

ON THE GROUND IN MYANMAR

mizzima WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight



NO SURPRISE
USDP wins Myanmar's
'sham' election

ELECTION UPDATE

UN expert urges world to reject Myanmar 'sham' election

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DIGITAL MAGAZINE

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

A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

Analysts and many people in Myanmar view the three-phase elections less as a democratic breakthrough and more as a carefully managed exercise designed to legitimize continued military dominance. From their perspective, the process offers the appearance of civilian governance while leaving the core structures of power untouched in the hands of the military.

The concern is not simply about who wins seats, but about how the entire political system has been engineered to ensure that the military remains the ultimate arbiter of the country's future, regardless of electoral outcomes.

A central criticism focuses on the constitutional framework underpinning the elections. The military's guaranteed share of parliamentary seats and its control over key ministries such as defense, home affairs, and border affairs effectively limit the authority of any elected civilian government. Analysts argue that this arrangement ensures that even a landslide electoral victory for civilian parties cannot translate into genuine policy autonomy. For many citizens, voting under such constraints feels symbolic rather than transformative, reinforcing the belief that the elections are designed to manage dissent rather than reflect popular will.

There is also deep skepticism about the credibility of the electoral process itself. The staggered, three-phase structure is widely seen as a mechanism that allows authorities to adjust tactics, control narratives, and suppress opposition as voting progresses. Restrictions on campaigning, limits on media freedom, and the exclusion or marginalization of key political actors - including Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy - have further fueled perceptions that the outcome is predetermined.

There is no surprise that the Union Solidarity and Development Party - the

military party in all but name - has been set up to win.

For communities that have experienced years, if not decades of conflict, displacement, and surveillance, the elections appear disconnected from their daily realities and urgent needs.

Many people in Myanmar also point to the broader climate of repression surrounding the vote. Arrests of activists, intimidation of journalists, and the silencing of dissenting voices undermine the idea that the elections represent a free expression of popular choice. Analysts note that democracy cannot be meaningfully measured by ballots alone when fear and coercion shape the political environment. In this context, the elections risk normalizing authoritarian practices by dressing them in civilian institutions.

Underlying these critiques is a shared belief that Myanmar's challenges are structural rather than procedural. Elections conducted within an unchanged system are unlikely to address entrenched problems such as military impunity, ethnic inequality, and the absence of rule of law. Many citizens argue that without fundamental reforms, including constitutional change, genuine civilian oversight of the armed forces, and inclusive political dialogue with ethnic minorities, elections will remain a hollow ritual.

For critics, what Myanmar needs is not another tightly controlled vote, but a reimagining of the political order itself. A true transition would require dismantling the mechanisms that entrench military power and creating institutions that are accountable to the people. Until such systemic change occurs, analysts warn that elections will continue to function as a civilian cloak over military rule, offering the language of democracy without its substance, and with the killing continuing.

EDITORIAL

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Managing Director and Editor In-Chief
Soe Myint

Managing Editor
Thaw Zin Tun

Network Engineer
Wai Min Han

Video and Graphics Editor
Wai Yan Shein Zaw

General Manager
No No Lin

Mizzima Weekly is published by
Mizzima s.r.o

Address:
Salvatorska 931/8,
Stare Mesto, 11000,
Praha 1, Czech Republic

Contact email:
sm@mizzima.com

Phone/Signal/WhatsApp
+420 608 616688

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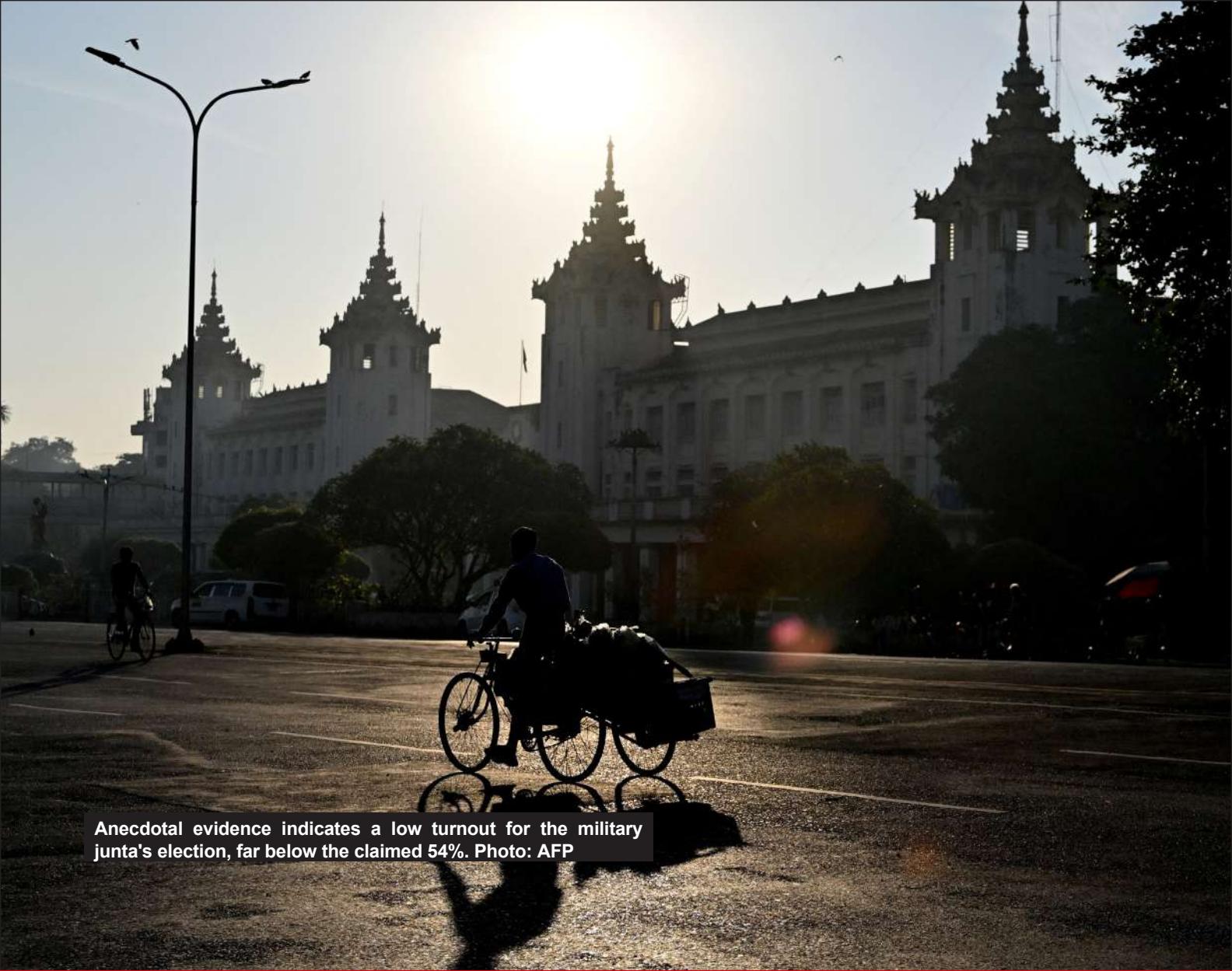
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Cover photo of USDP leader Khin Yi by AFP



Anecdotal evidence indicates a low turnout for the military junta's election, far below the claimed 54%. Photo: AFP

NO SURPRISE USDP WINS MYANMAR'S SHAM ELECTION

The deck was stacked in their favour. It is therefore not surprising that the leader of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) Khin Yi and his party colleagues are patting themselves on the back in the wake of the three-phase Myanmar junta-run election that concluded on Sunday.

Myanmar citizens will now have to wait until March and April for the new government to be formed – a process carefully planned by Myanmar military junta leader Min Aung Hlaing.

DISMISSING INTERNATIONAL CONCERN

Judging by his comments on 25 January – the last day of polling – Min Aung Hlaing does not care what the outside world thinks of his “election” – a poll widely discredited around the Western world and referred to as a “sham” by many critics including UN envoys.

The junta leader and Acting President and Chairman of the State Security and Peace Commission (SSPC), visited Chanmyathazi Township on the last polling day to oversee the conclusion of Myanmar’s three-stage general election. He explicitly brushed off global condemnation of his electoral process.

“It is the people living in Myanmar who are voting, not people from the outside,” Min Aung Hlaing told reporters as a Mandalay polling station. “Whether foreign countries recognize it or not is something we do not concern ourselves with. If the people recognize it, then this is how we must move forward.”

He further attributed low turnout in some areas to “security concerns” and the absence of certain political parties on the ballot – possibly a veiled reference to the gaping hole engineered by him to block the popular National League for Democracy (NLD) from competing and jail its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.



THE DICTATOR'S WILY PLAN

Things are going to Min Aung Hlaing's plan – the aim being for Myanmar's military or Tatmadaw to continue to pull the strings in the country but pursued behind the façade of a civilian government, claiming to be "returning power to the people".

Clearly absent from the process is Nobel Laureate Suu Kyi and her red-flag-waving NLD party.

In its place stands the green-flag-waving USDP.

"We won a majority already," a senior official from USDP told AFP said on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to share preliminary results.

"We are in the position to form a new government," they said. "As we won in the election, we will move forward."

Many analysts describe the USDP - which is staffed largely by retired senior officers - as a civilian proxy of the military. Ironically, the prime colour of the USDP is green, whereas the façade of the new government - due to be inducted in March and April - will be white.

Min Aung Hlaing's military generals snatched power in a 1 February 2021 coup, ending Myanmar's experiment with civilian rule under Suu Kyi's party and triggering civil war, but pledged a three-phase vote, which finished on Sunday, would return power to the people.

Critics claim the electoral ballot was stacked with military allies to prolong their grip on power. The three-phase electoral exercise was not held in large areas of the country due to the fight put up by resistance groups, including People's Defence Forces (PDF) and Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (ERO).

Many eligible voters did not vote, with questions raised over turnout numbers. The junta claims a 54 per cent turnout – a figure that is "designed" to give the incoming administration credibility and likely to bolster claims by Russia, China and Belarus through their election observers that the process was "free and fair". However, the turnout appeared to be closer to 20 per cent, according to observers.

"They won since before the election," a 28-year-old Yangon resident told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity for security reasons. "They were the only ones in the race, and they were the referee. Almost everyone won't have faith in the government they will form."

Public sentiment appeared worried and dismissive. Many social media users argued that elections cannot function while towns face airstrikes, displacement, and travel restrictions. Online conversations suggested people were focused on safety and survival, not ballots.

THE JUNTA'S PROXY

The military-backed USDP looks set to be sworn in following the three phases of the election held on December 28, and January 11 and 25.

In line with the military-written 2008 Constitution, a quarter of unelected parliamentary seats will be reserved for members of the armed forces. A combined house majority of MPs will elect the president after parliament convenes in March.

Touring Mandalay city polling stations in civilian dress on the last day of polling, junta chief Min Aung Hlaing again declined to rule out serving as the new government's president.

While the military has touted the poll as an opportunity for reconciliation, resistance groups regard it as illegitimate, and conflict monitors say it is unlikely to quell the bitter civil war.

Elections were called off in one in five of Myanmar's townships amid the fighting, but the military waged a withering pre-poll offensive, including attacks rights groups allege may include war crimes.

In junta-held territory, dissent has been purged, with new laws punishing protest or criticism of the election with up to a decade in prison.

More than 22,000 people are languishing in junta jails, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners monitoring group.

ENDLESS WAR

Min Aung Hlaing may well be smiling as his legitimacy tricks fall into place. But the electoral façade will not end the war.

"While the election results within Myanmar have never been in doubt, the election result that matters most is the response of the international community," UN expert Tom Andrews said last week. "International acceptance of this fraudulent exercise would set back the clock on genuine resolution to this crisis."

What happens on the ground in Myanmar will matter.

The ebb and flow of this conflict will inevitably drag on through 2026, writes security analyst Anthony Davis in Asia Times. It would be naive to expect any radical shift in tactics from the Tatmadaw, a force in which contempt for civilians is deeply ingrained in its institutional DNA.

That said, in the context of a military-propelled, Union Solidarity and Development Party-led government anxious to extend its writ, it seems likely that alongside the military's sticks, the coming year will also bring carrots calculated to erode resistance resolve via cash payments and live-and-let-live ceasefires that offer some stability.

How far these efforts prove successful will depend largely on how PDFs adapt to a war in flux, Davis writes.

One thing is clear according to comments made by critics and players in the field - resistance fighters and activists are not looking for regime change, especially the "wolf in sheep's clothing" provided by a "USDP victory". They are looking for "system change", where military rule is ended once and for all.

Reporting: Mizzima, AFP, Asia Times



Resistance groups are attempting to pull together. Photo: AFP

PULLING TOGETHER AND THE FORMATION OF THE SPRING REVOLUTION ALLIANCE

In the fourth week of November, several revolutionary armed groups - including some of the junta's most formidable opponents such as the Karen Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF), the Burma People's Liberation Army (BPLA), and the Chin Brotherhood (CB) - formed a new alliance known as the Spring Revolution Alliance (SRA). The alliance held an inaugural conference to discuss its formation, internal regulations, future plans, and shared revolutionary commitments.

