a coup on 1 February 2021 and the humanitarian situation in the country continues to deteriorate further as a consequence of the coup.

Under these circumstances, the Government of Japan has decided to provide additional humanitarian assistance totaling approximately US\$60.3 million through international

organizations such as UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and the AHA Centre.

According to the Humanitarian Response Plan for Myanmar announced by the United Nations on 25 January, 17.6 million people, including internally displaced persons, are in need of humanitarian assistance.

The Japanese Foreign Ministry said in its press release that as more than two years have passed since the coup d'état on 1 February, 2021, various parts of the country are still experiencing violence and as a result, the humanitarian situation in Myanmar continues to deteriorate further.

IDPS IN SAGAING REGION'S KHIN-U TOWNSHIP NEED MEDICAL CARE

Over 7,000 people including the elderly, pregnant women, and newborn babies who require immediate medical attention have had to flee Khin-Township in Sagaing due to junta soldiers burning down homes.

Amongst those who fled are over 100 elderly people, pregnant women, babies and a pair of newborn twins, who all require medical care, according to the Khin-U Township True News and Information Team.

Junta troops destroyed Kalon Village in Khin-U Township on 7 March. A woman of more than 90 years of age was killed as she tried to flee the destruction and a child from Monhla Village

was hit by an artillery shell.

Internally displaced people (IDPs) were killed three days in a row by junta artillery shells fired into villages in Khin-U Township, according to a local resident.

Junta soldiers have burned down 68 villages destroying over 4,000 houses in Khin-U Township.

The Khin-U Township True News and Information Team said that junta troops are still in the area and it has called for urgent assistance for the people displaced from their homes in the township.

NO GO

Why calls for a No-Fly Zone won't take off

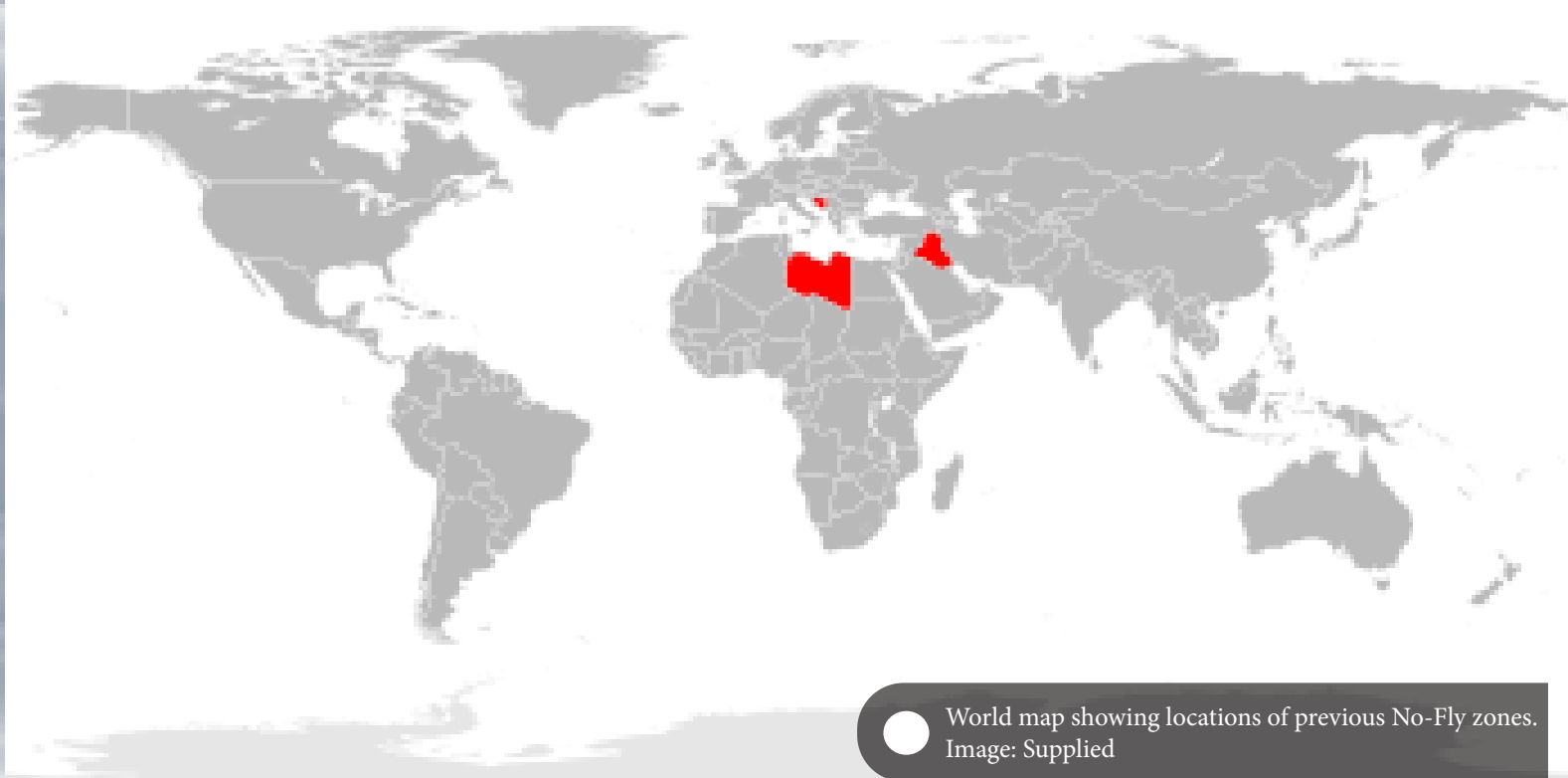
Mark Farmaner and Igor Blazevic

Since the military coup began in February 2021, the Myanmar military has become increasingly dependent on air power. It has ruthlessly used jets, helicopters and drones to target not only resistance forces, but also deliberately target civilians, including villages and camps for internally displaced people.

Bombs, missiles, and gunfire from the air reign down on homes, schools, churches, monasteries, health clinics and hospitals.



Russia is one of the main suppliers of Myanmar fighter jets that prowl the skies. Photo: Steve Portugal



World map showing locations of previous No-Fly zones.
Image: Supplied

Hundreds of people have lost their lives to airstrikes, and hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes, creating a humanitarian crisis. Jets perform daily flyovers without bombing, deliberately preventing displaced people from returning home for fear of further attacks.

The intention is to create a humanitarian crisis which soaks up the capacity of resistance forces, as well as to try to force the population into submission through terror.

Limiting the airpower of the Myanmar military is one of the single most effective steps that the international community could take to address the human rights and humanitarian crisis in Myanmar.

Some governments have started sanctioning Myanmar arms brokers supplying aircraft parts to the Myanmar military. The UK also sanctioned a Russian company for providing aircraft parts used by the Myanmar military. The process of implementation of this type of sanction is moving too slowly and in too limited a way to have any significant impact yet. Not all of the Myanmar companies brokering arms have been sanctioned, and not a single Chinese, Indian or Pakistani company has been sanctioned.

There is also a strong campaign for sanctions on the supply of aviation fuel. If jets can't fly, they can't bomb. Under pressure, some companies

have already decided to stop supplying aviation fuel to Myanmar. Sanctions on Myanmar companies which are supplying aviation fuel to the Myanmar military have started to be implemented. However, again the pace of implementation of these sanctions is too slow. Sanctions banning the supply of aviation fuel to Myanmar still seem a long way off.

So, as the international community dithers and delays and millions of people in Myanmar live in daily fear of airstrikes, calls have been growing again for a no-fly zone over Myanmar. On the face of it, a no-fly zone could be the answer, completely grounding the Myanmar military air force.

However, in practice, for many reasons, it is very unrealistic to expect that there will be a no-fly zone in Myanmar. Calls for a no-fly zone coming from Myanmar are understandable, but they risk providing people with false hope. Making a call for something that has little or no chance of ever being implemented, particularly if it comes from the side of the political leadership of the anti-junta movement, will raise high expectations which will be, unfortunately, quickly disappointed. Disappointment creates unproductive frustration, takes away energy and confidence, and leads to demoralization. None of those collective emotions are useful to sustain the will for resistance and endurance vis-à-vis a brutal and determined opponent that can be defeated and that is gradually being weakened by the nationwide opposition to the attempted coup.

What is a no-fly zone?

A no-fly zone is where there is a ban on aircraft flying over all or part of a country. The ban can be on all aircraft or on aircraft used for military purposes. A no-fly zone must be enforced by one or more countries, with the threat of shooting down any aircraft which violate the no-fly zone.

Where have no-fly zones happened before?

