



ON THE GROUND IN MYANMAR

mizzima WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight

GOLDEN TRIANGLE BLUES

**Myanmar production key
element as East and Southeast
Asia sees record meth seizures**

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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.

FEARS MYANMAR ENTERING A DANGEROUS NEW CHAPTER

Humanitarian organizations are voicing concern that the Myanmar crisis is worsening through a combination of increased violence, communal tension, and the seasonal storms and heavy rain.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) released its latest humanitarian update last week covering the period until 22 May 2024. As they note, the humanitarian crisis has entered a dangerous new chapter with entrenched conflict posing grave risks to civilians, stirring a worrying resurgence of inter-communal tension and driving record levels of displacement.

The humanitarian situation in Rakhine State is particularly alarming with fighting intensifying and intercommunal tensions simmering. Access restrictions remain severe despite soaring needs. With the peak of the dry season, water scarcity and cases of Acute Watery Diarrhoea (AWD) have been widely reported while an estimated 1.6 million people are now estimated to be without access to hospital care in central and northern Rakhine. Close to 3 million people remain displaced nationwide due to war.

In Kayin State, an intense battle for control of the key border trading town of Myawaddy resulted in both internal displacement and fluid cross-border population movement. An estimated 4,000 people from Myawaddy Town and the surrounding areas remain displaced along the Myanmar-Thai border.

As the volatile monsoon season approaches, strong winds and heavy rain have already hit several townships in Chin State, Magway, Sagaing, and northern Shan State in recent months, causing damage and destruction to civilian properties and other structures.

UNOCHA claims that despite these challenges, humanitarian partners continue to deliver assistance to people in need, reaching almost 1 million people during the first quarter of 2024 despite gross underfunding.

But they note that the 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) remains alarmingly under-resourced, with only 10 per cent of required funding received, according to the Financial Tracking Service (FTS). This is despite the deepening needs, the surge in new displacement, and soaring inflation that have further stretched the grossly insufficient resources across clusters.

Compounding all these problems, it is clear the Myanmar junta is stepping up their war against the people, with an uptick in military attacks including air strikes and artillery barrages against villages and civilians. In addition, the military conscription drive has seen many young men forcibly taken to fight in the army, and the flight of many to escape to the hills or abroad, primarily to Thailand and South Korea.

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Cover photo by Daf Jones





Photo: Emmanuel Potdevin

GOLDEN TRIANGLE BLUES

**MYANMAR PRODUCTION KEY
ELEMENT AS EAST AND SOUTHEAST
ASIA SEES RECORD METH SEIZURES**

Myanmar remains the key player in the illegal methamphetamine or meth trade in the Golden Triangle in Southeast Asia, a situation worsened by the February 2021 military coup.

A record quantity of methamphetamine was seized in East and Southeast Asia in 2023 as organised crime groups boosted production, the United Nations said last week, a large proportion of the drugs coming from Myanmar. While Myanmar is the leading source of opium and heroin, due to the recent decline in opium cultivation in Afghanistan, synthetic drugs produced in Myanmar are the key money-makers.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has just released a report – “Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia: Latest developments and challenges” that examines the meth trade with the focus being on the Golden Triangle including Myanmar, Laos and Thailand.

Drug trafficking has affected Southeast Asia for decades, with the Shan State in Myanmar the leading source of synthetic drugs in the region. Much of it is produced in illegal labs in areas controlled by ethnic minority armed groups near the Thai border.

MYANMAR HUB

The manufacture and trafficking of synthetic drugs situation in the region has become more complex. While Shan State in Myanmar continues to be the predominant source of synthetic drugs in the region, there are indications that the illicit manufacture of ketamine and its precursors is expanding to other parts of the lower Mekong.

Shan State in Myanmar remains the epicentre of methamphetamine production in East and

Southeast Asia, evidenced by numerous largescale methamphetamine trafficking cases in and around the state. The illicit drug manufacturing activity is undertaken by Asian organized crime groups who have partnered with armed groups in Shan State, in particular those within the Special Regions over the past decade.

However, Myanmar authorities have not identified any sizeable methamphetamine manufacturing facilities since April 2020; the only facilities seized in Myanmar during the past few years have been smaller methamphetamine tableting operations in areas of South Shan, which does not reflect the total supply of methamphetamine originating from the drug producing regions of Shan State.

Myanmar authorities continued to dismantle a small number of methamphetamine tablet manufacturing facilities in the Tachileik and Mong Hsat areas in South Shan near the Thai border, including six facilities in the Mong Hsat area in 2023. Tachileik in particular remains a primary transit point for large quantities of methamphetamine tablet trafficking into Thailand and an important transit for crystal methamphetamine and ketamine as well as other synthetic drug products such as “happy water”.

Authorities continued to seize large quantities of methamphetamine tablets in Tachileik, along with caffeine and other substances that can be used in the methamphetamine tableting process. Small-scale methamphetamine manufacture continues in other countries in East and Southeast Asia.

Although the Myanmar junta will make a fuss of marking International Day against Drug Abuse and





A rickshaw rider smokes meth. Photo: AFP

Illicit Trafficking this month, on 26 June, their publicized efforts to crack down on the trade is largely a smokescreen that allows they trade to continue apace.

DRUG SEIZURES

The UNODC said a record 190 tonnes of methamphetamine were seized in East and Southeast Asia last year.

After dropping slightly in 2022, seizures of methamphetamine rebounded in 2023 to the highest ever recorded, UNODC said in its annual report on synthetic drugs in the region.

Thailand is a major transit route for illicit drugs from the Golden Triangle region where the north of the kingdom, Laos and Myanmar meet.

The UN office said that large shipments of over a tonne of methamphetamine were seized en route to or on maritime routes throughout 2023 and into early 2024.

Earlier last month, Thai authorities intercepted a tonne of crystal methamphetamine in one of the kingdom's biggest ever single seizures of the illegal drug.

DIVERSIFYING TRAFFICKING CHANNELS

The continued and intensified use of maritime routes to traffic large quantities of methamphetamine

from Myanmar confirms that drug traffickers are diversifying outbound trafficking channels for crystal methamphetamine from Shan to Mekong countries, as well as to various destinations in East and Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Oceania.

Between 2022 and 2023, the regions and states of Myanmar with the highest seizure totals were Mandalay, which is a primary location for drug storage and transit for maritime trafficking, and the coastal regions of Tanintharyi, Yangon, and Rakhine. Seizures of crystal methamphetamine in Mandalay decreased to

5.2 tons in 2023, down from 7.7 tons in 2022. However, this drop was offset by a fourfold increase in seizures in Tanintharyi (4.5 tons in 2023 and 1 ton in 2022), an exponential increase in seizures in Yangon (3 tons in 2023, 275 kg in 2022, and 14.7 kg in 2021), and a doubling of the amount seized in Rakhine (2.1 tons in 2023, 1 ton in 2022 and less than 1 kg in 2021). Conversely, seizures of crystal methamphetamine in Shan State decreased over the last three years, from 7.4 tons in 2021 to 2.7 tons in 2023, likely due in part to the escalating conflicts within Myanmar, which has limited the access of the authorities in several of those areas, in particular northern Shan State.

The increased use of Yangon as a departure point for maritime trafficking by organized crime groups appears to continue in 2024. In May 2024, Myanmar authorities in Kyaukse township, Mandalay, found 5 tons of crystal methamphetamine being transported by a truck traveling to Yangon. The seizure of 5 tons is the largest single seizure of crystal methamphetamine in Southeast Asia.

DRUG RECIPES AND PACKAGING

Drugs gangs are changing their recipes to increase their output, UNODC said. They are also getting more inventive in how they package the drugs to avoid detection and seizure.

"Organised crime groups are lowering the production costs and scaling up production by using non-controlled chemicals," Masood Karimipour, the organisation's representative for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, said in a statement. Greater production is enabling bigger shipments which are driving down prices, he said.

Despite the large volumes of seizures and high inflation, prices of methamphetamine and ketamine had continued to fall, the office said.

The wholesale price of methamphetamine is now reaching as low as \$400 per kilogram in production areas, it said.

And new synthetic drug products are emerging on the market aimed at young users, the UN warned.

So-called "happy water" sachets and "party lollipops" - containing unpredictable mixes of substances like ketamine, MDMA and benzodiazepines - are becoming increasingly available.

As in previous years, the largest seizures of methamphetamine tablets in Myanmar in 2023 were made in Shan State, followed by Mandalay and Yangon. The volumes seized in these regions reflect the large quantities trafficked to Lao PDR, Thailand, and the domestic Myanmar market. Additionally, the significant amounts of methamphetamine tablets seized in Rakhine, Bago, and Naypyidaw over the past three years underscore these regions' roles as transit routes.

Some of the methamphetamine tablets seized in Mandalay were destined for western Myanmar and for

onward trafficking to India and Bangladesh, as were some quantities of tablets seized in Rakhine.

India is a growing transit and destination market for methamphetamine from Myanmar. Indian authorities have recognized that the smuggling of methamphetamine from Myanmar to India, particularly through its northeastern border states, has emerged as a trend in the illegal drug market. There have been numerous reports of methamphetamine tablet and crystal trafficking incidents in Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram.

MARITIME ROUTES

The Gulf of Thailand has been increasingly used for maritime trafficking in addition to the Andaman Sea. Crystal methamphetamine transported to the southeast and southwest regions of Myanmar is trafficked through international waters in the Andaman Sea near Myanmar, Thailand and Malaysia.

Several large-scale crystal methamphetamine trafficking cases involving more than one ton of crystal methamphetamine in the Andaman Sea were

reported through 2023 and early 2024. For instance, in January 2024, Myanmar authorities seized 1.5 tons of crystal methamphetamine at a warehouse in Patheingyi Township, Ayeyawady Region. Investigations revealed that the drug was destined for Malaysia. With its large international ports on both coasts, Malaysia serves as a significant transit country for large volumes of methamphetamine produced in Myanmar and trafficked to third countries.

What is clear is methamphetamines – rather than opium and heroin – are the most profitable illegal drugs for makers and traffickers in Myanmar and the Golden Triangle region, with little sign that the record seizures of the drugs are significantly impacting the trade.

Reporting: Mizzima, UNODC, AFP

MAJOR CONCERNS REGARDING MYANMAR

Methamphetamine

- Although the amount of crystal methamphetamine seized in the country dropped in 2023, at over 17.8 tons, it is still the second-highest amount ever recorded. However, the amount of methamphetamine tablets and powder seized both increased in 2023, resulting in the total amount of methamphetamine seized in country being higher than that of the previous year.
- According to government experts, not only did the use of methamphetamine in both tablet and crystal form decrease in 2023, but the use of all other reported drugs also decreased.
- Despite the high volumes of methamphetamine being seized in the country, the amount of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine seized remains limited. However, non-controlled chemicals which can be used in the production of methamphetamine, such as benzyl cyanide, ethyl acetate, and ammonium nitrate, continue to be seized.
- The retail price of crystal methamphetamine remained stable in 2023, while the price of methamphetamine tablets increased slightly.

Ecstasy

- The amount of ecstasy seized in the country declined sharply in 2023. Information on ecstasy use remains limited.

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) and other synthetic drugs

- The amount of ketamine seized continued to increase and a record amount of over four tons of the drug was seized in Myanmar in 2023.
- Seizures of kratom increased in 2023 after declining in 2022.

Other drugs

- The area under illicit opium poppy cultivation in Myanmar increased for the third year in a row from 40,100 hectares in 2022 to 47,100 hectares in 2023. Importantly, as a result of sophisticated farming practices, the potential yield reached 1,080 tons, which is the highest since 2001.

