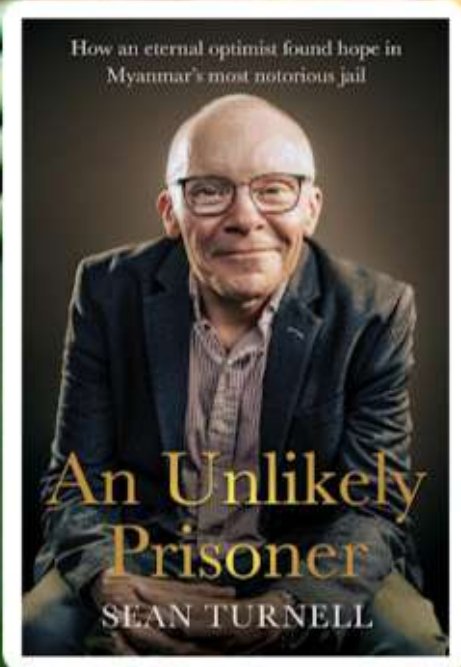
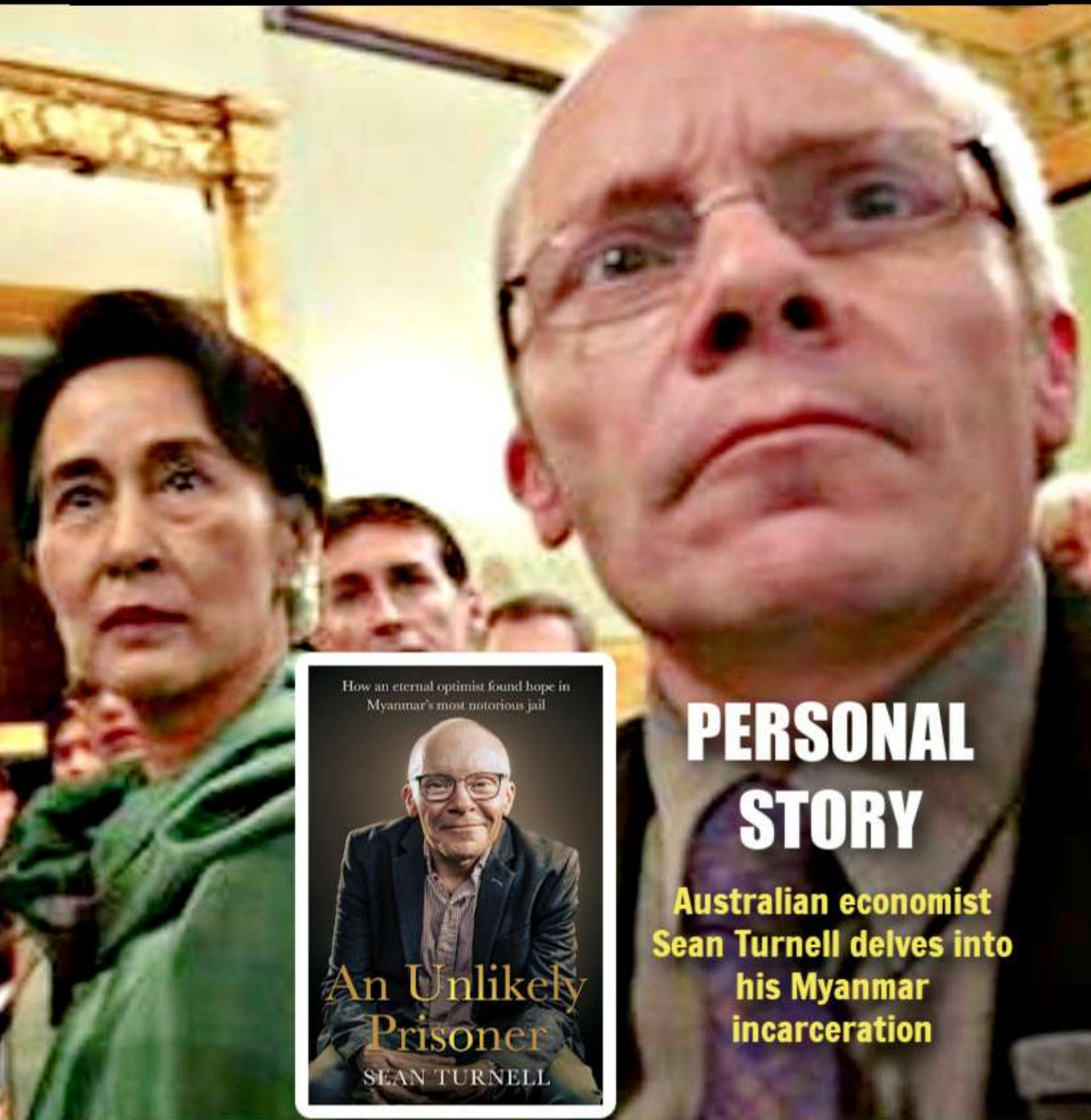


Army supporters urge Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing to resign

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## PERSONAL STORY

**Australian economist Sean Turnell delves into his Myanmar incarceration**

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# UN OCHA'S DIRE MYANMAR PICTURE OF 2023

**U**N OCHA has painted a dire picture of the Myanmar crisis in its review of the year 2023.

In a report issued 12 January, UN OCHA pointed to the continued intense fighting across vast swathes of the country, record displacement, and pervasive protection threats facing the civilian population.

The escalation in fighting since the end of October 2023 has persisted for more than two months and is the largest in scale and most extensive geographically since early 2021. At the end of 2023, more than 2.6 million people were estimated to be displaced nationwide, with an estimated 628,000 people forced to flee since the intensification of fighting at the end of October.

Humanitarians continue to face heavy access constraints and bureaucratic impediment. More than 142 aid worker arrests and detentions by parties to the conflict were self-reported by humanitarian organizations between January and November 2023. Advocacy continues for expanded access to conflict areas, especially in areas where bureaucratic impediments have accelerated since the conflict escalation at the end of October.

Humanitarians have stayed and delivered in 2023, reaching at least 2.5 million people with assistance in the first 9 months of the year and expecting to have assisted 3.1 million people by year's end. However, this reach is not as deep or sustained as planned due to gross underfunding of the response, leaving significant unmet needs that are flowing into 2024.

As the report noted, the 2023 Myanmar Humanitarian Response Plan received just 32 per cent of requested funding in 2023, leaving a \$600 million funding gap.

The 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan has been published identifying a record 18.6 million people in need, up from 17.6 million in 2023. The Plan prioritizes 5.3 million people for urgent assistance in 2024 for which \$994

million is required. The Myanmar translation of the 2024 HNRP executive summary can be found here.

Nearly three years since the military takeover, the crisis in Myanmar risks becoming a forgotten emergency. The situation demands immediate and sustained international attention in 2024 to raise the funds required to alleviate suffering and save lives.

UN OCHA says Myanmar stood at the precipice at the end of 2023 with a deepening humanitarian crisis that has spiralled since the February 2021. The civilian population is living in fear for their lives, with coping capacities stretched to the limit. The crisis is now marked by surging displacement, a fragile security environment, profound protection threats and escalating unmet needs. The humanitarian situation remains grim at year's end, largely fuelled by protection risks and conflict, compounded by a myriad of challenges, including food insecurity, a health system in crisis, disrupted education, huge numbers of people on the move amid fears for their safety, and the aftermath of Cyclone Mocha which struck Myanmar in May affecting 3 million people. Inflation and conflict are driving up the price of food, fuel, and other basic items, leaving vulnerable households hungry and in economic distress with increasing numbers resorting to negative coping measures to survive.

It should be noted that the UN, other INGOs, and local NGOs, continue to face road blocks and red tape from the Myanmar junta as they attempt to provide humanitarian aid to those in need. The INGO drive to provide aid has been criticized by some analysts and activists as being too dependent on the junta. A number of INGOs bow to the wishes of the junta in order for them to maintain their offices and personnel in Myanmar. This can make it difficult for the INGOs to help the National Unity Government (NUG) and independent NGOs deliver aid to areas under resistance control.

**EDITORIAL**

**mizzima**  
WEEKLY

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**MIZZIMA MAGAZINE**

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Cover photo of Australian economist Sean Turnell with Aung San Suu Kyi: Supplied

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# IN FOCUS







## RUNNING WILD

**M**yanmar Hindu devotees try to control a bull during the annual bull taming 'Jallikattu' festival in Kyauktan township on the outskirts of Yangon on January 17, 2024.

Photo:AFP



## FEMALE PRISONERS SUBJECTED TO HUMILIATING STRIP SEARCHES IN CORRIDORS

Political prisoners held in the female dormitory of Maupin Prison in Ayeyarwaddy Region are being subjected to humiliating physical searches in corridors, allegedly for 'security reasons'.

The female prisoners are being subjected to strip searches and intimate cavity searches at the dormitory entrance in front of all the other prisoners, when they leave for or return from court appearances, according to a statement by the Political Prisoners Network Myanmar (PPN).

Ko Thike Tun Oo from PPN said: "Our team has been monitoring searches of women that constitute sexual harassment by prison staff at Maupin Prison for almost a month now. Such searches had also been going on before [we started monitoring]. Because the situation remains unresolved we have decided to issue a statement."

He added that all women prisoners were being subjected to the humiliating searches, not just the political prisoners.

The searches are carried out under the supervision of the women's dormitory supervisor, Daw May Zin Tun and other female prison staff, according to PPN.

The prison claims that the searches are to stop drugs, other illegal substances and clandestine letters from entering the prison, according to Ko Thike Tun Oo.

But, he refuted this claim saying: "That is just an excuse. In reality, with today's technology, if they wanted to genuinely carry out searches they could use X-Ray machines and body scanners. It really distresses the women to be subjected to naked searches in corridors. The emotional toll on the female inmates is considerable."

The Prisons Department, under the Ministry of Home Affairs, purchased a body scanner before the coup in the 2019-2020 financial year, according to an anonymous employee of a company that tendered to supply the machine. It can scan body cavities and it was bought to search prisoners for drugs and other contraband.

Naypyitaw Prisons Department refused to speak to Mizzima about these searches when they were contacted.

PPN is a human rights monitoring group that advocates for the prosecution in the courts of those who have ordered, carried out or facilitated human rights abuses.

## JUNTA CONTINUES FIRING ARTILLERY INTO SAGAING'S KAWLIN TOWNSHIP

Six villagers have been killed by Junta artillery shelling of Kawlin Town in Sagaing Region that commenced on 2 January 2024 and is ongoing.

Four women and a man were killed when eight junta artillery shells landed on Kawlin Town, which is under the control of revolutionary forces, on the morning of 2 January.

Another woman died in Kawlin Town on 13 January when the junta's Light Infantry Battalions (LIBs) 120 and 111 fired artillery at the town.

On 15 January, at around 8:20 p.m. LIB 120 launched an artillery attack on Kawlin Town and shells hit two houses in Myauk Inn Ward and one near the Kawlin Township General Administration office. The two houses in Myauk Inn Ward were completely burned down.

"There were no residents in the two houses, so civilians were not harmed. The junta fired artillery

for no apparent reason and the two houses were burnt to ashes," said a resident of Myauk Inn Ward.

The National Unity Government's (NUGs) People's Defence Army and the People's Defence Team took control of Kawlin Town on 5 November 2023, after launching an attack on the town on 3 November. Since then, it has been under the control of the Public Administration and the People's Defence Teams.

Following their takeover of the town residents returned to their homes. But, because of daily junta artillery fire into the town, the situation remains tense and some residents have again fled.

The junta has been launching airstrikes and firing artillery from Sagaing Region's Wuntho Township at Kawlin Town and junta troops have been operational in the area around the town.



# INDIAN PRISON DEMANDS 50,000 RUPEES TO RELEASE MYANMAR PRISONERS AT END OF SENTENCES

**M**yanmar nationals who have completed their prison sentences are not being released from Imphal Prison in India's Manipur State until they pay 50,000 rupees (1.8 million Kyats).

This has been confirmed to Mizzima by the relative of an inmate and Salai Dokhar from the India for Myanmar grassroots advocacy movement who said his organisation has spoken to many families of inmates facing the same demands.

