

ON THE GROUND IN MYANMAR

mizzima WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight



WARM WELCOME

TNLA fighters take Mogoke town in Mandalay region

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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.

PRAY FOR MYANMAR'S KIDS

A combination of factors are making it hard to be a child in modern-day, junta-ruled Myanmar. Apart from the indiscriminate attacks on villages and schools in the war zones, that have led to the death and injury of children, families forced to flee their homes are struggling to protect and support their children in makeshift shelters or exposed taking refuge in forests. A sizeable percentage of the internally displaced people or IDPs are children.

Even in areas of the country that see little or no military action, normal life, including the opportunity to go to school, has been disrupted for many. Many poor families face economic pressure and feel forced to put their children to work, cutting short any opportunity to get a proper education. This was a problem even before the 2021 military coup, but the situation is worse now.

The junta's military draft has exacerbated a shortage of workers as young people flee to the hills or Thailand. This has seen a rise in the number of children forced to work since the draft was announced.

This growth in child labour is an underreported impact of the junta's People's Military Service Law, enacted in February as part of a bid to shore up its forces amid heavy losses to various ethnic armies and rebel militias since the coup.

Under the law, men between the ages of 18 and 35 and women between 18 and 27 can be drafted to serve in the armed forces for two years.

Various businesses have lost staff or are unable to fill up their quotas and there are menial jobs that children as young as ten are able to carry out. More children can be found working on the streets, in small businesses, and restaurants as the labour shortage worsens.

There have long been children under the age of 18 working in various roles in Myanmar, arguably the result of decades of economic mismanagement by a succession of military regimes. The issue was raised by labour organizations and NGOs, concerned about the children's well-being.

Now the situation is worse and needs attention. However, until the junta takes the pressure off its workforce and the economy improves substantially, kids will lose out on education and will suffer, forced to grow up early.

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mizzima WEEKLY

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Cover photo taken by Mai A. Hein on Facebook of Mogoke residents welcoming TNLA fighters who have ousted the junta forces from their town.





TNLA convoy drives through Mogoke.
Photo: Mai A. Hein/Facebook

WARM WELCOME

TNLA FIGHTERS TAKE MOGOKE TOWN IN MANDALAY REGION

Crowds of residents lined the streets of Mogoke town in Mandalay region last week to welcome a column of Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) fighters as they drove in during a "victory run".

The TNLA announced that it took control of the ruby-mining town of Mogoke in northern Mandalay Region on 24 July.

The TNLA said that along with other defence forces it had been attacking junta forces in Mogoke Township for nearly a month and there had been fierce fighting. They took control of the last junta military camp in the town at about 5:00 pm on 24 July 2024.

Later that evening the TNLA and joint coalition forces entered the town and were received by happy residents who greeted them with Eugenia leaves, according to photos and videos of TNLA members' and residents' social media feeds.

Mogoke Town is divided into two halves, east and west Mogoke, that are about seven miles apart. The TNLA had already previously taken western Mogoke Town on 2 July before finally gaining control of Eastern Mogoke Town on 24 July.

During the nearly month long fighting to take Mogoke Town the junta launched 30 airstrikes, 78 artillery shellings and 18 rocket strikes on the town. These destroyed four monasteries and 29 houses. A total of 14 men, eight women, and nine children were killed, and another 59 people were injured during these attacks and the fighting for Mogoke Town.

The TNLA said that more than 30 junta soldiers and over 200 various weapons were seized during the fighting for the town.

The junta has not yet released any information about what has happened in Mogoke Town.

Mogoke was the second town captured by the TNLA as part of Operation 1027 Part 2, which saw the resumption of the Operation 1027 offensive by the Three Brotherhood Alliance on 25 June 2024, following the breakdown of a Chinese brokered ceasefire in northern Shan State. Previously, on 10 July, the TNLA seized Nawngkhio (Naungcho) Town in northern Shan State.

Mogoke was one more junta domino to fall in Myanmar's north bordering China. The Chinese government has been seeking to calm the situation through talks and efforts to bring in ceasefires. The Three Brotherhood Alliance appears to have complied, but only temporarily. China is concerned about threats to its investments, citizens and border trade, with the underlying worry about the China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The CMEC provides a "back door" for China in terms of fuel supplies, trade and communications - connecting Yunnan province with the Indian Ocean and the Rakhine State-based deep-sea port of Kyaukphyu.

Analysts recognize a shift in Chinese diplomacy as Beijing engages more with ethnic armed organizations in Myanmar as the Myanmar military junta continues to lose military positions in the country.



Happy residents greet TNLA with Eugenia leaves.
Photo: Mai A. Hein/Facebook



Newly conscripted soldiers are being killed on the frontlines. Photo: AFP

BODY PARTS OF YOUNG CONSCRIPTS RETURNED BY MYANMAR JUNTA TO THEIR FAMILIES: REPORT

The horrific results of forced military conscription in Myanmar are gradually becoming apparent as fear and death stalk the battlefield frontlines.

Inexperienced conscripts are being slaughtered and a number are deserting their posts.

On July 18, six conscripted soldiers from batch No. 1 were arrested at the Sathwar bridge checkpoint in Gwa township in Rakhine State after fleeing their mother unit stationed at Zalun village. This unit had recently retreated from the battle in Thandwe against the Arakan Army (AA).

Sources close to army families report a growing trend of newly recruited soldiers deserting their columns. Due to their lack of experience, these conscripted soldiers are suffering high casualties in the ongoing battle in Ngapali, a famous beach resort-turned battleground.

In Laymyatna township, Ayeyarwady Region, a village administrator demanded a bribe of five million kyats from the family of a woman who received a call-up letter for military service. Local authorities in this township are reportedly collecting young women aged 17 to 28 for Batch No. 3 of conscription, despite no official announcement from higher authorities about recruiting women.

These local authorities are using the threat of conscription to extort money from ordinary people from rural areas.

As Batch No. 2 of conscripted trainees nears the end of their training, families are increasingly worried about their posting, especially given the dire news from the frontlines involving Batch No. 1 soldiers. Sources close to the victims reported that authorities are compensating the families of fallen conscripted soldiers with two million kyat. However, due to the inability to return the bodies, families are only receiving body parts such as hair and nails.



Police in a village in Rakhine State.
Photo: AFP

ARAKAN ARMY POISED TO TAKE RAKHINE MILITARY HEADQUARTERS

In a significant escalation of the conflict in Rakhine State, the Arakan Army (AA) has seized Thandwe town, prompting the State Administration Council (SAC) troops to prepare a defensive operation by taking positions in civilian wards in Taungok town, where the junta's No. (5) Military Operation Command headquarters is located. Local media reports that the AA has surrounded the town and issued a statement claiming they have cut off the junta military headquarters, including the No. (5) Military Operation Command.

On July 15, the AA captured Thandwe prison, seizing 50 junta troops and policemen. The AA rescued over 100 prisoners, including both criminals and political detainees.

On July 17, a policeman, named Kyaw Nu, from the Made Island police station, where Chinese projects are located, infiltrated the station's arsenal, taking 10 assault rifles and over 3,000 bullets before fleeing. Local media suggest that the policeman might have contacted the AA, a hypothesis popular among locals. As a result, the remaining policemen were detained by SAC authorities and sent to Kyaukphyu police station.

Meanwhile, junta troops in Gwa township have been extorting large sums of money from internally displaced persons (IDPs) trying to escape Rakhine State and head to Yangon. Young men, in particular, face strict checks at all checkpoints and are asked for bribes despite carrying certificates from relevant SAC departments.

Tragically, artillery shelling from the Kwinwine navy base resulted in the deaths of six villagers, including children and women. Four victims were from Ahbe village, while the other two were seeking shelter in Ahbe village from Gyaketaw village. The navy base forces are reportedly sabotaging bridges on the road leading to it in preparation for defense.

According to an AA statement, seven ethnic Rakhine people were killed by Rohingya militia armed by the junta. On July 18, these seven villagers left their IDP camp to find food in the jungle and were captured by the militia.

Despite the junta raising defensive positions, the AA has launched offensives targeting the Maung Shwelay and Kwinwine navy bases, aiming to control the entire Thandwe area. Due to the intensified battle, ten junta troops, led by a sergeant, deserted their posts, taking their arms with them. In response, warships from the Ayeyarwady Navy headquarters and Gwa Navy base have been dispatched to the Maung Shwelay Navy base. A local source close to the navy mentioned that the junta is also deploying inexperienced navy soldiers in the conflict.

OPERATION 1027 SECOND WAVE INTENSIFIES, DESPITE CEASEFIRE

Responding to demands from the Chinese government, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) announced a cessation of their offensive attacks from July 19 to July 31. Despite this ceasefire, the MNDAA instructed its forces to remain on standby for potential offensives and airstrikes from the military junta.

On July 21, the MNDAA announced that 317 junta soldiers, including a regiment commander, surrendered to them in Lashio. By the morning of July 23, the MNDAA had captured two SAC regiments, No. 41 and No. 68, and on the evening of July 24, they successfully seized the No. 507 Light Infantry Battalion.

