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**THREE YEAR
COUP
ANNIVERSARY**

**Myanmar junta
leader under
pressure from
resistance - and
own supporters**



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MYANMAR AWAITS INDIAN DECISION ON THEIR JOINT BORDER

For several months, the Indian authorities have tabled different views on their “border problem”.

It should be noted that their security problem is miniscule compared with the porous USA southern border, where thousands are entering the USA illegally every day. But a combination of factors have pushed some Indian ministers to speak out.

Indian lawmakers appear to have differing views on how to deal with the porous border with Myanmar.

India plans to erect a fence along its vast and porous frontier with Myanmar and will scrap a free movement border zone agreement, Indian media reported last week.

The announcement by Home Minister Amit Shah comes after hundreds of troops from Myanmar who were fleeing insurgent attacks crossed into India. The Indian government had “decided to fence the entire open India-Myanmar border”, Shah said Saturday last week during a visit to the northeastern state of Assam, AFP reports. The frontier stretches for more than 1,200 kilometres (750 miles), ranging from remote jungle to soaring snow-capped Himalayan peaks.

Shah, who gave no details of a timeframe or how the fence would be built, said the government would also end a free movement agreement. The deal allows those living in border zones to venture a short distance into each other’s territory without a visa. Many in the border zones share close cultural and religious ties.

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

On 2 January 2023, the Indian Government announced that it

would rescind the FMR.

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

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

At the press conference, he said that he opposed the government’s plans to rescind the FMR and build a border fence. He said that he would use central government funds to assist both Myanmar refugees who have fled conflict and people displaced by fighting in neighbouring Manipur State. He added that a border fence would be an acceptance of the British colonizers’ blunder of dividing the Mizo people’s territory between India and Burma when they drew up the border between the two countries.

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

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

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

EDITORIAL

mizzima
WEEKLY

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MIZZIMA MAGAZINE

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Cover photo of Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing by AFP

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IN FOCUS



ပြည်သူ့ပါတီ

PEOPLE'S PARTY





ELECTION COMING?

Ko Ko Gyi (C), leader of the People's Party (former leader of 88 Generation Student Group) poses for the group photo with other political parties' leaders during the party's headquarters office opening ceremony in Yangon, Myanmar, 27 January. Some of Myanmar's political parties re-registered under the military rules and are preparing to take part in a general election, the date of which has not yet been announced.

Photo:EPA

DRONES DROP TWO BOMBS ON MADAYA TOWNSHIP GENERAL ADMINISTRATION OFFICE

A drone dropped two bombs on the General Administration Office in Madaya Township, Mandalay Region at about 11:00 a.m. on 21 January.

The attack was jointly carried out by the Operation Myananda Drone Team, Madaya PDF, and Pyin Oo Lwin District Weapon Production Team.

A press officer from Operation Myananda (Mandalay) said, "We dropped two bombs that landed on the roof of the office." They added that the building appeared damaged as both bombs had hit its roof.

According to residents and a defence force scout team three junta soldiers, five members of the Pyu Saw Htee junta-aligned militia and two administrative staff were injured in the attack. They are currently receiving medical attention at Madaya Public Hospital.

However, Mizzima was unable to confirm any of these details.

Following the drone attack junta troops set up roadblocks and searched the area around the General Administration Office. On the morning of 22 January, they were going house to house under the pretext of checking households' overnight guest registrations.

A Madaya resident said: "The General Administrative Office was targeted by a drone. Given the movement of about three hospital vehicles, it is speculated that the State Administration Council (SAC) may have suffered numerous casualties. The inspection, which began on 21 January, is still ongoing this morning throughout the town, it is being done under the guise of inspecting overnight registration lists."

MYANMAR MIGRANT WORKERS TO BE ALLOWED TO FLY INTO THAILAND

As of February 2024, Burmese migrant workers will be allowed to fly into Thailand because they are facing difficulties crossing at land borders.

The two countries have signed an agreement that will allow Burmese migrant workers going to Thailand under the Migrant Workers Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to fly into Thailand.

Once workers have provided the Thai authorities with the relevant information and received the necessary documentation they will fly from Yangon Airport to Don Mueang Airport in Bangkok and from there, following checkups, they will be taken to their places of employment.

The migrant workers will also be issued with a 2-year visa stamp and residential permit at Don Mueang Airport.

Previously many migrant workers crossed from Myawaddy to Mae Sot in Thailand. But, since 19 December 2023, the junta has not allowed migrant workers to cross from Myawaddy. Since 1 December 2023, there has been heavy fighting on the Asia Highway that connects Myawaddy to the rest of Myanmar.

With the Myawaddy crossing closed to them, migrant workers are being forced to cross from Kawthaung, the southernmost point of Tanintharyi Region, to Ranong in Thailand. But, due to fighting on the roads leading to Kawthaung, it is hard for migrant workers to get there and many are forced to fly to Kawthaung.

Employment agencies have been pushing for permission to fly migrant workers to Thailand since before the February 2021 coup.

PASSPORT PANGS: QUEUES, BROKERS, AND FRUSTRATION IN MANDALAY

Despite the reopening of passport offices in Myanmar, securing a passport remains a labyrinthine quest, plagued by long lines and bureaucratic hurdles.

In Mandalay, thousands queue outside the immigration office in Aungmyaythazan Township, patiently hoping to be among the handful issued passports each day, according to a Mandalay resident.

“Thousands are lining up for passports, but as of the beginning of this month, only a few hundred people have received them,” said the resident. “Because online processes are available, I believe people in Yangon find it much more convenient.”

Late at night, a considerable crowd gathers to secure a place in the queue for the next morning. Kyaw Kyaw (pseudonym), who arrived at the line, said that those present during the night were subjected to physical assaults and threats by the army and police.

“People have to line up at night to get tokens. If not, they won’t get a token anymore. At that moment, the police and soldiers would come out, shout, and threaten. Some were beaten. This kind of thing happens almost every day, and it’s time-consuming for people who genuinely need a passport,” said Kyaw

Kyaw.

Mandalay residents state that delays in the passport office are due to the absence of a systematic approach. Additionally, the presence of queue-place buyers who pay to secure a spot in the line and passport brokers exacerbate the situation, leading to complications and inconvenience for people coming from distant locations.

A Mandalay resident said, “Brokers get paid to line up on behalf of those who want passports. Consequently, individuals who queued up were unable to secure a token. It is worse for people travelling from far-off places.”

Passport applications must be made in person in all other states and regions; the Yangon Region is the only place where you can book an appointment without having to queue in line.

Since the coup d’état, people have faced the effects of income and expenditure inequality due to the scarcity of employment opportunities in the country and the excessive increase in commodity prices. They are desperately trying to obtain a passport to go abroad for work or school.

DEFENCE FORCES ATTACK TADA-U AIR FORCE BASE

Brave Warriors for Myanmar (BWM) launched a mortar attack on the junta’s Tada-U airbase, which is located next to Mandalay International Airport, on 23 January at about 4:50 p.m.

According to a spokesperson of Brave Warriors for Myanmar (BWM), one of the groups involved in the attacks, they managed to evade the stringent security measures put in place around the airport by the junta.

The spokesperson said: “We attempted to launch 12 107 mm mortar rounds at the air force base. Unfortunately, seven rounds failed to detonate due to equipment malfunctions, while five rounds were successfully fired.”

Junta-associated Telegram channels also said seven unexploded rounds were found at the airbase and confiscated.

Explaining how they got around airport secu-

urity the BWM spokesperson said: “The security of the Tada-U Air Force Base is reinforced with two fences installed by the Military Council. We had to launch the mortar from a distance of approximately 300 feet from the Military Council troops’ post.”

Since the attack the junta has blocked the entrances to Mandalay Airport and the Tada-U Air Force Base and junta troops are conducting searches in the vicinity of the airports.

Junta planes flying out from Tada-U Air Force Base are launching airstrikes in northern Myanmar.

As well as BWM, other defence forces involved in the airbase attack included the Security and Special Task Force - Mandalay (SSTF MDY) and Urban Special Operations (USO).

Tada-U Air Force Base was previously attacked by defence forces on 9 February 2023.

THREE YEAR COUP ANNIVERSARY

Myanmar junta leader
under pressure from
resistance - and own
supporters





Is Min Aung Hlaing running out of options as he tries to hang on to power? Photo: AFP

Three years after he launched an illegal coup, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing finds himself under pressure from all sides.

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

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

U Ariya Wun Sa and the participating monks expressed their readiness to face potential arrest should it arise as a consequence of their stated request. He was in fact arrested for questioning a day after the protest, and was then released.

Political analysts said that such discussions have been prevalent not just within military support gatherings but also among other backers of the Military Council, which gained power in a coup on 1 February 2021.

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

Thein Soe Naing said, “I’ve heard that such sentiments exist within their organization. Pro-jun-



Most of the Myanmar population want Min Aung Hlaing out. Photo: AFP

ta monks openly expressed these views at a military support rally in Pyi Oo Lwin town, purportedly voicing the desires of those advocating for Min Aung Hlaing's resignation. However, this proposed solution is no longer deemed acceptable by the Burmese populace. At present, I believe the situation has reached a point of conclusion."

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

That said, it is unlikely that the "Sword" wielder – Min Aung Hlaing - will be kicked out of his position at this point.

From the outset of the coup attempt on February 1, 2021, until Operation 1027, analysts suggest there is no tangible evidence of success for Min Aung Hlaing in politics, military affairs, diplomacy, and economics. The relentless international pressure has significantly escalated, leading to substantial losses for the State Administration Council (SAC) and the Myanmar military over the past three years. Under Min Aung Hlaing's leadership, the military has experienced an unprecedented decline in prestige, facing both moral and physical setbacks.

The Myanmar military is facing the worst situation through the never-before-seen en masse surrenders by battalions up to an entire Regional Operational Command Headquarters - MOC(HQs). According to the chains of command and military administrative echelon, six MOCs are the third highest in command - after Office of the Commander-in-Chief (Army) at top and fourteen Regional Military Commands - RMCs in second. In fact, the en masse surrender of MOC (Laukai) under Northeastern RMC, including six Brigadier Generals with full depot of weapons and ammunition - which is the equivalent amount for an RMC - has been recorded as one of the worst in the Myanmar military history.

Amid these deteriorating circumstances, public criticism, even from steadfast supporters of Min Aung Hlaing, including extremist monks and veterans, has surged in recent weeks. Rumours of potential mutiny and an internal counter-coup against Min Aung Hlaing are circulating widely.

There's a growing consensus that Min Aung Hlaing ranks as the worst among the ten successive Chiefs of Defense, measured in terms of military, administrative, and organizing capabilities, as well as military, political, economic, and administrative perspectives—the guiding motto and principles of the Myanmar military. Min Aung Hlaing is also ribbed for being the shortest chief, in stature. Despite the challenging situation, the practical likelihood of his removal by internal forces under his command, including Deputy Chief Soe Win, remains very low.



Points to bear in mind include:

1. The removal of Min Aung Hlaing by ex-Chief Than Shwe, similar to the ousting of Gen. Saw Maung in 1992, seems implausible. The fact is that Than Shwe handpicked Min Aung Hlaing over his seniors, but Than Shwe, having lost the power he once wielded, lacks the influence to replace Min Aung Hlaing.

2. In April and May 2023, high-ranking Chinese officials' meetings with Than Shwe suggested Chinese confidence in his influence over Min Aung Hlaing. However, informed inside sources express, Than Shwe was heard to comment that Min Aung Hlaing seems to be overconfident about his subsequent actions, including the coup d'état, and probably about future actions.

3. According to former military intelligence officers, it is learned that Than Shwe used to receive for-

mer military officers who often came to pay homage or to ask for advice. It is said that about a month after the start of Operation 1027, Min Aung Hlaing went to pay his homage to Than Shwe, upon the latter's wish. Than Shwe's attempt to advise Min Aung Hlaing on retirement given the age factor, reportedly backfired, leading to immediate shifting of the guards and increased security around Than Shwe's residence, signaling a strong warning from Min Aung Hlaing. So, Than Shwe has left nothing but to pray for not boomerang the karma as he eliminated the former dictator Ne Win, Khin Nyunt and almost the entire military intelligence.

