

ON THE GROUND IN MYANMAR

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Analysis & Insight



PUTIN HAILS MYANMAR TIES

Embattled junta chief seeks further support from Russia and Belarus

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DIGITAL MAGAZINE

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

GOING HUNGRY IN THE BADLANDS OF MYANMAR

The food shortage crisis in Myanmar has escalated into a significant humanitarian issue, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations in the crisis-hit country. Since the military coup in 2021, the country has been in a state of political turmoil, which has worsened food insecurity and exacerbated the struggles of millions of people, particularly the millions of internally displaced. The economic fallout from the coup, coupled with conflict and displacement, has led to severe disruptions in food production, distribution and access.

All this is being worsened by a shortfall in international aid from Western countries, and the recent halt to foreign aid by the US government that has prompted cries of concern.

This is covered in the Insight Myanmar Podcast and story in this week's issue, entitled: The Hunger Games.

Myanmar's agricultural sector, which is a key part of its economy, has been heavily impacted by the ongoing crisis and civil war. Farmers face challenges ranging from the loss of livelihoods, destruction of crops, to restricted access to essential resources like seeds, fertilizers, and labour. The violence in many rural areas has forced farmers to abandon their lands, further reducing food availability. Many have been displaced from their homes, living in makeshift shelters or internally displaced camps where food access is limited. This not only disrupts food production but also increases dependence on humanitarian aid, which is often not enough to meet the needs of the population.

The political instability has also severely affected the functioning of markets, making it difficult for people to afford basic food items. The depreciation of the local currency and inflation have raised food prices, putting nutritious food out of reach for many families,

especially those already living in poverty. According to reports, a large proportion of Myanmar's population is struggling to meet their daily nutritional requirements, and malnutrition rates, particularly among children, are rising rapidly.

At-risk populations, including women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities, are especially vulnerable. Malnourished children face stunted growth, weakened immune systems, and increased susceptibility to diseases. For pregnant and lactating women, food insecurity can result in complications, including higher rates of maternal and infant mortality. In addition, the elderly and people with disabilities are often unable to access food assistance, especially in conflict-affected areas, where aid delivery is hindered or blocked altogether.

The international community is aware of the crisis and has responded with humanitarian aid, but the ongoing conflict, alongside limited access and resources, has made it difficult to provide long-term solutions. The UN has noted the serious shortfall in funding for Myanmar. International organizations are calling for increased access to food assistance, along with a political solution to the crisis.

In addition, the Rohingya community – both in Rakhine State and in exile in Bangladesh – look set to have aid and rations cut, according to the UN. Refugees could see a cut of 50 per cent to food aid.

With no clear end in sight to the conflict, a large percentage of the Myanmar people face a serious food shortage that requires urgent and sustained international attention to prevent a further humanitarian catastrophe. The problem is: many governments and aid organizations have their attention elsewhere.

EDITORIAL

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Cover photo of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing by AFP





Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing explaining why he thinks Russian President Vladimir Putin is the reincarnation of the "Rat King" at their meeting in Moscow. Photo: AFP

PUTIN HAILS MYANMAR TIES

EMBATTLED JUNTA CHIEF SEEKS FURTHER SUPPORT FROM RUSSIA AND BELARUS

Russian President Vladimir Putin on 4 March praised Russia's developing ties with Myanmar, during a state visit by Myanmar's embattled junta chief Min Aung Hlaing to its key ally.

Both Russia and Belarus are crucial arms suppliers to the isolated state, which is struggling to quell violent and expanding opposition to the junta's military rule.

"The relations between our countries are steadily developing," Putin told junta chief Min Aung Hlaing in a televised meeting at the Kremlin.

"We have great potential," he said, hailing growing trade ties.

Putin focused on a plan for Russia to help build a small nuclear plant in Myanmar, which he said would supply the country with "cheap and ecologically safe energy" that would boost its economy and create thousands of jobs. Myanmar has a serious energy shortfall.

The two sides on 4 March signed a memorandum about cooperating on the construction of a plant with a capacity of 110 megawatts that could be increased to 330 megawatts, TASS state news agency reported, citing the Rosatom state nuclear corporation. Russia and Myanmar in 2023 signed an initial agreement on nuclear cooperation and the possible construction of such a plant.

The head of Rosatom, Alexei Likhachev, told Russian television that Myanmar was interested in building a modular station with two reactors close to the capital Naypyidaw.

Min Aung Hlaing, who seized power in a 2021 coup, saluted Putin as a king and backed Moscow's full-scale military offensive on Ukraine, according to media reports.

"I believe that victory must be yours under your strong and decisive leadership," he told Putin.



Myanmar junta leader on his state visit to Moscow. Photo: AFP

European democracy activist Igor Blazevic, commenting on the meeting, raised eyebrows by saying the Myanmar junta leader explained to Putin that he is, in fact, the "rat king" - the reincarnation of an ancient Asian warrior king from over 2,000 years ago. According to Min Aung Hlaing, this prophecy is recorded in a book, which he presented to Putin as a gift.

"Notorious for his superstitious beliefs, Min Aung Hlaing was completely serious as he rambled about kings, rats, and reincarnation," Blazevic says, describing the meeting with Putin. "He genuinely believes in these ideas and is convinced that his glorifications would please Putin."

The junta chief also reiterated his praise for Russia's military operations against Ukraine. He declared, "Myanmar completely stands with Russia and its people in any action they are taking to maintain the sovereignty of Russia and global peace and stability."

Both countries are under heavy Western sanctions - Myanmar following the 2021 coup and Russia after its 2014 annexation of Crimea and its ongoing three-year-long offensive on Ukraine, a conflict that US President Donald Trump has promised to end.

Blazevic says that despite the absurdity of the scene, Putin has reasons to be pleased. "Russia is supplying weapons to the Myanmar junta and training its officers in drone warfare, psychological operations, and manipulation tactics. The Russian electoral commission is instructing its Myanmar counterparts on electoral manipulation, while Russian parliamentarians are prepared to serve as election observers in the country. Russia is using its assistance to Myanmar junta to 'project power' in South East Asia," Blazevic notes.

The Myanmar junta leader is continuing with his plans for an election this year.

Min Aung Hlaing also met with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin to discuss cooperation in space and satellite technology. Russia has offered to provide the junta regime with military intelligence gathered by its reconnaissance satellites. In addition to Putin, Min Aung Hlaing met with Sergey Shoigu to discuss increased cooperation in the security sector. Furthermore, Russia is expanding its footprint in Myanmar's future deep-sea ports, which hold

significant commercial and strategic value.

Blazevic points out that in the meantime, the US government has cut financial support for humanitarian aid and democracy initiatives in Myanmar, during this crucial period for the country.

"Indeed, Putin has ample reasons to be satisfied - even if he is being called the 'rat king' by this ridiculous clown from distant Myanmar," Blazevic says.

Trade was a key discussion point during the visit. Russia exports some raw materials and fertilisers to Myanmar, and both sides have talked up the prospect of deepening economic ties alongside their military and political alliance.

Myanmar last year imported about 90 per cent of its oil from Russia, which was a "reliable" supplier, Putin said.

Moscow's support has become vital to Myanmar's military - particularly the air force - as it battles an array of ethnic minority armed groups and pro-democracy guerrillas on multiple fronts. The junta suffered significant territorial losses after a 2023 rebel offensive in the north but its air power has been pivotal in attempting to arrest the advance of opposition forces.

Russia has sought to boost relations with what are considered anti-Western governments, particularly in Asia and Africa, since ordering troops into Ukraine in February 2022.

As part of the visit, Myanmar announced plans to open consular offices in Saint Petersburg and Novosibirsk to facilitate diplomatic discussions and cooperation. Additionally, a Russian cultural centre is set to be established in Myanmar, along with plans to construct the country's first Orthodox Christian church in Yangon.

This marks Min Aung Hlaing's fourth visit to Russia since the military coup.

Meanwhile, activist group Justice for Myanmar issued a statement on 4 March, condemning Russia as the primary arms supplier to Myanmar's military regime. The group accused Russia of fuelling war crimes committed against the people of Myanmar.

Min Aung Hlaing went on to visit Belarus, largely to discuss trade ties and security.

During his time in Belarus, Min Aung Hlaing engaged in discussions with President Lukashenko, the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the National Assembly, and other senior government officials. The talks will reportedly focus on strengthening diplomatic ties, economic collaboration, security cooperation, and partnerships in various sectors.

Belarus, under Lukashenko's leadership since 1994, is known for its close relationship with Russia and has allowed the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons on its territory.

Additionally, a 2022 report by Justice for Myanmar highlighted Belarus as one of the countries supplying arms to Myanmar's military regime.

Belarus has previously supported Myanmar's junta, including its opposition to a 2021 UN General Assembly

resolution condemning the coup. In September 2023, the Myanmar junta also expanded its diplomatic ties with Belarus by opening a military attaché office there.

For Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing the visit to Moscow was a welcome episode as his country suffers under Western sanctions and he comes under increasing scrutiny for crimes against humanity, including his role in the 2017 actions about the minority Rohingya, and his brutality in the wake of his 2021 military coup.

Reporting: AFP and Mizzima

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What are the reasons behind Min Aung Hlaing's drive for an election? Photo: AFP

QUESTIONMARKS OVER THE MYANMAR JUNTA PLANS FOR AN ELECTION

Myanmar's junta leader, Min Aung Hlaing, has reiterated his commitment to holding elections by December 2025 or early January 2026. He made the announcement during his visit to Belarus, rather than Russia, where he also discussed the election plan with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko. According to Min Aung Hlaing, both Russia and Belarus have agreed to send representatives to observe the junta-organized election.

Upon his return to Naypyidaw, Min Aung Hlaing reaffirmed the plan, stating, "I stated the multi-party election will be held. We will hold it firmly. If people need the multi-party democracy, they have to participate rather than be against it. If they do, our country will surely be successful, I guarantee. I want to ask for everyone's participation."

The junta's election plan has already faced criticism from international organizations and regional actors. On March 3, during a UN Human Rights Council meeting, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) urged UN member states not to recognize the junta's election, citing its exclusion of parties that won the 2020 general election. Malaysia, the current chair of ASEAN, also called on the junta to prioritize domestic peace and humanitarian aid over holding an election.

A representative from the pro-junta Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) suggested that the Union Election Commission (UEC) has already made preparations for the election. While the election for the lower house is expected to follow the previous first-past-the-post (FPTP) system, the junta is considering implementing a Proportional Representation (PR) system for the Senate to reflect ethnic representation.

