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Our relaunched magazine Mizzima Weekly provides 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.

MYANMAR JUNTA'S CRITICAL MILITARY PUSH TO REGAIN GROUND BEFORE THE RAINS

The Myanmar military is in a race against time at the height of the hot season.

The forces under Operation Aung Zeya are currently conducting raids in Kawkaeik, Kyainseikgyi, and Toekawcoe, deploying three large columns comprising over 3,000 soldiers, with armour, artillery and air power, bearing down on Myawaddy Township. These forces have advanced from Hpa-an, Mawlamyine, Thanbyuzayat, and Ye towns.

At the height of the hot season, Operation Aung Zeya seeks to regain territory from the Karen National Union (KNU) military forces before the rains set in, likely in June. With Vice Senior General Soe Win at the helm, the move appears to be a desperate bid to try to gain the upper hand nationwide after a string of defeats and stand-offs at the hands of the resistance in a number of theatres, most notably the Three Brotherhood Alliance's Operation 1027 in northern Shan State and the Arakan Army's gains in Rakhine, which saw junta dominoes fall.

Senior General Soe Win's mission is to wrest back and secure Myawaddy, a significant billion-dollar border trade town on the Asian Highway, both in terms of security and the revenue the town delivers to the generals in Naypyidaw.

That means Operation Aung Zeya's forces have three or four weeks at the most before the rains bog them down in the mud, substantially inhibiting forward momentum.

Security analysts stress that today, in May 2024, the Myanmar military stand at an important juncture. Success or failure in Myawaddy could dictate the junta's fortunes or its ability to hold on to power in Myanmar. What is clear is that junta leader Min Aung Hlaing miscalculated the public's response to his February 2021 coup and his military forces are not sufficiently prepared for the multi-front defence he is fighting against the People's

Defence Forces (PDF) and the Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (ERO) scattered across the hills and plains of the country.

In addition, as security analyst Anthony Davis points out in an article in Asia Times, Operation Aung Zeya is a complicated, untried and untested military operation that involves conventional warfare involving armour and air power. Such an operation involves careful communications and coordination, the military's biggest offensive operation since independence in 1948. The junta appears to have the help of the former Border Guard Force (BGF), now rebranded in "neutral" ethnic colours as the Karen National Army (KNA). In both guises, the force has been focused primarily on profiting from protection offered by its Commander Saw Chit Thu to a string of casinos and industrial scam centres run in the Moei River border region by Chinese mafia groups.

As analyst Davis points out, "Myanmar's armed forces, or Tatmadaw, are nowhere near qualifying as a modern war-fighting machine". How they will fare in this crucial battle against battle-hardened ERO and PDF forces is difficult to predict.

Recapturing Myawaddy matters to junta leader Min Aung Hlaing, both on a security level and to reinforce his now-tattered international status as the leader of an administration that diplomats and VIPs feel they have to deal with - not the leader of a "failed state" close to collapse.

Analyst Zachary Abuza claims the junta will pull out the stops in this crucial battle.

"Along with the scorching heat, expect blistering, brutal attacks, as the military junta desperately tries to retake lost territory and critical supply lines before the rains set in," Abuza says.

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Cover photo of Myanmar protestors in Bangkok by AFP



Myanmar nationals protest against the military junta. Photo: AFP

MYANMAR: POSSIBLE SCENARIOS & THEIR PROBABILITY

Igor Blazevic

At this moment, in May 2024, after a series of significant defeats that the Myanmar junta has suffered in the Northern Shan, Rakhine, Kachin, Karen and Karenni states, there are four possible scenarios of how the Myanmar people's liberation struggle could develop.

Scenario 1: Collapse of the SAC

According to this scenario, the collapse of the State Administration Council (SAC) could pave the way for positive change. Allied liberation forces will continue with successful waves of military offensives in different parts of Myanmar, taking more and more outposts, bases, territories and cities; capturing more and more weapons and ammunition; inflicting more and more demoralizing defeats on junta troops; taking control over more and more supply or trade routes, more and more revenue and production sources and more and more strategic assets. Well-prepared special operations will continue to either hit highly valuable targets such as jet fuel depots or high-profile psychological warfare targets such as the top military brass.

Junta troops will continue to be overstretched, depleted of soldiers, supplies and ammunition, exhausted and demoralized. There will be more and more defections and surrenders of individual soldiers and police officers as well as the whole units once they are put under the sustained pressure of the liberation forces and cut off from supplies. There will be more and more internal disagreements and disputes within senior officer corps. Frustration, fear and anger over the incompetence of junta leader Min Aung Hlaing will be bubbling until it reaches a boiling point.

The NUG and allied EROs will deepen and clarify their political agreement, paving the way for a unified and stable post-junta transition. This political pact will gradually include other political actors, fostering a broader alliance that will aggregate around the gravitational power of the National Unity Government (NUG) and "Three Brotherhood Alliance" (TBA). This NUG-TBA alliance, increasingly looking like the more probable winner in the struggle against the military regime, holds the promise of a brighter political future for Myanmar.

The solid political and military alliance of the liberation forces will make them appear credible vis-à-vis neighbours and international actors. So gradually, neighbours and ASEAN will grasp and accept the changing reality on the ground and will increasingly see allied forces as credible partners for talks about the political future, stability and their economic and geopolitical interests in Myanmar.

Urban underground operations will continue to make junta officers and administrators feel highly vulnerable and insecure. Anxiety and realization that they are not in control and do not have a place to feel safe will paralyze the junta's administrative rank and file in reluctance to implement orders from the top.

The civic resistance movement will continue to agitate for broad public support for the revolution and for the federal democratic future of the country. More and more educated people will put their knowledge and experience at service of revived public services and local governance in the liberated territories. More international assistance will flow to liberated territories to help rebuild public services and local governance.

All this together will lead to the collapse of the SAC either through the implosion of the military from the bottom up (units across the country, in a domino effect, start to lay down weapons and stop fighting for the SAC) or through an internal coup which will remove Min Aung Hlaing and accept an exit of the military from politics.

A winning alliance of liberation forces will move quickly to take over central power and form an inclusive transition government.

Scenario 2: New negative, destructive stalemate

In spite of defeats and losses on the periphery of the large country, the Myanmar military will manage to dig itself into better protected defensive lines in central and coastal parts of Myanmar. The SAC will leave the periphery of the country to resistance forces led by different Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and will concentrate all its resources (officers, best equipped and most loyal pretorian units, pro-junta militias and forcefully conscripted soldiers, weapons, supplies, available finances and Buddhist radicals) in defense of a smaller territory in a rectangle that comprise of Monywa, Mandalay, Pin Oo Lwin, Taunggyi, and stretch down to Bagan, Meiktila, Magway, Naypyidaw and further South to Pyay, Pago, Patheingyi, Yangon and Mawlamyine. This is less territory but still significant enough and still the place where around 60% of the population of the country lives. This territory includes big cities, the symbolic political capital (Naypyidaw) and commercial capital (Yangon), main airfields and ports, and state prerogatives such as the central bank, telecommunications regulator, issuing passports and visas, and foreign embassies.

The resistance will try to undertake further offensives but will face painful losses by hitting defense lines that are too strong. From this new "fortress", the

military will continue to inflict as much destruction as they can on civilians and civilian infrastructure in the liberated territories. The junta will intentionally, as much as they are able, commit atrocities, burn the land, villages and livelihood, destroy whole cities and escalate the humanitarian catastrophe. Parts of the country that are beyond the junta's control will continue to experience heavy, devastating destruction.

That destruction will be particularly fierce whenever liberation forces try offensive forays into the Magway, Mandalay and Bago regions. Any attempt of liberation forces to gain a stronger foothold in those regions will trigger an immediate counter-offensive with ruthless and excessive scorched earth tactics. Sagaing will be the next region where the junta will try to apply, as much as they can, systematic punitive destruction in order to prevent liberation forces from consolidating control and introducing functional governing. The liberated territory will be overburdened by an enormous humanitarian emergency. Big cities that remain under junta control and which lay outside of the mentioned rectangle, like Hakha, Myitkyina, Lashio, and Dawei, will be used as garrison outposts.

Liberated ethnic territories will be exposed to systematic and patient stick-and-carrot policy: either you accept a ceasefire and some sort of deal with us (junta), or we will continue to bomb in unpredictable ways your villages, cities, hospitals, schools, festivities and gatherings.

Nobody will give up, neither the junta entrenched behind its new defense lines and with whole cities taken hostages as human shields nor the resistance forces, which will not be ready to subdue themselves to the renewed military dominance once they have, with so much sacrifice liberated a significant part of the territory.

According to this scenario, Myanmar will remain stuck in further circles of destruction and suffering. Nobody will be a winner, and everybody will be a loser.

Scenario 3: Stalemate, de-escalation of fighting under outside pressure and ceasefire negotiations

According to this scenario, anti-junta revolutionary forces will significantly expand liberated territory, and by doing that, they will come under strong pressure and responsibility to govern the territory and population under their control. The task of consolidating governing control, providing law and order and basic services, and having stable financial sources for those new obligations will becoming more urgent than the task of continuing to fight with the junta, even more so

because the junta itself will show little ambition to attempt counteroffensives.

Everybody will feel exhausted after a prolonged period of intensive fights that started in October 2023. Many actors will feel that they have gained a lot, so they are ready to let active military operations calm down. There is always someone who will make this pivot as the first, that will influence the second one, and others will follow suit.

Neighbours, particularly China and Thailand, are already actively persuading and pressuring both the junta and EROs to accept ceasefires and start negotiations. The peace and aid community of donors, diplomats, INGOs, and NGOs sees new opportunities for themselves, so they are also actively offering carrots to anybody who is ready to take this path.

This scenario is hard to imagine as long as Min Aung Hlaing is in charge of the junta. He is not capable of making any strategic pivot; he sees victory at all costs as his only survival option ("The Assad choice"). He and the SAC are too tainted with crimes and too hated to be acceptable partners for anybody on the resistance side.

However, it is imaginable that at one point in time, a weakened military, to save itself, will remove Min Aung Hlaing and put forward a new incarnation of the "peace and development council" with a more moderate-looking interface. Neighbours (China, Thailand, India) and the ASEAN will see this as an opportunity that should not be missed and will jump to give this new "opportunity" credibility and incentives, which it would not otherwise have. Other international actors will accept whatever comes from the ASEAN and neighbours because their only concern is not getting involved.

In some parts of the country, the lower-intensity conflict will still continue for some time, and from time to time, high tensions will erupt, but in general, fragile ceasefires facilitated under the pressure of neighbours will hold (like in the Northern Shan State nowadays).

De-escalation of conflict will be used by international and regional actors to push for further ceasefire negotiations and for some new "power-sharing pact". People's uprising, nationwide liberation struggle, the revolution and the NUG will be sidelined, and neighbours and internationals will manage to bring back Myanmar politics into the familiar territories of the elite pact that is forged through the tripartite negotiations between the military, some political entity representing the Bama majority, and EAOs.

Scenario 4: New equilibrium through fragmentation of the country

According to this scenario, Myanmar will be de facto broken into 7-9 territories controlled and governed by different armed forces. The military will remain in control of a significant part of the lowlands and coastal area, but it will no longer be the dominant power capable of controlling the country as a whole. The military will be just one among several other armed-governing entities. The Myanmar borderland and a significant part of upper Myanmar will be controlled and governed by other armed forces.

There will be less conflict. All armed forces will be focused on controlling their own territories and on running different types of businesses to generate revenues for themselves and to provide some income and functionality to the population under their control.

Myanmar will nominally still be one state, but de facto, will be fragmented into several pieces that are governed autonomously one from another. Each of its pieces will have not only its own dominant and governing armed group but also one neighbour as its security guarantor and primary economic partner.

