

VIDEO SURFACES OF MYANMAR JUNTA PUBLICLY BURNING TWO MEN TO DEATH

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A photograph of Min Aung Hlaing, the leader of the Myanmar military junta, wearing a white surgical mask and glasses, and a light blue striped shirt. He is in the process of casting a ballot into a green ballot box. The box has a red front panel with the title 'BALLOT-BOX SHENANIGANS' in white capital letters. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

BALLOT-BOX SHENANIGANS

**Min Aung Hlaing uses military version
of 'democracy' as tool to maintain power**

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BURNT ALIVE: BARBARISM THE 'CORE' OF THE MYANMAR JUNTA

IGOR BLAZEVIC

A horrifying video has appeared showing junta soldiers and members of the Phyu Saw Htee pro-junta militias burning alive two captured resistance soldiers in Gangaw Township after terribly beating and torturing them.

It should be said and repeated clearly, that this is not just some junta foot soldiers and militias formed and armed by the military who have "gone wild". This is a policy of the junta itself. Instructions and encouragement to inflict this kind of barbarism is coming from the top, from Min Aung Hlaing and the military officers surrounding him.

This is the essence of the Myanmar military regime. Readiness to invite and encourage the worse barbarity in order to keep its kleptocratic power and to make Min Aung Hlaing an "old warrior king".

After spending some time and observing different ugly wars - including the war in my own Bosnia - I have learned that people have an angelic dimension in them, a capacity and tendency to do good, to be compassionate, caring, exhibit solidarity and be brave in the most extreme and the most hard circumstances.

At the same time, people, and that means not some others, but indeed many of us, have in us also dormant truly bestial instincts, which makes us revel in the fear, pain and humiliation of others.

Civilization, religion, social norms, laws, and codes of conduct do a lot to suppress bestial instincts and cultivate civic behaviour in people. When "rulers" encourage peo-

ple to do "everything they want" to other people, their dark instincts are woken.

This is what Myanmar military regimes have done many times in previous decades with full impunity. This is what they have done to many ethnic nationalities. This is what they have done to the Rohingya. This is what they are doing now across the country.

They perpetrate the sheer and horrifying barbarity of the worst imaginable terrors. They intentionally encourage such horror as part of their "state" policy and military strategy. The Myanmar military is using and encouraging the most horrifying barbarity in order to retain power and to keep privilege and accumulated stolen wealth for themselves.

This is the "regime" which ASEAN and Myanmar neighbours now want to bring to the negotiating table to persuade everybody else in the country to accept them as a negotiating partner and as an indispensable part of the "solution".

After three years since the attempted and failed military coup, the people of Myanmar have found deeper collective reservoirs of courage, determination and resilience to mount a heroic resistance of self-defence. At the end of 2023 anti-coup forces have started to bring the military regime to the edge of collapse. Almost half of the country has been liberated and the military is imploding from the bottom up. Pressure is building from all sides.

Editorial continues on page 9.

EDITORIAL

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WEEKLY

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Cover photo of Min Aung Hlaing voting in the 2020 election by AFP

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BANGKOK PROTEST

Myanmar migrant workers protest against the Myanmar military junta in Bangkok.

Photo:AFP

SNIPER SHOTS DEAD MYANMAR BRIGADIER-GENERAL IN HELICOPTER

Four members of the Myanmar security services including a brigadier-general were shot dead by sniper fire on Monday as their helicopter prepared to land, a military source told AFP.

Brigadier General Aye Min Naung, his personal security officer and two pilots were shot by a “sniper” as their helicopter prepared to land at eastern Thinnagya town near Myawaddy on the Thai border, the security source said.

The brigadier general later died, the source said, requesting anonymity as they were not authorised to talk to the media.

Two other servicemen on the helicopter had “survived,” they added, without giving details.

The source did not say how many snipers had shot at the helicopter, or attribute blame for the shooting.

The junta has clashed regularly around Myawaddy with ethnic minority fighters and allied “People’s Defence Force” groups in recent months.

Local media published images purporting to show the aftermath of the incident that showed a small helicopter lying on its side in a field.

One local outlet said the helicopter was a twin-engined Eurocopter 365.

The brigadier general is the latest high-ranking officer to be killed on the frontlines as the junta battles opponents of its coup across swathes of the country.

In November, the brigadier-general of a light infantry battalion was killed by a bomb dropped from a drone in Monekoe near the China border amid clashes, a military source told AFP.

Six brigadier generals are currently in custody for surrendering with more than 2,000 troops to an alliance of ethnic minority fighters in neighbouring Kokang region.

In November a light fighter jet, carrying two pilots crashed in the east of the country where fighting is ongoing, with anti-coup forces claiming they had shot it down.

The junta said engine failure had caused the crash.

Myanmar has been riven by conflict since the 2021 military coup, with multiple armed ethnic groups battling the junta on different fronts.

AFP

JUNTA VIOLENCE CONTINUES IN SOUTHEAST MYANMAR

The first week of February 2024 saw a continuation of violence and hostilities that targeted civilians and severely wounded children in southeast Myanmar according to the Human rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM).

A nine-year-old boy suffered a broken leg when the regiment fired artillery mortar shells into Kaw Hlaing Village, in Thaton Township, Mon State, according to HURFOM researchers.

"The army is firing artillery weapons every day. It hit a child living in the house. The injury is severe because of a leg fracture. The whole village is frightened," said a resident of Kaw Hlaing Village.

The daily firing of artillery shells into Kaw Hlaing Village has made it difficult for the local people to go to work to support their families as they are living in fear.

Kaw Hlaing Village is in the Karen National Union's (KNU's) Thaton District and is under the control of KNU Brigade 1. Many of the inhabitants are ethnic Karen people.

On 30 January 2024, two 15-year-old students were hit and injured when junta troops fired artillery into Pha Lan Taung Village, in Hpa-An Township, also in the KNU's Thaton District.

Arbitrary arrests are also ongoing in southeast Myanmar, according to HURFOM. A monk and a young man from Nang Pa Yout Village, in Pu Law Township, Myeik District, Tanintharyi Region, were also abducted by junta forces.

On February 1, around 6:00 a.m., a 40-year-old monk named Ko Wanna, who practicing at Nang Pa Yout village monastery and a young man in his 20s from a house in front of the monastery were abducted by the junta troops.

"U Wanna was a monk at the monastery. They asked him to change [into civilian] clothes and arrested him," said a local man.

The two men were initially detained at Pu Law Police Station before being moved to the Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 285 base.

According to sources, the men were arrested by a military column carrying out operations near Nang Pa Yout Village.

These incidents followed the killing and injuring of nearly 20 civilians by junta artillery attacks on Kyike Hto, Bilin and Thaton townships in the KNU-controlled areas of Thaton District in Mon State during January 2024.

HURFOM said: "These attacks indicate the lack of consequences faced by the junta, which routinely evades accountability due to the delayed response by the international community. Time is running out. The people deserve and are entitled to justice. To deny or dismiss their harrowing experiences disregards their plight and undermines the sacrifices of so many in Burma who have given their lives to ensure the success of the revolution."

Editorial continues.

The people of Myanmar have achieved this on their own, without meaningful assistance from anybody.

However, Myanmar's neighbours and other international actors do not want the junta to fall. They do not want the junta to win. But they do not want it to fall either. This is why neighbours and ASEAN want a "negotiated settlement" and "all-inclusive dialogue".

What is hidden behind this diplomatically correct language is a much more cynical and sinister reality. What they are proposing and pushing forward is the soft surrender of everybody to the ongoing military dominance in politics and economy. Plus, of course, full impunity including impunity for crimes like the ones in the pictures of the horrific murder of two PDF fighters.

By doing that, ASEAN and Myanmar's neighbours are not just abandoning the people of Myanmar.

They are abandoning the most fundamental values of humanity.

This will not bring an end to the violence or an "exit from the crisis". It will just prolong the time Min Aung Hlaing and his gang can continue to terrorize the population in their attempts to remain in power. Min Aung Hlaing has already said he will do everything possible to crush any resistance to his military rule.

The people of Myanmar have no choice but to defend themselves - and to win. Nobody can live under such ruthless, murderous, criminal rulers, especially those who brutalize and burn their opponents alive.

Editorial guest post by Igor Blazevic, a democracy and rights activist who has years of experience in Myanmar.



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BALLOT-BOX SHENANIGAS

**Min Aung Hlaing uses military
version of 'democracy' as tool to
maintain power**



Then Military Chief Min Aung Hlaing votes in the 2020 election. Photo: AFP

Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing, who grabbed power in a coup just over three years ago, has made clear his intent to hang on to power – even though some military supporters have been calling for him to stand down over his poor performance.

