

ON THE GROUND IN MYANMAR

mizzima WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight

A photograph of a man wearing a straw hat and no shirt, standing in a market stall. He is surrounded by large bunches of green bananas hanging from the ceiling and stacked on the floor. The stall has a rustic, wooden structure.

FAILED STATE?

**World Bank has the stats
but the citizens
understand Myanmar's
economic straits**

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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.

CALL FOR SUPPORT FOR MYANMAR'S DISPLACED

Last week, 128 organizations endorsed a statement to coincide with World Refugee Day on 20 June that called on the United Nations, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other neighbouring countries to address the root cause of the unprecedented mass displacement in Myanmar and its impacts across the region.

One of the NGOs, Progressive Voice said the international community must act urgently to end the military junta's atrocities and hold the perpetrators accountable under international law through all available avenues.

The NGOs called on the international community to directly support trusted local frontline humanitarian responders in delivering much-needed humanitarian aid to displaced communities through locally-led cross-border channels. They called on Myanmar's neighbouring countries to allow and support such cross-border channels for these frontline humanitarian responders to deliver aid to displaced communities.

The statement called on Myanmar's neighbouring countries and the wider international community to respect the principle of non-refoulement, end the arbitrary detention, pushbacks, and deportations of Myanmar people, and provide them with legal protection, humanitarian aid, and access to essential services.

Over 2.8 million people have been internally displaced in Myanmar by the Myanmar military junta's violence since 2021, according to Progressive Voice. It says that the Myanmar military junta's ongoing mass atrocity crimes continue to intensify mass displacement and suffering across the country and beyond its borders into neighbouring Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.

Since its illegal coup attempt in 2021, the junta's relentless violence has internally displaced more than 2.8 million

people countrywide—an 87% increase as compared to 1.5 million at this time last year. Prior to the coup attempt, the Myanmar military's violence had already forced an estimated 328,000 into protracted displacement—particularly in Rakhine, Kachin, Chin, Shan, and Mon States. The actual figures are likely significantly higher given reports from humanitarian responders on the ground with direct access to the affected populations.

For the thousands of Myanmar people crossing international borders to seek safety from the junta's violence, protection remains far from guaranteed. In addition to facing arbitrary arrest and detention, many Myanmar people have been pushed back or otherwise forcibly returned to Myanmar by neighboring countries, including Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, and Thailand.

This is occurring despite the undeniable reality that any Myanmar person will face irreparable harm at the hands of the Myanmar military junta upon return.

In many neighbouring countries, Myanmar refugees lack access to legal protection, humanitarian assistance, employment, formal education, healthcare, and other essential services. Forced to live in the shadows, countless Myanmar people seeking safety across the region are instead denied their human dignity and subjected to exploitation, violence, and other human rights violations with no means of legal recourse.

The call provided a fitting message for the World Refugee Day, highlighting the condition of the displaced in Myanmar.

EDITORIAL

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Cover photo of a worker with bananas in Yangon by AFP





Myanmar citizens are feeling the pinch in a struggling economy. Photo: AFP

FAILED STATE?

**WORLD BANK HAS THE STATS BUT THE
CITIZENS UNDERSTAND MYANMAR'S
ECONOMIC STRAITS**

Yangon resident May Khine is struggling to support her family through her small clothing shop business. With high inflation and costs going up, it is hard for her to make ends meet in a country at war in dire economic straits and societal crisis.

The Myanmar Economic Monitor Report for June 2024 entitled "Livelihoods Under Threat" delves deep into Myanmar's economic crisis, providing detailed statistics, its title pointing to the "human cost" of the ongoing crisis.

May could be referred to as the human face of the crisis.

The report has the statistics, as would be expected – but it is necessary to talk to the man or woman on the street in Myanmar to assess the difficulties faced.

May told Mizzima that she has been running a clothing shop in Yangon's Thein Phyu Market for over 10 years.

"Business is slow these days. When I go home, I wonder whether to buy meat and fish for cooking. I always have to think twice about buying vegetables because their prices are nearly as high as meat. It's almost impossible to afford both. Even cabbage costs almost 1,000 kyat. This is a tough time, and things have

gotten really bad," she says.

May can see the trend.

"Shops in the market near me have been closing one by one. Those who lose their businesses then start working in other people's shops," she says, noting the desperation.

Over the last six months she has seen business drop, with many of the shops nearby having closed.

FAILED STATE?

Is Myanmar's economy collapsing?

After all, the country on occasion hits the world headlines for all the wrong reasons.

It is tempting for journalists to offer brash headlines when it comes to the state of the economy. But the situation is more nuanced – and the World Bank report offers details that indicate that while people are suffering the economy continues to tick over, at least for now, a crucial factor for the military junta hanging on to power.

On a personal level, the man and woman on the street have been feeling the pain, whether due to the



The wet season adds to people's woes. Photo: AFP

chaos of war, poor pay, unemployment, a depressed business environment, or this year the fear sparked by the Myanmar junta's conscription drive.

The troubled economic and business situation is not helped by the paranoid military junta that is curtailing freedoms.

There have been arrests of small business owners for posting on Facebook that they had increased their staff's salary to help them cope with inflation - arrested and charged under Section 505 of Penal Code or Public Mischief. Well-known businessman Serge Pun was recently called in for questioning, likely due to junta concern over investment in properties in Thailand - money leaving the country. And money changers and gold shop dealers have felt the heat over the rates they charge - prompting the junta to remove licenses and make arrests.

COUNTRY AT WAR

So where does Myanmar's economy stand? And what is the human cost?

The World Bank Myanmar Economic Monitor provides a useful aerial view of the economic and

financial climate of a country at war and in crisis, though it errs on the side of caution when it considers the human cost and who is to blame - hoping, one suspects, to maintain access to the country and communications with the junta.

On a macro scale, Myanmar's economy is not a basket case. At least not yet. The economy is still functioning. The new report projects gross domestic product will rise by 1 per cent over the year to March 2025, in line with growth estimates for the previous year but down from the December 2023 forecast of 2 per cent growth. Economic output is expected to remain about 9 per cent below 2019 levels, in sharp contrast to the experience of other large economies in the region.

Myanmar is effectively reeling from two key crises - the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, when they were in play, and now the negative outcome of the 2021 coup, the current civil war, and related issues that are dividing society.

Naturally, when compared to other ASEAN countries, it is the "black dog" of the family - but even then regional countries continue to trade and invest in the country.



Close to 3 million people are internally displaced in Myanmar. Photo: AFP

CONSCRIPTION DRIVE

Fear pervades Myanmar today. The activation of the military conscription law in February has prompted significant migration out of major urban areas toward rural border areas and to Thailand, with some firms reporting labour shortages as a result.

Firms have reported resignations as employees relocated to rural areas or migrated outside Myanmar to avoid conscription. Results from the April round of the World Bank Firm Survey indicate that the share of firms reporting employee resignations due to migration increased to 28 per cent from 17 per cent in September 2023 and 11 per cent in April 2023, with services and manufacturing firms particularly severely affected.

Even before the conscription announcement, firms had been facing labour shortages caused by the escalation of conflict and declining real wages. A recent survey by the World Bank on the migration intentions of highly skilled graduate youth aged 20 – 40 indicate that more than half (52 per cent) wish to migrate abroad, with East Asian countries such as Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Thailand being the top preferred destinations.

POVERTY RATE UP

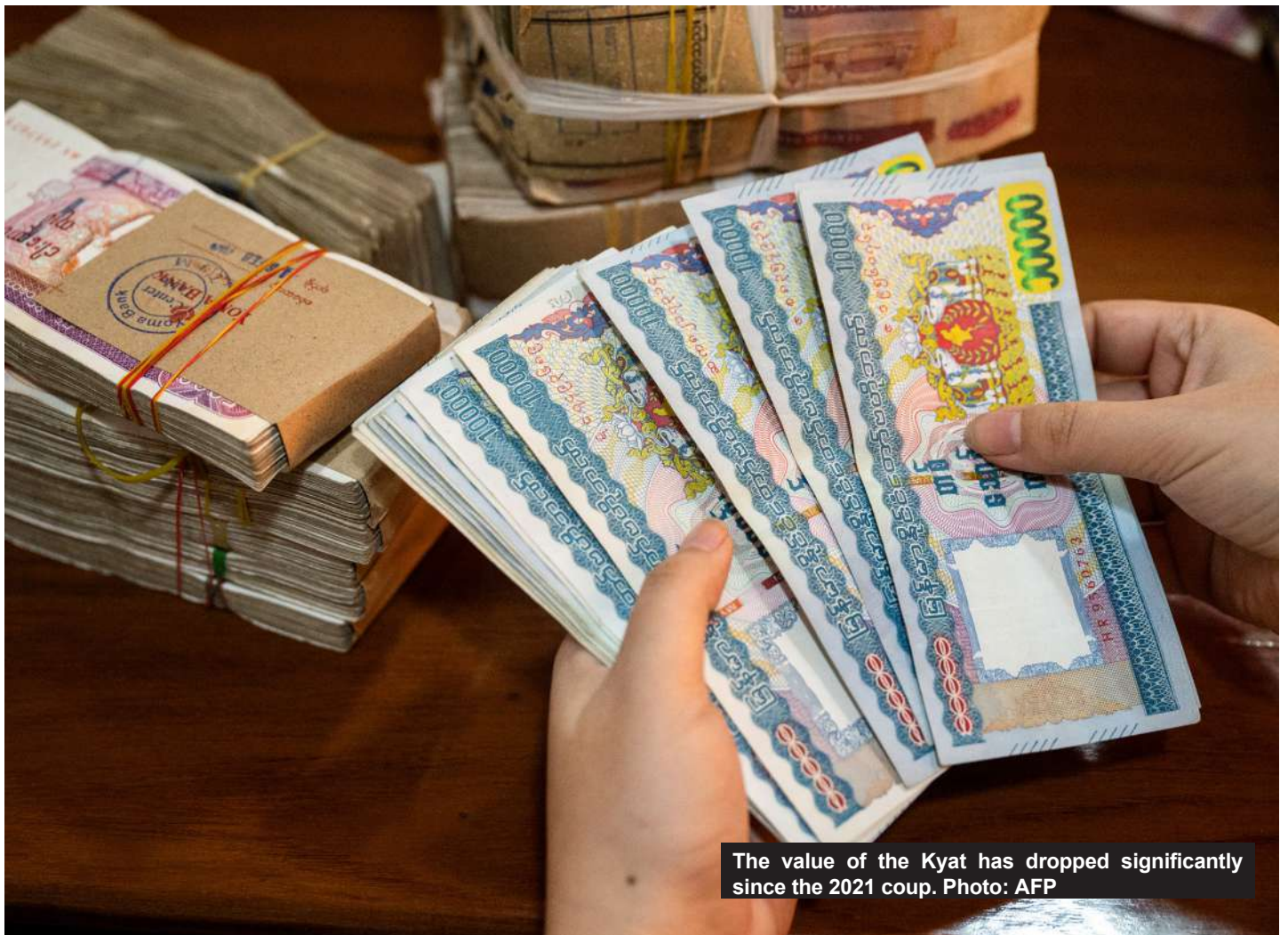
The human cost grabs attention with a growing number of people going hungry and people like Yangon shop owner May finding difficulty in affording food.

