

MYANMAR'S OPERATION 1027 FIGHTERS CLAIM KEY NORTHERN TOWN OF LAUKKAI

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SANCTIONS WEAPON

Myanmar junta
feels the pressure
from US and EU
curbs



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NOW THE HARD PART

As we enter 2024, it would be wise to recognize that the exuberant response to the successes of Operation 1027 run by the Three Brotherhood Alliance in northern Shan State ought to make way for a more cautious approach to the wave of “positive headlines” in local and international media signaling resistance victories.

The Myanmar junta was likely shocked by the actions in Shan State over the last two months, and are struggling to respond, buffeted by serious casualties, and capture of troops.

But we are far away from the Myanmar resistance rocking up to the gates of Naypyidaw expecting the military to wave the white flag. Operation 1027 was clearly a useful shot in the arm to the range of resistance players across Myanmar seeking to kick the junta out of power, prompting a gung-ho response from social media users. But, despite the weekly successes of Operation 1027, the junta remains heavily entrenched and using all its weapons of war – including the media and social media, and “misinformation” – to hang on to power.

Over the last two months, we have seen a rush of upbeat news and social media comment suggesting Operation 1027 was a “breakthrough” action that has galvanized a range of actions from other resistance players – including

People’s Defence Forces (PDF), Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (ERO), and the offices of the National Unity Government (NUG), all seeking to leverage the success of the operation to ratchet up their physical and propaganda war against the illegal military junta.

The acting president of the NUG, Duwa Lashi La, claimed Monday last week that the end of the junta is near amid mass desertions and surrenders of junta troops.

“We have seen the mass deserting and surrender of the Military Council soldiers unprecedented in military history. Looking at these, it can be said that the end of the Military Council is near,” said Duwa Lashi La, during his new year’s address. He noted that junta troops are facing the situation where its soldiers are either surrendering or being captured in battles on a daily basis, adding that 550 military junta soldiers have surrendered during Operation 1027.

The junta is clearly on a backfoot but it would be wise to be cautious. The weekly headlines of resistance “successes” – whether in Shan State, Rakhine or the recent KIA downing of a junta helicopter – tend to mask the difficulties Spring Revolutionary resistance players continue to face.

The Myanmar junta is not about to put down its arms.

EDITORIAL

mizzima

WEEKLY

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MIZZIMA MAGAZINE

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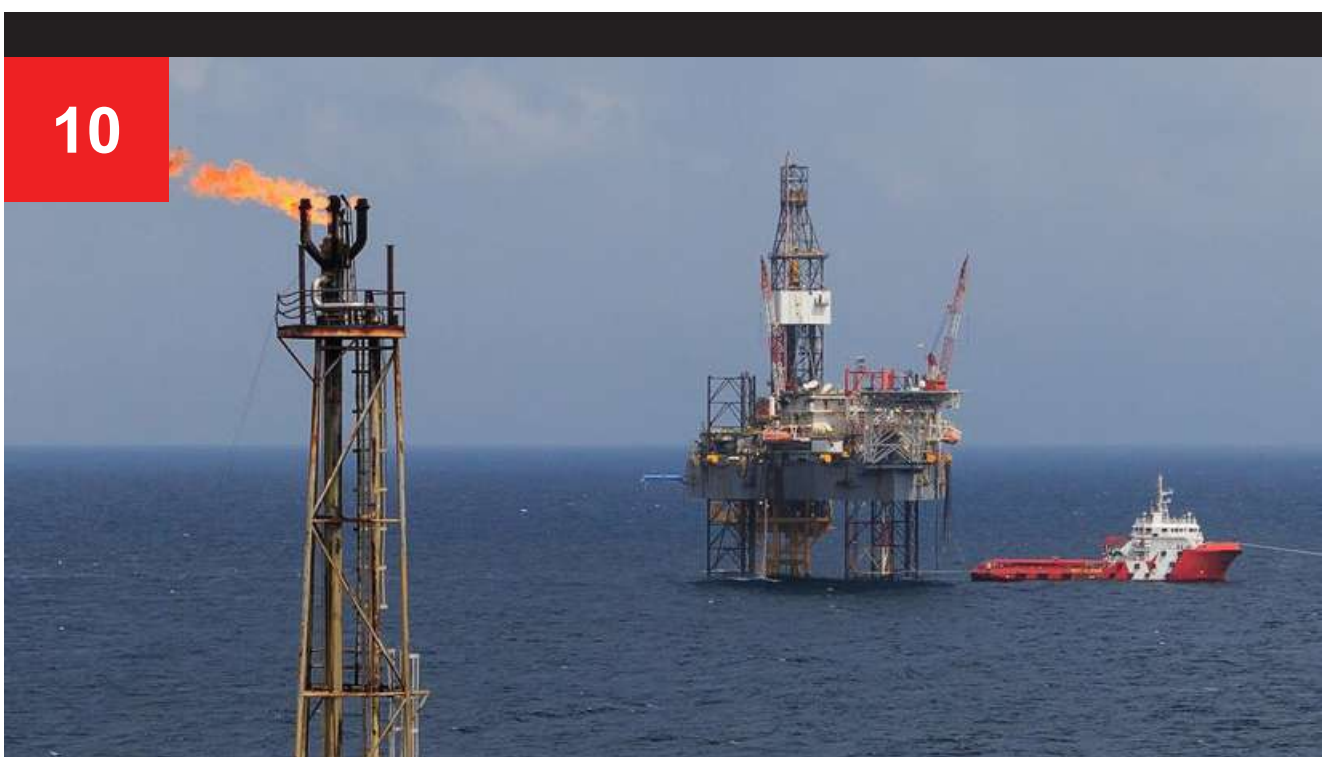


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Cover photo of an oil rig at sea by
Arvind Vallabh

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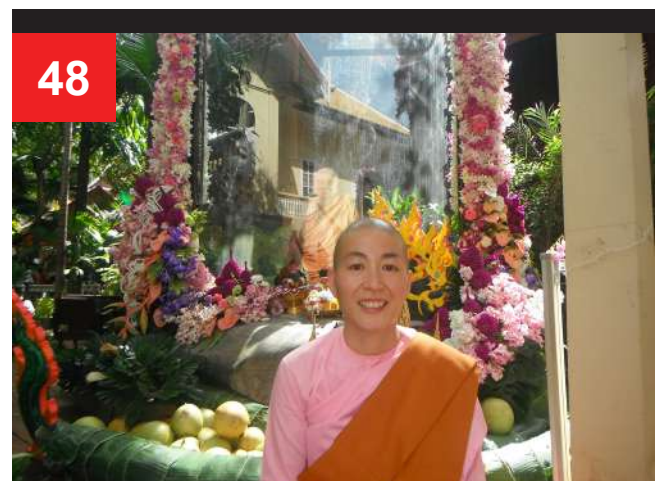
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WELCOMING FREED PRISONERS

Family and friends gather outside Insein Prison in Yangon to welcome freed prisoners, released on 4 January, Independence Day, in an amnesty.

Photo: AFP

IN FOCUS



JUNTA SOLDIERS RAID UDEIN VILLAGE IN MANDALAY REGION

A column of about 100 junta soldiers looted and set fire to Udein Village in Mandalay Region's Madaya Township, at about 7:30 a.m. on 31 December.

A source based in Madaya Township said: "The Junta troops raided Udein and set the village on fire. The entire village had to evacuate without any belongings. Despite the absence of any conflict, they engaged in destructive behavior."

According to reports, not only did the junta soldiers set fire to houses, they also looted valuable items and vehicles.

When the soldiers arrived about 300 people were able to flee from Udein Village. About 50 houses were burnt down making many people homeless.

A villager said: "The villagers didn't have a chance to run as the military raided suddenly. Some villagers got arrested. We also heard the sound of heavy weapons coming from there. That's all I can say right now."

Udein Village is a village of about 1,000 households on the bank of the Ayeyarwaddy River,

After raiding Udein Village, the junta soldiers moved on to Tokone Village, also in Madaya Township. The troops moved to Tokone Village so quickly that many residents did not have time to flee before they arrived, which led to many villagers being trapped in the village and unable to leave because of the junta troops there.

FORMER MAYOR OF MANDALAY DR YE LWIN RELEASED FROM OBO PRISON

Sources have confirmed the release of Dr. Ye Lwin, the former Mayor of Mandalay, and Kyaw Zeya, a member of the Mandalay Municipal Committee, from Mandalay Obo Prison. Both were released around 2:30 pm on 4 January and are reported to be in good health.

Dr. Ye Lwin, aged 72, and Kyaw Zeya, aged 44, had been detained on 1 February, 2021, the day the military took control of the country. They were charged with inciting national unrest under Section 505 (b) of the penal code and were sentenced to two years in prison on 8 December, 2021.

Subsequently, on 31 October, 2022, nearing the conclusion of their initial release period, both individuals faced renewed charges under Article 409 for the alleged embezzlement of state funds. They were sentenced to an additional two years in prison but have now been released through the amnesty granted

this week by the Military Council.

During the tenure of the National League for Democracy (NLD) government, Dr. Ye Lwin, who served as a city councilor in the Mandalay Region government, garnered substantial public support for his actions and was widely trusted and respected by the city's residents.

Presently, Mandalay Region Chief Minister Dr. Zaw Myint Maung, aged 73 and battling leukemia, and Mandalay Region Minister of Electric Power Zarni Aung remain incarcerated in Mandalay Obo Prison, alongside other political prisoners. Concerns have been raised about their inadequate access to health-care, as reported by those who have been released.

On 4 January, the Military Council declared the pardon of 9,652 inmates, including the release of 114 foreign prisoners, in commemoration of the 76th Independence Day.

MISSILE FIRED AT MYANMAR JUNTA TROOPS IN MANDALAY PALACE

Defence forces fired a long-range 107mm missile into Mandalay Palace, which is being used by the junta as a Central Military Command, at about 9:00 p.m. on 31 December 2023.

An official from the No More Dictatorship People Defense Force (NMD PDF), one of the defence forces involved in the attack, said: "We launched the 107-mm missile attack to celebrate Revolutionary New Year."

NMD PDF also sent the soldiers stationed at Mandalay Palace an ultimatum. It said that if they do

not leave the palace within 48 hours the defence forces will continue attacking the palace with missiles that have already been strategically positioned in preparation for the attack.

The attack was carried out by a combined force from NMD PDF and the Security & Special Task Force (SSTF-MDY).

Previously, early in the morning of 21 December, NMD PDF and its allies fired six missiles at Mandalay Palace.

FORMER NLD POLITICIAN REPRESENTING THAYARWADDY RELEASED IN AMNESTY, THEN RE-ARRESTED

Aung Myint, a National League for Democracy (NLD) Pyithu Hluttaw Representative for Thayarwaddy Town, Bago District from the 2020 Election, who was granted clemency on 4 January to mark the country's 76th Independence Day, has been re-arrested by the Township Police Chief, according to a local resident.