As the battle to capture Lashio intensified, the new commander of the Northeast Military Command has been avoiding his duties, leaving the vice commander to manage the situation. Reports indicate that the new commander is using the junta forces, who are supposed to resist the MNDAA offensive, to shield himself. A source to the Northeast Military Command remarked that the headquarters might soon fall to the MNDAA due to growing resentment among the junta troops.

In a separate development, during the battle to seize Singu, the Mandalay People's Defense Force (Mandalay-PDF) captured 26 soldiers, including a battalion commander and six other officials. Two police officials and several pro-junta militias were also taken into custody.

In a recent statement, the Ta'ang National Liberation

Army (TNLA) reported that 109 civilians were killed and 136 injured during 28 days of fighting in northern Shan State, from June 25 to July 22. The TNLA attributed the high number of civilian casualties to targeted attacks by the junta, including airstrikes and shelling. On the night of July 22, an airstrike by the junta on Laukkai town resulted in the death of two civilians and injuries to three others.

The towns most affected by civilian casualties include Lashio, Kyaukme, Naungkhio, Mogoke, and Mungmit. In one significant incident in Kyaukme township, junta troops at a checkpoint opened fire on four civilians riding motorcycles, causing further civilian deaths and injuries.

Mogoke is reported to have fallen to the TNLA (see Cover Story).

YANGON TO SEE WORSENING POWER CUTS

Power cuts in Myanmar are going to get much worse, especially in Yangon, because most of the electricity there comes from power plants supplied by Yadana gas, reports Guillaume de Langre in The Diplomat 25 July.

The power supply to Yangon has already dropped by a third since 2020, and industrial activity has had to be curtailed. Unless the State Administration Council (SAC) can import liquefied natural gas, a solution made much harder by the depreciation of the currency, the power supply is going to keep getting worse.

TOP MIZZIMA BURMESE VIDEOS

Please see the most popular Mizzima Burmese videos of the week.

A conversation with Dr. Teza San who protested again in the center of Mandalay

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPMsfugCl3M>

How far have the PDFs traveled home?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXeMtBf5Z34>

Shan-Man campaign and the way home of the Man (Mandalay PDFs)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5q2KDhMJGI>

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

မန္တလေးမြို့လယ်မှာ တကျော့ပြန် ဆန္ဒပြခဲ့တဲ့ ဒေါက်တာတေဇဆန်းနှင့် စကားစမြည်



Myanmar Permanent Secretary of Foreign Affairs Aung Kyaw Moe attends the ASEAN meeting in Laos. Photo: AFP

INDONESIA AND AUSTRALIA FMS SLAM MYANMAR JUNTA SHUNNING OF PEACE PLAN

Indonesia's foreign minister on Thursday slammed the Myanmar junta's unwillingness to engage with a regional peace plan to resolve the crisis sparked by its 2021 coup.

Retno Marsudi made the remarks after meeting her Singaporean counterpart on the sidelines of an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) foreign ministers meeting in Laos capital Vientiane.

Weeks after it seized power, the junta agreed to a five-point peace plan with ASEAN that it has since ignored as it wages a crackdown on dissent and battles armed opposition to its rule.

"We shared the same view on the lack of commitment of Myanmar military junta to implement the 5PC (five point consensus)," Marsudi wrote on her X account.

Both Singapore and Indonesia have been critical of the junta's power grab, which has divided the 10-member ASEAN bloc.

Australia also spoke out on the issue at the forum.

Australia's foreign minister Penny Wong on Saturday called on Myanmar's junta to "take a different path" from its bloody crackdown on dissent, saying the situation in the war-torn country is "not sustainable".

"Myanmar is deeply concerning, we see it in the economy, instability, insecurity, deaths," Wong told journalists at a press conference. "The message I want to send to the military regime is 'this is not sustainable for you and your people'. We urge them to take a different path and reflect the five-point consensus."

ASEAN, of which Myanmar is a member, has led diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis but has made little progress.

The junta has been barred from high-level ASEAN meetings.

Previously it had refused to send "non-political representatives" to attend but two senior bureaucrats are representing Myanmar at the talks in Vientiane.

The military's readiness to re-engage diplomatically was a sign of its "weakened position", a Southeast Asian diplomat told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Myanmar's generals have yet to make any meaningful counterattack following an offensive by ethnic armed groups in October that seized swaths of territory along the border with China.

The losses triggered rare public criticism of its top leadership.

Foreign ministers were struggling to agree on a common position on Myanmar for the meeting's communique, a diplomatic source told AFP.

"Myanmar is not resolved yet but we're almost there," the source said, requesting anonymity to talk to the media.

A draft ASEAN communique seen by AFP said ministers "strongly condemned" the continued violence.

The crisis has divided the bloc, with Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines calling for tougher action against the junta.

Thailand has held its own bilateral talks with the generals as well as detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

AFP



REGIONAL SECURITY CHIEFS IN MYANMAR FOR TALKS: STATE MEDIA

National security chiefs from six South and Southeast Asian countries arrived in Myanmar for regional talks, state media reported on Friday last week, in a rare visit for the isolated and embattled junta.

National security chiefs from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Thailand and Sri Lanka arrived on Thursday, the Global New Light of Myanmar reported.

The six countries, plus Myanmar, make up the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) group, loosely focused on trade.

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing met BIMSTEC officials ahead of the talks which begin Friday.

They discussed “peace and stability... cooperation among member states in drug eradication, combatting terrorism, anti-human trafficking,” the newspaper said.

AFP has contacted the embassies of the six countries for comment.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the military seized power in 2021 and launched a sweeping crackdown on dissent.

It is now battling established ethnic minority armed groups and newer “People’s Defence Forces” that are fighting its rule, and together have seized swathes of territory.

Rights groups accuse the military of massive human rights abuses as it struggles to crush its opponents.

Bangladesh, India and Thailand all share borders with Myanmar, across which thousands have fled to escape the conflict.

Most western nations have not replaced departing ambassadors to the country to avoid having to present credentials to the junta chief.

The United Nations has not accepted the junta’s choice of ambassador to the world body, keeping in place the representative who served during the civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi.

The junta is also barred from attending high-level meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations bloc.

AFP



Chin fighters. Photo: Supplied

CHINLAND GOVERNMENT CALLS ON AA TO STOP INTERFERING IN CHIN AFFAIRS

The Chinland Council formed Chinland Government has issued a statement demanding that the Arakan Army (AA), immediately stops interfering in the political and military affairs of the Chin people and Chin State.

The AA is allied with the Chin Brotherhood defence force. Recently there has been tension between the the Chinland Council and the Chin Brotherhood, to the extent that in Matupi Township, Chin State, they started fighting each other rather than the junta, between 18 and 24 June.

The two groups fought each other over who should be allowed to attack and take over the junta IB 140 bases on Matupi Hill in Matupi Township, which was eventually taken over by the Chin Brotherhood.

There has been tension and fighting between forces allied with the Chinland Council and Chin Brotherhood. in the townships of Kanpetlet, Lailenpi, Mindat, and areas around Matupi Township in Chin State, some of which is still ongoing.

The Chin Brotherhood along with the AA have taken control of the townships of Matupi and Paletwa

and Kyin Dwe Town in Kanpetlet Township.

The Chinland Government statement said that "The current conflict among Chin ethnic groups is unfortunate" and accused the AA of meddling in Chin State's internal matters while the Chinland Government is already engaged in combat against the Military Council, the common enemy.

It described the current situation in Chin State as one of the worst that the state has faced and urged the AA to respect the Chin

people's aspirations for self-determination and national equality.

Whilst advocating for the rights of all ethnic groups to self-determination, the Chinland Government statement also expressed support for the Rakhine people's revolution and commended the AA for capturing many towns from the junta in Rakhine State.

AA spokesperson Khaing Thukha responded to the statement saying: "As the ULA/AA [United League of Arakan/Arakan Army], we refrain from interfering in the political affairs of the Chin people or Chin State. We support others in their fight against the Military Council, collaborating with allies across the country to end the military dictatorship."

Also in its statement the Chinland Government emphasised its commitment to Chin State unity and said that it opposed any actions that might undermine Chin State unity and that its forces had not initiated any attacks on the Chin Brotherhood.

It also said that the Chinland Government is prepared to ally with any group, ethnicity or government that shares its goal of eliminating the junta, including seeking assistance from international governments and organisations, such as the United Nations.

The Chinland Council formed the Chinland Government which includes representatives from the Chin National Front (CNF), the Chin Hluttaw (parliament), and various township and regional groups, with the goal of establishing a federal democratic union, ensuring national equality and self-determination for all ethnic groups.



Photo: AFP

EIGHT MYANMAR BANKS AUTHORISED TO OPERATE RUPEE-KYAT TRADE SETTLEMENT MECHANISM

Eight Myanmar banks were authorised by the Indian Central Bank, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), to operate a rupee-kyat trade settlement mechanism on 21 July 2024.

