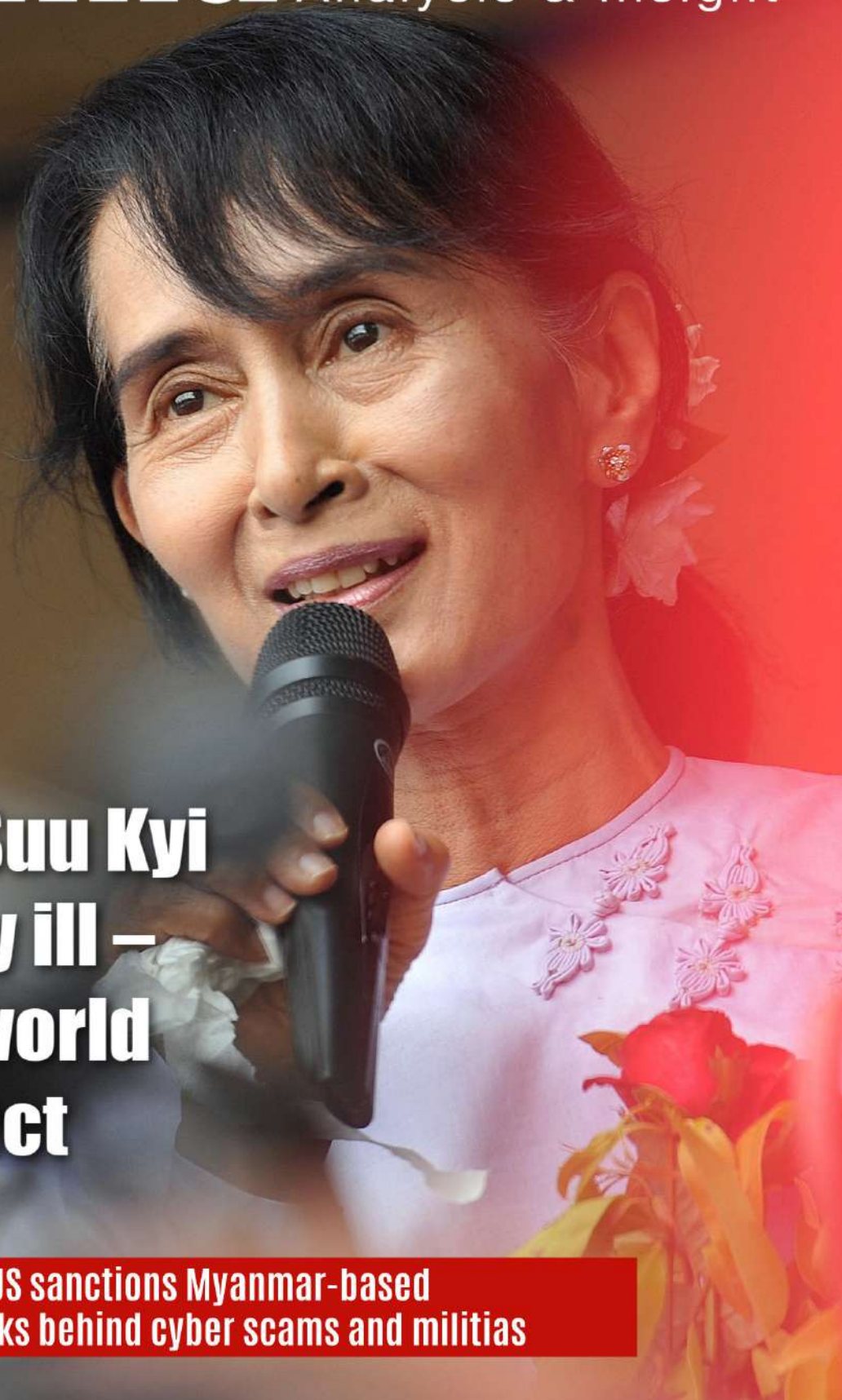


ON THE GROUND IN MYANMAR

mizzima WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight

A close-up photograph of Aung San Suu Kyi speaking into a black microphone. She has dark hair and is wearing a light pink traditional Burmese garment with floral embroidery. The background is blurred with a red overlay.

**Aung San Suu Kyi
is gravely ill –
and the world
must act**

**US sanctions Myanmar-based
networks behind cyber scams and militias**

mizzima WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight



DIGITAL MAGAZINE

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

MUFFLING MYANMAR POLL CRITICS

As Myanmar approaches its planned election scheduled for December 2025 and January 2026, tensions are escalating between the country's military junta and critics of the proposed polls. The military regime, which seized power in a coup in February 2021, has been working to consolidate its rule through a veneer of electoral legitimacy.

However, the crackdown on dissenting voices in the lead-up to the vote reveals a deeper crisis of legitimacy and exposes the authoritarian foundations of the junta's rule. Last week's jailing of a social media user, Nay Thway, to seven years' hard labour for criticizing the planned election underscores how fragile and intolerant the regime remains to any form of opposition or scrutiny.

From the outset, the proposed election has been widely regarded as an attempt by the junta to legitimize its seizure of power through controlled and deeply compromised political processes. The military leadership, led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, has promised a return to "disciplined democracy," a phrase long used by the military to justify its enduring control over the country's political system.

But critics both within and outside Myanmar have argued that any election held under the current circumstances cannot be free, fair, or credible. The imprisonment of a citizen merely for expressing skepticism about the election highlights the lack of political freedom and the growing climate of fear under military rule.

Since the 2021 coup, thousands of political activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens have been arrested, and many have been tortured or killed. Dissent has been met with brutal repression. The junta has dissolved the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party of deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and implemented restrictive laws to prevent

credible opposition from participating in any future political process. In this context, the upcoming election is widely viewed as a mechanism for the military to entrench its power further, rather than to restore democratic governance.

By cracking down on criticism of the election, the junta is making it clear that it views any challenge to its narrative as a threat. The latest arrest is not an isolated incident but part of a broader campaign to control information and suppress public discourse. Social media, which had once served as a platform for grassroots mobilization and dissent, is now being monitored closely by authorities, and users who voice anti-junta sentiments face arrest, imprisonment, or worse. This digital repression has chilling effects, pushing political expression further underground and silencing voices that are vital for democratic accountability.

The international community has largely condemned the planned elections as illegitimate, with calls for the release of political prisoners and the restoration of civilian rule. But the junta remains largely insulated, bolstered by support from countries like Russia and China, and empowered by the lack of unified global pressure. Inside the country, however, the resistance remains resilient, with many refusing to accept the military's roadmap to so-called "democracy". The widening gap between the regime's efforts to stage-manage political legitimacy and the population's rejection of military rule is likely to fuel continued unrest and instability.

Ultimately, the Myanmar junta's war on critics of the election is not just a battle over political messaging - it is a battle over the soul of the nation. The more it relies on fear and repression to silence opposition, the clearer it becomes that any election held under its watch will be neither democratic nor legitimate.

EDITORIAL

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Archive cover photo of
Aung San Suu Kyi by AFP





Photo: AFP

AUNG SAN SUU KYI IS GRAVELLY ILL - AND THE WORLD MUST ACT

Alan Clements

Kim Aris, the youngest son of 80-year-old Aung San Suu Kyi, in recent days told The Independent (UK) that his mother — Myanmar's imprisoned democracy leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate — is gravely ill with worsening heart disease.

He condemned her treatment by the country's coup-installed junta as "cruel, life-threatening and unacceptable," and insisted that "she must be freed."

"Without proper medical examinations, it is impossible to know what state her heart is in... I am extremely worried. There is no way of verifying if she is even alive," Aris said.

Suu Kyi is now in her fifth year of solitary confinement, the fourth time she has been detained by Myanmar's military rulers over the past three decades. More than 20 years of her life have been stolen by revolving-door generals who fear her popularity and moral authority.

Reuters, The Irrawaddy, the Democratic Voice of Burma and other credible news outlets have since amplified the alarm, underscoring the seriousness of Suu Kyi's condition and the magnitude of the moment.

Let us not overlook the weight of her son's words. She must be freed. Not later, not after negotiations, not at some vague point of political transition — but now.

Myanmar in Chains

On February 1, 2021, Myanmar's military staged a coup and overthrew the nation's lawful, democratically elected leadership.

President Win Myint, State Councilor Suu Kyi, ministers and other parliamentarians were all imprisoned, disappeared or killed. The nation's democracy was snuffed out for all to see in broad daylight.

Myanmar has since descended into widespread state-sponsored violence and repression. Villages, monasteries and schools have been bombed into rubble. Civilians are habitually hunted, tortured, executed or disappeared.

Untold millions are in desperate need of aid. At least three million have been driven from their homes. An entire nation is being starved, torched and erased,

in full view of a watching world.

The statistics are staggering. More than 29,000 people — boys and girls, men and women, monks and nuns, artists, teachers, civil servants, grandmothers — have been arrested, brutalized or executed for daring to stand for freedom. More than 22,000 remain behind bars in Myanmar's notorious prisons.

And now, as if to exemplify this architecture of cruelty, Suu Kyi — the woman who for decades embodied the hope of nonviolent resistance, who carried the aspirations of her people and inspired millions worldwide — is left to suffer from failing health alone in a cell.

Calculated Neglect

True to form, the military has leaked word of Suu Kyi's deteriorating health. Dictatorships are never transparent; they script their narratives carefully. The junta will likely say: "We didn't kill her; heart disease did."

Her son told this writer that Suu Kyi has recently been experiencing severe chest and heart pains — among the most foreboding of symptoms, requiring, by any diagnosis, immediate and thorough medical examination.

Suu Kyi needs immediate access to top-notch cardiac care — MRIs, CTA scans, echocardiograms and consultation with credible cardiologists. Without these, her chances of survival are slim. A prison doctor's cursory visit is no treatment; it is a mockery.

This is how tyrants operate: they deny care, delay intervention and then shrug at the inevitable. It is murder by neglect.

The Junta's Damage Control

As word of Suu Kyi's condition was breaking on the international stage, the regime scrambled to push back. On Saturday, junta spokesman Lieutenant General Zaw Min Tun told pro-junta media the reports of her failing health were "fabricated," timed to distract from coup-leader Min Aung Hlaing's recent trip to China, where he attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit 2025 and commemorations of the 80th anniversary of China's victory over fascism in World War II.

“Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is in good health,” he insisted, accusing critics of spreading rumors to overshadow Myanmar’s supposed “development” and the general’s photo-op diplomacy.

It was classic damage control: the generals’ familiar attempt to drown fact in fiction.

The Theater of Lies

And here the Orwellian farce reveals itself in grotesque detail. As international headlines broke about Suu Kyi’s deteriorating health, the junta rushed out its “assurance”: she is in good health. Healthy, apparently, in a windowless, rat-infested solitary cage, denied daylight, denied her family, denied doctors, denied even the dignity of human contact. By that measure, perhaps the 22,000 other political prisoners choking on filth in Myanmar’s gulags are “flourishing” too.

This is what Orwell called the politics of unreality: lies told so brazenly they demand your complicity to survive. And what Havel diagnosed as the ritual of “living within the lie,” where everyone is forced to nod along as the absurd masquerades as truth. But cruelty wrapped in absurdity is still cruelty. Lies repeated in unison do not heal the heart, or the body, of an 80-year-old woman locked in silence.

If the generals truly believed their own propaganda, the remedy is obvious: open the gates. Allow independent medical observers in. Let her son see her. Let Suu Kyi speak to the world, live, in real time. Let her heart be examined by those with the skill to save it. If she is well, prove it. If not, stop lying.

But they will not. Because dictatorships thrive on shadows. They fear the light of truth as much as they fear the people’s voice. And so, they double down, pumping out denials so ludicrous they would be laughable were they not paired with the slow-motion execution of a woman who embodies her people’s hope.

This is not health. This is a regime mocking life itself, weaponizing lies as a substitute for medicine, propaganda as a substitute for care. It is not governance; it is murder with a press release.

Twisted Narratives

Where is the world in all this? Too often silent. Too often complicit through indifference. Too often profiting off Myanmar’s pain. Arms dealers fuel the junta’s killing

machine. Oil and gas revenues keep the generals flush with cash. Governments issue statements of “concern” while quietly maintaining bilateral trade.

The international press, too, is not blameless. Major outlets repeated accusations against Suu Kyi, branding her complicit in crimes she neither condoned nor controlled — stripped of context, nuance or recognition of the facts. These distortions became headlines, and headlines hardened into dogma.

Yet the record tells a different story. The UN’s fact-finding mission in 2018, the US State Department’s investigations and my eight years of on-the-ground research — published in Burma’s Voices of Freedom, a four-volume set of long-form interviews co-authored with my colleague Fergus Harlow — reveal a far more complex and damning picture of military culpability.

Still, reputations were tarnished, narratives twisted and Suu Kyi was abandoned by many who once hailed her as a pro-democracy icon. In that abandonment, the generals found cover. Silence became complicity.

But this is not the hour to re-litigate old accusations. This is the hour to save Suu Kyi’s life.

Call to Conscience

The time for cautious statements and vague condemnations has passed. Suu Kyi’s son, speaking to the darkness of her confinement, now says he cannot even confirm that his mother is still alive.

Imagine that: a son uncertain if his mother still breathes. What greater indictment of the junta’s cruelty? What greater call to conscience?

Suu Kyi’s declining condition, of course, is not only about her. She is still the symbol and hope of a nation of nearly 60 million people.

Myanmar is a country rich in diversity with over 131 ethnic groups, dozens of languages and a living tradition of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and humanism. It is the modern-day seat of Vipassana — insight meditation — preserved from the time of the Buddha.

The junta seeks to strangle this richness into silence. But the people of Myanmar will not be silenced. Nor should the world at this crucial moment.