4. Other former military leaders are also no longer in a position to challenge Min Aung Hlaing's leadership. Maung Aye is paralyzed and Khin Nyunt is dying from a cerebral hemorrhage. U Thein Sein is on a pacemaker and Shwe Mann has been impotent



● Aung San Suu Kyi and Min Aung Hlaing in better times. Photo: AFP



Resistance groups are on the march.
Photo: AFP

since he was ousted by the head of the military-backed USDP party in what became known as the August 2015 midnight coup.

5. Deputy Chief Soe Win, often seen as a potential successor, remains cautious not to displease Min Aung Hlaing, especially after the removal of Army Chief of Staff Moe Myint Tun, who was referred to as Min Aung Hlaing's right-hand man and a potential successor. In addition, there is irreparable flaw of Soe Win that many people do not know. Two sons of his wife (Soe Win and spouse Daw Than Than Nwe do not have any child, but they have two sons with her ex-husband) committed extravagant abuses, but Min Aung Hlaing gave a pardon saying that it was not directly related to Soe Win.

6. Soe Win's actions during Min Aung Hlaing's trip to Russia in 2022 suggest a strong allegiance to the Chief, dismissing rumors of a military coup. "There are rumors out there that there will be a military coup," Min Aung Hlaing giggly said before boarding the plane. It is said that Soe Win was obviously shocked, and in front of the other officers, he immediately saluted and said to his boss, "No matter who they are, I will annihilate them decisively. Please go ahead confidently, Chief,"

he replied.

7. In the history of Myanmar military, given the military's institutionalization, it is unlikely that former military personnel out of service can influence current internal affairs due to the nature of its structure and chain of command. It is often said that it is a one-handed military model. It becomes an unchangeable tradition that the entire military, including the deputy Commander-in-Chief, will always obey the absolute orders of the person sitting in the seat of the Commander-in-Chief, regardless of personal and professional flaws. It used to say among ranks and files that the realization of the desire of the person holding the "Sword" must be the only priority.

8. Min Aung Hlaing's extensive reshuffling of top brass indicates that any changes in leadership would likely align with his own desires, with little challenge to his authority. SAC itself has been reformed at least four times. Therefore, even if changes are made in February, it may only be due to Min Aung Hlaing's own desire.

It is only possible to shift the "Sword" from the right hand to the left, but no one dare challenge him to release it.

BOTH JUNTA AND RESISTANCE DIGGING IN AS MYANMAR MARKS THIRD COUP ANNIVERSARY

As Myanmar marks the third anniversary of the 2021 Myanmar military coup, the situation is getting tougher for the military and for the civilians caught up in the war, reports Vimutti this week.

The number of clashes in northern Shan State has continued to decline this week due to the ceasefire agreed between the Myanmar Military and the Brotherhood Alliance. However, the Brotherhood Alliance continues to accuse the Myanmar Military of violating the ceasefire, including launching an attack on PSLF/TNLA forces in Mandalay Region. Meanwhile, the KIO/A has been on the offensive in both northern Shan State (where it has taken control of Mabein Town and most of Mongmit Town) and Kachin State, where it captured bases in both Hpakant and Mansi Townships. In southern Shan State, following a clash between the PNLO/A and PNO/A, the PNLO/A joined resistance forces in attacking Myanmar Military and PNO/A forces in Hopong and Hsihseng Townships in the Pa-O SAZ.

Meanwhile, the Karen BGF announced that it would no longer be accepting salaries or supplies from the Myanmar Military and has withdrawn its forces from shared outposts. The BGF has even report-

edly begun preparing defenses in Shwe Kokko and its leader threatened that they would fight back if the Myanmar Military attacked. While the BGF said they had decided to distance themselves from the Myanmar Military because they did not want to fight fellow Karen, some reports have suggested that this may have more to do with recent discussions between the SAC and Thailand on cracking down on cybercrime, scam, and gambling operations in the border areas. The BGF profits from and has ties to many of these criminal operations and so may be responding to the development either by preparing to resist any moves to close down these operations either directly or by forcing the SAC to negotiate not to move against the operations in exchange for the BGF's continued support.

Meanwhile, the KNU/KNLA reported that over 750,000 people have been displaced in the Kawthoolei area since the 2021 coup d'état and that almost 200 civilians were killed by the SAC in the same area last year. The ERO also reported that the SAC had carried out around 800 airstrikes and fired artillery around 2,000 times in 2023. These airstrikes and artillery fire have continued in 2024 and killed at least 17



Tensions remain high. Photo: AFP

civilians in the past week. This includes two incidents in which IDP camps appear to have been targeted. This week also saw the first airstrikes on Hsihseng Township in southern Shan State. In northern Shan State, it is estimated that 40 civilians were killed in the fighting in and around Mongmit Town. Meanwhile, in Tabayin Township, Sagaing Region, 14 people were detained by the Myanmar Military on January 18. Four of them were found dead the following day, while the whereabouts of the others remains unknown.

POLITICAL ISSUES

One of the Brotherhood Alliance's comments on the SAC's ceasefire violations described these as an insult to China, once again highlighting the importance of China's role in the negotiations. Some analysts have suggested that this in fact makes the ceasefire less likely to hold, as the EROs agreed only due to pressure from China. However another analyst suggested that they may be hoping to negotiate the surrender of Lashio Town. Meanwhile, commentators have highlighted China's economic interest, although noting that the ongoing fighting in Rakhine State especially in Kyaukpyu Township may impede Chinese projects, while analysts have disagreed as to whether recent developments suggest an increase or decrease in China's influence in Myanmar. Meanwhile comments by the NUG Acting President suggest that whichever way the trend is going, he sees China as having exceeded international norms on the relations of states in its engagement in Myanmar's internal affairs.

Criticisms of the SAC Chairman among supporters of the SAC and Myanmar Military have continued to be voiced, both online and offline. Some sources have suggested that the quick release of a monk who was detained after calling for the SAC Chairman to step down from his position as Commander-in-Chief of the Myanmar Military shows that the SAC is wary of further angering its supporters. Another source suggested that there are tensions between the SAC Chairman and the Deputy Commander-in-Chief. However, there are still some pro-SAC Telegram channels urging the Military's supporters to have patience and saying that the Myanmar Military could easily recapture the towns taken by the resistance forces. Among this discourse, there has been relatively little attention given to the question of what will happen on February 1, when the current state of emergency ends. Some commentators have however made predictions, mostly suggesting a further extension of the state of emergency, rather than any transition, although there has been some speculation about the forming of a transitional government.

Meanwhile, the PSLF/TNLA and MNTJP/MNDAA are continuing their efforts to establish their own administrations in the territories now under their control. The PSLF/TNLA noted that it was filling some positions with graduates from the policing and administration trainings that it has been running and that it plans to run further trainings to fill gaps in other depart-

ments. However, a PSLF/TNLA leader also suggested that the group might recruit non-CDM civil servants to fill gaps, particularly in the education sector. This has been criticized by CDM participants, one of whom called it equivalent to ignoring the sacrifice of fallen soldiers and suggested that it also implied the PSLF/TNLA believed CDM staff were unqualified. The MNTJP/MNDAA has also attracted some complaints due to its policy of not allowing Bamar to return to Laukkaing, despite the fact that some are long-term residents with lives and property to return to there. The MNTJP/MNDAA also ordered that all guns issued by the Kokang BGF should be handed in by February 5 and has placed restrictions on the sale of guns. Meanwhile, the sale of land or motorcars and the construction of houses are permitted, but require authorization. The MNTJP/MNDAA has also been taking steps to extend its administration in Hseni Township through engagement with Village Administrators, but one such Administrator died during an MNTJP/MNDAA inspection. Separately, the Chinland Council announced that it has begun forming the Chinland Government, which will have 15 ministries.

Discussion among scholars and analysts over the future of Myanmar continues. One this week suggested that those trying to "re-assemble" Myanmar should not start with discussions of territorial divisions (which are likely to prove contentious), but instead begin by trying to find agreement on more abstract principles and questions. He proposed that these could include "what kind of local government might be acceptable to all groups, and how would those governments be financed? Then, how would a guide for re-assembly—a new constitution—be written?" The same author stresses that dialogue, discussion, and compromise among conflicting parties are essential to finding a way forward. Three other articles focus primarily on the role of the international community. One by the Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister calls for more active and collective engagement from ASEAN, Myanmar's neighbors, and other partners, and stresses the need for all actors to encourage "genuine dialogue and reconciliation between the military and all the opposition parties and armed ethnic groups." Responding to this, Dutch and Thai former ambassadors noted that this approach would not work without more substantive engagement with the resistance than has yet been seen, and listening to "those who have been laying the groundwork for a new and inclusive federal democracy." The third article takes a rather different approach, setting out seven things that the author believes are needed for the resistance to prevail, several of which (including the recognition of the NUG and the provision of more sophisticated weapons for the resistance forces) would require action by the international community, something that the author sees as unlikely.

Vimutti is a media organization that brings local knowledge and insight on Myanmar to broader attention.

MYANMAR JUNTA ATTACKS ALONG PIPELINES IN NORTHERN SHAN STATE KILL AT LEAST 10

A string of deadly junta attacks targeting villages and towns near China's oil and gas pipelines in northern Shan State has left at least ten civilians dead and 14 others injured.

The attacks happened between 19 December 2023 and 11 January 2024, according to a report by Shan Human Rights Foundation.

The indiscriminate junta shelling and airstrikes, often landing dangerously close to vital infrastructure and have triggered fresh anxieties about a potential pipeline explosion further endangering local people.

The worst casualties in these attacks happened when junta forces launched a relentless aerial and artillery assault on Namtu Town and nearby villages in Namtu Township in the last week of December. Despite this, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) took control of Namtu Township on 28 December.

On 23 December, junta troops at the Light Infantry Battalion 324 base shelled indiscriminately into Ward 3 of Namtu Town, injuring four civilians and damaging a mosque and five houses. Further shelling of Namtu Town on 25 December fatally wounded



Photo: CNPC

a 19-year-old woman and airstrikes the same day on Namtu Town's Ward 3 killed two more people.

Two more civilians were wounded in Namtu Town by a junta airstrike on 29 December.

Beyond Namtu Town, villages along the pipelines weren't spared either. Mann Li village, 200 meters west of the pipelines was hit by an airstrike on 29 December that killed a woman and damaged a temple.

The fear of further attacks drove villagers from their homes, leading to the deaths of four more civilians in Namtu Township in the first week of January. A 35-year-old Man Jarm villager succumbed to high blood pressure whilst hiding in the jungle, and at midnight the same day, a male villager from Mann Dee and his two daughters, aged 3 and 12, were killed when their makeshift bunker collapsed.



Junta attacks weren't limited to Namtu. Airstrikes near Kyaukme Town, also in northern Shan State, injured three civilians and damaged twenty houses on 19 December. Another airstrike on 31 December damaged ten houses in Mong Ngaw Town (located north of Kyaukme), which the TNLA claimed to have captured the same day.

Neighbouring Hsipaw Township also saw its share of civilian suffering. On 28 December, junta troops stationed at their Hsipaw Bridge outpost indiscriminately shelled Nam Hoo Noi Village, 5 km west of the town, where roughly 200 villagers had sought refuge in a temple. No civilians were injured. The shells were fired over a distance of 7 km along the path of the pipelines, landing about 700 metres from the pipelines.

Further attacks came on 10 January, with junta aircraft bombing Pang Ner and Kunsanglek villages, which damaged Pang Ner temple, just 200 meters southeast of the pipelines, according to the report.

Landmines also claimed victims, with two farmers sustaining injuries near the pipelines in Hsipaw. One stepped on a junta landmine while searching for a missing buffalo, while another fell victim near the junta's Infantry Battalion 23 base, about 700 meters from the pipeline.

In Nawngkhio Town in Kyaukme District, junta shelling from Ohm Mark Dee village on 11 January killed three civilians including a child in Thonze Village.

BATTLES RAGING ACROSS RAKHINE HAVE BIG RAMIFICATIONS FOR MYANMAR AND ITS NEIGHBORS

ZACHARY ABUZA

Battles raging across Rakhine have big ramifications for Myanmar and its neighbors. Arakan Army forces pose with a large amount of captured arms and ammunition after recent fighting with Myanmar junta army units, Jan. 21, 2024.

