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MYANMAR JUNTA USES TERM 'MISINFORMATION' AS WEAPON

The Myanmar junta is fighting with bombs and bullets. But it is also fighting with words.

The Myanmar media and social media landscape can be challenging to navigate.

Last week, the junta's Information Minister Maung Maung Ohn accused independent media agencies of spreading fake news and misinformation about Myanmar's ongoing political and economic situation, according to a report by Development Media Group (DMG).

At a forum on "State Building and the Role of Media," Maung Maung Ohn said "destructive elements use media outlets to spread fake news and misinformation," and that they are "poisoning the minds of people with fake news and misinformation." The majority of news reports published on Facebook are lop-sided, and the Information Ministry is thus taking various measures to ensure the flow of correct information, and fight fake news and misinformation, he said.

Quick to rap Maung Maung Ohn's remarks were journalists in Myanmar, who say the regime is just trying to conceal its human rights violations and war crimes, and control people's right to information.

"Media always monitors and reports the human rights violations of the military council. And the

regime has used media outlets and social media accounts it controls to spread propaganda that those reports are fake news," a local female journalist from Rakhine State told a local media outlet.

Hundreds of journalists have been arrested since the February 2021 coup and around 50 journalists are still behind bars in prisons across Myanmar. The regime has also issued warrants for arrests of dozens of journalists as it continues to crack down on independent media in Myanmar.

The junta is hitting out using words through junta media and social media, particularly Telegram channels. For example, the junta-controlled Kyemon and Myanma Alin newspapers have devoted many column inches to responding to news reports published by internationally recognised news agencies such as RFA, VOA and Myanmar Now, claiming those reports are fake news, DMG reports.

By and large, Myanmar's independent media attempts to maintain reporting standards and, at the same time, debunk junta misinformation when necessary. The junta minister's recent comments are a reminder that the pen remains as mighty as the sword.

EDITORIAL

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WEEKLY

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A group of young Karen girls are captured in a traditional dance performance. They are wearing vibrant purple, shimmering traditional dresses with white scarves and headbands. The girls have their arms raised in a graceful dance pose. The background is a bright, clear blue sky with some light clouds. The overall atmosphere is festive and celebratory.

KAREN NEW YEAR IN YANGON

Karen girls and boys perform a traditional dance during a Karen New Year's celebration in Yangon on 11 January. The Karen communities in Myanmar and around the world celebrate the Karen New Year on the first day of the lunar month of Pyatho, the 10th month of the Myanmar calendar.

Photo:EPA

IN FOCUS



GENERAL STRIKE COORDINATING BODY SAYS MYANMAR JUNTA IS TERRORIST ORGANISATION

The General Strike Coordinating Body (GSCB), called on international governments and organisations to put pressure on the Military Council, by treating it as a terrorist organisation and prosecuting it under international laws.

The GSCB, a coalition of strike committees across Myanmar, made the call in a statement issued on 9 January that outlined the organisations stance on the Myanmar junta.

It said that as the junta continues to find itself in an ever weaker position it has increased the number of war crimes and crimes against humanity that it commits.

This is evidenced by the ongoing air force bombardments and continuous use of artillery and heavy weapons to target civilians, public buildings, and residences in towns and villages controlled by revolutionary forces.

The General Strike Coordinating Body (GSCB) highlighted that, despite the escalating war crimes and genocide in Myanmar, international governments and organizations maintain a concerning silence, prioritising their interests and nonchalantly overlooking the increasing casualties.

Regarding the junta's crimes the GSCB Mandalay Strike leader, Dr. Tayzar San said: "The international organizations such as the United Nations and ASEAN and governments of each country are completely silent."

The GSCB statement also gave examples of junta atrocities. These included an airstrike on Kanan Village in Tamu District, Sagaing Region that killed 17 villagers, including nine children, and injured more than 20 others, on 7 January 2024, at a time when there was no fighting in the area.

It also highlighted two other airstrikes in northern Shan State on the same day, 7 January 2024. At noon an airstrike on Myothit Village in Namhsan Township killed five civilians and injured a further six and at 9:35.p.m.an airstrike on Mineyaw Village in Lashio Township killed four women and destroyed 20 houses. There was no fighting in either area when these incidents took place.

Other junta war crimes highlighted in the document include airstrikes on schools in Letyatkone Village, Tabayin Township, Sagaing Region in November 2022 and in Pazigy Village, Kanbalu Township, Sagaing Region, in April 2023. A massacre in Hpruso Township, Karenni State, in December 2021, an assault on Anangpa Village, in Hpakant Township, Kachin State in November 2022 and artillery attacks on a monastery in Gyoetaung Village, in Wuntho Township, Sagaing Region in September 2023 and on an IDP camp in Monlaikhat Village, near Laiza Town, Kachin State, in October 2023.

The statement also said that the GCSB is committed to working tirelessly towards the removal of the Myanmar junta. It urged the revolutionary forces to continue in their struggles and urged civilians to embrace the revolution.

It also called on international governments and organisations to collaborate with the relevant groups to offer effective and beneficial assistance to those in Myanmar enduring hardship.

5,000 FLEE JUNTA ARMY IN SAGAING REGION'S KHIN-U TOWNSHIP

About 5,000 villagers from the western part of Khin-U Township in Sagaing Region have fled a junta army operation that started on the morning of 10 January.

Htoo Khant Zaw, from Khin-U People's Defence Force (PDF) said: "A column of military council forces advanced from the east side of Khin-U Town toward villages on the west side. They conducted a raid on Ba-O village in the morning and subsequently fired upon Indaingyi Village. As of noon, they are proceeding towards Pyin Htaung which is a Pyu Saw Htee village. As of the evening of 10 January, no villag-

ers have been reported arrested, and no villages have been set on fire."

People fled from at least 10 villages in the area.

Junta soldiers entered Khin-U Township on 3 January and arrested 30 people in the villages of Myindaung and Inntaing. The 30 villagers were interrogated and tortured by the army before being released on 6 January.

JUNTA ARMY AND GOVERNMENT RESHUFFLES

The junta Navy Commander in Chief, Admiral Moe Aung has changed jobs and been made the Union Minister for Ministry (4) in the Office of the Chairman of the State Administration Council (SAC) and the National Security Adviser.

As national Security Adviser, he will give national security advice to the SAC chairman, Min Aung Hlaing.

The announcement of Admiral Moe Aung job change was made by the SAC on 8 January.

On the same day, the SAC also announced that Ko Ko Hlaing would become the Union Minister for Ministry (1) at the Office of the Chairman of the SAC, and Aung Naing Oo would become the Union Minister

for Ministry (2) at the Office of the Chairman of the SAC.

During the NLD government, Aung Naing Oo served as the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Investment and Foreign Economic Relations (MIFER). However, following the coup, he became the Union Minister of the Military Council.

There have been no official announcements as to who will take up the posts vacated by these appointments.

BBC Burmese reported that the Navy Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General Zwe Win Myint, has been appointed Navy Commander in Chief, but there has been no official confirmation of this.

JUNTA AIRSTRIKE KILLS SIX VILLAGERS IN NORTHERN SHAN STATE

Six civilians were killed by junta airstrikes in Ywarthit Village, Namhsan Township, Northern Shan State on 7 January at approximately 12:00 p.m., according to locals.

The dead included a child, of unknown age, three women aged between 15 and 20, a male school teacher, and a local man.


The two airstrikes happened in an area where there was no fighting, for no apparent reason. They caused significant damage to Ywarthit Village High School, the school's library and nearby houses.

"The junta conducted two airstrikes, targeting the village school and homes. Tragically, six lives were lost, including a teacher and his child. Alongside the airstrikes, machine gun fire was also heard. The relentless assault has forced villagers to flee", said a local.

In previous airstrikes on Ywarthit Village on 19 December 2023 two villagers, one of whom was a child, were killed and a further seven were injured.

The TNLA successfully took control of Namhsan Town on 15 December.



 Rohingya refugees search through the burnt wreckage of their homes in a refugee camp in Bangladesh. Photo: AFP



ROHINGYA CRISIS

**No relief as Myanmar
minority suffers**

Arson, gang wars, illegal drugs and far too little to eat – that is the reality for hundreds of thousands of Muslim Rohingya refugees caught in limbo in Bangladesh camps.

With the ongoing conflict in Rakhine State, the Myanmar junta and Bangladesh repatriation plan appears to be going nowhere.

Little wonder hundreds are seeking to flee on rickety boats, setting sail for Indonesia in search of a better life.

POSSIBLE ARSON

The latest incident to disrupt the camps happened in the early morning of Sunday 7 January.

Thousands of Rohingya refugees were left without shelter after a suspected arson attack ripped through their camp burning nearly 800 homes, an official said.

Bangladesh is home to around a million Rohingya, many of whom fled a 2017 military crackdown

on the mainly Muslim minority in neighbouring Myanmar that is now subject to a UN genocide probe.

The United Nations refugee agency said “nearly 7,000 Rohingya refugees” had been left homeless, but that there were no casualties.

The blaze tore through the tightly packed complex of bamboo and tarpaulin shelters in the early hours of the morning at a camp in the country’s south-east, refugee commissioner Mizanur Rahman said.

4,000 HOMELESS

“At least 711 shelters were fully burnt and 63 were partially damaged,” said Rahman, who put the number of homeless at 4,000.