Political parties have also revealed that the UEC informed them that elections will take place in only 110 out of Myanmar's 330 townships. However, the UEC has yet to release an official list of townships, as 48 townships have been completely excluded, and many others remain under heavy contestation due to ongoing conflict.

Efforts ratchet up to rescue people from scam centres in Myanmar

The Border Guard Force (BGF) has launched a major crackdown on online scam operations in the Thai-Myanmar border region, arresting over 7,000 individuals from more than 30 countries since February 14. According to Lt. Col. Naing Maung Zaw, a BGF leader, approximately 1,500 Chinese nationals have already been deported to Thailand, with plans to send an additional 1,439 Chinese detainees between March



Alleged scam centre workers picked up in the dragnet to crack down on the illegal businesses. Photo: AFP

6 and 9, who have now been deported. However, he noted that the primary figures responsible for the scam operations have yet to be included in the deportations.

Lt. Col. Naing Maung Zaw addressed concerns about Shwe Kokeko, a known hub for online scams, stating, "Shwe Kokeko is not what people claim it to be. It is not a crime city like others. Only a few individuals came and committed crimes. The area is running as usual, and online scamming is almost eradicated."

The crackdown intensified following the rescue of Chinese actor Wang Xibing from scam centres along the Thai-Myanmar border. The operation has drawn attention from authorities in China, Thailand, and Myanmar. The scam centres, primarily located in Myawaddy Township, are under the control of the BGF, which operates under the Myanmar junta.

A senior leader of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), close to the BGF and the junta, admitted

that they had initially allowed the operations due to a lack of awareness about information technology. "We will not accept this kind of business anymore. We were unaware of what these companies were doing in the past, but now we understand the nature of their work. The infrastructure they left behind cannot be dismantled by us alone—perhaps the government (the junta) has the capacity to handle it."

Regarding the ongoing efforts to eliminate online scams, he added, "We cannot say the issue is fully resolved, as some businessmen are still here. The deportation process to Thailand is not yet complete. However, the torture of workers has been eradicated. You can check their bodies—there are no wounds now."

Myanmar junta pushback in Kachin State

The Myanmar military is reinforcing its positions in Tanghpore village, a key location near the Irrawaddy



Kachin residents flee junta attacks.
Photo: AFP

confluence and a strategic defense point for Myitkyina, the state capital. A company of junta troops, led by a strategic commander, has occupied the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) church as their base, while additional soldiers have taken positions in civilian homes and the Roman Catholic Church.

Locals report that the military is constructing trenches by cutting down villagers' hardwood plantations. The presence of six military checkpoints within the village has further heightened tensions. A resident told a local news agency, "The soldiers keep increasing. We feel very sad and anxious as they are everywhere in the village. We are worried that they may settle here permanently."

The military buildup in Tanghpore began at the end of January and has now grown to several hundred personnel. Junta troops are also stationed along the Myitkyina-Tanghpore road, solidifying their defensive positions.

Meanwhile, in Bhamo, the second-largest city in Kachin State, resistance forces led by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) have been besieging the junta's No. 21 Military Operations Command (MOC) headquarters since December 4, 2024. The prolonged assault has forced junta troops to rely on airstrikes and drone attacks to maintain their defenses.

However, on March 9, resistance forces successfully shot down seven military drones, dealing a blow to the junta's counteroffensive. Local media reports indicate that the junta's intensified drone warfare is hindering resistance forces from seizing control of Bhamo.

The situation in both cities underscores the ongoing and intensifying conflict between junta forces and resistance groups, with strategic locations in Kachin State remaining key battlegrounds.

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U.S. CUTS \$1.1 BILLION IN AID TO MYANMAR, ABANDONING DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Human Rights Myanmar (HRM) released a statement on 4 March concerning the Trump administration's decision to cancel a projected US\$259 million for Myanmar in 2025. This includes US\$45 million for democracy, human rights, and independent media. HRM calculates that US\$1.1 billion could be cut for Myanmar over the Trump administrations tenure in office.

The text of the Human Rights Myanmar statement continues below.

The closure of USAID means that Myanmar is on track to lose approximately \$1.1 billion in aid throughout the Trump presidency, including a total of \$181 million dedicated to the democracy movement. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom's recent 40% reduction in its foreign aid budget further compounds the crisis.

These cuts will deal a devastating blow to Myanmar's democracy movement, civil society, and the millions of people who rely on humanitarian support. They also serve as a gift to the Myanmar military and its

authoritarian allies, including China and Russia, whose influence will now expand.

Full scope of the funding cuts

The U.S. government's decision on 27 February to cancel 90% of its aid contracts marks an unprecedented shift in policy.[2] U.S. aid accounts for 26% of total global aid grants to Myanmar.[3] None of the U.S. funding went to the military-controlled authorities.

As the top recipient of USAID funding in the region and the ninth largest recipient in the world, Myanmar saw commitments of \$236 million in 2023 and \$237 million in 2024. In 2025, it was expected to receive \$259 million.

Of the projected 2025 funding, about \$172 million (72%) would have been allocated for humanitarian aid, healthcare, agriculture, and education, while another \$44 million (19%) would have been set aside for democracy, human rights, and independent media projects.

Over the next four years of the Trump presidency (2025–2029), Myanmar may lose \$1.06 billion in U.S. aid, including \$181 million for democracy projects—eliminating critical support that has long underpinned its civil society landscape.

Alarm bells for wider cuts

On 25 February, the United Kingdom announced a 40% reduction in its foreign aid budget. The U.K. currently funds 25 projects in Myanmar, with an approved budget of \$37 million for 2024 and an indicative budget of \$55 million for 2025.[4] With a 40% cut, Myanmar would receive only \$28 million by 2027—a drastic drop from the \$121 million provided before the coup and the COVID-19 pandemic.

These decisions follow repeated alarm bells from Human Rights Myanmar. In February 2025, we cautioned that the U.S. decision to close USAID programs had frozen \$39 million in aid to the democracy movement, jeopardising organisations, including independent media outlets, that challenge military rule and promote democratic governance. In November 2024, we warned that a shift in U.S. policy could destroy Myanmar's civil society foundations. Those warnings have now become a reality.

Humanitarian and democracy impact

The consequences of these long-term cuts will be catastrophic. In 2025, at least 19 million people in Myanmar—about 35% of the population—will need food, healthcare, and protection aid. The loss of this funding will deepen the humanitarian crisis, exacerbating food insecurity and worsening healthcare shortages. Displaced communities, ethnic minorities, and marginalised populations—who bear no responsibility for the political crisis triggered by the coup—will suffer the most.

The impact on Myanmar's civil society and independent media will be existential. Organisations that have played a crucial role in resisting military rule and advocating for democratic governance will

struggle to survive, replaced by a military tightening its grip on society. Many media outlets will go silent. It is unlikely that organisations like Human Rights Myanmar will survive.

Dangerous precedent for foreign policy and gift for authoritarians

These aid cuts reflect a broader pattern of developed democratic countries disengaging from democracy and human rights support. If the U.S. and U.K. are willing to abandon Myanmar's civil society in its time of need, what does that mean for other fragile democracies? This decision risks setting a precedent where human rights funding is deemed expendable, even in countries confronting some of the world's most brutal authoritarian regimes.

Moreover, withdrawing U.S. and U.K. support will directly embolden authoritarian regimes worldwide. The Myanmar military, long reliant on support from China and Russia, will now find its position strengthened, enabling these allies to expand their economic and strategic influence in Myanmar—an outcome that serves their interests, not those of democracy and human rights.

Reverse the cuts now

The U.S. and U.K. governments must act immediately to reconsider these aid reductions. Congress, the Senate, and policymakers in Washington and London must recognise the damage these cuts will cause—not only to Myanmar but to the broader fight for democracy worldwide. If USAID is to be permanently closed and its functions transferred to the U.S. State Department, the provision of aid must be treated as an emergency.

The Myanmar people should not be collateral damage in shifting foreign policy priorities. Aid must never be used as a political bargaining chip when lives, freedoms, and the future of an entire country are at stake. We urge all who believe in democracy and human rights to take action before it is too late.



Rohingya refugees in a camp in Bangladesh. Photo: AFP

ROHINGYA REFUGEE FOOD AID TO BE HALVED FROM NEXT MONTH: UN

Rations will be halved for around one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh from next month due to a lack of funds, the United Nations food agency has said.

Huge numbers of the persecuted and stateless Rohingya community live in squalid relief camps in Bangladesh, most arriving after having fled from a 2017 military crackdown in neighbouring Myanmar.

Successive aid cuts have already caused severe hardship among Rohingya in the overcrowded settlements, who are reliant on aid and suffer from rampant malnutrition.

The UN World Food Programme (WFP) said in a letter on Wednesday that "severe funding shortfalls" had forced a cut in monthly food vouchers from \$12.50 to \$6.00 per person.

"Unfortunately, we have still not received sufficient funding, and cost-saving measures alone are not enough," the letter said.

Md. Shamsud Douza of Bangladesh's refugee agency told AFP that his office would meet community leaders next week to discuss the cuts.

A decision by US President Donald Trump's administration to make drastic cuts to foreign aid has sent shockwaves through humanitarian initiatives worldwide.

But WFP's Kun Li said that the United States remained a donor for Rohingya aid and the ration cuts reflected a "funding gap across multiple sources".

Funds raised were only half the \$852 million sought by foreign aid agencies, she told AFP.

Wednesday's letter comes days before a visit by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who is slated to meet Rohingya refugees to mark the annual Muslim Ramadan fast.

The 2017 crackdown in Myanmar -- now the subject of a UN genocide investigation -- sent around 750,000 Rohingya fleeing into neighbouring Bangladesh with harrowing stories of murder, rape and arson.

Bangladesh has struggled to support its refugee population. The prospects of a wholesale return to Myanmar or resettlement elsewhere are remote.

Rohingya living in the camps around Cox's Bazar are not allowed to seek employment and are almost entirely dependent on limited humanitarian aid to survive.

Large numbers of refugees have attempted hazardous sea crossings in an effort to find a better life away from the camps, including more than 250 Rohingya who arrived in Indonesia in January.

AFP



Photo: AFP

UN REINSTATES AID TO ROHINGYA REFUGEES IN INDONESIA: OFFICIAL

The United Nations migration agency has reversed cuts to funding for Rohingya refugees in Indonesia, its top official in the country told AFP Tuesday, days after it slashed assistance because of US President Donald Trump's foreign aid funding freeze.

The mostly Muslim ethnic Rohingya are heavily persecuted in Myanmar and thousands risk their lives each year on long and dangerous sea journeys to reach Malaysia or Indonesia.

