

MANDATORY MILITARY CONSCRIPTION LAW BEGINS TO OPERATE IN YANGON

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JUNTA LOSING GROUND AS ARAKAN ARMY AIMS FOR VICTORY

The Arakan Army's 25 March announcement of invitation to foreign investors to put their money into the impoverished Rakhine State could be an indication that the AA is confident of victory against the Myanmar junta.

The announcement, published by the local media, welcomed any investments that benefit Rakhine State and it would also ensure the security of any such projects and the security of the people working on them. It also highlighted that the AA is a reliable organisation and is doing its best to bring peace, stability, security, new administrations, regional development and healthcare, as soon as possible, to the areas under its control.

The announcement also urged foreign investors who already have projects underway in Rakhine State to cooperate with the AA and continue with their projects. Foreign-financed projects underway in Rakhine State include the Chinese funded Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and the Indian-funded Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP), which also goes through areas of Chin State under AA control.

The announcement is important. While AA victory is not assured, and a great deal of damage may be inflicted on the state before the guns fall silent, the stance is one of confidence as Myanmar's protracted conflict worsens.

Currently, the AA is in control of Paletwa Township in Rakhine State and the townships of Pauktaw, Mrauk-U, Kyauktaw, Minbya, Myaybon, Ponnagyun, Ramree and Rathedaung in Rakhine State.

According to the AA announcement, it is currently launching attacks and offensives against all the remaining junta military outposts in Rakhine State and it will not stop until all the posts surrender or are overrun by the AA.

This is one more reminder to the junta that it is losing its grip. But it will also be a reminder to major foreign stakeholders – notably China, India and Russia – that they will increasingly need to deal with players holding ground, rather than the generals in their ivory tower in Naypyidaw.

We have glimpsed this in the meetings held in Kunming recently involving the Three Brotherhood Alliance holding ground in northern Shan State in the wake of Operation 1027. And China may well have to similarly engage with the AA as they get closer to accomplishing their dream of an autonomous Arakan State.

And all of this will need to be factored in when it comes to how the opposition National Unity Government or NUG approaches their federal union template for the country when the military junta eventually steps down or is kicked out of power. Right now, getting rid of the military junta and seeking peace is the priority. After that, the federal union template will need to be hammered out.

EDITORIAL

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WEEKLY

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MIZZIMA MAGAZINE

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**COVER PHOTO OF MYANMAR
JUNTA LEADER BY AFP**





CALM IN NAYPYIDAW

A woman rides her motorcycle past the Uppatasanti Pagoda in Naypyidaw on March 26. Photo: AFP

JUNTA DEMANDS MONEY FROM CONSCRIPT'S GRANDMOTHER AFTER HE FLEES DRAFT

A village administrator is demanding 7 million kyats from a youth's grandmother because he fled after being conscripted into the army, in Ingapu Township, in Ayeyarwady Region.

The incident happened in Kwinkaut Village, where the lottery to pick conscripts for the army has been happening since 20 March. According to villagers some of the people selected for conscription have fled and village administrators are now asking their families to pay compensation.

"A young man picked a lot saying that he had to serve in the military during the drawing of lots on 20 March at noon. But, he fled during the night of 23 March because he didn't want to join the military. Because of this, the village administrator demanded 7 million kyats from the runaway young man's grandmother on 24 March," said a Kwinkaut villager.

Villagers added that those selected for conscription were coerced into signing contracts saying that the conscripts promised not to flee and that if they did their remaining family members would face legal repercussions.

On the morning of 24 March, the administrator of Kwinkaut Village convened a meeting where he told the villagers that they would also have to subsidise the new conscripts, though it was not mentioned how much the villagers would have to pay in subsidies.

The villagers have also been told there will be more conscription lotteries.

"The administrators said that we will have to conduct monthly lotteries to choose people for military duty. However, many young people have fled from the village", said another villager.

Under the conscription law bought into force on 10 February 2024 men aged between 18 and 45 and women aged between 18 and 35 can be conscripted to serve a minimum of two years in the army. The army has said it wants to conscript 60,000 people a year into the army.

Population data to be used in conscription and selection of the first conscripts will be completed in April 2024 and the first batch of recruits will begin training in mid-April, according to a junta military spokesperson, who said they had a target of conscripting 5,000 people a month with women also being conscripted from the fifth batch onwards. He also said that workers and students who are currently abroad will have to return to do their military service.

Forced recruitment of soldiers is already underway in Yangon, Mandalay, Sagaing, and Ayeyarwady regions.

YOUTHS FROM OTHER AREAS BANNED FROM BORDER TOWN OF KAWTHAUNG

Young people not from Kawthaung, Myanmar's southernmost town in Tanintharyi Region on the border with Thailand, have been banned from entering the town to stop them fleeing to Thailand to escape conscription.

The junta will only allow youths whose ID cards show that they are resident in Tanintharyi Region to enter Kawthaung. Youths from other areas are barred from entering the town. Soldiers manning roadblocks on the road to Kawthaung have told youths from other areas to return home, whilst still allowing older

people from other areas to pass Kawthaung, on the southernmost tip of Myanmar, lies just across the Kra Buri River from the Thai city of Ranong and the authorities are worried that youths who want to avoid being conscripted into the army will flee across the Kra Buri into Thailand.

Unfortunately for youths trying to get to Kawthaung, the only way to get there overland is to take the Myeik to Kawthaung road that goes through Tanintharyi and Bokpyin townships. It is easy enough for the junta to set up roadblocks on the road to

prevent youths reaching Kawthaung as there are no alternative overland routes to Kawthaung.

From the third week in March, the junta started setting up roadblocks on the road to Kawthaung.

A bus driver who works on the Myeik to Kawthaung bus route said: “The military council’s security checkpoints have recently intensified their operations. Specifically, people who are not residents of Kawthaung are being instructed to return to their original destinations, with some even facing arrest.”

He did also remark that it was only younger people being denied entry to Kawthaung, older people were being allowed to continue to the town. Another bus driver on the same route said: “On 24 March, as numerous young men and women were traveling in passenger cars out of Myeik Town, approximately 40 young people were stopped and questioned at the Pathaung-Kyaynanthaing checkpoint just outside Myeik. I don’t exactly know what will happen to them.”

Though the junta is restricting entry to Kawthaung, the Kawthaung to Ranong border crossing remains open.

Following the introduction of the Myanmar conscription law on 10 February 2024 there has been a surge of young people leaving Myanmar for Thailand. That includes a surge in the number of young people crossing from Kawthung into Thailand, according to locals.

JUNTA SETS FIRE TO SAGAING VILLAGE BEHEADING AND MUTILATING PDF MEMBER

Junta soldiers from the notorious Wathawa Column set fire to a village and decapitated and dismembered a people’s defence force member in Tesu Village, Khin-U Township, Sagaing Region on the morning of 25 March.

Around 200 junta soldiers, and members of the Pyu Saw Htee junta-aligned militia led by Monk Wathawa, raided Tesu Village on the morning of 25 March, according to a villager.

They said: “On 25 March, the Military Council troops raided and set fire to the village. The extent of the fire damage is yet to be determined. One PDF member was beheaded, his body was mutilated and burnt, and remnants were found scattered on the street.”

The attack was carried out by a junta military column known as the Wathawa Column which was originally from Kantbalu Township in Sagaing Region. It is infamous for its violence against civilians.

“This column, known locally as the Wathawa Column, resorts to brutal violence upon encountering civilians, necessitating swift evacuation for safety”, said another villager.

As a result of the Wathawa Column’s raids more than 10,000 people have fled from villages in the western part of Khin-U Township, according to the Khin-U Township News and Information Release Team.

Previously the Wathawa Column raided the townships of Taze and Ye-U in Sagaing Region before they started raiding villages in Khin-U Township on 25 March.

On 22 and 23 March the Wathawa Column burned down the villages of Chaungyoe and Hpankharzin in Taze Township, killing three locals and two PDF members.



ELECTION RUSE

**Myanmar junta leader hints poll
may not be held nationwide**



Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing and his wife. Photo: AFP

Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing discussed Myanmar-Russia relations, election fraud and plans for a new poll last week when he met with a representative of ITAR-TASS Media of the Russian Federation in Yangon.

For Myanmar analysts attempting to decipher the junta leader's next moves, pursuing the election game in order for the military to hang onto power appears to be an important projected goal.