The mechanism will simplify trade between the two countries by eliminating the need for multiple currency conversions.

This means that importers and exporters from both countries will no longer have to take and make payments in US Dollars (USD) and convert their local currency to and from USD. Instead, payments made at the authorised banks can be directly exchanged between Myanmar Kyats and Indian Rupees.

As well as authorising eight Myanmar banks the RBI also previously authorised India's Punjab National Bank (PNB) to operate the rupee-kyat trade settlement mechanism.

All the authorised banks must open a Special Rupee Vostro Account (SRVA) which allows for settlement between banks in either kyats or rupees.

The first transaction using this settlement mechanism was made on 2 July 2024 by the Yangon office of PNB to pay 10,000,000 rupees for pulses imported to Myanmar from India.

Originally Myanmar asked the RBI for 11 Myanmar banks, including the state-owned Myanmar Economic Bank (MEB), to be authorised to operate the Rupee-Kyat trade settlement mechanism. But, the RBI rejected MEB's application and those of another two Myanmar

banks.

The eight Myanmar banks permitted by the RBI to run the rupee-kyat trade settlement mechanism are: United Amara Bank (UAB), Cooperative Bank (CB), Global Treasure Bank, Yoma Bank, Ayeyarwaddy Farmers Development Bank, Myanmar Citizens Bank, Ayeyarwaddy Bank and Shwe Rural and Urban Development Bank.

The Myanmar junta is trying to reduce its reliance on USD for trade as it is facing increasing difficulties in procuring US dollars due to sanctions and it hopes that the new Rupee-Kyat trade settlement mechanism will increase trade between the two countries.

Unfortunately for the junta the demand for USD still exceeds the supply in Myanmar and it is facing problems buying imports.

According to Investopedia "a vostro account is an account a correspondent bank (a financial institution that provides services to another one—usually in another country) holds on behalf of another bank. These accounts are an essential aspect of correspondent banking in which the bank holding the funds acts as custodian for or manages the account of a foreign counterpart. For example, if a Spanish life insurance company approaches a U.S. bank to manage funds on the Spanish life insurer's behalf, the account is deemed by the holding bank as a vostro account of the insurance company."

REPORT DOCUMENTS 174 INCIDENTS OF VIOLENCE AFFECTING MYANMAR'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM SINCE COUP

Data analysis and advocacy group Myanmar Witness has documented 174 distinct incidents of violence affecting educational institutions in Myanmar since February 2021 in its latest report, 'Schools Caught in the Crossfire.'

According to Myanmar Witness schools have been damaged by airstrikes, weaponry, and fire, with some hit multiple times. These events have caused significant infrastructure damage, impacting children's education in the short and long term.

Myanmar Witness' analysis draws from two primary datasets: the primary dataset (113 incidents), and a drone-specific dataset (61 incidents). The data reveals a steady increase in reported incidents affecting schools since February 2021, peaking in March 2024.

The trend is consistent with data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) on school infrastructure. Additional sources, including the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) and United Nations Human Rights Council (UN HRC) analysis, also indicate a rise since the coup.

The Myanmar military is implicated in 90 of the 113 cases documented in the primary dataset, with just under half resulting in major damage or total destruction to school infrastructure. In contrast, People's Defence Force (PDF) linked incidents generally caused less harm to educational infrastructure.

Sagaing Region has the highest number of incidents impacting school infrastructure (36 incidents, 33% of dataset), followed by Shan Kayin and Kayah states (11 incidents each, 10.1% of dataset, respectively) reflecting their status as major conflict zones. The drone specific dataset also indicates 36.8% of drone incidents occurred in Sagaing.

Myanmar Witness has assessed the varying levels of damage inflicted upon schools in their primary dataset, as well as examining damage to the surrounding areas (villages and towns).

31.5% of schools sustained major damage, potentially rendering the schools inoperable, while 9% were completely destroyed (primary dataset). The high percentage of incidents affecting surrounding areas suggests schools may not have been the main target. Thus, damage to schools could be the result of collateral damage during conflict.

Myanmar Witness has collected 64 reports of fatalities and 106 reports of injuries, though very few deaths have been verified due to challenges in verifying and geolocating user-generated content of the victims.

A number of these incidents may be linked to military use of school buildings, though Myanmar Witness cannot fully verify these claims. Regardless, these actions impact educational facilities, reducing access to learning materials and resources for students. Myanmar Witness recommends that international lawyers investigate these events to determine the status of these school buildings as protected sites under international law.

This report presents the available data on incidents affecting schools in Myanmar, highlights the frequency of such events in the context of the ongoing conflict, and seeks to hold those responsible to account. Myanmar Witness also compiled case studies that provide an insight into the trends uncovered during this investigation. Myanmar Witness will continue to monitor and report on incidents that impact on educational infrastructure in the country.



Rescue team in action. Photo: Facebook

109 CIVILIANS KILLED, 136 INJURED IN TWO NORTHERN SHAN TOWNSHIPS IN FOUR WEEKS

1 09 civilians were killed and a further 136 were injured by junta airstrikes and artillery fire in Nawnghkio and Kyaukme townships in northern Shan State between 25 June and 22 July 2024.

The figures were reported by the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). It also said that in Kyaukme Township during the four-day period from 19 to 22 July, 15 civilians, including two women, were killed, and five others, including a child, were injured.

During the same period junta artillery fire also damaged a school and six houses in Inkyin Taung Village in Kyaukme Township, and three houses near Shwe Pyinyun Street in Nawnghkio Town.

Also, on 20 July, four Kyaukme residents riding on two motorcycles were shot without warning by junta soldiers, near the entrance of Kyaukme Town. All four died on the spot and their bodies were just left by the roadside, according to reports from Kyaukme residents.



Photo: Facebook

JUNTA TURNS TO MAGIC RITUALS TO PREVENT AA ATTACKING AYEYARWADY REGION

The Myanmar junta is turning to magical rituals known as Yadaya in 26 Ayeyarwady Region townships in an attempt to stop the Arakan Army (AA) entering the region.

On 20 July 2024, the Military Council issued a directive ordering staff members from the General Administration Offices in each of the townships to make offerings of three coconuts and bananas to statues and shrines, according to a source close to the Military Council.

They said: "This instruction required the offerings to be made at famous pagodas in each township at precisely 9:00 am. The order was delivered to the General Administration Office, and the township administrator informed only a few trusted individuals who carried out the task."

Residents of Pathein and Hinthada Districts in Ayeyarwady Region confirmed that General Administration Office staff in their townships had offered coconuts and bananas to local pagodas.

"This news is accurate, but the staff were forced to perform the rituals discreetly," said a person familiar with the Military Council in Pathein Township.

Yadaya are superstitious Burmese magical rituals done to delay, neutralise or prevent misfortune and previous Burmese military leaders, such as Ne Win and Than Shwe also practiced Yadaya.

Since the February 2021 coup in Myanmar the junta has frequently engaged in Yadaya rituals to avert misfortune, including forcing local residents in the Ayeyarwady Region to cultivate 50 acres of sunflower per village tract and 2,000 acres per township, according to government employees and farmers.

The junta also frequently orders army families to recite Paritta, a protective Buddhist chant, according to a source close to the Southwestern Military Command.

Currently the AA is fighting the junta in southern Rakhine State on the border with Ayeyarwady Region. The junta is concerned that the fighting may spillover into Ayeyarwady Region and it has tightened security in the border areas.

Although no official statements have been released, some People Defense Forces (PDFs) from Ayeyarwady Region have reportedly been receiving military training from the AA and are already fighting alongside the AA, according to revolutionary forces.



Chauk Guerrilla Force. Photo: CGF

PDF ATTACK KILLS 11 SOLDIERS IN CHAUK TOWNSHIP, MAGWAY REGION

1 1 junta soldiers, including officers, were killed and several others were injured during an attack by People's Defence Force (PDF) fighters on a junta stronghold in Chauk Township, Magway Region.

The attack on a junta unit of about 30 soldiers in Sutaw Village, in Chauk Township happened at about 8:30 pm on 20 July 2024, according to Bo Daung a member of the Chauk Guerrilla Force (CGF), one of the PDFs involved in the attack, who spoke to Mizzima.

He said: "It was a sudden attack, we fired from approximately 100 meters away. I witnessed the deaths as the shooting happened."

But, the numbers of junta casualties is not confirmed, according to the CGF, which said the fighting lasted for 45 minutes before the PDF forces retreated without suffering any casualties.

The attacked junta soldiers had been stationed at the Wazi Factory near Chauk Township and had moved to Sutaw Village on the road to the Wazi Factory to prevent PDF forces getting near to the factory.

The Wazi Factory in Pakokku Township, also known as the Security Printing Works Factory, prints banknotes for the junta.

Since the attack the junta has heightened security and increased patrols in the region, according to local residents.

The attack was carried out by a combined force from the GKF, Oak Awe UG Guerrilla Force, Alawaka Guerrilla Force, Bagan Bo Cho Force, and Youth Revolution Front (YRF) Battalion 12.



