

DELVING INTO MYANMAR SCAMS AND ITS VICTIMS

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# TURNING POINT?

**Myanmar junta leader offers carrot  
and stick as resistance advances**



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# ONLY HEROES NEED APPLY

**T**he National Unity Government (NUG) Foreign Minister touched on an important issue in an interview last week.

Zin Mar Aung was speaking to Nikkei Asia magazine and mentioned a core issue that will need to be dealt with after the Myanmar military junta is defeated.

As part of any future transformation to democracy, the parallel government's foreign minister pledged to turn the country's "un-professional" army into one that would "protect the people and institutions."

"We are not trying to abolish the entire military. We are trying to transform the military. We need heroes and reformists in the military," Zin Mar Aung was reported as saying.

Reworking the Myanmar military will need great care as the NUG and other reformers seek to create a federal, democratic union. Myanmar's Tatmadaw has failed the Myanmar people. It was not just the illegal usurping of power from the people – kicking out the duly elected Aung San Suu Kyi government. It has been the brutality the Tatmadaw has displayed over the last two and a half years. The body tasked with "protecting the people" has done the opposite and carried out over 200 massacres, indiscriminate attacks on

civilians, tens of thousands of arrests, and overseen brutal torture and killing.

According to the NUG, junta leader Min Aung Hlaing and his cohorts have overseen this brutality and deserve no place in a future Myanmar. Not only that. They need to be brought to account.

The future of the Myanmar armed forces will need careful thought and the NUG – as self-professed representatives of the people's will – need to tread carefully. The Myanmar Tatmadaw is the birthchild of Myanmar Independence hero Aung San – Aung San Suu Kyi's father. Aung San – if he had been alive – would likely have watched with horror and sadness the trajectory of the armed forces from General Ne Win's coup in 1962 up until the present day.

Given the potential demands of the NUG and the array of resistance players, crafting a suitable place for the armed forces in a free Myanmar under a federal, democratic union will be an extremely difficult process. Heroes and reformists will indeed be needed as the Tatmadaw is shaped into the servant and protector of the people.

**EDITORIAL**

**mizzima**  
WEEKLY

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Cover photo of Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing by AFP

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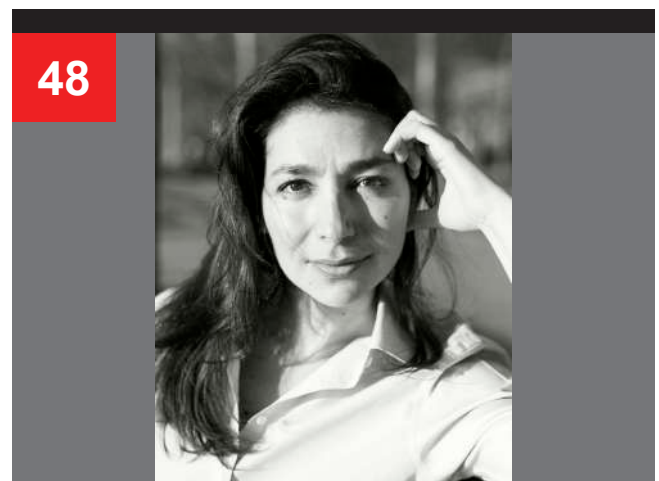
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## TENSION IN YANGON

**M**yanmar soldiers on a truck on the streets of Myanmar's commercial capital. The Myanmar junta has tightened security due to increased resistance attacks and threats to Yangon.

Photo: AFP

IN FOCUS



## DAWEI PRISON IN TANINTHARYI REGION BURNED DOWN

The new Dawei Prison was set on fire at about 9:30 a.m. on 3 December as its construction was nearing completion, according to locals.

Construction of the prison, which is in Zee Kya Village, Yephyu Township, in Tanintharyi Region's Dawei District, close to Dawei University of Technology, had been ongoing for about four months, according to local residents.

One of them said: "I heard that some of the workers' barracks and machinery were destroyed, but I cannot confirm which organisation was responsible for the attack."

After it set fire to the prison the armed group that carried out the attack fired small arms in the vi-

cinity of the prison for several minutes. This caused construction workers working on the prison to flee the area, according to a local source.

A soldier of the Dawei-based People's Defense Force (PDF) said: "As of now, the group responsible [for the attack] remains unidentified, but we can confirm that it was the People's Defense Team that carried out the act. I believe a press release will be issued shortly."

On 30 September members of an unidentified armed organisation apprehended two prison staff members who had arrived to initiate the construction of the new Dawei Prison. They then freed five prisoners and transported them to a liberated area.

## PETROL PRICE RISES FOLLOWED BY PETROL SHORTAGES THROUGHOUT MYANMAR

Petrol traders have reported petrol shortages throughout Myanmar as the price of petrol in the country has surged to its highest-ever level.

In Mandalay and Yangon petrol stations, 92 Octane was sold at 2,250 Kyat per liter, and 95 Octane at 2,350 Kyat per liter throughout November. On 1 December, the price of 92 Octane surged to 2,560 Kyat, and 95 Octane rose to 2,690 Kyat, an increase of over 300 kyats a litre. Petrol has remained at that price until the time of reporting, on 6 December.

As of 5 December, there have been petrol shortages throughout the country.

A Mandalay taxi driver said: "Many fuel stations, except for large fuel stations, have run out of fuel, and some stations have temporarily closed. I have had to drive around the city since dawn to obtain 30,000 Kyat worth of 92 Octane."

Market analysts attribute the abrupt price increase to the Central Bank's decision to, as of 1 December, stop selling 50 per cent of imported fuel at a cheaper rate, by calculating its price in kyats using a US dollar exchange rate of 2,106.30 Kyat to the dollar.

Also probably contributing to the shortages was an order from the junta telling industrial zone entrepreneurs that they will have to directly import any fuel they need themselves, from 5 December.

A market analyst said: "Prices [of fuel] continue to rise annually, especially under the control of the junta. Both gold and dollar prices have also seen increases despite their governance."

The junta has not commented on the rising price of petrol.

Currently, there has been no increase in the price of diesel fuel.



# TOWNS IN CONFLICT-HIT RAKHINE STATE GRAPPLING WITH RICE SHORTAGES

Residents report that certain townships in Rakhine State are currently grappling with food shortages.

Towns like Pauktaw, Ponnagyun, and Kyauktaw find themselves in a precarious situation with limited rice supplies, and in Maungdaw, rice has become so scarce that it is no longer available for purchase, according to residents.

A resident of Maungdaw said, “We have completely run out of rice, and even the local stores are depleted. Our food supplies are exhausted, and we are unable to afford eggs. We have been unable to purchase basic necessities for several days now.”

In recent days, the available food in Maungdaw has been sold at significantly inflated prices, with the cost of a bag of Paw San Hmwe (Myanmar rice) rising from over 100,000 Kyats to 220,000 Kyats. Similarly, the price of a viss (approx. 1.63kg) of palm oil surged from 8,000 Kyat to 20,000 Kyat, and the cost of an egg escalated from 250 to 900 Kyats. However, as of 30 November, these essential items are no longer available, even at such inflated prices.

In neighbouring Pauktaw Town, where there is heavy fighting between the Arakan Army (AA) and the junta, residents are grappling with a shortage of rice and consuming less rice, according to an official from the Pauktaw Town Social Assistance Association.

“Rice has become increasingly scarce, and virtually all essential food items are in short supply,” he said. “With road closures preventing us from shopping in Sittwe, our rice consumption has decreased significantly. Some are foraging for vegetables to supplement their meals. Due to insufficient food, some are forced to eat very modest portions without any curry. The lack of telecommunications has compelled us to climb the mountain for connectivity.”

According to some Pauktaw residents, the rice shortages may be due to a lack of fuel availability. Not only does this make it harder to transport rice, it also means that farmers are unable to plough their fields and plant rice.

The Pauktaw residents said that the situation is being made worse because the junta has been blockading town entrances preventing the movement of food and commodities in and out of towns, which could lead to civilians starving.

Many people go to Sittwe to buy basic commodities and food items as it is the largest town in the area. But now, because of fuel shortages, it is much harder for people to get to Sittwe and even if they can get there they might be unable to enter the town as the junta are blockading the entrances to Sittwe.

The junta also exacerbated food shortages in Rakhine State by closing roads and rivers to transport from 13 to 30 November.

The AA started a new offensive in Rakhine State on 13 November and there are an increasing number of conflicts between the AA and the junta in Pauktaw and Paletwa townships.



Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing is running out of options. Photo: AFP

# TURNING POINT?

Myanmar junta offers carrot and stick as resistance advances



**M**yanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing is in dire straits. A public statement by Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing this week indicates the Myanmar leader and his military may be on the backfoot, struggling in the face of increased armed resistance in the country in the wake of Operation 1027.

Min Aung Hlaing appears to be waving the carrot and the stick.

Myanmar's junta chief has called on ethnic armed groups battling the military across the country to find a "political solution", state media reported on Tuesday. The junta is reeling from coordinated offensives near the borders with China, India and Thailand, in what analysts say is the biggest threat to its rule since it seized power in 2021. Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing "warned that if armed organisations keep on being foolish, residents of the relevant regions will suffer bad impacts", according to the Global New Light of Myanmar. "So, it is necessary to consider the lives of the people, and those organisations need to solve their problems politically," he said.

"If armed groups persevere with their mistakes, only local populations will suffer the consequences. So, they should have sympathy for civilians who are bearing the brunt of the fighting. Armed groups should not persevere with their mistakes, and there is a need to find political solutions," Min Aung Hlaing said.

### **TRYING TO TRICK THE OPPOSITION**

Trying to lay the blame at the door of resistance and ethnic armed groups, Min Aung Hlaing is suggesting that his opponents put down their weapons and sidle up to the negotiating table – if they know what is good for them. That's the carrot.

The stick is the implied threat that local populations will suffer from the wrath of the Myanmar military if the resistance does not play the junta's game – using negotiations to turn down the heat, allowing the military to attempt to keep the upper hand.

### **AT A TIPPING POINT?**

Are Min Aung Hlaing and his generals at a tipping point? Myanmar watchers suggest the military junta is losing the war. His military forces are over-



Min Aung Hlaing on a visit in 2022 to Russia.  
Photo: AFP



● Opposition to military rule in Myanmar is steadfast.  
Photo: AFP

stretched. Myanmar has more than a dozen ethnic minority armed groups, many of which hold territory in the country's border regions and have battled the military since independence from Britain in 1948. In late October three groups launched a joint offensive under the name Operation 1027 across northern Shan state, capturing towns and seizing vital trade hubs on the China border. More than 250 civilians, including children, are feared to have died since the launch of the offensive in October, according to United Nations field reports. Over 500,000 people have been displaced across the country, the UN said. Galvanised by the offensive, People's Defence Forces formed after the coup that ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's government have launched renewed attacks on the military in the north and east. Last week PDF fighters said they controlled parts of the capital of eastern Karenni State Loikaw and were battling to dislodge junta troops from the city. In addition, the Arakan Army (AA) has broken their year-old ceasefire with the junta and attacked a number of positions on their home ground in Rakhine State.

### **DESPERATE RECRUITMENT**

Development Media Group (DMG) reports Myanmar's military regime has invited soldiers who have deserted or gone absent without leave to return

to the barracks, promising that they will not be punished for any minor crimes they might have committed. The fact that the regime has invited deserters and personnel who have gone absent without leave back into the fold amid an expanding nationwide resistance offensive indicates a shortage of personnel, a politician, who did not want to be named, told DMG. "This shows how much junta forces have been depleted, and the regime is doomed to defeat," said the politician.

