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CRIES FOR AID IN MYANMAR AS UN MARKS WORLD HUMANITARIAN DAY

There are limits to what diplomacy can achieve. As the United Nations marked World Humanitarian Day on 19 August, questions still hung over whether UN entreaties to the Myanmar military junta post-Cyclone Mocha would eventually result in the “green light” for allowing in UN humanitarian aid.

World Humanitarian Day is a campaign by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Questions are in the air after Martin Griffiths, UN head of Humanitarian Aid, met Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing on 15 August in Naypyidaw, yet one more UN representative to rock up to meet the generals, a full three months after Cyclone Mocha wreaked havoc across a swathe of the country.

According to the junta’s foreign ministry, during the meeting they discussed the ways to enhance coordination with the United Nations in post-Mocha rehabilitation work.

This included the practicalities of renewing the UN’s permits to operate in Myanmar and a call by Mr Griffiths to international donors around the world for funding to those affected by the Myanmar crisis.

Let’s be clear. UN representatives have carried out humanitarian aid programmes around the world for decades to help those in need. And there have been many times when such outreach has been dangerous. On 19 August 2003, a bomb attack on the Canal Hotel in Baghdad, Iraq, killed 22 humanitarian aid workers, including the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello. Five years later, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution designating 19 August as World Humanitarian Day.

As the UN points out, their humanitarian efforts around the world have grown, and so too have the challenges they face. From rising geopolitical tensions and the blatant disregard of international humanitarian law, to deliberate attacks and disinformation campaigns, their work is more difficult and dangerous than ever.

But as the world marked World Humanitarian Day last weekend, Myanmar junta intransigence

shows how the best will in the world cannot always break through the roadblocks, dangers and red tape inherent in dealing with troublesome gatekeepers.

Several UN delegations have reached out and met with the Myanmar junta in attempts to gain permission from Naypyidaw to deliver humanitarian aid to those badly affected by Cyclone Mocha that struck Rakhine State and other states and regions in May. Some international and local aid has been getting through, notably food and medicine parcels from the World Food Programme. Some aid has come in from China and India, arriving in Yangon to then reportedly be transported to Rakhine State.

But, by and large, cyclone victims continue to cry out for help, calling just for the basics of food, medicine and shelter to no avail. Many have received nothing – just an empty promise from the Myanmar junta that they will help, a promised made in June.

The UN does humanitarian work around the world, often under threat to life or limb. World Humanitarian Day is a reminder of that. But critics of the UN’s Myanmar operation question why all paths lead to Naypyitaw, with little or no consideration of other avenues to those in need. Surely, some critics ask, the UN could funnel aid through the National Unity Government (NUG), ethnic revolutionary organizations (EROs), and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).

As of last week, turning up on the doorstep in Naypyidaw has resulted in little or no progress in delivering international aid to millions in need. Maybe the visit of Mr Griffiths has opened the door. No statement indicates this at this point in time.

Myanmar is in a state of serious crisis with the military overlords seeking to crush resistance to their rule and seemingly intent on using humanitarian aid as a weapon.

Given these dire circumstances, the UN and other international donors would be wise to think outside the box if they are to provide humanitarian support to those in need in the bad and flooded lands of the Golden Land.

EDITORIAL

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WEEKLY

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MIZZIMA MAGAZINE

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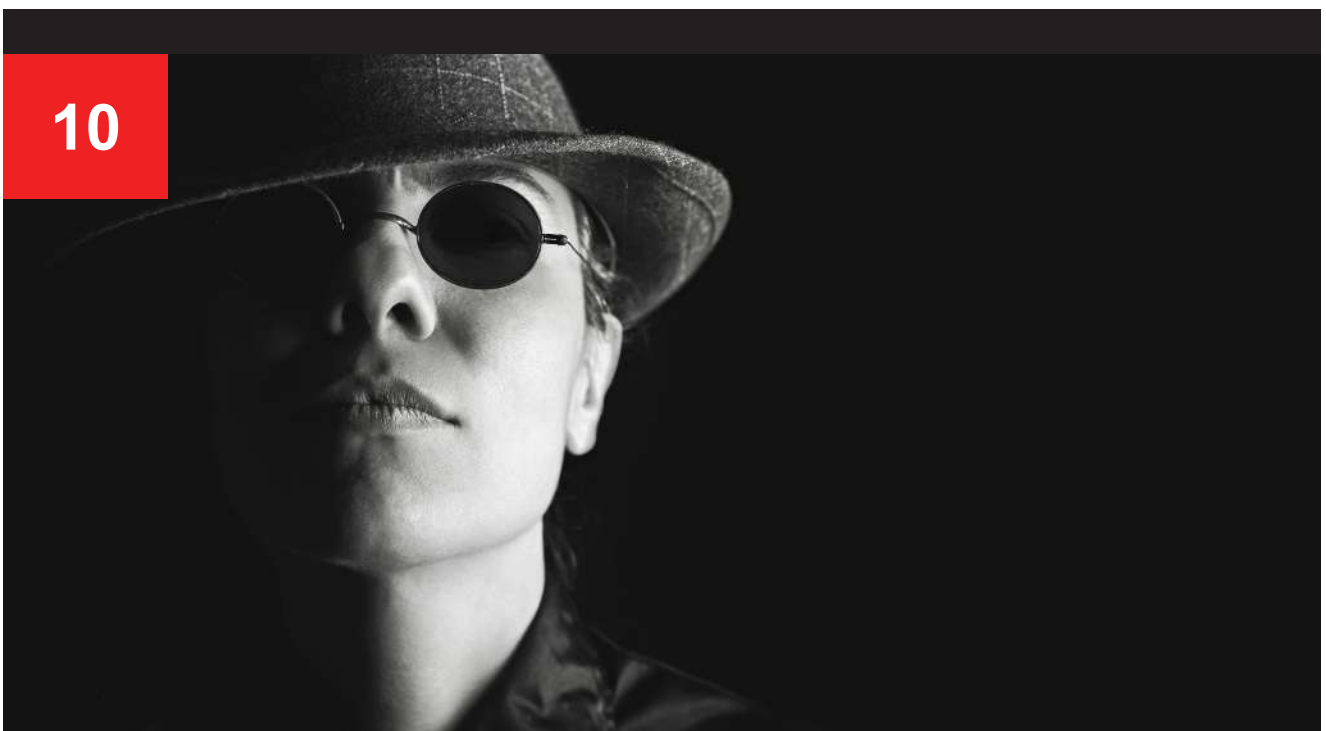
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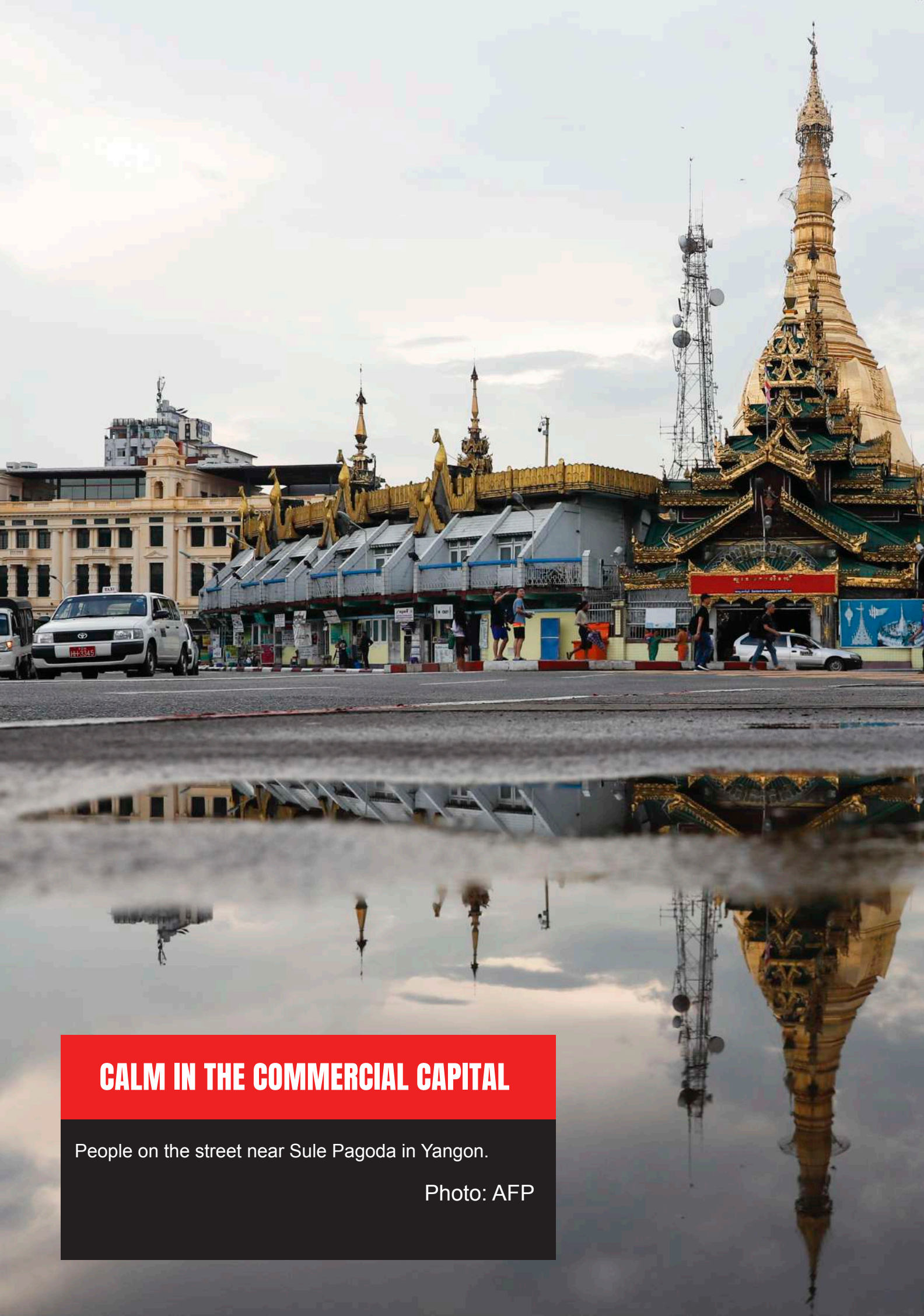
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CALM IN THE COMMERCIAL CAPITAL

People on the street near Sule Pagoda in Yangon.