Photo: AFP

RAKHINE STATE FACING MASSIVE MEDICINE SHORTAGE

Rakhine State is facing its largest ever shortage of medicines, putting the lives of patients with chronic diseases at risk, according to local media sources.

According to reports, the shortages are mainly affecting patients with chronic diseases such as neurological disorders, cardiovascular, liver and kidney diseases, leukemia and throat cancer.

The shortage of medicines has occurred because the junta has blocked and cut-off road and waterway transport routes into Rakhine State, since fighting restarted in Rakhine State in late 2023.

When the Arakan Army (AA) took control of most of northern Rakhine State foodstuffs, pharmaceuticals and fuel were imported from India, transported to Paletwa in Chin State and then onto Rakhine State. But nothing has been imported along this route since the Central Young Lai Association, a Mizoram-based Indian civil society organisation, blockaded the trade route at the end of June 2024 to pressure the AA into leaving Chin State.

Not only do small-scale hospitals and clinics run by the AA face a shortage of medicines, they also face staff shortages, especially of doctors.

The situation has been compounded since Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) was forced to suspend its activities in northern Rakhine State following arson attacks on its warehouses there.

In a 16 July statement MSF said: "This June 2024, Médecins Sans Frontières / Doctors Without Borders (MSF) was forced to indefinitely suspend its medical humanitarian activities in northern Rakhine following the extreme escalation of conflict and burning down of MSF's office in Buthidaung Township."

The statement also said that MSF would still maintain a minimal service in central parts of Rakhine State despite facing severe restrictions on access and the consequences of violent conflict.



Reverend Samson on his release. Photo: Facebook

U.S. EMBASSY WELCOMES RELEASE OF REVEREND SAMSON

The U.S. Embassy in Burma has issued a statement welcoming the release by the Myanmar junta of Reverend Dr. Hkalam Samson, a Kachin pastor and former head of the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC).

Below is the statement in full:

The United States welcomes the release of Reverend Dr. Hkalam Samson from prison in Burma after he served more than a year of a six-year sentence on military-led, manufactured charges. Rev. Dr. Samson is a prominent, well-respected religious leader whose courageous work includes advocating for freedom of religion or belief for all. We are pleased that he is finally able to return home to his family and continue his important work.

While we welcome this news, we reiterate our calls for the military regime to end its repression of, and violence against, religious actors, communities, and sites and houses of worship in Burma.

The regime has continued to imprison political actors, democratically elected officials, human

rights defenders, and members of civil society. We continue to urge the military regime to immediately release the many individuals it has unjustly detained, cease its violence against civilians, allow unhindered humanitarian access, and respect the people of Burma's aspirations for inclusive, representative democracy.

Reverend Samson was arrested at Mandalay International Airport by junta troops in December 2022 whilst on his way to receive medical treatment in Thailand.

Following a closed trial, he was sentenced, on 7 April 2023, to six years' imprisonment on charges including Section 17 (1) of the colonial-era Unlawful Associations Act, section 505 (a) of the penal code and offences under the counter-terrorism law.

He was then released as part of a prisoner amnesty on 17 April 2024 before being again re-arrested the next day, 18 April, and sent back to prison.



Photo: Facebook

THAI CENTRAL BANK TO INVESTIGATE MYANMAR WEAPONS PAYMENTS

Thailand's central bank and anti-laundering office will investigate claims that Thai commercial banks facilitated transactions linked to weapons purchases by Myanmar's junta, a foreign ministry said on Wednesday.

Myanmar's military deposed the government of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2021 and launched a bloody crackdown that has plunged the country into turmoil.

The United States, European Union and others have sanctioned members of Myanmar's junta and entities of its sprawling business empire.

A report last month by a UN expert said the junta imported nearly \$130 million in weapons and military supplies from Thailand-registered suppliers in the year to March 2024.

Five commercial banks in Thailand had been crucial in facilitating the transfers, which were more than double the total of the previous year, according to special rapporteur Tom Andrews.

On Wednesday government and banking officials had discussed "transactions that may be linked to the purchase of weapons and military supplies and the

Myanmar government," Thai foreign affairs spokesman Nikordej Balankura said in a statement.

The Bank of Thailand and the anti-money laundering office "will jointly establish a Task Force to investigate these transactions," he said.

He did not give details on a timeframe for the investigation.

The coup, which ended a short-lived experiment with democracy, plunged the Southeast Asian nation into turmoil.

Across swaths of the country, the junta is battling established ethnic minority armed groups as well as pro-democracy "People's Defence Forces"

Rights groups accuse the junta of committing possible war crimes as it struggles to crush opposition to its coup.

More than 5,400 people have been killed and 27,000 arrested in the junta's crackdown since 2021, according to a local monitoring groups.



Serge Pun. Photo: Supplied

MYANMAR TYCOON SERGE PUN STEPS DOWN FROM SINGAPORE-LISTED BUSINESS

Myanmar tycoon Serge Pun is being questioned by junta authorities in his home country and has stepped down as chairman of his Singapore-listed conglomerate, the company said.

Pun, one of Myanmar's richest individuals, was stepping down as executive chairman and director of Yoma Strategic Holdings Ltd "with immediate effect", the company said in a press statement filed with the Singapore Exchange (SGX) on Wednesday evening.

The Yoma Group has interests in real estate, mobile financial services, food and beverage, heavy equipment and passenger vehicles in Myanmar.

Pun's banking business has come under scrutiny in Myanmar.

The country's central bank said earlier this month that action will be taken against seven banks including Yoma Bank Ltd, for giving out loans that exceeded central bank limits.

"Recent developments in Myanmar have created a level of uncertainty with respect to Mr. Serge Pun and his engagement with the Myanmar authorities concerning banking activities in the country," the statement said.

"In light of these circumstances, Mr. Serge Pun, along with the Board of Directors... have determined that it is in the best interest of the company, its shareholders, its employees, and its customers to accelerate... succession plans," it said.

In response to queries from SGX last week, the company confirmed that Serge Pun was in the Myanmar capital Naypyidaw but said it had not been informed that the tycoon has been detained or placed under house arrest.

Serge Pun is "staying at accommodation provided by the relevant authorities and cooperating with the relevant authorities," the company said.

"No charges have been filed against him," the company said.

It said, however, that Serge Pun and two other company employees "do not have complete unrestricted use of their communication devices and would be expected to remain in (the capital)... until the relevant authorities have completed their queries".

Pun's son Melvyn has been appointed chairman and chief executive officer of the company, according to Wednesday's statement.

AFP



Naw Zipporah Sein

FORMER KNU VICE-CHAIRWOMAN NAW ZIPPORAH SEIN DIES

Naw Zipporah Sein, the former vice-chairwoman of the Karen National Union (KNU) died at the age of 69 from ovarian cancer, at 2:21 pm on 24 July.

She died at her home in Mae Sariang, in Thailand on the border with Myanmar.

Her nephew said: "She passed away at her home in Mae Sariang Town. I think her funeral will take place on Saturday. Cancer claimed her life. She received a variety of cancer treatments. The doctor finally gave up on her."

As the daughter of the former KNU Chief of Staff General Tamla Baw, Naw Zipporah Sein held important positions within the KNU, including Vice President and General Secretary. Beyond her leadership roles in the KNU, she was a dedicated women's rights activist and a central committee member of the Karen Women's Organization (KWO).

Naw Zipporah Sein participated in discussions with the government of former President U Thein Sein during Myanmar's political reforms in 2011, which resulted in her losing her position as vice-president of the KNU and not being re-elected to any KNU position in the group's 2016 leadership elections.

She remained a vocal critic of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), declaring it void after the military seized control and refused to recognize the 2020 general election results.

The KNU Concerned Group, which she led, pledged full support to the National Unity Government (NUG) in administrative, political, military, and diplomatic matters.

In 2014, Naw Zipporah Sein received the Women's Organisations Network (WON) Peace Award.



MYANMAR JUNTA RESTRICTS MORE MOBILE APPS, RESIDENTS SAY

Some Google apps along with the popular messaging app Signal now appear to be blocked inside Myanmar, residents told Radio Free Asia this week.

Several residents said they had been unable to access either the encrypted messaging service or Google apps except when using a virtual private network, or VPN.

The junta has not released a statement saying they have blocked the apps, but the military government has banned a range of messaging apps, social media apps, and VPNs since coming to power in a February 2021 coup.

Signal, which allows users to securely message, call, and send files, has become particularly popular in recent years.

Chit Oo, who works on the Thai-Myanmar border, told RFA that he has been speaking with his parents through Signal ever since Facebook Messenger was blocked in 2021. His parents live in Mandalay, which has faced fierce fighting in recent weeks.

"Since the last week of June, Signal has been difficult to use for communication," he said. "With the battle near Mandalay approaching, I am more worried about my parents."

A Yangon resident, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, told RFA that he is currently relying on VPNs to access internet services including Google apps, which are critical for sharing and storing information.

"They say these tools are not supposed to be used, but people have to use them," he said. "No matter how many bans are imposed, people will continue to use them."

