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UN CONCERNS OVER POSSIBLE MYANMAR HUMANITARIAN COLLAPSE

As we approach the beginning of 2024, and the third anniversary of the Myanmar 2021 coup, there are fears that Myanmar may be on the verge of what can be termed a “humanitarian collapse”.

UN OCHA’s year-end Global Humanitarian Overview singles out Myanmar as one of the world’s major crisis areas given the ongoing conflict and the roadblocks the Myanmar junta have put up in blocking aid to those in need.

On an anecdotal level, the breakdown in society and the economy can be seen in the queues for cooking oil, fuel, and other basic supplies, and the roadblocks and dangers posed in many parts of the country as the resistance steps up its attacks and the junta continues to bomb civilians and burn villages.

As we enter 2024, 18.6 million people are in humanitarian need. This is almost 19 times the number prior to the military takeover and equivalent to a third of the population. The spread of conflict has driven unprecedented displacement, with the number of IDPs steeply increasing to 2 million, which is nearly 600,000 more than at the same time last year. There are fears that this trend will continue into 2024.

Heading into 2024, 12.9 million people are moderately or severely food insecure, with food accessibility and availability presenting challenges. Agriculture has been heavily interrupted. Soaring poverty is making it difficult for households to put adequate food on the table and coping capacity is stretched to the limit.

As a result of conflict, rights violations, and the adoption of negative coping strategies, more than 12.2 million people are considered to have protection needs, up from 11.5 million the previous year. Despite the dire humanitarian situation of affected people, including IDPs, the junta has continued to control and limit the transportation of rice, medicine, and fuel, as well as humanitarian access to people in need throughout many parts of the country. Heavy fighting between ethnic armed organizations and the junta in the final quarter of 2023 has driven surging displacement and further constrained access to people in need.

UN OCHA points out that the combination of the considerable underfunding of the response, inflation, access restrictions and interruptions to services in Myanmar has resulted in many needs going unaddressed and worsening.

Since the military takeover many children are still not attending school. This situation places children at much higher risk of negative coping mechanisms such as child labour, trafficking, and early marriage and reduces the likelihood of permanent disengagement from education. The health sector is facing similar strain, with interruptions due to conflict, attacks on health structures and staff, funding, availability of medical supplies and pressure on people not to use public services.

All in all, there is a serious threat that basic services will collapse throughout the country in 2024 as the struggle for a viable future for Myanmar continues.

EDITORIAL

mizzima
WEEKLY

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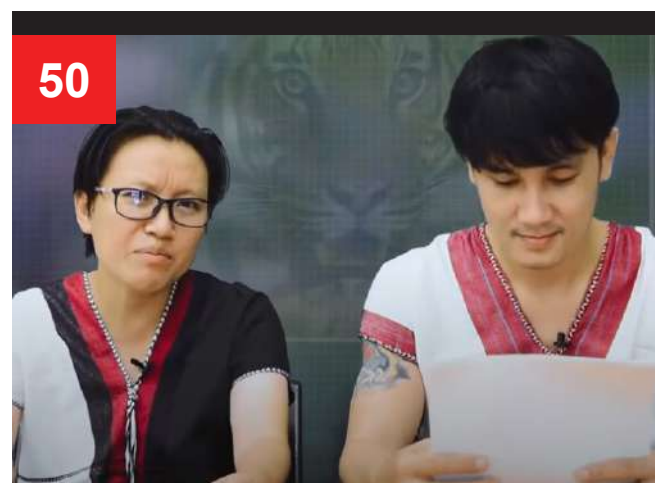
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IN FOCUS





FIGHTING AFTERMATH

A child plays in a Myanmar military bunker captured by the Three Brotherhood Alliance in northern Shan State under Operation 1027.

Photo: AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA SOLDIERS FIRE ON ORPHANAGE KILLING FOUR ORPHANS IN SAGAING

Four orphans, between the ages of five and 10, were killed when junta soldiers indiscriminately fired into their orphanage in Khampat Town, in Sagaing Region's Tamu Township, on 10 December.

Junta soldiers raided the AG Church Orphanage, in Ward 1 in Khampat Town, during the night of 10 December and randomly fired into the orphanage as they were trying to retake the police station next door and a nearby army camp that had been taken over by defence forces.

A defence force soldier said: "When the army attempted to get back their camp and the police station, they conducted a raid on the orphanage located behind the police station, and that's when the gunfire ensued."

At the time of the attack on the orphanage, there were about 40 people there, including 36 or-

phans and several caretakers. Sources say there is still a junta presence in the area.

Defence forces took control of Khampat Town on 7 November according to a National Unity Government (NUG) announcement.

On 10 December there was fierce fighting in Khampat Town when a column of about 200 junta soldiers tried to take back control of the town. They were also supported by junta airstrikes, according to defence force fighters.

Junta soldiers are also actively searching for defence force fighters hiding in wooded areas around Khampat Town.

Fierce fighting is ongoing in Khampat Town and the surrounding areas.

MYANMAR MIGRANT WORKERS WHO DON'T PAY TAX WILL NOT HAVE PASSPORTS RENEWED

The junta has told Myanmar migrant workers working abroad that if they do not remit 25 per cent of their salaries to Myanmar through official channels Myanmar embassies will not renew their passports.

The comments were made by the Myanmar Labour Minister Myint Naung whilst he was visiting Myanmar migrant workers working at a seafood processing factory in Suratthani Province.

He said that Myanmar migrant workers have to transfer 25 per cent of their salaries back to their families in Myanmar using Myanmar banks approved by the junta. The payments can be made quarterly or monthly.

He also said that all migrant workers have to pay two per cent of their salaries in tax. The tax payments must be in foreign currency and can be made every quarter or every year.

He explained that migrant workers who do not

follow these laws would not be able to get expiring passports renewed at Myanmar embassies.

Similarly, on 9 December, the Myanmar Embassy in South Korea announced plans for the Myanmar Internal Revenue Department to collect taxes from Myanmar migrant workers working in South Korea.

The announcement said that holders of Passports for Work and Passports for Business will have to pay income tax from 11 December when they come to renew their passports at the embassy.

The Myanmar embassy in Singapore made a similar statement saying passports would not be renewed for migrant workers not paying tax.

The junta also announced that migrant workers who had not sent back the necessary 25 per cent of their salaries through official channels or paid their tax would be barred from leaving Myanmar for three years after their return.

ARAKAN ARMY BUILDS PRESSURE ON MYANMAR JUNTA POSITIONS IN RAKHINE AND CHIN STATES

The Arakan Army (AA) reports that it has captured 142 Myanmar junta positions within the last 45 days as it builds pressure on the junta in Rakhine and Chin states.

The AA announced that during the 45-day duration of Operation 1027, they successfully captured army camps in 15 out of the 17 townships in Rakhine State as well as in Paletwa, Chin State, a total of 142 army camps, encompassing both large and small facilities, according to a statement on 14 December.

Operation 1027 was initiated by the Three Brotherhood Alliance including the AA, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) on 27 October in northern Shan State.

Specifically, among the 17 townships in Rakhine State, 125 junta camps were taken by the AA in 15 townships, excluding Gwa and Munaung townships. Additionally, 17 junta camps in Palatwa Township, Chin State, were also seized.

The statement further notes that the Aung Dai Chaungwa camp in Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State, has been occupied. The majority of the junta camps captured by the AA are concentrated in Maungdaw, totaling 62 camps.

Gwa is a township on the border of Ayeyarwaddy Region, while Munaung is an island surrounded by water.

Than Soe Naing, a political and military analyst in Myanmar, explained that Munaung cannot be accessed through land operations by the AA. Instead, it necessitates sea operations, making it a city that will require time to attack.

“The Military Council has established a strategic camp in Munaung, comprising approximately three

battalions. The unique challenge with Munaung Island is that any offensive must come from the sea, making the capture process a time-consuming endeavour,” the political analyst said.

Than Soe Naing claimed that while there is a prospect of Rakhine State being “liberated” in the near future, the AA must diligently prepare and take its time to engage in battles aimed at occupying the capital city Sittwe and capturing Ann City.

“There are two primary areas where military action needs to be carried out. One is Ann City, where the Western Military Command is located, and the other is Sittwe City. It is anticipated that surrounding and seizing these urban areas will require a significant amount of time. Consequently, while the prospect of liberating the entire Rakhine State is on the horizon, I acknowledge that the battles in these two locations will take time to conclude.”

Furthermore, Paletwa, located in Chin State, is highlighted as a target, with 17 military camps now occupied by the AA. Paletwa stands as the largest township in Chin State, boasting over 107,000 residents, with nearly 20,000 Rakhine ethnic people.

The AA has affirmed that the Three Brotherhood Alliance will persist in executing the military and political objectives initiated since Operation 1027.

The AA has also raised concerns, asserting that the Military Council's forces are consistently targeting civilians who have no affiliations during the ongoing conflict.



UN SPOTLIGHT

Report highlights Myanmar crisis in global humanitarian review



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UN OCHA has highlighted Myanmar and Afghanistan in its annual global report entitled Global Humanitarian Overview 2024 released on 11 December 2023.

It says that in 2024, nearly 300 million people around the world, including more than 18 million people in Myanmar, will need humanitarian assistance and protection, due to conflicts, climate emergencies and other drivers.

For Asia and the Pacific, the overview says: "Asia and the Pacific is the most disaster-prone region in the world, highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and natural hazards. In 2022, over 140 disasters struck the Asia-Pacific region, affecting over 64 million people and leading to over 7,500 deaths. Nearly 80 percent of the world's climate-induced displacement happens in Asia and the Pacific, mostly triggered by climate-related and geological hazards such as monsoon rains, floods, tropical cyclones, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and landslides. As a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), disasters cause more damage in Asia-Pacific than in any other region, and the gap appears to be widening. Last year alone, disasters in the region caused economic damages esti-

mated at US\$57 billion.

