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PANC Myanmar youth head for the exits or hiding

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PREVENTING MYANMAR SUFFERING FROM ANOTHER 'LOST GENERATION' OF YOUTH

yanmar is in the midst of crisis in the wake of the 2021 military coup. But there is one particular sector that deserves attention – education.

The current crisis in the country has severely disrupted a whole generation. Speaking at a press conference in Bangkok last week, U.S. Chargé d'Affaires in Yangon Ms Susan Stevenson says she hopes USAID'S Diversity and Inclusion Scholarship Program for Myanmar students will go some way to preventing another "lost generation" of Myanmar youth.

Ms Stevenson highlighted the benefits of the five-year USAID program for more than 1,000 Myanmar students to provide higher education opportunities in southeast and south Asia, with an online component linked to the University of Arizona.

With a focus on Myanmar's most marginalized and vulnerable people, this scholarship will foster academic excellence, strengthen the overall educational landscape of Myanmar, and empower the next generation of leaders to contribute meaningfully to their communities. In addition, there are also grants available.

Myanmar's youth are in dire straits, with many higher education schemes halted or "running on empty" without teachers or professors – many of whom fled to join the so-called Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Further complicating the picture, the Myanmar junta's recent conscription call-up for the military has prompted many of those students still studying to question whether they should be fleeing the country, or hiding out in so-called "safe areas" while the crisis continues. Ms Stevenson worries there will be another "lost generation" of Myanmar youth.

"What struck me is the number of young people who should be in secondary school or universities who because of circumstances are now outside their formal education, uncertain about what their future might bring," she told the press conference on 29 February. "And so the idea of having a scholarship to be able to study because they don't necessarily feel that they can study at their existing institutions in Yangon, or in Myanmar in general, is very important."

Ms Stevenson recalled the difficulties at the universities in the 1990s in Myanmar – in the wake of the earlier pro-democracy uprising - where students could take up to a decade to finish their graduate degree.

"Myanmar is very much in danger in confronting another lost generation without support," she said.

The Diversity and Inclusion Scholarship Program through US-AID is the United States government's way of doing something to help, in particular helping the disadvantaged, and also helping the region as a whole with Myanmar students getting the opportunity to study in Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, India and the Philippines – helping Myanmar youth engage with their peers in south and southeast Asia.

Education is crucial to Myanmar's future. And it is a crucial component of the well-being of Myanmar youth. The USAID program looks set to provide useful support for Myanmar youth in crisis.

EDITORIAL



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MIZZIMA MAGAZINE

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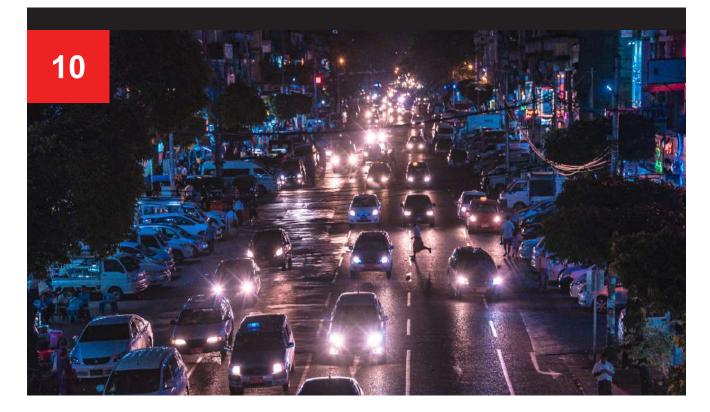
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IN FOCUS

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HEADING FOR THE EXIT

Myanmar youth line up outside the Thai Embassy in Yangon for visas to Thailand. Large numbers of youth are reported to be seeking to head for Thailand in the wake of the announcement of military conscription by the Myanmar junta.

Photo:AFP

NEWS ROUNDUPS

AA DESTROYS TWO MYANMAR JUNTA ARMOURED VEHICLES IN RAKHINE'S PONNAGYUN TOWNSHIP

n the midst of intense fighting in Rakhine state, the Arakan Army (AA) reported that on 28 February at 2:28 pm, they launched an attack that destroyed two armoured junta vehicles sent to assist in Ponnagyun Township in Rakhine State.

According to the AA, the convoy, dispatched from Sittwe township to reinforce Military Council soldiers in Ponnagyun Township, was intercepted near the Amyintgyun Bridge on the Sittwe-Ponnagyun road, resulting in the destruction of the two armoured vehicles.

The Light Infantry Battalion 550, the sole battalion in Ponnagyun Township, had been under attack by the AA since 23 February, with the operation continuing for over eight days.

In response, the Military Council ordered air support to aid the defense of the battalion, reportedly deploying a significant number of artillery units as well.

On 29 February, the AA announced their inten-

tion to intensify their offensive in an effort to capture the entire battalion.

Amidst the ongoing intense conflict in the township, residents are fleeing due to the warfare, with reports of significant damage caused by the Military Council's airstrikes and heavy artillery fire, according to residents.

Similarly, in the northern region of Maungdaw Township, a clash erupted between an 80-strong Military Council column and the AA on the Kyainchaung-Yanaung highway. The confrontation lasted approximately two hours, resulting in the deaths of seven Military Council soldiers and the seizure of ammunition, as reported by the AA.

Sources suggest that if the Light Infantry Battalion 550, which operates under the Military Operation Command in Sittwe, falls, the AA could potentially gain control over the entire Ponnagyun Township.

JUNTA BURNS DOWN VILLAGE IN TAZE TOWNSHIP, SAGAING REGION

an Htoo Ma Village in Taze Township, Sagaing Region was burnt down and completely destroyed by junta forces on 25 and 26 February.

The commander of the Comrades People's Defence Force (PDF), Htoo Khant Zaw said: "Two [junta military] columns have merged and they systematically burned down the village over two consecutive days starting from 25 February. Currently, the combined column is stationed in Kan Htoo Ma Village and is conducting raids on surrounding villages."

He explained that following a defence forces attack on Kan Htoo Ma Village Police Station, that killed at least 20 junta soldiers on 21 February, junta army reinforcements had arrived and started setting fire to houses in the area.

Talking of the damage caused by the soldiers he said: "We expect that the damage [caused by the junta soldiers] will be considerable. Because Military Council soldiers are deployed in the vicinity of Kan Htoo Ma Village we have not yet determined the exact extent of the damage."

He also said that the junta soldiers are currently conducting operations in neighbouring villages and apprehending residents, whilst launching airstrikes on Kan Htoo Ma Village. Phone lines have also been cut.

Htoo Khant Zaw said: "By cutting phone lines they are preventing villagers from communicating with each other whilst they conduct raids and make arrests."

Currently, the Comrades PDF does not know the exact number of villagers who have been detained by the junta.

CHAIRPERSON OF THE EASTERN YANGON UNIVERSITY Students union sentenced to a further 10 years in JAIL

A pro-democracy veteran has just been handed an extra 10 years in prison by a Yangon court.

According to the legal community, Su Yee Lin, also known as Lin Lin and chairwoman of the Eastern Yangon University Students Union, faced additional charges by the Military Council under Article 50 (j) of the Terrorism Act. On 28 February, she was sentenced to an additional 10 years in prison.

Su Yee Lin was apprehended alongside Zaw Lin Htut, also known as Phoe Thar, in Thingangyun Township on 19 December, 2021, while covering a demonstration against the military dictatorship in Yangon.

Initially, they were sentenced to three years in prison with hard labour on 31 March, 2022, under Section 505 (a) of the Penal Code by the Insein prison court. Phoe Thar was released on 5 May, 2023, while Su Yee Lin remains incarcerated.

After two years since her arrest, on 8 and 14 September, the Military Council pressed charges against Su Yee Lin under Section 50 (j), resulting in a further 10 years in prison. On 28 February, while attending Su Yee Lin's hearing at the Eastern District Court in Yangon's Dawbon Township, Nimo Hlaing, Su Yee Lin's aunt, was apprehended by soldiers from the Military Council.

"She was arrested at the court. The reasons for her arrest are unknown," said Phoe Thar, expressing uncertainty about the circumstances surrounding Nimo Hlaing's arrest.

Nimo Hlaing has been involved in politics since 1996 as an underground activist with the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU). Additionally, she participated in the democracy movement during the 1988 uprising. Within the National League for Democracy (NLD) party, she held the position of youth officer in the central youth support group in Thingangyun Township.

As a result of Nimo Hlaing's involvement in the 1988 uprising, she served a two-year prison sentence in Insein prison. Furthermore, she was arrested and detained for her participation in the 2007 Saffron Revolution, resulting in a five-year imprisonment term in Thayet prison, Magway region.

BRIDGE ON MAIN YANGON TO MAWLAMYINE ROAD Blown up

efence forces disrupted traffic when they destroyed a bridge on the main Yangon to Mawlamyine road on 28 February.

A mine explosion at about 1:00 am on 28 February completely destroyed the bridge in Moe Kaung Village, Thaton Township blocking the main Yangon to Mawlamyine road.