Decades ago, the Dalai Lama warned: “If we do not save Tibet now, there will be no Tibet to save.” The same holds true for Myanmar today. History has taught us — from Srebrenica to Rwanda, from Gaza to Xinjiang — that silence is complicity, delay is death.

I write not as a detached commentator but as someone who has lived much of my life in Myanmar — first as a Buddhist monk in Yangon and later as a journalist documenting human rights abuses until I was expelled and blacklisted by the regime. I have co-authored books with Suu Kyi and long supported Myanmar’s nonviolent struggle for democracy.

And I will never forget Suu Kyi’s sagacious words: “Use your freedom to support ours.” That plea echoes louder today than ever.

So world leaders: use your freedom, exercise your conscience to demand the immediate and unconditional release of Suu Kyi and every political prisoner in Myanmar.

Do not let Suu Kyi die alone in a cell. Do not let history record that the world watched, issued statements and shrugged while a Nobel Peace Prize laureate was allowed to succumb to deliberate and ruthless neglect. Headline it. Demand it. Speak it. Act on it.

This is not only about a nation’s future. It is about the moral credibility of the free world. If we abandon Myanmar, if we abandon Suu Kyi, then what hope remains for democracy anywhere?

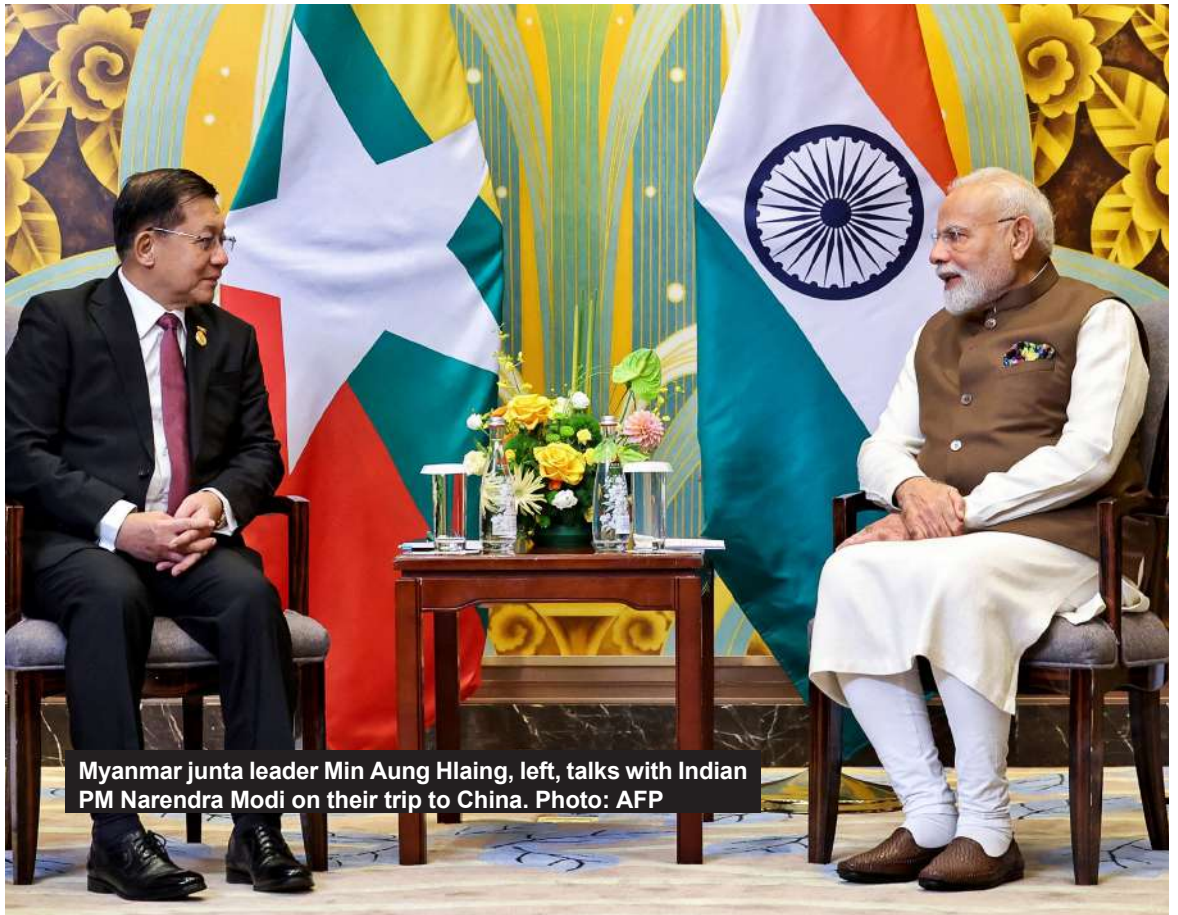
About the Author

Alan Clements is an author, investigative journalist and former Buddhist monk ordained in Myanmar, where he lived for years immersed in the country’s spiritual and political landscapes. He is the author of *Burma: The Next Killing Fields?* and *The Voice of Hope*, co-authored with Aung San Suu Kyi, *Conversation with a Dictator: A Challenge to the Authoritarian Assault*, as well as *Aung San Suu Kyi From Prison* and *a Letter to a Dictator*.

He is also co-author, with Fergus Harlow, of *Burma’s Voices of Freedom*, a four-volume set of long-form interviews documenting the struggle for democracy and human dignity in Myanmar. His decades-long work focuses on Myanmar’s ongoing struggle for democracy, human rights and spiritual resilience. For more information: AlanClements.com and UseYourFreedom.org.



ANALYSIS & INSIGHT



CRITICS RAP MIN AUNG HLAING'S TRIP TO CHINA

Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing's week-long visit to China has drawn criticism from political analysts, who argue the trip was designed more to showcase international recognition to his soldiers and supporters than to achieve meaningful cooperation between the two countries.

During his seven-day stay, Min Aung Hlaing attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Plus Summit 2025 and the 80th anniversary Victory Parade in Beijing, both attended by leaders from around the world. On the sidelines, he held formal meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Vice President Han Zheng, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Laos President Thongloun Sisoulith. He also exchanged greetings and handshakes with leaders including North Korea's Kim Jong Un, Indonesia's president, and Malaysia's prime minister. Pro-junta media outlets highlighted these moments to claim strong ties with international leaders.

Observers noted the unusually long duration of the trip, which included additional visits to Tianjin and Wuhan. In Tianjin, Min Aung Hlaing toured the seaport, where he viewed container operations managed by artificial intelligence systems. He also met Chinese businesspeople and encouraged them to invest in Myanmar, despite the country's ongoing conflict and economic turmoil.

In Wuhan, the junta chief met with Professor Gong Wei, Vice President of Wuhan University, and requested support in training human resources for satellite technology development. Analysts, however, argue such engagements were largely symbolic, given Myanmar's isolation and the lack of trust from global investors.

"His extended trip was primarily aimed at projecting legitimacy at home," one political commentator said. "By showing photos with world leaders, he wants to convince soldiers and supporters that he is not isolated internationally, despite sanctions and widespread rejection."

Junta steps up election plan

Myanmar's military regime has stepped up preparations for its controversial election, disqualifying political parties, jailing critics, and excluding dozens of townships from the polls.

On September 9, the junta-controlled Union Election Commission (UEC) struck off four parties, saying they failed to meet membership and branch



A Myanmar junta voting machine.
Photo: AFP

requirements. Three had planned to contest nationwide and one was a regional party. Among them was the National Democratic Force (NDF), a party formed in 2010 by former National League for Democracy (NLD) members who broke away after the NLD boycotted that year's vote.

That same day, a displaced man from Taunggyi Township was sentenced to seven years in prison. He had been arrested on August 25 after posting online about rising crime in Lashio, a town recently retaken by junta forces. In his post, he criticized the regime for chasing votes instead of protecting people. Residents say kidnappings, motorcycle theft, and home robberies are now routine in Lashio.

The crackdown comes as the junta narrows the areas where voting will be allowed. On September 14, officials announced that elections will not take place in 56 townships, citing security concerns. These include nine in Sagaing Region, five in Magway, and one in Mandalay—areas where resistance forces remain active. In total, 15 townships across Myanmar's central heartland have been cut from the polls. Most areas under the control of ethnic armed organizations were also excluded. However, four townships in Rakhine State—three in the south and one in the center—were not on the list, meaning elections are still planned there.

Critics say the moves show the junta tightening its grip while trying to present an election as legitimate, despite ongoing conflict, displacement, and widespread rejection.

What are the weaknesses of the Myanmar junta election?

The military junta has finalized the list of parties eligible to contest its planned election, which observers and pro-democracy groups widely dismiss as a sham. According to the Union Election Commission (UEC),

61 political parties have been approved, but only six will compete nationwide, while the rest are confined to their respective regions.

On September 9, three parties that had sought to compete across the country were disqualified, leaving six for national-level competition: the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), National Unity Party (NUP), People's Pioneer Party (PPP), People's Party (PP), Myanmar Farmers Development Party (MFDP), and the Shan and Ethnic Democratic Party (White Tiger Party).

The USDP, considered the junta's proxy and closely tied to the military, is widely expected to dominate with the support of the armed forces. The NUP, a successor of the former ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), has retained some organizational structure from its predecessor. The PPP is led by Dr. Thet Thet Khaing, a businesswoman and former National League for Democracy (NLD) lawmaker, while the PP is headed by 88 Generation student leader Ko Ko Gyi. Analysts suggest these four could mount the fiercest competition, though the White Tiger Party is expected to perform strongly in Shan State, where it secured victories in the 2010 election.

Despite the junta's nationwide census conducted in October 2024, the authorities have not disclosed official population and ethnicity data. Meanwhile, humanitarian groups highlight that conditions are far from conducive to a credible election. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimates that 3.5 million people are internally displaced as of August 2024, while nearly 4 million workers have left the country.

Abroad, Myanmar embassies quietly extended deadlines for advance voting registration from September 8 to October 3 and 6, citing low participation among migrant workers and diaspora communities.

Similar extensions occurred under the NLD government due to high demand for advance voting, but this time, observers say the extensions reflect widespread disinterest.

Facing criticism from both the democratic opposition and resistance forces, Ko Ko Gyi defended his decision to remain in the race. Speaking to freelance journalist Thet Htwe Naing, he said:

"Our objective is to establish a political platform in Myanmar and that's why we stand on our beliefs by enduring attacks by the democratic and resistance side. We are standing, enduring, with patience. However, I am not sure how much we can stand on our stance. If the ones who try to solve the problems with political

ways leave their beliefs, it will push the situation that there is no room for political space in this country, Myanmar."

Meanwhile, parties continue to face steep hurdles under the junta's strict criteria, which require proof of 50,000 members, offices in at least 110 townships, and matriculation-level education for candidates. Critics say these conditions are designed to sideline smaller and grassroots parties, while the USDP consistently meets the requirements with ease — fueling suspicion even among some junta sympathizers that the process is heavily tilted in favor of the army's shadow party.

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Doctors and nurses attending to a wounded fighter in a jungle clinic. Photo: Antonio Graceffo

SURGERY IN THE JUNGLE - THE CHALLENGES OF SAVING LIVES DURING WAR

ANTONIO GRACEFFO

Doctors in Burma's war zones work under punishing conditions, operating in stifling heat, swarmed by mosquitoes, with no electricity, no running water, and no referral hospitals or specialists to send difficult cases to. Supplies and equipment are scarce, and all of it unfolds under the constant threat of airstrikes amid ongoing fighting. For Western volunteers, the adjustment can be overwhelming. "I've seen surgeons flip out and start shouting," said 33-year-old Dr. Matthew Spreadbury, describing how those accustomed to the order and structure of Western hospitals often struggle to adjust to conditions in the field.

Spreadbury, a British vascular surgeon now living in Norway, travels with his wife, an orthopedic surgery resident, to volunteer in places where they feel the need is greatest. Together they have served in Africa and Burma, working in harsh conditions to save lives.

In 2022, Spreadbury joined the Free Burma Rangers (FBR) on missions in both Karen and Karenni states, returning again in 2024. On the front lines he performed trauma surgeries, often involving his specialty of vascular operations, repairing blood vessels in cases of severe bleeding or blocked arteries.

He explained that while conditions in Africa are difficult, he felt Burma's crisis demanded his skills even more. "When you go to Africa now, usually you'll find a surgeon in any hospital or clinic," he said. In resistance-controlled areas of Burma, there are very few working hospitals and even fewer doctors. "Burma is on my heart," he said.

A devout Christian, drawn by his faith to serve, the doctor quoted Luke 19: "The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost. It's the same with patients. You've got to go and find them where there is no healthcare system, where there is no surgeon."

According to Spreadbury, an estimated five to seven million people in Karen State lack an organized healthcare system, with only two or three clinics in the region performing surgery. He said that occasionally doctors from the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), ethnic Burmese who left government service after the 2021 coup to support the resistance, come to help. How long they stay varies, with some remaining long term, volunteering with Free Burma Rangers (FBR), Earth Mission, or alongside ethnic armed organizations, while others stay only a few months because of the lack of a salary.

When people think of surgery in Burma, particularly in connection with the Free Burma Rangers, they often imagine battlefield injuries. Spreadbury emphasized, however, that the reality is far broader. "I think of all the patients out in the night with peritonitis, or a mother dying of postpartum hemorrhage. Kidney stones that aren't getting treated," he said. Many assume frontline medics only treat gunshot wounds or landmine victims, but people in Karen State also die from everyday surgical needs that have nothing to do with the war.

The lack of development means routine conditions frequently turn fatal. Spreadbury cited one example: a leading cause of death among young men in the developing world, incarcerated hernias. This occurs

when a hernia traps part of the intestine, cutting off its blood supply and leading to bowel death. Without surgery, the patient also dies. Children, meanwhile, often die from pneumonia, but surgical conditions are also a major factor. "They've got all this surgical disease that is not treated," he said.

