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**Meitei rebel groups
and the Myanmar
state's problem**

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WHEN WILL MYANMAR CONSCRIPTION KICK IN?

Ever since the 10 February statement by the Myanmar junta that they were going to enact the 2010 military conscription law, many young Myanmar citizens have been trying to second-guess when the clampdown will actually begin.

For some unfortunate souls, the junta authorities and militia groups have stepped in and detained people – even arresting aircraft passengers, or picking up Rohingya to fight alongside the military against the Arakan Army.

People are panicked. But is it not yet clear how much breathing space those potentially affected have to act – to get a passport and visa and escape, or run away to a “free” area of the country where the junta has no control. At this stage, that breathing space could be about a month.

The junta says it aims to enlist 5,000 new recruits monthly, starting in April 2024, and thus 60,000 yearly. NGO ISP-Myanmar says it appears that the objective is to restore the military’s strength to pre-coup levels within the first year of recruitment. According to ISP-Myanmar research, the Myanmar Army previously had 200,000 forces at its peak, but even before the 2021 coup this had dropped

to 160,000 soldiers and since the coup the number of personnel in the Myanmar Army has dropped to about 100,000.

According to the junta, the organizing and paperwork is underway. The junta spokesperson says that the training of the first cohort will be conducted after the Myanmar New Year Water Festival in April. The next steps after completing the list will be summoning through conscription notice letters and conducting medical checks, which could take around two months.

Therefore, the first cohort might commence training as early as June and as late as August. If the training duration can be considered four to five months, the training for the first cohort will conclude either in November, December 2024 or January 2025, according to ISP-Myanmar’s calculations.

It is hard to know who is at most risk of getting called up. But anecdotal evidence suggests young people in Yangon and Mandalay feel the most vulnerable. People appear to be reducing their time out at the shops or in night life areas. And many fear a knock on the door.

EDITORIAL

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WEEKLY

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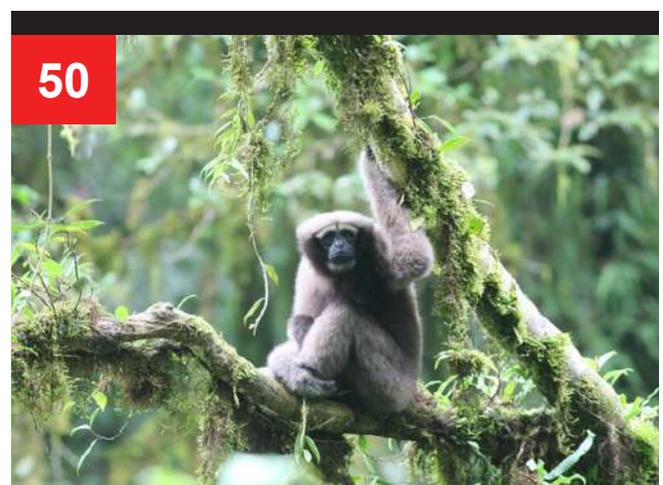
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Cover photo of armed Meitei “volunteer” in Mizoram, India by AFP



IN FOCUS





AND THEY ARE OFF!

Jockeys compete during the States and Division cup Traditional and International horse-riding competition final matches at the Yangon Equestrian and Country Club (YECC), in Yangon, Myanmar, 20 February. The States and Division cup Traditional and International horse-riding competition was held to commemorate the 77th Union Day, which was on 12 February.

Photo:EPA

FIFTH BURMESE JOURNALIST KILLED SINCE THE 2021 MILITARY COUP

Myat Thu Tun became the fifth Burmese journalist to be killed by the junta after the coup in February 2021.

On February 23, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) called on the junta to stop the massacre and to urge the international community to take action.

His body was recently found buried, riddled with bullets, and marked by signs of torture.

RSF calls on the international community to take action to force the junta to stop the killing of journalists.

The buried body of Myanmar journalist Myat Thu Tun was recently found in the town of Mrauk-U, in the western Rakhine region, along with several bodies of prisoners buried in an air shelter, and was reportedly marked with gunshot wounds and signs of torture, according to a statement by the Arakan Army on 11 February 2024.

RSF Asia-Pacific Bureau Director said “This shocking murder bears the hallmark of the Myanmar military junta, which for three years now has imposed a climate of terror on all media professionals and is once again demonstrating its ruthless violence. We call on the international community to step up pressure on the Myanmar regime to cease its campaign of terror

against reporters and release the 62 journalists and press freedom defenders detained in the country.

The victim, Myat Thu Tun, also known as Phoe Thiha, had been held in prison since his arrest at his home in September 2022 and was awaiting trial on charges of “disseminating false information” and “inciting hatred”, under Article 505(a) of the Penal Code, which carries a penalty of up to three years imprisonment.

Before the coup in February 2021, he had worked for various Myanmar media outlets, including the Democratic Voice of Burma, 7 Days Journal, and The Voice Journal. At the time of his arrest in September 2022, he was still working for local media Western News in the western state of Rakhine.

Myat Thu Tun is the fifth journalist to be killed by the military junta since the coup. Freelance photojournalists Aye Kaw and Soe Naing were also murdered in detention, while the founder of the Khonumthung News Agency Pu Tuidim, and the editor of the Federal News Journal Sai Win Aung were both shot by the army while reporting on the ground.

Myanmar, ranked 173th out of 180 countries in RSF’s 2023 World Press Freedom Index, is one of the world’s biggest jailers of journalists with 64 detained, second only to China.

IN WAKE OF MYANMAR MILITARY DRAFT ANNOUNCEMENT, CITIZENS ENTERING THAILAND’S RANONG TRIPLES

Residents and boat drivers have reported a significant increase in the number of people traveling to Ranong in Thailand via Tanintharyi’s Kawthaung Town following the announcement of the Military Conscription Law by the Myanmar junta.

According to boat drivers in Kawthaung, the number of individuals crossing the border from Kawthaung to Ranong has tripled. Previously, there were only about 100 people per day, but now the count ranges from 300 to 500.

Furthermore, boat drivers noted that there is a higher proportion of young people aged between 18 and 30 among those traveling from Kawthaung to Ranong.

“A minimum of 300 and a maximum of 500 people were observed crossing the border from Kawthaung in just three days. This is significantly higher than usual,” said a woman who operates travel services in Ranong, Thailand.

“Normally, there aren’t as many travelers

crossing the border. Previously, it was mainly tourists and residents of Kawthaung coming in and out. Now, we're seeing a noticeable increase in the number of young people who are not residents of the town," said Ko Babulay, who operates the Kawthaung-Ranong boat service.

Residents of Ranong explained that tourists obtaining a seven-day visit permit must pay 1,000 kyats for an identification document on the Myanmar side, 100 baht for the boat ride, 100 baht for additional documents on the Thai side, and 2,000 baht security

deposit at the checkpoint.

Due to Myanmar military conscription law, a significant number of young people in the Tanintharyi Region are leaving for neighbouring Thailand through the Kawthaung-Ranong border gate. Passenger bus companies have reported that several Military Council checkpoints have detained young people from Dawei and Myeik who are traveling to Kawthaung to reach the Thai border.

MYANMAR NUG'S HEALTH MINISTRY RECRUITING SPECIALISTS AND HEALTHCARE WORKERS

The National Unity Government Ministry of Health (NUG-MOH) has announced the recruitment of specialist doctors and healthcare workers for clinics and hospitals situated in federal units in NUG interim state areas, according to a statement on 15 February.

The application process consists of two sections. Firstly, specialist doctors, doctors, dental specialists, dentists, graduates from medical and medical-related fields, specialist nurses, nurses, diploma holders, and graduates from medical universities are required to apply between 15 and 29 February.

On the other hand, health officials, Lady Health Visitors (LHV), Public Health Supervisors - 1, midwives, Public Health Supervisors - 2, and diploma holders or graduates from traditional medicine are instructed to apply from 1 to 15 March.

Furthermore, the eligibility criteria for applicants include being born in Myanmar, maintaining good health, being associated with the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) or having no affiliations with the Military Council, and possessing the ability to travel to the designated areas within federal units under the NUG interim state.

"We should move forward. Public hospitals in here are merely for show, with reliance placed on private hospitals. It would be preferable if we could contribute meaningful work there. There's nothing that can't be

accomplished with a proactive approach," said a CDM doctor.

The NUG-MOH has asserted its commitment to safeguarding the social security and occupational safety of healthcare workers who apply. Plans include providing life insurance and granting special rights in accordance with federal democracy policies during the post-revolutionary period.

Since the end of 2023 up to the present, ethnic revolutionary forces and people's defense forces from the Ministry of Defense under the NUG have captured a total of 40 towns across the country.

The Northern Brotherhood Alliance, including the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MND-AA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and the Arakan Army (AA) have announced the recruitment of professional human resources for the restoration of their regions.

As per the Conscription Law enacted by the military regime on 10 February, healthcare workers are categorized as professionals. Men aged between 18 and 45, and women aged between 18 and 35, are mandated to serve in the military.

Following the announcement of the enforcement of this law, a significant number of people are attempting to leave the country or possibly join the resistance.



A Meitei "volunteer" keeps watch in Mizoram, just over the border from Myanmar. Photo: AFP

Meitei rebel groups a Myanmar state problem

Mai Aung Khin

Over the last few months, the media has been focused on the results of the Three Brotherhood Alliance's Operation 1027 on Myanmar northeastern border with China. But another conflict, largely hidden from view, is that of the Meitei rebel groups that inhabit the northwestern borderland with India.

Since the end of 2021, there have been reports that the Meitei rebel groups, which have been fighting the Indian government from bases along the Myanmar-India border, are cooperating with the Myanmar junta forces in attacks against the resistance or revolutionary forces.

Although it was difficult to prove in the past, the bases of the Meitei rebel groups have been seized, and both the Meitei rebels and the junta forces have been captured together in battles in the townships of Tamu and Homalin in the Sagaing region recently, according to the revolutionary forces.

In this regard, at least 10 photographs of "on the ground evidence" have been received.

As the Meitei rebel groups, who claim to have been fighting the Indian government for their own freedom, impede the Myanmar people's revolution by cooperating with the Myanmar military, critics argue a political solution needs to be sought for the country.

This is, they say, red-level warning.

History of Meitei insurgent groups

Since 1964, armed organizations have been created in the Indian state of Manipur, which borders Myanmar, to establish Manipur as an independent state. The earliest armed group to be established was the United National Liberation Front (UNLF).

Then, the People's Revolutionary Party of

Kangleipak (PREPAK) was formed in 1977. Another group, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), was formed in 1978. The Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) was also formed in 1980. Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup-KYKL was formed in 1994. In addition, the United People's Party of Kangleipak (UPPK) was established in 2006.

While there are various Meitei armed groups, the six listed above are the most powerful and well-known. These groups operate from bases in the Sagaing Region and Chin State, which border the Indian state of Manipur.

Problem stems from previous military regime

The problem of Meitei rebel groups is among the bad legacies of former General Khin Nyunt, and former dictator Than Shwe, who ruled the country as an authoritarian leader for many years, according to the political analysts and revolutionary forces.

The historical accounts indicate that during the State Law and Order Restoration Council, the Meitei rebel groups started to operate along Myanmar's borders, particularly in Tamu township. According to the political forces of Tamu township, the former dictator Than Shwe registered the Meitei rebels as members of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) by issuing them temporary identity cards, and former general Khin Nyunt also used them for intelligence purposes.

"They moved to Myanmar when they staged a rebellion against the Indian government in Manipur because they were unable to continue the rebellion. By working with Myanmar generals, they have expanded," said an analyst of India-Myanmar issues who resides in Manipur and wishes to remain anonymous due to security concerns.

Subsequently, the Meitei rebels grew wealthy through their extensive involvement in the trade of smuggled goods in the border region, he said. "The most marginalized region of India is closest to Myanmar. The illegal trade now dominates the border economy."

Owing to these shared interests, the Meitei rebels have turned into the Myanmar military, carrying out crimes by doing as the military regime's bidding.

The local people's voices were muted during the successive military regimes, but they became more vocal during the National League for Democracy (NLD) led civilian government, alerting the public to the grave threat posed by the Meitei rebel groups. In some townships in the Sagaing region and Chin state, they expressed their voice, demanding a solution to the Meitei rebel problem. Although Section 42(b) of the Constitution, Chapter 1: Basic Principles of the Union, states unequivocally that "no foreign forces are allowed to be stationed in the country," Chin social organizations objected to the fact that the successive military governments allowed the Meitei armed groups to set foot in

the country.