Photo: AFP

IN FOCUS



JUNTA MURDERS SEVEN VILLAGERS IN BAGO REGION'S PHYU TOWNSHIP

Seven villagers were killed by junta troops following intense fighting between the junta army and defence forces in Aukkyarkhin Village, in Bago Region's Phyu Township on 9 August.

People's defence forces (PDFs) led by the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) attacked junta troops in Aukkyarkhin Village. But, after they withdrew the junta soldiers murdered six villagers.

An official from the Yoma Column defence force said: "An estimated 100 rounds of artillery were fired by the military council between 5:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m. on 9 August. However, in the afternoon, our

side made the decision to withdraw our troops."

The same soldier then said that six villagers who had been unable to leave Aukkyarkhin Village and escape the fighting were brutally killed by junta troops. Five of the victims had their throats slit and one was burned to death.

The junta troops then set fire to Aukkyarkhin Village, but currently, it is not known how much damage the junta fires have caused.

Mizzima is investigating the exact number of villagers killed by the junta and details of the damage caused to the village.

MYANMAR JUNTA TO FORM AUXILIARY FORCES WITH CIVIL SERVICE PERSONNEL IN SOUTHERN SHAN STATE: LEAKED DOCUMENT

Myanmar's Military Council has ordered all the state departments in southern Shan State to collect a list of civil service personnel under the regime to form auxiliary forces in preparing for a militia strategy, according to a leaked document dated 9 August just released.

The order said that the data is to be collected by 17 August from government staff from state-level offices in East Military Command, Taunggyi district, Kalaw district, PaO Self-Administered Zone and Danu Self-Administered Zone.

"Auxiliary forces of the Tatmadaw will be formed into militia groups. They will be assigned for military duties depending on the number of force and the duty plan for these auxiliary forces must be reported for the emergency situation," says the report signed by Colonel Sein Win, Minister for Security and Border Affairs of Shan State, under the Military Council.

A local source in Ywangan township remarked that the military is working to recruit its auxiliary force from non-CDMers (those not in the Civil Disobedience

Movement) as they do not have enough manpower to control southern Shan State while there are raging battles throughout the country. However, this order has reportedly caused annoyance to civil service personnel.

An official of the recently-formed Danu People's Liberation Front (DPLF), speaking to Mizzima, has warned that it is time for non-CDMers under the regime to decide whether they will stand for the people or work for the junta regime.

"Non-CDMers are not too late to join the civil disobedience movement. This is the right time for them to make a clear decision," he told Mizzima.

Although there were no major clashes between the resistance forces and the military in Taunggyi, Kalaw, the PaO Self-Administered Zone and the Danu Self-Administered Zone in the East Military Command until now, the military has increased its security and set fire to houses and arrested civilians in Ywangan and Pindaya townships, after the establishment of the DPLF was announced on 29 July.

JUNTA PLANTS MINES TO TARGET CIVILIANS IN SAGAING REGION'S CHAUNG U TOWNSHIP

Junta soldiers deliberately planted mines on routes commonly used by civilians in Nga Hyan Village, in Sagaing Region's Chaung U Township, on 10 August.

About 25 junta soldiers stationed in Chaung U Township, which is in Monywa District, drove from their base to the area of Nga Hyan Village. There, they deliberately planted M-14 mines (commonly known as toe poppers) outside the village, on routes frequented by villagers, according to the National Unity Government's (NUG) Ministry of Defence.

Photos released by the NUG show that nine mines were planted.

After the junta soldiers left, on the afternoon of 10 August people's defence force (PDF) fighters ar-

rived in the area and successfully removed the mines, according to an NUG statement.

The NUG confirmed that the mines were M-14 mines which are particularly hard to detect because they are mainly made of plastic and have a low metal content. They are specifically designed to maim rather than kill as looking after wounded people uses up more resources and manpower than burying dead people. The mines are designed to explode 10 inches above the ground and cause serious injuries, including the loss of body parts.

The headquarters of the NUG's People's Defence Army issued a warning about mines to the public and told them to be extremely cautious.

ARTILLERY FIRED FROM CHINESE MINING COMPANY OFFICES KILL CHILD

Junta soldiers stationed at the offices of the Chinese-owned Wanbao Mining Ltd in Salingyi Township, Sagaing Region killed a child and injured seven villagers when they fired artillery into surrounding villages.

At about midday on 15 August, the junta fired artillery shells into Paykone Village in the neighbouring Yinmarbin Township. As well as killing an 8-year-old child and injuring the villagers, the artillery damaged two houses.

"The Military Council troops repeatedly fired 120 mm mortars towards the villages. Tragically, an 8-year-old boy lost his life, and seven local residents suffered serious injuries as a result of artillery shell. Furthermore, two houses were destroyed by fire during this incident", said a local who wished to remain anonymous.

Wanbao Mining Ltd is a Chinese company that runs three copper mines in Salingyi, Township, Let-

padaung, Sabetaung, and Kyesintaung, under a revenue-sharing agreement with junta owned Myanmar Economic Holdings.

Artillery fire from the Wanbao Mining Ltd offices and No. 28 Police Battalion in Salingyi Township have caused many of the surrounding population to flee.

"They are firing heavy weapons day and night, so I am afraid to stay at home. We're fleeing because the soldiers are constantly firing on the villages", said another local.

Junta artillery has caused more than 6,000 villagers to flee from villages in Yinmarbin Township.

The junta soldiers based at the Wanbao offices also raided the villages of Kankone and Dongtaw and detained seven villagers at about 9:00 a.m. on 14 August, according to the People to People volunteer organisation based in Salingyi and Yinmarbin townships.



Myanmar has become a major illegal trafficking hub. Photo: Ryan McGuire

ASIA'S CRIMINAL HUB

Myanmar hosts a booming trafficking empire that is tough to tackle

The stories are horrifying to hear. Young people who managed to escape tell of mind-numbing hours of work, torture and even killing in the “scam hubs” of Myanmar’s northeastern badlands. More and more news stories detailing this are coming out of people mostly from Asia being duped into working for online scamming operations operating out of Shan State, effectively eclipsing the stories we used to see on other illegal trades including drug running, wildlife, illegal logging, and money laundering.

But all this criminal activity is alive and well in the Golden Triangle, a swathe of territory that sweeps north from Myanmar’s Shan State into southwestern Laos. And the activity is getting worse.

Duped youngsters forced to extort grandmothers or other gullible people online in countries around the world may have recently made the headlines, in part because a significant number caught up in the scamming are young Chinese, and Beijing has expressed its disquiet. And the situation appears to have grown worse over the last couple of years since

the Myanmar military coup, with growing calls to close down the operations and rescue the detained workers.

But the multi-million-dollar scam hubs are just part of confluence of criminality.

In this special issue of Mizzima Weekly, we take an inside look at the lawlessness of Myanmar’s badlands – territory effectively out of the control of the Myanmar junta – at a time when Naypyidaw has its attention focused on staying in power and suppressing and killing its people in a widening war.

In the story “Insight into transnational crime in Myanmar and Laos” we look at the International Crisis Group report into the thriving and dangerous Golden Triangle activities.

In the story “Myanmar teak continues to be traded around the world” we investigate the teak trade, one that is seeing the last of the valuable teak trees being felled in Myanmar’s diminishing forests.

INSIGHT INTO TRANSNATIONAL CRIME IN MYANMAR AND LAOS

Over the last decade and a half, a vibrant criminal economy has arisen in the Mekong sub-region, based on illegal drug production, unregistered casinos, online gambling and money laundering, and most recently, sophisticated online scamming operations, according to the International Crisis Group (ICG).

In an in-depth report entitled “Transnational Crime and Geopolitical Contestation along the Mekong” and released on 18 August, ICG looks at the worsening situation in Myanmar and Laos in which tens of billions of dollars in illicit profits have driven criminal syndicates to make huge casino and infrastructure investments, which have flowed into poorly governed jurisdictions with weak regulatory enforcement or into semiautonomous enclaves beyond the state’s reach.

LARGELY LAWLESS

This is the heart of the notorious Golden Tri-

angle where “anything goes” due in large part to the bribery and other corruption that allows these criminal activities to flourish, money that oils the wheels and further corrodes already corrupt state institutions in both countries.

Two areas have emerged as hotspots: Laos’s Bokeo province, home to the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, and Myanmar’s Shan State, particularly the district to the east of the Salween River bordering China, Laos and Thailand, known in British colonial times as Trans-Salween. Together, these form a transnational zone of criminality straddling the geopolitically important Mekong River.

