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HOLDING THE MYANMAR JUNTA LEADER ACCOUNTABLE

The buck stops with the man at the top. As the Myanmar junta ratchet up their military attacks, calls are growing shrill for junta leader Min Aung Hlaing to be held to account for crimes against humanity.

Min Aung Hlaing, the leader of Myanmar's junta army, is facing heavy criticism from across the world for his alleged crimes. Evidence of systematic attacks on civilians by the Myanmar junta army has been documented since the coup in February 2021, leading to hundreds of deaths and thousands more fleeing their homes. The United Nations Human Rights Council has called for an investigation into these attacks with a view to holding those responsible accountable. But more needs to be done.

Myanmar Accountability Project (MAP), in a submission to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in December 2022 urged The Hague tribunal to open a criminal investigation "into the widespread and systematic use of torture as part of the violent crackdown against the protest movement" in Myanmar.

MAP director said in December that the leader of the illegal coup is criminally responsible for the security forces under his command committing mass atrocity crimes. "The prospects of a conviction are good and we believe that grounds for issuing an arrest warrant against Min Aung Hlaing are overwhelming," he told media.

After all, the buck stops with Min Aung Hlaing.

This drive to hold the Myanmar junta leader liable in court in The Hague comes on top of the ongoing case against him and the Myanmar military over alleged genocide against the Muslim Rohingya community in Rakhine State that led to thousands being killed and injured and over 700,000

fleeing to safety in Bangladesh.

The charges against Min Aung Hlaing and other members of Myanmar's military junta over the Rohingya debacle include crimes against humanity, such as murder, deportation and persecution, as well as genocide.

It is important to note that Myanmar is not a signatory to the Rome Statute, which established the ICC, and therefore does not fall under the court's jurisdiction. However, the ICC can still investigate and prosecute individuals for crimes committed in non-member states if the crimes have an impact on a member state. In this case, Bangladesh, which is a member of the ICC, has been directly affected by the forced displacement of Rohingya refugees.

With the post-coup violence against the people of Myanmar, the international community must take decisive and swift action to end the violence in Myanmar and ensure that all those responsible for these crimes against humanity are held accountable.

But unlike the ICC case against Russian President Vladimir Putin – in which an arrest warrant was issued in March – there is far less political will to deal with the butcher of Myanmar.

It is essential that justice is seen to be done so as to prevent this kind of horrific abuse and atrocities from occurring again.

The world cannot turn a blind eye any longer; it must act now before more innocent lives are taken by the brutal regime of Min Aung Hlaing.

The challenge is to get beyond statements, letters, submissions and other intermediate steps to fast-track judicial action to bring the man at the top to account.

EDITORIAL

mizzima WEEKLY

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MIZZIMA MAGAZINE

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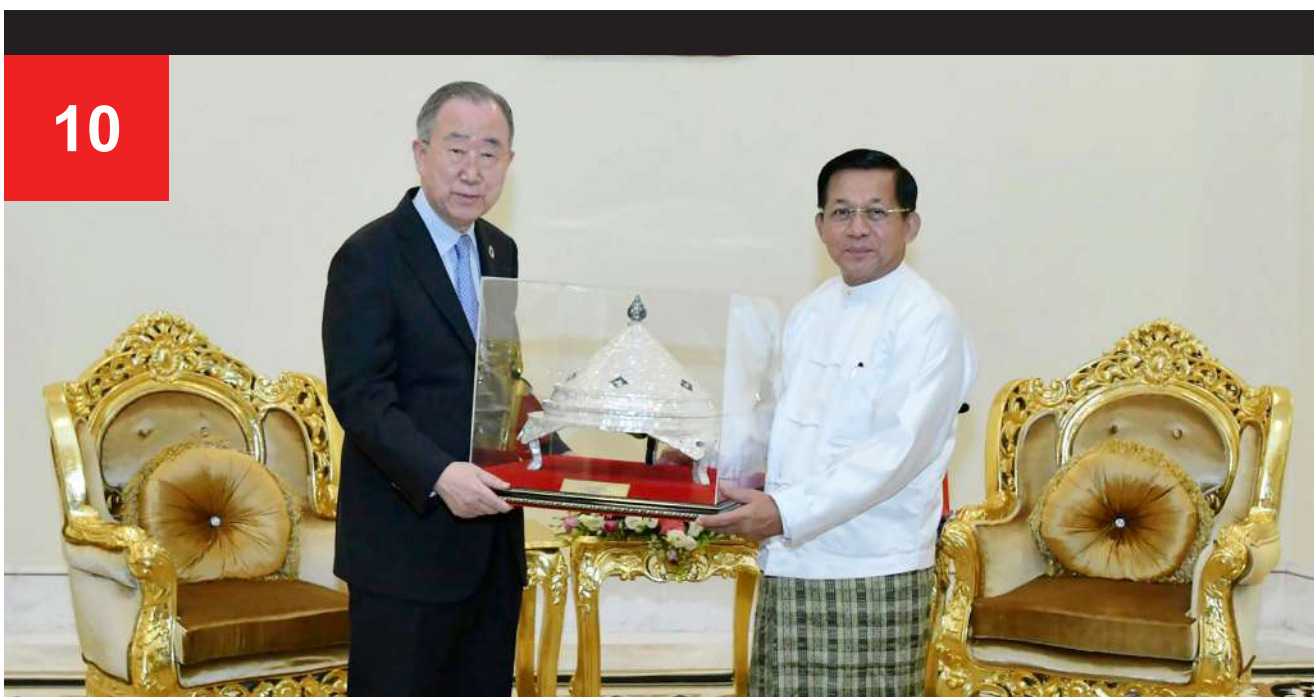
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Cover photo of Ban Ki-moon and Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing by EPA

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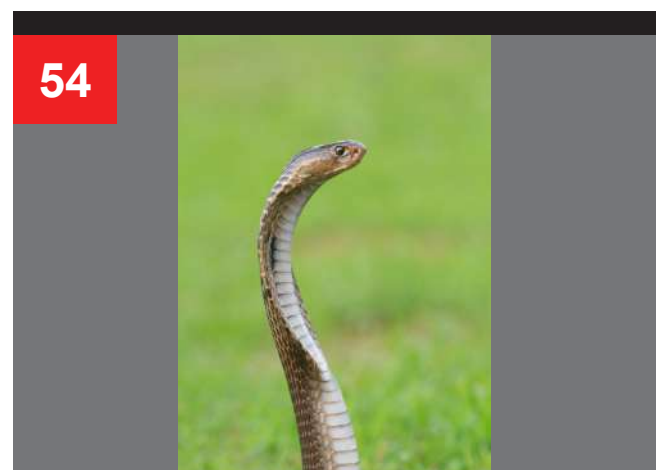
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HOT, HOT SUMMER

A water vendor pushes his trailer along the street in Yangon and Myanmar citizens swelter amidst high temperatures and long power cuts.

Photo: AFP

IN FOCUS



SAGAING ARTILLERY ATTACK KILLS 12 MYANMAR JUNTA SOLDIERS

A fundraising event called the “Revolutionary Nway Oo Thingyan Festival” was held in Kobe City, Japan, to support internally displaced people (IDPs) and the people’s defense forces (PDFs), in Myanmar on 16 April.

The fundraiser drew more than 2,500 Burmese and 300 Japanese. According to one of the organisers, the event was originally scheduled to take place in a park in Osaka City, but because of the venue’s capacity restriction of 500 people, it had to be moved to Kobe City.

Speaking before the event, one of the organisers, U Kaung Chit Thae, the vice chairman of the Myanmar Nationalities’ Support Organisation said: “The fundraiser’s goal is to support the Myanmar-based volunteer organisations IDPs, PDF, and others. This event is not being planned for fun; we are not even playing with water. Antiphonal chants and a motivational speech will also be performed at the event.”

He said that 50 per cent of the funds received from the event would be donated to the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management under the National Unity Government (NUG) and the remaining

50 per cent would be donated to local resistance forces that are actually working on the ground.

One of the leaders of Myanmar Relief Center (Japan) who came to the event, Khae Konaka Osan, said of the event: “Some people think that we are organizing this event for fun. But we are organising this event to support one another, share our emotions, and of course, we also supporting necessary organisations in Myanmar.”

Mr. Fujita San, a participant in the Myanmar Relief Centre (Japan), also discussed the rationale behind his organisation’s desire for Burmese individuals to take part in its fundraising event for Myanmar.

“After organising the event, we now know there are lots of Burmese communities in Japan for sure. So, the fundraising event is really helpful for the people in Myanmar and we all need to unite and cooperate to organise similar events in the future with Burmese people”, he said.

Tickets for the festival were priced at 2,000 yen and there were also food stalls selling traditional Burmese food such as Mohinga, Myeik Kat Kay Kike (fried-flat rice noodles).

YANGON: ELECTRICITY RATIONING INCREASES DRINKING WATER PRICES

The price of drinking water has gone up in Yangon since small businesses have been forbidden from using electricity at night between the hours of 5:00 p.m. and 5:00 a.m.

The ruling from the Yangon Electricity Supply Corporation came into effect on 24 April.

Since then, many businesses supplying purified water, ice cream and ice lollies have had to temporarily close because they do not have a regular, predictable supply of electricity.

The owner of an ice cream manufacturing company in Yangon said: “Small-scale ice cream manufacturing businesses like ours have had to put production on hold because of the high costs. Before was better because even though [during the day] the power comes on and off in four-hour cycles, electricity was available all night. Now, because we can’t use electricity after 5:00 p.m. the ice cream melts [overnight] and I lose business.

The price of bottled drinking water in Yangon has also gone up since the nighttime power restrictions came in, according to a Yangon housewife.

She said: “Before, a big 20-litre drinking water bottle was just 500 kyats. The price went up to 600 during the Thingyan festival. Now, it costs 800. Since the weather is so hot, people are drinking more water and a bottle is very quickly finished. The drinking water vendors think that the price has gone up because [the drinking water manufacturers] can no longer work at night.”

There are various brands of drinking water on the market. Now regular 20-litre water bottles are priced at 800-900 kyats a bottle and well-known brands are charging up to 1,200 kyats for a 20-litre bottle of water.

The Yangon Electricity Supply Corporation announced that it will take action against any violations of the nighttime restrictions on electricity usage.

MYANMAR NATIONAL RECAPTURED AFTER ESCAPING FROM MIZORAM PRISON

One of five Myanmar prisoners who escaped from Lunglei Town Prison in Mizoram State, India, was apprehended on 24 April, according to the Zalen News local newspaper.

The captured prisoner, named as Lal Chawimawia, was apprehended by police and local villagers in a shed on a farm between Hnahthial and Thingsai villages at 10:30 p.m. on 24 April.

According to witnesses, prior to Lal Chawimawia's arrest police, local villagers and members of youth organisations blocked off the area where Lal Chawimawia was hiding.

Lal Chawimawia has been charged with the 2021 murder of Vanlalduat, a 52-year-old woman.

He and four other Myanmar nationals being held at Lunglei Town Prison escaped at about 2:00 a.m. on 19 April, by breaking down a prison toilet wall.

Two of the fugitives, Lal Bawih Lian and Do Kap Thang had already been apprehended at a hotel close to Mausen Village at 8:30 p.m. on 20 April.

The remaining two escaped Myanmar prisoners, Hau Deih Cin and Van Nei Thang are still on the run and being hunted by Mizoram police.

POWER OUTAGES CAUSE WATER SHORTAGES IN MANDALAY

Mandalay City is facing water shortages due to long power outages since Thingyan Festival, according to locals.

Electricity is needed to power water pumps which supply households with water, so when there is no power there is no water. At times there has been no water supply in the whole city.

A resident of the Mya Yi Nandar housing estate said: "Water cannot be pumped up from the well due to the lack of electricity. Residents in high-rise apartments have many difficulties."

Except in Mandalay Palace, where junta soldiers and their families live, there have been long power outages in Mandalay since 18 April and on some days power is available for less than an hour.

"The power supply in Mandalay severely declined after the Thingyan festival. On some days there was no electricity supply for 24 hours, so we had no water supply from 20 to 23 April. Some people living close to the river bathed in the river, but most of us have to wait for water to be distributed by civil society organisations", said a local.

Local volunteers are distributing tens of thousands of gallons of water every day in the city, but demand is much higher than supply.

"We are also trying to get a water truck to distribute water. Although the teams are distributing thousands of gallons each day, we cannot supply the demand. We are also distributing water at night time", said a volunteer on condition of anonymity for security reasons.

MYANMAR MIGRANT WORKERS REPATRIATED FROM THAILAND TEST POSITIVE FOR COVID-19

Of 171 Myanmar who were repatriated from Thailand after serving prison terms nine tested positive for Covid, according to civil society organisations (CSOs) in the Myanmar border town of Kawthaung.

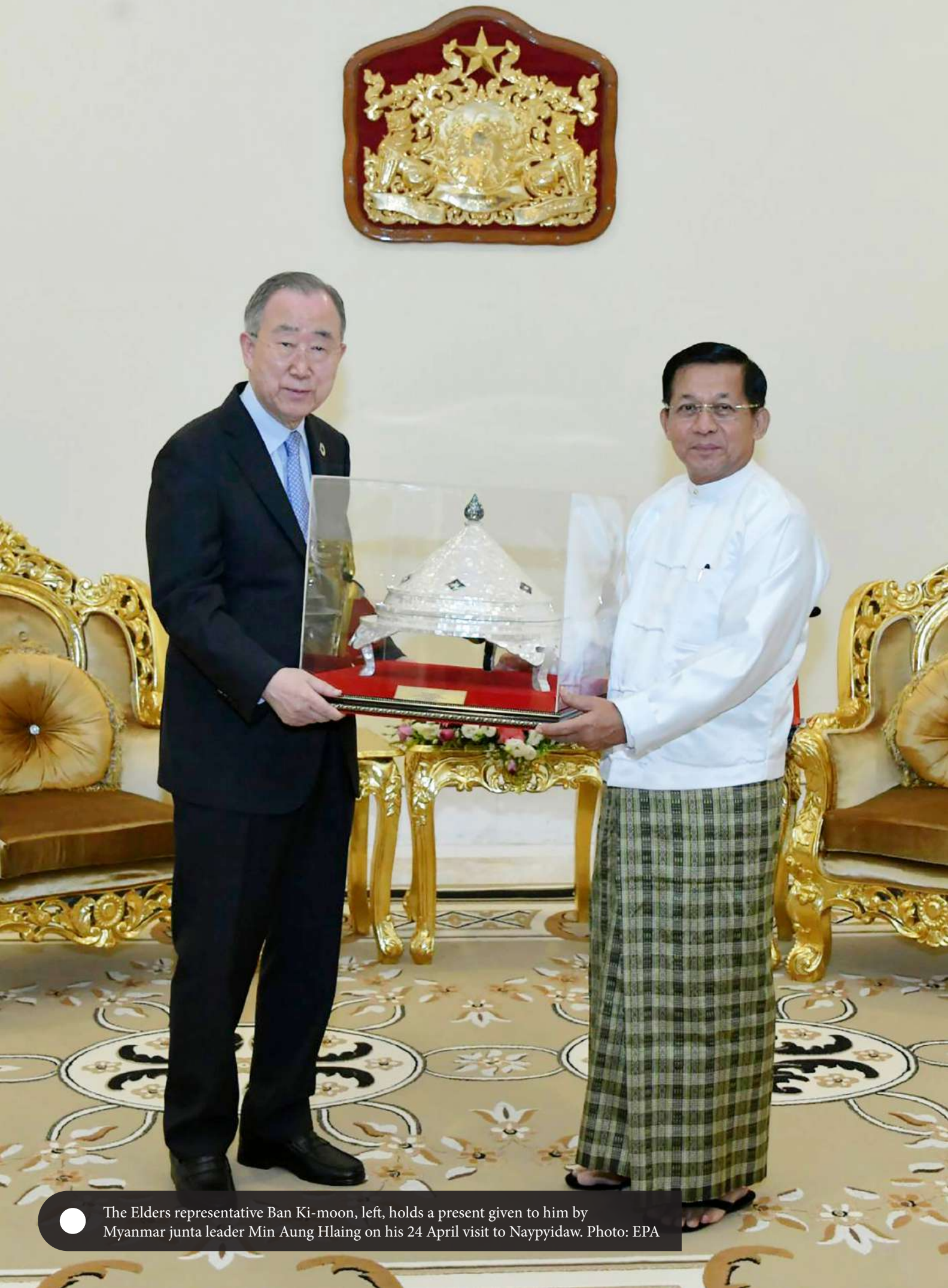
The migrant workers were sent through the Thai port of Ranong, just across the Kra Buri river from Kawthaung.