If we look back to the post-Cold War period, when concepts of humanitarian interventions and R2P were formulated and for a relatively short period of time gained some traction, there have been numerous situations of mass scale crimes against humanity and dramatic humanitarian emergencies caused by internal or external aggression. However, one may be surprised to find out that no-fly zones have only been utilized three times in history — in parts of Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War; in Bosnia in 1992; and Libya in 2011.

The first no-fly zone was over northern and southern Iraq, to try to prevent the Iraqi dictatorship using airstrikes against ethnic and religious groups in those areas. These no-fly zones were imposed after the Gulf War of 1991. Iraq had invaded Kuwait and the USA and allies went to war to drive Iraq out of Kuwait, whilst also encouraging ethnic and religious minorities to rise up against the Iraqi dictatorship. The USA, France and UK already had a large military presence in the area because the area was a vital source of oil and gas.

The no-fly zone in Bosnia began in 1993 and lasted two and a half years. It was introduced as an additional measure that backed up already significant engagement by the UN in the conflict in Bosnia and the presence of UN peacekeeping troops on the ground since 1992. The no-fly zone in Bosnia was authorized by a United Nations Security Council Resolution, while NATO acted as the implementing force. NATO had at its disposal significant airpower and air bases in close proximity to Bosnia.

In 2011 an uprising against the Libyan dictatorship of Muammar Gaddafi was met with deadly force. Opposition forces initially took control of some cities and civil war followed with

armed forces loyal to Gaddafi using ruthless tactics to retake cities, causing a humanitarian crisis which made headline news every day.

The UN Security Council passed a resolution, and a Western-led force, which included some Middle East states, was authorized to impose not just a no-fly zone, but also take offensive action to reduce conflict. Around 19 countries were involved in different aspects of implementing the resolution, with the UK and France leading on implementing the no-fly zone. They were supported by the US, with its superior air control and monitoring capacity. Again, NATO had significant presence, including military airfields in close proximity to Libya. The no-fly zone lasted seven months. Although addressing the humanitarian crisis caused by conflict was a key driving force for the UN intervention at the time, there is still controversy over the Western-led intervention, as Libya has still not been able to form a stable unified government, causing an economic crisis that has left half the population living in poverty.

Although there have been numerous other calls for no-fly zones regarding conflicts in many other countries, in practice there have only ever been these three no-fly zones. No-fly zones only happen in extremely rare circumstances. In all three cases, the US and NATO countries had national security interests in the conflict, they already had significant military presence close to the conflict area, the opponent they were facing had been an authoritarian and militarily relatively weak country and, at that particular moment, there was no neighbour or other big power that strongly opposed international intervention.

Most importantly, all those three cases took place during the time when the US and Western countries dominated international relations in what was called the 'unipolar world order'. Since then, international relations have gone through profound change. That change has been partly influenced by the rise and assertiveness of China and Russia, which made a big part of their foreign policy effort to undermine and oppose any Western domination over 'world order'. Last but not least, after the spectacular failures of Western interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, the West itself has become extremely reluctant to get involved in any new military intervention outside its own borders.

At least, that was the case until Russian aggression against Ukraine. But even in the case of Ukraine, the US and European countries promptly rejected early Ukrainian calls for no-fly zones, and have insisted that no NATO soldiers will be directly involved in combat operations.

Who decides if there will be a no-fly zone?

No-fly zones need a legal basis. These can be:

- A government imposing a no-fly zone over its own territory.
- A country implementing a no-fly zone over an area for self-defence.
- A government or coalition of governments implementing a no-fly zone on humanitarian grounds.
- A UN Security Council resolution.

Why won't a no-fly zone happen in Myanmar?

Firstly, there is no country currently able and ready to provide planes and other necessary – very complex and very expensive – intelligence, operational and logistics capacity that would be necessary in order to implement a no-fly zone.

Another insurmountable obstacle is that there would be no regional airfields to base operations from. No Myanmar neighbouring country would allow their territory to be used. India would not do it, Bangladesh would not do it, Thailand would not do it. So, the only remaining option would be to have hugely expensive aircraft carriers and support vehicles to spend months at a time off the coast of Myanmar, and being rotated in and out.

The USA has eleven aircraft carriers, the UK two and France only one in operation. With tensions high over Russia and with China over Taiwan, these countries will not want their carriers tied up implementing a no-fly zone over Myanmar. They simply need them somewhere else where the West has its own serious security concerns.

Another very important factor is that no-fly zones are very expensive. Currently, Western

defence budgets are under heavy strain with support being provided to Ukraine, and the expectation is that the war in Ukraine will be a protracted one. There is zero political willingness in any Western capital to open a new budget line for a distant conflict where the West has little at stake.

One more very important factor. Imposing a no-fly zone is a serious and risky military operation. It can easily lead to direct confrontation with the opposing side. In order to implement a no-fly zone, the US, probably the only country, in addition to China, that would be capable of imposing a no-fly zone over Myanmar, would need to be ready to bomb whatever anti-aircraft defense and radar system Myanmar has, and would need to be ready to engage in combat with Myanmar jets. It is beyond imagination that the Biden administration would be willing to do so in Myanmar, where the US has no immediate strategic or security interests and to do so at a time when it will have a hard time to continue military support to Ukraine with a Republican majority in the House of Representatives.

Neighbouring countries will be strongly opposed

There is another set of reasons why a no-fly zone is unrealistic any time soon, and most probably never. That is connected with Myanmar's neighbours.

The attitude of neighbouring countries is an important factor in any decision over a no-fly zone. China, Thailand and India would be strongly opposed to any no-fly zone. With sympathetic Western countries unwilling to even challenge Thailand and India at a high level diplomatically over their supply of arms and revenue to the military, there is no prospect of them going up against them over a no-fly zone.

Thailand is a US treaty country and is, at least within the US Defense Ministry and Pentagon, seen as a critical ally in Southeast Asia. The US is already worried that it is losing Thailand to China, so there is no way that the US would be willing to challenge Thailand over the idea of a no-fly zone in Myanmar, which Thailand would vehemently oppose.

At the moment, the US and EU are ready to go long way to try to persuade India away from its traditional military reliance on Russia. Bringing countries like India and Indonesia closer to the pro-Ukrainian block is what is of significant interest to the West in Asia.

Last but not least, China would be fiercely opposed to any Western country imposing a no-fly zone on its border, and, with tensions already high, Western countries would not want to increase tensions with a no-fly zone. The US and the Quad might be preparing themselves for rivalry with China in the Indo-Pacific, but none of these countries wants to make Myanmar a battleground for a proxy war between the US and China. That is why both the US and China prefer to keep ASEAN 'centrality' when it comes to dealing with the Myanmar crisis.

Western countries would also not be able to legitimately implement a no-fly zone on the basis of their own self-defence. Russia and China would veto a UN Security Council resolution implementing a no-fly zone.

Prospects for a no-fly zone

Although the humanitarian crisis caused by airstrikes provides justification for a no-fly zone, there are too many other factors which mean a no fly-zone will not happen. There is a lack of political

will, the opposition of neighbouring countries, the costs of a no-fly zone, and tensions with Russia and China meaning military resources are prioritised for use elsewhere.

Calls for a no-fly zone are justified but will not result in a no-fly zone. The obstacles are too big to overcome. Efforts spent on calling for a no-fly zone will be wasted.

Options for stopping or reducing airstrikes are limited. One of the most effective would be a ban on the supply of aviation fuel, which even sympathetic Western countries have not implemented so far, despite calls from hundreds of Myanmar civil society organisations.

Sanctions on arms brokers providing arms and equipment for aircraft have started to be implemented but more are needed. Chinese, Russian, Indian and Pakistani companies providing aircraft and arms should also be sanctioned.

The people of Myanmar are doing everything they can to resist military rule, but the military they are resisting is funded and armed by the international community. Much more can and must be done to cut off sources of revenue, arms and equipment to the Myanmar military. We must redouble our efforts to stop these sources of revenue and arms.



Iran fires missiles from Iranian territory at suspected Kurdish bases in northern Iraq in the 1990s at a time when No-Fly zones were in place in the north and the south of Iraq. Photo: AFP

INTELLIGENCE FAILURES AND THE SHARED FATE OF MOSCOW AND NAYPYITAW



Red Square in Moscow. Photo: Steve Harvey

One year removed from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and two since the coup in Myanmar, the paths of the two ostracized regimes continue to converge. They are paths born of similar faults and paths that once taken show no sign of an off ramp. In hindsight, would either Vladimir Putin or Min Aung Hlaing have launched their troubled military putsches if they could have foreseen the calamitous results? We may never know. But we can conclude that neither anticipated the extent of the fallout from their actions.

