

ACHOCE China increasingly pressured to deal with the Myanmar resistance

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SCREWS TIGHTEN IN MYANMAR'S CONSCRIPTION DRIVE

n Myanmar's major cities, young people – particularly men – fear a knock on the door. The junta's forced conscription drive – announced 10 February - has undeniably ignited unprecedented panic among the youth. Over recent weeks, the military junta has increased guest registration inspections, tightened road checkpoints, and imposed constraints on domestic air travel, particularly in Yangon, Mandalay and Naypyidaw.

The junta has been compiling lists of people who are potential candidates for conscription in several Yangon Region Townships. According to residents, the junta drew up the lists for the Yangon Region townships of Khayan, Hlaing Tharyar, Kyauktan, Thanlyin, South Dagon, and Dagon Seikkan during the second week in March, according to Mizzima news reports and NGO Progressive Voice.

Residents say junta soldiers and ward administrators have conducted door-to-door visits to gather information on the men listed as living in each household recently in areas of Yangon.

Skepticism has been voiced over junta claims that young men who are currently in education will be exempt from military service until they graduate from university, due to the junta's dubious track record of adhering to laws.

The junta said that it would only start conscripting people after the Thingyan New Year's celebrations in April. Despite this, there have been reports of junta soldiers already arbitrarily arresting and deporting young men from the street and during overnight guest list inspections across the country.

About 18 million people could be liable for military conscription, although the junta will only take in a fraction of this number in the first year's intake.

Tens of thousands are trying to flee by applying for visas at overwhelmed embassies or by embarking on dangerous journeys to other countries. In Rakhine State, this catastrophe is particularly grave. On 19 February, the junta detained around 600 passengers arriving from Yangon at Sittwe and Kyaukphyu Airports. The next day, the junta detained 100 ethnic Rakhine youth traveling by bus from Yangon to Rakhine State, holding them incommunicado in Yangon's Hlaing Tharyar Township.

In addition, the Chief Minister of Rakhine State Htain Lin is leading a militia conscription team with the call that the township conscription team must summon and register all adult nationals who will serve in the military. Simultaneously, the junta has arrested and forcibly recruited hundreds of Rohingya in internment camps and those remaining in Sittwe, as well as threatened and persuaded them to enlist with the potential of freedom of movement, money, rice, or national ID cards.

The Rohingya are thus being targeted by the perpetrators of genocide against them for conscription as human shields, human minesweepers, and porters, among other forced labour. The very Myanmar military conscripting the Rohingya has long deprived them of their citizenship, access to IDs and passports, and other fundamental human rights.

Over the coming months, many individuals fleeing forced conscription will enter Myanmar's neighbouring countries, which are ill-equipped to provide shelter and sufficient aid, have notoriously pushed individuals back, and have failed to provide them protection.

Progressive Voice warns that with neighbouring countries 'authorities on high alert, Myanmar people fleeing from the military's violence will likely encounter violent pushbacks and arbitrary detention in violation of international law. This will have resounding impacts on regional peace and stability at the expense of Myanmar people's safety and security.



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MIZZIMA MAGAZINE

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Cover photo of scene in Beijing by Vince Russell







UNPROVOKED JUNTA HELICOPTER ATTACK ON SAGAING VILLAGE

he junta carried out four unprovoked helicopter attacks on Muhtaw Village in Kani Township, Sagaing Region, at about 11:30 am on 10 March.

"Junta helicopters carried out four aerial attacks resulting in the injury of one local man and the destruction of two houses in the village", said Mizzima's source on the ground.

They added that at the time of the attacks, there had been no fighting on the ground in the area.

They said: "The village is approximately seven miles away from the town of Kani. They also opened fire around the monastery as well. There was no military target and no justification for firing."

Later in the day on 10 March, at about 5:00 pm, two junta fighter jets bombed Ward 3 in Kani Town. Mizzima is currently investigating the extent of the damage.

MYANMAR BORDER GUARD POLICE WHO FLED TO BANGLADESH TO BE REPATRIATED

Bangladesh is in discussions with Myanmar about returning 179 members of the Myanmar junta's Border Guard Police (BGP)who illegally crossed into Bangladesh on Monday 11 March 2024.

The Bangladesh Foreign Minister, Hasan Mahmud, said on 12 March that the Myanmar BGP members would be repatriated, according to the Daily Star newspaper.

It said that at least 179 Myanmar BGP from Angthapaya Camp entered Bangladesh in two groups on 11 March, one in the morning and another later in the evening.

Currently, they are being held in custody at the 11 Border Guard Bangladesh Battalion in Bandarban.

People living in Bangladesh on the border near to fighting on the Myanmar side were very worried by the latest fighting after a Bangladesh citizen was injured by a stray bullet. Even though the situation, for now, is calmer in Myanmar people on the Bangladesh side

of the border are still worried according to locals who spoke to the Daily Star.

Previously, on 15 February 2024, Bangladesh repatriated 330 Myanmar nationals who had illegally fled into Bangladesh from areas where the Myanmar junta was fighting with the Arakan Army (AA).

They included 302 Myanmar BGP members, four of their family members, two Myanmar soldiers, 18 people working for Myanmar immigration and four civilians, with at least 15 of them suffering from gunshot wounds. They all entered Bangladesh between 4 and 7 February 2024.

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SOME PDFS TURNING AWAY NEW RECRUITS DUE TO FUNDING SHORTFALLS

espite many people asking to join people's defence forces (PDFs) to avoid being conscripted by the junta some PDFs are unable to accept new recruits because they cannot afford it.

Following the announcement of the Conscription Law on 10 February more than 50 young men and women reached out to the Tada-U Township PDF asking to join, but the PDF was unable to take them all.

"We're facing challenges with the growing number of recruits, as we must procure additional food supplies and cover living expenses. Unlike regular battalions, we lack a designated monthly food allocation and rely solely on donations", said Ko Lay Hlaing, the deputy commander of the Tada-U Township PDF.

Whilst defence forces operating under the National Unity Government's (NUG's) Ministry of Defence (MOD) receive funding from the NUG local PDFs have to rely on donations from the public and as a result, some are facing funding problems, according to a member of a Mandalay based local PDF.

They explained: "We're receiving inquiries from people, but we're unable to accommodate them due to insufficient funds. Additionally, we encounter

challenges in providing weapons to new recruits."

Since the first week in March, the junta has been conducting censuses and forcing people to attend public meetings about conscription in several Mandalay Region townships. As a result, many people from Mandalay have been trying to join defence forces in the area.

"It's imperative to ensure that food rations and ammunition are supplied to the respective LPDF and guerrilla forces. They must be financially robust and well-equipped", said a member of a Mandalay-based local PDF.

Other defence forces and ethnic armed organisations have said that they can take on new recruits and have sent out calls asking for applications. They include the Karen National Union (KNU) the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF), the Bamar People's Liberation Army (BPLA), and forces operating under the NUG such as the Mandalay People's Defense Force, the Royal Peacock Column, Kalay District Battalion No. (4), Shwebo District Battalion No. (14), Ye-U PDF, and Myeik District Battalion (2).

MYANMAR ARMY VETERANS TO BE CONSCRIPTED BACK INTO SERVICE

ules which oblige ex-servicemen who have left the armed forces within the last five years to return to the army if they are summoned, were implemented on 10 March 2024.

The Reserve Force Rules were brought in by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), but never implemented. The junta announced that they would be implemented from 10 March 2024.

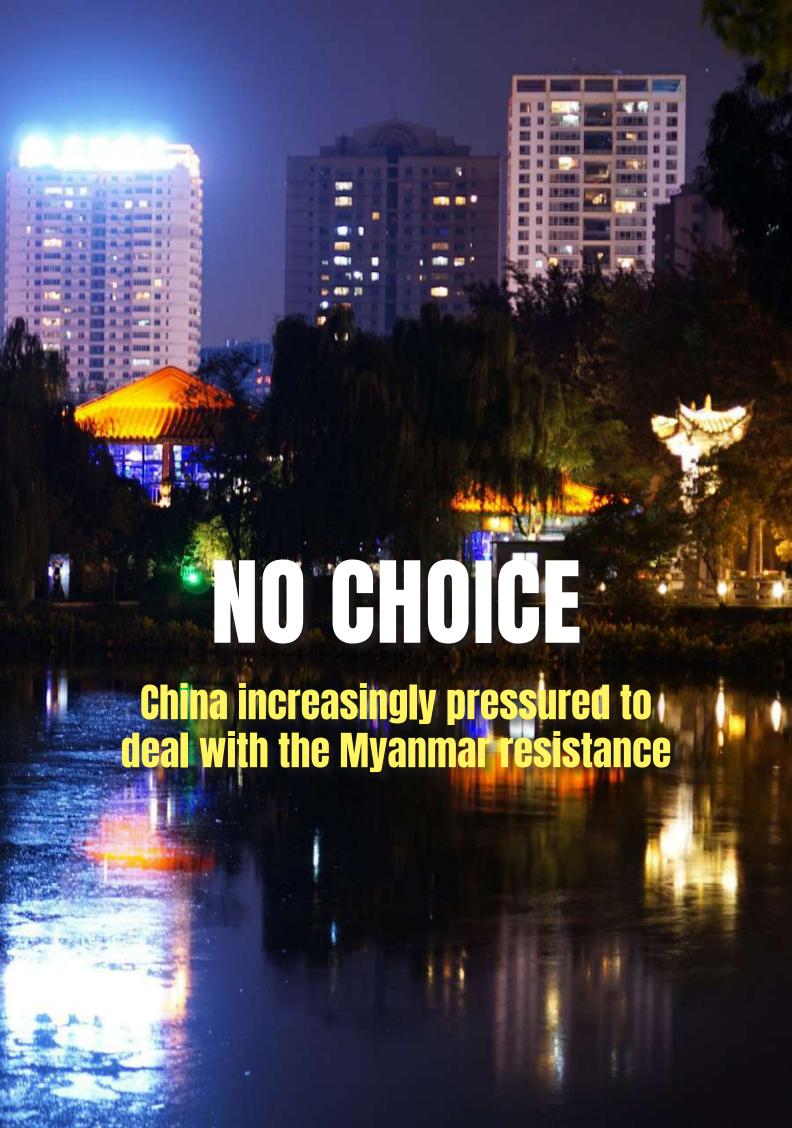
Under the law, brought in by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), but never implemented, military veterans who left the service in the last five years must return to the army if asked and serve up to five years more. This period could also be extended by the Commander-in-Chief.

At a meeting with representatives of political parties held on 13 February, junta leader Min Aung Hlaing said that only veterans who are fit and suitable will be recalled. But, it is not clear yet whether all veterans who are deemed fit enough to serve will be recalled or whether only a certain number of them will be recalled.

On 16 February the junta formed the Central Body for Mobilising the Reserve Force and appointed Min Aung Hlaing as its chairman.

Min Aung Hlaing also chairs the Myanmar War Veterans Organisation. It had over 91,600 members and over 161,000 auxiliary members nationwide as of September 2021, according to its website.





China realizes that pragmatism can pay dividends.

Given the geopolitical tensions in the world today, it is not surprising that Beijing is doing what it can to secure trade and supply routes. And right now, an important concern - apart from the South China Sea – is the country's "backdoor" – the Myanmar corridor that links China's southwest Yunnan Province with the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean.

Myanmar matters to China. That is why Beijing continues to engage with the Myanmar military junta. But it also has to recognize reality and deal with other players in the badlands of the Golden Land who could affect Chinese investment, infrastructure, trade and transport.