A member of a Thaton social assistance group said: "There was a loud explosion on a bridge near Moe Kaung Pagoda in Thaton's Moe Kaung Village. The damage is extensive. Currently, vehicles cannot use the Yangon to Mawlamyine road. People need to use the village road [instead]."

The explosion also destroyed a house next to the bridge, causing minor injuries to a young man and his father who were in the house at the time. "Our house was completely demolished. I sustained a neck injury, and my father suffered a minor injury to his forehead. We are currently recovering", said the injured young man.

Currently, the Yangon to Mawlamyine road is still impassable. Motorcycles, small cars and other small vehicles can bypass the destroyed bridge by using small village roads.

"The village roads are still accessible to small cars," said the injured young man.

Junta propaganda outlets claimed that the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and people's defence forces (PDFs) were responsible for the explosion, but Mizzima has been unable to confirm this.



PANCE Nyanmar youth head for the exits or hiding

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he recent announcement of the conscription law by the Military Council in Myanmar has cast a long shadow over the lives of young adults. Anxiety and fear have become constant companions, fueled by the regime's unpredictable and often brutal tactics.

The story begins with the chilling reality of forced abductions. Despite the official launch date being set for April this year, reports of young men being snatched under the guise of "overnight guest list inspections" or "population census" paint a grim picture. This has led to a climate of cautious movement, with young adults afraid to venture out, especially at night.

The panic started immediately after the Myanmar junta announced on 10 February the enactment of a military conscription law – on the books since 2010.

Under the military conscription law, men aged between 18 and 35 and women aged between 18 and 27 are mandated to serve in the military, along with professional men aged between 18 and 45 and professional women aged between 18 and 35.

One resident from North Okkalapa Township shares their experience: "I thought I would be caught that night. The electricity went off suddenly. After that, boys from the dormitory in our street were arrested. I thought I would also be arrested since my house is located at the top of the street. This law may mean that young people can be officially arrested and used as porters. Although they announced when they would start the process (in April), they have already started arresting people. It starts from here, North Okkalapa and Hlaing Tharyar (townships in Yangon). You could be arrested at any time, even if you are at home. I do not stay out late. Nothing good comes to us for staying late outside. This time, I will go home quickly and be vigilant while traveling."

Adding to the distress, reports emerge of junta soldiers exploiting the situation, extorting money during "guest inspections". The census, ostensibly conducted for elections, fuels suspicion of ulterior motives.

OUTSIDE YANGON

Outside Yangon, the picture is no better. In Lewe Town, in the Naypyidaw Union Territory, the regime has been pressuring communities to provide young men for "community security" training, essentially forced military service disguised as a local initiative. This constant pressure forces young people to



live in a state of perpetual vigilance.

Meanwhile, the vibrant nightlife of Yangon, once a refuge for young adults, has dimmed. With fewer people venturing out at night, the usual buzz of nightclubs and bars has faded. Young professionals hurry home before nightfall, their minds filled with anxiety.

As most young adults are trying to leave the country en masse due to the junta's conscription law, neighbouring foreign countries are reducing entry numbers and temporarily closing the application process for visas, or tightening regulations.

WORKERS' FEAR

Fearing conscription, workers in Yangon from other parts of Myanmar have returned to their hometowns causing labour shortages.

A representative of a workers' union estimated that Yangon has now lost a third of its workforce and is potentially facing a significant labour shortage.

A distributor of drinking water in Yangon said: "As everyone is heading back home, my business has come to a halt. I am gathering all our water bottles and informing our customers that we will be temporarily suspending operations until further notice, as our delivery personnel are also returning to their hometowns."

Other people fear leaving their houses because they worry that they will be forcibly conscripted into the army if they go out. This means people are not going out to work or study. There has also been a big drop in the number of people applying for training courses in Yangon.

SOCIAL MEDIA REPORTS

This follows social media reports of people going missing, being forced to work as porters and being abducted after being spiked with sedatives.

A woman who is studying Japanese in Yangon said: "I'm so afraid of being drugged and abducted for forced labour by the military council that I don't dare to attend lessons anymore. Even though I initially participated, the attendance dropped drastically within just a day or two of the law being enacted. Now, I'm only studying at home."

Another woman working in Yangon said: "I used to socialize with friends, even when I was running late from work. Now, I'm constantly anxious during my commute. I keep checking the time to ensure I know when it's safe to head home. There's no sense of security in this country. Honestly, I really want to relocate abroad."

INSPECTIONS

According to a resident of Yangon's South Dagon Township junta troops in the area are carrying out frequent inspections of the overnight guest lists, in which residents have to record the names and details of anyone staying at their home who is not a registered household member.

They said: "Recently, the scrutiny of overnight guests has intensified compared to before. The administrative office is busy with personnel verifying guest lists for the night. They resort to physical violence without hesitation during these checks, even if complaints are lodged. Failure to comply with reporting requirements may result in arrest, leaving us uncertain about what the next day holds."

He added that during surprise inspections, junta troops even resorted to slapping men who made eye contact with them.



EXPEDITED PASSPORT APPLICATIONS IN HAKHA NOW COST 3 MILLION KYATS

Since the introduction of the Myanmar Conscription Law, the number of passport applications in Hakha Township, Chin State has greatly increased, leading to long delays in the issuing of passports.

Normally the application process would take several months. But because people want to leave the country following the introduction of the Conscription Law on 10 February 2024, there has been a massive surge in applications and people will have to wait six months or more for their passports. This means they will not receive their passports before the junta starts conscripting people after the Thingyan New Year celebrations in mid-April.

Previously, before this surge in passport applications, it was possible to expedite the application process and receive a passport within a week by paying brokers 150,000 kyats. Since the surge in applications, the price of expediting an application has soared to 3 million kyats, (about \$835 at black market exchange rates or about \$1,430 at official Myanmar exchange rates) a sum well out of the reach of most normal people in Myanmar. A resident of Hakha said: "There's an urgent need to send my friend's child abroad. The brokers mentioned that to expedite passport issuance within a week, we would need to pay over 3 million Myanmar Kyats. When I inquired about the process, the brokers suggested they could modify the name within the QR code and deliver the passport in less than a week. Whether it's legitimate or not is another matter. All we're concerned about is obtaining the passport. People from Chin State and Sagaing Region are required to pay slightly more."

Due to the ongoing unrest in Chin State, parents who can afford it are opting to send their children to major Myanmar cities for training and classes. Many richer parents have been trying to send their children abroad since the Conscription Law was announced.

According to a 22 February Bangkok Post report, the Thai Embassy in Yangon received over 7,000 visa applications in just two weeks.

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ATTACKS ON JUNTA TARGETS IN YANGON REGION



esistance groups were active in Yangon Region during the night of 25 to 26 February 2024 with explosions being heard in the townships of Mingalardon, North Okkalapa, and South Dagon.

On 25 February between 8:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m., residents reported hearing two bomb explosions at the Za Ward Administration Office in North Okkalapa Township.

"The first explosion occurred at approximately 8:00 p.m., followed by another blast at 9:00 p.m. No investigations were conducted at the incident site this morning, 26 February. I observed a significant presence of military council troops in our vicinity last night," said a Za Ward resident.

The attack was carried out by North Okkalapa Township People's Defense Force. They had planted three bombs at the Ward Administration Office, but one failed to detonate.

A representative of North Okkalapa Township People's Defense Force said: "Extensive investigations were carried out in the ward. I heard reports that streets were shut down and thoroughly inspected following the explosion. The detonation was intended to showcase our opposition to the military conscription law. However, the damage caused is still unclear." Also, on 25 February, gunfire and an explosion were heard in South Dagon Township at about 8:30 p.m., according to a local resident. The group responsible for the explosion has not yet been identified.

Later that night, at about 5:10 a.m. on 26 February a drone strike was launched against a sentry position at the No. 1 Defence Service General Hospital in Mingalardon Township.

The Dark Shadow Urban Guerrilla group claimed responsibility for the attack on the 1,000-bed Defence Service General Hospital. It said that the amount of damage caused by the attack is presently unknown, but all of the Dark Shadow fighters successfully retreated after the attack.

The Dark Shadow UG also issued a statement telling people that it would be attacking junta targets and warning them to avoid areas associated with the junta, police stations, the Pyu Saw Htee militia, and individuals suspected of being military council soldiers dressed as civilians.

AID RECEIVED BY MYANMAR IN 2023 INSUFFICIENT ACCORDING TO ANALYSIS

hough Myanmar received aid in 2023 that enabled help to be given to people in need it was insufficient according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)

In its end-of-year report on humanitarian responses in Myanmar during 2023 the UNOCHA detailed what aid was distributed in Myanmar and areas where there was insufficient aid.

