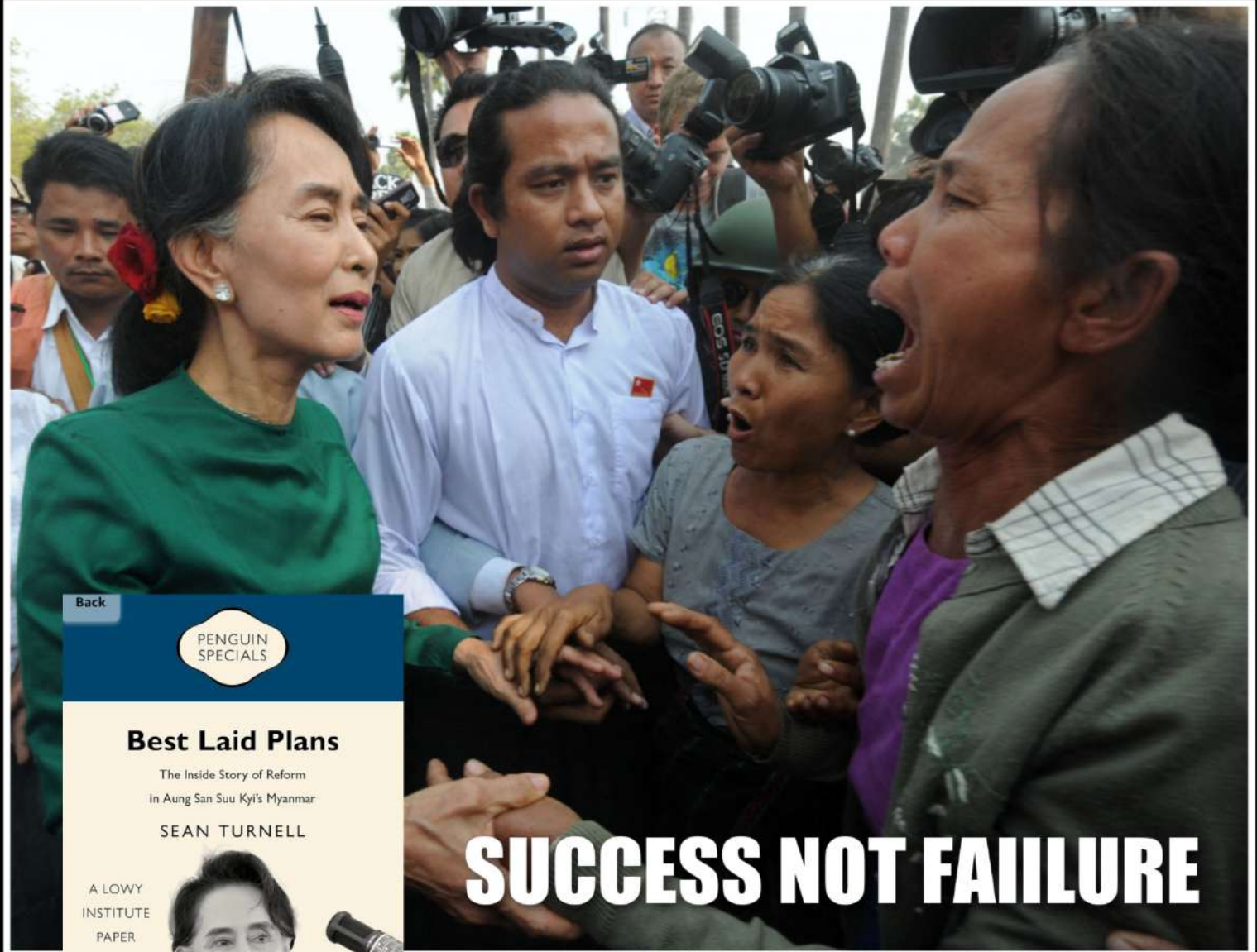


ON THE GROUND IN MYANMAR

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The Inside Story of Reform
in Aung San Suu Kyi's Myanmar

SEAN TURNELL

A LOWY
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Economist Sean Turnell delves into Aung San Suu Kyi's bold plan to re-engineer Myanmar's economy prior to the 2021 coup

Has Gen Z saved Bangladesh's democracy?

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DIGITAL MAGAZINE

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

GENOCIDE 2.0? NGOS WARN OF ANOTHER ROHINGYA CRISIS

The United Nations and other NGOs are warning that the Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar are facing the gravest threats since 2017.

August 25, 2024, marked the seventh anniversary since the start of the military's "crimes against humanity" and "acts of genocide" that forced more than 750,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh, cases that are currently in international courts.

The crisis revolves around the ongoing battle by the Arakan Army (AA) against the Myanmar military for control of Rakhine State. According to the UN and Human Rights Watch, both the Myanmar military and the AA have committed mass killings, arson, and unlawful recruitment against Rohingya communities in Rakhine State. Both sides deny involvement. On August 5, nearly 200 people were reportedly killed following drone strikes and shelling against civilians fleeing fighting in Maungdaw town near the Bangladesh border in the north of the state, according to Rohingya witnesses.

About 630,000 Rohingya remain in Myanmar under "a system of apartheid" that leaves them particularly vulnerable to renewed fighting. HRW claims the Rohingya in Rakhine State are enduring abuses tragically reminiscent of the military's atrocities in 2017.

Is this Genocide 2.0? Once again, armed forces are driving thousands of Rohingya from their homes with killings and arson, leaving them nowhere safe to turn, according to HRW

The minority Rohingya have been caught in the middle of the fighting since hostilities resumed in November 2023, ending a year-long unofficial ceasefire. As the AA rapidly expanded its control across Rakhine State, the military has responded with indiscriminate attacks on civilians using helicopter gunships, artillery, and ground assaults. In late April, Arakan Army forces began attacking Rohingya villages in Buthidaung, culminating in

their May 17 capture of the town, during which they allegedly shelled, looted, and burned Rohingya neighbourhoods. A number of witnesses testify to the attacks against the Rohingya.

The conflict has displaced more than 320,000 people in Rakhine State and southern Chin State since November 2023. At the same time, the junta has ramped up its blockages of humanitarian aid as a form of collective punishment, which is in violation of international humanitarian law and contrary to the 2022 United Nations Security Council resolution and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) five-point consensus – the latter signed but not honoured by the junta.

Rohingya are being pressured from all sides in Myanmar and Bangladesh, Human Rights Watch says. In recent months, the junta has unlawfully recruited thousands of Rohingya men and boys from Rakhine State and the refugee camps in Bangladesh, with support from Rohingya armed groups, inflaming tensions between the Rohingya Muslim and Rakhine Buddhist communities.

In Bangladesh, about one million Rohingya refugees face dire conditions in the Cox's Bazar camps amid surging violence by armed groups and criminal gangs. Bangladesh's interim prime minister, Muhammad Yunus, said he will continue to support the million-plus Rohingya people sheltered in Bangladesh, although his foreign adviser claims they are not in a position to accept more refugees.

HRW says that over the past seven years, UN bodies and governments haven't done enough to end the system of apartheid and persecution that has exposed Rohingya to further suffering. Ending the ongoing cycles of abuses, destruction, and displacement requires international efforts to hold those responsible to account.

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Cover photo of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2013 on a visit to a copper mine in Monywa by AFP





FLASHBACK - On a 2013 visit to a copper mine, Aung San Suu Kyi tries to balance people's grievances with the need to help Myanmar's economy. Photo: AFP

"DO THEY REALLY THINK I WOULD JUST ABANDON THE PRINCIPLES OVER WHICH I WAS DETAINED FOR NEARLY 20 YEARS SO EASILY?" - AUNG SAN SUU KYI, REFERRING TO THE 2017 RAKHINE CRISIS AND HER EFFORTS TO HANDLE THE CRITICISM.

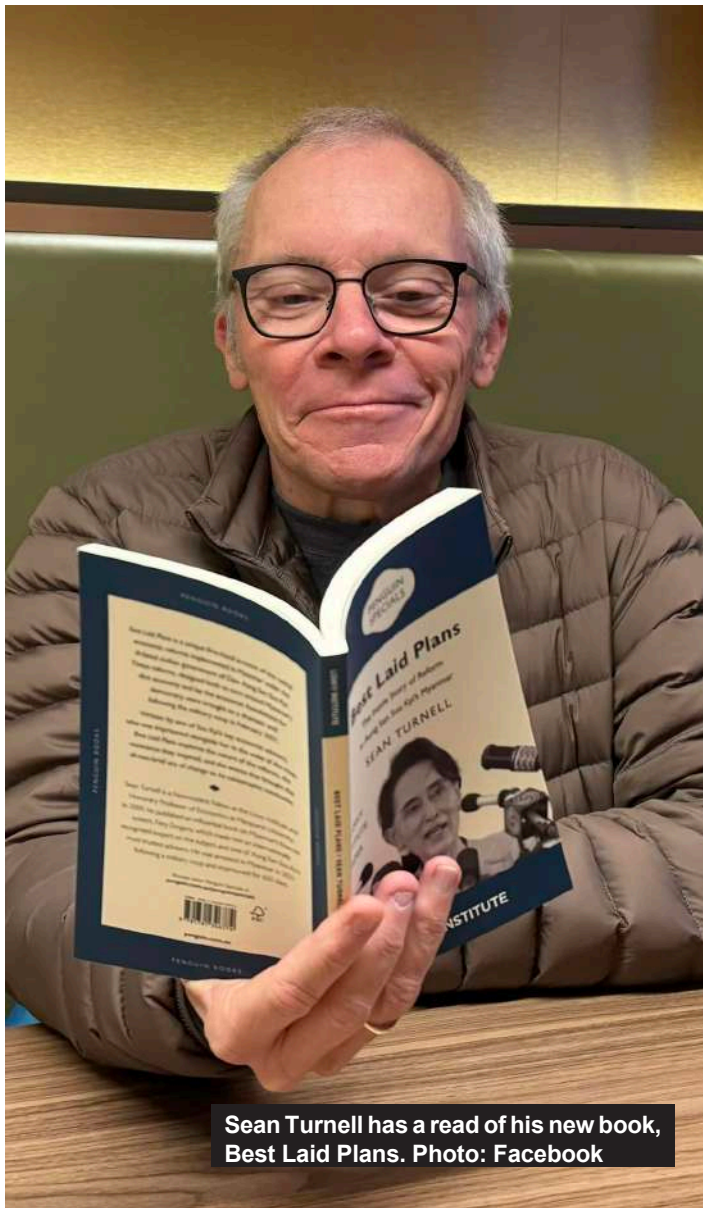
SEEK SUCCESS NOT FAILURE

ECONOMIST SEAN TURNELL DELVES INTO AUNG SAN SUU KYI'S BOLD PLAN TO REENGINEER MYANMAR'S ECONOMY PRIOR TO THE 2021 COUP

During her brief period in power, Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi had a small gripe when it came to well-meaning foreign guests, notes Australian economist and close confidante Sean Turnell.

Foreign visitors regularly rocked up with copies of James Robinson's book, "Why Nations Fail", a favourite present to give her. So much so that she once complained to Turnell, early in her government's term, "Why do all these people think I need a book telling me how nations fail? I want to know how they succeed."

With this sentiment in mind, Turnell – no stranger to the Myanmar halls of power and its dungeons – has written a book entitled: "Best Laid Plans: The Inside Story of Reform in Aung San Suu Kyi's Myanmar" published by Penguin and the Lowy Institute – a story he felt compelled to tell.



Sean Turnell has a read of his new book, Best Laid Plans. Photo: Facebook

It follows his recent book "An Unlikely Prisoner" recounting his post-coup arrest and imprisonment and his 2009 book "Fiery Dragons" about Myanmar's banking system.

JAILED FOR HIS EFFORTS

Turnell is well placed to delve into the story of how Suu Kyi's government – 2016-2021 – took on the gigantic task of trying to reform Myanmar's economic and financial system, given he was the chief foreign economic advisor during the period. He was later banged up in Myanmar jails for close to two years, post-coup, for his "sins".

"Best Laid Plans", published 27 August 2024, is a useful guide to Suu Kyi's short-lived attempt to change Myanmar from a military-led economic "basket case" to a country more on a par with its successful Southeast Asian neighbours.

As Turnell notes: "The story of what Myanmar's reformers attempted has yet to be told. It is my intention in this book to at least partially remedy this omission, as best I can."

As he recognizes, Suu Kyi's drive for "success" is an important story to embrace because Myanmar will have to revisit the reform process at some point in the future when "democratic forces" eventually regain power - however long that takes.

THE STORY THAT NEEDS TO BE TOLD

Turnell told Mizzima that the story needs to be told and given the current focus on Myanmar's post-coup crisis and ongoing civil war, it would be easy for this brief era to be forgotten.

The book is his personal take on the reform efforts – warts and all – that despite the media focus on Turnell as a key advisor, was driven by local Myanmar reformists who sought to drag the country shouting and screaming into the 21st Century.

The major challenge involved substantial changes to Myanmar's financial and economic infrastructure – not least the banks, which were reluctant to disturb their entrenched and antiquated practices. The changes were necessary to form the bedrock on which the economy could grow effectively and attract foreign investment – the latter a key element in the development of other countries in Southeast Asia over the last half century.