"Amongst the returnees to the country nine tested positive for COVID-19," said a member of the Kawthaung Red Cross Society.

The infected people were taken to Kawthaung Public Hospital by the Red Cross.

Of the repatriated people 126 were men and 45 were women.

Since the beginning of 2023, a total of 973 Myanmar migrant workers have been held in Ranong Prison before being repatriated to Kawthaung in three groups.



The Elders representative Ban Ki-moon, left, holds a present given to him by Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing on his 24 April visit to Naypyidaw. Photo: EPA



FLURRY OF DIPLOMACY

**Controversy erupts as VIPs visit
Myanmar junta chief**

Former United Nations chief Ban Ki-moon raised hackles last week in Myanmar and around the world by dropping in to Naypyidaw to speak to the junta leader Min Aung Hlaing and the generals, albeit under a call for peace.

Ban arrived on 23 April as a representative of The Elders group of world leaders founded by Nelson Mandela, which works to promote peace and defuse conflicts. He stayed overnight and left the following day.

His mission comes at a crucial time as the Myanmar military steps up its hot season offensive against their people, and as various governments and international bodies – including the United Nations – are growing shrill in their calls for a solution to the “Myanmar crisis” – effectively a full-scale civil war. Earlier in the month, Myanmar fighter jets and helicopter gunships hammered Pazigy village in Sagaing Region slaughtering over 170 people including women and children.

Ban met Min Aung Hlaing in the military-built capital Naypyidaw and “constructively and openly exchanged views on the latest developments in Myanmar,” according to the junta’s information team. It did not give details on the talks. Ban also met with junta-appointed defence minister Mya Tun Oo according to a statement from the junta.

Both Mya Tun Oo and Min Aung Hlaing have

been sanctioned by the United States since the junta’s coup in February 2021.

What is clear from the Ban visit – and the criticism it elicited – is that it did nothing to bring peace and helped the Myanmar junta score diplomatic points as the generals desperately seek international legitimacy.

Anger from Myanmar citizens and other supporters blew up over a photo of Ban receiving a present from Min Aung Hlaing, “a man who has blood on his hands,” according to critics. Social media was awash with negative memes.

To add further insult to injury, Ban was unable to meet with ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi. It is unclear whether Ban asked for a meeting with the Nobel Laureate or not. The former leader, elected in a landslide victory in 2020, is serving 33 years in prison on a number of spurious charges.

Ban, as Deputy Chair of The Elders had the following to say about his Naypyidaw visit: “I came to Myanmar to urge the military to adopt an immediate cessation of violence, and start constructive dialogue among all parties concerned. My meetings were exploratory. I will do all I can to help the people of Myanmar secure the peace, prosperity and freedom they deserve.”

Ban, who also served as South Korean foreign minister, travelled to Myanmar several times during his



The Thai foreign ministry delegation with Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing. The visiting delegation focused on bilateral relations, illegal human and drugs trafficking, and the haze affecting both Myanmar and Thailand. Photo: EPA

time as UN Secretary General. In 2009 he visited to pressure then junta leader Than Shwe to release Aung San Suu Kyi, when she was held under house arrest, but the general brazenly snubbed his attempts to visit her.

In 2016, with Aung San Suu Kyi out of jail and serving as Myanmar's de facto civilian leader, he returned to solidify international support for her push to sign peace agreements with the country's myriad ethnic rebel groups.

Aung San Suu Kyi was detained again at the start of the 2021 coup, which plunged the country into tumult and tanked the economy.

The Monday meeting with the head of the regime, though well intentioned, raised the hackles of many people around the world, including the people of Myanmar and several foreign commentators.

Ban was not the only recent VIP to visit Naypyidaw. On 21 April, Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai visited to meet with Min Aung Hlaing and other officials, though his low-key visit appeared focused on pressing bilateral issues – not the Myanmar crisis per se.

"Both sides cordially discussed cooperation among Myanmar, Thailand and Laos to reduce trans-boundary smog pollution, peace and stability in the border regions of both countries and plans to cooper-

ate in the eradication of human trafficking, drug trafficking and arms smuggling," the Myanmar state-run news said.

Ban's visit did, though, remind the world that the Myanmar issue is of concern on an international level.

There is a sense of desperation that more cannot be done to rein in the brutal Myanmar junta, whose troops are torturing civilians, literally lopping off people's heads and burning down their villages.

Criticism has been leveled at the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) over their Five-Point Consensus, signed by ASEAN members including Naypyidaw in 2021, that has failed achieve anything so far.

Regional players have been holding alternative talks, as seen in last week's Track 1.5 Dialogue held in Delhi with low level officials from the Myanmar junta, indicating the growing unease felt by neighbours, particularly India, over the Myanmar crisis and how the troubles have the potential to spill over the border.

What is clear from the response from the Ban visit is how engagement with the regime is leading nowhere.

Such is the dismay over the Myanmar crisis that it appears a red line has been drawn in the sand with critics claiming any political engagement or visit with this illegal regime merely helps convey legitimacy.

At least on paper, the international community is concerned.

The United Nations in 2022 condemned the actions of the Myanmar junta and a range of countries have imposed sanctions.

But questions have been raised over the efficacy of VIPs dropping in to see the generals.

UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Ms Noeleen Heyzer requested a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi during her visit to the country in August last year. The military rebuffed the request and Heyzer later vowed she would not visit the country again unless she was allowed to meet the Nobel laureate. The UN envoy came in for criticism for her visit that many said failed to achieve anything and gave the junta a level of legitimacy.

Critics say Ms Heyzer should do more to engage with the National Unity Government (NUG) which is a clear representative of the majority of the Myanmar people.

Meanwhile, the Myanmar generals will continue to play games. Their claim that they will hold a national election is yet another vehicle to allow them to retain power.

Assessing the outcome of the visit, Ban should realize that this was just one more handshake to prop up an illegal dictatorship.



Reporting: Mizzima, AFP, Bangkok Post

THE ELDERS EXPLAIN BAN KI-MOON MEETING WITH MIN AUNG HLAING



The Elders organisation has issued a statement following the Naypyitaw meeting between their representative, Ban Ki-moon, and the Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing.

Below is the statement:

Ban Ki-moon, Deputy Chair of The Elders and former Secretary-General of the United Nations, visited Myanmar on 23-24 April 2023, to find a path to an end to violence and establishing a peaceful, democratic, inclusive and legitimate government.

He met Myanmar's military leaders and former President Thein Sein to discuss the situation, and emphasised the importance of all parties playing a role in securing a lasting solution, including the National Unity Government.

"I came to Myanmar to urge the military to adopt an immediate cessation of violence, and start constructive dialogue among all parties concerned," Ban Ki-moon said.

"My meetings were exploratory. I will do all I can to help the people of Myanmar secure the peace, prosperity and freedom they deserve."

The visit was at the invitation of the Myanmar military. In

his meetings in Naypyidaw, Ban Ki-moon stressed the urgency of making progress on implementation of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) Five-Point Consensus and last December's United Nations Security Council Resolution 2669. He supported the international community's calls for the immediate release by the Myanmar military of all arbitrarily detained prisoners, for constructive dialogue, and for utmost restraint from all parties.

Ban Ki-moon reiterated the strong international condemnation of the recent military air strike in Sagaing region, which is estimated to have killed more than 160 civilians, including women and children.

He warned that elections must only be held when conditions are in place for them to be free and fair.

Holding elections under current conditions risks further violence and division, and the results not being recognised by the people of Myanmar, ASEAN and the wider international community.

Support for a full transition to democracy and civilian rule has been a feature of The Elders' engagement with Myanmar over the past decade, and Ban Ki-moon

has a personal history of supporting Myanmar's progress when UN Secretary-General.

"ASEAN Member States and the wider international community need to show unity and resolve in their commitment to peace and democracy in Myanmar, which is a source of serious international concern. With patient determination, I believe a way forward can be found out of the current crisis. The military must take the first steps," Ban Ki-moon said.

The subject of Ban Ki-moon's visit also came up during the 16th National Unity Government (NUG) meeting on 25 April. At that meeting, the acting president of the NUG, Duwa Lashi La, said: "The meeting [between Ban Ki-moon and Min Aung Hlaing] shows recognition of the terrorist military which is brutally killing people and destroying property. The meeting was unethical. The international community seems to be trying to tame the junta regime. They approached successive military regimes in the same way, which caused the dictatorship in the country to last longer."

The Elders is a group of world leaders founded by Nelson Mandela, which works to promote peace and defuse conflicts.

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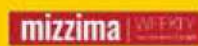
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TRACK 1.5 INDIA MEETING DELEGATES CALL FOR REDUCTION IN MYANMAR VIOLENCE

Foreign policy experts and representatives from several nations neighbouring Myanmar meeting in Delhi called for reduction of violence by all sides in that conflict-ridden country this week, PTI reports.

The participants at the second round of “Track 1.5” discussions on Myanmar carried out a comprehensive review of the situation after the Myanmar military junta resorted to air strikes on Pazagyi village in Sagaing region,

massacring over 170 people.

The dialogue was hosted by the Indian Council for World Affairs (ICWA). The first round of the dialogue was held in Bangkok in March.

In the political dialogue realm, meetings that include members other than current government officials are termed Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues.

The Delhi meeting included Indian officials, Myanmar junta midlevel representatives, and

officials from ASEAN countries, namely Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, and Indonesia as ASEAN’s current chair.

The attending countries agreed that this Track 1.5 process should be “complementary” to ASEAN’s own efforts to try to resolve the crisis, a source told Asia Nikkei. Both India and Bangladesh have complained about the slow progress exhibited by ASEAN in tackling this crisis that negatively impacts the region.



Indian PM Narendra Modi, right, in an earlier meeting with Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing. Photo: AFP/PIB

Sources said the Delhi meeting participants called for reduction of violence by all sides and underlined the need for creating political space for dialogue in Myanmar, PTI reports.

The discussions covered the current situation in Myanmar, reduction of violence, countering transnational crimes, national reconciliation, and delivery of humanitarian aid, according to the news agency.

It was agreed that delivery of humanitarian aid to Myanmar is to be expedited and that countries of the region need to continue supporting ASEAN's efforts. The participants also agreed to continue

the dialogue.

This week has seen an uptick in dialogue with the Myanmar military junta in Naypyidaw including the visit of the former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai and his special envoy on Myanmar, Pornpimol Kanchanalak. Ban says he is pursuing peace but has been rapped for his visit to Naypyidaw, as a member of The Elders, with critics claiming it helps provide legitimacy to an illegitimate regime.

Kim Joliffe, a Myanmar analyst, told Asia Nikkei that the Track 1.5 dialogue has delivered a debilitating blow to ASEAN's credibility and clout as the institution that can lead the world's response to Myanmar. He told the magazine that alternative initiatives have undermined ASEAN and left key stakeholders such as Myanmar's parallel National Unity Government (NUG) in the cold.

The Delhi Track 1.5 meeting followed an earlier meeting in Bangkok in March.

Thai commentator Kavi Chongkittavorn, writing for the Bangkok Post, said there were more divergences than convergences in views that emerged from the Track 1.5 Dialogue held between ASEAN members and dialogue partners, including representatives from Myanmar, at this Bangkok meeting.

The commentator noted that at this juncture, both ASEAN and Myanmar have their own modus operandi to follow. Last November, ASEAN reconfirmed its

Five Point Consensus (5PC) after a thorough review.

The regional body reaffirmed its guidelines toward a peaceful settlement, which critics said little progress has been made since its promulgation in April 2021. For the military junta in Naypyidaw, the 5PC is their preferred pathway, Kavi Chongkittavorn said.

This is despite the fact that the junta has not been adhering to the 5PC guidelines aimed at dialogue and pursuing peace.

Myanmar has been in crisis since the February 2021 military coup, with hostilities picking up pace as the junta attempts to crack down on the myriad resistance groups, and seek an election that it hopes will provide a fig-leaf of democratic legitimacy over military rule.

Myanmar is one of India's strategic neighbours and it shares a 1,640-kilometre-long border with a number of northeastern states, including militancy-hit Nagaland and Manipur. Indian PM Narendra Modi has been pursuing an Act East policy that seeks to engage with India's eastern and south east Asian neighbours. The Myanmar crisis has placed India in a quandary as it seeks to look east but finds that thrust means engagement with whoever is in power in Naypyidaw.

The Myanmar junta may be viewed internationally as a pariah state but many governments still remain engaged with the generals in Naypyidaw.



ASSESSING PROSPECTS FOR THE SPRING REVOLUTION ON THE EVE OF THE RAINY SEASON



● Activist Igor Blazevic. Photo: Facebook

Myanmar's Spring Revolution is both impressive and tragic according to rights campaigner Igor Blazevic.

In this recent interview with Sophia, assistant editor of the Federal Journal Myanmar, Blazevic assesses progress by the Myanmar resistance to oust the illegal military junta.

SOPHIA: The current Spring Revolution has reached a period of more than two years. It has been two years since the Federal Charter was enacted. It is two years since the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG). So, if you review the current Spring Revolution, how do you see it?

The Spring Revolution is impressive. It is heroic. It is tragic. And it is hopeful.