“We have ordered a probe into the fire,” he added. “We suspect it is an act of arson”.

The UN said 120 facilities, including learning centres, mosques and healthcare centres, had also been “destroyed or damaged by the inferno”.

Some refugees had to tear down their homes



A disabled Rohingya refugee sits in burnt out ruins of his home. Photo: AFP

to create corridors to stop the fire from spreading further.

“Refugees displaced by the fire are temporarily taking shelter within the camp’s community centres,” the UN refugee agency said in a statement.

TURF WARS

Fires in the dozens of Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh are common, especially during the dry season from November to April. But many of the camps are also riven by violence between rival Rohingya groups.

Police said security in the camps has worsened, with more than 60 refugees killed in turf wars and drug-related clashes last year, the highest number on record.

In March 2023, a fire in Kutupalong camp - one of the world’s largest refugee settlements - destroyed 2,000 shelters. Two years earlier, at least 15 Rohingya were killed and another 50,000 refugees were made homeless after a blaze in the same camp.



LIMITED RATIONS

The living conditions in the camps, including the problem of security, have worsened. Crime is rampant and two main political armed groups are fighting for territory. Food rations have reportedly been reduced.

All this is leading to more refugees willing to risk a dangerous sea journey to Indonesia in the hope of a better life. But the “welcome mat” in Indonesia’s Aceh has been removed, with villagers, and recently students, attacking Rohingya encampments, posing a challenge for the authorities.

Meanwhile, in Rakhine State, Rohingya are in danger of getting caught up in the conflict between the junta and the Arakan Army. Rohingya living in IDP camps face challenges in terms of food, medicine and shelter.

NOT ENOUGH

Rohingya living in Bangladesh refugee camps said the partial restoration by the United Nations of food rations is inadequate because the lack of protein and nutritious food among basic items is having a significant impact on their well-being, according to RFA.

The U.N.’s World Food Program (WFP) announced Monday that it was increasing the monthly food provision for the refugees from U.S. \$8 to \$10 (877 to 1097 taka) per person, which was previously cut twice from \$12 (1316 taka) because of funding shortages.

While this increase is supposed to help Rohingya offset the effects of rising inflation in Bangladesh, half a dozen refugees told BenarNews that this adjustment does little to compensate for the severe consequences of the original reduction from \$12, an amount they thought was already insufficient.

Aid organizations appear to be struggling to get enough funding for Rohingya in the Bangladesh camps and for those in need in villages and IDP camps in Rakhine State.

What is apparent is the Rohingya crisis will continue until the Myanmar crisis ends.

Reporting: AFP, Mizzima

MYANMAR RESISTANCE GROUP LAUNCHES ATTACK ON JUNTA NAVAL BASE



The deep sea port is important to the Chinese government. Photo: AFP

An ethnic army attacked a junta naval base in western Myanmar, locals told Radio Free Asia on Tuesday last week. The base is one of the largest in the country and located in part of an ongoing Chinese investment project.

The attack was initiated by the Arakan Army on Monday morning last week in Rakhine State's Kyaukphyu township, residents said. Danyawaddy Naval Base retaliated during the attack using heavy artillery and small arms, reported one resident, who declined to be named for security reasons.

"Yesterday morning, the Arakan Army fired at the naval base with shock missiles. They fired about six times. I don't know how much damage they inflicted," he said. "The naval base also fired back with heavy and small arms. There was no more fighting today, but the junta troops have closed all the roads and tightened security."

Danyawaddy is part of the Kyaukphyu deep sea port complex and in a special economic zone that is currently being developed by China. The project was approved in 2023 by the junta and attempts to recruit locals for work have been met with controversy and distrust.

Fighting in Rakhine in December has already stalled progress on both the port and railroad, locals told RFA.

Emails by RFA to the Chinese Embassy in Yangon for comment on the attack went unanswered Tuesday.

Both the Myanmar junta and resistance groups, like the Three Brotherhood Alliance, have been frequently urged by China to secure the country's projects inside Myanmar and stabilize the border region. The Arakan Army is one resistance group in the alliance, along with the Ta'ang National Liberation Army and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army.

Myanmar's regime has not released any information about the attack on the naval base. RFA was unable to reach junta spokesman Maj. Gen. Zaw Min Tun for comment regarding junta injuries and damages.

Monday was the Arakan Army's first attack on the junta naval base in Kyaukphyu, according to their statement released Monday. It said the army intends to capture all junta camps in Paletwa, one of the westernmost towns in Myanmar's Chin state.

Currently, all junta camps in western Paletwa have been captured, the group claimed.

Translated by RFA Burmese. Edited by Mike Finn.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia

AIR STRIKE ON MYANMAR VILLAGE KILLS 15: MEDIA



Photo: AFP

At least 15 people, including children, have been killed in an air strike on a village in northwestern Myanmar, local media said 7 January.

The country has been engulfed by increasingly vicious fighting, with the junta battling opponents in the north and the east.

The strike hit a village in Khampat Township, Tamu district, at around 10:15 am (0415 GMT).

Local media outlets put the death toll at 15 people, including children, with 20 wounded.

But two witnesses -- a man and a woman who asked to remain anonymous for safety -- told AFP the toll was higher.

"19 people were killed, including eight children," said the man, who said he saw a junta jet fighter overhead during the attack.

He said the first bombs targeted two churches in the village, and a second attack came as people fled the buildings.

"Most of them were killed outside the church area as they were running to escape," he said.

Women and children were among those killed in the attack, which was made more deadly because of the crowds, he said.

In total the jet dropped six bombs, he said.

"They targeted the two churches, but bombs hit outside the two churches, and hit some houses," he said.

Another device landed near the community's school, he added.

State media said late Sunday that reports of the attack were "fake news", with MRTV saying there had been no aircraft operating in the area at the time.

The village is under the control of a People's Defence Force (PDF) group, one of many that have sprung up to fight the junta.

The military has designated the groups as "terrorists".

On Sunday, a planned graduation ceremony for new recruits had been relocated to a nearby jungle.

"If they came to bomb our graduation area, we cannot blame them," the man said, referencing the army.

"But they bombed the wrong place and bombed public churches and areas."

He and the woman told AFP that 30 people were wounded.

She warned that the casualty rate could rise, with some people seriously hurt.

They were being treated at a clinic, she said, without giving further details.

AFP

NUG RAPS MYANMAR JUNTA OVER 'HORRIFIC' DEADLY AIR STRIKE IN SAGAING

The National Unity Government (NUG) issued a statement 9 January condemning a Myanmar junta air strike that killed 17 civilians including nine children in Sagaing's Kanan Village on 7 January.

The following is the text of the NUG's statement:

The Myanmar military launched a horrific air strike at Kanan village, Tamu Township, Tamu District, Sagaing Division, on the morning of January 7, 2024 as the Kanan villagers filled the streets with the lively atmosphere of their Sunday church gatherings.

According to the information from the ground at the time of this statement, a total of 17 civilians including 9 children aged between 5 to 17 years old lost their lives, and 19 people were injured. Based on reliable sources of information from the National Unity Government (NUG), from the day of the unlawful military coup in 2021 to December 31, 2023, 627 underage children and 1,017 women have been killed.

There have been 583 instances of air attacks on civilians, resulting in 897 fatalities and 958 injuries, 76 religious buildings and 52 schools were destroyed. The Myanmar military is experiencing heavy losses in all fronts, including politics, the military, and diplomacy, leading them to increasingly target civilians using disproportionately strong weapons.

The Myanmar military persistently commits egregious violations of international laws, encompassing war crimes and crimes against humanity, while consistently disregarding the 5 Points Consensus of ASEAN and UN Security Council Resolution 2669. These transgressions involve the heinous acts of murdering

and causing injuries to civilians, as well as the intentional targeting and destruction of properties. Such actions directly contravene numerous International and Regional Human Rights Treaties, Conventions on the Rights of Children, the Geneva Convention, and the Rome Statute. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has already called upon the Security Council to refer the Myanmar military's widespread and systematic attacks on civilians as war crimes and crimes against humanity to the International Criminal Court.

The National Unity Government (NUG) is committed to apprehending and holding accountable not only those directly responsible for the attacks but also those who supported or issued orders for such actions, utilizing the domestic justice system. The NUG also urges United Nations Member States to collectively take decisive action against the military council, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2669. This includes imposing stronger economic sanctions and formulating a new resolution to halt the import of jet fuels and weapons for the military. Furthermore, we call for collaborative actions to prosecute the Myanmar military using the universal jurisdiction mechanism, either through individual member states or via international and regional legal systems.

Courtesy of the National Unity Government

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NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT APPEALS FOR AID TO ADDRESS MYANMAR'S HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Myanmar's National Unity Government (NUG) is appealing to local, international aid organizations, and donor countries to help address the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, in a statement issued 12 January.

The following is the text of their statement:

People across Myanmar have been actively resisting the unlawful military coup since February 1, 2021. To suppress the resistance, the Myanmar military council has committed numerous human rights violations, resulting in grave humanitarian crises. Ever since the coup started, the Myanmar military used excessive force against unarmed peaceful demonstrators and when the civilians resorted to armed resistance to defend themselves, Myanmar military

escalated their ruthless attacks further. Myanmar military has engaged in extensive violence to weaken the revolution such as mass brutal killing of civilians, a destruction to cultural heritage sites, religious buildings, aerial bombardments of hospitals, schools, and public places and burning down villages throughout the country.