Aung Myint had previously received a two-year prison sentence from the Thayarwaddy Prison Court under Article (25) of the Natural Disaster Management Law. This sentence was imposed after his arrest during a house raid on the night of 10 February, 2021, by the military regime.

Although he was released on 1 November, 2022, he was not allowed to return home. Instead, he was taken to the Thayarwaddy Prison Court, where he faced further charges, this time under Section 505 (a) of the penal code.

His 4 January release was short-lived. "He was released again, but this time he was subsequently taken to the Township Police Chief's Office. The specific charges against him this time are still unknown," said a source from Thayarwaddy.

A total of 151 inmates, comprising 138 males and 13 females, were released from Thayarwaddy Prison on 4 January, as reported by a source within the prison. Among those released were four political prisoners, including three males and one female, which included Aung Myint.

Additionally, a source with close ties to the prison confirmed that Aung Myint had been re-arrested.

Aung Myint previously served as the Thayarwaddy Pyithu Hluttaw representative for the NLD and held the position of chairman of the Township NLD party. He had also been arrested during the 1988 uprising and had spent more than ten years in Thayarwaddy Prison.

As per information gathered by Mizzima, a total of 101 individuals, comprising 100 prisoners convicted in non-political cases and one political prisoner, were released from Pyi Prison in the Bago region on 4 January.

Furthermore, a source from Taungoo Prison in the Bago region has reported the release of 146 prisoners, with no political prisoners included.

The background of the image is a sunset over the ocean. The sky is a gradient of orange and red, with some dark clouds near the horizon. In the distance, an offshore oil rig is visible on the water's surface. The overall mood is dramatic and somber.

SANCTIONS WEAPON

**Myanmar junta feels the
pressure from US and EU curbs**



● US and EU sanctions are negatively affecting the Myanmar junta's income. Photo: Arvind Vallabh

Western sanctions are proving a serious problem for the Myanmar military junta, now approaching its third year in power.

Myanmar democracy advocate Michael Haack, in a podcast interview with Insight Myanmar, has been following the path of US and European sanctions on the illegal junta that grabbed power in a coup on 1 February 2021.

“US entities cannot provide financial services to Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprises [MOGE] or any sort of subsequent entity, like MOGE can’t just like change their name and then get exempted,” says Haack, explaining the latest round of US sanctions that went into effect.

Haack, speaking to Insight Myanmar for the fourth time, explains that these sanctions also mean that US banks can’t make loans available to MOGE, nor can they facilitate transfers.

“That might sound like not that big a deal,” he acknowledges, but then points out that because MOGE is the biggest source of foreign exchange for the military, and that most trade happens in US dollars,

this is actually more significant than it initially looks.

“By cutting this off, it provides a hurdle to the Myanmar military to fund itself,” he says, but then quickly adds, “it’s not going to be a game changing hurdle.”

In contrast, he addresses the EU’s sanctions, which he describes as much more effective because they “led to the Bank of China actually putting the money that would have gone to MOGE into escrow, so the Myanmar military wasn’t receiving that money.”

He praises the broad effects that these sanctions had, to the extent that even China felt compelled to follow them.

THAILAND IN MIND

On the other hand, Haack notes that the US sanctions were written “with Thailand in mind,” pointing out that they don’t prohibit Myanmar from selling its gas to their eastern neighbour. This is because, in Haack’s opinion, the US prioritizes its relations with Thailand over Myanmar, and acts in ways that satisfy Bangkok at the expense of opposing Myanmar’s regime.



The oil and gas business is a useful source of income for the Myanmar junta. Photo: Supplied

The irony is that studies have shown that Thailand is not all that reliant on imported gas from Myanmar, and some have posited that the cozy relations between respective militaries is to blame for keeping the pipeline flowing.

Still, the net result is that with these current sanctions in place, Haack feels the regime's revenue has been scarcely impacted by the US sanctions. Further parsing the Burma Act wording, Haack notes that the original version had much stronger language with regards to MOGE, but the final draft was watered down, which he credits to intensive lobbying by Chevron.

Haack allows that the current sanctions still do some good, in spite of their serious flaws. "It's going to be harder for [the regime] to get dollars, and so it will be harder for them to buy the things that they need for weapons of war," he says. Yet he again adds, "I don't think it's going to be enough that it's going to tip the balance."

US HESITANT

He points out that the US has long been hesitant to limit Myanmar's energy sector, and how its first

round of sanctions instead targeted the garment industry. "They went after the most vulnerable people in Burma," he notes, referring the many young women who lost their jobs as a result.

"We ended up having a blanket ban on apparel imports. And at the time, apparel was a quickly growing industry in Burma, and the US was about 50 per cent of Burma's apparel market."

US sanctions historically function more as a moral victory than a practical solution.

Haack finds that they operate within a kind of "semiotic loop."

He explains: "We'll give good news from Burma to think tanks, and then a lot of people in the US will repeat it, and then it gets broadcast back into Burma. But it often doesn't mean all that much!"

SMALL VICTORIES EXAGGERATED

In other words, no one wants to feel helpless that the bad guys remain in charge with impunity, and so small victories become exaggerated in order to feel that substantive change is actually taking place.

"Everybody wants to feel informed, but nobody wants to do the amount of research necessary to actually be informed," he exclaims. "So, this creates a market for people to sell simple narratives that make you feel good, but unfortunately, that amplify bad decisions and bad understanding of circumstances."

LIMITED INFORMATION

Haack characterizes Myanmar as a "a low information environment," and so as a result, big decisions get made on narratives stitched together by cherry-picking feel-good stories.

In describing how that sausage gets made, so to speak, he notes that that it involves a "pretty diverse coalition of people that includes religious folk, like the Baptists, human rights groups, and then you have the influence of corporations over the US government, and then the US is concerned about its allies. And all of those things boil together to make a decision."

That decision is not always sufficiently well-informed.

Check out Haack's podcast on Insight Myanmar under the title Burning the Midnight Oil: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2023/12/29/burning-the-midnight-oil>



MYANMAR'S OPERATION 1027 FIGHTERS CLAIM KEY NORTHERN TOWN OF LAUKKAI IN SHAN STATE

An armed alliance of ethnic minority groups in Myanmar claimed late Friday to have captured a northern town notorious for online scam operations in another blow to the embattled junta.

The military is facing its biggest threat since seizing power in a 2021 coup after three armed ethnic groups - known as the Three Brotherhood Alliance - launched a sweeping October offensive in northern Shan state under the name Operation 1027.

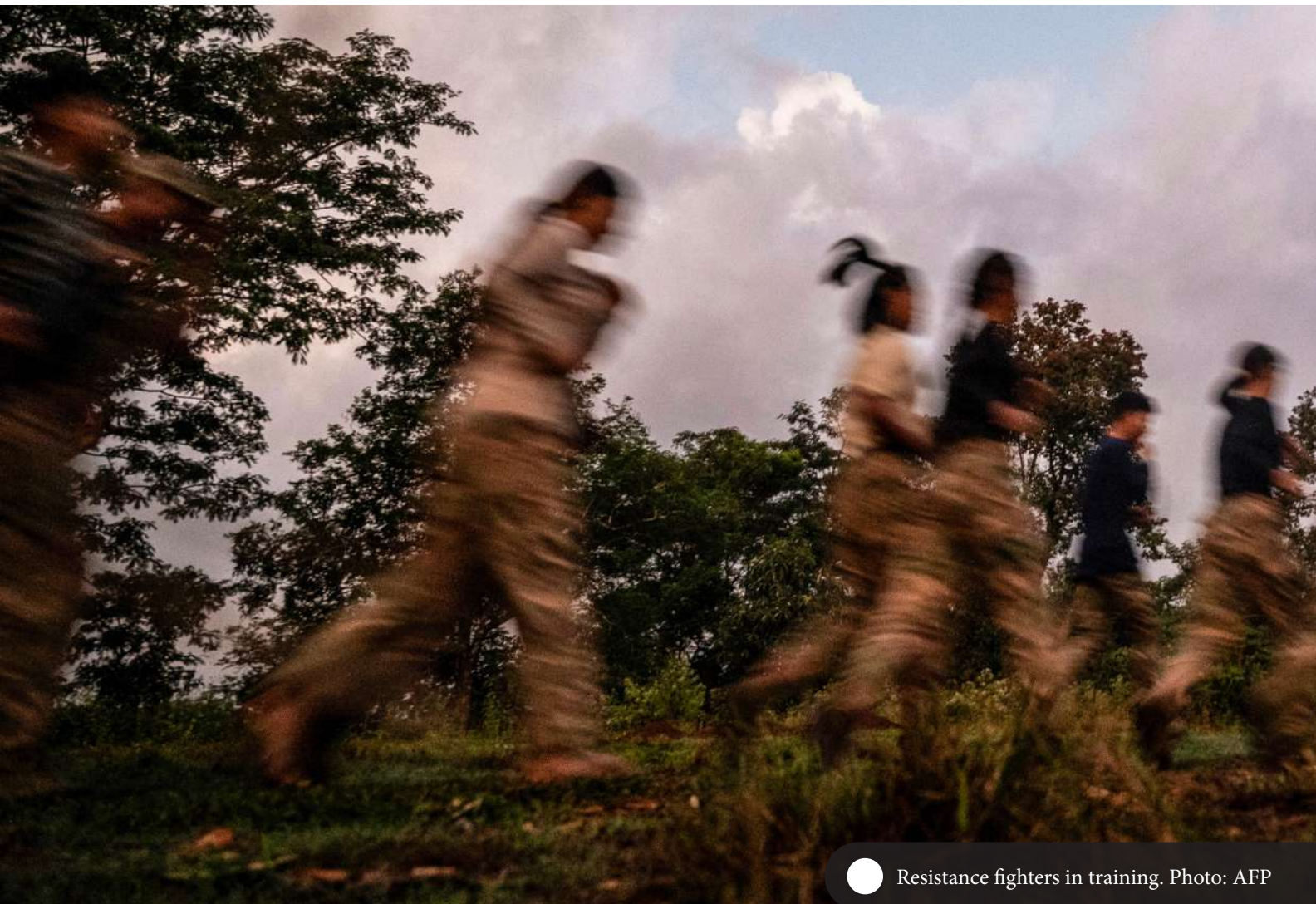
Since November people have been fleeing Laukkai town, located in a district bordering China that is run by a Myanmar military-aligned militia and notorious for gambling, prostitution and online scams

run out of compounds staffed by thousands of people, many trafficked.

The alliance -- made up of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Arakan Army (AA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) - said the town was now under their control.