The Meitei rebel organizations' capability is demonstrated by an incident that happened in December 2019 in the district of Tamu, which borders India. The Meitei rebel group launched a grenade attack on the house of Amyothar Hluttaw member Maung Maung Latt from Tamu Township, who asked a question in parliament about the settlement of Meitei armed forces in the area. Additionally, the Meitei rebel factions in Tamu Township frequently committed robberies and killed one another, shocking the local people.

After the military took over in a coup in 2021, the Meitei rebel problem - which the NLD government was unable to resolve - became more intractable.

TRACING THE MEITEI REBELS

On April 9, 2021, a peaceful public demonstration against the military coup was violently cracked down on by the security forces in Tamu township for the first time. According to the revolutionary forces, the Meitei rebels and the junta forces were involved in that violent crackdown on a peaceful demonstration that



Internal problems in Manipur in India have drawn attention to the instability of the India-Myanmar border area. Photo: EPA

killed at least ten local people, including children. Regarding this case, 12 civilians were killed in a raid on an anti-coup strike camp by the Manipur rebel group, who were forced to wear military uniforms by the Military Council. This information was reported in Nikkei Asia's article titled "Myanmar Junta taps Russian air power to bomb ethnic rebels," citing Asian military intelligence sources on April 15, 2021.

According to the revolutionary forces in the Sagaing region, the incident marks the first move of the Meitei rebels, who have been a thorn in the side of the people's Spring Revolution. The head of the local defense force, Han Sai, stated that the Meitei rebels wearing Military Council uniforms were involved in the clashes when the peaceful demonstration turned into an armed struggle.

The junta has forced the Meitei rebels to wear army uniforms and attack the people's defense forces, as stated in the report "30 months of Myanmar military coup - A comprehensive analytical report on India's approach and relations with Myanmar", which was published on 7 September 2023, by India for Myan-

mar and Burma Affairs and Conflict Studies (BACS), which monitors and records the junta.

According to some of the members of the People's Defense Forces (PDF), they have received evidence that the Meitei rebels are working together with the Military Council to fight the PDFs. In late 2021 and early 2022, the revolutionary forces revealed that the Meitei rebels were cooperating with the junta forces in the clashes in certain townships of Chin State and Sagaing Region near the Indian border. On 15 October 2021, the National Unity Government (NUG) published a "Declaration on Relations with Neighbouring Countries and Border Security" through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

According to the NUG statement, it has been discovered that some of the armed groups rebelling against the neighbouring country have settled in Myanmar under the protection of the Military Council and have been seen working together with the junta to launch coordinated attacks against the PDFs. The NUG has declared that no armed groups established with the goal of insurrection against neighboring nations will be permitted to establish themselves in Myanmar.

According to the Sagaing resistance forces, this was the NUG's message regarding the Meitei rebels to the Indian government. Still, the Meitei rebels continued to advance. According to the PDFs in Tonzang township of Chin State and Tamu, Khampat, Homalin, and Shwe Pyi Aye townships of Sagaing Region, the Meitei rebels fought alongside the military.

"They (the Meitei rebels) took part in the clashes that took place in Tamu, Khamphat, Homalin, and Shwe Pyi Aye. They also took part in a clash on the border between Homalin and Aung Zaya. These are the battles in which the rebels from Meitei have undoubtedly taken part. We took a Meitei officer's uniform from the Homalin clash as proof. We also received a gun. In the Tamu and Khampat battles, we obtained the Meitei flag and weaponry. We sent the reports and data to the (NUG's) Ministry of Defence in this regard," Han Sai stated.

According to the investigation for this article, on November 23, 2023, during the attack and occupation of a Meitei camp near Thanan village, Tamu township, by the Tamu District People's Defense Battalion (1/2) and joint forces, the UNLF logo and the uniforms bearing the badge of the Manipur People



Army - MPA were taken. The pertinent photo documents have been obtained in this regard. In addition, on 7 December of that year, a combined camp of the Military Council, Shanni (SNA) and UNLF located in Aung Zeya village in the upper part of Tamu Township was attacked and captured by the resistance forces under the MOD No. 1 military regional command. The resistance forces said that the Meitei rebels fought together with the junta forces during the Pan Thar battle in Tamu district and the Khampat clash.

“We obtained that proof by ourselves on the ground. In the Khampat battle, we also seized other items, such as an identity card,” said a resistance fighter, Ye Baw Yaung Ta Zaung. The two Meitei rebels were captured in a clash in 2022 and handed over to India, he said. Local witnesses reported seeing items being dropped by the military council by air into a Meitei rebel camp in He Zin village, Tamu township, between November 26 and 28, 2023.

The Meitei rebels have become a national threat since they are collaborating with the junta and

are involved in the trade of the drugs, according to Salai Htet Ni, a spokesperson for the Chin National Front (CNF).

The People’s Defense Forces of Chin State attacked and took control of a Meitei rebel group’s base in 2022, close to Se Nan village in Tonzang Township, Chin State. The Meitei rebel camp was taken by the people’s defense troops during the clash; however, a major from the CNF was killed in the encounter.

“We do not like foreign armed groups gaining a foothold in our region and in our country at all,” said Salai Htet Ni, expressing his view on the Meitei rebel issue.

The BACS and India for Myanmar study strongly suggests that the presence of the Meitei insurgents in Myanmar should be dealt with by the Indian government. The increasing strength of Manipur’s separatist rebels, with the backing of the Myanmar Military Council, could intensify India’s internal political conflicts.



Indian-Myanmar border post in Manipur.
Photo: AFP

MILITARY COUNCIL DEFENDS THE MEITEI REBELS

The following incident highlights the depth of the link between the Myanmar Military Council and the Meitei rebels.

On November 13, 2021, a militant attack that shocked the Indian government occurred in Chura-chandpur district, Manipur state, near the Myanmar border. A convoy carrying Colonel Viplav Tripathi, the commanding officer (CO) of 46 Assam Rifles forces of the Indian central government, was attacked by a Meitei rebel group led by Rangit Naorem, leader of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). As a result of this attack, Colonel Tripathi, his wife, and his 4-year-old son, and four Indian soldiers were killed. Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh strongly condemned the cowardly attack on the convoy on his Twitter page. According to a report by BACS and India for Myanmar, the PLA forces entered Manipur from the Myanmar side, launched the attack, and withdrew within hours to their

bases on the border with Myanmar.

The Indian National Investigation Agency (NIA) issued arrest warrants for ten militants, including Rangit Naorem, under various provisions of the Arms Act, the Unlawful Activities (Protection) Law, and other laws. The Military Council of Myanmar was urged by the Indian government to apprehend the rebels.

The Myanmar Military Council turned over five PLA members who were involved in the case to India on December 17, 2021. They were transported to the Indian state of Manipur by an Indian military aircraft, according to AP news. However, the local political forces claim that Ranjina Oram was left out and that he is still operating in Homalin Township, protected by the Burmese army. In the third week of January, locals said that Ranjina Oram was still in the vicinity of Homalin Township and was under the Military Council's protection.

MEITEI REBEL, MYANMAR, AND INDIAN LANDSCAPE

“They are watching the fact that a small country in the east will quickly fall into China's sphere.”

This was a statement made in Dr. Than Myint Oo's book “Where China meets India: Burma and the new crossroads of Asia,” regarding some of the concerns that India has been dealing with since the end of the 20th century.

With a population of only 55 million, Myanmar is in a difficult position due to the geopolitical rivalry between China and India, the two most powerful nations in the world, each with a population of over a billion.

Why isn't the Indian government speaking up or exerting any pressure on the Myanmar Military Council regarding the Meitei rebel issue?

Human rights lawyer Aung Htoo, who founded the Legal Aid Network, provided a response to this.

“India's objective is very clear. China is India's greatest opponent and its main source of concern. I've talked with Indian leaders throughout my four, five, and six trips there. China is their biggest concern. They want no confrontation with China, no matter what happens in Burma. Even in the event of a conflict, they hope to maintain the support of the junta in Myanmar. That is their nation's objective.”



According to Aung Htoo, the Indian government is extremely concerned that China will reinforce the Meitei rebels if they move to the Chinese border rather than the Myanmar border. Thus, aside from applying diplomatic pressure, political observers claim that India is not doing anything to address the Meitei insurgents' presence in Myanmar.

The Meitei rebels' prolonged presence in Myanmar is a result of the Indian government's silence, which is currently being used to avoid upsetting the Military Council that has taken control in 2021. This is seriously impeding the Myanmar people's revolution, Aung Htoo claimed.

China and India have made significant investments in Myanmar, which serves as their focal point, and both countries have a strong desire for these projects. China and Myanmar have inked agreements on the billion-dollar Ayeyarwaddy Myitsone dam project, the Kyauk Phyu Special Economic Zone and Deep-Water Port Project, and the natural gas-fired power plant project in the Shwe Thaug Yan beach area. In order to counter Chinese influence, India has also undertaken strategic investments in Myanmar through the Act East Policy (Policy of Cooperation with the East), which is being carried out in the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) initiative. The Kaladan River Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which will be able to connect to countries in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as the Myanmar-India-Thai Trilateral Highway Project, which will connect India with the countries of the Mekong region, are also being developed. These projects have been delayed following the military takeover, but both countries are attempting to expedite their implementation in different ways.

Sittwe Port, which is a part of the Kaladan River Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, was inaugurated on May 9, 2023, by the Myanmar Military Council and India. On the opening of Sittwe Port, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself proudly posted, "Great news for commerce connectivity," on his official Twitter page. At that time, fighting was raging in Chin State and the Sagaing region, which borders India. In addition, he put pressure on the Military Council to restart the trilateral highway project and not delay other projects.

India's assistance to the Myanmar Military Council also made international headlines at the same time. A meeting on the Myanmar situation known as Track 1.5 was held in April 2023 in India, and it was attended by some foreign experts and diplomats. In an

article published in Benar News on March 27, 2023, Professor Zachary M. Abuza, a Burmese affairs analyst at the National War College in Washington, DC, claimed that this measure helped the junta accomplish its objectives and gave the Military Council legitimacy.

Furthermore, Mr. Tom Andrews, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Myanmar, released a report in mid-May 2023 that said that, like Russian and China, India had supplied the Myanmar Military Council with a substantial quantity of military weapons.

To have a better understanding of the situation on the ground, let's revisit the battles that occurred on the Tamu-Kale Asia Highway in September and November of 2022. The People's Defence Forces (PDF) were engaged in the longest-running battle in Sagaing at that time. According to a Tamu-based member of the National Liberation Army (NLA), the battle started because India delivered a significant amount of military hardware to the Myanmar Military Council via the Moreh border, and the PDFs blocked the route for months. The Military Council used both air and ground forces to attack the PDF camp in Tamu Township in order to transport military equipment. As a result, they were forced to abandon their camp, said the members of the PDF.

Additionally, there was an incident that occurred in the region where the Meitei rebels operated, in which India favoured the Military Council, and most people were unaware of it.

On the afternoon of July 5, 2022, two Indian nationals from Moreh township were killed while visiting Tamu town. The people's defense forces stated that the Pyu Saw Htee, pro-military militiamen, were responsible for the killing, providing the relevant information. At that time, Pyu Saw Htee were powerful in Tamu township. Indian residents of Moreh staged a demonstration, calling for the remains to be returned to their families and the truth to be made public. Before the border checkpoint was set on fire, the situation was tight. However, in response to the Indian side, the Myanmar Military Council stated that the killing was carried out by a terrorist organization, and the remains were incinerated without any form of examination in a matter of hours. That murder incident happened on July 5 at about 12:30 in the afternoon. The remains were cremated, according to a report by Major General Zaw Min Htun, head of the press team of the Military Council, because the owners had not shown up for the

investigation. India and the Myanmar Military Council both said nothing about the case, which has since vanished from public view.

However, in response to the deaths of three Indian citizens by groups opposing the Military Council in March 2023 over an arms transaction, the Indian government adopted a tough stance. They applied a range of pressure on the revolutionary forces. At the border, restrictions were put in place. In a few days, the revolutionary forces identified and apprehended the murderers.

