

ON THE GROUND IN MYANMAR

# mizzima WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight

## DRIVE FOR UNITY

**Call for EROs to join  
Myanmar revolutionary  
battle for the heartland**

**The Great Escape - Insight into the Myanmar military  
Arakan Army denies bombing civilians and  
burning Buthidaung Town**



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## 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.

# RAKHINE'S WORSENING CRISIS

**Y**our viewpoint will dictate how you look at the worsening crisis in Myanmar's impoverished Rakhine State.

On the one hand, there will be people cheering on the Arakan Army (AA) as the Myanmar military dominoes fall, as it pushes to take over Rakhine State and run it effectively as an autonomous region. Many will view it as an important part of the Myanmar jigsaw as the resistance makes gains in its battle with the illegal junta.

On the other hand, last week saw a cacophony of calls to protect civilians in the state, including the National Unity Government (NUG) and the United Nations Human Rights Chief, and a call by 194 resistance and NGO organizations calling for action.

Over the last few weeks, civilians have got caught up in the crossfire, including Buddhists, Hindus and Muslim Rohingya. What is clear is the Myanmar junta is deliberately stirring the pot, pursuing a "divide-and-rule" strategy that sees the Rohingya caught in the crosshairs.

The UN Human Rights Chief Volker Turk is worried.

"I am deeply alarmed by reports of renewed violence and property destruction in Buthidaung township in Myanmar's northern Rakhine state, resulting in the displacement of potentially tens of thousands of civilians, mainly Rohingya," Turk said in a statement.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights indicated that the United Nations was seeking to corroborate information indicating serious violations. "With inter-communal tensions between ethnic Rakhine and Rohingya high - and being actively stoked by the military - this is a critical period when the risk of yet further atrocity crimes is particularly acute."

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

control of lucrative resources. The AA claims to be fighting for autonomy for the state's ethnic Rakhine population. The group has taken issue with some reports claiming the AA has targeted Rohingya and burnt their villages.

Fighting had spread to 15 of Rakhine state's 17 townships since November, Turk said last month. Hundreds of people have been killed or wounded and more than 300,000 displaced. Turk made a direct appeal to the Myanmar military and the AA to "pause fighting, protect civilians, allow immediate and unhindered humanitarian access" and to comply "unconditionally" with international law. He also appealed to neighbouring Bangladesh to extend protection to "vulnerable people seeking safety".

In one conflict area, nearly 20,000 people remain trapped in Maungdaw amid the fighting, most of them Rohingya and Hindus, as most of the Buddhist Rakhine population have slipped out since April.

What is clear is the Rohingya are caught in the middle of the conflict and are being used by the junta, and militant groups, in the battle for the state. There have been drives by the Myanmar military to conscript Rohingya men into the military. And Muslim militant groups have also been abducting Rohingya in the Bangladesh refugee camps to join the Myanmar military - raising eyebrows amongst those who understand the deep trauma of the military's "genocidal" programme against the Rohingya in 2017 that saw over 700,000 flee to Bangladesh. This military crackdown is now the subject of a United Nations genocide court case.

The future looks bleak for Rohingya in Rakhine State, given the attacks on their communities, and their use as cannon fodder in the current conflict between the AA and the junta forces.

## EDITORIAL

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**Cover photo of PDF fighters in Mandalay by AFP**







Why EROs should not withdraw from the “battle for centre” and why they should participate in the reconstructing of the power-sharing centre? - Photo of PDF fighters in Mandalay preparing a drone (AFP)

# DRIVE FOR UNITY

## CALL FOR EROS TO JOIN MYANMAR REVOLUTIONARY BATTLE FOR THE HEARTLAND

*Igor Blazevic*



Myanmar's borderland periphery can and will be liberated.

It has already happened to a significant degree - somewhere more and substantially, somewhere a bit less but still significantly. This is the irreversible outcome of the failed 2021 coup and ensuing nationwide uprising.

If the junta does not implode and until it does - either from the bottom-up or through an internal counter-coup that will remove Min Aung Hlaing and the State Administration Council (SAC) - the war for Myanmar's heartlands and "centre" will be even harder than the struggle so far - which has already been very hard and required extraordinary determination, endurance, and sacrifice.

The National Unity Government (NUG) and People's Defence Forces (PDFs), while crucial, cannot liberate lowland cities on their own. The active participation of Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs) is essential in the battles for Myanmar heartlands and in the war for the centre. Their readiness to invest and sacrifice will be a significant factor in the overall success of the struggle.

The question is how much EROs will be ready to do so, particularly once they have liberated their own territories and started the hard and demanding process of state-building (in some cases also nation-building) with very limited resources and in conditions of ongoing insecurity and fragility.

In the short run, it may seem like a reasonable choice for EROs to accept a ceasefire with the junta, consolidate control over liberated territories, and focus on building their own self-rule. However, the potential risks and long-term implications of this decision, particularly if the battle for lowlands proves to be long, hard, and costly, should not be overlooked.

In the longer run, without defeating the military in the centre and without removing the military-as-regime, ethnic proto-states can never be safe. If unreformed, the dictatorial and predatory Myanmar military will survive in the Bama lowlands, they will always resurrect as imperium striking back.

Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing does not have too many options at this moment. He knows that at the end of the day, he can sacrifice Myanmar's periphery as long as he can make a corrupt elite pact with armed



TNLA fighters in northern Shan State.  
Photo: AFP

groups controlling the territory. He can give the Wa-type of autonomy to the most powerful ethnic armed groups and BGF type of mafia-like autonomy to others, as long as they can agree on a mutual transactional deal and as long as ethnic armed groups will be satisfied with their "own" territory and own businesses, and will refrain from participating in the overall common anti-junta struggle.

The future of Myanmar will be decided by the strength of resistance in the Bama heartlands and in the battles for Sagaing, Magway, Mandalay and Bago regions. This Bama liberation struggle cannot succeed if EROs stop investing their own resources and making strategic contribution to this critical "battle for the centre".

Without the majority of relevant ethnic actors being actively involved in the common struggle, the NUG and PDFs do not have enough arms, ammunition, supply routes, training, and military expertise for well-planned and sustained strategic offensive operations to defeat the junta.

Without credible – and active, visible – political alliances, neighbours and regional and international actors will continue to believe that the military is an unavoidable factor in any negotiations about the future. And they will continue to bet on the junta's survival.

However, the argument goes the other way around as well. Without successful armed resistance in upper Myanmar and Bama lowlands, the EAOs are, in a longer-term perspective, no match for the military.

If an oppressive and predatory military regime controls the Bama heartlands and coast, if they control key economic assets and the Bama majority as a recruitment base, even a united ethnic alliance is not sufficient to sustain and protect whatever territory they might liberate and whatever concessions they might get from the current junta.

A reconsolidated kleptocratic military dictatorship will have both diplomatic, economic and hard power to continue to penetrate and exploit land, natural wealth, assets and the prospects of the ethnic people. The combined interests of local bosses, military commanders, unscrupulous investors, organized crime and predatory neighbours will pray on both Bama heartlands and ethnic "autonomies".

A military and political alliance between the Bama PDF resistance and the EROs resistance is capable of defeating the SAC and breaking the military dictatorship's domineering power. After three years of enormous suffering and heroic determination, this option has become both possible and probable.

However, if China, Myanmar's neighbours, and murky players such as the Sasakawa Peace Foundation partly pressure and partly lure ethnic stakeholders to abandon the Spring Revolution and make transactional deals with the SAC, new opportunities will not emerge for at least the next 20 years.

If the SAC is not defeated and if the military is not removed from Myanmar's politics and economy, a repressive, exploitative, kleptocratic, highly unequal, discriminatory, and wasteful regime will reconsolidate power piece by piece. The Myanmar military will go from being at the edge of collapse toward renewed strength.

The SAC, which will become victorious in Bama's majority heartlands, will again gain an appetite to take it all. There will be no real sharing of power or wealth, no fairness, and no compliance with the deals. If the monster of the Myanmar military is allowed to survive in Bama's majority areas, it will recuperate and come back like a metastasis.

The historic opportunity to remove the malign cancer should not be missed, whatever the hardship and length of the battle for the heartlands.

## THE WAY FORWARD IN 2024

In order to achieve the collapse of the SAC, liberate country from the military dictatorship and lay the ground for the peaceful, federal, democratic future of the country, allied anti-junta forces, political, armed and civic ones, should focus on the following priorities:

- **Wave after wave:** Land one strong blow after another with strategically prepared offensives, which will liberate more territory and, even more importantly, capture more strategic assets such as: important supply or trade routes, border crossings, sources of revenue, etc. There is only one military and one hierarchical chain of command that is fighting the war on the side of the junta. However, on the side of resistance,



there can be a rotation of a burden of bigger offensive operations. While one or two sub alliances of the EROs & PDFs are undertaking offensive operations in parts of the country, the other sub alliances can have a break to either prepare, supply or concentrate forces for their offensives. Or they can have a break after successful offensives to consolidate and secure defensively recent gains, to treat the wounded soldiers and rest their own units.

- **Hundreds of bees biting:** Relentlessly harass and bleed military outposts and personnel across the vast country with the strategy of “hundreds of bees biting a big animal” every single day. This is chopping off military strength bit by bit and making junta soldiers and loyalists deeply insecure.

- **Special operations:** Hit high-value targets, either because they have important military value (jet fuel depots, airports and ports, ammunition storages, weapons and ammunition factories, etc.) or because they have significant psychological and symbolic value (attacks on high-ranking officers, or on special military

facilities or events). A combination of bigger, well-prepared offensives which liberate chunks of territory and capture strategic assets with spectacular, surprise attacks hitting something that is valuable or highly symbolic for the junta will sustain significant real and psychological pressure on the junta and will sooner or later break its neck.

- **Cut the supply lines:** Particular effort should be put into making roads, railway and river shipments either impossible or highly costly for the junta. Resistance should continue to cut the SAC where they are highly vulnerable – on supply lines. It is particularly useful to explore what are the options to target vehicles transporting jet fuel and materials for weapons and ammunition production.

- **Psychological and information warfare:** Turn each success into a psychological and informational warfare offensive targeting both junta loyalists and internationals with the overarching stratcom message: “SAC is losing and will be defeated; liberation alliance is winning and will prevail. Abandon the sinking boat.”



Mandalay PDF fighters survey the battlefield in Mandalay region. Photo: AFP



- **Cut the revenues:** Explore options for subversions or passive strikes on economic assets that are valuable for the junta. Sanctions will not be the game-changer. So, it is better to look at how to subvert production or distribution facilities (taking into consideration, of course, the sensitivities of neighbours)

- **Hinder recruitment:** Increase prices and slow down the junta's attempt to replenish its units with new recruits.

- **Push back meddling of neighbours:** A well-coordinated effort of the NUG and K3C foreign affairs teams on one side, and the civil society, advocacy NGOs and strike committees on the other side is needed to push back any foreign effort to give a lifeline to the junta through the ceasefire negotiations and "all-inclusive" dialogue. The general line should be: "Liberation forces do not reject negotiations with the military; however, they are possible only when the military unilaterality stop attacks on civilians and liberated territories and when they are ready to agree on three common political objectives: no military in future politics; new federal democratic constitution and accountability through transitional justice"

- **Change the proportion of how aid is channeled:** It is necessary, through the exposure of failures of the UN agencies to address the needs of the most needy population in Myanmar and through systematic advocacy, to change the proportion of how international aid funds are channeled in the country. The goal should be that 50-40% of overall aid funds should continue to be distributed through the UN agencies and INGOs that are based in Yangon and who are hostages of the junta. 60-50% of international aid funds should be channeled to Myanmar through local civil society, religious charities and the NUG and EROs public service structures.

- **Revolutionary fundraising:** Do not take a break from fundraising for the revolution. To run the war, one needs money. International donors might contribute to humanitarian aid and, to some extent, also to public services and governing capacity on the liberated territories; however, they will never invest in liberation and revolutionary struggle. Liberation struggle must be self-financed by the population of the country, diaspora and locally harnessed revenues.

- **Credible political alliance:** Forge and make a visible political agreement about the ways in which the transition process will be managed. Project a credible political alliance.

- **Winning alliance of moderates:** Do not play hardball in internal political discussions. Sideline troublemakers. Do not compete for authority. Cultivate political moderation, tolerance and compromise. Understand and respect different sources of legitimacy (democratic legitimacy coming from elections; legitimacy of decades of ethnic liberation struggle for self-rule; legitimacy of bravery, leadership and heroism of the Spring Revolution actors). Move forward through minimum consensus, mutual assurances, collaborative actions and joint victories.

- **Do not try to catch all rabbits at the same time:** Do not overburden the struggle with too many demands. To remove the murderous military dictatorship and gain freedom, security, federalism, democracy, and fundamental rights must be seen as a priority so that other issues can be addressed in more favorable conditions through political and civil activism, without the need for deadly existential struggle. However, host thousands of dialogues and run educational programmes that aim to secure and defend justice, equality, and a democratic, liberal, inclusive and tolerant future of Myanmar.

- **Internet army:** Build and deploy an internet army for more effective psychological and informational warfare.