A new equilibrium will settle down, and some sort of new stability and new normality will be established, as in Syria today (with the difference that Myanmar will be fragmented in more pieces than Syria).

PROBABILITY OF FOUR SCENARIOS

Scenario No. 1: The collapse of the SAC, is a possible one and a probable one.

However, there is no international actor who is actively advancing this scenario, no government or inter-governmental body making meaningful diplomatic, political and financial investment to give this scenario a better chance. This scenario still depends primarily on domestic actors.

Lack of outside support is a hindrance, but if domestic anti-junta actors remain committed to the goal of removing the military from political power (removing military dictatorship), this scenario is a probable outcome.

This requires the NUG and allied EROs to sustain current patient and systematic military pressure on junta troops across the country. Taking the military cooperation of allied liberation forces to the next strategic level would accelerate the fall of SAC. It is probable that without taking military pressure to the next strategic level, it will not be possible to put the junta under sufficient military pressure in the heartlands.

In addition to ongoing military pressure on the junta, the NUG and allied EROs need to be more agile and effective in deepening and clarifying political agreement on how to manage the post-junta transition. Other armed and political actors should join



Young Myanmar citizens queue to apply for a visa at the Thai embassy in Yangon, seeking to escape the country. Photo: AFP

the alliance. Any self-interested, rigid competition over legitimacy and authority should be strictly avoided. Also, any competition, rivalry and jostling for the territory under the control of different armed groups should be prevented or calmed down whenever it emerges as the highest possible urgency. Everybody should avoid playing hardball (making and trying to push maximalist and dogmatic demands), and everybody should make a significant effort to assure everybody else that their legitimate demands will be satisfied.

Political representatives of the allied liberation forces need to project domestically and internationally that they are a credible political alliance capable of managing the transition, and they need - through a patient and systematic international relations charm offensive - to persuade neighbours and other internationals not to meddle with the intention to help the junta survive, and instead to bet on the peace, stability and recovery that can be delivered only by the allied anti-junta forces.

Scenario No. 3: The de-escalation of fighting under outside persuasion and pressure and follow-up ceasefire negotiations, is something that Myanmar's neighbours and the ASEAN want to achieve. Other relevant international actors (like the UN and Western and Asian democracies) do not want to get involved,

and they are happy to delegate responsibility to the ASEAN.

Since the initial days of the coup, both Myanmar's neighbours and other internationals have expected that the military junta will prevail. They opted to sit-and-wait until the junta finished its dirty job of the brutal crackdown and consolidate control so that they could resume the business-as-usual approach once the military government would remain the only game in the town.

Myanmar neighbours and ASEAN are pretending with various diplomatic initiatives. In reality, they have been avoiding any meaningful intervention, either diplomatic or humanitarian, and have restrained themselves from exercising any pressure. They have been sitting and waiting, comfortably hidden, behind different non-performing initiatives, like the Five Point Consensus, Hun Sen's loud and self-promoting "peace facilitation", Indonesia's behind-the-scenes, 300-plus dialogues with "all" stakeholders, or the recent Thai "humanitarian initiative".

In the meantime, and particularly since successive the Three Brotherhood Alliance offensive in the Northern Shan State, AA offensive in the Rakhine State, Kachin offensive in the North and Karenni and Karen offensives in the East, Myanmar neighbours and the



Many Myanmar men are seeking to avoid the military conscription drive. Photo: AFP

ASEAN have understood that the junta and Myanmar military are much weaker and much more incompetent than they thought they were. They have realized that the junta cannot prevail, cannot reign in control and cannot guarantee stability.

However, Myanmar's neighbours and ASEAN do not want the military to fall. They still cannot imagine Myanmar as a "holding-together state" without an authoritarian military at its centre. They do not want the military to fall because, in their mind, that means the break-up of Myanmar into many pieces and the chaos of state failure.

Myanmar's neighbours and the ASEAN are also not keen on seeing the revolution succeed. They prefer to see settlement achieved through the Asian way, through an elite pact, and not through people's power, revolution, and democracy. They prefer elite horse-trading to empowered citizens making their own choices.

These are reasons why China, Thailand and the ASEAN are eager to try to facilitate ceasefires, offer humanitarian and other incentives, and get everybody to participate in an "all-inclusive" negotiating process.

The junta is currently on the trajectory of inevitable decline and is ready to fall; however, unfortunately, neighbours and ASEAN can give it a lifeline. By doing that, they are prolonging the devastating conflict and making scenarios 2 and 4 (destructive stalemate and fragmentation of the country) more probable than they should be at this particular moment.

Under current circumstances, scenario 3 is not possible, but there is a real danger that Myanmar neighbours and the ASEAN, as well as peace-facilitating donors and INGOs, will create the illusion that this scenario is possible through their diplomatic and humanitarian initiatives and rhetoric.

Scenario 3 is not possible for two fundamental reasons. One is that Min Aung Hlaing is simply not ready and able for any moderation and compromise.

Another and even more important reason is that negotiations between the junta and resistance groups, as proposed and facilitated by either China or ASEAN, will not only help the failing and hated junta to survive but will also keep the military in a position of political dominance, impunity and economic control. What is offered to other stakeholders is a soft surrender in exchange for an end to air bombardments, humanitarian aid, junior positions in politics and a small piece of land where they can run legal and illegal businesses. Nobody on the side of anti-junta resistance has sufficient reasons and incentives to accept this

kind of soft surrender at the moment when they have the upper hand over the military.

Neighbours and the ASEAN cannot succeed in their effort to turn the dynamic of conflict in Myanmar in the direction of scenario 3. However – and unfortunately – their wrongly designed initiatives can turn the trajectory in the direction of scenario 2, a negative, destructive stalemate in which the people of Myanmar will remain stuck in further circles of destruction and suffering.

This will inevitably, after some time, lead not to anybody's victory but to total exhaustion, which will then most probably keep the country in the sad shape of scenario 4 – a broken land run by different militias.

A new warlord equilibrium and stability could emerge, but one in which Myanmar's natural resources and its people will be easy prey to powerful local, regional, and international predators. Youth and educated people will migrate anywhere abroad as much as they can. Those whose livelihoods will be ruined by the burning heat, long droughts, or devastating monsoons and cyclones will do the same.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, now, in May 2024, there are four possible scenarios of how war in Myanmar can develop further. There is only one good scenario: the potential and probable fall of the embattled, seriously weakened, and completely discredited SAC and the allied liberation forces taking over the transition government, with neighbours, ASEAN, and internationals, with a long-due effort, coming to assist them in the challenging but feasible task of building a federal, democratic country.

There is also one unrealistic and improbable scenario of a negotiated settlement between the junta and resistance forces, which is unfortunately preferred and pursued by Myanmar's neighbours and the ASEAN.

There are also two interconnected dark scenarios, with two more years of prolonged, bitter, highly destructive ongoing war between the junta and the resistance, which will end in the fragmentation of the country into different parts governed by different armed groups.

It is a really mindboggling why Myanmar neighbours, ASEAN and other internationals do not bet on what is the only positive scenario and the one which could become not only possible, but also very probable.

Igor Blazevic is a European democracy activist who has years of experience in Myanmar.



Civilians flee fighting between the Arakan Army and the junta forces in Rakhine State.

ARAKAN ARMY EDGING TOWARDS TOTAL DOMINANCE OF RAKHINE?

The Arakan Army (AA) has asserted its control over key military installations and strategic posts in Rakhine State, making a significant advancement in its ongoing conflict with the Myanmar military.

According to a statement released by the AA, on May 3, 2024, they successfully seized one Military Operation Command (MOC) and four Battalions in Buthidaung Township. The captured MOC, identified as No.15, along with Battalions No. 552, 564, 565, and 551 yielded a substantial cache of weapons and ammunition. Reports indicate that a considerable number of State Administration Council (SAC) troops were killed in the operation, while hundreds, including the vice-commander of MOC (15), surrendered to the AA. Additionally, over a hundred SAC soldiers reportedly fled to Bangladesh, further weakening the

military presence in the region.

The AA's offensive extended to Maungdaw Township, where they seized control of strategic outposts including the Tower post, the Six-Mile post, the No. 1 Border Guard Station (Kyiganpyin), and the No.10 Border Guard Station (Hlaphoekhaung) on the same day. Maungdaw, a crucial border trade city in Myanmar's western region, now finds itself under increased AA influence. The SAC troops have sabotaged bridges leading to both cities in this on May 6 and 8 in a bid to impede AA operations.

In Ann Township, the AA seized two strategic posts crucial for protecting the Western Command headquarters. With control over these posts, the AA gains leverage over the highway, the sole link between central Myanmar and northern Rakhine State.

Phe Than, a prominent Rakhine politician, expressed concerns over the escalating conflict, suggesting that the AA may target four major cities - Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Ann, and Thandwe - in the upcoming monsoon season. Kyaukphyu, home to the Deep-Sea Port project and surrounded by AA forces, also faces heightened tensions.

As military defeats mount, the SAC has reportedly attempted to stoke racial tensions in Buthidaung, resulting in the burning of approximately 1,500 houses in April, primarily belonging to Rakhine and Hindu communities. Local sources suggest that the actual number of destroyed houses could be significantly higher.

The conflict's impact extends beyond immediate casualties, with infants from seized townships facing obstacles in accessing vaccinations due to SAC-imposed restrictions. Medical professionals stress the critical need for refrigerated storage in hospitals to maintain vaccine potency, highlighting the dire healthcare situation exacerbated by the ongoing hostilities.

ROHINGYA DRAGOONED INTO ARMY AND MUSLIM MILITIAS

Many Rohingya men are currently caught between a rock and a hard place. In Rakhine State, the junta has been visiting Rohingya IDP camps and villages and conscripting young Rohingya men into the military. They are then being used to attack AA forces. Junta troops accompanied by a newly-recruited ethnic Rohingya militia reportedly raided a village in Rakhine last week, torching buildings and killing a young mother of two children, according to Mizzima and RFA reports. The attack on Maungdaw township's Wai Thar Li village came amid widespread gains in Rakhine by the AA, that prompted the military regime to implement a military draft to shore up depleted troop losses. As part of its efforts, the military has reportedly forcibly recruited Rohingyas into pro-junta militias which it says must be formed to protect their Muslim faith in the majority Buddhist Rakhine State. But observers say the junta is trying to stoke ethnic tensions in the region to slow the advance of the ethnic Rakhine AA. The irony will not be lost on this Muslim minority, seven years after Myanmar troops pursued a "genocidal" drive against Rohingya, driving over 700,000 to flee to Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, in Bangladesh refugee camps, Muslim militant groups have forced about 500 Rohingya refugees to join the war in their homeland where fighting between rival factions has intensified sharply in recent weeks, according to Mizzima and RFA

reports. Members of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the smaller Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) have taken their fellow Muslim Rohingya refugees from the camps for military training, said people living in the world's largest camp in southeast Bangladesh. The reports, if confirmed, could herald intensifying conflict in Rakhine State where residents say the Myanmar junta has been pressing members of the persecuted Rohingya minority to help battle one of Myanmar most powerful insurgent forces, the AA, which draws its support from the state's majority ethnic Rakhine Buddhist community.

CHINESE ARRIVALS IN A CONFLICT ZONE

On 28 April, 500 Chinese personnel and 20 construction machines landed on Made Island, Kyaukphyu township, via a maritime route. A local worker, who is working in the Chinese project, disclosed that a ship transported the machinery directly to Made Island, all destined for project use. Departing on 30 April, the ship returned to China. Chinese workers, including engineers and technicians, are lodging in Kyaukphyu city for the project's duration, focused on road construction within the Special Economic Zone and deep-sea port.