There is little doubt that one of the reasons Turnell was arrested post-coup and jailed for 650 days on trumped up charges was due to the bank lobby who had their noses put out of joint by the financial reengineering of the banking sector by the reformists. Turnell proved a convenient foreign “fall-guy” who was “in the wrong place, at the wrong time”.

BUILDING FOUNDATIONS

As “Best Laid Plans” explains, the election victory of Myanmar's National League for Democracy (NLD) in 2015 ushered in a period of dramatic economic change. These reforms, flawed, incomplete, and ultimately crushed by the 2021 coup that returned Myanmar to

military rule, aimed not just to turn around the country's dire economy, but also to lay the foundations for a more peaceful and democratic state.

As Turnell points out, ditching a structure that had seen decades of military regime mismanagement of the economy was far from easy, and the systems and plans brought in during Suu Kyi's short tenure were not always perfect.

“As ‘Special Economic Consultant’ to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, I was both a witness to and participant in this bold experiment. Lest this suggest otherwise, however, it is important to stress right from the get-go that the intellectual forces behind the economic reforms of this era were overwhelmingly local in source and inspiration. Led by a small cohort of relatively young and unambiguously brave deputy ministers, Myanmar's economic reforms were ideologically centrist within the broad frame of liberal democratic capitalism. Traces of the Washington Consensus – that standard set of market-oriented policy recommendations for developing countries promoted by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and US Treasury – were certainly visible, but arguably no more so than policies



Aung San Suu Kyi's government were faced with a major challenge in reengineering the Myanmar economy. Photo: Zuyet Awarmatik

yielded from the success of Myanmar's neighbours. Pragmatic but principled, Myanmar's economic reformers knew that implementation would be more important than inspiration."

LIMITED TIME AND A FRAMEWORK

In retrospect, this flurry of reform – following the opening up of the country under the pro-military Thein Sein regime 2011-2015 and continued under the Suu Kyi government 2016-2020 – rubbed established interests including the banks, the bureaucracy, the military and business cronies up the wrong way, leading to the eventual reasserting of authority by the military in February 2021 under the excuse of alleged fraudulent election practices in the 2020 poll.

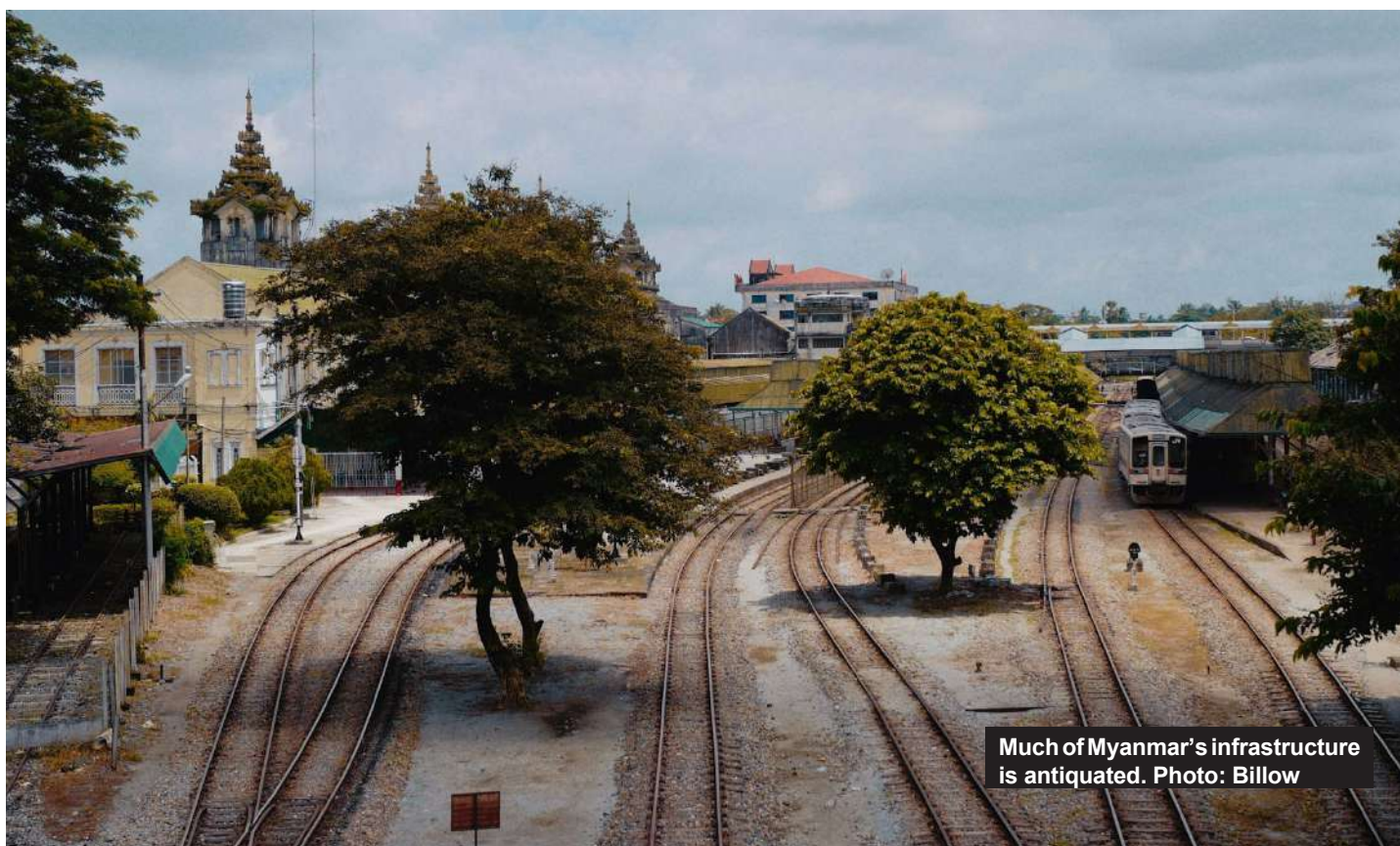
When the NLD-led government under "State Counsellor" Aung San Suu Kyi came to power and took up office in March 2016, the reformists recognized that time was in short supply, as was authority to be able to make significant changes affecting an entrenched bureaucracy. They had to tackle a system "designed decades ago to serve a military-socialist state – top-down, sclerotic, and decidedly unfit for purpose. And

authority over Myanmar's military, particularly its purse, its personnel, and its actions."

"Meandering, with intent, would be the reformers' order of business. Ducking and weaving, finding progress in the cracks," Turnell wryly notes.

Change had to come. The NLD had not spent decades in the wilderness, with many of its members in prison, to settle for an economic programme that dealt with mere superficialities when it finally got into office. Accordingly, but after something of a slow start as it grappled with the change-resistant civil service, it began to roll out reforms of increasing boldness.

These were given coherence early in 2018 when they were published together under the framework of the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (MSDP). The product of the fertile minds of three of Myanmar's most committed reformers, all of deputy minister rank – U Winston Set Aung, U Bo Bo Nge, and U Min Ye Paing Hein – the MSDP articulated five goals, beneath which was a dizzying array of action plans, targeted outcomes, designated actors, and assessment metrics. These were not prescriptive – central planning of the



old form was not on the table – but they gave some indication of where the reformers saw the country going, and how to get there.

IMPORTANCE OF PEACE

“Best Laid Plans” lays out the main points of this framework. A section in the MSDP on the importance of peace was more distinctive to the Myanmar context. Noting the “more than 60 years of debilitating conflict” the country had suffered, the MSDP went on to say that “unless a durable nation-wide peace is achieved, it will be considerably more difficult to ensure that the development efforts described throughout the MSDP can truly reach those made most vulnerable due to conflict.”

Peace was thus the “priority of priorities”, which would partly depend upon equitable socio-economic development. As the MSDP put it, “peace cannot be sustained without inclusive development” and vice versa. Special attention was also given to the need for Myanmar to establish functional federalism, outlining how equalisation payments and fiscal transfers might be employed to unite the country’s states and regions.

CENTRAL BANK INDEPENDENCE

The second goal of the MSDP was about steadying Myanmar’s chronically unstable macroeconomy. To this end, a number of policies were advanced, all within the boundaries of sound policymaking more or less everywhere where prosperity is apparent, including among Myanmar’s neighbours.

An important element in the MSDP was the call for independence for the Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM).

“On the one hand, such independence is demonstrably the best single undertaking to deliver price and monetary stability. On the other, in developing countries central banks are often tasked with other responsibilities. Some of these are unfortunate – funding the government through money-printing; being the source of favour and largesse – while others are

more justifiable, such as creating institutions needed for financial sector growth. In the end, we reformers came down in favour of independence; Myanmar’s monetary history was just too volatile to muck around with half measures.”

As Turnell notes, the CBM was not, at the start of the NLD administration, fit for independence. Poorly staffed, badly led, and under-resourced, it needed a thorough clean-up, restructure, and reinvigoration if it was going to fulfil anything other than its historical role as a tame dispensary for military spending.

Meanwhile, the MSDP put some firm numbers on its fiscal objectives, committing to keep any budget deficits to within five per cent of GDP.

FREE MARKET

The third goal of the MSDP was the objective that transformational economic growth in Myanmar would be led by the private sector. The most important way to support private enterprise was for government, so overbearing for much of Myanmar’s history, to simply get out of the way.

Under the MSDP came 70 or so liberalising measures, including freeing farmers from government direction on “what, how, and when” to produce; allowing farmers complete freedom in selling their product, ending forced procurement and state-dictated prices; and giving farmers unfettered access to international markets, allowing them to export any or all of their produce.

“Accessing sufficient and reliable electricity was one of the greatest challenges facing private enterprise in Myanmar. Myanmar’s electricity grid was outdated and poorly maintained, and many people (especially in rural areas) were not connected to it. Turning this around was a central plank of government support for the private sector in Myanmar, both in terms of committed budget allocations, and the profile given to cooperation with development partners on the issue (unstated in the MSDP, but we had the World Bank primarily in mind). The MSDP also directed government

attention to the likely availability of financing for renewable energy, primarily solar. The framers of the MSDP thought Myanmar ripe for a much 'greener' approach to power generation."

Improving governance within Myanmar's sluggish civil service was a necessary complement to facilitating the private sector. Understood to be a Herculean task across many generations, the MSDP recommended measures designed to bring about transparency and accountability, coupled with retrenching underperforming personnel.

Access to capital had been a binding constraint on Myanmar's private sector. The financial sector reforms to remedy this were substantial and generated much opposition.

HUMAN CAPITAL

The fourth goal of the MSDP was concerned with building human capital through improvements in Myanmar's health and education systems. These had long taken a back seat to resourcing the military, but free primary education and healthcare were determined to be basic rights, which meant greater financial and other resources had to be allocated to each. Both would also be made accessible regardless of gender, ethnicity, or any other basis for differential treatment.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The fifth goal of the MSDP was environmental protection and better resource management. The issues were related, of course – resource extraction, wasteful fossil fuel subsidies, illegal logging, destruction of habitats, poaching and trafficking of protected flora and fauna – all touching upon the unsustainability of too many damaging practices in Myanmar, and boundless economic inefficiencies. Myanmar's great alluvial rivers (the Irrawaddy, Salween, Sittaung, and Chindwin) provided the country with fresh water at volumes far in excess of the rest of Asia, but this extraordinary resource, critical in making the Ayeyarwady Delta one of the most naturally fertile rice-growing regions in the world, was fast being polluted and squandered. Reversing this trend was a key objective of the MSDP

and an identified area for international cooperation.

As a side note, it should be pointed out that Suu Kyi herself did not always have a smooth ride in attempting to balance environmental protection and the ability of companies to dig up the land for resources. In 2013, prior to coming to power, and when she was in power, she ran into problems on visits to the China-Myanmar copper mine in Letpadaung, Monywa, when trying to balance local environment and health concerns with the economic good of the project for the country.

CORE ISSUES

"Best Laid Plans" looks in some depth at a range of other crucial reform issues, not the least Myanmar's banks that appeared to be on a roll in 2016 in the wake of the opening up of the country and the introduction of high technology, including mobile phone banking apps.

Behind the glitter and glamour in 2016, however, scarcely a bank in Myanmar could have been considered solvent with the application of proper accounting standards. The state-owned banks were largely moribund edifices to sloth and inefficiency while the private banks were little more than corporate cash boxes for crony conglomerates. In all the banks, little in the way of proper credit analysis of borrowers was undertaken, a culture of 'chairman's picks' for lending was endemic, and collateral on loans was routinely overvalued and of uncertain provenance. Settling the payments of corruption and the dispensation of favours was the primary business at hand. The level of non-performing loans in Myanmar's banks was spectacular.

The NLD government brought in measures to turn this around, as a banking crisis was the surest way to bring down Myanmar's economy and stop their reform programme dead in its tracks.

The banks were greatly annoyed by the new requirements, but of more immediate and indeed existential concern to them was the reformers' next requirement: that banks properly and adequately provision for their non-performing loans.

