

ON THE GROUND IN MYANMAR

mizzima WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight



The Silent Winner of Myanmar's Northern Conflict

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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.

ANOTHER MYANMAR REPORTER DIES IN CUSTODY

It was with sadness that family and friends of Nay Linn Htike heard of his death from cancer in Insein Prison in Yangon last week. The former freelance reporter for the independent Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) in eastern Bago region, died on July 29 from oral cancer in the prison.

He had been transferred from Daik-U Prison in a remote area of the Bago region to Insein Prison to receive specialized health care, but the move failed to save his life.

Nay Linn Htike fell foul of Section 505(a) of the penal code, and Section 52(a) of the Anti-Terrorism Act, detained for anti-military activities for which he received an eight-year sentence.

Nay Linn Htike, who was in his 40s, published articles in the Democratic Voice of Burma before the February 2021 military coup.

Journalists have it tough in crisis-hit Myanmar. A total of seven journalists have died – including Nay Linn Htike – since the 2021 military coup. These include one who died while in military custody, two in conflict-related incidents and three journalists, believed to be associated with supporters of the military, who were killed by unidentified armed groups in 2023.

Since the coup, 202 journalists and news workers have been arrested, 67 convicted, and 138 released by the junta, according to media monitoring data. Many have been subject to brutal treatment under detention.

The challenges for journalists and independent media have been immense since the coup. The State Administration

Council (SAC), and its security apparatus continue to repress independent media and other forms of open public discussion. Journalists inside Myanmar, including citizen journalists, operate in an environment where independent news work has become a difficult, dangerous and life-threatening profession.

Over the last three years, the SAC has set up a system of restrictions on media, speech and expression, including through judicial persecution through the use of their laws, closure of media outlets and other publishing outlets, various forms of harassment by its proxies and supporters. At the same time, it allows pro-junta media outfits to operate in the country.

As part of its efforts to restrict and control spaces for news, information and public discussion and promote its agenda, the SAC uses internet restrictions and shutdowns, which often take place in regions of active conflict with anti-junta resistance forces.

Arrests, prosecutions, and convictions persist. The year 2023 saw the longest combined prison sentence handed down since the coup, 20 years for Myanmar Now's Sai Zaw Theik.

As of mid-2024, over 60 journalists and news professionals remained behind bars, the majority male and are reporters or photojournalists.

NGOs and international bodies including the United Nations have calling for the release of journalists and the ability of the media to be free to do their work – but the calls have fallen on deaf ears.

EDITORIAL

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Cover photo of UWSA fighter in Shan State by AFP





Wa fighters on the march. Photo: AFP

THE SILENT WINNER OF MYANMAR'S NORTHERN CONFLICT

Amara Thiha

From the chaos of the conflict in Shan State, the United Wa State Army has emerged as a potentially decisive force.

On the morning of July 28, a convoy of soldiers from the United Wa State Army (UWSA) drove through Lashio, the capital of the northern Shan State and home of the Myanmar military's Northeastern Regional Command, taking control of the administration under the pretext of peacekeeping. This occurred amid renewed fighting in northern Shan State, as the Three Brotherhood Alliance of ethnic armed groups launched the second phase of its Operation 1027 offensive, massing their forces around Lashio. Without firing a single shot, the UWSA has gained control of three additional townships in Shan State since October 2023 – Hopang, Pan Lon, and Tangyan – and likely more in the coming weeks.

Sources in Naypyidaw indicate that the military State Administration Council (SAC) has agreed to have the UWSA and Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) step in as peacekeepers to prevent the renewed conflict from spilling over into other parts of Shan State. This indicates the SAC's inability to maintain control and the potential total collapse of its authority in northern Shan State. The key question is: what are the strategic aims and implications of the UWSA's entry into Lashio?

To answer that question, here are five things you need to know about the UWSA, what it stands to gain from the northern conflict, and the broader regional implications.

A ROLE MODEL AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

As the largest of Myanmar's ethnic armed groups, the UWSA, which controls two noncontiguous

territories in Shan State and has as many as 30,000 soldiers under arms, is widely viewed as a model and a source of inspiration for other ethnic organizations in Myanmar.

"We have ambitions that are nothing less than Wa State," said Twan Mrat Naing, leader of the Arakan Army (AA), during celebrations marking the 30th anniversary of the UWSA's founding in Pangsang, the UWSA's capital, in 2019. Newly formed ethnic armed groups are now drawing similar inspiration from the AA and its battlefield successes in Rakhine State since the launch of Operation 1027.

The UWSA has also established itself as a political leader among the 20-odd ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) in Myanmar. At the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference convened by Aung San Suu Kyi's government in 2017, the group submitted a proposal for a confederation model as part of an ethnic coalition known as the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC). Led by the UWSA, the FPNCC's policy reflects the interests of the UWSA in two key ways: first, it advocates self-determination and authority over local security forces within designated areas until the establishment of a future federal system; and second, it advocates the creation of a security system that prioritizes local authorities and the self-defense of autonomous states through the formation of ethnic armies. This forms the foundational document of its political leadership. This significant demand for a parallel peace and political dialogue process in 2017 seemed ambitious at the time.



The UWSA is recognized as one the strongest ethnic groups in Myanmar. Photo: AFP

However, seven years after the proposal, with the central administration at its weakest in decades and ready to negotiate, it appears achievable.

The FPNCC, which also includes the AA, SSPP, Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), and Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), is now Myanmar's largest ethnic coalition. It includes more than half of all EAO combatants in Myanmar and operates from the banks of the Mekong River to the Bay of Bengal. The FPNCC has held regular meetings since the 2021 coup, with a clear framework and vision and clear political demands. Since the military takeover, no other ethnic coalition has hosted summits or regular meetings on this scale or presented a clear political position like the FPNCC. De facto leadership of the FPNCC has made the UWSA the most politically influential armed group in Myanmar, a role historically contested by the Karen National Union and the KIA.

The existing FPNCC's political framework differs significantly from the federal charter formulated by the opposition National Unity Government (NUG) and National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC). This difference is evident not only in the political process, but also in terms of fundamental visions, security arrangements, and relationship with the union administration. With its strength and influence, the FPNCC is unlikely to agree to participate in either junta or NUG processes, instead choosing to chart its own course.

WA STATE AND VISION

Using the FPNCC as a platform, the UWSA has aligned its political aspirations with the FPNCC's principles. In addition to this, the UWSA submitted two other documents in 2017: a proposal for a consultation process with the Myanmar government over the creation of an autonomous Wa State from the territories under the UWSA's control and a proposal for a new ceasefire agreement. These documents illustrate the UWSA's inspiration and vision for Wa State.

These proposals left open the question of what exactly constitutes Wa State. This has again become a live question in the current context, which the UWSA is hoping it can use to extend its territory as much as possible. Taking advantage of the weak central administration, it has already created buffer areas around UWSA-administered areas. The critical issue is whether it can link the central Wa State, which lies along the border with China, with southern Wa State, along the Thai border, over which it established control in the 1990s while fighting against a Shan insurgency

alongside the Myanmar military. In its 2017 proposal for a new Wa State, the UWSA requested the inclusion of Kengtung township in eastern Shan State. This would link the southern and central Wa States, turning the eastern part of Shan State into an exclave under direct UWSA control. The UWSA attempted this territorial expansion in 2016. In September of that year, a force of 1,000 UWSA troops marched toward Mong La, an area under the control of the NDAA, creating tensions with the NDAA. A settlement with the NDAA was reached following talks between the UWSA leadership and Aung San Suu Kyi's government.

All of this is to say that the UWSA's territorial ambitions extend beyond the current status quo. Linking the southern and northern parts of Wa State is a crucial aim. Having been granted permission by the SAC to mobilize in northern Shan State, the UWSA will undoubtedly seize the opportunity to expand its areas of influence and control. Given these territorial aspirations, and the UWSA's influence over the Three Brotherhood Alliance, particularly the MNDAA, since the start of Operation 1027, the UWSA now exerts possibly decisive influence in a long arc from the China-Myanmar border in the north of Shan State to the Thailand-Myanmar border in the south. This makes it the most influential and capable EAO in Myanmar's modern history.

THE STRATEGIC STALEMATE

In making its decisions, the UWSA has tended to act cautiously. In general, it has sought to maintain the status quo between the central administration, rival EAOs, and China. This strategic posture has been evident in its response to the coup and Operation 1027 offensive. While not directly involved, the UWSA has indirectly supported the MNDAA during the operation, for which the MNDAA leadership expressed gratitude in January.

By avoiding conflict with the SAC and maintaining its distance from the NUG, the UWSA has upheld its neutrality, at least officially. This neutrality has allowed the UWSA to increase its influence amidst the stalemate in the Shan State, not only among FPNCC members but also with those in southern Myanmar that are seeking supplies and arms. By preserving a relationship with the military junta and avoiding outright conflict, the UWSA's strategic approach seems to have paid off, positioning it as a leading political entity in northern Myanmar. This unique position allows it to mediate the relations between various EAOs and the junta administration, as evidenced by the SAC's request for the UWSA to deploy its forces in Tangyan and now in Lashio.

Despite the UWSA's entry into Lashio, its FPNCC allies, particularly the MNDAA, are continuing their siege of the city, and the TNLA persists in its offensive in northern Shan State and parts of Mandalay Region. The critical question is whether the UWSA will allow its own alliance to become uncontrollable, potentially challenging its political influence and disrupting the new status quo. Alternatively, the UWSA might seek to maintain a stalemate in northern Shan State. Regardless of its chosen path, it is certain that the UWSA will continue to have a significant impact on Myanmar politics for the foreseeable future.

NEW LEADERSHIP, RISING KINGDOM

The UWSA's strategic shift is being driven by a new generation of leaders. Young and energetic leaders in their 30s and early 40s, including Zhao Ai Nap Lai (son of Zhao Nyilai) and Bao Ai Kham (son of Bao Youxiang), were introduced in strategic meetings with the MNDAA in April. Zhao Ai Nap Lai has succeeded his father as general secretary and head of the Politburo, while Bao Ai Kham is the UWSA's new deputy general secretary.

These leaders, part of the generation that witnessed the fall of the Communist Party of Burma (from which the UWSA was created in 1989), bring different visions, views, and objectives. They lead the UWSA with heightened nationalism, seeking to preserve their legacy while seizing any opportunities that present themselves. However, their political ambitions may necessitate a recalibration of the UWSA's decades-long strategy of maintaining the status quo and stalemate in the region, given the evolving political and regional context.

As China's power grows and Myanmar's central administration weakens, the UWSA is actively seeking a new status quo that can maximize its influence. This context is reminiscent of the rise of new kingdoms. With

substantial tin deposits, rare earth elements, control over a critical juncture of Southeast Asia's largest drug trafficking route, and the ability to produce small arms, the UWSA possesses the resources needed to achieve its strategic goals. Importantly, the Wa State territories straddle the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and are relevant to the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation platform, both of which are crucial to China's strategic expansion in mainland Southeast Asia.