Following the recent decline in opium cultivation in Afghanistan, Myanmar is now the world's largest source of opium. An increase in the amount of heroin seized in 2023 was also reported.

Source: UNODC report



Arakan Army fighters in Rakhine. Photo: Supplied

ARAKAN ARMY MAKES PROGRESS IN RAKHINE, SUFFERS PR UPSET

The Arakan Army (AA) is making progress in its war against the Myanmar junta in Rakhine State but is also having to handle some “public relations” challenges over allegations – which they claim are false – that they attacked Rohingya villages in the state.

The AA celebrated the graduation of its 3rd batch of military cadets in Rakhine State for the first time. Previously, the first two batches were held in the Laiza region, Kachin State. A total of 326 cadets completed the training, which aims to produce qualified military officers with strong combat and educational skills. The 4th batch will commence soon, and AA invited interested youths from Rakhine State by inquiring at relevant AA divisions.

AA has seized the No. 2 Border Guard Force Police Battalion in Maungdaw township. Nearby, the No. 5 Border Guard Force Police Battalion, currently led by the MOC (15) commander, is resisting the AA's offensive with troops who retreated from the Buthidaung township battles. The State Administration Council (SAC) troops are preparing defensive operations in Maungdaw, positioning troops in civilian areas and religious buildings, and collaborating with Muslim Rohingya militias like the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).

A local from Maungdaw reported that SAC troops are reinforcing their positions daily, with two coastal landing crafts arriving on May 20 and 22, bringing ammunition and military personnel. In the southern part of the state, as a result of the intense battles in Thandwe township, local media reported approximately 50 decomposed bodies of SAC troops floating in the Linthi River.

In Sittway, the capital of Rakhine State, as part of their defensive preparations, the military junta troops arrested 40 unregistered guests on May 24.

The same day, UNOCHA Myanmar announced that around 1.6 million people in Rakhine State lack access to health services, and significant populations are suffering from diarrhea due to a lack of clean water. The humanitarian situation in Rakhine State is worsening, with escalating tensions between the Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya communities.

AA has invited the international community to

provide aid for about 500,000 IDPs, including 200,000 Rohingya from Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships, who are sheltering in the AA-controlled areas.

There is an ongoing dispute between Myanmar's 195 CSOs and revolutionary associations and the AA regarding accountability for crimes against Rohingya communities. The CSOs and revolutionary associations demand an inquiry into war crimes committed by AA's on-the-ground level members, which the AA has denied.

Some of the positions captured by the AA are being subject to aerial bombing by the Myanmar junta, prompting civilians to flee.

OPERATION AUNG ZEYA UPDATE

The Myanmar junta's Operation Zeya – aimed to restore junta control over the important trading post of Myawaddy and surrounding areas – appears to be bogged down due to resistance attacks and heavy rains and mud.

On 26 May, a fierce skirmish erupted between a column from the Myanmar junta's Aung Zeya operation and joint forces of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and the People's Defense Force (PDF) at the place locally called Phyarkone on the Myawaddy-Kawkareik highway. According to a PDF fighter, the conflict was part of a resistance operation against the military junta's column, advancing along the road passing Tawnaw waterfall the major base of the Aung Zeya operation. To support their advance, the junta troops utilized artillery fire and airstrikes.

Despite these efforts, the junta column was forced to retreat to their base after suffering losses and subsequently fired recklessly at nearby villages they suspected housed revolutionary forces. During the skirmish, the resistance forces seized and destroyed a military truck.

Some locals reported that the Border Guard Force (BGF) was aiding the SAC troops to attack the resistance forces from both the front and back. However, Major Naing Maung Zaw, a commander of the BGF, denied these allegations, stating that the troops moving along the highway were solely BGF forces – not junta forces.



Bangladesh forces capture two alleged ARSA militants. Photo: Facebook

In Kawkareik, the junta troops have been patrolling the area, which serves as the base for the Aung Zeya operation in the plain, to launch an offensive on Dawna Hill to reach Myawaddy.

However, resistance forces have surrounded the city, causing it to resemble a ghost town. Despite the ongoing battles, SAC administrations are pressuring locals to return to their homes, many of which have been destroyed.

As of the end of May, the Aung Zeya military operation remained stalled on Dawna Hill, east of Kawkareik, and has not advanced for 50 days. The situation remains tense as both sides continue to engage in sporadic clashes, with the revolutionary forces maintaining their positions against the junta's advances. Heavy rain has also hindered the junta's operation.

ROHINGYA REFUGEE CAMPS SUFFER FROM CYCLONE AND CONSCRIPTION

The Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar are confronting severe hardships as a result of the recent

Cyclone Remal that damaged their fragile shelters and militia groups forcibly recruiting young men. Cox's Bazar hosts the world's largest refugee camp with about one million Rohingya, the majority of whom sought refuge there since the Myanmar army's "ethnic cleansing campaign" of Rakhine State in 2017.

Last week, there were serious concerns about the threat posed by the cyclone. The camp's location in the cyclone's major path raised concerns about potential landslides and flooding. The makeshift shelters, constructed from bamboo and tarpaulin, were ill-equipped to withstand the storm's intensity. Md Nasir, a local Rohingya leader, highlighted the community's fears at that time: "Those who have built homes on steep hill slopes are afraid of landslides with the arrival of the cyclone, while those in low-lying areas fear flooding."

Meanwhile, Rohingya militia groups such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), and the Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA) are allegedly forcibly recruiting Rohingya from the camps to join the junta army in Myanmar. In the first week of May alone, over 500 male refugees, some as young as ten, were conscripted. Reports

indicate that recruits are sent directly to the front lines, leading to widespread fear that they will be killed or injured.

The US Institute of Peace (USIP) reported that some recruits have managed to escape, revealing that the military junta is misusing jihadism to recruit from the Rohingya community. These dual crises of natural disaster and conscription are compounding the already dire situation for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

IDPs IN RAKHINE SUFFERING

Rohingya internally displaced people (IDPs) in Rakhine State are reportedly facing food difficulties due to lack of humanitarian assistance and junta travel restrictions, according to Development Media Group. Some IDPs said they have not received relief items for six months.

Rohingya IDPs from several displacement camps in Sittwe Township are going hungry due to rising commodity prices caused by junta blockades of roads and waterways, said camp managers.

Previously, international organisations such as the World Food Programme (WFP), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Save the Children, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) and other groups primarily provided relief items to Rohingya IDPs. But the regime has banned local and international organisations from providing humanitarian aid to many of those in need in Rakhine State since the post-Cyclone Mocha period in 2023.

MIZZIMA'S MOST POPULAR BURMESE VIDEOS

The great losses of the Military Council (Editorial Talk)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmOQ8zBnsaw>

The KIA's strategic offensive heading to Myitkyina-Bhamo and the change in the Kachin battlefield

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kspKuYNVs

The leader of the Military Council trying to play cards

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVhli5eIC1w>

**စစ်ကောင်စီ၏
ကြီးမားသည့် ဆုံးရှုံးမှုများ**

EDITORIAL TALK

ဦးစိန်ဝင်း
သတင်းခန်းစီမံခန့်ခွဲမှုအယ်ဒီတာ

ရှားချန်း
မဇ္ဈိမသတင်းထောက်



Civilians flee the fighting.
Photo: AFP

BATTERED, EMPTY MYANMAR TOWN OF PAUKTAW SHOWS PRICE OF ARAKAN ARMY VICTORY AGAINST JUNTA

Gutted buildings, vacant windows and blocks bombed to rubble show the price paid by the western Myanmar town of Pauktaw for victory against the junta in the country's civil war.

Fighters from the Arakan Army (AA) ethnic minority armed group took control of the fishing port of 20,000 people in January, as the conflict sparked by the military's coup entered its fourth year.

Pauktaw was one of a string of losses suffered by the junta across the country at the time, leading many to hope its decades-long stranglehold over Myanmar's politics could be broken.

Four months later, the Arakan Army remains in control but Pauktaw is mostly empty of residents, who are living on the outskirts and fearful of a repeat of the junta's heavy artillery attacks on the town.

"We are frightened of them (the military)," one

man told AFP from his temporary home just outside Pauktaw, asking for anonymity for security reasons.

"We don't know what will happen or what kind of weapon they will drop on us if we go and stay back at home in the town.

"We can't detect their air strikes or bombs and we will be killed if they attack."

Video taken by locals this month and obtained exclusively by AFP shows streets silent apart from birdsong and the sounds of AA soldiers sifting through piles of debris and sheets of corrugated iron.

Near a deserted market that once bustled with vendors buying and selling crabs and tiger shrimp, a ragged awning advertising a mobile phone carrier flutters above the doorway of a gutted shop.

Phone and internet services have been all but cut off.

NO CHANCE

The AA has fought an on-off war for years against the Myanmar military, seeking more autonomy for the state's ethnic Rakhine population.

As the army has faced growing resistance to its rule, from multiple armed groups - some new, some long-established - the AA has stepped up its campaign.

As the junta has lost territory on the ground, it is increasingly calling on its air power to support its ground troops.

Rights groups accuse the junta of using the strikes to punish communities suspected of opposing its rule.

When a military helicopter hovered over Pauktaw and began shooting into the town last November, many fled in panic.

"There was no chance for us to take a single thing from our house," one woman now living outside the town told AFP.

"We had cooked a pot of rice and we were not able to eat it," she said, also asking for anonymity.

"We had no money when we fled. We only had some gold jewellery with us. We tried to pawn that but it wasn't easy. The interest was too high."

The fate of Pauktaw's residents reflects a nationwide tragedy. Across Myanmar, around 2.7 million have been forced to flee by the civil war.

LOOTING

The AA has not allowed residents to live back in Pauktaw, citing the danger of more air or artillery strikes on the town, although it does allow them to come and go to pick up items.

The man who spoke to AFP said he had returned to check on his house and found it partly in ruins, with the family statue of the Buddha fallen onto the floor.

His savings box - containing money for a Buddhist ritual for his children and for timber to repair a roof damaged by a cyclone last year - was gone, he said.

"I have lost all of that money," he said.

"Everything in our house got stolen... my father's fishing nets were stolen," another woman said, also requesting anonymity.

"I am a tailor, and luckily, I managed to save my sewing machines."

During the fighting, both sides looted houses and damaged buildings, according to local reports.

In March, the AA said it would "investigate" any reports of looting by its members during the fighting.

'DECISIVE BATTLE'

The AA's offensive has seized swathes of territory in Rakhine state and along the border with India and Bangladesh.

It has said it will capture state capital Sittwe, 25 kilometres from Pauktaw and the last major town in northern Rakhine in the military's hands.

In April, the AA warned residents of the town, which is home to an India-backed deep sea port, to leave ahead of a "decisive" battle.

Sittwe residents contacted by AFP said the military was restricting travel out of the town by road and river and the prices of basic foods such as rice and eggs had doubled.

Those already displaced from Pauktaw fear further fighting nearby.

"I am sad that we have fled our own house and we can't live in it," one resident told AFP.

"I have pawned my necklace for 18 lakhs (\$850) so we have money to live. I still hope I can claim it back."

Others said they wanted payback.

"I haven't joined the Arakan Army because I am worried about who will look after my child," one woman said.

"If I wasn't... I would join them and fight back. I will be satisfied only if I can take revenge."

AFP



A muddy route near the Thai border.
Photo: Facebook

BORDER TRADE STOPS AS RAIN MAKES ROADS TO MYAWADDY IMPASSABLE

Border trade with Thailand at the Myawaddy crossing in Karen State has almost completely stopped because the only open roads to Myawaddy have become impassable due to heavy rain.

