

— Let's not forget Burma's jailed democracy icon —

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LET'S NOT FORGET BURMA'S JAILED DEMOCRACY ICON

Burma's brutal generals are hoping that keeping their country's "democracy icon" locked up out of sight will keep her out of mind.

As the third year of her latest incarceration approaches, the world needs to remember Aung San Suu Kyi and lobby for her release, given her name has slipped out of the news headlines, her fate largely forgotten on the international stage.

At the ripe old age of 78, The Lady faces 27 years in prison on trumped up charges, effectively a death sentence as worries swirl around her health. Her imprisonment ought to be a daily reminder that Burma remains in crisis due to the actions of the illegal military junta that tore the country out of her hands on 1 February 2021, following the overwhelming victory of her National League for Democracy (NLD) party in the November 2020 elections.

Why are Burma's generals so frightened of this increasingly frail old lady?

Aung San Suu Kyi carries the burden of her father, the late General Aung San, who sought to wrest Burma from British colonial rule and provide independence until he was cut down in a hail of bullets in 1947 on the cusp of witnessing his dream. As fate would have it, his daughter would go on to marry a British academic and live in Britain, as Burma slipped under the pall of military rule.

In 1988, Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Burma to tend to her ailing mother, at a juncture in which the long-time military leader of Burma and head of the ruling party, General Ne Win, stepped down, and the generals began to toy with the idea of a democratic fig leaf on their rule.

Aung San Suu Kyi entered politics to work for democratization, and helped found the NLD on 27 September 1988, only to be put under house arrest on 20 July 1989. Her party won the 1990 elections, only to find the results trashed by the Burma military. As Burma's democracy icon spent her days isolated in her Yangon house by the lake, her stature grew, being compared to Gandhi and Mandela and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. In the meantime, the generals were

scheming behind closed doors, working towards their vision of "disciplined democracy" under the military-written 2008 Constitution, seeking to open up the country.

As Aung San Suu Kyi told a foreign audience following her release from house arrest in 2010 and her first steps along the democratic path, her task of freeing the country from decades of military rule was a tough nut to crack.

"What we are trying to do in Burma is not simply to set up a democratic political system but to establish the foundation of a truly democratic culture. It is not easy after half a century of dictatorship to establish such a foundation," she told an audience in Europe, as she worked to reinvigorate the NLD as the Burma generals cautiously opened up the country to a more democratic system.

In retrospect, Aung San Suu Kyi may have been too trusting and too conciliatory. Her "crime" probably was to choose the path of non-violence and attempt "national reconciliation" with the Burmese military, which has shown its contempt for Burma's population and minorities over the decades. She even stood up for the military in an international court following allegations of genocide against the Muslim Rohingya due to the military's 2017 pogrom in Rakhine State.

Today, Aung San Suu Kyi's voice is silent. What should now be starkly clear is Burma's generals were never serious about democracy. And their coup and imprisoning of the country's democracy icon only serves to demonstrate contempt for the people's choice.

Aung San Suu Kyi has spent nearly half her life walking a tightrope to fulfill the wishes of the Burmese people. And as she endures the boredom of solitary confinement in a Naypyidaw jail, it should now be painfully obvious to her that there is no future for the Burmese military's vision of democracy. As she has noted: "Just because you change out of military clothes (to enter the political process) does not mean your mindset changes automatically".

As the third anniversary of her imprisonment approaches, the world needs to increase its call for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi.

EDITORIAL

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WEEKLY

Editor In-Chief and Managing Director
Soe Myint

Contributors

Sai Wansai,
Andrew Landen, Marc Jacob

MIZZIMA MAGAZINE

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Contact: Mizzima Media Group
Email: sm@mizzima.com
Phone: +95-9421010100

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IN FOCUS





ANGER OVER ROHINGYA ARRIVAL

Indonesian students, many wearing jackets with different universities' insignias, entered a government function hall in the capital Banda Aceh last week where 137 Rohingya refugees were staying. The students demanded they be moved to a local immigration office so they could be deported.

Photo: AFP

ILLEGAL LOGGERS CAUGHT IN MIN SON TAUNG WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

The Natogyi Township People's Defense Force (PDF) caught loggers illegally felling trees and trying to remove the timber from Min Son Taung Wildlife Sanctuary, in Mandalay Region's Natogyi Township.

The loggers were arrested by Natogyi Township PDF at about 4:30 p.m. on 25 December. They also dismantled a locally made tractor that was being used to transport the wood. According to the PDF, the loggers were working with junta troops inside Min Son Taung Wildlife Sanctuary.

"A group of four men was apprehended for stealing wood using a locally-made tractor. After a thorough inspection, on the same day, they were released with a stern warning against engaging in such activities in the future", said a member of the Natogyi Township PDF.

According to Natogyi Township PDF, even though it has repeatedly warned the public not to illegally fell trees in Min Son Taung Wildlife Sanctuary, certain people are still ignoring the warnings and collaborating with the junta to illegally remove timber from the sanctuary.

A resident of Natogyi Township said: "Often, the smugglers are not locals but people from Taungtha Township in Mandalay. Despite previous attempts to intervene and halt their activities, the smuggling continues. The smugglers claim to have paid the army for permission to extract wood from the Min Son Taung Wildlife Sanctuary, and they continue their illicit activities day and night. Now, the PDF has caught them and warned them."

According to reports, the loggers made pay-

ments to the junta army unit stationed at the general administration office near the Min Son Taung Wildlife Sanctuary, in Natogyi Township.

Apparently, the loggers paid the army 300,000 kyats (approximately \$100 USD) to be allowed to use the locally-made tractor to remove the timber and 500,000 kyats (about \$170 USD) to be allowed to use a six-wheel truck to remove timber. They also, allegedly, have to pay fees ranging from 50,000 to 100,000 kyats for access to sawmills and cutting equipment.

According to locals, on the morning of 27 December, after the arrest of the loggers on 25 December, there were no loggers removing timber from the sanctuary.

A local said: "If the People's Defense Forces (PDF) were not present in the Min Son Taung Wildlife Sanctuary, the wood smugglers would continue their activities day and night. However, with the PDF's there, their illicit activities have noticeably declined."

The Min Son Taung Wildlife Sanctuary covers an area of 5,575 acres. It is characterised by dry forests and serves as a habitat for over 70 species of birds and amphibians, along with more than 50 species of butterflies. The sanctuary is also a critical refuge for the almost extinct Burmese star turtle.

Originally designated as a nature conservation area in 1998, it was formally established as the Min Son Taung Wildlife Sanctuary in 2001. The primary objectives behind this designation were to enhance tourism opportunities and to safeguard the unique ecosystem of the dry forest within the sanctuary.

JUNTA ARTILLERY KILLS WOMAN IN MATARA TOWNSHIP, MANDALAY REGION

A woman was killed by junta artillery fire in Thanatkone Village in Mandalay Region's Matara Township at around 1:00 p.m. on 24 December.

The woman, named as 35-year-old Yee Myint, was killed by artillery fired by junta soldiers based in Kywe Chan Kone Village in Matara Township.

An official from the Matara Township People's Defense Force (PDF) said: "Though the junta was not fighting with resistance forces in the area they fired into it causing the unfortunate death of Yee Myint and the loss of two cattle. A residence in Thanatkone village in

Matara Township sustained damage, and three bean mills were destroyed by the ensuing fire."

Junta troops have been based in Kywe Chan Kone Village for approximately the last six weeks. They frequently fire on people passing through the area and carry out arson attacks, according to locals.

Due to the junta's frequent use of artillery in Matara Township, Matara PDF has advised residents of the township to dig bomb shelters to protect themselves.

SEVEN BODIES OF MISSING VILLAGERS FOUND IN NYAUNG LAE PIN VILLAGE, BAGO REGION

Seven missing villagers were found burnt to death with their hands tied behind their backs, near Nyaung Lae Pin Village in Nattalin Township, Bago Region, on the evening of 25 December.

An official from the Nattalin People's Defense Force (PDF) said that junta soldiers allegedly tied the victims' hands behind their backs before setting fire to them.

According to local reports, junta soldiers, currently based in Kwin Kyal Village in Nattalin Township, have been patrolling in Nattalin Township since 19 December. They have been committing arson and destroying houses and people's property.

As of 26 December approximately 20 villagers had been reported as missing in the area, according to Yay Chan, an official of Nattalin PDF.

He added that the seven dead villagers, whose bodies were found on a farm close to Nyaung Lae Pin Village, were amongst the 20 villagers reported as missing.

Yay Chan said: "Some villagers are unaware that their relatives are dead, whilst others only know that their family members have been arrested by the junta. Out of respect for the victims' families, we have refrained from providing specific details about the dead.

The whereabouts of the other 13 missing peo-

ple are currently unknown, but defence forces are searching for them.