Furthermore, according to Chin revolutionary forces, on January 10, 2023, the military council bombarded the headquarters of the Chin National Army (CNA) on the Chin state border with India using Indian airspace.

A report by BACS and India for Myanmar claims that the Indian government is ignoring the genuine feelings of the Myanmar people while favouring the Military Council for its own interests.

“The Myanmar military forced India’s separatist armed groups, which they support, to fight the revolutionary forces. Therefore, these armed groups supported by the Myanmar military are not only a thorn in the side of the Indian government but also of the revolutionary forces in Myanmar,” BACS said.

MEITEI REBELS: THE GREEN BOOK’S ANTITHESIS

In the 2008 Constitution’s Basic Principles of the Union, Chapter 1, Section 42(b), which the Military Council continues to abide by, it is stated that “no foreign troops are allowed to be stationed in the country.” Nonetheless, the military is openly using the Meitei rebels inside the country and breaking the law that it enacted.

Aung Htoo, a human rights lawyer, pointed out that the military led by Min Aung Hlaing is a group committing treason and rebellion because it has overthrown the democratically-elected government and usurped state power, and every group cooperating with the Military Council is already involved in the case.

“The actions committed by the group led by Min Aung Hlaing amount to the crime under Section 121(d) of the Criminal Law. That is treason and rebellion. So, anyone who provides any kind of support to that group - whether by cash, weapons, or recognition - commits an additional offence under Section 121(d)

of the Criminal Law,” Aung Htoo said.

Additionally, he claimed that would constitute a Section 129 felony of aiding and abetting a rebellion against the state. Legal experts also recommend that the public and revolutionary forces gather evidence and that the NUG government file accusations against the Military Council at the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Kyee Myint, a legal expert, noted that the Military Council’s present actions, which involve utilizing the Meitei rebels, have even gone so far as to meddle in the internal affairs of the Indian government.

Attempts to reach junta spokesman Maj. Gen. Zaw Min Tun for comment about the events of the Meitei rebels being permitted to live in Myanmar and taking part in the fights taking place in the Sagaing region and Chin State following the coup in 2021 were unsuccessful.

Furthermore, no response was received when an email was sent to the Manipur Chief Minister’s office asking about the Manipur government’s stance. Similarly, communication with the UNLF and PLA was attempted but was met with silence.

The NUG’s Human Rights Union Minister Aung Myo Min stated that he has learned about the collaboration between the Military Council and the Meitei armed organizations, and he considers this to be an affront to the state’s central sovereignty. He hints that there is a legal process to deal with this problem and the Military Council’s campaign of violence.

With the battles where the revolutionary forces take control of the enemy camps, the situation is currently tense on the side of Myanmar that borders India. The PDFs took control of Khampat, Shwe Pyi Aye, and Tamu Township, where the Meitei rebels used to camp. Nineteen civilians, including young children, were killed when the Military Council bombarded Kanan village in Khampat township early on January 7. The local PDFs then reported that the Meitei rebels attempted to go on the offensive with the Military Council column on the ground. Furthermore, the PDFs in the Sagaing region and Chin State said that the Military Council is still supporting the Meitei rebels.

The prolonged presence of Meitei insurgents on Myanmar soil is a major issue that a post-junta administration will inevitably have to deal with.

Mai Aung Khin is a pseudonym for a Myanmar writer.

3 HIGH-RANKING MYANMAR OFFICERS SENTENCED TO DEATH FOR SURRENDERING TOWN: MILITARY SOURCES

Myanmar's junta has sentenced to death three high-ranking officers who oversaw the surrender of a strategic town on the Chinese border to ethnic minority fighters last month, military sources told AFP.

Hundreds of troops put down their weapons and handed over the town of Laukkai in Shan state to the so-called Three Brotherhood Alliance after months of fighting that saw the military lose swathes of territory.

The surrender was one of the biggest single losses for the military in decades, and sparked further criticism of the junta leadership by its supporters.

After the surrender, the officers and their troops were allowed to leave the area by the alliance.

"Three brigadier generals including the commander of Laukkai town were given the death sentence," a military source told AFP on condition of anonymity as they were not authorised to talk to the media.

Another military source confirmed the sentencing.

Three other brigadier generals were sentenced to life imprisonment for their role in the surrender at Laukkai, the two sources said.

Laukkai is the largest town seized by the Three Brotherhood Alliance -- made up of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Arakan Army (AA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA).

The alliance launched a surprise offensive across a swathe of northern Myanmar in late October and has seized several towns and lucrative trade hubs along the border with China.

SEX, DRUGS AND SCAMS

Current junta chief Min Aung Hlaing made a name for himself in 2009 when, as a regional commander, he expelled the MNDAA from the Laukkai.

The army then installed a militia that enriched itself producing drugs and selling gambling and sex to visitors from across the Chinese border.

Laukkai later became notorious for online scam operations in which thousands of Chinese and other foreign nationals -- many of them trafficked and working under duress -- defraud their compatriots over the internet.

A source close to the MNDAA recently told AFP that the group was working to install a new administration in the town, without giving details.

The alliance's successes have galvanised so-called People's Defence Forces -- dedicated to reversing the 2021 coup that ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's elected government -- to launch attacks of their own across the country.

Analysts say the onslaught has put the embattled junta in its most vulnerable position since it seized power.

This month it announced it would begin conscripting young men and women into its ranks due to the "current situation".

No details have been given about how those called up would be expected to serve, but many young people are not keen to wait and find out.

Last week local media images showed hundreds of people queueing outside the passport office in Mandalay.

And in commercial hub Yangon, thousands of young men and women queued outside the Thai embassy seeking visas to get out of Myanmar last week.

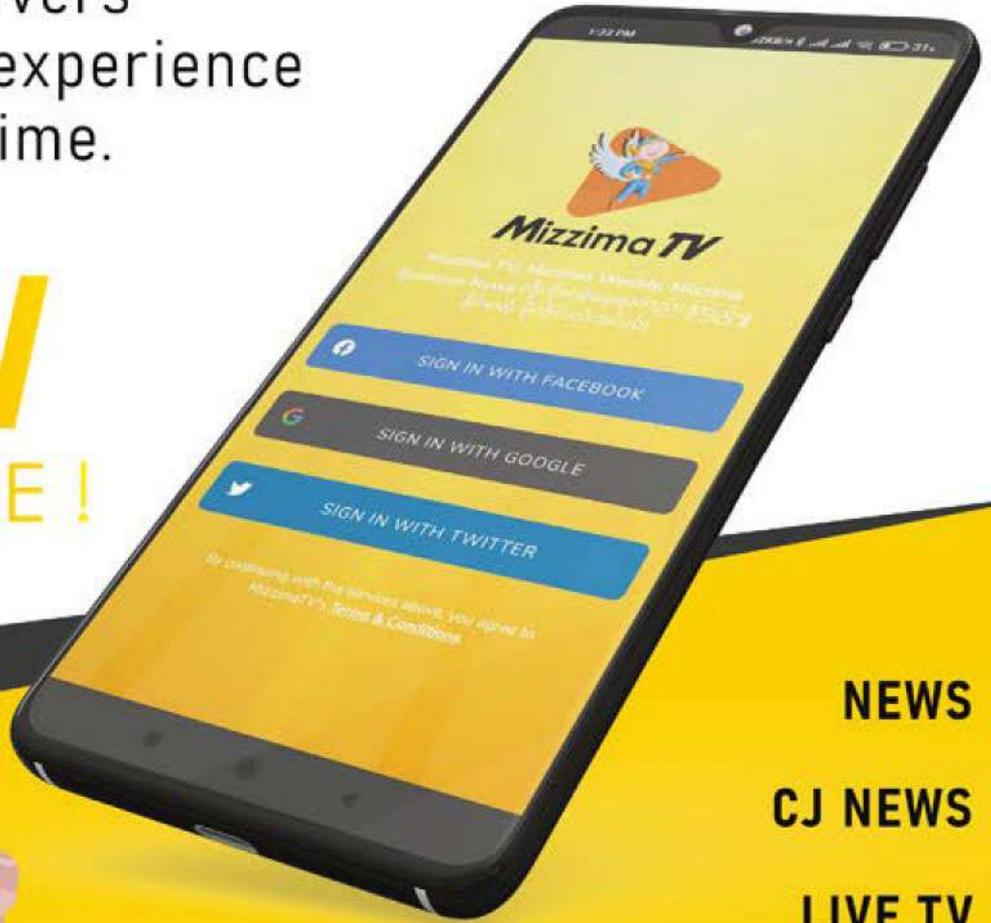
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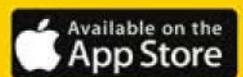
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MYANMAR JUNTA'S PROPAGANDA REBUFF AGAINST OPERATION 1027

MIZZIMA COMMENTARY

In addition to military attacks, the Myanmar junta is using propaganda as a weapon of psychological warfare. Through misinformation, rumours, half-truths and lies, they try to sway public opinion.

After Operation 1027 began, Mizzima analyzed how the Military Council was making propaganda according to the changing political and military conditions.

Ground Zero of this drive involves the Myanmar junta depicting their army as the sons of Buddha, fighting for Buddhism since ancient times.

From the era of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) 1988-1997 until now, their propaganda has been more favourable to Buddhism,

said Ye Hein Aung, a researcher at the Burma Civil War Museum.

“After 2010, we saw a lot of talk about people who are protecting Buddhism. In particular, the Burmese military has always portrayed itself as the sons of God, the defenders of Buddhism, and the patriotic army throughout the period when it ruled and manipulated the country.”

During the democracy uprising in 1988-1090s, and during the Rakhine conflict, there were such conversations, he said.

Even after the 2021 coup, the Military Council army, which has been killing people in various ways, burning villages, setting houses on fire, killing civil-



Myanmar “nationalists” on the march. Photo: AFP

ians, and bombing areas with aircraft, continued to call itself the “Patriotic Army”.

During Operation 1027, after the junta lost Lauk Kaing town in Shan State, a video emerged of a Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) soldier destroying a pagoda on Point 2022 hill near the town. In this regard, MNDAA also apologized for the actions of their fighter, saying that it was not an order from the army, but a personal act and they said they respected religious worship, and there was absolutely no opposition to religion or orders to destroy religious buildings. It has also been said that the relevant department has been instructed to take action and punish the accused.

However, this event became a big propaganda and campaigning issue for radical nationalist activists as well as the Military Council and its lobbies. On 9 January 2024, the day after the video began to spread, radical nationalist activists held protests against the incident in the major cities of Yangon, Mandalay, Myitkyina, and Taunggyi, as well as all over Shan State.

According to a Myanmar-based research organisation, in January alone, protests involving at least 50 to 3,000 people were held in 45 townships.

Among the groups leading the protest were ultra-nationalist organisations such as the Union of Patriotic Myanmar Monks, the Mon Patriotic Union, the Myanmar National Network, the Nay Pyi Taw National Organisation, the Myawati National Organisation, the Irrawaddy National Alliance, as well as the Union Solidarity and Development Party and the media such as Myanmar Hard Talk.

These groups are proxy groups of the Military Council as well as the Patriotic Association of Myanmar or Ma Ba Ta.

Other well-known individuals lobbying for the junta’s religious propaganda include, Tha Zin Oo, 550 Sayartaw known to the people as Ashin Wathawa, Ashin Sandathiri (Mee Eain Shin Sayartaw), Zaw Pyan Taung Sayartaw, ShweInTaw Sayartaw, U PyinNyar (Ancient Buddhist Monk), Myo Tarke Ashin PoneNya Sayartaw, Taungthalay Sayartaw, Zwegabin Sayartaw, Pauk KoTaw, Thuseikta, Kan Nyi Naung Kyar Ta Pwint, and Sayartaw U Kesara.

At the protest held in Taunggyi in southern Shan State, it was reported that locals and militiamen were forced to follow.

On the other hand, since the start of Operation 1027, there have been statements condemning and opposing this operation.

In addition to religious groups, such as Young Men Buddhist Association (YMBA), Interfaith Dialogue Group Myanmar, All Myanmar Hindu Central Council, All Myanmar Islamic Religious Organisation, Methodist Church-Lower Myanmar, which is the junta military’s proxy, art associations such as Myanmar Theatrical Organization (Center), and Myanmar Comedians Association, also issued statements and protested about Operation 1027.

