

UN OCHA REPORTS UPSWING IN MYANMAR FIGHTING AND ACUTE AID CHALLENGE

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**PRAYING FOR PEACE**

**Myanmar's displaced pray  
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# WORSENING SITUATION FOR MYANMAR'S 'REJECTED MINORITY'

The recent scene of Muslim Rohingya refugees on a beach in Indonesia's Aceh being forced back to sea is a reminder of just how dire the situation is for this "rejected minority" from Myanmar.

As if things weren't bad enough, the resumption of fighting in Myanmar's Rakhine State sets back any realistic plans for a return of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh exile to their land, despite the façade of a repatriation scheme being played out by the Myanmar junta and the Dhaka authorities.

Last week, the Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (BROUK) came out with a damning report entitled, "Struggling to Survive", that reminds the world that the Myanmar military junta is continuing to ignore the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) orders to protect the Rohingya as state policies are pushing hundreds of thousands of people to the brink of bare survival in Rakhine State – a situation made worse by May's Cyclone Mocha that seriously damaged IDP camps, including those of the Rohingya.

The report documents how Rohingya people live increasingly desperate lives in "open-air prisons" amid widespread restrictions on humanitarian aid by the junta. Due to restrictions on their freedom of movement, access to healthcare and livelihoods, Rohingya communities are almost entirely dependent on humanitarian aid. At the same time, the Myanmar military and armed groups have tortured, killed and arbitrarily detained Ro-

hingya people as renewed armed conflict threatens to put even more civilians in the firing line in Rakhine State.

The situation for the minority is bad in Rakhine and it is bad in the Bangladesh camps, particularly as international funding aid has been cut back. Little surprise that Rohingya take to being trafficked by boat to Indonesia and Malaysia – countries where patience is wearing thin, the welcome mat threadbare.

The stark reality is the Myanmar military is still trying to erase the Rohingya from the face of the earth, according to Tun Khin, President of BROUK.

With majority-Muslim countries like Indonesia and Malaysia growing tired of the hundreds who turn up on their shore, the options are limited – stay in the Bangladesh camps or try to survive in the IDP camps in Rakhine. On the weekend, Indonesian authorities said they were stepping up patrols to prevent Rohingya landing.

This is a worsening situation for what is a "rejected minority". Increased pressure needs to be brought to bear on the Myanmar junta to "take all measures within its power" to protect the Rohingya, as the International Court of Justice calls for. But right now, there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

EDITORIAL

**mizzima**  
WEEKLY

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**MIZZIMA MAGAZINE**

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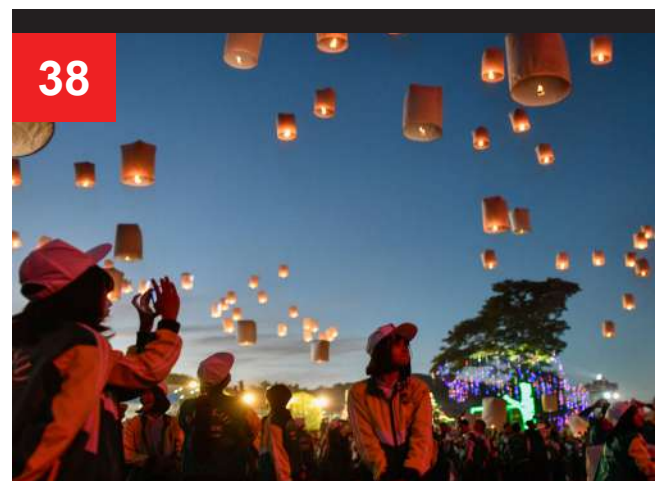
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Cover photo of girl praying in Kayah State by AFP





# IN FOCUS







## FLEEING RAKHINE FIGHTING

People flee from a village after renewed fighting between Myanmar's military and the Arakan Army (AA), an ethnic minority armed group, in Pauktaw Township in western Rakhine State on November 19. Ongoing clashes between the Arakan Army (AA) and the military "have resulted in the displacement of 26,175 people" across Rakhine, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said in an update.

Photo: AFP



## 142 JUNTA SOLDIERS AND FAMILY MEMBERS FLED TO INDIA IN NOVEMBER

**D**uring November, 142 Myanmar junta soldiers and their family members crossed into India to seek refuge from fighting on the Myanmar side of the border.

The Indian Army subsequently helped them to safely return to Myanmar.

On 4 November, 17 junta soldiers fled to Manipur State in India when defence forces seized the junta army's Witoke Camp near the border in Tamu Township, Sagaing Region.

On 7 November, a further 53 junta soldiers and their family members fled to Manipur when defence forces took control of the junta army camp in Khampet, Sagaing Region, about 50 kilometres south of Tamu.

On 13 November, 43 Myanmar junta soldiers fled to Mizoram State in India when defence forces took control of two junta army camps near the Myanmar-India border in Rikhawdar Town, in Chin State's Falam Township.

On 15 November, 29 more junta soldiers fled to Mizoram State after defence forces took control of the junta army's Tibual Camp, also in Falam Township.

The Indian Army drove the junta soldiers who had fled to Manipur to the border crossing of Moreh, where they crossed to Tamu Town on the Myanmar side.

The junta soldiers who had fled to Mizoram were flown by Indian Army helicopters directly to Tamu Town.

India for Myanmar, a grassroots advocacy movement made up of people and organisations from India and Myanmar submitted a letter to the Indian Government. It called on the government not to forcibly return junta soldiers to the Myanmar Army.

It said that, instead, the Indian authorities should give the junta soldiers the choice of communicating with revolutionary forces in Myanmar and being returned to them, or being returned to the junta army.

According to Salai Dokhar from India for Myanmar, the return of the junta soldiers also highlights discrepancies in the ways the Indian authorities treat different types of Myanmar people.

He pointed out that whilst the Indian authorities returned junta soldiers who had illegally crossed into India back to Myanmar, they arrested and detained displaced Myanmar people seeking refuge and Myanmar workers, in Impur Jail.

A Tamu Township defence force fighter also expressed concern about cooperation between India and the Myanmar junta. He strongly condemned the Indian government for helping the Myanmar junta.

## INCREASE IN YOUTHS ARRESTED IN YANGON IN NOVEMBER

**A**pproximately 300 youths have been detained in Yangon since the beginning of November, a notable increase on previous months, according to the Rangoon Scout Network (RSN).

An official from the RSN, an organisation that provides on-the-ground information related to the Military Council in Yangon, said: "These figures represent the precise calculations made by the RSN based on reported incidents. The exact number detained remains uncertain, given that additional arrests happened whilst people were doing things like waiting for buses, playing football, etc. When considering these unreported incidents, the total amounts to a significant number."

The rapid surge in the number of people detained in Yangon since the second week of November has been mirrored by a similar increase in the number of young people going missing. There has also been a commensurate increase in missing person posts on social networks, such as Facebook.

The number of young people disappearing has been increasing every day.

RSN also said that the army is detaining youths as a way to extort money.

An official from the RSN, an organisation that provides on-the-ground information related to the Mili-

tary Council in Yangon, said: "In recent incidents involving missing and detained youths, the Military Council has engaged in extortion. If you don't approach the authorities to seek the release of the arrested people, the junta will not provide any information about their whereabouts. For the Military Council, it seems to be a matter of either obtaining money or acquiring additional manpower."