"The families all said the same thing. They all said that the release of the detainees is contingent on the payment of 50,000 Rupees", he said.

There are over 100 Myanmar nationals who, despite having completed their sentences and paid all their fines for illegally staying in Manipur State, are still being held at Imphal Prison. Their families are allowed to contact them once a week.

The Indian authorities claim they are keeping the Burmese citizens in prison beyond their terms because there are difficulties in facilitating their return to Myanmar.

India for Myanmar has tried to negotiate with the prison authorities, but so far it has been unable to secure the inmates' release.

Family members of those imprisoned say they are facing difficulties in raising 50,000 rupees because they have been fleeing conflict and lack stable employment.

The wife of an inmate who has served his sentence said: "I heard that they will be released if we give money. However, I am hesitant to provide the money at this point as I am skeptical about the actual release of the inmates. I also want to encourage others to think carefully before giving money."

Her husband was arrested, along with over 20 other Myanmar citizens, for illegally crossing into Manipur State in 2021. Despite having served their sentences they are still all being detained at Imphal Prison.

On 16 December 2023, a group of 36 Myanmar women in Imphal Prison went on a three-day hunger strike to protest being held beyond the completion of their sentences.

Since the February 2021 coup in Myanmar over 200 Myanmar nationals have been arrested for illegal immigration in the towns of Lamka and Moreh in Manipur State.

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## JUNTA SETS UP SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING UNIT

**T**he junta has set up a special unit to monitor social media around the clock for indecent postings and political attacks and take action against those who post such material.

The formation of the unit in mid-December 2023 was reported in the 12 January 2024 edition of the Myanmar State Gazette, a weekly periodical published by the junta's Ministry of Information. It said that the committee's primary focus is to prevent and address issues related to fake news, false information on social media, obscenities, and political attacks and to ensure compliance with relevant laws.

The unit will be led by the junta's Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Deputy Director General of the Special Investigation Department. It consists of 11 members including the Deputy Police Major General (2) and the Director General of the Central Bank of Myanmar.

According to reports circulating on social media a team is being set up that will take action against media outlets that are critical of the junta or who pub-

lish information that it disapproves of.

The unit will shut down the phone number used by people who publish material the junta does not approve of. It will also be able to get information about those people's bank accounts and transaction records and be able to shut them out of their bank accounts.

On 13 January the junta's Ministry of Information announced that actions would be taken against actors, producers, organizers, and crew members working on recordings, broadcast videos, and TV series if they are found to have been involved in producing content that contains inappropriate behaviour or obscene speech.

Since the February 2021 coup people who have criticised the junta on social networking sites have been arrested every day, according to the junta-aligned Mirror newspaper. More than 10 news outlets and a minimum of five publishing houses have had their publishing licences suspended since the coup.





Sean Turnell talking to an audience in Australia. Photo: AFP



# PERSONAL STORY

**Australian economist  
Sean Turnell delves into his  
Myanmar incarceration**





**S**ean Turnell was aghast. It didn't make any sense that the Myanmar military junta would come for him, he told himself.

It was 6 February 2021, just days after the military coup that ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's elected civilian government, and the Australian economist was comfortably ensconced at a Yangon hotel following COVID-19 quarantine rules, but starting to get worried.

Then he found himself at the hotel reception surrounded by Myanmar officials under arrest.

At this point, as one commentator put it, he became "Australia's most unlikely political prisoner".

Turnell's story of 650 days of incarceration has been widely publicized, including in a book, "An Unlikely Prisoner: How an eternal optimist found hope in Myanmar's most notorious jail". But his personal story can now be heard in more depth in a podcast by Mizzima's partner, Insight Myanmar.

See link here: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2023/12/29/episode-212-sean-turnell>

## **THE LURE OF THE GOLDEN LAND**

What drew Turnell to Myanmar, a journey that would lead to imprisonment in Myanmar's notorious Insein Prison? And how did he become a trusted advisor to Myanmar's democracy icon, Aung San Suu Kyi?

Turnell's Myanmar journey was initially sparked by a Burmese housemate in Australia who was involved in the democracy movement, during his early student tenure. It then took a deeper turn through his work as an economist working with Australia's Central Bank. "And then gradually, little by little, I got pulled deeper and deeper into the Myanmar universe," he says.

## **FIRST INSIGHTFUL BOOK**

This led to his 2009 book, *Fiery Dragons: Banks, Moneylenders, and Microfinance in Burma*, which he notes was "a critique of the economy as it existed in the early 2000s. But it required me to go deep into Burmese history, and that's really where I fell in love with the place."

Taking ten years to write and requiring visits



Sean Turnell with his wife Ha Vu.  
Photo: Facebook



to the various archives located around the world, his book affirmed a deeply held belief that for “economics to be done properly, it needs to be rooted in national institutions, which in turn requires knowledge of history and culture, and all the aspects that actually make for a modern economy. I’ve actually been an economist who has long been critical of the narrowness of my own discipline, as economics has gotten narrower and narrower, and more and more mathematical, and sort of lost the plot.”

Turnell’s research for *Fiery Dragons* helped him understand to what extent the many years of failed Burmese leadership had doomed generation after generation, and instilled in him a sense of purpose to do what he could to help change this negative trajectory.

### **CATCHING DAW SUU’S ATTENTION**

His research on *Fiery Dragons*, and his subsequent interviews on BBC, eventually caught the attention of Aung San Suu Kyi, who was still under house arrest at the time. She began a written correspondence with him. When Turnell eventually got to meet her, he was quite impressed by her character, describing her as “a sort of English schoolmistress. She’s very proper, exceedingly bright, and not given to sort of mindless small talk.”

When the National League for Democracy (NLD) was voted into power in 2015, Turnell was brought on as an economic advisor, and notes that two things in particular kept him up at night: first, the constant danger of a military coup, and second, a looming banking crisis.

“I suspect not even one bank was solvent with the application of proper accounting standards,” he says, describing how a collapse of the banking system would have totally crippled the NLD’s attempts at reform.

Even worse, most Burmese banks were fronts for massive criminal enterprises and illicit activity.

“Even from the get-go, you don’t really want to lift too many rocks when it comes to the banks,” he

admits, adding that he even received personal threats regarding the banking regulations he was trying to implement.

### **PRIVATE REPORT**

The emerging Rohingya crisis during his tenure added a further layer of complexity, and horror, so much so that Turnell thought long and hard about resigning. Instead, he decided to stay and do what he could to advocate for change from within the system, for example, writing a memorandum or report that proposed internal sanctions on the military for their human rights violations in Rakhine state. Turnell also adds that while he might not have foreseen the specific nature of the Rohingya crisis. “The idea that the military would do something to try and bring the civilian government down and to tarnish the international reputation of Daw Su and the NLD was something we absolutely expected.”

This also plays into how he sees Aung San Suu Kyi’s infamous, fateful decision to go to the International Court of Justice: because she and her supporters were so fearful of an imminent military coup, they had to walk a tightrope trying to appease the military while pursuing reforms.

### **THE 2021 COUP**

All this leads up to the military takeover on 1 February 2021. Turnell feels the military’s decision was directly inspired by Donald Trump’s claim challenging the American elections, and the related, 6 January insurrection. Talks were held between NLD leaders and senior military officials to avert a takeover, but they had broken down in the days prior. Yet Turnell still did not suspect a coup was imminent, and remained at his Yangon hotel following COVID-19 quarantine procedures.

But early in the morning on 6 February, the military came for him, and Turnell would not be a free man for the next 650 days.

The official rationale behind Turnell’s imprisonment was that he had violated the Official Secrets Act, a colonial-era law that the junta used to paint him

as a spy having access to classified documents. But the unfolding of the state's case against him turned into a Kafkaesque masquerade: clumsily modifying the documents found on Turnell's devices by adding a clearly fraudulent "Top Secret" mark; a witness—who later admitted to not speaking a word of English—testifying about a long conversation he'd had with Turnell...in English; accusing him of possessing a "confidential" document that he himself was the author of (the aforementioned memorandum on internal military sanctions).

As he says, it was hard to even follow the logic of the regime's argument at times. Further heightening the absurdity was that the hearings were not held in formal colonial-era courts, but at "the quasi-ornate houses previously used for deputy ministers." And then there were the frequent, unpredictable power cuts would routinely stop proceedings for hours at a time.



Sean Turnell with Myanmar economist Hla Myint.  
Photo: Supplied

## **THE BOX HORROR**

Turnell spent his first two months of confinement in what he called "The Box": a windowless, claustrophobic, unbearably hot room where he was subjected to near constant interrogation. "It was just a really horrifying experience," he recalls. "The psychological tension is building all the time, particularly because at first the interrogators didn't seem to ask anything sensible, it was all just to try to discombobulate me and make me nervous and reduce my morale."

He was then transferred to the notorious Insein Prison in Yangon, but the conditions weren't any better there.

"It was a complete and utter horror," he describes, likening it to a medieval dungeon. "Just seeing that that old guard house which of course is deliberately built to intimidate." A passionate Lord of the Rings fan, he could only compare it to something Tolkien would have described as existing in the depths of Mordor. All the more distressing—and baffling—were the heavy iron shackles that Turnell was often burdened with. As a lifelong academic with a slight frame, his continual insistence that he could not possibly be a danger fell on deaf ears.

## **NO DAB HAND AT MEDITATION**

But Turnell soon fell into the rhythms of daily life behind bars. Some turn to meditation but Turnell had no prior experience, and was unable to gain any traction with it.

"This almost became a something as an immense personal failing on my part," he admits. "I would get advice on it, and I would try, but it was just completely hopeless! I think I was way too impatient." Instead, his lifeline to preserving his sanity came in the form of books, which helped his mind escape the prison. Some books were mere escapism, others kept his mental agility and critical capacities sharpened, while some provided important inspiration or information.

"To have any sort of stimulation completely removed was absolutely horrifying," he says, describing





Insein Prison in Yangon. Photo: EPA

the early stages of his imprisonment. Much of his book describes small moments of success when his wife or the Australian Embassy was able to get a shipment of books to him, as well as those darker moments, when he was transferred or his collection was confiscated.

### **COFFEE PACKETS**

Another way that he created intellectual stimulation was drawing on his academic background to study the functioning of the prison economy. For example, based on the fluctuating values of the different “Three-in-one” coffee and tea packets that operated as a kind of prison currency, he was able to make educated guesses about shortages and inflation in the country.

But the conditions of his incarceration remained, in his own words, “horrendous.” From his losing battle with the insects to suffering under Myanmar’s unrelenting tropical climate of intense heat and torrential rain to the disgusting and scarce food which was dished out of old paint buckets, everything about the experience was horrifying. As Turnell was also imprisoned during the pandemic, he caught COVID on five separate occasions, and describes a near total absence of any medical care.

### **FRIENDSHIP**

However, even as Turnell was plunged deeper into these pits of Mordor, there was a silver lining to his Insein experience, as the many Burmese political prisoners welcomed him with open arms. To be embraced and cared for at the worst, and scariest, time of his life will forever stand out. “They showed compassion and courage... I’m just lost in gratitude,” he remarks, adding that he also understands the support was symbolic in some way as well, and transcended him personally.

“I could tell just by my presence, and not me personally, but to the extent that I represented international interest, it was something that gave other people hope.” He couldn’t have asked for better company. Besides young Burmese activists, nearly the entire democratic leadership was imprisoned alongside him, leading Turnell to quip that they were attending BWU (Barbed Wire University) together. “The prisons in Myanmar, just being intellectually vibrant, it’s part of the way that people survive,” he says, “Essentially the entire reform wing of the NLD government was all lumped in together, and yet, we used to have this seminar in the afternoon... nothing was off limits, we used

to talk about everything from religion to politics, economics... it highlighted to me just the caliber of people that have been put away!"

### **CHATS WITH THE LADY**

Amazingly though, in spite of it all, Turnell was able to have a few guarded moments with Aung San Suu Kyi amid his various trial dates. As she has had virtually no access to media or foreign governments since the coup, Turnell's encounters are significant to note. "She was especially proud of the young people and the way that they had stood up and justified all the hopes that her and others had for them... just immensely impressed!"