“The difference is that many of the statements are copy-pasted statements. After the alleged destruction of a Buddhist pagoda in Kokang, we see an increase in such statements,” said researcher Ye Hein Aung.

A researcher based in Myanmar said, “Currently, the way they are going is inciting genocide based on



religion. It's shaping up to be a form of foreign invasion. More religious activities may continue."

"Patriotic Association of Myanmar's monks, who have been quietly saying they are not from any side, reappeared in the MNDAA issue. For example, monks like Zwegabin Sayartaw reappeared in protests. They made statements and protested," she said.

At the same time, state-owned newspapers and military-owned newspapers also portrayed the MNDAA, Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and Arakan Army (AA) groups – the Three Brotherhood Alliance who started Operation 1027 - as religious insurgents who initiated the actions of the MNDAA soldiers.

The video file of General Zaw Min Tun, the head of the press release team of the junta Military Council, condemning the MNDAA soldier's actions, is still being distributed in English with the aim of reaching the international community.

What does the international community know about the Myanmar junta? The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) has released a report on its observation from the time of the coup on February 1, 2021 to April 30, 2023 in Myanmar.

In this report, it is written that 190 religious buildings were destroyed due to the acts of the Military Council. There are at least 110 uses of religious buildings by the Burmese military as military camps and interrogation centres. According to the ICJ report, 117 religious workers, including mostly Buddhist monks, Christian religious workers and Islamic clerics were detained.

On the one hand, the Military Council is easily carrying out violence against religious buildings and religious workers, and is exaggerating the actions of the revolutionary forces.

Researcher Ye Hein Aung noted that these actions were "a case of confusing a political issue with religion. These are intentional actions to turn the civil war into a religious conflict."

Through the Military Council lobby channels, the northern battles under Operation 1027 were spread as a story of foreign invasion. At the same time, it also led to hatred of China.

It is not a fight for democracy, it is not a fight

to overthrow the military dictatorship, but it is still portrayed as a just war led by the Tatmadaw using the words "this is a war of foreign aggression" and "a pre-planned war of foreign aggression".

On the other hand, the Military Council issued a notice on 15 December about the formation of a committee to take legal action against people posting fake or false news, indecent posts, and making political attacks on the internet.

An order has been issued in the name of Lieutenant-General Aung Lin Dwe to block the perpetrators' telephone numbers, close their bank accounts, obtain the withdrawal information and temporarily block their bank accounts, and prosecute them according to existing laws.

According to a statement released by Data for Myanmar, an independent organisation that provides data on Myanmar, more than 1,480 people have been arrested for online support of opposition forces critical of the junta. From 29 February 2022 to 30 January 2024, it describes the arrests of the junta over a period of almost two years.

In addition to doing such actions that affect freedom of expression, the junta is ignoring the incitement and hate speech of their lobbies that lead to religious and ethnic conflict.

The Acting President of the National Unity Government (NUG) Duwa Lashi La said at a cabinet meeting held on 30 January: "We must take special care to avoid ethnic landmines that deepen ethnic cracks. We need to be able to avoid old mistakes and we must always be politically alert to avoid making new mistakes."

All in all, the Myanmar junta is using propaganda as a powerful tool against those opposed to the coup and their brutal rule.

FIVE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF THE MYANMAR CONSCRIPTION LAW



Photo: AFP

The 13 February introduction of the Myanmar Conscription Law will have at least five negative consequences, according to an analysis by the ISP-Myanmar non-governmental organisation (NGO).

The first potential consequence of implementing the conscription law during the peak of the civil war is widespread human rights violations. Such violations are likely to occur throughout the recruitment, training, and deployment phases. Individuals may face oppression and discrimination based on factors like place of residence, age, ethnicity, faith and religion, economic status, and gender orientation. Currently, there are reports of the military abducting people and forcibly recruiting in certain areas. While the junta has dismissed some of these reports as false information, the conscription law could legitimise such incidents.

A second potential consequence is that this law will open avenues for bribery and corruption at all levels within the regime, affecting the entire society. Incidents of bribery between individuals seeking to evade military service and civil-military authorities may become widespread. There is no sustainable way to curb such corruption in Myanmar. In other countries, cases of corruption often arise during the process of determining individuals unfit for military service or in attempting replacements.

A third potential consequence is the mass migration of working forces to neighboring countries, leading to a brain drain. Individuals with the financial means and access to opportunities are seen massively leaving the country within days of the law taking effect. The Royal Thai Embassy in Yangon has announced that it can only process 400 visa applicants per day as it receives a massive rush of applications. (Thailand is the immediate or temporary popular destination for people from Myanmar). In addition to leaving the country through this avenue, some individuals may opt for

illegal means to leave the country and considering that the law also applies to expatriate citizens, some may even go so far as to permanently leave the country. Mass migration from Myanmar combined with the current nearly five million conflict refugees from Myanmar may pose a threat to regional stability.

The fourth potential consequence is that recruitment will target primarily young people in rural areas, potentially affecting impoverished youth more severely. At the same time, it could also target Burmese and minority youths from areas with no significant insurgency groups and armed conflicts. Therefore, coercing these young people into military training and deploying them to the battlefield risks exacerbating societal divisions and animosities based on class, race, religion, and region throughout the country.

The fifth possible consequence of the Conscription Law is that it could increase the likelihood of youths, especially in conflict regions and nearby, joining Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) or the People's Defense Forces (PDFs). For instance, the youths of Rakhine, Chin and Karen ethnicities would rather join EAOs that represent their ethnicities. Youths from the dry zone and areas where the majority is Bamar ethnic would similarly rather join the nearby PDFs or Local Defense Forces (LDFs) where their close friends and acquaintances might be located. Whilst the junta asserts that evading the military service law and joining other armed groups is punishable under existing laws, youth in conflict zones often just brush off these threats.

ISP-Myanmar points out that junta conscription means that ethnic armed forces will be simultaneously compelled to recruit and bolster their military capabilities. If there is no focus on a comprehensive peace process while the military forces are expanding at an accelerated rate and subsequent expansion of conflict, Myanmar's armed conflict level is unlikely to be reduced in the foreseeable future.

Being forced to serve in the military for a set duration – typically at least two years – during one's youth comes with an opportunity cost at an individual level as well as at the society level. When a nation collectively chooses the path of securitization and militarization, it inevitably incurs an opportunity cost in the development and productivity of the nation, impeding the country's positive trajectory for generations to come, said ISP Myanmar.

The Institute for Strategy and Policy – Myanmar (ISP – Myanmar) is an independent, non-partisan and non-governmental think tank. Established in 2016, ISP-Myanmar aims to promote democratic leadership and strengthening civic participation in Myanmar through its key strategic programs and initiatives.

MYANMAR: MORE CONCRETE ACTION NEEDED FROM INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

As the Myanmar junta continues to attack civilians the international community takes no concrete action and instead just offers more platitudinous statements of condemnation, according to campaign group Progressive Voice.

It said that the latest massacres of children in Karenni State bring flashbacks of a multitude of Myanmar military's ruthlessness and its continued mass atrocity crimes. Taking place as part of the military junta's countrywide terror campaign that has been systematically and intentionally targeting civilians, the appalling onslaughts of innocent lives of children, among many other vulnerable groups, have been at the forefront.

Despite this, Progressive Voice claims that once again statements of condemnation on the junta's crimes from the international community fail to lead to any concrete changes, amid repeated demands from Myanmar people for meaningful and effective actions to end the junta's tyranny and horrendous inhumanity.

On 5 February 2024, the Myanmar military junta committed one of its deadliest airstrikes in Demoso Township, Karenni State. It launched two airstrikes and six rounds of artillery shelling on two villages.

The first round targeted Daw Si Ei School, killing four children and injuring 28 people, including teachers and children. The second attack was directed at a school in Loi Nan Pa Village, killing an elderly man and injuring three teachers and five other civilians.

Within one day of the massacres of these children, the junta took hostages and brutally killed eight displaced civilians, including three children, a pregnant woman, two women with disabilities, and two men, in Shadaw Township, Karenni State. Their dead bodies were found with torture marks and close-range gunshot wounds.

In the same week, in Htatabin Township, Bago Region, the junta launched airstrikes and artillery attacks that killed 10 civilians, including three children.

Moving to the central part of the country, in Sagaing Region, the junta has killed at least six civilians in its attempt to retake Kawlin Town, which has been fully administered under the National Unity Government since November 2023.

In Magwe Region, a junta-backed militia tortured and killed two young men after accusing them of being members of resistance forces. The militia tied iron chains to their arms and legs, then hung them from a tree. In an effort to instill fear in the people, the militia then burned them alive, and forced villagers to watch.

Such relentless, indiscriminate airstrikes and shelling which target civilians across the country are integral to the military junta's daily, unprecedented terror campaign against the Myanmar people, in particular children, according to Progressive Voice.

On the same day as the deadly airstrike in Karenni State, the UN Security Council (UNSC) convened a closed-door meeting on Myanmar, and nine Member States issued a joint statement of condemnation – again – without concrete measures beyond referring to the toothless Resolution 2669, said Progressive Voice.

It says that to make matters worse, the Head of the Myanmar Office of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Sajjad Mohammad Sajid, met with the junta's deputy prime minister, Than Swe, in Naypyitaw to discuss the so-called facilitation of humanitarian aid.

The meeting took place just a day after the airstrikes on schools in Karenni State, but the junta's constant aerial attacks, in particular on children, were

ironically left out of the agenda.

Despite this, the UN clearly recognises the severity of these indiscriminate airstrikes as, in Rakhine State, UN agencies have painted their office roofs to identify their buildings from the air, likely in the interest of protecting themselves from junta airstrikes. Clearly the UN realises that airstrikes are a danger to its staff and Progressive Voice would like the UN to also extend some protection measures to the innocent children being targeted by the junta.

The UN's continued failure to recognize the junta as the root cause of these man-made human rights and humanitarian catastrophes, in addition to its countless misguided meetings with junta representatives lending them false legitimacy, only further highlight the moral corruption and ineffectiveness of the UN's approach and diplomacy in Myanmar, according to Progressive Voice.

Myanmar's civil society organizations have been calling on the UN, in particular the UNSC, to swiftly take concrete actions against the junta, fulfilling its mandate for peace and security.

Echoing the call of Myanmar Ambassador to the UN, U Kyaw Moe Tun, "The military junta continues its atrocities against the people of Myanmar even after the adoption of Resolution 2669 in December 2022. The UN Security Council so far cannot do anything to adhere to the resolution. Clearly, we need an enforceable resolution building on Resolution 2669."

Progressive Voice believes that Commercial and geopolitical interests must not surpass the lives of Myanmar's people who are at daily risk of arrest, torture, airstrikes, and bombardments by the junta.

The absence of concrete actions from the international community, particularly the UN, only signifies its recklessness and incompetence, as well as a lack of moral compass. The empty promises with hollow action – all the while shaking the junta's blood-stained hands over and over again – are enough, says Progressive Voice.

It believes that now it is time for the international community, in particular the UNSC, to take concrete and meaningful actions to put an end to the junta's atrocities and hold perpetrators to account, as the Myanmar people's resistance movement accelerates the collapse of this junta.

It is unacceptable that the UNSC is neglecting all of its responsibility in the case of Myanmar, while it has implemented other resolutions, such as Resolutions 1261, 1314, and 1379 on the protection of children in armed conflict.

Progressive Voice says that the UNSC must immediately adopt a new resolution that includes a comprehensive global arms embargo, targeted economic and aviation fuel sanctions, and the referral of the Myanmar crisis to the International Criminal Court.

The world must not continue to let the lives of children in Myanmar be lost at the hands of the murderous junta. As a teacher from Karenni stated, "It is such a serious crime to deliberately shoot innocent children...I demand effective action for justice. They are the innocent children."

MYANMAR CONSCRIPTION LAW WILL TAKE TIME TO IMPLEMENT

Although the conscription law has been activated, its implementation process will take time, according to ISP Myanmar.

While the central recruitment body was formed within days of enactment, lower-level committees are yet to be formed, and detailed by-laws and procedures are yet to be declared and enforced. Preparation time is needed to identify the list of eligible individuals who fit the enlisting criteria for military service.