### **SECURITY BREAKING DOWN**

Min Aung Hlaing oversees a failed state as security breaks down, the economy struggles, and delivery of supplies – everything from fuel to food – falter. The junta's sources of income are also suffering due to sanctions.

The question now is how will the junta respond as resistance forces step up their operations. Both China and India this week reportedly called on the junta to pursue national reconciliation.

# 19 ATTACKS ON MYANMAR HEALTHCARE IN LAST TWO WEEKS OF NOVEMBER

Insecurity Insight, who already documented at least 323 attacks on Myanmar's health system this year till 31 October, has now documented a further 19 attacks from 15 to 28 November 2023.

Between 1 January and 31 October 2023, according to Insecurity Insight, 29 health workers were killed and 123 healthcare facilities were damaged.

Insecurity Insight said: "These attacks undermine health care providers' ability to effectively meet patient needs, maintain safe staffing levels and impact the population's access to health care."

Below are the details of the attacks on healthcare between 15 to 28 November, as documented by Insecurity Insight:

As reported on 17 November 2023: In Kyain Seikgyi town, township, and district, Kayin state, a hospital that was taken over and occupied by the Myanmar military on 02 November following clashes between a joint force of ethnic armed groups and local resistance forces and the Myanmar military in the area stopped functioning. From 2 November, the hospital functioned only for limited hours during daytime. Starting from 10 November, the hospital was closed down and local civilians fled in fear of further clashes. Source: Karen Information Centre

17 November 2023: In Minbya town and township, Mrauk-U district, Rakhine state, the operation theatre building of a fully-functioning hospital was severely damaged by artillery fire allegedly launched by the Myanmar military during armed clashes between the Myanmar military and a joint forces of three ethnic armed groups (the Arakan Army, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army). No patients or health worker injuries were reported. After the incident many patients left the hospital, with some relocated to other hospital buildings, and the hospital had to function in a low profile. Sources: Facebook, Narinjara, and NP News

17 November 2023: In Minbya town and township, Mrauk-U district, Rakhine state, an INGO clinic suspended its activities after the operation theatre building of a nearby fully-functioning hospital was severely damaged by artillery fires allegedly launched by the Myanmar military during armed clashes between the Myanmar military and a joint forces of three ethnic armed groups (the Arakan Army, the Ta'ang National

Liberation Army, and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army). Sources: Facebook, Narinjara and NP News

17 November 2023: In Pauktaw town and township, Sittwe district, Rakhine state, a fully-functioning hospital stopped functioning due to intensifying clashes between ethnic armed groups and the Myanmar military. Pro-democratic media reported that the hospital stopped functioning due to land, air, and navy attacks by the Myanmar military after the town had been taken over by the ethnic armed group. Patients and health workers evacuated from the hospital were reportedly amongst 100 to 200 people banned from leaving the town by the Myanmar military. Pro-military media reported that the hospital had been evacuated and medicines and consumables had been taken away by the ethnic armed groups before the attack. Sources: Development Media Group, Facebook, Radio Free Asia and Telegram

17 November 2023: In Kula village, Ku Lar village tract, Nagzun township, Myingyan district, Mandalay region, a non-CDM-affiliated health assistant and her female companion were taken from a fully-functioning rural health centre by an armed group. Their bodies were found with gunshot wounds on 18 November. The junta accused local resistance forces of this attack. Sources: Facebook, Mizzima and Telegram

17 November 2023: In Maubin town, township, and district, Ayeyarwady region, a 200-bed hospital was occupied by the Myanmar military starting from 17 November 2023 after heightened armed clashes in other states and regions. Source: Ayeyarwaddy Times

17 November 2023: In Pan Hseng town, Muse township and district, Shan state (North), a hospital was damaged in an armed drone attack. There were no casualties since the hospital stopped functioning just before the attack due to heightened clashes in the area. The perpetrator was not reported. Sources: Facebook, Mizzima, and Myanmar Transparency News

18 & 19 November 2023: In Budalin town, township, and district, Sagaing region, a hospital was damaged by artillery fire on 18 November. The same day, health workers at the hospital received warnings from local resistance forces urging them to leave the

hospital no later than 1 pm on 19 November. At least 20 health workers, including two doctors, an unspecified number of nurses, a medical superintendent, an X-ray technician and a laboratory technician left, causing patients to flee the hospital. On 19 November, the Myanmar military seized medicines and equipment from the hospital and sealed the building. These events took place after armed clashes between local resistance forces and the Myanmar military in the township. Other public services in the town, including the fire brigade, immigration, and Myanmar economic bank, stopped functioning. Sources: Democratic Voice of Burma, Irrawaddy, Myaelatt Athan, Myanmar Now and Voice of Myanmar

20 November 2023: In an unnamed IDP camp, Demoso township, Loikaw district, Kayah state, a volunteer female medic and ten elderly civilians were severely injured by bombs dropped from jet fighter(s) by the Myanmar military. Source: Kantarawaddy Times

20 November 2023: In Namhkan town and township, Muse district, Shan state (North), a hospital was entered by Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) fighters. Pro-democracy media reported that nurses were forcefully asked to provide medicine to the armed group, leading some to leave their duty station. In addition, TNLA soldiers were reportedly receiving treatment at the hospital and allegedly occupying it. Sources: Facebook, Shan News and Shwe Phee Myay News Agency

21 November 2023: In Nat Ye village, Kyauk Htu town, Saw township, Gangaw district, Magway region, a defence service nurse and her Myanmar military soldier husband were arrested by the military from their home with accusations of links to local resistance forces. Source: Zalen

22 November 2023: In Taze town and township, Ye-U district, Sagaing region, a hospital, staff houses, police station, and a football ground occupied by the Myanmar military were attacked by local resistance forces who seized medicines and weapons. Artillery was reportedly launched at the hospital building. The hospital was functioning before armed clashes in the township. Sources: Mizzima, Myanmar Now, Myanmar Pressphoto Agency, VOA Burmese and Voice of Myanmar

As reported on 23 November 2023: In Kawka-reik town, township, and district, Kayin state, a 100-bed hospital was closed down after most health workers left their duty station due to a warning issued by the Karen National Union (KNU) on 17 November 2023, urging government servants to leave the town. Source: Myanmar Pressphoto Agency

23 November 2023: In Mawlamyine town, township, and district, Mon state, a male pharmacy owner and another male civilian were arrested by the Myanmar military on accusations of providing support to local resistance forces. Source: Myanmar Pressphoto Agency

24 November 2023: In Salingyi town and township, Yinmabin district, Sagaing region, a hospital, police station, and general administrative office occupied by the Myanmar military were attacked by local resistance forces using small firearms. The hospital was functioning before the heightened armed clashes in Myanmar. Sources: Mizzima and Myanmar Pressphoto Agency

25 November 2023: In Loikaw town, township, and district, Kayah state, LNGOs were banned from provision of ambulance, rescue and relocation services. The service was restricted from 11 November after armed clashes broke out in the town. Sources: Myanmar Pressphoto Agency and Radio Free Asia

26 November 2023: In Salingyi town and township, Yinmabin district, Sagaing region, a hospital occupied by at least 150 Myanmar military soldiers was attacked by local resistance forces, using small firearms. Source: Democratic Voice of Burma

26 November 2023: In Man Awng village and village tract, Namhkam township, Muse district, Shan state (North), the buildings of a hospital were severely damaged and a female hospital guard and a child were injured due to bombs dropped from jet fighter(s) by the Myanmar military. The hospital was newly built in 2020 but was not functional due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 military coup. Sources: Irrawaddy, Myanmar Now and Radio Free Asia

As reported on 28 November 2023: In Namhkan town and township, Muse district, Shan state (North), most health workers left a hospital and patients had to seek health care elsewhere after wounded Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) members were treated by TNLA medics at the hospital and some TNLA soldiers positioned themselves at the hospital for security reason. Source: Democratic Voice of Burma

28 November 2023: In Taze town and township, Ye-U district, Sagaing region, a hospital, police station, general administrative office, and football ground occupied by the Myanmar military were attacked by local resistance forces. The Myanmar military used artillery and airforce in the clashes. Source: Radio Free Asia.

# MYANMAR JUNTA TO HOST 26TH MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE OF THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION

**J**ustice For Myanmar is calling for the cancellation of the 26th Ministerial Conference of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) program, due to be hosted by the Myanmar junta, in Naypyidaw on 15 December.

The Asian Development Bank, which acts as the GMS Secretariat, has told Justice For Myanmar that it will not attend the Ministerial Conference and will not provide any support. In response to an email, an ADB spokesperson told Justice For Myanmar, “The Asian Development Bank (ADB) will not attend the 26th GMS Ministerial Conference. In addition, ADB will not provide any funding for the event, nor provide logistical or advisory support. ADB also will not finance the costs of any developing member countries’ attendees.”

Justice For Myanmar wants GMS countries to cancel the conference and ban the junta from the GMS program and says that the ADB should reconsider its support for the GMS program while it continues to engage with the junta.

Justice for Myanmar points out that the conference is planned to take place at a time when the junta is continuing to lose control of Myanmar and rapidly losing territory whilst waging a campaign of terror against the people, carrying out mass killings, indiscriminate air strikes, shellings, arbitrary arrests, torture and causing the mass displacement of more than 2.5 million people.

The conference host is Kan Zaw, the junta’s minister for investment and foreign economic relations, who is sanctioned by the US and EU. The EU noted that Kan Zaw “takes an active role in supporting the military’s efforts to attract foreign investment, thereby contributing to securing the financial needs of the military regime. Therefore, he is responsible for undermin-

ing democracy and the rule of law in Myanmar/Burma as well as for engaging in actions that threaten the peace, security and stability of Myanmar.”

According to Justice For Myanmar sources, Kan Zaw has invited China’s finance minister, Lan Fo’an, Cambodia’s deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs and international cooperation, Sok Chenda Sophea, Lao’s planning and investment minister, Khamjane Vongphosy, Vietnam’s planning and investment minister, Nguyen Chi Dung, and Thailand’s deputy finance minister, Julapun Amornvivat to the conference.

The conference is being organised by a steering committee headed by the junta’s deputy minister for investment and foreign economic relations. The committee also includes a member of the military conglomerate Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) as the sole private sector representative, according to Justice For Myanmar sources. MEC is sanctioned by the US, UK, EU, Canada and Australia.

The junta-controlled Myanmar Police Force is providing security for the conference, overseen by the deputy police chief who is also a member of the steering committee. The junta’s police force is directly responsible for killings, torture and arbitrary arrest, which amount to crimes against humanity. The junta is preparing to maximise propaganda from the conference, having formed a committee to manage the release of information to control journalists.

The conference is being held at the Grand Amara Hotel, which is part of the junta-linked crony conglomerate International Group of Entrepreneur (IGE) owned by Ne Aung, the brother of the junta’s navy chief. The junta is covering the accommodation of delegates, their flights between Yangon and Naypyidaw and hosting a gala lunch.



The upcoming conference comes after Min Aung Hlaing participated in the 7th GMS Leaders' Summit hosted by Cambodia in 2021. The ADB told Justice For Myanmar that they had provided Cambodia with advisory support to prepare documentation for the summit, which was held virtually.

The Leaders' Summit, which is the program's highest body, was featured prominently in junta propaganda. In a speech at the summit, Min Aung Hlaing defended his illegal coup attempt and falsely stated that the 2020 election was rigged and that the coup attempt was constitutional.

At the 2021 Leader's Summit, Min Aung Hlaing illegitimately endorsed the GMS Strategic Framework 2030, which aims to promote investment and tourism that would help generate revenue for the junta, which it needs to finance its terror campaign.