- **Practice constantly aligned campaigning.**

*Igor Blazevic is a European democracy activist with years of experience in Myanmar.*



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The Myanmar junta is trying to use more technology in its fight against the resistance. Photo: AFP

# MYANMAR JUNTA'S NEW STRATEGY THREATENS RESISTANCE GAINS

**T**he Myanmar military junta has adopted a new, multi-pronged strategy to counter resistance forces. This approach combines drone attacks with ground troop advances and heavy artillery bombardments although a significant portion of the junta's ground forces are new conscripts with minimal training and discipline.

This tactic has been particularly effective in Karenni State, where resistance forces face severe ammunition shortages and lack effective countermeasures against drones and shoulder-launched weaponry.

This combined assault by the junta threatens to push resistance fighters out of key areas, including Loikaw in Karenni State and Hsi Hseng in southern Shan State.

## Strategic locations at risk

Loikaw's proximity to the capital, Naypyidaw (only 130 kilometers drive away), makes it strategically important. If resistance forces maintain control of Loikaw and establish a supply line to the victorious Three Brotherhood Alliance militia in northern Shan State, they could potentially threaten the junta's administrative centre.

Hsi Hseng, however, presents a different challenge. This area falls within the Pa-O National Organisation's (PNO) self-administered zone. Since the coup, the PNO's armed wing has actively recruited for the Tatmadaw. The junta has seized significant weapons caches from resistance forces within this PNO-controlled zone on at least two occasions.



A local resistance commander in Karenni predicts that by the end of the rainy season, the resistance could lose nearly half of the territory they've gained since the revolution began. He emphasizes the need for counter-attacks focusing on the junta's weak points:

**Drone Operators:** Targeting the individuals operating the drones could disrupt their attacks.

### **Junta's Drone Advantage**

The junta has been steadily increasing its use of advanced drones purchased from Russia and Belarus. These drones, some with fixed wings, reportedly have extended flight times and carry powerful bombs capable of destroying two-story buildings. This aerial warfare has resulted in a significant rise in casualties across Karenni, Karen, and Rakhine states.

### **Junta's Acquisition Efforts**

The junta's drone battalion is based in the No. (11) Light Infantry Division in Yangon Region. Source Information: Mizzima's source claims that Lieutenant Colonel Kyaw Zaw Ye, who was trained in Russia and a close associate of junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, played a key role in acquiring 15 fixed-wing drones and drone guards delivered in April 2024.

Following Operation 1027, the junta's offensive against the Three Brotherhood Alliance, they are reportedly seeking to acquire several hundred more military drones, with the BBC estimating the total number could reach 3,000.

Mizzima has also learned that the junta purchased a geospatial imaging system from China. This system has recently produced detailed images of Myitkyina in Kachin State, where fighting between the junta and the Kachin Independence Organization is ongoing.

### **Recommendations for the Resistance**

To tackle this challenge, the resistance would be wise to consider the following:

- Employ scouting drones or train "drone watchers" to detect and avoid drone attacks;

- Train troops on drone safety protocols;

- Develop countermeasures, such as concealment techniques and deploying multiple units to divert drone attention and allow for destruction attempts;

The National Unity Government's Ministry of Defense (NUG MOD) should prioritize supplying trained drone pilots and drones to critical areas.

### **Early Warning Systems**

Implementing an aircraft early warning system is crucial for effective defense.

By adapting their tactics and acquiring necessary resources, the resistance forces can hope to counter the junta's new offensive and preserve their territorial gains.

## **JUNTA'S OPERATION AUNG ZEYA NOW 'ON THE DEFENSIVE'**

The Aung Zeya state-level military operation faced formidable resistance from revolutionary forces while attempting to cross Dawna Hill between April 16 and 18, suffering several fatalities and injuries. On May 16, a sub-column from Aung Zeya tried to advance along the old Myawaddy- Kawkareik highway but was forced to retreat due to strong opposition from Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)-led revolutionary forces.

State Administration Council (SAC) troops involved in the operation are spread out along the Myawaddy-Kawkareik highway, with some columns surrounded by resistance forces. Currently, the junta's operations are largely defensive, responding to revolutionary offensives rather than initiating their own. While some columns are making weak offensive attempts, others are primarily focused on resisting ambushes by revolutionary forces. The Aung Zeya operation remains far from reaching its target, Myawaddy, and has not yet gained control of the Asia Highway.

A revolutionary force member mentioned that the Aung Zeya operation has lost 400 personnel, including those killed and injured, since its inception. Furthermore, new soldiers, forcibly recruited under the conscription law and misled into thinking they were undergoing military practice, have been assigned to this operation. Meanwhile, some SAC soldiers from the Aung Zeya operation have defected to the resistance forces, bringing their arms and ammunition with them. Other SAC troops are reportedly in contact with the resistance forces, planning to follow their defected colleagues.

## **RAKHINE CRISIS UPDATE**

On May 18, 2024, the Arakan Army (AA) declared that they had seized Buthidaung city, which hosts the second-largest number of military bases in Rakhine State, including No. 15 Military Operation Command. They claimed to have captured the remaining SAC military bases, including strategic headquarters. Following this, AA launched an offensive on Maungdaw, a major border trade hub with Bangladesh, by attacking the No. 2 Border Guard Police Battalion. Maungdaw, located 16 miles from Buthidaung, also hosts No. 5 Border Guard Police Battalions.

Unsurprisingly, the military junta shelled artillery indiscriminately, forcing tens of thousands of civilians





Combatting Operation Aung Zeya - KNLA forces.

from 30 villages, primarily Rohingya and Rakhine communities, to flee their homes. On the other hand, intense skirmishes in the southern part of Rakhine State resulted in over 30 military junta troops being killed and AA capturing a significant quantity of weapons. Additionally, an airstrike by the SAC airforce killed nine villagers and wounded many others in Nattaungmaw village, Thandwe township on May 18.

Meanwhile, the AA has denied allegations made by Rohingya activists that AA is responsible for burning Rohingya houses and bombing a school sheltering Rohingya internally displaced persons (IDPs). "It is not true. It is just a rootless accusation," said an AA spokesperson, who claimed that Rohingya militias trained by SAC troops carried out these actions. General Tun Myat Naing, the leader of the AA, also assured that they would "care for all communities without discrimination".

The humanitarian crisis has been further compounded by a severe shortage of medicine in areas controlled by the AA. Vulnerable groups, including the elderly, chronic patients, and pregnant women, are reportedly dying due to the lack of medical supplies.

Volker Turk, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, has raised alarm over the escalating violence and property destruction in Buthidaung township. The renewed hostilities have displaced

tens of thousands of civilians, with ethnic tensions between the Rakhine and Rohingya communities at an all-time high, exacerbated by the military junta's actions. He has urgently appealed to both the military junta and the AA to halt the civil war, protect civilians, and ensure immediate and unhindered humanitarian access. He stressed the necessity for all parties to fully and unconditionally comply with international law. (For more on the Rakhine crisis, please check the stories in this issue.)

## TRoubled Military Conscription Drive

In response to young men selected for military service through lottery draws attempting to evade conscription, the Myanmar junta is forcibly recruiting other youths. Authorities have begun snatching commuters engaged in everyday activities such as fishing, commuting, fertilizing fields, and watering paddy fields in Myothit township, Magway region. Similarly, in Natmauk township, SAC troops have been arresting individuals since the Thingyan Water Festival, only releasing those under 18 and over 48.

Chief of the General Staff (Army, Navy, and Air) General Maung Maung Aye, who also serves as Vice-Chairman of the Central Body for Summoning People's Military Servants, emphasized taking legal action against those evading military training courses.



Defence Minister Admiral Tin Aung San, Chairman of the Central Body, admitted there were irregularities in the first batch of conscripts and acknowledged difficulties in meeting recruitment targets.

According to the independent research team Data for Myanmar, the SAC has implemented the conscription law in over 170 of the country's more than 300 townships for the first batch of conscripts. This has led many youths to flee the country, join resistance forces, or even contemplate suicide. The military junta has threatened to take action against family members of selected youths who run away.

## MOST POPULAR MIZZIMA BURMESE VIDEOS

These are the most popular Mizzima Burmese videos over the last week.

### Where and what are the Myawati tigers?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBj4hH3DVRg>

This video focuses on the scamming operations in Myawaddy and Karen State. It discusses the international image related to the current online scammer distribution activities on the Thailand-Myanmar border, the situation with the Border Guard Force, the military junta, and the return of foreign workers who are caught crossing the border to their respective countries.

### Will the Military Council talks with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi? | Friday Analysis

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LecUs-E-WJY>

### Competitive drone technology and modern warfare | Editorial Talk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnFnIFcY3u8>







Photo: AFP

## 194 ORGANISATIONS SAY ROHINGYA MUST NO LONGER BE EXPLOITED FOR MILITARY AND POLITICAL GAIN

A total of 194 revolutionary forces and civil society organisations (CSOs) signed a statement last week expressing their concern about the way the Rohingya are being exploited for military and political gain by both sides in the Myanmar conflict.

It points out that though some Rohingya groups, such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA) and Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) are collaborating with the junta they do not represent all Rohingya and the Arakan Army (AA) should not treat Rohingya civilians badly because of the views and actions of such groups.

Below is the statement in full:

Joint Statement by 194 revolutionary forces and civil society organizations on the situation in Northern Rakhine

May 22, 2024

Calling on organizations and individuals in Rakhine and across the country to immediately stop exploiting the lives, property and image of the oppressed Rohingya for political and military use

The terrorist military junta has consistently oppressed and committed torture, killings, genocide, and crimes against humanity against the Rohingya.

Currently, with forced conscription orders, the military junta is forcibly using Rohingya as human shields and soldiers to perpetrate violence on its behalf.

In a significant incident, almost 100 Rohingya, who were forcibly abducted and taken into the fighting by the military during the battle with the Arakan Army (AA), were massacred in Angumaw, Rathedaung Township, Rakhine region, in March of this year.

In addition, the military junta is currently forcing Rohingya from the IDP camps in Buthidaung and Sittwe to protest the AA and is inciting a public misperception of Rohingya to cause further ethnic conflict.

In April of this year, the terrorist military junta used Rohingya who had been forcibly recruited under its conscription orders to burn down more than 200 homes of ethnic Rakhine people in Buthidaung Town, Rakhine Region, to intentionally create an ethnic conflict between the Rakhine and Rohingya communities.

In addition to the fact that the military junta is working to create such ethnic conflict, the revolutionary forces and the public need to be especially prudent, aware, and understanding that the Rohingya people—who do not have a choice and face unparalleled hardships, having been locked down for many years—are being forced into patterns that the terrorist military

junta wants to portray.

In this situation, it has been observed that organizations, media, and individuals are repeatedly using hate speech such as “Bengali terrorists” and “Muslim terrorists” to describe the Rohingya, as well as portraying all Rohingya as collaborating with the military junta. Such situations of indiscriminate accusations against an entire ethnic group and the religion they believe in are fomenting ethnic and religious conflict and increasing hatred among the public.

As in other ethnic groups, it is important to note that, among Rohingya, there also are some who are collaborating with the terrorist Myanmar military junta for their own self-interest, but at the same time, there are many Rohingyas who oppose the military dictatorship.

All of us need to understand and clearly distinguish that Rohingya armed groups, such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA) and Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO)—which are collaborating with the terrorist military junta—do not represent all Rohingyas.

We absolutely condemn and oppose any ethnic armed groups, including Rohingya armed groups, that are collaborating with the terrorist military junta and abusing the public.

We are well aware that there are armed groups like ARSA in other ethnic communities who collaborate with the terrorist military junta and falsely claim to represent these communities. Since December 7, 2021, Rohingya communities and organizations have issued a public statement declaring that ARSA does not represent the Rohingya in any way.

We urge the Arakan Army (AA) to take responsibility to be accountable to local communities for ensuring social harmony. It is also necessary to comply with the Geneva Conventions and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) not to wage battles in civilian areas and not to forcibly relocate villagers from the Rohingya villages.

Since the protection of civilians is a military code of conduct (a norm of customary IHL) that must be particularly adhered to during wartime, we specifically call on the Arakan Army (AA) to protect all civilians, whether they are ethnically Rakhine, ethnically Rohingya, or from other ethnic and religious groups living in region and allow access to independent international news media and humanitarian aid.

On the other hand, although the AA has announced that they will not engage in extrajudicial killings or arrest ethnic Rohingya people, there are cases on the ground that have been allegedly committed by soldiers

under the command of the AA. According to published reports, there have been massacres of entire Rohingya villages; Rohingya who were arrested, taken, and killed in hidden places; and illegal abductions of Rohingya in Thankyaukkhe Village and Ywetnyotaung Village in Buthidaung, and Thayetoak Village in northern Maungdaw, in April and May.

According to eyewitnesses and media reports, the Arakan Army (AA) burned down and destroyed houses where Rohingya civilians lived in Buthidaung Town, on the night of May 17 at approximately 10 p.m., after the Arakan Army (AA) gained control of most of the town. This incident is a war crime and a crime against humanity.

The undersigned revolutionary forces and civil society organizations specifically and seriously request the Arakan Army (AA) to carry out independent investigations of these matters and take action against perpetrators if there were violations.

The safety of all people in Rakhine is of grave concern during the intense fighting between the terrorist military junta and the Arakan Army (AA).

