

ON THE GROUND IN MYANMAR

mizzima WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight



ASEAN'S MYANMAR FAILURE

Forum's failure rooted in its long history of irrelevance to conflict resolution in the 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.

FORCED MILITARY SERVICE INSTILLS FEAR INTO MYANMAR'S YOUTH

A climate of fear hangs over young people in Myanmar today. Both men and women are facing significant challenges due to the military junta's enforcement of the People's Military Service Law, which mandates compulsory military conscription. The move began in February 2024 and has seen thousands scooped up in the draft.

Reports indicate that individuals, including minors, have been abducted from urban areas and coerced into enlisting. Additionally, villagers have been compelled to serve as porters and human shields, exposing them to significant danger.

In response, many young individuals are fleeing the country, particularly to neighbouring Thailand, to evade mandatory service. This exodus has exacerbated the country's economic woes, leading to a brain drain and labour shortages, especially in sectors like agriculture. The departure of working-age individuals has contributed to food insecurity and rising food costs, according to a report by the East Asia Forum.

What is becoming increasingly clear is that many of the new recruits are ending up being sent to the various military fronts to fight, typically with limited or even no training. Anecdotal reports indicate a number of these recruits have died in battles and often the families are

not informed, or can only gain sketchy information on the fate of their loved ones.

The conscription efforts have led to retaliatory attacks by the resistance against local officials involved in recruitment, resulting in numerous deaths and resignations. This has further destabilized the country and intensified the challenges faced by young generation, who are caught between the threat of conscription and the dangers of resistance. It is harder to stand in the middle ground – neither fighting for the junta or taking up arms and fighting under the Spring Revolution banner.

The pervasive fear of conscription and the ongoing conflict have taken a psychological toll on Myanmar's youth. Many are experiencing anxiety and uncertainty about their futures, with some feeling compelled to join the resistance movement, while others seek refuge abroad. The disruption of education and employment opportunities has further compounded their challenges.

The enforcement of compulsory military service in Myanmar has created a climate of fear and uncertainty among Generation Z, leading to mass displacement, economic challenges, and significant psychological harm.

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Cover photo of female guard at an ASEAN meeting in Vientiane, Laos by AFP





Protestors in Australia call on ASEAN for action over the Myanmar crisis. Photo: AFP

ASEAN'S MYANMAR FAILURE FORUM'S FAILURE ROOTED IN ITS LONG HISTORY OF IRRELEVANCE TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE REGION

TOM FAWTHROP

If the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) ever believed that their 5-point plan in response to the 2021 Myanmar military coup would ever be implemented by the ruling junta, it was surely a case of wishful thinking.

The bland assumption that the coup regime was prepared to make concessions to the ASEAN plan - a signed pledge by the junta that committed all parties to ending violence, engaging in dialogue to find a peaceful solution and facilitating humanitarian assistance - reflects a very naïve understanding of how Myanmar's military caste has dominated the nation's politics and society for nearly 60 years, since its first coup back in 1962.

The UN and western countries have always deferred to "ASEAN centrality" in dealing with violent conflicts in their region. However, while the Myanmar crisis has escalated in every sector - aerial bombardment of civilians, military atrocities including the hacking off of heads and burning people alive, a tottering economy, food scarcity, malnutrition and waves of refugees - far from leading western countries towards a conflict resolution, ASEAN diplomacy has stalled around their 5-point proposal.

LONG TROUBLED HISTORY

If we look back at recent history of ASEAN's record in coping with regional crises in peace-making, and conflict resolution, then it should come as no surprise that they are floundering to come up with any new initiative to solve their Myanmar conundrum.

During the last 40 years when the region's leadership has been deeply challenged by - The Cambodia conflict (1979- 1991), Indonesia's bloody suppression of East Timor's struggle for self-determination (1980s-1999), South China Sea conflict with China, and the Thai-Cambodia border hostilities over Preah Vihear temple - have all been issues that cried out for an ASEAN initiative to set in motion peace-making or conflict resolution.

In the case of Cambodia, Dr Paul Chambers, a specialist in regional governance and military affairs, says "ASEAN's involvement in Cambodia, often had destructive results. Thailand worked with China, and the CIA together with ousted Khmer Rouge forces during the 1980s to overthrow the new government based in Phnom Penh."



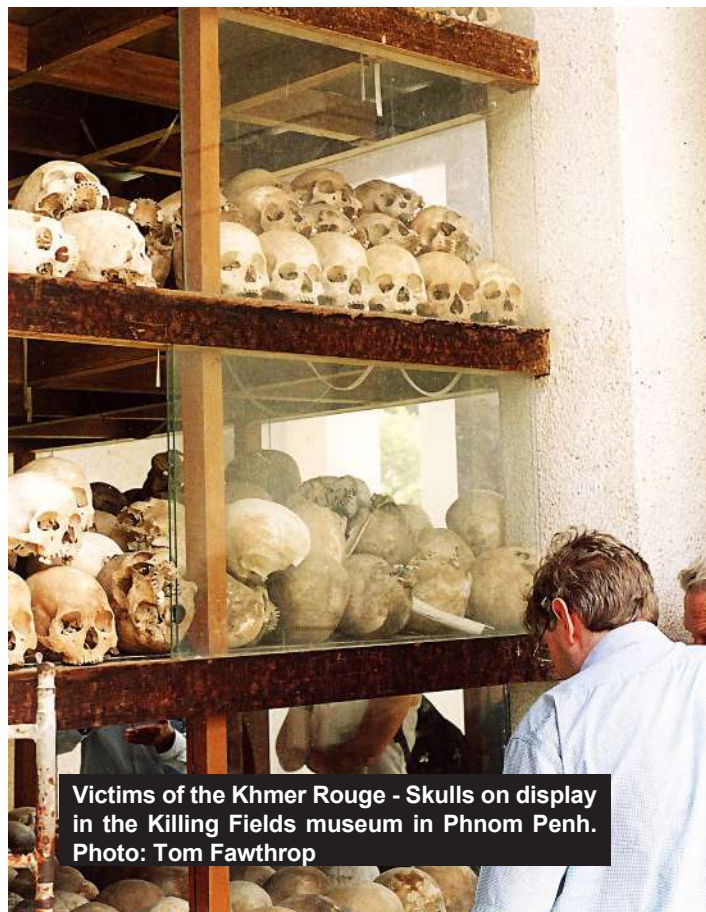
Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing arrives in Jakarta in April 2021 for an ASEAN meeting. Photo: AFP

While some ASEAN member states participated in UN peacekeeping in Cambodia's UN Peacekeeping Operation (UNTAC), it was always under the UN flag, in common with a UN operation in East Timor in 2000 (UNTAET).

The addition of new members added to ASEAN - now 10 member states - has made it harder than ever for this bloc to forge any unity on controversial issues - handicapped by a consensus rule that all states must be in agreement and a clear reluctance to "interfere" in their members' internal affairs.

For example, the strong complaints of three ASEAN members Vietnam, Philippines and Indonesia over China's aggressive tactics in the South China Sea, and Beijing's refusal to recognize their competing territorial claims over some of the archipelago's myriad islands, failed to get any support from support from Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, all heavily indebted to Beijing's aid and investment.

ASEAN's main achievements have always been focused on increasing regional cooperation in trade, infrastructure, and economic development where it was relatively easy for the 10 member states to reach a consensus.



Victims of the Khmer Rouge - Skulls on display in the Killing Fields museum in Phnom Penh. Photo: Tom Fawthrop

Dr Chambers, author and co-editor of "Khaki Capital: The Political Economy of the Military in Southeast Asia" told Mizzima, "ASEAN has never shown itself to be successful in resolving previous conflicts."

Since the Myanmar military junta signed but then snubbed ASEAN's resolution shortly after their coup, Myanmar has plummeted into war, economic crisis, and prompted a massive flood of refugees, food scarcity, and collapse of the health and education services. This certainly raises serious doubts about why the EU, and other western countries should be waiting for ASEAN to come up with any solutions.

The reality on the ground inside Myanmar dooms ASEAN's formula for peace based on deeper engagement and dialogue with all parties including the State Administration Council (SAC) or military junta as just the empty rhetoric of a talking shop.

ASEAN's only sanction on the SAC is confined to the exclusion of Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing from summit meetings. However, under the radar, SAC officials attend regional meetings on everything from connectivity, climate change, drugs and crime, free trade and foreign affairs.

The opposition National Unity Government (NUG) that includes representatives of the former elected National League for Democracy (NLD) government, has reminded ASEAN that the UN General Assembly has firmly rejected the SAC-Junta credentials and strongly condemned the coup.

This means that in International Law the SAC is an illegal regime still craving for recognition according to UN human rights rapporteur for Myanmar, Tom Andrews. He argues that since 2021, it has lost its status as even a "De Facto" regime, owing to the armed resistance armies battlefield victories, which puts them in control of over 50 per cent of the territory.

A new think-tank based in Bangkok founded by former Thai journalist Mr. Supalak Ganjanakhundee concludes that: "For ASEAN, the situation in Myanmar has yet again, put the concepts of 'ASEAN Centrality' and 'non-interference' in internal affairs, to a test and challenged their viability in a fast-changing world."

Critics are questioning the ability of ASEAN member states to effectively resolve their political emergencies,

according to the report: Thailand & Myanmar at The Crossroads: Strategic Pathways to Regional Peace and Stability CSP Bangkok published by Mizzima Weekly.

LESSONS FROM CAMBODIA?

Can ASEAN learn lessons from Cambodia's defeat of an intransigent pariah regime and its pathway to peace?

In the period of almost four years since the 2021 Myanmar coup, ASEAN's softly, softly diplomacy in dealing with the Myanmar junta, stands in stark contrast to the ever-worsening situation and the war raging inside the country.

