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ROHINGYA LIE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PILE OF WORLD AID PRIORITIES

The visit of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees last week to Bangkok was important for a group of refugees who are having a hard time maintaining support.

High Commissioner Filippo Grandi's message was don't forget the Rohingya refugees, the majority of whom are living in squalid camps in Bangladesh.

Global politics have seen their cause slip down the list of priorities, particularly given the world media spotlight on the Middle East and the war in Ukraine, conflicts in Africa, and the global migration crisis affecting Western countries.

On the sidelines of a regional meeting on Rohingya refugee assistance in Bangkok on 17 October, visiting High Commissioner Grandi said that more support is needed for ethnic Rohingya refugees who fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh. The high commissioner appears to be seeking to tackle the issue of Rohingya support in the wake of what appears to be "donor fatigue", with donor funding cutbacks over the last year regarding Myanmar generally, and the Rohingya specifically.

Grandi indicates the focus should be on the "voluntary, dignified return to Myanmar by the Rohingya refugees" being the "most desirable solution" but acknowledging "there are many challenges that need to be overcome".

"What I have asked the participants in this meeting is to make big pledges in support of the Rohingya refugees: open policies for the host countries, contributions for the donor countries and for everybody else across the

world, and attention by the international community," he told the meeting in Bangkok attended by delegates from Bangladesh, Britain, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the United States, as well as representatives of Rohingya-led organizations.

According to a UNHCR report, there are just over 1 million Rohingya taking refuge Bangladesh, 92,000 in Thailand, 21,000 in India, with smaller numbers settling in Indonesia, Nepal and other countries across the region. The situation for Rohingya people appears to have worsened since the 2021 Myanmar coup, both in terms of security and funding.

In theory, this ought to make the joint plan of Myanmar and Bangladesh to begin resettling the Rohingya refugees in Rakhine State an attractive proposition.

However, the efforts are unlikely to be successful due to ongoing conditions in Rakhine State, such as armed conflicts, including the continued though low-level activity of ARSA, the discriminatory 1982 citizenship law still being in place, and the resulting restricted mobility for Rohingya refugees as a result of their ID status. The Rohingya would not be able to return to their land and their citizenship status would mean they would largely be confined to newly-built settlements.

The Rohingya refugees are caught between a situation of falling funding and far from attractive "captivity" if they do sign up for repatriation. The harsh reality is a return home may be unlikely until the Myanmar junta is removed from power. How long that will take is anyone's guess.

EDITORIAL

mizzima
WEEKLY

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MIZZIMA MAGAZINE

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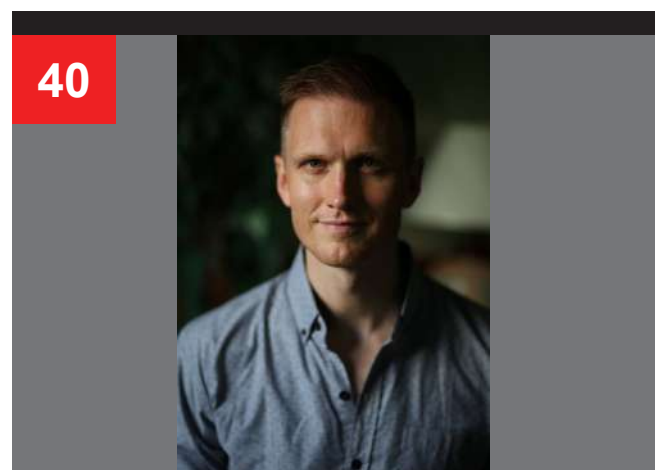
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Cover photo of T'ang fighters in training in Shan State by AFP





LAKE FESTIVAL

Devotees row in front of the four sacred Buddha images placed on a golden barge (L) during the festival of Phaung Daw Oo Pagoda in Inle Lake, Myanmar's Shan State, on October 19. Thousands of Buddhist devotees joined a waterborne procession on Myanmar's Inle lake as one of the country's biggest festivals returned to joy and sorrow as conflict between the military and its opponents rages on.

Photo: AFP

IN FOCUS



TWO WOMEN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES KILLED IN YAEZAGYO TOWNSHIP, MAGWAY REGION

Two women with learning difficulties from Nwaeni Village in Magway Region's Yaezagyo Township were killed by military junta soldiers on 14 October, according to locals.

The junta forces entered Nwaeni Village in the Yaelelkyun area, shooting and killing 51-year-old Daw Thi Thi Mar and 60-year-old Daw Mya Kyinn, on 10 October, according to a local.

They said: "Both are known to have learning difficulties."

Nearly 300 junta soldiers have moved into the Yaelelkyun area since 12 October. They have been

marching into villages in the area, where they have been looting and burning down houses.

"The military council troops from Nan Oo village burned down Tuni Village and opened fired on the villages of Warbo and Nyaungpin. The military column in Myaytaw Village stole people's property", said a local to Mizzima on the afternoon of 15 October.

Thousands of people have fled the Yaelelkyun area since the junta soldiers arrived on 12 October and they are currently in need of assistance.

JUNTA ELECTIONS WILL BE ILLEGITIMATE

The planned elections that the junta is trying to rush through are illegitimate and go against the will of the people, according to Nay Phone Latt of the shadow National Unity Government (NUG).

"The terrorist military group led by Min Aung Hlaing has no right to hold elections. They are not a government elected by the people, so they have no legitimacy to hold elections", said Nay Phone Latt, a spokesperson for the NUG Prime Minister's Office, when he spoke to Mizzima recently.

He said: "The most important thing is public participation. The elections cannot be successful without public participation".

He added: "The elections will be illegal and fake without public participation" and explained that even if the junta did manage to hold an election it would "distort the will of the people."

A young resident of Yangon said to Mizzima: "They [the junta] still think the public is stupid and naive. No one will be enthusiastic about the so-called elections. In the last elections, you saw young people actively participating in the elections as first-time vot-

ers. Now, even if the junta holds elections, only their people will vote and they may cheat."

The junta has claimed it will hold elections despite not having complete control of the country. This means it will be unable to properly run the elections, according to Nay Phone Latt.

He said: "Elections must be held nationwide and everyone must participate. Currently, the terrorist military led by Min Aung Hlaing is in no position to control even half the country. The ethnic revolutionary forces and our NUG have influence and control over more than half the country. So, Min Aung Hlaing is not capable of holding nationwide elections."

The NUG and revolutionary forces are calling for a boycott of the junta's elections and urging the general public to avoid associating with the junta. Young people put up stickers saying "No fake elections" around Yangon on 2 October.

In preparation for the election, the junta is planning to carry out a nationwide census. A trial census was carried out in 20 townships across the country from 1 to 15 October.

JUNTA TROOPS KILL SIX, INCLUDING TWO CHILDREN, IN SAGAING'S YINMARBIN TOWNSHIP

Junta soldiers killed six locals, including two tenth-grade students in Thaekone Village, Yinmarbin Township, Sagaing Region on 15 October according to villagers.

A junta military column entered Thaekone Village and attacked the villagers on 15 October and the bodies, of two tenth grade students and four men under the age of 35 were found on 16 October, according to a villager.

"They [the six villagers] initially came back to the village to check on the situation. They thought that they [the junta soldiers] had already left because they couldn't see them. So, they [the six villagers] returned to the village. Then, the junta troops came out of their hiding places and arrested and killed the six men. They did not kill them using guns, they killed them by smashing in their heads."

Prior to the junta troops entering Thaekone Vil-

lage there had been fierce fighting in the area between the defence forces and the junta army, who reportedly suffered many casualties.

A Thaekone villager said: "It's certain that some of them [the junta soldiers] were injured. They were apparently leaving Thaekone Village carrying stretchers."

The junta column reportedly left Thaekone Village on 16 October with some villagers they had arrested and headed towards the villages of Yinpaungtaing and Myintharkone.

Recently junta troops have planted mines in and around villages as they leave them. As a result, defence forces have warned villagers not to rush back to their villages as soon as the junta soldiers leave. Instead, villagers should wait until defence forces have checked and cleared the villages.

MYANMAR JUNTA CLAIMS IT WILL PRIORITISE STABILITY IN BORDER AREAS

Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing said that stability and development in Myanmar's border areas would be prioritised and the interests of neighbouring countries, including China, would not be harmed.

The comments were made to Den Xijun, the Chinese Special Envoy for Asian Affairs when they met privately, along with the junta Home Affairs Minister, General Yar Pyae, in Naypyidaw on 15 October, according to reports in the junta-affiliated media.

They also discussed the Myanmar Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA); Rakhine State and Rohingya refugees; and how China and Myanmar could cooperate to eliminate online fraud and gambling run from inside Myanmar.

