

2023 YEAR-END ISSUE

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WEEKLY

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## TURNING POINT

Is the Myanmar military  
junta heading towards  
collapse?

'I'm a Mandalay girl' - SPECIAL REPORT



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# ESCAPE OPTION NARROWS FOR MYANMAR'S HOUNDED MINORITY

The United Nations call on the weekend should have been a wake-up call to those concerned about the fate of Myanmar's most hounded minority, the Muslim Rohingya.

On Saturday, the United Nations called for the urgent rescue of 185 people, mainly women and children, on a distressed boat last heard to be near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean. Around 70 of those onboard are children and 88 are women, the UNHCR refugee agency said in a statement.

At least a dozen are feared to be in critical condition with one individual reported to have already died, the statement said, and many more could die under the watch of numerous coastal states without timely rescue and disembarkation to the nearest place of safety.

This was one boat but it is just one more reminder that the circumstances of the Rohingya are worsening week by week. These particular refugees are fleeing life in the Bangladesh camps, where rations have been reduced, and violence and fear are rife. On the other hand, Rohingya living in villages Rakhine State are facing the uncertainties of war, as the Arakan Army battle the Myanmar junta forces, or struggling to get by as in-

ternally displaced people in camps with limited support.

UNHCR spokesman Babar Baloch, commenting on the boat adrift at sea, says it is a really a desperate situation. Thousands of the Rohingya undertake risky sea journeys from Myanmar and refugee camps in Bangladesh every year trying to reach Malaysia or Indonesia. More than 2,000 Rohingya are believed to have attempted the risky journey to Southeast Asian countries in 2022, according to UNHCR. And since last year, more than 570 people, including Rohingya refugees, have been reported dead or missing at sea in the region, it said. Indonesia now appears to be the main destination for the traffickers running the boats as both Malaysia and Thailand have tightened controls on the illegal influx.

The UNHCR says help is needed by the Indonesian authorities, noting a bigger tragedy is preventable with timely efforts to save lives. They note that the situation once again underlines the importance of all states in the region deploying their full search and rescue capacities to avoid human disasters happening at this scale.

EDITORIAL

**mizzima**  
WEEKLY

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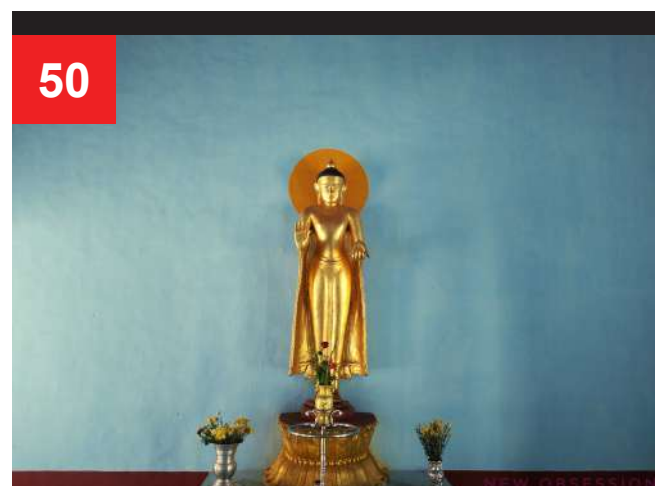
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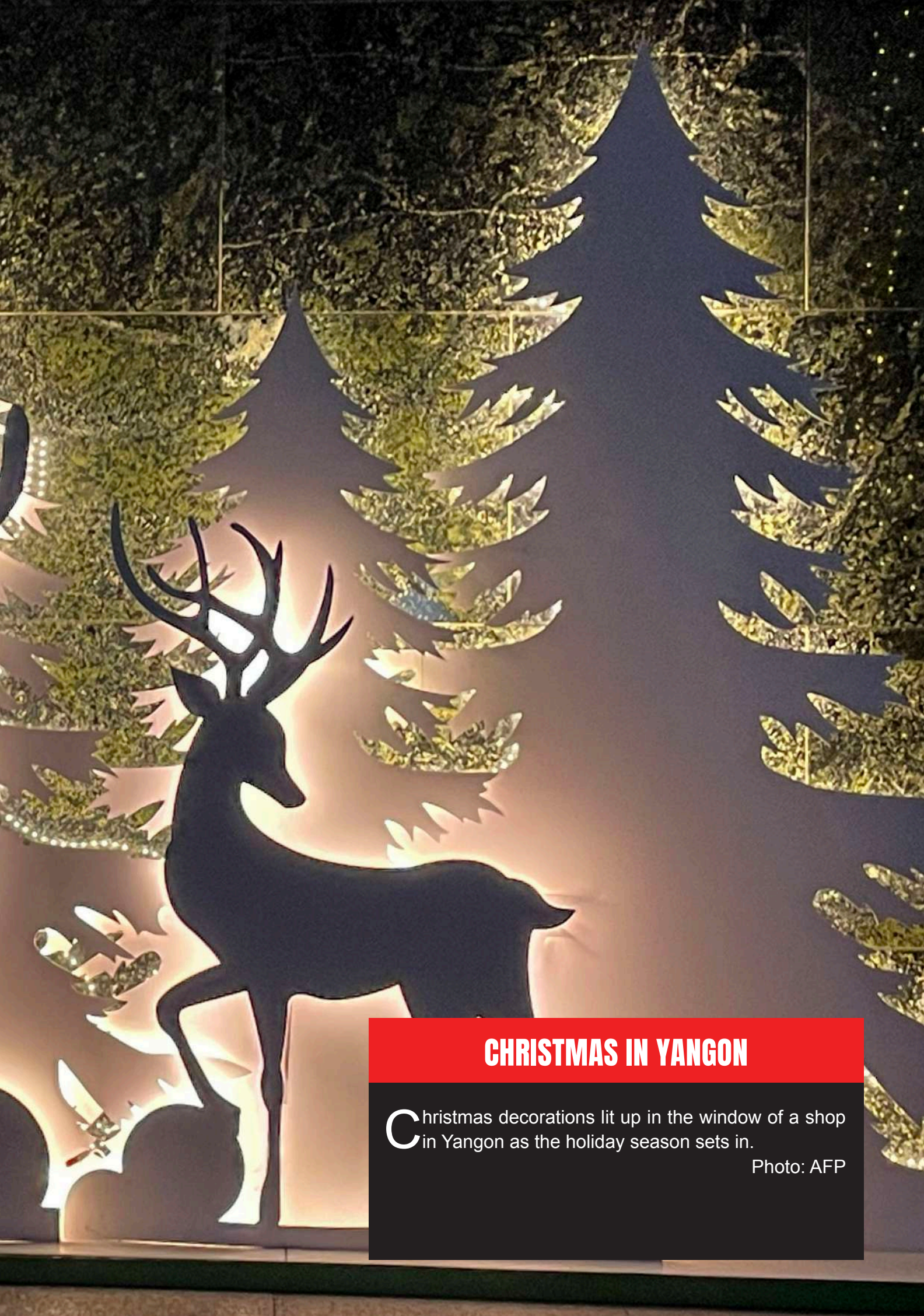
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Cover photo of Mandalay female resistance fighters by AFP



IN FOCUS





## CHRISTMAS IN YANGON

Christmas decorations lit up in the window of a shop in Yangon as the holiday season sets in.

Photo: AFP

## TWO DETAINED DAWEI WATCH JOURNALISTS MOVED TO MYEIK POLICE STATION

**T**wo journalists from Dawei Watch who were arrested on 11 December were moved to Myeik Police Station on 14 December.

Aung San Oo and Myo Myint Oo were arrested in Dawei on the night of 11 December. Following interrogation, they were transferred to Myeik Police Station on 14 December, according to police sources. So far, none of their family members have been able to see them.

Aung San Oo's wife said: "Both of them were brought to the police station, but I have not been permitted to see my husband. I was only allowed to provide him with necessities such as food and clothing."

Though they were abused during their interrogation they are in a stable condition, according to their family members.

Myo Myint Oo's mother said, "I have not received any communication from Myo Myint Oo. The last information I had was that he was at the police station. I am anxious and eager to see him."

The military told the journalists' families that they were arrested in connection with their reporting.

Laptops and phones were also seized from their houses at the time of their arrests. It is not known which law they are being charged under.

Mizzima tried to contact Thant Zin, the Tanintharyi Regional Minister of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, and Colonel Khin Kyaw, the regional police chief about the case on 18 December, but neither responded.

Kyaw San Min, the editor-in-chief of the Dawei Watch News Agency said that he hopes the two journalists will soon be released and stressed that Dawei Watch follows journalistic ethics in all its reporting.

He also said that previously, at the beginning of 2022, three other journalists working for Dawei Watch were arrested, but they were all released within a few days.

Since the February 2021 coup, in Myanmar, four journalists have been killed, hundreds have been arrested and 68 are still in prison, according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF).



# AUNG SAN SUU KYI APPEAL REJECTED

**A**ung San Suu Kyi's appeal against her conviction for corruption was rejected by the Myanmar Supreme Court on Monday 18 December.

According to the conviction Aung San Suu Kyi received bribes of gold and thousands of dollars from Phyo Min Thein when he was the Yangon Region Chief Minister, whilst her National League for Democracy (NLD) party was in power.

Aung San Suu Kyi was sentenced to five years imprisonment for this case. She called the statement by Phyo Min Thein which was submitted by the prosecution "totally absurd."

Typically, decisions in appeal cases take at least a month to be given. But unusually, in this case, the appeal was heard on 4 December and the verdict

was delivered two weeks later.

Initially, Aung San Suu Kyi was sentenced to 33 years in prison for 19 offences. Her sentence was reduced to 27 years on 1 August 2023.

She has been appealing all her sentences, though to date, she has not been successful with any of her appeals. So far, the courts have rejected 12 of her appeals.

Appeals are still ongoing for five more of Aung San Suu Kyi's convictions. They are for bribery during the procurement and hiring of helicopters for disaster prevention, breaking election laws and breaking the Official Secrets Act.

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## TNLA TAKES CONTROL OF NAMHSAN TOWN IN NORTHERN SHAN STATE

**T**he 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, according 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.



Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) fighters in action in northern Shan State under Operation 1027. Photo: AFP



# TURNING POINT

**Is the Myanmar military junta heading towards collapse?**

Igor Blazevic

**W**e have reached a turning point.

For a long time, for about two and half years, Myanmar has been in a dynamic and negative equilibrium. It was negative because the military junta was inflicting huge suffering, destruction, deprivation and trauma on the population on a massive scale. It has been dynamic equilibrium because something was happening constantly - junta terror, resistance attacks, brave acts of disobedience - however, neither was the military able to defeat armed resistance or to suppress the civil disobedience, nor the resistance was strong enough to topple the military junta.

