

ON THE GROUND IN MYANMAR

mizzima WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight



The Battle of Pasaung Reveals Moscow and Beijing's Deadly Influence in Burma

The Hollow Theater of Authoritarian Elections: When Dictators Play Democracy

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DIGITAL MAGAZINE

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

THE ORWELLIAN MYANMAR STATE

Since the military coup of February 1, 2021, Myanmar has descended into a repressive surveillance state under the control of an illegal junta, with a chilling focus on controlling, intimidating, and militarizing its youth in its fight against the people.

The junta's Orwellian grip over the country is maintained not only through brute force but also via an increasingly sophisticated and pervasive surveillance apparatus. Young people, once symbols of hope and resistance, are now among the most vulnerable, caught in a landscape of fear where even a social media post or a whispered opinion can lead to arrest, torture, or forced military conscription.

The surveillance system in Myanmar has rapidly evolved, driven by the junta's efforts to stamp out dissent and preempt any resurgence of resistance. The regime has imported digital surveillance technologies from authoritarian allies and some European companies, leveraging facial recognition systems, phone tapping, and data interception to monitor the populace.

Internet blackouts and strict monitoring of online activities have become tools to control the narrative and track dissidents. Encrypted messaging apps and VPNs, once commonly used to circumvent censorship, are now dangerous to possess, as the regime routinely checks phones at military checkpoints. These digital tactics have forced much of the pro-democracy resistance underground, and even then, the fear of being watched is ever-present.

For the youth of Myanmar, the consequences of living under this surveillance state are uniquely severe. Students, university graduates, and teenagers - many of whom played active roles in the initial civil disobedience movement - have become primary targets of the junta's crackdowns. Surveillance footage from protests has

been used to identify and imprison young demonstrators. In schools and universities, informants are embedded to report on any anti-regime sentiments. Social media accounts are scrutinized, and any hint of defiance, even in private messages, can trigger late-night raids. The culture of fear is such that some young people have deleted years' worth of digital history or have abandoned technology altogether to avoid detection.

Compounding this climate of fear is the looming threat of military conscription. In 2024, the junta announced the enforcement of a long-dormant conscription law, requiring all men aged 18 to 35 and women aged 18 to 27 to serve in the military. This law has been weaponized as a means of punishing dissent and replenishing the ranks of a military stretched thin by fighting against ethnic armed organizations and pro-democracy forces. Many young people now face the horrific choice of being forcibly drafted to fight on behalf of a regime they despise or fleeing their homes, risking arrest or death in the process.

Reports have surfaced of young people being abducted from streets or universities and conscripted against their will. The spectre of forced military service hangs over every family, adding yet another layer of trauma to an already brutalized society.

In this Orwellian landscape, resistance itself becomes an act of incredible bravery. The junta's surveillance state, engineered to control and crush the spirit of a defiant population, particularly targets the young because they embody the future the regime fears. Yet, even in the face of such terror, many continue to resist - silently or actively - hoping one day to reclaim their country from tyranny.

EDITORIAL

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**Mizzima Weekly is
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Cover photo of resistance fighters in Karenni State by Antonio Graceffo



A resistance fighter near the front line of Pasaung.
Photo: Antonio Graceffo

THE BATTLE OF PASAUNG REVEALS MOSCOW AND BEIJING'S DEADLY INFLUENCE IN BURMA

ANTONIO GRACEFFO

While artillery and airstrikes could be heard all day in Demoso, where the Myanmar junta was probing resistance defenses, Pasaung remained relatively quiet in the lead-up to one of the most crucial battles of the year in Karenni state. Resistance forces were preparing to retake the city and open a direct supply line to Thailand. For weeks, troops had been gathering for the big push through junta lines. Numerous resistance armies were represented, the KNDF, KA, KPL-Army, KNLP, multiple PDFs, and others. The Free Burma Rangers were also in position, having set up a casualty collection point (CCP) near the front lines.

Just before sundown, the Burma Army launched an airstrike that killed several KA soldiers. The next morning, at about 5:30 a.m., the battle began in earnest. I rode with the KNDF, to the front. As we got closer, the sound of artillery and drones grew louder, and the blasts came closer. He dropped me off at the CCP, where I stayed with the Rangers for about half the day.

The CCP was set up under cover from airstrikes, working in a cramped space, with a mud floor, lacking the sterility of a hospital environment. I asked the doctor if the most extreme cases were sent to Thailand, and he answered that all cases requiring surgery or highly invasive treatments, unsafe to perform in the jungle, were sent across the border. The doctors, nurses, and medics here were working without electricity, without running water, and without the diagnostic machines they would normally rely on in a hospital.

Normally, when the trucks came in, soldiers and medics responded quickly to unload patients and bring them to the CCP. But I watched them move more slowly with one soldier who had a massive, open head wound. They told me he was already dead. His body was wrapped in mylar and sent to Mese.

The medical team then shifted focus to the next patient, another head injury, this one still alive. He was brought into the CCP, where patients were laid out on rough tables as artillery thundered in the distance and jets circled overhead. Occasionally, the blasts were close enough to feel the concussion, though we were still far from a direct hit. As the day went on, however, jets crossed above us more frequently, suggesting the junta may have known we were there and were searching for the CCP to bomb it. Recently, junta propaganda had even claimed the junta had killed members of the Free Burma Rangers (FBR). It was just wishful thinking, but it revealed their goal to eliminate the Rangers.

Medical care under combat conditions is a mix of skill, improvisation, and triage under fire. The doctor used each patient as a teaching opportunity, helping the nurses and medics develop their skills. One man arrived with a tourniquet. After examining the wound, the doctor told the nurse to remove it, explaining, "This tourniquet is more dangerous than his wound."

Supplies had to be carefully tracked. Anything not essential at the CCP was sent back up front to help stabilize patients before evacuation.

Electricity and communications were a constant problem. Starlink internet provided connectivity, but it required power. Solar panels were unreliable during rainy season, and larger panels risked being spotted from the air. Running a generator was too noisy and could draw unwanted attention. Even the small solar collectors used for lightbulbs had to be positioned carefully, hidden from view, yet still able to catch the sun.

With planes frequently overhead, Starlink had to be shut off most of the day, as there was fear the Chinese-made Y-12 aircraft could home in on the signals.

With no refrigeration, blood transfusions depended



Fighters take a break. Photo: Antonio Graceffo

on whoever was standing nearby. Rangers and soldiers rolled up their sleeves, donating on the spot. One ranger told me several times how weak he felt after giving blood, and I have to believe it was because he had donated more than usual. Everyone, the doctors, the soldiers, the medics, and the Rangers, was making sacrifices so that others might live. Under these conditions, where no one, not the Rangers, resistance fighters, or medics, receives a salary, there is only one reason for them to do this kind of work: they do it for love, echoing the Bible's declaration: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13, KJV)

The jungle around the CCP felt like a waiting room, where battle-weary soldiers sat with concern etched on their faces as they waited to hear whether their comrades had lived or died. The waiting soldiers also helped unload the incoming wounded, regardless of what unit they were from. Despite wearing different patches and insignia, carrying different names and banners, they were all human, all Burmese, and all fighting the junta. These commonalities were enough to bring them together, to cooperate in the effort to win the war.

In speaking with soldiers, most were Karenni and Kayan, but there were also Shan, Bamar, even Indians and Gurkhas, and many other ethnicities. One of the most striking changes in the war since the 2021 military coup has been this growing unity across ethnic lines.

While they were loading a wounded soldier to be evacuated to Thailand, jets roared overhead. It was interesting to see the reactions of the soldiers. Some, likely newer recruits, immediately ran for cover, plugging

their ears. The more experienced fighters stayed calm, listening instead for the subtle change in the pitch of the aircraft, which told them whether bombs were about to fall and how close the strike might land.

One soldier with a small wound on his ear sat motionless during the entire incident staring blankly at nothing. He didn't move, and nothing registered on his face. I suspect that rather than calm under pressure from experience, he was in shock and would not have moved even if the explosions had landed directly on us. One of his comrades went and sat beside him, speaking to him in a soothing voice. More wounded arrived, artillery fire drew closer, and jets kept coming overhead. When I later thought to look for the soldier in shock, he was gone. Hopefully his comrades had taken care of him or sent him back to Mese.

The next time jets came over, everyone took cover. I learned to watch the toughest, most composed soldiers and Rangers and follow their lead. If the men who were usually unflappable suddenly ran, I ran with them.

Two patients needed to be carried out to the ambulances, but the vehicles couldn't get close to the CCP because of the jets. A medic hoisted a wounded man onto his back, another held the IV bag aloft, and together they sprinted to the road, where the ambulance waited under tree cover.

After the jets passed, I jumped onto a truck heading back to the front line. The closer we got, the louder it became, artillery, mortars, drones, airstrikes, and aerial strafing. Explosions were constant.

The truck dropped me at an outpost guarding a bridge. There was a bunker there, and this close to the



Medics with the Free Burma Rangers bring in a wounded fighter for treatment. Photo: Antonio Graceffo

front the soldiers spent the day diving in and out of it as bombs landed close enough to threaten, though, somehow, no one had been injured yet.

The commander and I went out onto the bridge to watch the bomb impacts. Huge plumes of white and black smoke climbed into the air as the sound of explosions rolled along the river valley. We watched the planes and drones overhead, powerless to do anything about them. The resistance has no aircraft. It is illegal to transport drone jammers or Starlink equipment through Thailand into Burma, and even the idea of obtaining anti-aircraft weapons was little more than a pipe dream.

Truckloads of soldiers sped across the bridge, and it was clear how poorly equipped the resistance is. Some soldiers didn't even have weapons. Body armor was in short supply, and there was an extreme shortage of helmets. Worst of all, there was a dire shortage of bullets. Some soldiers told me they went into battle with only thirty rounds, which made them seem rich compared to others I met, who had as few as four rounds of very old, museum-grade ammunition in their magazines. Just like other military equipment, it was illegal to transport bullets through Thailand.

Around 2 p.m., I met a resistance group heading back from the front. I asked them why, and they said they had taken too many casualties from the airstrikes and artillery and needed to rethink their strategy and fight again another day.

I returned to the CCP, where the Rangers told me they had treated about forty-four patients. Only two were suspected gunshot wounds. All the others were

victims of explosions. And this is where Russia and China enter the story.

Russia and China provide the junta with the vast bulk of their weapons. Junta soldiers have no shortages of rifles, body armor, helmets, or bullets. Russia and China also supply the junta with aircraft and jet fuel, and they manufacture the drones and artillery while providing the munitions to keep them firing.

At the end of the day, nearly every casualty sustained at the Battle of Pasaung was the direct result of Russian and Chinese support for the junta. Not only has the international community failed to halt the flow of weapons and jet fuel from Moscow and Beijing, but international law also prevents the resistance from purchasing bullets, drone jammers, and other equipment they desperately need to defend themselves or retake their territory.

The resistance will not quit. Eighty years of war has proven that they will not be ground into submission. The only thing keeping the war alive is Russia and China's continued support for the junta.

Antonio Graceffo is an economist and China expert who has reported extensively on Burma.



Casualty of war. Photo: Antonio Graceffo

ANALYSIS & INSIGHT



ROHINGYA CRISIS SHOULD BE RESOLVED TOGETHER, SAYS BANGLADESH LEADER YUNUS

From 24-26 August an international three-day conference titled “Stakeholders’ Dialogue – Outcomes of the High-Level Conference on the Rohingya Situation” was held in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, to discuss the situation of Rohingya refugees.

The conference coincides with the eighth anniversary of the 2017 mass exodus of Rohingya refugees from Rakhine State. It is also said to be a preparation for a high-level meeting on the Rohingya issue scheduled to take place alongside the United Nations General Assembly on 30 September.

Bangladesh’s interim head of government, Mohammad Yunus, delivered a speech at the conference on 25 August and participants visited the Rohingya refugee camps on 26 August, according to Mizzima’s visiting reporter.

Attending the conference were Bangladesh’s Minister for Disaster Management and Relief Farooqe Azam, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Tom Andrews, organizations working on the Rohingya issue, international experts, Rohingya refugees, groups currently addressing the crisis, and media personnel.

Mizzima asked Prime Minister Yunus when he left the conference if he had a message to send to Myanmar. "Let's do it together," he responded.

This is the first such conference held in Bangladesh since the change of government, and it was observed that both the Bangladesh military and some political parties also attended.