As the country marked the coup anniversary at the beginning of this month, Min Aung Hlaing said the military will do “whatever it takes to return the state to stability,” in a speech carried by state broadcaster MRTV.

Doing “whatever it takes” is read by Myanmar analysts as using any brutal method to cause terror to keep the country’s population in line – even burning them alive as seen in a shocking video that surfaced online last week showing a junta militia torturing and burning to death two People’s Defence Force fighters in Magway.

The incident in Myauk Khinyan Village, located in Gangaw Township, Magway Region, is believed to have happened on 7 November 2023.

FAKE DEMOCRACY

But it is not just brutality that Min Aung Hlaing has in his arsenal of methods to hang on to his ill-gotten gains and cause chaos across the country. The

junta seeks to use a corrupt form of electoral politics to maintain power.

In addition to an extension of emergency rule by six months, announced on 31 January, the junta announced the easing of rules governing political parties as it prepares for a national poll at some point in the future, possibly by the end of this year, analysts say.

The military has said it will hold fresh elections but has repeatedly extended the state of emergency imposed when it seized power, as it battles opponents across swathes of the country.

The new electoral order halves to 50,000 the number of members parties must have in order to contest national elections, and cuts the number of townships they must operate in. At the beginning of February, some willing political parties assembled, indicating their readiness to participate under military-set rules. The notice on changes to the party rules signed by junta chief Min Aung Hlaing makes no mention of why the changes were made.

BREAKING UP THE POPULAR PARTY

Before the coup, Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) swept the 2020 polls, trouncing military-aligned rivals. Last year the junta-stacked election commission announced the scrap-



● Nationalist monks rally in support of the military junta. Photo: AFP



● Ko Ko Gyi speaks at a meeting of his People's Party. Photo: EPA

ping of the first-past-the-post system - under which the NLD won its crushing majorities. A proportional representation system would be used across the country, it said. It also introduced tough new rules political parties had to comply with and dissolved the NLD after it failed to submit an application to register.

Aung San Suu Kyi co-founded the NLD in 1988, and won a landslide victory in 1990 elections that were subsequently annulled by the then-junta. The party carried the torch for democratic aspirations in military-ruled Myanmar and later won big victories over military-backed parties in elections in 2015 and 2020. Its leadership has been decimated in the junta's bloody crackdown on dissent, with one former lawmaker executed in the country's first use of capital punishment in decades. And party leader Aung San Suu Kyi, 77, remains in jail, facing 27 years – effectively a life sentence.

‘DISCIPLINED DEMOCRACY’

Far too many people fell for the Myanmar military's opening up of the country in 2010-11 that promised the people's say in the running of their country under a system of national polls every five years. But the decade of “disciplined democracy” under the 2008 military-written constitution effectively let the genie out of the bottle for Generation X and many democracy activists who saw the potential to get the Myanmar mili-

tary out of its stranglehold of power.

The 2008 Constitution was effectively a “con” – a way for the military, who feel they own the country as heirs to General Aung San's legacy, to maintain meaningful control over the country.

Three years after the coup, Min Aung Hlaing is playing “ballot-box shenanigans” as a way to maintain power, attempt to split the opposition, and seek to lure the international community into some form of “negotiated solution” to maintain power.

One of the challenges for the Spring Revolutionaries head-to-head with the junta militarily and diplomatically is warning the United Nations, ASEAN and other members of the international community that the promise of an “election” – under military rules – will not solve the core problem facing the Golden Land.

The sad fact is the Myanmar military has turned General Aung San's dream into a nightmare and the only solution – say the Spring Revolutionaries – is a complete dismantling of their grip on the country.

Reporting: Mizzima, AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA ACTIVATES MILITARY CONSCRIPTION IN WAKE OF BATTLEFIELD LOSSES



Photo: AFP

The Myanmar military junta announced 10 February the enactment of a Military Conscription Law, obliging all adult men and women in Myanmar to serve in the military.

According to the Fundamental Rights and Duties of Citizens, every citizen is required to undergo military training as per the law's provisions and serve in the Armed Forces to protect the Union.

The announcement stated that the Ministry of Defense of the Military Council will proceed to issue the necessary regulations and procedures.

Military service eligibility extends to all citizens: men aged 18 to 35 (or up to 45 for those deemed 'experts'), and women aged 18 to 27 (or up to 35 for 'experts').

"Professional" refers to individuals such as doctors and engineers, as well as those who have completed vocational training or work in other specialized professions, as outlined in the law.

Service deferment is feasible for students, government employees, missionaries, married women, individuals with disabilities, caregivers for elderly parents, those temporarily medically unfit or undergo-

ing drug abuse treatment, and individuals currently incarcerated.

Typically, military service lasts for up to 24 months, or up to 36 months for conscripts serving in specialized roles. In times of emergency, military service can extend up to five years.

Failure to attend medical examinations or comply with military service summons can result in penalties of up to three years' imprisonment, a fine, or both.

Following the 1 February 2021 coup, the Military Council initiated a nationwide war effort, and in response revolutionary forces took up arms leading to battlefield losses for the junta. As a result, the junta activated the Military Conscription law.

Since late 2023, widespread battles across the country, particularly Operation 1027 launched by the Three Brotherhood Alliance, have depleted the Military Council's strength, prompting political and military analysts to speculate that this is the moment when the council is mobilizing forces to activate the Military Conscription Law.

VIDEO SURFACES OF MYANMAR JUNTA PUBLICLY BURNING TWO MEN TO DEATH

A video showing junta personnel hanging two young People's Defense Force (PDF) members from a tree and forcing villagers to watch them burning the men to death was uploaded to social media on 6 February.

The incident in Myauk Khinyan Village, located in Gangaw Township, Magway Region, is believed to have happened on 7 November 2023.

According to Yaw People's Defence Force, the two murdered men, Phoe Tay and Thar Htaung, were members of Yaw PDF. It said that the two men were arrested in Myauk Khinyan Village on 7 November and it believes they were burned to death the same day.

The video shows that the two PDF members in their early 20s had clearly been tortured as they had severe injuries and were covered in blood and shackled when they were hanged from the tree before being covered in a liquid, believed to be petrol, and burned alive.

It is not known who uploaded the video, but it was probably leaked to the two local media outlets that first reported the incident

The video, which is narrated by a triumphant voice, shows junta soldiers and members of the Pyu Saw Htee junta-aligned militia singing and dancing as the men are burned alive. Villagers were also forced to watch. According to the Yaw PDF every household in the village was forced to send one member to watch the killings.

Myauk Khinyan Village is controlled by the Pyu Saw Htee militia. In March 2022, two civilians were tortured to death in the village.

BEWARE OF JUNTA'S POLITICAL TRICKS, GOVERNMENT-IN-EXILE WARNS

Foreign Affairs Minister of National Unity Government Zin Mar Aung speaks at the meeting with the Myanmar diaspora living in the Washington, D.C. metro area at the office of NUG on January 28, 2024. RFA

Increasingly desperate after a series of battlefield losses, Myanmar's junta may try to trick the world into thinking it is making changes to the political system – but don't fall for it, the foreign minister of the country's government-in-exile said.

"As the military council is suffering losses, they will do political stunts such as restructuring or reshuffling their organization," said Zin Mar Aung, foreign minister of the National Unity Government, or NUG, made up of former civilian leaders ousted by the military in a Feb. 1, 2021, coup.

"It is totally unacceptable and it is not a movement for change," she told about 100 members of the Burmese diaspora living in the greater Washington DC area on Sunday. "They have no intention or guarantee to change the political system. We should not fall for such stupid tricks."

In recent months, the junta has lost ground to ethnic armed groups and grassroots militia, and hundreds of army soldiers have surrendered or defected to the rebel side.

Since the end of October, the so-called Three Brotherhood Alliance, made up of three ethnic armies, have overrun dozens of Burmese army camps and captured key towns and cities in the northern and western parts of the country.

Zin Mar Aung called a potential political reshuffle an exit strategy for losers.

"Actually, it's the people all over the whole country who need an exit from being oppressed for many years," she said. "The dictators are trying to trick the international community by political stunts. I believe in the Myanmar people, but have some concerns with the international community."

The foreign minister of the shadow government said that support from both the international and domestic communities were required for the establishment of a genuine democratic country, and that the NUG is discussing with ethnic groups to ensure an all-inclusive federal democratic Union.

CALL FOR MORE SUPPORT

The gathering on Sunday included several senior NUG officials, who told RFA that they hoped to learn the concerns of the Myanmar diaspora and their willingness to support democratic movements in Myanmar.

"It has been about three years since the military coup. Democratic countries have not provided us with effective support," said Kyaw Moe Tun, the permanent representative of Myanmar to the United Nations, who was appointed by the government that was ousted during the coup, but has remained in office despite attempts by the junta to remove him.

