

INSIDE A JUNTA MASSACRE

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DEADLOCK

**UN Special Envoy for Myanmar
says she has met NUG,
rebuffing pro-junta perceptions**



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MIZZIMA MAGAZINE

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MISSION IMPOSSIBLE FOR UN ENVOY SEEKING END TO MYANMAR SLAUGHTER

The UN Special Envoy for the Secretary General on Myanmar Ms. Noeleen Heyzer appears to be saddled with Mission Impossible, judging by her own words. As she told the UN Security Council last week: “With both sides intent on prevailing by force, there is no prospect for a negotiated settlement.”

A lot now sits on this 74-year-old Singaporean’s shoulders. Since she was appointed in October 2021, Ms. Heyzer claims to have met a lot of the main players involved in the Myanmar crisis, including a visit to the Myanmar military junta in Naypyitaw, members of the opposition National Unity Government (NUG), ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), and humanitarian organizations, and has trudged through the dusty lanes of the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh.

The last 18 months have been a struggle, dogged by controversy, her Naypyitaw visit depicted as pandering to the generals. A Channel News Asia interview prompted anger

over the suggestion she was proposing a “power-sharing” agreement with the generals. She had to issue a statement saying there was a misunderstanding. And more recently, civil society groups, and women’s groups in particular, have said they need the UN Special Envoy’s ear.

Ms. Heyzer says her mission is to listen and it is clear that to some extent she has to tip-toe amidst the sensitivities that beset such a complicated country as Myanmar and the dire crisis. While UN Special Rapporteur for human rights in Myanmar Tom Andrews often comes out with angry rhetoric against the Myanmar junta, Ms. Heyzer tends to be more measured with her words of condemnation. But last week it was hard for her in her speech to the UN General Assembly to sugar-coat just how dire things are in Myanmar and where the blame lies.

The Myanmar generals and the NUG are at loggerheads. And that puts the UN Special Envoy in a tricky situation.

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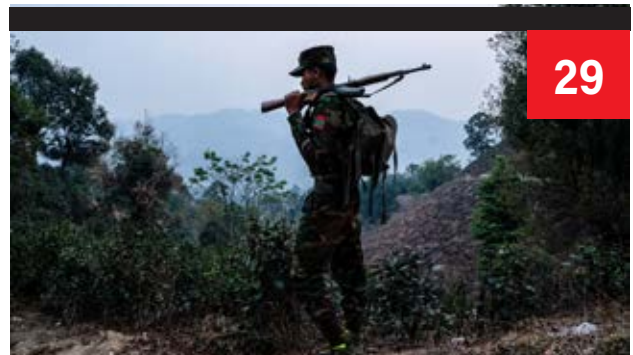
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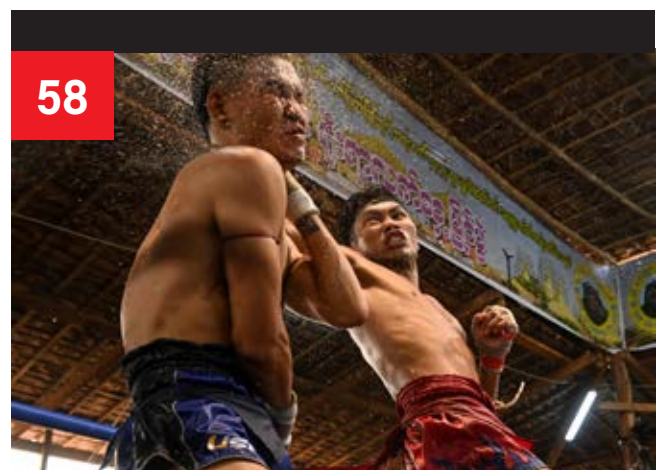
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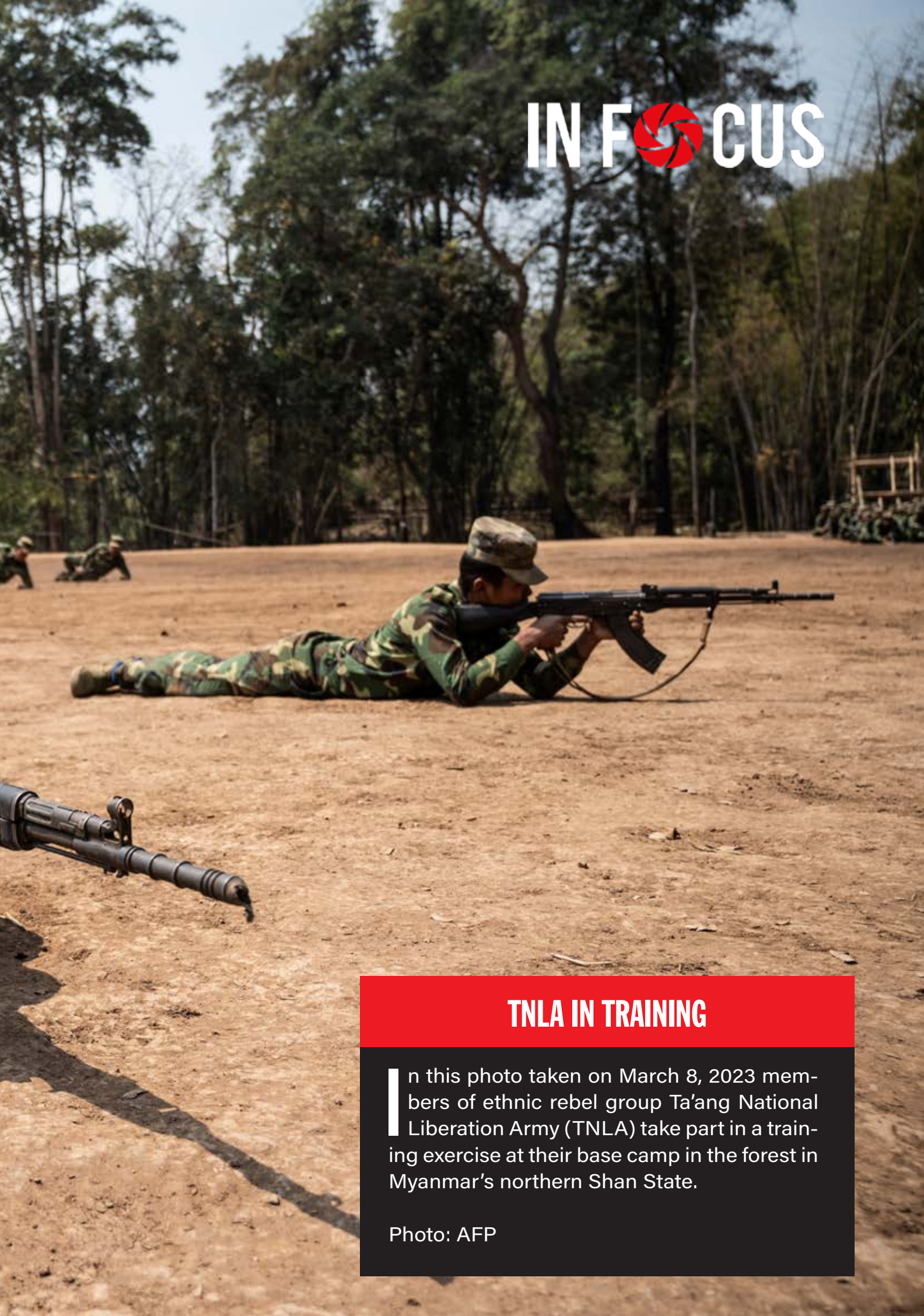
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IN FOCUS



TNLA IN TRAINING

In this photo taken on March 8, 2023 members of ethnic rebel group Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) take part in a training exercise at their base camp in the forest in Myanmar's northern Shan State.

Photo: AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA USE 30 LOCALS AS HUMAN SHIELDS IN MATTARA TOWNSHIP, MANDALAY

Myanmar junta troops have detained 30 people and are using them as human shields in Mandalay Region's Mattara Township.

On 13 March a junta army column torched the villages of Mwe Kuu Tot, Mwe Taline Thar, Mwe Hinthia and Mwe Pathein in the western part of Mattara Township.

A Mwe Taline Thar villager said: "The Army keeps rampaging through the villages. It has been going on for days. Every village they enter has been destroyed and torched. At least three or four houses in each village have been torched."

At around 1:00 p.m. on 13 March, the Unicorn Guerrilla Force and its allies carried out a drone attack on the junta military column as it was returning from torching the villages and killed at least seven junta soldiers.

Following that attack, the junta soldiers detained more than 30 people from various villages in the western part of Mattara Township and, at the time of reporting, were holding them all hostage in Wal Su Village monastery, in Mattara Township.

"The locals were detained without cause. They even beat people and yelled abusive words", said a villager from Mwe Kuu Tot.

The 30 arrested locals have also been used as human shields by the junta military column as it continues entering areas of western Mattara Township, according to the Unicorn Guerrilla Force.

Previously, on 11 and 12 March the same junta army column was bombed from drones and attacked with landmines, according to the Viper Guerrilla Force.

THREE ELDERLY PEOPLE DIE WHEN MYANMAR JUNTA TORCHES SAGAING VILLAGE

Three elderly people died after they were trapped in a fire started by Myanmar junta troops in Htanaungdaw (South) Village in Sagaing Region's Monywa Township, on 15 March.

At 6:00 a.m. on 15 March, 30 junta soldiers from a junta army column stationed at Swan Yay Htet petrol station in Moywa Township's Myayne Village marched on Htanaungdaw (South) Village and fired small arms at the village. At 7:00 a.m. they entered the village and set fire to houses, despite the fact that there had been no fighting in the vicinity of the village.

The actions of the junta soldiers in the village and surrounding areas forced villagers from

Htanaungdaw (South) and nearby villages to flee to safer areas.

The fire in Htanaungdaw (South) killed three older people who were aged about 70 and also destroyed more than 60 homes in the village, according to the Monywa-A Myint Road News and Information Group.

The junta soldiers left Htanaungdaw (South) at around 11:30 p.m. on 15 March and headed to Pyu Village before returning to their base at Swan Yay Htet petrol station with 15 motorcycles stolen from villagers.

MYANMAR'S DOMESTIC EDIBLE PALM OIL PRICE RISING

The edible palm oil reference price set by the Edible Oil Import Storage and Distribution Supervision Committee rose by over 100 kyats from 4,470 kyat per viss (approx. 1.5 Kg) to 4,600 kyat.

With the rise of the official reference price the retail price in the domestic market also rose to prices varying between 7,000 and 8,000 kyat elsewhere in the country.

In Yangon retail market, the edible palm oil price was 6,000 kyat per viss in late February and then it rose up to over 7,000 kyat per viss now.

The Edible Oil Import Storage and Distribution Supervision Committee constituted by the Military Council usually sets the reference price based on the global price for trading in the domestic market but the actual price being traded

in the open market is always nearly twice this reference price.

Similarly other edible oils such as groundnut oil, sesame oil, sunflower oil, vegetable oil, and soya bean oil are also rising in the domestic market along with the price of edible palm oil. The local products sesame oil is being traded at 13,500 kyat per viss and groundnut oil is being traded at 13,000 kyat per viss in the local retail market.

The annual demand of edible oil in Myanmar is about 1.1 million tons of which 900,000 tons is being imported from the foreign countries. The Military Council said they are aiming for self-sufficiency of edible oil in the country, with the plan to produce a surplus to export to foreign countries.

Continued from Editorial

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE FOR UN ENVOY SEEKING END TO MYANMAR SLAUGHTER

While she says she has no immediate plans to go back to Naypyitaw to visit the generals, it is clear she needs to engage more with the Spring Revolution players and the humanitarian groups. In large part this is because the humanitarian aid situation is so dire, and the practicality of delivering aid to the recipients problematic. While she has demonstrated a keen interest in the fate of Rohingya refugees, and visited the Bangladesh camps to hear their stories, controversy swirls around UN plans to repatriate the refugees to Rakhine State while the situation on the ground needs serious improvement.

As the stalemate ensues, Ms. Heyzer would be wise to focus her work on public interest groups such as Civil Society Organisations and particularly the young emerging leaders from Myanmar's

myriad societies and communities as such engagement would help their future and the future of the country as a whole.

Last week, two high-profile Burmese women's group activists invited to the UN by Norway's representative made an open call to meet with the UN Special Envoy to discuss their group's concerns.

The dire situation in Myanmar reinforces that old saying – it is easier to make war than to make peace.

But while the situation looks like Mission Impossible, the UN Special Envoy needs to make every effort to engage with a wide range of key Myanmar players to help bring real positive change to the Golden Land.



DEADLOCK

**UN Special Envoy for Myanmar
says she has met NUG,
rebuffing pro-junta perceptions**

Andrew Landen



UN Special Envoy Ms Noeleen Heyzer, right, on a visit to a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh. Photo: AFP

UN Special Envoy for the Secretary General on Myanmar Ms. Noeleen Heyzer had a stark warning for Myanmar last week.

“With both sides intent on prevailing by force, there is no prospect for a negotiated settlement,” the UN Special Envoy told the United Nations General Assembly on Thursday as part of a lengthy official speech to the UN General Assembly.

Such a statement suggests deadlock. And it is hard to ascertain from her speech that she has made any progress.

But the UN Special Envoy does appear to be trying to clear the fog over the work she has been doing to try to bring peace to the Golden Land.

Ms. Heyzer last week sought to clarify her negotiating position regarding the Myanmar crisis by saying she has met representatives of the National Unity Government (NUG) and other opposition players.

Since her appointment just over a year ago, Ms. Heyzer has run into controversy over the way she has been seeking a resolution of the Myanmar crisis largely because of her visit to the illegal junta in Naypyitaw last year and misunderstanding over a claim that she felt the junta should be involved in “power sharing” as part of the solution.

In a press conference at the United Nations on Thursday last week, Ms. Heyzer sought to correct the view that she was not effectively engaging



Ms Heyzer speaking to the UN General Assembly.
Photo: UNGA

with Myanmar’s opposition as part of her efforts to find a solution to the crisis that has plagued the country since the Myanmar generals executed a coup on 1 February 2021 and arrested many members of the elected government, including Aung San Suu Kyi.

OPPOSITION ENGAGEMENT

In response to questions at the UN from a small group of journalists, Ms. Heyzer sought to clarify her negotiating stance regarding how she, as representative of the UN Secretary General, was trying to find a solution.

“I have to say from the very start of my appointment, I have met or I have had meetings with the NUG leadership and with and in fact I have engaged in a very intense way with many of the local actors as well. It ranged from humanitarian actors on the ground to women’s groups and to ethnic armed organizations,” the UN Special Envoy said.

“So that has been my approach because my approach is always to listen first and indeed

from there to make sure I support a Myanmar-led process based on the will and the needs of the people. The thing is that although I have met with the leadership of the NUG and also with the CRPH, and this is of course the parliamentary groups and the local organizations. Well, some of them have actually indicated publicly that they have met me. But at the same time, just a few weeks ago, I have made an arrangement to meet the foreign minister of the NUG in person and therefore I think there are some misunderstandings,” she said, noting that people are busy and while she understands the misunderstanding these issues need to be clarified.