The SRA comprises 19 armed groups from across Myanmar. While the alliance aims to coordinate military operations, it does not operate under a single unified command. Instead, member forces are expected to conduct their respective operations in coordination and timing with one another. The alliance has also stated its intention to invite additional revolutionary forces to join. Although no official figures have been released, sources close to the alliance estimate its combined strength to exceed 10,000 fighters.

Following the announcement, analysts from Burma News International (BNI) suggested that junta-facing offensives could intensify and expand geographically if effective

coordination is achieved among Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs), the National Unity Government (NUG), and the SRA. However, they cautioned that such outcomes depend heavily on overcoming longstanding coordination challenges.

These concerns were echoed by the NUG's acting president, who outlined the government's ongoing transformation process in a speech in early December. He said the NUG had completed its first phase of transformation, with two additional phases still underway, and described the SRA as a potentially important new force in the struggle against the military. He urged revolutionary groups to come under a single command structure to dismantle the junta system and pledged to strengthen cooperation among resistance forces.

Similar calls for unity were made by Kachin Independence Army (KIA) General Gun Maw during a speech marking the Chin Brotherhood's second

anniversary, where he emphasized collective strength as essential to ending military authoritarianism in Myanmar.

Despite these public commitments, military analysts and sections of the public remain dissatisfied with the current level of cooperation among the NUG, EROs, and local People's Defence Forces (PDFs). Experts point to fragmented command structures and poor synchronization of operations across regions, arguing that the absence of unified strategic planning continues to limit the resistance's overall effectiveness against the junta.

Ongoing developments in Karen State

Despite an ongoing crackdown on online scam centers along the Thai–Myanmar border, new evidence suggests that fraud operations are continuing under the protection of armed actors in contested areas. According to local sources, Colonel Saw El Htoo, the



son of Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) leader Saw Steel, is providing territory under his control near Wa Le town to Chinese scam syndicates. The compound, known as Deeko Park, was reportedly built by Colonel Saw El Htoo in 2024.

Since November last year, online scam operations previously based in KK Park, Shwe Kokko, and parts of Myawaddy town have relocated as junta and Border Guard Force (BGF) troops intensified enforcement measures. Many of these operations are believed to have fled into areas controlled by the DKBA and allied groups. In Deeko Park alone, around 1,000 Chinese nationals are reportedly being forced to work in scam operations under severe conditions. Photos received by Mizzima appear to show individuals believed to be Chinese citizens being made to run and kneel for prolonged periods under the sun, suggesting routine torture and abuse within the compound.

Meanwhile, tensions are escalating in Myawaddy following a secret instruction issued by the junta on January 25 to its Southeastern Military Command and No. (22) Light Infantry Division. The directive reportedly ordered the removal of Karen National Army (KNA) forces from the city, reflecting the junta's opposition to the BGF's recent transformation into the KNA. Despite the order, KNA personnel were still seen in Myawaddy on January 26, although without identifiable insignia.

Local residents told People's Spring media that KNA forces have not fully withdrawn from strategic locations, including areas beneath the Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge, Mekane bus station, and nearby river crossings. While junta troops from No. (22) Light Infantry Division are actively patrolling the city, KNA units are reportedly maintaining positions in several areas, highlighting an unresolved standoff. The KNA has yet to issue a public response to the junta's directive.



Arakan Army fighters. Photo: AFP

At the same time, the DKBA and the Karen National Liberation Army–Peace Council (KNLA-PC) have reportedly been instructed to submit detailed personnel lists to the junta. These include names, photographs, and deployment locations of their members operating in Myawaddy. Observers say the move reflects the junta's growing concern over fragmented authority in the border town, where competing armed groups and criminal networks continue to operate amid shifting alliances and limited central control.

Pressure builds in Rakhine State

In the fourth week of January, Myanmar's military junta launched a counteroffensive against the Arakan Army (AA) in Kyaukphyu Township after suffering heavy losses in earlier clashes. The operation involved three columns of around 400 troops and targeted AA-controlled areas including Thynechyaung, Minpyin, and Doema Mountain. Despite deploying five paramotors, drones, and heavy artillery, the offensive reflected the junta's increasingly defensive posture as the AA maintained control over key terrain and continued to dictate the pace of fighting in the area.

Despite the offensive push, the AA has continued to advance on key junta positions. Fighting has intensified near the Danyawaddy naval headquarters, one of the military's strategic assets in Kyaukphyu. Clashes were reported in Ukin village, located close to the navy headquarters, where the junta has mobilized ground forces alongside naval and air support in an effort to halt the AA's assault. Observers describe the fighting as among the most intense seen in the area in recent months.

The junta has also continued airstrikes against camps holding prisoners of war (POWs) in AA-controlled territory. Over the past year, at least four such camps have been hit, resulting in more than 120 deaths and over 150 injuries among POWs, according to AA sources. Most recently, on January 22, junta airstrikes targeted POWs from Kyauktaw-based No. (539) Battalion and No. (377) Artillery Regiment, killing at least 21 detainees and wounding more than 30 others.

As AA operations expand toward Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State, signs of strain are emerging within junta forces. Since early January 2026, at least 48 soldiers and police personnel - including members of elite commando units - have reportedly deserted their posts. A local source told Mizzima that many of the deserters had been assigned to urban security duties and were acutely aware of the risks posed by escalating clashes with the AA. The source added that untrained and unarmed Muslim security personnel are now being deployed as replacements in some urban areas.

Beyond Rakhine State, the AA is also engaged in coordinated operations along the border areas with Magway, Bago, and Ayeyarwady regions, in alliance with other resistance forces. In the fourth week of January, AA-led forces advanced to within two miles of the No. (16) Defence Industry Factory near Mathone village, a key facility responsible for producing gunpowder for artillery shells and ammunition.

Overall, the AA has now captured 14 of Rakhine State's 17 townships, leaving only three under junta control. However, the remaining areas - particularly Sittwe and Kyaukphyu, which hosts major Chinese investments - are facing intensified AA offensives. Military analysts and former junta personnel aligned with the Civil Disobedience Movement warn that if current trends continue, the military risks losing both strategic hubs in the near future.

UN EXPERT URGES WORLD TO REJECT MYANMAR 'SHAM' ELECTION



The world must utterly reject the outcome of this weekend's final round of "sham" elections in Myanmar, the United Nations' special rapporteur on the country said Friday.

He and other democracy advocates say that with deposed democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi sidelined and her massively popular party dissolved, the three-stage vote has been rigged by a crackdown on dissent and a ballot stacked with military allies.

"The junta has orchestrated the election specifically to ensure a landslide by its political proxy," said Tom Andrews, the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar.

"It took no chances, banning credible opposition parties, jailing popular political figures, muzzling the press, crushing fundamental freedoms, and using fear and coercion to drive a reluctant electorate to the polls."

In his statement, the independent expert said the junta was hoping countries would "accept military rule dressed up in civilian clothing".

"Governments must not allow that to happen," he added.

Andrews, a former Democratic congressman in the United States, voiced hope Sunday's final day of balloting would bring relief to Myanmar's people.

They had faced election-related intimidation, threats, arrests and lengthy prison terms if they criticised the election or failed to participate, he said.

Voters had reported junta officials "pushing citizens

to polling stations even as military jets bombed villages throughout the country", he added.

'Rigged process'

Most countries "recognised the absurdity of the junta's election ploy", he said, and states endorsing the result would be "complicit".

"International acceptance of this fraudulent exercise would set back the clock on genuine resolution to this crisis," he said.

UN special rapporteurs are independent experts appointed by the UN Human Rights Council, but do not speak in the name of the United Nations itself.

The military has ruled Myanmar by force for almost all of its post-independence history, before a decade-long democratic experiment gave civilian politicians tentative control.

The generals took back power in a 2021 coup deposing the government of Aung San Suu Kyi, detaining the democratic figurehead and plunging the country into civil war.

Andrews urged countries to cut the flow of weapons, aviation fuel, and funds to the Myanmar military.

"The people of Myanmar have shown extraordinary courage in resisting military tyranny," Andrews said.

"They deserve a future decided by their will -- not by a rigged process designed to keep their oppressors in power."

AFP



Photo: AFP

TWO MORE TOWNSHIPS ADDED TO LIST WHERE MYANMAR JUNTA'S ELECTIONS CANNOT BE HELD

According to military-controlled newspapers published on 21 January, elections will not be held in the Mansi and Momauk townships in Kachin State, which were originally included in the third phase of the junta's elections.

The junta's Union Election Commission (UEC) announced that elections will not take place in the two Pyithu Hluttaw constituencies of Mansi and Momauk, nor in the two State/Regional First Past the Post (FPTP) constituencies.

Both Mansi and Momauk are controlled by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). Although the commission initially planned to hold elections in just one village tract in Mansi and one village tract in Momauk, it has now declared that no elections will be held in either township. Mansi has a total of 44 wards or village tracts and Momauk has 66.

With Mansi added to the "no-election" list, the UEC also disqualified U Kwan San, a candidate from the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), who had previously been declared the uncontested winner for the Pyithu Hluttaw seat in that township.

The third phase of the junta's election plan for Kachin State includes Bhamo, Hpakant, and Shwedu townships along with the now cancelled elections in these two townships.

The commission further stated that in Bhamo, where the KIA is conducting an offensive, elections cannot be held in 54 out of 58 wards and village tracts. In Hpakant, elections are cancelled in 8 out of 21 tracts, and in Shwedu, elections will not take place in 39 out of 45 tracts.

In the context of widespread fighting since the coup, this election now faces cancellations in 67 out of 330 townships nationwide. Additionally, even within the townships where elections are scheduled, over 4,000 wards and village tracts will be unable to participate.

Revolutionary forces, as well as domestic and international organizations, have asserted that the junta's election will be neither free nor fair. They have labelled it a "sham" and have refused to recognize the election. Malaysian Foreign Minister Mohamad Hasan stated on 20 January that ASEAN will not endorse or support the results of this election.



Photo: AFP

JUNTA PRESSURES YANGON VENDORS WITH MARKET BANS AS THIRD PHASE OF ELECTION CONCLUDES

As Myanmar's three-stage general election reached its final phase on 25 January 2026, reports of systemic coercion emerged from across Yangon. In several key townships, including Mingalar Taung Nyunt, Hlaing Tharyar, Tamwe, and Lanmadaw, street vendors and market stall owners were reportedly threatened with permanent bans on selling their goods unless they produced evidence of having cast their ballots.

At Tat Myo Market in Phasapala Ward of Mingalar Taung Nyunt, administrators explicitly warned vendors on 21 January that the market would not reopen after the election for anyone who failed to vote, an MGTN Scout official told Mizzima.

"They said we could vote for any party as long as we cast a ballot, but they pressured us by warning that the market would not reopen and we would not be allowed to sell our goods if we failed to vote," he said.

Similarly, street vendors and some market stalls in Hlaing Tharyar, Tamwe and Lanmadaw were reportedly pressured to vote. In addition, all shops along major roads and alleys in townships participating in the third

phase of the election were closed from January 21 to 25, according to local residents.

"I sell goods on the street because I have no other choice, yet they ordered the market to close for voting while distributing campaign flyers. They told us that, as citizens, we must vote, subtly implying that it was the only way we would be allowed to continue our business. It is a form of indirect coercion," a roadside vendor from Tamwe Township told Mizzima.

The A Yoe Kone Market, Kyar Kwet Thit Road and Thati PatthanRoad in Tamwe Township are typically bustling with roadside stalls, but all small businesses—including eateries—have been forced to close, except for larger shops inside apartment buildings. The closures have caused significant hardship for both street vendors and the working-class communities who depend on them.

The military junta and its ward administrations are distributing voting slips to individuals listed on voter rolls in some townships, according to the Rangoon Scout Network and the Mingalar TaungNyunt Township Scouts.

"There were voting slips given to people, distributed in the same manner as in phases one and two. We are still collecting data on which townships and wards received them. As far as we know, they were not distributed in every township or ward, but randomly," an RSN official told Mizzima.

The military junta is providing security for the third phase of voting, with numerous police vehicles patrolling the area. Local residents report that ward office officials are going through neighbourhoods each night using loudspeakers to urge people to vote.

For security reasons, roads in and around polling stations were closed to traffic, vehicles were barred from entering or leaving, and roadside shops near the stations were ordered to shut down for five days, from 21 to 25 January.

The townships included in the final phase of the election are Dagon, Latha, Seikkyi/ Khanaungto, Dala, Dagon Myothit (Seikkan), Dagon Myothit (East), Mingalar Taung Nyunt, Thaketa, North Okkalapa, Tamwe, Yankin, Kyauktan, Kayan, Thongwa, Sanchaung, Hlaing Tharyar (West), and Hlaing Tharyar (East).



VOTER PARTICIPATION HITS RECORD LOW IN YANGON AS FINAL PHASE OF GENERAL ELECTION CONCLUDES

The third and final phase of Myanmar's general election ended Sunday on 25 January, 2026, with historically low voter turnout across Yangon, even as junta authorities used loudspeakers and taxis to broadcast pro-voting messages throughout the city.