The junta has been detaining youths engaged in all sorts of activities for no apparent reason, including pedestrians, those who are out at night or consuming alcohol outdoors and even people casually playing football.

In some cases, youths managed to avoid arrest by making payments at local police stations or to the army. Reportedly both the army and police have been demanding between 200,000 and 1,000,000 kyats per arrested youth to release them.

The RSN and other civil society groups in Yangon are advising the public to not go out at night, especially to locations associated with the military.

Mizzima had difficulty obtaining personal details of youths who had been arrested and released after payments were made, as people were reluctant to talk, for security reasons.



# AA RESCUES 100 HOSTAGES HELD BY MYANMAR JUNTA

The Arakan Army (AA) said that it rescued 100 civilians being held hostage by the junta in Pauktaw Town, Sittwe District, Rakhine State, on 21 November.

During the hostage's release, there was intense fighting in Pauktaw Town at around 12:00 p.m. on 21 November. Numerous junta soldiers were killed during the fighting and some AA fighters were injured, according to the AA.

The AA also shared online a picture showing the amount of weapons and ammunition seized from the junta during the fighting.

The junta had been detaining local people in Pauktaw Town and using them as hostages since 16 November. The hostages, who included monks, pregnant women, elderly people and children were held at various locations in the town, including the Lawka Htate Pan Pagoda compound.

Following the fighting and hostage rescue in Pauktaw Town, the junta started firing artillery into the

town at 2:00 p.m. on 16 November.

They continued to fire artillery until 10:30 p.m., according to a man who lives near the No. 12 Police Battalion in Sittwe, from where they were firing artillery.

He said: "The No. 12 Police Battalion fired artillery every 10 or 15 minutes. Even my child woke up from the sound of heavy artillery fire. The fired shells could have landed anywhere."

Mizzima is currently investigating to see where the shells landed and what casualties were caused by the artillery fire.

On 13 November 2023 the AA broke a temporary ceasefire they had signed with the junta in November 2022. Currently, there is heavy fighting between the AA and the junta in northern Rakhine State and there are indications that the fighting may spread to the south of the state.

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## JUNTA ARTILLERY KILLS TWO IN NAMHKAM TOWN, NORTHERN SHAN STATE

Junta artillery fire killed two and injured six, including a three-year-old child in Namhkam Town, northern Shan State at about 4:00 p.m. on 21 November.

The junta based at Sakhanthit Camp just south of Namhkam Town fired at least five rounds of artillery into Namhkam Town killing a man and woman, according to a Palaung State Liberation Front/Ta'ang National Liberation Army (PSLF/TNLA) spokesperson, Lt. Col. Tar Aik Kyaw.

He said: "Two people died instantly, and six people sustained injuries. The heavy weapon rounds fell in the vicinity of houses, causing serious injuries to many."

Several of the injured people are receiving medical treatment at Namhkam Hospital, while others have been transported to Muse Hospital.

Lt. Col. Tar Aik Kyaw said that the TNLA and joint forces have successfully captured and gained control of junta camps and police stations in Namhkam Town. Presently, the only remaining area not under their control is Sakhanthit Camp.

On 21 November, the Ta'ang Women's Or-

ganisation confirmed that civilians lost their lives as a result of the Military Council's indiscriminate use of heavy weapons, which happened whilst there was no ongoing fighting in Namhkam Town.

Also in northern Shan State, according to the TNLA and Ta'ang Women's Organisation, a 14-year old girl was killed and her parents, older brother and 13-year-old neighbour were injured when a junta artillery shell hit her house in Ohnson Village, in Namhsan Township at about 11:30 p.m. on 20 November.

Since the beginning of the 1027 offensive against the junta in northern Shan State on 27 October, at least 40 civilians have been killed by junta artillery fire in Namhsan, Namhkam, Namhpatkar, Hsenwi and Kutkai, according to the PSLF/TNLA spokesperson Lt. Col. Tar Aik Kyaw.

He said that there is ongoing fighting between the TNLA and the junta in various areas, including: Kyin Thi Bridge in Hsipaw Township; Minekyat Military Camp in Lashio Township; and the stretch of road between miles 13 and 14 on the road between Lashio and Hsenwi.





● Karenni girl prays. Photo: AFP





# PRAYING FOR PEACE

**Myanmar's displaced  
pray and teach under  
deadly skies**



A woman rings a bell outside a makeshift church of wood and tarpaulin, calling the faithful to worship and a respite from war in eastern Myanmar's Kayah state.

Thousands of young people fled from Myanmar's cities to Kayah's rugged hills and jungle as the army launched a crackdown on pro-democracy protests following its 2021 coup.

Many volunteered for military training at hidden camps run by "People's Defence Force" groups, and have since fought the junta across the Christian-majority state.

The junta has battered Kayah with artillery and air strikes from its Russian and Chinese-built jets, and more than 100,000 people are now displaced in the state, according to the United Nations.

### **MANY NEW CAMPS**

A dirt path in Demoso township runs to one of the many new camps that have sprung up, where inhabitants pray, teach and eat under threat from the skies.

Mar Thi Yar, 45, says he is proud of the local church, with its roof of green tarpaulin and makeshift altar decorated with tinsel that inhabitants built last

summer.

"It shows our togetherness," he said last month. "We only have God to rely on in our lives."

Every evening the church is busy, he added.

At another camp, Daw Yit, 27, teaches at the school she helped found last December to serve 72 displaced students.

Constantly listening for the sounds of jets and shells makes it hard to teach as she would like, she said.

"There is no mental security for us and we can't teach well," she said.

"While we are teaching we have to be ready to run and hide if the jet fighters come."

Near the school, a network of trenches dug in the reddish earth provides rudimentary shelter from the military air and artillery strikes that are an ever-present threat.

"My son jumps every time he hears a loud noise," Daw Yit said.

"Even a one-year-old kid knows how to react - she puts her hands over her ears whenever she hears 'jet fighters are coming'."



Getting a proper education is important. Photo: AFP





Some women have taken up arms. Photo: AFP

## COLLECTIVE PUNISHMENT

Amnesty International said last year that the junta was likely using air strikes as “collective punishment” against civilians supporting anti-coup fighters in hotspots like Kayah.

“There are no safe places nearby for all the people in the camp,” said Aung Khet, a member of the committee that runs the camp where he has lived since May 2022.

“Usually if there is an air strike, we run into the forest to hide.”

Residents also build their shelters far apart from one another, he said.

“If there is an attack by the military we hope it won’t hit everybody and there will be fewer casualties.”

## COMBATING THE TRAUMA

Inflation and a battered economy, meanwhile, are taxing relief groups’ resources.

“Last year, 300,000 kyat (\$145) was enough to feed 150 people with rice and three meat curries,” Yinn Yinn of the Karenni Support Team told AFP.

“But now that money is only enough for rice and one meat curry for 60 people. Even if there is one meat curry, we have to add potatoes to bulk it out. The prices have doubled since last year.”

“Most families can’t afford” to rebuild their houses, Aung Khet said.

And he says even if people could, many would not do so until the military has been defeated.