Aid distributed in 2023 included:

631,000 boys, girls and teachers received learning materials (learners' kits + teachers' kits)

726,000 people were supported to access primary health care services

762,000 people received overall community awareness raising for prevention and mitigation of protection risks

54,000 people received dignity kits

439,000 people reached through distribution of non-food items (NFIs)

2.1 million people received food assistance (in-kind and/or through cash)

320,000 children aged 6-59 months screened for wasting

273,000 people received child protection case management and psychosocial support

445,000 people received mine action community awareness raising support for prevention and mitigation of protection risks

929,000 crisis-affected people were reached with hygiene items and community-tailored health and hygiene messages.

But, UNOCHA contrasted these figures with a list of aid needs that were unmet during 2023.

As a result of the dire humanitarian funding





situation (only 37 per cent of required funding received) report the following consequences for affected people whom they had planned to reach in the 2023 but were unable to support.

More than 200,000 children targeted for assistance lacked access to quality educational services in 2023, hindering their development, squandering future opportunity and perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage.

More than 1.1 million people targeted for support were left without priority life-saving health services, disproportionately impacting maternal and child health, and escalating the risk of preventable disease, something that has potential regional implications.

10,000 children below five years suffering from Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) faced grave risk of preventable death in the absence of life-saving treatment and planned support.

42,000 children under five years missed out on preventative acute malnutrition management and likely deteriorated to SAM, with potential consequences for their survival and long-term well-being.

311,000 children under five years faced higher risks of irreparable damage to their optimal growth and



development, negatively impacting their educational achievement, productivity in adulthood, and the development potential of the entire country.

An estimated 217,000 babies were potentially born with low birthweight (LBW) as a result of assistance gaps and are likely to face life-long negative impacts due to malnutrition experienced during their time in the womb.

410,000 children (37 per cent of the children targeted) were not supported with the life-saving child protection services planned by partners in the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP).

More than 1.2 million people (57 per cent of all people targeted) were left without humanitarian protection services exposing them to negative coping mechanisms, some of which are life-threatening (such as risky migration) and others have life-long consequences that are extremely difficult to reverse (such as the sale of productive assets and early marriage).

72 per cent of planned shelter activities (construction, reconstruction, repair) were not implemented in 2023, leaving 878,000 people living without appropriate places to live and sleep, jeopardizing their physical and emotional well-being.

76 per cent of non-food item (NFI) kits planned for distribution were not delivered, leaving 927,000 people without core relief items they need to survive with dignity such as beds, mats, cooking utensils and clothes.

352,000 displaced people were left without camp coordination assistance and protection services including service monitoring on the need for repairs and replacement infrastructure, camp management, coordination with camp actors and IDPs.

At least 832,000 people did not receive adequate support to cover their most urgent hygiene and sanitation needs, likely impacting their health status.

Access to safe drinking water was not provided to 672,000 people who had been targeted for support with water, sanitation and hygiene issues (WASH).

Nearly three years since the military takeover, the crisis in Myanmar risks becoming a forgotten emergency with catastrophic implications for the well-being of millions of people and for regional security if 2023 funding levels are repeated in 2024, says UNOCHA.

As of 31 January 2024, funding against the 2023 Myanmar Humanitarian Response Plan had reached \$324 million which is only 37 per cent of the requested funding, leaving a significant \$563 million funding gap. Urgent attention and a substantial increase in financial support for both humanitarian and development actors are imperative to bridge this gap in 2024.

U.S. CHARGÉ D'AFFAIRES IN YANGON STRESSES Importance of Education Scholarships for Myanmar Students

S. Chargé d'Affaires in Yangon Ms Susan Stevenson says she hopes USAID'S Diversity and Inclusion Scholarship Program for Myanmar students will go some way to preventing another "lost generation" of Myanmar youth.

Speaking at a 29 February press conference in Bangkok, Ms Stevenson stressed the importance of diversity and inclusivity and the importance of the regional interaction opportunities presented by the program as Myanmar youth face a crisis.

"What struck me is the number of young people who should be in secondary school or universities who because of circumstances are now outside their formal education, uncertain about what their future might bring," she told the press conference. "And so the idea of having a scholarship to be able to study because they don't necessarily feel that they can study at their existing institutions in Yangon, or in Myanmar in general, is very important."

The Diversity and Inclusion Scholarship Program through USAID is a five-year initiative that will provide scholarships for over 1,000 students from Myanmar to pursue higher education opportunities in south and southeast Asia. With a focus on Myanmar's most marginalized and vulnerable people, this scholarship will foster academic excellence, strength-



en the overall educational landscape of Myanmar, and empower the next generation of leaders to contribute meaningfully to their communities.

"We remember the difficulties at the universities in the 1990s (in Myanmar), where students could take up to a decade to finish their graduate degree," Ms Stevenson said. "Myanmar is very much in danger in confronting another lost generation without support."

She noted that there are private institutions in Myanmar and there are scholarships and other assistance from the international community, that complement the USAID initiative.

"The young people in Myanmar today are facing very complex challenges. Not only have they been wrestling with complex challenges and whether to continue their studies in the country, because they have seen a lot of the teachers, staff and professors walk out and leave their jobs and that means thousands of teachers and tens of thousands of students. What we want is to make sure they have those opportunities to continue higher education to the best of their abilities to maximize not only their own futures but the future of their country. And so this Diversity and Inclusion Scholarship Program is one way the United States is trying to help. The youth of Myanmar have not given up and so we don't want to give up on them. So this is a tangible part of the United States commitment to supporting the people of Myanmar in their pursuit of other opportunities."

The U.S. Chargé d'Affaires noted that the U.S. embassy had been in Yangon for 76 years and that the U.S. government remains committed to the betterment of the country through their engagement with the people.

She said that working directly with the students is a big source of pride. And this scholarship is only one of the ways they have been helping. This is in addition to the Lincoln Scholarship Program that is a very important initiative by USAID so students can study graduate programs in the United States.

"This diversity and inclusion program is going to focus on less advantaged youth in Myanmar and aims to give them opportunities to study in Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Cambodia and virtually with the University of Arizona in the United States. My presence speaks to the importance of the embassy in Yangon to this program," Ms Stevenson added.

During the press conference it was noted that this was a \$45 million program that includes \$8 million in educational grants, and that the program was underway, with the first cohorts signed up for scholarships. The idea for the program is to study and at the end of the study the expectation is that the students would go back to Myanmar, so they don't have any negotiations over job opportunities or any other educational opportunities,

Burmese students already in Thailand are eligible to apply for scholarships and are called on to check the program's website for instructions.

Myanmar's education matters for the country, and the program puts particular emphasis on certain fields like engineering and health.

There may be students who are unable to take part in the normal application process, whereas studying online gives them the opportunity to get an education through a different vehicle.

The program offers students the opportunity for regional integration – and it is open to all, including those with disabilities and sexual minorities.

The universities involved are making special efforts to accommodate students from Myanmar and give them a "great welcome". It is a great way to make sure everybody is included and everybody has an opportunity to get an education.

NUG AMBASSADOR TO THE CZECH REPUBLIC RECEIVES DIPLOMATIC SERVICE MEDAL

rish news agency, Diplomacy in Ireland – The European Diplomat, has awarded a Diplomatic Service Medal with Honours to Mr. Linn Thant, Ambassador of the National Unity Government (NUG) Ambassador to the Czech Republic.

Speaking from Dublin, Dr. Miceál O'Hurley, the Editor-in-Chief of Diplomacy in Ireland – The European Diplomat stated, "Ambassador Linn Thant's contribution to the advancement of democracy and upholding the dignity of the people of Myanmar as they endure more than 3-years of the latest military junta who is waging war on its own people has been exemplary. His Excellency's contribution to bettering Europe's understanding of the people of Myanmar and working towards the recognition and accreditation of the National Unity Government across Europe speaks to the shared values and ever-closer unity between Europeans and the democratic people of Myanmar".

Diplomacy in Ireland – The European Diplomat was founded in 2021 to focus on the truly international aspects of the Irish role in international affairs, foreign relations and diplomacy as well as covering international diplomats accredited to Ireland and the European Union. Within the context of reporting on international events, Diplomacy in Ireland – The European Diplomat provides original interviews with newsmakers, research, writing and reporting on issues that effect the diplomatic community around the globe.





March 7, 2024

According to the NUG, U Linn Thant was born into an Anglo-Indian Burmese family in central Myanmar in the 1960s. He studied in the government schools of Burma, as well as in the Christian mission schools founded by his grandfather, a British citizen.

He actively participated in social organisations as a child. After graduating from high school in basic education he studied civil engineering. He actively participated in the 1988 democracy movement at that time in the Ba.Ka.Tha organization (The All Burma Federation of Student Unions – ABFFSU).

After the 1988 military coup, he went into hiding and became active member of the ABSDF. He was arrested at the ABSDF mission in Rangoon and sentenced to death by a military court on 25 May 1990.

After about 3 years on death row at Insein Prison. The death sentence was replaced by a life sentence of 20 years in 1993 under the SLORC junta's



amnesty order celebrating the foundation of the National Assembly.

In 1997, he was transferred from Insein Prison to Thayet Prison. He was released from Thayet prison at the end of 2008. After being released from prison, he reunited the network of 88 generation students. He also organised an educational network for political activism.