He also describes the "extraordinary resilience and courage" she demonstrated. She was "immensely strong, and her biggest concern always to keep our spirits up." Despite enduring worse treatment than many other prisoners, he saw an iron will in her

to resist the regime even in these darkest moments. He recalls her once saying to him, "Look, Sean, don't feel that you've done anything wrong! This is all nonsense." Their talk also delved into other areas beyond their imprisonment, as they updated one another on what news stories they'd managed to hear from the greater world, such as Queen Elizabeth's death, and the falls from grace of Boris Johnson and Trump, and here he once again saw her biting wit and dry humour. They even had time to discuss familiar topic of shared interest, which included not only Lord of the Rings but also the Star Wars movies and French detective novels.

### **AMNESTY & REVOCATION**

Eventually Turnell was released in a prisoner amnesty, along with 5,000 other inmates, and he left the country. However, his battle with the regime did not end there. As soon as he gained his freedom, Turnell began to speak out often, and forcefully, against the



● Civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi offers testimony at the ICJ. Photo: AFP



crimes of the junta. General Min Aung Hlaing was so incensed that he formally revoked his amnesty, called for his extradition, and demanded he appear back at court to be tried again. As absurd as that demand was, Turnell must be quite careful with his travel these days, and make sure he not visit or transit through countries that have relations with the military junta, like China or Russia.

The 650 days Turnell spent behind bars has changed him. “I’ve become a little bit more impatient with academia,” he admits, noting he now inclines towards greater activism and advocacy. He was also impacted in deeply personal ways. “I suffered in the prison, but I got to experience humanity at its very best, as well as some awful things. But again, I keep talking about this courage and compassion of Burmese people around me, and that just came through again and again! The way that people who had less than nothing, the way that they were so generous to this person who

in every way imaginable was in a better position than them, this reaffirmed my faith in people.”

This is the sentiment that Turnell wants to close on.

“From what I’ve seen, Myanmar is the collection of the best, the brightest, most courageous people I’ve ever met in my life and I remain confident that they’ll win through in the end.”

Listen to the Insight Myanmar podcast here: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2023/12/29/episode-212-sean-turnell>

***This is Insight Myanmar’s second interview with Turnell, and listeners are encouraged to check out his earlier discussion that focused on the country’s financial landscape.***

***Turnell’s book “An Unlikely Prisoner: How an eternal optimist found hope in Myanmar’s most notorious jail” can be found here:***

<https://www.amazon.com/Unlikely-Prisoner-optimist-Myanmars-notorious-ebook/dp/B0C8X16FPM>



# ULTRANATIONALIST MONKS, ARMY SUPPORTERS URGE MYANMAR JUNTA LEADER MIN AUNG HLAING TO RESIGN

Political analysts in Myanmar suggest the appeal from military supporters and pro-junta monks for junta leader Min Aung Hlaing to resign from the Chief of Defense Forces role has led to a contentious narrative fueled by conflicting viewpoints.

During a military support rally in Pyin Oo Lwin town, Mandalay Region on 16 January, U Ariya Wun Sa, a prominent pro-junta monk, advocated for Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to assume a civilian role, asserting that his compatibility lies in such a position. Additionally, he suggested that the role of Chief of Defense Forces should be filled by Vice-Senior General Soe Win, Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Defense Services.

U Ariya Wun Sa and monks present at the rally said the role of Chief of Defense Forces should be given to Vice-Senior General Soe Win. The position of Prime Minister, more fitting for civilian responsibilities, should be assigned to Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

U Ariya Wun Sa and the participating monks expressed their readiness to face potential arrest should it arise as a consequence of their stated request.

Political analysts said that such discussions have been prevalent not just within military support gatherings but also among other backers of the Military Council, which gained power in a coup on 1 Feb-



Protestors in 2021 with a drawing of Min Aung Hlaing.



ruary 2021.

Furthermore, according to U Thein Soe Naing, a political observer, there is discontent and internal discord within the Military Council, in addition to assertions of incompetence against junta leader Min Aung Hlaing, who heads the council.

U Thein Soe Naing said, “I’ve heard that such sentiments exist within their organization. Pro-junta monks openly expressed these views at a military support rally in Pyi Oo Lwin town, purportedly voicing the desires of those advocating for Min Aung Hlaing’s resignation. However, this proposed solution is no longer deemed acceptable by the Burmese populace. At present, I believe the situation has reached a point of conclusion.”

U Thein Soe Naing further suggests that the primary motive behind the coup was to facilitate Min Aung Hlaing’s ascension to the presidency. Therefore,

conditions where people advocate for his resignation are unlikely to be accepted by him.

“Following the coup d’état, Min Aung Hlaing’s management and response to the crises in the country have left some nations, which had the potential to support him, disillusioned,” Daw Hnin Hnin Hmwe, the Joint General Secretary of the Myanmar New Society Democratic Party said.

Moreover, this request raises the prospect of attributing war crimes committed by the Military Council nationwide directly to Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, Daw Hnin Hnin Hmwe added.

“Their position within military circles suggests the existence of some internal rivalry. It’s possible that Min Aung Hlaing could bear the brunt of accusations related to all war crimes. Nevertheless, their overarching objective appears to be retaining power and not necessarily disbanding the military,” said Daw Hnin Hnin Hmwe, the Joint General Secretary of the Myanmar New Society Democratic Party.

With the initiation of Operation 1027 in Northern Shan State, the Military Council finds itself confronted with the possibility of relinquishing control over military bases and ceding cities and towns to revolutionary forces.

Concerning these issues, dissatisfaction with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing’s decisions is becoming evident even among those who have consistently supported the Military Council and people engaged in the propaganda machinery. This discontent is observable on a daily basis through various social networking sites, according to political analysts.

Following the viral spread of U Ariya Wun Sa’s speech and the remarks of the monks during the army support rally, there is a noticeable surge in discussions across social networks among army supporters. Many are advocating for the removal of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, suggesting the appointment of a leader who exhibits the courage to take decisive actions.



# MYANMAR JUNTA MASS KILLINGS BECOMING MORE FREQUENT

The Myanmar junta committed 86 mass killings in 2023, nearly twice the number they committed the previous year, according to the National Unity Government (NUG).

The NUG documented 86 mass killings in 2023, up from 44 in 2022, causing the death of 1,342 civilians.

This has continued in the first few days of 2024. In early January, for example, five civilians were killed including a child, as a junta jet launched two airstrikes on a village in Sagaing Region's Taze Township.

Rakhine areas are experiencing airstrikes on an almost daily basis as the junta reacts to losses there. Junta airstrikes on a resistance-controlled village near Khampat killed 17 people, including nine children, on the morning of 7 January.

The town of Kawlin in Sagaing Region, was liberated by a combined force of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and People's Defence Force (PDFs) in November and is now being administered by the NUG and nearby junta bases have been firing artillery into the town which has killed civilians and displaced people.

The shelling of Kawlin's market on 2 January killed six people, just days after four people including two children were killed in junta artillery attacks. Furthermore, the junta is blocking the supply of food and other essentials into the town.

According to the campaign group Progressive Voice, none of this should be a surprise, not only because of the recent and long-term history of the Myanmar military's war crimes and crimes against humanity, but also its explicit threats.

Progressive Voice points out that during talks between the junta and the Three Brotherhood Alliance

on 23 December in Kunming, China, Lieutenant-General Min Naing of the junta's so-called Peacemaking Negotiation Committee threatened the resistance groups saying "Even if you can militarily seize towns and villages in ethnic areas, your regions will never be peaceful. We will always carry out air raids using the sophisticated weapons we have."

The junta has no compulsions against perpetrating atrocity crimes and displacing civilians as it desperately tries to assert its diminishing power. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), there are over 2.3 million people who have been displaced since the junta's coup attempt, bringing the total to 2.6 million. However, according to Progressive Voice, given OCHA's lack of access on the ground, the real numbers are almost certainly much higher.

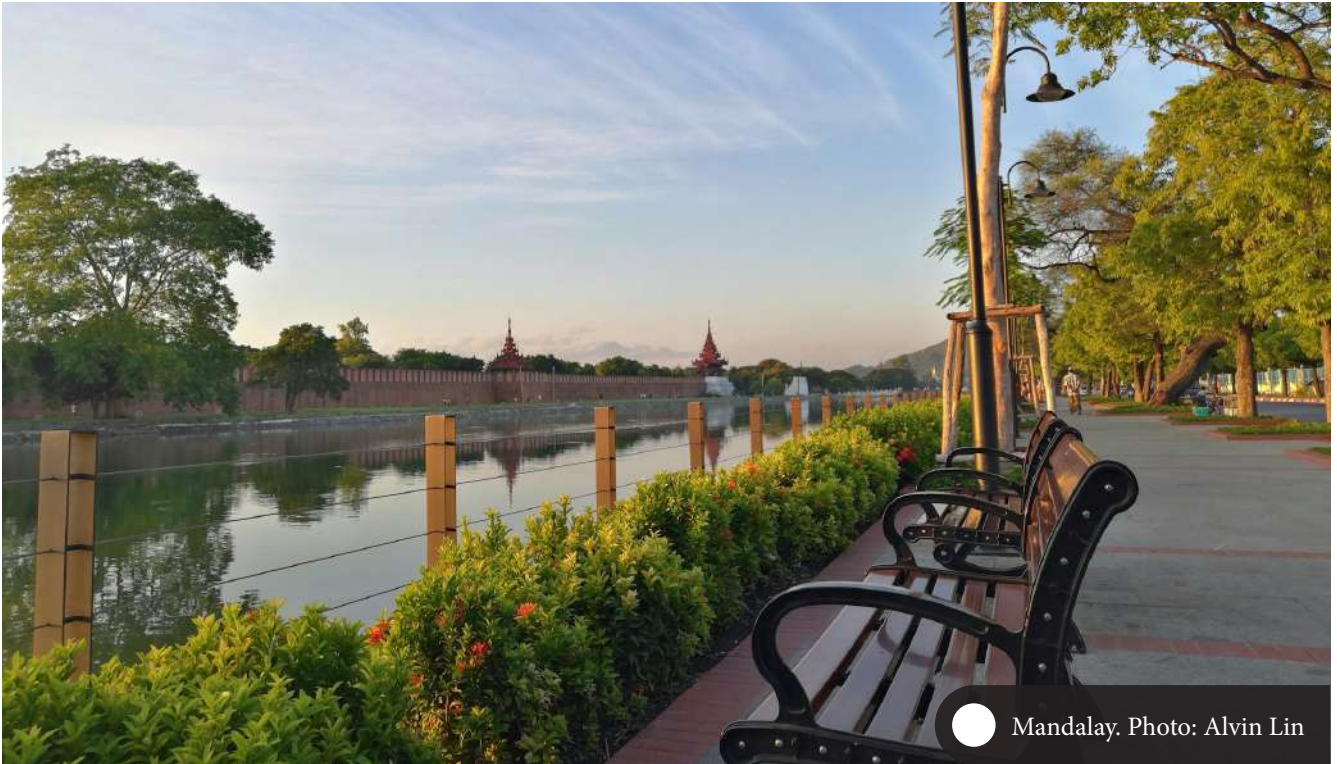
It believes that as the resistance forces make more gains, the junta's retaliation will also only grow, thus even further increasing the number of displaced population. The documented massacres, airstrikes, and other forms of collective punishment such as weaponization of aid will only continue to increase.

It is imperative therefore that humanitarian aid from international actors reaches these populations via the trusted networks and civil society organisations that have been on the frontline in liberated and contested areas to deliver such assistance, according to Progressive Voice.

It says that is because such networks and organisations have the legitimacy, expertise, capacity, trust of communities in need, and access to border regions and beyond, including central parts of the country, via cross-border and localised channels that the junta and UN agencies, which partner with the junta, simply do not. Such genuine locally led aid provision must be recognized and scaled up.



# NUG DESIGNATES SEVEN MANDALAY REGION CITIES AS INTERIM HERITAGE SITES



Mandalay. Photo: Alvin Lin

**T**he National Unity Government (NUG) said that seven ancient cities in Mandalay Region had been designated as Interim Heritage sites on 15 January by the NUG's Interim Board for Heritage Administration.