What is important to keep in mind is how the 2021 coup in Myanmar has unleashed centrifugal forces that have eroded Naypyitaw’s influence over trans-Salween Shan State. Non-state armed groups have subsequently tightened their grip in the area, re-



● A casino in Mongla Special Region in eastern Shan State. Photo: AFP

sulting in a surge of illicit activity.

The report examines the political and economic dynamics at play and the associated security and governance risks. It also explores the geopolitical context, looking in particular at how insecurity and piracy along this stretch of the Mekong has prompted extra-territorial Chinese projection of force downstream, at the same time that the United States is increasing its security cooperation with Thailand just to the south.

ZONE OF CRIMINALITY

Myanmar's Shan State and Laos's Bokeo province, which straddle the Mekong River, have emerged as a contiguous zone of vibrant criminality, much of which is beyond the reach of national authorities. Unregulated casinos, money laundering, drug production and trafficking, online scamming operations, and illegal wildlife trade all thrive, entrenching corruption, weakening governance and damaging the bonds that create community. The criminal networks involved have regional – in some cases, global – reach and can rapidly shift from one jurisdiction to another to minimize risks to their operations.

What the ICG argues in its report is that a coordinated regional approach is vital in order to tackle these challenges.

But the report recognizes that geopolitical competition between China and the US complicates coordination. Regional states continue to rely heavily on unilateral criminal justice responses, but collaborative law enforcement is needed, as are multi-state efforts to ameliorate the governance and socio-economic problems that allow these criminal syndicates to prosper. Ideally, these efforts would involve agencies with migration, development and other relevant expertise.

Countries need to work together to deal with the challenge.

LONG A PROBLEM

Parts of the Mekong, particularly the 100km section that forms the Myanmar-Lao border, have long

been a frontier of unregulated and illicit trade, far from centres of power and commerce. Given its importance as a conduit between China and South East Asia, in recent decades governments have aspired for the Mekong to become a major transport route. But along with physical obstacles – sandbanks, shoals and rapids – insecurity has impeded riverborne trade, most commonly in the form of piracy and extortion of boats plying the route. The situation came to a head in October 2011, when thirteen Chinese merchant mariners were murdered – the deadliest attack on Chinese nationals abroad since World War II. China pinned the blame on Myanmar pirates, whose leader it captured in Laos and executed following a complex extra-territorial police operation. (It later emerged that others may have been primarily responsible.) Beijing then initiated joint gunboat patrols with neighbouring countries, allowing it to project force down the Mekong.

While these actions put an end to piracy on this key stretch of river, they did not deter other forms of crime. Since 2011, the territories on the Myanmar and Lao sides of the Mekong have emerged as hotbeds of illegal activity, from drug production and trafficking to online gambling, money laundering and cyber-scam operations that often use captive workers from around the world.

Not only do transnational criminal organisations operating in this zone benefit from lax or non-existent regulations, but they also take advantage of its multi-jurisdictional character, quickly shifting operations from one place to another to evade crackdowns.

Coordinated law enforcement across the region is crucial if governments want any chance of tackling these expanding criminal activities, but other capabilities must also be brought to bear. Authorities in the region need to acknowledge that any solution to this transnational problem will involve government agencies from several jurisdictions – as opposed to the typical security or police approach that treats immediate symptoms, but not the fundamental causes of the problem, including weak governance and rampant cor-



Opium and heroin production in Myanmar have increased.
Photo: AFP

ruption, not to mention a willingness or desire of some jurisdictions to court illicit investments.

WORKING TOGETHER?

So far, however, a coordinated response is lacking, in large part due to geopolitical considerations. The Mekong is a locus of big-power rivalry, where longstanding US ties with Thailand and other countries are being tested by China's rising power and regional ambitions. The contestation has greatly limited cooperation between Western governments and China on transnational crime in the Mekong, while making it difficult for other countries to balance their relations with the two.

China is by far the most influential actor and could play a critical role if it chose to. China could adopt a more consistent approach to criminality in the Mekong subregion, using its influence over regional governments and non-state actors to curtail illicit activities. But Beijing is also guided by strategic considerations, including its inclination to view economic investment, even if it is partly illicit, as something that

can help build peace along its borders, and its desire to leverage enclaves in its neighbourhood controlled by pliant entities in order to project its power.

China has thus far tended to focus on law enforcement only selectively, responding only when it considers its national interests under direct threat, including with crackdowns on online gambling and efforts to shut down online scam operations – some involving their nationals - across South East Asia. At the same time, it has ignored much of the crime in locations controlled by entities and enterprises friendly to China.

PUT ASIDE RIVALRY

Ideally, the US and China should set aside their geopolitical rivalry when it comes to cooperating on combating transnational crime in the Mekong. Doing so could encourage greater Chinese cooperation with initiatives such as the US-led Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats, as well as the Thai operations and intelligence centre on transnational organised crime in the Mekong. Although this scenario

is more aspirational than likely, the two powers could also bring about enhanced regional collaboration by focusing on ways in which their respective Mekong co-operation platforms (the Mekong-US partnership and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation) could support initiatives to tackle the governance and socio-economic factors that allow organised crime to flourish, with programmes designed to foster good governance, fight corruption, alleviate poverty and create jobs.

It is equally important to address the human cost of transnational crime. States should provide more assistance to secure the release of, and support, the thousands of people from countries across the world being held against their will and often severely abused in online scam centres where they are forced to carry out criminal activities in Myanmar, Laos and elsewhere in the region. Too often, these people, even

if they are rescued or able to escape, are held on immigration offences or charged for the crimes they were forced to commit. A more proactive approach from their embassies in the relevant countries is needed, as is a “victim-centred approach” from the countries where they were held or fled to.

Reining in the sprawling illegality that has grown along the Mekong in Myanmar and Laos will not be easy. But the consequences of permitting the region’s illicit businesses to keep booming are too great for governments not to try their best. Better coordination is the place to start.



● Thai authorities rescue wildlife that have been trafficked.
Photo: AFP

MYANMAR TEAK CONTINUES TO BE TRADED AROUND THE WORLD



Teak is still in demand for high-grade yachts.
Photo: Michael Held

Check out some of the high-class yachts moored in the harbour in Monte Carlo and chances are that the golden wood is teak from the forests of Myanmar.

Two journalists know this all too well. Shirsho Dasgupta of the Miami Herald and Timo Schober, a German-based journalist who works at Papertrail Media have delved deep into the trade that continues to see valuable teak trees felled in the forests of Myanmar and shipped around the world.

Check out the Insight Myanmar podcast where they discuss their investigation into this dark trade: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2023/7/31/episode-182-the-dark-side-of-teak>

Following a leak from Myanmar's tax department which indicated a high volume of teak exports, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) convened a group of 39 media outlets to work together in uncovering where all this teak was going, and if the post-coup US sanctions on Myanmar Timber Enterprises (MTE), the military-linked corporation intimately connected to the teak trade, were being evaded.

This is when Dasgupta and Schober got involved as journalists.

As they note, during the Colonial period, teak became a highly prized hardwood, particularly sought after by the British Navy. As a result, there was extensive clearcutting of Burma's vast teak forests. Even so, by the time of Burma's independence in 1948, forested areas still comprised 70 per cent of the country.

However, Dasgupta explains how the real decimation of Myanmar's teak forests began with the rampant crony capitalism that started in the 1990s. As a result, today, just 40 per cent of the country remains forested. Since that time, corruption has been rife, child labour has often been used, and working conditions have been extremely unsafe, with narcotics flowing freely throughout the camps.

"It's not like things were hunky dory in the past," Dasgupta explains, even about the period before sanctions when it was possible to obtain legally sourced Burmese teak. Still, it was challenging to determine if the teak being imported met all the requirements of legality.



Forests are being heavily logged.
Photo: Hans Isaacson

During the brief window when the National League for Democracy was in power, attempts were made to introduce transparency and establish a paper trail to document the chain of custody in the timber industry. However, the results were limited due to the ease of forging paper documents.

“It was still an ongoing process when the coup happened,” Dasgupta says, “changing and reforming an industry which has existed and operated in a certain way for more than 100 years, it takes time.”

However, the Myanmar military coup in 2021 and the implementation of sanctions by the US, hasn’t actually stopped the international sale of Burmese teak.

Schober explains how the ultra-rich are driving this illegal trade. “If you’re a millionaire, or a billionaire, you want the best [teak], and the best is naturally grown teak.”

Dasgupta adds that “the demand and the prices is influenced by the fact that very rich people want teak as their furniture, and they want teak as decks on their luxury yachts.”

The Myanmar junta is not worried. Almost all of the forests are state-owned and the money from the teak trade is funneled through the junta. Check out the figures. A staggering \$400 million worth of teak having been exported from Myanmar since the coup, with one-fifth of that figure reaching European and American markets.

Dasgupta estimates that six million pounds of teak has reached the US alone, valued at \$25 million. “We haven’t really seen much of an effect,” he notes flatly about US sanctions.

Little doubt then that Myanmar teak continues to turn up in the world’s millionaire playgrounds.

Check out the Insight Myanmar Podcast here: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2023/7/31/episode-182-the-dark-side-of-teak>



Shirsho Dasgupta



Timo Schober

DEATH TOLL FROM MYANMAR JADE MINE LANDSLIDE HITS AT LEAST 31



The landslide site in Kachin State. Photo: AFP

The death toll from a landslide at an unregulated jade mine in a remote part of Myanmar has hit at least 31, with eight people still missing, rescuers said Wednesday last week.

The disaster struck on 13 August outside northern Kachin's Hpakant township, after torrential rain and floods ravaged the region over the weekend.