Asia-Pacific is also home to several conflicts and protracted crises, with 7 million refugees and asylum seekers and some 5 million internally displaced people. The region hosts the world's largest refugee settlement in the Cox's Bazar District of Bangladesh where one million Rohingya refugees continue to rely entirely on humanitarian assistance for protection, food, water, shelter and health. The crises in both Afghanistan and Myanmar continue to deteriorate, with significant impacts on the humanitarian situation in both countries, and the potential for repercussions across the region as civilians continue to flee conflict and instability. Small-scale and localized conflicts also characterise some countries in the region, including the Philippines and Papua New Guinea, with significant humanitarian impacts.

PROTRACTED CRISIS

Myanmar remains a complex, protracted protection crisis, UN OCHA notes. The people of Myanmar continue to face an unprecedented human rights, humanitarian and political emergency that is posing grave protection risks for civilians, limiting access to vital services including health and education, and driv-



Digging a bomb shelter in northern Shan State.
Photo: AFP

ing deep food insecurity. Humanitarian needs have worsened across the country as conflict continues to rage, causing unprecedented levels of displacement, destruction of property and livelihoods, and mine and other explosive ordnance contamination, especially in the Northwest and Southeast. This has created dire protection threats and underscores the need for the centrality of protection to be implemented and funded across the response. The use of heavy weapons, including air strikes and artillery fire, continues to claim lives and pose risks to the safety and security of civilians, while raids, random searches and arrests are of deep concern. Forced recruitment – including of children – is being increasingly reported.

MANY IN NEED

In 2024, 18.6 million people are in humanitarian need. This is almost 19 times the number prior to the military takeover and equivalent to a third of the population. This includes 6 million children, who are bearing the brunt of this crisis. The spread of conflict has driven unprecedented displacement, with the number of IDPs steeply increasing to 2 million as of 23 October 2023, which is nearly 600,000 more than at the same time last year. There are fears that this trend will continue



into 2024. More than one million IDPs are being hosted in the hard-to-reach Northwest alone. IDPs are living in terrible conditions without proper shelter, often in informal sites in the jungle where they cannot easily access basic services, such as clean water. The monsoon in the second half of 2023 has been particularly miserable for people in these informal sites. Those on the move in unfamiliar locations are at escalating risk from explosive ordnance (landmines, explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices). People living in protracted displacement, from conflicts prior to the military takeover, are also facing desperate situations with pre-existing vulnerabilities further compounded by the current situation and Cyclone Mocha, particularly for stateless Rohingya people. Extremely severe Cyclone Mocha hit the Myanmar coast on 14 May 2023, bringing wind gusts of up to 305 km/h, storm surge and accompanying heavy rains, and impacting more than 3 million people in an area where needs were already high.

FOOD INSECURITY

Heading into 2024, 12.9 million people are moderately or severely food insecure, with food accessibility and availability presenting challenges. Agriculture has been heavily interrupted. Soaring poverty is making it difficult for households to put adequate food on the table and coping capacity is stretched to the limit. As a result of conflict, rights violations, and the adoption of negative coping strategies, more than 12.2 million people are considered to have protection needs, up from 11.5 million the previous year. Despite the dire humanitarian situation of affected people, including IDPs, the military-led State Administration Council has continued to control and limit the transportation of rice, medicine, and fuel, as well as humanitarian access to people in need throughout many parts of the country, but particularly in the Northwest and Southeast. Heavy fighting between ethnic armed organizations and the Myanmar Military in the final quarter of 2023 has driven surging displacement and further constrained access to people in need.

CONCERNS OF COLLAPSE

The combination of the considerable underfunding of the response, inflation, access restrictions and interruptions to services has resulted in many needs going unaddressed and worsening over time. There is a serious threat that basic services will collapse throughout the country. Since the military takeover many children are still not attending school. More than 30 per cent of school-age children are not enrolled

in any form of learning, while half of the children has had their learning heavily disrupted for the past three years due to conflict, displacement, economic hardships, and natural disasters. While efforts are underway to support alternative education solutions, these are currently only reaching a fraction of children. This situation places children at much higher risk of negative coping mechanisms such as child labour, trafficking, and early marriage and reduces the likelihood of permanent disengagement from education the longer it goes on. The health sector is facing similar strain, with interruptions due to conflict, attacks on health structures and staff, funding, availability of medical supplies and pressure on people not to use public services. This is contributing to worsening maternal and child health outcomes, missed routine immunizations and poor emergency care for pregnant women. While ethnic and community health organizations and alternative private services are working to cover gaps, response capacity is not commensurate with needs. Private providers are

also too expensive for many people amid the current economic distress.

UN OCHA RESPONSE PRIORITIES FOR 2024

In 2024, humanitarian partners will work towards the following strategic objectives:

Protection risks and needs are identified, monitored, mitigated, and met for 3 million people, while the centrality of protection is upheld across the humanitarian response including through promotion of respect for human rights, international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles.

Suffering, morbidity, and mortality is prevented or reduced among 3.7 million displaced, returned, stateless and other crisis-affected people experiencing or at risk of food insecurity, malnutrition, and health threats.

At least 2.5 million returned, stateless and other crisis-affected people have safe, tailored, timely and



TNLA soldiers taking a break at a pagoda in northern Shan State. Photo: AFP

dignified access to essential services and support to ensure their survival and prevent deterioration of their humanitarian needs.

The HRP target of 4.5 million at the start of 2023 went up to 5 million post-Cyclone Mocha in May 2023, and has now modestly increased to 5.3 million in 2024. The new target amounts to 29 per cent of the total People in Need (PiN) of 18.6 million people. Given the centrality of protection to the crisis, the Protection Cluster is largely driving the overall increase in people targeted for humanitarian assistance, as the Cluster expanded its target significantly from 2.1 million to 3 million. Overall, there is a high correlation between the intensity of security incidents, the severity of needs and subsequent targeting decisions under the HNRP.

There is a high correlation between the intensity of security incidents, the severity of needs and subsequent targeting decisions under the HNRP OCHA

Given the sheer magnitude of the PiN, the

funding landscape, and capacity constraints, the HCT prioritized the response according to severity of needs and operational capacity.

More focus on IDPs, returnees/resettled/integrated IDPs, and non-displaced stateless people and less on the fourth population group – “other crisis-affected people.”

More focus on hard-to-reach rural areas and those with the most severe needs, while being realistic about potential reach, given access and capacity constraints.

Resilience, DRR, most prevention and basic social services-type activities have been transferred to the development objectives outlined in the soon to be finalized UN Transitional Cooperation Framework (TCF) for Myanmar to allow for greater focus on acute needs by humanitarians. The HNRP will include a dedicated section looking at “humanitarian consequences if development actors fail to raise enough funds.”

The Myanmar humanitarian funding requirement went up from US\$764 million at the start of 2023, to \$887 million after Cyclone Mocha in May 2023, and now to US\$994 million in 2024. The latest increase is the result of the more ambitious 2024 response target, the rise in costs of delivering assistance in hard-to-reach and insecure areas, as well as the inclusion of duty of care overheads for the first time. Inflation continues to play a major role in the costing of commodity-heavy clusters, especially where no alternatives are available in-country and cash is not viable.

Humanitarians have planned for the current situation to continue into 2024 with the potential for elections, if they take place, to be a possible trigger for increased tensions and further access restrictions. While there have been modest access openings in 2023, these were very localized, and the overall access environment is expected to remain heavily constrained, requiring a strong reliance on, and risk sharing with, local responders who are now the backbone of the response. Humanitarian operating space is under increasing threat from bureaucratic blockages imposed by the military-led State Administration Council around registration, travel, banking, and visas and continued advocacy will be required around the impacts of these constraints on the humanitarian response. Humanitarians will continue to engage with all parties in a bid to secure access, promote principled responses that are based on needs and raise civilian protection issues.



UN NEEDS \$46.4 BILLION FOR AID IN ‘BLEAK’ 2024

The United Nations said Monday last week that it needed \$46.4 billion next year to bring life-saving help to around 180 million people in desperate circumstances around the world.

The UN said the global humanitarian outlook for 2024 was “bleak”, with conflicts, climate emergencies and collapsing economies “wreaking havoc” on the most vulnerable.

While global attention focuses on the conflict raging in the Gaza Strip, the UN said the wider Middle East, Sudan and Afghanistan were among the hotspots that also needed major international aid operations.

But the size of the annual appeal and the

number of people it aims to reach were scaled back compared to 2023, following a decrease in donations.

“Humanitarians are saving lives, fighting hunger, protecting children, pushing back epidemics, and providing shelter and sanitation in many of the world’s most inhumane contexts,” UN aid chief Martin Griffiths said in a statement.

“But the necessary support from the international community is not keeping pace with the needs,” he said.

The 2023 appeal was for \$56.7 billion but received just 35 percent of that amount, one of the worst funding shortfall in years. It allowed UN agencies to deliver assistance and protection to 128 million people.



Photo: AFP

With a few weeks left to go, 2023 is likely to be the first year since 2010 when humanitarian donations declined compared to the previous year.

The UN therefore scaled down its appeal to \$46.4 billion this time around, and will focus on those in the gravest need.

72 COUNTRIES

Launching the 2024 Global Humanitarian Overview, Griffiths said the sum was nonetheless a “massive ask” and would be tough to raise, with many donor countries facing their own cost of living crises.

“Without adequate funding, we cannot provide life-saving assistance. And if we cannot provide that assistance, people will pay with their lives,” he said.

The appeal covers aid for 72 countries: 26 states in crisis and 46 neighbouring nations dealing with the knock-on effects, such as an influx of refugees.

The five largest single-country appeals are for Syria (\$4.4 billion), Ukraine (\$3.1 billion), Afghanistan (\$3 billion), Ethiopia (\$2.9 billion) and Yemen (\$2.8 billion).

Griffiths said there would be 300 million people in need around the world next year -- a figure down from 363 million last year.

But the UN aims to reach only 180.5 million of those, with NGOs and aid agencies targeting the remainder -- not to mention front-line countries and communities themselves who provide the first help.

CLIMATE IMPACT

The Middle East and North Africa require \$13.9 billion, the largest total for any region in 2024.

Beyond Syria, the Palestinian territories and Yemen, Griffiths also pointed to Sudan and its neighbours, and to Ukraine, Afghanistan, Venezuela and Myanmar as hotspots that needed sustained global attention.