After the meeting, Min Aung Hlaing said that the the junta and the Myanmar military are trying to restore peace in the country by following the NCA and China is helping by providing assistance with the NCA process.

Before the meeting, Den Xijun attended the junta's celebrations to commemorate the eighth anniversary of the signing of the NCA, on 15 October 2015.

Recently the junta has been fighting ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and defence forces in areas of Shan and Kachin states bordering China.

There was fighting in Kachin State's Laiza, an area controlled by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), after junta troops attacked Mung Lai Hkyet IDP camp in Laiza on 9 October. As a result, on the Chinese side, the Chinese military has been conducting frequent security patrols in armoured vehicles, according to locals.

The attack on Mung Lai Hkyet IDP camp killed 29 IDPs, including 11 children and injured a further 57, according to the KIA.

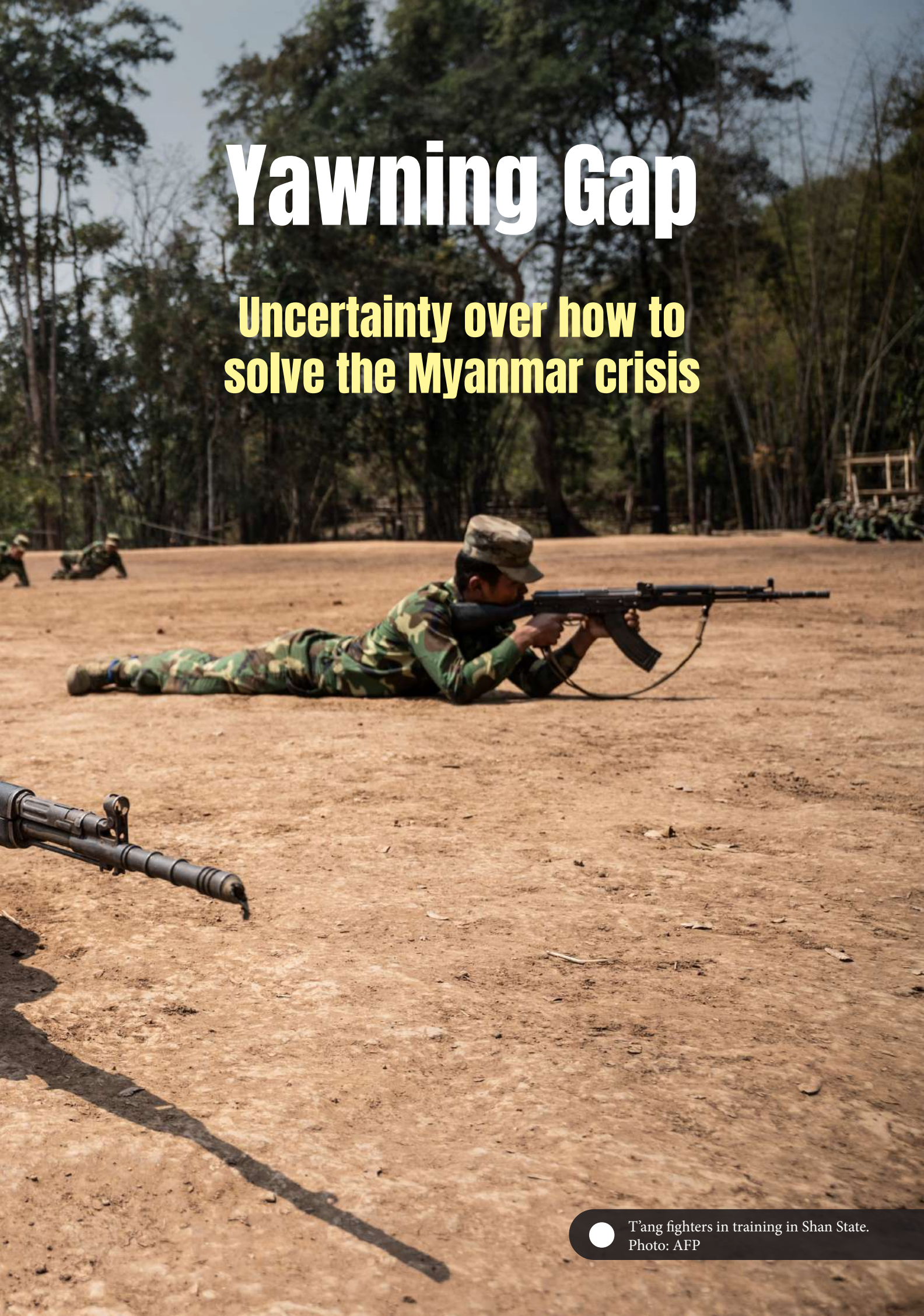
On 14 October there was also fighting between the junta and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) in Laukkai Township, in the Kokang Self-Administered Zone, which borders China.

16 junta troops were killed in the fighting and the MNDAA seized many guns and much ammunition from the junta, according to an MNDAA report that Mizzima could not independently verify.



Yawning Gap

Uncertainty over how to solve the Myanmar crisis



T'ang fighters in training in Shan State.
Photo: AFP

The unsettling truth is that there is a yawning gap between the two sides in the battle for Myanmar's soul.

This is made abundantly clear in "Resolving the Crisis in Myanmar," a report by the Euro-Burma Office published 12 October, that offers insight into the positions of the various Myanmar players, outlining the difficulties faced by those who wish to travel the road to peace in Myanmar.

BAD MOVE

What is clear is Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing (MAH) and the Myanmar military made a strategic miscalculation when they launched their coup on 1

February 2021, according to the report. Concerned by the inability of the Myanmar military to control the democratization process launched in 2011, the generals decided to recalibrate the process. They thought they could get away with manipulating the 2008 Constitution, imposing military rule, changing some rules, holding new elections within a year and restoring order.

The stark reality, however, is the junta plan has been delayed for almost three years with only a flicker of light at the end of the tunnel for the generals.

MAH and his commanders when they stepped in on that February 2021 morning had not realized the extent to which democracy had taken hold in Myanmar



● The Myanmar generals misjudged how the population would react to their coup. Photo: AFP

during the previous ten years. The access to information and the freedom to express one's opinion afforded by cheap SIM cards and the internet, had almost completely changed Myanmar society.

Instead of an ignorant subservient society, the youth were better informed and more assertive. The military's political moves could no longer be explained away as in the past. The new generation immediately saw through the hypocrisy and resisted MAH's attempts to legitimize his rule.

And the 2020 landslide election win of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party should have thrown up a warning sign.



NOT LIKE BEFORE

MAH's second mistake was to think that, if the military came down hard on the opposition, it would crumble as in the past, as in the 1980s and 1990s, valiant though those uprisings were. MAH's brutal and savage suppression of public street protests in 2021 created a backlash. Instead of buckling, the opposition came back with a tough and violent reaction.

This yawning gap between the two sides poses a serious problem. Neither the Myanmar military, under the guise of the State Administrative Council (SAC), nor the democratic resistance symbolized by the National Unity Government (NUG), and others, currently has the capacity to wipe out the other side militarily.

What this means is the SAC's escalation of violence targeting civilians and non-combatants, an increase in brutality and savagery in the civil war, will leave the country irreversibly divided. This is likely to mean a prolonged deadlock, intensified conflict and possibly the collapse of the economy that will deepen the crisis and may destabilize the region.

That said, the report claims common ground among the numerous and diverse domestic stakeholders (possibly with the exception of the military) can still be found through a dignified and honest dialogue amongst equals, if desired. An equitable political solution might be found if regional and international powers support domestic efforts and do not try to impose their own interest-based solutions by backing one group or the other.

That said, the Myanmar military, the largest and most powerful armed combatant in the conflict, does not seem to have plans to negotiate. It appears determined to hold onto power at all costs.

FINDING A SOLUTION

What is clear at the moment is the Myanmar junta is hunkered down seeking to take steps including holding a national election, possibly within the next two

years, in order to put a “democratic face” on its rule, desperately holding on to power.

But, as the report points out, the steps being taken, including maintaining the military-written 2008 Constitution will not win over the Myanmar population, and the results of the “sham” election, as critics refer to it, will not be accepted. It also points out that there are a plethora of views put forward by the range of players from the NUG to the Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations and the Ethnic Armed Organizations, some of the latter allied with the junta, or sitting on the fence – as seen by the recent EAO attendance at the 8th anniversary of the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) that is

not worth much more than the paper it is written on.

The report attempts to lay out options for negotiations and possible peace, including involvement of ASEAN – that so far has failed miserably with their Five-Point Consensus – and a call to explore international, even United Nations, mediation.

ROAD MAP FOR A DIALOGUE

Regardless of whether it is an ASEAN solution or any other agreed solution, the road map envisioned by most of the opposition is radically different from the SAC road map. Both sides are far apart.

