

ON THE GROUND IN MYANMAR

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Analysis & Insight



ARSA HEAD ARRESTED

Questions as Rohingya militant leader Ata Ullah is detained by Bangladesh

● Seminar seeks to foster peace and security on Thailand's borders

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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.

BANGLADESH SEEKS A RETURN OF THE ROHINGYA REFUGEES TO MYANMAR

Khalilur Rahman, Bangladesh's high representative on Rohingya issues Khalilur Rahman claims he is cautiously optimistic that a cessation of hostilities in neighbouring Rakhine State in Myanmar - a pre-requisite for the return of refugees - is now within the realm of possibility he told AFP on the weekend, offering an avenue of return for the Rohingya refugees.

Rahman was speaking as the Arakan Army (AA) is engaged in a fierce fight with the military for control of Rakhine, where it has seized swathes of territory in the past year, offering cautious optimism that there are "some fleeting lights at the end of the tunnel."

These words of encouragement come as the United Nations and aid workers seek substantial funds to keep providing humanitarian aid to the million or more refugees living a precarious life in the Bangladesh refugee camps.

The United Nations announced Monday this week that it was seeking nearly \$1 billion to provide life-saving aid this year for some 1.5 million Rohingya refugees and their hosts in Bangladesh. The UN and more than 100 partners launched a two-year 2025-26 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya crisis, amid what it called "dwindling financial resources and competing global crises".

The appeal seeks \$934.5 million in its first year to reach some 1.48 million people including Rohingya refugees and host communities, according to AFP.

The call comes at a difficult time for foreign humanitarian aid programme. A number of Western countries have been cutting back on foreign aid - most notably the USA, under President Donald Trump's administration.

"In its eighth year, the Rohingya humanitarian crisis remains largely out of the international spotlight, but

needs remain urgent," the UN said in a statement. Launching the appeal in Geneva, UN migration agency chief Amy Pope said drastic foreign aid cuts were putting lives on the line.

The UN and related bodies including the World Food Programme stress the importance of supporting both internally displaced people and refugees who have fled conflict in Myanmar, a situation that grew rapidly worse in the wake of the 2021 military coup and the junta's attacks on the people.

What makes sense in theory, at least, is to leverage peace returning to Rakhine State, which may be in sight if the AA finally take over the whole state, to allow the Rohingya to return home.

UN refugees chief Filippo Grandi added that ultimately, "the solution lies in Myanmar", and the situation was perhaps moving in ways "that may open up the door for the beginning of a solution".

The UN statement said that until the situation in Rakhine becomes conducive to safe and voluntary returns, "the international community must continue to fund life-saving assistance to refugees in the camps."

Any funding shortfalls could "force many to resort to desperate measures, such as embarking on dangerous boat journeys to seek safety", it added.

All this said, it is unclear how this crisis will pan out. Right now, there is vital need for substantial funds to support the Rohingya refugees and the development of a mindset and preparation for a return. Critics are likely to raise eyebrows over an organized return of the Rohingya in the near future as it is unclear how the "victors" in Rakhine will respond to such a prospect.

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Cover photo of ARSA head Ata Ullah with two of his fighters





Atta Ullah, third from left, and colleagues under arrest. Photo: Supplied

ARSA HEAD ARRESTED

QUESTIONS AS ROHINGYA

MILITANT LEADER ATA

ULLAH IS DETAINED BY

BANGLADESH

The recent arrest of Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) leader Ata Ullah raises questions about the history, motivation and actions of this militant group and how it prompted Myanmar's military to crack down on the minority Muslim Rohingya community in Rakhine State.

Much has been written about the 2016 and 2017 attacks by ARSA against Myanmar government targets, the resulting blowback and "genocide" against the community, the International Criminal Court (ICC) case, and the more recent actions by ARSA and other Rohingya militant groups against the Arakan Army - with the surprise that they appear to be working to support Myanmar military forces, the very forces they were fighting against in 2017.

Ata Ullah, 48, was arrested by the Bangladesh authorities last week. He first surfaced nearly a decade ago as the charismatic leader of ARSA, an outfit that claimed they were formed to wage an insurgency against the stateless Muslim minority's persecution in Myanmar.

Their attacks on security posts in 2017 sparked brutal reprisals that eventually sent around 750,000 Rohingya fleeing for their lives into squalid relief camps in neighbouring Bangladesh.

GROUP ATTACKS

Few if any analysts questioned the logic of this small group attacking Myanmar military and border guard targets - effectively offering the Myanmar military the "excuse" to rid Rakhine State of a Muslim minority dismissed as "interlopers" and not recognized by the Myanmar state.

Might there be more to this story than meets the eye?

The ARSA leader was arrested alongside five associates by the elite Rapid Action Battalion force on the outskirts of the capital Dhaka, while another four of his associates were arrested in the central district of Mymensingh, police said.



Atta Ullah in happier times

Ata Ullah was believed to have personally ordered the 2017 attacks and first came to public attention soon after in videos posted online, where he was seen flanked by masked gunmen and vowing to liberate the Rohingya from "dehumanised oppression".

What started out as a lauded militant group by some in the Rohingya community appears to have "turned on itself" with ARSA being accused of killings, abductions, and torture in the refugee camps and the group's leader has been accused of ordering the murder of Rohingya civic leaders who dared to speak out against the group. He has also been accused of involvement in the murder of a Bangladeshi military intelligence officer.

MILITANTS 'KILL THEIR OWN'

What is Ata Ullah and his ARSA militants responsible for?

At least 65 Rohingya refugees were killed last year in clashes between rival militant groups competing for influence in Bangladeshi relief camps, according to an NGO Fortify Rights report issued 18 March.

The 78-page report, "I May Be Killed Any Moment": Killings, Abductions, Torture, and Other Serious Violations by Rohingya Militant Groups in Bangladesh," notes that ARSA, the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) and other militant groups have for years waged a deadly battle for control of the camps. Refugee leaders campaigning against their influence have also been attacked and killed. The NGO refers to these actions as war crimes.

Fortify Rights documented 65 deaths last year along with dozens of assaults, abductions and acts of extortion blamed on "militant and criminal groups" in the camps.

The figure is down from 90 killings recorded in 2023 by the rights group.

"Rohingya armed groups are wreaking havoc in Bangladesh and Myanmar with near complete impunity," the watchdog's director John Quinley told reporters in Dhaka at the launch of a new report into the violence. "It's not only infighting that kills members of these militant outfits. Civilians are also victims."



The Fortify Rights report finds “reasonable grounds” to believe that certain acts committed by militants against Rohingya men, women, and children in refugee camps in Bangladesh constitute war crimes due to a demonstrable “nexus” between the criminal acts in Bangladesh and the ongoing armed conflict in Myanmar.

CALL TO INVESTIGATE

The report recommends that the Government of Bangladesh and international justice mechanisms - including the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar and the ICC - investigate Rohingya militant organizations operational in the refugee camps in Bangladesh and prosecute those responsible for war crimes.

The recent U.S. government funding cuts are creating more space for Rohingya militants in the camps, which will significantly worsen the security of Rohingya refugees, said Fortify Rights.

The new Fortify Rights report details yearslong and largely unmitigated deadly violence in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, including killings, abduction, torture, and threats and intimidation. It finds that deadly militant violence has increased significantly since the assassination of Mohib Ullah, a prominent Rohingya community leader and human rights defender, in September 2021. The report also shows how ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s government largely failed to protect Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh from Rohingya-led militant groups.

The report draws on interviews with 116 people, including Rohingya refugee survivors and eyewitnesses, Rohingya militants, U.N. officials, humanitarian aid workers, and others, about the ongoing violence in the camps. Fortify Rights spoke with former and current members of militant groups, including ARSA and RSO, and documented admissions of serious crimes.

YEARS OF VIOLENCE

Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have suffered years of violence and killings at the hands of Rohingya militant groups. Reported killings by camp-based militants numbered 22 in 2021, 42 in 2022, 90 in 2023, and at least 65 in 2024.

For example, on January 4, 2024, unidentified Rohingya militants abducted Mohammad Faisal - a beloved teacher, father, poet, and genocide survivor - from the Camp-4 extension between 7 and 8 p.m. and shot him dead. Before his killing, Mohammad Faisal was actively assisting Bangladesh authorities in investigating crime in the camp.

In another incident, on October 22, 2021, armed Rohingya militants, identified in an internal Bangladesh intelligence report as ARSA members, killed six men and tortured others in a madrasa - an Islamic religious school - in Camp-18 in Balukhali camp.

A Rohingya mullah - an Islamic religious leader - told Fortify Rights that militants attacked students and teachers who were staying overnight at the madrasa:

“We did not realize anything at first because we were all deeply asleep as it was 4 a.m. when they came to attack the madrasa. ... Those who entered the madrasa had knives, sticks, and guns. They entered the madrasa, fired their weapons, and killed the students with gunshots. ... Three teachers and three students were killed.”

A Rohingya man who witnessed the attack and had a relative killed in the attack told Fortify Rights: “I saw the men with knives, swords, sticks, and pistols in their hands. ... [The armed attackers] finished the killing mission, and I could see six dead bodies slaughtered on the ground. ... I saw [my relative’s] dead body. ... I saw blood everywhere.”

After militants had finished attacking students and teachers at the madrasa, they went on a rampage, beating and torturing Rohingya refugees in the neighbourhood surrounding the madrasa. One victim of this attack told Fortify Rights: “They cut off two of my fingers and hit me on my head. They thought I was dead, so they left me.”

CONTINUED THREATS

After the attack on the madrasa, Bangladesh police conducted security patrols in the surrounding area. However, the presence of the Bangladeshi police patrols did not stop ARSA from continuing its threats against Rohingya civilians. A survivor of the madrasa attack told Fortify Rights: “Even now, [ARSA] has been

threatening me, saying, 'Eat well while you are with the police. Once they are gone, you will be finished.'

He went on to say: "I feel I may be killed at any moment."

The majority of the killings by Rohingya militants documented by Fortify Rights occurred with impunity in the camps, creating a climate of fear for all camp residents, said Fortify Rights.

As well as killings, the new report details torture, abduction, and other crimes by militant Rohingya groups operating in Bangladesh, primarily by ARSA and the RSO. In an especially horrific example, in October 2023, ARSA abducted, tortured, and amputated the limbs of a 23-year-old Rohingya man, leaving him to die. Miraculously, he survived, telling Fortify Rights:

"First, they cut off my leg. I was able to hear the sound as they were cutting at the bones of my leg with a big knife. ... I told [the armed men], 'Please leave me, and I will give you whatever you want.' They replied, 'We will never leave you. We will kill you because you always report to NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] and the authorities against us.' ... [The militants] cut at my body for half an hour. My arm was cut just above my elbows."

HASINA'S FAILURE

For years, the government under ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina refused to publicly acknowledge the existence or activities of the Rohingya militant groups in Bangladesh territory. This denial resulted in a lack of access to justice or appropriate responses by Bangladesh authorities to Rohingya militant attacks on Rohingya refugees.

Donor governments should work with Bangladesh to redouble services for Rohingya at risk, including protective spaces and third-country resettlement, said Fortify Rights.

In an interview that aired on March 4, 2025, Bangladesh's interim leader, Muhammad Yunus, spoke about violence in the refugee camps, saying: "There is lots of violence, lots of drugs, lots of paramilitary activities inside the camps."

ARSA and RSO militants are engaged in Myanmar's internal armed conflict. They are both fighting with the Myanmar junta against the Arakan Army - an ethnic armed organization based in Rakhine State, Myanmar. To reinforce their armed campaigns inside Myanmar, ARSA, and RSO have abducted refugees in Bangladesh and forced them to fight in Myanmar. Such acts are grave violations of the laws of war and should be investigated as possible war crimes.

Ironically, these militant groups are supporting the Myanmar military - their enemies in 2017.

One Rohingya refugee, 17, told Fortify Rights how, in 2024, a Rohingya militant group abducted him in Bangladesh and forcibly transferred him to Myanmar to fight for Myanmar junta forces. He said:

"There were around seven people who came to a tea shop where I was drinking tea. They pointed a gun at me, blindfolded and tied my arms and legs with a rope, then abducted me from there. Later, I was taken to Myanmar .. I was taken to the Myo Thu Gyi Border Guard Police Headquarters [in Maungdaw Township, Rakhine State]."

Bangladesh's neutrality to the armed conflict in Myanmar does not shield individuals or groups operating within Bangladesh from being held accountable for war crimes. The ICC has already established jurisdiction and opened an investigation into cross-border atrocity crimes occurring against Rohingya in both Bangladesh and Myanmar. This should include crimes committed by ARSA and similar groups, said Fortify Rights.

In 2019, the ICC Chief Prosecutor at the time said the court was "aware of a number of acts of violence allegedly committed by ARSA," noting that the allegations would be kept "under review."

Three essential elements must be present to establish a war crime: there must be 1) an armed conflict; 2) a prohibited act committed against a protected person; and 3) a nexus between the armed conflict and the act committed. Protected persons include individuals not actively involved in the armed conflict.

In the context of the violence perpetrated by non-state actors in the Bangladesh refugee camps, Fortify

Rights says it has reasonable grounds to believe that all such elements are satisfied and that, as a result -at the very least, further investigation into the possibility of ongoing war crimes should be pursued.

It is unclear what the arrest of Ata Ullah will reveal and whether this action will help quell ARSA militant activity in the Bangladesh camps or in Myanmar's Rakhine.

HUMANITARIAN NIGHTMARE

Meanwhile, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres visited Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh last week where he promised to do "everything" possible to avoid looming cuts to humanitarian aid.

Funding shortfalls announced by the UN food agency this month could lead to a cut in monthly food vouchers from \$12.50 to \$6.00 per person at the camps from April.

Successive aid cuts have already caused immense hardship in the overcrowded settlements among Rohingya, who are reliant on aid and suffer from rampant malnutrition.

Bangladesh has struggled for years to support its immense refugee population, and Dhaka has said it is exploring ways to secure additional aid for Rohingya refugees.

Reporting: Mizzima, AFP, Fortify Rights

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THE FALL-OUT FROM THE US ADMINISTRATION'S CLOSURE OF VOICE OF AMERICA AND RADIO FREE ASIA

The Burmese-language services of Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA) are set to cease operations following a new policy directive issued by U.S. President Donald Trump on the night of March 14. The decision, which impacts both government and contract staff, was officially communicated on March 15, granting employees paid leave. However, by the next day, affected staff members—numbering approximately 100—were informed that their employment had been terminated with associated benefits.

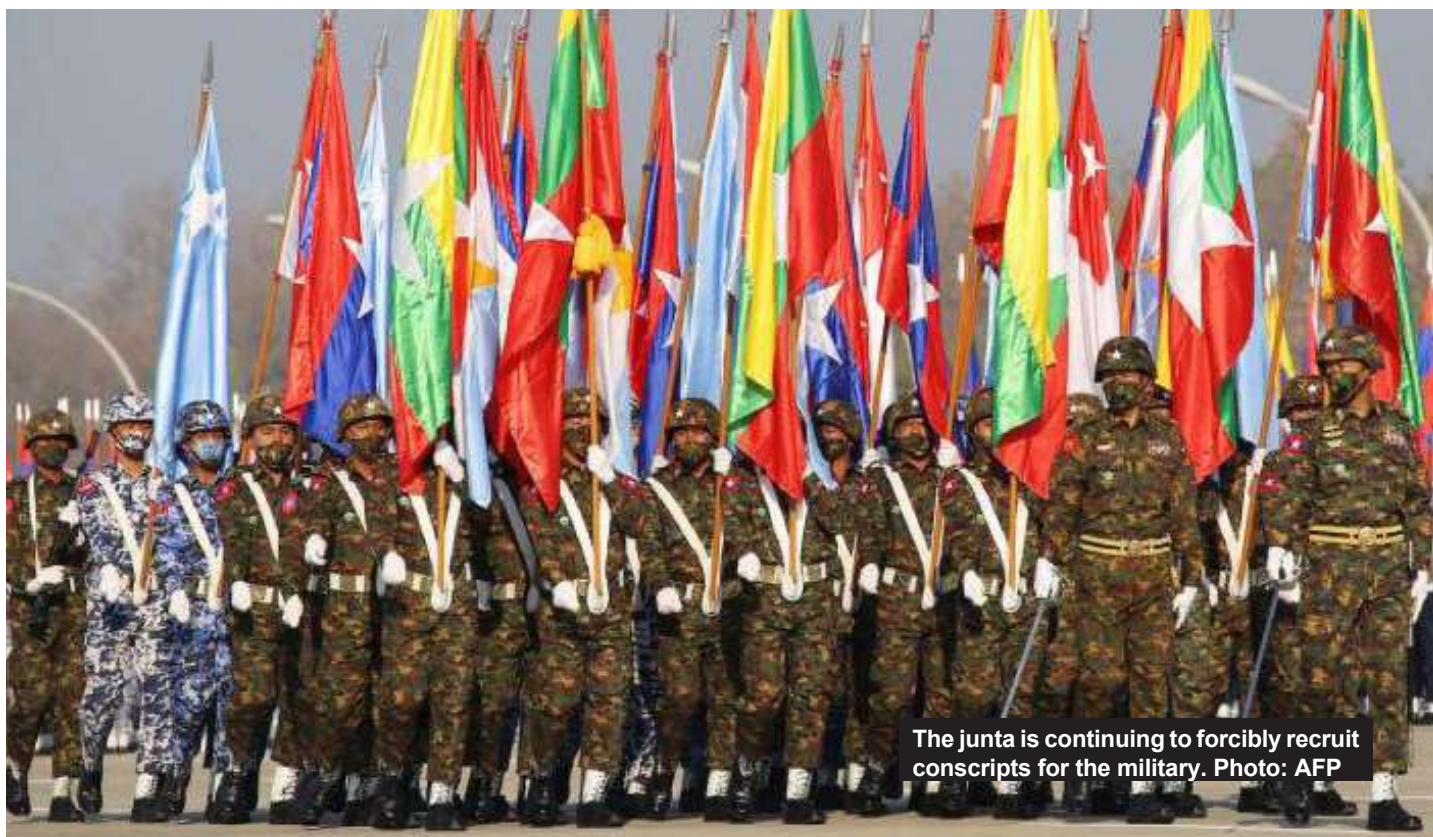
The closure of these two outlets, which have been pillars of Myanmar's independent media landscape, has raised concerns over the public's access to reliable news. In a country already overwhelmed by misinformation and propaganda amid ongoing conflict, media analysts warn that shutting down these services will leave a significant gap in credible reporting.