The Three Brotherhood Alliance of ethnic

armies that launched Operation 1027 three months ago is consolidating their gains and establishing administrative control over newly acquired territory across large swathes of Myanmar.

While a Chinese brokered ceasefire in Shan state has been repeatedly violated, the loci of violence



● IDPs flee. Photo: AFP

has shifted north to Kachin, where the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) has made steady advances, and west to Rakhine, the domain of the The Arakan Army (AA).

It is the fighting in Rakhine that is the most consequential for both the civil war and the inclusive federal democracy espoused by the opposition National Unity Government (NUG).

Residents have been fleeing the Rakhine capital Sittwe in anticipation of a looming battle between the rebel ethnic Arakan Army (AA) and junta soldiers. The fall of the fortified administrative and military hub in

far western Myanmar would be the latest in a string of victories by the ethnic Rakhine forces.

The Arakan Army (AA) had fought the military to a stalemate in 2020. Following the Feb. 1, 2021 coup d'état, the AA made a tepid pledge of support for the NUG.

But the AA did not break its ceasefire with the military, instead consolidating its political power, especially in the north of Rakhine, Myanmar's westernmost state.

Although the Rakhine ceasefire broke down in 2022, neither side had a stomach for a wider war. The military could ill afford a new front, while the AA realized that it was achieving substantially more autonomy by not fighting, leaving the army to focus their efforts elsewhere. The AA and their political arm stepped-up civil administration and neutralized rivals.

To the dismay of the NUG, the AA and military negotiated a ceasefire in November 2022, though tensions remained.

After Cyclone Mocha ravaged Rakhine in May 2023, the military blocked international aid agencies into the state – further legitimizing the AA, which provided the majority of humanitarian assistance to the local population.

ARAKAN ARMY ON A ROLL

Following Operation 1027, the AA – a member of the Three Brotherhood Alliance - broke its ceasefire with the government on Nov. 13. Since then they have captured over 40 military and police posts and several towns.

On Jan. 18, the entire Light Infantry Battalion 539 surrendered to the AA. Video, shared widely on social media, shows the soldiers and their family members being marched in handcuffs and under guard.

The AA has captured large caches of weapons, including artillery and multiple launch rocket systems, which has allowed the offensive to continue.

On Jan. 25, the AA took over Kyauktaw and



are currently moving south, with fierce clashes in Mrauk-U and Minbya townships.

AA now controls almost all of northern Rakhine. As important, they captured the river port city of Paletwa in southern Chin state. That has resulted in steady air attacks, which forced over 50,000 people from their homes.

On Jan. 8, the AA attacked the Danyawaddy Naval Base near Kyaukphyu. The navy plays a key role in ferrying troops in the region, but has also been used to attack civilian populations. On Jan. 21, the AA again fired a barrage of rockets into the naval base, though it's not clear the extent of damage they caused.

RETHINKS BY INDIA AND CHINA?

The war in Rakhine matters for five reasons.

First, the AA's offensive has forced the military to deploy men, planes, and other resources that they desperately need elsewhere. The military cannot countenance a counter-offensive in Shan state, when they are now fighting one of the best armed and largest ethnic armies. Indeed, additional troops are being deployed to Rakhine.

Second, the AA's success is forcing India to reevaluate their stance.

Narendra Modi's government, which has seen substantial democratic backsliding of its own, has since the coup sided with Myanmar's military, fearful that a weak and isolated junta would become too dependent on China.

India has not only not disarmed some 700 Myanmar troops who crossed into Mizoram, but flew some troops to Sittwe, the Rakhine capital. A Myanmar Air Force transport plane that was dispatched to return several hundred troops skidded off the runway on Jan. 23.

But the AA's gains complicate the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, a project connecting the eastern Indian seaport of Kolkata to north-eastern India's landlocked Mizoram state via Sittwe and Paletwa ports.

The \$484 million project includes a 110-kilometer (68-mile) road from Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram, to the border and then a 62-kilometer (38-mile) road to Paletwa, where goods continue to Sittwe via the Kaladan River. A parallel train route between Aizawl and Sittwe is being planned.

New Delhi's insecurity over eastern India, which is connected by the 22-kilometer (13-mile) wide Siliguri Corridor in Sikkim, is palpable.

Mizoram, Assam, Nagaland and Manipur are home to several insurgencies and transnational criminal groups, with several Myanmar ethnic armies and people's defense force (PDF) militias situated along the border. China's encroachment in Bhutan's Doklam Plateau, just north of the Siliguri Corridor, further heightens India's insecurity.

RAKHINE MEGAPROJECTS

India has been no friend of the NUG, participating in and hosting Thai-led Track 1.5 dialogues.

India said nothing when Myanmar Air Force jets bombed the Chin National Front's headquarters Camp Victoria on Jan. 10 and 11, 2023, violating Indian air space.

India has also turned over anti-government forces to the junta.

But with AA taking control over Palweta, and thus the Kaladan project, New Delhi may be forced to rethink its relationship with the State Administrative Council, the three-year-old Myanmar junta's formal name.

Mizoram's economic growth is dependent on connectivity to Sittwe, and the Kaladan corridor is the analog to the nearby China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) to Kyaukphyu.

That leads to the third implication: China, too, might have to reevaluate its position. Beijing is known to be frustrated with the lack of progress on the CMEC and the Kyaukphyu port and special economic zone, which date to a 2011 memorandum of understanding.

In December 2023, the junta offered additional terms to placate China, which didn't extend an invitation to regime leader Min Aung Hlaing to the October Belt and Road Initiative summit in Beijing.

Fighting has intensified in the port's neighboring Ramree. The loss of control even around Kyaukphyu, the terminus of China's oil and gas pipelines, will further stall the project.

CLASHING VISIONS FOR RAKHINE

Fourth, the AA's advances have important implications for the country's inclusive, democratic, and federal future.

Of all the ethnic resistance organizations, the Arakan Army is the most predisposed towards independence; and have expressed skepticism towards the NUG's proposed Federal Democratic Charter for the multi-ethnic country of 55 million people.

The AA mistrusts the majority Bamar population to ever fully share power and agree to substantial devolution of political authority. Likewise, the AA had a bad relationship with the deposed National League for Democracy government of Aung San Suu Kyi, whose members still dominate the NUG.

More importantly, the AA is not in favor of democracy. Their political arm, the United League of Arakan, has moved to eliminate rivals and the AA leadership has shown little interest in sharing power. They see Rakhine's future as a one-party state.

The AA's capture of Palweta has also caused tensions with the Chin National Front (CNF) and other Chin organizations, who view the strategic river town as theirs and mistrust the AA's long-term intentions.

Indeed, on Jan. 25, the Mara Defense Forces, a local people's defense force under the AA, attacked the Chinland Defense Forces, a PDF under the CNF. While this could be merely a localized conflict, it could erode trust.

Finally, the AA's advance will impact the return of the one million Rohingya refugees who are living in squalid and dangerous refugee camps in neighboring

Bangladesh.

The Buddhist-dominated AA has fought the Arakan Rohingya Solidarity Organization, whose attacks led to the military's 2016-2017 ethnic cleansing campaign.

The AA has stated that the Rohingya can return – but talk is cheap, and they have been less clear than the NUG's stated position that the Rohingya are an ethnic group of Myanmar who deserve full legal rights.

The AA's advances may be key to the defeat of the Myanmar military, but they also pose challenges as planning for a post-military union is deliberated.

Zachary Abuza is a professor at the National War College in Washington and an adjunct at Georgetown University. The views expressed here are his own and do not reflect the position of the U.S. Department of Defense, the National War College, Georgetown University or Radio Free Asia.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia

THE MYANMAR MILITARY'S AIR SUPERIORITY IS SLIPPING AWAY AMID SANCTIONS AND OPPOSITION ATTACKS

ZACHARY ABUZA FOR RFA

One of the most important setbacks for Myanmar's military since an opposition alliance launched Operation 1027 last October has been the loss of three different aircraft: two jet trainers and an Mi-17 heavy-lift helicopter. An Mi-35 attack helicopter was also lost in 2023.

The Myanmar military should have total air superiority.

For the first two years of the conflict, the opposition National Unity Government's (NUG) best air defense was doxing Air Force pilots – publishing their addresses, as part of an assassination campaign.

Gradually, the NUG's People's Defense Force militias began to erode the junta's air superiority by effectively deploying armed drones.

Significantly, we're now seeing Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs) begin to deploy air defenses, at a time when the junta has become even more dependent on air attacks. That increased tempo of operations requires more maintenance on over-worked airframes.

These military junta losses matter for three reasons.

First, while not small by regional standards, the Myanmar Air Force (MAF) certainly does not have excess capacity. At the top end, it has some 31 SU-29s and four recently delivered SU-30s from Russia.

The recently delivered seven JF-17s multi-role fighters, jointly produced by China and Pakistan, are reportedly already grounded due to cracks in their airframes and other maintenance issues.

AIRWORTHINESS QUESTIONS

On paper, Myanmar has approximately 40 other jet fighters, but these are old, Chinese-produced knock-off Russian jets from the 1990s. They are well beyond their service life.

The MAF is thought to have 20 Nanchang Q-5s, the Chinese version of the MiG-19, down from the 36 it imported from 1994-2001. It also has some 21 Chengdu J-7s, a Chinese produced MiG-21. That's down from some 60 that it had purchased from 1990-1999.



Photo: AFP

It's unclear how many of these fighters are still airworthy.

Myanmar's military has relied on its 18 Russian-built Yak-130 trainers for much of its combat operations. Since the February 2021 coup, Myanmar has taken delivery of some six Guizhou JL-9 jet trainers, referred to as FTC-2000G, which have a spotty performance and safety record.

The MAF also flies an unknown number of Chinese K-8 trainers that can be used for ground support.

Second, we should also assume that given sanctions on the Singapore-based companies that have been the key importers of spare parts, the overall lack of foreign exchange available to the junta, and other supply chain issues, including those caused by Russia's war in Ukraine, that around 20% of the aircraft are probably not operational.

In December 2023, the sanctioned director of Sky Aviator and two others were caught trying to smuggle 508,925 Singapore dollars (US \$382,380) in cash out of that city-state. Sky Aviator, which has an office in Singapore, had a large contract to purchase spare parts for the air force. Another sanctioned firm, Sky Royal Hero Company Limited, has the contract for the maintenance and spare parts for servicing the Russian jet fighters.

For nearly three years, the MAF has been flying at increased tempos without the scheduled maintenance they require.

AIRSTRIKES RAMPING UP

The military's promised counter offensive has not materialized. Over 4,000 troops have surrendered since Operation 1027 began, and well-documented recruitment issues mean the military does not have a sufficient number of troops to launch ground offensives across the multiple battle zones, which has forced them to rely on long range artillery and air strikes.

An independent research firm documented 336 airstrikes in December 2023, alone, with nearly half against the Three Brotherhood Alliance, the group of ethnic armies behind Operation 1027..

The loss of one of their 12 already over-taxed heavy lift helicopters is another important setback for the military's counter-offensive. One of their tactical advantages has been air mobility and resupply, especially given their loss of key roads.

Although the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) claims to have shot down the Guizhou JL-9/FTC-2000G on 17 January, there is little evidence to support this, Video footage that shows the plane falling from the sky, without smoke or any other sign of hostile fire, indicates likely engine failure.

That leads to the third implication: The MAF is losing aircraft to hostile fire.

While the military claims that it was a technical malfunction that brought down a K-8 trainer, Karenni forces claim to have shot it down.

The KIA claims to have shot down an Mi-17 transport helicopter, killing all six crew members on Jan. 3.

Both helicopters and the trainers, especially when they are being used for ground attacks, are vulnerable to small arms fire.

EYES ON BEIJING

But these developments also beg the question: What weapons are being used to down the aircraft?

The only ethnic armed group that is known to have shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles (known as MANPADs) is the United Wa State Army (UWSA).

Until very recently, the UWSA has sat out the conflict, neither supporting the junta nor joining the NUG. It recently declared its neutrality in the Three Brotherhood Alliance's Operation 1027, though it did receive two townships from them.

Though the UWSA has quietly sold weapons to other ethnic armies and the NUG, it has, to date, refrained from selling MANPADs.