The Kyaukphyu deep-sea port, a significant Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Myanmar, comprises 30% Myanmar ownership and 70% Chinese. The recent influx of Chinese labour is linked to an appendix agreement contract signed between SAC and China's CITIC Group on 26 December 2023, indicating their involvement in the implementation of the contract.

THE CHINA-MYANMAR RELATIONSHIP

In recent diplomatic engagements between China and Myanmar, significant developments have unfolded, highlighting a spectrum of cooperation in the suppression of online fraud, the resumption of border trade in ERO-controlled areas, and the National Unity Government (NUG) request to China.

Security cooperation: Myanmar's Home Affairs Minister, Lieutenant General Yar Pyae, and China's Public Security Minister, Mr. Wang Xiao Hong, recently convened a meeting in China to discuss combating smuggling, cross-border crimes, online fraud, and gambling. China also donated 5 million yuan to the Myanmar Police Force and offered the Golden Great Wall Commemorative Medal to Yar Pyae.

Repatriation of telecom fraud suspects: On 6 May, Myanmar handed over 92 Chinese nationals suspected



Divide and rule - Rohingya men are pawns in the struggle for control in Rakhine State. Photo: AFP

of telecom and online fraud to China. China's Ministry of Public Security confirmed the repatriation, revealing a total of 49,000 Chinese suspects have been returned to China as of 6 May.

NUG and the Chinese government: The NUG Foreign Affairs Minister Zin Mar Aung revealed in a recent interview with the South China Morning Post that they had sent a request letter to the Chinese government, which mentioned stopping weapons support to Myanmar military junta. She added that the Chinese government only acknowledged receipt of the letter and provided no further response.

Resumption of border trade: China-Myanmar border trade, which had been weakened due to Operation 1027, has resumed between Naung Taung in China and Nam Hkam in Myanmar in the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)-controlled area since 29 April. This reopening was conducted under the joint supervision of the TNLA and the Shan State Army (SSA). The trade primarily encompasses the export of Myanmar's metal ore and charcoal, alongside the import of construction materials from China.

THAILAND ANNOUNCES NARCOTICS CRACKDOWN

Expect a tightening of Myanmar border checks and Thai police searches as the Thai government tightens the screws on the illegal drug trade – but the crackdown is unlikely to be as severe as under former PM Thaksin Shinawatra's "war on drugs" in the early 2000s.

Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin on Wednesday last week vowed to crack down on illegal drugs, saying that possessing "even one pill" should be punished, and ordering officials to press ahead with plans to recriminalise cannabis, AFP reports. The Thai government announced plans to re-list cannabis as a narcotic in February, after decriminalising the drug in 2022 – a U-turn that is prompting protest. The kingdom was once notorious for its tough drug laws, but it has sought to cash in on the global boom in medical marijuana in recent years.

Srettha, who took office last August and has frequently voiced his opposition to recreational cannabis use, said he had asked the health ministry to speed up moves to recriminalise the drug. The ministry said in

February it planned urgent action, but little has changed, and the hundreds of legal cannabis “dispensaries” that sprang up in the wake of liberalisation still operate. The government wants marijuana restricted to medical purposes, after Thailand became the first country in Southeast Asia to approve such use, in 2018. It is unclear whether Thaksin – currently in legal limbo but viewed by some as pulling strings behind the scenes – might be involved in pushing for a return to a tough crackdown on drugs.

As Human Rights Watch reported, in February 2003, the Thai government under then Prime Minister Thaksin, launched a “war on drugs”, purportedly aimed at the suppression of drug trafficking and the prevention of drug use. In fact, a major outcome of this policy was arbitrary killings. In the first three months of the campaign there were some 2800 extrajudicial killings. In 2007, an official investigation found that more than half of those killed had no connection whatsoever to

drugs. Apart from the thousands who lost their lives, thousands more were forced into coercive “treatment” for drug addiction. HIV prevention and treatment efforts were also seriously compromised with fear of arrest and mistreatment driving people who inject drugs away from essential harm reduction services.

In 2005, the UN Human Rights Committee raised serious concerns about the “extraordinarily large number of killings” that took place during the “war” and recommended that thorough and independent investigations be undertaken. Then UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Asma Jahangir, sent an urgent communication to the Thai government in 2003. In its response, Thailand said that every unnatural death would be thoroughly investigated in accordance with the law. To date, none of the perpetrators of arbitrary killings have been brought to justice.



Thai PM Shrettha Thavasin speaks to the media. Photo: AFP



Tun Myat Naing, Commander in Chief of the Arakan Army. Photo: AFP

MYANMAR'S ARAKAN ARMY SAYS CAPTURED HUNDREDS OF JUNTA PERSONNEL

Myanmar's Arakan Army said on Monday last week it had captured a military command and taken hundreds of junta personnel prisoner in western Rakhine state, the latest blow to the military.

Clashes have rocked Rakhine since the Arakan Army (AA) attacked security forces in November, ending a ceasefire that had largely held since the junta's 2021 coup.

The military still holds the state capital Sittwe but AA fighters have seized territory in surrounding districts, including bases on the border with India and Bangladesh.

A video released by the AA's media channel said the group had captured "Military Operations Command 15" near the town of Buthidaung, around 90 kilometres (55 miles) north of Sittwe.

The video did not say when its fighters had captured the site but local media have reported regular clashes around Buthidaung in recent days.

"The video record of the deputy commander of MOC 15 after a certain period of siege," read a message published in Burmese, Chinese and English.

After a "final assault" the junta troops had "faced total defeat and surrendered," it said.

Images showed a long line of men, some wearing what appeared to be military uniforms, walking single file through a field.

Some were in shorts and T-shirts and sandals while others were not wearing any footwear. Some

shots showed women and children accompanying the men.

One man with a bandage around his knee was limping and some were being carried in makeshift stretchers.

The video also showed around 200 people sitting in rows in a clearing and men in uniform and guns watching over them.

AFP has attempted to contact a junta spokesman for comment.

The AA is one of several armed ethnic minority groups in Myanmar's border regions, many of whom have battled the military since independence from Britain in 1948 over autonomy and control of lucrative resources.

The AA claims to be fighting for more autonomy for the state's ethnic Rakhine population.

In 2019 clashes between the AA and the military roiled the region and displaced around 200,000 people.

In 2017 the military launched a crackdown on the Rohingya minority there that is now the subject of a United Nations genocide court case.

Since the November outbreak, fighting had spread to 15 of Rakhine state's 17 townships, the UN's human rights chief said last month.

Hundreds have been killed or wounded and more than 300,000 displaced, it said.

AFP



FLASHBACK - Hun Sen with Aung San Suu Kyi in 2019 on a state visit to Cambodia. Photo: AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA REBUFFS CAMBODIA EX-LEADER'S REQUEST TO MEET SUU KYI

Myanmar's junta on Wednesday last week denied a request by former Cambodian leader Hun Sen for talks with democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been detained since a 2021 coup.

Suu Kyi has largely been hidden from view since the military detained her as they seized power in a putsch that has plunged the country into turmoil.

The junta has rebuffed numerous requests by foreign leaders and diplomats to meet the Nobel laureate, 78, who has reportedly suffered health problems during more than three years in detention.

On Tuesday Hun Sen, who ruled Cambodia for nearly four decades before stepping down last year, said he had requested a meeting with Suu Kyi during video talks with junta chief Min Aung Hlaing.

But the junta had "no reason to facilitate it at this moment," junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun said in an audio message released by the military's information team.

The military would hold promised and much-delayed fresh elections "without fail," he said, without giving details.

"We are going to avoid matters which can delay or disturb future processes."

Since her detention Suu Kyi's only known encounter with a foreign envoy came in July last year, when the then Thai foreign minister Don Pramudwinai said he had met her for over an hour.

Suu Kyi is serving a 27-year sentence imposed by a junta court after a trial condemned by rights groups as a sham to shut her out of politics.

Last month the junta said she was being "given necessary care" as temperatures in the military-built capital Naypyidaw, where she is believed to be detained, hit around 40 degrees celsius (104 Fahrenheit).

Zaw Min Tun also addressed Thai media reports that former Thai leader Thaksin Shinawatra had recently held talks with several Myanmar ethnic armed groups operating along their shared border.

Some of those groups have given shelter and military training to those fighting the junta's coup and have themselves clashed regularly with the military.

"We assume that encouraging terrorists groups which destroy Myanmar interests is not appropriate," Zaw Min Tun said.

The military launched its coup citing unsubstantiated claims of massive electoral fraud in 2020 elections won resoundingly by Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD).

It has pushed back a timetable to hold fresh polls several times.

In March junta chief Min Aung Hlaing said it may not be able to hold polls nationwide as it struggles to crush opposition to its rule.



Kasit Piromya

NO DIPLOMATIC IMMUNITY: KASIT PIROMYA

“I have been going through three phases of my life. The first one was as a career diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand for 37 years. And the second phase, after my retirement, I went into politics, both as a former politician and as a political activist. And now I am in my third phase, since about a decade ago, I am more or less in working on advocacy for democracy and human rights, the NGO and civil society organizations.”

This is Kasit Piromya’s self-introduction. He joins the Insight Myanmar podcast to discuss his recent article in the Bangkok Post, titled “A Wrong Approach on Myanmar.”

“I have been working as a diplomat and as a politician, but I think my position is to be honest, truthful, and straightforward. I have done this inside Parliament and outside Parliament, and in every forum: regional, national and international. I do speak my mind,” he says. “I’m a peace-loving person, and I call for diplomacy and dialogue.”

Kasit’s relationship with Myanmar goes back more than five decades, and for much of this time he has been advocating for greater transparency on the Thai side of the equation, and pressing certain bad actors not to collude with the brutal Burmese generals. “The Thai government must take into consideration the welfare of the Myanmar people as a top priority, and not that of the authoritarian regime in Naypyidaw,” he says bluntly. This is in contrast to the military-to-military ties that have developed over the years, which helped spread “criminal activities across the Thai-Myanmar border, [such as] illegal trade in drugs and small arms, endangered species, animals and human trafficking, the scam centers and the illegal smuggling of the precious stones and timber from Myanmar.”

Kasit has also called on Bangkok to be more welcoming of the flood of Burmese migrants now seeking refuge in his country, and criticizes the routine exploitation which often greets them instead. “It is unbecoming and sinful indeed, for a Thai elected government to be cooperating with the authoritarian and quite cruel military regime,” he says. “I cannot condone, I cannot accept, and I have to be against the position of the current Thai government as expressed and conducted by the current Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Thailand. Pure and simple.”

Kasit goes deeper into how both sides of this relationship have benefited over the years. “I have no evidence, but I am old enough to sense things that are wrong, and from the Thai side, say some of the bad soldiers of Thailand who send arms, fuel, even for the aircraft, send food, medicine, basic necessities of life and so on, to the Tatmadaw leadership and for the families of the soldiers and for the supporters of the Tatmadaw, in exchange for the precious stones, gems and various type of rubies.” This is just the beginning of the illicit activity, however; he next addresses the more serious problems of human trafficking, scam centers (as Jason Tower addressed in a recent episode), and other criminal enterprises that some Thai military and political figures help facilitate in exchange for a handsome, personal profit.

In contrast to the situation today, Kasit recalls how Thailand has traditionally been a welcoming place for refugees fleeing all sorts of hardships in their own countries, as well as being a melting pot of cultures. He mentions a former Prime Minister who has Mon ancestry, as well as how both Aung San and Ho Chi

Minh sought temporary refuge in Thailand while pursuing their respective nationalist struggles. Looking at Thailand's prior acceptance of refugees, he points to the many Burmese who came over after the 1988 democracy movement, as well as Vietnamese boat people, Cambodians fleeing the Khmer Rouge, and Laotians escaping their civil war, among others.