In townships such as Tamwe, Mingalar Taung Nyunt, and Lanmadaw, polling stations were largely deserted by mid-morning. In Lanmadaw, where People's Party (PP) Chairman U Ko Ko Gyi contested, only a handful of elderly voters were seen at the ballots. In an effort to counter the public boycott, junta agents reportedly deployed white taxis equipped with loudspeakers to play campaign songs and urge residents to vote, particularly in East Dagon and Tamwe.

Residents in Mingalar Taung Nyunt, Tamwe, Hlaing Tharyar, and Dagon Myothit East townships reported that, beginning at 8 am, people were being urged to cast their votes by taxi in response to low voter turnout.

"They have been urging people to vote from 6 am to 4 pm. In East Dagon, residents say some people are voting, but on our side, there is almost no turnout," a Lanmadaw resident told Mizzima.

In Mingalar Taung Nyunt Township, home to a significant military junta presence, voter turnout was slightly higher than in other townships due to a circulating rumour, an official from the Mingalar Taung Nyunt Scout Group (MGTN Scout) told Mizzima.

"Yes, they began using loudspeakers to urge voting in the Kan-Nauk ward at 8:30 am. We haven't received

updates from other wards yet. In the Phasapala ward, turnout appears higher, as numerous pro-military groups are active there and a housing-related rumour—details unclear, has reportedly drawn a few more voters," he said.

In certain townships, vehicles are barred from entering polling stations, and only registered voters are allowed to access the streets surrounding the stations.

In Yangon, ahead of the final phase of voting (Phase 3), the military junta has attempted to intimidate and pressure civilians, but public interest and voter turnout remain low, except in neighbourhoods with significant grassroots support.

During Phase 3 of the election, coup leader Min Aung Hlaing visited polling stations in Chanmyathazi Township, Mandalay Region, and told officials at the station that he did not know whether foreign countries recognized the election or not.

The military leader had earlier visited polling stations in Hlaing and Insein townships in Yangon during the second phase of the election.

The townships taking part in Yangon's final phase of the election include Dagon, Lanmadaw, Seikkyi Kanaungto, Dala, Dagon Myothit (Seikkan), Dagon Myothit (East), Mingalar Taung Nyunt, Thaketa, North Okkalapa, Tamwe, Yankin, Kyauktan, Khayan, Thon Kwa, Sanchaung, and Hlaing Tharyar (West and East).



Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing visits a polling station. Photo: AFP

MIN AUNG HLAING DISMISSES INTERNATIONAL CRITICISM AS FINAL PHASE OF MYANMAR'S PHASED ELECTION CONCLUDES

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, Acting President and Chairman of the State Security and Peace Commission (SSPC), visited Chanmyathazi Township today to oversee the conclusion of Myanmar's three-stage general election.

As polling stations across 61 townships opened at 6:00 am this Sunday, 25 January, 2026, the junta leader explicitly brushed off global condemnation of the process.

"It is the people living in Myanmar who are voting, not people from the outside. Whether foreign countries recognize it or not is something we do not concern ourselves with. If the people recognize it, then this is how we must move forward," Min Aung Hlaing told reporters at a Mandalay polling station.

He further attributed low turnout in some areas to "security concerns" and the absence of certain political parties on the ballot.

The final phase was reduced to 61 townships from an original 63 after the Union Election Commission (UEC) cancelled voting in Mansi and Momauk (Kachin State) on 20 January, citing a total loss of administrative control. Across the entire month-long process, only 263 of Myanmar's 330 townships participated. The remaining 67 townships, largely in conflict-heavy regions like Rakhine, Chin, and Sagaing, saw no voting

at all.

According to UEC announcements as of 17 January, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) has won 80 out of 94 Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) seats and 31 out of 47 Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House) seats contested across the previous Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the election.

Min Aung Hlaing has announced that the new Parliament will be convened in March 2026, with the formal transfer of state responsibilities to the winning government scheduled for April. Speaking to military families at the Eastern Central Command in Kho Lam, Shan State, on 20 January, the junta leader stated that the transition would follow "established procedures" once the three-phase electoral roadmap is finalized.

While the junta has welcomed observers from eight nations including Russia, China, and India, the UN, EU, and ASEAN have formally refused to recognize the results, with Malaysia's Foreign Minister stating last week that the bloc will not certify the election.

According to early reporting and independent monitors, the military-backed USDP is on track for a landslide victory in the participating constituencies, having already claimed over 85% of contested seats in the first two rounds.



FIVE CIVILIANS INJURED AS ARTILLERY FIRE HITS NEAR HPAKANT POLLING STATION ON FINAL ELECTION DAY

Five civilians were injured on 25 January when an artillery shell exploded near a polling station in Hpakant in Kachin State during the final phase of Myanmar's three-part general election.

"Shells have been landing around the polling station in Hpakant. So far, five people have been injured, though there have been no fatalities. Three people from Myoma Kalapgon Ward and two others from a grocery near Kanbawza Bank in Hnagpyawtaw Ward were hit by shrapnel while inside their homes. Social welfare groups transported the injured to a nearby clinic," a local resident said.

The shell that landed in Hnagpyawtaw Ward reportedly exploded approximately 200 feet from the polling station, the resident added.

Despite the ongoing fire and reports of low voter turnout, junta authorities claimed that voting proceeded as planned. However, key access points including the bridge connecting Mashikahtaung Ward and Hpakant Myoma remained closed, and an explosion on the evening of 24 January reportedly destroyed a local power transformer.

"The bridge connecting Mashikahtaung Ward and Hpakant Myoma has been shut down, and all travel is

prohibited. Voting is expected to take place around the strategic hill," a local source said.

Hpakant Township consists of five wards, with polling stations located at Hnagpyawtaw High School Branch, Hpakant High School, Hmaw Wan High School Branch, and the middle school in Aye Mya Thar Yar Ward. Meanwhile, the area around Mashikahtaung Ward has been closed since 24 January, and it remains unclear whether voting will take place there, according to residents.

The violence in Hpakant underscores the security challenges of the final phase, which originally aimed to cover 63 townships but was reduced to 61 after the UEC cancelled voting in Mansi and Momauk earlier this week.

In Kachin State, the third phase specifically targeted Hpakant, Bhamo, and Shwegu townships all of which have seen intensified clashes between the military and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in recent days. Just two days prior, on 23 January, a military airstrike on a funeral in neighbouring Bhamo Township killed 21 people, further deterring residents from public gatherings.



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

PEOPLE'S PARTY CHAIRMAN REPORTS IRREGULARITIES IN HIGH VOLUME OF ADVANCE VOTES DURING FINAL ELECTION STAGE

Ko Ko Gyi, Chairman of the People's Party (PP), raised serious concerns on Sunday regarding the lack of transparency and an "unusually high" number of advance ballots cast in the military-managed general election.

"It is true that there were many controversies. Many of our candidates do not know who is eligible for advance voting," Ko Ko Gyi said.

Speaking to reporters as he contested the Lanmadaw Township Pyithu Hluttaw seat in Yangon, the veteran activist noted that many candidates remained unaware of who was eligible for advance voting, and alleged that government departments had registered entire workforces for early balloting, potentially skewing the results.

"When it comes to counting the votes, we can verify how many advance votes are recorded in Form 13(a) and how many are in the ballot boxes. However, we do not know how the number of advance votes reached such a high level," he said.

He said that in the first and second phases of the military-run elections, the People's Party won one seat in the Amyotha Hluttaw and seven seats in regional or state parliaments, totaling eight seats.

The military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won most of the seats.

Political parties that contested the elections, including the People's Party, have reported problems with advance voting and voter registration. However, the Military Commission announced on 2 January that the processes of advance voting, vote counting, voter registration compilation, and announcement were conducted transparently and accurately.

The Military Commission held the elections in three phases, excluding more than 4,000 wards and village tracts in 263 townships. There are also 67 townships out of 330 nationwide where elections could not be held.



Thet Thet Khine. Photo: AFP

MYANMAR'S PPP LEADER PLACED UNDER RESTRICTED MOVEMENT AFTER 24-HOUR INTERROGATION

Daw Thet Thet Khine, Chairperson of the People's Pioneer Party (PPP), has been placed under strict "restricted movement" at her home following a day-long interrogation by the Military Commission. The measures, enacted on 13 January, 2026, follow accusations of "secretly and unlawfully" meeting with foreign diplomats, a direct violation of the junta-administered Union Election Commission (UEC) rules.

"She is not permitted to participate in media interviews. She must notify the authorities in advance if she plans to engage in any activity. She is not allowed to post anything on her social media accounts. It is more accurate to say she is under 'restricted movement' rather than formal house arrest because there are no police guards stationed at the house," a source close to Daw Thet Thet Khine told Mizzima.

The restrictions on her followed a 24-hour interrogation by the Military Commission's military and police forces on the grounds that she had secretly met with certain foreign officials from an embassy on the afternoon of 18 December at a restaurant on Natmauk Road in Yangon.

The Union Election Commission (UEC), which is under the Military Commission, announced in a statement on 14 January, 2026, that action would be taken against Daw Thet Thet Khine and PPP Central

Executive Committee member Daw Htet Htet Hlaing for meeting secretly with foreign embassies without UEC permission.

Some news sources have identified it as the British Embassy, despite the UEC's statement not naming the particular embassy.

While most members of the political community consider meetings between foreign diplomats and politicians to be a routine procedure, some members of political parties have concluded that the Military Commission is utilizing these occasions to enforce stringent constraints.

Political parties must refrain from being influenced by a foreign government in accordance with Sections 407(c) and 408 of the Constitution as well as Section 6(f) of the Political Parties Registration Law. The party's registration may be canceled if they do not comply. It is also acknowledged that prior authorization and verification from the UEC are necessary for any such gatherings.

Previously, in October 2025, Daw Thet Thet Khine was disqualified from running for a seat in the Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House) by the UEC. This was as a result of the outstanding bank debts, which violated Section 8(d) of the election law, requiring candidates to be free from improper financial obligations to the state or private entities.



CONTROVERSY ERUPTS IN MYANMAR'S BAGO REGION OVER EARLY 'ADVANCE' VOTING MANDATES

Tension is mounting in Bago Region as the Military Commission enforces mandatory early voting in several townships ahead of the third and final phase of the national election scheduled for 25 January, 2026. Political parties and local candidates have raised sharp objections, arguing that the junta is misusing "advance voting" laws to prematurely conclude the election in volatile areas.

A local familiar with the situation said the Military Commission had informed and coordinated with political parties contesting the election in the area.

"In areas facing security concerns, the election is effectively being held early, that is how it should be described," he said.

U Yan Naing Win, vice chairman of the Federal Democratic Party in Bago Region, said polling stations opened on 22 January under full security at about nine locations near the foothills of the Bago Yoma mountains in Gyobingauk and Okpho townships.

"The entire village turned out to vote on the early voting day so the process could be completed at once. It was not that the election was held early, but that voting was conducted during the early voting period, with everyone casting ballots at the same time," he said.

In contrast, in Thegon Township, Bago Region, Daw Saw Yu Mar, central chairperson of the Union Peace and Unity Party (UPUP), wrote on her social media page on 19 January that she opposed the practice of requiring voters to cast their ballots early.

"Now, 11 groups have been instructed to vote early on January 20, citing security reasons. This is not advance voting but a final vote. The parties were not informed in advance, we only found out at 6 pm. The people also did not know, raising the question of who is above the UEC. As a result, we went to the township commission to protest, saying we would not comply, and replied at 10 pm that the election would not be held early," Daw Saw Yu Mar said.

Regarding advance voting, Article 79 of the Military Commission's Election Rules states that soldiers and their families, students, trainees, detainees, hospital inpatients, temporarily displaced persons, and citizens abroad with government permission are eligible to vote in advance in their respective constituencies, provided they have an advance voting certificate.

Additionally, the Union Election Commission (UEC), operating under the Military Commission, has announced that individuals unable to attend polling stations on election day including those with leprosy, serious illnesses, the elderly, women in labour, and civil servants, soldiers, and police temporarily assigned outside their voting area, are permitted to vote in advance.

Citizens over 18 who are able to walk normally are not allowed to vote in advance and must cast their ballots on election day. Those wishing to vote early must submit Form-13, U Nyi Nyi Lwin, central vice chairman of the UPUP, said.

"Our parties agreed that we can accept advance voting and the use of advance ballots. However, we do not accept using those days for the final. They are insisting that everyone must vote on the early dates instead of on the 25th. Our position is that if it is called 'advance voting,' there are already specific laws, bylaws, and regulations governing it. We told them to follow those existing rules," he said.

The third phase of the Military Commission's election covers several townships in Bago Region, including Kyaukkyi, Kyauktaga, Phy, Oktwin, Thegon, Waw, Gyobingauk, and Okpho. These areas are marked by significant military tensions and ongoing clashes between the commission's forces and revolutionary groups.



DKBA Patron Saw Steel (right), Colonel Saw Eh Le Htoo (second from right), and Commander-in-Chief General Saw Shwe Wa (third from right) at a DKBA ceremony (DKBA).