According to reports, the main aim of the conference is to regain international attention on the worsening humanitarian crisis facing Rohingya refugees, intensified by cuts in donor funding.

Bangladesh is currently hosting more than 1.3 million Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char. It is said that the Bangladesh government is working on a roadmap for their safe, voluntary, and dignified repatriation to Rakhine State in Myanmar.

BHRN urgent call to action on Rohingya atrocities

On 25 August, the Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) condemned ongoing atrocities against the Rohingya in Myanmar, urging international action to prevent further violence and ensure justice.

The statement is as follows:

Today marks eight years since Myanmar's security forces carried out coordinated attacks against the Rohingya population in Rakhine State, burning entire villages, killing thousands of men, women, and children, and subjecting women and girls to widespread sexual violence. More than 700,000 Rohingya were forced to flee to Bangladesh. These atrocities shocked the world, but they were not isolated. They were the culmination of decades of persecution, the stripping of citizenship,



Bangladesh's interim head of government Mohammad Yunus, centre, with delegates. Photo: Mizzima

apartheid-like restrictions, and state led efforts to erase the Rohingya from Myanmar. Genocide is a process, and for the Rohingya, that process began long before 2017.

For years, the international community witnessed the persecution escalate, and still it did nothing.

The 1982 citizenship law rendered the Rohingya stateless, denying them recognition in their own country. In the decades that followed, they were confined, denied education, healthcare, and livelihoods, subjected to marriage and family restrictions, and regularly targeted with violence and harassment by security forces. Waves of violence in 2012 forced more than 100,000 Rohingya into displacement camps where they remain today. Hate speech and propaganda from state authorities, nationalist monks, and online platforms dehumanized the Rohingya, portraying them as outsiders and enemies.

The structures of genocide were in plain sight. Still, the world did not act.

When security forces launched “clearance operations” in 2016 and 2017, burning villages, killing civilians, and engaging in widespread rape and torture, the international community once again failed to respond with the urgency required. Even as hundreds of thousands crossed into Bangladesh with harrowing testimonies, many governments hesitated to call the crimes by their name: genocide. Still, the world did not act to prevent further atrocities.

Since the 2021 coup, the situation has only worsened. The military junta has intensified its persecution of the Rohingya, imposing severe restrictions on movement, blocking humanitarian aid, and conscripting Rohingya

into forced labor and military service. Arbitrary arrests, torture, killings, and sexual violence continue with total impunity. At the same time, the Arakan Army has also targeted Rohingya communities, carrying out extrajudicial executions, forced displacement, arson, and spreading anti-Rohingya propaganda and hate speech. An estimated 150,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh since mid-2024. And still, the world has failed to act to prevent the ongoing genocide.

Today, more than a million Rohingya remain trapped in Bangladesh, denied legal status and rights, facing shrinking aid, food insecurity, and the loss of education and livelihoods. Across the region, Rohingya continue to die at sea or are detained and turned away from safety. Inside Rakhine State, they remain under siege, confined, deprived of humanitarian assistance, and subjected to systematic persecution by both the junta and the Arakan Army.

International justice efforts are underway. The International Court of Justice is hearing The Gambia’s genocide case against Myanmar, the International Criminal Court is investigating crimes against humanity against the Rohingya, and courts abroad are pursuing cases under universal jurisdiction. These processes are critical, but they remain slow, and survivors of genocide cannot live on promises of justice tomorrow while they continue to suffer today.

If states truly wish to honor their obligations under the Genocide Convention, they must act not only to punish, but to prevent. Prevention means restoring aid and ensuring protection for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and across the region. Prevention means halting the ongoing crimes of the junta and the Arakan Army. Prevention also requires protecting other Muslim communities in Myanmar, including the Pathi, Panthay, Pashu, Kaman, and Myaydu, who face

systematic persecution and attacks amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity, which also may amount to genocide. Prevention means dismantling the entrenched structures of persecution, propaganda, and apartheid that sustain genocide against the Rohingya.

Eight years on, remembrance without action is complicity. If “never again” is to mean anything, states must act now, decisively and urgently, to end the ongoing genocide and secure justice, safety, and dignity for the Rohingya people.

UK, Australia, Canada and others mark eighth anniversary of Rohingya atrocities

Numerous embassies including the UK, Australia, and Canada marked the eighth anniversary of the Myanmar military's campaign of violence against Rohingya communities on 25 August.

The following is the statement from the Australian embassy:

Eight years ago, the Myanmar military launched a campaign of systemic violence against Rohingya communities, leading to mass displacement, widespread human rights violations and abuses, and untold suffering. Today, more than 1.1 million Rohingya remain displaced in Bangladesh, along with hundreds of thousands elsewhere in the region and internally in Myanmar.

With the escalating conflict and deteriorating humanitarian situation in Rakhine State, many Rohingya have been forced from their homes and country. We remain deeply concerned by the targeting

of civilians, destruction of civilian infrastructure, and forced recruitment into the Myanmar military. We also note with concern credible reports of discrimination and abuse against Rohingya committed by other armed actors.

Displaced Rohingya want to return home, despite for decades having been denied citizenship and access to basic rights and services. This requires conditions to be conducive for their voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return, but these conditions can only be met by addressing the root causes of their displacement, which requires a peaceful and stable Myanmar. Australia remains committed to supporting the humanitarian needs of Rohingya in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Australia also supports the efforts to pursue accountability for crimes committed against the Rohingya.

We call for an immediate cessation of violence, the release of those unjustly detained, safe and unhindered humanitarian access, and for the regime to engage in genuine and inclusive political dialogue with all stakeholders with the view to a return to a more peaceful and stable Myanmar. Elections held without these essential steps risk greater instability. We urge a peaceful transition of power to a civilian democratic government that reflects the will of the people.

Australia continues to strongly support ASEAN's efforts to resolve the crisis, and we call again for the full implementation of ASEAN's Five Point Consensus. We will also continue to work with the Government of Bangladesh and the international community to focus attention on the situation in Myanmar and the related humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh, including at the upcoming High-Level Conference in September 2025.


 A photograph of Min Aung Hlaing, the leader of the Myanmar junta, seated in a dark leather chair. He is wearing a green military uniform with several medals and a colorful sash. He is looking down and to his left. In the background, a Christmas tree is visible.

Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing.
Photo: AFP

THE HOLLOW THEATER OF AUTHORITARIAN ELECTIONS: WHEN DICTATORS PLAY DEMOCRACY

JAMES SHWE

In the grand theater of international legitimacy, two leaders took the stage this week, each wielding the word "elections" like a prop in their respective performances. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy stood firm in his constitutional position that elections are simply impossible during wartime, while Myanmar's military strongman Min Aung Hlaing prepares for his own electoral charade in a country where he controls barely one-fifth of the territory.

The contrast between these two scenarios exposes the grotesque absurdity of Myanmar's junta and its shameless international enablers - including the pathetic spectacle of dubious "international monitors" who would legitimize this farce.

The Ukrainian Reality: Constitutional Democracy Under Fire

Zelenskyy's position is both constitutionally sound and practically sensible. Ukraine's parliament has affirmed that elections cannot be held under martial law, a position supported by 63 percent of Ukrainians who understand that conducting credible elections while Russian missiles rain down on polling stations

would be impossible. As the Ukrainian constitution clearly states, elections are prohibited during martial law to ensure governance continuity and national defense. Even Ukraine's opposition parties agree that wartime elections would be neither free nor fair.

The Ukrainian leader's commitment to democratic principles remains unshaken despite extraordinary pressure. When the war ends, Ukraine will hold elections as promised. This is what genuine democratic leadership looks like under existential threat.

Myanmar's Farcical Election Theater

Now observe the Myanmar junta's grotesque pantomime. Min Aung Hlaing, a general who has never won a single election and whose proxy party secured a humiliating 33 out of 476 seats in 2020, announces elections for December 28, 2025. This is from a regime that controls a mere 21 percent of the country while ethnic armed organizations command 42 percent. The junta has dissolved the National League for Democracy, imprisoned Aung San Suu Kyi, and systematically eliminated any meaningful political opposition.

The sheer audacity of this electoral charade would be comical if it weren't so tragic. How does one conduct "free and fair" elections in a country where the government has bombed schools, hospitals, and religious sites? Where over 3.5 million people are displaced and thousands more flee conscription? Where opposition groups control vast swaths of territory and have vowed to block any voting in their regions?

International election experts have unanimously declared such elections "impossible under current conditions," citing draconian legislation, detention of political leaders, severe media restrictions, and the absence of credible voter rolls. Even the junta's own supporters recognize this as a desperate gambit for legitimacy.

The Theater of "International Monitoring": Complicit Legitimizers

Perhaps most nauseating in this charade is the junta's announcement that it will allow "domestic and international observers" to monitor its sham elections. Who exactly are these so-called international monitors willing to lend credibility to this murderous regime's electoral theater?

The military-controlled Union Election Commission claims it will permit observers to monitor "various aspects of the electoral process", mimicking the legitimate observation that occurred during Myanmar's 2015 elections when respected organizations like the European Union and The Carter Center deployed credible missions. But contrast those legitimate efforts with today's reality.

Leading international election observation organizations have already issued devastating joint statements, with groups adhering to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation categorically denouncing and distancing themselves from this "sham election". They have explicitly called upon the international community to "deny the (junta) any technical, material, or symbolic support for such sham elections".

The Carter Center, which observed Myanmar's 2015 and 2020 elections with professional integrity, has joined other legitimate monitoring organizations

in rejecting participation in this farce. The European Union, which deployed 150 observers from all 28 member states in 2015, would never dignify this murderous regime's charade with their presence.

So, who will show up to legitimize Min Aung Hlaing's electoral theater? The junta's own allies reveal the answer. Belarus, fresh from its own rigged elections that ensured dictator Lukashenko's seventh consecutive term, has indicated support for the junta's election plans. Russia, which has signed a memorandum of understanding on "cooperation in election activities" with the Myanmar regime, stands ready to provide the fig leaf of international observation. These are the same countries whose own electoral systems are international jokes.

Cambodia's Hun Sen has offered to send members of his country's National Election Committee to help prepare for Myanmar's polls. This is from a regime with "a history of elections rendered meaningless by irregularities, dissolution of political parties, and physical attacks on the political opposition". What a perfect match - one rigged system legitimizing another.

UN human rights experts have been brutally honest, calling this exercise "a fraud" and urging member states to recognize it as such. They point out that Belarus and India have been among the few countries "publicly engaging with the (junta) on its plans to hold sham elections", highlighting how isolated the junta's supporters truly are.

The Enablers: A Rogues' Gallery of Opportunists

What makes Myanmar's electoral farce particularly nauseating is the parade of international enablers who prop up this failing regime for their own cynical purposes.

China leads this unsavory cast of characters, providing the junta with \$3 billion in assistance, advanced military equipment including fighter jets and drones, and technical support for weapons production at Myanmar's ordnance factories. Beijing's motivation is transparently self-serving: protecting its Belt and Road investments and maintaining a pliant neighbor, regardless of the human cost. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Min Aung Hlaing in 2024, after which the election proposal mysteriously materialized.

Russia has emerged as the junta's most reliable arms supplier, providing \$406 million in weapons since the coup and training Myanmar pilots to better bomb civilians. Moscow sees Myanmar as a useful partner in its anti-Western alliance and has explicitly indicated support for the junta's election plans, even signing cooperation agreements on electoral activities.

Thailand has perhaps been the most duplicitous enabler, serving as the junta's financial lifeline while maintaining a facade of ASEAN diplomacy. Thai banks have become the primary channel for Myanmar's weapons procurement, with transactions jumping from \$60 million in 2022 to nearly \$130 million in 2023. Thai companies have expanded operations in Myanmar since the coup, treating the military takeover as a business opportunity. Even former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has offered to mediate "peace talks" with the butcher Min Aung Hlaing.

These countries don't care about Myanmar's people. They care about profits, geopolitical advantage, and regional stability on their terms, not democratic legitimacy. Their support has enabled the junta to prolong its campaign of terror.

The Desperate Search for Legitimacy Through Fake Monitors

The junta's election strategy reveals the pathetic delusions of a dying regime. Min Aung Hlaing believes that a rigged electoral victory, blessed by complicit "international observers," will somehow transform him from an internationally isolated war criminal into a legitimate president. The UN Special Rapporteur has requested an arrest warrant for him at the International Criminal Court, yet he imagines that a sham election monitored by fellow authoritarians will wash away the blood on his hands.