"We can strongly confirm that we have not received effective support from [the international community,]" he said. "So, we need their support in our attempts to end the military dictatorship immediately."

Deputy foreign minister Aung Kyaw Moe said the armed struggles of the resistance forces are becoming stronger, so the junta is about to come to an end, and its leaders would stand trial in the international court of justice and other courts.

"No criminal will escape from punishment for their crimes," he said. "The ongoing situation has shown that their end is getting closer. They must be punished under the international and local justice system. They must be punished."

He added that NUG has informed international governments about the development of democratic movements in Myanmar.

RFA tried to contact Major General Zaw Min Tun, the spokesperson for the junta, about the NUG comments and criticism, but he could not be reached.

Translated by Aung Naing. Edited by Eugene Whong and Malcolm Foster.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia

NEW CONGRESSIONAL BURMA CAUCUS SIGNALS INCREASED US FOCUS ON MYANMAR

BY KRISTIANA KUQI AND SIMON BILLENNESS



Photo: Andy Felicitti

In a historic move, members of the House of Representatives launched the first-ever bipartisan Congressional Burma Caucus last week, marking a pivotal step in addressing the ongoing crisis in Myanmar. Republican Bill Huizenga of Michigan and Democrat Betty McCollum of Minnesota will co-chair the caucus, signaling an increasing commitment by Congress to support democracy and human rights in Myanmar.

The establishment of this caucus is a commendable effort to sustain U.S. focus on Myanmar amidst competing global issues. The Campaign for a New Myanmar, which worked to help establish this caucus, stressed the importance of congressional engagement to U.S. leadership in seeking positive change in the Southeast Asian nation.

The humanitarian crisis in Myanmar has reached a critical point, prompting the need for swift and sustained attention from the international community. The caucus aims to enhance awareness of Myanmar within the U.S. Congress and Administration, signaling a united front against military rule in Myanmar.

The caucus will join advocates calling on the Biden administration to provide increased support to democratic forces in Myanmar and to impose further targeted and coordinated sanctions on the military junta.

Last year, Congress passed the BURMA Act, enabling the U.S. government to provide non-lethal support to Myanmar's democratic forces and ethnic resistance organizations. Now, there is a push for the U.S. Administration to create an advisory group to make recommendations regarding the approximately \$1 billion in Myanmar assets frozen by the U.S. government post-coup.

On Wednesday, Washington announced new sanctions targeting companies and individuals connected to the military, focusing on disrupting the fuel supply for the Myanmar military's aerial bombings that have frequently targeted civilians. But action by the U.S. and the international community still remains short of the measures needed to cut off the junta from the revenues, weapons, and jet fuel that it needs to stay in power.

Additionally, the launch of the Congressional Burma Caucus has garnered support from the US-ASEAN Business Council (USABC). Ambassador Ted Osius, USABC President & CEO commended U.S. Representatives Bill Huizenga and Betty McCollum for their vision and leadership. USABC has joined the call for the Administration to appoint a dedicated U.S. Special Envoy for Myanmar to best coordinate U.S. support for the Myanmar democratic movement.

The launch of the Congressional Burma Caucus is not just timely; it is crucial in ensuring that U.S. policy towards Myanmar remains principled, proactive, and effective. As we mark the third anniversary of the military coup, united action through this bipartisan initiative stands as a beacon of hope for democracy and human rights in Myanmar.

Kristiana Kuqi and Simon Billenness are members of the advisory board of Campaign for a New Myanmar

MYANMAR'S SUU KYI IN 'STRONG SPIRITS', SON TELLS AFP

Ousted Myanmar democracy figurehead Aung San Suu Kyi is in "strong spirits", her son told AFP Tuesday 6 February 2024, after receiving a letter from her - their first communication since she was detained in a coup three years ago.

Suu Kyi was detained on the morning of the February 2021 coup that ended a 10-year experiment with democracy and plunged the Southeast Asian nation into bloody turmoil.

The Nobel laureate, 78, has since been jailed for more than 20 years by a junta court following what rights groups say was a sham trial designed to remove

her from politics.

"She is in strong spirits as always," Kim Aris said of the letter he received from his mother thanking him for a care package he had sent to her late last year.

The letter received in early January was "the first real indication I've had... that she's actually alive", he told AFP by phone from London.

"She was sending her love to all the family."

Suu Kyi, who remains hugely popular in Myanmar, has been largely hidden from view since



FLASHBACK: Kim Aris meeting with his mother Aung San Suu Kyi in 2010. Photo: AFP

the coup, appearing only in grainy state media photos taken during court proceedings.

Local media reported during her months-long trial that Suu Kyi had suffered dizzy spells, vomiting and at times had been unable to eat because of a tooth infection.

Her National League for Democracy (NLD) party accused the junta last September of endangering her life by denying her medical care.

Suu Kyi was continuing to suffer from dental problems, Aris told AFP, adding he had sent medicine and foods rich in vitamins in the care package.

He said she was still being held at a specially constructed compound in the military-built capital Naypyidaw.

The compound had no air conditioning in the searing heat and the concrete cells leaked during the monsoon, Australian economist Sean Turnell, who was detained there for months, told AFP last year.

Turnell, an economic adviser to Suu Kyi's government, was a co-defendant at one of her trials and later jailed before being pardoned and deported.

"She was incredibly strong throughout" their trial, he said.

"She was, I think more concerned to keep the spirits up of the people, like me, charged alongside her, than she was about her own situation."

ISOLATED

Confinement in the isolated capital is a far cry from the years Suu Kyi spent under house arrest during a previous junta, where she became a world-famous democracy figurehead.

During that period, she lived at her family's colonial-era lakeside mansion in the commercial hub Yangon and regularly gave speeches to crowds on the other side of her garden wall.

Local media have reported that the house - the subject of a dispute between Suu Kyi and her brother - will be put up for auction in the coming weeks.

The NLD has been decimated in the junta's bloody crackdown on dissent, with one former lawmaker executed in Myanmar's first use of capital punishment in decades.

The junta dissolved the party in March last year for failing to re-register under a tough new military-drafted electoral law, removing it from polls it has indicated it may hold in 2025.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the coup. A military crackdown on dissent has killed more than 4,400 people and seen more than 25,000 arrested, according to a local monitoring group.

AFP



BROTHERHOOD ALLIANCE CLAIMS MYANMAR JUNTA PROTECTING SCAM CENTRE KINGPINS



Though the junta repatriated Chinese nationals involved in scams and gambling in Laukkai Township, northern Shan State it is continuing to shield those who run the operations, said the Brotherhood Alliance.

The junta claims to have repatriated about 40,000 people suspected of taking part in online scams and gambling to the Chinese authorities, but most of them, except for a few higher-level scam centre workers, were low-level operatives, according to local sources.

Most recently, the junta said that on 23 January it repatriated 1,038 Chinese nationals, who were illegally in Namhsan Town and suspected of taking part in Laukkai-based scamming operations. But, they were all low-level scam centre operatives, according to local sources who said that senior scam centre operatives were not repatriated and instead taken to safe locations by the junta.

The junta is protecting high-level operatives of scam centres despite Chinese arrest warrants having been issued for them, said the Brotherhood Alliance.

Senior scam centre operatives and owners are rumoured to have been flown out of Laukkai in junta military helicopters in November 2023. They are currently being protected on military bases in Namhsan and Loilem towns in Shan State, according to uncon-

firmed reports.

Despite this, it seems as if the junta crackdown may have caused some of the scam centres to move their operations elsewhere.

A Laukkai resident said: “There are tens of thousands of Chinese scammers here in Laukkai. With the recent crackdown, many of the Chinese scammers easily fled to other townships and areas that border other countries. However, some still receive protection from entities affiliated with the Military Council.”

On 10 December 2023, the Chinese government issued arrest warrants for 10 individuals because it has ‘substantial evidence’ that they are involved in online scamming activities.

Among those targeted is Bai Suocheng, who is the leader of the junta-aligned Kokang Militia and a former MP for the military’s Union Solidarity and Development Party, and a former administrative chairman of the Kokang Self-Administered Zone. Chinese arrest warrants were also issued for Bai Suocheng’s son and daughter, Bai Yingcang and Bai Yinglan, and also Wei San, a commander in a junta-aligned Border Guard Force.

The other Chinese arrest warrants of 10 December were for: Wei Rong, Wei Qingsong, Liu Zhengxiang, Liu Jiguang, Liu Zhengmao, and Xu Laofa.

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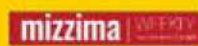
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FROM PLACARDS TO GUNS: MYANMAR'S DEMOCRACY PROTESTERS BATTLE JUNTA

Three years ago, young placard-waving Myanmar democracy protesters were hounded from the streets of Mandalay city by soldiers in the wake of the military's latest coup.