INFLUENCING AND THREATS TO THAILAND

Given that it is considered a natural ally of China, the UWSA maintains a close relationship with Beijing and the provincial administration in Yunnan. The UWSA's influence in the heart of the Mekong region extends Chinese influence deep into Myanmar and down to the border with Thailand.

As the UWSA grows more powerful, its political model will become more attractive to other EAOs. If Chinese efforts to mediate the current conflict secure formal autonomy and territorial concessions for the UWSA, other groups along Myanmar's borders might adopt the UWSA's approach and choose to come under greater Chinese influence. This development could undermine all dialogue processes initiated by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or the establishment of local administrative processes by the NUG and other ethnic Interim Executive Councils, which enjoy the backing of Western countries. The UWSA's expansion along the Thai-Myanmar border means that states and entities influenced by China could soon surround Thailand. This new player in the region poses a critical question: Is Thailand, the last remaining U.S. ally in mainland Southeast Asia, prepared for this expansion?

Courtesy of Amara Thiha and The Diplomat



The Wa are proud of their culture. Photo: AFP



Civilians flee fighting in Lashio in northern Shan State. Photo: AFP

OPERATION 1027

SECOND WAVE MAKES FURTHER HEADWAY IN THE NORTH

The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) declared they had seized the junta's Northeast Military Command and started their administration by deploying Kokang police forces from Laukai at the end of July. However, the genuine seizure of the Northeast Military Command news with photos appeared on 3 August after fierce skirmishes inside the junta headquarters.

On July 28 MNDAA forces captured Lashio prison, leading to the release of Tun Tun Hein, a Central Executive Committee member of the National League for Democracy (NLD) who had been sentenced to 33 years imprisonment. Over 200 other political prisoners were also released.

According to the National Unity Government (NUG)'s announcement, revolutionary forces are looking after the released prisoners.

Internal conflict within the junta

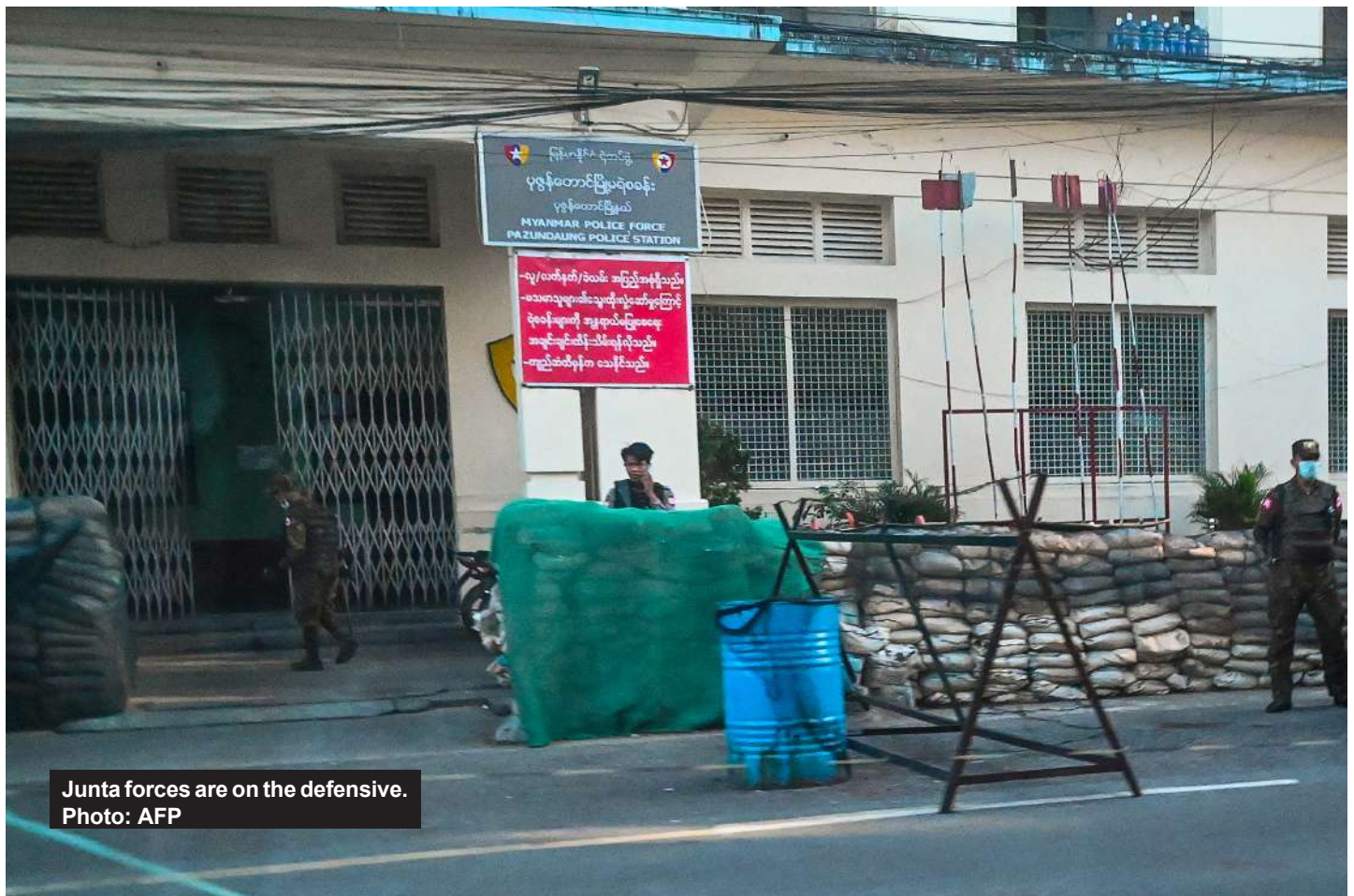
Fierce conversations were reportedly exchanged between the junta's on-ground commander generals, Northeastern commander Major General Soe Tint

and No. (2) Special Military Operation Commander Lt. Gen. Naing Naing Oo, with the Lt. Gen blaming the Northwest Commander for the defeat in Lashio. As a result, Major General Soe Tint was suspended after cursing back at Lt. Gen. Naing Naing Oo.

Additionally, some on-ground officials, including a lieutenant colonel, two majors, and two captains, refused to engage in battles, hiding in Muse, and were subsequently arrested.

Reinforcements from the Eastern Central Command to the Lashio base, comprising around 300 personnel and 15 trucks heading to Lashio, were ambushed by allied forces near Manpan and Hona villages in Lashio township. Over 50 junta soldiers were reported killed and over 80 injured. The reinforcement column ultimately retreated to their original position, with their leader, Brigadier General Than Tun Aung, sustaining serious injuries.

Around 500 armed personnel from the United Wa State Army (UWSA) entered Lashio. According to a UWSA representative, their forces negotiated with



Junta forces are on the defensive. Photo: AFP

both sides—the junta and the MNDA—and declared their neutrality in the ongoing conflict. (See this week's cover story)

In the Lashio battle, the junta sacrificed its top on-the-ground commander, Brigadier Tin Tun Aung, Vice Commander of the Northeast Military Command, who was seriously injured in the Lashio City Hall battle on July 26. He died on July 28 at Pyinoolwin Military Hospital.

According to the 2014 census, Lashio has a population of over 330,000, with the majority living in urban areas and the rest in the countryside. Many people fled the city ahead of the hostilities.

Dozens of civilians have been killed or wounded in the recent fighting in Shan state, according to the junta and local rescue groups. Neither the junta nor the ethnic alliance have released figures on their own casualties. Myanmar's borderlands are home to myriad ethnic armed groups who have battled the military since independence from Britain in 1948 for autonomy and control of lucrative resources.

In Mandalay region, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) announced their capture of Mogoke on 29 July (as featured in our cover story last week). They reported seizing 30 prisoners of war and over 200 weapons, including Multiple Rocket Launcher System (MRLS) missiles and launchers. Similarly, in the following two days TNLA achieved a strategic victory by capturing a strategic post from the junta in Mongmit township. The offensive began on June 25 and withstood junta airstrikes and artillery.

CONSCRIPTS: PRO-JUNTA CANNON FODDER

On July 30, a Rakhine State-based media outlet, Narinjara, reported that approximately 300 Rohingya pro-regime militiamen were killed in skirmishes in Maungdaw in the north of Rakhine State. The report, citing a local source, indicated that these militia conscripts were recruited from refugee camps in Bangladesh rather than from Maungdaw residents.

One local resident commented: "Armed men commuting in Maungdaw are not from this town; these

soldiers are from refugee camps in Bangladesh, and they are young and innocent." Another villager from Shwezar mentioned witnessing a truckload of dead Rohingya bodies early in the morning, though the dim light prevented him from identifying their origin.

There have been numerous reports from family members of conscripted soldiers in Batch 1 dying on the frontlines in Lashio in northern Shan State. One grieving elder brother of a deceased soldier said: "Before joining the army, the authorities assured us that the conscripts would be assigned to auxiliary duties in the Yangon area. However, after finishing their training on June 28, they were sent to the Lashio frontline on July 1 and my brother died on July 28."

Recruits from Batch 2 of the public military service were also sent to the frontlines prematurely. Their training, initially scheduled to conclude on August 2, was cut short. Some military training schools finished the training a few days early and deployed the conscripts urgently. A military source from Naypyidaw confirmed, "Batch 2 training ended quietly. The trainees did not even realize the training had concluded as it was announced as a rehearsal. The conscripts were then sent to the respective frontlines. Only the training officers know their exact deployment locations."

This situation highlights the dire conscription practices and the heavy toll on young, often inexperienced soldiers, exacerbating the ongoing conflict in Myanmar. The mandatory military conscription programme began in February 2024.

RAKHINE SEES HEAVY FIGHTING

Ongoing offensive operations by the Arakan Army (AA) have led to intense fighting around the No. (5) Border Guard Police Battalion (BGP) in Maungdaw. As the battles intensified, some BGP forces were forced to retreat, suffering severe casualties. In response, the junta launched support strikes through air and naval forces.

On the early morning of July 30, in heavy rain, the AA attacked various bases held by junta troops and Rohingya militias, mirroring the situation at No. (5) BGP. As of now, Maungdaw is the only township to have completely fallen under AA control, and the junta

troops are losing their positions.

In southern Rakhine State, the AA is targeting the junta's last stronghold, the Kwin Wine navy base. Reinforcements sent from the Ayeyarwady region have become trapped on an island situated between the navy base and the advancing AA forces. Tensions escalated further when retreating soldiers were refused entry to the navy base, leading to an exchange of gunfire among junta troops.

On July 25, over 70 armed personnel, comprising junta troops and Rohingya militias, broke into the Myanmar Red Cross office in Bohmoo village, which remains under junta control. The security staff reported to a local news agency that the intruders looted medicine and property.