"We have collected substantial evidence showing horrific levels of brutality and inhumanity across Myanmar," said Nicholas Koumjian, chief of the UN's Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM). Their report, which covers July 1, 2023-June 30, 2024, said the conflict had "escalated substantially" and "at an alarming rate." These UN fact-finding reports are shared with the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing is the first Myanmar coup leader to be accused by the ICC of crimes against humanity linked to a "genocidal persecution" of the minority Rohingya back in 2017 in an ongoing UN case that preceded the 2021 coup.

Calls have been made by UN human rights bodies

that the ICC should now expand its Myanmar mandate and jurisdiction to cover the junta leader to be held accountable for multiple war-crimes since the 2021 coup. Tom Andrews, UN rapporteur on Myanmar declared that, "Systematic, gross human rights violations, amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity, are being perpetrated daily on the people of Myanmar," in a report to UN Human Rights Council.

If this assessment is correct, then surely the military junta now ranks as the worst regime in the region since the Khmer Rouge brought in Year- Zero and terrorized the Cambodian people between 1975-79? Dr Chambers responds: "Yes, I think that is an accurate assessment."

ASEAN OBLIVIOUS

On the other hand, ASEAN remains oblivious to human rights and war crimes issues that have cast the coup regime as a pariah state at the UN headquarters in New York.

ASEAN's core interests have always centred on connectivity, infrastructure and trade. Human rights apparently has such a low priority among that nine member-states that they have never joined the 124 ICC member states.

Cambodia alone is the only member of the ICC and the only Asian country that has so far hosted a UN-backed Tribunal based on international law to



Pol Pot, right, on a trip with the Chinese Ambassador to Beijing. Photo: Supplied

investigate and judge the senior leaders of the Khmer Rouge "Killing Fields" regime, a tribunal that officiated in the 2006-2024 period.

While there are many differences in comparing the two phenomena - Myanmar's disastrous military rule and the genocidal rule of the Khmer Rouge that lasted only four years - there are some intriguing parallels.

What can we learn from Cambodia's long path to peace and how they ended the Khmer Rouge nightmare?

The sheer scale of atrocities committed by the Myanmar military directly targeting the civilian gatherings, systematic arson of villages, of schools, health clinics and religious buildings adds up to a prima facie legal case of the worse war crimes in South East Asia, since the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime (1975-79).

The Myanmar Armed Forces or Tatmadaw that staged the first coup in 1962 led by General Ne Win, ousted a fledgling democracy. The ideology and mindset of the military still clinging onto power, remains remarkably unchanged almost 60 years later.

In the early 1960s Burma and Cambodia (along with the Philippines) were regarded as the three most advanced countries in the region, when Singapore and Malaysia were still British colonies and Thailand lagged behind their neighbours.

However, the twin disasters of military rule in Myanmar from 1962, and US bombing and the rise of the genocidal regime in Cambodia in the early 1970s wrecked their development potential, and sent waves of refugees abroad to form major diaspora populations in Australia, France, US and the UK.

After independence Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, soon overtook Myanmar, Cambodia and the Philippines (that lagged under the baggage of martial law declared by President Ferdinand Marcos in 1971.)

The peoples of Myanmar suffered military dictatorship from 1962 to 2011 - with an interlude that could be termed a sort of "Myanmar Spring" which spawned an NLD-led government from 2015-2020.

Now the 2021 coup has added four more years to the previous 49 years of economic misery and absolutist military rule.

Could ASEAN learn something from some parallels between the historical role of military regimes in Myanmar, the 1962 Ne Win coup and how the Khmer Rouge Killing Fields plunged Cambodia back into the dark ages until their last surviving leaders surrendered in 1999?

The Khmer Rouge regime was overthrown by both an anti-Pol Pot dissident army and Vietnamese regular troops leading to a swift victory and capture of Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979.

A UN Peacekeeping Mission organised Cambodia's first ever fully democratic election which the Khmer Rouge attempted but failed to disrupt.

The appeal for demoralised Khmer Rouge soldiers to surrender worked well in Cambodia, and has been effective to some extent in Myanmar, where whole battalions have waved the white flag in Karen, Rakhine and northern Shan states.

Since the coup, more than 12,341 junta personnel - more than 5,000 soldiers and 9,326 police - have defected to the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), according to Myanmar's "The People's Embrace" a revolutionary group helping defectors.

The attempt by the UN and the Paris Peace Treaty to impose dialogue and reconciliation with the Khmer Rouge faction failed. After the UNTAC departed, the new government branded them as outlaws.

The NUG and ethnic armed groups have also mapped out a plan to exclude senior officers of the junta from any role in a future democratic government and that Myanmar's military must be completely restructured.

In Phnom Penh, the government always reserved the right to arrest senior leaders for genocidal crimes and in cooperation with the UN put them on trial. Cambodia's Khmer Rouge War Crimes Tribunal began in 2006.

The NUG-Resistance movement has adopted a similar policy that all Myanmar's senior intelligence, military and police officers will one day face justice in a tribunal under the auspices of the UN International Law and the Genocide Convention.

NOTE: This correspondent wishes to clarify that while the Cambodia Tribunal made significant contributions to the advance of international justice with the genre of a "mixed tribunal" – a panel of both international and local judges, prosecutors, and defence lawyers; sadly these standards have not been adopted in Cambodia's domestic courts that are now more than ever controlled by an authoritarian state.

ASEAN REFORM NEEDED?

ASEAN will need major reforms to develop an effective peacekeeping and conflict infrastructure to bolster its standing in the world in the wake of the Cambodian and Myanmar crises.

Whereas ASEAN prides itself on being one of the developing world's most successful regional blocs, it can be argued that it lags behind Africa and the regional bloc of the African Union (AU) in the field of peacekeeping and conflict resolution.

The AU has led peace operations in 17 African countries, with more than 70,000 authorized personnel. Among the AU's achievements it has assisted in resolving post-election violence in the Ivory Coast, and Kenya and pressured the coup-makers to hand back power to civilian governments. The main arm of peacekeeping is led by the regional Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

An example of the AU's "zero tolerance" policy for military coups is the fact that Gabon remains suspended from the African Union after the 2023 military coup. But Sudan has proved to be the most intractable of all the many coups that has defied all attempts at mediation over many years, and instability still wracks several Saharan countries, not least Niger and Mali.

Although the African continent is still plagued with coups, the spirit of democracy and good governance enshrined by the AU covering a huge continent of 55 nation states is in itself an impressive achievement.

AFRICA-ASEAN COMPARISONS

By contrast the complete lack of any red lines to define unacceptable rogue behaviour on the part of any ASEAN member – most obviously Myanmar – demonstrates ASEAN's shameful abdication to apply any basic common principle of good governance.

The historical lessons from past regional conflicts suggest that deepening ties with a regime so hated by its own citizens will solve nothing and will not facilitate the end of the war, that inevitably spills over Myanmar's porous borders with Bangladesh, China, India and Thailand.

The Myanmar crisis has a massive impact on its neighbours from the spill-over proliferation of cyber-crime, drug trafficking, health challenges and a refugee exodus – plus the negative effects on the ASEAN forum and the hampering of further regional development.

ASEAN is losing status on the world stage as the Myanmar crisis continues. But biting the bullet in making necessary changes to the forum's peacekeeping infrastructure will be a tough call.

As Nyein Kaung, an NUG-aligned academic, has pointed out, there is "reputational damage done to ASEAN, if it chooses to stand by as a spectator, while Myanmar burns, it shows itself to be weak, and incapable of protecting its own [interests]."

Tom Fawthrop is a veteran British journalist who has covered Southeast Asia since the 1970s. He has reported inside Myanmar for The Economist in 2002 and again in 2012-2013, and produced several documentaries for DVB TV including "The Last Undammed River - The Campaign to stop all hydropower dams along the Salween River". He is co-author of the book "Getting away with Genocide? Elusive Justice & the Khmer Rouge Tribunal" that covered the long struggle to set up the Cambodian tribunal and bring senior Khmer Rouge to justice for the crimes against humanity & genocide during their rule.



FLASHBACK - Senior General Min Aung Hlaing votes in the 2020 election. Photo: AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA SEEKS 'DIGNITY PARLIAMENT' UNDER POLL GOAL

Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing has reiterated his administration's intention to hold a general election in 2025, emphasizing the goal of forming a "dignity parliament" and transferring state power to the elected party.

Speaking during the 77th Independence Day address on January 4, the State Administration Council (SAC) president stated that holding a multi-party general election remains the council's ultimate objective.

On January 9, while meeting Belarusian Foreign Minister Maxim Ryzhenkov, Min Aung Hlaing confirmed the 2025 election timeline but refrained from specifying exact dates. Sources close to the junta speculate that the election schedule might be announced in May or July, the poll set for near the end of the year, possibly

November, with a potential transfer of power projected for April 2026.

In preparation for the election, the junta's Union Election Commission (UEC) has begun technical groundwork, including integrating voter information into the Central Voter List Management System (CVLMS). The UEC president indicated ongoing efforts to organize voter data ahead of the anticipated polls.

Despite these announcements, the timeline's lack of clarity and the junta's motives continue to draw skepticism from observers and the international community. Given the assumption that the "democratic" election would be held under the military-written 2008 Constitution, the outcome would ensure the military retain the levers of power, under a pro-military "democratic" government. The main pro-military party



Bombed and burnt Khauk Ni Maw village.
Photo: AFP

is the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Former leader Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party is disqualified from running, its leader in prison.

International response to deadly Khauk Ni Maw village attack

The United Nations representative office in Myanmar has issued a strong statement condemning a deadly airstrike by Myanmar's military on Kyauk Nimaw village, Ramree Island in Rakhine State. The attack, which occurred on January 8, claimed the lives of over 40 civilians, including women and children, and left more than 20 people injured.

In its statement, the UN called on all parties to the conflict to adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian law. It urged them to prioritize the protection of civilian lives and property, safeguard humanitarian workers and supplies, and ensure unimpeded access for delivering aid to the most vulnerable populations.

The airstrike has drawn international criticism as a stark reminder of the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, exacerbated by the junta's military campaigns against resistance forces in the region. The junta has lost many of its bases in Rakhine to the Arakan Army.



