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MYANMAR: PAWN OF THE DRAGON AND BEAR

The Myanmar military coup and the country's isolation as a result have led to Myanmar truly becoming a pawn of the Dragon and the Bear – China and Russia.

As the last toast was raised in Moscow this week by Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin, the scene appears set for a radical change in the balance of power world-wide, and one way or another Myanmar, currently under the illegal rule of the generals, is along for the ride.

Western media coverage of the visit of Xi to Moscow indicated that the two neighbours – China and Russia – sought an alliance to counteract Western power, with Putin, internationally isolated due to his war in Ukraine, receiving much-needed support.

The West is not amused. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Xi's Moscow visit "suggests that China feels no responsibility to hold the president accountable for the atrocities committed to Ukraine. And instead of even condemning, it would rather provide diplomatic cover for Russia to continue to commit those great crimes."

Russia's assault on Ukraine has also deepened fears among Western powers that China could one day try to take control of the self-ruled island of Taiwan, which Beijing views as part of its territory. Pundits "in the know" claim this is a real possibility.

Against this backdrop, it is clear what side the Myanmar junta is on. The visits of junta leader Min Aung Hlaing to Russia since the coup and his hosting of visiting Chinese officials indicate that the Myanmar generals need the handshakes and financial and military support in the face of Western anger and sanctions in response to the February 2021 coup and the war crimes they are committing.

This week, as Xi and Putin trumpeted a "new era" in their relations during Xi's visit to Moscow, it is important for Myanmar watchers and the Myanmar opposition to recognize the growing power of the alliance the Myanmar military junta has attached its horses to and what this says about the geopolitical situation now and possibly in a post-junta Myanmar.

China and Russia are founding partners of BRICS, an alliance that seeks to challenge US world hegemony and to strike down the dollar as the world's dominant

currency. BRICS – made up of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – appears to be acting as a magnet for a number of disaffected players. Over a dozen countries – including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – are eager to join, with rumours that at least one important European country is showing interest. Thailand and Indonesia are engaged with the alliance – but there is no mention officially at this time of Myanmar joining the fray.

We all need to stand back and look at the shifting sands, aware of what could be termed as the tussle between the West and East. It has been argued that the balance of power in the world is gradually swinging East. The failure of the West to truly recognize what is brewing is perhaps not surprising. BRICS and the meetings they have held since its official founding in 2006 tend to be boring, get minimal Western media coverage and partly as a result the alliance is not afforded the importance it arguably ought to receive. Given the current dire situations of the US and European economies – including fears over the collapse of more banks, following the disaster with Silicon Valley Bank – there should be no surprise that BRICS – particularly the Dragon and Bear – pose a significant challenge to US and European political and economic hegemony worldwide, and to NATO's forays into Asia.

Depending on your political position, you may view this as a struggle between good and evil. Yet this may be too simple a distinction.

The Myanmar junta is siding with Beijing and Moscow because they are desperate and are in need of the support from these powerful players as international sanctions ratchet up and the pressure grows to add more war crimes charges to Min Aung Hlaing's plate, on top of the Rohingya "genocide" ICC court case.

Myanmar is currently a pawn of the Dragon and the Bear but this alliance could well be setting the scene for Myanmar's geopolitical position when eventually – and hopefully – the Spring Revolutionaries win and the Myanmar generals lose power, long down the track though this scenario may be.

Myanmar's opposition and analysts needs to keep a careful eye on the shifting sands of world geopolitical power. Xi and Putin – as shown this week – are challenging the status quo and it is unclear how this will play out, for good or bad, who can tell?

EDITORIAL

mizzima WEEKLY

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MIZZIMA MAGAZINE

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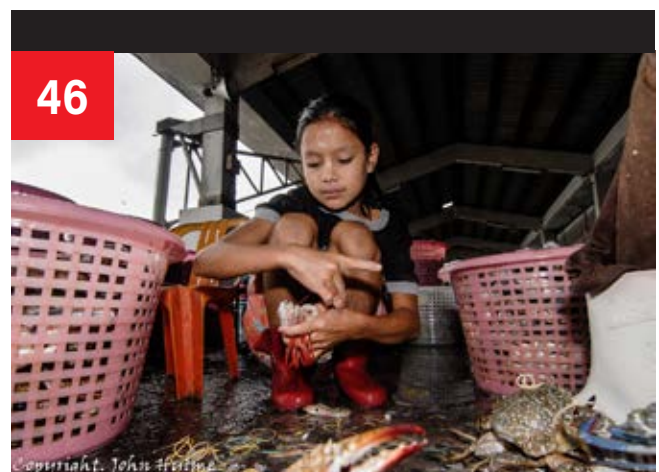
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Cover photo of protestors in Chin State by AFP



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T.O.E.KENNINGS-BESLUIT

Het bestuur van de Stichting Geuzenpenning heeft overzichtigheid in de laatste voorgedrukte beschikking, de

Geuzenpenning 2023

toekenning toegekend aan

Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPF)

De raad van bestuur (Raad) van de Stichting Geuzenpenning heeft op 15 maart 2023, op de voordracht van de Raad van Bestuur, de toekenning van de Geuzenpenning 2023 toegekend aan de Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPF).

Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPF) is een organisatie die zich inzet voor de rechten van politieke gevangenen. De AAPF wordt wereldwijd beschouwd als een belangrijke en scherpzinnige organisatie die informatie over de situatie van de gevangenen verzamelt en verspreidt. AAPF heeft ook een belangrijke rol in de toekenning van de Geuzenpenning.

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A photograph of a man and a woman standing in front of a wooden structure, possibly a staircase or a decorative railing. The man, on the left, is wearing glasses, a brown jacket, and a yellow sash. He is holding a white object, possibly a certificate or a piece of paper. The woman, on the right, is wearing a red jacket with white vertical stripes. The background is a wooden structure with intricate carvings.

IN FOCUS

MYANMAR HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATION RECEIVES GEUZEN MEDAL

Min Min of the Myanmar human rights organization Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) receives the Geuzen Medal in the Grote Kerk in Vlaardingen, the Netherlands, 13 March. AAPP has been working since 2000 to improve the fate of thousands of political prisoners in the country.

Photo: EPA

27 MYANMAR POLITICAL PARTIES APPLY FOR REGISTRATION WITH JUNTA

By 17 March, 27 Myanmar political parties had applied to officially register as political parties under the junta's new Political Parties Registration Act.

Of those 27 parties, seven parties, including the pro-junta Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), will contest elections nationally, whilst the remaining 20 parties will only compete in certain regional or state elections, according to reports in junta-controlled newspapers.

Previously, on 26 January, the junta-appointed Union Election Commission (UEC) released the new Political Parties Registration Act which will apply to any political party that wishes to contest the 2023 elections.

Even existing political parties that were previously registered must re-apply to the UEC for registration, under Article 25 of the new Political Parties Registration Act. This states that any political party that does not apply for re-registration will automatically be de-registered or not registered as a political party. These rules apply to new political parties as well as already established, registered parties.

In mid-March, the parallel Myanmar National Unity Government (NUG) said that the parties that emerge victorious from the junta's proposed election will not truly represent the people, but rather be puppets of the terrorist military junta.

Many people are apprehensive about the formation and registration of political parties because they do not believe that the junta's upcoming election will be free and fair.

But Ko Ko Gyi, the leader of

the People's Party and an 88 Generation student leader said on 28 February that the People's Party party would apply for registration.

At a 28 February press conference where he made the announcement, he said: "We will only get results if we return to politics. It is crucial to view the situation realistically. For those who suggest that forming a political party is not the solution, please tell us if there is an alternative way to address these problems. If

there are individuals or organisations that can guarantee a solution to these problems without forming a party, we invite them to come forward. Then, [if there is an alternative way], we will dissolve our party."