Take a look at the SAC. They want to suppress



The Myanmar junta has exhibited horrific brutality. Photo: AFP

the opposition; host a peace conference with select stakeholders – pliant EAOs and political parties; get the peace conference to endorse the SAC’s proposed amendments to the 2008 Constitution; hold elections – electronically or even with 50 per cent of the townships participating; install a new “elected” government to amend the 2008 Constitution (while maintaining the military’s role in Myanmar politics indefinitely); and continue military rule in Myanmar through the new government.

In the other corner, the opposition or resistance wants to stop all hostile acts of violence, especially against civilian targets; grant access to domestic and

international humanitarian aid providers; initiate an inclusive and equal dialogue process, internationally facilitated and supervised and jointly-implemented (from 1994 till 2010, the UNGA called for a dialogue amongst the military, the democracy movement and the ethnic communities); initiate a credible transitional justice process, assisted by the international community; form a joint Transitional Authority, internationally facilitated and supervised; draft a new constitution for a federal democratic union and a new electoral system (a withdrawal of the military from politics must be agreed and implemented); hold elections under the new Constitution; and last but not least, establish a federal and democratic nation.

How these two road maps can be reconciled is the challenge. Myanmar is at a crossroads. If the Myanmar military persists in destroying the country, the opposition will have no choice but to stop it by force. Or the military can stop and negotiate a transition. Either way, the Myanmar military’s days of absolute power are numbered.

But one thing is certain, the Myanmar military will not negotiate unless the capacity of the opposition is strengthened to the point where it is able to cooperate and coordinate and bring the war closer to Naypyidaw.

“Resolving the Crisis in Myanmar” provides a useful overview but the hard fact is there is no clear path to resolution.



TRAPPED IN HELL: NGO REPORT HIGHLIGHTS THE HORRORS OF CHINESE TRAFFICKING IN SHAN STATE

The Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) has just issued a harrowing report entitled: Trapped in Hell - Trafficking, enslavement and torture of youth by Chinese criminal gangs in north-east Shan State since the 2021 coup.

The report, out on 18 October in English, Chinese, Thai, Burmese and Shan is based on interviews with three young women and two young men who suffered severe abuse at the hands of Chinese criminal gangs operating on-line scamming, gambling and por-

nography businesses in the Kokang and Wa regions of northeastern Shan State of Burma.

Their experiences took place after the February 2021 military coup, and in the case of four interviewees, directly resulted from their education and jobs being cut short by the coup. Three former students and one CDM nurse needed to look for work and ended up being trafficked into situations of enslavement in the United Wa State Army (UWSA)-controlled towns of Panghsang and Mong Bawk, where



On the Myanmar-China border. Photo: AFP

they were forced to scam people on-line, provide sexual services to Chinese gang members, and take part in online porn videos. When they resisted, they were subjected to physical torture and, in the case of the women, sexual assault.

The interviewee who was not trafficked, but voluntarily worked for an on-line casino in the Kokang capital Laukkai, recounted how her younger sister, who worked with her, committed suicide by jumping from a high-storey building after being accused of embezzlement and then gang-raped by her Chinese employer and his associates when unable to repay the missing funds.

Payment of up to 30,000 yuan was demanded from the trafficked victims in exchange for release. One was released after her family paid the fee. Two were released after another victim's family used connections with the Wa authorities. One managed to escape while being moved to another location. None of the abusers has been brought to justice.

The testimonies provide clear evidence of collusion between the Chinese criminals and the local authorities. In two cases, when victims' families contacted the UWSA liaison office in Lashio for help, the criminals were tipped off and either escaped or moved the victims to another location before being "raided". The on-line scamming centre in Laukkai was openly guarded by uniformed members of the regime-aligned Kokang Militia Force.

The victims forced into cyber scamming in Mong Bawk revealed that they used the Burmese military-owned Mytel network, the only Burmese telecom service in the northern Wa area — raising questions as to why the State Administration Council (SAC) regime, with its extensive surveillance capability, is failing to crack down on cybercrime on its own network.

SHRF urges the Kokang and Wa authorities to stop colluding with and protecting the criminal gangs operating in their areas, and urges China to take more effective measures to hold their citizens to account for involvement in these operations.

SHRF also urges Vietnam, whose state-owned Viettel is a joint partner in Mytel, to investigate the use of the Mytel network for cyber crime in northeast Shan State.



LETTER FROM 440 CSOS TO UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY CALLS FOR ACTION AGAINST MYANMAR JUNTA

4 40 Myanmar, regional, and international civil society organisations have written a letter to the UN General Assembly calling on it to take decisive action against the Myanmar junta and hold it accountable for atrocities in Myanmar.

Below is the text of the letter:

To: Member States of the United Nations General Assembly

CC: The United Nations Secretary-General

17 October 2023

Your Excellencies,

We – 440 Myanmar, regional, and international civil society organizations – call on Member States of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to take immediate and decisive action to hold the Myanmar military accountable under international law through all possible avenues.

We welcome the report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights which provided corroborated evidence of the military junta’s intensifying brutality – particularly airstrikes, the burning of villages, and mass killings. In addressing the worsening crisis in Myanmar, High Commissioner Volker Türk described the junta’s actions as “inhumanity in its vilest form,” emphasizing that there is “no reason to believe that the military will...break the cycle of impunity that has characterized its operations for decades.” It is clear that the military has continued and will continue to commit genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes against the people of Myanmar unless it is held accountable under international law. We thus express our strongest support for the High Commissioner’s call for the UN Security Council (UNSC) to refer “the full scope of the current situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court (ICC).”

Nearly one year after its adoption in December 2022, we remain extremely disappointed by the insubstantial Security Council resolution 2669 on Myanmar. With this resolution, the Council has utterly failed to uphold its responsibilities under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and to ensure justice and accountability by failing to refer the current crisis in Myanmar to the ICC.

Despite the resolution’s demand of “an immediate end to all forms of violence throughout the country,” since its adoption, the junta has launched at least 965 airstrikes.[1] This amounts to a 150% increase in airstrikes following the resolution.[2] These aerial bombardments, often combined with attacks by ground troops, are one reason why at least 4,149 people have been killed, as of 17 October 2023, and over 1.7 million have been internally displaced[3] since the coup attempt. One of the latest attacks is as recent as 9 October 2023, when the junta once again launched an artillery bombardment on an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp: this time in Munglai Hkyet Village in Kachin State. The attack killed at least 29 people, including 13 children, and injured at least 57 people. Among the displaced, elderly women, pregnant women, and children have the most vulnerabilities, which are severely exacerbated by the lack of sufficient food, water, shelter, and other necessities. Moreover, the military – which has long used rape as a weapon of war – continues, with blanket impunity, its widespread sexual and gender-based violence, particularly against women and girls, in detention and in areas of its scorched-earth campaigns.

Further, in flagrant disregard of the resolution’s call for “full, safe and unimpeded humanitarian access to all people in need,” the junta continues to weaponize humanitarian aid by blocking, seizing, and destroying lifesaving supplies from displaced commu-

nities that have suffered from its heinous crimes. Even in natural disasters, such as the devastating Cyclone Mocha, the junta has proven its total disregard for human lives by blocking humanitarian access to affected communities across western Myanmar.

As the Myanmar human rights and humanitarian crisis further escalates, we express our greatest disappointment in the UN's deferral of its responsibilities to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its futile Five-Point Consensus (5PC) over the past 29 months. The regional bloc and its current approach have utterly failed to take concrete measures to end the crisis, serving only to deter tangible action by the international community. In fact, ASEAN itself has explicitly requested UN support in addressing the crisis. To address Myanmar's multi-faceted crisis, the UN must stop hiding behind the failed 5PC and take concrete actions to assume its responsibility to protect the people of Myanmar.

Excellencies, the loss of lives of the people of Myanmar at the hands of this ruthless military must not continue, and justice for the victims and survivors cannot wait. The Myanmar military's decades-long impunity, and thus its systematic and widespread violence, will continue to prevail – and thousands of lives will continue to be lost – unless and until the military faces prosecution and is held to account for its genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Thus, it is with great urgency that we once again call on the UNGA and its individual Member States to strongly recommend the UNSC utilize all political and technical instruments at its disposal, namely a resolution on Myanmar under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Such a resolution must necessitate the referral of the crisis in Myanmar to the ICC or the establishment of an ad hoc tribunal; robust, coordinated, and targeted economic sanctions on the Myanmar military and linked entities; and a comprehensive arms embargo to end the flow of weapons, jet fuel, and dual-use technology to the junta. Equally, we urge the UNGA to further recommend its Member States, agencies, and

mechanisms to stop lending legitimacy to the junta; impose new and further coordinated, targeted economic sanctions; cut the flow of arms; and provide financial, political, and technical support for accountability efforts under universal jurisdiction, including in Argentina, Germany, and Turkey.

