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## THE BIG LIE

Drug addicts suffer as  
Myanmar junta covers  
up their involvement in  
illegal trade

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# SURPRISE? MYANMAR RANKS POORLY IN 'TOURIST-FRIENDLY' RANKING

It is always wise to take country rankings with a pinch of salt when it comes to friendliness and happiness. And, therefore, when Yahoo Finance rolled around at the end of last month with a ranking of “unfriendly” countries with Myanmar staring at us, we would be wise to exercise a degree of caution.

According to the “25 Most Unfriendly Countries in the World” Myanmar joins the ranks of the likes of Congo, Benin and Saudi Arabia with the claim that the country has an “unfriendly reputation”. The Golden Land came in 15.

Yahoo attempts to explain: “For our list of the ‘Most Unfriendly Countries in the World,’ we based our ranking on three credible indexes: the Visa Acceptance Index, the Global Peace Index, and the Danger and Safety Index.

“Each of these indexes gives us different insights into how friendly or “unfriendly” a country might seem to outsiders. We selected countries that were included in all these indexes. Each country’s score was determined based on a weighted average of its positions in these three indexes. Specifically, the weight distribution was as follows: Visa Acceptance Index: 40%; Global Peace Index: 30%; and Danger and Safety Index: 30%.”

So, what is the reality when it comes to Myanmar?

Many international tourists will do a little bit of homework before flying off to an exotic location. So, unless they have been living under a rock over the last three years, Myanmar should show up with a warning sign flashing – after all, an illegal coup in 2021 has plunged the country into bitter civil war. If Yahoo is using their criteria, there should be little surprise that Myanmar would rank poorly – after all, it’s hard for visiting tourists to use a credit card, and if they were to venture out into some areas of the country, the peace, danger and safety monitors would be flashing off the charts.

But friendliness? World travelers wax angrily on travel websites about countries where people are both unfriendly and aggressive. It’s just a fact of life that the populations of some countries

don’t treat visitors well – and maybe don’t recognize that tourist dollars can help boost the economy.

But when it comes to Myanmar and friendliness, it’s not the people that are the problem. Chances are, even now in the midst of crisis, the Myanmar people will display their friendliness to foreign visitors. A survey of tourists, if carried out over the last decade, will likely show that Myanmar is one of the friendliest countries in Southeast Asia, even now.

However, what this “25 Most Unfriendly Countries in the World” survey does not do is indicate to foreign visitors how a visit to the Golden Land at this time could be construed as support for an ugly and brutal military junta and that it could be argued as having moral implications.

This has long been a question mark for people visiting countries with bad governments, pariahs on the international stage.

Does your visit signify support? Shouldn’t you stay away?

Myanmar’s tourist industry is currently in dire straits. And some would argue that local guesthouses, hotels, restaurants and guides are crying out for business. The security and economic situation in Myanmar is so bad that people are leaving the country either for their survival or their business.

Similarly, youth and students are flying in to the Land of Smiles to study and stay during these hard times. A survey of condominium purchase in Thailand shows Myanmar citizens - those with money - top of the list.

Against this backdrop, the spectacle of groups of foreign tourists signing up for a Myanmar visa and dropping in to the country for a holiday at this time might be viewed by the junta as support for their rule, something for the generals to crow about.

The majority of the friendly Myanmar people remain, battered down in a country in crisis. But until that crisis is over, a visit to the country now could be viewed as a visit of the ignorant, or worse, a tipping of the hat to the junta that the majority of the country’s citizens want ousted.

EDITORIAL

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WEEKLY

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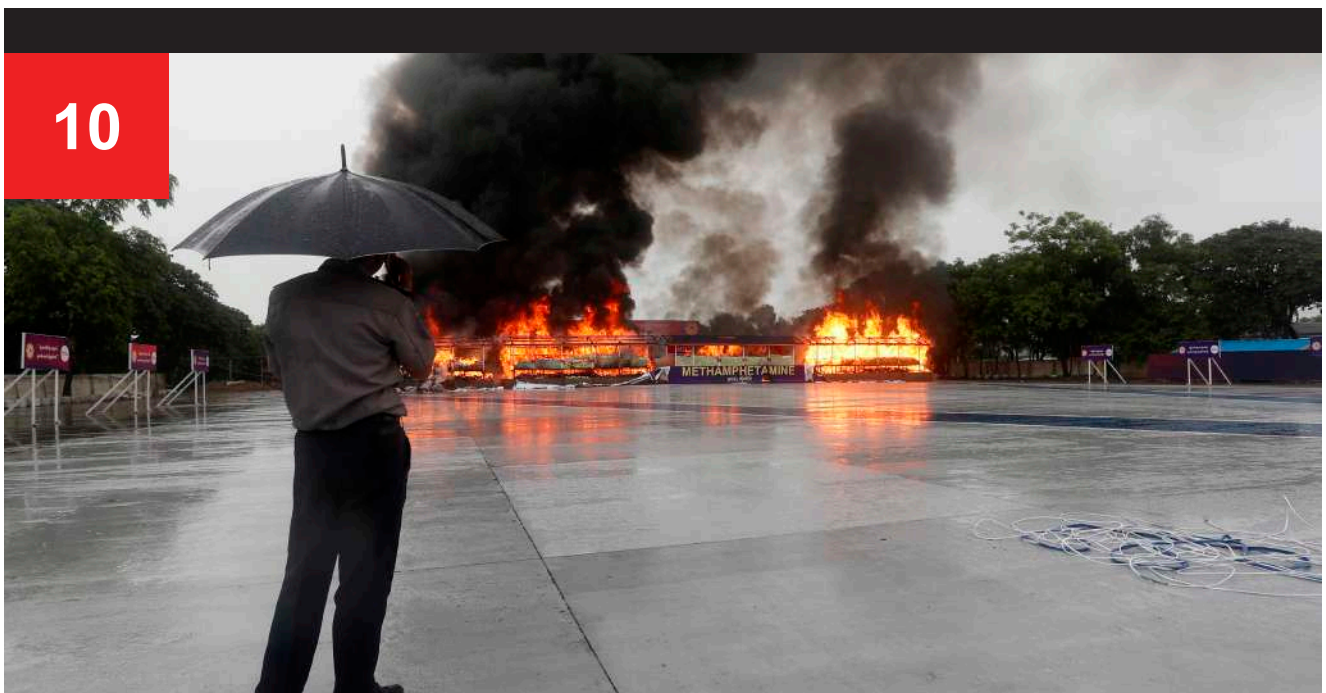
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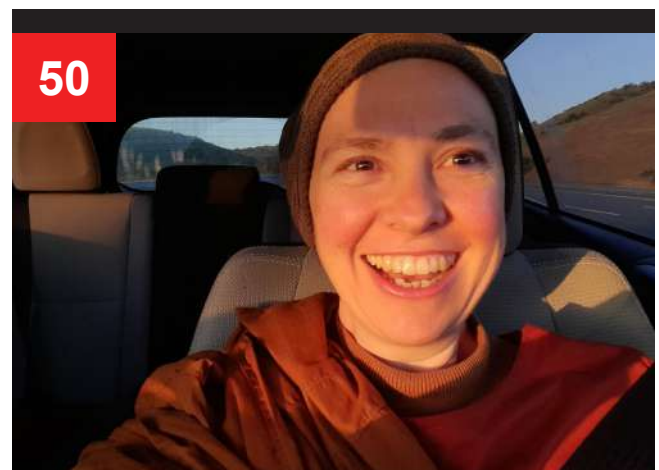
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## HAVING FUN

Children play in the flood waters in Yangon city last week.

Photo: AFP



IN FOCUS



## JUNTA MORTAR SHELL KILLS FIVE-YEAR-OLD IN SAGAING'S KALAY TOWNSHIP

Junta artillery fire killed a five-year-old boy and injured three of his family members in Kalay Township, in Sagaing Region at about 9:30 p.m. on 21 June.

Junta soldiers from Regional Operations Command (Kalay) stationed in the western part of Kalay Township fired 120mm mortar shells into East Santha Village in the southern part of Kalay Township.

According to witnesses, the five-year-old's head was blown off, his seven-year-old brother suffered a serious head injury, his 12-year-old sister was seriously injured and their mother lost her right leg below the knee.

The three victims are currently receiving emergency medical treatment at Kalay Hospital, according

to Kalay Township news sources.

A member of the Kalay People's Defence force (PDF) said: "We believe that Military Council troops are deliberately targeting villages and civilian areas. They are firing artillery when there is no fighting with local resistance forces."

He also said that there had been no resistance forces stationed in East Santha Village and the junta had deliberately tried to injure civilians by firing into areas where they knew there were only civilians.

Also, early in the morning of the previous day, 20 June, a 20-year-old man was killed when a junta artillery shell landed on nearby Thasi Village, also in southern Kalay Township.

## JUNTA MEETING WITH FIVE NATIONWIDE CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT SIGNATORIES

The junta is holding a meeting from 26 to 28 June with five of the nine ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) who signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).

The five EAOs attending the meeting are the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), the KNU/KNLA Peace Council (KPC) and the Pa-O National Liberation Organization (PNLO) who signed the NCA on 15 October 2015 and the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU) who signed the ceasefire on 13 February 2018.

The NCA signatories not attending are the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), the Chin National Front, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army-South (RCSS/SSA).

Colonel Saw Kyaw Nyunt, a spokesperson for the five EAOs attending the junta meeting said to Mizzima: "The five groups who will go have been invited to the meeting by the regime. The invitation says it is only a gathering. It doesn't say anything about peace talks or political issues. It's just an invitation to a gathering."

He explained that it is not known what topics will be discussed, but the EAOs will make presentations on topics they have agreed on between themselves and discuss them with the junta.

The five EAOs attending these meetings previously met with junta leader Min Aung Hlaing in May 2022.

NCA signatories the NMSP and the RCSS/SSA also previously met with Min Aung Hlaing in May 2022, but it is not believed that they will be attending this round of meetings. Mizzima tried to contact the two organisations to see if they are attending this round of meetings but was unable to get an answer from either group.

The junta Minister of Foreign Affairs, U Than Swe, said at a meeting in Thailand last week that there have been 106 meetings to discuss peace in Myanmar and over 5,000 negotiations have been held.

Despite attending ongoing meetings to discuss peace, the junta still kills people, violates human rights, carries out airstrikes, especially in Karen State, and causes people to flee their homes in fear.

Colonel Saw Kyaw Nyunt said: "We are still trying to find a solution in the current, complicated political crisis."

In early June, China brokered talks between the junta and the three EAOs that make up the Northern Alliance, the Arakan Army (AA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). Nothing was achieved by the talks.



# SIX JUNTA SOLDIERS KILLED IN FIVE DAYS OF FIGHTING IN TANINTHARYI TOWNSHIP

Six Myanmar junta troops were killed during five days of fighting from 16 to 20 June at Thameehla Village in Tanintharyi Township in Myeik District.

On 16 June near Thameehla Village, people's defence forces (PDFs) launched a drone and ground attack against a column of 60 junta soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 558, based in Tanintharyi Town.

The fighting lasted for five days until 20 June, according to the Thanintharyi Regional Military Command, one of the National Unity Government's (NUG) anti-junta military commands.

A spokesperson said: "The Military column withdrew from Thameehla Village on 20 June. The villagers saw three dead bodies when the troops retreated and three others died at Thanintharyi Hospital. Over 10 junta soldiers were injured."

One defence force fighter was injured during the fighting and a defence force drone was damaged.

Four villagers from Thameehla Village were injured during the fighting. Three houses were also destroyed when the junta soldiers indiscriminately fired heavy weapons.

"We are not concerned about the civilian casualties, there are no life-threatening injuries," said the Tanintharyi Regional Military Command spokesperson.

The defence forces involved in the fighting were The Kaw Htoo Lei Army (KTLA), the Batmalite Guerrilla Force, the Southern Warriors Defence Force (SWDF), the Myeik Local Defence Force, Myeik District Battalion 2, and the Tawponegyi Force.

## JUNTA FORCES LARGEST MICROFINANCE LENDER TO LEAVE MYANMAR

The largest microfinance company in Myanmar, Pact Global Microfinance Fund (PGMF), is withdrawing from Myanmar due to pressure from the junta and has forgiven all the outstanding debts in the country.

PGMF announced that restrictions put in place by the junta had made it impossible for the company to operate in the country. As part of its withdrawal PGMF has forgiven, and will not collect, over \$156 million USD in outstanding debts, all the debts owed by its 890,000 borrowers in Myanmar.

PGMF started operating with the support of the United Nations Development Plan (UNDP) in Myanmar in 1997, making loans to low-income households and people who were unable to obtain finance elsewhere, especially women and people in rural areas. It has given out loans to 2.3 million clients in nearly 15,000 villages in Myanmar.

But, the junta made it impossible for PGMF to operate in Myanmar in various ways.

The 2022 Myanmar registration Law banned unregistered non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as PGMF, from offering microfinance loans. But, the junta refused to let PGMF register as a commercial entity, which would have allowed it to continue offering microfinance loans.

Senior staff at the company were also denied visas and the tightening up of foreign exchange rules

also further limited PGMF's operations.

