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thrown into turmoil
by junta order**

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POSITIVE VIBE AS THAILAND SETS UP BORDER SAFE ZONE

After a lot of calls by NGOs, Thailand will establish a humanitarian safe zone and deliver aid to displaced people living on its border with war-torn Myanmar, the Thai foreign minister said 9 February, a move his ministry hopes will achieve the larger goal of establishing dialogue between the military junta, ethnic armed groups and the civilian government-in-exile, according to media reports.

The plan will serve some 20,000 people in three towns in Myanmar, Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara said at a press conference in Mae Sot, reports RFA. Thailand plans to begin delivering food and medical supplies within a month, he said.

Fierce fighting during Myanmar's three-year civil war, sparked by a military coup in February 2021, has forced more than 2.6 million people across the country to flee their homes, according to United Nations estimates. As of 19 January, roughly 190,000 of them are in Kayin (Karen) and Kayah (Karenni) states, along the western border of Thailand, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees or UNHCR.

Thailand has not disclosed the exact location of the safe zone.

According to reports, the

Thai and Myanmar Red Cross Societies will implement the plan, monitored by the Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management of the Association of South East Asian Nations, or ASEAN. It remains unclear if Myanmar's junta has agreed with Thailand's aid delivery plan. The Thai foreign ministry has also not engaged in dialogue with ethnic armed groups yet, Panpree said during the press conference.

For over two years, people working on border aid have called for expanded aid delivery, highlighting the immense need along the border with Karenni State.

Delivering aid to victims of Myanmar's war and ongoing crisis has become a touchy subject, given many international aid organizations appear to feel compelled to provide aid through or with the agreement of the Myanmar junta.

That said, Thailand's move should be welcomed.

EDITORIAL

mizzima
WEEKLY

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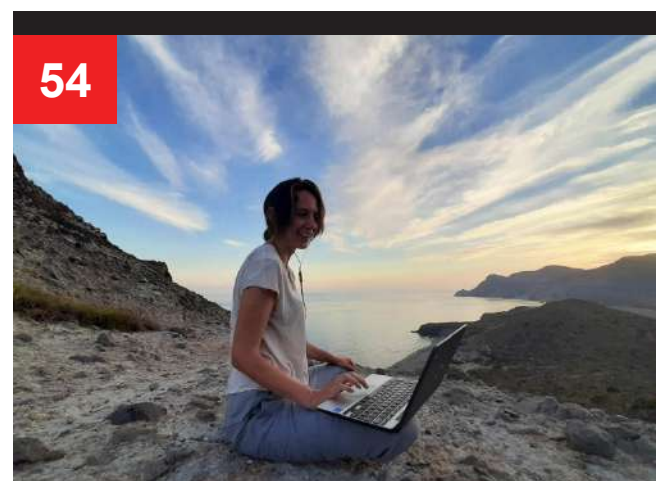
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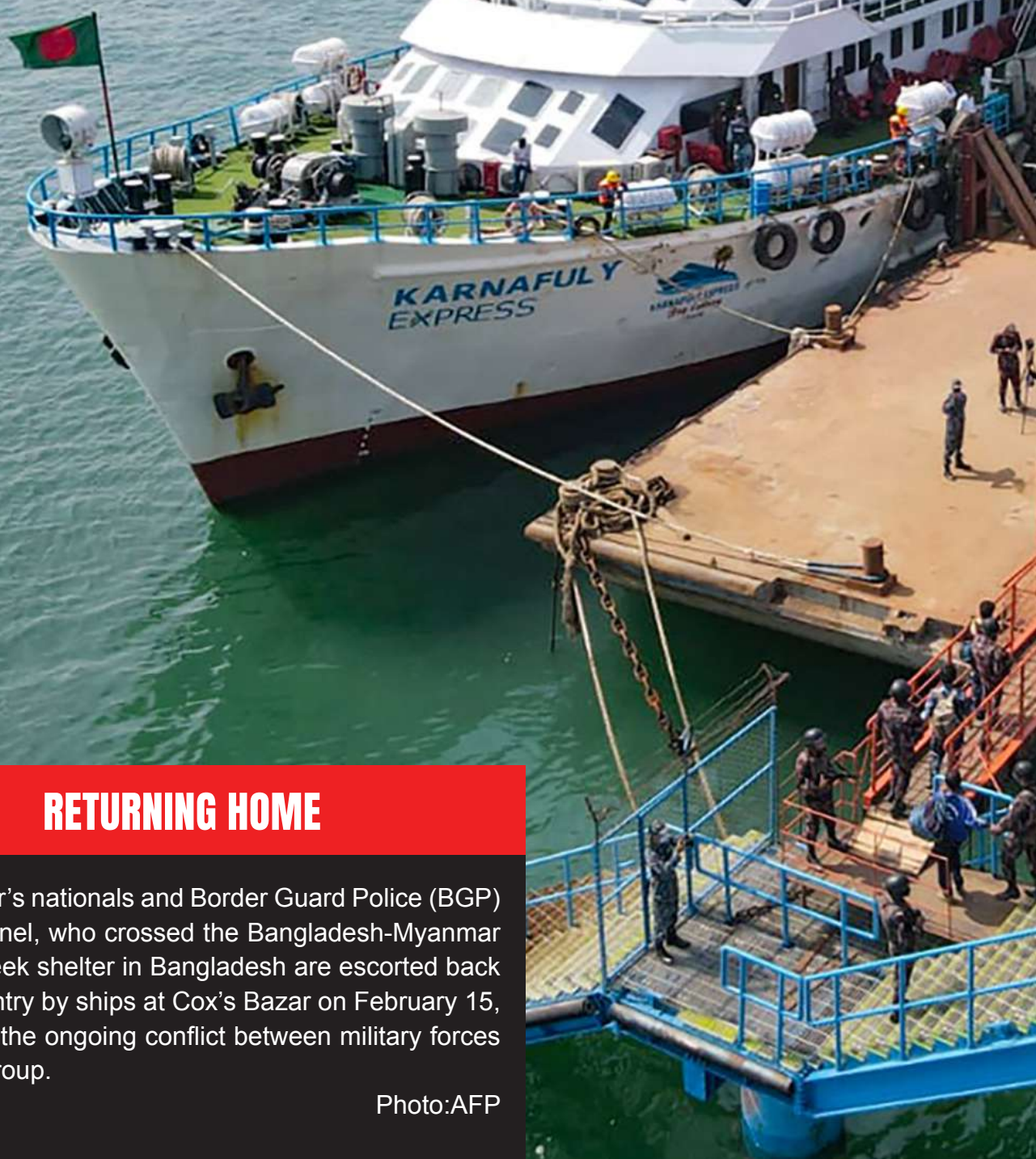
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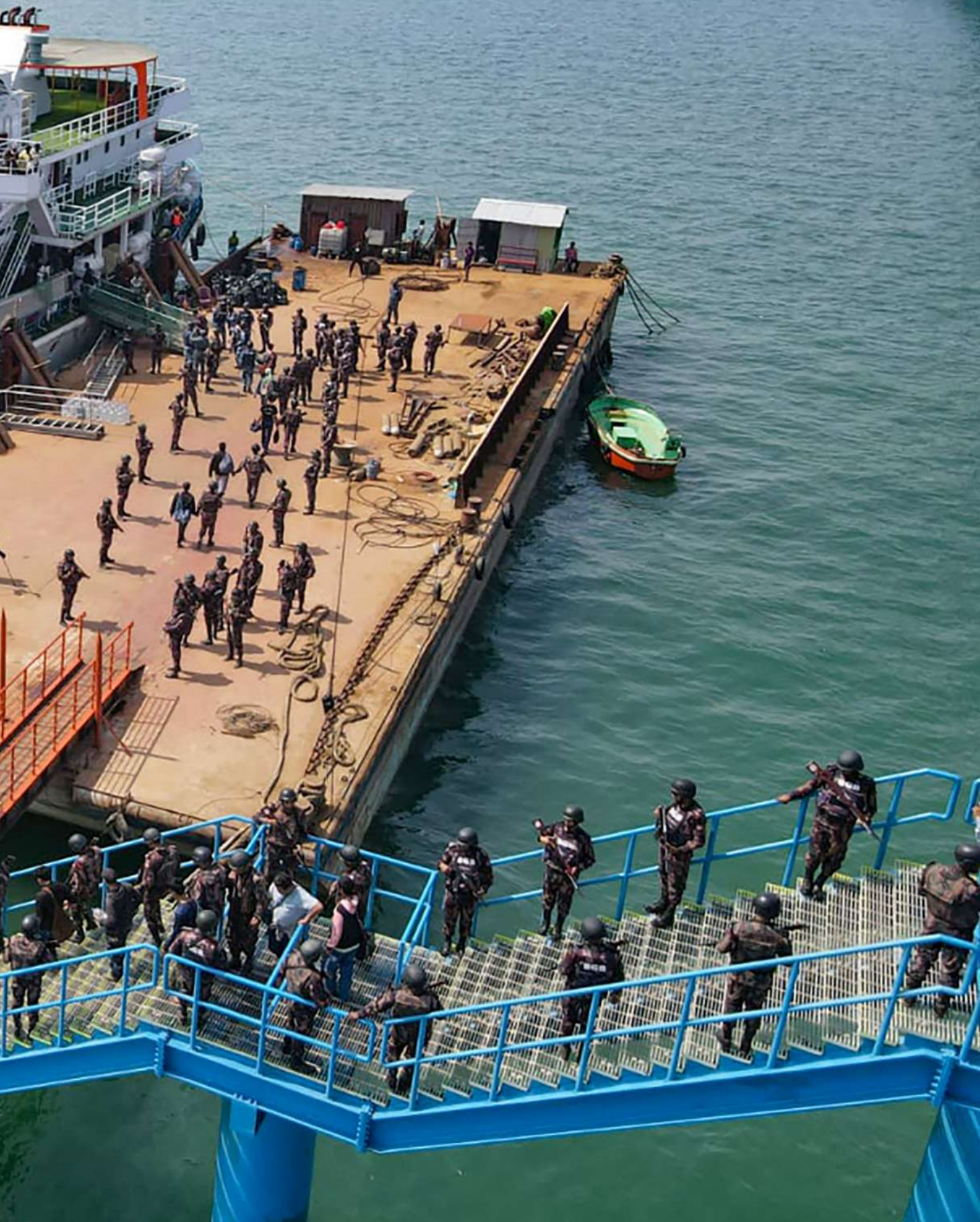


RETURNING HOME

Myanmar's nationals and Border Guard Police (BGP) personnel, who crossed the Bangladesh-Myanmar border to seek shelter in Bangladesh are escorted back to their country by ships at Cox's Bazar on February 15, 2024, amid the ongoing conflict between military forces and rebel group.

Photo:AFP

IN FOCUS



MYANMAR'S NUG WARNS AGAINST POLITICAL PARTIES COLLABORATING WITH JUNTA AS INFORMANTS

Myanmar's National Unity Government (NUG) has warned Myanmar political parties to not help the oppressive regime by acting as informants. This warning came in a statement on 10 February.

Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing met with the chairs, deputy chairs, and officials of political parties that have been registered under the military's political party registration law, and asked them to inform on people who are opposing the military dictatorship.

The NUG says this could indicate that the military is attempting to use political parties and their members as a support mechanism for the military dictatorship.

Political parties are organisations that represent people, train politicians, promote political participation, form elected governments, propose and implement policies, raise political awareness, and perform their responsibilities by contesting in elections, according to the NUG.

The NUG believes the junta leader's statement indicates that the junta disregards political parties' mandates and responsibilities and is instead using political party leaders and their members as informants for the terrorist military junta, which is attempting to use them as their support mechanism under the so-called the "Public Security and Public Defence System", and portraying the political parties as being historically responsible for destroying the country's democracy.

The NUG statement calls on political parties to maintain their political integrity. It urges political party leaders and members who registered under the military-appointed sham election commission to refrain from being used as informants against the will of the people, to avoid being part of the military oppression mechanism, and to abstain from being portrayed as being historically responsible [for the destruction of democracy] by withdrawing their party's registration and resigning their party membership.

CTUM CONDEMNS MYANMAR JUNTA'S MILITARY CONSCRIPTION DRIVE

The Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar (CTUM) has spoken out against the Myanmar junta's announcement of military conscription, in a statement on 13 February.

This issuance of the notification of the compulsory Military Service Law is a direct attack on the Myanmar youth who want a system change, a direct attack on the over 300,000 Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) members who still are unbowed to the Min Aung Hlaing regime in spite of all the hardships. Forced conscription is forced labor, according to the statement.

CTUM says "this compulsory military service" declaration is blatantly abusing and challenging International Labor Standards.

CTUM requests the ITUC and the Council of Global Unions to urge the ILO not to wait until the June 2024 ILC but to pass article (33) of the ILO Constitution at the March Governing Body against the Min Aung Hlaing regime.