Visitors to a solar electricity generating exhibition in Yangon in January 2025. Photo: AFP

Blackouts plague Yangon and Mandalay.

Myanmar is grappling with a severe electricity shortage, with the junta's Electric and Energy Development Commission attributing the crisis to four primary factors: reduced natural gas extraction, maintenance of natural gas pipelines, disruptions caused by natural disasters such as floods, and sabotage of the national grid and power stations by what it terms "terrorists."

Starting January 5, the Yangon Region Electric Power Corporation announced a schedule of four hours of electricity followed by eight hours of outages due to insufficient power supply. According to an Electric Office staff member, Yangon has been divided into three regions - A, B, and C - each receiving electricity for only eight hours daily. The staff member noted, "This may continue through January due to ongoing gas pipeline repairs. Even after repairs, power supply will remain

challenging, especially in summer, when hydropower production typically declines."

The national grid currently generates only 1,700 megawatts, 30% of actual usage, daily, far short of the 5,443 megawatts required. Yangon residents report inconsistent electricity schedules, with some receiving power for just three hours daily.

While the population endures these shortages, the junta is promoting solar energy as a potential solution. Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing has urged businesses to collaborate on solar power projects, which he claims can be implemented quickly. Meanwhile, his son, Aung Pyae Sone, is reportedly importing solar panels under various company names and constructing solar power plants at key power stations, raising concerns about cronyism amid the ongoing crisis.

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Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg.
Photo: AFP

HUMAN RIGHTS MYANMAR RAISES CONCERN OVER META-FACEBOOK CHANGES

Human Rights Myanmar released a statement on 8 January calling attention to the potential threats posed by new rule changes at Meta/Facebook. The statement notes how changes in content moderation can have serious consequences in the real world for Myanmar.

The text of the statement is as follows.

Mark Zuckerberg's announcement of significant changes to Meta's content moderation policies raises serious concerns for Myanmar, where Facebook has both enabled anti-coup dissent and fuelled real-world consequences, including contributing to atrocities against the Rohingya. While fostering free expression is commendable, Meta also has heightened legal and moral responsibilities under international human rights law and its previous commitments to prevent its platforms from enabling harm in high-risk environments like Myanmar.

Return to free expression must start with algorithms

Zuckerberg's acknowledgement that Meta's content moderation systems make "too many mistakes" is a positive step, as over-moderation stifles

legitimate expression and censors reliable sources, including Myanmar's independent media. However, restoring freedom of expression should first address Meta's algorithms, which prioritise emotive content—including disinformation and divisive rhetoric—over trustworthy sources. In Myanmar, where such content fuels violence, tackling algorithmic bias is essential. Moderation alone cannot resolve the issue if harmful content remains prioritised for profit.

Meta's goal of fostering "friendly and positive" platforms again misreads contexts like Myanmar, where people face widespread human rights violations and censorship, going online to seek truth and accountability—not superficial positivity. Meta must emphasise accurate and context-aware content over sentiment.

Eliminating fact-checkers weakens truth-seeking efforts

Meta's decision to phase out fact-checkers, first in the U.S. and then globally, in favour of community-based systems is concerning, especially in Myanmar, where military propaganda and misinformation campaigns are rampant online. Zuckerberg's use of

language discrediting fact-checkers as “politically biased” mirrors authoritarian regimes’ attacks on civil society.

Fact-checkers counter false narratives in Myanmar often spread by a military that simultaneously attacks independent media and civil society. They are digital safeguards that promote truth and integrity in public discourse. Indeed, Meta’s Human Rights Impact Assessment recommended that the company support fact-checkers in Myanmar. If fact-checkers’ public reach is limited, Meta could easily amplify their influence. Many fact-checkers are journalists so withdrawing support also threatens the long-term viability of independent media, a critical pillar of democratic societies.

Reintroducing current affairs content is positive, but Ameri-centric approach persists

Zuckerberg’s announcement to reverse the earlier deprioritisation of current affairs content is welcome. A coalition of Myanmar’s civil society and independent media previously warned Meta that deprioritising current affairs content globally because of political polarisation in America would undermine public access to independent news in countries like Myanmar, given the severe restrictions on traditional media in the country.

While the policy reversal is positive, it highlights Meta’s continued Ameri-centric approach in which global decisions are shaped by American political priorities, often disregarding the diverse needs of people worldwide that would be best served by prior consultation and potentially localised policies.

Free expression must be balanced with protection from harm

Meta’s plan to promote free expression by removing “out of touch” restrictions on topics such as immigration and gender shows a similar Ameri-centric approach to balancing human rights according to American political priorities that raises serious concerns in the Myanmar context.

Discriminatory online speech targeting the Rohingya—often framed as claims about illegal migration—contributed to atrocity crimes in the country.

Thousands of women and transgender persons have suffered from online harassment and abuse leading to real-world consequences. Establishing the right balance between protecting freedom of expression and protecting other rights cannot be done on a global level and should not be done without proper due diligence.

Challenge global digital dictators, not protectors

Zuckerberg’s pledge to collaborate with the U.S. administration to resist governmental pressures on digital platforms could positively impact Myanmar, where the military seeks to control the digital space.

However, Meta must prioritise challenging truly oppressive regimes rather than use human rights language to cloak a pushback on democratic governments attempting to protect human rights such as privacy and data protection.

Meta has human rights responsibilities

Meta has conducted Human Rights Impact Assessments on Myanmar and other high-risk countries after admitting its platforms enabled human rights violations, including crimes against the Rohingya. These assessments are part of the United Nations’ Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which Meta has committed to follow. Meta’s Myanmar assessment emphasises the need for context-based decisions and prior consultation. However, there is no indication that Meta has conducted adequate due diligence outside the U.S. ahead of these global changes. HRM fears this clear oversight could foreshadow a repeat of past mistakes.



Rohingya children at a reception centre in Indonesia. Photo: AFP

NEARLY HALF OF ROHINGYA REFUGEES LEAVING ON BOATS IN 2024 WERE CHILDREN

In 2024, children accounted for nearly half—44%—of the predominantly Rohingya refugees who left Bangladesh and Myanmar by boat. As the number of people taking to sea continues to grow, approximately 460 individuals have made the journey so far in 2025, according to Save the Children in a statement released on 08 January.

The Save the Children statement continues below.

Last year, more than 7,800 Rohingya refugees embarked on perilous boat journeys, an increase of 80% on 2023. UN data showed 44% of documented arrivals were children compared with 37% in 2023*. A total of 656 passengers were reported dead or missing in 2024 compared with 416 in 2023, the highest number since 2014.

So far 2025 has seen no let-up in the number of people embarking on the journey despite flimsy fishing boats often spending weeks at sea, with food and water sometimes running out before reaching land.

On 5 January, 254 Rohingya people landed in Aceh in Indonesia with 10 people reported missing or dead. Save the Children's partner organisation, the Geutanyoe Foundation, said 118 children were among the new arrivals.

Two days earlier 196 refugees arrived by boat in Langkawi in Malaysia with police detaining the new arrivals on the island. Two other boats are thought to be still at sea after authorities reportedly gave passengers food and water before escorting them out of Malaysian waters. Malaysia does not formally recognise refugees and has previously turned away boats or detained people as illegal migrants.

More than one million Rohingya refugees live in the world's largest refugee settlement at Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Since fleeing violence in Myanmar more than seven years ago, they are stateless and confined to camps, often in squalid and overcrowded conditions. Refugees are almost entirely dependent on humanitarian aid to survive.

Sultana Begum, Asia head of humanitarian policy and advocacy for Save the Children, said:

"Since February 2022, thousands of Rohingya refugee children have taken life threatening boat journeys from Bangladesh and Myanmar. Thousands of children who have got on rickety boats in the scorching sun with meagre supplies of food and water. Thousands of children who have no guarantee they will get to safety and have risked everything in the hope of a better future.

"2025 must not be yet another year of despair for Rohingya refugees. The surge in life threatening boat journeys in 2024, taken predominantly by Rohingya refugees, should sound a global alarm.

"Escalating conflict in Myanmar, and the deteriorating conditions in the Bangladesh camps, including violence, dwindling humanitarian aid, lack of freedom of movement, and limited access to education and livelihoods, is driving these risky journeys which often take refugees through several different countries in Asia.

"Regional governments must act decisively. All governments in the region must live up to their international obligations. They must not push refugee boats back and allow them to land safely, provide legal protection in transit and destination countries and address the root causes of boat journeys."

Save the Children is one of the leading international NGOs working in the Cox's Bazar camps in Bangladesh, providing child protection, access to learning, health and nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene services, and distribution of shelter and food items. We have reached about 600,000 Rohingya refugees, including more than 320,000 children, since the response began in 2017.



KIA in Mansi. Photo: KIA

KIA CAPTURES MANSI, WARNS OF INTENSIFIED FIGHTING IN BHAMO

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) successfully seized control of all Myanmar junta camps in Mansi Township, Kachin State, as of 8 January. It expects battles around Bhamo will escalate, according to Colonel Naw Bu, the KIA's information officer.

Key strategic sites, including the camps of Light Infantry Battalions 319 and 601 and Field Artillery Regiment 523, were captured during the operation. This marks the complete liberation of Mansi from junta control.

"Some junta soldiers were killed, while others were captured. Mansi is now free from junta control," Colonel Naw Bu said, adding that the KIA also seized weapons and ammunition, though the exact details remain undisclosed.

The operation in Mansi follows a broader offensive launched by the KIA and allied forces on Bhamo Township beginning on 4 December. With Mansi now under their control, revolutionary forces aim to intensify their operations in Bhamo.

"Although we have secured Mansi, major junta strongholds in Bhamo, including Military Operational Command 21, remain under their control. The fighting will undoubtedly escalate," Colonel Naw Bu said.