“We knew, and they knew that we knew, that this would leave most of them insolvent. And not by a small margin. In the global financial crisis that swept the banking world in 2007–09, non-performing loans of major international banks reached around 7–8 per cent of their portfolios. In Myanmar? Well, we estimated non-performing loans of around 50 per cent for the system and 60–70 per cent for the largest banks. They, and the country, were staring into a financial abyss.”

It was necessary to bring in a whole range of reforms, some welcome, others viewed by the banks with unease and anger.

MICROFINANCE TO BONDS

The NLD government were able to bring in positive changes on a number of other economic issues from the rapidly growing microfinance market to the bond market. In addition, the Yangon Stock Exchange – which had only four stocks listed when the NLD came into power, drew attention but there was little progress in attracting more companies to list as of the beginning of 2021.

“By 2019, the economic reforms instigated by the NLD government had begun to bear fruit – legislatively, institutionally, and in terms of economic performance. Of course, there were problems.

Some of these were specifically economic in nature and related largely to the machinery of policy implementation. But the most serious problems were political, including the atrocities committed by Myanmar’s military against Rohingya in Rakhine State, and countless abuses in other places.”

Terrible in themselves, these genocidal campaigns would significantly depreciate the civilian government’s political capital to enact economic reform – notwithstanding that such reform offered what few avenues there were to create a better Myanmar, Turnell notes.

Such was the gravity of the situation that Turnell

contemplated leaving Myanmar.

“The horrors perpetrated in Rakhine rocked me to the core and made me reconsider more or less everything I was doing. As I have recalled in my memoir of imprisonment in Myanmar, *An Unlikely Prisoner*, I considered simply leaving. I had come to Myanmar with the purpose of doing all I could to assist in the country’s journey to peace and democracy. I had never had any truck with the idea that there was conflict between these objectives and good economics. Indeed, to the contrary. I was not going to hide now behind the noxious idea that a diminution of human rights might be necessary to, as Mussolini had it, ‘make the trains run on time.’

“So, the first thing I had to do was make sure the State Counsellor, and other civilian leaders, knew fully the international opprobrium building on Myanmar over the military’s atrocities. Daw Suu had told me at the start of my appointment that the most important attribute she needed from me was the truth, and that I must never try to second-guess what she wanted to hear about anything. Much blather is now heard about the idea of telling truth to power. To an extent, it has become an almost meaningless cliché for use when nothing is at stake. But it was what I had to do now. It also meant I occasionally had to be an interlocutor between Myanmar’s civilian government and friendly governments wanting to vent their anger at what was happening. My truth-telling went both ways, if not always pleasantly for me.

“Daw Suu heard me out and thanked me for my honesty. Indeed, she even recalled her instruction to always tell her what I truly thought, but especially the awkward stuff. She told me she was aware of the international reaction to Rakhine, but thought that even close friends under-appreciated her limited room for manoeuvre, the ever-present threat of a coup, and the notion that she might just have ideas herself on how to bring the military to heel. She also expressed her disappointment in former allies, and what she perceived as their fickleness. ‘Do they really think I would just abandon the principles over which I was detained for nearly 20 years so easily?’”

MANY CHANGES

Turnell points out that among the sins that critics might levy against the NLD government, that of sloth is the least convincing. In its term of office, the government enacted more than 100 significant legislative, regulatory, and other changes, as well as re-orienting state expenditure. In addition to all the financial liberalisation measures there were new laws on company formation, investment policy, intellectual property, consumer protections, and tweaks to land laws and bankruptcy procedures aimed to create a business environment conducive to private sector development. In terms of spending, the (military-written) 2008 Constitution disallowed any control over military expenditure, but allocations elsewhere, especially on health and education, were dramatically increased.

And then there was China, ever looming over Myanmar. It was in dealing with the threat of excessive Chinese influence, and in minimising the debt burdens that came from China's Belt and Road Initiative, that some of the NLD government's biggest successes would come.

Not everything worked out, as Turnell explains - much like every other country on planet earth. The country was rattled by the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic that hit the economy hard. But as 2020 drew to a close, a new post-COVID-19 reform re-boot, the Myanmar Economic Resilience and Reform Plan (MERRP), was drawn up.

Grabbing the opportunity to push for bigger reforms, incorporating lessons from the past, and in the knowledge that the NLD's November 2020 election win - in which it took 83 per cent of the seats contested - had created new political capital for being bolder and better. The MERRP would be the manifesto the reformers always wanted. Social and environmental considerations were prominent, alongside the hard tack of greater monetary liberalisation - mandated interest rate caps and floors would finally go, allowing credit to be priced for risk.

Turnell says there were a myriad of other items, but the above alone gave them hope that the path ahead might be clearer than the one traversed.

"The final draft of the MERRP was completed on the last day of January 2021. I was asked to bring a hard copy to Myanmar's capital, Naypyitaw, for final review and approval by the State Counsellor and her ministers. A meeting was set for Thursday, 4 February 2021."

Little did the Australian economist know what was about to happen on 1 February 2021.

"Best Laid Plans" walks us through the heady and difficult steps taken by Turnell and the reformers, an invaluable guide to a key era in Myanmar's development - an era cut short by an angry military that lost patience with a "democratic experiment" gone wrong.

The man dubbed an eternal optimist had plenty of time to mull the wisdom of getting involved in Suu Kyi's bold reform plan during his 650 days of incarceration.

"Best Laid Plans: The Inside Story of Reform in Aung San Suu Kyi's Myanmar" is published by Penguin and the Lowy Institute.



China has sent a message to Myanmar. Photo: Supplied

CHINA SENDS MESSAGE TO MYANMAR JUNTA WITH LIVE-FIRE DRILLS AND PATROLS

This week, China reportedly held live-fire military drills and increased patrols near its border with Myanmar starting on Tuesday, fortifying its boundaries with a southern neighbour that has been engulfed in a civil war for more than three years. Analysts say Beijing likely wants to signal to Myanmar's junta leaders that they should return to peace talks and de-escalate the conflict, according to reports in The New York Times, Reuters and Al Jazeera.

China's People's Liberation Army's Southern Theater Command said on Monday that it would conduct both land and air exercises in the southwestern province of Yunnan to test the "joint strike capabilities of theater troops and maintain security and stability in the border areas." China conducted two similar drills in April, according to a report in The New York Times.

The drills and patrols this week come less than two weeks after China's top diplomat, Wang Yi, visited Naypyidaw, and reaffirmed Beijing's support for the ruling military junta.

Analysts say that despite Mr. Wang's pledge of support, Beijing is using the drills to send a signal to the junta that it would like the military to return to Chinese-led peace talks with rebels and refrain from intensifying the conflict.

As Mizzima Weekly has reported, China is torn between support for the junta and what it sees as the necessity to engage with some of the resistance players – most notably the northern Three Brotherhood Alliance regarding Chinese interests in northern Shan State and the Arakan Army regarding their interests in Rakhine State. Beijing is seeking peace and stability in Myanmar primarily to protect its interests including border trade, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, the deep-sea port in Rakhine, public-private investments and the safety of its nationals in the country. On a geopolitical level, Myanmar matters to China as a potential backdoor to the Indian Ocean, avoiding the use of the Malacca Strait.

Their focus is largely on Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (ERO) but it is unclear whether they have meaningfully engaged with the opposition National Unity Government (NUG) that tries to act as an umbrella of opposition to the Myanmar military junta.

Myanmar "plays a crucial role in the development of China's southwestern economy and national security," said Song Zhongping, an independent defense analyst based in Beijing and a former Chinese military officer told The New York Times. "China is very concerned about peace and stability in the region, and even more concerned about the security of our borders."



New recruits being put through their paces. Photo: Mizzima

JUNTA CONSCRIPTION ESCALATES

The Myanmar junta has escalated its conscription efforts by increasingly targeting young men and women, without exception from the workforce who are either departing for or returning from abroad. This move has led to severe restrictions and heightened anxiety among those affected.

At Yangon International Airport, young men between the ages of 23 and 32 are facing stringent checks and restrictions, especially those holding PV (passport for visit) type identification. Many of these individuals find it nearly impossible to board flights without presenting comprehensive documentation. A similar situation is faced by those returning on PJ (passport for job) types, with authorities imposing strict checks before allowing them to depart again. These checks include verifying the age group, OWIC (Overseas Worker Identification Card), taxation status, and the mandatory return of 25 per cent of their income.

A spokesperson for a job agency specializing in overseas employment expressed concern, stating, "Some workers who returned to Myanmar temporarily

and tried to leave again were refused boarding by airport authorities due to their age, lack of an OWIC card, absence of tax payment proof, or missing 25 per cent salary transfer documents. They were sent back from the airport. It is really difficult to go abroad again. Please, don't come back to Myanmar."

A local young man holding a PV passport echoed these sentiments, adding, "I don't understand their policy. Some PV passport holders were asked for bribes, while others were refused boarding even though they had complete documentation."

In addition to targeting young men, the junta has begun enlisting young women for military service. At the end of July, local authorities in Hopone Township, southern Shan State, issued warnings to women listed for conscription, sparking widespread concern. A female teacher participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) shared her fears: "I am very worried as I hear news of women being called up for conscription. I am a CDM teacher. I live with my parents and a younger sister, and I can't flee anywhere. I have no idea what to do."



Internally displaced people fleeing fighting. Photo: Mizzima

Meanwhile, on July 30, Thai authorities transferred over 150 Myanmar nationals from Ranong Prison to Myanmar authorities at Kawthoung port. Another group of over 120 followed on August 7. Upon their repatriation, the junta arrested 23 people from the first group and 48 from the second group. Some were released after paying bribes, with one 24-year-old man escaping detention by paying over 6,000 Thai Baht.

The Myanmar junta's intensified recruitment efforts, now extending to women, have exacerbated fears and uncertainty among the population, leaving many to question their future under the current regime.

MYANMARDISPLACEDCONTINUETO FACE HARDSHIP WITH ASSISTANCE UNDERFUNDED

Continued conflict and a deteriorating situation across Myanmar are fueling a growing displacement crisis. Millions are displaced in Myanmar and with limited options for aid are facing food shortages and rising costs as the 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan remains critically underfunded.

An estimated 3 million people are already internally displaced as a result of the armed conflict raging across the country. In the past weeks the conflict has intensified in Rakhine State, northern Shan State, and Mandalay Region.

Heavy rains since the end of June and resultant overflowing rivers in several states and regions are further exacerbating the situation. An estimated 393,000 people have been affected by these floods.

Residents of Rakhine State who have fled to towns recently liberated by the Arakan Army (AA). Here, however, the displaced face, in addition to aerial bombardment, rising rents, increased costs of basic foodstuffs, shortages of medicines, and inadequate healthcare services.

An IDP who fled from Sittwe to Kyauktaw said it cost 300,000-500,000 Kyat per month to rent a house and at least 30,000 Kyat to provide daily means for a family of five. Medicine shortages means a visit to general practitioner can mean medical expenses in excess of 100,000 Kyat per visit.

The AA has claimed responsibility for implementation of local governance in its newly-won territories. This includes the establishment of rule of law, municipal public services, law enforcement, and trade. However, locals say its control of prices is wanting.

In Karenni State, where fighting continues although offensives in Rakhine and northern Shan States gain headlines, displaced persons are facing food shortages. According to the Htun Myanmar Donation humanitarian aid organisation, IDP camps in Deemawsoe Township and Pekhone Township in nearby Shan State have had insufficient rice for six months. There are also shortages of other foodstuffs including cooking oil and salt.

Farming remains difficult in Karenni State as armed clashes are still frequent and people fear more artillery and air attacks. The situation is compounded by heavy rainfall and flooding that has destroyed paddy fields.

Humanitarian aid workers face considerable challenges to deliver aid to displaced communities including increased violence, restrictions imposed by armed actors, disruptions in communications and severe underfunding. However, according to UNOCHA, 2.1 million people across the country were reached during the first half of 2024.

This is far short of the targeted 5.3 million people, including 1.2 million internally displaced persons. The 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan only received 21.1 percent of required funding, according to the UN's Financial Tracking Service.



PDF fighters in the field.
Photo: Mizzima

MYANMAR RESISTANCE FORCES MAKE TERRITORIAL ADVANCES

According to recent studies and reports, the Myanmar resistance has grown in strength and numbers over the last three years.

Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), many of which have fought the military for decades, have grown in strength to around 120,000 troops since the February 2021 coup, according to the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). As of April 2024, the military had lost over 60% of the territory it once controlled in ethnic minority areas. The military has lost control of approximately 2,500 out of 5,280 positions, including outposts, bases, and headquarters. The number of combat and noncombat troops has dropped to 130,000. Auxiliary forces, including police and militias, now number around 70,000, down from previous estimates of at least 300,000.

The Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, in a report published on May 30, 2024, stated that 86% of the country's territory and 67% of the national population are in townships not under stable junta control.

The number of townships bordering India with over 90% resistance control has increased from 1 (7%) to 7 (50%). The number of townships under stable junta control has decreased from 3 (21%) to 1 (7%). Out of

18 townships bordering China, the number with full resistance control has increased from 6 (33%) to 11 (63%). The number of townships under stable junta control has remained at zero. Among the 17 townships bordering Thailand, the number with at least 90% resistance control has increased from 3 (18%) to 8 (47%). The number of townships under stable junta control remains at zero. Resistance organizations now control at least some territory in all the townships that border Thailand.