The oppressed and exploited Rohingya need protection, and it is crucial that another genocide is prevented. Along with political forces and civil society organizations of Myanmar, individuals in Myanmar are also responsible for civilian protection. It is vitally important to uphold the principles of human dignity and protection for all. The Arakan Army (AA), responsible for the Rakhine Region, has a special duty to protect all the people living in the Rakhine.

We strongly urge the Arakan Army (AA) leaders and the Rohingya leaders to engage in dialogue and hold consultations as soon as possible. We are raising these concerns constructively, and we will support and strengthen activities for the peaceful coexistence and long-term stability of various ethnicities and religions in the future Arakan [Rakhine]. We pledge to continue supporting the revolution that aims for the liberation of all people living in every part of Arakan.





National Unity Government of Myanmar  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs



NUG Foreign Minister  
Zin Mar Aung

## **NUG CALLS FOR PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS IN BUTHIDAUNG TOWNSHIP**

**A** National Unity Government (NUG) statement about the situation in Buthidaung Township, northern Rakhine State has called for the protection of civilians, their houses and goods, and the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

The Arakan Army (AA) took control of Buthidaung Town by 18 May 2024. Since then unconfirmed reports allege that the AA has set fire to Rohingya houses in Buthidaung Township.

The NUG statement condemns the junta for instigating inter-communal conflict, large-scale destruction and bombing.

It also says: "Some distressing reports also allege that an unconfirmed number of civilians have been killed and wounded. We are deeply concerned that violations in northern Rakhine State may be ongoing."

Though the NUG statement does not mention the AA by name it says that abuse of civilians in northern Rakhine State, large parts of which are now controlled by the AA, are ongoing.

Obtaining accurate reports of what is happening on the ground in Buthidaung has been hard and Mizzima is yet to receive verified reports of what has happened there.

Below is the 21 May NUG statement in full:

The National Unity Government is alarmed by grave reports on the situation in Buthidaung Township in northern Rakhine State. The terrorist Military Council is purportedly making inter-communal conflict by creating chaos and large-scale destruction, bombing and aerial attacks on villages. Rakhine, Rohingya and Hindu civilians are being forced to move and their

houses are being burnt.

Some distressing reports also allege that an unconfirmed number of civilians have been killed and wounded. We are deeply concerned that violations in northern Rakhine State may be ongoing.

The National Unity Government joins others in calling for the cessation of all attacks on civilians and civilian property; for the protection of all civilians, property, and objects, particularly those persons most vulnerable; and for the immediate and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance to all persons in need, including cross border.

The National Unity Government is fully committed to its international humanitarian and human rights law obligations, including through our military Code of Conduct. We hold ourselves to this standard and expect the same of all actors and forces in Myanmar.

The National Unity Government has repeatedly acknowledged that shameful past actions and failures in Myanmar allowed horrendous atrocities to be committed against minority communities, including the Rohingya, Rakhine, and others in Rakhine State. We are committed to ensuring that these crimes are never repeated. All attempts to foment divisions between ethnic communities must end.

We remain committed to the shared vision of structural change for all our people to live in peace, not only for regime change. We must continue to build trust, mutual respect, understanding and tolerance.

We will also work with UN bodies and international mechanisms to support justice, and with UN entities in Myanmar to help implement the Rosenthal report's recommendations.





Photo: AFP

## UNFPA CALLS FOR MORE FUNDING FOR ROHINGYA WOMEN IN BANGLADESH REFUGEE CAMPS

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Executive Director Dr. Natalia Kanem has released a statement last week highlighting that the lives of Rohingya women and girls living in refugee camps in Bangladesh are in jeopardy due to a lack of funding.

She said that, so far, UNFPA has only received 42 per cent of the \$31 million USD it needs in 2024 to provide sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence prevention and response services in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh.

Below is the 20 May statement in full:

Statement by UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Natalia Kanem

Seven years after the Rohingya people were driven from their homes in Myanmar, close to one million remain stranded in the refugee camps of Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar district – over half of them women and girls. Their current and future prospects are far from certain.

When I visited the camps in 2018, the women I met were haunted by the unspeakable acts of sexual violence they had endured – and barely survived. I met with women again this week at a women-friendly space in Camp 9 – one of 56 such spaces UNFPA and its partners are supporting across the camps. They told me they now feel more empowered to speak out against sexual violence; their husbands and sons are starting to listen; and they know how to access medical treatment, counselling and legal services when abhorrent incidents do occur. The spaces, they said, bring them hope and happiness amid difficult living conditions in the densely populated camps. I also met midwives who said the number of women using family planning had steadily increased over recent years.

At the Friendship Hospital in Balukhali, adjacent to the camps – the only facility serving Rohingya refugees and host communities that can manage complicated obstetric emergencies, including c-sections and blood transfusions – I saw first-hand how the skills of trained midwives are saving lives. Since 2019, the number of women giving birth in health facilities has doubled, reaching 85 percent, thanks in large part to the efforts of UNFPA and its partners, who facilitated more than 10,600 safe births in 2023 alone.

Yet amid this hope there is an underlying fear. With conflict mounting across the border in Myanmar, women spoke of their anxiety that husbands and sons will be recruited to fight. Shrinking humanitarian funding, and an increase in security incidents in the camps, have left them more exposed to violence. With no means of earning a legal income, and given that food rations are directly impacted by funding shortages, refugees are also resorting to increasingly desperate measures to survive. There are reports of forced early marriage – one in ten Rohingya girls is married as a child. Women and girls told me they are worried about how they will feed and support their families, with less food available and crime on the rise.

Given dangerous shortfalls in funding, UNFPA's services, a lifeline for Rohingya women and girls and host communities, are also under threat.

In 2024, UNFPA needs \$31 million to provide sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence prevention and response services in the camps. To date our response is only 42% funded. With additional and sufficient funding UNFPA will be able to establish more safe spaces, train more young people, extend our counselling services, and support more midwives with health supplies and equipment.

I left the camps at Cox's Bazar with a clear message for the international community: I urge you to renew your financial commitment to the Rohingya refugees as they continue to live lives marked by uncertainty and fear. Greater, more flexible and sustained funding is critical for both UNFPA and our UN agency partners to provide services for women and girls that can quite literally mean the difference between life and death.

UNFPA is the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency. Its mission is to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled.

UNFPA promotes gender equality and empowers women, girls and young people to take control of their bodies and their futures. Its work with partners in more than 150 countries to provide access to a wide range of sexual and reproductive health services. Its goals are to eradicate unmet needs for family planning, preventable maternal death, and gender-based violence and harmful practices including child marriage and female genital mutilation by 2030.





Arakan Army leader Twan Mrat Naing.  
Photo: AFP

## ARAKAN ARMY DENIES BOMBING CIVILIANS AND BURNING BUTHIDAUNG TOWN

**T**he Arakan Army (AA) issued a statement last week accusing the Myanmar Army of attacking civilians and inciting inter-ethnic violence whilst denying reports saying that the AA is doing the same.

In the statement, the AA denied that it was responsible for bombing a school in Buthidaung Township and killing 18 Rohingya sheltering there on 17 May, as reported by Radio Free Asia (RFA), which also reported that the AA had burned down homes in Buthidaung.

Recently aid organisations such as the UN have issued statements of concern for the situation of the Rohingya who have been caught in the middle of fighting between the Myanmar junta and the AA in Rakhine State. Since the AA takeover of Buthidaung at the weekend there have been further statements of concern about the situation of the Rohingya, especially in Buthidaung.

Though the AA statement says that it will help people caught in the conflict it mentions nothing about helping the Rohingya. The only time Rohingya are

mentioned in the statement they are referred to by the derogatory term Bengali Muslims. A term used by the Myanmar Army and others who believe the Rohingya do not belong in Myanmar and are foreigners, despite them having been in Myanmar for many generations.

Though the AA statement denounced the junta for stirring racial hatred, it never mentions the Rohingya by name. Instead, it calls them "Bengali Muslims" and accuses "Bengali militants" of burning down "all the houses of Rakhine, Hindu and other non-Muslim people in Buthidaung, preventing them from returning home."

The statement lays the blame for the burning of Buthidaung on the Rohingya when reports other than the RFA report indicate that the AA and the junta were responsible for setting fire to large parts of Buthidaung Town.

A statement by the Women's Peace Network (WPN) claimed that: "On 17 May 2024, starting at approximately 10:00 pm Myanmar time, the Arakan Army set downtown Buthidaung and its surrounding villages on fire."



The WPN statement also claimed: "Alarming, the AA's attack on Buthidaung is taking place against the backdrop of a pattern of escalating atrocities against Rohingya civilians. Over the past two weeks, WPN has been informed of cases including the AA's torching of dozens of Rohingya villages; as well as its shelling of the No. (1) Basic Education High School and the Buthidaung Township's only hospital, where internally displaced Rohingya were seeking refuge."

Definitive, reports of what happened during the AA's capture of Buthidaung Township are still scarce, so currently Mizzima is unable to establish and confirm exactly what happened.

Below is the 20 May statement from the AA in full:

"The fascist terrorist group known as the military council, or SAC, has been facing defeats across Myanmar, including in Arakan [Rakhine State]. They have lost control of many major military bases, including headquarters and border guard outposts, and stand to lose many more. Being desperate due to failures on all fronts, military, administrative, and diplomatic - SAC has resorted to tactics that violate international humanitarian and human rights laws, as well as laws on crimes against humanity. They have continually targeted civilian areas, markets, hospitals, schools, and religious structures with ground and naval artillery shelling and aerial bombardments. Additionally, they have been burning homes and destroying bridges.

"Civilians are once again warned to dig bomb shelters to protect themselves from aerial, artillery, and naval bombardments, and to swiftly evacuate to safer areas to avoid getting caught in the crossfire. Due to ongoing intense fighting in the Buthidaung, Maungdaw, and Thandwe regions, international organizations based there are advised to relocate to safer areas. If they become trapped in the warzone, they should contact ULA/AA for assistance anytime.

"In addition to the aforementioned crimes, SAC has been inciting racial and religious violence by recruiting, training, and equipping militant Bengali Muslims from Buthidaung, Maungdaw, and Kyaukphyu townships, in collaboration with RSO, ARSA, and ARA. The Arakan Army strictly adheres to its principle of fighting under the military code of conduct and never targets non-military objects. Accordingly, it has been helping people evacuate to safer areas in a timely manner. Conversely, the defeated military council, with malicious intentions, has been intent on inciting racial and religious conflicts.

"Moreover, in April this year, SAC, together with the Bengali militants they trained and equipped, burned

down almost all the houses of Rakhine, Hindu and other non-Muslim people in Buthidaung, preventing them from returning home. It should be noted that on May 17, SAC launched a prolonged aerial attack on Buthidaung township until midnight as their last desperate attacks. In reality, SAC and its allies have destroyed the town, and they are now spreading false narratives and accusations relentlessly as if it was done by the Arakan Army.

"The Arakan Army had issued warnings before the offensives began, advising people in major cities like Sittwe and Kyaukphyu to evacuate to areas under its control, and practically helped with their evacuation. Similarly, in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships, advance warnings were given, and the Arakan Army has been assisting people in moving to safer areas. Meanwhile, extremist organizations such as RSO, ARSA, and ARA, along with their cohorts, have been echoing SAC's lines for their own agendas.

"Spreading such disinformation is clearly aimed at destroying the unity, social harmony, and cooperation among the ULA/AA, Arakanese, Muslim communities and other minority ethnic groups in the region. These claims are in favor of SAC's propaganda and false, and we hereby denounce and condemn them. We also strongly and categorically reject the news broadcast by RFA Burmese on May 17, 2024 that portrayed that the Arakan Army had dropped bombs by drone on some civilians in Buthidaung which had killed some civilians and injured hundreds as groundless and having nothing to do with our organization.

"For transparency and truth seeking, both domestic and international media are welcomed to come and gather unbiased and objective information in accordance with media ethics. We are striving for truth and justice and we denounce all forms of terror and atrocities. And we are also ready to cooperate with the international ant-terrorism groups to participate in combating against all forms of terrorism. Regarding Buthidaung and Maungdaw situations, our organization can be contacted anytime to have clearance and ground truth about the many false accusation and fake news propagated by the groups who have negative stance on ULA/AA. We would like to firmly reiterate that we are ready to work with any unbiased organization for the above-mentioned subjects."



Photo: Denis Fuchdizhie

## UK AND PARTNERS VOICE CONCERN OVER ESCALATING CONFLICT IN MYANMAR

**A**ustralia, Canada, the European Union, the Republic of Korea, Malta, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States released a statement on 24 May on the escalating conflict in Myanmar.

The following is the full statement:

We, Australia, Canada, the European Union, the Republic of Korea, Malta, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States, are deeply concerned by the escalating conflict in Myanmar and in particular the increasing harm to

civilians, which are driving a worsening and devastating human rights and humanitarian crisis across the country.

Since the February 2021 coup d'état, the number of people in humanitarian need has risen from 1 million to 18.6 million. There continues to be credible reports of violations and abuses committed against the civilian population, including airstrikes on homes, schools, places of worship and hospitals, as well as torture, the use of civilians as human shields, and sexual and gender-based violence against women and children. As the conflict continues to escalate, communities across Myanmar are being subjected to further displacement.