Last month some of those same protesters faced off against the military again -- but this time they were operating a mortar in northern Shan state, firing rounds at a junta position with swift, practised movements.

The coup launched three years ago on Thursday was supposed to put control of Myanmar firmly back in the hands of the military after a 10-year experiment with democracy.

Instead it has plunged the country into civil war, crashed the economy and inspired tens of thousands of young people to join "People's Defence Forces" (PDFs) and wrest their democracy back by the gun.

PDF units range from small teams in the

scorching plains of Myanmar's heartlands to larger outfits in rugged border regions where more established ethnic rebel groups have taken them under their wing.

It is impossible to determine how many people have died in the conflict.

But at least 4,400 people have been killed in the military's crackdown on dissent since the coup, according to a local monitoring group.

The junta says its opponents have killed more than 6,000 civilians, and describes the PDF fighters as "terrorists" working to destroy the country.

TEACHERS TO FIGHTERS

Years of weathering attacks from the junta's Chinese and Russian-made weapons have transformed many PDFs into battle-hardened units.

"We have the ability to take down every soldier in our area," said Ko Phyo, a former teacher who



Photo: AFP

now goes to work for the Mandalay PDF in camouflage uniform and combat helmet.

He was speaking from a defensive position around 15 minutes drive from the town of Pyin Oo Lwin -- a former British hill station now home to the military's elite officer training academy.

"So, before they send a convoy they use heavy weapons and air strikes to cause havoc in our positions," he said from his trench on the frontlines.

"That's the only strategy they have."

For Ko Phyo and his comrades -- teachers, surveyors and students -- the latest coup was proof the non-violent struggle for democracy led for decades by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi would never dislodge the military from power.

"We shouldn't be an egg if we want to destroy solid rock," said Mandalay PDF commander Mone Tine, 30, who before the coup worked at a civil society organisation promoting good governance.

"We don't overestimate the military and we aren't afraid of them."

Graffiti on the pockmarked walls of a nearby police station gives graphic proof of the ebb and flow of battle.

On one wall a junta soldier had scrawled an expletive against the PDF, the foe the military has been unable to vanquish.

Nearby were written the words "Spring Revolution" -- the name given by Myanmar democracy fighters to their struggle -- and a depiction of the three fingered pro-democracy salute.

STOLEN AMMO

At their bases in the Shan hills the lives of the Mandalay PDF recruits are a far cry from home, ticking along to many of the same rules and regulations as their military foes.

Every morning the group's flag is raised and a chorus of assembled fighters reaffirms their commitment to overthrowing the junta.

Officers are saluted and sharp whistle blasts announce regular air raid drills and send fighters scurrying for cover in trenches.

An administration office hums with activity to

keep the fighters clothed, fed and armed.

Mone Tine would not give details on exactly how many fighters the Mandalay PDF has, but said it was in the "high thousands."

Finding the money to keep operations running is "a big problem," he admitted, with the group largely reliant on donations from a sympathetic population and from members of the diaspora.

For weapons and ammunition the group looks elsewhere -- including the junta.

"It's a good feeling to attack the military with the ammunition that we seized from them," said Mone Tine.

Many of Mone Tine's fighters received combat training from the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), an ethnic minority armed group that has long battled the military for more autonomy.

Ethnic armed groups in northern Kachin and eastern Karen states have also taken in PDF fighters for training.

Few expect that the PDF groups can topple a military that has run Myanmar for much of the country's 70 plus years of independence.

But their various alliances with the ethnic armed groups, some of which have fought central authorities for decades, have undoubtedly shaken the junta.

In October Mandalay PDF fighters joined a months-long offensive by an ethnic rebel alliance that led to the opposition forces gaining swathes of territory in northern Shan state.

Analysts say that offensive has left the junta at its weakest since it seized power.

On the front lines in Shan state, "Sugar," 33, -- a pseudonym -- said there was no turning back for his comrades in the Mandalay PDF.

"Our battlefield experiences have made us into different soldiers. We are learning from fighting and fighting while learning," he said.

"We know we have to sacrifice. We have adapted ourselves and have no more fears."

RAMREE TOWN, RAKHINE STATE BEING HIT BY AT LEAST 10 AIRSTRIKES A DAY

A junta aircraft dropped a 500-pound bomb on Ramree Town on the night of 27 January, according to residents.

They said that there are at least 10 junta airstrikes every day which have already destroyed nearly 30 houses in the town.

Fighting has been ongoing in Ramree Town, according to sources who say they are observing junta jet fighters and transport planes in the sky above the town every day.

There have also been reports of civilian casualties in Ramree Town but Mizzima has been unable to confirm the exact number, despite trying, unsuc-

cessfully, to contact the Arakan Army (AA) spokesman Khaing Thu Kha to discuss the situation.

As it loses more and more military camps the junta army is shifting its focus to targeting civilians and launching airstrikes and artillery attacks on towns and villages, according to the AA.

Intense fighting is ongoing in Ramree, Minbya, Pauktaw, Kyauktaw, and Rathedaung townships in Rakhine State and tens of thousands of people are currently fleeing from those townships.

FRAUD ALLEGED IN HIRING OF MYANMAR SEASONAL WORKERS IN SOUTH KOREA



Photo: Mathew Schwartz

Many Myanmar workers are reportedly cheated daily based on a recruitment schedule of seasonal workers by South Korea as Myanmar workers are not officially included in this programme for 2024.

South Korea is recruiting seasonal workers from Vietnam, Cambodia, Philippines and Kyrgyzstan but Myanmar workers are not included for this programme.

Many agencies in Myanmar have popped up for these seasonal workers and they are cheated by demanding nearly 3 million Kyats from them with the promise of sending them to South Korea as seasonal workers by the employment agencies.

Moreover, some are demanded up to 6.5-9.0 million Kyats for these seasonal worker jobs.

Under the seasonal worker programme, the workers have to work for short term of eight months per year and for the remaining four months will be out of job.

Myanmar Workers Social Security Centre (Korea) issued a news release which says that some local offices in South Korea are instructed not to recruit seasonal workers from Myanmar.

Similarly, the South Korea embassy in Myanmar issued an announcement dated 8 December 2023

which says that the notices and advertisements issued by individuals or online that are recruiting for seasonal workers are frauds and cheats.

The South Korean embassy in Myanmar also announced that South Korea had not issued any directive and announcement regarding the recruitment of seasonal workers from Myanmar but the state-run media in Myanmar reported in the third week of December 2023 that the Ministry of Labour of the Myanmar Military Council was trying to sign an MOU with the South Korea government for sending seasonal workers.

Under these circumstances, the sources close to the ministry and agencies said that some illegal brokers were recruiting seasonal workers and some employment agencies were demanding money from these workers as their service fees.

Currently, Myanmar is sending male workers to South Korea for agriculture, construction and manufacturing work under the bilateral agreement between two countries.

In 2023 too, many people were cheated by posts and ads on social media by promising to send them to South Korea as workers, house maids, nurses, etc. and many of them lost their money in these fraudulent cases.

MYANMAR SENDS REPRESENTATIVE TO ASEAN MEET FOR FIRST TIME IN TWO YEARS

Myanmar's junta sent a senior official to a gathering of ASEAN foreign ministers in Laos on Monday -- the first time the diplomatically isolated country has attended a high-level meeting of the regional bloc in more than two years.

The country has been ravaged by deadly violence since a 2021 military coup deposed Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government and unleashed a bloody crackdown on dissent.

The 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has led diplomatic efforts to ease the crisis but has little to show for it, with more

than 4,400 people killed and nearly 20,000 in detention in the military crackdown according to a local monitoring group.

ASEAN has barred junta leaders from its summits and ministerial meetings since October 2021, and the generals have refused invitations to send "non-political" representatives.

But on Monday senior foreign ministry bureaucrat Marlar Than Htike attended the talks in picturesque Luang Prabang.

Laos Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith welcomed Myanmar's attendance after two years



(L-R) Myanmar Permanent secretary Marlar Than Htike (R) and Undersecretary, Philippine SOM leader Theresa P. Lazaro (L) walk during the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' (AMM) retreat meeting in Luang Prabang on January 29, 2024. Photo: AFP

and said he hoped for progress, though he cautioned against expecting a swift end to the crisis.

“This time we feel a little bit optimistic that the engagement may work, although we have to admit that the issues that are happening in Myanmar will not resolve overnight,” he said.

“We are sure that the more we engage Myanmar, the more understanding ... about the real situation that is happening in Myanmar.”

ASEAN TENSIONS

ASEAN's diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis have been repeatedly stymied, with little progress made since 2021 when the bloc agreed on a five-point peace plan -- which Myanmar signed up to but has failed to implement.