The poverty rate topped 32 per cent in early 2024, rising to levels last seen in 2015, while an additional third of the population is classified as economically insecure. At the same time, poverty is becoming increasingly entrenched, with its depth and severity approaching 2015 levels. Myanmar is now estimated to have 7 million more people living in poverty than it did immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 and the coup were the “one-two punch”.

Weakness in economic activity and labour markets have had significant impacts on household welfare, with the poverty rate estimated to have risen to nearly a third by the end of 2023 and early 2024. The 2023-24 Myanmar Subnational Phone Survey indicates that there has been a substantial increase in the headcount, depth and severity of poverty in Myanmar in recent years.

The poverty rate is estimated to be 32.1 percent in 2023-24, a reversion to levels last seen in 2015, while



The value of the Kyat has dropped significantly since the 2021 coup. Photo: AFP

a further third of the population are at risk of sliding into poverty, with consumption less than 1.5 times that of the poverty line. At the same time, the depth and severity of poverty – indicators of how far the poorest households' consumption lies from the poverty line – have worsened considerably since 2017, indicating that poverty has become increasingly entrenched.

On the other hand, counterfactual estimates suggest that had Myanmar sustained its pre-pandemic growth trends in recent years, there would have been 8 million fewer poor people in 2023 and the poverty rate would be just 11 percent.

Poverty has risen particularly sharply in conflict-affected states and regions. Sagaing, Kayah and Kayah have seen substantial increases in poverty over the last six years, despite already having among the highest rates of poverty in Myanmar in 2017, while poverty in Mandalay and Tanintharyi has also increased sharply.

On the other hand, there has been a notable decrease in poverty in Ayeyarwady which has seen relatively less conflict and remains one of Myanmar's leading food producing regions. While the survey data shows a small reduction in poverty in Rakhine, pressures on household consumption have increased

markedly in more recent months due to the impacts of conflict and rising prices. The MSPS data show that internally displaced populations (IDPs) are particularly vulnerable, with poverty rates around 50 percent, and unemployment rates of 40-45 percent, almost three times higher than the unemployment rate of non-IDPs.

While poverty is still higher in villages than cities, urban poverty has increased faster between 2017 and 2023-24 than poverty in rural areas. Average household consumption in rural areas is estimated to be 6 percent lower in 2023 than in 2017 (in real terms), while household consumption in urban areas has fallen by almost 20 percent over the same period.

The increase in rural poverty between 2017 and 2023 can in part be explained by job losses afflicting less-educated populations in villages, particularly in agriculture. The share of the rural population employed in agriculture has declined from 43 percent in 2017 to 34 percent in 2023, largely due to poorer and less-educated workers moving out of agricultural employment.

These shifts are likely to have had substantial implications for poverty: poorer and less-educated households are more likely to have reduced spending on



In some areas of the country, food supplies are threatened. Photo: AFP

food, health, and education to cope with recent shocks, and the MSPS findings indicate that poor households that have no members working in agriculture are particularly likely to resort to these negative coping strategies, compared to poorer households that have at least one member employed in agriculture.

On the other hand, the significant rise in urban poverty between 2017 and 2023-24 has coincided with a decline in the quality of available jobs. Waged employment has become more restricted among urban populations, with the share of waged employment falling by 8.7 percentage points between 2017-2022 and recovering less than 1 percentage point over the past year. The proportion of waged workers with formal contracts and pension provisions have fallen by 3.6 percentage points in the past year. These declines have been especially pronounced among college graduates.

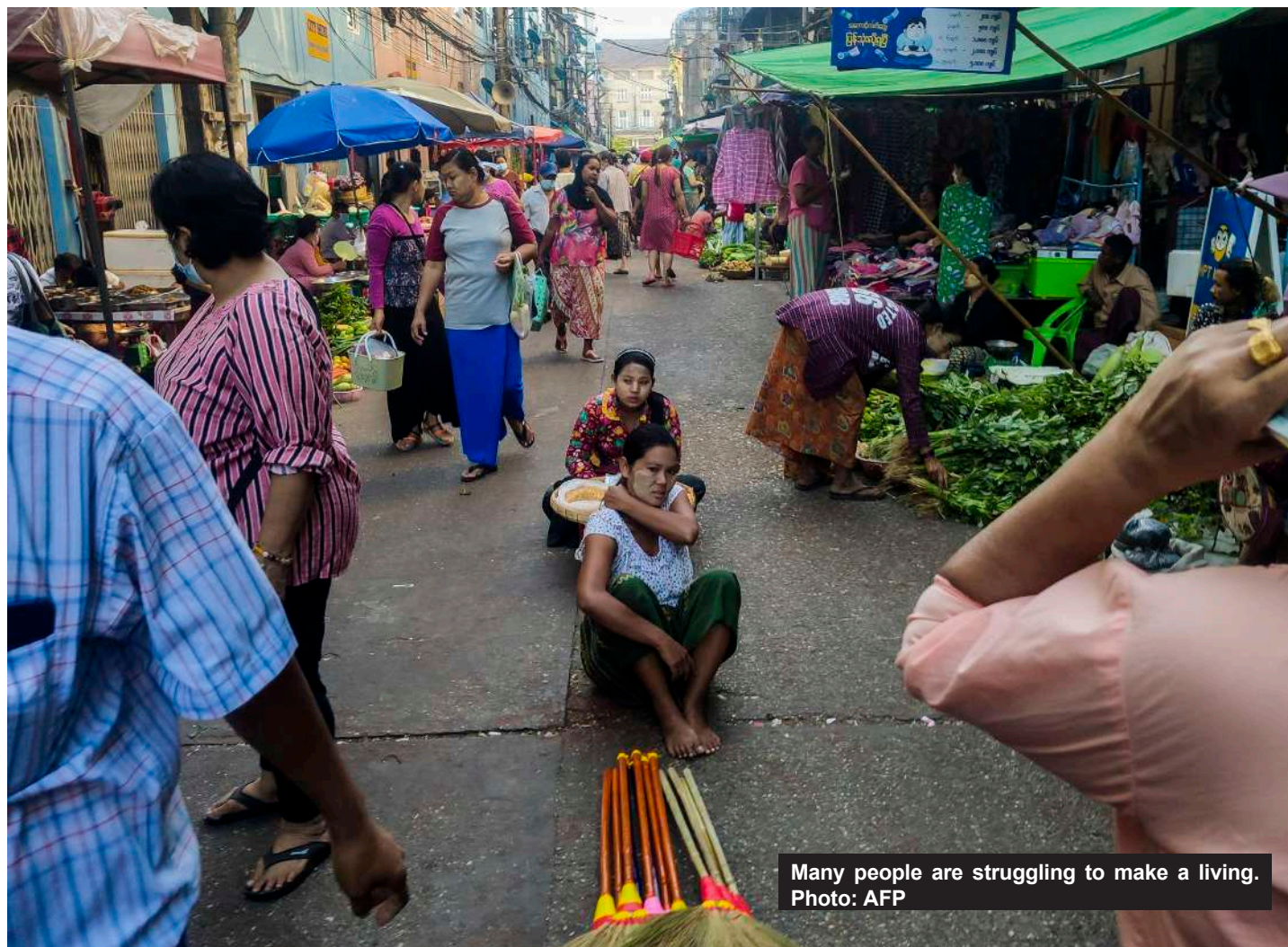
LABOUR MARKET

Labour market indicators remain weak, despite improvements in participation and employment over the last year. The World Bank's Myanmar Subnational Phone Survey (MSPS) indicates that following substantial

declines in labour force participation between 2017 and 2022, there was a moderate pick-up over the year to end-2023. The labour force participation rate (LFPR) rose 3.6 percentage points over the year to December 2023 but is yet to recover to levels observed in 2017. The employment rate (as a share of the working age population) increased by 2.3 percentage points over the last year but remains around 6 percentage points below 2017 levels.

Meanwhile, the estimated adult unemployment rate rose from 6.7 percent to 8.1 percent over the year to end-2023, up more than 3 percentage points from 2017.

After trending upwards in 2022, the number of job postings – a measure of labour demand – has plateaued since early 2023, and remains well below pre-pandemic levels, consistent with an economy that is yet to fully recover from the earlier contraction in activity. Vacancies remain particularly weak in tourism-related industries; engineering; legal, accounting and finance; and several other professional services. While the number of people not in employment, education, or training (NEET) has declined by 1.5 million over the past year, there are still 2.8 million additional NEET



Many people are struggling to make a living. Photo: AFP

in 2023 compared to 2017, 70 per cent of whom are women.

This ongoing weakness in labour demand has coincided with a more recent reduction in labour supply in some areas and industries, due to labour movements within the country and across borders in response to conflict and fear of conscription.

Results from the April 2024 round of the World Bank Firm Survey indicate that over half of the firms with job vacancies reported difficulty in filling these vacancies, due to a lack of applicants, a lack of skills, and-or demands for higher wages than could be offered by the firm.

This combination of weakness in demand and supply has meant that real-time indicators of employment have deteriorated in recent months: the April 2024 manufacturing purchasing managers' employment index fell to its lowest level since 2021, with employment in the manufacturing sector contracting for each of the last 10 months.

The quality of jobs has also declined over the last year. The share of wage work in overall employment and the share of formal employment among wage workers have fallen by 2.6 and 3.6 percentage points respectively over the last year. Workers with more education are experiencing particularly marked deteriorations in job quality, which has affected their consumption levels and raised the likelihood of them falling into poverty.

Aung Naing is a 21-year-old phone shop employee in Yangon's Yuzaan Plaza who is feeling the pinch. He currently receives a 180,000 Kyat salary, recently put up by 3,000 Kyat. "But the money has already run out by day fifteen of the month," he says.

He notes that people no longer crowd the market as much as before, and "for those of us who depend on a single salary, the money is low and the price of goods is high".

Aung Naing tells Mizzima he is overwhelmed. And there are days when he cannot afford to put food in his lunchbox.