The military regime is systematically restricting access to life saving humanitarian assistance. We are concerned about growing water and food shortages and the widespread denial of access to health care, medicines, and vital humanitarian services. The continued blocking of roads and telecommunications in areas of conflict is hindering humanitarian delivery and access to information.

Across the country, more than 1,000 civilians were killed or maimed by landmines in 2023, and casualties are rapidly growing. Increasing numbers of people are being trafficked and held against their will. All parties must ensure that they are prioritising the protection of civilians.

We are deeply concerned by the military regime's implementation of the 2010 conscription law, which is increasing the number of displaced people. This measure continues to attempt to divide communities and fuel identity-based violence across Myanmar.

In Rakhine State, towns and villages have been consistently targeted by the military regime and armed groups. We are concerned by recent reports of high levels of displacement in Buthidaung. We call on all armed actors to ensure the protection of civilians. Deliberate use of misinformation, disinformation and hate speech is stoking sectarian and intercommunal conflict. Reports of forced recruitment, including of Rohingya, is further dividing communities and exploiting tensions and mistrust. All populations are facing extreme levels of food insecurity. The situation is increasingly dangerous for all civilians, including Rakhine, Rohingya and other ethnic communities.

There must be accountability for all atrocities committed in Myanmar. We recall the International Court of Justice's provisional measures order and the

need for compliance with it to safeguard human rights and prevent violations.

We welcome UN Security Council Resolution 2669 on the situation in Myanmar, calling for the immediate end to all forms of violence and urging all parties to respect human rights and to allow full, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access.

We welcome the appointment of the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General on Myanmar (UNSE) and unified efforts by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the UNSE and regional actors to resolve the crisis. We reiterate the need for strengthened UN leadership in the country.

We reiterate our call for all States to prevent or to cease the flow of arms or military and dual-use material, including aviation fuel, to the Myanmar military.

The military regime must release all those arbitrarily detained and implement in full the ASEAN Five Point Consensus. We call on all parties to create space for meaningful and inclusive dialogue, so that democracy can be restored in full.

We remain resolute in our support for all those committed to working peacefully towards an inclusive, non-violent and democratic future for the people of Myanmar.



Helene Maria Kyed

## THE GREAT ESCAPE – INSIGHT INTO THE MYANMAR MILITARY

“There’s not a word in Burmese language for defection,” explains Helene Maria Kyed, a senior researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies with a focus on political and legal anthropology, speaking in an interview with Insight Myanmar.

She continues that while there have been accounts of individual Burmese soldiers deserting, there have never been any mass military defections—with the soldiers joining the opposition—until the aftermath of the 2021 coup.

“We’ve argued in our research all the way from beginning, that the dynamics of the defection movement and how it evolves is very much dependent both on what goes on in resistance movement and what goes on in terms of military strategies,” Kyed says, describing

the outline of their focus.

She first speaks about the military’s organizational culture. Kyed notes that it has long been effective at volunteer recruitment in Bamar regions, and in instilling discipline largely “by creating economic patron-client relationships between lower ranks.” She bluntly labels this policy as being “an indirect exploitation of poor families.” Beyond these financial incentives, many soldiers also “really believe that being in the military was doing the honorable thing... getting into the military was like serving their people.” In other words, they were told that service not only ensured the stability of the country, but also the continuation of the Buddhist Sāsana. So given the financial incentives and propagandized ideology, in the decades before the 2021 coup, it was almost unheard of for Bamar soldiers to quit their unit and join an ethnic army—and she adds



that moreover, few ethnic people have been recruited into the army, either.

Echoing the recent words of Thinzar Shunlei Yi, Kyed emphasizes just how insular the nature of the military is, as there is “an expectation of their sons and daughters continuing within the military, continuing within that sort of society that is not just an army, as we see in some other countries, but that is like a culture in itself.” As more defected soldiers and their spouses tell their stories (like Su Thit shared on a recent episode), Kyed notes that the inner workings of the military are coming to light as never before; for example, the systematic violence and exploitation of the lower ranks, and women becoming virtual slaves within the system. “It could be worthwhile to call it a cult, in a way, it’s definitely more than just an army! It’s a parallel society in itself, if we’re looking at these internal mechanisms.” And pointing out the corruption that is rife in the military, Kyed shares how “lower ranks were dependent, in terms of livelihood and survival, [to maintain] links to their patrons to the higher ranks.” These ties are further strengthened by the policy that battalions should be self-sufficient when out in the field, resulting in the people—along with any natural resources and business opportunities in the region—becoming ripe for exploitation and personal profit. “There’s an expectation that they could create their own economy and their own earnings to serve the system that has also been part of creating this culture of internal abuse,” she explains. Kyed recalls how people were rightly disgusted and shocked by the sickening physical violence inflicted on civilians after the coup, but she notes how defected soldiers later revealed that lower ranks routinely endured similar abuse from seniors—and if they survived, were then taught to heap that on incoming recruits. So after the coup, it was only natural that the same kind of abuse would fall on the civilian population.

For all these reasons, the act of defection involves more than just walking away from a position; it means leaving behind an entire ideology, community, and way of life—in this way, defected soldiers may have more in common with those who find a way to escape the indoctrination of cults. And because entire families are integrated into the military culture, the risks are multiplied by those trying to leave, and often soldiers must decide whether to bring their entire family to safety (assuming they are willing); or to cut ties completely and go out on their own. Kyed relates one story to illustrate the reach of the junta, in which a defector’s

sister, who was living in far-away Dubai, was tracked down and harassed by pro-military supporters.

Kyed says that the earliest to defect after the coup were not necessarily front-line soldiers, but those who may have voted for NLD and hoped to see the military reform itself into an institution they could be proud of. “The first defectors articulated a moral disdain for the atrocities and violence against civilians,” she says, adding that they had long been expressing concern about “the fact that it was not a professional army, but one driven by greed and economic and political power interests.” As far as actual numbers go, as of the last tally a year ago, Kyed points to 10,000 police and 4,000 soldiers who had publicly joined the Civil Disobedience Movement, although the actual numbers of defections might be far higher (especially in the aftermath of Operation 1027). But Kyed is cautious not to give too much credence to these numbers. She emphasizes that reliance on numerical data can oversimplify the complex realities at play, potentially obscuring the qualitative nuances of resistance activities and leading to misinterpretations.

The way in which one actually goes about preparing to defect has also changed over time. Initially, defectors relied on individual strategies and were mostly on their own. However, the support structures put in place by democracy activists and the NUG has stimulated a significant increase in defections, particularly during the latter half of 2021 as those structures became more effective and widespread. This support includes logistical and financial assistance, as well as moral encouragement. She explains that the Chin National Front was the first group to actually offer financial rewards to soldiers who defected with their weapons intact, and the NUG followed suit, although she doesn’t believe this has been a major factor in a defector’s decision-making; important questions remain about their future livelihood after leaving the military payroll. And even if financial incentives were an effective way to entice defections, there just isn’t nearly enough money to support every defector. And despite concerted efforts to get foreign countries and organizations to play a role, few have stepped up. “It’s very hard to convince international aid agencies that funding should go towards ex-armed members of the military,” she explains.

Kyed points to another, related issue, that “there’s only so much pressure you can put on people in Myanmar

and in the diaspora. So I think forms of international support within this field would be a hugely important way to support that the situation changes in Myanmar for the better." To accomplish this, Kyed explains that the present narrative must be changed, as potential donors worry that any defection campaign is basically code for getting soldiers to simply start fighting for the other side. "In Myanmar, defection is principally a non-lethal and non-violent strategy of undermining military atrocities by reducing the number of people who can commit those atrocities, by reducing the number of people who are supportive of this repressive regime committing these atrocities against civilians," she says, describing how she tries to reframe the narrative to foreign observers.

Kyed also paints a picture of defected soldiers struggling to find their place after leaving the military, with ethnic populations struggling to support them given their own prolonged hardships. "A lot of [defectors] have ended up going to border spaces in Thailand or in India, where they live undocumented lives like a lot of other CDMers," she says. "But in a lot of respects for defectors, it's been even harder, because there's still been forms of suspicion and not complete trust towards defectors." These difficulties have impeded the ability to convince yet more soldiers to join the democracy movement. It has also stimulated the debate among activists as to the number of soldiers they should even be trying to welcome to their side, given their own limited resources. And finally, this also provides easy propaganda for the military's anti-defection campaigns, which warn soldiers that a fate worse than death awaits them should they even think about joining their sworn adversaries.

She delves further into the various ways soldiers end up defecting using the example of a military base on the verge of being overrun: the soldiers might decide to de facto defect on the spur of the moment by surrendering and relinquishing their weapons instead of fighting on. And in some cases, Kyed notes that some soldiers actually seek out moments within an actual battle when they can simply give up and offer themselves over to their adversary. "Particularly in the beginning of 2022, you did start to see that that was the only possibility that they had [to escape], was on the battlefield...But that doesn't necessarily mean that [they] join the resistance movement and [fight] back against their own military. We've seen very few examples of that recently," she says. This is because

surrender-as-defection is quite different than for a soldier who intentionally and methodically plans their escape in advance. "[In the former case], they haven't necessarily been through that kind of personal soul searching, or moral, political decision of actually switching sides. Because that is a process of transformation." On the other hand, the military may not make such fine distinctions, as for them it's a numbers game, and both defection and surrender mean a loss of manpower on the ground.

But where lower-ranking soldiers may be quick to surrender, higher-ranking officers face more obstacles. This includes the harshness of the punishment if caught, as well as the uncertainties surrounding their reception by the other side. The issue of transitional justice, including accountability for crimes against humanity, is particularly pressing for higher-ranking defectors. There are debates within the revolutionary forces and ethnic resistance organizations about how to handle those high-ranking officers who had been involved in ordering atrocities against civilians. This lack of a clear policy creates insecurity among higher ranking officers and complicates their decision-making.

Kyed emphasizes that resolving these questions is essential in order to be able to encourage mass defections of higher-ranking officers, as opposed to just individual surrenders on the battlefield. "People have very different conceptions of what justice is, and in certain contexts, forgiveness and amnesty is preferred. So it's also about healing and reconciliation," she says. "But the bigger question of trials in the future and who should be put before war crimes courts, whatever these will be, and whatever approach would be, I think it would be better to take a longer time to discuss that, because these are very deep questions."

Kyed believes it is just as relevant to look at the situation that the soldiers are defecting to as what they are defecting from, (a topic addressed at the time in an earlier episode with Ven). "Historically, we have not seen a pro-democracy movement in Myanmar appropriating defection as a strategy of resistance," she says. For example, she describes not only the campaigns led by the NUG and various ethnic armies to encourage soldiers to join the other side, but many now being waged by soldiers (and their families) themselves, as well.



The cult-like indoctrination that soldiers go through, which their families are also subject to, creates a kind of information bubble that is challenging for pro-democracy campaigns to penetrate. Or put another way, military personnel and their families essentially live in a parallel universe where just the ability to hear basic facts can be a challenge. "If they could get this kind of information, we would have massive defection movement going on in Myanmar," she says simply. This has encouraged various defection groups (such as Breaking Brainwashed, a group of former military spouses that Better Burma has funded) to innovate as they seek ways to better shape the messaging for those still in the barracks. Kyed here also makes reference to the important role that the so-called "watermelons" play. A "watermelon" is a soldier or policeman who is "green" on the outside—the color of their uniform—but secretly supports democracy, and so "red"—the color of the NLD—on the inside. "They have played a key role in countering the internal propaganda and sending intel and connecting defectors on the outside with people still inside."

Kyed paints a broader picture of defections beyond just the current moment of ending the conflict. She believes it is also a critical component to the country's eventual peace. "Even though there's still a conflict going on, defection is already part of questions of reintegration and questions of disarmament." In other words, the process of dismantling the current military necessarily connects to the type of armed forces the Burmese people will want going forward, and what role, if any, members of the current military should play in its formation.

Turning her attention to the recent conscription laws, Kyed sees them as an admission that the military is now stretched thin as they struggle to maintain their ability to engage in fighting across the country, adding that their superiority in the air isn't enough. She affirms what Saw Htee Char shared in a recent episode, that the soldiers' morale is likely lower than it's ever been, given how they are under near constant attack and are sometimes now merely trying to survive from one day to the next. And she also echoes the words of Nathan Ruser, who described soldiers being more or less stuck in their fortified bases day after day, dodging drone attacks while bearing the brunt of the people's deep hatred, who see them as an occupying army. "What we hear from defectors is also that there is a complete

disregard from the military leadership of the lives of these lower ranks," she says, noting that they are seen more as cannon fodder than actual humans deserving of respect. In fact, the bodies of soldiers killed in conflict are not even returned to their families! "You're just not valued as a person, and that's hugely demoralizing," she says, and feels that the conscription efforts will only lower the morale further. "You fill up the battalions with these poorly trained, disloyal, potentially unwilling young people that you have to fight alongside, and it becomes very dangerous to engage in military warfare with resistance organizations," she says. In addition, she suspects that the conscription law will result in a big increase in defections, as Burmese youth begin to see their options narrowing steadily.

