

ON THE GROUND IN MYANMAR

mizzima WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight



CRYSTAL BALL GAZING

Democracy activist Igor Blazevic makes predictions for Myanmar in 2025

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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.

THE CHALLENGE OF MYANMAR AID DELIVERY

The stats are arguably fairly accurate. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) warns that over 15 million people in Myanmar face acute food insecurity, and millions are also without access to safe shelter, drinking water, and essential services this year. In addition, internal displacement has reached a record high, with more than 3.5 million people out of the 15 million now displaced by the war.

As we mentioned in last week's magazine editorial, 2025 is lining up to be the worst year for the people of Myanmar since the military illegally seized power in February 2021. As we noted, 2025 will be a year of hunger as Myanmar junta continues its war with the people, with many suffering as a result.

According to a 19 February statement from the UNOCHA, which appears to confirm the prognosis, the widespread military conflicts across Myanmar have left over 15 million people in 13 states and regions facing food insecurity, as well as facing crises such as inflation and power outages.

Internal displacement has reached a record high, with more than 3.5 million people now displaced. Armed clashes between Myanmar's military forces and non-state armed groups continue across multiple regions, particularly in the Northeast, Northwest, and Southeast. The expansion of conflict into new areas, such as Ayeyarwady, Bago, and Magway, has further compounded the suffering of civilians. Despite the increasing number of displaced persons, the situation remains unpredictable, with civilians at high risk from airstrikes, shelling, and landmines.

As the UN and its various rapporteurs have mentioned before, the main challenges are delivering aid to those in need in the war zones, and the amount of

funding governments are willing to give.

The recent moves by the US government to halt foreign aid as they "check the books" is further compounding the crisis of drops in the amount of foreign aid being funded to support people in need. There was already a reduction in interest by Western governments in the crisis in Myanmar, and the recent halt to a number of USAID programmes appears to be compounding the problem.

As UNOCHA notes in their latest report, the Myanmar humanitarian response remains underfunded, with only 39 per cent of the required funding for 2024 met by February 2025, leaving millions of vulnerable people without assistance.

That said, the UNOCHA claims their humanitarian partners have reached 4.2 million people in 2024, or 79 per cent of the target population, though this claim is difficult to confirm. A major achievement was the delivery of aid to displaced people, including high-energy biscuits, shelter supplies, and dignity kits, the agency says. However, the delivery of assistance remains difficult due to ongoing conflict and roadblocks, which limit access to many areas in need. The transportation of aid continues to face significant hurdles, with security risks for aid workers and a lack of access to the most affected regions.

UNOCHA claims that despite these challenges, humanitarian actors continue their efforts to provide life-saving assistance to as many people as possible. This is clearly a statement that hopes to put a positive spin on the situation. But going forward, the physical challenges of aid delivery will matter – and the serious drop in financial support will compound the problem.

EDITORIAL

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Cover photo by Arthur Ogleznev





Photo: AFP

CRYSTAL BALL GAZING DEMOCRACY ACTIVIST IGOR BLAZEVIC MAKES PREDICTIONS FOR MYANMAR IN 2025

Mizzima recently interviewed European democracy activist and Myanmar expert Igor Blazevic to obtain his views on how the crisis in Myanmar will unfold in 2025.

Professor Zachary Abuza of Washington State University said that the fifth year of martial law could mark the end of the military junta in Myanmar. Do you agree?

Yes, 2025 could mark the end of the SAC (State Administration Council). This is both possible and probable—if certain developments continue in specific directions. The survival of the junta in the lowland areas of Myanmar and a continued war for two more years is also a possible scenario.

The outcome depends on several key factors. The most important is maintaining sustained armed pressure across multiple fronts to prevent the junta from resupplying and reorganizing. Junta forces must remain stretched along extensive frontlines and under relentless pressure. They must not be given any opportunity to resupply, forcibly train new recruits, upgrade their military capacity with drones and new aircrafts, or consolidate defensive lines.

Military pressure from liberation forces must be combined with continuous psychological and information warfare. A full military victory through major offensives that capture large lowland cities is less probable. Instead, sustained multi-dimensional pressure is more likely to break the junta economically and psychologically.

Effectively converting captured resources into war efforts and governance is also crucial. Revolutionary organizations have not only liberated significant territory but have also gained control over strategic and economic assets, such as production lines, natural resource exploitation sites, trade routes, borders, and businesses that can be taxed. These assets provide essential revenue streams.

It is important to channel these captured revenues effectively into three partly contradictory tasks. First, resources must be used to invest in governance, law and order, and service provision for liberated populations. Second, the defense of already liberated territories must be strengthened. Third, continued support must be provided for the broader revolutionary war beyond currently liberated areas. Striking the right balance among these priorities is essential.

What could help the junta survive in part of the territory, including major cities?

The junta's survival depends on whether neighbouring countries—China, India, and Thailand—will pressure revolutionary forces into ceasefires, giving the military breathing room to regroup.

No country is willing to fully invest in the junta's military victory. Doing so would require major interference in Myanmar's internal affairs, massive financial and military support, complicity in war crimes, and an escalation of the junta's campaign of terror and destruction. This would destabilize border areas and significantly increase refugee flows—risks that no



Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing continues to hang on to power. Photo: AFP

country is willing to take.

What neighbouring countries—primarily China—are doing is trying to prevent the junta from collapsing entirely while simultaneously pressuring liberation forces to enter ceasefires and negotiations.

The junta is desperate to buy time—to resupply, strengthen defensive lines, and recruit soldiers. Giving them a break would be a serious mistake.

Will the military junta hold an election in 2025?

No, there will be no elections in 2025. Min Aung Hlaing cannot afford to abandon his dual role as commander-in-chief and head of government. If he relinquishes full control, he will likely be imprisoned or eliminated by his own military.

Instead, he will continue delaying, pretending to move toward elections while avoiding them. He will talk about elections when forced, then shift the conversation to the need for ceasefires and peace—much like his past rhetoric oscillated between elections and a national census.

There might be small, staged “pilot elections” within a few fortified military headquarters or in select parts of a few cities. Such tactics aim to create a false

narrative about elections, but even a staged fraud would produce some form of an ‘electoral result,’ which could ultimately lead to his removal by the military establishment. As a result, Min Aung Hlaing cannot allow even this to take place.

The current territorial control is said to be 40% resistance controlled, 25% junta controlled and 35% mixed control. Could this situation change again by 2025?

Yes, and it will. The Arakan Army (AA) will likely take full control of Arakan State in the first half of 2025. China will be forced to negotiate terms with the AA regarding the management and revenues of Kyaukphyu.

Chin State will also be completely liberated. India is unlikely to abandon the junta as long as China continues to support it. However, since key routes of the Kaladan project will be under the control of the AA and Chin forces, India will increasingly engage with them. Informal trade along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border will also rise.

Both the Arakan Army and Karen resistance forces will continue escalating operations in the Ayeyarwady region, with PDFs gradually gaining strength there as well.



Praying for peace. Photo: AFP

The Arakan Army, Chin resistance forces, and PDFs will systematically advance in Magway. Kachin and PDF forces will continue encircling and dismantling junta positions in Kachin State and Sagaing.

Even if China pressures the Northern Brotherhood Alliance into a temporary ceasefire, such a truce will not hold for long. Even during ceasefires, northern forces will continue outsourcing operations further south—toward Mandalay and Naypyidaw—through affiliated PDFs.

It is possible that some time in the 2025, half of Myanmar—from the west to the north, above the Chinese pipeline—will be fully liberated.

The stance of the two Shan armies remains difficult for me to predict. As the junta continues to lose ground and emerging ethnic states consolidate their governance structures, Shan armies may feel compelled to act in order to secure territory for a future, reduced Shan State.

Hopefully, they will turn against the junta rather than spark an inter-ethnic war in Shan State, which would be disastrous. If the southern and northern Shan armies actively join the resistance alliance, junta troops will become an easy target. They will crumble as quickly as in the case of the Operation 1027.

Karenni forces will hold their lines. Bago, outside urban centres, will be dangerous for junta troops. In Kayin State, Karen resistance forces will continue advancing. In Mon State and Tanintharyi, guerrilla groups will increasingly expand their operations.

The junta will not be able to launch successful counteroffensives to reclaim lost territories. So, the question is not whether liberation forces will expand, but whether their advances will be sufficient to cause the complete collapse of the SAC and when.

However, if China and other regional powers strongly push for ceasefires and provide more military, financial and diplomatic assistance to the junta, the SAC might hold onto a smaller territory centered around Mandalay, Magway, Naypyidaw, Bago, Patheingyi, Yangon, Hpa-an, and Mawlamyine. In that case, war, forced recruitment, destruction, and suffering will continue.

But even this is uncertain. Recent battles in Irrawaddy and western Bago have shown that the AA and its allies find it easier to engage and capture SAC positions, exposing the military's weaknesses in these regions. For decades, the military fortified ethnic areas with strong bunkers, heavy artillery, and its most capable combat troops. Meanwhile, central and lowland Myanmar was largely left under the control of military

administrators, service providers, and suppliers—none of whom had any serious combat experience.

Although resistance forces have captured 95 cities, the junta's airstrikes remain relentless, leading to a significant increase in civilian deaths. Is there any way to prevent this? And is there a position the international community can take?

Unfortunately, the international community will not help with this. As long as the junta has access to USD cash, it will find jet fuel suppliers. If Western or Singaporean companies are pressured to stop supplies, companies from authoritarian countries and the black market will step in.

Targeting the junta's financial assets—banks, cash flow, and transactions—could be more effective. This is the approach recently (suggested in a report) by Sean Turnell and the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar.

Resistance forces mainly need to explore ways to disrupt fuel supplies through targeted attacks on depots and transport lines, drawing inspiration from Ukraine's drone strikes and special operations targeting Russian fuel sites.

Is China's interference in Myanmar politics a threat to the freedom of the people?

Yes. China's interference poses a threat to both the freedom and sovereignty of Myanmar. Acting as a neocolonial power, China seeks to bring Myanmar into its sphere of influence while limiting its sovereign right to engage with democratic countries in the West and Asia.

China aims to dominate Myanmar politically and economically by supporting a weak, unpopular, and oppressive central government that is heavily dependent on China, while simultaneously fostering autonomous ethnic regions that also rely on China both economically and as a security guarantor.

However, we should reject the notion that China holds absolute influence over Myanmar. History provides many examples of powerful nations oppressing, occupying, and colonizing smaller countries or installing unpopular, oppressive governments to serve their interests. Yet history also offers numerous examples where determined liberation struggles ultimately defeated foreign intervention.

The key for resistance forces is to control valuable assets—borders, trade hubs, and economic zones—so that even powerful nations are forced to engage with them, recognize them, negotiate with them, and seek a deal.

A recent example involving Putin's Russia and Syria is telling. Russia, alongside Iran, played a key role in saving Assad's regime, with Russian airstrikes devastating Syrian cities. However, now that Assad has fallen, Putin is negotiating with the new government in Damascus. Russia has strong interests in Syria, including its naval base, which remains crucial for its military presence in the Mediterranean Sea. The new Syrian government now controls that base, and Russia is now willing to negotiate—even considering the extradition of Assad back to Syria to be punished for his crimes—if it secures Russia's naval interests.

I saw your statement on Facebook saying that you don't want to give the military junta a way out. What kind of actions do you think would provide the Military Council with an escape route?

A false expectation that dialogue is imminent and that a negotiated agreement is possible.

This is the illusion ASEAN is pretending to work on. Ceasefires and negotiations are also being pushed by China, but given the current situation, they are unlikely to succeed. The junta has no interest in compromise. Min Aung Hlaing seeks total victory. While a military victory is impossible, his delusional mindset prevents him from accepting this reality. Peace talks, ceasefires, and elections are merely delaying tactics designed to buy time for regrouping.

Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs) recognize that what ASEAN, the UN, and China are proposing is a soft surrender—one that allows the military to maintain control over Myanmar's state, sovereignty, and economy. In exchange, they are being offered limited and vulnerable autonomy over the territories they have already liberated. After achieving self-determination through immense struggle, heroism, and sacrifice, there is little reason for anyone to accept such a deceptive, soft surrender.