SUPPORTING IHF

“I am also in touch with the ethnic armed organizations, as I say, and they have actually asked me to support the Inclusive Humanitarian Forum (IHF) and that already you can’t build that kind of trust to have the local organisations coming to you and say can you convene something that is so important and that will make a difference to people’s lives. So, I think all this is just a misunderstanding, that can be easily cleared,” Ms. Heyzer noted.

The UN Special Envoy’s visit to Naypyitaw last year prompted controversy as critics claimed it lent legitimacy to the junta. In addition, there was heated criticism over a Channel News Asia (CNA) interview on 1 February 2022. Ms. Heyzer’s office was forced to issue a statement attempting explain a “misrepresentation” in the interview that prompted an angry response from Myanmar civil society organizations and the wider public. Ms. Heyzer issued a statement on 3 February 2022 saying her office regretted a misunderstanding over a suggestion in the interview – made by the interviewer - that she had used the term “power sharing” with the Myanmar junta and proposed it as a solution in the context of the political crisis in Myanmar. Her office said the envoy had “never proposed power sharing as an option and has consistently advocated for a Myanmar-led process that is reflective of the will and the needs of the people, as reflected in the 2020 elections.”

RETURN TO NAYPYITAW?

When asked in the press conference last week whether she was going back to visit the Myanmar junta, she said she was “not going back unless it is meaningful and I can facilitate a change or see a change in the direction, so that is the way I am thinking.”

Ms Heyzer said her office cannot give up and must support a process that is peaceful, seeking a “movement for a more just and more democratic union of Myanmar for all.”

ASEAN appears to be the cornerstone of the UN’s approach – or at least the UN Special Envoy’s approach - to the Myanmar crisis.

“Let me say that we all agree that ASEAN would take the lead in driving the pathway towards peaceful resolution,” Ms. Heyzer told the press conference. “I have made it very clear what we need of the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus is very concrete steps that need to be implemented with a timeline and there should be greater accountability if that is not done. And when I went to Naypyitaw to speak with a senior general, I stressed some of those concrete action could be, for example, to stop aerial bombings, stop the burning of civilian infrastructure, to put a public moratorium on execution, to release political prisoners, so there are many things that can be done that can actually be tracked.”

BIGGER THAN ASEAN

The UN Special Envoy stressed a “regional approach” was necessary, noting that ASEAN cannot proceed alone.

“Any step towards trying to resolve the crisis has to be done together with the neighbouring countries as well and therefore we need to take a regional approach that is much larger than ASEAN. But whatever approach we take, it has to be rooted in a Myanmar-led process reflective of the will and needs of the Myanmar people and that is extremely important. At the same time, it is not enough just to have a regional approach. We need to have a much stronger coherent, strategic and coordinated international action as well. And I am very pleased that there is today a Security Council resolution together with the UN General Assembly Resolution,” Ms. Heyzer said.

The United Nations and foreign governments have come in for criticism by members of the Myanmar public that it should do more to sanction and penalize the Myanmar military junta. Calls have been shrill for weapons and ammunition for the PDF groups, and for a No-Fly Zone to be implemented over the country to counter Myanmar junta air strikes.

DIFFERENT FROM UKRAINE

None of this is forthcoming or likely, judging by the response of the international community, reflecting a vastly different approach by Western governments who have been funneling billions of dollars of weaponry and aid – the USA \$140 billion alone – into Ukraine in response to the Russian invasion, but lacklustre interest in the Myanmar crisis.

A core issue, as far as Ms. Heyzer is concerned, is the need to funnel humanitarian aid the millions of Myanmar citizens in need as a result of the crisis. Practical problems stand in the way of delivering humanitarian supplies, and concern has been raised that the UN and other international donors may try to supply aid through the military junta, with the dangers of how this might be misused.

“We need to ensure we deliver humanitarian aid using all channels and all ways and many of the actions happens to be through a combination of a mosaic approach using all available channels including those at the local administration in the local ethnic areas and so on,” she said.

“And also many of the people I have worked with, they say, it is extremely difficult to deliver the last mile to the communities and the people in need, and therefore we need to ensure that we are working very closely with local humanitarian organizations who know the field and know how to do the last mile, and therefore what we need to ensure, firstly, wherever we can greater transporter of humanitarian aid, but more importantly more flexibility and support from the donor communities to ensure that these local networks are supported,” Ms. Heyzer added.

DONOR FLEXIBILITY?

The UN Special Envoy’s mention of flexibility from donor communities in part refers to the openness of donors to be flexible when it comes to accounting for the delivery of aid and the financing of aid delivery infrastructure, given the situation of war in the country.

Ms. Heyzer is no newcomer to Myanmar or women’s issues. In 1994, having secured a doctoral degree from Cambridge University in 1994, she was recruited by the UN as the executive director



of the UN Development Fund for Women. When she arrived in New York, she found to her horror that the organisation was bankrupt. She managed to turn it around and made it into a powerhouse working for gender equality in the world. The UN Secretary General, Dr Ban Ki-moon appointed her as the executive secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for the Asia Pacific. During her tenure, Myanmar was struck by Cyclone Nargis in 2008. She and the ASEAN Secretary General, Dr Surin Pitsuwan, are said to have succeeded in delivering much needed assistance to the

people at a time when the then-military junta was stone-walling and making it difficult for foreign aid delivery.

Originally published as a slightly abridged version on Mizzima.com online as: UN Special Envoy for Myanmar says she has met NUG, rebuffing pro-junta perceptions



UN Special Envoy Ms Noeleen Heyzer, left, with Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing in Naypyitaw in 2022. Photo: AFP

UN SPECIAL ENVOY SPEECH TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON THE MYANMAR CRISIS



UN Special Envoy Ms Noeleen Heyzer.
Photo: Supplied

The United Nations Special Envoy of the Secretary General on Myanmar Ms Noeleen Heyzer on Thursday last week offered her assessment of the Myanmar crisis and the way forward to the UN General Assembly.

The following is the full text of her speech:

Remarks by Ms. Noeleen Heyzer,
Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Myanmar General Assembly, 16 March 2023

Madame Vice-President,
Distinguished Delegates,

It is an honour to share my reflection on Myanmar's urgent crisis and my efforts as the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General on Myanmar.

I am grateful that the General Assembly in December 2022 renewed its resolution for my role and continued support to my all-stakeholder approach

in promoting a Myanmar-led process reflective of the will of the people.

In the resolution, Member States called for an immediate end to violence, safe and unimpeded humanitarian access, release of political prisoners and the need to find durable solutions for the Rohingya.

It underlines "the need for a peaceful solution for Myanmar, through an inclusive and peaceful dialogue between all parties, in accordance with the will and interests of the people of Myanmar."

Madame Vice-President,

In its third year, the impact of the military takeover on the country and its people has been devastating.

Violence continues at an alarming scale. On 1 February, the military extended the State

of Emergency and intensified its use of force, including aerial bombing, the burning of civilian structures and other grave human rights violations to maintain its grip on power.

Martial Law has been extended to 47 townships and the regime has revived a 1977 law allowing civilians it deems "loyal" to carry firearms.

In Sagaing Region, the Bamar heartland and once a key recruiting ground for the military, there are recent reports of further atrocities including beheadings and mutilation of People's Defence Forces (PDF) combatants.

Violence continues to escalate in several of the country's ethnic areas. We just received reports that 28 civilians were killed by the military at a monastery in Southern Shan State this weekend.

I also recently met with ethnic Chin leaders who shared that Martial Law is currently in effect in eight out of nine townships in Chin State. They highlighted an increase in airstrikes and indiscriminate shelling targeting civilian areas and displacement sites.

People on the ground have implored, "Please, the people are asking countries not to give military arms that are killing us and intensifying the conflict."

Despite brutal repression, widespread popular resistance to the military

continues by non-violent and violent means, across much of the country.

A generation that benefited from Myanmar's previous opening up, especially the youth, is now disillusioned, facing chronic hardship and many feeling they have no choice but to take up arms to fight military rule.

Heavy fighting has spread to areas previously unaffected by conflict, putting more civilian lives at risk and further complicating humanitarian operations delivering life-saving assistance to the people of Myanmar.

The regime's "four cuts" strategy – which seeks to block access to food, funds, information and recruits – continues to target civilians as collective punishment.

The military's Five-Point Roadmap – its exit strategy – which is supposed to conclude with elections, has been far from a pathway out of the crisis it has created.

Despite stated intentions to deliver relief and build conditions for peace, the military has passed an "Organization Registration Law" and "Political Parties Law" that hinder humanitarian operations and shrink democratic space. The regime has accused resistance forces of violence while the National Unity Government (NUG) continues to point to the military's brutality.

The NUG has also condemned killings by the PDFs warning resistance groups not to perform inhumane acts.

With both sides intent on

prevailing by force, there is no prospect for a negotiated settlement.

Humanitarian needs are rising across Myanmar as a result. As of today, 17.6 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, more than 1.6 million are internally displaced and an estimated 55,000 civilian structures have been destroyed since February 2021.

At least 29 per cent of households are facing moderate or severe food insecurity with conflict areas worst affected.

Myanmar's most vulnerable, including Rohingya and other ethnic minorities, the displaced, and women and children, are most gravely impacted.

The cost in human suffering will multiply and the political, human rights, humanitarian and socioeconomic crisis will intensify if urgent action is not taken.

We must send a strong signal that violence must end and support for democratic voices strengthened to help empower those seeking to chart a way for a peaceful future.

Madame Vice-President,

The Secretary-General and I have made clear that the military's proposed elections in the absence of inclusive political dialogue and conditions that permit citizens to freely exercise their political rights without fear or intimidation risk exacerbating the violence.

There is no public trust in the regime, whose interest is seen as consolidating its control by making a transition from emergency rule to a longer-term

military-backed government.

The arbitrary arrests and detention of democratically elected political leaders, civil society actors and journalists continue unabated.

While severely under-reported, women detainees increasingly face sexual harassment and violence.

Madame Vice-President,

It is critical that the country's future is decided by the people through a Myanmar-led process, reflective of all voices especially women, youth and minorities, to ensure the needs of all communities are addressed.

Sustainable solutions for the Rohingya people must be built into the design of a peaceful, inclusive and democratic Myanmar. Their voices have to be integral to decisions about their own future.

More than five years since the forced mass exodus from Rakhine State, the Rohingya are persecuted and stateless, and continue to suffer extreme hardship, living in difficult conditions and facing tremendous challenges.

Earlier this month, another massive fire ripped through a Rohingya refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, affecting 15,000 people.

The World Food Programme (WFP) has announced it needs to reduce rations for Rohingya refugees this month due to a severe funding shortfall amid competing global crises, issuing an urgent call for 125 million dollars to avoid the cut.

For the 2023 Joint

Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis, the United Nations and partners have appealed for 876 million dollars.

I urge Member States to redouble support to meet this extreme need. Now is not the time for donor fatigue.

Madame Vice-President,

I take this important opportunity to thank the Government of Bangladesh for showing humanity and immense generosity in carrying disproportionate responsibility in hosting over 1 million Rohingya refugees for more than five years.

I also heed Bangladesh's clear message that the current situation is not sustainable. 2022 was a deadly year for thousands of Rohingya who risked their lives in dangerous sea and land journeys. These increased by 360 per cent between 2021 and 2022 in the absence of progress in addressing the root causes of marginalization guided by the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State.

Since my last report to the General Assembly, a humanitarian ceasefire in Rakhine State between the Arakan Army (AA) and Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) has led to some improvements in humanitarian access in Rakhine.

Access to northern Rakhine remains restricted, however, and the situation of the Rohingya remains precarious.

Taking advantage of the ceasefire, the State Administration Council (SAC) is preparing for the return of

Rohingya refugees and IDPs.

I fully support the General Assembly's call that the return and relocation of displaced persons is carried out in accordance with international standards and best practices.

Return cannot be the mere act of closing camps or moving people. It must be a process that achieves durable solutions and guarantees the safety and wellbeing of the population concerned.

Issues such as citizenship, freedom of movement, land ownership and access to education, schools and livelihoods must be properly addressed.

During my visit to Bangladesh last year, the Rohingya made it clear they want to be engaged directly in decision-making. They feel their exclusion from discussions and decisions about their future has entrenched their marginalization.

It is imperative that sustainable solutions for the Rohingya people are integral to Myanmar-led solutions towards a peaceful, democratic and inclusive future.

Madame Vice-President,

In December, the Security Council adopted an unprecedented resolution on Myanmar, which stressed the importance of close coordination between the UN and ASEAN Special Envoys to address the Myanmar crisis.

Three days ago, Indonesia's Foreign Minister and I briefed the Security Council reinforcing this cooperation between ASEAN, the UN

and international partners.

We stressed that the people of Myanmar must see concrete progress in the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus, namely de-escalation of violence and unimpeded humanitarian aid towards alleviating the suffering of all communities.

The Security Council resolution complements the resolution of the General Assembly and is an opportunity to further develop a coherent international response to the crisis, promoting a Myanmar-led process reflective of the will of the people, the delivery of humanitarian assistance without discrimination, respect for human rights, addressing the root causes of the Rohingya crisis, and to work towards ending violence in all forms.

As highlighted by the General Assembly and the Security Council, cooperation with regional organizations such as ASEAN, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the European Union is essential and close coordination with these organizations and their respective Envoys, as called for by this Assembly, constitutes a vital part of my work.

Madame Vice-President,

Despite the grim situation with ongoing challenges, there are clear areas where we can try to make some meaningful progress.

In recent interviews with Rohingya mothers, young women and youth rescued during precarious sea journeys, they all had a single message – "we want a future and education."

Education is a powerful tool to transform lives, avoid a “lost generation” and enable the Rohingya to become leaders and contributors upon their voluntary and sustainable return to Myanmar.

I deeply appreciate my crucial partnership with the OIC and its Special Envoy in our collaboration to seek practical solutions to the Rohingya crisis, including our initial discussions during my recent visit to Jeddah on the possibility of upscaling education for the Rohingya.

Accountability remains essential, and I continue to remain in close contact with the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar and the Independent Investigative Mechanism on Myanmar (IIMM).

Madame Vice-President,

In delivering my mandate, I will continue to focus on reducing the suffering of the people of Myanmar through concrete initiatives and based on continued close engagement with relevant partners and stakeholders, including affected communities.

At the request of Myanmar actors, including key ethnic armed organizations, the NUG and humanitarian civil society organizations, I have supported their efforts to establish and convene an Inclusive Humanitarian Forum (IHF), which aims to open up operational space to deliver humanitarian aid through all available channels.

The Forum could comprise core group of Member

States, notably Myanmar’s neighboring countries and other regional actors, to engage inclusively in seeking a comprehensive assessment of ground realities and identify ways to overcome obstacles for operational actors to more effectively reach those in need.

My discussions on the IHF continue to advance, and the Myanmar stakeholders have established a Joint Secretariat that also includes civil society representatives.

Already, the IHF discussions with local actors have proven to be an important vehicle driving constructive discussions and building greater solidarity and coherence.

I have been working with Indonesia as the new ASEAN Chair. Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi and I are in close cooperation. I have discussed with her the urgency of concrete progress on the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus to contribute to a conducive environment towards the path of national reconciliation.

We have also discussed the possibility of a regional framework to protect the Rohingya and all refugees from Myanmar. I echo the call of the Secretary-General to ASEAN leaders at their November Summit to maintain open borders and provide protection and assistance to refugees from Myanmar, in line with the humanitarian and non-political nature of asylum, so that no refugee is forced to return to unsafe conditions in Myanmar.