Spreadbury referenced the Lancet Commission on Global Surgery's 2015 findings, which showed that five billion people worldwide lack safe access to surgical care. Every year, about 17 million people die from treatable surgical conditions, far more than the combined annual deaths from malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS which combined kill about 3 million people per year. "That's what everyone has heard about, malaria, HIV. But no one is talking about surgery," he said.

He listed common conditions that claim lives or drive families into poverty: mothers in obstructed labor unable to get C-sections, patients with untreated appendicitis, hernias, burns, or broken bones. For example, a man with an untreated femur fracture may be unable to work, leaving his family without income. These are highly treatable problems, Spreadbury emphasized, yet in many places they remain devastating.

To highlight priorities, he pointed to what global health experts call the "Bellwether procedures," three operations that define a functional surgical system: the ability to perform a C-section, open the abdomen for a laparotomy, and fix an open fracture. "If you can do these three operations in high volume, you'll start decreasing the surgical disease burden in your community," he explained.

He contrasted the training he and his wife received in Europe with the realities of practicing in Karen State. "I'm a vascular surgeon, and my wife, is training in orthopedics—bones and joints. But in the West, you'll never be trained to do a C-section, a laparotomy, and fix an open fracture. Each belongs to its own specialty. Nobody would ever be trained in all three," he said. That degree of specialization, while effective in developed healthcare systems, leaves surgeons unprepared for the broad demands of medicine in the jungle.

"What you really need are the missionary surgeons from the 1970s who could do everything—eyes, bowel, bones, anything," he added. Spreadbury explained that he often calls elderly doctors back in Norway, men now in their eighties, who practiced in that era. Thanks to Starlink, he and his colleagues can send photos and get real-time advice. "These surgeons don't realize the gold of knowledge they have," he said. "They can still save lives, and they don't even know it."

Many of the conditions faced inside Burma are ones doctors in Europe or North America rarely encounter anymore. "We haven't seen them, we haven't had

exposure to that kind of medicine," he said, noting that in Norway's socialized system, most conditions would be treated early before they became life-threatening. In Burma, however, advanced cases arrive untreated, often after weeks of suffering.

Discussing the overwhelming difficulties of surgery in the field, Spreadbury explained that Western-trained surgeons often struggle when confronted with conditions far from the clean, controlled environments they are used to.

"You can take a Western surgeon who has never worked in a mission hospital," he said. "Everything they know is about order and structure. Out here, they crumble. I've seen surgeons flip out and start shouting because it's so hot, there are mosquitoes, the instruments don't work, and there's no blood supply."

He described the daily challenges: thick cotton gowns soaked in sweat, no air conditioning, and electricity cutting in and out. "You might not have lights," he said. "Even suction often doesn't work. If there's major bleeding, you rely on lap pads and sutures, not machines."

Anesthesia, he added, is an even greater challenge. "In most hospitals in Africa, the general surgeon gives anesthesia. It's terrifying, because you can kill someone very easily." Spreadbury recalled being more afraid of administering anesthesia than operating when working at the Free Burma Rangers' Jungle School of Medicine. "Finding skilled anesthetists willing to come is much harder than finding surgeons," he said.

When electricity fails, ventilation must be done manually. "You use what we call the ambu bag, and you might be there for hours waiting for the anesthesia to wear off," he explained. Although medicines such as ketamine have improved anesthesia safety, the lack of infrastructure makes every case risky.

As the conversation drew to a close, I asked Spreadbury about a historical figure who had inspired him. Without hesitation, he named Gordon Seagrave, known as the "Burma Surgeon." "He arrived in the 1920s, highly educated, and wanted to go to the ends of the world for Jesus. He built a hospital on the Burma-China border, but his life's work was destroyed more than once—by war, by prison. Still, he rebuilt again and again." Spreadbury shared one of Seagrave's most striking quotes from the Second World War: "As he watched bombs falling on a nearby village, he said, 'Thank you, Jesus. I will soon have too many patients to pray for and operate on.'"

For Spreadbury, Seagrave's legacy captured the essence of missionary medicine: lives poured out in service, in hardship and in hope.

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



SWEDEN ENDS DEVELOPMENT AID TO MYANMAR, ABANDONING MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY: NGO

Sweden will end all development aid to Myanmar from 2026, following the U.S. government. This includes \$2.65 million per year for media and human rights groups, according to Human Rights Myanmar 12 September.

The shock decision, confirmed on 11 September 2025, is a profound blow to Myanmar's civil society, human rights defenders, and independent media, severing a final and critical lifeline of support in the face of a brutal military regime.

The back-to-back withdrawal of Sweden and the U.S., two of Myanmar's most significant donors in the democracy and governance space, triggers more than a financial shortfall. Donors like Sweden have championed international standards, and yet their decision severely undermines the "do no harm" principle. It also sends a demoralising political signal to civil society, journalists, and human rights defenders on the front lines. It suggests that long-term, principled support for their struggle is unreliable, subject to the shifting political priorities of donor capitals rather than the escalating needs on the ground.

This erosion of solidarity is a more damaging consequence than the loss of funding alone.

An ideological shift, not just a pragmatic withdrawal

Sweden has justified its decision by citing the need to reallocate aid to Ukraine as well as the "progressively worsened" conditions for development work in Myanmar. While operational challenges are undeniable, this withdrawal is a direct consequence of a broader ideological shift in Swedish foreign policy under its Development Assistance for a New Era agenda.

This new agenda has abandoned Sweden's long-standing commitment to allocating 1% of its Gross National Income to development assistance and pivoted toward priorities such as trade and migration control. The "deteriorating conditions" in Myanmar serve as a convenient justification for a decision that aligns with pre-determined budget cuts and new geopolitical interests. This approach disregards the established consensus that in repressive environments like Myanmar, flexible support to agile, local civil society is the most effective and critical form of engagement.

A withdrawal at odds with international standards

The manner of Sweden's withdrawal is as damaging as the decision itself. A complete, unilateral, and rapid exit, especially without meaningful consultation with local stakeholders, violates the spirit, if not the letter, of established international norms for responsible donorship.

Core frameworks like the Good Humanitarian Donorship Principles demand predictable, partnership-based funding. The OECD-DAC peer reviews call for coordinated exits that adhere to the principle of “do no harm.” Furthermore, the Core Humanitarian Standard insists on accountability to the affected communities, who are the ultimate beneficiaries of aid.

While these frameworks are not legally binding, they represent widely endorsed expectations for good-faith cooperation. By announcing a complete phase-out driven by domestic political priorities and a timeline that precludes a responsible transition, Sweden is disregarding these fundamental principles. If a complete withdrawal could ever be necessary, it should be coordinated, consultative, and phased to mitigate harm.

The data behind the disengagement

According to Human Rights Myanmar's data analysis, Sweden has provided a total of \$176 million (1.85 billion Swedish krona) in development aid for Myanmar since the coup. Sweden's planned aid budget for 2024 alone stood at around \$41 million (434.56 million krona). Its removal will leave a significant void.

Sweden's cuts directly target the foundations of a free society. Although the majority of Swedish aid was allocated to emergency response (42%) and conflict resolution (10%), a significant amount was donated for democratic participation and civil society (8%). Most of that was awarded to media programmes (6.3%), with a smaller amount spent on human rights (0.6%). Myanmar is the third largest recipient of Swedish media aid globally.

This is a projected loss to Myanmar's already vulnerable independent media of \$2.4 million per year from 2026 onwards. Approximately \$255,000 per year will be lost from the human rights community.

The withdrawal of this support threatens to dismantle critical infrastructure for independent reporting and human rights monitoring.

This is not to say that Swedish aid is without fault. There was always a disparity in funding channels. Of the 61.45% of post-coup funds that Sweden directed through non-governmental organisations, the majority went to international and Swedish-based INGOs (60.68%). In stark contrast, only 0.76% was provided directly to local Myanmar NGOs. The termination of aid will now dismantle programmes that local civil society actors had become reliant on.

The profound impact on the ground

The withdrawal of USAID had already created a precarious funding landscape. Sweden, as one of the last major donors with a strategic focus on human rights and media freedom, was a final pillar of support for these embattled sectors. While other international partners remain engaged in Myanmar, few possess the same mandate or dedicated budgets for democracy and governance work.

For Myanmar's civil society and media, the long-term implications are therefore profound. This is not simply about the closure of projects, but the potential collapse of entire organisations. The withdrawal signals an impending loss of institutional knowledge and capacity built over decades of partnership.

The fear within the community is not just of financial insolvency, but of a gradual return to the information darkness that characterised previous eras of military rule, leaving the regime's atrocities undocumented and its power uncontested.

Recommendations to Sweden

1. Immediately commission a rapid Human Rights and Conflict-Sensitivity Impact Assessment of its withdrawal, in line with the OECD-DAC principle of “do no harm.” This assessment must map the direct and indirect consequences on local partners, at-risk human rights defenders, and marginalised communities.

2. Based on the findings of this assessment, develop and fund a responsible, consultative transition plan. This plan must extend beyond the current deadline to ensure the institutional survival of its partners and mitigate the most severe impacts of the funding termination.

All international donors, including the EU, UK, and Australia, must recognise the profound funding and confidence gap now facing Myanmar's civil society and step forward to fill it. Crucially, new and existing support must be channelled through reformed aid models that prioritise flexible, direct funding to local actors.

The international community must not abandon the people of Myanmar. It is time to replace fragile, top-down funding structures with resilient, direct partnerships that empower the legitimate agents of the country's democratic future.



Filippo Grandi. Photo: AFP

UN REFUGEE CHIEF CALLS FOR INCREASED AID ACCESS AND FUNDING FOR MYANMAR

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) issued a press release on 11 September on the completion of a three-day visit to Myanmar by Filippo Grandi during which he witnessed the dire consequences of the ongoing violence in Myanmar which has left millions displaced and homeless.

The text of the release continues below.

"The suffering of millions of people across Myanmar is immense. With aerial bombardments, destruction of property, and forced recruitment, they live in daily fear for their lives. Communities have fled again and again in search of safety. Civilian men, women and children must be protected from violence, and solutions found so that they can choose to return home in safety and dignity," Grandi said.

The High Commissioner visited communities affected by the devastating earthquake in March this year and spoke with internally displaced and stateless people. In Nay Pyi Taw, he urged wider humanitarian access and discussed solutions for the forcibly displaced.

"Millions of people forcibly displaced within the country and as refugees throughout the region want nothing more than to be able to return home. They demand – and are entitled to – the safety and security that comes with peace.

"All parties – with the support of the international

community – must engage seriously to find solutions to their plight. This is particularly needed for the Rohingya, who have not only been attacked and displaced, but deprived of their basic rights for far too long," said Grandi.

Later this month in New York, Grandi will attend a high-level conference on the situation of Rohingya and other minorities in Myanmar, calling for greater regional and international efforts to create conditions for voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable returns. In the meantime, Grandi called for much greater financial support from the international community to help people in Myanmar and refugees throughout the region.

As part of a wider humanitarian response, UNHCR works with other UN agencies, NGO partners and communities in Myanmar, providing assistance to address the basic needs, physical safety and well-being of forcibly displaced and stateless people and promoting peaceful coexistence with host communities. But access remains constrained in many areas, cutting communities off from vital humanitarian aid.

UNHCR requires \$88.3 million to fund its response in Myanmar this year, but has so far received just 33 per cent of that total. The UN-wide Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025, including the earthquake addendum, is only funded at 22 per cent of a required \$1.4 billion.



Photo: AFP

US SANCTIONS MYANMAR-BASED NETWORKS BEHIND CYBER SCAMS AND MILITIAS

The U.S. Treasury Department has imposed sanctions on Burmese individuals and companies tied to cyber fraud, forced labour, and armed groups, as part of a wider crackdown on Southeast Asian networks accused of stealing billions of dollars from Americans.

The Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said the designations target key figures in the Karen National Army (KNA), a militia headquartered in Shwe Kokko, Karen State, and their business interests. The KNA is closely associated with the junta's Border Guard Force (BGF) in Karen State. The KNA, already blacklisted as a transnational criminal organization earlier this year, has sheltered sprawling scam compounds in the Myawaddy area, including the notorious Yatai New City project at Shwe Kokko.

Two Burmese nationals, Saw Min Min Oo and Saw Tin Win, were sanctioned for their roles in running KNA-linked companies and protecting scam operations. Saw Min Min Oo, a former KNA colonel, sits on the boards of multiple entities including Chit Linn Myaing Co., Chit Linn Myaing Toyota, and Chit Linn Myaing Mining and Industry, while also helping oversee the Myanmar Yatai International Holding Group, a joint venture with Chinese tycoon She Zhijiang.

Saw Tin Win, also linked to the KNU and BGF, controls Shwe Myint Thauung Yinn Industry and Manufacturing, a utility firm that supplied electricity to

Shwe Kokko's scam centres.

According to Treasury, the scam hub at Yatai New City has, over the past decade, transformed a riverside village into a city built on gambling, drug trafficking, and cyber fraud. Victims trafficked into the complex report beatings, forced prostitution, and captivity until ransoms are paid by their families.

Operators allegedly required workers with English skills to specifically target Americans through fake online investment platforms. In 2024 alone, U.S. citizens lost more than \$10 billion to Southeast Asia-based scams — a 66 percent increase from the previous year.

The sanctions also hit She Zhijiang, the principal developer of Yatai New City, along with his holding companies Myanmar Yatai International Holding Group Co. and Yatai International Holding Group Ltd., both accused of serious human rights abuses and corruption.

The Treasury statement says that all property and interests in property of the designated persons in the United States, or under control of U.S. persons, are blocked. The measures prohibit Americans from doing business with the sanctioned entities and extend to any companies majority-owned by them.

Officials urged international partners to act in concert, warning that the scam centres not only harm Americans financially but also perpetuate modern slavery in Myanmar's border areas.