The seven cities are Mongmao and Myinsaing in Kyaukse Township, Mekkhaya in Sintgaing Township, Wadee in Natogyi Township, Pinya and Inwa in Tada-U Township, and Takaung in Thabeikkyin Township.

According to the NUG, once a place has been declared an Interim Heritage Site there is a restriction on what activities can be carried out there.

Amongst the prohibited activities are the launching of any military attacks, the establishment of military camps, the use of any sort of firearms, including heavy weapons, and the torching, destroying, looting, repairing, or modifying of historic buildings.

The NUG said that anyone who violates any of the prohibitions that they have put in place will face

legal consequences under the Protection and Preservation of Cultural Heritage Regions Law 2019, the Protection and Preservation of Ancient Monuments Law 2015, the Counter Terrorism Law 2014, and other relevant domestic and international laws related to heritage protection.

An official from the Interim Board for Heritage Administration said, "We are dealing with cases and preparing to submit them to domestic and international courts. We are preparing to punish organisations that committed crimes after the revolution is over."

He added that where these violations have taken place in NUG-held territory, appropriate action would be taken following interim procedures set up by the NUG courts.

# 387 ATTACKS ON MYANMAR HEALTH FACILITIES RECORDED IN 2023

**3**6 health workers were killed and health facilities were damaged 140 times in at least 387 attacks on Myanmar's healthcare system during 2023.

The figures were recorded by the monitoring group Insecurity Insight. It said that such attacks undermine healthcare providers' ability to effectively meet patient needs, maintain safe staffing levels and impact the population's access to healthcare.

Insecurity Insight also recorded the following attacks on the healthcare system in Myanmar from 27 December 2023 to 6 January 2024:

27 December 2023: In Sa Mee village and village tract, Paletwa township and district, Chin state, a station hospital (primary-level, public) occupied by the Myanmar military was attacked by Chinland Defense

Force. Source: Ayeyarwaddy Times.

28 December 2023: In Myaung Bway village and village tract, Mrauk-U township and district, Rakhine state, a station hospital (primary-level, public) and a high school were used as bunkers by the Myanmar military during the armed clashes between the military and Arakan Army. Source: Irrawaddy.

02 January 2024: In Myaing town and township, Pakokku district, Magway region, at least 20 Myanmar military soldiers were stationed at a township hospital (secondary-level, public) and 40 at a school. Sources: Mizzima and Myanmar Pressphoto Agency.

02 January 2024: In Salingyi town and township, Yinmabin district, Sagaing region, a township



A health clinic in Karen State. Photo: AFP



hospital (secondary-level, public) and a police station occupied by the Myanmar military were attacked by the local resistance forces. There was an exchange of gunfire and artillery shelling between the Myanmar military at the hospital and local resistance forces. Source: Myanmar Pressphoto Agency.

02 January 2024: In Minbya town and township, Mrauk-U district, the staff house of a township hospital (secondary-level, public), a high school, shops in the market, houses, and buildings at a jetty were damaged by Myanmar military artillery shelling. Source: Development Media Group.

03 January 2024: In Tha Pyay Shaung village and village tract, Launglon township, Dawei district, Tanintharyi region, a private pharmacy owner was arrested by the Myanmar military and his house torched. Source: Dawei Watch.

03 January 2024: In Kaing Pyin village and village tract, Sagaing township, district, and region, a building of a sub-rural health centre (primary-level, public) was damaged by bombs dropped from armed drones used by the Myanmar military. Source: People's Spring.

As reported on 03 January 2024: In Ramree town and township, Kyaukpyu district, Rakhine state, a township hospital (secondary-level, public) was occupied by the Myanmar military. Source: Delta News Agency.

04 January 2024: In Yinmabin town, township, and district, Sagaing region, a township hospital (secondary-level, public) and a police station occupied by the Myanmar military were attacked with artillery fires by the local resistance forces. About 30 junta soldiers were stationed at the hospital and about 20 at the police station. Sources: Khit Thit Media and Myanmar Pressphoto Agency.

04 January 2024: In Paletwa town, township, and district, Chin state, a township hospital (secondary-level, public) was closed down as doctors had fled from the hospital due to the heightened armed clashes between the Myanmar military and ethnic armed groups. Sources: Democratic Voice of Burma and Zalen.

04 January 2024: In Kutkai town, township, and district, Shan state (North), health care and at least a hundred patients from a township hospital (secondary-level, public) were relocated to a station hospital (primary-level, public) in Kutkai township due to the

heightened armed clashes between the Myanmar military and a joint force of three ethnic armed groups. Sources: Burma News International and Shan News.

04 January 2024: In Lashio town, township, and district, Shan state (North), UN/INGOs left the town due to the heightened armed clashes between the Myanmar military and ethnic armed organisations in this area. This resulted in disruption of aid delivery in this area, including health care. Sources: Chindwin News Agency and Shwe Phee Myay News Agency.

05 January 2024: In Hopang town, township, and district, Wa self-administrative zone, Shan state (North), a township hospital (secondary-level, public), a general administrative office, and a police station were attacked and then occupied by an alliance of four ethnic armed groups and later taken over by the ethnic armed group United Wa State Army after armed clashes between the Myanmar military and the four armed groups (the Arakan Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, and Bamar People's Liberation Army). Sources: Khit Thit Media, Khit Thit Media I and Than Lwin Times.

05 January 2024: In Tha Win Chaung village and village tract, Pauktaw township, Sittwe district, Rakhine state, a 30-year-old patient with fragment wounds due to artillery shelling in her home village was denied travel to and health care access at a public hospital in Sittwe town by the junta police. The patient had to return to her village in Pauktaw township. Source: Narinjara.

06 January 2024: At a jetty in Sittwe town, township, and district, Rakhine state, three LNGO workers were arrested by the junta police while they were transporting a female patient in labour from the jetty to Sittwe state hospital in an ambulance. The female patient was sent to the hospital without being harmed. After investigation, two LNGO workers were released but the ambulance driver and ambulance were detained. Source: Radio Free Asia.

As reported on 09 January 2024: In Loikaw town, township, and district, Kayah state, a hospital (tertiary-level, public), and staff houses of nurses, midwives, and doctors were occupied by the Myanmar military. There have been heightened armed clashes between the Myanmar military and a joint force of ethnic armed groups and local resistance forces in this town since early November 2023 in the attempt of the latter group to take over the town. Source: BBC Burmese.

# HRW: INDONESIA SHOULD PROTECT NEWLY ARRIVED ROHINGYA REFUGEES

Indonesian authorities should immediately stop all pushbacks of boats carrying ethnic Rohingya refugees, and investigate and end all assaults on refugees, said Human Rights Watch (HRW).

It believes that the authorities should allow the asylum seekers to disembark in the nearest safe port, provide protection and humanitarian assistance, and investigate online incitement of violence against them.

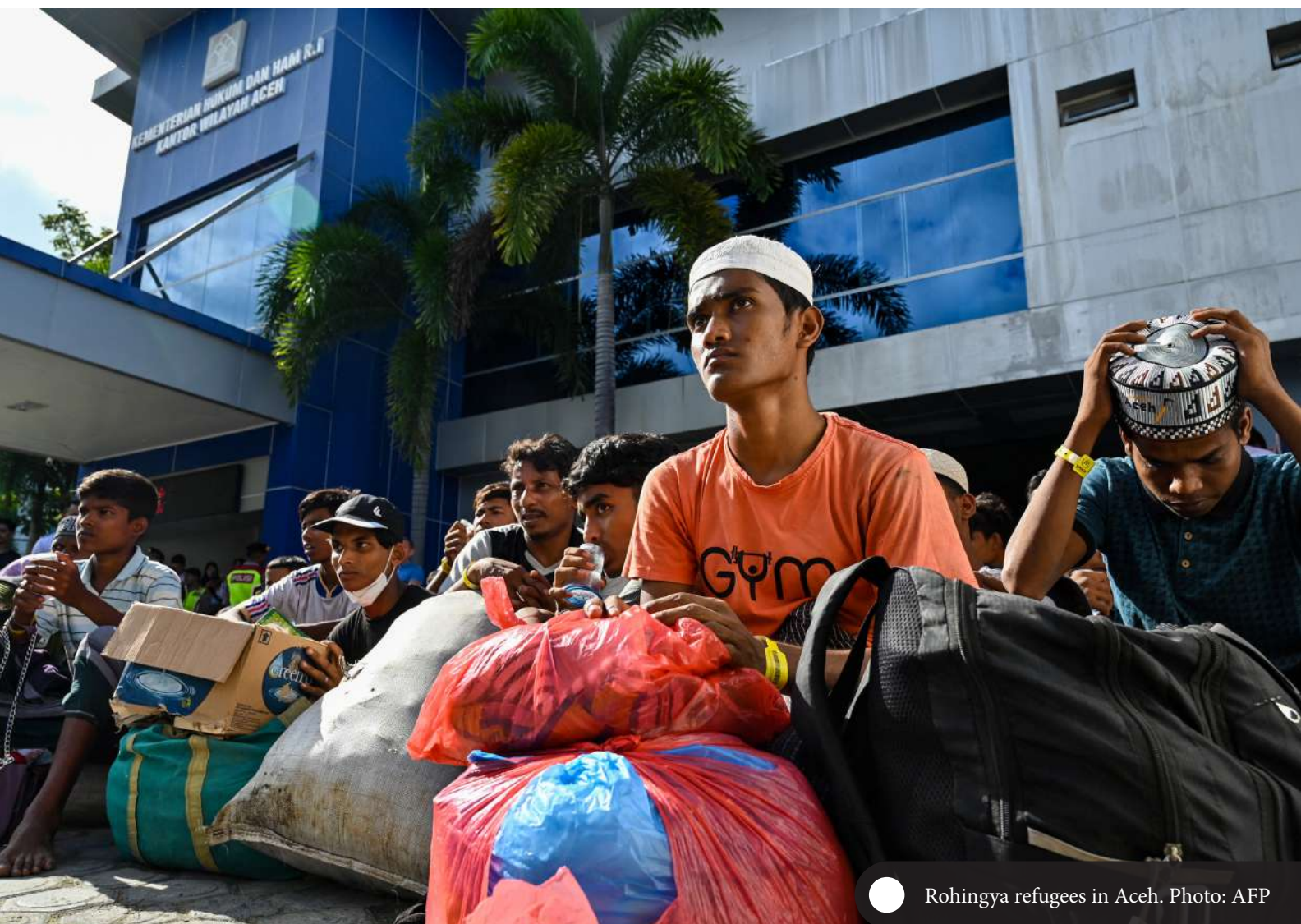
On 27 December 2023, more than 100 students broke through police lines and stormed a car park in the city of Banda Aceh, where 137 Rohingya refugees, mostly women and children, had been temporarily placed. The students verbally and physically assaulted the refugees, then forced them onto trucks, which transported the refugees to the government of-

fice responsible for immigration where the students demanded the refugees be deported.

Elsewhere in Aceh province, residents have tried to prevent Rohingya boats from reaching the shore, and surrounded the tents of Rohingya on beaches and other temporary locations, and demanded that they be relocated.

“The Indonesian government should ensure that Rohingya boat refugees are immediately brought ashore and protected, not pushed back to die at sea, or be attacked by anti-Rohingya mobs,” said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “The government should investigate and hold accountable whoever has been mobilizing an online campaign inciting violence against Rohingya arrivals.”

The United Nations High Commissioner for



Rohingya refugees in Aceh. Photo: AFP



Refugees (UNHCR) reported that since 11 November, Rohingya boats have landed and the refugees relocated to informal sites, mostly in Aceh and one in North Sumatra. At least 1,700 Rohingya refugees, more than 70 percent of them women and children, have landed in the two provinces since November.

A Rohingya refugee who has been living in Aceh since early 2023 told Human Rights Watch that his wife, their two children, and his brother were part of the group attacked on 27 December.

“In the video on social media, I saw my kids hit by things the students were throwing,” he said. “My wife was crying along with other Rohingya, and my brother was lying on the ground. He was so hungry because the group didn’t have food for many days while they were floating out at sea.”