As noted by the Institute for Strategy and Policy (ISP), there have been at least 17,000 clashes in 233 townships, which is 70% of all townships in Myanmar.

During the 25 July 2024 meeting of the Central Committee for the Implementation of Regional Public Administration, Union Prime Minister Mahn Win Khaing Than of the National Unity Government (NUG) urged preparations in both the military and administrative sectors, in line with the growing consolidation and expansion of territorial control in the near future.

On August 12, 2024, the Acting President of the NUG, Duwa Lashi La, said that EAOs, PDFs, and allied revolutionary forces have seized up to 75 townships. The revolutionary forces under the NUG captured

Takaung city on August 12, 2024.

According to Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), which tracks global armed conflicts, Myanmar's warfare is currently the most intense among the 50 countries it monitors. Myanmar is ranked 2nd on the Global Peace Index, indicating that it is one of the countries with the highest levels of conflict according to assessments of security and stability. Forty-three per cent of the country's population, over 22.8 million people, are living in conflict-affected areas.

Relationship between the NUG and different PDFs and civil administration in liberated areas

The NUG announced the formation of a People's Defence Force on 5 May 2021 as a first step towards creating a federal army, in response to attacks across the country by the new military regime. The People's Defence Force (PDF) is part of the NUG government structure and operates under the Ministry of Defence. According to the NUG's defence minister, there are 259 PDF battalions and 250 Pa Ka Pha groups across 330 townships. The Pa Ka Pha is also known in English as the People's Defence Organisation. The NUG's defence ministry reports that there are 401 Local Defence Forces (LDFs), with 354 linked to the NUG. The NUG has transformed 100 of these LDFs into PDFs and placed them under its command. The defence minister estimates that there are between 50,000 and 100,000 PDF fighters nationwide.

Some significant issues have arisen between PDFs and Pa Ka Pha and the NUG's civil administration, the People's Administration Teams, or Pa Ah Pha, and the public as follows:

Case (1)

The Yaw Defence Force (YDF) reported on 25 June 2023 that in Mauk Lin Village, Gangaw Township, Magway Region, there were disputes between Pa Ka Pha members and Pa Ah Pha members on June 23, 2023. To prevent violence, the unarmed Pa Ka Pha leader requested assistance in temporarily securing the weapons of armed Pa Ah Pha members. As a result, four weapons were temporarily confiscated in front of Pa Ka Pha members and village leaders. All of the held weapons were returned after the disputes in Mauk Lin Village were resolved.

Case (2)

Pa Ah Pha and Pa Ka Pha members requested that township officer, Daw Yin Min Hlaing, take action against an offender in a village for a crime in which there was full evidence. However, she did not address the issue. As a result, on 2 August 2023, the residents of Gangaw Township, Magway Region, collectively expressed their dissatisfaction.

Case (3)

In Htee Lin Township of northern Sagaing Region residents protested against the construction of a new road which they fear will damage their farmland. They demanded a suspension of road construction from 16 June to 18 June 2024. Local residents expressed their opposition to the road construction and carried signs with messages about their rights and the impact on their crops. On 16 June 2024, the National Unity Government (NUG) affiliated People's Defence Force (PDF) and the People's Security Force (PSF), responsible for law enforcement, detained four of the protesters.

Case (4)

In Mingin Township, Sagaing Region, 16 comrades from the Upper Chindwin River Revolution Force (UCRRF) in U village were temporarily detained by Mingin Pa Ka Pha.

Case (5)

On 24 November 2023, six members of the People's Democratic Organization/Army (PDO/PDA) were arrested by Kawlin Township's Pa Ka Pha in Kyauk Pyin Thar rural area, Naw Kone village while they were on their way to coordinate with the Arakan Army (AA) in Kawlin District. Six members of the People's Democratic Organization/Army (PDO/PDA) were arrested by Kawlin Township's Pa Ka Pha for entering Kawlin territory without prior notification.

Case (6)

Residents report that the local People's Defence Team (Pa Ka Pha) and People's Administration Team (Pa Ah Pha) are permitting timber extraction and collecting taxes on it within the area of Indaw Township and Banmauk Township in Katha District of Sagaing Region.

Case (7)

On 30 July, Yaw based organizations called on the National Unity Government (NUG) to promptly identify and take action against all those responsible for the death of U San Lwin, a resident of Kyundat village in Gangaw Township, Magway Region. He died after being detained and interrogated on suspicion of drug trafficking. U San Lwin was detained solely on suspicion with no drugs found in his possession at the time of his arrest. Upon examining his body, numerous bruises and injuries were discovered on his back and all over his body, indicating that he had been severely beaten.

Case (8)

In Naw Village, Saw Township, Magway Division, it was reported that two local women were beaten by the Deputy Commander of the Township-level People's Defence Team (Pa Ka Pha). The incident occurred on 21 July, after 58-year-old Daw Thet Kyi and 38-year-old Daw Zin Mar Khaing, were summoned and beaten for laughing during a village meeting held by the defence forces and local residents on 19 July.

The second People's Congress of the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), held from 4 to 9 April 2024, highlighted a key issue. The report to the public emphasized the need for local administration and the rule of law. It stated that the Pa Ka Pha, Pa Ah Pha, and Pa La Pha should work systematically under the Federal Democracy Agreement with responsibility, accountability, and balanced actions.

The lack of transparency in tax collection has weakened collaboration in operations, affecting the public and the revolution. This has caused conflicts between public administration, defence, and security, led to disputes between the Three Pillars Mechanism and PDF battalions, and created misunderstandings among Local Defence Forces (LDFs).

Demographics and resistance forces in Sagaing Region and Magwe Region

The population of the Magway Region is 3.9 million and the Sagaing Region is 5.3 million.

Sagaing Region:

- Ethnicities: Bamar, Shan, Mizo, Chin, Naga, Kuki, Kadu, Ganangng, Catholic Bayingyi
- Religions: Buddhists: 92.2%, Christians: 6.6%, Muslims: 1.1%, Hindus: 0.1%, Others/No Religion: 0.1%

Magway Region:

- Ethnicities: Bamar, Chin, Rakhine, Shan, Karen
- Religions: Buddhists: 98.8%, Christians: 0.7%, Muslims: 0.3%, Hindus: 0.1%, Animists: 0.1%, Others/No Religion: Less than 0.1%

The People's Defence Forces (PDF) under the Ministry of Defence of the NUG operate with the support and guidance of the NUG. They lead armed resistance efforts across Myanmar as part of the broader struggle against the military regime. In contrast, there are local defence groups that operate independently and are not under the direct control of the NUG. These groups are referred to as Local People's Defence Forces (LDFs). While they support resistance activities in their regions, they do so independently, following their own rules and guidelines rather than those of the NUG.

The NUG has organized People's Defence Forces (PDFs), consisting of 293 PDF battalions and 250 Township Defence Groups, to wage war against regime troops across the country, especially in Sagaing and Magwe regions and Chin, Karen, Kachin and Kayah states. The Local Defence Forces (LDFs) often work together with the People's Defence Forces (PDF) under the NUG to fight against the State Administration Council (SAC). Although they operate separately, they coordinate their efforts, share information, and sometimes carry out joint operations to strengthen their resistance against the military regime.



Photo: Pyi Thu Sitt via Telegram

NEW JUNTA 'SECURITY' COMMITTEE WOULD ARM MYANMAR'S LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Myanmar's junta has set up a committee to oversee security in the country's villages and wards by arming and training troops, according to a recently leaked document, but observers say the move is aimed at "tricking people into joining the military" and will create greater instability in local communities.

Amid mounting battlefield losses since its 2021 coup d'état, the junta enacted a draft law in February to shore up troop shortages and has since trained around 9,000 recruits, with more conscripts on the way. But the military has been devastated on the ground and can't draft soldiers fast enough to fill the void created by casualties and defections.

According to a document signed by junta Secretary General Aung Lin Dwe and leaked on Facebook, the military on Aug. 16 formed the People's Security and Counter-Terrorism Central Committee to establish and arm "supervisory bodies" in the capital Naypyidaw, as well as other regions, states, districts and townships.

The committee will distribute weapons and other military equipment according to the needs of conflict zones, the document says, as well as provide food and conduct combat and medic training, although it does not specify who will receive the supplies.

Additionally, the committee will be tasked with "expanding forces" and "recruiting experts capable of using high-tech military equipment."

But experts on the ground predicted that ultimately the plan will get more weapons into the hands of civilians – essentially arming them to fight the rebels.

"They [the junta] have realized that they no longer have the capacity for battles, and that more troops will surrender," said Zin Yaw, a former army captain who advises the opposition. "They are attempting to trick people into joining the military to serve as human shields."

TRUE INTENTIONS?

The junta has made no public announcement of the committee's formation and attempts by RFA Burmese to contact junta spokesperson Major Gen. Zaw Min Tun for comment went unanswered Monday.

But a former military officer confirmed the committee's formation for the purpose of increasing "security" in Myanmar's wards and villages, where he said residents are under regular threat of danger from conflict.

"Any government can only carry out military operations successfully when security prevails in local communities," said the former officer, who spoke to RFA on condition of anonymity due to safety concerns. "I assume that the [junta] officials formed this committee after realizing this."

RFA has received reports of civilians being forcibly recruited to the Pyu Saw Htee – a militia group formed by the junta in 2022 under the pretext of maintaining peace and stability in rural areas.

In reality, the bands have been responsible for some of the junta's worst atrocities in its scorched earth offensive against the armed opposition. The proxy groups regularly torch villages, loot property, and torture and kill residents, allowing the military to claim that its regular troops do not target civilians.

The establishment of the People's Security and Counter-Terrorism Central Committee, as outlined in the leaked document, may be the clearest evidence to date of the junta's efforts to arm and train civilian proxy forces under the guise of security enforcement.

VIOLENCE WILL INCREASE UNDER PLAN

Maung Maung Swe, the deputy secretary of the shadow National Unity Government's ministry of defense, agreed that the plan shows the junta is becoming more desperate amid worsening troop shortages.

"There are several reasons for the formation of this committee, but the primary one is the deteriorating situation of the ... junta on multiple fronts," he said.

But he suggested that the logistical requirements of such a roll-out make it "unlikely to succeed" and come with the risk of arming communities opposed to military rule.

"Even if military equipment were provided, it could very well backfire," he said.

Other observers warned that funneling weapons into local communities would inevitably worsen the conflict.

"Arming communities will lead to an increase in urban violent attacks, as well as greater instability and complications within those communities," said political commentator Than Soe Naing.

According to the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners, which monitors the conflict in Myanmar, junta authorities have killed at least 5,518 civilians since the military seized power more than three years ago.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia



Photo: AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA CHIEF ASSURES STABILITY IN BORDER REGION AND SAFETY OF CHINESE NATIONALS WORKING ON CHINESE PROJECTS

A Facebook page posted by the Chinese embassy in Yangon stated that newly appointed Chinese ambassador Ms. Ma Jia urged Myanmar's junta chief to protect Chinese nationals working on Chinese projects. Myanmar assured it will provide protection to these Chinese nationals working in the country.

The Myanmar junta chief reportedly assured the Chinese ambassador that the Military Council will provide utmost protection and safety to these Chinese nationals working in Chinese projects.

State Administration Council (SAC) Chairman Senior General Min Aung Hlaing gave this assurance to the Chinese ambassador when she submitted her credential to him on 21 August in Naypyitaw.

Myanmar will safeguard stability and tranquility along the Sino-Myanmar border and Myanmar would not let anyone do anything which will endanger and undermine Chinese security and interests, the Chinese embassy Facebook page post says.

Moreover, Myanmar places great emphasis on China-Myanmar relations and implementing cooperation in all sectors, enhancing the traditional 'Paukphaw' friendship to benefit the two peoples, The FB page post added.

The junta chief also said that Myanmar and China

were the first two countries proposing the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence in the international arena and they always abide by these principles and Myanmar is implementing friendly cooperation between the two countries.

The newly appointed Chinese ambassador to Myanmar, Ms. Ma Jia, assumed charge of her post on 12 August, two days before the visit by Chinese FM Wang Yi to Myanmar.

According to junta state-run media reports, Ms. Ma Jia served as a third secretary in the Yangon embassy from 1995 to 1998.

Junta forces and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) are currently fighting fiercely along the Sino-Myanmar border and border trade with China has been stopped by the advent of this intense fighting. It will be interesting to see how Ms. Ma Jia will tackle Sino-Myanmar relation as a new ambassador.

Diplomatic relation between two countries has been getting closer since the military coup in Myanmar in early February 2021.

Chinese FM Mr. Wang Yi met junta chief Min Aung Hlaing in Naypyitaw on 14 August and asked Myanmar to provide firm protection to Chinese interests and investments in Myanmar.

AA CLAIMS MYANMAR MILITARY COUNCIL USES LOCALS AS HUMAN SHIELDS DURING INTENSE BATTLES IN MAUNGDAW

The Arakan Army (AA) reported ongoing attacks on the remaining junta camps in Maungdaw, Rakhine State, accusing regime forces of using local civilians as human shields.