The terrorist Myanmar military council, that openly commits war crimes and crimes against humanity, weaponize the humanitarian aid for their political and military gains and hinders the delivery of aid to innocent civilians who are enduring the consequences of their brutal actions.

Due to these oppressive actions of Myanmar military council, the number of internally displaced



Photo: AFP

persons and those in need of humanitarian assistance is on the rise daily. As the number of territories under the control of the National Unity Government and allied ethnic revolutionary forces are increasing, local administration initiatives are being instituted in these areas. Myanmar military has amplified their targeted attacks towards the unarmed civilians and now more than 2.5 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.

There are now over 950,000 displaced persons in Sagaing, over 700,000 in Karen National Union (KNU) controlled areas, around 350,000 in Rakhine State and around 350,000 in Karenni State. Other states and regions also have several thousands of displaced persons. Both local and international humanitarian organisations are facing significant challenges in delivering essential aid such as food, medicine, and shelter to those in need, due to Myanmar military's blockade and restrictions.

Despite the efforts of the National Unity Gov-

ernment and revolutionary forces to safeguard civilians during the defensive resistance war, Myanmar military council is perpetrating aerial attacks, causing destruction and loss of civilian lives. As a result of Myanmar military council's arson attacks on civilian residences and villages, more than 90,000 private houses have been destroyed across the country, over 5,000 individuals have lost their lives, and about 4,000 suffered injuries due to Myanmar military's aerial bombings, indiscriminate shelling, and extrajudicial killings.

The revolutionary forces, along with the people of Myanmar, strongly urge against any humanitarian assistance operations collaboration with Myanmar military council, which has systemically and intentionally committed atrocities against innocent civilians.

Ensuring prompt assistance to those in need is crucial for the well-being of impacted communities. Therefore, in order to expedite the delivery of humanitarian aid to the displaced people, it is essential for local and international humanitarian organisations to coordinate with the National Unity Government and allied ethnic revolutionary forces, who have been seamlessly working to protect civilians, to facilitate the capacity building of local community-based organisations and civil society organisations, to implement the cross-border assistance delivery, to advocate neighbouring countries to allow such assistance, and to relax donors' rigorous financial procedures, and to increase the humanitarian support budget for Myanmar.

Based on the consensus of the people of Myanmar and ethnic revolutionary forces, the National Unity Government urges the international community to cooperate in solving the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar by imposing economic sanctions on terrorist Myanmar military, by reviewing and stopping international organisations' projects which favour the financial flow to the Myanmar military council, and by exerting political pressure to end the import of jet fuel in order to stop their devastating aerial bombings and heavy artillery attacks against unarmed civilians.

National Unity Government



TWO DAYS AFTER CHINESE BROKERED CEASEFIRE, FIGHTING ERUPTS IN NORTHERN SHAN STATE

Two days after a temporary ceasefire agreement between the Myanmar junta and the Three Brotherhood Alliance intense clashes erupted in Kyaukme Township, northern Shan State.

The conflict unfolded around 9 am on 13 January near the vicinity of Palaung Nyeinchanyay Hill, situated near Ward No. (9) in Kyaukme.

The Three Brotherhood Alliance forces made an announcement at approximately 1:00 pm on 13 January, stating that the Military Council had openly disregarded the agreement that was signed on 11 January in Kunming, Yunnan in China.

According to a local source, the hostilities began when soldiers from the Military Council's Battalions (501) and (502) based in Kyaukme launched an offensive on Palaung Nyeinchanyay Hill. This hill is also where the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and People's Defense Forces (PDF) are stationed. The area has historical significance as it was previously occupied by the Military Council.

The skirmishes persisted for at least two hours, as reported by local residents.

"PDFs are present in that area too. The junta initiated artillery shelling, and one projectile landed dangerously close to our ward. I was hesitant to leave the trench due to the fear induced by the widespread shelling," said a resident from Ward No. (9).

According to residents, people living in close proximity to Palaung Nyeinchanyay Hill in Kyaukme have reportedly fled due to the ongoing conflict. However, there are others who have chosen to remain and continue residing in the town.

Through the mediation of China, a ceasefire agreement was reached for the territories of the three

northern allies during a meeting conducted in Kunming on 10 and 11 January.

Following the discussions, the Three Brotherhood Alliance agreed to a ceasefire, and in response, the Military Council agreed to refrain from further hostilities. Additionally, it was agreed that the Military Council would abstain from employing their air force or artillery shelling.

Despite the Military Council's call for a ceasefire, the Three Brotherhood Alliance revealed on 12 January that the Military Council conducted airstrikes on territories held and controlled by the TNLA in northern Shan State.

As outlined in the agreement, ground contact battles were not envisaged. However, on 12 January at noon, the junta conducted five airstrikes on Kwalhal village in Namhsan township, which was under the occupation of the TNLA, resulting in the destruction of a tea leaf factory. Additionally, on the same day around 4:30 pm, due to the junta's airstrikes on Manli village in Namtu township, a school and three houses were reported to have been destroyed, the alliance reported.

Namhsan and Namtu townships are under the occupation and control of the TNLA.

Additionally, the junta conducted artillery shelling in Kyaukme, Mogok, and Hsipaw towns on 12 January.

In Rakhine State, where the Arakan Army (AA) operates, the junta initiated aerial attacks on Kyauktaw, Maungdaw, Minbya, Ann, and Kandaing townships on 12 January. The AA asserted that several houses were damaged, and there were reported civilian casualties resulting from the combined artillery and aerial assault.

TNLA RETURNS CAPTURED SOLDIERS TO JUNTA



TNLA fighters on the road. Photo: AFP

On 7 January at 11:00 p.m. the last remaining junta infantry battalion camp in Kutkai Town surrendered to the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), giving them full control of the town.

The TNLA had started attacking the Infantry Battalion 241 camp on 31 December 2023 and had to fight for eight days to gain control of the camp.

On 6 January, the TNLA offered the junta soldiers and their families in the camp the opportunity to surrender, according to a TNLA source.

They said: "Soldiers of the junta in the Infantry Battalion 241 camp ultimately capitulated last night [7 January]. Inside the camp, they raised a white flag as a sign of surrender. This morning, the surrendered soldiers were reportedly transported to Lashio."

Following the junta soldiers' surrender, the TNLA allowed all of them, over 300 soldiers, to leave the camp and return to the junta's Northeastern Military Command in Lashio, Shan State. The area covered by Northeastern Military Command includes all of

northern Shan State where the 1027 offensive against the junta is taking place.

Infantry Battalion 241 camp in Kutkai Town was the headquarters of the strategic commander overseeing the Junta's camps in Namhpatka, Tamornye, and Mone Se Town. It was equipped with a field artillery regiment and an army helipad.

The taking of Kutkai Town means that defence forces now control the main trade routes with China.

Fighting in the area of Kutkai escalated at the end of 2023 and residents have been evacuating since December 2023.

Kutkai is the seventh town in northern Shan State that the TNLA has taken control of as part of Operation 1027. The other towns that the TNLA now control are: Namhkam, Namhsan, Namtu, Monglon, Mantong, and Minengaw.

MYANMAR LEADER MEETS WITH ASEAN SPECIAL ENVOY



The Lao delegation with Min Aung Hlaing and other junta officials. Photo: AFP

Myanmar's leader met with the special envoy of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), state media said Thursday last week, with the regional bloc seeking to find a diplomatic solution to the country's conflict.

Myanmar's junta, which seized power in a 2021 coup, is facing its biggest threat yet, according to analysts, after a coalition of armed ethnic groups launched a sweeping northern offensive last year.

Army chief Min Aung Hlaing met Alounkeo Kittikhoun, ASEAN's special envoy, on Wednesday in the capital Naypyidaw.

The two discussed "efforts of the government to ensure peace and stability", state newspaper The New Global Light of Myanmar reported Thursday.

The meeting comes ahead of an ASEAN foreign ministers meeting later this month in Laos, this year's chair.

The bloc has so far failed to make substantial inroads into resolving the long-running conflict in member-state Myanmar.

No progress has been made towards implementing a five-point peace plan agreed three years ago, although former chair Indonesia welcomed "posi-

itive" talks with the main sides in November.

The junta was represented by "interlocutors" -- according to a statement at the time -- with Myanmar's generals barred from high-level ASEAN meetings.

Friction between ASEAN members escalated last year over the former Thai government's decision to meet with junta foreign minister Than Shwe.

Indonesia and Malaysia -- among the army's harshest critics within ASEAN - snubbed the meeting, while Singapore warned it was premature to engage the junta at such a high level.

Cambodia sent a junior foreign ministry official while China -- long a key supporter of the Myanmar military - dispatched Deng Xijun, its special envoy for Asian affairs.

The split was a further blow to ASEAN's faltering progress to defuse the crisis.

Fighting in northern Myanmar has only intensified.

The so-called "Three Brotherhood Alliance" -- a coalition of three ethnic armed groups -- have seized trading hubs and towns vital for the cash-strapped junta after launching their October offensive.

AFP

RENOWNED MYANMAR FILMMAKER SENTENCED TO LIFE BY JUNTA, FAMILY URGES SWIFT RELEASE



A Myanmar junta court has handed a life imprisonment sentence to Shin Daewe, a 50-year-old renowned filmmaker who has garnered numerous international awards, as confirmed by her cousin, Ko Myint Thu.