Major General Zaw Min Tun, the junta's spokesperson, could not be reached for comment.

'MANY LOOPHOLES'

A technology expert who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons said a lack of clear instruction from the junta may have led internet service providers, or ISPs, to be overly cautious about blocking apps.

"Some did not disable Google services, but some internet services mistakenly disabled them. With technology advancing globally, how can they disable it entirely? There are many loopholes, and we can still use it as we like," he said.

Kyaw Win, director of the Burma Human Rights Network, said the suppression of freedom of expression was just the latest abuse by a regime that has imprisoned and killed thousands.

"From a human rights perspective, everyone has the right to communicate and express themselves as they wish," he said. "It is not enough to arrest individuals; modern technology is also being used to block communication and expression."

Currently in Myanmar, the junta has restricted access to Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, WhatsApp, X, and independent media websites.

Observers have said that in areas resistant to the junta, internet access has been cut off and internet speeds have been slowed in some regions.

Translated by Kalyar Lwin. Edited by Abby Seiff.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia



MALAYSIA MUST INVESTIGATE ITS CITIZENS' INVOLVEMENT IN MYANMAR SCAM PARKS, SAYS NGO

Malaysia must investigate its citizens' involvement in cyber scams in Myanmar, says advocacy group Justice for Myanmar.

Former deputy minister of Malaysia, Mashitah Ibrahim, and husband Abdul Shakor bin Abu Bakar, are partners in Dongmei cyber scam park in Myanmar with ex-14K Triad boss Wan Kuok-koi (also known as Broken Tooth), according to Justice for Myanmar.

It says that rather than being subject to an investigation for their criminal ties, they have been able to access senior Malaysian politicians and police.

Dongmei Park was founded by Wan Kuok-koi along with Mashitah Ibrahim, Abdul Shakor and other Malaysian businesspeople. The Hong Kong registered

Dongmei Group, in which Abdul Shakor is a director, has operated in Malaysia and raised funds from Malaysian investors for the cyber scam park in Myanmar. The company has been sanctioned by the USA.

A recent Deduktif report unveils new ties between Mashitah Ibrahim and Abdul Shakor's family with Myanmar tycoons and crypto currency. Mashitah Ibrahim and Abdul Shakor's son, Muhammad Wafi, attended the launch of the crypto currency Meta X DAO. One of its early investors was Dato Sri Liong Kee Huat, who helped to set up Dogmei Park and they met together along with other elites. Wafi also met Myanmar tycoons on a trip to Myawaddy.



Underage boys working in a Yangon restaurant.
Photo: Supplied

MINORS MAKE UP FOR LABOR SHORTAGE CAUSED BY MYANMAR'S CONFLICT, DRAFT

Myanmar's junta-ordered military draft has exacerbated a shortage of workers caused by the country's civil war, and the gap is being filled by minors who are vulnerable to labor rights violations, experts and rights groups said Friday.

The growth in child labor is an underreported impact of the junta's People's Military Service Law, enacted in February as part of a bid to shore up its forces amid heavy losses to various ethnic armies and rebel militias since its 2021 coup d'etat.

Under the law, men between the ages of 18 and 35 and women between 18 and 27 can be drafted to serve in the armed forces for two years.

Thousands of young men have been recruited in the first three rounds of the draft, while thousands more draft-dodgers have fled into rebel-controlled territory and abroad to avoid service.

Last month, the International Labor Organization, or ILO, published a report that documented "an increase in child labor levels partly driven, amongst other factors, by parents preferring their children to work as means to avoid conscription."

While the ILO was unable to provide exact figures for the increase, it said its findings squared with an earlier report which found that "child labor rates in conflict-affected countries are 77% higher than global averages."

RFA Burmese spoke with labor rights groups who acknowledged the difficulty in obtaining precise data, but confirmed that child labor is on the rise in Myanmar in 2024 compared to previous years - in part due to the absence of workers who have been drafted or fled to avoid service.

They said that child labor is prevalent across various sectors, including garment production, agriculture, food services, domestic work, hazardous construction, street vending, and begging.

AT GREATER RISK OF EXPLOITATION

Ma Ei, the co-secretary of the Federation of General Workers Myanmar, said that in a country where workers have limited rights protections, children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

"We have documented numerous cases where child laborers face issues such as unpaid overtime, termination after completing critical orders, or dismissal for refusing overtime," he said.

Despite widespread violations, many child laborers are afraid to report abuses, fearing retaliation such as job loss.

Labor union leader Myo Myo Aye told RFA that labor violations are often disregarded in smaller factories, where minors often look for work using identity cards that belong to older relatives or friends.

"Eligible workers would avoid such factories due to low wages, lengthy working hours, and lack of benefits that workers rightfully deserve," she said. "Child laborers not only lose their rights but also endure exploitation and are denied the same rights as other workers."

But families facing poverty, exacerbated by the junta's mismanagement of the economy and foreign investors fleeing political instability, often have little choice but to send their children to work.

A June 24 report by the United Nations Development Program found that 75% of Myanmar's population – or 42 million people – live in poverty.

TRADING EDUCATION FOR WORK

RFA spoke with a young woman from western Rakhine state who said that after the Arakan Army ended a ceasefire agreement with the military in

November, she relocated to Myanmar's largest city Yangon to escape the conflict and continue her studies.

"However, upon arriving, I lacked the funds to pursue my education," said the young woman, who gave the pseudonym Thandar due to security concerns. "Consequently, I began working in factories instead of going to school. Often, I had to work late into the night, doing overtime without receiving any additional pay."

Thandar said she dropped out of school at the age of 14 to support her family and has been working in Yangon's garment factories using someone else's identification card.

Experts RFA spoke with said that while child labor existed in Myanmar during civilian rule, it had "significantly increased" under current conditions.

Attempts by RFA to contact the permanent secretariat of the junta's Ministry of Labor to inquire about efforts to combat child labor went unanswered Friday.

On June 8, 2020, Myanmar ratified the International Labor Organization's minimum working age provision, prohibiting those under the age of 14 from employment or work in any occupation, except for light work and artistic performances, and banning hazardous types of activities for young persons under 18.

It ratified a foundational agreement concerning the participation of children in armed conflict on Sept. 27, 2019.

Translated by Kalyar Lwin. Edited by Joshua Lipos and Malcolm Foster.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia



Photo: AFP

SPRING UNIVERSITY MYANMAR - EDUCATION POST-COUP

When the coup hit, Thura was a student at the Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT), which had a distinguished legacy in the annals of Burmese history. “It was, in some sense, the birthplace of the previous coup and the previous revolution, in 1988. It was at that time the military entered the university campus with a SWAT team, and then they opened fire into the student dormitories.”

Thura traces the importance of Burmese student unions in the country’s turbulent history. It starts in the 1920s, when Aung San and U Nu and other young leaders protested British rule, a movement that ultimately culminated in full independence in 1948. Then, following the 1962 military coup, the Student Union building at Rangoon University was bombed in the wake of student protests, killing hundreds. And the 1974 violent protests surrounding the burial of former Secretary General U Thant were also student-led. Finally, in 1990, the military constructed new campuses that were isolated from one another as well as from urban centers in hopes of limiting students’ political influence; they also banned all clubs and unions.

Thura was part of a student group that, during the transition period, sought to re-establish not only a variety of clubs, but also the vaunted Student Union. “We really wanted to be a part of this larger legacy of the Student Unions, resisting unlawful regimes since the previous times. So that was part of it. But there was also strong motivation among us to revitalize the campus,” he explains. Initially operating as an informal collective, it took them 15 months to secure the formal reinstatement of the Student Union on campus. They also championed the allocation of dedicated time and space on campus for extracurricular activities. “By the

time when COVID happened, we had one of the most vibrant university campuses across the country! And our students have also been well exposed and well connected through all these activities.”

Upon the Student Union’s official recognition, Thura and his peers leveraged their newfound strength to influence a range of political decisions aligned with the NLD’s initiatives. One issue they were particularly engaged in was the proposed reforms being planned as part of the National Education Law; some students were even invited to speak in Parliament. They called for teaching methodologies that were more student-centered, a revised history curriculum that departed from the “Burmanized” themes of the past, and greater collaboration between university courses and community projects.

Thura describes the gradual opening that occurred during the transition period as accomplishing a two-fold purpose. First, it revitalized campus life, which had long been suppressed. And this, in turn, showed students not only a pathway towards creating the kind of university life they wanted, but how they could also be active participants in helping shape the country’s new path forward. But it was not an easy transition. “We had to start everything from scratch, and formulate and just be creative along the way,” he explains. There was a kind of entrepreneurial spirit accompanying their work, partly inspired by American pop culture, particularly the high school TV show, Glee. These gave the students a taste for how to engage in the world—something no one could have predicted would be so impactful after the 2021 coup. “These are the same people that are now actively involved with the Spring Revolution, doing health care or fundraising efforts, or simply just picking

up guns and getting trained in the jungle, or working at Ethnic Armed Organizations, or working for the NUG in this resistance movement."