The failure of Russian intelligence to anticipate the reaction of Ukraine, and its allies, to the Russian invasion shares some similarities to the failure of the Myanmar military to anticipate the full extent of opposition to its coup. And this points to deficiencies in the intelligence sectors of

both countries well prior to the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and February 2021 coup in Myanmar.

“The Department of Operational Information (also known as the 5th Service of the FSB) performs the functions of foreign intelligence of the FSB,” writes investigative journalist Liubov Velychko in the recently published article *30 talking points about Ukraine: Why the FSB failed the ‘ideological prelude’ of the invasion of Ukraine*. “Since its establishment in 1998, the department has always singled out Ukraine among all post-Soviet countries, trying to keep it in its sphere of influence.” Thus, a principal aim of post-Cold War Russian intelligence was to ensure Russian interests were not prohibitively challenged in Ukraine.

Velychko continues by

stating that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), had for years been feeding President Putin what it imagined the Russian leader wanted to hear – namely the ease with which Kiev would fall and the support of many Ukrainians for Russian “liberation”. This should not come as a surprise. Intelligence communities, and not only in authoritarian regimes, frequently serve to reinforce rather than correct biases. This can be seen in Hitler’s conviction that the D-Day invasion force would land at Calais, or in Tony Blair and George W. Bush’s certainty that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction.

FSB operations in Ukraine were also riddled with corruption. Following the detention of the head of the 5th Service of the FSB and his deputy, again according to Velychko, media named the reasons for their fall from grace as a misuse of funds allocated for special operations in Ukraine as well as poor intelligence information.

Looking at Myanmar, following the mass protests of 1988 a primary role of the intelligence community was to ensure the military never again had to face a similar challenge to its privileged position in society. But the intelligence network in Myanmar has never recovered from the ousting of Khin Nyunt in 2004 and the dismantling of his apparatus. This, despite a decade of focus, following

the reforms initiated in 2011, on growing intelligence capacity under the Tatmadaw and Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing. “By the time of Aung San Suu Kyi,” writes Myanmar armed forces expert Andrew Selth in *Secrets and Power in Myanmar*, “almost all aspects of intelligence were answerable, directly or indirectly, to Min Aung Hlaing.”

This personal relationship with the state’s intelligence apparatus is one possible reason Min Aung Hlaing felt confident in launching his coup and in the assessments of his intelligence agents. But the system suffered from similar shortcomings to that of the FSB, namely corruption, feeding information based on erroneous assumptions and a penchant to favor personal loyalty and political reliability.

Militarily, both the Russian and Myanmar armed forces, once feared outfits with generously projected power potential, have punched well below pre-conflict assessments. And this is also at least partly a function of poor intelligence. Uninspired and inadequately provisioned forces are many times the norm. While corruption over the years has served to undercut the aims of military modernization programs in each country. The result, as seen in Ukraine and Myanmar, are much less capable fighting forces than previously anticipated.

Having met stiffer resistance than expected, and facing the distinct possibility of defeat, both Russian and Myanmar intelligence communities are scrambling to make amends. A

common tactic is the spread of misinformation and false flag actions.

One example well documented in Velychko’s article is the alleged preparation by Ukraine to employ a dirty bomb. The dirty bomb scare “was aimed primarily at the Russian audience,” contends Velychko. “This jumpscare was supposed to be an argument why Russia should continue to fight with Ukraine.” It was, in other words, supposed to stoke anxiety and fear among Russians.

Turning to Myanmar, the Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs (OCMSA) has a lengthy history since its founding in 2004/05 of false flag actions and fabrications aimed at stoking racial, religious, and communal animosities. This has even extended to the planting of bombs in population centers to cause confusion and provoke fears. In the current conflict, such activities are aimed at justifying the military’s actions and galvanizing public support.

These trends in misinformation and false flag actions highlight the importance for Ukrainian and Myanmar opposition forces in having a mechanism in place for a timely and transparent response announced at the highest level possible to deny, and ideally disprove, the false allegations and actions of Moscow and Nay Pyi Taw.

Having launched their countries down extravagantly damaging paths, is there any chance of an about face from either quarter? It seems

unlikely. Neither Vladimir Putin nor Min Aung Hlaing can afford to step back from the precipice. Both will view victory as the only guarantee of their personal security and privileged status. And the burgeoning relationship between Moscow and Nay Pyi Taw is likely only to further blossom as both sides have little other choice.

Nay Pyi Taw looks to Moscow for diplomatic protection, arms, and foreign investment. While Moscow seeks a market for its energy (and dwindling military surplus) along with a foothold in a strategically important region of the world. Countries aligned with the anti-junta opposition in Myanmar, many of which share pro-Ukrainian positions, have racked up the sanction regime against both Moscow and Nay Pyi Taw. However, while these measures can meet with some success at the bilateral level, they are unlikely to dissuade the growing bonds between Moscow and Nay Pyi Taw.

But to return to our original query, would a true appreciation of the intelligence deficits have altered the mindsets of either Vladimir Putin or Min Aung Hlaing? It is just possible that both figures harbor such disdain for their political opponents, either domestic or international, that an inspired resistance, let alone collective resistance, to their aggressions was simply unfathomable.

This commentary is written by an anonymous writer who covers Myanmar and the Asia region.

CHINA SHOULD STOP SUPPORTING THE MYANMAR JUNTA, SAYS PROGRESSIVE VOICE

China must stop its dangerous game of siding with the junta if it truly wants to see peace and stability in Myanmar, according to the NGO Progressive Voice.

It needs to stop aiding and abetting them and must not help them with technical support or lethal weapons.

In the wake of the ongoing Spring Revolution, a visit by China's Special Envoy to Myanmar to meet with some major ethnic revolutionary organizations (EROs) highlights China's approach in Myanmar.

Deng Xijun, China's Special Envoy to Myanmar, met the representatives of seven EROs including the Kachin Independence Army, the Arakan Army (AA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) at separate times and places in Shan State.

This is the second trip that Deng Xijun has made within three months of his appointment and it was devoted to persuading the EROs, three of whom are now actively participating in the Spring Revolution, to reach some form of ceasefire with the junta. In other words,

to cease participating in armed resistance against the illegal junta.

Despite its call for an end to violence, China continues to supply military equipment and arms to the junta.

Tom Andrews, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Myanmar, asserted in the Conference room paper of the Special Rapporteur to the 49th regular session of the Human Rights Council that China has continued to provide the Myanmar military with



Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Photo: Hennie Stander

arms including fighter jets and armoured vehicles since the attempted coup in 2021.

Nevertheless, China is not the only power supplying Myanmar's junta and condoning its atrocities. Russia, Serbia and India still support the military junta by supplying weapons and have continued to do so since the 2021 coup attempt.

Deng Xijun's trip also signals that China sees the West, particularly US support for the National Unity Government (NUG), the People's Defence Force (PDF) and the EROs as adopted in the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act as a major concern. It seems that China wants to maintain its "big brother" status mentality

over the EROs, particularly in the northern part of the country along the China-Myanmar border.

Myanmar has had a geopolitical headache with China since its independence from Britain in 1948. Particularly after the coup staged by the Myanmar military in 1988, successive Myanmar military juntas and quasi-civilian governments have resorted to taking refuge in China's power, finding ways to evade international sanctions and justice and accountability for grave crimes committed against the people of Myanmar.

Under the euphemistic "Pauk-Phaw" which can be translated into "fraternal friendship" in Burmese between the two neighboring countries, Beijing has never fully sided with the democratic opposition throughout the political history of Myanmar, instead ramping up its support for successive military regimes for its own advantage.

While China has shielded the military junta from international justice and provided support through a variety of means, including military equipment, it has also fueled conflict by providing guns and ammunition to both sides and taking advantage of a situation between complete peace and fully-fledged conflict.

Now it wants to create conditions that favour the military junta and ensure China's geopolitical strategic dominance and the stable operations of its massive investment projects in Myanmar.

As Myanmar's biggest trading partner, China has expressed concerns about its major investment projects that

range from oil pipelines and mining to deep-sea ports. Those projects cover areas throughout the country, from Shan State's Muse Township in the north to Rakhine State's Kyaukphyu Township in the west.

China has never condemned the illegal attempted coup of the Myanmar military, referring to it as a "major cabinet reshuffle" since 1 February 2021.

Progressive Voice believes that if China wishes to have good relations with Myanmar and a good reputation and support amongst the Myanmar people it has to make the right decision.

It wants to know if this failed coup is "absolutely not what China wants to see, why can China not be a genuinely responsible neighbour who respects the will of the Myanmar people.

If China truly wants to see peace and stability in Myanmar, it must stop playing a dangerous game of taking sides with and aiding and abetting the murderous junta.