On 8 January, fierce clashes were reported in Bhamo town, particularly near key military sites, including the Infantry Battalion 47 camp, Tamong Lon Ward, and areas along the 2-mile, 3-mile, and 4-mile markers, as well as Bhamo University.



MYANMAR JUNTA TRANSFERS SENIOR MILITARY OFFICERS TO CIVILIAN MINISTRIES AMID MANPOWER DEPLETION

Several senior officers from Myanmar’s military junta, including colonels and lieutenant colonels, were reassigned in late 2024 to civilian ministries, as reported in Myanmar gazettes published in December 2024 and early January 2025.

The transferred officers include Colonel Min Thaw Aye and Lieutenant Colonels Wai Yan Oo, Soe Myat Thu, and Thi Han Oo. They have taken up roles in the Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs, the Nay Pyi Taw Council Development Committee, the Anti-Corruption Commission office, and the General Administration Department.

Currently, transferred colonels occupy deputy director-general roles in civilian departments, while lieutenant colonels typically serve as deputy directors.

In November 2024, a brigadier general was also appointed to a joint position in the Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs.

Since the military coup, the junta has grappled with manpower shortages in governance sectors due to ongoing conflicts, prompting an increase in the transfer of military officers to civilian ministries. While captains represent the majority of these transfers, recent data indicate a growing trend of assigning colonels and lieutenant colonels to civilian roles.

The practice of transferring military personnel to civilian departments has existed since previous military regimes. It declined during the administration of the National League for Democracy (NLD), but has significantly surged under the current military junta, according to a former military captain who joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and spoke to Mizzima.

Currently, officers at the ranks of lieutenant, captain, and major continue to be reassigned to various ministries. In November 2024, personnel were transferred to the Myanmar Trade Promotion Organization, the Department of Consumer Affairs, the Department of Disaster Management, and the Electricity Supply Enterprise.

Data compiled by Mizzima reveal that over 300 military officers were reassigned to civilian positions between 2023 and May 2024.

MYANMAR JUNTA AIR STRIKE ON RAKHINE VILLAGE KILLS 40: ETHNIC ARMED GROUP, RESCUE WORKER

People watch as the village burns.
Photo: AFP

A Myanmar junta air strike killed at least 40 people in a village in western Rakhine state, a rescue worker and ethnic minority armed group told AFP on Thursday.

The Arakan Army (AA) is engaged in a fierce fight with the military for control of Rakhine, where it has seized swathes of territory in the past year, all but cutting off the capital Sittwe.

The Rakhine conflict is one element of the bloody chaos that has engulfed Myanmar since the military ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government in a 2021 coup, sparking a widespread armed uprising.

AA spokesperson Khaing Thu Kha told AFP a military jet bombed Kyauk Ni Maw, on Ramree island, around 1:20 pm (0650 GMT) on Wednesday, starting a fire which engulfed more than 500 houses.

"According to initial reports, 40 innocent civilians were killed and 20 were wounded," he said.

A member of a local rescue group whose team was helping people in the area told AFP that 41 people were killed and 52 wounded.

"At the moment, we don't even have enough betadine and methylated spirit to treat them as the transportation is hard," the rescue worker said on condition of anonymity to protect their safety.

- Charred ruins -

Photos of the aftermath of the bombing showed dazed residents walking through charred, smoking ruins, the ground littered with corrugated metal, trees stripped bare of leaves and buildings reduced to a few

scraps of walls.

AFP has attempted to contact the junta for comment on the incident, but calls have not been answered.

Ramree island is home to a planned China-backed deep sea port that when completed will serve as a gateway for Beijing to the Indian Ocean, though construction has been stalled by the unrest.

The military is struggling to fight opposition to its rule on multiple fronts around the country and it has been regularly accused of using air and artillery strikes to hit civilian communities.

As well as youth-led "People's Defence Forces" that emerged to oppose the coup, the military is also battling numerous long-established and well-armed ethnic minority armed groups, including the AA, which control large areas of territory along the country's borders.

In November, the UN Development Programme warned that Rakhine was heading towards famine as fighting squeezed commerce and agricultural production.

The United Nations last week said that more than 3.5 million people have been displaced by the conflict in Myanmar -- an increase of 1.5 million from last year.

The outlook for the coming year was "grim", the UN humanitarian agency OCHA said, with 19.9 million people -- more than a third of the population -- likely to need aid in 2025.

AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA'S AMNESTY FALLS SHORT: ONLY 344 POLITICAL PRISONERS RELEASED ON INDEPENDENCE DAY

The Myanmar Political Prisoners Network (PPNM) has criticized the Myanmar junta for misrepresenting the number of political prisoners released as part of its Independence Day amnesty.

Although the council announced a pardon for 5,864 prisoners, including nearly 600 political detainees, only 344 political prisoners were actually released.

According to PPNM, the list of released prisoners has not been disclosed, raising concerns over the junta's intention to manipulate the data for political advantage.

Among those released, 208 were male, 131 female, and five individuals whose genders are still being confirmed. The releases spanned 42 prisons, but no political prisoners were freed from facilities such as Patheingyi, Kawthaung, Bhamaw, Loikaw, and Gantgaw prisons.

PPNM steering committee member Ko Thaik Htun Oo accused the junta of obscuring the true figures.

"It is difficult to obtain accurate information on political prisoners. This situation is being exploited for political gain," he said.

In its announcement, the junta claimed that life sentences for 144 prisoners were commuted to 15 years. However, it withheld details regarding the prisoners affected, prompting warnings from revolutionary groups to continue monitoring the situation.

Notable individuals among the released include Dr. Khet Aung, former Chief Minister of Kachin State under the National League for Democracy (NLD). He had been in custody since 1 February 2021, following the military coup by the State Administration Council (SAC). He was sentenced to a total of 12 years in prison, receiving three years for each of the four charges under Section 55 of the Anti-Corruption law.

Additionally, actress Thin Zar Wint Kyaw, who was sentenced to five years under Section 33(a) of the Electronic Communications Act was among the released.

Data from the Institute for Strategy and Policy-Myanmar (ISP Myanmar) revealed that between February 2021 and January 2025, only 8.6% of political prisoners have been pardoned in the 16 amnesties announced by the junta.

Over this period, 101,729 prisoners were released, including 8,762 political detainees. ISP Myanmar estimates that 21,499 political prisoners have been arrested since the 2021 coup, with at least 9,985 of them facing sentences ranging from one year to the death penalty.

PPNM and ISP Myanmar have called for continued scrutiny of the junta's actions, emphasizing the need for transparency and accountability in the handling of political detainees.

MYANMAR JUNTA BOMBS MOGOK WHILE TNLA CALLS FOR POLITICAL TALKS

On January 8, around 1 pm, the junta launched a bombing raid on Mogok, a town in Mandalay Region under the control of the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). The attack reportedly involved at least 10 bombings.

The airstrike coincided with the TNLA's announcement of their willingness to engage in political discussions.

"As far as we know, the bombs were dropped in the eastern part of Mogok. There were claims of around 20 bombs, but we are unsure of the severity of the damage, the extent of destruction, or whose homes were affected," said a Mogok resident.

The Ta'ang Women's Organization (TWO) acknowledged the incident and confirmed they are investigating the scale of the damage.

According to the NAS webpage, which monitors military air activity nationwide, a Y-12 Military Light Transport Aircraft took off from Mandalay's Tada-U Air Force base, began its attack on Mogok at 1:00 pm and returned to base at 1:51 pm. Telegram channels supporting the junta reported that the Mogok golf course was one of the targets.

On 25 November 2024, the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF), the political wing of the TNLA, announced its readiness to engage in talks to end the ongoing conflict. The statement highlighted the suffering of civilians severely affected by the junta's airstrikes and the war in the Ta'ang region of northern Shan State. It also acknowledged China's role in stabilizing the border and facilitating a potential ceasefire.

No negotiations have taken place between the junta and the TNLA by late December.

However, TNLA spokesman Lway Yay Oo expressed hope in December that talks could materialize through Chinese intervention.

Despite the PSLF/TNLA's call for dialogue, clashes have continued in various areas, including Taung Kham village in Nawngkhio Township and several other parts of Mandalay Region.



Internally-displaced people take shelter in a Buddhist monastery in Rakhine State. Photo: AFP

RAKHINE CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS URGE INTERNATIONAL ACTION TO PREVENT SCARCITY AMID JUNTA BLOCKADE

Myanmar's military junta has blocked food and medicine supplies to Rakhine State for nearly a year, leaving residents in dire conditions. Rakhine civil society groups are calling on the international community and humanitarian organizations to collaborate with the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA) to deliver aid and avert a looming famine in the conflict-stricken region.

The junta cut off food supplies when fighting resumed in Rakhine State on 13 November 2023, worsening the hardships faced by local communities.

Clashes between the Arakan Army (AA) and the junta forces, coupled with intense airstrikes, have devastated the region, leading to critical shortages of

goods and medicine and causing prices to skyrocket.

"We are facing a shortage of goods and have been enduring this for more than a year. We are also struggling with skyrocketing prices," said Wai Hin Aung, an author and aid worker assisting displaced people in Rakhine State.

The scarcity of medicines has reached a critical point, forcing many to rely on expired supplies.

"Rakhine is experiencing a severe shortage of medicines. While some are brought in from India and border areas, the supplies are insufficient, and some patients have no choice but to use expired medications,"

said Ma Khin Mar Htwe, General Secretary of the All Arakan Students' & Youths' Congress (AASYC).

The ULA/AA has been working to provide basic healthcare and ensure the flow of goods and aid in areas under its control. Collaborating with traders and residents, the AA has sought to bring supplies through the borders of India and Bangladesh. Despite these efforts, resources remain inadequate.

The Arakan Army currently controls 14 of Rakhine State's townships, along with Paletwa in Chin State. The Rakhine State capital of Sittwe and the townships of Kyaukphyu and Munaung remain in junta control.

"The ULA is a capable organization with significant resources. The Arakan Army is committed to preventing famine and has taken every possible measure to address the crisis," said Wai Hin Aung.