The Min Aung Hlaing regime knowing they are losing, is torching the foundation of the country and we all must unite to squash their attempt," CTUM says in their statement.

Therefore, the CTUM announced that "we will continue to fight against the inhumane actions of the terrorist military group by implementing the establishment of a federal democratic system that the people want.

JUNTA ABDUCTS SAGAING REGION CIVILIANS FOR POSSIBLE CONSCRIPTION INTO ARMY

About 40 male civilians were abducted by junta soldiers in Monywa Township, Sagaing Region, on 11 February 2024, the day after the National Military Service law was enacted, by the junta.

The men were abducted near Tamakone Village on the Monywa to Mandalay Road in Monywa Township by about 20 junta soldiers, based in Sagaing Township's Hnonetwin Village, between 10:00 am and 11:00 am on 11 February.

The soldiers stopped cars on the road and abducted any male occupants that they found. Locals worry that they were abducted to be conscripted into the army under the newly enacted National Military Service law which says that men aged between 18 and 45 years and women aged between 18 and 35 must all serve two years in the Myanmar Army or face five years in prison.

"It's true, the junta soldiers abducted about 40 civilians. They abducted people who were travelling [along the road]", said a resident of Tamakone Village.

According to sources who spoke to Mizzima, the abducted men were taken to the headquarters of No. 72 Armoured Operations Command, which is between the villages Nyaungpinwun and Ohntaw in Sagaing Township, and are still being held there.

In response to the abductions, the public was advised to exercise caution and refrain from unnecessary travel by the Sagaing Township's True News Information Team, a National Unity Government (NUG) organisation that reports on the revolution.

A representative from a local people's defence force (PDF) said: "I believe they've begun unlawfully detaining civilians. It seems the junta is illegally abducting people, possibly to work as porters for the military in battles, following the implementation of the Conscription Law. This activity has commenced in Sagaing, with civilians being detained and questioned."

The National Military Service Law was enacted by General Than Shwe, the Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council, on 4 November 2010, but never enforced until Min Aung Hlaing announced it would be enacted on 10 February 2024.

Since that enactment, there have also been other reported abductions by the junta army.

According to a local PDF source, many people were abducted in Ahlae and Shwetaung Oo wards in Monywa Township, Sagaing Region on 11 and 12 February. Initial reports suggest that over 50 people were arrested, however, the exact number of arrests has not been confirmed.

The army also abducted people from Natyekan Village In Chaung-U Township in Sagaing Region on the evening of 11 February. Later they released three of them after they had interrogated them. But, the soldiers confiscated their mobile phones and said that if they villagers wanted them returned they would have to go to the junta military camp to pick them up.

GSCB CONDEMNS ENACTMENT OF MILITARY CONSCRIPTION IN MYANMAR

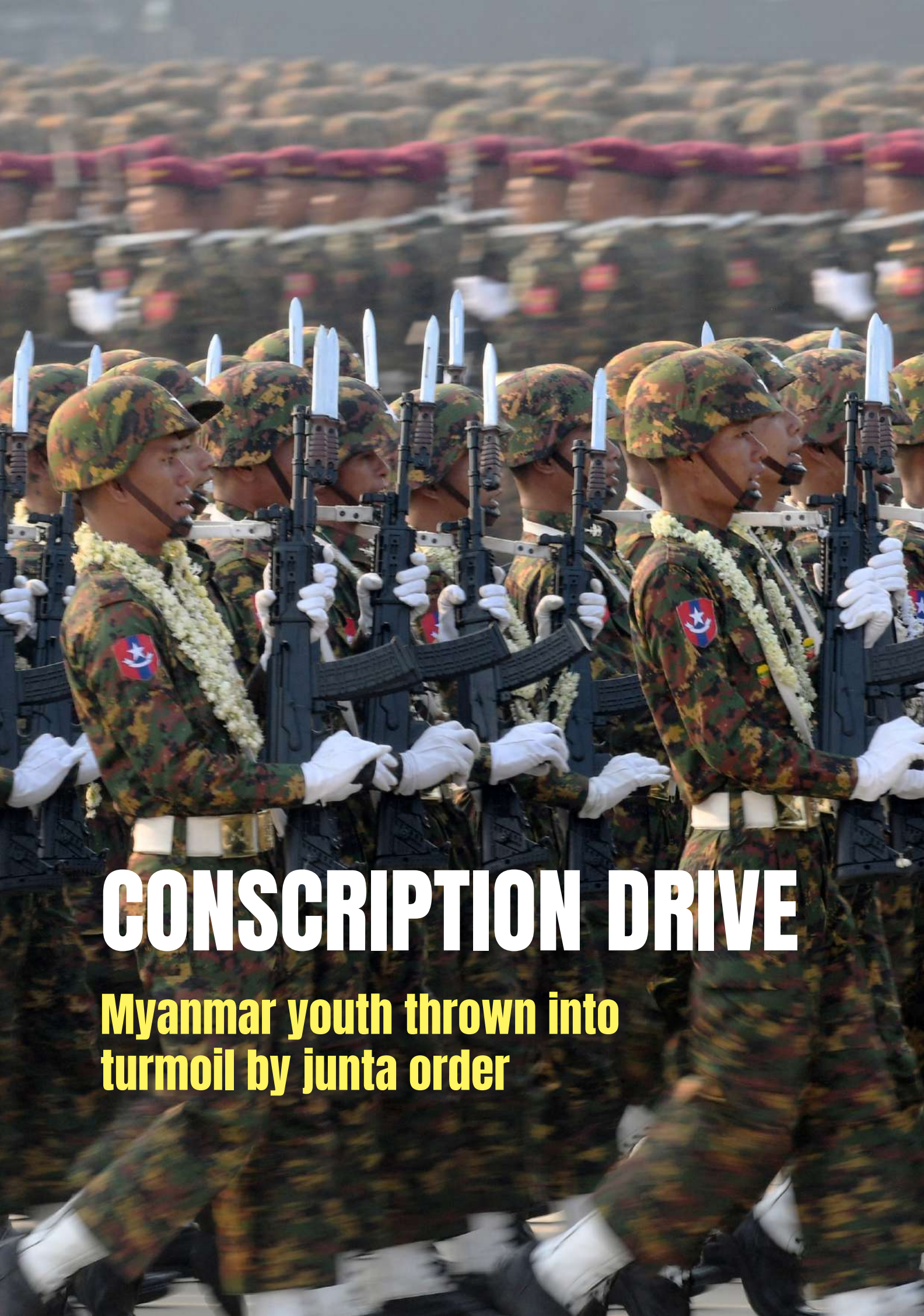
On 13 February, the General Strike Coordination Body (GSCB) issued a statement that condemns the Myanmar junta's recent enactment of a law on 10 February that brings in military conscription.

GSCB claims that as the junta, which grabbed power in a coup in 2021, is illegal, it does not have the right to amend, enact or pass laws. There is no public consensus, the NGO says.

The recent statement by the junta intends to force people to become soldiers, "furthering war crimes against humanity".

The NGO suggests the move could lead to forcible abductions and the using of civilians, now in uniform, as human shields. As they note, there have been cases of the junta forces abducting civilians, with the concern they may be drafted into the military. They say they fear for Myanmar's youth and their future.





CONSCRIPTION DRIVE

**Myanmar youth thrown into
turmoil by junta order**

It is difficult to understand the thought process involved in Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing's decision to bring in military conscription, activating a law originally put on the books back in 2010.

This is not how to “win friends and influence people” amongst his constituents as he simultaneously shunts the country deeper into civil war and pretends to be promoting democracy in a planned upcoming “sham election”.

The military call-up announcement has reverberated through Myanmar society, playing out in the media and social media, sparking a heated response – and a rush to the exits.

MILITARY CONSCRIPTION LAW

Min Aung Hlaing's call on 10 February brings in the Military Conscription Law, obliging all adult men and women in Myanmar to serve in the military.

Military service eligibility extends to all citi-

zens: 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 undergoing 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



It is unclear how many of the drafted military personnel will end up on the front lines. Photo: AFP

penalties of up to three years' imprisonment, a fine, or both.

Ironically, being a person with skills – such as a doctor, nurse, engineer or media person – does not mean they are exempt from military service. On the contrary, they are expected to spend up to five years in the armed forces, not just two years for the regular conscript.

CHAOS AMONGST THE YOUTH

While bravado has been seen in the comments from young people published in the media rebuffing the conscription call and claiming they will join the resistance or People's Defence Forces (PDF), there appears to be widespread fear amongst young people living in Myanmar that they could be forcibly inducted into the military.

As one analyst put it, there has been a lot of panic particularly among the youth in different cities

and already news is coming in of youth being detained and taken by the Tatmadaw on the streets. Young people in cities may be finding ways to leave to escape to areas controlled by the resistance forces or trying to leave the country in one way or another. Hundreds of young people have been queuing up at the Thai Embassy in Yangon seeking visas. Many are on the move.

FALSE PROMISE

Bringing in a bunch of unmotivated and untrained personnel – forced to join – will do little to help Min Aung Hlaing's war effort. The Myanmar military is struggling on many fronts, not least in northern Shan State, as a result of the Three Brotherhood Alliance's Operation 1027, and the bitter conflicts in Sagaing, Magway, Rakhine, Karen and Karenni regions.

Adrian Rovel, an independent political analyst, told Asia Nikkei that the conscription will have little effect on the junta's war. "I don't see how this move can turn the tide. What the SAC really needs are hardened, motivated combat units ... not a bunch of people coerced into a few weeks of training and sent as cannon fodder with no proper support or command."

Yet there are indications the junta and its allies have already acted on the move and scooped up civilian fodder.

News is already coming in of pro-junta militia and soldiers in Kachin State, Bago Region and Sagaing grabbing civilians and forcing them to take up arms against the resistance after the military junta announced it would begin enforcing the conscription law over the weekend, residents said. In Kachin state, the Lisu militia in Waingmaw township, the Khaunglanhpu militia in Puta-O township, and the Shanni Nationalities Army, or SNA, in Mohnyin township, began forcibly recruiting civilians as early as the end of last month, and have been emboldened by the new directive, sources in the region told RFA Burmese.

SNA fighters have been rounding up pedestrians and gathering people through village administrators for recruitment, said a resident of Nam Mun village in Mohnyin's Indawgyi sub-township. "The administra-



tors are being told to grab passers-by,” he said. “Everyone who is seen on the roads is apprehended.” People have fled the area and “dare not live in Nam Mun village anymore,” he said.

Another resident reported similar actions in Mohnyin’s towns of Hopin and Nam Mar, adding that those who refused to join the militia were being made to pay hundreds of thousands of kyats (100,000 kyats = US\$48).

“After stopping all passers-by, they recruited the people they wanted,” he said. “Among those who were released, some said that they had to pay about 1 million kyats (US\$477). They said they were asking for 30 million kyats (US\$14,000) [altogether],” RFA reports.

To the south, a junta recruitment drive that kicked off in Bago region’s Htantabin township on 12 February has led to the conscription of nearly all of the

youths in the town of Za Yat Gyi, residents told RFA on Tuesday last week. Most of Za Yat Gyi’s residents had already fled fighting that broke out between the military and anti-junta forces on 7 January, they said, but junta troops stationed at the town’s hospital have now rounded up those who remained from their homes and nearby villages. They have also drafted youths displaced by the earlier fighting, residents said, adding that the number of detainees and other information about the recruitment drive is still unknown.

Win Naing, a lawmaker from nearby Mogaung township, said forced recruitment is a tactic used by pro-junta groups to undermine public opposition.

“The militias will recruit our people whether they want to join their groups or not, and they will train them whether they are willing or not. Then, they will arm them,” he said. “Ultimately, it’s part of a plan



A number of young people have spoken out against the draft. Photo: AFP



At a crossroads? Myanmar soldier on the street in Yangon. Photo: AFP

to force the people to fight one another.”

NUG PROTEST

Meanwhile, the National Unity Government (NUG) and various NGOs have condemned the move by the junta to bring in military conscription.

The NUG, in a statement issued 13 February, condemned the move and claimed the public is not required to comply with it. “The terrorist military junta is an illegal organization with no legal authority. It cannot enact, activate or enforce any laws. It is clear that the military junta, having suffered significant and humiliating defeats across the country, is desperate.

“It now seeks to force Myanmar civilians to fight and to serve as human shields in a horrific war of its own making against its own people. The junta is set on destroying our youth and our future. The National Unity Government of Myanmar, in collaboration with allied organizations, will take all necessary measures to prevent the junta’s attempted roll out of forced conscription and will address dangers faced by the public.

“Assistance will be provided, and further announcements will be made as required. Furthermore, all junta members, representatives and associates that

assist in or support the implementation of forced military conscription will have acted unlawfully and will be subject to the full force of local and international laws and held to account.