"We are Buddhists, we are Christiana, we are Muslims," he says of Thailand. "And each of the religions say that you have got to help your neighbor when they are in distress!"

Kasit argues that the Thai government should coordinate with international aid organizations, the United Nations, and Western countries to set up welcome stations along the 2,400 kilometer long Burmese border and provide shelter, food, medicine, and other necessities for those now caught up in the conflict. "We have done that before, it is nothing new, and it is definitely not a burden!" he exclaims, adding that it will also invigorate the Thai industries that would provide such support, though he makes clear this would be only a side benefit, the real boon being helping fellow humans in need. "The last government and the present government have a heart of darkness," he says, "and as a fellow human being, it is not acceptable for the Thai government to be so unkind and lacking any feeling of humanity." Instead, Thai authorities have worked to establish a humanitarian corridor within Myanmar, which has been quite controversial given how this plan proposes a partnership with their counterparts in the junta. "If the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister especially are honest, and true to form, he must do something,"

Kasit insists, referencing as a helpful precedent Cyclone Nargis in 2008, when cross-border cooperation allowed aid to reach those who needed it most. But he sees nothing like that occurring now. "They cannot go on with setting up humanitarian corridor, which is a farce, because you cannot set up a humanitarian corridor in the midst of a civil war!" Like many, he suspects this less-than-transparent process is providing aid to all the wrong people, such as "the families and the supporters of the Tatmadaw, so that they can continue to keep on killing the Myanmar people!"

As an alternative, Kasit calls for Thailand to meet with China, Bangladesh, and India to discuss how they

can coordinate to provide urgent, humanitarian support at each respective Burmese border crossing. "Thailand has to do differently than the Five Point Consensus of the ASEAN community," he continues. "That is diplomacy, that is a civilized way of doing things, but not a unilateral thing." Moving onto Thai relations with the NUG and young Burmese democratic leaders, Kasit is again not shy about unleashing his disappointment. "How can a Thai Foreign Minister who comes from an elected government ignore all the democratic niceties and the happenings and the reality on the ground?" As the resistance to the coup has gone on, he is furious that Thai leaders haven't shown greater interest in at least meeting and recognizing the opposition forces, who now clearly have the momentum.

With the momentum now clearly changing on the battlefield in favor of the resistance, Kasit was asked if the Thai government might decide to shift their support away from the military. His answer echoes the pessimism expressed recently by security expert, Anthony Davis. "First, there is a fear of the Tatmadaw, and I don't know why they are afraid. Second there are lucrative businesses. And third, there is a fear to do the right thing. Fourth, ignoring together one of the Five Point Consensus is of ASEAN that is to speak to all the stakeholders. The Thai government has failed completely as a democratic entity, as a member of the ASEAN community and as member of the international community. It has been ignoring all of this simply to keep whatever friendship and common interests together with the Tatmadaw. Or maybe the Thai leadership doesn't have the guts and the determination to do the right thing! But to play safe, as long as it can, by being nice to the Tatmadaw, it's sad for Thailand, that we have had such a leadership and a few personalities that are useless."

However, Kasit's criticism is not limited to the political and military establishments, but also to Members of Parliament, the academics and scholars, and the media and journalist communities as well. "I think as a principle, it should be the number one priority for the Thai society," he says, adding that if Thailand invested more attention in creating peace in neighboring countries, their tourism sector would surely spike as a result.

One reason that some Thai authorities have given for continuing to support the military involves the extensive energy supplied by Myanmar to power their

CORE DEVELOPMENTS

country. However, Kasit also calls this out, noting that “we could increase more of the hydroelectric power by investing in Laos, the battery of the Asia-Pacific region. So one has to look all around, and the government has a duty to put this on the table for the Thai public. But to say that we cannot do anything with the Tatmadaw, because they will cross the gas pipeline, then we are being blackmailed by the Tatmadaw! To me, I would still use bad language and say ‘to hell with it!’ We might suffer for the first two or three months and so on,” he acknowledges. Moreover, he thinks that Thailand could address its energy needs by: diversifying through increased imports of coal and liquified natural gas from countries like Australia, Indonesia and the Middle East; enhancing renewable energy investments; and developing contingency plans for potential disruptions to Myanmar’s gas supply due to regional instability. “And if my Prime Minister, my Minister of Energy, my Minister of Foreign Affairs and Industry and so on, cannot do that, then they should not be in the position, they should resign and go home and play with their grandchildren.”

Regarding ASEAN, Kasit notes that the organization finally seems to have recognized that that Special

Envoy to Myanmar has never really been effective, and so now they are initiating a tripartite arrangement with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Laos, working together to find a solution. Kasit suggests a far more aggressive stance, which includes suspending Myanmar’s membership in ASEAN, and putting Thailand’s payments for their gas revenues into escrow so that the military cannot use them to continue killing their own people, and they will eventually be given to the legitimate leaders of the country. He also calls for an immediate ceasefire, as well as prohibiting visas to generals and their families.

Kasit closes by speaking directly to those in the resistance: “To all my Myanmar friends, I think you have to be encouraged. Now, by your own efforts, congratulations, you have denied the outright victory of the Tatmadaw. They have failed in the coup d’état, and they now on the defensive side.”

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HURFOM DOCUMENTS IMPACT OF CONSCRIPTION LAW IN SOUTHEASTERN MYANMAR

The Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) has released a report detailing how the junta's announcement that it would start conscripting people into the army has affected the population.

The report, 'Forced to Fight: Military Conscription in Southeastern Burma' was released on 7 May.

It documents how civilians have been impacted by the announcement of mandatory military service for all men aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27 who must serve for at least two years in the Myanmar Army.

The news has been incredibly distressing for families who are struggling to cope amid the already deeply challenging post-coup situation, according to HURFOM.

It is estimated that around 600 young individuals are currently undergoing forced military training across several regions within HURFOM's targeted documentation area, including Mon State, Karen State, and Tanintharyi Region. The junta has scaled up its recruitment tactics by sending directives to ward and village administrators to send lists of new conscripts.

The recruitment process was set to begin after the annual New Year holidays in April 2024, but HURFOM documentation shows that it started much earlier. This regime is set to enlist 60,000 new troops before the end of the year.

The impacts of the unjust law are already being felt on the ground. In response to the uncertainty of their futures, young men and women have dropped out

of school, left their jobs and joined ethnic revolution organizations or work opportunities in neighbouring countries, according to HURFOM.

Projections for May 2024 indicate that over 400 new conscripts may be subjected to involuntary service within various battalions under junta military units. This steep increase in conscript numbers underscores the aggressive recruitment strategies implemented by military authorities in the region.

In reality the junta is increasingly losing bases, territory and camps. The conscription law is evidence of their desperation and willingness to put young people's lives at the forefront of the battlefields. It is also indicative of the Burma Army's disregard for life and their ongoing sinister intentions to see the derailment of an educated and informed society, according to HURFOM.

It says they must not be successful, and ensuring they do not prevail will require the international community's intervention, which has a moral responsibility to offer protection pathways and alternative options they can access through livelihood and education opportunities to ensure their protection.

HURFOM was founded by exiled pro-democracy students from the 1988 uprisings, recent activists, Mon community leaders, and youth. Its primary objective is to restore democracy, human rights, and genuine peace in Burma. HURFOM is a non-profit organization, and all its members are volunteers with a shared vision for peace in the country.

ARAKAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY CRITICISES UNHRC CHIEF'S STATEMENT ABOUT RAKHINE

The Arakan American Community released a statement on 6 May 2024 criticising a statement made by the United Nations Human Rights Council's Chief Volker Türk on 16 April 2024, about the situation in Rakhine State.

The Arakan American community denounced the United Nations (UN) for not protecting all the people in Rakhine.

Below is the text of the statement:

"On April 19, 2024, the United Nations Human Rights Council's Chief Volker Türk issued a statement about Arakan (Rakhine) State in Myanmar. While the statement was trying to capture the general situation of Arakan State as a whole, it was disappointingly focused on protecting only a selective group of civilians rather than attempting to protect all the affected civilians in Arakan State.

"Since the fight restarted between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar's military in November 2023, the Myanmar's military has been committing war crimes and a type of state-sponsored terrorism by daily bombings, shelling of towns and villages, and burning of thousands of houses. Innocent civilians from all walks of life are being affected across Arakan State.

"The United Nations Human Rights Council has been actively ignoring the atrocities and killings of civilians and failed to take any effective action to protect those constant bombings and killing of innocent civilians or even mentioned in their statements.

"Instead of protecting Rakhine people who are currently being targeted by Myanmar's military and military supported mobs and armed groups, the UN Human Rights Council's biased and misinformed statement sounded stirring more misunderstanding and tensions among different communities in Arakan. More importantly, UNHRC has undermined the liberation movement of the people of Arakan and all people of Myanmar against the Military dictatorship.

Therefore,

"The Arakan American Community strongly denounces the UN Human Rights Council's Biased Statement on Arakan State and UN Human Rights Council's Chief Volker Türk for misinformed and biased handling of Arakan State.

"We demand the UN Human Rights Council's Chief Volker Türk to take full responsibility for the violation of the code of ethics for the UN personnel and resign.

"We also request the United Nations to take immediate actions that assure protection of all civilians in Arakan State.

"Hundreds of civilians have been killed in the bombings and shelling in the civilian areas and many towns have been burnt down to ashes by the Myanmar's military. The accountability needs to be clarified and restated correctly."

In his 19 April statement Volker Türk warned that intensified fighting in Rakhine State between the junta and the Arakan Army (AA), alongside tensions being fuelled between the Rohingya and ethnic Rakhine communities, poses a grave threat to the civilian population.

Türk said disinformation and propaganda are also rife, pointing to claims that "Islamic terrorists" have taken Hindus and Buddhists hostage. "This was the same kind of hateful narrative that fuelled communal violence in 2012 and the horrendous attacks against the Rohingya in 2017," he said.

He also sounded a warning in his statement, saying: "The alarm bells are ringing, and we must not allow there to be a repeat of the past," Türk said. "Countries with influence on the Myanmar military and armed groups involved must act now to protect all civilians in Rakhine State and prevent another episode of horrendous persecution of the Rohingya."

THAILAND CONCERNED THAT TRADE WITH MYANMAR IS DECLINING

The Asia Highway in Myanmar. Photo: AFP

The Thai Foreign Trade Department is concerned over the further decline in border trade between Thailand and Myanmar, due to fighting in Myanmar, and how it could affect transport and logistics.

Total border trade between Thailand and Myanmar in March 2024 was 19.7 billion baht, down 10.3 per cent for the same period in 2023, according to the Thai Foreign Trade Department.

Of that trade, 11.2 billion baht was exports from Thailand to Myanmar, a drop of 14.3 per cent from the March last year. Imports from Myanmar to Thailand were worth 8.52 billion baht, down 4.45 per cent on the previous year.

The Thai Commerce Ministry is targeting growth of 1 per cent in its cross-border trade this year.

The Thai Foreign Trade Department wants border trade to increase in 2024 after it contracted by 2.6 per cent to 1.74 trillion baht in 2023, according to Ronnarong Phoolpipat, the Foreign Trade Department Director-General.

He attributed the slowdown in cross-border trade to "challenges such as high inflation, a weak exchange rate in Laos and the conflict in Myanmar, as well as more protectionist measures by neighbouring countries."

The private sector in Thailand has proposed that the Thai Government speed up negotiations with the

authorities in Myanmar to facilitate trade. It said this should include the issuing of a single licence that will enable businesses to use any border crossing, meaning they can use other border crossings if the crossing they wanted to use is closed due to fighting on the Myanmar side. The private sector also called for a uniform tax collection system at all border crossings.