The main paved road to Myawaddy is the Asia Highway from Kawkaeik. Currently, this is closed due to heavy fighting and trucks transporting goods to and from the border have been forced to take alternative routes that involve driving along small unpaved mountain roads.

Trucks had been taking alternative routes to Myawaddy through Htokawcoe and Kyet Oo Taung. When roads were still passable thousands of vehicles a day were using the Htokawcoe road. But now because of the rain these routes are too slippery and muddy for trucks to pass.

There has been heavy, almost non-stop rain across Myanmar over the last few days, brought in by Cyclone Remal which was in the Bay of Bengal before making landfall in Bangladesh late on Sunday 26 May.

Previously, daily trade through the Myawaddy border trade post was worth US\$ 5.5 million and since the February 2021 military coup, it had been the third busiest border trading post in Myanmar.



UN LAUNCHES PROBE INTO BURNING ALIVE OF TWO REBEL FIGHTERS IN MAGWAY

The United Nations' investigative unit has called on Myanmar's ruling junta to provide information about two young men in Magway region who were burned alive by junta forces, to build a criminal case against the perpetrators.

In February, a video of the burning deaths of rebel fighters Phoe Tay, 23, and Thar Htaung, 22, was widely viewed by Burmese people on social media. The two young men were captured 7 November 2023, in fighting between pro-junta forces and guerillas at Myauk Khin Yan village in Magway region's Gangaw township.

On Monday, the UN's Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar sent a request to the military for details of the capture and killing of the two as part of a probe seeking accountability for their deaths.

The body was created by the UN Human Rights

Council in 2018 to collect and analyze evidence of serious international crimes and other violations of international law committed in Myanmar since 2011.

In an accompanying statement, Nicholas Koumjian, head of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, urged the military to "fully cooperate" with the request by giving his unit access to the country and sharing requested information.

"The mechanism is conducting an impartial and independent determination of the facts surrounding this incident, including the identity and affiliation of the perpetrators," Koumjian said.

"As part of this investigation, the mechanism has asked the Myanmar military to share with it any information about the units in the area and their commanders, the circumstances of the victims'

detention and treatment, and the persons seen committing the torture and killings.”

Since the military seized power in a February 2021 coup, reports of torture, beheadings and burning of corpses by junta forces have become commonplace, but the graphic nature of the Nov. 7 video has triggered a wave of revulsion in Myanmar and beyond – and sympathy for the dead.

The video showed the two alleged members of the anti-junta Yaw Defence Force fighters in shackles as they were interrogated by armed men. They were then dragged to a nearby tree where they were suspended as a fire was set underneath them. The two young men screamed as flames rose up and engulfed them.

The video was taken by a villager who fled Myauk Khin Yan in December, according to a local official from the administration of the shadow National Unity Government. It’s unclear who first posted the video that began circulating in early February.

A CHANCE TO RESPOND

RFA Burmese contacted a resident of Gangaw township who said that his community was glad to hear the case is under investigation and wants a resolution as soon as possible.

“They [the perpetrators] burnt two young men alive and threw their bodies into the water,” said the resident, who spoke on condition of anonymity due to security concerns. “It happened upstream from our village. We witnessed it and were outraged. They were brutally killed.”

The families of the two young men are currently sheltering in the jungle as internally displaced persons.

In February, their parents told RFA that they were proud of the sacrifices their sons had made for Myanmar and its people.

Human rights lawyer and legal expert Kyee Myint said that the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar’s request has given the junta the chance to

clarify the details of the case.

“The junta has supported its militia members in killing people and this act was carried out by its Pyu Saw Htee militia, so it was indirectly committed by junta troops,” he said. “The Mechanism has asked the junta to name the preparators, otherwise it will proceed with the case to a U.N. court.”

JUNTA HAS ‘NEVER CONFESSED’

Nay Phone Latt, spokesperson for the prime minister’s office of the shadow National Unity Government – made up of former civilian leaders in exile or hiding – told RFA that the junta was unlikely to respond to the mechanism’s request.

“They [the junta] have committed mass killings, war crimes, brutal beheadings, and arson attacks all over the country,” he said. “However, the junta never confessed to any of the crimes it committed. Instead, it accuses rebel forces... and ethnic armed groups of committing such crimes.”

Nonetheless, it is “impossible to hide such cases” in today’s age of technology, he added.

Attempts by RFA to contact junta spokesperson Major General Zaw Min Htun and Myo Myint, the junta’s social affairs minister and spokesperson for Magway region, for a response to the Mechanism’s request went unanswered Tuesday.

In his statement, Koumjian noted that the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar has made numerous requests to the military for information related to “the many serious crimes” it is investigating, including those allegedly committed by Myanmar security forces and by armed groups.

“To date, the military has not responded to any of these requests,” he said.

Translated by Aung Naing. Edited by Joshua Lipos and Malcolm Foster.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia.



Building a business network.
Photo: Supplied

JFM EXPOSES KAREN BGF-KNA REGIONAL CRIMINAL NETWORK

The Myanmar junta-allied Karen Border Guard Force (BGF), rebranded as the Karen National Army (KNA), has built a transnational network of businesses that enriches the militia's ruling family and their associates, and causes widespread suffering, according to Justice for Myanmar (JFM).

A Justice For Myanmar investigation into the Karen BGF/KNA corporate structure and regional network provides new details into the militia's involvement in illegal and abusive businesses with companies and individuals from Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Cambodia, China and Hong Kong.

These include cyber scam parks, illegal casinos and illegal online gambling as the junta and its allied Karen BGF/KNA continue to commit international crimes with total impunity.

Malaysians play a prominent role in the Yatai New City and Dongmei Park projects, which involve a vast range of criminal activities and human rights violations, in the Myawaddy area of Karen State.

Yatai New City is a mega development with illegal casinos, cyber scams and illegal online gambling operations and is a joint venture between the Karen BGF/KNA and Yatai International Holding Group. In 2022, Yatai's chairperson, She Zhijiang, was arrested in Thailand on an international warrant and is awaiting extradition to China to answer charges of running illegal gambling operations.

The two remaining members of Yatai Group in the company's Myanmar joint venture were Malaysian citizens.

Dongmei Park is a cyber scam park established by former 14K Triad boss Wan Kuok-koi (also known as Broken Tooth) with Malaysian associates that include former deputy minister to the prime minister Dato Dr Mashitah Ibrahim and her husband, Datuk Abdul Shakor bin Abu Bakar, a former diplomat.

The couple traveled to Karen State in 2020 with a contingent of prominent Malaysians and Wan Kuok-koi to launch the project. Datuk Abdul Shakor bin Abu Bakar continues to serve as a director and shareholder of Dongmei Group's US- sanctioned Hong Kong company.

The investigation also exposes new connections between Thai companies and individuals and Karen BGF/KNA businesses, including a trip to Shwe Kokko by representatives of several Thai banks via an unofficial Karen BGF border crossing to discuss financial support.

The investigation details the central role San Myint (who goes by the pseudonym Saw Chit Thu) and his children play in Karen BGF/KNA companies. By distributing shares between family members, San Myint's family controls six Karen BGF/KNA business and has a minority stake in two notorious cyber scam parks: Apollo Park and Yulong Bay Park. In both of these businesses, San Myint's son, Saw Htoo Eh Moo, a Karen BGF/KNA major, is a director and shareholder.

Justice For Myanmar calls for urgent sanctions against the Karen BGF/KNA, its businesses and key individuals, including San Myint and his family.

Justice For Myanmar calls for Malaysia and Thailand in particular, as well as other authorities in the region, to investigate and hold their citizens and residents accountable for their involvement in transnational crimes and human rights violations in Myanmar. Thailand must block the Karen BGF/KNA and its business associates from operating in its territory.

Justice For Myanmar spokesperson Yadanar Maung says: "The Karen BGF/KNA is responsible for war crimes and transnational crimes, which it commits with total impunity.

"The illegal junta not only protects these criminal activities but also profits from them as it continues to

wage a war of terror against the people of Myanmar.

"The Karen BGF/KNA and junta's international and transnational crimes have continued amid insufficient international action to resolve the crisis in Myanmar and to hold perpetrators accountable.

"Justice For Myanmar calls for urgent sanctions against the Karen BGF/KNA and its businesses.

"Authorities in the region must do far more to investigate the involvement of their citizens, residents and companies in the transnational and international crimes committed in Myanmar.

"In 2025, Malaysia will become chair of ASEAN and needs to step up and stamp out the involvement of its citizens in criminal activities in Myanmar. Malaysia cannot credibly respond to the crisis in Myanmar if its own citizens can do business with war criminals and cause harm to the people of Myanmar and the region with impunity.

"Thailand remains complicit in the commission of international crimes in Myanmar through its business with the illegal junta, and it has failed to take sufficient action against its citizens and companies enabling and profiting from the Karen BGF/KNA.

"Thailand and Malaysia need to change course now to help resolve the Myanmar crisis, rather than allowing their companies and citizens to cause more harm to the people of Myanmar."



Myanmar migrant workers in a Thai factory. Photo: AFP

MANY MYANMAR WOMEN FACE JOB SCARCITY

PAN PAN

Due to the increasing scarcity of jobs in Myanmar under the military junta, many young people are going abroad for work, including a significant number of young women.

Those who travelled legally or illegally are finding it difficult to secure employment in foreign countries too. According to Myanmar women abroad, there are fewer job opportunities in neighbouring countries for women compared to men.

An anonymous woman who went to Thailand on a 14-day visit visa and has been extending her stay for six months reported that she has been searching for a job for two months without success.

"I left in April. After the mandatory conscription was started to be implemented in February, I discussed it with my friends, and came to Bangkok. I haven't found a job yet. Even though I am not picky, it's hard to find a suitable job. My male friends coming with me are doing well," she said.

"It's easier for men to find jobs. They apply for basic jobs including elephant helpers. Some apply for factory truck driver positions. Those jobs are not suitable for me."

"I applied for jobs at garment factories and restaurants, but most places had no job vacancy. Sometimes, they do not hire me due to my lack of proficiency in the Thai language. That is a problem. Women have a harder time finding jobs, even if they

can work at whatever is available. Fortunately, I have an acquaintance in Thailand and can stay with them, which helps. It would be more difficult if I were here alone without acquaintances. Women have fewer job opportunities both here and in Myanmar."

She came to Thailand urgently due to the military conscription, using the easiest visa exemption (14-day arrival visa), and has been extending her stay for six months in Thailand. She mentioned that it was costly to come to Thailand. Currently, women find it more challenging to secure jobs than men in Thailand.

A staff member working at an overseas employment agency in Yangon claimed that it is becoming harder to find jobs abroad due to the increasing number of people going abroad, including the most popular destination, Thailand.

"Yes, jobs can be rare. Those who go on a visa then search for a job upon arrival face more difficulties. If they apply through official employment agencies in the two countries, it might take some time but is more reliable. It is important to have good connections with acquaintances. Without a job, it's harder to stay long-term in another country. Though job opportunities are limited for both men and women, women face higher unemployment rates. Due to physical limitations, women find it harder to secure jobs. So, it is crucial for women to have strong connections, secure a job before going to foreign countries, and keep some money in hand."

Similarly, Su Latt (a pseudonym), who has been working as a housemaid in Malaysia, said that women looking for jobs abroad should consider both mental and physical safety.

