

ON THE GROUND IN MYANMAR

# mizzima WEEKLY

Analysis & Insight

## SCAM CENTRES



**Chinese-led scam operations and human trafficking surge in Karen State amid armed group control**

**SPECIAL REPORT**

- Thailand cuts power to Myanmar border regions to fight scam centres

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Analysis & Insight



# DIGITAL MAGAZINE

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

# MYANMAR MILITARY GUNS FOR A POLL WIN

The United Nations and the international community need to be wary not to be taken in by the Myanmar junta's "democratic dance". Struggling on the battlefield, the junta leader Min Aung Hlaing and his men-in-green hope to sell the Myanmar public and the world on the idea of a national election in 2025 that will take international pressure off them as they "hand back" control to a "publicly elected government".

Four years after his disastrous military coup, Myanmar Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing is gunning for a "democratic fig-leaf" that uses the military-written 2008 Constitution to allow the fielding of largely pro-military political parties in an election that will see the military step down to allow the pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) to take up the reins of power. The 2008 Constitution would ensure the military retains a hold on the important levers of power – with 25 per cent of both houses of parliament and control over the ministries of Defence, Home Affairs and Border Affairs.

The Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services directly nominates the ministers for these ministries, and the President must appoint them accordingly, according to the Constitution. This ensures that the military maintains significant control over internal security, law enforcement, and border management, limiting civilian government authority. The Ministry of Home Affairs controls the Myanmar Police Force and the General Administration Department, which oversees local governance.

In essence, a USDP landslide – even on a small voter turnout – would allow Min Aung Hlaing to breathe a sigh of relief and claim he has handed back the country to its people. The reality

would be that the military still calls the shots and the people's real choice – the National League for Democracy (NLD) or representatives of the resistance, including the National Unity Government (NUG) – would be sidelined.

ASEAN's stance on the Myanmar crisis has been cautious, emphasizing dialogue and non-interference while struggling to enforce meaningful action. In April 2021, ASEAN adopted the Five-Point Consensus (5PC), calling for an end to violence, dialogue among all parties, humanitarian aid, and a special envoy. However, Myanmar's military junta has largely ignored it. The danger here is that ASEAN might accept some form of "democratic path" and "negotiations" as a way out of the crisis. And elements of the international community might follow suit as they typically lean on ASEAN to provide a solution – despite the lack of progress on the 5PC.

ASEAN wants the Myanmar crisis to "go away". So, there is a danger of a "sell-out" if the Myanmar junta proceeds with their plan to hold an election – even though it will be seen to be flawed, with the country's democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi left rotting in jail.

The Nobel Laureate could be used as a pawn in this democratic dance, with the newly elected administration being "gracious" in pardoning and releasing her, hoping the resulting public demonstrations calling for real democracy can be tamped down.

Crystal ball gazing will not help us here. Suffice to say, the wily Commander-in-Chief may have tricks up his sleeve as he seeks to extricate himself from the brutal crisis of his making.

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Cover photo by Daniel Korpai





Photo: Daniel Korpai

# SCAM CENTRES

**CHINESE-LED SCAM OPERATIONS  
AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING SURGE  
IN KAREN STATE AMID ARMED  
GROUP CONTROL**

***MIZZIMA SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT HAN HTOO ZAW***

Online scam operations, locally known as Kyar Phyant, run by Chinese-led online gambling syndicates and located in Myawaddy Township along the Thai-Myawaddy border, have drawn considerable international attention.

Shwe Kokko, a town in Myawaddy Township, has become a hub for organized crime and human trafficking due to the government's limited control and oversight of this area. Chinese-led development projects in the Yatai New City in Shwe Kokko and at KK Park, south of Myawaddy, have been linked to illegal gambling, human trafficking, extortion, and cyber scam activities.

The rising number of arrests and reports of mistreatment by these scam networks has sparked global concern, with international media highlighting the issue as a major transnational threat.

Kyar Phyant operations are extensive, with thousands believed to be exploited. These scams, orchestrated by organized crime syndicates across the Mekong region, include centres in Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and other ASEAN countries, are often linked to human trafficking, forced labour, and modern slavery.

## Human Trafficking Concerns

A key rescue operation to free trafficked workers occurred on 14 January, when Taiwanese dancer Hsieh Yueh-peng and five other Chinese nationals were freed,

according to the Central News Agency.

On 7 January 2025, Chinese actor Wang Xing was rescued from the notorious KK Park area near Myawaddy, a zone under the control of Karen National Army (KNA) leader Colonel Saw Maung Chit Thu. This incident sparked widespread media attention, particularly in China.

The Global Times reported that after Wang Xing's release, family members of other victims pleaded for help on social media to rescue 174 other Chinese nationals still held in Myanmar.

Beyond rescues, some victims have managed to escape on their own. On 15 September 2024, a Chinese national who was coerced into online scams and tortured fled from Payathonzu, a Myanmar border town, to Sangkhla Buri, Thailand, as reported by Thai PBS.

Thai authorities also intercepted Chinese nationals carrying Starlink devices and computer equipment at a security checkpoint in Sangkhla Buri, shedding light on the technological infrastructure used by these scam syndicates.

A Karen woman from Payathonzu said, "When news broke about a Chinese man escaping with ankle chains, it caused an uproar, prompting casinos to heighten their security."



A source familiar with the KNA said, "The revelation of these trafficking incidents will undoubtedly put pressure on Colonel Saw Chit Thu."

From December 2024 to mid-January 2025, reports surfaced of Chinese nationals being trafficked by online scam networks near Myawaddy. In response, the Chinese Embassy in Yangon announced on 21 January that it would launch the "Zinyaw" operation to dismantle the Kyar Phyant operation.

## A Performative Gesture

After this announcement, Colonel Saw Chit Thu, leading the KNA, reiterated on 22 January that they would work with international organizations to crack down on criminal activities in Myawaddy. However, scam operations continue to function on the ground.

Previously part of the Karen Border Guard Force (BGF) until last year when more than half split away to form the KNA, it is known for its long-standing ties to Myanmar's military. It has also been implicated in various human rights violations and organized crime, including cyber scams.

In October 2024, amid growing international pressure, Colonel Saw Chit Thu issued a public letter instructing online gambling operators in Shwe Kokko New Town to vacate the area by 31 October 2024.



Inside a facility for an online scam gang in Shwe Kokko

However, this appeared to be only a performative gesture. Internal communications later revealed instructions indicating there was no need for the operators to leave.

"When we saw Colonel Saw Chit Thu's letter ordering operators to leave, we asked our supervisor if we should stop working. The supervisor reassured us, saying there was no need to worry or leave," said a woman who worked for eight months in a Kyar Phyant operation.

Over the past year, Shwe Kokko has faced significant disruptions, including cuts to electricity supplied from Thailand, interruptions to Wi-Fi internet services, and sanctions imposed by Western countries.

These sanctions targeted key figures such as She Zhijiang, leader of Yatai International Holding Group, Saw Min Min Oo, a director of Chit Lin Myaing Company, and KNA leader Colonel Saw Chit Thu. Further scrutiny of these criminal activities intensified following the arrests of individuals involved in Chinese online scamming operations in Shan State.

## 1027 and Moves South

The crackdown on these operations dates back to 2023, when the Three Brotherhood Alliance of allied ethnic armed groups (EAOs) launched Operation 1027 in northern Shan State. The taking of the city of Laukkai near the border with China led to the arrest and repatriation of several online gambling syndicates to China.

However, beginning in March 2024, remnants of these syndicates that evaded capture relocated to Payathonzu, an area in Kyainseikgyi District, Karen State, controlled by the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA). By April 2024, Chinese mafia groups linked to Kyar Phyant operations had already begun moving into this area of Karen State.

Payathonzu has since become a crucial gateway for trafficked Chinese nationals and other foreign individuals involved in online scam operations. They are smuggled into the area through routes from Thailand, Myawaddy, and northern Shan State, often with the assistance of armed groups.



Reports indicate that traffickers charge at least 100,000 baht per person to transport victims from Myawaddy to Payathonzu.

A soldier on the border, speaking anonymously, said, "Chinese and other foreign nationals started arriving last year through DKBA-controlled routes, bypassing the river crossing. Once they cross the fence from the Thai side, they reach DKBA-operated casinos."

One trafficker disclosed that some Burmese women smuggle foreign nationals by pretending to be their partners to bypass road checkpoints.

"If a vehicle carrying Chinese nationals passed through, we didn't have to check it. Some even bore official-looking emblems and logos," a former checkpoint guard near Payathonzu said, adding that he saw at least ten such vehicles each month.

## Payathonzu Town

Payathonzu, an area in Karen State, Myanmar, is a region of strategic importance where several armed groups, including the Karen National Union (KNU), Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), Karen National Army (KNA), New Mon State Party (NMSP),

KNU/KNLA Peace Council (KNU/KNLA-PC), and the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), maintain active operations. Among these, the DKBA maintains the strongest presence under the influence of Colonel Saw A One, the Tactical Commander of the DKBA's Military Administration Area No. 2.

"Colonel Saw A One has dominated this area since before the military coup. It's essentially his hometown, and most businesses are under his control. Recently, even some People's Defence Force (PDF) groups have come under his influence," said a source close to the DKBA.

The influx of Chinese nationals has significantly impacted the town's economy. Residents report a sharp rise in real estate prices, with monthly rents for houses jumping from 4,000 baht to between 15,000 and 20,000 baht. Many Chinese nationals have secured long-term leases for houses, hotels, and guesthouses.

With the arrival of Chinese mafia groups, new infrastructure is being developed, particularly on Sri Yadaran Road, near the Thai-Myanmar border. Local residents report increased construction activity, including casinos, businesses, and residential buildings.



Residents of Payathonzu have expressed concerns that the increasing Chinese presence could lead to economic domination, making the cost of living unaffordable for locals. The newcomers are reportedly willing to pay above-market rates for goods, housing, and labour, driving prices higher.

“More infrastructure is going up. It’s hard to even buy bricks now. The casino is expanding, and Chinese-run shops are popping up along the road,” said a Payathonzu resident.

Despite this growth, tensions have arisen. The DKBA has ordered Chinese businesses to remove signboards with Chinese characters. Nevertheless, Chinese-run establishments, including KTV lounges, feature exclusive rooms called Hi Rooms [short for ‘High’], where partygoers can purchase and consume drugs, continue to thrive.

The core requirements for online scams, buildings, electricity, internet, and telecommunications are reportedly being provided by Chinese mafia groups. Electricity is sourced from Thailand at rates of 6 to 8 baht per unit, while internet connectivity relies on Thai fibre cables and Starlink satellite communications. It remains unclear which company’s fibre cables originate from the Thai side.

According to a former KK-Park employee, Payathonzu will become a major base for Kyar Phyant operations.

The Kyar Phyant business operates in three stages. In the first stage, they identify a victim. In the second stage, they lure the victim with financial incentives, deceiving them into believing they can profit. In the third stage, the victim reinvests, expecting greater returns, but the scammers stop disbursing funds beyond a certain amount and sever all communication. This final step is referred to as “the killer,” he explained.

“People I worked with at KK-Park in the Shwekokko area are now in Payathonzu, training new recruits and expanding their business like Shwe Kokko,” a former KK-Park employee said.

Thazin Oo Hotel is owned by Aung Khaing Oo, who is company commander of the DKBA, and who previously served in the Karen Border Guard Force BGF.

The Thazin Oo Hotel in town has been leased for a year and is undergoing renovations to accommodate these operations. However, since January 2025, Chinese nationals have become less visible in the town, staying mostly in hotels and new buildings.



"This month, I don't see them outside like before. Their organization has instructed them to stay in restricted areas. Some have moved to Colonel Saw A One's A1 Resort near Chaun Sone Village, where new buildings are also being constructed," said a source close to the DKBA.

The A1 Resort, equipped with electricity, phone lines, and 5D Hi Rooms, has become a secluded base for Chinese nationals. Strict restrictions are in place, including bans on phone use within certain areas.

Inside 5D Hi Rooms, drug users dance non-stop to music, sometimes played by private DJs. The entire room is equipped with five-dimensional (5D) television screens, creating an immersive visual experience.

Furthermore, reports indicate that a significant number of Chinese nationals have entered the camp at Payathonzu Natural Pool, also known as Kyawtpulu. Residents have observed continuous construction of new buildings in the area.

Additionally, investigations reveal that nine large high-rise apartment buildings are currently under construction at Saw A One's A1 Resort.

"The Chinese are no longer staying in the main town. They've been relocated to secluded areas to avoid attention. Colonel Saw A One is clever at managing these operations while keeping them hidden. In some places, new buildings are rising, but access is tightly controlled," said another local resident.

## Chinese nationals arrive

According to Colonel Saw A One, the conflict in Laukkai Township, Shan State, has led to an influx of Chinese, Kokang, and Lisu people into Payathonzu, where they have established casinos and businesses. He shared this information in an exclusive interview with KIC News Agency in November 2024.

When asked about the arrival of Chinese nationals and the presence of online fraud syndicates, DKBA Commander Lt. Col. Pha Blair declined to comment.

Similarly, Mizzima reached out to the Karen National Union (KNU) for insights on the situation in Payathonzu, but a KNU officer stated that the relevant leader was currently traveling and unavailable for an interview.