In recent months the junta told PGMF that it could continue to operate in Myanmar if it agreed to hand over a part of its profits and all of its assets to the junta, something PGMF said it could not even consider as it would breach US sanctions law.

PGMF explained that shutting its business in Myanmar was a last resort, but that under the current conditions, it had no other options. This also meant that PGMF will have to make all its 4,000 staff in Myanmar redundant.

PGMF Board Chair Ellen Varney said: "In addition to our borrowers and creditors, our priority now is our staff. The closure of PGMF is of great sadness for us as an employer. In recognition of the hard work and dedication of the organisation's staff, management has pre-paid salary and benefits, as well as a bonus, to all the PGMF family across Myanmar. It has also honored its obligation to pay for any accrued leave not taken and for any benefits owed."

An official PGMF statement also said that all loans in Myanmar will be written off as of 26 June and that following the statement no one need pay back any more money that they owe.





Dazed and confused drug addict. Photo: Mishal Ibrahim



# THE BIG LIE

## Drug addicts suffer as Myanmar junta covers up their involvement in illegal trade

Andrew Landen

**D**otted across the length and breadth of Myanmar are drug addicts caught up in a criminal cycle with little or no help from the authorities.

There is irony in the Myanmar junta's message this year on the United Nations International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking last week on 26 June.

The theme? "People first: stop stigma and discrimination, strengthen prevention," a line the junta parroted, along with ceremonies to burn large piles of seized illegal narcotics – everything from methamphetamines to Ketamin, opium and heroin.

Not only is the junta – illegally installed following the coup in February 2021 – failing to help addicts and put people first, but many junta officials – including military and police – are up to their eyeballs in the illicit trade themselves. According to analysts, the level of involvement by men in uniform picked up during the decade of the democracy experiment – but has kicked in to overdrive amidst the chaos post-coup.

The dire circumstances are not just bad for the lives of addicts and people negatively affected in the Golden Land. Meth tablets and refined heroin made in makeshift factories in a number of ethnic areas – primarily Shan and Kachin states – make their way onto the streets of countries in Southeast Asia, Australian and New Zealand and even further afield.

### **PUFF OF SMOKE**

As piles of seized drugs went up in flames last

week, the big lie is the Myanmar junta – in communication with international anti-narcotics organizations including the UNDP – is making efforts to stem the trade.

But the reality is the Golden Triangle made up of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand continues to be a profitable hub for illegal drug cartels. And it is people who suffer.

The junta claimed they torched almost half a billion dollars-worth of illegal drugs on the day.

The seizures could be said to be evidence of some success. But, as a junta official made clear, they were failing to stop a surge in the production and trafficking of narcotics.

Head-high piles of heroin, cannabis, methamphetamine and opium were burned in the commercial hub Yangon, and televised torchings also took place elsewhere in the country, with a total of \$446 million of narcotics going up in smoke, according to junta officials.

How serious is the anti-drug drive? Efforts are being made but, in a rare admission, the head of Myanmar's Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control said its efforts to crush the multi-billion-dollar trade were having no impact.

"Even though countless drug abusers, producers, traffickers and cartels were arrested and prosecuted, the production and trafficking of drugs have not declined at all," Soe Htut told the Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper.



## **'NOT SERIOUS'**

While the Myanmar junta puts on a façade of control and normality, the truth is the generals are fighting to maintain their position – including quietly maintaining sources of income from a range of illegal or damaging activities including the drug trade, logging, mining and human trafficking, including the activities of online scamming.

Analysts say the military, whose image has been seriously blackened in the wake of the coup, is not serious about ending the lucrative trade. The army is “actually the ultimate protection cartel of the trade,

and have been for many years”, independent analyst David Mathieson told AFP.

The burning comes as the United Nations reported record seizures of crystal meth last year in Myanmar and said opium poppy farming had seen a revival in the chaos unleashed by the coup.

More than 23 tons of crystal meth were seized in Myanmar in 2022, the UN's Office on Drugs and Crime said earlier this month.

Wholesale and street prices for meth across Southeast Asia were falling or at record lows, it said.

“The most powerful regional trafficking net-



● A pack of methamphetamine. Photo: AFP





Thai anti-narcotics officials with packs of meths seized in a raid. Photo: AFP

works are able to operate with a high degree of certainty they can and will not be stopped,” it said.

Opium poppy production in Myanmar also ramped up dramatically following the coup, the office said in January, as political and economic turmoil drove farmers to cultivate the crop. The area of land used for opium poppy is now at just over 40,000 hectares, the UN said - around half the size of New York City.

Authorities in neighbouring Thailand said they destroyed 32 tonnes of illicit drugs, mostly meth, with a value of around \$607 million.

Myanmar has seen a ratcheting up of access to drugs since the coup, with police more interested in extortion than real narcotics suppression. Police appear to be slack in the cities where drugs are openly available to youth at karaoke bars, with ketamine the drug of choice.

### **ADDICTS FORGOTTEN**

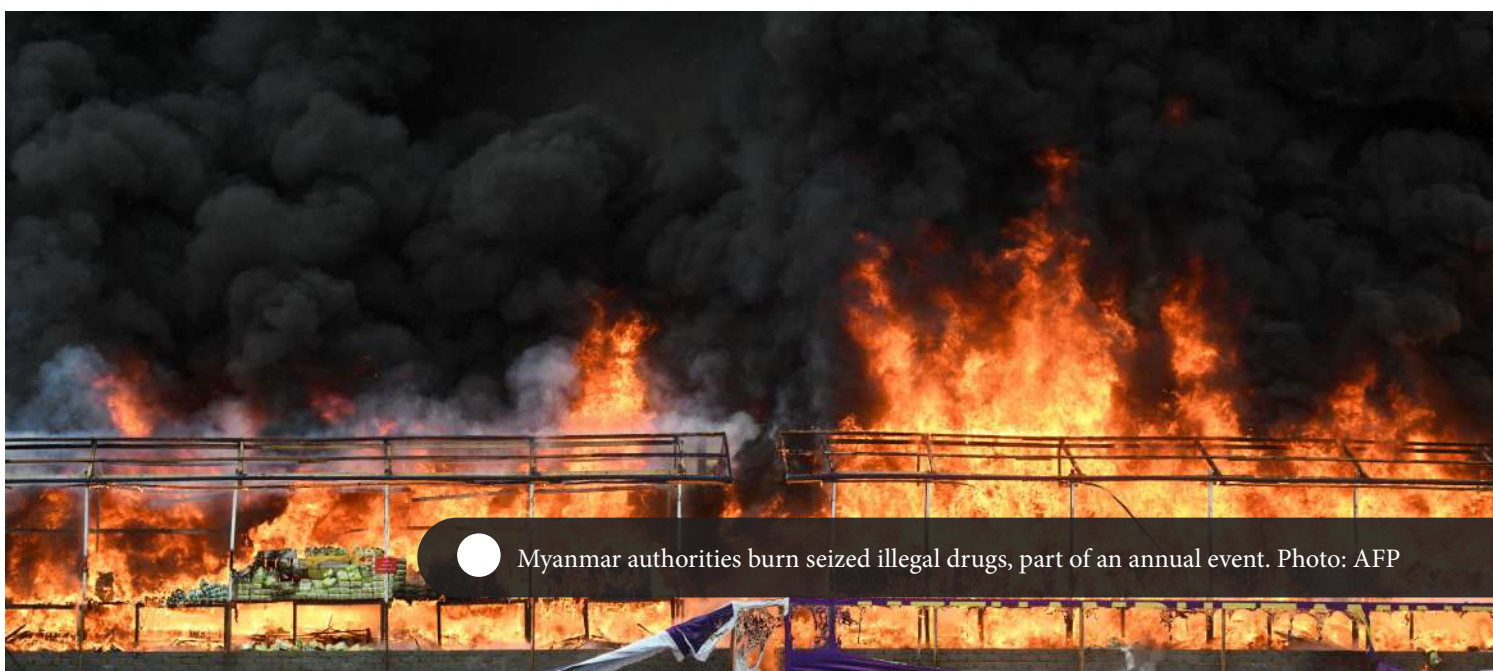
While military, police and junta administra-

tion officials benefit from the efforts of the drug cartels with their factories and refining facilities, hundreds of thousands of people, primarily youth, in the Southeast Asian region and further afield, are negatively affected by the availability and generally cheap price of a range of drugs that are typically consumed in a range of ways, from ingestion to smoking to injection.

For Myanmar youth, the drug scourge compounds the economic and social problems that have beset the country in the wake of the coup. It can be a vicious cycle. Limited or no job opportunities can lead to increased drug use – and the temptation to become a drug pusher, supporting their addiction and providing income during dire times.

Even when there was some form of stability in Myanmar – during the decade-long democratic window – the lure of drugs sucked the youth in. Today, post-coup, drug addicts face a bleak future.

*Additional reporting by AFP*



Myanmar authorities burn seized illegal drugs, part of an annual event. Photo: AFP



# KIA REJECTS MYANMAR JUNTA CLAIM OF AN ATTACK ON CHINESE CONVOY IN KACHIN



KIA fighters. Stock photo: AFP

The Myanmar junta on Saturday accused the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) of attacking a vehicle convoy containing Chinese military personnel who were travelling to a meeting on border security, a claim the KIA denied.

On Tuesday, a vehicle convoy containing Chinese military representatives and Myanmar counterparts headed to Myitkyina in northern Kachin state came under fire.

A vehicle that was second in line was shot five times, the junta said.

Myanmar security forces retaliated.

“We can confirm that (Kachin Independence Army) members attacked the convoy,” junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun said in an audio message.

The junta said no one was wounded or killed in the incident.

But the KIA denied responsibility.

“KIA did not attack any convoy,” KIA colonel

Naw Bu told AFP, adding there had been heavy fighting in the area, near where the convoy was attacked, since Monday.

Comment has been sought from China’s foreign ministry.

In October last year, dozens of people died when the Myanmar military conducted air strikes on a KIA concert.

More than 3,700 people have been killed in the military’s crackdown on dissent since the coup, according to a local monitoring group.

AFP, Mizzima

# MYANMAR AIR STRIKES KILL 10 CIVILIANS IN SAGAING'S NYAUNG KONE VILLAGE



The village suffered heavy damage. Photo: Mizzima

**A** Myanmar military airstrike on Sagaing's Nyaung Kone Village killed ten civilians, locals and media reports said on Wednesday last week.

Rights groups accuse the military of extrajudicial killings, razing villages and using air strikes as collective punishment of its opponents.

A military jet dropped three bombs on Nyaung Kone Village in the northern Sagaing region on Tuesday afternoon, according to Ko Zaw Tun, an anti-coup fighter from the village.

Ten people were killed and eight wounded, he said.

"There was no fighting, but they came to bomb the village," he told AFP, adding 11 houses had been destroyed in the attack.

A resident of Nyaung Kone also told AFP that ten people had been killed in the strike.

He and other locals had cremated the dead later that evening, he said, asking not to use his name due to fear of reprisal.

"We did not know what their [the military's] next plan is. So, we just held funerals for them as soon as we could," he said.

BBC Burmese and other local media also reported the air strikes, with some outlets saying nine

people had been killed.

Images published by local media showed people working to douse smouldering debris and ash, and a large building in ruins.

AFP digital verification reporters confirmed the images had not appeared online before Tuesday.

More than two years after launching its coup, the military is struggling to crush resistance to its rule.

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

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

Sagaing has emerged as a hotspot of anti-junta resistance.

In April, the military bombed a gathering in Sagaing that media and locals said killed about 170 people, sparking renewed global condemnation of the isolated junta.

AFP



# DEFENCE FORCES CAPTURE LAST JUNTA ARMY CAMP IN KARENNI STATE'S MESE TOWNSHIP



Karenni fighters with captured junta soldiers. Photo: Facebook

**K**arenni joint forces attacked and captured junta military camp BP-13 manned by junta Light Infantry Battalion (LIB), in Karenni State's Mese Township, on 23 June.

The joint forces first attacked the camp, the last strategic military hill camp in Mese Township still in junta hands, at 4:00 a.m. on 23 June and finally captured the camp on the afternoon of 23 June.

"Our forces attacked the tactical military hill camp in the early morning and captured it in the afternoon. Our members and forces are stationed at the camp. The camp is currently under our control. Right now, we are gathering information about the damage and fatalities suffered by the Military Council soldiers," said Khu Nye Reh, a spokesperson for the Karenni Military Information Center.

He said that two Karenni Nationalities Defense Forces (KNDF) soldiers and one Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front (KNPLF) soldier were killed in the fighting for the base and that another

soldier from the Karenni Army (KA) was killed in a junta airstrike launched after the fighting had stopped.

The number of junta casualties is still unknown.

The next morning, 24 June, 18 junta soldiers who had been stationed at camp BP-13 surrendered to the Karenni joint forces along with their weapons, according to Khu Nye Reh, who said that three junta officers were still missing and unaccounted for.

He said: "There were 21 [junta] soldiers stationed at camp BP-13 and 18 soldiers surrendered. The three officers are still missing. I believe the three officers are the commander and the second-in-command. They could be hiding somewhere or they might have fled to Thailand."

He also said that currently, the junta has no camps in Mese Township because all of its camps have been captured and occupied by Karenni joint forces and they now fully control all of Mese Township.