Jade mining in Myanmar is lucrative due to high demand from neighbouring China, but the unregulated industry is plagued with frequent worker deaths.

"We found six more dead bodies this morning," a rescue worker told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity. They added that eight people remain unaccounted for, with the search continuing.

Rescuers dug through thick mud to find bodies, while others were discovered floating in water.

A massive pile of earth about 150 to 180 metres (500-600 feet) high - left behind by mining excavations - was loosened by the intense rainfall and collapsed, according to rescuers.

The rainy season had forced the suspension of mine operations but those caught in the landslide are believed to be locals who were trying to find something valuable in the mud.

Myanmar is the world's biggest source of jade and in 2020 nearly 300 people lost their lives in a massive landslide at a Hpakant mine.

Jade and other abundant natural resources in Myanmar's north -- including timber, gold and amber -- have helped finance both sides of a decades-long civil war between ethnic Kachin insurgents and the military.

While environmentalists and rights groups have long called for reforms, a 2021 military coup effectively ended hopes for better standards in the industry, according to international watchdogs.

After the putsch, monitoring group Global Witness urged a consumer boycott of jade and gemstones from Myanmar, warning the industry could become a "slush fund" for military repression.

More than 3,900 civilians have been killed since the coup, according to a local monitoring group.

AFP

JUNTA CHIEF CLAIMS MYANMAR STABILITY IN INTERNATIONAL SECURITY CONFERENCE IN RUSSIA

Myanmar junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing said that political, economic and security situations have begun to recover in most of the country except in some areas, according to the reports of the military media on 17 August.

The junta chief was speaking in a video message to the 11th Moscow Conference on International Security in 2023 held in Russia on 15 August.

Min Aung Hlaing told the conference that his regime is striving for ensuring security, peace and stability, rule of law and economic development in the country and aims to hold a “free and fair” multi-party democratic general election.

He also said that his regime will hand over the State responsibilities to the elected political party under the democratic norms after the election.

What was not said during the conference was that the Myanmar Military Council had extended a state of emergency for four consecutive times, while the 2008 Constitution allows only for two six-month extensions “in normal situations”.

In the third extension, in January this year, the military defined situations of the country as “extraordinary”.

2022 PADOH MAHN SHA YOUNG LEADER AWARD GOES TO HEADTEACHER NAW HAY THI DEW



Naw Hay Thi Dew, right, being presented the award.

The Phan Foundation says it is pleased to announce that Naw Hay Thi Dew, a headteacher at a school in Kawthoolei (Karen State), is the recipient of the 2022 Padoh Mahn Sha Young Leader Award. The award is given annually to recognise young Karen leaders and provide a \$4,000 grant to support their work.

The award was given last week.

The Phan Foundation was established in 2008 by the four children of Padoh Mahn Sha Lah Phan and Nant Kyin Shwe, in their memory. It provides grants towards education, poverty alleviation, promoting human rights and protecting Karen culture.

Naw Hay Thi Dew is a headteacher with the Karen Education and Cultural Department. Under her leadership, the school was extended to a junior college in 2018 and has expanded from 82 students and 10 teachers to 700 students and 30 teachers and provides leadership courses for young people.

Naw Hay Thi Dew stated: "I am very thrilled to receive this precious award, as this award recognises and supports young leaders who are working hard on the ground for the development of their community. This award means so much to me as I really admire pu Padoh Mahn Sha, his principles, his leadership, his works, and his writings. They are the strength and guiding light for me."

"I would like to encourage other young leaders to be strong and to work hard in building our own leadership skills so that we can work effectively for our community. I would especially like to encourage other young women leaders, we can do it, our leadership

can make a difference in our community, our organisation and in our struggle for freedom. I would like to urge the Karen National Union to guarantee spaces for women leadership in every level of administrations."

The Karen Student Network Group (KSNG) nominated Naw Hay Thi Dew and described how she inspired both teachers and students.

"Naw Hay Thi Dew is a great example and role model for other young people, especially young women, to get involved more in community work and to take up leadership roles. Her ability and her leadership have inspired many young women in our communities not just in education sector, but also in other social sectors. At KSNG, we are very impressed and inspired by Naw Hay Thi Dew's hard work, her sacrifice for our people, her leadership and her ability to lead, to motivate and to encourage others."

Nant Zoya Phan, co-founder and Director of the Phan Foundation stated: "Naw Hay Thi Dew is a remarkable and outstanding young leader who deserves recognition and support. Her leadership shows how young woman leaders can make a difference in our community. This is how we would like our father Padoh Mahn Sha to be remembered, as someone who promoted and supported young effective leaders like Naw Hay Thi Dew. This award continues his work."

The 2022 Padoh Mahn Sha Young leader award was presented to Naw Hay Thi Dew at the commemoration of 73rd Karen Martyrs' Day event in Taw Oo District on 12 August 2023.

SWISS OFFICIALS IN CONTACT WITH FILMMAKER ARRESTED IN MYANMAR



Screenshot of the movie, Don't Expect Anything.

Switzerland said Saturday its diplomats are in touch with local authorities over the arrest of a Swiss man in Myanmar, who faces accusations of harming the “dignity” of Buddhism.

Didier Nusbaumer, 52, was arrested on August 8 for writing and directing a film “which could harm the morality and dignity of Buddhist monks,” the country’s military said in a statement Friday.

Swiss diplomats stationed in Myanmar are in contact with authorities over Nusbaumer’s situation, a foreign ministry spokeswoman said in an email to AFP.

The foreign ministry “is aware of the case... the local Swiss representatives are in contact with the relevant authorities,” she said.

Religion is an important part of daily life for many across Buddhist-majority Myanmar, where crimson-robed monks walk the streets every morning and prayer halls regularly blast chants on loudspeakers late into the evening.

The roughly 75-minute film entitled “Don’t Expect Anything” had been posted to a Buddhist YouTube and TikTok channel in July, Friday’s statement from the Myanmar military’s information office said.

In the film “a young woman used rude and insulting words against the culture and tradition of Buddhists by harming the good virtues of monks,” it added, without giving details.

The junta also said that thirteen others involved in the film who had “acted without care... to downgrade the morality and dignity” of monks were also arrested.

In 2016 a court jailed a Dutch tourist for three months with hard labour for insulting religion after he unplugged an amplifier relaying a late-night Buddhist sermon.

AFP

AFTER VISITS TO NAYPYIDAW AND RAKHINE, UN AID CHIEF CALLS FOR ACCESS AND INCREASED FUNDING



Mr Martin Griffiths, left, meets with Min Aung Hlaing.

Lack of access and funding hampering aid to 18 million people in Myanmar, UN Humanitarian Chief Martin Griffiths says following visit to the country

UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths on 17 August called for expanded humanitarian access and increased funding to assist the 18 million people in need of aid across Myanmar following his visits to Naypyidaw and Rakhine State.

“Successive crises in Myanmar have left one third of the population in need of humanitarian aid,” Griffiths said at the end of a three-day visit to the country. “They expect more and better from their leaders and from the international community.”

Griffiths was speaking after a controversial visit to Myanmar in which the question of junta access for foreign humanitarian aid continues to hang in the air. Three months after Cyclone Mocha hit Myanmar, hundreds of thousands if not millions of people badly affected have received little or no aid.

Griffiths’ visit appeared to include a call to help those hit by the cyclone as well as the ongoing need to support the impoverished across the country, a long-term process.

Humanitarian needs in Myanmar have surged in recent years, with the number of displaced per-

sons increasing fivefold in less than three years, from 380,000 at the start of 2021 to 1.9 million at present, says UN OCHA.

During the visit, Griffiths met with families affected by conflict and natural disasters, including with Rakhine and Rohingya communities and with Myanmar authorities.

Griffiths visited Rakhine state, still reeling from the impact of Cyclone Mocha three months ago. The cyclone flattened homes, damaged displacement camps, destroyed farmland, and killed livestock, leaving thousands of people vulnerable.

“Families are struggling to cope after the successive blows of the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict and Cyclone Mocha. We stand ready to do more both in Rakhine and nationwide, but we urgently need greater access and more funding to do so,” the UN aid chief said

Earlier, in the capital Naypyidaw, Griffiths met with the State Administration Council Chairman, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, with whom he discussed what humanitarians need to scale-up direct aid to affected populations in areas affected by conflict



Little international aid is getting through. Photo: AFP

and natural disasters.

“My meetings were an opportunity to raise the need for expanded access,” Griffiths said. “I also expressed my concerns about the protection risks facing civilians in conflict areas and the bureaucratic constraints we humanitarians are facing in reaching them. It is critical for us to have the humanitarian space we need for safe, sustained aid deliveries around the country,” Griffiths said.

Despite rising needs, the humanitarian operation in Myanmar is facing a huge resource gap with just 22 per cent of required funds received more than

half-way through the year, according to the UN.

“Over the past three days, I spoke with brave aid workers about their efforts to help those in need. However, a severe lack of funding means aid agencies are forced to make tough decisions about cutting assistance at a time when they should be scaling up even further. This needs to change,” Griffiths said.

The UN aid chief did not appear to publicly admonish the Myanmar junta for their deliberate policy of blocking humanitarian aid that international and local donors need permission to deliver.



Mr Martin Griffiths, left, meets with the Myanmar junta. Photo: AFP

ACTIVIST LAMBASTS UN OVER AID FAILURE



Igor Blazevic

In the wake of the three-day visit by UN humanitarian aid chief Martin Griffiths to Myanmar last week, democracy activist Igor Blazevic has called on the international community to get serious about providing aid, with the suggestion of a significant proportion to be funneled through the National Unity Government (NUG) and civil society organizations (CSOs).