"Having looked at defections in Myanmar for quite some time now since after the coup, I think it is extremely impressive and courageous, the way that this movement has been moving forward, and also the way that people have welcomed people from the military, in joining the people in this kind of revolutionary space, and despite the divisions and the disagreements, that people have been able to come together around this strategy of defection as part of the revolution," she says in closing, "Historically and comparatively it is quite unprecedented, and quite impressive how, not only in terms of the material support, but also the way that these different activities online have been able to move this defection forward in Myanmar... We need to keep in mind the historical unprecedentedness not only in the Myanmar context, but worldwide, of the resilience, and impressive strategies and practices of the revolutionary movement in Myanmar."

Check out the Insight Myanmar podcast here:

<https://player.captive.fm/episode/8051802c-2339-4ce5-9975-8e91af0ec8ad>



Entrance to the house. Photo: AFP

## MYANMAR COURT LOWERS BID PRICE ON DEMOCRACY ICON SUU KYI'S HOME

**J**ailed democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi's brother on Thursday won an appeal to lower the bidding price for their family's historic home in Myanmar's Yangon region, after a court-ordered auction in March concluded with no one willing to pay 315 billion kyats, or about US\$90 million, for the property.

Critics have called the auction part of an attempt by the military regime to "obliterate the history" of Myanmar's democratic movement, while the country's shadow government of former civilian leaders has vowed to take legal action against anyone who tries to purchase the home.

They say it should be protected as a place of cultural heritage.

In August 2022, Suu Kyi's brother Aung San Oo won a case at a military junta court to liquidate the residence at No. 54 University Avenue in Yangon's Bahan township.

On Thursday, he successfully petitioned the Kamaryut District Court to reduce the bidding price to 285 billion kyats, or about US\$71 million, according to sources with knowledge of the proceedings.



He also lobbied the court to allow potential bidders to visit the two-acre site of the lakeside home where the deposed state counselor spent nearly 15 years under house arrest under Myanmar's previous military junta.

On March 20, an auction of Suu Kyi's home concluded with no buyers after repeated calls for bids by the auction officer were unsuccessful.

The Kamaryut District Court will reconvene on May 31 to determine how to proceed with the liquidation of the property and Suu Kyi's lawyers are expected to file objections to its sale. If the home does not return to auction, the court will proceed with its sale on the open market in accordance with the law.

Political analysts told RFA Burmese on Thursday that any auction is unlikely to succeed due to the house's historic significance, the high bidding price and the property's ties to Myanmar's political affairs.

## LONG-RUNNING CASE

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

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

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

The legal case to liquidate the property began in

2000, with Aung San Oo auctioning off everything in No. 54 and dividing the proceeds with Suu Kyi.

In 2016, the Yangon Western District Court ruled that Suu Kyi was to receive half of the house and land, with Aung San Oo receiving the other half.

Dissatisfied with the ruling, Aung San Oo filed multiple appeals up to Myanmar's Supreme Court, where they were ultimately rejected, during the rule of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, or NLD, government.

Myanmar's junta arrested and imprisoned Suu Kyi shortly after deposing the NLD in a February 2021 coup d'etat, at which point Aung San Oo filed new special appeals, resulting in the Union Supreme Court overruling the earlier decision. Consequently, the Kamaryut District Court decided to sell the property by auction.

Suu Kyi, 78, was initially sentenced by the junta to 33 years on 19 charges, a sentence that was later reduced to 27 years. The Nobel Peace Prize laureate is believed to be in solitary confinement in Naypyidaw Prison, in the capital, but her exact whereabouts are unknown.

*Translated by Kalyar Lwin. Edited by Joshua Lipos and Malcolm Foster.*

*Courtesy of Radio Free Asia*



FLASHBACK - Protestors call to block the dam project. Photo: AFP

## STEERING COMMITTEE ANNOUNCED TO HELP COMPLETE MYITSONE DAM PROJECT

The junta's Ministry of Information has announced the formation of a steering committee to push forward the construction of the Myitsone Dam project on the Ayeyarwady River in Kachin State.

The announcement was ratified on 24 April by the junta and published by the Myanmar Gazette on 17 May.

According to the announcement, the steering committee will be led by the junta's Deputy Minister of Electric Power and the Kachin State Government Minister of Natural Resources will be his deputy.

The steering committee will put in place a five-point coordination plan to help SPIC Yunnan International Power Investment Co. Ltd. (SPICYN), previously known as China Power Investment Corporation (CPI) to implement the dams. The committee will organise public relations and help with technical issues and research, according to the junta notification.

The Myitsone Dam project is a series of seven dams planned for the Irrawaddy, Mali Hka, and N'Mai Hka rivers. The largest and most infamous of the seven dams is the Myitsone Dam on the Irrawaddy River, just downstream from where the Mali Hka, and N'Mai Hka rivers join to form the Irrawaddy, 23 miles from Myitkyina, the Kachin State capital.

The Myitsone Dam was first started in 2009 under

the military regime. President Thein Sein suspended work on the Myitsone Dam in 2011, the year he became president. At that time there had been many public protests against the dam.

As President Thein Sein had only suspended the dam's construction political activists, environmentalists and social activists called for the complete cancellation of the project.

The dam was supposed to be built by Chinese companies and China tried to restart the project when Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD came into power in 2018, but the NLD kept the project suspended throughout its tenure. Permission to restart work on the dam project was only given by the junta after the February 2021 coup.

The seven dams of the Myitsone project will produce over 20,000 MW of power.

Human rights activists and environmentalists are calling for the dam project to be completely cancelled. They are worried about the dams' impact on the environment and people's quality of life if the project comes back online after having been suspended for over 10 years. They also say that if the project goes ahead the Myanmar people will get the impression that China just wants to exploit Myanmar and be more likely to reject Chinese investment and involvement in the country.





Wai Moe Naing

## MYANMAR JUNTA SENTENCES ACTIVIST TO 74 YEARS PRISON FOR LEADING PROTESTS

Last week, a court in Burma sentenced leading activist Wai Moe Naing to 20 more years in prison. He is now serving a sentence of 74 years in jail. He would be over 100 years old when released.

After the coup, Wai Moe Naing led protests against the military in Monywa, Sagaing Region and was arrested in April 2021. He was beaten and dragged away by military forces after his motorcycle was rammed by an unmarked police car during an anti-coup rally.

After his arrest, he was tortured and interrogated

in a detention centre. Since then, he has faced multiple charges, including treason, alleged murder, incitement, and unlawful association. He was forced to represent himself in court because the military also arrested his lawyers as part of their crackdown on lawyers defending political activists.

There are more than 20,000 political prisoners in jail in Burma. Many have faced torture, rape and sexual violence. All are kept in appalling conditions without access to proper food or medical care.

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# MISSING THE TARGET: NORWAY'S AID TO MYANMAR AFTER THE MILITARY COUP

**KRISTIAN STOKKE**

Norway has for long claimed to be a supporter of democratization in Myanmar and has gained recognition for awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to Aung San Suu Kyi in 1991 and hosting the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) for two decades from 1992. But Norway has also been criticized for its close engagement with the military regime during its transition to electoral autocracy, the premature lifting of sanctions and rapid growth of business investments under the Thein Sein government (2011-2015), and for being too passive after the 2021 military coup.

Although Norway has signed on to joint statements that condemn the coup and has called for 'restoration' of democracy, the Norwegian government has neither imposed sanctions on the military nor provided direct support for the federal democratic revolution.

Myanmar remains a prioritized partner country for Norwegian aid and the allocations have increased since the coup. This raises critical questions about the strategies, priorities and channels of Norwegian aid. This short text will shed some light on these questions based on publicly available aid statistics supplemented by my own observations of Norwegian aid since 2011.

## THE PRIORITIES OF NORWEGIAN AID TO MYANMAR

The website of the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) provides information about the sectors, partners and projects that have received Norwegian aid each year. Figure 1 shows the growth and overall composition of aid to Myanmar

during the period from 2011 to 2023. Norwegian aid increased rapidly during the Thein Sein government, from 105 million in 2011 to 256 million NOK in 2015. Thereafter the level of aid remained stable at 250-280 million NOK per year before going up to 333 million NOK in 2023.

The figure also shows that there have been important changes in the sectoral priorities over these 13 years. From 2011 to 2015, Norway pursued interlinked roles as diplomatic door-opener and peacebuilder for the Thein Sein government, business investor in telecommunication and the energy sector, and state capacity builder at the Union level. Aid was strategically linked to economic development and focused on sectors where Norway has special interests and expertise. An additional tier of aid focused on humanitarian assistance, education, health and civil society development, but these were secondary priorities compared to the investments in economic growth and state capacity building. Both tiers of aid were justified with reference to the so-called 'democratic transition', but Norway's democracy assistance was indirect and developmental rather than direct and political.

Norway continued this combination of aid and investments during the NLD government but arguably in a more tempered manner, as the new democratic government sought to clean up after the bonanza of investment agreements during the Thein Sein period.

Since the 2021 coup, Norwegian aid has been marked by a changing continuity: Whereas the high level of aid and the emphasis on working from the



inside (rather than cross-border) remain relatively unchanged, the sectoral composition of aid has changed. Most strikingly, the relative importance of the two tiers has been reversed. While aid for state capacity building; environment and energy; and production and trade have been terminated, there is a marked increase in aid for emergency assistance, health, education and civil society. Figure 2 shows that 92% of Norwegian aid to Myanmar in 2023 falls within these four categories, and the background data indicates that the support for governance and peace has shifted from the state to civil society.

These post-coup shifts should, in theory, make Norwegian aid more relevant for the current struggle for federal democracy, especially if aid is delivered through partnerships with key actors within this movement. Closer inspection of the aid channels reveals, however, that this has not happened.

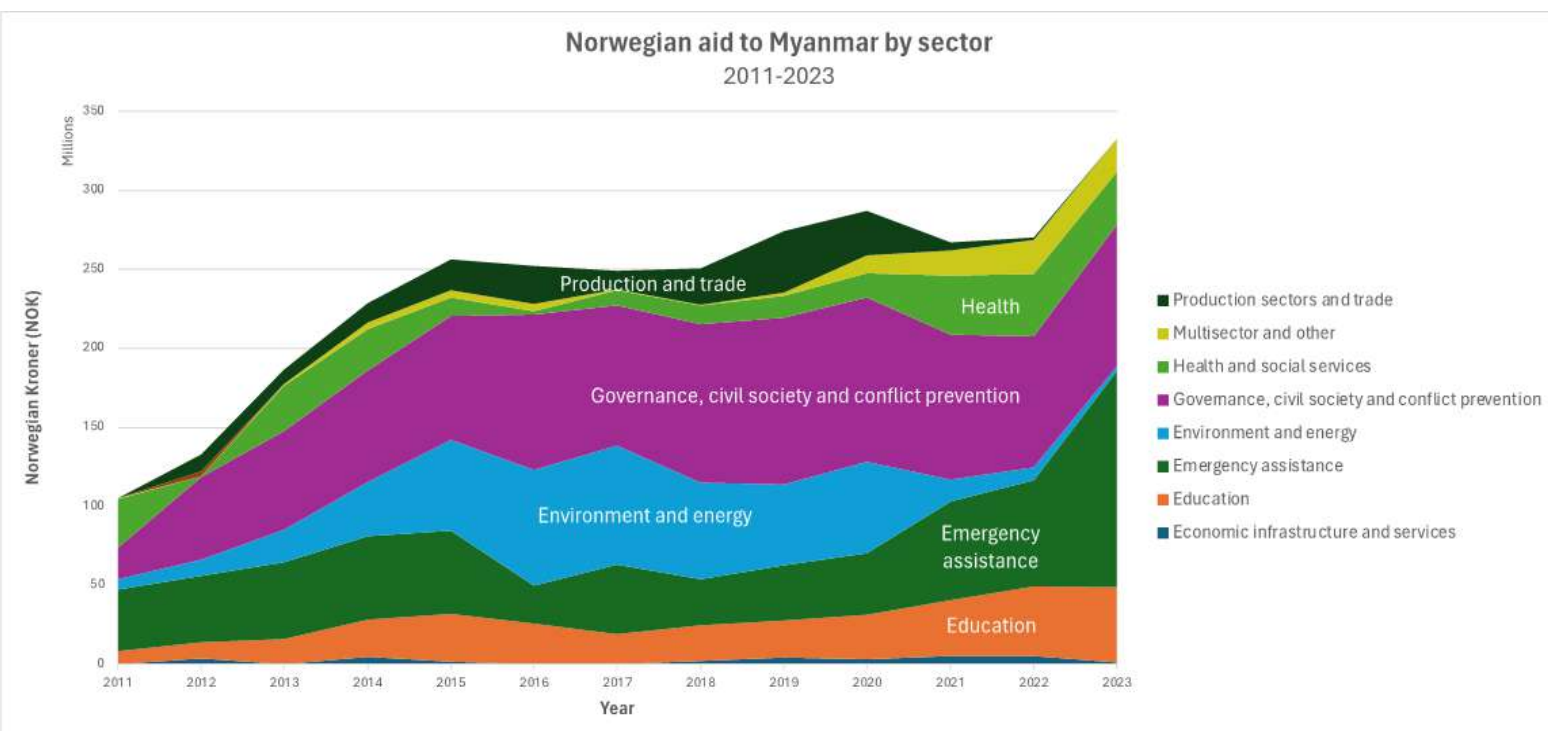
## THE CHANNELS FOR NORWEGIAN AID

Norway's post-coup aid to Myanmar is mainly channeled through two partner groups: Norwegian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and multilateral organizations, primarily UN organizations

(Figure 3). A smaller amount of aid is channeled through international and local NGOs. The public sectors in Norway and Myanmar became important channels for aid during the Thein Sein government and there was also some aid to the private sector linked to corporate investments (e.g. Telenor, SN Power, Equinor, Yara), but this has stopped after the coup.