This has changed in October and November 2023. This change did not happen out of the blue. It

has been aggregating for a long time. However, October and November brought the “Blitzkrieg” Operation 1027 which triggered a breakthrough out of the previous equilibrium.

We have now jumped into a new phase and a new power dynamic between the coup-maker’s State Administration Council (SAC) and the resistance.

### **DEADLY WOUNDED BEAST**

The Myanmar military has for some time been bleeding on all sides. Now it has become obvious that the SAC is a deadly wounded beast. The Myanmar military dictatorship has visibly entered into a downturn spiral from which it cannot recover - except under one condition, which I will elaborate on later on.



Myanmar protestor in Bangkok. Photo: AFP

I am talking about the collapse of the SAC, not about the collapse of the military. The “military-as-regime” was pushed into a downturn spiral at the end of which it will collapse. That does not mean that the “military-as-institution” will collapse. Because in Myanmar the regime is a military dictatorship, it is natural to consider the military-as-regime (SAC) and the military-as-institution as one and the same. Partly they are, but not fully. It is useful to keep that distinction, for better understanding, but also for important strategic choices, for psychological warfare and for political decisions.

The current SAC will inevitably collapse and with the collapse of the SAC also the Myanmar military

dictatorship or military-as-regime will collapse. There will be still be significant leftovers of the military-as-institution. What will happen with those leftovers will depend a lot on the way the military-as-regime will collapse. We can make assumptions and outline different possibilities, but we do not know and cannot know. We are in the midst of an accelerated and intensified history, which is still open and undecided.

### **WHEN WILL THE COLLAPSE OF THE SAC HAPPEN?**

We do not know and nobody can know because it is still open, unfinished history. It depends on many factors and their interplay. It could be anytime between six to eight months from now on. It could also take place in one year or a year and a half.

### **HOW WILL MILITARY REGIME COLLAPSE?**

This will most probably not happen through a total military defeat. I cannot imagine the Myanmar military defending junta leader Min Aung Hlaing till the last day, while allied resistance forces are gradually taking over territory until Min Aung Hlaing kills himself an underground bunker in the besieged and destroyed capital Naypyidaw. This is the story of Adolph Hitler in Berlin in 1945 but in Myanmar we will probably see another scenario.

Resistance military offensives can keep on exerting bigger and bigger pressure on the military. However, it is not realistic to expect, and it will be even very dangerous to expect that resistance forces can soon overrun the military that is entrenched in big cities. The disproportionality of military hard power is still too big.

### **COLLAPSE FROM WITHIN?**

In order for the SAC to fall, the Myanmar military must, under multilayer pressures - armed resistance, civil disobedience, political pressures by the allied forces of the National Unity Government (NUG) and Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs), economic warfare pressure and psychological warfare pressure - break from within.

This can happen in two different ways. One is, the Myanmar military could implode from the bottom up. Exhausted, demoralized, poorly fed and poorly equipped units across the country that are under relentless attacks by the guerrilla resistance could at one moment stop following orders from their senior commanders and simply lay down their weapons. This could trigger a domino effect which will reach as far as



the outposts leading to Naypyidaw. Some of the big cities, e.g. Mandalay, could revolt and overthrow military control after intense but quick fights. Min Aung Hlaing will realize that it is over and will probably jump on a plane and escape to China or some other safe haven country from where he will hope he will not be extradited.

The fall of the SAC can also happen through an internal putsch which will remove Min Aung Hlaing, unilaterally declare a ceasefire and offer readiness to negotiate with both allied resistance forces and Myanmar neighbours and ASEAN. If this were to happen, it will depend a lot on whether this internal coup is carried out by senior generals who are complicit in crimes and terror, and who are deeply involved in the corrupt

ownership of the economy; or the coup will be led by some other officers who have been less involved in crimes and are clean from corrupt enrichment. The former will have as a priority a desire to keep their economic assets they have stripped and accumulated and will try all they can to keep some powers, prerogatives and impunity, to protect their positions and ill-acquired wealth. If the coup is done by the other group, it will be easier for them to accept civilian control and security sector reform.

### **PHASES SINCE THE 2021 COUP**

Since the coup in February 2021, the people's struggle against the junta has gone through several phases.

The military coup triggered nationwide, mass,



Wounded Myanmar resistance fighters get medical aid. Photo: AFP

nonviolent civic resistance which lasted a few months.

The military tried to suppress protests and civic disobedience with a brutal crackdown. This has backfired. The crackdown activated the armed resistance and since then we had simultaneously ongoing civic resistance as well as gradually strengthening armed resistance. Both have been important to the same extent and both have been fuelled and sustained by popular anger against the junta and its crimes and by the heroic resilience of the people of Myanmar.

Faced with determined resistance which has shown no signs of receding, the junta escalated the level of violence and aggression. The military started to wage a full-fledged war of terror against the civilian population. The people of Myanmar did not give up in

spite of the huge level of suffering and pain. They continued with stubborn – and heroic – self-defence.

During this phase, the junta had an upper hand. It controlled disproportionate resources and hard military power to sustain systematic, patient, ongoing aggression against the population of the country. Their war of terror against the nation was highly destructive and plunged the country into an economic downturn. The junta cynically and ruthlessly calculated that they could endure longer than the resistance, that the people will give up and that they will regain control.

This is also what Myanmar's neighbours and other ASEAN countries, as well as the UN agencies and the INGOs have been expecting to happen. So, they decided to sit-and-wait until the junta finishes its "dirty job", reconsolidate control and remain the "only game in town". In that case it will be again possible to resume businesses and developmental projects with those who affirmed themselves as the authorities.

However, things did not happen this way because the people of Myanmar have found deeper sources of determination and resilience. The resistance was able to survive, to learn, to pull resources and to gradually increase its own military capacity. The story about resistance units watching videos from Ukraine and starting to adapt commercial drones and gradually developing capacity to apply them on the battlefields with significant effectiveness is just one of such stories of learning and gaining strength.

This development led to the phase of mentioned negative equilibrium. During this period, the resistance was constantly becoming stronger and stronger and more and more united, although this process was very slow due to the fact that nobody from other states or intergovernmental organizations was ready to provide any meaningful assistance to the people who were defending themselves against the murderous gang in uniform.

Then, suddenly, a surprise "Black Swan" appeared. The Three Brotherhood Alliance "Blitzkrieg" disrupted the negative equilibrium and tipped the power balance in favour of the resistance. Operation 1027 opened two new fronts, in northern Shan State and in Rakhine or Arakan state at a moment when the military was already overstretched to breaking point.

Different resistance forces launched partly collaborative, partly synchronized offensives and military started to crumble in many of its outlying posts and to



retreat into a defensive mode.

## **JUNTA ON DEFENSIVE**

This is the new phase where we find ourselves at the end of 2023. The junta is in a defensive survival stage. The resistance has gained momentum and is capable to sustain offensive pressures. The junta was thrown into a downward trajectory. The resistance has entered an upward spiral.

The junta is facing unsolvable weaknesses.

Armed conflicts are taking place in 221 out of 330 townships in Myanmar, which amounts to 67 per cent of the country. This is simply too much for a significantly weakened military to cope with.

The most serious weakness is dramatic loss of manpower and lack of capacity to recruit new soldiers in a situation in which it is overstretched extremely thin across a huge territory. Defection and non-cooperation rates are getting higher again. Units and junior officers on the ground know all too well what Min Aung Hlaing is refusing to accept – that roads are insecure for junta convoys and that any attempt to raid ERO-controlled territories with ground troops will end with junta soldiers being killed, wounded and decisively repelled.

Panic is creeping into the bones of soldiers in trenches of vulnerable outlying posts and anxiety is spreading among Naypyidaw inhabitants. This demoralization and psychological weakness will sooner or later break the SAC.

There are also other important junta's weaknesses. Its administrative capacity has collapsed across a big part of the country. The junta military has lost control of 43 per cent of Myanmar's territory. That means that the junta is simply not able to govern and control those territories, even if resistance forces are still not able to take over territory in full. Lack of hard currency, galloping inflation and economic meltdown is hurting the people hard, but they are also squeezing the junta's capacity to act.

On the other side, the allied resistance is on a trajectory of accumulating more and more strength.

Initially, when the NUG announced the self-defence struggle, the resistance of the Bama population dramatically lacked weapons, ammunition, military experience and a chain of command. EROs have been slightly in a better shape, but they also did not have too much in the way of weapons and ammunition; most of them did not have too many soldiers and have been

squeezed in very narrow territory. This has changed.

Each current victory of the resistance forces is adding supplies of weapons and ammunition, it is adding territorial control, establishing control over borders and important trade and supply routes and is adding capacity to expand taxation. Those are all game-changing increases in capacity to pull together much needed resources.

Each success of coordinated or synchronized operations of the resistance forces are increasing willingness to cooperate. Each joint victory generates trust and is making both the military and political alliance stronger.

One more important dynamic has been activated with the success of Operation 1027. The perception of who will be the more probable winner of the current war has changed.

The anti-junta alliance is gradually gaining a winning image. This is increasingly making it an attractive partner. It is no surprise that we are now seeing shifts among those Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and political actors who have been so far sitting on the fence or have been even cautiously interacting with the junta. They are also recalculating their choices because they do not want to stay as the last ones with the losing side.

## **TWO POSSIBLE IMMEDIATE SCENARIOS**

The Myanmar junta is a deadly wounded, bleeding beast, but it is wild beast, blind from the rage, which can still inflict a lot of damage and pain.

The junta cannot any more achieve military victories. It cannot regain territories it has lost and will lose more territories in the weeks and months to come. However, the Myanmar military still can inflict significant humanitarian disasters.

This is bringing us to two probable scenarios as to how things could develop in Myanmar from now on. At this point, it is not possible to estimate which scenario is the more probable one.

One probable scenario is that the SAC will collapse in the next six to eight months.

However, there is also a second possible scenario. According to this scenario, the junta will give up on the lost territories of the northern Shan State, on parts of Sagaing, as well as what is currently controlled by the Chin and Karenni resistance, Arakan Army and the Karen National Union (KNU). However, the junta



will inflict heavy destruction in parts of Karenni, Karen, Chin and Rakhine states as well as in Sagaing and Magway with one single purpose, not so much to achieve military victories and to regain military control, but to impose a new level of humanitarian disaster on both the urban and rural civilian populations.

The military might give up on the “periphery”, bunker itself in urban centres and Myanmar lowlands and increase a level of civilian destruction in the “buffer zones” which they can reach with a combination of both artillery and airpower.