An official from Western Bago PDF said: "If the junta was truly brave they would confront us directly in a fair fight. There's no need to burn and kill unarmed civilians. The junta soldiers are cowards."

At the time of reporting the junta had not released any statements about the villagers being burned to death or killed.

On previous days the junta troops had raided other villages in Nattalin Township. On 19 December they raided the villages of Yitkwin and Thayetchaung, on 21 December they raided Thaphan Chaung Village, on 23 December they raided Nyaung Lae Pin Village.

On 24 December the same soldiers escalated their actions when they went to Kyaykyi Village, also in Nattalin Township, and set fire to internally displaced people's (IDP's) shelters and rice storage barns.

During all these raids the junta army also abducted villagers, according to reports.

To make matters worse, according to local resistance forces junta troops in the area are sometimes hard to identify and target because they are wearing civilian clothes rather than their military uniforms.

As of 26 December, the junta troops were still stationed in Kwin Kyal Village.

TWO PYU SAW HTEE MEMBERS AND THEIR FAMILIES SURRENDER IN SAGAING

Two members of the junta-aligned Pyu Saw Htee militia, based in Theelone Village in Sagaing Region's Shwebo Township, surrendered to defence forces, along with their weapons and family members.

They surrendered to the Burma National Revolutionary Army (BNRA) on 23 December. According to a BRNA statement two Pyu Saw Htee members, a 17-year-old and a 20-year-old surrendered and also brought along 14 family members with them.

One said: "We fled with our family members due to coercion, violent abuse, and the Military Council

soldiers' forceful armed attacks. We are pleased that the BNRA has welcomed us and provided a place for us."

The surrendering men also brought with them, a G-3 gun, 150 rounds of ammunition, two additional boxes of magazines, one carbine, 82 rounds of ammunition, and another box of ammunition, according to the BRNA.

The two deserters were also given 10 million kyats each.



Myanmar protestors rally in Bangkok. Photo: AFP



2024

Keeping Myanmar in the spotlight



There is little doubt that 2024 will be another challenging year for Myanmar's resistance players and democracy activists seeking to highlight what is happening in the inaptly named "Golden Land". In particular, the National Unity Government (NUG), speaking for the Myanmar people, will have their work cut out trying to make sure the international community, and the world's media, pay attention to the crisis continuing to unfold at home.

WORLD ATTENTION

Keeping Myanmar in the spotlight will be tough in large part due to the other pressing crises that dominate mainstream media headlines internationally. Right now, world attention is focused on the Israel-Gaza conflict, the Russia-Ukraine war, the illegal migrant crisis at the southern USA border, major migration issues, dire economic trends, and the climate change issue. Fears have been voiced about a major economic crisis in the USA and Europe, as well as the potential threat of a major cyberattack, posing a danger to internet and power. In addition, 2024 is an election year in the USA and UK, and local politics will dominate the news cycle in those countries.

LAST CHANCE

Myanmar needs attention and it would not be an exaggeration to say the country's soul is at stake as the Myanmar resistance doubles down to get rid of military rule, once and for all.

The conflict sparked by the 2021 military coup is viewed by most players as a "last chance" to get rid of military autocratic rule that has dogged the country since General Ne Win's 1962 military coup, enslaving the people and holding back potential progress and development. A range of players have pitched in with the goal of getting rid of the brutal military junta and bringing in a democratically elected government under a federal system. These include the National Unity Government (NUG), People's Defence Forces (PDF), and Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (ERO), and a host of non-governmental organizations and activist groups.

DAMAGING ASEAN

In addition, the ongoing Myanmar crisis is muddying the Association of South East Asian Nations' regional and international standing, and posing problems in how the regional nations handle the trouble in



TNLA fighters in northern Shan State during Operation 1027. Photo: AFP

their midst. ASEAN typically displays reluctance to interfere in the internal affairs of forum member states, and has demonstrated problems in getting to grips with the Myanmar crisis as seen in the failure of the 5 Consensus Points, agreed in the wake of the coup in 2021. Laos takes over the ASEAN chair for 2024 and it is unclear whether they will do better than their predecessors and make any progress with the issue in the ASEAN forum.

MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH

Keeping Myanmar in the spotlight will need a multi-pronged approach, a combination of political, media, and NGO actions, built on the bedrock of the military actions of the Spring Revolutionary forces. Clearly, the NUG will need to lead the charge, building on its painstaking work of outreach diplomatically around the world. To name names, NUG Foreign Minister Zin Mar Aung has been in the forefront of a drive to put a spotlight on the Myanmar crisis in diplomatic circles, traveling to the USA, Europe and Asia and helping open NUG offices abroad.

The opening of a NUG liaison office in Washington, D.C. in February 2023 was made possible re-

sulting from the passage of the Burma Act, as part of last year's National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The Burma Act broadened the US government's authority to impose sanctions against the military government that seized power in February 2021 and extend a range of non-military aid to the various groups resisting the junta. Passage of the Burma Act was a "win" for the NUG and the Washington office will play an important role in the NUG's struggle against the military junta.

OPENING OFFICES

Zin Mar Aung, speaking to media at the office opening in February, said the presence of US government officials "signaled the state of official engagement" between the US government and the NUG. Similarly, NUG outreach in Europe and in Japan signals a willingness by foreign governments to take the NUG seriously, even though some Myanmar analysts complain that the NUG suffers from a lack of a charismatic figurehead. This lack of a face is tricky. Former civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi is incommunicado in jail, Duwa Lashi La is acting NUG president but reluctant to hog the limelight, and Zin Mar Aung as NUG foreign minister is the "mover-and-shaker" when it comes to diplomatic affairs.

As commentator Sebastian Strangio has pointed out, despite most Western nations roundly condemning the coup, few have extended the NUG the recognition that it requires. The main reason is that it would most likely force them to close their embassies in Yangon, cutting them off from any diplomatic representation within the core of the country. It might also court tensions with neighbouring countries, such as China and Thailand, that have taken a relatively accommodating position toward the coup government, and commit them to a level of support to the NUG that they are unable or unwilling to take.

RIDING THE WAVE

That said, 2024 may see the NUG riding the wave of resistance successes as Operation 1027 continues in the north and further inspires PDFs and EROs to step up their actions against the military junta.

Keeping Myanmar in the spotlight will need a combination of diplomatic and resistance efforts to make sure governments, the United Nations, humanitarian organizations, and the media give the country its due attention.

Myanmar matters. But, as we head into the new year, it will be crucial for all the main resistance players to step up their game as they battle for Myanmar's soul.

Sources: Mizzima. AFP, The Diplomat



WHY HAS MYANMAR'S DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT BEEN IGNORED?

INSIGHT MYANMAR PODCAST

In a recent online panel discussion, Insight Myanmar raised an important question as to why Myanmar's democracy movement has been ignored.

As we know, on 1 February 2021 the Myanmar military illegally overthrew the democratically elected government and attempted to extend its authoritarian rule throughout the country. Although few outside observers gave the Burmese people much chance, an organized resistance soon developed in the form of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), the National Unity Government (NUG), and the People's Defense Force (PDF), fueled by the commitment of ordinary Burmese of all ethnicities and backgrounds who have

been willing to risk their lives against a professional, Russia-backed military.

It has now been over two years since the military's attempted coup. However, they are not any closer to controlling, much less governing, the country than they were on that ill-fated day in 2021. And yet, while the people's movement has achieved what so many had dismissed as impossible, they have done it with almost no support from the outside. Considering the horrific situation in Myanmar—the overthrow of a democratically elected government, military's terrible brutality and human rights abuses, and the continued valiant resistance of the Burmese people against all



PODCAST #208

"Why Has Myanmar's Democracy Movement Been Ignored?"

Five guests come together to discuss why there hasn't been greater engagement from the international community in supporting the resistance.

PANEL DISCUSSION

odds--this lack of attention is actually rather startling.

It's not just international organizations and governments that have turned their backs on Myanmar's plight, but to a large extent, the media as well. There was some initial coverage of the coup and the massive, peaceful protests that took shape immediately following. After that, however, only sporadic stories have appeared that usually just highlight the worst atrocities, such as when airstrikes are ordered on a school or when innocent civilians are burned alive (on Christmas Eve, no less!). Indeed, unless one goes out of one's way to hunt down information about the situation in Myanmar on-line, one would have little idea about the latest developments in the country.

While evidence of this neglect can be found throughout the media and advocacy landscape, it was nowhere more apparent than in the Crisis Group's recent essay, "10 Conflicts to Watch in 2023." Want to guess what number Myanmar ranked?

IT DIDN'T EVEN MAKE THE LIST!