The North Dagon Military Tribunal, located in Insein Prison under the jurisdiction of the Military Council, imposed the sentence on 10 January. Shin Daewe was charged under Section 50 (j) and 54 (d) of the Counterterrorism Law, allegedly for possessing a drone used in film production.

“She is facing terrorist charges, and she has been sentenced to life imprisonment,” said Ko Myint Thu.

On 15 October, 2023, the Military Council arrested her while she was retrieving the filming drone she had purchased online at the bus station in North Okkalapa township, Yangon, according to a family member.

Following her arrest, she underwent interrogation for over three months, and was subsequently sentenced by the military court on 10 January.

“I have not yet had the opportunity to meet her in person. The details of the sentencing were reported by the community close to the prison,” said Ko Myint Thu.

Ko Myint Thu mentioned that he has heard that Shin Daewe’s health is good. Despite both being in their 50s, Shin Daewe also reportedly instructed her husband to prioritize his health.

Ko Myint Thu emphasized his inability to comprehend the severity of the Military Council’s decision, particularly considering Shin Daewe’s reputation as a high-caliber female documentary filmmaker and philanthropist.

“Our family simply wishes to see her resume her work as usual. We eagerly await the day when our sister will return home. I appeal for her prompt release,” said Ko Myint Thu.

Shin Daewe has garnered numerous prestigious awards at international film festivals for her outstanding documentaries. She has made approximately 20 films, a notable portion of which have received international recognition and awards.

NEARLY 3 DOZEN POLITICAL PRISONERS DIED IN MYANMAR JAILS IN 2023

Some 34 political prisoners died in military junta's prisons across Myanmar in 2023, with 18 killed inside jails and 16 others dying due to a lack of medical treatment, a human rights monitoring group said Tuesday.

The use of torture against inmates has increased in the wake of the military's February 2021 coup d'état, with some political prisoners killed after being accused of escape during transfer to other detention centers, according to the Myanmar Political Prisoners Network and the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

A report issued by the Myanmar Political Prisoners Network on Dec. 31, 2023, based its findings on inmate casualty numbers in Myanmar's most notorious jails in Patheingyi, Daik-U, Myingyan, Monywa, Magway, Tharyarwady, Insein and Kalay townships.

Thike Tun Oo, a member of the organization's leading committee, told Radio Free Asia that the ruling junta has stepped up its oppression of political prisoners as it loses ground to resistance forces throughout the country.

"While the military council is being defeated in the battles, they have seen prisons as battlegrounds, and they oppressed political prisoners more and more in 2023," he said.

FORMER RAPPER

San Linn San, a 29-year-old former rapper and singer, was one of the prisoners who died from a lack of proper medical treatment.

After the February 2021 coup, he left the entertainment industry to participate in various anti-regime activities, and joined a rebel fighting group.



Photo: AFP

On Sept. 24, 2023, the junta said it arrested San Linn San because he was a member of the anti-regime Black Dragon Force in Pyapon in Ayeyarwady region. He was sentenced to death in October because the group was accused of killing local administrators under the junta. He was later transferred to a jail in Patheingyi.

San Linn San had to have surgery for a build-up of cerebrospinal fluid deep inside his brain from being tortured at an interrogation center, said Ko Shine, a close family friend. He continued to suffer from the condition while in prison and died there.

“When he suffered this serious injury, he was not allowed to go for medical treatments outside the prison,” Ko Shine said. “His head was like a sponge.”

Myanmar’s Prisons Act of 1894 stipulates the right of inmates to obtain medical treatment without delay.

HIGH FEVER

Cherry Win, a 23-year-old who opposed junta rule and was sentenced to 10 years in prison under

the country’s Counter-Terrorism Law, died on Dec. 21, 2023, while suffering from a severe fever because she was not allowed to seek outside medical treatment, according to the sources with knowledge of the situation.

The young woman’s house in Demoso township in Kayah state was burned down amid fighting between armed resistance groups by junta forces in mid-2021, forcing her and her family to flee to safety, said a relative who declined to be named for safety reasons.

Junta authorities arrested Cherry Win in Yangon just before she planned to go to Singapore for a job, and accused her of having contact with anti-junta People’s Defense Forces.

“We did not know about her death immediately,” the relative said. “We got this news from RFA radio about 10 days after her death. It was confusing for us because we did not see her dead body, and [we believed that] the military council might have burned it.”

A lawyer told RFA on condition of anonymity that the junta does not inform family members about prisoner deaths, or show their bodies to them, as the authorities are required to do.

“No one can say what the law is at present because the military council has ignored laws and regulations,” he said.

An official at the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, a Thailand-based prisoner monitoring group, who was imprisoned by the junta in Myanmar, told RFA on condition of anonymity that he and others were tortured at an interrogation center.

“We felt relief once we were in prison, and I believed I would not die in the prison because I was liberated from the torture,” he said. “However, some prisoners were reportedly killed outside the prison.”

RFA could not reach officials at Myanmar’s Prison Department for comment.

Kyaw Zaw, spokesman for the President’s Office under the shadow National Unity Government, said officials are trying to take legal action against those responsible for the deaths of political prisoners that have occurred during the military regime.

As of Tuesday, the junta had arrested nearly 25,800 people and detained over 19,900 since the 2021 coup, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

*Translated by Aung Naing for RFA Burmese.
Edited by Roseanne Gerin and Malcolm Foster.*

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia



BURMESE WOMEN'S UNION LAUDS WOMEN'S ACTIONS AGAINST JUNTA IN 2023

Myanmar's women continue to be active in strikes, demonstrations, and projects aimed at getting rid of the military junta, according to a report for 2023 published 9 January by the Burmese Women's Union (BWU).

The "Women News Analysis Paper January to December 2023" looks at the challenges women faced last year as a result of military junta actions. Women faced threats both in terms of their physical wellbeing and also in terms of economic hardship.

As the paper notes, throughout 2023 it was found that women's political participation in the form of women's strikes to topple the junta was not fading away. Women led march-protests were held in 2023 in Launglon township, Dawei district, with the slogan

"The pen is mightier than the sword, but the mightiest is the power of women," organized by the women's union called the Hnin Si Yaung. Similarly, a women's group in Sagaing continued to carry out the campaigns in 2023, with the slogan "Red blood of peacocks, Victory banners high! Saviors none we seek, Villagers folks as we are! Golden Yekyi will unfurl the flag of victory, too! Our fervor shall never die. We of the golden bloodline!"

In addition, women actively participated in the fight against the junta, some demonstrating their determination by taking up arms.

Notably, Chin women fighters in the Chin National Defense Force (CNDF) courageously fought on the front lines, while women affiliated with the Manda-



Young female PDF fighter in Mandalay Region. Photo: AFP

lay People Defense Force (PDF Mandalay) played a vital part in the revolution, rallying the public to seize the territory. Media coverage has helped publicize stories of women taking up weapons to fight.

In 2023, various organizations, including women-led groups in Myanmar and independent entities, actively participated in the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence (GBV). This initiative witnessed the active engagement of IDPs. The Kachin Gender Star Group (KGSG), for instance, conducted events near Mai Ja Yang in Kachin State, involving 300 IDP women across four different locations. Approximately 200 migrant workers joined the 16-day campaign in Mae Sot, Thailand. Simultaneously, women's alliance groups organized a protest participating in the 16-day Campaign in Yinmarbin township, Sagaing Region.

As the paper makes clear, safety and security for women in Myanmar deteriorated significantly in 2023, as demonstrated by widespread human rights

violations (HRVs), particularly instances of sexual harassment and assault across the country. Among the various forms of abuse documented, sexual harassment and assault against women emerged as a disturbingly prevalent and persistent issue. It was reported that those responsible for such acts included not only members of the junta but also members of the revolutionary forces who engaged in sexual harassment and assault against women during the conflict.

Numerous cases also emerged in which women were detained, reportedly for political reasons, and according to the data released by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) and the BWU's data collection, the junta detained 541 women between 1 January and 31 December 2023. The majority of these women were accused of disseminating false information on social media. Some were detained allegedly having communication or in contact with the National Unity Government (NUG), revolutionary groups, and other resistance armed forces. Notably, the majority of women arrested in 2023 were from the Mandalay Region.

Within a timeframe of one year, from 1 January to 31 December 2023, a total of 392 women were brutally killed while 318 women were detained. The circumstances surrounding the fatalities varied with 130 women killed by airstrikes, 147 killed by artillery shelling, one killed by a bomb explosion, 20 during arrests or while in custody, another one killed by landmine, one was subjected to harsh treatments or torture by the terrorist military, 35 were burned, 3 were raped and killed, 47 were shot dead, and five were killed by headshots. The majority of those sentenced and killed were from the Sagaing Region.

According to the information that the BWU gathered, the health, physical, and mental well-being of women political prisoners currently detained was at a critical stage, with the added hardship of insufficient access to essential healthcare services in the prisons they are held.

The paper also covers the economic hardships that women face, and the specific challenges faced in conflict zones and in internally displaced people's camps. The full report is available from the BWU.



UNIVERSITY STUDENT POPULATION HAS PLUNGED 90% SINCE COUP

Myanmar's university student population has plummeted by more than 90% since the military's takeover nearly three years ago, according to statistics published by the junta's department of education.