A letter dated February 28 from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), seen by AFP, said support was being cut for nearly 1,000 Rohingya refugees in Pekanbaru city on the western island of Sumatra.

But the IOM chief of mission in Indonesia told AFP the cuts have been reversed, without a reason given.

"Our largest programme to provide humanitarian assistance has been reinstated," Jeffrey Labovitz said.

"I can confirm there is no current planned reduction in services."

The agency said in an email statement that it "remains committed to assisting Rohingya refugees in Indonesia, continuing our support as we have in the past."

More than 2,000 Rohingya are languishing in Indonesia under legal uncertainty as nations refuse to

take them in permanently, leaving them reliant on UN support for shelter and aid.

The IOM said last week that the US freeze was "impacting our staff, operations and the people we serve".

The freeze had left funds desperately needed to maintain levels of assistance to the persecuted minority, a source familiar with the matter told AFP.

The US embassy in Jakarta did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Indonesia is not a signatory to the UN refugee convention and says it cannot be compelled to take in refugees from Myanmar, calling instead on neighbouring countries to share the burden and resettle the Rohingya who arrive on its shores.

On Monday US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Washington was cancelling 5,200 programmes at development agency USAID, but would keep 1,000 to be administered by the State Department.

Aid groups argue much of the assistance supports US interests by promoting stability and health overseas.

AFP



UN ALLOCATES \$110 MILLION FOR UNDERFUNDED HUMANITARIAN CRISES

On 6 March, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) announced a US\$110 million allocation from its Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to support life-saving aid in 10 underfunded crises worldwide, including Myanmar.

The text of UNOCHA's statement is as follows.

More than 300 million people around the world urgently need humanitarian aid, but funding has been dwindling annually, with this year's levels projected to drop to a record low.

"For countries battered by conflict, climate change and economic turmoil, brutal funding cuts don't mean that humanitarian needs disappear," said Tom Fletcher, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. "Today's emergency fund allocation channels resources swiftly to where they're needed most."

One third of the new CERF funding will support Sudan, which is grappling with violence, displacement and hunger, and neighbouring Chad, to where many have fled. The funds will also bolster the humanitarian response in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Honduras, Mauritania, Niger, Somalia, Venezuela and Zambia. Funds will also support life-saving initiatives to protect vulnerable people from climate shocks, made possible by CERF's Climate Action Account.

Twice a year, CERF – the UN global emergency fund managed by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs – allocates resources for underfunded emergencies as a global alert to spotlight the need for additional funding from Member States, the private sector and others. In late 2024, \$110 million was disbursed to help more than 3 million people in underfunded emergencies in Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Haiti, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique,

Myanmar and Yemen.

This year, the humanitarian community is seeking nearly \$45 billion to reach 185 million of the most vulnerable people caught up in crises worldwide. To date, just 5 per cent of this funding has been received, leaving a gap of more than \$42 billion.

CERF is one of the fastest funding instruments available to help people affected by crises. Managed by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs on behalf of the UN Secretary-General, CERF enables timely, effective and life-saving humanitarian action by UN agencies and others to kickstart or reinforce emergency responses anywhere they are required. Funding decisions for underfunded emergencies are based on detailed analysis of more than 90 humanitarian indicators and wide consultation with partners.

Since its creation by the UN General Assembly in 2005, and with generous contributions from 130 Member States and observers, as well as other donors including private individuals, CERF has assisted hundreds of millions of people with some \$9.6 billion across more than 110 countries and territories. This includes \$3.3 billion to underfunded crises. CERF has an annual funding target of \$1 billion.

CERF is the leading global humanitarian funding tool for responding to climate-related humanitarian emergencies. To strengthen this function, CERF launched its Climate Action Account at COP28, offering a quick, efficient and impactful avenue for climate-related humanitarian finance. It aims to assist the world's most vulnerable communities facing the consequences of the climate crisis, including through anticipatory action and life-saving projects that also build people's adaptation and resilience.



INDIA FOR MYANMAR URGES PROTECTION FOR REFUGEES AMID DEPORTATION THREATS

On 4 March, India for Myanmar called on authorities in New Delhi to stop threatening Myanmar refugees with deportation, including those detained in Assam and Manipur.

On 23 February, police raided and threatened the Burmese Christian Association (BCA) and Grace Baptist Church (GBC) during a prayer session in Bikapur, a New Delhi neighbourhood home to Myanmar refugees.

"While we were worshipping, the authorities barged in without any respect for religion, demanding proof of our status. They threatened to arrest, imprison, or deport anyone without a UN card," a BCA member said.

Some church members presented identification cards issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), while authorities questioned those without them. In the following days, New Delhi authorities raided several temples and restaurants frequented by Myanmar refugees, but no arrests were made.

Salai Dokhar, leader of India for Myanmar, warned that authorities could intensify raids on locations frequented by Myanmar nationals if the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which campaigned on containing and repatriating refugees, remains in power.

"Given the current situation, caution is necessary, as authorities may conduct checks and arrests in crowded places such as churches and workplaces. Refugees from other countries, including Myanmar citizens in New Delhi, could face increasing difficulties," he said.

India for Myanmar urged the Indian government to halt the deportation of Myanmar refugees back to the military junta and to cease threats of repatriation. The organization also called for an end to actions that could cause psychological or physical harm to refugees, even if full support for Myanmar's democratic movement is not feasible under the current political instability.

The India for Myanmar leader stated that information is being collected and discussed with the Indian government, and that they will collaborate with the National Unity Government (NUG) and international organizations to address the issue.

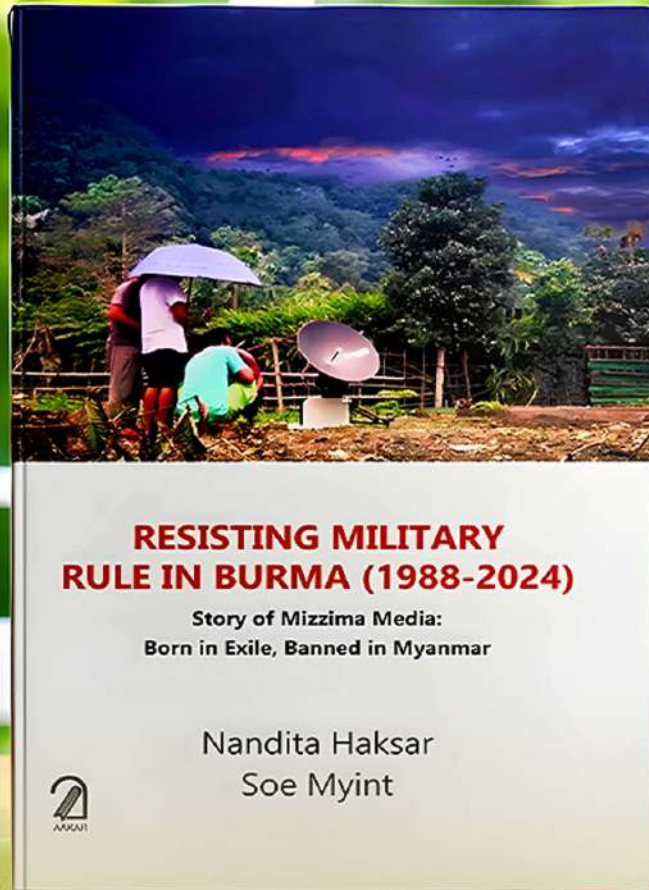
Regarding unannounced inspections, the New Delhi-based Chin Refugee Committee (CRC) has advised Myanmar nationals to exercise caution and ensure they carry their refugee identification cards at all times.

According to a statement from India for Myanmar, more than 250 people are currently imprisoned in Manipur and Assam. Of these, 115 have been deported to the Myanmar junta without security guarantees, and one individual has died in custody. Justice has yet to be served.

Among the detained Myanmar refugees in Manipur state jail, U Aung Myint, in his fifties, is in critical condition, along with at least 10 others reported to be in a similar state.

Despite completing prison sentences and paying fines, Myanmar refugees have remained in detention for years. The state governments of Manipur and Assam have repeatedly threatened to deport them to Myanmar, where they face serious risks to their safety.

Myanmar refugees who fled to India following the military coup on 1 February 2021, continue to face worsening conditions after more than four years of uncertainty and hardship. Aid workers estimate that over 70,000 people have crossed into India's Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, and New Delhi due to escalating political and military tensions in Myanmar.



RESISTING MILITARY RULE IN BURMA (1988-2024)
**STORY OF MIZZIMA MEDIA:
BORN IN EXILE, BANNED IN
MYANMAR**

by Nandita Haksar & Soe Myint

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MYANMAR WOMEN'S GROUPS ISSUE STATEMENT ON INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Women's rights and human rights organizations in Myanmar released a statement on 8 March to highlight ongoing gender-based violence, condemn violations by all parties, and demand accountability and justice for women in Myanmar.

The statement is as follows:

The historical origin of International Women's Day stems from the courageous protests of women workers in the workplace against inequality and for justice and equal rights, starting in 1857 in New York City, USA.

In a patriarchal society, the important role of women was not recognized, and women were subjected to oppression, subjugation, and various forms of violence. International Women's Day emerged from the struggle and protests of women for their human rights. In recognition of the women's rights movement, International Women's Day has been celebrated annually on March 8 since 1911. Furthermore, International Women's Day is a day to highlight the challenges women face, the needs for equality, and to celebrate the capabilities and empowerment of women.

In the current Myanmar political context, gender-based discrimination and exclusion are still being experienced, and various forms of violence, including sexual violence, are still clearly visible. During the Spring Revolution, women's organizations have continuously received reports of violations committed by the military council, violations among the general public, and allegations of violations by revolutionary forces. After reviewing these complaints and listening to the testimonies of women victims of violence, women's organizations have pointed to these key issues.

Sexual violence and violations against women during conflict are war crimes.

Various forms of violence against women (physical, psychological, sexual, economic, harmful traditional practices, and technology-based violence) are unacceptable and unforgivable violations of human rights, disregarding the value of human beings.

Women are determined to take a leading role in ensuring that perpetrators of the military council's inhumane abuses are not granted amnesty and that accountability and responsibility are established during the period of building a free, just, and accountable nation.