"I have been working as a housemaid for six years now. It is tough and women with good looks must be cautious of sexual harassment. We often had to change jobs due to issues with employers. After several years and with language proficiency, you can get better jobs. Otherwise, it is hard. Some Burmese acquaintances who came illegally have been arrested. Women who are working as maids often face violence. In a foreign country, it is hard to receive protection or file complaints."

"Women should be extra cautious when going to foreign countries," she added.

With increasing job scarcity and rising living costs in Myanmar, more people are going abroad for work. The rising number of Myanmar nationals leaving makes finding jobs harder, and women, in particular, find it increasingly challenging to secure employment.

ROHINGYA FORCED TO FIGHT ALONGSIDE MYANMAR ARMY TORMENTORS



Young Rohingya men are being conscripted by Muslim militants to fight for the Myanmar army. Photo: AFP

Rohingya mother Sofura Begum has spent years in a squalid refugee camp after fleeing Myanmar. Now her teenage son has been taken to fight alongside the troops that put her there.

Militant Rohingya groups in Bangladesh have forcibly recruited hundreds of young Rohingya men and boys to battle the Arakan Army, a rebel outfit in neighbouring Myanmar that has won a string of victories against the junta there.

Those sent to fight are making common cause with the military that drove 750,000 members of the persecuted Muslim minority from their homes and into Bangladesh in a 2017 crackdown now the subject of an ongoing UN genocide court case.

In their recruitment drive, militants say Rohingya need to ally with old enemies in the Myanmar army to face a new threat.

But the families of those dragooned into combat say that their relatives were not given a choice.

"They told us to hand him over," Begum, 30, told AFP after her 15-year-old son Abdul was picked up by armed men from her home.

"They threatened us... They said it's our war of faith. I didn't want my son to join the war. But we are in a dangerous situation."

AFP spoke with six families who said men from their household had been forcibly recruited by three Rohingya armed groups with an established presence in the refugee camps.

One man, speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution, said his 20-year-old son had been taken by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and sent across the border to fight.

"I learned that he was injured in the war," the man said.

"It's shameful my son was forcibly recruited... Every day our people are being picked up."

'SLAUGHTERED OUR PEOPLE'

Myanmar's military has lost vast swathes of territory this year to an advance by the Arakan Army, one of several rebel groups battling the junta that took power in a 2021 coup.

The Arakan Army says it is fighting for more autonomy for the ethnic Rakhine population in the state, which is also home to around 600,000 Rohingya who remained after the 2017 crackdown.

This month the rebel outfit took control of Buthidaung, a Rohingya-majority town not far from Bangladesh.

Several Rohingya diaspora groups said in a statement that fighters forced Rohingya to flee, then looted and burned their homes - claims the Arakan Army rejected and called "propaganda".

Another armed group in the Bangladesh camps, the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), said it had recruited refugees to fight.

"The Arakan Army has tortured and slaughtered our people," Ko Ko Linn, the RSO's political chief, told AFP.

"Their only policy is the extermination of the Rohingya community," he added. "So we are recruiting Rohingyas regularly, giving them military training."

Ko Ko Linn would not say if other groups had forcibly recruited people.

But Arakan Army spokesperson Khaing Thu Kha accused three groups - RSO, ARSA and the Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA) - of recruiting Rohingya from Bangladesh.

He said the conscripts were taken for training in a Myanmar army base, before "fighting alongside" the junta's forces.

With mobile and internet networks down across swathes of Rakhine state it is difficult to assess how any cooperation between Rohingya groups and the junta is playing out on the battlefield.

'LIED FROM THE BEGINNING'

A senior UN staffer and a rights group official, both speaking on condition of anonymity due to the

sensitivity of the subject, said Rohingya armed groups had recruited "hundreds" of refugees in Bangladesh.

Rohingya armed groups working in concert with the military have recruited hundreds more men and boys in Myanmar itself.

Myanmar officially regards the Rohingya as interlopers from Bangladesh, despite roots in the country stretching back centuries.

Successive governments there have subjected the minority to decades of persecution, including a 2015 decision to cease recognising their citizenship.

Thomas Kean of the International Crisis Group think tank told AFP that children as young as 14 had been pressed into battle against their will.

But he added that it appeared a small number of Rohingya had signed on to fight voluntarily after being promised "wages and even citizenship" by Myanmar's junta.

After significant battlefield losses against rebel groups since last year, Myanmar's junta activated a dormant conscription law in February to bolster its armed forces.

One Rohingya man in Buthidaung, who asked not to be identified, told AFP his brother had been "beaten and abducted by ARSA" and taken to serve alongside the military.

He said that the junta's representatives had said at first that the recruits were being trained as a militia to defend Rohingya villages.

"But later, they began using them on the battlefields," he added. "The junta lied from the beginning."

AFP

SOME 45,000 ROHINGYA HAVE FLED FIGHTING IN MYANMAR: UN

The United Nations warned last week that escalating fighting in conflict-torn Myanmar's Rakhine State had forced around 45,000 minority Rohingya to flee, amid allegations of killings and burnings of property.

"Tens of thousands of civilians have been displaced in recent days by the fighting in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships," UN rights office spokeswoman Elizabeth Throssell told reporters in Geneva.

"An estimated 45,000 Rohingya have reportedly fled to an area on the Naf River near the border with Bangladesh, seeking protection," she said.

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

The AA says it is fighting for more autonomy for the ethnic Rakhine population in the state, which is also home to around 600,000 members of the persecuted Rohingya Muslim minority.

Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fled Rakhine in 2017 during a crackdown by the military that is now the subject of a United Nations genocide court case.

"Over a million Rohingya are already in Bangladesh, having fled past purges," Throssell pointed out.

UN rights chief Volker Turk was urging Bangladesh and other countries "to provide effective protection to those seeking it, in line with international law, and to ensure international solidarity with Bangladesh in hosting Rohingya refugees in Myanmar," she said.

James Rodehaver, head of the rights office's Myanmar team, described the horrifying situation many were fleeing from.

He said his team had received testimonies and seen satellite images, online videos and pictures indicating that Buthidaung town had been "largely burned"

"We have received information indicating that the burning did start on May 17... two days after the military had retreated from the town... and the Arakan Army claimed to have taken full control of the village."

He stressed that the UN rights office was still working to corroborate that information, to clearly establish "who were the perpetrators".

One survivor had described seeing dozens of dead bodies as he fled Buthidaung, while another had said he was among tens of thousands who fled the town only to find themselves blocked by the AA on the road west towards Maungdaw town.

Other survivors also said AA members had abused them and extorted money from them as they tried to make their way to Rohingya villages south of the town.

In the weeks leading up to the burning of Buthidaung, Rodehaver said the rights office had documented renewed attacks on Rohingya civilians by both AA and the military in northern Rakhine, including through air strikes.

The team had documented "at least four cases of beheadings", he said, adding that they had determined with a high level of confidence that those were carried out by the AA.

Beyond Buthidaung, Throssell warned of "clear and present risks of a serious expansion of violence".

She pointed to the beginning of a battle for Maungdaw town, where the military has outposts and where a large Rohingya community lives.

"In this appalling situation, civilians are once more victimised, killed, their properties destroyed and looted, their demands for safety and security ignored," she said.

"They are again forced to flee their homes in a recurring nightmare of suffering."

AFP



GUNMEN MURDER ROHINGYA TEACHER AND STUDENT IN BANGLADESH

Gunmen in Bangladesh have killed a teacher and a student in a Rohingya refugee camp for refusing to return to Myanmar to fight, their parents said Thursday last week.

Hundreds of Rohingya boys and young men have been seized from refugee camps in Bangladesh, where they had sought safety after Myanmar's military drove about 750,000 members of the persecuted Muslim minority out of the country in 2017.

Now Rohingya militants working with the Myanmar junta are recruiting the refugees, according to camp residents, UN reports and analysts.

The militants say their fellow Rohingya need to ally with Myanmar's army - the same forces who drove them into exile - to face a common enemy in another Myanmar rebel force, the Arakan Army (AA).

Police said the two men, student Nur Absar, 22, and teacher Nur Faisal, 21, were killed by "unknown assailants" in Kutupalong camp in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar district.

"One died on the spot, another died in hospital," said Arefin Jewel, a police spokesman in Kutupalong.

"We are investigating whether it is a case of forced recruitment"

But Faisal's father blamed the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO).

"The RSO went to my son's school and wanted to recruit him," Zakir Ahmed, 45, told AFP. "My son

refused."

'Abduction, kidnapping and coercion'

Ahmed said his son had also been working as a community guard to stop the gunmen who prowled the camps to press-gang youths.

"He was also working as a night guard to save other young Rohingya from forced recruitment by armed groups," he said.

"RSO gunmen shot them. RSO killed my son."

Aman Ullah, 40, the father of student Nur Absar, also blamed the RSO.

"They tried to recruit him," Ullah said. "They have become the name of terror here"

Thomas Kean from the International Crisis Group think-tank told AFP the "tragic killings only highlight the growing threat that refugees face from Rohingya armed groups"

"For years now the groups have largely been allowed to operate with impunity, and refugees are really at breaking point," he added.

Kean said his research showed that since March "thousands of refugees" had been recruited by Rohingya armed groups and sent to Myanmar.

The Rohingya fighters are battling alongside Myanmar's regular army in Rakhine State.

They are fighting forces including the AA, which says it wants greater autonomy for the ethnic Rakhine population in the state, which is also home to around 600,000 Rohingya.

This month the AA took control of Buthidaung, a Rohingya-majority town not far from Bangladesh.

Several Rohingya diaspora groups claimed that fighters forced Rohingya to flee, then looted and burned their homes - claims the AA called "propaganda"

According to a report by the United Nations refugee agency seen by AFP, at least 1,870 refugees - more than a quarter of them children or youths - were recruited into the armed groups during a two-month period between March and May.

More than three-quarters were taken by force, the UN report said, including by "abduction, kidnapping and coercion"

The UN children's fund said it was "appalled" by the attack.

"UNICEF strongly condemns any attack against schools... which must always be a safe space for children, and for the staff delivering this essential service," country chief Sheldon Yett said.



EU Special Envoy for Myanmar
Mr Igor Driesmans

INTERVIEW: EU SPECIAL ENVOY FOR MYANMAR DISCUSSES WHY MYANMAR MATTERS TO THE EU

EU Special Envoy for Myanmar Mr Igor Driesmans feels he is tasked with keeping Myanmar on the radar within the European Union and operating on the ground in Myanmar and the region.

In this exclusive interview with Mizzima, Mr Driesmans discusses why Myanmar and the ongoing crisis matter to the European Union.

As EU Special Envoy for Myanmar, what are your priorities in tackling the Myanmar crisis?

The priorities of the EU in Myanmar since the military coup have been very clear: to support the people of Myanmar and to support a process that will return the country to its democratic path. These objectives guide my mandate.

The EU created the role of Special Envoy for Myanmar over two years ago, to have a dedicated European ear and voice that can listen to and speak with the different stakeholders, many of whom are outside Myanmar. The EU is a broad concept: 27 Member States and many institutions, with different roles and mandates. I have tried to be a visible liaison setting out the key objectives of EU policy towards Myanmar, policy which has been agreed unanimously by our 27 Member States – that is its source of strength. And this policy is clear: Myanmar matters to the EU.

We want to play a role in finding common ground for dialogue together with other partners, and in bringing long-term stability in line with the aspirations of Myanmar citizens. Through my role, the EU also wants to strengthen the voice of those actors that represent these citizen aspirations.

Why does Myanmar matter to the EU in terms of politics, trade and investment?