Trade between Mae Sot in Thailand and Myawaddy in Myanmar goes over the Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge No. 2. The bridge was closed on 19 April due to fighting but it reopened on the morning of 30 April.

Unfortunately, the fighting disrupted communication lines to the bridge cutting internet access and connections to banks, meaning that all import and export documentation has to be filled out and processed manually. The fighting also damaged and destroyed trade office buildings and office equipment at the bridge.

After the bridge shut the Myanmar junta announced on 11 April that it would allow goods to go by container ships from Yangon to Ranong in Thailand, which is opposite Kawthaung, Myanmar's southernmost city.

But it was not a satisfactory alternative as many importers and exporters said that it is much more challenging and expensive to send goods by sea or air rather than using the land border crossings.



MYANMAR SCHOOLS REOPEN AMIDST INSECURITY: PARENTS FEAR FOR CHILDREN'S SAFETY

PAN PAN

Parents bring their children to a school in Yangon. Photo: AFP

Myanmar schools are set to reopen in early June. The ongoing civil war, gradually spreading to major towns, has parents particularly worried about sending their children to school amidst the lack of security.

A parent in Yangon said that although he sends his children to school, he is constantly worried.

"If I send my child to school, I stay near the school, waiting until the school releases the students. Since my house is quite far away, if something happens, I need to do my best to pick up my child."

"As I cannot afford to send my child to private schools, I can only send my child to a public school. If possible, I would prefer to send my child to private schools. Since I don't know how to teach, what else can I do?"

"As my child gets older every year, I worry he won't be educated. Although I am worried about the situation, like the exploding bombs and general arrests, I wait until the school releases the students. It is quite tiring."

According to education personnel, school registration will begin towards the end of May to reopen schools in major cities and towns in early June in the embattled country. The school registration period is likely to be extended. The enrollment rate of students in public schools is not as high as it used to be.

A parent in Mandalay said that she would not allow her child to receive a poor education in the junta's public schools, so she is instead planning her own way for her child's education.

"I no longer let my child attend the junta school since the coup and the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before, I sent my child to public school until Grade 6.

"I reviewed this terrible situation. This poor education (provided by the junta schools) cannot give anything in life. Since we are from the common class, I cannot afford to send my child to a really good private school. However, I send my child to receive necessary skills such as English and computer skills. During this online education era, I let my child focus on studying more online. I consult with my child openly about what he wants to be and what he wants to do, and I will help him pave the way for education. I am unable to stop feeling anxious about my child attending school alone in such a dangerous environment. So, I am teaching my child as much as I should."

At the beginning of the military coup, the regime deployed its troops to monitor the schools and even intervened in administering the students. Only recently, as the junta's military strength has weakened, has the junta withdrawn its troops from the schools.

The junta also bombarded schools in intensely contested territories and murdered people, from the elderly to the children. As the opposition National Unity Government (NUG), People's Defense Force (PDF), Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs) and other resistance forces have declared plans to launch town-capturing battles soon, parents are particularly worried and afraid to send their children to schools out of their sight for a few hours.



Prisoners returning home.
Photo: Supplied

WOMEN AND CHILDREN PRISONERS REPATRIATED FROM INDIA TO MYANMAR

39 women and children Myanmar nationals were released from Imphal Jail in India's Manipur State and returned to Myanmar on 2 May 2024, according to one of their family members.

"Upon their initial arrival, they stayed in the border town of Moreh [in India]. Following communication with relatives and families, they will proceed to return to their homes," said the family member.

The group consisting of 35 women and four children crossed the India Myanmar Friendship Bridge from Moreh to Tamu where they were received by Myanmar junta police and junta general administration officers on 2 May.

The returned people had entered Manipur State without the correct legal documentation and were caught working illegally by the Indian authorities who arrested and sentenced them to prison.

An order issued by the Manipur Government's Home Department mandated the return of 77 Myanmar nationals. They were transported by helicopter from the Imphal, the Manipur State capital, where they were imprisoned to Moreh on 11 March.

The 39 women and children were part of that group. The rest are still in Moreh waiting to be repatriated.

Currently, nearly 300 Myanmar nationals who did not possess the necessary residency documents are still imprisoned in Imphal Jail, according to the family member of one of the repatriated.

Though India is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention it has still provided shelter on humanitarian grounds to Myanmar refugees fleeing violence.



The destroyed monastery.
Photo: Supplied

DEADLY AIR ATTACK ON MONASTERY IN MAGWAY'S SAW TOWNSHIP CLAIMS 15 LIVES, INJURES 30

According to the Saw Township People's Administration, at least 15 people lost their lives and approximately 30 others sustained injuries during an attack by the Military Council on a monastery in Akyipanpalone Village, Saw Township, Magway Region on 9 May around 10 am.

The assault occurred during a gathering aimed at enhancing goods flow and transportation in the region, involving discussions between drivers and local residents, as per a member of the Saw Township People's Administration, Sayar Kyi.

"Most of the bombs deployed were 500-pound bombs. The monastery was completely razed to the ground, and several adjacent houses suffered damage," said Sayar Kyi.

He further explained that the aerial bombardment occurred twice, accompanied by machine gun fire, and efforts are underway to compile an accurate list of casualties.

"Due to the extent of burns on the bodies, it has been challenging to identify individuals," said Sayar Kyi.

He said the motive behind the Military Council's bombing of the village and the exact reason for the attack remained unknown.

Mizzima has not been able to independently verify the number of victims.

According to the Saw Township People's Administration, the injured individuals have been transported to the hospital for medical treatment, and members of the local people's defense force will continue to extend assistance to those affected by the junta's air strike.

"Yet another war crime has been perpetrated by the Military Council. We cannot afford to forget this under any circumstances, and we must tirelessly strive until we can hold those responsible accountable," said Sayar Kyi.

Residents have reported that villagers from Akyipanpalone and nearby areas are currently relocating to safer locations out of fear of further attacks by the Military Council.



Myitkyina, Kachin State.
Photo: Supplied

KIA FIGHTERS ATTACK MYANMAR JUNTA'S SECURITY GATE IN KACHIN STATE'S MYITKYINA TOWN

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) launched a deadly attack on the Military Council security gate at Balamintin Bridge, located at the entrance of Myitkyina Town, Kachin State on 9 May around 3 pm, according to a source from the Kachin State Police.

This assault resulted in the death of several policemen, including a Police Deputy Superintendent, and left two other policemen injured.

"The Police Deputy Superintendent who was killed at the Balamintin Bridge was formerly the chief of the Wiangmaw Police station. During the attack, a traffic police officer sustained a leg injury, while another officer suffered unspecified injuries. Unfortunately, the incident also led to fatalities. However, this is the extent of the information available to us," said a source within the Kachin State police.

Local sources have indicated that at least two policemen lost their lives in the attack, although specific details could not be confirmed. The demise of Police Deputy Superintendent Tin Ko Ko was affirmed by individuals closely associated with the police station.

"He transitioned from his position as Police station chief at the Waingmaw police station to the state police office. He was generally reserved in nature. However, he was linked to the group responsible for guarding the bridge and allegedly engaged in extortion from locals," said a source familiar with the Police Deputy Superintendent.

A former police officer said, "The Police Deputy Superintendent was shot and fatally wounded. We have heard reports indicating that another police inspector sustained serious injuries."

In response to the incident, it has been reported that at least two vehicles from the Northern Regional Military Commands stationed on the riverside of the Balamintin Bridge have arrived to provide reinforcement.

This recent attack brings to mind a similar incident on 21 December, 2023, when three policemen were killed in a shooting attack at the Balamintin Bridge security gate.



Photo: EPA

MYANMAR JUNTA TARGETING HEALTHCARE

The Myanmar junta is targeting healthcare infrastructure across the country with the most recent of these being its attack on a hospital in Chin State on 25 April, according to campaign group Progressive Voice.

It said that since the February 2021 coup, the junta has bombed hospitals and clinics; targeted, arrested, and killed healthcare workers; and blocked lifesaving aid, all with completely impunity—putting millions of human lives at stake and severely exacerbating the dire humanitarian crisis across the country.

Amidst the junta's campaign of terror and destruction, local frontline humanitarian responders are working tirelessly and with remarkable ingenuity to deliver healthcare services to communities across Myanmar through field hospitals, mobile clinics, and other efforts, according to Progressive Voice.

On 25 April, the military junta attacked Wammathu Hospital in Mindat Township, Chin State, dropping six 150-pound bombs and engulfing the hospital in flames. The junta's aerial attack completely destroyed

the hospital, killing four civilians and injuring 15.

This hospital was staffed by members of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and relied on by countless civilians as the main healthcare provider for the local community and neighboring areas. Frequently in the junta's crosshairs, it had previously been raided by junta troops in August 2021 and February 2022.

In the first three weeks of April, more than 80 people died of dysentery in internment camps in Rakhine State due to extremely poor living conditions, particularly unclean water and lack of doctors and medicine.

On 15 April, the office and pharmacy of Doctors Without Borders/Medecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in Buthidaung, Rakhine State, was burned down amid ongoing violence, destroying all available medical supplies—another crippling blow to the “decimation of healthcare options for the people in Rakhine State.”

On 17 April, MSF raised the alarm that there's “a near-total absence of humanitarian assistance for communities who rely on it, including the Rohingya

people,” with the junta denying permission to operate to all organizations delivering healthcare in Rakhine State.

Myanmar’s health sector is undeniably under deliberate assault, according to Progressive Voice. Since the end of February alone, the junta has destroyed at least 35 hospitals and clinics across Chin, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan States and Magwe Region.

Today, the junta’s war of terror on healthcare continues unabated as a form of collective punishment against the people’s democratic resistance movement. Through its relentless violence, the junta has caused rates of infectious disease to soar, forced thousands of doctors to flee for their lives or go into hiding, and denied nearly all children access to critical vaccinations.

In defiance of the junta’s attacks, “Hundreds of doctors and medical workers in central Myanmar, who have resisted the military’s administration and joined the [CDM], have formed humanitarian and medical networks to address the dire needs deep within the country,” including through “successfully opening hospitals to provide medical assistance for free [in Chin State],” according to Adelina Kamal and Rin Fujimatsu’s paper on Myanmar’s resistance humanitarians.

These local efforts across the country are nothing new: Progressive Voice points out that for decades, the Ethnic Health Systems Strengthening Group (EHSSG), a network of ethnic and community-based health organizations, has been working towards an improved, equitable decentralized healthcare system that serves vulnerable and displaced people countrywide.

It is with exceptional creativity, tenacity, and bravery that member organisations of EHSSG and healthcare workers across the country are providing lifesaving care through building field hospitals and conducting mobile clinics.

In contrast to the assistance blocked by the junta, mobile clinics are able to reach the most vulnerable communities, including internally displaced persons repeatedly targeted by the junta’s campaign of terror. A member of Nway Oo Kyan Mar (Burmese for “Spring Health”), a group of CDM healthcare workers in Karenni State, said, “Only with a stethoscope, only with a syringe—we don’t have anything to resist the jet

fighters. But we resist very well.”

With the junta’s targeting of healthcare and weaponisation of aid on full display, the international community must immediately stop making efforts to channel humanitarian assistance through the junta and UN agencies, says Progressive Voice.

It says that Humanitarian assistance through the junta cannot reach those under junta attack and in the direst need, while UN agencies are unable to get permission from the junta to reach these most vulnerable populations.

The international community’s current aid approach of partnering with the junta has been dangerously misguided from its inception, according to Progressive Voice. The Myanmar military—the creator and exacerbator of Myanmar’s humanitarian and human rights crisis—has repeatedly proven that any incoming aid is only ever used to its strategic political and military advantage at the expense of civilian lives.