## Emergency meeting on human trafficking

Amid escalating reports of human trafficking cases, including those involving Chinese actors and models being transported to Myawaddy, Karen armed groups and Chinese businessmen held an urgent meeting in Myawaddy on 15 January.

The meeting focused on transnational crimes such as fraud, human trafficking, and illegal gambling operations. However, a source close to the DKBA indicated that the primary issue discussed was human trafficking.

During the discussion, representatives from the Karen Border Guard Force (BGF) and the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) stressed the need to prevent coercion, torture, child labour under the age of 18, and fraudulent business practices in the region.

Key attendees included KNA leader Saw Chit Thu, Major Mote Thun from the BGF, Colonel San Aung, and Sai Cho La from the DKBA, along with around 60 Chinese businessmen.

However, Colonel Saw A One, the Tactical Commander of the DKBA's Military Administration No. 2, who oversees Payathonzu, was absent from the meeting.



Photo: AFP

# SKEPTICISM OVER PLANNED ELECTION

Myanmar’s military junta continues to face skepticism over its promised 2025 general election, with critics accusing it of using the poll as a pretext to extend its grip on power. While the junta initially announced its intention to hold an election in 2025, uncertainty looms over whether it will actually take place.

On February 3, junta leader Min Aung Hlaing instructed political parties and officials to prepare for the election. However, the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) central committee issued a statement on February 8, condemning the planned election as a sham that would only deepen domestic conflict.

Internationally, three prominent election monitoring organizations—International IDEA, the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), and Club de Madrid—

released a joint statement rejecting the junta’s proposed election. Their statement warned that a fraudulent election would exacerbate national divisions, trigger more resistance, solidify the dictatorship’s rule, and worsen the post-coup conflict.

Regarding ASEAN’s stance, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, the current ASEAN chair, urged the junta to prioritize domestic peace over election preparations. His comments underscore regional concerns that a forced election could further destabilize Myanmar.

Meanwhile, some political parties registered under the junta’s election commission remain hopeful. Dr. Aye Maung, chair of the Arakan Front Party, expressed optimism that the election could still occur in 2025. He argued that the junta’s recent term extension does not necessarily mean the election is canceled, as elections



The Arakan Army leaders at a meeting of ethnic armed groups. Photo: AFP

are traditionally held in November. "If the SAC extends its term beyond November, then we can say the 2025 election plan has collapsed," he stated.

Despite such optimism, many political analysts doubt the junta's commitment to holding elections. Than Soe Naing, a political analyst, suggested that the junta's decision to extend its rule for another six months signals an implicit admission of its failure to maintain territorial control. As resistance forces continue to reclaim key areas, the likelihood of a legitimate election in 2025 appears increasingly slim.

## Why are young people in Myanmar worried?

The Myanmar junta's conscription law has placed severe restrictions on young men, particularly those seeking to work abroad. Since the introduction of the

law, youths within the conscription age group—men between 18 and 35—have faced increasing difficulties. As of January 30, the junta halted the issuance of the Overseas Worker Identification Card (OWIC), effectively preventing young men from legally migrating for employment.

A young man preparing to work in South Korea told RFA Burmese, "I feel like my future is lost. I invested so much time and money, and now this conscription law has derailed my plans. Even if we manage to leave, we have to pay exorbitant bribes to authorities at the airport, making it financially unbearable."

Although women and men outside the conscription age are still allowed to travel abroad, those within the targeted age range face restrictions, even for short-term visits. An agent who facilitates overseas employment commented, "Our operations have completely halted.



We don't know what the next step will be, and foreign employers are losing interest in hiring Myanmar workers."

The situation has become increasingly dire, with deadly consequences. On February 5, junta forces opened fire on a group of youths attempting to cross into Thailand through Bokpyin Township, Tanintharyi Region. One 20-year-old was killed, and six others sustained serious injuries.

According to local sources, around 60 people had gathered in an oil palm plantation area, preparing to cross the border with the help of local agents. Authorities alerted the township-level military and police, who raided the group. In the ensuing chaos, junta troops fired at the fleeing youths. A local witness stated, "These men were trying to cross into Thailand with arrangements from agents in Bokpyin. The junta troops were notified and ambushed them. One young man was killed on the spot, one was shot in the neck, and five others were wounded in their limbs. All of them were men."

With increasing restrictions, heightened surveillance, and deadly crackdowns, Myanmar's young men face limited options—either forced military service, illegal escape, or an uncertain future within the country.

## What is the Arakan Army doing to fight the military outside of Rakhine?

The Arakan Army (AA) continues to make strategic advances beyond Rakhine State, posing a significant challenge to the Myanmar junta. As the junta struggles to reclaim lost positions in Rakhine, it has turned its focus to neighbouring Magway, Bago, and Ayeyarwady regions in an attempt to prevent further AA incursions. However, despite leveraging airstrikes and heavy artillery, junta forces have suffered repeated defeats due to the AA's counteroffensive.

A Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) official analyzed the situation in a local media called *Narinjara*, stating, "The junta's frontline has become overstretched. Instead of reclaiming Ann, where its Western Command was previously based, it is now forced to defend Magway, Bago, and Ayeyarwady from AA's expansion."

Initially, the junta aimed to solidify its presence in these three regions, but the growing threat from the AA has forced it to shift its focus to protecting its weapons factories along the Rakhine border. These factories, once considered secure due to their distance from ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), are now vulnerable as the AA expands its operations, particularly along the western bank of the Irrawaddy River. The CDM official added that the AA is capitalizing on border towns and villages while coordinating with local resistance forces to strengthen its offensives.

The scale of the junta's losses was further exposed through the testimony of a captured officer from the junta's No. (99) Light Infantry Division. Lieutenant Colonel Kyaw Kyaw Thet, the No. 2 strategic commander of the division, revealed that his company had been ordered to secure the highway connecting Ann and Minbu in the second week of January. However, as they advanced toward their objective, they came under attack by the AA and allied forces. In the end only around 20 soldiers, including himself and members from another strategic company, survived the engagement. The majority were either killed, wounded, or went missing during the clashes.

The AA's growing offensive beyond Rakhine underscores the mounting challenges faced by the Myanmar junta. With its forces spread thin and critical infrastructure now at risk, the junta appears increasingly vulnerable to the escalating resistance movement.

## THAILAND CUTS POWER TO MYANMAR BORDER REGIONS TO FIGHT SCAM CENTRES

Thailand cut cross-border electricity supplies to five locations in Myanmar on Wednesday, in an effort to stamp out online scam centres blamed for scaring away Chinese tourists.

Scam compounds have mushroomed in Myanmar's lawless borderlands, run by criminal gangs and staffed by foreigners trafficked and forced to work swindling their compatriots in an industry analysts say is worth billions of dollars.

Beijing has grown increasingly concerned about the centres as many of those involved -- both victims and perpetrators -- are Chinese.

"Thailand has stopped the electricity supply to Myanmar in five locations based on the decision of the National Security Council," Interior Minister Anutin Charnvirakul told reporters.

Transmission was cut at two points in Mae Sai in the north, two in Mae Sot in the west and one at Three Pagodas Pass, also in the west.

Anutin said electricity sales to Myanmar at these five locations earned Thailand around 50 million baht (\$1.5 million) a month.

"The electricity supply is not being stopped because the companies violated the contract, but because the electricity is being misused for scams, drugs and call centres," Anutin said.

"No one can accuse Thailand now of being part of supporting illegal businesses."

The move came as Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra travelled to Beijing for talks with President Xi Jinping, with the scam centres likely to be on the agenda.

Fears among Chinese tourists of being kidnapped and forced to work in scam centres was blamed for a sharp drop in visitor numbers over the Lunar New Year holiday last week.

China is a hugely important market for Thailand as it seeks to rebuild its crucial tourism sector after the devastating impact of travel shutdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai said the scam centres were a "national security issue".

AFP





Chinese President Xi Jinping with Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra in Beijing. Photo: AFP

## CHINA'S XI HAILS THAILAND'S 'STRONG' ACTION AGAINST SCAM CENTRES

Chinese President Xi Jinping thanked visiting Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra on Thursday for the "strong measures" her country has taken against scam centres targeting Chinese people.

Scam compounds have mushroomed along the Thai-Myanmar borderlands, staffed by trafficked foreigners who are forced to swindle their compatriots in an industry analysts say is worth billions.

A number of Chinese citizens have been rescued from the compounds, prompting fears among tourists that they could be kidnapped next.

China is a hugely important market for Thailand as it seeks to rebuild its tourism sector in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

While meeting the Thai prime minister in Beijing, Xi said: "China appreciates the strong measures taken by Thailand to combat online gambling and phone and online scams", state broadcaster CCTV reported.

"The two sides must continue to strengthen cooperation in security, law enforcement and judicial cooperation" in order to "protect people's lives and property", Xi added.

As the pair met, 61 people rescued from scam centres in Myanmar were returned to Thailand, defence

ministry spokesman Thanathip Sawangsang told AFP.

"There are about 34 Chinese. The rest come from Indonesia, Ethiopia and other countries in Africa," he said.

Paetongtarn sought to assure Xi that "the safety of people and tourists who visit Thailand is the government's highest priority", according to a statement from her office.

"Thailand is ready to boost cooperation with China to tackle crimes passing through Thailand and to systematically warn about possible threats," she said.

Bangkok has described the scam centres as a "national security issue".

On Wednesday, Thai authorities cut off the electricity supply to five areas in Myanmar where fraud centres are allegedly located.

In January, Chinese actor Wang Xing was reportedly rescued from a cyberfraud centre in Myanmar.

After his high-profile alleged kidnapping, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Thailand during the Lunar New Year holiday sharply declined in comparison to previous years.



## HRN CONDEMNS ONGOING HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN MYANMAR FOUR YEARS AFTER COUP

**H**uman Rights Now (HRN) submitted a statement on 4 February to the 58th session of the Human Rights Council on the fourth anniversary of the military coup in Myanmar. The statement notes the Myanmar junta's continued massive human rights violations and calls on states to implement sanctions and a weapons and fuel embargo on Myanmar, support efforts for accountability, increase humanitarian assistance, and require companies with links to Myanmar to conduct heightened human rights due diligence to identify and address any possible links to violations.

The full statement is below.

Myanmar's Military Continues to Commit Massive Rights Violations Four Years into its Illegal Coup

As Myanmar passes the fourth anniversary of the 1 February 2021 coup, the humanitarian catastrophe has reached its worst point, with indiscriminate airstrikes on civilian areas, the targeting of ethnic groups, food insecurity, and the collapse of public and health services all reaching record numbers. Following the military's

eighth extension of its illegal rule, the end of military rule appears nowhere in sight, and rampant political crackdowns on opponents continue. Human Rights Now (HRN) urges states to support effective measures pressuring Myanmar's military to end its violence and abuses including sanctions, a binding weapons and jet fuel embargo, and accountability mechanisms, as well as to support humanitarian efforts and heightened human rights due diligence standards on Myanmar-linked businesses.

### 1. Military Violations in Conflict

Since the coup began, Myanmar's military has routinely conducted unrestrained aerial and artillery bombardments on populated areas, resulting in civilian deaths, injuries, and destruction of civilian objects and vital infrastructure. Currently more than 6,000 civilian deaths in Myanmar have been reported, with millions more severely vulnerable to starvation and health issues due to the massive displacement and humanitarian crisis. Two million are at risk of starvation in Rakhine state alone.

On January 9, more than 40 civilians were killed by aerial bombings in a Rakhine state village, with over 500 homes destroyed. The conflict has also seen a surge in executions, burnings, beheadings and other atrocities. The military is intensifying its crackdowns and disproportionately targeting ethnic minorities. Entire villages have reportedly been razed, displacing over 3.5 million people, while access to food, healthcare, and education has collapsed.

However, despite overwhelming evidence of crimes against humanity and war crimes, the international responses remain fragmented. While some nations have imposed sanctions, sanctions remain internationally non-binding and lack effective enforcement mechanisms, failing to curb the military's access to weapons and revenue.

Since August 2024, the military has also imposed forced military conscription on young civilians and barred individuals of conscription age from leaving the country, often extorting bribes to secure their freedom. Despite the military recently stating that it would not draft women, there have been increasing reports of a nationwide lottery system listing conscription-age women, with families and local authorities receiving conscription lists from military officials. In 2024 alone, more than 1,700 Rohingya men have been abducted from refugee camps in Bangladesh and forcibly enrolled within the military ranks of their own oppressors.

## **2. Forced displacement and Myanmar's humanitarian crisis**

Myanmar's humanitarian situation is catastrophic. Nearly 20 million people currently require urgent aid, 6.3 million of them children. Military blockades and bureaucratic hurdles impede relief efforts. December 2024 saw the number of IDPs reach over 3.5 million, and it is estimated that this number may reach up to 4.5 million in 2025, accelerated by high inflation and the collapse of agricultural and manufacturing industries. Many of those displaced by the conflict have fled to neighbouring countries already strained by refugee inflows. Ethnic groups, most predominantly Rohingya, are at their most vulnerable. Thailand and Bangladesh, which host the majority of displaced Myanmar people, report deteriorating conditions in overcrowded camps.