For the Bamar PDF resistance and the people who have been actively participating in the Spring Revolution, dialogue and negotiations have not even been extended to them. They are simply expected to be defeated, stay in jails and exile. So why should they accept that?

If negotiations are to be meaningful and serious, we must have in mind the different levels of the Myanmar military:

The first level is Min Aung Hlaing—an incompetent, criminal individual with a Napoleonic complex who orchestrated a disastrous and unnecessary coup driven by his personal ambition.

The second level is the SAC, the current junta, which serves as the governing entity formed by the coup—just as discredited, murderous, and incompetent as Min Aung Hlaing himself.

The third level is crucial: the military-as-a-political-regime, functioning as a dominant, dictatorial, discriminatory, and predatory ruler of a forcibly centralized Myanmar.

The next level is the military-as-a-general-administrative-body, exerting control over governance through pseudo-civil service organs.

The next important level is the military-as-a-kleptocratic-economic-conglomerate, which has captured and continues to control extensive and lucrative economic assets and enterprises.

Then comes the military-as-a-political-party, represented by the USDP (Union Solidarity and Development Party) and other pro-military factions.

The final level is the military-as-a-defense-institution, which should function solely as a national defense entity, completely devoid of political and domineering roles.

For Myanmar's crisis to be resolved, Min Aung Hlaing and the SAC must be removed—this is a sine qua non condition. Once this happens, negotiations become possible, and a weakened and discredited military could be pressured to relinquish both its political dominance and its centralization dogma.

The military must also surrender its grip on the general administrative system.

While much of the military's kleptocratic economic conglomerate may survive, this poses challenges for Myanmar's future democracy and popular support for the transition. However, history shows that in transitional deals, it is often easier to negotiate power in exchange for wealth—"give power, keep wealth." If this occurs, robust and well-funded restorative justice mechanisms will be essential.

The military as a political party will likely survive, and it would be in the interest of pro-democracy and federalist movements to allow this. Permitting its survival offers military elites who are not tainted by outrageous crimes a "soft landing."

The military as a defense institution will survive through reform. A reformed defense institution offers a soft landing for current military personnel, many of whom would otherwise have no viable future. However, these reforms must address concerns from ethnic nationalities, who currently perceive the military as a "Burmanized" threat. Significant restructuring is

necessary to change this perception.

Regarding future state-building, there are those preparing to implement a bottom-up federal system, while others prefer a confederation. Is there a way to reconcile the two?

Yes, and reconciliation is not only possible but necessary. Without compromise, Myanmar risks further war and even deadlier ethnic cleansings. I say this as a Bosnian who has already experienced the consequences of a state's breakup in a highly diverse country where leading political groups were unwilling and unable to reach a compromise.

Managing Myanmar's diversity is complex and challenging. It is possible to manage it, but it requires immense responsibility, wisdom, and patience—both from those leading political and revolutionary organizations and from those participating in negotiations.

At the core of this challenge is the need to find a viable compromise. There are multiple visions of what Myanmar's future federalism should look like. However, under the current circumstances, achieving a detailed agreement on federalism is unrealistic. Safe, in-person, and serious political discussions with clear mandates for negotiators are simply not feasible at this stage.

What has been possible has already been achieved—a minimum consensus on the principle of federalism.

Building on this, revolutionary forces must also agree on how they will manage the transition process once the SAC collapses. This includes determining who will take power in Naypyidaw as an interim national government, who will negotiate with the military once Min Aung Hlaing and the SAC are gone, and who will engage with neighbouring countries and international actors.

Expecting revolutionary stakeholders to agree now on the final outcome of the transition process—such as a constitution and future institutional architecture—is both unrealistic and potentially dangerous. What revolutionary organizations need to agree on now is how to manage the transition.

Some revolutionary groups advocate a "coming together" scenario. They argue that, as a consequence of the coup and the subsequent nation-wide uprising, Myanmar's central government effectively no longer exists. In its place, "federalism from below" has emerged—proto-states built on ethno-centric principles, such as in Kachin, Ta'ang, Kokan, Wa, Karenni, Karen, Arakan, and Chin states.

According to proponents of this scenario, the priority should be to accelerate a similar process in other ethnic states, primarily Shan and Mon. Even more crucially, they argue for initiating bottom-up state-building in the central and southern regions—Sagaing, Magway, Mandalay, and Tanintharyi. Once all regions free themselves from forced military unitarism,



Democracy activist Igor Blazevic

they could choose to "come together" in a (con)federal union—or remain separate.

However, I believe a more nuanced perspective is necessary.

It is true that the post-coup liberation of territory has led to the gradual emergence of ethnic proto-states—a form of bottom-up federalism. This process is ongoing, but it has already reached an advanced and irreversible stage. This development should be welcomed and supported, as it fulfills the aspirations and legitimate demands of Myanmar's ethnic nationalities, dating back to the country's post-World War II independence.

At the same time, alongside this positive progress, two significant and potentially dangerous issues must be addressed.

First, the exact boundaries between these emerging proto-states remain ambiguous, increasing the risk of future territorial disputes – and possible ethnic cleansings.

Second, while ethno-centric proto-states fully satisfy long-standing and legitimate aspirations for self-determination, many parts of Myanmar are not ethnically homogeneous. In these areas, a rigid ethno-federalist approach could create new challenges and conflicts. Careful negotiations and thoughtful compromises will be essential to ensure that Myanmar's diverse demographics are taken into account.

There is one more critical factor. The de facto emergence of proto-states in Myanmar's borderlands represents a tectonic shift that has profoundly altered the country's political geography. While much work remains, these new states have already been politically born and established. However—and this is key—this tectonic shift has not affected Myanmar's central and coastal lowlands. These regions—home to the majority Bamar population—are still "holding together."

Attempting to impose the "broken centre" model of bottom-up federalism on central and coastal Myanmar would be, I think, a serious political mistake. There is a legitimate "holding together" constituency—a significant population of 20–25 million people, including at least 10–15 million voters.

One possible way forward may be to recognize that Myanmar's future union state will likely need to be reorganized as an asymmetrical federal system—one that combines elements of both approaches:

- A "holding together" model of a more centralized territorial federation for the Bamar-majority regions and a few multi-ethnic states without a clear dominant ethnic majority.

- And a "coming together" ethno-centric federal units in Myanmar's borderlands.

Or perhaps not—nobody can say for certain yet. As long as the liberation war continues and the junta's campaign of terror persists, the fundamental conditions for meaningful national political dialogue do not exist.

What is possible, however, are mutual assurances and interim agreements that lay the groundwork for future discussions.

However, no one should play hardball and attempt to impose their vision on others. Both sides—proponents of "bottom-up federalism" and advocates of a more centralized territorial federal system—must exercise restraint and avoid maximalist demands.

Moving forward carefully, with mutual respect and a commitment to compromise, is the only way to prevent further conflict and ensure a stable, democratic future for Myanmar.

I have heard calls for the NUG to be reformed. What do you think?

Reforming the NUG would be a good idea, and that process has already begun. Governments, even in normal times, tend to lose popularity and effectiveness over four years. Bringing in fresh, capable, and respected individuals is one way to reinvigorate the government and restore public confidence.

However, reform must be bold and decisive, not slow and bureaucratic. It must be carried out with political courage and determination. A real reorganization is needed—one that eliminates inertia, inefficiency, and underperformance while injecting new energy, skills, and leadership.

If the reform process is slow, half-hearted, or merely expands bureaucratic structures and working groups, it will not be effective.

More importantly, NUG reform alone won't solve Myanmar's leadership challenges.

What is truly needed is an improved leadership mechanism for the anti-junta alliance of revolutionary forces—but this cannot be achieved solely by reforming the NUG.

It is unrealistic to expect the political and military leadership of emerging ethnic proto-states to simply join the NUG through its reform process. While Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations want to be and will remain in alliance with the NUG, they will not subordinate themselves to it.

A more realistic approach would be to establish a "team of teams" leadership structure, created jointly by

the NUG and EROs that control liberated territories.

The NUG essentially has three key tasks. First, it must maintain its claim as the only legitimate central government of Myanmar, even if it is not recognized internationally. This benefits all anti-junta stakeholders by preventing the junta from assuming the role of regionally and internationally recognized central authority.

Second, the NUG must act as the gravitational centre of the broader anti-junta alliance, which includes both the Bamar-majority "Burma proper" and the emerging ethno-centric self-ruling proto-states. This involves forging a political alliance capable of steering the transition process.

Finally, the NUG must serve as the revolutionary and governing leadership of Burma proper while also acting as the political force behind an inclusive, civic, and non-ethno-centric "holding together" framework for the future Burma—or at least for a significant part of it.

The international voices that were once concerned about the lack of unity among resistance forces and the risk of Balkanization in a post-SAC era seem to have subsided recently. Do you think these concerns are still present?

This fear was always exaggerated and often used as an excuse for not supporting the resistance. The Balkanization concern has always been a way of blaming the victims, while regional and international actors refuse to confront an obviously illegitimate, murderous, and criminal aggressor.

Myanmar is already "Balkanized" under Min Aung Hlaing and the SAC—a direct consequence of the removal of the legitimately elected democratic government. If the military regime, backed by China, continues to survive in Burma's lowlands, Myanmar will fragment even further.

The Myanmar military can no longer function as the force holding the country together through guns and repression. For Myanmar to have a future as a sovereign federal state, Min Aung Hlaing, the SAC, and the military regime must go. Only then will domestic political actors and international stakeholders have the space to negotiate a sustainable framework for new unity.

On another level, serious questions remain. Will revolutionary forces be able to reconcile ethno-centric state-building demands among themselves? Will they be able to find common ground between the majority Bamar population and the newly emancipated ethnic

states? Can they strike a workable balance between a necessary central government and autonomous ethnic state governments, ensuring that governance remains functional and that decisions can actually be implemented?

This is all possible, but it is also complex and difficult. However, I personally have confidence in the wisdom and sense of responsibility of those currently leading and driving the anti-junta liberation struggle. They understand, far better than any concerned outside observer or 'peace expert', the true cost of decades of war and destruction. They carry a deep sense of duty toward the people. They are, in the truest sense, from the people and for the people.

Do you think Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been imprisoned for many years, still plays an important role in Myanmar politics?

Aung San Suu Kyi remains significant because millions of people still deeply respect her. However, Myanmar today is vastly different from January 2021. She cannot simply walk out of prison and reclaim her old role.

There are many unknowns—her health, will she be released at all and the conditions of her release, and what she knows or thinks after years in isolation. Any speculation about her future role remains uncertain.

Because she is still revered by so many and carries the aura of "Mother Su", symbolizing sacrifice for the nation, she could play an immensely valuable role in the future—traveling across the country, meeting communities, listening to people, uplifting them, and helping to heal deep wounds.

I can easily imagine her in the role that late Gandhi and Nelson Mandela played. But this is just my personal projection. The truth is, we simply do not know.



FLASHBACK TO CYCLONE NARGIS 2008 - USAID help for Myanmar. Photo: EPA

USAID FUNDING HALT NEGATIVELY HAMMERS MYANMAR AID SUPPORT AND NGOs

The suspension of USAID funding to Myanmar has left tens of thousands of displaced people and refugees without essential aid, particularly in food, water, healthcare, and education. According to the Karenni State Interim Executive Council (IEC), over 55,000 people in Karenni (Kayah) State alone have been directly impacted by the funding halt. This figure only accounts for food and water shortages, while the full extent of the crisis in sectors like healthcare and education remains unassessed.

The Karenni National Women's Organization (KNWO) reported that its humanitarian projects came to a standstill after USAID funding was cut off on January 24. The organization revealed that before the suspension, 50% of humanitarian aid for refugees along the Thai-Myanmar border and 20% of domestic IDP assistance came from USAID. With the abrupt loss of funds, emergency reserves are being used to sustain aid for 90 days—the designated suspension period—but there is uncertainty about what comes next.

The effects of the funding cut are particularly severe in refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. At

Mae La refugee camp in Mae Sot, Thailand—the largest refugee camp for displaced Myanmar nationals—authorities have begun collecting contributions from families to sustain the camp's hospital. However, the self-funding initiative is expected to cover only 10% of the hospital's needs.