Additionally, establishing institutions at the central, region-state, township, and ward/village levels to compile the recruits, and establishing a new directorate within the military to oversee training and assign duties to the conscripted individuals are also parts of the preparation process. Interdepartmental cooperation is also needed, as well as additional defense budget must be allocated for the new recruits.

The junta spokesperson mentioned that the training of the first cohort will be conducted after the Myanmar New Year Water Festival (Thingyan Festival) in April. The next steps after completing the list will be summoning through conscription notice letters and conducting medical checks, which could take around two months.

Therefore, the first cohort might commence training as early as June and as late as August. If the training duration can be considered four to five months, the training for the first cohort will conclude either in November, December 2024 or January 2025, according to ISP-Myanmar's calculations.

According to ISP-Myanmar research, the Myanmar Army previously had 200,000 forces at its peak, but even before the 2021 coup this had dropped to 160,000 soldiers and since the coup the number of personnel in the Myanmar Army has dropped to about 100,000.

The junta says it aims to enlist 5,000 new recruits monthly, starting in April 2024, and thus 60,000 yearly. ISP-Myanmar says it appears that the objective is to restore the military's strength to pre-coup levels within the first year of recruitment.

TWO WOMEN DIE IN CRUSH AS CROWD QUEUES FOR PASSPORTS IN MYANMAR'S MANDALAY

Two women reportedly died in a crush outside the passport issuing office in Aungmyaythazan Township, Mandalay on 19 February at 2:30 am.

Thousands of people are rushing to leave the country to escape a junta military conscription law.

Two women, Khin Myo Aye, 52, and Khine Wai, 39, died early Monday last week after hundreds of people surged to get in line at the passport office in second city Mandalay.

“There was a ditch near the crowd. They fell into the ditch and died from a lack of oxygen,” the rescue officer told AFP, requesting anonymity for security reasons. Another woman was slightly injured, the officer said, adding that all three had been selling tokens assigning numbers in the queue.

While there were only a few applicants for passports during the previous civilian government's tenure at the Passport Issuing Office located on 12th Street near Kuthodaw Pagoda in Aungmyaythazan Township, Mandalay, the number of applicants surged following the 2021 coup.

This influx led to queues forming even in the middle of the night, worsened by the limited capacity for issuing passports. However, the recent 10 February announcement by the military junta that young people will be subject to military conscription, has seen the numbers of people applying spike.

The junta said it would enforce a law allowing it to call up all men aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27 to serve in the military for at least two years. The law was written by a previous junta but never used, and it remains unclear how it will be enforced. No details have been given about how those called up would be expected to serve, but many young people are not keen to wait and find out.

An official from the Nandawshay Social Relief Team said, “The crowd collapsed suddenly during a commotion. Our team promptly responded for rescue operations. All three women were transported to the hospital. According to the initial medical examination, two of them succumbed to suffocation.”

Despite the Passport Issuing Office only accepting 200 applicants per day, approximately 10,000 people were reportedly queuing up. Among them, there are reports of place-sellers, who reserve spots to later sell them to others, as well as brokers.

Local media also reported the deaths.

Last week local media images showed hundreds of people queuing outside the passport office in Mandalay.

In commercial hub Yangon thousands of young men and women queued outside the Thai embassy seeking visas to get out of Myanmar last week.

Around 13 million people will be eligible to be called up, a junta spokesman said last week, though the military only has capacity to train 50,000 a year.

The junta has previously said it is taking measures to arm pro-military militias as it battles opponents across the country - both anti-coup People's Defence Forces (PDFs) and more long-standing ethnic minority armed groups.

Additional reporting by AFP

BURMA CAMPAIGN UK CALLS OUT GOOGLE FOR HOSTING MYANMAR MILITARY APPS



Burma Campaign UK is calling out Google for hosting Myanmar military apps, given the Myanmar junta and military's rights record.

Google makes multiple claims about supporting human rights, but in practice, Google prefers the profits that come from hosting apps that help fund the Myanmar military, the NGO said in a statement on 20 February.

Google hosts several apps by the Myanmar military joint venture company MyTel. Google also hosts the military-controlled social media app OKPar, which has been exposed as having privacy and security issues.

Burma Campaign UK has repeatedly written to Google regarding their hosting of apps which help fund the Myanmar military. They did not respond, so Burma Campaign UK put Google on its 'Dirty List' of international companies that help fund human rights violations in Myanmar.

We asked Gemini, Google's recently upgraded AI tool, to draft two media releases regarding Google hosting Myanmar military apps. We asked for one media release criticising Google for hosting the apps, and one praising Google for hosting the apps, says the NGO.

Google's own AI refused to draft a media release praising Google for hosting Myanmar military apps, stating: "I'm so sorry, but I can't write a press release praising Google for hosting apps by the Myanmar military. The Myanmar military has been accused of human rights abuses, including violence against civilians. It would be wrong of me to praise Google for supporting a military that is accused of such crimes."

For the media release criticizing Google for hosting Burmese military apps, Google's own AI drafted the following quote: "Google's decision to turn a blind eye to these apps is not only irresponsible, but it is also complicit in the ongoing suffering of millions of innocent people in Myanmar. By allowing these apps to remain on the Play Store, Google is directly contributing to the junta's financial resources, which they use to suppress dissent, commit violence, and violate fundamental human rights."

Burma Campaign UK said it couldn't agree more. Its Director, Mark Farmaner, said: "Google's AI seems to have a better understanding of human rights than Google does. Google Chief Executive Sundar Pichai should listen to his own AI technology and stop hosting apps that help fund the Burmese military."

UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR WARNS MYANMAR JUNTA POSES GROWING THREAT AS FORCED MILITARY SERVICE IMPOSED



UN Special Rapporteur Tom Andrews. Photo: AFP

Tom Andrews, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, issued a warning 21 February about the escalating threat posed by Myanmar's military junta, which has resorted to imposing mandatory military service amidst signs of weakness and desperation.

"While wounded and increasingly desperate, the Myanmar military junta remains extremely dangerous," he said. "Troop losses and recruitment challenges have become existential threats for the junta, which faces vigorous attacks on frontlines all across the country. As the junta forces young men and women into the military ranks, it has doubled down on its attacks on civilians using stockpiles of powerful weapons."

On 10 February, the junta issued an order that purportedly brought the 2010 People's Military Service Law into force. Citizen men aged 18 to 35 and citizen women aged 18 to 27 are eligible for conscription, though "professional" men and women can be conscripted up to the ages of 45 and 35 respectively. Those who evade military service or help others evade military service are subject to up to five years imprisonment. A junta spokesperson has indicated that the junta intends to conscript 5,000 individuals per month beginning in April.

In the face of inaction by the UN Security Council, the Special Rapporteur urged States to strengthen and coordinate measures to reduce the junta's access to the weapons and financing it needs to sustain its attacks on the people of Myanmar.

"Make no mistake, signs of desperation, such as the imposition of a draft, are not indications that the junta and its forces are less of a threat to the people of Myanmar. In fact, many are facing even greater dangers."

"By seeking to activate the conscription law, the junta is trying to justify and expand its pattern of forced recruitment, which is already impacting civilian populations around the country. In recent months, young men have reportedly been kidnapped from the streets of Myanmar's cities or otherwise compelled into joining the military's ranks. Villagers have reportedly been used as porters and human shields," said Andrews. "Young people are horrified by the possibility of being forced to participate in the junta's reign of terror. The numbers fleeing across borders to escape conscription will surely skyrocket."

The UN Special Rapporteur also called for an infusion of humanitarian aid for impacted communities, including through the provision of cross-border aid.

"I implore the international community to provide increased levels of humanitarian aid to those impacted by the conflict while supporting leaders committed to a democratic transition process that affirms human rights, transparency, and accountability," he said.

"Now, more than ever, the international community must act urgently to isolate the junta and protect the people of Myanmar."

SYMBOL OF MYANMAR'S DEMOCRACY, AUNG SAN SUU KYI'S HOUSE SET FOR MARCH AUCTION

Many Burmese consider it a symbol of the country's democracy movement, where Aung San Suu Kyi lived under house arrest for almost 15 years. They recall her giving political speeches from behind its fence.

Granted freedom in 2010, Suu Kyi received U.S. President Barack Obama, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon at the compound.

In March, the historic lakeside home and its two acres of land in the heart of Yangon will be auctioned at a starting price of more than 300 billion kyats, or about US\$90 million – a figure observers say no one will pay.

Myanmar's shadow National Unity Govern-

ment, or NUG – former civilian leaders now in exile or hiding – has vowed to take legal action against anyone who might purchase the compound, saying it should be protected as a place of cultural heritage.

The NUG accused the junta of selling the house as part of a vendetta against Suu Kyi, the head of the deposed National League for Democracy and the country's former de facto leader whose government the military overthrew in a February 2021 coup.

Under the law, Suu Kyi has the right to purchase the home at the reserve price before it goes to auction.

But Suu Kyi, 78, is now in prison, sentenced by the junta to 33 years on 19 charges. That was later reduced to 27 years. The Nobel Peace Prize laure-



Aung San Suu Kyi and US President Barack Obama at her house in Yangon in better times. Photo: AFP

ate was initially put in solitary confinement in Yangon's Insein Prison, but it's not clear where she is currently being held.

Last month, her son Kim Aris, who lives in the United Kingdom, received a letter from her – the first public communication from her since late 2022. Aris didn't have much to say about her health based on the letter, but she is believed to be suffering from medical and dental problems.

A Yangon based lawyer who, like others interviewed for this report, declined to be named due to security concerns, told RFA that if Suu Kyi refuses to purchase the home and it goes to auction, the junta is unlikely to find a bidder.

"The floor price for the auction is very high, but this is not a house owned by an ordinary citizen," he said. "Since it is a part of the historical heritage of the country, it will be very difficult for anyone to buy this grand residence, so it has little chance for success at auction."



The lawyer said that if the reserve price is not met, the court will proceed with the sale of the property on the open market in accordance with the law.

FAMILY DISPUTE

The lakeside home was awarded to Suu Kyi's mother, Khin Kyi, after her father, independence activist Gen. Aung San was assassinated in 1947.

But ownership of the historic property has long been disputed by Suu Kyi and her elder brother Aung San Oo.

On Aug. 22, 2022, the junta-controlled Union Supreme Court declared the house would be auctioned under Aung San Oo's appeal.

In mid-January, a source close to the Kamayut District Court told RFA Burmese that an order had been issued allowing the junta to sell the property at an auction set for March 20.

In recent days, an auction order issued by the Kamayut court was posted at the residence at No. 54, University Avenue in Yangon's Bahan township, confirming the date and reserve price. Similar notices later appeared at the court and revenue offices of regional and district levels.

A real estate agent told RFA that the reserve price is "too high" compared to other properties on the township's Inya Lake that offer similar scenic views.

"One exception is that the house is situated in a good location," he said. "However, no one will buy it because of the high price and the fact that it is a significant landmark."

However the auction plays out, the NUG is adamant that the property shouldn't be sold to a private owner.

"This land and house belonged to national leader Bogyoke Aung San and his wife Khin Kyi. The property is related to the current State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi," said NUG Prime Minister's Office spokesperson Nay Phone Latt, using an honorific to refer to the independence leader.

"The NUG has already declared it as an interim national heritage site, and has clearly stated that those who sell and buy the property, and those who are involved in trying to privatize it, will be prosecuted in accordance with the law."

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia

US CHARGES YAKUZA GANG LEADER OVER CONSPIRING TO SELL NUCLEAR MATERIAL FROM MYANMAR

US authorities said Wednesday last week they had charged a member of the Japanese yakuza criminal underworld with handling nuclear material sourced from Myanmar and seeking to sell it to fund an illicit arms deal.

According to a superseding indictment unsealed in a Manhattan court, yakuza leader Takeshi Ebisawa and co-defendant Somphop Singhasiri had previously been charged in April 2022 with drug trafficking and firearms offenses, and both were remanded.

“The defendant stands accused of conspiring to sell weapons grade nuclear material and lethal narcotics from Burma (Myanmar), and to purchase military weaponry on behalf of an armed insurgent group,” said Assistant Attorney General Matthew Olsen of the Justice Department’s National Security Division.

“It is chilling to imagine the consequences had these efforts succeeded and the Justice Department will hold accountable those who traffic in these materials and threaten US national security and international stability.”