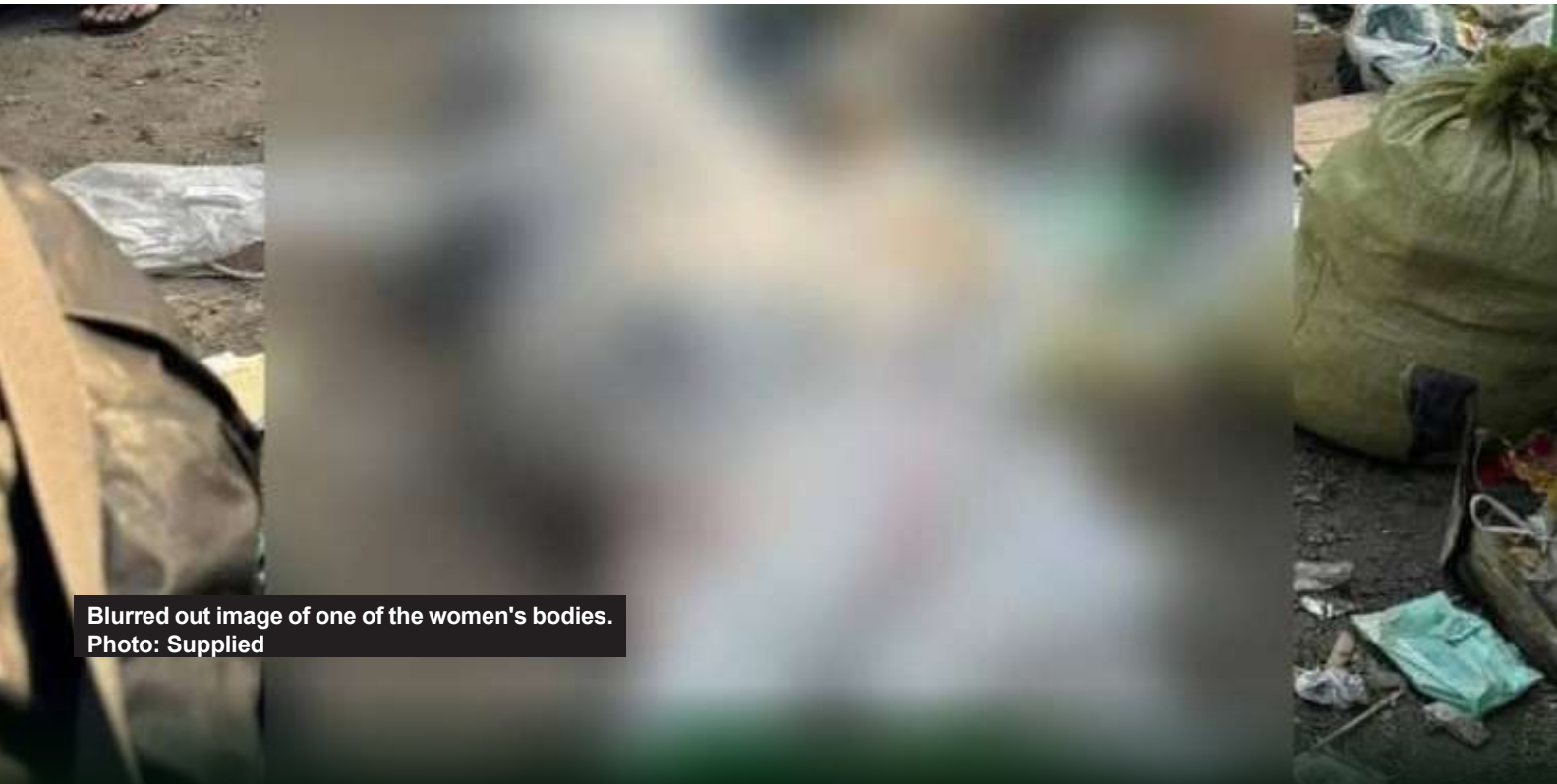
Furthermore, we see it as extremely disappointing that even civil society organizations, political groups, and revolutionary groups who cherish truth and desire justice, including male revolutionaries and revolutionary soldiers, under the guise of revolutionary solidarity, love, authority, age, social power, power, and trust, are committing sexual exploitation, harassment, and violence during the conflict. These actions severely undermine the security of women who are participating in the revolution based on trust. We strongly warn against the targeting and intimidation of those who speak out about violence and those who assist and support them, and demand that this practice be stopped immediately.

Although there are many challenges in legally prosecuting and punishing perpetrators under the rule of law during the revolutionary period, our women will seek justice through all possible means. Whoever commits violations, for whatever reason, wherever, in whatever region or organization, at whatever time, must be held accountable and responsible for their actions.

We will continuously monitor and urge that perpetrators of crimes are not granted impunity under the relevant judicial systems and the rule of law, and that accountability and responsibility are established.

We strongly urge that perpetrators of sexual exploitation, harassment, and violence against women who do not acknowledge their guilt, do not sincerely apologize (or confess and apologize and then repeatedly commit the same violations), and face many challenges in receiving appropriate legal punishment, be socially sanctioned by our organizations as a demonstration of our responsibility to ensure justice for women victims and to strengthen the system of accountability and responsibility within our society. Therefore, we will "absolutely" refrain from engaging in joint work, inviting to speak at events, giving platforms, communicating with, and acknowledging these individuals in our activities.

We also urge the public to unconditionally impose social sanctions on any perpetrators of sexual exploitation and violence against women, regardless of who they are, and to join in the path to seeking justice for women.



Blurred out image of one of the women's bodies.
Photo: Supplied

FOUR WOMEN FOUND MURDERED IN MYITKYINA AND HSIPAW, RAISING SECURITY CONCERNS

The bodies of four women were discovered abandoned in Myitkyina, Kachin State, and Hsipaw Township, northern Shan State, sparking security concerns due to weak law enforcement in the region, according to locals.

At around 7:15 am on 4 March, residents found the body of a woman wrapped in a plastic bag at a garbage dump in front of Basic Education High School (B.E.H.S) 6 in Injangdon Ward, Myitkyina.

The victim, estimated to be around 45 years old, was found with her legs tied using a motorcycle chain, a local eyewitness reported.

"It's a very bad situation. We don't even dare to go out during the daytime in Myitkyina," said a local woman.

Social aid groups arrived after being informed and took the body to the morgue. Upon opening the bag, they discovered signs of beatings and torture, suggesting she died from severe physical abuse. The details surrounding her death remain unclear, and no suspects have been arrested. The police are still investigating, according to an official from a local social welfare association.

A similar case occurred in Hsipaw Township, northern Shan State, where the bodies of three teenage girls were found on 25 February in Narma Khor village.

The victims, aged between 15 and 18, were reportedly burned to death by some members of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and village elders, a local resident said.

Although Hsipaw town is controlled by the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), local sources report that the Hsipaw-Namlan and Hsipaw-Mingre roads, including Narma Khor village, are under MNDAA control. The Shan State Progressive Party/Shan State Army (SSPP/SSA) is also active in the area.

The identities of the three victims remain unknown, and local authorities have not yet launched an investigation. Residents suspect they may have been women from other areas involved in online scams or KTV work.

Attempts to contact MNDAA and SSPP officials for information have been unsuccessful.

Residents report a rise in robberies, thefts, and looting in both Myitkyina, which is under junta control, and Hsipaw Township, which is controlled by revolutionary forces.

The murders of these four women have heightened fears over the lack of security and law enforcement in the region.

SWISS SANCTIONS ON MYANMAR JUNTA'S MOGE WELCOMED BY JFM

Justice for Myanmar (JFM) released a statement on 11 March welcoming the announcement of sanctions on the junta-owned Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise by the government of Switzerland. The move closes a loophole and aligns Switzerland with EU sanctions on Myanmar.

The text of the statement is as follows.

The sanctions follow European Union (EU) sanctions on MOGE imposed on February 21, 2022.

Switzerland does not impose unilateral sanctions but rather implements international sanctions imposed by the EU, United Nations and Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) through the Embargo Act.

Swiss sanctions on MOGE are important in closing a loophole that the junta could use to generate funds from the oil and gas sector, which finance its ongoing campaign of terror against the Myanmar people.

The oil and gas industry is the biggest source of foreign-currency revenue for the junta. Oil and gas revenue is used to purchase arms, aviation fuel and other supplies needed for the junta's continuing commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

According to the junta's own figures, Myanmar's natural gas exports were worth US\$841.7 million in the 3 months to June 2023 alone.

Switzerland's decision to sanction MOGE follows pressure on the government to act through a freedom of information request by Justice for Myanmar, a March 7 press release and reporting by Tages-Anzeiger.

Justice For Myanmar submitted a freedom of information request to the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO) on March 23, 2024 for "all documents prepared for the Federal Council advising on whether Switzerland should implement sanctions against Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE)".

According to documents received through the request, Switzerland's decision to not sanction MOGE was to avoid the need to modify Swiss law to implement a derogation in EU sanctions for the decommissioning of oil and gas fields.

Swiss banks have historic ties to Myanmar state-owned banks. A 2018 report noted that the now junta-controlled Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank, which has been used for international transactions by MOGE, had correspondent banking relations in Switzerland.

There have also been Swiss insurance links to Myanmar's oil and gas sector. The Swiss-based company Infrassure was chosen as the reinsurer for the China-Myanmar gas pipeline in 2011, according to a leaked document shared with Justice For Myanmar.



MYANMAR JUNTA SENDS 24 WORKERS TO RUSSIA DESPITE LABOUR RESTRICTIONS

Despite the junta's restrictions on overseas employment, Myanmar's military regime facilitated the deployment of 24 workers to Russia on 5 February, according to a report in the state-run Kyemon newspaper on 6 March.

The workers were sent without a formal labour cooperation memorandum of understanding (MOU) between Myanmar and Russia. However, the junta described the initiative as a "pilot project" within the framework of bilateral relations.

The deployment was coordinated by Vista International Co., Ltd. The workers signed employment contracts on 28 February, underwent orientation training on 3 March, and were issued Overseas Worker Identification Cards (OWICs) before departure. They are expected to work in Russia's construction sector.

Meanwhile, an official from an overseas employment agency told Mizzima that since mid-February, the junta

has halted the issuance of OWICs, creating difficulties for workers awaiting approval.

"It's been a long delay. Many workers are struggling because of rising loan interest rates," the official said.

The official also states that Myanmar workers show little interest in jobs in Russia due to limited opportunities and concerns over the ongoing war.

"There isn't much demand, and since Russia is at war, workers fear the risks of being caught in the conflict," the official said.

The junta has been prioritizing labour exports to Russia. On 24 February, officials held discussions on finalizing an MOU and employer-worker agreements to facilitate further deployment.