With over 3.5 million people displaced by ongoing conflict and economic collapse, nearly half the population now lives in poverty, struggling to access basic necessities like food, healthcare, and education. The collapse of essential services has created a vacuum filled by illicit activities, with Myanmar emerging as the global leader in opium and heroin production. This shadow economy fuels further instability, perpetuating a cycle of violence and deprivation. Military-administered power outages have rendered access to clean water scarce, leading to a new cholera outbreak without proper access to medicine. The recent devastation of Typhoon Yagi in September 2024 and subsequent floods destroyed critical infrastructure countrywide, with over 1 million impacted.

The military's blockade of conflict zones, particularly in Sagaing, Magwe, and Rakhine states, has severed access to food, medicine, and clean water, triggering catastrophic malnutrition rates, while over 1,500 healthcare facilities in conflict-affected areas have been shuttered or destroyed by targeted attacks. Meanwhile, the military's counterinsurgency strategy—burning villages, destroying crops, and controlling water sources—has severely impacted children, with 55% in extreme poverty and at least 40% IDPs.

Indiscriminate military violence and economic hardships have significantly and negatively impacted the livelihoods of the population. Unemployment is soaring, with many workers from key industries facing reduced wages or severe decreases in production capacity and demand. Incessant bombardments have crippled the agricultural sector, with the price of rice more than doubling and the cost for a healthy diet increasing by 40% over 2023, a number even higher in conflict areas. With more than a third of the country's population in need of urgent assistance, significant increases in humanitarian aid are essential.

## **3. Military crackdowns on civil and political rights**

Four years after the coup, Myanmar remains engulfed in turmoil and a worsening humanitarian crisis, as the military suppresses all dissent with a complete erosion of civil liberties. On 31 January 2025, the military extended its illegal coup another six months for the eighth time, as it claims to prepare transparently unfair

elections already continuously postponed since August 2023, destroying any credibility in the military's claims or confidence in a fair and free election. The National League for Democracy (NLD), the main opposition party, remains forcibly dissolved, and restrictive election laws discourage parties from participating, posing the military to legitimize its rule through a sham process. Importantly, as long the military remains in power, the violations discussed in this statement will continue.

Since the coup began, over 28,000 people have been arbitrarily detained, with more than 21,000 still detained in prisons under dire conditions. Over 2,000 custodial deaths have been reported, many resulting from torture and denial of medical care. Prison conditions are inhumane, with detainees subjected to overcrowding, unsanitary environments, and rampant abuse including sexual violence and torture routinely employed to extract confessions or for punishment. The replacement of trained intelligence officers with untrained soldiers has only intensified prison brutality, resulting in a sharp increase in torture-related deaths.

More than 1,840 individuals have been arrested for posting opinions on social media. Since the coup began, watchdog organizations also documented over 450 nationwide or localized internet cuts by the military to cripple dissent and resistance. Regions like Sagaing, Magwe, and Kachin, hubs of armed resistances, endure the most frequent and prolonged internet outages, often coinciding with ground offensives targeting civilian populations, placing them at greater risk of death and harm. Such outages also obscure atrocities, isolate communities, disrupt aid flows, destabilize local economies, stifle resistance organizing, and fragment its solidarity.

#### **4. What the International Community Must Do**

As Myanmar's military continues its ruthless campaign of violence against its own people, the international community must call for accountability and cease all form of business with the military that contributes further to its war efforts.

Moreover, Myanmar's military also continues to sustain its campaign of violence through international partnerships with foreign governments, such as China

and Russia, and corporations directly or indirectly bankrolling its violations. Beyond state actors, multinational corporations remain complicit, with one recent investigation revealing the military's reliance on Singaporean fuel oil. Since the coup, 665 instances of alleged business and human rights violations were linked with the supply chains of 187 global brands. States should require companies under their jurisdiction with suppliers in or other business links to Myanmar to conduct heightened human rights due diligence. In October 2024, it was reported the EU, UK, and Canada imposed sanctions on a list of individuals and companies supplying jet fuel and equipment to Myanmar's military to sustain its war efforts, indicating the persistence of international businesses continuing to support Myanmar's military still even almost four years after the coup.

#### **5. Recommendations**

HRN protests the continuing serious rights violations occurring in Myanmar, and we call on Myanmar's military to:

End its conflict and emergency rule, restore Myanmar's democratically elected government and rule of law, and hold perpetrators of violations accountable.

Ensure civil and political rights, access to health services and humanitarian aid, and cease its attacks on civilian targets.

We further urge the international community to:

Support firm measures to enforce the military's compliance with Security Council Resolution 2669, including targeted economic sanctions and a binding weapons and fuel embargo.

Strengthen and support efforts to ensure accountabilities for all violations, including a referral to the ICC; Reinforce humanitarian assistance to Myanmar.

Require companies with business links to Myanmar to conduct heightened human rights due diligence to identify and address any business linked to rights violations.



Photo: AFP

## JOINT STATEMENT ON FEDERAL DEMOCRACY AND RESISTANCE AGAINST THE MYANMAR JUNTA

The Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), and the National Unity Government (NUG) released a joint statement on 3 February, four years after the 2021 military coup, reaffirming their commitment to overthrowing the military dictatorship.

The text of the joint statement continues below.

1. With the common goal of extinguishing military dictatorship and establishing a federal democratic union that is transformative in both form and essence, grounded in the principles of equality and the will of the people, we are embarking on our revolutionary journey through a bottom-up federalism approach that focuses on strengthening states/federal units, guided by the belief that the strength of the union derives from the strength of its states/federal units, from the outset of the revolution through the transitional period to the establishment of a future federal democratic union.

2. At the dawn of 2025, we remain steadfast in our collective struggle to achieve the shared goal of triumph so ardently desired by the people. We are forging broader, stronger, and more cohesive alliances to advance together towards our shared goal.

3. We honour the contributions of our people and the political and revolutionary forces to the Civil Disobedience Movement, Operation 1027, and other significant achievements across various fronts of the revolution. We also celebrate the continued representation of Ambassador U Kyaw Moe Tun at the United Nations, a diplomatic victory that stands as a symbol of the people's revolution.

4. We consider the release of political leaders, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and political prisoners who have been arrested and detained, to be of utmost importance for resolving Myanmar's current issues.

5. We have set forth the following six political objectives to guide the establishment of a Federal Democratic Union:

(a) To overturn the usurpation of state power by the military, and to terminate the involvement of the armed forces in politics

(b) To ensure that all armed forces operate solely under the command of a civilian government elected through democratic processes

(c) To abrogate the constitution of 2008 in its entirety, and to quash all attempts to reinstate its provisions

(d) To draft and promulgate a new constitution that embodies federalism and democratic values, garnering the consensus of all relevant parties

(e) To establish a new federal democratic union in accordance with the proposed federal democratic constitution

(f) To institute a system of transitional justice to achieve justice and accountability for victims of injustices, including gender-based violence, during the conflict period.

6. We shall address the matters of defining and establishing state and federal units and delineating boundaries during the transitional period based on the will of the people, without any discrimination, and through peaceful negotiations in political dialogues that include all primary stakeholders. Any disputes that arise among revolutionary forces will be regarded as internal disagreements and will be resolved solely through peaceful means.

7. The terrorist military junta is the primary perpetrator driving Myanmar towards disintegration; Min Aung Hlaing and his associates must be held accountable for their crimes against humanity. We urge members of the armed forces to dissociate themselves from this terrorist military junta and join the people in establishing a reputable, professional institution accepted and supported by the people.

8. The terrorist military junta holds no authority to hold elections, nor is the current political situation in the country conducive to holding elections. The junta's preparations to conduct a sham election will not only lead Myanmar towards further disintegration and escalate conflicts but will also contribute to increased regional instability. We urge the people and the international community to refrain from engaging, supporting, or recognising the junta.

9. The terrorist military junta's ongoing crimes, including forced conscription, are severely damaging the socioeconomic livelihood of Myanmar, causing internal and external displacement of the people and endangering regional stability. We call on the international community to work with us, the revolutionary forces, to provide practical and effective support to urgently alleviate the immense suffering endured by the people of Myanmar. We urge certain nations to cease the provision and sale of military supplies, including aviation fuel, and to refrain from diplomatic recognition and engagement, that emboldens the junta to continue its acts of violence against the people.

10. With unwavering determination, we solemnly pledge to continue our revolutionary endeavour in unity for the emergence of a Federal Democratic Union that fulfils the aspirations of all our peoples.

Haksar • Myint

**RESISTING MILITARY RULE IN BURMA (1988-2024)**  
Story of Mizzima Media: Born in Exile, Banned in Myanmar



## **RESISTING MILITARY RULE IN BURMA (1988-2024)**

Story of Mizzima Media:  
Born in Exile, Banned in Myanmar

Nandita Haksar  
Soe Myint



# **INDEPENDENT MYANMAR MEDIA HOUSE MIZZIMA FIGHTS FOR THE TRUTH**

**M**izzima Media has been in the forefront of Myanmar independent media for over a quarter of a century and it currently working to publish the truth on the Myanmar crisis despite funding problems and the ongoing brutality of the ruling military junta.

To mark a milestone in the life of this leading independent news service, a book has been released entitled: "Resisting Military Rule in Burma (1988-2024) Story of Mizzima Media: Born in Exile, Banned in Myanmar" by Nandita Haksar and Soe Myint.

Myanmar's civil war has been described by experts as the longest running and most violent conflict in the world. The country is in the midst of crisis following the 2021 military coup, with the conflict displacing 3.5 million people yet it has received relatively muted international attention compared to the spotlight thrown onto the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. This discrepancy can be attributed to Myanmar's lower strategic significance to Western powers and the complexities within its borders. But this should not negate Myanmar's importance on the international stage.

The conflict had a direct bearing on India and the humanitarian crisis on the 1,643-kilometre-long Indo-Myanmar border has affected the politically sensitive North East Region of India, especially since the Myanmar coup.

This book is an account of Burmese resistance to brutal military rule since 1988, when Mizzima was set up, to the present day told through the story of journalist Soe Myint, the founding editor of Mizzima Media, who started out as a democracy activist before honing his skills in journalism. It is a personalized account of adventure and struggle, including student activism, flights to the jungle, arrests, and dogged determination "to get the story published" and run a well-functioning media organization.

The story of Mizzima is one of extraordinary courageous journalism and personal difficulties told in detail. Soe Myint along with Thin Thin Aung, a fellow student decided to start Mizzima News, an internet News and Feature Service in August 1998 in exile in India with just a laptop which they would connect to a local STD booth because they did not even have a phone line. After many years of hard work and sacrifice, Mizzima News grew into an internationally recognized award-winning Burmese and English news portal, with

online news, TV and radio, and a weekly insightful magazine initially operating in exile.

Mizzima faced many challenges but it managed to survive and grow following a return to Myanmar from 2012, when the country began to open up, to 2021, when the military took over the country in a coup, jailing democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and others. Mizzima's office in Yangon was raided, the journalists hounded, and several were jailed and subject to brutal treatment. Soe Myint managed to escape the junta dragnet.

"Resisting Military Rule in Burma (1988-2024) Story of Mizzima Media" is a compelling dive into the amazing struggles and difficulties faced by Soe Myint, the involvement of Indian lawyer Nandita Haksar, Soe Myint's younger brother Sein Win, and other players, told in their own words, offering insight into the struggle for democracy and human rights in the country – including the shocking developments from the 2021 military coup to the present day. Soe Myint was not entirely taken by surprise by the coup and managed to escape with a team and take shelter among the ethnic minorities. His brother Sein Win led another team of reporters into the jungle. From the wreckage of a successful commercially-run media organization, they were able to resurrect a full-and-functioning media service operating in a "safe-area" near the Thai border and in exile, with correspondents operating undercover dotted around the conflict-riddled country, with the backing of donor funding.

Soe Myint and Mizzima have been engaging with the question of what kind of democracy and federalism could emerge in Myanmar if the armed resistance is successful in defeating the military junta. Their interventions are in the area of media and communications, a vital component in a future



Myanmar. Mizzima gives wide coverage on the issues raised by the ethnic minorities in their social media platforms and on Mizzima television. Mizzima has also been helping the ethnic nationalities set up their own FM Radio stations and training journalists from various ethnic groups and having partnership agreements with the ethnic and regional media.

Soe Myint believes that Mizzima and independent media has a vital role in the Myanmar peace process; but for the time being, it is a "part of the resistance" wielding a pen rather than the gun against the brutal military regime.

The book is dedicated to the jailed Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. As Soe Myint has said: "Aung San Suu Kyi, I believe, is one of the few political leaders

who brings a new vision and a lot of compassion and courage into politics where by a new civilization of norms not only new political norms but new civilization of norms are attempted to be set into motion in the very same way that Mahatma Gandhi did and it is not for nothing that she is known as the Gandhi of Burma ..."

As Soe Myint says: "Life has been a long struggle. But if you have passion, idealism, commitment, and are prepared to sacrifice for those principles it is worthwhile."

Mizzima continues to function to shine light on the Myanmar crisis, despite the pushback by the military regime and a recent serious cutback in donor funding.