When the Myanmar military staged the coup, they were confident that they will suppress protests in few months and that at this point of time Min Aung Hlaing will be elected as President behaving as if he is the king. This

did not happen. Every single diplomat based in Yangon and the UN agencies expats believed that it was a pity what was happening, but they believed that it is inevitable to deal with junta because the junta will anyhow prevail at the end over the people's protests. The determination and courage of the Spring Revolution proved that they were wrong.

There is no need to explain why the military's war of terror against the nation is tragic.

The Spring Revolution is hopeful because of the courage and readiness of too many people in Myanmar to take absolute risk and endure enormous hardship in order to finally gain their freedom. Their moral and collective strength is bigger than the terror which the criminal, kleptocratic, mafia regime of Min Aung Hlaing is able to inflict.

With just a bit concrete assistance from the free world, neighbours and ASEAN, the struggle of the people of Myanmar for freedom would last just a few more months. Without that assistance the struggle will last longer and will be more painful, but there is no way Min Aung Hlaing's criminal junta can gain control. They can only be defeated and hopefully brought to justice.

The military is increasingly committing ugly crimes against civilians. Massacres are extremely traumatic but they do not give any real military gains to the junta. In a situation in which the military cannot suppress determined and stubborn armed guerrilla resistance, the military is targeting civilians. The brutality of the atrocities is trying to hide the profound vulnerability of the sit tat (military). Behind the shocking pictures of massacres, there is something very important going on. Multiple resistance forces are successfully "bleeding" the junta. The Military is

in a very bad position; especially once the rainy season comes. The junta is losing the Chin and Karen states and also large parts of Sagaing.

Increasingly they are under irresistible pressure in Karen State as well. Kachin and Arakan are piece by piece strengthening their proto-state from the bottom up.

The military has a simple problem they cannot solve – manpower. They have too many small units spread around a huge country. They have no reserves for re-enforcement. They are struggling with recruitment and supplies. On the other side, cooperation between EROs and PDFs is constantly increasing. The resistance is on a learning curve and is gradually increasing its capacity.

The brutality of the atrocities is trying to hide this profound vulnerability of the sit tat. If the pressure of resistance will continue, the military will sooner or later implode from the bottom-up.

SOPHIA: How would describe what kind of revolution the Spring Revolution is?

Initial drivers of the Spring Revolution have been young aspirational generation (Gen Z), middle class urban professionals (CDM-ers) and "Lady voters". The Myanmar Spring Revolution started primarily as the typical urban, middle class and youth non-violent, civic resistance.

However, the brutality of the military response to these non-violent urban protests has transformed the character of anti-junta uprising. With the need of people to defend themselves from military terror and with the shift to armed, guerilla resistance, the Spring Revolution largely became a rural revolution.

There is one more very

important thing we need to always have in mind in order to properly understand what is going on in Myanmar. The Spring Revolution is just one struggle and one dynamic evolving since the coup, but not the only one. We also have parallel struggle of the ethnic stakeholders for their self-rule and self-determination. This is not the same struggle as the Spring Revolution. It is complementary struggle, but not the same. This struggle started long, long before the Spring Revolution, and it has its own dynamic, its own logic and its own goals. To make things even more complicated, this struggle of ethnic stakeholders for their self-rule and self-determination is not one homogenous unified dynamic.

Political and military leadership of different ethnic groups are making different calculations how to achieve their short-term and longer-term goals.

So, what we have is a very complex dynamic in which we do not have one revolution. But we have the Spring Revolution that is trying to remove the military from power and we have multiple already long-lasting revolutions that are aiming to fulfil self-rule aspirations of the ethnic nationalities. Those different revolutions are partly convergent, but they are not the same. It requires both wisdom and responsibility on the side of leaders to keep those different revolutions together, so that overall the anti-junta uprising has enough strength to defeat and remove the junta.

SOPHIA: What are determinant factors to achieve the goals of the revolution?

There are many factors that are important and it is impossible to take one of them and say that that one is more important than others. There is no silver bullet. The outcome of the current

struggle against the military will be decided by the interplay of many different factors. Let me mention some of them.

People's support is critically important. The resistance to the junta has come this far because of the will and determination of the people. The SAC (State Administration Council) is trying hard to create the impression of "normalization" in urban centres and is ruthlessly trying to make support for the revolution extremely costly for people in the rural areas. In spite of that, it seems to me that the core support of people is likely to continue in spite of the hardship. The diaspora will remain mobilized as well.

However, it is critically important to keep participation and hope alive. Small victories matter. Bigger victories matter even more. Positive, hopeful narratives matter a lot. Bravery of youth protesters and of the guerilla soldiers keeps alive the revolutionary "social contract" for the whole nation. Their readiness to undertake the highest risk possible, the risk of losing lives, is putting a high moral imperative on everybody else. The new "social contract" is spelt out like this - if they, our brave kids, are ready to do so much, then every single one of us should do at least something.

It is also important to celebrate victories, and to turn pain into determination, victims into heroes. It is important to sustain strong civic and youth, the non-armed dimension of the anti-junta resistance in order to keep on mobilizing the general population.

Joint collective actions are very important; we need to practice them constantly. A myriad of highly motivated and creative Spring Revolution actors should keep on taking initiatives and doing their own campaigns and at the same time they all need, as

much as they can, to participate in joint campaigns.

This combination of horizontal diversity and capacity to coordinate collective actions is what is the source of enormous strength of the Spring Revolution.

We also need to be realistic about what to expect from the international community, in order to avoid demoralizing disappointments. There are no quick game changers. The Spring Revolution must continue to bet on determination and resilience. As Churchill said in the midst of the Second World War: 'If you're going through hell, keep going'.

I think that in this moment it is better not to overburden the struggle with too many demands and agendas. Better not to spend too much time or to disagree about formal agreements and details of how the future without military oppression and terror should look like. Better first to make that future come.

Minimum consensus about a few fundamental principles and strong, inspiring, visionary narratives about a positive, hopeful future is sufficient.

The NLD (National League for Democracy), I think, should boldly commit itself to ethnic self-determination. It is not enough to say we have already done that in this and that document or statement. Better to say it again and again thorough speeches of different NLD and NUG leaders. At the same time, ethnic political and ERO leaders should visibly and publically bet on the common project.

Current operational cooperation between PDFs and EROs is extremely important, but it is also necessary that ethnic leaders publicly speak about the common project of a new Myanmar. We need to project Togetherness both

domestically and internationally.

It is necessary to continue improving operational and tactical cooperation of PDFs and EROs. But at some point of time it will be necessary to undertake a second D-Day - a large coordinated waves of attacks on multiple weaker positions of the sit tat. Something like a Myanmar "Tet Offensive". Currently cooperation between PDFs and EROs is taking place in separate theatres of war. What will be needed is to achieve a strategic capacity to undertake offensives - not "taking territory", but waves of hit and run operations - happening simultaneously in all theatres. This would stretch the sit tat to the breaking point. This would send the shock and awe through the military rank and file. This will make junta loyalists feel extremely insecure. At the same time, if anyhow possible, with specially deployed units, it will be good to hit targets of strategic importance - for example facilities that are critical for junta revenue streams, planes on the airfields, ammunition and fuel depositories, or top brass officers.

What can bring us in the quickest way to this level is visible and confident political alliance among key political and armed groups stakeholders. Such a political alliance will further deny the junta any legitimacy. The political alliance will advance the capacity for military victories. The political alliance can sustain mobilization and organization of the people. And, last but not least, a clear political alliance can shift the position of neighbours and the international community on questions of legitimacy, money and arms.

SOPHIA: How important is the role of local ethnic armed resistance organizations or EAOs in the Spring Revolution?

The role of ethnic armed resistance organizations (EROs),

and not only EROs, but more broadly the role of ethnic stakeholders, both armed as well as political and civic, is of critical importance.

If the NUG will be isolated, it will be defeated. Without the majority of relevant ethnic stakeholders backing and working with the NUG or even being involved in the NUG, the NUG does not have full legitimacy. Without EROs, the PDFs do not have arms, supply routes nor training. Without EAOs, the PDFs do not have sufficient military strength and manpower to inflict serious enough harm to the sit tat and to stretch it. Without the political alliance, international factors will remain unwilling to actively support anti-junta forces.

However, the equation goes the other way around as well. Without armed and civic resistance in Bama lowlands and upper central Myanmar, the EROs are no match for the sit tat either. EROs will always have a hard time to unite in one front, if for no other reason, than because of geography. If the military regime controls the Bama heartlands, all economic assets and the Bama majority as recruitment base, even united ethnic alliance is not sufficient to gain concessions from the junta. The junta's divide-and-rule policy will always be more effective.

However, the alliance between the Bama PDF resistance and the ERO resistance, supported by the population at large and the diaspora, are capable of stretching the sit tat to the breaking point of the SAC and removal of MAH(Min Aung Hlaing). Once that happens, a completely new history of Myanmar will start. That will be like the new independence, like defeating the Japanese fascist occupying army. The opportunity for a new start.

SOPHIA: How much internation-

al support has the Spring Revolution been able to obtain?

The outcome of the current war in Myanmar - junta's war of terror and aggression against the population, and self-defensive and liberating war of people against military dictatorship will be decided primarily by dynamics inside the country. Foreign, outside factors will play a secondary role.

So far international actors have abstained from intervening in order to solve the crisis. They have been sitting-and-waiting for fires inside Myanmar to extinguish by themselves. Myanmar neighbours and ASEAN have been in a containing game. They have tried to limit the negative impact of the Myanmar crisis on themselves instead of seriously trying to do something meaningful to solve the crisis.

Myanmar neighbours, other Asian countries and the rest of international actors still cannot imagine Myanmar without the military. They think the military must be part of a "negotiated solution". Only when it becomes obvious that the junta will probably lose, they will change their approach. Not before.

A credible image of a winning anti-alliance will shift the position of neighbours and international players on questions of legitimacy, money and arms. No amount of junta atrocities will wake them up from the current passivity. They will express regret, they might make the junta even more of a pariah with whom they do not want to deal, but they will not actively support the anti-junta struggle in any meaningful way. It is not sympathy with people's suffering which will move neighbours and regional actors but the prospect of an anti-junta alliance prevailing.

There are three main biases that are preventing outside actors from supporting the Spring

Revolution.

One we can describe as the "authoritarian bias": Authoritarians support authoritarians, simple like that.

That is why Thailand, China, Russia, Cambodia, Vietnam support the junta. But even they do that in a limited way. Nobody really wants to be seen as too close to the junta.

Western democracies are far away, they have other priorities and have no core interests in Myanmar.

The second prejudice we can call the "Goliath bias, namely the belief and experience that brutally repressive regimes prevail at the end over people's uprisings. That in real life Goliath will always prevail over David. This is what happened in Egypt, Venezuela, Belarus, Hong Kong. Entrenched, resourceful regimes that kept loyalty of their repressive apparatus at the end suppress with systematic and brutal violence very big, mass protests. So many foreign actors expected that the same would happen in Myanmar as well. This is why the UN agencies, India, Japan and many others are trying to appease the junta in spite of junta crimes. The want to keep their geopolitical and economic eggs in the Myanmar nest.

Lastly, there is the prejudice we can describe as stability bias, namely that pretty much everybody in world politics is concerned about stability. Everybody is afraid of failed states. Many will not tell that openly, but they do prefer "authoritarian stability" over state break-up, chaos, un-governability and multiple civil wars. In today's international politics there is nobody any more who sees protection of democracy and human rights as its priority. Human rights and democracy supporting rhetoric might be still around, but not willingness for hard politics in

favour of democracy and human rights protection.

Everybody cares primarily about their own narrow self-interest, economic, security or geopolitical ones, and everybody is concerned about stability in the world that is becoming increasingly unstable.

Most of the outside actors have a deep prejudice that without the Tatmadaw, Myanmar will be broken up into many small territories controlled by different armed groups and warlords with no central government. What they do not understand is that it is exactly Min Aung Hlaing's junta that is doing what they are afraid of – breaking Myanmar in total chaos and making it a failed state.

I think that the NUG and actors of the Spring Revolution should use a different narrative when engaging with international players. Instead of emphasizing human rights and democracy discourse and instead of trying to rely on assistance because of junta atrocities; what we need to do is to put forward and enforce our own “winning narrative” and our own “stability narrative”.

Key talking points in the “winning narrative” are: We will never give up; the junta is gradually losing and will lose; we will win in the end. Key talking points in the “stability narrative” should be: the junta is the source of state failure and endless war. Min Aung Hlaing's futile effort to consolidate power can never succeed but if he is allowed to continue to wage a war of terror against the civilian population, he can irreparably break the country into a failed state. We, the NUG and EROs, are the alliance which is the only hope for lasting peace and stability in Myanmar.

This should be repeated again and again, in every single communication with international

players, be it policy-makers or media.

What is realistic to expect from neighbours, regional actors and international players? We can only gradually advance our agenda. We can make those currently passively supporting or appeasing the junta to be less and less willing to do so. We can make those who are currently passively supporting the Spring Revolution to be ready to do that a bit more. But nobody from outside will come to help the people of Myanmar defeat and remove MAH and junta. That can be done only by the domestic forces, and to do that, active and committed alliance is necessary.

SOPHIA: What is your opinion about the election planned by the Military Council?

The junta's talk about elections is just a time-buying strategy. They do not really mean to stage elections in the timeframe they are announcing. The SAC is using rhetoric about elections and the pretense of preparing one, to play a game in an effort to gain some legitimacy from countries like China, Thailand and India. The SAC is aware that it cannot organize even sham, staged elections any time soon.

Initially, in the moment of coup, Min Aung Hlaing had a Plan A with elections after two years but in the meantime, the military itself has admitted that it failed. So, the SAC is now testing what it can achieve with psychological warfare operations it calls “elections”, “postponed elections”, “collecting voter lists” and “conducting a census”. Always a new smoke bomb to divert attention and justify some new fake timeline.

MAH is now following another, alternative plan, trying to muddle through a five-year cycle after which he believes the 2020 election result will no longer be significant, and only after that hold

elections.

The bottom line is, there will be no junta-staged elections: not in 2023, not in 2024, not in 2025.

There will be no elections simply because the people of Myanmar will reject them. The people will not participate. Resistance, both civic and armed, will disrupt it. And it is fully legitimate to disrupt such “elections”, because they are not “elections”, but a psychological operation or PSYOPS warfare operation.

Myanmar Spring Revolution activists, civil society and resistance just need to stay alert and active, and discredit, undermine and disrupt any attempt to even start preparing the scaffolding for what would be the electoral equivalent of a Potemkin village.

SOPHIA: To what extent can the Federal Charter guarantee federal democracy?

The Federal Charter and the whole NUCC process has been an important phase of the Spring Revolution.

However, that process got stuck in one moment. Some very important actors have not been part of the NUCC from the beginning. Some others, have withdrawn from the process. In the meantime, political reality and power dynamics have moved somewhere else.