# AID BATCHES ARRIVE BUT CYCLONE MOCHA-HIT IDPS STILL LACK SHELTER AND FOOD



Photo: AFP

**C**onfusion continues to surround Myanmar's Cyclone Mocha humanitarian aid response because aid cannot be delivered without junta permission.

This has led to a slowdown in the delivery of aid to the most vulnerable and internally displaced people (IDPs) being left without shelters as the monsoon season begins.

The United Nations OCHA has complained that dispatching aid to those in need, primarily in Rakhine State, is being held up by red tape, while the junta says permission is needed for international and local organisations to deliver aid to those still suffering from the mid-May onslaught by Cyclone Mocha.

A total of over 140 died and as many as 5 million people have been negatively affected by the storm.

Six weeks on and a sizeable number of people are still struggling without adequate shelter and food.

Last week, local reports indicate some aid is being delivered, and some consignments are on their way.

Chinese aid in the form of mosquito nets and blankets, delivered by aircraft to Yangon last week, has now reportedly arrived in Sittwe, according to a local media report.

Indonesia, acting in its capacity as the current chair of ASEAN, has sent more than \$ 500,000 worth of humanitarian aid to the people affected by Cyclone Mocha in Myanmar. The aid was sent from Indonesia on 26 June.

The aid consists of 45 tons of logistics supplies and equipment, comprising tarpaulins, family tents, refugee tents, carpentry tools, instant foods, hygiene kits, blankets, mattresses, and generators, according to an Indonesian government official. Indonesia has also lent a Hercules transport aircraft to

Myanmar for the relief work, under the auspices of the ASEAN chair.

Meanwhile, the junta has announced that the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock Breeding and Irrigation will provide 73,397 baskets of paddy seeds to farmers in the storm-hit townships of Rakhine State for planting in the next rainy season under the guidance of the Natural Disaster Management Committee, according to Development Media Group.

Paddy seeds for Paw Hsan Hmwe rice and two local paddy varieties will be transported to Sittwe by military-owned vehicles for onward distribution to farmers, according to junta-controlled media.

While people in the town of Sittwe are getting back to normal, villagers and internally displaced people (IDPs) in Rakhine State continue to suffer, particularly due to the monsoon rains and winds.

IDPs in Rakhine State appear to be the worst affected by the natural disaster. According to Western News, a local media organisation, the IDPs are currently having an extremely hard time due to the bad weather conditions in Rakhine. As the monsoon sweeps in, they are still waiting for humanitarian assistance more than a month after their shelters were destroyed by the cyclone.

According to the report, the IDPs do not have the financial means to repair their damaged shelters, and the few tarpaulins that were donated to them are not enough to provide adequate shelter from the rain and the wind.

According to an IDP camp official in Kyauktaw Township, it is tough for the people because the price of bamboo continues to rise, which makes renovations of shelters more difficult, and the people do not have enough money. WFP food aid is being supplied but not in amounts sufficient to sustain them.

One spokesperson from an IDP camp in Mrauk-U Township said that at first, some charity organisations came and provided rice and some food-stuffs, but now they do not receive any support.

"The Military Council no longer supports anything, and we are experiencing great inconvenience," he told local media.

Local media report that some INGOs are still in discussions with the Military Council to allow them to support Rakhine IDPs as well as Muslim IDPs and the people who were affected by the storm.

IDPs said that the Military Council provided only marginal support to the storm-affected people of Rakhine and no support at all to those displaced by the war between the Military Council and the Arakan Army.



# UN ISSUES DIRE REPORT ON THE CRITICAL HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN MYANMAR

The annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on Myanmar officially released on 5 July paints a dire picture of the crisis that has befallen the country since the coup of February 2021.

The report identifies trends and patterns of human rights violations between 1 February 2021 to 30 April 2023 with a focus on the human rights impact of the denial of humanitarian access.

The report analyzes actions by all duty-bearers and finds that the Myanmar military is most responsible for the neg-

ative impact on the enjoyment of human rights and on delivery of humanitarian action. The report documents that the military has established an all-encompassing system of control based on instrumentalization of the legal and administrative spheres in Myanmar.

As the UN report notes, concrete steps are needed to ensure essential needs of all people are met, including food and health-care, and to respect, protect and fulfil peoples' fundamental rights.

The report includes recommendations to all parties, including the military authorities, the

National Unity Government, and the international community.

The following is an abbreviated assessment of the report.

## FOUR CUTS STRATEGY

Myanmar junta military actions since February 2021, including through its "four cuts" strategy against the civilian population, continue to expose the people in Myanmar to pervasive human rights violations, resulting in staggering humanitarian impacts.

Between February 2021 and April 2023, credible sources verified that at least 3,452 persons have died at the hands of the mil-



Deliveries of aid have been slow to come through. Photo: AFP

itary and its affiliates, 21,807 individuals were arrested, and 5,839 convicted without any respect for judicial guarantees. Additionally, 154 have been sentenced to death and four known to be executed.

An estimated 1.5 million people have been internally displaced, with nearly one million in the central regions alone, and approximately 60,000 civilian structures have been reportedly burnt or destroyed.

Over 75,000 people have reportedly fled to neighbouring countries. More than one million Rohingya already live under appalling conditions in refugee camps in Bangladesh and recent reductions to food rations due to limitations on available humanitarian funds are expected to have devastating consequences.



Of the remaining 600,000 Rohingya in Rakhine, nearly 150,000 live in camps where they are deprived of fundamental rights including freedom of movement. Under the current conditions, safe, dignified, and sustainable returns remain impossible.

Combined with the enduring impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the military coup has resulted in erasure of nearly a decade of progress, with a doubling of poverty levels since March 2020.

### **PEOPLE IN NEED**

Estimates indicate that 17.6 million people – one-third of the overall population – require some form of humanitarian assistance, marking a steep spike compared to the one million in need prior to the coup.

Restrictions on humanitarian access have been in place for decades under various governments and were mostly directed at limiting the delivery of assistance to minority groups. Since the coup, restrictions have increased amid a dramatic surge in humanitarian needs for all communities.

Food insecurity is on the rise in Myanmar, with 15.2 million people requiring food and nutrition support. Food prices have escalated tremendously by 63 and 177 per cent in 2021 and 2022 respectively. Food production has diminished because of continued violence and insecurity, reduced land access due to travel restrictions, displacement, land seizures, mine and unexploded ordnances contamination, insufficient agricultural workforce, and high transportation costs. Numerous interlocutors highlighted that many people are at risk of starvation.

In addition to the direct attacks on healthcare personnel and infrastructure and severe restrictions arbitrarily imposed on access to food assistance, the military has continued to instrumentalise the legal and administrative framework of Government to con-

trol and limit life-saving humanitarian assistance/relief. Imposition of martial law on an additional 40 townships across the country in February 2023<sup>21</sup> has further diminished access to aid of populations-in-need.

### **RESTRICTIONS**

Barriers to humanitarian access were already significant under previous governments, with serious concerns continuously raised regarding operations in Kachin and Rakhine, including for the Rohingya, among others. As part of its attempts to assert control, the military has imposed a range of legal, financial, and bureaucratic requirements on civil society and humanitarian activity that have severely reduced civic space and delivery of lifesaving assistance.

These restrictions have resulted in aid not reaching populations in conflict-affected areas, particularly those where the military has been most active in its attempts to suppress and crush resistance to its rule. Due to military actions, humanitarian assistance in most areas in the country can only be provided by evading military rules at great personal risk of arrest, mistreatment or even death. In areas under military control, access to populations-in-need has been limited through all-encompassing restrictive measures that instrumentalize the legal and administrative systems to control aid.

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### **AMENDING LAWS**

In October 2022, the military unilaterally imposed amendments to the 2014 organisation registration law ('registration law'), which formalised further restrictions on civil society and humanitarian actions. These amendments are the centrepiece of an interlocking system linking registration to several critical aspects of humanitarian action, including banking, importation and procurement of aid items, and movement of aid workers and items. Together with targeted restrictions in violence and conflict-affected areas, these have been instrumental in controlling and limiting necessary humanitarian assistance to populations-in-need.

These amendments introduce compulsory registration of all non-profit organizations and impose lengthy and onerous administrative procedures and criminal penalties, including up to five years' imprisonment, for lack of compliance. In their applications, organizations must disclose personal information of staff, funding sources, proposed project details, and operational locations. Vaguely formulated provisions, such as prohibiting any contact with broadly-defined groups including those organizations deemed "unlawful" or opponents of the military, are likely to result in their arbitrary application. This regime therefore facilitates extensive oversight by the

military of non-profit organizations and their activities.

Since adoption, the registration law has created a chilling effect within civil society and forced many organizations to grapple with whether their compliance could be perceived as legitimising the military.

### **LIMITATIONS ON MOVEMENT**

Limitations on freedom of movement have represented a long-term pressing and continuous human rights concern in Myanmar, including under the previous quasi-civilian Government. After the coup, the situation has significantly deteriorated as the military has increasingly attempted to control movements. Delays and denial of visas have become a tool for the military to decide time, locations, and functions of those entering the country. Once in country, travel authorizations are required for movements of international staff and distribution of humanitarian assistance. For both visas and travel authorizations, valid organisational registration is required. This has particularly affected areas outside military control, as the military tightly manages access to those areas, with interlocutors reporting that authorization regimes infringe upon a wide range of fundamental rights.

While the pre-coup travel authorization regime in general did not apply to national organizations and staff, under the new regime, national and international organizations that intend to operate in military-defined travel-restricted areas are required to cooperate with the relevant administration and military structures. On 17 March 2023, the National Unity Government also requested all local and international organizations to seek prior authorization before travelling through or within areas under its control. Grassroots and community-based organizations also reported being required to coordinate with anti-military armed groups when entering territories under their control.

Interlocutors confirmed that checkpoints are the main impediment to free movement of people and goods, and they serve as a means for various groups to assert control over territory vis-à-vis the civilian population.

### **AID WORKERS' CHALLENGES**

A key consequence of the coup is that security has dramatically worsened for humanitarian workers and aid providers are consistently exposed to risks of arrest, harassment or other mistreatment or even death. While no comprehensive and systematic collection of data on attacks on humanitarian actors since the coup is in place, figures from credible sources vary between 13 and 40 killed, and 17 and 28 wounded. Reports of arrests range between 43 and 212 individuals arrested. It is likely that these figures represent a mere fraction of the reality on the ground. Despite analytical limitations, it is evident that national actors are the most exposed as they account for all casualties, highlighting the continuous personal risks they face when alleviating the plight of victims. As one interviewee described, "Other people and I were trying to bring older people to the monastery and on the way, artillery [shelling] fell down. When you go to help people, you have to look at the sky and look at the ground. It is very difficult."

Incidents documented since February 2021 have repeatedly shown that the military perceives aid providers as part of the population opposing their rule, rather than as actors who deserve specific protection. One interviewee emphasised: "There is a complete disregard for all humanitarian principles. There are no legal protections in place for humanitarian workers".

In the early days of the coup, the military targeted medical personnel with arrest, and repeatedly opened fire on ambulances at protests. One interviewee reported that merely possessing an

identification card that lists a medical role puts individuals at risk of arrest when passing through military checkpoints. In the following months, attacks on ambulances have continued to occur, as have arrests and detention of health workers, and attacks against medical facilities and other protected objects.

Interviewees reported that in November 2021, the military raided a clinic that had been in operation for over two decades in Kayah State, arresting four doctors, 13 nurses and one volunteer while also confiscating medical supplies and food rations. On 11 April 2023 in Pazigyí village, Sagaing, a military combat aircraft bombed attendees, including women and children, at an inauguration ceremony for a community building. Minutes later, a helicopter arrived and opened fire on the injured and those rescuing them. Later that day, another military aircraft shot at people collecting dead bodies and human remains. This attack reportedly resulted in the deaths of up to 168 people, including at least 45 women and 38 children.

As indicated above, aid providers also face significant risks of harassment, intimidation, arrest, and detention when delivering assistance and passing through checkpoints. In Rakhine and parts of southern Chin, several aid providers and medics were arrested for transporting essential supplies, including medicines, when the military had placed blanket restrictions on humanitarian access.

Orders imposing curfews or restrictions on the number of individuals who can travel on a given vehicle at one time – often reported in areas under martial law – have made transportation of humanitarian assistance even more risky. An interviewee stated, “The main overall risk is that when you deliver assistance, you are considered as associated to illegal groups and get arrested for that.”

## CONCLUSIONS

As the post-coup human rights crisis continues to worsen, Myanmar’s overall humanitarian situation has also deteriorated to alarming levels. Through the implementation of its “four cuts” policy aimed at severing support for anti-military groups, the military has killed and injured thousands of civilians while destroying goods and infrastructure necessary for survival, including food, shelter, and medical centres. In violation of international obligations, the military has targeted humanitarian actions and actors through an all-encompassing system of military measures and the instrumentalization of the legal and administrative spheres, forcing aid providers to either renounce support to people in desperate need of life-saving aid or to deliver at enormous personal risks.