"All members from the Myanmar Army's Military Operational Command in Laukkai were disarmed and Laukkai became a clean area where there are no more members of the Myanmar Army," the alliance said in a statement.

It added that scores of junta soldiers, including some officers, had been captured and disarmed.



Resistance fighters in training. Photo: AFP

The junta has not commented.

TNLA Brigadier-General Tar Bhone Kyaw confirmed Saturday that the MNDAA had taken Laukkai.

“It is their land, they got it back now,” he told AFP.

“Their people will not have to stay anymore under the military regime,” he added.

ONLINE SCAMS

Laukkai is the latest town to fall to the alliance alongside vital border hubs, damaging trade between China and Myanmar’s cash-strapped junta.

Leader Min Aung Hlaing made a name for himself in 2009 when, as a regional commander, he expelled the MNDAA from the town.

The military installed a militia that got rich producing drugs and selling a potent cocktail of gambling and sex to visitors from across the Chinese border.

While China is a major arms supplier and ally of the junta, relations have been strained in recent months over the junta’s failure to crack down on online scam operations that Beijing says target Chinese citizens.

On Saturday, state newspaper The Global New Light of Myanmar reported that Min Aung Hlaing had met with Chinese vice foreign minister Sun Weidong in the capital Naypyidaw.

The two “exchanged views on efforts to forge peace and stability in the border region between Myanmar and China”, it said.

The uptick in fighting near Laukkai prompted Beijing to ask citizens to leave the area last month.

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

The alliance’s offensive has galvanised other opponents of the junta and clashes have spread to the east and the west of Myanmar.

More than half a million people have been forced to flee their homes, according to the United Nations.

Dozens of armed ethnic minority groups have battled Myanmar’s military since independence from Britain in 1948.

Some groups want greater autonomy while others simply want the right to run the lucrative trade in jade, drugs and timber in their territory.

Reporting: AFP, Mizzima



BEIJING CONDEMNS MYANMAR BORDER CLASHES THAT CAUSED CHINESE CASUALTIES



Chinese foreign ministry delegation visits Naypyidaw. Photo: EPA

Beijing on Thursday last week voiced “strong dissatisfaction” that fighting in neighbouring Myanmar had caused Chinese casualties and said it would take “all necessary measures” to protect its citizens, following reports an artillery shell had exploded across the border.

Armed conflict has raged in Myanmar’s northern Shan state since October, when an alliance of ethnic minority groups launched an offensive against the military junta.

Several Chinese media outlets reported on Wednesday that an artillery shell from Myanmar had fallen across the border in the town of Nansan in China’s Yunnan province, where it exploded and caused injuries to multiple people.

AFP was not able to independently verify the reports or accompanying images posted on social media.

Asked about the reports at a regular press briefing on Thursday, foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said China “expresses strong dissatisfaction that the armed conflict has caused Chinese casualties”, adding that Beijing had “made solemn representations to the relevant parties”.

“China once again demands that all parties in

the northern Myanmar conflict immediately cease hostilities and take practical measures to prevent further pernicious incidents that endanger peace and tranquility on the border,” Wang said.

“China will take all necessary measures to safeguard the security of its citizens’ lives and property,” he said.

Wang did not specify how many people had been killed or wounded in the incident.

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

Last month, Beijing said it had mediated talks between the Myanmar military and the allied ethnic armed groups and reached an agreement for a “temporary ceasefire”.

However, clashes have continued in parts of Shan state, and China’s embassy last week asked its citizens to evacuate an area along the shared border owing to security risks.

AFP

KIA SHOOTS DOWN MYANMAR JUNTA HELICOPTER NEAR LAIZA TOWN, KACHIN STATE



Myanmar military helicopter on fire and about to crash. Screenshot from Mizzima video.

Colonel Naw Bu, the spokesperson for the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), reports the downing of a Military Council helicopter near Laiza town in Kachin state, a region under KIA control, around 11:50 am on 3 January.

While initial reports suggested it was a Mi-17 helicopter belonging to the Military Council, the specific details remain unverified. Colonel Naw Bu affirmed that KIA soldiers were responsible for shooting down the helicopter, and investigations into the incident and its precise location are ongoing.

“It is highly likely that the helicopter crashed based on a frontline report received around 11:50 am today,” Colonel Naw Bu said.

Colonel Naw Bu mentioned that the helicopter, which took off from the Myitkyina Air Force, was reportedly involved in transporting weapons and supplying

food to military council camps near Laiza. If the helicopter was an Mi-17, this aircraft is capable of carrying over 20 soldiers, as well as carrying weapons.

A video circulating on social media this morning captured the moment when the helicopter crashed, enveloped in dense smoke, contributing to viral spread of the news.

In May 2021, KIA soldiers shot down a Military Council Mi-35 helicopter near Konelaw village, Momauk township, Kachin State. Additionally, on 29 March, 2022, a Mi-17 military helicopter, transporting education staff, experienced a tail failure and subsequently crashed in Hakha, Chin State.

LIFE OF A NURSE IN SHAN STATE

Nang Si Noon, a nurse working at a hospital in Mong Pa, southern Shan State, spoke to the Shan Women's Network (SWAN) about her life providing healthcare since the coup.

Here is what she said:

My name is Nang Si Noon, and I work as a senior nurse at the People's Hospital in Mong Pan, Southern Shan State, which is characterized by its mountainous terrain.

At age 38, I find myself working not only as a nurse but also a single mother, raising a 13-year-old son.

Despite the numerous challenges that come with being a single parent, I draw strength from my

duty to provide for my son. "No matter how tough things get, I have to stay strong for my son. I cannot afford to be disheartened and weak because my son relies on me. I think about everything for my son, and together, we manage to overcome difficulties with happiness.

Beside my role at the hospital, I actively engage in volunteer work as a health care provider, particularly for elderly individuals who struggle to afford healthcare. So, every Sunday, I open a clinic at the Nump Khone Shan Association for Welfare, offering free medical treatment to the elderly.

The number of elderly people regularly visiting the clinic keeps growing. Common issues include high blood pressure and diabetes. When I share in-



A patient in a Shan clinic. Photo: AFP

formation about the patients and the clinic, donators are inspired to contribute. Even elderly people who visit weekly contribute one or two thousand kyats. These donations help to cover medical expenses.

Running a charity clinic every week comes with its challenges, especially to secure doctors. In our township, there is only one doctor, and the doctor is often occupied with hospital duties. Since nurses lack the authority to administer medical treatment, the presence of a doctor is crucial.

My journey doing charity work began when I started to share information on social media about the difficulties and needs of people living in poverty in remote villages. People who read my posts were genuinely interested in donating and reached out to me. This collaborative effort allowed me to extend a helping hand.

I aspire to maintain this free clinic, providing medical care to people who cannot afford it. Despite financial constraints, I find merit and fulfillment through this work. I may not be wealthy, but the satisfaction I derive from making a difference is priceless.

To ensure that patients can access health care services, I also spend considerable time collecting donations. Every day at the hospital, I am disheartened to hear that people cannot continue their medical treatments due to financial constraints. This pushes me to collect donations in any way I can because I cannot stand idly by without helping.

Every day at the hospital, I am disheartened to hear that people cannot continue their medical treatments due to financial constraints. This pushes me to collect donations in any way I can because I cannot stand idly by without helping.

I have supported four children to get surgical operations for Chagas disease in Taunggyi. I donate to people in need of food. Also, I seek donation from others and ensure that donations reach people who necessitate help.

In addition, to address Shan communities' lack of knowledge regarding health in mountainous regions, I give presentations and distribute pamphlets in Shan language to promote health awareness. Living in an area where transportation is challenging and access to education is quite limited, my role providing health education is crucial. Therefore, I am delighted to find ways to cover medical expenses for patients facing difficulties.

Although balancing my time between raising my son and engaging in this work is challenging, I am determined to persist.

Courtesy of Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN). They can be found at:

<https://www.shanwomen.org/>



15 WOMEN HELD IN MYANMAR PRISONS WITH THEIR CHILDREN



Photo: AFP

At the end of 2023, the Myanmar junta was holding 15 mothers and their children as political prisoners in prisons throughout the country, according to Political Prisoners Network Myanmar (PPN).

According to the 31 December report by PPN, of those mothers, one is at Insein Prison in Yangon, two are in Daik-U Central Prison in Bago Region, four are in Thayet Prison in Magway Region, one is in Obo Prison in Mandalay Region, one is in Magway Prison in Magway Region, one is in Monywa Prison in Sagaing Region, and five are in Kyaikmaraw Prison in Mon State.

According to PPN and a former political prisoner, these women were detained for opposing the February 2021 coup. Some were arrested whilst they were pregnant because the junta wanted to arrest their husbands but could not locate them.

Theik Tun Oo, a member of the PPN Steering Committee said of the 15 women imprisoned with their children: “This includes women who have received death sentences under Section 505. The ongoing events and legal proceedings are of a political nature, making the process more challenging compared to other cases. Additionally, some of these mothers are unable to maintain contact with their families.”

Zu Zu May Yoon, a former political prisoner, told Mizzima that the imprisoned mothers and their children have insufficient medical support during pregnancy and childbirth, limited access to prison visits, and few family visits. This results in the mothers and children not receiving necessary medication and be-

ing undernourished. These abuses have left many of the mothers and children with psychological problems which are even harder to deal with in such a prison environment.

Zu Zu May Yoon said: “Children who are over a year old are at an age where they are learning. These children witness the distressing sight of female political prisoners who have been subjected to torture by prison staff, which results in significant emotional harm [for the children].”

She added that even once mothers and children are released from prison, the children may show abnormal and stunted development when compared to other children.

Cherry Bo Kyi Naing, a pregnant political prisoner who was being held at Insein Prison in Yangon, lost her child during childbirth in May 2022 because Prison authorities did not react in a timely way to her requests to be taken to hospital when she started having labour pains.

During December 2023 a political prisoner being held in Insein prison and another being held in Patheingyi Prison, in Ayeyarwaddy Region died when they were denied medical treatment.

Since the coup on 1 February 2021 until 31 December 2023, 25,656 political prisoners have been arrested nationwide. Of those 19,858 are still in custody, with 20.1 per cent being women and 2.8 per cent being youths., according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP).

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UN: MYANMAR'S WAR LEAVES 6 MILLION CHILDREN IN NEED

As conflict rages on in Myanmar's northwestern Chin state, a mother who lives in the conflict area struggles to find food and medicine for her children.

"When there are fights like this, I worry that my children will be harmed," she told RFA Burmese on condition of anonymity for security reasons.

"Even if you have money, you can't buy anything because roads are being blocked. That's why I'm worried that I won't be able to feed my children," she said. "I'm worried about something that will happen to them because I can't do anything for them."