The amount of aid channeled through Norwegian NGOs has remained relatively stable since the 2021 coup while the aid to multilateral organizations has more than doubled, from 56 million NOK in 2020 to 135 MNOK in 2023. Conversely, the channeling of aid through international and local NGOs has been halved, from 46 to 24 MNOK. In 2023, as much as 89% of Norway's aid to Myanmar was channeled through Norwegian NGOs and multilateral organizations, while another 7% was channeled through other NGOs (Figure 4).

Norway's aid to Myanmar is thus marked by the hegemonic position of multilateral organizations and Norwegian NGOs. The latter channel is dominated by a handful of large and professional humanitarian and development NGOs that are close partners with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Norad across many aid-



**Figure 1.** Norwegian aid to Myanmar by sector, 2011-2023. (Data source: Norad's online aid statistics for Myanmar).

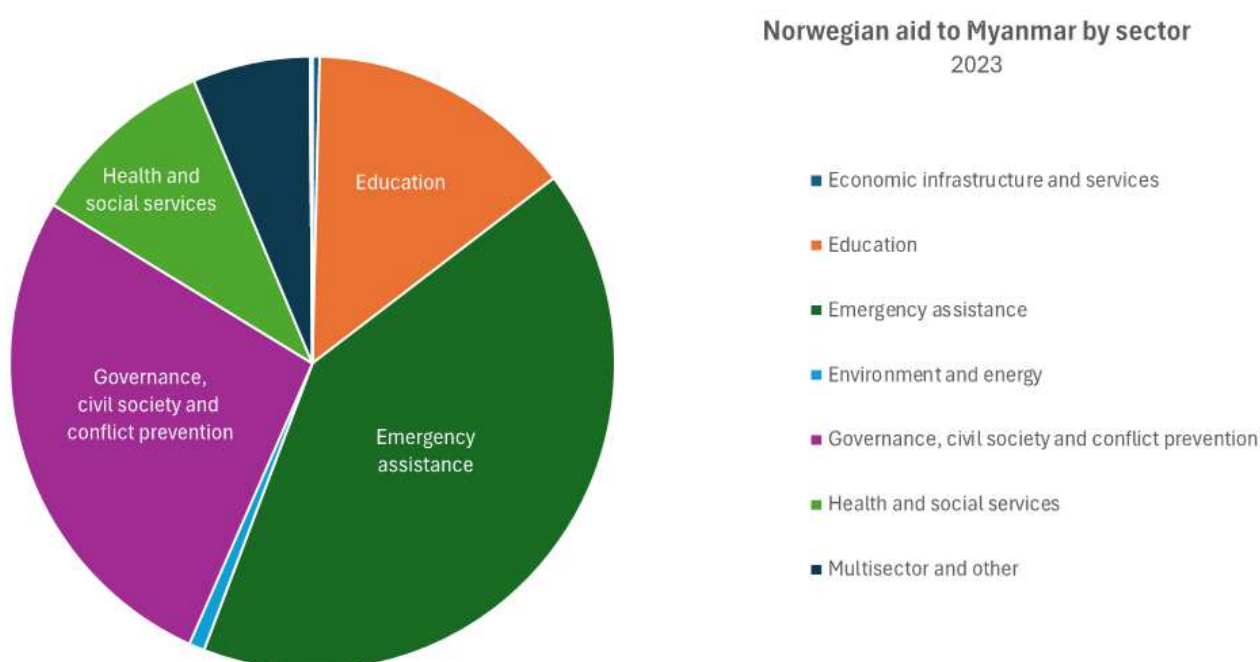
receiving countries. While they champion divergent interests when it comes to aid priorities, the actors within the MFA/Norad-NGO nexus seem to hold converging views on Myanmar's political situation and the appropriate mode of aid delivery. This hegemonic position and discourse constitute major obstacles for smaller and less professionalized organizations. This is for example demonstrated by the exclusion of Burmese diaspora organizations from aid contracts and dialog meetings, despite their proven capacity to deliver vital aid inside conflict zones based on contextual knowledge, locally defined needs and flexible networks and collaboration with local partners.

Furthermore, Norad's aid statistics also show that all aid channeled through multilateral organizations and most of the aid that goes through Norwegian NGOs are implemented by their own local offices or by other international NGOs. The most notable exceptions are the Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), the Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund (SAIH) and the Strømme Foundation, who continue to implement all or large parts of their projects through local NGOs. In contrast, Save the Children Norway lists Myanmar's Ministry of Education as their implementing partner for one project. And the Norwegian Red Cross works in

partnership with Myanmar Red Cross, either directly or through the International Committee for the Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent. These partnerships raise critical questions about conflict sensitivity in the current context of Myanmar.

The donor-driven and top-down channeling of Norwegian aid to Myanmar is in marked contrast to the emphasis on 'localization' and 'locally led development' within international aid discourse. It is only within the area of governance, civil society and conflict preventing that there is some direct support to local NGOs, primarily from the Norwegian Embassy in Yangon (Figure 5).

Norad's aid statistics do not provide information about the geography of aid delivery. There is no easily available data on which areas that receive aid, and whether they are accessed from military-controlled areas or from territories controlled by the National Unity Government (NUG), Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs) and People's Defence Forces (PDFs). Other information sources suggest that Norwegian aid is largely disbursed from junta-controlled areas rather



**Figure 2.** Norwegian aid to Myanmar by sector, 2023. (Data source: Norad's online aid statistics for Myanmar).



than cross-border and that local organizations are typically left out in the decision-making and delivery of aid. The Norwegian MFA has reportedly shown little flexibility on this matter and upholds administrative requirements that make it difficult to access and deliver aid inside the areas that have been most severely affected after the military coup.

There is also no indication that Norwegian aid is delivered in collaboration with key actors within the movement for federal democracy. While it is known that Norwegian diplomats have had some dialog with NUG and EROs, the latter have had little influence on Norwegian aid priorities and the actual delivery of Norwegian aid is typically bypassing these actors. Although Norway's post-coup prioritization of emergency assistance, education, health and civil society aligns with local needs in the most affected areas, the possibilities for meeting these needs through the local governance systems of NUG, EROs and PDFs are ignored. This hampers the effectiveness of aid and precludes strategic linkages to democratization and federalism from below.

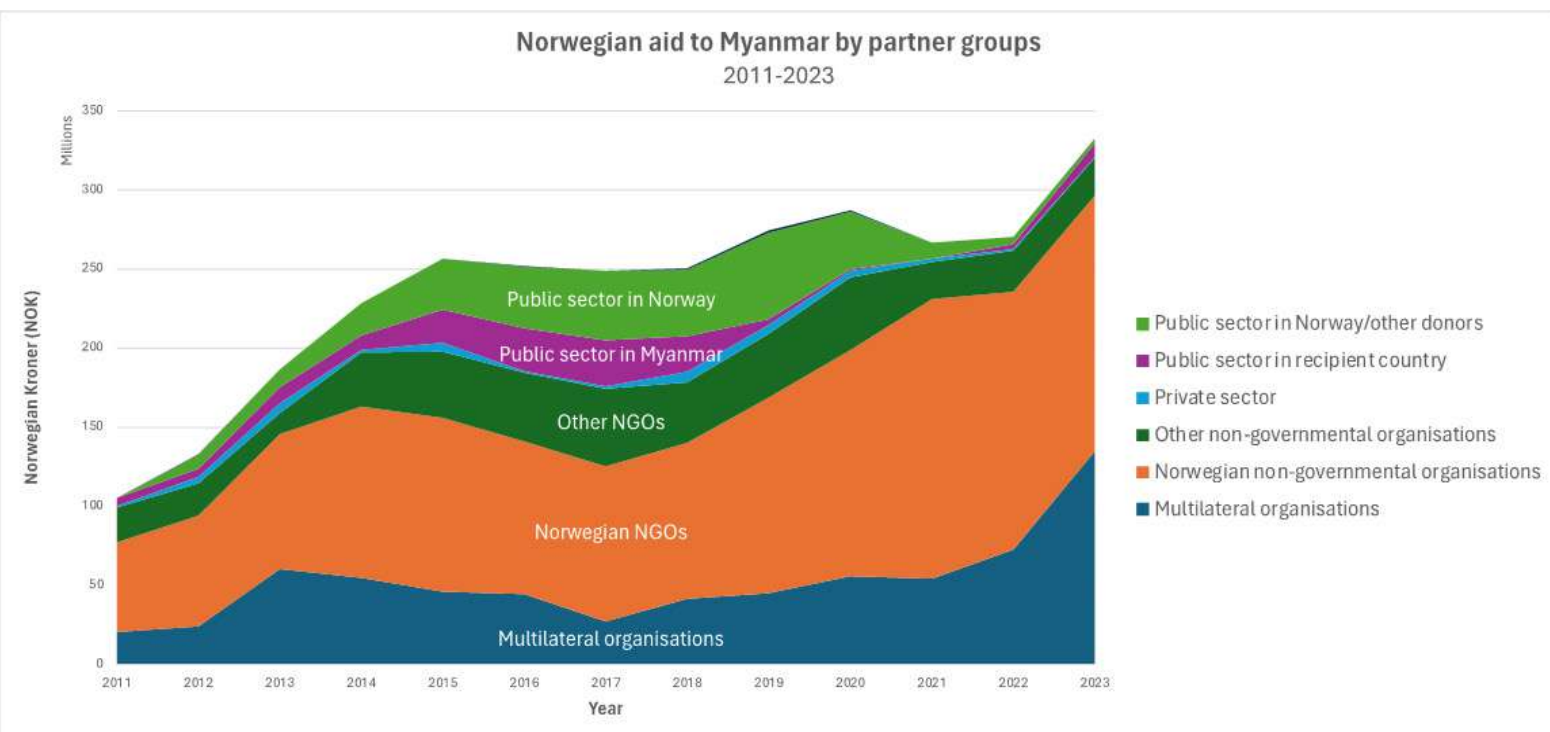
This brief analysis supports the conclusion that

although Norwegian aid to Myanmar is sizeable and oriented towards vital needs, it is channeled in ways that limits its effectiveness in supporting the goal of federal democracy or the need for livelihood assistance and basic services in conflict-affected areas. While statistical information on the distribution of Norwegian aid is unavailable, it is a common perception that it fails to reach the most vital social groups, geographical areas and political actors. Despite its stated commitments, Norwegian aid is missing the target at a critical moment in Myanmar's political history.

## TOWARDS A MORE EFFECTIVE AID STRATEGY

The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is currently revising its country strategy for aid to Myanmar. Considering the above analysis, I will propose five principles that I deem essential for a more effective strategy and as benchmarks for future assessments of Norwegian aid.

1. The overarching goal for Norwegian aid should be to support federal democracy.



**Figure 3.** Norwegian aid to Myanmar by partner groups, 2011-2023. (Data source: Norad's online aid statistics for Myanmar).

The MFA has signaled that they consider democracy, human rights, peace and reconciliation, and basic services as general goals for Norway's aid to Myanmar. These are promising signals, but it should be recognized that federalism and democracy are more overarching goals than the others and that these two goals are mutually constitutive and inseparable. The popular mass movement against military dictatorship is based on a vision of a federal democratic Myanmar that is given a formal basis through the repeal of the 2008 Constitution; the Federal Democracy Charter; the National Unity Government; and different local constitutional processes. If Norway adopts a singular focus on democracy, it will go against this unification of longstanding demands and have negative political consequences. The other goals for Norwegian aid – human rights, peace and reconciliation, and basic services – are subsidiary goals that contribute to and are contingent on the development of federal democracy.

2. Aid priorities should be strategically linked to the goal of federal democracy.

Democracy assistance was also identified as a main goal in the previous strategy, but this was not followed

by strategic actions in support of its realization. The new country strategy should therefore place much stronger emphasis on the linkages between the overarching goal of federal democracy, the general aid priorities and the specific aid projects. Priority should be given to sectors and projects that contribute directly and substantially to the building of a federal democratic Myanmar. This could mean a stronger focus on political democracy assistance but may also entail developmental democracy assistance if the strategic linkages are more explicit and direct than in the past. While support for education and healthcare, for example, may remain a priority, the overarching goal requires that it is delivered in a manner that contributes more effectively to the development of federal democracy.