Min Aung Hlaing has made numerous pledges to hold elections since he seized power in February 2021, but has repeatedly extended a state of emergency as his military brutally battles opponents across swathes of the country.

The junta leader attempted in the interview with the ITAR-TASS Media representative to convey a level of legitimacy to his military rule.

As part of the discussion, Min Aung Hlaing told the delegate that fraud was committed during the 2020 election, "hence, we declared the State of Emergency to the nation and took State responsibilities."

Min Aung Hlaing justified the coup with unsubstantiated claims of electoral fraud during the elections in 2020 won resoundingly by the National League for Democracy (NLD) party of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

"After we had verified the voting frauds, we reconstituted the Union Election Commission. Then, we ordered UEC to scrutinize the past event. The previous UEC announced more than 38 million of voters in the 2020 election. In scrutiny, voting frauds became 11.3 million of voters. I mean some 30 per cent of voter numbers were involved in the voting frauds. Number of vote rigging numbers from the hundreds to the tens of thousands were happened all 315 townships where the election was held. I sincerely and politically tell it was voting fraud. It was an ugly event. When such event has been exposed, I took action against all responsible persons at first," Min Aung Hlaing said, as quoted by the Global New Light of Myanmar.

The junta leader said they aim to hold a free and fair election. "At a time when the process of the State of Emergency period, we will hold the election. At that time, we will hand over the State power to the National Defence and Security Council. Then, we will hold the election within six months under the leadership of

the National Defence and Security Council. To do so, we will primarily emphasize correctness of the voter list not to cause voting errors. So, we will manage correctness of the voter list this year as much as possible.

If the State is peaceful and stable, we have a plan to hold the election in relevant sections as much as we can even if the election is not held nationwide under the law,” Min Aung Hlaing said.

In essence, the poll may not be held nationwide, the junta leader said.

On 27 March on Armed Forces Day, Min Aung Hlaing claimed in his speech that resistance fighters were delaying the election.

Without offering a timeline, the junta chief said efforts to conduct elections were under way, but blamed armed ethnic groups and “so-called People’s Defense Forces” for “deliberately engaging

in disruptive actions to sabotage and delay” the process. The junta-stacked election commission last year scrapped the first-past-the-post electoral system under which the NLD had won resounding victories. Instead, a proportional representation system will be used.

Three years after seizing power the junta is struggling to crush widespread armed opposition to its rule, battling pro-democracy armed groups and older ethnic minority armed groups across large parts of the country.

*Reporting: Mizzima, AFP,
Global New Light of Myanmar*



Photo: AFP

JUNTA AIRSTRIKES DESTROY SCHOOLS IN KNU AREA OF BILIN TOWNSHIP, MON STATE

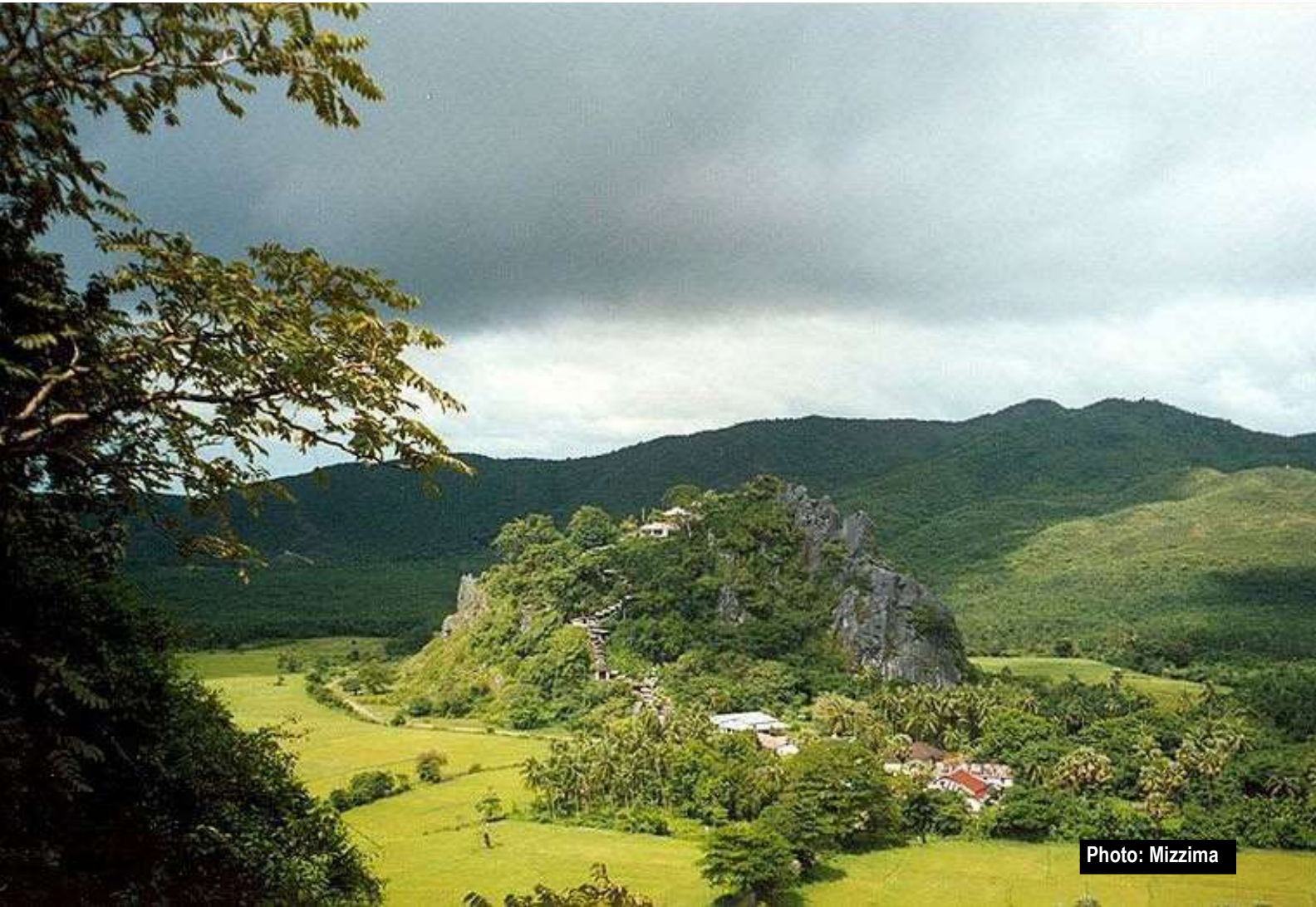


Photo: Mizzima

The junta destroyed schools, religious structures and other buildings when it launched three airstrikes on the Karen National Union's Brigade 1-controlled Minsaw Village in Bilin Township, Mon State on 23 March.

The three airstrikes happened between 10:20 pm and 11:00 pm on 23 March. Three middle schools, two religious structures, 11 civilian residences, and a sesame oil factory were damaged in the attack. A 56-year-old villager also sustained minor injuries.

Major Saw Kyaw Myint, the Chairman of the KNU's Allied Supervisory Committee, said to Mizzima: "It [the airstrikes] occurred late at night. I've heard reports of schools and neighboring houses being obliterated. With the military council's diminishing control, they're resorting to targeting innocent civilians and even resorting to the destruction of civilian settlements to instill fear among the populace."

According to a KNU source just prior to the airstrikes a junta jet had been flying over the village carrying out reconnaissance. They said the junta had purposefully launched airstrikes on a civilian settlement in an area where there was no fighting, with the express intention of harming innocent civilians.

Following the airstrikes, the residents of Minsaw Village are now terrified and fleeing their homes en masse, according to Major Saw Kyaw Myint.

Already in March, about 18,400 people have fled from 30 villages in the KNU-controlled Moo (Mone) Township following junta attacks.

JUNTA LAUNCHES AIRSTRIKES ON HOSPITALS IN MYEBON TOWNSHIP, RAKHINE STATE

The junta launched airstrikes on three consecutive days on Myebon Township in Rakhine State and badly damaged two hospitals between 22 and 24 March, despite there being no fighting in the area.

On 22 March airstrikes hit Nyaungkan Village in Myebon Township from 12:45 pm to 5:44 pm. The village monastery was destroyed and several monks suffered serious injuries. Approximately 20 houses in the village were also engulfed in flames.