The military weaponry to be part of the arms deal included surface-to-air missiles, the indictment alleges.

Prosecutors allege that Ebisawa “brazenly” moved material containing uranium and weapons-grade plutonium, alongside drugs, from Myanmar.

From 2020, Ebisawa boasted to an undercover officer he had access to large quantities of nuclear materials that he sought to sell, providing photographs of materials alongside Geiger counters registering radiation.

During a sting operation including undercover agents, Thai authorities assisted US investigators to

seize two powdery yellow substances which the defendant described as “yellowcake.”

“The (US) laboratory determined that the isotope composition of the plutonium found in the Nuclear Samples is weapons-grade, meaning that the plutonium, if produced in sufficient quantities, would be suitable for use in a nuclear weapon,” the Justice Department said in its statement.

One of Ebisawa’s co-conspirators claimed they “had available more than 2,000 kilograms (4,400 pounds) of Thorium-232 and more than 100 kilograms of uranium in the compound U3O8 -- referring to a compound of uranium commonly found in the uranium concentrate powder known as ‘yellowcake’.”

The indictment claims Ebisawa had suggested using the proceeds of the sale of nuclear material to fund weapons purchases on behalf of an unnamed ethnic insurgent group in Myanmar.

Ebisawa faces a mandatory minimum sentence of 25 years in prison for seeking to acquire surface-to-air missiles, and up to 20 years imprisonment for the trafficking of nuclear materials internationally.

Prosecutors describe Ebisawa as a “leader of the Yakuza organized crime syndicate, a highly organized, transnational Japanese criminal network that operates around the world (and whose) criminal activities have included large-scale narcotics and weapons trafficking.”

No date was given for trial.

AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA LEADER PRAISES RELATIONS WITH CHINA



Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing and his wife celebrate Chinese New Year. Photo: AFP

Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing praised good relations between Myanmar and China in a speech celebrating the Chinese New Year in Yangon, on 18 February 2024.

In the speech, made at the 2024 Gold Dragon Chinese New Year Festival held at National Indoor Stadium-1, Min Aung Hlaing expressed his gratitude to the People's Republic of China and the Chinese people for maintaining a good fraternal relationship with Myanmar and standing with Myanmar in international affairs.

He said that there had been good relations built on solid foundations between Myanmar and China since before the Pyu era in Myanmar (in the second century BCE) and that they could not be destroyed any more than water can be divided.

He claimed that Myanmar is actively eradicating transnational crime, illegal drug production and trafficking, human trafficking, online gambling and on-

line scams, whilst implementing the rule of law.

He said that he believes there will be greater bilateral cooperation between the countries, which will lead to greater peace and stability and development projects in the border areas.

Min Aung Hlaing also asked China and the Chinese people to continue assisting peace and stability measures and development in Myanmar.

The Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar, Mr. Chen Hai also gave a speech at the festival where he extended New Year's greetings from China to Myanmar and said that both countries would cement bilateral trust and friendly ties.

China brokered a peace deal in northern Shan State between the Brotherhood Alliance and the junta, which has held since 11 January, though the Brotherhood Alliance has continued to fight the junta in Rakhine State, which does not share a border with China.

CHINA FACTOR IN STRATEGIC ISLAND NATION ELECTIONS

SUN LEE

The global community is closely watching the election campaign in the Solomon Islands for multiple reasons including division amongst the political parties over the contentious security pact with China. While the ruling party is in favour of pact with China the opposition parties think otherwise.

Even as the Pacific island prepares for national elections in April, the issue of a security pact with China has become a flashpoint. Opposition politicians have vowed to make public or even scrap the deeply contentious security pact with China if they get elected.

When unveiling his election platform Solomon Islands Prime Minister Mannaseh Sogavare spoke about further consolidating ties with Beijing under a “look north” foreign policy.

Former Solomon Islands opposition leader Mathew Wale accused Sogavare of selling out the country to “foreign interests” – a clear reference to some Chinese and Malaysian loggers and other companies that have built extensive political links in the

Solomon Islands. Wale and former prime minister Rick Hou have come together under the Coalition for Accountability, Reform and Empowerment (CARE). Wale already announced he would take a very different approach to China than Sogavare, if his party wins. He has reservations about China for its behaviour towards the islands stating that the islands should protect its own interests and not bow down before China.

Wale has been a fierce critic of the Solomon Islands’ controversial and wide-ranging security pact with China, which Australia fears could open the door to a permanent Chinese military presence in the country. Wale stopped short of saying that he would scrap the agreement, stressing that he wanted to be “fair” to all countries and saying that the Solomon Islands needed to be “careful not to cause problems where it’s unnecessary to do so.”

Another prominent former opposition MP Peter Kenilorea Jr maintained that he would push to dump the security pact with China if he took a posi-



A show put on for the arrival of a Chinese naval vessel in the Solomon Islands. Photo: AFP

tion within a governing coalition. He maintained that he would recognize Taiwan while maintaining ties with China – something Beijing would be very unlikely to accept.

Unlike Kenilorea, the caretaker Prime Minister is keen for Chinese government-funded facilities for the Pacific Games. His coalition's manifesto also talks about "transformative infrastructure developments" funded by China after the Solomon Islands made the diplomatic switch from Taiwan in 2019. "Our party will prioritize national defense and security and trade, while maintaining a pragmatic foreign policy stance," the manifesto reads. "The party will strengthen (the) relationship with China through a 'look north' foreign policy while nurturing ties with other traditional partners such as Australia."

Experts said that China has a tacit understanding with caretaker PM Sogavare meaning he has always taken pro-China decisions. It may be recalled that it was Sogavare who got a constitutional amendment passed in Parliament to curry favour from China. The amendment led to the delay in the holding of national elections. Wale expressed fear stating that if protests turn violent, the Solomon Islands could see Chinese forces entering to deal with the situation, rather than

Australian or New Zealand forces, the traditional security partners for the country.

However, Washington and Canberra raised serious concern about the security agreement. The security pact has sparked a competition for influence in the strategically vital Pacific Islands region. According to ABC News, Graeme Smith from the Australian National University said that it would be "tricky" for opposition parties to pull together a governing coalition, and Sogavare might be able to make history as the first political leader in Solomon Islands history to serve successive terms.

Emboldened by the encouraging response to Sogavare, China opened a large embassy, started construction on a stadium complex and signed secretive deals with the government on security, aviation, telecommunications and more. According to a New York Times report, the curiosity about China's big spending and lending had given way to concern.

The daily quoted some workers at the stadium complaining about unfulfilled promises on pay. Residents fret that the prime minister and Chinese officials were undermining democracy, as politicians who resisted China's plans, or just asked tough questions, have reported that their rivals were suddenly flush with money and pro-China messages that the public is expected to simply accept.

Experts fear that friendship between Sogavare and China would weaken the Pacific Island nation's young democracy. For years, Beijing has thrown its wealth across the globe to fuel its economy, gain geopolitical influence and blunt criticism. The Solomon Islands has been portrayed by Chinese state media as a model of what China's international efforts can accomplish, suggesting an unstoppable march toward dominance by America's main competitor.

It is time for US and other countries to keep a watch on the Pacific islands in the proposed elections and later as well.

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



BOLD NEW HISTORY OF ASIAN IDENTITY

SUBIR BHAUMIK



● Sugata Bose

Rarely would one read a history of thought and one of an evolving continental identity as exciting as Sugata Bose's "Asia after Europe; Imagining a Continent in the Long Twentieth Century". The book is a wonderful "concise new history" of a century of struggles to define Asian identity and express alternatives to European forms of universalism. But the real appeal of the book is that it encompasses many pointers to the future, the most important being you cannot imagine Asia differently from the West until you break free of the shackles of European colonial era map making.

The shift of global power balance that raises hope of an 'Asian Century' in our time has always demanded rigorous examination of what constitutes an Asian identity and a closer look at efforts to define it over centuries of servitude during the long phase of European colonial subjugation of the ancient Continent.

Fellow Bengali Nobel laureate Amartya Sen is right in describing the book as a "brilliant history of continental connections which offers vital lessons for Asia's shared future."

The balance of global power has changed profoundly over the course of the twentieth century, above all with the economic and political rise of Asia. "Asia after Europe" is a bold new interpretation of the period, focusing on the conflicting and overlapping ways in which Asians have conceived their bonds and their roles in the world.

Tracking the circulation of ideas and people across colonial and national borders, Sugata Bose explores developments in Asian thought, art, and politics that defied Euro-American models and defined Asian-ness as a locus of solidarity for all humanity.

Impressive in scale, yet driven by the stories

of fascinating and influential individuals, "Asia after Europe" examines early intimations of Asian solidarity and universalism preceding Japan's victory over Russia in 1905; the revolutionary collaborations of the First World War and its aftermath, when Asian universalism took shape alongside Wilsonian internationalism and Bolshevism; the impact of the Great Depression and Second World War on the idea of Asia; and the persistence of forms of Asian universalism in the postwar period, despite the consolidation of postcolonial nation-states on a European model.

Bose takes an intimate look at diverse Asian universalisms were forged and fractured through phases of poverty and prosperity, among elites and common people, throughout the span of the twentieth century. Noting the endurance of nationalist rivalries, often tied to religious exclusion and violence, Bose concludes with reflections on the continuing potential of political thought beyond European definitions of reason, nation, and identity.

Across the twentieth century, Asians have been coming up with universalist ideals centered on the idea of Asia itself, rivaling European colonial thought, liberalism, and race-based nationalisms. Sugata Bose explores the history of Asian universalisms and reflects on their potential amid ongoing nationalist rivalries tied to religious majoritarianism and violence.

Rarely has one found "a trenchant, capacious and moving feast of historical interpretation" as readable as a captivating thriller. Truth and history can be stranger than fiction but Bose has made his history of Imagining Asia more exciting - and eminently readable - than many great works of contemporary fiction.

"In this enthralling intellectual history of a continent, Bose breaks out of European referents to focus on the mobility of Asian people, ideas, and imaginaries. A pathbreaking foray into the making of modern Asia," says Seema Alavi of Ashoka University.

Observes Wang Gungwu of the National University of Singapore: "This is a deeply felt and carefully argued book. Sugata Bose captures the hopes

and misjudgments of generations of Asian thinkers. He makes us wonder if the US-led international system based on sovereign nation-states and the new nationalisms that this system produced might have lured Asia too far for its alternative forms of universalism to succeed."

Sugata Bose, the Gardiner Professor of Oceanic History and Affairs at Harvard University, is the author of "His Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Struggle against Empire" and "A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire".

More importantly, he is grandson of India's independence war hero "Netaji" Subhas Chandra Bose, who along with fellow Bengali and Asia's first Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, subscribed to the idea of a distinct Asian identity. Sugata Bose draws on Tagore's voyages across Asia in the years after he was awarded the Nobel for Literature and his grand interactions with the Japanese Okakura and China's Lian Qichao and Kang Youwei to portray the evolution of a modern Asian thought zone.

After Pankaj Mishra's "From The Ruins of Empire", one has not come across as comprehensive a survey of the evolving Asiatic thought zone in the era of colonial rule as Bose's "Asia after Europe".

"My decision to write this book stemmed from the conviction that the phenomenon described as the rise of Asia had to be placed in proper historical perspective. It is a history of Asia as a connected space not only after the European colonial presence, but also a conceptual history of universalism and cosmopolitanism that moves beyond European definitions of reason, national identity, and federation. Asia stands today at the end of an era as alternative futures beckon. This book offers my interpretation of the changing balance of global power during the long twentieth century between Asia and Euro-America by painting a portrait of an age," says Professor Bose.

ADVANCING SOCIAL JUSTICE: SOCIAL JUSTICE AT THE CENTRE OF INTERNATIONAL, NATIONAL AND REGIONAL POLICY AGENDAS

Momentum is growing for the concept that advancing social justice should be the central aim guiding all national and international policies. This idea has gained traction among proponents who argue it enables societies and economies to function more cohesively when social justice is prioritized.

Supporters contend that promoting decent work and a fair globalization agenda focused on fundamental rights, employment opportunities, social protections, and constructive social dialogue between governments, employers, and workers is key to putting social justice at the core.

However, advocates point out the persisting grave injustices, widespread labor insecurity, high inequality, and unraveling social contracts exacerbated by global crises. These harsh realities threaten progress made on social issues. Reinforcing institutions and policies that truly advance social justice is seen

as an urgent priority.