The man said he has been unable to reunite with his family due to the risk of further attacks, and is regularly receiving calls from traffickers threatening to kidnap his family from their temporary shelter.

On 27 December, UNHCR said that the Rohingya have faced “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.”

Recently created anonymous accounts on Instagram, TikTok, and X, formerly known as Twitter, have spread disinformation and misinformation about Rohingya refugees that has put their safety at risk. Anonymous accounts also identified local UNHCR staff in Aceh and published personal information (“doxing”), leading to numerous online threats and personal risks in carrying out their work.

The social media monitoring and fact-checking organisation Drone Emprit analyzed posts from 2-8 December and found a campaign of false information and hate narratives against the Rohingya.

The Indonesian authorities should urgently investigate alleged organisers of incitement against Rohingya refugees and take appropriate action to hold those responsible to account, Human Rights Watch said.

On 28 December, the Indonesian navy pushed a Rohingya boat back out to sea off Weh Island, Aceh’s northernmost area.

This contravened Indonesia’s search-and-rescue obligations at sea and international legal obligations to provide access to asylum and to not return anyone to a place where they would face a real risk of

persecution, torture, or other ill-treatment. The push-back was also not in keeping with Indonesia’s long-standing humanitarian reputation for assisting refugees at sea, including Rohingya.

Southeast Asian governments should undertake greater regional and international cooperation to respond to boats carrying Rohingya refugees in distress, including coordinated search-and-rescue operations and timely disembarkation at the nearest safe port, Human Rights Watch said.

It called on the governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand to provide Rohingya refugees with access to fair asylum procedures and ensure that they are not indefinitely detained, held in inhospitable conditions, or threatened with being forcibly returned to Myanmar.

Rohingya are being driven to high-risk sea voyages due to growing restrictions and hopelessness in the refugee camps in Bangladesh and unending oppression and violence in Myanmar. Most are looking to ultimately reach Malaysia where an existing Rohingya community holds the promise of work, although many who arrive end up in immigration detention.

More than 3,500 Rohingya attempted dangerous sea crossings in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal in 2022, a fivefold increase over the previous year, at least 350 of whom died or were reported missing.

In the past two years, the one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have faced escalating gang violence, ration cuts and increasing restrictions by the authorities.

The Rohingya who remain in Myanmar’s Rakhine State are subject to persecution and violence, confined to camps and villages without freedom of movement, and cut off from access to adequate food, health care, education, and livelihoods.

Conditions for the safe, sustainable, dignified return of Rohingya refugees currently do not exist, given the frequent serious human rights violations by the Myanmar junta and ongoing crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution.

“The Indonesian authorities should fully investigate who is disrupting the practice of fishermen and villagers in Aceh to assist Rohingya refugees arriving in rickety boats and offer them assistance,” Robertson said. “Indonesia should not join other Southeast Asian countries that have been pushing back Rohingya boats and letting these desperate people float away to their deaths.”

# BRITISH FOREIGN SECRETARY SHOULD CUT OFF MYANMAR JUNTA SOURCES OF REVENUE



British Foreign Secretary David Cameron.  
Photo: AFP

**A**s the third anniversary of the February 2021 coup in Myanmar approaches, Burma Campaign UK (BCUK) has called on British Foreign Secretary David Cameron to do more to cut off sources of revenue to the Burmese military.

According to BCUK, the British government is falling far behind allies such as Canada, the USA and the EU in sanctioning some of the main sources of money for the Burmese military.

The European Union and the USA have imposed sanctions on the military-controlled Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), through which revenue from gas sales reaches the military.

The European Union, Canada and the USA have sanctioned the two state-owned military-controlled mining enterprises which provide revenue to the military from sales of minerals and rare earths.

The USA has sanctioned the Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank (MFTB) and Myanmar Investment and Commercial Bank (MICB), through which the military receives international revenue from gas, gems, minerals and other exports.

In contrast, the UK has not implemented any of these sanctions.

BCUK says more pressure is vital as the people of Burma continue to resist military rule.

The generals are becoming ever more desperate and brutal as they try to cling on to power, bombing homes, schools, hospitals, churches and mosques. Two million people have been forced to flee their homes, 20,000 political prisoners are in jail, according to BCUK.

There is no single thing that the British government can do to cut revenue to the Burmese military. It is the combination of sanctions and other measures that will have an impact, says BCUK.

That is why David Cameron must use every opportunity there is to cut off the supply of money, arms and equipment to the military.

Zoya Phan, Programme Director of BCUK said: "Delays in sanctioning the main sources of revenue to the Burmese military mean more money and bombs for the Burmese military. It makes no sense that the UK has not yet joined the EU and USA in sanctioning some of the main sources of revenue for the Burmese military."



# HURFOM: CIVILIANS IN SOUTHEAST MYANMAR NEED PROTECTION FROM BOMBARDMENTS

In conflict-torn Southeastern Burma, civilians are seeking refuge and urgently needed protection from the ongoing bombardments by the military junta, according to the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM).

Across HURFOM's target areas, including Mon State, Karen State and Tanintharyi region, those displaced continue to rise as offensives intensify.

For example, in Mon State, nearly 3,000 local people in Thaton District, who have been fleeing the war for almost a month due to the fighting, require emergency assistance. They urgently need basic food, medicine, shelter, blankets, and warm clothes.

Since 13 December, the fighting between the two sides has intensified since the joint forces of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) blocked and attacked the junta's Win Tar Pan camp based in Bilin.

Over the last week, a child was among those injured when the junta attacked with artillery weapons in Thaton Township. Two houses were also damaged.

"The military is firing artillery weapons almost every day towards Wee Yaw. That day, an artillery weapon fell towards Hton Bo Gyi and hit a child. The Karen National Union medical team gave the boy treatment, and now he has recovered," said a villager.

According to residents, due to the junta's attack with artillery weapons, the residents of Hton Bo Gyi are afraid to go to work, and they have dug bomb pits in almost every house.

On 19 December, a 26-year-old pregnant woman, Naw Phaw Ta Mae, was killed, and her 2-year-old son was injured when the regiment launched artillery weapons in Kyone Mein Village in Thaton Township.

Meanwhile, in Dawei District, the military is

burning homes in Nyaw Pyin Village, Out Kyauk Wut Village Tract, and Long Lone Township. Houses were embroiled in flames on 8 January in the evening. The locals are fleeing in advance due to the news of the incoming military operation in the area. The junta has been on the beaches of Nyaw Pyin and Pho Pho Kyauk in Dawei, since the evening of 7 January.

On 6 January, at 10:00 a.m., at least 30 houses were burned by the junta in Tha Kyat Taw Village in Long Lone Township.

On 4 January, after a shop selling household medicine was set on fire in Hin Cho Taw Village, eight homes in Hin Cho Taw Village and five houses in Yin Htae Village were burned again.

On 3 January, the arriving junta burned 14 houses in Tha Pyay Shaung Village in Long Lone Township.

According to HURFOM, civil society organisations continue to fill essential gaps in providing aid and safety to displaced and conflict-affected communities. Last week, the Karen Peace Support Network reported that 1,496 IDPs from 25 villages in Dooplaya District received emergency food assistance, including rice, cooking oil, salt, garlic, onion, and chili powder from KPSN.

HURFOM says that the international community must increase its funding to support these efforts through cross-border aid channels and engage with local actors on the ground to build trust and expand the capacity of first responders on the ground.

# ARAKAN ARMY SAYS IT HAS SEIZED PALETWA TOWN IN CHIN STATE

**T**he Arakan Army (AA) has said that it has captured the town of Paletwa and several junta outposts in Chin State near the border with Bangladesh and India.

Clashes have rocked Myanmar's western Rakhine and Chin states since the AA attacked security forces in November, ending a ceasefire that had largely held since the junta's 2021 coup.

The group said late Sunday that AA fighters had seized the town of Paletwa in Chin State, around 20 kilometres (12 miles) from the Bangladesh border.

Paletwa sits on the Kaladan River, which a New Delhi-backed infrastructure initiative hopes to use to link India's landlocked northeast to the Bay of Bengal.

The AA posted pictures it said showed its fighters outside the town's police station and general administration office.

It said it was now in control of all of Paletwa Township, which had a population of over 64,000 people according to the 2014 census.

The AA also said it had captured six military bases along the border with India's Mizoram state.

AFP could not confirm the reports.

In October an alliance of the AA and two other ethnic minority groups together launched the 1027 offensive across Myanmar's northern Shan state, capturing towns and seizing vital trade hubs on the China border.

Last week the alliance announced a China-mediated ceasefire in Shan State after months of conflict that posed the biggest threat to the junta since it seized power.

**AFP/Mizzima**



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# MYANMAR'S ARMY IS FORCING RESIDENTS TO JOIN PRO-JUNTA MILITIAS

**C**onscription drive comes as the military loses ground to rebels as civil war grinds toward third year.

Myanmar's military is pressuring residents in the southwestern Bago region to join pro-junta militias, offering them incentives such as money and rice, forcing them to pay fines if they refuse and even threatening to destroy their villages if they don't comply, RFA Burmese has learned.

The conscription drive comes amid reports of heavy losses suffered by the military in clashes with anti-junta forces in recent months, particularly in northern Myanmar's Shan state where an alliance of ethnic resistance groups have seized 15 out of 22 townships since launching an offensive in October.

Rebel gains since then have suggested that the country's civil war, triggered by the military's 1 February 2021, coup d'etat, may be approaching a turning point.

The pressure tactics come after the junta announced on 9 January that it plans to "increase public defense and security systems to enforce public and regional security." Residents said junta-appointed ward and village administrators began summoning residents to meetings last week to inform them of the plan.

"Most people don't want to join" the militias, said a resident of Thegon Township who insisted on anonymity for personal safety, forcing villagers to scrape together cash to buy their way out of the conscription drive.



An army post in Yangon.  
Photo: AFP



“Those who can afford to, give money in order not to join,” said the resident. “But others neither join nor give 200,000 kyats (US\$95) [to defer]. They can’t afford it ... Every village is facing this problem. No one wants to join.”

On 12 January, the junta ordered administrators in Thaegon to conscript 20 people per village, he said. They threatened to burn down villages that did not comply, saying they were siding with anti-junta People’s Defense Force, or PDF, paramilitary groups.

In nearby Nattalin Township, residents said that the junta has been conscripting militiamen since 11 January by offering various “incentives.”

“They force people to provide financial support for the ones who join,” said one resident. “In places where 50 people are conscripted, they plan to arm 10 of them and provide food as an incentive. They said the other 40 had to join as ‘reserves.’”

### **10 MEN FROM EVERY 100 HOUSES**

The resident said that administrators have been tasked with drafting 10 men from every 100 houses, resulting in 30-90 conscripts per village, depending on the size of the village. Heads of households are made to draw lots, and those selected must be provided a monthly subsidy of 5,000-20,000 kyats (US\$2-10) per month by those who are not.

Draftees are deployed as “community security,” the resident said, but must also serve in the military “if necessary.”

Other sources in the region said that similar drives were underway since early January in the townships of Hpayargyi, Daik-U, Taungoo, Thandaung, Padaung, Shwedaung, Paungde and Paukkaung.

Incentives included 120,000 kyats (US\$57) and a sack of rice per month for those who join, while the cost of deferring ranged from 500,000-800,000 kyats (US\$238-381).

### **PROTECTING AGAINST ‘TERRORISTS’**

When contacted by RFA for comment, Tin Oo, the junta’s economic minister and spokesman for Bago region, said that residents were “preparing to protect their communities from violence.”

“It depends on them [whether they want to join],” he said. “Some villages say that they do not al-

low these PDF ‘terrorists’ to enter their area at all. We know that many young people are joining the militias to protect their own community.”

Lu Aye, information officer of the Thayarwady District PDF, said that the conscription is being implemented to replenish the depleted strength of the military.

“The situation is always intense in Thayarwady District,” he said. “Mostly, we attack [the military] first. That’s why the junta needs to replenish the depleted strength of its soldiers with militiamen. And to be frank, they are forcing them to fight and die on behalf of the soldiers.”