In 2022, Laos hosted the 25th GMS Ministerial Conference, in which the junta was also wrongly allowed to participate. In the conference, the junta illegitimately endorsed the GMS Regional Investment Framework for 2023-2025, in which the junta has proposed US\$208.3 million in projects in sectors that include energy, information and communications technology, tourism and agriculture, mostly to be funded by unspecified "development partners".

The GMS program was established in 1992 under Myanmar's previous dictatorship, and has focussed on promoting trade and the development of economic corridors and infrastructure, including in ethnic areas of Myanmar.

As part of the Myanmar junta's chairing of the GMS, the junta-linked Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI) is leading the GMS Business Council, a grouping of chambers of commerce from GMS countries. The GMS Business Council is currently chaired by Zaw Min Win, a former UMFCCI president and the chair of the Myanmar Industries Alliance, which invests in the mobile operator Mytel with the military conglomerate

MEC.

Justice For Myanmar spokesperson Yadanar Maung says: "It is unfathomable that the GMS program and its members are not only inviting the illegal junta to participate but are even appointing it as host of a ministerial conference.

"The junta is a terrorist organisation that is committing war crimes and crimes against humanity with total impunity. The military's coup attempt is failing and the GMS program and its members are making a serious moral and strategic error in legitimising it and attempting to facilitate investment that will help it generate revenue and further fuel atrocities.

"GMS members should immediately cancel the planned conference or, failing that, refuse to attend. The junta must be barred from the GMS program, which should instead recognise and support the National Unity Government, which is the legitimate government of Myanmar.

"We welcome the decision of the ADB to withdraw support for the Ministerial Conference and to refuse to attend. The ADB should now reconsider its institutional support for the GMS program as long as its members continue to legitimise the illegal junta.

"The involvement of UMFCCI and the junta-linked crony Zaw Min Win in the GMS Business Council is alarming and is a further sign that the junta and its cronies are using the program to promote investment that can strengthen the junta and worsen the crisis in Myanmar caused by the military's illegal coup attempt."

Justice For Myanmar, a group of covert activists campaigning for justice and accountability for the people of Myanmar, is calling for an end to military business and for federal democracy and a sustainable peace.

# MYANMAR JUNTA RECRUITING FORMER RESISTANCE FIGHTERS TO BOLSTER NUMBERS

**R**esistance fighters who surrendered to the junta in southwestern Myanmar are now being enlisted by the regime's military, anti-junta militia members told Radio Free Asia.

Junta soldiers are bribing revolutionary groups with money and food, said one official from the Pathein Urban Guerrilla Group on Wednesday.

In the last two weeks the pressure has grown to bolster troop numbers by recruiting resistance fighters from Kyonpyaw, Yegyí and Pathein townships in Ayeyarwady region, he said. Both regime soldiers and former resistance group leaders who have surrendered are reported to be stepping up their recruitment tactics.

"Especially [those in] various forms of leadership among the surrenderers. They are called to meet up and recruit others to serve in the [junta-led] militia," the official said, asking to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals. "The steps of organizing each other and asking people to organize to serve in the militia have escalated in the past two weeks."

This month, the junta also recalled retired military and police personnel from Thabaung township, he added.

More than 100 people have surrendered to the junta in Ayeyarwady region in the past two years. Members of People's Defense Forces surrendered by

contacting junta forces to give up their positions.

Ayeyarwady residents also accused junta troops of recruiting teen soldiers and pressuring locals to fulfill quotas in October.

Pro-military militia members, including those in the Swan Ar Shin militia, have been undergoing military training since September, said a Pathein resident close to the junta army. The training is being provided at several military bases in Ayeyarwady division, including the Kyonpyaw-based Infantry Battalion 36, according to the Pathein Urban Guerrilla Group.

In October, a 20-year-old man from Kyonpyaw died during an interrogation by members of Battalion 36 after being accused of communicating with People's Defense Forces in Mandalay region.

RFA has not been able to independently verify the claims made by anti-junta militias. Calls by RFA to Ayeyarwady division's junta spokesperson Aung Thein Win seeking comment went unanswered.

*Translated by RFA Burmese. Edited by Mike Finn.*

*Courtesy of Radio Free Asia*

# 4 ROHINGYA KILLED IN BANGLADESH REFUGEE CAMP SHOOTOUT



Rohingya refugees arrested in Bangladesh as they sought to escape by boat for Indonesia. Photo: AFP

**F**our Rohingya refugees were killed during a gunfight between two insurgent groups in Bangladesh, police said Wednesday, in the latest sign of deteriorating security in the country's overcrowded relief camps.

Bangladesh is home to around a million members of the stateless and mainly Muslim minority, most of whom fled a 2017 military crackdown in Myanmar that is now subject to a UN genocide probe.

The dozens of squalid refugee camps housing the Rohingya have emerged as a battleground between rival armed groups who have used the settlements as staging posts for drug trafficking and human smuggling.

Local police chief Shamim Hossain told AFP that an hourlong shootout took place between the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) on Tuesday night.

"Four Rohingya refugees were killed and two Rohingya were seriously injured," he added.

Neither group gave immediate comment on the clash.

The RSO has been challenging the larger and more established ARSA for control of the camps since the start of the year, coinciding with a crackdown on ARSA by Bangladeshi security forces.

Violence has long been a fact of life for those

living in the refugee settlements.

Police say more than 60 Rohingya refugees have been killed in Bangladeshi camp clashes this year, including women and children.

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said Sunday it was "alarmed by the continuing deterioration of security conditions in the camps".

Malnutrition is also widespread, with the UN food agency saying a funding shortfall this year had forced it to cut rations by a third.

Those Rohingya remaining in Myanmar face severe persecution by authorities who deny them citizenship and access to healthcare.

The desperate situation both there and in the Bangladeshi camps has prompted thousands of Rohingya to embark upon dangerous and often deadly sea trips to Southeast Asian countries to escape.

More than 1,000 landed in Indonesia's westernmost province last month, the biggest wave of Rohingya since 2015.

Nearly 350 Rohingya died or went missing last year while attempting hazardous sea crossings, the UNHCR has estimated.

AFP

# INDONESIANS PROTEST AGAINST ROHINGYA REFUGEES, CLASH WITH POLICE



The Rohingya refugee arrivals were moved, due to protests by local people. Photo: AFP

**M**ore than one hundred Indonesians protested Wednesday last week against Rohingya refugees who arrived on a western island by boat last week, calling for them to be relocated and clashing with police.

The mostly Muslim Rohingya are heavily persecuted in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, and thousands risk their lives each year on sea journeys to try and reach Malaysia or Indonesia.

The last month has seen a spike in journeys to Indonesia's westernmost province of Aceh from Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh - a voyage of about 1,800 kilometres (1,120 miles) - with more than 1,000 arrivals in the biggest such wave since a 2017 Myanmar military crackdown.

A group of 139 refugees including women and children landed on Sabang island on Saturday, but locals threatened to push them back to sea and demanded that authorities move them.

They were then relocated to a dock where they were kept in tents.

On Wednesday dozens of police blocked a group of around 150 protesters who were trying to breach a gate and pushing officers to get to the area where the refugees were sheltering, according to footage shared on social media.

"The people can convey their aspirations. We were only securing (the area). We directed our personnel for security," said Sabang police chief Erwan, who

like many Indonesians goes by one name.

"The situation is safe and under control. The people were pushing the fence because they wanted to go in," he said, referring to the area where the refugees are staying.

After the protesters left, the Rohingya refugees performed a dusk prayer at the site, according to a video shared with AFP by the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR).

"Thank God the Sabang government continues to uphold humanitarian values. Protection for the Rohingya refugees continues to be given," said UNHCR official Faisal Rahman.

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.

There has been a noticeable uptick in negative posts in Indonesian about Rohingya refugees arriving by boat across social media platforms, according to AFP's FactCheck team in Indonesia.

More than 3,500 Rohingya are believed to have attempted the risky journey to Southeast Asian countries in 2022 with nearly 350 dying or going missing, according to the UNHCR.

**AFP**

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# BROUK PETITIONS ARGENTINIAN COURT TO ISSUE INTERNATIONAL ARREST WARRANT FOR MIN AUNG HLAING

**T**he Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (BROUK) last week petitioned a Court in Argentina to issue international arrest warrants for Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and six other Myanmar officials responsible for their genocide against the Rohingya people.

“This is a historic and unprecedented step towards accountability for the decades-long genocide against the Rohingya people. It shows that our long fight for justice is starting to bear fruit,” said Tun Khin, President of BROUK.

He added: “The Argentinian judiciary has already committed to investigate these crimes. Now, we ask the Court to act on overwhelming evidence that these seven individuals are responsible, and to im-

mediately issue international arrest warrants. Those committing genocide should have nowhere to hide from the law.”

Today’s development is part of the investigation in Argentina into the role of Myanmar’s civilian and military leaders in committing genocide and crimes against humanity against the Rohingya. Under the principle of universal jurisdiction, such crimes can be investigated anywhere in the world regardless of where they were committed. The case was opened in 2021 based on a petition by BROUK.

The Argentinian prosecution has initially focused its investigation on a massacre in a Rohingya village in Rathedoung township, Rakhine State, on 27 August 2017.



Photo: Benjamin R

Myanmar military and police attacked the village, killing hundreds of Rohingya people through indiscriminate fire, mutilating bodies of victims, torching houses, and committing widespread rape and sexual violence against women and girls. Moving forward, the Prosecutor will continue the investigation into other villages and areas in Rakhine State that were subjected to “clearance operations” in 2017.

BROUK’s request for an arrest warrant names seven individuals responsible for the attack, but arrest warrants can potentially be issued for more perpetrators as the case progresses.

Those named for now include senior military leaders with command responsibility for the massacre, such as Min Aung Hlaing, Myanmar’s Commander-in-Chief and current leader of the military coup in 2021, and Soe Win, Deputy Commander-in-Chief. The request also names two lower-ranking officials, a village Chairman and a police officer, who were direct perpetrators of killings and rapes during the attack. They are accused of genocide and crimes under the Argentinian penal code including aggravated murder, sexual abuse and torture.

In its 2018 report, the Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar recommended that Min Aung Hlaing and other perpetrators should be prosecuted for the Rohingya genocide.

The request is based on detailed and credible evidence uncovered during the case’s investigation phase. This included eyewitness testimony from seven Rohingya genocide survivors, who traveled to Buenos Aires to testify in court in June this year.

The First Instance Federal Court Number 1 in Buenos Aires and the Prosecutor will now consider BROUK’s request for an arrest warrant. If the Court accepts it, it will automatically trigger a request to Interpol to issue international arrest warrants for the individuals identified. BROUK also asked that ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), the European Union, African Union, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and States such as the US, the UK and Canada that have imposed economic sanctions and travel bans on perpetrators are notified about the arrest warrant.

“Those responsible for this genocide, including the horrific crimes committed on 27 August 2017, must be held to account, whether they planned them or carried them out directly. This massacre caused unimaginable suffering and is, in many ways, on its own enough to prove that a genocide is taking place. Sadly, however, it is only one of many examples of the violence and abuse Rohingya have faced for decades,”

said Tun Khin.

The case in Argentina is the first universal jurisdiction case anywhere in the world concerning the Rohingya genocide. Since the case opened, BROUK has further intensified its investigation against the Myanmar military and those abetting their crimes, including by requesting information from Facebook on how anti-Rohingya hate speech was shared on the platform. During the investigation, the UN Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM) has extended support to the Prosecutor in Argentina.