UK CONDEMNS MYANMAR JUNTA ATROCITIES AT UN RIGHTS COUNCIL

On 9 September, the United Kingdom delivered a statement at the 60th Session of the UN Human Rights Council during the Enhanced Interactive Dialogue on Myanmar.

The statement is as follows.

Thank you, Mr. President, High Commissioner, and distinguished panellists.

Your latest reports reveal deeply troubling evidence of human rights atrocities committed in Myanmar, including by the Myanmar military. Civilians are bearing the brunt: detained without due process, killed in indiscriminate air strikes, and displaced as their homes, schools, and hospitals are destroyed.

The Myanmar military's intensified use of airstrikes following the March earthquake inflicted further devastation on civilians, compounding the crisis.

The Mechanism has uncovered extensive evidence of systematic torture and abuse in detention facilities operated by the military since the coup. Detainees, including children, have been subjected to beatings, electric shocks, and sexual violence, including rape and sexualised torture.

These reports expose a pattern of deliberate cruelty, underscoring the urgent need for justice. The international community must do more to ensure perpetrators are held to account.

The UK remains committed to supporting future accountability in Myanmar. The Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM)'s documentation plays a vital role in laying the groundwork for this, and the UK has contributed £900,000 to the mechanism to help ensure that evidence is preserved, and justice can be pursued.



CHINESE TECHNOLOGY COMPANY HELPS TRACK THE LOCATION OF OVER 33 MILLION MYANMAR INTERNET USERS IN REAL-TIME

A Chinese technology company, Geedge Networks, is enabling Myanmar's military junta to track the online activities and real-time locations of 33.4 million internet users, according to a report released on 09 September by Justice For Myanmar.

The statement is as follows.

A new report published today exposes the significant collaboration between the illegal Myanmar military junta and Geedge Networks in implementing a commercial version of China's "Great Firewall", giving the junta unprecedented capabilities to track down, arrest, torture and kill civilians.

Geedge Networks is a Chinese company with links to the Chinese government. Justice For Myanmar's report, Silk Road of Surveillance: The role of China's Geedge Networks and Myanmar telecommunications operators in the junta's digital terror campaign also exposes 13 telecommunications companies in Myanmar that are integral to the continued functioning of Geedge's sophisticated surveillance and censorship technology on behalf of the junta.

These are ATOM (formerly Telenor Myanmar), Mytel, Myanma Post and Telecommunications (MPT), Ooredoo Myanmar, Frontiir, StreamNet, Golden TMH Telecom, Internet Maekhong Network (IM-Net), Myanmar Broadband Telecom (MBT), Myanmar

Telecommunication Network (MTN), Campana, Global Technology Group and China Unicom.

Geedge's transfer of a commercialised version of China's "Great Firewall" gives the junta unrestricted access to the online activities of 33.4 million internet users in Myanmar. Notably, Geedge systems enable the tracking of network traffic at the individual level and can identify the geographic location of mobile subscribers in real time by linking their activity to specific cell identifiers. By providing hardware, software, training and support to the illegal military junta, Geedge may be aiding and abetting in the commission of crimes against humanity, including the acts of torture and killing, carried out by the junta.

The report is based on a leaked dataset that casts light on Geedge's business around the world, including Myanmar, and has been reviewed by a coalition of media and non-governmental/civil society organisations through the Great Firewall Export project, made up of Amnesty International, InterSecLab, the Globe and Mail, Paper Trail Media, Tor Project, DER STANDARD, and Follow The Money.

Justice For Myanmar demands sanctions against Geedge Networks and its leadership, and an international criminal investigation of individuals in directive and leadership positions of Geedge for aiding and abetting international crimes.

These revelations come as the Chinese government itself deepens its aiding and abetting of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Myanmar through the continued transfer of arms, while also awarding false legitimacy to the junta and offering support to its sham election.

Justice For Myanmar demands the Chinese government immediately cease the transfer of arms, equipment, technology and associated training and support to the military junta, including software, hardware and technical assistance provided by Geedge Networks, to halt political and financial support for the junta and all entities under its control, including in relation to its planned sham election, and to recognise and support the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) as the highest consultative body, the National Unity Government (NUG) as the legitimate government of Myanmar, and Ethnic Resistance Organisations and federal units as key stakeholders in forming a federal union.

Justice For Myanmar spokesperson Yadanar Maung says: "Surveillance supplied and installed by Geedge Networks and implemented in collaboration with internet service providers in Myanmar poses grave risks to anyone in Myanmar who dares to criticise the junta, speak truth to power and access independent sources of information. "Geedge is helping the illegal junta refine its capacity to track down, torture and kill activists and may thereby be aiding and abetting those crimes.

"The Geedge leak confirms that multiple internet service providers, internet gateways and fibre optic operators, including those currently operated by foreign companies, are now directly involved in the junta's weaponisation of the internet in Myanmar.

"The illegal junta's import of a commercial version of China's 'Great Firewall' is part of a pattern of China's aiding and abetting of international crimes in Myanmar. This must end now and there must be accountability."



Photo: AFP

MYANMAR'S POLL RESULT DUE END OF JANUARY: ELECTION OFFICIAL

An official from Myanmar's junta-stacked election commission said on Thursday that the results of its upcoming and widely disputed national poll were expected by the end of January next year.

Myanmar has been consumed by a civil war since the military deposed the government of democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi in 2021, making unsubstantiated allegations of electoral fraud.

But the military is now organising an election they have touted as an off-ramp to the bloody conflict, with phased polls due to start on December 28 and lasting around a month.

The commission held a news conference on Thursday in the capital Naypyidaw, which lasted more than three hours and neither Suu Kyi nor her National League for Democracy -- which won the last polls by a landslide -- were mentioned once.

It said six parties would run for seats nationwide, with another 51 taking part in individual states or regions.

"Altogether we have 57 parties to contest in elections," UEC member Khin Maung Oo said.

The vote would be held in three phases, with two weeks between each phase, the UEC said.

Large areas of Myanmar are beyond the control of the military, administered by a myriad of pro-democracy guerrillas and powerful ethnic armed organisations that have pledged to block polls in their enclaves.

"We have about 63 places which have security risks," Khin Maung Oo said, "however we will continue working until we can hold (the vote)".

The junta has touted elections as a way to end the conflict, although the vastly popular 80-year-old Suu Kyi remains jailed and international monitors and analysts have described the vote as a ploy to disguise continuing military rule.

Conflict monitors predict the period will see an uptick in violence and unrest as the military seeks to expand the scope of the vote and opposition groups lash back.

The military government has introduced new laws dictating prison sentences of up to 10 years for critics or protesters of the election.

A scattered array of pro-democracy guerrilla groups and ethnic armed organisations initially struggled to make headway against the military before a series of territorial wins after a combined offensive starting in late 2023.

But their momentum has stalled and ahead of the vote the junta has made a limited series of successful counteroffensives clawing back a smattering of towns, mostly in the north.

Nonetheless the election is likely to be limited in scope.

A census held as preparation for the poll estimated it failed to collect data from 19 million of the country's 51 million people, according to provisional findings, citing "significant security constraints" as one reason for the shortfall.

In Myanmar's last election in 2020 over 70 of the 94 political parties registered ran at the national level.

AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA ELECTION BODY DISSOLVES FOUR POLITICAL PARTIES INCLUDING SANDAR MIN'S NDF

On 9 September, the junta's Union Election Commission (UEC) announced the dissolution of four political parties, including the National Democratic Force (NDF), where Daw Sandar Min serves as vice-chairwoman.

The dissolved parties are the National Democratic Force (NDF), the Democratic Party of National Politics (DNP), the Women Party (Mon), and the Union Farmer-Labour Force Party.

According to the UEC, the NDF was disbanded for failing to reach the required number of party members within the set timeframe, while the other three parties were dissolved for not establishing the minimum number of party offices mandated by the commission.

Daw Sandar Min, who was expelled from the National League for Democracy (NLD), had been preparing to contest in the junta's planned elections. She met State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi after the coup in a meeting arranged by the junta but was officially expelled from the NLD in March 2023.

The UEC stated that the dissolutions followed the parties' failure to comply with membership and organizational requirements by the 7 September deadline.

Following the 2021 coup, a total of 63 political parties, including the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), were registered under the junta. With the latest announcement, only 59 parties remain.

U Thein Nyunt, who previously led the NDF, now serves as a central advisor to the junta's National Defence and Security Council.

The current chairman of the NDF is U Thar Saing, with Dr. Myo Set Thway – formerly of Daw Thet Khaing's People's Pioneer Party (PPP) – serving as one of its secretaries.

NDF Vice Chairmen U Htet Aung Kyaw, Daw Sandar Min and Secretary General Dr. Tshering Thoway

NDF SAYS PARTY DISSOLUTION "A SLAP ON THE NOSE" AMID BROADER POLITICAL CRACKDOWN IN MYANMAR

The National Democratic Force (NDF) has described its abrupt dissolution by the Union Election Commission (UEC) as "a slap on the nose," highlighting a deepening sense of political injustice under Myanmar's military-appointed administration.

Dr. Myo Set Thway, Secretary of the NDF, told Mizzima on 10 September that although the move was technically within legal bounds, it struck a painful blow to democratic voices in the country.

"It feels like a slap on the nose — it hurts," said Dr. Myo Set Thway. "But as I mentioned earlier, [the commission] has the authority to strike, and I believe it did so because the time had come. Still, there's a sense of justice being lost, and the country is suffering from the absence of parties like ours."

The UEC announced on 9 September that the NDF had been dissolved for failing to meet the mandated party membership threshold. The commission claims the party did not reach the required 50,000 members within the legal timeframe.

However, Dr. Myo Set Thway pushed back against the justification, revealing the NDF had submitted over 80,000 members. He likened the commission's rejection to an unfair examination, where answers were arbitrarily marked wrong despite the effort made.

While the party has requested a list of the rejected members, it has decided not to file an appeal or enter negotiations. Nevertheless, NDF leaders say they remain committed to politics, either through re-registration, non-parliamentary activities, or individual candidacy.

"Those who want to enter parliament should still be allowed to run independently or under a different banner," said Dr. Myo Set Thway.

The NDF is not the only casualty in what appears to be a sweeping political purge. On the same day, the UEC also dissolved the Democratic Party of National Politics (DNP), the Women Party (Mon), and the Union Farmer-LabourForce Party.

Daw Mi Than Shin, president of the Women Party (Mon), claimed her party's dissolution was not due to missed deadlines but internal sabotage and administrative obstruction. She cited communication breakdowns in Yangon and alleged betrayal in Ayeyarwady, where party representatives failed to submit paperwork for 25 out of 26 towns.

"I was deceived. I was betrayed like that," she said, adding that the party plans to send a formal letter to the UEC in hopes of reversing the decision.

Since the 2021 coup, at least 40 political parties – including the once-dominant National League for Democracy (NLD) – have refused to re-register under the junta's rules. Meanwhile, more than 60 parties have re-registered, though four, including the NDF, have now been dissolved.

Notably, two former NDF leaders – U Thein Nyunt and U Khin Maung Swe – are now serving on the junta's National Defence and Security Council. The current NDF chairman is U Thar Sine, and the vice-chairman is Daw Sandar Min, a former NLD member.

The dissolutions raise further concerns about the credibility and inclusivity of any upcoming elections under military rule.

KNU WARNS SUPPORT FOR MYANMAR JUNTA'S ELECTION IS 'LICENSE TO KILL'

The Nyaunglebin District and Brigade 3 of the Karen National Union (KNU) issued a strong warning on 11 September, stating that anyone who supports the military junta's upcoming election would be considered as giving the regime an "official license to kill."

In a public announcement, the KNU said it would closely monitor individuals, political parties, religious groups, and social organizations involved in the junta's planned election. If necessary, it warned, action would be taken under Kawthoolei law, using the name the KNU uses for its area of control.

"The KNU Nyaunglebin District will closely monitor those who infiltrate or support the illegal and fake election organized by the military dictatorship and terrorist council, and will take action under Kawthoolei law, if necessary," the statement read.

The group described the election as one-sided and illegal, aimed solely at protecting the power of military leaders, their families, and aligned political parties. The KNU also said the election would serve to prolong military dictatorship and push ethnic communities into a life of oppression and exploitation, "a life no different

from death."

As a district-level command and military brigade under the KNU Central Committee, Nyaunglebin District and Brigade 3 stated it would follow the broader policies and guidance of the KNU leadership.

The KNU Central Committee has similarly rejected the military's election plan, declaring on 26 August that it would not recognize the process. It argued that the election lacks public participation, is designed to benefit the military, and can be easily manipulated.

Instead, the KNU called for a political solution based on a genuine federal democratic union. It emphasized the need for an inclusive political dialogue and a constitution drafted and approved by the people.

Meanwhile, the Union Election Commission under the military council announced on 18 August that the first phase of the election would be held on 28 December.

Union Minister U Yee Mon of the National Unity Government

U YEE MON SAYS REVOLUTIONARY GROUPS OPEN TO DIALOGUE IF MYANMAR'S MILITARY AGREES TO SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Union Minister U Yee Mon of the National Unity Government (NUG) has said that revolutionary forces would not oppose political dialogue if coup leader Min Aung Hlaing and the military were genuinely willing to discuss systemic change.

"If the coup leaders came to realize and are genuinely willing to discuss systemic change through political dialogue, I don't believe the revolutionary groups would reject that," he said in an exclusive interview with PVTv, a media outlet affiliated with the NUG.

He stressed that Myanmar's people have long sought to end military involvement in politics through peaceful means, but generations of politicians have been forced to sacrifice themselves. Now, amid the Spring Revolution, young people and civilians are taking up armed struggle, driven by the conviction that death is preferable to life under oppression.

U Yee Mon warned that if the military continues to cling to absolute power, the institution founded by General Aung San risks total collapse.

"The people will not back down," he said, noting that if political problems could be solved through political

means, there would be no need for armed revolution.