With Myanmar's crisis reaching the point of unfathomable devastation, we look to the leadership of UN Member States to immediately actualize a UNSC resolution. If the resolution is vetoed by China or Russia, the people of Myanmar fully anticipate the UNGA's adoption of the resolution, following in the footsteps of the decisive resolution on Ukraine promptly adopted by the same body in 2022.

Alongside a united call for a resolution, UN Member States must act immediately to ensure the response to the worsening humanitarian catastrophe across Myanmar is sufficient, effective, and harmless for affected populations. Member States must cease any partnership with the junta for the provision of aid, while increasing political and financial support through cross-border channels for locally led, frontline humanitarian responders – many of whom are women who serve and lead their communities in these roles in spite of great personal risks.

Now is the time for the UNGA and its Member States to fulfill their responsibility to the people of Myanmar. The UNGA and its Member States must ensure justice and accountability through all possible avenues, strengthen locally led humanitarian assistance, and unequivocally support the Myanmar people's will for federal democracy.

ILO ISSUES NEW REPORT ON MYANMAR



Garment workers in Yangon. Photo: AFP

A report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) on labour violations committed by the Myanmar junta has been embraced by the Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar (CTUM).

The 22 September Commission of Inquiry (COI) report says that if the junta does not rectify the violations Myanmar would face sanctions, as it previously did in 2000.

The junta has completely rejected the report.

Maung Maung, the CTUM Chairman told Mizzima that the junta needs to abide by the standards set internationally.

He said: “In addition to the issue of forced labor, we reported on and gave evidence showing how it is forbidden to form unions and the insulation and oppression [of workers] the prohibition of forming a union, insulation, and oppression with evidence. currently, the junta is rejecting the report.”

The junta does not recognise the ILO’s Commission of Inquiry (COI) and did not allow it into the

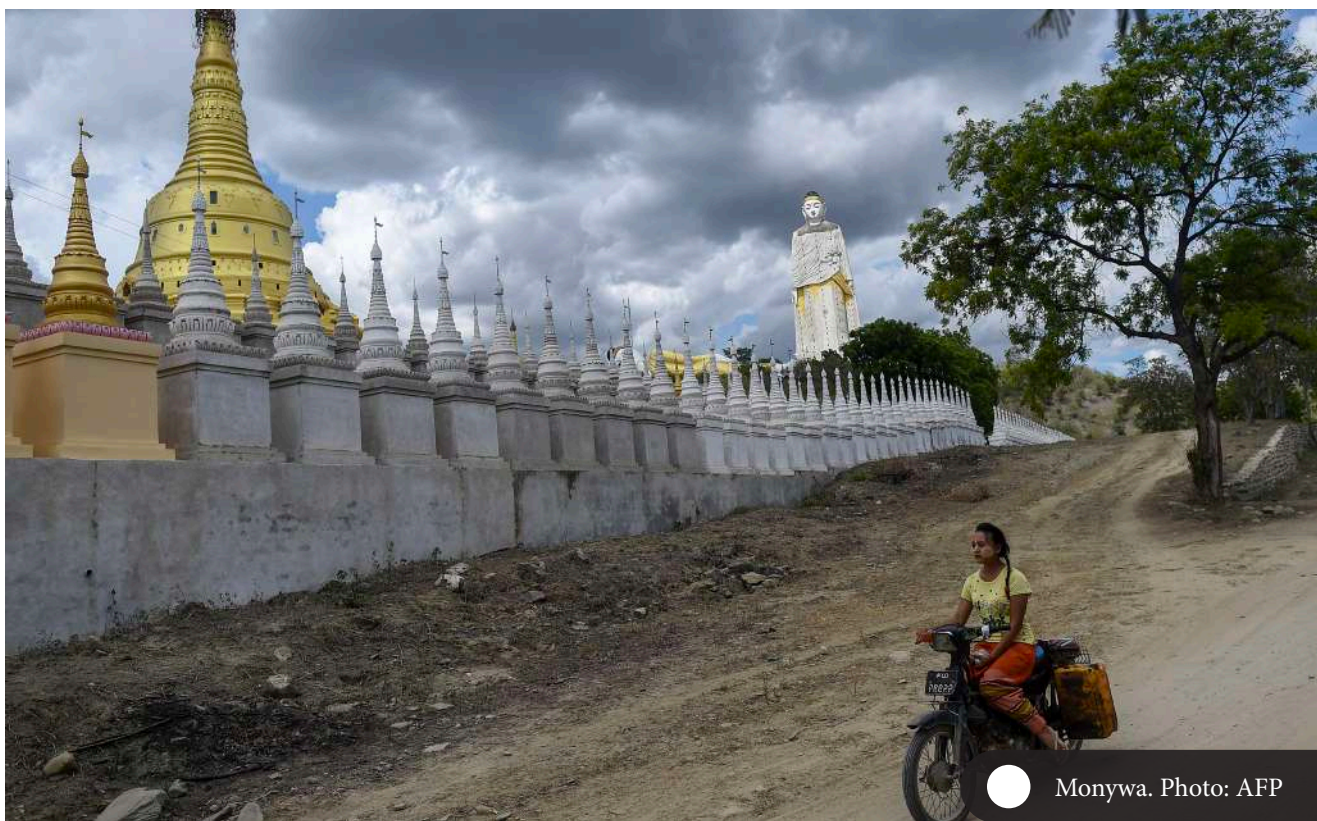
country, despite the country being signed up to the ILO.

Maung Maung said: “In its repudiation [of the report], the junta states that it hurts their dignity and claims that it insults Myanmar’s self-governance. They need to know that it is necessary to follow international standards if they want to be accepted internationally. Therefore, if they refuse to follow the report’s recommendations for reform, Myanmar will be prosecuted under Article 33 of the ILO’s constitution just as in 2000.”

Previously the ILO prosecuted Myanmar for breaches of Labour law in 2000.

Since the February 2021 coup employers have oppressed and exploited workers more and trade unions have become considerably weaker.

MONYWA PRISON HUNGER STRIKERS TO BE PROSECUTED



Prisoners who went on hunger strike in Monywa Prison last September are going to be prosecuted and have prison sentence reductions rescinded, according to the Monywa People's Strike Committee.

26 prisoners have been charged with illegal associations under Article 147 of the Penal Code. Of those nine were told they would not be eligible for any sentence reductions for a year. They were Ko Wai Moe Naing, the leader of the hunger strike and Ko Phone Myint Aung, Ko Moe Kyaw Htet, Ko Nayzin Lin Htet, Ko Nay San, Ko Chan Nyein Aung, Ko Ye Yint Thu, Ko Kyaw Soe Aye, and Ko Aungthu Hein.

"We received information that the prison will take action in the next few days. As we received the information not long ago, it's likely to happen within the next few days," said Ko Shin Thant, a member of the Monywa People's Strike Committee.

He also said that five prison staff, including the prison chief, U Win Min Latt and the head warden were dismissed and six prison guard sergeants were demoted.

The junta has yet to make a statement about the affair.

On 8 September, the junta authorities conducted a special investigation at Monywa Prison and confiscated political prisoners' food, clothing, books, and other permitted possessions.

In response 50 prisoners went on hunger strike. Some of them experienced anemia and some fainted as a result of going on hunger strike. The prison authorities then agreed to the hunger strikers' demands and the hunger strike was called off on 13 September. Subsequently, the authorities brought the charges against the hunger strikers.

Since the 1 February 2021 coup until 18 October 2023 over 25,300 people have been arrested across Myanmar, and of those, 19,500 are still being detained, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

YUNNAN BUSINESSPEOPLE INVITED TO INVEST IN MYANMAR



Yunnan. Photo: Marc Olivier

Businesspeople from Yunnan province in China were invited to Myanmar and offered the opportunity to invest in the power sector and other sectors.

Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry's (UMFCCI) officials met the Chinese delegation, led by Dr. Gao Feng, the chairperson of the Yunnan Provincial General Chamber of Commerce (YPGCC), on 17 October 2023. They exchanged ideas on trade and economic affairs, such as boosting bilateral economic cooperation and enhancing trade.

"Yunnan is an important hub in trade and economic cooperation with Myanmar. The federation also invited investments in the power sector and other sectors", said the UMFCCI Chairman, Aye Win.

"Myanmar's agricultural produce is primarily sent to China. The UMFCCI asked the YPGCC to assist Myanmar businesses to meet China's import rules and regulations", he added.

The YPGCC Chairman, Dr. Gao Feng, said: "The purpose of the visit is to reinforce the Memoran-

dums of Understanding (MoUs) signed between Yunnan and Myanmar, cooperate in the energy and mining sector, disaster mitigation, tourism, poverty alleviation and to upgrade the Myanmar-China Economic Corridor."