On 23 March, between noon and 3 pm, the junta conducted airstrikes on the village hospital in Thayettaung Village, in Myebon Township resulting in one fatality and one injury, according to sources from Myebon Township.

On 24 March at 4:30 pm junta jet fighter targeted the public hospital in Kandaunggyi Town, Myebon Township. The attack caused considerable damage to the hospital and injured a woman.

A witness said: “The bombs were assumed to be 500-pound bombs as the impact was felt throughout the towns and villages despite the distance. The hospital night guard’s wife was injured.”

Residents speculated that the junta targeted these villages because they believed that resistance fighters were receiving medical treatment there.

“They bombed Thayettaung Village. Two jet fighters came at a time. They also bombed Nyaungkan Village with jet fighters on 22 March. It appears that the junta suspected that resistance fighters were receiving medical treatment in the villages, prompting them to carry out these attacks”, said a source from Myebon Township.

Making matters worse for residents there has been no electricity for over a month in more than 30 villages in Myebon Township.



Photo: Mizzima

KNU SAYS IT IS GRATEFUL FOR AID SENT BY THAI GOVERNMENT THROUGH MYANMAR RED CROSS

The Karen National Union (KNU) has responded to the delivery of humanitarian aid by the Thai government to help people in distress in Karen State. The following is the statement issued this week on 27 March by the KNU:

KNU Statement Regarding the Royal Thai Government's Humanitarian Aid Delivery On the 25th of March 2024, at the 2nd Thailand-Myanmar Friendship Bridge, Mae Sot, Thailand, the Thai Red Cross Society handed over aid packages to the Myanmar Red Cross Society, through the Royal Thai Government's Humanitarian Aid Program.

The aid packages were distributed to 20,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who fled into Karen National Union (KNU) control areas; Nabu

Township, Paingkyon Township, and Tha Ma Nya (Don Yin Township), due to SAC's air strikes, artillery attacks, looting and burning of civilian houses.

The Karen Border Guard Force (BGF) transported the aid materials through Myawaddy via Thay Ka Tae.

Officials from the Royal Thai Army accompanied them to observe the aid deliveries. Officials from the KNU's Hpa-an District received 3,874 aid packages from Royal Thai Army officials in Nabu Township and

handed them over to CIDKP (Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People) and respective community leaders that assist and care for the IDPs.

In Paingkyon Township and Tha Ma Nya (Don Yin Township), officials from SAC and the Myanmar Red



IDPs line up for food in Karen State. Photo: AFP

Cross Society (MRCS) unexpectedly participated in the delivery of humanitarian aid. Our leaders were able to distribute them completely and with restraint despite the challenges.

Although there was a lack of information and challenges, we, the KNU would like to express our gratitude on behalf of the Karen IDP to the Royal Thai Government for the humanitarian assistance. We would like to share KNU's position regarding humanitarian assistance as follows:

1. The humanitarian crisis in Burma/Myanmar is a man-made humanitarian crisis caused by SAC intentionally targeting of civilians.
2. SAC always seeks ways to take political advantage of humanitarian aid, and the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS) is a military reserve force, and an organization that supports the SAC. Providing humanitarian aid through MRCS is showing an indifference to the suffering of the people because MRCS is working for SAC that deliberately targets its own people.
3. On 26 March 2024, while humanitarian aid was being delivered in Paingkyon Township, a SAC fighter jet flew over the town at 12:15 pm, which made the IDPs flee in fear. We are deeply saddened for those IDPs.
4. Although providing humanitarian aid to IDPs can develop trust between all stakeholders, transparency, accountability, and consultation between the parties on all sides is crucial, and activities that damage trust between the relevant parties only deepen the problem.
5. KNU has sent a proposed concept on appropriate aid delivery regarding Burma/Myanmar's humanitarian crisis to ASEAN countries and the Royal Thai Government.
6. As almost of the whole country is in urgent need of humanitarian aid during this period, we request that humanitarian aid is provided only after information sharing and consultation on all sides and among all relevant stakeholders with transparency, responsibility, and accountability is done.

UNHCR: 820,900 IDPS IN SOUTHEASTERN MYANMAR

820,900 people have now been displaced in southeastern Myanmar according to updated figures issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on 24 March.

It said that in the southeast the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) slightly increased from 811,200 last week to 820,900 this week.

The following displacements occurred in the last week. In southern Shan State, 2,721 people from Hsihseng Town were displaced to Taunggyi Township due to increased fighting.

In Kayin State, 2,140 people from Hpa Lu Village Tract, Myawaddy Township were displaced within Myawaddy Township due to intensified fighting, including artillery shelling and airstrikes.

In Tanintharyi Region, 4,347 people from Dawei Township and 374 people from Kyunsu Township were displaced within their townships.

This is an increase of over 100,000 more IDPs in southeastern Myanmar since the first week of February when the UNHCR said there were 716,700 IDPs in the region.

The UNHCR classifies the following areas as southeastern Myanmar: Tanintharyi and Bago regions and Mon, Kayin, and Kayah states and southern Shan State.

The number of IDPs recorded by UNHCR in those regions is as follows:

Tanintharyi Region 128,200, Mon State 72,900, Kayin State 182,100, Kayah State 126,00, southern Shan State 115,900, Bago East 195,900, and Bago West 700.



Trucks with aid line up at the border. Photo: AFP

CONSCRIPTION WELL UNDERWAY IN SOUTHEASTERN MYANMAR

According to the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) conscription has already started in Karen and Mon states and Tanintharyi Region in southeastern Myanmar. According to the military junta's conscription law, military service is mandatory for men aged 18 to 35, women aged 18 to 27, and those who have completed at least two years of service.

The first conscription week will begin after the New Year's Thingyan water festival in mid-April and will involve 5,000 people per month across the country. The junta also announced that 60,000 men would be called for military service each year.

According to HURFOM, the junta directed the ward, town, and township administrators in Mon State to send in lists of those who have been conscripted by the fourth week of March. Depending on population size, each village or ward administrator needs to select three to ten people for conscription.

The administrators in Thanbyuzayat and Mudon townships in Mon State have already submitted their lists of people to be conscripted.

Within Kyeikmayaw Township in Mon State the ward and village administrators were instructed to select recruits and send the list by 20 March. Similarly, in some of the villages in Chaungzon Township, on Bilugyun Island in Mon State, the administration has sent notices summoning men between 18 and 35 to come to meetings to be recruited in the Burma Army.

A resident of Thanbyuzayat Township said: "Mon youths are no longer in the village. Parents are more concerned. The issue of conscription is quite controversial. In some townships, the administrators carry out censuses."

The anti-junta breakaway faction of the New Mon State Party, the New Mon State Party (anti-military dictatorship) issued an order telling people not to comply with the conscription demands of the junta. It said that it would take decisive action against district administrations who follow the junta's orders. Pro-democracy bodies, including the National Consultative Council, the National Unity Government, and the Revolutionary Army, have all announced that they will do the same.

Those who criticize the Conscription Law are also being punished. HURFOM is documenting a case that has been opened against 24-year-old Tun Lin from Mawlamyine under Section 505-A of the Penal Code because he shared a post containing the text of the conscription law and a revolutionary post on a social media page.

According to HURFOM, the man was stopped whilst on his motorcycle at a junta roadblock at the Ah Yar Taw Road and Taung Paw Tan Street intersection in Maung Ngan Ward, Mawlamyine Town. He was arrested after junta soldiers checked his phone and found a post that read: "Terrorist junta prepares to activate conscription law, summons all citizens."

HURFOM says that the junta's conscription law is having a devastating impact and the junta is robbing the youth of their futures by forcing men and women to enlist in the terrorist regime.



MANDATORY MILITARY CONSCRIPTION LAW BEGINS TO OPERATE IN YANGON

Pan Pan

It is now becoming clear that despite the Myanmar junta's claim that they will begin enforcing the military conscription law after the Thingyan Water Festival, the authorities are already taking action.

The military junta initiated the enforcement of the mandatory conscription law on 12 March in Yangon. They are conducting door-to-door visits and collecting information of eligible young adults in certain townships for military service. Additionally, summon letters bearing the signature of the ward's administrator and the precise home address of the inductee are being dispatched.