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Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing.  
Photo: AFP

## MYANMAR COUP LEADER DEFENDS MILITARY ACTIONS AMID RISING CIVILIAN CASUALTIES FROM AIRSTRIKES

**M**yanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing has intensified airstrikes across the country while urging ethnic armed groups to prioritize national unity over their own interests. He claimed that ethnic communities are suffering due to the destruction of state infrastructure, attributing the damage to armed resistance groups.

His remarks were made in a message on the 78th Shan National Day (Shan State Day) on 7 February, where he also asserted that the country's human resources are being wasted as young people are conscripted under the military service law.

Despite his claims, independent research organizations have reported that the Military Council's airstrikes have devastated civilian infrastructure, including homes, schools, hospitals, and religious buildings, leading to increased casualties.

According to a report by the Myanmar Institute for Strategic and Policy Studies (ISP-Myanmar) on 3 February, the military carried out over 8,000 airstrikes between 2021 and 15 January, 2025. Shan State was the hardest hit, experiencing more than 1,700 of these attacks.

Further data from Nyan Lin Thit Analytica Research Group highlights a sharp rise in destruction

caused by airstrikes. In 2021, eight religious buildings, seven schools, and four hospitals were destroyed. The numbers escalated in 2022 to 20 religious buildings, 14 schools, and seven hospitals. By 2023, the destruction included 109 religious buildings, 55 schools, and 17 hospitals. In the first eight months of 2024 alone, airstrikes damaged 111 religious buildings, 66 schools, and 27 hospitals.

The same research group reported that as of August 2024, at least 1,749 civilians had been killed and 2,453 injured due to military attacks.

Meanwhile, U Kyaw Zaw, spokesperson for the Presidential Office of the National Unity Government (NUG), stated in a 3 February press conference that the Military Council has been deliberately targeting healthcare and education facilities. Over four years, 245 schools and 340 hospitals have been attacked, leading to the deaths of more than 250 students and teachers, including 88 children under 18.

Despite mounting evidence of civilian casualties and destruction, the Military Council continues to justify its military operations, blaming ethnic armed groups for the devastation while escalating its attacks nationwide.



Mandalay. Photo: AFP

## MYANMAR JUNTA ARRESTS 237 IN MANDALAY AS IT INTENSIFIES UNDER THE MILITARY SERVICE LAW

In January 2025, Myanmar's military junta arrested 237 people in Mandalay, including six women, according to an official from the Mandalay Strike Group. The detainees, primarily in their 20s and 30s, were taken from various townships, with Maha Aungmye reporting the highest number of arrests at 46.

"The junta threatened those who fled and disobeyed orders at gunpoint. They conducted nighttime raids under the pretext of overnight guest checks, beating and arresting people," a Mandalay Strike Group official said.

Other townships also saw significant arrests: 32 in Aungmyaythazan, 27 in Chanayethazan, 30 in Chanmyathazi, 35 in Pyigyitagon, 34 in Patheingyi, and 33 in Amarapura.

Since early 2025, the junta has ramped up arrests in Mandalay, deploying traffic police, soldiers, and police at checkpoints across the city. These security forces inspect vehicle licenses, mobile phones, and VPN usage, arresting individuals on the spot without questioning.

The heightened crackdown has left Mandalay's streets largely deserted after 6 pm.

"In the evenings, the streets are empty. Previously, neighbours would sit outside, but now most residents stay indoors," a Mandalay resident said.

Three Mandalay residents interviewed by Mizzima confirmed that the junta-aligned Pyu Saw Htee militia has been forcibly detaining individuals walking at night.

"Pyu Saw Htee militias are targeting young people returning from work, forcing them into vehicles. Those

who can pay are extorted, while those who cannot are handed over to neighbourhoods in need of military recruits," said a regional source.

Beyond arrests under the military service law, Mandalay residents are also alarmed by reports of child disappearances and rising gang-related crimes, including theft and robbery.

"We apologize for the repeated warnings to be careful and take precautions, but all these crises stem from the military dictatorship. We thank the people for their courage and their ongoing efforts, and we urge them to continue taking precautions and avoid falling victim to the military regime's exploitation," said an official from the Mandalay Strike Group.

The junta began enforcing the People's Military Service Rules on 23 January 2024, which mandates compulsory service for young men, women, and transgender individuals.

In response, the Mandalay Strike Group has urged the National Unity Government (NUG), the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), ethnic revolutionary groups, interim regional administrations, and the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Representative Committee to raise international awareness and pursue negotiations to address human rights violations under the junta's conscription law.

Meanwhile, People's Defence Forces (PDFs) continue to control significant areas in Madaya, Singu, Mogok, Taungtha, and Myingyan townships in Mandalay Region, where intense fighting persists as the military junta attempts to reclaim these territories.



## MONYWA RESIDENTS WARNED AS MYANMAR JUNTA INTENSIFIES FORCED ARRESTS FOR MILITARY CONSCRIPTION

The People's Security Force (PSF) of Monywa has urged residents to remain vigilant as the Myanmar junta escalates its forced arrests of young people under the pretext of security operations.

"They are openly rounding up people for forced labour as porters in Monywa. They conduct random inspections and arrests, pretending to carry out security checks, but in reality, they are seizing young men," said Ko Arr Ku, a PSF officer in Monywa Township.

Monywa, home to the Northwestern Military Command and several junta battalions, has witnessed a surge in arrests. Junta forces are not only conducting routine inspections at checkpoints but also raiding neighbourhoods and entering homes under the guise of checking household records, according to locals.

"This has become more widespread in Monywa recently. Just the other day, they pointed guns at a man eating at a bakery and took him away without saying a word," a local said.

Following the enforcement of the military conscription law in February 2024, approximately 300 people have been arrested in Monywa, with at least 100 detained in January alone, marking the highest monthly figure so far, according to Ko Arr Ku.

In response, the PSF is compiling personal data of those forcibly taken and providing assistance to individuals seeking to evade conscription.

"Our doors are always open for young people who wish to reach liberated areas or join resistance organizations. They can contact the local People's Defense Force (PDF), People's Administration Force (PAF), or People's Security Force (PSF), as well as the respective battalions," Ko Arr Ku said.

With a worsening troop shortage, the junta has expanded forced conscription across the Sagaing Region, targeting men in multiple townships. The People's Administration Force has urged urban residents to seek refuge in areas controlled by resistance forces.

Similar arrests are increasing in major cities, including Yangon, Mandalay, and Naypyidaw. The Mandalay People's Strike Force reported on 2 February that at least 237 young men were detained in Mandalay in January.

Resistance groups have also reported that the junta is deploying large numbers of forcibly conscripted soldiers in ongoing battles.

On 5 February, the Karen National Union (KNU) issued a statement calling on forcibly conscripted soldiers to surrender to the nearest ethnic resistance forces or People's Defense Forces (PDF) by any means necessary.



Photo: NUG

## NUG DISCLOSES OVER 1,000 HEALTHCARE FACILITIES ESTABLISHED ACROSS 190 TOWNSHIPS IN MYANMAR

The National Unity Government (NUG) has set up 106 hospitals, over 800 clinics, and approximately 100 mobile clinics across 190 townships since 2021, according to U Kyaw Zaw, spokesperson for the NUG Presidential Office.

He made these remarks during the NUG's "Addressing the Public and the International Community" program on 4 February.

These healthcare facilities have reportedly provided treatment to more than 900,000 outpatients, over 37,000 inpatients, 23,000 surgical patients, more than 3,200 injured patients, and over 4,300 transferred patients.

"The Ministry of Health-NUG, in collaboration with state and regional health teams, has provided prosthetic limbs and rehabilitation exercises to members of the People's Defence Forces, ethnic armed groups, allied forces, and approximately 700 civilians who lost limbs

due to conflict and landmine explosions," U Kyaw Zaw said.

Additionally, around 700 people who lost limbs for various reasons have been fitted with prosthetics. Another more than 1,500 others awaiting prosthetic limbs are undergoing rehabilitation training in preparation for their fittings.

However, U Kyaw Zaw did not disclose specific townships where these medical and prosthetic services are being provided.

The NUG also reported that the junta's deliberate attacks on healthcare and education facilities, including hospitals and schools, have resulted in the destruction of 245 schools and 340 hospitals and clinics since the military coup. These attacks have claimed the lives of more than 250 students and teachers, including 88 children under the age of 18.

Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing.  
Photo: AFP

## MYANMAR JUNTA BANS POSSIBLE CONSCRIPTS FROM FOREIGN TRAVEL

Myanmar's embattled junta has banned anyone eligible for military conscription from leaving the country without permission, as it seeks to shore up its forces fighting rebel groups opposed to its rule.

The junta has lost control of swathes of the country to ethnic minority armed groups and other opposition forces in the civil war triggered by its coup d'etat four years ago.

A long-dormant conscription law was enforced last year as the army reeled from a string of battlefield defeats to ethnic armed groups and civilian People's Defence Forces seeking to oust it from power.

A bylaw passed late last month that has only just come to light imposes new restrictions on those eligible to be called up -- men aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27.

"The person who receives the order shall not be allowed to leave for foreign countries without obtaining the permission of the Central Body," section 51 of the bylaw says.

The rule applies to those who have been called up and also those waiting for the outcome of appeals for exemption, reduction, or postponement of military service.

Breaking the rules can bring a jail sentence of up to three years.

The military service law, authored by a previous junta in 2010 but brought into force only in February

last year, requires those called up to serve for at least two years.

It also has a stipulation that during a state of emergency, the terms of service can be extended up to five years, and those ignoring a summons to serve can be jailed for the same period.

Myanmar has been under a state of emergency since soon after a February 2021 coup, with the junta announcing the latest six-month extension on Friday.

Rights groups estimate tens of thousands of young people have fled Myanmar to avoid being called up to the deeply unpopular military.

The recent restrictions have affected workplaces in Yangon by driving their employees out of the country, said a senior employee of a private company in Yangon who asked not to be named.

"At least six colleagues have resigned from work since the law was imposed," he told AFP.

"I worry when they will knock on my door and grab me from home," he said, adding he was looking for a way to leave the country and support his family from abroad.

The bloody multi-sided conflict triggered when the junta overthrew the government of Aung San Suu Kyi has left more than 6,000 civilians dead, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners monitoring group

AFP

# 278 MYANMAR NATIONALS IN SINGAPORE RENOUNCE CITIZENSHIP TO BECOME SINGAPOREANS



The Myanmar Embassy in Singapore announced on 3 February that 278 Myanmar nationals have voluntarily renounced their Myanmar citizenship and obtained Singaporean citizenship in 2024.

According to the statement, these individuals have already submitted their original national identification cards to the Myanmar Embassy and are required to return their Myanmar passports by 28 February after receiving the embassy's recommendation.

Singapore grants Permanent Resident (PR) status to outstanding foreign nationals who work and reside in the country. Those who obtain PR status can later apply for Singaporean citizenship.

"In the past, applying for PR was relatively easy, but the process has become much stricter. Now, applicants must have substantial financial resources, and eligibility is assessed based on factors such as salary and age. Even those who have lived in Singapore for years may not qualify for PR, but younger applicants have a higher success rate," said a Myanmar student studying in Singapore.

To be eligible for PR status in Singapore, applicants must be at least 21 years old, earn a minimum monthly income of S\$3,000, and have resided in Singapore for at least six months. Additionally, they must meet educational, health, and work experience requirements.

Applications must be submitted to the Singapore Immigration Department along with necessary documents, including proof of employment, educational qualifications, and a health check-up.

On 3 January, the Myanmar Embassy in Singapore outlined the procedure for renouncing Myanmar citizenship, stating that applicants must submit complete documentation.

A Myanmar national living in Singapore states that most PR applicants are educated young people. He added that Myanmar is losing valuable human resources due to the increasing number of skilled individuals renouncing their citizenship, particularly amid the country's ongoing political turmoil.

According to Singapore's Human Resource Department, more than 200,000 Myanmar nationals currently work in the country.

Meanwhile, following the junta's enforcement of the People's Military Service Law on 10 February 2024, young people eligible for military service are attempting to leave Myanmar through various means.

The military authorities have also intensified restrictions on those eligible for conscription, making it increasingly difficult for them to leave the country.



## JAPAN'S STATE MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS MEETS MYANMAR COMMUNITY

The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a press release on 4 February describing the of members of the Myanmar community in Japan to the offices of Mr Takuma Miyaji, State Minister for Foreign Affairs.

The text of the press release is below.

On 04 February Mr. Takuma Miyaji, the State Minister for Foreign Affairs, received a courtesy call from members of the Myanmar community living in Japan.

As marking four years since the coup d'état in Myanmar, State Minister Miyaji exchanged views on the situation in the country with members of the Myanmar community residing in Japan and received a "letter of request" calling for the Government of Japan to advance concrete and effective policies to help swiftly restore Myanmar's democratic political system and peace.

State Minister Miyaji expressed serious concern that there are still no signs of improvement in the situation in Myanmar although four years have passed since the coup d'état. He also stated that in light of this situation, Foreign Minister Iwaya issued a statement on February 1 and once again urged the Myanmar military to take concrete actions to:

- (1) immediately stop the violence,
- (2) release those who are detained, and
- (3) swiftly restore Myanmar's democratic political system.