This is the same military that rejected the 2020 election results—results that were validated by legitimate international observers from the Carter Center and other respected organizations. When genuine monitors from credible institutions found the 2020 elections to be conducted fairly, the military staged a coup anyway. Now, after four years of bombing civilians and losing most of the country to resistance forces, they expect the world to take their electoral theater seriously when monitored by the likes of Belarus and Cambodia.

The National Unity Government, formed by legitimately elected lawmakers ousted in the coup, continues to represent Myanmar at the United Nations. Meanwhile, the junta struggles to maintain basic governance even in areas under its nominal control, conducting a census in less than half the country's townships and resorting to forced conscription.

The Path Forward: Isolation, Not Legitimization

The international community must see Myanmar's planned elections for what they are: a desperate attempt by a failing military dictatorship to legitimize its reign of terror through the theater of fake international observation. Any organization or country that provides monitoring services for this charade becomes complicit in the junta's crimes against humanity.

Legitimate international election monitoring organizations have already drawn the line, categorically rejecting participation in this farce. The few "monitors" who show up will expose themselves as either fellow authoritarians or paid legitimizers of mass murder.

Ukraine's example under Zelenskyy shows what principled leadership looks like during wartime. The Myanmar junta's electoral pantomime, complete with its rogues' gallery of fake international monitors, shows what desperation and delusion look like when wrapped in the language of democracy.

The choice for the international community is clear: support genuine democracy by standing with Ukraine's constitutional position and Myanmar's resistance forces or enable authoritarian theater by legitimizing the junta's electoral fraud through complicit monitoring. There is no middle ground when democracy itself is under assault.

Myanmar's people deserve better than the hollow promises of war criminals and the cynical validation of their bought-and-paid-for international enablers masquerading as election observers. They deserve the democracy they voted for in 2020 - a vote that was properly monitored by legitimate international observers who found it free and fair - and continue to fight for today, even as their so-called neighbors count their profits from the junta's reign of terror.

JUSTICE FOR MYANMAR CALLS FOR CLOSING OF LEGAL LOOPHOLE

Photo: Supplied

Justice for Myanmar issued a statement on 21 August calling for the closing of a legal loophole in the sanctions regime of the US, UK, EU, and Canada against the Myanmar junta caused by its recent rebranding.

The text of the statement is as follows.

The illegal Myanmar military junta's rebranding of the name of its executive, legislative and judicial entity, the "State Administration Council" (SAC), to the so-called "State Security and Peace Commission" (SSPC), has created a dangerous loophole for the junta to circumvent international sanctions.

As part of its illegal coup attempt and ahead of its planned sham election, the military junta dissolved the so-called SAC and replaced it with SSPC on July 31, 2025.

As was the case with SAC, SSPC's "chair" and "vice-chair" are the war criminals Min Aung Hlaing and Soe Win, who are sanctioned by Canada, EU, UK, USA and Australia. All 10 members of SSPC are sanctioned in at least one jurisdiction and all were senior members of the junta before July 31.

Since its change of name to SSPC on July 31, the junta has further intensified its campaign of terror against the people, with indiscriminate airstrikes and shelling, arbitrary arrests, torture and the destruction of whole communities.

Last Sunday alone, the junta carried out an aerial massacre in Mawchi, Karenni State, killing at least 32 civilians.

The entity SAC was sanctioned by the USA on May 17, 2021, the UK on June 21, 2021, the EU on November 8, 2022 and Canada on October 31, 2023.

Under control and ownership tests in respective sanctions laws, the designation of SAC generally

meant that all entities under its control were in effect also sanctioned, including ministries and state-owned enterprises that the junta illegally seized through its violent coup attempt.

The loophole created by SAC's dissolution may have enabled the junta's recent hiring of the US public relations firm DCI Group, in a \$3 million yearlong contract with a scope to "rebuild" relations with the US – an attempt to launder the junta's international image. DCI has also committed to helping the junta exploit Myanmar's natural resources, which the junta continues to plunder from the people to fund its terror campaign.

The timing suggests premeditation. The junta signed the contract with DCI Group on July 4, weeks before it dissolved SAC, yet made it effective only after the SAC ceased to exist on July 31, likely to exploit the sanctions loophole.

The junta-controlled information ministry signed the contract for the junta. Since 2021, it was under the junta's former brand SAC and is now under the control of SSPC.

In 2021, the junta hired Ari Ben-Menashe of the Canadian public relations firm Dickens & Madson to lobby the US government. However, the contract was cancelled in July, shortly after the USA sanctioned SAC, because sanctions reportedly prevented payment.

Canada, EU, UK and USA now need to urgently add SSPC to their sanctions lists to ensure the illegal junta remains broadly sanctioned and to prevent their sanctions regimes from being circumvented. Australia also needs to play its part in upholding human rights and democracy by imposing targeted sanctions on SSPC and the junta's sources of funds, arms, technology and aviation fuel.

CHIN COUNCIL WARNS PARTICIPATION IN MYANMAR JUNTA'S PLANNED ELECTION WILL BE TREATED AS A CRIME


“Participating in a sham election would be helping to prolong the illegitimate military dictatorship, encouraging the continued killings of innocent civilians. Those involved will be considered complicit in the crimes committed by the military commission,” the ICNCC said in its statement.

The ICNCC stressed that with basic rights being stripped away and millions displaced, a free and fair election is impossible under current conditions. Instead of representing the people's will, the council warned, the vote will only serve to entrench military rule and could further fuel conflict.

Military analysts states that junta forces now control only Tedim and Hakha towns among Chin State's nine townships, while resistance forces dominate the rest, making it unlikely that elections can proceed beyond those areas.

The ICNCC called on international governments and organizations not to recognize the junta's election and to condemn it outright.

Formed after the coup, the ICNCC represents political parties and elected MPs from the 2020 election who refused to collaborate with the junta, along with CDM participants, strike committees, civil society groups, youth, and women's organizations. It works in cooperation with the Chin Brotherhood alliance.



Myanmar migrants in Thailand.
Photo: AFP

EXILES IN THAILAND REJECT MYANMAR JUNTA'S CALL FOR ADVANCE VOTING

The Myanmar junta's embassy in Thailand on 22 August issued a statement urging those who fled the country due to the People's Military Service Law and anti-regime revolutionary forces taking refuge in Thailand to cast advance votes in the upcoming election.

However, a survey conducted among 24 people - including youths, students, revolutionary communities, former political prisoners, Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) workers, and migrant workers - found unanimous rejection of the military regime's call.

All respondents said they had no plans to participate in advance voting and do not recognize the junta's election.

"It's like they're shamelessly showing their face. No matter what kind of election the terrorist military junta holds, as a citizen, I will not vote," said a former female political prisoner living in Thailand.

A Mon political activist expressed concerns that the junta may manipulate ballots regardless of participation.

"We don't accept this election. No matter how much we say we won't vote, they'll just pull the strings as they please. Even during Cyclone Nargis, they blatantly lied, claiming the 2008 Constitution was supported by the majority. It'll be the same this time," he said.

Others fear the junta could pressure exiles by linking residency permits to voting.

"If they say they'll only permit residency extensions for those who cast advance votes, what are we supposed to do? The extension process is already being dragged out for so long. If it really comes to that, I don't know what we'll do," said a female CDM teacher in Thailand.

The junta has set 28 December as the election date, requiring Myanmar nationals abroad to cast advance ballots at embassies.

The Myanmar embassy in Bangkok announced that applicants must submit designated forms with their information and signatures via email between 22 August and 8 September.



NUG VOWS JUSTICE FOR VICTIMS OF MYANMAR JUNTA'S CRIMES

The National Unity Government (NUG) has pledged to take all possible measures to deliver justice for victims of the junta's war crimes and human rights violations, according to U Nay Phone Latt, spokesperson for the Prime Minister's Office.

In its Reporting to the People and the International Community briefing on 20 August, the NUG said it will continue documenting atrocities committed by the junta, stressing that the evidence will be used to hold perpetrators accountable.

"The terrorist military junta has refused to release Ma Moe San Suu Kyi, head of the National League for Democracy's Central Youth Working Committee, even after her prison term ended. Instead, they took her out of prison and filed another case against her," U Nay Phone Latt said, citing an example.

He added that the NUG is determined to ensure all those responsible are brought to justice in line with the

law, and that victims receive the justice they deserve.

The junta's Union Election Commission announced on 18 August that the first phase of a general election will be held on 28 December this year.

Meanwhile, the Interim Chin National Consultative Council (ICNCC) declared on 19 August that anyone participating in the junta's planned election will be considered criminals. The group condemned the polls as "completely devoid of democratic norms of freedom, fairness, and transparency in campaigning and voting," while highlighting ongoing rights abuses and mass displacement.

Since the February 2021 coup, a total of 29,560 people have been arrested, with 22,317 still in detention and 10,994 serving prison sentences, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP).



MYANMAR'S UN AMBASSADOR APPEALS TO UN TO REJECT JUNTA'S ELECTION AND PROTECT WOMEN IN CONFLICT

On 19 August 2025, Myanmar's UN Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun condemned the military junta's use of sexual violence since the 2021 coup and called for urgent action to protect civilians, especially women and girls, during a Security Council debate.

The text of the ambassador's statement is as follows.

Mr. President,

At the outset, I would like to thank the presidency of Panama for convening this important UNSC open debate.

I also wish to express my appreciation to SRSG Pramila Patten and the other briefer Ms. Ikhlass Ahmed for their insightful and sobering statements.

Myanmar is alarmed by the recent UNSG report underscoring the staggering 25 percent increase in the perpetration of CRSV from previous year. Also, the report comprehensively presents the terrifying patterns, trends and emerging concerns of conflict-related sexual violence analyzing conflict-affected

settings in various countries.

Reflections in the report serve as a stark reminder that conflict-related sexual violence continues to require serious attention and effective actions. The crime continues to be a multidimensional and complex, having impact on broader peace and security of the world.

The prevailing global challenges testify that consequences of this war crime have been severely affecting many countries across different regions including my own country Myanmar, primarily triggering the lives and well-being of women and girls under conflict settings.

Therefore, today's theme of the open debate offers a significant opportunity for the international community to focus on finding meaningful ways to help the most helpless civilians and communities.

Mr. President,

In Myanmar, patriarchic culture is one of the many factors which causes CRSV. Cognizant of the fact, the

previous elected civilian government was devoted to address the issue. However, the environment for women and girls to live safely and peacefully has been shrinking in the country since the 2021 illegal military coup.

The perpetrators, starting by overthrowing the elected civilian government, arbitrarily detaining political leaders and suppressing peaceful democratic protests, have been committing atrocities that are amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The junta's daily atrocities, especially the conduct of indiscriminate airstrikes and aerial bombings against civilians have driven over 3.5 million people to displacement and placing more than 20 million in critical need of humanitarian assistance. Moreover, it has killed over 7100 people including 1770 women and 873 children. Only two days ago, on 17 August, the junta forces carried out an aerial bombing on Mawchee Village in Karenni (Kayah) State killing 32 people including women and children.

The military junta continues using sexual violence to attack the civilian population as part of its "modus operandi". This sexual violence includes rape (including with objects and gang rape), sexual slavery, sexualized torture, sexual mutilation, sexual assault at military checkpoints and forced nudity.

It is reported that around 500 cases of conflict-related sexual violence have been documented between February 2021 and June 2024.

While the number of these incidents is still on the rise, higher volume of such crimes is silently taking place in the junta's detention centers. In this case, women and female youth political activists are subjected to multiple forms of torture and sexual violence. Just last month, two female political prisoners; one aged 26 and the other 44, died in prison.

Sometime sexual violence including rapes by junta forces took place in front of husband, father, mother, sisters, brothers, children and relatives. The junta's cruelty is unspeakable and widespread and systematic.

Against this horrific backdrop, Mr. President, the National Unity Government, the EROs, CSOs and the local community groups are working together to protect women and girls and to seek justice for victims by setting up domestic complaint, monitoring, review and investigative mechanisms, and to provide life-saving and other necessary assistance to the people in need.

Moreover, courageous Myanmar women CSO groups and human rights defenders have been serving

at the forefront to resist against the military junta and raise voices on behalf of the vulnerable communities.

We have to state that we ourselves alone cannot stop this junta's heinous crime timely, and we need help from the international community in particular the UN Security Council to protect our helpless people including women and girls.