CHINESE NATIONALS TRAPPED AND TORTURED AT MYANMAR SCAM COMPOUND OPERATED BY SON OF DKBA LEADER

MIZZIMA SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT HAN HTOO ZAW

Mizzima has learned that more than 1,000 Chinese nationals are being held captive and subjected to daily torture at the Deeko Park online scam compound, reportedly controlled by Colonel Saw Eh Le Htoo, the son of Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) leader Saw Steel.

The online scam compound is located near Wawlay town, south of Myawaddy in Karen State, an area controlled by the DKBA. A Chinese national recently shared a photograph on Chinese social media showing people trapped and tortured inside the compound, accompanied by a plea for help.

"There is a resort known as Wa Le Zheng Hei Company in Myawaddy where more than 1,000 Chinese nationals are being held. They were initially transferred there from the No. 20 port area, and numerous soldiers are guarding the entrance, preventing anyone from leaving," he wrote on 11 January.

The Chinese national wrote that the workers confined in dark rooms and tortured if they fail to meet assigned money-laundering targets, adding that

he hopes international organizations will intervene to rescue them.

The online scam compound referenced in the letter, No. 20, is identified as a building known as Dingsheng Park, also called OK Park, located on Myat Lin Myaing Street in Ward No. 5, near Bridge No. 2 in Myawaddy. Satellite imagery indicates that construction of the Dingsheng Park building began in 2018. The online scam centre operating in the building reportedly relocated to Deeko Park by the end of 2025.

In November and December 2025, the Myanmar junta and the Karen National Army (KNA), formerly known as the Karen Border Guard Force (BGF), carried out raids on KK Park, Shwe Kokko, and parts of Myawaddy, prompting some individuals involved in online scam operations to relocate to areas controlled by the BGF and the DKBA.

Mizzima compared photos provided by the Chinese national with satellite imagery and interviewed escapees from the area. After analysing additional photos and videos sent by insiders, it confirmed that

CORE DEVELOPMENTS

the location described by the Chinese national is the Deeko Park scam centre complex near Wawlay, under DKBA control. The photos and satellite images obtained revealed matching features, including the same buildings, a swimming pool, a basketball court, and mountains in the background.

The Deeko Park online scam centre complex near Wawlay sits beside the Thaungyin River – known in Thailand as the Moei River – on the Thai-Myanmar border. Near Wawlay, the river is a narrow, shallow stream, making it easily crossable on foot.

The majority of workers were reportedly trafficked and survivors confirmed that they were being coerced into labour by Chinese mafia gangs.

A Pakistani national was reported twice by Mizzima in both Myanmar and English for being trafficked and forced into working at the Deeko Park online scam complex. On 23 November 2025, some of the trafficked foreigners were released from the facility.

Eighty victims of human trafficking from multiple countries were released, including three Pakistanis. The older brother of one of the interviewees was also among those included in Mizzima's report.

In February 2025, the DKBA handed over 261 foreigners from 12 countries to the Thai government via Kyauk Khat village on the Thai-Myanmar border. Thai media reported that many of those released bore injuries from torture, and there were accounts of sexual

assault.

A video has surfaced showing a Pakistani national being trafficked at night by DKBA soldiers in military uniforms, who beat and electroshocked him at the Zongfa Company in Taihe Park (also known as Qingsong Park) near the Kyauk Khat area.

The Pakistani national, who was later released, confirmed to Mizzima that the perpetrators were security guards and DKBA soldiers at the online money-laundering compound.

The Deeko Park compound is operated by Colonel Saw Eh Le Htoo, the son of DKBA patron and former Commander-in-Chief General Saw Steel. The site was constructed in 2024 by Saw Eh Le Htoo with investment contributions from the family of BGF Colonel Saw Mote Tho, commander of the BGF's No. 4 Military Region.

Information obtained indicates that the Deeko Park online scam compound is also identified as Heng Sheng 5 and is affiliated with the Heng Sheng Group Entertainment Complex, which comprises five Heng Sheng subsidiaries.

Three of the five Heng Sheng sites are located in Myawaddy, while the remaining two are in Wawlay town and under DKBA control. The Myawaddy sites function primarily as casinos, but this is only for display as they are mainly involved in online gambling operations.

Heng Sheng 1 is situated on Paung Si Myaing 4



Street in Ward No. 5, Heng Sheng 2 is on Myasandi Golf Course Street in Ward No. 5, and Heng Sheng 4 is located on Kan Khin Street in Ward No. 3, inside the area of Border Crossing Gate No. 1.

The landowner of these three sites is Colonel Saw Mote Tho, while the businesses are registered under the name of his eldest daughter, Naw Wai Moth Moth Lwin.

These three sites are jointly operated with Chinese nationals, with Heng Sheng 1 managed by Major So Kyi of BGF Cantonment Area No. 4, and Heng Sheng 2 overseen by Saw Nya Htee of BGF Battalion 1017.

Investigations are ongoing to determine who is responsible for managing Heng Sheng 4.

In the DKBA-controlled area of Wawlay, Heng Sheng 3, also known as Triumph Park, was led by Lt. Col. Saw Ba So Gay Htoo (deceased), son of DKBA Commander-in-Chief General Saw Shwe Wa. Heng Sheng 5, also known as Deeko Park, is led by Colonel Saw Eh Le Htoo, son of DKBA patron Saw Steel, the DKBA's former Commander-in-Chief.

In the DKBA-controlled area south of Myawaddy, there were only three online scam operations before 2024, two in Kyauk Khat village and one in Wawlay town but 15 additional operations emerged in 2024.

There are now 18 online scam operations under DKBA protection in the DKBA Military Command 1 Brigade's Area No. 1 in the East Dawna region, south

of Myawaddy.

On 12 November, 2025, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced economic sanctions against four leaders of the DKBA: Saw Steel (former Commander-in-Chief, now patron), Brigadier General Saw Sein Win (Adjutant General), Chief of Staff Major General Saw San Aung, and Major General Sai Kyaw Hla, Chairman of the Central Economic Committee of the 1st Military Command, for supporting cyber fraud centres in Myanmar that defraud U.S. citizens through investment schemes.

Similarly, on 29 October 2024, the European Union sanctioned Colonel Saw Mote Tho (b) U Saw Ngwe Lwin, Commander of Karen BGF Region 4, for allegedly protecting and profiting from online fraud, drug trafficking, human trafficking, forced labour, torture, and online money-laundering operations.

The EU sanctions impose asset freezes, travel bans to EU countries, and a prohibition on all business dealings with EU individuals and companies, targeting those deemed linked to transnational criminal networks and human rights abuses.

However, Colonel Saw Mote Tho has not yet been added to the U.S. sanctions list. Saw Mote Tho was not included when the Karen BGF, led by Saw Chit Thu, was reorganized into the Karen National Army (KNA) on 1 January 2024.

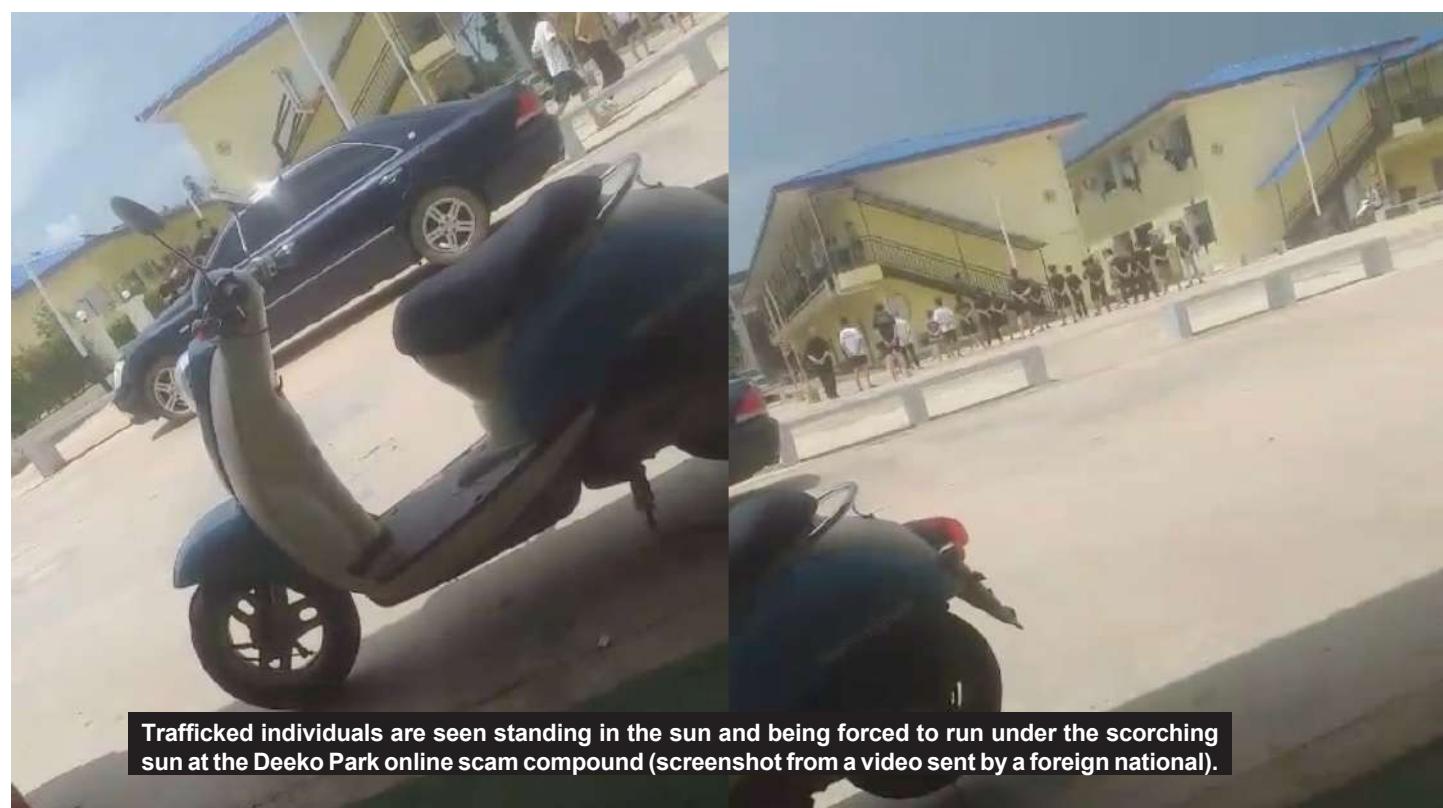




Photo: AFP

DOZENS OF MYANMAR JUNTA TROOPS DESERT AS ARAKAN ARMY ENCIRCLES RAKHINE STATE CAPITAL

Nearly 50 junta soldiers and police officers have deserted their posts in the Rakhine State capital of Sittwe over the past two weeks, as the Arakan Army (AA) intensifies its offensive to capture the strategically vital port city.

Local military sources and monitoring groups report that at least 48 personnel, including members of elite commando units and city security forces, abandoned their positions between early January and 14 January 2026.

"From what we know, 48 people fled. They haven't been found yet. Most are from security units. They likely fled because they can see the reality of the battle as the AA continues its offensive. Now, Muslims are being brought in to provide security in Sittwe, though it's said they aren't given training or weapons," local source said.

CDM Captain Zin Yaw also told Mizzima that the junta had pulled personnel from light infantry battalions within the Sittwe garrison for city security, and seven members of a newly formed commando unit deserted on 12 January.

Arakan Princess Media (APM), a Rakhine-based news outlet, also reported yesterday 18 January that over 50 junta troops had abandoned their weapons and ammunition to flee in groups.

The deserters are reportedly from the Ohn Taw Gyi military camp and the Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 270 based in Sittwe.

Similarly, in Kyaukphyu, where fighting is intense, and Manaung Township, which has not yet seen active clashes, junta forces are reportedly abandoning their

weapons to flee or surrendering to the AA in succession, according to APM.

According to some locals, police and junta forces that previously patrolled Sittwe and conducted frequent guest list inspections while arresting and threatening civilians daily have recently scaled back these activities.

"Before, they would check everywhere, including IDP camps and monasteries, and threaten people. It's a bit quieter now," a resident said.

In the first week of January, the AA attacked areas near the Regional Operations Command (ROC) headquarters in Sittwe, which is surrounded by 400 security force personnel. The AA captured two outpost camps on Kankaw Kyun that shield the ROC and took 34 prisoners of war.

Following this, on 9 January, the AA ambushed three junta vehicles with landmines in Yay Chan Pyin village, three miles from the ROC. Both the lead and middle vehicles were destroyed, according to local military sources.

In Sittwe, the ROC Commander and the Western Command Commander, Major General Kyaw Swar Oo, are present, along with the former Bureau of Special Operations (BSO) 2 Chief, Lieutenant General Naing Naing Oo.

Currently, military tensions are escalating in the Kyar Ma Thauk and Kankaw Kyun areas of Sittwe.

There are over 10 naval vessels in Sittwe, and at least 10 military units, including the Regional Operations Command, LIBs 20, 270, 232, 344, 354, as well as Police Battalions 12 and 36.