Then, after leaving Myanmar while being hunted by the military intelligence in a case related to photos being taken in a prison, he lived in Thailand and worked as an English teacher at the Thinking Classroom Foundation and started working in 2010 as a reporter and commentator at the Irrawaddy news agency based in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

In 2011, he received political asylum in the Czech Republic and returned to Thailand to continue working at the Irrawaddy news agency. In 2015, he moved from Thailand to the Czech Republic and wrote weekly political and business reviews on Myanmar and Asia for the Denik Referendum newspaper based in Brno, in the Czech Republic.

In addition, he taught English and Mindfulness in the Czech Republic's preschool and the Center for Modern Education's elementary and secondary schools.

Since 2018, he has been engaged in the business of importing Burmese coffee from Burma and distributing it in the Czech Republic and Europe.

On 24 April 2021, he was appointed as the representative of the NUG in the Czech Republic.

As a representative, he is actively working for the NUG in the Czech Republic and European countries. He is serving as a representative of the NUG based in the Czech Republic in the implementation of NUG's foreign policies, including the recognition of the National Unity Government to other partner countries.

THAILAND SHOULD GRAB A 'RARE OPPORTUNITY' FROM INFLUX OF MYANMAR YOUTH: BURIN KANTABUTRA

BURIN KANTABUTRA

hailand should act quickly to turn the imminent flood of Myanmar refugees into a once-in-alifetime opportunity to slow down our becoming a hyper-aging society. The Tatmadaw's surprise announcement of military conscription of males aged 18-35, females 18-27, and professionals like medical doctors and engineers is proof positive that the general public despises their military, which has failed to govern even at gunpoint. Our embassy has said that it will accept only 400 visa applications daily - clear evidence that those in their most productive life stage are fleeing being forced to kill their countrymen.

Once conscription starts next month, Myanmar youth will flood here (to Thailand). Our porous border cannot realistically be sealed off. We can force the refugees back to be killed or imprisoned by the Tatmadaw, jail them in prison camps - or help them to help us develop economically, in a win-win solution. As of 2023, we were among the fastest aging countries globally, with about 20% of Thais being over 60 years old. By 2040, more than 25% of us will be over 65 years old, increasing the burden on our youth. The able-bodied Myanmar youth and professionals are exactly of the right age to boost our productivity quickly - aiding both them and us.

We should triple our embassy's visa application quota and aid the refugees to find jobs here, with an acculturation program based on that of the US Peace Corps. We should have a merit-based path to citizenship encouraging them to aid us over the long term. This is an excellent opportunity for (Thai prime minister) Sreetha (Thavisin) to have concrete, feasible accomplishments - but he must move like lightning.

This letter was sent to the Bangkok Post by the Thai economist and previous member of the Thai parliament, Burin Kantabutra. Proudly Presented by Mizzima Media Group

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12 ATTACKS ON MYANMAR HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS DURING TWO WEEKS IN FEBRUARY

here have been 12 incidents of attacks on healthcare providers in Myanmar two weeks between 5 and 20 February, according to the humanitarian data aggregation organisation, Insecurity Insight.

Below is a list of the reported incidents collated by Insecurity Insight.

5 February 2024: In See Mi So Dar village, Mya Le village tract, Demoso Township and district, a makeshift clinic was damaged by bombs dropped by the Myanmar military aircrafts. Two community-funded schools in nearby villages were also damaged, killing four children. Sources: Independent Mon News Agency and Irrawaddy 9 February 2024: In Koke Ko Kone Village and village tract, Kawlin Township and district, Sagaing Region, a station hospital was damaged by bombs dropped by the Myanmar military aircraft. Sources: Myaelatt Athan and Myanmar Pressphoto Agency

9 February 2024: In Kawlin Town, township and district, Sagaing Region, a township hospital, a school, and a general administrative office were used as battlegrounds during armed clashes between the Myanmar military and local resistance forces. Source: Myaelatt Athan

9 February 2024: In Kawlin Town, township and district, Sagaing Region, a township hospital was damaged by bombs dropped by Myanmar military air-





crafts. The hospital was not functioning due to the increase in armed clashes in the area since November 2023. Sources: Facebook, Mandalay Free Press and VOA Burmese

As reported on 09 February 2024: In Myauk Khin Yan Village and village tract, Gangaw Township and district, Magway Region, a station hospital was used as an interrogation centre by the junta militia. Source: Myanmar Pressphoto Agency

As reported on 10 February 2024: In Aung Zay Ya Village, Hpai Lin Village Tract, Tamu Township and district, Sagaing Region, a sub-rural health centre and a school were damaged, reportedly by air bombardment by the Myanmar military. Hundreds of houses were also torched. There were armed clashes between the Myanmar military and local resistance forces in this village in December 2023 and there were a few airstrikes in that month. The damages were observed



only in February 2024 after local resistance forces had overrun the town. Source: Zalen

10 February 2024: In Maungdaw Town, township and district, Rakhine State, 16 UN and INGOs, of which many used to offer health services, left the town due to heightened armed clashes between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army in the area. At the time of the report, only three INGOs remained in the town. Source: Narinjara

11 February 2024: In Salingyi Town and township, Yinmabin District, Sagaing Region, a non-functioning township hospital occupied by the junta soldiers and their family members was attacked with armed drones and small arms by local resistance forces, reportedly killing at least three junta soldiers and injuring at least seven. Sources: Mizzima and Myanmar Pressphoto Agency

As reported on 11 February 2024: In Ramree Town and township, Kyaukpyu District, Rakhine State, a township hospital was no longer attended by doctors and nurses due to armed clashes in the town and surrounding area for two months. Source: Democratic Voice of Burma

15 February 2024: In Si Au Village and village tract, Mansi Township, Bhamo District, Kachin State, a sub-rural health centre and a house were damaged by bombs dropped by Myanmar military aircraft. Sources: Facebook and Mekong News

16 February 2024: In San Myo Village, Lel Gyi Village Tract, Gangaw Township and district, Magway Region, a sub-rural health centre and a school were torched by the Myanmar military. Source: Khit Thit Media

20 February 2024: In Ramree town and township, Kyaukpyu district, Rakhine State, a township hospital was severely damaged due to the bombs dropped by Myanmar military aircraft. A market, a convent and civilian houses were also damaged. Sources: Democratic Voice of Burma, Narinjara and People's Spring.

JUNTA VIOLENCE FORCES 6,000 TO FLEE MONG MIT Town area in Shan State

ver 6,000 local residents have fled from Mong Mit Town and surrounding villages due to airstrikes, shelling and abuses by SAC troops which killed twenty-seven civilians, injured twelve and incinerated large sections of the town between 1 January 1 and 2 February 2024.

The details of the attacks, in an area important to the junta due to Mong Mit being close to a gold mining area and the site of a planned dam, were revealed in an extensively researched report by the Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF).

According to SHRF, of the civilians killed, 17 were executed by troops of SAC Infantry Division (ID) 99, trucked into Mong Mit from Mandalay on 2 January, after resistance forces of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), PDF and Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) began operations to try and seize the town.

The SAC troops shot dead villagers in their homes or in the jungle; some bodies were burned; two teenagers were beheaded. One woman was gang-raped before being shot – one of three incidents of gang-rape committed by the ID 99 troops in and near Mong Mit Town.

The ID 99 troops also carried out looting and arson on a large scale, torching over 150 houses as collective punishment after resistance forces retreated from the town on 27 January.

Over 4,000 IDPs are sheltering in outlying villages, farmlands and forests of Mong Mit, while about 2,000 have fled to Mandalay, Pyin Oo Lwin and Kyaukme. Even though fighting has died down since the end of January, the IDPs dare not return home as ID 99 troops remain camped in buildings across the town.

Given the strategic importance of Mong Mit -a wealthy mining hub and gateway from northern Shan State into Mandalay -- it is unlikely the SAC will scale back its forces there in the near future.

The northern edge of Mong Mit township is

also the location of the planned Shweli 3 dam, a \$1.5 billion hydropower project revived by the SAC in 2023 – with an as yet undisclosed investor -- following the pull-out of France's EDF from the project in 2021 after the coup.

Details of airstrikes, shelling, looting and arson by SAC troops:

Resistance forces began attacking SAC outposts east of Mong Mit Town at the beginning of January.

On 1 January over 100 KIA, ABSDF and PDF soldiers attacked SAC IB 276 troops based near Man Pat Village, about 12 kilometers southeast of the town.

On 2 January, TNLA forces attacked SAC troops based at Jang Kang village on the Nam Mit river, five kilometers northeast of the town.

SAC troops responded by shelling indiscriminately from their bases near the town, and bringing in reinforcements from Mandalay. On the evening of 2 January, three military trucks carrying about 200 troops from ID 99 arrived in Mong Mit, where they separated into groups, some staying in the town and some along the Nam Mit River.

From 3 to 9 January, the TNLA carried out attacks east of Mong Mit town, and SAC troops responded with airstrikes and shelling which injured two farmers and damaged several houses.