Myanmar is a country with an enormous potential, as it proved with its steadfast progress in the last years before the coup. It has a young and dynamic population and plenty of natural resources to allow an equitable social and economic development. It has access to important trade routes and it is located in a strategic region. We want to see Myanmar unlocking this potential to the fullest benefit of its citizens. We are convinced that this will also be beneficial to the region and to the EU's partnership with the region.

The conflict has dramatically affected Myanmar's economy and this will be difficult to overcome. Despite the challenges, EU businesses still operate in Myanmar. We continue to make important efforts to uphold trade relations in sectors that have no links with the regime, primarily the garment sector. This way we support hundreds of thousands of workers and their families in an overall context of dire unemployment, and we

keep Myanmar within regional and global value chains. As I've said before, the EU's priority in Myanmar is to support its people, and we will continue doing this, including through the European private sector that remains engaged in the country in a responsible way.

But our engagement goes well beyond trade and investment.

Politically, Myanmar's situation affects regional and global security, as well as ASEAN's progress as a regional block. The rise in human trafficking, drugs production and scam centres should worry all partners. It certainly worries the EU, too.

Last but not less significant, for the EU, Myanmar's importance is grounded on values. In a historical context where fundamental freedoms are put to the test in many world crises, the EU stands steadfastly by the side of those who are determined to fight authoritarian impositions based on military strength, in Europe and elsewhere.

This is why the EU and its Member States have stayed on the ground supporting livelihoods, promoting education, supporting the most vulnerable and reinforcing the voices that would otherwise not be heard. And this is why we will continue to be present in Myanmar.

Since the Myanmar coup of 1 February 2021, there has been controversy over how to put Myanmar back on the democratic path, through a resistance war or through negotiations with the military junta. How does the EU view this dilemma?

The EU has consistently condemned in the strongest terms the violence that the military regime perpetrates against its people. We have so far issued eight rounds of EU sanctions against perpetrators of grave violations and entities financing the military.

Further, since 2021, we have halted all official relations with the Government of Myanmar and with any public institution, including Universities or schools under the Ministry of Education, or organizations with public funding. It is a firm decision of principle, and we respect it in all our actions in and on Myanmar. There can be no official relations as long as the military junta is unwilling to make concessions.

This said, I believe the time will come when the Generals in Naypyidaw will realize that a war against its own people is not in their interest. The polarization and splintering of communities and positions in Myanmar is not a long-term solution. Hence, the EU is supportive of initiatives that can bridge the different sides. These bridges will need to be strong and robust, constructed

by the Myanmar people. There cannot be a sustainable exit without a peace process. We believe that a durable solution can only be found if all relevant stakeholders have a seat, and a voice, at that table. The experience of these last three years shows us that partial solutions will not hold, and only deepen mistrust among the different parties. A sustainable outcome will require trust. We are currently far away from that, and more needs to be done to build trust among actors.

It will be equally important that those judged responsible of having committed grave human rights violations face justice. There will be no reconciliation without justice, or without reparation measures and guarantees that such violations will not happen again.

The EU has put emphasis on ASEAN's 5-Point Consensus road-map for Myanmar. How is this working out? And has the Laos chair made any difference?

As a regional bloc, ASEAN plays a central role in any sustainable solution for Myanmar. The 2022 UN Security Council Resolution on Myanmar, to which the EU subscribes, acknowledges this. Building upon long standing political and trade relations, the EU and ASEAN entered a Strategic Partnership in 2020, so ASEAN is a key counterpart for the EU. We therefore will continue to support ASEAN in its efforts to deal with the crisis that it faces in its region.

As the situation in Myanmar remains gridlocked, like other partners, the EU remains concerned that there is no progress on the first two critical points of the Five Point Consensus: violence has not ceased - on the contrary - and we are far away from a constructive dialogue among all parties. The junta has unfortunately shown no inclination to genuinely implement the 5-Point Consensus, which it had itself signed up to.

Building upon the work of previous chairs, Laos - through its Special Envoy Alounkeo Kittikhoun- is engaging different stakeholders. There is a lot of quiet diplomacy involved and Ambassador Alounkeo has our full support in taking forward this difficult task. Because neither the ASEAN Chair, nor any other country can or should carry such arduous task alone. Other regional stakeholders and dialogue partners of Myanmar have a responsibility in creating a conducive environment to overcome the crisis. The appointment by the UN Secretary General of Julie Bishop as UN Envoy is therefore most welcome.

But allow me to say this: the UN, ASEAN and other partners can support the process, but it is ultimately up to the national actors to come to a solution that

satisfies the people's aspirations.

How does the EU view the imposition by the junta of the military conscription law?

We are concerned over the tangible impact of this law on the people and on the economy. Its enactment has caused enormous pressure and exacerbated a brain-drain, which has been an ongoing concern since the coup. There is also a high impact on the social fabric. The way the law is being implemented and communicated is causing fear amongst communities. Our partners have been affected, as have been European companies in Myanmar, who keep reporting resignations and difficulties to sustain operations. To the extent that we can make out, it will affect our presence here and the ability of our partners and the private sector to carry out operations.

On a practical level, what does the role of EU Special Envoy for Myanmar involve?

As I focus on engaging different national and regional stakeholders over Myanmar, this means regular meetings, dialogues and some travel within the region. My outreach is complementary to that of my colleague-Ambassador in Myanmar, who has a mandate and the facilities to engage with stakeholders present in Myanmar. I also engage with organizations in Europe to explore further avenues for European engagement. Finally, my job also comes with some

down-to-earth internal coordination work. The EU is composed of different institutions, so I need to plug the information back to my colleagues in the different institutions and with the Member States. This is also a way to keep Myanmar on the radar within the EU.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

I am a diplomat, so my power mainly lies in words. But my words are complemented by concrete European support initiatives to the people. I started this interview by saying that the EU's first priority is to support the people of Myanmar. Between 2021 and 2023, the EU has committed more than 180 million EUR to development programmes in Myanmar. This money is entirely channelled through international and non-governmental organisations, including a large part towards national NGOs. During the same period, we also provided 85 million EUR humanitarian aid to address the most urgent needs in all areas of the country. If we add the support that several EU Member States give to Myanmar, the amounts more than double for 2023. Is this enough? Far from it. No aid envelope will ever suffice. We will need a political solution to put Myanmar back on the social and economic development track to make the lives of all citizens better. But it does show that the EU is still on the ground, and that we remain committed to helping the people through good, and especially through bad times.

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EU ADDRESSES UN MEETING ON THE CHILDREN AND YOUTH OF MYANMAR

The European Union (EU) made a written statement last week to an informal "Arria formula" meeting of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on the Children and Youth of Myanmar.

The statement is below:

The impact the February 2021 military coup and the escalating armed conflict has had on the children and youth of Myanmar is often forgotten. The EU welcomes the convening of an Arria-formula meeting on this issue, to consider how the international community can work towards a better future for the people of Myanmar, including its children, youth, and future generations.

Following the coup, the EU has put a large focus on supporting Myanmar's most vulnerable communities, including children, working through and with civil society actors, NGOs and international organizations, notably the UN. With no political dialogue with the military regime in Myanmar, the EU supports the urgent needs of children in armed conflict through development cooperation and humanitarian aid interventions targeting three critical areas described below. The Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus is a key guiding principle of EU programming in Myanmar.

1. The armed conflict triggered by the coup in Myanmar makes protecting children against violence an almost impossible task. The conflict continues to severely restrict freedom of movement, access to services, and the delivery of humanitarian aid due to violence, security risks, increased checkpoints, and severe infrastructure damage, exacerbated by onerous administrative procedures imposed by the military regime. Obstructions to humanitarian aid access and delivery, as well as extreme weather events, aggravate vulnerabilities. Children are particularly affected by heightened protection risks, with a 2023 UN Secretary General Report to the Security Council highlighting increased violations against children, including killing, mutilation and abduction. Around 8 million people need child protection interventions. High rates of child marriage, trafficking and unsafe migration are significant concerns, alongside child labour and recruitment into the military and other non-state armed groups. The EU supports protection by helping foster families and community actors engaged in children's rights and

through child labour prevention and protection policies for juvenile workers.

2. The children of Myanmar's right to education has been profoundly affected by a combination of prolonged school closures, political crisis and escalating conflict. All this has led to a significant increase in school dropout rates. The EU supports community-based remedial education programmes in Myanmar, improved access to ethnic education services, non-formal education to children and youth lacking access to formal education due to armed conflict and emergency education for internally displaced children. The complex political and operational environment characterized by an increased politicization of education, a volatile security situation and legal challenges renders supporting the Myanmar children's right to education extremely challenging.

3. The coup has also created a health and nutrition crisis, with children across the country paying a very high price. The military regime has repeatedly attacked medical infrastructure and personnel. Access to healthcare has declined dramatically, with the public health system struggling to stay on its feet. Essential public health initiatives, including critical vaccination programs, and sexual and reproductive health services, have been disrupted or halted altogether. Political instability, food insecurity, armed conflict, and violence have for long had a deteriorating effect on the mental health and psychological wellbeing of the population. The particular impact on children will plague Myanmar for generations to come. Conflict and displacement have also exacerbated malnutrition among children. 12.9 million people in Myanmar, nearly one in every four, are experiencing acute food insecurity, which severely impacts the education and learning of children. Children make up about half of the more than three million displaced individuals in Myanmar. The fragile situation affecting agriculture, food and nutrition security requires substantial direct assistance to vulnerable populations with a focus on women, children and people with disabilities. The EU works to improve the nutritional status of women of reproductive age and children under five years, in conflict-affected communities and also provides pregnant and breastfeeding women and children aged under two with cash transfers.



MYANMAR'S CHILDREN ARE BEARING THE BRUNT OF THE CRISIS, SAYS UK AMBASSADOR JAMES KARIUKI

UK Ambassador James Kariuki warned that youth and children are bearing the brunt of the crisis in Myanmar.

The ambassador was speaking at the UK-hosted UN Arria meeting on youth and children in Myanmar on 29 May

The following is his statement:

Thank you, excellencies, colleagues for joining today's Arria-formula meeting on the situation in Myanmar.

Last May, we held an Arria focused on Myanmar's humanitarian crisis. In a span of 12 months, the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance has risen from 17.6 million to 18.6 million. The number of internally displaced persons is now 3 million, in comparison to 1.8 million in 2023.

Myanmar's youth and children are bearing the brunt of this crisis, triggered by the military coup and their repression of the civilian population. More than half are out of school, routine vaccinations are being disrupted, and with food insecurity on the rise, there is a risk that many will suffer from childhood malnutrition.

So what can we do to shift the trajectory and protect Myanmar's children and future generations?

First, the international community needs to pay greater attention to the worsening levels of food insecurity. More than 13 million people in Myanmar are projected to fall into acute food insecurity this year. Babies will not receive the necessary nutrients to grow up healthy while children may be pushed to join armed groups or forced to be married to reduce the burden on their families. The United Kingdom has helped support 1.8 million people with nutrition and livelihood support in 2023. We call on others to urgently ramp up their response.

Second, there needs to be greater access to education and health services, including through localised delivery partners to ensure we reach all those in need. Through local providers, the UK has helped support half a million women and children to access maternal, newborn, and child health services. And last year, we helped facilitate education to over 200,000 children, of whom more than half were girls.

And finally, it is deeply concerning that nearly 150 children are estimated to have been killed in Myanmar in the first five months of 2024. We are also following reports of forced recruitment, increased violence, and displacement in Rakhine State, affecting all civilians, including Rohingya, Rakhine, and other ethnic communities. Unified messaging underlining the critical need for all parties to protect civilians, including children, is urgently needed. As per ASEAN's latest review of the five-point consensus, we call on the Myanmar Armed Forces in particular, to stop targeted attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, including schools and healthcare facilities. And we reiterate the Security Council's demand for an immediate end to all forms of violence as set out in Resolution 2669.