Though the People's Party is expected to apply for registration it has not yet done so. As of 17 March, the People's party was not on the list of political parties that have applied for registration published in the junta media.

On 27 September last year, the Central Working Committee of the National League for Democracy (NLD) party, which emerged victorious in the 2020 general election, announced that it would not accept the results of the junta's proposed elections.

At that time, Bo Bo Oo, a former NLD MP, expressed the view that political parties ought not to pursue their self-interests, but should instead work solely for the public good and in accordance with the will of the people. He added that political parties should not engage in activities that validate unjust oppression by the military junta.

Recently, Kyaw Zaw, the NUG President's Office

spokesperson, said that political parties opposed to the will of the people will be punished by the people. "If a political party is genuine, it has a responsibility to stand on the side of the public," he said.

The junta-appointed UEC is presently verifying to see whether the 27 parties that applied to register are eligible for registration.

The parties' application for registration coincides with growing international criticism of the legitimacy of the junta's proposed elections in Myanmar, which has been under military rule since February 2021, following the ousting of the democratically elected civilian government of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in a military coup.

The NLD won a landslide victory in the November 2020 elections, securing 82 per cent of the seats.

However, the junta 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.

Many western nations, including the United States, have rejected the junta's proposed 2023 election, asserting that the plan is simply a ploy to consolidate military power. Given this, it seems highly unlikely that the election will be conducted in a free and fair manner.

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

POSSIBLE CHEMICAL ATTACK BY JUNTA IN MONYWA TOWNSHIP

Following an attack on the Myanmar junta's Northwestern Command during a visit by junta leader Min Aung Hlaing the army allegedly retaliated by firing chemical weapons.

Min Aung Hlaing was visiting Northwestern Command in Sagaing Region's Monywa Township on 19 March when the Chindwin Attack Force fired eight artillery shells, five of which hit the gate of the base, at 2:00 p.m. on the afternoon of 19 March.

A spokesperson from the Chindwin Attack force said: "We conducted our operation amidst tight security as our intelligence information said that Min Aung Hlaing would be in Monywa and would pay a visit to Northwestern Command."

According to the Chindwin Attack Force, its artillery attack destroyed some of the

infrastructure at Northwestern Command, but it had no details about casualties. All of its fighters were able to retreat without suffering any injuries.

But, according to the Chindwin Attack Force, following its attack on the base, the junta army retaliated by firing two chemical weapon artillery rounds.

A Chindwin Attack Force representative said: "They fired back with chemical weapons. They fired two rounds back. The shells exploded a short distance away from us and emitted white smoke. We were hit once before, so we retreated immediately", according to a report by the Myanmar Press photo Agency (MPA).

Neither MPA nor Mizzima have been able to confirm whether a chemical weapon was fired by the junta.

A Chindwin Attack Force member said to MPA: "We have been hit by chemical weapons once before. We suffered for a long time. We became dizzy. Our eyes started stinging. We started to feel nauseous. One of our comrades was hit by that weapon and could not escape. He was arrested and killed. This time we retreated at once."

Before he visited Northwestern Command, Min Aung Hlaing met with departmental officials, town elders and MSME businesspeople in Monywa. At Northwestern Command he met with injured soldiers.

The junta has not issued a statement about the Northwestern Command attack.

The attack was carried out by fighters from Chindwin Attack Force Battalion 2 and Fight for the People Company 4.

HOUSEHOLDS FROM TAUNG NYO DAM AREA IN BAGO ONLY ALLOWED TO BUY 4KG OF RICE

Myanmar junta soldiers have restricted people living in villages near to Taung Nyo Dam in Bago Region's Nattalin Township to buying 2 pyi (approximately 5.11 litres or about 4.1kg) of rice per household.

The people from those villages often go to the markets in Taung Nyo and Nattalin Townships. To get there they have to go through the small port of Magpyin, where junta troops have stationed themselves and are searching villagers returning from the markets.

A villager from Kwinkyel Village, one of the affected villages, said: "One household can only buy two pyi of rice.

It's been going on for almost one week. If people are going to the market, they must take a boat from Magyipin's small port. It takes about 30 minutes to drive from the villages to the port. The harbor is patrolled by army soldiers. If you buy more than two pyi of rice, it is confiscated. It's not only rice, other products are also being checked and seized at their discretion."

The villager added: "There used to be about 20 soldiers at the port before but they have recently increased in number. They only allow villagers to buy two Pyi of rice. The main reason for this is because they accuse the villagers of supporting the resistance forces [based] in the Shan Yoma mountain range [also known as the Shan Highlands] if they have

extra food."

There are about 13 villages in the area of the Taung Nyo Dam. They include Kwinkyel, Thanpayarkhon,

Sinswell Ywarma, Yonekone, Kyetmanet, and Kwaegy.

A Yonekone Villager said: 'Army soldiers took chickens and ducks from village homes. They're still doing it.

They also beat people and accuse them of being connected with PDFs."

Martial law has been declared in Nattalin Township and there has been frequent fighting between defence forces and the junta army in the area around the Taung Nyo Dam.

CHIN TRAUMA

**Refugee exodus strains
Myanmar-India relations**

Nicholas Nugent





Chin protestors call for an end to Myanmar military junta rule. Photo: AFP

At least 52,000 members of the Chin ethnic community have taken refuge across the border in India since the military took power in Myanmar in February 2021, finding they have had a mixed reception.

It is not hard to find a reason for the exodus of Chin citizens. Chin State, one of the original component parts of the Union of Burma and now the least developed region of Myanmar, has suffered more than most states as the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's army, tries to enforce its rule across the country.

Categorised by the military as particularly rebellious, seven of its nine townships remain under martial law. The air force has targeted several townships, a sign says the Chin Human Rights Organisation (CHRO) that efforts to impose army rule on the ground have been unsuccessful.

Chin State has a troubled history of crackdowns during earlier attempts to enforce army rule across the country in 1962 and again in 1988. The Chin

people are Christian and considered by the army to be of doubtful loyalty to central authority in a country which operates according to the spirit of its dominant religion, Buddhism. Chins who opt to join the army, one of few non-agricultural opportunities open to them, come up against a Tatmadaw rule that prevents members of ethnic minorities from rising above the rank of captain, meaning power lies with officers from the dominant Bamar community.

With a population of less than half a million in Chin State, the Chin people will never attract international attention as the predominantly Muslim Rohingya people of nearby Rakhine state have done, though the Chin have suffered similar persecution at the hands of the Tatmadaw. An army pogrom against Rohingya in 2017, allegedly following attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, led to a mass exodus to Bangladesh where nearly a million Rohingya continue live in the vast Kutupalong and Nayapara refugee camps near Cox's Bazaar.



A Chin woman with her baby in Chin State.
Photo: AFP



Aerial view of damaged Thantlang town.
Photo: CHRO

The situation of the Chin people is little different except they are Christian rather than Muslim and their nearest international border is with the north-east Indian state of Mizoram. The Chin and Mizo people are related and their languages are mutually intelligible. Crossing the ill-defined border into Mizoram, they have been welcomed as brethren, including by the Mizo National Front-ruled state government.

India's central government is less happy about "illegal immigration" by non-Hindus. They associate the border with Myanmar with the smuggling of narcotics and weapons, the latter in support of so-called Indian Insurgent Groups, or IIGs, who operate in India and take refuge in Myanmar. Like the ethnic armed organisations or EAOs in Myanmar, IIGs are fighting for greater autonomy, or to maintain their control over fiefdoms.