Their story is common in Myanmar these

days as a result of fighting that has raged since the February 2021 coup, according to the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, or OCHA.

"Three years on from the military takeover, the humanitarian landscape for 2024 is grim with a third of the population – 18.6 million people – now estimated to be in humanitarian need," OCHA said in its recently published Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for Myanmar.

"Children are bearing the brunt of the crisis with 6 million children in need as a result of displacement, interrupted health-care and education, food in-



Photo: UN News

security and malnutrition, and protection risks including forced recruitment and mental distress.”

HUNGRY CHILDREN

For the mother in Chin state, the chaos has meant an interruption in not only regular supplies of food, it has also meant that routine vaccinations have stopped for her children.

Another mother, from Shan state in the east, expressed similar concerns for her three children. They currently live at an internally displaced persons’ camp in Hseni township.

“In terms of food, in the refugee camp, we were only fed two meals a day, and the children were hungry at noon,” she said. “The situation is like that. And in terms of living, I don’t have to stay at home. I feel that it is not safe for the children because we have to live in dormitories or under tarps.”



Whenever they hear the sound of airplanes, her children get scared and they have been suffering psychological trauma, she said.

A person helping displaced people in northern Shan state said that children are being affected by the fighting all over the region.

“They have difficulties accessing education,” the helper said. “Children, especially, suffer from severe emotional distress. Some under-aged children were recruited [to fight], and some have even been killed and wounded in the conflict. Nobody can work because battles are raging everywhere. So there is no food security.”

He said that he would like to ask armed organizations not to recruit the children, especially minors.

Since malnutrition in a child can affect the mental, emotional, and physical well-being, this problem must be dealt with urgently, Lwan Wai, a Yangon-based member of the Civil Disobedience Movement Medical Network, told RFA.

“After the coup, it has become much worse,” said Lwan Wai. “Malnutrition of children affects both their physical and mental health, and it will hugely affect their brain development and thinking ability when they become adults. That’s why this is an issue that must be dealt with urgently in our country. This is very important.”

In UNOCHA’s humanitarian fund proposal for 2024 released on Dec. 11, it stated that \$994 million in funding is needed to reach Myanmar’s 5.3 million people with food, water, shelter, health care and protection.

Translated by Htin Aung Kyaw. Edited by Eugene Whong and Malcolm Foster.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia

MYANMAR PRESSPHOTO AGENCY PHOTOJOURNALIST RELEASED FROM DETENTION



Kaung Sett Lin is released. Photo: Supplied

Kaung Sett Lin, a photojournalist with the Myanmar Pressphoto Agency, was released from Insein Prison today as part of a Myanmar junta amnesty for Independence Day on 4 January.

His father confirmed the news said: “Kaung Sett Lin has been released. He has come out of prison.”

Kaung Sett Lin had been held at Yangon’s Insein Prison since his arrest on 5 December 2021, while covering an anti-coup protest in Yangon’s Kyimyindaing Township, during which several protesters were shot and killed by soldiers.

He sustained serious injuries when authorities drove a military vehicle into the anti-coup protest.

Subsequently, a court under the military junta sentenced him to three years in prison under Section 505 (a) of the penal code. However, he was released almost two months prior to completing his sentence due to today’s amnesty.

Mizzima is actively investigating the status of TV journalist Mhu Yadanar Khet Moh Moh Tun, who was arrested alongside Kaung Sett Lin and is currently

serving a prison sentence, to determine whether she has been released or not. She was reported to have been badly injured by the military vehicle, suffering from broken legs and forced to use crutches.

On 26 May 2023, the Thingangyun District Court in Yangon pronounced Mhu Yadanar Khet Moh Moh Tun, a TV journalist affiliated with the Myanmar Pressphoto Agency, guilty and sentenced her to 10 years in prison with hard labour. The conviction was made under Section 50 (j) of the Counter-Terrorism Law, a provision related to terror financing.

Following the coup, the Military Council intensified its scrutiny of the news media, resulting in the arrest and imprisonment of journalists.

As per the Detained Journalists Information Group, which documents arrested journalists, approximately 50 journalists remain imprisoned in various prisons.

In commemoration of the 76th Independence Day on 4 January, the Military Council declared the pardon of 9,652 prisoners. The specific number of political prisoners among them has yet to be disclosed.

HPAKANT JADE MINING COMPANIES' WASTE SOIL THREATENS DRINKING WATER SUPPLY



Photo: Mizzima

Jade mining companies are endangering locals' water supply by depositing waste soil close to a lake where they take their drinking water from, in Sharaw Hka Village, in Hpakant Township, Kachin State.

The proximity of the dumping to the lake has caused locals to worry about potential drinking water shortages during the hot season, according to a Sharaw Hka villager.

They said: "They are now discarding soil very near the lake. If they keep dumping, there could be drinking water difficulties in the summer season."

The pile of dumped soil already covers three acres to a height of 700 feet. Monks and villagers from Sharaw Hka Village have been actively engaging with companies to discourage further soil dumping, according to locals.

As well as supplying Sharaw Hka Village, the 30-acre lake also supplies drinking water to the Manah-maw Quarter and most of the jade mining companies in the area. It has been providing drinking water to the area for over 30 years. More than 1,000 households made up of over 5,000 people rely on drinking water from the lake.

The dumping of soil in Hpakant by jade mining companies contributes to seasonal floods, according to locals.

Despite ongoing fighting in Hpakant, the jade mining companies in the area have continued with their lucrative operations.

LANDMINES THREATEN MORE THAN HALF OF MYANMAR TOWNSHIPS

People in more than half of Myanmar's townships are at risk getting injured or dying from landmines, which are used by both the military and ethnic rebel forces, a landmine monitoring group said.

Nearly 170 of 330 townships are at risk of landmines — a figure that has increased by 68 townships since 2020, according to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, whose monitoring wing tracks progress in eliminating landmines, cluster munitions and other explosive remnants of war.

The group issued the Burmese version of its latest 34-page Landmine & Cluster Munition Monitor report on Dec. 28. It did not include the total number of landmine incidents or victims for 2023, but recounted individual incidents covered in media reports.

In 2022, there were 384 deaths and 124 injuries caused by landmines in Myanmar, according to the monitoring group.

Myanmar is not a member of the Ottawa Convention, also referred to as the Mine Ban Treaty, which prohibits the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of anti-personnel landmines. Neither is the United States, China, Russia, India or Pakistan.

Both the ruling junta's armed forces and non-state armed groups have produced and used antipersonnel mines, including improvised blast and fragmentation mines that are victim-activated, said the report's 28-page English-language version.

"Myanmar's Armed Forces have repeatedly used antipersonnel mines since seizing power in a coup in February 2021," the report said. "This use rep-

resents a significant increase in use in previous years, including use around infrastructure such as mobile phone towers, extractive enterprises, and energy pipelines."

From 2018 to 2021, the Myanmar military was the only armed forces in the world to use anti-personnel landmines, though Russia joined the list in 2022, said Yeshua Moser-Puangsuwan, a researcher for the Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, said at a press conference in Chiang Mai, Thailand, on Dec. 28.

"Myanmar is the only country in the world that uses deadly landmines from its military," he said.

Among the mines seized by resistance armed groups were various types produced by the state-owned weapons production facility known as KaPa-Sa, or Defense Products Industries of Myanmar, the report said.

SOME INDIVIDUAL CASES

The report cited numerous instances where landmine explosions killed or maimed civilian adults and children in 2023.

At the beginning of March, a man was seriously injured after stepping on a landmine in the May mountains, where a Myanmar Army contingent is stationed near Cedipyin village in Rathedaung township of Rakhine state.

On Dec. 26, Lwang Kham, 12, was injured when a landmine exploded near Ma Ding village in Waingmaw township in northern Myanmar's Kachin state, near where the junta's 58th Light Infantry Battalion is stationed, a resident who did not want to be

named for security reasons, told RFA.

“In the afternoon, while he was looking after the cattle, the cattle stepped on a landmine and [the explosion] hit him near Ka War Hka creek,” the villager said, adding that many pieces of shrapnel hit his legs and his left eye.

The injured boy was taken to Myitkyina Hospital for surgery and medical treatment, he said.

In western Myanmar’s Chin state, residents are afraid to go to their hillside farms for fear of setting off an explosion, said Salai Vang Sweesan, assistant director of the Institute of Chin Affairs.

“In Chin, every village depends on the hillside farms to make a living. Since landmines are being planted along the roads [to the hillside farms], even if people want to go to the farms, it’s risky.”

SHAN STATE

Northern Shan state, where fighting between junta troops and an alliance of ethnic armies is intense, has seen an increase in civilian casualties from landmines.

At least five civilians were injured and lost their limbs due to mine explosions in the towns of Kutkai, Lashio and Kyaukme towns amid fighting in December 2023 between junta forces and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army, or TNLA, local residents said.

On Dec. 6, a man from Nam Kyan village in Lashio township lost one of his legs and his other limbs were damaged when he stepped on a mine while looking for honey in the forest, residents said.

Two days later, a 63-year-old man from Nam Hu Twang village in Kyaukme township lost one of his legs when he stepped on a mine while cutting bamboo, according to people living in the community.

Residents used to gather firewood in the forest or work in cornfields before the fighting escalated, but

now they have stopped and it has affected their abilities to provide for themselves, she said. Now they often hear blasts when dogs and cattle step on the mines.

“Villagers know that the mines are there,” she said. “That’s why we don’t go to the forest at all.”

RFA could not reach junta spokesman Maj. Gen. Zaw Min Tun for comment on the landmines.

Last August, the Cluster Munition Coalition condemned the new use of cluster munitions by the junta’s armed forces and demanded an immediate end to the use of this prohibited weapon.

At the time, a report by the organization’s monitoring wing indicated that junta forces had used what appeared to be domestically produced cluster bombs in attacks in several parts of the country since 2021.

“Myanmar’s production and use of cluster bombs is gravely concerning as these indiscriminate weapons primarily kill and injure civilians, Moser-Puangsuwan said in a statement. “There can be no justification for using them. All governments should condemn this use of an internationally-banned weapon.”

Translated by Htin Aung Kyaw for RFA Burmese.

Edited by Roseanne Gerin and Malcolm Foster.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia.

CHINLAND COUNCIL PRESIDENT CALLS FOR CHIN SELF-ADMINISTRATION



Pu Zing Cung, the President of the Chinland Council, called for the self-administration of Chin State within a federal union in his New Year's speech on 1 January 2024.

In his speech, he said that 2024 would be a crucial year for the Chin people and gave a list of four objectives that the Chin people should pursue. These are: eliminating military dictatorship, safeguarding Chin national territory, instituting a self-administering Chin Land in Chin State, and establishing a Federal Union ensuring political and national equality.