I look forward to visiting Jakarta to further advance our collaboration.

Madame Vice-President,

It is important we continue to advance the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda on Myanmar, empowering women and youth as change agents.

We must amplify their voices and utilize the expertise of those on the ground, listening to them to understand their struggles, and ensure women play leading roles in bringing about positive change to their communities and country.

I welcome Member States’ support as I plan to organize a roundtable on Myanmar “Envisioning the Future through Women’s Eyes” ahead of the Security Council Open Debate on WPS later this year, which I hope will be an opportunity to amplify the voices of women leaders on the ground and their important work.

Madame Vice-President,

Despite the tragedies and deep uncertainty in Myanmar, there is unprecedented solidarity that has emerged in the country. People, especially women and youth across communities, are working together to address old divides along ethnic and religious lines.

They are shaping the country’s internal dynamics and politics to reset Myanmar’s democracy, human rights and governance deficit.

I know that this General Assembly will renew its commitment supporting the will of the people, including the Rohingya, to build a peaceful, just and democratic union of Myanmar for all.

Thank you

UN CLOSED-DOOR MEETING EXCLUDES BURMESE WOMEN'S VOICES, SAYS NORWAY UN REP



Permanent Representative of Norway to the UN, Ambassador Mona Juul, with Woman Advocacy Coalition Myanmar, Ms May Sabe Phuy and Women's League of Burma, Ms Naw Hser Hser. Photo: Twitter

Norway's UN representative has expressed concern that Burmese women's voices were not being heard in a UN Security Council closed-door session on Myanmar held on Monday last week.

The Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General on Myanmar, Noeleen Heyzer, reportedly met on Monday with Security Council members, in closed consultations.

According to UN media, Heyzer was going to update the Council on her efforts to support the implementation of resolution 2669 (2022) adopted by the Council last December and in response to the Council's request for an update on the UN support to the implementation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Five-Point Consensus, which calls for an end to violence, engagement of all stakeholders and delivery of humanitarian assistance. In the closed-door session, she

was going to provide an overview of the current situation and brief on her cooperation with ASEAN and engagements with key stakeholders. The Special Envoy was also going to brief on her initiatives to support an inclusive humanitarian access, Rohingya education, women, peace and security, among other salient issues.

The UN announced a "live" online briefing Monday for the media after Heyzer's Council report but the briefing was cancelled with no explanation.

The UN Special Envoy Heyzer offered a public statement on the Myanmar situation on Thursday last week.

Aware that Burmese women are not receiving an adequate voice in international discussions on the Myanmar crisis, following the 2021 military coup, the Permanent Representative of Norway to the UN, Ambassador Mona Juul, provided a platform at the UN

for two Burmese NGO representatives - Woman Advocacy Coalition Myanmar, Ms May Sabe Phuy and Women's League of Burma, Ms Naw Hser Hser – to voice their concerns.

As Ms Juul noted, two years have passed since the military coup in Myanmar and the situation is critical, with more than 17 million people in humanitarian need and ongoing armed clashes.

For women and girls in particular, the coup has reversed a decade of progress. Women human rights defenders have become political targets resulting in harassment, forcible detention, displacement, torture and death. Many women have been forced to flee their country for safety. During Myanmar's democratic transition, women-led civil society organisations used the opening of civic space to grow and establish strong networks. They became key actors in policy development for women and girls.

Despite the significant challenges they now face, these networks and individual women human rights defenders continue to play a critical leadership role in promoting human rights – for all - and in defining the political future for the country.

She said it is absolutely critical to protect women civil society, and to include women in political processes, in order to save the future of Myanmar.

Pointing to the UN

Security Council meeting on Myanmar, Ms Juul told the panel that the closed-door meeting would have “no civil society briefers. That prevents the Council from hearing directly from those most affected. We therefore think it is important that Myanmar women themselves can voice their concerns and recommendations to the UN and its member states.”

Both May Sabe Phuy and Naw Hser Hser expressed concerns to the panel that UN Special Envoy Heyzer had not officially met with the National Unity Government (NUG) and other representatives of the opposition to the military junta.

It should be noted that Heyzer had previously come under fire publicly for meeting with the Myanmar junta and calling for negotiations with the junta that many if not most of Myanmar citizens consider illegitimate.

May Sabe Phuy told the meeting panel session that they cannot just complain and give up because of the existing (diplomacy and negotiation) mechanisms and processes are not working. “If these existing mechanisms are not working of course we have to find a new way to find a solution. Our expectation for the UN Security Council is for them to think outside of the box and not handing Myanmar issues on to ASEAN but trying to help in a way that will produce tangible results and progress.”

As she said, they are not diplomats but are “representing the voice and suffering of the people who are living inside the country, so that is why we will be very strict. We civil society organizations, women’s organizations, we are

unhappy with the position the UN Special Envoy is taking on our situation. We understand that. A lot of people are talking about it is impossible, or it will be more difficult if we would like to remove the military from the entire politics. But we have our own suffering and our own experience.”

May Sabe Phuy said the previous National League for Democracy (NLD) government “they had been really working hard to compromise with the military. But what the military wants is absolute power. Negotiations or compromising with them will not produce any result. That is how we strongly view (the situation).”

“You can give so many reasons to engage with the State Administration Council, it can be because of humanitarian assistance, you have to provide financial resources for the people who are suffering in the country. But all this is seen as engaging with the illegitimate junta.”

“If the UN and the Special envoy, if they are able to meet with the illegitimate junta publicly, why don’t they also meet with the pro-democracy movement, the NUG that the majority of the people of Myanmar recognize as a legitimate government?” May Sabe Phuy asked.

Naw Hser Hser said that “actually we have a lot of pro-democracy actors, ERO, NUG, NUCC and so forth but we did not see the Special Envoy meet them officially or publicly. But for the military junta, she meets officially and publicly, so this raises a lot of questions in our mind as to why she did that and why she did not meet publicly and officially with the

pro-democracy groups that struggle a lot to date. We therefore encourage her to meet with the pro-democracy activists publicly. This is one point.”

She noted that the Burmese conflict had been going on for decades and raised in a lot of international advocacy forums, with war and genocide happening not just since 2021 but over 70 years.

Ethnic groups like the Kachin and Karen have faced a lot of crimes against humanity and genocide but we did not get a chance to report.

When we look at the past and to date, they are the same perpetrator, Naw Hser Hser said.

“We want the Security Council to come forward with a solution for the Burmese and Myanmar people that have suffered and struggled along the way,” she noted, pointing for the need for an embargo including fuel due to the increased air strikes against the people.

May Sabe Phuy told the panel that people on the ground ask to be heard. There have been many calls on the UN at the beginning with us keeping pushing the UN for the people.

She said that the UN role is to provide peace and stability around the world. But tangible action was needed, not just rhetoric.

May Sabe Phuy highlighted two recent massacres by the junta of civilians but the junta’s human rights abuse is not getting much media coverage.

MYANMAR JUNTA HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS SINCE DECEMBER 2022 UN SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION

Many human rights organisations and Myanmar watchers have criticised the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution on Myanmar passed on 21 December 2022 as ineffectual and called for it to be strengthened.

Ahead of the UNSC's 13 March session on Myanmar civil society organisations Progressive Voice has detailed below atrocities committed by the Myanmar junta since the resolution came into force last December.

Increased attacks against civilians

Tensions have escalated in most areas as the Myanmar military continues to commit grave crimes across Myanmar, with an increase in conflict between armed actors as well as collective punishment directed against civilians. The legitimate government of Myanmar, the National Unity Government's (NUG) Ministry of Justice said in a recent report that 116 civilians died in the junta's attacks in January 2023, while at least 37 more people were injured.[9]

Collective punishment has taken the form of deliberate and indiscriminate shelling into villages, the burning and destruction of homes and property, and the torture, execution



Photo: Gayatri Malhotra

and burning alive of villagers. 189 incidents of shelling reportedly resulted in 62 fatalities.[10] In Ngazun Township, Mandalay Region, after resistance groups shot dead a junta-appointed village administrator in Yae Zin village, Myanmar military collectively punished the community by arresting and

executing seven residents on 24 December 2022.

Junta troops have engaged in burning sprees destroying entire villages. In January 2023, Myanmar military burned down nearly 5,100 civilian houses in Sagaing, Magwe, Mandalay and Tanintharyi

regions and Chin, Mon and Karen (Kayin) states, according to an NUG report. The majority of these attacks took place in Sagaing, where around 4,700 civilian homes were torched.

On 14 January 2023, junta troops torched a 129-year-old Catholic church and at least 120 houses in the predominantly Catholic village of Chan Thar in Sagaing Region. This was the fourth arson attack on the village since last year.

Troops have slaughtered civilians in the process. The NUG said that in January alone, 138 junta arson attacks nationwide had burned 23 people to death.[14] While in some cases, the elderly and disabled were unable to flee and thus were burned alive in their homes, in other cases, junta soldiers deliberately hunted down villagers and burned them.

During a six-day raid of Ah Lel Sho village in Khin-U Township, Sagaing Region that began on 28 December 2022, the military junta burned houses and terrorized villagers, killing nine villagers, at least three of whom were tortured and burned to death.

On 6 January 2023, a junta column raided a village in Kyunhla Township, Sagaing Region, killing two villagers and then burning their bodies along with the rest of the village. Three more bodies, also badly burned, were found near Kanbalu Township. Local sources said that the soldiers didn't just chase villagers from their homes—they also pursued them into the nearby forests as

they attempted to flee.

Arbitrary arrests have increasingly been followed by extreme acts of torture and murder. On 23 January 2023, in Tamu Township, Sagaing Region, Myanmar military arrested two men and a 14-year-old boy at a military checkpoint, before beating them to death.

On 4 January 2023, in Natogyi Township, Mandalay Region, junta forces reportedly arrested three villagers, then tortured and killed them while in custody. On 24 and 25 January 2023, in Thabeikkyin Township, Mandalay Region, Myanmar military junta detained and tortured a villager they accused of being a People's Defence Force (PDF) member. They then arrested three more villagers, executing all four.

Junta forces also engaged in a week-long killing spree in Sagaing District that began on 25 February 2023.

Five resistance fighters were dismembered, two of whom were likely beheaded alive. The same troops then murdered 17 locals in Tar Taing village in Sagaing Township on 1 March 2023. Bullet wounds were found in the heads and chests of the slain civilian victims, and their bodies also showed signs of torture. One victim, a resistance leader, was found disemboweled and dismembered, with his head, legs and arms cut off.

As the troops continued to Myinmu Township, 14 villagers, including three females, were taken as human shields,

then killed. The three women were also brutally raped before being stabbed and shot. Three days later, the same troops beheaded two children, aged 12 and 13, whom they abducted as human shields. Another two resistance fighters were beheaded while defending the village.

These acts are in direct contravention of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security and other relevant resolutions, as well as protection of children in armed conflict.

On 17 February 2023, 17 villagers were abducted by the Myanmar military following clashes in Sagaing Region's Kawlin Township. Witnesses said they saw the abductees being beaten on the way to Koe Taung Boet. There were also unconfirmed reports that one of the abductees had been beaten to death with a metal rod and that some of the others had been slashed with knives. As of 23 February, the whereabouts of those 17 villagers is unknown.

In Dawei, Tanintharyi Region, in January 2023, the junta abducted at least nine people, including a 17-year-old girl and other young civilians, accusing them of supporting the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and the NUG. The police also stopped a minibus with 14 passengers and grabbed people suspected of supporting the CDM.

Airstrikes

Since 22 December 2022, the junta has conducted

at least 125 airstrikes, killing 97 people. While Sagaing Region and Chin, Kachin and Karen states were already heavy targets of the military junta's aerial bombardments and strafing, the military has intensified its campaign of airstrikes on both civilian and resistance targets in these areas since early January 2023.

During the first two months of 2023, the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) reported 53 separate airstrikes by the junta's air force, with at least 138 heavy bombs dropped in four townships in Chin State. The air campaign significantly escalated in February following the declaration of martial law and the fall of the junta's key outpost in Thantlang. Over 40 bombs were dropped on Thantlang and surrounding areas in a single day on 16 February 2023.

The Myanmar military also carried out multiple airstrikes on IDP camps in eastern Loikaw Township, Karenni State, and shelled IDP areas in Phekon, Demoso and Pruso townships over a two-week period from 22 January to 3 February 2023, killing two civilians and injuring 13, including two children under the age of 5. In one attack, the Myanmar military dropped two 500-pound bombs around an IDP camp. On 3 February, the Myanmar military's airstrike set fire to an IDP clinic and a teaching shelter. At the time, there were no clashes in the area.

The junta has continued to launch heavy airstrikes in two districts of Karen State. In January alone, the junta carried

out 57 air strikes in Mu Traw and Doooplaya districts. Eleven deaths were reported for airstrikes during the first two weeks of January. Due to the onslaught of attacks in Doooplaya District, a local 45-year-old widow from Kyainseikgyi Township stated, "The Burmese Army's jet fighters and surprise artillery attacks are terrifying. You cannot indicate when and how you will be attacked. I couldn't sleep or eat for almost a week ago of great anxiety. There are children and old people in my family."

On 3 January 2023, four junta aircraft dropped more than 50 bombs and fired more than 20,000 rounds of machine guns on farmlands in Me Wai village tract in Dwe Lo Township in Mu Traw District. A few days later on 7 January, the junta sent seven fighter jets to Me Thu village tract, killing six civilians.

On 12 January 2023, four junta fighter jets conducted air strikes in Lay Wah village, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District. The Baptist church in the village was completely demolished, while two school buildings and the Catholic church sustained damages. Five villagers, including the Roman Catholic priest and the Baptist pastor, were killed, and two others were injured. According to a community member, the school was open that day and all students could have died if they hadn't been dismissed early.

Seven civilians were killed and at least 30 injured in Katha Township, upper Sagaing Region on 18 January 2023 when two Myanmar military jets bombed a large village

of 1,800 households. A bomb landed on one of the houses, and three people in the house were burned alive.[35]

New illegal martial law orders

On 1 February 2023, two years since the attempted coup, the illegitimate military junta extended the state of emergency for another six months. Since 22 February 2023, the junta has illegally imposed new martial law orders in 50 townships in Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, and Mon States, as well as in Yangon and Mandalay Regions. The new orders by the illegal and illegitimate junta declared that all administrative and judicial work in the junta-specified areas must be led by regional military commanders, who can now initiate military tribunals for 23 offences, including discrediting the "state", illegal association, and unlawful possession of a weapon. They are also authorised to hand out maximum punishments such as the death penalty and indefinite imprisonment for these offenses. All of the affected townships are in areas where anti-junta forces have a strong presence. Giving military courts such disproportionate and overbroad power has no precedent in Myanmar.

According to local reports, more than 50 people from Kawkaik Township, Karen State have been arrested since martial law was imposed in February. A resident of Kawkaik stated, "According to martial law, locals are instructed not to leave the house between 7:00 pm and 6:00 am. As soon

as they see people on the street who violate that rule even a little bit, they arrest them. We also heard that detainees were charged in court, were all sentenced to 6-month prison terms. Family members who want to send food to them are turned away.”

Ongoing restrictions

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that 17.6 million people – nearly one third of the population – are in need of humanitarian assistance with 1.6 million people currently internally displaced across Myanmar, though this number is likely conservative.