Like schools and universities the world over, the pandemic closed Burmese institutions and ushered in the era of online learning. This meant that when the coup occurred a year later, students could only connect remotely. Thura believes that if not for COVID, the initial protests would have been far bigger. "The general students' ideology was abruptly shifted more towards [the] left," he says, as many were enraged that the election was stolen from them. "With the Civil Disobedience Movement, the students were very visible, and were at the forefront of it, alongside doctors, teachers, and other government workers. It was actually a very big decision for students," he says, explaining that by joining the CDM, they would effectively be ending their educational aspirations not only in Myanmar, but also any hopes they might have had of transferring abroad. Moreover, a whopping 80% fewer students sat the following year's matriculation exams. In addition, he notes that Bamar students were beginning to have their consciousness raised about the country's long history of mistreating ethnic minorities. "It was a time for the students to become more active citizens in the sense that they were later drawn into the armed struggle and subsequent anti-regime activities that followed."

Like many, Thura didn't think the resistance movement would last that long, and as the months passed, he began to fear the consequences of such a prolonged period away from his education. Along with this, he reflected on the fact that many professors had joined CDM and so even if students chose to attend school, there would not be many teachers standing in front of classrooms. So he started to pull together the outlines of an idea, even sitting out the Thingyan water festival holiday that year to work on it. These ideas ultimately evolved into Spring University Myanmar (SUM), with the use of "Spring" deliberately evoking the Spring Revolution against the coup. SUM, formed as a virtual university, was founded on May 24, 2021. Somehow word of this spread quickly, and he and his group were soon inundated with an enrollment of nearly 9,000 pupils! To help provide funds to pay teachers, they collected tuition payments of \$5-20 per student. As of 2024, SUM has registered over 21,000 students and has over 200 staff!

As the name reflects, the underlying goal of the institution is not just to provide education, but also to align its values with the democratic aspirations of a nation. "When we started SUM in the early days, we

made it a priority to always be connected to... the pro-democracy movement." But Thura and his cohorts, besides reestablishing a learning space, were hoping to democratize and decentralize it by having students "unlearn" the propagandized and heavily Burmanized vision of the country's history and culture that their prior education had forced on them. They also sought out economic models that could sustain the their new institution going forward.

To transition from college student to university administrator and curriculum designer is no easy task, and Thura soon felt he had gotten in over his head. However, he found that his pre-coup work with the Student Union, and particularly his activity around forming social enterprises, had at least given him enough confidence in his abilities to forge a way forward. So he analyzed all the data, did an inventory of their available resources, discussed the options available... and then chose what he determined was the best approach. "Just pick one and stick to it," he explains, "and it's also an iterative process... The overall philosophy is generally a living organism or a living document. We keep updating and we keep reflecting on what was urgent on the ground, and we have to adapt to it and respond to it. But of course, without compromising the core foundational principles that we are trying. So at the core of SUM, we're not really trying to put the students back into classes, we are essentially trying to tackle this regime and no surprise, they called us a terrorist organization."

Indeed, the regime sees SUM as a threat to the legitimacy that it has constantly been striving to establish since the coup, and has publicly targeted it as a terrorist cell—and how many institutions of higher learning have to deal not only with their educational mandate, but the very survival of their students and faculty?! Given these risks, students and teachers alike use pseudonyms and avoid any public mention of an affiliation with the school, and students' and teachers' faces are pixelated or blurred in case anyone with nefarious intention logs on. This issue makes something like pronunciation videos in language courses a challenge, because pixelating the face modeling the sounds would be self-defeating. Concerns about security are so pervasive that the methods for receiving donations, tuition payments, and offering professor stipends must be carefully planned as well.

Thura does not mince words about the ultimate goal of his institution: besides serving students' (and teachers') needs, they all very much have the underlying objective of helping to topple the regime and its ideology as well. "Our primary goal has always

been to help the young people fight their fight," he explains. "Along the way, we are teaching and providing them with resources and connections and exposure, to each other and to the rest of the world, formulating their responses and campaigns, and helping the CDM professors, because as long as they remain CDM, they are fighting this military regime!" In this way, SUM can be seen as another thread—alongside the armed struggle, the NUG, the CDM, etc.—in the fabric being woven to overcome the junta.

Thura also hopes the groundwork he and others have laid with SUM will feed back into the educational reform discussions that were taking place before the coup. In this way, after the military is defeated, they can renew their efforts to build a new learning model that works for the entire country. "Our education priorities and deliverables need to be aligned with other governance and public administration objectives, as well as the political objectives that those authorities are trying to try to try and achieve. So it's a part of the package."

SUM has launched various educational initiatives, and is expanding and evolving as it goes. As noted above, it is mainly a virtual learning platform, but more recently, hybrid courses are being offered in liberated areas. Conversely, to facilitate remote learning in conflict zones, they have collaborated with tech providers to create a "SUM box" that provides local Wi-Fi access to educational content without needing internet or mobile connectivity.

They have since expanded their course offerings across multiple disciplines, including engineering, sciences, computer technologies, social sciences, humanities, languages, and law. Moreover, they have developed graduate-level programs in areas such as Human Rights Studies, Governance, Public Administration, and Teaching. These programs, which run for six to nine months, also offer partnerships and MOUs with 11 universities worldwide.

One of SUM's more standout initiatives are its ethnic language courses. Thura emphasizes that the goal of these courses goes beyond mere language instruction; they aim to foster improved understanding and rapport between the Bamar majority and various ethnic groups, and they have been very successful in this regard. He points out that overcoming years of ethnic biases and propaganda is crucial to this endeavor, and that these courses are part of a larger vision to build a Federal Democratic Union in Myanmar, underpinning political, defense, and strategic efforts towards more inclusive governance. This connects to another goal, to build on local educational initiatives as a means to foster

inclusive governance, aligning international resources with the needs and aspirations of local educators and students.

Between the opposing goals of SAC-administered schools on the one side and alternative institutions like SUM on the other lies the vast, monastic school network. Thura begins by outlining their historical context, noting that before British colonization and the advent of modern educational systems, monastic institutions were the main educational providers for nearly a thousand years. In addition to Buddhist monasteries, he mentions other faith-based organizations, like churches and mosques, all of which served a general public that otherwise had limited access to education. This patchwork system was highly effective, achieving an unusually high literacy rate by the early 20th century. Thura emphasizes that even today, monastic schools continue to serve as critical educational resources, especially for vulnerable and displaced communities from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and faiths. He contrasts the operational challenges faced by monastic schools with those faced by institutions like SUM, which do not interface at all with the SAC. Monastic schools, due to their physical infrastructures and locations in SAC-controlled areas, find it difficult to completely disengage without risking severe repercussions, including military attacks. He hopes that SUM might find a way to engage with and support these monastic schools, recognizing their unique role in serving communities that are often overlooked by other educational providers.

Thura concludes by describing how his educational philosophy has shaped this remarkable endeavor. "I've always believed that learning is everywhere, and all we need is to create a nurturing environment, where students are free to express their opinions, and where they could interact with each other freely, with no discrimination and with no sidelining of any agenda." For now, Thura is simply trying to do all he can to provide the most effective learning experience for students as possible. "I've joined some of these faculty lectures, and damn, they are just so wonderful and full of passion, both in their subject material and their approach to teaching. So beyond that political affiliation, and the affinity that comes with it, what really keeps the students coming back to SUM would be that kind of quality of teaching."

CATCH THE PODCAST

Listen to the Insight Myanmar Podcast here:

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2024/6/22/episode-246-spring-university-myanmar>



Protest against Israeli PM Netanyahu in Washington DC. Photo: AFP

ISRAELI PM'S SPEECH TO US CONGRESS SPARKS MIXED RESPONSE AS MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT WORSENS

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu received a mixed response last week for his speech to US Congress as conflict in the Middle East appears to be worsening, with Israel teetering on the brink of a full-scale offensive against Lebanon, in addition to its war in Gaza.

Speaking to the US Congress on Wednesday last week, Netanyahu slammed Gaza ceasefire demonstrators and called for a global alliance against the Iranian regime he accuses of funding them.

Washington has become increasingly alarmed by the humanitarian toll of Israel's nine-month campaign in the narrow coastal territory of Gaza, and protests in Israel and the United States have been ratcheting up pressure on Netanyahu.

The prime minister hit back at his critics in a speech at the US Capitol, accusing Tehran of funding and promoting US-based anti-Israel protest - and called Gaza peace activists "Iran's useful idiots."

"America and Israel today can forge a security alliance in the Middle East to counter the growing Iranian threat," he told lawmakers as demonstrators burned his effigy in the streets beyond the historic Capitol complex.

"All countries that are in peace with Israel, and all those countries who will make peace with Israel, should be invited to join this alliance."

Iran, he said, was the "axis of terror" behind almost all sectarian killing in the Middle East. He argued that the United States and Israel "must stand together" against Tehran and its proxies.

"Our enemies are your enemies. Our fight is your fight. And our victory will be your victory," Netanyahu said to a standing ovation in the House chamber.