However, the situation remains dire. Displacement due to military airstrikes and the junta's continued blockades have disrupted daily life, leaving residents struggling for survival.

In late 2024, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) warned that up to two million people in Rakhine State could face famine by 2025. On 17 December, Burma Campaign UK urged UN Secretary-General António Guterres to visit Bangladesh to discuss aid delivery and reopening trade routes to Rakhine State.

"Instead of merely stating that two million people are at risk, international NGOs and INGOs should take action. Many displaced people are in areas controlled by the Arakan Army, not the military junta. These organizations should collaborate with the AA to truly assist those in need," said Wai Hin Aung.

Critics argue that providing aid through the junta will only exacerbate the crisis.

"The Military Council is actively blocking roads and cutting off food supplies. If aid is funnelled through the junta, it will never reach the displaced people," said Ma Khin Mar Htwe.

Similarly, U James Shwe, a Myanmar activist in the United States, told Mizzima that Myanmar activists abroad, in collaboration with organizations in the Rakhine region, are urging the international community and the Bangladesh government to provide humanitarian aid through the border areas.

Meanwhile, IDP camps in Rakhine State are facing additional challenges, including the spread of skin infections and a severe lack of medical supplies. Without urgent international intervention, the humanitarian crisis in Rakhine continues to escalate, with millions of lives hanging in the balance.

RAKHINE REBELS SEIZE FIRST POLICE STATION IN MYANMAR'S HEARTLAND

The Arakan Army has seized a police station in the Ayeyarwaddy region, the first in Myanmar's heartland to fall to the ethnic Rakhine rebels since the 2021 military coup.

Until now, the Arakan Army, or AA, has been fighting junta troops in Rakhine state, in Myanmar's west, where it controls nearly all townships, and other states and regions on the country's periphery.

Now the emboldened rebel army is moving beyond its traditional territory. Thursday's capture of the police station in Pathein township is the latest sign that the junta is losing ground as the civil war grinds toward its fourth full year.

The AA, assisted by fighters with anti-junta People's Defense Forces, or PDF, took the station in Shwethaungyan sub-township, near the border with Rakhine state on Thursday, despite the military launching several airstrikes to defend it, residents told RFA Burmese.

Ma Gyi Zin village and surrounding areas in the northernmost part of Shwethaungyan are now under AA control, the residents said Friday, speaking to RFA on condition of anonymity due to security concerns.

"Ma Gyi Zin, on the far side of Shwethaungyan, has fallen," said a resident of the sub-township who is familiar with the military situation there. "Yesterday, the bombing targeted Pauk Taw Kwin and Ma Gyi Zin Pyar [villages], near Ma Gyi Zin village."

The resident said that the military launched airstrikes on Ma Gyi Zin Pyar, to the east of Ma Gyi Zin, "because [the junta's] troops have already withdrawn from Ma Gyi Zin."

"The village is already on fire, and this is what's happening in the Ayeyarwaddy region," he said.

The airstrikes caused casualties, the resident said, although exact details remain unclear.

The strikes destroyed Ma Gyi Zin village, along with schools and monasteries in nearby Pone Nyat Maw and Ku Lar Chaung villages, other residents told RFA.

The junta has stationed troops near Baw Mi village, south of the affected areas, to prepare to defend their position, they said, adding that "hundreds" of military troop reinforcements are being sent to the area from nearby Thabaung sub-township.

The number of people who have fled Ma Gyi Zin and nearby villages to Chaungthar, Shwethaungyan and Thabaung sub-townships is unknown.

When contacted, Khin Maung Kyi, the junta's Ayeyarwaddy regional spokesperson and minister of social affairs, said he was "unaware of the current situation" regarding the battles.

Moving beyond Rakhine state

Since early January, the AA, which controls nearly all townships in Rakhine state, has been attacking military bases in the bordering regions of Ayeyarwaddy, Bago and Magway, according to residents.

On Dec. 29, AA insurgents captured the west coast town of Gwa from the military, a major step toward their goal of taking the whole of Rakhine state, and then said they were ready for talks with the junta, which seized power in a February 2021 coup d'état.

However, nearly a week later, the military had carried out at least six airstrikes since the proposal in the AA-controlled townships of Ponnagyun, Ann, Gwa and Myebon, killing 10 civilians and injuring more than a dozen others, residents told RFA Burmese.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia



Photo: KNDF

CHILD SOLDIER RECRUITMENT AND DRUG USE ALLEGED BY KNDF IN CONFLICT WITH PNO

A 15-year-old soldier from the Pa-O National Organization (PNO) captured by the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF) has admitted to drug use and being forcibly conscripted into the army, according to a statement from KNDF.

The underage soldier, identified as Maung Du, was detained during a battle between Karenni revolutionary forces and PNO troops near Shwetagu village in Hsihseng Township, located along the Shan-Karenni border.

"PNO has forcibly recruited children as soldiers, compelling them to use drugs and assigning them duties such as gatekeeping, extorting the public, and collecting tributes," a KNDF information officer said.

On 9 January, joint resistance forces launched an attack on a military base near Shwetagu village, which housed around 50 troops from the PNO and the Military Council. The assault resulted in the deaths of approximately 40 soldiers and the seizure of nearly 30 weapons.

The KNDF stated that the Shwetagu base served as a checkpoint where Military Council troops forcibly conscripted locals and extorted bribes. According to the KNDF, the PNO also recruited minors, subjecting them to drug use and coercing them into various tasks,

including intimidation and extortion.

In December, National Unity Government (NUG) Human Rights Minister Aung Myo Min criticized the Military Council for resorting to underage conscription due to a shortage of adult volunteers.

"The Myanmar Army has turned to conscripting children as soldiers when adult recruits are no longer available," he said.

Evidence obtained by Mizzima suggests that, in addition to the PNO, the Myanmar military falsifies the ages of underage recruits to integrate them into their ranks.

According to a 2012 report by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, eight armed groups in Myanmar, including the Military Council, have been implicated in the recruitment of child soldiers. Despite a 2012 agreement between the Myanmar government and the United Nations to end the practice, the Military Council and its allied forces continue to recruit and exploit children, as reported by UNICEF Myanmar.

The KNDF plans to release additional information about the captured underage soldier in due course.

Chin State. Photo: Supplied

DIARRHEA OUTBREAK CLAIMS LIVES IN MYANMAR'S CHIN STATE, RESIDENTS URGENTLY SEEK MEDICAL AID

Three children have succumbed to a severe diarrhea outbreak spreading across Matupi and Paletwa townships in southern Chin State. The rapid escalation of the disease has led local residents to urgently appeal for medical supplies and professional healthcare.

Since late December 2024, over 30 villages in the region have been affected by the outbreak, with the loss of young lives attributed to a critical shortage of medicines and doctors, according to a resident from Paletwa. It is unclear what underlying condition is causing the severe cases of diarrhea.

"Most villages lack adequate health workers and essential medicines, causing preventable deaths among children. The disease is now spreading swiftly, affecting people of all ages, particularly in villages along the Mara region and the Matupi-Paletwa border," a local shared with Mizzima.

On 1 and 3 January, two one-year-old children from Doechaungwa village in Paletwa Township reportedly died from diarrhea. The outbreak is particularly severe in villages along the Lemro River in lower Paletwa Township, where children aged six months to two years and adults over 60 are most vulnerable.

Conflict-induced displacement in Paletwa and Samee towns has left residents struggling to access medical care, as there are no doctors available.

Locals are turning to the Kaisi clinic, established by Battalion-3 of the Chinland Defense Force (CDF-

Matupi) on the Matupi-Paletwa border, but the facility is running out of medical supplies.

"The disease was initially believed to be confined to Paletwa Township, but villages around Pin Stream in Matupi have also seen a surge in cases. The Kaisi clinic, located 30 miles from Matupi in our controlled area, is currently treating over 30 diarrhea patients. Although we have enough medical personnel and ways to source medicine, we lack financial support and donors," said the Commander of Battalion-3 of CDF-Matupi.

On 4 January, a five-month-old infant from Dilaungkone village in Paletwa Township died due to a lack of medicine, highlighting the critical situation.

The Kaisi clinic is currently operated by nine nurses, including a doctor under the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), who are treating patients with limited leftover supplies. However, the clinic urgently requires additional medicines and support.

In June 2024, a similar diarrhea outbreak in Paletwa Township claimed the lives of six women and four men, exacerbated by the shortage of medical resources, as reported by the Daai Regional Council (DRC).

Since the military takeover, residents in Chin State's Paletwa, Matupi, and Mindat townships have struggled to access healthcare, leading to recurring outbreaks of diseases and conditions like malaria, cholera, and diarrhea, which continue to claim lives.



Shin Daewe. Painting by Ko Oo

MYANMAR'S JUNTA CUTS FILMMAKER'S LIFE SENTENCE TO 15 YEARS AS PART OF WIDER AMNESTY

Myanmar's junta has reduced the sentence of journalist and award-winning documentary filmmaker Shin Daewe from life behind bars to 15 years as part of a larger prisoner amnesty, her family said Thursday.

On Jan. 5, the junta announced that it had shortened the life sentences of 144 people to 15 years in prison to mark the 77th anniversary of Myanmar's independence from British colonial rule a day earlier.

The reduction was part of a broader amnesty that saw the junta release more than 6,000 inmates, although that number included just a small share of the hundreds of political prisoners jailed for opposing the military's February 2021 coup d'état.

Family members confirmed to RFA Burmese on Thursday that Shin Daewe, 50, was among 14 of 48 people serving life sentences in Yangon's notorious Insein Prison who were included in the amnesty.

Known for her work highlighting the challenges facing Myanmar's environment and the impact of conflict on civilians following the coup, Shin Daewe was arrested on Oct. 15 in Yangon's North Okkalapa township while picking up a video drone that her

husband says she had ordered online to use in filming a documentary.

She was later sentenced to life in prison by the Insein Prison Special Court on Jan. 10, 2024, for violating Myanmar's Anti-terrorism Law, prompting an outcry from rights groups and members of the media.