Previously, the hospital was operated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) with funding from USAID. When the funding was suspended, all refugee camp hospitals supported by USAID ceased operations immediately. Camp officials are now attempting to keep healthcare services running by negotiating with the Thai authorities, putting the burden on the Thai healthcare system where possible.

Inside Myanmar, around 30,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in Karen National Union (KNU)-controlled areas are also suffering from the funding cut. The Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), which ran four major humanitarian projects in Karen State, has been forced to shut them down, as USAID was its second-largest funding source. The organization is now urgently appealing for emergency



Internally displaced children in Myanmar. Photo: EPA

support from international donors.

“We are relying on self-funding for now, but after 90 days, things may come to an end,” Saw Pwe Say, secretary of the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC), told BBC Burmese.

The consequences of the funding freeze have already turned fatal. On February 4, Pe Kha Lau, a 70-year-old chronic lung disease patient, died after being discharged from a hospital that had shut down due to the aid suspension. The hospital, previously operated by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) with USAID support, was forced to close its doors immediately after the funding cutoff.

Pe Kha Lau had relied on oxygen treatment for the past three years. On February 1, struggling to breathe, she asked her daughter to take her to the hospital, only to be told that it was no longer operational. She became allegedly the first recorded fatality directly linked to the USAID funding halt.

With half of Karenni State’s population affected by war and thousands of displaced persons across Myanmar depending on foreign aid, the suspension of USAID assistance has deepened an already dire humanitarian crisis. Aid organizations now face an urgent race against time to secure alternative funding before critical services collapse entirely.

Current IDP challenges in Myanmar

As Myanmar’s civil war intensifies, 15 million people across 13 states and regions are struggling with severe food shortages, according to a statement from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) on February 19. Inflation, electricity shortages, and disruptions to communication services have further compounded the crisis, leaving millions in dire conditions.

Four years after the military coup, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has surpassed 3.5 million. Many are in desperate need of adequate shelter



Photo: AFP

and clean water. Although junta leader Min Aung Hlaing pledged to provide aid to IDPs during a cabinet meeting on January 17, displaced communities have yet to receive any assistance. "The junta has no real intention of helping those displaced by its own actions," an on-ground IDP relief worker told Mizzima, adding that aid has not reached areas where thousands are sheltering.

In Rakhine State, where the Arakan Army (AA) has launched intensified attacks against the military, junta authorities have begun compiling lists of men staying in IDP camps in Sittwe. Since early February, combined teams of junta soldiers and police have been registering men aged 14 to 45 under the pretext of "city security."

Approximately 8,000 IDPs from over 20 villages around Sittwe are currently sheltering in 53 monasteries following last May's mass displacement. Witnesses reported that when junta troops arrived at these monasteries, they ordered men aged 14 to 40—and in some cases, those over 40—to stand separately and undergo questioning.

The troops checked national identification cards and inspected tattoos. Men without IDs or those with tattoos associated with Arakan nationalism faced immediate arrest. Fear of persecution has led many to erase their tattoos, with some reportedly dying from unsafe removal methods. Families of those detained were forced to pay bribes of around 150,000 kyats for their release.

In Karenni State, IDPs are facing a severe water shortage, particularly in camps in Demoso, Hpruso, Bawlakhe, and Nanmekhone. These camps rely on mountain streams for drinking water, but the dry season has reduced the water supply to a trickle.

"The stream we depend on is now as small as a creek," an IDP in Demoso told Mizzima. "When cattle pass through, the water becomes unusable." The lack of clean water has led to outbreaks of diarrhea and skin diseases among children. Water shortages in Karenni State typically worsen from February to mid-May, leaving thousands of displaced people in increasingly desperate conditions.

As Myanmar's humanitarian crisis deepens, the junta's failure to provide aid, coupled with its targeting of displaced men, has left IDPs more vulnerable than ever.

Conscription of women into the Myanmar military picks up pace

The Mon State Human Rights Foundation (HURFOM) has raised alarm over the forced conscription of women in Myanmar, reporting that more than 30 women from Mon State have been drafted as of the third week of February. The incidents occurred in Thanbyuzayat, Paung, and Thaton townships, where women were either summoned by name or arrested while commuting.

A staff member from the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM) told Mizzima that "Batch 10 (conscription) is now underway. Between 30 to 35 women have been taken for conscription." The source added that the confirmed number is likely an undercount, as more cases are being reported on the ground.

Similar cases have emerged in Karen State's Hpa-An Township and Tanintharyi Region's Dawei Township, according to Mizzima's sources. Despite mounting concerns, the junta's spokesperson told RFA Burmese that authorities are "not recruiting women at this time."

However, a researcher from the Burma Affairs & Conflict Study previously warned in late January that the junta had considered drafting women from Batch 5 onward. The move was postponed as the regime initially managed to meet recruitment targets with male conscripts. But as forced recruitment of men becomes increasingly difficult, the risk of women being drafted has grown.

"We women were deeply worried at first," a woman from Yangon told Mizzima. "Then, when conscription focused only on men, we felt some relief. But we know it will come for us sooner or later."

Local sources have also reported cases of junta troops taking women hostage. While some families have been able to secure their release through bribes, concerns are growing that this option may not remain viable.

Meanwhile, male conscripts are reportedly being sent to the front lines with minimal training, suffering heavy casualties. With dwindling numbers of available men, observers fear the junta may soon escalate forced recruitment efforts targeting women.



Photo: EPA

NUG DEMANDS REMOVAL OF CHARGES AGAINST AUNG SAN SUU KYI AND HTIN KYAW IN ARGENTINE COURT

The National Unity Government (NUG) requested on 18 February that Argentine court dismiss charges against State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and former President Htin Kyaw. The NUG objected to the inclusion of Suu Kyi and Htin Kyaw alongside military junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and his associates who are the actual perpetrators of the alleged crimes.

The statement is as follows.

The perpetrators of the mass atrocities committed against the Rohingya through various violent means are solely the leaders of the Myanmar military and their subordinate battalions. The National Unity Government (NUG) welcomes and supports all efforts to prosecute these crimes in international courts to ensure appropriate punishment for the perpetrators and justice for the victims.

The mass atrocities committed against the Rohingya in 2017 were carried out solely by the Myanmar military under the leadership of Min Aung Hlaing, as per Article 20(b) and (c) of the 2008 Constitution, which was in effect at the time. Therefore, those who must be held fully accountable for these crimes without exception are Min Aung Hlaing and his associates. As such, the NUG welcomes the legal action taken by the UK-based Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK (BROUK) in the Argentine court to prosecute and issue arrest warrants against Min Aung Hlaing and his accomplices.

However, we strongly consider the Argentine

court's attempt to include former President U Htin Kyaw and the incumbent State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in the list of perpetrators—alongside Min Aung Hlaing and his associates, who are the actual perpetrators of genocide and war crimes—as a misguided and erroneous legal accusation. Therefore, we call for removal of their names from the prosecution.

The former President U Htin Kyaw and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi made various efforts to find a long-term solution to the Rohingya issue, including the establishment of the “Kofi Annan Commission.”

Similarly, the National Unity Government (NUG) has also established a “Rohingya Policy” and is steadfastly working to ensure justice for the Rohingya people.

Given these circumstances, the inclusion of State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and former President U Htin Kyaw in the case filed at the Argentine court may create misunderstandings between the Rohingya community and other ethnic groups. This could hinder long-term peace, reconciliation, and Myanmar's democratic transition.

Therefore, the Argentine court's attempt to prosecute and issue arrest warrants against civilian government leaders will undermine national unity among the people of Myanmar and obstruct the ongoing Spring Revolution, which is relentlessly fighting to bring an end to military dictatorship and will ultimately benefit the terrorist military council.



Aung San Suu Kyi. Photo: AFP

GENERATION WAVE ISSUES STATEMENT ON ARGENTINE COURT'S ARREST WARRANTS FOR MYANMAR MILITARY LEADERS

Generation Wave issued a statement on 19 February regarding the arrest warrants issued by an Argentine court against Myanmar military leaders.

The text of the statement is as follows.

On February 14th, 2025, a court in Buenos Aires, Argentina, issued arrest warrants for 23 Burmese military leaders, including Min Aung Hlaing and Soe Win, as well as two civilian government leaders, former President U Htin Kyaw and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. These individuals are to be tried for genocide against the Rohingya people.

We welcome this legal process as an important step toward justice for the Rohingya and as an effort to uphold the principles of accountability and the end of impunity. However, it is essential to consider the

structural constraints imposed by Myanmar's 2008 Constitution, which was unilaterally drafted by the military. Under this constitution:

1. The armed forces are exclusively under the command and direction of the Commander-in-Chief of Defence.

2. The Ministers of Defence, Home Affairs, and Border Security-key institutions implicated in the genocide-are directly appointed by and operate under the orders of the Commander-in-Chief of Defence.

3. Military operations, such as "area clearance operations," are conducted under the direct command of the military, separate from civilian authority.

Given these constitutional limitations, the elected civilian government had no meaningful authority over security matters. Thus, at this stage, it remains uncertain whether former President U Htin Kyaw and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi had the power to intentionally direct or prevent the military's actions against the Rohingya.

Furthermore, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is currently serving a prolonged prison sentence following the military coup. Her incarceration severely restricts her ability to defend herself against the arrest warrant or to present her case in any legal proceedings.

The ongoing Spring Revolution in Myanmar aims not only to dismantle military dictatorship and all forms of authoritarianism and to establish a federal democratic union but also to bring an end to the practice of impunity for the oppression committed against the people by successive authorities. Political leadership and stakeholders are actively working to develop transitional justice policies and mechanisms to ensure accountability for past and present human rights violations.

In seeking justice for various crimes, including the genocide committed against the Rohingya, it will also be possible to investigate in the transitional justice process, whether the elected civilian government leaders who were responsible at the time participated in, supported, or failed to prevent any such violations.

We therefore urge the international community, including Argentina, to intensify actions against the perpetrators of the military dictatorship and to extend all possible support in bringing an end to military rule. Only through the dismantling of this oppressive regime can the people of Myanmar, including the Rohingya, be freed from the ongoing atrocities, paving the way for a free, just, and democratic society.



Photo: Alexander Schimmeck

A CALL FOR THE REMOVAL OF MYANMAR NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION FROM APF MEMBERSHIP

On 21 February, The CSO Working Group on Independent National Human Rights Institution (Burma/Myanmar) and the Asian NGO Network on National Human Rights Institutions (ANNI) issued an open letter calling for the immediate removal of the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission (MNHRC) from the Asia Pacific Forum on National Human Rights Institutions (APF).

The text of the letter is as follows.

Dear Chairperson Samar Kaled al Haj Hassan,

We, the CSO Working Group on Independent National Human Rights Institution (Burma/Myanmar) (Working Group) and the Asian NGO Network on National Human Rights Institutions (ANNI), urge the Asia Pacific Forum on National Human Rights Institutions (APF) to immediately remove the membership of the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission (MNHRC) from its network.

In October 2024, the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) Sub-Committee on Accreditation (SCA) recommended the removal of accreditation of the junta-controlled MNHRC. Following the MNHRC's failed attempt to appeal the recommendation, the decision to remove its accreditation with GANHRI was finalized on 31 December 2024, and soon the removal of its membership will too be finalized in the upcoming GANHRI Bureau Annual Meeting.

We are deeply concerned that the MNHRC remains listed as an Associate Member of APF and notes that its membership policy which "use(s) the accreditation decisions of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) to determine APF membership status." In response to the MNHRC's failure

to comply with the Paris Principles and in accordance with APF's policy, we request that the MNHRC be removed from your network without further delay.

We also strongly encourage APF to publicly announce the termination of the MNHRC's membership and promptly update relevant information on all its channels. We further urge APF to refrain from any future engagements with the MNHRC, including refusing its representatives from attending meetings, conventions, or other activities within your network. We look forward to receiving confirmation of the formal removal of the MNHRC from the APF.

The decision by GANHRI confirms its refusal to condone the MNHRC's blatant non-compliance with the Paris Principles. We sincerely hope that APF will act with urgency to uphold the same message of accountability.