It must stop providing technical support and lethal weapons for the military junta, the very perpetrators of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes against the people of Myanmar, and the root cause of decades-long conflict and violence in Myanmar.

Furthermore, progressive Voice believes that as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China should comply with its mandate and obligations and stop blocking Myanmar people's call for a global arms embargo including on aviation fuel, and pursue accountability and justice.



MYANMAR JUNTA HINTS AT FURTHER ELECTION DELAY

Myanmar will hold a national census late next year, state media reported Friday, hinting at another delay in elections the junta has pledged to hold to end the crisis sparked by its coup.

The Southeast Asian country has been in turmoil since the army's power grab in 2021, with a subsequent crackdown on dissent sparking fighting between military and anti-coup forces across swathes of the nation.

The "census will be taken simultaneously throughout the country" from October 1-15, 2024, immigration and population minister U Myint Kyaing was reported as saying by the Global New Light of Myanmar.

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing had previously said a national census would be required to ensure voting lists in the country of some 54 million were "accurate", suggesting a census would precede any election.

He also said fresh polls could only be held when the country was "stable".

In February, the junta announced a six-month extension to a two-year state of emergency, delaying elections it said it would hold by August.

The military justified its February 2021 power grab with unsubstantiated claims of widespread fraud in 2020 elections that the party of civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi won in a landslide.

Observers say any fresh poll could not be free and fair under the present circumstances.

The United States maintains that any junta-held poll would be a "sham", while Russia - a close ally and arms supplier of the military - has said it would support elections.

Two years after the coup, the situation in Myanmar is a "festering catastrophe", United Nations human rights chief Volker Turk said last week, adding that the military was operating with "complete impunity".

Diplomatic efforts to resolve the bloody impasse led by the UN and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations regional bloc have made little headway, with the military's generals refusing to engage with opponents.

The junta in December 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 condemned as a sham.

AFP



Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing.
Photo: AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA SLAMS UN HUMAN RIGHTS CHIEF'S 'IRRELEVANT' COMMENTS



The Myanmar junta is not amused. Photo: AFP

Myanmar's junta has slammed the UN's human rights chief for making "irrelevant" remarks after he said the military may have committed war crimes as it struggles to crush resistance to its rule.

Two years after the military ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's elected government, the human rights situation in Myanmar is a "festering catastrophe", the global body's rights office said last week in a report.

Stretched thin on the ground, the military was relying increasingly on air power and artillery to fight widespread opposition, with more than 300 air strikes in the last year, the UN said, including on schools and hospitals.

The junta's foreign ministry said the report was based on "sweeping allegations against the Government and its security forces", in a statement on its Facebook page on Tuesday last week.

"Myanmar, therefore, asserts its firm objection against the irrelevant recommendations made by the High Commissioner."

The junta acknowledged that the UN report recognised the violence committed by some of the groups arrayed against it, but only "slightly".

Swathes of the country are in turmoil, and killings of low-level junta officials and anti-coup fighters take place almost daily, with details murky and reprisals often following quickly.

The junta claims more than 5,000 civilians have been killed by "terrorist" groups since the coup.

Diplomatic efforts to resolve the bloody impasse led by the UN and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations regional bloc have made little headway, with the generals refusing to engage with opponents.

The UN Security Council passed its first resolution on the situation in Myanmar in December, urging the junta to release Suu Kyi and all "arbitrarily detained prisoners".

Security Council permanent members China and Russia abstained, opting not to wield vetoes following amendments to the wording.

India, which has close ties with the junta, also abstained.

More than 3,000 people have been killed in the military's crackdown on dissent according to a local monitoring group.

AFP

CALLS FOR CANCELLATION OF MYANMAR'S INVITATION TO ASEAN FORUM

Campaign organisation Justice for Myanmar called for the cancellation of Myanmar's invitation to this week's ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Workshop on Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism.

The workshop took place in Bali, Indonesia from 8 to 10 March 2023 and was co-chaired by the European Union, Indonesia and Laos, with apparent financial support from the German development agency, GIZ. As part of the workshop, the EU hosted a welcome dinner on 8 March.

The ASEAN Regional Forum's secretariat invited representatives of the Myanmar junta via its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which then invited the junta's Ministry of Home Affairs and Central Bank of Myanmar. The Ministry of Home Affairs houses the junta's police force and prisons department and is directly responsible for ongoing crimes against humanity.

The EU has sanctioned the junta's home affairs minister and deputy home affairs minister, as well as the junta's State Administration Council.

The workshop aimed to build knowledge and capacity to address the security risks of money laundering and terrorist financing, focussing on the prevention of the financing of terrorism by non-profit organisations related to the intergovernmental Financial Action Task Force (FATF)

Recommendation 8.

FATF blacklisted Myanmar in October 2022 over serious deficiencies in counter-ing money laundering, urging countries to conduct enhanced due diligence against the risks emanating from Myanmar.

A group of former United Nations experts, the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, have established that the Myanmar military junta is a terrorist organisation under Myanmar law and as defined in international law, and it should be treated as such by the international community.

In 2021, the junta illegally declared the National Unity Government (NUG), which is the legitimate government of Myanmar, as a terrorist group. It also designated the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) and People's Defence Forces (PDFs) as terrorist organisations.

Since the military's illegal coup attempt, the junta has created a state of terror, committing deliberate killings, arbitrary arrests, indiscriminate airstrikes and shelling, rape and torture, using counter-terrorism as a pretext. The junta has killed more than 3,100 people, and arbitrarily arrested over 20,000.

As part of its attempt to gain control, the junta illegally introduced an organisation registration law in October 2022 to force non-profits to register with the junta, and disclose funding sources and details

about their operations, under threat of imprisonment.

Analysis by the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) found that the junta's organisation registration law is "wholly non-compliant" with international law and standards, violating the right to freedom of association, assembly, opinion, expression, and political participation.

The junta has also increased surveillance of the financial sector. An August 2022 directive by the junta's Central Bank of Myanmar to mobile money businesses requires users to register a photo of their face, their ID card and phone number, increasing the grave risks of retaliation by the junta to those making payments to the NUG, CRPH, PDFs, civil society and other forces successfully resisting the military's attempted coup and providing humanitarian aid and basic services to the people.

Justice For Myanmar wrote to the co-chairs of the

ARF workshop to express dismay at the invitation of illegal military junta members, to urge that they are disinvited and that an invite is instead extended to the National Unity Government, and to seek clarification on funding arrangements.

A representative of the EU denied responsibility for the Myanmar junta's participation, saying that invitations for ARF activities are distributed through the ARF Secretariat,



Photo: AFP

and clarified that the EU is not funding the participation of representatives from Myanmar. GIZ responded that they are not financially supporting participants to attend the workshop.

Meanwhile, no response was received from Indonesia or Laos.

Justice For Myanmar requests the co-chairs of the workshop to immediately disinvite the Myanmar military junta and to ban the junta from this and all future ASEAN Regional Forum workshops and events.

Instead, these invitations should be extended to the National Unity Government.

Justice For Myanmar spokesperson Yadanar Maung says: "It is nonsensical for ARF to invite representatives of the Myanmar junta, a terrorist organisation, to a workshop on countering the financing of terrorism. The invite not only

legitimises the junta but also provides it with an opportunity to improve their understanding of measures to prevent money laundering and terrorist financing, which may help them to better circumvent these measures as part of their organised, criminal activities.

"By providing the junta with capacity to regulate the transactions of non-profit organisations, ARF is in effect supporting the junta's crack-down on freedom of association, assembly, opinion, expression, and political participation, which violates international law.

"The invite also undermines the integrity of ARF's important work to address the security and economic risks linked to money laundering and terrorist financing activities.

"The Myanmar junta is systemically corrupt and uses a vast network of business to

fund its ongoing war crimes and crimes against humanity against the people. ARF should treat the junta as a threat to regional economies and security, rather than as a partner.

"JFM calls on ARF to immediately revoke the invite to the military junta, and instead extend an invite to the National Unity Government.

"The EU should use its leverage as a co-host to urge the exclusion of the junta in the upcoming workshop, the EU hosted welcome dinner and all other international meetings and events the EU is part of. Instead, the EU should support and recognise the NUG as the legitimate government of Myanmar."

Justice For Myanmar is a group of covert activists campaigning for justice and accountability for the people of Myanmar



World Health Organization's director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. Photo: AFP

WHO URGES COUNTRIES TO COME CLEAN ON COVID ORIGINS INTEL

The WHO on Friday last week urged all countries to reveal what they know about the origins of Covid-19, following US claims of a Chinese lab leak and furious denials from Beijing.