**OVER 5,000 DISPLACED
IN TANINTHARYI
TOWNSHIP FACE URGENT
HUMANITARIAN CRISIS
AMID ONGOING CLASHES**

Over 5,000 residents displaced by ongoing fighting in Tanintharyi Township, Tanintharyi Region, urgently need aid, including food, while living in constant fear of junta air raids, according to local aid providers and residents.

The residents have been displaced for nearly three months due to ongoing clashes between the junta and combined revolutionary forces along the Tanintharyi-Maw Taung road (Union Road).

Over 5,000 local residents from villages such as Sin Khun, Ban Law, Nyaung Bin Kwin, Thon Makha, and Chaung Nga Pauk areas heavily affected by the fighting, are now seeking shelter in the forests and mountains to escape the violence.

A woman assisting the displaced people stated that while IDP support groups are providing food and medical aid, the displaced still urgently need additional help.

The woman assisting the IDPs said, "They just returned from the displaced areas today. We have access to 5,000 people from certain groups, but many others have fled to areas we cannot reach. The main needs are medicine and food. Aid is irregular, and

with the heightened military situation, food supplies, including rice, have been cut off. The IDPs are suffering."

Additionally, some of the IDPs are suffering from diarrhoea due to the lack of access to clean drinking water and proper sanitation facilities.

According to local residents, the junta is conducting airstrikes almost daily, not only in areas of active fighting in Tanintharyi Township but also in villages where no fighting has occurred, leaving the IDPs living in constant fear of airstrikes.

As the junta advances its forces to gain control of the Tanintharyi-Maw Taung road, fighting has erupted along the route. The military has primarily responding with airstrikes and drone attacks.

According to officials from the joint forces, there have been casualties and losses on the junta's side and that of the revolutionary forces.

Junta soldiers advancing south of Maw Taung are from the Myeik-based Infantry Battalion 101, the Bokepyin-based Infantry Battalion 224, and the Kawthaung-based Light Infantry Battalion 431, all under the Coastal Region Military Command.



STATEMENT BY MYANMAR AMBASSADOR KYAW MOE TUN AT NUCLEAR WEAPONS TREATY MEETING

On 5 March, Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun, Permanent Representative of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to the United Nations, made a statement at the General Exchange of Views of the Third Meeting of State Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Ambassador to the UN before the 2021 coup, U Kyaw Moe Tun has remained loyal to the National Unity Government (NUG).

The text of the statement is below.

Mr. President,

At the outset, I wish to congratulate you and other members of the Bureau on your election. I assure you of our delegation's full support throughout the meeting.

Mr. President,

Heightened geopolitical tensions, persistent conflicts and backsliding of international rules and norms are eroding the global security architecture. The Scientific Advisory Group reported an estimated increase in global stockpile of nuclear warheads and ongoing nuclear arsenal modernization efforts at the beginning of 2025. Nuclear rhetorics and threats continue to prevail while evolving technologies in the nuclear domain further exacerbate its danger.

As humanity moves inches closer to nuclear catastrophe, it is now more urgent than ever to redouble our efforts in achieving our collective goal of the world without nuclear weapons.

Mr. President,

Nuclear weapons pose an existential threat to humanity because a single use of nuclear weapons will have catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences whether the use is intentional or accidental.

Therefore, we firmly believe that the only guarantee against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is their total elimination. The urgency of achieving a nuclear-weapon free world is one of the guiding principles of the creation of the TPNW. The prohibition of nuclear weapons is in line with international humanitarian law and a critical step towards their elimination.

Mr. President,

Myanmar welcomes the significant progress in the implementation of the Vienna Action Plan as well as the ratification by Indonesia, Sao Tome and Principe, Sierra Leone and Solomon Islands last year. Myanmar attaches great importance to universalization of the TPNW and urges all member states to ratify it without delay.

Under the elected civilian government, Myanmar signed the Treaty in 2018 and considered progressively for ratification accordingly.

Unfortunately, our plan to ratify the TPNW was disrupted by the attempted illegal military coup in 2021.

Despite the setbacks and challenges caused by the military coup, Myanmar remains steadfast to upholding the purposes and objectives of the Treaty. We will become a State Party to the TPNW whenever circumstances permit.

Mr. President,

We are of the view that peace and stability at national, regional and international levels can all contribute to achieving progress in our TPNW universalization efforts.

Sadly, for Myanmar, the military coup and ongoing atrocities by the military junta have shattered the fabric of peace in the country, caused human suffering and impacted regional peace and stability.

Therefore, I urge the international community to address the root cause and support the people of Myanmar and their resolutions to end the military dictatorship and build a federal democratic union to restore peace and stability.

Please help the people of Myanmar by cutting the flow of arms, weapons and jet fuel to the military junta.

INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN MYANMAR WITH THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

The Ministry of Human Rights of the National Unity Government (NUG) of Myanmar released a statement on 4 March during an interactive dialogue with UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk. The statement expressed gratitude for his update on the human rights situation in Myanmar and supported calls for stronger international action against the military junta.

The text of the statement continues below.

The High Commissioner described the situation in Myanmar as among the worst in the world and, addressing the military junta's crimes and violations, catalogued a "litany of human suffering that is difficult to fathom". This includes famine, mass civilian casualties, coercive conscription, beheadings, burnings, mutilations, executions, torture, the use of human shields and sexual violence. Arcing forced displacement also continues to impact communities already in the most stark situations of vulnerability, including the Rohingya.

Myanmar fully supports the High Commissioner's appeal to the international community to prioritize Myanmar, including through sharpened targeted sanctions against junta members and their businesses and associates, and by demanding an embargo on weapons, munitions, jet fuel and dual-use items transfers to the junta.

We also support the High Commissioner's call on UN Member States to support solutions that place the National Unity Government, ethnic organizations, women's groups, youth, civil society and other pro-democracy actors at the centre. This should include an ASEAN+ approach that brings Myanmar's neighbours and other influential States into a political process that upholds the Myanmar people's democratic will and aspirations, and that meets ASEAN's call for scaled-up financial support for the delivery of desperately needed humanitarian assistance. The UN Special Envoy on

Myanmar and ASEAN's Troika mechanism could take lead roles in this process.

Furthermore, Myanmar also shares the High Commissioner's commitment to accountability and to breaking the cycle of impunity by holding perpetrators of human rights violations and abuses to account.

This session, the Human Rights Council has before it the opportunity to adopt a stronger resolution on Myanmar that is attuned to the rapidly evolving situation on the ground, where the National Unity Government and ethnic organizations are expanding territorial control and service delivery.

Looking to a post-military future, the new Myanmar text should:

- sharpen condemnation of the junta, including its continued atrocities against civilians, its forced conscription drive, its planned sham elections, and its withholding and blocking of humanitarian assistance
- welcome the filing by the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court of an application for a warrant of arrest for Senior General Min Aung Hlaing
- condemn the continued failure of the military junta to comply with UNSCR 2669 (2022) and call on the Security Council to take clear punitive steps against the junta in follow-up
- express its clear support for a political process that places the National Unity Government, ethnic organizations, civil society, and the people's democratic aspirations at its centre
- support expanded humanitarian assistance, reconstruction, transitional justice and nation-building efforts as essential steps toward cementing an inclusive, sustainable federal democratic union.
- Myanmar repeats its thanks to High Commissioner Türk and extends its full cooperation to OHCHR and to the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms.



Photo: AFP

JUSTICE FOR MYANMAR URGES THAILAND TO ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES OF CYBER SCAM INDUSTRY

Justice For Myanmar released a statement on March 4, urging Thailand to address the root causes of the cyber scam industry in Myanmar.

The statement is as follows.

In February 2025, Thailand suspended electricity and fuel exports to Myanmar border areas where the cyber scam industry has developed a significant foothold. However, to succeed, Thailand's cyber scam crackdown needs to address the root causes that have allowed these criminal operations to flourish in Myanmar.

Justice For Myanmar calls on Thailand and other government to cut all sources of funds, arms and aviation fuel to the Myanmar military and its militias and hold them and their accomplices criminally accountable for their transnational criminal activities.

Without targeting the root causes of the cyber scam industry, temporary suspensions of electricity will only enable the industry to be more sophisticated in its operations and relocate to other areas.

This is not the first time Thailand has suspended electricity to areas where there are cyber scam compounds in Myawaddy Township. Measures were taken by Thailand to cut power to two scam zones in 2023, but a new Justice For Myanmar investigation shows that the cyber scam industry actually expanded, enabled by Thai state-owned and private businesses, the Myanmar military, its militias and their accomplices.

Satellite imagery analysed by Justice for Myanmar reveals extensive expansion of known cyber scam compounds including KK Park, Yatai New City, Yulong Bay Park, Apollo Park, Huanya and Dongmei Park throughout 2023 and 2024.

Brand new compounds have also sprung up in the Minletpan area, which bear all the hallmarks of online scam operations.

The Myanmar military is at the centre of a web of criminal businesses and nurtures and harbours the Karen Border Guard Force (BGF), which is under Myanmar military command.

Cyber scams have greatly proliferated in Myanmar's Myawaddy Township since the military's attempted coup in February 2021.

The Myanmar military and its militias profits from cyber scam operations in Myanmar, which help fund their commission of international crimes.

To target these root causes of cyber scams, governments should coordinate and widen targeted sanctions against the Myanmar military's sources of funds, arms and aviation fuel. The Myanmar military and its cartel must be dismantled.

The Myanmar military and its militias have long enjoyed impunity for their transnational crimes and this needs to end. Thailand should widen its criminal investigation against Karen BGF leaders to their family members, the Myanmar military, and also criminally investigate the complicity of Thai officials and businesses who have enabled the growth of cybercrime in the region.

Thailand should take more targeted measures to block the sale of electricity and fuel to cyber scam operations, while alleviating the suffering of local communities. Thailand should also urgently review cross border fuel and electricity transactions and existing power purchase agreements; and transparently report on the extent to which supplies have enabled criminal activities.

Justice For Myanmar spokesperson Yadanar Maung says: "The Myanmar military and Karen BGF have been rattled by Thailand's sudden crackdown,

and are clearly anxious to avoid further measures, while simultaneously avoiding culpability.

"However, the depth of their involvement in the cyber scam industry, the rate of growth of these compounds over recent years, and their willingness to protect their operations means they must not be allowed to escape justice through short-term gestures.

"The Myanmar military is a key player and beneficiary in the cyber scam industry, and the profits finance its international crimes against the Myanmar people.

"The growth of cyber scams has been further enabled by the involvement of Thai state-owned companies and corrupt officials who have profited from electricity and fuel sales.

"Without addressing the root causes – the Myanmar military, its militias and their accomplices that have allowed the industry to flourish – any crackdown will only lead to the relocation of these operations, not their elimination."