Concern about security along its border with Myanmar, which also affect the states of

Manipur and Nagaland, led the Indian government to adopt a policy of collaboration and dialogue with the military government led by senior general Min Aung Hlaing that took power after the 2021 coup. That policy has lately come under attack by factions in India that believe the government should take a more sympathetic attitude towards the Chin arrivals and be less supportive of the Naypyitaw-based government.

Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, a former Indian ambassador to Myanmar, accuses the government of "misplaced faith in the Myanmar Army as the best guarantor of India's security interests vis-à-vis both IIGs and China". He calls India's approach to IIGs "a transactional relationship... not one for which India needs to be beholden to the Tatmadaw." In articles for The Wire, the former ambassador calls for India's government to resist a military-based relationship and "judiciously to steer Myanmar to a more constructive path".



He says that unless India's government starts to talk to the underground National Unity Government (NUG), which consists mainly of Myanmar citizens elected to the country's parliament before the coup, it risks losing influence in Myanmar. "Post-coup, a perception has grown in political quarters in Myanmar and [among] observers outside that, notwithstanding its

pro-democracy rhetoric, India [like China] is assisting and supporting the Tatmadaw including through military supplies," he writes.

Meanwhile Myanmar army's aerial onslaught on Chin State continues in an effort to end rebellion and bring the state under army rule, seemingly with no thought for its civilian inhabitants. Za Uk, deputy executive director of the Chin



Damaged buildings in Thantlang.
Photo: CHRO

Human Rights Organisation (CHRO), says morale in the army is low and they are running out of ammunition adding “they don’t have the ground-forces to capture Chin State so have to rely on air power.” CHRO has documented photographically the destruction of the town of Thantlang, close to the border with Mizoram.

In February the insurgent Chin National

Army (CNA) took control of the town including its police station, a centre of power, a claim not disputed by the Tatmadaw who have resorted to daily bombardments from the air in an effort to retake the town.

It has been reported that at least two air force bombs have landed in India and as recently as 12 January an air force jet flew over Indian territory. CHRO estimate that Myanmar’s military government controls less than 10 per cent of Chin State, well below the nationwide estimate of central control which ranges from 25 to 50 per cent.

Unless it can substantially increase its control over territory the military’s government’s plan to hold national elections, an attempt to reinforce its own control, looks destined to fail. For Ambassador Mukhopadhaya, elections are a lost cause as he believes real power in Myanmar is shifting towards the NUG and ethnic armed organisations, like the Chin National Army.

The Tatmadaw are not about to lose the civil war raging in Chin State and around the country. Nor are they close to winning peace or controlling most of the country’s territory as the conflagration in Chin State and exodus of refugees to India demonstrate. This is a difficult issue for India’s government with its own concern about insurgent activity in its north-eastern states. It has so far ignored calls to take a more robust stand towards Myanmar’s military rulers, and to stop selling the country both weaponry and electricity.

India’s prime minister Narendra Modi fears any distraction from his year in the international limelight as chair of the G20 group of nations. So far, he has been content to leave attempts to negotiate a ceasefire to the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Myanmar is a member. That may change if the continuing arrival of refugees in India’s north east deepens India’s own security concerns.

MYANMAR'S DISPLACED DIG TO SAFETY FROM JUNTA AIR STRIKES



At a makeshift camp for Myanmar's displaced people, two young men hack away at the red earth with a hoe and machete to build a bunker before the next junta shelling or air raid.

Kayah state, near the Thai border, has become a flash-point of armed resistance to the military's coup, with "People's Defence Forces" clashing regularly with junta troops.

"We hear the sound of heavy weapons firing every day and we wonder if the shells will land near us," said Ar Mu, who lives in the settlement near Demoso town.

She has been in the camp, a patchwork of tarpaulins strung up in the gaps between trees that is a temporary home to around 200 people, for months after fighting drove her from her village.

Two years after launching its coup, the military is struggling to crush resistance

to its rule.

Battling fierce opposition on the ground, experts say it is resorting to artillery strikes and air power.

The military carried out more than 300 air strikes in the last year, the United Nations said earlier this month.

More than 90,000 people are currently displaced in Kayah state, according to the UN's refugee agency.

The bunkers that pockmark the camp near Demoso are little more than small chambers in the earth, their sides and roofs reinforced by sandbags and strips of wood.

In one, a group of small children play a game of snakes and ladders.

Strikes can come at any time, said Ar Mu.

"Sometimes while we are having lunch we hear the sound of firing and we have to go straight into our bunkers."

"It's the worst for elderly people who are unhealthy like me. We can't move quickly."

Last year Amnesty International said the junta was likely using air strikes and artillery barrages as "collective punishment" against civilians opposing its coup.

"Everyone wants to go home but we can't go back in this situation," Khu Oo Reh, a more recent arrival to the camp, told AFP.

"I told my family that we can go home one day."

Until then, and as bombardments and air raids remain a threat, the families sheltering in the camp know their lives are in fate's hands.

"If the artillery shell lands in our bunker, we'll be wounded or we'll die," said Ar Mu.

"If we are lucky, we will be safe."

AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA HAS BURNED DOWN 60,459 HOUSES IN TWO YEARS SINCE COUP



Myanmar junta forces have set fire to 60,459 houses in the two years since the 1 February 2021 coup.

From the coup until 28 February 2023, according to Data for Myanmar, Myanmar junta soldiers and members of junta-aligned militias, such as the Pyu Saw Htee, have destroyed 47,778 homes in Sagaing Region, 9,019 houses in Magway Region, 1,485 houses in Chin State, and 2,177 in the remaining states and regions.

As can be seen from the figures, the region that has suffered the most is Sagaing Region, where the junta has destroyed 47,778 houses, over 3.5 times more than the total destroyed across the rest of the country.

Data for Myanmar (D4M) is a non-profit organization that provides useful “data for the people” in Myanmar.

To compile these figures for the number of houses burnt down by the junta it validated its data by cross-checking it with data from news media organisations, regional news and information teams, regional human rights organisations and volunteer organisations for IDPs. It also consulted NASA’s Fire Information for Resource Management System (FIRMS Database) to verify incidents of burning.

Data for Myanmar has warned that real figures for the number of houses burned down may be higher than the figures it has published.

WOMEN'S PEACE NETWORK RELEASES REPORT ON ROHINGYA SITUATION

The Women's Peace Network has released a report about the situation of the Rohingya since the 1 February 2021 coup, titled "We are targeted for being Rohingya in Myanmar and everywhere."

The organisation hopes that the report will help shed light on the deteriorating conditions suffered by the Rohingya, and encourage the international community to immediately pursue concrete, comprehensive, and concerted actions for the Rohingya people of Myanmar.

On 22 March 2023, the one-year anniversary of the United States government's official recognition of the Rohingya genocide, the founder and executive director of the Women's Peace Network, Wai Wai Nu, said: "The past year has been catastrophic for the Rohingya community, who now risk genocide in Burma and life-threatening conditions as refugees. So I hope that the United States will follow its historic determination with equally momentous actions to lead Rohingya through 'a path out of the genocide' -- until Rohingya find peace, justice, and freedom in their homes in Burma."

According to the Women's Peace Network, since the Burmese military's attempted coup on February 1, 2021, the Rohingya community has been subjected to increasingly life-threatening circumstances in Myanmar and other countries in South and Southeast Asia.

A pattern of escalating grave rights violations has emerged from such circumstances.

In Myanmar, in addition to committing serious international crimes and other violations of international law across the country, the military is targeting the over 600,000 Rohingya who remain in the country with laws and policies that criminalize the exercise of fundamental freedoms, as well as arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, sexual violence, and even murder.