"They are not biased; they maintain balance in their coverage. We feel starved of information now," a listener told The Irrawaddy. "We used to wake up

listening to them in the morning and go to sleep after their night broadcasts. With them gone, it feels like we are malnourished in terms of media access."

Another listener expressed concerns about the loss of dependable news sources. "People will struggle to access accurate domestic and international news," they said. A resident of Sittwe, where intense clashes between the Arakan Army and junta forces continue, highlighted the difficulty of staying informed in an area with poor internet access. "We relied on shortwave radio for news. Now that these broadcasts have stopped, we are left in uncertainty. It's becoming extremely difficult to get accurate information."

Meanwhile, reports indicate that some journalists and media personnel affected by the closures have been approached by other organizations that are trying to spread regime propaganda. The shutdown of VOA and RFA Burmese services marks a major shift in Myanmar's media landscape, intensifying challenges for audiences seeking verified and impartial news.



The junta is continuing to forcibly recruit conscripts for the military. Photo: AFP

Updates on the junta military conscription drive

Authorities in Myanmar's Ayeyarwady Region have issued warrants for individuals attempting to evade conscription, particularly in Ye Kyi Township, according to local sources. Village administrators, accompanied by armed police, have been conducting door-to-door searches in villages such as Gwekaw to identify and list those avoiding military service.

"They are checking census records to identify those who have fled to escape conscription. This has been ongoing for two days," a local resident told DVB. Reports suggest that instead of relying on a lottery system, authorities have been forcibly conscripting

individuals since the eleventh batch of recruitment. Many conscripts who managed to escape have been declared absconders, with public announcements made in February in Ye Kyi Township.

Meanwhile, conscription-age youths in Maha Aungmyay Township, Mandalay Region, were required to participate in a lottery draw on March 24. Authorities announced the lottery at short notice, conducting the selection process in preaching halls, schools, and ward administration offices. The events were led by township officials, immigration officers, local militias, and ward administrators. Households with eligible male members were specifically targeted, though those selected were left uncertain about when they would be taken for service.



The growing concerns over Myanmar's conscription practices were indirectly acknowledged by the junta's second-in-command, Lieutenant Senior General Soe Win. During a meeting with military forces and their families in the Kalaw region, he admitted that some conscription teams had engaged in bribery and misconduct. "Problems caused by the recruitment teams need to be resolved daily," he said, emphasizing that their actions must be corrected in a timely manner.

However, a military veteran pointed out that corruption within recruitment teams has long existed, even before the enforcement of the conscription law. "The top-level officials may speak in line with policy, but on the ground, enforcement is difficult. Recruitment teams have pre-set quotas, making corruption inevitable," he said.

The junta's intensified conscription drive comes as it faces mounting battlefield losses and growing resistance nationwide. The forced recruitment measures, coupled with allegations of bribery and coercion, have further fueled public resentment and evasion efforts.

How are junta paramotors affecting PDFs and EAOs?

The Myanmar junta has increasingly deployed paramotors for military operations in Mandalay, Sagaing, Magway, and Bago Regions since early 2025. These lightweight aircraft, which are cost-effective and require skilled operators, have become a strategic tool for both reconnaissance and targeted bombings.

According to resistance sources, paramotors offer greater precision in dropping bombs compared to airplanes and drones. Their relatively low altitude—

ranging within rifle range—makes them vulnerable to ground fire, prompting the junta to conduct attacks primarily at night. A single paramotor can travel up to 90 kilometers from its base, carry a payload of approximately 160 kilograms, and drop up to five bombs per mission.

Despite their invisibility in the dark, the distinct engine noise of paramotors provides civilians with a brief warning before strikes occur. "Y-12 and jet fighters attack during the day, but paramotors come at night. We can't see them—only hear the engine. We only realize the attack when the bombs drop. We cannot counter them in the dark," a People's Defense Force (PDF) fighter from Yarza told Mizzima.

Recent reports indicate that the junta is using paramotors to target displaced civilians. "They chase internally displaced people (IDPs) all the way to their jungle shelters," said another PDF member from Myingyan District. In addition to dropping bombs, paramotor operators have been reported firing at villagers from above, as seen in an attack on Tawpu Village in Nahtoegy Township.

Civilian casualties continue to rise due to paramotor assaults. In Myaung Township, four people, including an elderly woman, were killed in a recent strike. On March 21, junta forces used paramotors alongside conventional air power to attack Nyaunggyo post in Padaung Township, Bago Region, which was under heavy assault by the Arakan Army-led alliance forces.

The growing use of paramotors has heightened security concerns in central Myanmar, making them one of the primary threats to both resistance groups and civilians in conflict zones.



Myanmar migrant children coming back from school in Thailand. Photo: Antonio Graceffo

THE FATAL ALTERNATIVE IN SHAN STATE: FLEE OR STAY

ANTONIO GRACEFFO

“The total income of my family isn’t enough to buy new clothes and blankets, so we rely on our neighbors to share with us,” said Loung Panta.

The war in Burma has claimed thousands of lives, while many more have been left disabled by government bombs and landmines. However, the impact extends far beyond deaths and physical injuries—tens of millions have seen their life plans and aspirations vanish before their eyes.

The loss of potential and destruction of human capital are among the war’s most severe and far-reaching consequences. Approximately 26% of the population now lives below the poverty line, and an estimated 20 million people require humanitarian assistance. In Northern Shan State, the situation is even worse, with more than 37% of the population living in poverty.

Millions are grappling with the choice of whether to endure the hardships of life in Burma or flee to neighboring Thailand, where they will join the throngs of undocumented Burmese facing a new set of struggles. It is a brutal dilemma, where the best one can hope for is survival—and perhaps a slight reduction in suffering.

A 38-year-old Shan woman, Nang Mwe Oo, explained why she recently fled to Thailand, where she

now works as a laborer on a garlic farm, earning 300 baht (\$9 USD) per day.

“We lived in a small village called Wan. Before the military coup, there were 50 households, but after the military took power, only 15 families remained,” she shared. “In my area, several militias operate.”

She listed the armed groups active in her region, including the SSA-South (Restoration Council of Shan State – RCSS/SSA-S), SSA-North (Shan State Progress Party – SSPP/SSA-N), BGF 768, United Wa State Army (UWSA), and the Burmese military (State Administrative Council – SAC). The area is also plagued by call center gangs, locally known as Jia Pyan, a transliteration of the Chinese name (zhàpiàn diànhuà zhōngxīn), which means “telephone fraud center.”

“We have faced countless hardships under the pressure of these armed groups,” she said. She went on to describe how they forcibly recruit young people into military service. “The SSPP and UWSA are particularly strict. They check family registration books to verify household members. If someone is away—whether working abroad or living elsewhere—the military pressures their parents to bring them back to enlist. If they refuse, the parents risk arrest. Many young people flee to avoid being forcibly recruited.”

Militias and gangs are notorious for criminal

activities, including human trafficking, scams, illegal drug production and distribution, and the arms trade. Shan State is the largest drug-producing region in Myanmar, accounting for 88% of the country's opium crop. At the same time, Myanmar has become the region's leading producer of synthetic drugs, particularly yaba—a mix of methamphetamine and caffeine.

Yaba production in Shan State has surged to such an extent that prices have collapsed, with pills selling for as little as \$0.25 each in local markets. Some reports suggest that the kyat has depreciated so severely that, in certain parts of Shan State, yaba pills are even being used as currency.

Despite low local prices, transnational trafficking has grown into a multibillion-dollar industry, with yaba shipments fetching exponentially higher prices as they move through regional and global markets. A kilo of pills sells for between \$4,000 and \$7,000 USD in Southeast Asia and fetches multiples of that price by the time it reaches Australia.

The drug producers “torture people badly,” she recounted. “They force their workers to produce and sell 200 yaba pills per day. If they fail to meet the quota, they tie them up, lock them in cages like animals, beat them, or even hang them.”

Fearing for her family's safety, Nang Mwe Oo made the heartbreaking decision to leave her home. “We didn't want to leave our village, but the situation became unbearable. If we stayed, we would face endless hardships, and I feared one of the armed groups would take my daughter for military service.” She was

also terrified of the gangs. In the end, her family gave up everything and fled to Thailand - “our only option for safety, even if it meant living as illegal migrants.”

Nang Mwe Oo lost her oldest sons to the military in Burma, but she has her young daughter with her in Thailand. She has been told that her daughter will be able to attend an informal school for older, undocumented children at the start of the next semester. That, and the fact that they are both still alive, might be the one bright spot in her story.

As bad as things are in Shan State, not everyone has the means to flee. While those like Nang Mwe Oo take the risk of crossing into Thailand in search of safety, others—especially the poor and disabled—have no choice but to remain behind, struggling to survive amid worsening conditions.

For Loung Panta, a 55-year-old Shan man born with only one hand, and his wife, Nang Noan, who is visually impaired, escaping was never an option. Already disadvantaged before the coup, their situation has only grown more desperate as social services collapse. Homeless, they live in a temporary shelter on farmland where Loung Panta works as a caretaker, earning just 15,000 kyat (\$8 USD) per month.

The couple has four children—two sons and two daughters—but only the two youngest, aged 7 and 13, still live with them. Instead of attending school, they work on garlic farms and paddy fields to help support the family. When the farming season ends, they take jobs as cattle caretakers to earn additional income. On days when no farm work is available, the children



venture into the jungle to gather mushrooms and sell them in the local market.

Loung Panta also does whatever he can to provide. He cuts young bamboo to make fencing materials, which he sells to neighbors, and catches fish from small streams and paddy fields, which his wife sells at the market for extra money.

"We are deeply saddened that we cannot send our children to school like other families," said Nang Noan. "Our children have to start working at a young age because we believe that survival must come first."

Alongside the universal suffering gripping all of Myanmar, families are forced to make agonizing decisions—chief among them, whether to flee to Thailand or stay behind.

For young people facing conscription, Thailand offers a chance to escape military service and avoid being dragged into the war. But leaving comes at a cost—their parents may face retaliation in their absence. For parents, the journey to Thailand means getting themselves and their children beyond the reach of armed groups and criminal enterprises, yet it also means stepping into the unknown. Life as

an undocumented laborer brings the likelihood of grueling physical work, poverty, and the constant fear of deportation. Still, for some, the risk is worth it if it means their children might have the chance to attend school and build a future.

For others, like Loung Panta and Nang Noan, fleeing is not an option. Keeping their children out of school was never a choice—it was a necessity for survival. But even this precarious existence carries its own looming dangers. Their middle child will soon turn 14—old enough for unscrupulous armed groups to forcibly conscript her. If not next year, then certainly the one after. For his parents, this wouldn't just mean losing a precious child to war, but also losing a critical source of income that helps keep their family afloat.

For those with the means and will to flee, the choice is brutal—neither path offers true safety, but one may be less likely to lead to death. For those with no choice but to remain, the future is simply a continuation of their current suffering—one that already feels hopeless.

Antonio Graceffo is an American economist, China analyst and author who has lived in several Asian countries.



Migrant work in Thailand is insecure.
Photo: Antonio Graceffo



SEMINAR AT THAI PARLIAMENT HOUSE SEEKS TO FOSTER PEACE AND SECURITY ON THAILAND'S BORDERS

Thai Parliament House is hosting a two-day seminar organized by Thailand's Standing Committee on National Security, Border Affairs, National Strategy and Reform to discuss important peace and security issues concerning Thailand's borders, particularly the troubled Thai-Myanmar borderline and the crisis in Myanmar.

The seminar is entitled: "Fostering Sustainable Peace and Security: Thailand and ASEAN's Path towards Border Stability and Democracy," runs from 22 to 23 March.

The event is the second annual event to help update policymakers, analysts and the media on border security. It is being held at a time when the fall-out from the 2021 Myanmar military coup is prompting serious border security issues for Thailand. The seminar had a particular focus on the complex situation concerning Myanmar.

The aim of the seminar is to foster constructive dialogue, explore potential solutions, and strengthen

collaborative efforts towards a more peaceful and secure ASEAN.

Two sections of the two-day event are open to publication, with other sessions being held in private to allow a free flow of views.

In the welcome speech by Mr Rangsiman Rome, Chairperson of the Standing Committee on National Security, Border Affairs, National Strategy and Reform, Thailand, addressed the conflict in Myanmar, noting the ongoing conflict has uprooted millions, leaving devastation in their wake, and casting a shadow far beyond its borders.

The following is the main substance of his speech:

This tragedy has led not only to human suffering but also given rise to transnational criminal enterprise. From scam centres to drug trafficking to the trade in human rights. This criminal network now stands as the primary threat to Thailand's national security and the stability and the international community at large.

It is therefore critical that we adopt a proactive approach to these challenges by working hand in hand to foster an environment where meaningful dialogue can take root and to lend our support to the pursuit of a peaceful and enduring solution to the crisis in Myanmar.

Despite the daunting challenges we face, this period of global instability is a reminder of our shared responsibility to uphold democratic values and promote regional stability. The committee on National Security Borders Affairs National Security and Reform of the House of Representatives on Thailand remains fully committed to strengthening Thailand's national security and contributing to the security of the ASEAN region as a whole. This now, the second year, we have had the privilege of hosting this seminar here at the Parliament of Thailand. Last year the event was a great success and led to several positive outcomes that we are proud of.

One notable example is our cooperation with Mr Tom Andrews, the UN Special Rapporteur who is with us again this year. That collaboration helped pave the way for the Bank of Thailand to create a watchlist of companies potentially complicit in supporting crimes against humanity in Myanmar. Additionally, we received valuable information and insight from many of you from last year's discussions which directly contributed to the action plans targeting the scam centres in Myawaddy.

With momentum behind us, I am optimistic this year's seminar will bring even more progress as we work together to promote peace and stability in the region. We are collaborating closely with local governments and NGOs to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to internally displaced persons among our borders. However, recent developments including the executive order from President Donald Trump have complicated this mission making international and ASEAN support more vital than ever to ensure the safety and well-being of all those affected.

For Myanmar workers in Thailand, we are actively exploring ways to legitimize their legal status as migrant workers, and to implement a healthcare system for them in partnership with the Ministry of Labour. Just earlier this month, we hosted a seminar to discuss this matter in depth, here in this very hall.

Regarding the growing threat of transnational crimes, dismantling this criminal network along our

borders is among our top priorities. But this is a task we cannot achieve alone. Over the past two years, our joint effort with the Royal Thai Army has led to the successful return of numerous human trafficking victims of various nationalities from scam centres in Myawaddy.

The Royal Thai government has also begun cutting off the supply of electricity, fuel and auto resources to this compound in an effort to shut them down. Yet much more needs to be done. Given the vast economic damage these criminal operations have caused worldwide we must strengthen our cooperation to end their activity and prevent further victimization. Apart from external threats, Thailand faced numerous challenges that we must overcome. From the rampant spread of drugs and illegal substances that have infected our people, the economic crisis and illegal smuggling of products, to the conflict in the Deep South that we have been pushing to renew the peace process.