Due to the intense fighting in the area, NGO and INGO staff have evacuated Maungdaw, closing their respective offices. This evacuation underscores the deteriorating security situation and the significant impact on humanitarian operations in this western region of Myanmar.

TOP MIZZIMA BURMESE VIDEOS

Please see the top Mizzima Burmese videos over the last week.

"I think the soldiers became more demoralized after Min Aung Hlaing became interim president" (Editorial Talk)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLDAVuIkMKk>

Meeting with U Ne Myo Zin, who is about to join the CDM soldiers

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUE06h_tt5U

Battle in Nyang Shwe Township sees junta forces defeated (On the Ground report)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXBJ8AOal9w>





Photo: AFP

THREE BROTHERHOOD ALLIANCE SAYS IT WILL FIGHT THE JUNTA UNTIL IT IS DEFEATED

The Three Brotherhood Alliance issued a statement on 30 July 2024 declaring its unwavering commitment to fighting the junta's military dictatorship until it is defeated.

The statement also praised the people of Myanmar for their peaceful protests and support for the revolution.

It came as fighting has intensified in northern Shan State as the Three Brotherhood Alliance, made up of the Arakan Army (AA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), attempts to take over and occupy more towns in northern Shan State, as part of the second wave of the Operation 1027 offensive.

So far, the MNDAA claims that joint forces led by the Three Brotherhood Alliance have taken control of the towns of Mogok in northern Mandalay Region and Lashio in northern Shan State.

However, the military junta has refuted the claims about Lashio, stating that the city has not fallen and

that heavy fighting is ongoing and the junta is launching airstrikes.

The AA has taken control of more than half of Rakhine State. It is continuing its offensive to capture the remaining military junta camps in the region and wants to assert complete control over Rakhine State.

People's Defence Forces (PDFs) under the National Unity Government (NUG) and their allies, are participating in the second wave of Operation 1027. They have successfully captured the town of Singu in Mandalay Region and are continuing their offensives to capture the towns of Matara and Thabeikkyin, also in Mandalay Region.

The Three Brotherhood Alliance's statement of its commitment to fighting the Myanmar junta is in stark contrast to a statement issued by another ethnic armed organisation, the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), on 29 July 2024, that called for an end to hostilities and negotiations with the junta.

MYANMAR REBEL GROUP VOWS TO PROTECT CHINA'S INTERESTS

A member of a Myanmar rebel alliance fighting military rule has promised to protect Chinese interests in northern Myanmar.

The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, or MNDAA, pledged to protect Chinese nationals and investments as the battle for a major Shan state town intensified, the group announced on Tuesday last week.

Several ceasefires brokered with China's help between Myanmar's Three Brotherhood Alliance and junta forces have failed to maintain a lasting peace since January. Since July 22, when the latest ceasefire collapsed, fighting over Lashio, the main city in northern Shan state, has surged.

The MNDAA has since claimed it captured most of the town, including a regional military headquarters, which junta officials have denied.

The group said it would consult allied organizations and "prevent actions that may harm Chinese investment and Chinese employees."

Political analyst Than Soe Naing told Radio Free Asia that groups involved in fighting the junta, which include the allied Ta'ang National Liberation Army and Arakan Army, are already obligated to protect Chinese interests under an earlier agreement.

The renewed declaration may be the result of a warning from China to be more cautious during battles, he said.

"China's interests in northern Shan state are to keep its trade routes convenient and smooth and to maintain stability on the border region. Its interests are also to clean up online scamming," he said. "Therefore, China has put its trust in the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee to ensure that its interests are not affected."

The committee is an alliance of seven ethnic minority forces established in 2017. In 2023, it called on China to help solve the crisis triggered by a military coup two years earlier.

China's investments in Myanmar include oil and natural gas pipelines running through both Shan and Rakhine states. Fighting in the latter has threatened the safety of Chinese employees.

The MNDAA said it would urge its allies to assist injured Chinese citizens trapped by fighting as well as those who have businesses affected by the war. RFA telephoned MNDAA spokesman Li Kyar Win to ask about the details of the statement, but he did not answer calls.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told a recent briefing China's borders and the security of people living there, as well as its projects and businesses in Myanmar, should not be compromised.

China has called on Myanmar's rivals to end their fighting and resolve differences peacefully and said it would push for ceasefires and talks.

WA ARMY CLAIMS NEUTRALITY

Conflict in Lashio continued early on Wednesday morning, after another ethnic minority militia group, the United Wa State Army, which controls an autonomous region of Shan state and is known to be closely affiliated with China, evacuated trapped Lashio prison employees and their family members, residents told RFA on Wednesday.

The Wa army led more than 120 junta-affiliated prison staff and their relatives, who had been trapped by clashes, to a nearby town on Tuesday, said one witness, declining to be named for security reasons.

"I saw three military vehicles carrying prison employees. They were sent to Mongyai town," he said, referencing a town 93 km (58 miles) from Lashio.

The evacuees said they were trapped when MNDAA fighters captured an infantry battalion's position near the prison.

RFA attempted to contact Nyi Ran, an official of the Wa Liaison Office in Lashio, regarding the evacuation but he did not answer.

One resident close to the Wa army, asking to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals, told RFA that troops arrived in Lashio on Saturday in order to protect properties at the request of "various ethnic groups" in the town. However, the resident declined to reveal which parties had asked the Wa force to come although the resident said the Wa army would not take sides in any battles.

Two Lashio neighborhoods have been damaged by junta airstrikes and heavy weapons fire, residents said, but they could not verify if there were any casualties. The Wa Liaison Office and nearby houses were also damaged in air strikes, they added.

RFA called Shan state's junta spokesperson Khun Thein Maung for more information on the battle in Lashio but he did not answer.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia



Calm on a Lashio street.
Photo: AFP

The source, who requested anonymity to talk to the media, did not say if any troops were still inside the regional command.

AFP was unable to reach people on the ground in Lashio, which is normally home to around 150,000 people.

Myanmar's military has 14 regional commands across the country, from the Himalayan foothills in the north to the sprawling

southern delta region bordering the Indian Ocean.

MYANMAR ARMED GROUP SAYS CAPTURED REGIONAL MILITARY COMMAND IN LASHIO

A Myanmar ethnic minority armed group said Saturday it had captured a regional military command after weeks of clashes, in what would be a major blow to the junta.

Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) fighters have “fully captured the headquarters of the northeast military command” in Lashio in northern Shan state, the group said in a statement.

Fighting has rocked Lashio, which sits on a major trade highway to China, since early July when MNDAA fighters renewed an offensive against the junta.

A junta spokesman could not be reached for comment.

A military source told AFP on Saturday that “soldiers who have been resisting for weeks inside the north eastern command started retreating this morning.”

Soldiers in at least 10 of them are currently engaged in fighting established ethnic minority armed groups or newer “People’s Defence Forces” that have sprung up to battle the military since its 2021 coup.

The capture of the Lashio post would be the first time the military has lost a regional command during the conflict which erupted more than three years ago.

The military is yet to recover territory in northern Shan state lost to an alliance of ethnic minority armed groups, including the MNDAA, launched late last year.

That offensive saw the MNDAA capture the city of Laukkai near the China border after around 2,000 junta troops surrendered, in one of the military’s biggest single defeats in decades.

Dozens of civilians have been killed or wounded in the recent fighting in Shan state, according to the junta and local rescue groups.

Neither the junta nor the ethnic alliance have released figures on their own casualties.

Myanmar’s borderlands are home to myriad ethnic armed groups who have battled the military since independence from Britain in 1948 for autonomy and control of lucrative resources.

AFP

OVER 400 PRISONERS ESCAPE LASHIO PRISON AS RETREATING JUNTA OPENS GATES

Over 400 political prisoners and other prisoners escaped from Lashio Prison in northern Shan State's Lashio Town when retreating junta troops opened the prison gates on the afternoon of 29 July 2024.

The incident happened as the Myanmar National Democracy Alliance Army (MNDAA) and its allies launched an attack on the prison and the nearby junta military base.

According to former political prisoners there has been no communication with the escaped political prisoners, though a person who assists political prisoners said that efforts are being made to contact them.

He said: "The fighting occurred near the prison, prompting the political prisoners to flee for safety. I have had no contact with them so far and we are still

trying to reach out. I'm waiting for calls from them."

He added that the job of tracking down the political prisoners has been complicated because phone lines and internet services have been cut off in Lashio since 27 July, making it difficult to ascertain the whereabouts and safety of the escaped prisoners.

The prison housed more than 300 male and 100 female political prisoners from across the country, some of whom were serving life sentences, according to sources in the political prisoners' community.

Among the escaped political prisoners was U Tun Tun Hein, a central executive of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and the vice president of Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House), according to a BBC report. It also said that U Tun Tun Hein has now made contact with defence forces in the area, according to Mg Saung Kha, the leader of the Bamar People's Liberation Army (BPLA), one of the defence forces fighting in Lashio.

mizzima WEEKLY Analysis & Insight



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RCSS CALLS FOR CEASEFIRE WITH MYANMAR JUNTA

Unlike nearly every other ethnic armed organisation (EAO) the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) has called for an end to hostilities and negotiations with the junta to establish a federal union.

Despite defence forces currently launching successful offensives against the junta in northern Shan State and taking strategic towns, the RCSS issued a statement on 29 July 2024 calling for a ceasefire with the junta, as it struggles to defend its positions.

The statement also claimed that the RCSS is committed to maintaining stability in southern Shan State and protecting the lives and property of local residents. It also expressed deep sorrow over the destruction of homes and property, civilian casualties, and the hardships faced by those fleeing the ongoing conflict in northern Shan State.

However, a Shan State analyst suggested to Mizzima that though the RCSS claims to protect stability and local lives, it may actually be focusing on safeguarding its own territories from the junta army's threats in southern and eastern Shan State.

He said: "RCSS's actions seem aimed at protecting its interests rather than fostering broader peace."

Efforts by Mizzima to reach the RCSS for comments were unsuccessful.

The RCSS signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in October 2015.

The RCSS Chairman, General Yawd Serk, is also the leader of the 7 EAO Alliance—a coalition of seven EAOs that signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), which has held several peace talks with the junta's generals in Nay Pyi Taw since the coup.

Following the signing of the NCA, RCSS troops went from their base in southern Shan State into northern Shan State, an area where traditionally the RCSS did not operate. As a result the RCSS ended up fighting with the Shan State Army/Shan State Progress Party (SSA/SSPP), an older Shan EAO based in northern Shan State and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), which eventually caused the RCSS troops to retreat back to southern Shan State.

More recently, in June 2024, the RCSS and SSA have been again fighting each other in Lawksawk Township, in southern Shan State.



Cartridge cases at the scene of an Arakan Army firefight. Photo: AFP

ARAKAN ARMY INTENT ON TARGETING MYANMAR JUNTA HOLD-OUTS AS IT SEEKS TO CONTROL RAKHINE STATE

The Arakan Army (AA) has issued a stern warning that it will persist in attacking all remaining Myanmar junta military bases, including those in Taungup and Gwa townships, Rakhine State, where Military Operation Command No. 5 is based.