This is similar to how the Russian forces have fortified themselves in the East Ukraine and are relentlessly hitting civilian targets and civilian infrastructure on the western Ukrainian side. The Russians have been very vulnerable when they have been trying offensive operations to take control over Ukraine. However, when they stated to be defensive and just use artillery, rockets and drones to destroy Ukrainian civilian targets and when Ukrainians started to be expected to undertake offensives, suddenly Ukrainians started to be bogged down with heavy, demoralizing losses.

One can imagine how something similar could happen in Myanmar. This development cannot help the SAC regain control. But it could create a new exhausting and highly destructive stalemate. It would also create a situation in which everybody on the resistance side will need to carefully calculate does it have capacity for further offensive attempts and how much more civilian suffering can the resistance sustain. This development could bring us back to demoralization after the current optimism.

### **HOW A MISLEADING NARRATIVE CAN EMERGE AGAIN**

This development would also bring us back to the narrative among diplomats, within the international community and neighbours that the military cannot be defeated and that any effort to defeat the military is just leading to enormous civilian suffering. Pressure from neighbours and other internationals could start again with the belief that they need to facilitate negotiations between the military and resistance.

This scenario would play even better for the military’s survival strategy if they will themselves remove Min Aung Hlaing and make an offer of some fake compromise. This will give the excuse to everybody among neighbours and the international community to start to pressure the EROs and the NUG to accept ne-

gotiations with the “new” military in order to end further human suffering.

The junta will now try to do whatever they can to create a new temporary stalemate on the battlefield. It will also try to increase destruction and human suffering wherever they are able to do so.

It is in junta’s interest to replace narratives about resistance successes and about the strength of resistance cooperation with narratives of suffering and destruction. This is why they will try to bomb, destroy, burn and cut.

The junta will also try to use neighbours and anybody ready to help, to replace narratives about its losses with narratives about possibility of “negotiations”, “humanitarian ceasefires”, “peaceful solution”, “elections”, or whatever else.

This is bringing us to the question of where neighbours and foreign actors stand on Myanmar and what we can expect them to do.

### **THREAT FROM NEIGHBOURS**

So far, the overwhelming perception among Yangon and Bangkok-based diplomats, Myanmar neighbours and other regional and international actors has been that whatever is happening in Myanmar, the military is too strong to be defeated.

Expectations have been that in the end, the junta will anyhow, through combination of brutality and trickery, reconsolidate control over a large swathe of the country. So, diplomats and foreign policy-makers made the assumption that it is and it will be inevitable to deal with the junta, even if they are murderous and disliked. The generals have been seen as someone who is and will be in charge.

This has changed now. Understanding has spread that the junta is on a downturn trajectory and that it could fall. This is a significant and important change. The change of perception can change the attitudes and policies of neighbours and other countries toward Myanmar.

However, it is important to understand that change of perception is still not a change of policy. Change of perception is necessary for a change of policy, but change of perception does not automatically lead to a change of policy.

Three neighbours, China, India and Thailand, are increasingly nervous. They want stability in Myanmar to pursue their economic and geopolitical interests

and what they see is a country falling in deeper and deeper conflict, in economic meltdown and in instability that threatens to turn into a state breakdown.

They are becoming more and more aware how weak and incompetent the junta is, but – and this is the most critical but - they cannot imagine stability in Myanmar without the military. They simply do not believe and do not want to believe that the NUG and EROs are able to come to political agreement about the future of the country. They do not believe that the NUG and EROs are able to take over government and to provide stability and keep the country together.

They have partly interiorized the decades of military propaganda that the military is the only national institution capable to hold the country together. Partly they are projecting on Myanmar the negative experiences from the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, Syria and South Sudan.

Those historic experiences with state fragility of robustly diverse and divided societies in a moment when long established dictatorships are falling run deep in the collective mind of the foreign policy decision-makers. Historic experiences from other places, particularly if they are relatively recent ones, create assumptions, prejudices and mind frames that are not easy to overcome or remove.

The NUG and EROs do not need to persuade international actors that they stand for democracy and/or federalism and that democracy and federalism are better than military dictatorship. In today's messy "multipolar" chaos, outsiders will not become supportive toward the NUG or EROs in order to help them achieve democracy or federalism. The NUG and EROs also do not need to persuade international actors that the Myanmar military is committing horrendous crimes and that civilian suffering is enormous. International players will not intervene against the military for those reasons either.

The NUG and EROs have a mountainous task to persuade neighbours and other internationals that the best bet for preventing the disintegration of Myanmar comes from the NUG and ERO alliance. They need to persuade neighbours and other internationals that the SAC is the primary and only source of instability and serious security threats for neighbours. They need to make the SAC appear as the only obstacle for de-escalation of violence, as the one that is responsible for the illicit drug trade and human trafficking, for the collapse of vaccination and treating of infectious

diseases spreading over the border, and as a threat that can trigger a mass exodus of the scale seen in Syria or Venezuela.

They need to persuade neighbours and internationals that the futile effort of Min Aung Hlaing and the SAC to stay in power will actually lead to the disintegration of Myanmar in five to seven territories controlled by different armed militias. And at the same time the NUG and EROs need to persuade neighbours and internationals that they have solid mutual political agreement and a joint transition roadmap which they are able to credibly describe, so that the removal of the SAC and installation of the NUG and EROs transition government will be able to quickly de-escalate violence across country, impose law and order, cope with hyper-inflation, revive economic activities, manage return of IDPs and refugees, and restore stability.

In order to be able to do so, the ethnic-democratic alliance need to have in hand a solid political agreement to be presented and they need to have a blueprint of how the future transition government will look like and what will be the transition roadmap for the first months and the first year after the collapse of the military junta.

It is not enough to say that the NUG and NUCC has already outlined such a transition roadmap.

This is bringing me to the next point about the three sources of legitimacy.

### **SHIFTING SANDS OF POST-COUP LEGITIMACY**

It is very important that everybody who is involved in the lead political bodies of the anti-junta alliance recognize and accept the changing power relations as we approach the third anniversary of the coup.

It all started with the nationwide protests, mass public participation, and a civil disobedience movement. The diaspora was energized and mobilized as well. This Big Bang of the People Power generated new entities that took leadership roles in the Spring Revolution – the NUG, CRPH and NUCC. All three of them enjoyed popular support. They have driven legitimacy partly from the 2020 elections and partly from the post-coup mass support coming both from inside the country as well as from the diaspora. Hundreds of thousands of people undertaking significant risk and standing on the streets calling for the international community to "Reject the Coup" and "Recognize the NUG" have a strong mandate to new political entities

that replaced the dissolved parliament and arrested elected government.

The expectation has been that the NUG will receive international recognition and that it will mobilize assistance from the other countries. This did not happen.

The junta tried to suppress protest and disobedience with brutal violence which led to the emergence and growth of the armed resistance. The NUG endorsed and called for the self-defending struggle, and tried to play the command role. However, the NUG lacked resources to affirm itself in the leadership role of the armed struggle. It did not have arms and ammunition, it did not have production capacity, it did not control territory necessary for military training and logistic bases, it lacked military experience and command authority, and it did not control sufficient steady revenue streams to effectively finance nationwide armed resistance.

Armed struggle led to the growth of power and influence of the EROs. They had weapons, ammunition, some production facilities, access to borders; they had territory for training and logistic bases and they had a lot military experience. A complex resistance army developed out of the convergence of interests of the NUG, the uprising of the majority Bama population and EROs.

As a result, the junta's power and control started to shrink significantly. Liberated territories expanded primarily in the ERO-controlled areas. The proto-states started to develop in Kachin, Chin, Karenni and Arakan states, more recently in the northern Shan State as well. The Wa has for already a long time consolidated its own fully autonomous rule.

In the meantime, for multiple reasons the NUCC process got blocked and has not been unlocked until now.

All those developments have created a very different situation than was apparent at the beginning of the Spring Revolution.

The NUG starting to float in terms of its own authority. It started to be ambiguous - is the NUG a governing authority over all other stakeholders; or it is just one authority among several other political authorities which are mutual and equal, or is the NUG a coordinating body of an alliance of the willing which is helping hold a unifying front but cannot exercise authority over the EROs or different bottom-up developed

autonomous state executive or coordinating councils. This ambiguity did not come from the NUG itself, but from the extent in which other actors have been ready to accept the NUG as governing or coordinating body.

The role of the CRPH become even more problematic because it was increasingly starting to act more as a blocking factor and as a guardian of the past, instead of being visionary co-driver of the revolutionary momentum.

### **THREE SOURCES OF LEGITIMACY**

In order to advance mutual trust and cooperation which is necessary to move the current political process forward and generate political agreement and a blueprint of how the future transition government will look like - the one that will be solid and look credible to skeptical Myanmar neighbours and others in the international community - it is, I think, very important that all political actors in existing the anti-junta alliance understand and respect that in the current situation we have there sources of legitimacy and authority in Myanmar.

The first source of legitimacy and authority is coming from the elections. Not just from the 2020 elections, but from three overwhelming victories of the NLD over military parties. For 30 years the NLD has been the prime democracy party of Myanmar and Aung San Suu Kyi enjoyed and for sure still enjoys overwhelming popular support. This is a source of legitimacy and authority which nobody should try to throw off the deck because it will just trigger a dangerous backfire.

The second source of legitimacy and authority is coming from the decades, in some cases 70 years of national liberation struggle of the ethnic nationalities. This source of authority is in this moment strengthened by the expanded territorial control of the EROs and by "interim" state building processes. This is already yet another source of legitimacy and authority which nobody can question, dismiss and overlook any more.

There is also the third source of legitimacy and authority, the one that is a more dispersed and vague than the first two, but not less relevant. In the moment of huge uncertainty and enormous risk, different individuals and groups took leadership roles and become drivers of the Spring Revolution. Since the armed resistance started, we also have the constantly developing legitimacy and authority of on-the-ground commanders and leaders of self-organizing of communities across Myanmar. They should be also recognized and respected in their right to be stakeholders of the insti-

tutional build-up of the future Myanmar.

What is very important in this moment is that none of the three mentioned sources of legitimacy claims to have superior authority over the other two. Any competition of authorities will be disastrous. The only way to achieve viable and credible political agreement is the way of “tripartite toleration”. Each of them needs to accept and treat the other two as equally legitimate.

If anybody plays “hardball” claiming that it has higher authority than the other two, the result will be polarization, disunity or paralysis of so much necessary political process.

### **HOW TO MOVE FORWARD?**

The current war of terror the military is waging against the nation and the liberation war the people are waging against the kleptocratic gang in uniforms could develop in three different directions.

Hard to achieve, messy and good scenario is: Allied democratic and ethno-federalist forces will keep on generating momentum which will lead to further weakening and implosion from the bottom up of the SAC. A complex, messy built up of the federal democratic country will follow.