Has that changed? And if so, why now? It was long believed that they would not sell the weapons for fear of angering China. So did China approve the transfer, or are the groups now willing to incur Beijing's wrath?

The KIA claims that they shot down the Mi-17 helicopter with a Chinese made FN-6 MANPAD. The transfer of these weapons to the KIA has never been acknowledged, and may indicate a substantial shift in Chinese policy.

Even if the 17 January crash was caused by a mechanical failure, the KIA is smart to claim credit for downing the aircraft – if for no other reason than to sow fear amongst the pilots.

But what is clear, is that at the same time Myanmar's military has become even more dependent on air strikes, it's confronted by international sanctions and cash shortages that have hurt the servicing of their planes. At the same time, opposition forces are now fielding a limited number of surface-to-air missiles.

Like everything else in the nearly three years since the coup, the junta's air superiority is slipping away.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia (RFA). Zachary Abuza is a professor at the National War College in Washington and an adjunct at Georgetown University. The views expressed here are his own.

WA AND KOKANG REGION LEADERS MEET IN SHAN STATE'S PAN HSENG TOWN



Wa fighters. Photo: AFP

On 24 January, a delegation led by Peng Daxun, the Commander in Chief of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and another led by Zhao Guo An, the Vice Chairman of the United Wa State Party (UWSP/UWSA), met in Pan Hseng Town, also known as Pangkham, the capital of Wa Self-Administered Region in Shan State.

A group of nine individuals, including the Commander in Chief and Deputy Commander in Chief of MNDAA, traveled to Pan Hseng for the meeting.

UWSA's liaison officer Nyi Rang (Lashio) said, "The leaders of MNDAA visited Pan Hseng to meet with Wa leaders. It's a routine visit ahead of the Chinese New Year."

MNDAA spokesperson Li Kyar Win said, "No formal discussions took place. Given the approaching Chinese New Year, it was a gesture of advance greetings."

The recent meeting marked the first encounter between Wa and Kokang leaders since the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) took full control of the Kokang region during Operation 1027.

The United Wa State Party (UWSP) emerged in April 1989, breaking away from the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), and subsequently formed the UWSP/UWSA (United Wa State Party/United Wa State Army) in November 1989.

MNDAA was established by Peng Jiasheng, a leader who disagreed with the Communist Party of Burma, in March 1989.

According to MNDAA spokesperson Li Kyar Win, there exists a strong alliance between the two forces.

He said, "We maintain a fraternal relationship, never experiencing any breakdown. The Wa remain neutral, not aligning with any side, offering assistance. We are appreciative of their support and acceptance of our displaced population."

On 5 January, the three northern alliance forces, including the MNDAA, conducted an assault and successfully seized military council camps in Hopang and Panlon towns within the Wa Self-Administered region. Subsequently, on 10 January, a formal handover ceremony took place, transferring control of these camps to the United Wa State Army (UWSA).

Initiated on 27 October, 2023, Operation 1027 led by the three northern alliance forces, including the MNDAA, has resulted in the occupation and control of 17 towns in northern Shan State. The MNDAA has officially declared that Kokang Special Region (1) is now fully under their control and has become a military council-free area.

The UWSP/UWSA has affirmed its commitment to maintaining a neutral stance and declared its non-participation in armed conflicts within the Kokang region.

Telegram channels associated with the Military Council have announced their intention to monitor the meeting between the leaders of MNDAA and UWSA.

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KAYIN BORDER GUARD FORCE CUTS TIES WITH MYANMAR JUNTA

The decision by the commander of the Border Guard Force in southeastern Myanmar's Kayin state to cut ties with the ruling junta has dealt a blow to the regime's military might and undermined its influence on the country's ethnic groups, observers said last week Thursday.

Earlier this month, Col. Saw Chit Thu, an ethnic Karen former leader of the insurgent Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, said his junta-affiliated Border Guard Force, or BGF, would no longer answer to the junta, which pays the group's salaries, or fight against Karen people living in the state.

He also proclaimed the BGF's neutrality in the armed resistance to junta rule.

Political observers and analysts told RFA Burmese that the breakup is significant because it diminishes the military's power and the junta's influence over ethnic minority groups, many of which have fought regime in the three years since it seized power in a coup d'état.

The announcement came after Saw Chit Thu, general secretary and senior advisor of Kayin's BGF, withdrew about 300 BGF soldiers from a military base it shared with junta troops near the border with Thailand.

The colonel oversees 13 battalions with more than 7,200 soldiers in Kayin and neighboring Mon state, which patrol parts of Kayin's Myawaddy dis-



Members of the Border Guard Force patrol the Mae Tha Waw area of southeastern Myanmar's Kayin state, Sept. 24, 2016. Photo: AFP

tract, including the border with Thailand and the Chinese-backed Yatai Shwe Kokko Special Economic Zone.

He met with Lt. Gen. Soe Win, vice chairman of the junta, on Jan. 23 in the Kayin state capital Hpa-an to discuss the matter.

“The lieutenant general said that he would report the discussion to the commander-in-chief,” Saw Chit Thu told RFA on Wednesday, referring to junta chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. “We hope to resolve these issues. They are still being negotiated.”

LIVING IN PEACE

Saw Chit Thu said BGF members no longer want to fight against their own people.

In 1994, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, or DKBA, split from the ethnic Karen National Union and signed a cease-fire agreement with the government, pledging support for offensives against its former group in exchange for military and financial assistance. In August 2010, the DKBA joined the Border Guard Force, part of the national army.

“It has been 30 years that the Karen people have fought and killed each other,” said Saw Chit Thu. “If we continue accepting support from the Tatmadaw [Myanmar military], we would have to continue to perform the duties of soldiers under its guidance.”

“For us, salary is not the main thing, but rather to live in peace,” he said.

Analysts and ethnic armed organizations welcomed the news that the Kayin state BGF would go it alone.

Hla Kyaw Zaw, a China-based political analyst, said the decision amounted to a peaceful revolution against the junta.

“The military has nothing more it can do. That’s why they [left talks] without giving any answer. They dare not say that they will fight, or that they will allow [the separation],” she said.

HEDGING ITS BETS

Political commentator Than Soe Naing questioned the Kayin BGF’s intentions and suggested the group is hedging its bets.

“It will not be possible to stand by itself for a

long time,” he said. “If the cards are stacked against the junta, it will join the KNU, but if it’s the other way around, it will return to cooperating with the junta and continue to be a Border Guard Force.”

Col. Saw Kyaw Nyunt, secretary general of the Karen National Liberation Army-Peace Council, said that the move will benefit the Karen region and its people.

“My understanding is that existing independently and working for peace, which they want to do, will be much better than fighting and killing,” he told RFA.

RFA could not reach KNU spokesman Padoh Saw Taw Nee or junta spokesman Maj. Gen. Zaw min Tun for comment on the Kayin BGF’s decision to split from the national army.

The Karen Information Center on Wednesday cited BGF Chairman Major Gen. Saw Tun Hlaing as saying that the junta had removed BGF Director Major Gen. Thet Paing Oo for failing to persuade the Kayin BGF to stay with the military.

In December 2023, Saw Chit Thu was sanctioned by the U.K. government for alleged human trafficking, forced labor and human rights violations in the China-backed Shwe Kokko New City project, a hub for gambling, online scams and other crimes, the online journal The Irrawaddy reported. The project is said to be a major source of income for the colonel and the Kayin BGF.

“We do not accept scam businesses because they are illegal,” Saw Chit Thu told RFA on Wednesday.

“We plan to send the people involved back [to their countries],” he added.

Translated by Htin Aung Kyaw for RFA Burmese.

Edited by Roseanne Gerin and Joshua Lipes.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia

PROGRESSIVE VOICE: MYANMAR JUNTA SHOULD NOT BE INCLUDED IN PEACE DIALOGUE

Campaign Group Progressive Voice has warned the international community not to negotiate a settlement with the junta that gives it any authority because it is completely responsible for the crisis.

Progressive Voice points out that in three years, the Myanmar people's revolution has made big strides with waves of military victories and revolutionary forces have established many local governance structures with service provision for the people.

Despite this progress, certain actors within the international community are undermining the Myanmar people's resistance movement, trying to impose a trade-off solution through dialogue and negotiation with the military junta, the very root cause of the crisis, according to Progressive Voice.

It says that the international community must not make the same mistakes it did in the past by falling for the junta's guise of peacemaking. Every proclama-

tion of peace and gesture of cooperation made by the junta is fraudulent and lacks sincerity.

Instead, the unprecedented sacrifices, unwavering determination and efforts, demands, and aspirations of the Myanmar people must be centered on addressing the political, human rights, and humanitarian crisis in Myanmar.

At the beginning of the new year, on 10 January, the newly appointed ASEAN Special Envoy, Alounkeo Kittikhoun, visited the junta leader Min Aung Hlaing and met with 39 political parties that had registered under the political party registration law – the law which the military junta illegitimately enacted.

Junta-controlled media reported that the ASEAN Special Envoy discussed three issues: the implementation of the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus, humanitarian aid, and the election.

Progressive Voice says that this troublesome



Photo: Harish Shivaraman

approach of ASEAN has been rooted in the belief that engagement and dialogue with the military junta — the creator of the crisis — is the most effective means to end Myanmar's junta-caused and -exacerbated crisis, rather than leveraging its position to align with the people's will to dismantle the illegal junta and build sustainable peace in Myanmar.

The same approach was taken by China as, two days after the visit of the ASEAN Special Envoy, China brokered a ceasefire agreement between the Myanmar military and the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA) after multiple rounds of talks. However, the ceasefire didn't last long.

The day after the ceasefire agreement, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) reported that the junta had broken the ceasefire by launching artillery strikes in northern Shan State. It is the same old story of the Myanmar military's lack of any dignity to honor its words, violating its own promises as it always has during the past decade of ceasefire agreements. This includes the infamous "Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement," which international peace donors funded in large sums and which has utterly failed as the Myanmar military's one-sided "peace" agenda, according to Progressive Voice.

Negotiations and political dialogue in the Myanmar context have a long track record of huge trust deficits, due to the history of broken promises where the Myanmar military has never upheld its agreements. It only engages in negotiations when it reaches its lowest points and realizes that it is losing.

Likewise, the military junta's breach of this most recent ceasefire agreement with the 3BHA also exemplifies and reaffirms that the Myanmar military can never be trusted, and their promises are never genuine. Placing the problem maker at the center of solving the Myanmar crisis will never lead to sustainable peace; rather, it will only exacerbate and prolong the crisis.

The ultimate goal of the Myanmar people's revolution is to dismantle this deeply corrupt and repressive military institution and build a new federal democratic Myanmar. Taking concrete steps towards that goal, people across Myanmar are establishing local governance systems through a bottom-up, grass-roots approach to replace the military tyranny.

ASEAN and the wider international community must find a coherent approach towards Myanmar that follows the will of the people of Myanmar, and refrain from pushing for any dialogue with the military junta, says Progressive Voice.

Instead, the international community must direct its support towards the people of Myanmar, in alignment with their vision and aspirations for change: to foster sustainable peace and build an inclusive political path forward.

The aspirations of the Myanmar people must not be undermined or overlooked by imposing so-called "inclusive dialogue" with the crisis causer. Instead, the three-year journey of the people's resistance movement – built by tireless efforts that they have taken almost entirely by themselves – must be respected, valued, and supported.

The people's revolution has gained unprecedented momentum and forged better cooperation among resistance forces with the common goal of dismantling the Myanmar military, according to Progressive Voice. It says that even more cohesiveness and strategic coordination between the armed resistance forces and political actors will undoubtedly bring the revolution to the next level and closer to victory.

It believes that such increased cooperation is the essential step to move towards a new federal democratic Myanmar that recognizes and respects its diverse peoples and communities and guarantees justice and equality.

Progressive Voice is calling on ASEAN and the wider international community to support the people of Myanmar as they develop concrete solutions to build a federal democracy from the ground up.

ASEAN and the broader international community must engage and collaborate with the legitimate representatives of Myanmar's peoples – including the National Unity Government, ethnic councils, and Ethnic Resistance Organizations – while also supporting activists, independent media, civil society, and community-based organizations in their human rights and democracy work, as well as their provision of emergency humanitarian aid through cross-border channels.