Shin Daewe's husband, Ko Oo told RFA at the time that police had interrogated her for nearly two weeks before charging her and transferring her to Insein Prison, adding that it appeared she had been tortured.

PROLIFIC DOCUMENTARIAN

Shin Daewe served as a journalist for the independent Democratic Voice of Burma during Myanmar's 2007 Saffron Revolution, when the military violently suppressed widespread anti-government protests led by Buddhist monks.

She later released a documentary that helped bring global attention to the revolution — named for the monk's saffron-colored robes — and ensuing crackdown.

Beginning in 2010, Shin Daewe began making documentaries full time, several of which went on to win awards at local and international film festivals.

In 2013, her documentary "Now I Am 13," about the life of an uneducated teenage girl in central Myanmar, won a silver medal at the Kota Kinab International Film Festival and won the Best Documentary Award at the Wathann Film Festival a year later.

Other documentaries, including "Brighter Future," about the Phong Taw Oo monastic education center; "Rahula," which portrays the story of a sculptor from Mandalay; and "Take Me Home," about a camp for internally displaced ethnic Kachins, also received recognition at various festivals.

Observers had labeled Shin Daewe's sentencing part of a bid by the junta to stamp out criticism by using lengthy jail terms to instill fear in opponents.

Shortly after the ruling, the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk, the International Film Festival Rotterdam, the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, and the European Film Academy issued a joint statement calling for Shin Daewe's immediate release.

Before the coup, Myanmar ranked 139th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' annual press freedom index, but dropped to 171st in the media watchdog's latest rankings — up slightly from 173rd a year ago, which was the worst in the country's history.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia



AMID ESCALATING CLASHES IN BHAMO, MYANMAR'S MILITARY LEADER STRESSES DIALOGUE FOR PEACE

As military tensions escalate near Bhamo, the second-largest city in Kachin State, Myanmar's military leader Min Aung Hlaing emphasized the importance of dialogue as the sole path to peace in a message marking the 77th Kachin State Day on 10 January.

"Success in bringing peace to our country can only be achieved through political means, dialogue and negotiation rooted in the spirit of the Union," the general stated.

He underscored the necessity of reducing political, ethnic, and religious divisions, asserting that only then can democracy thrive and political challenges be addressed in a functional parliamentary framework.

Meanwhile, the conflict in Bhamo continues to intensify. On 7 January, Colonel Naw Bu, spokesperson for the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), reported that KIA forces had seized control of several neighborhoods in Bhamo, with battles ongoing near Military Council camps.

The KIA also claimed to have captured Mansi Township in Kachin State on 8 January, with further

clashes anticipated in Bhamo.

In his address, Min Aung Hlaing also highlighted Kachin State's economic potential, citing its fertile land and abundant natural resources. He suggested that by transforming raw materials into finished products, the region could enhance socio-economic conditions and create job opportunities for locals.

The senior general also voiced concern over the destabilizing actions of ethnic armed groups and what he referred to as terrorist organizations. He claimed these activities undermine security and stability, causing widespread suffering, and vowed to take measures to safeguard the country's interests.

The 77th Kachin State Day ceremony was held in Myitkyina, where Deputy Prime Minister and Military Council member General Tin Aung San delivered Min Aung Hlaing's message.

Despite repeated calls for dialogue, clashes between the Military Council, ethnic armed groups, and revolutionary forces persist, highlighting the deepening instability as military setbacks mount.



Igor Blazevic

THE BLATANT TRUTH ABOUT THE MYANMAR MILITARY JUNTA

IGOR BLAZEVIC

The Myanmar military junta are not partners for a ceasefire and elections. They are a criminal terrorist organization.

This is clear by yet one more horrific act of pure terror committed by the men-in-green.

The junta bombed a densely populated village, causing catastrophic civilian casualties. Bombs were dropped on multiple sites by two fighter jets, igniting fires that quickly spread. Over 500 homes and a busy market were destroyed. The junta's airstrikes killed at least 41 people and injured 50 others.

This atrocity took place in Kyauk Ni Maw village in Rakhine State's Ramree Township on Wednesday.

THE FAILURE OF INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

When will Myanmar's neighbours—Thailand, Laos, China, India, and Bangladesh—as well as ASEAN and the other relevant actors in the 'international community,' finally stop treating the worst kinds of atrocities and mass killings of civilians as a 'normality' that must be expected and accepted from the State Administration Council (SAC)?

The Myanmar military junta and its leader, Min Aung Hlaing, cannot be negotiating partners for ASEAN, India, China, Thailand, or anyone else. They cannot be seen as an indispensable part of the solution to Myanmar's conflict.

Min Aung Hlaing and the SAC are the sole source of all the problems. They are the ones who removed and imprisoned the elected and popular democratic government. They are the ones who gave the orders to shoot non-violent protesters with live ammunition. They unleashed brutal beatings, extrajudicial killings, mass arrests, and torture in detention centres.

They are the ones killing and injuring civilians, destroying civilian infrastructure, burning homes, bombing villages and towns, attacking humanitarian workers and facilities, abducting and forcibly recruiting children, instigating inter-ethnic violence, restricting humanitarian aid, and driving the worsening human rights and humanitarian crisis.

The Myanmar military junta does not aim to de-escalate violence. It is not ready to hold ceasefires or peace talks. The junta has no intention of using elections as a way to exit the crisis it caused through its attempted and failed power grab—as Myanmar's neighbours and many in international policy circles foolishly assume.

All of this is merely a time-buying tactic and an acceptance-and-legitimacy-buying tactic.

Min Aung Hlaing and his junta still aim to 'crush all enemies of the state'—a dogma central to their indoctrination. They hope to achieve this through mass atrocities and terror.

The logic of appeasing them, offering a 'soft landing' through fraudulent elections (which are aimed for them to win), and persuading them to de-escalate to become more 'reasonable' and 'constructive' will not work. There will be no ceasefire, no de-escalation of violence, and no elections.

Instead, there will only be the continuation of this kind of terror.

THE PATH FORWARD: BREAKING THE CYCLE OF TERROR

This situation can be stopped quickly and effectively, but it requires decisive action from the international community, particularly Myanmar's neighbours and ASEAN.

First, Thailand should, just temporarily, suspend gas payments to the junta, cutting off a critical source of funding. Banks in Thailand and the region must stop facilitating both legal and illegal financial flows to the regime.

Denying the junta access to jet fuel for even a few months could cripple their ability to conduct airstrikes, saving countless civilian lives.

Second, ASEAN member states, India, and China must end all diplomatic engagement with the junta. They must stop legitimizing the regime through planned electoral fraud or other forms of engagement.

Third, borders with Bangladesh, India, China and Thailand, largely controlled by liberation forces not the junta, should be opened for trade and aid. This would allow much-needed goods and humanitarian relief to flow into the country, addressing the enormous crisis that has left millions on the brink of famine, especially in Rakhine State and other conflict-affected areas.

UN agencies and international NGOs must also reevaluate their presence in Myanmar. Many have effectively been held hostage in Yangon and Naypyidaw, their aid funds locked away and unable to reach those in desperate need. Cross-border aid channels must be utilized instead.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) must issue an arrest warrant for Min Aung Hlaing. The evidence against him is overwhelming, and his removal is a necessary step toward ending the junta's reign of terror.

Furthermore, someone in the international community must equip Myanmar's liberation forces with the necessary tools to counter the junta's relentless violence. Providing a small number of man-portable anti-aircraft weapons could dramatically shift the balance. These weapons would enable the liberation forces to neutralize the junta's fighter jets and helicopters, crippling their capacity for airstrikes.

The junta's reliance on air superiority is central to its campaign of terror. Without the ability to dominate the skies and bomb civilian populations, their military operations will be significantly hampered. Once this key advantage is stripped away, the junta's grip on power will weaken rapidly.

If the junta is rendered unable to fly and bomb, Min Aung Hlaing and his regime will collapse within a matter of months. Faced with such a scenario, Min Aung Hlaing will have limited options: he may attempt to flee abroad, be killed, or face arrest by his own military comrades. The junta's fall is not a question of "if," but "when," – and how much destruction and horror they will inflict in between.

Ending the junta's ability to terrorize from the skies is the quickest and most efficient path toward peace and justice for Myanmar.

The removal of Min Aung Hlaing and his regime will open the door for conflict de-escalation, political dialogue, and the return of humanitarian aid. Prisoners will be released, internally displaced persons will begin to rebuild their lives, and the economy can finally start to recover.

Trade and security will resume, and Myanmar will have a chance to heal from the wounds inflicted by years of junta rule. This future is possible, but it requires the international community to act with urgency and resolve.

The terror of the Myanmar military junta can be stopped. The world must rise to this challenge—for the people of Myanmar and for the most elementary principles of justice and humanity. Even for the sake of geopolitical stability, the Myanmar military junta must be finally stopped and removed, to bring stability back to the big and important country between India, China, South East Asia and the Indian Ocean.



even more involved in trying to help people get out of Burma, and once they're here, to try to help them stay," she says. "Some of [those we help] are students, and so we apply for political asylum for them. Some come on a visitor's visa, and again, we apply for asylum."

Before going in the U.S., Thailand is a common first stop for many Burmese refugees. But it is no easy stay. Many face abuse from Thai authorities, and sometimes they are forcibly repatriated back into Myanmar, landing them back in the same peril from which they had fled. For those who manage to evade being sent back, a different set of challenges remain. "I have quite a few clients in Mae Sot, and it's such a worrisome, horrifying situation" she says. "People there are living hand-to-mouth, frightened, having a horrible time. Those who've been forced back can be conscripted. Conscription is another horror—one I make sure is part of my asylum claims for those at risk."

COMPLICATED PROCESS

For those going the asylum route, Maia notes that it is "a process that can take years—it's complicated, and can be painful because people don't want to feel like they're abandoning Burma. They just need to be safe." While seeking asylum in the US remains the most attractive option, refugees also seek help from the UNHCR (United National High Commission for Refugees), which has its own extended process, and one that comes with no guarantees.