REFUGEE CHILDREN'S EDUCATION AT 'BREAKING POINT' ON THAI-MYANMAR BORDER, SAYS SAVE THE CHILDREN

Access to education for children living in camps along the Thailand-Myanmar border has reached "breaking point" due to increased student numbers at a time of foreign aid cuts, Save the Children warned in a new report released 20 January.

Thailand has a long history of hosting refugees and migrants from neighbouring countries fleeing conflict, but children without identification documents have faced challenges in gaining admission to Thai schools and schools inside the camps which are heavily dependent humanitarian aid, the NGO says.

The report surveyed about 2,500 people including students, parents and teachers in Thailand between late 2025 and early 2026.

Aid cuts that began in early 2025 have severely impacted the nine camps along the Thai-Myanmar border which are officially home to about 90,000 people, [1], the report shows, causing food shortages, clinic closures and reduced medical care for refugees.

Students and school-aged children make up one third, or 30%, of the camp's residents [2] and student numbers in the camps have increased 33% from about 18,000 in 2020 to about 24,000 in 2025. The recent conflict in Myanmar has contributed to an influx of refugees and migrant families.

Classrooms inside migrant learning centres are also often crowded and some host up to 60 students at a time, while teachers reported an acute shortage of learning resources, including textbooks and science and IT equipment.

Many learning centres catering to migrant families also operate on rented land, leaving them without security, and teachers said they faced legal constraints

as they are prohibited from holding teaching licenses which impacts their professional recognition.

Guillaume Rachou, the Executive Director of Save the Children Thailand, said:

"Education in the camps along the Thai-Myanmar border is at breaking point. Education can be life-saving and it is certainly life changing which is why we must collectively put resources towards education."

"We know that the camps operate with limited resources, that classrooms can be overcrowded and that there is a shortage of trained teachers and learning materials even as enrolment has risen in recent years following renewed conflict in Myanmar."

Although Thailand's Education for All policy guarantees free schooling for non Thai children, access in practice remains limited. Many migrant and undocumented children struggle to enrol due to legal, financial, and language barriers, leaving them at heightened risk of dropout and exploitation.

Save the Children is calling on donors to ensure that the education needs of children living and learning in the Thai-Myanmar refugee camps are met through diverse streams of funding.

Save the Children also urges Thai authorities to ensure that there are effective ways for migrant, undocumented and stateless children to enrol in school without fear of deportation.

Save the Children has worked in Thailand since 1979 and works to support children who are most impacted by discrimination and inequality through programmes on education, child protection, livelihood and child rights governance.



CHIN REFUGEE ORGANIZATIONS IN MALAYSIA MEET WITH AUSTRALIAN MP TO DISCUSS RESETTLEMENT

The Alliance of Chin Refugees (ACR) recently held discussions with Australian Senator Dean Smith in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to explore the potential resettlement of Chin refugees from Malaysia to Australia.

Representatives from several Chin refugee organizations in Malaysia, including the ACR, the Chin Refugee Committee (CRC), and the Falam Refugee Organization (FRO), gathered to address the challenges surrounding resettlement.

On January 19, the ACR announced that discussions had taken place from 11 to 13 January regarding third-country resettlement for Chin refugees and delays in their visa applications. ACR Chairman James, who attended the meeting, described it as "positive and hopeful" when speaking to Mizzima.

During the discussions, James highlighted the delays experienced by refugee families applying for asylum in Australia, as well as the difficulties they are currently facing in Malaysia. Senator Dean Smith expressed his commitment to addressing the issues related to Myanmar, pledging to raise the topic with the Australian government through parliamentary questions.

The meeting also included the participation of other Australian senators, leaders from Chin refugee organizations, Pu Renny Ceu Lian Mang from the

Australia Chin Federation, and representatives from various ethnic communities.

Additionally, the Australian Refugee Council announced plans to accept 20,000 refugees from overseas for the 2025–2026 period.

Senator Smith engaged with leaders of Chin refugee organizations, held discussions with officials from the UNHCR and the Australian Embassy in Malaysia, and visited Chin refugee schools and organizational offices in Kuala Lumpur, according to an ACR statement.

Local newspapers reported that the Immigration Department arrested 89 Myanmar nationals for illegal residence in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor on 17 January, followed by another 15 arrests in Kelantan on 19 January.

The ACR chairman cautioned that these recent arrests, which have been occurring day and night – sometimes even within people's homes – underscore the urgent need for refugees to live quietly, avoid criminal activity, and maintain harmony with their surroundings.

He noted that there are between 300,000 and 400,000 Myanmar nationals in Malaysia and stressed the importance of registering as refugees. Without a refugee card, securing employment can be difficult, and access to essential services such as food and security may be limited.



Photo: AFP

FORTIFY RIGHTS URGES BANGLADESH TO CLOSE BHASAN CHAR AND END ROHINGYA DETENTION

On 21 January, Fortify Rights called on the interim Government of Bangladesh to immediately close Bhasan Char, the isolated island refugee camp in the Bay of Bengal, and to grant all Rohingya refugees from Myanmar freedom of movement and the right to work, said Fortify Rights in a new report.

Based on more than 100 interviews conducted over five years, the 36-page report finds that Rohingya refugees confined on Bhasan Char are subjected to severe restrictions on liberty that amount to de facto arbitrary detention in violation of Bangladesh's constitution and international law.

The press release accompanying the new report continues below.

"The Bangladesh authorities should immediately close the camp on Bhasan Char and end the mass arbitrary detention of Rohingya refugees on the island as well as on the mainland, and ensure freedom of movement," said John Quinley, Director at Fortify Rights. "Bhasan Char should never have been considered an appropriate place for refugees. Being a refugee is not a crime, yet Rohingya from Myanmar have been treated as if it were. The island, in practice, functions more like

a penal colony—that is neither lawful nor humane."

The report, "Like Prisoners:" The Mass Arbitrary Detention and 'Warehousing' of Rohingya Refugees from Myanmar on Bhasan Char in Bangladesh, calls on the government of Bangladesh to permanently close Bhasan Char, end refugee "warehousing," and guarantee all Rohingya refugees' freedom of movement, liberty, and access to livelihoods by dismantling restrictive policies nationwide.

The new report, researched over the course of five years, documents human rights violations associated with the "warehousing" of Rohingya refugees, with a focus on restrictions on freedom of movement. Refugee "warehousing" involves the practice of keeping refugees in protracted situations of restricted mobility, enforced idleness, and aid dependency in violation of human rights. Testimonies documented in the report indicate that Bangladeshi authorities, primarily under former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, routinely misled, coerced, or threatened Rohingya refugees with detention and abuse if they resisted relocation to Bhasan Char.

Upon their transfer to the island, Rohingya

refugees quickly discovered that traveling back to the mainland refugee camps, even for legitimate reasons such as medical care, funerals, weddings, and family reunification, was severely restricted and subject to arbitrary decisions and time-consuming application processes, often resulting in refusals. This has been a consistent concern for refugees since 2021 and remains so today.

"Like Prisoners" is based on 102 interviews, including with Rohingya refugees on Bhasan Char, their relatives, humanitarian aid workers, journalists, and others. This report is the product of research conducted between May 2020 and October 2025, including documentation on the island itself.

In 2018, following a mass influx of Rohingya refugees fleeing a genocidal military campaign in Myanmar, the Bangladesh government proposed relocating Rohingya refugees from Cox's Bazar District to Bhasan Char, ostensibly to ease overcrowding in the mainland refugee camps. Deposed and recently indicted, former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina spearheaded the initiative, which aimed to move up to 100,000 Rohingya refugees to the island.

In May 2020, Bangladeshi authorities began transferring Rohingya refugees to Bhasan Char. Despite initially resisting the plan, on October 9, 2021, the U.N. signed an agreement with the Bangladeshi government on the provision of humanitarian services for Rohingya refugees on the island. According to the U.N. and government of Bangladesh, there were more than 34,500 Rohingya refugees on Bhasan Char as of December 2025.

Fortify Rights has privately and publicly highlighted Bhasan Char's inappropriateness as a place to house refugees, and the organization has consistently documented human rights violations on and related to the project. Although the previous Bangladesh government repeatedly stated that Rohingya relocation to Bhasan Char would be entirely voluntary, Fortify Rights exposed multiple instances of the authorities forcing, coercing, or otherwise carrying out involuntary transfers to the island. Refugees transferred to Bhasan Char reported severe restrictions on movement and serious mental health concerns. Fortify Rights also documented how the agreement between the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and the Bangladeshi authorities codified restrictions on the freedom of Rohingya refugee movement on and off the island.

After years of rejecting criticism directed toward Bhasan Char, in a recent interview with Fortify Rights,

Mohammad Mizanur Rahman, Bangladesh's current Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner, said "The government is not interested in continuing the Bhasan Char project," conceding that conditions on the island are "a kind of confinement." In recent media interviews, Rahman has also labelled Bhasan Char "a failed project." Despite these statements, Rohingya refugees remain arbitrarily detained on Bhasan Char, and the interim Bangladeshi government has not publicly laid out plans to close the island camp.

With the publication of the new report, Fortify Rights offers to assist the Bangladesh authorities in ensuring they respect and protect the rights of Rohingya refugees.

Rohingya interviewees repeatedly told Fortify Rights that government officials had misled them by promising material benefits, such as employment and monthly cash payments, or third-country resettlement, in an attempt to agree to be transferred to Bhasan Char. As part of this effort, Bangladesh officials organized large meetings to show misleading videos to Rohingya refugees, and went "door-to-door" to convince people to relocate to the island. One refugee, quoted in the report, described to Fortify Rights what a government official said at such a large gathering:

"If you go to Bhasan Char, we will give you cows, you can do farming there, we will give you money, and we will give you proper houses." They also mentioned giving goats, chickens, ducks, shops, and other benefits. They have sent us here by alluring us with these promises.

Other refugees shared their experiences of coercive pressure to submit to relocations to Bhasan Char, which also included threats of forced repatriation to Myanmar and the seizure of their registration cards, without which they cannot access goods and services. A 45-year-old refugee told Fortify Rights:

They said, "You have to go to Bhasan Char. You can't stay here in the camp." Some of the Majhi [unelected, appointed camp leaders] replied to them, "What if we go to another camp rather than going to Bhasan Char?" The authorities said, "You can't go to another camp, but you have two options: either you go back to Myanmar, or you go to Bhasan Char."

Once on the island, Rohingya refugees faced prison-like conditions, including barbed wire fences and guard towers around the camps, constant patrols by armed guards, as well as 24-hour CCTV surveillance. A Rohingya man, 29, originally from Maungdaw Township in Myanmar and still on the island at the time

of publication, told Fortify Rights:

It is like a prison here. ... [W]e don't want to live here at all, let alone for years. People can't just leave because of the Navy guards and control by the authorities. If there is no guard or control, not a single person will remain here. All will leave this place.

Further compounding prison-like conditions on the island, Rohingya who wish to travel from Bhasan Char to the mainland camps to visit family or for other reasons face significant restrictions. In recent years, Bangladesh authorities have attempted to ease these restrictions, with some family visitation trips facilitated by the Bangladesh Navy, but many Rohingya seeking to visit or relocate to the mainland for legitimate purposes still report that the application process is opaque and arbitrary and often requires bribes, though this still does not guarantee the movement would be granted.

The title of this new report, "Like Prisoners," reflects the words of a 38-year-old Rohingya man and genocide survivor from Myanmar on Bhasan Char who, in July 2024, told Fortify Rights: "If we are to live on Bhasan Char for an extended period, it is essential for us to be able to visit our relatives, as we are human beings. Currently, we feel as though we are confined here, like prisoners."

Bangladesh law, including its constitution, guarantees everyone in Bangladesh freedom from arbitrary deprivation of their liberty. Article 9 of the U.N. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Bangladesh is a state party, also prohibits arbitrary deprivation of liberty. Under international law, freedom from arbitrary deprivation of liberty is an absolute, or non-derogable, right that cannot be suspended or restricted under any circumstances, including national emergencies and war. Moreover, freedom from arbitrary deprivation of liberty is also considered a peremptory, or *jus cogens*, norm of general international law binding on all states and hierarchically superior to other norms of international law. These protections apply to Bangladesh citizens and non-citizens alike.

The U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD), the only body within the international human rights system with a mandate to receive and examine cases of arbitrary deprivation of liberty, states that deprivation of personal liberty occurs "whenever a person is being held without his or her free consent." Typically, detention occurs in places like prisons and police stations, but the WGAD also recognizes irregular detention sites, such as psychiatric institutions and

administrative detention, as well as instances of *de facto* deprivation of liberty—where individuals are in theory able to leave a location, but in practice are unable to do so.

While there are limited legitimate reasons under international law to deprive individuals of their liberty, such as when they are convicted or suspected of committing a crime, deprivation of liberty becomes illegitimate when it is arbitrary. The WGAD has found that deprivation of liberty can be considered arbitrary when it results from the exercise of a fundamental human right, such as the right to seek asylum, and when it is discriminatory toward a particular ethnic, religious, or social group.