To counter this growing threat to our national security, our committee has proposed a series of aims at combating corruption and improving performance. Earlier this year, we introduced a bill to reform our judicial system by allowing attorneys to collaborate more closely with police on criminal cases, streamlining process and enhancing the effectiveness of prosecutions. Additionally, our sub-committee are working diligently on police reforms and a comprehensive restructuring to border security. We firmly believe these changes will strengthen Thailand's national security and help eradicate the corruption that has undermined our institutions for too long.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude to our co-host, the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights whose unwavering dedication and support have made this event possible.

As chairperson of the committee on National Security, I thank you sincerely for your presence today. Let us reaffirm that the only path forward is one of unity and cooperation. As we collectively advocate for a democratic and stable Myanmar, I hope this seminar serves as a platform where we can speak openly, grow closer, foster mutual understanding and identify ways to effectively address the challenges ahead. Paving the way for peaceful and lasting political solution for Myanmar. Thank you.



UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar Tom Andrews speaking at the seminar.

BRIDGING THE GAP: THAI SEMINAR EXAMINES THE VARIOUS APPROACHES TO THE MYANMAR CRISIS AND BORDER SECURITY

A comprehensive two-day seminar held at Thailand's Parliament House on the weekend delved into a range of challenges faced by Thailand in tackling the Myanmar crisis, border security, scam centres, and the status of Myanmar citizens fleeing to Thailand.

The seminar was entitled: Fostering Sustainable peace and Security: Thailand and ASEAN's Path towards Border Stability and Democracy.

Held on 22 and 23 March, the seminar included open sessions, and closed sessions that the media could not report. It was the second annual event of this nature.

The event was led by Mr Rangsimon Rome, chairperson of Thailand's Standing Committee on National Security, Border Affairs, National Strategy and Reform.

In two days of lengthy sessions, discussions were held on the Thai-Myanmar border challenges, what the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) needs to do to tackle the Myanmar crisis, transnational crime, including the Myanmar-based scam centres, the UN's approach to the crisis, political updates and health and education challenges for Myanmar nationals on Thai soil.

In an attempt to summarize the lengthy sessions, the following is an assessment of the challenges facing Thailand in tackling the Myanmar crisis and border concerns as laid out by the speakers.

Burmese researcher Moe Thuzar, speaking during

a keynote summary speech on the first day, stressed the importance of engaging with the range of actors in the Myanmar crisis.

"The way in which the current Myanmar crisis is viewed, interpreted or understood by various external actors or interlocutors, and the lived realities, expectations and aspirations of the various Myanmar political and ethnic actors and stakeholders present an "outside-in inside-out" gap of sorts that needs to be bridged," she said.

"External interlocutors, especially in intergovernmental or inter-state settings, refer to past experiences of communicating with Naypyidaw, while Myanmar's present reality is that there are many 'Myanmars' in the country, and along the country's peripheries. Thus, even as engagement with one entity or group of individuals might not equate with acceptance, it is important to engage with all key actors or stakeholders in independent dialogue to build trust and confidence. The ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute's annual State of Southeast Asia survey findings related to assessing ASEAN's response to the Myanmar crisis also indicate a regional preference for this option," Moe Thuzar notes.

"Creative approaches can thus be considered in bringing up the importance of accountability to comply with what ASEAN members have collectively agreed upon with regards to the Five Point Consensus negotiated with the State Administration Council (SAC) chief. Despite frustrations over the lack of progress in pursuing some of the Five Point Consensus (5PC)

priorities, the 5PC can be viewed as a broad policy framework under which specific actions can be taken to implement the broad priorities.

“In this context, it is also important to connect the dots between regional priorities and commitments, national interests and actions, and the global and geopolitical circumstances that may inform and influence any action.

“The conflict dynamics in Myanmar may also require consideration of a medium-term, multi-track strategy, where the different ASEAN members can exercise and exert their different strengths and capacities in concert, and coordinate with ASEAN’s dialogue partners and other external interlocutors who have an interest to assist the Myanmar people achieve their aspirations to forge a better future,” Moe Thuzar adds.

BORDER SECURITY

The seminar started with a session on the question of border security, as well as a future federal Myanmar, and contentious issue of a planned election by the Myanmar military junta or SAC.

The conflict that erupted in Myanmar after the military coup of February 2021 has sent ripples throughout Southeast Asia, with Thailand bearing some of the effects, from bombs and shells landing on the Thai side of the border, to the fall-out from the scam centres. From border security issues to the delivery of humanitarian aid, the situation poses substantial challenges for both Thailand and ASEAN as a whole. In this context, Thailand faces not only direct threats to its sovereignty and stability but also moral and diplomatic dilemmas that have far-reaching implications for the region.

Border security between Thailand and Myanmar has become increasingly problematic due to the political instability in Myanmar, speakers said. With the ongoing conflict between the Myanmar military and various ethnic armed groups, the porous border region has become a hotspot for cross-border movements. Refugees, armed groups, and illegal trade have been a consistent concern in these areas and Thailand has seen a significant uptick since the Myanmar coup. Thousands of Myanmar nationals have crossed the border into Thailand, seeking refuge from violence, forced recruitment by the military, or to escape deteriorating living conditions. This situation places immense pressure on Thai border security forces who are tasked with regulating these movements while managing the broader issues of trafficking, smuggling, and illegal cross-border activities.

Furthermore, the presence of various armed groups near the border complicates the situation. The Thai government has to balance ensuring its security while simultaneously not exacerbating an already troubled situation. Striking this balance is critical, especially as there is no clear end in sight to the conflict in Myanmar, and the situation is unpredictable.

SCAMS AND CRIMINALS

Another aspect of the border security challenge lies in the proliferation of scam centres operating on the Myanmar side of the border, an issue that has hit local and international headlines. These scam centres primarily target individuals in Myanmar and neighbouring countries by luring them into fraudulent operations, such as online scams, human trafficking, and forced labour. The centres are often located in border areas on the Myanmar side of the border where the Thai authorities cannot control. These illegal enterprises have made headlines in recent years as they increasingly affect the lives of Myanmar citizens, many of whom are desperate for work or escape from the harsh realities of war, as well as a range of other nationalities, including Chinese citizens.

Thailand has made a number of interventions including help with the rescue of individuals caught up in these crimes and the cutting off of electricity, fuel and auto parts to areas that host the scam centres. China has also engaged with this issue, given a significant proportion of the trafficked people are Chinese nationals. Chinese government pressure has arguably prompted regional countries, notably Thailand, to take action against the criminals.

The operation of scam centres complicates Thailand’s position in dealing with Myanmar. These centres are often used to fund activities of illegal networks that can undermine the stability of border regions. The presence of such centres also tarnishes Thailand’s image internationally, as they are often seen as exploitative operations taking advantage of vulnerable refugees and migrants. The number of Chinese tourists visiting Thailand dropped significantly after “bad press” over Chinese nationals being kidnapped, including a famous movie star. The political situation in Myanmar, where the military junta has become more repressive, contributes to the growing number of victims who are trafficked or coerced into these operations.

HUMANITARIAN AID

One of the most pressing challenges facing Thailand in dealing with the Myanmar crisis is ensuring that humanitarian aid reaches those in need. While Thailand has been a generous host for Myanmar refugees, its

ability to deliver aid efficiently and in accordance with international standards is often hindered by a mix of political, logistical, and security concerns. Many of the displaced Myanmar people live in temporary refugee camps in Thailand's border regions. These camps, which house thousands of refugees, often lack basic services and are vulnerable to overcrowding, disease outbreaks, and insufficient supplies.

As speakers pointed out, these camps are now facing serious funding problems, after the US government put a halt to foreign aid and the work of USAID. As UN Special Rapporteur Tom Andrews pointed out, 19.9 million people in Myanmar now need humanitarian support. Myanmar is a "hunger hotspot" he said.

One significant issue is the difficulty in accessing remote areas to deliver aid, particularly in the context of conflict zones where armed groups or the Myanmar military might obstruct aid. Humanitarian organizations face restrictions from both the Myanmar government and, at times, from the Thai authorities, making it difficult to coordinate relief efforts. Political sensitivities also play a role, as Thailand must balance international expectations with its own domestic security concerns and its delicate relationship with Myanmar's military-led government. Furthermore, ASEAN, as a regional body, has been largely ineffective in offering coordinated solutions to this crisis, leading to a situation where ad hoc responses from neighbouring countries are often more reactive than proactive.

Thailand's role as both a recipient and provider of humanitarian aid complicates this issue. While Thailand has provided shelter and medical assistance to refugees, the lack of coordination between various national and international organizations often leads to inefficiencies. Aid distribution can become politically charged when donors or recipients perceive Thai government restrictions as too heavy-handed or politically motivated, thus stalling progress.

FLEEING CONSCRIPTION

Another contentious issue concerns Myanmar citizens who flee to Thailand to avoid conscription by the Myanmar military. Following the coup, the Myanmar military has been aggressively recruiting young men for military service, with many conscripts reportedly being forced into combat roles in war zones. As a result, young men, fearing for their lives, have fled across the border into Thailand. These individuals face the challenge of being caught between two competing interests: avoiding forced conscription in Myanmar and seeking refugee status in Thailand, which is not an easy

process. As one speaker pointed out, the status of these individuals needs clarity as they are fleeing a war, and should not be merely treated as an illegal immigrant.

Thailand's legal framework does not provide full refugee status to Myanmar citizens, and while they may be temporarily sheltered, their legal status remains ambiguous. The Thai government has to navigate these challenges while balancing domestic concerns about the potential for large numbers of military-age males fleeing Myanmar. There is also the issue of whether Thailand should classify these individuals as refugees or asylum seekers and whether it is prepared to offer them legal protections or only temporary asylum.

FAILED 5-POINT PEACE PLAN

ASEAN, too, has been slow to act on this issue and their Five-Point Consensus, signed in 2021 by the Myanmar junta, appears dead in the water.

The regional body has failed to offer any cohesive strategy on how to handle these individuals, often falling back on its non-interference principle, which hinders any significant collective response. This inaction places the burden solely on Thailand and the other neighbouring countries that face similar challenges.

While individual countries have offered varying degrees of assistance, the lack of a unified ASEAN approach highlights the fragmentation of regional politics and underscores the limitations of ASEAN's ability to address such crises effectively.

MULTIFACETED CHALLENGES

The challenges that Thailand and ASEAN face in dealing with Myanmar's crisis are complex and multifaceted, ranging from border security to the delivery of humanitarian aid and the proper treatment of conscription-avoiding refugees. Thailand, in particular, bears much of the burden, balancing the competing interests of national security, humanitarianism, and regional cooperation.

ASEAN's inability to present a unified approach only compounds the difficulties, leaving neighbouring countries like Thailand to manage a crisis that is not of their making. As the Myanmar crisis deepens, it is imperative for ASEAN to reevaluate its strategies for dealing with this evolving crisis, especially if it hopes to maintain regional stability and prevent further destabilization.

One of the key messages to come out of the seminar is the call for a more compassionate approach to the victims of the Myanmar crisis who turn up at Thailand's door.

Professor Vitit Muntarbhorn speaking at the seminar.



PROF VITIT MUNTARBHORN OUTLINES THAILAND'S MAIN CHALLENGES REGARDING THE MYANMAR CRISIS

Professor Vitit Muntarbhorn offered insights into Thailand's main challenges in tackling border issues and the Myanmar crisis in a seminar held at Parliament House in Bangkok on Sunday.

The two-day seminar was entitled: Fostering Sustainable peace and Security: Thailand and ASEAN's Path towards Border Stability and Democracy.

The seminar, held on 22 and 23 March, included open sessions, and closed sessions that the media could not report.

The following is an edited and abridged version of Professor Vitit Muntarbhorn's speech, the final presentation bar the roundup at the end:

Firstly, I am happy to be in parliament as a pillar of the state as a check and balance. And we have to use this to negotiate well with the executive branch, which handles a lot of the foreign policy. So, let's make sure that we use this check and balance well for the future, and to enable particularly Thailand now sitting in the UN human rights Council to have a more proactive meaningful resourceful role on Myanmar.

Secondly, whatever we advocate here must be non-partisan. It has to transcend any colours and it has to be conveyed through all the political parties as issues of national concern together, transcending political parties.

And thirdly, this cannot be a personalized quid pro quo affair. So many so-called Thai policies have

been personalized quid pro quo. Yes and no, give and take, vested interest at the top, which claimed to be national policies, but which are not. And so what we want is convincing, substantive, synchronized, systematic national policy, humane, realistic interests, including Thai interests, but not personalized quid pro quo and that is a big issue today – the hidden quid pro quo personalized interests which claim to be national policy. Will it be on this issue or other issues that you and I follow.

So those are the three lynch pins to start off with in terms of the context.

Secondly, the contours shaping this. Well, we have talked about a multi-layered panorama – national, regional, international, multilateralism, but you know multilateralism is also fragmenting. And yet there are opportunities every step of the way, because even if one level is blocked, you might try something else. We do not put all eggs in one basket and we should not. We work on the basis of checks and balances. And we've heard many options today. Even if it's stuck in the UN Security Council or General Assembly. You can still support good education for refugees and you can still advocate that refugees should be able to work, especially when there is a decline of aid at this point in time. It's not impossible, even if it is stuck at the top. Multi-layered means multi strategies or multi components of strategies that can reach out and not be stuck. We are not going to be despondent. We're going to be astute and strategic.

Secondly, it is multi factored. Security, yes, human security, we don't neglect national security but in a humane sense. Social economic cultural environmental, humane, humanitarian, national and international interests together. We heard many possibilities today in terms of the multi factors of what is possible and we are not going to neglect humanitarian issues while we also advocate socio-economic development and we've

heard this already in terms of a merged issue, merged approach of the possibilities of change.

And, thirdly, it is multi actor, 'multi-layered'. Well, we've heard about the (Myanmar) junta, we've talked about the ethnic armed groups and non-governmental groups, we've talked about civil society. Many of whom are here this afternoon. We are neighbours and there are other neighbours that have not been mentioned too much. You haven't mentioned India very much. You have mentioned some others but not India and we will talk about this in a moment. In terms of the slight missing links that offer opportunities for the future. And the international community at large. In a world of multilateralism that is fragmenting.

So, what are some opportunities? Of change. Maybe we need to go for a more plurilateral entry point. Several countries and blocks are coming together. But not necessarily waiting for the superpower. Especially when they are bickering or becoming insular or chauvinistic or whatever. We need to transcend the negative fragmentation which interfaces with elements of multilateralism today. Even though humanitarian rules are based on multilateral norms which we do cherish and will ensure in terms of implementation, to the best of our ability.

What are some transversal concerns that cut across the various policies that we've heard about today of what we wish to see in terms of components for a brighter future even among very dark times?

Concerns. We seek a systematic national policy from Thailand. Not a personalized vested interest approach and that is the most dangerous in terms of national policy that doesn't really exist. But it is personalized. Has been personalized. And of which we must be wary. Secondly, a transversal concern is accessibility, different types of access to key players, to geographies, to political strata, different stakeholders,

humanitarian assistance here and there. If you cross the border, we are also concerned not only with cross border, but cross line between different mini state of any state including Myanmar. So, it is not just cross border access but cross line. As well as border security in terms of access but with a humane touch. With objective, international monitoring. Not just subjective. Access but with some credibility in terms of international monitoring. The UN is there. It is not perfect but it is the best humanity can do, unfortunately. So, use it even if it is disintegrating to some extent but not all arms of the UN are disintegrating and the better part of the UN are the ones at the field level, not the ones worrying about no electricity in New York or Geneva for the escalator, at least.

Thirdly, transparency. Lots. Let's be polite. We don't want blood money. We don't want to be feeding the pockets of the (Myanmar) junta. We want due diligence from the business sector as well as political actors actually. They are not very duly diligent at this point in time. We're anti-corruption and we advocate a certain sense of responsibility and accountability as well actually. Through that transparency.

Next we are concerned, fourthly, as regards concerns with what I call trans nationality or trans territoriality. The spill over, the border flows, the criminality, and we haven't solved that 100 per cent, I mean how many prosecutions have there been in terms of the online scams around here? Recent ones. There has only been one. And here we talk about thousands being sent back to the countries of origin. But no prosecutions around here. It's just next door. And we have human trafficking law. We have anti-scam laws in terms of criminal code, etc. So, yes, I mean let's help those who are victims but have some accountability in terms of protection. Particularly in regards to the spillover effect and the criminal elements that benefit from our weaknesses politically here and there.