In a Facebook post on 18 August, Blazevic – who wrote earlier about the agenda of the recent UN visit – calls on the international community for a new approach to the Myanmar crisis – both the response to the post-coup humanitarian needs and the dire situation for Cyclone Mocha victims, many still waiting for aid.

Blazevic repeats his allegation that the “visit of the UN aid heavyweight Martin Griffiths to Myanmar is all about fundraising for the UN agencies and about getting visas for international staff, Letters of Agreement (LoA) and Memorandums of Understand-

ing. This is now confirmed by the own press statement of OCHA. Lack of sufficient funding is highlighted as the most serious problem, together with the lack of access.”

In essence, the UN needs the paperwork from the Myanmar junta to secure its position, and positions of its representatives, in the country, and is making a call for countries around the world to fund an under-funded programme of aid to Myanmar.

As he notes, one of the fundamental problems of international humanitarianism which becomes “big business” and a “career model” for a number of well-entrenched players - both the UN agencies and many INGOs - is that they claim that they are “the solution” and that all that is needed is to give them more money.

But Blazevic says the reality is that the causes of man-made disasters - and current situation in Myanmar is fully a Min Aung Hlaing and military junta-cre-

ated disaster - are always power-related and political. Solutions can only be achieved with proper application of power and politics.

Humanitarian effort make sense, but as a complement to politics and re-balancing of power dynamics between aggressor (main perpetrator of atrocities, destruction and repression) and those who are defending themselves. Not as replacement for politics.

As he notes, another thing what humanitarianism does not want to admit is that even when international humanitarian effort is well-funded and big scale, it covers just a fraction of the needs. Conflicts and the war of rogue regimes against the segment of population (like Rohingya and ethnic nationalities before) or against the whole population (what we have now in Myanmar) always, in every single moment, create multiple times bigger and more dramatic needs than any humanitarianism can address and match.

"In my (time in) Sarajevo, during the siege, one of the biggest international aid efforts that existed, has been delivering a little bit food once in a month or two (few kilos parcel with few items inside, rice, oil, old cans and cottage cheese from overdue food reserves of rich countries). The rest of the time, my family has been hungry and surviving by depleting all possible 'reserves'. In one moment, that meant cutting the parts of furniture to make fire to warm for a while in an extremely cold nights or spending all money and valuable things we had to buy food on black market," Blazevic says.

"Even more importantly, huge international humanitarian effort which included airlifts bringing aid to besieged Sarajevo, did not stop the shelling of the city and sniper fire. People were dying almost every single day. With certain regularities terrible massacres have been taking place. Sometimes when people were standing in queue for bread or aid. Over 14,000 civilians have been killed in four years in a city of just 350,000 citizens.

"The whole airlift to Sarajevo did not stop systematic ethnic cleansing, ugly massacres and genocide in other parts of Bosnia which has gone for four years. That has stopped only when Bosnian army, which build itself from zero, managed to create some level of power-balance and when the West provided limited military assistance to Croatian and Bosnian

army to launch few major offensives," Blazevic notes.

It is completely the same situation in Myanmar right now, he says. Extremely limited international aid which the junta will allow sometimes to be delivered to some part of the country and only when it serves junta's own interests to divide opposition to its rule. Most of the time, most of the people in most of the country will continue to suffer and to survive through its own self-help. And killing and atrocities and cleansing operations and burning and bombing of villages will not stop. Targeting civilian population is the core of the junta's military strategy against the nationwide uprising and resistance.

This is what international humanitarianism does not admit and does not say. That they are not solution and will never be, Blazevic says.

"Something else is needed to stop dramatically worsening of the situation in Myanmar, not more money for the UN agencies to deliver limited aid (sometimes) to Rakhine State and to people in need in Yangon, Mandalay and few other places that are still under junta control. And just a very small trickle of that will go – rarely – to conflict areas where resistance to the junta is strong. Places where international aid will trickle in completely insignificant amounts is 2/3 territory of the country. That is the territory where over 70,000 houses have been burned and where the majority of the 1.7 million people that has been expelled from their villages by the junta are," he adds.

Blazevic feels a new approach is needed. He says a simple solution would be to funnel a third of the international aid money through the current mechanisms of aid agencies that operate with and LoA and MoU with the junta.

Then two-thirds of the aid money should be channeled to the country through existing public services that are affiliated with the NUG and EROs and thorough local CSOs and charities operating in liberated and mixed control territories and which operate without a MoU with junta and in explicit opposition to junta.

"I can hear chorus saying that is not possible," says Blazevic. "I have worked in enough 'crisis spots' and enough 'conflict areas' that I know that it is possible when there is a political will."

RAKHINE FLOODS CAUSE SERIOUS PROBLEMS FOR IDPS



Rakhine State has been badly flooded.
Photo: AFP

From the beginning of August, prolonged monsoon rainfall and a rise in river levels have resulted in the flooding of internally displaced people's (IDP) camps located in Kyauktaw and Mrauk-U Townships in Rakhine State in Myanmar.

IDP camp officials have reported that the residents of several IDP camps in those townships were forced to evacuate as a result of the floods. These displaced individuals are now experiencing shortages of food and facing health challenges.

The water levels in the Mya Tan Saung IDPs Camp in Mrauk-U Township subsided on 10 August, allowing the displaced individuals to return to their homes. However, there are reports indicating that they are facing challenges with their living conditions and experiencing difficulties in accessing food.

"Approximately 40 houses were destroyed as the water receded. Among them, one house was completely demolished while 31 others suffered partial damage. Thanks to donations from relevant volunteer groups, there is enough food to sustain the camp residents for around 10 days. However, the daily living conditions continue to pose challenges for the displaced individuals," said Mya Tan Saung Sayardaw, in charge of Mya Tan Saung IDPs camp in Mrauk-U Township.

It is reported that relevant volunteer organizations are providing healthcare services to at least 40 individuals who are currently sick in the Mya Tan Saung IDPs Camp. The camp is currently home to 1,175 IDPs.

"Several people in the camp are unwell. Approximately 40 people of all ages are currently experiencing illness," Mya Tan Saung Sayardaw said.

Mosquitoes breeding in ponds formed after

water entered the Tain Nyo IDPs camp in Mrauk-U Township is causing concern for the camp's population of over two thousand people, as there is an increased risk of dengue fever and malaria, according to an official of Tain Nyo IDPs camp.

"I am also concerned about the current living conditions, including the presence of stagnant water and mosquito breeding after the camp was flooded. The muddy road is making travel difficult, and there is growing worry about the spread of diseases such as dengue fever and malaria. Previously, the camp did not experience such health issues, but with the water submerging the area, mosquito breeding has increased, resulting in a rise in mosquito bites," Ko Kyaw Htin, the official of Tain Nyo IDPs camp told Mizzima.

According to residents of Kyauktaw, the Nyaung Chaung IDPs Camp in Kyauktaw township, housing over 4,000 IDPs, has also been flooded as a result of the rising river water and prolonged rainfall. This unfortunate situation has led to significant health and food-related challenges for the camp.

The United League of Arakan (ULA) has reported that heavy rains in Rakhine State had caused floods in several townships, including Buthidaung, Rathedaung, Ponnagyun, Kyauktaw, Min Bya, Mrauk-U, and Taungup.

According to the ULA, the flooding in Rakhine State has resulted in the unfortunate loss of five men and one woman. Additionally, more than 30,000 houses have been flooded.

Rakhine IDP camps were badly hit when Cyclone Mocha hit the state in May. The recent monsoon flooding has compounded the damage caused during that natural disaster.

OVER 55 KILLED IN BANGLADESH FLOODS INCLUDING ROHINGYA REFUGEES

At least 55 people have been killed and more than a million affected by two weeks of torrential rains causing floods and landslides in southeast Bangladesh, officials said 13 August.

Administrators of four of the worst-hit districts said floods and landslides since August 1 killed 21 people in Cox's Bazar, 19 in Chittagong, 10 in Bandarban and five in Rangamati.

"These are some of the heaviest rains in recent years," Bangladesh Meteorological Department chief Azizur Rahman told AFP.

He said 312 millimetres (12 inches) of rainfall was recorded on August 7 alone.

Officials said heavy rains lashed the region until August 11, triggering flash floods that caused rivers to burst their banks and inundate hundreds of villages.

It was only possible to confirm how many were killed after the floodwaters began to recede.

The summer monsoon brings South Asia around 80 percent of its annual rainfall, as well as death and destruction due to flooding and landslides.

The rainfall is hard to forecast and varies considerably but scientists say climate change is making the monsoon stronger and more erratic, while deforestation and building on hillsides has made flash floods worse.

VILLAGES SWAMPED

"In Cox's Bazar some 600,000 people were affected by the floods," district administrator Shaheen Ibrahim told AFP.

Bangladesh is home to one million Rohingyas who fled a military crackdown in Myanmar and now live in some three dozen camps built on cleared forest and hill slopes in Cox's Bazar.

"At least 21 people were killed", Ibrahim said.

Refugee commissioner Mizanur Rahman said four Rohingyas were killed, including a child and her

mother who were buried under a landslide.

"We have relocated around 2,000 people to safe places who are at risk of landslides in the camps," he told AFP.

Hundreds of villages were swamped in Chittagong, Bangladesh's second-largest city and home to its biggest port, in what residents said was some of the heaviest flooding in decades.