This very frustrating situation was the focus of Better Burma's third panel, entitled "Why Has Myanmar's Struggle for Democracy Been Ignored?" Specifically, the panel addressed these questions: Why has the democratic movement in Myanmar been left to fend for itself? Why has this issue not risen to a global consciousness and concern, and not engaged any real sector to take on as an issue? Why have news media outlets, international organizations, neighboring countries, Western governments, and large aid organizations consistently declined to provide the support and attention necessary to an unfolding humanitarian disaster?

The panel was comprised of following five guests:

- Michael Haack, Campaign Manager for Campaign for a New Myanmar, and member of the U.S. Advocacy Coalition; Michael has been closely involved in a number of important, Myanmar-related issues, as both a researcher and lobbyist.

- Philipp Annawitt, a governance specialist, political analyst and experienced project management professional who has been advising development partners in their engagement with the NUG and CRPH; Philipp has researched the concept and definition of "legitimacy" from a historical perspective, and argues that the NUG meets its basic criteria.

- Nandar Min Swe, a Los Angeles-based doctor who became one of the main fundraisers for humanitarian aid; Nandar has also led various NUG fundraising projects.

- Igor Blažević, a senior adviser at the Prague Civil Society Centre; between 2011 and 2016 he worked in Myanmar as the head lecturer of the Educational Initiatives Program, and following the coup, became a fulltime advisor for the Spring Revolution.

- Thiri, a researcher, fixer and documentary producer based in Myanmar; Thiri has worked as a freelance consultant for international human rights organizations and media outlets, and reports, documents and advocates about the on-going conflict in Myanmar as well as political, social and economic issues.

Check out the Insight Myanmar panel discussion here: <https://player.captivate.fm/episode/26f87499-e4bc-4066-b1eb-0a99051c3fd0>

ETHNIC ARMIES' OPERATION 1027 PUT MYANMAR JUNTA ON DEFENSIVE IN 2023



A local resistance fighter at a temple in northern Shan state. Photo: AFP

Resistance forces are now turning their attention to setting up civil administrations in towns they control
Tin Aung Khaing and Kyaw Lwin Oo for RFA Burmese

Myanmar's ethnic armed organizations and other resistance groups made significant gains against the country's military dictatorship in 2023.

"Operation 1027," launched by the Three Brotherhood Alliance in northern Shan state in October, was a surprising success. Along with the efforts of local People's Defense Forces, or PDFs, and ethnic armed groups in Kayah, Kayin, Chin and Kachin states, anti-junta forces put the ruling military junta on the defensive.

The junta lost hundreds of outposts as rebel forces captured towns and several key border crossings in November and December, suggesting the tide could be turning in the country's civil war that erupted after the military overthrew a democratically elected government in a February 2021 coup d'etat

"The military council suffered great losses in 2023, while the people's revolution has stepped forward gradually," said Kyaw Zaw, spokesman for the shadow National Unity Government, or NUG. "It is the victory of the people."

The number of junta troops surrendering to resistance forces increased after Operation 1027 be-

gan.

On Oct. 30, more than 40 members of Light Infantry Battalion 143 in Kunlong township, northern Shan state, surrendered to the Three Brotherhood Alliance, which includes the Arakan Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army.

A day later, the military junta's 15 local militia members laid down their weapons and turned over their arms and ammunition. Reports of junta units submitting to resistance forces have continued over the last two months.

"Many have contacted us to surrender," said Maung Maung Swe, spokesman for the NUG's Ministry of Defense. "If we can have more collaborative fights, the military council will soon topple."

Junta troops have lost motivation and confidence in their fighting ability because of Operation 1027, political observer Than Soe Naing said.

"They have realized they should not sacrifice their lives for corrupt senior military officials," he said. "They will surrender if they are defeated, and will flee from the military if they have an opportunity. It's be-

come a common idea among soldiers.”

RFA was unable to reach junta spokesman Maj. Gen. Zaw Min Tun for comment about junta forces surrendering.

LOCAL ADMINISTRATIONS

Ethnic armies and officials from the NUG, which is mostly made up of former civilian government leaders, have been setting up interim administrative bodies in areas they control.

In other areas of the country, resistance leaders have started to think about what Myanmar would look like if the junta was defeated.

In Sagaing region, a hotbed of resistance to military rule that saw a resurgence of anti-junta protests in 2023, more than 170 resistance forces held a forum on May 30-31 to discuss the armed revolt and local administration.

“The forum was held to continue the revolution collaboratively as it has been for more than two years,” Sagaing Forum spokesman Chaw Su San said. “It also aims to forge more cooperation among anti-military dictatorship forces in Sagaing region.”

On Nov. 17, democratically elected representatives from Sagaing, Tanintharyi and Magway regions convened regional parliaments and approved a preparatory bill for an interim constitution, supported by the dissolved National League for Democracy.

But revolutionary groups objected to the measure, saying they wanted to ensure equal rights for negotiation, participation and collective leadership by all resistance groups, said Soe Win Swe, another Sagaing Forum spokesman.

“We concluded that the recent approval was intended just for the interest of a single organization, so we objected to it,” he said. “The Sagaing Forum firmly stands on collective leadership.”

DRAFT CONSTITUTIONS

In western Myanmar, armed ethnic Chin groups have also gone on the offensive since October.

“Our resistance forces could capture only four or five military outposts in the past two and half years,” said Salai Timmy, the secretary of the Chinland Joint Defense Committee.

“However, after launching Operation 1027, we controlled about nine outposts,” he said. “Meanwhile, the military troops abandoned about 12 camps.”

The Chin National Front, an ethnic Chin political organization whose armed wing has battled junta

forces, along with local administration organizations, established Chinland — Chin state’s new name — following the approval of a new constitution on Dec. 6.

The Chinland Council, the new governing body, will form a legislature, an administration and a judiciary branch within 60 days, said Salai Htet Ni, first joint secretary of the council.

In eastern Myanmar, ethnic Karenni forces launched Operation 11.11 — their own version of Operation 1027 — in November, seizing at least nine military outposts in Kayah state, said Khun Bedu, chairman of the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force.

“The junta soldiers abandoned their camps,” he said. “We are moving on to capture more outposts.”

Resistance forces in Kayah state set up an Interim Executive Council, or IEC, on June 12, putting in place local administrations at village, village-tract and township levels, IEC General Secretary Khu Plue Reh said.

NUG is working with the IEC without intervening in administrative procedures, he said.

“We also work together to provide public services especially in education, health care and humanitarian assistance,” he said.

With its own public support, the establishment of the IEC could be an initial step toward the establishment of a federal union in Myanmar — a long-running goal of ethnic political organizations and their respective ethnic armies.

In adjacent Kayah state, the Karen National Union, or KNU, battled junta troops, while providing training to local PDFs.

The KNU’s Karen National Liberation Army and PDF forces took control of Mon township in early December — the first town captured in Bago region. Resistance forces controlled four other military outposts near the township after three military officers and 19 soldiers surrendered during the battles, according to a KNU news release on Dec. 6.

Ethnic Karen resistance groups announced that they would form a federal unit this year and would prepare a draft constitution, KNU spokesman Padho Saw Taw Nee said.

Translated by Aung Naing for RFA Burmese.

Edited by Roseanne Gerin and Matt Reed.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia

DAWEI WATCH REPORTERS TO BE CHARGED UNDER ANTI-TERRORISM LAWS



● Aung San Oo, left, and Myo Myint Oo, right.

Two arrested reporters from Dawei Watch, Aung San Oo and Myo Myint Oo, are going to be charged under counter-terrorism laws, according to their families

The two reporters were taken by the army from their homes in Myeik on the evening of 11 December. After spending four days in an interrogation center, they were taken to the Central Police Station in Myeik Town and later transferred to Myeik Prison on 20 December.

One of Aung San Oo's family members said: "The family only had a chance to meet him on 22 December, after the two of them were sent to the prison. We learned that they are going to be charged under the Counter-terrorism Act, specifically under sections 50 (J), 52 (A), and 52 (B)."

Despite being subjected to beatings during interrogation, family members reported that both reporters appeared to be in good health when they met with them.

One of Aung San Oo's family members said:

"We still don't know anything about the case as both of them were sent from police custody to jail. The police told us that their first hearing is scheduled for 29 December.

Aung San Oo will be charged under sections 52 (A) and (B), while Myo Myint Oo will be charged under sections 50 (J), 52 (A), and (B), of the Counter-terrorism Act, according to their families.

The men have been charged with terrorism offences, despite the soldiers who arrested the men telling their families that they were being arrested because of news reports they had written.

The Dawei Watch Editor-in-Chief said he hopes that the two reporters will soon be released. He also emphasised that Dawei Watch, has an official licence to produce news, adheres to high journalistic standards and is not involved in any criminal activities.

Since the February 2021 coup, the junta has arrested journalists from a variety of news agencies, including Mizzima, DVB and Dawei Watch.