First, the question of sustainability and actually of course we are all advocating maybe a bit more aid after 90 days of a certain suspension (USAID). But the crunch is not just sustainability in the old way. It's diversification and more self-reliance actually. That's sustainability of a different kind. In terms of not putting your eggs in one basket. Or at least not the previous basket anyway. Because the world is changing. And it is also an opportunity to take stock of how we build our capacity and not just ask for money all the time. The donor, donate, relationship. It's not. It's partnership for the future and maybe our wisdom could even transcend those who are now rescinding their humanitarian aid towards us.

And then there is the element of omnivulnerability in terms of intersectionality, different types of vulnerability. They are a concerned with gender, children, disabilities, and we are so happy our friend the special rapporteur for Myanmar (Tom Andrews) is here because he advocates very much for intersectionality in terms of addressing vulnerabilities of different kinds that pervade our very sense of being. One person might be multiply violated, sadly, or discriminated against. So, there are some concerns, which are six transversal concerns, which cut across the planning we seek to do in terms of improved policy making. And last but not least, what are the components that protrude, exude, emanate from the discussions that would be the advice to the Thai authorities at least in terms of the next steps towards a more synchronized systematic policy that is nation-state based rather than personalized for hidden benefits here and there.

Number one, the component is that we want, we advocate, truncate, stop, amputate the lifeline to the junta please. And that was the message from our friend, the special rapporteur this morning. Stop the money. Stop the arms. Stop the illegitimacy. And happily one bank is stopping transfer to a certain bank in that country as stoppage of potential blood money. Well,

we still have to deal with money, negative money, arms and their attempts to be legitimate. Together with the credential issue in the United Nations which is at the moment still pending. But still it is not so bad in terms of this ambivalent situation at the moment in another country. Not so far away, there used to be an empty seat policy actually in terms of no one sitting in the seat in the General Assembly, but at the moment the country is still in the seat to some extent in terms of the person who was there before the coup d'état.

Secondly, sustain aid, please, if you can, but if not, diversify, creatively. Other partners can come in a bit, hopefully to help the Thai Border Consortium but otherwise we will have to look to other ways. And happily, the Thai authorities are a bit more open to helping at least on the health side. So that is a starting point. And hopefully we can expand that to education and more volunteers and so on. And we have to learn to scale down as well and be more compact in terms of streamlining, I'm afraid, for the next steps.

Thirdly, let's retain the space for humanitarian actors. The UN must remain in Myanmar and must try to have more crossline access as well as cross border access. And it is still there but it is shrinking. Together with whatever civil society presences across cultures that we can work towards. And we cherish cross-cultural cooperation between Buddhists, Muslims and others in Myanmar and elsewhere.

Fourthly, we must protect civilians more effectively and that ranges from respect for human rights as a whole. Sadly, so many detainees, sadly those flying off somewhere in flight because of the forced conscription. We are concerned with 3.5 million internally displaced persons as well as access to them in terms of humanitarian aid which is also dependent on the presence of humanitarian actors including the UN in Myanmar. We are concerned with 2 million refugees outside including in Thailand, the old group and others

together with new ones and what about how do you deal with the new ones arriving who have been coming because of conscription? What policy? Can they become persons of concern of the UNHCR classified as refugees or not when they are fleeing conscription and when they might take up a job on arrival also. These are issues that have to be ironed out. And we've heard already the 80,000 old batch who have spent 30 years in Thailand. They need to be able to work. I've said this for years. And we are hearing this so many times today. There is no money. They need to work and there is no point in disabling them, by keeping them in the camps. Nothing worse than people doing nothing in the camps, especially when there is no money. It is also a security issue if you think about it. For the benefit of everybody including the Thai human security and national security. We should be talking about this.

And then of course as has been voiced, it is not just human rights, it's human rights in times of war, protection of civilians, against attacks, international humanitarian law being violated with these air attacks and indiscriminate targeting of people and hospitals and so on. And then of course there are accountability issues for violations and we can be at least cognizant of the work of the International Court of Justice today and there is a court case pending. There is a court case pending in the International Criminal Court and there is national jurisdiction being exercised in Argentina as voiced by some Rohingya groups. So those are the harder elements of accountability to protect civilians while we also work with the softer elements of humanitarian assistance and protection for the conglomeration of victims and civilians and those affected.

Six, we advocate for a more comprehensive integrated response that bears in mind connectivity between human rights, peace, sustainable development, and democracy. And there are different layers where we can operate. Humanitarian response in terms of

humanitarian aid maybe but what about tackling the root causes? Not very easy. Part of the root causes are historical, let's not forget. Some groups were excluded because of the independence element which excluded particularly the Rohingya. And you only need to look back to the Second World War as to what people are doing then. To understand why they are discriminated against also today. There is a longitudinal bird's eye view that we have to look at in terms of root causes. And our international standards that we can use to enable full implementation of people's protection. And in the meantime, of course, I mean, we've heard about federalism before even nineteen eighty something, ninety something. I mean there was a draft constitution being circulated by the border here in Thailand before the coming into power of people, Aung San Suu Kyi and so on. So, you know, the federal approach is something that was aired then and could be something aired now and I am sort of intrigued, while we talk about humanitarian response, what about a peace process, if at all? Is it not possible? Is there a peace gateway? Together with human rights, democracy and sustainable development?

And in the meantime, of course, we can undertake certain little things like the little touches that we've heard in terms of doables such as health workers and more access to education and work in vicinity of here and last but not least, let's maximize leverages. Let's be strategic and clever and astute. Different leverages, constructive leverages, international, multilateral, regional, national.

You know, shortly there will be a meeting here, a summit of BIMSTEC. The Bay of Bengal summit, and we will have India there and Bangladesh and various others and Myanmar. I'm just waiting to see how they are going to be represented. But BIMSTEC is also interesting because it is the outreach towards South Asia. Whereas, of course, ASEAN well you have got the chair, you have to think of and see what the chair is

going to do together with some partners and we hope Thailand will be active but in a systematic approach not a personalized approach in terms of policy.

And we have got other possibilities. We have got a UN high-level forum on Rohingya in the General Assembly coming up. So, let's see what we can do there and you know in the UN Security Council resolution, the only one which advocated the five-point consensus of ASEAN. It actually referred directly to the word Rohingya as well.

As you know I have trained people in Myanmar. Whether to mention or not to government officials so many years ago, when I went, what I did was this, as a life story, I said have a look at this, what the UN says and what do you think of this? An this was in front of so-called government human rights people. I put on the board various information from the UN. I didn't use the word Rohingya, I just pointed to the screen which had the word Rohingya on it. And oh my god, this flurry of hands 'No Rohingya, No Rohingya.' That's what you have to deal with. So, my speechlessness conveyed a certain element to them too. So, you don't always have to be vocal, you just have to be tactful here and there.

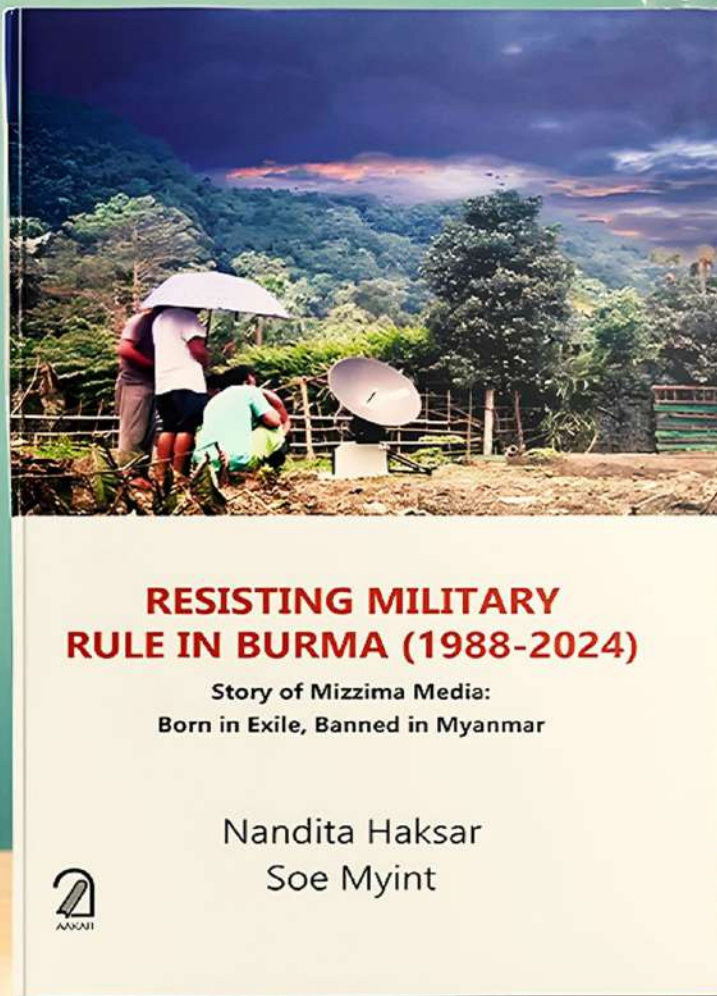
And maybe I am intrigued. I am not always multilateral. But what about a more plural lateral approach? Learning from the trade negotiations. Maybe ASEAN-plus, maybe ASEAN BIMSTEC, and various other actors from the region. We are not neglecting superpowers but it they don't work so much together these days maybe we need some other options. So, please don't be daunted. I am not going to forget my absent friends nor are you. We will give hope and it will be hope with dexterity, creativity, and empathy.

Thank you.

RESISTING MILITARY RULE IN BURMA (1988-2024)

STORY OF MIZZIMA MEDIA: BORN IN EXILE, BANNED IN MYANMAR

by *Nandita Haksar and Soe Myint*



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Voice of America Burmese Service presenters

VOICE OF AMERICA'S CRITICAL ROLE IN COUNTERING DISINFORMATION, SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY IN BURMA

JAMES SHWE

Many of the Burmese diaspora who are advocating for democracy in Burma in California, underscore the indispensable role Voice of America (VOA) has played for decades as a lifeline against the military dictatorship's misinformation and disinformation campaigns.

VOA has been a trusted source of truth for the people of Burma, empowering them in their fight for democracy while also addressing regional threats posed by foreign powers and extremist groups.

VOA as Lifeline Against Military Disinformation

Since the military seized power in 1962, Burma has been subjected to relentless propaganda aimed at suppressing dissent and manipulating public opinion. This disinformation intensified after the 2021 coup, as the junta weaponized state-controlled media and social platforms to distort reality. In this environment, VOA has been a beacon of truth, providing accurate reporting on human rights abuses, resistance efforts, and political developments. It amplifies the voices of pro-democracy leaders silenced within Burma and exposes the regime's atrocities to the world.

For millions of Burmese citizens, VOA represents

hope and resilience. Its broadcasts counteract the junta's propaganda machine while inspiring both domestic resistance movements and international advocacy efforts.

VOA's Impact and Reach

With over 2 million daily viewers, VOA Burmese has cultivated an unparalleled level of trust and loyalty for America among Burma's population of 54 million. This is particularly significant given Burma's pivotal geopolitical position at the intersection of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and China. The country sits at the western gateway of the Malacca Strait, a critical waterway through which 80% of China's energy imports and 30% of U.S. trade pass. VOA Burmese's sustained efforts have built invaluable brand recognition and loyalty for America, serving as a critical counterbalance against China's aggressive misinformation campaigns and malign influence.

Admiration for U.S. Freedom and Democracy

The people of Burma have always admired America's principles of freedom and democracy. Despite decades of oppression under military rule,

Burmese citizens hold U.S. friendship in high regard, viewing America as a symbol of hope and justice. VOA embodies these values, serving as a bridge between Burma's aspirations for democracy and America's enduring commitment to human rights.

China's Malign Influence on Burma

China's growing influence over Burma poses a significant threat to both Burmese democracy and U.S. strategic interests in Southeast Asia. Beijing has heavily invested in Burma through initiatives like the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), which is part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These projects prioritize Chinese economic and strategic interests while propping up Myanmar's military junta with economic aid, weapons, and diplomatic cover.

China uses its influence to manipulate Burma into becoming a "pseudo-Chinese state," granting Beijing access to ports on the Indian Ocean and expanding its sphere of influence in Southeast Asia. This undermines U.S. regional interests while enabling authoritarianism in Burma. Furthermore, China has pressured ethnic armed groups to cease supporting pro-democracy forces while backing the junta's illegitimate 2025 elections—moves that fragment resistance movements and prolong instability.

Russia's Influence on Myanmar's Junta

Russia has also emerged as a key ally of Myanmar's military regime by supplying advanced weaponry such as fighter jets, drones, and artillery used against civilians. This partnership not only sustains the junta but also strengthens Moscow's geopolitical influence in Southeast Asia—a direct challenge to U.S. interests. VOA plays a critical role in exposing these alliances, helping to rally international condemnation against such malign actors.

The Dangers of Islamist Extremism in Rakhine State

Rakhine State remains a flashpoint for religious conflict and extremist violence. Groups like the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) have carried out attacks on security forces and civilians, reportedly with links to global extremist networks. Such violence risks destabilizing not only Rakhine but also neighboring countries like Bangladesh.

VOA provides balanced reporting that highlights both the junta's abuses against Rohingya Muslims and the dangers posed by extremist groups. This nuanced coverage helps break cycles of violence while fostering informed dialogue on solutions.

How VOA Strengthens U.S. Security Interests

1. **Countering Authoritarian Influence:** By exposing China's support for Myanmar's junta, VOA weakens Beijing's grip on Southeast Asia while promoting democratic values.
2. **Promoting Stability:** A democratic Burma reduces risks of violent conflict, refugee crises, extremist violence, and foreign manipulation spilling over into neighboring countries like India or Thailand.
3. **Enhancing U.S. Global Leadership:** VOA reinforces America's image as a defender of freedom while countering narratives from authoritarian regimes like China and Russia.

Conclusion

For us, VOA is not just a news source—it is a lifeline for truth in Burma's darkest hours. For decades, it has stood with the people of Burma against military oppression while embodying the values of freedom and democracy that they so deeply admire in America. By countering disinformation from the junta, exposing malign foreign influences from China and Russia, and addressing extremist threats in Rakhine State, VOA contributes to regional stability while safeguarding U.S. strategic interests.

We urge continued support for this vital institution as it remains critical to both Burma's fight for democracy and America's leadership in Southeast Asia.

Courtesy of James Shwe



RSF SUES TRUMP ADMINISTRATION TO DEFEND VOICE OF AMERICA

Following President Donald Trump's executive order to dismantle the government-funded, editorially independent news outlet Voice of America (VOA), Reporters Without Borders (RSF) joined VOA employees and their unions in filing a legal complaint against the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM) — the federal agency that oversees VOA — as well as USAGM Senior Advisor Kari Lake and Acting CEO Victor Morales. RSF demands an immediate halt to the dissolution of VOA and the prompt reinstatement of its employees.

Donald Trump ordered the dismantling of USAGM on March 14, 2025, gutting the federal agency that supervises vital independent media outlets such as Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and Radio Free Asia (RFA). On March 15, VOA employees were placed on administrative leave, violating the rights of VOA journalists and USAGM's legally required functions.

RSF's work to defend journalists and the public's right to reliable information has been gravely impaired by the elimination of VOA as it is among the most reliable — if not the only — source of independent information in many parts of the world where RSF and its correspondents operate.

"Authoritarian censorship regimes, like the Kremlin and the Chinese Communist Party, are loudly cheering for the death of Voice of America. It's clear that Donald Trump's action will encourage harsher crackdowns against journalists and press freedom, putting VOA and RSF staff, correspondents, volunteers, and supporters in greater danger. RSF is compelled to act to protect VOA and the broader press freedom community," said Clayton Weimers, Executive Director, RSF USA.

VOA was established in 1942 to combat Nazi propaganda with accurate information. While the outlet operates with federal funding, it has been editorially independent from the US government as stipulated by the 1994 US Broadcasting Act, which prohibits interference by government officials. It is the largest and oldest US international broadcaster, producing digital, TV, and radio content in 47 languages. VOA journalists report from around the world and face serious danger to keep the public informed. Two are currently detained: Sithu Aung Myint was arrested in 2021 on charges of incitement and defaming the military in Myanmar and Pham Chi Dung is serving a 15-year sentence in a Vietnamese prison.

"VOA reporting helps keep the public and local journalists informed about human rights violations, violence, protests, and corruption — even in the world's most censored countries. Trump's decision is not only illegal, it's also a major blow to millions of citizens' right to trustworthy information and an invaluable gift to the world's biggest predators of press freedom. RSF is proud to champion this battle in US court, defending access to independent, reliable journalistic reporting for citizens worldwide," said Thibaut Bruttin, Director General of RSF.