"The flood damaged at least 5,000 thatched houses," district administrator Abul Bashar Mohammed Fakhruzzaman told AFP.

"At least 19 people have died from the floods. We recovered some bodies from the Sangu river after floodwater receded in the past few days. Some 450,000 people were affected by the floods."

Transport between Chittagong and Cox's Bazar was cut for a few days and newly laid railway tracks were damaged, he said.

The rains also triggered a major flash flood in the hill district of Bandarban, where administrator Shah Mujahid Uddin said at least 10 people were killed.

Five people were killed in the Rangamati hill district, where heavy rains cut off some 23,000 people, administrator Mosharraf Hossain said.

Bangladeshi authorities have sent food and relief to the worst-affected region, said Shahina Sultana, a senior government official in Chattogram region, the new name for Chittagong.

Five people were still missing, she said.

"The government is doing everything in its power to support people," she said.

AFP

CHINA'S PROPERTY SECTOR CRISIS FUELS FEARS OF CONTAGION

Troubled Chinese property giant Country Garden risks defaulting on its bond payments next month, which could have disastrous consequences for the world's second-largest economy.

The firm's debt woes come two years after the unravelling of its competitor Evergrande.

Here is why Country Garden's plight is being closely monitored by markets:

HOW IMPORTANT IS COUNTRY GARDEN?

Country Garden was China's largest private developer in terms of sales last year.

It has extensive operations in small cities, which host about 60 percent of its projects.

But that is where recent drops in China's property prices have been most pronounced and where customers have limited purchasing power.

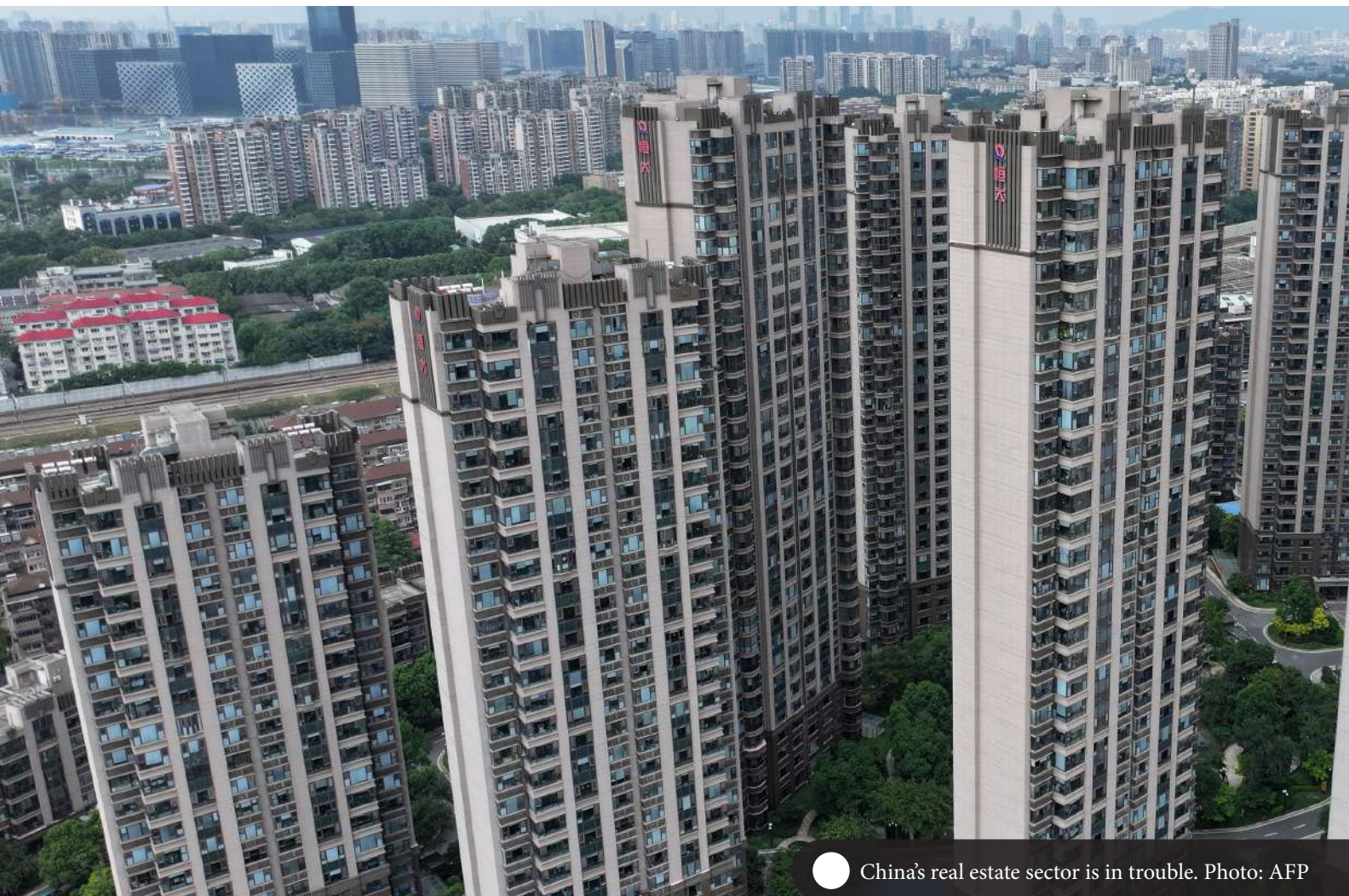
At the end of 2022, Country Garden listed more than 3,000 active construction sites, including around 30 abroad, mainly in Australia, Indonesia and the United States.

Any prolonged suspension of work at the sites could threaten social unrest, as Chinese homeowners often pay for new properties even before the building is fully constructed.

Country Garden has four times as many projects as its competitor Evergrande, whose stalled development led to protests and payment strikes last year.

WHAT IS ITS CURRENT SITUATION?

At the end of 2022, Country Garden had amassed colossal debt estimated by the group at around 1.152 trillion yuan (\$157 billion).



China's real estate sector is in trouble. Photo: AFP

Other estimates of its overall debt are as high as 1.4 trillion yuan, according to Bloomberg.

Also at the end of 2022, the developer had cash totalling 147.5 billion yuan (\$20.2 billion today).

Last week, Country Garden was unable to make two bond payments.

It now risks a default as other bond maturities are expected in September.

Adding to the firm's pressure, 31 billion yuan (\$4.2 billion) in bonds will expire in 2024, said rating agency Moody's.

Evergrande, once China's top property developer, had nearly \$340 billion in debt and \$2 billion in cash at the end of 2022.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES?

Property and related industries are major contributors to China's GDP.

The setbacks faced by Country Garden and Evergrande have further weakened a sector that was battered by the Covid pandemic and the general economic slowdown in China.

This situation is fuelling mistrust among potential buyers, further aggravating the financial situation of developers.

State-backed company Sino-Ocean announced Monday that it had defaulted on an interest payment and expects record half-yearly losses this month.

In another sign of the market troubles, real estate prices fell in July at the fastest pace in a year, according to official figures published on Wednesday.

China's debt problems are likely to worsen as "recessionary and deflationary pressures pile up, (and) Chinese enterprises struggle to make profits," warn analysts at SinolInsider, a US-based consultancy that focuses on the Chinese economy.

RISKS TO THE FINANCIAL SYSTEM?

During the sector's boom years, many Chinese property developers enlisted trust firms or asset managers to finance their projects.

Beijing-based conglomerate Zhongzhi - and its galaxy of financial companies -- is one of the most important players in the market, alone managing more than one trillion yuan in assets.

Its clients include businesses and wealthy individuals who have entrusted it with their savings.

But Zhongzhi has recently found itself unable to issue some payments, causing "significant losses" to investors, noted Nomura analyst Ting Lu.

Concerned investors gathered Wednesday to demand accountability outside the Beijing location of one of the firm's subsidiaries, Zhongrong International Trust, Bloomberg reported.

Any default by the Zhongzhi conglomerate risks exposing some of China's "massive financial and debt 'iceberg'", said SinolInsider.

"More of the 'iceberg' is likely to be uncovered going forward."

AFP



MOSQUES PROBED OVER PROTEST CALL IN PAKISTAN BLASPHEMY RIOTS

A Muslim cleric is among a dozen people being investigated for using mosque loudspeakers to order protests against alleged blasphemy by Christians which erupted into mob violence in Pakistan earlier this week, a senior police official said.

More than 80 Christian homes and 19 churches were vandalised when hundreds rampaged through a Christian neighbourhood in Jaranwala in Punjab province on Wednesday last week.

Reports that a Koran had been desecrated were broadcast from mosques, with one cleric telling his followers it was “Better to die if you don’t care about Islam”.

“That cleric should have understood that when you gather people in such a charged environment... in a country in which people were already very sensitive

about (blasphemy) it is like adding fuel to fire,” Punjab police chief Usman Anwar told AFP during an interview in Lahore on Friday.

“He’s not saying that go and burn their houses. But when the mob gathers, it’s really impossible to control that.”

He said the cleric was one of 12 people who were being investigated for using mosque loudspeakers, while more than 125 people have been arrested linked to the vandalism that followed, thanks to the use of facial recognition technology, mobile phone geo-fencing and data gathered from social media.

At its peak, more than 5,000 people had poured into the neighbourhood from other districts, with smaller mobs spreading to narrow alleys where they ransacked homes.



● Christians protest in Lahore. Photo: AFP

Christians who fled in their hundreds have criticised police for failing to protect their property, with some sheltered by their Muslim neighbours.