Any delay in publicly announcing the expulsion of the MNHRC from APF is at risk of lending credibility to the junta-controlled institution. It is vital that the junta-controlled MNHRC no longer be allowed to claim accreditation nor credibility from any regional or global platforms and faces the consequences of its complicity in the junta's widespread and systematic human rights violations and atrocity crimes under international law.

As we work towards the establishment of a new independent and impartial national human rights institution of Myanmar—one that is fully compliant with the Paris Principles, we look forward to your support, collaboration, and future endorsement of this endeavor. Your decisive action in this matter will signal APF's strong commitment to human rights and accountability to the Myanmar people as well as across the region.

MYANMAR OPPOSITION GROUPS PUSH FOR A NEW HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION AMID MNHRC SUSPENSION

The National Unity Government (NUG), the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), and various civil society organizations are collaborating to establish a new commission to address human rights issues in Myanmar.

On 18 February, civil society representatives held an online press conference titled "Removal of Myanmar junta-controlled Myanmar National Human Rights Commission (MNHRC) from the Global Human Rights Network."

During the event, Ma Zee Pe, Executive Director of Athan, a non-profit advocating for freedom of expression, stated that discussions are ongoing with ethnic groups to form the new commission and efforts are being made to expand its inclusivity.

"We have drafted a bill for the new human rights commission, which has been discussed multiple times," said Ko Bo Bo, Executive Director of Generation Wave.

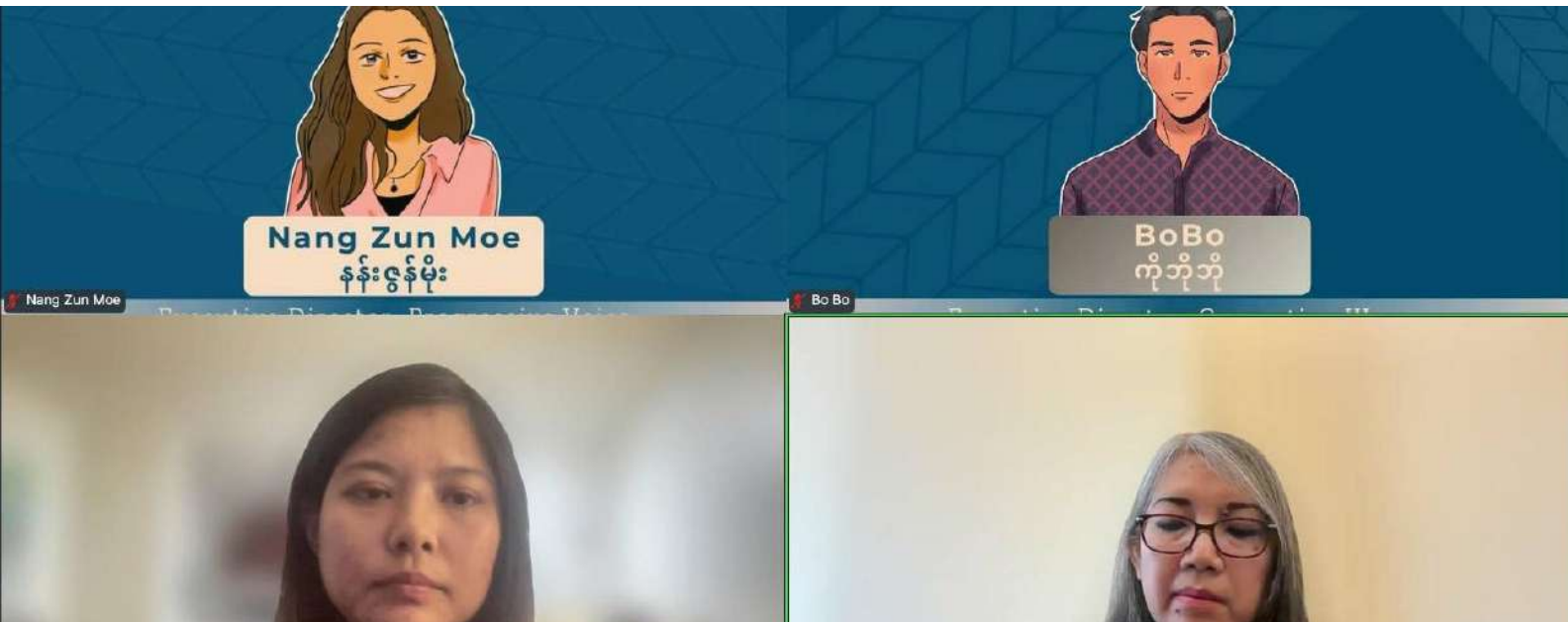
However, he added that the NUG has yet to officially endorse the draft law. The bill, designed in line with international standards, was first submitted to the NUG, NUCC, and CRPH on 6 December, 2021, and has since undergone multiple rounds of review.

On 16 January, the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) suspended the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission (MNHRC), which is under the junta's control, from its membership. Subsequently, on 13 February, the NUG declared the MNHRC officially dissolved, asserting that it no longer recognizes the body.

Nan Zun Moe, Executive Director of Progressive Voice Myanmar, who participated in the discussion, reaffirmed that advocacy efforts will continue to establish an independent human rights commission under the NUG.

The MNHRC, which has remained silent on human rights abuses committed by the junta since the coup, has been criticized for failing to uphold the Paris Principles, which set the standards for credible, independent, and effective National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs).

The press conference was organized by the CSO Working Group on Independent National Human Rights Institutions, a network of about 20 civil society organizations. Since 2019, this network has been advocating for the creation of an independent human rights commission to replace the MNHRC.



SAC-M WELCOMES NUG'S DISSOLUTION OF MYANMAR JUNTA-CONTROLLED MNHRC

On 18 February, the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar (SAC-M) issued a statement welcoming the stance of the National Unity Government (NUG) to dissolve the junta-controlled Myanmar National Human Rights Commission (MNHRC).

The text of the SAC-M statement is as follows.

SAC-M urges the NUG to establish a new, impartial and independent National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) to replace the defunct MNHRC without delay.

The MNHRC was formed in 2011 under the quasi-civilian Thein Sein government and has been complicit in the horrific violence committed by the Myanmar military in the years that followed, including since its attempted coup on 1 February 2021.

The NUG's decision to dissolve the Commission follows a ruling by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) on 31 December 2024, to officially revoke the MNHRC's accreditation status and remove it from its network. GANHRI, which accredits NHRIs worldwide, found that the MNHRC had failed to meet the Paris Principles — minimum standards that NHRIs must meet to be considered credible and effective, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993.

In practice, the MNHRC's main function since its formation has not been to protect the rights of the Myanmar people, but to attempt to whitewash the military's abhorrent human rights record. The Commission stayed silent during the military's

genocidal attacks against the Rohingya in Rakhine state in 2016 and 2017. The MNHRC has not once raised the alarm as credible allegations of human rights violations and serious international crimes committed against civilians by the junta have become widespread since its attempted coup.

GANHRI's decision to revoke the MNHRC's accreditation marks a significant blow to the military's attempts to launder its enduring international image as one of the world's worst human rights abusers.

The people-led process already underway to remove the military and build a new Myanmar is, at its heart, a struggle for human rights. The establishment of an impartial, independent NHRI for Myanmar, that upholds the Paris Principles, is a critical step in the development of robust human rights protections for all Myanmar people.

SAC-M calls on the NUG, having sacked the junta-controlled MNHRC leadership, to also sack the criminal leaders of the illegitimate Myanmar military, including Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, and his deputy, General Soe Win and appoint new, legitimate leaders to head the military.

Furthermore, SAC-M calls on the NUG to dissolve the junta-controlled Union Election Commission and establish a new, independent Election Commission in preparation for such time that free, fair, and genuinely democratic elections are held in accordance with the Federal Democracy Charter.



Father Donald Martin

NUG ISSUES STATEMENT ON PROSECUTION OF LOCAL SECURITY UNIT MEMBERS IN SHWEBO OVER PRIEST'S MURDER

The Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration of the NUG issued a statement on 18 February regarding the intended persecution of individuals associated with its local security unit in Shwebo.

The statement is as follows.

The National Unity Government (NUG) is deeply saddened by the murder of 44-year-old Father Donald Martin of the Mandalay Archdiocese on February 14, 2025, at 6:00 PM, at the Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Kan Gyi Taw Village, Shwebo District. The NUG is urgently working to ensure that those responsible for this killing are brought to justice and punished according to the law.

Upon receiving the report, the People's Defence Force (PDF) Shwebo District Battalion 5 and local

People's Defence Organizations (Pakhapa) jointly arrested ten suspects within the same day. Initial investigations reveal that the suspects are members of a local defence group. As they are members of an armed group, the Ministry of Defence of the National Unity Government will convene a military tribunal to investigate and take action according to the law. Currently, an investigation tribunal has been formed and investigations are underway.

The National Unity Government strongly condemns any targeting of civilians, including religious leaders, regardless of which organization commits such acts. We reiterate that those responsible will be investigated, exposed, and prosecuted according to the law, without discrimination.



Photo: AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA TEMPORARILY SUSPENDS OVERSEAS WORKER DEPLOYMENT FOR SCREENING

The Myanmar military junta has temporarily suspended the deployment of overseas workers to screen for individuals linked to the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and those eligible for military conscription, according to sources within the overseas employment sector.

The suspension was announced during a meeting on 18 February between the junta-controlled Ministry of Labour, the Myanmar Overseas Employment Agency Association (MOEAA), and overseas employment agencies.

A MOEAA member revealed that workers had already been prevented from departing via Yangon International Airport since 17 February. Agencies are currently coordinating with airline officials to address the issue.

"Both men and women have been temporarily halted for re-screening. Young workers scheduled to depart are now stuck. It's not a complete ban but a temporary suspension. This has caused widespread frustration in agency communication groups, such as Viber groups," said a source from the overseas employment sector.

Industry insiders warn that agencies could face penalties or even closure if workers voice significant complaints or if foreign employers cancel job offers.

"If an employer withdraws a job offer, penalties


should be imposed on them, not on the agencies. It would be unfair to punish agencies for circumstances beyond their control," said an overseas employment agent.

The situation in Myanmar has led to growing reluctance among foreign employers to hire Myanmar workers, according to an employee at a Japanese employment firm.

"The instability is making Japanese employers reconsider hiring. We cover training fees, medical checkups, and flight expenses for recruits. Normally, we recover these costs from employers once workers arrive. But now, with workers unable to leave Myanmar, employers are hesitant to proceed with new hires," the employee said.

In April 2024, the junta's Ministry of Labour barred men aged 23 to 31 from leaving the country. This restriction was expanded in January 2025 to include men aged 18 to 35, with authorities indicating that travel approvals would be subject to additional screening.

Additionally, in September 2024, the junta revoked the overseas deployment rights of more than 100 employment agencies and 320 businesses. The affected agencies were penalized for failing to remit 25% of their deployed workers' salaries back to Myanmar or for outstanding tax payments from the 2023–2024 fiscal year.



**MYANMAR JUNTA
VOWS CRACKDOWN
ON ILLEGAL
NATURAL RESOURCE
EXTRACTION**

Photo: AFP

The Myanmar junta has announced plans to investigate and take action against businessmen involved in the illegal extraction of state-owned natural resources and those providing support to revolutionary forces and armed groups.

The announcement was made on 19 February through Myawaddy News, a media outlet controlled by the junta.

The statement emphasized that, under the constitution, the state is the sole owner of all natural resources, and business entities are only permitted to exploit them in accordance with relevant laws.

However, the junta claimed that some businessmen have taken advantage of the situation in certain regions by engaging in illegal resource extraction and supporting what it called "terrorist groups" and "armed insurgents."

The statement also warned local residents to refrain from participating in such activities.

Since seizing power, the junta has frequently labelled revolutionary forces and armed groups opposing its rule as terrorist organizations and insurgents. However, the latest statement did not specify which regions are affected by these alleged activities.

Meanwhile, the National Unity Government (NUG) has established Union-level and township-level Resource Management Committees to oversee the proper management of natural resources and reduce waste during the revolutionary period.