Effective actions of the UN Security Council and the other UN bodies matter to save lives and protect women and girls from such atrocities as well as bring justice for victims of CRSV.

To conclude Mr. President, I wish to make the following appeals: -

First, I wish to request all of us to take a pause for a moment and put ourselves in the shoe of those victims, their fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, children and relatives. Then, let's think of their daily life in the conflict settings and unsecure environment under prevalence of the junta's atrocities. Every second, every minute, every hour counts for them.

Second, therefore, I appeal to the members of the Security Council, the UN member states, the UN system to take immediate concrete actions by using all tools available to stop the junta's atrocities and save lives of innocent civilians. The junta's heinous crimes are already documented, and they are available for such actions.

Third, I also call on all member states to take all available ways and means to stop flows of weapons, jet fuel, dual use items and financial assistance to the military junta. The military junta is using them to commit such atrocities.

Fourth, the junta's planned sham election will not be a free, fair and inclusive, and is a deceitful process to hold onto power illegally at the expense of the people's lives and future. The sham election will give the military a license to commit further heinous crimes including CRSV against the population in Myanmar. We have to stop it. Therefore, I urge all member states to respect the aspiration of the people of Myanmar and to categorically reject the junta's sham election.

Fifth and finally, I appeal to the international community to strongly support our endeavour to end the military dictatorship and build a federal democratic union. The future Myanmar will ensure peace, stability, prosperity, justice and accountability for all.



ILO LAUNCHES EARTHQUAKE RECOVERY PROJECT IN MYANMAR

On 19 August, the International Labour Organization (ILO) launched the Enhanced Livelihood Recovery and Community Resilience Project in the Inle Lake region of Myanmar, to support communities devastated by the March 2025 earthquake.

The following is a statement by the ILO announcing the launch of the initiative.

The Enhanced Livelihood Recovery and Community Resilience Project, funded by Japan's Social Safety Net (SSN) and supported by internal ILO resources, will focus on rebuilding structures, restoring livelihoods, and strengthening resilience. This will be done through hiring workers locally, as part of the ILO's Employment Intensive Investment Programme (EIIP), which prioritises job creation, decent work, and capacity-building in collaboration with affected communities.

Launched in Inle Lake on 19 August 2025, the initiative comes in response to the 7.7 magnitude earthquake that struck central Myanmar on 28 March 2025, causing extensive damage to 58 townships and affecting more than 17 million people, with more than 9 million facing severe hardship.

Schools, health centres, multi-purpose halls, roads, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities are slated to be repaired or rebuilt, using local labour and locally sourced materials.

"This is an ILO global initiative, which has assembled solid and dedicated expertise at the country, regional, and global levels. The ILO will spare no effort to ensure the timely and effective delivery of this project, as a rapid response to the Myanmar Earthquake, and the follow-up to the Resolution adopted by the International Labour Conference in June 2025 under Article 33 of the ILO Constitution on Myanmar. This initiative is to mitigate the impact of conflicts and earthquake disasters on workers and enterprises. The ILO's response is aligned with the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, ensuring that crisis responses contribute to long-term recovery and resilience of the social partners, communities and people of Myanmar," said Kaori Nakamura-Osaka, ILO Assistant Director-General and Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific.

The 8-month project expects to generate more than 25,000 decent workdays with a minimum of 30 per cent allocated to women.

Workers, community contractors, and Village Development Committees (VDCs) will receive skills development training programmes, including construction, maintenance and project management.

VDCs will also benefit from IT equipment to VDCs and computer literacy training.



FORTIFY RIGHTS AND PARTNERS CALL FOR JUSTICE FOR ROHINGYA AHEAD OF HIGH-LEVEL UN CONFERENCE

On 22 August, eight years after Myanmar's clearance operations against the Rohingya, Fortify Rights and 58 organizations called for urgent international action. They urged the UN Security Council to refer Myanmar to the International Criminal Court (ICC) to ensure accountability for the crimes committed.

The statement continues as follows.

Starting in August 2017, Myanmar security forces razed several hundred Rohingya villages and killed Rohingya women, men, and children throughout northern Rakhine State, forcing at least 700,000 to flee to Bangladesh. An Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar documented evidence of genocide and crimes against humanity.

Since these atrocities, no one has been held accountable in Myanmar for the crimes committed against the Rohingya. In 2021, the military launched a coup that overthrew the democratically elected, civilian-led government. Since then, the military junta has committed crimes against humanity and war crimes, including targeted airstrikes against civilians and civilian infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, displacement camps, and places of worship.

The Rohingya who remain in Rakhine State continue to face grave risks and ongoing persecution. The junta's movement restrictions and aid blockages have increased food shortages and health concerns. The Myanmar junta and Rohingya armed groups have unlawfully conscripted Rohingya in Bangladesh and Myanmar to fight in the ongoing conflict against the ethnic Rakhine armed group, the Arakan Army, which

also uses forced recruitment.

The Arakan Army in recent years has committed serious abuses against the Rohingya, including extrajudicial executions, torture, forced labor and large-scale arson. An estimated 150,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh since mid-2024.

Over one million Rohingya refugees are facing increasingly dire conditions in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar camps, including abductions, sexual violence, and the impact of aid cuts on health care, education, and food.

Important accountability measures are taking place. The International Criminal Court (ICC) is investigating atrocity crimes committed in Myanmar and Bangladesh, and provisional measures have been issued by the International Court of Justice as it hears a genocide case against Myanmar brought by The Gambia. Despite this, impunity remains.

In November 2024, the ICC prosecutor requested the issuance of an arrest warrant against Myanmar's Commander-in-Chief, Min Aung Hlaing. Based on publicly available information, the request is still pending before the court's judges.

We, the undersigned organizations, urge the United Nations Security Council to immediately refer the situation in Myanmar to the ICC, to ensure comprehensive accountability for crimes committed against all communities. UN member states should also exercise universal jurisdiction to initiate or support criminal prosecutions of those responsible for crimes under international law, including through national courts, as done in Argentina.

While the Myanmar military has committed the vast majority of human rights abuses since 2021, we call on all parties to the armed conflict in Myanmar to comply with international humanitarian law and engage with international justice mechanisms, including the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar.

In addition, we hope the UN General Assembly resolution to convene a High-level Conference on the Situation of Rohingya Muslims and Other Minorities in Myanmar on September 30, 2025, at the UN Headquarters in New York will provide much needed attention to this crisis. However, we are concerned about the lack of Rohingya representation at the conference and the need for a wider spectrum of voices, including Rohingya women, youth, and diverse Rohingya-led civil society from Myanmar, Bangladesh, and the global diaspora.

Rohingya community members must be at the forefront of discussions about their future. As such, we urge the High-Level Conference to be more inclusive, survivor-centered, and focused on accountability and durable solutions, including restored citizenship and the full spectrum of economic, social and political rights for all Myanmar citizens.

We urge all countries hosting Rohingya refugees to protect their rights, including allowing access to education and livelihoods and ensuring they are not threatened with forced returns to Myanmar.

We stand united in our call for an end to impunity, the right of the Rohingya to live in safety and dignity, full recognition of the Rohingya as citizens of Myanmar, and the inclusion of their voices in shaping the country's future.



Photo: Supplied

SITTWE BRIDGE FORTIFIED BY MYANMAR JUNTA IN PREPARATION FOR ADVANCE TOWARD PONNAGYUN

A bridge destroyed earlier by junta forces in Sittwe, Rakhine State, is now being temporarily repaired and reinforced with defensive fortifications, according to local sources.

The Minchaung Bridge near Amyintgun village on the Sittwe–Yangon highway, was demolished by the junta with explosives on 11 February 2024. The bridge was roughly repaired on 2 August, shortly after the junta declared more than 60 towns, including several townships in Rakhine State, as military administration areas on 31 July this year. Military outposts were also established, a local source told Mizzima.

“They have been transporting troops by warships. Now they are rebuilding the bridge, though it is not usable for vehicles. Once the bridge is finished, I believe they will attack Ponnagyun again. After crossing Kuntaung, the bridge leads directly to Ponnagyun. That is the only available land route. Security measures have also been set up along the riverbanks,” he said.

According to CDM Captain Zin Yaw, although the junta appears to be rebuilding the bridge to advance towards Ponnagyun, they may be forced to retreat before reaching Kuntaung village if there is only one land route available.

“If they rebuild the Minchaung Bridge, it signals the junta’s intent to advance on Ponnagyun. But reaching Yotaru or even Ponnagyun is difficult. The Minchaung

crossing has always been inaccessible. If they attempt it now, they can only succeed with air support. Without it, they will likely retreat before crossing Kuntaung because the area is not secure. Their movement from Amyintgun clearly indicates an attempt to push towards Ponnagyun. In Sittwe, only the junta’s heavy fortifications allow them to hold ground, while the Arakan Army continues to monitor the situation,” he said.

Military sources and locals also report occasional clashes near Amyintgun bridge on the Sittwe–Ponnagyun road.

In Sittwe, key defensive positions include Kankaung island, Narikan Bridge, and the Kyauktan bridges. Captain Zin Yaw assessed that if fighting breaks out in the city and the AA manages to seize these positions, it will mean the AA effectively controls half of Sittwe.

The junta has stationed at least 10 warships in Sittwe, loaded with weapons and troops, though the exact number of forces remains unknown, according to Mizzima research.

There are also at least 10 battalions deployed in Sittwe Township, including the Regional Command Headquarters, Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 20, LIB 270, LIB 232, Infantry Battalion (IB) 344, 354, and Police Battalions 12 and 36.



Myanmar soldiers. Photo: AFP

AT LEAST 20 MYANMAR CIVILIANS KILLED IN MYINGYAN DISTRICT RAIDS

At least 20 civilians, including two children, were killed by junta troops in Myingyan and Nahtoegy townships of Mandalay Region's Myingyan District over the past month, according to a verified list compiled by local sources.

The killings, which occurred between 19 July and 19 August, were confirmed by humanitarian groups and community members who cross-checked names to avoid duplication. Victims included a six-year-old child, a 10-year-old child, pregnant women, and several elderly people over 60. Two middle-aged men were reportedly beheaded.

"Some were shot dead, and some bodies were left to decay before being dragged apart by dogs. Villagers said soldiers warned them not to flee when troops entered. Those who ran were shot on the spot, while those who stayed risked capture or execution. For instance, Ko Kyaw Kyaw from Kansint (North) was beheaded and his body burned," a resident said.

The victims were from Myauk Kone, Pyaw Bwe, Sanpya, Thamone Gaing, Balone, Kansint (North), and Dazoe villages. On 15 August, five elderly villagers hiding in a forest near Dazoe were reportedly captured, tortured, and killed.

In addition to ground raids, junta forces launched airstrikes and artillery attacks during the same period, killing seven more civilians. Residents from Balone were among those killed in arson assaults.

Since martial law was imposed in more than 60 townships nationwide, the junta has stepped up operations in Myingyan District with near-daily air and artillery strikes. More than 20,000 people from at least 20 villages have been displaced, according to locals.

Photo: Supplied

MYANMAR JUNTA COLUMN BURNS VILLAGE IN MONYWA AFTER CLASHES

A military column torched Kyaukka (South) village in Monywa Township, Sagaing Region, on 18 August following clashes with resistance forces nearby, according to the Township People's Security Forces.

The Monywa Township True News Report Team said the troops began setting fire to the village around 7:49 pm.

"The burning started last night. There's no fire this morning, but resistance groups here are preparing to launch an attack as the military column has arrived," said Ko Ar Ku, a member of the Township People's Security Forces.

The column, which left the Northwestern Military Command camp on 8 August, has been torching

villages along its route and is currently based at Monywa University of Economics.

Local organizations said it has burned at least four villages, including Yenangon and Kyaukka (South).

"They burn villages, even where there are oil fields. When they arrive, the owners flee, and the troops extort money, demanding payment to avoid having their property set on fire," Ko Ar Ku said.

At least 10 civilians have been detained along the column's path. As of 19 August morning, the troops were in Kyaukka (North) village and reinforced by another unit from Ayardaw, raising their numbers to about 400, according to resistance groups, who described the situation as tense.



MYANMAR MILITARY USING AI TO BUILD DIGITAL DICTATORSHIP, RIGHTS GROUP WARNS

Myanmar's military junta is transforming the country into a "laboratory for 21st-century authoritarianism" by deploying artificial intelligence (AI) to tighten repression under the guise of counterterrorism, according to a new report from Human Rights Myanmar (HRM).