He also said that the business people from Yunnan who had accompanied him to Myanmar would help bolster economic and trade cooperation between Yunnan and Myanmar.

Myanmar is currently Yunnan's largest trading partner.

Previously, Myanmar and China signed an MoU on 7 February 2021 to implement the Myanmar-China Economic Corridor (CMEC), which is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The BRI was announced in 2013 by the then Chinese President, Xi Zheng Pin. It includes 38 projects to build railroads, highways, special economic zones, ports and satellite towns.

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MYANMAR RESISTANCE REPRESENTATIVES ATTEND PRAGUE CONFERENCE

A delegation consisting of representatives of Myanmar's NUCC, NUG, EROs and Spring revolutionary forces, led by Union Minister Zin Ma Aung and Union Minister Aung Myo Min, visited Prague to attend the high-profile annual conference Forum 2000 this week.

During their visit to Prague the delegation met with Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský, to whom Minister Zin Ma Aung presented the "Prague Appeal to the European Union Member States and the EU".

In the Prague Appeal, the NUCC, NUG, EROs and Spring revolutionary forces have articulated "ground truths" about the situation in Myanmar and requested support for their efforts to realize a "federal democratic transformation" of their country.

Their appeal states:

"NUCC, NUG, EROs and Spring Revolution forces are united in our commitment to democratic and representative governance and to breaking the chain of brutal military dictatorships in Myanmar. Our common political objective is to establish a fully democratic nation based on a new federal democratic constitution, founded on the principles of equality and self-determination, peace, justice and human rights, the protection of minorities and the fostering of social cohesion. We are committed to removing the military from politics, to delivering transitional justice and accountability, and to partnering with the international community to reconstruct our country."

"Together we have forged a democratic and united federal coalition that is expanding its territorial control. This is not the time for mediating ceasefires or



● Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský, right, with NUG Foreign Minister Zin Ma Aung.

a negotiated settlement. Nor is this the time for sham elections.”

The NUCC, NUG, EROs and Spring Revolution forces have made 10 specific requests to the EU Member States and called on European partners to help mobilize other countries to support them.

In addition to meeting with Foreign Minister Lipavský, the Myanmar delegation visited the Czech Senate, the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, and the Foreign Ministry. They met with the Vice-President of the Senate, Jiří Oberfalzer, and the chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense and Security, Pavel Fischer. In the Chamber of Deputies the delegation met with the Parliamentary Group of Friends of Democratic Myanmar, led by MPs Josef Damián Flek and Jarmila Levko.

In these meetings, the delegation stressed that the democratic and united federal coalition forces are expanding their territorial control in Myanmar. They have built administrative structures to provide essential public services and humanitarian aid to communities under assault by the junta’s attacks and its weaponisation of suffering.

The Myanmar delegation also explained the processes that have been established to achieve consensus in a “large, diverse and inclusive coalition” which is committed “to remove the military from politics, to deliver transitional justice and accountability, and to partner with the international community to reconstruct our country.”

In addition, members of the delegation participated in the annual Forum 2000 conference, opened by Czech President Petr Pavel and Moldovan President Maia Sandu on 16 October.

The first day featured a panel discussion on “Myanmar’s Overlooked Struggle” with the following introduction:

“In Feb 2021, Myanmar’s military attempted to stage a coup, sparking a nationwide disobedience movement. When the junta responded with harsh re-



pression, the people of Myanmar defended themselves with all possible means, ie. civil disobedience, armed resistance, economic boycotts, and educational, humanitarian and political resistance. Two-and-a-half years on, the junta continues its attempts to brutalize the population into obedience, with no success. Myanmar’s Spring Revolution is one of the most heroic and enduring struggles for freedom and democracy of our times. However, it is almost completely overlooked and unassisted by the democratic countries.”

In a well-attended panel, representatives of the NUG, Myanmar’s ethnic nationalities and civic activists discussed why the military cannot prevail over the people, and what the anti-junta alliance needs from democracies and its neighbours. The panel was moderated by Igor Blazevic, a staunch supporter of Myanmar’s struggle for liberation from military oppression and terror.

MYANMAR BOAT FESTIVAL'S RETURN ON INLE LAKE BRINGS JOY AND SORROW

Thousands of Buddhists took to boats on Myanmar's famed Inle Lake on Thursday to celebrate the return of one of the nation's biggest festivals, but the devotees' joy was laced with the sorrow of war.

The seventeen-day Phaung Daw Oo pagoda festival sees four sacred Buddha images placed on a golden barge and rowed through villages that dot the shores of the tourist hotspot in eastern Shan state.

The coronavirus pandemic and then the military's 2021 coup cancelled the three previous editions

of the festival, denying locals the chance to worship the images and gain merit.

On Thursday morning, the golden barge zipped through the cool water, towed by sleek wooden longboats crewed by men rowing in the local fashion -- a leg wrapped around their oar to gain more push.

Dozens of boats filled with worshippers followed as the sun rose, the sounds of drums and cymbals accompanying the flotilla.

"We are enjoying here but on the other side (outside of Inle Lake) the situation is not good," student



● Taking part in the festival on Inle Lake, Shan State. Photo: AFP

Phuu Pyae Thwe told AFP on the water.

“We feel sad because of their situation... We are also worrying what could happen on the way,” the student added, such as possible armed clashes.

“We want to apologise to you all. We haven’t held [the festival] for three years already. We are sorry about the fighting in other places.”

As they drew alongside the golden barge decked out with Buddhist flags, devotees prayed to the four images inside.

A fifth Buddha image remains in the Phaung Daw Oo pagoda during the festivities -- the legacy of an accident several decades ago when it was dropped into the lake from the boat carrying it.



TOURIST NO-GO

Foreign travellers flocked to Inle’s waters and brooding hills after the then-junta transitioned to semi-civilian rule in 2011 and opened up the Southeast Asian nation.

But arrivals have dried up since the 2021 coup, which has battered the economy and put many areas of the country off-limits.

One worker in the nearby town of Nyaungshwe told AFP his hotel had shed 80 percent of its staff.

“Many hotels are closed because there are no local or foreign guests,” they said, asking for anonymity.

Shan state has been spared the worst of the military’s crackdown that a local monitoring group says has killed more than 4,100 people and seen tens of thousands arrested.

But in March around 30 people sheltering from fighting at a monastery just hours from Inle were killed, with the junta and anti-coup fighters trading blame over the massacre.

The military says more than 6,000 people have been killed by anti-coup fighters.

“We’ve been preparing since we heard the festival was going to happen,” Than Nyunt, 75, told AFP.

“We are also doing good deeds for those people in Myanmar who are suffering as well,” she said.

“We are praying for them. We are wishing for them to be happy and peaceful again quickly like here.”

On the shore, Htway Yi said she was “very happy” for the festival’s return.

“We were sad as we hadn’t seen (the Buddha statues) for three years,” she told AFP.

“We are happy now... I want the lake to be crowded like before.”

AFP

CHINA'S XI ANNOUNCES OVER \$100 BILLION IN NEW BELT AND ROAD FUNDING

第三届“一带一路”国际合作高峰论坛 THE THIRD BELT AND ROAD FORUM FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

2023年10月18日 中国·北京

18 OCTOBER 2023 BEIJING, CHINA



Chinese leader Xi Jinping addresses the BRI meeting. Photo: AFP

Beijing will inject over \$100 billion of new funding into its Belt and Road initiative, President Xi Jinping said Wednesday last week at a summit marking the vast infrastructure project's tenth anniversary.

The Belt and Road is a central pillar of Xi's bid to expand China's clout overseas, with Beijing saying it has now inked over two trillion dollars in contracts around the world.

Proponents hail it for bringing resources and economic growth to the Global South.

But the initiative has also been slammed for saddling poor countries with enormous debt.

Xi announced on Wednesday that key Belt and Road lenders the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank will now offer an additional \$100 billion in loans.

Both will set up financing opportunities of 350 billion yuan (\$47.9 billion) for BRI projects, he said.

An additional 80 billion yuan will be injected into the project's official lending institution, the Silk Road fund, Xi said.

This week's forum, attended by representatives of 130 countries, is the third major summit of its

kind to be hosted by Beijing since the Belt and Road's launch in 2013.

Critics have long pointed to opaque pricing for BRI projects built by Chinese companies, with countries including Malaysia and Myanmar renegotiating deals to bring down costs.

Beijing has been forced to hand out billions of dollars in bailout loans to BRI countries in recent years to allow the countries to extend their loans and remain solvent, according to a joint report this year by the World Bank and other institutions.

And China said this month that BRI participants owe more than \$300 billion to the Export-Import Bank of China.

The initiative has also drawn scrutiny for its massive carbon footprint and the environmental degradation caused by massive infrastructure projects.