Union Prime Minister Mahn Win Khaing Than highlighted this initiative during a meeting in late January. He also stressed the importance of implementing a transparent and systematic tax collection system for the natural resources sector.

Civil society organizations have reported that the rule of law has significantly deteriorated since the coup, leading to rampant illegal extraction and overexploitation of resources, particularly timber.



MYANMAR JUNTA AND TNLA TALKS IN CHINA END WITHOUT AGREEMENT

Negotiations between the Myanmar military junta and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) held in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China, concluded without any concrete results due to a challenging situation.

The talks, which took place at the Haigeng Hotel in Kunming on 16 and 17 February, were facilitated by China's special envoy to Myanmar, Mr. Deng Xijun.

According to a TNLA statement released on 19 February, both sides agreed to hold further discussions after internal consultations and preparations.

During the meeting, the TNLA outlined three key demands: a ceasefire with no further military advances in areas controlled by both sides, a complete halt to all military operations—including airstrikes, artillery shelling, drone attacks, and ground offensives—and the unrestricted movement of essential supplies and medical aid to civilians in conflict zones.

The statement did not provide details on the junta's response to these demands, nor did it mention any counterproposals. Additionally, the military has yet to

issue a public statement regarding the negotiations.

The TNLA delegation was led by Lieutenant General Tar Gu Jar of the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF), the TNLA's political wing. The junta was represented by Lieutenant General Ko Ko Oo, commander of Bureau of Special Operations (BSO) No. 1.

Despite the negotiations, the TNLA reported that the junta carried out airstrikes and artillery attacks on 15 February, targeting Na Swe, Ohn Mate, Nyaung Ni, and Taung Shwe villages in Naung Cho Township. Additionally, Mansa village, located on the border of Namtu and Kutkai townships in TNLA-controlled territory, was bombed on 17 February.

TNLA Secretary-General Major General Tar Phone Kyaw stated on social media on 16 February that the junta might negotiate as if it held the upper hand, suggesting that the discussions were influenced by Chinese government pressure.

Mizzima has attempted to contact the junta's spokesperson, Major General Zaw Min Tun, for comment, but no response was received.



Photo: Mizzima

MYANMAR JUNTA ENACTED LAW ALLOWING PRIVATE SECURITY FIRMS TO CARRY AND USE WEAPONS WHEN NECESSARY

The junta enacted the Private Security Services Law on 18 February, granting private security firms the right to apply for a license to carry weapons and ammunition while mandating cooperation with state security agencies when required.

The law, signed by junta chief Min Aung Hlaing, requires private security firms to obtain a license within six months of its enactment. Aimed at tightening restrictions and ensuring systematic cooperation with state security forces, the law seeks to prevent the misuse of private security services.

The junta is currently integrating private security firms into its security operations. The new legislation mandates that licensed companies cooperate with military security organizations in coordination with relevant supervisory committees.

Additionally, security firms must provide a full list of male and female security personnel along with their personal information. The junta reserves the right to inspect and, if necessary, conduct training courses for private security personnel.

Employees of private security firms are required to report any information deemed harmful to national security and law and order during security operations. Failure to do so can result in up to two years in prison, a fine of 300,000 kyats, or both.

The Central Committee will review applications for weapon and ammunition licenses before seeking approval from the National Defence and Security Council.

Businesses or subsidiaries employing more than 10 private security personnel, even if unrelated to private security services, must also obtain a permit. Foreign security firms operating in Myanmar must employ at least 75% Myanmar nationals as security personnel.

It also outlines the crimes and penalties, stating that anyone who operates without a license, purchases, sells, possesses, or transfers a business or license without the approval of the Central Committee will face a maximum prison sentence of three years and a fine of up to 10 million kyats. For a company or organization, the fine will range from a minimum of 100 million kyats to a maximum of 300 million kyats.

Refusal to cooperate with the junta in security matters is punishable by up to two years in prison or a fine of 50 million kyats. Companies in violation will face fines between 50 and 100 million kyats.

According to the law, the junta has mandated that license applicants must deposit at least 100 million kyats as business insurance with the Myanmar Economic Bank for the duration of their operation. In the case of a foreign company, the deposit must be made in foreign currency, equivalent to 100 million kyats, as a fixed deposit.

According to the Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business's 2022 report, over 120 private security firms operate in Myanmar, with 115 registered under the Directorate of Investment and Company Administration (DICA).

Following the 2021 coup, China proposed a joint Myanmar-China security company, leading to the junta forming a working committee in October 2024 to draft a memorandum of understanding for its establishment.



Photo: Supplied

MYANMAR MILITARY INTENSIFYING RECRUITMENT EFFORTS IN NAYPYIDAW

Military recruitment is intensifying in the Naypyidaw Union Territory, where the junta is based, according to local sources.

An employee, who requested anonymity, revealed that the junta and ward administration offices have access to census data and records of employees working for Naypyidaw-based companies partnered with the military. Using this information, monthly military draft notices are issued to these companies.

"We pay the ward administration and relevant authorities each month to avoid recruitment," said a company employee. "If draft notices still arrive, we must resolve the issue with money. If that fails, we have to pay for a replacement."

Similarly, when draft summonses are sent directly to employees' homes instead of their workplaces, companies cover the costs to resolve the issue.

Local residents report that daily census checks and arrests are occurring in eight townships of Naypyidaw Union Territory, except for Zeya Thiri Township, also known as "Army Town."

A Pyinmana resident described nighttime raids in Mauk Hlut Kone village: "They arrived in military vehicles, arrested people from their homes, and took them away. The ward head isn't trustworthy—he informs them of new residents or property buyers. Nearby areas like Yezin experience similar raids, with soldiers entering homes to seize people."

Military draft selections are also being conducted through a lottery system in Pyinmana's wards and villages.

A Lewe town resident expressed ongoing fear: "People in blue uniforms, believed to be military recruiters, along with ward administrators and junta members, patrol the streets at night conducting census checks from military vehicles. I feel unsafe day and night. Although I'm slightly above military service age, they no longer seem to care."

In Naypyidaw's Zabuthiri Township, census checks have intensified. A local reported that a person was recently arrested on the street in Shwe Kyar Pin ward while on their way to school.

"People are also being forcibly conscripted as porters on the streets," another Zabuthiri resident said. "At night, overnight guest list inspections are harsh. Many arrive in pilot petrol cars and motorbikes, accompanied by soldiers and police. Everyone must report in. If you exceed your permitted stay, there's no escape."

The junta has now entered its 10th week of military training since enacting the Military Conscription Law on 10 February 2024. Since early 2025, recruitment efforts have escalated in junta-controlled townships nationwide compared to the previous year.

The Spring Revolution Database (SRD), a research group monitoring the junta's war crimes, reported on 16 January that between 10 February and 31 December 2024—following the enactment of the Military Conscription Law—11,751 civilians were arrested. Of those, 10,680 were taken during the day, while 1,071 were detained at night.



Photo: Supplied

ESCALATING MYANMAR JUNTA AIRSTRIKES IN MONYWA FORCE AROUND 10,000 TO FLEE AMID URGENT HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Daily airstrikes by Myanmar’s military junta in Monywa Township, Sagaing Region, have displaced around 10,000 residents, leaving them in desperate need of food and humanitarian aid, according to local relief workers.

Monywa Township, which is also the location of the Northwestern Region Military Command, has been subjected to frequent artillery attacks. However, the military has intensified its operations since January, using fighter jets, Y-12 bombers, and paramotor troops, local sources report.

Airstrikes were carried out continuously for a week between 12 and 18 February, forcing thousands to flee. A volunteer from We Are People, a local aid organization, described the worsening humanitarian crisis.

“With tens of thousands displaced, there’s an urgent need for food. Injured civilians require immediate medical attention, and essential supplies like rice, cooking oil, and salt are critically low,” he said.

Residents from villages including Nyaung Phyu Bin, Thitseint, Chaung Kauk, and Magyi Kone in Monywa Township, as well as surrounding areas in Chaung-U Township, have been forced to flee, according to relief groups on the ground.

“The bombings are relentless. They’re using paramotors and Y-12 aircraft for airstrikes, and artillery shelling with 120mm rounds and howitzers is ongoing,”

said Ko Arr Kuu, a leader of the Monywa Township People’s Security Force (PSF).

On 12 February, an airstrike killed 12 civilians, including three children, and wounded at least 15 others. Subsequent attacks have claimed 16 more civilian lives, a member of the Public Administration reported.

“Monywa has become a danger zone for airstrikes. Bombings happen day and night, and we’re struggling to find safety,” said a displaced woman.

In recent days, the junta has expanded its aerial assaults to Chaung-U, Kani, and Kalay Townships. Resistance groups and humanitarian organizations have urged residents to dig or reinforce bomb shelters to minimize casualties.

On the afternoon of 18 February, an airstrike was reported in Kani Township, though the extent of the damage remains unknown.

To help residents protect themselves, the Ministry of Defence of the National Unity Government (NUG) issued safety guidelines, advising people to seek shelter immediately during air attacks. If indoors, they should stay in a designated safe room or take cover under sturdy furniture. If outside, they should find a low-lying area, cover their heads, and keep their mouths slightly open to reduce lung damage from blast pressure.

THREE PEOPLE KILLED, AND SIX OTHERS INJURED IN MYANMAR JUNTA PARAGLIDER BOMBING IN KANI TOWNSHIP

Three civilians were killed, and six others sustained serious injuries when junta forces dropped bombs using a paraglider over Chaungma (East) village in Kani Township, Sagaing Region.

The attack occurred at around 5 pm on 18 February, when junta soldiers from the Northwestern Region Military Command released two bombs from a paraglider.

“The paraglider hovered over the village for an

extended period before dropping two bombs. One landed near the main road, causing damage to public transportation routes,” a local source told Mizzima.

According to on-the-ground reports, three residents of Chaungma (East) village lost their lives, while six injured civilians are receiving medical treatment.

A day earlier, on 17 February, two oil tankers in Muthaw village, Kani Township, were destroyed by an airstrike conducted by a military jet fighter.

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KAREN BORDER GUARD FORCE ARRESTS ONLINE SCAM SUSPECTS, REPATRIATES SECOND BATCH OF CHINESE NATIONALS

**MIZZIMA SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
HAN HTOO ZAW**

The Karen Border Guard Force (BGF) has arrested individuals involved in online scam operations in Shwe Koko, a new town near Myawaddy, Karen State. The arrested Chinese nationals began being repatriated via chartered flights to China through Mae Sot International Airport in Thailand, starting from 20 February.

On 20 February, 200 individuals were sent back to China, followed by 300 more on 21 February, escorted by over 100 armed personnel via Friendship Bridge No. 2.

Thailand, China, and Myanmar have been working together over the past month to dismantle scam centers that have defrauded victims worldwide of billions of dollars through fraudulent romantic schemes, illegal gambling and other methods.

A spokesperson for the Karen BGF stated that more than 2,000 foreign nationals were discovered during the crackdown. Among them, Chinese nationals are being repatriated in three groups through Mae Sot International Airport.

The Chinese Embassy in Myanmar announced on 20 February that more than 800 Chinese citizens suspected of involvement in fraudulent activities will be repatriated in the coming days.

Meanwhile, the Thai government has imposed a ban on importing 12 types of goods, including electricity and fuel, to Myawaddy, Phayathonzu in Karen State, and Tachileik in Shan State, areas known for harbouring online scam centres starting from 5 February.

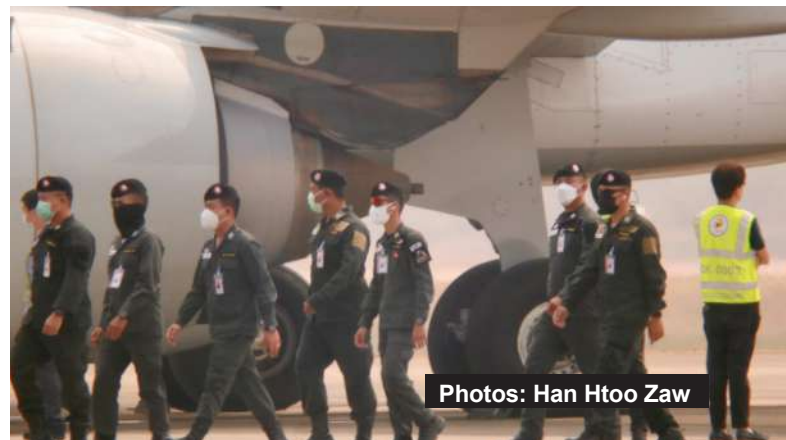
The Karen BGF launched its investigation into online scam activities on 14 February, following reports that the Thai government was preparing to issue an arrest warrant for Saw Chit Thu, the leader of the Karen BGF.