Although the junta announced that new recruitment for the conscription law would begin by the end of April, recruitment actually commenced from the second week of March. Consequently, young adults are feeling anxious and fleeing their homes.

Those intending to leave the country are doing so by any available means, fearing the junta's restrictions before the officially permitted period, as reported by residents of Yangon.

"A family from our wards said that they received a summons notice, so they sent their young adults away. Some families also received the notice. Every day becomes a sorrowful day for parents. Everyone is afraid. Some are crying, some are running away, and some are holding a money bag. Things are happening like that at the moment in Myanmar," a resident from Mingalar Taung Nyunt township, Yangon, said.

These days, the junta is said to be gathering the lists for eligible youth in Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township, Tharkayta Township, Mayangone Township, South Dagon Township, Hlaing Tharyar Township, Kungyangon Township, and Taikkyi Township in Yangon Region, and drawing lots for military service in some townships

A young adult, who initially planned to pursue further education in Dubai but fearing restrictions if he received a summon notice, said that he has opted to relocate to Japan where relatives reside.

"I was initially trying to continue my education in Dubai. However, I am afraid I will not be permitted



Photo: Harish Shivaraman

to leave the country if the summons notice is received. So, I am going to Japan, where my relatives live first. My family is also worried. Even though we set aside our money for that purpose, in case things do not go according to our plan. So, I have to follow in a convenient way.

I would like to encourage young adults to reconsider the incentives the junta gives. The salary (for those who have to join mandatory military service) that they promise is nothing. Even they themselves are starving,” said the young man.

The junta set the military training period for military service for six months. The residents said that the junta has persuaded the people that the recruits must serve in the military for one year and six months after graduating and will be paid a salary of 470,000 kyat from the beginning of the training. But in some townships, the promised monthly salary for those who will have to join mandatory conscription is just 200,000 kyat.

Yangon residents said that the junta’s terms are only lies and are a deception to recruit young adults when job opportunities are scarce.

Moreover, a young man who fled to Thailand due to the law enacted on 10 February said that he was depressed as he has not got a job yet in Thailand.

“I came here after selling my car. However, I am slowly becoming depressed as I have not yet found a job. Since I do not want to work under the military junta, I have to search for any kind of job here. Now, everyone is giving up everything and starting over. We have to be strong to overcome this.”

EFFECTIVENESS OF SCAM CENTRE CRACKDOWN QUESTIONABLE



If online scam centres are suppressed in one location, they relocate to another area and continue their illicit activities, according to the latest report by ISP Myanmar. v

After Operation 1027 in northern Shan, which was partly aimed at eradicating the online scam syndicates, the term “Kyar Phyant” (originally from the Chinese) gained widespread use among the public as it began to emerge as a global threat.

According to a report in August 2023 by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), these scams are increasing and are orchestrated

by organized crime groups. Primarily situated in the Mekong region, including countries like Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and other ASEAN nations, these scam syndicates are often linked to human trafficking, forced labor, and even slavery. The UNODC has even coined the term “cyber slavery” to describe cases where individuals are abducted and coerced into committing online crimes.

The report estimated that hundreds of thousands to millions of people may be forced to participate in these criminal activities, highlighting the horror of how these schemes extract profits. According to the UNODC report, the profits generated from these scams could range from 7.5 to 12.5 billion US dollars. This amount is equivalent to approximately half of the GDP of some small ASEAN countries, highlighting the global nature of the threat.

2024 can be named “the year of eradicating Kyar Phyant” problem by regional governments, which has become so widespread in Myanmar and neighboring countries, according to ISP Myanmar.

From the opposition National Unity Government (NUG), the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), to the junta’s State Administration Council (SAC), all have claimed to eliminate these online scam syndicates. The geographic reach of crackdowns

extends from the far northeast to the far south of Myanmar, with repercussions felt along the Thai-Myanmar border from Tachileik to Kawthoung.

In January 2024, Chinese police officers arrived in Nay Pyi Taw. They arrested ten individuals, among them the four Kokang leaders who were closely associated with and shielded by Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) top leaders. Allegedly, the Beijing Supreme Court later sentenced four of these leaders to death, although no details were reported.

UWSA Deputy Commander in Chief Bao Junfeng, aka Tax Ai Chan, the nephew of UWSP Chairman Bao Youxiang, was also detained by the Chinese authorities with similar charges. The Chinese authorities also extended their cross-border search to Monghsu, situated east of the Salween River, in pursuit of two former officers associated with Bao Youxiang.

However, according to ISP Myanmar, Kyar Phyant syndicates that have relocated to Mongyai and Tangyan, where the Shan State Army and United Wa State Army (UWSA) are based, remain unaffected. As per a China Central Television (CCTV) report, out of 689 Thai, Chinese, and Myanmar nationals arrested in Tachileik, almost 500 Chinese nationals have been transferred to the Chinese authorities.

Additionally, hundreds of online business workers were arrested in Tachileik after surprise raids. But in this region, where multiple armed groups, including the Myanmar Army, have been involved in the business, those arrested are low-level workers rather than big fishes. In late 2023, a delegation led by Lt. Gen. Jakkapong Janpengpen, Thailand's Armed Forces' Director of Joint Operations, visited Naypyitaw to eliminate Kyar Phyant operations



situated along the Myanmar-Thailand border, as well as in Shwe Kokko.

SAC Chairman Snr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing also discussed the matter online with the Royal Thai Chief of Defence Forces, Gen. Songwit Noonpackdee.

The Myanmar-Thailand discussion has raised suspicions and tensions between the SAC and the Karen Border Guard Force (BGF), led by Col. Saw Chit Thu. Amidst multiple conflict fronts, the SAC appears to be avoiding a confrontation with Col. Saw Chit Thu, the leader of Myanmar's most potent border guard force, at least for the time being.

Instead of targeting the BGF directly, SAC Chairman Min Aung Hlaing opted to accuse the Karen National Union (KNU) of involvement in online scams and human trafficking. He also issued warnings of potential action against the KNU with the collaboration of neighbouring countries. Next in line is the case of Kyaw Lwin, a prominent business figure in Kawthoung, Tanintharyi, who had an arrest warrant issued against



him by Thailand and the SAC on 7 February 2024, for his alleged involvement in online gambling, tax evasion, and money laundering.

Htay Win, aka Naung Paing, younger brother of Kyaw Lwin, died at an SAC interrogation centre after being captured. Currently, Thai police have arrested Kyaw Lwin's wife and his close staff member, whilst Kyaw Lwin is still in hiding.

Kyaw Lwin, the owner of a five-star hotel on Thahtay Kyun Island (adjacent to Ranong in Thailand), which had integrated legal gambling operations happening on the premises.

However, following a raid by a Thai special investigation team on 1 February 2024, the hotel, which employed over 1,500 individuals, has been shut down.

According to reports from SAC newspapers, following the launch of Operation 1027 in northern Shan State, a total of 52,820 foreign nationals from China, Vietnam, Thailand, India, and Indonesia were evacuated or otherwise transferred across Myanmar's borders, with 50,772 of them being Chinese nationals.

According to the UNODC report, some victims are coerced into participating in these activities against their will, highlighting the importance of supporting those who are victimized by such crimes in line with human rights principles. Distinguishing between criminals and victims is a challenge in such situations.

Despite the ongoing efforts to stop Kyar Phyant operations throughout Myanmar, there remains uncertainty regarding the methods and procedures

involved in the arrest and prosecution of Chinese nationals who are leaders of Kyar Phyant gangs.

The case of Mr. She Zhijiang, formerly a Chinese citizen, highlights the apparent reluctance or delay on the part of the Chinese government to intervene or provide clarification, despite his arrest by Thai authorities more than a year ago. Born in Yunnan Province, She Zhijiang has been involved in the gambling industry across various Southeast Asian countries, including Cambodia, the Philippines, and Myanmar, and involved in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments.

ISP Myanmar believes that if other Kyar Phyant gang leaders like She remain at large without facing arrest, or if their trials proceed without significant consequences, then the eradication of Kyar Phyant will remain far from complete. It adds that based on the experiences of the Philippines and Indonesia, if Kyar Phyant operations are suppressed in one location, they relocate to another area and continue their illicit activities.

Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia have not reached a conclusive fight againsts Kyar Phyant operations. Subsequently, it is imperative to closely monitor the emergence of new bases in border regions and areas lacking a stable rule of law, according to ISP Myanmar.