The development of megaports, pipelines, railways and highways could render the Paris climate goals unreachable, researchers from China, the United States and the United Kingdom warned in 2019.

AFP

INDIA SENDS 38.5 TONNES OF HUMANITARIAN AID FOR GAZA



Destruction in Gaza. Photo: AFP

India on Sunday flew 38.5 tonnes of humanitarian aid to Egypt's Sinai region for Palestinian civilians from the embattled Gaza Strip, the foreign ministry said.

An Indian air force Boeing C-17 transport plane "carrying nearly 6.5 tonnes of medical aid and 32 tonnes of disaster relief material for the people of Palestine" departed for Egypt's El Arish airport, foreign ministry spokesman Arindam Bagchi said.

"The material includes essential life-saving medicines, surgical items, tents, sleeping bags, tarpaulins, sanitary utilities, water purification tablets among other necessary items", Bagchi posted on social media.

War broke out two weeks ago between Israel and Hamas, the Islamist militant movement which rules the Palestinian enclave of Gaza, home to 2.4 million people.

Israel's military has pounded Gaza with relentless strikes in response to Hamas's murderous October 7 attack, in which militants killed at least 1,400 people, mostly civilians who were shot, mutilated or burnt to death, according to Israeli officials.

The bombing campaign has killed more than 4,300 Palestinians, mainly civilians, according to the Hamas-run health ministry, and reduced swathes of the densely populated territory to smouldering ruins.

India condemned Hamas for the "terrorist attack", but it has also reiterated its longstanding position for an independent Palestinian state.

Israel has repeatedly urged the 1.1 million people in the north of Gaza to move south ahead of any ground operation.

After negotiations and US pressure, food, water and medicine, but no fuel, crossed from Egypt into Gaza on Saturday.

The Hamas government has criticised the lack of aid arriving, despite the arrival of 20 trucks in the Palestinian territory on Saturday. It said there were now 1.4 million displaced people in the enclave.

AFP

FROM CAIRO, GUTERRES APPEALS FOR ‘SUSTAINED’ HUMANITARIAN ACCESS TO GAZA

With essential supplies running out in Gaza, UN Secretary-General António Guterres on Thursday appealed for humanitarian access to the besieged enclave.

“For nearly two weeks the people of Gaza have gone without any shipments of fuel, food, water, medicine, and other essentials. Disease is spreading. Supplies are dwindling. People are dying,” he said at a press conference in Cairo alongside Egypt’s Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry.

Mr. Guterres is in the Middle East to witness UN preparations to be able to deliver massive support

to Gaza.

‘A MOMENT OF PROFOUND CRISIS’

He is there at what he described as “a moment of profound crisis...unlike any the region has seen in decades”, triggered by the “atrocious” Hamas attacks against Israel on 7 October, resulting in Israel’s siege and relentless bombing of Gaza.

He pointed to the ever-mounting toll on civilians, the vast majority of whom are women and children, but also journalists, health workers and many others, including UN staff.



UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. Photo: UN News

The UN chief called for two immediate humanitarian actions in the face of the humanitarian catastrophe.

“To Hamas, for the immediate and unconditional release of the hostages. To Israel, for immediate unrestricted access of humanitarian aid to respond to the most basic needs of the people of Gaza.”

He also called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire to help realize them.

“Let me be clear. The Palestinian people have legitimate and deep grievances after 56 years of occupation. But, as serious as those grievances are, they cannot justify terror attacks,” he said.

“And as appalling as those attacks have been, they cannot justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people.”



SAFE AID DELIVERY

Mr. Guterres underlined the need for rapid, unimpeded humanitarian access to Gaza, where some two million people require urgent assistance.

“We need food, water, medicine and fuel now. We need it at scale, and we need it to be sustained,” he said.

“It is not one small operation that is required. It is a sustained effort to deliver humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza. In plain terms, that means humanitarians need to be able to get the aid in and they need to be able to distribute it safely.”

In this regard, he said Egypt’s El Arish airport and the Rafah crossing, the sole one open into Gaza, “are not only critical, they are our only hope” and “the lifelines” to the people there.

He also warned of the risk of the violence spilling over, the longer the situation persists.

The Secretary-General praised Egypt for being “a pillar of multilateral cooperation and the linchpin in helping to defuse tensions and to ease colossal human pain and suffering.”

Mr. Guterres is scheduled to participate in an international summit on Gaza convened by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi for this Saturday.

Courtesy of UN News



Photo: Vlada

RAKHINE STATE

Red Cross warns of difficulties in providing aid to Myanmar's Rakhine

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) says international aid groups are struggling to reach people in need in Rakhine State as the Myanmar junta continues to restrict access.

In a recent statement, ICRC speaks of its concerns.

“In Rakhine, as in many other conflict-affected areas throughout Myanmar, humanitarian access to deliver aid remains challenging, particularly in rural areas. Despite the difficulties in reaching these communities, our team is doing its best to continue providing vital aid to most in need. ICRC can only reach vulnerable people when humanitarian access is granted, respected and facilitated by all,” the statement says.

After Cyclone Mocha, the ICRC and partner organisations responded to the needs of the most vul-

nerable in Rakhine providing materials to build shelter and improve access to clean water and sanitation to communities living in Ponnagyun, Rathedaung, Kyauktaw and Mrauk-U townships, the organization says. Tarpaulins, bamboo poles, iron sheets, shelter tool kits, nails and other related materials were provided to over 5,000 families (21,140 individuals).

The ICRC also provided water purifiers and chlorine tablets to prevent water borne diseases. By constructing temporary latrines and donating tarpaulins and sanitations kits, the ICRC helped to improve hygiene in distressed communities and promoted practices to prevent communicable diseases.

A number of international and local aid organizations have spoken of their frustration over the junta red-tape that has made it difficult to aid Cyclone Mocha victims in Rakhine, and also other people in need in this state.



JUNTA HOLDS GEMS EMPORIUM, DESPITE INTERNATIONAL SANCTIONS AND CONDEMNATION

Myanmar's junta kicked off its mid-year gems emporium for 2023 in Nay Pyi Taw on October 20, amidst international sanctions and widespread condemnation against its rights violations and war crimes.

The gems emporium, which will last for nine days until October 28, will feature an array of precious stones, including 300 pearl lots, 160 gem lots, and 4,025 jade lots, according to the junta-controlled newspaper Kyemon (The Mirror).

Foreign merchants can purchase jade, gems, and pearl lots in a variety of currencies, including US dollar, euro, Chinese yuan, and Thai baht. Local merchants must pay in kyat, the official currency of Myanmar.

The gems emporium has been held since 1964, but it has been boycotted by many foreign buyers in recent years due to the junta's human rights abuses.

In 2021, the junta launched a brutal crackdown on anti-junta protesters following a coup. The crackdown has resulted in at least 1,500 deaths, according to Reuters.

The junta has also been accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity by the United Nations.

The international community has condemned the junta's human rights abuses and imposed sanctions on its leaders. However, the junta has refused to budge.

The gems emporium is a major source of revenue for the junta. The proceeds from the emporium are used to fund the junta's military and security forces.

YANGON SEDONA HOTEL SOLD AT US\$ 57.4 MILLION



Photo: Supplied

The Sedona Hotel on Kabaraye Pagoda Road in Yangon has been sold at the price of US\$ 57.4 million.

Keppel Land, wholly owned by the Singapore based Keppel Corporation, this week announced that it had made the sale.

The Spring Blossom Venture which bought Sedona Hotel from Keppel Land is a Singapore based multi-sector investment and tourism services conglomerate.

Spring Blossom Venture intends to continue operating the hotel business locally and they are reportedly finding a new operator to run this hotel business.