Federalism, autonomy, self-rule and self-determination has been the core demand of all Myanmar ethnic nationalities from the country's independence onward. That demand has never been listened to and has been suppressed by the military dictatorship. In a period between 2010 and 2015, and between 2016 and Feb 2021, the critical question in the core of negotiations about the peace, has been how much

devolution of power the Myanmar military and from 2016 on the NLD government will be willing to accept in favour of the states and how much power Bama-dominated central government will be ready to delegate and share with ethnic nationalities.

We can say the critical question has been how much power and budgetary resources the central unitary state has been ready to decentralize, devolve and federalize through incorporating that decentralization in the constitution. This is not the fundamental question of Myanmar federalism any more. Attempted and failed coups, and the aftermath of the coup have fundamentally changed the situation and power relations in Myanmar.

The failure of the military coup and junta's gradual loss of the administrative and territorial control over big parts of the country on the one side, and, on the other side, critical dependence of the NUG and "democratic camp" on EROs and ERO-controlled territories have drastically weakened any central power in Myanmar.

In the meantime, emerging bottom-up federal structures have already advanced and that is an irreversible process. Chin and Karenni have already in significant extent liberated their own territory, they seem capable and determined to defend it and they are in the process of building, bottom up, its own proto state. Kachins have also very patiently and very strategically laid down the building blocks of their own state. Rakhine people led by the AA (Arakan Army) are also in advanced stages of creating foundations of their own proto state. Due to internal divisions among Karens and due to fact that they are not just territorial concentrated in Karen State but also territorially dispersed in few other states and regions, they

are slightly lagging behind, but they will also not give up from their ambitions to have their own ethnic state. The Wa de facto already have their state. The Mon did not have leadership up to the challenge of this historic opportunity, but they are waking up as well. Shan State is such a complex case due to its extreme diversity and number of armed groups there, that it is very hard to predict how things can develop there.

So, the question is not any more will some top-down political negotiations process devolve and federalize Myanmar and how that will be done. The question is, will bottom-up federal structures that already came into existence on one side, and political and armed leadership of the Bama majority on the other side, will they have prudence enough to navigate the very complex process of coming together.

If this future "coming together" of the country that has been already broken by the attempted and failed coup will be driven by maximalist and dogmatic, uncompromising demands by representatives of different ethnic groups – all of them armed – then the people of Myanmar will continue to live in something that will be similar to a Hobbesian Warre, in which life of man and even more so of women and children will be "poor, nasty, brutish, and short".

I see in current Myanmar – if I take the criminal junta out of the equation – three different political groups which are deriving their legitimacy from very different sources. In the first group are political actors that have done well in previous elections, whenever they have been at least partly free and fair.

This is where the NLD belongs, but also the SNLD and few more ethnic parties. They will most probably do well in any future elec-

tions again, if they will be free and fair.

The second group are civic and social groups that have been drivers of the Spring Revolution and who are until today making huge contribution to the struggle. They have their own organizing infrastructures, their own leadership and their own significant reputation. Inevitably, they will also claim their own right and legitimacy to have a say in how the future of Myanmar will look like.

The last group consists of all those who will hold guns and control smaller or bigger territories in the moment when the junta will collapse.

It will require a lot wisdom and responsibility on the side of leaders of all those groups to "come together" in a new Myanmar. Nobody will be able to get all of what he or she would like to have, and everybody will need to accept some compromises.

Lessons learned from the bitter past, end of decades of internal conflict, end of dictatorship, prospect of peace and socio-economic development, the wealth and potential which Myanmar has should be, I hope, strong incentives enough to tune the majority of key actors into a compromising mode, instead of dogmatism of maximalist demands.

Igor Blazevic, lecturer at the Educational Initiatives Myanmar between 2010 and 2016 and senior advisor at the Prague Civil Society Centre

Sophia, assistant editor for Federal Journal Myanmar

INTERNATIONAL ACTION NEEDED TO STOP MYANMAR JUNTA: NGO



The site of the Pazigy village massacre. Photo: Facebook

As the Myanmar junta resorts to aerial attacks, actors and supporters of Myanmar's Spring Revolution are calling for help from the international community to sanction the aviation fuel which the junta's fighter jets and attack helicopters rely on.

Campaign group Progressive Voice says that amid the terror and cruelty that Min Aung Hlaing and his murderous junta are inflicting on the people of Myanmar, the massacre of up to 200 people at a gathering in Pazigy Village in Sagaing Region from aerial attack will live long in the memory. And while the various members and bodies of the international

community such as the UN Security Council and ASEAN dither, the people of Myanmar continue their brave resistance, refusing to back down in the face of unfathomable inhumanity.

The gathering in Pazigy Village on 11 April was to celebrate the establishment of a village administration department under the National Unity Government (NUG).

Around 300 people were in attendance, representing all households of this village. They were gathered together under a shelter enjoying a festive meal, just as Thingyan, one of the most important Buddhist annual holidays – the Buddhist New Year, or

water festival – was about to begin.

Yet, a junta aircraft specifically targeted this celebration and dropped two bombs on the main gathering. To inflict more fatalities, as the villagers were scouring for signs of life amid the carnage and bloodshed, an attack helicopter returned to the scene, opening fire on those who were attempting to aid the wounded.

While the total death toll is as yet unconfirmed, at least 170 people, including over 40 children are known to have died with dozens more injured. Meanwhile, junta troops returned to the village in the following days, arresting villagers, while a helicopter and a fighter jet

have flown over the village inciting intense fear among survivors, who are hiding in displacement sites nearby, that they will be attacked again.

It was the deadliest attack since the coup on 1 February, 2021, and adds to the litany of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by junta forces including the bombing of a music concert in Hpakant, Kachin State in October 2022 that killed over 60 people and the Let Yet Kone Village school bombing that killed 11 children in September 2022.

The junta did not deny what had happened, instead reverting to its usual line that there were “terrorists” present at the gathering.

Progressive Voice says that this is an absurd, Orwellian notion given that it is clearly the junta that is using terror in its desperate attempt to establish power in regions such as Sagaing where the resistance forces have legitimacy from the people and govern significant territory.

The escalation of aerial attacks, which have devastating civilian death tolls such as that seen in Pazigy Village, demonstrates a desperation as the junta’s thinly spread, demoralized military units are losing on the battlefield, the generals are losing territorial control, and the military bureaucrats cannot function or administer people and land.

Recent airstrikes prior to the Pazigy bombing also include the bombing of a town in northern Chin State that killed 10 people including a child on 10 April, the day before the Pazigy attack, while another airstrike in Chin State on 30 March killed at least eight people. In Karenni State, hours after the 30 March airstrike in Chin State, a fighter jet targeted a clinic

and a school, killing one, while on the same day, Shwegu Township in Kachin State also experienced the junta’s aerial attacks.

Given this resorting to aerial attacks, actors and supporters of Myanmar’s Spring Revolution are calling for help from the international community to sanction the aviation fuel which the junta’s fighter jets and attack helicopters rely on.

This was seen in the open letter signed by over 540 Myanmar, regional and international civil society organizations calling for the UN Security Council to convene a meeting and impose “punitive measures against the junta.”

This includes targeted economic sanctions against junta-linked entities, a comprehensive arms embargo, including on aviation fuel, and to pursue justice and accountability at international mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court.

The arms embargo and sanctioning of aviation of fuel is all the more important given Min Aung Hlaing’s plans to massively increase military spending, shown by his approval of a military budget of \$2.7billion for the next fiscal year, up from \$1.6 billion.

Progressive Voice says that while recent sanctions imposed on Myanmar entities and individuals related to the import of aviation fuel, such as those by Canada – and to a more limited effect, the UK and the US – are welcomed, the international community must act as a matter of urgency in a more targeted and coordinated way to ensure that further obstacles are put in the way of the junta’s ability to commit such atrocity crimes.

Furthermore, the notion that China and Russia should re-

main ‘impartial’ in other countries’ internal affairs, as both countries expressed related to the failure of the UNSC to release a statement condemning the attack, is hypocritical given that the junta buys a significant amount of its weapons, including jet fighters, from China and Russia. Indeed the type of helicopter used in the second round of the attack on Pazigy – MI-35s – are supplied by Russia to the Myanmar junta.

Progressive Voice believes that geopolitical and commercial interests must not trump the right of the people of Myanmar not to have bombs and bullets rain down on them from the sky ahead of the much-celebrated Buddhist new year holiday.

There is no way back for the junta, and as recent successes of resistance forces in destroying jet fuel storage facilities at an airbase in the nation’s capital, Naypyidaw, shows, the junta are becoming more and more desperate and vulnerable.

Silence and inaction equates to complicity says Progressive Voice. It is time for international bodies such as the UNSC to exercise their mandate and responsibility to help hasten the demise of this murderous junta by taking concrete actions to isolate them and prevent them from getting their hands on military equipment.

Furthermore, governments and bodies, including ASEAN, must recognize that the government of Myanmar is the NUG, and that any concessions to, appeals for restraint, or engagement with, the junta is only enabling them to further commit more horrific massacres that the people of Pazigy experienced during this year’s Thingyan.

SWEDISH HYDROPOWER FIRM HEADS FOR MYANMAR EXIT



Swedish firm AFRY says it is ending its commitment to hydropower projects in Myanmar, citing the deteriorating situation of human rights in the country. The announced move follows published criticism by Justice for Myanmar over their role in the country.

In a recent press release, AFRY said that due to the negative development in Myanmar with deteriorating human rights situation and on the back of an enhanced human rights due diligence process, AFRY has decided to end its commitment in hydropower projects in Myanmar.

Following the UN report: Situation of human rights in Myanmar since 1 February 2022, which was published in March 2023,

AFRY says it has re-assessed its engagement in the country. The report concludes that the human rights situation has worsened during the last year and recommends that any engagement in Myanmar should undergo an enhanced human rights due diligence process.

AFRY has been present in Myanmar for over twenty years, having worked on several hydropower projects, all aiming to accelerate the transition to a clean and stable energy system in the country.

UN global development goal number seven declares that access to clean and affordable energy is key to the development of agriculture, business, communications, education, healthcare, and

transportation. The lack of access to energy hinders economic and human development. In Myanmar, 30 percent of the population still lack access to energy.

AFRY is currently involved in three hydropower projects in Myanmar, whereof one project is active.

The contracts were signed before the military coup in February 2021 and AFRY has not signed any additional contracts after that. We have evaluated our presence in the country, international sanctions, the client with regards to the military regime, safety of our employees, environmental and social impact relating to the ongoing projects, and whether we are able to complete our engagement without being complicit or provide direct

or indirect support of the military or other operations that violate human rights. Our conclusion is that AFRY has not contributed to any violations of human rights, we have ensured stronger safeguards for the environment through our engineering competence and the hydropower projects have contributed to a cleaner energy system.

Nevertheless, AFRY's assignments will be ended at the latest by the end of this year due to the negative development in the country, while we continue to monitor the situation closely.

Although Myanmar is in desperate need of electricity-generating capacity – with power black-outs common – hydropower projects have come in for criticism and scrutiny due to the negative environmental and social effects, including the displacement of people and the potential to reduce water flow downstream. One high profile project, the Myitsone Dam, remains on hold having been stopped by the Thein Sein regime in 2011.

NGO Justice for Myanmar accuses AFRY and another European engineering firm ILF of earning millions advising the brutal Myanmar military junta on the construction of socially and environmentally destructive dam projects after the Myanmar military's illegal attempted coup two years ago.

Justice for Myanmar, in a report in March prior to the AFRY move, said that since February 2021's coup attempt, the military has tried to proceed with disastrous hydropower projects while waging a campaign of terror against the people of Myanmar, 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.

Documents, some of which were shared by Distributed Denial of Secrets, show that the Swedish engineering firm AFRY AB and the Austrian-German ILF Group pocketed huge fees at a time when other European and Japanese firms pulled out of Myanmar dam projects following the violent coup attempt.

It is unclear how much profit AFRY and ILF made from their consulting revenues, after paying taxes to the junta, and other costs, the NGO notes.

Both companies are paid by a department of Myanmar's electricity ministry which is illegally under the control of 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.

Leaked tax filings suggest: AFRY's Swiss arm 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.

Of the total earnings found in leaked filings, US\$2.6 million was for work on the Upper Yeywa dam and US\$2.07 million was for work on the Middle Paunglaung dam.

Leaked invoices show that AFRY asked to be paid in US dollars into an account at Nordea Bank in Finland. Payments in kyat were to be made to an account at CB Bank in Myanmar.

Leaked tax filings suggest: The Myanmar branch of ILF Group's Thai subsidiary, ILF Consulting Engineers (Asia), earned US\$1.1 million in consulting fees from the junta from February 2021 to April 2022. ILF Group is working on another dam scheme in Myanmar, the Tha Htay Hydropower Project.

According to a leaked invoice from January 2021, the total cost of ILF's service on the Tha Htay Hydropower Project is US\$6.33 million.

ILF's invoices list a local account with the crony-owned United Amara Bank. This bank is linked to the local International Group of Entrepreneurs (IGE) conglomerate which has been sanctioned by the European Union.

In March, 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, "the dam required for the power plant is a so-called rockfill dam with a clay liner. With this type of dam, once construction has begun, it cannot be stopped immediately for safety reasons. 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.

As Justice for Myanmar notes, the illegitimate military junta is building dams while attempting to crush freedom of expression,

assembly, and association.

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.

Villagers have repeatedly protested against the dam (also see banner image from Shan Human Rights Foundation, 2017). Before the attempted military coup, a local legislator from the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy pushed in parliament for the dam to be cancelled.

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, com-

munities throughout Shan State protested against the junta's dam projects, including Upper Yeywa. Members of the network, Action for Shan State Rivers, displayed slogans on banners and rocks opposing dams on the Namtu and other rivers in the state and called for foreign companies to withdraw.

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.

However, successive governments and now the illegitimate military junta have continued work on the dam.

Since the coup attempt, the media has reported that affected villagers faced drinking water shortages, problems with compensation, inadequate housing, financial hardship, and joblessness.

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.

During an October trip to Russia, the junta's electric power minister signed an agreement with PTG Energy for the development of the dam, with the participation of the Russian company, Inter RAO Export.

The Myanmar military junta is speeding up the development of existing dams and initiating new ones.

In January 2022, war criminal and junta leader Min Aung Hlaing visited the Yeywa hydropower project, commenting that hydropower needed to be prioritised and suggested that opponents of dam projects overstate their environmental impacts for political purposes.

In July 2022, the junta's Department of Hydropower Implementation illegally launched tenders for six new dams. In September 2022, the junta released a tender, addressed to European and Japanese consulting firms, for feasibility studies and the design of hydropower projects.

However, some major European and Japanese companies have stopped work on hydropower projects as a result of the military's coup attempt and civil society and community opposition: The French energy giant EDF suspended work on the Shweli-3 dam; Norway's SN Power suspended work on the Middle Yeywa dam; and Andritz Hydro and Kansai Electric Power suspended work on the Deedoke dam.