The confinement of Rohingya refugees on Bhasan Char amounts to *de facto* and arbitrary deprivation of liberty on a massive scale, Fortify Rights said.

"The Bangladesh interim government and the international community must learn from the failed Bhasan Char project," said Professor Ken MacLean, a co-author of the report, Senior Advisor at Fortify Rights and faculty member at the Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Clark University. "Protecting the rights of refugees, including the right to work and freedom of movement, is not only good for refugees, but also for Bangladesh. Countries that host refugees often report significant economic and even social improvements after respecting the rights of refugees, and states that violate the rights of refugees often face a litany of negative consequences, as Bangladesh has."



MYANMAR ENVOY CALLS FOR GLOBAL CONVENTION TO PREVENT CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

On 20 January, Myanmar's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun, has called for stronger international legal action to prevent and punish crimes against humanity, warning that Myanmar's military junta continues to commit widespread and systematic abuses against civilians and cannot evade accountability through sham elections.

The test of Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun's statement is as follows.

Mr. Chair,

I wish to congratulate you on your election and assure you of our full support for your leadership.

I also wish to express our appreciation to the International Law Commission, in particular to the Special Rapporteur, Professor Sean Murphy, for his work on the draft articles on the prevention and punishment of crimes against humanity.

This session takes place at an important moment, marking the eightieth anniversary of the Nuremberg Tribunal. The principles affirmed at Nuremberg, including individual accountability for serious international crimes, continue to guide efforts to strengthen international law on crimes against humanity.

Myanmar welcomes the participation of non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations in this process. Based on our experience, their work with victims and affected communities is of particular importance, especially where access to justice is limited. Their engagement contributes valuable perspectives to the discussions.

Mr. Chair,

Myanmar considers the elaboration of a convention on the prevention and punishment of crimes against humanity to be a necessary step toward strengthening the international legal framework in this area.

The ongoing case between the Gambia vs. Myanmar at the International Court of Justice is the best example. The military junta is trying to escape from its international crimes against Rohingya in an absence of such convention on the prevention and punishment of crimes against humanity.

As I speak, the military junta continues perpetrating the international crimes against not only Rohingya but also all people in Myanmar.

While the prohibition of crimes against humanity is well established under international law, gaps remain in the absence of a dedicated convention to ensure effective prevention, accountability, and cooperation at the national level.

Crimes against humanity constitute breaches of obligations *erga omnes* under international law. The legal consequences of such breaches extend to the international community as a whole. The draft articles seek to address these gaps by clarifying State obligations and reinforcing domestic jurisdiction and inter State cooperation.

In this regard, Myanmar supports the inclusion of provisions concerning preliminary measures when an alleged offender is present, as reflected in the draft articles. These provisions are important to ensure that the exercise of jurisdiction is effective and that accountability mechanisms are not rendered purely theoretical. Myanmar encourages States to give careful consideration to their implementation in practice.

Myanmar further recalls the relevance of the non-refoulement obligation in situations where individuals face a real risk of crimes against humanity upon return. Given the circumstances affecting Myanmar nationals, this safeguard remains closely linked to the preventive objective of the draft articles.

Mr. Chair,

Against this background, Myanmar notes with appreciation the practical relevance of the work of this Preparatory Committee for individuals affected by

crimes against humanity. In this regard, it is important to recall the situation in Myanmar following the illegal coup of 1 February 2021, during which civilians have been subjected to widespread and systematic violence by the military junta. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, a total of 7,695 people, including pro-democracy activists and civilians, have been killed by the junta.

As of 31 December 2025, a total of 23,272 human rights violations have been documented in Myanmar. In addition, more than 9,000 aerial attacks have been recorded, resulting in the deaths of 4,683 people. These figures illustrate the continued impact of crimes against humanity and underscore the importance of effective prevention and accountability.

Crimes against humanity cannot be displaced by sham electoral processes that lack legitimacy and are not free and fair. Attempts by the military junta to mask such crimes through a sham election do not affect their criminal liabilities arising under international law.

Mr. Chair,

Accountability remains essential.

Myanmar underscores that international law itself must not be instrumentalised or misused as a shield to protect perpetrators of crimes against humanity from accountability. Upholding the rule of law requires the rejection of impunity and the timely pursuit of justice for victims.



The ICJ court in session. Photo: AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA'S REPRESENTATIVE LAWYER CHALLENGES THE CREDIBILITY OF ANONYMOUS WITNESSES AT THE ICJ

At the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on 19 January, Myanmar junta argued that the evidence submitted in the Rohingya genocide case, brought against it by The Gambia, lacks credibility.

Representing the Myanmar junta, lawyer Christopher Staker asserted that most witnesses are anonymous and come solely from refugee camps in Bangladesh, which makes their testimony unreliable.

However, The Gambia previously explained during earlier hearings that the identities of these witnesses were withheld for security reasons.

The Myanmar junta's legal team further accused The Gambia of relying excessively on reports produced by United Nations bodies and non-governmental organizations.

They also argued that, since the witnesses are anonymous, it is possible that the same individual

provided identical testimonies to multiple organizations.

Additionally, the Myanmar junta side claimed that the alleged influence of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) within refugee camps compromises the independence of witness statements.

In contrast, The Gambia and international organizations have firmly maintained that the evidence was collected systematically and in accordance with international standards.

By emphasizing the anonymity of the witnesses, the Myanmar junta's lawyers aimed to weaken the overall credibility of The Gambia's evidence.

The international community is closely monitoring how the court will rule on the arguments presented by both sides.



ပြည်ထောင်စုသမ္မတမြန်မာနိုင်ငံတော်

FIVE RESISTANCE FIGHTERS KILLED IN MYANMAR JUNTA AIRSTRIKE ON NUG OFFICE

Five members of the resistance were killed after the military conducted an airstrike on an office of the National Unity Government (NUG) People's Defence Organization (Pa Ka Pha) in the Mawlu area of Indaw Township, Sagaing Region. The 21 January attack targeted the resistance office located in Man Hae village.

According to local sources, the airstrike occurred around 11:15 PM, resulting in at least two injuries.

"The People's Defence Organization office, which was operating out of the village's rural health clinic, was bombed. A jet fighter dropped bombs twice. Five people were killed, and two others were injured," a local man from the Mawlu area informed Mizzima.

In this incident, four members of the People's Defence Organization (Pa Ka Pha) and one member of the District People's Security Force (Pa La Pha) lost their lives. Additionally, two houses near the office were destroyed, and two civilians were reported injured.

This is not the first such incident. Previously, on 2 January, a People's Security Force (Pa La Pha) office near Ywar Shay village in Mawlu was also bombed, resulting in the death of a Grade 12 student living nearby.

Indaw Township is currently fully controlled by resistance forces and is known as a region where the junta has been unable to conduct elections.



Photo: Mizzima

MORE THAN 2,000 CIVILIANS ARRESTED BY MYANMAR JUNTA IN YANGON IN THE PAST YEAR

According to the Rangoon Scout Network (RSN), the Myanmar junta arbitrarily detained 2,035 civilians in Yangon between January and December 2025. Of those arrested, 282 people were later released, while 294 were transferred to prisons and military training schools. The whereabouts and current status of the remaining 1,459 detainees are still unknown.

The data indicates that arrests peaked in the early months of 2025. By township, the highest numbers of arrests were recorded in Thaketa, North Dagon, Thingangyun, North Okkalapa, Sanchaung, and Insein compared to other areas of Yangon.

According to RSN, 840 individuals were arrested during indiscriminate sweeps, 597 while walking on the streets, 172 sitting on the roadside, 62 in shops, and nine inside vehicles. The remaining arrests occurred during random inspections, household guest-list checks, and similar operations.

RSN also reported that 393 people were arrested under the pretext of being sent to military training schools. Among these, 177 were actually transferred to training centres, 29 were released after paying money, while the fate of the remaining 182 individuals remains unknown.

"We strongly advise people not to travel alone, especially at night or in deserted areas, and to avoid sitting by the roadside at night," an RSN official stated. "Residents should stay alert in their neighbourhoods and be prepared to temporarily relocate if they hear

news related to forced conscription."

RSN noted that arrests related to robbery, drug offenses, gambling, fraud, and cases of missing persons were not included in the figures for arbitrary arrests cited in the report.

A Yangon-based human rights organization commented to Mizzima that human rights encompass both freedom from fear and freedom from want. "At its core, it is about living without fear. No one has the right to violate a person's fundamental freedoms. People must be able to live safely and securely without fear. If that is possible, human rights exist; if not, they do not," the organization stated.

Residents also reported that the junta has recently intensified guest-list inspections in townships such as Tamwe and Thaketa, specifically targeting Rakhine internally displaced persons and individuals holding Rakhine State ID cards marked with '11/'. Homes deemed suspicious are reportedly searched thoroughly, and arbitrary arrests and extortion are carried out.

Additionally, Yangon residents indicated that in some townships involved in the final phase of elections, individuals living under guest-list registration have faced ongoing threats and pressure to vote.

Overall, Yangon has seen an escalation in daily arrests, frequent guest-list inspections, voter registration activities, and coercion to participate in voting, all carried out by the junta and its affiliated groups.



Photo: Supplied

TWO KILLED, INCLUDING A CHILD, MANY INJURED IN MYANMAR JUNTA ATTACKS IN SALIN TOWNSHIP

According to the People's Brotherhood-Salin group, a one-year-old child and an elderly man were killed, and at least 15 residents were injured as junta forces targeted villages in Salin Township, Magway Region, using drones and heavy artillery.

An official from the People's Brotherhood-Salin reported that junta forces have been attacking villages daily from 17-20 January, employing heavy weapon fire and dropping bombs via drones.

"Due to the heavy artillery and drone bomb attacks, 15 local residents were injured, while a one-year-old infant and a 70-year-old man were killed. Some patients remain in critical condition," the official stated.

It is reported that on 17 and 18 January, junta forces used both heavy weapons and small arms fire, as well as drone-dropped bombs, to assault several villages in Salin Township, including Panteinkone, Kanyat, Naungtawgyi, Naungtawlay, U Yin Su, Pantaw, and Kyauk Khe Kone. Furthermore, the official added that

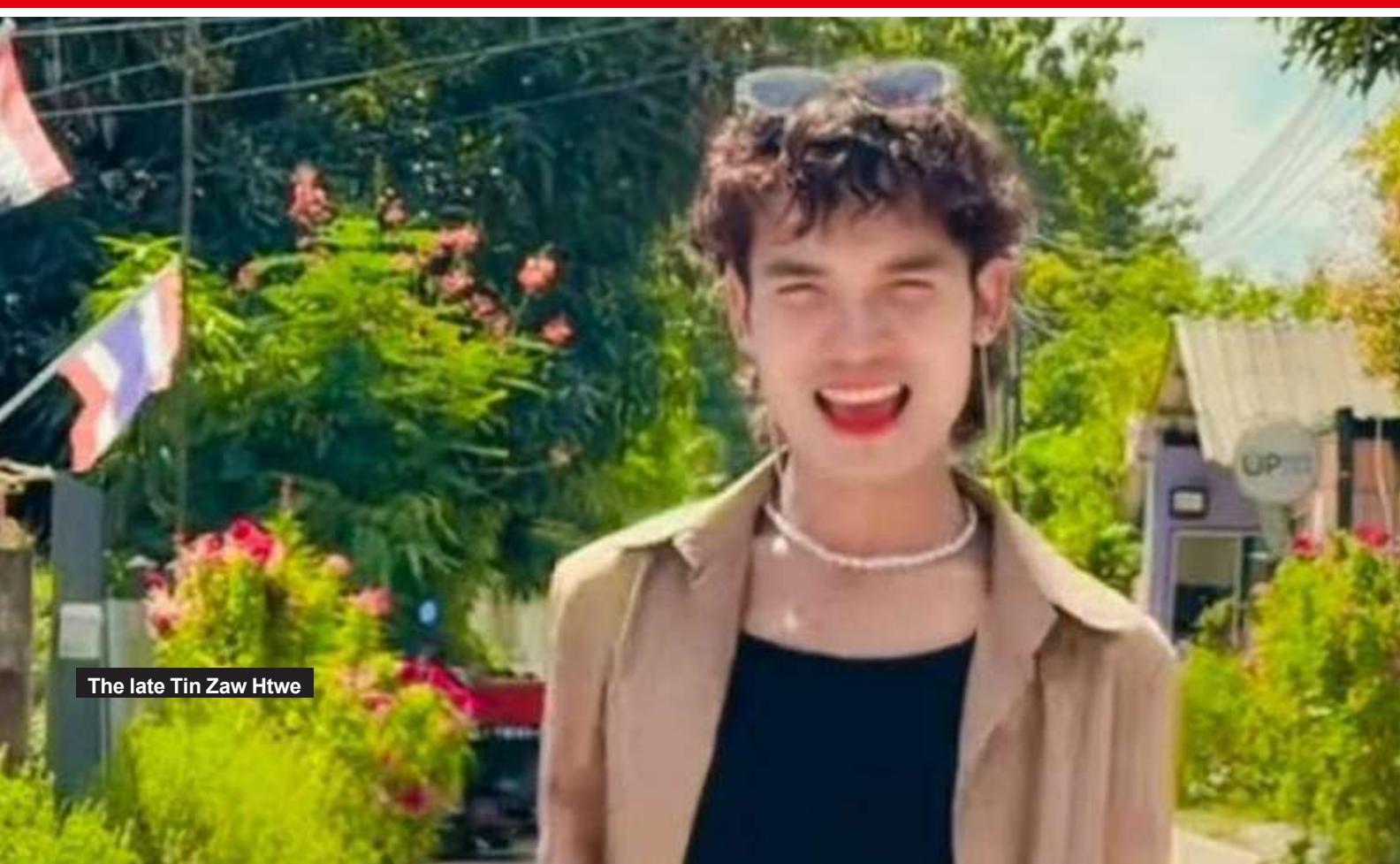
after sending military columns into these villages, junta forces also set fire to and destroyed civilian homes.