“Strong, effective action will be taken against them. The preservation of our people’s lives, property, security and freedom demands that the terrorist military junta be rooted out. We therefore urge the brave people of Myanmar to intensify their participation in the Spring Revolution, and call on our courageous Revolutionary Forces to strengthen cooperation among us,” the NUG statement concludes.

NET TIGHTENS

It is all very well for the NUG to claim the public does not have to comply with the conscription order. But if young people are picked up on the streets on in their home, there will be little they can do, particularly if bribing officials to slip the net does not work.

The net is tightening and as the rush by young people to exit the country, or escape to “safe areas”, picks up pace it is clear that this is yet one more stick being used by the illegal military junta to punish Myanmar’s citizens.

NUG DENOUNCES MYANMAR JUNTA'S FORCED MILITARY CONSCRIPTION



Photo: AFP

The National Unity Government (NUG) issued a statement on 13 February, saying that the Myanmar junta's conscription law aims to destroy the youth and the country's future.

The NUG says that the illegal military junta has claimed that the People's Military Service Law of 2010 will come into force on February 10th, 2024. The law provides for the forced conscription of young Myanmar women and men into the armed forces for at least two years and sets out harsh punishments for refusal.

"This announcement is unlawful and has no legal effect. The public is not required to comply with it. The terrorist military junta is an illegal organization with no legal authority. It cannot enact, activate, or enforce any laws," their statement says.

"The military junta, having suffered significant and humiliating defeats across the country, is desperate. It now seeks to force Myanmar civilians to fight and to serve as human shields in a horrific war of its own making against its own people. The junta is set on

destroying our youth and our future.

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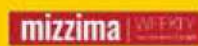
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YOUNG PEOPLE SCRAMBLE TO LEAVE MYANMAR AS MILITARY CONSCRIPTION LOOMS

Young people in Myanmar's commercial capital are lining up outside the Thai embassy to apply for visas and looking for other ways to leave the country following an announcement from the junta regime that it will call up conscripts for mandatory military service.

Starting in April, about 5,000 people each month will be enrolled into the military to perform "national defense duties," junta spokesman Maj. Gen. Zaw Min Tun said in an interview with BBC Burmese.

Zaw Min Tun told several junta-affiliated newspapers on Thursday that as many as 50,000 men will be recruited this year into the military, which has suffered numerous battlefield defeats and large-scale surrenders in recent months.

In Yangon, young people have already started heading for the Thai border, which is about 420 km (260 miles) away, several residents told Radio Free

Asia.

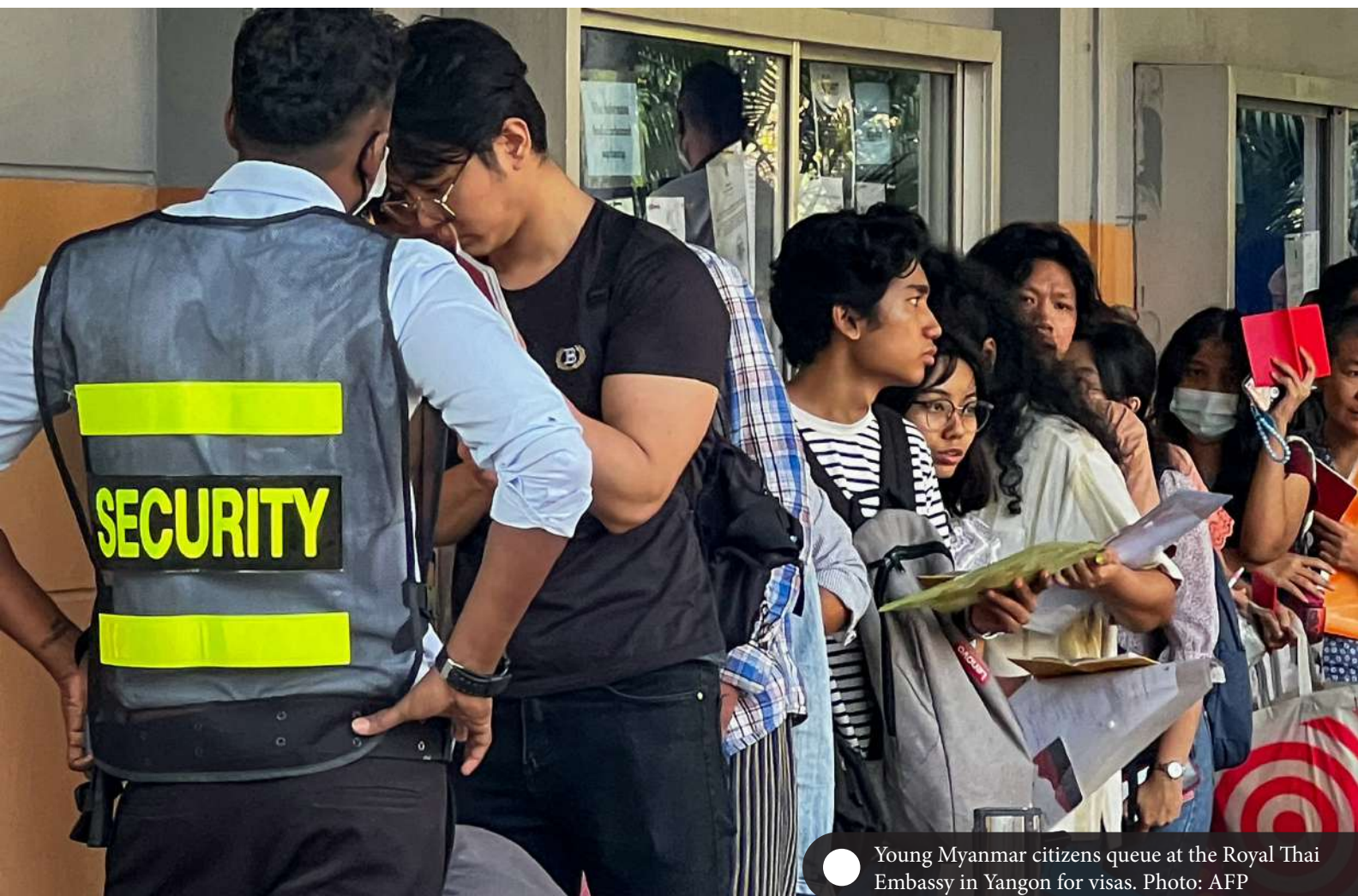
About 50 people – most of them young – had already formed a queue in front of the Thai embassy at 5:30 a.m. on Thursday, one Yangon resident, who didn't want to be named for security reasons, said to RFA.

Additionally, young people riding on city buses are talking to each other about entering the Buddhist monkhood to avoid military service if they get out of the country, the Yangon resident said.

They all seemed deeply worried, he added.

Because of the recent rush of visa applicants, the Thai embassy said in a statement on Wednesday that only 400 applicants would be accepted per day.

Also, the Buddhist University in Thailand's city of Chiang Mai, which has an affordable tuition fee, announced Wednesday that it is no longer accepting applicants from Myanmar because it had already re-



Young Myanmar citizens queue at the Royal Thai Embassy in Yangon for visas. Photo: AFP

ceived too many applications.

‘THEY HAVE LOST THEIR WAY’

A poor job market and the turmoil of the ongoing civil war had already made it very difficult for young people to build a life for themselves in the country, a young man who also lives in Yangon told RFA.

Now, with the enforcement of the conscription law, young people know for certain that they don't have a future in Myanmar, the young man said.

“All of them are preparing to leave the country because there are no jobs for them,” he said. “Now, with the implementation of this conscription law, they have lost their way.”

The young man said he had been searching for jobs in Japan, but is now focusing on finding work in neighbouring Thailand.

“I heard that the junta is blocking workers from going abroad,” he said. “I also heard that [they block] new job offers by foreign countries. It's hard to leave the country.”

Sai Kyi Zin Soe, a political commentator, said that targeting young people – who typically have the highest productivity among all age groups – will dam-

age the country's economy and cause widespread resentment.

“It is natural for many people who have their own goals in life to avoid armed conflicts,” he said. “They are educated young people. They can learn things. We see the targeting of this age group for use in conflict – to gain political advantage – as a very bad move.”

STATE-LEVEL COMMITTEES

Zaw Min Tun's comments on Thursday about conscription followed a Feb. 10 announcement from junta leader Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing that a military service law enacted in 2010 by a previous military regime would go into effect immediately.

Enforcement of the law comes as anti-junta forces and ethnic armies have scored significant victories against the military in Myanmar's civil war, which escalated in October 2023 when the rebel groups joined together and launched new offensives, causing significant casualties.

Under Min Aung Hlaing's directive, Burmese men aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27 could face up to five years in prison if they refuse to serve for two years.

Doctors, engineers and technicians – aged 18-45 for men and 18-35 for women – must also serve, but up to five years.

In the initial rounds, fewer women will be recruited, Zaw Min Tun told state media.

The junta will appoint a central committee and regional- and state-level committees to oversee the conscription, according to Zaw Min Tun. But because the junta would have to provide salaries, food and other items, the military won't need more than 50,000 recruits, he said.

“I want to emphasize that we will not call up everyone who is eligible for military service,” he said.

The CIA World Factbook estimated that last year Myanmar's military had somewhere between 150,000 and 400,000 personnel.

The Washington-based U.S. Institute of Peace has suggested that 21,000 service personnel have been lost through casualties, desertions and defections since the February 2021 military coup d'etat, leaving an effective force of about 150,000.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia (RFA)



JUNTA ABDUCTS SAGAING REGION CIVILIANS FOR POSSIBLE CONSCRIPTION INTO ARMY

About 40 male civilians were abducted by junta soldiers in Monywa Township, Sagaing Region, on 11 February 2024, the day after the National Military Service law was enacted, by the junta.

The men were abducted near Tamakone Village on the Monywa to Mandalay Road in Monywa

Township by about 20 junta soldiers, based in Sagaing Toewnsip's Hnonetwin Village, between 10:00 am and 11:00 am on 11 February.

The soldiers stopped cars on the road and abducted any male occupants that they found. Locals worry that they were abducted to be conscripted into the army under the newly enacted National Military



Photo: AFP

Service law which says that men aged between 18 and 45 years and women aged between 18 and 35 must all serve two years in the Myanmar Army or face five years in prison.

“It’s true, the junta soldiers abducted about 40 civilians. They abducted people who were travelling [along the road]”, said a resident of Tamakone Village.

According to sources who spoke to Mizzima, the abducted men were taken to the headquarters of No. 72 Armoured Operations Command, which is between the villages Nyaungpinwun and Ohntaw in

Sagaing Township, and are still being held there.

In response to the abductions, the public was advised to exercise caution and refrain from unnecessary travel by the Sagaing Township’s True News Information Team, a National Unity Government (NUG) organisation that reports on the revolution.

A representative from a local people’s defence force (PDF) said: “I believe they’ve begun unlawfully detaining civilians. It seems the junta is illegally abducting people, possibly to work as porters for the military in battles, following the implementation of the Conscription Law. This activity has commenced in Sagaing, with civilians being detained and questioned.”

The National Military Service Law was enacted by General Than Shwe, the Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council, on 4 November 2010, but never enforced until Min Aung Hlaing announced it would be enacted on 10 February 2024.

Since that enactment, there have also been other reported abductions by the junta army.

According to a local PDF source, many people were abducted in Ahlae and Shwetaung Oo wards in Monywa Township, Sagaing Region on 11 and 12 February. Initial reports suggest that over 50 people were arrested, however, the exact number of arrests has not been confirmed.

The army also abducted people from Natyekan Village In Chaung-U Township in Sagaing Region on the evening of 11 February. Later they released three of them after they had interrogated them. But, the soldiers confiscated their mobile phones and said that if they villagers wanted them returned they would have to go to the junta military camp to pick them up.



NUG SPOKESPERSON CLAIMS MYANMAR ‘MILITARY COLLAPSING’

“This is a very exciting moment for our resistance forces,” says Kyaw Zaw, the spokesperson for the Office of the President of the National Unity Government, speaking in an Insight Myanmar podcast on the recent developments in the wake of Operation 1027 in northern Myanmar.

He does not mince words on how pivotal a moment this is. “The whole military is fragile. The military is collapsing,” he says. “This is an unprecedented time, and a turning point in this revolution. It shows that we are winning, and when we are fighting together, then the military is collapsing. When the military fails, then this revolution will succeed!”

SIZE MATTERS

Kyaw Zaw scoffs at pre-coup assumptions that Myanmar’s military was the strongest in the region, pointing out that their fighting prowess was diminished over the years by corrupt generals who prioritized personal fortunes over maintaining the

country’s forces. As an example, he explains that battalions are supposed to have at least 500 men, but analysts estimate the number may only be around 100 these days. Fighting units have also become depleted by defection, and Kyaw Zaw notes that the NUG “warmly welcomes” soldiers who leave the military, and provide accommodations and care for their families. “They know that only by switching to the side of the people, not only will they save their own lives and their families, but also that they can be part of the restructuring and rebuilding of the nation.”