Another, bad scenario is: The junta will manage to survive with the help of neighbours, China, India and Thailand. The military will re-consolidate control over two-thirds of the country. Some EAOs will get a high degree of autonomy in “their” territories. Something similar happened in Syria when Russia and Iran intervened to help resuscitate an already falling Assad regime. This scenario is not very probable in the case of Myanmar, but we cannot completely exclude its possibility.

The worst possible scenario: Different resistance forces will not find political agreement among themselves and under combined pressures of military atrocities and outside actors will abandon the current aligned struggle. Without a functional alliance, the military will not be defeated. What will follow is two to three more years of destructive conflict with no winner. Myanmar will at the end finish being broken into five to seven territories controlled by different armed militias. This scenario will resemble something between what happened in Libya and South Sudan.

What interests us is what is needed for the first, not easy to achieve, messy but good scenario.

As a start, it is necessary under any circumstances to hold together the current anti-junta alliance and as much as it is possible, expand and deepen it. This requires to put aside mistrust instead of reviving it. To bet on what is possible instead of fuelling old grievances. More importantly, this requires recognition and acceptance of all three sources of legitimacy and to consciously and intentionally cultivate “tripartite toleration”.

For the NLD political leaders it is critically important to show full understanding of the legitimate fear of ethnic nationalities from democratic majoritarianism. They need to find political courage to boldly commit themselves to ethnic self-determination. It is not good enough to say that “we have already done that in this and this statement and in that and that document”. It is necessary to repeat it, multiple times. This should be done not only by those involved in the NUG, but even more so by the other senior NLD leaders.

On the other side, political leaders of the ethnic stakeholders should also avoid trying to impose a confederal “coming together” model on Myanmar as a whole. Political leaders of ethnic stakeholders should understand and tolerate that on the side of the political leadership of Bama majority nobody in this moment has a full mandate to decide how central and coastal areas of Myanmar will be organized. (Note, I will comment more on the “coming together” concept in one of the chapters which will follow).

It is also important for everybody to understand that ethno-nationalist principle can work for some parts of Myanmar, but not for many others. Some federal units of Myanmar can be organized around ethno-centric principle without significant challenges. However, many other states are so diverse and mixed, sometimes without a clear ethnic majority, so the ethno-centric principle will simply not work in a democratic polity.

Let me mention just some of potential problems of the ethno-centric federalism: Territorially concentrated sub-minorities within the states where another ethnic group is in the majority and claims its historic ownership and self-rule rights. Such sub-minorities will, as we know, demand autonomy or their own state. In Myanmar we also have several groups spreading across more than one state. They are the majority in their “own” state, however they are also concentrated as a minority in neighbouring states. This creates pressures on “correcting the borders” which is dangerous thing to do in diverse and mixed societies. At the end

of the current conflict, we will have ethnic groups which will be in military and administrative control of “their” de facto state, but not the de jure one, at least not according to previous organization of state units. We will also have some extremely diverse states or diverse state in which titular ethnic will not be a majority one. Last but not least, the majority which used to be a domineering one and which is territorially dispersed across all other states will not accept to be second class citizens in other groups’ states and can become easy prey for radical nationalistic populism.

In the case of Myanmar, one model fits all will not work. And almost everybody will need to make some concessions and sometimes even hard compromises from its own maximalist demands.

I am confident that the Spring Revolution, current joint struggle against military junta and joint victory over military dictatorship are creating the foundation for the political agreement about a future asymmetric federal and democratic Myanmar. However, to achieve it and to agree on details where notorious devils lurk, it will require a lot wisdom, moderation, statesmanship, responsibility, time and negotiations to find such compromises.

In this moment we have three different concepts of the future Myanmar cherished by different stakeholders who are all indispensable for the victory over junta. One is the concept of symmetric ethno-centric federalism with different actors having different ideas about the number of states. The second concept is the concept of confederal, “coming together” state with very high degree of self-rule of constituent ethnic states and very weak central government. The third concept is a concept of asymmetric federation which combines ethno-centric principles for some of its units and territorial principle for other units. Proposals have been done, mainly by outsider experts on institutional building in divided and post-conflict societies, to have a look also into the experiences of deeper decentralization to the level of townships and local authorities as one concept worth considering.

I am of the opinion that in current conditions, in the midst of ongoing war and unfinished liberation struggle, when political leaders cannot even safely meet to talk and negotiate, it is not possible to seek for and find compromise between the above-mentioned different concepts.

Better to take a pragmatic approach: to sustain

and broaden the alliance around existing consensus and cement it additionally with mutual assurance regarding principal demands of each stakeholder. This is good enough to prevail over a deadly enemy.

In order to prevail over a deadly enemy, it is necessary to gradually integrate all different dimensions of struggle in an overarching strategy. Critically important dimensions of the way forward are:

- Ongoing armed resistance: Organize and coordinate a few more waves of simultaneous attacks on the military’s weak points and supply lines on multiple frontlines. Multiply impact of those pressures and hard bites with good psychological and information offensives calling upon the military rank and file to abandon Min Aung Hlaing and the other criminal kleptocratic generals.

- Political alliance: It is necessary to project both domestically and internationally an image of determined and confident anti-junta Coalition of the Willing that is strong enough to look like the probable winner and as an Allied Force that can be in charge of an orderly transition process.

- Ongoing civic resistance and public participation: It will be useful to undertake one or two more bigger collective actions of civic resistance in the next 6-8 months. It is important both domestically and internationally to show what is the will of the people. In case that any of Myanmar neighbours will try to come to save the junta or if regional and international actors will start to put pressure on the NUG and EROs to accept negotiations with the SAC, civic resistance groups and civil society should organize strong push-back protest actions. Foreign countries should not be allowed to meddle in the internal matters of Myanmar by providing lifesaving hooks to the junta.

- Keep on cutting the junta from important revenue chains: The junta is running out of money and is already in a desperate state. A few more effective, well targeted rounds of sanctions will inflict additional, breaking pressure on the SAC. In addition to sanctions, it will be advisable for resistance forces to look into possibilities for smaller scale diversions which will not inflict big damage but will serve signalling purposes. Passive striking has proved to be very effective in Iran in the moment when Shah Reza Pahlavi was falling. It makes sense to look into such options as well.

- Continue staging actions of revolutionary fundraising: War and revolution cannot be won with-

out money. Foreign donors might provide funding for civil society, HR defenders, media or humanitarian aid. However, donors will never fund revolution and victory. This can be only self-financed by the people and diaspora. It makes sense to make additional fundraising efforts in 2024. The junta is on the brink of breakdown. It makes sense to mobilize for the few more final punches.

- Information & PsyOp warfare: Operation 1027 has been remarkable not only by the level of cooperation and strategic patency with which it has been prepared. It has also been a masterpiece of psychological and information warfare. 3GHA was not taking military posts due to the military offensive and surprise factor only, but also because of very well played communication. It has offered inspiration to everybody else to get better in psychological warfare and public narratives undermining the morale of junta troops and loyalists.

- This diplomatic “offensive” must be launched quickly. The NUG and allied EROs should rapidly form a joint foreign affairs team for visits to Washington, Brussels, London, New Delhi, Tokyo, Canberra, Jakarta, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, etc. The team should be ready to go to Beijing if invited.

### **ONE MORE TASK: START WORK ON REFORM PLANS**

As already mentioned, one probable scenario is that the SAC will collapse in the next six to eight months.

It is important for us to recognize that neither Myanmar stakeholders participating in the anti-junta resistance, nor Myanmar neighbours nor the international community are prepared to deal with the vacuum that will emerge with the collapse of the SAC. There is a solid level of military cooperation and basic elements of political agreement among political and armed actors participating in the anti-junta alliance. But a lot is still open. It is not quite clear who will be in authority and who will manage transition and how in the case of the sudden collapse of the SAC.

A lot of what the anti-junta alliance and political bodies of the Spring Revolution have as policy plans is still very general and very aspirational. The reality of policymaking and even more so the reality of transition policymaking is much more complex. When dictatorships fall, many things start to move quickly and in many directions. Decision-makers do not have any time to make considerations, to collect information and

to get advice. Under multiple pressures they are forced to decide and to act.

It is good to have general aspirational policy goals, but it is as important to quietly prepare concrete policy plans and make necessary political agreements among those who will be key political actors with real power. Even if we do not manage to make concrete policy plans, it is good to at least start proper thinking and discussion.

It is, I think, important at this point to realize that it is not enough if various NUG ministries say that they have prepared policies in place. It is also not enough for EROs or for state interim councils to focus their own thinking and preparations for the post-SAC period only on their “own territories”. At this point, we do need joint NUG and ERO policy teams to start to prepare concrete policies in case we will actually suddenly find ourselves in the messy post-SAC transition. We should not allow ourselves to be surprised by something that becomes so probable.

These are policy fields which I see as very important ones to be prepared for:

- 1) who, where and how secures human security and law and order;
- 1) security sector reform;
- 2) coping with hyperinflation, emptied state budget, bankruptcy of cash stripped banks;
- 3) urgent need to restart economy while at the same time it will be necessary to restructure it;
- 4) huge and complex issue for which we need to prepare is the fact that even when the military was removed from the political power, an economic power, particularly financial capital will be in the hands of military families and cronies, international investors or in hands of organized crime. Even if those who accumulated huge wealth under military regimes are sidelined from political power in the aftermath of the fall of military dictatorship, if they keep the ill-acquired economic assets, they will find a way, four or eight years later to recapture political power by buying and corrupting politics and the state;
- 5) judiciary reform and the speedy cleaning of judiciary is always a hard task to be tackled. This is one more sector in which old regimes survive after they have been defeated and from this entrenchment to corrupt, subvert and undermine democratic performance and democratic consolidation.

There are for sure two to three more important sectors. Myanmar revolutionary and liberation forces must be prepared to have concrete policies which they will implement quickly. The window of opportunity after the fall of dictatorships is open for a year or maximum two for radical reforms.

If there is an understanding of what will be the most critical tasks and challenges in the immediate post-coup period, and if we have political agreement between the NUG and EROs about establishing task-force teams, it is possible to find expertise among CDM technocrats, educated Burmese at home or in the diaspora, with some help of foreign expertise.

This is the task which should not be postponed and needs to be done in parallel with securing victory over the military dictatorship.

## **APPENDIX**

Remark about the confederal (“coming together”) scenario

Proponents of this scenario argue that as a consequence of the coup and the Spring Revolution uprising, central government does not exist anymore in Myanmar.

What we have is an emerging of “federalism from below”: emerging proto states based on ethno-centric principle (Kachin, Wa, Karenni, Karen, Arakan and Chin states). What is now needed is to accelerate a similar process in other ethnic states (primarily Shan and Mon) and even more so to start the same process of bottom-up state building in Sagaing, Magway and Tanintharyi divisions (maybe some others as well).