Fighting has flared in Kayah over the last 10 days, with anti-coup fighters spurred on by an offensive launched by an alliance of ethnic minority groups hundreds of kilometres away in northern Shan state.

Analysts say that offensive has put the junta on the back foot.

In Kayah state, the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF) is battling the junta for control of state capital Loikaw, and earlier this month said it had shot down a military jet.

The junta said the plane had crashed as a result of engine failure.

As the fighting rages, Daw Yit keeps teaching and trusting in her faith.

“We teach children about the Bible and worship. It’s the way we cure their trauma... I think children have got many traumas during this war,” she said.

“We are taking care of them to be good citizens and I wish they will become leaders who can rule our country well.”

*Reporting by AFP and Mizzima*



# MYANMAR ANTI-JUNTA FIGHTERS BATTLE MILITARY IN KARENNI STATE CAPITAL

**M**yanmar anti-coup fighters were battling the military for control of a state capital, both sides said on Tuesday last week.

Clashes across Myanmar have entered a fourth week, sparked by a surprise offensive against the military by an alliance of ethnic minorities along a swathe of territory near the China border.

The offensive has galvanised other opponents of the military, with clashes spreading to the east and west in what analysts say is the biggest challenge to the junta since it seized power in 2021.

Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF) and ethnic minority Karenni Army (KA) fighters were in “very intense fighting” with the military in Loikaw town, KNDF chairman Khun Bedu told AFP.

KNDF, KA and “People’s Defence Force” fighters were “in control in many areas,” he said, without giving details.

He said the military was fighting from positions at the main police station and other government buildings.

Junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun said anti-coup fighters had attacked Loikaw prison on Tuesday, without giving details.

Loikaw is normally home to around 50,000 people.

The United Nations has evacuated most of its staff from Loikaw due to “aerial bombardment of the town and active fighting in urban areas,” a spokesperson told AFP on Tuesday.

They did not say when the evacuations had taken place or how many staff had left.

The “National Unity Government” dominated by lawmakers ousted in the military’s 2021 coup said that a total of 228 people -- UN and other NGO staff and their families -- had been evacuated.

Anti-coup fighters also launched drone attacks on two airports in northern Sagaing region, hundreds of kilometres from Kayah, junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun said.

He did not say whether the attacks had caused casualties or damage.

Fighting has raged since October 27 after the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and Arakan Army (AA) launched attacks on the military near the northern border with China.

Last week the AA launched fresh attacks on the military in western Rakhine state.

Access to the affected areas is impossible while fighting rages, making it difficult to confirm casualty tolls from the various clashes.

At least 75 civilians including children have been killed and 94 people wounded in the fighting, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, citing initial reports.

**AFP**



# OVER 280,000 DISPLACED IN EXPANDING MYANMAR CLASHES: UN

**M**ore than 286,000 people in Myanmar have been displaced so far by recent fighting between the junta and ethnic groups, the UN said Wednesday, describing it as the biggest escalation since the 2021 coup.

“Our humanitarian colleagues tell us that intense fighting between ethnic armed organizations and the Myanmar Armed Forces continues and has expanded into more areas, including densely populated urban centres,” said Farhan Haq, deputy spokesman for UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

“This escalation is the largest and most geographically widespread since the 2021 military takeover,” he added, noting that the worst affected areas were in Shan, Sagaing, Kayah, Rakhine and southern Chin states.

“As of yesterday, more than 286,000 people have been displaced since the escalation of fighting on October 26, with this number continuing to climb,” he said.

Fighting broke out at the end of October in the north of Shan state, close to the Chinese border, where three ethnic minority groups coordinated an attack against the central military power.

The Arakan Army, which is part of this alliance, then launched an offensive last week in Rakhine in the west, at the same time as clashes were raging in Kayah in the east, not far from the Thai border, between anti-junta fighters and the army.

“The security situation in Rakhine remains alarming, particularly in Pauktaw Township where some 20,000 people have fled to safer locations since the middle of this month,” said Haq.

Entry points to the town have been closed and it is no longer accessible, he said, leaving hundreds of people trapped.

In addition, some 26,000 Rohingya in five refugee camps in Pauktaw cannot be reached, he said.

With more than two million people now displaced in Myanmar, Haq called for urgent funding for humanitarian aid.

**AFP**



# NEW CLASHES IN MYANMAR'S RAKHINE STATE DISPLACE 26,000: UN

**R**enewed fighting this week between Myanmar's military and an ethnic minority armed group has displaced more than 26,000 people in western Rakhine state, the United Nations said on Friday last week.

Ongoing clashes between the Arakan Army

(AA) and the military "have resulted in the displacement of 26,175 people" across Rakhine, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said in an update.

AA fighters launched attacks on security forces in Rakhine and neighbouring Chin state on Mon-



● People displaced by the fighting. Photo: AFP



day, ending a shaky ceasefire and opening another front as the military battles opponents in the north and east.

UNOCHA said at least 11 people had been killed in military shelling of AA positions since Monday.

On Thursday junta troops shelled the town of Pauktaw, 16 miles (25 kilometers) west of state capital Sittwe, and shot at it from helicopters after AA fighters briefly seized the police station, residents told AFP.

The military took control of the town later in the



day, and on Friday local media cited residents saying that around 50 people had been detained and an unknown number were feared dead.

UNOCHA said 19,000 people had been displaced from Pauktaw.

“Virtually all” roads and waterways connecting Rakhine townships have been blocked, UNOCHA said, adding most humanitarian activities in affected townships had been suspended.

It added more than 100 people had reportedly been detained by junta authorities since the renewed clashes.

For years the AA has fought a war for the autonomy of the state’s ethnic Rakhine population in their home near the border with Bangladesh.

### **WIDENING CLASHES**

Since last month AA fighters, in alliance with two other armed ethnic minority groups, have been battling the junta across a swathe of northern Shan state near the border with China.

The alliance, which includes the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) has seized towns and blocked vital trade routes to Myanmar’s northern neighbour.

The offensive has galvanised other opponents of the military, with clashes spreading to Myanmar’s western and eastern borders in what analysts say is the biggest military challenge to the junta since it seized power in 2021.

On Friday anti-coup fighters in eastern Kayah state said they had torched a courthouse in the state capital Loikaw amid clashes with security forces in and around the city.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said Wednesday he was “deeply concerned” about the widening conflict.

AFP



# UN OCHA REPORTS UPSWING IN MYANMAR FIGHTING AND ACUTE AID CHALLENGE

Conflict between the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) and various groups, including Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and People's Defence Forces (PDFs), continues in many parts of the country, with fighting particularly intense in northern Shan, Rakhine, Sagaing, Chin and Mandalay, reports UN OCHA on 23 November.

In Rakhine, armed clashes have again escalated in Pauktaw township, where more than 20,000 people have been newly displaced to safer locations since mid-November. Access here is heavily constrained.

As of 22 November, there are nearly 335,000 people in multiple states and regions who have been newly displaced as a result of the escalation of fighting since 27 October, in large part due to the resistance's Operation 1027. More than 2 million people are now displaced nationwide.

Key transport routes in townships with active fighting have been blocked both by the MAF and EAOs, restricting people's movements to safer locations, as well as hampering humanitarian access. In addition to Lashio and Loikaw, the airport in Kale is now closed.