Such brutal, systematic acts add to the decades-long genocide to which the predominantly Muslim Rohingya have been subjected, and risk the surviving population with further attacks of genocide in Rakhine State.

Rohingya who have had no choice but to escape this persecution have since joined the near-one million refugees from their community in Bangladesh, Malaysia, India, as well as other South and Southeast Asian countries, where their access to basic needs and livelihoods continue to deteriorate despite the sustained efforts of the international and regional community.

Throughout their desperate attempts to find any semblance of safety or hope, Rohingya face human trafficking, deportation, and various grave rights abuses -- all of which pose a gendered effect to these victims and survivors of genocide.

Such conditions are dire, thus requiring immediate attention and effective actions for Rohingya's safety and protection, justice and accountability, and recovery and rehabilitation as a people: a path out of the genocide.

The report makes three key recommendations. These are:

1. Bangladesh, Malaysia, India and other host countries of Rohingya refugees must ensure them reliable access to basic needs and services, as well as safety and protection, over arrest, detention, and forced repatriation to Myanmar.
2. The international community must pursue concrete and comprehensive measures to hold the Burmese military accountable for its international crimes. It must also consult with Rohingya in all decisions and mechanisms that may affect their lives and future.
3. The civilian government and leadership in Myanmar must recognize the genocide, guarantee Rohingya equal rights and citizenship, meaningfully engage with them in its administration and governance, and provide them with avenues for justice, rehabilitation and reparations in Myanmar.

In response to the report Tun Khin, the President of Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK, said: "Over the past year we have seen Rohingya refugees in great peril. They do not have the assurances of safety and protection that you would expect survivors of genocide to have."

MYANMAR TO TAKE 1,000 ROHINGYA REFUGEES IN PILOT PROGRAMME: JUNTA



Rohingya children. Photo: AFP

Myanmar will accept the return of around 1,000 Rohingya refugees in a pilot repatriation programme, with a junta spokesman telling AFP Wednesday last week that the resettlement would likely begin by mid-April.

“We will receive people back according to both countries’ agreement... About 1,000 people will be in (the) first batch,” Zaw Min Tun told AFP.

“Myanmar side is checking some lists at this moment.”

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.

A delegation of 17 officials from Myanmar’s military regime met with around 480 refugees over the past week in a process brokered by China and partly facilitated by the United Nations.

The team were officially there to assess refugees for potential return, based partly on whether they could prove their residence in the country before the 2017 crackdown.

AFP

BIDEN EXPRESSES & 'SOLIDARITY' WITH ROHINGYA AND OTHER MUSLIMS FACING PERSECUTION



US President Joe Biden expressed “solidarity” Thursday last week with Myanmar’s Rohingya and China’s Uyghur minorities in a message to Muslims around the world as they celebrate the holy month of Ramadan.

“Together with our partners, the United States stands in solidarity with Muslims who continue to face oppression, including Uyghurs in the People’s Republic of China, Rohingya in Burma, and other Muslim communities facing persecution around the world,” Biden said in a statement.

“During this sacred time of reflection, the United States also reaffirms our support to Muslim communities suffering hardships and devastation,” Biden said, referring to earthquake victims in Turkey and Syria, and flood victims in Pakistan.

“Today especially, we remember the universal human right to practice, pray, and preach our faiths peacefully and openly.”

Biden’s highlighting of the Uyghurs - who the US government says are being subjected to genocide by the Chinese communist authorities - came at a time of strong tension between Washington and Beijing.

According to rights groups, Uyghurs are subjected to mass incarceration in forced labor camps and banned from expressing their culture. Beijing says the ethnic minority is not being repressed and that any security measures in their northwestern region of Xinjiang are a response to a terrorism threat.

AFP

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ROHINGYA SCEPTICAL OF MYANMAR REFUGEE RETURN OVERTURE

Rohingya refugees said they doubted Myanmar was offering a genuine return to their homeland, after conclusion a week ago of an official visit to Bangladesh ostensibly aimed at jumpstarting a stalled repatriation agreement.

A delegation of 17 officials from Myanmar's military regime met with around 480 refugees over the past week in a process brokered by China and partly facilitated by the United Nations.

Bangladeshi authorities told AFP they were hopeful that a refugee return could begin soon, more than five years after a brutal military crackdown drove immense numbers of Rohingya into their country.

But members of the persecuted minority interviewed by the Myanmar delegation told AFP that none of their queries on safety or recognition of their citizenship had been answered.

"They used to treat us badly there. I asked whether we would be able to live a normal life there, but then they stopped me," Shamsun Nahar, a 40-year-old Rohingya woman, told AFP.

"They did not want any more questions," she added. "I don't think they will take us to Myanmar. If they do, they won't give us any rights."

Myanmar's delegation

left Wednesday after a week in the sprawling refugee camps home to around a million Rohingya.

The team were officially there to assess refugees for potential return, based partly on whether they could prove their residence in the country before the 2017 crackdown.

But another refugee interviewed by the visitors said documentation proving his residency was treated with scepticism.

"I provided all the documents, they said 'hmm'," Soyod Hossain, 50, told AFP. "I don't think they believe that our documents were genuine."

The Rohingya are widely viewed in Myanmar as interlopers from Bangladesh, despite roots in the country stretching back centuries, and are stateless after Myanmar ceased recognising their citizenship in 2015.

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

That year's violence is now subject to a genocide investigation, with the International Court of Justice probing allegations of rape, murder and arson against entire Rohingya villages

by Myanmar's security forces.

The Arakan Rohingya National Alliance, a prominent Rohingya diaspora group, last week accused Myanmar of planning to orchestrate a "token" return of refugees to avoid the court's censure.



The UN refugee agency said once again Sunday that conditions in Myanmar remained unsuitable for the “sustainable return” of Rohingya refugees.

But civil society groups have criticised the agency for facilitating the transport of Myanmar officials into Bangladesh last week as part of the return scheme.

‘We don’t have any option’

A repatriation plan was

first agreed upon soon after the 2017 crackdown but failed to make any significant headway, partly over concerns the Rohingya would not be safe if they returned.

Bangladesh’s refugee commissioner Mizanur Rahman said his country was hopeful that refugee returns would start soon, with more clarity on timing to come next week.

“We don’t have any option other than repatriation.

But the whole process is complex,” Rahman told AFP.

China is mediating between both countries on the renewed repatriation push and Beijing’s ambassador to Dhaka, Yao Wen, also told reporters last week that repatriation would start “very soon”.

Myanmar’s state media has so far not reported on the delegation’s visit to Bangladesh.

AFP



Rohingya women and children in a refugee camp. Photo: AFP



CHINA APPROVES FIRST DOMESTIC MRNA VACCINE FOR COVID-19

China has approved its first locally developed messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccine against COVID-19, its manufacturer said last week, months after the relaxation of strict Covid-zero regulations sparked a surge in cases.

The vaccine, developed by CSPC Pharmaceutical Group Ltd, has been approved for “emergency use” by Beijing’s health regulator, the company said in a statement.

It showed high efficacy in a trial in which it was used as a booster shot for people who have been given other types of vaccines, the company added, without offering further details.

While traditional vaccines use a weakened or inactivated germ to prepare the body for a future attack from the real virus, mRNA deploys snippets of genetic material that carry instructions showing the body’s cells how to produce a protein - in this case, the spike protein on the coronavirus

that causes Covid.

The body’s immune system then triggers antibodies to fight off that spike protein, making it ready for when the real coronavirus comes knocking.

Beijing has refused to greenlight mRNA-based vaccines from foreign firms Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna for public use.