PRISONERS DENIED MEDICAL TREATMENT DIE

The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) condemned the ongoing ill-treatment of political prisoners as it reported on the deaths of two political prisoners who were denied medical treatment.

The two prisoners were being held at Kyaikmayaw Township Central Prison when they were denied medical treatment which led to their deaths.

Ko Yar Shin, a 43-year-old political prisoner who was serving a life sentence, had been in poor health since November 2023, due to internal injuries from being beaten and tortured during interrogation. Since then, he had not received adequate medical treatment and his internal injuries did not heal. He was taken to a hospital outside the prison for emergency treatment on 11 January but, by then, it was too late, and he died on 12 January.

Ko Yar Shin had been sentenced to life imprisonment under Sections 54 and 52(a) of the Anti-Terrorism Act in 2023.

Ko Pyae Phyo Aung, aged 31, another prisoner at Kyaikmayaw Township Central Prison, was transferred from the prison dormitory to the prison hospital for treatment for a stomach problem at 10:00 p.m. on 15 January. As the prison hospital doctor was resting the prison dentist gave Ko Pyae Phyo Aung an injection. One hour later he passed out and pus came out of his mouth.

Then the prison hospital director arrived and Ko Pyae Phyo Aung was given two more injections before he was put onto oxygen and taken to Mawlamyine Hospital, where he died at 1:00 a.m. on 16 January.

Ko Pyae Phyo Aung, from Insein in Yangon Region, was arrested on 3 January 2022 at the Thanlwin Bridge checkpoint in Hpa-An Township, Karen State. He had been sentenced to 7 years in prison under Section 52(a) of the Anti-Terrorism Act.

HURFOM says the deaths of these two political prisoners were preventable, especially as they should never have been arrested and detained for exercising their fundamental rights and freedoms.

HURFOM is calling for an immediate investigation into the deaths of both the men and the many others who have been killed in military-run detention centers and prisons.

Sick prisoners are dying because the junta has restricted foreign medicines in prisons and does not provide sufficient access to medical treatment. In addition, prisoners are not allowed to be transported outside hospitals in emergencies, according to HURFOM.

According to the rights monitoring group, Political Prisoners Network - Myanmar (PPNM), seventeen political prisoners died in 2023 because their medical symptoms were ignored and treated too late by junta-staffed personnel.

HURFOM says that Ko Yar Shin and Ko Pyae Phyo Aung died because the junta failed to prioritise their health and wellbeing and that the junta should be held accountable for all the deaths of prisoners who died because they were denied proper medical care.

HURFOM, along with many other civil society organisations, such as the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) has stated that the Myanmar junta's unlawful detention of innocent civilians violates international norms and principles.

The security and protection of detainees remains an ongoing concern as HURFOM calls upon the international community to investigate conditions in prisons in Myanmar and to hold perpetrators responsible for the demise of the health and ultimate deaths of political prisoners.

LAO SEX TRAFFICKING VICTIMS PLEAD FOR FREEDOM IN MYANMAR'S MONGLA

When Namtan left her home in the Lao capital of Vientiane last year to go work at a restaurant in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, her hopes were high.

The 17-year-old was promised wages of US\$75 per month – just below the national minimum wage, but not bad for a young, unskilled worker in impoverished Laos, where the average income is around US\$2,150 a year.

“I decided to go to the Golden Triangle SEZ ... because I was promised a good wage and I wanted to make money to help my parents,” said Namtan who, like the other women interviewed for this report, didn’t give her last name, citing fear of reprisal.

In September, six months after her arrival, Namtan’s plans began to unravel. The restaurant where she was employed turned into a karaoke “entertainment venue,” or KTV bar, and she was forced to provide sex to clientele or risk being beaten by the owner.

She was later “recruited” to work at a similar establishment in Mongla, a seedy town in northern Myanmar’s Shan state on the border with China.

“I was traded several times – the latest time I was sold from the Golden Triangle SEZ to Mongla,” Namtan said of her relocation four months ago to the border town, which is under the control of an ethnic Wa army at odds with Myanmar’s military regime. “Now, [my boss] is demanding that my mother pay a ransom for my release.”

She said her boss, who she believes is a Chinese national, demanded a sum of 30,000 yuan (US\$4,200) for her freedom – far beyond anything she or her family can afford.

Namtan is one of three young women from Vientiane that RFA spoke with in recent days who were first recruited to work in the Golden Triangle SEZ in Bokeo before being sold and forced to work as prostitutes at the same KTV bar in Mongla.

All three faced beatings and other forms of punishment if they did not do the owner’s bidding, and were told they must pay a huge ransom for their freedom.

The women said that there are altogether 30 people held at the KTV bar in Mongla, which is located in an establishment called Kings Roman Casino – the same name as the casino that houses the KTV bar in the Golden Triangle SEZ in Bokeo, Laos. Other women held at the Mongla bar are nationals from Myanmar, China and Vietnam, they said.

Their stories are increasingly common as more youths with few job prospects fall victim to trafficking gangs in the enclaves of Southeast Asia’s Golden Triangle, where the borders of Laos, Thailand and Myanmar meet to form a remote and largely ungovernable region.

Impoverished young people from Laos and neighboring countries have told RFA they were lured to the area with the promise of a lucrative job but were then held against their will in casinos and karaoke ven-

ues by trafficking rings that exploit them under threat of violence.

‘SKINNY, PALE AND TIRED’

The Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, or SEZ, was established in 2007 in the northern province of Bokeo on a 3,000-hectare (7,400-acre) concession along the Mekong River where Laos, Myanmar and Thailand meet.

It’s become a gambling and tourism hub catering to Chinese citizens where investors – exempt from most national-level economic regulations – have built hotels, restaurants, casinos, a hospital, markets and factories.

But it has also earned a reputation as a haven for criminal activities, including prostitution and drug trafficking.

Nok, 19, said she agreed to work at a bar in the Golden Triangle SEZ when she was approached by a Lao middleman who said she would earn a good salary and “be treated well.”

“After working for two months, I went out for an hour, and when I returned, I was beaten with a wooden stick on my legs and arms,” she said, adding that she suffered “bruises all over my body.”

Her captor also reduced her paycheck by 200 yuan (US\$28) and kept her confined at the club.

At that point, I was thinking about fleeing, as soon as I got paid,” she said. “Instead, I was sent to Thailand then Myanmar where I was beaten up again.”

Nok said she was sent to Thailand’s Chonburi

province, but traded after a few months to the establishment where Namtan works in Mongla for 25,000 yuan (US\$3,500) and forced to “provide sex services to Chinese tourists.”

Last week, she said her boss “threatened to kill me for my organs” unless she came up with 30,000 yuan (US\$4,200) for her release by Jan. 19.

“My parents say they don’t have that much money to pay the ransom,” she said.

Nok said that in the three months since she was sent to Mongla, she went from weighing 50 kilograms (125 pounds) to 45 kilograms (112.5 pounds) “because I was allowed to eat only once a day.”

“I’m so skinny, pale and tired,” she said. “My parents are very worried about me and are trying to sell their home and land to rescue me.”

‘WHY DON’T THEY LET US GO BACK HOME?’

Around six months ago, Dao, 20, also ended up at the same karaoke bar in Mongla, where she was forced to provide sex to clientele.

While she has paid off her 10,000-yuan (US\$1,400) “debt” to the owner, he told her she can’t return to her home in Vientiane because her “labor contract” doesn’t expire until April.

“At first, they told me that there would be no beatings, and that I ... would be free to come and go as I pleased,” she said. “But in reality, it’s the opposite. We’re beaten up badly, confined in a room and deprived of food.”

Fa, a 21-year-old Myanmar national who can speak Lao and Thai, also works at the KTV bar in Mongla.

She said that when she started work at the bar, the owner promised that she would not be made to prostitute herself, but was told to 10 days later. When she and her Lao counterparts refused, the owner put them in handcuffs for two days.

Fa said that she suffers from a uterine condition that makes her unfit for sex work.

“Right at the beginning, I told my boss that I wouldn’t sell my body because my uterus is infected,” she said. “They said to me, ‘That’s OK, you can do whatever you want, and won’t be forced to do anything’ ... They said if I have a 5,000-yuan (US\$700) debt, I’ll have to pay exactly that and nothing more.”

Her boss said that she could stop working, but would have to pay him 22,000 yuan (US\$3,100) for her freedom – money she doesn’t have.

In the seven months since she arrived, Fa said that her health has worsened and that she went from weighing 52 kilograms (115 pounds) to 45 kilograms (100 pounds).

“My friends and I have been confined, detained, beaten up and deprived of food for days,” she said. “Why don’t they just let us go back home? Why?”

NO HELP FROM AUTHORITIES

The young women at the KTV bar told RFA they have been calling on Lao and Myanmar authorities and the media to help free them, but with no result.

Parents of the women from Laos said that they had also filed a request for help rescuing them with Lao authorities, but are not hopeful because they were told there was nothing they could do as “that area in Myanmar is a special economic zone controlled by the Chinese.”

RFA Lao contacted the Lao Embassy in Myanmar and officials from the Lao anti-human trafficking unit in Vientiane to ask Myanmar authorities for help rescuing the women in Mongla, noting that they risk being sold to other bar owners in the area if they are unable to pay their ransoms.

Lao Embassy officials said that they need assistance from their counterparts in Myanmar, but added that authorities have limited access to the area due to ongoing conflict.

“It’s controlled by the ethnic army,” one official said. “We’ve notified the Myanmar foreign affairs ministry asking for help ... Lao police don’t have any connections with the Wa [ethnic army], but Thai police do.” The official noted that there are currently 20-30 Lao victims of human trafficking being held in Shan state.

“Most of them were unaware of the dangers of human trafficking and ended up detained in Mongla,” he said.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia

CONSTRUCTIVE ADVOCACY: EMPOWERING MYANMAR POLITICAL CHANGE THROUGH CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

JAMES SHWE

When seeking political change, the power of collective action and public discourse cannot be underestimated. However, it is crucial to distinguish between constructive advocacy and public negative criticism when striving for meaningful change. While the former empowers the resistance by fostering unity and progress, the latter can prove detrimental, hindering the very cause it purports to support. This op-ed argues in favor of constructive advocacy over public negative criticism, emphasizing its ability to strengthen the resistance and achieve its transformative goals. In a true democracy, the people must be able to convey their wishes, sentiments, and opinions to the leadership, which must be able to accept the criticism and respond accordingly. We should not discourage or prohibit criticism, but it should be

done in a way to prevent the junta from taking advantage of it.

THE PITFALLS OF PUBLIC NEGATIVE CRITICISM

Fragmenting the movement: Public negative criticism can divide and fragment the resistance, diluting its strength and reducing its impact. When individuals publicly criticize without offering constructive alternatives, it becomes challenging to maintain unity and a shared vision. This disunity weakens the revolution's ability to effectively challenge the status quo. Note that divide and conquer was and is still the military's principal strategy of staying in power.

Undermining public support: Public negative criticism, particularly when expressed without a clear



Photo: AFP

purpose or solution, risks alienating the broader public. Continuous negativity can lead to disillusionment and apathy, eroding the support base upon which the revolution relies. To achieve significant change, the resistance must foster public trust and maintain a positive image. Note that Dr Mie Mie Winn Byrd's DIP principle places the resistance's success on (1) Defection of the junta's forces (2) International Pressure and (3) Public support.

Feeding into opposition narratives: Critics of the resistance often seize upon public negative criticism to undermine its legitimacy. By amplifying internal dissent, these opponents seek to delegitimize the resistance and portray it as chaotic or ineffective. Publicly airing grievances without offering constructive alternatives plays into the hands of those seeking to discredit the movement.

THE POWER OF CONSTRUCTIVE ADVOCACY

Unifying diverse voices: Constructive advocacy encourages open dialogue and collaboration among

resistance forces. It facilitates the pooling of ideas, expertise, and experiences to create a cohesive and inclusive movement. By focusing on constructive solutions, individuals can find common ground and work together towards their shared objectives.

Garnering public support: Constructive advocacy engages the broader public by presenting well-reasoned arguments and practical solutions. It ensures that the resistance's message resonates with the masses, inspiring support and active participation. By offering constructive alternatives, advocates can demonstrate the revolution's ability to effect positive change.