State Minister Miyaji committed that based on our consistent policy of supporting the people of Myanmar who are facing difficulties, Japan would continue to actively provide humanitarian assistance and work toward improving the situation while actively engaging in dialogue with various stakeholders.





Photo: AFP

## MYANMAR JUNTA TO ESTABLISH AGRICULTURE AND LIVESTOCK UNIVERSITY IN AYEYARWADY REGION AMID REPORTS OF MILITARY ACADEMY RELOCATION

The Myanmar military junta has announced plans to establish an agriculture and livestock university in Ayeyarwady Region in the upcoming academic year. This comes amid reports that the Defence Services Academy (DSA) and the Defence Services Technological Academy (DSTA) in Pyin Oo Lwin, Mandalay Region, will be relocated to Yezin in Naypyidaw.

Currently, Yezin Agricultural University, Myanmar's only agricultural university, is based in Yezin, Naypyidaw. In late January, Deputy Minister for Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation Dr. Tin Htut confirmed that the DSA and DSTA would be moved to Yezin, according to media reports.

The Irrawaddy news reported that these military academies will be relocated near the University of Veterinary Science (Yezin), the University of Forestry, and Yezin Agricultural University. On 4 February, junta officially announced a plan to establish the agriculture and livestock university in Ayeyarwady Region.

However, it remains unclear whether Yezin Agricultural University will be relocated or if a separate institution will be established. On 29 January, Yezin Agricultural University stated on its official social media page that there were only plans to expand agricultural

and livestock education, not to relocate the university from Yezin.

Meanwhile, fighting has been ongoing for about six months near Pyin Oo Lwin, along the Nawngkhio–Pyin Oo Lwin road, and in Ohmti, Ohmkha, and Sammse villages, as well as Taungkhan village in Nawngkhio Township.

Clashes between junta troops and resistance forces, including the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Mandalay People's Defence Force (MDY-PDF), have escalated.

As military tensions rise, the junta has been reinforcing defences and digging trenches in Pyin Oo Lwin throughout 2024. Following the MDY-PDF's announcement of a planned offensive on Mandalay, military analysts suggest that capturing Pyin Oo Lwin could be a crucial step before advancing on Mandalay.

Reports indicate that some families linked to the military have left the town due to security concerns.

In Ayeyarwady Region, military activity has also intensified since December 2024. Clashes have been reported in villages in Shwethaungyan Township, Pathein District, between Arakan Army (AA)-led resistance forces and junta troops.



## SKIN DISEASE OUTBREAK SPREADS AMONG TENS OF THOUSANDS OF IDPS IN RAKHINE STATE AMID MEDICINE SHORTAGES

Tens of thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Rakhine State are suffering from a severe skin disease outbreak, exacerbated by a military-imposed blockade on medical supplies, according to aid workers. Children around the age of 10 are the most affected.

The outbreak, which began around five months ago, has led to widespread cases of itching and skin lesions across nearly all IDP camps, said aid worker U Wai Hin Aung.

"The infection rate among children is significantly higher than among adults. Many develop bumps and large sores that, in some cases, spread extensively across their bodies. Almost every child in nearly all camps is affected," he said.

The disease had not previously been widespread in Gwa, Taungup, and Thandwe townships, but cases are now rising in these areas. In Gwa Township alone, around 3,000 people including approximately 2,000 children, have been infected, according to an aid worker.

"A tube of anti-itch ointment now costs around 10,000 kyats and is difficult to obtain. One tube is not enough to treat a single person, as the sores cover large areas of the body. This has made controlling the outbreak among IDPs extremely challenging," said a social worker in Gwa Township.

The outbreak in Gwa began in December 2024, and within just over a month, infection rates have escalated rapidly.

"Ointments are scarce, and prices are high. The number of infected people has reached tens of thousands," the social worker said.

Strict junta-imposed restrictions on the transportation of goods have worsened medicine shortages in Rakhine State, leaving residents with limited access to treatment.

According to data collected by Mizzima, the outbreak has spread across major townships in Rakhine State, including Sittwe, Ponnagyun, Ramree, Kyauktaw, Minbya, Thandwe, Gwa, Taungup, and Ann.

Health experts from the 'Hello Doctor' medical network attribute the outbreak to poor sanitation, lack of personal hygiene, and deficiencies in essential vitamins and nutrients.

Ongoing clashes since 13 November 2023 between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar military junta have displaced more than 600,000 civilians in Rakhine State, according to a 29 December report from the Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office (HDCO).

Relief workers warn that these displaced populations urgently need food, medicine, and humanitarian assistance.

Currently, the Arakan Army controls 14 townships in Rakhine State as well as Paletwa in Chin State, excluding the towns of Sittwe, Kyaukphyu, and Mrauk-U.



The bidding process underway outside side the house. Photo: AFP

## BID TO SELL AUNG SAN SUU KYI'S MYANMAR MANSION FLOPS FOR THIRD TIME

Myanmar's junta failed in an attempt to auction Aung San Suu Kyi's lakeside mansion on Wednesday, with no bids submitted for the former democracy leader's home -- the third time the sale has flopped.

The two-storey Yangon house, on about 0.8 hectares (1.9 acres) of land, was put up for sale with a minimum price of \$140 million following a lengthy legal wrangle over the property between the Nobel laureate and her brother.

Suu Kyi, who spent years under house arrest at the mansion under a former junta, has been detained since the military seized power once again in February 2021.

Around a dozen journalists, watched over by security personnel in plain clothes, attended the kerbside sale run by junta-appointed officials outside the colonial-era house on leafy University Avenue, a few doors from the US embassy.

After calling for bids starting from 297 billion kyats -- around \$140 million at the official exchange rate -- and getting no response, the auctioneer called off the sale, AFP reporters at the scene saw.

"I announce the auction is not successful after calling for bids three times," the auctioneer said.

The sale is being run by junta-appointed officials on behalf of Suu Kyi's estranged brother Aung San Oo, who won a court ruling granting him ownership of half of the property.

Aung San Oo, who has lived outside Myanmar for decades, agreed the minimum sale price with the junta, which has run two previous unsuccessful auctions, in March and August last year.

With Myanmar's economy shattered by the civil war triggered by the military coup, it is unclear who in the country would be in a position to spend \$140 million on a single, increasingly dilapidated property.

Real estate agents say similar-sized properties in upmarket Yangon areas might fetch \$1 million to \$2 million.

The house holds a special place in Myanmar history -- Suu Kyi was confined within its crumbling walls for around 15 years after shooting to fame during huge demonstrations against the then-junta in 1988.

Cut off from her husband and children in England, Suu Kyi spent time playing the piano, reading detective novels and meditating as her status as a democracy leader grew.

Hundreds of people would regularly gather on the pavement outside to hear her talk about democracy and fighting military rule through non-violence.

After her release in 2010 she continued living at the villa, receiving a string of foreign leaders -- including then US president Barack Obama, journalists and diplomats.

Suu Kyi, 79, is serving a 27-year prison sentence on charges ranging from corruption to not respecting Covid-19 pandemic restrictions -- charges rights groups say are a junta sham designed to eliminate her politically.

AFP



Karen BGF

## KAREN BGF HANDS OVER 61 TRAFFICKED INDIVIDUALS TO THAILAND AMID CRACKDOWN ON SCAM CENTRES

The Karen Border Guard Force (BGF) transferred 61 individuals who were trafficked into online scam operations in Myawaddy, Karen State, to Thai authorities on 6 February, according to Thai news outlet The Reporters and local residents in Mae Sot.

Thai government officials received the victims after they were transported via the No. 2 Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge, which connects Myawaddy and Mae Sot. Among those handed over were 39 Chinese nationals, five Indonesians, 13 Indians, and one each from Kazakhstan, Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Malaysia, The Reporters stated.

On the same day, Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister, Phumtham Wechayachai, arrived in Mae Sot. Thai authorities confirmed that the trafficked individuals would be questioned before being repatriated to their respective countries.

The handover comes as both China and Thailand intensify efforts to combat online scam operations along the Myanmar-Thailand border. On 4 February, Thailand announced plans to cut off power to five border areas, including Myawaddy, Tachilek, and Payathonzu, to disrupt scam networks. The power supply to these areas was officially cut on 5 February.

Despite the power outage, scam operations reportedly continue using private generators, while local residents bear the brunt of the fuel and electricity shortages. Additionally, scam centres in Myawaddy, Shwe Kokko, Mae Thaw Tha Lay, KK Park, AA Park, 999, and Wang Kha are reportedly relocating. Thai authorities have also tightened border security measures.

On 6 February, the BGF reaffirmed its commitment to tackling human trafficking and criminal activities in its controlled areas, aligning with broader anti-scam initiatives by China and Thailand.

Of the 61 individuals handed over, seven were women and 54 were men. Attempts to contact the BGF for further details have so far been unsuccessful.

In a statement on 3 February, Myanmar's junta reported that 4,176 people including 3,415 men and 761 women from 38 countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa had been trafficked into Myanmar. The regime stated that diplomatic and Interpol channels have been used to request investigations into their whereabouts.

Photo: Louis Velazquez

## MYANMAR JUNTA EMBASSY IN U.S. URGES UNDOCUMENTED NATIONALS TO LEAVE AMID STRICTER IMMIGRATION POLICIES

The Myanmar junta's embassy in Washington, DC, issued a statement on 5 February, advising Myanmar citizens residing in the United States without proper legal status to leave the country voluntarily before facing deportation.

The announcement follows the tightening of US immigration policies under President Donald Trump. The new administration has intensified enforcement actions against undocumented immigrants. As a result, authorities have increased deportations of individuals without valid residency permits or those who fail to comply with immigration regulations.

The embassy urged Myanmar nationals with expired visas or legal documents to take necessary steps to secure legal status. It warned that those without valid documentation could be classified as unauthorized immigrants and risk deportation. Additionally, the statement noted that individuals with expired passports who face difficulties returning to Myanmar can apply for a Certificate of Identity at the embassy, a document allowing them to travel back to Myanmar permanently.

Many Myanmar nationals enter the US through various visa programs, including tourist and student visas, applying not only at the US Embassy in Myanmar but also in neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Some overstay their visas and seek US citizenship or asylum.

During President Joe Biden's administration, a presidential order prioritized the deportation of criminals. However, immigration lawyer Lun Kham Paik, an American of Chin descent with decades of experience

in immigration cases, explained that President Trump has revoked this policy. Under Trump's new executive order, all immigration law violators, including those who overstay their visas, are now subject to deportation.

Nevertheless, individuals with valid residency permits, active visas, or pending asylum applications are still considered legal residents. If questioned by immigration officers, they should provide proper documentation to confirm their status, Lun Kham Paik advised.

"The US is a developed and free country, so many of us dream of living there. Given Myanmar's current political turmoil, young people like me want to escape. That's why we explore all possible ways to go to the US, including applying for the Diversity Visa (DV) lottery. We believe that once we arrive, we'll find a way to stay. In the past, this worked for some, but now, even with a visa, the future is uncertain," said a Burmese woman who recently obtained a visit visa to the US.

On 5 February, the US government deported 104 Indian nationals on illegal immigration charges. In late January, the US Border Security Chief announced intensified efforts to identify, arrest, and deport undocumented immigrants across the country.

Additionally, President Trump has suspended the US refugee program and the Welcome Corps initiative, which was introduced under President Biden to allow private sponsorship of refugees. This suspension has left individuals from refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, who had been approved for US resettlement, unable to leave.



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# NUG DECLARES MYANMAR JUNTA'S ELECTION A SHAM, LAUNCHES MISSIONS TO PREVENT IT

**U** Kyaw Ni, Deputy Minister of Labor Affairs for the National Unity Government (NUG), has denounced the junta's planned election as a fraudulent process and confirmed that missions have been initiated to prevent it from happening.

Speaking on 6 January during the second day of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw session organized by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), U Kyaw Ni addressed a proposal submitted by the CRPH and the International Relations Committee regarding the junta's election.

"Elections are fundamental to democracy, but the one organized by the junta is entirely illegitimate. The Military Council, which seized power by disregarding the people's will, cannot hold a fair election, nor can it resolve the ongoing political crisis," he said.

According to U Kyaw Ni, in December last year, the NUG launched a mission in coordination with various ministries to gather intelligence on the junta's electoral preparations and the territorial control of revolutionary forces. The collected data will be shared with international bodies and relevant stakeholders.

The mission also seeks to obstruct the election through military, administrative, and legal means, strengthen cooperation with allies, and monitor any deceptive peace initiatives that may follow the election.

The NUG and its allies assert that the junta lacks the legitimacy to hold elections, warning that forcibly

pushing ahead with a fraudulent vote will only deepen Myanmar's crisis and exacerbate regional instability. On 3 February, the NUG, CRPH, National League for Democracy (NLD), National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), and Chin Brotherhood issued a joint statement calling on the public and international community to reject participation, support, or recognition of the election.

Despite these objections, the junta remains determined to proceed. It previously announced that elections would take place in 2025, yet on 31 January, the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC) extended the state of emergency by another six months, citing the need for electoral preparations and national stability.