BROUK’s efforts complement other international justice processes against the Myanmar military, such as the cases at the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court.

These efforts have taken on new urgency since 1 February 2021, when the Myanmar military tried to seize power through a coup. Since then, the military and its proxies have killed thousands of people opposing its rule and arrested tens of thousands.

“Our fight for justice is not just for the Rohingya, but for all victims of the Myanmar military, regardless of what ethnic groups they belong to. The military has terrorized Myanmar and its people for decades, and repression has only intensified since the coup almost two years ago,” said Tun Khin.

“We commend the Argentinian judiciary’s decision to investigate the crimes committed by the military. If our request for an arrest warrant is accepted, it would be a historic development that brings hope to millions of victims. It would also show Min Aung Hlaing and other officials that the eyes of the world are on them.”

## **BACKGROUND**

The seven individuals identified in BROUK’s request for an arrest warrant are (all titles refer to their positions at the time of the massacre on 27 August unless otherwise noted):

1. Min Aung Hlaing, Commander-in-Chief and 2021 military coup leader
2. Soe Win, Deputy Commander-in-Chief
3. Aung Kyaw Zaw, Commander of the Bureau of Special Operations No. 3
4. Maung Maung Soe, Chief of the Army’s Western Command
5. Aung Aung, Commander of the Army’s Light Infantry Battalion No. 33
6. Kyaw Shay, police officer
7. Aung San Mya, village Chairman

# UK, ALLIES SANCTION HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSERS 75 YEARS AFTER UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS



Photo: Lucas Davies

**U**K, US and Canada lead coordinated action against human rights abusers and accessories to authoritarian governments around the world, 75 years after Universal Declaration of Human Rights was ratified, according to a UK government press release on 10 December.

UK targets forced labour operations in South-east Asia, and government-linked officials in Belarus, Haiti, Iran, and Syria complicit in repressing individual freedoms. These sanctions underline the UK's continued commitment to deterring malign activity around the world

The UK, US and Canada are announcing a sweeping package of sanctions targeting individuals linked to human rights abuses around the world, ahead of the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December.

On 10 December, the UK announced 46 sanctions, including asset freezes and travel bans, in two categories.

The first set targets nine individuals and five entities for their involvement in trafficking people in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, forcing them to work for online 'scam farms' which enable large-scale fraud. Victims are promised well-paid jobs but are subject to torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

The UN estimates at least 120,000 people in Myanmar alone are being forced to work for such

schemes. The FCDO has helped a small number of British Nationals return to the UK who had become victims.

The second is aimed at a number of individuals linked to the governments, judiciaries and prosecuting authorities of Belarus, Haiti, Iran, and Syria, for their involvement in the repression of citizens solely for exercising fundamental freedoms in those countries. This includes:

17 members of the Belarusian judiciary including judges, prosecutors and an investigator involved in politically-motivated cases against political activists, independent journalists and human rights defenders;

Five individuals in the Iranian judiciary, security forces and Tehran public transport system for their involvement in imposing and enforcing the mandatory hijab law;

Eight individuals for complicity in atrocities against the Syrian people by Assad's regime;

Two individuals in Haiti for their involvement in the 2018 La Saline attacks.

The UK Foreign Secretary, David Cameron, said: "We will not tolerate criminals and repressive regimes trampling on the fundamental rights and freedoms of ordinary people around the world. I am clear that 75 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UK and our allies will continue to relentlessly pursue those who would deny people their freedom."



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# DELVING INTO MYANMAR SCAMS AND ITS VICTIMS



Jason Tower

Many of us are well acquainted with receiving unsolicited messages on Whatsapp or Telegram, sent from a stranger with an attractive profile picture and accompanied by a seemingly innocuous introduction. While the wary roll their eyes and delete the number, not everyone does. And while many may sympathize with the victims of these scammers, few understand that the people sending those unsolicited messages are themselves victims of nefarious yet sophisticated criminal enterprises.

Jason Tower of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) paints a far grimmer picture about who these scammers really are. He recently sat down for a podcast interview with Insight Myanmar to explain.

## **STRONG CREDENTIALS**

Currently serving as the country director for the Burma program at USIP, Tower boasts a wealth of expertise spanning over two decades regarding conflict and security matters in China and Southeast Asia. Before joining USIP, his work focused on the repercussions of cross-border investments on conflict dynamics. Tower's dedicated involvement in Burma has dealt with peace and security issues, and his overall

research agenda is concentrated on exploring the intersection of crime and conflict in Southeast Asia.

Notable recent contributions include a comprehensive study of the influence of transnational criminal networks on conflict in Burma and regional security throughout Southeast Asia. Tower also authored a report examining criminal activities associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and conducted a review of the BRI's impact on conflict. Beyond this research, Tower has authored over a dozen articles delving into the implications of the Myanmar coup, with a specific focus on its ramifications for regional security in Asia. Fluent in Mandarin as well, he is a Fulbright research student, a Fulbright-Hays scholar, and a Harvard-Yenching fellow.

## **DIRE TRADE**

In this Insight Myanmar podcast, Tower describes how over half a million people languish in modern-day slavery in Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and the Philippines. Routinely beaten and electrocuted, they are also threatened with sale to drug traffickers, prostitution rings, and organ harvesters if they don't comply. In Myanmar alone, at least 120,000 captives are enslaved in overcrowded, prison-like compounds, fitted with torture chambers and surrounded by armed guards, and forced to participate in these criminal activities.

Their task: to scam thousands of dollars a day out of educated and well-off victims around the world, but most importantly in China.

And these scams are extremely sophisticated. Work spaces resemble modern IT company interiors, with access to the latest tech, in order to reach as many potential victims as possible. Scripts have been written and are to be meticulously adhered to. These are actually referred to as "pig butchering scams." Each scammer has his or her role to play in fattening up the target, passing the victims—or "pigs"—along from person to person until they are ready to be "butchered"—that is, exploited for as much as possible.

## **EARNING BILLIONS**

Tower estimates that the kingpins, who earn a whopping \$100 billion annually, are now investing heavily in AI and fintech to better be able to fake conversations, voice, and video messages in real-time, and they are establishing legitimate-seeming fronts, including fraudulent crypto schemes.

But as horrific as the scam centers are, they are but a small part of a much larger and much more terrifying reality. The global abduction and human trafficking industry feeds victims into the centers, which are housed in Burmese cities, and which have literal-



Aerial view of building that allegedly include a scam centre on the Myanmar-Thailand border. Photos: Supplied

ly been built around illicit activity. They were originally intended to host gambling and other vices mainly for wealthy Chinese customers outside Beijing’s jurisdiction. In Myanmar, these cities are built and owned by wealthy clans with private armies and connections to other illicit trades. Protection is further provided by the junta-aligned Border Guard Forces (BGF), thus part of the profits of this illicit trade are fed into military coffers to prop up their violent regime.

### THE PIVOT

Following the border closures of COVID, and pressure from the Chinese government to clamp down on online gambling, revenue from those activities plummeted, leading to the highly successful pivot to large-scale human trafficking and scamming.

The relationship between the scam centers and the Myanmar military has become a thorn in Beijing’s side. Many have in fact posited that China may have tacitly signed off on Operation 1027 given the professed aim of the ethnic armed groups to liberate some of these centers, which house tens of thousands of enslaved Chinese nationals. For its part, the military junta has been loath to do anything about this terrible enterprise, given their own complicity.

The recent release of some 31,000 victims and their repatriation to China, along with the detention of key actors in the enterprises, is certainly good news. But this is overshadowed by the fact that at least 75% of Myanmar’s scam center victims remain in bondage, and that barely a month earlier, criminal security forces opened fire on scam victims attempting to flee, killing many.

### GLOBAL CRISIS

“A lot of people may be thinking, ‘Well, how is this relevant?’ Well, what’s important to point to here is that we’re facing a global crisis around these pig butch-

ering scams,” Tower says in closing. “Where these criminal syndicates are trafficking labor from around the world, really anyone at this point in time could now become a victim of trafficking, or be trafficked into a country like Myanmar, that’s something we really have never seen in history. Myanmar has never been before a destination country for human trafficking!”

He goes onto add: “The point here is, we’ve got a major global crisis on our hands that extends way beyond Myanmar, and many people in Myanmar are being victimized by this. This is sort of something that’s playing a role in violent conflict in Myanmar, but it’s also something that’s touching people and harming people all around the world!”

Check out the Insight Myanmar podcast here: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2023/12/7/emergency-edition-scams-and-shackles>



Tight sleeping quarters for trafficked workers.

# PARIAHS IN ARMS: RUSSIA FINDS AN ALLY IN MILITARY-RUN MYANMAR

LUNA PHAM FOR RFA

A relationship forged in Soviet times has assumed new significance as the two nations face international isolation.

A month after the February 2021 coup that plunged Myanmar into a bloody civil war, military leader Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing gave a rare interview with a Russian newspaper. In it, he declared his countrymen's Buddhist appreciation for "tranquility and peace." He also spoke of his love for "old and true friends" like Russia.

"Our friendship does not depend on various external factors," he told the newspaper *Moskovsky Komsomolets*. "And I'm sure this friendship will last forever."

Few would be persuaded by Min Aung Hlaing's appeal to religion, but his description of Myanmar-Russia ties may be closer to the mark. A relationship forged during the Cold War after Myanmar's independence from Britain has taken on new importance as their respective authoritarian regimes face international isolation.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union three decades ago, the two countries had little to do with each other. But today, their rulers are united by the global condemnation they face: Naypyidaw for the 2021 coup that toppled Myanmar's democratically elected government, and Moscow for its invasion of Ukraine a year later.

"Deepening their relations and showing it to the world is a way to lessen the isolation," said Michal Lubina, a well-known Myanmar analyst from the Jagiellonian University in Poland.

"China is always the top priority for Myanmar in terms of foreign policy, but Russia is dangerously moving up the list, even if bilateral ties in reality may not be as strong as they are being presented," he said.

The two sides have sought to spur trade between their sanctions-hit economies, particularly with Russian military sales to Myanmar. There's also been

high-level official contacts. President Vladimir Putin met Min Aung Hlaing for the first time in the wake of the Ukraine invasion after the Myanmar junta defended Russia's actions.

## *KHRUSHCHEV BAREFOOTED AT SHWEDAGON*

The origins of this relationship can be traced to the early years of Myanmar's voyage as a nation after it won independence from Britain in 1948. Seven years after that, the leadership of the Soviet Union paid it a visit. Moscow was looking to forge ties with small nations in Asia and Africa and push them away from political, economic and military reliance on the West.

In 1955, First Secretary of the Communist Party Nikita Khrushchev and his right-hand man, Premier Nikolai Bulganin, arrived in Rangoon (now known as Yangon) to a warm welcome by the Burmese leadership.

In a contemporary documentary film, a beaming Khrushchev can be seen trotting alongside Burmese Prime Minister U Nu and sitting comfortably on a sofa next to Gen. Ne Win, chief of staff of the Burmese Armed Forces.

Ne Win would, a few years later, seize power through a coup d'état and become Myanmar's first dictator, isolating the country and keeping it in the firm grip of a military junta for decades.

The film, "In The Hospitable Land Of Burma," produced by famous Soviet director Roman Karmen, followed the USSR leader as he strolled barefoot at the Shwedagon Pagoda – the nation's most famous Buddhist place of worship in Rangoon.

At the end of the week-long stay that included visits to Mandalay and Shan State, the two sides signed a joint statement calling for Burmese-Soviet cooperation in economic, cultural, scientific and technical fields.