Students and instructors interviewed by RFA Burmese, who spoke on condition of anonymity citing security concerns, said the decline in enrollment numbers reflects their choice to boycott the junta's education system and join the resistance movement.

On Nov. 23, the junta re-opened 47 universities across the country and 24,243 students enrolled for the 2023-24 academic years, according to statistics published by the Department of Higher Education.

But the Department of Basic Education said that 161,850 students took the university entrance exam during the 2022-23 academic year – 109,851 of whom passed.

The numbers from the two departments show that only around 22% of students who passed the entrance exam ended up enrolling at a university.

The rate of enrollment also reflects a staggering drop from that of the year prior to the military's Feb. 1, 2021, coup.

During the 2019-20 academic year, when the civilian-led National League for Democracy was still in power, 910,229 registered for the university entrance exam, of whom 291,798 passed. Of those who passed, 260,173 enrolled, or nearly 90%.

The numbers show that, under the junta, university enrollment has declined by more than 68%, while the population of university students contracted

by more than 90%.

The decline also comes despite junta exhortations for students to attend universities published in state media.

HIGHER EDUCATION 'BASICALLY STOPPED' UNDER JUNTA

When interviewed by RFA, students and instructors said that they can no longer expect to receive or provide an education that differentiates between right and wrong under the regime, and therefore had decided to suspend their studies.

Others said they could not bring themselves to attend or teach at a university amid widespread suffering in the country and would rather forgo their studies or resign than allow the junta to claim that it had returned enrollment rates to the levels seen prior to the coup d'etat nearly three years ago.

"I feel ashamed to attend university while many families have lost their homes and family members due to the junta," said one student from the University of East Yangon, who is boycotting classes and has vowed not to return until the military is removed from power.

"As a member of the young generation, I will fight to remove the military dictatorship however I can. So, I decided not to attend university."

A first year student told RFA that while some students continue to attend university classes, many others have left.

"It is their choice to do so," the student said.

Meanwhile, an associate university professor

who has joined Myanmar's anti-junta Civil Disobedience Movement, or CDM, boycotting state employment said that the country's higher education system had essentially ground to a halt under military rule.

"Around 60% of teachers at this level have joined the CDM," the professor said. "In reality, [the junta] aren't able to open colleges and universities [due to enrollment declines and boycotting teachers], but they did so anyway."

The professor acknowledged that "tens of thousands" of students are attending classes at the country's major universities in cities such as Dagon, Yadanabon, Mawlamyine, Magway and Monywa.

"But the country's higher education system has basically stopped due to the CDM of university teachers and students since the coup," they said.

Other sources told RFA that the junta decided to reopen schools despite having so few students enrolled in a bid to show that a sense of normalcy had returned to the country under its watch.

'KNOWLEDGE NO LONGER PROTECTED'

An official with the shadow National Unity Government, or NUG, Federal Democratic Education Cooperation Network told RFA that a genuine education is "impossible" in Myanmar while a military regime that routinely persecutes its opponents is in charge.

"Knowledge is no longer protected under the regime," the official said. "We expect an education system that differentiates between good and evil, but this is no longer possible. We can't expect such an education amid an environment filled with injustice and corruption."

In the meantime, the NUG's Ministry of Education has launched several online programs to support an interim education for CDM students who have boycotted their schools since the coup.

An official from the ministry told RFA that students who are unable to take advantage of the interim education programs due to security concerns will be given a chance to enroll in universities in the country's post-revolution period.

"[They] will be allowed to join their original university, while assistance will be provided for those who are unable to rejoin their original universities to attend public online universities and other classes," the official said.

Attempts by RFA to contact the junta's Department of Higher Education for comment on the state of the country's university enrollment went unanswered.

Translated by Aung Naing. Edited by Joshua Lipes and Malcolm Foster.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia

MIZORAM CHIEF MINISTER SAYS NO TO END OF FREE MOVEMENT BETWEEN INDIA AND MYANMAR

The Chief Minister of Mizoram State in India, on the border of Myanmar, has rejected the Indian Government's plans to erect a border fence and stop freedom of movement between the two countries.

Currently, the 40-year-old Free Movement Regime (FMR) at the border allows any person living within 16km of either side of the 1,643-km-long India-Myanmar border to cross into each other's territory visa-free. They just need to be able to produce a border pass valid for at least a year and they can then spend up to two weeks in the other country.

On 2 January 2023, the Indian Government announced that it would rescind the FMR.

"We are going to end the FMR along the Indo-Myanmar border soon. We are going to put fencing along the entire border. The fencing will be completed in the next four-and-a-half years. Anyone coming through will have to...get a visa", an Indian government representative said to firstpost.com media.

After meeting with Indian Prime Minister Mr. Modi and other leaders in New Delhi, Laldhuoma, the newly elected Mizoram State Chief Minister who took up his post on 8 December 2023, held a press conference on 6 January.

At the press conference, he said that he opposed the government's plans to rescind the FMR and

build a border fence. He said that he would use central government funds to assist both Myanmar refugees who have fled conflict and people displaced by fighting in neighbouring Manipur State.

He added that a border fence would be an acceptance of the British colonizers' blunder of dividing the Mizo people's territory between India and Burma when they drew up the border between the two countries.

According to unconfirmed reports, over 31,000 refugees from Myanmar have sought shelter in Mizoram since the February 2021 coup in Myanmar.

According to Chief Minister Laldhuoma, the Indian Home Minister, Amit Shah, told him not to return refugees to Myanmar until the situation there had returned to normal.

In contrast to Chief Minister Laldhuoma, politicians in the Indian states of Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, which also share a border with Myanmar, are increasingly demanding that a border fence be built. In September 2023 the Manipur Chief Minister, N Biren Singh, called on the central government to rescind the FMR to curb "illegal immigration."

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CHINA MILITARY TELLS US WILL 'NEVER COMPROMISE' ON TAIWAN



China has its sights on Taiwan. Photo: AFP

Chinese military officials told US counterparts at talks last week that Beijing will “never compromise” on the issue of Taiwan and urged them to stop “provocative actions” in the South China Sea, the defence ministry said Wednesday last week.

China “stressed that it will never compromise or back down on the Taiwan issue”, the ministry said in a readout of the talks in Washington, held Monday and Tuesday, urging the United States to “stop arming Taiwan”.

“China urged the United States to reduce its military deployment and provocative actions in the South China Sea and stop supporting violations and provocations by individual countries,” the statement continued.

“The United States should fully understand the root causes of maritime and air security issues, strictly rein in its frontline troops, and stop with the exaggeration and hype,” it added.

“The Chinese side also elaborated its solemn position and major concerns on issues involving China’s core interests and international hotspot issues,” it said.

President Joe Biden and Xi Jinping agreed in November to restart military talks between the countries, put on hold for more than a year.

Top US military officer General Charles “CQ” Brown then spoke with China’s General Liu Zhenli in December, discussing “the importance of working together to responsibly manage competition”, according to Washington.

This week’s talks, held at the Pentagon, were led by US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Chase and China’s Major General Song Yan-chao, Washington said.

“China expressed its willingness to develop healthy and stable military-to-military relations with the United States on the basis of equality and respect,” the Chinese side said in its readout.

“The United States should face China’s concerns squarely and take more actions that are conducive to the development of relations between the two militaries,” it added.

AFP

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BANGLADESH'S HASINA CELEBRATES 'ABSOLUTE VICTORY' AFTER POLLS WITHOUT OPPOSITION

Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Monday last week dismissed the opposition's criticism of the country's general election as "illegitimate" as she celebrated securing her fifth term in power.

Hasina has presided over breakneck economic growth in a country once beset by grinding poverty, but her government has been accused of rampant human rights abuses and a ruthless crackdown on dissent.

"The election was free and fair," Hasina told reporters in her first comments since the vote on Sunday, where her party took three-quarters of seats in parliament after polls boycotted by the opposition, with the turnout a meagre 41.8 percent.

"If any party does not participate in the election, it does not mean there is no democracy," she said, adding that "those who want to criticise can criticise".

The opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which has seen its ranks diminished by mass arrests, called a general strike and, along with dozens of others, refused to participate.

Senior BNP leader Moyeen Khan called it a "fake election" and told reporters in Dhaka on Monday that the government was "illegitimate".

Hasina, 76, branded the BNP "a terrorist organisation".

Britain and the United States slammed the vote, but India endorsed it.

"The United States shares the view with other observers that these elections were not free or fair and we regret that not all parties participated," US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said in Washington.

Like India, the United States has largely had a warm working relationship with Hasina, seeing her



● Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina. Photo: AFP

as pro-business and like-minded on opposing Islamist extremism, but Washington has not shied away from criticism on rights issues.

'NO CREDIBLE' OPPOSITION

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres "calls on all parties to reject all forms of violence and to ensure that human rights and the rule of law are fully respected," spokeswoman Florencia Soto Nino said Monday in a statement.

Bangladesh was the first in key South Asian elections this year where embattled opposition parties face a tough battle -- including in Pakistan, where jailed former prime minister Imran Khan has been rejected as a candidate, and in neighbouring India.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said Monday he had called Hasina and congratulated her on her "historic" victory, praising the "successful conduct" of the polls.

Election Commission secretary Moniruzzaman Talukder said Hasina's party had won 222 seats in Sunday's polls, but the support of other lawmakers means her actual control over the 300-seat parliament is even higher, analysts said.