Despite insecurity, access and telecommunication challenges, small-scale provision of essential humanitarian assistance to affected people continues where possible using a variety of flexible approaches.

UN OCHA notes that while the US\$1 million from the Myanmar Humanitarian Fund is being disbursed to local actors to support those responding to emerging needs in northern Shan, needs in the Northwest, Southeast and Rakhine are increasing by the day and require immediate response. Urgent additional donor support is critical given the 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan remains severely underfunded with



Photo; AFP

only 28 per cent of requirements received this year.

## **EXPANDING FRONTS**

Intense hostilities continue between the MAF and various armed groups, including EAOs and PDFs, across multiple states and regions. Nearly 335,000 people have been newly displaced within northern and southern Shan, Kayah, Rakhine, Chin, Sagaing, Mandalay, eastern Bago, Kayin, Mon, and Tanintharyi due to the surge in conflict since late October. This displacement is creating urgent needs for immediate and ongoing support to both newly displaced and protracted IDP populations, as well as host communities. In addition, almost 200 civilians, including men, women, and children, have reportedly died and 263 others have been injured in the fighting and related insecurity.

In northern Shan State, fighting continues in several townships, resulting in significant civilian casualties (48 fatalities and 136 injuries reported). More than 320 houses and other civilian properties have reportedly been damaged or destroyed in 6 townships. As of 22 November, the number of new IDPs from the current fighting has risen to nearly 82,000 people who are now taking refuge in 141 sites across 15 townships. Most of the displaced people are staying in religious compounds including monasteries and churches, while others are sheltering in host communities, forested areas or paddy fields along the China-Myanmar border in northern Shan, as well as in Pyin Oo Lwin township in Mandalay and in Mansi township in Kachin.

UN OCHA says partners are actively delivering essential aid, including cash, food, and healthcare, to those in need, where access has been possible. Humanitarian assistance has reached about half of the IDPs however, there remains a gap in humanitarian support for some locations in Namhkan, Nawngkhio, Mansi and Pyin Oo Lwin townships due to security situation and access restrictions. In Laukkaing township, 30,000 people, who have been displaced on the border with China, have only been able to receive minimal assistance. Partners are managing to transport some supplies to Lashio, though there is still a high unmet need for cash, food, health supplies, shelter materials, NFIs, and dignity kits among the new IDPs.

## **TENSION IN RAKHINE**

UN OCHA notes that intensified fighting between the MAF and the Arakan Army (AA) in Pauktaw township in central Rakhine, has escalated since the

AA's offensive on 21 November. The clashes, involving ground artillery, naval, and air strikes, have left control of the area uncertain. An artillery shell landed near a Rohingya IDP camp in Pauktaw township without causing any casualties. Nearly 20,000 people from Pauktaw town and nearby villages have been displaced to northern Pauktaw and the southern island, the latter of which also hosts 26,000 Rohingya IDPs from the 2012 violence who have been cut off from aid since 10 November. Approximately 100 civilians were reportedly rescued by the AA from Pauktaw town on 22 November, while around 500 remain trapped in the downtown area. Pauktaw is currently inaccessible, with entry points blocked. Urgent humanitarian and protection assistance, including food, cash, water purification tablets, fuel, emergency healthcare, and medical supplies, is needed. There are ongoing advocacy efforts to secure humanitarian access to the newly displaced, including in Pauktaw, and resume services to those in Rohingya IDP camps.

## **NORTHWEST**

Meanwhile, in the Northwest, armed clashes between the MAF and EAOs/PDFs have escalated since late October in 25 townships across Sagaing, Chin, and Mandalay, causing further displacement and civilian casualties. Approximately 33,000 people are newly displaced from Madaya in Mandalay, Matupi in Chin, and Kale and Taze in Sagaing, contributing to the nearly 150,000 people who have been displaced since early November. These hostilities are thought to have resulted in 60 civilian deaths, 16 injuries including children, and the destruction of 74 houses in Chin, Mandalay, and Sagaing. Reports of arbitrary arrests in Myaing in Magway and Madaya in Mandalay have been received, with fears of detainees being used as porters in military operations. Humanitarian access is hindered by ongoing fighting, roadblocks, and movement restrictions in multiple townships. Kale Airport in Sagaing closed on 21 November following an explosion the previous day, with no reopening date announced. The region faces a fuel crisis, particularly in Kale and Tamu townships, and banking issues pose additional challenges for humanitarian efforts.



# MYANMAR TROOPS DETAIN, KILL RESIDENTS OF RAKHINE TOWN: LOCAL MEDIA



**M**yanmar's junta detained around 50 people and left an unknown number of others feared dead in western Rakhine state after a clash with an ethnic armed group, local media reported on Friday.

Arakan Army (AA) fighters launched attacks on security forces in the west of the country this week, opening another front as the military battles opponents in the north and east.

On Thursday, junta troops shelled the town of Pauktaw and shot at it from helicopters after AA fighters seized the police station, residents told AFP.

The military took control of the town later Thursday, and on Friday, local media cited residents saying that around 50 people had been detained and an unknown number were feared dead.

Thousands had already fled the town of around 20,000 people, the residents said.

The junta has said its forces have taken con-

trol of the town but gave no details on casualties or deaths.

AA fighters are also battling the junta across northern Shan state as part of an alliance of ethnic minority groups that has seized towns and blocked vital trade routes to China.

The AA said on Thursday that an unspecified number of "civilians of Pauktaw" had been killed by the military after troops entered the town.

It pledged to "retaliate".

A ceasefire between the junta and the AA in Rakhine had held until this week, despite the ongoing clashes in the north.

The junta on Wednesday said the AA was "destroying its Rakhine people and regional development" following AA attacks on security forces.

**AFP**



# NUG FOREIGN AFFAIRS MINISTER CALL FOR MORE SUPPORT FROM JAPAN



**T**he National Unity Government (NUG) Foreign Affairs Minister, Zin Mar Aung, called on the Japanese parliament, government and people to provide more effective support for Myanmar's Spring Revolution.

She made the comment at the 'Japan-Myanmar Relations: Past, Present and Future' seminar held at the Office Building of the House of Representatives, in Tokyo, Japan, on 21 November.

Of the Spring Revolution, she said: "Myanmar's Spring Revolution is not calling for a return to the 2008 Constitution, it wants the implementation of a political system that can guarantee a federal democracy that is expected by all ethnic people."

Zin Mar Aung said that the Spring Revolution wants to end the country's tradition of military coups and establish a system that can guarantee democracy, human rights, justice and self-administration.

She also talked about the sacrifices being made by students in Myanmar who are fighting and protesting against the junta.

During her 12-day visit to Japan, from 16 to 28 November, Zin Mar Aung held meetings with Myanmar communities in the country.



# BANGLADESH STOPS SCORES OF ROHINGYA SEEKING TO SAIL TO INDONESIA

**B**angladesh police have clamped down on Rohingya refugees setting sail to Indonesia, officers said Saturday, after hundreds from the persecuted Myanmar minority took the long and risky sea voyage to escape squalid camps.

Some said they had paid traffickers a relative fortune of \$1,000 for a place on a boat.