Challenging the status quo effectively: Constructive advocacy provides a platform for the resistance forces to challenge the existing systems and structures while presenting viable alternatives. By proposing tangible solutions and reforms, the movement gains credibility and legitimacy in its pursuit of a better future. This approach enables the resistance to shape public opinion and mobilize support for its cause.

CONCLUSION

While public criticism has its place in any movement, it is essential to recognize its limitations and potential risks. Negative criticism, when not accompanied by constructive alternatives, can undermine the revolution's unity, public support, and credibility. Constructive advocacy, on the other hand, empowers the movement by fostering collaboration, garnering public support, and challenging the status quo effectively. By focusing on constructive solutions and maintaining a cohesive message, the revolution can achieve its transformative goals and build a better future for all. Let us prioritize constructive advocacy as the driving force behind the movement, ensuring its long-term success and enduring impact.

Author James Shwe is a Myanmar democracy activist in the US and is a member of the advocacy groups Free Myanmar and the Los Angeles Myanmar Movement.



THE QUIET DRAGON: UNRAVELLING CHINESE INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN CAMBODIA

Out of all the ASEAN member states, Cambodia has proved the most willing to align its interests with the People's Republic of China. When the country recently held the position of ASEAN chair in 2022, they blocked the use of language implying that China was taking aggressive action in the South China Sea, resulting in no consensus on the region being reached. For the first time in its over 45 years of history, ASEAN failed to issue a communiqué at the conclusion of its annual meeting in Cambodia. Its ten members reach a stalemate over China's baseless claims in the South China Sea, and member countries disagree over whether to include the territorial issue in the joint statement. This diplo-

matic freeze follows an ongoing maritime standoff between China and the Philippines in the Scarborough Shoal, and is widely seen as a failure for the regional body. Some observers view China's influence on Cambodia, the 2012 rotating chair of the conference and again in 2022, as having caused the exclusion of the Scarborough Shoal and EEZ issues from the text, resulting in an impasse.

CHINESE INFLUENCE IN ASEAN THROUGH BRI

Cambodian Prime Minister of Chinese heritage, Hun Sen, who has ruled for 35 years, was supported by Vietnam from the late 1970s when he was part of the rebel army that helped overthrow the Chi-



Photo: Vicky T

na-backed Khmer Rouge. He also enjoyed robust support from Hanoi through the 1980s, when Hun Sen's government was embargoed by China, the United States, and their partners in ASEAN. In recent years, however, the wheel has turned, and Hun Sen became a good friend of Chinese President Xi Jinping. Underscoring the closeness of their relationship, Hun Sen became the first foreign leader to visit Xi in China amid the coronavirus pandemic. He referred to Cambodia and China as "steadfast friends."

Hun Sen has taken his loyalty to China a step further by echoing Beijing's revisionist history on Chinese support for the Khmer Rouge. He now omits any talk of Chinese transgressions, which must be particularly galling to Vietnam; Hanoi clearly no longer has its man in Cambodia. In 2009, Phnom Penh made a decision to deport twenty Uyghur refugees to China, an action which was met with strong condemnation by

human rights groups. In July 2019, UN ambassadors of 37 countries, including Cambodia, have signed a joint letter to the UNHRC defending China's treatment of Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups in the Xinjiang region.

Moreover, in mid-October 2020, Hun Sen's regime welcomed Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and the two sides inked a new free trade agreement, which was negotiated in less than a year. China is already Cambodia's largest aid donor and investor as well as its top trade partner. Cambodia is also an active participant in BRI to the tune of at least \$5.3 billion, and Phnom Penh is "benefiting" in the form of infrastructure projects including roads, bridges, airports, railways, hydropower dams, and special economic zones (SEZs). After three years of Chinese-led construction work, Cambodia's very first toll expressway has opened for business in late 2022, the project symbolizing the deepening economic ties between the Southeast Asian nation and Beijing. Costing roughly \$2 billion to construct, the expressway stretches 190 kilometres between Phnom Penh, the capital, and the port city of Sihanoukville, which became a Chinese hub for cybercrimes, gambling, human organ harvesting and many other heinous crimes.

In other areas of the world, such as Sri Lanka, Beijing has leveraged BRI projects for geopolitical gain once the recipient country realizes it cannot afford the program. Hun Sen dismisses these concerns for Cambodia even though some observers believe Phnom Penh has already relinquished some of its sovereignty due to BRI deals, especially within Chinese-owned SEZs. Even Cambodian academicians are dancing to the tunes of Chinese charm offensive activities with both calling for building a "community for shared future 人类命运共同体".

Although Hun Sen has denied reports that China is planning to build a naval and air base at Ream and Dara Sakor, respectively, Beijing is clearly involved in financing infrastructure construction at these locations, which may give it preferential access to them



in the future. Further fuelling speculation, Cambodia in September 2021 bulldozed U.S. facilities at Ream without notifying Washington, strongly suggesting that Phnom Penh attempted to do it secretly. Commercial imagery indicates that runways at Dara Sakor can accommodate Chinese military aircraft. To add to Vietnamese concerns, China and Cambodia have continued holding joint military exercises in spite of the pandemic, highlighting the importance each side attaches to these engagements. If Beijing were to obtain any level of access to Ream or Dara Sakor along the Gulf of Thailand, or, in a worst-case scenario, Beijing suddenly owned and operated the bases, this would severely threaten Vietnam's western flank. Coupled with Beijing's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, Hanoi would increasingly feel the pressure of geostrategic encirclement. Phnom Penh also welcomed Chinese construction of its military intuitions and regular dispatches its officer cadets to China for training .

CHINESE IMPACT ON DAMMING MEKONG

The Tonle Sap in Cambodia, which takes its name from a tributary that connects it to the Mekong River, is the world's largest inland fishery - more fish are usually caught here than in any other lake on Earth. Known as the beating heart of Mekong, it has supported generations of fishermen in this part of Cambodia. Studies suggests an alarming decline in fish populations in the lower Mekong, including the Tonle Sap. Scientists across the world recently analysed 110 fish species over 17 years and found their numbers had dropped by more than 87%. The giant catfish, one of the world's largest freshwater fish, and revered by some locals, is believed to be on the verge of extinction - while the striped catfish, once a staple in countries along the Mekong, is now endangered. The fish is so important in Cambodian culture that the currency is named after it.

Hydropower has proved unreliable for Cambodia because of recent water shortages and low

river levels, caused by Chinese damming Mekong upstream. Even after importing electricity from neighbouring Laos, Vietnam and Thailand, power outages in Cambodian urban areas are common. The dams upstream by China and Chinese builders in Laos are not just trapping water, but also rich sediment, according to several studies, including one by the Mekong River Commission (MRC), and that is starving the Mekong of essential nutrients. The waters of the Mekong are muddy brown not because of dirt, but because of nutrients that the river picks up on its journey south. Fish and farmlands all the way to Vietnam need that sediment not just to survive, but to thrive.

The hegemonic riparian acts by China upstream is now fuelling determination among younger generations of Cambodians. They want to save the Mekong, or at least protect the river that is called "the mother of water" in the many languages spoken along its banks. They cannot solve climate change, nor can they prevent dams being built upstream in Laos or China. However, they can try to save the fish from illegal and unregulated fishing - especially the fish that do make it downstream to the unique flooded forest habitats in the north of Cambodia. These protected forests have adapted over hundreds of years to the two seasons - months of dry weather followed by months of monsoon rain. However, the gush of water from upstream dams during the dry season gives the forest no time to dry out. When this happens, fungi grow in the damp conditions, causing dry rot. This, in turn, has an impact on the fish - because the submerged yet healthy roots are a safe haven for fish to spawn. The ecosystem around the roots also provides food for the fish.

With regional cooperation considered essential to changing policies, some people are looking towards MRC to take on a stronger role. The organisation has long been seen as politically weak, because it only includes four of the basin countries and not China, which has set up its own commission, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (The Mekong is called

Lancang in China). The accelerating pace of change, coupled with cumulative impacts of transboundary stressors, and the impending impacts of climate change, point to a fear that the Mekong River, which is the lifeblood of most of Southeast Asia, will gradually lose function until it no longer supports the huge diversity of wildlife and millions of people that depend on it.

CHINESE CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES IN CAMBODIA

Cambodia has become so popular for Chinese anti-fraud operations that in 2019 Chinese police moved to set up a joint law enforcement office with its Cambodian counterparts in the capital of Phnom Penh. In 2021, at least 610 Chinese nationals suspected of online fraud were repatriated to China: none of them via formal extradition procedures, but simply deported with the direct cooperation from the Cambodian authorities. Cambodia is one of many countries around Asia with a ratified bilateral extradition treaty with China, but these are rarely – or in some cases, never – used as authorities instead rely on the faster, smoother and easier method of having people deported – thus depriving them of any chance of due process to fight accusations of criminal behaviour. Since the ratification of the extradition agreement, Cambodia has been involved in several highly problematic extradition and disguised extradition cases to China.

Cambodia has also extradited Taiwanese nationals to China on several occasions, despite objections from Taipei. On several occasions, Taiwan's Ministry of Justice has unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate with the Chinese Ministry of Public Security and Cambodian officials in efforts to prevent the extradition of their nationals from Cambodia to China. Taiwan does not have formal diplomatic relations with Cambodia and the Cambodia – China Extradition Agreement has been used by China to also cover the apprehension and extradition of Taiwanese nationals, often without any consultation or prior notification to Taiwanese ministries.

Similar stories of often young people being lured to other countries only to be held hostage and forced to engage in online scams are not limited to Cambodia. It is well depicted in the recent Chinese blockbuster crime thriller *No More Bets* 孤注一擲 (2023). This movie received immense attention from Chinese tourists to an extent that many vowed to never visit Southeast Asian countries like Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar in future. As a damage control measure, Phnom Penh and Naypyidaw banned release of this hit Chinese film in their territories. Myanmar's Consul-General in Nanning, China, U Kyaw Soe Thein, met with the Director of the Foreign Office of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Lian Yin, on 26 Sep 2023 discussed the film's role in "hurting" Myanmar's reputation in China.

CONCLUSION

The disturbing extent of Chinese influence in Cambodia's economic development through MRI, its "friendship" activities in cooperation with Phnom Penh's military, aggressive riparian acts through unsustainable dam building, coupled with a changing climate, will continue to alter the course of the Mekong River - and the lives of Cambodians who live along it. The fate of the river may depend on the resilience of the people it supports. And how far they are willing to go to defend it - and to restore that famous might to the Mekong is a tough question to predict, ponder and resolve. In addition to these, the increased resurgence of Chinese cultural and economic activity in 21st-century Cambodia has triggered distrust, resentment, and anti-Chinese sentiment among the poorer indigenous Khmer majority, many of whom eke out a rudimentary daily living engaging in rural agrarian rice peasantry or fishing in stark socioeconomic contrast to their modern, wealthier, and cosmopolitan middle-class Chinese counterparts.

UN EXPERTS WANT CHARGES AGAINST HK TYCOON JIMMY LAI DROPPED

Four UN experts called Monday for all charges against pro-democracy Hong Kong tycoon Jimmy Lai to be dropped, as they pressed for his immediate release.

Lai pleaded not guilty on 2 January to “sedition” and “collusion” charges in a high-profile national

security trial that could see him jailed for life.

The charges against Lai -- founder of the now-shuttered popular Chinese-language tabloid Apple Daily -- revolve around the newspaper’s publications, which supported pro-democracy protests and criticised Beijing’s leadership.



Photo: Jimmy Lai

“Jimmy Lai’s arrest, detention and series of criminal proceedings over the past few years appear to be directly related to his criticism of the Chinese government and his support for democracy in Hong Kong,” the UN experts said.

The statement was penned by the special rapporteurs on freedom of expression; on freedom of association; on degrading treatment or punishment; and on the independence of judges and lawyers.

Special rapporteurs are unpaid experts who are appointed by the UN Human Rights Council. They

do not speak on behalf of the United Nations.

Their announcement came a day before China faces a regular review of its human rights record at the UN in Geneva, with a crackdown on rights in Hong Kong among the issues expected to be raised.