JUNTA ARTILLERY SHELLS HIT MRAUK-U ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES



Mrauk-U. Photo: AFP

Junta troops damaged the Mrauk-U Archaeological Museum and ancient stone pillars when they fired artillery into archaeological sites in Mrauk-U City in Rakhine State, on 25 December.

Mrauk-U Archaeological Museum was hit by an artillery round fired by junta battalions 540 and 377 based in Mrauk-U at around 6:00 a.m. on 25 December.

The city is famous for its many ancient pagodas and its museum, which contains stone inscriptions, ancient stone pillars, statues, and artifacts from the area.

In December 2021 the Mrauk-U Department of Archaeology and the National Museum Conservation Committee submitted a final proposal to UNESCO to have Mrauk-U listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

According to residents of Mrauk-U damage from junta artillery fire poses a major threat to the rich cultural and historical heritage of the region.

Previously, on 23 December, about 70 soldiers from junta Battalion 377 of the Military Council entered Mrauk-U's Aung Mingalar Ward and Vandula Ward and arrested nine people.

Over 2,000 people from villages around Mrauk-U have fled fighting between the Arakan Army (AA) and the junta and are seeking shelter in monasteries, according to residents.

INDONESIAN STUDENTS FORCE ROHINGYA REFUGEES FROM TEMPORARY SHELTER



Indonesian students rally outside shelter housing Rohingya refugees. Photo: AFP

Hundreds of university students in Indonesia's westernmost province stormed a temporary shelter for more than a hundred Rohingya refugees on Wednesday last week, forcing them to leave in the latest rejection of the persecuted Myanmar minority.

More than 1,500 Rohingya refugees have arrived on the shores of Aceh province since mid-November in what the United Nations says is the biggest influx for eight years. Some of their boats have faced rejection by locals and in some cases have been returned to sea.

The students, many wearing jackets with different universities' insignias, entered a government function hall in the capital Banda Aceh where 137 Rohingya refugees were staying.

The students demanded they be moved to a local immigration office so they could be deported, according to footage seen by AFP.

It showed students chanting "kick them out" and "reject Rohingyas in Aceh". The students were also seen kicking the Rohingyas' belongings.

Some women and children were in tears while men who had been praying looked to the ground.

The protesters were also involved in a scuffle with police who were guarding the frightened refugees but officers ultimately permitted their removal by the students, according to an AFP journalist at the scene.

The students burned tyres and prepared trucks for the Rohingyas to be moved. Police helped them board before they were taken to another government office nearby, the AFP journalist observed.

Banda Aceh police did not respond to an AFP request for comment.

The UN refugee agency said the incident left refugees shocked and traumatised.

"UNHCR remains deeply worried about the safety of refugees and calls on local law enforcement authorities for urgent action to ensure protection of all desperate individuals and humanitarian staff," it said in a statement.

"The attack on refugees is not an isolated act but the result of a coordinated online campaign of misinformation, disinformation and hate speech against refugees."

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

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

"We protested because we don't agree with the Rohingyas who keep coming here," Kholilullah, a 23-year-old university student who goes by one name, told AFP.

Indonesia is not a signatory to the UN refugee convention and says it cannot be compelled to take in refugees from Myanmar, calling instead on neighbouring countries to share the burden and resettle Rohingyas who arrive on its shores.

AFP

UNHCR DISTURBED OVER MOB ATTACK AND FORCED EVICTION OF REFUGEES IN ACEH, INDONESIA



The UN Refugee Agency or UNHCR, says it was deeply disturbed to see a mob attack on a site sheltering vulnerable refugee families, the majority being children and women, in Indonesia's Banda Aceh city. Hundreds of youngsters stormed a building basement on Wednesday 27 December 2023 where refugees were sheltered.

According to the UNHCR, the mob broke a police cordon and forcibly put 137 refugees on two trucks, and moved them to another location in Banda Aceh. The incident has left refugees shocked and traumatized.

UNHCR remains deeply worried about the safety of refugees and calls on local law enforcement authorities for urgent action to ensure the protection of all desperate individuals and humanitarian staff.

The attack on refugees is not an isolated act but the result of a coordinated online campaign of misinformation, disinformation and hate speech against

refugees and an attempt to malign Indonesia's efforts to save desperate lives in distress at sea.

UNHCR reminds everyone that desperate refugees seeking shelter in Indonesia are victims of persecution and conflict, and are survivors of deadly sea journeys. Indonesia – with its longstanding humanitarian tradition – has helped save these desperate people who would have otherwise died at the sea – like hundreds of others.

The UN Refugee Agency is also alerting the general public to be aware of the coordinated and well-choreographed online campaign on social media platforms, attacking authorities, local communities, refugees and humanitarian workers alike, inciting hate and putting lives in danger.

UNHCR appeals to the public in Indonesia to cross-check information posted online, much of it false or twisted, with AI generated images and hate speech being sent from bot accounts.

SOUTHEAST ASIA'S 'NARCO-STATE' AND 'SCAM-STATES' UNDERCUT AUTHORITARIAN RULE BOASTS

AUTOCRATS FROM MYANMAR TO VIETNAM SHOWED THEY COULDN'T CONTROL CRIME IN 2023.

DAVID HUTT

The year 2023 has been one of disorder in Southeast Asia.

War is still raging in Myanmar, where perhaps thousands of civilians were killed this year, on top of hundreds more soldiers and anti-junta fighters. ASEAN, the regional bloc, has failed yet again to either bring the warring parties to the negotiation table or, as a result, take a sterner position on the military government that took power through a coup in early 2021.

A consequence of the escalation of political violence in Myanmar has been the proliferation of crime. According to the Southeast Asia Opium Survey 2023, published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the country reclaimed the spot as the world's biggest opium producer, with the area of land used to grow the illicit crop increasing by 18 percent to 47,100 hectares in 2023, compared to the previous year.

The report noted that “although the area under cultivation has not returned to historic peaks of nearly 58,000 ha (143,300 acres) cultivated in 2013, after three consecutive years of increases, poppy cultivation in Myanmar is expanding and becoming more productive.”

At the same time, production of methamphetamine has also increased. One result has been to flood the rest of Southeast Asia with cheap drugs. On Dec. 13, the Thai police seized 50 million methamphetamine tablets near the Myanmar border, the country's largest-ever drug bust and the second largest in Asia.

Alastair McCready, reporting for Al Jazeera in November, noted that yaba pills—combination of methamphetamine and caffeine—are selling for US\$0.24 cents each in Laos.

The flood of drugs has led to an explosion of other criminal activity. Radio Free Asia has reported on the growing anger of ordinary Laotians about the authorities inability to investigate even petty crimes, which has been compounded by the ongoing econom-

ic crisis in the communist state, another indication of the disorder now infecting the region.

ENTER 'SCAM STATES'

Singapore, after staying capital punishments for years, felt it necessary to begin state-enforced executions again, killing the first woman defendant in two decades this year for drug-related offenses.

If Myanmar has the distinction of becoming Southeast Asia's “narco-state” once again, some of its mainland neighbors now have the reputation of being what could be called “scam-states.”

The blockbuster Chinese hit of the year *No More Bets*—a film about unwitting Chinese youths being lured into working for scammers somewhere in Southeast Asia, whereupon tragedy unfolds—was banned by several Southeast Asian governments, including Cambodia's, which presumably thought its “ironclad” friend was spreading malicious propaganda.

Indeed, if in China *No More Bets* was a Tarantino-esque public health warning, in Southeast Asia it was an alarming indictment of all that's wrong in their nations, a held-aloft mirror they couldn't ignore, hard as they tried.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported in August that at least 120,000 people in Myanmar and 100,000 in Cambodia “may be held in situations where they are forced to carry out online scams.” According to a UNODC report, there could be “at least 100,000 victims of trafficking for forced criminality” in Cambodia alone. “If accurate,” the report added, “these estimates of trafficking for forced criminality in Southeast Asia would suggest that this is one of the largest coordinated trafficking in persons operations in history.”

Note that those numbers are only of people forced to work in Southeast Asia's scam compounds, which stretch from mainland Southeast Asia to Malaysia and the Philippines. The number of workers who choose, however you understand that word, to work in

this industry is no doubt many times higher.

HALF OF NATIONAL GDP

The UNODC was more hesitant in its language than it could have been. It offered a “conservative estimate” that the scam industry of one Mekong nation, which it did not name, “may be generating between \$7.5 and \$12.5 billion” in revenue annually, around half that country’s official GDP in 2021.

Some think it was a reference to Cambodia, whose GDP was US\$27 billion that year. My guess is that the UNODC was being vague because it knows this estimate could also apply to Laos and Myanmar.