"This is a one-party parliament," Ali Riaz of Il-

linois State University told AFP, adding that "only the allies of the Awami League had the opportunity to participate".

The Jatiya Party, which won 11 seats, is a long-time ally of Hasina's Awami League, as are many of the 61 independent candidates, said Mubashar Hasan, a political scientist at the University of Oslo.

"This election has legitimised one-party rule in the country with no credible and effective opposition in the parliament," Hasan told AFP.

"Almost all the independent candidates who won the parliamentary seats are also part of the Awami League."

Among the victors was Bangladesh cricket team captain Shakib Al Hasan, who won a seat for the ruling party.

Hasina's party avoided fielding candidates in a few constituencies, in an apparent effort to avoid the legislature being branded a one-party institution.

"It was a farce election, like a local neighbourhood or a market association election," said Mohammad Shahin, 42, who pulls a rickshaw.

Opposition activists staged a protest Monday in Dhaka, wearing black gags over their mouths to condemn the election.

'ABSOLUTE VICTORY'

BNP head Tarique Rahman, speaking from Britain where he lives in exile, called the result "a disgrace to the democratic aspirations of Bangladesh" in a social media post, alleging he had seen "disturbing pictures and videos" backing his claims.

Meenakshi Ganguly, from Human Rights Watch, said the government had failed to reassure opposition supporters that the polls were fair, warning that "many fear a further crackdown".

Envoys from China and Russia were among the first to congratulate Hasina, visiting her at home on Monday and praising her "absolute victory", her office said in a statement.

Beijing's ambassador Yao Wen praised a "long-established friendship" with Dhaka in a statement, underlining the deepening ties during Hasina's 15-year-long rule.

Politics in the country of 170 million people has long been dominated by the rivalry between Hasina, the daughter of the country's founding leader, and two-time premier Khaleda Zia, wife of a former military ruler.

Hasina has been the decisive victor since returning to power in a 2009 landslide, with two subsequent polls accompanied by widespread irregularities and accusations of rigging.

Zia, 78, was convicted of graft in 2018 and is now in ailing health at a hospital in Dhaka. BNP head Rahman is her son.



AFP

THE PRICE OF PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT: PAYING FOR THE UN

The UN is tasked with tackling many urgent issues of global importance, from humanitarian crises to peacekeeping operations and the climate crisis. This all comes at a cost, but not as much as you might think. With the 2024 budget recently approved, we crunch the numbers.

Just before Christmas, the 193 Member States that make up the UN General Assembly signed off a \$3.59 billion budget to cover the expenses of the UN Secretariat in 2024. That's a lot of money but, as UN Deputy Spokesperson Farhan Haq explained to UN News, there's plenty of bang for each buck spent.

Farhan Haq: When you add up the regular UN Secretariat and peacekeeping budgets, the annual average cost of the UN for each person on the planet is about \$1.25; that's about the cost of a bag of chips in New York.

Aside from the U.N. Secretariat, the United

Nations also comprises a vast range of agencies, funds, programmes and peacekeeping missions to deal with all kinds of issues, which are funded separately, and which are not included in the \$3.59 billion budget.

At the high end you have agencies such as the World Food Programme, the refugee agency (UNHCR) and the children's fund (UNICEF), which have budgets in the billions of dollars. Smaller agencies deal with, for example, maritime affairs, world tourism or civil aviation, and have budgets set accordingly. Member States join and pay dues for these agencies on a voluntary basis.

UN NEWS: HOW ARE MEMBER STATES' FOR THE UN BUDGET DUES WORKED OUT?

Farhan Haq: The amount paid is based on a complex formula that includes the size of each country's economy [other elements include the country's



Photo: UN News

external debt, income per capital, and level of development]. The amounts range from a high of 22 per cent of the budget, paid by the United States, to 0.001 per cent, paid by the least developed countries. [Find out how much your country paid in 2023 in UN dues here]

UN NEWS: WHAT HAPPENS IF A COUNTRY DOESN'T PAY ITS UN DUES?

Farhan Haq: If the amount that a country owes is equal to what they were assessed to pay for the previous two years, they lose their vote in the UN General Assembly. They don't get that vote back unless the General Assembly makes a special decision, or they pay enough to get below the two-year threshold, so they try to avoid owing that much.

UN NEWS: DOES THE BUDGET KEEP GOING UP EVERY YEAR?

Obviously, because of things like inflation, the budget might increase in nominal terms, but in real terms, there are many times when the United Nations cuts on expenses so that there is no overall real growth. On the other hand, dealing with crises such as the COVID-19 epidemic can add to expenses, in which case you can see a real rise in the budget.



UN NEWS: WITH SO MUCH MONEY CHANGING HANDS, HOW DOES THE UN HANDLE FRAUD AND WASTE?

Farhan Haq: We have external and internal auditors, such as the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services, that investigates allegations of internal fraud or corruption.

But the main method of oversight is ultimately through the Member States of the United Nations, which approve the annual budget and make sure that the expenses that the UN pays match up with its goals.

The United Nations tries to use all of its money in ways that are verifiable. We have oversight at our peacekeeping operations, to ensure that all of the countries that contribute troops and equipment are reimbursed for the work that they do, and, when humanitarian aid goes out to countries, we try to put checks in place to make sure that all of the aid goes to where it is needed, and is not diverted.

UN NEWS: WHAT IS THE COST OF HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS?

Farhan Haq: In 2021 [on top of the regular budget], we appealed for an extra \$3.77 billion to help 174 million people in 60 countries.

That was crucial life-saving aid, and yet we received a little less than half of that; with some appeals only between 20 or 30 per cent of our expenses are met. It really depends; with some crises, that get the most attention worldwide, we get all of the money we're asking for. But in others that are not as visible in the news get much, much less.

Humanitarian relief falls into a few basic categories, but the main ones have to do with food, drinkable water, shelter, and different assets that can help people survive. Whether it's mosquito nets in some countries or winter clothing in others, we try to get it to people as efficiently as possible.

We don't see humanitarian aid as simply an expenditure. It's an investment in people, and a sign that we're not giving up on those who have a crucial role to play in building their own country.

We need to create a better world where people can take care of themselves. And that's what we try to do with the money we spend; when you invest a dollar in the education of a girl, you're investing in someone who can create a better future for herself and for her community.

Courtesy of UN News



Photo: Drzayar Min

SHAN STATE

Junta families and workers fleeing northern Shan State

People affiliated with the junta, including soldiers' and police officers' families, living in Lashio, Kyaukme, Muse, Hsipaw, and Momeik towns in northern Shan State have been evacuating.

According to residents, personnel associated with the regime, such as municipal and general administration staff, the family of the regional commander, and some United Nations (UN) and International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO) staff, have been relocating from Lashio where the Northeastern Military Command is based, to destinations including Mandalay, Taunggyi, and Yangon, since early January.

"Every wife, including the regional commander's spouse, has left. Everyone, including EPC and traffic police, has relocated," said a female resident of Lashio.

Similarly, in Kyaukme, family members and individuals associated with the regime have fled to cities where conflicts have not erupted. The departmental offices in Kyaukme were said to have been closed since last November.

"The wife of the Battalion 502 commander fled to Pyin Oo Lwin on 4 January. The army's defenses were significantly strengthened, and dispersed soldiers were brought back to the base camp in Kyaukme. Some military families are still present in the camp in Kyaukme," said a resident of Kyaukme.

Following the departure of military families and a majority of employees aligned with the junta, security measures have been heightened, and defences are being put in place in Kyaukme Town at Military Op-

eration Command No. 1, Light Infantry Battalion 501, Light Infantry Battalion 502, Field Artillery Regiment 352, as well as township and district police offices.

In Muse on the border with China families of police officers and employees associated with the military junta have been relocating to other cities since last November. Some employees who are unable to move are reportedly choosing to rent houses independently, instead opting to live in housing provided by the junta, according to local residents.

"Most personnel have relocated. Families that were previously residing in government housing are no longer there. They have opted to rent houses outside," said a resident of Muse.

Likewise, in Momeik and Hsipaw towns, the families of police personnel and military junta employees fled to other cities in January. Others have vacated their housing in the police station compound and are now renting houses in the town, according to residents.

They also said that there is ongoing fighting in the area of Momeik and Hsipaw towns which has caused civilians from surrounding villages to also flee.

Though there has been no fighting near Lashio Town it is believed that the failure of the third round of talks between the junta and the Three Brotherhood Alliance has prompted residents, including military families and junta personnel, to flee to other cities.

Some Lashio residents have reportedly chosen to remain in the town, but many are concerned that fighting may soon break out in the area.

On 7 January, joint forces successfully captured Military Operation Command No. 16 and gained full control of Hsenwi Town, located just 20 miles away from the Northeastern Military Command in Lashio Town.



MYANMAR JUNTA AND THAILAND DISCUSS TO COLLABORATE TO COMBAT ONLINE GAMBLING AND ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES ALONG BORDER

In a collaborative effort to combat online gambling and scams along the Myanmar-Thai border near Myawaddy, Myanmar junta chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing engaged in discussions with Thailand's General Songwit Noonpackdee, Chief of Defence Forces of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, through a video conference, according to Myanmar junta controlled newspapers.

The leaders emphasized joint efforts in eradicating illegal activities, including drug trade and terrorism, as well as enhancing peace and stability in border areas, reported the newspapers.