With surging displacement and ongoing restrictions on the transportation of essential goods, the resources of host communities and those on the move are being rapidly depleted. Nutritious food is becoming increasingly scarce and more unaffordable. The sick continue to have little access to medicine and life-saving treatment.

Meanwhile, OCHA’s report states that the access situation remains “substantially constrained” and that “Heavy fighting, including air-strikes, tight security, access restrictions, and threats against aid workers have continued unabated.”

Medical professionals persistently face arrest and imprisonment under counter terrorism laws. The junta has also been forcing medical facilities in resistance strongholds to

shut down.

In Mahaaungmyay and Chanayethazan townships in Mandalay, five private hospitals were forced by the military junta to close on 27 December 2022.

On 5 January 2023, in Kyainseikgyi Town, Karen State, the Myanmar military occupied the township hospital after forcing dozens of patients to immediately leave the building. Many patients who were forced to leave the affected hospitals lacked access to health care since the remaining public and private hospitals did not have the capacity to admit them.

Ongoing persecution and deprivation of rights of the Rohingya and failure to protect

The voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return of Rohingya refugees remains impossible under the current multiple crises in Myanmar. The Rohingya who remain in Rakhine State face systematic abuses that amount to ongoing atrocity crimes, including apartheid like conditions, persecution, and deprivation of liberty. They are confined to camps and villages without freedom of movement, cut off from access to adequate food, health care, education, and livelihoods.

Moreover, on 29 December 2022, the junta notified IDPs of their intention to shutdown 25 temporary IDP camps near Sittwe in Rakhine State, which amounts to forced evictions. IDPs had to sign pledges to leave and choose between returning home

despite the lack of security guarantees, moving to a place of their own choosing without any support, or resettling in junta-designated areas.

One IDP said that, given the alternatives, most felt compelled to choose to move where the military sent them. The junta is also planning the permanent closure of over 20 IDP camps in and near Myitkyina, Kachin State in 2023. It will reportedly give their inhabitants the same three choices.

UN SAYS HELPED MYANMAR JUNTA OFFICIALS TRAVEL TO BANGLADESH FOR ROHINGYA RETURN TALKS

The United Nations refugee agency helped officials from Myanmar's junta travel to Bangladesh this week for repatriation talks with Rohingya refugees, two UN officials told AFP, despite maintaining that conditions in the country remain unsafe for their return.

Bangladesh is home to around a million Rohingya, most of whom fled neighbouring Myanmar following a 2017 military crackdown, now subject to a UN genocide investigation.

On Wednesday last week a 17-member team led by a senior official in Myanmar's immigration ministry arrived in the border town of Teknaf to interview refugees for potential repatriation to Myanmar.

A UNHCR spokesperson in Myanmar told AFP on Thursday that UNHCR had "facilitated the transport of some officials" from Myanmar to Bangladesh "in support of interaction between the de facto authorities in Myanmar and refugees."



UNHCR

The UN Refugee Agency

The transport had been facilitated by both UNHCR and the World Food Programme in Myanmar, who had provided boats for the junta officials to travel in, a senior UN official in Bangladesh told AFP.

“I can confirm that UNHCR and WFP provided boats to junta officials to come,” the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

This month Johannes van der Klaauw, UNHCR’s representative in Bangladesh, said there was “no prospect for a safe, dignified and sustainable return in the immediate future,” for Rohingya seeking to come back to Myanmar.

UN markings removed

The Rohingya are widely viewed in Myanmar as interlopers from Bangladesh and rights groups say those still in the country are denied access to healthcare and education, and

require permission to travel.

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing, who was head of the armed forces during the 2017 crackdown, has dismissed the Rohingya identity as “imaginary”.

The UNHCR spokesperson said the decision was made “within the framework” of a non-binding memorandum of understanding signed with Myanmar in 2018, aimed at “creating the conditions conducive to the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable repatriation of Rohingya refugees.”

UN agencies were not involved in the discussions that took place in Bangladesh, the spokesperson said.

The spokesperson did not give details on how many boats had been provided, or whether members of the Myanmar military, police or security forces had ridden in the boats.

The UN provided boats for the journey to Bangladesh after a “very firm request” by junta officials, and the UN markings were removed prior to the journey, according to a leaked email from UNHCR’s resident coordinator in Myanmar seen by AFP.

The UNHCR spokesperson did not elaborate on the nature of the “very firm request” from the junta for the boats.

Repatriation plan

The delegation from Myanmar had planned to interview more than 700 Rohingya to assess the suitability of their return to Myanmar, an official from the commission said.

A Myanmar junta spokesman confirmed to AFP the trip was taking place but would not give details.

A repatriation plan agreed by Myanmar and Bangladesh in 2017 has failed to make any significant headway in the years since, partly over concerns the Rohingya would not be safe if they returned.

Progress ground to a complete halt during the coronavirus pandemic and after the military ousted Myanmar’s civilian government in 2021.

AFP

ICR
ee Agency

UNHCR DISPUTES ACCOUNT OF THEIR INVOLVEMENT WITH REFUGEE RETURN

UNHCR statement on Bangladesh, Myanmar bilateral pilot project on Rohingya returns:

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is aware of the visit of a Myanmar delegation to Bangladesh to meet with a group of refugees on a bilateral pilot project between the two countries on possible returns. UNHCR is not involved in these discussions.

UNHCR's position on returns of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar remains unchanged. In UNHCR's assessment, conditions in Myanmar's Rakhine State are currently not conducive to the sustainable return of Rohingya refugees. At the same time, we reiterate that every refugee has a right to return to their home country based on an informed choice, but that no refugee should be forced to do so. Bangladesh has consistently reaffirmed its commitment to voluntary and sustainable repatriation since the onset of the current crisis.

In support of efforts to preserve the right to return, UNHCR considers consultation of and dialogue with Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh by all parties in relation to the conditions in Myanmar's Rakhine State as important to enable refugees to make an informed choice about return and build confidence amongst the community. This is particularly important as many refugees have reiterated that they do hope to go home to Myanmar as soon as conditions allow.

Following the events of August 2017, UNHCR has also consistently encouraged Myanmar to expeditiously verify the previous residence in Myanmar of refugees in Bangladesh, as part of efforts to lift any administrative obstacles to return when the refugees decide to do so.

UNHCR therefore supports efforts that could lead to the verification of all refugees and pave the way for eventual return. This most recently included providing logistical support to members of the Myanmar delegation to cross into Bangladesh for the technical verification process.

UNHCR will continue to work with Bangladesh and Myanmar to ensure that Rohingya refugees maintain the right to return when they choose to do so, based on a fully informed and voluntary decision. UNHCR will also support efforts to create conditions that would be conducive to the sustainable return of Rohingya refugees in Myanmar's Rakhine State.

In Bangladesh, UNHCR will continue to support building the skills and capacities of refugees to facilitate their eventual return and sustainable reintegration in Myanmar. The 2023 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis in Bangladesh was recently launched and UNHCR calls upon the international community's continued robust support for this appeal which is currently 10 per cent funded.

MYANMAR ETHNIC REBEL ALLIANCE ASKS CHINA TO HELP DIFFUSE COUP CRISIS

An alliance of China-backed Myanmar ethnic rebels on Thursday last week called for Beijing's help to diffuse the bloody post-coup crisis that is ravaging the country.

China is a major ally and arms supplier of the internationally-isolated junta and has refused to call the putsch that ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's government two years ago.

Beijing also backs and arms several ethnic rebel groups along its border with Myanmar, analysts say, some of which have clashed repeatedly with the military in the aftermath of the coup.

The Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) groups seven ethnic outfits, who together can call on tens of thousands of well-armed and well-trained fighters, analysts say.

"We welcome and support China's involvement to end domestic conflicts happening in Myanmar," the FPNCC said following the meeting in an autonomous enclave run by the United Wa State Party (UWSP).

With a standing force of around 25,000, the UWSP's forces are one of the world's largest non-state militaries.

The FPNCC statement did not give details on what involvement from Beijing it



Photo: AFP

would welcome.

It would "continue working together with the Chinese government to improve the stability of border areas," it added.

On-off fighting along the border before the coup sent thousands fleeing into China, and analysts say Beijing has recently been pressuring the northern ethnic rebel groups to stay out of the post-coup conflict.

But many FPNCC members have offered shelter and weapons training to the "People's Defence Forces" (PDF) that sprung up across the country to fight back against the coup.

Last year a military airstrike on a concert held by the Kachin Independence Army in northern Kachin state killed around 50 people and wounded

more than 70, the rebels said.

Several projects in Beijing's Belt and Road initiative are slated to run through northern Myanmar and link China's landlocked Yunnan province with the Indian Ocean.

China's special envoy to Myanmar has met junta chief Min Aung Hlaing at least twice since he was appointed in December and has also met ethnic rebel leaders for talks.

Beijing's diplomats are also mediating between Myanmar and Bangladesh for a pilot programme to repatriate Rohingya refugees who fled a 2017 military crackdown now subject to a UN genocide investigation.

Repatriations would start "very soon," Beijing's ambassador to Dhaka, Yao Wen, told reporters on Tuesday.

AFP

REFLECTING ON RUSSIA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MYANMAR JUNTA AT THE BEGINNING OF 2023

Ondrej Soukup

This interview, conducted by Igor Blazevic, is based on Ondrej Soukup's talk about Russia's relationship with Myanmar since the coup and in the context of Russian aggression in Ukraine. In the talk Soukup responded to questions as to what extent Russia is really capable of providing military, diplomatic and economic support to the junta, how much Russian surveillance and propaganda know-how and technology can be useful for Myanmar military and whether Russia is really able to assist the junta with its nuclear ambitions.

Ondrej Soukup is a Czech journalist with Hospodarske Noviny, an economic newspaper, with 25 years of specialisation on Russia, Ukraine and East Europe.

Question: Since the Myanmar coup, Putin's Russia has been ready to sell weapons to the junta and to support it diplomatically. However, Russia has already been fully absorbed for one year in the war of aggression in Ukraine. Is Russia still able and interested to provide support to the junta?

Soukup: In 2021 it looked like the mighty Russian army was able to supply modern weapons to Myanmar to help the junta suppress resistance. Russia looked like a protective, strong and confident older brother in that relationship. After one year



Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing with Russian President Vladimir Putin on a visit to Russia. Photo: AFP

of the war in Ukraine, the balance has shifted.

First, we see that the Russian army is definitely not as mighty as most people were thinking. We see that the Russian military equipment is not as good as they wanted to show. Now Russia needs Myanmar to help it with its war effort. Despite the huge military depots back from Soviet times, Russia is lacking ammunition especially artillery shells. During the summer offensive, they used an enormous amount of these shells. By some estimation, it was up to 20,000 artillery shells a day. One cannot sustain such a waste for a very long even if you have big stocks.

Russia is now searching all around the world to get artillery shells. The West is doing the same because the Ukrainian Army uses the same type of ammunition. There is a worldwide search for these shells and other ammunition.

For example, both sides tried to get the ammunition from Laos. Russia is buying artillery shells from North Korea and probably Iran as well. I wouldn't be surprised if they asked the Myanmar generals if they have some spare artillery shells.

Actually, according to local independent Myanmar media, this is already happening. It has been recently reported that Russian military representatives visited Myanmar to discuss the purchase of ammunition produced by Defense Equipment Manufacturing Factories (DMFs).

Russia's need for ammunition doesn't mean that Russia will not be able to supply some other weapons. Russia does have enough Sukhoi and Yak military training planes. They are able to continue to supply them to Myanmar and to continue training the Myanmar pilots and other military staff. It's not just about selling

one or ten planes. One needs to supply spare parts and provide training. Standard training for military pilots is about six months somewhere in Russia to teach already experienced pilots to use these specific types of planes.

Russians is also sending instructors and technical personnel to Myanmar. After basic training in Russia, when new planes are delivered, specialist instructors are coming to Myanmar to check that everything works well, to make sure that technical staff are also working properly. Usually, they stay from two to six months.

It is a different story with tanks and armoured vehicles. Russians have enough planes and they are producing more. Tanks and armoured vehicles were destroyed in Ukraine in enormous amounts. If the Myanmar regime would like to buy some tanks or other land vehicles, I don't believe that Russia will sell them. If Myanmar would like to have anything that can be used in Ukraine, Russia will not supply it.

Question: Can Russian engagement in Myanmar be of concern for China?

Soukup: There is a sort of coalition of authoritarian regimes nowadays. A sort of natural sympathy. They will not compete with each other and they will help each other, if they can, to squeeze out the influence of the United States or other Western countries. General Russian politics in the South East Asian region is not to anger China. Their perception is, Myanmar belongs to the Chinese sphere of influence and we are not going to do anything

against the interests of Beijing. Russia has much more important problems in Ukraine. They will not get involved in some deep engagement with the Myanmar regime. They simply don't have the resources, time and interest.

Question: Can current-day Russia be a source of investment or technology for the Myanmar junta?

Soukup: In previous times and even sometimes today we hear about investments in Myanmar by some semi-state Russian companies. I don't believe it will ever go through. The thinking in the Kremlin is that the war in Ukraine is going to last. They are preparing everyone including ordinary Russians for a long war of attrition and they expect everybody in Russia to adjust to it.

Even before the war in Ukraine, the level of Russian investments in Myanmar was quite low. I am not aware of any big project actually being materialized. So, I don't think that investment from Russia can help the junta.

However, this doesn't mean that Russia will stop to work with the Myanmar junta. Probably it will be fewer state actors and more private groups with state backing. Typically, it could be some military instructors. The sector of private military contractors is booming in Russia even if that is technically illegal because there is no law about private contractors. I can imagine that Russian private military contractors will work in Myanmar as well.

The same is the case with the IT sector. the Kremlin has for the last eight to nine

years been trying to put the internet under its control. Most of the big social networks like Facebook or Twitter are blocked in Russia. There are a lot of Russian IT companies with huge experience in helping the Russian state with its oppressive activities on the internet.

The same is true with tracking software. There is a law in Russia forbidding criticism of the Russian army. Russian IT companies have developed an efficient system of tracking posts on social networks and identifying people who wrote them.

The Russian IT specialists have also developed an efficient system of face recognition. In Moscow, there are more than 20,000 cameras and it is a reliable surveillance system. For example, there was an anti-Putin demonstration on Saturday. On Monday, a person who participated in this demonstration was arrested on his way to work in the metro because the system recognized him and called the police.

The software was developed by a private company and sold to the Russian state. There is no obstacle for that company to sell it to Myanmar as well. However, I wouldn't overestimate the Russian impact in this regard. China has developed even better software for surveillance, for the blocking of the internet, for face recognition and they are selling it to other countries as well. For example, in Central Asia, China sold such technology to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Both Russia and China can be suppliers for the Myanmar junta.

Question: What about Russian propaganda and disinformation know how?

Soukup: Yes, Putin's Russia has significant know-how about how to influence people by using social media. They have the technology and experience to run hundreds and thousands of accounts on social media and coordinate them in pushing some message.

You have heard about the so-called Troll Factories and how they influenced the American presidential elections which finished with the victory of Donald Trump. That was seven years ago. In the meantime they developed a lot. Back then, it was hundreds of people sitting in one space and writing comments on social networks in a coordinated way. Basically, it was done by hand. Now it is semi-automatic. It is still a human who is writing the initial messages, but then robots are spreading that message via hundreds of accounts through different networks. Real people are now rather working on what the message should be, the mass chain delivery is almost automatic.