Meanwhile, duty bearers have failed to meet their obligation to protect civilians. Security across the country has deteriorated as the military has persistently targeted civilians through airstrikes and razing of populated areas. Widespread use of landmines by multiple actors has also furthered insecurity. As a result, many organizations have forgone or drastically modified operations in affected areas, negatively impacting a wide range of human rights protections for individuals affected by violence. Local actors, who are overwhelmingly carrying out operations, are continuously risking death, arrest, torture, and harassment. Violations and restrictions documented in this report, when conducted as part of a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population, and if they resulted in severely depriving fundamental rights of individuals perceived as part of a group opposing military rule may constitute the crime against humanity of persecution.

Amongst the numerous and interconnected measures put in place by the military to control or deny humanitarian assistance,

a key obstacle are the military checkpoints. These are unanimously reported to be places of arbitrary enforcement of unclear rules, instilling fear in anyone who has to cross them. Whenever possible, those seeking assistance and those seeking to assist try to avoid checkpoints. Given increased violence and mine contamination across the country this is, however, increasingly difficult, resulting in a clear negative impact on the quantity, quality, and timeliness of assistance reaching people-in-need.

While the military restricts movements of people through several measures, the instrumental use of the pre-existing arbitrary and discriminatory travel authorizations regime plays a critical role. In all areas under its control, the military strategically decides on the groups of beneficiaries and types of aid to be delivered, as well as its timing, in violation of principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Similarly, the military prevents the movement of goods and humanitarian items through systemic restrictions, and the ability of individuals to transfer and safely access funds.

These pervasive and interlinked restrictions are anchored in the recently imposed regime for compulsory registration of organizations. Through its unilateral instrumentalization of the legal system and criminalization of lack of compliance or engagement with non-registered organizations, the military has cohesively linked access to funds, goods, authorizations, visa, and numerous other critical aspects of humanitarian actions, to registration. Registration depends on lengthy and onerous administrative procedures whose rules remain unclear and are under the discretion of the military. Intrusive documentation is required of applicants and stringent checks indicate the intention to politicize the delivery of humanitarian assistance.



# UN OFFERS RECOMMENDATIONS TO BRING PEACE AND REDUCE HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN MYANMAR



**A**s part of the annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on Myanmar released on 5 July, the UN offers recommendations to deal with the crisis.

The report identifies trends and patterns of human rights violations between 1 February 2021 to 30 April 2023 with a focus on the human rights impact of the denial of humanitarian access.

The following is a list of the UN recommendations included in the report:

The High Commissioner recommends that military authorities:

(a) Cease immediately all violence and attacks directed against the people of Myanmar and civilian infrastructures across the country, in compliance with Security Council resolution S/RES/2669(2022);

(b) Ensure full compliance with international human rights law and international humanitarian law and, in particular, refrain from planting anti-personnel landmines which are inherently indiscriminate weapons greatly contributing to the suffering of the civilian population. Accurate recording and marking must be implemented and, whenever possible, implement humanitarian demining activities.

(c) Release immediately all those arbitrarily detained, prosecuted and/or sentenced, particularly those deprived of liberty for carrying out humanitarian action, as well as those who exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. Discontinue politically-motivated prosecutions of all persons expressing opposition to the military's assertion of power;

(d) Immediately cease implementation of the

unilateral amendments made to the 2014 Organizations Registration Law and all other actions aimed at restricting humanitarian and civic space and ensure that humanitarian organizations have unrestricted and predictable access to all people-in-need across the country without fear of retaliation for the exercise of rights;

(e) Take all prompt and necessary action, including in the banking and financial sectors, to guarantee the availability, accessibility, acceptability, and quality of food and healthcare products and services essential to meet the pressing needs of all people in Myanmar, without any discrimination.

The High Commissioner further recommends to the National Unity Government and other duty-bearers:

(a) Take all steps to protect the civilian population, including stopping the use of inherently indiscriminate explosive devices, investigate reports of human rights violations, and take all adequate measures to ensure full compliance with international law by members of anti-military armed groups under their control;

(b) Refrain from imposing physical or administrative restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian assistance to people-in-need in the areas under their control;

(c) Allow unrestricted access to humanitarian organizations to assess needs and develop responses on accurate and evidence-based data;

The High Commissioner recommends that the Security Council, also in view of the documented disregard by the military of resolution S/RES/2669 (2022), take steps to refer the full scope of the current situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court;

Further, the High Commissioner recommends that the Security Council, ASEAN, and other Member States:

(a) Maintain continuous attention to the situation on the ground and take necessary steps to promote political solutions to end the crisis and guarantee access to all people in need of life-saving assistance in the shortest possible time given the gravity of the situation;

(b) Take urgent action to ensure that the Humanitarian Response Plan is adequately funded to provide humanitarian organizations with necessary resources to meet the compelling demands of the people in Myanmar;

(c) Ensure adequate funding for the “2023 Joint Response Plan: Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis” to ensure that members of the Rohingya community in Bangladesh receive life-saving humanitarian assistance;

(d) Provide flexible direct funding to local humanitarian organizations to support their ability to assist the population-in-need with life-saving aid and services;

(e) Advocate for meaningful access to OHCHR in the country to facilitate independent and impartial monitoring and reporting on the human rights situation, including on civilian protection and humanitarian actions.



# NUCC CONDEMNS ‘ONE-SIDED RELATIONSHIPS’ OF CHINESE GOVT WITH MYANMAR JUNTA



Beijing. Photo: Li Yang

**T**he National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) has objected to the Chinese government’s ‘profound connection’ with Myanmar junta, viewing it as backing for the junta to continue oppressing people.

The NUCC said that China is making a one-sided relationship and closer ties with the military junta, contrary to the desire of people who play a crucial role in China’s long-term interest in Myanmar.

In its statement on 24 June, the NUCC also warned that China’s current approach could hurt Myanmar people’s feelings, and could create an adverse impact on friendly relations between people of the two countries because the Myanmar military has committed human rights violations, arbitrary arrests, killings, crimes against humanity, and war

crimes after the coup in February 2021.

The NUCC also recognized the critical role of China in resolving Myanmar’s ongoing crisis as a geographically important neighbouring country and the highest investor in Myanmar.

The NUCC called for China to cease its military intelligence support and cooperation, to stop the sale of military weapons, and to make a practical approach as a good neighbour through close coordination with revolutionary and political forces, including the NUG.

As of 25 June, the Chinese government or Chinese embassy in Myanmar has not responded to the statement by the NUCC, which is comprised of elected parliamentarians, ethnic resistance organisations, political parties, on-ground forces, women

organizations, youth groups, worker unions, representative committees and organizations of interim state and federal units, and employer organizations.

One month after the military coup in 2021, China condemned the Myanmar military’s violent attacks on civilians, suspended its investments and engaged with the officials of exiled National League for Democracy (NLD) government. However, its strategy changed. Chinese foreign minister Qin Gang recently visited Naypyidaw and expressed China’s support for the Myanmar military regardless of the situation. He also promised deeper economic cooperation and further support to Myanmar’s efforts “to maintain stability”.

Since the military coup, China has invested US\$113 million in Myanmar.

# NUG WARNS MYANMAR BUSINESSES TO RESPECT WORKER RIGHTS



Workers protest in Yangon. Photo: EPA

The Ministry of Labour under the National Unity Government (NUG) warned businesses in Myanmar to value labour rights and norms as some factories in Yangon industrial zones are oppressing employees who demanded their rights peacefully.

In its statement, the labour ministry said that since the military takeover on 1 February 2021, the junta and the factory owners, who are influenced by the military dismissed leaders and members of labour unions, arrested workers and violated their labour rights.

The statement highlights three cases in industrial zones in Yangon.

In the first case, 400 workers at the Sun Apparel Myanmar owned by a Thai citizen in Industrial Zone (5) of Hlaingtharyar township, Yangon, peacefully gathered to demand an increase in their salaries, to enjoy benefits of off-days and to get hygienic drinking water and to accommodate a designated lunch area in the factory which is manufacturing JAKO band clothing.

However, the Military Council arrested two labour leaders in the workplace, and took them to the interrogation centre.

The second case happened at the Chinese citizen-owned Hosheng Myanmar garment factory which is manufacturing ZARA and Inditex brands clothing, on 10 June 2023. Seven labour leaders were dismissed as they asked to increase the daily wage of workers to K5,600 to meet rising commodity prices, and more than 600 workers were threatened by the military although they peacefully protested for labour rights. In this case, a dismissed labour leader who is the secretary of labour union and a head of labour were arrested while they came to township's General Administration Office for negotiation with authorities.

The third case happened at Myanmar York garment factory owned by a Chinese citizen, manufacturing ZARA, Only, DIVIDED (H&M) brands in Industrial Zone (3) of Hlaingtharyar Township, Yangon. The workers there have to work extra time and are forced to do overtime. The workers have no welfare programmes and no rights for regular leave although they are forced to work for more production.

Sometimes, female workers are harassed by the supervisors at the workplace, the statement alleges.

The statement of the labour ministry highlighted their government is working with International Labour Organization to take legal action against business owners and brands and buyers involved in labour rights violations which will be considered as committing crimes together with the Myanmar military that has been accused of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

According to the ITUC Global Rights index in 2022, Myanmar was included in the 10 worst countries for working people.

The ILO's report in August 2022 said that an estimated 19.3 million women and men were employed in the first half of 2022, compared to an estimated 18.6 million in 2021 and 20.4 million in 2020, while job losses remain higher among women than men.

Meanwhile, labour productivity contracted by nearly 8 per cent in 2021 and a further 2 per cent in 2022, a reduction in the strong gains achieved in previous years prior to the military takeover.

The report also said that garment workers are facing a deterioration in working conditions, including reduced take-home pay, overtime and attendance bonuses as well as the increased use of casual or daily labour, and irregularity of working hours.

The 2022 Global Labour Rights Index compiled by the International Trade Union Confederation, which represents 200 million workers from all over the world, reported that the Myanmar junta brutally killed and arrested workers and trade unionists, accusing them of participating in protests and strikes. Their houses were raided and their belongings confiscated after the junta declared 16 labour organisations illegal on 2 March 2021.



# JUNTA MEETING WITH FIVE NATIONWIDE CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT SIGNATORIES



Photo: GNLM

The junta held a meeting from 26 to 28 June with five of the nine ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) who signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).

The five EAOs that attended the meeting were the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), the KNU/KNLA Peace Council (KPC) and the Pa-O National Liberation Organization (PNLO) who signed the NCA on 15 October 2015 and the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU) who signed the ceasefire on 13 February 2018.

The NCA signatories not attending are the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), the Chin National Front, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Restoration Council of Shan State/ Shan State Army-South (RCSS/ SSA).

Colonel Saw Kyaw Nyunt, a spokesperson for the five EAOs

attending the junta meeting said to Mizzima: "The five groups who will go have been invited to the meeting by the regime. The invitation says it is only a gathering. It doesn't say anything about peace talks or political issues. It's just an invitation to a gathering."

He explained that it is not known what topics will be discussed, but the EAOs will make presentations on topics they have agreed on between themselves and discuss them with the junta.

The five EAOs attending these meetings previously met with junta leader Min Aung Hlaing in May 2022. NCA signatories the NMSP and the RCSS/SSA also previously met with Min Aung Hlaing in May 2022, but it is not believed that they will be attending this round of meetings. Mizzima tried to contact the two organisations to see if they are attending this round of meetings but was unable to get an answer from either group.

The junta Minister of Foreign Affairs, U Than Swe, said at a meeting in Thailand last week that there have been 106 meetings to discuss peace in Myanmar and over 5,000 negotiations have been held.

Despite attending ongoing meetings to discuss peace, the junta still kills people, violates human rights, carries out airstrikes, especially in Karen State, and causes people to flee their homes in fear.

Colonel Saw Kyaw Nyunt said: "We are still trying to find a solution in the current, complicated political crisis."

In early June, China brokered talks between the junta and the three EAOs that make up the Northern Alliance, the Arakan Army (AA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MND- AA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). Nothing was achieved by the talks.

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# UN MUST HOLD MYANMAR JUNTA TO ACCOUNT FOR ROHINGYA GENOCIDE

Testimonies of Rohingya genocide survivors and witnesses at the Argentine federal court are a grim reminder that justice and accountability remain elusive for victims of the Myanmar military's decades-long human rights violations and atrocious crimes, according to an NGO.

Progressive Voice says only the guarantee of justice will lead to a durable solution to the current human rights and humanitarian catastrophe and Myanmar's future and the international community must take all necessary steps to hold the Myanmar military to account.