While the military is viewed as a collective, he argued that ultimate responsibility lies with a small group of top commanders.

"There are soldiers who are not power-hungry and who simply want to serve their duty to defend the country," he said.

"This is a moment for the military junta to reconsider its course. It's not the time for blame or internal division. I believe we must come together to build on our strengths and address our weaknesses. If we continue to tear each other down, only the enemy will benefit," he added.

Since its formation in 2021, the NUG has undergone internal and external reforms to adapt to shifting circumstances. As of 15 July, U Htet Naing Oo, Permanent Secretary of the NUG's Ministry of Electricity and Energy, told Mizzima that 10 ministers and deputy ministers are active in Kachin State and Sagaing Region, eight in Kayin State, Mon State, and Tanintharyi Region, and six in border areas.



Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar

Responsibilities & Rights

CTUM STRONGLY CONDEMNS THE MYANMAR MILITARY FOR 'CREATING A FAÇADE TO LIE TO THE WORLD'

The Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar (CTUM) says it strongly condemns the Myanmar military junta for stealing the "CTUM" and presenting it to ASEAN as a representative of the Myanmar workers, according to a press statement released last week.

According to the statement, the CTUM received registration as a Confederation in 2015 July 13 and had been a Myanmar workers representative at the National Tripartite Dialogue up to 2020. Only in 2021 when the coup was staged, did CTUM, alongside other legitimate trade unions, withdraw from all forms of engagement with the military junta due to the denial to Freedom of Association essential for an independent National Tripartite Dialogue Mechanism.

The statement goes on to say:

Even though we were issued warrants, had our passports declared void, respecting our own constitution, CTUM held its Extraordinary Congress on 28th and 29th of November 2023 in Myanmar.

As CTUM did not accept the coup we did not see any need to report to them. The mechanism now used by the military is just a farce created since 2023 out of desperation to possibly prevent Article 33 of the ILO (International Labour Organization) Constitution being applied by the ILO.

CTUM will only apply the independent complaints

mechanism established directly by the ILO. In addition to this, CTUM urges the people of Myanmar to reject any mechanism established by the military junta and its allies.

Moreover, the CTUM is gravely concerned that participating in or submitting complaints to a mechanism run by the military junta will expose individuals to serious security risks. Those who submit complaints (against the violation of the (junta's) troops, administrators, and followers) will face retaliation or further abuse at the hands of the very perpetrators of forced labour.

The CTUM, together with its allies continues to vigorously monitor the military junta's compliance with the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry (COI). Both from 1998 as well as 2023. We remain committed to ensuring that these recommendations are implemented fully and effectively, holding the military accountable for any failures to do so.

CTUM points out to the ILO and the ILO Myanmar Liaison Office that the Myanmar MOL officers are the same ones who have not fulfilled the recommendations of the 1998 Commission of Inquiry report on Workers' Rights violations.

CTUM advises advocates of the military junta to study the documented work of the Myanmar trade unions, the Human Rights organizations of Myanmar, the international community, the constituents of the ILO and the ILO itself on the work done over twenty years to get the previous military junta to stop its atrocities on its people.

CTUM calls on all workers, employers, and

members of the international community to reject this so called workers representatives. CTUM will continue to work independently, alongside our international allies, to combat forced labour and advocate for the rights and safety of all workers in Myanmar.

The CTUM remains committed to ensuring that any mechanisms addressing forced labour are conducted with full transparency, impartiality, with accountability, and the genuine involvement of independent social partners. Any mechanism under a military junta and martial law with a gagged UMFCCL is inherently flawed and will not deliver justice or protect workers' rights.

CTUM warns the Myanmar Military's Ministry of Labour and their so-called "Workers representatives" that proper judicial action is being followed up with the Burma Lawyers Council on Intellectual Property Rights for stealing CTUM Logo and CTUM flag, IWFM flag and IWFM logo, BWFM flag and BWFM logo, AFFM flag and AFFM logo.

CTUM strongly condemns the Myanmar military for creating a façade to lie to the world.

It is a facade that the primary perpetrator of Article 33 in Myanmar created, designed to create confusion and take away attention from their obligations to the Commission of Inquiry of the ILO.



Photo: Supplied

WETLET RESIDENTS AND ABFSU DEMAND SWIFT JUSTICE IN CHILD RAPE CASE INVOLVING LOCAL PDF MEMBER IN SAGAING REGION

The All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) in Wetlet Township and local residents have called on the National Unity Government (NUG) to take swift action against a member of a local defence force accused of raping an 11-year-old girl in Wetlet Township, Sagaing Region.

According to residents, the incident occurred at around 9 am on 5 September, when a member of the Lin Mywe Gyi Local PDF, identified as Myo Ko, allegedly raped the girl on a bund in the southwestern part of Rwasar Gyi model village. The victim later recounted the incident and identified the accused at their camp.

Local villagers staged protests demanding justice, chanting "No mercy" and calling for the "death penalty" for the accused. On 9 September, the Wetlet Township ABFSU issued a statement urging the NUG to ensure swift and effective punishment.

"We are not calling for the death penalty or execution, but rather for effective and appropriate action that matches the crime committed. We demand that the NUG court deliver a verdict as quickly as possible. If they fail to do so or delay, we will use the people's system of justice as the fastest way," said Ko Han Min Soe, chairman of the Wetlet Township Students' Union (ABFSU).

The ABFSU statement confirmed that the accused is currently being held by the Wetlet Township People's Security Force under the Interim NUG Ministry of Home Affairs and expressed solidarity with the victim and her family.

U Nay Phone Latt, spokesperson for the NUG Prime Minister's Office, told Mizzima that the case will proceed in accordance with the law.

"The People's Security Force has detained and charged the suspect. The court will adjudicate in accordance with the law," he said.

He also appealed to the public to respect the legal process, stressing that the accused is a member of a local defence force and not part of a battalion under the NUG Ministry of Defence (MOD)'s Code of Conduct.

Under the Penal Code amendment signed into law on 26 March 2019, rape of a minor is punishable by a minimum of 10 years' imprisonment up to the death penalty. In cases involving children under 12 or disabled women, the sentence ranges from 20 years to life imprisonment.



A family mourns. Photo: Supplied

35 CIVILIANS KILLED IN KARENNI STATE IN AUGUST DUE TO MYANMAR JUNTA ATTACKS

At least 35 civilians were killed and 47 others injured in Karenni State during August as a result of human rights violations committed by the Myanmar junta, according to a statement released by the Karenni Human Rights Group (KNHRG) on 8 September.

The report stated that among the dead were three children and eight women, while the injured included six children and 13 women. The casualties were caused by junta airstrikes, heavy weapons fire, landmines, and shootings.

In addition, 45 houses, one religious building, two schools, three clinics, one public building, six vehicles, and nine agricultural fields were destroyed during the month.

The junta carried out nine airstrikes and 13 incidents of shelling, alongside shootings and arrests in civilian areas across the state. One man was injured

after stepping on a landmine, while another was shot dead by advancing junta troops in Demoso Township. At least 15 civilians were also arrested.

“The junta’s military operations to secure townships for holding elections have forced people to continue fleeing. Between July and August, up to 200,000 people have been displaced, facing an extreme need for emergency food supplies and shelter,” the KNHRG statement said.

The group called for urgent international assistance, including cross-border humanitarian aid, and urged the international community to take decisive action against the junta and comprehensively uproot its oppressive actions.



MYANMAR JUNTA SHELLING KILLS WOMAN, INJURES SEVEN IN HPAKANT TOWNSHIP

Myanmar junta forces stationed on Hpakant Hill indiscriminately fired artillery into residential areas of Hpakant Township at 12:30 am on 9 September, killing a local woman and injuring seven others, according to residents.

The shells struck Ward 3 of Seikmu village and Bazan Chaung Ward in the Seikmu group. Three people from Seikmu and five from Bazan Chaung were injured, with one reported to be in critical condition.

"They fired about 19 or 20 rounds of 120mm shells from the Hpakant Hill base around 12:30 am. The shells exploded in residential areas. The woman who died suffered severe facial injuries. Those who were not in critical condition were hit in their arms and legs," said Ko Soe Gyi, a Hpakant resident.

The deceased woman, believed to be about 50 years old, was killed instantly after being struck in the

face by shell fragments. The critically injured man has been transferred to Myitkyina Hospital for treatment.

Locals reported that a teacher from a junta-run middle school was also among the injured.

The shelling destroyed two houses and a school in Seikmu Ward 3, as well as five houses in Bazan Chaung Ward.

Separately, at around 8:40 pm on the evening of 8 September, junta forces reportedly set fire to and destroyed the Katone San Company building in Hmaw Maung Layan village, Ayemyathaya village tract, in Hpakant Township.



MYANMAR JUNTA AND BGF PREPARE JOINT OFFENSIVE ON LAY KAY KAW AFTER RETAKING LAT KHAT TAUNG CAMP

The Myanmar junta, in coordination with the Karen Border Guard Force (BGF), is preparing a joint assault on Lay Kay Kaw Myothit, south of Myawaddy in Karen State, according to Karen military sources.

On 9 September, frontline resistance groups confirmed that junta forces had regained control of Lat Khat Taung camp, marking a key development in the ongoing clashes.

The renewed offensive follows a major operation launched on 28 August, when the junta, with BGF support, mobilized elements of four divisions in four columns to attack Thingannyinaung town and the Asian Highway near Myawaddy. The assault forced the Karen National Union (KNU), People's Defence Forces (PDF), and Joint Revolutionary Forces to withdraw.

By 6 September, resistance forces had abandoned the Light Infantry Battalion 355, 356, and 357 camps, a strategic hill camp, and a police station in Thingannyinaung. The junta has since intensified air assaults in preparation for an advance on Lay Kay Kaw.

"The attack on Lay Kay Kaw may come from Behikalw and Hpalu villages, with troops potentially advancing through forest roads. Locals are fleeing due to the threat of military action," said a revolutionary source.

On 8 September at around 10 am, junta aircraft carried out two airstrikes on Yathaytgu village near Lay Kay Kaw, though no casualties were reported. Residents from at least eight nearby villages – including

Lay Kay Kaw, Yathaytgu, Minletpan, Hpalu, Behikalaw, Maekanei, Nohphoe, and Hteemuhta – are now fleeing.

"People are fleeing, but the rain is making it harder. Some remain behind to watch the situation, and others are staying home as guards to take care of their possessions. The last time the military invaded, they looted everything," a 50-year-old resident of Lay Kay Kaw told Mizzima.

With BGF support, junta forces have been moving in large numbers around Myawaddy town, conducting evening arrests, according to locals. Mizzima is still investigating details of these arrests.

On 6 September, Lay Kay Kaw Myothit Hospital was hit by a suicide drone at around 11 pm, damaging buildings but causing no casualties.

Between March and April 2024, the KNU, PDF, and allied revolutionary forces seized control of Thingannyinaung, capturing battalion camps, police stations, and sections of the Asian Highway. In response, the junta launched Operation Aung Zeya in April 2024, led by deputy junta chief Lieutenant General Soe Win, deploying multiple divisions and heavy airstrikes to reclaim the area.

Despite sustained offensives, revolutionary groups held the territory for more than 500 days, from 21 April 2024 until 5 September 2025. Resistance forces blame the BGF for guiding junta troops in recent battles, contributing to the fall of outposts and forcing their retreat.

MYANMAR JUNTA CONDUCTS SECOND AIRSTRIKE ON KANPETLET IN UNDER A MONTH

The Myanmar junta carried out a second airstrike on Kanpetlet Township in Chin State within a month, according to the Chin Defence Force - Kanpetlet (CDF-Kanpetlet).

Around midnight on 10 September, a military jet dropped two 500-pound bombs on Khapan village, located in Administrative Unit No. 5 of Kanpetlet Township. This follows a previous airstrike on Kanpetlet town on 17 August.

"A jet fighter dropped two 500-pound bombs. It may have targeted the area believing our comrades were there, or it might have deliberately aimed at civilians," said Peter Than Shwe, spokesperson for CDF-Kanpetlet, in a statement to Mizzima.

The airstrike destroyed two school buildings and injured one local resident, who sustained a hand injury.

CDF-Kanpetlet believes the junta is using airstrikes to intimidate civilians in territories it no longer controls. The 17 August attack on Kanpetlet town caused no casualties, but damaged around 20 houses. Most residents had evacuated in time.

In response to junta movements in Chin State, CDF-Kanpetlet has closed two key routes – the Swal

Lwe Kyin-Kyin Dwe road and the Saw-Kanpetlet road – since 20 August for military and security reasons.

As of 11 September, the roads remain closed. However, emergency travel for health or welfare purposes is still permitted with prior notice to the relevant local authorities.

Kanpetlet town has been under civilian control since 21 December 2024, when the Chin Brotherhood Alliance seized the town after junta military and police forces retreated. A local civilian administration has since been established.

With tensions escalating, Kanpetlet authorities have advised residents to remain on high alert and to build bunkers and trenches in preparation for possible future airstrikes.

Meanwhile, the CDF-Kanpetlet has launched a campaign to collect 20,000 bullets between 8 September and 8 November. The initiative is aimed at equipping local defence forces and sustaining security in areas liberated by the Chin revolutionary movement.



OVER 70 MYANMAR JUNTA TROOPS KILLED IN AA OFFENSIVES NEAR NGAPE TOWNSHIP

More than 70 junta soldiers were killed in recent clashes near Ngape Township in Magwe Region, as Arakan Army (AA) forces launched a series of successful defensive and counter-offensive operations, the AA announced on 10 September.

The military junta has been attempting to regain control of territory along the Ayeyarwady-Rakhine and Magwe-Rakhine borders, deploying battalions under the Military Operations Command 17 (MOC 17). These include Light Infantry Battalions (LIB) 574, 569, 575, 577, 520, and 295, as well as units formed with newly trained conscripts.