Ukraine is going through a “desperate winter” with the prospect of more warfare on the other side, he said.

With the Gaza war between Israel and Hamas, plus Russia’s war in Ukraine, Griffiths said it was hard for the Sudan crisis to get the attention it deserved in foreign capitals.

More broadly, Griffiths said climate change would increasingly impact the work of humanitarian aid workers, who would have to learn how to better use climate data to focus aid resources.

“There is no doubt about the climate confronting and competing with conflict as the driver of need,” he said.

“Climate displaces more children now than conflict. It was never thus before,” he said.



AFP

UN URGES RETURN TO SPIRIT OF UNIVERSAL RIGHTS DECLARATION, 75 YEARS ON

The UN on Monday urged world leaders to revive the spirit that led to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 75 years ago, to counter today's widespread oppression and polarisation.

The text adopted after World War II and the Holocaust marked the first time that countries agreed to protect fundamental rights and freedoms on a universal scale, for all people.

"In the ashes of global warfare, it brought hope. To put an end to cycles of bloodshed, it promised justice," said United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk.

"It set out the path to peace," he told a gathering celebrating the 75th anniversary of the groundbreaking tract, adopted in Paris on December 10, 1948.

Turk said his thoughts went "to the millions of people suffering unbearably in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, notably in Gaza, and Israel; in Sudan; Ukraine; Myanmar; and so many other places".

"Famine. Oppressive and hateful discrimination. Repression and persecution. Threats to human rights generated by climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss."

"These are profound and interlocking challenges that stem from failure to uphold human rights," Turk told Monday's event at the UN's European headquarters in Geneva.

During the event, which began with a minute of silence for victims of rights violations, Turk said the declaration provided a "guide" to solve the towering challenges we face today.

The declaration, he said, "resonates with the ancient wisdom that connects all human beings".

It drew its inspiration from around the world, he said, including the philosophies of the Enlightenment; Islam's emphasis on human dignity and compassionate sharing; and the demands of the Haitian revolution for an end to enslavement and racist oppression.

Although not legally binding, the declaration stresses the supremacy of individual rights over those of states.

"The drafters of the Universal Declaration transcended geopolitical clashes and economic differences.

"They set aside many terrible disputes to achieve this luminous text, which lit the path to peace, justice and freedom," he said.

The 75th anniversary, he said, should be seen as "a call to hope and ... action".

"At a time of so little solidarity, and so much divisive and short-sighted vision, I view it as a call to overcome polarisation," he said.

"A call to hark back to the spirit that led every member state to adopt the Universal Declaration; and to base local, national and global decisions, across all areas of policy, on the intrinsic, and equal, value of every human life."

AFP

WORLD BANK SAYS MYANMAR ECONOMIC RECOVERY FALTERING AS CONFLICT AND INFLATION WEIGH



Photo: Floriane Vita

Little economic growth is expected in Myanmar in the near term, as rising conflict, trade and logistics disruptions, kyat volatility and high inflation combine to negatively impact businesses and households, the World Bank's semi-annual Myanmar Economic Monitor said 12 December.

Myanmar's economy is projected to grow by just 1% over the year to March 2024, according to the report, "Challenges Amid Conflict".

Conflict has escalated across much of Myanmar since October, leading to the displacement of an estimated half a million people, disrupting key overland trade routes and increasing logistics costs.

Even if conflict does not escalate further, growth is expected to remain subdued over the rest of 2024 and into 2025 given a broad-based slowdown across productive sectors including agriculture, manufacturing, and trade. The size of Myanmar's economy remains around 10% lower than it was in 2019, leaving it the only economy in East Asia that has not returned to pre-pandemic levels of economic activity.

Consumer prices rose by almost 29% in the 12 months ending in June this year, and the more recent drop in the value of the kyat and escalation in conflict have led to further price rises in the months since. Household incomes continue to be severely strained. In surveys conducted by IFPRI in mid-2023, 40% of households reported earning less than in the previous year, with median real incomes declining by around 10 percent. Measures of food insecurity have also worsened.

"The economic situation has deteriorated, and uncertainty about the future is increasing," said World Bank Country Director for Myanmar, Cambodia, and the Lao PDR, Mariam Sherman. "High food price inflation has had a particularly severe impact on the poor, who spend a larger portion of their income on food, and who tend to live in areas where prices have risen at a faster pace."

Indicators of business activity have worsened since mid-2023. Firms reported operating at just 56% of their capacity in September, down 16 percentage points from March. Weakness in sales has been a major challenge, particularly for retailers.

A special section of the report explores the scope for Myanmar's garment industry to continue to drive growth in employment and incomes, as it has done for much of the past decade. However, conflict, high logistics costs, trade and foreign exchange restrictions, and electricity disruptions have raised the cost of doing business and reduced the sector's international competitiveness.

"With the operating environment deteriorating and uncertainty about the future increasing, Myanmar's garment firms have been forced to focus on survival rather than investment and growth," said World Bank Program Leader and Senior Economist for Myanmar, Kim Alan Edwards. "The scarring effect of recent developments is likely to curtail Myanmar's longer-term development potential, in the garment industry and across the broader economy."

MYANMAR OVERTAKES AFGHANISTAN AS WORLD'S BIGGEST OPIUM PRODUCER: UN

Myanmar became the world's biggest producer of opium in 2023, overtaking Afghanistan after the Taliban government's crackdown on the trade, according to a United Nations report released on Tuesday.

Myanmar produced an estimated 1,080 metric tonnes of opium -- essential for producing heroin -- this year, according to the latest report by the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

The figures come after opium production in Afghanistan slumped an estimated 95 percent to around 330 tonnes following the Taliban's ban on poppy cultivation in April last year, according to UNODC.

The "Golden Triangle" border region between Myanmar, Laos and Thailand has long been a hotbed of illegal drug production and trafficking, particularly of methamphetamine and opium.

The total estimated value of Myanmar's "opiate economy" rose to between \$1 billion and \$2.4 billion -- the equivalent of 1.7 to 4.1 percent of the country's 2022 GDP, UNODC said.

Last year, an estimated 790 metric tonnes of opium were produced in Myanmar, it said.

Myanmar's legal economy has been gutted by conflict and instability since the military seized power in 2021, driving many farmers to grow poppy.



Photo: AFP

Poor access to markets and state infrastructure as well as rampant inflation “appears to have played a significant role in farmers’ decisions in late 2022 to cultivate more poppy”, the report said.

Estimated opium production for 2022-23 was at its highest level for more than 20 years, UNODC said.

UNODC also said poppy cultivation in Myanmar was becoming more sophisticated, with increased investment and better practices -- including improved irrigation and possible use of fertilisers -- pushing up crop yields.

Afghanistan, the world’s biggest producer for some years, has seen cultivation collapse after the Taliban authorities vowed to end illegal drug production.

Poppy crops accounted for almost a third of the country’s total agricultural production by value last

year, but the area used for poppy shrank from 233,000 hectares in late 2022 to 10,800 in 2023.

RAMPANT VIOLENCE

In Myanmar, the main cultivating area is Shan state, the northern part of which has been convulsed by fighting in recent weeks after an alliance of ethnic minority armed groups launched an offensive against the junta and its allies.

Shan accounted for about 88 percent of the 41,300 hectares (102,054 acres) of opium poppy areas nationwide, the UN report said.

In eastern Shan, the average estimated yield of opium per hectare increased from 19.8 kilograms in the 2022 survey to 29.4 kilograms in 2023, it said.

Shan state occupies almost a quarter of Myanmar’s land mass and is dotted with ravines and jungle-clad hills.

A giddy array of ethnic armed organisations that can call on tens of thousands of well-armed fighters control swathes of the state, which the UN says is also Southeast Asia’s primary source of methamphetamine.

Some administer autonomous enclaves granted to them by previous juntas, which analysts say are home to casinos, brothels and weapons factories.

The UN said cultivation had also increased in northern Kachin state and in Chin state on the border with India.

Analysts say the military, which ousted an elected government and seized power in 2021, is not serious about ending the multi-billion dollar trade.

In a rare admission earlier this year, the head of Myanmar’s Central Committee on Drug Abuse Control said its efforts to crush the trade were having no impact.



AFP

GLOBAL COOPERATION CRITICAL TO COMBAT TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

The UN Secretary-General called for stronger action to fight the growing challenge of transnational organized crime in an address to the Security Council on Thursday last week.

António Guterres urged countries to strengthen cooperation, the rule of law and prevention efforts against this “vicious threat to peace, security, and sustainable development” that operates everywhere, including cyberspace – “a virtual El Dorado for criminals.”

DIFFERENT CRIMES, SAME OUTCOMES

Transnational organized crime is a multi-billion-dollar industry that encompasses illicit financial flows, the illicit trade in firearms, and trafficking in humans, drugs, natural resources, wildlife and other commodities – all of which are increasingly interlinked.

Despite these many forms, “the ramifications are the same: weakened governance, corruption and lawlessness, open violence, death, and destruction,” said Mr. Guterres.

Furthermore, transnational organized crime and conflict feed off each other, he added, thus undermining the authority and effectiveness of State institutions, eroding the rule of law, and destabilizing law enforcement structures.

Secretary-General António Guterres addresses the Security Council meeting on threats to international peace and security with focus on transnational organized crime, growing challenges and new threats. UN Photo/Loey Felipe Secretary-General António Guterres addresses the Security Council meeting on threats to international peace and security with focus on transnational organized crime, growing challenges and new threats.

FUELLING CHAOS AND CONFLICT

He pointed to examples across the world such as Afghanistan and Colombia, where drug production and trafficking fuelled brutal and long-lasting conflicts.

He also cited the situation in Haiti, which is caught in a vicious cycle of state collapse, escalating gang violence and a growing illicit trade of firearms smuggled into the country that has allowed gangs to take control of ports, highways and other critical infrastructure.

“In Myanmar, human trafficking and online scams, often run from outside the country, are flourishing in an environment of violence, repression and the erosion of the rule of law following the military takeover in 2021,” he added.