RSF's vested interest

RSF exists to defend journalists like Sithu Aung Myint and Pham Chi Dung, as well as the thousands of journalists who have been summarily fired as a result of Donald Trump's purge of USAGM. The RSF mission also extends to defending every citizen's right to reliable information. Each time RSF's work is thwarted by the absence of VOA, the organization and the people it defends suffer irreparable harm. That's why RSF is urgently seeking legal remedy to protect the integrity of VOA.

The lawsuit was filed in The United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, a federal court. RSF is represented pro bono in this case by State Democracy Defenders Fund, a nonprofit organization that "brings together a nonpartisan team to work with national, state and local allies across the country to defend in real-time the foundations of our democracy."

Ambassador Norman Eisen (ret.), Co-founder and board member of the State Democracy Defenders Fund said: "The attempt to dismantle Voice of America and the US Agency for Global Media is an unconscionable and outright attack on press freedoms. A free and independent press is the bedrock of democracy both at home and abroad. We are proud to stand with Reporters Without Borders and coalition members in our critical fight to defend free and independent journalism."

EU STATEMENT ON THE LAUNCH OF THE 2025-2026 JOINT RESPONSE PLAN FOR THE ROHINGYA HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

The European Union Member States (EUMS) issued a statement on 24 March concerning the launch of the 2025-2026 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis. The statement reiterates the EUMS commitment to finding a solution for the Rohingya crisis.

The text of the statement is as follows.

Over seven years after the mass displacement of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to Bangladesh, prospects for a durable solution to the crisis unfortunately remain beyond reach.

The situation in the country of origin of the Rohingya continues to deteriorate, and the ongoing escalation in Rakhine State is posing additional challenges for neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh. The European Union renews its condemnation in the strongest possible terms of the military coup and its aftermath. We remain deeply concerned by the continuing escalation of violence and the evolution towards a protracted conflict in the country. We call on the military to release all detainees, immediately cease all violence, respect fundamental human rights, and take decisive steps to restore Myanmar's democratic path, respecting the will and democratic aspirations of the people of Myanmar. We are closely following the situation at the border between Myanmar and Bangladesh and urge all parties to respect international law and international humanitarian law, especially in relation to the protection of civilians.

The European Union and its Member States remain committed to helping establish the conditions necessary for the voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable repatriation of the Rohingya to Myanmar. However, until these conditions are met, supporting the Rohingya refugees in the region, and particularly in Bangladesh, remains essential.

Today, as stated by Hadja Lahbib, Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management, during her recent visit to Bangladesh, we reaffirm our commitment to support Bangladesh in its generous response to the needs of the refugees and the communities that host them. The cost to Bangladesh and Bangladeshi citizens must be acknowledged and cannot be understated.

The European Union has maintained a consistent

level of support over the past seven years. In 2025, the European Union has already allocated over EUR 32 million to support the Rohingya refugees and their Bangladeshi host communities. These funds are provided via the Joint Response Plan, which we are launching today.

The European Union also supports Rohingya refugees who have fled to other countries in the region, as well as the Rohingya who remain in Myanmar. Our total support for the Rohingya since 2017 equals nearly 1 billion EUR provided together by the EU and its Member States.

As global humanitarian funding continues to face unprecedented strain, we need to keep up our efforts to mobilise additional resources. We need to make the humanitarian response more efficient, and we need to reduce its total cost. We need to encourage the self-reliance of the Rohingya to end their dependence on aid, and to provide them with a more dignified life before they return to Myanmar.

It is more critical than ever to find ways of providing the Rohingya refugees with the basic help they need to sustain a decent life until their return to Myanmar. They will need food, so we will have to find a way to reverse the recently announced ration cuts, or to minimise their impact. They will also need safety – we have seen that hunger breeds violence, and the security situation in the camps is already a concern. As desperation increases, risky boat journeys to try and find a better life in Malaysia or Indonesia are likely to multiply.

We look forward to working closely with the Government of Bangladesh, the international community, and the United Nations to build a more realistic and compassionate response. The UN conference on the Rohingya, taking place on 30 September, will be an opportunity to come together and agree on solutions that enable the Rohingya to meet their basic needs that give them the tools to reintegrate back into their homeland once conditions allow, and that address the concerns of Bangladesh and other host nations in the region.

The Rohingya deserve to be allowed to imagine and prepare for a better future in Myanmar, when they will finally be able to voluntarily, safely, sustainably return with dignity.



Arakan Army. Photo: AFP

ARAKAN ARMY DENOUNCES MYANMAR JUNTA'S DRUG ALLEGATIONS AS "POLITICAL DEFAMATION"

The United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA) has vehemently refuted allegations published in a junta-affiliated newspaper on 19 March, linking the organization to a recent drug bust in Yangon. The AA dismissed the accusations as a politically motivated attempt to defame the group amidst escalating conflict.

The newspaper reported the arrest of 14 individuals in possession of narcotics valued at over 96 billion kyats (US\$45.6 million) and implicated a fugitive, Ye Win (alias Kyaw Soe Lin), as being responsible for the AA's business operations. The AA flatly denied any association with Ye Win or the alleged drug network.

"This accusation is nothing more than political defamation," said an AA spokesperson.

The current junta, facing numerous military defeats, is using a tactic historically employed by previous military regimes by resorting to the spread of misinformation and attempts to discredit revolutionary forces.

The AA statement further highlighted that online gambling, a known revenue stream often linked to drug trafficking, is predominantly confined to areas

under junta control, including Naypyidaw, Mandalay, and Yangon. The AA alleges that military generals are involved in such activities, primarily within regions dominated by militias and corrupt officials.

The AA characterized the junta's actions as driven by "shame and anger," causing diplomatic embarrassment both regionally and internationally.

The accusations come as the AA intensifies its military campaign. The group has seized control of 15 towns in Rakhine State and Paletwa Township in Chin State. Currently, they are engaged in attacks on Sittwe and Kyaukphyu, the remaining towns in Rakhine State, while simultaneously launching offensives in Bago and the Ayeyarwady Regions.

On 12 March, the AA seized control of Nyaungjou village, Ushispin town, and Padaung Township in Pyay District, Bago Region.

Rakhine-based news outlets are reporting fierce fighting between the AA and junta forces in Nga Thaing Chung, Ye Kyi, and nearby villages in Ayeyarwady Region.



JFM CALLS FOR INVESTORS TO CUT TIES WITH BHARAT ELECTRONICS OVER MYANMAR MILITARY SUPPORT

Justice For Myanmar (JFM) released a statement on 20 March, welcoming the recommendation of Sweden's Council on Ethics of the AP pension funds to exclude Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) due to its ongoing sales of military equipment to the Myanmar military over its links to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The statement is as follows.

Sweden's Council on Ethics of the AP pension funds has recommended the exclusion of the Indian arms company Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) over the sale of weapons to the Myanmar military.

The decision, detailed in the Council's 2024 Annual Report, notes that BEL has sold radar systems, an air defence weapons station, radio systems and equipment for military vessels both before and after the military's illegal attempted coup on 1 February 2021.

Justice For Myanmar has exposed BEL's transfer of arms and equipment to the Myanmar military over the last four years in a series of reports, including over US\$5 million in military end-use equipment in the six

months ending April 2023 alone.

Shipment records on file with Justice For Myanmar confirms more recent sales, including a transfer by BEL of a console for a 3D surveillance radar to the Myanmar military as recently as March 2024.

BEL also has a branch office in Myanmar which remains registered.

BEL has been supplying arms and equipment to the Myanmar military with full knowledge that they could be used in the commission of international crimes, including war crimes and crimes against humanity, in Myanmar. These crimes have been extensively documented by the United Nations.

BEL is controlled by the Indian government, which is the company's majority shareholder. Justice For Myanmar has urged BEL's institutional investors, including Swedish pension funds, to divests because of BEL's repeated failure to uphold its human rights responsibilities under the OECD Guidelines for multinational enterprises and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Justice For Myanmar also notes that BEL is expected to respect the standards of international humanitarian law when dealing with conflict-affected countries like Myanmar and that, where the company fails to do so, both individual personnel and the company itself expose themselves to the risk of criminal and civil liability. BEL's continued activities in Myanmar will only increase the legal and financial risks of dealing in these shares over time.

In 2021, Nordea Bank placed BEL on its exclusion list for exporting arms to Myanmar. In 2023, Norway's sovereign wealth fund excluded BEL for selling arms to the Myanmar military, citing that such actions constitute "serious and systematic violations of international humanitarian law".

The Council on Ethics is a collaboration between Sweden's First, Second, Third and Fourth AP Funds to encourage companies to act responsibly in relation to environmental, social and governance issues.

AP2's July 2024 foreign equities disclosure showed that the fund held over 359 million Swedish kroner (US\$33.8 million) in BEL, and has since divested.

The Swedish fund, AP7, which is not part of the Council on Ethics, continued to hold shares in BEL as of December 2024, valued at over 289 million Swedish kroner (US\$28.7 million).

Justice For Myanmar calls on AP7 and all other investors of BEL to divest in accordance with their international human rights responsibilities, or risk increasing liability exposure over its activities.

The Council on Ethics decision again draws attention to India's continued complicity with the Myanmar military. By providing arms, equipment and technology to the Myanmar military, India is directly supporting the junta's brutal attacks against the people, aiding and abetting war crimes and crimes against humanity.

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

Adani Ports and SEZ

In its annual report, Sweden's Council on Ethics also announced that they had positively concluded their human rights dialogue with Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone (APSEZ) over the company's port investment in Myanmar with the military conglomerate Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC).

The Council concluded that APSEZ exited Myanmar responsibly but has not disclosed in detail

the basis for its conclusion. The Council is continuing a separate dialogue on the company's environmental impacts in Australia and India.

Justice For Myanmar is dismayed by this decision. APSEZ's sale of its Myanmar business was done in secret without disclosing the beneficial owners of the buyer, Solar Energy Limited, which is registered in Anguilla, a UK Overseas Territory and secrecy jurisdiction.

In March 2021, the Australian Centre for International Justice and Justice For Myanmar published Port of Complicity, a report into Adani Ports' business in Myanmar that included new evidence of payments to MEC and the company's direct relationship with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, increasing pressure on investors. Adani Ports' initial response was to deny the stark evidence of its business relationship with MEC.

In 2023, Justice For Myanmar revealed apparent kickbacks paid to MEC by APSEZ, as well as the involvement of two other Adani businesses in Myanmar after the military's coup attempt.

Justice For Myanmar urges the Council to resume its dialogue with APSEZ and to push the company to disclose the beneficial owners of Solar Energy Limited and the human rights due diligence in relation to its divestment from Myanmar.

Justice For Myanmar spokesperson Yadanar Maung says: "We welcome the move by Swedish pension funds to exclude BEL, which has been aiding the Myanmar military's international crimes for years.

"This sends a strong message to BEL that business with the Myanmar military not only flouts international law. It's also a bad investment.

"AP7 and all other BEL investors should follow and immediately divest.

"This should be a wake-up call to the Indian government to finally end its transfers of arms and military equipment to the Myanmar military and abide by its obligations under international law.

"The people of Myanmar have been courageously resisting a brutal military junta for over four years. The military's campaign of terror is enabled by an international network of businesses that continue to provide it with resources.

"Institutional investors need to do more to pressure companies to end business with the military junta or divest."



Photo: AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA FORMS TASK FORCE TO BLACKLIST UNAUTHORIZED IMPORTERS

Myanmar's military junta announced the formation of an administrative body tasked with taking action, including blacklisting, against individuals and companies importing foreign goods through ports and airports without prior approval. The decision was made public on 18 March.

The 12-member task force, led by the Deputy Minister of Commerce, was established in the third week of February.

According to the junta, unauthorized imports – those lacking the necessary licenses or permits – will be subject to prosecution under the Import and Export Law.

The newly formed group will assess whether imported goods qualify for exceptional measures and submit reports to the Ministry of Commerce. If they do not meet the criteria, the importers will be blacklisted, and the goods will be dealt with according to existing procedures.

In cases where the imports fall under exceptional measures, the group has proposed that the ministry revoke the importer/exporter registration certificate of the responsible individuals or companies. However,

the junta has not clarified which goods qualify for exceptional measures.

A statement issued in July 2020 under the previous National League for Democracy (NLD) government, emphasized that goods should not arrive at ports without prior approval, except those stored in customs warehouses.

After the 2021 coup, the junta further tightened import controls, seizing unauthorized shipments as public property.

Companies applied for import licenses in advance, but the junta failed to issue them for various reasons. As a result, when the goods arrived at the port without a license, they were labelled as illegally imported and confiscated as public property.

Exporters and importers told Mizzima that after the coup, the junta imposed restrictions on imports to curb foreign exchange spending. As part of this, it introduced a policy requiring licenses for all foreign imports, even those that previously did not need them under the NLD government. They added that obtaining a license was often difficult and time-consuming.



Photo: AFP

ORGANIZATIONS DEMAND RELEASE OF DETAINED MYANMAR REFUGEES IN INDIA

A coalition of 196 organizations along the India-Myanmar border has issued a formal petition, dated 20 March, pressing the Indian central government for the immediate release of detained Myanmar refugees in the states of Manipur and Assam. The refugees, fleeing conflict in Myanmar and enroute to seeking asylum under the auspices of the UNHCR in New Delhi, are currently being held without proper documentation.

According to the organizations, 147 individuals are detained, including pregnant women, newborns, children of school age, and elderly individuals suffering from chronic illnesses.

The petition highlights the deteriorating conditions and lack of adequate medical care, citing the recent death of U Aung Myint, 57, who died in custody after being arrested and sent to Imphal Prison on a foreigner offence. He has been seeking treatment for pulmonary oedema in India since 2021. This follows the previous death in custody of Ko Dal Kho Loon, 32, who died in February 2023.

Salai Dokhar, head of India for Myanmar, the leading organization behind the petition said, "We will send an open letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and the Prime Minister's Office today. If there is no comprehensive response to these demands, we will inform India's activities to the

international community."

Dokhar further appealed to international organizations and media outlets to scrutinize India's actions.

The open letter prioritizes securing the release of detainees through diplomatic channels, but threatens to engage other entities, including the Human Rights Commission of India, if progress stalls. The letter demands justice for the families of the deceased and emphasizes the potential damage to long-term Indo-Myanmar relations and India's international standing as a leading democracy.

The wife of one detainee conveyed the pervasive despair among the detainees and their families, telling Mizzima, "They are not happy anymore because some of their co-detainees in prison died... They are depressed with the thought that they will never be free." She further described the desperate economic situation of families left behind.

Aid groups estimate that approximately 70,000 Myanmar nationals have sought refuge in India's Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and New Delhi since the military coup in Myanmar. The petition underscores the urgent need for a humanitarian response that upholds human rights and democratic principles.