Since 2013, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has been pushing its worldwide Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) outreach, with mixed results. While this stretches as far as Europe, Africa and the Middle East, it can be argued that one of its most crucial components is the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a trade, transport and communications avenue that when fully up and running will provide an important alternative to transport through the Malacca Strait – an avenue vulnerable in times of geopolitical tension.

PRAGMATIC APPROACH

For this reason, China has no choice but to engage with some of the Myanmar resistance and ethnic players who currently hold sway over areas of the corridor in the north of Myanmar, through to the country's western coast in Rakhine State. This was seen recently in the China-mediated talks in Kunming, where delegates from the resistance's Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA) and the military junta discussed security, trade and transport, linking northern Shan State with China, in the wake of Operation 1027 power grabs by the alliance.

Representatives from the ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) that make up the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Myanmar National Democratic Army (MNDAA), and the Arakan Army (AA) attended the talks that took place from 1 to 3 March. Judging from what has been published, and behind the scenes comments, various matters were discussed, but there were no discussions regarding the fighting between the Arakan Army (AA) and the junta in Rakhine and Chin states, which do not share borders with China.

The Myanmar junta spokesman said they agreed to the ceasefire and deescalating of the con-



flicts with the aim of stability of socio-economic life of the local people and the issues of stability in the border region, maintaining law and order, management of border trade zones and posts and the trade would continually be under the control and management of the two countries.

The two countries would work for stability in the border region and will fight against drug trafficking and cybercrimes resolutely as they would undermine the security, the spokesman added.

The ceasefire agreement has satisfied the MNDAA by recognizing its territory, allowing it to collect trade taxes, and mandating the withdrawal of all junta troops from the area. However, there is no agreement yet on the Muse-Namkham road between the TNLA and the junta. This means the TNLA must continue fighting the junta for full control of the territory, but may be hesitant to do this alone.

What is important to keep in mind is the truce and the ongoing rounds of Kunming talks could help the overstretched Myanmar military to focus attention aggressively elsewhere in the country – particularly attacking PDF targets and support bases in Sagaing, and combating the AA in Rakhine – the latter, a worrisome problem for Naypyidaw.

WORRISOME TOO FOR BEIJING

Crystal ball gazers will no doubt be wondering how China will respond to AA action in Rakhine as the security of the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone deep-sea port complex and the Shwe gas facilities and pipeline becomes a concern.

Fighting between the AA and junta forces has increased in Rakhine State over the last few weeks, with the junta struggling to fight back.

The AA has made clear its mission is Rakhine autonomy under AA control.

This poses a problem for China.

While the Rakhine State is one of the poorest

in Myanmar, it is an important part of both China's BRI and CMEC, as well as India's Kaladan Multimodal Project, and the accompanying deep-sea port.

The situation is growing more acute for Naypyidaw. The AA captured a key township near the major Chinese special economic zone in Rakhine, the ethnic rebel group said 12 March. The recent seizure of Ramree comes after three months of fighting, according to the AA. The AA has captured the Rakhine townships of Minbya, Mrauk-U, Kyauktaw, Ponnagyun, Myebon and Ramree, as well as Pauktaw township in neighbouring Chin State.

Ramree shares an island with Kyaukphyu township, site of the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone deep-sea port complex, which China requests security for. The complex was approved in 2023 by Naypyidaw but efforts to recruit locals for work have proved lukewarm.

MORE TALKS?

It appears that the AA is now in control of areas within the complex that suggests the Chinese government will have to engage with the AA to ensure security. Reports indicate the Myanmar junta has reinforced its defence near the Shwe natural gas pipeline project on Kyaukphyu's Maday Island. But the AA is tightening its grip.

China is likely to be pragmatic when it comes to who holds territory along the corridor from Yunnan to the deep-sea port on the Bay of Bengal. China may seek to hold talks – like it has in Kunming over the status of northern Shan State – to ensure the security of its projects and investments.

Beijing will have to deal with the AA if it wishes to secure its backdoor to the Indian Ocean.

CHINA'S PREDATORY GRIP ON SOUTHEAST ASIA

SUN LEE

decade ago, China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was heralded as a transformative force, promising infrastructure development and economic prosperity across the globe. Among its primary targets was Southeast Asia, a region of 690 million people seen as China's backyard. However, as the wave of Chinese investments swept over the region, it has become increasingly evident that China's influence in Southeast Asia is not without its pitfalls and dangers.

At first glance, the influx of Chinese money into Southeast Asia seemed promising. Giant earth-moving machines, Chinese construction crews, and diplomats descended upon the region, promising roads, railways, and power plants. Cambodia's new Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville expressway, cutting travel time from the capital to the south coast, was hailed as a success. However, beneath the veneer of progress lies a darker reality.

Many BRI projects have failed to deliver promised returns, with some even proving grossly wasteful or environmentally damaging. Malaysia's debacle

with \$1.8 billion given to Chinese firms for pipelines in Sabah, now shelved, is a prime example. The absence of a coherent strategic plan behind the BRI has led to overcapacity-driven Chinese state-owned firms rushing into the region, driven more by profit motives than strategic foresight.

China's economic hegemony in Southeast Asia is further complicated by its efforts to embed a cultural narrative of natural cooperation among Asian nations. However, Beijing's assertiveness in territorial disputes, mistreatment of minority groups, and allegations of political meddling have strained relations with its neighbors. Despite this, Southeast Asian nations find themselves walking a tightrope, hesitant to openly criticize China for fear of economic repercussions. This hesitance is symptomatic of a broader power imbalance in the region. While Southeast Asian countries are willing to voice concerns about Western powers, they tread carefully when it comes to China. This asymmetry of incentives has created a dynamic where China's dominance in Southeast Asia appears increasingly inevitable.



One of the most pressing concerns is the militarization of disputed territories in the South China Sea. China's aggressive actions, including the construction of military installations on artificial islands, have heightened tensions and raised fears of potential conflict. Southeast Asian countries, reliant on maritime trade routes for economic prosperity, face the daunting challenge of asserting their territorial claims while avoiding confrontation with a militarily superior China. Furthermore, China's economic dominance poses risks to the region's long-term prosperity. While Chinese investments may initially boost infrastructure development and create employment opportunities, they often come with strings attached. Many Southeast Asian countries have found themselves ensnared in debt traps, unable to repay loans and forced to cede control of strategic assets to Chinese creditors. This economic dependence on China undermines the region's sovereignty and leaves it vulnerable to exploitation.

Moreover, China's influence extends beyond the economic sphere, shaping political dynamics and undermining democratic institutions in Southeast Asia. Through its "sharp power" tactics, including media censorship, disinformation campaigns, and support for authoritarian regimes, China seeks to exert influence and suppress dissent within the region. As a result, Southeast Asian countries face increasing pressure to align with China's interests, sacrificing their own democratic principles in the process.

In response to China's growing assertiveness, Southeast Asian nations must strengthen regional cooperation and solidarity to counterbalance Chinese influence. By presenting a united front and advocating for a rules-based international order, the region can assert its autonomy and protect its interests against Chinese encroachment. Additionally, Southeast Asian countries must diversify their economic partnerships and reduce dependency on China, seeking alternative sources of investment and trade to ensure long-term sustainability.

Ultimately, the future of Southeast Asia hinges on its ability to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape and resist external pressures from China. By upholding principles of sovereignty, democracy, and mutual respect, the region can assert its identity and shape its own destiny in the face of growing Chinese influence. Only through unity, resilience, and strategic foresight can Southeast Asia overcome the challenges posed by China's predatory grip and emerge as a prosperous and independent region on the global stage. Amidst the specter of Chinese hegemony, there are glimmers of hope. Southeast Asian nations are not passive actors in the face of China's rise. They are seek-

ing to diversify their economic partnerships, embrace new technologies, and assert their own interests on the global stage. However, the road to autonomy is fraught with challenges. China's deep pockets and aggressive economic tactics make it difficult for Southeast Asian nations to resist its influence. The lack of transparency and accountability in Chinese investments leaves countries vulnerable to exploitation and coercion.

Moreover, China's efforts to cultivate a narrative of Asian solidarity serve to undermine regional unity and perpetuate a cycle of dependency. By framing itself as a benevolent benefactor, China seeks to mask its true intentions of dominance and control. In this context, Southeast Asian countries must be wary of falling into the trap of "debt-trap diplomacy." While Chinese investments may offer short-term economic gains, they often come with hidden costs and long-term consequences. The region must prioritize sustainable development and safeguard its autonomy in the face of predatory Chinese tactics.

The Philippines' experience with illegal online gambling and Malaysia's entanglement with the 1MDB scandal underscore the dangers of unchecked Chinese influence. Despite this, Southeast Asian countries continue to welcome Chinese investments, albeit with increasing caution. Moving forward, Southeast Asia must adopt a more assertive stance towards China, balancing the benefits of economic cooperation with the need to protect national interests and sovereignty. This requires greater transparency, accountability, and strategic planning in dealing with Chinese investments.

Moreover, Southeast Asian nations must strengthen regional cooperation and solidarity to counterbalance China's growing influence. By presenting a united front, the region can assert its autonomy and resist Chinese attempts at hegemony.

China's predatory grip on Southeast Asia poses a significant threat to regional autonomy and sovereignty. While Chinese investments may offer economic opportunities, they also come with hidden costs and risks. Southeast Asian countries must tread carefully, balancing the benefits of economic cooperation with the need to protect national interests and safeguard regional autonomy. Only through unity, resilience, and strategic foresight can Southeast Asia navigate the challenges posed by China's growing influence.

Sun Lee is a pseudonym for a writer who specializes in Asian affairs.

AA TAKES CONTROL OF RAMREE TOWN IN SOUTHERN RAKHINE STATE



The Arakan Army (AA) took control of Ramree Town in southern Rakhine State at about 1:15 pm on 11 March, according to an AA announcement.

It took the AA nearly three months to capture Ramree Town after it launched its first attack on the town on 18 December 2023.

During that time junta forces planted landmines in and around the town, according to the AA, who warned locals to either be cautious or not return to their homes until the AA has carried out landmine clearance.

Also, according to AA reports, the AA started attacking the junta headquarters in Rathedaung Township at 7:00 pm on 10 March.

Also on 10 March, AA troops fought with junta soldiers from the Aung Tha Pyay Border Guard Camp in Aung Tha Pyay Village in in the north of Rakhine State's Rathedaung Township, according to the AA.

UN SAYS CIVILIANS NEED TO BE PROTECTED IN RAKHINE STATE

n a daily press conference held on 11 March, the Office of the Secretary-General's Spokesperson called for civilians to be protected as international law demands, as the number of civilian deaths in Rakhine State rises.

Below is what Stéphane Dujarric, the Spokesman for the Secretary-General, António Guterres said about Myanmar at the press conference:

"Turning to Myanmar, where our humanitarian colleagues are deeply concerned about the indiscriminate use of heavy weapons in residential areas that is posing grave risks and costing civilian lives in Rakhine State.

"On Saturday, a stray artillery shell landed in a residential area in the state capital Sittwe, killing at least eight Rohingya civilians and injuring 12 others, including five children. This is the second time in two weeks that a stray shell has killed people in Sittwe. "These incidents take place amid intensifying fighting in Rakhine between the Myanmar Armed Forces and the Arakan Army. The situation has prompted a surge in displacement across the state. More than 300,000 people are now displaced in Rakhine State.

"The tactics used by the parties to the conflict are harming civilians and undermining humanitarians' continued ability to deliver assistance to people in need.

"We remind all parties to the conflict of their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect civilians, including aid workers."

VIDEOS APPEAR TO SHOW MYANMAR MILITARY TRAINING ROHINGYAS

RADIO FREE ASIA (RFA)

days that appear to show junta personnel providing military training to ethnic Muslim Rohingyas at a site in western Myanmar's Rakhine State, amid reports of forced recruitment around the country.