Other reports suggest that the junta has also launched conscription campaigns in Yangon and Ayeyarwaddy regions.

On Thursday, the No. 2 southern regional sub-command of the shadow National Unity Government’s Southern Command, issued a statement saying it will “take action” against anyone pressuring civilians to form militias for the junta.

Tin Oo, the deputy commander of the No. 2 sub-command – which operates in Yangon, Bago and Ayeyarwaddy (and a different person than the junta minister with the same name) – told RFA that anyone involved in militia conscription will be “prosecuted under military law.”

“We have urged the public to avoid [the drives] as much as possible,” said the deputy commander. “Our statement is aimed at stopping the forced recruitment immediately and, if it does not end, we will take effective action against those who are involved or supporting it. There is a war going on, so we will take action according to military law.”

Forming militias is part of a junta bid to shore up military troop shortages and “drive a wedge between the people,” he added.

*Courtesy of Radio Free Asia (RFA)*

# WHAT ROLE DID CHINA PLAY IN A REBEL GROUP'S VICTORY IN NORTHERN MYANMAR?

**E**thnic-minority armies couched their campaign as an effort to rid the region of criminal organizations that had frustrated China.

When the Three Brotherhood Alliance of rebel groups in Myanmar started a campaign against junta forces in the northern part of the country they chose a slogan designed to win support from a fourth potential ally: China.

“Wipe out the scammers, rescue our compatriots,” the group declared in the message.

China, which shares a border with Kokang, a region in Shan state in northern Myanmar, had expressed increasing frustration with organized crime rings that had been allowed to operate in the area by junta-aligned forces. An estimated 120,000 people are being held in Myanmar against their will. Chinese na-



TNLA fighters in northern Shan State. Photo: AFP



tionals have both been trafficked by these groups and fleeced by them.

The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army – which along with the Ta'ang National Liberation Army and the Arakan Army make up the Alliance – had tried and failed twice before to retake the region. This time, however, Kokang's capital of Laukkai fell into rebel hands on 4 January.

Since then, China has played a clear role in mediating a truce between the two sides. But the initial success of the rebel campaign has led analysts to speculate that it had, in fact, received Chinese backing.



China's leaders may have sought to kill “two birds with one stone,” according to Deng Yuwen, a political commentator and former journalist – strengthening China's position in the region while removing the destabilizing threat presented by the scam compounds.

“The Chinese government can use the scamming operations as a way to secretly support local forces ... and control the area that way,” Deng said.

“They solve the scamming problem and cultivate bold agents of the Chinese state at the same time,” he said, meaning China believes the new leaders of Kokang will better reflect its interests.

### **A ‘KING’ AND A COUP**

Kokang has long been in China's orbit, and many of its residents are ethnically Chinese. In the mid-20th century, Kokang served as a base for Myanmar communists.

With the collapse of the Communist Party of Burma in 1989, local warlord Peng Jiasheng – whose nickname was “the king of Kokang” – switched his allegiance to the junta. The military granted the region autonomy and allowed Peng to keep his military presence in the area, though China remained an important patron.

In 2009, Peng was ousted in a coup led by his second-in-command, Bai Suocheng, who consolidated his family's control over the state. Bai allowed government troops to be stationed in Kokang for the first time while residents were granted Myanmar nationality.

Bai offered sanctuary to criminal groups in return for huge payouts that also benefited the junta. Eventually, massive, organized scam operations began to thrive in Kokang.

### **CHINA PUSHES BACK**

Last year, the Chinese government appeared fed up. In August, it took part in a joint operation with Myanmar and Thailand targeting the scam centers.

Over the intervening months, more than 40,000 Chinese nationals were arrested in Shan state

for involvement with online scams, according to data collected by RFA.

A number of powerful Kokang business people were arrested at a trade fair in China in October, and in November, Beijing issued arrest warrants for a well-connected Kokang politician and three family members on allegations of masterminding an online scam ring.

On 10 December, China's Ministry of Public Security put out another wanted list, naming 10 individuals in connection with the scams, including Bai Suo-cheng, his grown children and a few junta officials.

The move not only showed Beijing's growing impatience with Myanmar's handling of the scam rings, but signaled that China favored leaders in Kokang more closely aligned with its national interests.

### **THE PRINCE'S PLANS**

After he had been dethroned as the king of Kokang, Peng Jiasheng resurfaced as the leader of the MNDAA, fighting Myanmar forces on occasion without significant success.

When he died in 2022, his son, Peng Denren, took over and immediately made plans to reclaim control of his father's lost territory. The Alliance launched "Operation 1027" – so-called for its start date of 27 October 2023, – offensive against Myanmar military strongholds in northern Myanmar.

Even though the Alliance remained outnumbered by government troops, the rebel forces scored several significant victories early on. Its soldiers have since seized more than 300 military bases, around a dozen towns, and won control of several key trade routes with the neighboring Chinese province of Yunnan.

### **SUSPICION OVER 'FOREIGN' EXPERTS**

Myanmar's junta chief in November claimed that the ethnic-minority armed groups were getting outside assistance, according to a report by Agence France-Presse.

He said the rebels had been using "drones with advanced technology" to attack junta positions and were aided by "foreign drone experts," although he didn't specify which country they came from.

Li Jiawen, a spokesman for the MNDAA, denied the offensive was aided by the Chinese. "The situation we have today is the result of nearly 70 years of tyranny by the junta," Li said.

Even China's tacit approval of the operation is important, Yun Sun, the director of the China Program at the Stimson Center, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, said in an interview with RFA.

"The biggest support that China has lent to this organization is to not stop them," she said.

Rebel forces were able to retreat over the border to avoid junta artillery barrages. China allowed the flow of money and goods in Shan state that helped to sustain the rebels to continue, Sun said.

And there was likely a psychological effect: The morale of junta forces would have suffered when they realized the difficulty of sustaining control of the area without China's approval.

"The fact that China did not stop them carries a lot of currency," she said. "It sends a message ... that China is not completely happy with the junta at this time."

### **CHINA MEDIATES**

Beijing has indicated that its chief priority in Myanmar is stability, which has meant supporting the junta in the broader struggle for control of the country.

"China's position is very clear," ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said in a late December press conference. "China will not support any party in provoking trouble. A ceasefire and negotiation are in the interests of all relevant parties in Myanmar and will also help maintain peace on the China-Myanmar border."

After a stray missile landed in a Chinese border town in Yunnan – injuring three Chinese citizens



and prompting a strong rebuke from Beijing – China’s vice foreign minister, Sun Weidong, flew to Myanmar on 4 January. He met with junta leader Min Aung Hlaing and held talks with his Myanmar counterpart, Lun Wu, about the situation in northern Myanmar.

On the day of Sun’s arrival, the junta announced it would transfer control of the Kokang Autonomous Region headquarters to the MNDAA.

The months-long struggle for Laukkai had come to an end.

“The formal cessation of hostilities began two days ago,” MNDAA’s Li Jiawen told RFA on 6 January. “You could still hear some artillery sounds on 5 January, but as of today, the artillery has stopped.”

Videos provided by sources close to the MNDAA show Myanmar military personnel, with the Myanmar flag on their chests, handing over weapons and ammunition to the MNDAA before lining up for withdrawal. Kokang chairman and junta Brig. Gen. Tun Tun Myint engaged in what appeared to be friendly conversations with his recent enemies.

The analyst Deng Yuwen said the scene might be an example of junta realpolitik: concede a hard-to-defend territory and appease a powerful neighbor in the process.

“This place still needs to develop its economy before it can finally be safe,” Deng said. “If the economy doesn’t grow, other issues will arise over time ... which China doesn’t want to see.”

## **SCAM CRACKDOWN**

The MNDAA emphasizes the restoration of law and order in laying out its plans for Laukkai. Li Jiawen said that efforts to crack down on scam operations are ongoing, while most members of the Bai family and their associates have fled to Myanmar’s capital.

“Telecommunications fraud in Laukkai has been largely eliminated, with only a small number of remnants,” Li said. “We will continue to investigate and completely root out telecommunications fraud.”

He also expressed gratitude to China: “This has definitely been fruitful, and China’s mediation and involvement will continue in our negotiations with the Myanmar military. I believe that, under the vigorous mediation of the Chinese government, we will have a favorable outcome to those, too.”

The junta military meanwhile seems intent on getting back on China’s good side.

After Taiwanese voters backed a political party that supports an independent Taiwan in the recent presidential race, the junta issued a statement declaring its commitment to a “one China policy.”

Myanmar’s military rulers oppose “any separatist activities aimed at ‘Taiwan independence’ and foreign interference in the internal affairs of other states,” the junta said in the statement.

*Courtesy of Radio Free Asia (RFA)*

# CHINA'S POPULATION DECLINE ACCELERATES IN 2023



Photo: AFP

China's population decline accelerated in 2023, official data showed Wednesday last week, extending a downward streak after more than six decades of growth as the country battles a looming demographic crisis.

Once the world's most populous country, China was overtaken by India last year, with Beijing now scrambling to boost falling birth rates through subsidies and pro-fertility propaganda.

"By the end of 2023, the national population was 1,409.67 million... a decrease of 2.08 million over that at the end of 2022," Beijing's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said Wednesday.

Last year's decline was more than double the fall reported for 2022, when the country lost 850,000 people as its population shrank for the first time since 1960.

"In 2023, the number of births was 9.02 million with a birth rate of 6.39 per thousand," the NBS said Wednesday, down from 9.56 million births in 2022.

China ended its strict "one-child policy", imposed in the 1980s amid overpopulation fears, in 2016 and started letting couples have three children in 2021.

But that has failed to reverse the demographic decline for a country that has long relied on its vast workforce as a driver of economic growth.

Many blame falling birth rates on the soaring cost of living, as well as the growing number of women going into the workforce and seeking higher education.

"The trend of China's population decline is basically impossible to reverse," He Yafu, an independent Chinese demographer, told AFP.

"Even if fertility is encouraged, it is impossible for China's fertility rate to rise to replacement level, because now the younger generation has fundamentally changed its conception of fertility and is generally unwilling to have more children," He said.

To postpone an economic crisis as the pool of working-age adults shrinks, He said the government should roll out more incentives including childrearing stipends, "developing universal child-care services, and increasing the rate of children under the age of three entering nursery schools".

AFP



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# MODI OPENS FLASHPOINT TEMPLE SYMBOLISING 'NEW ERA' FOR INDIA

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said the opening of a temple Monday heralded a “new era” for India, at a ceremony that embodies the triumph of his muscular Hindu nationalist politics, galvanising loyalists ahead of elections this year.

“Breaking the shackles of slavery, the country should rise, taking lessons from the past,” Modi said, speaking outside the temple to the Hindu deity Ram, built on grounds where a mosque stood for centuries before it was torn down in 1992 by Hindu zealots incited by members of his party.

“A country creates new history only like this.”

That demolition triggered the worst religious

riots since independence -- killing 2,000 people, most of them Muslims -- and shook the foundations of India’s officially secular political order.

“January 22, 2024 is not merely a date in the calendar but heralds the advent of a new era”, he added, after praying at the feet of the black stone idol in the heart of the grand temple, garlanded in flowers and decked in jewels.

“It’s Ram’s supreme blessings that we are witnessing.”

Outside, tens of thousands of chanting and dancing devotees waving flags, honking horns and beating drums, packed the streets of the northern



Indian PM Narendra Modi, centre.  
Photo: AFP



town of Ayodhya, as military helicopters showered flower petals from the sky.

Few members of Ayodhya's Muslim community were seen joining the jubilant street party, and opposition leaders have stayed away.

But for Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the opening of the Ram Mandir temple is a landmark moment in a decades-long campaign to align the country's governance with its majority faith.

"The Lord has made me an instrument to represent all the people of India," Modi had said ahead of the "auspicious" opening.

### **TYCOONS, CRICKETERS AND ACTORS**

Excitement has reached a fever pitch, with thousands of Hindu believers dancing in packed streets as giant loudspeakers blast out religious tunes.

Vijay Kumar, 18, took four days to reach the town after walking and hitchhiking 600 kilometres (370 miles).

"We just wanted to be here," Kumar said. "We just wish to see the temple before we leave."