"The locals have not been able to return home yet. Since military columns are still present in the area, we do not yet know the exact number of houses that have been burned down," he said.

On 19 January at around 2:00 p.m., junta forces dropped bombs via drones on Wan Pyay village in Salin Township, injuring four members of a local family.

"They launched drones from the direction of Shwe Lay cemetery and dropped bombs into Wan Pyay village. Two of the injured are in critical condition," a local resident reported.

Additionally, the People's Brotherhood-Salin reported that on the morning of 20 January, junta forces fired heavy weapons and dropped drone bombs on Shar Taw, Kyauk Ye Kone, and Auk Hline villages.



The late Tin Zaw Htwe

MYANMAR TIKTOK CELEBRITY 'AYEYARWADY MA' ROBBED AND MURDERED IN MAE SOT

Ayeyawdy Ma' also known as Tin Zaw Htwe, a Myanmar migrant and LGBT TikTok personality living in Mae Sot on the Thai side of the Thai-Myanmar border, was robbed and murdered while traveling to meet someone she had connected with online.

On 19 January, she left her home around 11 p.m. to meet the owner of an account named "Thiha." After that, all contact with her was lost.

On 20 January, she was found lying face down in a vacant plot of land in Mae Tao TK Gyi Ward in Mae Sot. She suffered severe head injuries and multiple stab wounds.

"One stab wound was to her neck, and beer bottles, snacks, and condoms were found nearby. She was naked from the waist down," a Myanmar witness told

Mizzima. The victim had also been sexually assaulted, and a blood-stained bamboo stick was recovered at the scene. Her belongings, including an iPhone 17 Pro Max, a gold necklace, a gold bracelet, and several rings, were reported stolen.

Thai authorities have recovered a migrant worker identification card belonging to a suspect near the scene and are intensifying their investigation to identify and arrest the perpetrator as quickly as possible. The victim's body has been transported to Mae Sot General Hospital for further examination.

Family members have discovered evidence on social media indicating that she had arranged a meeting with the alleged perpetrator, identified as "Thiha," and are preparing to file a formal complaint, according to sources close to the deceased.



SEVERE HEALTH CRISIS AND WATER SHORTAGES GRIP 8,000 DISPLACED RESIDENTS IN SALIN TOWNSHIP

A burgeoning humanitarian crisis is unfolding in the forested areas of Salin Township, where more than 8,000 residents from 18 villages are facing critical shortages of water and a widespread outbreak of skin diseases following sustained military offensives.

The displaced population, forced to flee during the third week of January 2026, is currently sheltering in makeshift forest camps without access to basic hygiene or adequate nutrition.

"In certain villages, the displaced people are experiencing fevers, rashes and itching on their bodies. Since they are in the forest, they are having trouble getting water for drinking, washing, and bathing," said an official from Pyithu Nyinaung-Salin group.

The mass displacement was triggered by a series of raids, heavy artillery shelling, and drone-assisted bombings by Military Commission forces targeting rural communities.

Affected villages include Shar Taw, Kyauk Ye Tone, Auk Hlaing, Pan Tain Kone, Ka Nyat, Naung Taw Gyi,

Naung Taw Lay, Ou Yin Su, Pan Taw, and Kyauk Khe Kone.

According to an official from the local aid group Pyithu Nyinaung-Salin, the lack of clean water for drinking and bathing has led to a surge in fevers and contagious skin conditions characterized by severe rashes and itching.

Local resistance sources have confirmed the deaths of an elderly resident and a one-year-old child during the initial military strikes, with at least 15 other civilians reportedly injured. Beyond the immediate casualties, the military has systematically raided villages and burned civilian homes to the ground.

Reports indicate that junta troops are preparing to expand their "clearing operations" to villages south of Salin Creek in an attempt to consolidate control over the territory. Aid workers have issued an urgent appeal for instant noodles, rice, cooking oil, eggs, and essential medicines to prevent further loss of life among the displaced families.



Mizoram. Photo: Supplied

ASSAM RIFLES SEIZE OVER 52 MILLION KYAT FROM MYANMAR NATIONALS IN MIZORAM BORDER OPERATIONS

Indian security forces have apprehended four Myanmar nationals and seized over 52 million Myanmar Kyat in cash during back-to-back operations in Mizoram's Siaha district. The seizures, conducted by the Assam Rifles between 18 January and January 20, 2026, highlight an intensifying crackdown on the illegal transport of foreign currency and contraband along the sensitive Indo-Myanmar border.

The most significant recovery occurred on 20 January at a mobile vehicle check post in Tuipang. According to official statements, security personnel intercepted a tipper truck and discovered 17.5 million Kyat in cash, along with smuggled tobacco and foreign cigarettes. The driver, identified as U Phyu Maung, a resident of Myanmar's Rakhine State, was taken into custody.

Just hours later, a separate operation near Laki village led to the seizure of 34.607 million Kyat from three Myanmar women and two local Indian men traveling in two intercepted vehicles.

"They were arrested after authorities received intelligence. Foreign currency cannot be legally held here, so people need to be careful," a Myanmar national in Mizoram told Mizzima.

He said the seizure of illegal currency, along with drugs, has made locals suspicious of the remaining Myanmar nationals, raising fears that their lives will become more difficult.

Authorities seized more than 17 million kyats in cash, tobacco worth 50,000 rupees (over 2.2 million kyats), and foreign cigarettes valued at 130,000 rupees (more than 5.8 million kyats) from a Myanmar national arrested in the Thu Pan area of Siaha district.

Similarly, a mobile checkpoint near Laki village in Siaha district led to the seizure of more than 30 million kyats in cash from three Myanmar nationals and two local men, according to a statement.

The Assam Rifles said the arrested individuals were handed over to the Thu Pan police station in Siaha district for further legal action.

Siaha district, where the currency and illegal goods were seized, borders Myanmar's Chin State and serves as a key transit route for food, medicine and fuel into Matupi township and Rakhine State.

The illegal import of foreign currency into India is punishable under the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA) and the Customs Act of 1962. Under these laws, offenders can face fines or imprisonment ranging from five years to life, depending on the amount of money involved.

India has announced plans to fence its 1,643-kilometre border with Myanmar to enhance national security and curb the influx of illegal goods, including drugs.



Photo: Supplied

FIVE KILLED AS MYANMAR JUNTA AIRSTRIKE TARGETS WEDDING PREPARATION IN AUNGLAN TOWNSHIP

A devastating airstrike by Military Commission forces on Tat Kone Village killed five civilians, including a one-year-old child, while residents were gathered to prepare for a local wedding on 22 January, 2026. The attack, which took place at approximately 2:00 pm, reportedly involved the dropping of three 100-pound bombs directly onto the site of a wedding pavilion.

According to the official from Aunglan Community Group, the victims included a one-year-old infant, a woman in her 60s, and a man in his early 30s. Numerous others sustained injuries, though a precise casualty count remains difficult to verify due to a total internet blackout in the region following the strike.

"They (Military Commission) carried out this aerial attack while people were gathering and preparations for the wedding were underway. It occurred because an informant gave false information claiming that revolutionary forces were present at the location. The

situation is still being evaluated as there are many injured individuals. The precise figure is unknown at this time because the internet connection has been cut off," the official said.

Furthermore, two houses that were hit by the bombs were totally destroyed by fire, and several other homes were damaged.

According to locals, Tat Kone village residents were forced to flee to neighbouring villages after the Military Commission's airstrike made it impossible for them to remain in the area.

On 29 December last year, the Military Commission's No. 15 Defense factory fired a 120-mm artillery shell and it directly hit at a house in Sat Su Wa Village in Aung Lan Township, killing four family members inside the house.



Insein Prison. Photo: AFP

IPCM CALLS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE OF 27 JOURNALISTS AND STRONGER MEDIA SAFETY GUARANTEES IN MYANMAR

The Independent Press Council Myanmar (IPCM) has issued a five-point demand that includes the immediate and unconditional release of 27 journalists currently imprisoned across the country. This request was made on 19 January during the IPCM's second general conference, which took place online from 17-18 January.

"Myanmar has the second-highest number of imprisoned journalists in the world, following China. This is not just an issue we report on, we are actively collaborating with regional and international press and media councils behind the scenes," said IPCM Secretary U Toe Zaw Latt in an interview with Mizzima.

U Toe Zaw Latt noted that 14 of the detained journalists are serving long-term sentences and emphasized that they have not been forgotten. The main demands include an immediate cessation of targeted

arrests, torture, and imprisonment of journalists, respect for their right to report during armed conflicts, cooperation from authorities to ensure journalists' safety, and international assistance to support the long-term survival of independent media.

The conference also elected 14 new executive committee members, appointing U Ko Ko Zaw of the Thamlwin Times as chairman and veteran journalist U Toe Zaw Latt as secretary. Additionally, the conference approved a workplace policy aimed at preventing sexual harassment and a policy supporting indigenous language media.

Founded in 2023, the IPCM is primarily focused on promoting media freedom and upholding journalistic ethics in Myanmar.

RESISTING MILITARY RULE IN BURMA (1988-2024)

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

by *Nandita Haksar and Soe Myint*



RESISTING MILITARY RULE IN BURMA (1988-2024)

Story of Mizzima Media:
Born in Exile, Banned in Myanmar

Nandita Haksar
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Myanmar journalists. Photo: Supplied

OVER 300 JOURNALISTS BEHIND BARS FOR FIFTH STRAIGHT YEAR: WATCHDOG

The number of journalists imprisoned worldwide for their work was 330 in the final month of 2025, the Committee to Protect Journalists said 21 January, the fifth consecutive year the count has exceeded 300.

China held 50 prisoners as of December 1, followed by Myanmar with 30 and then Israel, which detained 29 Palestinian journalists, the press freedom watchdog said in its annual report.

Next was Russia with 27 prisoners, of which five were Ukrainian, then Belarus with 25 and Azerbaijan with 24, the CPJ said.

It is the third highest total recorded by the CPJ since its census began in 1992 and just short of the record 384 journalists in prison for their work at the end of 2024.

"These record-setting numbers reflect growing authoritarianism and escalating numbers of armed conflicts worldwide," the CPJ said in its report.

The New York-based NGO said that almost half of the imprisoned journalists had not been convicted of a crime. Of those who had been, more than a third were serving prison sentences of over five years.

Nearly a third of the detained journalists had experienced "mistreatment," the CPJ said, including 20 percent with claims of torture or beatings. Since 1992, Iran has had the greatest incidence of torture and beatings, followed by Israel and Egypt.

In 2025, Asia remained the region with the highest number of imprisoned journalists at 110. Beyond China and Myanmar, Vietnam held at least 16, Bangladesh four, India three, and the Philippines one.

The United States detained Salvadoran journalist Mario Guevara in June after he covered a protest against President Donald Trump, but he was deported over his immigration status before the December 1 CPJ census was taken.

AFP

FRAUDSTERS FLEE CAMBODIA'S 'SCAM CITY' AFTER ACCUSED BOSS TAKEN DOWN

Hundreds of people dragged away suitcases, computer monitors, pets and furniture as they fled a suspected Cambodian cyberfraud centre, after the country's most wanted alleged scam kingpin was arrested and deported.

Boarding tuk-tuks, Lexus SUVs and tourist coaches, an exodus departed Amber Casino in the coastal city of Sihanoukville, one of the illicit trade's most notorious hubs.

"Cambodia is in upheaval," one Chinese man told AFP. "Nowhere is safe to work anymore," he said.

Similar scenes played out at alleged scam compounds across Cambodia last week as the government said it was cracking down on the multibillion-dollar industry.

But residents said many of the people working inside the tightly secured buildings moved out several days before the arrival of authorities, and an analyst dubbed it "anti-crime theatre".

From hubs across Southeast Asia, scammers lure internet users globally into fake romantic relationships and cryptocurrency investments.

Initially largely targeting Chinese speakers, transnational crime groups have expanded operations into multiple languages to steal tens of billions annually from victims around the world.

Those conducting the scams are sometimes willing con artists, sometimes trafficked foreign nationals who have been trapped and forced to work under threat of violence.

AFP journalists visited several alleged internet scam sites in Sihanoukville, in the wake of the high-profile arrest in Cambodia and extradition to China of internationally sanctioned accused scam boss Chen Zhi.