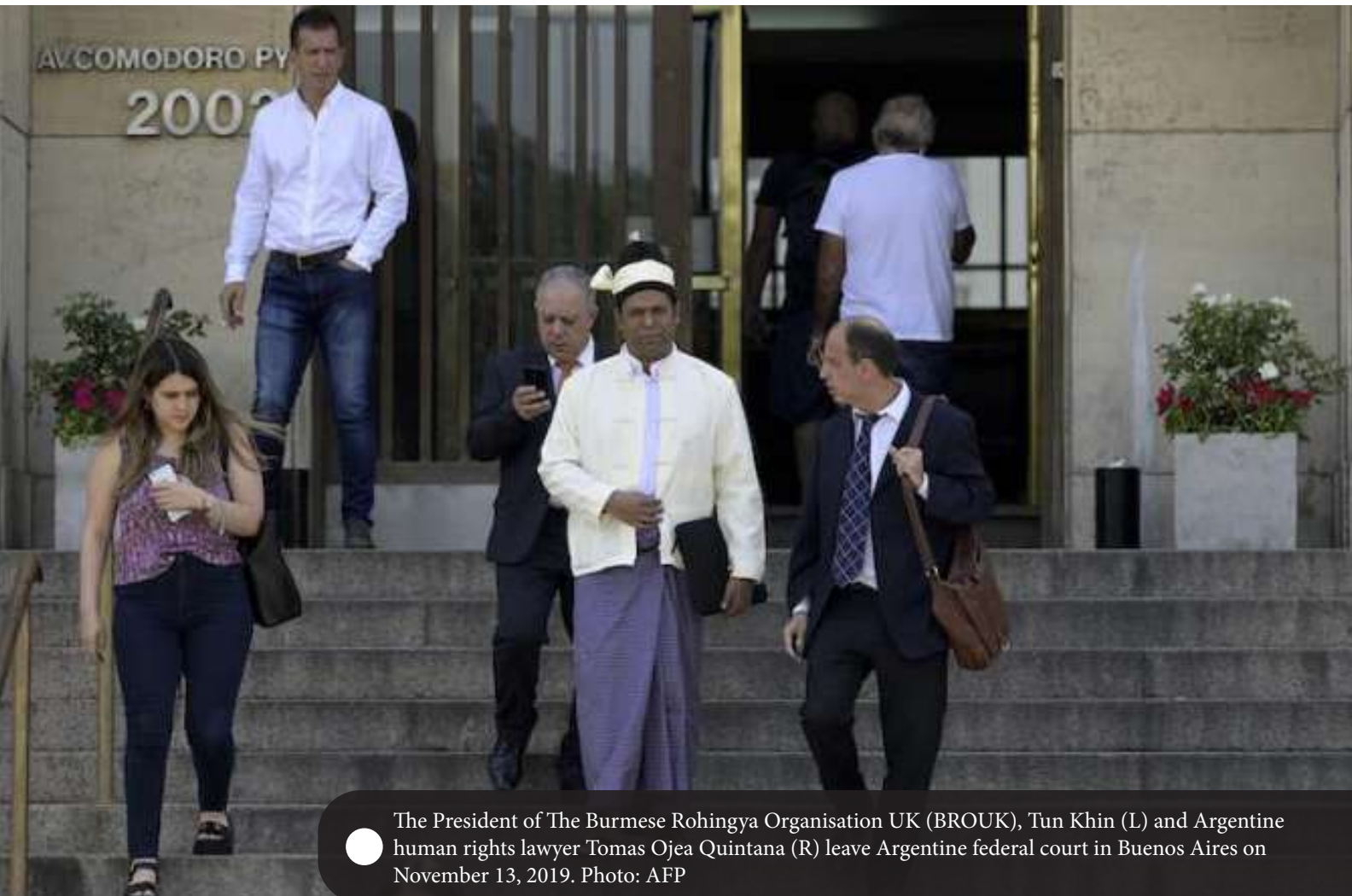
The spotlight once again returns to justice and accountability – or lack thereof – for ethnic minorities in Myanmar as the UN Human Rights Council's 53rd Regular Session kicks off on 19 June 2023.

In parallel with this, a couple of weeks before the session, a federal court in Buenos Aires, Argentina, started the hearing of a historic universal jurisdiction case, filed by the Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (BROUK) in November 2019, against Myanmar military leaders for the Rohingya genocide. Rohingya witnesses testified about the heinous crimes

committed by the Myanmar military from 2012 to 2018, which led to mass forced displacement within and across Myanmar borders.

The complaint incriminated the Myanmar military and its soldiers in rape and other forms of sexual violence against numerous Rohingya women and girls. Notably, "large-scale gang rape was perpetrated by soldiers in at least 10 village tracts in Rakhine state." At times, groups of up to 40 women and girls were raped or gang-raped together, even in public and in front of their families, "to maximize humiliation."

Another horrendous inci-



The President of The Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (BROUK), Tun Khin (L) and Argentine human rights lawyer Tomas Ojea Quintana (R) leave Argentine federal court in Buenos Aires on November 13, 2019. Photo: AFP

dent exposed in the complaint was the massacre of Min Gyi Village, Maungdaw Township in Rakhine State, on 30 August 2017, where the Myanmar military slaughtered at least 750 people. Men were killed, and their bodies were thrown into pits and incinerated. Women and girls were robbed, raped, and stabbed, while children were slain.

In 2020, a Myanmar military deserter who took part in a Rohingya massacre in 2017, confessed that he followed an order from his commanding officer to “Kill all you see, whether children or adults.”

According to Progressive Voice, the Myanmar military has never deviated from its plan to persecute and exterminate the Rohingya people, even after the genocide. A total of 1.6 million Rohingya were forcibly displaced by the Myanmar military between 2012 and 2017, with over 900,000 living in extremely congested camps in Bangladesh.

Some of them are now being used by the military junta as political pawns in its repatriation “pilot project” to return to internment camps in Myanmar without any guarantee of their rights, particularly restoration of their citizenship. This will add to the over 140,000 Rohingya confined in Rakhine State’s overcrowded, flood-prone internment camps since 2012, who recently faced the junta’s willful negligence and weaponization of humanitarian aid during Cyclone Mocha.

BROUK warned that the junta’s tactics are all designed to result in “slow death” for Rohingya.

Progressive Voice points out that the Rohingya massacre

is far from an outlier in the military’s history of violations against innocent civilian populations. The Myanmar military has committed uncountable war crimes and crimes against humanity against ethnic minorities throughout Myanmar’s history.

These crimes have only worsened as the military has tried to suppress the nationwide democratic resistance movement since its illegal coup in 2021.

One example is the Muso Massacre, also known as the Christmas Eve Massacre, in Hpruso Township, Karenni State, where junta troops killed at least 35 Karenni civilians. Another mass killing happened this March in Pinlaung, Southern Shan State, where junta troops killed 23 civilians from the Pa-O community.

These are only a few examples among countless more.

Progressive Voice believes that the lack of response from the international community has emboldened the Myanmar junta. It says that although the Myanmar military has been repeatedly applying the same patterns to commit these atrocities, the international community continues to allow these war criminals to enjoy blanket impunity. The cowardly Myanmar military has been enabled to evade justice for decades because the international community has allowed it to do so.

The UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution 2669 failed to produce concrete actions to stop the Myanmar military’s terror campaign against the people of Myanmar. The Pa Zi Gyi Village aerial attack that killed almost 200 civilians happened only a week after the adoption of another annual resolution by the UN Human

Rights Council, which demanded the junta immediately cease all air-strikes. This is merely more clear evidence of the junta’s total disregard for the international community’s repeated empty calls.

Progressive Voice believes that only concrete actions to hold the junta accountable for its crimes can stop the ongoing horrific acts committed nationwide against the people of Myanmar.

It says that excruciating testimonials of Rohingya witnesses, including the victims of sexual and gender-based violence, must not be just another reminder of the junta’s crimes. The international community must take them seriously and pledge to bring about justice and accountability for those victims and survivors violated by the Myanmar military.

This must be done through concerted efforts to pursue all available mechanisms and avenues to actualize justice and accountability, including a UNSC resolution under Chapter VII of the UN Charter to refer the situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court (ICC), and for UN member states, agencies and mechanisms to provide financial, political and technical support for ongoing universal jurisdiction efforts in Argentina, Germany, Indonesia, and Turkey.

Progressive Voice says that now is the time for the UN and member states to live up to their mandates and obligations by ending the culture of impunity that has plagued Myanmar’s history.

As Tun Khin, president of the BROUK said, “Holding the military accountable for genocide of the Rohingya will benefit everyone in Burma.”



# CHINA'S TOP DIPLOMAT SAYS NEW LAW TO COUNTER FOREIGN 'BULLYING'

China's top diplomat said Thursday last week that a new foreign relations law would help counter "bullying" from abroad after Beijing approved legislation it said would enhance its powers to counter

sanctions.

The United States has imposed sanctions on a lengthy list of Chinese companies and individuals, accusing them of complicity in human rights abuses that Bei-

jing has strenuously denied.

The sanctions - particularly those restricting access to critical technology needed for semiconductors - have hit some Chinese firms hard, forcing them



Anthony Blinken and Wang Yi. Photo: AFP

to slash jobs and freeze expansion plans.

China's top legislature passed the Law on Foreign Relations on Wednesday, which defines the main principles and positions of Beijing's international diplomacy and will come into effect on July 1.

The law "clearly shows

our opposition to hegemony, power politics... and bullying", China's top diplomat Wang Yi wrote in an article published in state media Thursday.

It is "an important measure to strengthen the Communist Party Central Committee's centralized and unified leadership over foreign affairs", Wang, a former foreign minister, wrote in the party-run People's Daily newspaper.

It will also "provide China with a legal basis for exercising legitimate powers against sanctions and interference", he added.

"Facing severe challenges, we must maintain our strategic capacity... and deftly use the weapon of rule of law to continuously enrich and improve our legal 'toolkit' in struggles with overseas (powers)," Wang said.

Moritz Rudolf, a research scholar and fellow at Yale Law School, told AFP that fending off foreign sanctions was "just one aspect" of a law that gives Beijing broad room for interpretation on how to apply international treaties domestically.

"The law may be used to defend a political position, when (China) does not implement an international treaty in the name of its sovereignty, national security or public interests," he said.

The legislation also sets the stage for Beijing to eventual-

ly apply domestic laws beyond its borders, Rudolf said.

Tensions between China and the United States have soared, with both President Joe Biden and his predecessor Donald Trump calling Beijing the most serious threat to long-term US global primacy.

Biden has largely followed Trump's approach in slapping a flurry of sanctions on Chinese entities deemed guilty of abuses.

Beijing has decried the moves as illegitimate and responded with its own penalties targeting American businesses and politicians.

China's foreign ministry said on Thursday the new law "fully demonstrates China's determination and responsibility to resolutely safeguard national sovereignty".

**AFP**





# HONG KONG EXILES IN UK SAY ‘LIVING IN FEAR’ OF BEIJING



Artists Lumli and Lumlong. Photo: AFP

**W**hen artists Lumli and Lumlong fled Hong Kong in 2021 they didn't tell a soul for fear of being reported and arrested before they could leave.

Two years later in London the couple still feel threatened by the long arm of Beijing, like many other Hong Kongers exiled in the UK.

Following Beijing's crackdown on huge pro-democracy protests in 2019 and a sweeping security law imposed the following year, London has granted 166,000 visas to people from its former colony.

Holders of a British National Overseas passport - issued to Hong Kongers born before the handover to China 26 years ago on July 1, 1997 - can apply for a visa.

It allows them to live and work in the UK for five years and then apply for British citizenship.

In their small London apartment, Lumli and Lumlong, both 43, who go by the one-word names they use professionally, keep their artworks depicting the violence inflicted on the pro-democracy demonstrators.

It was after an exhibition in Hong Kong in May 2021 that they realised that they would have to leave.

"We were accused by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the newspaper of violating the Hong Kong National Security Law because of our painting," Lumlong said.

"The police even came to our studio to frighten us."

The visit left both feeling they would be arrested “sooner or later” if they didn’t flee, added Lumli.

## **INFORMANTS**

Their visa took two weeks to come through but it was only after they actually landed in London that they told their family.

Even now, on the other side of the world, “we are not totally safe here”, Lumlong said. “There are so many informants in the UK.”

The British government earlier this month ordered China to close what it views as clandestine police stations on British soil.

Beijing has said it does not operate any secret police stations, but that it runs centres providing administrative services.

Human rights group Safeguard Defenders said in a report that stations in cities around the world have been used to track down opponents.

Such “police service stations” in the UK should “not operate in any form”, security minister Tom Tugendhat said.

The couple say journalists working for pro-Beijing media came incognito to one of their exhibitions in London last year.

The pair were then accused by the same media of “coalition with foreign forces”, they said.

A few days later, they said, their social media accounts were hacked.

“It was scary. The hackers changed our picture into (the) ISIS flag,” Lumlong said.

He said they were grateful to the UK for giving them sanctuary but warned that London had to resist pressure from Beijing.

“If the government doesn’t stand up strong against the CCP, we will never be safe,” he added.

The Hong Kong community in the UK was shocked last October after video footage emerged of an incident at the Chinese consulate in Manchester in northern England.

## **NIGHTMARES**

Police said a group of men came out of the consulate and dragged a Hong Kong protester inside

the grounds where he was assaulted.

The Chinese authorities responded by saying staff were required “to physically fend off unauthorised entry and subsequent assaults”.

“There’s a transnational repression happening on our community,” said Simon Cheng, founder of the group Hongkongers in Britain.

A former employee of the British consulate in Hong Kong, he says he was detained and tortured by Chinese police for 15 days in August 2019.

He was then granted asylum in the UK.

“Sometimes I feel I’m being followed,” he said, adding that he has nightmares over fears “they could report me to the police and find a way to catch me and deliver me back to Hong Kong or China”.

Several Hongkongers expressed similar fears as they attended a vigil marking the Tiananmen massacre of 1989, on London’s Trafalgar Square on June 4 - the kind of event that is now effectively banned back home.