Bangladesh is home to one million mostly Muslim Rohingya refugees, the majority of whom fled a violent 2017 crackdown by the Myanmar military that is now subject to a United Nations genocide probe.

Conditions in the overcrowded, dangerous and under-resourced relief camps are tough, and refugees have said the situation is worsening due to cuts in food aid, deadly gang battles and a lack of jobs.

As the seas in the Bay of Bengal calm after

monsoon rains, human traffickers are offering hundreds of Rohingya people berths on boats bound for Malaysia and Indonesia, police officers told AFP.


## **SURGE IN NUMBERS**

This month has seen a spike in journeys to Indonesia's westernmost province of Aceh -- a voyage of about 1,800 kilometres (1,120 miles) -- with more than 1,000 arrivals in the biggest such wave since the 2017 crackdown.

Police said they had "stopped and held 58 Rohingya" on Friday night as they reportedly left camps heading to board boats at Teknaf, a Bangladeshi river port just across the border from Myanmar.

"Among them nine are men, 16 are women and 33 are children. We detained two Bangladeshi human traffickers who were allegedly guiding them,"



 Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh. Photo: AFP



Teknaf police station chief Osman Goni told AFP on Saturday.

“They were ready to sail in a boat from Teknaf and were going to Indonesia and Malaysia.”

Goni said all 58 would be sent back to the camps.

Several Rohingya refugees who were held by police told AFP that they had paid human traffickers around \$1,000 each for a boat journey to Indonesia.

“They (the traffickers) kept us in a house, and said they would send us to Indonesia on a boat the next day,” said Selim Ullah, a 22-year-old Rohingya refugee, who was detained with his wife and daughter.

### **‘WE KNOW WE CAN DIE’**

Ullah said a sharply worsening security situation in the camps and opportunities have prompted them to pay the traffickers to sail to Indonesia.

“We thought we can get a better life, education and healthcare there,” he added. “We know we can die in the boat. But as we’re suffering here, we’ve decided

to go there on boats”.

Police say about 60 Rohingya people have been killed in violence in the camps this year.

“There are bandits in the camps,” Ullah said, saying they robbed and extorted people. “They abduct people at night and take them to the hills. We can’t stop them.”

Rabeya, 19, the mother of an infant, was also among the 58. She said she was deeply worried about the safety of her family.

“My husband was kidnapped from the camp twice. Once they took 20,000 taka (\$190) and again 40,000 taka,” she told AFP, saying aid agency food handouts were not enough for her family.

“We can’t do anything with the ration we get. They give us 10 kilograms (22 pounds) of rice per month, which doesn’t cover our monthly food intake. That’s why we decided to go.”

Chris Lewa, director of Rohingya rights organisation the Arakan Project, said on Friday they had confirmed two boats left this week, on the night of the 20 and 21 November, departures confirmed by Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

One boat was carrying around 200 people, and the second had up to 150 people, she said.

Rohingya refugees said Friday a third boat with around 200 people had set sail on Thursday night.

In Myanmar, those Rohingya who remain are facing new challenges to their movement.

The UN said last week that renewed fighting between Myanmar’s military and an armed group belonging to an ethnic minority in Rakhine state -- where many Rohingya are from -- has displaced thousands and restricted movement.

More than 2,000 Rohingya are believed to have attempted the risky journey to other Southeast Asian countries in 2022, according to the UN refugee agency.

Nearly 200 Rohingya died or went missing last year while attempting hazardous sea crossings, the agency has estimated.

**AFP**





# INDONESIA MOVES REJECTED ROHINGYA REFUGEES STRANDED ON BEACH

**M**ore than 200 Rohingya refugees were relocated from the beaches of a remote Indonesian island Wednesday last week after weeks adrift on a wooden boat, as authorities rejected locals' efforts to push the members of the persecuted Myanmar minority back to sea.

The latest arrivals brought to more than 1,000 the number of desperate and exhausted Rohingya who have landed on the shores of Aceh province in the last week.

Thousands from the mostly Muslim minority risk their lives each year making sea journeys from refugee camps in Bangladesh, often in flimsy boats, to try to reach Malaysia or Indonesia.

The latest group of 219 refugees, which included 72 men, 91 women and 56 children, arrived in Sabang city in western Aceh province, at around 11:00 pm (1600 GMT) Tuesday.

But they were rejected by locals who threatened to put them back to sea.

"How can we go anywhere?" 15-year-old Rohingya refugee Abdul Rahman asked. "We don't want to go back."

Local authorities then agreed to their relocation by ferry later on Wednesday to a temporary shelter at an old immigration building in one of Aceh's biggest cities, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) said.



Rohingya arrivals on the beach in Indonesia. Photo: AFP



"The plan is for the refugees to be relocated to a shelter in Lhokseumawe," Sabang social agency head Naufal, who like many Indonesians goes by one name, told AFP.

He said the relocation had been coordinated with UNHCR.

"The (local) government decided to take them to a place designated by the national government," UNHCR protection associate Faisal Rahman told AFP on Wednesday.

A day earlier, 256 previous Rohingya arrivals were given a reprieve when Indonesia granted them three months of temporary shelter and moved them to the same Lhokseumawe facility.

Another 36 Rohingya who arrived in East Aceh on Sunday were also moved to the same location on Wednesday, officials said.

But local immigration official Izhar Rizky told AFP the shelter was "no longer suitable for use" and

said it was in no condition to shelter more than 500 people.

### **'REJECTION VIRUS'**

The recent influx is the biggest wave of Rohingya refugee arrivals to Indonesia since 2015, Ann Maymann, a UNHCR representative in Indonesia, told AFP.

Tuesday's late-night arrivals had spent 15 days at sea after leaving Bangladesh for Aceh, Abdul Rahman said.

The engine of their vessel -- which could be seen bobbing offshore -- had been damaged, leaving them unable to travel elsewhere, he added.

On Wednesday, the refugees were seen huddled on a beach in Sabang -- located on an island off the tip of northern Sumatra -- surrounded by a yellow cordon and security officers to stop them from running away.

Next to screaming babies, some children on the beach whacked the ground and built sandcastles, seemingly oblivious to the situation unfolding around them.

Later in the day the group set off on the ferry journey to mainland Aceh, with staff handing out snacks to children as one sick person was seen being transported on a stretcher and others were placed on the floor.

Many Acehnese, who themselves have memories of decades of bloody conflict, have long been sympathetic to the plight of their fellow Muslims.

But some say their patience has been tested, claiming the Rohingya consume scarce resources and occasionally come into conflict with locals.

### **'EMERGENCY, HUMANITARIAN CRISIS'**

More than a million people from the ethnic group have fled Myanmar since the 1990s, most in the wake of a 2017 military crackdown that forced the bulk of them to settle in camps in Bangladesh.

Indonesia is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention and says it is not compelled to take in refugees from Myanmar, complaining that neighbouring countries have shut their doors.

But rights groups said Jakarta should do more to help under other international conventions such as those that enshrine the safety of life at sea.

"These conventions also oblige Indonesia to save those who are in danger at sea," Amnesty International Indonesia executive director Usman Hamid told AFP.

"The latest wave of new refugees shows there is an emergency and humanitarian crisis experienced by the Rohingya."