Laukkaing, the capital of the Kokang Self Administered Zone located in northeastern Shan State along the China-Burma border Photo Source: DVB

INDIAN AIR FORCE AND PUBLIC SECTOR SUPPLYING ARMS TO MYANMAR JUNTA

The Indian Air Force and Indian public sector undertakings (PSUs) are supplying military equipment to the Myanmar junta, according to research by campaign group Justice for Myanmar.

According to the research, Indian PSUs have equipped the illegal Myanmar military junta, including with military goods and infrastructure for the junta's air force and navy as the junta widens its war of terror against the people.

The junta relies on its air force in particular to wage indiscriminate airstrikes across Myanmar, murdering civilians including children and destroying homes, livelihoods, schools and hospitals. Justice for Myanmar says that the continued supply of military goods to the junta by India once again confirms India's ongoing complicity in the junta's war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In a new investigation, Justice For Myanmar has identified 10 PSUs, mostly operating under India's defence ministry, which have supplied military equipment, technology and fuel to the Myanmar military since the coup or have disclosed attempts to secure business with the illegitimate junta.

In addition, the Indian air force shipped 52 items to the junta's air force in January 2024 that appear to be for one or several automatic weather stations (AWS). It follows a deployment of 15 Indian Air Force personnel to Myanmar in December 2023 to install meteorological instruments.

Among other uses, data obtained through AWS can be decisive for the timing of airstrikes, the aircraft used and the choice of weapons.

One of the PSUs is Goa Shipyard Limited (GSL), which signed a contract with the junta for the commissioning of a propulsion plant for 81m offshore patrol vessels for the Myanmar Navy.

The contract was signed with the Myanmar Naval Dockyard in October 2021, during which India sat as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council negotiating texts concerning increasing violence in Myanmar following the February 2021 military coup attempt.

Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), an Indian defence PSU, lists Myanmar as an active client and has exported MiG spares to the Myanmar military. Justice For Myanmar could not confirm the last date of export.

The Myanmar Air Force uses MiG-29 fighter jets in its airstrikes.

In January 2024, Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL), another PSU under India's defence ministry, shipped several military-end use items to the Myanmar military's Directorate of Procurement, including a pan and tilt camera and a low noise front end for marine radar receivers, showing its continued support for the junta.

BrahMos Aerospace Private Limited (BrahMos Aerospace), a joint venture of India's Defence Research



and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Russia's Joint Stock Company "Military Industrial Consortium" "NPO Mashinostroyeniya", has announced discussions with the junta for the export of missiles pending financing.

In comments to Russian state media in August 2022, BrahMos Aerospace CEO Atun Rane said that BrahMos would need to arrange financing from an Indian credit line for the sale to the junta to proceed.

According to Justice for Myanmar, beyond the exports of military equipment, the Indian government is also actively providing platforms for members of the Myanmar military junta to attend Indian defence events and receive military training, lending further support and legitimacy to an illegitimate and illegal entity and war criminals that have been conducting a nationwide campaign of terror for over three years.

By encouraging exports of arms and related materials to the Myanmar military, India is directly supporting the junta's brutal attacks against the people, and therefore aiding and abetting war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Justice For Myanmar calls on India to immediately impose an arms embargo on the Myanmar military junta and cease all training and other military support.

It also calls on Indian defence sector companies – private and public – to immediately stop doing

business with the Myanmar military – directly or through front companies in Myanmar – and halt any agreed consignments of additional arms and related material to the junta.

Justice For Myanmar spokesperson Yadanar Maung said: "The Indian government and its PSUs must stop equipping the Myanmar military with weapons and related materials, which enable its nationwide war of terror.

"By providing equipment to the Myanmar military, India is directly supporting the junta's ongoing attacks against civilians and is therefore complicit in its international crimes.

"Indian PSUs have continued to supply arms, equipment and fuel after the military committed genocide against the Rohingya and launched an illegal coup attempt. This is a serious dereliction of India's international responsibilities.

"Governments and companies that are engaged with the Indian government, its PSUs and arms industry should use their leverage to ensure India ends its complicity in the Myanmar junta's atrocities."

"Investors in PSUs that are providing arms, equipment, technology and fuel to the terrorist junta need to urgently convince their investees to act responsibly and to divest from those companies if they do not."



ROHINGYA CONSULTATIVE COUNCIL TO BE FORMED TO ADVOCATE FOR ROHINGYA RIGHTS

The formation of a convening committee for the establishment of the Rohingya Consultative Council was announced on 26 March 2024.

According to the announcement, the Rohingya Consultative Council will serve as a unifying platform, bringing together Rohingya politicians, activists, organisations, women leaders, youth advocates, intellectuals, professionals and community-based figures from around the globe.

Its overarching objective will be to cultivate a coherent and impactful Rohingya political entity by harnessing and aligning diverse Rohingya perspectives, expertise and experience.

This initiative directly responds to the Rohingya community's call for a cohesive and inclusive political entity, to enable inclusion of Rohingya representation in all decision-making fora that affect Rohingya lives,

according to the announcement.

It says that the Rohingya Consultative Council aims to strengthen the efficacy of collective efforts in addressing Rohingya concerns by ensuring broad consultation across diverse contexts and sectors.

Such an approach is imperative against the backdrop of the multi-layered and persistent challenges confronting Rohingya people everywhere, the increasingly complex dynamics within Myanmar and the broader geopolitical landscape of the region.

The Rohingya Consultative Council Convening Committee will be made up of eight organisations and 25 individuals who will work to represent the priorities and interests of the Rohingya people and spearhead the evolution of a consolidated Rohingya political platform.



Rohingya IDPs in Rakhine State. Photo: AFP

US OUTLET RADIO FREE ASIA CLOSES HONG KONG OFFICE OVER SECURITY LAW FEARS

The US news outlet Radio Free Asia (RFA) said Friday last week it had closed its Hong Kong office over staff safety concerns after the city enacted a controversial new national security law. The Chinese finance hub last week brought into force a homegrown security law -- commonly known as Article 23 -- that introduced tough penalties for crimes such as treason, espionage and external interference. The law, which prompted swift criticism by several democracies and rights organizations, will work in tandem with a 2020 Beijing-imposed version that has silenced nearly all dissent in Hong Kong and seen nearly 300 people arrested since its enactment.

RFA president and CEO Bay Fang said in a statement that the company no longer had full-time staff in Hong Kong and has closed its physical office, citing "concerns about the safety of RFA staff and reporters."

"Actions by Hong Kong authorities, including referring to RFA as a 'foreign force,' raise serious questions about our ability to operate in safety with the enactment of Article 23," Fang said.

A Hong Kong government spokesperson declined to comment on "operational decisions of individual organizations," but said authorities "strongly disapprove of and condemn all scaremongering and smearing remarks" in relation to the national security law.

"To single out Hong Kong and suggest that journalists would only experience concerns when operating here but not in other countries would be grossly biased, if not outrageous," the spokesperson told AFP on Friday. Hong Kong's security chief Chris Tang slammed RFA last month for "smearing" Article 23 when it reported that some new offenses would target the media.

RFA's article had quoted criticism of the law. When asked whether RFA had breached the law, Tang later said that he wanted to alert the public to wrong information peddled by "foreign forces."

FURTHER EROSION OF AUTONOMY

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in a report Friday delivered to Congress, said that China has kept chipping away at the autonomy promised to Hong Kong when Britain handed it back in 1997.

Article 23 could be used "to eliminate dissent inside Hong Kong" and overseas as part of China's "ongoing campaign of transnational repression," Blinken said in a statement.

RFA, headquartered in Washington with broadcasts in nine Asian languages, was founded in 1996 with a mission to provide news coverage of places that restrict free media. RFA is funded by the US Congress but with a mandate of editorial independence.

US Representative Greg Meeks, the top Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, hailed RFA as a "rare source of independent news coming out of Hong Kong despite facing unrelenting pressure and harassment."

"The closure of RFA's bureau in Hong Kong, after 28 years, is a stark reminder of how brazenly Beijing has extinguished Hong Kong's autonomy," Meeks said.

Fang said that RFA would still cover Hong Kong, but in the same way as it does in closed media environments where the organization cannot station staff.