Thai media estimate that up to 70,000 people may have been trafficked to over 20 countries, including China, due to human trafficking operations linked to these scam centres in Myawaddy on the Thai-Myanmar frontline.

Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister confirmed that a total of over 600 Chinese nationals from these scam centres were to be sent back to China via Thailand beginning last week.



Photos: Han Htoo Zaw



Photos: Han Htoo Zaw



Photo: Supplied

CHINESE COURT TRIES FAMILY ACCUSED OF AIDING MYANMAR SCAM CENTRES

A Chinese court said on 19 February it had finished a public trial for alleged members of a crime family accused of murder, fraud and collusion with cross-border scammers based in Myanmar.

Scam compounds have flourished in Myanmar's lawless borderlands, staffed by foreigners -- many of them Chinese -- who say they were trafficked and forced to swindle people online, part of a multibillion-dollar illicit industry.

In recent months, Beijing has stepped up cooperation with Southeast Asian nations to crack down on the compounds, and a militia allied with the Myanmar junta said this month that it is preparing to deport 10,000 people with ties to scam operations.

A court in the eastern Chinese city of Wenzhou said in a statement Wednesday it had held a six-day public trial of 23 members of a family with links to Myanmar accused of acting as a criminal syndicate.

Among them were Mg Myin Shaunt Phyin and Ma Thiri Maung, which the court identified as "main suspects" along with other key members Yan Sone Hwar and Myin Shut Lan.

The defendants stand accused of a litany of crimes including murder, fraud, intentional injury, illegal imprisonment, extortion, drug smuggling, prostitution and running illegal gambling dens.

The court said the group were linked to the deaths of 14 Chinese citizens and the wounding of six more, as well as illicit gains of over 10 billion yuan (\$1.4 billion) since 2015.

It cited one instance in 2023 in which the accused "opened fire" on people at a scam compound to prevent them from being transferred back to China.

They also allegedly relied on influence with armed forces in Myanmar's Kokang region, which borders China, to "collude with criminal groups".

A verdict in the trial would be announced "at a later date", the court said.

AFP



PPNM RAISES ALARM OVER REMOVAL OF 936 ROHINGYA DETAINEES FROM MYANMAR'S INSEIN PRISON

The Political Prisoners Network-Myanmar (PPNM) has voiced grave concerns after the military junta and police removed 936 Rohingya detainees, including women and children, from Insein Prison on the morning of 16 February.

According to Ko Thaik Htun Oo, a member of PPNM’s steering committee, the detainees—over 500 of whom are men – were taken away in vans at around 6 am and their whereabouts are still unknown.

“Since their families are unknown, obtaining any information about them is extremely difficult. There is a strong possibility that the Military Council is deploying them to reinforce its forces amid ongoing losses, which is highly alarming,” he said.

A day before their transfer, more than 50 immigration officers under the junta reportedly visited the prison to

issue identity documents to the detainees, though the type of ID remains unclear. Additionally, some of those removed had been transferred from other prisons in recent days.

PPNM also highlighted that some Rohingya detainees have been held beyond their official release dates. Some have been imprisoned for over a year and a half past their sentences.

Initial reports suggest that the detainees may have been sent to the front lines, prompting PPNM to call for immediate monitoring of their situation.

Efforts to obtain comments from military spokesperson General Zaw Min Tun and Insein Prison officials have so far been unsuccessful.



INDEPENDENT MYANMAR MEDIA HOUSE MIZZIMA FIGHTS FOR THE TRUTH

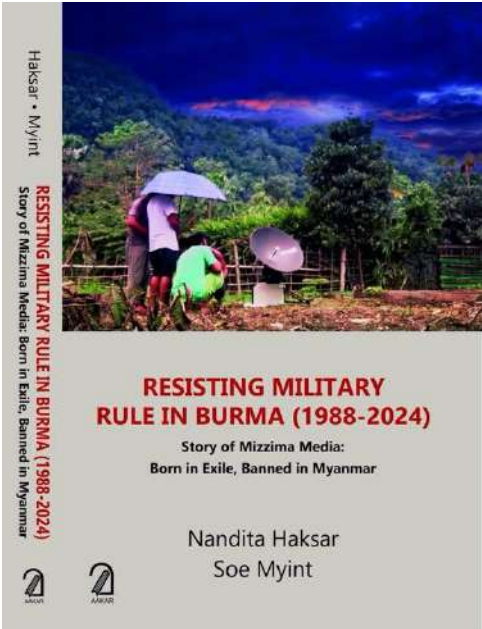
Mizzima Media has been in the forefront of Myanmar independent media for over a quarter of a century and it currently working to publish the truth on the Myanmar crisis despite funding problems and the ongoing brutality of the ruling military junta.

Mizzima faced many challenges but it managed to survive and grow following a return to Myanmar from 2012, when the country began to open up, to 2021, when the military took over the country. Mizzima continues to operate inside and outside Myanmar despite the challenges.

To mark a milestone in the life of this leading independent news service, a book has been released entitled: "Resisting Military Rule in Burma (1988-2024) Story of Mizzima Media: Born in Exile, Banned in Myanmar" by Nandita Haksar and Soe Myint.

DONATE TO SUPPORT MIZZIMA'S WORK
<https://donate.mizzima.com/>

This book is a fascinating account of Burmese resistance to brutal military rule since 1988, when Mizzima was set up, to the present day told through the story of journalist Soe Myint, the founding editor of Mizzima Media.



The story of Mizzima is one of extraordinary courageous journalism and personal difficulties.



Photo: AFP

UNOCHA SAYS OVER 15 MILLION PEOPLE IN MYANMAR FACE ACUTE FOOD INSECURITY

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) issued a statement on 19th February saying that widespread military conflict across Myanmar has left over 15 million people in 13 states and regions facing food insecurity. They are also facing crises such as inflation and power outages.

Myanmar continues to grapple with a deepening humanitarian crisis four years after the coup, marked by ongoing conflict and escalating displacement marking th Internal displacement has reached a record high, with more than 3.5 million people now displaced.

Armed clashes between Myanmar’s Armed Forces (MAF) and non-state armed groups continue across multiple regions, particularly in the Northeast, Northwest, and Southeast. The expansion of conflict into new areas, such as Ayeyarwady, Bago, and Magway, has further compounded the suffering of civilians.

Despite the increasing number of displaced persons, the situation remains unpredictable, with civilians at high risk from airstrikes, shelling, and landmines.

Myanmar has become the global epicenter for landmine and explosive ordnance casualties, surpassing all other affected countries. The use of landmines in the ongoing conflict has not only caused numerous civilian deaths and injuries but also disrupted agriculture and displaced entire communities.

In 2023, Myanmar recorded the highest number of landmine casualties globally, and despite the growing

threat, funding for mine action remains severely underfunded. This gap in funding hampers efforts to address the immediate dangers posed by landmines, leaving civilians vulnerable to these threats.

Over 15 million people in Myanmar face acute food insecurity, and millions are also without access to safe shelter, drinking water, and essential services. Education and healthcare systems are severely disrupted, while inflation and loss of livelihoods further exacerbate the situation.

The country is simultaneously dealing with various crises, including disease outbreaks, inflation, and limited access to critical infrastructure. The humanitarian response remains underfunded, with only 39% of the required funding for 2024 met by February 2025, leaving millions of vulnerable people without assistance.

Despite severe challenges, humanitarian partners reached 4.2 million people in 2024, or 79% of the target population. A major achievement was the delivery of aid to displaced people, including high-energy biscuits, shelter supplies, and dignity kits.

However, the delivery of assistance remains difficult due to ongoing conflict and roadblocks, which limit access to many areas in need. The transportation of aid continues to face significant hurdles, with security risks for aid workers and a lack of access to the most affected regions. Despite these challenges, humanitarian actors continue their efforts to provide life-saving assistance to as many people as possible.

Photo: RFA

VIETNAMESE MONK WEIGHS DANGER OF CROSSING MYANMAR ON INDIA JOURNEY

PIMUK RAKKANAM FOR RFA

Deep into his trek through Thailand, Thich Minh Tue must decide whether to enter the war-torn nation.

NONG BUA, Thailand - Resting after a long day of walking barefoot across the Thai countryside, Vietnamese monk Thich Minh Tue sat on a mat under a tree and talked quietly about the purpose - and logistics - of his 2,700-kilometer (1,600 mile) pilgrimage to India.

"I want to be grateful to Buddha, who has shown me and others the path of learning," Minh Tue told a Radio Free Asia reporter who caught up with him and his entourage last week at Wat Udom Pattana temple in Nakhon Sawan province.

"I want to walk there to repay his gratitude and hope that all people in the world will be happy and peaceful and learn according to Buddha's teachings," he said.

Thich Minh Tue is a Buddhist monk who captured hearts in Vietnam last year when he undertook a barefoot hike across the country that met the disapproval of controlling communist authorities.

He has since gone international. In December, he crossed from Vietnam into Laos before entering Thailand.

His goal is to reach India, the birthplace of Buddhism.

Sporting a patched, multicolored robe, rather than a typical saffron one, the 43-year-old cuts an unassuming

figure as he walks across Thailand, accompanied by about 16 monks. He carries a rice cooker pot as an alms bowl.

But after two months of walking about 20 kilometers (12 miles) a day on scorching asphalt, the hurdles are piling up. The hot season is starting, and smog from burning of crops pollutes the grey skies.

Plus, his Thai visa runs out in a week and a knee injury sustained by a monk in his entourage is slowing his group's march.

MYANMAR STRIFE

A bigger dilemma faces the monk, who typically stops overnight at Buddhist temples that dot the Thai countryside, or if not, stretches out on a mat amid the mosquitoes and under the stars in a roadside field.

How can he get across Myanmar - gripped by a civil war - to India?

Some of the monks's supporters, as well as Myanmar dissidents who are well-informed about their country's troubles, say he wouldn't make it across that country.

As of Wednesday, he and his entourage were some 330 kilometers (200 miles) from Mae Sot, the western Thai border crossing to Myanmar, and 600 kilometers (375 miles) to the northern border crossing at Mae Sai.

A Vietnamese monk's pilgrimage map

Minh Tue - "Thich" indicates he's a monk - said he intended to avoid the closer Mae Sot crossing, citing fighting in the area between rebels and the Myanmar military, which seized power in a 2021 coup and has been embroiled in a multi-front civil war ever since.

Instead, he said he was leaning towards crossing at Mae Sai, in Thailand's far north, into Myanmar's Shan state.

But much of Myanmar is in the throes of conflict and it's not clear whether Tue and his entourage would be safe even if they take the alternative route, which involves a major detour.

The naysayers contend he'd either be refused entry to Myanmar, or, if allowed in, it would be only a matter of time before he'd run into some sort of obstacle.

Moe Kyaw, a labor rights activist and veteran Myanmar dissident living in Thailand, said he'd rate the monk's chance of crossing Myanmar at 1%.

"There'd be too many challenges. I simply don't think it's possible," he told RFA.

Vietnamese monk leaves Laos, enters Thailand

Another expert on Myanmar, human rights campaigner David Mathieson, said he doubted Myanmar's military would allow Minh Tue in, both because of the "completely chaotic security landscape" and because he could attract crowds, which the unpopular junta would be wary of.

"I don't think that the sakasa really wants to take the risk of people coming out to see him," Mathieson said, referring to the junta. "They probably also don't want to take the risk of having him or his followers injured by an airstrike or by a drone or landmine."

But if Minh Tue were to bypass Myanmar, how would he complete his pilgrimage?