3. Aid should be channeled in ways that support federal democracy.

The analysis of Norwegian aid to Myanmar shows that most of it is channeled through multilateral organizations and Norwegian NGOs that operate from junta-controlled areas and have weak or no links to key actors within the federal democracy movement. Such channeling prevents effective delivery to the areas that

Norwegian aid to Myanmar by partner groups (2023)

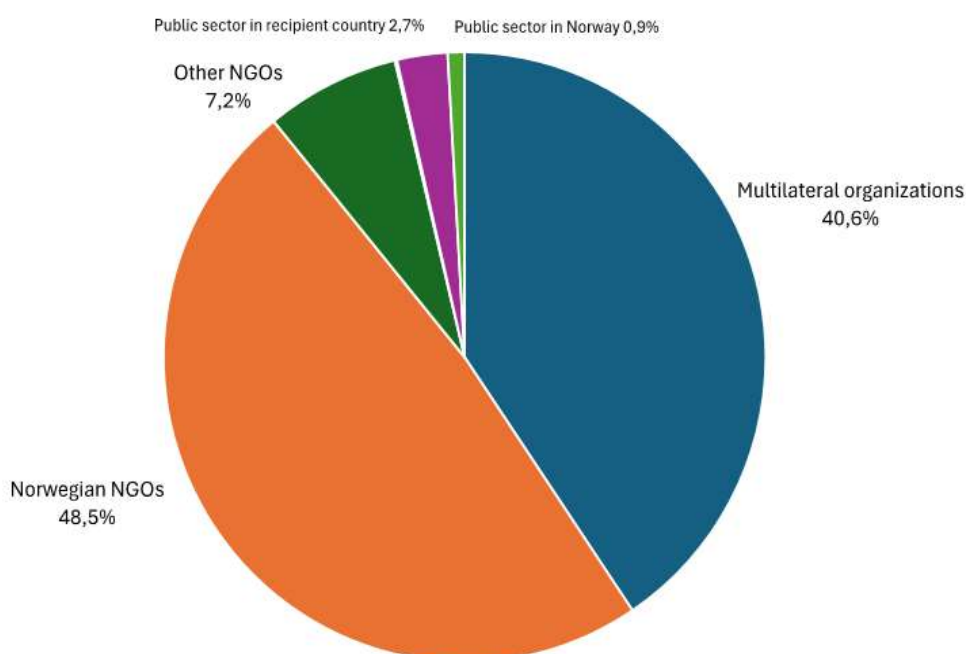


Figure 4. Norwegian aid to Myanmar by partner groups, 2023. (Data source: Norad's online aid statistics for Myanmar).



are most severely affected by military atrocities and raise critical questions about the socio-spatial unevenness and conflict sensitivity of Norwegian aid. It is vital that Norway develops channeling strategies that mitigate these shortcomings. To support the overarching goal, aid organizations must work with rather than around the movement for federal democracy.

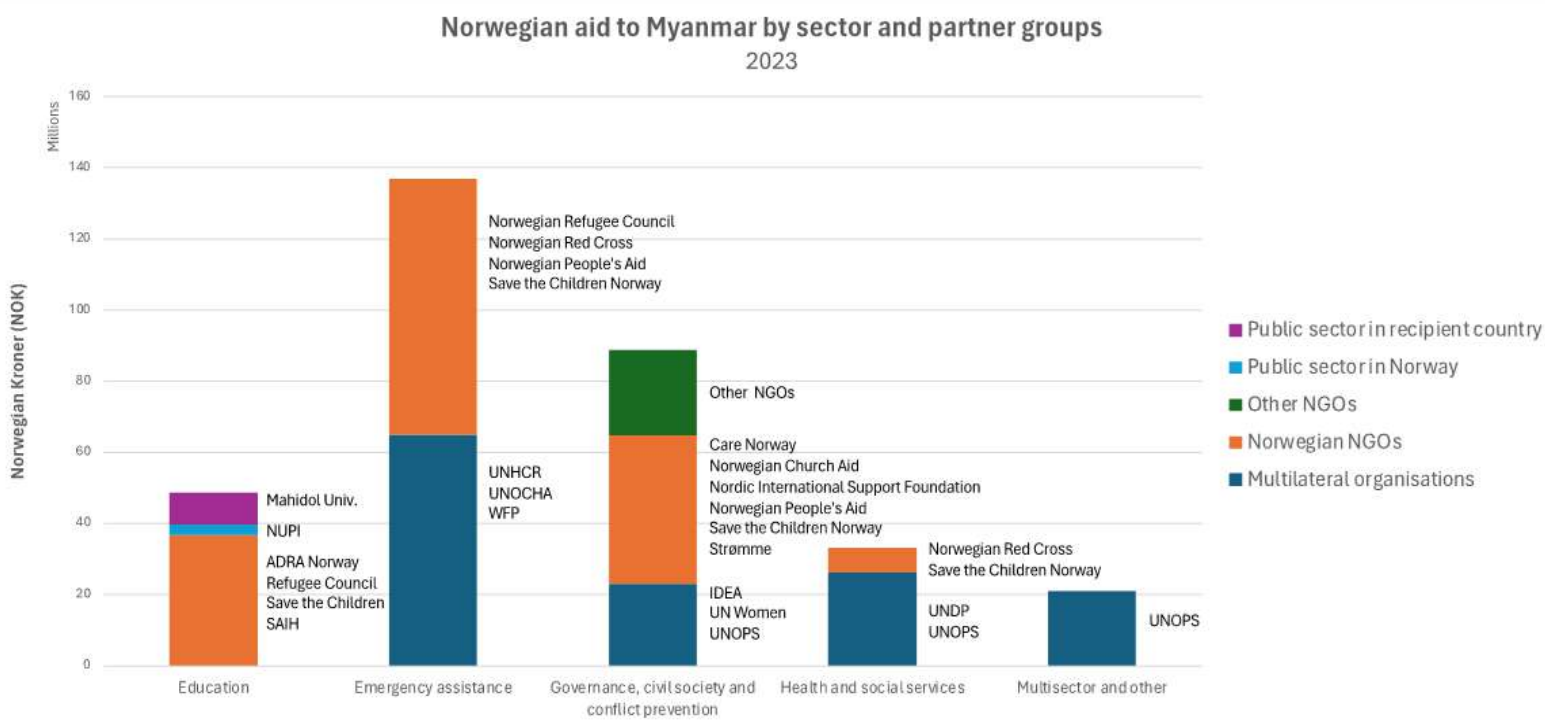
4. Decision-making and delivery of aid must include local actors.

It is a normative goal for much of Norwegian aid that it should be 'localized' or 'locally led'. The above analysis indicates that Norway's aid to Myanmar fails to meet this normative goal, as it is dominated by external actors and top-down delivery. Local actors receive little support and have limited or no influence on the decision-making and implementation of aid-funded projects. Norway's new aid strategy should therefore prioritize substantive inclusion of local actors. Given the overarching goal, this especially means that Norwegian aid organizations must collaborate closely with key organizations within the movement for federal democracy and implement aid projects in partnership with their local administration systems and civil society.

5. Norway should strengthen its contextual knowledge and analytical capacities.

The Myanmar context is complex and changing. This situation requires contextual knowledge and informed analyses as a basis for effective engagement strategies. Such capacities have been insufficiently developed within the Norwegian aid system. This has left the MFA, Norad and NGOs ill-prepared for political changes such as the 2021 military coup and the rise of a revolutionary mass movement for federal democracy, or the changing complexity of armed resistance to military rule and authoritarian conflict management. The new country strategy should thus prioritize a concerted effort to strengthen the contextual knowledge and analytical capacities among Norwegian actors on politics and development in Myanmar.

*Kristian Stokke is Professor of Political Geography at the University of Oslo and has conducted research on democratization and conflicts in Myanmar for more than a decade.*



**Figure 5.** Norwegian aid to Myanmar in key sectors, 2023. (Data source: Norad's online aid statistics for Myanmar).



Taiwan Air Force jet.  
Photo: AFP

# CHINA HOLDS MILITARY DRILLS AROUND TAIWAN AS 'PUNISHMENT'

**C**hina on Thursday last week began two days of military drills around Taiwan, surrounding the island with navy vessels and aircraft as "strong punishment" for "separatist acts", state media reported.

The military exercise came three days after Lai Ching-te was sworn in as the self-ruled island's new president.

China claims Taiwan as part of its territory and has branded Lai a "dangerous separatist" who will bring "war and decline" to the island.

China, which split with Taiwan at the end of a civil war in 1949, regards the island as a renegade province with which it must eventually be reunified, and has refused to rule out using military force to do so.

Relations have plunged in recent years as China has stepped up pressure on the democratic island, periodically stoking worries about a potential invasion.

Thursday and Friday's drills, code-named Joint Sword-2024A, will "focus on joint sea-air combat-readiness patrol, joint seizure of comprehensive battlefield control, and joint precision strikes on key targets", Xinhua reported.

"The Eastern Theater Command of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) started joint military

drills surrounding the island of Taiwan from 7:45 a.m. Thursday (2345 GMT)," the news agency said, adding the drills were being conducted in the Taiwan Strait and to the north, south and east of the island.

The drills will also take place around the islands of Kinmen, Matsu, Wuqiu, and Dongyin, Xinhua said.

The news agency reported military spokesman Li Xi as saying the exercises "involve the patrol of vessels and planes closing in on areas around the island of Taiwan and integrated operations inside and outside the island chain to test the joint real combat capabilities of the forces of the command".

The spokesperson said the drills would also serve as a "strong punishment for the separatist acts of 'Taiwan independence' forces and a stern warning against the interference and provocation by external forces", Xinhua said.

## 'REAL COMBAT CONDITIONS'

The last time China announced similar military exercises around Taiwan was in August last year after Lai, then vice president, stopped over in the United States on a visit to Paraguay.

Those drills also tested the PLA's ability "to seize control of air and sea spaces" and fight "in real combat conditions", according to state media.

Beijing at the time described them as a "stern warning".

They followed on the heels of April drills that simulated the encirclement of the island, triggered after Lai's predecessor Tsai Ing-wen met then-US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California.

China also launched major military exercises in 2022 after Nancy Pelosi, then the speaker of the US House of Representatives, visited Taiwan.

The country also held drills when then-president Tsai later transited through the United States.

World powers are keen to see as much stability as possible between China and Taiwan, not least because of the vital role the island plays in the global economy.

The Taiwan Strait is one of the world's most important maritime trade arteries, and the island itself is a major tech manufacturer, particularly of vital semiconductors -- the tiny chips used in everything from smartphones to missile systems.

AFP



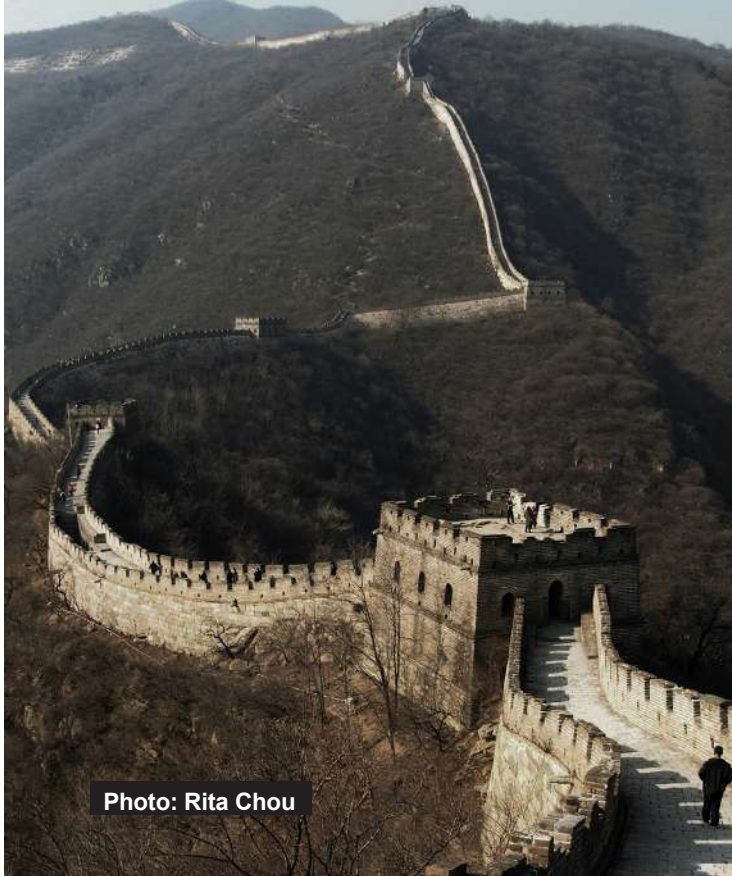


Photo: Rita Chou

# THE GREAT FALL: CHINA'S STEEL INDUSTRY NEARS EDGE OF COLLAPSE

SUN LEE

China stands on the precipice of losing a market worth one trillion dollars, a market that is a significant job creator. This sector provides employment, directly and indirectly, to over 10 million people. Experts predict that in the near future, 3 to 5 million individuals could face unemployment. The South China Morning Post warns that the steel industry, which is already grappling with overcapacity, is at risk of a significant downturn that could lead to further job losses. China, accounting for 57% of global steel production, is feeling the impact of this overcapacity. The recent collapse of the real estate industry, including the world's largest real estate company, Evergrande, has caused a sharp decline in steel demand. The magnitude of the steel industry's overcapacity is such that its impact could signal the end of an era.

China's steel industry is currently at a critical juncture. The growing concerns about overcapacity

are causing a stir within the sector. There's a fear that without proper discipline, the industry might take a nosedive, jeopardizing China's long-standing dominance in global trade. Over the years, China has emerged as the world's top producer and exporter of steel, thanks to a rapid increase in its steel production. However, the industry is now facing a moment of truth.