“We are alarmed by the multiple and serious violations of Jimmy Lai’s freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association, and his right to a fair trial, including the denial of access to a lawyer of his own choosing and the handpicking of judges by the authorities,” the experts said.

Lai’s trial, which began in late 2023 after he was jailed for more than 1,100 days, is being closely watched as a barometer of Hong Kong’s political freedoms and judicial independence.

His case has drawn widespread condemnation from the international community but Beijing has dismissed the criticism as interference.

A rags-to-riches figure who made his fortune selling clothes before expanding into media, Lai, 76, will be tried without a jury and has been denied his first choice of lawyer.

The British national is accused of “collusion” with foreign forces under sweeping national security legislation that Beijing imposed on Hong Kong in 2020.

“We expressed our concerns about the National Security Law before it was enacted and will continue to do so, as we believe it is not in line with international legal obligations,” the UN experts said.

Critics say the law has curtailed civil liberties, silenced dissent and eroded the judicial independence that once attracted foreign businesses to the city.

AFP



TECHNOLOGY ‘SUPERCHARGING ILLICIT ECONOMIES’ IN SOUTHEAST ASIA



Organized crime gangs in Southeast Asia are migrating operations to remote areas of the region where the rule of law is absent and are using technology to lead what a senior official at the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is calling the “supercharging of illicit economies”, including expanding the trafficking of drugs and people as well as money laundering and fraudulent ‘scam’ activities.

UNODC Regional Representative for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, Jeremy Douglas, explained to UN News how technology is changing the landscape of transnational organized crime in the region.

Jeremy Douglas: Transnational organized criminals are innovators, they have always used technology to do business. However, with the acceleration of technology, particularly cryptocurrencies, online gaming, marketplaces and recently AI, we’re seeing that they are quickly adopting and using these different technologies to create new business opportunities in the region.

We’ve seen this most particularly when it comes to money laundering, especially through casinos, some of which are fundamentally operating as banks for criminal transactions.

UN News: What technologies in particular are organized crime groups using?

Jeremy Douglas: They’re using a variety of cryptocurrencies in online businesses and market-

places, both on the publicly accessible clear web and the dark web, to generate and mix money, and to move commodities. They’re using a range of social media apps to market goods and to operate different businesses, including the trafficking of drugs and precursors, and for human trafficking. At the core it’s all about profit, and these technologies allow them to generate and move large amounts of money and value very quickly.

UN News: How troubling is this development?

Jeremy Douglas: It’s troubling on many levels. The capacities of organized crime groups are often far ahead of the governments in the region, particularly of the less developed countries. And criminal groups are migrating operations to locations where they can capitalize on vulnerabilities. It’s going to be a long period of catch-up with the technology advancing and accelerating change in a whole range of transnational crimes.

UN News: How have these developments in technology changed these illicit businesses?

Jeremy Douglas: It depends on the illicit business, but, for example, we’ve seen online marketplaces that are fronts for trafficking in human beings; people being bought and sold online on Facebook, in Telegram groups and in the dark web.

It is most pronounced in relation to the scam centres, often located alongside casinos, or obscure

hotels or guarded buildings where people have been trafficked to work cyber-enabled scams and financial fraud. So, in this sense we are seeing a convergence of crimes.

Money laundering is also taking place in new ways which are accelerating the expansion of illicit businesses. For example, the trafficking of drugs with money moving through or being invested in casinos or reinvested into innovations in drug production or precursor chemical production.

Fundamentally, what we are seeing is the supercharging of illicit economies within the Mekong sub-region of Southeast Asia.

UN News: How are criminal networks able to flourish with such impunity?

Jeremy Douglas: They are basing operations in parts of the region that are autonomous or semi-autonomous, often in border areas far from major capital cities, basically in places where the rule of law is incredibly weak or corruptible and where there is limited authority to step in and stop them; in some extreme cases to areas which are actually under the control of armed groups, for example, in northern Myanmar.

This is posing a distinct challenge for the governments of the region because how do you confront something that is in a place you don't control?

UN News: How are States adapting to the threat?

Jeremy Douglas: It really depends, as this is a region of vast diversity, with some of the highest capacity states in the world within proximity of some incredibly low-capacity states. Some are trying to protect themselves, others are not really adapting as they are under-resourced.

It is also so difficult to understand these crimes; the technologies needed to analyse and counter these crimes are also very sophisticated.

So, there's a knowledge and technology gap on the State side that needs to be addressed and resourced quickly, while criminal networks are using technology to innovate and develop rapidly.

UN News: What measures can be taken to tackle this issue and how is UNODC involved?

Jeremy Douglas: First and foremost, UNODC is helping countries and authorities to understand these crimes. We're carrying out analysis to inform our understanding, thinking and programming, while at the

same time we are helping governments to understand the challenges that they face.

Our discussions with governments started as we were looking at addressing the drug trade and associated financial flows, but as criminal networks have matured and innovated we have been looking more at the convergence and evolution of crimes.

Part of our approach has been to bring countries to the table to talk about the issues to set the stage for responding, and we've recently agreed on a plan of action for the ASEAN region and China to address a range of aspects of criminality in an integrated way. At the same time, we're talking with governments in Southeast Asia, one-on-one, about the situation and the needs and capacity gaps that they have.

It is extremely important to bring States together so they can agree quickly on the actions they and the region need to take, and how the capacity gaps can be addressed.

UN News: What could happen if the issue is not addressed?

Jeremy Douglas: If the absence of rule of law in the places where these businesses are operating is not addressed, then we're going to see these criminal operations continue to grow, to metastasize. They will have greater global reach and an increased ability to defraud people or worse in other parts of the world.

As these criminal networks expand and become more sophisticated, they will also become very powerful and governments may lose control in some parts of the region, particularly where non-state armed groups are entrenched. This will impact the wider region and further afield.

We really need to ensure that this issue is addressed quickly, and in a holistic, strategic way.

Courtesy of UN News



Photo: Sebastien Goldberg

SHAN STATE

Defence forces capture Mabein town in Northern Shan State

Joint forces from the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the People's Defense Force (PDF) took control of Mabein Town in Mongmit District, northern Shan State on the morning of 21 January.

According to reports the only junta bases in Mabein Town were the police station and the military camp in Konemahkan Village, where Infantry Battalion 276 was stationed, both of which have now been captured by the KIA and PDF joint forces.

"The town was captured. The KIA took control of the police station and also seized the military camp in Konemahkan Village. The military council did not launch any airstrikes today", said a resident of Mabein Town at noon on 22 January.

They also said that earlier in the morning of 22 January there had been intense fighting, but it had subsided by noon.

On the night of 20 January, the junta conducted a series of airstrikes on Mabein Town.

The Mabein resident explained: "A police station collapsed. This morning, some junta soldiers were detained. There was fighting throughout the day on 21 January. The military council also launched airstrikes at night. I believe they used 500-pound bombs."

There has been no official comment from the junta about the situation in Mabein Town, but pro-junta Telegram channels did acknowledge the attack and said that the junta was not in a good position there.

Mizzima is currently investigating the situation in Mabein Town.

Mabein Township where Mabein Town is located is in a strategic position on the borders of Kachin State, and Mandalay and Sagaing regions.

Corpses of 30 civilians found in Momeik Town in northern Shan State

About 30 civilians were killed by junta artillery and airstrikes in Momeik Town, northern Shan State between 18 and 23 January.

During that period in Momeik Town there were confrontations between the junta army and combined defence forces from, amongst others, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the All Burma Democratic Front (ABDF), The Kachin People's Defense Force (PDF) and members of other PDF groups.

30 civilian corpses were discovered by body collectors, according to a Momeik resident who Mizzima talked to on 24 January.

They said: "There is a person in the town who is involved in collecting corpses. I am unsure whether he is working independently or as part of a group. It is estimated that around 40 bodies were buried by 23 January, including the remains of troops affiliated with the Military Council. Among them, approximately 30 are believed to be civilians. On the KIA side, when their soldiers perish, they promptly retrieve them using bags."

The resident said that they believed more bodies would be found and the death toll would rise.

Fighting is ongoing throughout Momeik Town. Junta airstrikes have destroyed many houses and on 19 January 2024 the town's market was burned down. About 80 per cent of the population has fled, though there are residents who remain trapped in the town.

Momeik Town is home to the junta's Light Infantry Battalion 348, Infantry Battalion 276, and Infantry Battalion 223.

JUNTA REPLACES DETAINED GENERALS AFTER SURRENDER IN KOKANG; REPORTS OF DEATH AND LIFE SENTENCES

Six junta brigadier generals, currently detained in Naypyitaw, were replaced by Myanmar's regime after surrendering to the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) in Kokang, according to local news outlets.

The junta was reported to be interrogating the six generals who surrendered in Laukkai, the capital of the Kokang self-administered zone in northern Shan State in early January.

Reportedly, Brigadier-General Moe Kyaw Thu, who was overseeing the surrender negotiations with the Kokang army Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) in Laukkai, has been substituted by Colonel Myo Min Htwe from the Light Infantry Division (LID) 11. Concurrently, Brigadier-General Tun Tun Myint, former head of the Kokang administrative body, has been replaced by Colonel Thant Tin Soe.

Colonel Aung Kyaw Moe, previously assigned to the sergeants training school, has now taken command of the Military Operations Command 12, succeeding Brigadier-General Aung Zaw Lin.

Furthermore, Brigadier-General Zaw Myo Win has been replaced by Colonel Aung Soe Min and Brigadier-General Thaw Zin Oo has been substituted by Colonel Maung Maung Lay. Another one who had to give up his military position is Brigadier General Aye Min Oo.

According to the Chindwin News Agency, the junta has sentenced three of the six generals to the death penalty while the other three were given life sentences. But Mizzima could not independently verify the information.