Alms from villagers

Last year, Minh Tue's ascetic demeanor struck a chord in Vietnam where social media posts of his barefoot walks went viral and well-wishers came out in droves.

Vietnam's state-sanctioned Buddhist sangha has not officially recognized him as a monk, but he has nonetheless garnered widespread admiration and support.

At one point, Vietnamese authorities, leery of his popularity, announced he had "voluntarily retired." But that doesn't seem to be the case.

Though he much less well-known in Thailand, villagers come out to greet the him and offer alms of vegetarian food in the mornings. Along the way, people give the group water and policemen pay their respects.

Vietnamese reporting the trip on their social media channels and overseas Vietnamese supporters gather around their "teacher" when they get the chance.

Minh Tue told RFA that Buddhist teachings inspired him to practice "dhutanga," or austerity, on his journey to India.

While he espouses Buddhist philosophy, authorities in Vietnam are suspicious of any political motive.

His name has come up in connection with a U.S.-based opposition party-in-exile called Viet Tan that aims to transition the country from communism to a liberal democracy, said a Thai security officer monitoring the monk's journey.

Attempts by RFA to reach Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to clarify whether Tue's visa could be extended have gone unanswered.

Doan Van Bau, a former Vietnamese security officer who has said he was assigned by his government to protect Minh Tue and be "head of delegation," was walking with him for a few weeks, but is no longer with the group apparently after a dispute with the monks.

Bau has helped Minh Tue and two other monks get visas for Bangladesh and India and he has urged them to avoid Myanmar altogether and fly over it, members of the entourage said.

Minh Tue has said he does not know how many of the monks in his entourage would follow him into Myanmar, if he were to choose that option.

He has also raised the possibility of bypassing Myanmar entirely by flying to Sri Lanka, and then going on to India, tracing the route in reverse along which Buddhism first arrived in Thailand.

"If the route crossing into Myanmar is convenient, then I will walk from Thailand into Myanmar," he said. "If Sri Lanka is better, then I will take this route."

The uncertainty over the route has sparked some friction among members of the entourage, adding to a sense of anxiety.

But that doesn't seem to affect Minh Tue.

"What will be, will be," he told RFA. "Whichever side is favorable, I'll walk there."

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia



World walker Paul Salopek gets his temperature taken during his visit to Myanmar a couple of years ago.

WHERE THE STREETS HAVE NO NAME

INSIGHT MYANMAR

“Walking allows you to make these connections that make the world seem like home, no matter where you are. And I think that's a gift of the walk.”

An American journalist and writer, Paul Salopek is celebrated for his exceptional reporting, which has earned him two Pulitzer Prizes. Over his career, Paul has reported from over 50 countries, contributing to leading publications such as National Geographic and the Chicago Tribune. The focus of this episode of the Insight Myanmar Podcast is a still-continuing journey he began in 2013. Called the “Out of Eden Walk,” it is an unparalleled exploration of human history that traces the migration paths of early Homo sapiens and shows their connection to modern, human experience through immersive storytelling – including walking in Myanmar and the problems brought by the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions and the 2021 military coup.

Starting from the Rift Valley of Ethiopia, Paul’s route will eventually span Africa, the Middle East, Central and South Asia, through China, across North America, and down to Tierra del Fuego. His focus in this project is exploring the enduring, human reality of “migration.” However, Paul distinguishes his understanding of “migration” from its usual meaning by calling it a process of “dispersal.” By this he means that early humans did not move from point A to point B with a destination in

mind; instead, they traveled into unknown lands, driven by survival needs and environmental conditions.

RHYTHMS OF TIME

Paul’s walk does not seek to replicate the physical challenges faced by our ancient ancestors. Rather, his goal is to try to experience the rhythms of time and space they once navigated. His meticulous approach contrasts sharply with the fleeting pace of modern journalism, where reporters often contend with the relentless demands of the 24-hour news cycle. He describes the project as a testament to the power of slowing down, of bearing witness, and of connecting deeply with people and places. He views his experience as a reminder of the fragility and impermanence of human constructs, from cities to political systems. As he walks, Paul documents the stories of those he meets, weaving a tapestry of humanity that transcends time and place.

Paul speaks about the transformative power of walking, which fosters an attentiveness that unveils the experiential, emotional and behavioral commonalities of humanity across cultural, ideological, and geographical differences. “Humans are humans,” Paul says simply. Whether engaging with a yak herder in Afghanistan or a relative in California, he finds striking parallels in behavior, desires, and vulnerabilities.

Yet, the walk also illuminates the vastness of the world. Landmarks may take days to reach; time stretches, and the vast expanse of human history becomes palpable. This allows ample time for internal exploration well. “[The walk] cultivates a priority list about what’s important, right? And for me that’s human relationships above all else, and not so much the physical world that’s around me,” he reflects. He has noticed that walking dovetails with increased creativity, an insight shared with wandering bards, Sufi mystics, and ancient pilgrims throughout history.

Paul also reflects on humanity’s nomadic past, noting that a sedentary lifestyle is a fairly recent development on our species’ timeline. For 99.5% of human history, he says, people were nomadic, moving through landscapes in search of sustenance and survival. This deep connection to movement remains embedded in our DNA, Paul believes, serving as an adaptive mechanism in times of turbulence.

LANDING IN MYANMAR

His Out of Eden Walk landed Paul in Myanmar in early 2020, when he crossed from northeastern India, traversing jungle mountains and crossing the Irrawaddy River. His route eventually took him into the heart of the country, accompanied by ethnic Chin and

Lisu walking partners. Initially focused on cultural and historical storytelling, Paul found himself unprepared for the upheaval that would soon unfold.

First, the COVID-19 pandemic caused an unexpected halt to his journey. When borders closed, Paul had to pause his journey in Mandalay; later, he stayed with his Lisu walking partner in a rural village, which enabled him to immerse himself in the rhythms of daily life there. He assisted local farmers with planting rice and documented cultural aspects of his surroundings, while adapting to the slower pace of life. The relative quiet and peacefulness of his time in the village contrasted sharply with the uncertainty brought by the pandemic and offered him a chance to deepen his connection with the land and its people. Living in a remote area also meant navigating the challenges of limited communications and resources. Paul observed the resilience and resourcefulness of the villagers as they managed their lives amid lockdowns and health concerns.

He moved on to Yangon in early 2021 to extend his visa and plan the next phase of his journey. His arrival coincided with the early days of the coup, yet he was not aware of the full extent of the situation because he was quarantined in a Yangon hotel, as the pandemic was still raging.



Salopek got caught up in some of the protests during his walk.

MILITARY COUP

But when the internet was shut down on the morning of February 1, and he started hearing the turmoil in the streets, Paul knew something was up, and instinctively slipped into survival mode—filling his bathtub with water to prepare for potential utility shutdowns, and rationing small amounts of leftover food. The hotel staff, left to manage without guidance from health authorities who were now leading strikes to protest against the military takeover, wrote out quarantine release notes on their own for the guests by hand, a stark reminder of the administrative breakdown enveloping the nation.

Paul recalls that period as one of fragile hope and, due to the demographic of many of the protestors, youthful innocence. Delivery drivers, students, and workers united in an extraordinary show of solidarity, marching side by side and demonstrating a collective sense of responsibility. Protesters not only voiced their dissent but cleaned up after demonstrations and provided food and water to sustain protestors. This communal spirit, however, was buttressed by a naive faith that international powers might intervene on their behalf. Having spent decades reporting in conflict zones, Paul recognized the grim reality that such hopes

were likely misplaced. “Nobody’s coming to save you,” he thought, acknowledging the indifference of global powers to their plight.

As the junta’s violent crackdown escalated, the mood on the streets transformed from hopeful defiance to a desperate and uneven struggle for survival. Paul witnessed the harsh escalation of violence: police abducting organizers in broad daylight, live rounds echoing through neighborhoods, and the once euphoric protests dissolving into scenes of chaos and despair.

PUSHBACK

Peaceful protests gave way to a makeshift resistance as young people, once armed only with signs and chants, began crafting weapons in their living rooms. Students and digital creatives, surrounded by laptops and Coke cans, improvised bows and arrows, while household items like cooking pots and bicycle tires became tools of defense. Protesters wielding trash-can lids for shields faced down a regime unhesitating in its use of lethal force, a vivid representation of the tragic disparity in power that highlighted both their vulnerability and extraordinary courage. These acts of ingenuity and defiance underscored the profound resourcefulness of the resistance, using whatever was



Salopek catches a shot of a protest in Yangon.

at hand despite the immense risks. Amid the chaos, they embodied the unyielding spirit of a population determined to fight for its future against overwhelming odds.

Paul's experiences during that period illustrates the limitations of international media in capturing the breadth and urgency of certain crises. He describes Myanmar as "kind of an orphan," highlighting the lack of a strong international patron and the absence of easily exportable vital resources. While China does have economic interests in northern Myanmar, they were not critical enough to cause them to intervene in the country's political chaos. Paul further contextualizes the crisis as a reflection of Myanmar's complex history, including colonialism and military control, which complicates the narrative for global media. Drawing a bleak parallel to underreported conflicts in Africa, such as the Congo Civil War, he emphasizes how both have been marginalized because they are not that geopolitically relevant for major powers, and lack compelling interest for international audiences.

Paul expands his critique of global media, describing how their neglect of Myanmar reflects broader inequalities in their news priorities. He notes that the compelling, heart-wrenching stories of resistance and survival—from improvised weapons to underground networks distributing food and information—rarely reaches international audiences. For Paul, the consequence of the media's failure is the

effective silencing of the voices of those suffering and reinforces their isolation, making their struggle even more challenging, leaving them to face their plight without the solidarity or intervention of the international community.

LOCAL REPORTERS

That said, he also highlights the resilience of local reporters who, despite operating under tremendous danger, have continued to document the resistance. And again, Paul praises the bravery and resourcefulness of Myanmar's people, who have managed to organize and fight back against all odds. For him, their tenacity served as a poignant reminder of the human spirit's capacity to endure and resist, even in the face of global indifference.

He concludes with reminder to listeners to keep paying attention to what is happening in Myanmar. "Keep Myanmar in your heart, keep it in front of your eyes. Do whatever you can to help the people of Myanmar."

LISTEN TO THE PODCAST

Catch the Insight Myanmar Podcast as Paul discusses his window of time in Myanmar.

<https://player.captivate.fm/episode/52fc2c2c-dc99-405b-9537-9181223f4e80>



Salopek takes a selfie.



Photo: Mizzima

EXAMINING CHINA'S SPRAWLING RAIL PROJECTS AROUND ASIA

Vietnam approved plans on 19 February for a multi-billion-dollar railway with China, boosting links between the two communist countries.

Around the region, China has been financing railways under its Belt and Road Initiative, which funds infrastructure projects globally, but has come under fire with a number of plans stalled or mired in controversy.

Here are some of the key instalments in Asia's China-backed railway network:

Indonesia: Southeast Asia first

Indonesia launched Southeast Asia's first high-speed railway in October 2023, after years of delays.

The \$7 billion China-backed project links the capital Jakarta to the city of Bandung in 45 minutes -- slashing the journey by about two hours.

Built by a joint venture of four Indonesian state companies and Beijing's China Railway International Co, it was initially set to cost less than \$5 billion and be

completed by 2019. But construction challenges and the pandemic led to delays and surging expenses.

Indonesia's then-president Joko Widodo nevertheless hailed its opening as a symbol of modernisation.

Laos: on the move

Laos unveiled its \$6 billion Chinese-built railroad in 2021, bringing hopes of an economic boost despite backlash after thousands of farmers had to be evicted to make way for construction.

The 414-kilometre (260-mile) route connects the Chinese city of Kunming to Laotian capital Vientiane, with plans for the high-speed line to ultimately reach Singapore.

Infrastructure-poor Laos, a reclusive communist country of about 7.4 million people, previously had only four kilometres of railway tracks.

It was hoped that the railway would boost the

Southeast Asian country's ailing tourism industry, which struggled to rebound from the pandemic.

But experts also raised concerns over whether cash-strapped Laos -- where public debt made up 116 percent of GDP in 2023 -- would ever be able to pay back Beijing.