DEEP DIVISIONS

But Americans are deeply divided over Israel's actions in Gaza as the death toll climbs, and the demonstration outside the Capitol swelled to thousands ahead of Netanyahu's appearance.

Activists were kept at least a block away by police who fired pepper spray, and they eventually dispersed.

Inside the House of Representatives - one-half of the main Capitol building - six protesters were arrested before Netanyahu began.

Rashida Tlaib, the only Palestinian-American lawmaker, waved signs from the floor calling Netanyahu a "war criminal" and accusing him of genocide.

The Israeli leader's visit came in the wake of a gunman targeting Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, and President Joe Biden bowing out of the election and endorsing his deputy, Kamala Harris – a move that has seriously shaken the Democratic Party.

Netanyahu singled out both Biden and Trump for praise for their efforts towards Middle East peace.

Biden and Harris both met Netanyahu separately on Thursday, but Republicans nevertheless criticized Harris for skipping Wednesday's address.

Vice presidents typically preside over such occasions, and Senate leadership hopeful John Cornyn was one of a number of Republicans who called her no-show "disgraceful."

J.D. Vance, the Republican senator who wants to replace her as vice president, was not there either.

Netanyahu met Trump - with whose administration he had a much less fraught relationship than Biden's - in Florida on Friday.

'CLOSEST ALLY'

Last week's address made Israel's longest-serving premier the first foreign leader to address a joint meeting of Congress four times - pulling ahead of Britain's Winston Churchill.

But he has lost backing among dozens of liberal lawmakers, and some 68 Democrats - including some of the most senior figures in Congress – did not attend.

Netanyahu says only military pressure can free the hostages and defeat Hamas, which launched a shock attack on October 7 that resulted in the deaths of 1,197 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on Israeli figures.

Netanyahu said he was "confident" in efforts to secure the release of the 114 hostages still in Gaza, where Israel's retaliatory military campaign has killed at least 39,145 people, also mostly civilians, according to figures from the Hamas-run territory's health ministry.

The Palestinian militant group said Netanyahu was "misleading" the international community in his address, saying he "thwarted all efforts aimed at ending the war and concluding a deal to release the prisoners."

The United States has voiced concerns over bombing in heavily populated parts of Gaza but has defended Israeli interests while taking a key role in mediation efforts.

A senior Biden administration official said last week that negotiations for a Gaza ceasefire and a hostage release deal were in their "closing stages," speaking on

the condition of anonymity.

In Congress, Netanyahu called on Washington to fast-track military aid to his country to "dramatically expedite an end to the war in Gaza and help prevent a broader war in the Middle East."

But his call for support sparked a backlash from Democrats angry that there was little of substance in his speech about securing peace.

Influential former House speaker Nancy Pelosi called it "by far the worst presentation of any foreign dignitary" invited to speak before Congress.

IRAN WARNING

Meanwhile, Iran on Sunday warned Israel that any new military "adventures" in Lebanon could lead to "unforeseen consequences," following a deadly rocket strike in the Israel-annexed Golan Heights blamed on Tehran-backed Hezbollah.

"Any ignorant action of the Zionist regime can lead to the broadening of the scope of instability, insecurity and war in the region," said Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani.

He added that Israel will be responsible for "the unforeseen consequences and reactions to such stupid behaviour".

Hezbollah, which on Saturday claimed multiple attacks on Israeli military positions following a deadly raid on southern Lebanon, has denied responsibility for the rocket fire that Israeli authorities said killed 12 people including children in the Druze town of Majdal Shams.

Kanani accused Israel of pinning the blame on Hezbollah "to divert public opinion and world attention from its massive crimes" in the Gaza Strip, where war has raged since October 7.

He added that Israel "does not have the least moral authority to comment" on the deaths in Majdal Shams, on the Golan Heights which the country has seized from Syria in 1967 and later annexed in a move not recognised by the United Nations.

Iran does not recognise Israel and has made support for the Palestinian cause a centrepiece of its foreign policy since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

The Islamic republic has hailed Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel that sparked the Gaza war but denied any involvement.

AFP



Commuters in Tokyo. Photo: AFP

FOREIGN RESIDENTS SURGE IN JAPAN AS NUMBER OF CITIZENS DROPS

The number of foreign nationals living in Japan has hit a record high, according to official data released Wednesday last week that also showed the nation's largest-ever yearly drop in Japanese citizens.

With chronically low birth rates, Japan has the world's second-oldest population after tiny Monaco.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has introduced policies aimed at boosting births, warning the country is "on the verge of whether we can continue to function as a society".

The government has also been reviewing immigration policies to make moving to Japan more attractive to overseas workers.

As of January 1, there were 3.32 million foreign residents in the country, the figures showed.

That marks a surge of 11 percent on-year and a record high since the internal affairs ministry began logging the data in 2013.

Foreign nationals accounted for around 2.7 percent of Japan's total population of 124.9 million.

Japanese media attributed the rise to the end of pandemic-era border controls, which prompted the return of international students and workers taking part in the government's vocational training scheme.

The number of Japanese citizens residing in Japan, meanwhile, stood at 121.6 million, the data showed, with 2023's drop of 861,237 the biggest ever recorded and the 15th straight yearly decline.

AFP

PODCAST #252

A Star2 Is Born

From war-torn Burma, to Thai refugee camps, to displacement in the US, a budding superstar emerges.

MEDIA CORNER

A STAR2 IS BORN

"As an artist, the bigger you get, the bigger fan base you get. There's more eyes and ears focusing on you! When I have enough attention and focus on me, then I'll let the world know about my people. I'm the first from my people to make it this far in the industry. I can't let them down. I've come a long way, and they are still suffering from the same things my family had to deal with before we came to the U.S. It's very sad and it motivates me to keep going and not give up."

These are the words of Star2, a Karen artist whose extraordinary journey has spanned continents and defied the odds. Born in a refugee camp in Thailand, Star2 and his family fled violence and persecution at the hands of the Burmese military. These early years were marked by a struggle to survive, with daily life centered around securing basic necessities like water and food. "Sometimes we had to ask our neighbors to borrow their rice," he recalls, adding that protein sources were far harder to locate, and often led him to trying to catch fish. "A cup full of rice would feed the whole family! I used to walk barefoot around the camp."

His grandmother's decision to take the family to the United States was a pivotal moment, offering a glimmer of hope amid all the hardship. They ended up in San Diego, California. Yet adjusting to life there came with its own set of challenges. The language barrier, cultural differences, and economic hardships were

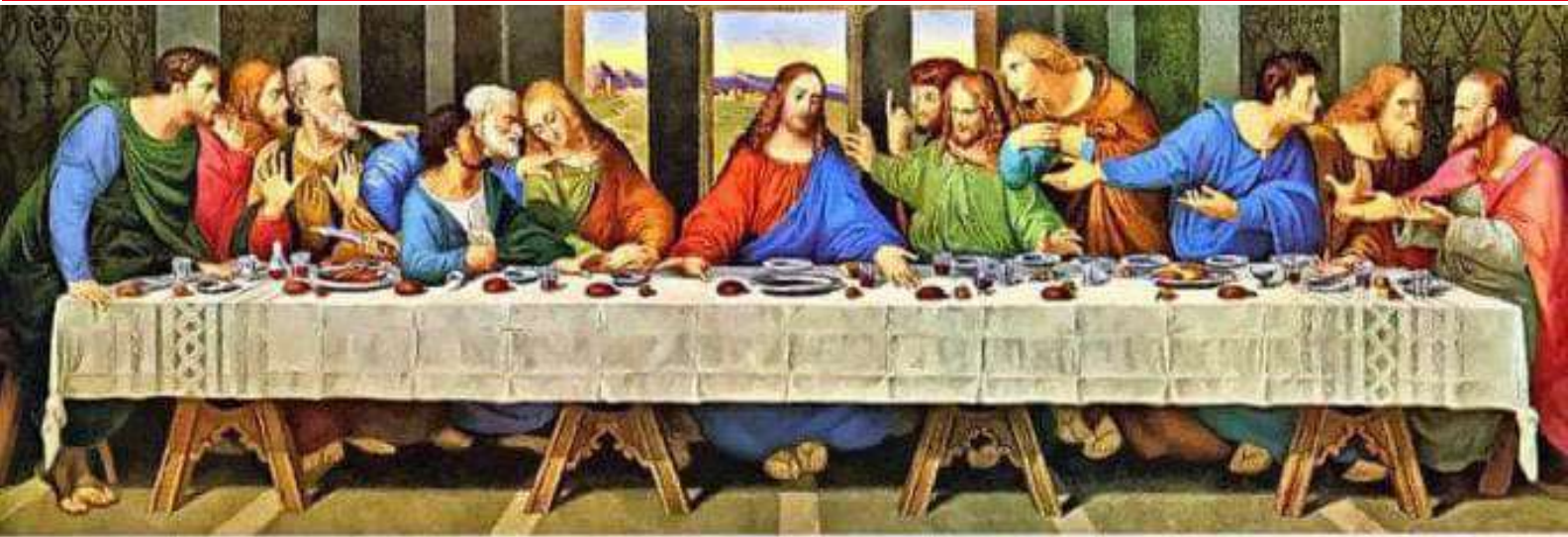
daunting, and Star2 faced bullying and isolation. But these experiences only fueled his determination. Music became his refuge, and his voice. Initially influenced by artists like Justin Bieber, he soon found a deeper connection with hip-hop, in particular Tupac Shakur and other West Coast rappers. "What inspires me is I know they all had their tough times. They all had to go through their path. So I feel like if they can make it, I can make it."