The ongoing slump in the property market and the reduction in infrastructure spending by some local governments, in an attempt to manage debt risks, are posing significant challenges. Since 2021, there has been a sharp drop in prices. This has led some steelmakers to advocate for production cuts, as they grapple with increasing losses and cash flow issues due to overcapacity.

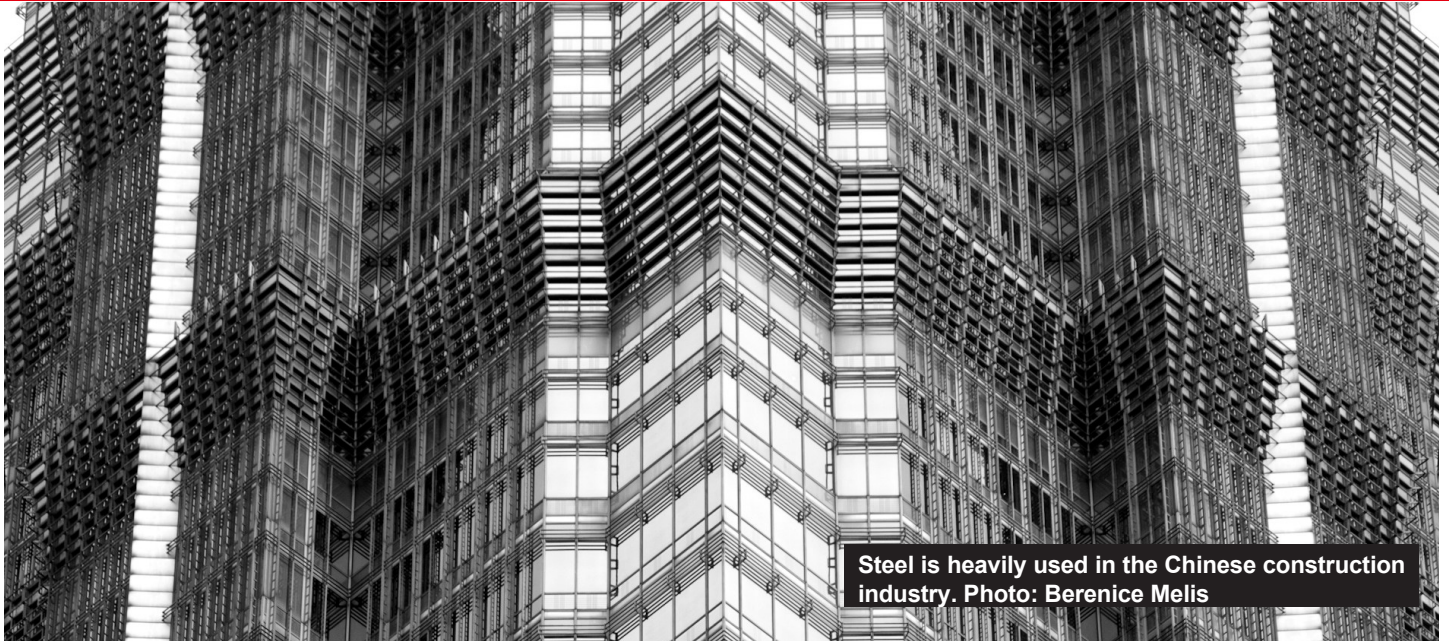
At a meeting with the largest steelmakers in China at the end of April, Tang Zujun, the vice-president of the China Iron and Steel Association, made some significant remarks. He pointed out that traditionally, the steel industry has been bolstered by investments in areas like real estate, infrastructure development, and factory equipment upgrades. However, he believes that the future of the industry will be shaped by consumer demand and innovative, strategic emerging industries.

Tang emphasized that the days of large-scale construction in China have come to an end. He urged for improved discipline and resource allocation, along with a "healthy" growth of the sector. He warned that excessive investment in certain products could exacerbate the issue of overcapacity. This is certainly giving a death blow to the Chinese steel industry, moreover the Communist government see no way out of this crisis.

The most pressing issue at hand is finding a way to maintain a dynamic equilibrium between supply and demand. If not managed properly, it could significantly affect the ecosystem, sustainable growth, and global competitiveness of the entire industry. The current state of China's steel industry can be likened to a field that has been over-seeded, resulting in stunted crop growth. The challenge now is deciding which seeds to remove, and everyone should brace themselves to avoid a potential downfall.

These remarks from Tang come at a time when trade frictions are escalating over Chinese steel exports, with US President Joe Biden advocating for increased tariffs. In the middle of April, Biden proposed that import tariffs on Chinese steel and aluminium should be tripled, marking his administration's first major tariff proposal on Chinese goods.

In March, a pair of prominent steel manufacturers



Steel is heavily used in the Chinese construction industry. Photo: Berenice Melis

in Vietnam lodged a request for an investigation into the alleged dumping of hot-rolled steel exports from China. Just last week, Chile announced its decision to levy temporary anti-dumping duties on Chinese steel products utilized in its mining sector. This move is aimed at bolstering local producers who are currently struggling. It's worth noting that Mexico had already implemented tariffs on Chinese steel back in December.

However, the issue of overcapacity is expected to continue. This is because nearly 55% of China's steel products find their application in the construction of property and infrastructure. Given the current market trends, both these sectors are unlikely to experience a substantial increase in demand in the upcoming months, as per the analysis by Fitch Ratings. Even though the manufacturing industry has bounced back robustly, and there are numerous standout subsectors like shipbuilding, electrical machinery, general equipment, and automobiles, it still can't fill the enormous demand for steel created by the slump in construction, said the US rating agency.

During the first quarter, China's cumulative iron and steel exports surged by 13% compared to the same period last year, and they were 80% higher than levels before the pandemic. This increase suggests a potential oversupply that could lead to dumping practices, according to a report by Oxford Economics released recently.

In early April, China's National Development and Reform Commission, the country's economic planning body, announced its intention to regulate crude steel production for the fourth consecutive year. This decision is part of an effort to foster 'high-quality' growth within the industry, with a particular emphasis on energy efficiency and carbon reduction.

Fitch Ratings has noted that despite the Chinese government's efforts to control steel production, the industry generally lacks discipline. Smaller mills are likely to resume operations as soon as they see a profitable opportunity. The Ratings reported that China's steel exports rose by 36.2% last year, reaching 90.26 million metric tonnes. Furthermore, in the first quarter of 2024, the country's steel exports increased by 30.7% to 25.8 million metric tonnes, according to the US rating agency. This figure represents approximately 5% of China's total steel production.

Fitch Ratings also warned that steel, a significant export product for China, is susceptible to trade barriers due to low-price dumping. The agency cautioned that escalating trade protectionism could pose a significant challenge to China's steel exports.

China's steel industry, once the world's leading producer and exporter, is at a crossroads. The sector is grappling with overcapacity issues, falling prices, and a construction downturn. Despite a robust recovery in manufacturing, the demand for steel remains unmet. The industry's future hinges on maintaining a balance between supply and demand, fostering high-quality growth, and navigating global trade frictions. As smaller mills eye profitable opportunities, the challenge lies in enforcing discipline and adapting to a new era of consumer demand and strategic innovation. The stakes are high, and the world is watching.

*Sun Lee is the pseudonym for a writer who specializes in covering Asia.*





# SKETCHING THE JOURNEY

"I really dreamed of going someday to see how Buddhism and meditation teachings are in their home," says Dragos Badita, describing the rationale for his 2019 trip to Myanmar to Insight Myanmar in a podcast.

Growing up in Romania, Dragos had learned meditation from local teachers, in addition to attending some retreats in England. But he yearned to spend extended time in a monastic setting in order to go deeper in the practice, and for that, he knew he needed to go to the Golden Land.

However, Dragos' focus while traveling was not just meditation. He is also an accomplished artist. "I tend to take my time on my sketches, because I think it's a very good way of sitting and soaking into the experience and the people, and paying attention to what's happening," he explains. "If you have to draw something, you have to be attentive, and this is a kind of meditative practice."

Indeed, Dragos tries to take in everything that falls in front of his eyes: from daily, mundane scenes, to the details of monastery architecture, to the morning's breakfast. His sketches capture a wide range of the life he experiences while traveling. "You can snap a photo and just forget about it," he says, noting that drawing an object forces him to look more closely at it. "And that sticks with you, it sticks in your memory. It's a way of looking more objectively." When Dragos is immersed in his drawing, he becomes acutely attuned to its details

and intricacies, which often escape casual observation, revealing a depth and complexity previously unnoticed at first glance. And like meditation, drawing takes a kind of patience and commitment that is often missing in "point-and-shoot photography." This allows him to integrate into a scene, as pen and paper is often less obtrusive than a camera, which is particularly important in monastic settings.

Dragos spent several weeks at Pa Auk Monastery, and his sketches reflect his time there, from drawing his room (which he notes was made entirely of wood), to the path where he walked every day, to such mundane details as door frames and monks' bowls. "Some little details stand out to me," he recalls. "In the meditation hall, each meditator has a cushion and a reserved place with a mosquito net, that was really like a cocoon! You have some privacy, even though it was a really big meditation hall, and sometimes quite noisy on Sundays. But you have this personal space, and you felt secluded, just because you had this net around you. There's also many dogs that were living at the monastery, and you could hear them at night howling far away, around the forest."

Dragos highlighted one mundane scene as illustrating the depth of meaning an object of everyday life can have: the footwear left at the entrance of a building. "I think there's a lot of meaning," he explains. "With the sandals, it's this kind of respect that in Myanmar, everyone takes off their sandals when they go inside a meditation hall. So you can see a sense of community that happens where everyone is together. It's a bit symbolized, like with the sandals going together, and I don't know how they recognize [their own] because all of them look the same! How they knew which one is which..."

## CATCH THE PODCAST

Check out the Insight Myanmar podcast here:

<https://player.captivate.fm/episode/07e2a39d-17c7-407d-90e7-bb24dead1e1b>



General Maung Maung Aye, centre.  
Photo: Supplied

## JUNTA'S GENERAL ISSUES STERN WARNING TO DRAFT DODGERS AMID MILITARY STRUGGLES

**G**eneral Maung Maung Aye, the third-ranking officer in the Myanmar junta, has issued a warning to those avoiding conscription. He said that they will pursue legal action against draft dodgers, as their forces face ongoing defeats throughout Myanmar, according to NP News.

He made the remarks at the coordination meeting of the Central Body for Summoning People's Military Servants held at the Ministry of Defense meeting hall on May 20.

He urged subordinate officers to plan in advance for the opening of conscription training batch 3 to meet the target. He also said that all those who failed to appear for mandatory conscription in the previously opened batches will face action in accordance with the existing law.

According to the conscription law, young men who dogged the mandatory conscriptions may be subjected to a penalty of up to three years in prison, a substantial fine, or both.

## UNEASY EMBRACE: INDIA AND MYANMAR MEET

**O**n May 25, a meeting in Naypyidaw shed light on the complex relationship between India and the country's military junta, officially known as the State Administration Council (SAC).

Myanmar's Admiral Moe Aung received Indian Ambassador Abhay Thakur for discussion that is framed as friendly cooperation.

Officially, the meeting focused on strengthening ties. Both sides pledged to accelerate development projects, a topic likely touching on the stalled Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project, crucial for India's access to Southeast Asia.

Discussions on security and border stability were another key point. This likely included concerns about the Arakan Army's recent offensives in Rakhine State.

On February 29, weeks after a key township near the Indian border in Myanmar was captured by the Arakan Army, an Indian delegation led by lawmaker K. Vanlalvena met with the Arakan Army inside Myanmar to discuss the Kaladan Project.

However, beneath the surface, deeper issues cast a shadow. India has faced criticism for its engagement with the Myanmar junta, which has been accused of human rights abuses since seizing power in February 2021. Meanwhile, India grapples with refugees fleeing the violence in Myanmar and a fragile security situation along its northeastern border.

The meeting offered little public indication of how these issues were addressed.





Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein

## MUSICAL SHORT FILM ON SPRING REVOLUTION STARRING EXILED ARTISTS HITS 5 MILLION FACEBOOK VIEWS

**A** Burmese musical short film depicting the Spring Revolution has garnered nearly 5 million views on Facebook. This short film features exiled actor Daung and exiled female singer Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein.

The lyrics express deep longing and concern: "Day and night I miss you so much. You have chosen a very rough path, so I am praying for your health. I am in tears in front of God... I'm broken..."

This poignant song is about the girl's revolutionary boyfriend.



Aung Myo Min, centre.

## NUG HUMAN RIGHTS MINISTER AUNG MYO MIN ENGAGES WITH BURMESE COMMUNITY AT UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

**N**ational Unity Government's (NUG) Human Rights Minister Aung Myo Min, held a meeting with the Burmese people on May 21, 2024, at the University of Toronto, Canada, according to the official Facebook page of the NUG

During the meeting, the current situation and progress of the publicly-mandated exiled NUG were openly discussed with the participants.

Additionally, the role that the Burmese people in Canada can play in establishing a federal union of Myanmar was suggested and discussed.

# mizzima WEEKLY

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.