Recent clashes between AA and junta troops in Taungup have escalated since last month. In response, the junta troops have been destroying bridges in Gwa as a defensive measure to prevent AA troops from entering the area.

On 16 July, AA successfully captured most of Thandwe township, which lies between Taungup and Gwa and is home to the well-known Ngapali Beach resort. However, the military junta is attempting to reclaim Thandwe by reinforcing and resupplying their troops via waterways. They are also firing heavy weapons from the Maung Shwe Lay naval base and

naval warships stationed in the Bay of Bengal, resulting in ongoing skirmishes in Thandwe, the AA said.

As a consequence, civilian motorboats and longboats are now prohibited from navigating the sea near Thandwe and Gwa. This restriction will remain in place indefinitely from August, the AA has announced.

In cases of urgent health or mandatory travel issues, the AA advises contacting the nearest AA administrator or area commander and following designated routes and markings for passage.

The AA, which controls 11 towns in Rakhine and Paletwa in Chin State, has declared its intention to intensify its offensive until the entire Rakhine State is liberated, continuing to target military bases that do not surrender.

JUNTA ORDERS MONITORING OF RAKHINE STATE IDPS IN AYEYARWADY REGION

The junta has issued a directive to police and local administrators in wards and villages to monitor internally displaced persons (IDPs) entering Ayeeyarwady Region from Rakhine State.

Administrators and police officers have been instructed to check where IDPs are staying and to conduct interrogations of IDPs and the homeowners of the homes they are staying in.

The junta directive also states that the arrival in Ayeeyarwady Region of any IDPs from Rakhine State must be immediately reported to the authorities.

A source close to the police said: "Midnight guest lists are conducted at KTVs [karaoke bars], restaurants, and guest houses. Administrative bodies have been ordered to conduct thorough searches of their areas."

"I'm sure that officials will arrest any suspicious IDPs. Everyone should be careful", said a source close to the junta in Patheingyi Township.

In recent months heavy fighting between the Arakan Army (AA) and the junta in Rakhine State has caused people to flee their homes.

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Photo: AFP

ABOUT 1,500 MYANMAR REFUGEES CROSS INTO MIZORAM STATE, INDIA IN ONE WEEK

Approximately 1,500 Myanmar refugees entered the India's Mizoram State between 22 and 29 July bringing the total number of Myanmar refugees in Mizoram to 35,125, according to All India Radio.

It said that the 1,500 new refugees had dispersed across five districts in Mizoram State.

Champhai District saw the highest influx, with 1,293 refugees arriving in small groups, rather than in one large group.

In addition, 108 of the newly arrived refugees went to Lawngtlai District, 77 went to Saiha District, 14 went to Serchhip District and one went to Aizawl District, according to a Mizoram State official quoted by All India Radio.

Currently, there are 15,505 Myanmar refugees in Champhai District. They are staying in 23 refugee camps and with family and friends.

The recent refugee surge is believed to be due to intense fighting between Chin revolutionary forces and junta troops in the area between Hakha and Thantlang townships in Chin State. It is not uncommon for Myanmar people to flee from Chin State to Mizoram when there is fighting and then return when the fighting subsides.

A senior member of an Indian based refugee organisation said: "We are unaware of the recent influx of refugees. Typically, refugees flee during attacks and return when the situation calms down, making it difficult to maintain a constant refugee list."

Mizoram based youths and NGOs have warned Myanmar refugees in Mizoram State that they must respect local customs and follow local laws and regulations. These include being prohibited from starting a business and not becoming involved in drug trafficking.



Photo: AFP

NUG DECLARES SAGAING VILLAGE A MYANMAR 'JUNTA-FREE ZONE'

The Ministry of Defense under the National Unity Government (NUG) has announced that Maungkone village in Htigyaing township, Sagaing Region, has become a Myanmar junta-free zone.

A video released on 27 July by the NUG ministry shows locals welcoming the People Defense Forces (PDFs).

Recent reports indicate that PDFs have gained control of the Tagaung nickel processing plant, which has Chinese investment. Following this, MOD designated the nearby Maungkone village as a junta-free area. Now, many parts of Htigyaing township are under PDF control, with the Military Council forces stationed in the downtown area, resulting in a calmer situation, according to local residents.

The battle in Htigyaing has been ongoing since 8 November, 2023. The Military Council's intense airstrikes caused significant damage to homes and led

to the displacement of many residents.

Subsequently, PDFs shifted their offensive from the township to the surrounding Military Council camps. They have successfully seized Maungkone village, about eight miles from Htigyaing township, and taken control of the Tagaung nickel processing plant, the primary Military Council camp in the area, according to PDF fighters.

The Tagaung nickel processing plant is a major project with an investment of US\$855 million by the China state-owned company, China Nonferrous Metal Mining and Construction. At the end of July, around 50 Military Council soldiers stationed in the project area surrendered to the PDFs. The defensive forces are currently securing the project area, and China is reportedly in communication with the NUG, according to Kyaw Zaw, a spokesman for the NUG's President's Office.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the ASEAN meeting. Photo: AFP

US SECRETARY OF STATE ADDRESSES ASEAN POST MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken addressed the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference held in Laos on 17 July 2024.

Below is a transcript of Secretary Blinken’s speech:

“We have seen an unprecedented expansion of ASEAN-U.S. cooperation. It could not have happened without Indonesia’s support. To Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sok, the U.S. is very eager to partner with Cambodia as our next country coordinator, and we thank you for that. And to our host, Saleumxay, thank you for your leadership as ASEAN chair this year. Let me also say to Foreign Minister Mohamad Hasan that we’re very much looking forward to working with

Malaysia as the ASEAN chair in 2025.

“Finally, to the secretary-general of ASEAN, we’re grateful for the secretary’s partnership. We were very pleased to welcome you to Washington last month. We had a chance to talk about that earlier today. And let me also say a special thanks to ASEAN’s Committee of Permanent Representatives for all the hard work in support of our growing partnership.

“Finally, I’d like to thank – if you’ll allow me a moment of personal privilege – our own ambassador, Ambassador Abraham, for his efforts to elevate the U.S.-ASEAN partnership and relationship. As you know well, Yohannes is one of our best. When he picks up the

phone, Washington listens, in no small part because he used to be on the other side of the line in Washington himself.

“Over the last few years, the United States and ASEAN have embarked on a remarkable deepening and expansion of our ties. We’ve upgraded our relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, and we’ve elevated our work together on digital issues, cyber security, health, the environment and climate, energy, transportation, women’s empowerment – all while reinvigorating longstanding lines of effort in foreign affairs, in economics, and in defense. This strengthening of our partnership is built upon common values and a shared vision, a shared vision of an open Indo-Pacific, an Indo-Pacific that is free, that’s prosperous, that’s secure, that’s connected, and resilient, as our friends from Laos have emphasized for their chairmanship.

“As President Biden has said, ASEAN is at the heart of the United States Indo-Pacific Strategy. We’re deeply committed to ASEAN’s centrality. This means we’ll keep working with and through ASEAN to tackle the biggest challenges, while seizing on what we see as almost limitless opportunities. And we strongly support ASEAN’s Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which shares fundamental principles with their own Indo-Pacific Strategy. Our commercial and economic ties are incredibly robust, with two-way trade and investment supporting jobs here in Southeast Asia and in the United States, enhancing the economic futures for U.S. and ASEAN businesses and workers. The United States is very proud to be the number-one source of foreign direct investment across ASEAN.

“Through our partnership, training entrepreneurs and students to the region’s workforce can succeed – excuse me, so that they can succeed in the digital economy. We’re improving the region’s access to secure and affordable energy, also critical to economic success. Enhancing ASEAN’s defenses against infectious disease to protect the health of millions of Southeast Asians is another critical line of effort. We look forward to discussing all of the work that we’re doing to improve the lives of our combined 1 billion people.

“As we take stock of this affirmative agenda, we also have to work together to address challenges to this shared vision, whether it’s Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine, the DPRK’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, the ongoing and heartbreaking crisis in Burma, or the PRC’s escalatory and unlawful actions taken against the Philippines in the South China Sea over the last few months. On that, we are pleased to take note of the successful resupply today to Second Thomas Shoal, which is the product of an agreement reached between the Philippines and China. We applaud that and hope and expect to see that it continues going forward.

“Finally, while it is far afield, we recognize the impact that the crisis in Gaza is having on so many people around the world, but first and foremost on those who are suffering its consequences every single day. About six weeks ago, President Biden put forward a proposal for an immediate ceasefire, the release of hostages, and the prospect of more enduring peace and security for all concerned.

“And we were very gratified that the entire world came out in support of that proposal, including – something we rarely see these days – the United Nations Security Council. We are working intensely every single day to bring that proposal to a conclusion so that we get the ceasefire, we get the return of hostages, we get a path to more enduring peace and security. We’re grateful for the support of so many countries around this table for that effort, and we’re determined to see it over the finish line.

“And with that, I look forward to our discussion today about how we can enhance what is already a strong, robust partnership between the United States and ASEAN, and address the most pressing issues of our time, particularly those that have a direct impact on the lives of all of our citizens. We are here responsible to them, and the purpose of this partnership is to do right by them. Thank you.”

UN SPECIAL ADVISERS CONCERNED ABOUT MYANMAR SITUATION

The United Nations (UN) Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Alice Wairimu Nderitu, and the UN Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect, Mō Bleeker, have expressed concern about the situation since the military coup in 2021 and are alarmed at the increase of violence and conflict across Myanmar.

The situation has been under the close observation of the Office and in March 2021 the Special Adviser Wairimu Nderitu and the then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michele Bachelet, issued a joint statement calling for an end to systemic impunity in Myanmar.

Ms. Alice Wairimu Nderitu, and Ms. Mō Bleeker, remain concerned about the increased violence in Myanmar.

Below is the statement they issued on 29 July 2024:

Converging reports indicate that serious crimes under international human rights and humanitarian law are being committed, notably the direct targeting of civilians with aerial and artillery bombardments, numerous violations of children's rights, among them enforced recruitment, maiming and abduction by the Armed Forces. Despite provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice in January 2020, Rohingya in Myanmar, including women and children, continue to suffer from targeted killings and indiscriminate violence, including by airstrikes, shelling, burning, landmines, and unexploded ordnance. OCHA reports that the humanitarian crisis "has entered a dangerous new chapter with entrenched conflict posing grave risks to civilians, stirring a worrying resurgence of inter-communal tension and driving record levels of displacement". As of today, more than 3.2 million people have been internally displaced with young people, boys and girls, reported to be leaving Myanmar, trying to avoid conflict, and enforced military conscription.