Five telecom and internet fraud suspects who were handed over to the Chinese police pose for a photo at Yangon International Airport in Yangon, Aug. 2023. (Chinese embassy in Myanmar/Xinhua via AP)

Five telecom and internet fraud suspects who were handed over to the Chinese police pose for a photo at Yangon International Airport in Yangon, Aug. 2023. (Chinese embassy in Myanmar/Xinhua via AP)

Moreover, it’s possible that online scamming, with its associated human trafficking and money laundering, might now be the most profitable industry in all three states, and this increasingly un-shadowy sector may be worth as much as the entire GDP of all three states.

To quote the UNODC report: “the scam industry is earning criminal groups the equivalent of billions of U.S. dollars, with profits rivaling the GDP of some countries in the region.”

There have been some busts in Cambodia and the Philippines. One of the sparks for the “Operation 1027” offensive that unfolded in October across northern Myanmar, touted as the biggest rout of the junta’s forces since the February 2021 coup, was the apparent inability of the military junta to tackle Chinese-run scam compounds in Shan State. Because of the junta’s inactivity, a number of armed ethnic groups stepped in to tackle the scam compounds, which was well received in Beijing.

However, the task of tackling these groups is beyond the capabilities of the police and militaries of Southeast Asian states. In authoritarian mainland Southeast Asia, law enforcement is a patronized, pay-for-promotion extension of ruling parties, which makes them not only ineffective but also systematically corrupt.

POLITICAL PROTECTION

Naturally, there is a good deal of political protection of these vast scam syndicates. Quite obviously, one doesn’t build an industry worth as much as half

a country’s GDP without the active participation of a section of the ruling aristocracy. Li Kuong, the alleged owner of a scam compound in Cambodia, was made a neak oknha, one of the country’s highest honorific titles, in June.

In Laos, does the long-ruling Lao People’s Revolutionary Party control Bokeo province or is it now the fiefdom of the Chinese criminal tycoon Zhao Wei, who runs the province from its de-facto capital city, the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone?

Which brings us to corruption. This year, the Vietnamese Communist Party’s anti-graft investigators arrested dozens of senior officials and businesspeople related to the case of a prominent real estate developer who allegedly embezzled nearly US\$12.4 billion, the equivalent of more than 3 percent of the country’s GDP.

For some moments in 2021 and 2022, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a notion gained traction that authoritarian states are more able than their democratic cousins at ensuring stability, order and prosperity. Events in 2023 in Southeast Asia showed the opposite.

Communist Vietnam has just uncovered perhaps the biggest corruption scandal in the region’s history—and there may be worse to come. Crime rates are spiraling out of control in communist Laos, whose economic crisis is unlikely to end next year, suggesting that authoritarians are not trustworthy guardians of economic growth.

Myanmar, the region’s “narco-state”, is engulfed in a war created by a military junta that traces its lineage to previous military regimes that called themselves the State Law and Order Restoration Council or State Peace and Development Council.

Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar could possess illegal scam industries worth as much as half their national GDPs, effectively making them “scam-states,” where the government, judiciary and military appear to have been effectively infiltrated by scam syndicates.

Does all this sound like the sort of stability and orderliness that authoritarians say justifies their monopoly of power?

David Hutt is a research fellow at the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) and the Southeast Asia Columnist at the Diplomat. As a journalist, he has covered Southeast Asian politics since 2014. The views expressed here are his own and do not reflect the position of Radio Free Asia.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia

MYANMAR JUNTA SAYS TO CRACK DOWN ON SCAM OPERATIONS ON THAI BORDER



Myanmar authorities will crack down on online scam operations along the border with Thailand following talks on military cooperation between the two countries, state media said on Thursday last week.

Scam compounds have mushroomed in Myanmar's lawless borderlands and are staffed by citizens from China and other countries who are often trafficked and forced to work swindling their compatriots.

In recent weeks the junta has said it has arrested scam ringleaders from a militia-run enclave on the border with China and deported thousands of Chinese nationals in a crackdown on the multi-billion-dollar industry.

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing and Lieutenant General Jakkapong Janpengpen of Thailand's armed forces discussed cooperation between their militaries at a meeting on Wednesday, state media said.

"They also discussed plans to jointly eradicate online gambling and online scams near Myawaddy" on the Myanmar-Thai border, according to the Global

New Light of Myanmar.

Myawaddy town is controlled by a military-aligned militia and analysts and media reports say the surrounding area is a hotbed of drug production and online scam outfits.

AFP has contacted the Thai military for comment on the meeting.

Earlier this year the UN human rights office said at least 120,000 people were being held in scam compounds in Myanmar.

Many were housed in the town of Laukkai in northern Shan state, now the target of an offensive against the military by an alliance of ethnic minority armed groups.

Fighting has raged around the town for weeks and thousands of its inhabitants have fled.

Hundreds of Thai and Vietnamese citizens working in scam compound in Laukkai have been evacuated in recent weeks.

AFP

CHINA ASKS CITIZENS TO LEAVE MYANMAR BORDER DISTRICT, CITING SECURITY



China's embassy in Myanmar on Thursday last week asked its citizens to leave a northern district along the countries' shared border, citing heightened security risks as ethnic minority armed groups battle the junta.

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

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

The MNDAA has vowed to recapture Laukkai town, located in a district bordering China that is run by a military-aligned militia and notorious for gambling, prostitution and online scams.

"The conflicts in Laukkai district of Kokang, northern Myanmar continue, and safety risks have escalated for people stranded there," the embassy said on its WeChat account.

"The Chinese Embassy in Myanmar once again reminds Chinese citizens in Laukkai district to evacuate as soon as possible."

Media affiliated with the MNDAA said this week that Myanmar's junta had carried out airstrikes in the self-administered Kokang region that surrounds

Laukkai and shelled parts of the town.

AFP has contacted an MNDAA spokesperson for comment.

Earlier this month, Beijing said it had mediated talks between the military and the three ethnic armed groups and reached an agreement for a "temporary ceasefire".

But clashes have continued in parts of Shan state, with the TNLA claiming to have captured two more towns in recent days.

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

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

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

Photo: AFP

'LIFE IN DANGER': HONG KONG INDEPENDENCE ADVOCATE DEcriES POLICE PRESSURE

A few days before Christmas, Hong Kong activist Tony Chung boarded a flight to Okinawa, Japan, carrying nothing but a backpack - his casual appearance a ruse to hide plans to seek political asylum in the UK.

Chung was among the youngest people in Hong Kong to be convicted under a sweeping national security law imposed by Beijing, and had finished serving time six months before.

Fresh out of prison, he found that he remained under the thumb of the authorities, particularly the national security police, who pressed him to become an informant and take a trip with them to China.

"Not only do they completely control my life and interfere with it, their actions affect my personal

safety and put my life in danger," Chung, 22, told AFP in an interview from Britain on Friday.

Taking HK\$40,000 (\$5,100) with him, Chung left Hong Kong last week after he promised his overseers he would come back after a short vacation. Once in Okinawa, he bought a ticket for London.

Chung is among a growing list of Hong Kong activists who have sought refuge overseas, as city officials and Beijing vow to hold them accountable.

He wrote a long public post on Facebook detailing his escape after landing at Heathrow Airport on Wednesday, a move that turned him into a fugitive in the eyes of the Hong Kong government.

On Friday, a spokesperson for the Chinese embassy in the UK urged Britain to "bring (Chung) to



● Hong Kong activist Tony Chung arrives in London, seeking exile. Photo: Facebook

justice as soon as possible and repatriate him to Hong Kong”.

Asked if he felt safe, Chung said the UK would not accept Hong Kong’s attempt to paint him as a criminal.

“I believe the UK government would not agree with how China’s government has implemented the national security law in Hong Kong to suppress Hongkongers,” he said.

Independence advocate

In 2016, Chung was a high school student when he led the group “Student Localism”, which called for Hong Kong’s independence from China.

Considered a redline for Beijing, calling for separation from China was a fringe view in the former British colony.

Student Localism ceased its local operations in 2020 just before Beijing’s national security law took effect in response to the huge and sometimes violent democracy protests the previous year.

Despite authorities saying the law would not be retroactive, Chung - then 19 years old - was arrested for secession in July 2020 and granted bail.

He was arrested again three months later outside the United States consulate in Hong Kong, where he said he had been trying to seek political asylum.

He later pleaded guilty to secession and money laundering in connection with donations taken for his group, and was sentenced to three and a half years behind bars.

In prison, he said he witnessed the nascent stages of Hong Kong’s “deradicalisation” program -- partly consisting of patriotic movie screenings, Chinese history lectures and cultural performances.

“(Prison officials) lectured us with a pitying tone, saying we were exploited, that we were bought by Americans to disrupt China’s development,” Chung said.

‘VERY IMMEDIATE THREAT’

In June, Chung said he was granted early release after agreeing to strict limits on speech, move-

ment and employment.