Its vaccination shortfall was widely believed to have led to more severe infections and deaths after lockdowns and mandatory quarantine rules were suddenly dropped in December.

Other Chinese drugmakers including CanSino have previously said they were developing mRNA-based shots to help the country bridge its immunisation gap.

AFP

Inside a vaccine development lab in China. Photo: AFP

MOSCOW TRIP SEEN AS A WIN FOR 'BIG BROTHER' XI

Xi Jinping's pomp-filled visit to Moscow underscored a burgeoning but unequal alliance between the two countries, cementing China's status as a "big brother" to Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Recently indicted for war crimes, Russia's KGB spook-turned-president is grateful for any diplomatic support he can get.

So, when the Chinese president embarked on a bells-and-whistles three-day visit to Moscow, that was a win in itself.

After all, it is difficult to be painted as an international pariah when hosting one of the world's most powerful men.

But Putin - bogged down in Ukraine, his economy groaning under the strain of Western sanctions and forecast to shrink by about 2.5 percent this year - needed more than a diplomatic grip and grin.

What happened behind closed doors is difficult to know. But in public, Xi delivered very few of the big-ticket items on Putin's wish list.

China's leader pledged a trade lifeline and some moral support, but more conspicuous was that he did not commit to providing arms for Russia's depleted forces in Ukraine, a move that would have invited Western sanctions on China.

There was also no long-term Chinese



Chinese President Xi Jinping, left, toasts Russian President Vladimir Putin on his visit to Moscow. Photo: AFP

commitment to buy vast quantities of Russian gas that is no longer flowing to Europe.

European imports of Russian gas have dropped by about 60-80 billion cubic metres a year, according to the International Energy Agency, leaving a gaping hole in Russia's finances.

Xi has taken advantage of this, snapping up some of that supply on the cheap.

But he has also shied away from Putin's request to build a pipeline bringing gas from vast Siberian fields to China, with a non-committal Beijing insisting more study is needed.

Having seen Russia's ability to pull the plug on Europe, Beijing appears in no hurry to create long-term dependence on Russian gas that the so-called "Power of Siberia 2" pipeline would bring.

That lack of commitment "clearly shows (the) unsentimental and interests-driven nature of China's 'friendship' with Russia," said Asia Society expert Philipp Ivanov.

'Junior partner'

As far as Xi is concerned, the visit required few concessions in exchange for achieving important strategic and symbolic goals -- presenting a united front against the United States, amplifying Xi's statesman status, and deepening the perception of Russian dependence on China.

"Xi's meetings with Putin may have taken place on the Russian president's home turf, but it was clear as day just exactly who was in charge," said Brian Whitmore, a Russia expert at the Atlantic Council.

"The body language said it all. In one joint public appearance this week, Xi confidently leaned back in his chair, relaxed, and smiled. Putin in contrast, appeared nervous and anxious as he bent forward and fidgeted."

Chinese state TV helped burnish Xi's statesman credentials at home, airing lengthy clips of him being greeted on the airport tarmac by an honour guard and by flag-waving Muscovites along his motorcade's route.

Xi's visit appeared to be part of a concerted effort to amplify China's diplomatic clout.

Recent decades have seen Beijing flex its economic muscle from Asia to Africa, and push its security presence far beyond the Chinese mainland - from a military base in Djibouti to naval facilities in the South China Sea to small-scale security deployments to the Solomon Islands.

Until now, China's diplomatic power has lagged behind its economic and military power.

But that is starting to change, with China floating a Ukraine peace plan, brokering a detente between arch-rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia, and through Xi's high-profile visit to Moscow.

According to Whitmore, the visit also took advantage of Putin's current weak position.

Xi's trip "illustrated just how dependent on China that Russia has become since being cut off from the global financial system, Western markets, and Western technology," said Whitmore.

That is a significant role reversal from the Cold War when the Soviet Union was considered China's "big brother".

"The Sino-Russian relationship is developing on Beijing's terms and Putin has no choice but to accept that. He is now Xi's junior partner," he said.

But experts are quick to caution that Putin -- a wily operator who has survived for decades in the cutthroat world of Kremlin politics -- may be dependent, but that does not make him subservient.

"While the relationship is clearly unequal - the Chinese economy is 10 times larger than Russia's - and Moscow's dependency on China is rapidly growing, it's too early to call Russia a vassal state," said Ivanov.

AFP

RUSSIA ‘DANCING TO CHINA’S TUNE ON TAIWAN, SAYS TAIPEI



Protesters in Taipei. Photo: AFP

Taiwan on Wednesday last week condemned Beijing and Moscow for a joint statement that called the self-ruled island an “inalienable” part of China, accusing Russia of “dancing to China’s tune”.

Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping for two days of talks this week, with the leaders signing a joint statement pledging to deepen their strategic partnership -- and affirming Russia’s support for China on Taiwan.

Beijing views the self-ruled and democratic island as its territory, to be retaken one day - by force, if necessary.

“The Ministry of Foreign Affairs solemnly protests and strongly condemns (China’s) authoritarian expansionist government for continuing to issue false statements in the international arena to belittle and damage our country’s sovereignty,” said the Taiwanese statement.

It also condemned “Russia’s attempt to sing and dance to China’s tune for its conspiracy of aggression and expansion”.

In the joint statement, Russia had reaffirmed its adherence to Beijing’s “One China” principle, terming Taiwan “an inalienable part of Chinese territory”, according to the Chinese state-run Xinhua news agency.

“(Russia) opposes any form of ‘Taiwan independence’, and firmly supports China’s measures to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity,” Xinhua reported the statement as saying.

Taiwan lives under constant threat of military action by China, and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has deepened fear on the island that Beijing might attempt something similar.

Beijing has ramped up military, economic and diplomatic pressure on Taiwan in recent years, staging massive military drills around the island last year that Taipei said were preparation for an invasion.

AFP

CHINA TRIES TO BLOCK PROMINENT UYGHUR SPEAKER AT UN

China attempted Thursday last week to block a prominent Uyghur activist from speaking at the UN Human Rights Council, where he demanded the body urgently address allegations of serious violations by Beijing.

Dolkun Isa, a Uyghur activist based in Germany and president of the World Uyghur Congress, spoke up during a general debate about concerns around the world.

Pointing to a number of recent reports, including one from former UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet, warning of possible crimes against humanity being committed against Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in China's far-western Xinjiang region, he said the allegations "require the immediate and urgent attention of the council".

But as soon as he began speaking, China's representative in the room Mao Yizong demanded the floor to object.

"We have reason to challenge the qualification of the speaker," he said, insisting that Isa was "not the representative of an NGO, and still less a human rights defender."

"Rather he is an anti-China, separatist, violence element," Mao said, speaking in Chinese through an interpreter, warning that "allowing him to engage in separatist activities in the council would be in serious violation of the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, as well as the rules of procedure of the Human Rights Council".

After Mao's objection, US representative Sam Birnbaum took the floor to insist on Isa's right to address the council, the top UN rights body.

And council president Vaclav Balek of the Czech Republic pointed out that NGOs are free to pick the speakers that represent them during the debate, and ruled he was entitled to finish his intervention.

Isa had been invited by the non-governmental organisation Global Human Rights Defence to take its brief speaking slot during the NGO portion of the debate, which comes after the council's 47 member states and numerous observer countries have voiced their positions.



Dolkun Isa. Photo: EPA

'Disinformation'

"It's not the first time the Chinese government is trying to stop me," Isa told AFP later, saying "China is trying to manipulate the UN rights system."

As he completed his statement before the council, he lamented that it had failed last October to agree to even put the Xinjiang issue on the agenda, despite the damning findings in Bachelet's report.