"Since October 2023, civilians across the country are paying the brunt of renewed violence between the ethnic armed groups and the Myanmar military. Regardless of religion, ethnicity, origin, gender, political affiliation, the Myanmar military is primarily responsible to address and counter hate speech and prevent

incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence against minorities, as well as to prevent and protect the entire civil population from and against the crimes of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity", the Special Advisers note.

The Special Advisers reiterate concerns raised by the High Commissioner for Human Rights in his statement to the Human Rights Council on 18 June, which described most serious allegations of targeted violence against the Rohingya, by both the Arakan Army and the Armed forces, including beheadings, burning of villages as people sleep, drone attacks, killings of unarmed people fleeing, evacuation orders with nowhere to go. The situation has seriously deteriorated, and disturbing reports indicate that displaced civilians, many of whom are Rohingya, are being used as human shields. In this context, hate speech is also being used again, since 2017, to stoke ethnic tensions between Rohingya and Arakan community, with the view to exacerbate interethnic polarization. In addition, reports indicate forced recruitment of the Rohingya into the Armed Forces and the Arakan Army.

Furthermore, the Special Advisers stress recent reports of escalation of violence in the Shan State and the neighboring Mandalay Region, ending a six-month ceasefire as set by the Haigen agreement, resulting in a deterioration of the security and humanitarian situation also in the north of the country.

Measures to prevent further hate speech and incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence, as well as violations of human rights, international humanitarian law, and protection of all groups at risk across the country among other against forced internal displacement and forced recruitment, must be put in place. In particular, the provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice in 2020 in relation to the members of the Rohingya group on the territory of Myanmar must be upheld.

The restrictions on humanitarian aid threatening civilians in conflict areas may be considered as violation of international humanitarian law. The Special Advisers recall that parties to the armed conflict shall fully respect international law and international humanitarian law and urge them to return to dialogue,

deescalate violence, and fully protect civilians.

The Special Advisers also urge for a prompt implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2669 (2022) on the situation in Myanmar, which demands an immediate end to all forms of violence throughout the country, and restraint and de-escalation of tensions.

They encourage ASEAN to renew urgent and commensurate efforts towards a political solution and a full protection of civilians, taking into account the ongoing serious deterioration of the situation. An inclusive and comprehensive national political dialogue and nationwide reconciliation process is required with the full, effective, and meaningful participation of all ethnic groups, including Rohingya and other minorities, women, young people, and persons with disabilities, as well as civil society and religious leaders. Finally, the Special Advisers urge for the international community to implement joint efforts to reassess the crisis in Myanmar in the light of the significant developments that are unfolding and launch a robust coordinated effort.

The Special Advisers also expressed concern over the ongoing instrumentalisation of justice against the political opposition and call the Myanmar Military to respect and reestablish the full independence of justice. The Special Advisers also acknowledge the important efforts taking place before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), as well as the work being carried out by the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM) established by the United Nations Human Rights Council. Ensuring the full observance of the principles of Rule of Law today and ensuring accountability for past crimes, to realize a holistic transitional justice process and trial the most serious international crimes committed are indispensable to bring sustainable peace, justice, safety and create the basis for a new peaceful future for all people across Myanmar.

US SENATORS CALL ON STATE DEPARTMENT TO TAKE ACTION OVER MYANMAR CRISIS

Two US senators have called on the US State Department and USAID to take action over the political and humanitarian crisis continuing to unfold in Myanmar.

US Senators Benjamin L. Cardin and Mitch McConnell have written to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and USAID administrator Samantha Power on 29 July.

The following is the text of their letter:

Dear Secretary Blinken and Administrator Power,

We are writing to express our concerns regarding what appears to be a failure to meet the moment regarding the evolving situation in Burma. As the risk rises of a prolonged stalemate in the conflict, resulting in a permanently fragmented state, it is imperative that the U.S. government has a comprehensive and forward leaning strategy on Burma. We urgently need a revitalized approach, which will better support resistance forces within the country who are courageously standing up to the brutality of the military junta.

The United States should reinvigorate its diplomacy to bring together and empower the pro-democracy groups and ethnic organizations who are crucial to forming a future democratic government with an inclusive, federalist framework in Burma. Our diplomatic efforts should involve close and continued engagement with traditional constituencies such as the National.

League for Democracy (NLD) and the National Unity Government (NUG), as well as ethnic organizations who have recently gained and are holding considerable swaths of territory across the country. While the People's Republic of China manipulates all sides of the conflict to advance its strategic interests and influence in the region, recent developments in Burma open up the possibility of creative multilateral diplomacy and coordination with ASEAN and key partners in the Indo-Pacific, including Thailand, Japan, and India. Multilateral support for the various resistance

CORE DEVELOPMENTS

groups will be crucial in charting a course for a stable, democratic political future in Burma, and multilateral assistance with reconstruction and development efforts will be essential following the conflict. At the same time, the United States and international partners should continue to make clear to all armed actors that they must protect civilian populations and allow for unhindered humanitarian access, and that the United States will promote accountability for those who commit abuses.

The United States should also revisit the Burma sanctions regime and explore new accountability actions, including those that target the aviation fuel sector, to maintain pressure on the junta and deprive it of the financial, economic, and military resources it needs to continue its campaign of violence against the Burmese people. We applaud the success that has been achieved working with Singapore to constrain the flow of weapons to the regime and hope that a similar effort will be possible as financial flows move to other countries in the region, including Thailand and Vietnam.

We also have concerns over the State Department's and USAID's insufficient implementation, and unnecessarily narrow interpretation, of the non-lethal assistance provisions of the Burma Act. Resistance groups are facing relentless military attacks and indiscriminate bombings by junta forces. Providing these groups with non-lethal items such as medical equipment, body armor, early warning radar systems,

drone jammers, and similar tools for use against the junta's ISR drones will give them additional protection from these regime attacks. The slow pace of implementation and unnecessarily narrow interpretation of the "non-lethal assistance" authority provided by Congress have significantly hampered the U.S. government's efforts to provide timely and impactful support to resistance forces. It is our understanding that this stems from a policy decision not to provide these kinds of life-saving resources in spite of the authorities provided by Congress, and we urge you to reconsider this decision.

We reaffirm Congress' willingness to coordinate closely with you to find strategic and impactful ways to assist the Burmese people, avoid a protracted conflict that impacts the broader region, prevent entrenched PRC influence, and work in concert with partners and allies. The United States has stood with the Burmese people for decades against this oppressive military regime, and we must not cede U.S. leadership at this critical inflection point, but rather do everything in our power to support the hopes and aspirations of the people of Burma, from all of its diverse communities, for a democratic, peaceful, and prosperous future.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.



Photo: Michael



Mount Popa shrine. Photo: AFP

WAR IN MYANMAR HEARTLANDS SILENCES MOUNT POPA VOLCANO SHRINE

A shrine perched on an extinct volcano in Myanmar once thronged with the bustle of pilgrims praying to flower-eating spirit Popa Maedaw, but civil war has cut the complex off from the faithful.

Now, the prayers have fallen silent at the Taung Kalat shrine, the plains around it a battle zone and the faithful mostly blocked from access by fighting and checkpoints manned by all sides in the conflict.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since 2021, when the military ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's government, ending a 10-year experiment with democracy and sparking nationwide protests.

The junta's crackdown on dissent sparked renewed fighting with ethnic minority armed groups in the borderlands and sent thousands to join newer People's Defence Forces (PDF) formed to battle the military.

"There are not many young people here anymore," said one shop owner on the road that winds up through thick forest to the summit of Mount Popa, the extinct volcano.

"They have gone to join the PDF."

The plains surrounding Mount Popa are home to the Bamar ethnic majority and were largely untouched by decades of previous conflict between the military and minority armed groups in the remote jungles and hills.

Now the region of rolling fields of sesame, pulses and beans - studded with the golden spires of Buddhist pagodas - is a battle zone.

PDF fighters use homemade mines to ambush military convoys and regularly assassinate local officials accused of working with the junta.

The junta has armed and trained civilian militias and its troops are accused of razing villages and massacring inhabitants suspected of supporting the PDFs.

The warring sides use checkpoints along roads they control to levy "taxes" on travellers.

On the road to neighbouring Myingyan district, a group of villagers told AFP to turn back.

“The situation is bad if you go that way,” said one.

In May PDF fighters killed dozens of people, including civilians, in a raid on a pro-military village in Myingyan, according to local media reports.

Days later, north of second city Mandalay, the well-known abbot of a monastery was shot dead by security forces at a checkpoint.

The junta initially blamed PDF fighters, but later said its forces were responsible.

WISH GRANTER

The Taung Kalat shrine honours Popa Maedaw, one of dozens of nats, or guardian spirits, that exist alongside Buddhism in Myanmar.

Devotees believe she has the power to grant wishes.

They also believe she was a flower-eating ogress who turned into a beautiful woman when she fell in love with a royal emissary - and that she later died of heartbreak when the monarch ordered her beloved's murder.

Along the shrine's steep stairway, tiles record donations to the shrine made by senior officers from the military that has ruled Myanmar for most of its history since independence from Britain.

One of the Popa Maedaw statues is said to resemble Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's democracy figurehead and the military's most famous foe.

Ahead of elections in 2020 officials from her National League for Democracy (NLD) party held a private ceremony at the Taung Kalat shrine to ask for victory, according to senior party sources.

The NLD later won a landslide, trouncing its military-backed rival.

The military made unsubstantiated claims of massive fraud, and seized power again in February 2021, sparking a civil war now in its fourth year.

Struggling to crush resistance across Myanmar, in February the military announced conscription of men aged 18-35 to shore up its ranks.

At the Taung Kalat shrine, a woman from the town of Pyin Oo Lwin made an offering for the success of her small business, holding a wad of notes against her forehead as a priest recited a mantra.

Pyin Oo Lwin, about a six-hour drive away, is home to the military's elite officer training academy.

In recent days ethnic minority fighters have battled junta troops to within around 50 kilometres (30 miles) of the town.

At the base of the shrine, there were few customers to buy the flower offerings, toys or T-shirts set out in stalls.

Some offered slingshots and sticks to ward off the hordes of monkeys that live on Mount Popa and off the donations of pilgrims.

Now pickings are slim, the primates are getting more aggressive, said one vendor selling water and bottles of juice on the stairway.

“When more visitors came here and fed the monkeys, they were fat and strong,” she said.

“They are thin now because not many visitors come.”

AFP



Bago from the air. Photo: AFP

WATER LEVELS DROP IN BAGO AND HPA-AN TOWNSHIPS BUT FLOOD VICTIMS UNABLE TO RETURN HOME

The water levels of the Thanlwin (Salween) River in Hpa-An Township of Karen State and the Bago River in Bago Township of Bago Region have decreased slightly but are still above their danger levels, and tens of thousands of flood victims are still unable to go back to their homes, according to aid groups and local residents.

According to the Meteorology and Hydrology Department, the water level in the Thanlwin River is approximately six feet above its danger level in Hpa-An Township, and the Bago River's level is approximately four feet above its critical level in Bago Township, as of 1 August.