Friction between ASEAN members escalated

last year over differing approaches to the crisis, especially after the previous Thai government's decision to meet junta foreign minister Than Shwe.

Laos, a one-party communist state with deep ties to Myanmar's most important ally China, is chairing ASEAN for the first time since 2016.

Saleumxay said “many members welcome the participation of non-political representation from Myanmar”.

Laos' calls for engagement follow a move by the Laotian special envoy of ASEAN, Alounkeo Kittikhoun, to meet with junta leader Min Aung Hlaing in the capital Naypyidaw earlier this month.

Myanmar state media reported at the time that the two discussed “efforts of the government to ensure peace and stability”.

But a spokesman from Indonesia - which along with Singapore and the Philippines has taken a firm line on Myanmar - insisted Monday's attendance did not signal a change in policy.

“It is true that a Myanmar representative was present at the ASEAN FM meeting in Luang Prabang. The attendance was not by a minister-level or political representative. So, it is still in line with the 2022 agreement of the ASEAN leaders,” Lalu Muhamad Iqbal told AFP.

Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said it was “helpful” to have the Myanmar representative at the talks.

But he said he “cannot use the word optimistic” about the junta taking steps to implement the five-point peace deal.

The continued need for humanitarian aid to Myanmar was also highlighted, with Laos welcoming efforts led by Thailand for humanitarian assistance. The kingdom shares a long border with Myanmar.

“All ASEAN member countries express their will to support, to make sure that we can provide full and effective assistance and support to Myanmar people,” he said.

AFP



OVER 1,000 ATTACKS ON HEALTH CARE IN THREE YEARS SINCE MYANMAR COUP

Since the armed forces seized control of Myanmar on 1 February 2021 following a general election that the National League for Democracy party won by a landslide, Insecurity Insight has identified 1,127 incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care in the country.

In the early months following the coup, attacks on health care were characterised by health workers being arrested on allegations of Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) affiliation or because of the care they provided to injured CDM members, according to Insecurity Insight.

Since then, at least 897 health workers have been arrested in 302 incidents.

Health workers were often beaten while they were detained, and mass arrests were reported. Some detained health workers were given prison sentences ranging from three to 25 years, while others were tortured, with at least five dying as a result.

Health facilities were frequently raided by the military searching for pro-democracy health workers or injured protesters, and patients were routinely searched and risked being arrested or forcibly discharged.

Starting in late 2022, armed violence has escalated, with the Myanmar military increasingly using aircraft-delivered explosive weapons against communities that strongly resisted the military's rule, according to data collated by Insecurity Insight.

At least 49 incidents were recorded in which Myanmar military aircraft dropped explosive weapons that damaged clinics, hospitals, pharmacies, and rural health centres, and killed or injured health workers.

Most of these incidents occurred in Kayah State.

Since April 2023 opposition groups have increasingly been using drones armed with explosive weapons to carry out attacks on Myanmar military forces occupying hospitals and health centres. In at least 25 incidents drone-delivered explosive weapons damaged health facilities taken over by the Myanmar military. Most of these incidents occurred in Sagaing, according to Insecurity Insight.

Air-dropped explosive weapons usually have a wide-area effect and cause death and destruction beyond the intended target, thus having reverberating adverse effects on the health sector.

In addition, the use of air-dropped explosive weapons has had devastating mental health impacts on health workers with increasing evidence that high levels of stress resulting from their use has caused many health workers to flee or stop providing health care.

Insecurity Insight believes that over time, such violence has a devastating impact on the quality of care provided by a health care system.

Insecurity Insight supports the work of aid agencies, providers of healthcare, education, and protection services, and other civil society organisations by providing publicly available information for evidence-based policies. They collect and analyse data about violence against civilians and damage and destruction of vital civilian infrastructure in order to strengthen civilian protection and the delivery of aid in armed conflict.

OWNER OF GRAND ANDAMAN HOTEL ARRESTED IN JOINT THAI-MYANMAR OPERATION

In a joint operation Thai and Burmese authorities arrested Kyaw Lwin, the owner of the Grand Andaman Hotel, on the Burmese Island of Thathay Kyun just off Ranong in Thailand.

The arrest warrant was issued by the Thai authorities and Kyaw Lwin was arrested on Thathay Kyun on 4 February and taken to Thailand.

“Thailand’s Department of Special Investigation (DSI) issued an arrest warrant. They then conducted a search for Kyaw Lwin on the island. The operation culminated in his apprehension”, said a source who knows staff at the hotel.

The same source said that the DSI had issued the arrest warrant under charges that included tax evasion. Kyaw Lwin tried to negotiate with the DSI and said he offered to pay the taxes he owed, but this was not sufficient to prevent the DSI from taking him back to Thailand in handcuffs.

On their return, the DSI held a press conference at the DSI building in Ratchburi, Thailand, on 5

February at which they said that they had confiscated luxury cars, gold, silver and weapons as well as seven suspects in connection with the case. The identity of the seven arrested people was not revealed.

According to the Thai media Kyaw Lin, who holds dual Thai-Myanmar citizenship, founded a money laundering gang called Ko Fuk.

According to a Thai police officer in Ranong Kyaw Lin may also face arrest and prosecution under Myanmar laws.

The Grand Andaman Hotel is a five-star hotel and casino complex on a 730 hectare site on the Myanmar island of Thathay Kyun, at the mouth of the Kra Buri River that marks the border between Myanmar and Thailand. It is also just off the coast from the cities of Kawthaung in Myanmar and Ranong in Thailand and easily accessible from both countries.

TWO KILLED IN BANGLADESH AS FIGHTING RAGES ON MYANMAR BORDER: POLICE

At least two people were killed in Bangladesh Monday last week after mortar shells fired from Myanmar during clashes there landed across the border, as terrified residents reported heavy fighting and medics treated several with gunshot wounds.

Parts of Myanmar near the 270-kilometre (167-mile) border with Bangladesh have seen frequent clashes since November, when rebel Arakan Army (AA) fighters ended a ceasefire that had largely held since a 2021 coup.

Bangladeshi villagers living close to the border said they were fearful of the fighting, with aid agency Doctors Without Borders (MSF) saying they had treated 17 people wounded in the clashes on Sunday

following fighting at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.

“All the patients had gunshot wounds”, MSF said Monday. “Two were in life-threatening condition, and five were seriously injured.”

Local police chief Abdul Mannan said a Bangladeshi woman, named as 48-year-old Hosne Ara, and an unnamed ethnic Rohingya man had been killed Monday afternoon.

“They were sitting in the kitchen... when a mortar hit the place,” Ara’s daughter-in-law said.

“She was serving lunch to the Rohingya man who was hired by the family for farm work when they were hit.”

With conditions deteriorating, the United Nations Security Council was to hold a closed-door



Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) personnel detain a Myanmar national (C), who crossed the Bangladesh-Myanmar border illegally, in Ukhia on February 6, 2024. At least two people were killed in Bangladesh on February 5, after mortar shells fired from Myanmar during clashes there landed across the border, as terrified residents reported heavy fighting and medics treated several with gunshot wounds. Photo: AFP

meeting Monday regarding Myanmar.

Nine countries including three permanent Security Council members -- Britain, France and the United States -- issued a joint statement expressing concern about the “dire” situation in Myanmar, notably 18 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and 2.6 million displaced from their homes.

Britain’s UN mission said its envoy will tell the council the countries “strongly condemn the ongoing violence harming civilians, including the military’s continued use of indiscriminate air strikes.”

‘NOT OUR WAR’

Bangladeshi villagers living close to the border said fighting broke out across the frontier last week, with many sending their children away to relatives to escape the conflict.

“We are living in fear,” said Abdus Shukkur, 75, from Tumbru Bazaar, a Bangladeshi border village. “It’s not our war, but they are attacking our homes and peo-

ple.”

Hasina Banu, 50, returned to her home in Tumbru early Monday after four days, only to be caught in fresh clashes. She reported seeing helicopter gunships firing nearby.

“I didn’t eat anything since last night,” Banu said. “We are in constant fear for our life.”

Bangladesh Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said Sunday that border police officers from neighbouring Myanmar’s Rakhine state had “entered our territory for self-protection” ahead of advancing AA fighters.

A spokesman of the Border Guard Bangladesh, the country’s frontier forces, told AFP Monday that “at least 95 border officers of Myanmar have crossed the border and taken shelter in Bangladeshi border posts”.

A Myanmar junta spokesman could not be reached for comment on the clashes.

Myanmar’s rebel Three Brotherhood Alliance, of which the AA is a member, said late Sunday that AA fighters were battling Myanmar border guard forces near Bangladesh.

They reported nearly 60 members of the Myanmar security forces had “sneaked into Bangladesh through the border and escaped with weapons”.