FBI director Christopher Wray told Fox News television on Tuesday that the US Federal Bureau of Investigation had now assessed the source of Covid-19 pandemic was “most likely a potential lab incident in Wuhan”.

The first infections with the new coronavirus were recorded in late 2019 in the Chinese city, which hosts a virus research laboratory.

Chinese officials have angrily denied the FBI claim, calling it a smear campaign against Beijing.

“If any country has information about the origins of the pandemic, it’s essential for that information to be shared with WHO and the international scientific community,” said the World Health Organization’s director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

“Not so as to apportion blame but to advance our understanding of how this pandemic started so we can prevent, prepare for and respond to future epidemics and pandemics.

“WHO has not abandoned any plans to identify the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic,” he told reporters.

WHO urges transparency

In 2021, the UN’s health agency set up the Scientific Advisory Group for the Origins of Novel Pathogens (SAGO) to look into the origins of the pandemic.

“WHO continues to call for China to be transparent in sharing data and to conduct the necessary investigations and share the results,” said Tedros, adding that he had written and spoken to top Chinese leaders on multiple occasions.

“Until then, all hypotheses on the origins of the virus remain on the table.”

But he added that politicisation of the origins research was making the scientific work harder -- and the world less safe as a result.

The comments from FBI chief Wray came after a report earlier this week said the US Department of Energy had determined that a Chinese lab leak was the most likely cause of the Covid-19 outbreak.

The department works with a network of national laboratories, including some

involved in advanced biological research. Other agencies within the US intelligence community believe the virus emerged naturally.

Share the data, says WHO

Maria Van Kerkhove, the WHO’s Covid-19 technical lead, said the WHO had reached out to the US mission in Geneva for more information.

So far, however, they did not have access to the data on which the US reports were based, said Van Kerkhove, who is an infectious disease epidemiologist.

“It remains vital that that information is shared”, to help move the scientific studies forward, she added.

Tedros said there was a moral imperative to find out how the pandemic started, for the sake of the millions who lost their lives to Covid-19 and those living with long Covid.

More than 6.8 million Covid-19 deaths and more than 758 million confirmed cases have been reported to the WHO, which acknowledges that the true toll is far higher.

AFP

CHINA'S XI HANDED HISTORIC THIRD TERM AS PRESIDENT

Xi Jinping was handed a third term as Chinese president on Friday last week, capping a rise that has seen him become the country's most powerful leader in generations.

The appointment by China's rubber-stamp parliament comes after Xi locked in another five years as head of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October.

Since then, the 69-year-old Xi has weathered widespread protests over his zero-Covid policy and the deaths of countless people after its abandonment.

Those issues have been avoided at this week's National People's Congress (NPC), a carefully

choreographed event that is also set to appoint Xi ally Li Qiang as the new premier.

On Friday, delegates handed Xi a third term as China's president and re-elected him as head of the country's Central Military Commission in a unanimous vote.

Beijing's Great Hall of the People, a cavernous state building on the edge of Tiananmen Square, was adorned with crimson carpets and banners for the landmark vote, with a military band providing background music.

A digital monitor on the edge of the stage proclaimed the final tally -- all 2,952 votes had been cast in favour of awarding Xi another term



Chinese leader Xi Jinping, centre. Photo: AFP

in office.

The announcement was followed by fervent declarations of allegiance by delegates to the Chinese constitution in a demonstration of loyalty and unanimity.

Xi held up his right fist and placed his left hand on a red leather copy of China's constitution.

"I swear to be loyal to the constitution of the People's Republic of China, to uphold the authority of the constitution, to perform my statutory obligations, to be loyal to the motherland, to be loyal to the people," he said, promising to fulfil his duties with honesty and hard work.

In the oath -- beamed live on state television across the nation -- he vowed to "build a prosperous, strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious and great modern socialist country".

- Remarkable rise –

Xi's re-election is the culmination of a remarkable rise in which he has gone from a relatively little-known party apparatchik to the leader of a rising global power.

His coronation sets him up to become communist China's longest-serving president, and means Xi could rule well into his seventies -- if no challenger emerges.

Adrian Geiges, co-author of "Xi Jinping: The Most Powerful Man in the World", told AFP he did not think Xi was motivated by a desire for personal enrichment, despite international media investigations having revealed his family's amassed wealth.

"That's not his interest," Geiges said.

"He really has a vision about China, he wants to see China as the most powerful country in the world."

- Tearing up the rulebook –

For decades, China -- scarred by the dictatorial reign and cult of personality of founding leader Mao Zedong -- eschewed one-man rule in favour of a more consensus-based, but still autocratic, leadership.

That model imposed term limits on the

largely ceremonial role of the presidency, with Xi's predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao relinquishing power after 10 years in office.

Xi has torn up that rulebook, abolishing term limits in 2018 and allowing a cult of personality to foster his all-powerful leadership.

But the beginning of his unprecedented third term comes as the world's second-largest economy faces major headwinds, from slowing growth and a troubled real estate sector to a declining birth rate.

Relations with the United States are also at a low not seen in decades, with the powers sparring over everything from human rights to trade and technology.

"We will see a China more assertive on the global stage, insisting its narrative be accepted," Steve Tsang, director of the SOAS China Institute, told AFP.

"But it is also one that will focus on domestically making it less dependent on the rest of the world, and making the Communist Party the centrepiece of governance, rather than the Chinese government," he said.

"It is not a return to the Maoist era, but one that Maoists will feel comfortable in," Tsang added.

"Not a direction of travel that is good for the rest of the world."

AFP

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM XI'S NEXT FIVE YEARS AS CHINESE PRESIDENT

Xi Jinping on Friday last week sealed a historic third term as China's president.

AFP examines how he is expected to handle the key issues facing the country:

Slowing economy

China's slowing economy will likely dominate Xi's next five years but his decision to pack the Communist Party's top leadership with loyalists has stoked concerns about him prioritising ideology at the expense of growth.

The world's second-largest economy expanded just three percent last year, widely missing its target of around 5.5 percent in the face of strict Covid curbs and a simmering property crisis.

Beijing has set a growth target of "around five percent" for 2023, one of the lowest in decades.

And Xi's picks for top government jobs suggest the days of liberal reformers steering the economy have come to an end, while his track record of propping up heavy industry and cracking down on big tech suggests a more state-led approach is here to stay.

While he has thrown his weight behind the development of a more consumption-driven economy -- a policy known as "dual circulation" -- his calls for addressing China's yawning wealth gap under the banner of "common prosperity" have gone quiet in recent months after giving investors the jitters.

With the United States promising to prioritise maintaining "an enduring competitive edge" against China as they battle for dominance over technology, Beijing may find itself under growing pressure internationally as growth slows at home.

Tensions with the US

Relations between Beijing and Washington have been on a steady decline in recent years, with the two sides butting heads over a number of issues including trade, human rights and the origins of Covid-19.

A planned visit by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken last month was cancelled at the last minute after the United States shot down

a Chinese balloon it said was conducting surveillance over US territory -- a claim strenuously denied by Beijing.

Since then, Chinese diplomats have kept up a steady drumbeat of anti-US criticism, with Foreign Minister Qin Gang this week warning of "conflict and confrontation" with potentially "catastrophic consequences" if Washington does not change tack.

Xi himself also made



a rare direct rebuke of Washington this week, accusing “Western countries led by the United States” of trying to thwart China’s rise.

The countries in question “have implemented all-round containment, encirclement and suppression of China, which has brought unprecedented severe challenges to our country’s development”, Xi said, according to state news agency Xinhua.

year prompted a furious Beijing to hold its biggest military drills around the island in years.

The Communist Party for the first time enshrined its opposition to Taiwanese independence in its constitution in October.

Any move to invade Taiwan would wreak havoc with global supply chains given the island is a major supplier of semiconductors -- an essential

warned of “escalating” threats from abroad.

Drew Thompson, a visiting senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, said the “sustained, year-on-year” spending increases made Beijing’s claim that its military modernisation does not threaten its neighbours “ring hollow”.

China’s concurrent lack of openness is “destabilising” and “fuelling a cycle of worrisome deterrence signalling that China is quick to blame on other parties, without acknowledging its own explicit actions and policies”, he told AFP.