He said: "This is the best time to eradicate the dictatorship as well as our best opportunity to achieve the right of self-administration that we have been longing to do for many years."

To achieve this he said that all the organisations fighting the junta should join together to abolish

the one-nation dictatorship and instead establish a federal democratic system.

He said that though the Chin people had suffered some setbacks in 2023 they had also had military successes when they had withstood assaults by junta troops and had even launched counter-offensives against them.

He also said that a Chinland Constitution that would enable Chin people to administer themselves, had been drawn up. A Chinland Council has also been established to build solid foundations for a self-administered Chin State in a federal system.

INDIAN GOVERNMENT REPATRIATES MYANMAR JUNTA SOLDIERS WHO FLED TO INDIA



A Myanmar soldier under Indian custody. Photo: supplied

The Indian Government has repatriated 151 Myanmar junta soldiers who fled to Mizoram State in India when the Arakan Army (AA) seized the junta's Point 377 army base on the border with India, in Chin State's Paletwa Township.

According to a report by the Mizoram news outlet, DD News, the junta soldiers were taken from Lengpui Airport in Aizawl Town to Myanmar on two Myanmar Airlines flights on 2 January. 84 soldiers were returned on the first flight and 67 were returned on the second flight. DD News did not specify the planes' destinations in Myanmar.

"The Assam Rifles and the Mizoram Police provided security, preventing the public from getting closer. The repatriation took place on two flights, with the first one at around 11:00 a.m. and the second between 2:00 to 3:00 pm," said a witness.

The Arakan Army took over the junta's Point 377 army base in Myeikwa Village, Paletwa Township, on 28 December. On 29 December the 151 junta soldiers, who had fled the base, sought sanctuary with In-

dia's Assam Rifles base in Lawngtlai District, Mizoram State.

Initially, the junta soldiers were taken to Longley Town on 31 December. They were then moved to Aizawl Town on 1 January, according to DD News.

"Despite being a democratic country, it is obvious that the Indian government's stance and actions are aligned with supporting injustice and exposing civilians to violence. This is not an isolated incident, and it is crucial that the international community recognises their apparent collaboration with the terrorist State Administration Council (SAC)," said an official from the Chin Defence Force (CDF).

Previously, in November 2023, the Indian government repatriated another 101 junta soldiers to Myanmar after they had sought shelter in India following the seizure of Myanmar junta army camps in Rikhawdar, Thibawl and Lailenpi in Chin State. In that case, the soldiers were repatriated to Tamu Town in Myanmar.

US PUTS AZERBAIJAN ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM WATCHLIST THAT INCLUDES MYANMAR

The United States on Thursday last week added Azerbaijan to a watchlist on religious freedom, following fears for Christian heritage after the country seized back an ethnic Armenian enclave.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, releasing an annual index of designations, maintained all 12 countries that had been on the previous year's blacklist, including Myanmar, China, Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

In the sole change, Blinken added Azerbaijan to a watchlist, meaning it will join the blacklist, which carries potential sanctions, without improvements.

Energy-rich Azerbaijan, a frequent US partner, sent troops on September 19 into Nagorno-Karabakh and quickly achieved the surrender of Armenian separatist forces who had controlled the region for three decades.

In a recent recommendation to the State Department, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom pointed to concerns for the preservation of Christian religious sites in Nagorno-Karabakh, where virtually the entire population of 100,000 ethnic Armenians has fled to Armenia.

The commission also voiced alarm over regulations on all religious practice in the Shiite Muslim-majority but largely secular country under strongman President Ilham Aliyev, including a requirement that all religious groups be registered and their literature approved by an official body.

The commission, which is appointed by lawmakers but does not set US policy, was ignored by

Blinken on another recommendation - blacklisting India.

The commission alleged incitement and a climate of impunity by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government on rising attacks against religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians.

India has scoffed at the accusations and few had expected any action by the US government, which for years has sought warmer relations with New Delhi, seeing the fellow democracy as a bulwark against China.

Blinken in a statement noted that "significant violations of religious freedom also occur in countries that are not designated."

"Governments must end abuses such as attacks on members of religious minority communities and their places of worship," he said.

The "countries of particular concern" on the blacklist are China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar, Nicaragua, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Besides Azerbaijan, countries on the watchlist are Algeria, the Central African Republic, Comoros and Vietnam.

AFP

MYANMAR'S NUG REACHES OUT TO CHINA WITH 'ONE CHINA' PLEDGE, INVESTMENT SAFEGUARDS

The National Unity Government (NUG) of Myanmar extends an olive branch to China by committing to uphold the "One China" policy, and to uphold its obligations under any treaties or agreements safeguarding Chinese investments.

In NUG's official statement dated 1 January outlining its position on China, the NUG seeks to navigate a delicate balance between recognizing China's importance and asserting its own aspirations for a democratic Myanmar.

The statement entitled "The National Unity Government's Position on China" says "The One China principle will be upheld and supported in a sustained manner".

"Aspiring to foster the interests of the people of the two countries, measures will be taken to safeguard Chinese economic investments and other socio-economic enterprises within Myanmar," the statement said.

The statement also asserts the publicly-mandated NUG policy to prevent any organisation that poses a threat to the neighbouring countries' "national security" from setting up operations or establishing a presence within Myanmar's territory.

"Any organisation that poses a threat to the national security of neighbouring countries shall not be permitted to establish a presence within the territory of Myanmar."

The statement also reaffirms NUG's dedication to honouring its commitments outlined in treaties or agreements, specifically emphasising the pre-existing boundary treaties or agreements signed with other countries before the military coup in 2021.

"Myanmar remains committed to upholding its obligations under any treaties or agreements, including boundary treaties, signed between the two countries before the attempted military coup in 2021," the statement said.

Regarding combating transnational crimes, NUG's statement said that the country will be steadfast

in collaborating with China and neighbouring nations to combat the crimes.

"Myanmar remains committed to engaging in close cooperation with China and other countries in the region to combat transnational crimes, including online scams and gambling, human trafficking and drug-related activities, which pose threats not only to the border stability of the two countries but also to the stability and security of the whole region."

China's influence over Myanmar's escalating political crisis is prominent, as it holds sway over both the Myanmar junta and multiple armed groups, with the NUG statement marking a crucial point in this scenario.

The NUG's statement carefully walks a tight-rope, acknowledging China's economic clout and historical influence while subtly pushing back against the junta's closer alignment with Beijing.

Some Burmese activists have voiced alarm on social media.

An anonymous activist who is a member of the Milk Tea Alliance Myanmar Facebook group told Mizzima on the condition of anonymity, "In its statement, NUG says it accepts the One China principle. That means the NUG appears to be betraying the Milk Tea Alliance activists, who expressed strong support for Myanmar's Spring Revolution."

The Milk Tea Alliance comprises primarily internet activists from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, and Myanmar, advocating for democracy and human rights through online activism.

In his recent New Year's address, Chinese President Xi Jinping reaffirmed China's determination for eventual reunification with Taiwan. This in essence is the One China principle.

"China will surely be reunified, and all Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait should be bound by a common sense of purpose," Xi said in his New Year address.

SECURITY COUNCIL MEETS OVER RED SEA ATTACKS AMID GROWING THREAT OF SPILLOVER FROM GAZA WAR

The UN Security Council on Wednesday held its first open meeting on the continuing attacks by Houthi rebels in the Red Sea, which are becoming an increasing threat to global trade and the stability of the entire region as the intense fighting between Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza continues.

Key points:

UN Assistant Secretary-General Khaled Khariari said “no cause or grievance” could justify continuing Houthi attacks against freedom of navigation in the Red Sea

All incidents originating in Houthi controlled areas “must stop”

He encouraged “all concerned parties” in the wider region to avoid any further escalation and de-escalate tensions and threats

Called for a return to the regular flow of traffic to avoid the risk of Yemen being “dragged into a regional conflagration”

IMO Secretary-General Arsenio Dominguez described the attacks as unacceptable saying ships “must be allowed to trade worldwide unhindered and in accordance with international law”

Reiterated a call for de-escalation “to ensure the safety of our seafarers, freedom of navigation and stability of supply chains”

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY FOR PEACE IN YEMEN: FRANCE

Nicolas de Rivière, Permanent Representative of France which holds the presidency of the Council this month, said through their armed actions, the Houthis and those who train and support them, bear a



Photo: UN News

heavy responsibility for the escalation of tensions in the region as well as for international stability.

He recalled that France and all States have the right to take appropriate measures to ensure safety at sea. This is what France did when the frigate Languedoc destroyed drones on December 9 that were threatening one of its ships, he told the Council.

It is also the collective responsibility of the Council to ensure that the peace process in Yemen continues according to the road map of the UN Special Envoy, he noted.

France will carry out its responsibilities in the Bab Al Mandeb Strait and will continue to contribute to the safety of commercial ships in conjunction with its partners, he insisted, calling on all international and regional actors to avoid further escalation.

GASOLINE TO PUT OUT A FIRE: RUSSIA

Vassily Nebenzia, Russia's ambassador to the UN said that restrictions on freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden was not happening in a vacuum.

He said nobody should deny that "what is happening in the Red Sea is a direct projection of the violence in Gaza, where Israel's bloody operation has been ongoing for three months."

Escalation is also happening in other occupied Palestinian territories, he continued, as well as across the Israel-Lebanon border.

He blamed the US for covering up Israel's actions and holding the remaining members of the Security Council "hostage" by vetoing any resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire.

We see two scenarios going forward he said: firstly and preferably, redouble the Council's efforts to resolve the decades-long conflict in Yemen and end the violence in the Gaza Strip.

The second "catastrophic" option would be "putting out the fire" of the crisis in the Red Sea with gasoline, as the United States and its allies are calling us to do.

Unfortunately, the second scenario seems to be emerging, he said, attacking the US-led "international maritime coalition" established last month and aimed at deterring Houthi attacks.

For the "hot heads" in Washington, another conflict in the Middle East is just one more geopolitical game, he claimed.

RED SEA IS MORE THAN JUST A SHIPPING ROUTE: ALGERIA

In his inaugural address as a Security Council member, Algeria's ambassador, Amar Bendjama, said Algeria was committed to international peace and security.

He recognized the crucial role of the Red Sea route as of "paramount importance for the whole world."

But he said the crisis at sea must be seen within a broader regional context.

First, the region is currently wracked with instability due to the war in Gaza with the potential of spillover "at any moment". It is crucial to prevent the emergence of any regional conflict with "out of control regional consequences", he warned.

He said positive signs have been emanating from Yemen due to the good work of the UN Special Envoy. He said it was vital to steer clear of any action that could interfere with his work there.

He said comprehensive analysis necessitated an understanding of the history and geography of the region, therefore addressing the root causes of the conflict is essential.