That report, published minutes before Bachelet's term ended on August 31 last year, highlighted "credible" allegations of widespread torture, arbitrary detention and violations of religious and reproductive rights.

It brought UN endorsement to long-running allegations that Beijing detained more than one million Uyghurs and other Muslims in prison camps.

Isa told AFP his mother died in such a camp a few years ago, and that two of his brothers were serving lengthy sentences.

During China's intervention in the UN debate, representative Li Xiaomei alleged the United States and others "out of their own political agenda fabricate and spread disinformation" about the rights situation in China.

US ambassador Michele Taylor flatly rejected that statement, pointing to the numerous expert findings of "evidence of serious abuses, including possible crimes against humanity".

AFP

THAI PM DISSOLVES PARLIAMENT, CALLS ELECTION

Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-O-Cha dissolved parliament on Monday last week, setting up a general election in May as the former coup leader seeks to extend army-backed rule.

The vote pits unpopular former army chief Prayut, who came to power in a 2014 putsch, against the daughter of billionaire former PM Thaksin

Shinawatra, who still casts a shadow over the kingdom's political scene despite more than a decade in exile.

The main opposition Pheu Thai group, fronted by Paetongtarn Shinawatra, is polling strongly but Thailand's junta-scripted 2017 constitution will make it hard for her to secure the top job.

A statement in the official Royal Gazette published on Monday announced the dissolution, and the Election Commission will confirm the date of the poll later, with May 7 or 14 tipped as most likely.

The election is the second since the 2014 coup and the first since the country was rocked by massive, youth-led pro-democracy protests in



Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-O-Cha. Photo: AFP

Bangkok in 2020.

Unofficial campaigning has been under way for weeks, with rising living costs and the kingdom's sluggish recovery from the coronavirus pandemic high on the agenda.

Prayut, speaking after the announcement, declined to say whether he was satisfied with his tenure, telling reporters: "I cannot answer, you have to ask the people."

The 68-year-old, who cemented his rule in a

controversial election in 2019, has demonstrated a longevity rare in Thai politics.

But in a poll published Sunday of who voters would like to see as PM, Prayut lagged in third place on just over 15 per cent -- way behind front runner Paetongtarn on 38 percent.

In the same poll of 2,000 people, conducted by the National Institute of Development Administration, nearly 50 percent said they would vote Pheu Thai, with Prayut's United Thai Nation party on around 12 percent.

Odds favour army

Pheu Thai has said it is targeting a big victory to prevent the military establishment from blocking its route to power -- avoiding a repeat of 2019 when it won the most seats but was shut out of government.

Under the army-drafted 2017 constitution, the prime minister is chosen by the 500 elected lower-house MPs as well as 250 military-appointed senators.

"I have a strong hope that we can form the government for sure," Paetongtarn told reporters at a rally on Friday.

"That's why we... campaign about the landslide, because the landslide is going to make us strong enough to form the government."

If successful, she would be the third Shinawatra to become premier, after her father and his sister Yingluck -- ousted by Prayut's coup.

The opinion polls would indicate Pheu Thai is in with a chance, with many voters sick of Prayut and the lack of progress

they have seen in their own lives.

Prayut is polling behind the pro-reform Move Forward Party, which hopes to capitalise on the anti-establishment spirit of the 2020 street protests.

"I would argue that on the ground for the past four years the sentiment of the era has changed so much for every institution in this country," Move Forward leader Pita Limjaroenrat told AFP, saying he believed voters were ready for change.

"I am sure they will vote for the future, and not the good old days."

Coup-prone

Thailand has seen more than a dozen coups since the birth of democracy in 1932, and the military-royalist establishment is a major force.

It remains to be seen whether this elite is prepared to accept another prime minister linked to Thaksin, a bogeyman figure for them.

Chulalongkorn University political analyst Thitinan Pongsudhirak told AFP the election would be the "most consequential in my lifetime".

It will decide whether the kingdom "breaks out of an entrenched, prolonged rut that goes back two decades", he said.

If Pheu Thai misses its landslide, it is possible that two or more military-linked parties - such as Prayut's United Thai Nation and the ruling Palang Pracharath Party - would form a coalition.

AFP



SRI LANKA LEADER WARNS HARD TIMES TO FOLLOW IMF BAILOUT

Sri Lanka's president warned Wednesday last week of more economic pain to come for the crisis-hit nation, with strict austerity measures needed to restore its ruined finances after an IMF bailout deal.

The International Monetary Fund approved its long-delayed rescue package on Monday after China, the South Asian island's biggest bilateral lender, offered debt relief assurances.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe lauded the deal in a speech to parliament as a milestone in Sri Lanka's recovery from last year's unprecedented economic crisis.

But he also told lawmakers that the bailout was only the first step in more difficult structural reforms.

"The IMF loan is not an end in itself, this is the beginning of a long and more difficult journey," Wickremesinghe said.

"We have to traverse it with care and courage. The only objective is to rebuild the economy."

Sri Lanka defaulted on its \$46 billion foreign debt last April after nearly exhausting its foreign exchange reserves, making it almost impossible for importers to source vital goods.

The island nation's 22 million people

endured months of food and petrol shortages, along with runaway inflation and prolonged blackouts, as a result.

Wickremesinghe has sought to restore government coffers by sharp tax hikes and ending generous consumer subsidies on fuel and electricity.

On Wednesday he said more taxes were on the cards to meet the IMF's demand that Sri Lanka halve its spend on foreign debt servicing from the 9 percent of GDP recorded last year.

The IMF also requires Sri Lanka to set up tough anti-corruption laws and sell off cash-bleeding state companies, including beleaguered carrier SriLankan Airlines.

Wickremesinghe said the government would assume the external debts of key public companies to make them more attractive to investors.

Trade unions have opposed the austerity programme with strikes crippling the health and transport sectors last week and warnings of further industrial action to come.

AFP



Ordinary people are suffering due to the political and economic crisis in Sri Lanka. Photo: AFP

DAMMED THIRSTY: THE CROSS-BORDER FIGHT FOR WATER

Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-O-Cha dissolved parliament on Monday last week, setting up a general election in May as the former coup leader seeks to extend army-backed rule.

The vote pits unpopular former army chief Prayut, who came to power in a 2014 putsch, against the daughter of billionaire former PM Thaksin Shinawatra, who still casts a shadow over the kingdom's political scene despite more than a decade in exile.

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The election is the second since the 2014 coup and the first since the country was rocked by massive, youth-led pro-democracy protests in Bangkok in 2020.

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AFP



‘HOPE IS RARE NOW IN MYANMAR’, UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL HEARS



Photo: UN News

The Myanmar military has continuously used arbitrary lethal violence against its own people amid an expanding humanitarian emergency, and a worsening economic crisis, the UN rights chief told the Human Rights Council last week.

“Hope is rare now in Myanmar,” said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Volker Türk said, calling for robust support for its citizens under fire.

“The disregard and contempt for human life and human rights that are continuously demonstrated by the military, constitute an outrage to the conscience of humanity,” he said.

The latest report, covering the period between 1 February 2022 to 23 January this year, details a number of incidents in which thousands

were detained, hundreds of houses were burned, and dozens of people, including children, were killed by shelling and military raids.

Villages set ablaze

In the second year following the coup, the military has increased airstrikes against civilian locations by 141 per cent, and the incidence of homes and neighbourhoods being set ablaze have risen by 380 per cent.

UN colleagues indicated that since the military takeover, some 39,000 structures have been burned in villages and towns where the military has operated, he said. Satellite images confirm that numerous incidents have involved destruction of entire villages, while other communities have been set on fire on multiple occasions.