The 80-page submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights alleges that the military is constructing a vast AI-powered surveillance ecosystem designed to eliminate anonymity, crush dissent, and even automate atrocity crimes.

HRM says the system relies on a national biometric database that fuses fingerprints, facial scans, travel histories, and financial records to create comprehensive profiles of citizens. Linked with AI-driven CCTV cameras in major cities, the technology enables authorities to identify, track, and detain opponents in real time. "With a single identity scan at a checkpoint, the regime can access a person's communications, movements, and political affiliations," the report warns.

The group highlights a "Great Firewall of Myanmar," where AI intercepts private communications, blocks VPNs, and maps dissident networks. Far from protecting national security, HRM argues, the system automates arbitrary arrests and torture, while paving

the way for extrajudicial killings through what it calls an "automated 'kill chain'".

International actors also face scrutiny. The report identifies technology suppliers from China, India, Israel, and Western countries that allegedly provide the junta with surveillance software, forensic tools, and drone systems despite existing sanctions. Social media platforms like Meta and Telegram are accused of enabling harassment and incitement by failing to curb military-backed doxing and hate speech campaigns.

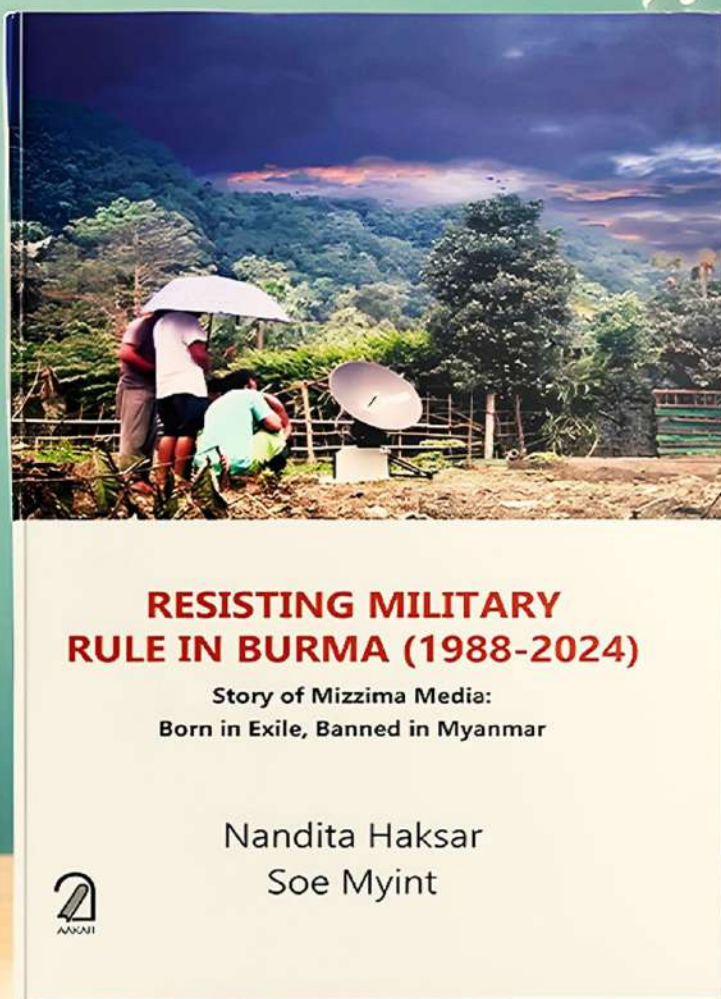
HRM stresses that Myanmar's domestic legal system offers no avenue for accountability, with courts and regulators under military control. It calls on the international community to establish stricter export controls, mandate corporate human rights due diligence, and support civil society groups resisting digital repression.

The junta is weaponizing artificial intelligence as "a human rights violation multiplier," the report concludes. Without urgent international action, Myanmar risks becoming the first fully "AI-powered digital dictatorship," where algorithms, not laws, determine who lives and who dies.

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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Photo: Supplied

MYANMAR JUNTA BOMBS KANPETLET, DESTROYING 20 BUILDINGS

The military junta's air force bombed Kanpetlet town in Chin State on 17 August, destroying civilian and government buildings, according to the Chin Defence Force–Kanpetlet (CDF–Kanpetlet).

Two bombs were dropped on the town at 6:43 am, despite there being no junta troops stationed in the area. Around 20 buildings were destroyed, but no casualties were reported.

"There were no casualties—only property damage. The houses hit by bombs were unoccupied at the time. Although people were nearby, they were able to flee as soon as they heard the aircraft," a CDF–Kanpetlet spokesperson said.

The group accused the junta of carrying out repeated airstrikes with support from China in an effort to terrorize civilians living in areas it has lost control of. Residents were urged to follow defence guidelines, take shelter in trenches and bomb bunkers, and remain alert to instructions from resistance forces.

Kanpetlet has been targeted before. In April, the junta conducted seven airstrikes on the town, killing two civilians and destroying 63 buildings, including homes. On 3 August, just days after martial law was imposed across Chin State, nearby Mindat was also bombed, leaving around 10 homes and other buildings destroyed.

On 31 July, junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing declared martial law in 63 resistance-held townships, including seven of nine townships in Chin State. The CDF–Kanpetlet suggested the latest airstrike could be linked to the junta's announcement on 15 August that all nine Chin townships would be designated constituencies for the Pyithu Hluttaw, Amyotha Hluttaw, and State Hluttaw.

Kanpetlet fell to Chin resistance forces on 21 December 2024, after junta troops and police abandoned the town at midnight as Chin Brotherhood forces prepared to launch an assault.



Photos: Supplied



KIA RETAKES TWO CAMPS NEAR INDAWGYI LAKE AFTER CLASHES WITH MYANMAR JUNTA

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) has regained control of two camps near Mongnaung and Mamonkaing villages on the western side of Indawgyi Lake in Mohnyin Township, Kachin State, according to KIA officials.

"These were originally KIA/KIO bases. After joint forces of the junta and the Shanni Nationalities Army (SNA) launched an offensive, we had to withdraw and leave them. Now, we have recaptured them," said Colonel Naw Bu, the KIA's information officer.

The bases had fallen to junta and SNA forces in July. But beginning on 16 August, the KIA and allied groups mounted a counteroffensive that pushed them out and restored control of the positions.

Frontline sources claim that a junta drone was shot down and a drone-jamming vehicle seized during the fighting. Naw Bu said the information "appears to be true" based on available video and audio but noted that the KIA has not been able to independently verify it.

Junta and SNA troops are currently regrouping near Longton village, raising the prospect of renewed clashes.

Fighting has also erupted east of the lake, in Hepu and Hepar villages. Residents from those areas, along with villagers from Mongnaung and Mamonkaing, have fled their homes, local sources said.



Trucks lined up at the border. Photo: AFP

MYANMAR CLOSES THAI-MYANMAR FRIENDSHIP BRIDGE NO. 2, HALTING TRADE

The Myanmar side temporarily closed the Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge No. 2 on the morning of 18 August, halting cross-border trade, according to local sources.

The closure comes about a week after the junta announced a ban on 35 imported consumer goods, including toothpaste and soap. The bridge is the main trade route between Myawaddy and Mae Sot, and its shutdown has stopped all official trade.

"This bridge is the only official trade route, so now that it's closed, trade has stopped. If trade stops, the

price of goods could go up even more. I'm not sure why they closed the bridge," said a Myawaddy resident.

Thai media reported that more than 500 cargo trucks on the Mae Sot side have been stranded for over a week, unable to enter Myanmar.

With the import ban and trucks stuck at the border, prices of imported goods including food and medicine, have risen sharply inside the country.



WITNESS TO LOSS: FUNERAL FOR SOLDIERS AFTER THE BATTLE OF PASAUNG

ANTONIO GRACEFFO

A truck full of soldiers tears at breakneck speed through the jungle into the area behind the Free Burma Rangers (FBR) casualty collection point. There is a great deal of shouting and confusion as his comrades, with their weapons strapped across their backs, hoist him out of the bed of the truck. Together with the Rangers, they carry him on a stretcher, rushing to meet the medics and doctors. A second casualty is lying in the back of the truck, covered in mud and blood, but there is no sense of urgency or buzz of activity around him - because he is already dead on arrival.

On the morning of the first day of the Battle of Pasaung, I was at the casualty collection point, photographing the wounded soldiers as they were delivered. Of course, death and permanent wounding or maiming are always tragic, but in the context of this war, it is even more so. The average soldier is only

around nineteen years old, and with the post-coup war already running four and a half years, these young people died without ever having the crucial formative experiences one normally has in late teens and early adulthood. And for those who were killed, there was no more future, no more hope. They would never get to make up those lost experiences.

Being a journalist at war is often a difficult balancing act. You want to get the word out to the world, to let them know about the pain and suffering in Burma in the hope of bringing international intervention. On the other hand, you must be careful about operational security, as the junta also reads international media and can target people who appear in photos and videos. But when it comes to death, the calculus becomes more complicated. Regardless of the religion of the dead soldier, Buddhist, Baptist, or Catholic, death is

the moment when they will meet their Creator. It is one of the most private moments of human existence, and taking photos seems a violation. As a result, when I photographed the dead, I tended not to photograph their faces, documenting the death while still allowing them to remain anonymous.

After photographing the latest arrivals, I headed back toward the medic area, and suddenly, I found myself surrounded by anxious soldiers. "Were you the one who took photos of the dead soldier?" It was so intimidating I almost lied and said no, but I told them the truth. Then they asked, "Can we see the photo?" I was sure they were going to make me delete it, so I showed it to them. They all looked disappointed. "We need to see the face," they said, "so we know who died."

That's when it occurred to me that soldiers on the line may hear about casualties but won't necessarily know who made it and who didn't for days, until official word was passed around. Obviously, they want to know as quickly as possible. Moving forward, I made a mental note to always photograph the faces. Taking those photos is a kind of service, helping soldiers find out about their comrades.

Deceased soldiers are placed in body bags and first sent back to their units before being released to their families. However, if the soldiers' families live in

government-controlled areas, it is usually impossible to send the body there. In such cases, the families - particularly the mothers - are denied the closure and religious ceremony that are both psychologically and spiritually crucial in dealing with the death of a loved one.

Toward evening, as the fighting wound down, I hopped into an ambulance and rode back into town with a wounded soldier.

Early, the next morning, I went with a priest to a joint wake for seven fallen Karenni Army soldiers, one of whom was Catholic. Although the Karenni resistance forces are composed of multiple ethnicities and religions united against the junta, Catholicism is the most common faith, and Catholic soldiers frequently wear the rosary on their uniforms. Unlike in the U.S. Army, there are almost no chaplains in Burma apart from those with the Free Burma Rangers (FBR) and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and they are all Protestant. So, when a Catholic soldier dies, there is no one on the front lines and no one at the casualty collection point to administer last rites.

The soldiers were laid out in a large meeting room, on sleeping mats on the floor. They were covered in blankets, with their faces exposed. At their heads



A wounded fighter is treated in a makeshift clinic.
Photo: Antonio Graceffo

were flowers, candles, drinks, and offerings. On the wall above each soldier was a handwritten sign with his name and unit. Their comrades and families were gathered around in attendance.

Only one of the seven was Catholic, 22-year-old Augustino. Father said last rites for him but told me he prayed for the souls of all seven. He also said that the Buddhist monks would most likely stop by later and do the same.

Because of the tropical climate, the bodies wouldn't keep long, and funerals had to be held quickly. While Father prayed, the army embalmers were working on the seven dead right in front of their grieving families and mourners. The noses of the deceased were all stuffed with paper or cotton to prevent gases from escaping, and the embalmers used huge syringes, the size of turkey basters, to inject noxious chemicals into the dead. It made me feel even sadder that while the families dealt with their loss, they also had to watch the embalmers doing their work.

After the prayers had finished, Father introduced me to Augustino's parents. Once again, I regretted not having photographed the faces of the dead. Not that I would have shown them the photo, but I would have loved to have been able to speak with certainty and tell the mother, "I was with your son when he died. He did not die alone." Maybe it would have given her some degree of comfort. But I couldn't say that, because I wasn't sure if Augustino was one of the dead I had photographed. I vowed once again that my next mission would be very different.