On 10 February, the junta imposed a military draft law – officially called the People's Military Service Law – prompting civilians of fighting age to flee Myanmar's cities.

Many said they would rather leave the country or join anti-junta forces in remote border areas than serve in the military, which seized power in a 2021 coup d'etat.

The junta has sought to downplay the announcement, claiming that conscription won't go into effect until April, but RFA has received several reports indicating that forced recruitment is already underway.

Two videos emerged on Facebook over the weekend showing junta troops training a group of people wearing full military uniforms in the use of firearms and around 30 armed people wearing fatigues inside of a military vehicle. They were posted to the site with a description that identifies the subjects as Rohingyas.

A third video, posted on March, shows junta Rakhine State Security and Border Affairs Minister Co. Kyaw Thura visiting a warehouse where hundreds of people, believed to be Rohingyas, are seated in military attire.

RFA was unable to independently verify the content of the videos.

Reports suggest the junta has been forcibly recruiting Rohingyas in Rakhine in recent weeks, and residents told RFA Burmese that the video shows members of the ethnic group receiving training at a site in the north of the state, although they were unable to provide an exact location.

They said that junta personnel have detained and enlisted around 700 Rohingyas for military training from the Rakhine townships of Buthidaung, Maungdaw and Kyaukphyu, as well as the capital Sittwe, since the 10 February announcement, with the goal of forming a militia.

In Kyaukphyu, the training has progressed to using firearms, said a resident who, like others interviewed for this report, spoke to RFA on condition of anonymity due to security concerns.

"It is known that the current training phase



involves firearms practice," the resident said Monday. "Gunfire has been heard over the past two or three days, although the training regimen varies daily."

Many of the detainees are living at Kyaukphyu's Kyauk Ta Lone camp for internally displaced persons, or IDPs, where on 29 February junta authorities forcibly gathered 107 mostly ethnic-Rohingya Muslims between the ages of 18 and 35 at the camp's food warehouse, after collecting their personal information.

Former military captain Nyi Thuta, who now advises the armed resistance as part of the anti-junta Civil Disobedience Movement, questioned why the military regime is forcibly recruiting the Rohingya when it has refused to grant them citizenship.

"These people are being coerced and manipulated in various ways into fighting to the death for the junta, which is facing defeat in [the civil] war," he said.

'NO WAY TO ESCAPE'

Some 1 million Rohingya refugees have been living in Bangladesh since 2017, when they were driven out of Myanmar by a military clearance operation. Another 630,000 living within Myanmar are designated stateless by the United Nations, including those who languish in camps and are restricted from moving freely in Rakhine State.

Rights campaigners say the junta is drafting Rohingya into military service to stoke ethnic tensions in Rakhine, while legal experts say the drive is unlawful, given that Myanmar has refused to recognize the Rohingya as one of the country's ethnic groups and denied them citizenship for decades.

Myanmar's military is desperate for new recruits after suffering devastating losses on the battlefield to the ethnic Arakan Army, or AA, in Rakhine State.

Since November, when the AA ended a ceasefire that had been in place since the coup, the military has surrendered Pauktaw, Minbya, Mrauk-U, Kyauktaw, Myay Pon and Taung Pyo townships in the state, as well as Paletwa township in neighbouring Chin state.

On 28 February, the pro-junta New Light of Myanmar claimed that Rohingya had not been recruited for military service because they aren't citizens. Attempts by RFA to reach Hla Thein, the junta's attorney general and spokesperson for Rakhine State, went unanswered Monday 11 March.

Nay San Lwin, a Rohingya activist, condemned the coercion of members of his ethnic group into military service as a "war crime."

"They wield power and resort to coercion and arrests," he said, adding that he believes the junta's goal is to "obliterate the Rohingya community." "I perceive this as part of a genocidal agenda."

Earlier this month, the shadow National Unity Government, or NUG – made up of former civilian lead-

ers ousted in the coup – warned that Rohingya were being pressed into duty by the military "because there is no way to escape."

KACHIN YOUTH FLEEING RECRUITMENT

Meanwhile, residents of Kachin State said Monday that young people in the area are increasingly fleeing abroad or to areas controlled by the armed resistance to avoid military service. The draft law says males between the ages of 18 and 35 and females between 18 and 27 must serve in the military.

A draft-eligible resident of Kachin's Myitkyina Township said that he and others like him "no longer feel safe" in Myanmar.

"Since the conscription law was enacted, it has become quite difficult for us to realize our dreams," he said. "It isn't even safe to go out to a restaurant. We feel threatened daily."

But even for those who have left the country, life can be difficult abroad.

A young Kachin named Ma La Bang who recently relocated to Thailand said he doesn't have a visa to stay in the country legally, and told RFA that people like him worry about being forced to return home.

"Young people living in Thailand without any visa feel insecure, and it is also difficult for them to get jobs," he said. "They are struggling to get a visa and any legal status for residency right now."

La Sai, the chairman of the Kachin Refugee Committee in Malaysia, said that Kachin youths have been flooding the country since the enactment of the draft law.

Two weeks after the junta activated the conscription law, the number of people entering Malaysia from Kachin state has more than doubled, he said. "This kind of migration is also taking place at [Myanmar's] Thai and Indian borders."

'SACRIFICING THEIR FUTURES'

Win Naing, a member of parliament for Kachin's Moe Kaung Township for the deposed National League for Democracy, said the future of Myanmar's youth is being lost because of the law.

"The conscription law ... has directly interfered with the opportunities of young people for education and employment," he said. "The youth are being made to sacrifice their futures."

Junta spokesperson Major General Zaw Min Tun was quoted in pro-junta newspapers on 15 February as saying that 50,000 soldiers will be recruited every year that the law is in effect.

Based on Myanmar's 2019 interim census, at least 13 million people are eligible for military service. Those who refuse face five years in prison.

Courtesy RFA

KACHIN OFFENSIVE OPENS NEW FRONT FOR OVERSTRETCHED MYANMAR JUNTA FORCES

ZACHARY ABUZA FOR RADIO FREE ASIA (RFA)

while the Three Brotherhood Alliance move to consolidate territorial gains in northern Shan state, and the Arakan Army continues their attacks across Rakhine state, a new offensive against Myanmar's junta has begun in Kachin State this month.

On 7 March, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) launched an offensive and quickly captured three military junta bases and 11 small outposts along the 120 km-long (72-mile) Myitkyina-Bhampo highway, parallel to the Chinese border. The KIA has sought to both neutralise threats to their capital and control the trade and movement along the highway.

The military has responded with a spasm of air and artillery assaults into Lai Zar, the seat of the KIA's headquarters. The KIA is now on the outskirts of Myitkyina, the capital and economic hub of Kachin State.

The KIA's offensive deserves close attention for five reasons.

First, although the KIA was one of the first ethnic resistance organisations to join with the National Unity Government (NUG) and fight the junta after the 1 February 2021 coup d'etat, they have been less militarily active since the Three Brotherhood Alliance launched a coordinated offensive on 27 October 2023 that has turned the tide against the junta in Shan

State.

The Three Brotherhood Alliance – which includes the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Arakan Army – took towns across northern Shan State.

In November, the Arakan Army broke their ceasefire with the government and swept across northern Rakhine. The AA is now in control of six townships, and is advancing on the capital. The military government is quickly trying to evacuate civil servants and some forces from Sittwe.

SHAN CEASEFIRE

In early January, China brokered a ceasefire between the Three Brotherhood Alliance and the State Administrative Council (SAC), as the junta is formally known.

The ceasefire in northern Shan State has largely held, and both the TNLA and the MNDAA have been focusing on consolidating power in the townships that they captured, imposing law and order, and providing social services.

Members of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) attacked and captured the junta's 123rd Light Infantry Battalion and the heavy weapons of the Military Council based in Nam Hpat Kar village. (Citizen



journalist)

The ceasefire has allowed the junta to regroup its forces. The military retook Kawlin Township in Sagaing after a two-week siege. The junta has recently declared martial law in two KIA-controlled and three TNLA-controlled towns in northern Shan, suggesting that they were preparing for a counter-offense and were loosening the rules of engagement for their forces. Now 61 of 330 townships nationwide are under martial law.

Despite a fourth round of Chinese-brokered ceasefire talks from 29 February to 1 March that purportedly resulted in a border trade revenue sharing agreement with the MNDAA, the Brotherhood Alliance has more recently signaled that the ceasefire is under threat

The opening of a new front is essential to prevent further counter-offensives by the junta. The military is now unable to redeploy their forces - already spread thin - from Kachin to Sagaing, Rakhine, or other fronts.

THE KIA STEPS UP

Secondly, the KIA's offensive also matters for harmony among the opposition forces, where there is some frustration that the KIA, which has close relations with the Three Brotherhood Alliance, had largely sat out the Operation 1027 offensive over the past four months.

Fairly or unfairly, carping about the KIA had started to emerge, and critics saw them as not participating sufficiently in Operation 1027, which has fundamentally reshaped the anti-military Spring Revolution's trajectory.

It's not that the KIA has not been fighting. In February, airstrikes in Mansi, a town the KIA captured, left six dead. The past week has seen intense fighting between them and junta forces around the economically important jade mining town of Hpakant.

Criticism of the KIA is not entirely fair. The KIA fought in northern Shan State, taking two towns and other military bases. But some saw the KIA's presence as a power grab that caused tensions with the local Ta'ang community; despite the close ties between the TNI A and KIA.

Third, the KIA has reportedly damaged at least one Mi-17 helicopter at Myitkyina airport. This further dents the air force's overtaxed fleet of fixed and rotary-wing aircraft.

To date, six other aircraft have been destroyed, including a MiG-29 that crashed on 1 March, apparently due to technical malfunctions. The loss of additional heavy-lift aircraft will hurt junta military logistics.

Already the military has shown severe strains in maneuver and resupply, including in Rakhine where the Arakan Army has recently sunk four naval troop carriers. In other parts of the country, helicopters are absolutely essential for military sustainment.

Interviews with defecting junta troops have

made clear that the SAC's inability to resupply troops with ammunition, food, and water – while ferrying in reinforcements and carrying out wounded soldiers – has led to plummeting morale.

CHINA BORDER

As we have seen in both Rakhine and Shan states, the light infantry battalions that have surrendered are severely undermanned, prompting conscription.

Recently, the military leadership ordered family members of troops to be deployed to frontline outposts. Pictures emerged on social media of wives in foxholes. This was designed to both shore up the depleted manpower, but also motivate the troops to fight and hold their positions at all costs.

Unsurprisingly, it has had just the opposite effect, with troops surrendering in order to save the lives of their family members, and often at the encouragement of their wives.

Fourth, although the KIA is leading the offensive it includes an allied ethnic resistance organisation as well as people's defense forces from the shadow opposition National Unity Government (NUG). Joint operations are essential in building up trust between these organizations.

Finally, during the junta's bombardment of Lai Zar, which sits on the border, at least four military artillery shells landed in Chinese territory, destroying several buildings. The military denied firing the shells and blamed the KIA.

While they could have hit China inadvertently because of the poor quality of their troops, it is more likely that the attack was intentional, and done to force China to pressure the KIA into a ceasefire.

Kachin State remains a complex place with its own inter-ethnic tensions. The recent fighting led to the death of a well-known and charismatic ethnic Lisu politician who ran a pro-junta militia.

The Lisu, a very small minority group, looked to the junta for protection. The NUG and their ethnic army allies need to quickly reach out to these groups and offer them assurances.