RFA is the first foreign media outlet to publicly announce its closure in Hong Kong since the national security law came into effect on March 23.

Hong Kong officials have defended the new security legislation as necessary to "plug" security loopholes.

AFP

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE: UN INTENSIFYING EFFORTS TO UPHOLD VICTIMS' RIGHTS

The UN received 758 allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse committed by staff last year, together with related personnel and partners, according to its latest report on the issue. The findings published on Tuesday state that although progress has been made since 2017 through the establishment of new frameworks, policies and procedures, sexual exploitation and abuse continues to occur across the UN system.

RISING CRISES, RISING RISKS

Risks increased significantly last year, with the unprecedented rise in humanitarian crises along with significant reductions in funding, especially in high-risk and complex contexts where the UN operates.

Last year, 758 allegations were received, compared to 534 the previous year and 265 in 2018. Of the 2023 figure, more than half, 384, were related to UN staff and affiliated personnel. The remainder concerned personnel from partners and non-UN military forces not under UN authority. One hundred allegations were reported in peacekeeping and special political missions, compared to 79 in 2022.

Some 143 identified victims were associated with these allegations -115 adults and 28 children. Most allegations, 90 per cent, related to the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, MONUSCO, and another in the Central African Republic, known as MINUSCA.

PREVENTION EFFORTS CONTINUE

The report contains updates on the implementation of the UN Secretary-General's strategy to improve efforts in preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and abuse.

"Our approach, which is centered on the rights and needs of victims, continues," UN Deputy Spokesperson Farhan Haq said during the daily media briefing in New York. "We are intensifying efforts to uphold the rights of victims, and to end impunity. This also includes engagement with Member States to facilitate the resolution of paternity claims."

GUTERRES UPHOLDS ACCOUNTABILITY

The Secretary-General's Special Coordinator on improving UN response to sexual exploitation and abuse, Christian Saunders, has commissioned a comprehensive assessment to determine how to best integrate the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse in all UN activities and programmes. The assessment will propose a strategy to ensure sustainable, effective prevention work across the UN system and options for predictable and adequate resourcing at headquarters and in the field.

"Sexual exploitation and abuse violate everything the United Nations stands for," Secretary-General António Guterres said in a video message accompanying the report. "It is up to all of us to eradicate sexual exploitation and abuse from our work, support victims, and hold perpetrators and their enablers to account."

Courtesy of UN News

ETHNIC PEOPLE REJECT MYANMAR JUNTA DAM CONSTRUCTION PLANS



Popular protest. Photo: Supplied

On the 2024 International Day of Action for Rivers, 14 March, a powerful wave of defiance flowed through the valleys and hills of Karen and Shan States in Myanmar, according to campaign group Progressive Voice.

United in peaceful environmental and social movements, young people, villagers, and local groups sent a resounding call for environmental justice, urging the protection of their sacred rivers—which have served as the lifeblood of their communities for generations—and a halt to dam construction along the Salween and Namtu Rivers.

On 14 March 2024, over a thousand local people demonstrated their steadfast rejection of the proposed Hatgyi Dam site, gathering on the banks of the Salween River and holding banners saying “No Dam” and “Let the River Flow Freely.”

For the past 20 years, Karen Rivers Watch (KRW), which led the 14 March demonstration, has been at the forefront of anti-dam campaigns along the Salween River, particularly the Hatgyi Dam Project,

which seriously threatens local peoples’ livelihoods and security, and was decided upon without their consent.

In the many years of planning for the dam project, the Myanmar military has committed grave violations of human rights against local communities by imposing forced labour, committing rape, and forcibly displacing over 5,000 people.

Since its attempted coup, the illegal military junta has intensified its attacks in Karen State, exacerbating the human rights, humanitarian, and environmental crisis affecting the local population. In the face of strong local opposition, the junta leader attempted to resume the project while visiting Karen State in May 2021 as part of the junta’s strategy to continue to exploit the country’s natural resources and force out indigenous populations for its own monetary and political gain.

Similarly, in Shan State, local villagers and youths from Hsipaw and Kyaukme, northern Shan State, and, Kunhing, southern Shan State, held blessing

ceremonies along the Namma and Namtu Rivers on the International Day of Action for Rivers, waving banners saying “May Shan State Rivers flow freely” and “May Shan State people be free.”

Despite the people’s unequivocal rejection of dam projects, two large hydropower dam projects—the Upper Yeywa dam in Taung Che Village in Kyaukme Township, and the Namtu Dam in Tadae Village in Hsipaw Township—are continuing unabated for the Myanmar military’s benefit. The former is operated by the military-owned company Myanmar Electric Power Enterprise, with companies from China, Germany, Switzerland, and Japan involved in the dam’s construction. As for the latter, the Natural Current Energy Hydropower Co. Ltd., signed a memorandum of understanding with the junta on 29 April 2022 and was blatantly constructed despite local people being utterly opposed to the construction.

Meanwhile, in Kachin State, Yup Zau Hkawng, owner of Jadeland Company and a business associate with ties to the military junta, has been expanding his illegal gold-mining operations near the Ayeyarwaddy River, including in prohibited areas. Such illegal mining activities without adherence to environmental regulations are leading to irreversible damage to the flow of the river and water quality.

At this juncture, Myanmar’s people are agonizingly grappling not only with the devastating humanitarian crisis caused by the Myanmar military junta during its past three years of attempted coup and terror campaign against the people, but also with the dire environmental crisis exacerbated by decades of exploitation by the military and its cronies, according to Progressive Voice.

As the seasons shift, people in Myanmar bear the brunt of extreme weather events in varying ways. Communities suffer catastrophic flooding during the rainy season and severe droughts in the summer. Currently, approximately 115,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Demawso and Pruso Townships, in Karenni State, are facing water scarcity, exacerbating their already dire living conditions.

However, hope prevails in the local and indigenous people’s grassroots environmental and social movements, which center on the right to self-determination and the local governance of indigenous communities over their own land and environment, as we witness in the case of the Karen people.

Progressive Voice says that the Salween Peace Park and the Thaw-thi Taw Oo Indigenous Park

in Karen State serve as examples of sustainable alternatives to destructive extractive development models, empowering local indigenous communities to reclaim their traditional practices, assert their rights, and manage their own natural resources.

These initiatives were led by the collective effort of local representatives and environmental groups, such as the Mutraw Forestry Department and the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network.

In Myanmar’s long history, through ruthless violence and blatant corruption, the Myanmar military has systematically destroyed the country’s economy, natural resources, and environment to amass immense private wealth for itself and its cronies.

It has suppressed existing forms of local governance, established economic arrangements, and long-standing socio-cultural practices. Needless to say, they would not have been able to do this without colluding with foreign investors.

Time and again, the Myanmar military has offered foreign investors an opportunity to exploit communities, land, and other natural resources to fuel global capitalism on the backs of Myanmar’s people.

The Myanmar military junta’s environmental destruction and ruthless pursuit of wealth through extractive activities come at an extremely grave cost to the people of Myanmar, both now and for generations to come, according to Progressive Voice.

It says that it is critical for the international community, private companies, and state-owned companies to immediately and responsibly divest from junta-led destructive so-called development projects.

Instead, solidarity and practical support, as identified by local and indigenous communities that commit to human rights and environmental protection, must go directly to the people of Myanmar in their struggle for federal democracy, self-determination, justice, and sustainable development.

For Myanmar’s rivers to flow freely, respect and recognition of local communities’ wisdom, resilience, and self-determination that protect and preserve their ancestral land and natural resources for their future generations to come are essential.