He noted that in many conflicts, the activities of transnational criminal groups and armed groups overlap and intersect, making conflict resolution even harder.

THE TERROR CONNECTION

Mr. Guterres said the links between organized crime and terrorism is another concern. In the Sahel region in Africa, for example, illicit trade in fuel, drugs, arms and natural resources, provides resources for armed groups, threatening the lives and livelihoods of millions.

Although the Security Council has long recognized the danger posed by transnational organized crime to international peace and security “we must do more to strengthen our defences,” he said, urging action in three priority areas.

COOPERATION AND CONSENSUS

As multilateral cooperation is “the only credible path to target the criminal dynamics that fuel violence and prolong cycles of conflict,” it must be strengthened, he said.

The Secretary-General urged Member States to fully implement the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its three additional protocols, and to work together on investigations and prosecutions.

He also expressed hope that countries will reach consensus on a new treaty on cybercrime, and that they will share and exchange data, noting that crime groups have been quick to exploit cryptocurrencies and digital tools.

AGAINST 'RULE OF LAWLESSNESS'

His second point highlighted the critical need to strengthen the rule of law which is “foundational to our efforts to find peaceful solutions to conflicts, and tackle the multifaceted threats posed by transnational organized crime.”

Effective rule of law builds trust in institutions, creates a level playing field, and contributes to reducing corruption. It also underpins human rights and enables sustainable social, political, and economic development.

However, “many countries are at grave risk of the Rule of Lawlessness,” he warned. “From unconstitutional seizures of power to the trampling of human rights, governments themselves are contributing to disorder and a lack of accountability.”

PROMOTE GREATER INCLUSION

Mr. Guterres appealed for countries to strengthen prevention and foster inclusion, which includes stepping up efforts to achieve sustainable development for all.

Action required includes ensuring respect for human rights, tackling cybercrime more effectively, and advancing gender equality.

The head of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Ghada Waly, echoed the Secretary-General’s call for collective global action.

Ghada Waly, Executive Director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, briefs the Security Council meeting on threats to international peace and security

with focus on transnational organized crime, growing challenges and new threats.

HOMICIDE AND OTHER VIOLENCE

She previewed a report, to be published on Friday, which reveals that organized criminal groups or gangs are responsible for almost a quarter of all homicides worldwide.

The impact of organized crime is also manifesting in alarming new ways, she said, “from shocking forms of violence in European port cities connected with the drug trade, to political assassinations and infiltration of prisons in parts of Latin America.”

ESCAPING JUSTICE, EXPLOITING FINANCIAL SYSTEMS

She told the Council that criminal networks exploit commercial practices to facilitate their operations. They take measures that include using certain professions, especially in the legal field, to escape justice and exploiting financial structures for money laundering, for example.

These groups have also become “more nimble and decentralized”, and their structures are “less hierarchical, more fragmented, and grouped together into a network of specialists, which deliver services and collaborate amongst themselves,” she said.

Meanwhile, digital markets and cryptocurrencies have facilitated the expansion of illicit transactions, making them more rapid and anonymous.

The costs and risks of engaging in criminal activity have never been lower, and the global threat posed by organized crime has reached new levels of complexity, Ms. Waly told the Council.

“To respond, we need institutions capable of delivering justice and ending impunity, as well as resilient communities,” she said. “And we need to invest far more resources to confront illicit markets that are worth trillions of dollars.”

Courtesy of UN News

JAPAN, ASEAN SUMMIT TO ADVANCE ‘SECURITY COOPERATION’

Southeast Asian and Japanese leaders in Tokyo on Saturday will commit to strengthening “maritime security cooperation”, according to a draft statement seen by AFP, at a summit focussed on boosting economic ties but also China’s growing regional assertiveness.

Beijing claims almost the entire South China Sea, a vital trade corridor, and its increasingly aggressive behaviour in disputed areas has riled nations across the region as well as Washington.

Close US ally Japan, which also has competing territorial claims with China, is upping its military spending and has boosted security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.

According to the draft of the summit’s final statement, Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will commit to “(strengthen) security cooperation, including maritime security cooperation”.

The leaders are also expected to stress the need for a “rules-based Indo-Pacific region that is free and open”, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and respect for territorial integrity.

Japan last month agreed to loan the Philippines -- which has seen a spate of incidents involving Chinese vessels in recent weeks -- hundreds of millions of dollars for new coast guard vessels and to supply a radar system.



Tokyo. Photo: Jazaele Malgoza

Japan and the Philippines, whose President Ferdinand Marcos was due in Tokyo, also agreed to start talks on a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) that would include provisions for the deployment of troops on each other's soil.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida will use the summit to talk with Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim about providing Malaysia with rescue boats and drones under a new security framework, Japanese broadcaster NHK reported.

In September, militaries from ASEAN nations held their first-ever joint exercises, although host Indonesia insisted they were non-combat drills, focusing on areas such as disaster relief and maritime patrols.

Asked about the ASEAN summit, China's foreign ministry said Friday that Beijing "believed that any cooperation should be conducive to advancing mutual trust among regional countries and promoting com-

mon development."

"We hope that relevant countries can truly do things conducive to regional peace and stability. At the same time, any cooperation should not target third parties," spokeswoman Mao Ning told a regular briefing.

'ZERO EMISSION COMMUNITY'

Japan is also expected to use the summit to push energy cooperation, with a meeting of its Asian Zero Emission Community (AZEC) initiative scheduled for Monday that will be attended virtually by Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, officials said.

Tokyo is boosting its renewables sector but has also come under fire from environmental groups for providing large-scale public financing for fossil fuel projects around Asia.

Japan has also been seeking to push the export of tech aimed at reducing emissions by coal plants, such as co-firing with ammonia and carbon capture. But critics say these methods are unproven and expensive.

"This push to lock in fossil fuel-based energy across the continent is delaying the transition from fossil fuels to renewables," the Climate Action Network said this month.

Ammonia "fails to meaningfully reduce emissions, jeopardises the decarbonization of Japan's energy and any possibility of phasing out fossil fuels," it said.

ASEAN's 10 member states are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar. The summit marks 50 years of ties with Japan.

While Myanmar is a member, the leaders of its junta have been banned from the bloc's high-level meetings since failing to implement an agreed five-point peace plan following the 2021 coup in which they took power.

AFP



CHINA ISSUES ARREST WARRANTS FOR HIGH-LEVEL JUNTA CRONIES IN KOKANG

China has issued arrest warrants for high-level junta cronies in Kokang accusing them of being involved in running scam call centres that force trafficked people, often Chinese citizens, to scam unwitting victims.

Amongst those who have had arrest warrants issued against them are Kokang Border Guard Force (BGF) founder Bai Suocheng, and Fully Light Group President Liu Zhengxiang and Wei San, the commander of junta-aligned BGF 1006.

Bai Suocheng was originally part of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) but he broke away from them and formed the Myanmar military-aligned Kokang BGF when the MNDAA withdrew from a ceasefire with the army in 2009, after the army said the MNDAA had to become a BGF and attacked the MNDAA in Laukkai when it refused to do so.

The ceasefire had run for 20 years, from 1989 and had led to the formation of the Kokang Self Administered Zone (SAZ) that was governed by the MNDAA until the end of the ceasefire in 1989, when they lost control of the Kokang SAZ

The MNDAA are one of the armed groups currently fighting the junta as part of the Operation 1027 offensive in northern Shan State.

Liu Zhengxiang is a member of the Kokang SAZ governing body and chairman of the Fully Light Group which has over 30 subsidiaries with interests in tourism, gems and mining, amongst others. According to the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) the Fully Light Group also opened a casino in Cambodia in 2017 and has been helping finance the junta.

Other senior Myanmar government-aligned figures from Kokang have already been arrested by the Chinese. They include Liu Zhengqi, the son of Liu Zhengxiang.

The Chinese have been pressing the Myanmar authorities to close down the scam centres on Myanmar's borders that target foreign nationals, particularly Chinese people. These arrest warrants show that the Chinese do not believe the junta has done enough to stop the scam centres.

It also shows that they tacitly approve of the 1027 offensive by the MNDAA, Arakan Army (AA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), which had as one of its aims the shutting down of the scam centres.

According to Jason Tower from the U.S. Institute for Peace (USIP) on X (formerly Twitter) these arrest warrants make "the likelihood of Laukkai falling to MNDAA almost certain absent other PRC [People's Republic of China] moves."

The arrest warrants for Bai Suocheng Liu Zhengxiang and Wei San were issued along with another seven arrest warrants. According to China Daily, evidence gathered by police in Liaoning, Fujian, and Chongqing indicates that these gangs have been defrauding Chinese citizens for a significant period whilst engaging in grave violent crimes, including murder, assault, and kidnapping.

CHINA SAYS ‘POSITIVE’ PEACE TALKS HELD OVER NORTH MYANMAR CONFLICT



China said Monday peace talks had been held over the conflict in northern Myanmar and yielded “positive results”, after weeks of fighting between the country’s junta and ethnic minority armed groups.

Clashes have raged across Myanmar’s northern Shan state after the Arakan Army (AA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) launched an offensive in late October.

The groups have seized military positions and border hubs vital for trade with China in what analysts say is the biggest military challenge to the junta since it seized power in 2021.

“China is happy to see the parties to the conflict in northern Myanmar hold peace talks and achieve positive results,” foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said.

Beijing would “continue to provide support and facilitation to this end”.

“We believe that the easing of the situation in northern Myanmar serves the interests of all parties in Myanmar and is conducive to maintaining tranquillity and stability along the China-Myanmar border,” Mao said.

A Myanmar junta spokesman said the military had held talks with the AA, MNDAA and TNLA aimed at finding a “political” solution to the conflict.

The talks had been held “with the help of China”, spokesman Zaw Min Tun said, without saying when or where they were held.

“Based on the development of this meeting, there will be another meeting at the end of this month,”

he said.

CLOSE TIES

Beijing is a major arms supplier and ally of the junta but ties have been strained in recent months over the junta’s failure to crack down on online scam compounds in Myanmar that Beijing says target Chinese citizens.