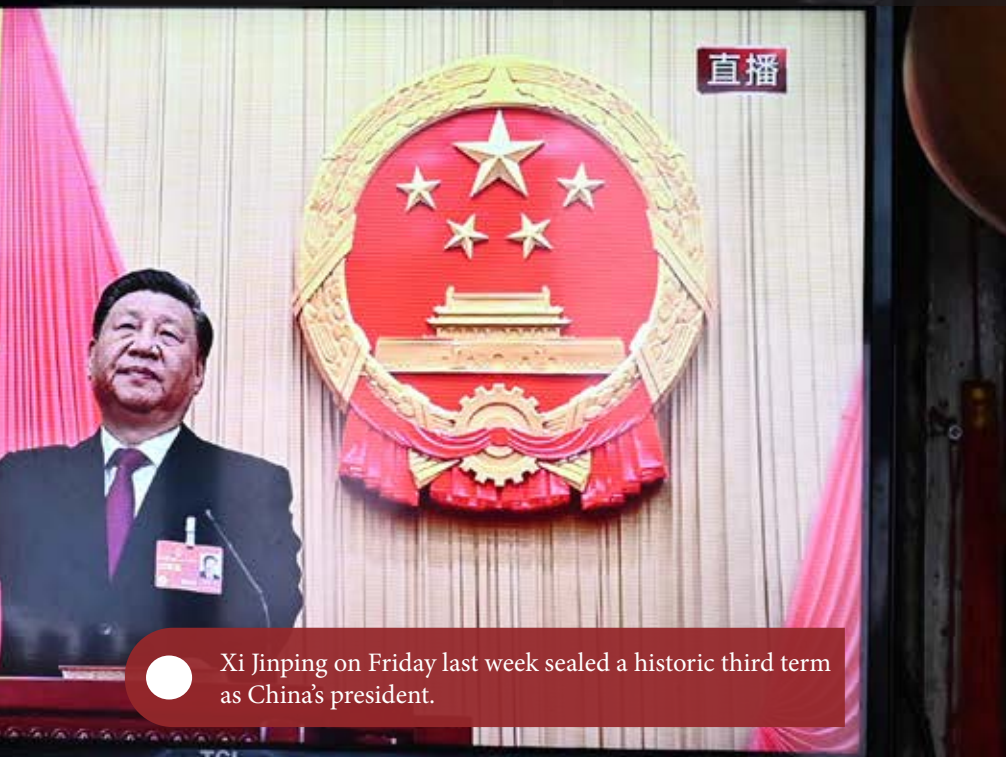
Human rights

China under Xi has seen the almost-total eradication of civil society -- scores of activists have fled the country and opposition to the government has been all but snuffed out.

In the far-western region of Xinjiang, rights groups say more than a million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities are detained in what the United States and lawmakers in some Western countries have said amounts to genocide.

The situation looks unlikely to improve in the next five years as Xi’s power grows increasingly impossible to challenge and the leadership digs in its heels against international pressure.

AFP



Xi Jinping on Friday last week sealed a historic third term as China’s president.

Taiwan threats

After ratcheting up tensions with Taiwan, an emboldened Xi could decide the time is right to fulfil Beijing’s longstanding ambition of seizing the self-ruled democratic island.

China’s sabre-rattling towards Taiwan has become more pronounced in recent years.

A visit by the then US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi last

component of nearly all modern electronics.

It would also provoke outrage from the West, deepen China’s isolation, bring Beijing and Washington closer than ever to direct military confrontation and snuff out Taiwan’s hard-earned democratic freedoms.

China on Sunday said its military budget would rise at the fastest rate for four years, as outgoing Premier Li Keqiang

WOMEN MARCH AS RIGHTS UNDER THREAT ACROSS THE GLOBE

Women hit the streets from Kabul to Mexico City on Wednesday last week to mark International Women's Day and stand up for rights that are coming under increasing attack.

With Afghanistan's Taliban rulers imposing what the United Nations has called a "gender apartheid" on women, Iran's repression of the Mahsa Amini protests, new US restrictions on abortion rights and the Ukraine war, protesters were fuelled by a sense that hard-won progress is being turned back.

But as thousands raised their voices and marched through cities across the world, others were forced to keep a low profile as authorities sought to block the demonstrations.

As night fell in Madrid, thousands of women, many wearing purple, packed the tree-lined boulevards of the Spanish capital, singing and shouting slogans to the beat of drums.

"My grandmothers fought for us to have certain freedoms that people are now trying to take away from us, so for me it's really important to keep up the struggle," said Mariam Ferradas, a 52-year-old kitchen worker.

In Istanbul, several thousand women defied a local ban on protests and staged a



Women protestors in Paris.
Photo: AFP

"Feminist Night March" under the watchful eye of the police, but were unable to reach Taksim Square because armed security barricaded entrances.

Whistling and chanting, they marched through the side streets, holding up flares and shouting "government resign".

Rare protest in Kabul

In Afghanistan, which the UN has denounced as the "most repressive country in the world for women's rights," an AFP correspondent saw some 20 defiant women holding a

rare protest in the capital Kabul.

The Taliban government adheres to an austere interpretation of Islam and has effectively squeezed women and girls out of public life since seizing power in August 2021.

Thousands also joined rallies across Pakistan, despite efforts by authorities to block them over slogans addressing subjects such as divorce, sexual harassment and menstruation.

Rallies also took place in Thailand, and in Indonesia, but march organisers in Hong

Kong called off a rare, authorised protest after activists were repeatedly summoned by the police.

In France, demonstrators



marched in 150 towns and cities to demand “equality both at work and in life” in protests focused on the fight against unpopular pension reforms that critics say is unfair to women.

‘Dramatic’ setbacks

In Washington, US President Joe Biden warned that “in far too many places around the world, the rights of women and girls are still under attack,” pointing to Afghanistan, Russia and Iran.

And in Abu Dhabi, former US secretary of state

Hillary Clinton said progress on issues affecting women and girls had been “dramatically set back” by the Covid pandemic and “organised pushback” against women.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, speaking in Kyiv, praised women for their role in defending the nation against the Russian invasion, pointing to those who “teach, study, rescue, heal, fight - fight for Ukraine”.

Media rights watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said women journalists have paid the price for being at the front line.

Of the 12 women journalists detained in Iran, 11 were arrested following the Amini protests, with two facing charges that could carry the death penalty, it added.

Amini, a young Iranian Kurd, died in custody last year after she was detained for allegedly violating Iran’s strict dress code for women.

Meanwhile Brazil on Wednesday released a study showing the country had suffered 1,410 femicides last year - the highest number since records began in 2015.

In Venezuela, a women’s demonstration in Caracas focused on demands for a living wage amid inflation that has seen the minimum wage plummet. Thousands also demanded better economic conditions in the Argentine capital Buenos Aires.

While in Mexico City, Fatima Rios walked slowly

among thousands of women demonstrators -- still feeling the effects of being shot in the leg three times two years ago by a man “who simply hates women, and is still free,” she told AFP.

“My daughter and I live in fear! She recently told me: ‘Mommy, and if we both die at once?’” Rios said in tears.

Abortion rights in focus

This week, the European Union imposed sanctions on those responsible for violence and rights abuses against women in Afghanistan, Iran, Myanmar, Russia, South Sudan and Syria, with the UK following suit on Wednesday in Iran, Syria, South Sudan and Central African Republic.

Wednesday also saw feminists mobilising over abortion rights following the US Supreme Court’s decision to overturn a woman’s constitutional right to terminate a pregnancy.

In Paris, French President Emmanuel Macron announced his government would put forward a draft law enshrining abortion rights in the French constitution within months.

United Nations chief Antonio Guterres also called for greater protections for women online.

“Online mob violence is a direct attack on democracy and is effectively censoring women, hounding them from office, and blunting girls’ ambition to step up as leaders,” he said.

AFP

MYANMAR: TATMADAW ARMY'S 'SCORCHED EARTH' POLICY IN SPOTLIGHT



Photo: UN News

Two years since a military coup in Myanmar, the UN rights office, OHCHR, warned on Friday that the generals' "scorched earth" policy had left thousands of civilians dead, 80 per cent of townships impacted by fighting and the army "stretched so thin" on the ground, that it resorts to airstrikes.

"Continuous" violence, including the killing, arbitrary arrest, torture and enforced disappearance of opponents in Myanmar between 1 February 2022 and 31 January 2023, have left the country's people desperate for outside help, OHCHR's James Rodehaver said, unveiling the Office's latest report on the crisis.

"Despite all the

challenges that they face, so far there has been so far no break in the will of Myanmar's people to oppose this coup and to continue searching for their human rights and democratic future."

Tatmadaw control

According to the UN rights office report, around 3,000 civilians have been killed since the coup. A full 30 per cent are believed to have died in custody.

Violence rose sharply last year - especially in northwest and southeast Myanmar - which has left the military "actively fighting" on 14 different fronts. "(It is) one of the reasons why they are stretched so thin and why they're having to rely on airstrikes and heavy weaponry," said Mr. Rodehaver, who heads

OHCHR's Myanmar team. "It does not paint a picture of them being in control."