On 8 January, KIA, ABSDF and PDF forces seized a SAC IB 276 outpost at Myitsone Village, about 20 km north of Mong Mit Town, at the confluence of the Shweli and Nam Mit rivers on the border of Mabein Township.

From 11 to 12 January, SAC troops continued shelling indiscriminately northwards from their bases near Mong Mit Town, killing two villagers, injuring a young boy, and damaging a temple and ten houses in Ohn Kyaw Mai Village.

On the evening of 18 January, joint KIA, ABSDF and PDF forces launched an attack on the SAC tactical post south of Mong Mit Town and on the

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main police station. In response, two SAC jet fighters bombed indiscriminately around the town, killing one man, injuring one woman and four children, and damaging two temples and twenty houses.

On 19 January, KIA and allied troops seized Mong Mit Police Station. That night, at 7:00 pm, Mong Mit market was burned to ashes by an SAC airstrike, destroying a large amount of civilian property. The fire lasted for several hours. At midnight, SAC ground troops entered the Pauk Pin Tan quarter and looted possessions from about 40 houses whose residents had fled due to the fighting. On that day, all communications, including internet and phone lines, were cut by the authorities.

On 20 January the SAC again launched airstrikes over Mong Mit Town, killing six civilians, including four women.

Fighting between the SAC and joint KIA forces continued in and around Mong Mit Town until 27 January, when KIA and allied troops were forced to withdraw to Shwe Jali and Ohn Kyaw Mai villages north of the town. The SAC then shelled and dropped incendiary bombs on these villages, causing about 200 houses to burn down.

At 4:00 pm on 27 January, SAC troops entered Let Kok Tan quarter, looted possessions from about 50 houses, then burned the houses down. Over the next six days, SAC troops continued looting and burning down houses in the southern quarter of Mong Mit town, torching a further 100 houses.

Details of extrajudicial killing and sexual violence by SAC troops:

Seventeen villagers were killed by SAC ID 99 troops patrolling through the outskirts of Mong Mit Town between 19 January and 2 February. Most of the victims were male villagers who had stayed behind to look after their houses when other family members fled.

In Shwe Jali Village alone, seven men were shot dead; two were burned after being shot. In Kyi Taw Su quarter, five men and one woman were shot dead; the men were tied up before being shot; the woman's body was burned.

The ID 99 troops also mutilated the bodies of those killed. Two male teenagers were found behead-

ed near the bridge at the entrance to Mong Mit Town.

There were three incidents of gang-rape by SAC ID 99 troops. On 19 January, at 4:00 am, three SAC soldiers entered a house in Ywa Daw Lay quarter, on the western edge of the town, and gang-raped a 24-year-old woman in her bed, while threatening other family members at gunpoint.

On 20 January, a group of SAC troops came across a couple who had returned from hiding in the jungle to feed their cattle in the village of Ohn Kyaw Mai. They shot dead the husband, raped his wife and then shot her dead in the throat.

On 26 January, five SAC troops gang-raped a 32-year-old woman hiding in the forest near Shwe Jali village, leaving her severely injured.

There was also an attempt at sexual violence by SAC troops on 21 January, when they found a group of villagers fleeing Thayetdaw Village, among whom were four young women. The troops ordered the young women to stay behind, clearly intending to sexually abuse them. However, fortunately, a male villager argued with the troops, enabling the women to escape, but he was then tied up and badly beaten by the troops. It is not known if he survived.

Details of displacement:

After the SAC began shelling and bombing villages around Mong Mit Town at the start of January, villagers fled to take refuge in temples in the town, as well as to outlying villages, farmlands and forests. When fighting spread into the town, town residents fled to take refuge outside the town. Nearly 2,000 also fled outside the township, to Mandalay, as well as to Kyaukme and Pyin Oo Lwin townships.

Even though fighting died down at the end of January, the displaced villagers are still too afraid to return home, due to the ongoing presence of SAC troops camped around the town.

JUNTA CAPTAIN CONFESSES TO ORDERING MURDER OF SEVEN PRISONERS IN RAKHINE STATE

junta army captain confessed to ordering the murder of seven Rakhine prisoners, including the famous Rakhine singer Phoe La Pyae and the journalist Phoe Thiha, in a video released by the Arakan Army (AA).

The seven prisoners were being held at the Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 378 base in Mrauk-U Town, Rakhine State. They were executed in a bomb shelter at the clinic on the base, at about 2:00 pm on 23 January 2024 and their bodies were then secretly buried.

The crimes were uncovered after the AA took control of the LIB 378 base on the morning of 5 February.

According to Captain Arkar Myint's video confession, the LIB 378 commander, Major Thein Htike Soe, ordered him to kill the prisoners.



Captain Arkar Myint claimed that the order had been relayed to him by Lance Corporal Than Aung and his subordinate, Maung Maung.

In the video he said: "That order was given by Major Thein Htike Soe, an LIB 378 company commander who was getting medical treatment for an injury at the LIB 377 clinic. It was to execute the seven prisoners, including Phoe La Pyae, who had been transferred from the District Police station to LIB 378."

After receiving the order Captain Arakar Myint told District Police Chief Khin Maung Soe, who was also stationed at the LIB 378 base, about the order. The Police Chief said he would deal with the consequences of the murders.



Captain Arakar Myint then told Lance Corporal Than Aung about the orders. The Lance Corporal suggested that they shoot the prisoners in the bomb shelter.

Captain Arakar Myint then gave Lance Corporal Than Aung the keys to the prisoners' cells and ordered him to shoot the prisoners and then to properly bury the bodies.

Describing what happened on the video, Captain Arakar Myint said: "Lance Corporal Than Aung and his team took the seven prisoners, including Phoe La Pyae, with their eyes covered by clothes and their hands chained. The team took them through the back road of the central outposts to the basement of the clinic. After 15 minutes I heard seven to eight gunshots. 15 minutes later Lance Corporal Than Aung and his team returned to the centre outpost and reported that they had completed the order."

The next day Major Thein Htike Soe and District Police Chief Khin Maung Soe lied to the LIB 378 Company Commander, Min Min Tun and told him that the seven prisoners had died in a bomb explosion.

In the video Captain Arkar Myint said that he had followed "orders from above" against his will and apologised to his victims' families.

He said: "I sincerely apologise to the family members of the deceased and all the people of Arakan [Rakhine State] and feel saddened. Therefore, we acknowledge our guilt for committing these crimes and will willingly accept the punishment that the people of Arakan will give us."

The seven victims were named as: Rakhine singer Kyaw Zan Wai, also known as Phoe La Pyae; journalist Myat Thu Tun, also known as Phoe Thiha; Kyaw Thein Hlaing, Kyaw Win Hlaing, Ko Nyunt, Win Naing, and Pyae Sone Win.

They were detained in late 2023 and at first were held at Mrauk-U District Police Station before being transferred to the LIB 378 base on 24 December 2023, according to sources.

The AA has vowed that the perpetrators of war crimes such as this will be punished and that justice will be pursued for the victims of war crimes and their families.

MYANMAR WORKERS SENDING MONEY HOME FROM JAPAN DEFRAUDED AT LEAST 40 TIMES IN 2023



here were at least 40 instances of financial fraud committed against Myanmar citizens in Japan trying to send money home.

These were the number of financial crimes reported to the Federation of Workers' Union of Burmese Citizens in Japan (FWUBC), but the real number affected by financial crimes may well be higher according to the federation's chairman, Myint Swe.

He said: "We've seen numerous cases of fraud, with approximately 40 reported just in the past year. Additionally, six major crimes have been brought to our attention. However, it's important to note that this is the extent of the information we currently have; there could be more cases out there."

Myanmar citizens trying to send money back to Myanmar have been defrauded by dishonest money brokers who just keep the money given to them instead of sending it to Myanmar.

The brokers send the money back using the informal Hawal system rather than official channels because it offers much better exchange rates, about 3,500 kyats per US dollar (USD) as opposed to the official exchange rate of 2,100 kyats per USD.

The money is not sent across borders. Instead, brokers match up people in Japan who want to send kyats to Myanmar with people who want to send yen to Japan, for instance, Myanmar importers who want to buy Japanese goods.

Once that is done, the Myanmar broker pays the kyats given to him by the importer to the worker's representative in Myanmar and the Japanese broker pays the yen given to him by the worker to the importer's representatives in Japan.

Financial fraud has been occurring when Japanese brokers take Myanmar workers' money and just keep it instead of matching them up to people who want to exchange kyats for yen.

According to a statement from the Japanese Immigration Office, as of the June 2023 census, approximately 70,000 Myanmar nationals are employed in Japan.

THAILAND'S BORDER TRADE WITH MYANMAR DOWN, DUE TO CONFLICT

hailand's border trade is expected to slow down this year due to the ongoing political conflict in Myanmar and economic problems in other neighbouring countries, according to the Federation of Thai Industries (FTI).