Analysts say China maintains ties with ethnic armed groups in northern Myanmar, some of whom share close kinship and cultural ties with China and use Chinese currency and phone networks in the territory they control.

Protesters gathered at a rare demonstration in Yangon last month to accuse China of backing the ethnic minority alliance, in what analysts say was a move sanctioned by junta authorities.

Beijing has expressed “strong dissatisfaction” over the clashes in Shan state, home to oil and gas pipelines that supply China and a planned billion-dollar railway link.

The junta’s foreign minister met the deputy secretary of the Yunnan Provincial Party Committee last week in China’s Kunming, where they discussed “peace and stability along the border areas”, according to the junta-backed Global New Light of Myanmar.

The offensive by the alliance of ethnic minority armed groups has galvanised other opponents of the junta.

Clashes have spread to the east and the west of Myanmar and forced more than half a million people to flee their homes, according to the United Nations.

AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA TO JAIL FUEL HOARDERS AS SHORTAGE BITES

Myanmar's junta launched a new crackdown on fuel hoarding Monday with authorities threatening to jail anyone found with more than 180 litres of petrol without a licence, state media reported, as the country reels from an acute shortage.

The Petroleum Products Regulatory Department began "supervision and inspection of unlicensed transport and storage" of petrol products on Sunday, according to the Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper.

Anyone caught storing or transporting "more than 50 gallons (180 litres) of petroleum products without a licence" will face a year in jail or be fined \$2,370, it said.

The crackdown comes as commercial hub Yangon reels from a fuel shortage, with drivers in the city of 8 million people queueing at dawn in the hope of securing the scarce commodity.

The shortage also affects businesses and hospitals that rely on generators for power during the city's frequent electricity blackouts.

Myanmar's kyat currency has plunged against the dollar since the military seized power in 2021, hitting importers' ability to pay for fuel shipments.

The 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.

AFP

PDFS TAKE CONTROL OF ASIA HIGHWAY FROM MYAWADDY TO KAWKAREIK



The Black Panther Column People's Defence force (PDF) announced that it had taken control of the Asia Highway between Myawaddy on the Thai border and Kawkareik, on 10 December.

The Black Panther Column said that the junta had been using that part of the Asian Highway to maintain its power, increase its military strength and cause problems to the public, so it took control of it to keep the public safe and to maintain peace and security in the region.

One of the commanders of the Black Panther Column said: "The fighting began on 1 December. Our Black Panther Column was under Commander General Darbaw. We launched an operation against the Nyinaung police station. The Kawkareik area was also closed by the junta on 2 December. At that time, our troops also closed the Myawaddy to Kawkareik section of Asia Highway."

He explained: "We took over and closed the road because it was reportedly being used by Mili-

tary Council soldiers to bolster their armed forces. We have carefully checked the villagers from nearby and released them."

Junta army camps, police stations and departments along the Myawaddy to Kawkareik road section of the Asia Highway have been under attack by resistance forces since 1 December. Two junta camps in Kawkareik township have also been seized by resistance forces.

On the 6 and 7 of December, Myawaddy District Police Office and Myawaddy Township Police Station were bombed by resistance forces drones, resulting in casualties.

As a result of the fighting, more than 40,000 civilians have fled their homes in Kawkareik District, and more than 20 civilians have been killed, according to local charity groups.

RESIDENTS OF SOUTHEAST MYANMAR NEED AID

Communities in southeast Myanmar desperately need urgent relief, including medicine and food and the most vulnerable, especially women and children, are in a fragile situation and their overall well-being is at risk, according to the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM).

Along with local communities, HURFOM is “calling for local voices and solutions to be amplified as the junta’s horrendous atrocity crimes continue to be perpetrated with impunity.”

According to HURFOM’s weekly report on the situation in southeast Myanmar most of the villagers from villages on the west side of Yebyu Township, where the military junta often launches its operations, moved to other areas because they did not dare to stay in their villages.

The military junta entered the west bank of Yebyu twice in October 2023 burning 29 houses in five villages and shooting seven residents dead. After the incidents, more people moved to the Na Buu Lal area on the west bank and the towns around it: “We’re always listening to the news. Many people have moved, but it has increased obviously,” said a man living there. Last month, in November, most of the inhabitants of Pa

Ra Dud, Muu Duu, Ba War village, and Ba War coastal villages fled, mainly to Dawei.

Other incidents include that of a young man, 28-year-old Karen Saw Saung Hnin Htoo Phaw, who was arrested at the front entrance checkpoint of Dawei City on 25 July 2023. The military junta court sentenced him to ten years in prison after he was detained for more than four months. His family has received hardly any information about his case.

A friend of Saw Saung Hnin Htoo Phaw said that he was charged with Section 52(a) and 50(j) of the Anti-Terrorism Act for the information found on his mobile phone, which is yet another area where the junta has tried to exert control over people, according to HURFOM.

Saw Saung Hnin Htoo Phaw holds a degree in computer technology from Dawei Computer University and works as a gardener with his parents, according to Kyauk Mee Laung village residents.

There are around 400 political prisoners in Dawei Prison, some of whom have been sentenced and others who have been charged, the majority for anti-terrorism offences. but not yet sentenced.

UK MUST SANCTION BRITISH OVERSEAS TERRITORY MINING COMPANY WORKING WITH THE MYANMAR JUNTA



Photo: Marcin Nowak

Greenway Mining Group Limited, a mining company based in Kunming, China and operating through British Overseas Territories, is expanding its business in Myanmar following the military's illegal coup attempt, providing revenue to the junta as it widens its campaign of terror.

The revelations published by Justice For Myanmar based on the company's disclosures to the Hong Kong Stock Exchange before its recent delisting, come as the UK lags behind its allies in sanctioning No. 1 Mining Enterprise (ME 1) and No. 1 Mining Enterprise (ME 2), which are under illegal control of the junta.

ME 1 and ME 2 have already been sanctioned by the US, EU and Canada.

The junta's minister for natural resources and environmental conservation, Colonel Khin Maung Yi, has also been sanctioned by the US, EU and Canada, while he has yet to be designated in the UK.

Greenway Mining Group operates two mines in Shan State, Myanmar. Since the coup attempt, it has been seeking approval from the junta to expand one of its mines and has organised the shipment of minerals to China, in partnership with ME 1.

The company, which is incorporated in the Cayman Islands and also operates in the British Virgin Islands, has earned millions of dollars in revenue

during the past decade from its lead and silver mines in Myanmar, according to its financial statements.

Justice For Myanmar calls on UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron to immediately sanction all key junta entities and individuals in the mining sector, including ME 1, ME 2 and Khin Maung Yi.

Justice For Myanmar calls on Greenway to immediately end all business with the junta, in line with its human rights responsibilities under the UN Guiding Principles on business and human rights.

Justice For Myanmar spokesperson Yadanar Maung says: "Greenway Mining is using British Overseas Territories for its business with the illegal Myanmar military junta, supporting ongoing war crimes and crimes against humanity committed with total impunity.

"Greenway's business with the junta, conducted via the Cayman Islands and British Virgin Islands, has been enabled by the UK's slow pace of sanctions on the mining sector, which is a key source of funds for the junta.

"As the junta continues to lose ground, it is increasingly relying on indiscriminate air strikes and is desperate for revenue to sustain its war of terror.

"The UK and its allies must urgently coordinate to block all of the junta's sources of arms and revenue, including from the mining sector, and support the people of Myanmar's struggle for federal democracy."

TWO JOURNALISTS FROM DAWEI WATCH ARRESTED BY JUNTA

Two journalists from the Dawei Watch News Agency were arrested by the junta on the evening of 11 December, according to family and friends.

The journalists, Ko Aung San Oo and Ko Myo Myint Oo were arrested at their homes in Myeik Township, Tanintharyi Region.

Ko Aung San Oo's wife said: "On the night of 11 December, soldiers and ward administrators surrounded our home and apprehended my husband. During the arrest, they alleged that my husband was involved in news writing. They seized my husband's laptop and confiscated three family members' phones."

After Ko Aung San Oo's arrest, Ko Myo Myint Oo was arrested at his house, in Zeyarthiri (4) Quarter, by five soldiers dressed in civilian clothes. According to Myint Oo's mother, they arrived in two cars claiming that they were carrying out an overnight guest inspection.

As of 13 December, the time of reporting, friends and family of the two arrested journalists had still not been able to contact the men or find out their whereabouts.

The editor-in-chief of Dawei Watch said: "We reported today that two of our journalists have been arrested. We have reached out to their family members and we are currently investigating their whereabouts, but as of now, we have not received a definitive answer. The latest information we have indicates that they are being held and questioned at an interrogation centre."

Dawei Watch holds a news media licence. It said that there is no legal basis for the arrests and that writing news is not a crime. Despite this, the junta apprehended its journalists without a warrant in the middle of the night and refused to disclose the location where they are being held.

During the arrests, the junta also seized two laptops and phones belonging to the journalists and their families.

Dawei Watch has called for the immediate release of the journalists saying that their detention, and interrogation is against the law.

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HONG KONG PRO-DEMOCRACY MEDIA MOGUL JIMMY LAI GOES ON TRIAL

Jailed pro-democracy media tycoon Jimmy Lai went on trial in Hong Kong on Monday for national security crimes, facing life in prison in a case that has sparked international condemnation.

Lai, who is 76, is charged with several counts of “colluding with foreign forces” -- a crime under a national security law imposed on Hong Kong by Beijing in 2020 following massive pro-democracy protests.

The case against Lai, which will see him tried without a jury, is being closely watched as a test of

how many of the civil liberties the city once boasted remain.

More than 30 people have been convicted under Hong Kong’s security law, but Lai was one of the most recognisable figures in the pro-democracy movement.

Lai is the first to contest the charge of “foreign collusion” - punishable with life behind bars.

Hong Kong’s crackdown has also seen police offer huge bounties for activists who fled the city, in a



Jimmy Lai. Photo: AFP

move that has been strongly condemned by the United States and Britain.

The most serious charges against Lai revolve around Apple Daily, which he founded in 1995 and was once Hong Kong's most popular Chinese-language tabloid.