Rights chief's appeal

In a call for "urgent, concrete action" to end the crisis, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, backed calls for an immediate halt to the violence, the release of all those arbitrarily detained, accountability and unhindered humanitarian access.

The UN rights chief added: "Two years after the military launched a coup, the generals have embarked on a scorched earth policy in an attempt to stamp out opposition. Tragically, regional and global efforts for peace and restraint have largely fallen on

deaf ears...Urgent, concrete action is needed to end this festering catastrophe.”

Airstrike horror

Among the many documented airstrikes on civilians, OHCHR’s report details how four helicopters opened fire on a school killing at least six children and injuring nine others, on 16 September 2022, in Let Yet Kone village, Tabayin Township, Sagaing.

“After some 60 soldiers deployed from helicopters to the ground, they reportedly raided the village, executing a school technician and five villagers before arresting wounded children and teachers,” OHCHR spokesperson, Ravina Shamdasani, told journalists in Geneva.

In another incident, on 20 October last year, an airstrike against a hospital in Man Yu Gyi village, Banmauk Township, Sagaing, killed one woman and injured five others. The OHCHR report noted that the hospital had been inaugurated a day earlier and that the victims were all volunteers.

Death by four cuts

OHCHR’s Ms. Shamdasani explained that military employs a “four cuts” approach, involving indiscriminate airstrikes and artillery shelling, razing villages to the ground to displace civilian populations and the denial of humanitarian access. The strategic aim is to cut off non-State organized armed groups and other anti-military armed elements from access to food, financing, intelligence and

recruits.

“Consistent with their modus operandi documented over decades, including in Kachin in 2011 and Rakhine in 2017, UN reports indicated that nearly 39,000 houses nationwide have been burnt or destroyed in military operations since February 2022, representing a more than 1,000-fold increase compared to 2021,” the OHCHR spokesperson said.

Sagaing was the most affected region, accounting for over 25,500 homes. In an incident on 1 May 2022 in Ah Shey See, Kale Township, Sagaing, satellite images suggest the burning of almost the entire village, with 621 structures destroyed.

Furthermore, satellite imagery coupled with interview reports suggest that between 16 and 28 September in Taze Township, Sagaing, the military destroyed 458 houses and damaged another 319 across eight villages during a series of raids and attacks.

Political detainees’ plight

The UN rights office report also noted that there are now also nearly 20,000 political prisoners in Myanmar. Some 16,000 remain in detention but their whereabouts remain unclear.

“Many of those people, we know that they were arrested but we have no idea where they are, and that includes their families,” said OHCHR’s Mr. Rodehaver. “Unfortunately, no-one is given access to the detention centres, including many humanitarian groups.”

He added: “The people that we do get hold of - who either have been able to contact their relatives in detention, or when detainees are released - their stories are very grim, either about the conditions they are kept in and in terms of the use of torture.”

Because OHCHR does not have access to Myanmar, the report’s findings are based on over 96 interviews and meetings with victims, survivors and corroborated by satellite imagery, verified multimedia files, and credible open-source information as well as regular collaboration, data and information exchanges within the UN system.

“Figures of casualties likely represent an underestimation of the reality on the ground,” it noted.

Courtesy of UN News



Photo: Mizzima

KARENNI STATE

Karenni defence forces and junta forces fight 35 times in February.

There were 35 clashes between the Military Council forces and the Karenni Joint Forces in Karenni State in February 2023, according to the Karen Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF) News and Information team.

In February, 45 members of the Military Council were killed, 16 were wounded, and 34 weapons were seized along with some ammunition, according to a statement by the KNDF News and Information team.

In the same period, junta forces killed eight civilians, including children, and injured 12 were in Karenni State.

The clashes included Karenni defence forces attacking junta army camps in Loikaw, Moebye, Hpruso, and Pinlaung townships.

During February the junta targeted civilians in the townships of Demoso, Hpruso, Loikaw, Pekhon by firing artillery at them and launching airstrikes.



CHINESE AMBASSADOR CHEN HAI MEETS WITH BURMESE JUNTA'S ELECTION COMMISSION CHAIRPERSON

On 7 March, Chinese Ambassador Chen Hai met with the Burmese junta's Union Election Commission (UEC) chairperson Thein Soe in Nay Pyi Taw to discuss the junta's preparations for the junta's upcoming election, according to junta-controlled media.

China supports the junta's planned elections, and Chen Hai had also met with the UEC chairperson in April of last year.

While a political analyst suggested that China's support for the junta's election is not unusual, as the superpower nation only looks after its national interests, it is widely believed that the election will not be free and fair.

In February, the junta enacted the new Political Parties Registration Law, requiring existing parties to re-register with the UEC. Currently, 17 parties have re-registered for the junta's planned elections.

The international community, including the US and the European Union, has rejected the junta's proposed election due to concerns about its fairness and severe human rights violations by the junta.

The Burmese military staged a coup in 2021, citing alleged massive electoral fraud in the 2020 general elections, which were overwhelmingly won by the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by now-detained leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

CHINA SIGNS AGREEMENT WITH JUNTA FOR WIND POWER PROJECTS IN RAKHINE STATE



Photo: Mike Setchell

The media run by the Military Council reported that China and the junta would jointly implement wind power projects for the first time in Ann, Thandwe and Gwa Townships in Rakhine State.

The Ministry of Electricity, Directorate of Electric Energy Planning (DEPP) and Primus Advanced Technologies Yunnan Machinery and Equipment Import and Export Co. Ltd. signed Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) in Naypyitaw for these wind power projects.

The junta-appointed Minister of the Ministry of Electricity and Energy, Thaung Han, said that they would work for wind power projects with a total generating capacity of 360 MW in Rakhine State as there were limited power resources. These projects are 150 MW in Ann, 100 MW in Gwa and 110 MW in Thandwe Townships respectively.

He urged the companies to implement all three projects energetically to be completed by 2025 and the first phase of Gaw project with 50 MW capacity must be completed by December 2023.

The Chinese ambassador said that the cooperation between the largest electricity energy producer China and the energy-resources-rich

Myanmar would benefit both countries and China would help Myanmar for electric power sufficiency in the whole country by the year 2030.

A local resident from Thandwe said that the project got very little support from the local people as it did not ensure that this wind turbine project was the people-centric project.

Similarly, a local resident from Ann said that the project must not affect the interests of the local people in implementing it.

Junta's Union Minister Thaung Han said that the 360 MW energy produced from these projects would be used for the local projects which would benefit the local people but currently even the insufficient electric energy being provided to the local people was diverted to the connections of the local army units.

The government led by the then President Thein Sein signed MoU for wind turbine projects with China two times in 2012 and 2016 and they conducted the feasibility study in 2012 for the first time but it was not successful.

China has the installed wind power capacity of nearly 400 GW and it is nearly one third of the total global wind power capacity and China stands as the largest wind power producer in the world.

MYANMAR'S EXPORT OF RICE FALLS 'DUE TO NEW EXPORT EARNING POLICY'

An announcement made by the Myanmar Rice Federation (MRF) said that the rice and broken rice exports in February totalled 191,404 metric tons, a drop of 77,431 metric tons in comparison with the exports in January.

The export of rice and broken rice has reached the record-high level in January this year in the 10-month period since April 2022 but this figure dropped in February though three more companies exported rice and broken rice. This was the lowest figure in the last four months.

The export earnings from rice and broken rice fell by US\$31 million in comparison with January.

The Junta's Directorate of Trade imposed restrictions on export earnings unilaterally and then the traders from Sino-Myanmar border trade said that the export of rice and broken rice through border trade was almost stopped.

The Department of Trade previously exempted export earnings from rice and broken rice through border trade from compulsory exchange of these foreign currencies at the rate set by the Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM) and then the new policy cancelled this exemption.

The traders who have close relations with Association of Traders on the Border said that this new policy hit hard the export of rice and broken rice through the border trade and then the export of these goods fell drastically within one week after the new policy was announced.

The global rice price is reportedly rising in the last week and the local market news reported that the domestic rice market was stable at the high price.

India, one of the largest rice exporters, said that they would continue the policy of increasing taxes on rice export and restrictions on rice export to keep the domestic rice price stable. Despite these measures, rice exports in India reached a record high level in 2022.

According to the statistics released by the Myanmar Rice Federation (MRF), the rice export by Myanmar during the last 11 months from April 2022 to February 2023 in the 2022-23 financial year was 2.09 million tons and earned US\$783 million.

China is the largest buyer of Myanmar rice and broken rice this month. The number of rice exporting countries rose by one more country last month and the number of broken rice exporting countries fell by one less country.