About 2,500 musicians are performing on over 100 stages for the crowds of pilgrims around the elaborate temple, built at an estimated \$240 million that the project's backers say was sourced from public donations.

The 140 kilometres (87 miles) between the town and Uttar Pradesh state capital Lucknow is a seemingly endless stream of billboards of blue-skinned Ram with bow and arrow -- as well as of Modi and the region's chief minister, the saffron-robed Hindu monk Yogi Adityanath.

"It's all because of Modi," said Prem Sharan, 35, a resident of Ayodhya.

"Some critics say that it is being turned into an election-like atmosphere; so be it. At least they are doing what they promised and one needs the power to do things for the people."

Other attendees jetted into the newly built international airport and will stay at a crop of hotels built to cater to the millions of pilgrims expected to visit each year.

Celebrity guests include Indian tycoons, cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar and Bollywood titan Amitabh Bachchan.

### **'DESTRUCTION'**

Modi and the BJP have sought to bring the Hindu faith to the forefront of public life since sweeping to power a decade ago.

Party luminaries regularly condemn earlier eras of Islamic rule over parts of India as a time of "slavery" when their own religion was oppressed, with Ayodhya a key plank in their narrative.

Devout Hindus believe Ram, one of the most revered Hindu gods, was born in the town more than 7,000 years ago, but that the Babri mosque was built over his birthplace by a 16th-century Muslim emperor.

The BJP played an instrumental role in public campaigning that eventually led to the mosque's demolition.

The destruction presaged the rise of the BJP and Modi as unstoppable electoral juggernauts, displacing the secularist Congress party that had governed India almost without interruption since independence from Britain.

Modi's consecration of the temple alongside Hindu priests will again project him as a defender of the faith ahead of a general election expected to begin in April.

The BJP is heavily favoured to win a third successive landslide victory, in part because of Modi's appeals to Hindu nationalism, and opposition parties are boycotting the temple ceremony, saying the event will be a thinly veiled campaign rally.

But many of India's 200 million Muslims, already anxious in a climate of increased sectarian tensions, have watched the clamour around the temple with trepidation.

Mohammed Shahid, 52, speaking to AFP last month in Ayodhya, recounted how his father was burned alive by a mob.

"For me, the temple symbolises nothing but death and destruction", he said.

**AFP**

# WHAT IS THE INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?



Photo: UN News

**T**he International Court of Justice (ICJ) has been placed firmly in the global spotlight this month following South Africa's decision to turn to the world tribunal after accusing Israel of violating its obligations under the Genocide Convention. Here is a primer on the ICJ and what it does.

## ***What is the ICJ for, and how does it work?***

The ICJ, which is situated in the Peace Palace in The Hague, a city in the Netherlands, was established in 1945 as a way of settling disputes between countries. The court also provides advisory opinions on legal questions that have been referred to it by other authorized UN organs.

Widely known as the "world court", the ICJ is one of the six "principal organs" of the United Nations, on the same footing as the General Assembly, Security Council, Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), Trusteeship Council and the Secretariat, and the only one that is not located in New York.

Unlike the Court of Justice of the European Union, the ICJ is not a supreme court to which national courts can turn; it can only hear a dispute when requested to do so by one or more States.

The court is composed of 15 judges, all of whom are elected to nine-year terms of office by the UN General Assembly and Security Council. Elections

are held every three years for one third of the seats, and retiring judges may be re-elected. The members do not represent their governments but are independent magistrates, and there is only ever one judge of any nationality on the court.

Cases open with the parties filing and exchanging pleadings containing a detailed statement of the points of fact and of law on which each party relies and an oral phase consisting of public hearings at which agents and counsel address the court.

The countries involved appoint an agent to plead their case, someone who has the same rights and obligations as a solicitor in a national court. Occasionally, a leading politician may defend their country, as in the 2020 *The Gambia v Myanmar* case (see below).

After this stage, the judges deliberate in camera (in private, behind closed doors), and then the Court delivers its verdict. The length of time this takes can be anything from a few weeks to several years.

## ***Why is the ICJ important?***

The ICJ is the only international court that settles disputes between the 193 UN Member States. This means that it makes an important contribution to global peace and security, providing a way for countries to resolve issues without resorting to conflict.



### ***What kind of cases are brought before the court?***

The court can rule on two types of case: “contentious cases” are legal disputes between States and “advisory proceedings” are requests for advisory opinions on legal questions referred to it by United Nations organs and certain specialized agencies.

The case brought by South Africa against Israel on 29 December last year is the first time a contentious case has been brought against Israel at the ICJ (a 2004 advisory opinion found that the construction of the wall built by Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including in and around East Jerusalem, and its associated regime is contrary to international law).

South Africa contends that “acts and omissions by Israel...are genocidal in character, as they are committed with the requisite specific intent...to destroy Palestinians in Gaza as a part of the broader Palestinian national, racial and ethnical group”.

South Africa seeks to found the court’s jurisdiction on the 1948 UN Genocide Convention, to which both countries are signatories. Israel rejects the allegations.

Another relatively recent case that gained international attention involved a ruling against Myanmar in January 2020, ordering the country to protect its minority Rohingya population and the destruction of evidence related to genocide allegations. That case, which was brought by The Gambia, was notable for the appearance of Aung San Suu Kyi, then the de facto leader of Myanmar, at The Hague to defend her country.

As for “advisory proceedings”, on 20 January 2023, the General Assembly requested an advisory opinion from the court on “Israeli practices affecting the human rights of the Palestinian people in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem”.

In March 2023, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution to ask the court to deliver an advisory opinion on the obligations of States in respect to climate change, with most speakers in the resulting debate hailing the move as a milestone in their decades-long struggle for climate justice. Both advisory proceedings are ongoing.

### ***Who can bring a case to the court?***

Any UN Member State can bring a case against any other Member State, whether or not they are directly in conflict, when the common interest of the international community is at stake.

In the case of The Gambia v Myanmar, for ex-

ample, The Gambia was not directly concerned by the genocide allegations levelled against Myanmar, but that did not preclude the country from bringing the action, on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

### ***What are the consequences of a court ruling?***

The rulings of the ICJ are final, and there is no possibility of appeal.

It is up to the States concerned to apply the court’s decisions in their national jurisdictions, and, in most cases, they honour their obligations under international law and comply.

If a country fails to perform the obligations incumbent upon it under a judgment, the only remaining recourse is to turn to the Security Council, which can vote on a resolution, per the UN Charter. This happened in a case brought by Nicaragua against the United States in 1984, demanding reparations for the US support for Contra rebels.

The ICJ ruled in Nicaragua’s favour, but the US refused to accept the finding. Nicaragua then took the matter to the Security Council, where a relevant resolution was vetoed by the United States.

### ***How is the ICJ different from the ICC?***

There is frequent confusion between the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

The simplest way to explain the difference is that ICJ cases involve countries, and the ICC is a criminal court, which brings cases against individuals for war crimes or crimes against humanity.

Also, whilst the ICJ is an organ of the United Nations, the ICC is legally independent of the UN, although it is endorsed by the General Assembly.

While not all 193 UN Member States are parties to the ICC, it can launch investigations and open cases related to alleged crimes committed on the territory or by a national of a State party to the ICC or of a State that has accepted its jurisdiction.

Cases have been heard and decisions rendered on a range of violations, from using rape as a weapon of war to conscripting children as combatants.

*Courtesy of UN News*



Photo: Mizzima

## KACHIN STATE

### *Leaders of Hpakant strike committee sentenced to 10 years in prison*

A Myanmar junta court in Hpakant Town, Mohnyin District, Kachin State has handed down a ten-year prison sentence to two leaders of the Hpakant Strike Committee, who were involved in efforts to overthrow the military dictatorship.

The Mohnyin District Court, on 18 January, imposed the sentence on the two strike leaders, Ko Myint Lwin and Ko Thein, citing violations of the Counter Terrorism Law, Sections 52 (a) and 50 (j), a member of the committee told Mizzima.

The rationale behind two leaders' arrest, a Hpakant Strike Committee member said, was "due to their leadership roles within the Hpakant Strike Committee and their affiliation with the People's Defense Force (PDF), they were arrested by junta."

The junta forces apprehended both leaders on 8 June, 2023, in Kantharyar Village, Hpakant

Township, while they were traveling by car. Ko Maung Aye was also present in the vehicle. During the arrest, junta troops fired shots at Ko Maung Aye, resulting in his death.

"Details regarding Ko Maung Aye's role, whether he was the driver or a member of the Hpakant Strike Committee, remain unclear. As of now, his deceased body has not been returned to the family," said a source in Hpakant town.

Ko Myint Lwin and Ko Thein have been sentenced to prison more than seven months following their arrest and subsequent interrogation by the military regime. The two leaders are reportedly being transferred to Mohnyin Prison.

As reported by residents in Hpakant, since the military coup, more than 100 people have been apprehended and detained in Hpakant Township for their involvement in alleged anti-military activities.





## MYANMAR JUNTA CHIEF AND THAI MILITARY OFFICER TALK ON REGIONAL STABILITY

**M**yanmar junta chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and the Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Royal Thai Army General Kittisak Boonprathamchai discussed their perspectives on advancing collaboration in peace and stability, upholding the rule of law, countering terrorism, and sharing information in the border regions of both nations, reported the Myanmar junta-controlled media.

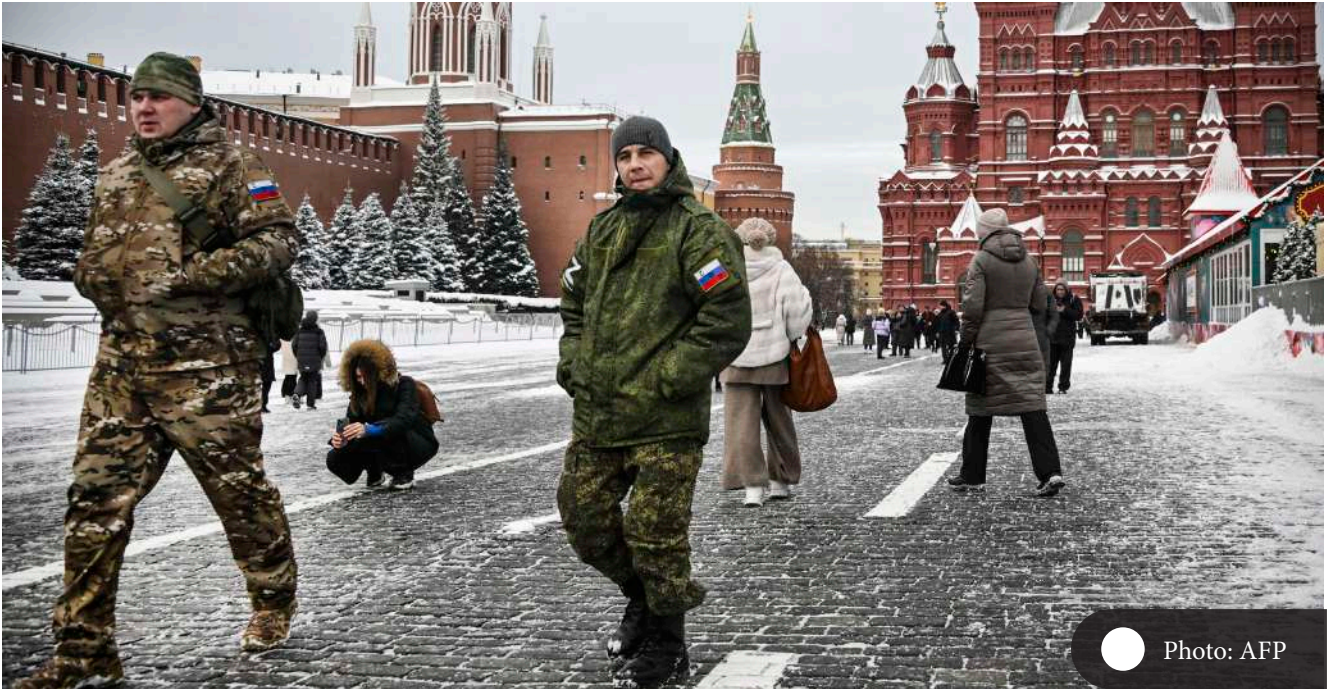
The meeting took place on January 16 at the Bayintnaung Villa in Nay Pyi Taw.