“People who are unable to flee, risk being burned to death,” he said. “Those who can escape – over 1.3 million people displaced since the coup was launched – face destitution.”

Deaths, torture in military custody

Credible sources have verified that at least

2,947 civilians have been killed by the military and its affiliates since 2021, including 244 children, he said. More than one third of these confirmed deaths occurred in military custody, and the actual number of civilian killings is almost certainly far higher, he added.

“It is imperative that the military respect the Security Council’s resolution and take steps to end the violence,” he said, adding that all armed parties must institute or strengthen efforts to comply with the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law.

Noting that the military extended in February the state of emergency, he said detainees have reported severe beatings, mock executions, suspension from ceilings without food or water, electrocution, and acts of sexual violence.

Credible sources verified that since 1 February 2021, at least 17,572 people have been arrested, including 381 children, with 13,763 remaining in detention.

Rights violations also continue to “strangle” media freedoms and civic space, he said.

“Merely ‘liking’ a Facebook post may lead to terrorism charges, with sentences of 10 years or more in prison, following opaque trials that do not meet fair trial standards at all,” he said.

‘Dire’ humanitarian needs

Across the country, 17.6 million people now need humanitarian assistance, and more than 15.2 million face acute food insecurity. At a time of such dire humanitarian needs, current regulations will impede the capacity of many non-governmental organizations to deliver essential goods and services, he said.

The Rohingya community, which has already endured decades of persecution, faces “a bleak present and worse future”, he said. More than one million Rohingya remain in forced exile and hundreds of thousands of others have been internally displaced.

“There will be no durable vision for the

future without accountability for the cruel violence of the past,” he said, calling for increased international support and the provision of education and livelihood opportunities to the refugees.

International courts warrant support

He said ongoing proceedings at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC), with respect to severe human rights violations against the Rohingya people, warrant greater support.

Amid mass displacement and the arbitrary detention of elected political leaders in February 2021, and thousands of others since then, whose only crime was to oppose the military takeover, he remained deeply concerned by the prospect of new elections taking place in Myanmar while violence spirals out of control.

“The elections of November 2020 made clear that what the people of the country wanted was to continue the hard-won path of democratic reform,” he said. “It is critical that the country’s future is decided by a process led by the people of Myanmar.”

To address these concerns, he called on Human Rights Council members to do their utmost to deliver humanitarian support directly to Myanmar’s people, including by channeling operations through grassroots organizations. He also called on all UN Member States to promote dialogue and sustainable solutions that are representative of the will of the Myanmar people, in order “to bring an end to this brutal crisis”.

Courtesy of UN News



Photo: AFP

MON STATE

Six-year-old killed by mortar fire in Mon State's Bilin Township. A six-year-old boy died after being hit in the head by indiscriminate junta mortar fire in Bilin Township in Mon State's Thaton District, on 18 March. At around 3:30 p.m. on 18 March, Artillery Regiment 314, based in Zeewun Village in Bilin Township fired mortars into Shweyaungpya Village-Tract, also in Bilin Township. One of the mortar shells landed near to a family fishing in a pond in Ahwungyi Village and shrapnel from the shell hit six-year-old Saw Poe Thingyan in the head. He died on the spot. "At around 3:30 pm, artillery, fired by the Military Council, landed and exploded near a family fishing with nets in the fishing pond in Ahwungyi Village. One child died from brain injuries. The child's name is Saw Poe Thingyan", said a Bilin Township resident to Mizzima. "The parents were safe; however, it was heartbreaking for such a loss to happen in front of them," said a 37-year-old woman who witnessed the incident. Until this incident, there had been no fighting in Bilin Township for two weeks and this latest attack was just aimed at innocent civilians. "The fighting had already stopped for half a month in Bilin. But now, this shooting for no reason was done with the intention of killing civilians", said a member of a local defence force.

Two killed by artillery shell in Mon State's Bilin Township. Two men were killed when they were hit by a junta artillery shell in Karawaleseik Village, in Mon State's Bilin Township on 20 March at about 7:30 p.m. "At around 7:30 pm, a shell landed on U Kalar's house in the upper part of Karawaleseik Village. U Kalar died on the spot. His son Ko Aung Lwin was injured and died on the road while being taken to the hospital because his condition was bad", a local person said to Mizzima. Junta troops stationed at the Than Thadar Military Gate started firing artillery into the village at 7:00 p.m. on 20 March. When a shell hit 50-year-old U Kalar's house he was instantly killed in the resulting explosion, whilst his son, 20-year-old Ko Aung Lwin suffered severe head, hand, and stomach injuries before dying on the way to the township hospital. A woman from Karawaleseik Village said: "We have to hide because they [the Junta] are shooting at random. Two people died in the village as a result of artillery [fire], which makes me even more afraid." Twice earlier that day, at 10:00 a.m. and then at 6:00 p.m., the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the Thaton People's Defense Force (TPDF) and other local defence force groups dropped bombs from a drone and fired on the Than Thadar Military Gate. Casualty numbers from that attack are currently unknown. According to junta propaganda social media pages "the local resistance forces dropped five bombs with a drone, two of which fell on the road and three of which fell into the Thalpyu creek." Mizzima has been unable to confirm the extent of the damage to the Than Tadar Military Gate. Previously, also in Bilin Township, on 18 March 2023 at about 3:30 p.m., a junta artillery shell landed in Ahwungyi Village and killed six-year-old Saw Po Thingyan.



CHINESE AMBASSADOR AND MYANMAR'S HOME AFFAIRS MINISTER DISCUSS COOPERATION IN COMBATING CROSS-BORDER CRIMES

Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar, Chen Hai, met with the Home Affairs Minister of Myanmar, Lieutenant General Soe Htut, in Nay Pyi Taw on 23 March, reported Chinese based news website Global Times.

The two nations discussed increasing cooperation in cracking down on cross-border crimes, such as internet fraud and gambling, which damage the safety and interests of people and undermine social stability and order.

Chen urged the Myanmar side to take illegal activities seriously and work with China to combat them, citing recent cases of Chinese personnel illegally entering Myanmar linked to online fraud and gambling.

The Myanmar side stated that they are willing to collaborate with China and neighboring countries to form a joint force to combat such crimes, safeguard friendly cooperation, and ensure people's safety.

Media reports suggest that after the coup, Myanmar has been facing various social problems, including online gambling, murder, kidnapping, human trafficking, and illegal immigration. Criminal groups lure people from neighboring countries to Myanmar with promises of high salaries.

OVER 400 WORKERS FIRED AHEAD OF WATER FESTIVAL HOLIDAY BY FITEX GARMENT FACTORY, SAYS WORKER FEDERATION



Garment factory worker in Yangon. Photo: AFP

More than 400 workers have been fired from the Fitex (Myanmar) Garment Manufacturing Co., Ltd, which is located in the Shwe Lin Ban Industrial Zone, Hlaing Thayar Township, Yangon Region, according to the Federation of General Workers Myanmar (FGWM).

The factory is primarily focused on producing the AMISU brand, and is owned by a Chinese company.

According to some dismissed workers, more than 400 workers will be allegedly terminated by the company in anticipation of the upcoming water festival holiday, known as Thingyan, in mid-April, as the company purportedly did not want to provide holiday pay. This is not the first instance of such action, as some workers were also reportedly dismissed shortly before the previous Thingyan holiday in April 2022.

A female garment worker from the company said in the condition of anonymity: "Some of the workers were informed to work only until 12 April. The factory did not even post a notice letter in advance. The employer did not provide transparency to the workers, and they fired more than 400 workers out of fear of having to pay Thingyan holiday wages. In the same way in 2022, the employer did not want to pay the holiday pay, so the employer fired some workers in the same way as it is now."