The five largest buyers of broken rice from Myanmar remain unchanged but the descending order in the list was slightly changed. One of the buyers of Myanmar broken rice, Bangladesh, was not included in this five largest buyers' list this month.



Photo: Vinicious Bénédict

PRESIDENT XI VOWS TO BOOST CHINA'S MANUFACTURING

Chinese President Xi Jinping vowed to boost the country's manufacturing capacity and not rely on overseas markets, state media reported Monday.

Speaking at the annual gathering of the rubber-stamp parliament in Beijing on Sunday last week, Xi said China should be able to fend for itself.

"I've always said there are two critical areas for China: one is to safeguard our rice bowl, and the other is to build up a strong manufacturing sector," Xi said, according to the state-run People's Daily.

"As a great nation of 1.4 billion people, we must rely on ourselves," Xi added. "We can't depend on international markets to save us."

The comments, during a meeting with delegates representing China's economically advanced Jiangsu province, belie concerns in Beijing over an increasingly hostile international environment and lagging growth at home.

As China's technology ambitions have been hit with a raft of restrictions by the United States and its Western allies, Beijing has doubled down on the need to build a self-reliant industry and shift away from imports for sectors perceived as vital to national security, such as semiconductors and artificial intelligence.

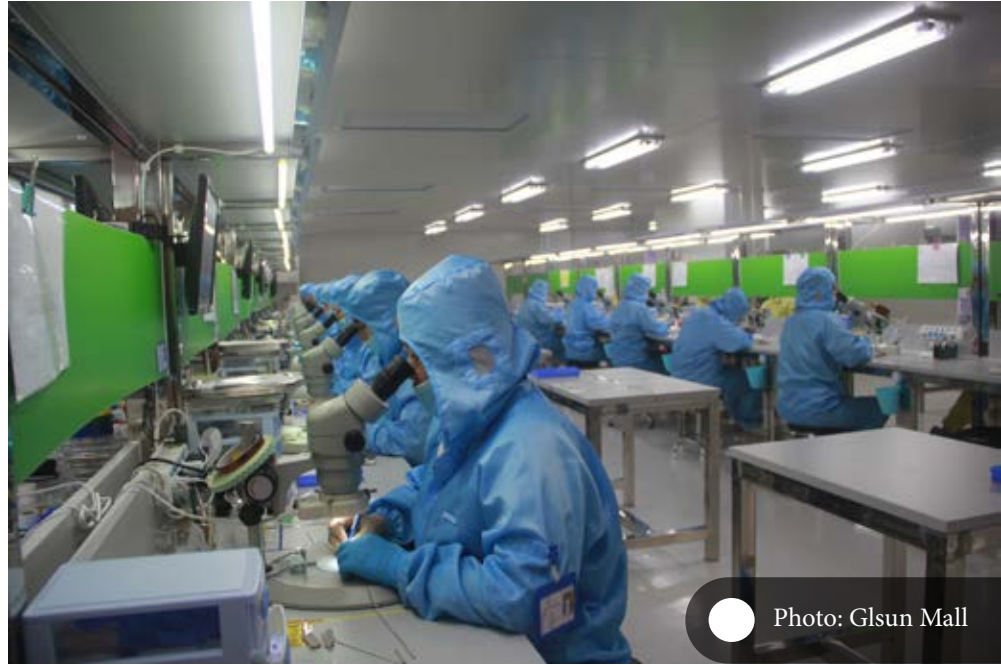


Photo: Glsun Mall

Washington has in recent months tightened sanctions on Chinese chipmakers, citing national security concerns and the ability for the technology to be used by China's military.

The highly choreographed National Party Congress (NPC) kicked off with outgoing Premier Li Keqiang announcing an increase in military spending and modest economic growth.

The 2023 GDP growth goal of "about five percent" fell slightly short of market expectations and comes as Chinese authorities are grappling with how to stem the recent reorientation of global manufacturing chains to countries such as India and Vietnam.

Xi, who will start his third presidential term after securing

a precedent-breaking third stint as party chairman last October, spoke during the Sunday meeting about the need to ensure high-quality manufacturing that is "innovative, coordinated, green, open and shared".

China's state news agency Xinhua published other comments from Xi saying that development in these key areas will propel China forward in its bid to become a "great modern socialist country in all respects".

AFP

Penrose Thitsa

JUNTA CALLS FOR REDUCTION IN LOCAL FUEL CONSUMPTION TO CUT FOREIGN EXCHANGE SPENDING

The Burmese military junta's Vice-Senior General Soe Win has called for a reduction in local fuel consumption to reduce foreign exchange spending, according to junta-controlled media.

Speaking at a coordination meeting on the submission of the Union budget for the 2023-24 financial year, Soe Win urged Union level organizations, ministries, and the Nay Pyi Taw Council to adopt appropriate measures under the financial rules and regulations.

He noted that now is the time when fuel prices across the world are rising, and so local consumption of fuel needs to be reduced as much as possible. He said that fuel consumption will be scrutinized not only for administrative measures but for industries.

He also said that Myanmar is expected to earn more income in the 2023-24 financial year than the previous year.

After the military coup by the military in 2021, local businesses in Myanmar have been crippled for the past two years and have not been able to recover until now. So, the claim of Soe Win is completely impossible, said economic analysts.

An analyst has commented on Soe Win's statement about earning more income, suggesting that the junta is likely to raise tax rates to generate revenue, as well as reduce fuel imports.





MORNING MARKET

Vendors sell food in Pyin Oo Lwin Township, Mandalay.

Photo: AFP

DOCUMENTARIES LOOK BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE MYANMAR CRISIS

Mizzima has been hosting the latest in a series of documentaries by filmmakers MyanmarDocs that look at several key issues of post-coup Myanmar.

This is the fourth in a series of underground documentaries, made by independent Myanmar film makers and journalists, giving an insight into the suffering in Karenni State, the hardship of the Shan people, the lives of underground journalists, and in the last episode investigating the downfall of nature protection since the coup.

[MyanmarDocs.org](https://myanmar-docs.org) gives the viewer a window over places and situations which are rarely accessible. The series gives many ordinary people from around the country a voice, and it gives a feel of what's going on in Myanmar.

Here are brief descriptions of the documentaries that can be found on Mizzima.com.

Journey Through Karenni State (29'50 minutes)

In the months after the coup all over Myanmar fighting broke out between the Myanmar Army and people resisting the military junta. One of the areas with intensive fighting was Kayah State, or Karenni State as the Karenni people like to call it. On May 21, 2021, the first battle between State Administration Council troops and





local fighters took place. It was at Daw Nga Khar village, Demoso Township in Karenni State. When the fighting started, the people from Daw Nga Khar and other nearby villages fled to safer places and one-and-a-half years later they are still on the run. In this documentary film maker Karenni Eye gives the refugees, IDPs and local villagers a voice to tell about their misery.

Underground Journalists (24'15 minutes)

Press freedom ended after the 2021 coup in Myanmar. Those who report the news without permission can, if arrested, be tortured to death. Those who survived the torture suffer long-term imprisonment. It is dangerous to do journalism under the military regime. The army targets journalists because they want to hide what is happening, their atrocities. This documentary tells the story of four Myanmar journalists who put their lives at risk just by doing their jobs. This story by Burma Bear is about how they've survived two years of military rule and what motivates them to keep on doing their dangerous work.

What is Happening in Shan State? (28'00 minutes)

In Shan State there are many different ethnic armed groups: Shan, Pa Oo, Pa Laung, Wa and there're more. Not only Burmese military and Shan armed groups were fighting for decades, the two Shan armed groups are fighting each other

for decades as well. The people in Shan State are forced to facilitate this fighting. With food, money, and with blood, when their sons are forced to join one of the groups. Due to this internal conflict the Shan barely benefited from the economic boom after 2012 and now they suffer from the economic collapse after the generals sized power. Three Shan women give their perspective on the situation in their state, where the danger does not only come from the Tatmadaw, but also from their own people.

Guardians of Nature Under Threat (27'00 minutes)

Myanmar is well-known for its biodiversity. It harbours more than 230 globally endangered species. However, overexploitation of its natural resources degraded the natural environment. Myanmar is also one of the most vulnerable countries to the consequences of climate change. Researchers and civil society organizations have been joining hands on environmental conservation, starting from the community all the way up to the government level. But most of these efforts slowed down or came to a complete halt after the 2021 military coup. And the lawlessness that comes with the new civil war creates opportunities for illegal exploitation of natural resources. To make things worse, that military junta takes all kinds of measures to control Myanmar and foreign NGOs. Not only the people of Myanmar suffer from military rule, but nature does too.





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