AFP



# INSIGHT MYANMAR DELVES INTO RAKHINE ROULETTE

In the wake of Operation 1027, a joint military operation conducted by the Three Brotherhood Alliance—comprised of the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army—the state of the conflict in Myanmar has changed overnight.

The operation involved coordinated attacks on multiple towns in northern Shan State and the Sagaing region, targeting the Myanmar Army, Myanmar Police Force and pro-military militia installations. The Three Brotherhood Alliance's operation has several aims: to safeguard civilians; assert their right to self-defense;





maintain control over their territory; respond to attacks by the State Administration Council; eradicate military rule; combat widespread online gambling fraud, particularly along the China–Myanmar border.

This operation signals a pivotal time in Myanmar’s history. Vladimir Lenin once said, “There are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks when decades happen.” At this moment, Myanmar is going through one of these weeks.

In the attached podcast by Insight Myanmar, Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, an independent writer, analyst and researcher, and author of dozens of articles on human rights, political transitions, and issues related to civil war and the 2021 military coup, delves into the latest developments.

In this wide-ranging interview, he provides an overview of the political context in Rakhine state, detailing the history of the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD), the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP), the Arakan National Party (ANP), and the Arakan Front Party (AFP). He describes the often-fraught relations that the Rakhine people have had over the years with the Burmese military, the Bamar-majority National League for Democracy (NLD), and the Rohingya minority. He also explains the origins of the powerful Arakan Army (AA) and its political affiliate, the United League of Arakan (ULA), delving into their relations with the National Unity Government (NUG), why they initially agreed to a post-coup truce with the State Administration Council (SAC), but then why they have so dramatically broken that truce to join Operation 1027.

Finally, he touches upon the Chinese response to the dramatic escalation, referencing their investment in the region, their relation to various ethnic groups, and their growing concern about the online scam centers operated by the military-aligned Border Force Guards (BGF).

In closing, Kyaw Hsan Hlaing posits that contrary to the opinions of some analysts, the AA/ULA is deeply invested not only in crushing the Burmese mil-

itary, but also in establishing a strong federal democracy. He describes how the high-stakes gamble that the AA took in joining the operation is very much in line with this aim. It’s a gamble because after the coup, the Rakhine people had enjoyed relative stability amid the rest of the country’s chaos because of that truce, but now they find themselves in the military’s cross-hairs once again. Yet if they make it through the present challenges and the military is defeated, the country has a real chance to become a stable democracy, which will benefit not only the Rakhine people, but all the citizens of Myanmar.

Listen to the Insight Myanmar podcast here: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2023/11/1/rakhine-roulette-emergency-edition>

# MYANMAR: INTENSE FIGHTING SPREADS TO CITIES, AS CIVILIANS SEEK SHELTER

The conflict between ethnic armed groups and the Myanmar military has expanded to the country's eastern and western regions, with urban areas increasingly affected by intense fighting and aerial bombardment, UN agencies have reported.

In the fighting so far, about 70 civilians - and combatants who are out of action - have reportedly been killed and over 90 wounded, according to the UN human rights office (OHCHR).

The fighting has also fuelled a fresh wave of displacement, driving over 200,000 people from their homes since 27 October.

In all, over two million people have been displaced across Myanmar.

## **TRANSPORT, COMMUNICATION DISRUPTED**

According to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), key transport routes in areas with active fighting have been blocked by both the military and the ethnic armed organizations.

There are also reports that at least one critical bridge was destroyed, and an airport has closed, restricting people's movements to safer locations as well as access for humanitarians.



Photo: UN News



Telecommunication networks are being increasingly disrupted.

## **REPRISALS FORBIDDEN**

Spokesperson Jeremy Laurence, said OHCHR is closely monitoring developments in Myanmar, amid reports that several hundred soldiers have laid down their weapons.

“It is essential that all those captured are treated humanely,” he said on Friday, stressing that reprisals are absolutely forbidden under international law.

“Individual soldiers are not collectively responsible for crimes and human rights violations that have been committed by the military,” he added.

The OHCHR spokesperson said past behaviour indicated that when the military junta’s forces

suffered setbacks in the field, they use even greater force, through indiscriminate and disproportionate air strikes and artillery barrages.

“Over the past two years, we have documented the severe impact of such tactics on the civilian population,” he said.

## **UN CHIEF DEEPLY CONCERNED**

UN Secretary-General António Guterres also voiced deep concern over the worsening situation in Myanmar.

“He calls on all parties to adhere to international humanitarian law and do their utmost to protect civilians,” UN Spokesperson, Stéphane Dujarric, said in a statement earlier this week.

Civilians should be protected in accordance with international humanitarian law, and those responsible for violations must be held accountable, Mr. Dujarric said.

“The Secretary-General appeals for unhindered access for the delivery of urgent humanitarian assistance and essential services through all channels. The safety and security for UN agencies and their partners is crucial,” he added.

## **EARTHQUAKE**

Meanwhile, Myanmar’s Shan state, one of the provinces affected by the fighting, was struck by a 5.7 magnitude earthquake Friday morning shortly after 8 AM local time.

According to media reports, no casualties or major damage have been recorded. Earthquake modelling estimates suggest that about 20,000 people were exposed to significant tremors during the quake.