What are the messages they are delivering? Basically, the aim is to radicalise and polarise targeted society. They skillfully use already existing divisions in society and just fuel them further. For example, in the United States, this Troll Factory from St. Petersburg was at the same time running Far Right accounts and groups on Facebook as well as Far Left. Or for example, they were posting about the supremacy of the black population in Far Right white groups because they knew that such posts will fuel the anger among Far Right

participants of the group. They do the same in the groups on the other side and keep on fueling mistrust, anger, polarization.

The owner of the company which runs this Troll Factory is the same one who owns a private military organization called Wagner Group, which was founded at the beginning of the war in Donbas, nine years ago. After involvement in Ukraine in 2014, the Wagner group fought in Syria and Libya. Now they are back in Ukraine. They have also been active in the Central African Republic, Sudan and some other African countries.

At least in Libya, Sudan and Central African Republic this mercenary force did not just train local security forces but they also brought some specialists for PR and propaganda to help the regimes that invited them.

The financing of this group is semi-autonomous. They are working with some support from the Russian Ministry of Defense. They are getting all ammunition and weapons from the state. But the rest is rather self-financing. For example, in Syria they got a license from the government to guard some oil fields. In the Central African Republic, they got involved in the diamond trade.

Key people involved in such private security companies are people from the Ministry of Defense and from intelligence agencies, retired officers, and through working for such companies they get financial rewards for serving the Kremlin for 20 years.

Question: Can Russia be

reliable supplier of aviation fuel for Myanmar military if other companies are pushed out through sanctions?

Soukup: Yes, it can. There might be some logistic and production capacity obstacles, because this would need to be delivered through far eastern ports. But in principle, if there is a demand and capability to pay, Russia will be able to supply.

Question: Can Russian Gazprom take over Myanmar offshore gas fields in the Indian Ocean if oil and gas companies from other countries are pushed out by sanctions?

Soukup: No, it cannot. Gazprom has some capacities on its own but Gazprom is still over-dependent on Western equipment and they are now seriously hindered by the Western sanctions. Gazprom is trying to switch to Chinese equipment and technology. However, that will take years and they don't have a spare money at the moment for any big expansion like they were doing 10 -12 years ago. Expansion of Gazprom stopped in the last five to six years and the same is true for other Russian energy companies.

Question: Representatives of Rosatom have visited Myanmar at least twice and there are intensive talks between the Myanmar junta and Russia about nuclear technology. Can Russia help junta-controlled Myanmar become a nuclear power? It has been for long time an ambition of the Myanmar generals to have one "small nice bomb".

Soukup: I do not think so. Russia is quite jealous about the nuclear ambitions of other

states if it is about military programmes. The other question is can Russians build a nuclear reactor in Myanmar. I am skeptical about that as well. First, the cycle of production is really very long, ten years or longer from the beginning of building it to finishing it. The reactors are not somewhere in stock. Even if you would take some reactor's equipment from another project that is already going on, you need to adapt it.

Rosatom is speaking about a Small Modular Reactor they can supply. But the reality is that Rosatom does not have such technology. They put in an exploitation floating nuclear station in Chukotka peninsula in Far East three years ago. But it is basically a ship with nuclear reactors from Russian nuclear icebreakers. To adapt it for use in land nuclear plants is extremely demanding task and realistically we cannot expect that to happen on the horizon of, let say, ten years.

This is also a heavily regulated market. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regulates everything connected with anything radioactive. If one wants to start a new nuclear project, one has to comply with international regulations.

It is also an extremely expensive project. I do not see either Russia or Myanmar having at this moment the stability of the regime stability and resources to sustain such a long-term and demanding project. They might just want to project the illusion of stability and capacity. Making Potemkin villages does not cost a lot and Russians have always been good at that.

Question: The Myanmar junta

would like to revive the tourist industry, but has had little success so far. Do Russians still have money to spend on holidays on exotic tropical beaches?

Soukup: Yes, they do. There is still a well-off middle class in Russia that used to travel to Europe and other places and they would like to continue travelling. They now face bans or visa restrictions to many Western countries so they can look for other destinations. They are probably not more than one percent of the overall population but because Russia has 140 million citizens, it is still significant amount of people. We are primarily talking about people living in the eastern part of Russia. The price of air tickets from Moscow to South East Asia is high. However, there are quite a lot of people from Siberia and the Far East that routinely travel to Thailand and Cambodia. They could go to Myanmar as well.

Question: Is India inclined to support Russia, or will India join the West in the war in Ukraine?

Soukup: I don't see any proof that India is colluding and supporting Russian aggression in Ukraine. India has a pragmatic relationship with Russia. They are buying Russian oil very cheaply, with a big discount. However, they are definitely not supporting the war. They are blaming Russia for starting the war and for the food crisis.

Last year, I spoke with the Indian foreign minister when he was in Europe. He told me, we are not sanctioning anyone, this is simply not India's policy. But we are definitely not happy that Russia has started

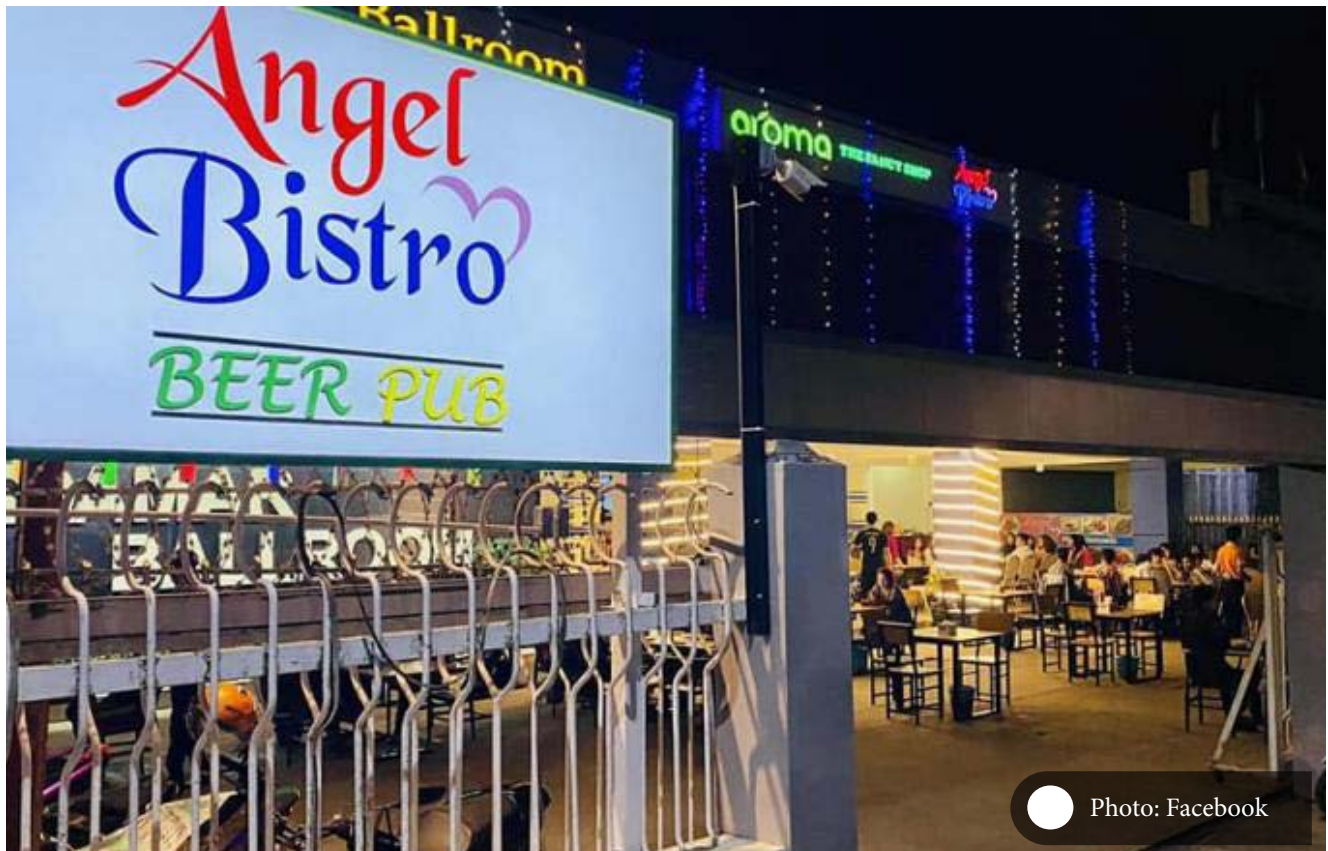
a war and how its army is performing. He also added that it is good for India that they are not buying as many Russian arms as they used, because it is obvious that Russian weapons are not good enough.

Question: Do you have any suggestion for those who are involved in the Spring Revolution, who are in the midst of struggle against a very brutal authoritarian regime?

Soukup: Let me say something optimistic. When the revolution happened in my country, Czechoslovakia, I was an 18-year-old student. I was convinced at that time that there would be no change of the regime for at least four years. I could not imagine that the Communist regime would collapse. Even Václav Havel, the famous dissident who later become the president of a free country, was convinced that it would take two to three years. Regimes look strong when they are still in power and when they apply brutality, however, once they fall, their weaknesses become obvious. I will also add that the current conflict in Ukraine will have consequences for a Myanmar. It will definitely change the balance of power. War in Ukraine is changing not only how Western states will behave, it is also changing how Western companies think. It is not going to be business as usual anymore.

Ondrej Soukup is a Czech journalist with Hospodarske Noviny, an economic newspaper, with 25 years of specialization on Russia, Ukraine and East Europe. Igor Blazevic is a senior adviser at the Prague Civil Society Centre. Between 2011 and 2016 he worked in Myanmar as the head lecturer of the Educational Initiatives Program.

BURMA CAMPAIGN UK UPDATES ITS MYANMAR BOYCOTT LIST



Burma Campaign UK has updated its Boycott List of Myanmar military-owned companies and brands. According to Burma Campaign UK the Boycott List names the products and brands of the vast business empire of the Myanmar military, enabling individuals, companies, organisations and governments to avoid purchasing goods and services from military companies.

Five new listings have been added: The Angel Bistro (Patheingyi), NayPyi Daw Wholesale, Five Star Compound (Yangon), Five Star Port, Thateka Wharf (Yangon), and Gandamar Wholesale. These are not new military companies or brands, most are part of existing companies and brands on the list. They are being added to ensure the Boycott List is as comprehensive as possible.

One entry has been removed. The cargo vessel Yaan Byea has been sold by the military-owned Five Star shipping line.

Military-owned and controlled companies are an important source of revenue for the Burmese military. Buying goods and services from the military increases their revenue and this revenue is used to fund their operations, building their military capacity and paying for the human rights violations they commit.

"The Boycott List enables people in Burma to avoid funding the military, and should also be used by embassies, companies and UN agencies to make sure they are not funding human rights violations," said Mark Farmaner, Director of Burma Campaign UK.

"All embassies and aid donors in Burma should have policies not to buy goods and services from military companies, and that local and international NGOs cannot use their funds to purchase goods and services from military companies", he added.

The updated Boycott List is available here: <https://burmacampaign.org.uk/media/The-Boycott-List.pdf>

JUNTA SOLDIERS MASSACRE 30 UNARMED PEOPLE IN SHAN STATE'S PIN LAUNG MONASTERY



PNDF-KK

Aerial view of area where the massacre took place. Photo: Supplied

Junta soldiers massacred at least 28 people and monks at a monastery in southern Shan State's Nam Nein Village in Pin Laung Township, on 11 March at about 4:00 p.m.

Initially, Nam Nein Village was attacked by fighter jets and hit with an artillery bombardment before junta soldiers entered the village and killed 30 people, including three monks, who were sheltering in the monastery, according to the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF).

According to an official from the KNDF, scouts from local resistance forces witnessed the massacre, "but they were unable to enter the monastery and help people due to the overwhelming number of Military Council forces."

KNDF forces were only able to enter Nam Nein Village on 12 March. Once there, they made a record of the massacre and collected evidence.

According to reports, 30 people including monks were sheltering at the monastery, but only 28 bodies have so far been found. Three of the bodies were monks from the monastery.

"The Military Council shot and killed 30

people who were taking shelter in the monastery. We have found bodies and are still searching for more. We believe that the soldiers did this to create racial hatred among the people", said the KNDF official.

The KNDF has removed the bodies from the area and said that it will help the grieving relatives of the victims to hold funerals in a secure location.

The National Unity Government (NUG) will arrange for investigations and forensic tests to be carried out to establish further details of the attack.

The KNDF also said it would take action against the junta soldiers responsible for the massacre.

Junta troops were still stationed in the eastern part of Nam Nein Village at the time of reporting.

According to the NUG, the junta has committed more than 30 mass killings in Myanmar since the February 2021 coup.

MYANMAR PDFS AND JUNTA TRADE BLAME FOR MONASTERY KILLINGS

Myanmar's junta and anti-coup fighters traded accusations last week over the killing of around 30 people who were sheltering in a monastery.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since a coup two years ago, with the military fighting dozens of People's Defence Forces (PDFs) across much of the country.

Local villagers and media have reported killing and burning sprees by junta forces in many parts of the country as they struggle to crush opposition to the coup that ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's government.

Two rebel groups operating around Shan state - the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF) and the Pa-O National Defence Force - said soldiers entered Nam Nein village on Saturday.

After ordering civilians sheltering in a monastery to come out, the soldiers shot dead 33 people, including three Buddhist monks, the KNDF said.

Junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun confirmed there had been clashes in Nam Nein village on Saturday and some anti-coup fighters had been killed.

He also confirmed that some civilians had died in the village, but blamed their deaths

on the local PDF fighters.

AFP has not been able to independently verify those involved.

Pictures posted on Facebook by the KNDF showed a bloody aftermath of the incident, with bodies on the ground, including some who appeared to be wearing the saffron robes of the monkhood.

The Pa-O National Defence Force said junta troops had killed 22 civilians including three Buddhist monks.

Its members had found seven other dead bodies but were working to confirm who they were, it added.

AFP on Monday also obtained video from the Karenni Revolution Union (KRU), another anti-junta group operating in the area.

The video showed around a dozen bodies lying in pools of blood on the ground, near a wall with what appeared to be bullet holes in it. Three of the dead are in saffron robes.

'Shot in the head'

Junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun did not confirm how many civilians had died in Nam Nein village.

He said reports that the military had killed civilians were to create "illusions

between local people and the Tatmadaw", using the word Myanmar's military refers to itself.

Another series of pictures purportedly taken in the same village were released by a prominent pro-military Telegram channel.

According to AFP digital verification reporters, landmarks seen in the images matched a satellite image of Nam Nein village.

The pictures from the pro-military Telegram channel showed several bodies on the floor, and the account said 24 "PDFs had been shot in the head".

One picture from the pro-military Telegram account showed three bodies slumped in a corner holding what appeared to be homemade rifles - differing from the KRU video that showed the same bodies, with no rifles visible.

"Disciplining unruly Kayah PDFs," the text on the pro-military Telegram account read.