A note from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union one month lat-

er said the Burmese leaders “expressed their opinions relating to the essential issues (disarmament, including the ban of the atomic weapon, attitudes towards the military blocs, assessment of the Geneva Conferences), which correspond with our positions or come close to them.”

“U Nu paid great attention to the question of selling Burmese rice to us,” the note said.

“Comrades Khrushchev and Bulganin ... offered as a gift for the people of Burma to build and equip a technological institute in Rangoon.”

Khrushchev made a return trip to Burma in February 1960, during which he also met with Ne Win, by then the prime minister, and President U Win Maung.

During the ensuing decades, Myanmar-Russia ties have endured both sides’ turbulent histories, although the strategic importance of Myanmar to Russia waned when the Cold War ended.

But now the relationship has assumed fresh importance for both as they navigate their recent pariah status.

“Russia always has a big embassy in Yangon,” said Ludwig Weber-Lortsch, German ambassador to Myanmar between 2011 and 2017.

“Even during the years under General Ne Win, when Burma was cut off from contacts with the outside world, there was never a break-up in their relationship,” Weber-Lortsch said.

“Geographically, Russia is far away from Myanmar so it never got entangled in the country’s internal issues such as ethnic violence or border tensions. China projects more power and influence over Myanmar, but as neighbors, the relationship between them is much, much more complicated,” he added.

## **SOCCKER AS SOFT POWER**

Soccer became an unexpected tool of soft power that the USSR wielded in those early years in Burma.

During their 1955 visit, Khrushchev and Bulganin met with members of the visiting soccer team Lokomotiv Moscow in Rangoon.

Lokomotiv was on a tour in Asia at that time, playing six matches in Indonesia, two in India and two in Burma. It won all the matches, including the two in

Rangoon with scores 7-1 and 10-0.

Myanmar soccer fans still remember two Soviet coaches of their national team: Mikhail Bozenenkov and German Zonin.

Bozenenkov was the coach of the Burmese national soccer team from 1961 to 1965. Under him, the team won a silver medal at the 1961 Southeast Asian Peninsular Games, not an easy feat at that time.

“He was a doctorate holder in sports in the Soviet Union and participated in the Russian national football team. So, he was perfect,” reminisced veteran Burmese footballer Maung Maung.

After Bozenenkov, German Zonin led the team from 1964 to 1968. During his time, Burma won top prizes in the 1965 and 1967 Southeast Asian Peninsular Games, as well as a gold medal in the 1966 Asian Cup and joint gold medal in the Merdeka Cup, an international soccer competition held in Malaysia.

A 2022 research paper by the PeaceNexus Foundation in Switzerland found that “Russia’s successful deployment of soft power in Myanmar has been largely overlooked.”

“It has built upon a certain commonality in outlook and values, and has no previous history of support to the armed opponents of Myanmar’s military, no large-scale controversial investment projects, no involvement into Myanmar’s complex identity politics and no previous attempts at expansionism.”

Perhaps surprisingly, PeaceNexus says that soft power extends to bonds of religion. While Russia is predominantly Christian, it has an estimated 700,000 to 1.5 million Buddhists.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu comes from the Tuva region in southern Siberia where Buddhism is the main religion.

Born in the year Khrushchev and Bulganin made their Burma trip, Shoigu is not known as a practicing Buddhist but reportedly “is aware of its customs and symbolisms,” according to PeaceNexus.

This probably helped build a personal rapport between him and Myanmar’s military leaders. During a visit by Min Aung Hlaing to Moscow in June 2021, Shoigu referred to him as “dear friend” and emphasized the latter’s personal contribution to the Russia-Myanmar relationship.

## **BROTHERHOOD OF PARIAH STATES?**

After Myanmar was slapped with Western sanctions over a deadly crackdown on democracy protesters in 1988, its military faced arms embargoes and international isolation.

Russia remained one country where the officer class of the Tatmadaw, as the Burmese military is known, could seek overseas schooling. A report by the International Crisis Group, a think tank, said Russia has provided postgraduate education to more than 7,000 Myanmar officers since 2001.

Min Aung Hlaing himself clearly has a soft spot for Russia. He has visited Moscow six times and even has an account on the Russian social media network V Kontakte.

Russia has reciprocated with diplomatic support. Moscow stayed silent when Myanmar was internationally condemned for forcing three-quarters of a million Rohingya Muslims to flee their homes in 2017. And it has been one of the few countries that have defended the junta after the 2021 coup.

For its part, Myanmar defended the Russian invasion of Ukraine, stating that it was “to ensure world peace.”

Junta spokesman, Maj. Gen. Zaw Min Tun, said in an interview with RFA Burmese that he saw the invasion firstly “as an effort to consolidate Russian sovereignty.”

“Secondly, it shows that Russia is a force to be reckoned with in the balance of power to ensure world peace,” the general said.

In the opinion of Myanmar analyst Lubina, the war in Ukraine was a turning point in Russia-Myanmar relations.

“After the military coup, Min Aung Hlaing went to Moscow twice but was never received by Vladimir Putin.”

“Only after its invasion of Ukraine and being condemned by the West as a pariah state, did Russia find itself in a more or less similar situation to Myanmar,” said Lubina, who has written six books on Myanmar. “Finally, in 2022, Putin met with Min Aung Hlaing on the sidelines of the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok and the junta got Moscow’s full recognition.”

Since the meeting, the two countries have promoted bilateral trade and investment.

Representatives from the Fund RC-Investments, an investment platform of the Roscongress Foundation under Putin’s direct control, have visited Myanmar twice since last November.

The two sides want to increase “cooperation on tourism, mining, energy, the agricultural and livestock sectors and the monetary and financial sectors,” the Irrawaddy newspaper reported.

As of July 2023, Russian citizens can get a “special” 30-day tourist visa upon arrival at Myanmar’s three international airports without having to apply in advance. This measure, in effect on a trial basis until July 2024, is aimed at attracting visitors from Russia who, facing travel restrictions from many European countries, are on the lookout for new destinations.

Myanmar Airways International is also launching twice weekly direct flights between Yangon-Man-dalay and Novosibirsk.

## **WEAPONS WITH NO STRINGS ATTACHED**

Official Myanmar-Russia bilateral trade remains modest. In 2021, Russia exported around US\$70 million worth of goods to Myanmar, mainly navigation equipment, vehicles and machines. Myanmar exported \$145 million of garments to Russia in the same year.

But the hidden lion’s share lies in the arms trade, which is not covered by the official trade data.

The U.N. Special Rapporteur for Myanmar Tom Andrews said in a report to the Human Rights Council that the bulk of weaponry and other arms-related equipment that have been sent to the junta since its coup two years ago came from Russia.

The report identified \$406 million in arms sales from 28 Russian entities including state-owned companies; and \$267 million from entities in China.

“Since the coup, Russian entities, including state-owned entities, have transferred fighter jets, advanced missile systems, reconnaissance and attack drones, and spare parts for fighter jets, attack helicopters, and other systems,” the report said.

During the 1990s, China, Myanmar’s influential northern neighbor, was the dominant source of arms, with an estimated \$1.6 billion-worth of tanks, military vehicles, aircraft and ships sold to Myanmar, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

But in the following decade, the Myanmar mil-

itary began buying more arms from Russia, which offers “better quality and less political implications,” said Lubina.

“With Chinese arms, there are always political strings attached, but Russian arms are relatively hassle-free.”

SIPRI data shows that from 2000 to 2009, Myanmar bought U.S.\$1.7 billion worth of arms from China and U.S.\$1.44 billion from Russia.

Russia’s own trade data, meanwhile, shows that “secret code” exports including arms, military-related equipment and nuclear materials to Myanmar grew from less than U.S.\$8 million in 2014 to more than U.S.\$115 million in 2020 and accounted for 51% of all exports.

“Our army has become one of the strongest in the region thanks to the Russian Federation,” Min Aung Hlaing himself once said in Moscow.

Media sources say since the early 2000s, Myanmar has bought from Russia 30 MiG-29 jet fighters, 12 Yak-130 combat trainers, 10 Mi-24 and Mi-35P helicopters, and eight Pechora-2M anti-aircraft missile systems.

The junta has also signed a contract to procure six Su-30 fighters, and during a visit to Myanmar in 2021 by Defense Minister Shoigu, Russia pledged to supply Naypyidaw with Pantsir-S1 surface-to-air missile systems, Orlan-10E surveillance drones and radar equipment.

A joint service center was set up in Myanmar to provide maintenance to the Russian-made military equipment. And earlier this year the junta established a Nuclear Technology and Information Center in Yangon with help from Russia’s Rosatom State Corp., amid suspicions that the Myanmar military has ambitions to acquire nuclear weapons.

Rights campaigners also say Russian-made aircraft have been used to attack ethnic rebel groups.

## **TWO-WAY ARMS TRADE?**

As the war continues in Ukraine, news emerged that Russia is now buying back some military supplies previously sold to Myanmar, as well as using ammunition produced by the Myanmar army.

Japan’s Nikkei Asia analyzed customs clearance data and found that Russia may be reimporting parts for tanks and missiles that had been exported to Myanmar and India in order to improve its old weap-

ons.

The U.S., Japan and European countries have banned exports of goods with potential military use to Russia since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

UralVagonZavod, which manufactures tanks for the Russian military, on Dec. 9, 2022, imported military products from the Myanmar army for U.S.\$24 million, according to Nikkei’s report.

UralVagonZavod exported military products to the Myanmar army in 2019.

“Buybacks of exported equipment make it possible to upgrade older weapons in Russia’s arsenal and send them into battle,” Nikkei Asia said.

The Ukraine Weapons Tracker, an independent research project, in July alleged that the Russian Military now uses ammunition made by the Myanmar army, including the 120ER 120mm HE mortar bombs.

The mortar bombs were identified by the characteristic features such as specific tail markings, fuses and propellant charges, it said, adding that most of the markings were deliberately removed or painted over.

Some news outlets in Myanmar, meanwhile, said that Russia’s plan to buy Myanmar-made ammunition was discussed during a visit by Russian Colonel-General Alexei Kim, first deputy commander of Russian Ground Forces, to Naypyidaw in December 2022.

Restrictions imposed on Russia’s and Myanmar’s banks make it harder for both countries’ militaries to pay for arms purchases, as well as other goods.

The state banks of the two countries have reportedly been working to set up a direct ruble-kyat exchange mechanism to dodge the global financial system, but it is still a work in progress.

During the visit by Nikita Khrushchev in 1955, the Soviet leader agreed to buy rice from Burma “on the condition that the rice consignment covers the value of the goods bought in the USSR.”

Nearly 70 years on, could a similar barter agreement be reached between the two brothers-in-arms?

*Edited by Mat Pennington and Jim Snyder.*

*Courtesy of Radio Free Asia*

# PUTIN SAYS HE WILL RUN FOR RE-ELECTION IN 2024

**R**ussian President Vladimir Putin announced Friday that he would run for re-election in 2024, allowing the Kremlin leader to extend his decades-long grip on power into the 2030s.

The 71-year-old has led Russia since the turn of the century, winning four presidential ballots and briefly serving as prime minister in a system where opposition has become virtually non-existent.

The announcement came at a set-piece Kremlin event for army personnel, including some who fought in the offensive in Ukraine that Putin or-

dered in February last year.

“I won’t hide it, I’ve had different thoughts at different times, but this is a time when a decision has to be made,” Putin said at the ceremony.

“I will run for the office of president of the Russian Federation.”

He was speaking to Lieutenant Colonel Artyom Zhoga, a Russian military officer, who had moments before urged him to run.