Few of those departing the casinos, hotels and other facilities were willing to speak with AFP, and none were willing to be identified due to concerns for their safety.

"Our Chinese company just told us to leave straight away," said a Bangladeshi man outside Amber Casino.

"But we'll be fine. There are plenty of other job offers," he added.

Studded with casinos and unfinished high-rises, the glitzy resort of Sihanoukville has become a cyberscam hotbed, where thousands of people involved in the black market are believed to operate cons from fortified compounds.

Before Chen was indicted last year by US authorities who said his firm Prince Group was a front for a transnational cybercrime network, the Chinese-born businessman ran multiple gambling hotels in Sihanoukville.

A 2025 Amnesty International report identified 22 scam locations in the coastal resort, out of a total of 53 in the country.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime estimates global losses to online scams reached up to \$37 billion in 2023, and that at least 100,000 people work in the industry in Cambodia alone.

Tipped off

But the Cambodian government claims the lawless era has come to an end, with Prime Minister Hun Manet pledging on Facebook to "eliminate... all the problems related to the crime of cyber scams".

Cambodia's anti-scam commission says it has raided 118 scam locations and arrested around 5,000 people in the last six months.

Following Chen's deportation to China, the Cambodian government has tightened the screws on some Prince Group affiliates, ordering Prince Bank into liquidation and freezing home sales at several of its luxury properties.

In recent months, China has stepped up its pursuit of the scam industry, sweeping up Chen and other key figures from across Southeast Asia to try them on its own soil.

But while Cambodia says it is "cracking down", there are suspicions over the timing.

A tuk-tuk driver in Sihanoukville told AFP hundreds

of Chinese people left one compound this week before police arrived.

"Looks like they were tipped off," said the 42-year-old, declining to give his name.

Mark Taylor, former head of a Cambodia-based anti-trafficking NGO, said the "preemptive shifting of scam centre resources", including workers, equipment and managers, had been seen ahead of law enforcement sweeps.

It was "seemingly the product of collusion", he added, in a strategy with "dual ends" of boosting the government's anti-crime credentials while preserving the scamming industry's ability to survive and adapt.

Amnesty has accused the Cambodian government of "deliberately ignoring" rights abuses by cybercrime gangs, which sometimes lure workers with offers of high-paying jobs before holding them against their will.

AFP journalists saw several coachloads of Mandarin speakers leaving Sihanoukville on the main highway to the capital Phnom Penh.

Multiple people said they "didn't know" where they were going or what their plans were, but appeared anxious as they anticipated law enforcement closing in.

Outside the Amber Casino, holding a fake designer hold-all, the Bangladeshi man fell in with the crowd, saying: "This is about survival now."

AFP



INDIA'S VISION OF THE INDO-PACIFIC

AMBASSADOR (RETD) SUCHITRA DURAI

On 20 October 2025, on the occasion of Deepavali, the great Indian festival of lights, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, speaking from aboard India's first indigenously built aircraft carrier INS Vikrant, drew attention to the centrality of the Indian Ocean in India's strategic calculus. He recalled that 66% of the world's oil supply and 50% of global container shipments pass through the Indian Ocean. "And in securing these routes," he said "the Indian Navy stands guard like the sentinel of the Indian Ocean."

The perception of the Indian and the Pacific Oceans as one strategic space gained traction in the mid-2000s, particularly in India after the Japanese PM Shinzo Abe in a speech to the Indian parliament in August 2007, referred to the Confluence of the Two Seas. In a decade, 'Indo-Pacific' became a globally accepted term after US President Trump in his address to APEC summit in Vietnam in 2017 called for a free and open Indo-Pacific.

India's Indo-Pacific vision was articulated by PM Modi at the Shangri La Dialogue in June 2018. He said that the Indo-Pacific region, *inter alia*, "stands for a free, open, inclusive region which embraces us in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity. It includes all nations in this geography as also others beyond who have a stake in it."

In a sense, this was an organic evolution of India's foreign and security policy, whose reorientation had begun in the 1970s and accelerated since the end of the Cold War in 1991. From a predominantly continental orientation, India began to focus on its maritime advantages, particularly its dominant position in the Indian Ocean. The Indian navy was in the forefront of this reorientation. From a coastal force, it became a balancing force in the 1970s and a blue water navy by the 1980s, dominating the northern and central Indian Ocean from the 1990s.

India's economic liberalization also made it view countries to its east, particularly the Tiger economies and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), as attractive partners for economic growth and shared prosperity. Thus, in 1992 India's Look East Policy (LEP) was launched and institutional dialogue commenced with ASEAN. In 2012 India and ASEAN became strategic partners; the relationship was elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2022. Over the years, India also established with other partners plurilateral groupings including BIMSTEC focusing on the Bay of Bengal region and the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) mechanism. In 2014, India elevated its LEP to Act East policy, significantly adding substance to its engagement.

India's Indo-Pacific vision has many building blocks. In 2015, PM Modi launched its policy for the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) – Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). The SAGAR policy has five components: safety and security of the Indian mainland and island territories and ensuring a safe, secure and stable IOR; deepen economic and security cooperation with friends in the IOR through capacity building; collective action and cooperation; work towards sustainable development of all; increased maritime engagement as the primary responsibility for the stability and prosperity of the region lay with those in the region. India is also a founder member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), a 23-member body established in 1997 that promotes economic cooperation, maritime security and sustainable development. India's Act East policy is the umbrella policy that upholds ASEAN centrality and ASEAN's various mechanisms including the East Asia summit as apex platforms for dialogue.

The 2004 Tsunami established India's credentials in disaster relief operations as well as rehabilitation. From the eastern shores of Africa to the Pacific islands, India has extended humanitarian assistance in times of disaster and crisis. India's speedy assistance to Myanmar in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008; when neighbouring Maldives faced a freshwater crisis in 2014 India was the first country to deliver drinking water under Operation Neer; in 2018, India stood shoulder to shoulder in relief and rescue efforts in Tsunami-struck Indonesia; in 2019, India was the first responder when two tropical cyclones devastated Mozambique; in early 2025 when a massive earthquake affected Myanmar India launched Operation Brahma, an extensive tri-service operation; in end 2025, it extended timely assistance to cyclone-ravaged Sri Lanka. On 19 January, India extended 30 tonnes of HADR to Philippines that had recently been struck by a Super Typhoon.

Development partnership is an intrinsic part of our Indo-Pacific vision. The Indian model of development cooperation involves grants-in-aid, concessional lines of credit, capacity building and technical assistance. Significantly, it is unconditional, transparent, sustainable, financially viable and undertaken at the request of the partner state in keeping with the latter's priorities. India's vaccine outreach during the Covid-19 pandemic to both developed and developing states is perhaps

unprecedented. In 2023, during its presidency of G-20, India succeeded in amplifying the voice of the global south and championed development cooperation. In 2025, PM Modi announced MAHASAGAR, an updated version of the SAGAR doctrine, that marked an evolution from a regional focus to a global maritime vision with emphasis on the global south.

As a preferred maritime security partner in the Indo-Pacific, India's engagement has included joint exercises at the bilateral and plurilateral level, naval symposia, capacity building as well as exports of defence equipment either as a grant or under a defence line of credit at the request of the partner state. A crucial aspect of maritime security is enhanced maritime domain awareness. Thus, India has been pursuing white shipping agreements with several countries and has established a state-of-the-art Information Fusion Centre (IFC – IOR) that facilitates sharing of real time information with member countries.

Freedom of navigation and unimpeded commerce is one of the main aspects of our Indo-Pacific vision. In 2024, under Operation Sankalp, the Indian Navy deployed over ten warships including guided missile destroyers and frigates in the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea to protect commercial shipping in the wake of Houthi-led attacks. This was the largest deployment by any country.

At a time of global churn and unpredictability, India continues to uphold its role as a responsible member of the international community that contributes to the stability, prosperity and a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region.

*By Ambassador (Retd) Suchitra Durai
Former Ambassador of India to Thailand*



THE WEIGHT OF FREEDOM

I You know, I'm not a superwoman or anything, but at least I can do what I can do." Humble and understated, Moe Thae Say's quiet confidence belies her courage. She lived a comfortable life in Yangon, surrounded by friends and family who even in the fog of wartime continue to enjoy the luxuries of a middle-class lifestyle. Soon after the coup, the war raging on, something began to stir in her. Soon enough, Moe Thae Say found herself in the jungle, having committed herself to helping and training with the People's Defense Force (PDF).

Before the coup, she was deeply embedded in the Yangon creative industry, a digital creator who rose to become a Creative Director. During the pandemic, a new entrepreneurial side emerged as she created a successful business crafting unique decorative items from concrete and cement. Moe Thae Say's life was on a clear trajectory, but when the military took control in February 2021, she was unwilling to normalize the dictatorship.

Feeling unable to stand by while her fellow civilians suffered, she made the irreversible decision to leave Yangon, joining her comrades at the border. She used profits from her business to support the resistance efforts, ultimately sacrificing her livelihood to join the PDF. Her

journey began with a grueling two-month combat training course deep in the jungle.

Disconnected from the world, she faced extreme psychological challenges, struggling with pre-existing PTSD and the harsh physical demands of the camp. Training was led by Myanmar military defectors, giving Moe Thae Say an unprecedented look into the inner workings, weapons and tactics of the professional army she was now preparing to fight.

At first, the most challenging experience was handling a weapon. Having never touched a gun before, she recalled feeling terrified, being told by one of the trainers that her heart was beating "louder than the gunfire." Discrimination was also rife, as she was one of only seven women among sixty trainees. The leaders initially attempted to segregate them, assuming they lacked the capacity for frontline service. But she and the other women challenged this prejudice directly, determined to be treated equally and undertake training alongside the men. "Most of the service women in the military, they just worked in the backline," she notes.

Even after Moe Thay Say completed her combat training and expressed her wish to go to the front line, gender norms continued to restrict her ability to contribute to the struggle. Her service shifted to essential management, medic training and administrative support – vital yet unglamorous work. Despite the hardships, the presence of her fiancé and the overwhelming sense of purpose carried her through the most extreme period of her life.

CATCH THE PODCAST

Read more and listen to the Insight Myanmar Podcast here:

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2026/1/3/episode-463-the-weight-of-freedom>



Air Force cadets at graduation. Photo: Regime media

MYANMAR JUNTA'S AIR FORCE GRADUATES NEW PILOTS

The Myanmar junta announced on 22 January it has graduated a new intake of air force pilots, reinforcing the ranks of an arm that has come in for much criticism for the indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets as well as military as it claims to battle armed resistance across the country.

The ceremony for the graduates of the 87th intake of the Tatmadaw (Air) pilot training course took place in Meiktila, according to state media. Shante Air Base, the Air Force's main pilot training facility, is located near Meiktila.

The event was overseen by Air Force chief General Zeya Kyaw Htin Sithu Tun Aung, who presented wings and awards to newly qualified pilots.

In a speech reported by the Global New Light of Myanmar, the general said the graduates would be assigned to various air force units to operate "high-value, advanced aircraft and helicopters" in the service of national defence.

He said the training programme was aimed at producing "qualified and competent pilots" capable of flying modern aircraft, as part of efforts to build a "strong, capable and modern" air force. He also reportedly urged graduates to uphold discipline, unity and fairness in their duties, and stressed the importance of continued learning.

State media reported that the military is prioritising the procurement and domestic research and production of aircraft, helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles and weapons systems, alongside ongoing training to keep pace with modern technology.

The ceremony comes as Myanmar's junta faces widespread armed opposition nearly five years after seizing power in a 2021 coup. The military has increasingly relied on air power in its fight against ethnic and pro-democracy resistance forces.

The Air Force has been repeatedly accused by rights groups and the political opposition of also carrying out airstrikes against civilian targets including villages, schools, monasteries, and hospitals and clinics. Hundreds of civilians have been killed and many more injured in these airstrikes.

The junta denies targeting civilians and says its operations are aimed at restoring stability and countering what it describes as "terrorist" groups. Indeed, air strikes are often described in state media as targeting supporters of "terrorist" organisations.

Analysts say the graduation of new pilots highlights the military's determination to sustain its air operations despite battlefield losses, defections and international sanctions that have restricted its access to aircraft, spare parts and aviation fuel.



NATIONWIDE FIGHTING UNDERMINES MYANMAR ELECTION CREDIBILITY: SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

Across Myanmar, ongoing clashes between the military and resistance forces are a major topic in online social media discussions. Users say active fighting in many regions makes voting unrealistic, unsafe, and disconnected from daily reality.

Public sentiment is worried and dismissive. Many social media users argue that elections cannot function while towns face airstrikes, displacement, and travel restrictions. Online conversations suggest people are focused on safety and survival, not ballots.

Common user-style comments include:

"There is fighting everywhere. Who is thinking about voting?"

"Ballots don't stop bombs."

"War first, election later."

"You can't vote under airstrikes."

Some users point out that conflict areas will be excluded or tightly controlled, which they say distorts any turnout claims. Others argue that holding elections during nationwide conflict deepens mistrust and fear.

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.