JUNTA'S PEACEMAKING COMMITTEE HOLDS MEETING WITH 7 NCA SIGNATORIES

- The junta's National Solidarity and Peacemaking Negotiation Committee (NSPNC) held an official meeting with the seven ethnic armed groups that have signed the Nationwide Cease Fire (NCA) at the National Unity and Peacemaking Center in Nay Pyi Taw on March 28, according to junta-controlled newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar and local news outlets.
- The junta's Union Minister of Border Affairs and NSPNC chairperson Lt. Gen. Tun Tun Naung and NSPNC members met with representatives from Pa-O National Liberation Organization (PNLO), Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), Lahu Democratic Union (LDU), Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), KNU/KNLA Peace Council, New Mon State Party (NMSP) and Shan State Restoration Council (RCSS).
- During the meeting, the NSPNC chairperson delivered an opening speech and further discussed the peace process related to the NCA. He elaborated on issues concerning halting armed clashes across the country, the junta army's six peace policies, and sustainable peace processes.
- Following this, Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) chairperson Saw Mra Razar Lin delivered a welcome speech and addressed the ongoing development of the peace process. She also discussed issues pertaining to building a democratic and federal union, as well as the preparation and formation of the Peace Process Steering Team (PPST).
- However, analysts argued that peace negotiations involving the Myanmar military and the seven NCA signatories, none of whom are actively engaged in conflict with the junta, hold little pragmatic significance.
- Currently, the junta has engaged in fighting with various ethnic armed groups and local resistance groups including People's Defense Force (PDF) and People's Defense Team (PDT) operated under the command of publicly-mandated exiled National Unity Government (NUG).



AA INVITES FOREIGN INVESTMENT IN RAKHINE STATE

The Arakan Army (AA) announced on 25 March 2024 that it invites and welcomes foreign investment in areas that it controls and that it will protect any foreign investments in its areas.

The announcement said that the AA would welcome any investments that benefit Rakhine State and it would also ensure the security of any such projects and the security of the people working on them. It also highlighted that the AA is a reliable organisation and is doing its best to bring peace, stability, security, new administrations, regional development and healthcare, as soon as possible, to the areas under its control.

The announcement also urged foreign investors who already have projects underway in Rakhine State to cooperate with the AA and continue with their projects.

Foreign-financed projects underway in Rakhine State include the Chinese funded Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and the Indian-funded Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP), which also goes through areas of Chin State under AA control.

The KMMTTP is a transport route connecting the landlocked Indian northeastern states with a port at the mouth of the Kaladan River in Rakhine State.

In Myanmar, the project will consist of a highway through Chin State from the Indian border at Zorampu to a river port in Paletwa Township, also in Chin State. From there, goods will be transferred onto boats and carried down the river to the seaport at the mouth of the Kaladan River.

So far, in Myanmar, the building of the river port at Paletwa, the dredging of the Kaladan River so that it can take bigger cargo ships and the construction of the port at the mouth of the Kaladan River in Sittwe have been completed, but the road between Zorampu and Paletwa still needs to be built.

Construction of the road was suspended in 2020, but it restarted in early 2023 and as recently as June 2023, the junta Federal Economy and Commerce Minister U Aung Naing Oo said that the road was under construction and that completion of the KMMTTP would not be affected by fighting in Rakhine State.

But, the AA broke a November 2022 ceasefire with the junta in Rakhine and Chin states in November 2023. The renewed fighting then stopped construction of the road and the AA took control of Paletwa.

The Indian Government had already held talks with the junta about the Zorampu to Paletwa highway, but since the AA has now taken control of Paletwa it is also in talks with the AA about the parts of the project in areas under the AA's control.

The Member of Parliament (MP) for the Indian state of Mizoram, Pu Valavena, already met with officials from the Arakan Army (AA) at the border on 29 February to discuss the KMMTTP.

Currently, the AA is in control of Paletwa Township in Rakhine State and the townships of Pauktaw, Mrauk-U, Kyauktaw, Minbya, Myaybon, Ponnagyun, Ramree and Rathedaung in Rakhine State.

According to the AA announcement, it is currently launching attacks and offensives against all the remaining junta military outposts in Rakhine State and it will not stop until all the posts surrender or are overrun by the AA.



RUSSIA AND MYANMAR JUNTA DISCUSS BUILDING A DEEP-SEA PORT

The Myanmar junta is in negotiations with Russia to build a deep-sea port in southern Myanmar, the junta leader, Min Aung Hlaing, said in an interview with the Russian ITAR-TASS Media.

He said: “We are implementing a project that will enable vessels of more than 200,000 tons deadweight to dock at the port.”

Though he referred to the project being built in southern Myanmar during the interview, Min Aung Hlaing gave no further details.

Previously, at the 4th Russia-Myanmar Economic Forum held in Moscow on 27 January 2024, the junta Minister of Investment and Foreign Relations, Dr. Kan Zaw, said that the junta would ensure that Russian investors and their investments were fully protected.

On 14 September 2023, Russia also said that it was closely cooperating with Myanmar in trade and the economic, cultural and educational sectors.

Though Min Aung Hlaing gave no further details about Russian investment in a deep-sea port, currently, the junta is building two deep-sea ports.

One is at the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Rakhine State. Another is also planned for the Dawei SEZ in Tanintharyi Region. Currently, construction there is suspended, though the junta says it plans to start construction again soon.

In early 2024 the junta deputy chief, Vice-Senior General Soe Win, urged officials to speed up the building of the Kyaukphyu and Dawei SEZ mega-projects.

The Chinese company, China International Trust and Investment Corporation (CITIC), is currently constructing the Kyaukphyu SEZ.

Originally, the Dawei SEZ was going to be built by the Thai company Italian-Thai. Construction was started in 2008 but is currently suspended for various reasons and little work has been done to develop the SEZ.

The current Thai government has an interest in seeing the Dawei SEZ constructed as it is working on an Eastern Economic Corridor with an SEZ in eastern Thailand that the Thais want to connect with the Dawei SEZ.

It is planned to build the Dawei SEZ in two parts. The first part, on a 27-square-mile plot, will include the deep-sea port, an industrial zone, an electric power station, and an LNG terminal as part of its construction. It is estimated that the cost to build the first part of the Dawei SEZ will be about one billion US dollars.

Also in the interview with ITAR-TASS Media, Min Aung Hlaing claimed that the junta was struggling hard to make sure Myanmar economy recovers from its decline, which he claimed was caused by economic mismanagement by the previous National League for Democracy (NLD) government, rather than the junta dragging the country into an unsustainable civil war.

CHINA REAFFIRMS FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR SRI LANKA

China has said it would continue to support Sri Lanka, as the crisis-hit island nation's prime minister on Saturday wrapped up a visit to Beijing to try to finalise a debt restructuring deal.

Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena arrived in China on Monday for a visit that included meeting President Xi Jinping and an appearance at the Boao Forum, a high-profile international meeting.

Sri Lanka's years-long economic crisis was high on the agenda during Gunawardena's trip, with China accounting for around 10 percent of the South Asian country's total foreign debt.

China is willing to "continue supporting its financial institutions to actively negotiate with Sri Lanka, maintain friendly communication with other creditors, play a positive role in the International Monetary Fund, assist Sri Lanka in financial relief," Beijing's foreign ministry said in the Chinese version of a joint bilateral statement released Friday.

The two sides agreed to "make every effort to promote the Port City Colombo and Hambantota Development Project, turning them into flagship projects of the Sino-Sri Lankan joint construction of the 'Belt and Road'", the statement said, referring to Xi's massive Belt and Road global infrastructure initiative.

The southern sea port of Hambantota was considered among the white-elephant projects launched by former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, who ruled the country for a decade until 2015.

Rajapaksa borrowed heavily from China for projects that many criticised as a debt trap that led to the worst economic crisis in Sri Lanka's history.

Unable to repay a huge loan taken from China in 2017 to build Hambantota port, Sri Lanka handed it over to the state-owned China Merchants Group for \$1.12 billion on a 99-year lease.

Sri Lanka defaulted on its \$46 billion external debt in April 2022 after it ran out of foreign exchange to finance even essential imports such as food, fuel and medicine.

It secured a \$2.9 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout last year, with the programme conditional on a debt deal that satisfies foreign creditors.

China had agreed "in principle" to restructure Sri Lanka's debt in December, but neither Colombo nor Beijing had given details and the two are yet to finalise an agreement.

Sri Lanka's government said in January that a foreign debt restructure would be finalised by the beginning of April.