FARMING SECTOR

That said, the agriculture sector remained comparatively resilient in 2023-24. The latest round of IFPRI's Myanmar Agricultural Performance Survey (MAPS) indicates that rice yields increased by 7 percent in the 2023 monsoon season, following consecutive declines in 2021 and 2022. Fertilizer use on paddy rose as fertilizer prices moderated. MAPS survey results

also showed farmers benefiting from an increase in nominal and real profits reflecting higher farmgate prices. Compared to April last year, sales and profits of agricultural firms in the World Bank Firm Survey increased by 3 percent and 4 percent, respectively, explained largely by favorable global prices and strong regional demand especially for rice and beans and pulses.

However, conflict and insecurity remained a major challenge to farmers across the country. About 26 percent of surveyed agricultural firms in the World Bank Firm Survey reported challenges with conflict in April (up from just 4 percent in April last year). In the MAPS survey, farmers in insecure areas reported particular challenges in accessing agricultural inputs and fuel, as well as higher input costs.

It is noticeable that the World Bank report tends to ignore the plight of farmers in conflict zones – such as Sagaing, Magway, Chin and Rakhine states – where planting and harvesting has been badly affected by junta military attacks and their "scorched earth" policies.

MANUFACTURING

The manufacturing purchasing managers' index (PMI) indicated that the sector expanded in May 2024, but this was off a low base after several months of decline. After seven consecutive months of contraction, factory orders increased in April and May. The rise in new orders in turn supported an increase in manufacturing output in May for the first time since August 2023, with food processors in particular appearing to have benefited from substitution away from imported goods. On the other hand, the garment sector remains under pressure with exports down almost a quarter in the six months to March 2024, compared with the same period a year earlier.

Results from the April 2024 World Bank Firm Survey indicate that the manufacturing activity remains constrained by power outages, conflict, import restrictions and foreign currency shortages. The average operating capacity of manufacturing firms was 61 percent in April 2024, 7 percentage points lower than a year ago. While conflict has exacerbated supply chain disruptions, delays in obtaining import licenses have been the main driver of longer supplier delivery times, while the high cost of imported inputs remains a major constraint.

Labour shortages have reportedly become an increased challenge for the sector in recent months

due to falling real wages and the threat of conscription.

GROWTH IN CONSTRUCTION

Indicators of construction activity have improved in FY2023-24. Permits for residential construction in Yangon, representing approximately half of total construction activity, grew steadily until the end of 2023 before easing in the first half of 2024. Construction of small-scale government projects, including roads, bridges, public buildings, and bus stations, has also picked up. Reflecting these trends, the volume of imported construction materials from China rose in FY2023-24 compared with the previous year. However, major foreign funded infrastructure projects like the planned China CITIC deepwater port in Kyaukphyu and the Indian Kaladan project, which aims to connect India with the Sittwe port in Rakhine State, have faced ongoing delays.

The price of construction materials has risen sharply since mid-2023, reducing margins and constraining activity in the sector.

GAS PRODUCTION

Natural gas production and exports declined on a year-on-year basis. Gas exports to Thailand and China declined by 23 percent in six months to March 2024 reflecting lower production volumes following the temporary closure of the Yadana pipeline for repairs.

Taking a longer-term perspective, gas reserves at existing fields are diminishing rapidly and the medium-term outlook is for a pronounced decline in production in the absence of investment in exploration to develop new gas fields. However, international sanctions on Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise – in conjunction with challenges in the broader business environment – have amplified risks and financial uncertainty, hastening the exit of existing investors and deterring new foreign investment.

MINERAL MINING

Mineral production trended downwards in the six months to March 2024, mainly due to reduced mineral exports to China amid conflicts in northern Myanmar. Overall, mineral exports to China and Thailand fell by 14 percent reflecting disruptions caused by conflict. Rare earth exports also fell by 29 per cent December and March and by 18 per cent year-on-year. However, copper and aluminum production improved as

operations in the Wa region likely resumed in January 2024 after a five-month halt, reflecting strong demand for copper from China and Thailand.

Informal or illicit mining activities have increased significantly over the past few years and could increase further due to the recent escalation of conflict across the country, posing serious social and environmental risks.

TOURISM CRISIS

Not surprisingly, tourism is in the doldrums. After a relatively strong recovery in international arrivals in 2023, tourism has seen a downturn since the beginning of 2024 due largely to the escalation of conflict. International arrivals have declined by 11 percent since December, to be less than a quarter of pre-pandemic levels in March 2024.

The slump in international visitors has shifted the focus to domestic tourism in non-conflict areas, which has seen modest growth, with Myanmar people accounting for the large majority of hotel guests in Yangon and Mandalay.

At the same time, some conflict-affected regions have experienced a surge in air travel as passengers sought to avoid insecurity risks associated with land transportation. Domestic arrivals at airports such as Tachilek, Myitkyina, and Lashio exceeded 2019 levels in 2023 - but arrivals at previously popular tourist destinations such as Bagan are less than 5 per cent of 2019 levels.

WHOLESALE & RETAIL

The wholesale and retail sector continues to face supply and demand side challenges, with some evidence of a shift of sales toward locally produced goods. Import restrictions have led to a shortage of imported consumer goods, resulting in an increased reliance on domestically produced goods, which now account for over half of retail sales.

With high inflation and weak nominal incomes driving consumers to prioritize essential items, retailers have responded by offering smaller package sizes and substituting premium imported products with more affordable but lower quality domestic alternatives.

However, retailers continue to grapple with stock shortages as supply from domestic manufacturers is also hindered by limited access to imported raw materials and other constraints. Compared with firms in other sectors, in the April 2024 World Bank Firm Survey

retail and wholesale firms reported challenges related to the availability and cost of intermediate inputs, as well as weaker demand and reduced sales.

EXPORTS & IMPORTS

Goods exports and imports experienced sharp declines in the six months to March 2024 (or the second half of FY24 – H2 FY24), by 13 per cent and 20 per cent respectively compared with the same period last year.

The declines were primarily associated with disruptions in land border trade. Compared to the same period last year, exports through land borders decreased by 27 per cent. Excluding natural gas exports, this decline reached 44 per cent. Likewise, imports through land borders fell by 50 per cent. Exports via sea routes were comparatively stable, declining by 3 per cent, while imports via sea routes declined by 15 per cent.

Besides border disruptions, import and foreign exchange restrictions, weaker domestic demand, and the domestic production of substitute items also contributed to the decline in imports. The relatively large decline in imports resulted in a sharp narrowing of the merchandise trade deficit in the six months to March 2024.

The largest contributor to the overall reduction in exports in the six months to March was the decline in manufacturing exports, which fell 19 per cent compared to the same period last year.

Garment exports to major international markets – the EU, Japan, Korea, the UK, and the US – experienced a 24 per cent decline due to sustained weak global demand throughout 2023 and the withdrawal of global brands from Myanmar. The value of Myanmar's gas exports to China and Thailand also saw a 23 per cent decline (or approximately US\$475 million) in the past six months compared to the same period last year.

Myanmar's gas exports have steadily declined since the second half of FY23.

Agricultural exports were relatively stable in the past six months compared to the same period last year. Data from the Myanmar Rice Federation indicates that Myanmar rice exports increased by 25 per cent in value terms but decreased by 4 per cent in volume terms – suggesting that the increase is mainly due to the global rice price upturn, which increased by 17 per cent in the past six months to March 2023 compared to the same period last year.

However, the 4 per cent decline in volume terms reflects lower production levels in recent years and the impact of trade restrictions (including a temporary

export ban to curb domestic rice prices and frequent changes in foreign currency surrender requirements). Myanmar's bean and pulse exports declined by 8 per cent in value terms and 19 per cent in volume terms, driven primarily by land border disruptions (primarily to China, which is the second major destination for Myanmar beans and pulses and accounts for about 30 per cent of total beans and pulses exports). Bean and pulse exports through land border declined by 73 per cent (or US\$81 million).

Imports declined significantly in the past six months, attributable to a combination of import restrictions, border disruptions, and lower domestic demand. All import categories declined in the past six months compared to the same period last year. The value of capital imports fell by 31 per cent, while imports of intermediate goods and consumer products each declined by 17 per cent. Myanmar's diesel and gasoline imports through Yangon seaport, in volume terms, declined by 3 per cent and 13 per cent, respectively – reflecting frequent fuel shortages in recent years with reportedly the worst shortage in December 2023, due to difficulty in access to the US dollar and unpredictable policy changes.

Available data indicated that major consumer products, except palm oil, continued to decline. Palm oil is a staple commodity for most Myanmar households, so imports of it remained strong in volume terms in the past six months. However, prepared food and pharmaceutical imports through the Yangon seaport declined by 23 per cent and 41 per cent, respectively, due to lower demands and import restrictions.

CHINA & INVESTMENT

Foreign direct investment (FDI) commitments fell to US\$177 million in the six months to March 2024, a 56 per cent decline from the same period last year. The manufacturing sector dominated total FDI commitments by industry, accounting for 50 per cent (US\$88 million across 34 projects). Following this, the power sector comprised 32 per cent (US\$57 million), while the "other services" and real estate sector accounted for 12 and 6 per cent, respectively.

China was the top investor in the past six months to March 2024, accounting for 51 per cent of the total commitments, followed by Thailand (14 per cent) and Hong Kong (11 per cent). The trajectory of actual FDI flows is expected to have broadly followed the trajectory of commitments in FY2023-24, although the relationship is by no means precise, including because of lags in implementing commitments.

DROP IN CONSUMPTION

Declines in consumption have also been particularly significant among more educated workers with more work experience. In 2017, households with greater endowments—such as better education, more assets, smaller household sizes, and service sector jobs—exhibited lower poverty levels. However, consumption has substantially declined among these groups, leading to a rise in poverty. For example, individuals with college or higher levels of education had a poverty rate of 4 per cent in 2017, but the poverty rate among this group increased to 18 per cent in 2023-24. Workers in manufacturing and services have also experienced sharper reductions in consumption and increases in poverty than workers in agriculture.

Some of Myanmar's most educated workers are turning to typically lower-productivity farming activities as a result of the current economic and security conditions, a reversal of the normal structural transformation process.

CURRENCY CRISIS

The market kyat exchange rate has depreciated rapidly and inflationary pressure persists, putting pressure on household consumption and retail sales. The kyat depreciated by about 28 per cent against the US dollar on parallel markets over the year to May 2024, while foreign currency shortages remain prevalent.

Combined with conflict-related logistics disruptions, border post closures, and restricted access to import licenses, exchange rate depreciation has seen inflation persist at high levels.

As the owner of a Yangon drug store told Mizzima, medicine prices are going up due to the exchange rate.

"The dollar plays an important role in the drug market. All medicines are imported. The rising dollar price results in increasing medicines prices. Currently, household medicines like Decolgen cost over 500 Kyat per tablet. Previously, this medicine was only around 150 Kyat," he said.