The current international and regional instability is the manifestation of yet another profound malaise he said, warning of the “erosion of collective security architecture” and “weakening of diplomacy”.

He said the Red Sea was far more than just a trade route, hailing it as an historic region that is home to communities with legitimate aspirations and hopes.

WE WILL NOT HESITATE TO ACT IF NECESSARY: UK

The UK Deputy Permanent Representative, James Kariuki, called on the Houthis to cease their attacks immediately.

Today we joined 11 countries in a statement warning against further attacks, he said.

“We will continue to work with allies and partners to pursue all diplomatic routes to end this threat.

“If necessary, as the UK Defence Secretary has stated, we will not hesitate to take action to deter threats to freedom of navigation in the Red Sea.”

Contrary to claims made by the Houthis, these attacks are totally indiscriminate and target shipping that has no connection to Israel, he insisted.

The British Foreign Secretary spoke with the Iranian Foreign Minister on Sunday, making clear our view that Iran shares responsibility for preventing these attacks, given their long-standing support to the Houthis, he continued.

He called for all parties in the region to avoid escalation, and exercise restraint, expressing concern for the plight of civilians.

STEPS MUST BE TAKEN BY COUNCIL: JAPAN

Yamazaki Kazuyuki, Permanent Representative of Japan, said his country was outraged by the armed “seizure” and continued holding of the Japanese-operated Galaxy Leader and its 25-person multinational crew, on 19 November.

He said it was unacceptable that the innocent crew has been detained for more than 40 days.

The Red Sea is a critical sea lane and being forced to divert around the Cape of Good Hope is more costly, energy-intensive, and time-consuming.

He unequivocally condemned the Houthi’s actions and called on them to cease.

Continued attacks will have a negative impact on supply chains and the global economy. It is crucial now to think about next steps, he said, and the Security Council must take “appropriate action to deter additional threats” by the Houthis and maintain inter-

national peace and security.

THERE MUST BE A GLOBAL RESPONSE: US

United States ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative, Christopher Lu, said that the threat to navigational rights and freedoms in the Red Sea is a global challenge and necessitates “a global response”.

He warned that the Houthis continue to strike commercial vessels transiting through the Red Sea’s vital shipping lane amid growing consensus for freedom of navigation, regional peace and security and global commerce.

Since 19 November, there have been over 20 attacks by the Houthis, he noted. The US and its allies have launched multinational naval operations to protect ships in the southern part of the Red Sea and deter lawless non-State actors, he said.

US-HOUSHI STANDOFFS

He recalled an incident during which US navy personnel issued verbal warnings to the Houthi attackers but rather than cease their attacks, they responded by opening fire.

Three Houthi boats subsequently sank. Additionally, two anti-ship missiles were fired from Houthi-controlled areas at United States navy vessels.

Citing these attacks as clear violations of international law, he said that they pose grave implications for maritime security and undermine the fragile humanitarian situation in Yemen, thwarting the ability of the international community to deliver assistance to 21 million people in need.

He also shed light on the root of the problem – Iran’s long-standing provision of financing to aid the Houthi operations.

He called on the Council to speak with one voice and demand that the Houthis stop their attacks.

We call for a global response from this Council to this global challenge and we are ready to discuss the situation further with other Member States, he added.

ENSURE SAFETY OF SEAFARERS: IMO CHIEF

The Secretary-General of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), Arsenio Dominguez, said that recent information received by IMO showed that Houthis were not confining their attacks just to shipping linked to Israel.

A significant number of companies are already rerouting their ships around South Africa to reduce their risks, representing an additional 10 days to journeys on average, and negatively impacting international trade, and costs of freight.

He reminded of earlier recommendations agreed in December on how to deal with the crisis, saying IMO had a programme already in place on security in the Red Sea region.

He reiterated his call for de-escalation “to ensure safety of our seafarers, freedom of navigation and stability of supply chains.”

He said IMO would continue to monitor the situation in collaboration with Member States and partners from the industry, together with navies involved in ensuring security at sea.

AVOID FURTHER ESCALATION AND RISK OF ‘REGIONAL CONFLAGRATION’: KHAIRI

We reiterate that incidents originating from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen must stop, said Mr Khairi.

“No cause or grievance can justify continuation of these attacks against the freedom of navigation”, he added.

“As to the overall situation in the region, we encourage all concerned parties to avoid further escalation and de-escalate tensions and threats. This is critical so that traffic through the Red Sea can return to its normal state and the risk of Yemen being dragged into a regional conflagration be avoided.”

He concluded saying that the “continued assistance of this Council in actively engaging with all concerned parties who may be able to push for restraint remains extremely valuable so that through our combined efforts we can prevent further escalation in the Red Sea from exacerbating regional tensions or undermining regional peace, security, or international trade.”

The meeting has just begun, presided over by France, which holds the gavel for January.

UN Assistant Secretary-General for the Middle East, Khaled Khairi, said that there have been alarming developments in the Red Sea since the Council last met on the crisis.

He said the repercussions of military escalations and threats to maritime navigation is of serious concern that could impact “millions in Yemen, the region, and globally.”

There have been well over 20 attacks on international shipping by Houthi rebels in Yemen along

the crucial international shipping lanes of the Red Sea, since the 7 October attacks by Hamas led to Israel’s devastating offensive.

The Houthi rebel movement controls the capital and large swathes of the country, including the Red Sea coast. They began targeting what they believe to be Israel-bound vessels in mid-November after first launching missile and drone attacks against Israel, in support of extremist group Hamas.

Now they have widened their aim to all international shipping companies, until Israel allows full humanitarian supplies to enter Gaza, causing many to divert their ships far to the south around the Cape of Good Hope, incurring extra costs and adding extra days, driving up costs.

With tensions and concern over regional spillover also rising following the assassination of Hamas’s deputy leader and other commanders in Beirut on Tuesday, Iran has also reportedly rejected calls from the US and the UK to end its support for the attacks by Houthi rebels.

An Iranian destroyer crossed into the Red Sea on Monday, while a US-led multinational task force was formed on 18 December in a bid to counter the Houthi attacks.

TOP UN OFFICIALS TO BRIEF

The Security Council issued a press statement on 1 December addressing the Houthi threat condemning the attacks “in the strongest terms”. They also called for the immediate release of the Japanese registered MV Galaxy Leader which was seized by rebels on 19 November.

Two senior UN officials are due to brief ambassadors beginning at 3:00 PM, and following the open meeting, the 15-member Security Council will then go into closed session.

Just a reminder here of the last Security Council resolution adopted on the Gaza crisis on 22 December, where ambassadors called for immediate, safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid to stricken civilians in Gaza.

And the most recent meeting focused on the crisis of the Council on 29 December, saw the UN chief António Guterres warn of the widening risks of further spillover.

Courtesy of UN News

GLOBAL REFUGEE FORUM ENDS WITH BOLD PLEDGES, SOLUTIONS FOR DISPLACED

While some of the world's poorest countries are welcoming refugees "with great hospitality", the international community must match that generosity with far greater solidarity, UN chief António Guterres said last month.

Speaking at the closing of the Global Refugee Forum, the Secretary-General said that protection and help for these most vulnerable of people, was "an obligation shared by all of humanity".

He was speaking after three days of intensive activity geared to finding solutions and building partnerships, which saw pledges from multiple stakeholders that have the potential to generate "a bright burst of light" for the millions displaced worldwide.

Mr. Guterres stressed that resources to support refugees are "under enormous strain", especially in the Global South which bears a disproportionate amount of the burden.

He noted it had been a year of "intense political division, conflict and climate catastrophe" which has pushed record numbers of people to flee.

"From the Sahel to Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen - to the DRC, Myanmar and Somalia - to the utter devastation we are witnessing in Gaza," he emphasized that "humanitarian nightmares" had created and exacerbated the displacement of 114 million people during the year, 36 million of whom are refugees.

HOPES AND DREAMS

Mr. Guterres asked not to forget that the statistics represent real people with legitimate hopes and dreams: women and men with skills and ideas, children with plans and ambitions.

These are people, he underscored, who have the same rights to safety, food, water, shelter and dignity.



Photo: UN News

And as the refugees deserve every chance at a better future, protection and support should not be a lottery, or a disproportionate burden that falls on a few countries and communities based on geography.

“It is an obligation shared by all of humanity,” he declared in his remarks.

Mr. Guterres praised the commitments made by stakeholders, saying that they ‘breathe life into the great promise of the Global Compact on Refugees not only to support refugees, but to ease pressure on host countries and tackle the systemic issues that cause people to flee in the first place’.

PLEDGES FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Among the key pledges made were commitments to resettlement and community sponsorship.

States agreed to resettle one million refugees by 2030, supported by a new global sponsorship fund. This fund aims to assist an additional three million refugees in accessing third countries through innovative community sponsorship schemes.

Refugee participation took centre stage, with more than 100 organizations committed to promoting

meaningful engagement by including refugees on governing boards and involving them in decisions that directly impact their lives.

This move is seen as a crucial step toward recognizing and leveraging the valuable perspectives and contributions of those displaced.

SAFEGUARDS ONLINE

Leading tech companies, including Google and Meta, joined forces to produce a Digital Protection pledge. This commitment involves dedicating increased resources to understand, address, and prevent misinformation and hate speech targeted at the communities of displaced and stateless.

The collaboration aims to bolster humanitarian responses and ensure the safety and well-being of those affected.

States at the forefront of peacebuilding efforts, including Colombia, Egypt, and Norway, supported by the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, pledged to engage with countries of origin. The goal is to address the root causes of displacement and facilitate safe returns by promoting peace and economic development.

Addressing an alarming increase in the risk of trafficking as well as considering alternatives to child detention, Siobhán Mullally, the UN Special Rapporteur – or independent rights expert – on Trafficking in Persons, announced a pledge supported by the UNHCR.

It aims to enhance protection mechanisms, mitigating the risk of refugees and migrants to being trafficked. Simultaneously, there was a pledge to find alternatives to end the detention of refugee, asylum-seeking, and migrant children.

MATCH ‘COURAGE AND RESILIENCE’ OF REFUGEES

“By rallying around the needs of refugees at this Forum, you are all providing a bright burst of light in what has been a dark and troubling year,” the UN Secretary-General summed up the Forum’s work, encouraging its participants to ‘to continue matching the courage and resilience of every refugee with our own steadfast commitment to help them rebuild their lives in safety and dignity’.

Courtesy of UN News





Photo: Vlada

SHAN STATE

TNLA takes control of Minengaw in Kyaukme Township, northern Shan State

The Ta'ang National Liberation Army claimed to have seized Minengaw Sub-Township in Kyaukme Township, northern Shan State on the morning of 1 January, following fierce fighting on the morning of 31 December.