Addressing Operation 1027, which many say is shifting the momentum in favor of the resistance, Kyaw Zaw points out that this is “not simply an ordinary military operation, but a military operation with a political objective to end the military dictatorship in Myanmar for once and for all.” He describes the months of careful planning and coordination between different groups in order to pull it off, rejecting the media’s characterization of it being carried out solely by the Three

PODCAST #219

Revolt, Rebuild, Rebirth

NUG Spokesperson Kyaw Zaw predicts the imminent defeat of the military and outlines the steps being taken to bring a federal democracy to the Golden Land



Bonus Shorts

Brotherhood Alliance. “This is unprecedented unity that we have in Myanmar, and this is how we all are united against a common enemy, which is which is the military dictatorship. We are fighting not for regime change, but for system change... We want to replace the military dictatorship with a federal democracy.”

COLLABORATION

Kyaw Zaw describes how coalition forces are not just collaborating on the battlefield, but also in regions of the country where the military no longer rules, administering services ranging from the judiciary, to education, to the local police force, to medical care, to banking. They are also trying to restore the infrastructure, communication, and media outlets that the military has destroyed, as well as find a way to care for the millions of people throughout the country that have now become displaced due to the violence. Kyaw Zaw acknowledges it is no small feat to be simultaneously trying to win a revolution against an entrenched, tyrannical regime while also looking to administer government services, with scarcely any international support to speak of! “I will say that this is the most innovative revolution in world history,” he remarks. “We are fighting against the mighty military dictatorship. And after a very short period of time, we are winning, because of the people’s support, and also with our innovative ways.”

WESTERN SUPPORT

Looking at the involvement of Western countries, Kyaw Zaw is thankful for the support shown thus far, but also expresses concern that they still have not issued sanctions on jet fuel (a topic that Montse Ferrer covered on a recent episode), as airstrikes on civilians continue to take many innocent lives. Given their weakened infantry units, the military has become more reliant on their air power, which Kyaw Zaw notes is largely supported by Russia. “Russian pilots are even training the Burmese pilots in Myanmar. And some reports are indicating that Russian pilots are flying the jets and then dropping the bombs!” Given this foreign interference, Kyaw Zaw hopes that the UN or ASEAN, for example, would take a more active role to limit the overt Russian support of the regime. The NUG has also been seeking international support for No Fly Zones or early defense systems to limit the damage caused by airstrikes, but that has also been to no avail.

AID DELIVERY

He notes that, unfortunately, the UN has not had a great track record since the coup. UN agencies have resisted providing humanitarian funds through anything but military channels. Regarding this, Kyaw Zaw echoes the words of Shade, a past podcast guest, exclaiming that “support that goes through Naypyidaw will never reach the most vulnerable people!” He explains how, in the last month alone, the displaced population has increased by a half a million. It is the height

of insanity and hypocrisy for the UN to send large amounts of money to the military to help the very people the military has intentionally displaced! Rather, this money will more likely be used to harm more innocent civilians.

Kyaw Zaw is well aware of the opinion of many outside observers that once the military falls, the country will plunge into a prolonged and bloody civil war, as each group will stake out its own influence and territory. “It will not happen,” he says forcefully. “It will be a new Myanmar. It will be a stronger, peaceful and more united Myanmar.” He points out that there is no resistance group currently proclaiming a wish to be an entirely independent entity, and that rather, all are expressing their desire to build a federal democracy. “We may argue at the negotiation table, but we are not going to fight or turn against each other, that will never happen! We all are one, we are all in the same boat.” As evidence, he loops back to the government services now being provided in liberated areas, noting how rule of law and cooperation have allowed this to develop, and that in a post-coup Myanmar, this will only blossom further.

CHARTER FOR MYANMAR

Additionally, even as the fighting continues today, democratic actors have continued discussing the federal charter they hope to create in the new Myanmar. Noting that the current NUG is only the interim government, which is necessary during this period of instability and active conflict, the next phase will be a “transitional constitutional arrangement,” which a Coordination Committee is already working towards. “If the military falls tomorrow, we have the roadmap, we have a plan, and will a transition government to lead that period. Then, the federal constitution will be widely consulted with the people across Myanmar, and then will be approved by the people of Myanmar. And then we’ll have free, inclusive, and fair elections. We are building an inclusive democracy.” He also adds that there are plans in the works to develop an interim Central Bank, echoing the recent words of Sean Turnell describing how this coup has almost entirely gutted the Myanmar economy.

“We want to save innocent lives and build a peaceful, stable, and prosperous country, and to be part of the international community,” he says in closing. “We are resourceful country, a resource-rich country. We have talented, resilient, people who want to rebuild our country.”

The Insight Myanmar podcast can be heard here: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2024/1/26/episode-219-revolt-rebuild-re-birth>

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.”

KNU AGAINST ONLINE SCAMS AND ILLEGAL GAMBLING, CALLS FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION



The Karen National Union (KNU) says it is seeking to tackle the problem of illegal online gambling and scams operating in the border regions of Karen State.

The emergence of online scam activities and illegal casino gambling is rooted in the poor system and corruption practiced by the successive governments of Burma (Myanmar) and because of the lack of responsibility, accountability, and rule of law of the successive governments, the KNU said in a statement on 13 February.

The State Administration Council (SAC) or military junta is directly benefiting from these illicit businesses and is protecting and supporting them behind

the scenes. This has resulted in various social problems, not only for the Karen people in Karen State, but also for all those involved, and it brings instability to the region, threatening global financial security and economic stability, the statement says.

The KNU is absolutely opposed to any illicit business and is willing to combat online scams and illegal casino gambling businesses.

The KNU is ready to cooperate with neighbouring countries and international organisations to clear out online scam activities and illegal casino gambling businesses, they note.

ARSPH URGENTLY CALLS FOR INTERNATIONAL HELP TO STOP ATTACKS ON ROHINGYA IN RAKHINE



Rohingya people in a village in Rakhine. Photo: AFP

The Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights released a statement on 13 February calling for an end to attacks on Rohingya civilians in Buthidaung Township, Rakhine State, Myanmar.

Since 25 January, more than 80 innocent Rohingya civilians have been killed, and more than 100 others have sustained severe injuries in the indiscriminate bombardment carried out during an armed conflict between the Myanmar military and the militant group known as the Arakan Army (AA), the NGO reports. Moreover, nine Islamic Scholars and Teachers were arbitrarily disappeared by the AA on 28 January.

“Regrettably, the attacks continue to persist as we issue this urgent statement.”

The attacks have resulted in the destruction of Rohingya houses in Hpon Nyo Lake, Sain Ying Wai, Athouing Ngathay, Kin Taung Ywa, Tharakin Manu, and Washilla Ywa villages, and nearby Rohingya villages, with an additional hundred houses partially damaged, displacing the populations to other villages. These incidents have exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation in the region. The shutdown of mobile networks, communication disruptions, and transportation challenges due to the ongoing fighting have led to a surge in the prices of necessities and goods, including food and medicines. This has further endangered the lives of civilians, the statement says.

The situation in Kyauktaw is deeply distressing, as the details provided reveal the devastating impact on the Rohingya community. The loss of 11 lives is heart-wrenching, with several individuals, ranging in age, tragically losing their lives in different villages. Additionally, 16 others have been injured and are in

urgent need of medical attention. The displacement of villagers, including the burning of Khong Doke Plaung, has further exacerbated the crisis. The total numbers of 1,996 displaced households and 19,160 displaced people is staggering, with the displaced people seeking refuge in various villages, particularly Yadanapon village. However, the displaced population is facing immense challenges in receiving the necessary support, with multiple families forced to share limited accommodations. Immediate assistance is crucial to alleviate their suffering and provide the help they desperately need.

In 2020, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) mandated provisional measures, requiring the Myanmar government to safeguard and protect the Rohingya population in Rakhine State and preserve all evidence. However, these recent attacks demonstrate a blatant disregard for these measures and the lives of the Rohingya people, the statement says.

The ARSPH urgently calls on the international community, including the United Nations (UN), the United States, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to put further pressure on the Myanmar government to fully comply with the ICJ provisional measures and ensure the immediate cessation of attacks on Rohingya villages by the Arkan Army (AA) and the Myanmar Military.

The ARSPH believes that it is essential for the international community to take immediate action to protect the lives and rights of the Rohingya people. We urge all relevant parties to work together to bring an end to the violence and ensure the safety and well-being of the Rohingya community.

NINE MURDERED PRISONERS FOUND BY AA AS JUNTA RETREATS

As the Arakan Army (AA) liberated the towns of Mrauk-U and Minbya in Rakhine State it found the dumped bodies of nine prisoners who had been murdered by junta soldiers before they retreated.

On 5 February 2024, when AA soldiers captured Mrauk-U Town and the junta's Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 378 base, also in the town, they found the bodies of seven men buried in a bomb shelter near Mrauk-U Town Hospital.

Amongst the bodies, which the junta soldiers had clearly tried to hide, were the bodies of Myat Thu Tun, a former DVB journalist, and Kyaw Zan Wai who was a popular social media star famous for performing Arakan (Rakhine) language protest songs.

An AA statement identified the murdered men as: Myat Thu Tun (aka) Phoe Thiha, Kyaw Zan Wai (aka) Phoe La Pyae Kyaw, Thein Hlaing, Kyaw Win Hlaing, Ko Nyunt, Win Naing and Pyae Sone Win.

It said that the seven men were moved from Mrauk-U Prison, where they were being held, to the LIB 378 base where they were all shot on 31 Janu-

ary by junta soldiers, who then took their bodies to the bomb shelter where they buried them.

The AA said it also found the bodies of two more prisoners when it captured the junta's LIB 379 military base in nearby Minbya Town.

The AA said that the two murdered prisoners, Nyi Nyi Aung (aka) Aung Zaw Win from Rathedaung Township and Kyaw Nyunt from Minbya Township, were being held in cells on the LIB 379 base before they were both shot on the evening of 19 January.

All nine of the murdered prisoners had been charged under Section 505 (a) of the penal code.

The AA said that it would act decisively to secure justice for the murdered men and their families by finding those responsible for their murders and prosecuting them for war crimes.

Since the AA broke its ceasefire with the junta army on 13 November 2023 it has taken control of Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, Minbya, Pauktaw, and Paletwa towns in Chin State.

MYANMAR DECLARED ONE OF THE LEAST DEMOCRATIC COUNTRIES AS DEMOCRACY SLIDES GLOBALLY

Myanmar was designated as one of the three least democratic countries in the world in an annual study by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) released on Thursday 15 February.

THE EIU said that the three least democratic countries are North Korea, Myanmar and Afghanistan, whilst the three most democratic countries are Norway, New Zealand and Iceland.

According to the EIU, democratic standards across the world fell in 2023 amid the spread of wars,

authoritarian crackdowns and declining levels of trust in mainstream political parties,

While the number of countries categorised as democracies increased by two last year, the global average index score fell to 5.23 in 2023 from 5.29 the year before, its lowest level since the first study was published in 2006.

“The world has entered an age of conflict, and the contours of a future major war are already visible,” said the study titled “Age of Conflict.”