It's too soon to determine whether the KIA offensive can be sustained. China is insistent on peace along its border. While the KIA has Chinese backing, it also has agency.

Whether it has the will to broaden the offensive and keep the junta bogged down across eight distinct military fronts, remains to be seen. But it is a new front that the beleaguered military leadership can ill afford.

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

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia

EU EXHIBITION SEEKS TO REMIND THE WORLD OF THE MYANMAR CRISIS AND THE VULNERABILITY OF WOMEN

he EU is holding an exhibition to highlight
Myanmar's forgotten humanitarian and human rights crises and remind the EU and the
international community their support is needed now
more than ever.

"The European Union and the international community must remain by Myanmar's side and increase humanitarian and development assistance," Vice-President of the European Parliament Heidi Hautala said ahead of an art exhibition in Brussels.

The exhibition, open to the public from 20 to 24 March 2024, sheds light on the struggles of Myanmar people, and especially women, amid the country's deteriorating security environment.

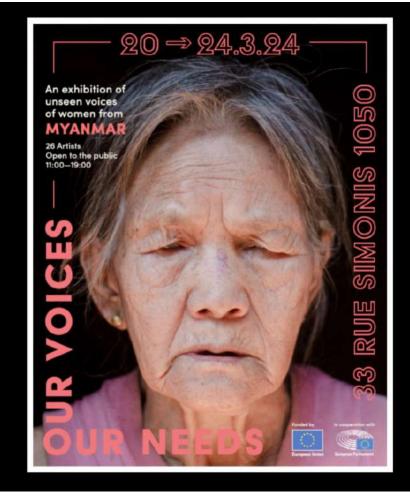
The exhibition – 'Our Voices, Our Needs' – enables people from inside Myanmar coming from differ-

ent ethnicities, religions, regions and backgrounds to represent their daily lives, visions and dreams through various forms of art. It is an open space for self-expression. It provides visitors to the exhibition with an opportunity for both contemplation and action.

The exhibition is supported by the European Union and the European Parliament.

In February 2021, a military coup halted Myanmar democratic transition, with devastating effects for the country and its people. As of today, over 7,200 civilians have been killed and more than 20,000 detained, with 119 on death row.

The country is plunging daily into deeper humanitarian and socio-economic crisis, with 2.6 million people internally displaced, almost half of the population living under the poverty line, and 18.6 million peo-



ple in need of humanitarian support (up from 1 million before the coup). It is estimated that more than 9.7 million of these are women and girls. Their vulnerability to trafficking, gender- based violence and other violations have spiraled in the last three years.

Despite the broadening humanitarian disaster, the UN estimates that in 2023 only 29% of the humanitarian needs were met.

Ms Hautala, a renowned human rights defender and former Minister for International Development of Finland who has worked for decades to give voice to dispossessed and oppressed peoples around the world, said "It would be easy for the EU and the international community to listen to some voices that are demanding we should abandon our presence and work in Myanmar. But in fact it's more important than ever that we are on the ground, listening to people and supporting them in their most basic needs".

"As in any conflict situation, women are often those who bear the heaviest burden. We haven't seen poverty levels like this in Myanmar for more than 15 years. Development gains that took decades have unraveled rapidly," a humanitarian expert added. "People's livelihoods are endangered more than ever, and the uncertainty that characterizes daily life is affecting all aspects of an already fragile economy hard-hit by inflation and shortages," she added.

Women have played a pivotal role in standing up to the regime, and have also been quick to step in to provide support systems to their families and communities. They serve as multipliers of essential goods and social services. Myanmar is a society in which women's voices are often overshadowed and marginalised.

Since the military coup, gross human rights violations in Myanmar have multiplied. The voices of the Myanmar people are growingly silenced by the military junta and restrictions on freedoms of expression, media, association, travel, access to information and to the internet are muting the voices of those in more vulnerable positions.

As one of the artists whose works are showcased in the exhibition signaled, "showing our work in Brussels is a way to remind the international community about the largely forgotten crisis afflicting our country and its people."

The Head of the EU Delegation to Myanmar, Ambassador Ranieri Sabatucci, said: "The EU has committed more than €290 million over the past three years to address the multifaceted crisis in Myanmar. This has been a vital lifeline for the people. We have also been supporting and advocating for maintaining the hundreds of thousands decent jobs created for women mostly before the coup, in spite of the economic crisis and restrictions imposed. All EU development and humanitarian funding is channeled via international and local partner organisations. The European Union is as determined as ever to play its part in supporting the needs and aspirations of the people of Myanmar. But there's a funding gap for humanitarian actions of well over half a billion dollars that necessitates other countries and partners to step in with their support."

"That's why visibility actions like this exhibition are so important," he added.

'Our Voices, Our Needs' – An art exhibition of the unseen voices of women in Myanmar – is open to the public and can be visited from 20 to 24 March 2024 at 33 Rue Simonis, 1050 Brussels, from 11:00 to 19:00 hrs daily. The exhibition is supported by the European Union and the European Parliament.

UN SEEKING MORE THAN \$850 MN FOR ROHINGYA REFUGEES

he UN on Wednesday called for increased support for the many Rohingya refugees languishing in camps in Bangladesh, where funding shortfalls have left many without enough food or other aid.

In its annual response plan to the crisis, the United Nations appealed for \$852.4 million to provide desperately-needed assistance this year to the mostly Muslim Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and their host communities.

Bangladesh is home to around a million members of the mostly stateless minority, many of whom fled a 2017 military crackdown in Myanmar, where the conflict on the ground has continued to escalate.

Some 95 percent of Rohingya households in Bangladesh are considered vulnerable and remain dependent on humanitarian assistance, the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) pointed out in a statement.

"International solidarity with Bangladesh and refugee protection is needed more than ever as the conflict in Myanmar escalates," it said.

Last year, the UN and its partners asked countries to provide \$876 million to help those caught up in the Rohingya refugee crisis.

But in the end, only \$440 million -- barely half the requested amount -- was provided.

With the humanitarian crisis largely out of the international spotlight, UNHCR warned that significant funding shortfalls in recent years had had "serious implications".

Many of the refugees were struggling to meet their basic needs, it warned, insisting that "sustained assistance is critically and urgently needed".

More than 75 percent of the refugee population receiving aid are women and children, it said, cautioning that they are facing "heightened risks of abuse, exploitation and gender-based violence".

"More than half of the refugees in the camps are under 18, languishing amidst limited opportunities for education, skills-building and livelihoods," it said.

The UN-led joint response plan to the crisis brings together 117 partners, nearly half of them Bangladeshi organisations.

It will aim to help around one million Rohingya refugees in the Cox's Bazar camps and on the island of Bhasan Char, along with nearly 350,000 people from host communities.

The money will be used to fund food, shelter, health care, drinking water access, protection services, education and other assistance, the UN said.

Conditions in the overcrowded camps in Bangladesh, where lawlessness is rampant, have seen a growing number of Rohingya attempt dangerous and often deadly sea voyages headed for Malaysia and Indonesia.

There is, meanwhile, little progress towards repatriating the refugees to Myanmar, which is facing a UN genocide probe over the 2017 exodus.

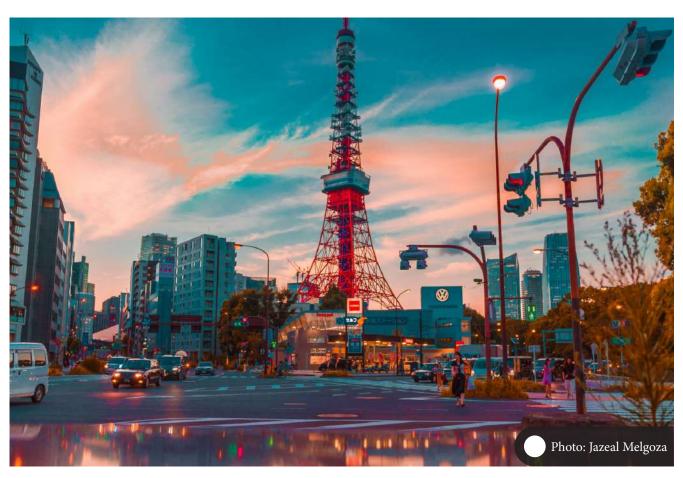
And since then, the country's military junta seized power in a 2021 coup that ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's democratically-elected government.

The military rule in Myanmar, which faces widespread armed resistance, has inflicted unbearable cruelty, UN rights chief Volker Turk warned earlier this month.

"The human rights situation in Myanmar has morphed into a never-ending nightmare, away from the spotlight of global politics," he told the UN Human Rights Council.

AFP

JAPAN ANNOUNCES EXTRA US\$ 37 MILLION IN AID TO MYANMAR



apan announced on 8 March 2024 that it would send an extra US\$37 million in aid to Myanmar to help alleviate the humanitarian crisis.

Japan has already sent more that US\$ 109.5 million in aid to Myanmar through international organisations since the February 2021 coup.

The extra US\$ 37 million will be put through international aid organisations such as the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), The World Food Programme (WFP), The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), UN Women, The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) and other NGOs.

The assistance will include medical services, improved nutrition for pregnant women and infants, water and sanitation infrastructure, access to educa-

tion, food and medicine distribution, support for women victims of trafficking in persons, and support for anti-drug measures and rehabilitation. This assistance will be provided not only in Myanmar but also in neighbouring Thailand.

The Japanese Government also said that it will continue to strongly urge the Myanmar military to allow safe and unhindered humanitarian access and will continue to provide diverse assistance so that as many people as possible who are in need can receive support.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for Myanmar, which was announced in December 2023, 18.6 million people, including 6 million children, are still in need of humanitarian assistance in Myanmar.

THOUSANDS TRAPPED BY FIGHTING IN WAINGMAW TOWNSHIP, KACHIN STATE



housands of people have been trapped in three villages in Waingmaw Township, Kachin State by fighting between the Myanmar junta and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).

The affected villages are Aung Myay (1) Village, Aung Myay (2) Village, and Shwenyaungbin Village. All are on the Myitkyina to Bhamo road section in Waingmaw Township, Kachin State.

Fighting between the junta army and the KIA on the Myitkyina to Bhamo road in Waingmaw Township started on 7 March 2024.

Fighting in Aung Myay (2) Village started intensifying at around 5:00 am on 7 March, making leaving impossible. The junta forces then started firing artillery into the village on 9 March, according to a villager.

They said: "On 9 March, the junta commenced artillery shelling at 5:30 am. I was still in bed at that time. When heavy weapons struck our village, I sought refuge under the bed without eating or drinking until 5 pm. In the evening when we sought safety at the village monastery."

According to villagers three people, including a 100-year-old woman, were killed and two people, including a child, were injured in a junta drone attack on Aung Myay (2) Village at around noon on 9 March.

Currently, about 600 displaced local people are seeking refuge inside the monastery in Aung Myay (2) Village. They have said that they want to go to Waingmaw Town for their own safety, but they cannot

because of the fighting and because they cannot get permission from the junta to do so, according to a villager from Aung Myay (2).

They said: "The situation is dire. However, we fear potential airstrikes and heavy weapon fire from the Military Council. We wished to evacuate, but the ongoing fighting is hindering our movement."

The villagers of Aung Myay (1) Village and Shwenyaungbin Village, also in Waingmaw Township, have also been trapped in their villages by fighting, according to the villagers' social media posts.

"We are making efforts to aid those trapped. It's heartbreaking to witness their distress. Currently, we are striving to assist residents of Aung Myay (1), Aung Myay (2) and Shwenyaungbin villages to reach safety in Waingmaw. Stay resilient," posted Abbot Van Vizaya, of the nearby Washaung Village, on his social media platform.