POWER CUTS

Electricity generation has continued to decline due to a downturn in gas-powered supply and conflict-related disruptions of transmission and distribution lines. Lower gas-powered supply has led to increased reliance on hydropower and the overutilization of aging

dams, which in turn has accelerated wear and tear and increased safety risks. At least four major hydropower plants have experienced operational disruptions. In major urban residential areas, power outages have ranged from 5 to 20 hours per day in recent months, while industrial zones (where manufacturing firms are located) generally have been hit by even longer-lasting outages. The decline in electricity provision has significantly raised operating costs for businesses, many of whom have been forced to run expensive diesel-powered generators as a substitute for grid-based power.

A third of firms surveyed by the World Bank in April reported power outages as their primary challenge, up from 12 per cent in September, while 68 per cent of firms reported that they had invested in diesel generators and 17 percent in off-grid solar power.

DESPERATE STRAITS

For garment shop owner May Khine, it is clear that Myanmar's economy is in dire straits but there is an element of normality on the streets of Yangon. Significant elements of the economy continue to turn over, even though many citizens like May are feeling the pinch. Several areas of the country are in survival mode as the junta battles the resistance, many people forced to flee their homes, adding to the calls for humanitarian aid.

Given the Myanmar junta's economic mismanagement, it is no surprise that the man and woman on the street is finding life difficult. But the country has not yet become a failed state.



Many young women are worried that the junta will draft them into the military. Photo: AFP

WOMEN IN DANGER OF BEING CONSCRIPTED INTO MILITARY

The State Administration Council (SAC) of Myanmar is preparing to implement conscription for women, aiming to draft 500 to 1,000 women in each batch. This move marks the SAC's latest effort to bolster its military forces amid ongoing conflicts and territorial losses.

The initial focus for conscription will be on women who have completed at least a middle school education. Specific professional groups are also targeted, including statisticians, nurses, medical doctors, technicians, and other professionals. If the SAC fails to meet its recruitment goals from these groups, women from rural areas and daughters of junta ordinary soldiers may be conscripted.

Although the conscription law specifies the age range for recruits, there are concerns that the SAC may not adhere strictly to these guidelines. Past conscription

efforts for men have included underage children and overage males, raising fears that similar practices may occur with women.

Human rights activists are alarmed by these developments. They argue that as the SAC loses control over various regions, forced recruitment could become a significant burden in areas still under its control. The expansion of conscription to include women highlights the SAC's desperation to replenish its ranks in the face of sustained resistance and diminishing manpower.

AUNG SAN SUU KYI LOOMS LARGE AS 79TH BIRTHDAY MARKED

Judging by the arrests of women marking the birthday of Aung San Suu Kyi on 19 June, the illegal Myanmar junta continues to struggle with symbolism of the incarcerated Nobel Peace Laureate. Rather than ignore the protests by handfults of women in Yangon,

Mandalay and elsewhere, the junta thought it necessary to make arrests – a total of 22 in all – which only served to draw attention to her fate. The junta’s imprisonment of “The Lady” has placed her out of sight but turned her into a martyr and a symbol of protest, as her image is typically carried during demonstrations in exile against the military regime.

The small but important protests held on Suu Kyi’s birthday last week were yet one more reminder of the illegality of the military junta and its attempts to stifle the democratic aspirations of the Myanmar people. Suu Kyi is currently serving 27 years of jail time under what critics claim were trumped up charges – effectively a life sentence given she has just turned 79. One of her sons, Kim Aris, told media on her birthday that he was worried about her health – though he had received a letter from her that he indicated was upbeat.

Suu Kyi’s voice is stifled but in the absence of a prominent and recognizable leadership figure for the National Unity Government (NUG), her image provides a focus for much of the “Spring Revolution” resistance movement that three years on is providing a formidable opposition. Some analysts might argue that the Myanmar resistance has moved on – respectful of Suu Kyi but representing what they would claim is the true voice of the people. NUG Acting President Duwa Lashi La, for his part, appears to be deliberately keeping a low profile, rather than providing the “face” of the resistance.

KIA MAKES GAINS IN KACHIN STATE

On 11 June, the KIA (Kachin Independence Army) intensified its offensive against the State Administration Council (SAC), targeting posts along the Waingmaw-Kanpaiti highway, a crucial route for the China-Myanmar border trade. This follows the KIA’s capture of the border trade town Loije in Bamho district on 8 April. On that day, the KIA seized 18 junta posts, including a strategic position in Sadung town. Some posts, manned by the Border Guard Force (BGF), were abandoned without resistance. As a result, the 70-mile border-trade road is now devoid of the junta or BGF checkpoints and posts, leaving only the Kanpaiti border town to be attacked.

Meanwhile, Zahkung Ting Ying, facing KIA and revolutionary forces nearing his controlled areas, ordered his followers to counter-attack against the KIA and the PDF. He is the head of the BGF forces. Despite this, many of his troops are abandoning their posts in the face of KIA attacks. Ting Ying has reiterated calls for peace talks.

On the Waingmaw-Chihpwe highway, four additional posts have been abandoned by junta troops and BGF forces. The KIA is now focusing on seizing the last major border trade city, Kanpaiti, after capturing Loije and Man Weing Gyi in the southern part of Kachin State.

The junta troops conducted a drone attack on a church in Lamyang village, Waingmaw township,



Myanmar citizens mark Aung San Suu Kyi’s birthday with a protest. Photo: Facebook

amidst fierce battles between the KIA and junta forces. Artillery fire from junta troops in Myitkyina resulted in the death of one villager and serious injuries to six others in Khatcho village. The following day, a 57-year-old woman in Waingmaw town was killed by junta artillery.

In southern Kachin State, intense clashes continue between SAC troops and KIA-led revolutionary forces. On 13 June, KIA forces attacked a junta reinforcement column, forming two armoured vehicles, destroying one and stalling the column in Kaung Ja Yang, where they had faced ambushes for five days.

Having control firmly in the eastern part of the state, the KIA has established a new brigade, No. (11), at the border of Northern Shan State and Kachin State, in the Shweli River basin, signaling a continued and expanded offensive against the SAC.

ARAKAN ARMY MAKES FURTHER GAINS IN RAKHINE

Only two posts of the State Administration Council (SAC) remain to be seized by the Arakan Army (AA) in Maungdaw Township in the north of Rakhine State. On 16 June, the AA urged locals to evacuate Maungdaw City in preparation for an assault on junta bases. While most residents managed to flee, junta troops and Rohingya militias, including members of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), blocked the escape of thousands.

Close followers of developments in Rakhine State over the last few years will recognize the absurdity of

Rohingya and ARSA militia actually fighting for the junta, given they were the target of the Myanmar military in a "genocidal" push against the Muslim community in 2017.

In the first week of the Maungdaw offensive, the AA captured six SAC posts in the township, followed by another four on 13 June. These battles resulted in the death of the junta's strategic commander and approximately 200 of his troops. As of 18 June, the AA was targeting the No. (5) Border Guard Police post and another outpost in a Rohingya village.

On 17 June, junta troops fired artillery at Taungok University after the rector refused to vacate the campus in Taungok township. Over 100 junta personnel subsequently occupied the strategically located university to defend against the AA offensive.

On 18 June, the junta conducted an airstrike on Pandin village in Thandwe township, resulting in the deaths of three people, including two women, and injuring several others. Continued naval artillery fire forced villagers to abandon their dead and flee the area.

Fighting has been raging near Thandwe Township's Ngapali Town since Wednesday last week, with the regime using its navy and air force to defend against the AA attacks on junta positions, according to Development Media Group, citing local residents.

The fighting broke out on Wednesday between Ngapali Town and Gawt Village northeast of Ngapali - in pre-conflict times considered Myanmar's premier beach resort destination.



Women resistance fighters mark Aung San Suu Kyi's birthday. Photo: Facebook

“They have been fighting every day near Ngapali. The fighting was quite fierce yesterday. Junta warships and aircraft have carried out continuous bombardment,” said a Ngapali resident.

Junta Infantry Battalion No. 55 and Light Infantry Battalion No. 566 and the Maung Shwe Lay naval base are based in Thandwe. Following fighting near Thandwe Airport in early June, the regime has deployed more troops to the airport.

Attacks by the AA that started some 20 miles from Thandwe Town are moving closer after more than two months of fighting.

“Thandwe Town will fall once those battalions are defeated. The regime will do whatever it can to repulse the AA’s attacks,” said a Thandwe resident.

Despite the fighting moving closer to the town, residents trapped in the town can’t flee due to the junta’s travel restrictions.

Fighting since 13 April in Thandwe Township has displaced more than 40,000 people, most of whom need emergency relief supplies, DMG reports.

On 17 June, the AA ambushed a junta patrol, consisting of about 100 personnel including Rohingya militias, near the Danyawaddy Navy headquarters in Kyaukphyu township, which is associated with a Chinese deep-sea port project.

In addition, as we reported last week, the junta ordered villagers living in about a dozen villages around Sittwe city to empty their villages and take refuge in the city and the military prepares to defend it from the

Arakan Army.

Reportedly, the AA recognize the challenge they face in using force to try to take Maungdaw and Sittwe as the junta is effectively using the civilians in the cities as a “human shield”.

The ongoing conflict in Rakhine State highlights the escalating violence and the increasing toll on local communities. As the AA continues its offensive, the humanitarian situation remain dire, with widespread displacement and casualties. The AA continues to struggle in the “social media war” that has erupted, largely on Telegram, that paints them in a bad light with regards to their relationship with the Muslim Rohingya community.

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zh5-8_CIFaY





Photo: AA

AA WARNS MAUNGDAW RESIDENTS THAT IT IS ABOUT TO LAUNCH OFFENSIVE

The Arakan Army (AA) issued a statement saying that it will launch a significant offensive against the remaining junta bases in Maungdaw Town in Rakhine State on the Bangladesh border.

The 16 June AA statement said that the AA has already seized most of the junta camps in Maungdaw Township and has surrounded and blocked the remaining junta-held camps in the township.

The statement warns that the situation in Maungdaw Township could worsen as of 16 June 2024, when the AA will launch an all-out assault on the remaining junta bases.

The statement tells people to leave if they can saying: "Due to concerns for the safety of the residents of Maungdaw, the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army urgently advises all residents to evacuate Maungdaw immediately, starting from 9 PM on June 16, 2024."

Unfortunately, it will be very hard for residents to leave, they have nowhere to go and it is the wet season.

For those who cannot leave the statement warns them not to stay close to junta forces or junta positions.

It says: "As further assaults on these remaining camps are imminent, residents of Maungdaw Township are urged to avoid staying in areas such as roads and houses from which the SAC [State Administration Council] forces have fortified positions, the locations which could be targeted by the snipers from top of the buildings, and any place where the SAC forces are present."