According to the AA, junta forces conducted offensives in the Nat Yay Kan Kone area of Ngape Township – once on 4 September and twice on 7 September – but were pushed back with heavy casualties.

The AA stated that it inflicted significant losses during these clashes, forced the troops to retreat, and continued to pursue the fleeing soldiers.

Over 70 junta troops were reportedly killed during the fighting, and the AA seized a large cache of weapons, ammunition, and military equipment. The group released photos of the captured materiel as part of its announcement.

The AA also issued a message to soldiers forcibly conscripted under the junta's military service law, urging them to surrender and promising fair treatment and protection if they do so.

Fighting has intensified in several areas as junta forces continue to reinforce their positions near Setsetyo village (Ayeyarwady-Rakhine border), Sinlam village (Bago-Rakhine border), and along the Yotaung border. Armed engagements are ongoing, according to the AA.

The military junta has not released any statements regarding the recent clashes.

The Arakan Army, which has already captured and now controls 14 townships in Rakhine State, is aiming to seize the remaining key towns of Sittwe, Kyaukpyu, and Manaung, according to AA spokesperson Khine Thukha at a press conference on 11 August.

Clashes between AA and junta troops have continued for over a year along the borders of Rakhine, Magwe, Bago, and Ayeyarwady Regions, as the AA intensifies its military campaign through urban sieges, defensive operations, and coordinated offensives.



Photo: Mizzima

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS AT ITS LOWEST IN 50 YEARS WITH MYANMAR ONE OF THE WORST

Press freedoms worldwide have declined significantly over the past five years to hit their lowest level in 50 years, a report by a democracy think tank showed Thursday.

Afghanistan, Burkina Faso and Myanmar -- already among the poorest performers in press freedoms -- posted the biggest falls, the report by the Stockholm-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) said.

The fourth-biggest drop was in South Korea, it added, citing "a spike in defamation cases initiated by the government and its political allies against journalists, and raids on journalists' residences".

"The current state of democracy in the world is concerning," IDEA secretary general Kevin Casas-Zamora, secretary general told AFP.

More than half of countries in the world (54 percent), registered a drop in one of the five key democracy indicators between 2019 and 2024, the report said.

"The most important finding in our report is the very acute deterioration in press freedom around the world," Casas-Zamora said.

Between 2019 and 2024, it saw "the biggest drop over the past 50 years".

"We've never seen such an acute deterioration in a key indicator of democratic health," he said.

Press freedoms declined in 43 countries across all continents, including 15 in Africa and 15 in Europe.

"There's a toxic brew that is coming together, which involves, on the one hand, heavy-handed interventions on the part of governments," some of them "legacies of what happened during the pandemic".

On the other hand, "you have the very negative impact of disinformation, some of which is real disinformation and some of which is used as a pretext by governments to clamp down on press freedoms".

The think tank is concerned about the consolidation of traditional media worldwide, as well as the "disappearance in many countries of local media which plays a very important role in supporting a democratic debate", Casas-Zamora said.

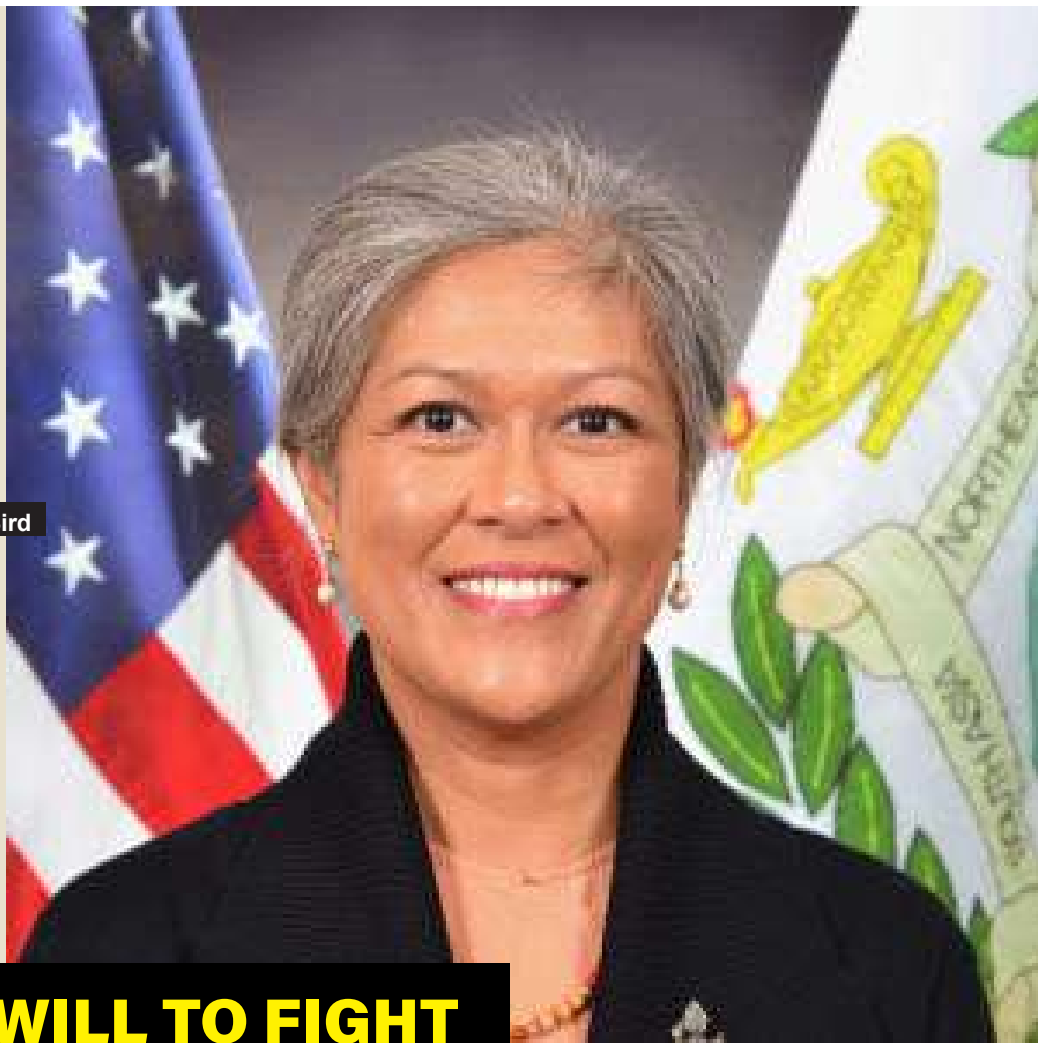
The report only covers the period 2019 to 2024 and does not include the first effects of US President Donald Trump's return to the White House in January.

But "some of the things that we saw during the election at the end of last year and in the first few months of 2025 are fairly disturbing", Casas-Zamora said.

"Since what happens in the US has this ability to go global, this does not bode well for democracy globally," he added.

AFP

Mie Mie Wynn Bird



THE WILL TO FIGHT

INSIGHT MYANMAR

Mie Mie Wynn Bird is a retired U.S. Army officer and defense strategist who conducts leadership and capacity-building workshops for members of Myanmar's pro-democracy movement, including People's Defense Forces (PDFs), ethnic armed organizations, and civil resistance networks. In this conversation, she draws on her decades of military experience and close observation of Myanmar's conflict to talk about morale: what she believes is the single, most decisive factor in the country's ongoing war.

Mie Mie Wynn Bird starts by explaining her main, operating principle: "people first, mission always." In any military or resistance effort, the concept of "people first" means that weapons, plans, and resources amount to little without motivated, capable people to use them. So leaders must ensure their teams are trained, protected, supported, and respected, which builds a trust and loyalty that in turn strengthens performance in high-pressure situations. And "people first" is framed by "mission always": that is, leaders must never lose sight

of the ultimate objective, and ensure that their teams do not waver in pursuit of that goal. For Mie Mie, this leadership philosophy has been forged in combat and validated by history.

In this perspective, morale then becomes the "center of gravity" in a conflict. It is not simply an abstract or emotional state of mind, but a combination of purpose, trust, and confidence that sustains fighters under extreme stress. Mie Mie Wynn Bird recounts how, during the Burma campaign in World War II, the British commander, William Slim, turned "defeat into victory" (also the title of his famous memoir) by restoring the fighting spirit of his exhausted troops to battle back and ultimately defeat the Japanese. "It was not [additional] firepower," she says, "it was the morale!"

For Mie Mie Wynn Bird, morale is built on two pillars: belief in a cause larger than oneself, and trust forged between leaders and those they lead. She gives

an example of her experience during the first Gulf War. Her platoon moved more ammunition in one night than any comparable unit in that theater, not because of orders from above, but because the soldiers were confident that she had their backs. She had trained them rigorously, but more importantly, had shared their hardship and led from the front. That trust, she argues, cannot be fabricated for a crisis—it must be earned over time.

Turning to Myanmar, she laments that international analysts often underrate the importance of this very morale, focusing instead on data about territorial control or weapons counts. Yet, in her view, morale explains much of the conflict's trajectory. On the resistance side, morale remains high; she hears again and again from fighters that "This is our last battle!"; in other words, they are fighting the good fight, and if they indeed prevail, they will never need to fight the military again. This conviction sustains them despite shortages of arms and supplies. She estimates that the military regime firmly holds just 20% of the country (with the opposition controlling around 40% and the remainder contested). This is despite the junta's weapons and supplies advantages, and their ongoing receipt of arms, fuel, and diplomatic cover from Russia and China.

By contrast, junta morale has all but collapsed, according to Mie Mie Wynn Bird. She attributes this to several interlocking factors: a loss of ideological purpose, endemic corruption, and the leadership's neglect of its own troops. Field units, she says, are left undersupplied, underpaid, and demoralized, their sacrifices unacknowledged. In many cases, soldiers are kept in the dark about the broader war effort and treated as expendable, leading to desertions and surrenders. She notes that soldiers are now defecting in unprecedented numbers, often bringing intelligence and operational details, as well as insight into regime weaknesses.

This erosion of the junta's fighting spirit has been accelerated, she says, by the loose-knit but potent Burmese-language information ecosystem, which includes comedians, musicians, influencers, and ordinary citizens who produce satirical videos, biting memes, and grassroots news updates. By ridiculing the regime and exposing its contradictions, they sap its authority and keep opposition morale high. Many defectors, once silent, now speak openly on social

media, creating a feedback loop of credibility, and emboldening others to follow.

Mie Mie Wynn Bird stresses that language is part of the fight, arguing that English-language media too often frames the conflict in ways that distort perceptions, like defaulting to simplistic "both-sides-do-it" platitudes. She offers a couple of examples of how the media could use language more skillfully to reflect a more informed understanding of the conflict: call the armed opposition "revolutionary forces," not "rebels" or "insurgents"; avoid the term "civil war," which implies a symmetrical conflict between two legitimate parties, and use "internal conflict" to better capture the reality of an illegitimate military clique fighting the people. And she calls for dropping honorifics like Tatmadaw or "General" for junta officers, who she bluntly describes as "a criminal gang."

Beyond the battlefield, Mie Mie Wynn Bird highlights the indispensable role of Myanmar's diaspora. Spread across the globe, they contribute in ways both overt and less visible: lobbying foreign governments, providing technical assistance, and raising funds to keep the resistance supplied. She tells the story of an 82-year-old woman in Queens who cooks and sells Burmese food every weekend, donating all proceeds to People's Defense Forces. For Mie Mie Wynn Bird, this exemplifies the long-term, intergenerational commitment that will be necessary to sustain the struggle. "She's an American citizen now," she says. "She's too old to travel. She will never benefit from the Burma independence, the democracy that will arrive! But to her, she said, that's the inheritance she wanted to give back."

Another shift she observes is the rising participation of women. Compared to earlier uprisings, women are now more present in logistics, communications, medical work, and even in combat. However, deep-seated cultural norms still limit their advancement. In many units, women are trained alongside men but then told, "No, you stay back" or relegated to rations and supply duties when the fighting starts. "There are women that really wanted to be a real soldier, and many of them left the revolution because they got frustrated," she says. "You lost a very valuable soldier — this motivated soldier — for no reason." Early in the conflict, women made up roughly 65% of certain

resistance groups, but that number has now dropped to about 37%. Byrd calls this a “huge loss” that’s both avoidable and harmful to the cause, and she insists her training programs deliberately use mixed cohorts because diversity, including gender, strengthens problem-solving and resilience.

From a strategic standpoint, Mie Mie Wynn Bird situates Myanmar within a broader regional and global context. She calls it the “Eastern Front,” a geostrategic position that controls access between South and Southeast Asia and borders key maritime routes. “Myanmar is the last [chance for] democracy on the mainland of Southeast Asia,” she warns, and its fall would seal the region into authoritarian dominance. She says Russian involvement is not just hypothetical, but that it already has trainers, advisors, and weapons physically present in the region, and she notes how China looms large over the country, with its many economic entanglements and political influence. Myanmar’s rich trove of natural resources raises the stakes higher still, with rare earth minerals, oil and gas reserves, and an extensive coastline as assets that make the country a constant target for foreign

exploitation. Control over these resources, she argues, is one of the junta’s primary motivations for holding territory, and one reason foreign powers hedge their support for the resistance.

In closing, she decries the tendency of the international community— particularly Western media— to cast Myanmar purely as a place of suffering. “The Myanmar story is not a story of victims,” she insists, but rather “a story of amazing resiliency and human ingenuity and commitment.” To her, sustaining morale isn’t just for battlefield effectiveness, it’s also about shaping the story that gets told to the outside world. In her view, winning the narrative—presenting Myanmar as a capable, determined nation rather than a perpetual victim—is itself a morale-sustaining act, and part of the struggle.