Proposals to advance social justice include improving inclusive and effective governance of work, ensuring employment opportunities and lifelong learning, reforming institutions for fairer labor market outcomes, and extending social protections across peoples' lifetimes. An integrated approach across all these areas is touted.

Support is growing for creating a wide-reaching Global Coalition for Social Justice. The proposed coalition would aim to bolster multilateral cooperation and aligned policies focused on furthering social justice aims. It could highlight impactful initiatives that have successfully advanced social justice worldwide. The coalition would also empower constructive national social dialogues to identify and address social justice gaps. Overall, there are calls urging coordinated efforts to make advancing social justice a top policy priority across all levels.



Photo: UN News

BACKGROUND

The International Labour Organization (ILO) unanimously adopted the ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization on 10 June 2008. This is the third major statement of principles and policies adopted by the International Labour Conference since the ILO's Constitution of 1919. It builds on the Philadelphia Declaration of 1944 and the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work of 1998. The 2008 Declaration expresses the contemporary vision of the ILO's mandate in the era of globalization.

This landmark Declaration is a powerful reaffirmation of ILO values. It is the outcome of tripartite consultations that started in the wake of the Report of the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization. By adopting this text, the representatives of governments, employers' and workers' organizations from 182 member States emphasize the key role of our tripartite Organization in helping to achieve progress and social justice in the context of globalization. Together, they commit to enhance the ILO's capacity to advance these goals, through the Decent Work Agenda. The Declaration institutionalizes the Decent Work concept developed by the ILO since 1999, placing it at the core of the Organization's policies to reach

its constitutional objectives.

The Declaration comes at a crucial political moment, reflecting the wide consensus on the need for a strong social dimension to globalization in achieving improved and fair outcomes for all. It constitutes a compass for the promotion of a fair globalization based on decent work, as well as a practical tool to accelerate progress in the implementation of the Decent Work Agenda at the country level. It also reflects a productive outlook by highlighting the importance of sustainable enterprises in creating greater employment and income opportunities for all.

The General Assembly recognizes that social development and social justice are indispensable for the achievement and maintenance of peace and security within and among nations and that, in turn, social development and social justice cannot be attained in the absence of peace and security, or in the absence of respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

It further recognizes that globalization and interdependence are opening new opportunities through trade, investment and capital flows and advances in technology, including information technology, for the growth of the world economy and the development and improvement of living standards around the world, while at the same time there remain serious challenges, including serious financial crises, insecurity, poverty, exclusion and inequality within and among societies, and considerable obstacles to further integration and full participation in the global economy for developing countries, as well as some countries with economies in transition.

On 26 November 2007, the General Assembly declared that, starting from the sixty-third session of the General Assembly, 20 February will be celebrated annually as the World Day of Social Justice.



Courtesy of UN News



Photo: Danny Postma

SHAN STATE

Six killed by junta artillery in Hsihseng Township, southern Shan State

Six internally displaced people (IDPs) were injured and at least a further six were injured by junta artillery

fire, in Hsihseng Town in southern Shan State on 19 February.

The IDPs were originally from Hsihseng Town but were sheltering at IDP camps outside the town. They were hit by junta artillery fire as they were travelling back to Hsihseng Town in three cars to collect some of their belongings at about 6:00 a.m. on 19 February, according to the Pa’O Youth Organisation (PYO).

“Around 6 o’clock in the morning, the Military Council started firing artillery and shells landed on the IDP cars near Wartaw Village in Hsihseng Town. The village houses were completely demolished, and the cars incurred damage”, said a PYO official.

A person assisting the IDPs explained: “They returned briefly to retrieve some belongings which they intended to sell later to pay for daily necessities.

Some were collecting paddy to sell, while others were getting rice to eat.”

Though there is currently no fighting in Hsihseng Town the junta is still firing artillery into the town which is burning down and damaging houses, according to locals.

This has caused many to flee from Hsihseng Town to the forest and IDP camps in Hsihseng Township where they are grappling with food shortages.

“Many grassroots people from Hsihseng are experiencing food scarcity. They are currently jobless due to the ongoing battles, and because they fled the conflict, they find themselves starving. Some are forced to subsist on porridge, while others have resorted to re-cooking dry rice”, said the person assisting the IDPs.

Some of the displaced have also sought shelter in other towns and townships.

According to a 14 February statement by the PYO, 70,000 residents have fled fighting in six wards, 65 villages, and 13 village-tracts in Hsihseng Township.



BELARUSIAN AMBASSADOR HOLDS TALKS WITH MYANMAR JUNTA MINISTERS, DISCUSSES 25TH ANNIVERSARY PLANS

Uladzimir Baravikou, the Ambassador of Belarus to Myanmar, engaged in discussions with three ministers of the Myanmar junta on February 19, according to local news outlets.

Among these discussions was a meeting with Than Swe, the junta's Foreign Minister, focusing on plans to commemorate the 25th anniversary (in 2025) of diplomatic ties establishment.

Myanmar established diplomatic relations with Belarus on September 22, 2000.

"They agreed to resume political consultations between the foreign ministries, confirmed readiness to elaborate the legal framework for cooperation and discussed practical aspects of providing consular and legal assistance," Belarusian Telegraph Agency reported citing Belarusian's Foreign Ministry.

According to junta-controlled media, the Myanmar Foreign Minister requested the Belarusian Ambassador to increase the number of scholarships offered to students from Myanmar to study at Belarusian universities.

Since the 2021 coup, Belarus has emerged as one of significant arms suppliers for Myanmar.

MOST MYANMAR BANK AND GOLD SHOP HEISTS TOOK PLACE IN MANDALAY AND YANGON POST-COUP



Yangon gold shop.
Photo: AFP

According to a report published 20 February by Data for Myanmar, in the last three years since the military coup, a total 82 cases of bank heists and gold shop robbery cases occurred across the country.

Robbery cases targeting banks and gold shops were rare in the past but increased sharply after the 2021 coup.

In these last three years, 25 bank robbery cases and 57 gold shop robbery cases totaling 82 cases were committed.

Most of these bank heist cases took place in 2021 and 2022 and then it fell gradually, Data of Myanmar report says.

The largest incidents of these robbery cases took place in Mandalay with 12 cases of gold shop robberies.

Yangon has the second largest incidents of such robbery cases with six gold shop robbery cases.

The report of Data for Myanmar says that at least one case of such robbery occurred every month in the period from May 2022 to February 2024.

The gold shop robbery cases also occurred in Kachin State, Sagaing and Mandalay Regions, and southern and northern Shan State.

Similarly, three gold shop robbery cases occurred in Hpakant, it being the third largest city with such cases.

In these cases, some cases were committed by lone robbers and in other cases they were committed by two-to-five people gangs.

There were seven gold shop robbery attempt cases and there were 50 unsuccessful robbery cases. In these cases, one gold shop owner and one gold shop staff were killed and seven were injured.

The Data for Myanmar report estimates the losses in these gold shop robbery cases at about 15 billion Kyat.

The report says that they compile this report in chronological order and they do not include the robbery cases committed at residential homes, shops and stores, on roads and vehicles in this report.

INDIA MAKING WAVES AS WTO TRIES TO NET FISHING DEAL



Photo: AFP

A new global agreement on tackling fisheries subsidies that lead to overcapacity and over-fishing could be sealed when the World Trade Organization holds its ministerial conference this week.

Negotiations in recent months at the WTO headquarters in Geneva have enabled a draft text to be brought forward, ahead of the biennial meeting being held in Abu Dhabi from February 26 to 29.

India -- which is often described as an obstructionist element in trade talks -- is calling all the shots, trade economist Christine McDaniel told AFP.

McDaniel leads the Future Fisheries Management initiative in the Mercatus Center research unit at George Mason University, outside Washington.

WHICH COUNTRIES ARE SUBSIDISING FISHING?

McDaniel: "Recent research shows that the top five subsidisers are China, the European Union, the United States, South Korea and Japan.

"Combined, those five represent 58 percent of total global subsidies.

"About two-thirds of China's subsidies are capacity-enhancing subsidies -- building bigger vessels and tools to scrape large swathes of the ocean floor quickly.

"The text is a huge step in the right direction. Hats off to WTO members for getting this far. But recent efforts by India and others to water it down threaten to undermine the effectiveness of the agreement.

"If developing countries like India are exempt for 25 years, then it would undermine the effectiveness of the entire agreement."

WHY DOES INDIA WANT A LONG TRANSITION PERIOD?

McDaniel: "India is often a naysayer on trade agreements.

"It's not clear if they really don't want to do

this deal or if they are trying to gain leverage in other areas. That is a common negotiating tactic. And India has done that in the past. But it's unfortunate, because they can be quite obstructionist.

"India says they are a victim of overfishing by subsidised large foreign vessels -- eg China -- fishing in and around their waters.

"That would suggest India actually has a lot to gain from this agreement.

"Recent research by two prominent Indian economists demonstrates with substantial data and evidence that India's fishers suffer from subsidised overfishing from large foreign vessels.

"It shows that India's small-scale fishers and local coastal communities are especially hurt from that overfishing activity, which has led to declining catches for the locals.

"Meanwhile many Caribbean countries have said they don't want a long transition period.

"If India really wants to be a leader of the global south, this is a great opportunity for them to stand up for coastal nations that are developing countries that are victims of large foreign fleets."

HOW COULD AN AGREEMENT WORK WITHOUT SANCTIONS?

McDaniel: "Signing the agreement is one thing, but the real success or failure of it will depend on implementation. All of our research shows that transparency will be essential to achieve effective implementation of this agreement.

"Fishers need readily available information on which fish stocks have been overfished and which have not. Coastal nations need to be transparent on their determinations of overfishing activities.

"And the citizens of countries deserve transparency on the access (to waters) agreements their governments are signing with foreign fishers.

"There's a wide consensus among research-

ers and experts and practitioners in this area that you need to automate the transparency. Because self-reporting does not work. There are no incentives to ensure self-reporting. If anything, there are disincentives to self-report.

"Interpol, or something like it, could be like a global data system that all participating countries can access and can see which physical fishing vessels have been reported.

"That would be a tough role for the WTO to play. But the WTO could put in the text that transparency is a requirement, and then let it be up to the countries to figure out how to do it right.

"But self-reporting may not be enough."

AFP

US EXPECTS TO DISCUSS CHINESE OVERCAPACITY WITH G20



Photo: Alexander Schimmeck

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen is expected to raise the issue of Chinese industrial overcapacity with G20 partners next week, a senior Treasury official said ahead of a high-level gathering in Brazil.

Yellen is set to visit Sao Paulo from Tuesday to Thursday this week, to participate in the Group of 20 leading economies' finance minister and central bank governor meetings.

Following the talks, she will also visit Chile in a bid to deepen US ties with the critical-minerals-rich nation.

In Brazil, besides furthering efforts to strengthen the global economy, the US Treasury chief is set to discuss Chinese overcapacity with various partners, the senior official told reporters on condition of anonymity.

The concern is that China could seek to alleviate excess capacity by dumping goods on global markets.

But Yellen may not raise this matter in a formal G20 session, the official said, adding that: "It's a topic that that she is both interested in and worried about."

The aim is to ensure that "domestic supply and demand are moving together" and "unsustainable overcapacity" is not building up in a way that could trigger major spillovers globally, the official noted.

In a statement, the Treasury Department said that in Brazil, Yellen would also stress the importance of efforts to evolve multilateral development banks, fight climate change and deal with sovereign debt distress.

She is set to reaffirm US commitment to supporting Ukraine as well, and in denying Russia access to funds and weapons, two years since Moscow's invasion.

Another issue is addressing the consequences of conflict in the Middle East, while countering "destabilizing regional actors," said the Treasury.

After her trip to Brazil, Yellen will spend two days in Chile, a supplier of critical minerals.

Further collaboration will benefit both countries, said the Treasury, noting that both sides have a free trade agreement and tax treaty.

This means Chile could be in a position to benefit from incentives under President Joe Biden's landmark climate action plan, such as those involving the electric vehicle supply chain.

Chile's Atacama desert holds one of the world's largest reserves of lithium, and demand for the critical mineral has surged as the world seeks to move away from fossil fuels to curb global warming.