Now, today, we will hear perspectives from Myanmar's youth and children, as well as from UNICEF Emergency Operations Director, Lucia Elmi. I would now like to turn my colleagues' attention to the screen to hear the invaluable voices of Myanmar's future generation.



Isabel Todd

"It's a revolution to rebuild what Myanmar is, and that's already happening!"

BEYOND IMPUNITY – DELVING INTO THE CRIMES OF THE MYANMAR JUNTA

"I'm from London, and my background is in human rights and international law, and for the better part of the past ten years, my work in human rights has focused directly on Myanmar."

Insight Myanmar sat down to interview Isabel Todd, currently a coordinator of the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar (SAC-M), who discusses her background in Myanmar and current advocacy work.

WORKING WITH YANGHEE LEE

In 2015, Todd worked on the Thai-Myanmar border, a very exciting time for human rights defenders, as the civil society space was rapidly expanding. Then in 2018, she was hired as a research assistant to the Yanghee

Lee, the UN Special Rapporteur. After having been banned from Myanmar by the NLD, Lee's team was crafting the UN's response to the Rohingya genocide, and they coordinated with the Human Rights Council, which was then engaged in a parallel, fact-finding mission.

"It was felt that the impunity that the military had enjoyed for so long, and that as long as that was allowed to continue, these utterly devastating cycles of violence would not only continue, but likely get worse," she says. They believed that sustained, coordinated pressure would be needed to bring those generals and their cronies to justice and in 2019 they began having targeted discussions about it; in fact, that was the real impetus for the formation of SAC-M. Their mission to support the people of Myanmar is three-fold: providing strategic advice to democratic actors; advocacy on behalf of the democratic movement; and communication updates and analysis to keep the wider public informed. And though the pandemic halted the team's momentum, the 2021 military coup re-ignited their resolve. She describes their various efforts (and associated challenges) in this interview.

ACCOUNTABILITY

First, in light of increasing, post-coup violence, SAC-M has pressed forward with trying to ensure that those responsible for human rights violations are held accountable. Todd believes that ideally, justice should be delivered through domestic courts; however, in Myanmar, the justice system is currently incapable of acting independent of military control, and it lacks the capacity to handle the large volume of cases that would be necessary to establish a just system. The other avenue is through international courts. One possibility is the International Court of Justice (ICJ). In line with this, she points to Gambia's claim in the ICJ that alleges that Myanmar violated its obligations under the Genocide Convention in its treatment of the Rohingya people. However, that case does not seek to hold individual military leaders accountable, which is SAC-M's and the Burmese people's goal, but rather aims to determine Myanmar's responsibility as a state under international law. Therefore, while the ICJ can deliver a significant judgment regarding state responsibility, it is not equipped to directly address individual accountability for the atrocities committed.

GOING TO COURT

Another venue is the International Criminal Court (ICC), which does have the authority to initiate proceedings against individuals for war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and crimes of

aggression, as defined by the Rome Statute, the treaty that established the ICC. However, Todd points out a significant limitation: Myanmar never ratified the Rome Statute, which means that the ICC does not have jurisdiction over crimes committed within Myanmar. But she notes an exception that has allowed the ICC to exercise limited jurisdiction: the cross-border nature of certain crimes against the Rohingya. Since these crimes involved deportation or forcible transfer of populations across the Myanmar-Bangladesh border, and Bangladesh is a signatory of the Rome Statute, the ICC has been able to claim jurisdiction over these specific actions.

NUG STEPS IN

Seeking to rectify this bureaucratic holdup, the NUG (while not yet recognized as the official government of Myanmar) filed a declaration under Article 12(3) of the Rome Statute. This provision allows states not party to the Rome Statute to accept the ICC's jurisdiction on an ad hoc basis. The NUG did this in mid-2021, potentially enabling the ICC to investigate crimes committed in Myanmar dating back to 2002, including post-coup events. However, the ICC did not respond as many would have hoped, as they chose to not expand its investigation. Todd notes an overall discomfort about the willingness to state that the NUG has the legal authority to act on behalf of Myanmar as the cause for their reluctance.

This directly connects to the broader "legitimacy" debate that has been raging for over three years now across the international community with regard to Myanmar, which is: Who should be recognized as officially representing that nation? Todd stresses that whatever decision the ICC makes concerning the NUG has to have international "standing." That's why the ICC was looking to the ICJ case to see what their decision would be regarding the formal recognition of NUG's legitimacy. Todd notes that unfortunately, the ICJ not only did not give the NUG a voice at their proceedings, but they in fact allowed someone from the military to represent Myanmar's case, which she labels "disastrous."

Todd points out that there are two factors that complicate the ability to reach a general, international consensus about the NUG. The first is that individual nations make their own decisions about recognition; international bodies do not make these decisions for them. The second is that actually, nations most typically recognize a country as a whole, rather than the government that happens to be in power at a given moment in time specifically. But the on-the-ground

policies of nations, not to mention the functioning of international courts and arbitrations, have to deal with the particularities of governments. So in disputed situations like Myanmar's, where the claim is that the nominal government in power—the junta—is illegitimate, and the government-in-exile—the NUG—is the true representative of the people, it's sort of like everyone is waiting for others to make the first move, which no one has yet done.

QUESTION OF JURISDICTION

While she understands the dynamics at play here, Todd nonetheless expresses frustration with the lack of resolve shown by countries regarding the NUG, as she feels the situation is quite clear. "The wariness on the part of the international community to recognize the NUG for what it is, the most legitimate representative of the Myanmar people, denies Myanmar people a voice on the international stage when they need it the most!" she says.

Todd next moves on to discuss other UN organs that have the authority to take action against the junta. The Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), established in 2019 by the United Nations Human Rights Council, is charged with collecting evidence and preparing case files related to allegations of international crimes committed by military leaders in Myanmar. The IIMM is charged with gathering evidence and maintaining case files in anticipation of a future jurisdiction where prosecutions could occur. It mirrors a model previously established by the UN General Assembly for Syria, and represents a significant step by the Human Rights Council in addressing international crimes. Yet while it can pass resolutions and establish mandates and mechanisms, it does not have the power to enforce its decisions.

RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT

Another UN initiative is the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), a principle that affirms existing international obligations to protect populations from severe human rights violations when their own governments fail to do so. R2P does not create new legal obligations, it merely emphasizes the international community's duty to intervene, potentially even with military action, though Todd says this drastic step is rarely desirable, and that more preferable actions are coordinated arms embargoes, sanctions, etc. Like many, including R2P expert Liam Scott, Todd feels strongly that the international community's response to the crisis in Myanmar has been insufficient, and that it has not lived up to its obligations under R2P despite the clear

calls for help from within Myanmar during the post-coup protests in 2021. Interestingly, Todd notes that the Security Council actually has the power to refer a situation to the ICC even if the country in question hasn't ratified the Rome Statute. Doing so would grant the ICC jurisdiction because their charge is to protect civilian populations; this is part of the R2P framework. But, alas, the Security Council has also not moved forward to even consider such steps.

After seeing how one international organization and statue after another has failed to protect the Burmese people, it can be hard to have faith going forward, and Todd does not mince words with her own frustration.

DISAPPOINTMENT

"People in Myanmar should feel incredibly disappointed with the international system," she says. "The word we used was 'betrayed.' People should feel betrayed, because the promise of the international system, and what it stands for, has been betrayed in Myanmar." She also points out that it may be worthwhile to honestly reflect on the reality of the United Nations. "As much as it stands on certain principles, it still simply just reflects the power dynamics that exist globally." This is where SAC-M acts in its advocacy role, using its reporting and influence to try to remind (and at times push) the international community to be on the right

side of history as the crisis in Myanmar wages on. "That is what we do, and we hope that we can make progress over time."

One of the important tasks SAC-M has undertaken in the service of its advocacy role is how it has set about to create a map illustrating the various degree of control by different actors, and Todd describes what led to this project.

MAPPING 'CONTROL'

"What we were met with [after the coup], which really floored us, actually was this sense of inertia and complacency from the international community. Basically, when we tried to understand it, it seemed to be based on this completely, frankly, lazy assumption, that, 'Okay, there was a coup, there were some protests. But now the military has quashed those, and it may not be legitimate, but you don't have to be legitimate to be considered a government. It's the de facto government on the basis that it is in effective control of the country. There's not a lot we can do about it. We're back to the 1990s and the 2000s in Myanmar, the military dictatorship. So we'll just not engage directly for a few years, and then hope that things change in a decade or so.'" Alarmed that this response would embolden the junta's ability to retain power, SAC-M went about creating a map that would clearly illustrate the degree



The Myanmar military have been accused of crimes against humanity. Photo: AFP

of control by various actors. “The basis for being a de facto government is that you have effective control of the country, as the government. And we were confident that [the military] did not, but we had to set about showing that.”

The task was challenging. First, the SAC-M team had to set the criteria for determining what “effective control” even means in the context of an entity claiming to be the de facto government. For this, they referenced a pivotal 1923 arbitration case between Great Britain and Costa Rica, a case that is often cited when trying to define what constitutes “effective control.” Based on that, they created their map based on the following criteria:

- **Control of Territory:** An entity must control some territory, but not necessarily all or even most of it. It cannot be completely outside of the country it claims to govern.

- **Control of the Population:** The population must, by and large, accept the entity as the government. This acceptance does not require approval or democratic mandate; it can even be under duress. The entity may enforce acceptance through authoritarian means.

- **Capacity to Administer Government Functions:** The entity must have the capacity to perform governmental functions beyond merely occupying territory. This includes being able to manage day-to-day governance and administrative duties effectively, particularly in ways that affect the local population’s daily lives.

- **Degree of Permanency:** The entity’s control must show some degree of stability and permanency; it cannot be fleeting or merely temporary.

SAC-M’s unambiguous conclusion was that the military does not meet these criteria, particularly re controlling the population and administering government functions effectively. In the areas they “control,” there is significant resistance and alternative governance structures being established by the population.

However, to be really accurate, their map had to reflect the dynamism of the rapidly changing situation there; Nathan Ruser pointed out in a previous Insight Myanmar podcast episode how challenging it can be to track the unconventional conflict being waged in Myanmar.

“If you look at the scale, there’s a sense of movement, even in the legend,” she says, adding that this also shows a clear “trajectory that was in favor of

the resistance.” By creating a “heat map” that applied a scale—from full junta control at one end to full resistance control at the other—to each township in the country, a very fluid picture was captured, but still one where “we were able to say conclusively that the military could not be considered a de facto government because it did not meet those criteria across enough of the country.” Additional criteria they hope to include in future maps may track rivers and roads, and show whether the regime is able or unable to resupply their battalions, which would visually illustrate the military’s problems with supply lines.

At the same time, she acknowledges that few places are under the firm control of the resistance, either, given the overwhelming superiority of the military’s air force, which runs an average of 70 airstrikes per day! Todd believes that they are able to continue doing so points to the absence of any effective sanctions being placed on incoming jet fuel, a topic taken up by Montse Ferrer in a previous episode. Nonetheless, despite the military’s far greater armed capability, they are still losing control steadily across the map.