LISTEN TO THE PODCAST

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2025/8/29/episode-389-the-will-to-fight>



Female PDF resistance fighters in training.
Photo: AFP



Internally displaced people.
Photo: Supplied

BUILDING BACK BETTER IN BURMA: WHAT MIGHT 'RECOVERY' LOOK LIKE?

ASHLEY SOUTH

Four and a half years since the coup, the challenges of recovery in Myanmar are immense, amid the devastation of communities and infrastructure, including widespread personal and community trauma. But there is extraordinary resilience amid the violence, with unprecedented experiments in local democracy and 'Bottom up Federalism' underway in several areas, despite very limited outside support.

A generation of young people from heartland areas of Burma have been forcibly displaced following the 1 February 2021 coup, and are struggling to survive and resist the junta, while contributing to communities under the most difficult circumstances. In the meantime, large numbers of people from ethnic nationality populated areas have been displaced on and off over decades, with well over three million newly-displaced since the coup. Civilian protection needs include establishing early warning systems and building bomb-shelters. As well as protection from death, injury and other abuses, humanitarian needs are acute in the fields of food and nutrition, health and education, plus the need for psycho-social support to help maintain and restore hope and confidence in devastated communities.

Massive humanitarian needs exist in a context of collapsing international donor – and normative pro-democracy – support, especially since the destruction

of USAID. Therefore, the focus will be increasingly on 'localisation' of aid. This is important, as local communities, CSOs, Ethnic Armed Organisations (and their service delivery wings) have significant capacity. There are also CSOs and some international organisations inside the country which can make a difference and should be supported to do so. However, this is a case of making the best of a bad situation. In the medium-term, foreign aid to Myanmar will likely further decrease, with growing domestic crises in donor countries.

Despite its illegitimacy, and that the State Security and Peace Commission (SSPC) junta only controls about half the country, it seems that – after strong intervention by China – elements of the international community are swinging behind the SSPC elections. Thailand and Cambodia will likely manoeuvre the ASEAN regional grouping into endorsing these fake polls, which will also take the pressure off Min Aung

Hlang. Yet to be seen is how opposition forces respond. Armed groups will have to be careful that anti-election activities do not get framed as 'terrorism' by the junta and its supporters.

In themselves, the elections will have limited impact on the conflict. However, the Myanmar Army, reinforced by China and Russia, again has momentum on the battlefield - for the first time in at least a couple of years. This is very worrying, and risks reinforcing a narrative among some embassies and analysts that victory for junta is inevitable, so we might as well start working with them now. For many stakeholders, this is an impossible, detestable suggestion.

It is impossible, after the collapse of a ten-year peace process (2011-20), and over four years of brutal war directed at civilians, for conflict-affected communities (victims of atrocities) or self-determination movements to trust the militarized and centralised state again. That was tried in good faith during the period 2011-20, as epitomised by the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. The previous peace process proved that the Myanmar government and military were committed centralists, unable and/or unwilling to address the grievances and aspirations of ethnic nationality stakeholders. A post-election scenario in which a military-backed ruling party proposes some kind of transition would risk repeating the mistakes of the past.

It is possible that some battle-wearied Ethnic Armed Organisations make ceasefires with the junta, in order to consolidate extraordinary battlefield victories over the past three years. But a lasting political or peace settlement with the military seems highly unlikely; it is more likely that fragmentation of the centralised state will continue.

It is difficult to conceive of realistic scenarios in which the diverse and divided state of Myanmar recovers as a coherent or functional polity - despite the junta's fake elections. The collapse of Myanmar as an effective state will be exacerbated by the massive impacts of climate change. Shifting patterns in rainfall (shorter rainy season, more intense precipitation) leading to more frequent and widespread flooding. Increasing temperatures will have a devastating impact on harvests, particularly in lowland areas (e.g. the Dry Zone). Myanmar is entering the period of extended climate crisis, with tipping points beyond which communities will experience profound livelihood and basic survival challenges beyond those caused by armed conflict.

In this context, some stakeholders are developing

climate change mitigation and adaptation plans. For example the Karen National Union (KNU)'s Kawthoolei Climate Action Plan is a 10-year mitigation and adaptation strategy, based around the UNFCCC Nationally Determined Contributions framework. Local climate action contributes towards the global public good of climate change mitigation, through carbon draw-down (via photosynthesis), while supporting communities to adapt to the coming climate crisis. The KNU and Kawthoolei Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation Committee have attended two UN Climate Change COP conferences, representing Karen indigenous sovereignty, and local control over Kawthoolei natural resources.

In the meantime, the junta continues attacking civilians, including air-strikes and the destruction of churches and monasteries, towns and villages, markets, schools and clinics. Meanwhile, the international community largely turns a blind eye, and previous supporters evaporate. The prospects for recovery are therefore bleak - but local stakeholders have already proved effective. They need political, technical and financial support.

There have been some inspiring and creative post-coup developments in the political domain. The emergence of new, state-based governance bodies, as part of the bottom-up federalism movement, is unprecedented. The Karenni State Consultative Council, Ta'angland Council and proposed Kawthoolei Governing Council for example are emerging as inclusive forms of local governance, with a structural focus on inclusion (including of 'minorities within minorities').

As Thramu Ardeth Thawngmung and I argued in our working paper earlier this year (Trends in Southeast Asia 2025/4, March 2025), "These developments have significant implications for democratic practices, national reconciliation and intercommunal relationships in Myanmar, serving as 'bottom-up building blocks' for a new federalism aspired to by many ethnic minority (ethnic nationality) groups."

Again, these innovative bodies urgently require political, technical and financial support. However, the collapse of western funding and political backing (particularly with the destruction of USAID) has led to a huge reduction in material support for anti-junta forces, and a perception that previous international backers are no longer interested in democracy or human rights. This is a major set-back for the revolution, at a time when Russia and China are increasing their support for

the junta, including direct military support.

It seems unlikely that widespread armed and state-society conflicts in Myanmar will be resolved anytime soon; more probable is that collapse of the state will accelerate, amid the growing impacts of climate change. In this context, what's left of international support should focus on inclusive and effective local governing bodies and service providers.

In respect of bottom-up federalism, Burma has seen significant progress over the last few years. Prior to the coup, the main challenge for ethnic self-determination movements in Burma was to 'federalise' a highly centralised state, through a deeply contested and political reform and peace process. Following the coup, the challenge is to build new Union-level structures, growing out of and based on the realities of 'state units' administered by Ethnic Armed Organizations and state-based bodies. In many such areas, basic health and education services and access to justice, have been provided to highly marginalised communities for decades, often in partnership with CSOs.

State-based bodies and Ethnic Armed Organization are the building blocks of a new federalism, emerging from the bottom up. In late 2024 the Multi-Ethnic Council (MEC) - an informal nine-member coalition of Ethnic Armed Organizations and state-based bodies - issued a first statement on bottom-up federalism. A follow-up statement on 12 February 2025 (Union Day, commemorating the 1947 Panglong Agreement) announced the development of Articles of Federal Transitional Arrangement (AFTA), in member groups' respective areas. It insisted that they "will not accept a holding together model of federalism that will renew centralization" - calling instead to "rebuild our country as a strong nation through bottom-up federalism by strengthening the states." Having originated out of frustration with the slow-moving NUCC process, in early 2025 the MEC re-engaged with the peak opposition policy-making body, through the latter's Transitional Constitution Working Group, in order to draft a governance framework, formalising these 'bottom-up' transitional governance arrangements.

This was a demonstration of 'effective occupation' and 'performance legitimacy', on the part of Ethnic Armed Organizations and state-based bodies, in the face of vicious onslaughts by the SSPC. The diverse but tightly coordinated set of groups working on the AFTA made significant progress through August 2025, devising guidelines for recognizing accommodating bottom-up federalism at the union level (most

groups having already established their own state-level transitional arrangements). This development reflected the increased political (and military) weight of Ethnic Armed Organizations in the post-coup context. The convergence of negotiations on federal-constitutional arrangements around a bottom-up approach is a highly significant development. The AFTA process brings together much of the resurgent pro-democracy movement, with longstanding Ethnic Armed Organizations and newly emergent state-based bodies - to the advantage of the latter. However, the involvement of some groups in the AFTA process remains low-profile (mostly for fear of offending China), leaving the Ta'angland Council as the main northern partner in this grouping, which was mostly focused on the southeast.

Meanwhile, in the Anyar (central Dry Zone), newly emergent local governance bodies (e.g. the Sagaing Forum) are being recognized by the NUG, in a process of mutual validation between bottom-up and top-down political bodies actors. These developments show the struggle for bottom-up federalism (and even sovereignty) gaining traction in 2025. As a Karen friend put it - "Myanmar is dead, Long live Kawthoolei!"

The challenge is to support progressive, local rights-based initiatives and actors amid and despite protracted conflicts, and a growing climate crisis. Unfortunately, the junta elections may become a smokescreen, under which donors and diplomats are failing to support radical efforts in democracy and self-determination. It would be a tragedy for Myanmar and the world if these innovative forms of people-led local democracy are not supported to succeed.

Dr Ashley South is a Senior Research Fellow at Chiang Mai University.

Most of his publications (and films) are available on: www.AshleySouth.co.uk.

An earlier version of this essay first appeared on Substack:

<https://frogmortpress.substack.com/p/building-back-better-in-burma>



The 15-year-old survivor.
Photos: Supplied

SIX CIVILIANS BURNED ALIVE BY MYANMAR JUNTA TROOPS IN KANTBALU

Junta troops detained, tortured, and burned six civilians to death in Sagaing Region's Kantbalu Township on 12 September, according to a report released by the Kyun Hla Activists' group. One 15-year-old boy survived the massacre and later recounted the incident.

The victims, all residents of Nghat Pyaw Taing old village, were returning from a gold-mining area known locally as Shwe Hmaw in the Singu area.

They were traveling on motorcycles along the Shwebo-Myitkyina road when they were intercepted by junta forces at Bu Gone junction at around 3 pm on 9 September.

According to the survivor's account, the group was taken to a monastery in Bu Gone village, where they were beaten, tied up, and denied food for four days. On the evening of 12 September, the detainees were

forced to climb onto a pile of car tires while still bound. They were then beaten until unconscious and set on fire.

"They (junta troops) beat our heads with sticks. When we lost consciousness and were unable to run, they burned and left," the survivor said. "I was fortunate; I regained consciousness and managed to escape."

The Kyun Hla Activists' group identified the six victims as Ko Yi Wai Moe (18), Ko Moe Thet Kha (16), Ko Chit Thae Maung (23), Ko Than Zaw Htun (23), U Soe Tint (45), and Ko Chan Phyo Wai (14). Two of the victims were minors.

As of 16 September, their bodies have not been recovered.

"We are unable to enter that area because the junta troops are still there," an official from the Kyun Hla Activists' group told reporters.

Since August, the military has increased its efforts to tighten control over the strategic Shwebo-Myitkyina route, setting up checkpoints and troop positions in locations including Zee Kone-Ma Lae, Bu Gone, and Yay Kyi Oo.

Local resistance and civil society groups warn that the military continues to arrest, torture, and kill civilians in these areas, urging travellers to avoid the route or exercise extreme caution.

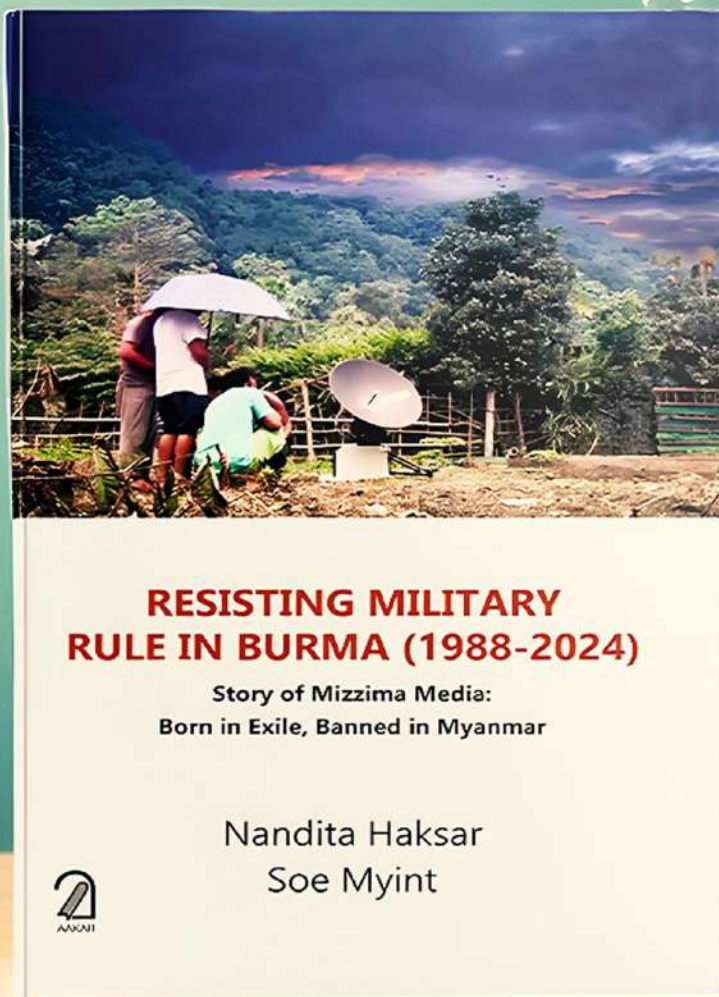


The 15-year-old survivor.
Photos: Supplied

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: AFP

BRICS LEADERS DENOUNCE PROTECTIONISM, TARIFF 'BLACKMAIL'

Leaders of the 11-member BRICS bloc railed against economic protectionism and "tariff blackmail" during a virtual meeting Monday held amid a damaging trade war with US President Donald Trump.

The group of emerging economies met via videoconference at the initiative of Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, whose office said it was necessary to address the "intensification of unilateral measures" in the world.