"The water level has decreased by roughly one foot on 2 August. However, knee-deep water still exists on the old Yangon-Mandalay Road. Flood victims remain in temporary relief camps. They are still unable to return to their homes," a flood relief worker from Bago Township's Kyun Thar Yar Ward said.

Floods have been plaguing the people living in Bago Township for about 10 days. About 20,000 people have been relocated to the township's 27 flood relief camps, which have been opened. Tens of thousands of other flood victims were unable to reach the flood relief

camps and are still at their homes.

"Since the flood relief teams are limited to boats, they are unable to travel by boat to locations with extremely deep water. Taking the motorboat will be more convenient. Thus, relief supplies still need to be transported to hard-to-access locations with deep water where motorboat transportation will be practical," said a flood relief worker.

Currently, those who remained at their homes and were unable to reach the relief camps rely on the rice packets that the aid groups distribute.

According to locals, there have been major floods in the western neighbourhoods of Bago Township, including Kyun Thar Yar, Shwe Thar Lyaung, Mazin, and Mahar Myaing wards. Six locals are said to have perished in Bago's flooding as a result of either electrocution or drowning as of today.

Similarly, although the water level in the Thanlwin River has decreased slightly, flood victims are still unable to go back to their houses.

"Over 20 camps for flood relief have opened. Approximately 90 per cent of the township had been submerged when the river's water level began to rise. The water level in the river has now somewhat decreased. However, the flood victims are still unable to go back to their homes," a social aid official in Hpa-An Township said.

The Meteorology and Hydrology Department has issued a forecast for the first ten days of August, indicating that water levels in several rivers will rise significantly. In the townships of Myitkyina, Bhamo, Shwegu, Katha, and Thabeikkyin, the Ayeyarwady River is expected to increase by three to seven feet above its current level. The Myittha River in Kalay Township is predicted to rise by nearly four feet. Additionally, the Sittaung River in Taungoo Township is anticipated to rise by about five feet, while the Dokhtawaddy River in Hsipaw Township is expected to rise by approximately one foot.

The Meteorology and Hydrology Department forecasts a slight decrease in the water level of the Ayeyarwady River in the townships of Mandalay, Sagaing, Pyay, Hinthada, and Zalun. Additionally, minor drops in water levels are expected in the Bilin, Bago, Thauingyin (Moei), Shwe Kyin, Ngawun, and Chindwin rivers.

Tanintharyi River's water level has gone past the danger level, causing floods and necessitating assistance for the people in Tanintharyi Township.

The National Unity Government's (NUG) Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management has issued a warning, stating that heavy rain is expected to continue until August 4, and people should be aware of flooding risk in Bago, Tanintharyi and Ayeyarwady Regions and the Mon and Karen states.



Nay Linn Htike. Photo: Facebook

FORMER REPORTER FOR INDEPENDENT NEWS OUTLET DIES AT MYANMAR'S INSEIN PRISON

A former reporter who was imprisoned under a law designed to punish comments that imply the military junta's rule is illegitimate has died of cancer at an infamous prison near Yangon, a former coworker told Radio Free Asia.

Nay Linn Htike, a former freelance reporter for the independent Democratic Voice of Burma in eastern Bago region, died on July 29, according to the former coworker who requested anonymity for security reasons.

Several friends told RFA that Nay Linn Htike was suffering from oral cancer and was transferred from Daik-U Prison in a remote area of Bago region to Insein Prison to receive specialized medical care.

"He liked beetroot and developed ulcers in his mouth and was unable to receive adequate medical treatment," one of the friends said.

Nay Linn Htike, who was in his 40s, published articles in the Democratic Voice of Burma before the February 2021 military coup.

The former coworker said Nay Linn Htike was arrested while campaigning against the military after the coup and was prosecuted under Section 505(a) of the penal code, which was added by junta authorities to crack down on anti-military speech.

He was also charged under Section 52(a) of the Anti-Terrorism Act, which was also amended by the junta after the coup to make it easier to prosecute critics. He received an eight-year sentence.

"He was detained while participating in anti-military activities, reportedly as an organizer," the former coworker said.

The friend told RFA that he received messages from Nay Linn Htike just before he was transferred to Insein.

"He wanted to ensure that those connected to him were informed about his whereabouts and health conditions," the friend said.

Another friend of Nay Linn Htike told RFA that his family were unable to visit him at either of the prisons because they have been avoiding junta authorities.

RFA was unable to contact anyone at the office of the deputy director general of the junta's Prisons Department to inquire about Nay Linn Htike's death.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia



Photo: AFP

DECODING THE REGIME PLAYBOOK

ROGER HUANG LOOKS INTO THE DOMINANCE OF THE MYANMAR MILITARY

“In the political science literature, there has always been a belief, almost an expectation, that military regimes are the weakest form of authoritarian regime,” explains Roger Huang to Insight Myanmar. “So it’s always been a puzzling question: ‘Why has the Myanmar Tatmadaw successfully... been able to maintain its dominance over Myanmar state and society since 1958?’”

This is just part of the question that Huang sets out to answer in his 2020 book, “The Paradox of Myanmar’s Regime Change”. After providing an overview detailing how the infamous “Burmese Way to Socialism” had failed horribly following the 1962 coup, Huang describes how the 1988 democratic protests alerted the generals that some kind of change was dramatically needed.

CHANGE NEEDED

“[They] wanted to introduce its version of a Burmese democracy; its version of a market-based economy.” For Huang, the regime’s policy shift did not represent any real desire to bring democratic reforms, but was rather just an attempt to remain in power by reinventing itself. The military coined the term “disciplined democracy” for this strategy, which Huang describes as being “segregated politics, a clear delineation where one big chunk of governance is reserved for civilians, elected parliamentarians, and partisan politics; and then you have the other side of politics where the military has control, dominance, and monopoly of power for issues

where they don’t think the civilians, partisan politics, citizens, and individuals should touch on.”

He explains how the military took steps to voluntarily dissolve the ruling junta towards that end, and doing so at a time when the opposition forces posed no real threat, and international sanctions were having little effect.

MILITARY’S VIEW OF ITSELF

Huang acknowledges that his analysis contrasts with the accepted narrative, which centers around the agency of what he calls “elite, individual actors.” And while not discounting the influence of important figures like Min Aung Hlaing and Aung San Suu Kyi on shaping events, Huang argues that they were not the determining factor as to how the transition period and coup played out. As he exclaims, “The determining factor is the [military] institution, itself!” In other words, to Huang, the key to understanding this history is how the military has viewed itself and its role over the years.

Huang grounds the discussion in the military’s postwar origins. Conflicts raging throughout the country as well as along the borders prompted the army to strengthen itself, in order to quell the disturbances and establish order. “This allowed the military to see itself as being the only legitimate political actor that could really protect the unity of the Burmese state,” he

says. Importantly, these circumstances led the army to view itself in a somewhat idealistic light, as rising above the partisanship of political parties and ethnic groups, as the only organization truly committed to the country's stability; it is a vision which its current propaganda continues to harken back to. He summarizes the military's thinking in this way: "They presented themselves as the Praetorian guards, as the leaders who have the best interests of Burma at heart, and the only one that could rise above partisan politics, above these different ethnic interests and unite all of Myanmar... And that's why the military has consistently put itself front and center of Myanmar politics, because it does not trust the civilians!"

NE WIN STEPS IN

To Huang, this mindset explains why Ne Win launched the 1962 coup: he feared the prevailing political strife was threatening the very Union, and that only military control could stabilize it. This also explains the military's intervention after the NLD's 1990 electoral victory. "If [the NLD] is going to threaten the military's position in the system [in building] this disciplined democracy, this 'Myanmar way to democracy,' then that's where they would step in," Huang says, describing how the military has grown to believe that the stability of the nation is synonymous with its own ascendancy within the system. And to Huang, this explains the 2021 coup, too, as the military viewed the NLD's victory in the elections as existentially threatening to its continued influence.

In its pursuit of its "disciplined democracy," Huang describes the military as forming what he terms a "hybrid regime"; that is, a type of governance that had "some features of democratic politics, but there's of course a lot of authoritarian mechanisms still in place." It was Ne Win who, recognizing the shortcomings of his socialist policies, can be credited as the architect of this hybrid system. And indeed, beginning in the 1990s, Myanmar's economy did gradually begin to become more liberalized, although the lack of corresponding political freedoms deterred Western engagement. Instead, neighboring Asian nations filled this void, and seized on the Myanmar's new, economic opportunities, engaging in trade and investment that enriched a new echelon of Myanmar's crony elite. At the same time, the military negotiated ceasefires with ethnic factions, which allowed it the space to focus on opportunities for its own enrichment. This also reinforced the junta's belief that its strategy of allowing controlled economic expansion—but critically, not substantive, fully

transformative democratization—was indeed the most effective way to remain in power.

DRAMATIC CHANGE

This strategy paved the way for the dramatic changes that took place during the transition. And Huang is emphatic that "dramatic change" was indeed underway at that point, and that it was not just cosmetic. "This was real! Suddenly, you can actually have almost full access to the internet. This is astounding for a lot of people, you have access to everything!" he exclaims. "Finally, you can actually talk about democracy and human rights and all these things." Be that as it may, Huang also points out how the overall trajectory of Myanmar's political landscape during those years continued to align closely with the military's original blueprint. And this was, in fact, aided by the NLD's slow-walking of liberal reforms, much to the chagrin of progressives, and more or less allowing the military free reign in its brutal offensives against ethnic groups like the Rohingya and Kachin. So on balance, despite the dramatic changes that Huang also points to, he feels that the military was generally pleased with the way things were developing during that transformative period.

But once the NLD began to make real noise about changing the Constitution to lessen the military's control, the generals were spurred to action. "They allowed the internet, allowed these foreigners to come in to preach about democracy and human rights," Huang says. "But it didn't actually threaten the military's control and their key interest. If you actually see when crackdowns did happen during Thein Sein's period, it was still always on cases that threatened the military's idea of security or defense. So when you had a nationwide kind of discussion about education, there were crackdowns. When you have journalists touching on issues of ethnic affairs and security, they were arrested. And this also happened during the Aung San Suu Kyi period."

NLD'S HOPE

This is also where Huang's early comments about the divergent understandings of "democratization" come into play. In contrast to the military's policy of "disciplined democracy," the NLD hoped for gradual democratic transformation that was incremental enough so as not to rattle the military, while civil society organizations were drawn to Western concepts of democracy—one either had political freedom, or one did not. As for the country's ethnic groups, their

priorities mainly revolved around autonomy and self-determination.

For this reason, Huang questions the commonly used term, “democratic transition,” for this period in Myanmar’s history. Instead, he argues that these years can be more accurately characterized as a “hybrid” of competing interests and dynamics: of democratic forces, economic expansion... and of course, looming over everyone, the military’s firm grip on control and total impunity.