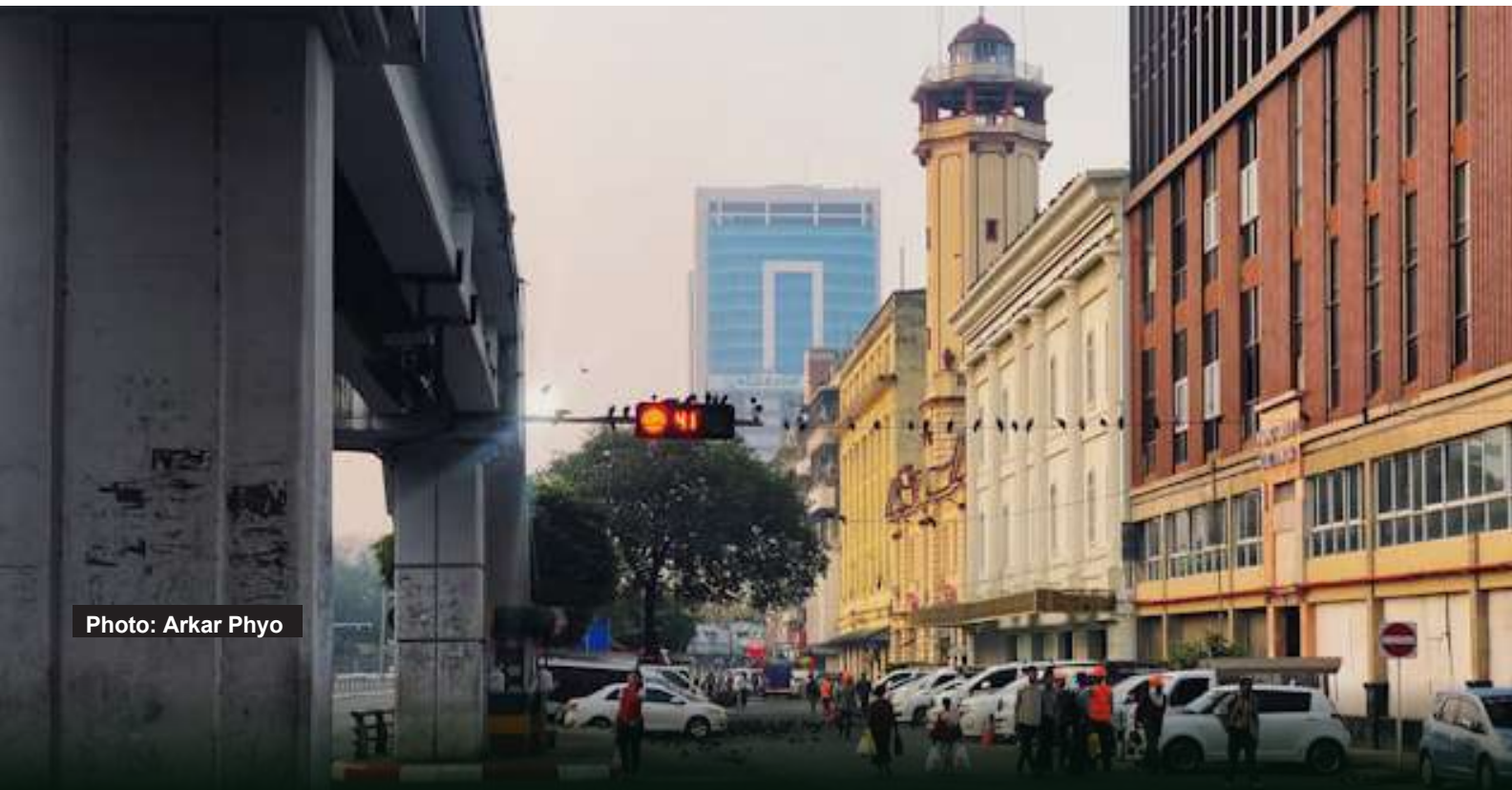


Photo: Arkar Phyo

YANGON'S CID OFFICE ATTACKED WITH REMOTE-CONTROLLED MINE; POLICE OFFICER INJURED

A police officer was seriously injured when the Rangoon Urban Column (RUC) attacked the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) office in Insein Township, Yangon, using a remote-controlled mine on the evening of 19 March, according to RUC in-charge Ko Ye Khaung.

The explosion, which occurred at around 8:04 pm, involved a large mine composed of three smaller explosives detonated near a police sentry post.

"We've been informed that a police sentry was seriously hurt. The guards on duty were unlikely to escape unharmed," said Ko Ye Khaung, describing the explosive as "rather potent."

An Insein resident confirmed hearing a loud explosion but noted that the military had not disclosed information about the attack.

"Security checks are regularly carried out, and junta forces also conduct random inspections by stationing people at street corners," the resident said.

Located in Insein, the CID office where the junta troops and police are stationed has been a frequent target of attacks by the People's Defence Forces and the urban guerrilla groups in Yangon Region with grenades and remote-controlled mines.

At about 9:30 pm on 31 January, Mother Son Yangon Force, an urban guerrilla group, used two grenades to attack the west gate of the CID office. In that instance, two police officers on sentry duty were killed and another was injured, according to the Mother Son Yangon Force.

Meanwhile, Ko Ye Khaung announced a month-long campaign, "March Towards the Urban-RUC," running from 8 March to 8 April, to raise funds for an off-road vehicle for RUC members.



CASUALTIES REPORTED AS RESISTANCE FORCES CLASH WITH MYANMAR JUNTA AT LAT KHAT TAUNG TOWER OUTPOST

Both junta forces and resistance fighters sustained casualties in a battle at the military-controlled Lat Khat Taung Tower outpost in Launglon Township, Dawei District, Tanintharyi Region, sources confirmed.

On 13 March, resistance groups, including the Duraka Column of the Dawei National Liberation Army (DNLA), the Yephyu People's Defence Force (YPPDF), and Dawei District Battalion 2 (T5), launched an offensive against the outpost near San Hlan village. The intense battle lasted six hours, according to a DNLA statement issued on 18 March.

"During the battle, the junta carried out airstrikes and received artillery support from naval vessels, dropping 500-pound bombs. As a result, two of our comrades were killed, and four others sustained minor injuries," a DNLA official said.

The DNLA reported that 12 junta soldiers were killed, and resistance forces seized an MA-3 rifle, three grenades, and additional military equipment.

Junta forces reportedly conducted two airstrikes during the engagement while receiving artillery support from naval units. Resistance sources confirmed that heavy bombardment led to two fatalities and four wounded among their ranks.

The junta had fortified two positions at Lat Khat Taung. While resistance fighters managed to seize one bunker, they were forced to retreat from the second due to the intensity of air and naval attacks.

On the same day, resistance groups launched an attack on the Maungmagan police station in Maungmagan village, Launglon Township, with junta naval forces reportedly providing artillery support.

As of 19 March, junta reinforcements have been deployed in Launglon Township, according to local reports.



CHIN NATIONAL FRONT GRANTS AMNESTY TO 72 PRISONERS ON CHIN REVOLUTION ANNIVERSARY

The Chin National Front (CNF) announced on 19 March that it had granted amnesty to 72 prisoners in commemoration of the 37th anniversary of the Chin Revolution.

Chin Revolution Day, observed annually on 20 March, marks the founding of the CNF and its armed resistance, which began in 1988 with the objective of dismantling authoritarian rule and establishing a federal union based on self-determination and equality.

"Those released include junta personnel captured in combat and Chin National Army (CNA) soldiers who breached military laws," CNF's spokesperson Salai Htet Ni said. The CAN is the armed wing of the CNF.

He noted that some of the pardoned individuals were members of the junta's forces, including police officers, but declined to provide further details due to security concerns.

CNA soldiers who were granted amnesty had violated military regulations, including weapon-related offenses and unauthorized leave.

Salai Htet Ni emphasized that the decision to release prisoners was made on humanitarian grounds, prioritizing elderly detainees, those serving long sentences, and individuals whose families faced hardships.

A CNF statement revealed that CNA and Local Defence Forces had seized several junta outposts in the first two months of 2025, eliminating approximately 30 junta troops, capturing 20 prisoners of war, and seizing

around 80 weapons. The battles occurred as part of the Kalay-Kabaw operation, with the CNF acknowledging casualties on both sides but refraining from disclosing specific numbers.

The CNF reaffirmed its commitment to eradicating the junta's presence in Chin State and dismantling the influence of the 2008 Constitution. The group vowed to intensify its political, military, and diplomatic efforts throughout 2025, working alongside ethnic armed organizations and People's Defence Forces to establish a genuine federal union.

In its statement, the CNF paid tribute to revolutionaries who sacrificed their lives and called on international governments, organizations, and donors to support efforts in rebuilding communities affected by military violence.

The organization also held its third Central Committee meeting of the eighth conference term from 12 to 15 May at its Victoria headquarters. The gathering, attended by 50 Central Committee members, including CNF leadership and advisors, focused on future political and military strategies.

Furthermore, the CNF endorsed unification efforts between the Chinland Council (CC) and the Interim Chin National Consultative Council (ICNCC), which were initiated on 26 February 2025. The organization expressed its commitment to collaborating with relevant bodies to strengthen the Chin revolutionary movement while promoting Chin nationalism.



**EU CONDEMNS
MYANMAR
MILITARY'S
HUMAN RIGHTS
VIOLATIONS AT UN
HUMAN RIGHTS
COUNCIL**

Photo: AFP

The European Union (EU) released a statement on 19 March during the 58th Session of the UN Human Rights Council to condemn the Myanmar military's human rights violations, advocate for accountability, and call for an end to violence and the release of political prisoners.

The statement is as follows.

As reported, the Myanmar military has been doubling down on violence and oppression, escalating aerial assaults, executing villagers en masse, and perpetrating widespread sexual violence against women and girls.

The EU continues to advocate for the de-escalation of violence and for the reversal of the rising militarisation of civilians, including Rohingya in Rakhine and refugee camps. The EU calls for the enhancement

of accountability mechanisms and their use, including the IIMM, to support rapid due legal processes.

Accountability must be ensured for all human rights violations and abuses, committed mainly by the Myanmar military, but also by other armed actors.

In line with UNSC resolution 2669, the EU calls for the end of all violence against civilians by the military, the release of all prisoners arbitrarily detained, in particular as a consequence of the 2021 military coup, including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, and for stability and peaceful reconciliation in Myanmar.

We agree that it would be utterly impossible to hold a free and fair election under current conditions, and without an inclusive political process.

ISP REPORT ON MYANMAR-THAILAND RELATIONS PROVIDES RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WAYS FORWARD



The Institute for Strategic Policy (ISP) released a report on 15 March exploring the potentials for regional peace and stability in Thai-Myanmar relations.

The report notes the complexity of the conflicts in Myanmar as well as its far-reaching impacts on the security, economy, and regional standing of its neighbour, Thailand. For Thailand, the conflict has increased border vulnerabilities, disrupted cross-border trade, and created significant humanitarian and diplomatic challenges.

The paper suggests there is a necessity for a comprehensive and proactive strategy that balances immediate responses with long-term objectives.

Thailand, directly affected by the situation in Myanmar, is also in the position of potential mediator to resolve the crisis. However, the ISP notes that this requires a nuanced navigation of domestic priorities and external expectations.

Thailand must deal with the direct spillovers of the conflict while also fostering potential diplomatic solutions in line with ASEAN principles. These, the paper says, must also meet the international community's expectations for peace and democracy in Myanmar.

ISP puts forth a number of recommendations in

the report. Each requires a multifaceted approach in order to deal with the highly nuanced situation.

The recommendations put forward by ISP include enhanced intelligence sharing with ethnic armed organisations opposed to the junta, safeguarding of Thailand's economic interests, refined labour migration policies, and a recalibration of Thailand's strategy "to position itself as a credible and neutral actor."

The latter must also take into account ASEAN's leadership as well as engaging with major powers such as the United States and China.

Humanitarian responses, the paper recommends, should not only address the immediate needs of displaced persons, but also long-term consequences. It notes the need for collaboration with international organisations, the improvement of conditions in the refugee camps along Thailand's border, and development of pathways for employment and education.

ISP suggests its recommendations provide a pathway to strengthen Thailand's resilience, heighten its diplomatic stature, and place itself as pivotal in steering Myanmar to a more peaceful and inclusive future.



Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing.
Photo: AFP

JUNTA CHIEF CALLS FOR CEASEFIRE WHILE CONTINUING MILITARY OFFENSIVES ACROSS MYANMAR

During a message delivered at the 51st Mon State Day ceremony on 19 March, Myanmar's junta chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, called for an end to the ongoing armed clashes involving ethnic armed organizations and resistance groups. He urged all sides to cease fighting, claiming that continued conflict was endangering the nation and its people.

Despite his appeal for peace, the military continues to conduct indiscriminate attacks, targeting civilian areas with no active combat. Min Aung Hlaing, however, blamed the People's Defence Forces (PDFs) and ethnic armed groups for damaging infrastructure and worsening the country's economic hardship.

He reiterated the junta's commitment to holding an election and encouraged ethnic groups to participate in efforts to restore stability. While visiting Belarus on 7 March, Min Aung Hlaing announced military plans to organize an election between December 2025 and January 2026.

However, many politicians remain sceptical, believing that if an election occurs, it will be limited to the small territories still under junta control.

According to a report released by the National Unity Government (NUG) on 4 January, the junta now controls less than one-third of Myanmar due to continuous losses against resistance forces.

Armed conflicts persist in almost all states and regions, except Yangon and Nay Pyi Taw, with ethnic armed groups, PDFs under NUG's Ministry of Defence, local defence units, and joint resistance forces attacking junta-controlled areas.

While Min Aung Hlaing called for an end to fighting, the junta simultaneously vowed through its propaganda channels to reclaim lost territories.

In recent months, the military has escalated its airstrikes, targeting towns such as Nawngkhio in northern Shan State, Mogok and Singu in Mandalay Region, and Kani in Sagaing Region. These attacks, carried out between February and March, resulted in at least 60 civilian deaths, according to revolutionary sources.

Since the military coup in 2021, the junta has arrested 28,879 individuals, with 22,094 still in detention as of 18 March 2025, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP).

The organization also reported that junta forces and affiliated groups have killed 6,410 civilians and pro-democracy activists during the ongoing revolution.



MYANMAR MIGRANT WORKERS IN THAILAND WARNED OF RE-ENTRY CHALLENGES AFTER SONGKRAN

Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand planning to return home for the upcoming Songkran holiday in April have been cautioned about potential difficulties when re-entering Thailand. While the Thai government has announced that entry and exit visas will not be required during this period, activists assisting Myanmar workers fear they may face restrictions upon leaving Myanmar after the festival.

Thailand's Songkrakn New Year festival period coincides with Thingyan New Year celebrations in Myanmar.

Ko Ye Min, founder of the Myanmar Humanitarian Alliance Centre (MHAC), stated that the return period coincides with the junta's intensified efforts to recruit young people for military service. The regime has also imposed stricter controls on those attempting to leave the country, raising concerns about potential obstacles for returning workers. Reports indicate that military recruitment efforts have been taking place at border checkpoints.

"Going back may be easy, but returning to Thailand afterward will be much harder. Some may be arrested at border gates, while others risk being reported by informants in their hometowns," Ko Ye Min said.

Additionally, there are reports that the junta is planning to reduce the number of workers permitted to travel abroad for employment while tightening inspections of those seeking to re-enter Thailand.

Young men eligible for military conscription have been subjected to intense scrutiny at Yangon International Airport, facing rigorous inspections and demands for bribes from junta officials. Many have been denied permission to leave, forcing them to seek alternative routes at border crossings, which remain difficult to access.

"I have my visa and all necessary documents, but I'm too afraid to go through the airport. Many are being stopped and prevented from leaving. If I can't go, I'll lose all my travel expenses. I'm searching for a legal way to exit through the border, but it's not easy. Once you return, it's best not to come back again," said a young man from Yangon.

Thailand's Ministry of Labor announced on 11 March that migrant workers from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos will be permitted to return to their home countries between 1 April and 15 May without needing entry and exit visas.

Labor Minister Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn described the policy as a Songkran gift intended to facilitate travel and reduce costs for workers.

However, U Khaing Gyi, director of the AAC Alliance, cautioned that the visa-free policy does not guarantee smooth re-entry. He urged workers to carefully assess the risks before returning home.

"Two-thirds of Myanmar workers in Thailand have visas expiring on 13 February next year. If they leave to save a small amount on re-entry fees but are then blocked from returning, it would be disastrous. The junta could prevent their re-entry due to visa expiration," U Khaing Gyi said.

According to data from Thai authorities, approximately five million Myanmar nationals are residing in Thailand in 2025. Some have already arranged travel back to Myanmar for the Thingyan festival, purchasing tickets or renting private vehicles in preparation.



ICG RELEASES BRIEFING ON THE STATE OF RESISTANCE IN CHIN STATE

The International Crisis Group (ICG) released a new report on 19 March analysing divisions between resistance groups in Myanmar's Chin State.

Although the armed Chin resistance has forced the junta out of most areas of the state, divisions within the resistance are disquieting. Deep divisions between two rival factions have erupted in violent clashes on several occasions, says ICG.

More than one third of Chin State's population – some 160,000 people – have been displaced by the conflict. Some are internally displaced while others have fled across the border to India.

The clashes have made it difficult for the resistance factions to reach an agreement on statewide political, governance, and justice matters. This in turn has jeopardised the stability and safety necessary for the displaced to return home.

They have also made the provision of services to the population and reinvigorating markets more difficult.

"Anti-regime forces have succeeded in expelling the military from much of Chin State, but are divided into two competing factions, who have engaged in sporadic deadly clashes. An in-principle agreement

last month to unify is an important start. Achieving this outcome will require farsightedness from leaders as well as practical de-escalation measures. Progress on this is indispensable for meeting the difficult challenge of administering Chin State and delivering vital services at a time when conflict and displacement have created a dire humanitarian situation," says ICG's Senior Advisor on Myanmar, Richard Horsey.

The rival armed groups have committed to uniting. To further this, says ICG, the groups should create formal communications channels. These can be used to prevent misunderstandings and outbreaks of violence.

The group also suggests shared political goals for the state need to be identified.

"Donors need to provide more assistance to this neglected part of the country, and India should facilitate increased informal border trade to ease shortages of essential goods," continues Mr. Horsey.

Humanitarian, livelihood, and governance support should be scaled up in Chin State. These are identified as key areas of support for donors in this hard to access and badly neglected part of Myanmar.