Thailand: full steam ahead

After long delays, Thailand is pressing ahead with a Chinese-backed high-speed line set to partially open in 2028.

The \$5.4 billion project aims to expand the connection to Kunming, running to Bangkok via Laos by 2032.

Thailand already has nearly 5,000 kilometres (3,000 miles) of railway but the sluggish, run-down network has long driven people to favour road travel -- despite extremely high accident rates.

When the new railroad is fully complete, Chinese-made trains will run from Bangkok to Nong Khai, on the border with Laos, at up to 250 km/h.

Unlike Laos, Thailand signed a deal to cover project expenditures itself and has pitched it as a way to boost the economy through trade with China.

China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan: bridge to Europe

Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov inaugurated construction in December of a railway linking China, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, with hopes it will serve as a supply route to Europe.

"This route will ensure supply of goods from China to Kyrgyzstan and then onto Central Asia" and nearby countries "including Turkey" and "even to the European Union", he said.

The project, which Kyrgyz authorities estimate could cost up to \$8 billion, includes construction through mountains and in areas of permafrost, where the ground never fully thaws.

Vietnam: link to manufacturing hubs

Vietnam this week approved an \$8-billion railroad running from its largest northern port city to China.

The line will operate through some of Vietnam's key manufacturing hubs, home to Samsung, Foxconn and Pegatron factories, many of which rely on components from China.

Another yet-to-be-approved line to China would connect Hanoi to Lang Son province, travelling through more areas packed with manufacturing facilities.

Malaysia: back on track

Malaysia has revived construction of a nearly \$17 billion railroad to carry passengers and freight between shipping ports on its east and west coasts.

The China-backed, 665-kilometre project was originally launched in 2011 under ex-leader Najib Razak, but shelved due to a dispute about payments.

After blowing past several deadlines and budgets, it now looks set to be operational by 2027.

Pakistan, Myanmar, Philippines: stalled

In Pakistan, a railway linking southwestern Gwadar Port with China's northwestern Xinjiang province has long been on the cards but has yet to materialise.

If the project moves ahead, a 2023 Chinese study estimated an eye-watering price tag of \$58 billion.

In coup-hit Myanmar, talks on building a railway from Mandalay to China's Yunnan province appear to have stalled.

And in the Philippines, plans for China to fund three railways flopped after Manila backed out of talks in 2023 as the South China Sea dispute heated up.

AFP



Photo: AFP

IS CHINA'S ECONOMIC STRUGGLE BEHIND THE TECHO CANAL FUNDING DELAY?

SUN LEE

While keeping a brave face, China has, though, downplayed reports that it has pulled out of the \$1.7 billion Funan Techo Canal in Cambodia, yet several months have passed since the project failed to show any sign of progress on the ground as Beijing has not provided any funding for it despite the Southeast Asian country's Prime Minister Hun Manet's claim that Beijing would contribute 49% of the funding for the project.

This development has surfaced in the backdrop of the fact that China, the top creditor of Cambodia, has not approved any loans to the Southeast Asian nation in the first nine months of last year, indicating Beijing's continuous effort to downsize its overseas investments because of its domestic economic struggles.

On August 5, 2024, the groundbreaking ceremony for the 180km long canal, which will link Cambodia's two major rivers - the Mekong River and the Bassac River - with the Gulf of Thailand was held. On completion, the canal will reduce Cambodia's reliance on Vietnamese Ports, which currently transport one-third of the Southeast Asian nation's exports.

However, despite it being seen as an ambitious project, it seems to have haemorrhaged as more than six months have passed, yet it has shown no sign of beginning. As per media reports, it was agreed that China would support the construction of the canal under its Belt and Road Initiative. Australian think-tank, Lowy Institute's website 'Interpreter' even hinted that the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), a Chinese state-backed enterprise was given the contract to build the canal.

A few reports went to the extent of suggesting that the concept of linking the Mekong River and the Bassac River with the Gulf of Thailand was brought to the Cambodian government by the CRBC, rather than the officials of the Southeast Asian nation. Despite this, the waterway project, which is expected to be completed by 2028, appears to be heading towards meeting the same fate that China-backed series of unsuccessful infrastructure projects in Cambodia have witnessed.

The collapse in funding for the canal project may "signal China's more cautious approach to investment in Cambodia after a series of so-far unsuccessful infrastructure projects in the Southeast Asian country," Reuters said in its recent report.

Amidst this, a question is being raised that how a 180 km long canal with its 5.4 metre depth and 100 metre width will cost just \$1.7 billion, when a shorter canal, also being built by China under its BRI scheme in Thailand, is projected to take 10 years and cost \$28 billion. Besides this suspicion over the canal project and estimated cost around its construction, another question being raised is on China's shoddy assessment of environmental and ecological factors linked with the project in Cambodia.

According to experts, the Funan Techo Canal, which is planned to run across Cambodia's Kampot, Kandal, and Takeo provinces is the habitat of several endangered species and are also very fertile, thus, critical for the Southeast Asian country's food security as well. Given this, the potential threat that will be caused by the planned canal to endangered species like sarus cranes, emergence of extreme weather conditions, damage to wetland ecosystems, as well as increased salinisation cannot be ruled out.

Along with this, experts warn that China seems to have overlooked the fact that the Mekong River has in recent years experienced frequent and prolonged droughts of increasing intensity during the wet as well as the dry season.

Despite this, if Beijing decides to go ahead in conceiving the project, which envisages altering the flow of water from the Mekong to the Gulf of Thailand, it means the world's second economic power has slipped up on the ground reality: The disruption will jeopardise the social and economic livelihoods of the millions of Cambodians as well as Vietnamese people as they rely on the Mekong River for their survival.

But what has for the moment drawn people's attention towards China is its attempt to downplay media reports which have suggested that Beijing has withdrawn from the canal project in Cambodia and that ongoing cooperation between the two iron-clad friends over several other projects have also stalled.

"These remarks on Cambodia are purely groundless smears and deliberate vilification. China and Cambodia are iron-clad friends supporting each other and sharing weal and woe. This time-honoured friendship was cultivated by the older generation of leaders of both countries, and has stood the test of the changing international landscape. It serves the fundamental interests of both countries and peoples, has strong vibrancy and promising prospects of development, and can never be weakened or undermined by any force," China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun said.

However, no matter how smartly China may play with words to project its friendship with Cambodia, Beijing has, in truth, not treated Phnom Penh on a par with other Southeast Asian countries. This can be assessed from the fact that among the ten ASEAN members, Cambodia ranks ninth as a source of imports for China, seventh as an export destination, and fifth as a trading partner.

Besides, in terms of Chinese investment, Cambodia ranks sixth. And of the nine ASEAN countries receiving Chinese aid, Cambodia is seventh in aid committed and fourth in aid received. Cambodia fares not much better in people-to-people exchange among ASEAN members, with the sixth greatest Chinese population by number and fifth in terms of Chinese population as a proportion of the total population, Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) a US-based think tank said.

Sun Lee is a pseudonym for a writer who covers Asia and geopolitical affairs.



AUGUST AND EVERYTHING AFTER

"So on February 1, the coup happened," August begins, speaking on the Insight Myanmar Podcast. "All the internet connections and all the mobile lines were cut off, so once it got back online, I got a call with my mom, [and I told her] that this is really a big disaster that will just threaten our future and also our generation and all generations. And what she replied was that this is only for one year, [that the military is] controlling the power, not taking over the power. So we should wait for one year and nothing bad will happen. That's what her response was! I was shocked. I mean, they have witnessed, they have experienced the same incident in 1988 and 2007. I don't want to mention 2003, or 1990. I just want to mention the big ones! But how could they say that nothing going to happen, no bad thing!? So I was amazed, shocked, and also at the same time I felt sad."

Growing up in Taunggyi, August's family consisted mainly of a mother who worked full time and a pair of grandparents. It was a loving home, but the grandfather had a history at odds with the life of activism that August would come to choose: he was connected to the military and had played a role in the violent suppression of the 1988 protests. And not just his grandfather, but many of August's relatives either served in the military or were connected to government roles. These dynamics shaped a conservative, religious household, where any mere discussion of politics was considered taboo, and political engagement was viewed as a direct path to danger. August's grandfather's first-hand knowledge of

the military's capacity for brutality, in particular, led him to stress the importance of political disengagement.

However, when August entered a pre-collegiate program, and he began to meet people from diverse backgrounds across Myanmar, his outlook drastically changed from the worldview his family had tried to inculcate in him. He heard first-hand accounts of the brutality faced by ethnic minorities—stories his military-aligned family had either downplayed or ignored. And it wasn't just the stories he heard; it was the realization that other people, who looked like him and who lived in the same country, had been subjected to horrors inflicted by institutions his family supported.

As his political consciousness grew, his relationship with his family became increasingly strained; his grandfather's past military involvement and deeply ingrained conservative values loomed over their interactions. Drawn across ideological lines, the tension between August and his family widened with each passing day and finally erupted into outright conflict. This was compounded by another personal challenge—August came out as gay to his mother, a revelation that reshaped but did not fully fracture their relationship. His mother, to August's relief, sought out education and sensitivity training to better understand his orientation and expressed her love and acceptance in a heartfelt gesture on his birthday. Her quiet but profound gesture of acceptance stood in stark contrast to the assumptions and unspoken disapproval that August believed other family members might hold, most of whom remained unaware of his sexual orientation. This concern applied in particular to his grandfather, whose advanced age, declining health, and strong adherence to traditional family expectations and conservative religious beliefs would have made coming out to him quite problematic.

CATCH THE PODCAST

Read more or listen to the Insight Myanmar Podcast here:

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2025/2/2/episode-312-august-and-everything-after>



Photo: AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA'S SUSPICIOUS TRANSFER OF ROHINGYA PRISONERS TO CONFLICT ZONE

The Myanmar military regime has transferred 936 Rohingya prisoners, including 548 men, 267 women, and 67 children, from Yangon's Insein Prison to Sittwe in conflict-torn Rakhine State, according to Myanmar news outlets.

The transfer occurred just days after an Argentine court issued international arrest warrants for junta chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and other officials over the 2017 Rohingya genocide in Myanmar.

Rights groups reported that many detainees had been held beyond their sentenced terms, some for over 18 months.

The Political Prisoners Network Myanmar has warned that the transfer may be a pretext to use the prisoners as human shields or conscripts in the

ongoing armed clashes with the Arakan Army, which now controls most of Rakhine State.

The junta processed the prisoners' documentation in an unusual pre-dawn operation at 3:00 am on February 16, issuing unspecified identification cards.

Recently, the junta has demonstrated a pattern of forcing Rohingya from displacement camps into militia service in Rakhine State.

The timing of this transfer, coinciding with the landmark Argentine court ruling and intensifying battles with the Arakan Army, raises serious concerns about the junta's intentions.



Shamil Erdogan and Aung La N Sang in the ring

FIGHT FANS REACT TO ERDOGAN'S SWIFT VICTORY OVER MYANMAR-AMERICAN FIGHTER AUNG LA N SANG

Social media erupted with emotional responses following Shamil Erdogan's 28-second knockout of former two-division champion Aung La N Sang at ONE 171.

Myanmar fans particularly expressed their heartfelt reactions, mixing disappointment with respect for both fighters.

The stunning head kick knockout that ended the bout sparked widespread discussion online, with many supporters sharing their concern for Aung La N Sang's wellbeing.

One touching comment noted that "every fighter faces their sunset eventually" - a poignant reflection on the natural cycle of combat sports careers. Aung La is

39 years old, and Turkish fighter Erdogan is 34 years old.

What stood out was the sportsmanship displayed in many comments. While some Myanmar fans expressed sadness at seeing their hero fall, others praised Aung La's courage and legacy in the sport.

Several social media users called for respectful discourse, reminding others that wins and losses are part of the sport.

Erdogan's post-fight conduct also drew attention, with observers noting how he remained composed after his victory. One fan highlighted how Erdogan didn't even celebrate extensively, showing respect for his opponent's stature in the sport.

mizzima WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight



DIGITAL MAGAZINE

Our relaunched magazine Mizzima Weekly provides readers with a more focused read on what matters in Myanmar and the wider region, with an emphasis on analysis, insight and providing key talking points.