Once those “bottom-up” constituted states will liberate themselves from the forceful military unitarism, they can choose to “come together” in (con)federal union – or not.

I see a few serious problems of the confederal (“coming together”) scenarios.

It is very dangerous to assume that central government does not exist anymore in Myanmar. International relations are terrified of stateless territories or failed states. From the international relations perspective, there is a state Myanmar with the seat in the UN. If the revolutionary actors themselves question and deny the NUG to be the legitimate Myanmar government, what will happen is that the SAC or any other entity put forward by the military will have a better chance

to become regionally and internationally recognized as the Myanmar government. If the Spring Revolution leaders had not been so quick to form the NUG, ASEAN and Myanmar’s neighbours would long ago have recognized the SAC as the government and all others would have followed suit.

If the anti-junta alliance loses the already existing “centre” that is formed on the wave of the mass popular Spring Revolution, we risk the breaking of the resistance into a fragmented, “leaderless” movement which will not be able to generate new coordinating and leadership body. Historic experience shows that leaderless movements always finish in entropy, fragmentation, chaos and defeat. Better to keep what we have and upgrade it and reform it, instead of breaking it with nothing to replace it with.

There is one more very serious reason for cautiousness. It could be very dangerous to conceptualize a future Myanmar federation as exclusively based on the ethno-centric principle. There are many reasons to believe that this can lead to a Bosnian type of ethnic cleansing.

It is true that some parts of Myanmar can be and should be organized as ethno-centric states with a high degree of autonomy. It is highly probable that many other parts of Myanmar will remain parts of a held together federation which will be organized on the territorial principle.

To find agreement and compromise about this, it is better to first defeat and remove the military dictatorship which is lurking for any disagreement between allied revolutionary forces to misuse it with its “divide-and-rule” tactics.

At this point of time, as I have said earlier, it is better to keep the winning alliance solid and credible based on minimum consensus about future asymmetric federal democratic Myanmar and on mutual assurances that everybody’s principle demands for self-rule will be satisfied and expressed readiness to seek consensual solutions which will bring peace to the country.

Better to focus now on re-agreeing and re-articulating a blueprint of how the future transition government will look like and what will be the transition roadmap for the first months and the first year after the collapse of the military junta.

*This commentary was originally published on Mizzima.com under the title: “Myanmar 2023: Big picture, priorities, main challenges and the way forward”.*

# 'I'M A MANDALAY GIRL': TEENAGE SOLDIER FIGHTS ON MYANMAR'S FRONT LINES

An 18-year-old recruit in one of Myanmar's pro-democracy fighting units prepares to launch a drone strike on junta troops, driven by anger and her mother's call for revolution.

Moe Moe is one of hundreds of women training, living and fighting alongside men in the "People's Defence Forces", upending gender norms in the mostly Buddhist country.

She grew up during a rare period of democracy in Myanmar and, after the military ended it with a 2021 coup, joined one of the dozens of PDF units that formed to end the junta's rule.

Moe Moe initially worked with a group organising protests against the military but, after months of the junta's deadly crackdown, decided to become a fighter.

"I can't stand the military's injustice," she said after carrying out the drone strike in Shan state, which neighbours the more populous Mandalay region.

"They killed innocent civilians. The main reason I joined was because of my anger."

Moe Moe, wearing the group's camouflage fatigues and its red peacock badge stitched onto her arm, said she had friends in the Mandalay PDF who invited her to fight with them.

"I was born in Mandalay, I'm a Mandalay girl. So, I joined Mandalay PDF," she said.

Moe Moe, who uses a pseudonym for security reasons, is one of around 100 women in the Mandalay PDF, which has clashed regularly with the junta in Shan state and Mandalay.

Moe Moe and other women make up around a third of the group's drone unit, challenging the military's dominance of the skies by flying commercial drones adapted to carry bombs that can be dropped on junta positions.

"If I drop bombs directly onto a military target I feel very good for the rest of that day. It motivates me,"



An increasing number of women are taking up arms against the Myanmar junta. Mandalay region. Photo: AFP





Female resistance fighters practice drilling, Mandalay region. Photo: AFP

she said.

“I want more drone missions and to better show what I can do.”

Soe Thuya Zaw, a male soldier in charge of drone operations, said his women comrades had proved to be formidable assets.

“We believe in the ability of women. When we were thinking how would be best to use the abilities of female soldiers, we decided that they would be most suited to the drone force,” he said.

### **‘COME BACK HOME’**

Women in the Mandalay PDF are also performing a range of other duties, including joining patrols and working as medics.

Wearing combat trousers and T-shirts, female recruits go for morning jogs along dirt tracks hurried by the sharp blasts of an instructor’s whistle.

Later they go through a punishing routine of squats and sit-ups before lining up for a meal of rice and meat at the canteen.

Women also work in the administration that keeps the Mandalay PDF funded and fed.

At an office table cluttered with laptops and paper, a group of women are busily at work when another whistle blast announces an air raid drill and they run, files in hand, to take shelter in a nearby trench.

In another shelter women sit dismantling and cleaning rifles with rags and oil, keeping the group’s precious arsenal of weapons in good order.

In recent weeks the Mandalay PDF has joined fighting in Shan state driven by an alliance of three ethnic minority groups.

The uptick in clashes means more work for Mandalay PDF’s female medical staff.

At one health post - consisting of a bed placed outside a house alongside a trolley containing a few bottles - a doctor and nurse change a wounded fighter’s dressing.

Back at the camp in the late afternoon sun, several women sit round a camp fire, clothes hanging on lines strung between trees and a clutch of rifles resting against a table.

Two are on patrol duty and pick up their weapons and head out into the forest as the light dwindles.

They are wearing full camouflage fatigues, plus red lipstick that matches the red badges on their uniforms.

As the night settles in, they group by the fire to eat by the light of their phones and talk of home.

It is a place Moe Moe often finds herself thinking about, and especially the people she has left behind.

“Sometimes I miss home,” she said.

“But every time I talked with my mum on the phone she told me ‘my daughter, we are fine, just come back home after the revolution’.”

“When I remember her words, I am fine.”

AFP

# FIGHTING APPEARS TO RESUME IN LAUKKAI, NORTHERN SHAN STATE

**F**ighting appeared to have resumed in Laukkai Town in northern Shan State on 18 December after it temporarily ceased following the regime's announcement of Chinese government-mediated negotiations between the Three Brotherhood Alliance and the junta.

Junta jet fighters dropped bombs in the area of Laukkai Town on the night of 18 December and junta helicopters that may have been bringing in troop reinforcements were seen hovering over the town.

Residents of Laukkai seemed unsure as to what was happening. One said: "I don't know if the





fighting will restart.”

Mizzima reached out to a spokesperson for the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) to find out more, but it has, so far, received no response.

Junta spokesperson General Zaw Min Tun revealed on 12 December that the junta had engaged in discussions with the Three Brotherhood Alliance members, the MNDAA, The Arakan Army (AA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), but he did not reveal details of the discussions.

Neither did any Three Brotherhood Alliance members reveal details of the talks. But, on 12 December they issued a statement saying that they remain committed to the political aspirations of the Myanmar population and would not back down. They said that they anticipate a period of sustained fighting before they will be able to achieve their objectives.

# ‘WALKING THE REVOLUTIONARY PATH’: MYANMAR ETHNIC MINORITY FIGHTERS SEIZE NAMHSAN

Pickup trucks carrying ethnic minority fighters rolled into a town in Myanmar’s northeastern Shan state recently cleared of junta troops - another victory redrawing the frontlines of the country’s civil war.

The convoy passed the golden spire of a Buddhist pagoda in Namhsan but most eyes were scanning the skies for the attack jets the junta is using to support its embattled ground troops.

The men jumped down from the vehicles and fanned out on foot past locked wooden houses and down deserted streets silenced by days of fighting.

A burst of gunfire revealed a pocket of junta troops on the edge of the town and sent the fighters scuttling for cover behind walls.

Nestled in the hills of northern Shan state, Namhsan is the latest town to fall to Ta’ang National

Liberation Army (TNLA) fighters since they launched a surprise offensive against Myanmar’s junta in October.

The TNLA announced it had captured Namhsan on Saturday.

Footage obtained by AFP shows the fighters in the last stages of their operation to secure the town last week.

On the road to Namhsan hours before the TNLA moved in, its spokesman Tar Aik Kyaw said his fighters were “walking the revolutionary path.”

“The main objective is to take down the military dictatorship, which is what Myanmar people always want.”

Nearby, a squad of fighters in camouflage fatigues and peaked caps with badges showing the TNLA emblem set against a blue sky, unloaded crates



Resistance fighters with armed drones.  
Photo: AFP

of mortars for a final check before heading into battle.

## **DESPERATE CIVILIANS**

For almost three years, civilian “People’s Defence Forces” have been battling around the country to oust the junta which seized power in a 2021 coup.

But the offensive launched by the TNLA and its allies - the Arakan Army (AA) and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) - in October has galvanised the anti-junta movement and presented the generals with their stiffest military challenge in decades, with groups attacking on multiple fronts.

Evidence of fierce fighting was everywhere in Namhsan.

One of the pagoda’s spires had been knocked down, an unexploded rocket lay on the ground and a building was riddled with bullet holes.

Inside, a dark pool of blood stained the floor next to blankets and food wrappers, while in the next room more blood was smeared on the walls.

Residents who have not already fled live in fear.

“We don’t have anywhere to go. There are caves to hide in but they are a long way from our house,” said Ohmar, 50, who asked to use a pseudonym for security reasons.

“My neighbours left this morning to hide in the caves but on the way artillery shells started landing all around them and so they came back here,” she said.

One man dug a hole into the side of a hill to make a rudimentary shelter -- an action familiar to many across Myanmar after three years of conflict.

“I already sent my family members to other places,” resident Zaw Oo said.

Ohmar, whose house walls were perforated by bullet holes, has also dug a rough shelter that she said could hold up to 20 people.

“But it’s very tight and hot inside. If we don’t cover the whole entrance with sandbags, we are also afraid of artillery shells,” she said.

“I’m so worried for my family.”

## **DRONES**

Later, under cover of darkness, a TNLA commander whispered urgent orders into a walkie-talkie, calling in a new tactic that has put the Myanmar military on the back foot -- a drone strike.

Within minutes a drone was primed with a bomb and buzzed up into the night air to target a tea factory outside Namhsan where junta troops were holding out.

Soon a flash lit up the night sky and an ex-

plosion rumbled across the hills, prompting muffled cheers from TNLA fighters.

The drones used by the ethnic minority groups are civilian models modified to carry “drop bombs” that are released over the target.

The tactic may be simple but it has caused the junta enough problems for it to put out a statement condemning the TNLA, MNDAA and AA for using “thousands” of drop bombs and accusing the groups of receiving “foreign” help.