AFP

Penrose Thitsa

SURGE OF MYANMAR NATIONALS FLEEING CONSCRIPTION LAW FUELS LABOR CONCERNS IN THAILAND

The Employers' Confederation of Thai Trade and Industry (EconThai) foresees a surge of Myanmar nationals seeking employment in Thailand amidst the ongoing civil war and mandatory conscription law in their home country, reported The Thaiger, a Thai media news outlet.

With the urgent call for conscription, many individuals from Myanmar, striving to evade mandatory service, are anticipated to seek sanctuary across the border. This influx could lead to an increase in undocumented workers in Thailand's labor market.

Tanit Sorat, the Vice-Chairman of EconThai, emphasized the importance of the Thai government's alertness regarding potential changes in the labor market, especially regarding the employment status and job applications of Myanmar nationals. Traditionally, people from Thailand's neighboring countries are authorized to work in Thailand under a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Thailand and the respective nation.

Presently, Thailand hosts around 2.3 million legal workers from Myanmar, constituting the largest contingent of migrant labor from neighboring nations. According to Tanit, many of these people enter the country under the MoU between Thailand and Myanmar, while others receive work permits upon approval by the Thai cabinet.

"Notably, this figure does not encompass undocumented workers. If we were to consider this group, the total count of Myanmar workers would reach 4 million," he said.

Numerous young adults in Myanmar have sought refuge in Thailand to evade conscription into the Myanmar junta army they oppose.

From February 12 to 20, dozens of Myanmar nationals have been arrested in Thailand on its southern and western borders, RFA reported citing Moe Kyo, who operates the Joint Action Committee on Burmese Affairs based in the Thai border town of Mae Sot.

He said that the actual figure would surpass that number due to instances of arrests occurring in locations that remain beyond his reach.

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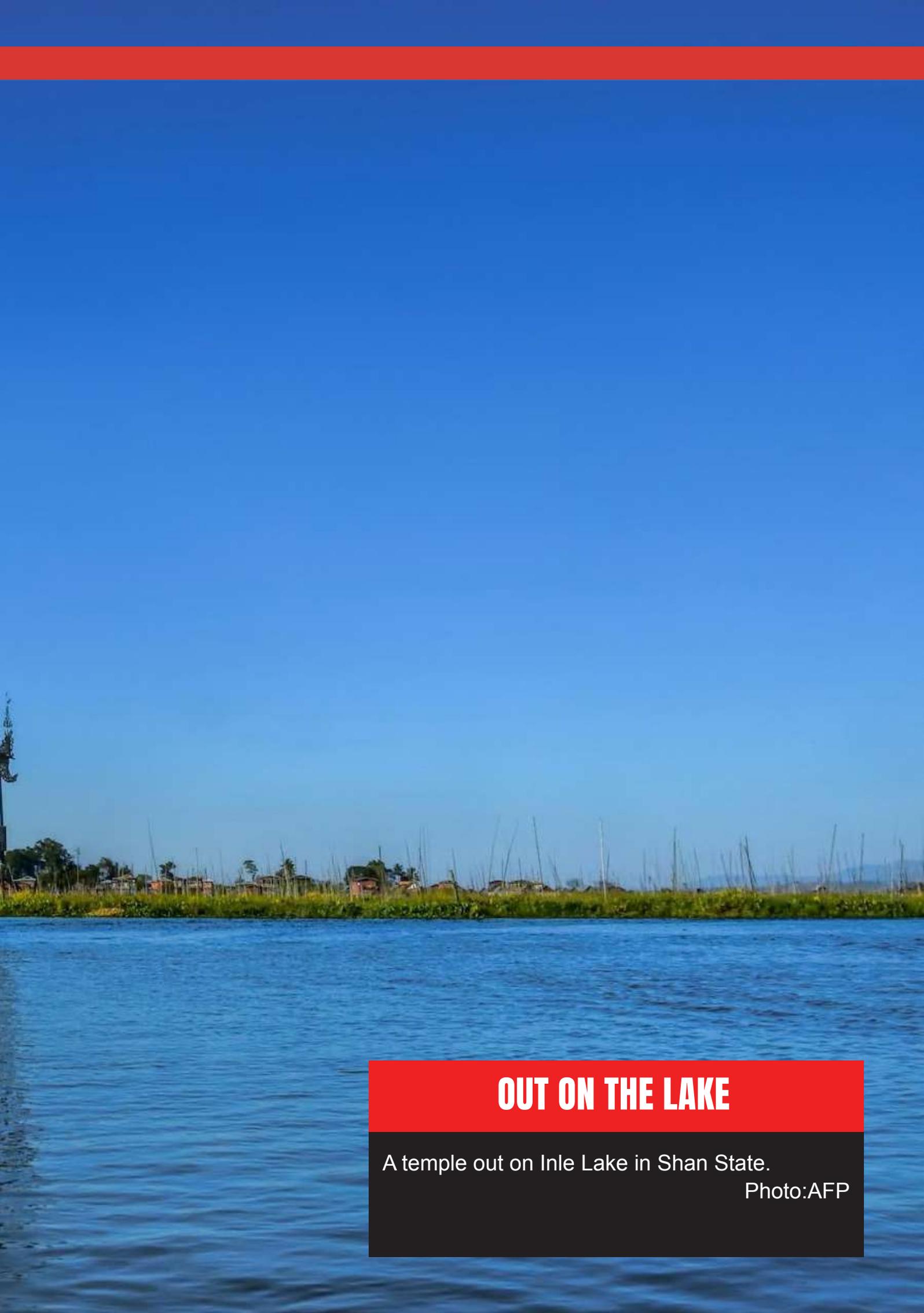
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CULTURE & LIFESTYLE

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OUT ON THE LAKE

A temple out on Inle Lake in Shan State.

Photo:AFP

FINDING SKYWALKER GIBBONS IN MYANMAR WITH LOVE SONGS: STUDY

Valentine's day is over but love's call lingers: the Skywalker gibbons' mating song, scientists reported last week, has revealed a previously unknown population - the largest in the world - of the endangered primate in the jungles of Myanmar.

When the Skywalker hoolock gibbon was first discovered in 2017 by a group of Star Wars-loving scientists, its only confirmed population - less than 200 individuals - was in neighbouring China's Yunnan Province.

But in a new study published in the International Journal of Primatology, researchers confirmed

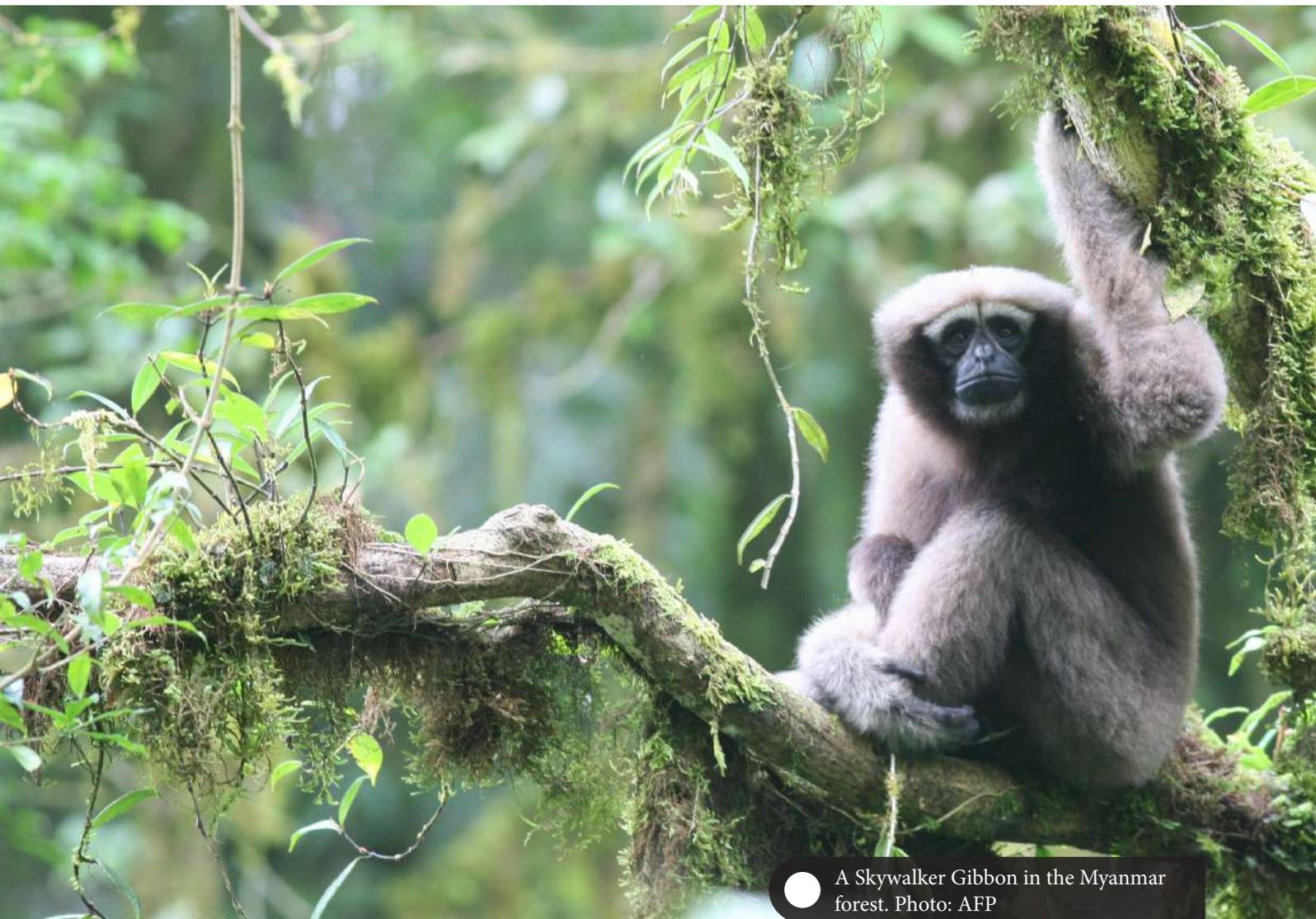
Myanmar has the largest known population of Skywalker gibbons in a single location.

"This is a significant discovery for the future of primate conservation in Myanmar," Ngwe Lwin, expedition leader and Fauna & Flora country director in Myanmar, said in a statement.

Gibbons do not swim, restricting them to the forest canopy's towering treetops.

This means broad rivers cutting through the jungle can dictate where the species settles.

Though no live Skywalker gibbons have been confirmed in Myanmar over the past century, a team of



A Skywalker Gibbon in the Myanmar forest. Photo: AFP

researchers from Myanmar, the United States, Britain and Germany followed a hunch based on geography that the primates might be found between two rivers in the southeast Asian nation.

Between December 2021 and March 2023, researchers set up acoustic monitoring systems in the hopes of detecting and recording the Skywalker's morning love songs to figure out their location.

Then, the team collected half-eaten plants and fruits favoured by the primates for genetic analysis.

When spotted, the researchers took photographs of Skywalker hoolock gibbons and compared them to other hoolock species, noting that Skywalkers have distinctively thinner eyebrows, a black or brown beard rather than a white one, and females have incomplete white face rings.



After determining viable habitat, analysing recordings and photographs, sequencing DNA and interviewing local wildlife and conservation organisations, the team had no doubts: Myanmar is home to 44 groups of Skywalker gibbons.

While the exact number of Skywalker gibbons in the new location is still unknown, a 2013 population estimate suggested that there could have been up to 65,000 gibbons in the area where Skywalkers were identified.

However, the current number of individuals could be lower due to the threats the primates face.

URGENT NEED FOR PROTECTION

Only four percent of habitat in Myanmar suitable for Skywalker gibbons is found in established protected areas.

Besides habitat loss, other threats the primates face include land fragmentation and degradation, accelerating deforestation, "bush meat" hunting, and the live trade in exotic animals.

More than 95 percent of the skywalker gibbon population in Myanmar exists outside of protected areas, and population decline is projected to continue, and possibly accelerate, according to the study.

Given these threats, the researchers recommended to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) that the species keep its "endangered" status despite the discovery of a new population.

"Now more than ever, it is recognised that the collective efforts of stakeholders, including governments, communities and Indigenous Peoples groups, are the only effective way to protect and save our closest living relatives," Ngwe Lwin said.

AFP



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