Photo: AFP

THAILAND REPATRIATES HUNDREDS MORE CHINESE SCAM CENTRE WORKERS

Hundreds of Chinese nationals freed from Myanmar online scam centres flew home through Thailand on Thursday, as the kingdom said it aimed to repatriate 1,500 such workers a week.

Thailand, Myanmar and China have been making efforts in recent weeks to clear out illegal cyberscam compounds on the Thai-Myanmar border where thousands of foreigners -- mostly Chinese nationals -- have been working.

Under pressure from key ally Beijing, Myanmar has cracked down on some of the compounds, freeing around 7,000 workers from more than two dozen countries.

Around 600 Chinese nationals were returned from Myanmar through Thailand two weeks ago, and last week the three countries held talks in Bangkok to arrange further transferrals.

Thai media broadcast footage on Thursday of coaches bringing hundreds of Chinese workers from Myanmar and offloading them on to planes destined for China at Mae Sot airport.

The Thai border force later said that 456 Chinese nationals were sent back on six China Southern chartered aircraft.

Thai foreign ministry spokesperson Nikorndej Balankura told reporters that the government plans to repatriate 1,500 people per week, or 300 each weekday,

with "regular repatriations of Chinese nationals every Wednesday, Thursday and Friday."

Mondays and Tuesdays would see other foreign nationals including Africans repatriated, he said, with the ministry coordinating with foreign embassies to help with "immediate" repatriations.

The remaining freed workers have been languishing for weeks in sometimes squalid conditions in holding camps near the Thai border while officials organise their repatriation.

Many workers say they were lured or tricked into taking the work -- defrauding strangers online with investment, romance and gambling scams -- and suffered beatings and abuse.

A Rwandan scam centre worker who asked to remain anonymous told AFP on Wednesday that he had been trafficked into one of the compounds where he was tortured and had his money taken from him.

"It's a big challenge. If I get home I will have a big challenge also," he said.

Unsanitary conditions at the overcrowded makeshift encampments have raised concerns about possible disease outbreaks.

"There are sick people... they need be repatriated onto the Thai side as early as possible," Nikorndej said.

AFP



Photo: Supplied

MYANMAR JUNTA AIRSTRIKES KILL 26, INJURE 40 IN MYAING TOWNSHIP SINCE LATE FEBRUARY

The Myanmar junta's air force launched another airstrike in Myaing Township, Magway Region, on the morning of 4 March, leaving two locals seriously injured.

The latest attack adds to a series of deadly air raids that have killed 26 civilians and wounded at least 40 since 25 February, according to local resistance groups.

The Anyar Myae Resistance Coalition reported that a junta fighter jet dropped three 500-pound bombs on a monastery in Sin Sein village at 9:50 am on 4 March, severely injuring two men.

"Both are in critical condition," said a spokesman from the Anyar Myae Resistance Coalition.

The airstrike damaged the monastery, several vehicles, and caused pagodas to collapse. Sin Sein village is located seven miles from the Kyauk Khwak oil field, which was targeted by airstrikes on 25 February. Locals believe the junta deliberately attacks civilian areas.

On 25 February, the junta bombed a wedding hall in Sonkon village, near Kyauk Khwak oil field, killing 11 civilians and injuring at least 20.

On 3 March, the Anyar Myae Resistance Coalition reported that junta forces conducted at least eight airstrikes near the Latpan oil field and surrounding villages in Myaing Township, resulting in 15 deaths and about 20 injuries.

According to the Myaing People's Defence Force (PDF) and the Anyar Myae Resistance Coalition, junta airstrikes in Myaing Township on 25 February, 3 and 4 March have caused a total of 26 civilian deaths and at least 40 injuries.

Oil drilling activities have come to a halt as locals fear further attacks. In response to the escalating airstrike threat, the Myaing Township People's Defence Force issued an order on 3 March, urging villagers to dig bunkers, monitor people entering the area, and block all communication channels except those used by revolutionary groups.



Photo: Supplied

MYANMAR JUNTA ARTILLERY AND AIRSTRIKES KILL FIVE CIVILIANS, INCLUDING A CHILD, IN SOUTHERN SHAN STATE

The Inle Region Human Rights Group has reported that five civilians, including a 10-year-old child, lost their lives, while nine others sustained injuries in February due to artillery shelling and airstrikes carried out by Myanmar's military in Nyaung Shwe and Pinlaung townships in southern Shan State.

According to a statement released on 2 March by the Inle Region Human Rights Group, the junta launched one firebombing, 20 drone strikes, 113 artillery strikes, and five airstrikes targeting multiple villages. The affected villages include Taung Po Kwe, Ho Pan, Nyaung Lay Pin, and Ye Pu in Nyaung Shwe Township, as well as Nan Tok village in Pinlaung Township.

"There was no active fighting in the areas struck by the shelling. However, on 16 February, clashes did occur in the Pinlaung area between the revolutionary forces, junta troops, and the Pa-O National Army (PNA). Despite this, the junta has continued artillery shelling before, during, and after the battle," an official from the Inle Region Human Rights Group said.

Additionally, a school was completely destroyed, and several houses suffered damage or were set ablaze during the ongoing attacks.

"The junta forces and the PNA are persistently launching artillery and airstrikes, leaving villagers in a state of fear and forcing most of them to flee. Many residents no longer feel safe staying in their homes," said a displaced woman.

At present, thousands of villagers from various communities in Nyaung Shwe and Pinlaung townships have been displaced and are seeking safety elsewhere.

The Pa-O National Organization and its armed wing, the Pa-O National Army (PNO/PNA), have been working in collaboration with the junta since the 2021 military coup, including training and recruiting Pyu Saw Htee militias in their controlled territories, according to revolutionary forces.

The Burma War Crimes Investigation (BWCI) has reported that the junta, alongside the PNO/PNA, has been deliberately targeting civilians in Karenni State and southern Shan State in an effort to suppress local resistance movements.



Photo: Supplied

MYANMAR JUNTA AIRSTRIKES KILL 12 CIVILIANS NEAR OIL FIELD, DOZENS INJURED

Myanmar's military junta launched a series of airstrikes on villages near the Latpanto oil field, situated at the border of Myaing and Pauk townships in Magway Region, killing at least 12 civilians and injuring dozens, according to the Anyar Myae resistance coalition.

The attacks took place between 1:00 am and 2:00 am on 3 March, with junta forces conducting eight airstrikes, an official from the resistance coalition told Mizzima.

"At this time, we cannot confirm whether women and children were among the casualties. However, four of the victims were villagers from Baung Bin in Myaing Township, while the rest were oil field workers," the official said.

The junta deployed Y-12 aircraft and jet fighters to bomb multiple locations, including a rice field near Taw Ywar village, a monastery in Nyaung Gone village, areas near Sate Chay and Gyouk Gone villages, and Baung Bin village, which was hit twice. Additionally, a jet fighter bombed an area close to Suu Win village and another near Latpanto village in Pauk Township.

At least 30 people sustained injuries, while buildings and equipment used in the oil field were damaged, the

resistance coalition reported. The group has launched an area clearance operation, identified victims and transported the wounded to medical facilities.

"At the moment, we have been carrying out the area clearance operation, attempting to identify the victims, and transferring the injured to the hospital," the official said.

Images released by the Anyar Myae resistance coalition showed bodies with amputated limbs.

Locals are quite concerned and are currently escaping to safety from their houses as a result of the junta's airstrikes that targeted the villages on the outskirts of Myaing and Pauk townships, according to a local resident.

"In fear of further attacks, villagers are temporarily evacuating," a resident confirmed.

The resistance coalition continues to warn communities about the risk of aerial assaults while assisting the affected families.

This incident follows a separate airstrike on 25 February, when the junta targeted a wedding ceremony in Song Gone village, also in Myaing Township, killing at least 11 civilians and injuring 20 others.



Photo: Mizzima

AID GROUP SAYS 4,000 DISPLACED BY BATTLE FOR KEY MYANMAR PORT SITE OF KYAUKPHYU

Fierce fighting between Myanmar's military junta and ethnic minority rebels closing in on the planned site of a strategic China-backed port of Kyaukphyu has displaced 4,000 people, a local aid worker said on Wednesday.

The Arakan Army (AA) is battling the military in western Rakhine state, where projects including oil pipelines, power plants and transport links are sprouting up with billions of dollars of Chinese funding.

The region has emerged as a key front in Myanmar's highly fractured civil war, pitching a myriad of ethnic minority rebels and pro-democracy fighters against the junta that seized power in a 2021 coup.

New battles have flared since late last month around the town of Kyaukphyu, where the junta's key ally Beijing has pledged investment worth an estimated \$9 billion for a deepwater port.

"Due to recent clashes, people from 10 villages around the fighting area have been fleeing," said Aung Aung, a representative of a local rescue committee.

"According to our data received, there's been around 4,000 people displaced," he told AFP, adding that the total number of people displaced in the area was now around 15,000.

While the port project has been largely stalled by the fighting, Kyaukphyu is also the site of a completed

China-backed power plant and natural gas pipeline, as well as a naval base.

A Rakhine-based charity leader, speaking on condition of anonymity, said "there is a need for healthcare and medicine for those displaced".

A junta spokesman could not be reached for comment, while an AA spokesman did not respond to a request for comment.

China has invested in the coastal state, which neighbours Bangladesh, under its Belt and Road Initiative founded in 2013 to expand its international trade footprint.

However, control of the projects has emerged as a key objective for both the internationally isolated junta, which is deeply reliant on China, as well as the AA, one of the junta's most powerful adversaries.

The AA claimed complete control of a key region along the Bangladesh border in December, piling further pressure on the junta battling opponents elsewhere in the country.

More than 3.5 million people are internally displaced across Myanmar, according to United Nations data, more than 500,000 in Rakhine state alone.

AFP

KIA AND TNLA CLASH OVER CHECKPOINTS AND TAX COLLECTION IN MYANMAR'S NORTHERN SHAN STATE

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) have engaged in clashes across at least four townships in northern Shan State during the first two months of 2025, according to reports.

Fighting has been reported in Nampheka town, Namtu Township, Monewee village in Moemit Township, and Mantong Township. However, there have been no confirmed reports of full-scale conflict between the two ethnic armed groups.

The clashes reportedly stem from KIA forces setting up checkpoints and collecting taxes in TNLA-controlled areas, according to TNLA spokesperson Lway Ye Oo.