Meanwhile, Myanmar's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, U Kyaw Moe Tun, reiterated during a 31 January dialogue at Yale University's MacMillan Centre that the international community must reject the junta's legitimacy, including its planned election.

Additionally, Karen National Union (KNU) Chairman Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win declared on 31 January, on the 76th Karen Revolution Day, that the KNU would oppose any election aimed at consolidating the junta's power.



**FEMALE MYANMAR POLITICAL PRISONERS HELD IN SOLITARY AT DAIK-U PRISON AMID RISING ABUSES**

The newly appointed warden of Daik-U Prison in Bago Region has placed 13 female political prisoners in solitary confinement, in what appears to be an assertion of power, according to Zue Zue May Yoon, a representative of the Women’s Organization for Political Prisoners (WOPP).

Daw Zar Zar Min, who took over as the warden of the prison’s women’s dormitory this year, began enforcing solitary confinement on 24 January. As of 7 February, the detainees have been held in isolation for 15 days.

While prison authorities claim the measure was taken in response to an argument between inmates and staff, Zue Zue May Yoon argues that it constitutes a deliberate violation of human rights.

“We’ve heard that this was done arbitrarily. The main issue is that when a prison warden is transferred, they are categorized based on their track record as

‘strict’ or ‘harsh.’ Right now, it appears that Zar Zar Min is particularly targeting political prisoners who are actively engaged in the resistance,” she said.

Conditions inside Daik-U Prison remain dire, with reports indicating that meals served to inmates are of extremely poor quality, leading to digestive issues. Those suffering from illnesses are also denied even basic pain relief medication, while the women’s ward lacks a medical clinic, worsening the healthcare crisis.

According to Zue Zue May Yoon, over 300 female political prisoners are currently held in Daik-U Prison, including pregnant women and mothers with young children.

The WOPP stated that it continues to expose human rights violations inside prisons and is working with both domestic and international organizations to prevent further abuses.



Photo: UNICEF

## UNICEF WARNS OF RISING CHILD MORTALITY DUE TO AIR POLLUTION IN EAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

**U**NICEF issued a press release on 6 February regarding over 100 daily deaths of children under five associated with air pollution in East Asia and the Pacific. It cites a new UNICEF analysis revealing the staggering impact of toxic air on millions of children and urges immediate action.

The text of the press release continues below.

As Thailand's capital, Bangkok, grapples with unhealthy levels of air pollution, leading to school closures and widespread health concerns, UNICEF's latest analysis sheds light on the devastating impact of toxic air on children across East Asia and the Pacific. Air pollution, which peaks in many parts of the region during the dry season from now until April, is linked to over 100 deaths in children under five every day.

The analysis reveals that all children in East Asia and the Pacific – 500 million children in total – live in countries with unhealthy levels of air pollution. Household air pollution, caused by solid fuels used for cooking and heating, is linked to more than half of all air pollution-related deaths in children under five. Meanwhile, 325 million children live in countries where average annual particulate matter (PM2.5) levels exceed World Health Organization (WHO) guideline levels by more than five times, and 373 million live in countries with unhealthy levels of nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>). Additionally, 91 percent of children in the region – 453 million – live in countries where ozone pollution exceeds WHO guideline levels. Nearly half of the PM2.5 in countries with the highest levels of this pollutant, came from the burning of fossil fuel, biomass fuel, and agriculture waste, which also generate the greenhouse gases driving climate change.



"Every breath matters, but for too many children every breath can bring harm," said June Kunugi, UNICEF Regional Director for East Asia and the Pacific. "The air they breathe, at a time when their bodies and minds are still developing, too often contains unhealthy levels of pollution that can comprise their growth, harm their lungs, and impair their cognitive development."

Air pollution is linked to nearly one in four deaths of children under five in East Asia and the Pacific, and can impact every stage of a child's life. It begins in the womb with risks of premature delivery and low birth weight. The harm continues into early childhood, as young children breathe more rapidly and are closer to ground-level pollutants like vehicle exhaust, making them more vulnerable to asthma, lung damage, and developmental delays. The threat is often worse for low-income children living near factories or highways, where exposure to pollution is higher. Over time, air pollution can silently fuel chronic illnesses such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease, jeopardizing children's futures.

Air pollution's toll goes far beyond children's health – it strains already overwhelmed healthcare systems, drives up costs, and disrupts learning and productivity. School absences due to illness, hindered brain development, and the risk of school closures limit children's potential, while parents caring for sick children lose income. The economic fallout is staggering: the World Bank estimated that in 2019, air pollution from PM2.5 caused premature deaths and illnesses that cost East Asia and the Pacific 9.3 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP), equivalent to more than \$2.5 trillion.

UNICEF urges governments, businesses, the health sector, parents and educators to urgently address air pollution's impact on children for children in East Asia and the Pacific, more specifically:

Governments must lead by strengthening climate and environmental policies, transitioning to clean energy, and enforcing WHO-aligned air quality standards to protect children's health.

Businesses should adopt clean technologies, reduce emissions, and ensure their practices and products prioritize the safety and well-being of children.

The health sector should take measures to improve detection and treatment, and adopt sustainable, net-zero operations.

Parents and educators should play a crucial role in raising awareness, advocating for cleaner environments, and empowering young people to take action.

UNICEF is partnering with governments, businesses, health systems, and communities across East Asia and the Pacific to protect children from the devastating effects of air pollution. Key initiatives include:

Advocating for climate and environmental policies that create a cleaner, more sustainable world for children.

Implementing programmes that reduce children's exposure to household air pollution with solutions like chimney ventilation and cleaner heating systems.

Improving air quality monitoring and public reporting through initiatives like installing affordable sensors.

Strengthening healthcare systems to address pollution-related illnesses and investing in cleaner medical waste management systems.

Collaborating with communities and empowering young people as clean air advocates to raise awareness, monitor air quality, and push for stronger policies.

"Addressing air pollution will lead to enormous improvements in children's health, education, and well-being, with ripple effects across entire societies and economies," Kunugi emphasized. "The solutions exist, and our collective future depends on implementing them."



Photo: AFP

## MYANMAR JUNTA SOLDIERS BEHEADED AND MUTILATED CIVILIANS IN APPARENT WAR CRIME IN SAGAING REGION

In a statement released by Fortify Rights on 4 February, the human rights group claims “Myanmar military junta soldiers attacked a village in the Sagaing Region and killed six civilians, including three who were decapitated and had their heads displayed on a fence in an apparent attempt to spread terror.” Local residents discovered the bodies when they returned to the village after the October 2024 attack.

The group calls on members states of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to urgently refer Myanmar to the court’s Chief Prosecutor for investigation and prosecution. The group notes that killing civilians as well as deliberately terrorising them are war crimes under international law.

The text of the press statement continues below.

Fortify Rights recommends that member states of the International Criminal Court (ICC) urgently refer

the situation in Myanmar to the ICC Chief Prosecutor to investigate and prosecute these and other crimes.

“These horrific violations demonstrate how the junta continues to terrorize the Myanmar people with impunity,” said Sai Arkar, Human Rights Associate at Fortify Rights. “ICC member states can and must take steps to end the Myanmar military junta’s wanton savagery.”

According to residents and witnesses, on October 17, 2024, at approximately 7:30 a.m., Myanmar junta soldiers launched an attack on the village of Sipa (also known as Si Par) in Budalin Township, Sagaing Region. Junta soldiers opened fire on the village and burned down houses, forcing residents to flee. There were no other armed forces in or near the village other than junta forces at the time of the attack, said Fortify Rights.

Junta troops appear to have killed at least six civilian men during the attack and mutilated and

decapitated three of them, displaying their severed heads in a deliberate act of psychological warfare against the civilian population. This gruesome display was intended to instill terror among survivors, force civilian displacement, and deter resistance, tactics that amount to war crimes under international law, said Fortify Rights.

Fortify Rights confirmed the identities of five of the six people killed, including Tin Hlaing, in his 80s (exact age unknown); Thet Aung, 42; Kyaung Po, 57; Yar Sein, in his 50s (exact age unknown); and Htay Lwin, also in his 50s (exact age unknown). Residents of Sipa found another body in the village that remains unidentified.

Fortify Rights interviewed eight witnesses with direct knowledge of the attack, including a relative of one of the victims and a man who witnessed junta soldiers detain a person who was later found dead. Fortify Rights also analyzed dozens of photographs shared by first responders. More than 20 photographs show charred bones and dismembered body parts, including amputated legs, hands, and genitals. Another ten photographs show three severed heads mounted on a bamboo house fence. In the photographs, some of the bodies appear to have been deliberately burned, with charred firewood and bamboo beside the bodies.

Fortify Rights spoke to one Sipa resident who remained in the village after junta soldiers invaded. He told Fortify Rights how he saw junta soldiers arrest Tin Hlaing, one of the men later found beheaded, on October 17, 2024. He said:

I was the only one in the village [at the time] other than those who were killed. ... [The junta soldiers] cooked their meals at my [place] that day. ... Around 4 p.m. [on October 17, 2024], I saw [junta soldiers] take U Tin Hlaing. There was no one in the village, which was why U Tin Hlaing came to visit me [at my place].

Another Sipa resident "Hla May," (name changed for security), described the junta soldiers' attack on the village, saying:

[The junta soldiers] entered the village around 7:30 a.m., firing their rifles. We were in the village at the time. We were a little way away at the time... They were firing recklessly [into the village] and began to torch the houses around 9:30 a.m. They stopped firing

and torching for a bit in the early afternoon. They then started torching the village again around 3:30 p.m.

She and her husband fled the village but described the aftermath of the attack when they returned the following day:

We arrived in the village in the evening. We wandered around, trying to see which houses had been burned. Then we saw them [the bodies]. ... three bodies were burned and placed in a single compound. ... The genitals of the men were placed in [their] mouths. Three more severed heads were put onto the fence of a neighboring home.

Another resident from Sipa village, "Thet Htwe," (name changed for security), witnessed the attack on Sipa village from a distant hiding location, saying: "We saw the junta troops torching the village. We could see smoke streaming out of the village from there. We didn't hear any gunfire from Sipa village when they [junta forces] were torching the houses since there were no clashes."

"We saw dead bodies and body parts all over the village," he told Fortify Rights, describing the scene when he returned to the village on October 19. "[The residents] had not removed the heads from the fence, so we saw this ourselves."

A 26-year-old student, "Lin Maung" (name changed for security), who entered Sipa shortly after the junta troops left on October 17, described a similar scene, saying:

The moment we entered the village area, we came across a dead body that was located close to the monastery. Afterwards, when we walked further into the village, we came across two additional dead bodies. These bodies were cut up into pieces. The guts were removed from one of them.

"We found a total of five dead corpses in the village," Lin Maung said. A sixth body was discovered by other residents.

The attack on Sipa village was part of a more extensive attack by the military junta on Sagaing Region — an area of Myanmar that has become a

stronghold of resistance to the military junta since it launched a deadly and illegal coup d'état four years ago this week. Several People's Defense Forces and ethnic armed organizations have engaged in frequent armed clashes with the military junta in Sagaing Region. More than one million civilians in the area have been forcibly displaced since the coup, and many are in desperate need of humanitarian aid.

Sipa residents confirmed to Fortify Rights that junta troops issued a warning that they would start a military operation in response to an attack on junta troops by resistance fighters on September 30, 2024, near the junta's Northwestern Regional Military Command Headquarters in Sagaing Region.

International humanitarian law — also known as the law of war — establishes basic rules for engaging in armed conflict, which includes the protection of civilians and “[p]ersons taking no active part in the hostilities.” Mutilation is considered a war crime both under Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and Article 8 of the Rome Statute of the ICC. Additionally, the intentional use of beheadings and public displays of mutilated bodies as a means to terrorize communities violates the fundamental prohibition against targeting civilians through psychological warfare, as enshrined in Article 51(2) of Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions. Under Article 51(2), any acts or threats of violence intended to spread terror among civilians are explicitly prohibited, making such acts prosecutable as war crimes.

The display of severed heads is a hallmark tactic of terror, designed to psychologically break communities and force civilian displacement through fear, said Fortify Rights. Survivors and witnesses to the attack described to Fortify Rights how it instilled terror and fear among them and how it enforced civilian displacement.

This is not the first incident of the use of such terror tactics by junta soldiers in Sagaing Region: in 2023, villagers reported the beheading of at least one resistance fighter and civilian in Pale Township. Photographs of the beheadings are on file with Fortify Rights.

Given the ongoing crimes by the Myanmar junta, on October 25, 2024, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, urged ICC member states to refer the situation in Myanmar to the ICC prosecutor. In his report to the U.N. General Assembly, Tom Andrews said: “Junta troops have killed civilians in ground assaults, including the mass killing of individuals already in the custody of junta forces. ... Victims have been tortured, raped and beheaded, and their bodies burned.”

Under Article 14 of the Rome Statute, ICC member states may request the Chief Prosecutor to investigate atrocity crimes. The process for ICC member states to refer a situation to the Chief Prosecutor involves a simple diplomatic letter with supporting documentation.

ICC member states should refer the situation to the ICC Prosecutor immediately and the Prosecutor should launch a full investigation into atrocity crimes by all parties to the armed conflict in Myanmar, focusing especially on the junta's crimes since it launched a coup on February 1, 2021.