The AA's offensive to capture Maungdaw began on 4 August, targeting two key military bases: one in Haw Ri Tu Lar village, north of Maungdaw, and another in Maung Ni village to the south.

According to the AA, they captured the Military Council's police station in Maung Ni village and the military camp in Haw Ri Tu Lar on 6 August. On 9 July, the AA claimed to have seized the junta's 3-Mile camp in Maungdaw Township.

The AA alleged that groups such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), and the Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA) are fighting alongside the military council in the battles within Maungdaw Township.

Local sources reported that the junta, in an effort to prevent the loss of Maungdaw, is providing air support and launching rocket attacks from Sittwe towards Maungdaw Township.

The fighting continues across Maungdaw, with junta forces and their allies allegedly using local residents as human shields. The AA stated they are making daily efforts to rescue these individuals and have already saved nearly 20,000 Maungdaw residents, including staff and family members of international organizations.

The displaced population is reportedly suffering from diarrheal diseases and urgently needs medical supplies. The AA calls on neighboring countries, international organizations, civil society groups, and

volunteers to provide assistance to those fleeing the conflict in Maungdaw Township.

A fierce battle erupted on the evening of 15 August between the AA and junta forces near a residential house close to No. 2 High School in Ward No. 2, Maungdaw city. The junta forces reportedly set the house on fire before retreating, leading to the destruction of five homes. The AA claimed to have seized weapons, ammunition, and the bodies of two junta soldiers left behind during the retreat.

Clashes continued in Maungdaw city on 16 August, particularly around the Maungdaw clock tower, the southeastern area, and the town's entrance.

The AA reports regime forces are now stationed in key areas across Maungdaw, including Wards 1, 2, 3, 4, and Kanyin Tan Ward, as well as in high-rise buildings, residences, and schools deemed critical for military use.

The junta has also destroyed nearly all bridges in Maungdaw town, though the AA intervened during an attempt to blow up the Shweza bridge, preventing its destruction.

The AA warns that misinformation about the Maungdaw conflict is circulating, potentially jeopardizing harmony between ethnic groups in Rakhine State.

Despite attempts to reach AA spokesperson, Khaing Thukha, for updates on 19 August, Mizzima received no response. The AA has stated that it will continue to provide updates on the situation in Maungdaw.

KACHIN INDEPENDENCE ARMY SEIZES KEY MILITARY BASE IN MOMAU, KACHIN STATE

KIA fighter. Photo: AFP

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) captured the last remaining camp of the Military Council's Light Infantry Battalion 437 (LIB 437) in Momauk, Kachin State, around 3:30 pm on 19 August. A KIA frontline source reported that a tank and assorted ammunition were seized during the operation.

With the fall of the LIB 437 camp, the KIA has now taken full control of Momauk city.

KIA spokesperson Colonel Naw Bu confirmed the capture, stating, "Now that LIB 437 has been seized, we have taken over the entire city. The administration has not yet been restored, and residents have fled to avoid the conflict."

The KIA's efforts to seize the LIB 437 camp began in late May. The camp was briefly captured in July. The KIA later renewed its offensive and successfully secured the camp and the city. Momauk Police Station and parts of the city had been under KIA control since May, while the LIB 437 camp served as a stronghold for the junta.

Reports indicate the junta reinforced its ground forces with armored vehicles from Bhamo township,

located more than eight miles from Momauk. Yet, the KIA has not disclosed further details about the materials confiscated in the captured camp.

The junta's Military Operations Command 21 and its subordinated Infantry Battalion 47, Infantry Battalion 236 of Northern Regional Military Command's, a field artillery regiment, and other the armed forces are based in Bhamo.

The KIA's advances extend beyond Momauk. They have also seized cities along the Bhamo-Momauk road, including the China-Myanmar border town of Lwejel, and the towns of Dawthponeyan, Myothit, Myohla, Hsinbo, Injangyang, Sumprabum, and Sadung. Momauk marks the ninth city in the Kachin region to fall under KIA control.

The KIA's operations are spreading across Kachin State, which comprises 30 townships. Fighting is ongoing between the KIA and junta troops in Waingmaw Township, to the immediate east of the capital city Myitkyina, as well as in Bhamo, Mansi, and the jade-rich area of Hpakant.



SEVEN CAPTIVES AND AMMO SEIZED IN ATTACK ON POLICE STATION IN NGANZUN, MANDALAY REGION

Revolutionary forces, including the Nganzun People's Defense Force (PDF), launched a coordinated attack on a junta-run police station in Nganzun Township, Mandalay Region, early on 19 August.

The attack, which began at 4:00 am, resulted in the capture of seven individuals and seven firearms by 7:00 am, according to an official from the Nganzun PDF.

Approximately 30 junta troops and police personnel were stationed at the police station stormed by the PDFs.

"We captured seven individuals and seven weapons. The captives, which include five men and two of their female spouses, are being detained according to the law," said a representative of the Nganzun PDF.

The junta forces abandoned the station following the battle and retreated. However, reinforcements from the Nganzun military camp, along with troops from

Simeekhon town and Soneywar village camp, quickly arrived at the scene. The junta also responded with airstrikes, forcing the PDFs to retreat without incurring any casualties.

The attack was a joint effort involving multiple groups, including the Nganzun PDF, Myaung PDFs, Mandalay District Battalion 5, Naung Yoe Group, and Myingyan Hero Group.

In the aftermath of the battle, the Nganzun Township PDF issued a warning to local residents to be vigilant due to the increased risk of airstrikes and ground operations. They cautioned that junta columns are expected to march around the police station area, and they also urged non-CDM (Civil Disobedience Movement) participants, junta troops, police personnel, and the Pyu Saw Htee militia to cooperate with civilians immediately.



FEMALE POLITICAL PRISONERS INJURED BY BEATINGS IN MYANMAR'S DAIK-U PRISON

The Political Prisoners Network – Myanmar (PPNM) reported that female political prisoners were assaulted and injured by prison authorities at Daik-U Prison in Bago Region.

After a female political prisoner transferred from Kyaikmaraw Prison, Mon State was accused of possessing illegal items following a family visit, prison authorities prepared to punish her. Other female political prisoners protested in response, leading to a violent crackdown wherein 50 male and seven female prison staff members assaulted them on August 19 at 3:00 pm.

“This is just an allegation. There is no evidence to show. When prison authorities attempted to punish her, claiming the items she received contained illegal substances, other female political inmates defended her and were subsequently beaten by the authorities,” said Ko Thaik Tun Oo, a member of the PPNM Steering Committee.

Prison staff, led by a Second Lieutenant and prison officer, Daw San Nwe Oo, accused a female political inmate of receiving illegal goods during a family visit. They pulled her hair and beat her. When other female political prisoners protested the unjust treatment, they too were subjected to violence.

Seven women were kicked, beaten, and shot with a slingshot, including one who has abdominal pain and

is receiving medical treatment for gynecological issues. The women sustained bruises on their abdomens, chests, and heads, said Ko Thaik Tun Oo.

Female political prisoners, fearing they would be dragged out of their cells that evening, stayed together in the same cell. As a result, they did not receive medical treatment until late at night.

Military vehicles were parked outside Daik-U Prison, but it remains unclear whether their presence is part of a routine security operation or related to the current situation at the prison.

According to records, at least 15 people died last year in Daik-U Prison during prisoner transfers and in the interrogation center, and now the situation of female political prisoners is in danger, said a member of the PPNM Steering Committee.

This is the second time since 18 June that female political prisoners were beaten in Daik-U Prison.

The Political Prisoners Network – Myanmar (PPNM) urges organizations and international communities not to ignore the rights of women and female political prisoners, calling on them to pressure the Military Council and the Myanmar Prisons Department and to implement concrete measures against them.

YOMA DENIES ALLEGATIONS OF USING ILLEGAL FUNDS FROM MYANMAR

Singapore-listed Yoma Strategic Holdings, a property developer founded by one of Myanmar's richest tycoons, Mr. Serge Pun, has denied allegations that criminal proceeds from online scam centres were used to fund a project expansion.

Yoma was responding to a report of Yoma Holdings Ltd. CEO Serge Pun aka Thein Wai was charged with money laundering and other financial crimes.

The real estate project, Star City, was mentioned in an article by The Irrawaddy on Aug 16 titled "Myanmar junta charges tycoon Serge Pun with money laundering, other financial crimes", said Yoma in a Singapore Exchange filing on Aug 18. The Irrawaddy claimed Mr. Pun is facing several charges including money laundering and misuse of public funds, after his month-long detention by the Myanmar junta.

"Star City is now a vibrant community of over 6,000 residents that in recent years does not require and does not receive any external funding," Yoma said.

"The company emphasises that there are no investigations by the Myanmar authorities involving the company, its directors, executive officers, employees, or the group's businesses."

Mr. Serge Pun decided to step down as executive chairman in July and his son Melvyn Pun, Yoma's chief executive officer, took over the role, a 24 July 2024 Yoma's press release says.

CEO Melvyn Pun said his father remains in Nay Pyi Taw at the accommodation provided by authorities and is cooperating with the authorities concerned including the Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM). Yoma Holdings said in response to SGX queries it has not been informed of 71-year-old Serge Pun's detention or placement under house arrest.

As a responsible organization in Myanmar, Yoma Strategic Holdings Ltd. Is engaging with relevant government ministries to continue its business operations, the press release of the group says.

But the Military Council said in its statement that responsible officials from seven banks including Yoma and Ayeyarwady are under investigation for authorising home loans exceeding a cap set by the Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM).

Yoma Group is engaged banking, healthcare services, real estates, tourism and many other service sectors.



Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun.
Photo: AFP

AMBASSADOR KYAW MOE TUN'S STATEMENT AT UNSC OPEN DEBATE ON PEACEBUILDING AND SUSTAINING PEACE

Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun of Myanmar addressed the United Nations Security Council on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace in New York on 21 August 2024. The following is his statement.

Mr. President, I wish to begin by extending my profound appreciation to you and the Presidency of Sierra Leone for convening this High-level Open Debate on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace: "Addressing global, regional and national aspects of conflict prevention", reflecting on the Secretary-General's New Agenda for Peace.

I am also thankful to the briefers for their comprehensive statements.

Mr. President, As aggression, conflicts, wars and a series of interlocking threats continue to swell in numerous parts of the globe, our world today has been unprecedentedly and increasingly endangered in multiple forms.

With security and protection of civilians fading at all levels, global citizens, subjected to and affected by the prevailing armed conflicts, terrorism, technological warfare, inequalities, shrinking space for civic participation, climate emergency alongside other

ramifications, have desired for sustaining peace and development that could mitigate their sufferings and guarantee the betterment of their livelihoods.

In recognition of these challenges, the UN Secretary-General underscored the importance of stronger international cooperation in his Policy Brief 9 of "Our Common Agenda" and proposed to convene the Summit of the Future aiming at achieving a new global consensus for a better future for the present and future generations.

We are approaching this journey of solidarity in a month of time and Myanmar views the upcoming SoTF as an important opportunity and venue for the international community to agree on multilateral solutions and fill in gaps for various agendas, ranging from peace to sustainable development.

Accordingly, we are of the view that strengthening of conflict prevention must be placed at the center of all strategies to ensure peace at the national, regional and international levels. We must also continue to adhere to the principles of the UN Charter and International Law and uphold our commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights and the maintenance of

international peace and security for all.

Mr. President, My country, Myanmar is currently undergoing through a revolution to end the unpopular military dictatorship and to build a federal democratic union in Myanmar. I wish to stress that astonishing experiences have taught us to completely understand the intensity of violent conflicts, ignited by the illegal military coup and the junta's continued atrocities, and its severe consequences. We are therefore cognizant of the price of sustainable peace and development more than ever.

As such I wish to highlight the following points:

First, there is a critical roll back in the hard-earned progresses achieved during the tenure of the previous elected civilian government.

Second, peace, security and development can hardly be afforded in Myanmar due to the military junta's continued disregard of the rule of law, violation of international law, international human rights law and international humanitarian law and perpetration of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Third, as a result of the military junta's atrocities, the number of displacement and refugees has reached 3.2 million, and 18.6 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. Large number of children and youth have lost their right to education and health. Vulnerable groups including women and girls as well as Rohingya have been facing numerous forms of violence by the junta forces. Humanitarian operations remain challenging where essential services cannot be delivered efficiently as being highly politicized and weaponized by the military junta.

Fourth, incidents of trafficking and transnational organized crimes, including online scams, are alarmingly growing, and it has impacts on the neighbouring countries and beyond.

Fifth, the economic and social outlook of the country is becoming extremely dire, particularly due to high inflation, skyrocketing commodity prices, low income, lack of employment opportunities, unemployment and brain drain driven by the forced conscription and migration.

Yet, Mr. President, we regret that desperate calls of Myanmar people to the international community for effective action and support have been repeatedly

ignored. We witness that the absence of concrete actions from the international community have extended the unlawful military coup and the junta's license to commit the international crimes. Throughout this lengthy period, sadly our people especially women and girls and youth are bearing the brunt of the perpetrating military junta's atrocities and international crimes.