“If police had started baton charging, or attacking (the mob) or tear gassing that would have resulted in multiple injuries or deaths. And that is what we were avoiding at that time. That would have aggravated the situation that would have spread in all the country,” Anwar said.

Negotiations with religious leaders led to calls for calm, he added.

THOUSANDS OF CHURCHES GUARDED

Two Christian brothers have been arrested for blasphemy, after torn pages of the Koran with offensive words scrawled across them were stuck to the walls of a mosque in Jaranwala in the early hours of Wednesday morning.

Anwar said he personally interrogated the pair to avoid the possibility of accusations of torture.

On Friday, 3,200 churches were guarded by

police across Punjab province to provide reassurance to the Christian community, Anwar said, adding that he would travel to Jaranwala Sunday to show solidarity.

Christians, who make up around two percent of the population, occupy one of the lowest rungs in Pakistani society and are frequently targeted with spurious blasphemy allegations.

The majority of those accused of blasphemy in Pakistan are Muslims, but members of religious minorities face an especially acute threat, according to rights groups.

Blasphemy is an incendiary charge in deeply conservative, Muslim-majority Pakistan, where even unproven allegations of insulting Islam and its Prophet Mohammed can provoke death at the hands of vigilantes.

Politicians have been assassinated, lawyers murdered and students lynched over accusations of blasphemy.

In one of Pakistan’s most high-profile cases, Christian woman Asia Bibi was at the centre of a decade-long blasphemy row, which eventually saw her death sentence overturned and ended with her fleeing the country.

Her case sparked violent demonstrations and high-profile assassinations while spotlighting religious extremism across wide sections of Pakistani society.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said the number and size of the attacks “appear to have increased in recent years”.

Anwar said that while the anger towards blasphemy may be justified, the violent reactions were not, describing the scenes in Jaranwala as “tragic”.

He said it was the role of clerics and the government to ensure that religion was not misused.

“The most important thing is that we, the Muslims, in this country, are going to become more tolerant. Once we are given the true message of Islam, that is the role of the government,” he said.



AFP

DISABILITY RIGHTS THREATENED BY BAD WORKING CONDITIONS FOR CARERS: INDEPENDENT EXPERT

Discussions about the “future of care in the 21st century” must prioritize working conditions and career opportunities – or else disability rights will be in jeopardy, a UN-appointed independent rights expert warned on Monday last week.

Gerard Quinn, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, said that “dead-end jobs, low wages, poor conditions and little room for social mobility” in the care sector are not a way to build resilient systems – as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown.

WOMEN CARERS ‘SEVERELY DISADVANTAGED’

Speaking at the opening of the latest session of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in Geneva, he highlighted the particularly unfavourable situation of women care workers.

“The ‘feminisation of poverty’ – whereby women carers are almost always severely disadvantaged – cannot continue,” he said, adding that being “serious” about rights meant that “we have to be serious



Photo: UN News

about the ecosystem that gives them reality or that undermines them.”

Mr. Quinn stressed that discussions of disability rights did not exist in a vacuum and had to include a focus on women’s rights, as well as making service providers in the sector – a “multi-billion-dollar industry” – conscious that they too have a role to play in fulfilling human rights.

DISABILITY AND CONFLICT

According to Mr. Quinn, far from being an “isolated or hermetically sealed instrument”, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities “pressed a re-set button on so many areas – climate, conflict, development, democratisation”.

The Special Rapporteur previewed his up-

coming report on conflict and disability to be launched in October, saying that he was “shocked” to learn that only six per cent of peace treaties in the last 30 years mention disability.

He deplored this “wasted opportunity” to build a more inclusive future at a pivotal moment in the life of any political community, insisting that it had to change – just like the fact that “official apologies, criminal accountability, reparations and memorialisation of past wrongs tend to exclude persons with disabilities”.

Special Rapporteurs are mandated by the UN Human Rights Council to monitor and report on specific thematic issues or country situations and work on a voluntary basis. They serve in their individual capacity, are not UN staff and do not receive a salary.

UN-WIDE POLICY GUIDANCE

Also speaking at the CRPD opening on behalf of UN Human Rights (OHCHR), Ms. Asako Hattori said that the Office continued to work on the topic of inclusive care and support systems and was currently preparing a report on good practices for community inclusion of persons with disabilities, to be presented to the Human Rights Council next year.

She underscored that since April, the Office had been contributing to the development of a UN system-wide policy guidance on “care”.

According to OHCHR, there are an estimated one billion people with disabilities globally, or some 15 per cent of the world’s population.

To help advocate for their rights, the CRPD, a body of 18 independent experts, monitors the way countries have been implementing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and provides them with recommendations.

To this day, 187 States have ratified the Convention, which entered into force in 2008. During its current session, which will run until early September, the Committee will review the reports of Andorra, Austria, Germany, Israel, Malawi, Mauritania, Mongolia and Paraguay.

Courtesy of UN News





Photo: Zinko Hein

CHIN STATE

Locals concerned as Arakan Army moves into southern Chin State

Arakan Army (AA) columns have recently moved into several townships in southern Chin State causing concerns to the residents living there.

According to residents, AA columns have entered the townships of Paletwa, Mindat, Kanpetlet, and Matupi, all in southern Chin State, north of Rakhine (Arakan) State.

A fighter from the Matupi People's Defence force (PDF) said: "We have reached a mutual understanding with the AA troops, allowing them to travel within our territory. However, we have made it clear to them that they should refrain from sleeping and camping in villages."

Despite any such agreements the appearance of the AA troops in southern Chin State has alarmed locals who fear it will lead to an increase in violence and ethnic conflict in the areas where they are stationed.

A Matupi resident said: "There were AA troops sleeping on the side of the Matupi Road. Initially, I mistook them for the [Myanmar] military army and I was ready to flee. Later I noticed that they were wearing AA logos. I do not live in fear of either the [Myanmar] military army or the AA troops. Additionally, I want to know the reasons why the AA is setting up encampments on Chin land instead of remaining in Rakhine [State]."

According to a political analyst from Chin State, AA troops have reportedly established a presence in nearly all townships within southern Chin State.

They said: "It has been nearly ten years since the AA troops first established their presence in Paletwa, Chin State. However, following the military coup, the troops expanded their presence to include Kanpetlet and Mindat townships, organizing themselves by battalion. Additionally, AA troops have also arrived at Lalengi, which is a border area between Matupi and

India. This issue will potentially lead to future conflicts between the Chin and Rakhine communities after the revolution."

On 7 March 2020, the Chin National Front (CNF) issued a statement urging the AA to refrain from using Chin State as a military camp for its operations.

CDF issues travel warning for Chin State road following landslides

Chinland Defence Force (CDF) - Matupi issued a statement on 15 August advising people not to travel on the Matupi to Hakha road in Matupi Township, Chin State, following a landslide.

The road between the villages of Lonhlaw and Zakan in Matupi Township was blocked for 40 feet after a landslide fell onto it on the evening of 14 August. Landslides have also blocked other sections of the road.

Naing Jun Kein, a CDF-Matupi official said: "It is anticipated that three other locations may also experience landslides due to mountain runoff. The specific landslide mentioned earlier took place between Lonhlaw and Zakan Village."

He also said that the landslides blocking the Matupi to Hakha road may lead to an increase in commodity prices and possible food shortages in Matupi Township.

A Matupi resident said: "The Matupi to Hakha road is primarily used by locals for trading and transportation, with traders relying on it for transporting food products."

The resident also emphasised that if the road remains damaged, it will inevitably cause difficulties for the city's inhabitants and an increase in commodity prices. There is also a worry that the blocked road may lead to shortages of essential foods and fuel in Matupi.

There has been almost continuous rainfall in Chin State during August. The damage caused by rainfall and landslides has been exacerbated because drainage channels on the side of the road have not been properly dug, according to the Matupi resident.



MYANMAR'S WITHDRAWAL FROM ROTATING ASEAN LEADERSHIP ROLE AMID INTERNAL TURMOIL

Diplomatic insiders reveal that Myanmar, currently governed by the military regime, will give up its opportunity to assume the rotational leadership position within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2026 due to internal circumstances and the nation's lack of readiness, reported Thai PBS World.

The Philippines will step into the role, assuming the chair in that year, while Myanmar is anticipated to take up the position in 2027.

Nay Pyi Taw's action at this point highlights the prevailing and forthcoming unpredictability within the nation.

Myanmar witnessed a military coup led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on February 1, 2021, resulting in significant deterioration of human rights conditions and overall stability within the country.

Amidst widespread human rights abuses and internal armed conflicts throughout the country, the Myanmar junta has faced defeat in diplomatic struggles on the global stage.

As of 18 August this year, the military junta has conducted 24,352 arrests for political motives, with 19,838 people remaining in detention, reported the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma). The junta has been responsible for the deaths of 3,959 people, including children.

H&M TO 'PHASE OUT' MYANMAR OPERATIONS AFTER REPORTS OF LABOUR ABUSE



Swedish clothing giant H&M said Friday it would begin closing its operations in Myanmar, after reports of abuse against garment workers in the wake of the 2021 military takeover.

"After careful consideration we have now taken the decision to gradually phase out our operations in Myanmar," H&M said in an email to AFP.

The Southeast Asian country has been ravaged by deadly violence since a coup deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi's government in February 2021, unleashing a bloody crackdown on dissent that has sparked fighting across swathes of the nation.

"We have been monitoring the latest developments in Myanmar very closely and we see increased challenges to conduct our operations according to our standards and requirements," the company said.