Junta aircraft are still circling the area of Aung Myay (1) and Aung Myay (2) villages and fighting persists, according to locals. At the time of reporting the most recent airstrike had been carried out at 10:00 pm on 10 March.

Local residents estimate that approximately 3,000 individuals may be trapped in the villages of Aung Myay (1), Aung Myay (2), and Shwenyaungbin. However, Mizzima has not yet been able to independently verify this figure.

ONE DEAD, 20 MISSING AFTER JADE MINE DELUGE IN MYANMAR'S KACHIN STATE



ne person died and around 20 were missing after a deluge of water and mud swept through a jade mine in northern Myanmar, a rescue worker and local media said on Tuesday last week.

An old mining pit used to store rain runoff in Hpakant township in Kachin state burst its banks at around 4:30 am on Tuesday (2200 GMT Monday), a rescuer told AFP.

Mud and water flooded another pit around 100 feet (30 metres) below, burying around 20 people working there along with several vehicles, they said.

One body was recovered and four people were being treated at a nearby clinic, he said, requesting anonymity.

Local media reported the same toll from the latest tragedy in the jade mines that pockmark the hills of Kachin state.

Dozens die each year while working in Myanmar's highly lucrative but poorly regulated jade industry, which feeds insatiable demand for the gem in neighbouring China.

Miners also come to Hpakant from across Myanmar to pick through the piles of waste in the hopes of finding an overlooked hunk of jade.

In 2020, heavy rainfall triggered a massive landslide at another mine in Hpakant that entombed nearly 300 miners.

Watchdog Global Witness estimated that the industry was worth about \$31 billion in 2014.

But corruption means very little reaches state coffers.

AFP

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SHOULD HELP MYANMAR PEOPLE DEFEAT THE JUNTA

s the Myanmar junta increases its violence against the people in the face of increasing losses campaign group Progressive Voice calls on the international community to help the Myanmar people defeat the junta.

The junta is plunging Rakhine State into fullscale violence in retaliation for the Arakan Army (AA) seizing Rakhine State towns from the junta in the last few weeks, according to Progressive Voice.

Coordinated junta barrage of attacks from air, water, and ground have taken hundreds of lives and caused widespread destruction of civilian communities.

Progressive Voice says that now, with the junta is at its lowest and weakest, there is an unprecedented opportunity for the international community to finally support the Myanmar people's efforts to dismantle the murderous, corrupt institution.

Progressive Voice believes that this can be done by imposing a comprehensive arms embargo, including aviation fuel, and targeted sanctions, setting up a special tribunal to seek justice for the victims and survivors, and a complete cessation of all engagements with the junta.

As the Arakan Army (AA) ramps up its offensive attacks against the junta and expands control over five townships in Rakhine State—Kyauktaw, Minbya, Mrauk-U, Myebon, and Pauktaw—and Paletwa in Chin State in the span of a few months, there has been a drastic uptick in the junta's disproportionate retaliatory attacks.

On 27 February, the junta deployed airstrikes on Min Hpu Hospital in Minbya Township, Rakhine State, severely damaging the hospital and injuring many civilian medical workers and ex-junta soldiersturned-prisoners-of-war.

A day after this heinous air attack, the military junta's navy forces shelled the Myoma Market in Sittwe, Rakhine State's capital. The attack—carried out around 8.10 am, the busiest time of the day—killed 12 civilians and injured at least 81 people. These actions are on par with the junta's onslaughts across Myanmar, and only highlight its intention to cause death and destruction, says Progressive Voice.

The junta's bloody response has exacerbated the already dire humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State. Nearly 270,000 people have been reportedly newly displaced, a five-fold increase in Rakhine State.

Civilians are left unprotected and caught in the junta's unprecedented violence—indiscriminate airstrikes, bombardments, and ground offensives.

Junta troops have blocked all land routes and waterways out of Rakhine State while imposing severe restrictions on air travel. As a result, civilians are trapped in under-siege villages with nowhere to run, while the junta continues to severely restrict access to humanitarian assistance. To rub salt in the wounds, amidst chaos and despair, the junta has cut off internet in most of Rakhine State's townships, trapping civilians in the unknown fearing for their lives.

A recent confession by captured junta captain Arkar Myint confirmed what the world already knows: The orders for junta soldiers to target and kill civilians come directly from central command.

Ko Ko Aung, another prisoner of war, also confessed to gang-raping a civilian woman at her home in Rakhine State, while forcing her to watch junta soldiers kill her mother.

Such heinous crimes are committed carte blanche, without any raised eyebrow about humanity and civilian protection. Contrary to the Myanmar military's propaganda image as the savior of the coun-

www.mizzima.com

try, these soldiers' confessions—in addition to multiple others—reveal its true, inhumane nature and pattern of widespread and systematic violence directed at civilians.

Never before has the Myanmar military descended to this point. It has no authority or people's support, while rapidly losing territorial control by the day. Revolutionary forces, on the other hand, are taking over towns and outposts, and steadily building local governance.

Yet, according to Progressive Voice, the reality remains that the junta's war of terror against Myanmar's people, in Rakhine State and across the country, will not cease unless and until the Myanmar military—perpetrators of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide for the past seven decades—are held to account by international criminal prosecution.

It says that this is the most critical moment for international actors to take meaningful actions, instead of exacerbating and prolonging the intensifying crisis caused by the junta.

Progressive Voice is calling on the United Nations (UN) to stop repeating its systemic failures in Myanmar. It must cease all attempts to normalize the junta's illegal and illegitimate coup, and repeated engagements with junta personnel.

It points out that any engagement with the junta—including the recent meeting of UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator ad interim, Marcoluigi Corsi, with junta's foreign minister Than Swe on 28 February in Naypyitaw—only lends false legitimacy to the junta, further emboldening it to continue with its terror campaign against civilians.

Instead, the UN and the international community at large must escalate diplomatic pressure, and unequivocally reject the junta. Effective and comprehensive punitive measures, including against the finance and weapons flows to the junta, must be imposed immediately to guarantee civilian protection and human security across Myanmar and the region.

At the same time, international aid actors must revamp their ineffective humanitarian approach and promote the people-to-people solidarity approach—if they are serious about fulfilling their responsibility and saving people's lives.

Progressive Voice believes that delivering humanitarian aid through the murderous junta is morally and ethically corrupt, as the junta has been weaponizing aid for its own political advantage. Aid through junta entities has proven to perpetuate cycles of violence and tyranny, thus prolonging the suffering of the people. Every penny spent on humanitarian assistance must not go towards—directly or indirectly—funding the junta's atrocities against the very people aid actors are mandated to protect.

Rather, aid must be provided through the triedand-true channels that guarantee effectiveness and sustainability, such as local humanitarian responders who have delivered aid to those in direst need in a direct and timely way over many decades.

Progressive Voice says that now is the time for the international community to support the will of the Myanmar people to end the Myanmar military's vicious cycle of violence and atrocity crimes once and for all.

MYANMAR CONSCRIPTION LAW CAUSING PEOPLE TO PANIC AND FLEE THE COUNTRY

he junta's implementation of the forced conscription law has caused panic among the public and has already begun to further jeopardize the human security of Myanmar's people, sending thousands running for their lives., according to campaign group Progressive Voice.

It says that this act is the latest wave of the junta's relentless terror campaign against the people, which has also impacted the peace and stability of Southeast Asia, especially Myanmar's neighbors.

In response, Myanmar's neighbors must comply with its international human rights obligations and grant legal protection to individuals fleeing the junta's forced conscription and mass atrocity crimes. These countries must also support Myanmar's local frontline humanitarian responders by allowing cross-border channels for them to deliver lifesaving aid to the most vulnerable populations, including those forced to flee from conscription.

The junta's forced conscription has undeniably ignited unprecedented fear among Myanmar's people, particularly youth. Over recent weeks, the

military junta has increased guest registration inspections, tightened road checkpoints, and imposed constraints on domestic air travel.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands are trying to flee, such as by applying for visas at overwhelmed embassies or by embarking on dangerous journeys to other countries. In Mandalay, two women were crushed to death outside a junta passport office on 19 February 2024, as around 5,000 people had queued to apply for passports to leave the country.

In Rakhine State, this catastrophe is particularly grave. On 19 February, the junta detained around 600 passengers arriving from Yangon at Sittwe and Kyaukphyu Airports. The next day, the junta detained 100 ethnic Rakhine youth traveling by bus from Yangon to Rakhine State, holding them incommunicado in Yangon's Hlaing Tharyar Township.

Simultaneously, the junta has arrested and forcibly recruited hundreds of Rohingya in internment camps and those remaining in Sittwe, as well as threatened and persuaded them to enlist with the potential of freedom of movement, money, rice, or na-



tional ID cards.

The Rohingya are thus being ruthlessly targeted by the perpetrators of genocide against them for conscription as human shields, human minesweepers, and porters, among other forced labor. And what's more, with remorseless hypocrisy, the very Myanmar military conscripting the Rohingya has long deprived them of their citizenship, access to IDs and passports, and other fundamental human rights.

Because of the junta's countrywide terror campaign, including the enforcement of the conscription law, Myanmar's people are being forced, at unprecedented levels, to seek safety outside the country by making perilous journeys across borders, according to Progressive Voice.

However, regional governments have blatantly refused to offer any protection. Earlier this month, Bangladesh refused the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' request to accommodate hundreds of Rohingya who fled to the border. As such, in the coming months, even more deadly sea crossings are inevitable, as the Rohingya and others desperately seeking safety have nowhere else to turn.

On the Thailand border, protection has also been refused, as Thailand's Prime Minister warned that legal action would be taken against those entering the country "illegally." Along these lines, since the junta's

forced conscription announcement on 10 February, Thai authorities have arrested at least 167 Myanmar people for entering Thailand without proper documentation.

Meanwhile, the junta's Labor Ministry has foreclosed one critical route to flee by suspending recruitment drives of the Myanmar Overseas Employment Agencies Association. With few options remaining to evade conscription and save their own lives, many may be trafficked to other countries, only to live in further precarious situations, potentially facing increased extortion and rights violations.

Moreover, as articulated by Progressive Voice's Chairperson, Khin Ohmar, to CNN, Myanmar society will suffer an exacerbated brain drain, as countless youth flee the junta's forced conscription, thus "caus[ing] utter devastation to the country."

Over the coming months, many individuals fleeing forced conscription will enter Myanmar's neighboring countries, which are ill-equipped to provide shelter and sufficient aid, have notoriously pushed individuals back, and have failed to provide them protection.

With neighboring countries' authorities on high alert, Myanmar people fleeing from the military's violence will likely encounter violent pushbacks and arbitrary detention in violation of international law, according to Progressive Voice. This will have resounding impacts on regional peace and stability at the expense of Myanmar people's safety and security.

Progressive Voice says that as the military junta exacerbates human suffering in Myanmar causing further impacts on regional peace and stability, neighboring countries must, without delay, provide legal protection for those fleeing from the junta's forced conscription and ongoing mass atrocity crimes.

They must also support local, trusted frontline humanitarian responders by allowing cross-border channels for them to deliver emergency aid to displaced communities.

Alongside this regional action, the UN Security Council must fulfill its mandate to restore peace and security in both Myanmar and the region by coordinating Myanmar's neighboring countries to expedite protection and aid for Myanmar's people, while taking decisive action to adopt a binding resolution to hold the military – the root cause of Myanmar's multi-faceted crisis – accountable for its decades of mass atrocity crimes.

Ultimately – Progressive voice believes that to end this cycle of violence, instability, and impunity – Myanmar's neighbors and the wider international community must heed the steadfast calls of Myanmar's people to dismantle the military junta and its criminal, corrupt institutions, and pursue sustainable, long-term solutions to ensure democracy, peace, and stability in Myanmar.