"We trade with these countries which currently face challenges to their economic growth," said Montri Mahaplerkpong, vice-chairman of the FTI.

The challenges include attempts to deal with an anti-government insurgency in Myanmar and negative economic factors, including high inflation and household debt problems in other countries, he added.

Border trade volumes with most of these countries have already dropped, with trade with Myanmar decreasing by 11.1%, trade with Malaysia falling by 11.7% and trade with Cambodia diving by 19.2%.

Thailand sees its trade with Laos rising by 1.16%.

According to Mr Montri, the neighbouring countries also face the problem of an influx of cheap Chinese products into their countries, affecting local manufacturers.

Thailand is struggling to deal with this problem that has hit its manufacturing sector. The FTI said earlier that up to 20 industrial sectors, including steel, aluminium, plastics, ceramics, petrochemicals and medicine, are struggling to deal with tougher competition, with small and medium-sized enterprises being the most negatively affected.

The FTI suggested that Thai exporters use the baht as a key exchange currency for their trade with neighbouring countries. "The baht value is financially healthier than Myanmar's kyat, Laos's kip and Cambodia's rial, which are weak and prone to fluctuations," said Mr Montri.

The traders said that they had to suspend their export of agricultural produce as there were difficulties and hurdles in transporting these goods to the Thai-Myanmar border trade zone and the Military Council's increased commercial taxes on their goods.

The Thai-Myanmar border trade fell sharply after the military coup because of political instability and transportation difficulties.

Myanmar mainly exports agricultural produce and fishery products to Thailand through border trade.

The Thai-Myanmar border trade is being conducted at the border trade zones of Tachileik, Kawthaung, Myeik, Htekhee, Mawtaung and Mae Sae.

MYANMAR NOW A 'NEVER-ENDING' NIGHTMARE: UN



hree years of military rule in Myanmar have inflicted unbearable cruelty, leaving people trapped in an unending nightmare as the conflict spreads, the UN human rights chief said Friday last week.

The junta is crushing all forms of dissent with total impunity, Volker Turk told the UN Human Rights Council, urging the United Nations' top rights body and countries to focus on preventing further atrocities.

"The human rights situation in Myanmar has morphed into a never-ending nightmare, away from the spotlight of global politics," Turk said.

"Armed conflict has escalated and spread to nearly every corner of the country. Three years of military rule have inflicted -- and continue to inflict -- unbearable levels of suffering and cruelty on people in Myanmar."

He said the junta was cracking down on any opposition with "total abuse of power", while development in the southeast Asian nation was now in freefall.

The junta came to power in the February 2021 coup that ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's democratically-elected government, ending a 10-year experiment with democracy and plunging the country into bloody turmoil.

The junta is struggling to crush resistance to its rule by long-established ethnic rebel groups and newer pro-democracy People's Defence Forces. Turk told the council that credible sources had verified that over 4,603 civilians, including 659 women and 490 children, had been killed by the military since February 2021.

"The actual toll is almost certainly much higher," he noted.

He said around 400 civilians, including 113 women, had been burnt -- either alive or after being executed.

Turk said the violence had intensified since late October, when ethnic armed groups launched coordinated attacks, triggering punishing retaliation from the military.

He said that in January, 145 out of 232 verified civilian deaths were attributable to air strikes and artillery attacks as the military increasingly directs its jets on towns and cities.

"This is horrific," said Turk.

"For the last three years, people in Myanmar have sacrificed everything, and kept alive their aspirations for a better and safer future.

"They need the entire international community to support them."

AFP

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CHINA FOCUS

SECURITY, ECONOMY IN FOCUS AT KEY CHINA MEETINGS

hina's top officials hold an annual gathering this week, offering a rare window into the ruling Communist Party's thinking as it tightens its grip in the face of dire economic headwinds.

From a protracted property crisis to waning domestic spending, China's lawmakers face a litany of challenges as they hold their "Two Sessions".

The meetings are not expected to see the unveiling of big-ticket bailouts that experts say are needed to get the economy back on track.

Instead, they will continue a path of "elevating national security measures on all fronts", Ho-fung Hung, a professor of Political Economy at Johns Hopkins University, told AFP.

"It will not help the economy but could help the party-state weather the storm of the economic crisis," he said.

Smaller-scale investments in science and

technology, as well as steps to lift China's debt-battered property market, could be on the agenda.

However, Neil Thomas, an analyst on Chinese politics at the Asia Society, said President Xi Jinping "seems relatively unfazed by his country's recent growth struggles".

"I do not expect major shifts on core economic issues," he told AFP.

Meticulously choreographed and staged over more than a week, the most important of the "Two Sessions" is the National People's Congress (NPC), China's legislature, beginning Tuesday in Beijing's Great Hall of the People.

The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the first of the sessions, begins on Monday but is generally overshadowed by the NPC.

Thousands of delegates from across the country convene for the sessions to approve bills,



budgets and personnel moves every year.

First on the agenda will be Premier Li Qiang's announcement of China's GDP growth goal for 2024 -- broadly expected to remain around five percent.

"The GDP target will likely err on the side of caution without conceding how large the pressures on the economy are," Diana Choyleva, chief economist at Enodo Economics, told AFP.

Beijing has for years been reluctant to confront those pressures head-on with a major bailout, fearful of putting too much pressure on fragile state coffers.

Analysts don't see any reason to think that will change soon.

"Investors and consumers are looking for measures that can restore their confidence," Choyleva said.

"But the government's focus on preventing increased economic risk and improving security will not allow for the kind of measures that will immediately increase positivity," she said.

LIMITED POWERS

The NPC serves as a "crucial networking



event, where thousands of powerful individuals from around China meet and discuss politics", according to analyst Nis Grunberg.

On paper, it wields little actual power.

All major decisions will have been made weeks before in closed-door meetings of the Communist Party, far from the international media's cameras.

"It has never rejected any bill, budget, report, or nomination put before it," Changhao Wei, a Fellow at the Paul Tsai China Center of Yale Law School and founder of the NPC Observer website, said of the congress.

However, the topics that are up for discussion and the tone of the speeches allow for key insights into what's keeping China's rulers up at night.

High among those worries are national defence and security. An increase in China's military budget, which is second only to the United States, is also expected on Tuesday.

Beijing revised a law dramatically expanding its definition of espionage last year and conducted raids on a string of big-name consulting, research and due diligence firms.

The legislature's top body approved a broad and vaguely worded revision to China's state secrets law in the run-up to the NPC that was "a clear signal of security's importance for this year's governance agenda", Choyleva of Enodo Economics said.

Given the choice between deep reforms to restart economic growth and efforts to strengthen the state's power, analysts say China's policymakers have little room for manoeuvre.

"Beijing will not budge on its control and security-first approach," analyst Grunberg said.

"Everyone should ask themselves: when did Xi last compromise on control in favour of economic growth, let alone liberal reform?"

AFP

WITH EYES ON GAZA, UKRAINE, UN CHIEF LAUNCHES RIGHTS PROTECTION PLEDGE

n all-out Israeli offensive on Rafah would spell the end for UN-led humanitarian relief to the people of Gaza, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned on Monday, in a wide-ranging call to the international community to fulfil its "primary responsibility" of promoting and protecting human rights everywhere and for everyone.

Addressing the Human Rights Council in Geneva at the start of its first high-level session of the year, the UN chief insisted that any further extension of Israel's ground operation in the south of Gaza "would not only be terrifying for more than a million Palestinian civilians sheltering there; it would put the final nail in the coffin of our aid programmes".

RULES OF WAR IGNORED

The top human rights body also heard the UN chief decry how the "rule of law and the rules of war" were being undermined from Ukraine to Sudan and from Myanmar to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and beyond – a theme echoed by the UN's top human rights official, Volker Türk, and by the President of the UN General Assembly, Dennis Francis.

SECURITY COUNCIL 'UNDERMINED'

The UN Secretary-General also reiterated his longstanding concerns about the Security Council, which he said was "often deadlocked, unable to act on the most significant peace and security issues of our time".

"The Council's lack of unity on Russia's invasion of Ukraine and on Israel's military operations in Gaza following the horrific terror attacks by Hamas on 7 October has severely – perhaps fatally – undermined its authority," Mr. Guterres said, as he urged serious reform of the 15-member body's "composition and working methods".

In a call for reasoned and long-term solutions to these conflicts and other serious threats to human rights around the world, the UN chief emphasized that the Summit of the Future in September would be the ideal opportunity for Member States "to step up and re-commit to working for peace and security rooted in human rights".

PROTECTION PLEDGE

Mr. Guterres also pledged the global body's system-wide support to all governments in this endeavour, announcing the launch of the United Nations Agenda for Protection, in partnership with the UN human rights office, OHCHR.

"Under this Agenda, the United Nations, across the full spectrum of our work, will act as one to prevent human rights violations and to identify and respond to them when they take place," the Secretary-General said. "That is the Protection Pledge of all United Nations bodies: to do their utmost to protect



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people."