Tar Aik Kyaw said the TNLA was “not under the control” of any group or country.

“We have launched attacks against the military to protect the lives of civilians, to prevent the military’s air strikes and attacks on the TNLA,” he said.

“Our areas are near China’s border region and we have some discussions [with them]. But we don’t discuss military issues, we have discussed stabilisation of the border and participation in suppressing on-line scams.”

Beijing has been angered by a mushrooming of online scam operations in Myanmar’s lawless borderlands staffed by Chinese citizens forced to work swindling their compatriots.

The alliance says one of the goals of its offensive is to eradicate the scam operations -- in what analysts say is likely a nod to a powerful neighbour which maintains ties with some of Myanmar’s myriad ethnic minority armed groups.

## **CEASEFIRE HOPES**

More than 600,000 people are estimated to have been displaced and 378 civilians killed since the alliance launched its offensive on 27 October, according to the United Nations.

On Thursday, Beijing announced it had mediated a temporary ceasefire between the junta and the ethnic minority armed groups, but it is not clear how far this is holding on the ground.

And while the alliance offensive has captured some towns, TNLA spokesman Tar Aik Kyaw urged caution.

“A thirsty person is happy when he sees water,” he said.

“We have noticed how Myanmar people are happy and hopeful for the win over military. But we can’t depend on one organisation to defeat the military.

“All the people have the responsibility to participate.”

**AFP**

# MORE CLASHES IN MYANMAR'S RAKHINE STATE

**M**yanmar's military has called in air strikes and naval bombardments against an ethnic minority armed group on an island hosting a planned billion-dollar China-backed deep sea port, the group and local media said.

Clashes have rocked Rakhine state since last month after the Arakan Army (AA) launched attacks on security forces, ending a shaky ceasefire that had largely held since the military seized power in a coup in 2021.

The attacks in the western state opened another front for the military as it battles the so-called "Three Brotherhood Alliance" alliance of ethnic minority fighters, which includes the AA, in the north of the country.

On Tuesday a naval vessel bombarded Ramree town on Ramree island, the alliance said on its Telegram channel.

During fighting with the AA in the area on Monday 18 December 2023, junta forces called in air strikes and fired from naval ships, the alliance said.

Local media reported civilians had been killed and wounded in the firing on Ramree town.

The AA said it had seized "military equipment" following the clash on Monday, without giving details.

Ramree island is home to a planned China-backed deep sea port that when completed will serve as gateway for Beijing to the Indian Ocean.

The planned port near Kyaukphyu, around 50 kilometres (30 miles) from Ramree town, is the centrepiece of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor

(CMEC) project -- a key thread in China's global Belt and Road vision.

Construction on the port and a nearby special economic zone has been stalled amid on-off unrest in Rakhine state.

AFP has contacted China's embassy in Yangon for comment.

Clashes between the AA and the military roiled the region in 2019, and in 2017 the military launched a crackdown on the Rohingya minority that is now the subject of a United Nations genocide court case.

Local media reported this week that authorities had banned all fishing and transport boats from the waters around Kyaukphyu until February next year.

Last week the AA said it had seized three military bases in neighbouring Chin state near the border with Bangladesh.

More than 110,000 people have been displaced by the recent clashes in Chin and Rakhine states, the United Nations said last week.

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

Clashes between the AA and the military in 2019 displaced more than 200,000 people across Rakhine state, home to around one million people.

**AFP**

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# NGO FEARS DEADLY MYANMAR JUNTA ATTACKS IN SHAN STATE COULD SPARK CHINESE PIPELINE EXPLOSION

**T**he Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) says State Administrative Council (SAC) attacks along the Chinese pipelines in northern Shan State have killed dozens of civilians, raise fears of a pipeline explosion.

In a press release dated 21 December, SHRF says that since the start of Operation 1027 launched by the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA) on October 27, 2023, 27 civilians have been killed, 33 injured and over 160 buildings damaged by indiscriminate SAC air and ground attacks in townships along China's oil and gas pipelines in northern Shan State.

The main target area of Operation 1027 has

been townships bordering China, including Namkham, where the pipelines cross into Burma, but fighting has also occurred in townships further south along the pipelines, including Nawngkhio, Kyaukme and Hsipaw, where the 3BHA has been disrupting SAC supply lines along the Muse-Mandalay highway. Clashes in these townships have triggered indiscriminate SAC air and artillery attacks close to the pipelines, raising fears of a deadly pipeline explosion.

Airstrikes along the pipelines began on October 29, when SAC aircraft bombed Kyaukkyan village, six kilometers west of Nawngkhio town on the Muse-Mandalay highway, where Ta'ang National Lib-



Resistance fighters heading for battle. Photo: AFP



eration Army (TNLA) and Mandalay PDF troops were active. The airstrike damaged a Hindu temple in the village, killing a man and injuring two other civilians. The southern edge of Kyaukyan village lies less than 100 meters from the pipelines.

Over the next few days, SAC continued launching airstrikes to drive out TNLA and PDF troops from villages along the highway west of Nawngkhio town, damaging about 30 houses, killing one man and injuring three other civilians. Two of the villages where bombs landed, Shwe Nyaung Pin and Oom Markha, lie close to the pipelines.

On November 6, TNLA and PDF troops attacked a SAC camp guarding the Gokteik bridge, where the Muse-Mandalay highway crosses into Kyaukme township. This triggered SAC airstrikes over the next few weeks along the highway east of the

Gokteik Bridge in Nawng Ping village tract, Kyaukme township, which injured a man and damaged over 20 houses in four villages near the pipelines. On November 15, a bomb fell only about 200 meters from the Zee Pin pipeline station. At 5 pm that evening, about 50 SAC troops came and ransacked the pipeline station, and looted about 20 houses in nearby Pang Din village, stealing rice, oil and other household items. SAC media then broadcast pictures of the ransacked pipeline station, blaming TNLA for the damage.

In the second half of November, fighting spread along the highway east of Kyaukme town into Hsipaw township, resulting in indiscriminate shelling and shooting by SAC troops in and around Hsipaw town, killing one man and injuring eight other civilians. On November 27, SAC launched airstrikes on Pu Khar village on the Muse-Mandalay highway east of Kyaukme town, injuring one civilian and damaging three houses. Pu Khar village lies only 500 meters north of the pipelines.

Since the start of December, SAC has stepped up shelling and airstrikes in and around Namkham town to prevent TNLA seizure of the main SAC base on the southern edge of the town. By December 16, the attacks had killed fourteen civilians, injured eleven and damaged over 100 buildings. On the night of December 6 alone, five civilians were killed and four injured in an airstrike on the village of Ho Na, about 10 kms southwest of Namkham town. The pipelines run directly beside Ho Na village, only 40 meters from its northern edge.

The repeated airstrikes and shelling so close to the pipelines, which lie only about one meter underground, are heightening local fears that a direct hit could trigger a huge explosion, harming civilians over a wide radius, NGO SHRF says. Villagers living along the pipelines in northern Shan State have feared possible pipeline leaks and explosions since the project began.



# JUNTA BLOCKADES LEAD TO FOOD SHORTAGES IN RAKHINE STATE

Since the junta blocked road and river transport routes into Rakhine State there have been shortages and massive increases in the price of basic foodstuffs in the state.

Conversely, there has been a big drop in the price of seafood in the state because it cannot be sent out of the state to Yangon and other places in the country.

A resident of Ann township in Rakhine State said: “The prices of fish and shrimp [normally] sent to Yangon and other cities have seen a significant decline. On the other hand, essential items such as onions, garlic, and other products originating from the mainland have seen sharp price increases, leading to them being out of stock and unavailable for purchase.”

Residents of the Rakhine State townships of Ann, Sittwe, Kyaukphyu, and Maungdaw have reported steep price increases for food products that come from outside the state since the junta started blocking transport routes into the state on 13 November.

The price of onions and garlic has surged from 4,000 - 5,000 Kyat before 13 November to 30,000 - 50,000 Kyat per viss (1.63kg) now. Similarly, the cost of green chili has risen from 5,000 Kyat to 60,000 Kyat per viss. Other notable increases include the price of oil, which has gone up from 7,000 Kyat to 20,000 Kyat per viss, and the price of an egg, which has increased from 250 Kyat to 1,000 Kyat.

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A Maungdaw resident said: “While rice and oil are still available, there prices have significantly increased. However, other food products like onions, green chilies, and eggs have become scarce, with residents unable to purchase them in Maungdaw. I guess people could face severe food shortages in the coming one or two months.”

But, because seafood cannot leave the state it has more than halved in price in Rakhine State.

Tiger prawns have dropped from 50,000 Kyat to 20,000 Kyats a viss and Shwe Prawns have dropped from 70,000 Kyat to 30,000 Kyat a viss in local markets.

The junta blockade of Rakhine State combined with fresh fighting in the state has also led to shortages of medical supplies in the state, according to an Ann resident, increasing the pressure on the local population.

Since 13 November, when the Arakan Army (AA) started its offensive there has been fighting in the Rakhine State townships of Pauktaw, Mrauk-U, and Ann and in Sami Town and Paletwa Township in Chin State.

The AA claims that it has taken control of 142 junta camps, but Mizzima is unable to independently verify this figure.

# NGO ALLEGES ONE OF THE THREE BROTHERHOOD ALLIANCE GROUPS USING ‘FORCED RECRUITMENT’

**H**uman Rights Watch (HRW) is claiming an ethnic armed group in northern Myanmar has abducted and forcibly recruited civilians fleeing fighting in Shan State, in a statement issued 21 December.

The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), an ethnic Kokang armed group, should immediately end its abusive practices against civilians, and take all available measures to protect them during hostilities against Myanmar’s armed forces and pro-junta militias, HRW says.

“The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army is violating the laws of war by abducting and forcibly recruiting civilians, putting them at grave risk,” said Elaine Pearson, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “Civilians should be able to seek safety from fighting without fearing that the Myanmar military or ethnic armed groups will force them into their armies.”

On October 27, 2023, the Three Brotherhood Alliance – a coalition of the Arakan Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and Ta’ang National Liberation Army – began Operation 1027, an offensive targeting Myanmar military outposts in northern Shan State. The offensive triggered attacks by opposition armed groups elsewhere in the country. Since late October, fighting between opposition forces and the military has displaced more than 600,000 people, including almost 100,000 in Shan State.

Tens of thousands have fled Laukkai, the capital of the Kokang Special Autonomous Zone in northern Shan State, in advance of an anticipated MNDAA assault on the town, which the group formerly controlled. Although the MNDAA assisted those fleeing by opening up previously closed forest roads, the armed unit also confiscated mobile phones and detained an unknown number of people as they left Laukkai, local

media and witnesses said.