Nevertheless, Myanmar people have been endeavouring their best at the national level to establish sustainable peace in the country through their efforts for ending the military dictatorship which is the root causes of the conflict. The National Unity Government, Ethnic Resistance Organizations, NGOs, CSOs including women led groups for peace and security and all relevant actors on the ground have been working together to achieve our ultimate goal of building a federal democratic union. Thus, we are committed to endure until peace and justice prevail in Myanmar.

Clearly, no one else knows the real situation of Myanmar better than the people of Myanmar do. No one else wants Myanmar to be a peaceful, stable and prosperous state more than we do.

While welcoming any support of all interested member states to find a sustainable solution to our crisis, we urge them to listen attentively and seriously to the people of Myanmar and respect our aspiration sincerely.

It is critically important that all initiatives to resolve the crisis must be in line with the people's wishes and for a sustainable solution.

What the people of Myanmar desperately need now is an immediate and decisive action from the international community. Only through a concerted and coordinated effort from the international community to isolate the military junta and cut it off from all support including the flow of arms and weapons, jet fuel, money to the military junta will Myanmar return its path towards democracy and create a peaceful and stable environment.

In this regard, the role of the UN, especially the UN Security Council remains vital. I urge them to act now.



IDPs in the forest in Chin State. Photo: AFP

CHIN CIVIC MOVEMENT CALLS FOR PEACEFUL RESOLUTION BETWEEN CHIN REVOLUTIONARY GROUPS

Chin Civic Movement (CCM) leaders called on Chin revolutionary groups engaged in ongoing conflicts to urgently and peacefully resolve their differences. This appeal was made in response to the findings of a public opinion survey conducted by the CCM from 18 to 31 July.

The survey gathered input from 1,010 Chin people representing 35 ethnic groups within Myanmar and abroad. The questions centered on the conflict between the Chinland Council, led by the Chin National Front (CNF), and the Chin Brotherhood Alliance.

According to the CCM, an overwhelming 94% of respondents believe that both factions are responsible for resolving the conflict and urged them to engage in open and peaceful dialogue, coupled with an immediate ceasefire.

A CCM official said, "this survey revealed that the majority of respondents took the view that both sides are responsible for resolving the conflict and need to hold a dialogue as soon as possible."

The survey identified a lack of mutual recognition between the Chin revolutionary forces as the primary cause of the conflict. Concerns over prolonged fighting could foster generational resentment among Chin ethnic groups and delay the fulfillment of the

revolutionary objectives.

The CCM also recommended the involvement of civil society leaders, religious figures, the National Unity Government (NUG), and associations from Mizoram, India, to mediate if necessary. Respondents expressed fears that continued battles for township control could prolong the conflict, making relocation impossible and leading to an endless cycle of violence among the Chin armed groups.

Recent armed clashes between the Chinland Council forces and the Chin Brotherhood Alliance in Matupi and Lailenpi Townships have heightened these concerns. With revolutionary forces stationed in other townships and the military situation remaining tense, many Chin people worry that further conflicts may erupt between these groups.

The Chin Civic Movement (CCM) is a community-based initiative formed by activists, scholars, and civil society organizations in Chin State, alongside prominent members of the strike movement. The CCM aims to promote peace and unity within the region, especially during these challenging times.



Chauk Guerrilla Force

PEOPLE'S DEFENSE FORCES SEIZE TWO JUNTA CAMPS IN PAKOKKU, MAGWAY REGION

Junta troops and police forces abandoned their posts at the Kyahtoo area and Tha Gyi Taung police outpost in Pakokku Township on the night of 21 August, allowing the People's Defense Forces (PDF) to seize the camps and clear the area by the following day.

The retreat occurred after sustained attacks from the PDF.

A PDF official from Pakokku town said, "We fought for a long time to capture the camps. Now, they know that the offensive has intensified, so they are scared and left the camps and run away."

The two police outposts, manned by over 40 junta troops and police officers, were frequently targeted by the PDF. After the latest attacks, the fleeing junta forces

were reported to have headed toward Nyaungjippin village, approximately 12 miles away from the outpost.

"We know that they ran towards Nyaungjippin. Currently, we are clearing the area," said an official from Pakokku town's PDF.

Photos released by the People's Defense Forces show the main building of the Kyahtoo police station with its roof and front façade damaged by bullet holes, evidence of previous attacks.



TNLA fighters on guard duty.
Photo: AFP

TNLA TAKES CONTROL OF HSIPAW TOWN, ESTABLISHES LAW ENFORCEMENT AMID ONGOING CLASHES

The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) has successfully taken control of all junta administrative offices and military camps in Hsipaw town, located in northern Shan State, and is in the process of establishing a law enforcement and administrative system, according to TNLA spokesperson Lway Yay Oo.

Despite the TNLA's control over the town since 12 August, fierce fighting continues around military bases situated outside Hsipaw, including those of Infantry Battalion 23 and Light Infantry Battalions 503 and 504.

"Since 12 August, we have controlled all the town and government offices in Hsipaw. Law enforcement activities are being implemented. We are also preparing to operate the administration," Lway Yay Oo said.

The TNLA's entry into Hsipaw followed the escalation of hostilities during the second phase of Operation 1027, which intensified throughout August.

TNLA forces entered Hsipaw on 10 August after a fierce battle resulting in significant civilian casualties.

According to Lway Yay Oo, more than 10 civilians were killed and over 40 were injured due to the junta's aerial and artillery attacks during the clashes.

While there have been reports of civilian homes being damaged, the exact number has yet to be confirmed. The situation in Hsipaw town appeared calm as of 21 August, but more than half of the town's population has fled the ongoing conflict.

In addition to Hsipaw, TNLA joint forces have captured and now control the towns of Mongmit, Nawnghkio, and Kyaukme in northern Shan State, as well as Mogok in Mandalay Region, as a result of the second phase of Operation 1027.



CENTRAL BANK OF MYANMAR ISSUES DIRECTIVE TO PAY SALARIES TO GOVERNMENT STAFF IN DIGITAL CURRENCY

It is learned from the junta's Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM) that they authorized private banks and junta-backed financial services platforms to pay monthly salaries to government staff from 34 ministries in Yangon, Mandalay and Naypyitaw in digital currency.

The CBM informed all ministries and departments to cooperate with CBM to make salary payments to their staff with digitally.

ATMs are being installed in states and regions for convenience of government employees in withdrawing their salaries through ATM debit cards, the CBM directive says.

There 1,908 ATM machines being installed in Yangon Region, 707 machines in Mandalay Region and 332 in Naypyitaw and more will be installed as and when needed, it says.

The CBM directive says they are speeding up the work of reducing printing paper money and curbing inflation through implementing a strategy of a national

digital currency payment system. A pilot project in Naypyitaw to make salary payments to staff from ministries and departments in digital currency was found successful.

The staff from 32 ministries were paid their salaries in digital currency in Yangon and Mandalay since May 2023. The monthly transactions in digital currency to the government staff in these cities totaled over 9 billion Kyats, the CBM says.

A businessperson pondered that the Military Council was implementing the digital currency and digital payment system urgently so they would not need to print all the required money. They could also settle the budget deficit of nearly 20 trillion Kyats by this means so they are tightly restricting the use of paper money in the country.

The Military Council is using this digital currency and payment system more to tighten and control the cash flows and cash payments in the territories they recently lost to ethnic armed groups, he said.

MYANMAR JOURNALISTS CLUB ESTABLISHED BY LOCAL AND EXILED JOURNALISTS

Photo: Kyle Petzer

The Myanmar Journalists Club (MJC) was founded by working journalists both inside and outside Myanmar on 17th August 2024. MJC is independent and free from funding.

Myanmar media workers are facing not only the possibility of brutal torture and killings by the junta but also severe rights violations within their own media organisations.

As a result, the quality of news stories has suffered due to the physical and mental trauma experienced by journalists, despite this being a critical time for the country.

While journalists are committed to reporting on human rights violations and injustices as part of their

work, their own rights are being severely violated. In these challenging times, these violations are often ignored or silenced due to concerns about security, survival, livelihood, and job stability.

The Myanmar Journalists Club (MJC) is dedicated to supporting Myanmar journalists whose rights have been violated and to promoting a safe, hostile-free work environment. MJC also aims to strengthen the network among working journalists.

Additionally, MJC will document the rights violations faced by all media workers, not just journalists, and will advocate for fairness and compensation.



Htet Myat Thu, left, and Win Htut Oo

TWO MYANMAR REPORTERS AMONG FOUR KILLED IN RAID BY JUNTA FORCES

RFA

Myanmar junta forces hunting insurgents raided a reporter's home killing him, another reporter and two other people, one of whom was a member of a rebel group, associates of the victims, including a former employer, told Radio Free Asia.

The troops raided reporter Htet Myat Thu's home in Mon state on Wednesday after receiving a tip-off that insurgents were meeting there.

Since the military seized power and toppled a civilian government more than three years ago, junta officials have closed independent media outlets and arrested and tortured some reporters, victims and rights groups say.

Junta soldiers opened fire on the home of Htet Myat Thu in Kyaikto township on suspicion the people there were members of a pro-democracy insurgent group

called the Kyaikto Revolutionary Force, the associates of the men said.

The second reporter killed in the raid was Win Htut Oo, 28, a freelance journalist who worked for the Democratic Voice of Burma and The Nation Voice, one of his employers told RFA.

About 30 soldiers raided the home, said a source close to one of the victims who declined to be identified for security reasons.

"Htet Myat Thu was shot first when he opened the door. Another man, Kyin Wak, was shot in the leg when he jumped out of a window," said the source.

"Win Htut Oo and another man, Ah Win, were shot at the back of home while they were trying to flee."

CORE DEVELOPMENTS

Ah Win was a member of the Kyaikto Revolutionary Force but the other man, Kyin Wak, just lived in the house and had no militia affiliations, associates said.

Authorities did not return the bodies to their relatives but cremated them, they added.

Twenty-six-year-old Htet Myat Thu worked for the Voice of Thanbyuzayat news outlet. He was arrested once before while reporting on protests that followed the 2021 coup but continued his work as a journalist after being released.

Nay Aung, chief editor of The Nation Voice, dismissed any suggestion that either of the reporters was a member of an insurgent group.

"The journalists are just trying to report the right information in a timely way while they're out in the field," he said. "But the junta viewed this as an attack on the military and retaliated against them, step by step."

Pro-junta channels on messaging app Telegram reported that four Kyaikto Revolutionary Force soldiers were killed in a shootout during a raid on a home where rebel soldiers were gathering.

RFA tried to contact Mon state's junta spokesperson Saw Kyi Naing for comment but he did not respond.

According to data from the Independent Myanmar Journalists Association, 176 journalists have been arrested since the 2021 coup. Of these, five have been killed and 52 remain in custody.

Myanmar ranks ninth for number of journalists killed and second for the number of jailed journalists worldwide, according to the 2023 Global Impunity Index released by the Committee to Protect Journalists press freedom group.

Translated by RFA Burmese. Edited by Kiana Duncan and Mike Finn.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia

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UN FEARS REPEAT OF 2017 ATROCITIES AGAINST ROHINGYAS

The United Nations said Friday it fears a repeat of the 2017 atrocities committed against the Rohingya minority in Myanmar, warning a human tragedy was unfolding in Rakhine State.

UN human rights chief Volker Turk voiced grave alarm about the sharply deteriorating situation across Myanmar, particularly in Rakhine where, he said, hundreds of civilians have reportedly been killed while trying to flee fighting.

Clashes have rocked Rakhine since the rebel Arakan Army attacked forces of Myanmar's ruling junta in November, ending a ceasefire that had largely held since a military coup in 2021.

Turk blamed both sides for abuses against the Rohingya including extrajudicial killings, abductions and indiscriminate bombardments of towns.

The AA says it is fighting for more autonomy for the ethnic Rakhine population in the state, which is also home to around 600,000 members of the Rohingya Muslim minority.

Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fled Rakhine in 2017 during a crackdown by the military that is now the subject of a United Nations genocide court case.

"Thousands of Rohingya have been forced to flee on foot, with the Arakan Army herding them repeatedly into locations that offer scant safe haven," Turk said in a statement.

"As the border crossings to Bangladesh remain closed, members of the Rohingya community are

finding themselves trapped between the military and its allies and the Arakan Army, with no path to safety."

Bangladesh is now home to around one million Rohingya refugees.

"This month marks seven years since the military operations which drove 700,000 across the border into Bangladesh. Despite the world saying 'never again,' we are once more witnessing killings, destruction and displacement in Rakhine," said Turk.

In a statement released by his office, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on all parties in the conflict "to end the violence and ensure the protection of civilians."

He also urged the strengthening of "regional protection efforts, to provide access to conflict-affected communities and further support host countries," especially in Bangladesh.

'HUMAN TRAGEDY'

Turk said parties to the armed conflict were denying responsibility for attacks against the Rohingya, which "stretches the bounds of credulity."

The UN Human Rights Office said that according to its information, the military and the Arakan Army have both committed serious human rights violations and abuses against the Rohingya.

These include extrajudicial killings, some involving beheadings; abductions, forced recruitment, indiscriminate bombardments of towns and villages, and arson attacks.