Photo: Supplied

MYANMAR JUNTA AIRSTRIKES KILL DOZENS IN LAT PAN HLA VILLAGE, SINGU TOWNSHIP

A junta airstrike on Lat Pan Hla village, Singu Township, Mandalay Region, killed at least 31 people on 14 March when a jet fighter dropped two bombs on a local market, according to the Mandalay People's Defence Forces (MDY-PDF). The attack left more than 30 others injured, including six children.

Three days later, on 17 March, another airstrike targeted a rice mill between Lat Pan Hla and Pinlalgyi villages at around 7 pm, killing three people, including a woman, and injuring five others.

A local resident said, "Two of the victims were left unrecognizable, with only their skin remaining."

Ma Aye Myint Aung, the leader of the Women's Alliance Forces, who met with victims' families, stated on social media that as some of the injured were in critical condition, the death toll from the March 14 attack had reached 31.

Mizzima has reached out to MDY-PDF spokesperson Osmond for further details on the 17 March airstrike and updated casualty figures.

The junta carried out a previous airstrike on Lat Pan Hla village on 4 March, killing six people and injuring several others, according to MDY-PDF reports.

The junta has increasingly targeted civilians in these surrendered areas with frequent airstrikes since the People's Defence Forces (PDF) fully captured all junta camps in Singu Township on 17 July 2024.

In a similar attack, on 16 March at around 5 pm, a junta airstrike hit Sein Yadana Priyatti Monastery in Nawngkhio Township, Northern Shan State, an area controlled by the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). The attack killed nine monks and five civilians.



Wreckage of homes and a monastery in Magyibintae village, Taungtha Township, following a paramotor bombing attack by junta forces on the morning of 18 March.

MYANMAR JUNTA'S PARAMOTOR BOMBING DAMAGES HOME AND MONASTERY IN TAUNGTHA TOWNSHIP

A paramotor bombing attack carried out by junta forces on the morning of 18 March damaged a house and a Buddhist monastery in Magyibintae village, Taungtha Township, Mandalay Region, according to a member of the Taungtha People's Movement Committee.

"Eight bombs were dropped in and around Magyibintae village. While one civilian house and a monastery sustained damage, no casualties were reported," the committee member said.

Following the attack, residents began clearing debris from the affected areas. However, due to the ongoing threat of further airstrikes, elderly individuals and children have started relocating to safer locations.

"People immediately take cover whenever they hear the sound of a paramotor. That's why there were no casualties this time," a local resident said.

The 18 March strike follows a series of recent paramotor bombings in Taungtha Township. Junta forces previously launched attacks on Zayatgyi village on 11 March and Aye Kyin village on 9 March.

Resistance forces claim that the military junta has been deliberately targeting civilian areas.

On 14 March, an airstrike hit a marketplace in Lat Pan Hla village, Singu Township, resulting in numerous casualties. By the morning of 18 March, at least 31 people had been confirmed dead from the attack. Additionally, on 17 March, another airstrike on the village killed a woman and two men instantly, while five others sustained injuries, according to local sources.



MYANMAR RELIEF CAMPS RECEIVE **LAST** **WFP AID AS CUTS** **BEGIN**

Distraught Myanmar relief camp dwellers received final handouts from the World Food Programme on Wednesday as the UN agency begins halting aid to a million people in the country because funding has dried up.

President Donald Trump's slashing of the US aid budget has contributed to "critical funding shortfalls" for WFP, forcing it to make sweeping cuts in Myanmar, which has been racked by a four-year, multi-sided civil war.

"I pray every night that this news is not true," said Byar Mee, who on Tuesday received the last of her monthly payouts worth around \$50, which she uses to feed her family of five.

"I pray to God that the donors are blessed and are able to help us again," she told AFP in a camp outside the northeastern city of Myitkyina. "Please help us and pity us."

Since the military toppled a civilian government in 2021, Myanmar has been in the grip of a conflict that has killed thousands, displaced millions and pushed the poverty rate up to 50 percent.

Because of cuts, WFP says it will only serve around 35,000 people in April -- a fraction of the 15 million

people unable to meet their daily food needs.

One person in need, Zi Yay Tar, has been displaced from his home by landmines and fighting for more than a year.

His family of seven have scraped by alongside Byar Mee's in the relief camp run by the Waingmaw Lisu Baptist Association in Kachin state, 25 miles (40 kilometres) from the border with China.

"We are struggling because we don't have any other income," the 32-year-old told AFP. "The World Food Programme was our biggest hope."

WFP Myanmar chief Michael Dunford told AFP last week the organisation was being forced to winnow down aid because donors including the United States were no longer forthcoming.

Since returning to office in January, Trump has overseen a crusade to dismantle federal spending spearheaded by his top donor and the world's richest person Elon Musk.

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) -- formerly a major WFP donor -- has had its \$42.8 billion budget eviscerated.

- 'We are going to starve' -

There are 379 households -- more than 1,800 people -- living in the Waingmaw Lisu Baptist Association camp, which has been supported by WFP since July, according to Le Tarr, a community organiser among its residents.

"After we heard the WFP announcement, all the people in the camp are depressed and are having trouble sleeping," he said.

"Without food and supplies, we are going to starve. After we heard this announcement, we felt hopeless."

Trump has presented the cuts as part of his campaign to undo bloated government spending.

But USAID accounted for only between 0.7 and 1.4 percent of total US government spending in the last quarter century, according to the Pew Research Center.

The United Nations' special rapporteur on Myanmar Tom Andrews on Monday said the United States' "sudden, chaotic withdrawal of support" was having a "crushing impact" on people in the country.

"The abrupt termination of this support is going to kill them," he told a press conference in Geneva.

AFP



Photo: Supplied

AT LEAST 23 FORCIBLY CONSCRIPTED SOLDIERS IN MYANMAR DEFECT TO PDF IN MARCH

At least 23 forcibly conscripted soldiers who were made to undergo military training and sent to the frontlines against their will have surrendered to the People's Defence Forces (PDF) in the first half of March, according to the relevant PDFs. The figure, confirmed by Mizzima, could be higher as more defections may have occurred on the ground.

Ko Dewa, leader of an underground guerrilla group from Okpho Township said that one junta soldier from the Nyaunggyo junta camp defected on 16 March.

Additionally, two soldiers from Light Infantry Division 66 based in Inma Township defected to the Bago Region PDF on 15 March. Two others from Infantry Battalion 253 joined the Tada-U PDF on 13 March.

A PDF official said, "the two soldiers who surrendered in Tada-U were forced to undergo military training twice and were sent into battle for the first time after spending over eight months as porters.

Similarly, two conscripted soldiers from Tanintharyi Township joined the Tanintharyi PDF, while five others from Military Operation Command 19 (MOC 19) in Ye, Mon State, defected to the Ye Belu force.

One soldier from Infantry Battalion 258 in Yesagyo Township joined the Yesagyo PDF. Another from Light Infantry Division 101 joined the Myaing PDF. An

additional four soldiers from Infantry Battalions 253 and 113, along with five others from Infantry Battalion 235, defected to the Natogyi PDF.

The defecting soldiers included workers who were forcibly taken as porters by the junta while commuting to and from work, as well as those arrested while crossing the Sagaing Bridge. They were among recruits from military training batches one to seven.

A PDF official from Tada U Township urged more conscripted soldiers to defect, saying, "Think about the people and join with the people whenever possible. The people's revolutionary organizations are always here to welcome you."

The Revolutionary Forces of Bago Region announced that they would facilitate connections for those who were forcibly conscripted and wish to defect.

The junta implemented the People's Military Service Law on 10 February 2024. As of March 2025, it had entered its 11th batch of training for new recruits.

According to a February report from the Spring Revolution Database (SRD), the military junta has arrested 12,655 young civilians for mandatory military training over the first ten weeks of 2025, with 11,497 taken during the day and 1,158 at night.



JUNTA FORCES BURN DOWN VILLAGE IN YESAGYO TOWNSHIP, LOOT PROPERTY

Junta forces, accompanied by Phyu Saw Htee militia, burned down Beesatkone village in Yesagyo Township, Magwe Region, at around 11 am on 18 March, according to the Yesagyo Township Info Committee.

“Phyu Saw Htee members in Min village have been struggling with food shortages. Now, with the support of the military column, they have been looting food and belongings from nearby villages for the past three days. After seizing valuables, they set fire to Beesatkone village this morning,” said an officer from the committee.

According to local residents, junta forces have been forcibly taking property from villages in the Yelalkyun area, including Myaeswan, Beesatkone, Salthitmyin, and Myaetaw. The military column first entered the Yelalkyun area on 26 February, burning villages and killing 18 civilians.

Resistance forces reported that the military's destruction resulted in the burning of 266 homes in Myaeswantaw village, 68 in Zayatne, 20 in Thargaung, several houses in Myaetaw, and three school buildings

at a secondary school in Pannyo village, Myaung Township.

Among the 18 civilians killed, 11 were elderly residents or individuals unable to escape from Myaeswantaw village. Another six were killed in Thargaung and one in Myaetaw.

The junta column re-entered the Yelalkyun area on 14 March through Pannyo village in Myaung Township, later joining Phyu Saw Htee members in Min village. After their property was looted and houses burned, many local residents were forced to flee.

“This column is indiscriminately killing people and burning everything in sight, causing widespread panic,” said an official from the Yesagyo Township People's Defence Forces.

The attacks have displaced residents from at least 10 villages in the Yelalkyun area, including Myaetaw, Shaethal, Myaeswan, Beesatkone, and Nyaunghmwepin, according to resistance sources.



MYANMAR JUNTA AIRSTRIKE KILLS 14, INCLUDING NINE MONKS, AT MONASTIC SCHOOL IN NORTHERN SHAN STATE

A Myanmar junta jet fighter bombed the Sein Yadanar Priyatti monastic school in Nawngkhio Township, northern Shan State, at around 5:30 pm on 16 March, killing 14 people, including nine monks and novices, according to local sources.

A resident confirmed the casualties, stating, "Based on the information we have so far, nine monks and novices, as well as civilians, have died."

The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) reported that the junta's Air Force dropped four bombs and followed up with machine gun fire, causing significant casualties among both monks and displaced civilians. The group stated that the official death toll would be announced later.

A local source in Nawngkhio told Mizzima that the bombs directly hit the three-story building of the Sein Yadanar Priyatti monastic school.

"The casualties are severe. I heard that around 30 people were killed or injured. The attack targeted the monastery's dormitory, where monks and novices were resting in the evening," he said.

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

A monk close to the monastic school posted on social media, expressing his grief, saying, "Many monks and novices were hit."

According to a TNLA statement, a house and a monastic building were also damaged in the bombing.

Nawngkhio town is under TNLA control, and fighting continues in Taung Kham village. The junta frequently conducts airstrikes in Nawngkhio amid ongoing clashes.

This is not the first such attack in the area. On 22 January, the military junta bombed a tea shop in Nawngkhio town, killing at least 10 civilians.

The TNLA has urged residents to remain cautious, warning of continued airstrike threats against civilian areas.

On 14 March, the junta's Air Force also bombed a market in Letpanhla village, Singu Township, Mandalay Region, killing 27 people, including six children, and injuring many others.



ASEAN YOUTH CONVENE AND CONTRIBUTE TO EU-ASEAN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Members of European Union (EU) youth sounding boards in the ASEAN region as well as Erasmus alumni and representatives of ASEAN youth organisations provided their views and policy recommendations for the future of ASEAN-EU relations at an event titled “The EU’s Evolving Role in Asean: Youth Perspectives on Opportunities during Malaysia’s 2025 ASEAN Chairmanship and Beyond”.

The event took place in Kuala Lumpur on 20 March.

In total 52 participants provided their contributions in four strategic areas of the EUASEAN partnership: environment and climate; democracy and human rights; higher education, science, technology and innovation; as well as connectivity, sustainable growth and jobs, and digitalisation. Each group presented its draft recommendations, which will feed into a youth statement.

Hosted by the Mission of the European Union to ASEAN and the Delegation of the European Union to

Malaysia in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, the event also highlighted the main priorities of Malaysia’s ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025.

In the EU’s partnership with ASEAN, young people are important stakeholders to engage with.

“You are the future of ASEAN. Your engagement here today will contribute to shaping the future of this region, the engagement of the two regions and the world we will live in tomorrow. Do keep in mind that the EU remains a reliable partner of ASEAN for peace, development and prosperity,” H.E. Rafael Daerr, Ambassador of the European Union to Malaysia, said in his opening remarks.

“Under Malaysia’s chairmanship, ASEAN will finalize and launch the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and youth is at the centre of this vision of the ASEAN Community,” H.E. Dr Selvaraj Ramasamy Abdullah, Deputy Director of ASEAN Socio-Cultural

CORE DEVELOPMENTS

Community Division (ASCCD), ASEAN-Malaysia National Secretariat, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said in his opening remarks.

The EU youth sounding boards were established as part of the Youth Action Plan for EU external action. This plan serves as the EU's guiding framework to promote meaningful youth participation and empowerment globally for sustainable development, equality and peace.

Focusing on three core areas of action, namely engage, connect and empower, the plan is a timely endeavour to engage young people in EU external actions. "This is a great opportunity for us youth to contribute our thoughts on things that matter to us and to connect with our peers in the region," Alicia Tien, a member of the Youth Sounding Board for EU in ASEAN from Malaysia said. "It is also encouraging to see the commitment of the EU and ASEAN to facilitate and support our engagements."

Meanwhile, the Erasmus+ programme has been one of the EU's flagship programmes for student mobility, contributing to EU-ASEAN cooperation in connectivity. Under the Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters scholarship programme, more than 200 ASEAN

students per year have the opportunity to choose from 190 available courses. From 2014 to 2024, the total number of Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters awardees from the ASEAN region has risen to 1,857 ASEAN students.

"It is often too easy to work in silos and forget that we can achieve bigger things when we work together. Today, we are reminded of the power of youth and our role in shaping the future of our region," Dinh Khac Dong, Erasmus Country Representative from Viet Nam said.

Concluding the event, Katerina Lopo, Political Advisor of the Mission of the European Union to ASEAN said: "It is truly inspiring to see how much the EU and ASEAN youth have in common and how much we can learn from each other. Every journey starts with the first step, the EU and ASEAN will celebrate half a century together in 2027. A golden wedding is a significant milestone symbolising the wisdom and strength of enduring relations. We count on you to be in the driving seat for the future of our two regions."



INDIAN HIMALAYAN COUNCIL OF NALANDA BUDDHIST TRADITION HOSTS INAUGURAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN DELHI

Photo: Raimon Klavins

The Indian Himalayan Council of Nalanda Buddhist Tradition (IHCNBT) will convene its first General Assembly at the India International Centre (IIC) in the national capital on March 21 and 22, reports ANI.

The event will bring together 120 Buddhist delegates from various Himalayan states across India to engage in vital discussions on the preservation and promotion of the core philosophies and practices of Buddhism, specifically the Nalanda Buddhist tradition, ANI notes.

This two-day assembly will focus on addressing the challenges that the Nalanda Buddhist tradition faces in a rapidly changing world. Delegates will examine the effects of modernization, globalization, and socio-

political issues on the preservation of these sacred teachings. The assembly aims to identify practical solutions and strategies to ensure the continuity of Buddhist traditions for future generations.

The event provides a crucial platform for knowledge sharing and collaboration among Himalayan Buddhist communities. It will foster a deeper connection among these communities and strengthen efforts to protect the essence of Buddhist philosophy and practices.

Additionally, the assembly will provide an opportunity for delegates to discuss how to safeguard the rich cultural heritage of the Himalayan Buddhist traditions, which include ancient practices, teachings, and rituals.

IHCNBT, founded under the patronage of Nalanda Buddhist spiritual masters from across the Trans Indian Himalayan region, is an important body in the preservation of these traditions. Spanning from the Western Himalayas of Ladakh, Lahaul-Spiti-Kinnaur, Kaza (HP), Uttarkashi, and Donda in Uttarakhand to the Eastern Himalayas of Sikkim, Darjeeling-Kalimpong (WB), and Monyul-Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, the Council has become a national force in safeguarding Himalayan Buddhism.

Rooted in the ancient Nalanda University tradition, the IHCNBT focuses on preserving not only the spiritual aspects of Buddhism - such as meditation, monastic discipline, and philosophical study - but also the region's rich cultural and artistic heritage. This includes visual arts, sculpture, painting, music, dance, and architecture, all of which are integral to the Himalayan Buddhist identity. The Council is committed to protecting sacred sites, ancient manuscripts, and

rituals that face threats from modern development, climate change, and external influences.

In addition to its preservation efforts, the IHCNBT organizes festivals, workshops, and educational programs to bridge the gap between local communities and their Buddhist heritage. The Council also promotes interfaith dialogue and collaborates with local governments and international Buddhist organizations to ensure the continued respect and safeguarding of this unique cultural legacy.