While Star2 hopes to be a beacon of hope for those Karen who are struggling to survive in the wake of the military coup, he also hopes his music transcends boundaries and resonates with people from all walks of life, no matter where they are from. Reflecting on his very diverse peer group growing up, he shares how it shaped his musical journey and worldview. "I had black friends, Mexican friends, Asian friends, not just Karen. That influenced me to become like them for a little bit, like when I started rapping and listening to hip hop."

CATCH THE PODCAST

Read more and listen to the Insight Myanmar Podcast here:

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2024/7/13/episode-252-a-star2-is-born>



Facebook meme depicting The Last Supper and a snapshot from the ceremony.



WITH OLYMPIC GAMES IN FULL SWING, OPENING CEREMONY CONTROVERSY SIMMERS ON

The controversy over the iconoclastic opening ceremony of the Paris Olympics is refusing to abate days into the Games, with conservative political figures worldwide condemning a show that has been staunchly defended by President Emmanuel Macron and its creators.

Friday's parade along the River Seine, the first time the opening ceremony for a summer Games has been held outside a stadium, featured celebrations of same-sex love, drag queens and a scene critics have alleged lampooned the Last Supper of Jesus Christ.

The ceremony's creator, French theatre director Thomas Jolly, has said that it aimed to create a "cloud of tolerance and love" while Macron has said the display made France "extremely proud".

With the controversy also swirling within France, a French lesbian activist who performed in the ceremony has filed a complaint with prosecutors over cyber-bullying and death threats.

"I'm very open-minded but I thought what they did was a disgrace," Republican Donald Trump, US president from 2017-2021 and frontrunner to regain the White House in this year's elections, told Fox News.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who hails from an Islamic-rooted party, condemned the opening ceremony for "immorality against all Christians" and said he would call Pope Francis to discuss the controversy.

"The Olympic Games have been used as a tool of perversion that corrupts human nature," said Erdogan.

The president said he had been invited by Macron but a warning from his 13-year-old granddaughter, who "showed me images on Instagram", persuaded him to pull out.

The X account of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who leads the theocratic Islamic republic, condemned "insults" he said were made against Christianity at the opening.

DANCERS AND DRAG QUEENS

Particular attention has focused on a scene including dancers and drag queens during Friday's show that was reminiscent of depictions of the Last Supper, the final meal that Jesus is said to have shared with his apostles.

Organisers have said they intended to portray a pagan feast led by the Greek god of wine Dionysus, and meant no offence. Jolly has denied there was any intention to represent the Last Supper.

The scene -- intended to promote tolerance of different sexual and gender identities -- also featured French actor Philippe Katerine as Dionysus, who appeared on a silver serving dish, almost naked and painted blue.

One of the performers in that tableau, Barbara Butch, a lesbian body-positive feminist and DJ, wrote on Instagram that she had become the target of "particularly violent... cyber-harassment" and said her lawyer had filed legal complaints with prosecutors.

"Although at first I decided not to speak out to let the haters cool down, the messages I receive are increasingly extreme," she said.

"I won't shut up. I'm not afraid of those who hide behind a screen, or a pseudonym, to spew their hatred and frustrations... I'm committed, and I'm proud."

She attached a statement by her lawyer Audrey Msellati saying her client had been "threatened with death, torture and rape" and had been the target of "anti-Semitic, homophobic, sexist and fat-shaming insults".

MANY UPSET

There has also been criticism from within France from extreme right wing figures including Marion Marechal and Eric Zemmour and in Italy from Italy's deputy prime minister, far-right League leader Matteo Salvini.

The French Bishops' Conference has also weighed in, saying the ceremony contained "scenes of derision and mockery of Christianity, which we deeply regret."

Nevertheless the French far-right National Rally (RN) of three-time presidential candidate Marine Le Pen has largely kept its distance from the controversy.

Olympics organising committee spokeswoman Anne Descamps said her team stood by its artists.

"We strongly condemn the cyber-bullying that our ceremony and artistic team have been subjected to," she said.

The scene that has sparked controversy "depicts a pagan feast," she insisted. "If any people have been offended, it was not intentional."

Another controversy relates to the television production of the show which was criticised by Jolly who said that the director had "missed a lot of moments".

But the subsidiary of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) responsible for filming the ceremony, Olympic Broadcasting Services, denied any failure, while acknowledging difficulties related to the rain and the scale of the show.

AFP



MYANMAR JUNTA STRENGTHENS TIES WITH CHINA'S SICHUAN AND CHONGQING

In a series of high-level meetings, Myanmar junta officials have been actively making efforts to engage with their Chinese counterparts to bolster bilateral relations.

On July 17, Kyaw Zeyar Lin, Consul General of the Myanmar Consulate-General in Chongqing, met with Zhang Tao, Director-General of the Foreign Affairs Office of Sichuan Provincial Government, according to state media. Their discussions centered on enhancing collaboration between Myanmar and Sichuan Province across various sectors, including economy, trade, education, culture, and tourism. A key point of discussion was the potential resumption of direct flights between Myanmar and Sichuan Province.

Just a day earlier, on July 16, Kyaw Zeyar Lin engaged in talks with Yang Lin, Director-General of the Port and Logistics Office of Chongqing Municipal Government. Their meeting focused on the operations of the International Land and Sea Trade Corridor (ILSTC) in Chongqing, exploring ways to improve transport and logistics services between Myanmar and Chongqing. The possibility of resuming direct flights between Chongqing and Yangon was also on the agenda.

In a related development, a high-level Myanmar delegation departed for China on July 21. Led by Than Swe, the junta's Deputy Prime Minister and Union Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Htun Ohn, the junta's Union Minister for Commerce, the delegation is set to participate in the 8th China-South Asia Expo and 28th China Kunming Export and Import Fair.

BIMSTEC SECRETARY-GENERAL VISITS MYANMAR AMID ONGOING POLITICAL TENSIONS

Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) Secretary-General Ambassador Indra Mani Pandey met with Myanmar junta's Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Lwin Oo in Nay Pyi Taw on July 23, 2024.

The officials discussed BIMSTEC cooperation mechanisms, regional food security, and future directions for the organization.

This introductory visit comes as Myanmar continues to grapple with political instability following the military coup in February 2021. Despite international condemnation and ongoing civil unrest, the military junta is making efforts to control the country. Economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation have severely impacted Myanmar's economy and foreign relations, while armed conflicts between the junta army and resistance groups persist in various areas.

The junta has been forced to cede control of significant territories, including major towns in northern Shan State and Rakhine, as ethnic armed groups and resistance forces continue to make substantial gains across the country.

BIMSTEC, established in 1997, comprises seven member states around the Bay of Bengal and aims to promote regional economic cooperation. Pandey, who assumed his role in January 2024, has been conducting introductory visits to all member states.



NUG MINISTER MEETS PHILIPPINE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Aung Myo Min, Union Minister for Human Rights in the cabinet of the shadow National Unity Government (NUG) of Myanmar met 26 July with the leadership of the Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines (CHRP) in Manila, according to the official Facebook page of the NUG.

The meeting, which included CHRP Chairperson Hon. Richard P. Palpal-Latoc and Commissioner Hon. Faydah Maniri Dumarpa, focused on the current human rights situation in Myanmar.

Minister Aung Myo Min discussed international actions against Myanmar's military junta, accountability for human rights violations, and the Philippines' stance on Myanmar's situation.

The CHRP expressed its commitment to collaborating with Myanmar's pro-democracy activists to better understand the country's human rights conditions and to work with the international community.

During the meeting, activists criticized junta-controlled Myanmar's National Human Rights Commission for its failure to speak out against the junta army's human rights abuses since the coup.

PRISONERS FREED FROM LASHIO PRISON

After the Kokang army named Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), political prisoners and non-political inmates have been released from Lashio Prison in northern Shan State, Myanmar, according to a social media report.

The prisoners' release took place on July 28, shortly after the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and its allied forces captured the military junta's Infantry Battalion (IB) 68 on July 27.

Reports of the incident emerged on some local news outlets and social media platforms early on July 28. While specific details about the release remain unclear, the news was greeted with widespread joy and gratitude among citizens. A social media user commented, "Our deepest thanks to the MNDAA. We hope you continue to safeguard our town's inhabitants."

The full impact of these releases and the shifting power dynamics in the area remain to be seen. As the situation unfolds, many social media users say they are hopeful for positive changes in the country's political landscape.

mizzima WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight



DIGITAL MAGAZINE

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