The AA took over Buthidaung Town in Rakhine State, a key junta stronghold, on 18 May. The AA has also taken control of the towns of Rathedaung, Ponnagyun, Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, Minbya, Myebon, Pauktaw, and Ramree in Rakhine State, and Paletwa in Chin State.

However, fighting is ongoing between the AA and the junta in other areas of Rakhine State that the AA does not yet hold.

The junta currently also holds Sittwe and reports indicate that junta soldiers have been forcing villagers from villages around Sittwe Town to leave their houses and move to Sittwe. If the villagers refuse the junta troops say they will burn down their villages and massacre the population as they did in Byai Phyu Village in Rakhine State on 2 June, when they killed over 50 villagers and burned down the village.

The junta has not provided anywhere for the displaced people to stay in Sittwe and the suspicion is that the junta is getting the villagers into the town so that it can use them as human shields during expected attacks on Sittwe by the AA.

Also in Sittwe Town, on 16 June, junta troops carried out raids in Mingan Ward and arrested nearly 200 residents under the pretence that they were checking residents' overnight guest lists. Amongst the arrested were youths under 13 years of age and adults aged over 50 years.



Myanmar junta soldiers tighten security in embattled Sittwe. Photo: AFP

ESCALATING INSECURITY IN RAKHINE'S SITTWE TOWNSHIP DUE TO JUNTA RAIDS AND ARRESTS

Overnight raids and arrests by junta troops in several wards of Sittwe Township, Rakhine State, have led to increasing insecurity in the area, according to residents and human rights organizations.

A resident said, "The soldiers have been conducting mass roundups, forcing everyone in each ward and village, including children and the elderly, out of their homes and into vehicles, seemingly using them as human shields."

A resident recounted an incident on 15 June in Mingan Ward, Sittwe Township, Rakhine where junta forces arbitrarily arrested around one hundred locals, including children and elderly individuals.

"The soldiers called everyone out, including children and the elderly, before forcing them into vehicles. It seems like they're using them as human shields. We are now gripped by fear of being abducted by such junta forces," said a resident of Sittwe.

On 16 June, in Dok Pyaung Thay Village, joint forces comprising junta troops and an armed group backed by the junta looted the village monastery.

Myat Tun, director of the Rakhine Human Rights Protection Group said, "The monastery was closed

because the abbot left for Yangon. When groups of armed people came to look for supplies, villagers tried to stop the looting. The armed Muslims and junta forces beat the villagers, and took away valuable items and money."

In late May, the junta army attacked Byaing Phyu village, Sittwe Township, killing over 70 villagers. Survivors are now taking shelter in monasteries and schools, with many living in makeshift camps in Sittwe Township.

Another Sittwe resident described the dire situation said, "The displaced persons have no alternatives but to stay with relatives, in local monasteries, or in small tents on the streets."

Fierce battles have forced residents from several villages, including Aungdaing, Yaygyanpyin, Tangarpyin, Padaleik, Kyweete, Paikseikkyi, Pyale Chaung, Palin Pyin, Onyaypaw, and Kyattaw Pyin, to flee to Mingan Ward and other areas in Sittwe Township.

Residents said that an increase in military repression is coinciding with intensified battles by the Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State.

MYANMAR JUNTA ARRESTS NEARLY 200 IN SITTWE, RAKHINE STATE

Nearly 200 local residents, were arrested by the Military Council in Mingan Ward, Sittwe Town, Rakhine State on the evening of 15 June 2024.

A local source told Mizzima that at around 11:00 pm on 15 June the junta arrested residents of Mingan Ward under the pretence of carrying out inspections of residents' guest lists that give the details of any overnight guests staying in their homes.

"They came in with three military vehicles and arrested around 200 people. The arrests were made under the guise of checking the guest list", said the source.

"We don't know where they [the junta forces] are now. We heard that they will arrest more people again. The rest of the neighborhood will also run away. Some who have nowhere to flee are choosing to stay at their homes", said a resident of Mingan Ward.

Mingan Ward is located near the highway bus terminal in the west of Sittwe Township.

Similarly, on 29 May, in Byinephyu Village, Sittwe Township, more than 100 villagers, including women and children were arrested. The women and children were released on 31 May, but the men are still being held.

According to the Arakan Army (AA) the junta also killed more than 50 villagers in Byinephyu Village.

Heavy fighting between the AA and junta is ongoing in the Rakhine State townships of Maungdaw, Thandwe, Taungup, and Ann. Junta soldiers are also arbitrarily beating and arresting civilians from areas in Rakhine State where there is no fighting.

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Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing.
Photo: AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA LEADER ANNOUNCES 2025 ELECTIONS

Myanmar military coup leader Min Aung Hlaing has announced plans to hold a general election in 2025 despite ongoing nationwide conflicts.

General Min Aung Hlaing made the statement during a meeting with civil servants and local leaders in Meiktila Town, in Mandalay Region, on 15 June 2024.

He said that preparations are underway to hold a population census in October 2024 before holding the election in 2025.

Currently, the junta is demonstrating the electronic voting machines that it intends to use in the elections to various political parties and selected members of the public.

Tin Tun Naing, the shadow National Unity Government (NUG) Minister of Planning, Finance, and Investment said that the junta is planning to hold

elections in mid-2025. He also said that analysis by defence forces shows that the election will be held under a proportional representation (PR) system and the junta may combine constituencies where it is not in control.

At a press conference he said: "For example, in Chin State, they will combine townships like Thantlang, Hakha, Mindat, Matupi, and Paletwa into one large township, one large constituency. They will not conduct the election throughout the entire large township. Instead, they will only hold elections in the small controlled areas and then declare that these elections represent the entire large constituency, deceptively claiming victory."

The junta is still facing ongoing fighting throughout the country and it has lost large areas of northern Shan State and Rakhine State and some areas of Kachin State.



MYANMAR JUNTA USING CHINESE COMPANIES FOR DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE AND CENSORSHIP

The Myanmar junta has used Chinese equipment, technology and support in its efforts to spy on Myanmar internet users and to censor the internet as it speeds up efforts to build a digital dictatorship, according advocacy group Justice for Myanmar.

A Justice For Myanmar investigation based on sources including leaked documents and corporate records has exposed the involvement of two Chinese companies in the junta's digital surveillance and censorship program.

Planning documents show the use of two products from the Chinese company Geedge Networks, which trades as Jizhi (Hainan) Information Technology Company Limited, in the surveillance and censorship system that was activated in Myanmar at the end of May.

Geedge Networks founder and chief scientist is Fang Binxing, the "father" of the Great Firewall of China.

One product, Taingou Secure Gateway (TSG), uses deep pack inspection and claims to be able to decrypt and inspect traffic between the server and client that is encrypted with secure sockets layer (SSL) and transport layer security (TLS) encryption protocols.

TSG also features a firewall that can block applications, including virtual private networks (VPNs), based on their behaviours and attributes.

Cyber Narrator, also from Geedge Networks, is a network intelligence platform designed to monitor and analyse internet traffic and respond to "threats", including the use of VPNs.

In addition, the Chinese state-owned company China National Electronics Import and Export Corporation (CEIEC), also linked to Fang Binxing, has been involved in a proposed location tracking system for the junta controlled communications ministry.

Both companies business with the junta is brokered by the crony Mascots Group of Companies, led by Dr Win Kyaw and his wife Khin Kay Khaing, who are part of a network of at least 30 companies across Myanmar, Singapore and Thailand, more than half of which were named by the UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar.

Justice For Myanmar calls on governments to urgently impose sanctions against Geedge Networks, CEIEC and Mascots Group, its directors and related companies.

It says that governments must block companies and individuals in their territory from providing the illegal junta with arms, equipment, technology, technical support and jet fuel.

Justice For Myanmar spokesperson Yadanar Maung says: "Chinese companies and their Myanmar crony partners are providing the illegal junta with surveillance and censorship technology that will cost lives.

"The junta is a terrorist organisation under Myanmar law and definitions in international law that is waging a campaign of terror against the people with total impunity.

"The junta is killing, torturing and arbitrarily detaining people across Myanmar and this new Chinese technology will further aid and abet the junta's crimes against humanity as it seeks to track down those who oppose the military's illegitimate coup attempt.

"Geedge Networks' censorship system is further violating the Myanmar people's right to free expression and is part of the junta's war on independent sources of information.

"Governments must take urgent action against the complicity of foreign and Myanmar companies in the junta's international crimes, including through targeted sanctions."



Chinese Foreign Minister visits Myanmar in 2022.
Photo: AFP

CHINA GIVES MYANMAR JUNTA US\$ 3.6 MILLION FOR MEKONG RIVER PROJECTS

China has signed an agreement to give the Myanmar junta US\$ 3.6 million in grants for projects in Myanmar that are part of the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC) Special Fund (2024).

The agreement was signed at a ceremony in Naypyidaw on 14 June that was attended by the Myanmar Deputy Prime Minister and Union Minister for Foreign Affairs, Than Swe, and the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to Myanmar, Mr. Chen Hai.

The MLC projects will be implemented by six Myanmar ministries in the fields of agriculture and livestock, forest resources preservation, eco-innovation and green practices of Micro-, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs), village-level poverty reduction, ICT and innovation and cultural promotion.

At the signing ceremony, the Chinese ambassador said that China was supporting the MLC projects because it will benefit Myanmar people.

The junta Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Than Swe, in his speech at the ceremony, reiterated Myanmar's commitment to working with

China and other countries on the Lancang/Mekong River to promote peace, prosperity and stability in the Lancang/Mekong River.

The Lancang River flows through southwest China into Myanmar, where it becomes known as the Mekong River, before flowing through Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and southern Vietnam. The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) was established in 2016 for cooperation between the riparian states of the Lancang River and the Mekong River.

From 2017 to 2024 Myanmar received US\$ 35 million from China to help fund 118 LMC projects in various regions.

Myanmar was supposed to be the co-chair of MLC with China from 2020 to December 2023 but it was suspended from the co-chair position by China after the Myanmar military coup in early 2021.

On 11 June 2024, China donated six patrol vessels to the Myanmar junta under an agreement drawn up with the previous National League for Democracy (NLD) Myanmar Government.



Preparing for the funeral. Photo: Supplied

IN RARE BACKTRACK, JUNTA SAYS IT WILL INVESTIGATE SENIOR MONK'S SHOOTING DEATH

RFA

Myanmar's military junta announced Friday that it would investigate the shooting death of a senior Buddhist monk, just one day after junta-controlled media denied responsibility.

Sayadaw Bhaddanta Munindabhivamsa, the abbot of Win Neinmitayon Monastery in the Bago region, was shot dead Wednesday in his car as it left an airport in the central Mandalay region.