The paper was staunchly critical of Beijing and supported Hong Kong's huge and sometimes violent pro-democracy protests in 2019.

It later called for international sanctions against Chinese and local officials.

The outlet was forced to shutter in June 2021 after authorities used the security law to raid it twice and freeze assets worth HK\$18 million (US\$2.3 million).

Authorities charged Lai and six former Apple Daily executives with "conspiracy to collude with foreign forces".

Lai was singled out for an additional collusion charge.

All defendants except Lai have pleaded guilty and some have agreed to testify for the prosecution.

The court on Monday will also hear a raft of other charges against Lai -- which include "seditious publication".

WORLD SHOULD 'PAY ATTENTION'

The United States, Britain, the European Union and the United Nations have all expressed concerns about Lai's case -- which Beijing has dismissed as smearing and interference.

Lai's son Sebastien last month told AFP the case was "an opportunity for Hong Kong to show whether they are actually rule-of-law compliant".

The world "should be paying attention to my father's case, to the case of Hong Kong", he said.

The Apple Daily owner's arrest came during the rapid erosion of press freedom and political dissent in Hong Kong, with analysts saying the trial will show whether the city's courts can rule independently of Beijing.

How judges draw the line between the con-

cepts of advocacy and collusion will be a key issue to watch, according to Georgetown University legal scholar Eric Lai.

"It is important to observe how the court would define ordinary overseas advocacy activities as a crime," Lai told AFP.

The case was "also worth concern in terms of fair trial and due process," he added.

'ANTI-CHINESE'

Senior Beijing and Hong Kong officials have repeatedly issued statements condemning Lai since 2019.

China's foreign affairs commissioner in Hong Kong in September accused Lai of being "an agent of the anti-Chinese forces in the United States and the West" and a secessionist.

In a post on X -- formerly known as Twitter -- Britain's foreign office said that Foreign Secretary David Cameron met this month with Lai's son, Sebastien, "to listen to his concerns for his father".

"The UK opposes the National Security Law and will continue to stand by Jimmy Lai and the people of HK," the office said on Wednesday.

Beijing blasted the meeting as a clear sign of Britain's "malicious intentions", calling Lai "a driving force behind the chaos in Hong Kong".

Hong Kong follows a common law system due to its colonial history, but Lai's case differs from how criminal trials are usually run.

He will be tried, without a jury, by three judges drawn from a pool of jurists handpicked by Hong Kong's leader.

Lai has been jailed since Hong Kong's top court denied him bail in late 2020 - a change from the city's previous practices on pre-trial detention.

His case has been further delayed after Hong Kong authorities last year sought to bar Lai from being represented by British rights lawyer Tim Owen, citing security risks.

AFP

HONG KONG ELECTION SEES LOWEST-EVER TURNOUT WITH DISSENT BANNED

Hong Kong's first district elections for "patriots" saw a turnout of 27.5 percent, the government said Monday, a record low for a race that had shut out all opposition candidates.

The city last held district council elections at the peak of huge, sometimes violent, pro-democracy protests in 2019, recording a historic-high 71 percent turnout that delivered a landslide victory for the democracy camp.

But a clampdown on dissent, aided by a sweeping national security law imposed by Beijing in 2020, has included a drive by authorities to weed out from public office anyone deemed politically disloyal after the protests.

Police acted swiftly to quash any sign of dis-

sent on Sunday, arresting at least six people in an exercise that officials said drew just shy of 1.2 million out of 4.3 million registered electors to the polls for a final turnout of 27.54 percent.

The previous lowest turnout since the city's handover to China was 35.82 percent in 1999.

Beijing's top office overseeing Hong Kong congratulated the city on Monday for holding an election that "uplifted the spirit and consolidated consensus", adding that the vote "injected strong momentum" for the city's development.

City leader John Lee had said this year's election was "the last piece of the puzzle to implement the principle of patriots administering Hong Kong".

"From now on, the district councils would no



A polling station in Hong Kong.
Photo: AFP

longer be what they were in the past -- which was a platform to destruct and reject the government's administration, to promote Hong Kong independence and to endanger national security," Lee said after he cast his ballot on Sunday.

'HUGELY HUMILIATING'

John Burns, an emeritus professor at the University of Hong Kong, said the record-low turnout may "reveal citizens' widespread scepticism" about whether the district councils could reflect their views.

"The public turned its back on the polls, effectively saying 'the polls have little to do with us'," Burns told AFP, adding that the result showed the local government's "weak mobilisational capacity".

Kenneth Chan, a political scientist at the Baptist University of Hong Kong, said the turnout was "hugely humiliating" for the authorities.

Pro-Beijing political heavyweight Tam Yiu-chung said on Monday the turnout was "not bad" given the new system, adding that young people were less

eager to vote.

Some constituents believed that "society is stable and patriots are in charge, so it's no big deal (not to vote)", Tam said on a radio programme.

The number of seats that could be directly elected was slashed from 462 to 88 according to new rules announced in May, with the other 382 seats controlled by the city leader, government loyalists and rural landlords.

Candidates were also required to seek nominations from three government-appointed committees, which effectively shut out all pro-democracy parties.

More than 70 percent of the candidates picked to run for the election were themselves members of the nominating committees.

"Meaningful opposition in Hong Kong's electoral system is being eliminated," a spokesperson for the UK's foreign office said, calling on the city to "uphold its international commitments and respect the civil rights and freedoms of Hong Kong citizens".

European Union spokesperson for foreign affairs and security policy, Nabila Massrali, said on Monday the revamped electoral system "severely weakens" Hong Kong people's ability to choose their representatives.

The EU "calls on the authorities to restore confidence in the democratic process", Massrali said in a statement.

Police deployed in force on Sunday and three of the six people arrested were members of the League of Social Democrats (LSD), one of the city's last remaining opposition groups.

Their cases were taken up by Hong Kong's anti-graft agency, which said they were suspected of "inciting others not to vote".

Veteran activist Koo Sze-yiu, 77, was denied bail on Monday after he was charged with "attempting or preparing to do an act with seditious intention".

The three LSD activists and Koo had said they planned to stage protests but were all arrested before they could show up.



AFP

INDIA'S SUPREME COURT UPHOLDS REVOCATION OF KASHMIR'S AUTONOMY

India's top court upheld on Monday last week a move by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to revoke the limited autonomy of Muslim-majority Kashmir, where an insurgency has raged for decades, and ordered elections within a year.

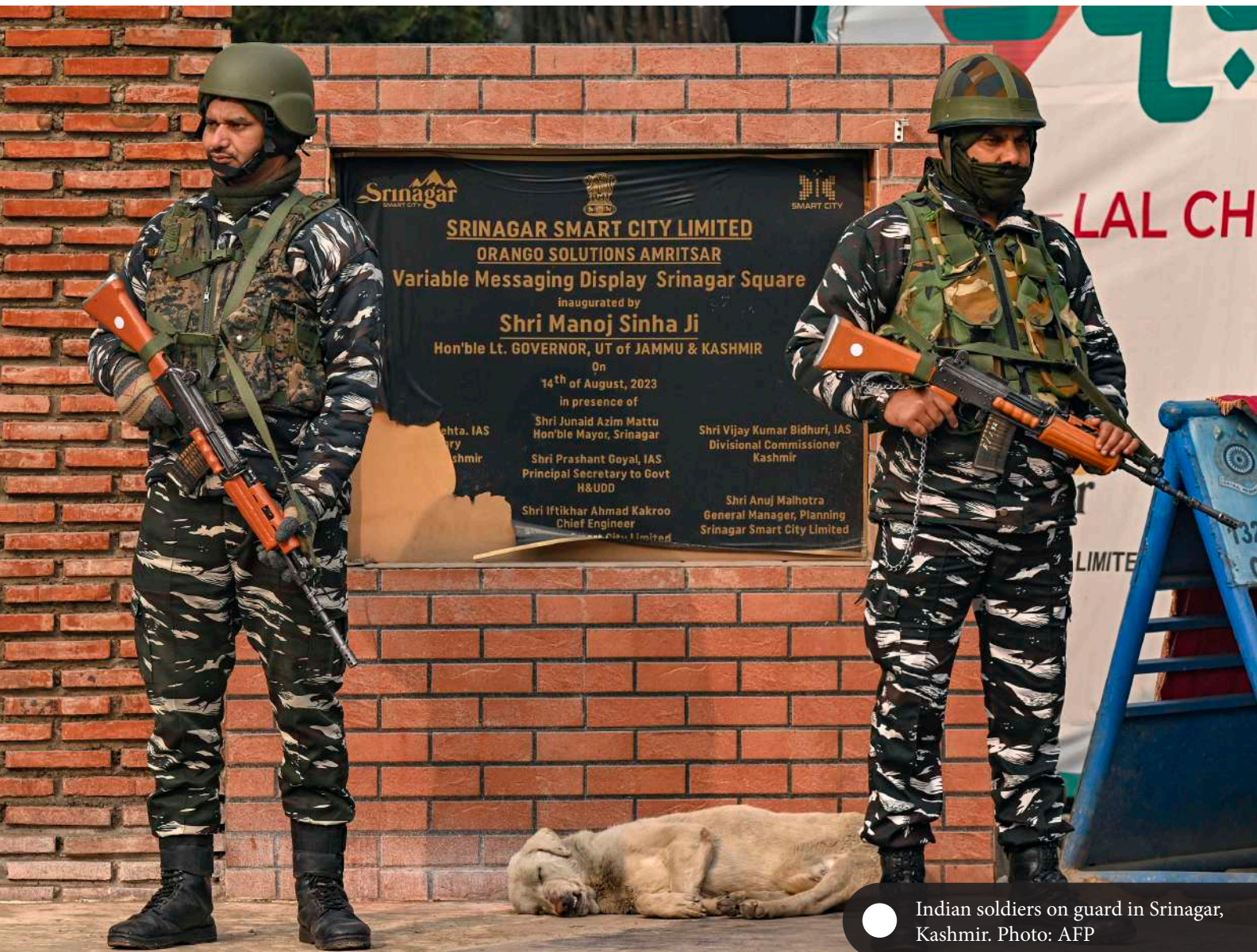
The 2019 declaration was "a culmination of the process of integration and as such is a valid exercise of power", the Supreme Court said in its verdict.