One man, a 39-year-old accountant who declined to give his name for safety reasons, said he and his wife had moved to London to ensure their two small children could be assured an education free of CCP propaganda.

The Chinese Embassy in London told AFP the claims had “no factual basis”.

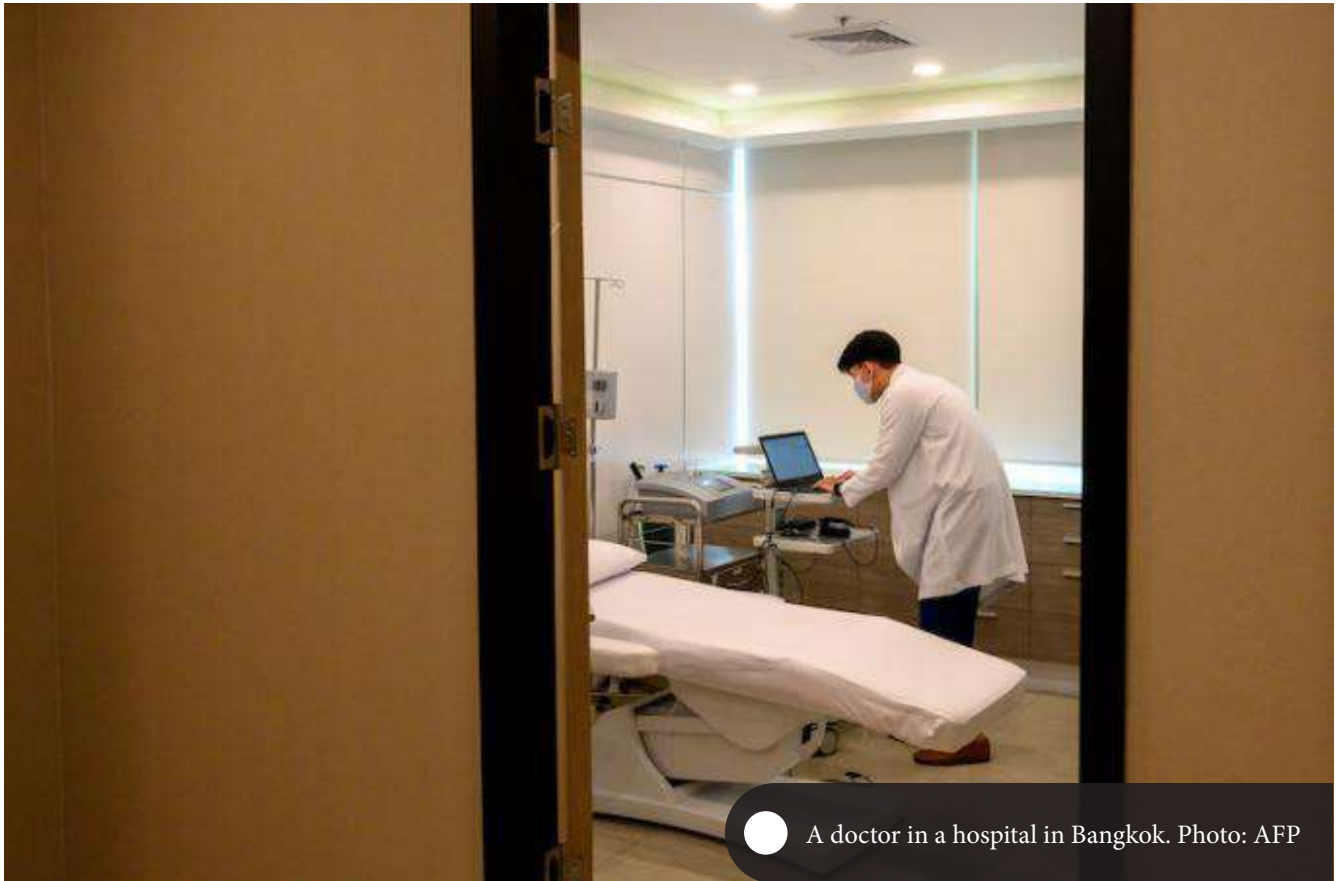
“The Chinese government is fully committed to protecting the safety and lawful rights and interests of overseas Chinese citizens in accordance with the law, including our compatriots in Hong Kong,” it said.

“China respects the judicial sovereignty of other countries and never interferes in other countries’ internal affairs.”

**AFP**



## ‘SIGNIFICANT THREAT’: AROUND WORLD, DOCTORS BATTLE IMPERSONATORS



A doctor in a hospital in Bangkok. Photo: AFP

**A** Thai doctor endorsing a dubious diabetes treatment, a Filipino physician touting crotch-enhancing underwear, a US doctor sparking off anti-vaccine conspiracies - they are all victims of identity theft plaguing health professionals.

AFP’s fact-checkers have exposed a slew of cases around the world in which fraudsters impersonated doctors, fabricating their comments or endorsements to push out bogus treatments and products or to peddle propaganda.

The trend underscores how medical professionals are often sitting targets for online scammers seeking to profit off disinformation, which leaves their reputations tarnished, provokes harassment and, in some cases, legal challenges.

For ordinary consumers, the growing wave of impersonation scams poses financial risks and often jeopardises access to safe and reliable healthcare.

“I get impersonated (nearly) every month,” Thiravat Hemachudha, a Thai neurologist, told AFP.

“These fraudsters want to make money, so they cite renowned or credible health professionals to support their claims.”

Thiravat’s name has been falsely linked to Facebook ads and posts promoting a range of treatments, from diabetes to penile enlargement. It is unclear who was behind the disinformation, but he warned that it poses “significant threats to consumers’ health”.

### ‘MIRACULOUS CURES’

In the Philippines, consumer Marissa David thought she had found the best cure for a benign lump in her body when she purchased a cream that a Facebook ad said was recommended by popular physician Willie Ong.

But the cream that cost \$12.50, a small for-

tune for the Filipino mother, was ineffective and not endorsed by Ong.

“It’s a lesson learned,” David told AFP.

“I should not trust so easily, especially if those products are not recommended by a doctor I personally know.”

Winston Kilimanjaro Creones Tiwaquen, a Filipino doctor who is also a popular social media influencer, has been impersonated in Facebook pages promoting magnetic underwear, which they falsely claim enlarges male genitalia.

AFP, which has spotted similar impersonation scams in other countries such as Myanmar and Bulgaria, has a global team of journalists who work with Facebook owner Meta’s third-party fact-checking programme to debunk misinformation.

AFP has debunked about half a dozen Facebook posts that used doctored videos of Ong or impersonated Tiwaquen, part of a deluge of internet content in the Philippines that promotes “doctor-recommended” quick-fix treatments for even complicated ailments.

“People often seek quick solutions and can fall prey to scams promising miraculous cures or easy remedies -- especially communities that lack access to reliable healthcare services,” Patricia Schouker, a fellow at the Colorado-based Payne Institute, told AFP.

“Impersonating doctors gives these fraudsters an air of credibility and trustworthiness.”

### **‘STAND UP TO DISINFORMATION’**

For doctors such as Natalia Solenkova, a Florida-based critical care specialist, such disinformation triggered aggressive online harassment.

Earlier this year, conservative commentators including American podcast host Joe Rogan amplified a screenshot of a fabricated tweet about the COVID-19 vaccine that used her name and Twitter handle.

“Knowing that he (Rogan) has millions and millions of followers, that felt threatening,” Solenkova told the American Medical Association.

“That felt threatening to my career, threatening to my job, threatening to my reputation.”

Rogan acknowledged his mistake but not be-

fore Solenkova was deluged with hateful messages.

“We (physicians) need to keep organising against disinformation,” Solenkova said.

“We need to stand up to this disinformation and this harassment.”

Some physicians like Ong, from the Philippines, have also battled legal threats over viral ads for a mixed nuts brand that he had nothing to do with.

The younger sister of the late Philippine president Benigno Aquino III asked Ong to cease and desist from using her name for the product’s promotion on his Facebook page, reports said.

Ong clarified in a series of videos in April that the ads came from imposter pages on Facebook.

“I can’t believe they didn’t know those pages were fake,” he said in one video.

“What’s happening to me right now is too much... I can’t believe it.”

Meta says it views the “threat of scams seriously”. It faces calls for more vigorous online policing from users and consumer activists.

“Platforms need to invest in robust content moderation systems to detect and remove fraudulent listings and can play a significant role in educating users about the risks,” Schouker said.

“Addressing this issue requires a collective effort by platforms, regulators and law enforcement agencies.”

**AFP**



# 'GODFATHER OF AI' URGES GOVERNMENTS TO STOP MACHINE TAKEOVER



Geoffrey Hinton. Photo: AFP

**G**eoffrey Hinton, one of the so-called godfathers of artificial intelligence, urged governments on Wednesday last week to step in and make sure that machines do not take control of society.

Hinton made headlines in May when he announced that he quit Google after a decade of work to speak more freely on the dangers of AI, shortly after the release of ChatGPT captured the imagination of the world.

The highly respected AI scientist, who is based at the University of Toronto, was speaking to a packed audience at the Collision tech conference in the Canadian city.

The conference brought together more than 30,000 startup founders, investors and tech workers, most looking to learn how to ride the AI wave and not

hear a lesson on its dangers.

“Before AI is smarter than us, I think the people developing it should be encouraged to put a lot of work into understanding how it might try and take control away,” Hinton said.

“Right now there are 99 very smart people trying to make AI better and one very smart person trying to figure out how to stop it taking over and maybe you want to be more balanced,” he said.

Hinton warned that the risks of AI should be taken seriously despite his critics who believe he is overplaying the risks.

“I think it’s important that people understand that this is not science fiction, this is not just fear mongering,” he insisted. “It is a real risk that we must think about, and we need to figure out in advance how to

deal with it.”

Hinton also expressed concern that AI would deepen inequality, with the massive productivity gain from its deployment going to the benefit of the rich, and not workers.

“The wealth isn’t going to go to the people doing the work. It is going to go into making the rich richer and not the poorer and that’s very bad for society,” he added.

He also pointed to the danger of fake news created by ChatGPT-style bots and said he hoped that AI-generated content could be marked in a way similar to how central banks watermark cash money.

“It’s very important to try, for example, to mark everything that is fake as fake. Whether we can do that technically, I don’t know,” he said.

The European Union is considering such a technique in its AI Act, a legislation that will set the rules for AI in Europe, which is currently being negotiated by lawmakers.

### **‘OVERPOPULATION ON MARS’**

Hinton’s list of AI dangers contrasted with conference discussions that were less over safety and threats, and more about seizing the opportunity created in the wake of ChatGPT.

Venture Capitalist Sarah Guo said doom and gloom talk of AI as an existential threat was premature and compared it to “talking about overpopulation on Mars”, quoting another AI guru, Andrew Ng.

She also warned against “regulatory capture” that would see government intervention protect the incumbents before it had a chance to benefit sectors such as health, education or science.

Opinions differed on whether the current generative AI giants - mainly Microsoft backed OpenAI and Google - would remain unmatched or whether new actors will expand the field with their own models and innovations.

“In five years, I still imagine that if you want to go and find the best, most accurate, most advanced general model, you’re probably going to still have to go to one of the few companies that have the capital to do it,” said Leigh Marie Braswell of venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins.

Zachary Bratun-Glennon of Gradient Ventures said he foresaw a future where “there are going to be millions of models across a network much like we have a network of websites today.”

**AFP**



# ‘DIRE YEAR’ FOR CHILDREN CAUGHT IN CONFLICT, AS HOSPITAL AND SCHOOL ATTACKS DOUBLE

Violations of international law regarding children and armed conflict continued to have a “devastating impact”, the UN’s top official on the issue said last week, with a 112 per cent rise in the number of attacks on schools and hospitals.

Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict Virginia Gamba unveiled the Secretary-General’s latest annual report, for 2022, which showed there were 27,180 grave violations overall, an increase from the previous year.

The recorded violations only refer to verified information, with the likely toll much higher, and cover four categories: recruitment and use of children into armed groups or forces, killing and maiming, rape and sexual violence, and abduction.

Two thirds of violations involved boys, span-

ning 24 different conflict situations. A total of 8,831 children were killed or maimed, and another 7,622 were recruited by armed groups or forces.

## WORST OFFENDERS

Ms. Gamba told journalists at a press conference in New York that the countries recording the highest number of violations were the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Israel, the State of Palestine, Somalia, Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Yemen.

“The monitoring and verification of grave violations remained extremely challenging, including owing to access constraints leading to the underreporting of such violations and an increase in violations verified in 2022,” according to the report.

The countries where “the worst deterioration” occurred were Myanmar, South Sudan, and Burkina



A damaged school in Ukraine. Photo: UN News

Faso.

## **SCHOOLS AND HOSPITALS**

There were 1,163 attacks on schools recorded, and 647 attacks on hospitals – a 112 per cent increase, the report said.

The widespread military use of schools both by armed forces and armed groups, is a “very worrisome trend”, said Ms. Gamba, calling for them to remain “zones of peace”.

Nearly 2,500 children were detained, a practice that “should only be used as a last resort and for the shortest period”, she added.