"In recent times, we have witnessed frequent disputes and minor clashes between TNLA and KIA troops. In 2025, KIA has expanded its checkpoints and intensified tax collection in our controlled areas, especially in Mantong and Monewee. We have warned them against doing so," said Lway Ye Oo.

The TNLA has also demanded the removal of KIA forward checkpoints and district offices in the areas where clashes occurred in Mantong. TNLA troops raided the Lauk Kyae Gate and Raw Kyein Gate under the Southern Division 4 and Battalion 34 of the KIA in Mantong township on 23 February. After seizing weapons from these checkpoints, the TNLA later returned them to the KIA and requested the relocation of the checkpoints.

TNLA spokesperson Lway Ye Oo stated that if the KIA continues to expand its checkpoints and collect taxes in TNLA-controlled areas, the conflict is likely to escalate and the TNLA does not want that to happen.

"We have already sent letters to the central command to arrange a meeting in order to maintain the alliance relationship and prevent further clashes at the grassroots level. At the same time, we have also instructed our troops to handle this matter with restraint," Lway Ye Oo said.

The KIA also wants to preserve the alliance and seek a solution through central-level discussions. Negotiations are ongoing, KIA press officer Colonel Naw Bu told Mizzima.

"Right now, things have calmed down a little. But to prevent further conflicts, finding a solution through dialogue is the most important thing. We are open to discussions, but no meeting has taken place yet. Negotiations are still in progress," Colonel Naw Bu said.

The TNLA has designated Mantong and Namhsan townships as special administrative zones and is focusing on transportation and regional development. As a result, it does not allow other ethnic armed groups to establish bases in these areas, according to the KIA.

"They don't want checkpoints on the roads where taxes are collected, nor do they want administrative offices running a governing system. If we negotiate these issues, things will be fine. Once that is resolved, I believe the situation will be settled," Colonel Naw Bu said.

The ongoing conflict between the KIA and TNLA is rooted in territorial disputes. Since the country has yet to reach a stage where all parties can come together for dialogue and settle border demarcations, such clashes will likely continue to occur frequently, Myanmar political and military analyst U Thein Soe Naing said.

"The problem is difficult to resolve while the civil war is still ongoing. The armed groups that have fought in the conflict continue to treat the territories they have captured as their own. Only after nationwide peace is achieved can territorial boundaries be properly defined, while considering public influence and sentiment," U Thein Soe Naing said.

He also said that as long as territorial demarcation remains unresolved, such disputes will persist and be difficult to fully settle. However, he emphasized the urgent need for central committees from both the KIA and TNLA to meet and negotiate as soon as possible to prevent these unarmed confrontations from escalating into full-scale armed conflict.

"The main conflict arises from differences in territorial claims. The Kachin people want this conflict to end as soon as possible. Resolving the conflict primarily requires the authorities to negotiate, meet, and find a solution," Mr. Jacob, a spokesperson for Kachin Human Rights Watch (KHRW) said.

The Myanmar junta has been carrying out frequent airstrikes on townships and areas in northern Shan State and Kachin State that it has lost control of, leading to civilian casualties. During such times, local people rely on the ethnic armed groups in the region for survival. However, frequent clashes between these groups create insecurity among civilians, and there is growing concern that these conflicts could escalate into full-scale fighting, according to a local from northern Shan State who wished to remain anonymous.

The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) captured Namhsan, Mantong, Namhkam, Kutkai, Namtu, Mong Ngor, Monglon, Kyaukme, Nawngkhio, Mongmit, Hsipaw townships in northern Shan State, and Mogok township in Mandalay Region during Operation 1027. Meanwhile, since 2021, the KIA has taken control of Mabein and Nampheka in northern Shan State, as well as Sumprabum, Injangyang, Sadon, Chipwe, Hsawlaw, Phimaw, Panwa, Dawthponeyan, Sinbo, Myohla, Momauk, and Loije in Kachin State. The KIA is currently engaged in fighting to capture Bhamo.



Thin Lei Win

THE HUNGER GAMES

“Hunger and undernutrition in Myanmar is a political failure, and it’s a conscious political failure that’s devastating.” So says Thin Lei Win, speaking to the Insight Myanmar Podcast. This guest navigates two distinct, yet interconnected worlds: journalism and global food systems. This is her second appearance on the podcast. She previously joined the “Taste of Resilience” panel, which discussed intersections of food and culture in Myanmar.

Thin’s professional journey began within the strict traditions of journalism, where reporters were taught never to be the story themselves. Yet, as a co-founder of Kite Tails, a nonprofit storytelling project established in 2016, she and her co-founder, Kelly McNamara, sought to change this paradigm. They set out to provide a counter-narrative to mainstream Myanmar reporting, which often presented a monolithic view of the country’s politics and struggles. Instead, they encouraged local journalists to share personal narratives. Their objective was to highlight everyday experiences and to provide a contrast to the foreign media’s often simplistic depiction of Myanmar politics, the framing of which Thin characterizes as “the Lady [Aung San Suu Kyi] and the Generals.”

MEDIA IN MYANMAR

Thin describes how Myanmar’s press, which had been shaped initially by an oppressive environment, briefly experienced relative freedom during the transition years, before the 2021 military coup reinstated severe restrictions. During that time, newsrooms began moving beyond reporting just in reaction to events, and towards a kind of storytelling that provided context, personal stories, and long-term perspectives. However, the coup forced journalists into survival mode, struggling to provide coverage amid brutal repression; they no longer had the luxury of time or space for a more nuanced, creative approach. Many media outlets shut down entirely, and independent reporters found themselves financially and politically vulnerable. As for Kite Tales, they adapted by pivoting from documenting everyday life to publishing anonymous diaries from Myanmar journalists, chronicling the realities of their situation while shielding their identities.

The challenges now facing local media are immense. However, Thin remains hopeful that journalists can still foster more nuanced storytelling that reflects

Myanmar's diverse realities, arguing that despite the ongoing conflict, the media must nonetheless continue to strive for depth and accuracy to capture the lived experiences of people from all regions and backgrounds. To do so, this will require both determination and a firm commitment to journalistic integrity, critical thinking, and persistence in navigating the restrictions imposed by military control or other governing authorities. Thin emphasizes that independent journalism and a protected space for dissent are crucial for Myanmar's media to be able to play a meaningful role in the country's path toward democracy and accountability. She sees a free press as essential for fostering informed discussions and holding those in power accountable.

FOOD SHORTAGES

Transitioning to her second topic of expertise, food insecurity, Thin describes how Burma was once labeled the "Rice Bowl of Southeast Asia," because its fertile land, warm climate and British Colonial investment made it one of the world's leading exporters of rice.

Yet today, its population suffers from a variety of severe challenges regarding food. An interview that Thin conducted with a representative from the World Food Program gave her critical insight into this paradox: While the country does produce a significant surplus of crops like rice and pulses (legumes), the overreliance on rice as the primary dietary staple has led to widespread malnutrition, as many communities lack access to a more diverse range of nutrient-dense foods. She found that the necessary infrastructure and policies to ensure that all citizens have access to a well-rounded, nutritious diet have long been neglected. This crisis is particularly acute in remote regions such as Chin State and Rakhine, where food insecurity is compounded by geographic isolation, insufficient infrastructure, and deliberate government neglect.

There are also political complications. For one, Thin points out that Myanmar's rural farming communities have been marginalized. They continue to live in poverty, and successive governments have failed to address the infrastructure needs that would enable these communities to thrive. The military's Four Cuts strategy, aimed at weakening insurgencies by limiting resources, has deepened food disparities as well. In conflict zones, food has been weaponized as a means of exerting control over vulnerable populations.

The deliberate obstruction of aid, destruction of food supplies, and systematic underdevelopment of minority regions have perpetuated cycles of deprivation, making food insecurity a tool of oppression rather than an issue of mere scarcity. In sum, Thin argues forcefully that food insecurity in Myanmar is not merely an unfortunate consequence of a colonial legacy, economic hardship and agricultural mismanagement, but also a direct result of intentional, political decisions.

Regarding the country's food challenges, Thin is also deeply concerned about climate change. She has observed how the increasing number of extreme weather events, such as floods and droughts, disproportionately affect rural farmers, further exacerbating existing inequalities. She advocates for urgent policy changes to mitigate environmental degradation and promote sustainable farming practices, emphasizing that climate resilience is crucial to Myanmar's long-term stability and food supply. Recognizing these intersecting challenges, she continues to push for a holistic approach that addresses both political and environmental factors to ensure equitable food systems.



Thin Lei Win

CULTURAL SHIFTS

Another topic that Thin reflects on is how the post-coup resistance in Myanmar has led to unexpected cultural shifts. As they navigate the realities of their oppression, people have found themselves openly questioning topics once considered to be taboo, such as the role of the Buddhist clergy in politics and the legitimacy of Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership. This newfound willingness to criticize authority echoes broader discussions being held about Myanmar's ethnic diversity: historically, the majority Bamar population had ignored the grievances of ethnic minorities, but more recently, there has been an increased awareness and acknowledgment of their struggles. Thin also considers the role of religion in this evolving landscape, stating, "I still see a role that Buddhism can play, an important role, in rebuilding the country in the country's future. But I think we really need to reimagine how we practice it." In other words, while tradition remains influential, it must evolve to better serve the people.

Thin emphasizes that real change in Myanmar requires amplifying marginalized voices, fostering open discussions--even difficult ones--and implementing systemic reforms. She believes that progress is possible but warns against falling into complacency.

"If given a chance to rebuild, I think we can build a Myanmar that is so much stronger, caring, truly caring, and a force for good. But we need to be very careful not to fall back into what feels comfortable," adding, "We need a culture where we can discuss things and have a healthy debate without resorting to personal attacks." Thin remains optimistic that despite the immense challenges ahead, the determination and collective efforts of dedicated individuals can drive the country toward a more inclusive and equitable future.

Finally, reflecting on her role as a journalist in exile, Thin acknowledges the emotional burden of witnessing Myanmar's struggles from afar. "Survivor's guilt is a thing. And I think that propels a lot of us who are outside of the country, who have the privilege and freedom to speak, to do something, to keep doing it, because that feels like the least we could be doing." She sees this responsibility as a driving force, compelling those in the diaspora to continue advocating for Myanmar's future, ensuring that the stories of those who remain silenced are heard.