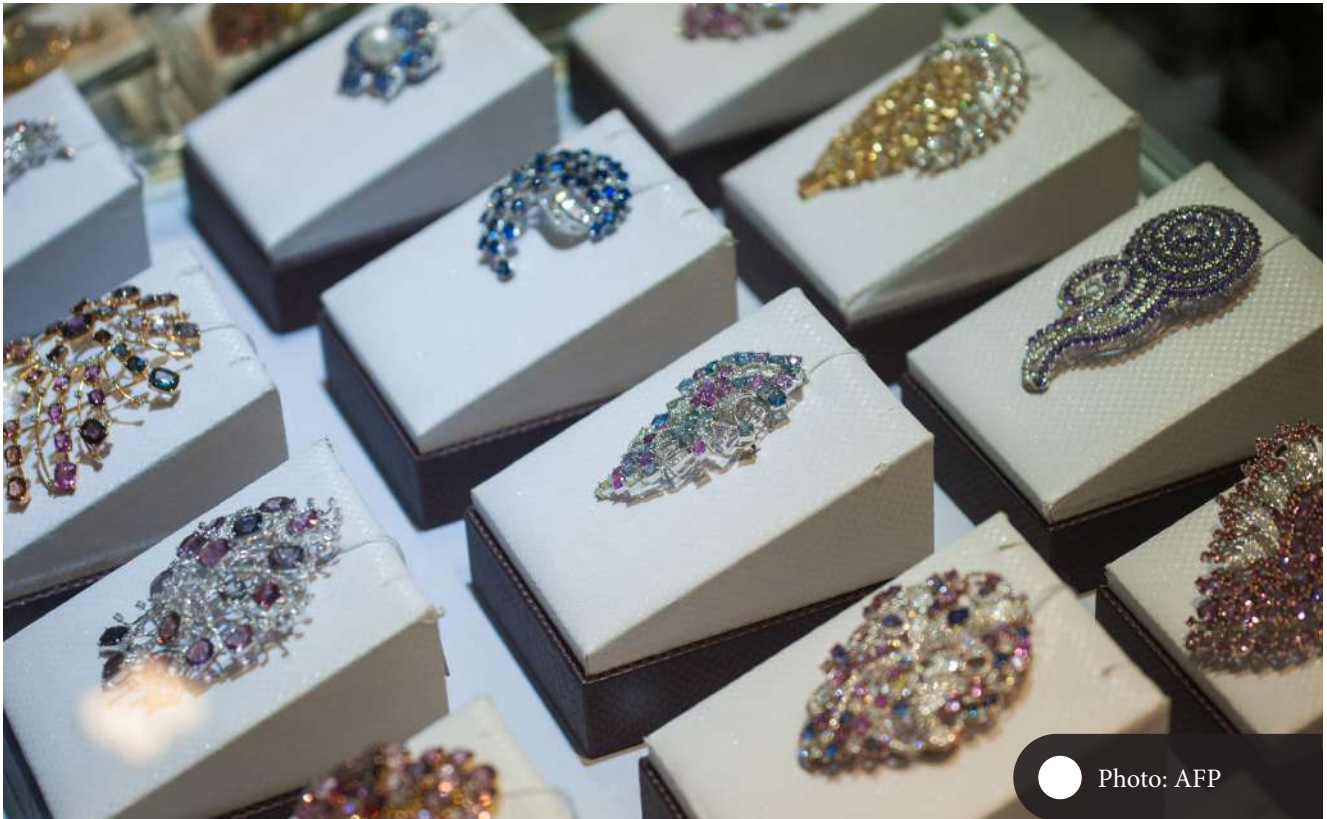
The sale of this hotel follows the earlier announcement of the corporation issued on 6 March 2023 on the divestment after being faced the setback twice consecutively by the COVID-19 pandemic and

the military coup in 2021.

The divestment is in line with Keppel's asset monetisation plans to unlock value that can be invested to pursue new opportunities, the announcement of Keppel Corporation says.

The Singapore government-backed Keppel Corporation has planned to sell this Sedona Hotel (Yangon) since early 2023. The hotel was opened in 1996 and it is one of the first ever 5-star international hotels in Myanmar.

MYANMAR JUNTA HOLDS 9-DAY GEMS FAIR AS THEY NEED FOREIGN EXCHANGE



Myanmar's Military Council is currently holding a nine-day gems emporium as they need foreign exchange.

Myanmar Gems Emporium Central Committee this week issued an announcement which says that the Military Council which desperately needs foreign exchange will hold the 9-day gems emporium in Naypyidaw at Mani Yadana Jade Hall from 20 October to 28 October.

The gems extracted in Myanmar - namely pearls, gems and jade lots - will be sold at this emporium.

The central committee said that the prices of some jade lots were set in foreign exchange and the buyers at home and abroad must pay in foreign currencies of US dollar, Thai Baht and Chinese Yuan for these lots.

The Myanmar national gem traders who have received permission in accordance with the Myanmar Gems Law will be allowed to attend this emporium and buy the gems shown there.

The junta chief Min Aung Hlaing attended the last emporium held from 17 to 23 March. At this emporium, 295 lots of pearls, 120 lots of gemstones and 215 lots of jade were sold to gem traders at home and abroad in an open bidding system.

The National Unity Government (NUG) issued an announcement in 2021 which called on the trading companies not to deal with the Military Council in Myanmar for buying natural resources, metals and minerals, gemstones, pearl and timber which were extracted in Myanmar.

The Military Council which desperately needs foreign exchange holds these gems emporium twice a year,

These gem emporiums have been held in Myanmar since 1964 with the intention of earning foreign exchange for the State and obtaining economic benefits for Myanmar nationals by selling gemstones mined and extracted from gem mines in Myanmar.

NGO UPDATES ITS LIST 'BOYCOTT LIST' OF MYANMAR MILITARY PRODUCTS



Photo: AFP

Burma Campaign UK has updated its Boycott List of products and services produced by companies owned by the Burmese military.

The Boycott List enables people in Burma, and UN and aid agencies, embassies and corporations, to avoid buying goods and services from companies which help fund the Burmese military.

The Boycott List was first published in 2020. Since the military coup began in 2021, there has been a widespread boycott of military products, which has had a significant impact on sales and profits.

Following feedback from some international companies operating in Burma, Burma Campaign UK has added some company names in addition to products and services, to enable them to more easily identify Burmese companies which they need to avoid.

There are 30 new entries on the list, which is now 8 pages long. Some additions are variations of different names used for products already on the Boycott List. One entry, the Five Star vessel Coco Gyun, has been removed as it has been sold.

“The vast range of products and services provided by military-owned companies demonstrates their importance to the Burmese military and the dominant role that have always played in the economy,” said Mark Farmaner, Director of Burma Campaign UK. “We particularly encourage embassies, UN agencies and international companies to look again at this Boycott List and ensure they are not helping to pay for the airstrikes and guns being used against the people of Burma.”

The new entries are:

- Star Sanitizing Spray
- Star Sanitizing Gel
- Bhone Min Myat (imports)
- Ever Meter
- Adipati Agricultural Produce Trading Limited
- Hlaing Thar Yar Inland Container Depot
- Myanmar Ruby Enterprise (Gems & Jewellery Co.,Ltd)
- Myanmar Imperial Jade Co. Ltd
- Dagon Stars United Football Club
- OSM Sugar (Oktwin Sugar Mill Sugar)
- Yangon Amber Beer
- Knowledge Light Magazine
- Nghwe Ta Yi Magazine
- Myawaddy Yathazone Magazine
- Knowledge World Journal (Thuta Gabar Journal)
- Myawady Literature House/Myawaddy Library/Myawati Library
- Myawady Magazine
- Ngwetaryee Magazine
- Tayza Booklet
- Aurora Journal
- Sports View Journal
- Knowledge World Journal (aka Thuta Kabar Journal)
- Chii Mala Tang restaurant
- Adipati Rice Mill Shops
- Marble Tiles Factory Company
- Dried Tea Leaves and Dried Fruit Factory (Naungtaya)
- Ngwe Pinlae Livestock and Breeding (Silver Sea)
- Okkan Sugar/Okkan Sugar Mill
- Yadanabone Hall
- Aung Myint Mo Min Securities

This list can be found here:

<https://burmacampaign.org.uk/boycott-list-of-burmese-military-products-updated/>

JUNTA DISCUSSES DIRECT FLIGHTS WITH BANGLADESH

The Myanmar junta is discussing the possibility of direct flights with Bangladesh, Narinjara reported citing business news site BETV.

Myanmar Ambassador to Bangladesh Aung Kyaw Moe and Federation of Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) President Mahbubul Alam discussed the possibility of direct flights between the two countries during a meeting in Dhaka on October 14, 2023.

The FBCCI President said that Bangladesh is eager to improve trade relations with Myanmar and is therefore emphasizing the importance of strengthening trade ties between the two countries.

He added that both countries have many potential sectors that have not yet been fully utilized. Once these sectors are developed, both countries will benefit economically, even though the Rohingya Muslim refugee issue remains a challenge.

Direct flights would help to promote regional integration between Myanmar and Bangladesh, and would help to improve people-to-people ties between the two countries.

However, the Rohingya refugee crisis has put a strain on relations between Myanmar and Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi government has repeatedly called on Myanmar to take back the Rohingya refugees



TAKING REFUGE

Bago citizens take shelter from the floods in a monastery.

Photo: AFP

IN FOCUS



NEW BOOK 'NARCOTOPIA' DOCUMENTS THE DRUGS TRADE IN THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE



Money maker: A seized cache of illegal drugs on show in Yangon. Photo: AFP

American journalist and non-fiction writer Patrick Winn in a Podcast interview with Insight Myanmar stresses it is important how we assess the challenge of the illegal narcotics trade in Myanmar and in the Golden Triangle as a whole.