“Thanks to your actions, your decisions, we



Russian President Vladimir Putin.  
Photo: AFP



have gained freedom,” Zhoga said, adding: “We need you, Russia needs you.”

Putin will not face any major challengers in his bid for a fifth term and will likely seek as big a mandate as possible in order to conceal domestic discord over the Ukraine conflict, analysts say.

Following a controversial constitutional reform in 2020, he could stay in power until at least 2036.

Rights groups say that previous elections have been marred by irregularities and that independent observers will likely be barred from monitoring the vote.

Putin also tightened media rules on covering the 2024 election in November, banning some independent media outlets from accessing polling stations.

The election will be held over a three-day period from March 15-17, a move that Kremlin critics have argued makes guaranteeing transparency more difficult.

Five major parties have been allowed to submit a candidate for the 2024 vote without collecting signatures, all of which support the Kremlin and the offensive in Ukraine.

### **‘PARODY’**

Putin’s most high-profile rival, Alexei Navalny, is currently serving a 19-year prison sentence on charges his supporters say are false.

In a statement issued through his team Thursday, he encouraged Russians to vote for “any other candidate” aside from Putin and called the elections a “parody” of electoral procedure.

Since launching its assault on Ukraine last February, the Kremlin has waged a sweeping crackdown on dissent that rights groups have likened to Soviet-era repression.

Thousands of people have been detained and imprisoned for protests, and many thousands more have fled the country in fear of being called up to fight.

The Ukraine offensive has made the Kremlin chief a pariah among Western leaders and his country has been hit by unprecedented sanctions designed to curb its funding for the conflict.

But while sanctions initially prompted an exodus of Western companies and turbulence in industry, the economy has proven resilient and Putin’s domestic approval ratings have remained high.

Moscow has re-oriented much of its energy exports to Asian clients including China, allowing it to continue pouring money into the offensive, now in its 22nd month.

Analysts say Putin has sensed revived fortunes as Western support for Ukraine frays and Kyiv’s counter-offensive fails to pierce heavily entrenched Russian lines.

In a bid to boost turnout at the last presidential election in 2018, which saw Putin win by a landslide in every region, officials cast the vote as a pivotal battle against Western values.

The Kremlin appears to be employing the same strategy this time round, labelling the “international LGBT movement” as extremist in a November court ruling, as part of a broader culture war with the West.

**AFP**

# CHINA SLAMS ‘SMEARING’ OF BELT AND ROAD PROJECT AFTER ITALY WITHDRAWS



A guard outside the Hall of the People in Beijing.  
Photo: AFP

China on Thursday last week slammed what it called the “smearing” of its Belt and Road infrastructure project after Italy said it would withdraw four years after it became the only G7 nation to sign up.

“China firmly opposes smearing and undermining of cooperation on the joint construction of the Belt and Road,” foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said.

Beijing is also opposed to “confrontation and division among camps that causes separation”, Wang added.

The foreign ministry did not directly comment on Italy’s decision to withdraw from Beijing’s vast BRI project, a central pillar of President Xi Jinping’s bid to expand China’s clout overseas.

But Wang pointed to the more than 150 participating countries as evidence of it being the “most

popular international public product and the largest international cooperation platform in the world today”.

He also noted that Italy had sent representatives to Beijing’s BRI forum in October.

“This embodies the huge appeal and global influence of jointly constructing the Belt and Road,” he said.

An Italian government source confirmed to AFP on Wednesday that Rome had pulled out of the initiative.

Proponents of the BRI praise it for bringing resources and economic growth to the Global South.

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

AFP

# THIRTEEN KILLED IN SURGE IN FIGHTING IN INDIA'S MANIPUR



Peace protest in Manipur. Photo: AFP

**A**t least 13 people have been killed in gun battles in India's northeastern Manipur, the latest clashes since ethnic violence erupted seven months ago, a state official and local media said last week.

At least 200 people have been killed in Manipur state since fighting broke out in May between the predominantly Hindu Meitei majority and mainly Christian Kuki community.

A state official confirmed to AFP late Monday last week that the bodies were found in Manipur's Tengenoupal district, an area lying close to the border with Myanmar.

State police also released a statement confirming the death toll, the Times of India said Tuesday.

Longstanding tensions between the two communities have revolved around competition for land and public jobs, with rights activists accusing local

leaders of exacerbating ethnic divisions for political gain.

The far-flung state has now fractured along ethnic lines, with rival militias setting up blockades to keep out members of the opposing community.

Human Rights Watch has accused state authorities in Manipur, which is governed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party, of facilitating the conflict with "divisive policies that promote Hindu majoritarianism".

AFP

# MYANMAR: TECHNOLOGY KEY TO AID WAR CRIMES INVESTIGATIONS

Being denied access to sites where some of the most horrific crimes and human rights violations are alleged to have taken place during the military's brutal repression of dissent, is a major challenge for the IIMM, the UN-appointed Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar.

But the investigation team has nonetheless been able to interview victims and witnesses outside the country and sift through a vast amount of useful

data that has laid at least the groundwork for future prosecutions, says the IIMM head, Nicholas Koumjian.

He explained to UN News's Vibhu Mishra how the UN Human Rights Council-mandated independent investigators go about their work, and what they hope to achieve.

The following is a transcript of the interview:

**UN News:** Can you tell us the circumstances



IIMM head Nicholas Koumjian.

that led to IIMM's creation?

**Nicholas Koumjian:** The IIMM was created following the crisis of the clearance operations in 2017 that led to about three quarters of a million Rohingya fleeing the country, to Bangladesh where they remain today in refugee camps.

**UN News:** And what sets the mechanism apart from other independent entities like the Special Rapporteur on Myanmar or UN offices like OHCHR?

**Nicholas Koumjian:** We have a very specific mandate. Our mandate is to collect evidence of the most serious international crimes committed in Myanmar since 2011. And then to prepare files that could facilitate criminal prosecution. Though we are not a reporting mechanism, our purpose is not to give advice to States about how to treat the problems of Myanmar. Rather, it is to look at the individuals criminally responsible for what happened.

And it is based on the fact that many observers of Myanmar have recognized that a lot of the problems go back to the fact that, for decades, the authorities – particularly the military in Myanmar, has gotten away with very bad behavior, with crimes without any accountability.

So, there is a recognition that if we really want to treat the root problem then there is a necessity to bring accountability.

**UN News:** Without going into the specifics, can you tell us what kind of allegations you are investigating and how these have evolved since the military coup of 2021?

**Nicholas Koumjian:** Well, our mandate is to collect evidence of the most serious international crimes. And international crimes are defined as war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. So the crimes that we concentrate on are the most serious. And there are issues in some cases about individual killings. Are they part of a larger armed conflict where they could qualify? So there are, sometimes we have

to look at all the context to see if a particular incident falls within our mandate or not. But what we are concentrating on is we have one team that that works in the Rohingya about what happened in 2012, 2016 and 2017.

Each of those times there were military operations that led to large numbers fleeing the country. And the other half of the team looks at everything else, which mainly means concentrating. Now on the post-coup violence. The February 2021 coup occurred and that itself, as we said at the time, was not within our mandate. Our mandate is not fair. Elections and constitutional and unconstitutional change, it is limited to these serious crimes. But we said we would be watching based on the history of Myanmar and unfortunately the history of political violence repeated.

And we see indications of a widespread and systematic attack on a civilian population. The other team, what we call team one, has spent most of its efforts, collecting evidence of this post-coup violence.

**UN News:** You said you are looking at a lot of allegations concerning the State forces. Are you also looking at the non-state side?

**Nicholas Koumjian:** Absolutely. Our mandate is crimes and it does not matter what the ethnicity, religion, or citizenship of the victims are or the perpetrators, but they do have to qualify as among these most serious international crimes. So we are looking at for example, in the post-coup situation many allegations and sometimes there are pretty good indications that individuals were targeted because they were suspected to be informants. But it appears that these were non-combatants. They were civilians at the time, and under the laws of war, they cannot be targeted. So we are looking at those to see if they would amount to an international crime within our mandate. Again, not all killings are within our mandate.

**UN News:** The mechanism has not been able to visit Myanmar in this situation. How are you gather-

ing evidence and conducting your investigations?

**Nicholas Koumjian:** Well, it requires, for us to be as innovative as possible. And part of what we do is using new technologies. Anything from aerial photographs of villages you can see how they looked before and after an attack, before and after they were burned arsons. But also looking at things like social media and examining those and using modern technologies to search through vast numbers of documents. For the most relevant evidence, we have collected over 20 million items of evidence, individual photographs, textual post of a few words, or it could be a 500 page document and videos.

It is a challenge to be able to review those to find what is relevant. So we are trying to use all these new technologies and innovations. We do speak to people; we try to speak directly to those who saw and heard events. Obviously, that is very difficult when we cannot go to Myanmar, but there are many individuals now outside the country. We try to work with different countries to allow us to operate on their territory, to do these interviews and collect this evidence.

**UN News:** How can you ensure that the evidence you are collecting will help ensure individuals and entities are held accountable?

**Nicholas Koumjian:** Well, you know, our mandate is to collect the evidence and then prepare files for courts. And what we cannot control is what courts are able and willing to use the evidence. When we were created, it was to collect and preserve. And I think there was a recognition that which is true, that international justice is very slow but that things can change. Before I worked in Myanmar, I worked at the KH Rouge Tribunal in Cambodia. And when I left, the year I left, we got convictions against two of the top leaders of the Khmer Rouge, the former number two in the regime, the former head of state for crimes that they had that had been completed 40 years earlier.

Now, that 40 years is way too long to wait for justice. But it is important to preserve evidence so that

it can be used in courts one day.

And ideally one day these will be used in courts, in Myanmar courts that could give fair trials that are really interested in objectively looking at the evidence and holding to account those responsible. But in the meantime, there is also the possibility of sharing this with international courts or with national courts that may exercise some form of universal jurisdiction. And we are currently sharing with three different processes. One is the International criminal court, which is investigating the situation of the Rohingya and what happened to them.

Another is the federal courts in Argentina, some Rohingya who lived in the United Kingdom and were currently refugees in Bangladesh, filed a complaint with the courts of Argentina, even in that country is halfway around the world. And there was no link to Argentina. Appellate court there said that the courts have to investigate that complaint because these are crimes against humanity, which means it affects everyone. Their courts were obligated under their constitution to investigate. So we are providing evidence, sharing our evidence with that court to try to assist them in their obviously very complicated, difficult investigation.

And then finally, there is a case at the International Court of Justice. This is not a criminal case, but it is a case where The Gambia has alleged that Myanmar has failed to fulfill its obligations under the convention for the prevention of genocide. Both Gambia and Myanmar have signed that convention many years ago, and that convention puts obligations on States to prevent genocide, to punish it.

And in that case the proceedings are ongoing. The court has ruled that it does have jurisdiction. The parties are still filing written motions, which should be completed by the end of next year. And probably in 2025 they will actually proceed to the court hearings on the merits of the case.

So that is, I think we think a very important

case for Myanmar. But of course, any ruling by the International Court of Justice, which is the highest court of the United Nations can have effects on everyone around the world. So, we think it is important that the judges in that case have the very best evidence of what would actually occurred.

We are trying to share our evidence with the, um, with that proceedings so that it can benefit and ultimately we hope a, a verdict that would help bring some justice.

**UN News:** In your opinion, what are the most significant obstacles to achieving justice and accountability in Myanmar?