Our next stop was at the funeral of a 20-year-old Catholic soldier, named Gianni. Funerals are generally held in the family's home and they always display photos of the deceased in uniform, generally holding a weapon, and somehow, in every funeral I've been to, the photos are beautiful. I have no idea if the army has its own photography studio, but the display photos are always striking. In Gianni's case, he looked strong, muscular, handsome, and heroic in his photos, and now he was dead, it seemed such a shocking transformation. Unlike a grandparent who becomes frail over time, or someone suffering from disease who goes on a downward spiral, he had been at his peak just two days earlier

After so many years, this has become the norm, the routine, for everyone in the country: the soldiers who lose friends, the families who lose sons, the medics who transport every dead body, and the priests who must say last rites at every funeral.

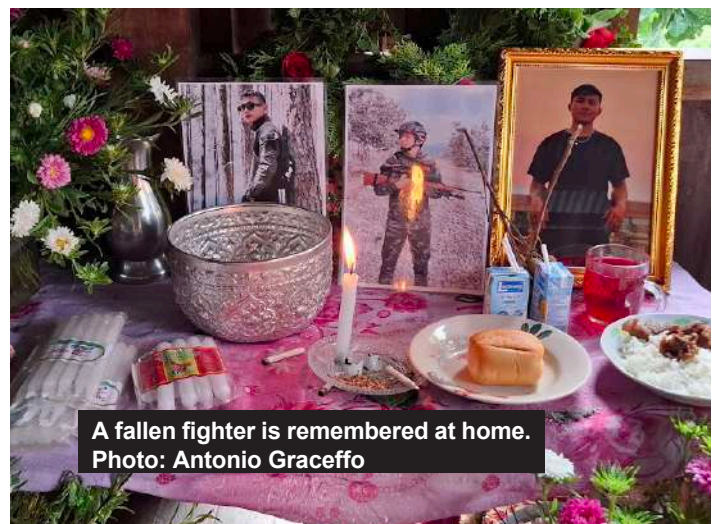
Death is a full-time job in Burma. But looking at the mothers, who seem to age ten years the moment they learn their son is dead, you realize that so is sadness, so is loss, so are anguish and suffering.

Yet, the people of Burma cling to their religion even in the midst of such sorrow, there remains a promise of hope: "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away." (Revelation 21:4, KJV)

Antonio Graceffo is an economist and China expert who has reported extensively on Burma.



Father blesses the fallen.
Photo: Antonio Graceffo



A fallen fighter is remembered at home.
Photo: Antonio Graceffo



MYANMAR JUNTA CLAIMS DEMOSO TOWN CAPTURED, EXPANDING ELECTION REACH

Myanmar's junta said on Wednesday its troops had captured a key town in the east after a 16-day battle, clawing back rebel-contested territory as it prepares for a disputed December election.

Demoso, 105 kilometres (65 miles) east of the capital Naypyidaw, has witnessed intense fighting since the military's overthrow of the democratic government in 2021 sparked a civil war.

The embattled junta plans to hold elections in areas it controls starting on December 28, and has been pressing a series of counter-offensives to expand the territory it holds.

The polls have been criticised by international monitors as a tactic to rebrand the rule of the military, which has kept democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi jailed since ousting her.

State mouthpiece newspaper the Global New Light of Myanmar said the military captured Demoso township -- encompassing the town and surrounding countryside -- after a 16-day battle that ended on Tuesday.

However, one resident said there was still a constant drumbeat of gunfire, heavy weapons and air strikes and denied that the military had total command of the area.

"The fighting is close and I'm always afraid in my heart whenever I hear explosions," said 26-year-old Moe Moe. "We are very worried, especially in the night-time as we can't sleep."

"If they actually controlled this area we would see them in person, but there are none now near us," she said.

The Global New Light of Myanmar said six bodies were recovered after pro-democracy guerrillas and fighters from ethnic armed organisations in the area were driven out.

"Some of the security force members were wounded and deceased," it said, without giving further details.

A photo showed junta soldiers posing with their rifles aloft in front of a sign reading: "You are warmly welcomed to Demoso."

More than 130,000 people have been displaced in the state of Kayah (Karenni), where Demoso sits on the crossroads of two highways branching off from the main route linking Naypyidaw and the commercial capital Yangon.

The junta-organised election will be held in phases and is expected to take weeks.

Conflict monitors say the run-up is likely to see a further spike in violence as the junta attempts to expand the reach of the vote into enclaves controlled by its opponents.

A junta-organised census, held as preparation for the election, failed to contact nearly four out of 10 people in the country of more than 50 million, indicating how limited the poll might be.

Some democratic lawmakers ousted in the coup have called for a boycott, while Suu Kyi's immensely popular National League for Democracy party has been dissolved.

"The terrorist military group is attempting to stage an illegitimate and fraudulent election to sustain its grip on power," the National Unity Government, a self-proclaimed administration in exile, said in a statement.

"All revolutionary groups are urged to stand united with the people in resisting and overcoming this trap," it said.



Photo: Supplied

KARENNI IEC CONDEMNS MYANMAR JUNTA AIRSTRIKE THAT KILLED 32 CIVILIANS IN MAWCHI

On 18 August, the Interim Executive Council (IEC) of Karenni State issued a press statement condemning deadly Myanmar military junta airstrikes on Mawchi town in Karenni State.

The statement is as follows.

On 17 August, the military junta carried out the airstrikes and indiscriminate attacks using military aircraft targeting civilian areas in Mawchi town, Karenni State, killing the lives of 32 civilians, injuring five others, and leaving several residents still missing. In 2025 alone, the terrorist military junta has already conducted about 11 aerial bombing attacks using fighter jets in the Mawchi area.

For this tragic incident, the Interim Executive Council of Karenni State (IEC) would like to share our deepest condolences with the families of the civilians who lost their lives.

The IEC affirms our commitment to stand alongside the people and the revolutionary forces in responding to the military junta's ruthless airstrikes and heavy artillery attacks against the innocent civilians.

We strongly urged the international community, including the United Nations and ASEAN, to give serious attention and take decisive action against the unlawful military junta committing these serious military crimes against civilians.



Photo: Supplied

MYANMAR JUNTA AIRSTRIKES KILL DOZENS OF CIVILIANS IN KARENNI STATE AND MOGOK

The military junta launched airstrikes on 17 August in Mawchi, Karenni State, and Mogok, Mandalay Region, killing dozens of civilians, including children, and injuring many more, according to local sources.

The Karenni State Interim Executive Council (IEC) said 23 bodies were recovered in Mawchi and Hpasawng Townships among them five women, 14 men, a five-year-old child, and four unidentified victims. Two people remain missing.

"Some people are still missing. The bodies have already been buried, as preparations began yesterday. It is not good to keep them for too long. Some of the unclaimed bodies were buried by the village administration," said U Banya Khun Aung, Secretary 2 of the IEC.

At 7:50 am on 17 August, junta aircraft struck a hospital in Lokhalo village, Mawchi Township, before carrying out a second bombing at 12:10 pm in a crowded residential area in the 16th Hill Quarter of the town. Among the dead were children as young as five and elderly residents.

Those killed included Ma Zun Pwint Phyu (age 5), Maung Moe Thet Maung (12), U Kyi (61), Ma Einanda Soe, Phaw Sheena, Ma Khin Cho Win, Ma Ju Dit Nyi, Saw Nway, Saw Say Pyaw Wah, Saw Ae Tha Yu, Saw Yan Shin, Saw Hay Buk, Saw Thaw Hmu, U Kyaw Kin, Thiha Aung, Ko Nan Win, Ko Min Min, Maung Mar Tay

O, and Maung Mi Ye. Four bodies remain unidentified, and two people are still unaccounted for. The hospital and nearby houses were also damaged.

The junta has repeatedly carried out air raids in Mawchi although no fighting has been reported in the area. Local residents said the 17 August assault was the deadliest to date.

On 9 July, a junta bombing in Lolawhti village, Mawchi Township, killed five members of a single family including two girls aged two and eight and injured five others.

Meanwhile, in Mogok, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) reported that at 9 am on 17 August, junta aircraft dropped three 250-pound bombs near the police station and township administration office in an area under TNLA control. Three people, including a child, were killed and several buildings destroyed.

Two days earlier, on 15 August, a junta airstrike in Mogok killed 21 civilians, injured seven, and destroyed 15 homes, according to the PSLF/TNLA.

The TNLA has urged civilians to remain vigilant and follow air defence precautions amid near-daily air raids by junta forces in Karenni State. According to the CTER-Karenni group, which supports displaced communities, airstrikes in July alone killed 14 civilians, including three children.



Derek Mitchell, left, with Aung San Suu Kyi and Antony Blinken in calmer times. Photo: AFP

THE ART OF NO DEAL

AN INTERVIEW WITH FORMER AMERICAN DIPLOMAT DEREK MITCHELL

INSIGHT MYANMAR

“I think the main message here... is don't fall for the junta's attempt to try to propagandize,” says Derek Mitchell, the former American diplomat and a longtime architect of Washington's Myanmar policy. This is Mitchell's second appearance on the Insight Myanmar Podcast. In his first interview, Mitchell spoke about his time as U.S. ambassador to Myanmar — a landmark 2012 posting that filled a position left vacant since 1990. In this conversation, Mitchell provides a sobering yet clear-eyed assessment of U.S. strategy towards Myanmar under the Trump administration. His informed perspective is particularly germane in light of the recent “de-listings” of four individuals from the U.S. Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) sanctions list who have ties to Myanmar's military, which has stirred confusion and concern.

Mitchell agrees with a recent guest, Sean Turnell, stating that these de-listings do not represent a systematic change in U.S. policy. Rather, they appear to be the result of bureaucratic inconsistencies, possibly initiated during the prior administration and carried forward without adequate interagency coordination. “It could be the left hand didn't know what the right hand was doing,” Mitchell explains, adding that the absence of a functioning National Security Council has made policy coherence nearly impossible.

Myanmar is rich in rare earth metals, a crucial natural resource for high-tech devices and clean energy technologies. At the heart of this conversation is the question of whether the U.S. might consider loosening sanctions or even recalibrating its overall Myanmar policy in order to secure access to these

critical minerals, or as a way to try to blunt Chinese influence in the country. President Trump reportedly became interested in Myanmar after learning about its rare earth deposits, prompting a review of U.S. engagement. Mitchell acknowledges that rare earths have put Myanmar on the administration's radar but still does not believe that any strategic decisions have been made. The Trump administration, he says, is discovering just how complicated the situation is: Myanmar's rare earth deposits lie in conflict zones largely outside junta control, and only China possesses any real capacity for processing them.

Mitchell thinks that any assumption that the junta could be a reliable partner in helping secure mineral access for the U.S. is misplaced. Instead, he encourages more serious engagement with ethnic forces like the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and other resistance groups that control areas rich in natural resources. In his opinion, any move to broker peace between the junta and the Kachin for the sake of resource access would be "beyond strange."

Addressing a troubling suggestion—that Trump would indulge his propensity for engaging with strongmen and attempt to legitimize the junta as part of a geopolitical strategy to counter China—Mitchell acknowledges that engagement with the junta is possible, especially given Trump's history of prioritizing transactional gains over democratic concerns. However, he emphasizes that even in the Trump administration, there are officials who continue to reject the junta's legitimacy and speak openly against its planned elections, calling them a sham.

The conversation then turns to the information war being waged between the resistance and the junta. The latter has attempted to spin the de-listings, correspondence with Trump, and other symbolic

events into a narrative of growing international acceptance. In contrast, the resistance portrays them as isolated and unrelated decisions, and points to the fact that Congress has strengthened its support of pro-democracy forces, and that the sanctions regime against the junta is still basically in place. "When you leave a vacuum of information, then others are going to fill that with speculation," Mitchell says about the U. S. administration's silence on these questions, which only fuels confusion and empowers the junta's messaging.

Despite the chaos in Washington, Mitchell points to encouraging signals. Besides Congressional support of pro-democracy forces, he says the State Department still has senior officials who speak out on behalf of Myanmar's people. One example he highlights is Sean O'Neill, the nominee for U.S. Ambassador to Thailand, who, according to Mitchell, declared during his confirmation hearing that the junta's elections should not be legitimized — an especially notable stance given the Department's previous guidance discouraging embassy staff from commenting on electoral legitimacy.