In October, an alliance including AA insurgents and other ethnic minority fighters launched a joint offensive across northern Myanmar, seizing vital trade hubs on the Chinese border.

Last month, the alliance announced a China-mediated ceasefire, but it does not apply to areas near the Bangladeshi and Indian border, where fighting continues.

Bangladesh is already home to around one million Rohingya refugees, driven out of Myanmar in a military crackdown in 2017.

Britain and eight other countries said in their statement that conditions have “further deteriorated” in Rakhine state, and called for “the voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable return of Rohingya refugees and internally displaced persons.”



AFP

THE LEADERSHIP VOID: CRITIQUING PRESIDENT XI JINPING'S INCOMPETENCY AMIDST CHINA'S ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

JOHN SMITH

China's economic landscape currently mirrors the challenges faced by America during the Great Depression in the 1930s, raising concerns about the nation's future trajectory. While distinct in their specifics, both scenarios share a common theme of eroding confidence in economic structures and prospects. It is important to highlight that, unlike the Great Depression, China has not witnessed a stock market crash. However, the loss of faith in the economic system is a shared element that can have profound consequences. At the core of China's eco-

nommic challenges are the policies of its current leader, President Xi Jinping, whose decisions have significantly contributed to the nation's economic woes.

In the meanwhile, Chinese equity markets have experienced a significant downturn since late 2023, exacerbating losses that have accumulated to trillions of dollars over the preceding years. The confluence of a real estate slump, unemployment, and other challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic has instilled a sense of prudence among consumers, leading to hesitancy in expenditure. This



Image of Chinese leader Xi Jinping at an exhibition in Germany. Photo: AFP

poses the potential risk of evolving into a deflationary spiral, as the decline in prices for housing and various commodities may dissuade investment, hindering job creation and impeding a robust economic recovery, as asserted by certain economists.

One conspicuous sign of China's economic distress is the notable drop in bank lending. Traditionally seen as a reliable indicator of business and consumer spending plans, Chinese demand for bank credit in December saw a staggering 16% decline compared to the previous year, falling nearly 20% below consensus expectations, as reported by the People's Bank of China (PBOC). This downturn is particularly striking considering Beijing's extensive stimulus spending on infrastructure and the PBOC's efforts to inject liquidity into financial markets, with the broad money supply witnessing a notable increase of approximately 9.7% over the past year.

The perplexing aspect of this economic downturn lies in the fact that, despite these monetary interventions and infrastructure investments, Chinese individuals and businesses seem hesitant to capitalize on the available resources. This reluctance stems from a pervasive sense of pessimism about the future and a lack of confidence that things will improve enough to justify taking on additional debt. According to Beijing's National Bureau of Statistics, the nation's consumer confidence index has plummeted nearly 10% from its peak in March, now standing at a historic low, even when considering the challenges posed by the pandemic and associated lockdowns enforced under Beijing's zero-Covid policies. While business confidence has shown a slight uptick since late 2023, it remains depressingly low by historical standards, stretching back to the early 2000s when data collection began.

A comprehensive analysis of the root causes of China's economic downturn reveals that the blame primarily lies with President Xi Jinping and his policies. Four crucial contributions have exacerbated the nation's economic challenges. The first misstep was Xi's decision in 2019-20 to abruptly withdraw longstanding support for residential property development. This move triggered a collapse in a sector that was once a cornerstone of China's economy, causing a ripple effect with a drop in property values and devastating

effects on household wealth.

Xi's second mistake compounded the unfolding economic troubles, as he offered, at best, a tepid response to the crisis. From the initial failures in 2021 until only a few months ago, Beijing seemed to adopt a posture of denial, insisting that the situation required no intervention from the authorities. Instead of providing essential support for financial markets, this lack of action allowed the problems stemming from the property sector and eroding household wealth to spread throughout China's financial system, further undermining the economy and eroding confidence.

The uncanny parallels with the root causes of the Great Depression in 1930s America prompt speculation about the possibility of a similar fate for China. If historical patterns hold, these circumstances could impede China's economic prospects for a considerable period, particularly if there is a failure on the part of President Xi and his colleagues in the Forbidden City to recognize the urgency of policy changes. The need of the hour is a recalibration of policies that instills confidence among individual Chinese citizens and businesses, paving the way for a sustainable economic recovery.

Critics argue that President Xi's consolidation of power, elimination of term limits, and suppression of dissent have created an environment where decision-making lacks diverse perspectives. This centralized power structure has hindered the agility needed to respond effectively to economic challenges. Additionally, Xi's ambitious geopolitical agenda and assertive foreign policies have strained international relations, leading to economic repercussions such as trade tensions and sanctions. The lack of transparency and accountability in the decision-making process under Xi's leadership further exacerbates concerns among investors and citizens alike. The economic challenges in China, therefore, not only reflect policy missteps but also raise questions about the leadership style and decision-making process under President Xi Jinping.

John Smith is a pseudonym for a writer who specialises in Asian affairs.

INDIA'S RULING PARTY PUSHES POLARISING COMMON CIVIL LAW

India's ruling party introduced contentious legislation Tuesday last week to create a common civil code in a northern state, including for marriage, reigniting a polarising debate weeks before national elections.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has long campaigned for standardised individual laws but its pitch has fuelled tensions, with many minority Muslims seeing it as yet another majoritarian push by Modi's Hindu nationalist party.

The move comes weeks after Modi's consecration of a grand temple in Ayodhya at the site where a Mughal-era mosque was demolished by Hindu zealots.

Critics see it as a signal from the ruling BJP to its base and an unspoken promise to implement the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) nationally after elections expected in April that it is already tipped to win.

The UCC bill tabled in the assembly of BJP-ruled Uttarakhand state represents one of the BJP's



Photo: AFP

three key long-standing promises.

The other two, already fulfilled, were the consecration of the Ayodhya temple and ending the constitutional autonomy of the Muslim-majority Kashmir region.

“Our government, taking all sections of society together, has tabled the Uniform Civil Code Bill,” state chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami said, adding they were close to achieving the “historic” win to implement Modi’s vision.

The bill is expected to be approved this week, with the BJP enjoying a comfortable majority in the state. Uttarakhand has a population of about 12 million people, roughly 80 percent of them Hindu.



END TO POLYGAMY

India’s 1.4 billion people are subject to a common criminal code, introduced during the British colonial era.

But they have never followed uniform laws for personal matters such as marriage, divorce, adoption and inheritance.

These are instead governed by a patchwork of different codes based on the customary traditions of different communities and faiths.

The rights of women, children, and families across India vary considerably depending on which code they fall under.

Many right-wing politicians, jurists and reformists have described these custom-based codes as regressive and have lobbied for a code that would apply to all Indians equally.

However, many communities, particularly Muslims, fear it would encroach on their religious laws as an attack on their identity and against India’s secular constitution.

Among the many clauses in the 192-page bill is a proposed end to polygamy.

Goa, the beach resort state on India’s west coast, is the only part of India with a common code, introduced when it was still a Portuguese colony.

“The objections of the Muslim community have been ignored,” Raees Kashmi, president of Uttarakhand Imam Organisation, told AFP.

Mohammad Ahmed Qasmi, another Islamic preacher in the state capital Dehradun, said the bill was “against a particular religion -- Muslims”.

“We strongly oppose this,” he said.

AFP

MYANMAR DEMANDS GREATER FOCUS URGES UN RIGHTS CHIEF, THREE YEARS AFTER COUP

Three years after the military deposed the elected Government in Myanmar, the ever-deteriorating human rights crisis in the country is now in freefall, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said on Tuesday, appealing for greater attention from the international community.

“Amid all of the crises around the world, it is important no one is forgotten. The people of Myanmar have been suffering for too long,” Volker Türk said ahead of the anniversary of the coup on 1 February.

He explained that fighting between the military and armed opposition groups has resulted in

mass displacement and civilian casualties, with the regime “launching waves of indiscriminate aerial bombardments and artillery strikes” after recent setbacks on the battlefield.

RISE IN DEATHS

Sources have verified that over 554 people have died since October, while the number of civilians reportedly killed by the military rose to over 1,600 in 2023, an increase of some 300 from the previous year.

Overall, nearly 26,000 people have been arrested on political grounds. The majority, 19,973, re-



Photo: UN News

main in detention. Some reportedly have been subjected to torture and abuses, and with no hope of a fair trial, some 1,576 individuals have died over the past three years while in military custody.

“Military tactics have consistently focused on the punishment of civilians who they view as supporting their enemies,” Mr. Türk said. “As a result, the military has routinely targeted civilians and protected objects under international humanitarian law, especially medical facilities and schools.”

CONCERN FOR ROHINGYA COMMUNITY

He said Rakhine state has been especially hard hit since fighting restarted there in November, with the mostly Muslim Rohingya community particularly affected.