On November 24, the MNDAA abducted seven men as they traveled from Laukkai to Chin Shwe Haw, near the Myanmar-China border. Relatives told the Shan News Herald that the men’s friends last saw them detained on the roadside just outside Chin Shwe Haw, before Alliance Army fighters took them away. The Shan News Herald reported that an MNDAA spokesperson said that Sai Ai Naw, 18; Maung Nyi Ka, 19; Sai Lianghan, 20; Sai Ilaw, 26; Maung Nor Goon, 26; Sai Aung Heng, 27, and a seventh, unnamed 20-year-old man would be assigned to military service.

On November 25, a doctor who left Laukkai along the same route said he witnessed many young men pulled over and detained by MNDAA fighters outside Par Hsin Kyaw, a village between Laukkai and Chin Shwe Haw.

“They [MNDAA fighters] were pulling over men who were on motorcycles in groups of twos and threes,” he said. They did not pull over couples, and I had one of the female nurses riding pillion, so we didn’t get stopped. But there were scores of young men pulled over and I saw them being rounded up. I was too afraid to stop and look but they were being gathered together and taken away somewhere.”

On December 12, the parents of seven other young men who did not arrive home after fleeing Laukkai in late October issued a letter to the Alliance Army, pleading for their release. The families wrote, in the letter obtained by Human Rights Watch, that they last saw their sons being led away by MNDAA fighters near Chin Shwe Haw. All those abducted were of Ta’ang ethnicity and came from Man Khite village, Namhsan township, in northern Shan State.

The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army operates in northern Shan State along the Chi-

na-Myanmar border. It was founded as the Communist Party of Burma collapsed in 1989 and agreed to a ceasefire with the Myanmar military later that year. The ceasefire ended in 2009, when a military-aligned faction of the Alliance Army became the Kokang Border Guard Force and was put in charge of Laukkai, where illegal activity, most recently cyber scam centers, has thrived. The MNDAA has attempted multiple times to regain the territory, including Laukkai, that it lost in 2009.

Some ethnic armed groups, including the MNDAA, impose quotas requiring villages or households to supply a recruit, who in some cases may be willing to serve. Myanmar's military and pro-junta militias also use forced recruits, including children, to bolster their armed forces or for other roles such as porters, cooks, or cleaners.

In a widely shared video dated December 5, an MNDAA official in uniform warns families not to shirk their responsibilities and to ensure those recruited were at least 15 years old and younger than 50.

"If [you don't] have a boy ... if you have a girl ... if you have three [one must serve]," the official tells a crowd gathered at a monastery in Pang Hseng village, Monekoe township, in northern Shan State. "If you have five, two of them must serve. Got it? If you have five males at home, two of them must serve."

He continued: "So, if you're thinking about not bringing your sons and daughters because you're concerned, don't do that. ... One day when they come back because things are peaceful, we are going to collect household registrations and we will know that they did not serve, and we will arrest them for it."

Under international humanitarian law, or the laws of war, applicable to the non-international armed conflicts in Myanmar, warring parties are prohibited from arbitrarily depriving anyone of their liberty, including through abductions and forced recruitment. Parties must treat all civilians humanely; arbitrary deprivation of liberty is incompatible with this requirement.

In September 2019, Myanmar ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which obligates non-state armed forces not to, "under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities persons under the age of 18." The 2019 Myanmar Child Rights Law also forbids recruiting anyone under 18 into the armed forces or non-state armed groups.

In 2023, the United Nations secretary-general's annual report on children in armed conflict identified the Myanmar military as responsible for the majority of the cases the UN had verified as recruiting and using children the previous year. However, the report also named the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army as having recruited up to seven children and separately, abducting up to seven others. The UN special rapporteur on Myanmar, Tom Andrews, has also received various reports that the Myanmar military's recruitment and use of children has increased since the 2021 military coup.

"Governments with any influence over opposition and ethnic armed groups in Myanmar should impress upon them that violations by the Myanmar armed forces never justifies abuses by their own forces," Pearson said.

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## INDIA HOLDS MASS BURIAL FOR VICTIMS OF ETHNIC VIOLENCE

**B**odies of 87 people killed during bitter ethnic violence over the past eight months in India's Manipur state were buried in a mass ceremony on Wednesday last week, a community leader said.

At least 200 people have been killed in the northeastern state since fighting broke out in May be-

tween the predominantly Hindu Meitei majority and the mainly Christian Kuki community.

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.



Protesters call for peace in a rally in Manipur, India, close to the Myanmar border. Photo: AFP

The far-flung state has fractured along ethnic lines, with rival militias setting up blockades to keep out members of the opposing community -- meaning many families were not able to travel to collect the bodies of their relatives.

The remains of the victims had been lying in morgues in the state capital Imphal, considered a mainly Meitei-dominated area.

India's top court last month ordered authorities to cremate or bury the bodies, with the remains of 64 people airlifted from Imphal and handed over to their

families.

"The burial is over of all the 87 bodies," said Ginza Vualzong, a spokesman for the Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF) in Manipur, told AFP.

"It is a day of mixed emotions. It is a sad day, but in a way a sense of relief as we can finally put our martyrs to rest."

Long lines of coffins - many with Christian crosses laid on top - were lowered into separate holes dug into a hillside, while men with rifles fired volleys into the air.

The mass burial was held in the Kuki-dominated area of Churachandpur. It followed a burial of 19 bodies last week in Kangpokpi district.

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".

Earlier this month, at least 13 people were killed in gun battles in Manipur's Tengnoupal district, close to the border with Myanmar.

On Tuesday last week, a long-running on-off internet ban was reimposed and large public gatherings were banned after fresh clashes.

AFP



# ‘REBUILD A FOUNDATION OF HOPE’ FOR GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS: TÜRK

**W**orld leaders gathered in Geneva on Tuesday to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), calling for new guardrails to protect rights amid a surge of conflict and other challenges.

“This is a pivotal day. We are here to rebuild a foundation of hope - hope that we need now, perhaps more than ever, at this sombre moment in history,” Volker Türk, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said, addressing participants which included leaders from Poland, Slovenia, Estonia, Greece Senegal, Colombia and the Maldives, taking to the stage.

Highlighting unprecedented challenges, Mr. Türk emphasized the need for unity and hope in the face of growing disorder, division, geopolitical complexities, deepening inequalities, and fear.

## TRUST IN FREEFALL

“Trust – in each other, and in the institutions that guide us – is in freefall,” he warned, pointing out suffering in conflict zones, including the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Israel, Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar, and other regions where civilians endure the brunt of intractable and brutal conflicts.

He warned again backtracking on the Sustainable Development Agenda, the silencing of voices in the public square, and the urgency of the climate crisis.

“These and other crises are the consequence of the failure to uphold human rights. They are not the failure of human rights; they bear witness to the damage that is done when human rights are ignored and violated,” the High Commissioner asserted.



United Nations. Photo; UN News



Mr. Türk expressed gratitude for the 'transformative promises' made by over 155 states, focusing on human rights issues such as women's rights, children's rights, climate change, and empowerment of people with disabilities. He called on world leaders to shift perspectives to make human rights central to policymaking and action.

## **DUTY TO ADVANCE HUMAN RIGHTS**

"Human rights is a global public good – and as leaders, you are entrusted with the duty of advancing it," Mr. Türk said, outlining four key areas that require immediate attention: peace and security, digital transformation, human rights-infused economies, and placing human rights at the centre of environmental policy.

He called on leaders to come together, 'transcending different societies and systems', to seek areas of agreement and ensure meaningful change. Mr. Türk reminded them of the role their forebears played 75 years ago when they set the foundations for freedom, justice, and peace through the UDHR.

"It is our turn now to take on this profound and visionary task of ensuring that human rights become both the overarching goal and the guardrails," Türk said. "Human rights principles are our best solution to this fraught and frightened world. I entreat you to rekindle the spirit, impulse, and vitality that led to the Universal Declaration 75 years ago."

## **APPLICABLE TO ALL**

Leaders also took part in four roundtable discussions.

"Human rights are universal, universally applicable to every person. They do not need to be proven or additionally granted in any way," Andrzej Duda, President of Poland, whose country has provided assistance to over 950,000 Ukrainians since Russia's full-scale invasion of their country, told the members of the panel addressing the Future of Human Rights and Peace and Security.

Speaking at the same meeting, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the observer State of Palestine Riyad Al-Maliki said: "There are many dark ironies in our discussions today, not the least of which is that I represent the people whose fundamental rights to life, to

dignity and to self-determination among many others have been denied for 75 years".

"When human rights are not universal, this declaration and all the progress we thought we achieved over the decades, become irrelevant and unconvincing," he added, calling for human rights to be defended everywhere, without exception.

## **FOUNDATION FOR PROGRESS**

"Innovation must reflect universal human values. While contributing towards the protection of our planet and the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals" said the President of Slovenia, Nataša Pirc Musar, at the roundtable on the Future of Human Rights and Digital Technologies.

"AI has immense potential for our economies, societies and the planet," she added, encouraging countries to invest more in solving societal problems and shared global challenges when it comes to digital technology.

The session discussed how artificial intelligence, surveillance technology, social media platforms and a host of other new and emerging technologies could be used to ensure that human rights are central to the way tech is developed, used, and governed, including through recent UN initiatives.

A session on Human Rights, Development and the Economy, focused on securing the rights to food, health, education, water and sanitation for millions worldwide.

And as negotiations over the final declaration continued in Dubai at COP28, with environmental campaigners and many States calling for a fossil fuels phase-out, the fourth roundtable discussed the massive impacts that the cumulative crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution is having on the enjoyment of all human rights.

Participants considered ways to advance human rights in the context of the environmental emergency, improving accountability, securing a just transition and protecting environmental rights defenders.

Courtesy of UN News



Photo; Aung Myint

## RAKHINE STATE

### *Junta blockades lead to food shortages in Rakhine State*

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## SIX MEKONG-LANGANG NATIONS UNITE FOR VISIONARY DEVELOPMENT AT FOURTH LEADERS' SUMMIT

Leaders representing the six Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC) countries—Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam—convened for the fourth MLC Leaders' Meeting, endorsing a collective vision for modernization and a shared future community, according to regional and Chinese news outlets.

The virtual gathering resulted in the 'Nay Pyi Taw Declaration,' emphasizing mutual trust, respect, and the harmonization of national development strategies to tackle common challenges together.

The focus pivoted towards accelerating the Lancang-Mekong Economic Development Belt (LMEDB), leveraging cutting-edge scientific and technological advancements, and fortifying economic resurgence. Their objective involves deepening collaboration across various domains, championing sustainable economic growth, and upholding the values of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits.