The Upper Yeywa project has a history of foreign companies pulling out in response to local community and civil society pressure. Lahmeyer, a German subsidiary of the French energy company Engie, withdrew in 2019. In 2020, the Swiss engineering firm Stucky SA also withdrew from the project.

But like AFRY, some unscrupulous companies have ignored their international human rights responsibilities and have apparently continued to work on the Upper Yeywa dam.

These include International

al Power Group Public Company Razel-Bec (IPGRB), a joint venture between France's Razel-Bec and the EU-sanctioned crony conglomerate IGE, led by the brother of Myanmar Navy chief Moe Aung. IPGRB is responsible for the design and construction of the dam's intake galleries. Razel-Bec did not respond to questions from Justice For Myanmar on the current status of their business in Myanmar.

In 2015, China's Zhejiang Orient Engineering contracted Japan's Toshiba to provide the dam's hydro turbine and generator. Myanmar crony conglomerate Shwe Taung has been contracted for road construction, and to supply concrete via its subsidiary, High Tech Concrete Technology Company Limited. The Mandalay-based construction firm Aung Pyitan Company Limited provides machinery and is the local consulting partner of AFRY, according to the company's website.

AFRY and its predecessors have decades of experience in Myanmar, first entering in 2000, supporting and profiting from the Myanmar military's devastating hydropower ambitions, Justice for Myanmar claims.

AFRY was formed through the 2019 merger of Sweden's ÅF and Finland's Pöyry. AFRY Switzerland registered a branch office in Myanmar in July 2020, succeeding ÅF-Consult Switzerland, formerly Colenco Power Engineering, which both previously operated in Myanmar.

According to the AFRY website, the company has provided engineering consultancy services on 13 hydropower projects in Myanmar. These including Shweli-3, Yeywa, Upper Paunglaung,

Upper Kengtawng and Tamanthi.

All these projects have contributed to environmental destruction, displacement of local communities, militarisation, conflict and grave human rights violations.

A 2015 report into the Upper Paunglaung dam by Physicians for Human Rights, Kayan New Generation Youth and Land In Our Hands found that international guidelines on evictions were not followed, and that 8,000 people were forcibly displaced by the dam and faced acute humanitarian needs. Many were pushed into poverty, experienced hunger, lacked access to drinking water and the dam project caused depression and suicide.

Questions over ÅF-Consult's role in the human rights abuses caused by the Upper Paunglaung dam were raised in the Swiss parliament in 2013. The Swiss government responded that the dam project was important for the development of Myanmar's economy.

AFRY and ILF appear to have supported the development of hydropower in Myanmar, disregarding community and civil society concerns, and their responsibilities under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, under which corporations have a responsibility to respect internationally recognised human rights. This responsibility is heavier because a dam project can have severe, potentially irremediable, human rights impacts, and because AFRY and ILF are large enterprises. The companies also appear to undermine the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises through their negative

impact on human rights and the environment.

Since the military's coup attempt, both companies have maintained business with and profited from the illegal junta, as it seeks to speed ahead with socially and environmentally destructive dams, while committing war crimes and crimes against humanity with total impunity.

Prior to their April statement, a representative of AFRY noted, "AFRY's Code of Conduct (CoC) cements our commitment to follow the principles set out in internationally recognized Human Rights instruments set out in United Nations conventions on human rights and OECD's principles for multinational enterprises. Our compliance & ethics framework enables systematic and effective prevention, detection and management of violation risks. The framework is supported by a top level commitment to ensure consistent application and awareness of human rights principles throughout the organisation as well as in our activities and business relationships. We recognise the diversity of laws in the countries where we operate and strive to respect domestic laws. When faced with conflicts between domestic laws and human rights commitments we seek to honour the principles of internationally recognized human rights to the greatest extent possible."

MYANMAR INDEPENDENT PRESS UNDER PRESSURE AS WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY IS MARKED

MIZZIMA EDITORIAL

UNESCO calls on the world to “celebrate” World Press Freedom Day on 3 May but for Burmese journalists the day will be more like a sad wake.

Myanmar independent media are under attack by the Myanmar military junta, a campaign that has been underway since the 1 February 2021 military coup plunged the country into crisis and junta soldiers and police scrambled to arrest journalists and

trash their media offices.

The brutality and fear has put Myanmar close to the bottom of world press freedom rankings for 2023, placing a pall of tension over the lives of journalists and media people in the country who attempt to report on the crisis, and those journalists who have been jailed for trying to do their job.

UNESCO’s global theme this year for World Press Freedom

Day is “Shaping A Future of Rights: Freedom of Expression As A Driver for All Other Human Rights” – a reminder of how crucial press freedom is today. This theme is highlighted as World Press Freedom Day marks its 30th anniversary.

As UNESCO notes, this year’s commemoration provides an occasion for all press freedom stakeholders to reaffirm their commitment to freedom of expression to including press freedom, right to



A Myanmar journalist covering a public protest in 2021.
Photo: Supplied

access information and safety of journalists and media workers, all issues that resonate in war-and-crisis-torn Myanmar.

The international community faces multiple crises; conflicts and violence, persistent socio-economic inequalities driving migration, environmental crises and challenges to the health and wellbeing of people all around the world, while disinformation and misinformation online and offline proliferate with serious impact on the institutions underpinning democracy, the rule of law and human rights, UNESCO says.

Polarised political and societal discourse; erosion of trust; impositions of states of emer-

gency and internet shutdowns; crackdown on critical voices and independent media; news desertification due to the collapse of traditional media business models; and tackling hate speech and online harms that disregard international standards, pose new threats to freedom of expression, and the fundamental role of human rights.

It is exactly to counter these critical situations and threats, that press freedom, safety of journalists and access to information take centre stage this year. The right to freedom of expression, enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is a prerequisite and a driver to the enjoyment of all other human rights.

This year's Special 30th anniversary celebration of World Press Freedom Day is therefore a call to recentre press freedom, as well as independent, pluralistic and diverse media, as necessary key to the enjoyment of all other human rights. This anniversary coincides with the 30th anniversary of the Vienna Conference and its Declaration and Programme of Action on Human Rights, which established important institutions safeguarding human rights, and with the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On this occasion, the global community will debate and set the agenda for both the development of human rights and how to protect them in an everchanging world, and World Press Freedom Day will serve as an opportunity to put a strong focus on freedom of expression within the overall human rights agenda.

This is all well and good. But the concept of "freedom to report" is in a bad way in Myanmar and many other countries around the world, a situation arguably

worse that many people actually perceive.

Freedom of expression is vital, says UNESCO, but Myanmar and many other countries are proving tough places to operate for journalists seeking to inform the public about what is really going on in the world – and also for members of the public seeking news and insight through their mobile phones.

The badlands for journalists are both obvious and also less clear. Operating in countries like China, Russia, North Korea is tough if freedom of expression is pursued. But even the media in so-called free countries – such as the USA, UK and France – exhibit signs of censorship, politicization and warped editorial lines that indicate what they publish is not always free, fair and objective. Media wars are being played out publicly as we write.

At this 30-year juncture, UNESCO says it is an opportune time to address the future of human rights and shape how the challenges to freedom of expression will be met in the digital ecosystem and rapidly evolving information environment.

If one country needs a spotlight thrown on it at this time then it is Myanmar and the hard work of independent media. Brave souls – both male and female – are diligently working under threat of arrest and imprisonment to show people in Myanmar and around the world what is happening under the Myanmar junta's dark and brutal rule.

These fighters for freedom of expression need our support.



CAMERA OF JAPANESE JOURNALIST SLAIN IN MYANMAR RETURNED AFTER 16 YEARS

When Japanese journalist Kenji Nagai was shot dead by Myanmar troops as he covered anti-military protests in 2007, his video camera disappeared, along with the last images he filmed.

On Wednesday, 16 years and a secret journey out of Myanmar later, the camera and its contents were handed back to his family, who hope the footage will hold clues to the final moments of his life.

Nagai had travelled to Myanmar to cover monk-led demonstrations against the then-junta for APF News, a small

Tokyo-based agency that specialises in reports from danger zones.

He was killed on September 27, 2007 after troops opened fire on demonstrators near Yangon's famous Sule Pagoda, bringing renewed international attention to the generals' brutal crackdown.

A photo of Nagai lying on the road, a soldier in combat uniform and sandals standing over him and holding a gun, won a Pulitzer prize in 2008.

FOOTAGE AIRED

Nagai's sister Noriko Ogawa said on Wednesday she was "thrilled and filled with joy" to have

retrieved her brother's camera.

She had given up hope of ever seeing the footage, she said, after Myanmar authorities ignored her request to return it to her.

"I think my brother was waiting for this day too," she said.

"I want to bring it to his grave."

Nobody has been charged in relation to Nagai's death and Myanmar officials claimed the killing was an "accident".

But an autopsy conducted in Japan showed that Nagai was likely shot dead from close range -- around one metre (three feet).



Noriko Ogawa, sister of the late Japanese journalist Kenji Nagai, who was shot dead in Yangon, Myanmar while covering the Saffron Revolution in 2007, receives his camera and footage from journalist Aye Chan Naing (L) at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand in Bangkok on April 26, 2023. Photo: Jack Taylor/AFP



WARNING GRAPHIC PHOTO - Japanese journalist Kenji Nagai lying dead on the street in Yangon after being shot. Photo: Screenshot from DVB/AFP

Footage retrieved from Nagai's camera was shown to media for the first time on Wednesday at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand in Bangkok.

It shows a huge crowd of demonstrators singing songs in downtown Yangon, facing off against police and soldiers carrying wicker riot shields and rifles.

Some hoist flags bearing the peacock symbol of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy.

Protesters bow before a line of saffron-robed monks and a young child is seen collecting used plastic water bottles from the crowd.

A convoy of green army trucks filled with troops then arrives at the scene to jeers and cries from the demonstrators.

Nagai turns the camera on himself and points to the trucks.

His last words in the foot-

age are: "The army has just arrived. The army is over there. They are heavily armed."

'REVEAL THE TRUTH'

The camera was obtained by journalists from Myanmar news outlet the Democratic Voice of Burma.

Its chief editor Aye Chan Naing said he could not go into detail about how they obtained the camera, in order to protect sources in Myanmar, which is once again under military rule.

We "got it from a good citizen who knows what is right and what is wrong", he said.

The outlet obtained the camera before the military's latest coup in 2021 that has plunged the country into turmoil.

Since then at least 170 journalists have been arrested in the junta's crackdown on dissent, according to the United Nations, and dozens of independent media

outlets -- including DVB and Mizzima -- have been banned.

They include Japanese journalist Toru Kubota who spent three-and-a-half months in prison last year after being detained near an anti-government rally in Yangon.

Ogawa said her family would submit the footage to authorities in Japan as "evidence" against the Myanmar military's assertion that her brother's killing was an accident.

"We will continue demanding that Myanmar's government reveal the truth... At this time, I want the world to focus on Myanmar again," she said.

AFP

COVID DEATHS DOWN 95 PERCENT THIS YEAR: WHO



Photo: AFP

The WHO said last week that Covid-19 deaths had dropped by 95 percent since the start of the year - but warned the virus was still on the move.

The World Health Organization said Covid-19 was here to stay and countries would have to learn how to manage its ongoing non-emergency effects, including post-Covid-19 condition, or Long Covid.

"We're very encouraged by the sustained decline in reported deaths from Covid-19, which have dropped 95 percent since the beginning of this year," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a press conference.

"However, some countries are seeing increases, and over the past four weeks, 14,000 people lost their lives to this disease.

"And, as the emergence of the new XBB.1.16 variant illustrates, the virus is still changing, and is still capable of causing new waves of disease and death."

Maria Van Kerkhove, the

WHO's technical lead on Covid-19, said XBB sub-lineages were now dominant worldwide.

They have an increase in growth advantage and are also showing immune escape, meaning people can be reinfected despite having been vaccinated or previously infected.

She called for increased surveillance through testing "so that we can monitor the virus itself and understand what each of these mutations means".

That knowledge could feed into vaccine composition and inform decisions on handling the virus, she said.

Tedros reiterated that the WHO remained hopeful of declaring an end to Covid-19 as a public health emergency of international concern, with the committee that advises him on the status due to convene next month for its regular quarterly meeting.

"But this virus is here to stay, and all countries will need to learn to manage it alongside other

infectious diseases," he added.

Tedros meanwhile said that an estimated one in 10 infections resulted in Long Covid, suggesting that hundreds of millions of people would need longer-term care.

The WHO chief also noted how the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted vaccination programmes, with an estimated 67 million children missing out on at least one essential jab between 2019 and 2021.

Following a decade of stalled progress, vaccination rates are back to where they were in 2008, he said, leading to rising outbreaks of measles, diphtheria, polio and yellow fever.

All countries must address "the barriers to immunisation, whether it's access, availability, cost or disinformation", he said.

AFP.

MYANMAR SEES SMALL RISE IN COVID-19 CASES AMID WEAK HEALTHCARE SYSTEM



Medical workers in Myanmar. Photo: AFP

As of April 2023, the number of COVID-19 cases in Myanmar has increased, according to the junta-controlled media.

From 23 April to 26 April, there were a total of 235 confirmed cases, according to the junta's Ministry of Health.

It is unclear whether those tested are showing symptoms of COVID-19 or have merely tested positive for the virus.

COVID-19 cases hit a high in July and August 2021 but have since dropped to negligible numbers. At its height, Myanmar saw 40,000 new cases on the day

of 19 July 2021.

The junta's Ministry of Health reported that there were 45 confirmed COVID-19 cases on 23 April, 51 cases on 24 April, 71 on 25 April and 68 on 26 April, bringing the total number of cases to 235. Of these cases, 17 individuals had returned from Thailand.

The Ministry of Health of the parallel National Unity Government [NUG] announced on 27 April that the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 has increased sixfold in the Southeast Asian region and doubled in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Over the past month, In-

dia, Indonesia, and Nepal have reported the highest number of new cases of COVID-19 among Asian countries.

A doctor from Yangon, who preferred to remain anonymous, stated that "Under the military regime, the healthcare system is weak. Additionally, the junta insisted on holding the water festival in mid-April, which could have contributed to an increase in the number of infections."

As per the junta, the death toll from COVID-19 in Myanmar has reached 19,490 and the number of cases appears to be increasing, possibly due to an increase in testing.

CHINA WARNS US, SOUTH KOREA AGAINST 'PROVOKING CONFRONTATION' WITH NORTH KOREA



In the capital of North Korea. Photo: AFP

China warned Washington and Seoul against “provoking confrontation” with North Korea on Thursday last week, after US President Joe Biden and his South Korean counterpart said Pyongyang would face the “end” of its leadership if it uses its nuclear arsenal.