MYANMAR JUNTA COMPILING NAMES OF PEOPLE FOR CONSCRIPTION IN YANGON REGION

he junta has been compiling lists of people who are potential candidates for conscription in several Yangon Region Townships.

According to residents, the junta drew up the lists for the Yangon Region townships of Khayan, Hlaing Tharyar, Kyauktan, Thanlyin, South Dagon, and Dagon Seikkan during the second week in March.

A Khayan resident said: "A team comprising of junta soldiers and ward administrators conducted door-to-door visits to gather information on the men listed as living in each household, on 10 March and 11 March in some wards of Khayan Township."

According to residents, they were told that young men who are currently in education will be exempt from military service until they graduate from university.

However, a resident from Dagon Seikkan township expressed skepticism, saying: "Although they claim they will postpone the enlistment of students until

they graduate, we are dubious given their track record of adhering to laws."

A resident from Thanlyin, just across the Bago River from Yangon, said: "A group comprising of junta soldiers and ward administrators conducted inquiries about household registration lists, specifically focusing on the number of men residing in each household. They allocated more time to inspecting houses with male occupants."

The Myanmar Conscription Law was brought into effect on 10 February, but the junta said that it would only start conscripting people after the Thingyan New Year's celebrations in April. Despite this, there have been reports of junta soldiers already arbitrarily arresting and deporting young men from the street and during overnight guest list inspections across the country.

UK'S FOREIGN SECRETARY LIKENED TO A SNAIL AS PROTESTORS CALL FOR SPEED UP OF MYANMAR SANCTIONS



bout 80 people took to the road outside the British Foreign Office in London on 13 March, calling on Foreign Secretary Lord David Cameron to speed up the pace of implementation of targeted sanctions against the Myanmar military, according to Burma Campaign UK.

Protesters wearing David Cameron face masks slowly walked up and down outside the Foreign Office, representing the slow pace of sanctions implementation. Protesters also held placards of a snail with David Cameron's face, representing the snail's pace of sanctions implementation.

Since the military coup began in 2021, the British government has adopted a policy of sanctioning sources of revenue, arms, and equipment to the Myanmar military, including military owned companies, the gems sector and Myanmar companies supplying jet fuel and equipment to the military.

However, the pace of sanctions implementation has been incredibly slow, and sanctions are still not in place on key sectors providing revenue and facilitating arms purchases to the military, such as gas and state-owned banks. The aviation fuel sector has also not been sanctioned, despite the role of British companies insuring vessels delivering jet fuel to Myanmar - jet fuel which can be used for airstrikes on civilians.

The protest, organised by Stars of Myanmar Friendship and the Myanmar community, was held to coincide with Myanmar Human Rights Day, the NGO said.

Julie Khine of Stars of Myanmar Friendship said: "Today is our Burma Human Rights Day, the day in March 1988, Ko Phone Maw was killed by police in the University Campus. Ko Phone Maw's death was the turning point in Burmese history and still impacts us now. Our human rights day is a day established by the people of Burma who value human rights and democracy."

"Unfortunately, we are still fighting against the Military to get human rights, democracy and justice. Britain remains an important nation for the people of Burma, and the legacy of British rules is the foundation of stability and human values in Burma. Similarly, David Cameron is important for us. He made a historical visit to Burma in April 2012 even in our water festival to meet our leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. When he became Foreign Secretary, we looked on hopefully to see how he would act for us. However, we haven't heard any initiation from David Cameron yet therefore we hold today's protest to ask him four points including to do targeted sanctions quickly on state enterprises MOGE, MICB & MFTB."

The Myanmar military has met with unprecedented resistance since it launched its coup in 2021. It has responded by unleashing weapons of war against the civilian population, including airstrikes on hospitals, schools, and civilian villages. Around 3 million people have been forced to flee their homes, and more than 20,000 people have been jailed by the Myanmar military. The UN estimates about a third of the 55 million population needs aid.

BOOM TIMES FOR MYANMAR OPIUM FARMERS AS COUP CHAOS BITES

n a remote corner of Myanmar a line of farmers move through a field of nodding poppies, making small cuts in the greenish-purple pods to release opium resin.

The next morning they will collect the residue that has seeped out overnight and parcel it up into bundles of sticky opium -- the building blocks for manufacturing heroin.

Myanmar became the world's biggest opium producer in 2023, according to the United Nations, overtaking Afghanistan after the Taliban government launched a crackdown on the crop there.

The flowers have long flourished in Myanmar's rugged borderlands, where ethnic minority armed groups and criminal outfits refine them into heroin and law enforcement turns a blind eye to the billion-dollar trade, analysts say.

After the military seized power in 2021, sparking social and economic turmoil and armed conflict across the country, the cash crop has become more important to some farmers struggling to get by.

"I planted poppies in recent years, but only a few," said Aung Moe Oo, speaking from the vast field enclosed by hills on the border of Shan and Karen states.

"This year, I planted three acres," he told AFP.

He expects those three acres to yield around 16 kilograms of poppy resin this harvest, which he hopes to sell for around \$4,500.



He shrugged at the question of legality.

"Growing poppies is the best way to make a living for our family," he said, sporting a brown bucket hat and a striped grey shirt.

POPPY INSTEAD OF CORN

Aye Aye Thein, another farmer from the region, used to grow rice, corn, beans and avocado.

But when the conflict between the junta and its opponents came to her home, she was forced to leave her fields.

Conflict since the coup -- which ended a rare experiment with democracy in Myanmar -- has displaced almost two million people, according to the UN.

Even before Aye Aye Thein had to leave her home, the plunging value of the local kyat currency had made buying agricultural inputs like fertiliser much more expensive.

"After the political situation changed and there



is fighting, we can't grow anything in our own fields," she said.

Farmer Aung Moe Oo agreed.

"If we send our crops to the brokers' centre, there are lots of costs that we can't afford," he said.

"So, we grow poppy flowers instead of corn this year."

The raging conflict is disrupting transport and stunting the export of agricultural goods like rice and corn - a major revenue earner - the World Bank said late last year.

Meanwhile poppy cultivation is becoming more sophisticated, the UN says, with increased investment and improved irrigation pushing up crop yields.

Myanmar produced an estimated 1,080 metric tonnes of opium last year, the world body's office on drugs and crime said, up from an estimated 790 metric tonnes the previous year.

The opium is refined into heroin in factories hidden in the jungles and ravines of Shan state and then smuggled through neighbouring countries such as Thailand and on to the world market.

Aung Moe Oo said he was unaware his country was now the world's biggest producer of the narcotic.

"I can only know about my region of poppy fields," he said.

But with no end in sight to conflict, he did think that this year's harvest could be even bigger, in his locality at least.

"There are more displaced people and we can't do any other work," he said.

AFP

HONG KONG JAILS 12 OVER 2019 LEGISLATURE STORMING

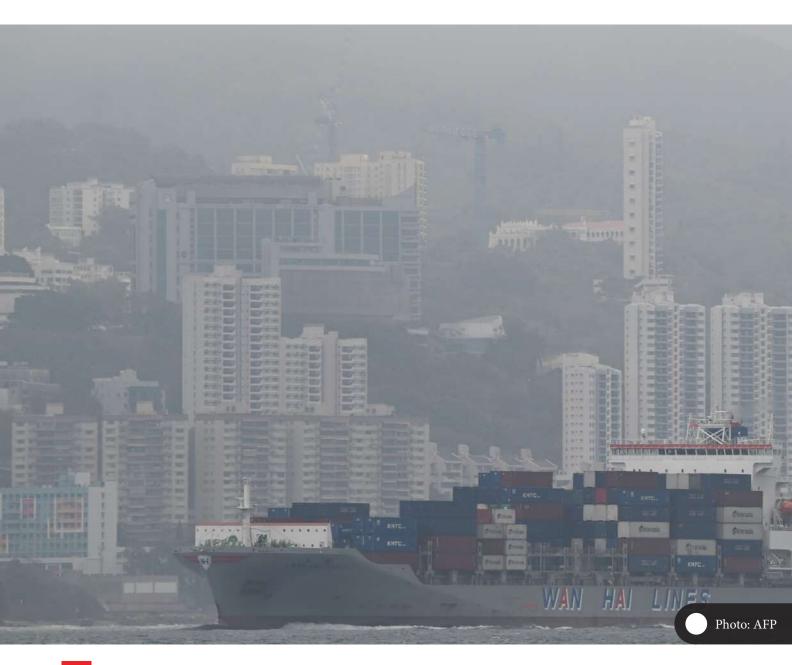
welve Hong Kongers were jailed last Saturday for up to seven years over the storming of the city's legislature in 2019 at the height of pro-democracy protests that challenged the Beijing-backed government.

It was the most violent episode in the initial stage of the huge protests that upended the financial hub that year, with Beijing later imposing a sweeping national security law to snuff out dissent.

Hundreds of protesters broke into the legislature on the night of July 1, 2019, smashing windows and spraying graffiti on the 22nd anniversary of Hong Kong's handover from Britain to China.

A total of 14 people were later charged with rioting - which carries a punishment of up to 10 years in jail - and other offences such as criminal damage and entering the legislative chamber.

Twelve of them were sentenced to between



six-and-a-half and seven years in prison after being earlier convicted of rioting.

The actual jail terms will be slightly shorter - ranging from 54 to 82 months - following reductions for various reasons, including guilty pleas.

Two former reporters charged alongside the 12 were not convicted of rioting, but were fined up to HK\$1,500 (\$190) for "entering or staying in the Legislative Council chamber".

Deputy judge Li Chi-ho of the District Court on Saturday stressed the symbolic significance of the legislature storming and its "long-lasting effects" on society.



"Aside from the actual damage to the building, it had a symbolic meaning... (which was) challenging the Hong Kong government and even weakening its governance," Li said.

Protesters committed "insulting and provocative" acts such as tearing up copies of Hong Kong's constitutional text, the Basic Law, and displaying colonial-era flags, Li added.

The defendants waved vigorously to the courtroom public gallery as they were led away after sentencing, with many friends and supporters left in tears.

Days earlier, some defendants who had pleaded guilty made defiant courtroom speeches.

"The actual crime committed by the protesters... is the pursuit of democracy, freedom of thought and free will," said Althea Suen, a children's rights activist and a former student leader.

Activist Owen Chow said a "riot is the language of the unheard", citing civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

"How a political regime handles dissent and whether it can rectify its mistakes will decide whether a society can maintain sustainable growth," said Chow, who is charged with conspiracy to commit subversion in a separate ongoing national security trial.

The 2019 protests were triggered by a later-abandoned government bill that would have allowed extraditing criminal suspects to mainland China, but they snowballed into a city-wide movement with more fundamental demands including universal suffrage in voting for city leader and lawmakers.

More than 10,000 people were arrested as authorities sought to extinguish the protests.

AFP

UN AN 'UNSINKABLE COMPASS' FOR HUMANITY, SAYS TOP EU OFFICIAL

top European Union (EU) official on Tuesday emphasized the crucial role of the United Nations in addressing global challenges, describing it as an "unsinkable compass" for humanity.

"The UN remains a landmark in the turmoil, a lantern in the thiack fog through which we search our way every day, trying to look for a solution – it is a ray of light, a sign of hope," Josep Borrell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, told ambassadors at the Security Council.

He emphasized the need for reforms of the Security Council and the international financial institutions to better reflect the present realities: "The future will come anyway, so let us try to make it less bleak than our bleak present."

WAR IN UKRAINE

Mr. Borrell emphasized the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, citing Russia's violation of international law by launching its war of aggression against a sovereign State.