**Courtesy of UN News**





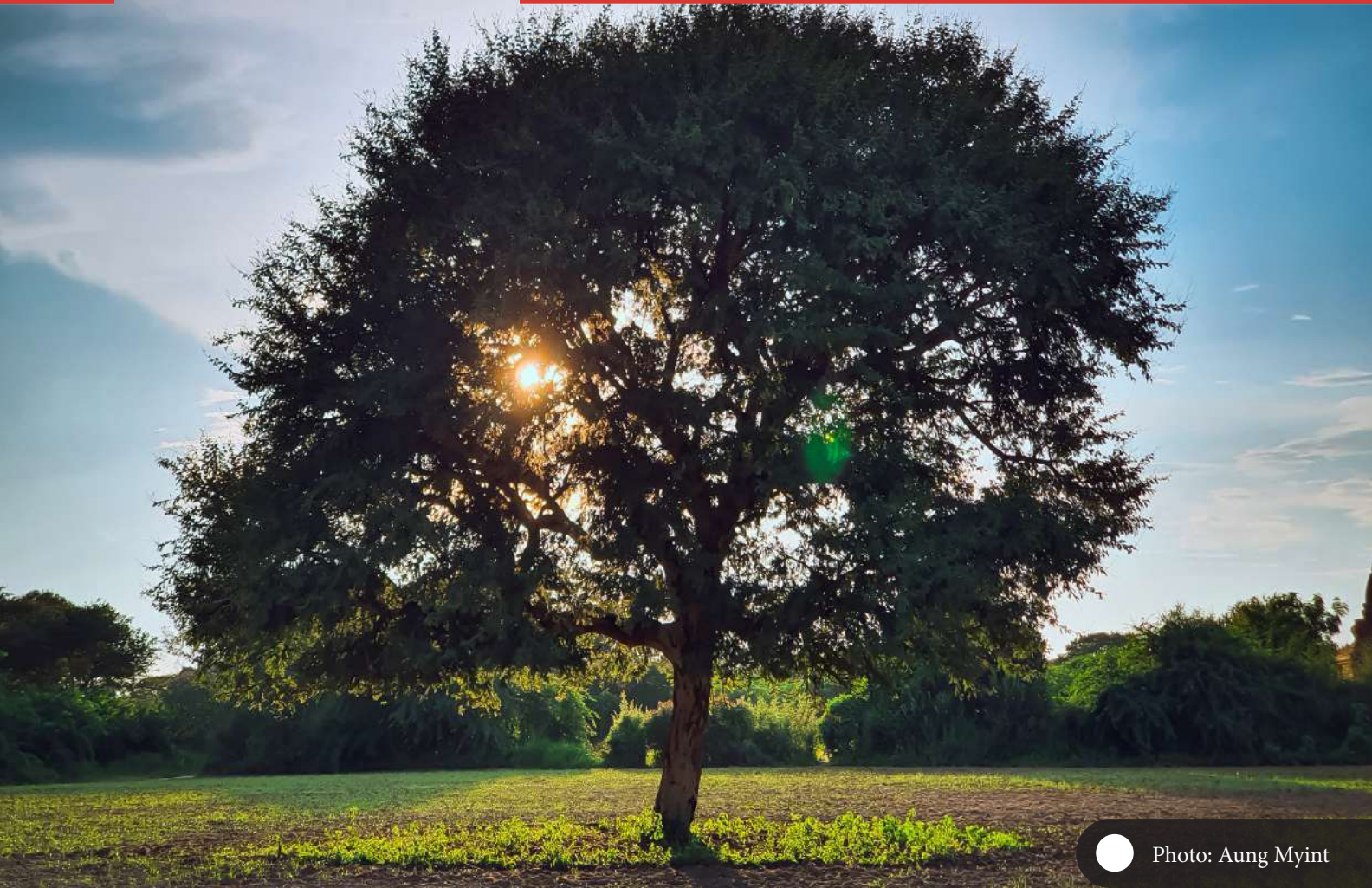


Photo: Aung Myint

## **KARENNI STATE**

### ***Karenni State Interim Parliament announced***

The Karenni State Legislative Committee has changed its name to the Karenni State Interim Parliament (KSIP), according to a 17 November 2023 statement.

The name change was approved by the Karenni State Consultative Council (KSCC).

The interim legislative body was set up by 15 representatives from Karenni State elected as Members of Parliament (MPs) in 2020. They will work to enact laws, represent the people and ensure a system of checks and balances between the executive and legislative branches, according to the statement.

It also said that the parliament will engage with national and international political stakeholders

and coordinate and collaborate with organisations to address the needs of the Karenni people.

The KSIP also pledged to eliminate all forms of authoritarianism, restore national equality, support the democratic system and establish a genuine federal democratic union.

There have been over 700 clashes between the junta military and defence forces in Karenni State since the coup in February 2021, according to local rights groups.

The number of airstrikes by the junta in Karenni State for the first half of 2023 was double the number for the same periods in 2021 and 2022, according to the monitoring group the Progressive Karenni People Force (PKPF).





## THAI AIR CHIEF MEETS WITH MYANMAR JUNTA LEADER AMID CONCERNS OVER GROWING MILITARY TIES

**T**hailand's Air Chief Marshal Punpakdee Pattanakul met with Myanmar junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on November 23 to discuss issues of cooperation between the two countries, according to the junta-controlled media.

The meeting took place in Nay Pyi Taw, the capital of Myanmar.

Meanwhile, political observers expressed concern about the growing closeness between the Thai and Myanmar air forces, saying that the strengthening of air force relations between the two countries could have a negative impact on the bases of armed resistance groups on the Thai-Myanmar border.

Some of the military bases of the resistance forces are on the Thai-Myanmar border. If those camps are bombed by the Myanmar junta, and if the Thai side agrees, it will pose problems for resistance groups, said observers.

The two leaders discussed a range of issues, including training, logistics, and counterterrorism, according to the junta media.

Prior to meeting with General Min Aung Hlaing, Thailand's Air Chief met with his Myanmar counterpart General Tun Aung on November 22.

## BANGLADESH-MYANMAR BORDER TRADE STOPS AFTER WAR BREAKS OUT IN RAKHINE

**R**enewed fighting in Rakhine State between Myanmar junta forces and the Arakan Army (AA) has led to the shutdown of Myanmar-Bangladesh border trade, according to local merchants.

Fierce fighting started on 13 November in Re-thadaung, Maungdaw, Pauktaw and Minbyar Townships between the AA and government forces. A trader from Maungdaw said that the border trade between two countries stopped after the war broke out again.

Bangladesh-based importers said that they were concerned over the border trade between two countries through the Naf River port as the fighting was raging in Rakhine State.

The news report said that these importers would incur losses of about 150 million Takas after the border trade was stopped by war.

Bangladesh mainly imports foodstuffs such as frozen fish, onion, and ginger from Myanmar and five to six cargo vessels arrived daily at Bangladesh ports before the renewed war.

Bangladesh imported over 40 tonnes of fish from Sittwe port in Myanmar to Teknaf port in Bangladesh on 14 November but it was the last shipment and also Bangladesh did not export any cargo since then to Myanmar.

The data from Cox's Bazar Customs Department says that Bangladeshi importers imported goods worth US\$192 million in 2022 through Teknaf port.

The stoppage of border trade was the result of the Myanmar Military Council closing all roadways and waterways in Rakhine State after the war broke out, prompting merchants on both sides to incur losses.

A news report in Bangladesh media said that Bangladesh imported 1,300 tonnes of onion from Myanmar in October this year and 600 tonnes of onion and 400 tonnes of wheat were yet to be imported.

Myanmar uses Sittwe Shwe Min Gan port and Maungdaw Kanyin Chaung trade zone for exporting forest products, aquatic products and agricultural products to Bangladesh Teknaf port in border trade.



# MYANMAR FUEL PRICES RISING IN DOMESTIC MARKET



**T**he fuel prices in the domestic market are rising after the Singapore MOPS (Mean of Platts Singapore) fuel price index also rose.

According to the announcement made by Fuel Import Storage and Distribution Supervising Committee on 23 November, the reference prices for Yangon Region are 2,210 Kyats per litre for RON 92 petrol and 2,350 Kyats per litre for RON 95 petrol.

On 21 November, the fuel prices were stable at 2,105 for RON 92, 2,240 Kyats for RON 95, 2,125 Kyats for ordinary diesel and 2,215 Kyats for premium diesel.

According to the Fuel Import Storage and Distribution Supervising Committee, fuel prices are rising in other states and regions too.

The Singapore MOPS index for fuel were US\$86.18 per barrel for RON 92 and US\$ 92.65 per barrel for RON 95 on 17 November, and then it rose to US\$ 91.30 for RON 92 and US\$ 97.3 for RON 95 on 21 November.

Local residents from Kalay Myo said that the filling stations were seen with long queues of vehicles even at the price of 48,000 Kyats per gallon (approx.3.78 liters) and also roadside shops selling fuel were running dry.

Similarly, the local residents in Lao Gai where the fierce fighting is raging said that the fuel price had reached the exorbitant price of over 80,000 Kyats per liter for petrol.

The Military Council is planning to import fuel from Russia for distribution in the domestic market.