“All parties should face up to the crux of the (Korean) peninsula issue and play a constructive role in promoting a peaceful settlement of the issue,” foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said.

She urged against “deliberately stirring up tensions, provoking confrontation and playing up threats”.

At a summit in Washington, Biden and Yoon Suk Yeol made clear that if the isolated dictatorship in North Korea attacked the South or the United States, the response would be devastating.

The two sides also agreed that the US security shield for South Korea would be strengthened in the face of the nuclear-armed North’s missile tests.

Beijing condemned that decision Thursday, saying Washington “ignores regional security and in-

sists on exploiting the peninsula issue to create tension.”

“What the US is doing ... provokes confrontation between camps, undermines the nuclear non-proliferation regime and the strategic interests of other countries,” Mao said.

US moves, she added, “aggravate tensions on the peninsula, undermine regional peace and stability, and run counter to the goal of denuclearization on the peninsula.”

AFP

UN EXPERTS SAY CHINA FORCING TIBETANS INTO 'VOCATIONAL TRAINING'



Tibetan exiles march in Dharamsala India on 10 March 2023 calling for freedom for Tibet. Photo: AFP

UN experts on Thursday last week accused China of forcing hundreds of thousands of Tibetans into programmes that threaten their cultural identity and could lead to forced labour.

Six UN special rapporteurs voiced concern over claims that the so-called vocational training and labour transfer programmes were being used as a pretext to undermine Tibetan religious, linguistic and cultural identity, and to monitor and indoctrinate Tibetans.

"Hundreds of thousands of Tibetans have reportedly been 'transferred' from their traditional rural lives to low-skilled and low-paid employment since 2015, through a programme described as voluntary -- but in practice their participation has reportedly been coerced," the experts said.

They said the labour transfer programme was facilitated by a network of vocational training centres, "which focus less on developing professional skills and more on cultural and political indoctrination in a militarised environment".

They found that Tibetans in the programme were reportedly prevented from using the Tibetan language and discouraged from expressing their religious identity.

The statement was signed by the special rapporteurs on contemporary slavery, people trafficking, contemporary racism, cultural rights, minority issues and the right to development.

Special rapporteurs are mandated by the UN Human Rights Council but are unpaid, independent experts who do not speak for the United Nations.

QUESTIONS OF CONSENT

"Tibetans are being drawn away from sustainable livelihoods in which they have traditionally had a comparative advantage, such as wool and dairy production, and into low-paid, low-skilled work in manufacturing and construction," the experts said.

"Tibetans are transferred directly from training centres to their new workplaces, leaving it unclear whether they are consenting to this new employment. There is no oversight to determine whether working conditions constitute forced labour."

The experts urged Beijing to clarify how Tibetans could opt out of the programmes, and to monitor their working conditions in new places of employment.

Tibet has alternated over the centuries between independence and control by China, which says it "peacefully liberated" the rugged plateau in 1951 and brought infrastructure and education to the previously underdeveloped region.

But many exiled Tibetans accuse China's ruling Communist Party of repression, torture and eroding their culture.

In February, three UN experts said that around a million Tibetan children had been separated from their families and put through "forced assimilation" at Chinese residential schools.

The special rapporteurs voiced their alarm at Chinese government policies aimed at assimilating Tibetan people culturally, religiously and linguistically through the school system.

AFP

INDIA ARMS HINDU VILLAGE MILITIAS TO COMBAT KASHMIR REBELS

Brandishing a bolt-action rifle, civil servant Sanjeet Kumar is one of 5,000 Kashmir villagers who have joined all-Hindu militia units armed and trained by Indian forces to fight off rebel attacks.

India has more than half a million soldiers permanently stationed in the parts of Muslim-majority Kashmir it controls, as the Hindu nationalist government presses a bid to crush a decades-long insurgency.

Authorities announced the new militias last year, and a deadly rebel assault in Kumar's frontier village in January prompted him to sign up.

"We were totally terrorised by the attack," the 32-year-old municipal worker in the electricity department told AFP.

Wearing a saffron-coloured tilak on his forehead to mark himself as a member of the Hindu faithful, Kumar said he was ready and able to defend his home.

"Anyone who turns a traitor to our nation is my target," he told AFP.

'ONLY ONE COMMUNITY'

Kashmir has been disputed between India and Pakistan since both countries achieved independence 75 years ago. Both sides claim the territory in full.

India has fought against rebel groups demanding the territory's independence, or merger with Pakistan, in an insurgency that has claimed tens of thousands of lives.

The new militia units, known as Village Defence Guards, were unveiled last year in the wake of a string of murders targeting police officers and Hindu residents of Kashmir.

The scheme has been broadly popular among the region's Hindu residents but Muslim villagers are concerned the militia will only exacerbate Kashmir's



woes.

“My worry is about the way weapons are now being distributed among only one community,” said one elderly Muslim living in Dhangri, who asked not to be named.

“Now weapons are being brandished around by young ones. This is not good for any one of us,” he told AFP. “I sense a growing tension.”

‘I WILL FIGHT BACK’

Many residents of Dhangri, the remote hamlet where Kumar lives, are still grief-stricken by the attack that claimed the lives of seven of their neighbours, which police blamed on Pakistan-based militants.

“With or without the weapons, we’re terrorised,” said farmer Murari Lal Sharma, 55, as he cradled his loaded .303 calibre rifle.

“But now I will fight back.”

One Indian paramilitary officer said the newly armed villagers were on such a constant state of alert that his unit informed them beforehand of their night patrol, so that they were not accidentally mistaken for militants and fired upon.

“The purpose is to create a line of defence,

not a line of attack,” Kanchan Gupta of India’s information ministry told AFP.

India first created a civil militia force in Kashmir in mid-1990s as a first line of defence when the armed rebellion against Indian rule was at its peak.

About 25,000 men and women, including teenagers and some Muslims, were given weapons and organised into village defence committees in Jammu region.

Rights groups accused members of these committees of committing atrocities against civilians.

At least 210 cases of murder, rape and extortion blamed on the militias were prosecuted, official records show -- though less than two percent of defendants were convicted.

Gupta said that these cases were individual acts and there was no record of organised crime by the militias.

“There is always a chance that a few may turn rogue,” he said. “It’s not possible to control everyone.”

Most of the committees became dormant as Indian troops gradually throttled the insurgency and the security situation improved.

‘NOW THERE ARE GUNS’

This time around, militia members are warned by trainers from the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) that they would be punished for misusing their rifles.

“Alongside training them in firing, maintenance and cleaning of the weapons we also tell them what legal action will be taken for misuse,” CRPF spokesman Shivanandan Singh told AFP.

Three people have nonetheless been killed since the new Village Defence Guards were established, including two who died by suicide using weapons issued to the militias.

The wife of another member was killed in January when her husband’s rifle accidentally discharged.

But the reservations of some neighbours have not stopped men in the villages around Dhangri from clamouring to get their own arms.

“Now there are guns in houses all around mine,” said Ajay Kumar, a flour miller and ex-service-man, pointing out to AFP the homes of neighbours who had been given arms.

“Whenever needed, I will take full advantage of my weapon.”

AFP



● A man getting searched at a checkpoint in Kashmir’s Srinagar. Photo: AFP

RUSSIA DENIES US CONSULAR VISIT TO JAILED JOURNALIST

Moscow said Thursday last week it had denied an upcoming consular visit to detained US reporter Evan Gershkovich in retaliation for Washington not issuing visas to several Russian journalists.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov complained last weekend that the United States had denied visas to Russian journalists due to travel with him to the UN headquarters.

“The US embassy was informed that its request for a consular visit on May 11... to US citizen (Evan) Gershkovich, who was detained on charges of espionage, has been rejected,” the Russian foreign ministry said.

The decision followed what the ministry called a “provocative” US decision to bar Russian journalists from flying to the United States.

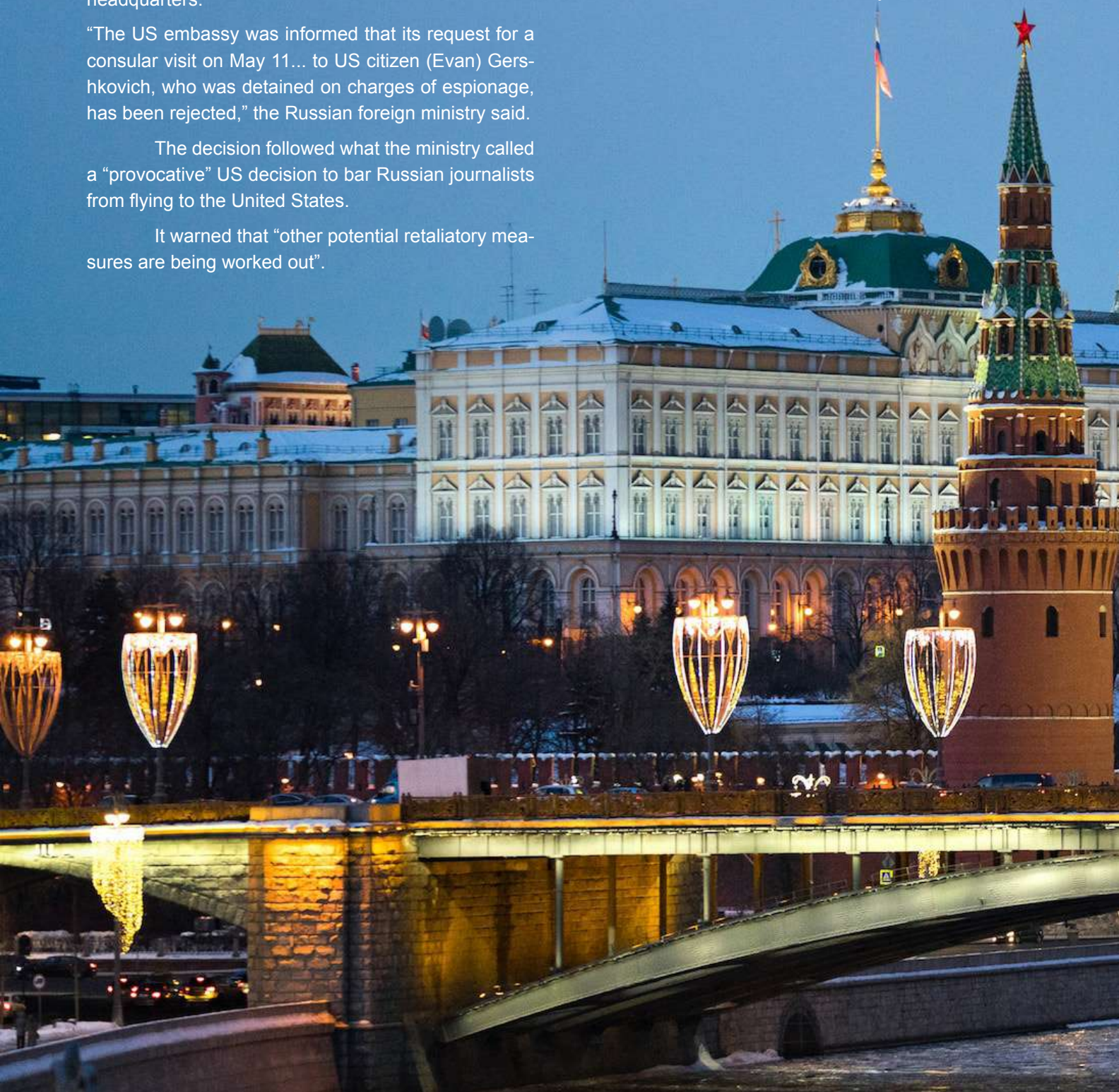
It warned that “other potential retaliatory measures are being worked out”.

Gershkovich was arrested in Russia last month and charged with espionage.

His employer, The Wall Street Journal, and US officials denied the allegations.

Gershkovich, who previously worked for AFP, is the first foreign journalist arrested in Russia on spying charges since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In a statement distributed by the Journal via



his Russian lawyers, Gershkovich thanked the people who have offered him support during his detention.

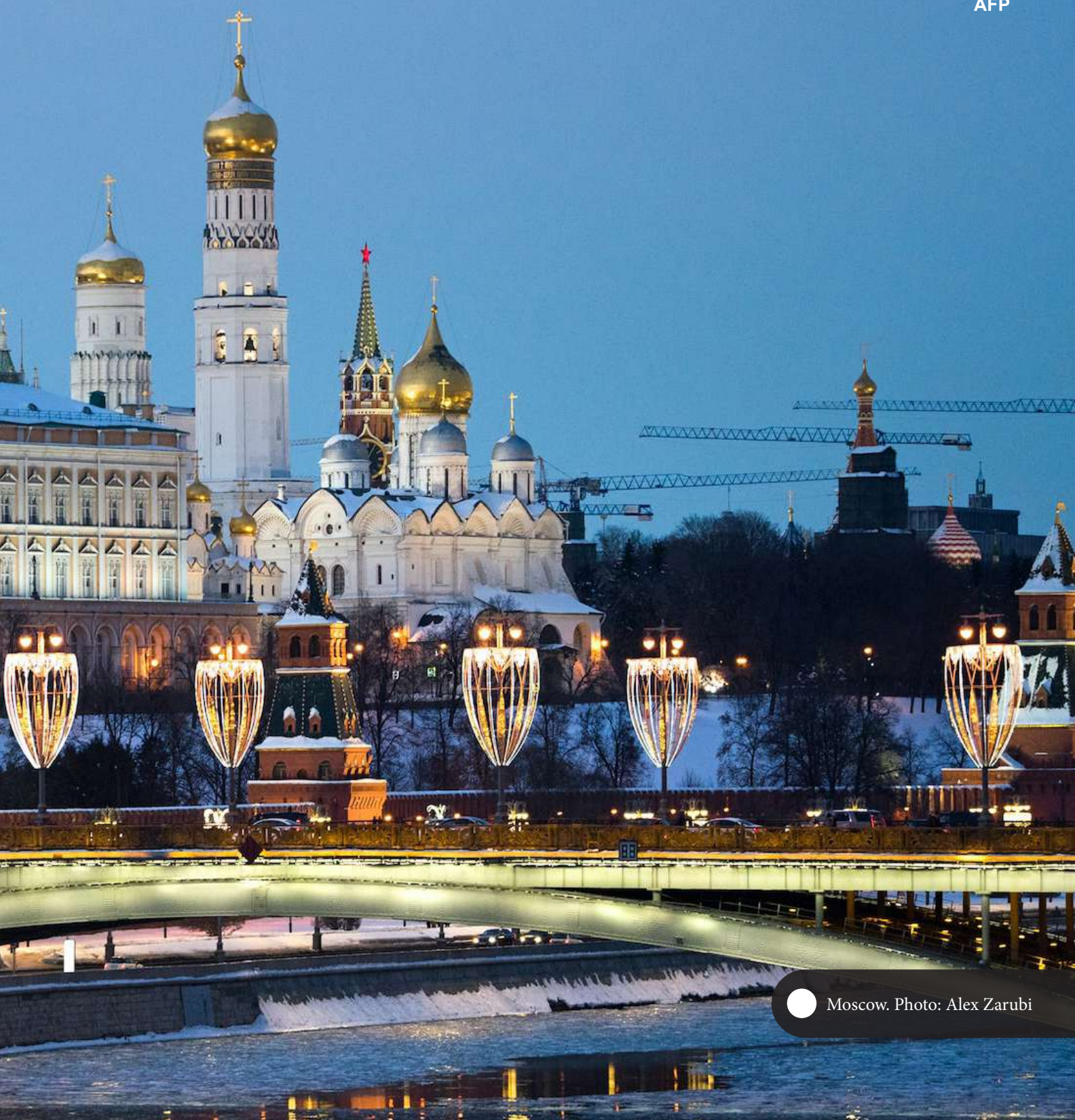
"I am humbled and deeply touched by all the letters I received," the statement read. "I've read each one carefully, with gratitude."