“ICC member states must now act to end the almost daily atrocity crimes taking place in Myanmar,” said Sai Arkar. “An ICC referral would send an important message to perpetrators and help swing the balance away from impunity and toward accountability.”

John Quinley

## THE LONG ROAD TO FREEDOM

"The mass amount of unity across the country is still surprising to me every day. And it's a big reason to be hopeful, because in the midst of Min Aung Hlaing's oppression, the Myanmar people have said, 'No, we're going to fight for democracy and human rights!'"

So says John Quinley, a Director at Fortify Rights, on the Insight Myanmar Podcast. He shares his journey to becoming deeply involved in Myanmar, beginning from his high school years as he was growing up in Thailand, a few years before the transition period. His curiosity about the region led him to visit Myanmar when he was just 16—on his first humanitarian mission—working with local communities in Shan State to provide resources, such as food, medicine, and other vital supplies, aimed at supporting vulnerable

populations in the region. Shan State was largely under the control of the Shan State Army (SSA), an Ethnic Armed Organization that has long sought greater autonomy from the central authorities. As there was much political and social repression in Myanmar at that time, Quinley connected deeply with the people and their stories; it was a formative experience planted the seeds for a lifelong commitment to Myanmar's people and their fight for human rights and justice.

On a subsequent trip to Myanmar, also pre-transition, Quinley traveled with a Lonely Planet guidebook that contained basic information about the country's military dictatorship. One of his Burmese tour guides asked to keep the book at the end of their journey, as information was so scarce that he was desperate for anything that could help him understand

what was really happening in his own country beyond tightly controlled, government propaganda. This encounter deeply affected Quinley, and showed him the immense hunger that the people of Myanmar had for knowledge and truth.

Fortify Rights, the organization he joined nearly a decade ago, is an independent, nonprofit organization based in Southeast Asia. It is focused on investigating human rights abuses, engaging with authorities, and empowering human rights defenders and affected communities. Quinley emphasizes that Fortify Rights operates largely in the background, ensuring that Myanmar's people lead their own struggle towards freedom. Their operational methodology includes participatory training to build a knowledge of human rights, helping communities document abuses, and making connections with international legal mechanisms like the International Criminal Court (ICC). The ICC, established by the Rome Statute in 2002, prosecutes individuals for crimes such as genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, making it a vital mechanism for justice in the context of Myanmar's abuses.

The coup of 2021 changed everything. Myanmar had been undergoing a tenuous transition towards democracy since 2011, following decades of military dictatorship. During this period, the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, took a leading role in the government, though the military retained significant power, controlling key ministries and maintaining a veto over constitutional changes. As it was for so many, the coup was a seismic event that upended the work that Fortify Rights and other human rights organizations had been doing.

Suddenly, Fortify Rights' efforts to amend restrictive laws and improve civil liberties had to be put aside as Myanmar descended into violence. Quinley and his team swiftly adapted to support those most at risk, providing emergency support grants, helping activists find safehouses, and documenting abuses as the military crackdown on peaceful protests escalated. He details the horrors inflicted by the junta, including the use of snipers against peaceful protesters—young people who Quinley stressed were simply advocating for their basic rights and a future free from dictatorship.

Another task that Fortify Rights began implementing after the coup was to submit evidence to the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), aiming to preserve documentation for future prosecutions and international accountability. This work underscores the importance of preserving evidence for a time when accountability becomes possible. They have also continued to petition ICC member states to make an Article 14 referral to bypass the United Nations Security Council, where vetoes from China and Russia have obstructed accountability efforts. Quinley and his colleagues even traveled to East Timor and engaged with other ASEAN member states, seeking to build a coalition that could refer Myanmar's situation to the ICC. They have also pushed for local governance bodies, like the Arakan Army (AA), to grant Rohingya people freedom of movement and dismantle internment camps as part of the broader liberation effort in Rakhine State.

These actions are part of a larger struggle that highlights a central theme throughout Quinley's talk: the resilience of Myanmar's people. He expresses admiration for the courage of those resisting the junta, despite great personal cost. This includes ethnic armed groups and the National Unity Government (NUG), which was formed by elected lawmakers, ethnic representatives, and civil society leaders, positioning itself as the democratic alternative to the military regime.

Quinley underlines how these resistance movements have sought to build a more inclusive, democratic future, one in stark contrast to the policies of discrimination and exclusion perpetuated by the military regime and even, to some extent, the previous government led by Aung San Suu Kyi. Now, he stresses, "It's not about ethnicity. It's not about religion. It's not about sexual orientation. It's about a fight for democracy and human rights." He notes how the NUG has even appointed Rohingya representatives to positions of leadership—an unprecedented step in Myanmar's history and a stark departure from the NLD's earlier silence on the plight of the Rohingya.

Quinley also describes the mental toll that decades of oppression have taken on the Rohingya people. He mentions Fortify Rights' recent work documenting

the widespread trauma among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, which has revealed the lingering impact of the atrocities committed against them. Such trauma has both physical and mental dimensions. Since 2017, nearly a million Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh, where they live in overcrowded camps like Cox's Bazar, the largest refugee settlement in the world. Conditions in these camps are dire, with limited access to education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities.

Quinley urges for more mental health and psychosocial support for Myanmar's displaced communities, advocating for funding that respects local contexts and cultures. Fortify Rights collaborated with researchers to survey 495 refugees in Cox's Bazar, and their research revealed that PTSD and daily stressors among Rohingya refugees are significantly higher than average, pointing to generational trauma that continues to affect the community profoundly.

Related to that community's trauma, Quinley speaks about the challenges of regulating his own mental health while documenting human rights abuses and supporting victims—a kind of second-hand trauma that is very real. He emphasizes the need to maintain a balance between emotional involvement and professional detachment. "You want to experience joy with people, but you also want to experience sorrow with people. So you have to be clinical, but you don't want to be devoid of empathy."

Despite the grim realities, Quinley conveys a sense of hope, rooted in the unity and determination he has seen across Myanmar. "Even in the midst of oppression," he says, "the Myanmar people are saying, 'We will still build a future, we will still fight for our rights, and we will still hold onto hope.'" He highlights the efforts of local governance bodies and ethnic armed organizations, such as the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), that are establishing parallel governance structures, forming new institutions, administering liberated areas independently from the military, and providing essential services.

Quinley describes Myanmar's struggle as a broader fight for human dignity and justice, one that deserves much more international attention and support than it currently receives.

He acknowledges the work of the Milk Tea Alliance, a transnational, pro-democracy movement that originated in response to authoritarianism across Asia and has become a symbol of solidarity in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Taiwan. Drawn by the solidarity of Myanmar's youth and the cooperation across ethnic lines, many young activists from neighboring countries have lent their support.

In Quinley's eyes, the Burmese people are crafting their own path to freedom, one marked by both extraordinary resilience and profound suffering. He concludes by saying, "The Myanmar people have said, 'Actually, we're going to still create our own institutions, we're going to still create our own government structures, we're going to still be journalists, we're going to still be doctors, we're going to still be teachers, we're going to create alternative systems that are outside the junta system, and that are able to meet the needs of our own people.'"

### LISTEN TO THE PODCAST

<https://player.captivate.fm/episode/8c7120d9-9ed5-464c-96e6-af8fa994db57>



Photo: AFP

## UK INCREASES HUMANITARIAN AID TO SUPPORT MYANMAR AMID ONGOING CRISIS

The UK announced additional humanitarian funding for Myanmar on 1 February. The enhanced support four years after the military coup is aimed at funding healthcare delivery to 1 million in the country during the first half of 2025 including maternal care, nutrition support, and disease treatment. The stepped-up aid comes as humanitarian needs reach record levels.

New climate resilience funding will help rural communities tackle extreme weather, improve water management and strengthen food security.

The text of the UK announcement continues below.

Almost one million vulnerable people in Myanmar will receive essential medical care through UK aid support in the first six months of 2025, helping communities access vital healthcare services despite ongoing conflict.

The UK is announcing an uplift of £22.45 million in humanitarian support for 2024/25 to deliver this support, four years on from the military coup. On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military overthrew the democratically elected government, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, and installed a military regime. Since then, they have used violence and atrocities to maintain power and suppress opposition voices. The UK has consistently called for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all those arbitrarily detained in Myanmar.

UK funding will provide maternal and child health services to around 107,000 women and children, while

86,000 people will be reached with crucial nutrition support. It is expected that a further 142,000 people will be able to access sexual and reproductive health services and treatment for diseases like tuberculosis and malaria.

The life-saving assistance comes as Myanmar faces an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, with nearly 20 million people now requiring aid – a twenty-fold increase since the military coup four years ago.

Minister for Development, Anneliese Dodds, said:

While global attention may shift, the UK will not forget the millions in Myanmar still living through a brutal conflict, creating a humanitarian crisis in a country already vulnerable to the impacts of the climate crisis.

Four years on from the military coup and amid ongoing violence, the UK is matching words with action – providing additional support to meet urgent health needs and tackle long-term climate challenges.

Over 3.5 million people are now displaced from their homes due to the fighting, 19.9 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, and Myanmar is now seeing a proliferation in serious and organised crime.

Typhoon Yagi caused devastation across South-East Asia in September 2024, severely affecting over one million people across Myanmar. Additional funding will help rural communities prepare for future climate-related disasters, through improved food systems and early warning mechanisms, including support for areas recovering from recent typhoons.

Agriculture is vital to Myanmar's economy and without it, the country will find it difficult to rebuild and grow when the conflict finally ends. UK support is planting the seeds for Myanmar's long-term recovery, restoring security and stability to make the world safer for all of us.

The UK continues to support ASEAN's central role in addressing the crisis. The UK convened a UN Security Council meeting on 30 January, calling for full humanitarian access across Myanmar to help protect civilians and pressed for further action to secure a peaceful democratic future for the Myanmar people. As penholder on Myanmar at the UNSC, the UK will continue to take action to bring stability to Myanmar and the wider region, maintaining our commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific in the interests of UK national security.





US President Donal Trump.  
Photo: AFP

# TRUMP EXTENDS 'NATIONAL EMERGENCY' DECLARATION FOR MYANMAR

RFA

U.S. President Donald Trump has extended by one year the declaration of a “national emergency” in Myanmar, a measure that allows Biden-era sanctions against the military junta to continue.

But the extension, which was announced Thursday, came as human rights groups criticized the Trump administration’s freezing of nearly \$40 million in aid for Burmese pro-democracy groups as part of the dismantling of U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID.

Myanmar has been embroiled in a four-year civil war ever since a military coup on Feb. 1, 2021, which has pitted various ethnic armies and People’s Defense Force units of civilians who have taken up arms.

Trump signed an extension to the February 2021 declaration of the national emergency because the situation in Myanmar “continues to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and

foreign policy of the United States,” according to a statement.

The declaration was first issued under former President Joe Biden days after the 2021 coup d’etat in Naypyidaw.

Zachary Abuza, a professor at the National War College in Washington and a regular commentator for Radio Free Asia, said the main impact of the extension would be to extend various U.S. sanctions that have since been imposed on the military junta Myanmar, such as those covering jet fuel and banks.

“I was surprised that it was renewed given the administration’s priorities right now,” Abuza told Radio Free Asia. “But I was very pleased that it was extended. I think this is an important signal. I think Secretary of State [Marco] Rubio has actually a very long positive track record on Myanmar issues.”

Kyaw Zaw, a spokesperson for the presidential office of Myanmar's shadow National Unity Government, or NUG -- made up of former civilian leaders -- said the exiled government welcomed the continuation of Biden-era declaration by Trump.

"I also believe that the announcement by U.S. President Donald Trump does not alter their foreign policy regarding the Myanmar issue," he told RFA. "That being said, we welcome their statement. The current situation in Myanmar also has implications for the United States."

Those implications included flows of drugs leaving Myanmar, he said.

## Geopolitical fight

Banyar, the secretary of the Karenni State Interim Executive Council in Myanmar, told RFA he believed the decision was likely driven by concerns over the geopolitical influence of Beijing, which has backed the junta.

"China's influence over Myanmar's political, socio-economic, and military affairs has become increasingly evident," said Banyar, who goes by one name. "From an American viewpoint, strong ties with China pose a threat to both geopolitical stability and economic interests."

Salai Peter Thang, the vice president of the Chin National Organization -- which is fighting the junta -- also welcomed the decision, but said he was waiting to see if the United States took a more proactive approach to the junta.

"In reality, the situation is highly detrimental, not only to democracy but also in the broader geopolitical landscape, where America's competitors, such as China and Russia, are gaining influence without sufficient challenge," he told RFA. "I am eager to see when the United States will formally recognize this as a national security threat."

Khin Lay, a feminist activist, said the extension was "good news" for those in Myanmar's pro-democracy

movement who were wondering how Trump would approach the ongoing crisis in Myanmar.

"We are eager to see how he will handle Myanmar's affairs. While we await his actions, I believe that the secretary of state and his team will present him with the necessary conditions in Myanmar and push for action, which is likely why this statement has been issued," she said.

## Aid curb

Still, the extension came as rights groups voiced concerns about Trump's cuts to U.S. funding for pro-democracy groups in Myanmar.