The Military Council said in June that Myanmar and Russia had reached an agreement to jointly work between ministries from both countries for meeting fuel and electricity demand in Myanmar.

The Military Council said that the domestic fuel prices were fair in comparison with prices in the neighbouring countries and they claimed that they had enough fuel stock for distribution in the domestic market.

But in reality the fuel is rationed at filling stations with a prescribed quota for each vehicle per day and the people could buy only the limited amount. Moreover, the fuel prices are rising in the market after the US dollar-Kyat exchange rate was worsening.

# SALT PRODUCED IN MON STATE TO BE EXPORTED TO JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA



Photo: Quang Ngyuen Vinh

**T**he Mon State Salt Producers Association said that they would export raw salt produced in the State to Japan and Korea markets.

South Korea signed an MoU with Myanmar in the last week of September this year to import salt produced in Myanmar to meet domestic demand in Korea.

Mon State is reportedly planning to export high quality salt produced in the State before the end of this year.

In the meantime, they have already sent samples to South Korea and then they received an order of 40 tonnes of salt, in two shipping containers, for initial export.

South Korea produces about 3 million tonnes of salt annually but they have to import about 7 million tonnes every year to meet domestic demand.

The salt farmers in Mon State will get a stable and firm market if they can export their salt to South Korea.

Besides Korea, Mon State is looking to export salt to Japan. Japanese agents told them to put aside 30 shipping containers, about 600 tonnes of salt, for export in this open season.

Mon State is the second largest salt producing area in Myanmar and over 50,000 tonnes of salt are produced every year from over 4,500 salt farms. The normal salt harvesting time is in December every year.

Mon State Salt Producers Association says salt produced in Mon State is distributed to all States and Regions in Myanmar.



**Penrose Thitsa**

## **JUNTA DEPUTY COMMERCE MINISTER'S OPTIMISTIC RHETORIC FAILS TO MASK MYANMAR'S GRIM REALITY**

**A**midst the backdrop of the Sichuan-Chongqing Region of China and Mekong Countries Sub-National Cooperation Forum 2023, Myanmar junta's Deputy Minister of Commerce, Min Min, gave a speech at the forum, reported iChongqing, a local government media agency located in Chongqing Municipality, China.

In his interview and address, on November 23, he painted a vivid picture of Myanmar's economic ties with China and the Mekong sub-region, highlighting the potential of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor.

The New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor, a trade and logistics route with its heart in Chongqing, has woven connections to 190 ports across 90 diverse countries.

This corridor stands as a significant participant in the Belt and Road Initiative—an expansive global economic connectivity endeavor orchestrated by China, joining numerous other pathways in this program.

Despite Myanmar minister's optimistic rhetoric, the inauguration of the cross-border road-rail inter-modal trains, connecting Chongqing to Ruili in Myanmar, served as a hollow symbol of progress. The reality is that Myanmar, under the oppressive rule of the military junta, remains a war-torn nation, its infrastructure ravaged, and its economy crippled.

Myanmar's currency, the kyat, has depreciated by over 60% since the military coup in February 2021, plunging the country into a severe economic crisis.



CULTURE & LIFESTYLE

# IN FOCUS







## TAKING A BREAK

This picture taken on November 21 shows a man resting after performing a traditional dance during a ceremony at the Tazaungdaing festival, also known as the Festival of Lights, in Taunggyi in Myanmar's Shan State. The usually riotous Tazaungdaing festival was muted this year, with revellers staying away and a heavy presence of security personnel, as Myanmar's military battles coordinated attacks across the country.

Photo: AFP



# MYANMAR TAZAUNGDAING FIREWORKS FESTIVAL MUTED AS CLASHES SPREAD

**A** brightly patterned hot air balloon spitting fireworks soared into the night sky above Myanmar's Shan state as a much-loved festival returned, but crowds stayed away from the military-backed event as violent clashes swell across the country.

Tuesday last week marked the return of the Tazaungdaing festival to the city of Taunggyi after a three-year hiatus due to the coronavirus pandemic and unrest following the military seizing power in 2021.

The usually riotous event sees teams load batteries of fireworks into homemade hot air balloons,

with referees judging both the design of the contraptions and the magnificence of their aerial explosions.

But this year's military-managed celebration was muted, with revellers staying away and a heavy presence of security personnel deployed as the junta battles coordinated attacks across the country.

Taunggyi lies towards the southwestern edge of Shan state, around 350 kilometres (220 miles) away from the state's northeast, which has seen intense fighting since an armed alliance of ethnic minority groups launched an offensive against the junta on October 27.

Masked soldiers stood watch next to a sig-



● Making merit during the festival.  
Photo: AFP



nal-jamming truck in the city, and the shadows of others standing guard on the surrounding hills were silhouetted against the dusk sky.

A convoy of four-wheel-drive vehicles delivered local dignitaries -- some accompanied by pro-military militia bodyguards -- to the stage, where they watched hundreds of school and college students perform synchronised dances.

In the spectators' area across the fence -- usually packed with revellers -- people sat on blankets in small scattered groups.

"There are fewer people coming this year," said Nu Nu Sein, 70.

"I'm really sorry. Many more people should be here."

Launching the balloons requires teamwork and daring.

Team members hold up the heavy canvas balloons and inflate them by holding flaming torches underneath.

Once the balloon has filled with hot air, they attach a wooden frame loaded with fireworks, light the fuse and release the balloon.

The payload is timed to go off once the balloon has achieved a safe height, but in the past there have been injuries and even deaths from mistimed firings.

On Tuesday, teams banged drums and cymbals as each balloon was launched into the sky, the clamour competing with dance music thumping from a nearby fairground.

Win Aung, 54, said he enjoyed the event, despite the thinner crowds.

"We have to do it with the people we have here," he said after his team had launched their balloon.

"I really enjoy playing with gunpowder... I can't stand by when this festival arrives."

## **FIGHTING RAGES**

A rock band on a stage belted out old favourites, including one wistful number about pretty Shan ladies selling local delicacies on the road to the town of Muse on the China border.

That road has been cut by the offensive launched last month by the alliance of ethnic minority groups across a swathe of northern Shan state.

The move has hampered the junta's ability to send reinforcements to tackle the offensive, which has seized a cross-border trade hub and dozens of military outposts.

Muse previously handled a sizeable share of border commerce with Myanmar's biggest trade partner, China, and the recent blockage is denying the cash-strapped junta taxes and foreign exchange.

In recent days junta-controlled media have published notices denying petrol shortages and restrictions on withdrawals at banks.

Wednesday's edition of the Global New Light of Myanmar refuted "false news" that young people were being press-ganged from the streets into serving as porters for the military.

The clashes in the north have galvanised other opponents of the junta, who have launched attacks in the east and west of the country in what analysts say is the biggest challenge to the military leadership since it seized power.

On Tuesday the military and anti-coup fighters said they were battling for control of a state capital in the east.

Anti-coup fighters also launched drone attacks on two airports in northern Sagaing region, hundreds of kilometres from Kayah, junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun said.

"I'm also scared coming here," said Nu Nu Sein at the festival in Taunggyi.

"I was asked not to go to very crowded places."

"I want all to be peaceful and happy. I wish no one had to face the situation like this."

**AFP**



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