In seeking US asylum, obtaining a visa is just the first hurdle, and one that is increasingly getting harder. Even individuals with valid reasons, such as students with full scholarships, are often denied, despite the U.S. government's rhetoric about supporting the Burmese people. Many Burmese must apply repeatedly, sometimes needing to travel to neighboring countries like Vietnam because the Yangon Embassy has frequent closures and has been stingier in issuing visas; but this often only means that applicants get to face rejection somewhere else. Although rarely granted in practice, an option for those who cannot secure a visa is "humanitarian parole," a mechanism under U.S. law that allows individuals to enter the country temporarily for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit.

IMMENSE CHALLENGES

However, for those who are finally able to reach the U.S., the challenges are still immense. Asylum seekers do not have access to government-appointed lawyers, unlike criminal defendants, and without representation, asylum seekers are five times more likely to lose their case! Moreover, immigration court is grueling: judges

COMING TO AMERICA

INSIGHT MYANMAR

"I get 100% of my clients through referrals. Somebody has already been referred to me by somebody who's learned to trust me, and so that's how you stay long enough inside a community, then you establish a level of trust."

Maia Storm is an immigration attorney with nearly 25 years of experience who specializes in asylum cases. She is now playing a role in helping refugees fleeing political violence in Myanmar to navigate the often-overwhelming U.S. immigration system. And as her quote indicates, she has established a fair degree of trust within that community. "Most of these people have been active in some kind of anti-coup activity," she says. "They may even have warrants out for their arrest! So I try to help as many people as I can."

HELPING BURMESE REFUGEES

Maia's journey began working with Burmese refugees in Michigan. She initially assisted them with green cards, citizenship, and family petitions. There was a significant population of Burmese in the area, particularly from Chin State, and as Maia became more involved, she found herself drawn to the country's culture and complexity. "Since the coup, I've gotten

are overworked, prosecutors aggressive, and the rules opaque. Maia describes the preparation process as exhausting, requiring hours of rehearsal, consistency, and dealing with the trauma that retelling their harrowing stories brings. One thing that is quite helpful to winning their case is good storytelling, as often, the success of a case hinges on these details—minutiae that might seem irrelevant in the big picture but are crucial to establishing credibility. "So much depends on looking the judge or interviewer in the eye and explaining your story. I send it back to the client—'No, I need more details. What was this person's name? The date? How many times did the policeman hit you? Was it sticks, batons, or fists? How many men were there?' Detail after detail, because that's what makes your story credible." Maia values authenticity, emphasizing natural language over excessive revisions. "What I love in a statement is mistakes—grammatical mistakes, spelling mistakes, awkward phrasing—because you know what? That person wrote that story from their heart, and that's what I'm looking for." Over-polished narratives lose their credibility, especially when created using generative tools like ChatGPT.

If they finally are granted a visa, many Burmese asylum seekers apply for Temporary Protected Status (TPS). This is a designation that provides temporary protection without a clear path to citizenship. Maia elaborates: "We call it TPS, and it doesn't have to be specific to an individual, like 'Oh, if you send me back, they'll arrest me.' No, something has made the country unlivable—be it a hurricane, a coup, or political upheaval. As long as you're from that country, you can be granted TPS." However, TPS is not a long-term solution, and its temporary nature means many Burmese remain in limbo.

NAVIGATING THE DIFFICULTIES

Finally, even making it through the process with at least a minimum positive outcome like TPS or asylum or a visa of some sort, a new set of difficulties kicks in. Many end up in hazardous, low-wage jobs, such as meatpacking, that strip away the illusion of the "American Dream." Unlike resettled refugees, asylum seekers receive no support and must fend for themselves.

Yet despite the ordeal, time and again, Maia emphasizes the resilience of

the Burmese people. "I have not met a Burmese person I've worked with who says they don't want to go back to Burma when this is over. They all want to go back. Sometimes I have to almost literally twist their arms to say, 'Yes, we will do TPS! Yes, we will do asylum!' It's okay to take these protections, and then, when Myanmar is peaceful again, thank America and go home."

Beyond her individual work with clients, Maia runs Mingalabar, an organization that provides immigration aid and advocacy specifically for Burmese people. It also advocates for the release of wrongfully detained individuals, improved prison conditions, and a democratic future for Myanmar, while raising awareness of socio-political challenges.

Maia concludes by stressing again that asylum is more than just a legal process: it's a fight for dignity, for the right to be heard and seen. Refugees face a system designed to doubt them, one that demands they prove their worthiness of safety. And yet, they persist. They tell their stories, gather their evidence, and confront the future with courage. For many, the journey to safety is far from over, but they continue to hope that one day they will return to a Myanmar that is free and at peace.

LISTEN TO THE PODCAST

<https://player.captivate.fm/episode/b36d9fbc-270c-40ba-b5c7-f25fdd7c9898>





Israelis protest in Tel Aviv against the ongoing war. Photo: AFP

HAMAS SAYS FATE OF HOSTAGES DEPENDS ON NETANYAHU

Palestinian militant group Hamas on Saturday said the fate of a hostage held in Gaza depends on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a day after the captive's wife appealed to the group for proof of life.

Sharon Cunio had directly addressed the group in Arabic in a video on Friday, asking for a sign that her husband David was still alive, over 450 days after he was taken to the Palestinian territory.

She too had been kidnapped alongside 250 others on October 7, 2023, but was released the following month alongside their twin daughters during the sole brief truce in the war that has raged for over 15 months.

Hamas's armed branch on Saturday said that since Sharon's liberation, Israeli military pressure had surged and that her husband has "either been killed, injured or (is) in good health".

"Netanyahu has not decided yet. Time is running out," the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades added.

Stop-start negotiations have been underway seeking an end to the devastating war and the release of the remaining hostages, with the latest round starting last weekend in Qatar.

But both Hamas and Israel have repeatedly accused one another of seeking to derail the indirect talks.

There are currently 94 hostages still held in Gaza, including 34 whose death has been confirmed by the Israeli army.

The October 7 attack that triggered the war resulted in the deaths of 1,208 people on the Israeli side, most of them civilians, according to an AFP tally based on official Israeli figures, which includes hostages killed in captivity.

At least 46,537 Palestinians, a majority of them civilians, have been killed in Israel's military campaign in Gaza since the war began, according to data provided by the health ministry. The United Nations has acknowledged these figures as reliable.

AFP



Russian leader Vladimir Putin.
Photo: AFP

RUSSIA SAYS US RISKS GLOBAL ENERGY INSTABILITY WITH NEW SANCTIONS

AFP

Moscow on Saturday accused the US of being ready to risk global energy instability with new wide-reaching sanctions on Russia's energy sector.

The US and the UK on Friday announced new sanctions against Russia's energy sector, including oil giant Gazprom Neft, just days before President Joe Biden leaves office.

Moscow's foreign ministry said in a statement that on the eve of Biden's "inglorious time in power", Washington was trying to "cause at least some harm to Russia's economy even at the cost of destabilising world markets".

"Of course Washington's hostile actions will not be left without reaction", it added.

In a reference to the California wildfires, Moscow accused Biden's administration of leaving behind "scorched earth", or total destruction, for incoming US President Donald Trump -- since he cannot cancel the sanctions without Congress approval.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov earlier told reporters that the Biden administration was trying to leave Trump "as heavy a legacy as possible".

designating more than 180 ships as well as Russian oil majors Gazprom Neft and Surgutneftegas, fulfilling "the G7 commitment to reduce Russian revenues from energy".

Gazprom Neft on Friday slammed the sanctions as "baseless" and "illegitimate", Russian state news agencies reported.

Biden's deputy national security advisor for international economics, Daleep Singh, called the sanctions "the most significant" yet on Russia's energy sector, which he said was "by far the largest source of revenue for (President Vladimir) Putin's war".

The Russian ministry on Saturday accused the US of seeking to "hinder as far as possible or even make impossible any bilateral economic ties, including with US business".

It said Washington was "sacrificing to this the interests... of European allies", which are "forced to switch over to more expensive and unreliable American supplies".

It also accused Washington of "ignoring" the views of its own population on rising energy prices once the presidential election was over.

The US Treasury Department said Friday it was

AFP



ONCE UPON A TIME

"You can talk with older Rohingya in their 70s now, and most of them will end up saying something to the degree of, 'There was a time when I had friends who were from the Rakhine community, and we were going to university in Yangon...' They have a frame of reference that is so critical right now, because they know what life was like before everything went bad."

Greg Constantine's project on the Rohingya community is a profound exploration of both their suffering and enduring humanity. Through photographic and investigative storytelling, Greg has dedicated his career to shedding light on the often-overlooked experiences of the Rohingya people; which culminated in the 2017 genocide.

His journey began in 2006 when he first visited southern Bangladesh. There he encountered a stateless community that had largely been ignored by the world. What started as curiosity quickly turned into a mission—to unearth and share the hidden stories of one of the world's most persecuted and marginalized communities.

The Rohingya, a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority in Myanmar, reside mainly in Rakhine State on the country's western coast. Despite their deep roots in Rakhine, they have faced systemic persecution for decades. It escalated following Myanmar's independence from British colonial rule in 1948, reaching its political peak after the 1982 citizenship law, which effectively rendered the Rohingya stateless. This law stripped them of basic rights—freedom of movement, access to education, and healthcare—and left them vulnerable to exploitation and violence. Such injustice

is part of a broader phenomenon of statelessness that Greg explored in his earlier project, "Nowhere People," which documented ethnic communities worldwide that were arbitrarily deprived of citizenship.

Greg's work has sought to answer pressing questions about how the Rohingya's situation fits into the broader theme of statelessness. To him, what has befallen the Rohingya is a kind of "perfect storm" of statelessness and systemic, state-inflicted suffering. His documentation of the Rohingya offers a rare insight into the lived realities of stateless individuals, especially during periods when international attention wavered. To fully capture the Rohingya's struggles, Greg realized the importance of individual stories that reflected not only the dire circumstances, but also the hope that has not been extinguished.