The BRICS represents nearly 40 percent of global GDP and almost half of the world's population.

Several of its members are among those most affected by what Lula referred to Monday as "tariff blackmail" and "unjustified and illegal" trade practices.

Addressing his colleagues, Chinese President Xi Jinping called Monday for the upholding of "the multilateral trading system with the World Trade Organization at its core" and for rejection of "all forms of protectionism."

Brazil's exports to the United States plunged 18.5 percent year-on-year in August after Trump slapped his highest level of trade tariff -- 50 percent -- on a range of goods from Latin America's biggest economy.

Trump is punishing Brazil for what he calls a "witch hunt" against his ally, former president Jair Bolsonaro who is on trial for allegedly plotting a coup to take power back from Lula after losing the 2022 elections.

A verdict in the trial is expected this week.

"Tariff blackmail is being normalized as an instrument to conquer markets and interfere in domestic affairs," Lula said Monday.

'Great hardships'

Washington also imposed tariffs of up to 50 percent on Indian imports, accusing New Delhi of fueling Moscow's deadly attacks on Ukraine by purchasing Russian oil.

Russian President Vladimir Putin also took part in the virtual meeting, just days after meeting Xi, North Korea's Kim Yong Un and India's Narendra Modi in China where regional leaders slammed "bullying behavior" in a veiled reference to Trump's United States.

South Africa for its part, was hit with a 30 percent tariff -- the highest in sub-Saharan Africa -- amid soaring tensions with Washington over a range of domestic and international policies.

Trump has said he would not attend the G20 summit in South Africa later this year.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, in a prepared speech, said "unilateral tariff actions are contributing to an increasingly protectionist environment which poses great hardships and danger for the countries of the Global South."

In July, Trump lashed out at the BRICS and threatened its members with additional tariffs after they voiced concern that his trade war was putting the global economy at risk.

"No matter how the international situation changes, we must remain steadfast in promoting the building of an open global economy, sharing opportunities and achieving win-win results through openness," Xi reiterated Monday.

Other BRICS members are Indonesia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

AFP



Former chief justice Sushila Karki, centre.
Photo: AFP

NEPAL EX-CHIEF JUSTICE KARKI BECOMES NEXT PM AFTER PROTESTS

Nepal's former chief justice Sushila Karki was sworn in Friday as the country's prime minister to lead a six-month transition to elections, after deadly anti-corruption protests ousted the government.

The previous prime minister quit Tuesday as parliament was set ablaze.

"I, Sushila Karki... take an oath in the name of the country and the people to fulfil my duty as the prime minister," the 73-year-old Karki, Nepal's first woman chief justice, said as she was sworn into office by President Ram Chandra Paudel.

"Congratulations! We wish you success, wish the country success," Paudel said to Karki after the small

ceremony in the presidential palace, attended by diplomats and some former leaders.

Parliament was later dissolved, and elections were set for March 5, 2026.

The Himalayan nation of 30 million people was plunged into chaos this week after security forces tried to crush rallies by young anti-corruption protesters.

At least 51 people were killed in the worst violence since the end of a civil war and the abolition of the monarchy in 2008.

The military took back control of the streets on Wednesday, enforcing a curfew.

The appointment of the judge, known for her independence, comes after two days of intense negotiations by army chief General Ashok Raj Sigdel and Paudel, including with representatives from "Gen Z", the loose umbrella title of the youth protest movement.

Thousands of young activists had used the online app Discord to debate the next steps -- and name Karki as their choice of next leader.

Karki, dressed in a red sari dress, took the oath but did not make a further speech. She smiled and bowed with her hands pressed together repeatedly in traditional greetings.

"It is a moment of victory... finally the power vacuum has ended," said Amrita Ban, a Gen Z protester.

"We did it", key youth protest group Hami Nepal posted on Instagram, calling for unity.

"Honour the lives of those who sacrificed themselves for this moment".

Neighbouring India said that it welcomed the formation of the interim government and Karki's appointment.

"We are hopeful that this would help in fostering peace and stability", New Delhi's foreign ministry said in a statement.

'Make a better Nepal'

Protests fed into long-standing economic woes in Nepal, where a fifth of people aged 15-24 are unemployed, according to the World Bank, with GDP per capita standing at just \$1,447.

At least 21 protesters were among those killed, mainly on Monday during the police crackdown on demonstrations against corruption and poor governance that was sparked by a ban on social media.

Parliament, major government buildings and a Hilton Hotel were among the sites set ablaze by protesters on Tuesday.

KP Sharma Oli, the 73-year-old leader of the Communist Party, then quit as prime minister. His whereabouts are not known.

More than 12,500 prisoners who escaped from jails across the country during the chaos "are still at large", police spokesman Binod Ghimire told AFP.

Nepal's army said it had recovered more than 100 guns looted in the uprising, during which protesters were seen brandishing automatic rifles.

Soldiers patrolled the largely quiet streets of the capital Kathmandu for a third day on Friday.

"I was very afraid, and stayed locked inside my home with family and didn't leave," said Naveen Kumar Das, a painter-decorator in his mid-40s.

He was among many ordinary residents of Kathmandu who took advantage of a brief lifting of the curfew to stock up on supplies.

James Karki, 24, who was among the protesters, said he was hopeful for change ahead.

"We started this movement so we could make a better Nepal," he said.

AFP

Indian PM Narendra Modi with bodyguards on his visit. Photo: AFP

INDIAN PM VISITS NORTHEAST STATE 2 YEARS AFTER ETHNIC CLASHES

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made his first visit to troubled Manipur state on Saturday since more than 250 people were killed in ethnic clashes there two years ago.

Modi's visit is part of a three-day tour that also includes Assam, which borders Bangladesh, and Bihar, India's third-most populous state with at least 130 million people.

Bihar is a key electoral battleground ahead of polls slated for October or November, the only state in India's northern Hindi-speaking heartland where Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has never ruled alone.

It is also India's poorest, and Modi was set to unveil investments worth \$8 billion, a package that includes agricultural projects, rail links, road upgrades and an airport terminal.

Manipur in the northeast has been bitterly divided since May 2023, when violence broke out between the mainly Hindu Meitei majority and the largely Christian Kuki community.

The violence has also displaced tens of thousands of people who are still living in makeshift camps established by the government.

"In order to bring life back on track in Manipur, the government of India is making all possible efforts," Modi told a gathering of thousands in Churachandpur, a Kuki-dominated town.

"I promise you today that I'm with you. The government of India is with the people of Manipur," Modi said, while also appealing "to all groups to take the path of peace for realising their dreams".

Modi was also scheduled to address a rally at Imphal, the Meitei-dominated capital of the state.

The premier last visited the state -- bordering Myanmar and 1,700 kilometres (1,050 miles) from New Delhi -- in 2022.

The Hindu nationalist leader inaugurated development projects worth more than \$960 million, including five highways and a new police headquarters.

Manipur's former chief minister, N. Biren Singh, from Modi's BJP, resigned in February after criticism he failed to stop the bloodshed there.

The state of nearly three million people has since been ruled directly from New Delhi.

Tensions between Meiteis and Kukis, rooted in competition for land and government jobs, have long simmered in the region.

Rights groups accuse political leaders of fuelling the divisions for their own gain.

AFP



BARELY BREATHING

"I think I wouldn't have survived if I was in Thailand or Myanmar at that time." This is the sober reflection of Maw Htun, currently the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Electricity and Energy in Myanmar's National Unity Government (NUG), on his brush with mortality as a cancer patient. He speaks about that health scare, the NUG, and an unexpected spiritual awakening that reshaped his understanding of identity, governance, and the essence of human connection. Maw Htun's personal transformation has deeply shaped his vision for a future Myanmar.

Maw Htun had always had a strong ambition to serve his country. When the National Unity Government (NUG) emerged as a symbol of democratic resistance following the coup, he seized the opportunity to join. Relocating to the border town of Mae Sot, Thailand, for an orientation, a new chapter of political engagement seemed to be unfolding for him, promising a chance to help build the federal democracy he had always envisioned.

Yet destiny had a different plan in store for him. Just six months into his NUG tenure, Maw Htun received his devastating cancer diagnosis. The initial symptoms were deceptively benign—a persistent stomach ache and loss of appetite. Living in that border town meant limited medical access, and lacking the official documents that would enable him to take advantage of Thai hospitals, his illness was initially misdiagnosed. "Everybody thought it was a stomach related problem,"

he recounts. His weight plummeted. By December 2021, he was so critically ill that he could barely walk ten meters. Fortunately, the Swedish Embassy intervened – what Maw Htun regards as "unexpected" and "predestined" – and helped make arrangements for him to be transported to a hospital in Bangkok.

Upon his arrival, he was given an immediate blood transfusion to stabilize him before any further examination could proceed. A battery of tests—CT scans, colonoscopies, endoscopies, and extensive blood work—then unraveled the grim truth: what was initially suspected to be intestinal tuberculosis turned out to be a malignant tumor. While treatment options existed in Bangkok, the Swedish embassy fortunately intervened again, and strongly urged him to seek treatment in Stockholm, promising a better chance of survival.

He was fortunate to get such advice. Hospitalized immediately after arriving, his cancer diagnosis was confirmed; an operation was essential, though its success could not be guaranteed. In surgery, he started to hemorrhage, forcing a pause in the operation that unfortunately led to significant organ damage – his large and small intestines, pancreas, gallbladder, spleen, and even a portion of his liver and abdominal partition muscle were compromised. "It has put a real stress on me," he recalls, detailing his nearly three-week struggle in the ICU, followed by a month in rehabilitation. For five agonizing months post-operation, he battled a complete loss of appetite. Compounding his ordeal, he contracted drug-resistant tuberculosis, necessitating yet another month of quarantine in a hospital. Only after ensuring he was no longer infectious was he allowed to return home, remaining on medication for a year and a half before finally being declared free of tuberculosis. This prolonged health battle left Maw Htun but a shadow of his former self. "I was like a zombie! I lost about 30 kilograms," he says, adding that it was a miracle he survived at all.

CATCH THE PODCAST

Read more and listen to the Insight Myanmar Podcast here:

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2025/8/24/episode-386-barely-breathing>



MYANMAR MILITARY, AIR FORCE ATTEND HIGH-LEVEL ASEAN DEFENCE MEETINGS

Myanmar's military and air force took part in two major regional defence forums this month, engaging with counterparts from across Southeast Asia to discuss security cooperation, regional unity, and future military coordination, according to junta media.

On September 9, a Tatmadaw delegation led by Chief of Staff (Army) Lt Gen Than Htike attended the 22nd ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Forces Meeting (ACDFM) in Kuala Lumpur. Representing Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the delegation also joined the 15th ASEAN Military Operations Meeting and 22nd ASEAN Military Intelligence Meeting.

The ACDFM, hosted by Malaysia, convened under the theme "ASEAN Unity for Security and Prosperity." Lt Gen Than Htike stressed in his remarks that unity among member states was essential to both regional development and security. The meeting approved a Two-Year Work Plan (2025–2027) and concluded with the signing of a joint statement by the assembled defence chiefs.

Alongside the multilateral sessions, the Myanmar delegation held bilateral meetings with defence leaders from Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Discussions centred on strengthening military ties and cooperation, with commemorative gifts exchanged to mark the engagements.

Meanwhile, Myanmar's Air Force participated in the 22nd ASEAN Air Chiefs Conference (AACC), held September 7–8 in Jakarta. Commander-in-Chief (Air) General Tun Aung led the delegation, which engaged in bilateral talks with the air force chiefs of Laos, Brunei, and Indonesia upon arrival.

The AACC, hosted at the Ritz-Carlton Ballroom, focused on "ASEAN Inclusivity and Sustainability of Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations." Regional air chiefs discussed coordination in humanitarian and evacuation efforts and signed joint agreements to reinforce cooperation. The Myanmar delegation also joined a state dinner hosted by Indonesian Air Chief Marshal Mohamad Tonny Harjono before returning to Yangon on September 10.

Myanmar's parallel participation in the defence chiefs' and air chiefs' forums underscored its continued involvement in ASEAN's security frameworks, even amid ongoing political turbulence at home. Both meetings emphasized closer coordination among Southeast Asian militaries to enhance regional security and readiness for shared challenges.

The military, and the Air Force in particular, have been widely accused of gross human rights violations committed while suppressing political dissent and in military operations against revolutionary forces as the junta struggles to maintain its grip on power.



MAN JAILED FOR CRITICIZING JUNTA'S ELECTION PLAN ON SOCIAL MEDIA

A 36-year-old man in Shan State has been sentenced to seven years of hard labour for criticizing Myanmar's planned December election on social media, sparking anger and fear across online platforms.

The man, identified as Nay Thway from Taunggyi, was convicted under a newly-introduced law criminalizing dissent against the junta's election process. According to AP reports, this is the first known conviction of its kind since the military announced the December 28 polls.

On Facebook, news of the sentencing spread quickly, with users warning that the case shows how any criticism of the election could lead to imprisonment. A widely shared post read, "If one comment costs seven years, what freedom is left for the people?"

Advocacy groups also highlighted the case, saying it demonstrates the regime's attempt to silence opposition voices ahead of the vote. Rights organizations warned that the sentencing sets a dangerous precedent and signals a wider crackdown on online expression.

Aung San Suu Kyi's Health sparks public alarm online

Concerns about the health of detained leader Aung San Suu Kyi have dominated social media discussions last week after her son revealed she is suffering from multiple serious conditions in custody.

The revelations quickly spread across Burmese Facebook and Twitter, with users expressing both sorrow and outrage. Many posts criticized the military for denying Suu Kyi proper treatment and family visits, while some highlighted that she has been kept incommunicado since her arrest in February 2021. A widely shared comment read, "Even in prison, she deserves dignity and medical care - this cruelty must end."

Internationally, rights groups echoed the concerns, warning that the junta bears full responsibility for her well-being.

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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.