Another source of stress was Hong Kong’s national security police, who would pay him between HK\$500 and HK\$3,000 for information on people in his circles.

“They never offered me a choice, they just said this (arrangement) would happen,” Chung said.

“I can only accommodate them, and let them think I fit their idea of rehabilitation.”

Asked about Chung’s informant claims, Hong Kong police said it “has been effectively collecting intelligence... through various channels, means and individuals”.

The final straw came when national security police suggested taking him on a trip to mainland China.

“I could not speculate what their aim was. What I can say is I felt a very immediate threat,” he said.

Police dropped the idea when he objected, but he believed that future requests may be harder to turn down.

Fleeing to the UK felt “unreal”, until his flight touched down and British immigration officers secured plastic tags on his luggage - standard procedure for asylum claimants, he was told.

Chung stopped short of discussing his plans for the future, only saying he wanted to “continue to contribute” to Hong Kong.

“Since long ago, I have thought about the prospect of being jailed and being forced to leave Hong Kong,” he said.

“But when I actually took the path that may lead me away from Hong Kong forever... I would hope that I can one day return.”

AFP

INDIA TARGETING HIGH-PROFILE JOURNALISTS WITH SPYWARE: AMNESTY

India's government has again targeted high-profile journalists with Pegasus spyware, Amnesty International and The Washington Post said in a joint investigation published Thursday.

Created by Israeli firm NSO Group, Pegasus can be used to access a phone's messages and emails, peruse photos, eavesdrop on calls, track locations and even film the owner with the camera.

Watchdogs have documented widespread use of the spyware - which is normally only sold to governments or security agencies - against journalists and activists in dozens of countries, including India.

Amnesty said journalists Siddharth Varadarajan of The Wire and Anand Mangnale of The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) had been targeted with the spyware on their iPhones.

"Increasingly, journalists in India face the threat of unlawful surveillance simply for doing their jobs," said Donncha O Cearbhaill, head of Amnesty International's Security Lab.

That threat compounds an already hostile climate for reporters also facing "imprisonment under draconian laws, smear campaigns, harassment, and intimidation", he added.

India's government did not immediately respond to the report, which said the most recent identified case of spyware use occurred in October.

In 2021, New Delhi was accused of using Pegasus to surveil journalists, opposition politicians and activists, with leaked documents showing the spyware had been used against more than 1,000 Indian phone numbers.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's main political rival, Rahul Gandhi, was among those targeted.

The government denied conducting "illegal surveillance" but refused to cooperate with a Supreme Court probe into the allegations, the findings of which have not been made public.

The OCCRP, one of the two target organisations named in Thursday's report, published an inves-

tigation in August into the financial dealings of Indian tycoon Gautam Adani, a key business ally of Modi.

Adani's conglomerate shed more than \$100 billion in value earlier this year after a US short-seller investment firm made explosive allegations of accounting fraud, which the Indian company dismissed as an organised "smear campaign".

Mangnale told AFP that he was targeted "within hours" of sending questions to Adani Group on behalf of the OCCRP.

"I can't blame the Adani Group or the Government of India for it, because we don't have the evidence yet," he added. "But, the chronology itself is really telling."

Varadarajan of The Wire suggested to The Washington Post that he had been targeted for leading opposition to the detention of a prominent news publisher in New Delhi.

'STATE-SPONSORED ATTACKERS'

Local media reported last month that authorities were again investigating allegations by opposition politicians of attempted phone tapping after they reported receiving warnings from Apple of "state-sponsored attackers".

In that case, Ashwini Vaishnaw, the information and technology minister, said the government was "concerned" by the complaints.

Activists say that press freedom in the world's biggest democracy has suffered during Modi's tenure.

India has fallen 21 spots to 161 out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index, compiled by Reporters Without Borders, since he took office in 2014.

Journalists reporting critically on the government say they are subjected to judicial harassment and relentless campaigns of online abuse.

AFP

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INDONESIA URGED TO PROTECT REFUGEES FOLLOWING MOB ATTACK

The UN refugee agency, UNHCR, has appealed for action in the wake of a mob attack against refugees in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, on Wednesday.

Hundreds of young people stormed a building basement where scores of Rohingya refugees were sheltered, according to media reports.

The Rohingya are a mainly Muslim community who have fled waves of persecution in Myanmar, a predominantly Buddhist country.

Nearly one million are living in camps in Bangladesh and more than 1,000 have arrived in Indonesia by boat in recent months.



● Jakarta. Photo: UN News

CALL FOR PROTECTION

UNHCR issued a statement saying it was “deeply disturbed to see a mob attack on a site sheltering vulnerable refugee families.”

The mob broke a police cordon and forcibly put 137 refugees on two trucks and moved them to another location in the city, the agency said, noting that the incident has left refugees shocked and traumatized.

“UNHCR remains deeply worried about the

safety of refugees and calls on local law enforcement authorities for urgent action to ensure protection of all desperate individuals and humanitarian staff,” the statement said.

ANTI-REFUGEE CAMPAIGN

The attack was “not an isolated act but the result of a coordinated online campaign of misinformation, disinformation and hate speech against refugees and an attempt to malign Indonesia’s efforts to save desperate lives in distress at sea.”

UNHCR appealed for the public “to be aware of the coordinated and well-choreographed online campaign on social media platforms, attacking authorities, local communities, refugees and humanitarian workers alike, inciting hate and putting lives in danger.”

People are urged to cross-check information posted online, much of which is “false or twisted, with AI generated images and hate speech being sent from bot accounts.”

Courtesy of UN News





Photo: Ajay Karpur

RAKHINE STATE

Junta artillery kills three, injures 16, in Mrauk-U Township, Rakhine State

Three people have been killed, at least 16 have been injured and more than 20 homes have been damaged during fighting between the Arakan Army (AA) and junta in Mrauk-U Township, Rakhine State.

Three people, a man and a married couple, were killed by junta artillery fire in Sinchaseik ward in Mrauk-U Township on the morning of 24 December. The couple's seven-year-old daughter was also seriously injured and had to have her hand amputated. 16 other people were also injured in the attack.

A resident of Mrauk-U said: "At Least sixteen people were injured and three are in a critical condition. Three civilians lost their lives. The aftermath included shattered glass, damaged roofs, and fractured concrete pillars in monasteries and residences throughout the central part of the township."

They further explained: "The Mya Tan Song Monastery, which was providing shelter for refugees, has also been destroyed. Those inside have been affected. Over 20 buildings in the township incurred damage, including residential homes."

The fighting in Mrauk-U Township intensified from the morning of 24 December until about 2:00 p.m. on 25 December.

Junta Light Infantry Battalions 540 and 377, based in Mrauk-U Township, fired over 100 artillery rounds into villages and residential areas in Mrauk-U Township, even though there was no fighting in those areas, according to a statement by the AA.

Also, on 25 December, at approximately 6:00 a.m., Light Infantry Battalions 540 and 377 fired artillery at Mrauk-U Archaeological Museum, damaging a building housing ancient pillars.

Most of the residents of Mrauk-U Township have fled the area. According to residents still left there only about 20 per cent of the population has remained in Mrauk- U Township.



CHINA-MYANMAR REKINDLES KYAUKPHYU PORT PROJECT

In a significant move, China and Myanmar have rekindled their commitment to the long-stalled Kyaukphyu Port project, signing a pivotal agreement worth US\$7.3 billion, reported Marine Insight.

The signing ceremony, held in Myanmar's capital, Nay Pyi Taw, marked a step towards revitalizing the deep-sea port initiative that had been on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the political crisis in Myanmar.

The Kyaukphyu Port, situated in Myanmar's Rakhine province, holds strategic importance for China as it provides direct access to the Indian Ocean. Once completed, it will serve as the southernmost point of the 1,700-kilometer China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), linking Yunnan Province's capital Kunming to the Indian Ocean.

This corridor aims to offer an alternative route for China, circumventing the congested Malacca Strait and facilitating increased trade opportunities.

However, the port's location in Rakhine province, a region marred by clashes between the Arakan Army and Myanmar junta's military, adds a layer of complexity to its development.

Rakhine is also home to the persecuted Rohingya population, raising concerns about the potential impacts of the port's construction on the local community and the ongoing conflicts.

MYANMAR GARMENT INDUSTRY HAS TO FOCUS ON SURVIVAL RATHER THAN GROWTH



Yangon garment worker. Photo: AFP

The recently issued World Bank country report of Myanmar Economic Monitor (MEM) said that the garment industry in Myanmar had to focus on survival of the business rather than investment and growth.

The economic indicators in the country have been worsening since mid-2023 and the businesses which ran 56% of their operating capacity in September can now run only 16% of their capacity.

The World Bank curtailed prospects for Myanmar's garment industry and says that merely 5% of garment factories in Myanmar use FOB (Free on Board) system which produces the garments by themselves and exporting to foreign countries.