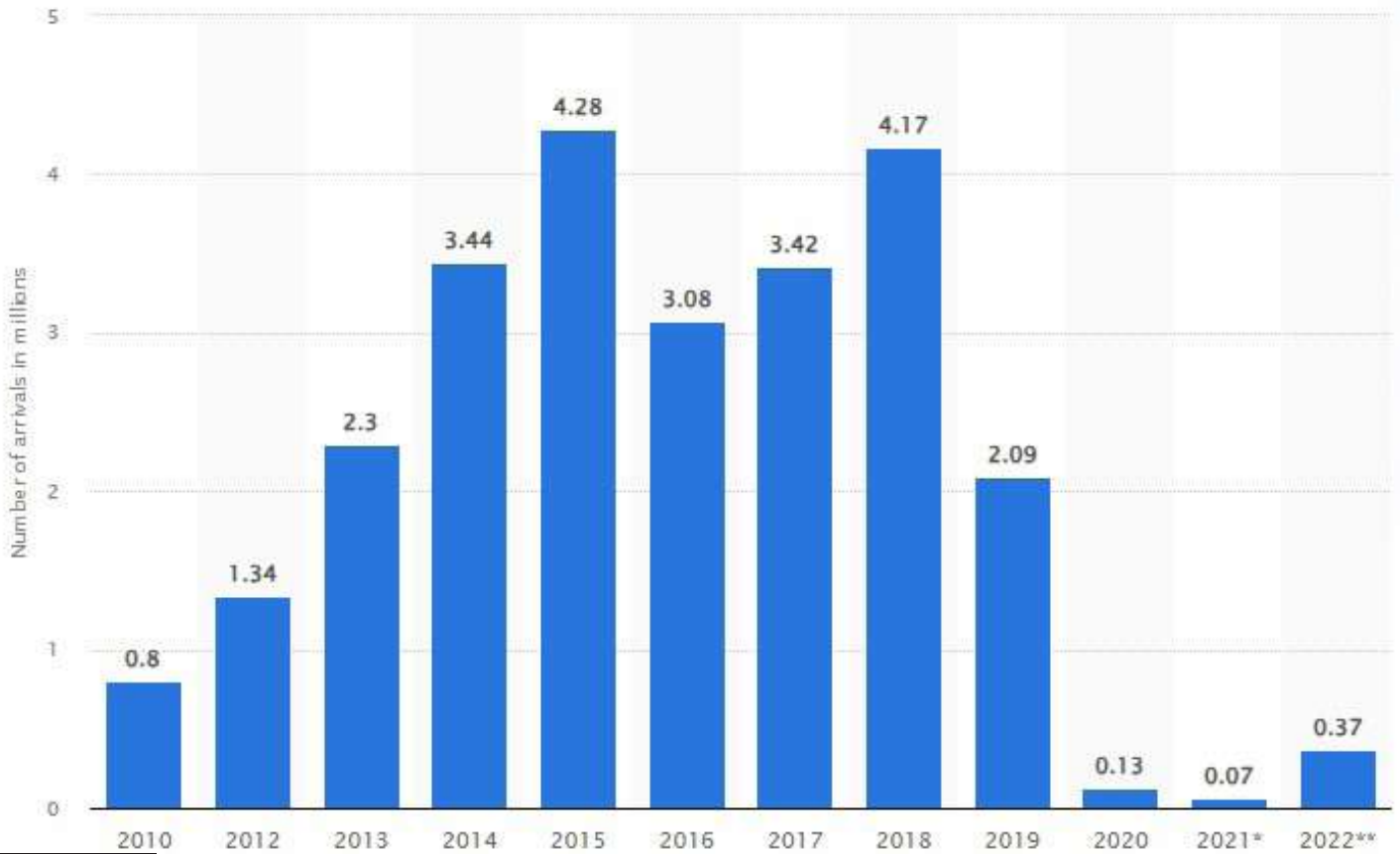
Greg's dedication to the Rohingya narrative has been about more than just documenting crises; it has been about showing the gradual buildup of pressure—denial of marriage rights, forced labor, barriers to education, and extortion—that eventually led to mass violence and displacement. By embedding himself within the community, Greg was able to document not only the visible consequences of violence, but the oftentimes less obvious conditions that fueled it. He understood that the international narrative often missed the underlying factors that led to each Rohingya crisis, treating them as spontaneous eruptions rather than the result of systemic oppression.

In 2019, Greg was invited to guest curate an exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, focusing on the plight of the Rohingya. This experience marked an important turning point, prompting Greg to reassess his work and how best to present a fuller picture of the Rohingya community. This is because the exhibition aimed to challenge the prevailing narrative by highlighting not just the suffering but also the historical and cultural contributions of the Rohingya to Burma. It was essential to convey that the Rohingya story did not begin with the violence of 2017, but was deeply rooted in decades of systemic exclusion and resilience.

CATCH THE PODCAST

To read more or listen to the Insight Myanmar Podcast, just click here:

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2024/12/23/episode-299-once-upon-a-time>



Tourist arrivals

MYANMAR'S TOURISM STRUGGLES AMID POLITICAL CRISIS

Myanmar's military junta is attempting to revive the country's struggling tourism sector, with General Mya Tun Oo highlighting tourism development as a priority for economic growth.

However, recent data reveals a concerning decline in visitor numbers, with foreign arrivals dropping to 1.06 million in 2024, down from 1.28 million in 2023 - a stark contrast to the pre-coup era when the country welcomed over 4 million visitors in 2018.

Despite the junta's efforts to promote Myanmar as a tourist destination through visa relief and market promotion initiatives, Myanmar's tourism industry continues to face significant challenges. The military junta's focus on traditional tourism products and local services appears disconnected from addressing the fundamental issues affecting the sector's recovery.

While officials emphasize developing local products and conducting training programs, international tourism experts note that the primary barriers to tourism growth stem from ongoing political instability, armed conflict and security concerns in Myanmar.

The dramatic drop in visitor numbers since the pre-pandemic and pre-coup period - when Myanmar was emerging as a promising Southeast Asian destination - highlights the severe impact of the current situation on the tourism industry.

The majority of current visitors come from neighboring countries like China and Thailand.

Photo: Number of international tourist arrivals in Myanmar from 2010 to 2022 (<https://www.statista.com/>)



Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein's video screenshot

MYANMAR VOCALIST IN EXILE RELEASES TRIBUTE SONG FOR DETAINED LEADER AUNG SAN SUU KYI

Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein, a Myanmar singer who has been granted political asylum in France, has released a new song honoring detained Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The song, which also includes pointed criticism of Myanmar's military rulers, was composed, performed, and accompanied on piano by the artist herself.

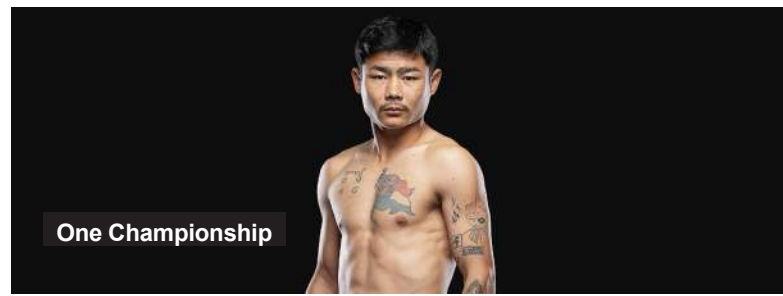
Released on her Facebook page on January 11, the video was accompanied by Phyu Phyu's heartfelt message reflecting on the five years under Suu Kyi's leadership.

She wrote in her post, "I am immensely grateful for those five years (under Daw Aung San Suu Kyi led government) when we experienced unprecedented freedom, security, breathing space for ordinary citizens, illuminated cities, internet access, hope, youth's dreams for the future, and love. While these might seem ordinary to people in other countries, for us who have lived through generations of darkness, poverty, and oppression, she gave us a dreamlike nirvana from which we never wanted to wake. I think we can still dare to say 'We miss her.'"

The tribute has resonated deeply with Myanmar netizens. One Facebook user commented, "I'm deeply grateful that another respected 'her' (Phyu Phyu) has created this musical tribute about 'her' (Aung San Suu Kyi) whom we always respect and love."

Another user expressed, "The lyrics are profoundly meaningful; it touches the heart deeply."

A third commenter praised both the artistic and emotional value of the song, thanking the artist for "giving us something to listen to whenever we feel nostalgic."



MYANMAR MMA FIGHTER THWAY LIN HTET'S STUNNING VICTORY SPARKS EXCITEMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Myanmar's rising mixed martial arts (MMA) star Thway Lin Htet achieved a remarkable first-round knockout victory against Thailand's Yookitti at ONE Friday Fights 93 in Bangkok.

The dramatic win, which came at 2:39 in the first round, earned him a 350,000 baht performance bonus from ONE Championship.

Social media erupted with analysis and praise for the fight.

A sports writer Soe Nae Thit provided detailed tactical observations: "At the beginning, the Thai fighter was aggressive with leg kicks. What's impressive is how Thway Lin Htet calmly responded by counter-kicking with the same leg that was being attacked - that was a brilliant move."

A user commented, "Yookitti 's left hook was really powerful and accurate, but Thway Lin Htet managed to evade it impressively. The Thai fighter's counter combinations were incredibly fast and powerful in the opening moments - I actually thought Thway Lin Htet might get knocked out. Really proud of you, brother!"

Another MMA fan on social media noted how both fighters started with full energy and traded strikes competitively. They observed that Yookitti, who had dominated his previous two ONE Championship bouts with quick finishes, appeared slightly hesitant when faced with an opponent who could match his intensity. Thway Lin Htet seized this opportunity, pressing forward aggressively to secure the knockout win.

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.