To address the intensifying humanitarian crisis on the ground, Progressive Voice says that the international community must robustly support frontline responders, including civil society and community-based organizations, directly through locally led cross-border channels.

It says this must also involve forming meaningful and equal partnerships with local organisations, rather than a so-called ‘localisation’ strategy that ignores the will and sacrifices of Myanmar’s people to end the military’s tyranny. The world must put its trust and investment in local organisations, which have proven to have the access, trust, and competencies to provide healthcare services and meet the emergency needs of Myanmar’s communities.

Progressive Voice says that as Myanmar’s healthcare remains in the junta’s crosshairs, the world must no longer delay putting its full support behind the people’s steadfast resistance movement and providing humanitarian aid directly to the people through locally led cross-border channels.



MYANMAR'S MILITARY ON THE BACK FOOT AS THE DRY SEASON COMES TO A CLOSE

ZACHARY ABUZA

Myawaddy, as seen from the Thai side of the border. Photo: AFP

Expect an uptick in fighting in the weeks before monsoon rains and the next phase of the war.

Myanmar's dry season is ending soon, with the military junta on the back foot after more than six months of reversals and losses to the opposition. This points to an intensification of attacks from the beleaguered regime.

With official forecasts that monsoon rains will start in the second week of June, the State Administrative Council (SAC), as the junta is formally known, is likely to focus on six priorities before the rains set in, hampering the military's already weak logistics and troop mobility.

While the military recently retook control over the key Thai border city Myawaddy, they have not retaken much of the territory lost since the Three Brotherhood Alliance's Operation 1027 began in late October, especially outside of the Bamar heartland.

With the rainy season favoring the more flexible opposition, the junta is likely to focus on six strategic priorities in the coming weeks.

The first priority is to retake control along Asia Highway 1, which connects Myawaddy with Yangon. This road is the economic lifeline to Thailand, with over \$1 billion in annual border trade.

The SAC cannot afford a repeat of Muse in northern Shan state, where junta troops still control the border town, but the Ta'ang National Liberation Army controls much of the road to Lashio, the state's largest town, which allows the rebel group to collect taxes.

And yet, their attacks have not only faltered, but also tied down troops who are needed elsewhere.

FOCUS ON ANN TOWNSHIP

The second junta priority is playing out now in western Rakhine state's Ann township, where the Arakan Army has captured two strategic outposts that protect the city after a two-month long battle.

Ann is the headquarters of the Western Military Command, one of the 12 military regions, so its loss would be hugely embarrassing for the junta.

More importantly, Ann is a critical transportation and logistics hub, the junction for the road north to the Rakhine state capital of Sittwe and to a major Chinese special economic zone and port project in Kyaukphyu. China's oil and gas pipelines also pass through Ann.

In western Myanmar, the Arakan Army has already captured eight townships comprising most of northern Rakhine state, while reports are emerging that it has just captured Maungdaw, a key border port with Bangladesh, and surrounded Buthidaung.

The Arakan Army has not tried to capture Sittwe or Kyaukphyu for now, seemingly content to try to consolidate control of the roads to both. The capture of Ann would force the junta to supply what they still control in Rakhine by sea or from the south through the town of Toungup.

In sum, without control of Ann, the chances for a significant and sustained military counteroffensive in Rakhine get a lot harder. So the military is surging reinforcements there now and stepping up airstrikes.

The third priority for the junta is to push for a new round of ceasefire talks with the Three Brotherhood Alliance and the Kachin Independence Army. As such, it will increase its lobbying of China, which borders

Kachin state.

BEIJING SEEKS BORDER CEASEFIRE

Beijing clearly wants a ceasefire on its border. Both Beijing and Naypyidaw are keen to see border trade return to pre-war levels. The junta now controls only 11 of 17 border posts with China, Thailand, India and Bangladesh – and pinched trade flows have led to shortages and spiking prices.

China has also dispatched some 300 additional technicians to Kyaukphyu as construction there ramps up, so Beijing is urgently trying to broker a ceasefire between the junta and the Arakan Army. Before any such pact is reached, we should expect a lot of fighting and air attacks before then.

Unlike the Three Brotherhood Alliance, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) is likely to reject a ceasefire, as they seek to take advantage of the military's distractions.

Indeed, on May 5, after a lull of several weeks, the KIA launched a second wave of attacks, capturing a number of junta camps along the Myitkyina-Laiza highway, as well as an assault on the town of Sumprabum, midway between the provincial capital and Puta-O. The KIA has taken over 12 positions in the past four days.

The fourth priority for the junta in the coming weeks must be the resupply of its deployed forces. One of the leading factors in military defections that have taken place since October has been the military's failure to resupply remotely deployed forces with food, water, ammunition and medical supplies.

Sustaining operations is getting much harder for the military. They have lost several of the few helicopters in their inventory. This week in eastern Myanmar the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force insurgent group said it shot down a junta military helicopter and killed its pilot in Kayah State.

CONVOYS UNDER THREAT

With roads and bridges are increasingly being mined, and military manpower spread thin, convoys are smaller and less well protected, making opposition ambushes more costly. Captured weaponry has allowed opposition forces to target junta riverine convoys more effectively.

If the junta is unable to supply those light infantry battalions in the coming six weeks, the ethnic resistance organizations and People's Defense Forces will pick them off one by one during the rainy season.

The fifth priority for the military regime will be to continue their assaults in Sagaing and Magwe. The heartland of the majority ethnic Bamars is arguably

more important to the junta psychologically than militarily. That they do not have full control of Burmese-majority regions and have to worry about their supply lines in once-secure areas is hard for the generals to countenance.

While the generals don't have the means to hold territory, the junta is punishing civilians with air and artillery strikes, serving up a harsh reminder of the cost of supporting the opposition.

The sixth junta priority is to ramp up the production of arms and munitions. There is a parallel here with Russia, which also expected a very brief war in Ukraine, and did not have its logistics or defense industries prepared for a multi-year conflict.

DRONES ON BOTH SIDES

The SAC is broke and cannot afford the costly import of weapons and ammunition, forcing its own defense industries to go into overdrive.

At the same time, given the shortage of spare parts and regular servicing of their overtaxed air force, which has led to the crash of several aircraft, the military has stepped up the production of armed drones.

The opposition National Unity Government (NUG) and the ethnic armies have used modified hobby and crop dusting drones with incredible efficacy, including an attack that purportedly wounded Soe Win the deputy junta commander.

There is concern among the opposition that the military will be able to replicate the NUG success with cheap drones. Evidence has surfaced that the military is already fielding more lethal drone-specific munitions, rather than relying on mortar shells.

The junta has lost significant amounts of territory since Operation 1027 began – which is notable because it happened during the dry season, when the military should have had all the advantages. The rainy season tends to benefit resistance forces.

Along with the scorching heat, expect blistering, brutal attacks, as the military junta desperately tries to retake lost territory and critical supply lines before the rains set in.

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.



CHINA'S 'PROXY GAME' IN MYANMAR

SUN LEE

Photo: Ricardo

Since anti-government forces in Myanmar took control of Laukkai this year, the Myanmar army has lost more than 50 posts near the area. Laukkai is the capital city of Kokang region that shares a long border with Yunnan province of China. With a population of largely Kokang Chinese, the fall of the city to the “Three Brotherhood Alliance” raised suspicion among the top leadership in Naypyidaw regarding growing Chinese influence in the region.

China, which has long supported the Military Junta, is now playing with both sides. Many analysts believe that without the support from Beijing, it would have been impossible for the “Three Brotherhood Alliance” to capture the city. China is continuously supporting these rebel forces in order to maintain the game of check-and-balances with the Tatmadaw.

On the one hand China is supplying military equipment and aircraft to the Naypyidaw, on the other hand, it is continuously arming the rebel forces like the Arakan Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army. Experts even claimed that it was Beijing that actually facilitated

the unification of these three groups into the “Three Brotherhood Alliance” against the Tatmadaw.

Recently, these forces have acquired strongholds in a large part of the northern border area. And it's not just a coincidence that China is operating hundreds of casinos, cyber trafficking industries and “pig butchering” hubs in these areas. Laukkai has been the crime capital of Northern Myanmar owing to the influential Chinese gangs in the region. From gambling industries to kidnapping, extortion and arms smuggling, under the influence of these armed Chinese gangs, crime has raised to another level.

During the last one year, Tatmadaw has accelerated military actions against these groups. These Chinese gangs and the illegal businesses in the region have direct or indirect connection with many of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) members. Corrupted local CCP members from bordering provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan operate illegal casinos and “pig butchering” hubs in this northern part of the country. The local populace are either forced to work for them or forced to migrate.

Another business in which many of CCP members are involved is drug trafficking. Being part of the "Golden Triangle", more than 50% of all drugs smuggled to Southeast Asia and the Pacific passes through Myanmar. As per a report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Myanmar became the world's largest producer of opium in 2023, with an estimated production of more than 1,000 tonnes per year.

Poppy cultivation is the prime source of living in the Northern and Northwestern part of the country. As per several reports, many of the Chinese CCP members and their associates and local Chinese groups have been directly associated with the cultivation and smuggling of opium and drugs to the adjacent countries. Questions hang over whether Beijing is aware of these CCP members or not? Or whether there is any involvement of bigger players (ministers) that stops the Beijing administration from taking action against these individuals.

The Tatmadaw fears that the monetary gains from this drug smuggling have recently been used by the rebel groups to illegally import arms. Therefore, it has launched a drive against these groups. Fearing the complete wipe out of poppy cultivation in the region, Chinese groups have started favoring the various rebel groups, who in exchange for support, money and arms, provide safe haven for these groups.

Another reason for Chinese interest in the rival groups of Myanmar is because of the huge deposits of rare earth metals. In terms of processing and refining of rare earth metals, Myanmar accounts for 9% of global production. It is estimated that Myanmar might have seven times more deposits of these metals. With the help of these rival groups, it would be easy for Chinese mining gangs to smuggle these rare elements worth billions of US dollars.

Beijing also fears the uncontrolled growth of these local Chinese groups in northern Myanmar has started to launch cyber fraud against Chinese citizens. Despite regular requests from the Chinese authorities, Tatmadaw seems least concerned. By supporting these rival groups, China is trying to somehow blackmail the junta.

Similar blackmails have been visible in the case of Chinese economic interests as well. China needs the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) to start operating on time. The "Chinese Malacca dilemma" has made Beijing paranoid and they are putting pressure

on the Myanmar government to complete the project on time. Many geo-political experts argue that with the mounting pressure from Beijing and its support for the rival groups has forced the Tatmadaw to allow Beijing to use various ports and islands of Myanmar as military bases. Recently, the Chinese military presence on the Coco Islands has increased rapidly, raising concerns in the adjacent countries.

Another reason is the issue of the Shan State. Since rebels took control of a vast region of the Shan State, the number of illegal migrants in the adjacent Chinese Province of Yunnan increased rapidly. Appeasing these rebel groups would not only help Beijing to get rid of these unwanted guests but would also help it to control the inflow of opium smuggling into China through Yunnan.

Beijing also fears that the ethnic minorities of the Yunnan might also get influenced by these rebel forces as these people along both side of the border share the same ethnicity. A rebellion is something that Beijing fears the most. CPC is already dealing with the wrath of Tibetans, Mongolians and Uyghurs and it would not allow any new revolt-like situation in its territory, especially in a region like Yunnan where tens of different minorities reside.

Among these check and balances and the geo-political games, it is the people of Myanmar who are suffering the most. Since 2021, approximately a million people have lost their homes and hundreds of thousands were forced to leave their nation. In such a time, when Beijing needs to provide assistance to the people of Myanmar, it is involved in a zero-sum game in order to fulfill its own self-centered geo-political goals.