Kayah state borders Shan state, and has seen regular clashes between the military and anti-coup fighters, including the KNDF.

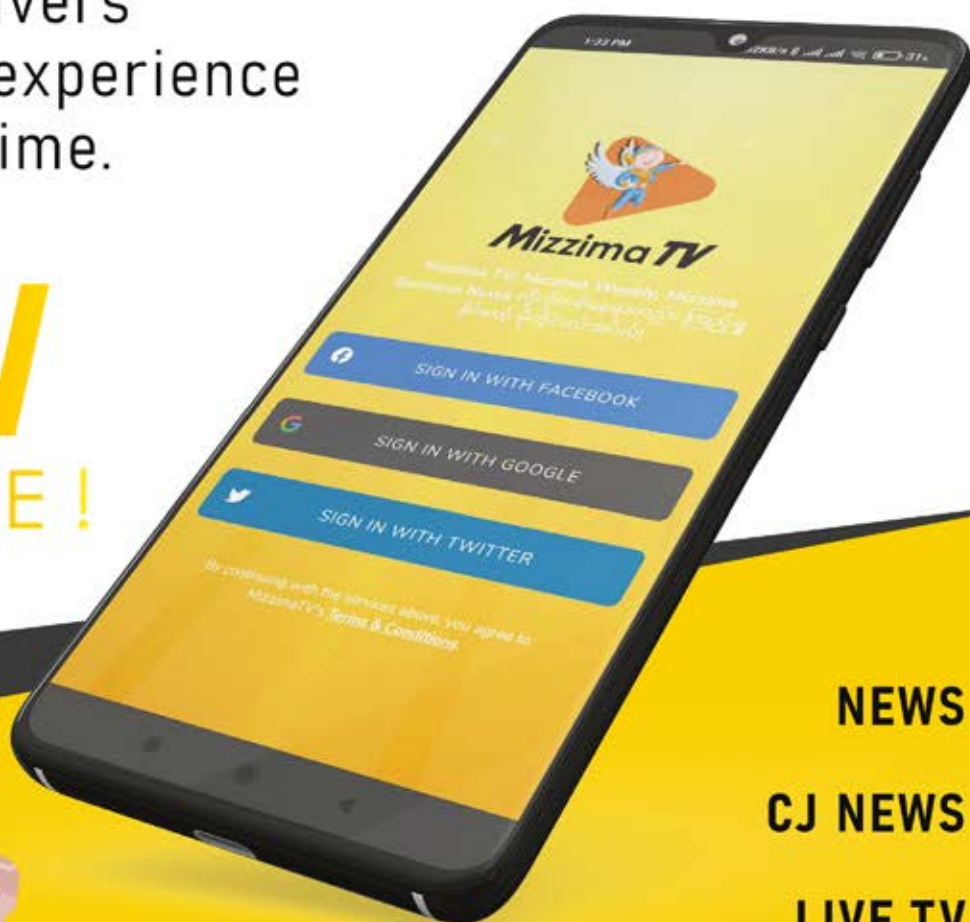
AFP

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NUG GIVES DETAILS OF MYANMAR JUNTA MASSACRE OF CIVILIANS IN NAM NEIN VILLAGE

The National Unity Government (NUG) held a press conference to present forensic evidence showing what happened when at least 22 people were massacred by the Myanmar junta military at the Nam Nein Village monastery in Pinlaung Township on 11 March

According to evidence gathered by the NUG a column of soldiers from the junta army Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 518 and about 50 fighters from the junta-aligned Pa-O National Organisation/Pa-O National Army (PNO/PNA) set up camp on Dragon Pagoda Hill in Shan State south's Pinlaung Township on 9 and 10 March.

As the junta forces were setting up camp, local defence forces advised villagers in the surrounding villages to flee. Most did, but a group of villagers and monks told the defence forces that they would remain in Nam Nein Village to protect the village.

On the evening of 10 March, the junta troops fired into Nam Nein Village, before entering it at 5:30 a.m. on the morning of 11 March.

To establish what happened next the NUG had to investigate the scene of the massacre, the monastery at Nam Nein Village, on the evening of 11 March after the junta soldiers had left. Helping them to carry out the investigations



were Dr Ye Zaw a Karenni medical examiner and members of the NUG-controlled Karenni Police Force.

22 bodies were found at the monastery, including three monks and a woman. The victims were from 30 to 60 years of age.

Many of the bodies showed evidence of torture prior to them being killed, these included a broken leg, burns and wounds from cigarettes and trauma from blunt and sharp objects.

The people were then shot in two groups at very short range. This was proved because the bullets had passed straight through the bodies and lodged in the monastery wall, the smell of gunpowder on the gunshot wounds and gunpowder burns on bodies.

Some of the victims had been shot by a gun put into their mouths. Other victims had

obviously been gravely injured in the first hail of bullets and were either bayoneted or shot as they desperately tried to crawl away.

It is clear that the junta soldiers went round all the victims making sure they were dead shooting, bayonetting or beating to death those they thought were not yet dead.

The villagers were obviously the victims of a frenzied attack as all the corpses had at least three bullet wounds.

The bodies found at the monastery did not account for all of the 33 missing villagers. Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF) fighters, who were the first people to enter Nam Nein Village after the junta forces left, also flew a drone over the junta camp on Dragon Pagoda Hill. From the drone they saw that there were a further seven bodies in the camp. Unfortunately, they could not

establish if these were some of the missing villagers or junta soldiers.

As of the time of writing the fate of the missing eleven villagers is unknown. According to the NUG they may have been already killed or are being held by the junta, possibly to be used as hostages or human shields.

On the evening of 11 March, junta Telegram channels put up pictures of the slain villagers with eight air rifles placed on their bodies. The channels and a Myanmar junta press conference claimed that the villagers were Karenni people's defence force (PDF) fighters who had been shot by junta soldiers at about 5:00 p.m.

According to the NUG, the time stamps on the junta Telegram photos said they had been taken at 8:50am and as the blood on the corpses was still wet they had not long been killed. By the time the KNDF found the corpses late in the afternoon all the blood had dried.

Most Pa-O people are devout Buddhists, whereas many Karenni people are Christian. According to the NUG, the junta is using the incident to try to set ethnic Pa-O people against ethnic Karenni people by implying that the Karenni PDF fighters killed the Buddhist monks.

The NUG also said that the junta was claiming the villagers were Karenni fighters to destroy the image and reputation of the KNDF and other Karenni defence forces.

The NUG was unable to establish whether any of the Pa-O PNO/PNA fighters, who helped the junta soldiers set up

the Dragon Pagoda Hill camp, were involved in the massacre.

But, following the incident, the PNO put out a statement condemning the KNDF and its allies for committing the massacre and killing ethnic Pa-O people and Buddhist monks, according to Spring Revolution News.

Khun Myint Tun the chairman of the NUG-aligned Pa-O National Liberation Organisation (PNLO) said that the junta had been abusing Pa-O people and getting them to kill each other. He explained that after the PNO political party aligned with the junta, the junta forced its armed wing, the PNA to fight under the command of the junta army.

Bo Bo, a representative of the NUG's Karenni Police Force said that the Pa-O fighters who were accompanying LIB 215 had not known that they were going to attack villages when they set off. Apparently, they were told that they would be providing security for a temple festival.

Khun Myint Tun called on Pa-O people to stop fighting each other and asked them to "keep the spirit of family and brotherhood."

Dr Ye Zaw who inspected the bodies at the massacre site said such things were very hard for her to do as a doctor. She advised that junta soldiers "are psychotic killers," and warned everyone to "please run away" if junta troops come to their villages so such incidents do not happen again.

The NUG has also warned "all civilians, particularly the elderly, women, children, and the disabled, to remain

vigilant and evacuate prior to attacks."

The investigation into what happened at Nam Nein Village is part of an NUG drive to compile information about all the crimes committed by the Myanmar military, including forwarding witnesses and material evidence to international prosecution organizations.

The NUG is also calling on the international community to provide vital communication technology, equipment, and early warning systems. It is also calling for the imposition of sanctions on the Myanmar military and the associates who supply jet fuel, weapons, dual-purpose technology, and other military equipment to the Myanmar army.

It also wants international legal bodies and the International Criminal Court to expand their current investigations to encompass all crimes committed in Myanmar in order to hold perpetrators to account. The NUG also urges governments to increase pressure on the Myanmar junta by establishing universal jurisdiction in order to try cases of crimes against humanity perpetrated by them.

According to the NUG, it has so far gathered evidence that the junta has massacred a total of 766 civilians in 64 mass killings of five or more innocent civilians between July 2021 and March 13, 2023. Those killed included 482 males and 78 females, with the remaining 206 dead bodies not being able to be classified by gender. Among the 559 unclassified dead bodies were 42 elders over the age of sixty and 62 children under the age of eighteen.

MYANMAR JUNTA PAID MILLIONS OF DOLLARS TO EUROPEAN FIRMS FOR DAM CONSULTATIONS



Yeywa Dam in Myanmar.
Photo: Supplied

Two European engineering corporations have been paid millions consulting for the Myanmar military junta on harmful hydropower projects, Justice For Myanmar has revealed through an analysis of leaked tax filings, some of which were provided by Distributed Denial of Secrets.

The Swiss arm of the Swedish publicly listed company AFRY AB earned US\$4.68 million in service fees for consulting work on the Upper Yeywa and Middle Paunglaung Hydropower Projects in Myanmar from February 2021 to September 2022.

The Myanmar branch of the Austrian-based ILF Group earned US\$1.1 million in consulting fees from the junta from February 2021 to April 2022. ILF Group's local branch is working on another dam scheme in Myanmar, the Tha Htay Hydropower Project.

Both companies are paid by a department of Myanmar's electricity ministry which is illegally controlled by the military junta. They are advising the junta under tenders awarded in 2020 by the democratically-elected government, preceding the military's brutal coup attempt.

AFRY did not respond to specific questions from Justice For Myanmar regarding the current status of their operations in Myanmar, but confirmed they have projects in the country.

ILF Group responded, "our activities were discontinued some time ago, and most recently focused on dam stabilization and slope stabilization for spillway purposes." ILF Group did not disclose the date their activities were discontinued.

Both companies remain registered on Myanmar's corporate registry.

According to Justice for

Myanmar the illegitimate military junta is building dams while attempting to crush freedom of expression, assembly, and association. Since the military's coup attempt, the junta has created a state of terror, committing deliberate killings, arbitrary arrests, indiscriminate airstrikes and shelling, rape and torture. The junta has killed more than 3,100 people, and arbitrarily arrested over 20,000.

The Upper Yeywa dam is a 280MW hydropower project on the Namtu River, which is also known as the Myitnge River. It was conceived under the former military dictatorship in Myanmar in 2008, and has been opposed by local communities because of its devastating social and environmental impacts, lack of transparency, threat to ancestral lands and fuelling of conflict.

In 2020, the Shan Human Rights Foundation documented grave human rights violations by the Myanmar military near the Upper Yeywa project, including an extrajudicial killing and torture. The group called on foreign companies to withdraw from the dam project or risk complicity in the Myanmar military's atrocities.

In December 2022 a local community network, the Namtu River Protectors, warned that more than 40,000 people living in villages near the dam could be impacted by flooding.

Following the military coup attempt, communities have courageously continued to protest the Upper Yeywa Dam, despite grave risks, and a group

of workers from the dam project joined the Civil Disobedience Movement against the junta.

On the 2022 International Day of Action for Rivers, communities throughout Shan State protested against the junta's dam projects, including Upper Yeywa.

The Tha Htay Chaung dam is a 110MW hydropower project in Thandwe Township, Rakhine State. In 2013, a coalition of Rakhine civil society and political parties demanded a halt to the dam, along with other infrastructure developments in the state, until Myanmar has a federal democracy which would ensure ethnic people have control over the management of their resources.

The Middle Paunglaung dam is a 152MW hydropower project on the Paunglaung River, near Naypyidaw. The dam threatens villagers with forced displacement, according to researchers.

Justice For Myanmar calls on AFRY and all other companies to responsibly suspend any remaining work on hydropower projects in Myanmar until there is federal democracy.

In the meantime, Justice For Myanmar calls for AFRY, ILF and all other involved companies to disclose their human rights due diligence and justify their reasoning and decision-making to advise on hydropower projects in Myanmar, and to remediate damage already incurred in accordance with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights

and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises.

Justice For Myanmar spokesperson Yadanar Maung says: "It is deplorable that AFRY and ILF Group have been collaborating with the Myanmar military junta, supporting socially and environmentally destructive dams while their business partner wages a campaign of terror against the people of Myanmar.

"AFRY and ILF Group have disregarded the voices of local communities and their international human rights responsibilities by carrying out business as usual with war criminals.

"These dams displace communities, destroy livelihoods and harm Myanmar's rivers, while emboldening an illegal military junta attempting to use infrastructure to gain control of territory.

"We call on AFRY to stop any remaining work for the military junta and for AFRY and ILF to remediate damage already incurred in accordance with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises.

"We urge AFRY's shareholders to take concrete action urgently to ensure the company fulfils its human rights responsibilities, or to divest."

KAREN RIVER'S WATCH STATEMENT ON INTERNATIONAL RIVERS' DAY



Photo: Karen News

Karen River's Watch issued the following statement to mark International Rivers' Day on 14 March:

Today, on the International Day of Action for Rivers and Against Dams, we celebrate the healthy rivers that play a vital role in our lives, and call on governments, social organizations, and people around the world to stand

united in protecting our rivers.

Rivers provide water for agriculture, drinking, and food production and they provide essential ecosystem services for humanity. They are also important for the protection of biodiversity and survival of countless trees, flora, and fauna species. However, living rivers are facing threats due to the building of dams and extraction

of water and natural resources. In particular, large-scale hydro-power projects built on rivers in Myanmar are having negative effects on the environment and people in river basins.

Large-scale development projects in Myanmar are ignoring the rights of Indigenous and local peoples; their participation rights and rights to their lands. Their rights are

not recognised by the centralized system of governance in Myanmar. During the two years since the military coup, environmental damage has increased in Myanmar's ethnic areas, while



civic spaces and mechanisms for taking urgent action have broken down.

After the coup, the State Administration Council (SAC) leader announced the resumption of the Hatgyi dam project on the Salween river in Karen state. Military conflicts have occurred at the proposed Hatgyi Dam site since 2014. Gold mining in rivers, and river sand

extraction activities have poisoned the waters and impacted local communities and the environment along the river. Along with militarized development, local people are also losing their livelihoods, homes, and lives due to the military's air and ground attacks and many are hiding in forests. Humanitarian aid is urgently needed.

We, Karen Rivers Watch, Karen indigenous people, and Karen civil society partner organizations call upon international governments, UN agencies, investors, and individuals to preserve our healthy rivers and their ecosystems, and halt all large-scale hydropower projects on Myanmar's rivers, which have significant social and environmental impacts. This is especially important at a time when climate change already contributes greatly to environmental degradation.

Today, on the International Day of Action for Rivers and Against Dams, we celebrate the beauty and power of living rivers and renew our commitments to protect them for all people and the planet. We make the following demands:

The Karen Nation Union must:

Oppose all large-scale development and resource extraction projects that confiscate lands, destroy forests and threaten local livelihoods.

Implement their existing environmental policies and protect rivers, forests resources, endangered species and valuable resources.