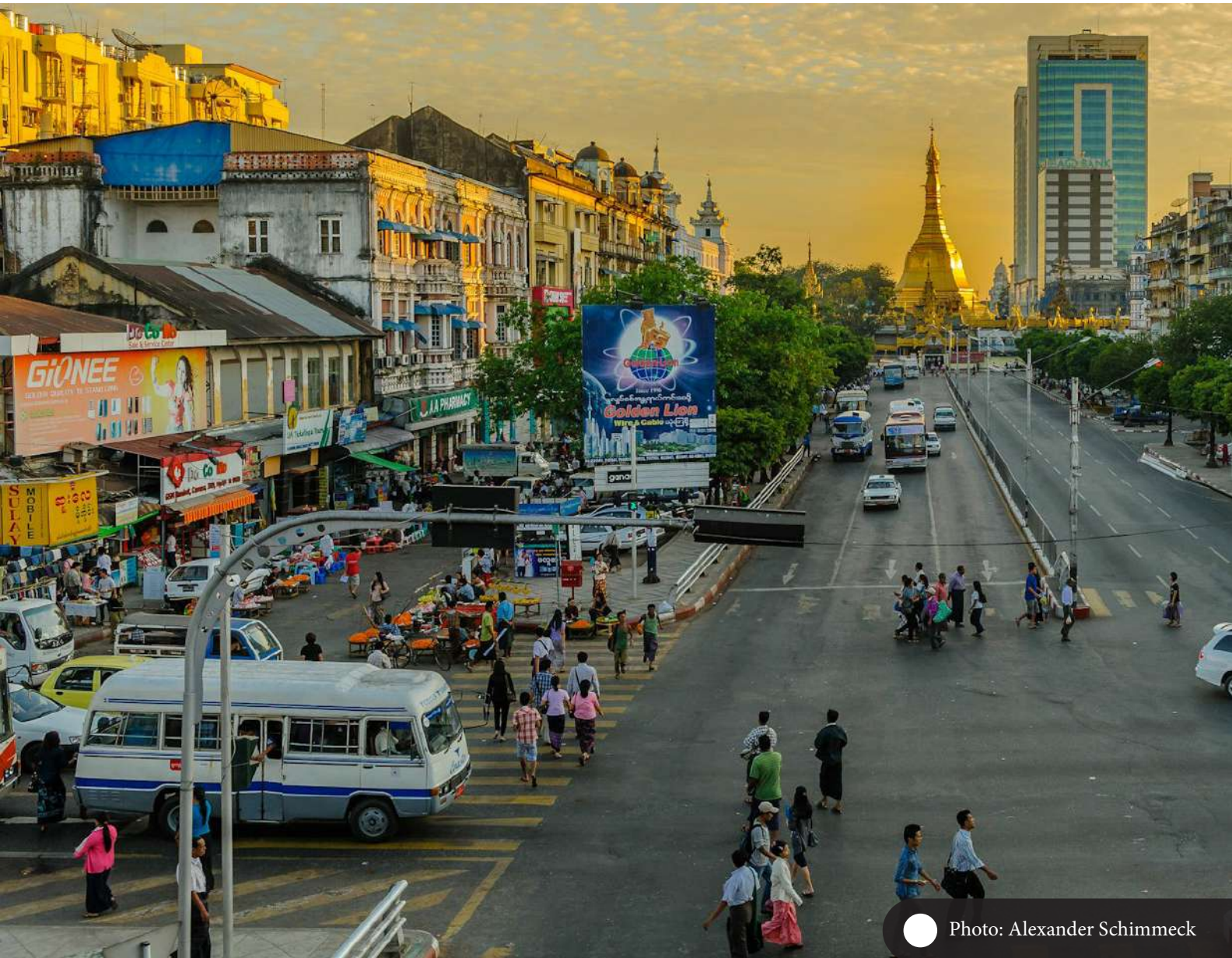


Photo: Alexander Schimmeck

"Today's wars are concentrated in countries where democracy is absent or in trouble."

Western Europe was the only region to improve its score, moving ahead of North America. The study said it was the first time that North America has not placed as the world's highest-scoring region.

Joan Hoey, the editor of the report, said scores fell for "not only those nations prosecuting wars (Azerbaijan and Russia), but for those on the receiving end (Armenia and Ukraine)."

"However, growing democratic resilience and consolidation in EU member states in Central Europe, as well as in Balkan and Baltic countries, ensured that the overall regional score did not significantly fall,"

Hoey added.

"The narrative of democracy in Eastern Europe and Central Asia can be best summed up as a tale of resilience."

The London-based analysis group pointed to intensifying anti-immigration sentiment in many countries, saying the political landscape in the Americas and Europe has become increasingly polarised.

"Three years after the covid-19 pandemic, which led to a rollback of freedoms around the globe, the results for 2023 point to a continuing democratic malaise and lack of forward momentum."

"More countries are experiencing declining levels of trust in mainstream political parties and leaders, and succumbing to 'culture wars' of the sort that have long characterised the US," the study said.

"Western Europe is plagued by low levels of trust in government."

The 27-nation EU holds elections for its European Parliament later this year and polls suggest the far-right could rise to become the third-biggest grouping in the legislature.

The report said that Ukraine's battle to repel Russia's two-year invasion was taking a toll on its democratic institutions and practices, while Russia continued its steady slide towards "outright dictatorship".

Only 7.8 percent of the global population reside in a "full democracy", and substantially more than one-third live under authoritarian rule.

The number of democracies increased by two in 2023, with Paraguay and Papua New Guinea being upgraded from "hybrid regimes" to "flawed democracies".

Greece became a "full democracy", while Pakistan was downgraded to an "authoritarian regime." The United States remains a "flawed democracy".



AFP

FORTIFY RIGHTS: COMBATANTS COMMITTING POSSIBLE WAR CRIMES IN RAKHINE STATE

Fortify Rights has documented a four-day-long Myanmar junta attack on the predominately Rohingya-Muslim village of Hpon Nyo Leik in northern Rakhine State beginning on 25 January 2024 that may amount to war crimes.

“The laws of war apply to the junta’s forces and all parties to the conflict and, whenever possible, civilians must be warned of incoming attacks,” said John Quinley, Director at Fortify Rights. “Our recent investigation suggests effective warnings of military attacks could have saved civilian lives. The junta’s atrocity crimes are a daily occurrence. ICC member states should urgently refer the situation to the Court and send a message to the junta that these attacks are unacceptable.”

The Myanmar military junta shelled Hpon Nyo Leik Village in Buthidaung Township, northern Rakhine State for four consecutive days beginning 25 January 2024. The attacks began after the Arakan Army (AA) dug trenches in Hpon Nyo Leik on 24 January. The four days of shelling by the Myanmar military junta resulted in 44 civilian casualties—12 civilians killed and 32 injured, including at least eight children, all Rohingya. According to sources on the ground, the attacks also displaced 15,000 civilians, including children, from Hpon Nyo Leik and surrounding areas.

A community-based worker and resident of Hpon Nyo Leik identified 41 civilian houses destroyed in the village, which had an estimated 1,000 houses. The names and identifying information of the civilian victims and survivors of the attack as well as owners of the destroyed properties are on file with Fortify Rights, which says that those people should be compensated for their losses.

Fortify Rights believes the Myanmar junta’s Light Infantry Division (LID) 22, Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 551, and Military Operations Command (MOC)-

15 are likely responsible for the attacks and should be investigated for war crimes.

In January and February 2024, Fortify Rights interviewed six Rohingya survivors of the attacks, including four residents of Hpon Nyo Leik Village. Fortify Rights also reviewed mobile-phone videos and dozens of photographs showing wounded civilian women, men, and children, as well as burning buildings and homes reportedly damaged from the attacks.

Hpon Nyo Leik residents told Fortify Rights that the AA dug trenches in the village on 24 January. The AA did not warn residents to evacuate the area. A resident told Fortify Rights: “AA came into our village, spread around from the south side, and started digging trenches. Then, they took positions around our village.” The same resident said that later, on 26 January around 3:00 a.m.: “AA came into the village and fired their guns into the sky without any reason. ... Then the [Myanmar junta] military fired artillery continuously.”

Another resident told Fortify Rights, “AA didn’t alert or inform our villagers in advance to move out or evacuate.”

“So many Rohingya were killed in my village,” a 22-year-old farmer from Hpon Nyo Leik Village told Fortify Rights:

“I saw more than 10 dead in total. It was such heavy shelling that I and others didn’t dare to search for other dead or injured villagers. ... I even found fragments of brain that went up to the roof of a two-story building. The junta’s shelling was that severe.”

The attacks forcibly displaced him and his family. He said: “When the shelling was getting heavier, my family and I escaped. ... I couldn’t take any of my belongings. I had to leave everything behind in my village.”

The 22-year-old man also told Fortify Rights

about injuries sustained by his brother-in-law, who was, at the time of the interview, receiving treatment in Buthidaung's downtown hospital:

"[My brother-in-law] was injured due to the shelling. His ankle was damaged, and he got several punctures in his thigh. ... Other Rohingya I saw in the hospital have injuries on the chest, arms, back, and heads. Some others lost their legs and arms. The majority of them lost their legs."

A 29-year-old survivor of the attack on Hpon Nyo Leik Village described events on 26 January. He said:

"At around 9:30 a.m., when the shelling stopped for a while, some other villagers and I returned to the village to check the casualties. The shelling hit one family—two men died, Sadek and Faruk. ... Their legs got crushed. Faruk's grandmother died too. Her head wasn't there. I saw only the brain. A few meters from that, there was another woman called Shonshuna who died, the wife of Lala. Her head [was] smashed, and her skull was gone. The bodies had so much blood around them."

Describing the second day of the attack, on 26 January a 35-year-old Rohingya resident of Hpon Nyo Leik Village told Fortify Rights:

"The incident began in Hpon Nyo Leik [Village] at 4:00 p.m. on 25 January, 2024. I was at my home in Hpon Nyo Leik. The junta started firing artillery, and it hit one house in my village. One person died, and four others were injured. ... At around 3:30 a.m. [on 26 January 2024], the junta military's artillery fell on another house and killed three people."

Another civilian survivor said to Fortify Rights: "LID-22 is the main battalion that fired artillery... LID-22, LIB-551, and MOC-15 are stationed in the area of Hpon Nyo Leik and Da Pyu Chaung."

Another resident, also an eyewitness, described the destruction of civilian properties from shelling on 27 January, saying the destruction included 13 houses in Ward-Two, behind the market, and 28 houses

from Ward-13, near the school. These properties were burned down due to artillery shelling, he said.

The Myanmar military's attack affected not only Hpon Nyo Leik Village but also surrounding villages. According to an aid worker from Buthidaung involved in helping injured and displaced Rohingya from the area:

Until today, as per the estimated data we collected, more than 15,000 Rohingya have been displaced from their original villages [Hpone Nyo Leik and other nearby villages] due to the clash between AA and the junta. This happened within a week of time.

The Myanmar junta's ongoing attack on the civilian population of Myanmar is happening nationwide, affecting all ethnic and religious groups in Myanmar, said Fortify Rights.

On 30 January 2024, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, issued a statement on ongoing atrocity crimes in Myanmar, specifically addressing the shelling in Hpon Nyo Leik Village, saying, "[F]ighting between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military reportedly left at least 12 Rohingya civilians dead, and 30 others wounded." High Commissioner Türk continued: "Indiscriminate shelling and airstrikes underline the lack of measures to protect civilians on the ground, including disruption of basic communications that would help warn civilians in advance of fighting so they could get out of harm's way."

According to the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Communications and internet services in some 74 townships, including most of the 17 townships in Rakhine State, are experiencing partial, intermittent or total shutdowns."

In 2016 and 2017, the Myanmar military-led genocidal attacks against Rohingya communities in northern Rakhine State and, in a span of weeks, forced more than 700,000 Rohingya survivors into Bangladesh.

On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military launched a deadly coup d'état, killing untold numbers

of civilians and imprisoning tens of thousands of others in a bid to secure nationwide political power. The junta's attacks against civilians continue and amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes.

According to Fortify Rights, international humanitarian law—also known as the law of war—is applicable to the situation in Rakhine State and the broader revolution in Myanmar, which constitutes a non-international armed conflict. In particular, the Geneva Conventions set forth fundamental rules regulating armed conflict conduct. Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions protects civilians in a non-international armed conflict, stating:

“Persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of the armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed hors de combat (out of the fight) ... shall in all circumstances be treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, color, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria.”

Under the laws of war, parties involved in the conflict are required to distinguish between, on the one hand, civilians and “civilian objects” (such as homes and hospitals that are not being used for military purposes) and, on the other hand, combatants and “military objectives.” The laws of war expressly prohibit both direct attacks and indiscriminate attacks that target civilians and civilian objects, and violations can be prosecuted as war crimes.

The laws of war also require all parties to armed conflict to take precautionary measures to minimize harm to civilians and civilian objects. This includes providing effective warnings to civilian populations when circumstances permit.

Furthermore, Article 8(2)(c)(i) of the Rome Statute provides, “Violence to life and person in particular murder of all kinds” when “committed against persons taking no active part in the hostilities” are considered serious violations of international humanitarian law that may amount to war crimes. Similarly, under Ar-

ticle 8(2)(e)(i) of the statute, “intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population as such or against individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities” in a non-international armed conflict constitutes war crimes.

Under these benchmark standards, the attacks on civilians in Hpon Nyo Leik Village may constitute violations of international humanitarian law as well as international criminal law.

Article 14 of the Rome Statute empowers ICC member states to request the Prosecutor to investigate international crimes within the Court's jurisdiction. While Myanmar is not an ICC member state, the National Unity Government—the body representing Myanmar's democratically-elected leaders—lodged a 12(3) declaration with the Court's registrar on 17 July 2021, accepting the jurisdiction of the Court for international crimes committed on Myanmar territory since 1 July 2002, and into the future.

Hpon Nyo Leik Village is located southeast of Buthidaung Township in northern Rakhine State. Before the attacks, the estimated population of Hpon Nyo Leik Village was approximately 8,800 and comprised predominantly ethnic-Rohingya residents with some ethnic-Rakhine, also known as Arakanese, residents.

All parties engaged in armed conflict in the Myanmar revolution should protect civilians, and member states of the International Criminal Court (ICC) should refer the situation in the country to the Chief Prosecutor under Article 14 of the Rome Statute, said Fortify Rights.

“The conflict in Myanmar is disproportionately affecting civilians, including Rohingya, and the perpetrators of international crimes against civilians must be held accountable,” said John Quinley. “All combatants need to protect civilians as a priority, and the international community should immediately impose a global arms embargo against the Myanmar military to help end its horrific attacks.”