## **RUSSIA ADDED TO OFFENDERS’ LIST**

Ms. Gamba said that Russian forces and affiliated armed groups in Ukraine were being added to the annex of the report as a notable offender, for the number of attacks on hospitals and schools carried out during the invasion and the killing of children during military operations.

Russia’s use of rocket systems, airstrikes, and shelling of populated areas had resulted in “very high casualties”, she said, adding that her engagement with Moscow to introduce measures to decrease attacks would continue.

She said that the Ukrainian armed forces had also received a warning from the UN Secretary-General through the report owing to attacks carried out on schools and hospitals during the war.

Stressing that even defensive responses needed to accord with international humanitarian law, she commended progress made by the Ukrainian Government to make improvements.

## **ISRAEL, PALESTINE NOT ADDED**

The Special Representative said Israel and the State of Palestine would not be added to global list of offenders, emphasizing that a warning not to repeat the urban assault on Gaza in May 2021 and retaliatory missile launches had been heeded sufficiently.

She said there had been an “important decrease” in Israeli airstrikes during 2022, noting that the whole purpose of publishing the report and highlighting violence was to change behaviour and strengthen protection.

However, she raised concerns over the continuing high level of violence in the West Bank and other occupied territories so far this year.

Among those added to the offenders’ list are armed groups in the DRC including M23, Mai-Mai Zaire, and CODECO. Two non-State actors in Burkina Faso were also added.

Ms. Gamba also highlighted the addition of Myanmar’s military rulers, listed for attacks on schools and hospitals, saying “they sit with five violations”.

In addition, she said two situations – in Haiti and Niger – are of growing concern to her office.

Courtesy of UN News







Photo: Ajay Karpur

## KARENNI STATE

### *Unprovoked airstrikes on Hpruso Township in Karenni State*

The junta launched three unprovoked airstrikes on a village in the western part of Hpruso Township, in Karenni State at about 1:00 a.m. on 22 June.

There were no casualties, but six homes and a village school were destroyed and some animals were killed in the attacks.

A local woman from Hpruso said to Mizzima: “Some of my relatives fled in fear from the first airstrike. The junta launched its first attack at around 1:00 a.m. My sister ran to the shelter for safety. Locals from nearby were also running to safe places. We have no idea what will happen next.”

Though there has been fierce fighting in some areas of Karenni State, there had been no fighting since the beginning of this year between junta forces and revolutionary forces in the area of Hpruso Township where the airstrike hit.

A spokesperson from Jobs for Kayah, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that helps IDPs and provides news and information in Karenni State said: “There has been no fighting whatsoever this year in Hpruso Township, but there was a lot of fighting last year. There are many internally displaced people here in Hpruso.”

The last fighting in the western part of Hpruso happened at the end of 2022. Since then there has been no fighting and more than 7,000 people displaced by fighting (IDPs) are sheltering in Hpruso Township.

During May 2023 the Myanmar junta launched 59 airstrikes throughout the country, the most it has so far launched in a single month. Of those, 22 hit Karenni State and the nearby townships of Pinlaung and Pekon, just across the state border in Shan State, according to the Burma Affairs and Conflict Study, a news organisation that collects, compiles and analyses data to write reports on the junta’s political and military actions.

### *Mobile phone services cut in Karenni State*

The Myanmar junta has cut mobile phone and internet signals in townships to the east of the Thanlwin River in Karenni State amid heavy fighting in the area.

On 27 June a resident of Loikaw Township in Karenni State said: "Phone services have totally stopped this afternoon on the eastern bank of the Thanlwin River and on previous days it [mobile phone and internet service] was poor."

Phone and internet services have been cut in Karenni State's Bawlake, Pasawng, Mawchi and Mese since noon on 27 June.

Mizzima had difficulties contacting people in the Karenni townships of Loikaw, Demose, Pekhon and Myobye on the afternoon of 27 June.

According to locals in Loikaw City at 7:30 p.m. on 27 June there were no internet connections in Loikaw and the only mobile phone service available was the military-owned Mytel service.

A spokesperson from the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF) said to Mizzima: "Communications were cut off in conflict areas some months ago. Loikaw still has communication services, but Mese has had all telecom services cut."

On 23 June Karenni forces captured the last junta held camp in Mese, Camp BP-13, following an offensive against all the camps in Mese township, that started on 13 June. Currently, Karenni defence forces control all of Mese Township and the junta no longer has any military camps there.

get them but we were able to shoot four out of eight soldiers guarding at the checkpoint. We did not collect the guns because this was just a guerrilla attack.

There was no exchange of fire during the attack," the leader of the Yebilu Force said.

On the same day, at 10:00 am, Ma San Myint Kywe, 56, a passport broker, was shot eight times by two members of Yebilu Force near the clock tower in Lamaing Town in the same township. According to local people, she was hit three times and died in Lamaing hospital.

"We heard eight gunshots. Her daughter is a staff member the General Administration Office in Ye Township. Honestly, she [the deceased] is a passport broker. She was infamous for some time already.

Local resistance fighters had been warning her on social media since last year. However, she kept doing it," said a resident of Lamaing Town to Mizzima.

Though the Immigration Office of Lamaing Town and Ye townships were closed, Ma San Myint Kywe cooperated with the Military Regime and collected fees from those who wanted to make passports. This was the reason she was shot, the leader of the Yebilu Force added.

"She did not care even though the offices are closed. She cooperated with the Military Council in another way. Actually, she took advantage by cooperating with the regime," he added.

Since the passport registration offices in Ye Township and Lamaing Town are currently closed, if any outsiders need to register urgently, they have to go through the process via Ma San Myint Kywe. And, the price of a registration is 80,000 to 150,000 Kyats, depending on the duration of the process, according to another Lamaing resident.

In addition to the two attacks, Yebilu Force carried out a security check on Highway No. (8) in Ye Township together with KNLA forces and the Special Operation Force (SOF) on the morning of 22 June. The leader said that his fighters sought to increase the speed of their attacks in the future.

## MON STATE

### ***Yebilu Force carries out two attacks in Ye Township and Lamaing Town, Mon State***

A PDF group called the Yebilu Force attacked a checkpoint at the Chaung Taung Bridge located at Ye Township, Mawlamyine District, Mon State, around 9:30 am on 22 June, killing four military soldiers.

Eight soldiers from No. (19) Military Operations Command were guarding the checkpoint of the Chaung Taung Bridge and four of them were hit during the attack, said the leader of the Yebilu Force.

"We tried to get the machine guns. We did not





## NAY PYI TAW COUNCIL CHAIRMAN JOINS FARMERS AT CENTENARY AGRICULTURE EXHIBITION AMIDST CHALLENGES IN MYANMAR'S AGRICULTURE SECTOR

**N**ay Pyi Taw Council Chairman Tin Oo Lwin, who is also junta's Deputy Minister for Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation Dr Tin Htut joined forces to meet with farmers from eight townships in the Nay Pyi Taw Union Territory, reported the junta-controlled media. The purpose of their meeting was to attend an exhibition held to commemorate the centenary of the Agriculture School in Pyinmana.

The exhibition, which took place on the campus of the Agriculture Institute in Pyinmana, showcased a wide array of agricultural artifacts and equipment. Among the highlights was a 100-year-old ancient building, as well as a collection of ancient farming tools, laboratory equipment, and carpentry tools used throughout various eras. The event also featured booths displaying agricultural science curriculum, modern farming machinery equipment, exhibits on agricultural water supply, seeds, and agricultural inputs from specialized companies.

Furthermore, agricultural equipment showrooms were set up to showcase the latest advancements in farming technology.

During the exhibition, departmental officials

took the opportunity to demonstrate the proper use of agricultural equipment to the attending farmers, according to the junta-controlled media. This practical demonstration aimed to provide the farmers with insights and knowledge on utilizing the latest tools and machinery in their farming practices.

The campus of the Agriculture Institute in Pyinmana holds significant historical importance.

Established by Mr Brayton Clarke Case in 1923, it has now been officially designated by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture as an ancient building named Napata No 3001. This recognition makes it the first-ever ancient building in the Nay Pyi Taw Council area, adding to its historical significance.

However, it is important to note that while this exhibition celebrated the rich heritage and advancements in agriculture, the agriculture sector in other regions of Myanmar has recently faced challenges. Reports indicate that the Myanmar junta frequently set fire to numerous villages in the Sagaing Region and Magway Region. These destructive acts have adversely affected the agriculture sector and the farmers in those areas, leaving them in a state of turmoil.

# RUSSIAN DELEGATION HOLDS TALKS ON COOPERATION WITH MYANMAR JUNTA AMID CONTROVERSY AND OPPOSITION CONDEMNATION

A delegation led by Anatoly Bulochnikov, the Vice-President of the Russia-Myanmar Association of Friendship and Cooperation, held separate meetings with Admiral Tin Aung San (junta's Deputy Prime Minister and Union Minister for Transport and Communications) Myo Myint Oo (junta's Union Minister for Energy) and Khin Maung Yi (junta's Union Minister for Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation) on 28 June, reported state-run newspaper The Global New Light of Myanmar. The meetings took place at the respective ministry's meeting halls in Nay Pyi Taw, the capital city of Myanmar.

The discussions between the Deputy Prime Minister, Union Ministers, and the delegation focused on various areas of cooperation. They explored opportunities for the development of rail transportation, including the extension of direct flights. Additionally, they delved into potential investments in the transport and communications sectors, as well as the provision of technological assistance to enhance the mining industry's development.

Furthermore, the participants exchanged views on cooperation in the energy sector, specifically concerning the exploration of oil and natural gas reserves. Another significant point of discussion was the potential investment of Russia in Myanmar's petroleum products, according to the junta's newspaper.

An advisory group comprising political parties and civil society organizations, opposed to Myanmar's military junta, has expressed strong condemnation towards the Russian government for its political support and ongoing sale of weapons to the regime.

On the other hand, a recent joint statement of Myanmar's opposition groups draws parallels between Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the mass killings and atrocities that followed the Myanmar junta's seizure of power in Myanmar's coup in February 2021. They accuse Russia of prolonging the suffering of the

Myanmar people by openly supporting and advocating for the terrorist regime. The statement suggests that Russia's actions are driven by its own geopolitical interests, rather than a genuine attempt to address Myanmar's political issues.

The National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), advisory body of the shadow National Unity Government (NUG), civil society groups, ethnic armed organizations, and civil disobedience groups, has spearheaded this condemnation. The NUG serves as the parallel civilian government in Myanmar, consisting of individuals who oppose the junta.

Since the coup, Myanmar's junta chief, Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, has made three visits to Russia, during which he has procured modern Russian-made jet fighters, helicopters, and military equipment. Additionally, the two countries have signed an agreement to construct a small-scale nuclear reactor in Myanmar.

This highlights the complex dynamics surrounding the meetings between the Russian delegation and the Deputy Prime Minister and Union Ministers of Myanmar, as it sheds light on the controversial relationship between Russia and Myanmar's military junta.



# MYANMAR ECONOMY HAMPERED BY JUNTA RESTRICTIONS, POWER CUTS: WORLD BANK



Photo: EPA

**R**olling power cuts and the Myanmar junta's restrictions on businesses and foreign exchange are hampering the country's economy, the World Bank has said.

The Southeast Asian nation has been in turmoil since the military ousted democratically elected civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi from office in a 2021 coup.

Fighting between the junta and its opponents has ravaged swathes of the country and displaced more than one million people, according to the United Nations.

Economic conditions in Myanmar showed "tentative signs of stabilisation" in the first half of 2023, the World Bank said in an update released on Tuesday last week.

Food and fuel inflation appeared to be cooling, and manufacturing output and new orders had risen since the start of the year, it added.

But Myanmar's GDP was still around 10 percent lower than in 2019, the World Bank said, warning that its economy would be "permanently scarred" by the fallout from the coup.

Since the beginning of the year, junta authorities have introduced more requirements for export and

import licenses, and tighter regulations of fuel imports, it said.

A US dollar on the open market fetches around 25-30 percent more than the central bank's fixed rate, adding to the pressure on businesses.

The World Bank said businesses were finding it hard to access foreign exchange, inputs and trading licenses.

Power cuts also hit economic activity in 2023, with 42 percent of all firms reporting blackouts as the most "significant constraint to their operations in March", it added.

Such cuts are common in Myanmar due to a creaky and outdated electricity grid, with demand regularly outstripping supply during the sweltering summer months.

The junta has blamed the worsening outages on rising gas prices and attacks on infrastructure by anti-coup fighters.

The World Bank predicted three percent growth for the year ending September 30.

Myanmar saw its GDP grow 6.8 percent in 2019, according to the World Bank, before the coronavirus pandemic hit.

AFP

# SOME SOLAR SALT FARMS IN MON STATE CLOSE AFTER PRICE FALLS



The largest microfinance company in Myanmar, Pact Global Microfinance Fund (PGMF), is withdrawing from Myanmar due to pressure from the junta and has forgiven all the outstanding debts in the country.

PGMF announced that restrictions put in place by the junta had made it impossible for the company to operate in the country. As part of its withdrawal PGMF has forgiven, and will not collect, over \$156 million USD in outstanding debts, all the debts owed by its 890,000 borrowers in Myanmar.