The move was accompanied by the imposition of direct rule from New Delhi, mass arrests, a

total lockdown and communication blackout that ran for months as India bolstered its armed forces in the region to contain protests.

Modi's muscular policy has been deeply controversial in Kashmir but was widely celebrated across India, with the insurgency that claimed tens of thousands of lives over decades largely quietened.

The removal of Article 370 of the constitution, which enshrined the Indian-administered region's special status, was challenged by Kashmir's pro-India



Indian soldiers on guard in Srinagar, Kashmir. Photo: AFP

political parties, the local Bar Association and individual litigants, culminating in Monday's verdict.

The court upheld removing the region's autonomy while calling for Jammu & Kashmir, as the Delhi-administered area is known, to be restored to statehood and put on a par with any other Indian state "at the earliest and as soon as possible".

The court also ordered state elections to take place by 30 September 2024.

Security was stepped up across Indian-administered Kashmir ahead of the verdict, with authorities deploying hundreds of soldiers, paramilitary troops, and police in the main city of Srinagar to thwart any protests.

Modi welcomed the judgement as "historic".

It was "a beacon of hope, a promise of a brighter future and a testament to our collective resolve to build a stronger, more united India", the Hindu nationalist leader posted on X, formerly Twitter.

Removing Article 370 has been a key plank of his Bharatiya Janata Party's platform since its inception, and the Supreme Court decision comes ahead of elections next year.

Former Kashmir chief minister Mehbooba Mufti -- who governed in coalition with the BJP but whose party was among the litigants in the Supreme Court case -- condemned the ruling as a "death sentence not just for Jammu and Kashmir but also for the idea of India".

'MORAL COMPASS'

One of the advocates who argued for the revocation to be ruled unconstitutional was sanguine.

"Some battles are fought to be lost," Kapil Sibal posted on X, even before the verdict was read out, saying the court action was intended to ensure that "history must record the uncomfortable facts for generations to know".

"History alone is the final arbiter of the moral compass of historic decisions," he added.

Since the suspension of Article 370, Indian authorities have curbed media freedoms and public protests in a drastic curtailment of civil liberties.

The changes allowed Indians from outside the region to buy land in it and seek government jobs and education scholarships, a policy denounced by critics as "settler colonialism".

Kashmir has been divided between India and Pakistan since the neighbours were granted independence from British rule and partitioned in 1947, when its Hindu maharajah chose to join the new secular and federal Union of India.

Initially, New Delhi controlled only foreign affairs, currency and communication, but over the decades Kashmir's pro-India leaders cooperated with national authorities to dilute the provision.

Both India and Pakistan claim the Himalayan former kingdom in full and the nuclear-armed rivals have fought two wars over the region.

More than half a million Indian soldiers are deployed in the territory to control the insurgency, which erupted in 1989.

Over 120 people have been killed in 2023, two-thirds of them militants, a fraction of the four-figure tolls of past years.

India blames Pakistan for backing the militants, a charge Islamabad denies, saying it only supports a Kashmiri struggle for the right to self-determination.

Pakistan's foreign minister Jalil Abbas Jilani called the court decision "a travesty of justice".

"India has no right to make unilateral decisions on the status of this disputed territory against the will of the Kashmiri people and Pakistan," he told reporters in Islamabad.

"Their ultimate goal is to convert the Kashmiris into a disempowered community in their own land."

AFP

FIGHTING ENGULFS OVER TWO-THIRDS OF MYANMAR, FUELLING HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

Over half a million people have been displaced in Myanmar amid a surge in fighting between the military and armed groups that started in late October and has spread to over two-thirds of the country, the UN humanitarian affairs office reported on Friday.

Among those fighting the military are a loose coalition of well-armed ethnic militias, as well as the People's Defence Forces (PDF) – an armed group

supporting National Unity Government (NUG) and opposed to the February 2021 military coup, according to media reports.

TELECOMMUNICATION BLACKOUTS

In a flash update, the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said that more than 578,000 people are estimated to have been displaced since 26 October but cautioned that figures are difficult to confirm given undocumented returns, re-



Photo: UN News

peated displacements and telecommunication blackouts.

In addition, 363 civilians, including women, and children, have reportedly been killed and a further 461 injured over the last six weeks.

“Ongoing armed clashes, airstrikes, landmines, arbitrary arrests and roadblocks are rapidly increasing protection risks for civilians and are severely restricting the movement of essential goods, as well as people seeking places of safety,” the Office said.

“Telecommunications blackouts in many conflict-affected areas are also making verification more challenging,” it added.



RISING HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

According to OCHA, food, shelter, hygiene, basic health and protection, are the most pressing needs across conflict-affected areas.

The latest displacements add to some two million people displaced since the junta usurped the democratically elected government in February 2021.

Faith-based organizations and local responders, in collaboration with aid agencies, continue to provide critical and lifesaving assistance to displaced and affected communities wherever access is possible.

CHALLENGE TO RESPOND

In addition to access challenges, underfunding and rapidly depleting supplies are complicating the situation.

The 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan for Myanmar, which seeks \$887 million to support the 4.5 million people worst affected in the country, is only 29 per cent funded.

Against this backdrop, the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) on Tuesday approved an emergency \$7 million allocation to provide lifesaving aid to people most affected by the violence.

However, more support is urgently needed to enable humanitarians respond effectively and at scale to the escalating needs.

Courtesy of UN News



Photo: Ajay Karpur

SHAN STATE

TNLA takes control of Namhsan Town in northern Shan State

The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) announced that it took control of Namhsan Town in northern Shan State on 15 December.

The TNLA started its assault on the junta forces in Namhsan Town on 10 December and by 3:00 p.m. on 15 December the TNLA had occupied all the junta army bases in the town, which had previously been occupied by Light Infantry Division 101 and forces under its command.

Lieutenant Colonel Tar Aik Kyaw, a spokesperson for the TNLA said: "We can say that the TNLA has taken over Namhsan. There are no more Military Council soldiers in the town. After the seizure on 15 December, the soldiers of the Military Council fled. On 16 December, there was an encounter with about 20 junta soldiers who had fled. As for the rest, there are no more offensive attacks from the Military Council."

Over 60 junta soldiers were killed and 64 people were captured during the assault on Namhsan, ac-

ording to the TNLA. Of the captured people 30 were junta soldiers, three were junta soldiers' family members, six were police officers and a further 25 were police officers' family members. Mizzima has been unable to independently confirm these figures.

During the fighting for Namhsan three civilians were killed, 54 residential buildings were burnt down and pagodas, religious buildings and a school were damaged, according to the TNLA.

It also said that four howitzers, weapons, ammunition, landmines and military equipment were seized from the junta.

The junta bases in Namhsan captured by the TNLA included Kadaihu Camp, the Tatmadaw Tea Factory, Namhsan Police Station, Namhsan Military Camp, Construction Tactical Hill and the junta camp in the Mahamyatmuni Pagoda compound.

This is the second town the TNLA has taken control of. It also controls Monglon Town in Kyaukme Township, according to Lieutenant Colonel Tar Aik Kyaw.



MYANMAR JUNTA HOSTS GMS MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE AMID BOYCOTT CALLS

Myanmar hosted the 26th Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Ministerial Conference on December 15 in Nay Pyi Taw, the country's capital, according to the junta's Ministry of Information.

Representatives from five Mekong Subregion countries – Cambodia, China, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam – attended the conference, with a total of 80 participants.

The conference program incorporated both a formal plenary meeting and an off-the-record discussion session dedicated to shaping the GMS 2030 innovation strategy and bolstering local government participation in GMS initiatives.

On December 5, just days before the junta's conference, activist group Justice for Myanmar urged GMS members to boycott the event in Nay Pyi Taw and permanently expel the regime from the program.

It is an annual meeting of GMS Ministers. It provides policy direction for the program and oversees progress in identifying and implementing results-oriented subregional cooperation initiatives, according to the official website of the GMS.

Laos hosted the 25th GMS Ministerial Conference on December 6-8 last year.

MYANMAR PLANS TO INCREASE COFFEE ACREAGE BY NEARLY 28,000 ACRES IN 2024



Photo: Winrock

Myanmar is considering an increase in coffee acreage for 2024, increasing the land by nearly 28,000 acres.

If the coffee can be grown as planned, the production of coffee will be increased in the coming five years so that 27,900 additional acres are planned for coffee growing in the coming 2024.

If the coffee producers can nurture the coffee saplings in advance it will give many benefits to them and there will be total 300,000 acres of coffee plantation with these business expansion plans.

Currently the coffee zones are designated in Shan State (North), Naunghko, Ywagnan and Pyioolwin in Mandalay Region and also the coffee is grown in Chin State, Bago Region, Thantaunggyi and Pa-O regions.

Similarly, Robusta coffee is grown in lower Myanmar too.

In the coming 2024, Robusta coffee will be

grown in 1,000 acres of land in low-lying Bago Region as part of this business expansion plan.

The Life House Coffee produced in Taungoo District has received export orders of 30 tonnes to Thailand and 50 tonnes to Europe.

The coffee and rubber can be grown in Myanmar as major cash crops besides other seasonal crops. The Military Council said that they had provided support for coffee and rubber plantations over recent years.

Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing said Vietnam had less agricultural land than Myanmar but it could produce more coffee than Myanmar, so investors should make more investments in coffee plantation and production.

In Myanmar, half of the coffee production goes to US, Europe, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, China and Taiwan as exports.

PETROL BEING RESOLD FOR TWICE NORMAL PRICE IN MYANMAR



Lining up for fuel in Yangon.
Photo: AFP

Petrol is being resold on the black market in Myanmar for almost double the normal price.

Petrol stations are charging between 2,100 and 2,500 kyats a litre, but resellers are charging between 4,000 and 5,000 kyats a litre.

92 and 95-octane petrol is particularly scarce, meaning that desperate car drivers who cannot get fuel at petrol stations are having to turn to the black market.