Television broadcaster MRTV announced initially that the abbot's car was caught in a firefight between junta troops and guerillas from the rebel People's Defense Forces, a grassroots militia formed by citizens opposed to military rule.

But another monk who was in the car with him said the attack on the car was carried out by junta soldiers.

On Friday, the junta's chief minister for the Bago region visited the monks of the Win Neinmitayon

Monastery and admitted that the military had published incorrect information.

The junta later announced that it would re-examine the incident and respond accordingly.

Dhammaduta Buddhist University and the Patriotic Myanmar Monks Union in Yangon released a statement Thursday expressing their condolences over the death of Sayadaw Bhaddanta Munindabhivamsa.

The Samgha Samagga, a monk's association in Mandalay, also released a statement condemning the shooting, labeling the incident as terrorism.

At the time of his death, Sayadaw Bhaddanta Munindabhivamsa was 77 years old and had been a monk for 57 years. He also held many advanced Buddhist literature degrees.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia.



Photo: AFP

US SPEAKS IN SUPPORT OF MYANMAR AT UN

Ambassador Michèle Taylor from the United States of America delegation to the United Nations (U.N.) 56th Session of the Human Rights Council made a statement about Myanmar.

The statement was made on 18 June during the interactive dialogue on the High Commissioner's Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar.

Below is the ambassador's statement in full:

Thank you, High Commissioner Türk, for drawing attention to the worsening human rights situation in Myanmar through your alarming and illustrative report today. It was devastating to listen to; I can't imagine what it must be to live it.

We support your impassioned advocacy in recent weeks to raise the alarm about escalating violence and inter-communal tensions in Rakhine State. The world simply cannot sit idly by and allow the status quo to continue!

The United States condemns the reported forced conscription of Rohingya and the targeted destruction

of towns in Rakhine, resulting in the displacement of civilians.

We call on Myanmar's military, as well as all armed actors, to protect civilian populations in Rakhine and allow for unhindered humanitarian access.

The military's continued use of violence against civilians across the country underscores the need for the international community to do more to impede its access to arms and financial resources.

We welcome this Council's unanimous adoption of a resolution that calls for states to restrict the Myanmar military's access to jet fuel, and we reiterate our call for all states to prevent the flow of arms to the military.

High Commissioner Turk, you have warned that past atrocities could recur in Rakhine. What can member states do to prevent this?

I thank you.



The Bago countryside. Photo: AFP

PRISON STAFF IN BAGO BEAT 80 WOMEN PRISONERS THEN PUT THEM IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

A total of 80 female political prisoners, who were beaten and injured by prison staff are being held in solitary confinement at Daik U Prison, in Bago Region's Daik U Township.

According to the Political Prisoners Network Myanmar (PPNM) at about midday on 15 June, 40 political prisoners who had just been transferred to Daik U Prison from elsewhere had their food and utensils confiscated by female prison staff. When the prisoners demanded the return of their items the prison staff responded with violence.

Chief Officer Kyaw Zeya led sub-inspectors Myo Thiha Aung and Min Zaw Thein and dormitory head Ko Lay Myint in the attacks on the prisoners. The prison officers yelled and cursed at the prisoners, fired their guns to intimidate them and assaulted the prisoners with stun guns, rubber batons and wooden sticks, according to a PPNM report.

The attacks on the prisoners resulted in over 80 prisoners being injured, with about 30 of those being from the group of newly arrived prisoners and the remaining 50 being prisoners who were already being held at Daik U Prison. Five of those were seriously injured and are currently receiving treatment at Daik U Prison Hospital, while the remaining injured prisoners have been placed in solitary confinement.

"Five injured women are at the prison hospital. The rest have been put in solitary confinement. As soon as those five women who are receiving treatment are better, they will also be moved into solitary confinement. So, being in the hospital is little relief from being sent to solitary confinement, for the injured," said Thaik Tun Oo, a PPNM committee member.

About 160 political prisoners, including many of the victims, had recently been transferred from Kyaikmaraw Prison in Mon state, as well as Bago's Thayarwady Prison, known for its poor conditions and crumbling infrastructure, Thaik Tun Oo said.

Two prominent members of the political activist organisations 88 Generation Peace and Open Society, Nu Nu Aung and Khat Khat Lwin, are being held at Daik-U Prison, said sources close to Nu Nu Aung, who added that she had been injured in the disturbance.

Also on 15 June, 73 political prisoners and three other prisoners were transferred from Obo Prison in Mandalay to Magwe Prison in Magwe Region and Myingyan Prison in Mandalay Region.

Reporting: Mizzima, RFA

RFA contributed to this story

RISING DRUG PRICES AND SHORTAGES HIT MAJOR MYANMAR CITIES

In major cities including Yangon and Mandalay, drug prices have been rising recently, with some medicines reportedly in short supply, according to drug sellers.

Medicine sellers stated that the increasing prices of imported medicines are due to the rising dollar exchange rate and stringent import-export processes imposed by the military regime at ports. The regime has mandated that pharmaceutical importers will only receive an import license if they purchase US dollars at the official rate. This requirement has exacerbated the rise in drug prices and the decline in stock levels.

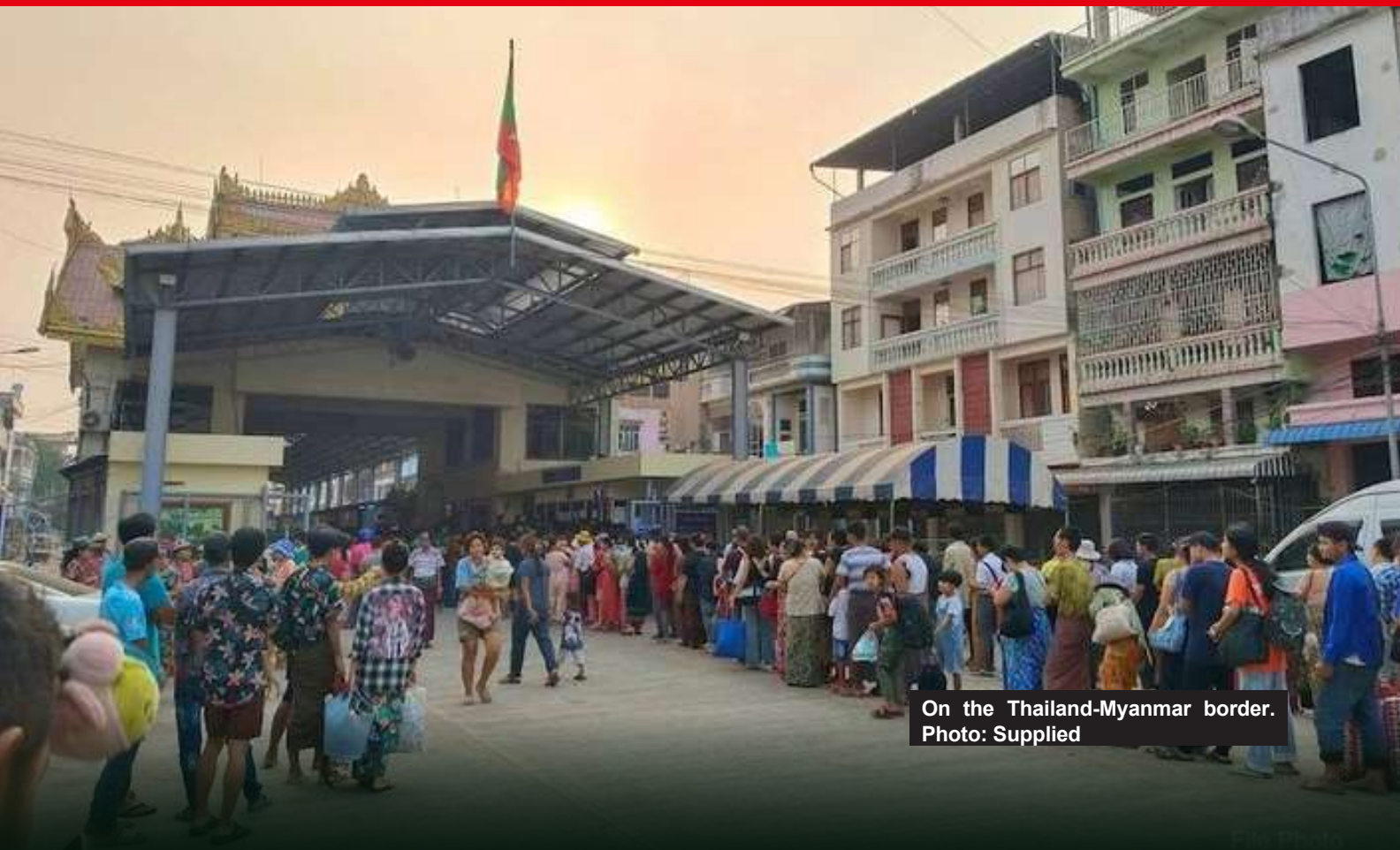
"The dollar plays an important role in the drug market. 70 per cent of medicines in Myanmar are imported, so rising dollar prices result in increasing medicine prices. Currently, household medicines like the Decolgen brand cost over 500 Kyat per tablet. Previously, this medicine was only around 150 Kyats. These shortages will be a long-term trend because of the junta's dollar controls," said a worker at a household drug store in Yangon.

Household medicines are transported from Yangon port to other regions. With shortages in Yangon, the situation is even worse in other regions and states, according to a drug seller in Mandalay.

"Everything, including Oral Rehydration Solutions (ORS), is distributed across the country from Yangon port. Here, every day, we ask for the arrival of the supply truck. Currently, some household medicines and heart and diabetes medications are in short supply," said a drug store owner in Mandalay.

Medicines for chronic diseases like high blood pressure, coronary heart disease, and antibiotics for lung problems and diabetes are now hard to find in both Yangon and Mandalay.

"The medicines that need to be taken regularly for a long term are the ones in short supply. The suppliers and shops do not have them in stock. While some household medicines are still available, heart and diabetes medications are not available from the companies or the suppliers," a drug seller in Yangon said.



On the Thailand-Myanmar border.
Photo: Supplied

FROM TEMPORARY SHELTERS TO PERMANENT SOLUTIONS: A NEW PATH FOR MYANMAR REFUGEES IN THAILAND

EDITORIAL - THE BORDER CONSORTIUM

As we commemorate World Refugee Day 2024, we are called to reflect on the untapped potential of the Myanmar refugees who have found sanctuary in Thailand. This year, we mark 40 years since the first refugee camps were established along the Thai-Myanmar border. For tens of thousands of individuals, these camps have been the only homes they have ever known. However, the time has come to rethink our approach and explore sustainable, long-term solutions that benefit both refugees and Thailand.