He says, “It doesn’t matter who was voted in, it doesn’t matter what the electorates want. When it comes to matters of national security, those are independently decided by the military!” Huang insists that the military never had any intent to allow the country to “transition to a democracy” in the sense that many Western observers would interpret that term. This harkens back to the military’s intended meaning of a “disciplined democracy,” which they see as operating in sharp contrast to fledgling democracies that “will allow the civilian elected officials to decide on the direction of military, and to decide over issues of national security, and border control, and ethnic relationships.”

CONTROL OVER DEMOCRACY

This controlled view of democracy also informs how the military viewed the development of civil society during those years. “[The junta] needed the society, the individuals, the citizens to understand that ‘we will give you the space to operate, whether it’s providing health, food security to your neighbors, free funeral service, and whatever you need for education and health. You can do all this, as long as you do not touch on issues, though, that seem political.’” So long as Myanmar’s emerging civil society did not threaten the military’s entrenched position, it was allowed to proceed. In other words, “you’re allowed to work on your local community issues and welfare, as long as you stay out of national politics and national security.”

Huang also criticizes the presumption that the evolution of a more liberal civil society necessarily leads towards democratization, and provides a striking example: the Weimar Republic in Germany of the 1920s and its open society, which was followed by the brutal Nazi regime! Looking at an emphasis on civil society from a different angle, he notes how not all such associations are positive, either; he points

to the very illiberal, Buddhist-monk led, anti-Islam group Ma Ba Tha illustrates as a case in point. What is more, he rejects the view that the civil space in Myanmar was ever as closed as some made it out to be. “There was this perception that there was a lack of associational life in Myanmar, and that’s just frankly not true. This has always survived in some form or the other.” Finally, he echoes the words of the activist Bobo speaking about Generation Wave’s activity during the transition years, noting that the NLD was actually not much more interested in working together with civil society groups in seeking genuine liberalization than the military. “Unfortunately, I’m a bit of a pessimist and a downer, and I just don’t see an immediate turn, or a greater cohesion within the system, this so-called civil society space, to produce this kind of positive, liberal, democratic narrative that might serve as a genuine counterweight to the authoritarian practices of the military, in a systematic and a nationwide manner.” Contrasting recent examples of democratization in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Taiwan, Huang also notes the Burmese military has never really suffered serious internal rifts, which would have provided a possible opening to progressive groups.

THE JUNTA NOW

Where does this leave the military now, more than three years after the coup and its horrifying aftermath?

“I do believe this is probably a critical stage today, that the military is probably in one of its weakest positions compared to the last several decades,” he says. “That doesn’t mean the military will necessarily collapse. I do hope the military does get out of politics at some stage. But I do think this is the most legitimate kind of challenge that the military state is facing in contemporary times.” He adds that as the soldiers have often followed lockstep in the direction of its leadership, that a fundamental change at the top—however unlikely that might be—would immediately be accepted throughout the ranks.

“Until there is a genuine discussion within the military itself, until there’s real consensus that their current direction is a wrong one, I don’t think you’ll see much change in the short near future.”

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<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2024/7/27/episode-255-decoding-the-regime-playbook>



A billboard in Tehran. Photo: AFP

FEARS OF MIDDLE EAST WAR GROW AFTER HAMAS LEADER'S KILLING

Middle East tensions soared Saturday as Iran and its allies readied their response to the assassination of Hamas's political leader, blamed on Israel, spurring fears of a regional war.

Israel ally the United States said it would move warships and fighter jets to the region, while Western governments called on their citizens to leave Lebanon -- where the powerful Iran-backed Hezbollah movement is based -- and airlines cancelled flights.

The killing this week of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, hours after the Israeli assassination of Hezbollah's military chief in Beirut, has triggered vows of vengeance from Iran and the so-called "axis of resistance".

Iran-backed groups from Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq and Syria have already been drawn into the nearly 10-month war between Israel and Palestinian militant group Hamas in Gaza.

Israel on Saturday again traded fire with Hezbollah,

carried out a deadly raid in the occupied West Bank, and struck a school compound in Gaza City in an attack that the Hamas-ruled territory's civil defence agency said killed at least 17 people.

Numerous schools turned into displacement shelters have been hit across Gaza in recent weeks, with Israel insisting the facilities had been used by militants. Hamas denied using civilian infrastructure for military activities.

Haniyeh was buried on Friday in Qatar, where he had been based. Israel, accused by Hamas, Iran and others of carrying out the attack, has not directly commented on it.

Iran said on Saturday it expects Hezbollah to hit deeper inside Israel and no longer be confined to military targets.

The Pentagon said it was bolstering its military presence in the Middle East to protect US personnel and defend Israel.

It said an aircraft carrier strike group led by the USS Abraham Lincoln would be deployed, as well as additional ballistic missile defence-capable cruisers and destroyers and a new fighter squadron.

US President Joe Biden, at his beach home in Delaware, was asked by reporters if he thought Iran would stand down.

"I hope so," he said. "I don't know."

Soon after, Hezbollah announced it had fired dozens of Katyusha rockets at the northern Israeli settlement of Beit Hillel.

They said it was in response to an Israeli attack on Kfar Kela and Deir Siriane in southern Lebanon which, it said, had injured civilians.

Earlier Saturday, Hezbollah announced the deaths of two of its fighters, including a 17-year-old from Deir Siriane.

TAKE 'ANY TICKET AVAILABLE'

In Beirut, 20-year-old student Diana Abu Aasel told AFP she feared "something bad will happen to my family and friends.

"If there is war, I don't think I will be able to bear staying" in Lebanon, she said.

Crowds of thousands rallied Saturday in Morocco, Jordan and Turkey to denounce Haniyeh's killing and show solidarity with Palestinians, AFP correspondents reported.

Haniyeh's killing is among a series of attacks since April that have heightened fears of a regional conflagration.

His death came hours after Israel struck south Beirut, killing Hezbollah military commander Fuad Shukr.

Both Britain and the United States on Saturday urged their citizens in Lebanon to leave immediately.

Israel has vowed to destroy Hamas in retaliation for its unprecedented October 7 attack which triggered war in Gaza and resulted in the deaths of 1,197 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on Israeli official figures.

Militants also seized 251 hostages, 111 of whom are still held captive in Gaza, including 39 the military says are dead.

Israel's campaign against Hamas has killed at least 39,550 people in Gaza, according to the territory's health ministry, which does not give details of civilian and militant deaths.

Haniyeh was Hamas's lead negotiator in efforts to end the war. His killing raised questions about the continued viability of efforts by Qatari, Egyptian and US mediators to broker a truce and exchange of hostages and prisoners.

Hamas officials but also some analysts and protesters in Israel have accused Netanyahu of prolonging the war to safeguard his ruling hard-right coalition.

Protesters in several Israeli cities Saturday renewed their calls for a hostage-release deal.

DISEASE SPREADING IN GAZA

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke separately with his French and British counterparts on Saturday about the situation in the Middle East, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said.

Blinken, UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy and French Foreign Minister Stephane Sejourne all agreed on the need for restraint on all sides in the region, Miller said in a statement.

Violence has also surged in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Palestinian official sources said two Israeli air strikes killed nine people in the north of the territory Saturday.

The military said it had "eliminated terrorist cells".

The war in Gaza has caused widespread destruction and displaced almost the entire population of the territory where, the UN said on Friday, public health conditions "continue to deteriorate".

It said nearly 40,000 cases of Hepatitis A, spread by contaminated food and water, have been reported since the war began.

Hezbollah has been exchanging near-daily cross-border fire with Israeli forces since October, saying it is acting in support of Hamas.

Several airlines have suspended flights to Beirut and Tel Aviv.

Flights to Beirut by Air France and low-cost carrier Transavia France will remain halted until at least Tuesday, their parent company said Saturday.

Turkish Airlines on Saturday cancelled its night-time flights to Tehran for the second night running, AFP correspondents noted.

AFP



Many view the ousting of the PM as a people's victory. Photo: AFP

WESTERN POWERS URGE BANGLADESH CALM, DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

Western powers called for calm in Bangladesh after long-ruling leader Sheikh Hasina fled, with the United States saluting the military for forming an interim government rather than cracking down further on protesters.

Sheikh Hasina, who had particularly close relations with regional power India, enjoyed a mostly cooperative relationship with the West during her 15 years in power but had increasingly drawn criticism for her authoritarian turn.

The United States called on all sides in Bangladesh to "refrain from further violence" as bullet-ridden bodies

were strewn across hospital floors and looting swept the capital Dhaka.

"Too many lives have been lost over the course of the past several weeks, and we urge calm and restraint in the days ahead," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller told reporters on Monday.

Hasina, the daughter of Bangladesh's founding father, had sought to quell a nationwide uprising that started with student-led protests against job quotas. Nearly 100 people were killed on Sunday as calls grew for her to step down.

Miller said that the United States had seen reports that the army refused pressure to crack down further on student-led demonstrations.

"If it is true in fact that the army resisted calls to crack down on lawful protesters, that would be a positive development," he said.

"We welcome the announcement of an interim government and urge any transition be conducted in accordance with Bangladesh's laws," he said.

Asked if the military should choose the next leadership, Miller said, "We want to see the Bangladeshi people decide the future Bangladeshi government."

CALL FOR UN-LED PROBE

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for a "peaceful, orderly and democratic transition" as well as a "full, independent, impartial and transparent investigation into all acts of violence," his spokesman Farhan Haq said.

Bangladesh's former colonial power Britain called for the United Nations to take the lead in an investigation.

"The people of Bangladesh deserve a full and independent UN-led investigation into the events of the past few weeks," Foreign Secretary David Lammy said in a statement.

The European Union also called for "calm and restraint."

"It is vital that an orderly and peaceful transition towards a democratically elected government is ensured, in full respect of human rights and democratic principles," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said.

Canada's Foreign Minister Melanie Joly said her country "condemns the human rights violations, deaths, torture, arbitrary arrests and lethal force" used in response to the protests.

"During this transition, we urge all parties to respect and uphold democratic institutions and processes and the rule of law," Joly said in a statement.

There was no immediate reaction from regional governments to the fall of Hasina, who had sought a delicate balancing act of enjoying support from India while maintaining strong relations with China.

Indian media said that Hasina flew to a military airbase near New Delhi.

A top-level source said she wanted to transit on to London, but it was unclear if she would be allowed.

The United States in the past praised Hasina's economic track record and saw her as a partner on priorities such as countering Islamist extremism and sheltering Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution in Myanmar.

But Washington more recently criticized her for autocratic tendencies and imposed visa sanctions over concerns on democracy.

AFP



Protestors with police in Weymouth, UK. Photo: AFP

RIOT SUSPECTS IN COURT AS UK GOVERNMENT READIES 'ARMY' OF 6,000 POLICE

Suspected far-right rioters appeared in British courts on Tuesday as the government said 6,000 specialist police were ready to deal with England's worst disorder in over a decade.