The remaining 96% use the simple cut-make-pack (CMP) system instead, the report says.

The survey of 100 garment firms conducted by the World Bank from March to May 2023 indicates that about 85 percent of garment workers (and 56 percent of garment firm managers) in Myanmar are women.

Recent developments have worsened the operating conditions of Myanmar garment firms and turned the focus to survival rather than growth, the World Bank's programme director and senior economist reported.

Major constraints affecting the garment industry include limited access to power supply, logistics

bottlenecks, and trade and foreign exchange restrictions and moreover, in the context of a squeeze in profit margins, high inflation and declines in real wages are spurring labour migration which has become a pressing issue for many firms and these constraints increase the cost of doing business and will tend to reduce the international competitiveness of Myanmar's garment industry, the report says.

According to the World Bank study, the gross production of the garment industry fell by 7.9% in 2022 in comparison with 2019 because of a decline in SME businesses.

Even assuming no further escalation in conflict, growth is expected to remain subdued in 2024. This baseline forecast is predicated on a broad-based slowdown across productive sectors including agriculture, manufacturing and trade in 2025, the World Bank's Myanmar Economic Monitor (MEM) report estimates.

Business people said that severe power outages, fuel oil shortages and unavailability of materials in the market caused many difficulties in running and operating their businesses.

Some factories have to stop operating at the time of power outage and due to a lack of fuel to run their generators and then they are facing difficulties in completing their job orders in time.

MYANMAR ELECTRICITY MINISTER SAYS THEY WILL GIVE PRIORITY TO TRANSNATIONAL POWER PURCHASE



The Minister of Electric Power Nyan Tun said that Myanmar's power demand by 2030 would reach 14,542 MW and that his ministry was looking into building transnational power transmission lines.

He said this last week at the Myanmar-Laos Electricity Sector Cooperation meeting held in Vientiane, Laos on 25 December.

He also said that Myanmar was seeking to purchase electricity from China and Thailand by building power transmission lines with these countries.

Myanmar and Laos reportedly discussed at the meeting joint surveys and studies for building and implementing hydropower projects in the Mekong basin and transnational power transmission lines.

According to the previous studies, 3-4 hydropower projects can be built along the Mekong River and they can generate 2,800 to 3,200 MW electrical power. So new studies should be conducted into hydropower potential.

The junta's Union Minister Nyan Tun also said that they would like to implement the Myanmar-Laos transnational power transmission line project in a short-term period and he urged the companies concerned to complete their Feasibility Study Reports (FSR) and get the guidelines on these reports from the governments of the two countries.

Moreover, the two countries reportedly discussed the signing of the "Power Supply Framework Agreement", forming a consultant team for studying

technology for connecting two power grids in Myanmar and Laos and the amount of power to be purchased and finally the cooperation between Myanmar and Laos companies for feasibility studies for this project.

They claimed that significant progress could be seen between the two countries in the work of the Joint Working Committee (JWC) and the Joint Working Group (JWG) in the past over five years.

The World Bank said in its country report that the Myanmar Power sector had been in decline since the 2021 February military coup and it would worsen in the future.

The consultant of Myanmar Electricity Power and Energy Ministry Guillaume de Langre told the Insight Myanmar podcast that Myanmar generated 50% of electricity in the national power grid with gas produced in the country and these gas wells could run dry by 2030.

The junta chief admitted that they could not generate even 50% of the country's demand.

The State Administration Council (SAC) Chairman Min Aung Hlaing said at a meeting held on 8 August that suspension of electric power projects in the last ten years caused the power shortage in the country.

If these power projects had been implemented at that time Myanmar would not face a power shortage in the country now, the SAC Chairman said.

MIGRANT WORKERS SENT TO THAILAND THROUGH HTAW KAW KO ROAD AMID INTENSE FIGHTING



The State Administration Council's Labour Ministry said that they had to send Myanmar workers to Mae Sot, Thailand under an MoU signed between the two countries through Htaw Kaw Ko Road as the usual main route of the Asian Highway could not be used because of intense fighting there.

Some people said that there were some difficulties in the Myawaddy route but the workers sent under the MoU to Thailand could use this route and there was no suspension and stopping of these MoU workers to Thailand through this normal route.

Despite facing some difficulties in sending workers to Thailand, the flow of Myanmar migrant workers to Thailand is almost normal and some of them went to Kawthaung first by flight and then proceeded to Ranong, Thailand by ferry boat.

Myanmar labour activist organizations in Thailand said some MoU workers were finding difficulty in getting jobs. Some Myanmar migrant workers sent un-

der the MoU to Thailand could not join start work two months after their arrival in Thailand and they had to ask for assistance for food and shelter from labour organizations.

Most of these MoU workers are Burmese, Karen, Pa-O and Mon female workers coming from rural areas.

These migrant workers have to work in foreign countries as they have little job opportunities in Myanmar and face economic hardships after the February 2021 military coup.

The labour statistics of the Thai government shows that there are about 4 million foreign workers legally and officially working in Thailand of which about 1.5 million are sent under the MoU.

Penrose Thitsa

MYANMAR GARMENTS INDUSTRY EARNS OVER US\$3.1 BILLION IN 8 MONTHS

Myanmar earned more than US\$3.1 billion from finished garment exports between April 1 and December 15, 2023, marking a significant boost for the country's foreign revenue, the junta's Ministry of Commerce reported.

Topping the list in revenue were finished garments, surpassing other key exports such as natural gas, which brought in over US\$ 2.36 billion, and black grams, contributing more than US\$501 million, according to the Ministry.

Under the cut-make-pack (CMP) system, Myanmar predominantly produced these garments, exporting them to 80 different countries. The main recipients included Japan, Poland, Spain, Germany, South Korea, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Italy, the United States, France, Denmark, and Belgium.

Amidst the fallout from the 2021 coup in Myanmar, the garment industry faced severe scrutiny due to subpar working conditions. This led major Western brands like H&M to exit the country. However, the withdrawal created an opening swiftly filled by investors from China and other regions, exacerbating the situation, according to reports from workers and labor groups.



RIGHT OF PASSAGE

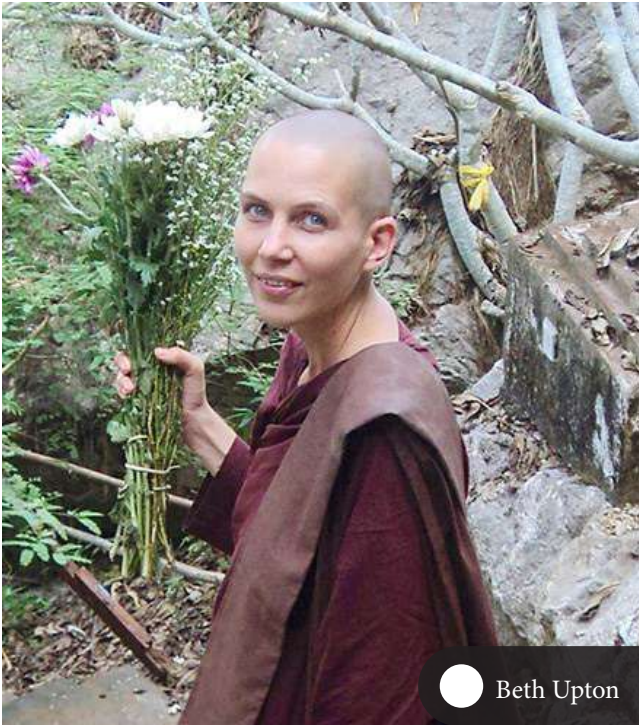
Buddhist novice being transported on a horse during his initiation ceremony in Mrauk-U, Myanmar.

Photo: AFP

IN FOCUS



BETH UPTON: DELVING INTO THE SPIRITUAL LIFE



Beth Upton

From deep meditative absorption with Pa Auk Sayadaw, to sitting in caves in southern Spain in the company of drug addicts and criminals, Beth Upton has led a most amazing spiritual life, reports Insight Myanmar.

Beth's parents split when she was young, and her mother remarried. Her step-father had once stayed with Osho, the controversial Indian guru also known as Bhagawan Sri Rajneesh. Osho was a polarizing figure for many, including Beth. "Honestly, [it] did a lot to damage my perceptions of anything that might be called 'spiritual,'" she recalls about her teen years.

Beth's mother encouraged her to follow her heart, and supported Beth through all the unconventional choices she made in her life.

Beth's academic focus was on math and finance; she remembers that time in her life as being "on the rationality train." Initially working in the financial sector in London, she parlayed that into a position in international development, in Sri Lanka. But eventually she decided the field was just not for her, and she began to awaken to a deep spiritual longing.