IT’S A REVOLUTION

“It’s so important to look at this beyond purely military terms, because this isn’t a civil war. This is an uprising,” she says, echoing the words of security analyst Anthony Davis. “It’s a revolution to rebuild what Myanmar is, and that’s already happening! The sort of foundations of the federal democracy that will be established in the future, are already being built at that community and township level. This is an uprising that people are willing to happen, and there are acts of resistance that are taking place every day that aren’t necessarily seen, but what’s very clear as people are actively opposed to the junta.”

Listen to the Insight Myanmar podcast here:

<https://player.captivate.fm/episode/549e66b0-4228-48a3-b661-a09583a4da5d>

INTERVIEW: 'MOST EASILY CORRUPTED' CAMBODIA, LAOS AND MYANMAR FORM SCAM EPICENTER

SOVANNARITH KEO FOR RFA KHMER

A recent U.S. Institute of Peace study finds transnational crime in Southeast Asia is a global threat

The US Institute of Peace (USIP) recently published a study on the cyber scamming industry in Southeast Asia finds that a decision in 2022 by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to delist Cambodia from its "gray list" of countries with deficient money-laundering controls has contributed to facilitating industrial-scale money laundering and strengthening the scamming industry there.

According to the USIP's estimates, in Cambodia alone, return on cyber scamming is estimated to exceed \$12.5 billion annually – half the country's formal GDP; and funds stolen by criminal syndicates based in Mekong countries likely exceeds \$43.8 billion a year – nearly 40 percent of the combined formal GDP of Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Speaking to RFA Khmer, Priscilla Clapp, a USIP senior advisor and who co-chaired the study, suggests that FATF should blacklist Cambodia in order to curb money-laundering and cyber-scamming.

RFA: Your report states that Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar are the epicenter of the cyber scamming industry in Southeast Asia. Can you give us a brief summary of the cyber-scamming industry in these three countries, in particular Cambodia?

Clapp: Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos are the epicenter of the scamming. But the scamming itself is a combination of investment schemes, fraudulent investment schemes and fraudulent dating schemes. They try to draw people into a relationship through which they get them to begin handing over money, transferring it into crypto coins, crypto currency. And once they do that, it's gone. They just move it, they bundle it and move it into other places so people never see it again. This is part of a network that extends throughout the region. It's not individual states so much as it is the network. And that's the key point here.

What we were trying to bring out in this study was that Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar happen to be the epicenter because they are the most easily corrupted right now because of weak governance, and, in the case of Myanmar, because of extensive conflict that really creates a lot of instability in the country. These networks take advantage of unstable conditions, where they can capture the elite, either government, business or society. They are run by Chinese. They have grown out of the ancient Chinese triads, which came with the Chinese population that migrated into Southeast Asia. So there is, of course, a large Chinese population throughout Southeast Asia, including in Cambodia. And that's the population that these scams were originally focused on.

But during the COVID period, because China closed its borders and its own people were called home and not allowed to leave the country, they lost their access to labor. It's a very labor-intensive industry, and they needed the Chinese to run the scams before. So they began to transform themselves into a more global phenomenon, meaning that they began enticing people from around the world into these scam centers with the promise of high-tech, high-paid jobs, which, of course, wasn't the reality. And they began using them to scam their own countrymen. So it's now become a global problem. And the United States is one of the large victims of this. I would say the two largest victims are the U.S. and China. So we have a common interest here in doing something about it.

RFA: Globally, more than 60 countries have become victims of the cyber-scamming industry originating in Southeast Asia. Your report mentions that as of May 2024, Cambodia is host to large-scale, sophisticated cyber-scamming operations spread widely across the country. How did it happen?

Clapp: It started with illegal online gambling. You may recall that in 2016 or 2017, gambling operations started appearing in Sihanoukville. And they were run by Chinese. And they drew a lot of Chinese gangs to enforce the payment for gamblers that had lost money. Some of it was in-person gambling, but a lot of it was online and that was focused on China. But the gangs got out of control and started shooting up people on the streets, including police, and Prime Minister Hun Sen started to close it down, and he invited Chinese police to come in and round up these gangs. And so it was suppressed in Cambodia at that time – the online gambling. And then what happened is it started moving out into more local areas, smaller operations. So it wasn't concentrated in Sihanoukville the way it had been. And at that time the gambling operations moved to Myanmar from Cambodia where they found a welcome home in Karen state. They were also on the China border, and they were being protected by Myanmar Army Border Guard Forces, the Karen Border Guard Force and the Kokang Border Guard Force. They were not only protecting, but they were also making money off it. They were profiting from them. But the operators were Chinese, actually the Kokang are Chinese. So, they were playing a dual role. That's when it started in Myanmar.

And then COVID hit in 2020, and that started changing the whole dynamic. It came back in Cambodia in a different form, the scamming form that's now focused on investment and dating sites, that sort of thing. There's still probably some online gambling going on, but it's not the central focus of them anymore. And this happened with the Philippines as well, because a lot of the online gambling actually started in the Philippines. And when the Philippines started cracking down on it, it moved to Cambodia. The Cambodian government cracked down on it and it moved to Myanmar. But it never really left those other places. It's more and more under control in the Philippines now since (Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.) has become the president.

RFA: In Cambodia alone, your report estimates that the cyber scamming industry generates \$12.5 billion annually. It is stated that a significant part of the proceeds from these stolen funds have gone into the pockets of the ruling elites because they have connections to cyber scamming syndicates. Can you elaborate on how these connections arise?

Clapp: Well, the connections are, let's say, the Chinese bosses who set these scams up, who sponsored them, are very well connected. And they operate in both licit and illicit business areas. And so they make connections with the ruling elite through what appear to be legitimate business operations. But then they start running these illegitimate operations underneath. So it's not clear that the ruling elite understands what they're getting into, but they do know that they're profiting from it. And so they let it go on. I'm not sure that they fully understand the illegal parts of it and the victimization that's happening.

RFA: In terms of governments' responses to cyber scamming, do you think they have done enough?

Clapp: It keeps taking different forms. The thing is that these networks are very, very sophisticated, very advanced. The technology is extremely advanced, and they keep finding new ways of using the technology that get way out ahead of even law enforcement's ability to deal with it. But in Cambodia, what they've done is when the government moves in on, let say Sihanoukville or some of these large compounds where they have the scamming, they move out into the rural areas, particularly towards the Vietnam border. And it starts becoming much smaller operations. But most of them still have ownership among Cambodian businesses. Whether they know what's going on or not, I don't know. But they need to have a Cambodian sponsor. So yes, definitely it gets all mixed in. And the same thing happens in Laos and Myanmar.

RFA: So if the issue of cyber-scamming is not curbed properly, what do you foresee will happen to Cambodia in the future?

Clapp: The government and law enforcement and civil society – the whole population – has to be aware of what's going on and try to seize back control of their country. And that would take a large understanding within the population. But the government needs to be in the lead. The government can do a lot about it, but they have to be tough. And it's going to cost financially because there is a lot of money coming from these scams. It's filtering into the economy there. There's no question about it. A lot of it's going into the international financial system. It's laundered through big banks and all over the place – probably here as well as Singapore,

and Hong Kong. So the bulk of it goes there, but enough of it stays in Cambodia that it makes a difference to the Cambodian economy. As resources begin to disappear, they have to find other ways. But what they should be doing is finding better ways of investing in industry or tourism or whatever. But this scamming is basically in many places, getting out of control, and there is a lot of violence that goes along with it with these Chinese gangs that come in and force conditions inside, and they corrupt the local police force, certain people in the police force, not the whole thing, but certain people, so that they have protection. And, it's very hard to crack into that.

RFA: Your report mentions that part of the issue that allowed the money laundering to reach industrial-scale in Cambodia is because in 2022, the international organization, the Financial Action Task Force, delisted Cambodia from its "gray list," and as such also contributes to strengthening the cyber-scramming industry there. Was that the right decision?

Clapp: We think they should be listed back onto the "gray list." I think they should be on the black list, actually. It will certainly send a message. It will help. But the Financial Action Task Force does not necessarily have the power to do it on its own. The government would have to be a higher power, and the government would have to step in and be behind it. And that may not be happening. But I'll tell you that with money laundering, when these scams collect money, they immediately move it out. They move it out into other networks and it winds up in China, Singapore, Hong Kong and other places. Not necessarily in Cambodia. Very little of it stays behind there. So it's not likely that Cambodia will become a significant banking system for them.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia

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Chinese President Xi Jinping hosts Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and other Middle East delegates in Beijing. Photo: AFP

CHINA HOSTS ARAB LEADERS AT FORUM AIMED AT DEEPENING TIES

China last week hosted a litany of Arab dignitaries and diplomats ahead of a forum that Beijing said it hoped would deepen ties with the region and present a “common voice” on the conflict between Israel and Hamas.

Beijing has sought to build closer ties with Arab states in recent years, and last year brokered a detente between Tehran and its long-time foe Saudi Arabia.

It has also historically been sympathetic to the Palestinian cause and supportive of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

And Beijing last month hosted rival Palestinian groups Hamas and Fatah for “in-depth and candid talks on promoting intra-Palestinian reconciliation”.

Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, as well as a host of other regional leaders and diplomats, were among the delegates who attended the forum last week.

President Xi Jinping delivered a keynote speech at the opening ceremony, which Beijing said aimed at building “common consensus” between China and Arab states.

Top of the agenda was the war between Israel and Hamas, which Xi has called for an “international peace conference” to resolve.

China sees a “strategic opportunity to boost its

reputation and standing in the Arab world” by framing its efforts to end that conflict against US inaction, Ahmed Aboudouh, an associate fellow with the Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme, told AFP.

“This, in turn, serves Beijing’s focus on undermining the US’s credibility and influence in the region,” he said.

“The longer the war, the easier for China to pursue this objective,” he added.

On Tuesday, Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with counterparts from Yemen and Sudan in Beijing, saying he hoped to “strengthen solidarity and coordination” with the Arab world.

He also raised China’s concerns over disruptive attacks on Red Sea shipping by Iran-backed Huthi forces acting in solidarity with Hamas with his Yemeni counterpart Shayea Mohsen al-Zindani.

“China calls for an end to the harassment of civilian vessels and to ensure the safety of waterways in the Red Sea,” state news agency Xinhua quoted him as saying.

Xi met Sisi in a grand ceremony outside Beijing’s Great Hall of People on Wednesday afternoon, state media footage showed, with the national anthems of both countries blaring out.

AFP

CHINA, JAPAN, SOUTH KOREA TRILATERAL SUMMIT: MORE FOR OPTICS, LESS FOR SUBSTANCE

SUN LEE

Photo: Su San Lee

In the midst of tension in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, Japan, China and South Korea held a trilateral summit in Seoul on May 27, the first since July 2019. The summit was attended by Chinese Premier Li Qiang, Japanese Premier Fumio Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol.

For the sake of optics, it was important as it took place after a gap of nearly four years. But there lies a crude reality: The summit was held when the region was in the grip of tension on account of China's aggressive military activities.

Particularly in the Taiwan Strait, the Eastern Theatre Command of the Chinese People's Liberation Army held military drills on May 23-24. China described it as "punishment" drills and "a necessary and legitimate move to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity." It went on to say that the military exercise in the Taiwan Strait was aimed at cracking down on "Taiwan independence separatist forces and their separatist moves and sending a warning to external interference and provocation."

In the background of such provocative statements and confrontational scenarios in the region, Japan, China, and South Korea held their trilateral meet.

Since Chinese President Xi Jinping kept himself out of the summit, military, foreign affairs, and security issues were off the agenda at the meet. Instead, on the agenda were economics, trade, climate change, cultural exchanges, health, aging populations, science and disaster response, Reuters reported.