Sun Lee is a pseudonym for a writer who covers Asian affairs.



Tourists practice yoga on a beach at Krabi. Photo: AFP

POST-COVID AND THE CHANGING FACE OF THAI TOURISM

SCOTT MURRAY

One of the biggest changes in Thai tourism is how Thai tourism officials view prospective visitors to their country. For a long-time, the focus was on attracting high-income tourists with the Thai Elite programme being a reflection of that desire. Indeed, during former PM Thaksin Shinawatra's time in power in the early 2000s there was talk of turning Koh Chang into a five-star island.

But the COVID-19 pandemic, and the restrictions brought in, really changed that viewpoint. It's not that those Thai officials don't still want to attract high-income earners, but they began to realize the benefits that middle-to-lower income travelers bring to the country.

And that is while high-income earners tend to spend large amounts of cash in certain places, five-star hotels, pricey restaurants, etc., budget travelers tend to spread their money around more and much of it goes to shop owners, cafes, smaller independent

accommodation (Airbnb's), who desperately need that money to survive.

This was made frighteningly clear for tourism business owners during the COVID-19 "Lockdown" period of 2020-22.

STARK REALITY

Check out the tourist arrival figures to see the evidence. 2019 saw close to 40 million arrivals. 2021 saw less than 1 million. And 2023 saw a partial recovery of up to 28 million, according to Statistica figures.

Another shift in thinking has been towards cannabis tourism. Now legal in Thailand - though the government is threatening as of this month to do a U-turn, banning its recreational use - backpackers who had been scorned upon for years are now seen as a boon to this industry. If you travel to tourist meccas like Phuket and Koh Samui, you'll find more cannabis shops than convenience stores.

The stereotypic backpacker has changed a lot too. Gone are the days of kids on their gap year using Tony & Maureen Wheeler's yellow bible, *The Shoestring Guide to Southeast Asia*. Backpackers, today, could be a couple of senior citizens traveling on their savings and pension. They are not party animals and usually just want a peaceful, nice, clean place to stay and many in the Thai hospitality industry are eager to host them.

DIVERSITY

LGBT travelers also tend to feel much more comfortable when visiting Thailand than they do in many other countries, and with the Thai government having legalized same-sex marriage this opens the door to

many in that community to consider getting married in the Land of Smiles, honeymooning here or at least extending their stay while here.

Thai tourism and immigration officials have always had to deal with the ying and yang of wanting as many tourists as possible but having to deal with the inevitable miscreants who sneak in with them and make a bad name for all foreigners with their misdeeds. Recently, one of the UK's most wanted pedophiles was found to have been hiding in plain sight in Phuket for 25 years. And the Swiss owner of an elephant sanctuary



Tourists pose for a photo at the ancient wall in Chiang Mai. Photo: AFP

kicked a Thai doctor while she was sitting on the steps of his property in Phuket, prompting the authorities to kick him out of the country. Another Swiss man, who had a history of mental illness, attacked an elderly Thai woman in a supermarket in nearby Trang. These and similar incidents caused Deputy Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul to tell Phuket authorities to crack down on "wayward farangs".

As the number of foreigners visiting Thailand increases, so inevitably will the number of foreigners who break the law and unfortunately get into automobile

and motorcycle crashes, but that is a simple co-relation as numbers increase - there hasn't been an influx of nasty farangs.

AMAZING PROMOTION

Few government agencies have done a better job of promoting their country than the Tourism Authority of Thailand, especially with their "Amazing Thailand" campaign, which was initiated in 1998 as a response to the 1997 economic crisis that struck the country badly.

But now Thai tourism officials are keenly aware that regional countries, especially Vietnam, have improved their tourist infrastructure and are starting to offer services and facilities on par with Thailand. This poses another conundrum to tourism officials as they know that if they are too strict or regimented in who they let



Cannabis shops have sprung up in many tourist resorts. Photo: AFP

in, or how long they let them stay for, those prospective tourists will just go to another nearby country.

Statistica says that in 2023, around 28 million foreign tourists visited Thailand with 20 million of those coming from the Asia-Pacific region visited Thailand. Why? Well, the cost of long-haul flights has risen considerably in part due to fuel costs but also the airlines' desire to recoup some of the income they lost due to the COVID-19 restrictions. So, the TAT, and other Thai related tourism agencies, have spent a lot of time and effort trying to convince those living close by, especially those in India, to visit Thailand as short-haul flights are still reasonably priced.

DOMESTIC TOURISTS

The Thai government has also done its best to promote domestic tourism. Few countries in the world have as many holidays as the Thais do. It's been a long-running joke that many Thais take government jobs just so they can enjoy all the official holidays that come with government positions. Provincial tourism agencies will go to great lengths to market a holiday in their province during long weekends or extended holidays.

Affordable and clean accommodation with the growth of Airbnb have helped make this happen. But

also, there's a growing number of tourists (domestic & foreign) that don't want to go and sit on a beach with other tourists. They want a unique experience; hence the TAT launched their "Unseen Thailand" programme to promote experiences and destinations that tourists, expats, and even Thais themselves, might not normally have found on their own.

WORLD'S BIGGEST WATER FIGHT

TAT has long done a good job of packaging national holidays. This year is no different as Songkran (Buddhist New Year) was branded "Maha Songkran World Water Festival 2024". The world's biggest water fight was staged across the country from 12-16 April. Government officials said they were hoping for 24.42 billion baht in overall tourism revenue from the event (8.76 billion baht from international tourists and 15.66 billion baht from domestic tourists) with 510,000 visitor projected tourist arrivals and 4.29 million domestic trips. In Bangkok, Songkran celebrations may have generated 3.69 billion baht in revenue and 653,590 domestic trips.

MEDICAL TOURISM

In the past, Thai tourism officials have expended a lot of time and effort on medical tourism, telling people



Tourists gesture on a beach in Phuket as an aircraft comes into land. Photo: AFP

they could come to Thailand for a medical procedure and then recuperate on a beach while staying in a nice hotel for the same price the procedure would cost them back in their own country. As a result, dental tourism took off as did other procedure-holidays including sexual reassignment.

The TAT is launching into religious tourism as well planning 72 faith-based tourism routes in different locations across five regions. These include journeys to pay homage to relics of Buddha, a trip following in the footprints of highly-revered monks, and trips to famous temples. Each route includes visits to local communities and attractions as well as the chance to try distinctive cuisine that are unique or special to those regions.

Thai cuisine has long been a drawing crowd for visitors to Thailand with literally millions of tourists traveling to the country over the years to take a cooking course. And what a selection there is – everything from the course offered at the luxurious Oriental Hotel in Bangkok to a grassroots course located in a small village in Isaan, the northeast.

And with the Thai hospitality industry hiring more Michelin-star chefs and more Michelin-star restaurants being opened a foodie is spoiled for choice in a country that many consider serves the best street food.

HIGH GOAL

The current Thai government appears gung-ho on encouraging tourism. Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin's administration has set a goal of attracting 80 million tourists by 2027, double the 2019 figure of 40 million, prior to the COVID-19 debacle, according to a Bloomberg report. Srettha's plans include a reciprocal visa waiver deal with China – Thailand's largest market for tourists – and offering temporary visa waivers for travelers from India, Taiwan and Kazakhstan. In addition, Thailand has been discussing with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) a Schengen-type visa for the ASEAN countries to open doors to tourists, with 90 days of stay, rather than 30 days.

All this is highly ambitious. But the Thai administration hopes to build on the country's previous success. When it comes to tourism, the slogan "Amazing Thailand" really does fit.

Scott Murray is the Managing Editor of SEA Yachting magazine. He has lived and worked in Thailand for the past three decades and has traveled extensively throughout Southeast Asia.



A tourist takes a "selfie" on Pasak Jolasid dam in Lopburi. Photo: AFP



Secretary-General of ASEAN Dr. Kao Kim Hourn officiates at the event.

ASEAN SECRETARY-GENERAL OFFICIATES THE LAUNCH OF THE ASEAN-EU BLUE BOOK 2024-2025

Secretary-General of ASEAN Dr. Kao Kim Hourn last week officiated the Launch of the ASEAN-EU Blue Book 2024-2025 together with Ambassador of the European Union to ASEAN Sujiro Seam and Permanent Representative of the Philippines to ASEAN and Country Coordinator for ASEAN-EU Dialogue Relations Hjayceelyn M. Quintana.

The event took place 8 May at the ASEAN Headquarters-ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, Indonesia.

In his remarks, Dr. Kao expressed his hope that through today's initiative, ASEAN and the EU will be able to sustain the momentum and continue to work closely together to further advance the ASEAN-EU Strategic Partnership for the betterment of the peoples in the two regions.

The Blue Book underscores the strategic partnership between ASEAN and the EU and showcases new cooperation programmes under the EU's Global Gateway strategy. The launch event was attended by Diplomats from Permanent Missions and Embassies of EU Member States along with staff from the ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN-EU programmes.

The Blue Book serves as a testament to the robust and comprehensive cooperation between ASEAN and the EU with the aim of ensuring regional peace and security, fostering sustainable connectivity, promoting free and fair trade, and advancing sustainable development across ASEAN.

This year's Blue Book also highlights the Team Europe approach and Initiatives on sustainable connectivity and green transition in the ASEAN region. Under the Global Gateway strategy, the EU has pledged to mobilise €10 billion in investment from Team Europe for green and connectivity programmes in ASEAN.

"In 47 years of ASEAN-EU relations, we have proven the strength of our strategic partnership and what we can do together in the face of global challenges. This Blue Book offers a comprehensive overview of the multifaceted and deep relationship between our regions and the commitments of our two regions to join hands in the pursuit of our common goals," H.E. Sujiro Seam, Ambassador of the European Union to ASEAN said.

The Secretary General of ASEAN stressed the importance of EU-ASEAN ties.

"The ASEAN-EU Blue Book continues to serve as a valuable platform in showcasing the EU's meaningful support towards ASEAN Community-building efforts, the potential of our Strategic Partnership as well as the progress and key achievements in the implementation of the ASEAN-EU Plan of Action (2023-2027). I share the significance of the Blue Book in advancing the visibility of our partnership to generate awareness among all stakeholders in our regions," said H.E. Dr. Kao.

Ambassador Hjayceelyn M. Quintana conveyed that, "As we go through every page of the Blue Book, I invite our ASEAN and EU partners to implement more activities and projects that would further enhance our partnership. Deepening the strategic partnership between ASEAN and EU, two of the world's most advanced and successful regional organisations, could serve as a model of partnership for other groupings around the world, which contribute to the promotion of international peace, stability and prosperity."

Highlights of the ASEAN-EU Blue Book 2024-2025 include:

1. The December 2022 ASEAN-EU Commemorative Summit and the 24th ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting, held in February 2024 in Brussels;

2. The Global Gateway initiative, showcasing the EU's commitment of €10 billion from Team Europe for green and connectivity projects in ASEAN;

3. The October 2023 5th ASEAN-EU Policy Dialogue on Human Rights, preceded by the 3rd ASEAN-EU Civil Society Forum and followed by the AICHR-EU study visit to Strasbourg;

4. EU cooperation priorities and updates on EU-supported projects across key sectors in ASEAN;

5. Compelling stories from the field, illustrating the tangible impact of ASEAN-EU cooperation on the lives of ASEAN's citizens.

Please feel free to download the ASEAN-EU Blue Book 2024-2025 here: <https://europa.eu/!kkmHnD>

EUROPE STUDENT GAZA PROTESTS SPREAD, SPARKING CLASHES, ARRESTS

Protests by students demanding universities sever ties with Israel over the Gaza war spread across western Europe last week, sparking clashes and dozens of fresh arrests.