"Since the beginning of this war, which is an attack on the UN Charter, the European Union has shown its full solidarity with Ukraine and granting it exceptional economic, financial, and military aid," he said.

He added that the support, symbolized by EU's commitment to make Ukraine a member of the bloc, will continue.

"Because it is not simply a matter of preserving a fundamental principle of international law, that



is the territorial integrity of sovereign states, it also reflects European determination to protect ourselves against the danger that Russia now represents for our peace and security."

CONFLICT IN GAZA

The EU foreign affairs chief also voiced deep concern over the situation in the Gaza, stating that it is "just the tip of an extraordinarily serious conflict that has been raging between Israelis and Palestinians for almost a century."

Condemning the 7 October attacks on Israeli communities and Israel's right to self-defence, he added that this must be done in full compliance with international law and international humanitarian law.

"I don't want to teach anyone of you about what is happening in Gaza," he said, adding:

"This humanitarian crisis – it is not a natural disaster...it is man-made," he added, stating that aid deliveries via road are "being artificially closed, and



starvation is being used as a war."

UNRWA, AN ANSWER TO PALESTINIANS' NEEDS

Mr. Borrell stressed that UN entities, such as the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), World Food Programme (WFP), and the UN agency assisting Palestine refugees (UNRWA), in Gaza are the "last lifelines" for many.

"Yes, UNRWA is facing allegations, but allegations have to be proved – that is why they are allegations," he said, noting that the EU awaits, with interest, the conclusions of the Office for International Oversight Services (OIOS) investigation, an EU systems audit, and the independent review led by Catherine Colonna.

"But let me remind something, UNRWA exists because there are Palestinian refugees. It is not a present to the Palestinians, it is an answer to their needs," he said, stressing that one cannot make the refugees disappear by making UNRWA disappear.

In fact, the only way to make UNRWA disappear is by making those refugees citizens of a Palestinian state that coexists with an Israeli state, Mr. Borrell said, emphasizing the importance of the two-State solution.

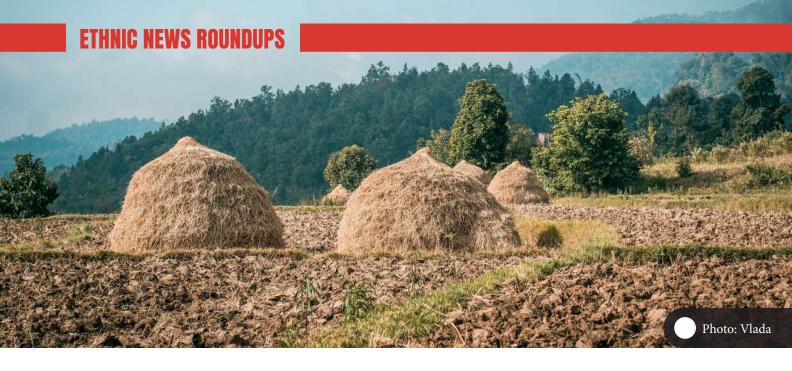
OTHER CRISIS HOTSPOTS

The EU High Representative also expressed concern over several crisis hotspots, including Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Haiti, and the Sahel.

On Haiti, he emphasized that the skyrocketing violence by criminal gangs over the past weeks has brought the country to the brink, with ordinary Haitians to pay the price.

Commending regional body CARICOM for its intervention on Monday, he expressed support for the efforts for a Haitian-led political transition, as well as the broader objective of the security initiative led by Kenya.

Courtesy of UN News



KAREN STATE

Junta drone attacks destroy houses in Karen State's Kawkareik Town

Two bombs dropped from junta drones on Ward Number 6 in Karen State's Kawkareik Town caused fires that burned down and damaged houses at about 5:00 pm on 11 March 2024.

"Around the area in front of the movie theater on Bogyote Street, in Ward Number 6 of Kawkareik, flames engulfed the entire vicinity. People were reluctant to venture out and assist in extinguishing the fire. However, the fire was successfully extinguished by around 7:00 pm", said a resident of Kawkareik.

"The fires were caused by the junta's drones. Recently, the Military Council has been deploying incendiary drone bombs. It has been reported that at least 10 houses were destroyed by the fire. There have been no reports of casualties as yet."

Fighting in Kawkareik Town between the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and junta has been ongoing for the past three months and many residents have been forced to flee the area.

In those three months, junta artillery fire has caused over 20 fires that have destroyed more than 300 houses in Kawakareik Town, according to locals.

RAKHINE STATE

AA warns that retreating junta troops are leaving poisoned food

The Arakan Army (AA) has warned defence forces to be cautious about food rations they find in abandoned junta military camps after finding purposefully contaminated rations at the Aung Thabyae Border Guard Force (BGF) camp.

The AA reported that it had seized Aung Thabyae BGF camp on the border with Bangladesh in the northern part of Rakhine State's Maungdaw Township on 12 March.

As a result of the attack on the border post, 179 BGF soldiers fled into Bangladesh. As they left they contaminated all the remaining food and water rations with poison, according to the AA, who warned other defence forces to closely inspect any food or water left behind by junta forces.

When they seized the BGF base the AA also seized ammunition, mortar rounds, assorted rifles, other military equipment and the bodies of several junta soldiers.

The Bangladesh authorities have said they will repatriate the 179 BGF soldiers.

The AA has said that it intends to capture all the BGF camps in northern Maungdaw Township still being held by the junta.



MYANMAR JUNTA PLANS K-POP STARS LINEUP FOR NAY PYI TAW WATER FESTIVAL

he Myanmar junta has announced that Nay Pyi Taw's Water Festival, regionally known as Thingyan (in Myanmar) and Songkran (in Thailand), will showcase K-pop stars and renowned artists from across Asia, reported Eleven Media group.

The yearly Water festival is celebrated in Myanmar from April 13 to 16.

However, since 2020, the people of Myanmar have refrained from celebrating the Water Festival due to the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the military coup staged in 2021. Despite this, the junta intends to hold the festival to convey a sense of normalcy in the situation.

The junta's Union Minister for Information, Maung Maung Ohn, disclosed plans to showcase K-pop stars and acclaimed Asian performers at the central pavilion of the Nay Pyi Taw Walking Thingyan festival.

This announcement was made during a junta meeting at the Ministry of Information in Nay Pyi Taw, aimed at ensuring the success of the 2024 traditional Water Festival in Nay Pyi Taw.

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MYANMAR CONFLICT CAUSES DOWNTURN IN OVERLAND FRUIT EXPORTS TO CHINA



ue to conflict in border areas fruit exports from Myanmar to China have dramatically dropped in 2024, compared to previous years.

Normally up to 70 per cent of the mangoes and watermelons exported from Myanmar to China go through overland border crossings, but because of fighting many of the border crossings that would be normally used for such trade have been shut.

Merchants have been forced to sell their products in Myanmar for considerably less than they would get for them in China. A truckload of high-quality watermelons goes for over 25 million Kyats in China but only for three to five million Kyats in Myanmar.

Over 90 per cent of border trade with China normally goes through the 105-Mile Trade Zone in Muse Township, northern Shan State, but it has been closed since the end of last year when the Brotherhood Alliance took control of the area.

With the 105-Mile border crossing closed, merchants have to instead use either the Tarlaw border trade post in Mongla, eastern Shan State or the crossing at Lwejie in Kachin State. Using these routes is far more expensive and adds an extra 10 days to transport times.

But, it is not just fighting in border areas that is hindering fruit exports. Farmers in the Taunggyi area

of Shan State complained that they were having great difficulties exporting their melons because they could no longer use the Taunggyi to Loilem road in southern Shan State due to fighting. As a result, the melons had to take a longer more expensive road route which damaged many of the melons. Exporters said they suffered huge losses because of this.

Following Chinese-brokered peace talks between the Myanmar junta and the Brotherhood Alliance that started on 11 January, an agreement was reached to re-open border crossings.

As a result, the Brotherhood Alliance has reopened two border crossings that it controls at Chinshwehaw in Laukkaing Township, Shan State and at Pang Hseng in Muse Township, northern Shan State. The Brotherhood Alliance has also agreed to re-open the 105-Mile border crossing and is planning to do so soon.

Currently, there are only two other open border crossings between China and Myanmar. They are Mongla in eastern Shan State and Lwejie in Kachin State.

The border crossing at Kan Paik Ti, in Kachin State's Waingmaw Township, remains closed due to fighting in the area.

MYANMAR'S CENTRAL BANK REVOKES LICENSES OF NINE FOREX DEALERS IN MARCH



he state-run daily papers of the Military Council reported that the Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM) revoked licenses of the nine foreign currency dealer companies in March 2024.

The spot check was conducted in Yangon on 6 and 8 March and then the CBM announced that it temporarily revoked the money changer licenses of four companies for three months.

The CBM issued an announcement dated 11 March which says that the Central Bank of Myanmar has temporarily revoked the licenses of four foreign currency dealers for three months for failing to comply with the provisions under the Foreign Exchange Management Law following a spot check.

These authorized dealers are Thura Nay Tun (Fame Money Changer), Lead Star Money Changer, Steber Group Money Changer and Asia Shwe Thee Money Changer.

Moreover, the CBM announced that they temporarily revoked the money dealer licenses of Sweet

Yadanar Company and Ngwe Myinn Phyu Company on 12 and 13 March for six months.

Similarly, the CBM revoked licenses of three money dealer companies namely Archipelago Seamen Club Company, SJ Vita Myanmar Company and M Plus Myanmar Company for failing to comply with the provisions under the law and the directives issued by the CBM.

The spot check was conducted in Yangon on 6 and 8 March by a joint team led by the Monitoring and Steering Committee on the Gold and Currency Market, including the CBM, Yangon City Development Committee, General Administration Department and law enforcement organizations and these four dealers were found to be non-compliant, CBM stated.

On 19 September 2023 too, the CBM revoked the money changer licenses of 123 companies.

CRISIS-HIT SRI LANKAN ECONOMY REBOUNDS AS TOURISTS RETURN



ri Lanka's economy rebounded strongly in the fourth quarter of 2023 from the island nation's unprecedented financial crisis as tourism arrivals rose, the government said Saturday.

Agriculture, industries and services boosted the expansion to 4.5 percent in the December quarter compared to a 12.4 percent contraction a year earlier, the census and statistics department said.

It added however that the economy shrank by 2.4 percent overall during 2023 compared to a contraction of 7.8 percent in 2022, when the country defaulted on its \$46 billion foreign debt.

"Sri Lanka's economy experienced some kind of duality in 2023," the department said in a statement, noting that the first half of the year recorded negative growth while the economy bounced back in the second.

"The long-awaited boom in tourism came towards the end of the year," the department said, adding that worker remittances too had improved. The number of tourists visiting the South Asian nation jumped to 210,000 in December, more than double the 91,900 a year earlier.

Sri Lanka is currently drawing down a fouryear \$2.9 billion bailout loan from the International Monetary Fund and is in talks with foreign creditors over a debt restructure.

The peak of the economic crisis in 2022 saw months of food, fuel and pharmaceutical shortages after the island ran out of foreign exchange to pay for imports.

The resulting civil unrest forced the ouster of then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa when protesters stormed his residence in July of that year.

His successor Ranil Wickremesinghe has doubled taxes, withdrawn generous energy subsidies and raised prices of essentials to shore up state revenue.

AFP

Penrose Thitsa

JUSTICE FOR MYANMAR URGES ITALY TO ACT AGAINST HTOO GROUP SHAREHOLDER RACHEL TAYZA

ustice For Myanmar has urged Italy to act swiftly against Rachel Tayza, a shareholder and director of Htoo Group, TTR Weekly reported citing the activist group.