Meanwhile Rohingya refugees living in dire humanitarian conditions in camps in Bangladesh “are

again risking desperate and dangerous journeys by sea, finding few ports or communities in the region willing to accept or welcome them”.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND SANCTIONS

Mr. Türk said the crisis in Myanmar will only be resolved by insisting on accountability for the military’s leadership, the release of political prisoners and the restoration of civilian rule.

“I urge all Member States to take appropriate measures to address this crisis, including to consider imposing further targeted sanctions on the military to constrain their ability to commit serious violations and disregard international law, limiting access to weapons, jet fuel and foreign currency,” he said.

INVEST MORE IN HUMAN RIGHTS

Separately, Mr. Türk also called for a significant increase in funding for his office this year, warning that it remains woefully short of the funds needed to better promote human rights around the world.

Speaking to UN Member States in Geneva, he appealed for \$500 million to support the work of rights office, OHCHR, amid immense challenges globally.

“Right now, we are living through profoundly divided times,” he said, pointing to concerns such as spiralling conflict in many parts of the world, climate impacts, rising disinformation and an increase in hunger, poverty and inequality.

Last year, OHCHR’s advocacy contributed to the release of more than 13,000 detainees. Staff also undertook some 3,664 human rights monitoring missions and monitored at least 1,088 trials, among other accomplishments.

Member States and other funding partners donated \$283.2 million in voluntary contributions to the office last year.

“Yet, we are still falling drastically short of the funding we need to provide human rights solutions that are more effective and wider reaching, solutions that we desperately need in today’s world marked by break-neck pace shifts and persistent, urgent challenges,” he said.

Courtesy of UN News





RAKHINE STATE

Artillery fire kills four in Rakhine State's Mrauk-U Town

Junta artillery killed four people, injured a further seven and destroyed 20 houses in Mrauk-U Town in Rakhine State on 28 January.

According to locals, at least four people were killed and 20 houses were destroyed in Mrauk-U's Zay Ward by artillery fire at about 9:00 a.m. on 28 January.

A local woman who fled from Mrauk-U Town said: "We heard that four people died. The situation is worsening. I have also fled from Mrauk-U and I have not been able to communicate with those who are still in the town because telecommunications have also been cut off."

Mizzima attempted to make multiple calls to residents in Mrauk-U to find out more about the situation there, but was unable to speak to anyone due to the telecommunications problems.

According to Mrauk-U-based local media, the junta units firing the artillery into Mrauk-U were Light Infantry Battalions (LIBs) 377 and 540 and Police Battalion 31.



JUNTA MARKS UNION DAY AMID CONFLICT: UNITY RHETORIC CLASHES WITH AIRSTRIKES IN ETHNIC AREAS

The junta observed the 77th anniversary of Union Day with an official ceremony in the capital Nay Pyi Taw on February 12, despite ongoing conflicts with ethnic armed organizations, according to state run media.

Union Day commemorates the significant event of February 12, 1947, when General Aung San, Myanmar's independence hero, and more than 20 ethnic leaders signed the Panglong Agreement, committing to the collective effort to secure independence from British colonial rule.

In his Union Day address, junta chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing said that safeguarding independence and sovereignty, achieved through the unity of all ethnic groups, can only be maintained through continued unity. He also called upon all ethnic communities to uphold this spirit of unity to ensure the country's enduring existence.

However, in reality, the junta's rhetoric contrasts starkly with its actions. The military has been conducting frequent airstrikes, even targeting civilian populations in ethnic regions, undermining the principles of unity and peace espoused in the general's speech.

CONFLICTS HAVE IMPACT ON MYANMAR GARMENT SECTOR



Photo: AFP

S&P Global Myanmar Manufacturing PMI said that it was the fourth straight month of drop in factory activity, as armed violence across the northern region of the country continued and it was another challenge for supply chains.

As the result of ongoing conflicts in northern Myanmar, demand conditions deteriorated, with firms curtailing output, buying activity, and employment, the S&P PMI (Purchasing Managers Index) report says released this week.

In line with falling business requirements, firms curtailed their production and purchasing activity.

The supply chains are still struggling as the trade routes are affected by armed conflicts in the country which caused the material shortages, the report says.

Besides the uncertainty in the country and security concerns, the global economic crisis creates challenges for the manufacturing sector in Myanmar.

The report says that inflationary pressure caused by higher costs of raw materials and depreciation of Myanmar currency Kyat against the US dollar will continue.

Moreover, some Chinese garment factories are leaving the country because they were unable to get orders and the raw materials for their factories.

Although the Myanmar junta claims that the garment sector earns the largest export earnings for the country, in reality, some garment factories have closed in the meantime.

According to the statement issued by the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association (MGMA) in August 2023, there are 817 factories in this association and of which 546 are operating and 271 have suspended their operations.

The conflicts, input price rises, material shortages and higher transportation costs, foreign exchange regulation and trade restrictions added to the cost burdens, which lead to lower competitiveness in the global market.

Moreover, the World Bank report says that Myanmar is facing a labour shortage as many people are leaving the country to seek jobs in neighbouring countries.

CHINESE CONSUMER PRICES SUFFER QUICKEST DROP IN 14 YEARS

Chinese consumer prices fell in January at their quickest rate in more than 14 years, data showed Thursday last week, piling pressure on the government for more aggressive moves to revive the country's battered economy.

Officials have struggled for months to kickstart economic growth as they battle a range of headwinds, including a prolonged property-sector crisis, soaring youth unemployment and a global slowdown that is hammering demand for Chinese goods.

Policymakers have in recent months announced a series of targeted measures as well as a major issuance of billions of dollars in sovereign bonds, aimed at boosting infrastructure spending and spurring consumption.

But that, and recent announcements including central bank interest rate cuts and measures to boost lending, have had little impact so far.

And analysts warn a "bazooka" stimulus plan is needed to restore confidence.

"China needs to take actions quickly and aggressively to avoid the risk of deflationary expectation to be entrenched among consumers," Zhiwei Zhang, president and chief economist at Pinpoint Asset Management, said.

January's 0.8 percent drop in the consumer price index, announced by the National Bureau of Statistics, marked the fourth straight month of deflation and was much bigger than the 0.5 percent fall forecast in a survey by Bloomberg News.

The reading was the worst since the second half of 2009, during the global financial crisis.

And a 2.5 percent plunge in the producer price index - which measures the cost of goods leaving factories - signalled continued weakness.

China slipped into deflation in July for the first time since 2021 and, apart from a brief rebound in August, have been in constant decline since.

"The primary drag on inflation continued to be food prices, which fell by 5.9 percent year-on-year, the lowest level on record," said Lynn Song, Chief Econo-

mist for Greater China at bank ING.

However, he pointed to figures showing costs rising month-on-month.

"While a far cry from the above-target inflation levels seen in many other economies, these numbers do not imply China is stuck in a deflationary spiral," Song said in a note.

"We see a high likelihood that January's data could mark the low point for (year-on-year) inflation in the current cycle."

China's sinking prices are in stark contrast with the rest of the world, where inflation remains a persistent bugbear, forcing central banks to ramp up interest rates.

While deflation suggests goods were cheaper, it poses a threat to the broader economy as consumers tend to postpone purchases, hoping for further reductions.

A lack of demand can then force companies to cut production, freeze hiring or lay off workers, while potentially also having to discount existing stocks -- dampening profitability even as costs remain the same.

In reaction to the woes in the world's number two economy, markets have been among the worst-performing globally in recent months.

On Wednesday, the chairman of China's securities regulator, Yi Huiman, was replaced after overseeing a sell-off that has wiped trillions off companies' valuations.

The losses have prompted pledges of support, with Xi Jinping also becoming more involved, though observers say the moves would not solve the country's deeper economic problems, which needed to be addressed to fully restore optimism.

AFP/Bloomberg

IMF WARNS OF MALDIVES FOREIGN DEBT CRISIS, AFTER CHINA BORROWING

The strategically-placed Indian Ocean nation of the Maldives, which has borrowed heavily from China and shifted allegiance from India, is at high risk of “debt distress,” the IMF warned Wednesday last week.

Beijing has pledged more funding for the Maldives since pro-China President Mohamed Muizzu took power in November.

Muizzu thanked China last month for its “selfless assistance” for development funds after a visit to Beijing.

The International Monetary Fund did not give details of the Maldives’ foreign debt but said there was a need for “urgent policy adjustment”.

“Without significant policy changes, the overall fiscal deficits and public debt are projected to stay elevated,” the IMF said after a review of the country’s economy.

“The Maldives remains at high risk of external and overall debt distress”.

The archipelago, famed for its white sand beaches and where tourism accounts for nearly a third of the economy, has recovered economically from the Covid-19 pandemic.