JAPAN PROVIDES \$50 MILLION FUNDING TO WFP WORLD PROGRAMME WITH SOME AID GOING TO MYANMAR



Photo: Tianshu Liu

The Government of Japan has provided \$50 million to the UN World Food Programme (WFP) to support more than 20 countries, including Myanmar, to help tackle a WFP funding shortfall, according to a statement issued 15 February.

The WFP announced that \$5.8 million will be provided to Myanmar in the aid programme.

From the contribution, US\$13.5 million will help the most desperate in Afghanistan through emergency food distribution and nutrition assistance. In Afghanistan, the economic crisis has worsened since the Taliban takeover in 2021, and one in three people does not know where their next meal will come from. The earthquakes in the Herat region and the recent forced return of Afghans from Pakistan have further aggravated the crisis in the country.

More than US\$11 million will be allocated to provide food, nutrition, and livelihood assistance to the conflict-affected people in the Palestinian Territories. The hostilities since October 2023 have resulted in large-scale displacement and put the total population of 2.2 million people Gaza in acute hunger.

In Myanmar, US\$5.8 million will go to emergency food and nutrition assistance programmes for the most vulnerable, including displaced school children in conflict-affected states and regions. The country is experiencing a surge in food insecurity due to mass displacements, the political crisis, the economic downturn, and extreme weather events including Cyclone Mocha in May 2023.

In Ukraine, Japan is supporting WFP's food assistance to respond to the immediate needs of families affected by the war with \$4.7 million. One in five

Ukrainian families is estimated to be food insecure, and most of those who live close to the frontline have great difficulty accessing food.

The conflict in Sudan, which has been going on since April 2023, has put the country on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe with the effects felt throughout the fragile region. Japan's contribution of \$ 1.9 million will be used to provide life-saving emergency food assistance to families in need. Nearly 18 million people are suffering from acute hunger and at least 7.6 million people have been displaced.

A further grant of \$2 million will support tackling deteriorating food insecurity among Yemen's most vulnerable people with life-saving assistance.

"We are grateful for this invaluable contribution from the people of Japan. This contribution enables us to reach families who suffer from hunger and lack of access to food as a result of conflict and disasters, supporting the lives and livelihoods of the most vulnerable households," said Yasuhiro Tsumura, Director of the WFP Japan Relations Office. "WFP is facing a critical funding shortage now. Cutting rations, however, will only increase the number of people in need. We sincerely ask for the continued support of the people of Japan."

Japan has consistently been one of WFP's top donors. The countries and regions benefitting from this year's \$50 million supplementary funding are: Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Haiti, Jordan, Liberia, Mali, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, Palestine, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, Ukraine and Yemen.

AS CHINA FLEXES MUSCLE IN SOUTH CHINA SEA, JAPAN DRAWS 10-YEAR ROAD MAP TO CHALLENGE BEIJING

SUN LEE

As Japan is drawing up a new 10-year roadmap to strengthen its defence relations with Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia by improving their naval capabilities, the Indo-Pacific region is about to see the emergence of strong counter measures against China which continues to pose a challenge to peace and security around the South and East China Seas and the Taiwan Strait.

The South China Morning Post quoted Masafumi Iida, a senior official of the National Institute of Defence Studies, a think tank which is affiliated with Japan's Ministry of Defence as saying that under the plan, Japan will provide "sustained and evolving assistance over a period of a decade" to Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia as they are struggling to save their atolls and shoals in the South China Sea from being encroached upon by China.

Details of the roadmap for improving maritime capabilities of four Southeast Asian nations are being drawn up by the Japan International Cooperation

Agency (JICA). While the proposed roadmap is not expected to see the light of the day very soon, discussion is going on among the Japanese authorities over the provision of drones, radar systems and patrol boats to all four Southeast Asian nations.

In the meanwhile, Japanese officials have conducted on-site surveys in Philippines and Indonesia and similar activities are scheduled for April in Malaysia and Vietnam, NHK, the Japanese news outlet said.

Amid this, questions are being raised on the fate of the Official Security Assistance (OSA) which was launched by Tokyo last year. Under OSA, Japan announced providing financial assistance to the national security authorities of other countries to boost their defence capabilities in order to strengthen regional stability.

It was said that the OSA will run in parallel to Japanese Overseas Development Assistance. There



● Tokyo. Photo: Ryo Yoshitake

is an understanding that the new 10-year road map being drawn up to enhance maritime capabilities of Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia will work as an additional framework of support for these four Southeast Asian countries in the area of defence.

In simple words, Japan will help Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia in procuring quality defence equipment and infrastructure to fight off China's threat to their sovereign areas in the South China Sea. In fact, China lays claim over 90% of the South China Sea and as such, in violation of international law, continues to threaten those countries which have overlapping claims over this water body of the Pacific Ocean.

On January 18, as per The Japan Times, officials of the JICA and Japan's embassy in Manila met officials of the Philippines government to discuss Tokyo's intention to offer OSA-related assistance to the Southeast Asian country in the midst of the evolving security challenges in the region.

Earlier in November 2023, Tokyo and Manila during Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's maiden visit to the Philippines, agreed to begin their talks on the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) - a pact that provides the legal framework for greater bilateral security cooperation, The Yomiuri Shimbun said. Once Japan and Philippines conclude RAA, the armed forces of the two countries will get access to each other's bases and undertake rotational deployment of troops and begin joint exercises. Japan had previously signed similar agreements with Australia and the UK.

In November, during the visit to the Philippines, Kishida as the Japanese Prime Minister had pledged to provide \$4 million worth of coastal surveillance radars to Manila under the OSA framework, making the Philippines the first Southeast Asian country to become a beneficiary of Japan's security assistance programme. Significantly, Tokyo's announcement of providing coastal surveillance radars to Manila came close on the heels of Japan delivering the first air surveillance radar system to Philippines that the Southeast Asian nation procured from Japan under a 2020 deal.

Japan's objective behind such assistance is to create a bulwark of defence and security mechanism around the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. This factor was also present when Prime Minister Kishida, during his visit to Malaysia on November 4, 2023, agreed to "accelerate coordination for the implementation of the OSA and concurred to further strengthen cooperation in the maritime field, including joint training and exchanges between the Japan Self-Defence Forces and the Malaysian Armed Forces as well as joint training between coast guard agencies of the two countries," Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said. Ja-

pan has agreed to provide \$2.8 million to Malaysia to boost its maritime security.

With Vietnam, Japan agreed to deepen military cooperation even more than before, "to maintain and enhance a free and open international order based on the rule of law," Japanese Prime Minister Kishida was quoted by The Yomiuri Shimbun as saying during a press conference with Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong in Tokyo on November 28, 2023. During the Vietnamese President's visit, the two countries had concurred upgrading Tokyo-Hanoi ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership. Japan had also agreed to provide weapons and defence technology to Vietnam under the OSA framework which is under discussion between the two countries.

Japan also agreed to provide the Indonesian coast guard with a patrol vessel worth \$63million to help Jakarta enhance its maritime capability. Interestingly, China has so far not issued any statement against Japan's new roadmap for security assistance to four Southeast Asian nations, but Global Times, which is mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had made a scathing comment against Tokyo when it had organised a special summit with the ASEAN in December last year. China's English daily said, "Japan's ambition to use Southeast Asian countries to improve its maritime defence capabilities deserves vigilance."

China appeared to be peeved at the joint statement issued by Japan and ASEAN after the summit. "Japan and ASEAN will commit to security cooperation including maritime security cooperation," Japan-ASEAN joint statement said. "If defence cooperation between Japan and Southeast Asian countries is directed against a third party, it will have a very negative impact on the stability of the regional order," Global Times said.

In recent years, given the radically altered geo-security situation in the Indo-Pacific region, with China and North Korea flexing their military capabilities, Japan's pacifist idealism has given way to pragmatic and proactive moves. It has changed the course of its defence and security policy. While churning is within Japan's ruling establishment on hosting US nuclear weapons facilities on Japanese soil, Tokyo has not ruled out developing the capability to strike at enemy bases. In order to maintain a rules-based global order and preserve world peace, it is not shying away from developing new policy initiatives, including a network of strategic and economic partnerships and expanding security and defence cooperation with regional partners and like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific region.

Sun Lee is the pseudonym for a writer who covers Asia.

CHINA SAYS WON'T ROCK THE BOAT AT WTO FISHING TALKS



China said Thursday last week it would not behave irresponsibly towards developing nations when countries try to strike a new WTO agreement on combating overfishing later this month.

“We will not compete with other developing members,” Li Chenggang, Beijing’s ambassador to the World Trade Organization, told a press conference.

After more than two decades of negotiations towards banning harmful subsidies that encourage overfishing and threaten the sustainability of the planet’s fish stocks, a deal was finally sealed at the WTO in 2022.

The agreement bans subsidies that contribute to fishing that is illegal, unreported or unregulated, or of overfished stock.

The deal also recognises so-called special and differential treatment for developing countries.

But some issues were left untouched, and the WTO’s 164 members hope to conclude a second package on subsidies contributing to overfishing and overcapacity at the global trade body’s 13th ministerial conference (MC13), to be held in Abu Dhabi from February 26 to 29.

It is down to states themselves to decide whether or not they are classed as developing or developed countries at the WTO. China is registered as a developing country.

As stipulated in the organisation’s rules, the draft agreement on fisheries provides flexibilities and advantages for developing countries, but some of them -- notably India -- are demanding greater flexibility.

Ahead of the meeting in Abu Dhabi, Beijing’s approach is being closely watched by many diplomats who believe China -- one of the main countries granting fishing subsidies -- should not take advantage of its status as a developing country but instead submit to the strictest rules provided for in the draft agreement.

“China is a responsible developing member,” Li said Thursday.

“We will make our own contribution commensurate with our capability, especially on SDG issues,” he said, referring to the UN’s sustainable development goals.

While some observers fear that India will derail the negotiations, “on fish subsidies, China remains committed to delivering a phase two agreement at MC13”, said Li.

“I believe we could reproduce the success of the MC12 (in 2022) if the delicate balance is drawn... and also the respective red lines and key concerns of members are appropriately addressed”.

AFP

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INDIAN POLICE BLOCKADE CAPITAL FROM PROTESTING FARMERS

Indian riot police fired tear gas Wednesday last week at columns of farmers on tractors seeking to breach heavily guarded roadblocks and march on the capital to demand guaranteed crop prices.

Farmers in India this week launched the “Delhi Chalo”, or “March to Delhi”, in an echo of January 2021, when they broke through barriers and rolled into New Delhi on Republic Day during a then year-long protest.

But this time around, the lines of hundreds of tractors have been stalled by fearsome barricades of concrete blocks and lines of razor wire.

The farmers are demanding a law to fix a minimum price for their crops, in addition to a clutch of other concessions including waiving loans.

Tear gas was fired at Shambhu, about 200 kilometres (125 miles) north of the capital on the border between Punjab and Haryana states where the main group of farmers has been stopped, AFP reporters at the scene said.

“The police are treating us as if we have come from an enemy country,” said Mohan Singh, a 65-year-old farmer from Punjab’s Kapurthala district, some 415 kilometres by road from Delhi.



Indian farmers are met by tear gas in a protest in Delhi.
Photo: AFP

“All we want to do is go to Delhi and ask for our rights, but more than 150 of us have been injured.”

Haryana state police said in a statement Tuesday night that “heavy stones” were hurled at police and 24 officers had been hurt.

Farmers in India have political influence due to their sheer numbers, and the renewed protests come ahead of national elections likely to begin in April.

Two-thirds of India’s 1.4 billion people draw their livelihood from agriculture, accounting for nearly a fifth of the country’s GDP, according to government figures.

‘BREAK ALL THE BARRIERS’

After first deploying tear gas on Tuesday, police fired fresh barrages on Wednesday, including dropping canisters from the air by drone as tractor-driving

farmers tried to open the road by dragging barricades away.

“We are just waiting for the green signal from our leaders,” said Santokh Singh, 65, from Ludhiana in Punjab. “Once that comes, we will break all the barriers.”

But farm union leaders used microphones to call for restraint from supporters.

“We will win this battle and go to Delhi,” one of them shouted. “But we cannot afford to get carried away.”

Police have ringed the capital on three sides, blocking highways with metal spikes, blocks and steel barricades, while mobile internet services have been cut in parts of Haryana.

In places, ditches have been dug to stop the tractors, with some farmers trying to outflank barricades by driving across the fields.

Minister of Agriculture Arjun Munda said a law guaranteeing a minimum support price for crops “cannot be brought in a hurry”, the Press Trust of India news agency reported Tuesday.

Talks with farmer unions continue, Munda said, while urging protesters to be “aware and alert” about those seeking to exploit demonstrations for “political benefits”.