Looking back at his own time as ambassador, Mitchell reflects on the policy that prevailed at the time of framing Myanmar engagement as a tool of U.S.-China competition. Mitchell says that he, personally, never saw Myanmar as merely a wedge against China. "We needed to engage on its own terms," he recalls. Still, he recognizes that others in the Obama administration, and certainly today's officials, view Myanmar through a geopolitical lens, particularly in the context of strategic rivalry with Beijing. The use of that lens, however, can distort: it tends to shift focus away from Myanmar's internal dynamics—its democratic resistance, ethnic complexities, and humanitarian crisis—reducing the country to a pawn in great power competition, thereby reducing the amount of attention the U.S. pays to issues more directly affecting the Burmese people.

Expanding on this geopolitical theme, Mitchell also warns against any return to Cold War-style, covert engagement reminiscent of 1950s CIA operations in Myanmar's borderlands geared towards influencing the Chinese civil war. He notes that any U.S. support for armed resistance or attempts to create a "Western Front" against China would provoke a harsh response from Beijing and could backfire, potentially into a proxy war, or worse. "If the United States is partly in and they're playing games, the Myanmar people are going to get hurt, because the Chinese are not playing games, and they're not partly in! They're all in." Mitchell recounts how, during his tenure, the Chinese ambassador directly told him not to visit Kachin or Shan states — a demand he found both audacious and unacceptable. He had already planned to go, but the warning only strengthened his resolve: his final trip as ambassador was to Kachin State, partly to demonstrate that China had no right to dictate U.S. diplomatic relationships inside Myanmar.

Mitchell reiterates a proposal he made in his earlier appearance: appoint a special envoy to Myanmar. He believes this could facilitate more coherent engagement, both with ethnic actors inside the country and with regional players in ASEAN. However, he questions whether the Trump administration would appoint someone with the appropriate knowledge, background and sensitivity.

Turning to the wider region, Mitchell expresses disappointment with the current U.S. neglect of Southeast Asia: multilateral offices have been shut down, many ambassadorial positions remain vacant, and the administration appears unwilling to engage consistently with this part of the world. He also speaks about his mixed feelings regarding ASEAN. On the one hand, he praises the bloc for refusing to seat junta representatives in high-level meetings, but laments its

overall lack of assertiveness on the other. Countries like Malaysia and Indonesia have shown more leadership, but others remain passive. In addition, he believes that ASEAN should work in concert with the U.S., Japan and India to prevent the junta from legitimizing itself through fraudulent elections.

All this leads to a critical dilemma for U. S. policy: is it better for Myanmar to remain under the radar entirely and face continued neglect, or to attract engagement that might end up being counterproductive, especially for the Myanmar people? Mitchell describes a best-case scenario as being "a robust diplomatic corps" working under the radar; he says the worst would be Myanmar coming to the attention of a President known for favoring dictators and undermining human rights. Overall, Mitchell adamantly believes U.S. policy should not be aligning with the junta which, he argues, is "a devalued asset," and a policy that would be both morally and strategically wrong. He urges support for civil society and the resistance, arguing that "if we can do something in their interest to bring dignity to the people of this country, that will automatically serve the strategic interests of the United States over time."

In conclusion, Mitchell emphasizes that while the junta may be attempting to create an illusion of legitimacy, they are clearly on a losing course. The real task, he argues, should be ensuring that U.S. policy doesn't inadvertently help them prolong their grip on power. "We must do no harm in what we do, and we must do more," he says.

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<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2025/8/6/episode-375-the-art-of-no-deal>



UN HUMANITARIAN COORDINATOR URGES PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS ON WORLD HUMANITARIAN DAY

On World Humanitarian Day 2025, Michael Dunford, Humanitarian Coordinator for Myanmar, urged global awareness of the daily dangers faced by civilians in Myanmar, including airstrikes and displacement, leading to significant suffering and loss of life.

The text of his statement is below.

This World Humanitarian Day (WHD), we urge the global community to bear witness to the daily dangers faced by civilians in Myanmar – suffering that too often goes unseen. Airstrikes; drone attacks; artillery shelling; forced recruitment; displacement; landmines – these are causing untold suffering to the population. These are not isolated incidents, they are the daily realities for women, men and children trying to survive in Myanmar. Civilians are losing their lives and safety, in clear violation of international law.

As humanitarians, we advocate tirelessly for the protection of civilians. Yet the violence persists. Ongoing security and protection risks, especially in conflict- and disaster-affected areas, put vulnerable communities in constant peril. Threats on civilians continue to escalate—largely resulting from targeted attacks and failures to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants.

I call on all the numerous parties to the conflict to uphold their obligations under International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights

Law, and to protect the innocent caught in a conflict they never chose. Civilians are not combatants, yet they are paying the highest price.

World Humanitarian Day is also an occasion to raise an urgent alarm for the safety of humanitarian workers—the people who risk everything to help others. Aid workers, especially frontline responders and local partners, are the back-bone of life-saving operations. But they, too, are increasingly at risk. In 2024 alone, nine aid workers were killed in Myanmar, according to the Aid Worker Security Database. Others have reportedly been injured, detained or obstructed from reaching those in need.

The normalization of violence against aid workers must end. Humanitarian personnel, assets and access must be protected—without exception.

We call on the global community and all governments to stand unequivocally with survivors of violence in Myanmar, and with the humanitarians striving to support them. This World Humanitarian Day, we denounce the failure to protect. We honour those we have lost. Impunity must end. Those with power and influence must act for the most vulnerable in Myanmar. Together, let us #ActForHumanity.

Photo: AFP

CHINA DRILLS FOR WAR—IS TAIWAN READY TO FIGHT ALONE?

SUN LEE

Han Kuang 2025 marked a major shift in Taiwan's defence posture, combining live-fire military drills with full-scale civilian mobilisation across all 22 regions. Citizens practiced air raid responses, rationing, and emergency logistics, while the military deployed new US-supplied weapons and tested drones and cyber warfare. Exercises moved into public spaces, making war planning visible and urgent. Yet Taiwan's focus remains on conventional conflict, while grey-zone threats of cyber attacks, disinformation, and sabotage are already underway.

The drills raise critical questions: Can Taiwan hold out alone before allies intervene? Is the public truly ready? Does US support go beyond symbolism? Are regional partners prepared to act? As China escalates pressure, Taiwan must accelerate coordination, planning, and resilience before time runs out.

Taiwan's Han Kuang drills were long seen as symbolic, especially during the Ma Ying-jeou era, lacking urgency and public connection. But in 2025,

amid rising Chinese military pressure, the Democratic Progressive Party reframed the exercise as essential. President Lai Ching-te declared July as "National Unity Month," urging civic participation as a democratic duty and signalling Taiwan's active preparation to both Beijing and Washington.

However, the Kuomintang raised concerns about weak coordination with the allies and the risk of false confidence. Public opinion reflects this divide: while 67.8 per cent are willing to fight and 51 per cent support increased defence spending, only 14 per cent trust the military's effectiveness. Safety incidents during the drills such as vehicle collisions and overturned armour exposed logistical flaws and raised doubts about operational readiness. Han Kuang 2025 expanded civilian involvement and showed political will, but Taiwan's defence still leans heavily on conventional warfare, with limited response to grey-zone threats. The intent to prepare is clear, but real readiness remains uncertain.

Taiwan's defence strategy relies heavily on the United States, with over 90 per cent of its key weapons sourced from America and expectations of US intervention in case of war. In 2025, Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth named Taiwan the Pentagon's top planning priority, directing more US assets to deter China. Yet promises outpace action as there is no joint command, integrated training, or shared battle plan. While 500 US troops are now in Taiwan, they're trainers, not combat forces. Congress has approved billions in aid, including US\$2 billion in an Indo-Pacific package, but delivery remains slow. Equipment orders lag, and joint planning is stalled. The alliance is built on speeches, not readiness. Meanwhile, China conducts frequent, focused drills, preparing for conflict with urgency. Taiwan's partners are falling behind, and without faster coordination and real integration, symbolic support won't be enough to counter a serious threat.

Talisman Sabre 2025 was the Indo-Pacific's largest drill, with 35,000 troops from 19 nations training across every domainland, sea, air, cyber, and space. The scenario? A high-end East Asia conflict, clearly modelled on a Taiwan contingency. Yet Taiwan wasn't invited.

While Japan and the Philippines trained as frontline players and others like the UK, France, Germany and Singapore joined in support, Taiwan remained excluded. The country most at risk was absent from the coordination. That gap matters, a coalition without Taiwan in the loop risks failure under pressure. Talisman Sabre signalled strength but also exposed a strategic blind spot.

Despite improvements, Taiwan still faces its defence challenges alone. There's no joint planning with allies for civil unrest, economic warfare, or cyber defence echoing Ukraine's early isolation. China applies daily pressure through cyberattacks and disinformation, yet Indo-Pacific nations remain vague in their support. Taiwan's defence budget is just US\$20.25 billion

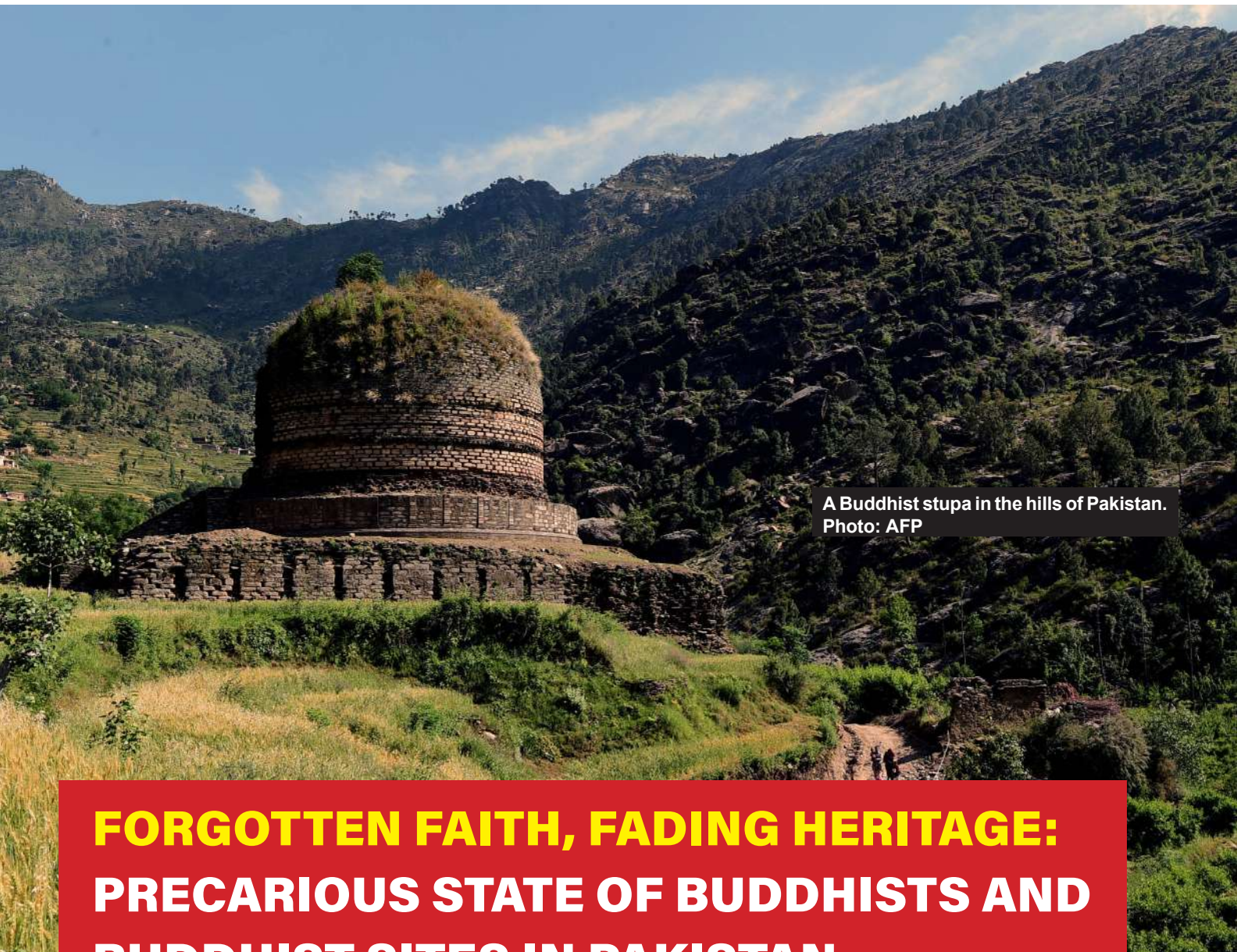
dwarfed by China's, even with a planned increase to 3 per cent of GDP. Funding alone won't fix the gap. What's urgently needed is faster coordination and stronger regional partnerships. Han Kuang 2025 expanded civil defence, but without allied integration, Taiwan's preparations remain national in scope and insufficient for the regional threat it faces.