French lawyers William Bourdon and Lily Ravon submitted a legal plea on March 4, 2024, calling for Italian authorities to investigate Rachel Tayza's involvement in EU-sanctioned companies and freeze her assets.

The submission calls for the Italian government to investigate Rachel Tayza, for her alleged "involvement as a shareholder and director of companies that are part of the EU-sanctioned Htoo Group of Companies, and, where appropriate, to freeze her assets and to remove her from Italy."

Rachel allegedly holds shares and directs at least seven Htoo Group companies from Italy, some formed after Myanmar's 2021 coup. Ayeyarwaddy Resorts and Lodges Company Limited is highlighted, allegedly involved in projects with the Myanmar army.

The US, UK, Canada, and EU have all prolonged sanctions against the Htoo Group. Rachel Tayza was sanctioned by the US on January 31, 2023, for her involvement in the Htoo Group of Companies and her relation as the daughter of Tay Za, the Htoo Group chairperson. Additionally, the EU, USA, UK, and Canada have also imposed sanctions on her brothers, Pye Phyo Tay Za and Htoo Htet Tay Za.

The EU stated in its reasons for imposing sanctions that the Htoo Group of Companies had served as a mediator for supplying military equipment used against civilian populations protesting the military coup.





MYANMAR ACTIVIST THINZAR SHUNLEI YI ON A MISSION



yanmar activist Thinzar Shunlei Yi has come a long way from her beginnings, growing up in a Myanmar military barracks.

"[When I was young,] I didn't really know what towns looked like," Thinzar tells Insight Myanmar in a podcast. "I'd never been to one! I never met or talked with any civilians. I was raised inside [the military compound], around soldiers, and by soldiers. We had our own school, our own hospital, our own markets, and we lived in our own small society."

In describing her childhood growing up in a military family, Thinzar explains how the impact was not just material, but also psychological. "We were trained to be superior. I was always being told that we were different, we were not same as civilians. We have to take care of them, which gives us a superior role.

We are the protector."

BUDDING CURIOSITY

Because her father was more progressive than others, Thinzar was allowed to read books, which she did voraciously, and this piqued her sense of curiosity, and she was charged with running the family grocery shop, which inspired a sense of independence from a young age. This budding curiosity and sense of freedom significantly shaped the adult she has become. At the same time, her upbringing shielded her so much from normal life outside the barracks that she had little clue what was really going on in her country, until she attended university, where she found herself alongside people of all backgrounds. Ethnic minorities, who she had long considered terrorists, described a different story of the atrocities visited on them generation after

generation... and all at the hands of her father's peers.

"That really shocked me," she remembers thinking. "I couldn't accept it, and I was defensive." But after more conversations, and seeking out books that had been banned on the compound as well as exploring the newly-emerging internet, Thinzar came to realize the tragic truth of what she was hearing. "I prepared myself mentally and physically about becoming more democratic... and in that way I built my tolerance and understanding, and that's where my activism grew out of."

'DAUGHTER OF A SOLDIER'

It was not an easy transformation, however, as Thinzar had to grapple with inner feelings of guilt and shame as she reflected on her past and upbringing. "The reason why they were persecuted, the reason why the families are living in fear, the reason why civilians always submitted to us, now that all makes sense," she admits. "When I went out in public, civilians gave an immediate priority to me, just because I'm a daughter of a soldier."

Where she had once interpreted this action as a sign of respect and gratitude, she now understood it was in fact fear and contempt.

Yet while her experiences with other students at the university began to open her eyes, Thinzar soon learned that her professors were afraid of her opening her mind. They quickly hushed her when she inquired into the nature of democracy, or why ethnic and religious minorities were not afforded basic rights. Myanmar was not a free society, and there was much danger in speaking about such topics.

So Thinzar began to form discussion groups with a diverse circle of friends. Yet she faced resistance from the activist community, who doubted that someone from such a privileged class could genuinely be interested in the plight of others. But she persevered. "I became part of the activist community, I became a human rights defender, and a civil society actor. And then I protested, I was charged, and then I became,

really, a revolutionary," she says of her transformation.

CLASH WITH NLD

Yet she still faced questions and resistance from other activists because of her background. For example, when she publicly called out the National League for Democracy (NLD) for not following through on their promises to improve the lives of minorities, she was accused of being a military lackey who really just wanted to undermine Aung San Suu Kyi. And she admits to having to overcome her own fears that Myanmar was under threat from a Muslim invasion, which the military's relentless propaganda had fostered over the years. Her final realization came in 2017, when she heard stories of persecution from many Muslim Rohingya friends, and she understood the full extent of her brainwashing and the terrible consequences it was leading to. So she organized a public forum to amplify her friends' voices, but because this was at the height of the military's Islamophobic propaganda, many Bamar were quite upset with the event. She describes targeted attempts to shut her down by engaging in public character assassination, and disparaging things were said about her Muslim boyfriend.

"I was speaking about privilege and power," she describes, "and how we should be aware of our own privilege, and not abuse it or misuse it against others, but use it in a better way."

Believing in the impact that communication and dialog could have, Thinzar did everything she could during those years to influence public perception of the nation's ethnic minority communities. She began to travel across the country, conducting trainings and forming grassroots networks of like-minded activists. This was no easy work: speaking in front of tight-knit communities who had developed a built-in suspicion of The Other over the years, she encouraged people to trust where little had existed in the past. "I felt like there was a space for us [as a Bamar person] to raise different opinions, especially when you are not a minority. So that gave me more confidence, and I started

speaking up for other different minorities."

PERFORMING ART

In addition to organizing dialogues and training sessions, Thinzar's activism also began to encompass performance art. One of her more meaningful activities was dressing up as a Shan IDP in 2015 in front of a popular, downtown, Yangon mall, to bring the reality of continued violence against ethnic communities to the Bamar heartland. Taking on the actual identity of a persecuted minority was another step in Thinzar's evolution to understanding the ethnic experience, and it left a deep impact on her to quite literally wear the shoes (or in this case, the flip-flops), of another person.

"It was so overwhelmingly humbling," she says. "It gave me a strong reason to work for the people, especially on the grassroot level."

Of course, today the question of privilege in Myanmar has changed dramatically following the coup and its ensuing violence, as Thinzar wryly notes, "We all equally refugees, we are all equally stateless, and in a way, this gives us more chances to open up our heart!"

As most Bamar have by now faced the targeted terror of the military in some form, they sadly understand through their own, direct experience the truth of what ethnic communities have been alleging for years.

Far from feeling superior to them as had so often been the case in the past, many Bamar have come to rely on the fighting prowess and training of ethnic militias to survive. That people from all sides now see the necessity of a true federal democracy is a clear silver lining for Thinzar that emerges out of the dark clouds wrought by the coup.

"We're on the right track, and I feel better than the past 10 years," she says. Indeed, Thinzar was so depressed by the NLD's track record that she couldn't even bring herself to vote in the 2020 election. "The one thing that we can say is, we will never be the same again, after 2021. So that's something we get out of this whole process. It is so painful, but at least we are

going for a better political system."

CHANGING BUDDHISM

Aside from the political sphere, another core element of Burmese society and culture undergoing a radical shift is religious, specifically Buddhism. Although she grew up in a traditional Buddhist family, Thinzar's personal transformation with the faith began in earnest when she was 16 years old, when she attended an Abhidhamma course at Sule Pagoda. Always the independent thinker, she took advantage of her teachers by asking many questions, and their answers encouraged her to read and study further. Realizing that study could only take her so far, she also enrolled in intensive meditation courses every Thingyan.

Learning the Buddha's teachings through diverse methods and teachers demonstrated that there was not one single way forward, but many different options based on one's personality and interests. In this sense, she learned that her spiritual path need not be constrained by simply reading and sitting formally and intensively in silence. As an active person, she realized that she could apply mindfulness throughout her life.

"There are other way of doing things, and that unlocked my understanding of Buddhism," she says simply, adding that meditation practice also provided a stable mental and emotional training that could be utilized and applied anywhere. To her, now, the Buddha's teachings are less a religion, and more an ethical guide, as "a way to rely on yourself to [develop more] self-awareness and a critical mindset." It helps her to contextualize the inevitable ups and downs of life, be more reflective about her mental states and emotions, and to trust in the ethics of her actions based on the law of cause and effect, even when facing various difficulties or criticism.

The complex social and political dynamics of Buddhism in present-day Myanmar has created an odd dichotomy that affected Thinzar's ability to openly integrate her sincere Buddhist faith into her role as an activist. On one hand, the nationalistic brand of Buddhism actively promoted as a tool for persecution by

the military has caused ripple effects throughout society, and their backwash complicated Thinzar's efforts.

LACK OF TRUST

Due to her privileged background and association with the military, she had to break through the resistance of those who had suffered at their hands. Similarly, she found that many non-Buddhist contacts did not initially trust someone who devoutly claimed the faith that was used as a means to oppress them and deny their own freedom of religion. Moreover, when she emphasized the Buddhist tenants of compassion and good-will while speaking out against the military's violence against the Rohingya community, it was not received so well by the older generation, in particular, who had been the most susceptible to the military's propagandizing; they felt she was naïve about the "problem" of Muslims in the country as well as unreal-istically idealistic, and so her appeals went ignored.

Thinzar has also watched with growing concern as the younger generation is coming to associate the Buddha's teachings with the nationalist, pro-Bamar sentiments promoted by the military, and she fears this could alienate an entire generation from the benefits of this spiritual path. Still, she sees is a growing awareness among some Bamar Buddhists as to how the military tricked them with hateful propaganda, spurring them to try to uncouple their devotion to the Buddha's teachings from the regime's divisive messaging. And where she had once been dismayed to see how many Bamar Buddhists had showed a lack of compassion towards the Rohingya and ethnic minority communities, Thinzar now sees a wealth of forgiveness being expressed towards those soldiers who choose to defect, understanding they were part of a corrupt system that harmed them as much as anyone else.

That goodwill extends to ethnic peoples who are non-Buddhist as well, recognizing that these soldiers were treated like animals, underscoring the need to finally break what Thinzar calls "this "cycle of violence." Her Buddhist understanding allows her to see how many in the military suffer with intense insecurity

and fear, which makes them cling all the more to their power and their weaponry, causing them to feel they will have nothing left if they walk away. Therefore, part of her work is not only trying to bring about defections while encouraging their warm reception by the people; but also helping these former soldiers to discover a greater meaning and fulfillment in life once they leave the military behind.

GOING VIRAL

Thinzar has also continued her use of performance art. Perhaps the work she is most famous for, and which went viral around the world, was done in solidarity with the many women who the military had assaulted. She photographed herself with makeup to give the impression of her face being bloodied and bruised in order to highlight how the military had brutalized these women, and even published their photos as a kind of twisted warning to other female activists.

"You could be ugly, but it's your spirit that we are fighting with, and it's your spirit that we love," she says by way of explanation. Hundreds of other women in Myanmar and beyond followed suit, and because of this, an online campaign began to shed a light into what was happening in Myanmar.

Although Thinzar Shunlei Yi has lived as activist for all these years, she acknowledges the personal toll it takes. "You see all your close friends being tortured, sometimes killed, and also different stories coming out from the ground every day, we have to deal with this news," she says in closing. "In the morning, you will be really sad and depressed, you don't know what to do, you're not in a position to control things; and in the evening, you will be motivated again, because you see the whole picture of what the revolution is about, and still people are striving, and this is for the good for the country."

Check out the Insight Myanmar podcast with Thinzar Shunlei Yi here: https://player.captivate.fm/episode/643f27ff-d846-4f26-830d-c7bc70b558e1



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