Protests by farmers against agricultural reform bills in November 2020 lasted for more than a year, forming the biggest challenge to Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government since it came to power in 2014.

Tens of thousands of farmers set up makeshift camps then, with at least 700 people killed during the protests.

In November 2021, a year after the protests began, Modi pushed through parliament the repeal of three contentious laws that farmers claimed would let private companies control the country’s agriculture sector.

Thousands of Indian farmers die by suicide every year because of poverty, debt and crops affected by ever-more erratic weather patterns caused by climate change.



AFP

US RAISES CONCERN WITH SRI LANKA LEADER ON SOCIAL MEDIA LAW



Photo: Rodion Kutsaev

The United States on Tuesday last week pressed Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe to address concerns over a strict new internet censorship law that has alarmed tech companies.

Samantha Power, head of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), raised the issue during a virtual meeting with Wickremesinghe in which she also voiced US readiness to help address economic challenges on the island, a closer partner of China in recent years.

Power “highlighted strong US support for freedom of expression and association,” USAID said in a statement.

She “encouraged President Wickremesinghe to address concerns about the potential impact of the Online Safety Act on freedom of expression, as well as investment in Sri Lanka’s vibrant digital economy.”

The law passed last month would make social media companies liable for any content posted on their platforms deemed offensive by Sri Lankan authorities, with prison terms of up to 10 years for tech executives

who fail to disclose details of users found to be in violation.

Tech companies had warned that the law is unworkable and that they would not implement it, while opposition lawmakers decried what they saw as an attempt to censor political speech ahead of presidential elections later this year.

Information Minister Bandula Gunawardana earlier Tuesday said that the government would revisit the law after considering proposals from experts.

Social media was a key tool used by protesters during Sri Lanka’s unprecedented economic crisis in 2022, which precipitated nationwide demonstrations that eventually compelled then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa to step down.

The International Monetary Fund in December revived a \$2.9 billion bailout for Sri Lanka after Colombo reached a debt restructuring deal with China, its biggest official lender.

AFP

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GLOBAL CONFLICTS HERALD 'DANGEROUS DECADE': MILITARY THINK-TANK

The Israel-Hamas war, conflict in Ukraine and rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific and Africa herald "what is likely to be a more dangerous decade," a British military think-tank warned Tuesday last week.

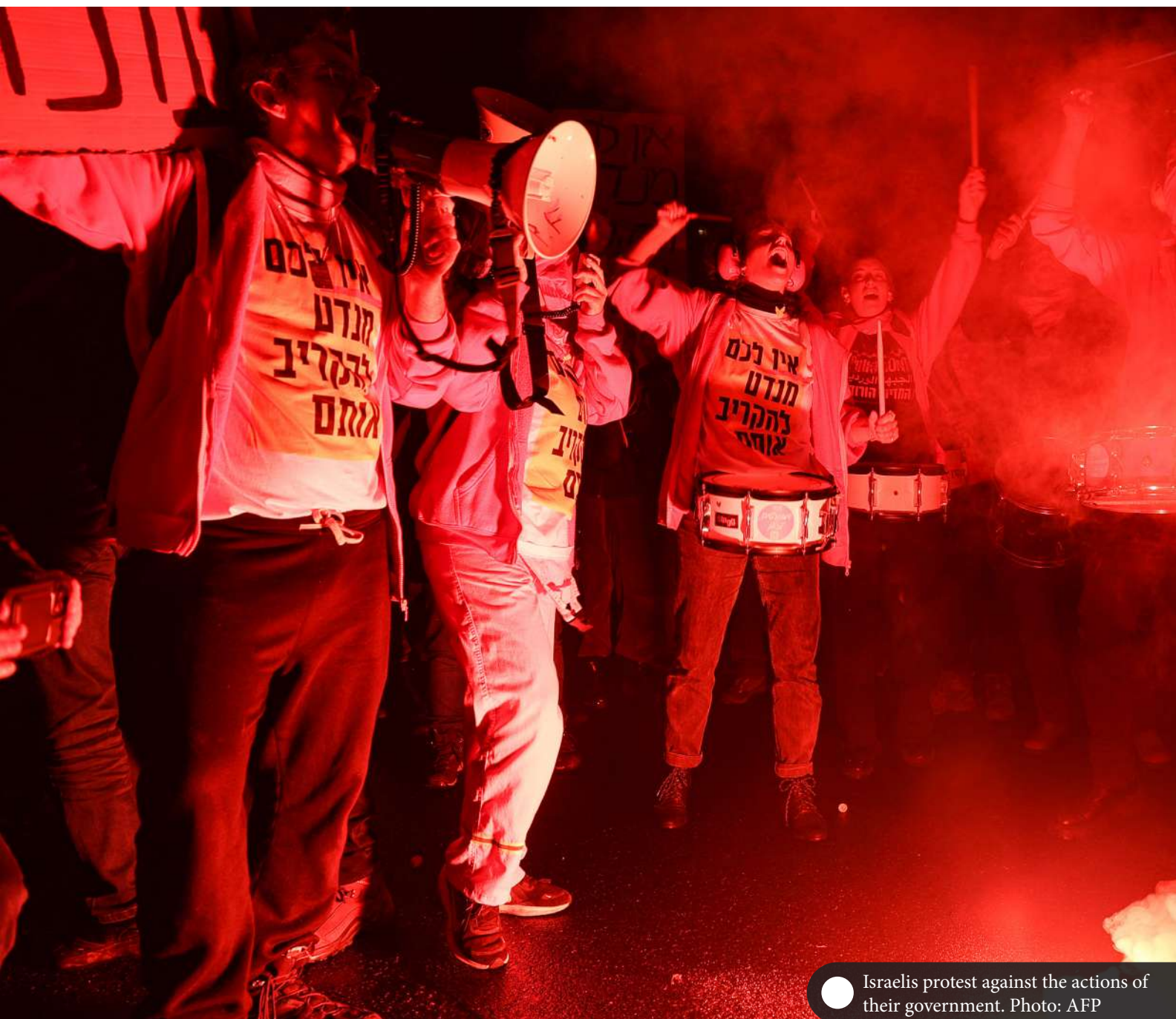
The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) said in its annual "Military Balance" report that the world has entered "a highly volatile security environment".

"The current military-security situation heralds what is likely to be a more dangerous decade, characterised by the brazen application by some of military

power to pursue claims," the report said.

The "era of insecurity" is resetting the global defence-industrial landscape, with the United State and Europe ramping up production of missiles and ammunition "after decades of underinvestment," the report added.

As the two-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine looms, the London-based IISS reported that Moscow had lost around 3,000 battle tanks in the conflict, roughly the same number it had at the beginning of its operation.



Israelis protest against the actions of their government. Photo: AFP

Russia has traded “quality for quantity” in replacing the lost tanks and will only be able to sustain such losses for another two to three years, Bastian Giegerich, IISS director general, said at the report’s release.

Ukraine, so far, has been able to offset equipment losses through Western donations, upgrading quality in the process, added the think-tank in its yearly assessment of the militaries and defence economics of over 170 countries.

But “western governments find themselves once again in a position where they must decide whether to furnish Kyiv with enough weapons to deliver a decisive blow or merely enough not to lose,” added Giegerich.

It is therefore “incredibly vital” that the US passes a package releasing \$60 billion of funding for

Ukraine’s war effort, Fenella McGerty, IISS defence economics specialist, told AFP.

The US Senate approved an aid bill on Tuesday but the legislation but if faces opposition from the Republican majority in the House of Representatives upper chamber.

Failure to pass the bill “would require a complete rethink about the goals and tactics used, because that funding would be very difficult for Europe to make up,” McGerty warned.

NATO ‘REINVIGORATED’

Driven in part by NATO’s response to Russia’s invasion, global military spending grew by 9 percent in 2022 to reach a record \$2.2 trillion, noted the report.

“The security outlook has definitely deteriorated and we’re seeing countries respond to that,” said McGerty.

Republican presidential hopeful Donald Trump said on Saturday he had told one NATO member’s leader that he would “encourage” Russia to “do whatever the hell they want” to that country if it had not met its NATO financial obligations.

“You got to pay. You got to pay your bills,” Trump recounted at a campaign rally.

Only 10 members of the security alliance met the group’s target of spending two percent of GDP on defence, although 19 of them increased spending last year, according to IISS figures.

“Russia’s actions have reinvigorated NATO, with Finland completing its rapid alliance accession process in April 2023,” the report noted.

“Russia’s border with NATO members is now more than 1,300 kilometres longer.”

Elsewhere, unrest related to the Gaza conflict risked spreading having already affected Yemen, the Red Sea, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, warned Ben Barry, a land warfare expert at IISS and a retired British army brigadier.

“All those conflicts carry with them the risk of escalation,” he told AFP.

“The longer the war goes on, the more the chance there is of an accident... leading to retaliation,” he added.

The report said Iran’s supply of missiles to Huthi rebels in Yemen and drones to Russia highlighted Tehran’s growing role in conflict zones.

China had also demonstrated “increased power-projection capacity”, it added.

Western governments were now treating China as the world’s greatest “pacing threat”, said Douglas Barrie, IISS military aerospace specialist, with western demand driven by attempts to keep up with Chinese modernisation.



AFP

UNICEF CONDEMNS AIR STRIKE ON SCHOOLS IN MYANMAR

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) has strongly condemned Monday's deadly airstrike on two schools in eastern Myanmar resulting in the deaths of at least four children and two teachers, with many more left injured.

The children killed were boys between 12 and 14 years of age.

"UNICEF strongly condemns any strikes against schools and places of learning, which must always be safe spaces for children," Debora Comini, UNICEF Regional Director for East Asia and the Pacific, said in a statement.

"Attacks against schools are a grave violation of children's rights and international humanitarian



Photo: UN News

law.”

According to media reports, over 100 children were present at the time of the attack. Those killed and injured were among many running to bunkers as military aircrafts dropped bombs and fired machine guns.

Over 90 per cent of the school was reportedly destroyed.

The school is in an area recently marked by intense clashes between military forces and armed groups opposing the junta, according to media reports.



INTENSIFIED CONFLICTS

The strikes came as the military coup marked its third anniversary on 1 February amid a deepening humanitarian crisis that has left 18.6 million people across the country dependent on aid.

Since the military takeover in 2021, armed conflicts across Myanmar have intensified, including indiscriminate airstrikes resulting in numerous civilian casualties, mass killings of detainees, dismemberment, desecration of bodies, rape and the intentional burning of entire villages

The Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), mandated by the UN Human Rights Council to collect evidence of serious crimes, revealed that the pattern of such crimes pointed to an “organizational policy” of the junta.

“The evidence reveals a pattern that indicates that these are not isolated crimes, but rather a manifestation of an organizational policy implemented on a widespread and systematic basis by the military regime,” Nicholas Koumjian, head of IIMM said in a statement last week.

“No one has yet been held accountable for these crimes, which has deepened the culture of impunity in the country,” he added.

Courtesy of UN News



Photo: Zinko Hein

CHIN STATE

Chin National Front rejects junta's Conscription Law

The Chin National Front (CNF) criticised the junta's Conscription Law and called on young people of conscription age to join efforts to topple the military dictatorship.

The comments were made in a statement released to commemorate the 76th Chin National Day on 20 February.

It also said that the law would be hard to enforce in some areas.

CNF spokesperson Salai Htet Ni said: "This directive may be enforced in certain major cities in Chin State where the military regime has a presence. However, its effectiveness is limited. If the junta enforces this law, adults will come to join the Chin National Army (CNA) or the Chinland Defence Force (CDF)."

He said that the conscription had been brought in because military personnel have been depleted in the three years since the coup and during that period the army had been unable to recruit enough soldiers.

The CNF statement also said that the conscripts would be used by the army as human shields.

The junta announced the Conscription Law on 10 February 2024. It states that males aged 18-35 and females aged 18-27 can be compelled to serve in the military for up to two years.

A committee, the Central Body for Summoning the People's Military Servants, was then set up to conduct censuses in various townships to find out who qualifies for conscription.

Residents in areas of Chin State under junta control have been expressing concern over the junta's collection of household census data in downtown neighbourhoods.

On 13 February the Conscription Law was declared unlawful by the National Unity Government (NUG) which also urged civilians not to comply with the law. The NUG said that it believes the law is going to be used to conscript people and use them as human shields during fighting to safeguard junta interests.

Defence forces have also urged people to escape conscription by joining and seeking refuge with defence forces.



JUNTA CHIEF MEETS POLITICAL PARTY OFFICIALS AMIDST CRITICISM OF ELECTION PROCESS

The junta chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing met officials from registered political parties in Nay Pyi Taw on February 13, reported the state-run newspaper The Global New Light of Myanmar.

During the meeting, the junta chief emphasized the necessity for political parties within a multiparty democratic framework to engage in party political activities and actively pursue national agendas.