Taiwan still lacks joint command structures, cyber defence coordination, and regional contingency plans for economic or energy disruption. In contrast, China's Strait Thunder 2025A drills simulated blockades, grid attacks, and missile strikes, showing how it intends to fight. While China trains for war, Taiwan's partners remain stuck in rhetoric.

Taiwan should raise defence spending to 3.4 per cent of GDP, adding US\$4.7 billion for allied coordination and gray-zone response. Han Kuang must evolve inviting Japan, Australia, and South Korea to train together. The Pacific Deterrence Initiative should fund shared capabilities, not just US-led efforts. A new regional group, modelled on the Ukraine Defence Contact Group, must include Taiwan and meet regularly to align plans, intelligence, and logistics. Symbolism won't stop missiles. Only real preparation will.

2027 isn't a warning, it's a timeline. China isn't bluffing; it's rehearsing. Every drill, cyberattack, and blockade simulation targets Taiwan. Allies are watching Japan, Australia, Southeast Asia, Europe, the US but China watches most closely. Taiwan is running out of time. Defence must outpace politics. Signals must become substance. Stronger training, sharper planning, and real cooperation must come first. Action must be taken now before asking others to follow.

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



A Buddhist stupa in the hills of Pakistan.
Photo: AFP

FORGOTTEN FAITH, FADING HERITAGE: PRECARIOUS STATE OF BUDDHISTS AND BUDDHIST SITES IN PAKISTAN

SUN LEE

The land that once nurtured Buddhism's flourishing civilisation has today turned into a stark reminder of neglect, decay, and cultural erasure.

Pakistan, home to the ancient Gandhara region where Buddhism thrived for centuries, now stands as a paradox: it carries the remnants of a world-renowned Buddhist past while offering little space or dignity to its surviving Buddhist community.

As 2025 unfolds, the plight of Pakistan's Buddhists and the crumbling state of their sacred heritage tell a story not of reverence, but of abandonment and marginalisation.

A history of flourishing, now buried in silence

The Gandhara civilisation, centred in what is now northern Pakistan, was once a luminous chapter in Buddhist history. The region produced exquisite art, architecture, and scholarship, influencing Buddhist traditions across Central and East Asia.

Monasteries thrived in Taxila, Swat, and Peshawar; stupas towered over bustling centres of trade and learning. Pilgrims and scholars from as far as China travelled to Gandhara to study and carry its knowledge home.

That world, however, lies buried under the sands of time, dismantled by waves of conquest, religious transformation, and, later, systemic neglect.

While the ruins remain, they are treated more as archaeological curiosities than living symbols of faith.

Today, the historical continuity of Buddhism in Pakistan is all but severed, and the few surviving adherents live in the shadows of their once-proud heritage.

A community in decline

The Buddhist community in Pakistan is almost invisible. Estimates place their numbers in the low thousands, scattered and often afraid to declare their faith openly.

Many practice in secrecy, fearing social ostracism or outright persecution in a society where religious minorities struggle to secure even basic rights.

For decades, Pakistan's religious climate has been defined by intolerance and pressure on minorities, from Hindus and Christians to Ahmadis and Sikhs.

Buddhists, by virtue of their small numbers and lack of institutional backing, have been left especially vulnerable.

They are excluded from public life, marginalised in education and employment, and denied effective representation in politics.

What was once a vibrant community deeply interwoven with the subcontinent's cultural fabric has withered into near-extinction, surviving only as a silent remnant.

The weight of discrimination

Accounts from Buddhist families in Sindh and other regions reflect the deep insecurity they face. Many conceal their religious identity, often passing as adherents of other faiths to avoid harassment.

Social discrimination is compounded by economic

exclusion; few opportunities are made available to them, and those who dare to embrace their identity risk losing even the limited privileges they have.

Religious freedom, guaranteed in theory by Pakistan's constitution, has become a hollow promise in practice.

The rigid Islamization of public life leaves little space for minorities, let alone a faith that is barely recognised in official discourse.

The state's focus remains almost entirely on Islam, and even when other religions are acknowledged, Buddhism is often absent from the conversation, as if deliberately erased from the narrative of Pakistan's identity.

Neglect of sacred sites

If the plight of the Buddhist community is a human tragedy, the condition of Buddhist heritage sites is a cultural one.

Pakistan is home to some of the world's most significant remnants of Buddhist civilisation, including the ruins of Taxila, a UNESCO World Heritage site, and the stupas and monasteries of the Swat Valley.

Yet these treasures languish underfunded, poorly maintained, and frequently threatened by looting, encroachment, and vandalism.

Tourists and scholars visiting these sites often describe the lack of infrastructure, the absence of preservation measures, and the sheer vulnerability of monuments that should have been protected as national treasures.

In many cases, caretaking is minimal, with little to no effort made to restore or safeguard fragile structures.

Security concerns add another layer of difficulty, particularly in regions where militancy has in the past targeted symbols of non-Islamic heritage.

The Bamiyan Buddhas of Afghanistan, destroyed by the Taliban in 2001, serve as a grim reminder of the

fate that can befall Buddhist heritage in this part of the world.

In Pakistan, while such large-scale destruction has not been repeated, the slow erosion of sites through neglect and indifference represents a quieter but equally devastating form of cultural annihilation.

The lost opportunity of cultural pride

Pakistan has long touted its historical richness, showcasing Indus Valley relics and Mughal monuments as symbols of its past.

Yet Buddhism's legacy, arguably one of the most globally recognised aspects of the region's history, has been marginalised. Instead of being celebrated as part of the country's cultural wealth, it is often treated with ambivalence or disregard.

The irony is profound: while countries like Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Japan hold deep admiration for Gandhara's contributions to Buddhist history, within Pakistan itself, the sites remain neglected, seen as alien to the nation's religious identity.

This selective amnesia not only undermines Pakistan's historical authenticity but also alienates it from a global cultural conversation in which it could have played a central role.

A mirror of intolerance

The condition of Buddhists and their sacred spaces in Pakistan is not merely a matter of heritage preservation; it is symptomatic of the broader intolerance that defines the state's treatment of minorities.

When a community is reduced to invisibility, and when the symbols of its history are left to decay, the message is clear: certain faiths are not welcome, and certain pasts are not worth preserving.

In this light, the plight of Buddhists in Pakistan is inseparable from the plight of other marginalised groups.

The erosion of Buddhist identity is one thread in a larger tapestry of exclusion that undermines pluralism and entrenches a monolithic narrative of nationhood.

The weight of 2025

That this reality persists into 2025 is a damning indictment of the Pakistani state's priorities.

Decades after independence, with ample opportunity to embrace diversity and to safeguard its historical legacy, Pakistan has chosen instead to turn its back on one of the richest chapters of its past.

The Buddhists who remain live on the margins, stripped of the ability to practice their faith freely, while the monuments of Gandhara crumble in silence.

The tragedy is twofold: a human tragedy, in the erasure of a community that once thrived; and a cultural tragedy, in the slow disintegration of a heritage that belongs not only to Pakistan but to the world.

An unwritten obituary

The story of Buddhists in Pakistan is one of survival against erasure. Their community dwindles, their voices are muted, and their heritage lies neglected.

In a land that once illuminated the Buddhist world, silence now reigns. The stupas of Gandhara stand as monuments not of glory but of loss, echoing a civilisation that Pakistan seems determined to forget.

As long as the plight of Buddhists remains ignored, and as long as their sacred spaces languish in neglect, Pakistan's Buddhist past will remain an unwritten obituary - a legacy fading into obscurity, a history denied its rightful place in the present.

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



IT TAKES ALL OF US

For people who have experienced traumatic injuries, hope can be a lifeline. “Two or three years ago, one of the service users we provided for said, ‘At one point, I was thinking of putting my pistol to my head and killing myself,’” says Dr. Zaw Moe Aung, Country Leader for The Leprosy Mission Myanmar (TLMM), which provides prosthesis and care for people with leprosy and disabilities, including those caused by landmines and other injuries. “We came across a very difficult psychological mode for them to cope with, because of losing their limbs, and also especially because they did not know when they could receive a prosthesis.”

With TLMM’s support, that survivor has slowly made his recovery. Amid the many challenges of disability care in a time of conflict, and the devastating toll of landmines and explosive remnant of war (ERW), the experience points to the organization’s strengths grounded in holistic care, a social model of service based on human rights, peer support, and disabled champions able to take their own rightful place in society and as leaders of the disability movement.

In a recent interview with Insight Myanmar, as part of the Navigating a Minefield series, Dr. Zaw Moe Aung discussed TLMM’s mission and how the organization has expanded into victim assistance for landmine and ERW survivors in recent years. His work continues

the 150-year-old commitment of The Leprosy Mission founded in India by the Irish missionary Wellesley Bailey, and TLMM’s own origins in Myanmar in 1898. While keeping people affected by leprosy at its heart, informed by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the organization has expanded to provide prosthetics and holistic care for all disabled people, limited only by access and resources. In recent years, that mission has encompassed support for survivors of landmines and ERW, in work that has, in turn, contributed to the survival of TLMM as a whole.

During the period of relative openness, which Dr. Zaw Moe Aung identified as beginning in 2008, the regime allowed increased access to international organizations, providing new avenues for disability partnerships. TLMM saw this as an opportunity to connect to the broader disability community and forge new alliances, strategically strengthening its mission to continue providing care to those affected by leprosy and expanding to help more people.

The organization’s expertise and experience has connected common themes among people affected by disabilities, including those caused by leprosy and, increasingly, injuries caused by the conflict and the terrible toll of landmines. Social stigma, loss of livelihoods and income, and psychological trauma can all contribute to people’s burdens, but so too can solidarity, peer support, and a human rights-based model help realize success.

CATCH THE PODCAST

Read more and listen to the Insight Myanmar Podcast here:

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2025/8/3/episode-374-it-takes-all-of-us>



Photo: AFP

MIN AUNG HLAING SAYS FIRST PHASE OF MYANMAR ELECTIONS WILL START IN DISTRICT TOWNS ON 28 DECEMBER

Myanmar junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing said during a visit to Chauk and Yenangyaung in Magway Region on 19 August that the first phase of the planned elections will begin in district towns, according to junta-controlled newspapers.

He said the initial round of voting in the four-phase election is set to start on 28 December, beginning with district towns and surrounding areas. He also described the elections as crucial for the junta, claiming that state responsibilities would be transferred to whichever government wins.

Min Aung Hlaing had previously said in March that elections would be held between the third and fourth weeks of December 2025 and the first and second weeks of January 2026. The schedule was later revised, with 28 December now set as the opening date.

The junta's Union Election Commission (UEC) announced on 18 August that dates for the remaining phases will be announced later.

According to the UEC, 60 political parties, including the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), have registered to contest the polls. At the same time, 40 parties have been dissolved, including the National League for Democracy (NLD), which won the 2020 election, and the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), a major Shan party. Both were disbanded after failing to re-register under new junta rules.

Revolutionary forces have dismissed the planned polls as a sham, while analysts say they lack credibility and could intensify conflict and bloodshed across the country.



ONLINE COMMENTATORS UPSET OVER MYANMAR JUNTA'S NEW IMPORT RESTRICTIONS

Myanmar's social media has been filled with concern this week after the military's Foreign Exchange Supervisory Committee (FEFC) announced a temporary suspension of import permits for 35 consumer items through land borders. The decision, issued on August 12, has sparked widespread debate, with many users asking whether the ban will also extend to air cargo.

The online conversation has been strongly critical, with many calling on authorities to issue clear guidance. "Without proper rules, ordinary families will be the first to suffer," one user wrote in a widely shared comment.

The impact is already visible. Around 500 trucks loaded with Thai goods remain stranded at the Friendship Bridge II crossing, while importers say tightened permit checks are slowing trade further.

The banned list first appeared in 2022 under a previous FEFC order. With the committee reinstated earlier this month, questions remain about the list's current legal validity, adding to public uncertainty.

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Analysis & Insight



DIGITAL MAGAZINE

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