A local trader said: "I work as a vegetable vendor and I need to wake up early to buy goods from the wholesale market for resale at a local market. Since I have to buy vegetables in the morning and have limited time, I end up purchasing fuel from resale vendors at prices ranging from 4,000 to 5,000 kyats per liter, depending on the type of fuel."

Motorcycle drivers are buying petrol from people reselling petrol from shops in their local neighbour-

hoods.

A motorcycle sidecar driver explained: "Petrol stations do provide petrol to motorcycle drivers, but they impose a limit of 4,000 kyats per purchase and you have to wait in line for an excessively long time. Some people who used to operate motorcycles have now shifted to queuing for fuel and subsequently reselling it at 5,000 kyats per litre."

Fuel has been in short supply throughout the country for over a week and the shortage is still ongoing.

The junta has claimed that petrol tankers from abroad are currently arriving at Thilawa Port and further arrivals are due.

IMF RESUMES SRI LANKA BAILOUT AFTER CHINA'S DEBT DEAL



Sri Lanka protest. Photo: AFP

The International Monetary Fund revived its \$2.9 billion bailout for Sri Lanka on Tuesday last week after the South Asian nation clinched a debt restructuring deal with China, its biggest official lender.

The IMF said its board had completed the first review of Sri Lanka's rescue package known as the Extended Fund facility (EFF) and released the second tranche of \$337 million to support economic policies and reforms.

Sri Lanka had expected the progress review to be completed by September, but it was held up pending financial assurances from China, which holds 52 percent of the island's bilateral debt.

IMF's mission chief for Sri Lanka, Peter Breuer, told reporters in Washington that Colombo had shared China's debt-restructuring offer with the IMF on a "strictly confidential basis."

However, it fell within the IMF's debt sustainability targets for the island, he added.

He said policy reforms were starting to bear fruit and the economy was showing signs of stabilization, but the key to a full and swift recovery was sustaining reform momentum.

"We encourage the authorities to continue to build on these hard-won gains and further advance revenue mobilization," Breuer said.

Colombo welcomed the latest IMF cash injection and reiterated its commitment to maintain unpopular reforms to raise taxes, scrap energy subsidies and privatize state enterprises.

"We are grateful to the cooperation of the official creditor committee... for agreeing in principle to the debt restructuring process," junior finance minister Shehan Semasinghe said.

The island nation of 22 million people default-

ed on its \$46 billion external debt last year after running out of foreign exchange to finance imports such as food, fuel and medicines.

The country went to the IMF and secured the rescue loan spread over four years with the first instalment of \$330 million paid in March.

With Tuesday's decision, Sri Lanka has received about \$670 million of the full loan of nearly \$3.0 billion.

'COMMENDABLE PROGRESS'

Last month, Colombo announced it had struck an "agreement in principle" with its lenders, including China, to restructure nearly \$6 billion in bilateral loans, a key to pressing ahead with IMF funding.

The finance ministry did not disclose details, but said the deal included a mix of extending the tenure and reducing interest on bilateral loans.

China had been reluctant to take a haircut on its loans and instead had offered to extend the terms and lower interest rates.

The IMF said Sri Lankan authorities had made "commendable progress" toward restoring debt sustainability, raising revenue, rebuilding reserves, reducing inflation and safeguarding financial stability.

Inflation, which peaked at nearly 70 percent in September last year, had eased to 1.5 percent last month.

At the height of last year's economic crisis, civil unrest forced the ouster of then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa when protesters stormed his residence.

His successor Ranil Wickremesinghe has doubled taxes, withdrawn generous energy subsidies and raised prices of essentials to shore up state revenue.

AFP

Penrose Thitsa

THAI SHIPPING GIANT PLEDGES RESPONSIBLE OPERATIONS IN JUNTA-RAVAGED MYANMAR

Despite ongoing political turmoil in Myanmar, Thai-based Maersk, a global integrated logistics company, has announced plans to continue operating in Myanmar, emphasizing its commitment to responsible business practices in a delicate environment, according to the company's press release published on the company's official website.

Following the February 2021 coup in Myanmar, civil war has engulfed the country, exacerbating already fragile political conditions and leading to a surge in human rights violations by the Myanmar junta.

Prioritizing both employee safety and local economic contribution, the Thai company said that it undertook a rigorous human rights due diligence assessment in collaboration with external experts. That study, encompassing conflict risk analysis, stakeholder engagement, and supply chain scrutiny, concluded that responsible operation in Myanmar is achievable with robust safeguards in place, the company stated.

"We recognise that the situation in Myanmar is complex and have been continuously monitoring developments and expectations towards companies operating there. Our response to the conflict in Myanmar was to immediately increase our due diligence activities, screening all business partners for links to sanctioned parties or to the military, and assessing potential or actual human rights impacts," explained Niseth Boerrigter, Country Manager for Maersk Myanmar.

Despite the company's claims, Myanmar's human rights situation in 2023 remains dire, marked by ongoing conflict, severe violations, and limited international access.

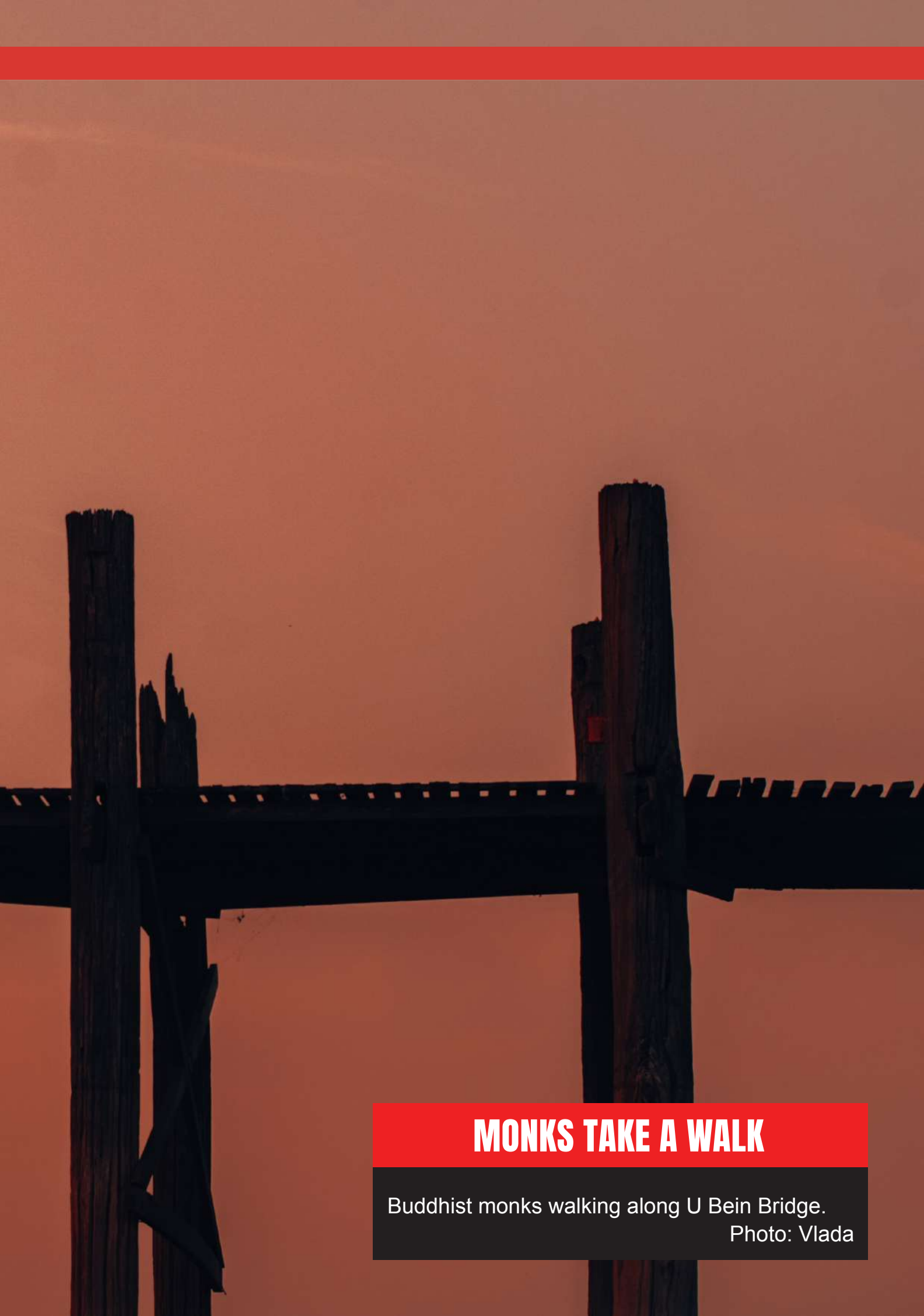
Civil war between the Myanmar junta and various resistance groups continues, displacing millions of people and fueling human rights abuses.

Junta's airstrikes and indiscriminate shelling also caused civilian casualties, particularly in ethnic minority regions.

CULTURE & LIFESTYLE

IN FOCUS





MONKS TAKE A WALK

Buddhist monks walking along U Bein Bridge.
Photo: Vlada

KESAN CHANNEL PRODUCES DOCUMENTARY ON THE KAREN PEOPLE'S THAWTHI TAW-OO INDIGENOUS PARK



Kesan Channel provides insightful documentaries and videos.

Kesan Channel has produced a full documentary that presents the efforts of Taw-Oo District KNU and the people to establish a territory where the Indigenous Karen people can maintain their culture and their traditional practices, and to govern their land, environment, and biodiversity in a sustainable way.

The documentary is entitled: Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park: An Indigenous Conserved Territory for People and Nature.

The documentary includes the effort to revitalize their ancestors' land governance system that incorporates customary practices, the formation of wildlife ranger group to protect wildlife and forest, empowerment of the community in forest governance,

and the development of Thawthi Taw-Oo Indigenous Park Charter through bottom-up approach and community participation.

This park is a model of good governance; that recognizes indigenous people's governance system which promotes peace and power sharing.

Check it out at Kesan Channel:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvQQUKJBT_0



The documentary tells the story of a conservation project.



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