DISINFORMATION TARGET

Welcoming the UN chief's initiative and offering to help advance people's fundamental rights "in every circumstance, no matter how challenging", UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Türk cautioned that the global body's work was at serious risk from "continued attempts to undermine the legitimacy and work of the United Nations and other institutions".

Mr. Türk explained that these attempts "include disinformation that targets UN humanitarian organizations, UN peacekeepers and my Office. The UN has become a lightning rod for manipulative propaganda and a scapegoat for policy failures".

This malign influence was "profoundly destructive of the common good, and it callously betrays the many people whose lives rely on it", insisted the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY CHIEF'S ALERT

Echoing warnings that international humanitarian law and even the UN Charter were coming under increasing threat around the world, the head of the UN General Assembly, Mr. Francis, told the Human Rights Council that it was time for all global citizens to "do our part".

Today, 75 years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – "humanity's cherished Magna Carta" – conflict and the impact of climate change "including the existential threat of sea-level rise" had left 300 million people in dire need of humanitarian assistance, some 114 million of them being refugees and other displaced people, he warned.



"We must not simply stand by as callous observers lest we be seen as complicit in the expanding web of dehumanization," he said. "We must do our part."

Highlighting the crisis in the Middle East, the UN General Assembly President said that the suffering of innocent civilians in Gaza had reached an "unbearable tipping point".

More than 80 per cent of the enclave's population had been displaced and was now "teetering on the brink of starvation and trapped in the depths of an impending though avoidable public health catastrophe", Mr. Francis told the forum's 47 Member States.

As war continues in Gaza, triggered by Hamas-led attacks that left some 1,200 dead and more than 250 taken hostage on 7 October, "the most vulnerable suffer most", Mr. Francis continued. "Hostages and their families are living in anguish, women and children are facing desperate and uncertain futures, and innocent civilians are unjustly caught in life threatening crossfire."

IN THE NAME OF HUMANITY

To help the most vulnerable – not only in Gaza but in Haiti, Myanmar, Sudan, the wider Sahel and Yemen – the General Assembly President insisted: "we must not fail the victims – the victims of human rights violations... We must never tolerate or ignore the flagrant disregard for the rights and freedoms our forebearers worked so arduously to define and to codify. Nor should we ignore the systemic impunity with which it is perpetrated."

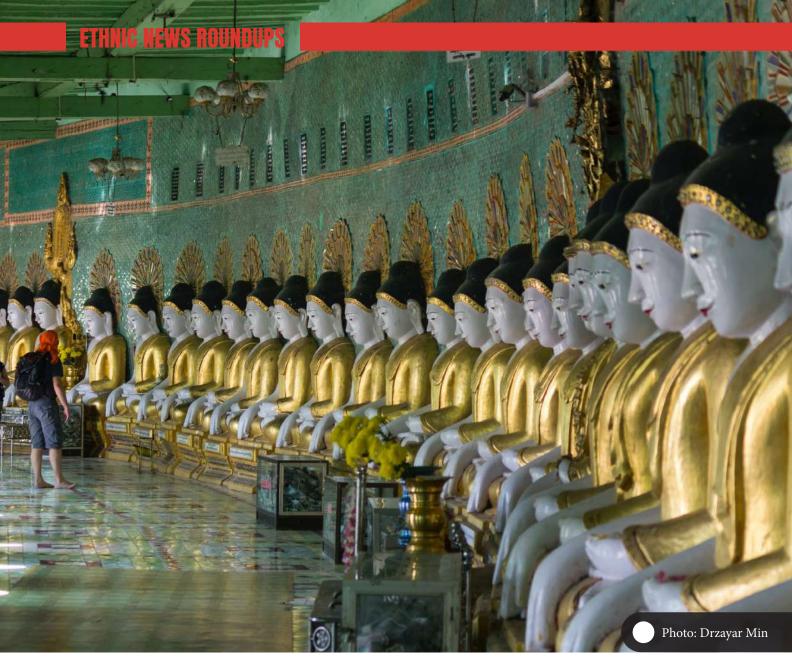
Mr. Francis also insisted on the need for an "immediate humanitarian ceasefire" in Gaza and for humanitarian corridors to deliver aid to some 1.5 million homeless Palestinians "in the name of humanity".

The appeal by the President of the General Assembly came days after receiving a letter from the head of the UN agency for Palestinians, UNRWA, warning of a "monumental disaster" in Gaza and the West Bank amid repeated Israeli calls to dismantle it and the freezing of \$450 million in funding by dozens of donors.

"I implore donor States to uphold and sustain their contributions to the critical funding necessary for UNRWA to discharge its mandated responsibilities to the Palestinians. Even in the midst of the current extraordinary challenges, UNRWA has been and continues to be an indispensable lifeline of support to the Palestinians," Mr. Francis said.

Courtesy of UN News

www.mizzima.com



SHAN STATE

Martial law declared in Mongmit and Mabein townships in northern Shan State

The junta declared martial law in the townships of Mongmit and Mabein in northern Shan State, on 28 February 2024.

The order stated that martial law was necessary for the National Planning and Administration Council to provide better security, law and order and regional peace.

Martial law was brought in under Article 419 of the Constitution. It puts the regional military commander in charge of administrative and judicial affairs in the areas where martial law has been declared. Mongmit and Mabein come under the area of the junta's Northern Region Military Command and its commander is now officially in charge of the townships.

Under the law he can exercise that power himself or delegate that responsibility to others under his command.

LAST WEEK IN NAY PYI TAW

JUNTA-RUN CBM, PRIVATE BANKS LAUNCH PROGRAM TO SIMPLIFY FOREIGN CURRENCY ACQUISITION FOR MYANMAR TRAVELERS

he junta-run Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM) has teamed up with three private banks to implement a program to simplify the process of acquiring foreign currencies for Myanmar citizens who are traveling overseas, the junta-controlled newspaper The Global New Light of Myanmar, reported on March 5 this year.

The CBM is "selling a small amount of foreign currencies to those going abroad in Nay Pyi

Taw, Yangon, Mandalay and Taunggyi cities under the special scheme," said the newspaper.

People studying, working, or seeking medical treatment abroad can now purchase foreign currencies equivalent to US\$300-500 per person at authorized banks' FX counters and money changers at Yangon International Airport, said the newspaper.

This follows the CBM's decision on December 5 last year to discontinue setting fixed exchange rates and allow sales based on market rates.

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BUSINESS

NEW 20,000 KYATS BANKNOTES WILL NOT GO ON General Release



he Myanmar Central Bank issued a statement on 26 February rebutting rumours that 20,000 kyats banknotes will go on general release in March.

Previously, on 31 July 2023, the Central Bank issued a new 20,000 kyats banknote. However, news of its issue caused panic, a devaluation of the kyat on international markets and an increase in the price of gold. This led to the junta to announce that the new 20,000 kyats notes were a limited issue to commemorate the completion of a Buddha statue.

Until now, because the 20,000 kyats banknote is limited, the only way people could obtain a 20,000 kyats banknote was by taking old and damaged notes to a bank where they could be exchanged for a new 20,000 kyats banknotes. The bank would then destroy the old and spoiled money used to buy the new notes, meaning that the issuing of the new notes would not lead to an increase in the money supply. Economic theory states that if governments print more money without an improvement in the economy it reduces the value of money. This is because there has been no increase in the goods available to buy but people have more money, creating a greater demand for a limited number of goods. So, the price of goods rises, leading to inflation.

The recent rumours that the new 20,000 kyats note would no longer be limited and go on general release led people to panic about inflation and caused the prices of cars and real estate in Yangon to rise over the last few days, according to brokers on social media. The value of the kyat against the US dollar also dropped.

MYANMAR JUNTA TARGETS RICE EXPORTS OF \$1 BILLION NEXT FINANCIAL YEAR



he junta wants to export \$1 billion USD worth of rice in the coming 2024 to 2025 financial year, as it desperately tries to earn foreign currency.

Rice exports make up an important part of the junta's exports earning it nearly half as much as oil and gas exports, which are worth over \$2 billion USD a year.

The Myanmar Rice Federation (MRF) said that its target is to export nearly 2 million tonnes of rice for \$1 billion USD in the 2024-25 financial year.

Rather than increasing output the MRF instead wants to increase the value of exports by concentrating on higher quality and higher value rice.

Myanmar usually exports 2.1 million tonnes of rice a year, but in the 2023 to 2024 financial year it has only, so far, managed to export just over a million tonnes for \$700 million USD, making it the 8th largest exporter of rice worldwide for the year.

However, rice exports were down from September to December 2023 because the junta's onerous foreign exchange rules made exporting rice unprofitable.

In the 2022 to 2023 financial year Myanmar exported 2.4 million tonnes of rice, making it the 5 largest exporter of rice worldwide for that year.

The main rice export market for Myanmar is the European Union (EU), followed by more local markets such as China, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Currently, the price of rice to consumers in Myanmar's domestic market has risen to an unprecedented level due to the junta prioritising rice exports. Because of this, exports for the rest of this financial year, which runs to April, will be reduced, in an attempt to stabilise the domestic market.