Given the deep political distrust between the three countries, partly due to stronger defence and security ties of Japan and South Korea with the US, and partly owing to China's growing military assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region, the summit failed to bring forth "any game changing improvements in their relations," the South China Morning Post said.

In fact, just a week before the summit, relations between Tokyo and Beijing dipped to a new low after Chinese Ambassador to Japan Wu Jianghao warned Japan of consequences if it continued to support Taiwan. "If Japan ties itself onto the chariot of splitting China, the Japanese people will be led into a pit of fire," Chinese Ambassador Wu Jianghao was quoted by CCTV as saying.

This threat reminded East Asian watchers of a similar warning that was issued by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) against Japan in July 2021, when the world

was reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic. In a video aired by the CCP, Japan was warned of a nuclear attack if it interfered in China's handling of Taiwan.

"We will use nuclear bombs continuously. We will do this until Japan declares unconditional surrender for the second time," the CCP said through a video aired nearly four years ago. Following international hue and cry, this video was eventually removed, but the deep scar caused by this threat on Japanese people's mind got revived after Chinese Ambassador Wu Jianghao recently warned of consequences. Global Times, China's state-backed media outlet characterised Japan as a "rogue state" after Tokyo released treated radioactive wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear water plant into the Pacific Ocean in August 2023. These developments have added to historical distrust between Japan and China.

Similarly with South Korea, China's relations have not been evenly balanced. Instead, both are sharing frayed relations since Seoul decided to install the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system in 2017. Last year, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol created a stir in China's diplomatic and strategic circle when he, in an interview with Reuters, said increased tension around Taiwan were due to attempts to change the status quo by force. Then despite strong opposition from Beijing, Seoul continues to have engagements with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), described by China as the "spokesperson and enforcer of US interests."

Nearly two weeks before the Japan, South Korea and China trilateral summit, NATO hosted military staff talks with Seoul at NATO headquarters in Brussels. Discussions between a delegation of South Korean military officials and NATO's experts from both International Staff and International Military Staff focused on the "ongoing partnership, resilience building and future opportunities for cooperation," NATO said in a statement on May 14.

In its 2022 strategic concept paper, NATO defines the alliance as an integral part of transatlantic efforts to counter Chinese military, economic and industrial challenges. China's concern is that under the administration of Yoon Suk-yeol, South Korea's engagement with NATO has strengthened. President Yoon Suk-yeol has himself attended NATO summits twice in the recent past - once in Madrid in June 2022 and another time in Vilnius, Lithuania's capital city in July 2023.

On the economic front too, China and South Korea are not sharing good relations. In 2023, South Korea's exports to China saw a decline of 20%, plummeting to \$124.8 billion from \$155.7 billion in 2022. The same year, South Korea also witnessed a trade deficit of \$18 billion with China, marking the first time this has happened since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Amidst all this, the US trade restrictions on China are proving a boon for South Korean solar-power cell manufacturers, OCI and Hanwha Solutions. They were struggling to compete with Chinese firms for the international market space. They are currently benefiting from opportunity provided by US trade and technology restrictions on Beijing, which have slowed China's manufacturing and global value chains, the Japan Times said.

All along, both Japan and South Korea are supporting the US-led CHIPS and Science Act which curbs the sale of advanced chips to China, depriving the country of the computing power it needs to develop artificial intelligence at scale. In the backdrop of such developments, there is no guarantee that the three neighbours will not struggle to move beyond surface-level diplomacy even after the trilateral summit.

Sun Lee is the pseudonym for a writer who specializes in geopolitical developments in Asia.



CONVERSATION WITH DEBBIE STOTHARD

"Most people expect some white woman when they meet Debbie Stothard. It's a very Anglo, white bread name." So begins Debbie's self-introduction that relates the story of her Scottish great-grandfather who went to Malaya to work on, and eventually own, a portion of the huge rubber company Guthrie's vast plantations. "I'm a product of colonial capitalism!" Debbie exclaims. He settled down in Penang with a woman who was most likely Thai, but when he got older, returned to Scotland. So Debbie, a Malaysian citizen, is clearly not just the "Anglo, white bread" person her name might imply.

Debbie's journey as a catalyst for change began to take shape during her high school years, ignited by her first foray into journalism, when she wrote a compelling article addressing a pressing issue within her school community. The principal pulled her aside and scolded her, saying, "That's not the way to solve things!" But it did solve things," she recalls, "so I was convinced that I wanted to be a journalist." In college, she became a stringer for a local paper, then got a full-time job as a crime reporter—the only female on the beat. "I was drunk with power and access," she acknowledges. "Look, I'm a Malaysian school girl, living in a very sheltered-type situation, and then you unleashed me into a world where you're chasing the police with stories, where politicians entertain you and show some respect because you're media."

Against her parents' wishes, Debbie refused to return to university, and continued to spend time with colleagues she characterizes as "alcoholic, very

jaded, old men," chasing stories that put her closer to the reins of power. Increasingly drawn into that world, she became less interested in peers her own age; this concerned her parents, who decided to offer to support her to study in Australia, and after a couple of years, she realized she "didn't have a life." So she attended Sydney's University of Technology, where she joined what was then known as a "Third World Solidarity" movement, which engaged in anti-racism advocacy with other Southeast Asian students. Expanding their influence to other campuses, they were energized by the events of the day, which included the People's Power movement in the Philippines, Suharto's overthrow in Indonesia, Tiananmen Square in China, the 1993 Thai coup, as well as ongoing oppression in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. "Governments were colluding with each other to violate human rights, and to surveil and persecute human rights activists, at the very least, they were protecting each other from international pressure for human rights violations," she says.

But nothing captured the group's imagination like the 1988 democracy movement in the Golden Land. "These were students rising up against a military dictatorship in a country, Burma, which was really mysterious but also fascinating to me," she recalls. They tried contacting student groups in Burma, but had no luck, then tried to find Burmese students attending Australian universities, but couldn't locate a single Burmese student anywhere in the country. Debbie was also growing increasingly worried when the Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir, pushed for Burma's inclusion in ASEAN, as she feared it would normalize the latter's ongoing human rights violations. This is when an idea came to her that would focus the direction of her future action: "Hey, why don't we have an alternative ASEAN meeting on Burma?" she proposed to a friend, "because we don't agree with the anti-human rights positions of our governments."

CATCH THE PODCAST

Listen to the rest of Debbie's story on the Insight Myanmar podcast here:

<https://player.captivate.fm/episode/07792134-a3e0-4987-8060-c73fafa1e51a>



US URGES MYANMAR JUNTA TO END VIOLENCE AND RELEASE DETAINEES AT ASEAN-US DIALOGUE IN WASHINGTON

At the 36th annual ASEAN-US Dialogue held in Washington, the United States made a strong appeal to Burmese military junta, demanding an immediate end to violence and the release of activists unjustly detained, reported local news outlets.

The 24 May forum, designed to bolster cooperation between the US and the ASEAN, brought together high-ranking officials from ASEAN member states. Among them was chargé d'affaires Thet Win from the junta's Burmese embassy in Washington.

During the discussions, US Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Daniel Kritenbrink, voiced the US's firm position. He urged the junta to cease all forms of violence, free those held without just cause, and ensure that humanitarian aid can reach those in dire need.

The US Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs also assured that Washington would work closely with ASEAN to support Myanmar during this critical period.

In mid-May, an ASEAN delegation led by ASEAN envoy Alounkeo Kittikhoun traveled to Myanmar to meet with the country's junta chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, in an effort to advance a potential resolution to the ongoing conflict.

AMID DECLINING INDUSTRY, JUNTA PLANS MAJOR INDUSTRIAL ZONE EXPANSION

The Myanmar junta's Vice-Senior General Soe Win held a meeting with the Industry and Industrial Zone Development Central Committee in Naypyidaw on May 29, reported the junta-controlled newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar.

During the meeting, he said that Myanmar plans to develop 28 main industrial zones, 53 branches, and five industrial wards, with two additional zones in progress to ensure compliance with legal standards.

The Vice-Senior General highlighted the importance of forming local industrial zones and supervisory committees, establishing industrial management committees, and securing investments from local and foreign businesses.

He stressed the necessity of proper funding, policy-making by the central committee, and the vital role of local supervisory and management committees in ensuring successful implementation.

However, in reality, Myanmar's industry is declining due to the political crisis and the poor management by the junta. Electricity from the national grid is frequently and severely cut off, affecting the operation of most factories. Additionally, due to the junta's mandatory conscription law, many young people are leaving the country in droves, leading to a labor shortage in Myanmar.



The late Tin Oo. Photo: AFP

PUBLIC MOURNS PASSING OF NLD PATRON TIN OO

National League for Democracy (NLD) patron Tin Oo passed away at Yangon General Hospital on June 1 at 8:50 am, the official Facebook page of RFA (Radio Free Asia) Burmese reported citing his family.

"The body will be kept for five days before the funeral. He will be buried on Wednesday (June 5)," Thant Zin, son of Tin Oo, said.

He was 98 years old when he passed away.

When the NLD was founded in 1988, along with Aung San Suu Kyi, Tin Oo was a top leader of the NLD.

The public wrote comments expressing their condolences.

"The country's star has fallen again," said a user.

Another user said, "In the army, following General Aung San (Suu Kyi's father), a highly esteemed figure in the Myanmar army, Tin Oo is the next most respected general. Rest in peace!"

From 1974 to 1976, Tin Oo held the rank of General and became the commander-in-chief of the army. He held this position during the bloody crackdown on student protests surrounding the funeral of former UN Secretary-General U Thant.

On March 6, 1976, Tin Oo was forced to retire from his position as commander-in-chief of the Myanmar army. The official explanation from the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party cited his retirement as due to his wife, Dr. Tin Moe Wai, violating regulations by allegedly accepting numerous bribes.

On May 30, 2003, Tin Oo was attacked by a then-junta-sponsored mob while traveling with NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi in Depayin, resulting in numerous deaths and injuries among their supporters. Following the attack, Tin Oo was detained and initially held in a prison in Kalay before being moved to house arrest in Yangon in February 2004. His detention was extended yearly in 2007, 2008, and 2009. He was finally released from house arrest on February 13, 2010.



NUG Acting President Duwa Lashi La

NUG ACTING PRESIDENT CALLS FOR HUMANISTIC APPROACH TO RAKHINE STATE CRISIS

The Acting President of National Unity Government (NUG) said at the NUG cabinet online meeting on May 28 that it is necessary to approach events, including the incident in Rakhine State, from perspectives based on humanism and human rights, according to NUG's official Facebook page.

Acting President Duwa Lashi La said, "At today's cabinet meeting, I would like to address some of the current issues in Rakhine State. Especially in Rakhine State, the Terrorist Military Council (the junta) is losing in battle fields. In Rakhine State, the liberation struggle of the Arakan Army is gaining momentum and victory."

"As all members of our government are well aware, the geopolitical problem in Rakhine State is still suffering from the legacy of colonialism. At this time, regarding the Rohingya issue, the Terrorist Military Council is plotting and inciting ethnic conflict. It can be seen that the Arakan Army and the relevant Rohingya community are trying to focus on preventing this incident from reaching the most serious level," he said.

"As our National Unity Government, it is especially necessary for us to help so that the ethnic violence that is happening in the existing situation can be put to an end as completely as possible. I think it is necessary to take a serious approach to issues that are usually racially sensitive."

The public supported the words of the NUG Acting President.

One user commented, "May NUG be successful"

However, a few users wrote that the Rakhine issue is only related to the Rakhine people, so the NUG should not get involved in the Rakhine issue.

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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.