"Both the military and the Arakan Army bear direct responsibility for the human tragedy that is unfolding in Rakhine," said Turk.

"These atrocities demand an unequivocal response: those responsible must be held accountable, and justice must be pursued relentlessly.

"Recurrence of the crimes and horrors of the past must be prevented as a moral duty and a legal necessity."

Turk called on both parties to cease attacks on civilians and urged the ASEAN regional bloc to take all necessary measures to protect the Rohingya.

Guterres voiced hope "for sustainable peace and national reconciliation that are important steps to create conditions conducive to the voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable return of the Rohingya people to Myanmar."



Photo: PNO/PNA Information

PRO-JUNTA ETHNIC ARMY FINISHES TRAINING FOR 10,000 IN SOUTHERN SHAN STATE

More than 10,000 freshly-trained fighters from an ethnic army are on their way to replenish Myanmar's depleted junta forces.

On Wednesday last week, the pro-junta Pa-O National Army, or PNA, completed a military training program for the new recruits in southern Shan state.

The graduation ceremony, held in Naungtayar town, within the Pa-O Self-Administered Zone, was attended by the militia's chief of staff, military regional commanders and officials from the Pa-O National Organization party.

The training was primarily aimed at supporting the military junta, which has suffered numerous battlefield setbacks in Shan state in recent months, according to a political analyst who requested anonymity for security reasons.

"The primary objective is to demonstrate strength and power," the analyst told Radio Free Asia. "This display suggests that they will likely participate in conflicts in the border region, seemingly acting as a proxy for the military council."

Founded in 1976, the Pa-O National Army, or PNA, signed a ceasefire agreement in 1991 with a previous military junta, the State Peace and Development Council.

It later transformed into a state-backed people's militia force and merged with other Pa-O paramilitary groups in 2009. The following year, the area under its control was officially designated as the Pa'O Self-Administered Zone, or Special Region 6.

The Pa-O people, the second largest ethnic group in Shan state, are split between pro- and anti-junta factions.

Earlier this year, a different militia – the Pa-O National Liberation Army, or PNLA – fought several battles against junta troops in southern Shan State and the PNA conducted counterattacks on behalf of the junta during this fighting.

The newly trained 10,000 troops are intended to protect the military junta, PNLA spokesperson Khun Rain Yan told RFA.

RFA attempted to contact Major Than Kywe, the spokesperson of the Pa-O National Organization, to inquire about the new trainees but received no response.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia



CJ feed processing plant in Yangon.
Photo: Supplied

POLITICAL INSTABILITY SINCE COUP PROMPTS FOREIGN INVESTMENT EXIT FROM MYANMAR

Foreign investment in Myanmar has dropped precipitously in the three and a half years since the military seized power from a democratically elected government, according to officials and observers, as companies weigh the risks of operating in a nation engulfed in civil war.

Myanmar's economy has been in freefall since the Feb. 1, 2021, coup, contracting by nearly 20%, according to the World Bank. Its 2024 gross domestic product growth estimates have been halved to 1%, in large part due to widespread conflict and junta mismanagement.

Investors have fled, citing political instability, rising inflation, difficulties with bank transactions, challenges in obtaining raw materials, and insufficient manpower as reasons for scaling back their presence or leaving Myanmar altogether.

According to official statements from Myanmar's Directorate of Investments and Company

Administration, foreign investment reached a mere US\$150 million in the first seven months of 2024.

Comparatively, some US\$2.9 billion in investment flowed into Myanmar during the three years between 2021 and 2024.

These numbers represent a drop in the bucket when measured against US\$3.8 billion in foreign investment in 2020 alone, when the country was governed by former State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian National League for Democracy party.

Singapore's Sembcorp became one of the latest firms to reduce its footprint in Myanmar on Aug. 12, when it announced the temporary closure of its gas-fired power plant in the Mandalay region city of Myingyan, citing safety concerns.

Similarly, on May 28, South Korea's CJ Feed Myanmar announced the suspension of its production

and sales of animal feed at its plant in the largest city Yangon due to the economic crisis.

DUELING EXCHANGE RATES

One Myanmar businessman told RFA Burmese that the junta's control of the exchange rate for the kyat has made it difficult for foreign companies to operate.

"The exchange rate of the dollar is unstable due to inflation," said the businessman who, like others interviewed for this report, requested anonymity for security reasons. "The Central Bank's control of the dollar, with a fixed rate of 2,100 kyats, poses significant challenges for foreign companies."

The junta is increasingly cracking down on black market money changers as they keep desperately needed foreign exchange out of the formal banking system, where people and companies are forced to convert it to kyats at artificially low exchange rates.

In Myanmar's informal banking sector, known as hundi, one U.S. dollar is worth more than 6,000 kyats.

WORSENING CONFLICT

However, the main obstacle to foreign investment is the worsening conflict, according to Aung Thu Nyein, a member of the Institute for Strategy and Policy – Myanmar think tank.

"The current environment in Myanmar is not conducive to smooth business operations," he said. "The primary concern is that investing in Myanmar under the present circumstances entails significant political risk."

Meanwhile, the junta's investment policies are unclear, "making it uncertain with whom one should engage."

Just last month, Thailand-based newspaper The Thaiger reported that Thai companies with investments worth US\$7 billion had withdrawn from Myanmar due to the persistent tensions between the junta and the armed opposition.

And Japan's Nikkei Asia reported last week that numerous businesses in Myanmar have relocated to Thailand due to the conflict.

JUNTA LACKS 'BUSINESS MINDSET'

A senior official from the junta's Ministry of Investment and Foreign Economic Relations, who also declined to be identified, told RFA that "new investment is unlikely."

"Foreign investment is almost non-existent under the present circumstances," he said. "Existing businesses may be transferred, with the likelihood of such transfers depending on the evolving situation."

The official noted that it was increasingly difficult for companies to justify investing in Myanmar when they could do so elsewhere in the region, where the political situation was more stable.

An economic analyst told RFA that the junta lacks a "business-oriented mindset."

"If the economy were managed by a government with a strong understanding of business practices, the country's economic situation would likely improve," he said.

Following the coup in 2021, a majority of Western companies withdrew from Myanmar.

According to a report released by ISP-Myanmar at the end of 2022, out of 52 countries with companies that had regularly done business in Myanmar, 39 had ceased their investments.

The primary foreign investors in Myanmar now are companies based in Singapore, China, and Thailand.

Among the 12 foreign investment sectors, energy, natural gas, and oil manufacturing attract the most investment.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia



Gen Z protestors in front of a defaced image of ousted leader Sheikh Hasina. Photo: AFP

HAS 'GEN Z' SAVED BANGLADESH'S DEMOCRACY?

NICHOLAS NUGENT

August has long been a significant month in South Asia. It saw an end to colonial rule in British India when independent India and Pakistan were born in 1947. Bangladesh had to wait another 24 years to gain its own independence from Pakistan. August was also the month in 1975 when the country's founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and most of his family were assassinated in an army coup d'état in Dhaka.

This August saw Sheikh Mujib's daughter, prime minister Sheikh Hasina, flee the country following a violent police crackdown against street protests brought her rule to an end. She fled to India accompanied by her sister, Rehana, the only other family member to survive the 1975 assassination.

I came to know Sheikh Hasina during the 1980s when she, as leader of the Awami League, campaigned vigorously for elections to restore civilian government after a long period of martial law. I was reporting from Bangladesh for the BBC whose Bengali (Bangla) radio

service was widely followed and respected across the country. I also interviewed her main political opponent, Begum Khaleda Zia. Despite being bitter political rivals, the two ladies collaborated together in campaigning for the restoration of democracy.

And I interviewed the country's military president, General Ershad. All three leaders realised the power of the media in influencing the people of Bangladesh.

Sheikh Hasina was always obliging and spoke fluent English having already spent years in political exile in India. She seemed well placed to become the country's next leader. Her credentials as daughter of the country's founding father, or Bangabandhu, stood her in good stead and the manner in which her parents and siblings were murdered carried a strong sympathy factor.

She was well educated, had been active in student politics and while in exile in India had been elected as

leader of the Awami League. Her husband M. A. Wazed Miah was a respected nuclear physicist. I was impressed by her commitment to democracy, seemingly the only path to end military rule.

Yet when elections eventually took place in 1991, Sheikh Hasina's Awami League was trounced by her main political rival Begum Khaleda Zia, the widow of President Ziaur Rahman who ruled the country from 1977 until he was assassinated in 1981. Just as Sheikh Hasina had inherited her father's leadership of the Awami League (AL), so Begum Zia succeeded her husband at the helm of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) to become Bangladesh's first female prime minister.

Sheikh Hasina eventually won the 1996 election to become the second female prime minister. She lost a subsequent election but was returned to power in 2008 after a period as leader of the parliamentary opposition. During a total of twenty years in office she turned the country's economy around, gaining rapid economic growth, reducing the previously high level of poverty, and bringing Bangladesh's GDP per capita – a measure of the country's wealth – level with that of India.

Sheikh Hasina clamped down on the trafficking in drugs across the border from Myanmar, signed an accord to end a long-standing rebellion in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and was praised internationally for allowing three quarters of a million Rohingya refugees fleeing alleged genocide in Myanmar to settle in the southern province around Cox's Bazaar in 2017.

Against these achievements, the country's foreign debt increased sharply, there were constant allegations of corruption and claims that the prime minister had politicised the police and judiciary as part of on-going vengeance against the Bangladesh National Party and its leader, whom she jailed.

Early this year the Awami League won a controversial general election which was boycotted by the BNP amid claims that Sheikh Hasina had abandoned democracy and made the country an autocracy.

The final straw was when her attempt to reserve a large quota of jobs for descendants of 1971-era 'freedom fighters' backfired and students confronted by a high national level of unemployment came onto

the streets of the capital, Dhaka, to protest. Realising she was losing the battle of public opinion, Sheikh Hasina and her sister fled to India. Street billboard pictures of both her and their father were painted over by triumphant protestors.

One victim of Sheikh Hasina's wrath was Bangladesh's celebrated Nobel Peace laureate Muhammad Yunus. So it is ironic that within three days of Sheikh Hasina's flight Mr Yunus was sworn in as interim prime minister after returning from medical treatment abroad and having corruption charges brought against him by the previous government cancelled.

Mr Yunus will rule until fresh elections are held which, according to the country's constitution, should be within 90 days. Already there are calls for elections to be delayed to allow both main political parties to reform themselves under new leadership. Now aged 84, Mr Yunus may not want to preside for long. A distinction of his long life is that he has been a citizen of (British-ruled) India, then of Pakistan and finally of Bangladesh without relocating from Bengal.

In 2007 Mr Yunus toyed with the idea of creating a new political party – one of the factors that angered Sheikh Hasina – but did not proceed with the idea. Until this month he had never held a role in government. As an economist and banker he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for pioneering micro-finance, supporting small-scale village entrepreneurs through his Grameen Bank.

Bangladesh's transition from Sheikh Hasina's rule to that of one of her key adversaries is remarkable in many respects. It happened swiftly with just a three day 'interregnum' between Sheikh Hasina's flight on 5 August to the swearing in of Muhammad Yunus on 8 August, during which the army held the reins of power.

Secondly, it was the student's choice that the widely respected figure of Mr Yunus take over, a choice endorsed by the armed forces and enacted by the country's president who administered the oath of office, though the official title Chief Adviser signifies that he leads an interim administration.

Most remarkable of all is that the country's army showed no interest in holding power itself. It was not

the generals who brought Sheikh Hasina down but, in the words of a graffiti slogan seen in Dhaka, 'Gen Z', a reference to the generation born around the turn of the millennium.

This is very different from the mood of the 1970s and 1980s when the army was all too ready to seize and hold power when it judged an elected government had failed. This puts Bangladesh on a higher plain democratically than both Pakistan and Thailand where, despite the holding of elections, armies still wield ultimate power, and way above Myanmar where, at least nominally, the army remains in control.

It was a speedy and relatively trouble-free transition though key questions remain unresolved. How much can the Chief Adviser achieve before he is required to call elections – or will some mechanism be found to enable him to stay in office for longer? As regards the army, will they continue to take a back seat to the incumbent even if he fails to call an election within the prescribed period? At present it remains unclear whether the army takes orders from the Chief Adviser, or vice versa.

Mr Yunus moved fast to appoint a new chief justice after the judge appointed by Sheikh Hasina resigned, as well as a central bank governor. He is understood to be reviewing the positions of university vice chancellors. As he moves to restore law and order to a country wracked by violence in which at least 400 people died an early priority will be reform of the police and judicial system.

There is unlikely to be any significant change in foreign policy during the interim period though the close relationship Bangladesh enjoyed with India's prime minister Narendra Modi under Sheikh Hasina cannot be taken for granted under her successor.

Mr Yunus was a strong critic of Myanmar's rulers during the Rohingya crisis and is not expected to call for the million or so refugees to be resettled back in Myanmar's Rakhine state – the policy of the previous government – while the neighbouring country remains under military rule.