Lieutenant Colonel Tar Aik Kyaw, a representative of the TLNA, said: "We captured Minengaw at around midnight. There is only one junta's military camp in the Minengaw. The entire Minengaw Sub-Township is under our control. Every State Administration Council (SAC) soldier has retreated."

On the evening of 31 December junta troops fired 17 rounds of artillery fire into the villages of Chone Thit and Chone Haung, both in Minengaw Sub-Township.

Also, on the evening of 31 December two fighter jets attacked Minengaw Sub-Township and

burnt down three houses in Mantong and Zay wards. Airstrikes in Minengaw Sub-Township were ongoing on 1 January, according to social media posts made by residents that morning.

Minengaw Sub-Township is one of the sub-townships in Kyaukme Township. The other two are Monglon and Kyaukme sub-townships.

The TNLA had already captured Monglone and is still fighting to take control of Kyaukme where the situation is tense and the junta is constantly firing artillery in the area, according to Lieutenant Colonel Tar Aik Kyaw.

Since the start of the 1027 offensive by defence forces in northern Shan State, on 27 October 2023, the TNLA has taken control of six towns. They are: Minengaw, Namhkam, Namhsan, Namtu, Mantong, and Monglon. It has also taken over 70 junta military bases in northern Shan State during the 1027 offensive.



JUNTA PUSHES FORWARD WITH CENSUS PLANS AMID ONGOING CONFLICT

Myanmar's military junta has said that it would conduct a census this year, disregarding concerns about the ongoing conflicts that could disrupt the process, reported Nikkei Asia.

Soe Win, the deputy commander-in-chief, said that plans for the 2024 census are advancing, addressing a gathering in Naypyitaw commemorating Myanmar's Independence Day anniversary, January 4.

Since staging a military coup in February 2021, the military junta has viewed the census as a crucial step preceding general elections. Originally aiming for a vote by August last year, they adjusted the schedule due to sustained turmoil in Myanmar, the enduring conflict between armed revolutionary groups and the military junta.

Reading a statement from junta chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, Soe Win emphasized, "We need the census to complete the voter roll and a biometric database."

By late January, the junta will determine whether to extend the state of emergency initiated after the 2021 coup. Per the 2008 constitution, a general election must be held within six months following the conclusion of a state of emergency.

Should the census wrap up by late 2024, the junta might consider lifting the state of emergency and proceeding with a general election. However, the country's persisting instability could pose a significant hurdle.

MYANMAR AGRICULTURAL PRODUCE EXPORT INCREASES IN NEW YEAR PERIOD: MINISTRY



Photo: EPA

Myanmar Military Council's Ministry of Economy and Commerce said that the export of agricultural produce was in a rising trend in this New Year period.

The export value in the period from 16 to 22 December 2023 is US\$226 million of which over US\$72 million is from agricultural produce, over US\$16 million from fishery products and over US\$166 million from finished industrial goods, the data released by the ministry says.

During this week, the agricultural produce of mung pea, green gram, pigeon pea and other pulses and beans, sesame, groundnut, watermelon, muskmelon, raw rubber, onion, etc. was exported to foreign buyers, the ministry says.

Moreover, the data released by the ministry says that prawn and other fishery products and finished industrial goods of CMP (cut, make and package) garments have been exported.

Varieties of sesame are in high demand in this New Year period and the country could export more sesame to China than usual. The demand from Japan,

Thailand, Singapore and Taiwan are also high and reportedly could fetch the good price up to US\$1,380-1,815 per tonne.

In this week, the export of 24,779 tonnes of pulses and beans earned over US\$ 21 million and more maritime exports were made to Pakistan, Thailand, UAE, Vietnam, Canada, US and Japan.

During this week the export of CMP garments to 53 countries could earn over US\$82 million and most of the buyers for these goods are from Japan, Poland, South Korea, Britain and USA.

The trade data shows that the export value of agricultural produce in this fiscal year 2022-23 is lower than the previous fiscal year by over US\$60 million.

The major export items from the agricultural sector are rice, broken rice, pulses and beans, corn, avocado, sugarcane, mangoes, rubber, onion, watermelon, and muskmelon and they are exported primarily to China, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan and Sri Lanka.

JAPAN IS THE LARGEST IMPORTER OF MYANMAR HONEY



Photo: Arwin Neil Baichoo

Japan is the largest importer of Myanmar honey produced by the beekeeping industry among other importing countries.

The Apiculture Department, Apiculture Development Branch said that Myanmar exported 1,441.2 tonnes of honey in this fiscal year up to the end of November and of which Japan imported 948.92 tonnes.

Myanmar exported over 1,400 tonnes of honey in this fiscal year from 1 April to the end of November and it earned over US\$ 2.162 million from the honey exports.

The price of honey in the world market is US\$ 2,500-3,000 per tonne and Myanmar produces about 3,000 tonnes annually.

Myanmar exports honey to Japan, Thailand, Korea, China, Saudi Arabia, US, Singapore and EU markets.

The most favourite varieties of Myanmar honey are sunflower honey, plum honey and buckwheat honey and the sunflower honey in largest demand.

The largest producer of honey is China and the largest honey producers in the ASEAN region are Vietnam, Myanmar and Thailand.

GLOBAL MARITIME TRADE SAILS INTO GEOPOLITICAL STORM

International maritime trade has hit stormy waters as attacks by Yemen's Huthi rebels on ships in the Red Sea has reduced the availability of ships, causing freight rates to surge.

Most large international shipping companies have decided to reroute trading to avoid the Red Sea and Suez Canal through which 12 percent of world trade usually passes.

The Huthis say the strikes are in solidarity with Palestinians in war-ravaged Gaza, which Israel has bombarded relentlessly for three months, in what it says is a campaign to destroy militant group Hamas.

Danish shipping giant Maersk said Friday last week that it would divert all vessels around Africa instead of using the Red Sea and Suez Canal for the

"foreseeable future" after Yemeni rebels attacked its merchant ships.

Vessels are circumnavigating Africa via the Cape of Good Hope, which extends the journey between Asia and Europe by 10 to 20 days on average, according to Arthur Barillas, general manager of Oversea, a freight organiser.

Shipping companies have already announced significant price increases to cover the costs associated with the detour.

French shipping group CMA CGM has doubled the price of a 40-foot container between Asia and the Mediterranean to \$6,000.

Italian-Swiss peer and sector leader MSC has



Photo: AFP

hiked its prices to \$5,900 from \$2,900 for the same offering.

The United States says there have been more than 20 Red Sea attacks by Huthi rebels since October 19.

CHINESE NEW YEAR

The industry is suffering from a shortage of containers in Asia owing to longer journey times, causing a headache ahead of the Chinese New Year next month.

“There is a real influx (of goods) from Asia,” said Barillas.

In the runup to the Chinese New Year on February 10, “all the ships are full”, causing freight rates to rise, he added.

Customers are rushing to have their goods shipped before the celebrations bring China, the world’s biggest exporter, to a week-long standstill.

A benchmark indicator for measuring the freight tariff rate of goods transported from China -- the Shanghai Containerized Freight Index -- has almost doubled in a few weeks.

Such a sudden increase is reminiscent of what occurred during the Covid pandemic, when freight rates reached unprecedented heights on disruptions to supply chains.

“Many people, they focus on the spot rate. And yes, it has doubled. And, of course, it speaks about how desperate the situation is,” Niels Rasmussen, chief shipping analyst at BIMCO, told AFP.

He added, however, that some shippers would have negotiated better deals.

“If you look at the average rate for everything out of China through most of Europe and the Mediterranean, the increase is 15 percent to 20 percent,” said Rasmussen.

TAIWAN ELECTIONS

Attacks in the Red Sea are not the only ones disrupting international trade. The worst drought in decades to hit the Panama Canal has forced authorities to slow transits.

A potential further hazard could be the outcome of presidential elections in Taiwan due January 13, should it lead to another crisis with China, according to analysts.

However, “even with the threat of some congestion and equipment shortages, carriers are much better-positioned to accommodate operationally for these diversions when compared to the disruptions seen during the pandemic”, Israeli freight reservation and payment platform, Freightos, said in a weekly note to clients.

Shipping companies have used recent huge profits to order hundreds of new ships which are beginning to be delivered.

AFP



Penrose Thitsa

INDIA MOVES TO SCRAP FREE MOVEMENT REGIME ALONG INDO-MYANMAR BORDER

The Free Movement Regime (FMR) along the Indo-Myanmar border is on the verge of being eliminated by India, according to a senior government official of India who made the announcement on January 2, reported The Hindu.

The FMR was an agreement between India and Myanmar that allowed people living within 16 km of the shared border to travel freely across it without a visa. This facilitated cross-border interactions, particularly for members of shared hill tribes with familial and ethnic ties on both sides.

Those residing in border areas will soon be obligated to obtain visas, as stated by the official of India.

The official initiation of the FMR dates back to 2018. This is when it was formally established as part of India's Act East policy, promoting stronger ties with South and East Asian nations.

The Indian official said that around 300 km of the border will be fenced and a tender will be issued in the next few days. He added that a survey of the border areas with the help of drones has been completed.

Despite concerns about potential opposition from states like Nagaland and Mizoram, the official emphasized, "Border security is Centre's domain. We may take note of their concerns but the final decision is of the Union government. We are in talks with Myanmar."

Since 2020, India's Manipur state government has halted the FMR due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Manipur's Chief Minister, N. Biren Singh, said on September 23, 2023, that he has urged India's Ministry of Home Affairs to terminate the FMR along the India-Myanmar border and finalize its fencing. He linked the ongoing ethnic turmoil in the state to the unrestricted movement of people from across the border.

Following the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, an influx of undocumented Myanmar migrants occurred, with over 40,000 refugees seeking refuge in Mizoram. Approximately 4,000 refugees are said to have entered Manipur.

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QUIET IN SHWEDAGON PAGODA

Worshippers walk around the chedi in Shwedagon pagoda in Yangon on 4 January, Independence Day.

Photo: EPA

NOBUKO NAKANA TAKES A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY



Nobuko Nakana

Nobuko Nakana is on a spiritual journey that has seen her “ordain” with a bhikkhuni order in Burma.

Listen to her journey in this Insight Myanmar podcast: <https://player.captivate.fm/episode/e963d455-75ca-4489-b7ef-5971c9cc80e8>

She has had an interesting and at times challenging journey that has shown the good, bad and ugly in modern-day Burmese society.

“I didn’t really have an inclination towards an identity,” says Nobuko, about growing up in a Japanese Buddhist home in Australia. “Even if I would look in the mirror, and I’d see Asian features, but I because I grew up with very Caucasian, external surroundings. I felt like I assimilated and blended in with the white Australian upbringing.”