FRAUD ALLEGED IN HIRING OF MYANMAR SEASONAL WORKERS IN SOUTH KOREA

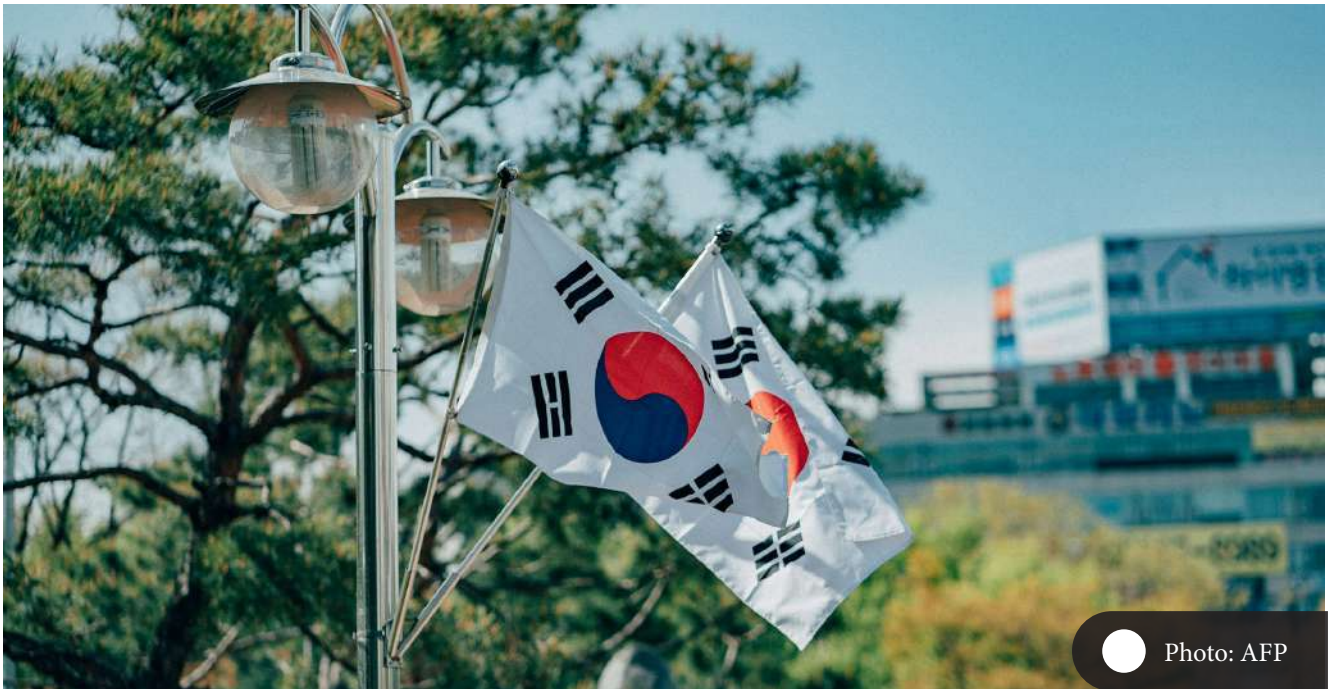


Photo: AFP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

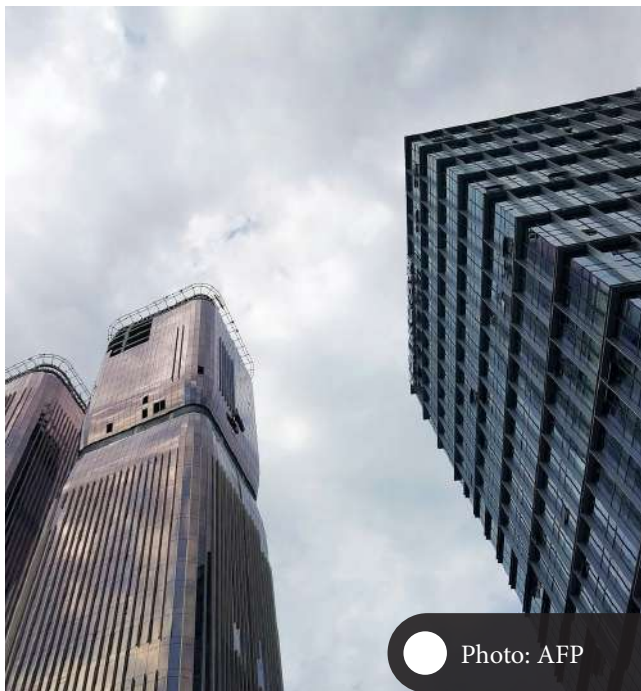
The South Korea embassy in Myanmar also announced that South Korea had not issued any directive and announcement regarding the recruitment of seasonal workers from Myanmar but the state-run media in Myanmar reported in the third week of December 2023 that the Ministry of Labour of the Myanmar Military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

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

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

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

CHINA TO CUT AMOUNT BANKS HOLD IN RESERVE TO BOOST LENDING



China said Wednesday last week it would next month cut the amount banks must hold in reserve in order to boost lending, state media reported, as officials look to reignite stuttering growth.

The decision comes as the world's second-largest economy faces multiple headwinds, including a prolonged crisis in the property sector, sluggish domestic consumption and weakening foreign demand.

People's Bank of China Governor Pan Gongsheng told a press conference that the reserve requirement ratio (RRR) will be "lowered by 0.5 percentage points on February 5", state broadcaster CCTV reported.

The move will provide "one trillion yuan (\$140 billion) of liquidity to the market", it added.

China last cut its RRR in September by 0.25 percentage points to around 7.4 percent.

The move is intended to allow commercial banks to lend more to businesses, offering support for the real economy.

The latest decision is "another step in the right direction, but monetary policy by itself is not enough to boost economic momentum", Zhiwei Zhang, president and chief economist at Pinpoint Asset Management, told AFP.

"A more proactive fiscal stance focusing on consumption is more important and effective," said Zhang.

"The allocation of fiscal resources to consumption instead of investment is critical, as China faces deflationary pressure."

News of the reduction follows Premier Li Qiang's calls for more "forceful" measures to support China's battered stocks, giving a shot in the arm to investor confidence.

Bloomberg reported authorities were looking at a raft of initiatives, and policymakers were seeking to mobilise nearly \$280 billion, mainly from the offshore accounts of state-owned enterprises.

The central bank's governor also said Wednesday that more policies to offer support for the country's struggling property sector would soon be announced.

Markets appeared to react positively on Wednesday, with Hong Kong stocks surging to close more than three percent higher on the day.

Mainland stocks were also up: the Shanghai Composite Index closed 1.80 percent higher, while trading in Shenzhen saw a 1.25 percent rally.

China last year recorded one of its worst annual rates of growth since 1990, dampening hopes for a rapid economic recovery following the end of draconian Covid restrictions in late 2022.

The country's gross domestic product expanded 5.2 percent to hit 126 trillion yuan (\$17.8 trillion) in 2023, national statistics authorities revealed last week.

The reading was an improvement on the three percent recorded in 2022, when zero-Covid weighed heavily on activity, but it also marked the weakest performance since 1990, excluding the pandemic years.

China's economy enjoyed an initial post-pandemic rebound, but ran out of steam within months as a lack of confidence among households and businesses hit consumption.

This year, China's GDP growth is expected to slow to 4.5 percent, according to World Bank forecasts.

The government is due to announce its official target in March.

AFP

CHINA ANNOUNCES FRESH BAILOUTS FOR AILING PROPERTY SECTOR



Photo: Li Yang

China will offer more bailout loans for its struggling real-estate sector with the first funds expected to become available in the coming days, its housing ministry said Friday, in the latest move to help kickstart stuttering growth.

Troubles in the property industry have been one of the main headwinds facing the world's second-largest economy, with a government clampdown on excessive borrowing in 2020 leaving several developers grappling with massive debt and flagging demand.

"In view of the current financing difficulties of some real estate projects," the official newspaper of Beijing's housing ministry quoted officials as saying, local governments would "propose a list of real estate projects that can be given financing support".

"It is understood that loans will be available for the first batch of project lists before the end of the month," it added.

A national body will be set up to oversee the loans, the report said.

Officials this week pledged new measures to stimulate the economy -- which in 2024 expanded at one of the slowest rates in decades -- with the People's Bank of China on Wednesday slashing the portion of

cash banks must hold in reserve.

China has issued several rounds of bailout funds for its embattled property sector, with Beijing saying this week that its banks had provided nearly 10 trillion yuan (\$1.4 trillion) in loans to real estate last year.

The property sector -- which long accounted for around a quarter of the economy and experienced dazzling growth for two decades -- has been beset in recent years by spiralling debt crises at some of its top developers.

Financial woes at major firms such as Evergrande and Country Garden are now fuelling buyer mistrust against a backdrop of unfinished housing developments and falling prices.

A Hong Kong court will on Monday consider a winding-up petition for Evergrande led by off-shore creditors.

And Beijing's top decision-makers, including President Xi Jinping, pledged at an annual closed-door meeting in December to "actively yet safely defuse risks in the real estate sector" and "meet the reasonable financing needs of real estate enterprises".

AFP

Penrose Thitsa

MYANMAR EXPORTS REACH OVER US\$264 MILLION IN A WEEK

In a recent announcement, the junta's Ministry of Commerce reported that the country's exports soared to more than \$264 million during the week of January 6 to 12, reported the junta-controlled media.

Myanmar's major export items included rice, broken rice, beans and pulses, fruits, rubber, and sesame.

The junta's ministry in collaboration with the Myanmar Rice Federation, successfully implemented the Myanmar Rice Online (MyRo) system. This online registration system aims to supervise rice exports, with a focus on ensuring sufficient domestic stock and maintaining price stability.

During this period, Myanmar saw substantial rice exports, with Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Belgium, Cameroon, Slovenia, Italy, Croatia, Bulgaria, and the Ivory Coast emerging as the primary purchasers.

In addition to rice, the country exported 326 tonnes of rubber, generating about US\$10 million in revenue. The rubber products, including Ribbed Smoked Sheet Rubber (RSS Rubber) and mixture rubbers, found markets in China, Malaysia, Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia, and South Korea. Rubbers were also delivered to China and Thailand via the border trade route.

The ministry urged farmers to extend cultivation and increase productivity of seasonal agricultural produce and tree crops, particularly rubber. With latex collection possible from seven or eight-year-old trees, Myanmar has already secured a reasonable global market share in the rubber industry.

Highlighting the link between rubber production and Sustainable Development Goal 8 — 'promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work for all' — the junta ministry emphasized that Myanmar annually produces 300,000-400,000 tonnes of rubber.

In mid-2023, The junta's unnecessary restrictions and trade limitations as well as the mandate that export earnings be converted into Myanmar kyat at the reference price, caused a sharp decline in rubber exports and the market collapsed, Than Lwin Times reported.

CULTURE & LIFESTYLE

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OFFERING WRISTBANDS AND PENDANTS

A Hindu woman offers holy charm wristbands and pendants during the bull-taming festival of Jallikattu at the Pilakat Hindu temple in Kyauktan township, outskirts of Yangon, Myanmar, 17 January 2024. This annual traditional rural sport is a part of the south Indian during the mid-January harvest festival Pongal, said to date back to 400 BC.

Photo:EPA

STUDYING FIGHTING STRATEGIES IN MYANMAR

Where does most conflict occur in Myanmar between military forces and ethnic armed groups? This is the question that Enze Han set out to find. Han, who is an Associate Professor at the Department of Politics and Public Administration at the University of Hong Kong, co-authored an article entitled “Rugged terrain, forest coverage, and insurgency in Myanmar,” which is the basis for a recent Insight Myanmar podcast.

His findings, which analyzed the period between 2010-2018, indicated that most conflict avoids the extremes of either high- or low-density forests. “So what does that mean?” he asks rhetorically. “It means that there is a very strategic consideration when rebels and government militaries engage in militarized conflict with each other.”

Ethnic fighters recognize both the forest’s tactical advantages and their opportunities for refuge, and the military must engage them there. However, if the forest is too dense, conflict is much less likely because military forces with superior arms and motorized vehicles are not able to navigate through it. So ethnic forces avoid low density forests and the military avoids high density forests; thus, the fighting happens where ethnic forces are more easily able to hide and the military is still able to navigate and move supplies to engage them. “Our results indicate an inverted U-shaped relationship between civil conflict and forest coverage,” he explains.

Han adds that elevation is also a factor in this calculus. While the country’s ethnic forces have always preferred the high terrain of their home areas,



Fighters in the hills. Photo: AFP

the military have established bases in the mountains too, although historically, their stronghold has been the relatively flat expanse of the country's largely Bamar Dry Zone. Han explains that from their mountain footholds, the military engages in systematic deforestation, which deprives ethnic forces of their cover and safety, and allows for the construction of new roads. At the same time and for no less a reason, it lines the pockets of military leaders and their cronies.

It's important to keep in mind that Han's study occurred before the coup, when conflict was mostly limited to military-ethnic skirmishes in the mountainous and forested, tribal regions far from the Bamar heartland. Indeed, following World War II, conflict in Bamar territory was limited to that initiated by the Burmese Communist Party, and even then, they preferred areas of slightly higher altitude, such as the Yoma Mountains in Rakhine state.

Han explains that one of the biggest differenc-



es between his data and post-coup Myanmar is that now there is also frequent conflict between Bamar-led PDF groups and the Burmese military. But again, there seems to be a preference for higher and more forested terrain, as it provides an asymmetrical advantage against a better-armed foe, and is more conducive for guerilla activity. He says that this scenario is playing out throughout Sagaing and Magwe today. "If the goal is to eliminate the military and then have the revolution take over the whole country, that will require to change the asymmetry of power, which means that unless the resistances are becoming better equipped with tanks and airplanes and everything else, otherwise, that will probably be difficult."

Han notes that his study is one of the few in this field that incorporates quantitative methodology along with more traditional on-the-ground research. He explains that if researchers can access the appropriate data sets, they can better understand and analyze patterns of conflict; this includes satellite data and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping, which provide a macro-understanding of the context. A fundamental challenge for the continuation of this kind of research in Myanmar is that, at present, undertaking studies on the ground in the country is almost impossible.

Han's ground-breaking, data-driven research sheds important light on how conflict is managed in Myanmar. But it's crucial to remember that it nests in a very human crisis. Beyond the data and academic analysis lies the reality of lives in the balance, where the ongoing conflict continues to take its toll on communities and individuals. Han's study carries profound implications for the people in the country's mountainous and forested regions caught up in these tumultuous situations.

Listen to the podcast at Insight Myanmar here: <https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2023/12/29/episode-211-climb-every-mountain>



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