*Nicholas Nugent reported from Bangladesh and Myanmar for the BBC World Service. His book *The Spice Ports: Mapping the Origins of Global Sea Trade* will be published in the UK and US next month (September 2024).*



Protestors paint on a wall in Dhaka.
Photo: AFP



Interim leader Mohammad Yunus.
Photo: AFP

BANGLADESH LEADER YUNUS AND USAID CHIEF DISCUSS ASSISTANCE

Newly appointed Bangladeshi leader Muhammad Yunus on Wednesday last week spoke with the head of the United States's international aid program, according to a US statement, his highest-level call with a US official since taking office.

Yunus and USAID Administrator Samantha Power discussed ways in which the US agency "might best support the interim government" on human rights, governance and economic issues, USAID spokesperson Shejal Pulivarti said in a statement.

Yunus, 84, returned from Europe this month to take the reins of the government after a student-led revolution ousted his predecessor Sheikh Hasina, who fled the country after 15 years of iron-fisted rule.

He took office as "chief adviser" to a caretaker administration -- all fellow civilians aside from two retired generals -- and has said he wants to hold elections "within a few months."

On Sunday, Yunus vowed to continue two policies of major international concern: support for Bangladesh's immense population of Rohingya refugees, and the resumption of normality for the country's linchpin textile industry.

The issue of the country's one-million-plus Rohingya refugees was discussed in the call with USAID Administrator Power, according to the US statement.

"Administrator Power also emphasized the need to protect vulnerable refugees and enable the work of humanitarian partners providing critical support," Pulivarti said.

Most of the refugees fled neighbouring Myanmar in 2017 after a military crackdown that is now the subject of a genocide investigation by a United Nations court.

On Sunday, Yunus said his government would "continue to support" the refugees and called for more international support.

"We need the sustained efforts of the international community for Rohingya humanitarian operations and their eventual repatriation to their homeland, Myanmar, with safety, dignity and full rights," he added.

The United States and European Union, among others, had earlier welcomed the establishment of the new interim government in Bangladesh.

AFP



Indian PM Narendra Modi, left, with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky, on a visit to Ukraine. Photo: AFP

MODI SAYS 'FIRMLY FOR PEACE' ON HISTORIC UKRAINE VISIT

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi used his first visit to Kyiv on Friday to again call for a diplomatic solution to more than two years of war with Russia, saying he stood "firmly for peace" in talks with President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Modi was in Kyiv just over a month after angering Ukraine by hugging Russian President Vladimir Putin during a meeting in Moscow.

His visit also came as Kyiv's forces are mounting a major incursion into Russia's Kursk region, while Moscow's army is advancing in eastern Ukraine.

Arriving for talks on Friday in the first visit to Ukraine by an Indian prime minister, he embraced Zelensky and the pair held a minute of silence at a memorial commemorating children killed in Russia's invasion.

New Delhi, which has avoided explicit condemnation of Moscow's invasion, has cast itself as a possible peacemaker between the warring neighbours.

"We were not neutral from day one, we have taken a side, and we stand firmly for peace," he told Zelensky.

He earlier said that "no problem should be solved on the battlefield."

The Indian leader pledged humanitarian support for Kyiv, saying: "Whatever help is required from a humanitarian standpoint, India will always stand with you."

Zelensky called Modi's visit a "historic moment"

But neither side showed signs of a breakthrough, with India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar later saying it was "clearly a complex issue" and that India believes Moscow should be involved if peace efforts were to progress.

Later in his evening address to the country, Zelensky said it is "important for us that India remains committed

to international law and supports our sovereignty and territorial integrity," without saying if he received such guarantees from Modi.

'TRULY HEARTBREAKING'

In Washington, US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters that Modi's visit could be "helpful" if it works toward "getting us to an end to the conflict that comports with President Zelensky's vision for a just peace".

Later, US President Joe Biden said in a statement that he had spoken to Zelensky on Friday and announced a new package of military assistance, including air-defence missiles and counter-drone equipment.

Zelensky said he welcomed the package during the call, writing on X, formerly Twitter, that Ukraine "urgently" needed the new weapons.

As Modi arrived in Kyiv, Ukraine said Russian strikes had killed eight civilians in several regions.

Modi began his visit by accompanying Zelensky to an exhibit commemorating children killed in the war.

"I realised that the first casualty of war is in fact innocent children," Modi said. "And that is truly heartbreaking."

He was criticised in July for hugging Putin in Moscow hours after a Russian strike on a Kyiv children's hospital.

It is not yet known how effective Modi could be as a deal-maker.

Jaishankar said the pair held "very open and in many ways constructive talks" and that Modi had invited Zelensky to India.

He said New Delhi is willing to do "whatever we can because we think that the continuation of this conflict is terrible for Ukraine and the world."

India has not joined UN sanctions over the invasion and is a major buyer of Russian oil.

Jaishankar said it was not in line with the country's "political-diplomatic history" to impose sanctions on countries.

INDIAN DIPLOMACY

But the Ukraine invasion has also put some strain on relations between India and Russia.

In the first year of the invasion in 2022, Putin publicly acknowledged that Modi had "concerns" over Moscow's actions in Ukraine.

India has also been angry at Moscow over reports of several Indian citizens dying in Ukraine after being enlisted with Russian forces.

Ukraine has said one of the aims of launching its surprise offensive into the Kursk region on August 6 was to force Moscow into "fair" negotiations.

While there was no sign of any serious talks to end the war before then, Russia has said the counter-offensive now makes them impossible.

Putin earlier this year said Kyiv would have to abandon territory in four of its regions which Moscow claims to have annexed as a precondition to opening talks -- a hardline demand that drew scorn in Kyiv and the West.

Zelensky has also ruled out direct negotiations with Putin.

Even as Moscow scrambles to fight off the Ukrainian attack into its western Kursk region, its forces are still advancing in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine, capturing several towns and villages in recent days.

AFP

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BEYOND THE HEADLINES

“I haven’t been to any war areas before this,” Helene Buchholz, a radio journalist for the German Broadcasting Network who traveled to Myanmar to document how the Burmese youth has been faring in its ongoing resistance to the military tells Insight Myanmar in a podcast. “We thought that showing what was happening in Myanmar to our young German audience was an important story, [as they] are currently discussing the idea of conscription because of the war in Ukraine, so we thought that presenting the case of Myanmar would be interesting to them. Although the discussion in Germany is different to what young people are experiencing in Myanmar, this issue makes possible to have a point of identification. That is why we wanted to tell the story from the perspective of young people.”

Before the coup, Buchholz’s knowledge of Myanmar came mainly through her personal engagement with garment workers unions around the world. “In my private life, not my journalist life, I have these connections to the unions from Myanmar and we already had those contacts before the coup,” she explains. “And when the coup happened and they had to go underground or they were becoming illegal, they were very invested in the city and movement. We were already supporting them.”

Like many journalists who have been reporting on Myanmar, Buchholz believes that the country’s struggle has not been getting the attention that it should from the international media, including her own country’s. She explains that in the German media, areas of conflict like Ukraine and the Middle East are heavily reported on; the former is geographically close to Germany, and there is a historical link with the latter. For this reason, Buchholz says that many Germans probably do not understand much about the Myanmar crisis, and that when the local news does cover a story, the scope and depth of the conflict is not fully conveyed.

This is why Buchholz wanted to personally visit, to better understand what was really happening. But because of her lack of experience in war zones, she had to first undertake a “hostile environment awareness” training, where she learned basic survival strategies. This included how to deal with fires and change tires, and she even participated in a hostage situation role play. “Why am I doing this?!”

“What do I do it for?,” she kept asking herself through this rigorous course. Her answer was always the same, though: while there are reports in Germany on the Myanmar conflict, they do not really communicate how critical the situation has become. “Myanmar stands out as having possibly the best shot of not only liberating itself from military dictatorship, [but] establishing a lasting democratic system,” she says. “It just boggles my mind how we do not have more [German] people who are deeply invested in this! It is such an incredible story!”

CATCH THE PODCAST

Catch the full Insight Myanmar story and podcast here:

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2024/8/1/episode-260-beyond-the-headlines>

MILITARY PANEL FORMED TO ARM CIVILIANS AS MYANMAR JUNTA STRUGGLES

The military junta in Myanmar, in mid-August, formed a new committee to create and support armed civilian groups across the country, according to local news reports citing a document signed by junta Secretary General Aung Lin Dwe and leaked on Facebook.

This move comes as the ruling junta faces increasing pressure from resistance forces,

A high-level committee named the People's Security and Counter-Terrorism Central Committee has been tasked with establishing local security units in villages and urban neighborhoods. These groups will receive weapons, supplies, and combat training from the military.

The plan, revealed in an internal document, outlines a broad strategy to bolster the regime's defenses. It includes provisions for logistical support, medical care, and small financial compensation for civilian recruits who participate in military operations.

This development follows a string of setbacks for the junta forces, including the loss of a key military outpost in the country's north. It also comes on the heels of a controversial conscription law enacted earlier this year.

Political analysts view this as a sign of the junta's weakening position.

As the conflict intensifies, concerns grow about the implications of arming civilian populations in an already volatile situation.



JUNTA-LED COMMITTEE MEETS WITH POLITICAL PARTIES

In a highly controversial meeting on August 21, the National Solidarity and Peacemaking Coordination Committee (NSPCC), a body established by Myanmar's military junta, convened with a select group of political parties at the National Solidarity and Peacemaking Center in Nay Pyi Taw, according to the junta-controlled newspaper The Global New Light of Myanmar.

The meeting, chaired by the junta's Union Minister for Border Affairs Lt-Gen Tun Tun Naung, purportedly aimed to discuss amendments to the 2008 Constitution.

However, critics have argued that this is merely a facade to legitimize the junta's rule following the February 2021 coup.

Dr. Aye Maung, leader of the Rakhine Party, was present as the head of the political parties' working group.

Absent from the meeting were representatives from the National League for Democracy (NLD), which was forcibly dissolved by the junta in 2023, as well as numerous ethnic political parties that have refused to recognize the military regime.

Human rights organizations have condemned the exclusion of these voices as a clear indication of the junta's unwillingness to engage in genuine dialogue.

MYANMAR FANS' BEHAVIOR RAISES CONCERNS AMIDST GROWING PARTICIPATION IN ONE FRIDAY FIGHT

Five Myanmar boxers participated in One Friday Fight (76) Muay Thai competition held in Bangkok, on August 23.

Among the Myanmar fighters, Thant Zin and Eh Mwi secured victories by knockout, while Thway Lin Htet won on points against his Thai opponent. However, Sulaiman (also known as Tun Min Naing) and Sa Soe Thiha suffered defeats, both losing by knockout.

This increased participation of Myanmar fighters has led to a surge in viewership among Myanmar fans, according to a statement from the Soe Nay Thit sports Facebook page.

However, this rise in engagement has been accompanied by a troubling trend. The Facebook page reported a noticeable increase in abusive comments from Myanmar fans, describing the situation as "embarrassing" and potentially damaging to the country's reputation on the international stage.

Of particular concern is the treatment of muslim fighter Suleiman, who competes under the muslim name rather than his Myanmar name Tun Min Naing. The sports page questioned the rationale behind the insults directed at Suleiman, advocating for respect towards the fighter's personal choice of ring name.

"If you don't like his fighting style, just don't support him," the sports page advised, emphasizing that there's no justification for insulting athletes regardless of their chosen names.

The statement called for better behavior from Myanmar fans, especially in international forums. It highlighted the importance of maintaining individual standards and beliefs, even in the face of the country's current political challenges.

Even under that post, a Facebook user who appears to have anti-Muslim tendencies, wrote, "We don't even consider him (Suleiman) as a Burmese. In reality, he's not a Burmese, so there's no reason to support him."

Another Facebook user commented, "Last night was really bad. I saw so many racist comments. It's really shameful!"



Photo: Tun Min Naing

MYANMAR'S SHADOW NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT COMMEMORATES 7TH ANNIVERSARY OF ROHINGYA ATROCITIES

On August 25, 2024, Myanmar's opposition National Unity Government (NUG) issued a statement marking the seventh anniversary of the atrocities committed against the Rohingya people in 2017.

The statement, published on the NUG's official Facebook page, reaffirms the shadow government's commitment to justice and equality for all ethnic groups in Myanmar.

The NUG, which opposes the current military junta, highlighted the long-standing issues of fascist ideologies, racial supremacy, and systematic discrimination that have plagued Myanmar for decades. These factors, according to the statement, have led to human rights violations affecting all ethnic groups in the country, including the Rohingya.

In its statement, the NUG emphasized the ongoing "Spring Revolution," which aims to dismantle the military dictatorship and establish a federal democracy. The resistance movement is described as a fight against injustice, inequality, and ethnic and religious discrimination.

The statement also acknowledged and honored the Rohingya people participating in the revolution alongside other ethnic groups across Myanmar. However, the NUG warned of the current risks faced by the Rohingya and other vulnerable populations, including forced recruitment by the weakened military junta and the use of civilians as human shields.

Looking to the future, the NUG pledged to pursue justice for the atrocities suffered by the people once the revolution succeeds and a transition period is reached. The NUG envisions a new political system based on justice and fairness, which it claims is the long-held aspiration of Myanmar's people.

The statement concluded with a call for unity among all citizens, regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds, to work together towards achieving this goal.

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