BACKGROUND

Nobuko’s father was with the Japanese Navy, and so the family moved around. They spent her early years in Russia and Japan before eventually settling in Melbourne. Her Japanese parents practiced Mahayana Buddhism, following a sect that was over 800 years old; its main temple is located at the base of Mount Fuji. Nobuko remembers a lot of chanting growing up, and she says the religion also imparted other lessons that were integrated into her upbringing. “I think it’s a very underlying, Japanese way of communicating, like being very mindful of the impact we have on others as

we speak.”

Another kind of impactful lesson came when she was just five years old. Her older sister told her about the Holocaust, and hearing about all that horror and death was very heavy for someone so young. But rather than being overwhelmed after learning about this terrible history, it instead offered a kind of reflection on death that she was somehow able to contemplate in those early years. “When you have that awareness, then those fundamental things are deeper, and things in life become a lot more precious,” she recalls. “It can let go of a lot more of superficial dramas and thoughts that are going on. You don’t get so attached to them.”

PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIMENTATION

Years later, while studying marine biology at university, Nobuko started to feel sharp pangs of unhappiness, although she didn’t know what was causing them at the time. “I think there’s a part of me that always yearns to investigate and understand what freedom is,” she notes. “I was born in the Year the Horse, and the horse never wants to be reined in!” So she decided to take a year off, and spent the days alternating between two jobs, and the nights taking psychedelics at raves while sampling Melbourne’s exuberant nightlife scene. In addition to opening up to new facets of reality, the drugs also manifested interpersonal change as well. “I grew up very introverted, as well as quite shy, and going through the whole



party scene, it opened me up to developing lifelong friendships with people who I still have in my life now, and consider my oldest friends. It was understanding on a deep level what true heart-connection and intimacy means with other people.”

Her experimentation eventually led to LSD, and on one trip, she began to feel as though she could predict the future, which made her contemplate the importance of intention. “If we have intention, then whatever is behind that intention, it will occur,” she says, “That’s why it became so important to come from a wholesome space of mind as much of the time as possible.”

INTRODUCTION TO MEDITATING

Noboku’s first taste of meditation happened around that time. Returning home in the early morning hours after a night of clubbing, her boyfriend gave her some basic instructions. But it didn’t stick. Then fast forward several years, and her new partner at the time told her about vipassana courses he was taking in the tradition of S.N. Goenka. However, she wasn’t impressed “He wasn’t an inspiration, because he was smoking a lot of weed,” she says bluntly. “He was pretty stoned, and he wasn’t practicing.” But shortly after, Nobuko met someone in a farmer’s market who had also been practicing the same technique, and believing in synchronicity, felt it was time to try it out. She attended a retreat at Dhamma Aloka with her twin sister, and the results were astounding. “I knew that it was possible to experience the clarity of the mind and the clarity of the moment, and to have in-the-moment awareness without drugs.”

But while she continued to take more courses

and also began serving, she wasn’t yet ready to let go of her heavily partying lifestyle, or give up intoxicants. She took a job teaching English in Japan, but continued to indulge in the vibrant nightlife scene there. However, as she was preparing to return home to Australia, she felt she had finally come to a fork in the road. “I just knew that that hedonistic lifestyle, it didn’t bring any pleasure, because I was feeling pretty crusty. I’d already done a vipassana course and I knew the benefits and how clear I felt.” With that in mind, she made the commitment to spend an extended period of time sitting and serving courses at Dhamma Aloka.

DHAMMA ALOKA

The first eight months were terrible! She went through serious drug withdrawal, but eventually came out the other side. She became more grounded in the tradition, and the rhythms of a busy meditation center. “It’s like a snowball of perpetual motion, of internal energy building up,” she recalls, “but also, it’s a real test to see if I was really practicing what was being taught, which was being equanimous with a lot of my emotions that were coming up.” Although Nobuko was aware that her choice to stay at the center bucked societal expectations to some degree, she felt confident that she was following her heart’s intentions.

Those initial months eventually stretched to two years, and when she finally left the center, it was with an intention of going even deeper into the practice. She traveled to India in 2010 and stayed at the flagship center of the Goenka tradition, Dhamma Giri, where she took an extended Pāli course. “I realized how much I loved meditating,” she notes. “I found that when I really applied myself to something with such commitment and depth, I can see the results and the

benefits. When I was a teenager, I used to do long distance swimming, and that was probably my first seed of having that really strong drive, of finding something that I felt really passionate about, and I could see the benefits, mentally and physically. And then with meditation, I could see mentally how much it was benefiting me.”

Around that time, she enrolled with her partner in a 45-day vipassana course at Dhamma Sindhu, a Goenka center in Gujarat. They originally had plans of returning to Australia and becoming more committed in their relationship, but on this course, something fundamental shifted in Nobuko; she realized that direction—a relationship commitment in lay life—was no longer for her. “I just knew that that’s not the path that I was going to take. It was actually really painful to have to let that go, and very emotional.”

LANDING IN BURMA

So she traveled through Nepal and Thailand, and finally landed in Burma. She initially spent several months at Dhamma Joti, the Goenka center in Yangon, but suddenly all foreign yogis were required to leave because of something that happened there. So she went to stay for a time at The Phyu Taw Ya Monastery, whose Sayadaw had formerly been a teacher in the Goenka tradition, and who she deeply respected.

But the pull of wearing robes, which had first come to her during her extended stay at Dhamma Aloka, only grew stronger as she committed more deeply to the spiritual path. She started looking for tangible options to make her desire a reality in Burma. As she didn’t want to lose her eligibility to sit long courses in the Goenka tradition, she decided that it was best to ordain at a Pariyatti (study) monastery, as it would not expose her to other meditation techniques. Moreover, the Pāḷi course had inspired her to learn more about the suttas, and she looked forward to studying them in depth.

A FORM OF ORDINATION

She ended up finding a suitable nunnery in Yankin Hill, just east of Mandalay, and ordained. Because the Burmese Sangha doesn’t formally recognize the bhikkhuni order, Nobuko could only become what is called a sayalay, and allowed to observe a maximum of ten precepts. Even though everything in her past few years had been leading Nobuko to that moment, the actual ceremony was surprisingly intense for her. “I got my head shaved, and I could feel how my energy was changing,” she says. “I felt very emotional! I was actually crying as I was getting my

head shaved.”

Beyond her initial ceremony of becoming, she found that the experience of being a nun had its challenges. The strongest was that, even nine months into wearing robes, the pain of having let go of her relationship with her boyfriend was still so acute that one day she decided to disrobe, leave Burma, and go back to him. While writing him a letter about her intention to return, the senior nun approached. Although not able to speak or read English, the nun realized what was happening. “I could see her perspective and the space she was coming from,” Nobuko recalls. As a lifelong monastic who had never known the intimacy of a relationship, the nun didn’t understand the particular kind of internal struggle that Nobuko was facing, yet was adamant that she resist the temptation. “It was just so black and white, and I thought, ‘She’s absolutely right!’ I actually never sent that letter, and he never found out.”

Over time, however, her nun’s life took on a predictable routine. Early on, Nobuko had arranged lessons from a respected monk who lived at nearby Oo Yin Monastery. “It was quite remote,” she remembers of the area. “When I climbed one of the mountains, all you can see, it is amazing! Idealistic scenes of green rice paddies and oxen and mountains and small villages, really grassroots living of Burmese people and dirt roads.” So she would sleep and eat at the nunnery, and then walk to Oo Yin Monastery to receive private tutoring, and where she also began to teach English to the novices. She began to relish what the monastic life had to offer. “There is an unspoken but yet so deeply felt sense of why we’re in robes,” she explains. “It’s with a deep honor and reverence and respect for the Buddha’s teachings.” For Nobuko, being a nun affirmed a sense of commitment and determination to work arduously in order to escape the trappings of worldly life, and seek full liberation.

GENDER ROLES

Yet eventually, after the novelty had worn off, Nobuko started to notice various aspects of monastic life that she had at first been unaware of. The first was gender roles. “I had decided to flow and accept the great fortune that I could be sayalay in this country, and not look at it as a comparison, or that I was lesser,” she remembers thinking. But the fact that women were barred from upper areas of pagodas—which Nobuko attributes to the perception that females had a lower vibration than males—became harder to accept. She also became disheartened at how few monks scrupulously followed the Vinaya (monastic discipline) as well as some of more egregious

incidents when she encountered monks who were actually intoxicated. But it was another issue that pushed Nobuko over the edge.

It was 2015. One day, as she was perusing a monastic newsletter, she noticed several articles warning against the increasing presence of Muslims in the country. In talking to her fellow nuns, she found that many of them believed the growing, anti-Muslim propaganda. “They really had this perception that all Muslim people were bad,” she recalls. “Their immediate judgment was that they’re going to get their heads cut off by Muslim people, so they have to stay clear of them!”

Nobuko couldn’t reconcile how a community that had been so supportive and generous towards her, and was so committed to following the Buddha’s teachings, could become so hateful and paranoid. “To actually hear these stories coming out of these Saṅgha publications, completely demonizing Muslims, I was absolutely shocked! It actually created fear inside me. The Buddha had taught compassion to all beings, and that all beings are equal. And yet they uphold this perspective— how can this be?!” Nobuko realized that it was time for her to move on from Myanmar.

Not that long after she left, in fact, the Rohingya crisis erupted, and she felt strongly that she had been witness to some of the initial seeds of the genocide being sown. Her reflections on the complex reality of the country deepened. “Fundamentally, it is a Dhamma country. We can’t rule that as an absolute complete blanket portrayal of them,” she says. “They

are human, and things like greed, corruption, anger, they will all also exist. Where there is dhamma, there can also be anti-dhamma as well. That’s the reality of the human the human conditioning. That’s just how it is.”

Even though she had left the country, Nobuko had still not disrobed. She sat a 45-day meditation course at a Goenka vipassana center in Thailand, then returned to Melbourne. Her mother confided to her that she wanted her to return to lay life. “I hadn’t lived in the world for nine years, so I gave it some thought, and I decided, ‘How about I give it a shot being back in the world, and try to be a good, wholesome, dhammic person in the lay life, a contributing member in society?’”

The transition was not easy. Even the prospect of trying to meet a potential partner had changed so much during her time away, with the explosion of online dating. But she has found work teaching yoga and integrated herself into a community. “I surround myself with friends who I’ve known for more than ten years, a lot of them vipassana meditators. People around me are very supportive, and we have similar values, and follow a path of always trying to do what’s wholesome and have the intelligence to communicate. If we’ve done any mistakes, we come forth and bridge that communication, and always connect with love.”

Check out the Insight Myanmar podcast here: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2023/11/26/episode-207-nobuko-nakano>



Nobuko Nakana at Shwedagon pagoda in Yangon.



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