After its journalists were denied visas on Sunday, Russia vowed to respond.

"We will find formats to respond to this so that the Americans remember for a long time that such things must not be done," Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov was cited as saying by state-run news agencies.

Since the beginning of Russia's military intervention in Ukraine last year, Moscow has tightened conditions to obtain the accreditations needed to work as a journalist in the country.

AFP



Moscow. Photo: Alex Zarubi

GUTERRES: URGENCY OF GLOBAL CHALLENGES DEMANDS BOLD, SWIFT ACTION



UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. Photo: UN News

The world's multilateral system is under greater strain than at any time since the creation of the United Nations, requiring swift action to “do better, faster” in using the UN Charter and existing tools to forge greater security and prosperity for all, the Secretary-General told the Security Council on Monday, which marks the International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace.

“We face unprecedented and interlocking crises,” UN Secretary-General António Guterres said in his briefing at the Council’s ministerial-level open debate on effective multilateralism through the defence of the principles of the UN Charter.

“Tensions between major powers are at an historic high, so are the risks of conflict, through misadventure or miscalculation. It is time to deepen cooperation and to strengthen multilateral institutions, to find common solutions to common challenges.”

To do so, he called on Member States to comply with their obligations, use existing tools to peacefully resolve disputes, and fill gaps in global governance to deliver on the Charter’s promises.

Security Council members, particularly those serving permanently (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom and the United States), have a responsibility

to “make multilateralism work, rather than contribute to its dismemberment”, he said.

“We must cooperate; we must adapt multilateral institutions and foster trust where it is most needed,” he said. “The urgency of global challenges demands bold and swift action.”

COLLECTIVE RESPONSES, COMMON CRISES

Effective multilateral responses are urgently needed to prevent and resolve conflicts, manage economic uncertainty, rescue the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and address challenges to the global norms against the use and possession of nuclear weapons, he said.

Such immediate attention includes addressing Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which violates the Charter and international law, the global economic dislocation triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, and conflicts grinding on in Myanmar, the Sahel, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and beyond.

At the same time, the world is witnessing a deepening climate crisis, soaring inequalities, a rising threat from terrorism, a global pushback against human rights and gender equality, and the unregulated

development of dangerous technologies, he said.

‘WE NEED TO DO BETTER, FASTER’

“All these global challenges can only be solved through respect for international law, adherence to global commitments, and the adoption of appropriate frameworks of multilateral governance,” he said.

“We need to do better, go further, and work faster,” he said. “That must start with countries recommitting to their obligations under the UN Charter, putting human rights and dignity first, and prioritizing the prevention of conflict and crises.”

‘BEATING HEART’

“Our institution was created for crisis,” he said, noting that throughout its history, the UN has overcome seemingly intractable conflicts and deep divisions. “We must find a way forward and act now, as we have done before, to stop the slide towards chaos and conflict.”

Recalling past achievements, from preventing a third world war, to helping decolonize 80 countries and crafting tools for advancing diplomacy and development, he said multilateral solutions to global problems, from the ozone layer to the eradication of polio, are “tried, tested, and proven to work”.

“None of this progress would have been possible without countries standing together, as a multilateral human family, which makes today’s situation all the more dangerous,” he added, emphasizing that “multilateral cooperation is the beating heart of the United Nations, its *raison d’être*, and guiding vision”.

While competition between nations is inevitable, that should not rule out cooperation where shared interests and the greater good are at stake, he said.

RUSSIA: ADDRESSING ‘MIGHT IS RIGHT’

At the outset of the meeting, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov of Russia, which holds the Council presidency in April, drew attention to the meeting’s concept note, which states that some stakeholders are “undertaking attempts to preserve the unipolar world order, by imposing the ‘might is right’ principle and trying to replace universal norms of international law with a ‘rules-based order’”.

“We have reached a dangerous threshold,” Mr. Lavrov said, speaking in his national capacity.

“Double standards need to be abandoned. Advancing the West’s rules on the international arena is asphyxiating multilateralism. The key to success is concerted efforts.”

Genuine multilateralism requires major changes at the UN, he argued, including Security Council reform to more accurately represent the global landscape. Outlining UN Charter violations, including Washington, DC’s responsibility for the atomic bombing of Japan in 1945, and its intervention in Iraq, which unleashed terrorism across region and beyond, he urged the United States, as the UN host country, to comply with obligations and issue visas promptly.

Turning to the situation in Ukraine, he said international relations will continue to be shaped through a balance of interest or what he described as the United States’ hegemony and support of the “Kyiv regime”. In this vein, he urged the UN Secretary-General to ensure that staff members comply with impartiality.

UNITED STATES: ‘WORLD NEEDS EFFECTIVE UN’

“Today, it’s Ukraine, but tomorrow, it could be another country,” United States Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield said, emphasizing that Russia’s invasion is among the reasons the Charter was drafted in the first place and Moscow’s attempt to redraw international borders violates agreed principles.

“This little blue book spells out our purposes and principles,” she said, holding up a copy of the UN Charter. However, the Ukraine conflict runs counter to agreed principles, as the world braces itself for what she described as the next atrocity and war crime.

“The world needs an effective UN,” she said, adding that despite the international system’s imperfections, Charter principles have helped to prevent nuclear proliferation and atrocities, while lifting more than one billion people out of poverty.

CHINA: ONE WORLD ORDER

“The world has only one order”, with the UN Charter being its “cornerstone”, stated China’s Ambassador Zhang Jun.

However, problems arise in the world today because Charter principles are honoured, and safeguarding them requires deeds that match words consistently and inclusively, he said. Indeed, the pace of international relations must reflect equality and enhance the effectiveness of multilateralism, he added.

In this regard, developing countries must play their role, he said. To do so, he called for action to improve global governance, revamp the international financial system, and eliminate unilateral sanctions that are crippling humanitarian conditions in many nations.

Courtesy of UN News



Photo: Zinko Hein

KARENNI STATE

Myanmar junta fires artillery into Demoso Town for no reason

The Myanmar junta fired heavy artillery into Demoso Township in Karenni State at 2:00 a.m. on 19 April, despite there not being any recent fighting in the area.

“Approximately 10 shells landed. In recent days there has been no fighting, however they recklessly fired heavy artillery into civilian neighbourhoods. We don’t understand why they started firing. I assume it was Light Infantry Battalion 102 that fired [the artillery]. The junta soldiers also fired out of moving vehicles”, said an official from Demoso People’s Defense Force (PDF).

One civilian was injured by a shell that landed close to an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp.

“An artillery shell landed close to the IDP camp this morning. No one was severely wounded, one person reportedly had a minor bruise. They fired artillery constantly”, said the Demoso PDF official.

Recently, the junta has often fired artillery into Demoso.

A local news source said: “Heavy artillery shells land every one or two days. A 40-year-old man was injured whilst he was travelling. He received serious injuries and was taken to hospital, he has not yet been discharged.”

Prior to that, a civilian was seriously injured by an artillery shell that landed in western Demoso at about 2:00 p.m. on 16 April.

According to Demoso PDF the junta army units firing artillery into Demoso Town were from Light Infantry Battalion 102 and Infantry Battalion 427.

“The soldiers occasionally opened fire from Loikaw and Hpruso Town. They would occasionally

fire from the Light Infantry Battalion 102 and Infantry Battalion 427, which had previously been stationed at Ngwe Taung,” said the official from Demoso PDF.

There has been frequent fighting between the junta and defence forces in Demoso Township, according to the Institute for Strategy and Policy Myanmar.

There were at least 82 clashes during February and March 2023 in the border areas between Karenni and Shan State, which displaced nearly 300,000 people. Since the declaration of martial law the frequency of fighting has increased threefold.

KACHIN STATE

Myanmar junta officer and two businessmen killed at Hpakant Karaoke

One junta army officer and two local businessmen were shot dead and two more businessmen were seriously injured at a KTV (karaoke) lounge in Hpakant Township, Kachin State, on 23 April.

Major Zaw Maung, the platoon leader of 13th Infantry Battalion under the 33rd Light Infantry Division, was killed along with two businessmen, one of whom was U Wa Tok, when unidentified gunmen fired at a party of about 10 guests in HAPPY KTV in Hpakant Town, at about 5:00 a.m., according to locals.

The locals said the men were killed by unidentified gunmen who also injured two other people, both of whom are in a critical condition.

Some KTV employees were injured in the incident according to a local source, but Mizzima currently has no further details about their injuries.

The same source said that the three bodies were taken to the morgue at Hpakant hospital “but only one body was reportedly found there [at the morgue]”

Following the attack the junta fired heavy artillery into the south and north of Hpakant Town.



JUNTA'S ENVIRONMENTAL MINISTER MEETS WITH RUSSIAN DELEGATION TO DISCUSS MINERAL DEVELOPMENT

The junta's Union Minister for Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, Khin Maung Yi, met with a delegation from the Russia-Myanmar Association of Friendship and Cooperation, led by Senior Vice-President Anatoli Bulochnikov, to discuss mineral development and technical cooperation between the two countries, reported Myanmar's state media.

The meeting, attended by deputy ministers and officials from both sides, focused on the potential for increased cooperation in mineral development, reported the state media.

According to environmental activists, the recent coup in Myanmar has allowed the military junta to exploit natural resources without concern for the natural environment.

Russia has had close ties with Myanmar's successive military regimes, and is currently providing aid to the Myanmar military junta led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

MYANMAR IN TALKS WITH CHINA OVER PROCESSED FROZEN MEAT EXPORT



Photo: Jez Timms

Negotiations are underway for the export of processed frozen meat from Myanmar to China, according to local media reports.

A Myanmar delegation and China's Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs Ma Youxiang held a meeting in Beijing for the official export of Myanmar agricultural products and frozen beef, frozen mutton and frozen duck to China.

In this meeting, they discussed an inspection process by Chinese officials at the Animal Disease Control Center in Kutkai near the Sino-Myanmar border and giving of approval to this center, providing Chinese technology and good breeding practices for the expansion of Myanmar husbandry in sheep and goats by Myanmar farmers.

They reportedly discussed giving and pro-

ducing hybrid sunflower and potato seeds and other important crops by joining hands between agricultural companies from two countries, as well as cooperation in cross-border animal disease control work.

China offered Myanmar the opportunity to buy meat and meat products (frozen) for their domestic consumption but the exporters must abide by ASEAN's Good Animal Husbandry Practices (GAHP) standards and guidelines in husbandry, food safety and packaging and also they need to produce value-added products too.

According to the data released by the Myanmar Ministry of Economy and Commerce, the bilateral trade between China and Myanmar was over \$2 billion in the last financial year and Myanmar was able to export more agricultural products.

SOME SOLAR SALT FARMS IN MON STATE CLOSE AFTER PRICE FALLS



Photo: Quang Nguyen

A salt price fall has prompted a number of solar salt farmers in Mon State to close their businesses.

Salt farmers say the price of solar salt – dried in the sun on salt flats – has been dropping prompting them to suspend their businesses before the end of the salt collecting season.

The price of raw solar salt (ordinary) was 160 kyats per viss (approx. 3.6 lbs) before the Thingyan water festival and then it fell to about 110 kyats per viss after the festival.

The solar salt farmers said that the production output this year was high as they received strong summer heat but they had to close their businesses as they were facing falling salt prices and rising production costs.

Intense heat in this summer caused the fall of labour productivity in the solar salt farms, they added.

The solar salt season is from October to the

middle of May every year in Mon State but the businesses had to stop before the end of season this year.

Most of the salt farmers could not recover from their losing businesses though the production output from their farms was very high in this season since the price of salt was dropping, getting only low prices and having fewer buyers for their salt.

The salt production was low in the last season because of the La Nina weather effect and these salt farmers incurred losses in their businesses so that some salt farmers had to reduce their businesses this year in the beginning of the salt season and some had to permanently stop their businesses.

The solar salt is produced in Mon State mainly in Paung, Thanbyuzayat and Ye Townships typically produces over 40,000 tons annually. The solar salt produced in Mon State is transported to Regions and States across the country including Yangon and Mandalay.