PGMF started operating with the support of the United Nations Development Plan (UNDP) in Myanmar in 1997, making loans to low-income households and people who were unable to obtain finance elsewhere, especially women and people in rural areas. It has given out loans to 2.3 million clients in nearly 15,000 villages in Myanmar.

But, the junta made it impossible for PGMF to operate in Myanmar in various ways.

The 2022 Myanmar registration Law banned unregistered non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as PGMF, from offering microfinance loans. But, the junta refused to let PGMF register as a commercial entity, which would have allowed it to continue offering microfinance loans.

Senior staff at the company were also denied visas and the tightening up of foreign exchange rules also further limited PGMF's operations.

In recent months the junta told PGMF that it could continue to operate in Myanmar if it agreed to hand over a part of its profits and all of its assets to the junta, something PGMF said it could not even consider as it would breach US sanctions law.

PGMF explained that shutting its business in Myanmar was a last resort, but that under the current conditions, it had no other options. This also meant that PGMF will have to make all its 4,000 staff in Myanmar redundant.

PGMF Board Chair Ellen Varney said: "In addition to our borrowers and creditors, our priority now is our staff. The closure of PGMF is of great sadness for us as an employer. In recognition of the hard work and dedication of the organisation's staff, management has pre-paid salary and benefits, as well as a bonus, to all the PGMF family across Myanmar. It has also honored its obligation to pay for any accrued leave not taken and for any benefits owed."

An official PGMF statement also said that all loans in Myanmar will be written off as of 26 June and that following the statement no one need pay back any more money that they owe.



# NUG SAYS MYANMAR JUNTA SALES OF GOVERNMENT SECURITIES ILLEGAL



Photo: AFP

**T**he National Unity Government (NUG) has declared the sale of government securities by Myanmar's junta regime illegal and said that any future administration would not be liable for any debts or liabilities incurred by the junta.

In a statement, the NUG's Ministry of Planning, Finance and Investment referred to its Public Debt Management Law approved by the exiled Pyid-aungsu Hluttaw (parliament) after the coup in 2021.

This states that the issue, sale and distribution of government securities should only be conducted with NUG approval and that any securities issued without its approval will not be honoured or recognised as government or public debt.

As a result of this, the NUG, or any government that follows it, will not be liable for any borrowing, debt or liabilities incurred by the Myanmar Military Council, or any of its subsidiary organisations, since the 1 February 2021 coup.

The NUG is already selling its own Spring Revolution Special Treasury Bonds. These do not pay interest and the capital will only be paid when the revolution succeeds and the junta is toppled.

As of January 2023, the NUG had raised \$100 million, 45 per cent of which came from the sale of Spring Revolution Special Treasury Bonds, according to Bloomberg.

Funds have also been raised from the auction of junta-linked properties, including two mansions owned by junta chief, Min Aung Hlaing. Currently, because the NUG is not in power, the new owners cannot take possession of their properties. They will have to wait until the junta is overthrown, at which point, the NUG has promised to let them take control of their properties.

## INDIA-MYANMAR-THAILAND TRILATERAL HIGHWAY NEARS COMPLETION: INDIAN MINISTER

The ambitious India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, a key infrastructure project aimed at enhancing connectivity and trade between the three nations, is nearing completion, Zee Business reported citing India's Minister of Road Transport and Highways Mr. Nitin Gadkari. Approximately 70 percent of the construction works on the 1,400-kilometer-long highway have been accomplished, bringing the vision of linking India with Southeast Asia by land one step closer to reality.

The project, which will connect Moreh in Manipur, India with Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar, is expected to foster trade, business, health, education, and tourism ties among the three countries.

The trilateral highway is a significant component of India's Look East policy, which seeks to strengthen economic and strategic relationships with South and East Asian nations.

Speaking to the Press Trust of India (PTI), Minister Nitin Gadkari affirmed the substantial progress made thus far, stating, "Around 70 percent of the project is completed." However, he refrained from providing specific details regarding the timeline for its completion and operationalization.

The highway project has encountered delays since its inception. Initially, the governments of the three nations had aimed to make the highway operational by December 2019.

With great enthusiasm, India is actively advocating for the ambitious expansion of the trilateral highway to encompass Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, thereby amplifying trade relations with the ASEAN bloc.

## MYANMAR JUNTA'S DRUG BURNING EFFORTS INEFFECTIVE AS TRADE THRIVES

Myanmar junta authorities burned nearly half a billion dollars worth of illegal drugs in an attempt to combat drug production and trafficking, reported the junta-controlled media.

However, they admitted that their efforts were ineffective as the drug trade continued to flourish.

Myanmar's Home Affairs Minister Soe Htut told the junta-controlled state newspaper The Global New Light of Myanmar, "Even though countless drug abusers, producers, traffickers and cartels were arrested and prosecuted, the production and trafficking of drugs have not declined at all."

The burning took place in Yangon and other locations in the country. The Golden Triangle border region between Myanmar's Shan State, Laos and Thailand is a major hub for drug production, particularly meth and opium.

Observers believe that the military, which seized power in 2021, is not serious about ending the lucrative drug trade and may even protect it.

The United Nations reported record meth seizures in Myanmar last year and noted a resurgence in opium poppy farming following the political turmoil caused by the junta's military coup.

The UN's Office on Drugs and Crime recently revealed that a staggering amount of more than 23 tons of crystal meth was confiscated in Myanmar during 2022.



CULTURE & LIFESTYLE

# IN FOCUS





## SUNSET

**M**onks walk on U Bein Bridge that spans the Taungthaman Lake near Amarapura in Myanmar.

Photo: Vlada



# TASTE OF MYANMAR DHAMMA FROM MEXICO, BRAZIL AND THE UK



Bhante Rahula in Myanmar.

Insight Myanmar, in another in-depth podcast, highlights the personal journeys of three foreigners who came to Myanmar as part of their inner journey.

The show – check out the link at the end - is a bit nostalgic, as it evokes the content they focused on before the dark days post-coup enveloped the Golden Land.

The guests—a monk, a nun, and a lay meditator—share how Myanmar has influenced and supported their spiritual paths, and the depth of gratitude they have for the country and people.

Their words and reflections are of value to practitioners everywhere.

Venerable Canda is a Buddhist nun from England. When she was 15 years old, she felt “this very overwhelming sense of needing first to find the meaning of why I’m actually here, what this life is about, and why there’s so much suffering in the world. Also, what the purpose of suffering is, and whether we just suffer helplessly and with no particular reason, or whether there’s something we can do with that suffering in order to transform our hearts and find a compassionate response.”

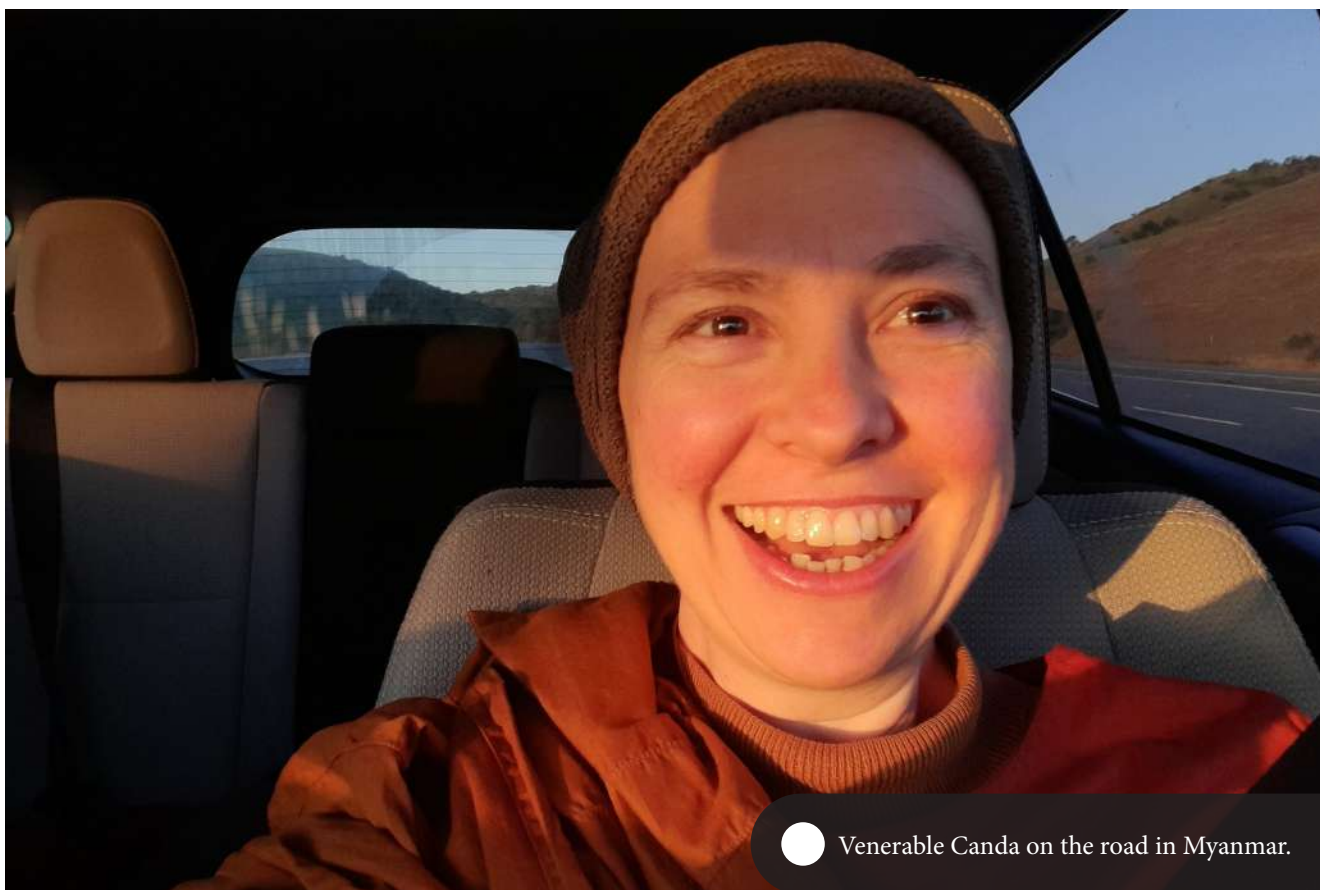
Four years later, this query set her on a spiritual path to India, where she attended a ten-day vipassana meditation course in the tradition of S.N. Goenka. The experience was so profound that she knew that the path would be her whole life. Indeed, ten years later she would find herself north of Yangon, shaving

her head and preparing for nun ordination. Her preceptor was The Phyu Taw Ya Sayadaw, a monk who had formerly been appointed a teacher in the Goenka tradition. He was renowned for his deep samādhi prowess, and Venerable Canda observed how he “gained very deep insight quite quickly as a result of his strong foundation and of course, a life of virtue, a life of pristine sila, ethics, and virtuous conduct.”

Despite the difficulties of climate and food, she found the whole experience like “stepping back into the days of the Buddha.” Reflecting now on everything she received in her spiritual life from Burmese teachers and the wider monastic and lay community, Venerable Canda feels that now is very much the time to give back. Towards this end, she reminds practitioners: “I do believe we have to learn how to bring our practice on the cushion into every aspect of our life.”

Bhikkhu Rahula is a Mexican monk currently on retreat in Malaysia. His first vipassana course took place in Japan, also in the tradition of S. N. Goenka, and as with Venerable Canda, it was a life-changing experience. As a result, he and his wife also visited Myanmar, having learned that many meditation traditions originated here and wishing to immerse themselves in monastic life.

Choosing to stay at monasteries rather than meditation centers ended up being a profound learning experience for him: “I felt I felt a degree of freedom and responsibility. There was no one looking at what are you doing, if you’re sitting or not. So the teachers



Venerable Canda on the road in Myanmar.

give you the responsibility, and you are responsible for your own mind.”

Before Bhante Rahula decided to ordain for life, he traveled annually to Myanmar for temporary ordinations, where he visited a wide variety of monasteries and learned under several teachers.

While doing so, he came to realize that the spiritual experience in Myanmar was not limited to practice, as he soon devoted himself to studying pariyatti under some of the most renowned academic monks, which brought an even further benefit to his practice. As he says, “The most important thing that I ever encountered in my life, is a gift from Burma. I learned from many teachers and have rejoiced from the generous support of so many people. So it is really beyond words, it is priceless. It is the biggest treasure in my life and something that I’m dedicated to, and I hope I can live up to it and do service for the Dhamma and all the generosity of all these people.”

Bhante Rahula also brings a Buddhist perspective to his understanding of the crisis, commenting, “The first thing we must do is become responsible for our own greed, aversion and ignorance. That’s the first thing we should do because it’s still alive in our hearts.”

Finally, the podcast features a talk recorded in January 2020 with Breno Liberato. Like our other two guests, he also got his start on a vipassana course in the tradition of S.N. Goenka, attending a center near his home in Brazil. However, this interview is quite

different from any others aired since the coup, as it was conducted in person, just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and a full year in advance of the coup. So although the talk took place relatively recently, ensuing events make it feel as if from a different century. It is bittersweet to revisit this conversation now, as it shines a light on a world that is no longer available, and may never return.

Check out the podcast here:

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2021/7/22/episode-65-the-taste-of-dhamma>



Venerable Canda.





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