Due to the junta being put under international economic sanctions following the February 2021 coup it is facing a shortage of foreign currency which it needs to buy arms on the international market, so that it can continue its war of oppression against the Myanmar people.

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BUSINESS

SOME PETROL STATIONS IN YANGON RUN DRY



Some filling stations in Yangon have suspended the sale of Octane 92 petrol as they are facing difficulties in buying fuel from wholesalers, shortage of fuel in the market and no fresh arrival of fuel.

The business community say that some filling stations reduced the sale after the news appeared that there would be a new export-import policy on 1 March.

The new policy by the Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM) is a 70/30 ratio in which 70 percent of export earnings of the exporters must be exchanged at the CBM's exchange rate and the remaining 30 percent can be exchanged at the market rate. This new policy will apply from 1 March to 31 March.

Though the concerned ministry of economy and commerce has not yet officially disclosed this new policy, the business community is in a "wait-and-see" mode as this unconfirmed news circulates.

Myanmar has been facing frequent fuel shortages, inflation and rising commodity prices during the last three years since the military coup. The country experienced the worst ever fuel shortage in December 2023, besides nearly 20 such shortages over the last three years. The business community said that the problem of severe fuel shortage in the country was caused by the wrong policy of the Military Council in controlling and restricting the inflow and outflow of US dollars after the military coup in February 2021.

The Military Council wants to reduce their budget on fuel import and they use a quota system in fuel import business as they are facing the lowering foreign reserves in their hands.

According to data compiled by the fuel importers that the fuel import before the military coup was total over 600,000 tonnes per month from both border trade and maritime trade.

But after the coup, the fuel is being imported by maritime trade only and it has fallen to nearly 370,000 tonnes per month, virtually half of pre-coup figures.

The prices of fuel in the market on 1 March was 2,175 Kyats per liter for Octane 92 petrol, 2,825 Kyats per liter for Octane 95, 2,585 Kyats per liter for premium diesel and 2,525 Kyats per liter for diesel respectively.

Penrose Thitsa

THAI BUSINESSES IN MYANMAR ADOPT CAUTIOUS APPROACH: FTI CHAIRMAN

hai businesses operating in Myanmar are facing a complex situation due to the ongoing political turmoil and its impact on regional trade, The Nation reported citing Kriengkrai Thiennukul, chairman of the Federation of Thai Industries (FTI).

He said that Thai businesses are adopting a cautious approach.

While the situation hasn't significantly affected Thai investors yet, concerns are rising as the military rule in Myanmar and geopolitical tensions escalate, according to Kirengkrai Thiennukul.

Thai companies are monitoring the situation closely and delaying expansion plans until stability returns in Myanmar. However, Kriengkrai sees an opportunity amidst the challenges.

As international investors display hesitancy and begin to divest, it's imperative for Thailand to craft a strategic approach to either capitalize on or leverage this situation to its benefit, said Kriengkrai.

This necessitates deeper exploration and discussion, he emphasized.

However, Kriengkrai highlighted the logistical challenges and security risks faced when the conflict spilled into ethnic regions near the Thai border, disrupting trade and distribution.

"But when the conflict expanded and extended into ethnic areas near the Thai border, this caused logistical problems. Trade and product distribution were disrupted and security risks soared," said Kriengkrai.

CULTURE & LIFESTYLE

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CULTIVATING THE LAND

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A farmer in Bagan works on his land. Photo:Hakan Nural



CHASING MYANMAR'S HIDDEN MONEY TRAIL



K We're a Washington DC based nonprofit that uses publicly available information to investigate illicit networks as they pertain to global security and human rights abuses across the world," Savanna Slaughter of the Center for Advanced Defense Studies (C4ADS) tells Insight Myanmar in a podcast. "We work in various issue areas such as natural resource security, wildlife crimes, as well as national security derivative issues, such as China, Russia, Iran. So incorporating a bunch of publicly available information to help expose these networks and then take impactful actions working with government actors, on-the-ground authorities, civil society organizations, to stop these networks."

The C4ADS team has been looking into two main areas regarding Myanmar: first, how the junta is able to stay in power through sustaining its military might; and second, examining the regime's illicit finances and assets through, Slaughter says, "crony financing and conglomerates, as well as the industries and ways in which the Tatmadaw is able to continue financing their war efforts." Myanmar is not a new area of focus for C4ADS—their 2016 report, "Sticks and Stones," looked at online hate speech directed towards the Rohingya.

More recently, their investigations have mainly relied on hunting down and interpreting, publicly available trade data. In the US and other Western countries, such information is often a legal requirement, although it can still be challenging to sift through so many documents; however, countries like Myanmar and its neighbors present a much greater challenge, because just the process of gathering data alone is difficult. "Unfortunately, corporations can act totally in secret. We've no window into that, besides previous examples from when we were able to scrape the data," she explains, adding that in such cases, leaked information has played a significant role.

Fortunately, C4ADS has its own data team, which has been able to digitize vast troves of documents, making them more accessible. Still, it takes much more work to make sense of them. Trying to untangle illicit financing is particularly challenging because the players intentionally hide their tracks, often setting up shell companies and deliberately obfuscating records. Slaughter's team searches social media and the wider web to cross-check names and



other details found in their document trove, in hopes of building a clearer picture. "The key takeaway is that you can't operate with a single data source, ever," she explains. "Basically, you have to combine it with the other resources we have and try to maximize it. All of this data fits together to form a puzzle [while] working through the other types of publicly available information. And then, in certain cases, particularly with Myanmar, slotting this in for leaked information or defectors or human sources, as relevant."

Because Myanmar doesn't publish its own trade data, Slaughter and her colleagues must search the other end of the transaction where possible. Of course, records from places like North Korea and China are not accessible to her team, but there are public records available for many other countries. "A lot of these shipments have been spotted and identified, and have been a pretty good starting place for a lot of investigations," she says, noting that all shipments are required to list the sender, recipients, dates, and contents. It can also be helpful to narrow down the search by looking at the HS code, a classification system which numerically indicates the item type being moved. But it gets tricky from there, as documents are sometimes forged, or the actual actors hire shipping agents to act on their behalf. To uncover these details, Slaughter admits that in addition to critical investigation and data analysis, it can also take a bit of luck, such as someone slipping up somewhere along the paper trail. Another possibility is piggybacking on criminal investigations, such as what happened recently in Singapore, when two men were arrested for falsifying documents that covered up a shipment of military grade sonar equipment to the Burmese regime. "It's really dangerous to have these whole illicit networks," she says. "It's not just one bad actor, it's typically a whole series of them all working in concert, which makes it really dangerous, but we just try to do what we can and apply some critical analysis."

Slaughter's work touches on the subject of sanctions evasion, something covered extensively in past podcast episodes, such as the jet fuel coming in or the teak wood going out, the ongoing gas and oil operations, the profits in jade and rare earth, or prohibiting the use of US currency in any transaction. For example, some US teak importers claim to not know about the ethical challenges of the teak industry in Myanmar, or that the particular teak they import has been ethically sourced. However, they have had longterm relationships with teak mills in the country, know how the teak industry there operates, so Slaughter and her team believe it strains credulity that those companies are not turning a blind eye to the situation there, even if it cannot be proven. The issue of jet fuel is more complicated, since it is used both by civil aviation as well as the military. But their research has uncovered Navy-grade, high speed, diesel fuel coming from India delivered to "The Master," a moniker which piqued their interest and prompted them to dig deeper, and which was written about in more detail in a recent Frontier article. At the same time, she describes the formation of so many shell companies that their work is like "Whack-A-Mole," where they can barely identify one entity before others pop up. "Unfortunately, given that we only deal with publicly available data, unless they're publishing and bragging about this somewhere, which it never ceases to amaze me sometimes how self-incriminating people can be on their websites, we just don't know for sure."

While it is easy to get trade data from many countries, it is quite different for other nations, in particular Russia and China. C4ADS has established that Russia is one of the main suppliers of military parts to the regime, and does try to not hide it "because no one's going to hold you accountable for it," she explains. On the other hand, she finds that "China is much more of a black hole." Given the extensive border between China and Myanmar and their close ethnic bonds, there is certainly a great deal of trade taking place; however, because China stopped publishing trade data within the last few years, unless Slaughter gets lucky and sees a Chinese national's name appears on a leaked document, or is able to review the annual minutes published from a Chinese board meeting, there is little she can do. Finally, while trade data coming out of India is fairly well-documented, it poses a different kind of challenge; even though there are accessible trade records, shipments of interest run the risk of being heavily obfuscated or being shipped to nondescript entities, making them very hard to unravel and trace in the context of military imports.

"Moving forward with this is going to require a lot more innovation," she says in closing, "in terms of identifying companies of interest, perhaps working to develop some screening lists, or building out directors of interest and combining corporate data in a new way to form screening lists for shell companies and things like that."

Check out the Insight Myanmar podcast here:

https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2024/2/4/ hidden-ledgers

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