Take action to prevent large business interests profiteering from Kawthoolei's natural resources.

Resist the military dictatorship, which is perpetuating the centralized system which exploits the resources of ethnic groups, and instead encourage and support local management systems.

The National Unity Consultative Council must:

Begin implementing policies to develop a federal resource management system that respects the rights of indigenous peoples and ethnic nationalities.

Blacklist companies and entrepreneurs who invest in or implement natural resources extraction projects which financially support the military.

Cooperate with civil society organizations to advocate to the international community.

International organizations, donors, and UN agencies must:

Terminate all loan programs to companies attempting to build Mega-dam projects that will damage people's livelihoods and the environment.

Provide cross-border humanitarian aid to those affected by the ongoing conflicts in Burma through ethnics existing infrastructures.

CHINA LIFTS SWEEPING VISA CURBS ON FOREIGNERS POST-ZERO COVID

China has started issuing a range of visas to foreigners as of Wednesday last week, according to the country's foreign ministry, in a major easing of travel restrictions in place since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The move marks the latest step towards reopening China to the outside world, as Beijing breaks with the strict zero-Covid strategy that defined its pandemic response until a few months ago.

In addition to new visas being reviewed and approved, those issued before March 28, 2020 that remain valid will once again allow entry to China, said a notice posted Tuesday on a social media account affiliated with the foreign ministry's consular affairs bureau.

Similar notices appeared on the websites of several overseas Chinese missions, including its embassies in the United States and France.

The updated policy will also allow for the resumption of visa-free travel for those arriving on cruise ships to Shanghai as well as for certain tourist groups from Hong Kong, Macau and countries within the ASEAN regional grouping, the notice said.

The move would "further facilitate the exchange of Chinese and foreign personnel", it added.

China received 65.7 million international visitors in 2019, according to data from the UN World Tourism Organization, before sealing itself off from the rest of the world during the pandemic.

While most countries started fully reopening their economies and welcoming international travellers earlier, China only began emerging from its strict Covid-19 containment strategy in late 2022, after rare demonstrations against President Xi Jinping's signature policy broke out across the country.

Those protests in late November expanded into calls for more political freedoms, with some even calling for Xi to resign, the most widespread opposition to communist rule since the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising.

Abrupt reversal

In early December, Chinese authorities effectively ended the regime of mass testing, lockdowns and long quarantines -- but the abrupt reversal led to a spike in Covid cases.

Beijing announced in late December that inbound travellers to the country would no longer need to quarantine from 8 January, but kept in place visa restrictions on foreigners.

At the time, Beijing said

it would "continue to adjust its visa policy for foreigners visiting China in a scientific and dynamic manner in accordance with... the epidemic situation".

It also then resumed issuing Chinese passports for "tourism" or "overseas visits of



friends”.

With cases surging in China around the New Year, several countries -- notably Japan and South Korea -- reimposed restrictions on Chinese visitors, provoking a tit-for-tat response from Beijing.

As cases waned in China, both sides subsequently eased those restrictions.

The announcement that China will resume issuing visas

to foreigners comes on the heels of an important session of the country's rubber-stamp parliament, which saw Xi confirmed to a third term as president and his close ally Li Qiang named premier.

Li on Monday admitted that achieving the country's economic growth target of “around five percent” would be “no easy task”.

China posted just three

percent growth last year, missing its stated target of around 5.5 percent by a wide margin as the economy strained under the twin impact of strict Covid policies and a property crisis.

AFP



Foreign passengers arrive in China.
Photo: AFP

'ONE CHINA': BEIJING'S DIPLOMATIC PUSH TO ISOLATE TAIWAN

Honduras has decided to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China, describing it as an economic necessity.

If completed, that means Taiwan would be recognised by just 13 nations, marking the latest victory in Beijing's long-running campaign to isolate the island on the world stage.

Why does recognition matter to Beijing?

At the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, Mao Zedong's communist forces successfully pushed out Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists, who relocated to Taiwan.

The island has been self-ruled since, but

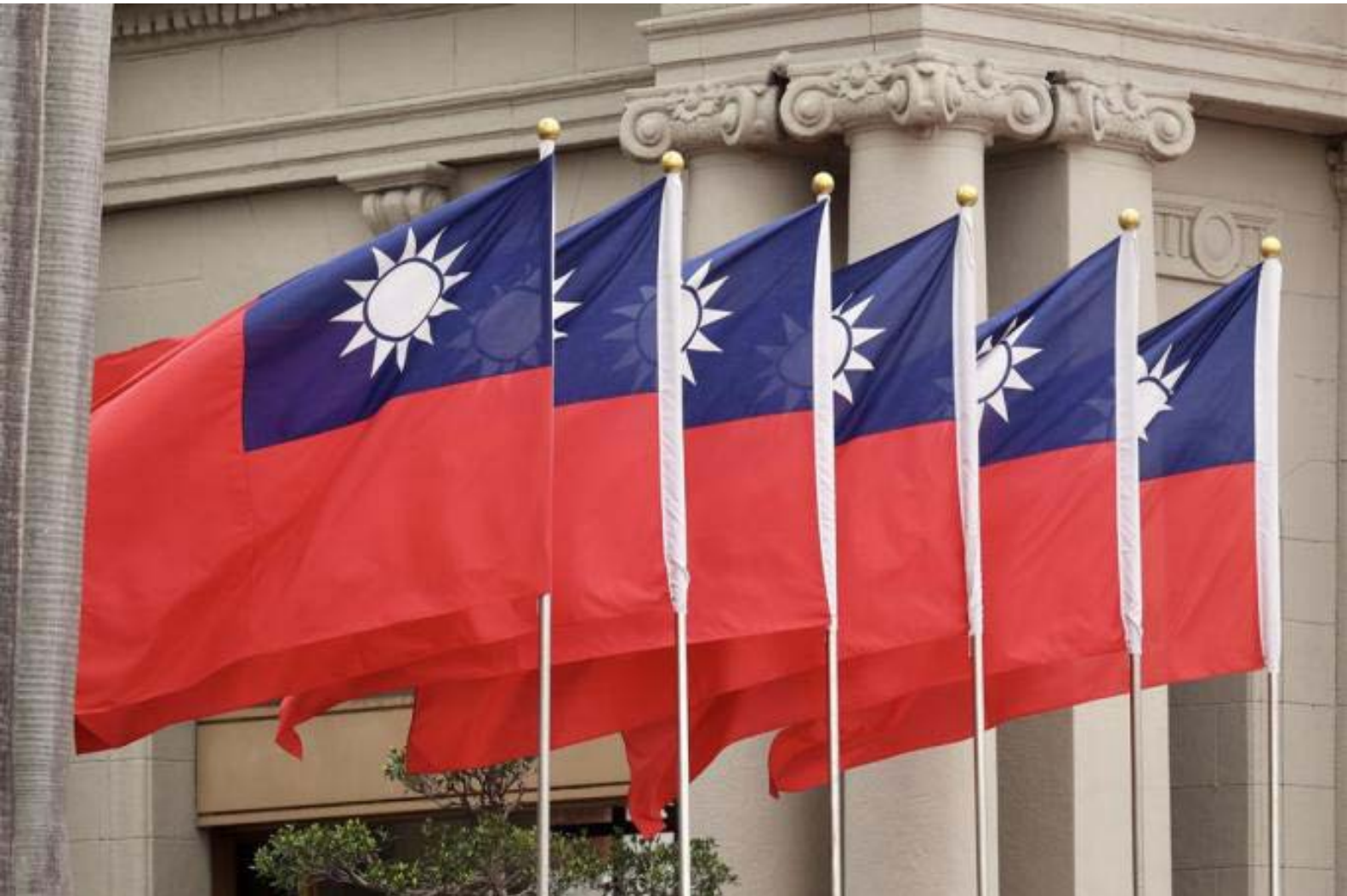
Beijing considers it a part of its territory, to be taken one day, by force if necessary.

China also bristles at any attempt to treat the island as an independent nation-state. Under its "One China" principle, no country may maintain official diplomatic relations with both China and Taiwan.

Taiwan maintains a similar policy, cutting ties with countries that recognise Beijing over Taipei.

Why has pressure grown on Taiwan?

During the eight years in which Beijing-friendly Ma Ying-jeou was president of Taiwan,



the island lost diplomatic recognition from just one country.

But relations plunged in 2016 with the election of his successor Tsai Ing-wen.

She enraged China by espousing a position that Taiwan is an “already independent” sovereign nation that is not subordinate to Beijing.

China has since ramped up diplomatic and military pressure on the island, with eight nations ditching Taipei to recognise Beijing. Honduras would be the ninth.

How has China wooed Taiwan’s allies?

China has used economic leverage to poach several of Taiwan’s erstwhile allies in recent years, especially in Latin America.

The imminent switch by Honduras came weeks after the Latin American nation’s government announced it was negotiating with China to build a major hydroelectric dam.

What China offers countries is, however, much more than just infrastructure investment, analysts say.

“China represents one of the largest markets in the world and it is growing and expanding,” said Henry Rodriguez, head of the economics department at the National Autonomous University of Honduras.

“Taiwan has been a partner to Honduras for many years, they supported us, but people say the support they give us is not very significant because it is capped at \$50 million a year and that China will be able to give us more support.”

Does Taiwan have any powerful friends?

Despite switching diplomatic recognition to Beijing in 1979, Washington remains Taiwan’s main ally.

The United States has pursued a policy where it “acknowledges” China’s claim to the island, which is not the same as accepting Beijing’s claim of sovereignty over Taiwan.

It opposes both Taiwanese independence

and any attempt by China to forcibly take the island. It also maintains trade ties with Taiwan and is its biggest arms supplier.

Taiwan also has deep trade links with Europe and other parts of the world, thanks in particular to its dominance in the production of semiconductors, whose supply is critical to the global economy.

And the United States may step in to help stop Honduras from going through with its switch to Beijing, analysts said.

“Washington has long considered Central America within its sphere of influence and is loath to welcome any additional Chinese influence in the region,” said Gary Sands, a former US diplomat and analyst at geostrategic consultancy Wikistrat.

“So to some extent, the US, as Honduras’s most important economic partner, could provide economic incentives to Tegucigalpa and/or apply diplomatic pressure.”

How does loss of recognition impact Taiwan?

Despite the dwindling pool of nations that recognise it, Taiwan would not be considered internationally isolated even if that number fell to zero, said analysts.

“Strong, multifaceted ties with influential economies and democracies are better at solidifying Taiwan’s international presence than official ties with relatively small states,” said J. Michael Cole, a Taipei-based adviser at the International Republican Institute.

“The officials and NGOs in Taiwan have been very active in managing relationships with international partners through non-official channels,” said Lo Li-chia, a political analyst at the University of Canberra.

“This part would not go away even if Taiwan has zero international recognition.”

AFP

MYANMAR: SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES URGED TO STAND UP TO JUNTA

UN-appointed independent rights experts on Myanmar have urged social media companies to do more to resist the military junta's "online campaign of terror".

In an appeal to internet chat platforms to monitor content more carefully and allocate sufficient resources to do so, the rights experts warned that Telegram in particular had become "a hotbed of pro-military activity".

'Violent and misogynistic'

Tens of thousands of followers had been drawn to the junta's "violent and misogynistic content", warned the rights experts, who noted that women were often accused of having sex with Muslim men or supporting the Muslim population.

This is a "common ultranationalist, discriminatory and Islamophobic narrative in Myanmar", said the experts, who added that women are also targeted by so-called "doxxing" - the act of publishing private information, including names and addresses, about individuals without their consent.

The experts, who include Special Rapporteur on Myanmar, Tom Andrews, welcomed Telegram's decision to block at least 13 pro-military social media accounts after being made aware of what was happening, although at least one of the worst offending channels is back online.

"Unless Telegram fundamentally changes its approach to content moderation in Myanmar, it is likely that pro-military actors will simply open new accounts and continue their campaign of harassment," they said.

Daily threats

"Every day, women are being threatened online with sexualised violence because they are standing up for human rights, opposing the military's attempted rule, and fighting for a return to a democratic path," the experts said in a statement.

'Doxxing' and other forms of online harassment add to the multiple threats that women activists, human rights defenders and independent



associations are already facing in Myanmar,” they said.

The independent experts urged Telegram and other social media companies to meet their responsibilities to identify, prevent, and mitigate any human rights abuses taking place on their platforms.

Due diligence

“Tech companies must ensure that their services do not contribute to human rights abuses, including gender-based violence and discrimination, arbitrary arrest, the right to privacy, and the suppression of freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, both online and offline, and association,” they said.

They urged social media platforms to allocate the necessary resources to protect the human rights of their users, referring to the targeting of women and the need to monitor content in Burmese - and ethnic languages in Myanmar - in close coordination with local organisations and actors.

Special Rapporteurs and other UN Human Rights Council-appointed rights experts, work on a voluntary and unpaid basis, are not UN staff, and work independently from any government or organisation.

Courtesy of UN News



Photo: UN News



Photo: Aung Myint

RAKHINE STATE

Nine women accuse Sittwe IDP camp manager of rape . Nine women from Phwe Yar Gone internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in Sae Thamar Gyi Village Tract in Rakhine State's Sittwe Township have accused the camp manager, Ous Phan Gawni, of raping them. They are filing a lawsuit against him and according to the president of the Rakhine Women's Association, Daw Nyo Aye, the women have all undergone DNA tests to help prove they were raped by Ous Phan Gawni. They are currently awaiting the results of the tests and once they have the results they will file charges. Daw Nyo Aye said: "We submitted the DNA tests in the first week of March. We also did an x-ray of an injured young woman. We [just] took DNA from the rest. Other necessary examinations have been completed. Now, we are waiting for the results. Once we get the results, we will take legal advice about filing a lawsuit. The DNA test results are likely to take about 15 days [to arrive]." She added that at least 40 women have accused Ous Phan Gawni of raping them, but that currently, only nine are working on filing a lawsuit against him. "Now, only nine have filed a lawsuit. Others who have been raped are reluctant to speak out due to the fear of marriage difficulties according to their traditions. Some are afraid of being divorced by their husbands. And some do not have the courage to come to court. Now, the victims include married women, virgin women, mothers of children, and one disabled [woman]", said Daw Nyo Aye. The nine women who are trying to bring the case against Ous Phan Gawni are aged between 18 and 34 years of age, one is disabled. They were raped in 2022 and 2023. According to women in Phwe Yar Gone IDP camp Ous Phan Gawni has been harassing many Muslim women in the camp since 2017. Daw Nyo Aye decried the violations of the women's human rights. She said: "What I would like to say is that these human rights violations should not happen. When they [women] are subjected to these violations I want to say that they have to suffer everything done to them, because men and women have a different existence. I have been devastated by this." The rape victims told the media that inspections need to be carried out in other IDP camps and effective action needs to be taken against anyone who is found to have assaulted women.



JUNTA-CONTROLLED NEWSPAPERS ANNOUNCE TWO MORE POLITICAL PARTIES APPLYING FOR REGISTRATION, AMIDST CRITICISM OF PROPOSED ELECTIONS

Myanmar's junta-controlled media announced on 14 March that two political parties, the Shan-Ni Solidarity Party (SSP) and the Party for People, have applied for permission to establish political parties under the Political Parties Registration Act.

This move brings the total number of parties applying for registration to 21, with five parties seeking to organize the entire union and 16 parties only operating within a specific region or state.