During the discussions, both sides engaged in talks about plans to enhance existing relations and cooperation between their respective countries and armed forces, according to the junta media.

Meanwhile, the Thai government is contemplating offering extensive humanitarian aid to aid vulnerable populations in Myanmar, reported Bangkok Post. Additionally, Thailand has plans to engage in discussions with both the junta leaders and ethnic minority groups to seek a resolution to the crisis in Myanmar.

Thailand has a border with Myanmar that extends over 2,400 kilometers.

# RUSSIA AND MYANMAR DISCUSS USING AI TO BOOST OIL AND GAS FIELD OUTPUT



The Myanmar Ministry of Energy and the Russian Federation have been discussing the use of AI technology in boosting production of oil and gas from Myanmar's dwindling reserves of oil and gas fields.

The Russian Federation ambassador to Myanmar Mr. Iskander Azizov and Myanmar Energy Minister Ko Ko Lwin reportedly discussed the use of AI technology in geological and geophysical work, and promotion of cooperation in the energy sector between Myanmar and Russia on 17 January.

They also exchanged views regarding the matters of building an oil refinery in Myanmar.

The major oil and gas production centre of Myanmar is in the oil fields of Magway and Mandalay Regions.

After the 2021 military coup, the relationship between Myanmar and the Russian Federation has grown closer and friendlier, and has seen a proposal that Russia will help build a nuclear power plant in Myanmar.

The World Bank's Semi-annual Economic Monitor Report for Myanmar says that Myanmar's natural gas production continued its downward trajectory due mainly to dwindling reserves and a lack of investment in new energy sector projects and it would create another crisis for the Military Council as the supply and demand gap will grow wider in the electricity and energy sectors.

Depletion of reserves, lack of new investments in the upstream oil and gas sector and regular maintenance of pipelines, especially the Yadana field, pose further constraints on production, the report says.

New international sanctions on Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) could pose additional challenges for the oil and gas sector by restricting the provision of financial services and deterring badly needed foreign investment, hence the Military Council is trying to boost oil and gas production with Russia's technological assistance.



# MYANMAR PLANS EXPORT OF 300,000 TONNES OF RUBBER DESPITE SLOWDOWN CAUSED BY FIGHTING



**R**ubber export is in slowdown as there are some difficulties in border trade routes but Myanmar expects more rubber exports in this fiscal year.

Myanmar was able to export only 100,000 tonnes of rubber in the last fiscal year. The annual production of rubber in Myanmar is about 400,000 tonnes.

About 75% of rubber exports go to China, and the other main markets are Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan.

The Rubber Planters and Producers Association (RPPA) says that currently the rubber price is stable in the domestic market but the supply is higher than the demand.

Currently the rubber planters in villages near Thuwunna Wadi, Thaton Township, Mon State, are selling their rubber at 1,580 Kyats per pound.

The RPPA notes that fighting in northern Shan State caused difficulties in transporting their goods to China and then the rubber price is falling in the market.

After the stoppage of rubber export through border trade, Thai rubber gets 2,599 Kyats per pound but Myanmar rubber gets only 1,500 Kyats per pound, so the price difference is nearly 1,000 Kyats.

The rubber planters said that they were worrying about further fall of the rubber price amid the current political and conflict situation.

Rubber cultivation is widespread in Mon State, Kayin State, Taninthayi Region, and other states, covering 1.64 million acres. The annual production is estimated at 950,000 tonnes with Mon State being the primary supplier, followed by Taninthayi Region and Karen State.



# CHINA SAYS ECONOMY GREW 5.2% IN 2023



Photo: AFP

China's economy last year suffered one of its worst annual performances in more than three decades, official figures showed Wednesday, as it battled a crippling property crisis, sluggish consumption and global turmoil.

Gross domestic product expanded 5.2 percent to hit 126 trillion yuan (\$17.6 trillion), National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reported.

Official GDP figures remain a key source of insight into the health of the world's second-largest economy, despite being eminently political.

Wednesday's reading is an improvement on the three percent seen in 2022, a year that saw business activity hammered by tight health curbs designed to contain the virus.

But excluding the pandemic years, it marks the weakest performance since 1990.

After lifting Covid measures, Beijing set itself a growth target of "around five percent" for 2023.

Officials are due to release their target for this year in March.

After the lifting of zero-Covid measures at the end of 2022, the economy enjoyed a quick rebound but that quickly ran out of steam within months as a lack of confidence among households and businesses battered consumption.

An intractable real estate crisis, record youth unemployment and a global slowdown are also gumming the gears of the Chinese growth engine.

The country's exports - historically a key growth lever - fell last year for the first time since 2016, according to figures published by the customs agency on Friday last week.

Geopolitical tensions with the United States and efforts by some Western nations to reduce dependence on China or diversify their supply chains have also hit growth.

AFP



**Penrose Thitsa**

## **RISING SMUGGLING CRISIS SPARKS STRINGENT MEASURES IN BANGLADESH'S COX'S BAZAR AMIDST ESCALATING CONFLICT IN MYANMAR**

In response to a remarkable surge in smuggling activities, law enforcement in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar has heightened measures to combat the smuggling of fuel oil, edible oil, and food products to Myanmar via coastal areas, reported Bangladeshi news outlet The Business Standard.

During last month, law enforcement operations resulted in the arrests of 28 smugglers, with confiscated items comprising 7,636 liters of octane, 136 liters of diesel, and 3,752 liters of soybean oil intended for Myanmar.

A directive was issued to fuel and edible oil companies, mandating the submission of a weekly list to Bangladesh's Upazila Nirbahi Officer.

The submitted list must provide comprehensive information, including the names of buyers, purchased quantities, and the time intervals between transactions. Following this, the Upazila administration will transmit the compiled data to the district administration for thorough examination.

The intensified clashes between junta forces and resistance groups, disrupting internal communication and causing shortages in essential goods in western Rakhine, Sittwe, Buthidaung, Rashidong, and Maungdaw area, have created the surge in smuggling.

CULTURE & LIFESTYLE

# IN FOCUS







## CALM IN YANGON

Worshippers at Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon.  
Photo: Laurentiu Moratiu



# TO GO OR NOT TO GO: A GUIDE FOR MYANMAR-BOUND SPIRITUAL SEEKERS



Photo: Insight Myanmar

**A**re you considering going to study Buddhist Dhamma in the Golden Land?

Insight Myanmar podcast director Joah McGee says that before the military coup in Myanmar, he used to get frequent messages from foreign meditators inquiring about where they could practice and ordain, as well as how to organize pilgrimages. They contacted him because his name had gotten around due to his long-time involvement in the country and the meditation-related projects he had undertaken there. Although he says don't know how many foreigners asked for his help at some time or another, he suggests the number is well in the hundreds.

Insight Myanmar is a good source of interesting interviews discussing a range of issues, including Buddhist Dhamma.

As we know, Myanmar was plunged into crisis by the military coup in February 2021, but there are still queries coming through.

"I continue to get messages from those hoping to travel to Myanmar for meditation, either asking my thoughts on the safety or ethics of such a trip... or simply wanting help in planning a trip they'd already decided to take," Joah says. "Because these requests are landing in my inbox more regularly, I am posting this as an open letter for anyone considering a trip to Myanmar at this time."

Dear Fellow Meditator,

Thanks for your message. I definitely understand your interest in wanting to go to Myanmar to practice meditation and maybe stay at a monastery. Indeed, this is the reason I, myself, visited the country for the first time, that I ended up living there for nearly 15 years, and that I've spent so much time supporting foreign practitioners to more easily access the country's spiritual riches. Yet in spite of that, I would strongly encourage you not to travel to Myanmar now. In fact, I would urge you to avoid a trip there at all costs. I say this for several reasons.

First, the context of my response is that the crisis and humanitarian disaster in Myanmar continues. Some people have asked me, 'Can I trust the media, is it really as bad as they say it is?' My answer is, 'It is actually far worse than any reporting you've seen!' The conflict has displaced over two million people, who don't know when they can ever return home, as was discussed in a recent panel discussion hosted by Insight Myanmar. The military jails and kills with impunity, yet the Burmese people continue to bravely resist for the better future to which they all aspire.

So first, of course, is the matter of your own safety. Given the current state of things, anyone who says that you can follow a plan or itinerary that ensures any degree of safety is either delusional or grossly misinformed. While it may be true to say that



there is more conflict in some parts of the country than others, random violence can spring up anywhere, and often without warning. Similarly, anyone who says that meditating at a monastery will be a kind of protection is also either delusional or grossly misinformed. Monasteries have been repeatedly bombed, raided, and taken over as military bases. Even silent meditation retreats have been attacked at times, as Kyun Pin Sayadaw described on a recent podcast, where he also spoke of bullets flying through meditation kutis and soldiers storming the Dhamma Hall!

Second, it's not just your own safety that's at risk, but that of anyone who you associate with. Even Burmese people that you might meet casually or briefly — let alone those helping you in any way — could very likely fall under suspicion by local authorities, and face dire consequences... which you will likely never be aware of, and which you could do nothing to prevent in any case. Any spiritual benefit you might accrue in meditation there would be negated if anyone suffered simply because of your presence there, especially now that you are aware of the associated risk.

Third, the Myanmar economy is all but broken; there is a shortage of food and water throughout the country. The humanitarian arm of our nonprofit, Better Burma, has been active in supporting rice donations to monks and nuns, especially in local communities where they are no longer able to provide these and other requisites. A foreign presence would take precious resources away from Burmese who are barely able to, and in some cases unable to, get by. Yet your host would likely never admit this you, as the Burmese people are generous to a fault and don't like to complain even when they face hardships, and especially when they're supporting spiritual endeavors. So you would be given the best of what they have, at a time when there is barely enough to go around.

Finally, a visit now, despite one's intentions, will serve only to legitimize a murderous regime. The junta is, in fact, hoping that more foreign travelers visit, because increased numbers of foreign visitors would not only present a veneer of normalcy for the regime, but also add money to their coffers. In an especially sickening twist of irony, there has even been a concerted effort at the highest levels to bring foreign monks to the consecration ceremonies of new pagodas and Buddha images.

Still, some meditators insist that they will be taking their trip "for Dhamma, and not for politics," or try to assure me that they will be able to take care that their money only supports local people and business-

es. But I'm sorry, this is, again, delusional, clueless, knowingly turning a blind eye to the reality there... or simply magical thinking. Travel to Myanmar at this time for any reason is by definition political whether one wants it to be or not.

I understand this might not be the response you were hoping to hear, and I deeply regret having to give it, as I feel it is truly tragic that the Golden Land is not able to share its spiritual wisdom as before; hopefully, one day, that opportunity will come again. But until then, I strongly recommend that no foreign traveler or meditator visit Myanmar.

If you really do value the teachings of liberation, and are grateful for the Burmese teachers or traditions that have provided them, I encourage you to explore the many positive ways you can still show your gratitude in the meantime. One way is stay informed. You can do so by reading up on the situation, or by listening to our podcast episodes. Also, if you have any Burmese friends or acquaintances, reach out to them and let them know you're an ally. Another possibility is that if you have extra time, consider volunteering with a local organization, or with us! Or, make your voice heard in your local community, by writing editorials in the neighborhood paper, posting online, or contacting your local representative. And finally, consider making a donation to organizations supporting the Burmese people, or consider a contribution to our mission.

It is distressing that a place that has been the home to the some of the greatest wisdom the world has ever known is not at present in a state to unconditionally welcome spiritual aspirants as it once was. We all deeply hope that the current dark period we find ourselves in will soon dissipate, and that Burmese throughout the country can be free, healthy, and safe. We hope that Burmese in the diaspora can finally return home, and we wish that meditators and monastics may travel from around the world to once again find a life-changing practice inspired by the warm generosity of the Golden Land."

The original posting can be found at Insight Myanmar here: <https://insightmyanmar.org/burmad-hammablog/2023/12/27/can-i-come-to-myanmar-for-meditation-now>



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