A report published this week by rights group Business & Human Rights Resource Centre noted 156 publicly reported cases of alleged labour and hu-

man rights abuse in the period from February 2022 to February 2023, compared to 56 for the previous 12 months.

"In other words: things are getting worse for garment workers — and quickly," the report noted.

Out of the total 212 cases recorded by the NGO since February 2021, 20 were linked to H&M suppliers.

According to H&M the company does not own any textile producing factories in the country but sources products from 26 suppliers in the country with a total of 39 factories.

A slew of international companies have left the country following the military takeover.

AFP

DOLLAR TRADING DIFFICULT IN MYANMAR AFTER CENTRAL BANK REVOKES MONEY CHANGER LICENSES



Foreign currency exchange is growing more difficult in Myanmar.

The Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM) recently announced that it had revoked the foreign exchange money changer licenses issued to 13 companies.

The Military Council ordered the people to buy foreign currencies officially but the dollar trading became difficult as they closed many money changer counters in recent days.

An export import merchant said that they could not buy foreign currencies from these official money changer counters freely and then they had to rely on the open market only. He said they were facing difficulty in buying dollars, noting the foreign currency black market was growing in the country.

The CBM under the control of the Military Council revoked licenses of 45 money changer counters in this year without any wrongdoings by these banks in their attempt to contain the rising US dollar exchange rate but the FOREX market wholesalers and retailers said that the US dollar black market was growing in the country.

The banks which have Authorized Dealers

(AD) license and their customers (exporters and importer) can exchange US dollars from online trading as permitted by the CBM and the people who are leaving the country can buy only petty cash (imprest money) in limited amounts from the banks.

The CBM is taking action against speculators in the FOREX market and illegal money changers to contain the rising gold prices and dollar exchange rate. They warned against speculation in the FOREX market.

After the US government put two state-owned banks namely Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank (MFTB) and Myanmar Investment and Commercial Bank (MICB) in their targeted sanctions list, the dollar exchange rate fluctuated wildly in the market and it rose from about 2,800 Kyat to over 3,000 Kyat against the dollar.

In addition, the news of the leading bank in Singapore, United Oversea Bank (UOB), planning to sever contacts with Myanmar-based banks appeared and announced by the UOB Bank and then the US dollar exchange rate soared to about 3,700 Kyat against the dollar.

CHINA STOPS RELEASING YOUTH JOBS DATA AS ECONOMIC FIGURES DISAPPOINT

China stopped publishing data on its rising youth unemployment rate on Tuesday last week, as it released a raft of disappointing figures that stoked concerns over the state of the world's second largest economy.

Shortly before the latest uninspiring indicators were published, the central bank cut a key interest rate in an effort to boost flagging growth.

The new data added to a slew of figures in recent months reflecting a slump in China's post-Covid rebound, with joblessness among 16- to 24-year-olds hitting a record 21.3 percent in June.

But the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said on Tuesday that it would no longer release age-group-specific unemployment data, citing the need to "further improve and optimise labour force survey statistics".

"Starting from this August, the release of urban unemployment rates for youth and other age groups across the country will be suspended," bureau spokesman Fu Linghui said at a press conference.

Overall unemployment rose to 5.3 percent in July compared with 5.2 percent in June, the NBS said.

College student Li Nuojun told AFP in Beijing on Tuesday that the rate of joblessness among young people had her "very worried".

"When thinking about finding a job, I become very anxious," the 18-year-old added.

SLOWING RETAIL SALES

As indicators of an economic slowdown have piled up, many experts have called for a large-scale recovery plan to boost activity.

"In order to revive demand quickly, we think that the more effective policy option at this junction would be to embark on a central government-backed consumption stimulus measure," said Societe Generale analysts Wei Yao and Michelle Lam in a note.

But for the time being, authorities are stick-

ing to targeted measures and declarations of support for the private sector - with little in the way of tangible steps.

Tuesday's announcement that youth unemployment data would be suspended came as Beijing released a series of weak economic indicators for July.

Retail sales, a key gauge of consumption, grew 2.5 percent year-on-year in July, the NBS said, down from 3.1 percent in June and falling short of analyst expectations. Industrial production grew 3.7 percent in July from a year ago, down from 4.4 percent in June.

The suspension of youth jobs data "may further weaken global investors' confidence in China", Ting Lu, China economist at Nomura, said in a note.

'GAGGING AND BLINDFOLDING'

Chinese social media users were sceptical of officials' explanation for the move, with the topic receiving over 140 million views and tens of thousands of comments on the Weibo platform.

"Can you solve the problem by gagging and blindfolding yourself?" asked one Beijing-based user in a post liked by more than 3,000 people.

Chinese leaders have sought to boost domestic consumption in recent weeks, with the State Council last month releasing a 20-point plan to encourage citizens to spend more in sectors including vehicles, tourism and home appliances.

The country's top brass has warned that the economy faces "new difficulties and challenges" as well as "hidden dangers in key areas".

The recent data suggests China may struggle to achieve a five percent growth target set for the year. The economy grew just 0.8 percent between the first and second quarters of 2023, according to official figures.

BANGLADESHI STATE-OWNED BANK FREEZES \$1.2 M FROM ACCOUNTS OF TWO MYANMAR JUNTA-CONTROLLED BANKS

The Sonali Bank of Bangladesh has frozen accounts of two banks of Myanmar, following the reminder of US embassy in Dhaka that Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank and the Myanmar Investment and Commercial Bank were under US sanctions, according to a report of the Daily Star.

Md Afzal Karim, managing director and CEO of Sonali Bank, said, “Those banks of Myanmar have \$1,200,000 in our bank but they cannot withdraw the funds because we froze the accounts after US sanctions.”

Sonali Bank has already sought opinion from its central bank about the accounts of these two banks, said an official of this bank on condition of anonymity, adding that further steps would be taken depending on the decision of the central bank.

The US government-imposed sanctions on MFTB, MICB and Myanmar’s defence ministry in June, followed by the European Union’s seventh round of sanctions on Myanmar on 20 July.

According to the report of BenarNews, Sonali Bank took this action due to the reminder from the Office of Foreign Assets Control, an agency under the US Treasury Department that enforces sanctions.

He also said that the Myanmar junta had requested Bangladesh to make the accounts available for transactions although it will not be possible to open until the sanction is lifted.

Trade volume between Myanmar and Bangladesh is very small, with around \$128.5 million from Myanmar to Bangladesh and \$3.9 million from Bangladesh to Myanmar in the 2022 fiscal year.

Syed Mahbubur Rahman, managing director of Dhaka-based private commercial Mutual Trust Bank, told BenarNew that since Bangladesh does not have a large amount of business with Myanmar, there will not be a significant bottleneck due to this reason, and there is no reason to worry about it.

Singapore’s United Overseas Bank (UOB), the biggest foreign bank in Myanmar, warned local banks in the first week of this month that it will cut ties with them for all payments to and from Myanmar accounts on 1 September as a move to restrict the military regime’s access to the global financial system.

IN FOCUS





TAKING A BREAK

A truck driver sleeping under his truck in Nay-pyidaw, the Myanmar capital.

Photo: AFP

CAPTURING THE ROHINGYA PLIGHT ON FILM

With the recent news of the deaths of about two dozen Rohingya at sea, we are reminded yet again about the dire problems Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya minority face in trying to survive.

An overloaded boat, said to be carrying about 50 Rohingya, was sailing from Rakhine State to Malaysia when it sank. As of last count, at least 17 people were reported dead, including women and children.

Since the 2016-17 crisis in Rakhine State that led to over 700,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh, and the difficulties for the pockets of Rohingya trying to survive in the state, many living in internally displaced people's camps, journalists, photographers and film-makers have been attempting with some level of success to document the crisis for Myanmar's most downtrodden minority.

A number of documentaries have been made. But one that stands out is "Wandering, a Rohingya Story".

As the film-makers note, the documentary is an immersive, poetic and powerful look into the biggest refugee camp in the world, the Kutupalong refugee camp. In 2017, within a few months, 700,000 people of the Rohingya Muslim minority fled Myanmar to escape genocide and seek asylum in Bangladesh. Between poetry and nightmares, food distribution and soccer games, the Rohingyas of Kutupalong camp bear witness to their daily lives and to the ghosts of the past.

The 2020 award-winning documentary is directed by Mélanie Carrier and Olivier Higgins and is one hour and 27 minutes in length. In 2020, Higgins and Carrier completed the conception of a multidisciplinary exhibition at the National Museum of the Art of Quebec, inspired by their documentary.

The documentary is yet one more reminder of the seemingly never-ending crisis for this minority that is torn between the Rakhine State, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia.



The documentary offers an insight into the lives of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Photo: AFP

a film by Mélanie Carrier and Olivier Higgins



WANDERING

A ROHINGYA STORY



MÔ FILMS & SPIRA present **WANDERING A ROHINGYA STORY** written, directed and produced by **OLIVIER HIGGINS & MÉLANIE CARRIER** with the participation of **REFUGEES FROM THE KUTUPALONG CAMP** inspired by the work and research of photographer **RENAUD PHILIPPE** directors of photography **RENAUD PHILIPPE & OLIVIER HIGGINS** editors **AMÉLIE LABRÈCHE & OLIVIER HIGGINS** narrator **MOHAMMED SHOFI** sound recordists **OLIVIER HIGGINS & KALA MIYA** sound designer **PIERRE-JULES AUDET** mixer **LUC BOUDRIAS** music **MARTIN DUMAIS** poet **KALA MIYA** produced by **MÔ FILMS**

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