To date there are 97,000 refugees in nine camps. While some of these will be eligible for resettlement to third countries, tens of thousands are not. A return to Myanmar is not currently feasible, nor does it look likely for the significant future. The current policy of housing

refugees in temporary shelters is no longer sustainable. Refugees should not be forced to remain confined to temporary shelters for four more decades.

It's time to recognize that refugees are not just passive recipients of aid; they are educated, skilled, and resilient individuals who have thrived in managing their communities under challenging circumstances. More than half of these refugees are of working age, and a significant number speak Thai fluently. Many have expressed a strong desire to integrate into Thai society and contribute to the country that has provided them with safety and shelter.

Integrating refugees into the Thai workforce is not just an act of charity—it is an economic imperative. Refugees bring with them a wealth of skills and

experiences that can inject fresh energy and innovation into the Thai economy. By integrating them into Thai society and providing them with the legal right to work, we empower them to build stable and secure futures for themselves and their families, reducing their reliance on aid and allowing them to contribute more meaningfully to society.

Moreover, allowing refugees to integrate would enable the Thai government to redirect resources currently used to manage refugee camps towards other critical areas. This shift would not only be more cost-effective but would also reduce the security risks associated with long-term refugee camps, which can sometimes become pull factors for further migration.

We do not have to look far to see the successful integration of people from Myanmar in Thai society. Thailand is home to large Shan, Mon, Karen and Karenni communities, whom have integrated successfully and have played vital roles in Thailand's development. Their stories prove that integration is possible and beneficial, providing a model for how we can approach the current refugee situation.

The time for temporary fixes is over. As we mark 40 years since the establishment of these camps, it is imperative to seek permanent solutions for refugees who may never return to Myanmar due to ongoing conflicts. By embracing a policy of integration, we can transform the status of these individuals from temporary residents to permanent, productive members of Thai society.

This World Refugee Day, let us challenge ourselves to see beyond the confines of refugee camps. Let us recognize that the true potential of these individuals lies not in their capacity to survive in temporary shelters but in their ability to thrive as active participants in Thai economy and society. By taking this bold step, we can unlock the potential of Myanmar refugees who have long called Thailand home, ensuring that they—and Thailand—can look forward to a future of shared prosperity and growth.

Courtesy of The Border Consortium.

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OVER 1 MILLION INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE IN KNU TERRITORIES AMID ONGOING CONFLICTS

Due to the ongoing conflicts within the Karen National Union (KNU) territories, the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) has risen over 1 million (1,078,505), according to a statement released by the KNU Central Executive Committee on 20 June.

On World Refugee Day, 20 June, the KNU released data showing the number of IDPs resulting from military conflicts and human rights violations by the junta from the coup in February 2021 to May 2024.

The region with the highest number of IDPs is Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin), KNU Brigade 3, with 494,590 IDPs. It is followed by Dooplaya District, KNU Brigade 6, with 154,330 IDPs.

KNU Brigade (1) is in Thaton District, Brigade (2) in Taungoo District, Brigade (3) in Nyaunglaybin District, Brigade (4) in Dawei, Brigade (5) in Hpapun, Brigade (6) in Dooplaya District, and Brigade (7) in Hpa-an District.

Out of the over 1 million IDPs, the KNU has provided assistance to over 600,000. The remaining displaced people, are in dire need of humanitarian assistance, according to the KNU statement.

On World Refugee Day, the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) also called on international officials and foreign governments to permit entry, provide support, and protect asylum seekers. They urged the international community to allow humanitarian aid to reach Myanmar through cross-border assistance agencies and civil society organizations (CSOs).

Furthermore, the KHRG urged international judicial bodies to hold the junta responsible for the current human rights and humanitarian crisis. They advised against signing agreements or cooperating with the junta, giving it authority over the distribution of aid, or sending supplies through them. The KHRG also called for immediate action against the junta for targeting civilians.



Bangkok. Photo: Joe Waranont

QUESTIONS ARISE AS THAILAND AND MALAYSIA PREPARE TO JOIN BRICS

Thailand and Malaysia are preparing to join BRICS, the group of developing countries that includes Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, but experts have expressed uncertainty over whether the move is advisable, according to reports from VOA, Reuters and Chinese media outlet Guancha.

Members of BRICS want to build an alternative to the US dollar and the world financial system tied to it. They have created financial initiatives such as the New Development Bank, seen as a competitor to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

While BRICS is typically portrayed in Western media – if mentioned at all – as a rather lacklustre grouping, the drive to solidify the international body appears to be picking up pace, part of what can be argued is a geopolitical shift eastward and a diminishing of Western power.

The group last year began to expand its membership as it looks to challenge a world order dominated by Western economies, with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Ethiopia, Egypt, Argentina and the United Arab Emirates joining and more than 40 countries expressing interest. In addition, analyst Colonel Lawrence Wilkeson believes Turkey could be gearing up to leave NATO and move to join BRICS, a potentially destabilizing move for NATO and the European Union.

Thailand’s efforts to join have picked up pace. Thai Foreign Ministry spokesperson Nikordej Balankura said in a written statement to VOA that the foreign minister had met with his Russian counterpart regarding BRICS.

“At the BRICS Foreign Ministers’ meeting this week, the minister of foreign affairs delivered to H.E. Mr. Sergey Lavrov, minister of foreign affairs of the Russian

Federation, as the current BRICS president, Thailand's formal letter of intent to join BRICS, for the grouping's consideration. We anticipate that BRICS will now consider Thailand's request based on its processes," according to the statement. Nikorndej, added in the statement that it is in Thailand's national interest to join BRICS.

"Thailand views that BRICS has an important role to play in strengthening the multilateral system and economic cooperation between countries in the Global South, which aligns with our national interests.

"As for economic and political benefits, joining BRICS would reinforce Thailand's role on the global stage, and strengthen its international cooperation with emerging economies, especially in trade, investment, and food and energy security," the statement said.

Malaysia is preparing to join BRICS, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said in an interview with Chinese media outlet Guancha.

"We have made a decision, we will be placing the formal procedures soon... we are just waiting for the final results from the government in South Africa," Anwar said, according to a video of the interview posted by Guancha last week.

Washington's relations with Beijing and Moscow have soured over a variety of geopolitical issues, including China's crackdown in Hong Kong and on Taiwan's sovereignty and Russia's war in Ukraine.

Some analysts are skeptical about the benefits Thailand and Malaysia might gain from BRICS - and what message it sends to the West.

Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a political science and international relations professor at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University, told VOA that BRICS has become too much of a political effort against the West.

BRICS "initially began as a kind of a platform, a geo-economic grouping. But now, I think it has become a more geopolitical company outfit," Thitinan told VOA. "BRICS is kind of being turned into a ... geopolitical

front against the West."

Ian Chong, a political scientist from Singapore, told VOA economic interests are more persuasive for Thailand.

"Thailand's interest in joining BRICS is that the current Thai government may believe that it offers the country more economic options. They include diversifying financial ties and supply chains, and the possibility of currency support in a crisis. This may have to do with the Thai establishment view that their country's economic future is tied with the PRC. The type of support the BRICS can actually deliver remains to be seen."

Thai foreign ministry spokesperson Nikorndej said it is up to each country to decide its own national interests and that Thailand wants to work with all its partners, despite their differences.

"Every country's decision to support or join regional or international groupings is based on their respective national interests. Thailand maintains good relations with all countries and, as a bridge-builder, promoter of peace, and believer in shared benefits for all, we could play a role in enhancing the synergies between various international groupings," he said.

Reporting: Mizzima, VOA, Reuters, Guancha



Photo: AFP

'VICTORY FOR THE PEOPLE': THAILAND APPROVES SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Thailand on 18 June became the first country in Southeast Asia to legalise same-sex marriage, in a historic parliamentary vote hailed as a "victory" by campaigners.

The senate upper house gave final approval -- by 130 votes to four, with 18 abstentions -- to changes to the marriage law allowing same-sex couples to tie the knot.

The new legislation will now go to King Maha Vajiralongkorn for royal assent and come into force 120 days after publication in the official Royal Gazette.

Thailand will become only the third place in Asia where same-sex couples can get hitched, after Taiwan and Nepal, and activists are hoping the first weddings could be celebrated as early as October.

"We are very proud of everyone involved in this historic moment. You have helped to bring about a massive change," Plaifah Kyoka Shodladd, an LGBTQ activist and member of the committee that scrutinised the law, told senators after the vote.

"Today love wins over prejudice."

Ahead of the vote, Tunyawaj Kamolwongwat, an MP with the progressive Move Forward Party, said the change in the law was "a victory for the people".

The new legislation changes references to "men", "women", "husbands" and "wives" in marriage laws to gender-neutral terms.

It also gives same-sex couples the same rights as heterosexual ones when it comes to adoption and inheritance.

"My partner has one boy and I want to have legal rights to formally adopt him as my child and to have a say about his well-being. This bill will allow it," Kevin Pehthai Thanomkhet, 30, told AFP.

Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin, who has been vocal in his support for the LGBTQ community and the bill, will open his official residence to activists and supporters for celebrations later.

Activists also plan an evening rally featuring a drag show in central Bangkok, where giant shopping malls have been flying the rainbow flag in a show of support since the start of Pride Month in June.

LONG STRUGGLE

Thailand has long enjoyed a reputation for tolerance of the LGBTQ community, and opinion polls reported in local media show overwhelming public support for equal marriage.

More than 30 countries around the world have legalised marriage for all since the Netherlands became the first to celebrate same-sex unions in 2001.

But in Asia only Taiwan and Nepal recognise marriage equality. India came close in October, but the Supreme Court referred the decision back to parliament.

"I am so happy to see how far we have come," said Chotika Hlengpeng, a participant in the Pride march that drew thousands of enthusiasts in Bangkok early in June.

Tuesday's vote is the culmination of years of campaigning and thwarted attempts to pass equal marriage laws.

While the move enjoys popular support, much of Buddhist-majority Thailand still retains traditional and conservative values.

LGBTQ people, while highly visible, say they still face barriers and discrimination in everyday life.

And some activists have criticised the new laws for failing to recognise transgender and non-binary people, who will still not be allowed to change their gender on official identity documents.

AFP



Photo: AFP

UN SEES TRIPLING OF CHILDREN KILLED IN CONFLICT IN ONE YEAR

Global conflicts killed three times as many children and twice as many women in 2023 than in the previous year, as overall civilian fatalities swelled 72 percent, the UN said Tuesday.

Warring parties were increasingly “pushing beyond boundaries of what is acceptable -- and legal”, United Nations rights chief Volker Turk told the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

They are showing “utter contempt for the other, trampling human rights at their core”, he said. “Killings and injuries of civilians have become a daily occurrence. Destruction of vital infrastructure a daily occurrence”.