The terminated workers will not receive any compensation from the factory, according to the workers. So far, Fitex Myanmar has not been held accountable for their actions.

FGWM chairperson Moe Sandar Myint told Mizzima, "There was no transparent explanation to the workers about the layoffs. On 12 April, the workers will have to quit their jobs without receiving any compensation."

The Chinese-owned Fitex garment factory reportedly forced some workers to work overtime against their will and threatened termination for missing a single day of work. This factory has been accused of violating multiple labour rights, including mistreating workers.

Moe Sandar Myint has stated that the number of unemployed individuals in Myanmar will continue to rise due to the military dictatorship and exploitative employers, and that the main culprit behind the increase in unemployment is the junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

"Since the military coup, forming unions has been prohibited and our FGWM that supports workers has been declared an illegal association. As a result, openly addressing workers' issues has become challenging. Despite these obstacles, FGWM is doing what it can to help with labour problems. Due to the military dictatorship and exploitative employers, the unemployment rate in Myanmar will only increase."

In 2022, the garment sector of Myanmar reportedly had the highest rate of labour rights violations at 78 per cent, followed by the food sector at 8.1 per cent.

CHINESE BUSINESSES INVITED TO INVEST IN MYANMAR



Chinese car maker.
Photo: AFP

The Myanmar Military Council has called for Chinese business people to invest in Myanmar's three main special economic zones.

Sein Win Aung, the Chairman of the China-Myanmar Friendship Association, invited Chinese business people to invest in the special economic zones (SEZs) of Kyaukphyu, Thilawa and Dawei.

All three of the SEZs are based around ports.

Thilawa SEZ is located just south of Yangon and became operational at the end of September 2015 and was originally developed by the Myanmar government and Japanese companies.

Kyaukphyu SEZ, is being developed on Ramree Island in Rakhine State. It was first announced in 2013 and was originally a venture between the governments of China and Myanmar but it has now been taken over by private developers. Gas and oil pipelines run from Kyaukphyu to Yunnan in China.

The Dawei SEZ was first implemented in 2008, but there has not been much progress since then and little has been established there. The Italian-Thai Development company was originally given the contract to develop Dawei SEZ, but it was relieved of the contract in 2013 after it failed to find investors and the project was taken on by the Myanmar and Thai governments who are still looking for investors willing to restart the project.

GOLD MARKET EXPERTS PREDICT A NEW RECORD-HIGH LEVEL OF THE GOLD PRICE

From Myanmar to New York, gold markets are alert to the changing price of gold.

The gold price is rising in the global market in the backdrop of the bank collapses of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) in US and Credit Suisse in Switzerland and the prices of the US dollar and US bonds and securities are also falling.

Three US banks have collapsed and another fourth bank is on the brink of collapse and then the gold price rose sharply in the global market.

The capital flight is experienced in the global stock markets with the expectation of another bank collapse in the US and then the investors shifted their investments to gold and then the gold price on 14 March Tuesday was over the US\$ 1,900 per troy ounce level.

Three US banks namely Silicon Valley Bank, Silvergate Bank and Signature Bank collapsed in a week and then the fourth bank, San Francisco based Financial Republic Bank, is on the brink of collapse.

In the Myanmar domestic market, the price of 24 carat gold rose up to 2,950,000 kyats per tical (approx. 16.3 gms) and then the Military Council's Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM) and Yangon Gold Entrepreneur Association (YGEA) are waiting for gold prices to fall back.



Photo: Jinming Pan

The CBM made an announcement on 20 March which says that the gold price fluctuations in the domestic market is not connected with the global market as the country is not importing and exporting of gold from the global market and also it says that the gold prices in spot market in the country posted on social media by gold traders are unofficial.

YGEA who is working under the directives given by the Military Council also issued a statement which says that the domestic gold market has no connection with the global market so that the gold prices mentioned in media are unofficial, echoing the CBM's announcement.

A gold trader commented on these announcements as saying the domestic gold price

has been set daily on the daily gold price and dollar exchange rate.

YGEA sets its gold reference price at 2,325,600 kyats per tical for 24 carat gold on 23 March but the gold is traded at around 2,950,000 kyats per tical in the open market.

The current gold price in the global market is US\$ 1,974 per ounce as of Friday.

CNBC reported that the gold reached an all-time high of US\$ 2,075 per ounce in August 2020 and the metal market experts forecast that it may reach the new record high level of US\$ 2,200 per ounce.

Penrose Thitsa

US IMPOSES FRESH SANCTIONS ON MYANMAR DEFENSE SECTOR OVER AIR ATTACKS ON CIVILIANS

The US Treasury Department has imposed fresh sanctions on six entities and two individuals involved in Myanmar's defense sector, particularly its air attacks on civilians, reported Aljazeera.

Among these are firms responsible for importing, storing and distributing aviation fuel to the country's military.

The sanctions come in response to Myanmar military's continuing atrocities since taking power in 2021. Since then, air attacks have become more frequent, with civilian areas being targeted using unguided munitions and rockets.

The Myanmar military has even been accused of war crimes.

According to Aljazeera, the US Treasury has sanctioned several firms, including Sia Sun Group, which had previously been sanctioned by Canada and the European Union; Asia Sun Trading Co Ltd, a company that had been designated for sanctions by the UK earlier this year; and Cargo Link Petroleum Logistics Co Ltd, a transportation firm that distributes jet fuel to the military throughout Myanmar and was also designated by the UK earlier this year.

In addition, two individuals were also sanctioned. The Treasury described Tun Min Latt as a close associate of the military regime's leader. Tun Min Latt's wife, Win Min Soe, was also sanctioned and is the co-owner, with her husband, of three business entities: Star Sapphire group of companies, Star Sapphire Trading Company Ltd, and Singapore-based Star Sapphire Group PTE Ltd.

In November last year, Amnesty International called on aviation fuel suppliers to suspend shipments to Myanmar to prevent the military from using the supplies to conduct air attacks on civilian targets.

That report documented 16 air attacks that took place between March 2021 and August 2022 that killed at least 15 civilians, injured at least 36 others, and destroyed homes, religious buildings, schools, health facilities, and a camp for displaced people.





Hindu festival in Yangon

A Hindu devotee throws flowers while sitting on a blade ladder during the Sri Maha Muniswarar temple festival in Yangon on 19 March. The annual festival of the Sri Maha Muniswarar temple is celebrated in the last month of the Hindu calendar.

Photo: EPA

MYANMAR MIGRANTS FEATURE IN SEA-JUNCTION BANGKOK PHOTO EXHIBITION



Photos of Myanmar migrants working in Thailand by John Hulme.

Copyright John Hulme

Several hundred thousand women and men migrant workers from Myanmar and Cambodia are now employed at different levels within the seafood supply chain in Thailand, working precariously under various temporary labour migration regimes and precarious living and work conditions.

Their plight is highlighted in a photo exhibition entitled, “Migrants’ Labour and Lives in Thailand’s Blue Economy”, run by SEA-Junction in Bangkok.

The photos taken by Thailand-based photographer John Hulme over the course of a decade focus on the two major fishing and sea-processing locations Rayong and Ranong with a majority of workers from Myanmar and Cambodia.

The exhibition is being held on the First Floor of the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) and runs from 28 March to 9 April, from 10:00 to 20:00 every day.

The event is organized by SEA-Junction and ILO’s Ship to Shore Rights South East Asia funded by the European Union.



Photos of Myanmar migrants working in Thailand by John Hulme.

Copyright. John Hulme





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