During the talks, the officials exchanged views on strengthening relations and cooperation between the two countries and armed forces. Both nations also committed to bolstering humanitarian measures and discussed initiatives to prevent forest fires and transboundary haze pollution at the Myanmar-Laos-Thai border areas.

In a related development, despite the recent crackdown by Brotherhood Alliance's Operation 1027 in northern Shan State, Chinese syndicates reportedly maintain control over the Shwe Kokko complex, Myawaddy Township in Karen (Kayin) State, the BNI reported citing Karen Information Center.

The Karen Border Guard Force (BGF) and Chinese entrepreneurs are said to continue operating these businesses near the Thailand-Myanmar border. Local reports suggest that the operations of these alleged mafia establishments remain undisturbed.

HOPES AND FEARS SEEN AS MYANMAR JUNTA EASES FOREX RULES TO RAISE FOREIGN CURRENCY

At the end of last year, weeks before the third anniversary of the 2021 military coup that plunged Myanmar into chaos and war, the junta-controlled central bank took the rare step of freeing up its strict foreign exchange controls.

The Dec. 6 move by the Central Bank of Myanmar would mean that “buyers and sellers can set exchange rates by themselves depending on the market trends,” the official Global New Light of Myanmar reported.

Analysts say the partial liberalization allowing exporters to convert foreign currency into the domestic kyat at better rates reflected desperation for foreign currency needed to import materials to lift flagging exports and manufacturing.

Western sanctions on military-owned firms have started to pinch income, while the shadow op-

position has worked to deny the major military-owned conglomerates revenue through boycotts of products and services.

As economic, political and military pressures mounted in 2023, the military regime tried to dampen demand for foreign currencies, cracked down on black market trading in a campaign that saw 140 money changer licenses revoked last year.

The new policy marked a U-turn by the military regime, which had tightened forex controls several times since the Feb. 1, 2021 overthrow of the country’s elected government, shifting from its predecessors’ managed floating exchange rate system to tighter administrative controls.

“Previously, the military junta was maintaining what they call a managed float that was trying to control the exchange rate between the Myanmar curren-



Photo: AFP

cy, the kyat, and the U.S. dollar in particular, trying to keep it within a certain range and intervening in the markets if the range got too high or too low,” said Michael Martin, a consultant and scholar on Myanmar.

“It helped provide predictability for trade purposes and investment purposes,” he told Radio Free Asia.

“Getting rid of that means they’ve introduced a level of uncertainty for traders in import and exporters for investors ... and for the general public as well,” added Martin, who covered Myanmar for the U.S. Congressional Research Service before his retirement.

Junta Deputy Information Minister Major Gen. Zaw Min Tun was quoted by state-owned media as saying the relaxation of certain forex controls was intended “to prioritize production sectors for the development of the country, while promoting the export sector.”

INFLATIONARY PRESSURE?

The regime spokesman also said the military government expected the easing of controls would

bring in more hard currency through remittances from migrant workers abroad and the export sector.

A key change implemented in December relaxed administrative controls forcing businesses to exchange foreign currency export revenue to Myanmar’s kyat at an overvalued “official” exchange rate. The policy allowed regime-linked entities and individuals to arbitrage between the official rate of 2,000 kyat to the U.S. dollar and the black market rate of more than 3,000 kyat.

Under the new rules, the 50 percent of the export revenue received from exports that traders had to exchange at the official rate of 2,100 kyat to the dollar was reduced to 35 percent of the export revenue.

The tight control on foreign currencies has caused significant losses for exporters and importers, and some of them have suspended their business or reduced their export volume – causing prices of fuel, hard currency, gold and commodities to soar.

A rice merchant in Muse at the China-Myanmar border said traders are scrambling to adjust to the latest of frequent policy shifts.

“Exporters have seen positive outcomes. However, import items depend on the current exchange rate. So, we cannot imagine the possible market,” said the merchant.

“Under the new exchange rate, the exporters will get benefits and opportunities, while importers will be at risk of losses. Hard currency trade will decline,” an import/export businessman from the commercial capital Yangon told RFA Burmese on condition of anonymity.

Martin said the new forex strategy could buy short-term stability while storing up greater risks for Myanmar and its people.

“Temporarily, it’s a relief valve, but now they’re going to have to use more and more money,” he said.

“Another implication of that is if you’re circulating more and more money to get what you need, more money running around trying to buy the same number of goods, prices tend to go up ... you can potentially get an inflationary spiral.

Reported by RFA Burmese and Lauren Kim. Translated by Aung Naing. Written by Paul Eckert.



Courtesy of Radio Free Asia

MRF SAYS 70% OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCE EXPORT EARNINGS WILL BE SPENT FOR FUEL IMPORTS



Photo: AFP

The Myanmar Rice Federation (MRF) said that 70% of the earnings from the export of rice and broken rice would be used only for spending on diesel fuel imports.

The Union of Myanmar Federation of Chamber of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI) issued its circular in December last year which says that if the exporters import fuel by themselves 70% of their export earnings must be used for fuel import bills from their FE accounts.

The companies which have export earnings in their FE accounts may import fuel and they must be paid from 70% of their export earnings from these FE accounts.

The MRF said that this system was directly connecting exporters and fuel importers which would

benefit exports, stability in the fuel market and the exchange rate.

The Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM) under control of the Military Council also sold over US\$51 million in the FE market for those who have to use FE for their imports.

The negotiations are underway with exporters for setting the exchange rate and to spend 70% of export earnings from agricultural produce exports such as rice, broken rice, pulses and beans and corn for payments of fuel import bills.

In the open market of FE, which is out of the ambit of CBM, the US dollar exchange rate is stable at around 3,500 Kyats against the dollar currently.

BETWEEN CHINA AND THE US, TRADE TAKES A DIFFERENT ROUTE



Chinese cars ready for export. Photo; AFP

Are the US and Chinese economies on the verge of decoupling? Trade data might suggest so, as the Asian giant, Washington's largest trading partner for a decade, has been supplanted by Mexico and is seeing its market share shrink.

"Decoupling" or "derisking" vis-à-vis China are themes repeated over and over by President Joe Biden's administration, but also by his Republican rivals, led by Donald Trump, in this general election year during which China is likely to be the main foreign policy topic.

But the reality is not necessarily so obvious, analysts say, pointing to the growing complexity of supply chains which make it more difficult to identify the trade flows between the world's two largest economies.

On the face of it, there can be no doubt the divergence of the US and Chinese economies is underway; in absolute terms, Chinese imports have not fallen particularly sharply, but regarding market share the decline is significant.

China's share of US imports fell from 22 percent in 2017 to 16 percent today, according to Caroline Freund, an economist specialising in international trade at the University of California.

"That's a really sharp decline in China's share of US imports," she told AFP. "It takes it back to the level China was in 2007, before the global financial crisis."

"Decoupling is definitely happening," she said, adding this isn't necessarily due to shrinking imports from China, but rather the result of a more rapid expansion of trade with other partners like Mexico.

Trade data published by the US Department of Commerce show a more marked increase in Mexican imports, benefiting in particular from the US-Mexico-Canada agreement, or USMCA.

But Mexico is far from alone.

Asian countries -- and Vietnam in particular -- are also benefiting greatly from the redefinition of trans-Pacific trade.

“Yes, Mexico has captured some of that, but the majority of the relocating of production away from China, is now occurring in Taiwan, South Korea, India, Vietnam,” former Mexican ambassador to Washington, Arturo Sarukhan, told AFP.

The main reason for the shift, according to Dragoman Global analyst Henry Storey, is that these countries take advantage of their proximity to China, and are therefore able to attract Chinese investment.

INVESTING TO CIRCUMVENT

Vietnam in particular has seen its exports to the United States soar in recent years, rising from \$21 billion in 2012 to \$136 billion in 2022, to become one of its major trading partners, although the majority of operations there are actually final assembly.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen visited the Southeast Asian nation last summer to stress the importance of Vietnam in US supply chains without China, underscoring the dramatic change in America’s trading relationships.

While the symbol of this visit was a photo of Yellen on an electric scooter assembled in Vietnam, it later transpired that most its components had come from China, the US press discovered afterwards.

It is difficult to trace the origin of products entering the United States, even though assembly is most often the stage at which the famous “made in” label is applied.

And so Chinese companies can often get around trade restrictions.

“Although China is losing market share, I think overall its exports are still trending very strongly,” said Storey from Dragoman Global.

“Since Trump’s tariffs were imposed in 2018, the fastest growing area of exports is actually the central and western provinces of China,” he added.

“The value added share of US imports from China has fallen less than the direct imports,” said Freund from the University of California. “So we’re getting indirect imports from China via places like Mexico and Vietnam.”

This has had a knock-on effect: Chinese investment in Mexico, which until now has been very low, is now rising sharply, causing concern in Washington.

“Mexico is an outlier if you compare it to the rest of Latin America because the Chinese footprint in Mexico is nowhere close to what it is in South American countries that are commodity exporters,” said Sarukhan, the former ambassador.

Although the country is not a commodity exporter, there has nevertheless been “an increase in Chinese investment in Mexico,” he added.

Washington has been paying close attention to this growing relationship.

During a visit to Mexico City in early December, Janet Yellen agreed with Economy Minister Raquel Buenrostro Sanchez to set up a US-Mexican working group to evaluate Chinese investment in the country, particularly in sectors deemed key by the United States.