**Nicholas Koumjian:** Well, I think the, the biggest obstacle is the lack of cooperation. I mean, ideally, we would be going to crime scenes, we would be speaking to the victims. We would also be speaking to the people that are alleged to be perpetrators or were in the same units of the forces that committed or alleged to have committed crimes. And that is how you would normally do a criminal investigation. We cannot do that in this situation, so we have to, compensate by, for example, going to neighboring countries or talking to witnesses in different places around the world.

What we need is a cooperation of states to allow us to carry out that work. We, of course, need the resources to be able to do this. It is not easy because we are based in Geneva and so a lot of, to speak to people, we have to travel. That is expensive, but it is necessary in these circumstances.

**UN News:** Before we conclude, would you like to add anything from your side?

**Nicholas Koumjian:** I would just like to say to the people of Myanmar, to the victims of these crimes that we recognize how much they want to see some justice, they want to see. I have talked to victims from Myanmar and they are similar to victims I talked to from Cambodia or Darfur or Bosnia and Sierra Leone, places that I have worked before. And what victims generally want is they want a recognition by a court

that these crimes really happen to them, and they want to see the persons who are responsible held to account some recognition that they were responsible.

We are working. We hope for one day to achieve that justice. And we ask for your, for your patience and cooperation. And we will do our best to achieve that.

**Courtesy of UN News**



Photo: Dinis Bazgudino

## KARENNI STATE

### *Junta launches 350 airstrikes in Karenni State over 19 days*

The junta launched over 350 airstrikes in Karenni State since the start of the Karenni defence forces 1111 Offensive on 11 November until 30 November.

The 350 airstrikes, which killed 76 civilians between 11 and 27 November, targeted the towns of Loikaw, Moebye, and Demoso, according to the Karenni Humanitarian Aid for IDPs (KHAI) organisation.

KHAI reported that on 29 November alone, there were 60 airstrikes according to the Karenni Army (KA).

According to the Progressive Karenni People Force (PKPF), an ethnic rights group overseeing regime atrocities in the state, there was a total of 880 airstrikes on Karenni State since the coup until the end of November 2023.

This means that in the 19 days from 11 until 30 November 2023, the junta launched more than half as many airstrikes in Karenni State than it had in over two-and-a-half years from the February 2021 coup until the beginning of November 2023, when it carried out 530 airstrikes in the state.

The November airstrikes were carried out by

a variety of jet fighters deploying a range of bombs, according to an official from the Central News and Information Department of the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF).

He said: “During the initial four or five days of Operation 1111, the junta air strikes took the form of 15-minute attacks employing various jet fighters. They not only dropped bombs but also fired machine guns. We observed that they used a variety of jets for the attacks, including types that had never been seen before.”

A significant number of the airstrikes targeted Loikaw and some of them dropped 500-pound bombs, according to KHAI.

A KHAI official said: “The junta’s airstrikes are predominantly focused on strategic battlegrounds. However, they have also targeted civilian areas, including public camps, internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps, schools, hospitals, and more.”

76 civilians were killed in airstrikes in Karenni State between 11 and 27 November, according to KHAI.

The KA, the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF) and other Karenni-based defence forces launched the 1111 Offensive on 11 November. They now control nearly half of Loikaw, according to the KNDF and control all the routes into Loikaw.





## OVER A MILLION TOURISTS VISIT MYANMAR AMIDST US STATE DEPARTMENT'S 'DO NOT TRAVEL' DESIGNATION

In the span from January to October 2023, over a million international tourists graced Myanmar shores, announced by General Mya Tun Oo, chairperson of the Central Committee for National Tourism Development, according to the junta-controlled media.

Mya Tun Oo made the remark at the meeting of the committee held in Nay Pyi Taw on December 6.

He explained that tourism covers lots of stuff, like hotels, airlines, travel companies, restaurants, and souvenirs.

He said that the global COVID-19 pandemic dealt a heavy blow to global tourism, significantly impacting Myanmar's economy by stalling travel, causing job losses, and affecting businesses; however, with decreasing Covid cases, nations began actively reviving tourism as a vital economic stimulant.

According to junta-controlled media, international flights started back up on April 17, 2022, and the world travel e-visa started on May 20. In 2022, over 230,000 international tourists came to Myanmar, which was 43 percent more than in 2021.

Then, from January to October 2023, over a million tourists visited, a 47 percent jump from 2022. Even with this rise, Myanmar still gets fewer tourists than nearby countries. In comparison, Thailand has received almost 24.5 million international tourists in the first 11 months of 2023, according to EFE, a Spanish international news agency.

Myanmar has been placed on the US State Department's list of 21 nations under "Level 4: Do Not Travel," primarily due to ongoing civil unrest, potential unjust detentions, and inadequate healthcare resources.

# MYANMAR JUNTA PLANS TO COLLECT MORE TAX AS THEY DESPERATELY NEED MONEY FOR EXPENSES



Photo: AFP

**M**yanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing said at a meeting held on 4 December that they would collect more taxes in expanded areas as the Military Council is losing foreign exchange revenues and desperately needs finance for expenses.

The Military Council has been facing a financial crisis after the coup as fighting is spreading across the country and the national economy is in decline. They are now trying to collect more taxes from the people.

The junta chief said that the country needed taxes for development work in the country so that they would make sure to collect taxes at the existing rates and that no revenue would be allowed to run into arrears in the country.

The junta's Internal Revenue Department says tightened tax collection would include restaurants, hotels and guesthouses, TV and media, gold and jewellery, mobile phones and accessories and other service sectors.

The Military Council is also working to collect taxes from Myanmar national overseas workers working under an MoU with the employment permit system, medical workers working in private hospitals and clinics and other basic taxes such as electricity and water and also planning to increase license fees for businesses.

The Myanmar Gems Enterprise (MGE) under the control of the junta's Ministry of Mining notified to businesspersons on 15 September that they would increase the gems and jewellery license fees as the existing rates are not relevant in the current age.

The overseas workers working under MoU must send 25% of their salaries to their family members through official channels as remittances monthly or quarterly and those who failed to abide this regulation will be barred for three years from overseas employment when they came back home. Moreover, the junta amended the Union Taxation Law 2023. Under this amended law overseas workers must pay 10% of their salaries to the State as income tax.

The inflation rate has grown since the 2021 coup and the Myanmar currency Kyat has been falling against hard currencies. The US dollar exchange rate has reached 3,700 Kyats against the dollar or a nearly three-fold change within two and half years.

Moreover, in the wake of escalating armed conflicts across the country, the junta is facing a huge budget deficit, they are not receiving foreign loans, and the receipt of internal revenues is declining.

The Internal Revenue Department says it hopes to double commercial tax receipts in the 2023-24 financial year.

# YANGON HIT BY FUEL SHORTAGE



Filling up on petrol in Yangon.  
Photo: AFP

**M**yanmar's commercial hub Yangon is facing a fuel shortage, residents and junta-controlled media said Wednesday, with hundreds of vehicles queuing up at dawn in the hope of securing petrol.

The state-run Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper said the shortage had begun on Tuesday and was "due to delays in oil delivery from Thilawa Port to filling stations", without providing further detail.

Most of Yangon's fuel arrives through the port, but the local kyat currency has plunged against the dollar since the military seized power in 2021, hitting importers' ability to pay for fuel shipments.

Dozens of cars and motorbikes lined up in the early morning in Yangon, AFP correspondents said.

In Bago region north of Yangon, some stations were limiting sales to 20 litres per customer, an AFP correspondent said.

"We closed for a week because of shortages and just opened this morning," an attendant at a petrol pump in Phayargyi, about 75 kilometres north of Yangon, told AFP.

"Even though we have petrol now, it will run out soon because many cars and motorcycles are coming to us as other stations nearby are closed," they said, asking not to give their name.

Myanmar's economy has tanked since the coup, which sparked huge pro-democracy protests that were crushed by a military crackdown.

Dozens of "People's Defence Forces" have since sprung up across the country to fight the junta, with regular clashes across swathes of the country.

Earlier this year, the World Bank said Myanmar's GDP was projected to increase by three percent in the year to September 2023, still around 10 percent lower than in 2019.

"Severe supply and demand constraints" continue to hamper economic activity, it said.

In late October, an alliance of ethnic minority armed groups launched an offensive against the military across northern Shan state near the border with China -- Myanmar's biggest trade partner.

The alliance has captured one key border crossing and blocked roads leading to several others, denying the cash-strapped junta tax and foreign exchange.

Last week, fighting in the east briefly blocked another key trade highway to neighbouring Thailand.

AFP

# CHINA SAYS EXPORTS RISE FOR FIRST TIME IN SEVEN MONTHS



Cars ready for export from China. Photo: AFP

Chinese exports rose in November for the first time in seven months, officials said Thursday last week, as the country navigates a troubled recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overseas shipments edged up 0.5 percent on-year to \$291 billion, the General Administration of Customs (GAC) said, marking their first increase since April.

The figure was much better than the 0.3 percent contraction forecast by analysts in a Bloomberg poll.

However, imports slipped back into contraction, falling 0.6 percent to \$224 billion, the GAC said.

Chinese exports -- long a key growth driver -- have largely been in decline since last October except for a short-lived rebound in March and April.

They slumped 6.4 percent in October, faring far worse than analysts' predictions.

The world's second-largest economy expanded a moderate 4.9 percent in the third quarter, slightly less than Beijing's five percent target, which is one of the lowest in years.

Officials have struggled to sustain a recovery from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, even after removing draconian containment measures at the end of 2022.

Exports have been hit by weak global demand, while a debt-fuelled property crisis and low consumption have caused headaches at home.

Consumer prices shrank 0.2 percent in October, marking a return to deflation following a modest rebound from the summer.

AFP

Penrose Thitsa

## MYANMAR ECONOMIC MONITOR: WORLD BANK PROJECTIONS SIGNAL BLEAK 1% GROWTH AMIDST ESCALATING CONFLICTS

**A**midst escalating armed clashes, trade disruptions, and soaring inflation, Myanmar faces a significant economic setback, predicts the World Bank's semi-annual Myanmar Economic Monitor released on December 12, 2023.

Projections suggest a meager 1 percent economic growth for Myanmar by March 2024, painting a grim picture due to amplified conflicts since October this year.

Myanmar's military staged a coup in February 2021 by ousting the civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi. And the junta army violently cracked down on peaceful anti-coup protesters. Since then, armed resistance has emerged across the country.

On October 27, Brotherhood Alliance, composed of three ethnic armed organizations—Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and Arakan Army (AA)—started Operation 1027 against the junta.

The resultant displacement of people, interruptions in critical trade routes, and surging logistics expenses have compounded the country's economic woes.

Anticipating a prolonged sluggish phase across multiple sectors including agriculture, manufacturing, and trade, analysts foresee a persistent deceleration in growth throughout 2024 and possibly into 2025.

Myanmar's economy still lingers at around 10 percent below its 2019 levels, standing as the sole country in East Asia unable to rebound to pre-pandemic activity levels.

A substantial spike in consumer prices, surging nearly 29 percent in the year ending June 2023, compounded by a depreciating kyat and heightened conflicts, has further exacerbated the cost of living.

Household incomes have taken a severe hit, with 40 percent of households reporting reduced earnings compared to the previous year and median real incomes declining by about 10 percent.

Mariam Sherman, World Bank Country Director for Myanmar, Cambodia, and the Lao PDR, highlighted the distressing economic conditions, particularly the impact of soaring food prices on vulnerable communities.

The report underscores an uncertain future for Myanmar's economy, suggesting a considerable setback in its development trajectory across various sectors if current challenges persist.

CULTURE & LIFESTYLE

# IN FOCUS





## DAYLIGHT CALM

Afternoon sun on Hsinbyume Pagoda.