Students at various European universities, inspired by ongoing demonstrations at US campuses, have been occupying halls and facilities, demanding an end to partnerships with Israeli institutions because of Israel's punishing assault on Gaza.

Several hundred protesters resumed a demonstration around the University of Amsterdam campus, where police the previous night were filmed baton-charging them and smashing up their tents after they refused to leave the grounds.

As protests resumed on Tuesday night, demonstrators erected barriers to access routes watched over by a heavy police deployment.

Police said in a statement that a total of 169 people had been arrested when officers broke up Monday night's protests.

All had been released apart from two still in custody on suspicion of public disorder offences.

Violence had briefly erupted Monday when a small group of counter-protesters wielding flares stormed the main protest.

Around 50 demonstrators were also protesting Tuesday outside the library in Utrecht University and a few dozen at the Technical University of Delft, according to local news agency ANP.

PROTESTS IN GERMANY

In the eastern German city of Leipzig, the university said in a statement that 50 to 60 people occupied a lecture hall on Tuesday, waving banners that read: "University occupation against genocide".

Protesters barricaded the lecture hall doors from the inside and erected tents in the courtyard, according to the university.

The institution called in the police in the afternoon, and filed a criminal complaint.

A pro-Israeli counter-protest also took place in the area, involving about 40 people, police said.



Protests have been taking place in Europe and around the world. Photo: AFP

Criminal proceedings have been initiated against 13 people who were in the lecture hall on suspicion of trespassing. No arrests have been made so far.

Earlier, at Berlin's Free University, police cleared a demonstration after up to 80 people erected a protest camp in a courtyard of the campus.

The protesters, some of whom wore the keffiyeh scarf that has long been a symbol of the Palestinian cause, sat in front of tents and waved banners.

They later tried to enter rooms and lecture halls and occupy them, according to the university, which said it then called in police to clear the protest.

The university said property was damaged while classes in some buildings were suspended for the day.

Berlin police said they made some arrests for incitement to hatred and trespassing.

FRANCE, SWITZERLAND, AUSTRIA

In Paris, police twice intervened at the prestigious Sciences Po university to disperse about 20 students who had barricaded themselves in the main hall.

Security forces moved in to allow other students to take their exams and made two arrests, according to Paris prosecutors. The university said exams proceeded without incident.

Police have intervened several times over the past week at Sciences Po, where protesters are demanding the university reveal its partnerships with Israeli

institutions. Some 13 students are on a hunger strike, according to the university.

At the nearby Sorbonne university building, police late Tuesday moved to eject about 100 students who had occupied an amphitheatre and made 88 arrests, police sources said.

In Switzerland, protests spread to three universities in Lausanne, Geneva and Zurich.

The University of Lausanne said in a statement it "considers that there is no reason to cease these relations" with Israeli universities as protesters demand.

In Austria, dozens of protesters have been camped on the campus of Vienna University, pitching tents and stringing up banners since late Thursday.

The war in the Gaza Strip was sparked by an unprecedented October 7 attack on Israel by the Palestinian group Hamas, which resulted in the deaths of more than 1,170 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally of Israeli official figures.

Vowing to destroy Hamas, Israel launched a retaliatory offensive that has killed at least 34,789 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry.

AFP



PODCAST #233

Workers Strike Back

Jeff Vogt describes how workers and trade union leaders have been at the forefront of resisting the regime and supporting the fight for democracy

Bonus Shorts

WORKERS STRIKE BACK

Jeffrey Vogt is legal director of the Solidarity Center, an international NGO that promotes the rights of workers and trade unions worldwide, and a member of the International Labor Organization (ILO) governing body, a UN Agency devoted to social justice and safeguarding worker rights around the world. It has been joined by 187 of the UN's 193 member countries.

"We have been working with workers and trade unions in Myanmar for several decades," Vogt explains to the Insight Myanmar podcast, before clarifying two of its "conventions" that make the situation in Myanmar relevant to his focus.

The first is Convention 87, or the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise; and the second is Convention 29, which addresses forced labor. "These are two conventions which Myanmar has ratified, which allows us to seek a Commission of Inquiry," he explains. Vogt notes how trade unions were almost non-existent until the government allowed their formation during the transition period, along with their ability to engage in collective bargaining and disputing settlements.

"These two laws had numerous defects, but at least set the foundations for trade unions to be once again legal and to undertake their activities, though

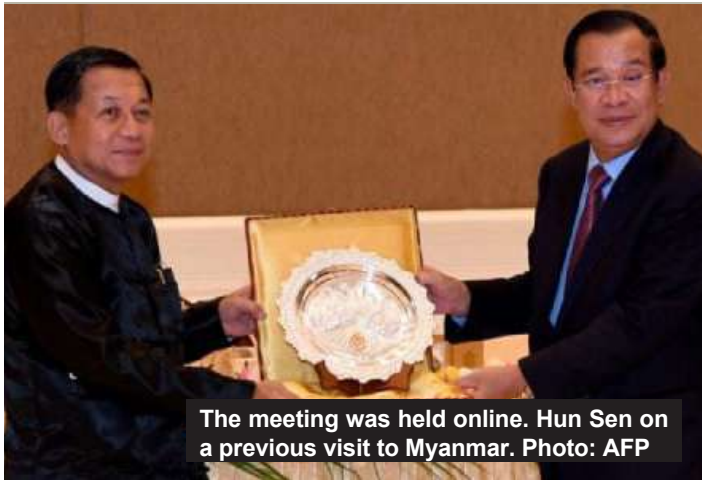
with many limitations. So this led, from that period forward, to a kind of a new springtime for trade unions in Myanmar," he says. Like the post-Soviet transition period after the fall of the USSR, he notes how thousands of Burmese workers across the country took advantage of that environment of increased freedoms by coming together to organize and demand better wages and working conditions.

But the 2021 coup reversed this trajectory. Many trade union leaders were involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement, which Vogt chalks up to their adept organizing skills. Because of this, the military regime quickly went after them to arrest or, in extreme cases, seek a revocation of their citizenship; as a result, many went into hiding. These repressive measures violated Convention 87, prompting the Vogt, along with the ILO, to open an inquiry on behalf of Myanmar workers.

CHECK OUT PODCAST

Listen to the Insight Myanmar podcast here:

<https://player.captivate.fm/episode/174743a7-54c6-4cd3-9b1d-7e13507739ca>



The meeting was held online. Hun Sen on a previous visit to Myanmar. Photo: AFP

JUNTA CHIEF ENGAGES IN TALKS ON ELECTION PROSPECTS WITH FORMER CAMBODIAN LEADER

The military chief of Myanmar engaged in discussions regarding the prospect of holding an election in the nation with former Cambodian leader Hun Sen during talks in the first week of May, according to Reuters and local news outlets.

This exchange occurred amidst mounting pressure on the ruling junta from an increasingly assertive armed struggle in Myanmar.

Despite the Myanmar junta's repeated assurances of restoring democracy in Myanmar, no definitive timeline for holding elections has been provided.

Hun Sen, having relinquished his position as Cambodia's Prime Minister after nearly four decades in power, recently revealed that he had sought permission from Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing to converse with detained Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, whose legitimately elected government was overthrown by the military in the military coup in 2021. The request was rebuffed by the junta.

ASEAN-CHINA WORKSHOP ON TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER AND COMMERCIALIZATION HELD IN YANGON AMID MYANMAR'S CIVIL WAR

The ASEAN-China Workshop on Technology Transfer and Commercialization, hosted by ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN COSTI, aimed to enhance human capital in tech transfer for 'Micro, Small, Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)' using the ASEAN-China Cooperation Fund was held at Lotte Hotel in Yangon on May 9-10,

Attendees included Yangon Region Chief Minister Soe Thein, ministers, officials, and experts from ASEAN nations.

Discussions covered challenges and solutions in tech transfer, strengthening China-ASEAN cooperation, and developing human resources for startups and tech transfer networks.

However, in Myanmar, in 2021, the military overthrew the civilian government and seized power, resulting in a civil war.

Many young people's right to education in Myanmar is also affected. Additionally, as the junta is forcibly implementing the mandatory conscription law, young people who do not want to join the armed forces of the junta are leaving abroad en masse. Consequently, human resources are lacking in Myanmar.



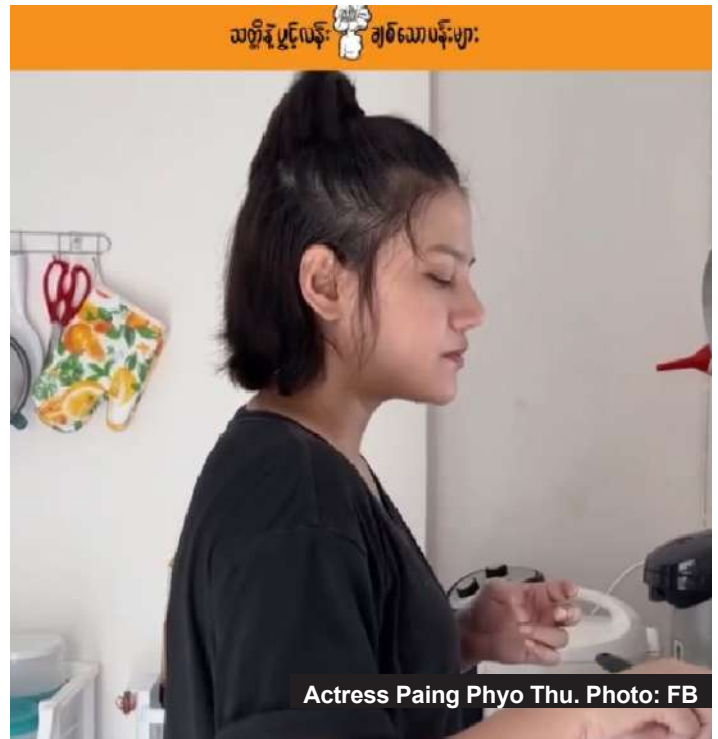
National Unity Government (NUG) Human Rights Minister Aung Myo Min on his visit to New Zealand. Photo: Supplied

NUG HUMAN RIGHTS MINISTER MEETS WITH LAW EXPERTS IN NEW ZEALAND TO TAKE ACTION AGAINST MYANMAR JUNTA

The National Unity Government (NUG) Human Rights Minister Aung Myo Min held a meeting with law experts on May 9 regarding Universal Judiciary (UJ) in New Zealand, according to the official Facebook page of the NUG.

During the meeting, discussions were held regarding the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which Myanmar is currently facing; the transfer of the case to the International Criminal Court (ICC), intergovernmental organization and international tribunal; and the circumstances for taking action under Universal Jurisdiction for the crimes committed by Myanmar junta.

Among the law experts who met with the NUG minister were former New Zealand Prime Minister Geoffrey Palmer and judge Kenneth Keith who formerly served on the ICJ.



Actress Paing Phyo Thu. Photo: FB

ARTISTS' SHELTER EXTENDS GRATITUDE TO MYANMAR MOVIE FANS IN SINGAPORE FOR FILM SCREENING SUPPORT

The Artists' Shelter wrote on their official Facebook page expressing special gratitude to their Myanmar movie fans in Singapore for their attendance at the Film Screening named Flowers That Bloom With Courage on May 12 for placing pre-orders for the related merchandise items.

Artists' Shelter is a private, nonprofit organization founded by Myanmar artists in exile, according to the official Facebook page. Its members come from various artistic fields, including filmmaking, music, photography, literature, visual arts, performing arts, and more.

At the Film Screening, three films were shown, including 'Guilt,' directed by Na Gyi and starring Daung and Paing Phyo Thu.

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Analysis & Insight



DIGITAL MAGAZINE

Our relaunched magazine Mizzima Weekly provides 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.