This first led her to Spain, where she volunteered at a small Mahayana Buddhist center. Though she had been living in Sri Lanka with its Buddhist culture, it was there, at that small monastery, where she first resonated with the power of the Four Noble Truths. She started gravitating towards becoming a Buddhist, but hesitated because she was not ready to observe one of the core precepts, abstaining from all intoxicants. She decided to delay taking that step for a few years until she became "disenchanted, and get life out my system enough."

FIVE YEARS IN MYANMAR

In 2008, Beth went to Pa Auk Monastery in Myanmar to take a deeper plunge into the spiritual life, and she remained there for five years.

"Really an incredible monk, incredible," she says, recalling Pa Auk Sayadaw. "He has a mind that delights in detail, and precision. An incredible intellect, and an incredible depth." She cultivated deep states of jhāna under his tutelage, and enhanced powers of perception. Yet she acknowledges that a powerful commitment as well as stores of patience are needed, and that Pa Auk's method is not for everyone. She notes that some yogis stay on the grounds just to remain a part of the large and welcoming spiritual community there, but don't progress much in their practice, and probably should find another method. Beth is especially grateful for the supportive environment that Pa Auk creates for female meditators and nuns, in contrast to what is found elsewhere in Myanmar.

Beth really loved her years in Myanmar and benefited tremendously from the spiritual opportunities it afforded. In the main part of the interview conducted before the coup, she waxes eloquent about the heart of the Burmese people, who despite their overall material impoverishment have open-handedly given the gift of Dhamma to the world, and so gener-



Beth has had quite a journey.

ously and selflessly support those practicing in their land, including herself. So it is all the more poignant when, in the introductory portion recorded post-coup, she expresses deep sadness and concern at the situation there currently. She encourages meditators to do whatever they feel they can do in support.

Beth describes the peace and happiness of jhānic states in compelling terms. She contrasts the fleeting happiness born of satisfying sense desire, with the deep blissfulness of jhānic states that develop with a mind of non-clinging. And while one may cling to that profound happiness, attachment to jhānas is less solid than sensory attachment. As the practitioner goes from jhāna to jhāna, mental fabrication becomes increasingly refined and subtle, and one's attachment similarly becomes more and more ephemeral, moving in the direction of going beyond all attachments. She notes it is challenging to develop this depth of concentration outside of a monastery or meditation-centric environment, especially in a social space that is not supportive of that kind of spiritual commitment, like in the West. However, she does say that some of her Western students have developed profound skill with the jhānas. She also finds that many Western meditators have strong investigative minds, which is helpful for vipassana practice, but works against jhānic attainments.

DWELLING ON CONCEPTION

In the Pa Auk system, one turns the deeply concentrated mind towards seeing beyond concepts, into the moment-by-moment change of materiality and mentality. One of the practices that Pa Auk Sayadaw teaches to those with advanced skill in jhānas is following the thread of mind moments back to, and past, the moment of conception. When asked whether a meditator may not just be fabricating that experience while presuming it is genuine, Beth admits to that possibility, but also notes that the strength of mind a meditator has developed at that level of attainment would be able to discern that. Through this type of practice, one is able to perceive not only past animal and human existences, but also realms of existence “above” the human world, such as the deva realm. The clarity of these direct perceptions causes Beth to question the authority of Western scientific “knowledge.” She calls it arrogant, since rational science would deny the reality of what she claims to experience. She also started off this area of practice with some degree of skepticism, but her own experiences ultimately convinced her of its validity. Beth notes that many Western meditators find comfort when interpretations of Dhamma theory and practice conform to Western scientific views of the world. She feels that while it's fine if this perspective allows a meditator to get their foot in the door, other,

more “fantastic” aspects of Buddhism will naturally be experienced as their practice deepens. She says that the practice reveals one of the characteristics the Buddha uses to describe true Dhamma: *ehipassiko*, or “Come and see for yourself!”

Of course, as Beth explains, “view” can be taken too far on both sides of this equation—completely denying the possibility of these kinds of experiences on one hand, or believing any claim at all about them on the other. To whatever extent one adheres to any kind of view, it merely signifies the degree of attachment one holds. Beth compares it to being in a boat in a stormy sea. In speaking to strong adherents of either kind of view, her goal as a teacher is not to try and knock the yogi off their boat into the giant waves, but rather to help them find a bit of firm ground to stand on. That means initially allowing them to ground their practice in whatever belief they hold, after which their unfolding meditative insights will help guide them. Through this process, their direct understanding, and thus their views, will naturally begin to shift towards what their practice has revealed to them.

THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

Beth agrees the teacher-student relationship and the question of submission requires a careful balancing act. On the one hand, a certain degree of submission is essential if one is beginning to step into uncomfortable territory—the right kind of submission entails genuine but discriminating faith. On the other hand, submission can easily become blind faith, which might lead one into dangerous territory.

Beth also addressed the question of how deep the “true” *jhānas* are. Some Western teachers consider “lighter” states of *samadhi* more true to the early suttas. This is in contrast to the descriptions of deep absorptions as found in the Commentaries, and which Pa Auk teaches. For Beth, though, it is clear: she feels that as the Dhamma weakens over time, conceptions of *jhāna* become “watered down.”

Now that she is teaching in the West, Beth

feels that “integration” is an important issue. For her method of meditation, she insists a lot of time and effort is necessary, which necessitates retreats. However, she observes that too often, the practice becomes divorced from life outside the retreat center, especially when the society-at-large is not set up to nurture and support those with a Dhamma practice, as it is in Myanmar. So in addition to her retreat schedule, she is also looking to build community, to help facilitate this integration.

HEADING TO SPAIN

After leaving Myanmar and the Pa Auk center, Beth—still in robes—ended up living in a series of caves in southern Spain. These caves “were inhabited by addicts and criminals. It’s like the Gypsy suburb!” But no one gave her any problems, and eventually some even approached her asking to be taught meditation. She adds, “And so we turned it into a little rebellious meditation community! Beautiful times, really good times. I learned a lot there.” She has also practiced under a couple of other teachers since leaving Myanmar, such as Ajahn Brahm, not so much to change her practice as to enlarge her teacher toolkit.

After she disrobed in 2018, the transition to lay life was not completely smooth. After so many years in robes, she had to relearn some “life skills,” in particular regarding money, which she was prohibited from handling—and never even had to think about—as a Buddhist nun. She realized staying in robes so long was in fact becoming a kind of avoidance of entanglement with this aspect of the mundane world. And around this time, she became involved in a non-sexual, but abusive relationship, which Beth opens up about in a vulnerable and honest way. It was the most suffering she ever experienced, and at the time did not see how any of the skills she had learned on the cushion could help her. She had spent so long practicing to dissolve concepts of self, that her “self” did not know how to respond when the abuser crossed the line. At first she thought, “Maybe this is

my fault.” Then she thought, “I’ll just send mettā [loving kindness], and it will be all right.”

Eventually, she worked her way out of that challenging relationship, and in retrospect learned a lot. “If you are able to meditate deeply, there’s a choice to pick up a degree of self and enter the world. And when we do that, we need a certain set of tools that we’re not taught as monastics.” So now, both as a meditator and as a teacher, she is trying to integrate meditative skills with life skills, balancing a “soft inner, trusting core” with a “harder, protective, outer layer.”

DEEPER LEVEL

Today, Beth no longer thinks in terms of “should I ordain, or not ordain.” Rather, her goal is understanding the Four Noble Truths at deeper levels, which she can do as a nun or lay person. In fact, she realizes now that while her time in robes was extremely valuable, her monastic experiences limited her to some degree.

The conversation moves to a discussion of the Abhidhamma. The Thai Forest tradition tends to discredit it as an authentic teaching, but it is central to many Dhamma teachings and practices in Myanmar. In Beth’s opinion, the Abhidhamma is a “scientific” description of the meditative experience, each piece of which is observable and can be experienced, in particular when applying Pa Auk’s method. She thinks that someday, if she “gets a minute,” she might even write a book about it.

TEACHING

Initially somewhat fearful of taking up a teacher role, it developed naturally starting in those caves in southern Spain. She spoke with Pa Auk Sayadaw about her inclination to teach in the West, and he has been encouraging. He noted that other of his Western students, such as Shaila Catherine, teach his method in the West, though not 100% like him. So he encouraged Beth to go with the flow and teach from her heart, which provides more flexibility. In that spirit, she bases her teaching on the Pa Auk method, but tailors

her instruction to individual meditators. She also works strictly on a dana (donation) basis. Beth says, “I made the determination if anybody asks me to teach, I will say ‘yes.’ And so I’ve just gone with that, since then. I started leading retreats and seeing people benefit. Only recently I started to get a growing confidence with it more, and enjoy it. I really delight in seeing people’s understanding of the Dharma grow.”

Please check out the Insight Myanmar podcast here: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2022/3/24/episode-97-beth-upton>



 Beth Upton



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