Photo: Sandip Roy

# JOURNALIST INVESTIGATES THE EARLY DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT IN MYANMAR



Delphine Schrank

**W**ashington Post reporter Delphine Schrank can class herself as a veteran of the early days of Myanmar's democracy movement, arriving on assignment to cover the aftermath of 2008 Cyclone Nargis, initially a little bewildered by the military-run country she found herself in.

As she tells Insight Myanmar in a podcast interview, her initial questions about a democracy movement were rebuffed.

Check out the Insight Myanmar podcast here: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2023/11/26/episode-206-rebels-without-a-pause>

## MAKINGS OF A BOOK

Describing herself as a contrarian at heart, Delphine believed there must be a movement.

So she did some digging, and learned just how active Myanmar's underground networks really were.

Her work ultimately resulted in a book, "The Rebel of Rangoon", which follows the clandestine and grassroots organizing during those years, largely through the lives of two protagonists, Nway and Nigel.

"There was something was about to happen, and it wasn't at all clear," she describes. "This underground dissident movement, they were very much trying to build and grow the idea of democracy after a very repressive period, right after the Saffron Revolution. People had been hunkered down and very much spooked by the crackdown. And yet, there was still the existence of this organization."

## EARLY DAYS

Myanmar usually makes the international news only after some kind of atrocity or tragedy, like a natural disaster, genocide, or a military coup. But Delphine didn't want to cover the same big headlines that typically attract "parachute journalists." She hoped to understand the lives of those who were working towards change, and whose efforts went largely unnoticed by the outside world. "[My book] tries to tell the deep story of what it meant to be a dissident during that time, what it meant to be living in the street with no place to go through fear, and not being able to have a relationship or fall in love and then having to leave because you were afraid for your new love. That's the tale that I'm trying to tell: what it really takes to stand up to a brutal, repressive regime that has spies, possibly on every corner, while at the same time capturing a moment of Burmese history as I was able to witness it. I think that had not been told to this day."

Ironically, Delphine had no way of knowing about the massive changes that were coming just



around the corner.

“I thought I was writing about the twilight of a real existing movement, one that I was told didn’t exist,” she says. “And I ended up seeing a ray of light of this movement being so essential to the opening.”

In contrast, most foreign journalists felt that the Burmese people were simply too beaten down to find a way to continue resisting, and that there was no change coming to the junta’s rule.

## **UNBEATABLE**

“My thesis is that these [activist] people were there and never went away! Even if you tried to discard them into 90 different prisons, and you can knock off as many heads as you want, but they will keep coming.”

The Saffron Revolution that she covered occurred just before the Arab Spring, and Delphine observed a real difference in how the Western media was covering those developments. While the Arab Spring was front page news, very little attention was paid to Myanmar, in spite of the similarities between the two movements in pushing tyrannical regimes to change. “[There was] a whole network of citizens who understood that one day, beyond protests, beyond toppling a statue, you have to put another government in place... ‘How are we going to get rid of this dictatorship? How long will it take? And what are our values?’ I simply haven’t seen that book, so I felt I had to be the one to write it.”

As Delphine made more connections within the underground movement, she realized the stakes at play for anyone willing to speak with her; if military intelligence found out, they could easily be arrested, if not killed. So she had to be very careful not only about who to approach but how, as well as considering how to safely frame questions. She also had to take circuitous routes to meetings lest she was being followed, sometimes taking taxis, and sometimes walking. “Instead of just interviewing someone cold, you’re witnessing their lives and writing this scene,” she describes of her process, referencing the nonfiction writers David Finkel and Katherine Boo as inspirations, as well as Andre Malraux’s *La Condition Humaine*, which detailed the failed 1927 Communist insurrection in Shanghai.

As a further safety precaution, Delphine scrambled her completed transcripts and hid them in her clothes when leaving the country.

## **DEDICATED TO THE MOVEMENT**

As noted earlier, one of her protagonists was Nway, who gave a compelling answer as to why he chose to dedicate himself to the movement. Delphine explains that while in medical school, Nway had a run-in with the military police, who told him that he had to give up his activism in order to be allowed to stay in school. “He’s like, ‘That’s it, I’m done!’ And he’s never made money since. He’s lived destitute. He could have gone on to a comfortable professional life relative to what that’s possible to have in a repressive regime. I wanted to capture more than just the cold bare facts, which, to be honest, can be quite dull to people who aren’t really interested into the history. I wanted to capture with a sensibility and a feel and like, ‘What does it take?!’” In Nway’s case, Delphine also learned that this dedication to the cause is a family affair, as Nway’s father was a doctor who chose to work in rural poor areas, and whose activism eventually landed him in prison, where he died. Nway’s mother then informed her four sons that one of them must continue to carry the torch of democracy—much like one male child is often expected to ordain as a lifelong monk to bring the family merit—and Nway’s hand shot up to volunteer. And much like a Buddhist monastic, Nway also chose to sacrifice any semblance of a romantic relationship in order to commit fully to the movement.

## **THE LONER**

The other protagonist, Nigel, was somewhat the opposite. While Nway was a networker and organizer, Nigel was more of a lone operator. “He almost looked like a Hollywood matinee idol in a masculine and tranquil way. When he spoke—and he didn’t speak that often, but when he spoke—you listened.” Like Nway, politics also ran deep in Nigel’s family; both his parents were NLD members and had spent long periods in prison. This led to the family becoming destitute, which initially disgusted Nigel, turning him off to politics. But during the Saffron Revolution, he gave an impromptu speech and got caught up in the moment, which ignited his passion for the movement. He soon

joined the underground network.

In addition to the two principal characters, Delphine also fleshes out her story with other key individuals who had dedicated themselves to pursuing this change. One is Win Tin, the beloved political prisoner who emerged in 1988 as one of the leading intellectuals and journalists associated with the NLD. Imprisoned for his participation in the democracy movement, he was released 20 years later, and famously refused to wear any other shirt for the rest of his life than the standard issued blue prison uniforms, as a testament to and reminder of the many still behind bars. Win Tin was also unafraid to share his opinions, even when they went against NLD party orthodoxy, such as his insistence that the Bamar-led movement needed to do a better job incorporating ethnic voices. “People loved Win Tin because he dared,” she says. “He dared to say whatever the hell he wanted to say! He wasn’t scared and he wouldn’t bite his tongue, and he was really sharp about it.” To Delphine, Win Tin was part of a strong cadre of Burmese activists advocating for democratic ideals who didn’t then— and often still don’t— get as much attention as the bigger names. “This movement wasn’t all about this one messiah, this figure who descended on Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi, who told them, ‘We can have democracy.’ A lot of it came from the bottom up, and he was one of those he was one of these.”

Other important figures inhabit Delphine’s chronicles. Nyan Win, the longtime lawyer of Aung San Suu Kyi’s, was imprisoned by the military in 2021 and died shortly thereafter. Khin Maung Swe, a geologist, was arrested and then brutally tortured for his involvement with the NLD, but later had a nasty break with Aung San Suu Kyi, and has since made strongly anti-Rohingya statements and joined the SAC (State Administration Council, synonymous with the junta) after the 2021 coup. Dr. Zaw Wai Maung, an NLD candidate who was elected to parliament, was sentenced to two decades in prison, and became one of the party elders following his release. And Khin Sandar Win, Nigel’s wife, had to manage her pregnancy alone while also caring for Nigel after he was thrown in prison.

### **SACRIFICE**

A common theme running through all these personal accounts is the value of sacrifice, and Del-

phine sees many of their stories as a kind of “Hero’s Journey.” However, many dismissed such notions when Delphine tried to understand their stories, regarding their effort as nothing special. “It wouldn’t even occur to them that they were doing something brave and courageous,” she relays, and goes on to point out how their work planted the seeds of what we’re seeing now in post-coup Myanmar. “That level of sacrifice is what has allowed the Burmese to have this deep, long-haul vision of Generation Z.”

### **INSPIRING, PRAGMATIC, RIGID**

Delphine also brings Aung San Suu Kyi in as a character in her book. She skirts the more usual, polarized, Western narratives about “The Lady”—as either a pro-democracy human rights icon, or a defender of the hated military and an apologist for genocide—and brings her into focus through the perspectives of Burmese informants. Her informants describe Aung San Suu Kyi in equal measures as inspiring, pragmatic, and rigid. Yet at the end of the day, Delphine acknowledges that “take her away, and there will be no democracy movement.”

Delphine also explores the role that Buddhism and meditation plays among activists, particularly how the practice finds its way behind bars. She notes that many former prisoners recall their initial experience as a child learning ānāpāna meditation, or observation of breath, and how this simple technique becomes a lifeline once they are incarcerated. Delphine believes that the enduring practice of mindfulness embodies the essence of what Aung San Suu Kyi alluded to in her famous book title, “Freedom From Fear,” which suggests that mental liberation is attainable through this transformative discipline, even in the face of oppressive regimes or the loss of physical freedom. Delphine takes issue with what she feels is a rather lazy, Western characterization of Burmese Buddhism as leading to passively suffering under a longstanding, brutal military regime. “The dissidents used Buddhism and meditation as a way to strengthen their resolve and strengthen their ability to move forward through, frankly, incredibly difficult personal suffering that other people might sit back and feel themselves to be victims.” She also notes how their understanding of the Buddhist concepts of *anattā* (non-self) and *samsara* (the endless round of rebirths) encourages activists



Delphine Schrank in conversation, collecting testimony for her stories and book.

to courageously sacrifice themselves for the greater movement.

### **NON-VIOLENT ETHOS**

Delphine points out that while a nonviolent ethos defined the pre-transition activist community, largely guided by the writings of Gene Sharp, the post-coup resistance, and the NUG itself, has since called for armed resistance. She recently checked in with Nway about this shift in strategy. “Since 1960, we could say that armed struggle has not succeeded. But since 1962, we can say that nonviolent struggle has also not succeeded,” she reports him as saying. “That was his answer to me, and it was this beautiful balance between, ‘We don’t know, [and] we got to do what we got to do!’” In other words, nonviolent resistance was never promoted just for its nobility, but also because it was really the only sane way to respond to an oppressive dictatorship. Yet that is no longer seen as a viable option in Myanmar, and many feel the time has come to launch an armed response. Delphine references a scenario from the Saffron Revolution to buttress the movement’s decision to take up armed resistance: Buddhist monks peacefully chanted the mettā sutta while calling on the junta to engage in dialog with democracy activists... and were subjected to horrific violence in return. “They were seeing these horrific crackdowns that led to children getting killed! At some point, everyone has the right to self-defense, unless you’re truly a sort of ex-

treme pacifist.” Many activists have come to the somber realization that peaceful protests no longer work because the military acts inhumanely, and shows no sign of changing.

Delphine’s book is a useful insight into Myanmar’s fight for freedom before the opening up and the subsequent 2021 coup that tipped the drive for democracy on its head.

“From a 30,000 foot perspective, in the long, long story of Burma, they haven’t exactly sat pretty and said, ‘Oh, fine, yeah, forget this whole democracy movement.’ Quite the contrary, to a degree, and that’s pretty amazing,” she says in closing. “And no, they haven’t got to the destination... but they’re getting there eventually, so I still have huge faith in them. And because of all the things we spoke about in the sacrifice, and the understanding of that long struggle, and all the other things that many of them have, and even the Buddhist philosophy underlying all this, they’re going to get there, it just might not be in their own lifetimes. And some of them are willing to accept that. But they’re going fight like hell until they get there and lose a lot of people along the way.”

The Insight Myanmar podcast interview with Delphine can be heard here: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2023/11/26/episode-206-rebels-without-a-pause>



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