But while a planned airport expansion and an increase in hotels are projected to boost growth, the IMF said “uncertainty surrounding the outlook remains high and risks are tilted to the downside.”

Muizzu’s mentor, former president Abdulla Yameen, who ruled for five years until 2018, borrowed heavily from Beijing for construction projects.

That left it owing 42 percent of its more than \$3 billion foreign debt to China in 2021, according to the World Bank, citing the Maldives’ finance ministry.

Muizzu, who has requested that Indian troops operating three reconnaissance aircraft in the Maldives leave by May 10, has vowed to strengthen his military to defend the country’s vast maritime territory.

Global east-west shipping lanes pass through the nation’s chain of 1,192 tiny coral islands, stretching around 800 kilometres (500 miles) across the equator.

AFP

Penrose Thitsa

MYANMAR UNREST DRIVES INVESTMENT IN THAI REAL ESTATE: CHIANG MAI AND PHUKET SEE SURGING INTEREST

While the initial wave of Myanmar property buyers flocked to Bangkok for safe havens, education opportunities, and healthcare options, the trend is now shifting towards recreational destinations like Chiang Mai and Phuket, reported Bangkok Post.

This surge in interest has even attracted Myanmar buyers to invest in a single-detached house project in Chiang Mai.

According to Karlo Pobre, deputy managing director of Colliers Thailand, “Buyers in Myanmar have been more active every year since the ongoing political unrest,” he said.

“The recent wave considers Chiang Mai a retirement destination and Phuket for vacation homes.”

Following the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar, civil war and severe inflation have ravaged the country. Access to quality education and healthcare has also significantly deteriorated, driving many citizens to seek stability and opportunity across the border in Thailand.

In Chiang Mai, buyers seek detached houses priced between 20-30 million baht, and while freehold ownership might be challenging, leasehold options are readily accepted.

Phuket, with its idyllic villas overlooking Laguna and Bangtao Beach, particularly attracts Myanmar buyers seeking properties priced around 40 million baht. These villas often serve as dual-purpose havens, providing both a relaxing vacation getaway and a convenient location for recuperation after healthcare visits, as Bumrungrad Hospital plans to open a branch nearby.

While Bangkok remains a popular choice for initial purchases due to its practical benefits, the growing trend towards Chiang Mai and Phuket highlights a shift in priorities among Myanmar property investors.

CULTURE & LIFESTYLE

IN FOCUS





CHINESE NEW YEAR

A shop in Yangon sells decorations for the Lunar New Year.

Photo:AFP

FORGING SOLIDARITY IN MYANMAR



Photo: Action Corps

“Our mission is to champion justice and solidarity with people facing disasters around the world: climate disasters, violent conflict... We campaign for U.S. policy to save lives around the world. We do this by bringing together people from all different walks of life around the United States to advocate for policies to save lives,” says Isaac Evans-Frantz, describing the mission of his organization, Action Corps, which is active in 30 states across the U.S.

Action Corps has undertaken a number of successful initiatives. These include the passage of the Yemen War Powers Resolution, which helped end some of the US support for Saudi-led aggression there; and they successfully lobbied Congress to secure the International Monetary Fund’s largest-ever release of Special Drawing Rights to support low- and middle-income countries. Action Corps has also long been involved in advocacy on behalf of ethnic and religious minorities in Myanmar facing persecution by the military. Isaac notes how advocating for similar issues in other countries has informed their Myanmar work. “We have certainly learned from these campaigns and are able to apply some of that knowledge,” he says. In this work, he cites the value of developing relationships with Senatorial staff who are engaged on human rights issues internationally, as well as the overall experience that comes from organizing grassroots campaigns.

Even though Isaac has never actually visited Myanmar, this work hits home in a personal way.

“When I was a child, somebody came to my class and spoke about surviving the Holocaust. He had been in a Nazi death camp, he showed us the number on his arm, and he told us horrific stories. I promised myself after that, that if I were ever in a position where I knew about some genocide that was happening... I would do everything that I could to stop that!” So for him, it was only natural that the situation in Myanmar would find a place in his heart.

Jade, a Kachin-American, has been assisting Action Corps’ recent efforts, and joins the conversation. “I was always made aware of the issues that were happening back at home, and I couldn’t help but to feel that I had some sort of duty or some sense of responsibility towards the people back in my home country who were [living] under terrible poverty,” she says. Her first experience came with student-led groups, but she yearned for a deeper involvement that could make a lasting difference, and was inspired by how the power of building stronger relationships could propel a movement forward. “These relationships were really powerful in a sense of solidarity, so that we could further advocate for one another’s causes and see the larger picture in the world of what we were really advocating for, which is people who are in need all over the world.”

Jade recognizes that living in America affords her enormous privilege compared to those facing violence back in Myanmar. Yet she still feels connected, and she pursues advocacy based on her strong sense of cultural identity... which is not something that ev-

everyone in the Burmese diaspora feels. “What we see with a lot of diaspora kids is that we’re all struggling with a sense of cultural identity. I remember growing up feeling as if I was never American enough, or I was never Kachin enough. And what does it even mean to be Kachin? Or what does it even mean to be American? What does it mean to be Burmese?” For Jade, seeking to build a strong movement among exiles requires first developing pride in one’s own identity. “And once we have collective identity, I truly believe that collective action can be taken,” she says.

Once this strong, collective identity has been established, Jade hopes that broader connections can be made linking Myanmar’s struggles to the challenges people face in other countries. “Much of the problems that may be existing in Burma are pretty similar to any problem existing elsewhere around the world, whether it’s through systemic injustice, police brutality, or racism. All of these issues can definitely be pinpointed, and the intersections can be drawn.” Isaac concurs, noting large democracy protests in San Francisco in opposition to American policymakers’ neglect— and sometimes outright support— of authoritarian regimes abroad. “Any opportunity that we can find to support one another’s causes and struggles is so important!” he exclaims. “There’s a commonality here, which is when we look at U.S. foreign policy, that it prioritizes geopolitical domination and control, and after that is an interest in commercial relations, and then finally, if it makes the list at all, it’s democracy and human rights.”

Beyond advocacy, another important part of their current work is storytelling, putting the facts and figures together in a way that can open hearts and change minds. And for Jade, there should be no doubt what the main focus should now be, which is what’s it been for years: “The real issue, just to be clear, has been the persecution of ethnic minorities for decades! It’s been that from the start, and it continues to be that today, and any other narrative that counters that, or any other note that skews that, or it doesn’t match along with those lines, is very inaccurate and misleading.” She notes that there are 300,000 members of the diaspora in the U.S. alone, and believes that their stories and voices should be harnessed so their American neighbors have a better understanding what has been going on in their homeland for far too long. But she admits that, unfortunately, longstanding divisions that have their roots in Burmese history have followed the diaspora overseas, which inhibits the formation a collective voice and narrative. “Because Burma is so divided, it’s hard to get this sense of unity. It’s hard to get a single narrative that really boils down to the

truth. It’s not just about one Lady! It’s not just about the Rohingya, but it’s about everyone, all these ethnic minorities,” she says, explaining that the one factor that ties all these groups together is the decades of oppression they’ve faced at the hands of the Burmese military. However, poor education about this history has limited many Burmese here from seeing how this suffering actually binds them together... which further inhibits this larger narrative in forming. She adds that many Burmese struggle to survive economically in America, causing political advocacy to take a back seat to just making ends meet. Complicating this are cultural norms that emphasize being stoic about one’s inner turmoil and sharing less with outsiders (a topic that Nanda Swe Min explored on a recent podcast episode).

The impact of personal stories should not be underestimated; Isaac remembers US Senators who seemed less interested in engaging on the crisis in Myanmar until they actually met people who had escaped the violence and had harrowing stories to tell. Despite the challenges Jade described related to the fractured nature of the Burmese diaspora, Isaac nonetheless asserts that it played an important role in getting the Burma Act passed (detailed in a recent podcast episode with Michael Haack). “The fact is that people from Burma and the children of people from Burma played a major role in moving legislation through the U.S. Congress, when the people in Congress were paralyzed [by] personal and partisan conflicts,” he says.

Isaac encourages listeners to follow Action Corps’ continued advocacy supporting the democracy movement in Myanmar, and to speak about the crisis with members of one’s community. Being of a younger generation, Jade defaults to the power of social media, inviting people to follow her Instagram account in addition to sharing themselves. She adds that one can probably connect fairly easily with Burmese and/or ethnic diaspora enclaves around the country, and become a real ally to their cause.

“Feel encouraged that there are people out here who are trying to make a difference and that you can too!” Jade says in closing. “No one is ever alone. Our power really does come from coming together and being in solidarity.”

Check out the Insight Myanmar podcast here: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2023/12/29/episode-213-forging-solidarity-across-conflict>



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