DOMINANT US DOLLAR FACES CHALLENGE FROM EMERGING CURRENCIES

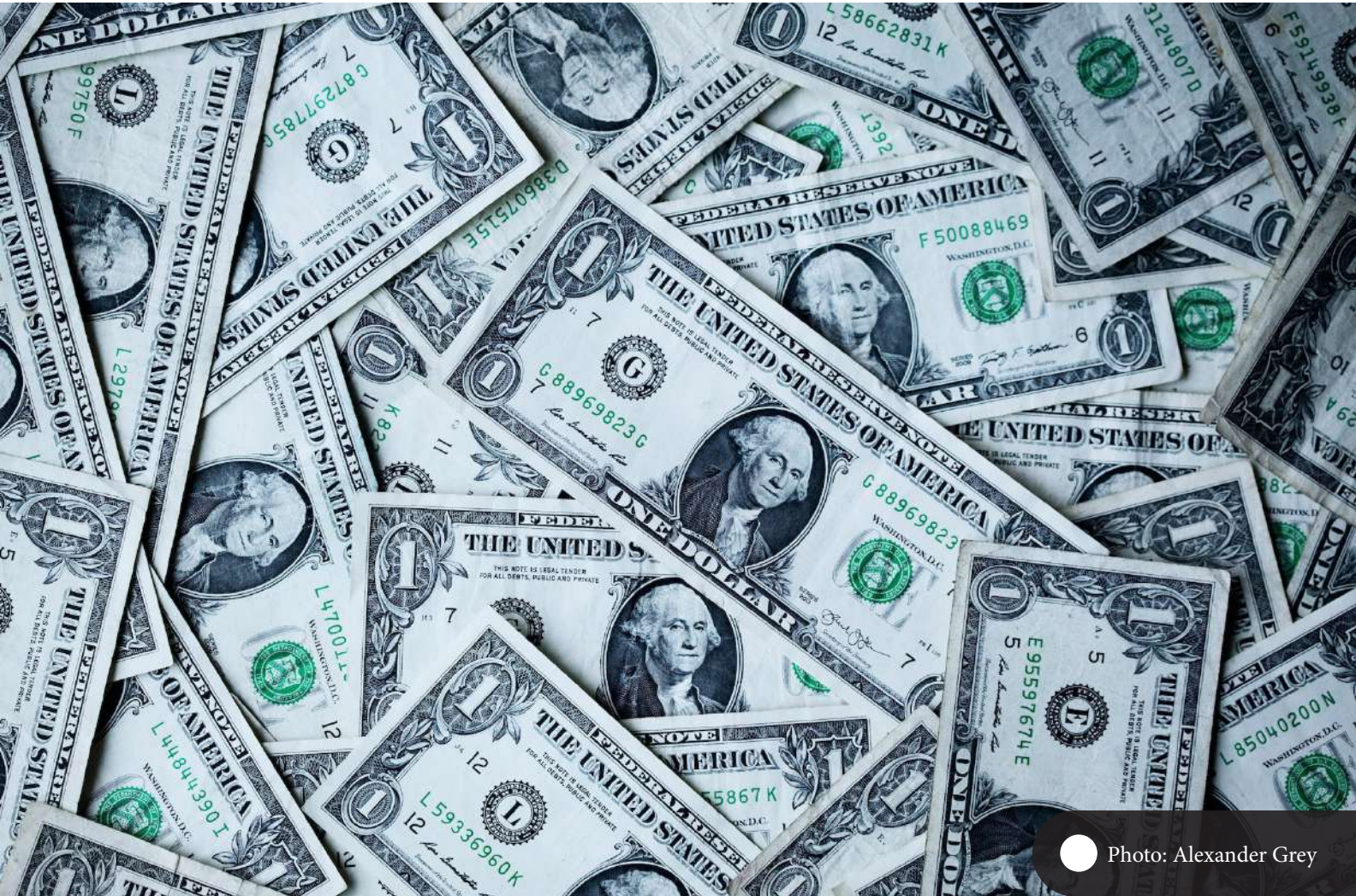


Photo: Alexander Grey

As the top global currency, the US dollar has enjoyed decades as the cash of choice for investors - but it is now facing a growing challenge to that status.

The greenback has been used for almost everything in terms of international trade and global finance, from ordering planes, buying oil, or issuing debt.

But a number of developing economies, particularly China, have been leading a drive against over-reliance on the US currency.

"In many developing countries there is desire to be less dependent on the dollar, particularly on the trade side," said Paola Subacchi, professor of International Economics at the Global Policy Institute at Queen Mary University of London.

On a visit to China in April, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva asked why "all countries are forced to trade based on the dollar", before signing an agreement with Beijing to provide commercial contracts denominated in yuan and reals.

And Bangladesh announced recently it paid Russia for a nuclear power plant in Chinese yuan, as well as using its own currency for a delivery of liquefied natural gas from France's TotalEnergies.

SANCTIONS

The widely-used dollar gives the United States a big competitive advantage.

Emerging and developing countries are dependent on the movements of the US currency, which influences the price of their imports and their exports.

US-set interest rates also influence the cost of

dollar-denominated debt.

But the dollar's dominance has come under the spotlight since the war in Ukraine, which saw Washington and western countries impose sweeping sanctions on Moscow after it invaded Ukraine last year.

"The US uses its dollar hegemony to sanction Russia," said Larry Yang, chief economist at Shenzhen-based First Seafront Fund Management.

"Other countries feel concerned that they might be sanctioned by the US as well, and hence they have decided to opt for more currencies for payment and settlement," he added.

"This change is good for the stability of international trade and it is definitely a long term trend."

China, the world's second-largest economy and Washington's great political rival, has been internationalising its currency for several years.

But its currency is still largely restricted and regulated by the Chinese authorities.

Yang said the internationalisation of the Chinese yuan, also known as RMB, will mean more countries choose the currency for international deals in the future.

"With China's trade volume on a long term rapid ascending trajectory ... the level of RMB internationalisation will increase and there will be more trading partners opt for RMB payment and settlement," he told AFP.

POLITICS VS ECONOMICS

But others warn any significant move away from the dollar would require a number of key factors to be in place, including a transparent government framework, independent central bank, and investor security.

"Clearly, we're entering a very delicate moment for the world economy, with lots of geopolitical tension and the world splitting into two large poles," said Alessandra Ribeiro, an economist at the Tendencias Consultoria consultancy in Sao Paulo.

But she said proposals against the dollar are often "more political than economic".

Ribeiro also noted that China doesn't have a full market economy.

"Depending on the government's interests, it could artificially devalue the yuan. And if I'm getting paid in yuan, that creates problems for me."

Political or not, the level of foreign exchange reserves held in dollars in central banks has been gradually decreasing.

Reserves of the greenback fell from 71 percent of the total in 1999 to 59 percent in 2021, according to a report from the International Monetary Fund last year.

This was partly down to an increase to 10 percent of reserves in "smaller" currencies, outside of the euro, the yen or the pound.

But the dollar was still the currency used in 42 percent of international trade in April, followed by 33 percent which used the euro, according to international payment system Swift.

The Chinese yuan was used in just two percent of transactions, showing that there is still a long way to go for it to rival the dollar.

"Can we move toward an alternative currency? Yes," said Ribeiro.

"But the entire structure the United States offers in terms of security and institutionality would have to be offered somewhere else."

AFP

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NORGES BANK EXCLUDES GAIL INDIA LTD AND KOREA GAS CORPORATION OVER MYANMAR MILITARY TIES

Norges Bank, central bank of Norway, on 27 April, announced the exclusion of two companies, GAIL India Ltd and Korea Gas Corporation, because of their collaboration with an organization affiliated with the military junta in Myanmar, according to an official statement published on the bank's website. The decision was made based on a recommendation from the Council on Ethics of 29 November 2022.

The Executive Board of Norges Bank has determined that the companies' business collaboration with the organization poses an unacceptable risk that the companies contribute to serious violations of individuals' rights in situations of war or conflict.

The move to exclude the two companies was made based on the conduct-based criteria outlined in section 4(b) of the Guidelines for the Observation and Exclusion of Companies from the Government Pension Fund Global. These guidelines serve as a framework for ensuring that the companies invested in align with the bank's values and ethical standards.

"The Executive Board has not conducted an independent assessment of all aspects of the recommendations but is satisfied that the observation and exclusion criteria have been fulfilled. Before deciding to exclude a company, Norges Bank shall consider whether the use of other measures, including the exercise of ownership rights, may be better suited," said the statement, which adds that after careful consideration, the bank has reached the decision that alternative measures would not be suitable in this particular situation.

UN EXPERT URGES JAPAN TO SANCTION MYANMAR

UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, Thomas Andrews, has called on Japan to impose sanctions on Myanmar, similar to those imposed on Russia over the invasion of Ukraine, reported AFP.

Andrews also urged Japan to end its training programme for Myanmar troops, saying it is tarnishing the image of the country's military.

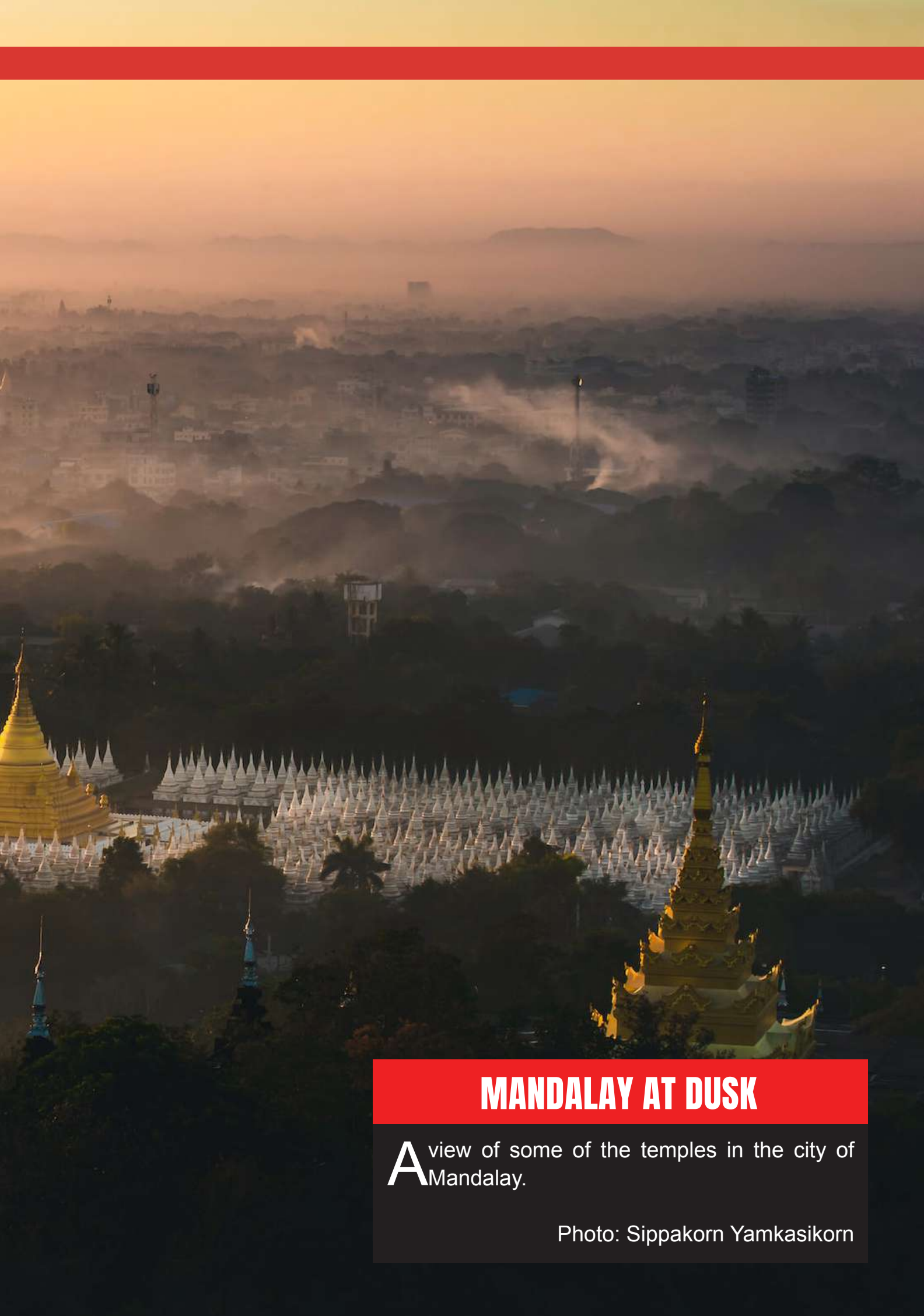
Andrews has accused the Myanmar military of "barbarism and oppression," saying that economic sanctions would weaken the junta's capacity to attack its people.

Prior to the coup, Japan had established significant ties with Myanmar, serving as a major provider of aid and a source of investment.

CULTURE & LIFESTYLE

IN FOCUS





MANDALAY AT DUSK

A view of some of the temples in the city of Mandalay.

Photo: Sippakorn Yamkasikorn

COMPASSIONATE SNAKE CATCHERS DEAL WITH THREAT TO YANGON



● A common visitor on the outskirts of Yangon. Photo: Jan Kopriva

At four in the morning outside a Yangon monastery, Shwe Lei and her team were wrestling 30 writhing pythons into old rice sacks and loading them into a van.

It was just another day in the life of Myanmar's premier snake removal squad, prising pythons and cajoling cobras from dangerous entanglements with the human world before returning them to their natural habitat.

Stuffed into the sacks were three months' worth of work, rescued from homes and apartments around Yangon and cared for at the monastery until they are fit for release to the wild.

"I love snakes because they are not deceitful," Shwe Lei said at the snake shelter run by the group, a python entwined around her body.

"If you acknowledge their nature, they are lovely."

Her mentor Ko Toe Aung, a burly 40-year-old who said he has been hospitalised seven times since he started catching snakes in 2016, was more prosaic.

Anyone in the snake-catching game has to be "fast and agile", he said.

"Wherever we catch a venomous snake, it is 90/10... It's a 90 percent chance the snake will bite me."

Their team - called Shwe Metta, or "Golden Love" in Burmese - has around a dozen members and rescued around 200 snakes last year from around Yangon.

Social media videos of the pair pulling snakes out of sink plugholes and extricating them from roof

eaves have earned them the moniker “prince and princess of snakes” from local media.

ON THE SCENT

The team all have day-jobs and rely on donations for everything from their protective gear to petrol to run their purple-coloured snake “ambulance”.

They mostly catch Burmese pythons - non-venomous snakes that typically grow to around five metres (16 feet) long and squeeze their prey of rats and other small mammals to death.

Cobras and banded krait also make homes in Yangon’s apartments and are a trickier prospect -- their venom can be fatal.

More than 15,000 people were bitten by snakes in Myanmar in 2014, according to the latest available figures from the World Health Organization.

Of those, 1,250 died, a fatality rate higher than many other countries, largely due to Myanmar’s creaking healthcare system and patchy access to antivenoms.

It is a danger never far from the team’s work.

In March, they spent two days trying to remove several cobras nesting underneath a Yangon house.

Tunnelling into the foundations as neighbours watched, their digging was frequently interrupted by the snakes inside spitting venom towards them.

“It stinks,” said Ko Ye Min, 31, a tattooed member of the team, as he took a break from trying to reach the nest.

Recognising exactly which kind of stink is another skill a snake-catcher must hone, according to Ko Toe Aung.

“We have to be familiar with their smells... to identify the species of snakes before removing them,” he said.

Cobras smell “rotten”, he said.

“But the smell of a python is much stronger. Sometimes we even vomit when we bring it into the ambulance.”

‘COMPASSION’

Through their online videos and growing fame, the Shwe Metta team hope to encourage people to be more compassionate towards the slithering reptiles -- especially if one turns up in their house.

“In the past people... used to kill snakes whenever they found them,” said Shwe Lei.

“But they have more knowledge and they know we can release snakes back into the wild. So they call us to capture and remove them.”

The rescued snakes are kept under observation in a nearby monastery until there are enough of them to justify a journey into the bush to release them.

In late March, the team walked into the sweltering backwoods of the Bago Yoma hills, 150 kilometres (90 miles) north of Yangon, on such a journey.

Each member carried a python in a bag slung over their shoulder until they reached a suitable spot to release it.

A few of the dazed reptiles needed gentle prods to get going, but after weeks in a cage and a five-hour car journey, Shwe Lei sympathised.

“Nobody likes the feeling of being locked up,” she said after the last one had slithered off - hopefully not to return to the human world for a long time.

“I feel happy releasing the snakes... from the point of view of compassion for each other, it is satisfying.”

AFP



A cobra rears up. Photo: Mohan Moolepetlu



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