The junta-appointed Union Election Commission is currently verifying the right to establish and register these parties. This announcement comes amidst mounting international criticism regarding the legitimacy of the junta's proposed elections in Myanmar, which has been under military rule since February 2021 when the democratically elected civilian National League for Democracy (NLD) government was ousted in a coup d'état.

The NLD won a landslide victory in the November 2020 elections, securing 82 percent of the seats. However, the junta-appointed UEC invalidated the results, citing allegations of election irregularities. Despite numerous international observers investigating and declaring Myanmar's 2020 election fair, the junta claimed that it did not adhere to the country's electoral laws and constitution.

The United States has dismissed the proposed elections as a military ploy to control power, with senior advisers stating that there is no chance that the election will be free and fair. The NLD has also described the upcoming election as a sham, and Western governments have dismissed it as phony.

The junta's move to allow new parties to register has been seen by some as an attempt to create a facade of democratic participation while continuing to retain control of the power.

PLAN TO RECOMMENCE YANGON PENINSULA HOTEL PROJECT DOWNTOWN

The hotel project operator Hong Kong and Shanghai Hotels Group (HSH Group) said that it was ready to recommence their Yangon Peninsula Hotel project in downtown Yangon, at the site of former Myanmar Railways Headquarters.

The operator of Peninsula Hotels Group is planning to recommence the Yangon Peninsular Hotel project worth over US\$130 million after pausing in the post-coup period.

After the military coup in February 2021, the CEO Clement Kwok of HSH Group confirmed that they suspended the Yangon Peninsula Hotel project which was a part of the redevelopment plan of downtown Yangon.

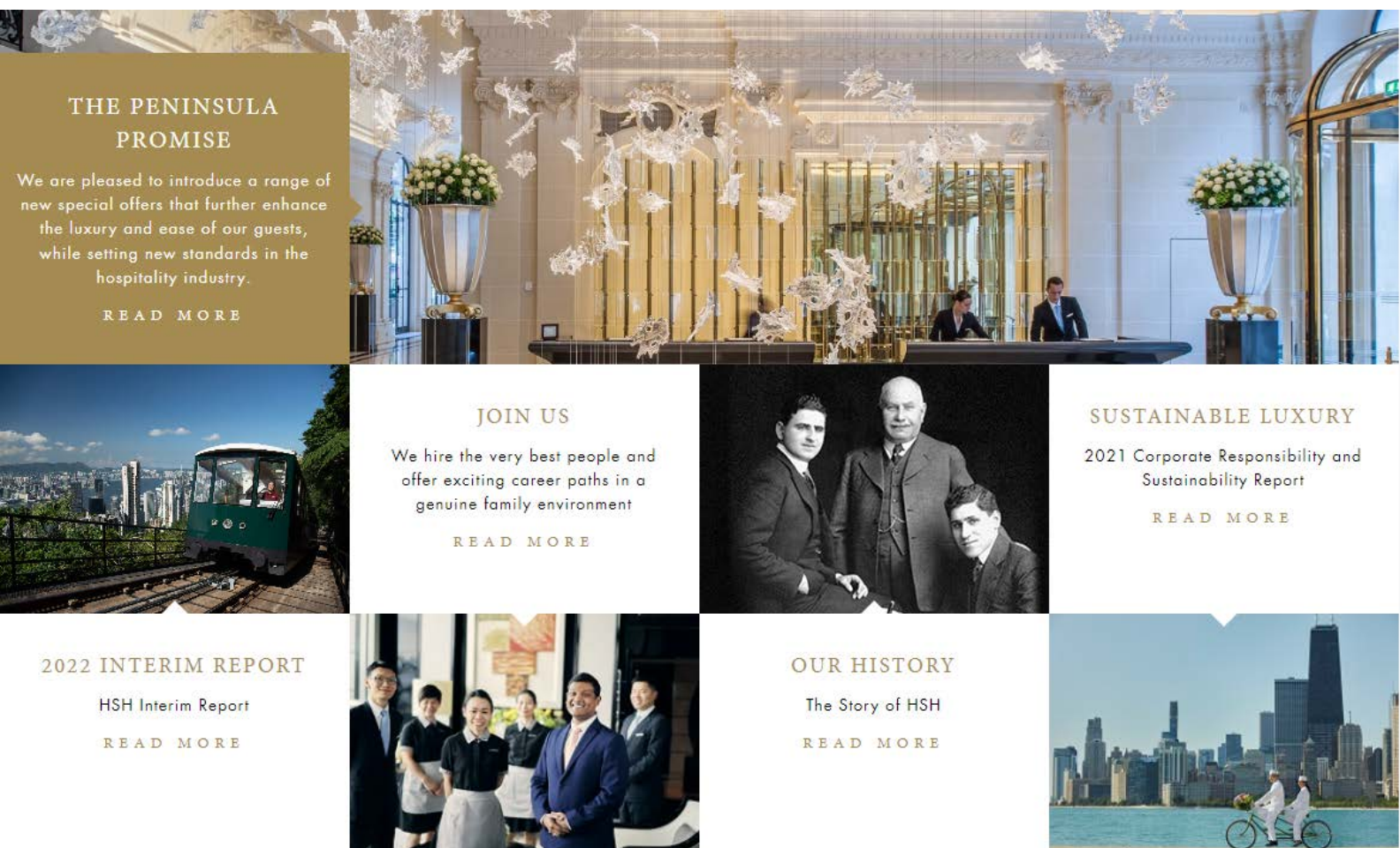
The local partners of this hotel project are Singapore based Yoma Strategic Holdings Ltd. (YSH) and First Myanmar Investment (FMI) which

are the subsidiaries of business tycoon Serge Pan's Yoma Group. HSH Group owns a 70% stake and Yoma Group owns a 30% stake in this project.

This 88-room hotel project is a part of redevelopment of the colonial-style building Myanmar Railways HQ and it was started in 2014 and expected to be completed in 2022 but the construction work had to be suspended in mid-2021.

Kwok said: "We will continue to evaluate the situation in Myanmar to establish a suitable time to recommence work of the planned Yangon Peninsula Hotel project."

The project operator wrote off US\$87 million from the halted project's original investment of US\$130 million in May last year.



MYANMAR'S DOMESTIC GOLD PRICE RISES TO NEARLY 2.9 MILLION KYAT



Photo: Jinming Pan

Amid a global gold price rise, the Myanmar domestic price of 24 carat gold rose to nearly 2.9 million kyat in the market, with people in gold trading circles saying there might be coming instability in the market.

After the banking crisis in the United States of America with the collapses of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) and Signature Bank, these banks had liquidity problems and they could not pay the customers' deposit. This bank crisis pushed gold prices upward.

Before the bank crisis, gold was traded in the global market at US\$1,876 per troy ounce and then it rose up to around US\$1,929 on 17 March.

Yangon Gold Entrepreneurs Association (YGEA) announced that the domestic price for 24 carat gold was 2,272,600 kyats per tical (approx. 16.3 gms).

Reportedly, the domestic price of 24 carat gold rose up to 2.9 million kyat per tical because of the rising trend in the global market and that the gold prices were unstable and volatile.

A Myanmar gold trader said that gold was in high demand in the global market after the US bank crisis with the collapse of the two banks and the price of gold was rising too but the trading of gold in the domestic market was sluggish.

The 24 carat gold price in the domestic market reached the record high level of around 3.5 million kyats per tical in August last year after the soaring exchange rate of the US dollar.

Under the rule of the National League for Democracy-led government the 24 carat gold price was around 1.3 million per tical in the domestic market and then it rose markedly after the military coup and also experienced price instability more often.

CHINA RETAIL SALES UP IN NEW YEAR AFTER COVID REOPENING

Chinese retail sales rebounded in January and February as Beijing abandoned its suffocating zero-Covid policy, reopening borders and ending mandatory quarantine, and the country celebrated the Lunar New Year holiday.

The 3.5 percent growth, released by the National Bureau of Statistics, came in line with expectations and was much better than the 1.8 percent drop suffered in December, indicating the world's number two economy was picking up after years of painful restrictions.

And with Beijing this week announcing it will resume issuing tourist visas, there is a hope for a further improvement this year.

China usually releases January and February economic data together to ensure they are not skewed by the long Chinese New Year holiday.

Fixed-asset investment also showed an improvement, rising 5.5 percent in January-February -- beating forecasts of 4.5 percent growth -- as the government poured billions of dollars into building new railways and industrial parks, NBS data showed.

However, industrial output expanded 2.4 percent -- below the 2.6 percent expected.

"Production and demand have improved significantly, and

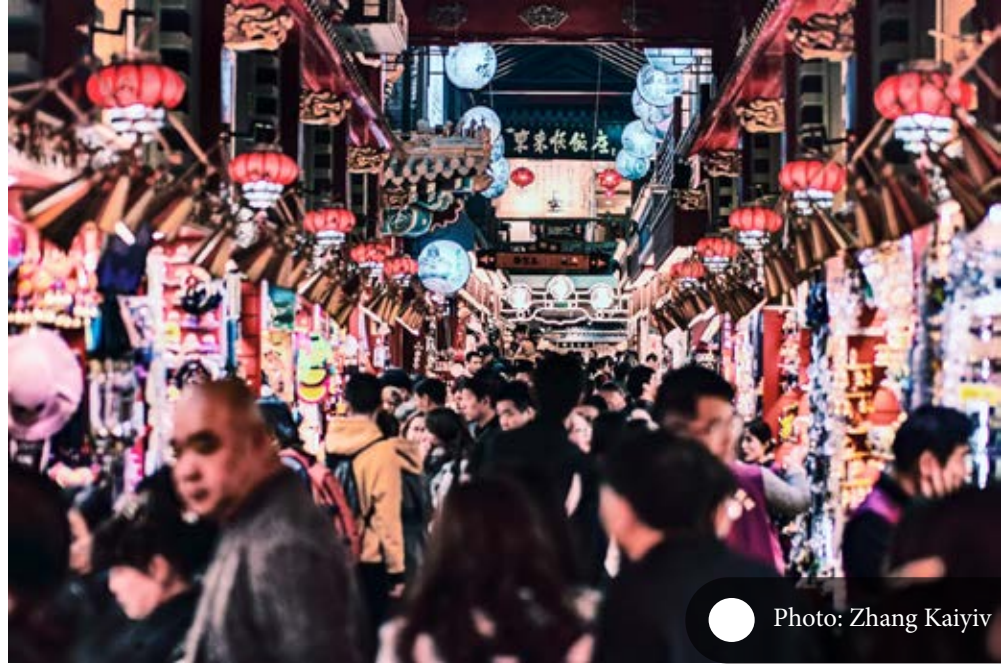


Photo: Zhang Kaiyiv

employment and prices are generally stable," the NBS said in a statement.

"The economy is showing signs of stabilisation and recovery."

China has set an economic growth target of "around five percent" for 2023, one of the lowest in decades.

But Premier Li Qiang has warned that even this was "not easy" to achieve as a grinding property crisis continued and global demand slowed.

In a sign of the troubles facing the property sector, the NBS figures showed investment in real estate fell 5.7 percent in January-February as it continues to feel the effects of a government crackdown to curb risky borrowing by developers.

The unemployment rate rose to 5.6 percent in February, up 0.1 percentage points from the previous month, with that for 16- 24-year-olds at 18.1 percent.

The government has warned that a global slowdown will hamper the country's recovery from pandemic-era damage.

China's exports for January and February fell 6.8 percent compared to the year before, due to low global demand.

Zhiwei Zhang from Pinpoint Asset Management said: "The economic data released today confirmed the recovery in China was well on track. This is consistent with the strong credit growth released earlier."

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.





GETTING AN EDUCATION

Pupils from another village attend a class at Kone Tar Village in Namhsan Township, northern Shan State, as their school is being reconstructed after clashes with Myanmar's military.

Photo: AFP

MYANMAR'S LETHWEI BOXING PACKS A PUNCH IN KAREN STATE



Fighters competing in a bout during a traditional Myanmar boxing Lethwei tournament at Pyi Thar Lin Aye pagoda in Hlaingbwe township in Karen State. Photo: AFP

After Hlaing Htet Aung landed another vicious kick to his opponent's chest, the referee called a stop to the bout of traditional Myanmar boxing, the crowd cheered and the ringside band ended their tune with a flourish.

The 22-year-old strutted victorious from the ring at the end of a five-day traditional Lethwei tournament, now in front of big crowds again following the pandemic.

He has just beaten the current champion for his weight and has the bruises and lumps on his face to prove it.

"It's nothing," he said of his swelling face. "It's normal to get hit like this in Lethwei."

"I'm happy because I won."

Lethwei is considered

one of the most aggressive combat sports in the world, with fighters eschewing boxing gloves for thin gauze bandages wrapped around hardened knuckles.

Feet, knees, elbows and even the head can also be used to strike an opponent.

Handing her son an ice cube to cool his wounds, the fighter's mother Chit Htwe, 52, was unfazed by his injuries.

"Nothing happened. He's a man, isn't he? A Lethwei fighter is used to going home with injuries."

Later she counted out his winnings - 900,000 kyat (\$430).

The tournament also featured children aged about 10 slugging it out in a whirl of

skinny arms and legs.

Many Lethwei fighters start training and competing from a young age.

"I was frightened when I went into the ring... I had no experience in fighting then," said Hlaing Htet Aung.

Lethwei has a long history, with Myanmar temple carvings appearing to show pairs of men locked in combat, suggesting the sport is over a thousand years old.

In the modern era it was kept alive in the eastern border states of Karen and Mon, where bouts are held to mark everything from monks' funerals to New Year festivities.

More than 1,000 people turned out to watch the end of the tournament in Hlaingbwe township in Karen state, sitting in plastic chairs under a huge wooden roof.

In the crowd a dozen or so monks watched the violence unfold as flutes played, drums and cymbals clanged and a commentator encouraged the fighters through a microphone.

Fighters from the local Border Guards Force -- former ethnic insurgents now loosely allied with the military -- stood outside on guard holding rifles or rode in jeeps with machine guns mounted on the back.



● Crowd gets excited watching the bouts. Photo: AFP

‘Not afraid’

Karen state has been riven by conflict since independence from Britain in 1948, with ethnic rebels fighting the military and each other.

The biggest of the ethnic rebel groups, the Karen National Union, has clashed repeatedly with the military since the junta’s coup two years ago and bloody crackdown on dissent.

But on Sunday officers and senior figures from rival groups sat in the same crowd to watch the spectacle.

Not far from the boxing ring thousands prayed at a Buddhist pagoda as part of a ceremony to mark the hoisting of an auspicious golden umbrella to the top of its spire.

One of the few female

fighters on the bill, Dawna Bo Ma, 16, is from Myawady on the Thai border.

Like Hlaing Htet Aung, her father was a Lethwei fighter.

In her match she went the full five rounds with her taller and heavier Thai opponent.

After the fight her team took her bandages from her hands and applied petroleum jelly to a cut above her eyebrow.

She had drawn that match but had big ambitions for her fighting skills.

“I have to beat female fighters in Myanmar first and if there is no one who will challenge me, I will go to Thailand to fight,” she said.

“I am a fighter... I’m not afraid of being hurt.”

AFP



● Down and possibly out - a fighter lies on the floor. Photo: AFP



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