"I would encourage everybody looking at Myanmar's drug trade, to try to see it as a trade, as a commodity," Winn, 42, explains. "Try and look at it for what it is: a way to achieve power, a way to manipulate borders, a critical ingredient in how Myanmar's future will unfold. Think of it as a commodity, just like oil has shaped the fate of Saudi Arabia. You should look at the mountains of Myanmar as a place where narcotics affect it. And in the future, if there is a new democratic government controlling Myanmar, it will then have a say in whether it wants to see Myanmar continue to be

a place that produces vast quantities of narcotics for the entire region. Or, if that future government wants to wipe out the narcotics trade, it will have a very big task ahead of it. I just hope that people can see this for what it is and not see it in this as a as a morality play."

The narcotics industry is a "giant industry," says Winn, noting the vast sums made.

NEW BOOK

Winn first visited Southeast Asia in 2008, landing in Bangkok, and was immediately fascinated by the region. His curiosity led him to write about some of the more unusual stories he came across, which ultimately led to "Hello, Shadowlands", a book exploring organized crime and illicit activity across Thailand, North Korea, Vietnam and the Philippines.

His latest book, *Narcotopia*, due out early in 2024, continues his exploration into the history of the dangerous but lucrative Southeast Asia drug trade.

Myanmar has a special hold on him. “I don’t really look at Myanmar as a single country. I look at it as a collection of nations,” he tells *Insight Myanmar*. “It’s really a collection of groups that have, many times, fought for their own independence to preserve their own way of life. It has even more depth and richness than any other Southeast Asian country, and for my money, any other country in the world.”

GOOD OR EVIL

Winn’s work brings a more nuanced understanding than one typically finds when exploring the motives driving the Southeast Asian underworld’s criminal activity. “I try not to ever view the world as through the lens of good and evil,” he says, which informs his quote above about viewing Myanmar’s narcotic trade as a commodity like any other, rather than through a moral lens.

“This is a giant industry that shapes people’s lives. It shapes how they make money, even if you’re not involved in the narcotics trade... The money is so big that it is on the level of Fortune 500 companies in any corporate environment! You have people who are absolute sharks that are absolutely ruthless, that will leave bodies in their path if it helps them make more money.”

In tracing the history for his new book of what became known as the “Golden Triangle,” Winn describes how Chinese nationalists (the Kuomintang or KMT) staged incursions from Shan state and elsewhere in northern Burma into Communist China following World War II. As it became increasingly obvious that they were never going to overthrow Mao, the KMT broke up. Some fled to Taiwan, but others stayed in Burma, where they began to cultivate opium and produce heroin. This was the height of the Cold War, and the CIA secretly began supporting their drug trafficking

ventures in the hope those Chinese exiles could still find a way to undermine their Communist foes across the border.

DRUGS ARE POWER

“Drugs are power. If you have drugs, you have access to power, and you have tremendous finances. You can change borders, you can rally fighters, you can destabilize countries, you can start your own country!”

But Winn then wryly notes one of those ironic twists of history – how CIA support of the KMT led to American soldiers getting a taste of Golden Triangle heroin, much of it produced in Myanmar. This led to the drug turning up on the streets of the USA prompting the Nixon and then Reagan administrations to ramp up their so-called “War on Drugs,” and prioritizing the eradication of drug production centers worldwide.

In the case of Burma, ironically this meant going after the very cartels that had grown so strong in large part because of the money the US had funneled their way several decades prior.

The free flow of narcotics also proved to be a major, destabilizing factor in the Burmese military’s attempt to subdue its population. Unable to limit the drug flow, they instead tried to control it, by offering to look the other way so long as the group (known as a KKY, or Ka Kwe Ye) agreed in principle that it was occupying land on behalf of the military, and would do their bidding when called upon.

“Essentially, it was a license to engage in crime, namely drug trafficking,” Winn explains. “The military and the Burmese police are not going to come after you. You do your thing: you traffic drugs, you produce drugs, you do whatever you need to do, you just need to hold down this territory... really the thinking is not all that different than what the CIA did.”

This resulted in endemic corruption throughout the military; regional commanders “fortunate” enough to be posted around the Golden Triangle provided pro-

tection from the traffickers while ensuring the smooth transportation of their drug shipments, and in turn greatly enriched themselves in the process, while also beginning to view the areas they administered as their own, personal fiefdoms. This is a major reason why the National League of Democracy administration was unable to make any inroads in stopping the drug trade during their time in office.

SCOURGE OF METHS

More recently, many Golden Triangle drug barons have switched to producing methamphetamines (as Winn reminds us, those same narcotics made famous in *Breaking Bad*). “It’s so much easier,” Winn explains. “You get barrels of chemicals from China, you bring those barrels to your meth lab, you refine them into methamphetamine, [and] you’re done! That is so much more efficient than having to worry about farmers, and weather, and law enforcement.”

Today, the Burmese meth trade is estimated at \$60 billion, while Burmese heroin nets “only” \$10 billion. And those old KMT rebels and exiles have now given way to Chinese organized crime groups, in what Winn calls a “landlord model” of drug cultivation. He describes how ethnic armed groups will “rent” the land to set up vast methamphetamine labs, in return for receiving a share of the profits, all the while distancing themselves from the actual drug production process.

NOT CHINA

The drugs produced in these labs are then passed through a network of smuggling groups, each with specific expertise, ultimately increasing the price of the narcotics at each stage until they reach their destination. However, in yet another ironic twist, Winn observes that the one place the drugs produced by Chinese crime cartels in northern Myanmar certainly don’t reach in large quantities is: China. Very severe penalties and swift justice are visited on anyone found with drugs in their position there.

And yet despite the increased trade, the West now pays little attention to the Golden Triangle’s flour-

ishing drug trade. “That’s astounding and I’m just constantly shocked that it doesn’t get more attention,” Winn notes. In his estimation, this is because unlike in previous eras, narcotics from this region seldom reach the US, since local demand has skyrocketed. “In this day and age, there’s enough wealth in Asia to support its own narcotics market,” he explains.

Since the coup, drug production and trafficking has only increased, although Winn is unable to confirm exact numbers. He notes that while he has not seen any reports that NUG-aligned PDF units are getting involved in drug trafficking or production, he wouldn’t be surprised if at some point they at least consider taxing products passing through areas they control as a way to support their continued resistance efforts. If so, it would be a case of history repeating itself, as another ideologically-driven armed group turns to narcotics to keep its revolution alive in Myanmar.

CHEAP DRUGS

The cheap availability of narcotics is proving to be especially detrimental to local populations. For example, Winn notes how an entire generation of Kachin youth have become addicts, leaving some to suspect the Burmese military is intentionally flooding the area with drugs to gut their community, not unlike accusations in the 1980s that the CIA was behind the crack cocaine epidemic decimating African American neighborhoods.

In response, Kachin vigilante groups have sprung up, known as Pat Jasan, which essentially abduct suspected drug users and force them into faith-based, austere detox programs, with threats of violence if they don’t reform. “This was just country Baptist justice, is what I’d call it. I’m from the South, and that’s what it looked like to me. They felt like they had no other option, because they believe they are under the boot of this military imposed system that was unrelenting, and just gleeful to see their people lapse into addiction, instead of going out and picking up a rifle and resisting.”

WA STATE ROLE

Winn also addresses the critical issue of Wa State and their sizeable United Wa State Army (UWSA), a very important actor in this unfolding drama. He says that “essentially [it is] another country inside Myanmar, that isn’t talked about very much... A big funder of this de facto nation is narcotics, taxing narcotics produced on their soil by outside criminal groups. Look, it works! Drugs are power, I don’t know how else to put it.”

He explains specifically where the Wa fit into the current conflict. “One way that they might be able to play a role is that the Wa have weapons that the revolution, the pro-democracy forces need badly!” However, like many ethnic minorities, much of Wa leadership has viewed the current state of affairs as little more than lowlander Bamar groups engaged—yet again—in their own conflict. In addition, after enduring decades of racist policies, the Wa have little motivation to participate with other ethnic minorities against the Tatmadaw, particularly if they think that such actions might destabilize their region—especially as they are fully capable of defending their land.

Further complicating matters is the close relationship that Chinese officials enjoy with the Wa. They may need Beijing’s approval, or at least blessing, to undertake any major initiative.

Still, in spite of the uncertainty surrounding the Wa, Winn believes that there has been more solidarity among different groups since the 2021 coup than ever before.

“The real revolution that’s already happening, is the beginning of this feeling of unity between the lowlands and the highlands,” he says. “And if that doesn’t work, then the revolution won’t succeed.”

Check out the Insight Myanmar podcast with Patrick Winn here: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2023/9/28/episode-193-narcos-myanmar>



Patrick Winn



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