But, analysts criticized the junta chief's election as a fraudulent exercise, asserting that the junta's electoral process, conducted amid allegations of war crimes, merely serves as a facade for maintaining military dictatorship.

In early February, Min Aung Hlaing reassigned Ko Ko, who was serving as the Minister of Religious Affairs, to the position of head of the junta's Union Election Commission.

The former chief of the junta's election commission, Thein Soe, was permitted to retire due to health reasons.

ATOM MYANMAR EXPELS DIRECTORS AND SHWE BYAIN PHYU COMPANY SANCTIONED BY US



The ATOM mobile operator company announced this week that they had expelled the Shwe Byain Phyu Company and those who were related with this company sanctioned by the US government from the Board of Directors.

The announcement, released 9 February, further says that the operator is not concerned with these people and entities anymore and those sanctioned by the US government are not appointed as their shareholders, senior management and beneficiary of this company.

ATOM Myanmar is owned by Investcom Pte. Co. and the shares of Shwe Byain Phyu have been sold completely to Myancom Holding Company, the announcement says.

Thein Win Zaw, Win Paing Kyaw and Tin Min Latt who were sanctioned by the US on 1 February have resigned from Shwe Byain Phyu Company group.

The US government imposed sanctions against four individuals who have close rapport with the Myanmar military and two companies which have close relationships with the junta on the third anniversary of the military coup.

Those included in this sanction list are Shwe Byain Phyu Group (SBPG) which has close relations with junta's Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd. (MEHL) and its president Thein Win Zaw, spouse and their sons and daughters.

Norway based telecom company, Telenor Myanmar, was sold and handed over to Shwe Byain

Phyu Co. and Lebanon Company M1 Group on 12 May 2022 and formed as Investcom Pte. The SBPG owned 80% stakes in this company.

The SBPG announced in state-run daily papers in August 2023 that its subsidiary fuel oil importing company had been liquidated under the Insolvency Law.

The shareholders decided to liquidate their company at the Shareholders' Meeting held on 10 August 2023, the newspaper ad says.

But the business community assumes that they did so to avoid economic sanctions which may be imposed by the US government under the protection of the Insolvency and Liquidation Law. And six months after that, the US government imposed sanctions against them.

The SBPG owner Thein Win Zaw owns over 20 companies in the names of his wife, sons and daughters.

These companies have investments in fuel import and retail business, mining, gemstones mining, telecom business, banking, timber, fishery, plastic bags manufacturing, and sugar, pulses and beans exports.

Similarly the EU imposed economic sanctions against business groups and conglomerates where Thein Win Zaw has shares.

GROUNDNUT OIL DEMAND FALLS IN MYANMAR DOMESTIC MARKET



Groundnut oil manufacturers in Myanmar say the demand for groundnut oil has fallen by about half in the domestic market because of the wide gap between the prices of palm oil and groundnut oil.

The prices of domestically manufactured vegetable oils such as groundnut, soybean and sunflower etc. are much more than the imported palm oil price.

The price of groundnut oil is getting higher after the rise of raw material groundnut price and then the retail prices of groundnut oil became about 15,000 Kyats per viss (approx. 1.6 Kg) while the palm oil price is about 8,000 Kyats per viss only.

The groundnut oil is the most favourite oil and mostly used oil in the domestic market but the demand of for this oil is falling as some oil millers adulterated groundnut oil with other inferior quality oils and distributing them in the market.

The demand for groundnut oil fell by about half in the domestic market after the price of palm oil was regulated to be a stable and fair price.

Most of the oil mills in the country are small-scale cottage industries with oil expellers extracting oil from groundnut seeds by crushing them in mortar

press but now about half of these small-scale manufacturers have stopped their business after the demand for groundnut oil fell.

Magway Region is the largest edible oil manufacturing hub in the country but the production has fallen as the instability in the region caused by armed conflict has seriously affected the agricultural sector.

The oil industry manufactured about 10-15,000 tonnes of groundnut oil every month before June 2023 but now it is learned from the Myanmar Edible Oil Millers Association (MEOA) that it fell to 6-8,000 tonnes every month.

The oil manufacturers said that there should be a precise policy adopted by the departments concerned for the regulation of quality and safety of edible oil in the domestic market in order to revive the groundnut oil market in the country.

The palm oil price in the market has two prices, the first one is the open market retail price and another one is the regulated price by the Military Council. The retail price of palm oil in the open market is about 10,000 Kyats per viss and it has only a slight difference with the groundnut oil price but now the price gap between these two commodities is widening.

MYANMAR JUNTA SAYS ABOUT 36,000 MIGRANT WORKERS IN THAILAND PAY TAXES TO THEM



Photo: AFP

The Myanmar embassy in Bangkok says that the number of taxpayers who paid taxes in the last two months is about 36,000.

The receipt of tax payments started on 13 December 2023 and about 1,000 taxpayers come to the embassy in Bangkok daily and total 35,919 people have paid their taxes until 8 February 2024, the announcement says.

The migrant workers in Thailand do not want to pay taxes to the Myanmar junta but they have no choice as they need to produce tax payment receipts when they apply for residential permits.

The tax receipt documents are being issued to these tax payers and it must be produced when the migrant workers apply for renewal of their passports, labour ID card and recommendation letters from the embassy.

The Military Council enacted and promulgated the Amendment for Taxation Law on 12 September 2023 and under this amendment law the levying

of income taxes would be started from 1 October 2023 depending on the salaries of these migrant workers in foreign countries.

The announcement of the Military Council says the overseas workers of Myanmar nationals must pay 2% of their salaries as the income tax and 25% more must be sent back to their families in Myanmar as remittances through the official banking system.

A campaign group consisting of 16 organizations at home and abroad issued an announcement on 8 January which calls on overseas Myanmar nationals to join their cutting off blood money and blood tax campaign and to show their protest against taxation by the junta.

The Myanmar pro-democracy groups and rights groups are calling the international community to impose sanctions against the foreign exchange accounts of the Military Council and freeze these accounts in their countries.

Penrose Thitsa

THAILAND'S THONBURI HEALTHCARE GROUP EXPANDS HOSPITAL OPERATIONS IN MYANMAR AMID SURGE IN DEMAND FOR MEDICAL CARE

Thonburi Healthcare Group Plc (THG) intends to grow its hospital operations in Myanmar in response to a surge in demand for medical care from patients, reported Bangkok Post.

Tanatip Suppradit, CEO of THG, said that a feasibility study for the new investment is underway, with its results anticipated shortly.

In 2021, the company, operating a 97-bed hospital in Yangon, opted to delay new investments due to Myanmar's military coup, which caused uncertainty in businesses.

"Demand for medical services continues to increase in Myanmar, especially after the depreciation of the kyat against the baht, causing many patients to avoid flights from their country to seek treatment in Thailand," said Dr Tanatip.

THG plans to increase hospital beds and offer new treatment services to patients.

Myanmar's healthcare sector has faced significant challenges since the coup. More than 1,000 attacks on healthcare facilities have been documented, ranging from raids on hospitals to the arrest of health workers and airstrikes on clinics, according to the Relief Web.

At least 880 health workers have been arrested, 97 killed, and 117 injured. This exodus of trained professionals further cripples the already weakened system.



VALENTINE'S DAY

Shoppers check out the toys for sale for Valentine's Day in Yangon.

Photo:AFP

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MYANMAR DHAMMA AT A CROSSROADS: BETH UPTON

INSIGHT MYANMAR



Beth Upton

“Without the Burmese tradition, there would be no ‘me’ here teaching the Dhamma,” explains Beth Upton to Insight Myanmar in a podcast, “and it’s easy to lose sight of that.”

After an extended time practicing as a Buddhist nun in Burma, Beth started a teaching career in the West, which she discussed in a previous interview—which also happens to be the fourth most listened-to interview in the history of our platform). As some of her students suggested she might address the ongoing conflict in Myanmar, Beth reached out to Insight Myanmar to renew the conversation.

DEPTH OF DHAMMA

“Burma isn’t the only country in the world that is holding a depth of Dhamma, but it’s definitely one of the main ones,” she points out, noting just how many teachers in the West come from Burmese traditions or learned under Burmese teachers.

“It’s easy to lose sight of what of wealth we have there, and how desperately we need to protect it,” she adds. As meditators are now advised to avoid visiting Burma as this conflict plays out, Beth

describes how, with the Golden Land all but closed off, “we lose that diversity and complexity and richness and layering of the Buddhist teachings that we find in a culture that’s been carrying it for years.”

SEEKING ANSWERS

While agreeing that it’s natural for spiritual teachings to be transformed as they are carried across time, geography, and culture, Beth stresses that there is depth of understanding in Burma that is difficult to find elsewhere. For example, she describes how it can be challenging to understand the suttas “through our own modern day cultural lens, our own new interpretation of what that sutta means,” and so that is where the commentaries are so helpful in digging deeper into its intended meaning.

In Burma, where regular study of ancient commentaries is common across society, there are many resources for Beth can seek out answers. “If I want to find out what this one line of the Paṭṭhāna is referring to, I want to go to Burma. Where do I go if I can’t go there? Where do I go? In Myanmar, even in the tiniest little village, you can wake up in the morning

to hear the whole of the Paṭṭhāna any day!” Looking ahead, Beth sadly notes how this isn’t only a short-term loss of not having a particular question clarified, but potentially a generational loss; it is an entire community of teachers in the West not being able to refine and improve their spiritual guidance. “It’s a huge loss of incredibly powerful wisdom, held in that deep refined scholastic knowledge and practicing knowledge [of Burma.]”

For her, this points to how the benefits that a meditator accrues from spending time in Burma transcends the experience found on silent retreats alone. “When you live in that culture, you are immersed in its richness, and it shows up in little ways, in all aspects of life. That can’t be encapsulated in a meditation technique,” she says. “A meditation technique is great to have, but it’s a very small part of the teachings of the Buddha! And if that’s all that we’ve taken, just the meditation technique, then there’s very much that we miss.”

WARMTH OF COMMUNITY

Similarly, Beth is concerned that stripping the Buddha’s teachings down to a single meditation technique removes the “relational aspect” of the path that is critical for any real spiritual development. “It mirrors back to us things that we don’t see in ourselves when we’re just alone with our little meditation technique, because to us, those defilements have been normalized in our experience of ourselves,” she explains. Noting how the generosity, warmth, humility, and sense of community that she found in Burmese Buddhist practitioners has been quite hard to replicate in the West, a practitioner visiting the Golden Land is able to more easily see where further growth is needed when experiencing these qualities in others.

Speaking on the growth of practice around the world, Beth notices that terms like karma, vipassana, jhāna, and others have become increasingly popular. However, what hasn’t become as well-known is kusala (kuthol in Burmese), meaning a skillful, wholesome action which brings joy to the mind. “Whoever you meet in Myanmar, the shop owner or the local drunk, they all know this word! They all know what is kusala, [which is] just so much more rich and so much more broad than a meditation technique. It’s the wholesome way in which we engage with the whole of life.” And so, losing access to this Burmese Buddhist culture leaves

a missing piece of the practice unfulfilled.

AFTER THE COUP

This naturally leads one to wonder about what a foreign practitioner who has benefited from these Burmese teachings might do in response to the present situation there. For Beth, it all starts with an open heart. She then echoes the words of a previous guest, Whit Hornsberger, who affirmed that one’s practice must extend beyond oneself to truly be effective. “If we don’t reciprocate, then we lose something in ourselves,” Beth says. “We lose some authenticity or alignment in ourselves, on some level, and we know something is out of balance there. Whether you’ve directly spent time in Myanmar or not, if you are a dedicated practitioner of the Dhamma, then part of that has come from the Burmese tradition, and the dedication of the of Burmese practitioners over hundreds of years. So when we receive that gift, and we don’t repay it when reciprocity is needed, we are not fully congruent in ourselves.”

Still, the question as to what to do and how to do it is not so easy to answer. On one hand, Beth points out the danger of over-politicizing the Dhamma, noting that the Buddha’s teachings were not intended to “fix” the problems of the world, but rather to guide the practitioner in coming out of one’s own suffering. “But there’s also the way in which we can take that messaging to the other extreme, where you hear meditators saying, ‘Okay, I’ll just do my silent retreat, and that’s what I do. I don’t want to be involved, that’s just externalizing, I can’t do anything about that.’ This is also a mistake.” In other words, while some Western yogis define “spiritual qualities” strictly as those meditative skills developed in silence on the cushion, Beth points back to the Burmese example, which also refers to acts of service and generosity; e.g. the relational side.

In closing, Beth says, “This has been felt by anybody who has gone to practice in Myanmar for a stretch of time long enough to immerse themselves in the culture, so that we feel these teachings like faith, humility, generosity, sīla, so deeply embedded in the culture in a way that we can’t carry away with us, like a meditation technique.”

The interview with Beth Upton can be found here at Insight Myanmar: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2024/1/26/episode-218-dhamma-at-a-crossroads>



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