Human Rights Watch on Thursday released a statement identifying some \$40 million in aid that had been allocated over the next three years to democracy and human rights groups as well as to media.

That figure includes \$30 million for nine separate pro-democracy initiatives, \$8 million for seven human rights projects and \$1 million for two programs supporting independent media covering Myanmar.

"The funding freeze is already disrupting critical programmes. Local human rights, democracy, and media organisations—many of which operate on tight budgets—are being forced to close programmes, terminate staff, and scale back essential services," HRW said.

"Without urgent intervention, many will not survive. Once lost, experienced personnel and effective projects will be difficult, if not impossible, to restart," the organization said. "The loss of these funds would reverse hard-won progress in the struggle for human rights, democracy, and press freedom in post-coup Myanmar."

*Courtesy of Radio Free Asia*

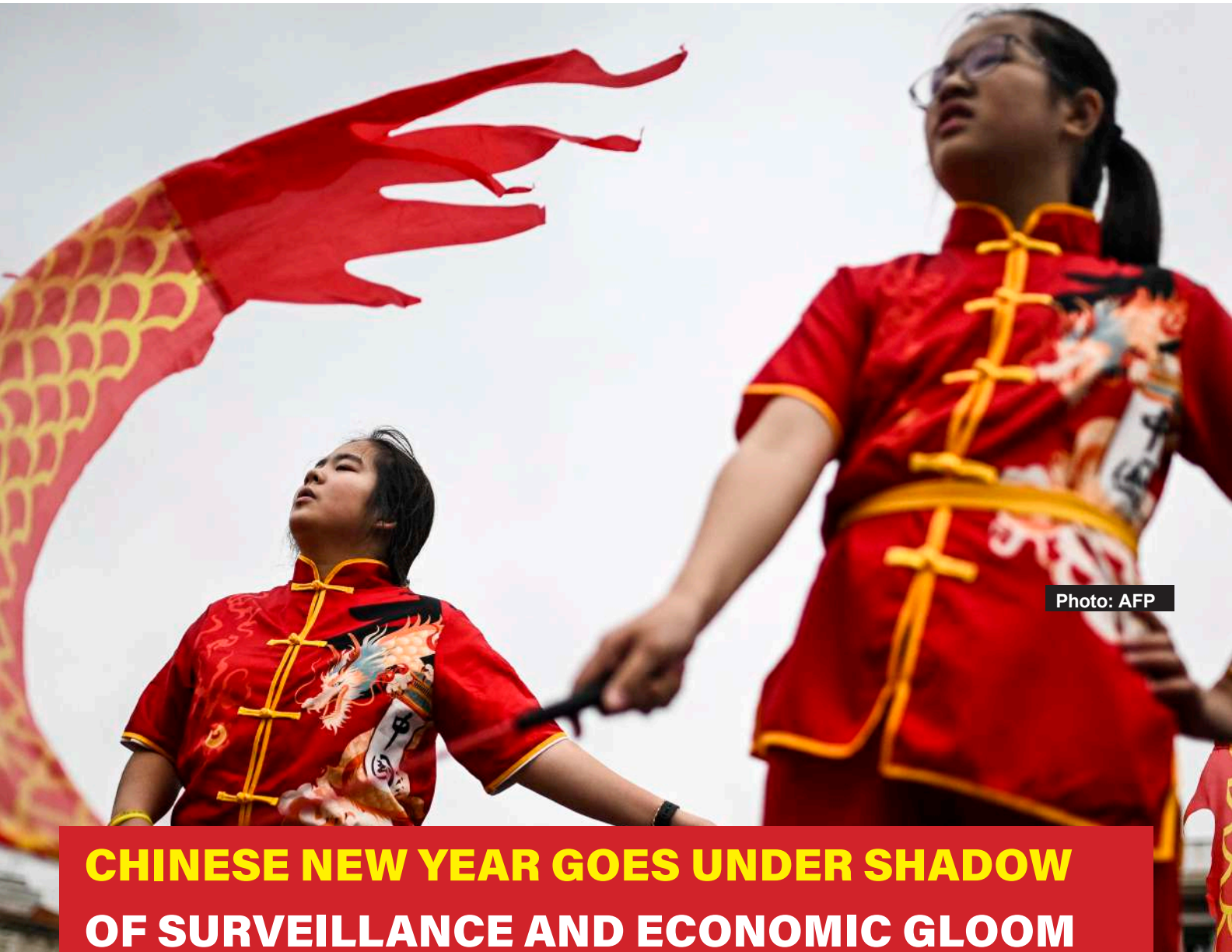


Photo: AFP

## CHINESE NEW YEAR GOES UNDER SHADOW OF SURVEILLANCE AND ECONOMIC GLOOM

**SUN LEE**

**A**s China ushers in the Year of the Snake, the traditional joy of the Lunar New Year celebrations has been strangled by a suffocating combination of state surveillance and economic malaise. The Ministry of State Security's ominous New Year's message to citizens, warning them to "beware of endangering national security" during family gatherings, has cast a dark shadow over what should be China's most jubilant festival. The ministry's WeChat post reads like a dystopian party invitation, cautioning citizens to maintain vigilance against "ulterior motives to spy and steal state secrets" even as they attempt to celebrate with loved ones. The irony is palpable that in a season traditionally marked by uninhibited sharing of news and warm reunions, Chinese citizens must

now watch their words at the dinner table, lest casual conversation be deemed a threat to national security.

The paranoia extends beyond family gatherings. The security ministry has issued bizarre warnings about avoiding "military restricted zones" and "key power facilities" during festivities, as if Chinese citizens were planning to ring in the New Year with reconnaissance missions rather than fireworks. Even social media comments are under scrutiny, with users warned that foreign spies might be lurking in comment sections, ready to harvest state secrets from innocent holiday banter. This atmosphere of suspicion comes at a time when China's economy is showing serious signs of distress. The streets of major cities, typically bustling

with pre-festival shoppers, now echo with the footsteps of fewer customers. In Hong Kong's usually vibrant street markets, vendors report business plummeting by more than half compared to previous years.

The economic downturn is particularly visible in the changing travel patterns of Chinese citizens during chunyun, the world's largest annual human migration. Instead of taking the sleek high-speed trains that were once a symbol of China's economic miracle, many travelers are now cramming themselves into older, slower "green trains" to save money. The sight of empty high-speed rail carriages during the busiest travel season speaks volumes about the financial struggles of ordinary Chinese citizens. The traditional practice of giving hong bao (red envelopes containing cash) has become a source of stress rather than joy. Urban residents find themselves caught between maintaining face and managing their shrinking budgets, with some forced to reduce their gift list to just ten recipients. Even the luxury alcohol market, a reliable indicator of Chinese consumption, has taken a hit, with prices of premium Moutai liquor dropping significantly due to lack of demand.

The government's response to this economic downturn has been telling. Rather than acknowledging the hardship, authorities have rebranded austerity as a virtue, calling for a civilized and rational Lunar New Year. This bureaucratic step for belt-tightening would be almost comical if it weren't masking real suffering. Local governments have been ordered to identify and provide emergency assistance to the poorest families, a tacit admission of the widespread financial distress. Citizens' expectations for the Year of the Snake reflect this grim reality. The lingering trauma of the zero-COVID policies continues to colour perceptions, with many Chinese feeling disconnected from the government's rosy economic pronouncements.

The state media's attempts to maintain an upbeat narrative stand in contrast to the reality on the ground. The annual CCTV Spring Festival Gala, once

a must-watch celebration, is increasingly viewed as disconnected from reality, with one eastern China resident dismissing its forced positivity as fake, given that most people's lives are getting worse and worse. This New Year reveals a China at odds with itself, a country whose citizens are reverting to slower trains and smaller celebrations, while its security apparatus frets about spies in social media comments. The Year of the Snake begins not with a bang but with a whimper, as Chinese citizens struggle between surveillance warnings and empty pockets.

The government's dual approach of tightening social control while attempting to project economic confidence has created a peculiar atmosphere where citizens must be simultaneously cautious about both their words and their spending. Indeed, this New Year period seems to epitomize that mystery, a time of traditional celebration transformed into an exercise in self-censorship and economic restraint. As firecrackers light up the night sky to ward off evil spirits, many Chinese citizens might wonder if they can similarly dispel the twin specters of surveillance and economic uncertainty that have come to define their New Year celebrations. For now, the Year of the Snake began under a cloud of caution and constraint, with many hoping merely to live normally, a modest wish that speaks volumes about the current state of affairs in the world's second-largest economy.

*Sun Lee is a pseudonym for a writer who covers Asia and geopolitical affairs.*



# ROOTS RUN DEEP

“For us in English, we use the word ‘stewardship,’ right? We are the custodians of this land, this forest. Because we also need it for our survival and for our communities to thrive, we must have a relationship with it—a respectful, reciprocal relationship. Let’s say we wanted to clear land to grow agriculture, our community has to perform the ritual ceremony to ask permission from the guardian of the forest that we’re going to clear the land, and we’re going to grow rice here. ‘We ask for your permission and your blessing!’ In today’s terms, we’d say that we are making a contract with the God of the land, or the spirit of the land, right?”

Paul Sein Twa’s story is not just about trees and rivers; his is a narrative of hardship, survival, and a profound connection to the environment. He tells of growing up in Karen territory along the Burma-Thailand border, in the long shadow cast by deforestation, flooding, landslides, and the destruction of crucial ecosystems—legacies of the often-secretive economic deals between Myanmar’s military and Thai corporations in the 1980s and 1990s. For Paul, it was this intimate exposure to the ravaging of his homeland that sparked a dedication to environmental activism. In addition to his environmental work, Paul’s activism addresses indigenous rights, cultural preservation, and peace-building.

Paul speaks of ecological stewardship not only as a duty, but as a sacred bond that is both spiritual and physical. It is a relationship built upon reciprocity, where the forest’s well-being is viewed as important as his own community’s survival. Towards these ends, Paul co-founded the “Salween Peace Park,” a community-led conservation effort dedicated not only to preserving biodiversity but also resisting military-led, exploitative development projects with sustainable alternatives.

Even today amid the terrible violence that has engulfed the country in the wake of the 2021 military coup, Salween Peace Park has emerged as a lasting symbol of community-driven environmental stewardship. Its mission aligns with the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), underscoring the rights of local communities to manage their ancestral lands. The Salween River, one of Southeast Asia’s last free-flowing rivers, is at the heart of this ecosystem, which spans more than 5,000 square kilometers and sustains a remarkable biodiversity.

Paul describes these initiatives as deriving their power from core, Karen values; for example, a deep, spiritual bond with nature and a preservation of traditional knowledge derived from it. Paul talks about the rituals of his community that honor the natural environment—ceremonies that apologize to the spirits of the forest for any unintended harm, like the accidental killing of animals during land clearing. These customs are not merely symbolic, but are expressions of a respect for nature, while emphasizing balance and reciprocity.

### CATCH THE PODCAST

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

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2025/1/13/episode-305-roots-run-deep>



In Kani Township. Photo: Mizzima TV

## JUNTA PARAMOTORED AIRCRAFT ATTACK CLAIMS CIVILIAN LIFE IN SAGAING REGION'S KANI TOWNSHIP

A junta aerial bombing using a paramotored aircraft killed a civilian and injured another in Natlarpoetmyauk village, Kani Township, Sagaing Region, in the early hours of February 11, according to local news reports.

The attack occurred around 12:30 am when the paramotored aircraft, reportedly from the junta's Northwestern Command based in Monywa, dropped two bombs directly hitting a residential area.

A man, 49, was killed instantly in the attack, while a woman, 57, sustained severe injuries.

A local resident said that the paramotored aircraft from Northwestern Command attacked their village with two bombs striking directly on houses, resulting in one death and one injury.

This attack marks the junta's first aerial operations in this year's February targeting villages in Kani Township, including Sulaykone and Natlapot villages. Similar paramotored attack has been reported in neighboring Taungtha Township. Local sources said that there was no active fighting in the area when the aerial attack occurred.

The People's Defense Force (PDF) in Yinmabin District has advised residents in areas near the junta's Northwestern Command to construct bomb shelters as a necessary precaution against future attacks.



Rakhine actor Nay Toe. Photo: Facebook

## MIXED REACTIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA AS RAKHINE ACTORS WIN JUNTA'S FILM ACADEMY AWARDS AMID CONFLICT

**S**ocial media users in Myanmar are divided over Rakhine actor Nay Toe and Rakhine actress Chue Lay winning film academy awards, with the controversy playing out primarily on Facebook.

The awards ceremony comes at a sensitive time as Rakhine State faces intense fighting between the junta and the Arakan Army, and humanitarian challenges.

Many users expressed criticism of the timing and political implications. One popular comment noted, "While one part of Rakhine is suffering without food or shelter, they're putting on an awards show on the other side."

Another user with significant engagement wrote that accepting awards from the current administration during this period was inappropriate.

However, defenders of the actors also emerged. Some comments argued that the artists shouldn't be criticized for their professional achievements, with one stating, "They earned these awards through their talent and hard work, regardless of the current situation."

Some commenters questioned the credibility of the awards themselves, with one widely-shared comment noting, "The value of these awards depends on who's giving them. In these times, it doesn't matter who wins."

# 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.