Furthermore, a five-year action plan spanning 2023 to 2027 emerged, aiming to foster neighborly relations, propel economic and social progress, and fortify the robustness of the LMEDB. Joint initiatives on innovation corridor development were outlined to propel economic advancement and societal well-being through the avenues of science, technology, and innovation (STI).

Additionally, Chinese Premier Li Qiang unveiled China's commitment to offering a special loan to foster the shared development of the Lancang-Mekong countries.

Li underscored four proposals to bolster cooperation, encompassing integrated development, eco-friendly collaboration, security governance reinforcement, and the deepening of people-to-people exchanges.

# MYANMAR'S ECONOMIC WOES TO CONTINUE



Yangon. Photo: Supplied

**D**ue to the accumulating adverse effects of the military coup in 2021, Myanmar remains the only economy in East Asia that has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels of economic activity, according to a report by The Institute for Strategy and Policy – Myanmar (ISP-Myanmar).

The World Bank's Myanmar Economic Monitor, published on 12 December 2023, reported that "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 World Bank report, entitled 'Challenges Amid Conflict' projected that Myanmar's economy would grow just one per cent during the year to March 2024, leaving it the only economy in East Asia that has not returned to pre-pandemic levels of economic activity.

The World Bank warns that the economy will continue to slump over the rest of 2024 and into 2025, given a broad-based slowdown across productive sectors.

The World Bank report also pointed out the rapid rise of consumer prices and depreciation of the country's currency, while the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) 13 December analysis reported that because of the de facto devaluation in Myanmar's exchange rate regime, there will be significant pressure on the official exchange rate and the parallel market rate.

The EIU reported that Myanmar kyat market rate has fallen by more than 60 per cent since the 2021 coup. Moreover, the World Bank reported pressure against production in Myanmar due to "conflict, high logistics costs, trade and foreign exchange restrictions,

and electricity disruptions," which have raised the cost of doing business.

Indicators of business activity have worsened since mid-2023, reported the Myanmar Economic Monitor, as firms reported operating at just 56 per cent of their capacity in September, down 16 percentage points from March.

The World Bank reported, based on the International Food Policy Research Institute's (IFPRI) survey conducted in mid-2023, that measures of food insecurity have also worsened, with 40 per cent of households reportedly earning less than in the previous year.

The World Bank's Country Director for Myanmar, Cambodia, and the Lao PDR advised that "the economic situation has deteriorated, and uncertainty about the future is increasing... and high food price inflation has had a particularly severe impact on the poor."

According to ISP-Myanmar's socio-economic study conducted to understand the post-coup situation of Myanmar's society, the rising commodity prices are one of the most prevalent problems people encounter in their daily lives.

Along with these economic hardships, frequent electricity blackouts and losses of job opportunities are increasing the burden on them.

According to ISP-Myanmar's data, since the armed conflict has intensified and broadened, it is imposing more pressure on logistic flows, and leading to severe impacts on economic activities. For instance, 'Operation 1027,' launched by the Three Brotherhoods Alliance (3BHA) on 27 October, has effectively choked border trade with China.

Since the beginning of the operation, almost 91 per cent of China-Myanmar border trade has been clogged, and within more than a month (from 27 October to 15 December), Myanmar lost USD 445.5 million worth of trade.

Myanmar traders are struggling to export their products to China, directing their exports through the Kengtong–Mongla road of Eastern Shan State via the Talone checkpoint; they are encountering higher transaction costs and many of their soft commodities are being damaged.

Though the State Administrative Council (SAC) suggested that the traders move their goods through sea routes, this takes time and is not suitable for agricultural products. The expenses incurred for sea-route trading are almost threefold that of border trade.

# CHINA HALTS EXPORT OF SOME RARE EARTH PROCESSING TECHNOLOGIES



Photo: Wavie

China said on Thursday last week that it would halt the export of a range of rare earth metal processing technologies, potentially hindering other countries in a crucial sector dominated by Beijing.

Rare earths are strategic metals that are essential in the manufacture of smartphone chips, LCD screens, military equipment and offshore wind turbines, among many other uses.

China is the heavyweight in the sector, currently controlling around three-quarters of rare earth production.

It will now ban the export of “rare earth extraction, processing and smelting technologies”, according to a lengthy document published on Thursday by Beijing’s commerce ministry.

Contrary to what their name suggests, this group of 17 metals essential to cutting-edge technolo-

gies are relatively abundant.

It is their particularly sought-after electromagnetic properties that make them “strategic metals”.

The United States, European Union and other countries are increasingly treating the supply of these metals as a matter of national security, especially as the global energy transition is fuelling fears of potential shortages.

In addition to the permanent magnets used in wind turbines and electric cars, some rare metals are used in television screens, drones and hard drives.

China sources some of its rare earths from northern Myanmar.

AFP

# WORLD BANK RELEASES \$250 MILLION TO BOOST SRI LANKA REFORMS



Photo: Eddy Billard

**T**he World Bank said Wednesday last week it had released \$250 million to support bankrupt Sri Lanka's tough economic reforms following last year's financial crisis.

Sri Lanka defaulted on its \$46 billion external debt in April 2022 after running out of foreign exchange to finance essential imports of food, fuel and medicines, with civil unrest ousting then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

His successor has been pressing tough austerity measures to help restore essential supplies.

The World Bank said it had released the second and final tranche of a total \$500 million package "considering the continued satisfactory progress made by the government with the reform program".

Sri Lanka has doubled taxes, removed subsidies on fuel and electricity and introduced anti-graft legislation in line with a \$2.9 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund.

The IMF released the second tranche of \$337 million of its four-year bailout last week, after the country secured a debt restructuring deal with its main bilateral lender China.

The economy grew in the September quarter, marking the first expansion since the foreign exchange crisis.

The Central Bank of Sri Lanka said the economy had grown by a modest 1.6 percent in the quarter ending September, up from a contraction of 11.5 percent a year earlier.

Despite the positive data, overall figures from the first nine months of the year showed a contraction of 4.9 percent.

The IMF has forecast Sri Lanka's full-year GDP growth in 2023 at negative 3.6 percent.

AFP

**Penrose Thitsa**

## **JUNTA IMPOSES STRICTER TIMELINES FOR EXPORT EARNINGS, MANDATES FOREIGN CURRENCY DEPOSITS**

**A**n announcement surfaced in the junta-controlled newspaper on December 26, dictating that export earnings must now be swiftly deposited in foreign currency into the exporter's bank account, adhering to a significantly shorter timeline than before.

This method of depositing foreign currency is aimed at directing foreign currencies into the junta-controlled banking system.

"The period for repatriation of export earnings received from the exports to Asian countries is changed to 30 days instead of 45 days, and 60 days is changed to 90 days for depositing export earnings received from the exports to countries outside Asia," said the announcement.

Not complying with this rule will result in repercussions under the Foreign Exchange Management Law.

The junta is taking steps such as blacklisting non-compliant companies and temporarily suspending their trade licenses, according to business sources.

Exporters have encountered limitations on freely using foreign currency earned from exports, being required to convert a portion of their foreign currency earnings into kyat at a forced fixed rate mandated by the junta, which is remarkably lower than the prevailing market dollar price.

CULTURE & LIFESTYLE

# IN FOCUS







## AFTERNOON CALM

Looking out over Bagan plain and the array of Buddhist temples and stupas.

Photo: Sebastien Goldberg

# PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE FINDS FREEDOM IN BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS

With Australian economist Sean Turnell releasing his book on his incarceration in Myanmar's Insein Prison, it reminds us of another former inmate who spent time in this prison and also put pen to paper.

From childhood, Ma Thida dreamed of helping others - caring for the sick, sharing information despite censorship, and standing up for people's rights. To stand against the oppression that had been stifling Myanmar's progress for decades, she joined Aung San Suu Kyi and the many other activists in the National League for Democracy, campaigning steadfastly despite intimidation, harassment, and worse. Because of her efforts, the regime sent her to Insein Prison, where she faced serious illness and bleak conditions.

However, it was in fighting the obstacles of

her imprisonment and following the Buddha's teachings that Ma Thida found what it means to be truly free. In her memoir, *Prisoner of Conscience*, readers join Ma Thida on her path through captivity and witness one remarkable woman's courageous quest for truth and dignity.

Ma Thida talks of her struggles in this Insight Myanmar podcast: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2022/5/2/episode-102-a-voice-of-conscience>

Ma Thida has lived through previous cycles of revolution and repression in Myanmar similar to the one we are all witnessing now.

A self-professed bookworm who grew up listening to the BBC, she developed a keen interest in



Ma Thida



Photo: Htun Teza

the stories of resistance fighters and philanthropists, and while attending medical school tried her own hand in writing fiction as well. Then in 1988, the military violently suppressed peaceful protesters at the nearby Rangoon Institute of Technology. “All the medical students were shocked to see how a government can kill students easily,” she recalls, noting that some soldiers even fired random shots at patients in Rangoon Hospital. So she joined a group of students and attended a subsequent demonstration, and also began to help make sure the news of what was really happening got out.

As the protests heated up, networks among the democracy activists grew tighter, and Ma Thida soon found herself volunteering at local NLD offices that had formed in the wake of the unrest. They had so few resources they couldn’t even furnish the office, and the work was unending and unpaid. At the same time, Ma Thida realized the historical significance of what was transpiring in the country, and began to take detailed journal entries, recording the daily events, speeches, meetings, and work. She also kept abreast of the dramatic changes happening internationally with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and she hoped that the Burmese people would also be able to rejoice in the same kind of freedom before too long.

But it was not to be. Fellow democracy activists were infuriated when the results of the 1990 elections weren’t honored by the military, and in 1993 Ma Thida began to lobby against the National Convention, an event hosted by the military ostensibly to draft a

new Constitution, but was really just a façade to further delay any real democracy. Ma Thida was arrested for merely reading and then passing along a document prepared by the National Coalition Government, an exile group based in Maryland that was formed by a group of Burmese leaders. She was given 20 years for this “offense,” the severity of which Ma Thida believes belies the military’s real concern, that somehow she would be able to convince ethnic leaders to turn against the convention.

Adjustment to prison life was not easy. She found the prison culture and both jailers and prisoners “rough” and “hard.” However, she came to understand and even befriend them over time, and developed her closest relationship with a fellow prisoner, an activist who was accused of beheading a hired thug who had poisoned the water at a Children’s Hospital.

She first found relief from her situation in the form of smuggled books, which she could only read secretly under a blanket. “So the whole night I was just sitting in a squatting position and reading,” she recalls. “It gave me so much strength, because my hunger is not just for having food to survive, but also for intellectual understanding. Without that I don’t think I can survive. That’s why the books are really like a tonic to me.”

Catch her full story in the Insight Myanmar podcast here: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2022/5/2/episode-102-a-voice-of-conscience>



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