AFP

Penrose Thitsa

ASTUTE ANALYTICA UNVEILS MYANMAR ENERGY DRINKS MARKET EXPANSION

In a recent analysis titled “Myanmar Energy Drinks Market Analysis and Forecast of Key Trends from 2024 to 2032,” presented by research firm Astute Analytica, the Myanmar energy drinks market is set to witness substantial growth, reported Taiwan News.

The Myanmar energy drinks market, valued at US\$ 100.06 million in 2023, is projected to surpass US\$ 150.54 million by 2032, reflecting a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 4.65 percent. This growth is attributed to the distinctive trends and challenges inherent in the country’s socio-economic landscape.

Characterized by a young and increasingly urban population, Myanmar presents a fertile ground for the energy drink sector to flourish, according to the report published on the official website of Astute Analytica.

International giants like Red Bull and M-150 hold significant market share. However, local brands are quickly carving their niche.

While the market thrives on its energizing image, health concerns are brewing. Awareness about sugar content and potential side effects is rising.

CULTURE & LIFESTYLE

IN FOCUS





TAKING TIME OUT

People gather to observe the last sunset of the year at the Botahtaung jetty on Yangon River in Yangon on December 31.

Photo: AFP

LETHWEI 'AMBASSADOR' DAVE LEDUC REFLECTS ON MYANMAR EXPERIENCE



Before the coup - Dave LeDuc celebrates a win.

Dave LeDuc loves Myanmar. Whenever in the country, he chats with monks while enjoying mohinga in the mornings, often plays a game of chinlone with the local boys, and pays respect to elders and teachers. Though at present living in Turkey, he still routinely wears a longyi (the national dress of Myanmar, like a sarong), and carries a Burmese flag to place in any office he enters in his work. But maybe more than anything, Dave loves stepping into a fighting pit without gloves or shoes, and giving well-placed head butts that knock an opponent cold!

Check out the Insight Myanmar podcast with Dave here: <https://player.captivate.fm/episode/a8a4d0e4-0736-460c-8a36-78e59a690bb9>

EARLY INTEREST

You see, this French Canadian has become Myanmar's first—and only—foreign champion of Lethwei, a traditional martial arts boxing practice that dates back centuries. Dave first heard about this sport when young, and immediately felt an attraction to it, but he could not find enough information about the details of this Burmese martial art to learn how to compete. Ultimately, Dave's enthusiasm for Lethwei would animate the deep passion he brings when rep-

resenting the culture and country of Myanmar around the world.

Growing up in Gatineau, Canada, Dave was drawn to wrestling from a young age. This quickly led to an interest in mixed martial arts, where he trained in a teaching lineage connected to Bruce Lee, and from there he became interested in various traditional Asian forms of combat, including Wing Chun from China and the Muay Thai from Thailand.

ARRIVING IN THAILAND

Dave eventually landed in Thailand, and began looking for fighting opportunities. He hoped to raise his martial arts profile enough to help him be accepted as a Lethwei trainee, and hopefully gain an invite to compete in Myanmar. An unlikely opportunity came from the Department of Corrections, who invited Dave into a Thai maximum-security prison to spar with a convicted felon trying to win his freedom, a controversial custom in Thailand that dates from the 18th century. The stakes were high: if the criminal beat Dave, he would be released from prison. But Dave won, and is currently in talks about a movie being made on this encounter.



● Dave LeDuc, right, in action.

ENTERING THE GOLDEN LAND

Although Dave was on the rise in the Thai fighting circuit, he still felt a yearning to get to the Golden Land and devote himself to Lethwei. However, even with Myanmar then heading into a quasi-democratic transition, it still was not that easy to figure out how to stay in country for an extended time and compete in their martial arts bouts. Amazingly, the stars aligned when Dave reached out to a promoter who happened to have strong connections within Myanmar.

From the moment Dave arrived in Myanmar in 2016, he knew he had found a home! The contrast between what he saw as Burmese cultural norms of kindness, generosity and peacefulness on the one hand, and the fighting spirit found in the Lethwei ring on the other, was especially intriguing for him.

IN THE RING

“I related to Burmese fighters,” he shares. “Burmese men, in a way, they’re very polite and very kind. They are the most polite people I’ve ever seen in my life... outside of the ring. But then in the ring, they go bare knuckles, no scoring system, kill to win, and head butts allowed! The Burmese invented Lethwei. So I felt this sort of contrast, and that’s what I like in life. I don’t like neutral. I like contrast and extremism. I’m a very passionate man. So I like the fact that it’s all or nothing.”

His first opponent was the undefeated Lethwei champion, Too Too. Amazingly, Dave was victorious, and overnight became a household name in Myanmar, which led to three fights with a fighter who became his arch-enemy, Tun Tun Min. Dave would go on to spar with him three times, winning each bout.

CULTURAL PHENOMENON

By that time, Dave had become a sort of cultural phenomenon in Myanmar, through the national sport he had mastered. His subsequent marriage to Irina Terehova, arranged as a traditional Burmese wedding ceremony and filmed live by MRTV, was seen by upwards of 30 million people! And yet there was one final element of truly integrating into his adopted community, which his fans were also beginning to call for publicly: tattoos. Receiving traditional Lethwei tattoos is a kind of rite of passage, showing that one truly belongs, and within this tradition, certain tattoos are only permitted if one has shown adequate fortitude signifying that one is indeed worthy. As Dave now held the Golden Belt, there was no question he was deserving. The most respected tattoo maker in the country was a former coach in Mandalay, at that point 75 years old, who had inked the tattoos of many of the Lethwei’s greatest contemporary fighters. Initially expecting the tattoos to be created in the traditional by way of bamboo, Dave was surprised to learn that the master intended to use

an electric tattoo machine. Why? The simple answer was that it was far more painful. It is considered an important part of the process for the warrior to withstand this tremendous pain with stoicism. For Dave, the entire process of tattooing both legs lasted a full 24 hours.

“You endure this immense amount of pain,” Dave describes, “Behind the knee, inner thighs, on top of the kneecap, it’s very painful. And then, you shouldn’t show pain while getting tattooed, but keep a straight face as much as possible to show that you’re able to withstand the pain. It’s a rite of passage to become a man.”

HIS DIET

Dave’s penchant for strong, passionate contrasts even encompasses his diet. It is a given that he has to hone an almost animalistic instinct within the ring, but outside it, he looks for ways to cultivate compassion; he avoids all animal products, frequently speaking out against animal cruelty. While Dave once mocked those who avoided meat, and he could never eat his fill of ice cream, he is now a strict vegan. He routinely calls out what he sees as the hypocrisy of those who proclaim to be animal lovers, yet continue to consume meat.

PROTEST MOVEMENT

These contrasts that define who Dave LeDuc are reflected in his relationship to the current protest movement in Myanmar. Similar to the great boxer Muhammad Ali and his stance against the Vietnam War, Dave is someone who chooses to engage in a violent sport and is forever improving his fighting prowess, yet sickened by the violence being perpetrated every day by the Burmese military.

“Some people say, ‘How can you be vegan if you fight in the ring and you’re punching people?’ Well, the key difference is consent. I’m consenting, my opponent is consenting, we’re getting paid. I don’t slit his throat at the end of the day, I don’t kill him. It’s a different thing when we’re talking about warfare or when one party is not consenting to this, and the other party has more weapons. If we’re talking about a fight and we’re both equally equipped, equally skilled and we’re like, ‘Let’s see who the best man is, and may

the best man win.’ But when we have a military that has weapons, guns, tanks and bulletproof vests, and my brothers and sisters have slingshots with rocks... I feel powerless. I’m outraged and I’m sad. I had moments where I cried. I don’t know what to do. The only thing I can do is raise awareness and talk to my people and send them money.”

A DILEMMA

This is all the more heartbreaking for Dave, as he had been working on initiatives for Lethwei to play a role in supporting Myanmar’s rise in the world, as he had witnessed how Muay Thai put Thailand on the map, opening the region up to tourism and investment. Indeed, Dave remains a proud representative of the country where the sport of Lethwei originated, in spite of no longer living in Myanmar. He oversees martial arts trainings across Europe, and had partnered with Myanmar’s Ministry of Tourism and several large hotels to plan events in 2021. Unfortunately, with the coup, this was canceled.


Although Dave realizes he is not facing the same life-or-death stakes as those within the country, he knew that choosing to speak out would have immediate repercussions for his brand, and the livelihood he has been working towards. Like so many other activists today, he realizes that refusing to stay silent has closed off any potential business he hopes to build in Myanmar, along with ensuring that he won’t personally be able to visit for the foreseeable future. This was not a light decision, but it was one that Dave knew he had to make. Through thick and thin, he has decided to stand and fight for the Burmese people.

MESSAGE FOR MYANMAR

This is also his direct message that he shares in closing: “Keep fighting, stay strong. You’re not alone. There’s a lot of love from around the world. People are watching and trying to do their best to help you guys and send money. The most important thing is, evil is always beaten by good, so just stay good. Stay with the hope.”

Check out the Insight Myanmar podcast interview with Dave here: <https://player.captivate.fm/episode/a8a4d0e4-0736-460c-8a36-78e59a690bb9>



 Dave LeDuc shows his support for Myanmar's Spring Revolution.



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