“Children shot at. Hospitals bombed. Heavy artillery launched on entire communities. All along with hateful, divisive, and dehumanising rhetoric.”

The UN rights chief said his office had gathered data indicating that last year, “the number of civilian deaths in armed conflict soared by 72 percent”.

“Horribly, the data indicates that the proportion of women killed in 2023 doubled and that of children tripled, compared to the year prior,” he said.

In the Gaza Strip, Turk said he was “appalled by the disregard for international human rights and humanitarian law by parties to the conflict” and “unconscionable death and suffering”.

Since the war erupted after Hamas’s unprecedented attack inside Israel on October 7, he said “more than 120,000 people in Gaza, overwhelmingly women and children, have been killed or injured ... as a result of the intensive Israeli offensives”.

“Since Israel escalated its operations into Rafah in early May, almost one million Palestinians have been forcibly displaced yet again, while aid delivery and humanitarian access deteriorated further,” he said.

DWINDLING FUNDS

Turk also pointed to a range of other conflicts, including in Ukraine, the Democratic republic of Congo and Syria.

And in Sudan, in the grips of a more than year-long civil war, he warned the country “is being destroyed in front of our eyes by two warring parties and affiliated groups ... (who have) flagrantly cast aside the rights of their own people”.

Such devastation comes as funding to help the growing numbers of people in need is dwindling.

“As of the end of May 2024, the gap between humanitarian funding requirements and available resources stands at \$40.8 billion,” Turk said.

“Appeals are funded at an average of 16.1 per cent only,” he said.

“Contrast this with the almost \$2.5 trillion in global military expenditure in 2023, a 6.8 percent increase in real terms from 2022,” Turk said, stressing that “this was the steepest year-on-year increase since 2009”.

“In addition to inflicting unbearable human suffering, war comes with a hefty price tag,” he said.

AFP



A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

"This year, for the very first time, I went to Thailand because many of the people that I wanted to see, as it turns out, have actually fled across the border, and have now sought safety and shelter in places like Mae Sot and Chiang Mai."

So says Kenneth Wong, and his discussion for the Insight Myanmar podcast centers around what he learned during his recent sojourn to the Land of Smiles. Kenneth, a Burmese language teacher at UC Berkeley who also translates Burmese poetry, makes his second appearance on the podcast (his first discussion focused on the history of Burmese cinema).

An avid language learner, Kenneth threw himself into studying Thai before his trip. He purchased language books, began listening to Thai-oriented podcasts, and tested his comprehension by streaming his favorite Netflix shows, such as *The Crown* and *Stranger Things*, with the Thai language dubbed over. Yet he was in for something of a shock when he landed in Mae Sot, and saw official signs in English, Thai... and Burmese! "That was my first encounter, and it gave me a hint that Mae Sot was much more Burmese than I expected it to be. When I went around town, it reminded me a lot about some outskirts of Mandalay." Like so many Burmese now, Kenneth cannot return to his land of origin due to the ongoing conflict. For non-immigrant Burmese, anyway, Mae Sot has become the next best thing; spending time in the local teashops helps satisfy Kenneth's nostalgia. For Burmese immigrants, however, Kenneth learned it is a different story altogether.

On the language front, Kenneth was a bit surprised that many Thais could converse with him in basic Burmese. On reflection, he realizes it's like Americans who work with Mexican immigrants along the border, and who pick up conversational Spanish. Conversely, he was dismayed to find that few within the burgeoning Burmese refugee population try to learn Thai. One reason for this, according to Kenneth, is that Burmese young people have less interest in Thai culture as compared to say, Korea's K-Pop. Perhaps the main reason, however, is that many see Thailand as just a temporary way station on the way to another country (or at least, they hope it is), so there is less perceived need or desire to learn the language. Whatever the reason, Kenneth sees that this has a big downside, though. "If you have a large population of refugees who don't make an effort to learn the language, it could foster resentment among the local population, looking at that as your lack of desire to integrate and adapt," he says. "You won't have access to some of the social services, or to establish social bonds with local people who could help you if you don't speak the language. So that to me is a not-so-comforting dichotomy." One exception that Kenneth is quick to point out comes in the form of Joy House, a community-based organization in Mae Sot, sponsored by Jeanne Hallacy, that provides Thai language classes to the refugee population, among other services and support.

CATCH THE FULL PODCAST HERE:

<https://player.captivate.fm/episode/6cb3448d-d06e-4465-a7d0-b0f9e1d7f838>

JUNTA'S PEACE COMMITTEE HOLDS TALKS WITH WORKING GROUP OF POLITICAL PARTIES AMID ELECTION PROMISES

The junta's National Solidarity and Peace Negotiation Committee (NSPNC) met with a working group of political parties in Naypyidaw on June 19, reported the state-run newspaper.

The junta established the committee to address ethnic armed groups and political parties, which excludes Myanmar's most popular political party National League for Democracy (NLD). The working group of political parties is led by the pro-junta Union Solidarity and Development Party.

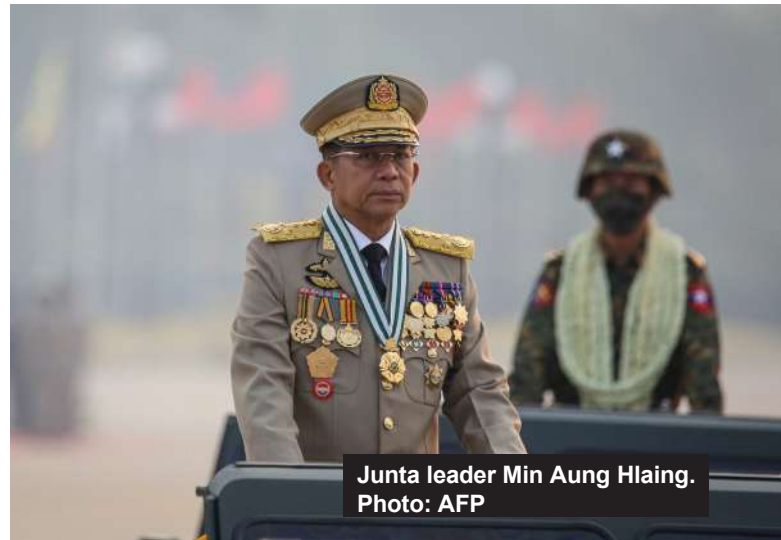
The meeting was led by the committee's chairperson Lt-Gen Tun Tun Naung.

During the meeting, NSPNC member Lt-Gen Win Bo Shein clarified the points of common agreement for the peace and development of the country and the points to be amended and added in the 2008 State Constitution, according to the state-run newspaper.

The second day meeting was held on June 20.

Junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, on June 16, promised a general election next year

The junta's superficial five-point roadmap includes an election to transfer power to the winning party, but Min Aung Hlaing has consistently postponed the election due to political unrest and civil war throughout Myanmar.



Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing.
Photo: AFP

JUNTA'S TOURISM COMMITTEE REVIEWS SECTOR GROWTH AMIDST WESTERN VISITOR DECLINE

The junta's Central Committee on National Tourism Development convened a meeting in Naypyidaw on June 21, reported the state-run newspaper.

The junta's Deputy Prime Minister General Mya Tun Oo, serving as the committee's chairperson, highlighted Myanmar's tourism sector performance, stating that tourist arrivals in 2023 reached 1.28 million, marking a significant increase from 230,000 arrivals in 2022.

There were about 520,000 tourist arrivals from January to May 2024, and it shows an increase of 63 per cent when compared to 310,000 arrivals in the same period of 2023, he said in the meeting.

However, in March, TTG Asia, leading publisher and organizer of events in travel and tourism in the Asia Pacific region, reported that Myanmar's tourism sector has been nearly decimated in the wake of over three years since the coup and four years since the onset of Covid-19.

Jochen Meissner, managing director of Uncharted Horizons Myanmar, told TTG Asia that the number of western tourists has plummeted to a few thousand annually, with group bookings no longer occurring, while Russian, Chinese, and Thai tourists comprise the majority of the remaining arrivals.



AUNG SAN SUU KYI'S BIRTHDAY MARKED BY FLOWER PROTEST, SONGS AND POEMS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

On June 19, the public, including famous singers, actors, and performers, participated in a flower protest on Facebook to mark the 79th birthday of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize winner who led a decades-long pro-democracy struggle against military rule, was detained again on February 1, 2021, when the army seized power from her elected government.

She has been serving a 27-year prison term on charges widely regarded as contrived to prevent her from engaging in political activity.

Since the coup, activists and performers and the general public conducted a flower protest every year on her birthday.

One common online practice is to post self-portraits wearing flowers adorned with symbols of protest.

On that day, the famous Burmese exiled singer Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein published a song marking Suu Kyi's birthday, participating in the flower strike.

Later, she wrote a post saying "Thank you very much to each and every fan who supported and watched the song, helping it reach 1.5 million views in 17 hours despite the internet difficulties.

Famous exiled actor Daung also wrote a poem marking Suu Kyi's birthday.

The pro-junta lobby posted the addresses and photos of some of those participating in the flower protest on social media, and they called for their arrest on their Telegram channel.

CONTROVERSY ERUPTS AS PRO-JUNTA SITAGU SAYADAW URGES FORGIVENESS FOR MONK'S KILLING COMMITTED BY JUNTA SOLDIERS

The pro-junta Sitagu Sayadaw, a well known Buddhist Abbot in Myanmar, urged the people and Buddhist monks to forget and forgive the junta army's killing of a senior Buddhist monk, a member of the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee. Many people on social media have criticized the Sitagu Sayadaw for making this statement.

Sayadaw Bhaddanta Munindabhivamsa, the abbot of Win Neinmitayon Monastery in the Bago Region, was fatally shot on June 19 inside his car as it departed from an airport in central Mandalay Region. Another monk who was in the car said that the attack was carried out by junta soldiers.

At present, both the public and the Buddhist monks are furious with the junta army over the shooting of the senior monk.

Sayadaw Bhaddanta Gunikabhivamsa, who was a passenger in the car, reported that junta soldiers fired approximately seven or eight shots from a truck at the car, resulting in the senior abbot's death and injuries to himself and the driver.

In response to Sitagu's speech, a Facebook user wrote, "He preached forgiveness towards the army that unjustly killed the monk. His speech is not Ok."

Another Facebook user commented, "I used to respect this monk (Sitagu) a lot because I didn't know much about him. Now, I no longer respect him."

Sitagu has been affiliated with Myanmar's Buddhist nationalist group Patriotic Association of Myanmar.

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Analysis & Insight



DIGITAL MAGAZINE

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