AFP



Photo: Eddy Billard

GEOPOLITICAL UNREST SPURS WEALTHY MYANMAR NATIONALS TO SEEK REFUGE IN THAILAND

- Amidst the tumultuous currents of geopolitical unrest and the civil war in Myanmar, a new wave emerges, driving wealthy Myanmar nationals to seek refuge in Thailand, according to Suphin Mechuchep, the CEO of Sen X, reported The Nation.
- She said on March 27 that numerous wealthy people from Myanmar are purchasing condominiums in the Ramkhamhaeng and Bang Na districts of Bangkok, primarily for their children enrolled in universities within these vicinities, including Ramkhamhaeng University and Assumption University (ABAC).
- “Before and during Covid-19, the top foreign buyers of condo units in Thailand were from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. But since last year, there has been greater demand from Myanmar nationals and that has pushed them into the top 3,” said Suphin Mechuchep.
- Suphin said that more people wanting condos is good for Thai developers. They struggle to sell to Thai buyers because they have less money due to rising household debts and a slow economy. He thinks Myanmar people moving to Thailand will continue for a while.
- In Myanmar, the junta, which has lost territories and bases in northern Shan state and Rakhine state and is confronting a widespread armed uprising across the country, has implemented a law mandating military service for all eligible youth. As a result, many young people opt to avoid fleeing to Thailand.



Photo: AFP



DIGITAL MAGAZINE

Our relaunch of Mizzima Weekly – with Issue 1 released on 11 April – will provide readers with a more focused read on what matters in Myanmar and the wider region, with an emphasis on analysis, insight and providing key talking points.



TENDING THE FIELDS

Women work in the rice fields on the outskirts of the capital Naypyidaw. Photo: AFP





The Long Road Home

Ko Ko Gyi describes his many decades of activism with a single goal in mind: to take down the Burmese military

KO YIN AYE RECOUNTS HIS ACTIVISM IN MYANMAR AND THE USA

After the National League for Democracy (NLD) party's landslide victory in 2015, Ko Yin Aye remembers thinking to himself, "Okay, this is the time to retire from my activism, so let's just relax. I felt forced to retire."

This is now a rueful memory as he looks back over some of the key moments in his decades-long struggle for Myanmar's freedom, and autonomy from military rule and brutality in an interview with Insight Myanmar on their podcast service.

Ko Yin Aye's journey as a student activist began with the 1988 Uprising, after which he joined the newly-formed All Bamar Student Democratic Front (ABSDF). His active involvement in that historic movement, and subsequent years of steadfast domestic and international advocacy, illustrate his unwavering commitment to advancing Burmese democracy. In this episode, he offers some reflective insights and perspectives that both shed light on the persistent obstacles the country faces, and the windows of hope he sees in Myanmar's ongoing journey towards peace and freedom.

Looking back, Ko Yin Aye vividly recalls those pivotal events of 35 years ago, when he and his college mates at the Rangoon Institute of Technology bravely stood up to their country's repressive regime. In 1987, the government decided to invalidate key currency denominations with little notice, which plunged the majority of the country into poverty overnight

and compelled Ko Yin Aye and his peers to protest despite the dangers. He adds, "A lot of people were in trouble, because all their money was just gone! They went broke and experienced a lot of trouble. They [the regime] never compensated anyone for what they had done."

Tensions further escalated the following March, when a dispute between university students and the son of a local official culminated in a violent— and disproportionate— response from local authorities. Ko Yin Aye recounts in detail a horrific night in which nonviolent gatherings were greeted with water cannons, tear gas, and ultimately live ammunition, resulting in casualties.

"The security force showed up, and then they started to crack down on the students who had gathered peacefully! They didn't give any warning, nor did they talk to the students. They just started cracking down on us. That happened at night; it was like a nightmare! We didn't expect that crack down." This initial spat of violence would trigger widespread outrage, eventually leading to the historic event known later as the 8888 Uprising.

"Our anger and frustration got to the maximum. We started a big protest against the injustice and behaviour by the security forces," he recalls. "That was 35 years ago, and I still remember that night." Sadly, that evening was only the beginning, and as the military began unleashing even greater violence, Ko

Yin Aye, along with many other protesting students, were forced to flee for their lives towards the Thai-Burma border. “They simply switched from one military dictatorship system to another, and they used guns to control the country,” he says, describing how the BSPP (Burma Socialist Program Party) was disbanded, with SLORC (State Law and Restoration Council) quickly taking its place. “So we decided to fight back through armed struggle,” he says, referring to the ABSDF.

Ko Yin Aye, along with other student leaders, joined forces with various ethnic militias, pushing towards a shared goal of toppling the regime. “We fought back together with the KNU [Karen National Union] and Mon together against the military,” he says. “The ABSDF made a bridge between the majority Bamar and the ethnic people, by paying with some of our colleagues’ lives... we gained the trust of the KNU, the new Mon state party, the KIA [Kachin Independence Army].”

However, the path to liberation was fraught with challenges. Ko Yin Aye tells how General Khin Nyunt sought to weaken the emerging armed resistance by employing a “divide and conquer” strategy, signing ceasefire agreements with certain ethnic organizations and forging deals with others. “The armed struggle alone couldn’t win, because we didn’t have much support from the international community or the diaspora,” Ko Yin Aye says, acknowledging the need for a strategic shift of their own in response.

So, in the face of overwhelming force and with the pathways to any ground victory increasingly closed off, Ko Yin Aye and many of his fellow compatriots made the critical decision to abandon direct action, instead undertaking nonviolent protest from abroad. He, himself, relocated to the United States in 1993, where he continued his tireless advocacy for democracy in Myanmar.

Settling near Washington DC, Ko Yin Aye established the Democratic Burmese Student Organization, laying the foundation for diaspora activism in the post-8888 era. “We began campaigning, lobbying, and doing whatever we could,” he remembers. He recalls that US President Bill Clinton increased sanctions on the Burmese military regime in 1997, and feeling gratified that his efforts were paying off. And while he began to wonder if he could finally retire from his life of activism after the 2015 election of the NLD, the 2021 military coup set him back on his original course.

He has since been involved in a variety of activities, which include: regularly organizing and attends rallies and demonstrations to mobilize people on the ground;

supporting diplomatic campaigns to help rally global support and condemn the coup; overseeing grassroots fundraising campaigns, which often take the form of events or food fairs; and encouraging the NUG to look into war bonds, a clever strategy that facilitated the influx of much-needed funds from the Myanmar diaspora. And then there is the Burma Act. Ko Yin Aye describes how he and his colleagues provided critical feedback on the legislation as it was being crafted in the US Congress. Important collaborations and endorsements were sought through lobbying, including from influential lawmakers like Mitch McConnell, Ben Cardin, and Gregory Meeks. He describes how Senator McConnell included some of their suggested revisions in the National Defence Authorization Act in 2022.

“Mitch McConnell is a long-time champion of democracy of Burma in the US Congress,” Ko Yin Aye affirms. “He’s been introducing a lot of sanction bills, and whenever the United States tries to punish the military, he was there! Mitch McConnell just took that leap, and I think that’s his very personal interest. We love it.”

These days, Ko Yin Aye is also pushing for early warning systems in areas where the junta carries out air attacks, and continues to advocate for further sanctions against MOGE (Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprises) to limit military funding.

“We have voters’ rights,” he says in closing, recognizing the power he now holds in possessing an American passport, “so we used those kinds of powers to approach the State Department. We definitely need the American people’s help, because... the voice of the people is very powerful. [Getting support] not only from the Burmese diaspora, but also the American voices, is more powerful. So, please help us to push the United States government, and the United States Congress, to help Burma more effectively and to help end the terrorist regime!”

Check out the interview with Ko Yin Aye on Insight Myanmar here:

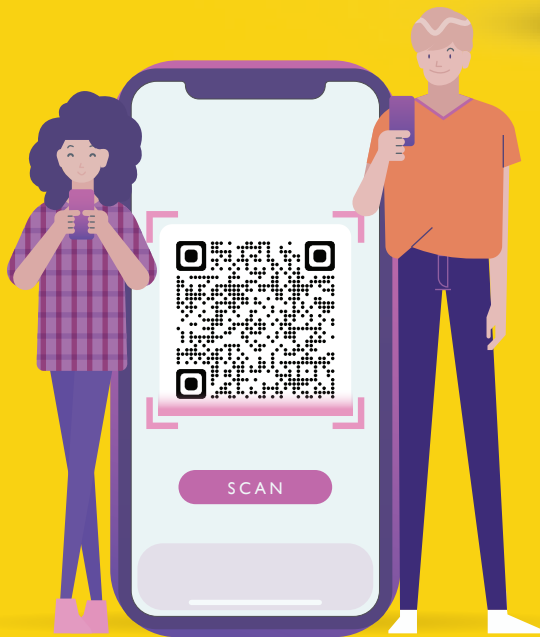
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