Through these efforts, the Indian Himalayan Buddhist Council of Nalanda Tradition plays a vital role in the preservation and global understanding of the Himalayan Buddhist way of life.

Courtesy of ANI

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Photo: AFP

DOCTORS AND MEDICAL WORKERS VULNERABLE TO FATAL ATTACKS IN CHINA

SUN LEE

Doctors and healthcare workers in China are under constant threat of attacks from patients and their relatives, which often are fatal in nature. The overburdened infrastructure, lower treatment satisfaction, media sensationalism and weak legal protection have emerged as major reasons for the growing violence against medical professionals in China.

This reflects the poor conditions of safety and security of China's healthcare workers. The Chinese Medical Doctor Association (CMDA) initiated physician rights protection and support to the family of doctors after a man killed Li Sheng, a cardiologist at Wenzhou Medical University's hospital.

While China has a law to regulate the practice of medical professionals, there is little legal protection for their safety. According to a CMDA report, 66 percent of doctors in China had conflicts with their patients while 30 percent experienced violence. China's National Health Commission said "Local authorities should improve hospital safety prevention systems and effectively implement security measures."

A doctor died after she was stabbed in the neck by a relative of a patient in Beijing. There was an uproar in the country when an eye surgeon was stabbed as the patient was not satisfied with the medical treatment.

A Shenzhen-based doctor revealed that many hospitals did not have adequate security measures such as emergency exits for employees, which is ideally required by the law.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, doctors in China were often beaten as people could not get treatment in the overcrowded hospitals. Even the whistle-blower doctor Li Wenliang who was the first one to warn about coronavirus danger was criticised online and later detained by police.

The doctors who worked among the infected patients round-the-clock had complained of the inferior treatment by top officials. "The bosses inspecting our hospital are wearing top-notch N95 masks, while frontline doctors and nurses only have the regular ones. What else can I say?" said one doctor.

Chinese doctors are forced to work overtime but are not paid enough. They are paid less than their Western counterparts. Excess patients in bigger, government-run tertiary hospitals put significant pressure on doctors. "The higher the level of the hospital, the higher the frequency of reported violent incidents in China. Seventy percent of the violent incidents reported in the past ten years occurred in tertiary hospitals," Pinghui Xiao, Senior Lecturer of Law School of Guangzhou University.

About 362 medical workers were injured and 24 doctors were killed in violence by patients between 2009 and 2018, revealed data compiled by a Chinese media outlet. These kinds of attacks saw a surge during the Covid-19 pandemic. About 27 attacks on medical staff including doctors occur in each hospital every year, according to a survey by the Chinese Hospital Association (CHA).

While there is a lack of communication between doctors and patients, the higher expectations of medical technology as propagated by media is a major cause of conflict and violence, said Yuhao Si. "Movies and television repeatedly portray heroic characters as doctors and overstate current medical techniques. These portrayals yield many discrepancies between ideas and reality," Si said.

These kinds of discrepancies may drive patients or relatives to fight with medical staff when the treatment is not satisfactory. "The media must maintain neutrality in medical disputes, and movies and television dramas must be conceived based on realistic contemporary healthcare situations in China," Si said.

Beijing government introduced a law to prevent attacks on medical professionals. However, it has turned out to be weak and inefficient, said Guochen Chen, a researcher at the Beijing-based School of Criminology.

"The law does not provide full protection for medical personnel... Simply relying on the law as a deterrent cannot prevent all incidents of violence against doctors," Chen said.

Doctors in China are often treated with suspicion and are subjected to violence, which caused them to lose confidence, said Yuxin Wang and Shunda Du, researchers from the Peking Union Medical College Hospital. Doctors' satisfaction with their profession was significantly lower compared with that among the average social reference group, and 45 percent of doctors didn't want their children to work in the medical profession, reflecting a lack of confidence in their profession, they said.

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



Palau. Photo: Rene Paulisich

CHINA'S SHADOW IN THE PACIFIC: THE BATTLE FOR PALAU'S SOVEREIGNTY

SUN LEE

China has been steadily working to increase its influence in the Pacific island of Palau, using media, economic leverage, and political tactics as part of a broader strategy to expand its global presence.

One key aspect of China's strategy involves the Overseas Chinese Big Data Group (OCBD), a Chinese company that backed the Palau Media Group, founded by Moses Uludong. The OCBD has ties to China's military and public security organizations, raising concerns about espionage and Chinese influence in Palau.

Uludong, a prominent figure in Palau and founder of the island's first newspaper Tia Belau, has long advocated for closer relations with China. This stance contrasts with the Palauan government's position, as

Palau remains a strong ally of the United States and one of only 13 nations globally that recognizes Taiwan. Amid rising tensions between China and the West, Uludong has expressed concerns about the devastation Palau could face if a conflict erupts between the two powers.

In 2018, Uludong launched the Palau Media Group to increase Palau's visibility in China and create a "hub of information." However, the initiative was funded by Chinese groups with ties to the police and military, raising red flags over potential espionage and undue influence in Palau's media landscape.

Although the media initiative failed to gain traction, emails revealed that China had used Uludong's Tia Belau to publish pro-Chinese content. Uludong denied direct involvement with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), claiming interactions were with the Zhi Gong Party,

which he described as "capitalist." However, experts view the Zhi Gong Party as a front for the CCP. While the media initiative's direct impact on editorial content was brief, the involvement of influential Palauans raises concerns about elite capture, especially when foreign powers gain influence over key decision-makers.

Even though China's media efforts did not achieve significant traction, the country has continued to expand its influence in the Pacific. A recent report by the US think tank 'Pacific Economics' warned that China may use transnational criminal organizations to further its political objectives in Palau. These organizations, acting under China's influence, have been attempting to increase their local presence, secretly funnel funds, and pressure Palauan officials.

The report highlighted investments by the Cambodia-based Prince Group Holdings, led by Chinese businessman Neak Oknha Chen Zhi, which has been involved in resort and real estate projects in Palau. The group faces accusations of money laundering, online gambling, and internet fraud. Its investments in Palau are near critical infrastructure such as Koror Port, Palau International Airport, and radar stations, with land leases extending up to 99 years. These developments have raised concerns over Chinese influence on Palau's strategic assets.

In addition, a recent incident involving two Chinese nationals—Cary Yan and Gina Zhou—has drawn attention to China's ongoing influence in Palau. The pair, convicted in the US for bribing officials in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, attempted to enter Palau but were denied entry due to their criminal convictions. This incident further underscores the growing tension surrounding Chinese activities in the Pacific.

China's irritation with Palau also stems from the country's recognition of Taiwan, a stance Beijing vehemently opposes. The re-election of Surangel Whipps Jr. as president of Palau in November 2024, known for his pro-Western views, further exacerbated

tensions. Whipps condemned China's maritime activities near Palau, accusing Chinese research vessels of trespassing in Palauan waters and disrespecting its sovereignty. He also criticized China's naming of underwater mountains that Palau claims as its own.

It is important to mention China's 'tourist ban' and how it had adversely affected Palau way back in 2018. A ban on Chinese tourists to the tiny Pacific nation of Palau had left hotels empty, an airline in limbo, and shown the power China has over its vacationing middle class. China had done it as pressure tactic against Palau because of its support for Taiwan. However, China blacklisted Palau as a tourist destination, severely affecting the island nation's economy. Between 2017 and 2018, Chinese tourism to Palau dropped by 22.7%, significantly impacting the island's GDP, which heavily relies on tourism.

Despite these challenges, Palau continues to resist China's attempts to influence its domestic and foreign policies. Its resistance is a crucial stand for other smaller nations in the Pacific and beyond, as it represents a larger struggle against growing Chinese influence in the region.

China's efforts to encircle Palau through media manipulation, economic influence, and political pressure pose significant risks to the island nation's sovereignty and regional stability. As China continues to expand its footprint in the Pacific, its tactics raise serious concerns about the potential for broader geopolitical shifts that could alter the balance of power in the region.

The world must remain vigilant, as the unfolding situation in Palau could serve as a blueprint for China's future strategies in smaller, vulnerable nations—making it imperative for the international community to monitor these developments closely.

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



RUNNING ON EMPTY

“What we should understand is that [Burmese people] have supported Thai society a lot. I can say that with our Myanmar friends being here, Thai society could really develop at lighting speed!” exclaims Don Tajarosuk, a human rights advocate, speaking on the Insight Myanmar Podcast. “When I talk with [Burmese migrants], actually, they really don’t want to make any problem for Thailand. They feel thankful to Thai society for letting them live safely. They don’t want to disturb the country, they don’t make any problem. They want to pay taxes! And they are already part of our society. If we have more respect towards them, then our country will be better.”

When Don was just five years old, his mother frequently hosted children who would stay for varying periods at their home—some for a few weeks, others for months, and one even stayed for two years. These guests were refugees, staying only temporarily as they were being processed to a third country; but as a child, Don didn’t fully understand their situation. He still remembers them fondly today, particularly one named Manuel, who became like family, playing football and sharing daily activities with him.

This all made more sense to Don when he was 20 years old, and finally learned what his mother, Chalida Tajarosuk, does for a living: she is a prominent Thai human rights defender, with decades of experience advocating for peace, human rights, and democracy across Asia. “I realized that she’s working for human rights for a long time, since I was really young. The days she did not come home, she’s going somewhere or to

some country to work for human rights and democracy.” Chalida currently serves as the Director of the People’s Empowerment Foundation (PEF), where she supports marginalized groups, including refugees and migrant workers, particularly from Myanmar. Her advocacy work often focuses on improving relations between Thai authorities and vulnerable communities, and she has been involved in arranging humanitarian aid, advocating for refugee rights, and promoting peaceful resolutions to conflicts along the Thai-Myanmar border.

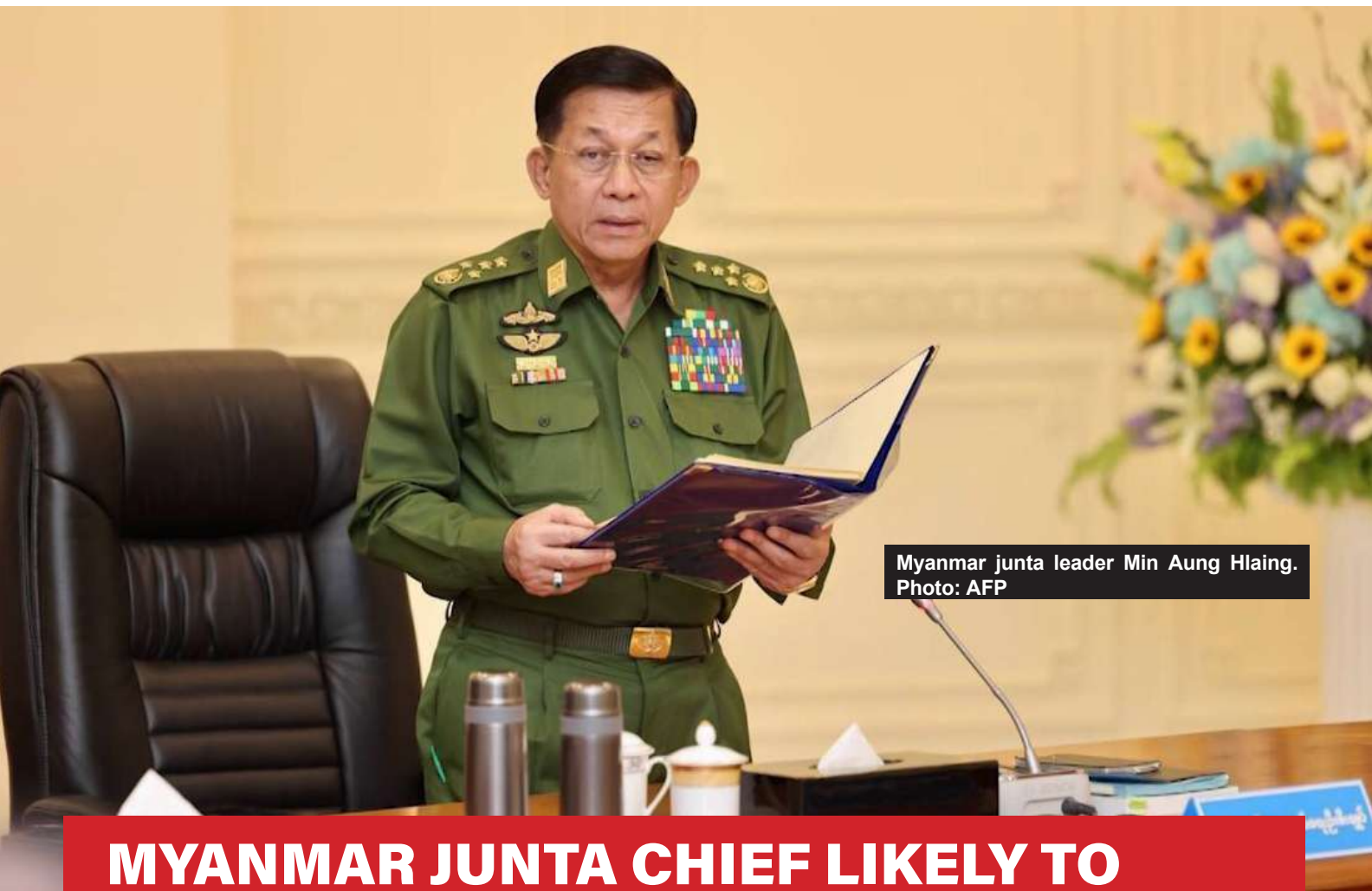
In recognition of her contributions, she was awarded the prestigious Order of Timor-Leste in 2019 for her solidarity in advocating for human rights in the region. “Some people say that she’s like the mother of independence,” her son quips, before adding, “Democracy is not just one country’s perspective, but about all the people connected together. So now, even though we focus on Thailand, we also work with our friends in Southeast Asia. She believes that good policies should come from the people. Good policies should come from the ground.”

Thailand has long been a major destination for refugees fleeing conflict and persecution, particularly from neighboring countries. “Thailand is one country that has the highest influx of migration in and out,” he says. “Many foreigners who come to Thailand are seeking safe places, like asylum seekers and migrants, they come to Thailand.” Over the decades, besides Myanmar, the country has hosted significant numbers of refugees from countries experiencing political turmoil, armed conflict, and human rights abuses, such as Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Thailand has also taken in refugees from distant countries, like Pakistan and Syria, further highlighting its role as a hub for displaced populations.

CATCH THE PODCAST

To read more or listen to the Insight Myanmar Podcast, check the link here:

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2025/3/1/episode-320-running-on-empty>



Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing. Photo: AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA CHIEF LIKELY TO MAKE FIRST ASEAN VISIT SINCE 2021 TO ATTEND BIMSTEC SUMMIT

Junta chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing will reportedly attend the upcoming Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) summit in Bangkok on April 3-4, according to Thai PBS citing a highly placed source.

This would mark Min Aung Hlaing's first visit to an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member state since April 2021, when he attended an emergency summit in Jakarta shortly after seizing power in a military coup.

The BIMSTEC summit, hosted by Thailand, brings together seven nations surrounding the Bay of Bengal

- India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, and Thailand. Member states are expected to conduct bilateral meetings to strengthen diplomatic and economic relations during the event.

Min Aung Hlaing's international travel has been largely limited to Russia, where he has made four trips since the coup, most recently meeting with President Vladimir Putin earlier this month. He also visited China for the first time last November since the coup.



People's Party Chairperson
Ko Ko Gyi. Photo: AFP

SOCIAL MEDIA ERUPTS AS PEOPLE'S PARTY CHAIRPERSON KO KO GYI WARNS AGAINST ELECTION RESULTS DISPLEASES TO MILITARY

People's Party Chairperson Ko Ko Gyi faced fierce criticism from Facebook users after suggesting that upcoming elections announced by the junta must not yield results that would displease Myanmar's military.

"Election results cannot be in direct conflict with Tatmadaw (the military) that currently holds power," said Ko Ko Gyi in Nay Pyi Taw on March 24.

He also claimed that the ongoing civil war and conflicts in the country are problems that must be solved in cooperation with the military.

His comments sparked immediate outrage on social media platforms.

A Facebook user wrote that Ko Ko Gyi completely

lacks democratic spirit, while another sarcastically questioned, "Then why even talk about holding elections? Just declare the party junta wants to win as the victor."

"Your place in history is dead, Ko Ko Gyi," commented another user, highlighting the growing public discontent with his stance.

Another critical comment pointed out the irony in Ko Ko Gyi's party name: "Your party is named 'People's Party,' but everything you say and do goes against the people."

Ko Ko Gyi has agreed to participate in the upcoming election and has registered his People's Party with the junta, further fueling criticism about his alignment with the junta amid ongoing conflict in Myanmar.

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.