Almost 400 people have been arrested and 100 charged over the week-long disturbances sparked by online misinformation about the murder of three children in a mass stabbing, amidst a backdrop of concern about illegal immigration, with police bracing for further possible violence.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer, a former chief state prosecutor, said he expected "substantive sentencing before the end of this week" for the rioters, after chairing his second emergency meeting in as many days late Tuesday.

"That should send a very powerful message to anybody involved, either directly or online," he added in televised comments.

The unrest, Britain's worst since the 2011 London riots, has led a number of countries to warn its citizens about the dangers of travelling in the United Kingdom.

Rioting in several cities has seen demonstrators throw bricks and flares at police officers, burn cars and attack mosques and at least two hotels that have been used as accommodation for asylum seekers.

Scores of alleged perpetrators were hauled before judges on Tuesday, with some entering guilty pleas.

A 19-year-old man became the first person to receive a prison sentence related to the unrest when he received a two-month term Tuesday, PA Media reported.

Another man was convicted after he admitted assaulting a police officer outside a hotel housing asylum seekers in Rotherham, northern England, on Sunday.

A 15-year-old boy pleaded guilty to committing violent disorder in Liverpool on Saturday after he was identified from a TikTok video, while a man in Leeds admitted posting threatening words on Facebook to stir up racial hatred.

Unrest started last Tuesday after three children were murdered at a Taylor Swift-themed dance class in Southport, northwest England. Several others were seriously injured and are still receiving medical attention in hospital.

'RECKONING'

False rumours initially spread on social media saying the attacker was a Muslim asylum seeker.

The suspect was later identified as 17-year-old Axel Rudakubana, born in Wales. UK media reported that his parents are from Rwanda.

The government, only one month old, has vowed to take a tough line on the unrest and the National Police Chiefs' Council said Monday that 378 people had so far been arrested.

"99.9% of people across the country want their streets to be safe and to feel safe in their communities, and we will take all necessary action to bring the disorder to an end," Starmer said Tuesday.

Justice minister Heidi Alexander told BBC Radio 4 that the government had freed up an extra 500 prison places and drafted in 6,000 specialist police officers to deal with the violence.

Police have blamed the disorder on people associated with the now-defunct English Defence League, a far-right Islamophobic organisation founded 15 years ago, whose supporters have been linked to football hooliganism.

The rallies have been advertised on right-wing social media channels under the banner "Enough is

enough".

Interior minister Yvette Cooper said "there will be a reckoning" for perpetrators, adding that social media put a "rocket booster" under the violence.

Tech billionaire Elon Musk escalated a dispute with the UK government Tuesday by likening Britain to "the Soviet Union". A spokesperson for Starmer had said there was "no justification" for Musk's earlier comment that a British "civil war is inevitable".

The latest violence on Monday night saw rioters hurl bricks and fireworks in Plymouth, southern England, injuring several police officers.

Officers in Belfast, Northern Ireland, were attacked as rioters attempted to set fire to a shop owned by a foreign national. Police said a man in his 30s was seriously assaulted and that they are treating the incident as a racially motivated hate crime.

A group of men who gathered in Birmingham, central England, to counter a rumoured far-right demonstration forced a Sky News reporter off air shouting: "Free Palestine". She was then followed by a man in a balaclava holding a knife.

Kenya became the latest country to warn its citizens to be vigilant in Britain after Nigeria, Malaysia Australia and Indonesia issued alerts advising their nationals to stay away from the demonstrations.

Alternative media channels highlight Starmer's failure to discuss the underlying cause of the unrest, namely widespread concern over unfettered illegal immigration, its costs, and the negative effects on communities.

AFP



LONGFORM INTERVIEW

JONATHAN CROWLEY EXPLORES MEDIATION IN MYANMAR

This is the fourth installment of a multi-part discussion on Insight Myanmar with Jonathan Crowley. A long-time, devoted, vipassana meditator and Assistant Teacher, Jonathan has since left the S.N. Goenka tradition. In Part One, he shares how he came across the meditation; in Part Two, he explores his growing dedication with the tradition and his work around social justice; and in Part Three, he describes his experience being a teacher and his developing struggles with the organization’s messaging.

Today’s conversation focuses on the time that he and his wife Carolyn spent in Myanmar, and how it impacted his spiritual journey. While the experience there inspired them and greatly enriched their understanding of the Dhamma, it also contributed to his growing concerns with the tradition.

Jonathan starts by reflecting on how his preconceptions of Myanmar had been strongly shaped by Goenka’s characterizations of the country. As a result, he initially viewed it almost as an idealized place, where this tradition’s technique—described as the one, pristinely pure iteration of the Buddha’s teachings—had been safeguarded over the centuries. Jonathan’s first visit to the Golden Land was a 1997 pilgrimage to lineage sites connected to the Goenka lineage, during which he basically experienced the country within the context of those sites. While he was vaguely aware of the other manifestations of Dhamma all around him,

they remained on the periphery, while his framework for interpreting his Myanmar experiences drew from that somewhat mythological “pure Dhamma land” of Goenka’s lineage narrative.

Jonathan’s perspective feeds into the concept of “Orientalism,” a term coined by Edward Said, who criticized the West for exotifying non-Western cultures without really trying to understand them on their own terms, and then using that warped view to derive further interpretations. Myanmar, because of its relative isolation over the years, has been particularly susceptible to this exotified view, and so Goenka’s creative license in describing the country gave rise to even greater distortions.

When Jonathan and Carolyn went to Myanmar in 2011, the country was on the cusp of big changes. Though Aung Sang Suu Kyi was being released from house arrest when they arrived, it was still dangerous to speak about her in public. Yet around the time that they left, little more than a year later, she was elected to Parliament! Jonathan talks about the sea change he felt in the air during this initial, enthusiastic period of opening up. He was also struck by the rich Dhamma atmosphere that seemed to emanate from a variety of directions... including those that weren’t associated with the Goenka tradition, as he began to open to other influences. For example, he recalls meditating at Shwedagon Pagoda, and visiting sites containing relics. And while they did attend a course at Dhamma Joti, the Yangon vipassana center in the Goenka tradition, they found themselves much more affected by Sayagyi U Ba Khin’s center, IMC. “It just knocked our socks off to sit there!” he exclaims. Jonathan also speaks about how he was somewhat taken aback to learn that Saya Thet, the teacher of U Ba Khin, taught much stronger concentration than is encouraged in Goenka’s teaching. Jonathan says, “There’s a kind of a conflation [between the Buddha’s teachings and this lineage] that happens within this tradition.... But coming to Burma showed me there was a much broader scope of the Dhamma than just Goenkaji’s tradition.”

CATCH THE PODCAST

Check out the full text and listen to the Insight Myanmar podcast here:

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2024/7/19/episode-253-jonathan-crowley-part-4>



MYANMAR TYCOON'S CALL FOR CEASEFIRE SPARKS CONTROVERSY AMID ONGOING CONFLICT

A son of late major drug trafficker Lo Hsing Han has drawn criticism for urging the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) to cease fighting and negotiate with the military junta, according to reports on social media.

Myanmar business tycoon Steven Law, also known as Htun Myint Naing, released a statement in Chinese on July 24 calling for an end to the conflict in Lashio.

Steven Law's company has long-standing ties to Myanmar's military, with a history dating back to his father Lo Hsing Han's involvement in the opium trade.

Asia World has benefited from numerous government contracts, including infrastructure projects and airport operations.

Critics argue that Steven Law's appeal is self-serving, aimed at protecting business interests rather than addressing the broader conflict.

The opposition National Unity Government (NUG) blacklisted Steven Law in February 2022 for his alleged support of the military regime.

The MNDAA, a member ethnic armed group of Three Brotherhood Alliance, has recently made significant gains, including capturing a military headquarters in Lashio.

NUG CONDEMNS JUNTA'S AIRSTRIKES ON HOSPITAL, CIVILIAN AREAS

Myanmar's opposition National Unity Government (NUG) strongly condemned the military junta for conducting airstrikes on civilian areas, including a public hospital, in the country's northeast in northern Shan State, calling the attacks a blatant violation of international law.

In a statement released on August 2 on its official Facebook page, the NUG's Ministry of Health reported that the junta launched bomb attacks late Thursday night (August 1) and early Friday morning (August 2) in Laukkai area and nearby areas in the Kokang Self-Administered Zone.

At least one hospital security guard was killed, and two patients were seriously injured when bombs struck the No. 2 Public Hospital in Laukkai. Civilian homes and hotels also suffered damage in the airstrikes.

"These attacks on hospitals and the health sector are blatant violations of the Geneva Conventions, UN Security Council resolutions, and international humanitarian and human rights laws," the NUG health ministry said.

The opposition government, which opposes the military government that seized power in a 2021 coup, accused the junta of deliberately targeting healthcare facilities. The statement cited two other recent attacks on medical centers, including a July 10 drone strike on a rural health clinic in Sagaing Region that reportedly killed six fighters of People's Defense Force (PDF) and a midwife.

The NUG called for urgent international action to prevent further attacks and support the affected Myanmar population.

Facebook users responded to the news with strong condemnation of the junta's actions. One user commented, "The atrocities committed by Min Aung Hlaing's terrorist military council will not be forgiven when the time comes." Another user wrote, "Take action against the junta's war crimes."



Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing under increasing pressure. Photo: AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA CHIEF PUSHES COOPERATIVE SYSTEM AS ECONOMIC SOLUTION

Myanmar's junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing announced plans to bolster the country's cooperative system during a government meeting on July 29, according to the state-run newspaper *The Global New Light of Myanmar*.

The military-led administration said that it will provide capital, technology, and other support to form cooperative societies and establish agriculture and livestock-based industries.

He reported progress in internal and external trade from April to June but warned of the economic threat posed by illegal border trade.

However, economic experts and international observers remain skeptical of the junta's claims. In 2022, the World Bank reported that Myanmar's economy is 30% smaller than it would have been without the 2021 coup and subsequent political turmoil.

Widespread conflict, inflation, and currency instability continue to plague the country.

JUNTA'S ECONOMIC CLAIMS CLASH WITH BORDER TRADE DECLINE DATA

Myanmar's junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing claimed progress in maritime and land border trade from April to June, emphasizing the government's commitment to boosting the economy and removing hurdles to border commerce, according to state-run media.

Speaking at a recent government meeting, Min Aung Hlaing outlined plans to support cooperative societies and agriculture-based industries with state-provided capital and technology. He warned that illegal trade in border regions could harm the economy.

However, official data painted a contrasting picture. Figures from the junta's Commerce Ministry showed Myanmar's total trade dropped 6.8% in the first 1.5 months of the fiscal year, with border trade plummeting 48% year-on-year.

The decline is particularly acute at border posts, where ongoing conflicts have disrupted key trade routes. From October 2023, several border crossings with China have fallen to ethnic armed forces.

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.