LISTEN TO THE PODCAST

Check out the Insight Myanmar Podcast here:

<https://player.captivate.fm/episode/94a55046-814e-48f3-9926-2bfdb5276ac9>



Thin Lei Win speaking to a farmer in Rwanda

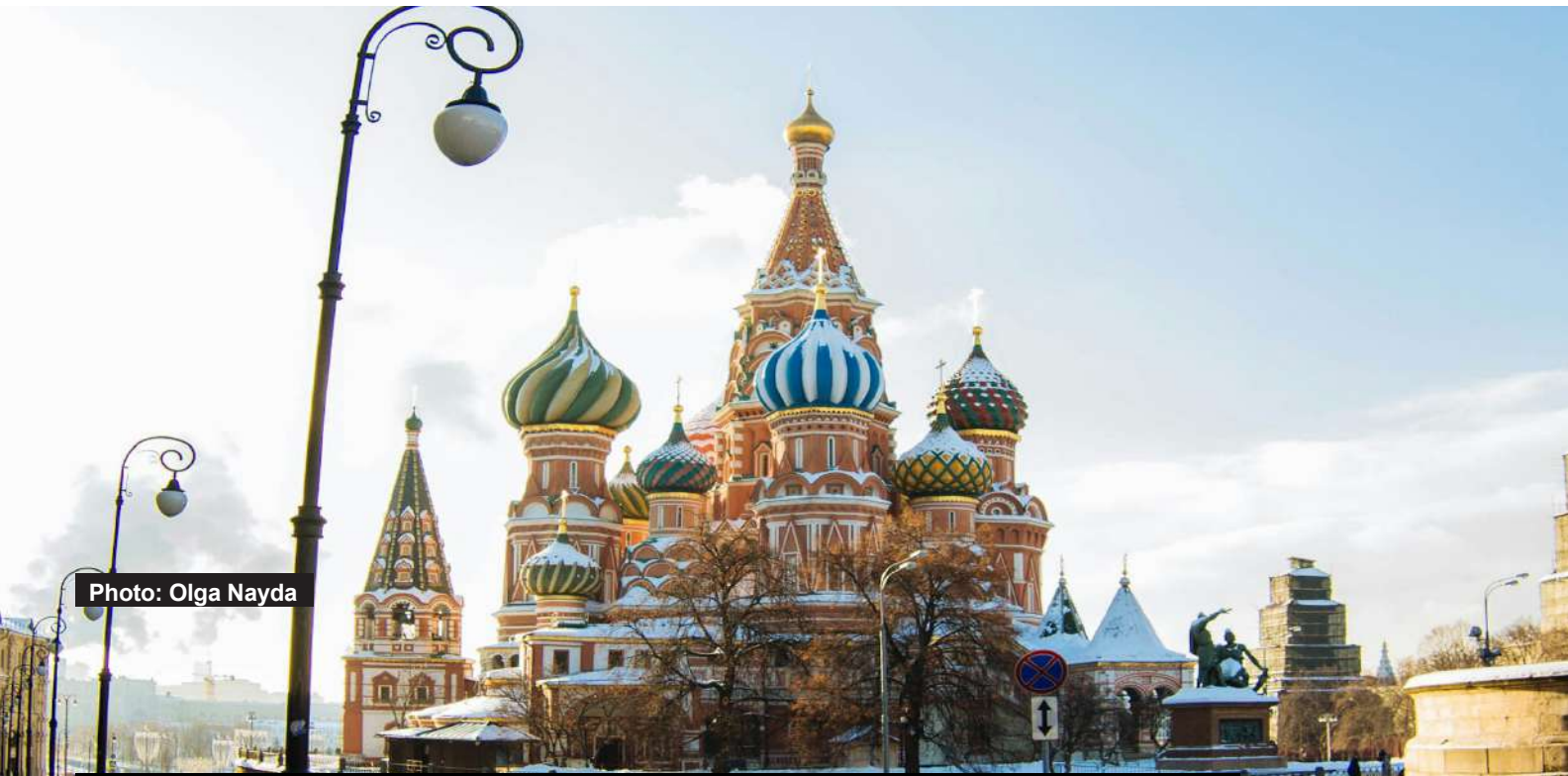


Photo: Olga Nayda

RUSSIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA DRAW CLOSER IN PURSUIT OF MULTIPOLAR POLITICAL, TRADE TIES

Russian President Vladimir Putin has underlined his goal to increase engagement with Southeast Asia by recently dispatching a top aide to boost ties with the region towards a common goal for a more multilateral world order, analysts told BenarNews.

Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu's talks with Indonesia and Malaysia last week were also in line with the desire of all three countries to diversify markets and power centers beyond the Washington and Beijing binary, said Emil Avdaliani, an international relations expert at the European University in Tbilisi, Georgia.

"Russia regards Southeast Asia as one of the pillars in the emerging multipolar world order. This means Moscow strives to foster political and economic ties with this vibrant geopolitical space," Avdaliani told BenarNews.

Western sanctions on Russia after it invaded Ukraine "served as a major driver to look eastward," he said.

"Russia understands that Southeast Asia has been in a difficult position after its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Moscow has been careful not to impose its vision on the region," Avdaliani added.

"Russia [also] understands that Southeast Asia pursues its own interests, which implies [they follow a] multi-vector foreign policy, balancing among big actors and not choosing any sides."

Southeast Asia is by no means homogenous, which means that countries such as staunch U.S. ally the Philippines, and Singapore, which sanctioned Moscow, may balk at an expanded Russian footprint.

Russia's renewed Southeast Asia engagement may also be uncomfortable for Manila because of Moscow's relatively new partnership with Beijing, which many call "an alliance of convenience."

For the Philippines, China is a thorn in the side because of its increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea, where both countries have contending

territorial claims.

However, in a fractured – and fractious – geopolitical world order, nations firmly allied with Washington or Beijing may be realizing that they need to be self-reliant in safeguarding their interests.

For instance, Manila's envoy to Washington, Jose Manuel Romualdez, told reporters earlier this week that countries need "to be always ready ... to put up their own resources" to do what is best for themselves.

Southeast Asia's nations overall, though, have for long been seen as following expedient foreign policies, which is a draw for Russia, according to analyst Muhammad Waffaa Kharisma.

"Southeast Asian countries are less constrained by transatlantic or European political decisions," the researcher at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta told BenarNews.

"Most developing countries here can be quite pragmatic."

Trade data reflects that pragmatism.

After a brief blip following Western sanctions imposed on Moscow after February 2022, Southeast Asia's trade with Russia has been on the upswing.

Russia-ASEAN trade increased 10% to U.S. \$17 billion in the January-September 2024 period, Moscow-owned news agency Sputnik cited a Russian minister as saying in November.

Trade between the two sides for the whole of 2023 totaled \$15.8 billion, according to ASEAN data.

ASEAN member-states Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam, all of which profess non-alignment, increased trade with Russia especially in 2024.

The Indonesian government struck a defiant note when asked about a deepening of ties with Russia.

As long as the association was mutually beneficial and "respectful," there was no reason not to expand relations, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman, Rolliansyah Soemirat, said.

"Why not cooperate with Russia?" he told BenarNews.

"Indonesia is not intimidated by any country as long as our national interests are upheld."

Alexey Gruzdev, Russia's minister of industry and trade, said the increase occurred because Russian businesses had "successfully adapted" to Western sanctions, Sputnik reported in November.

Analysts said there was more to it than businesses adapting.

Russia has capitalized on growing anti-West sentiment, particularly over the conflict in Gaza, to bolster its image in Southeast Asia, said Radityo Dharmaputra, a Europe and Eurasia expert at Indonesia's Airlangga University.

Russia's support for the Palestinian people is in line with Muslim-majority nations Indonesia and Malaysia, which have condemned what they say has been U.S. ally Israel's disproportionate response to the Oct. 7, 2023, attack by Hamas militants.

"This narrative has been a core part of Russia's strategy," Radityo said.

"By promoting an anti-West ... message, Russia has effectively won support, particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia."

'Diversifying supply chains'

Additionally, some Southeast Asian nations proactively want to access alternate markets, which has also led to an uptick in trade with Russia, said Julia Roknifard, an international relations expert in Kuala Lumpur.

"It is about diversifying the supply chains away from the sole focus on the largest trade partners," Roknifard, senior lecturer at the School of Law and Governance at Taylor's University, told BenarNews.

"Russia, on the other hand, is interested in the products from Malaysia's semiconductor industry."

Following warnings by new U.S. President Donald Trump to tax imports, with a focus on countries America has a trade deficit with – especially Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia – a new market would help ease a potential trade slowdown in Southeast Asia.

The BRICS factor

Another Russian strategy to court Southeast Asia has been to market BRICS, a bloc of emerging economies it co-founded in 2006, as a pathway to creating a multipolar world.

BRICS is named after its founders Brazil, Russia, India and China, as well as South Africa, which joined in 2010.

Increasing cooperation within the BRICS platform was a priority of Moscow's foreign policy, TASS quoted Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov as saying in April 2023.

During Russia's chairmanship last year, BRICS announced that ASEAN members Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam would become its partner nations.

Indonesia then formally joined the grouping as a member in January, and expressed "gratitude to Russia" for facilitating its membership.

A former Malaysian foreign minister, Syed Hamid Albar, said more ASEAN cooperation with BRICS was needed to "hedge" Southeast Asian nations' relationship with major powers in an ever-shifting world order.

"Anyway, Russia is providing space for small and big nations to move forward from hegemony and

operate under a new world order and multilateralism," he told BenarNews.

US policy shift on Ukraine

Meanwhile, Washington reversing its adversarial stance towards Moscow over Ukraine would have implications across the world, including in Southeast Asia, analysts said.

Chester Cabalza, a security expert, spoke about the possible ramifications of this change in relation to the Philippines. Manila and Washington are bound by a longstanding mutual defense treaty.

"U.S. defense officials are still adamant on saving their defense ties with the Philippines," Cabalza, who heads a Manila think-tank, International Development and Security Cooperation, told BenarNews.

Still, Washington's shift has "gently reminded Manila to practice self-reliance," he added.

Washington's Ukraine pivot may also aid the expansion of Southeast Asia's ties with Russia, indicated Radityo Dharmaputra, a Europe-Eurasia expert from Airlangga University

"There now appears to be a sense of relief in Southeast Asia regarding U.S.-Russia relations," Radityo, head of the university's Centre for European and Eurasian Studies, said to BenarNews.

"These nations seem to feel reassured that ties between Washington and Moscow have improved, allowing them to resume trade and diplomatic engagement."

Iman Muttaqin Yusof in Kuala Lumpur, Tria Dianti in Jakarta, and Jason Gutierrez in Manila contributed to this report. BenarNews is an online news outlet affiliated with Radio Free Asia.

Courtesy of Radio Free Asia



Family members transporting scrap material to sell in China. Photo: AFP

STRUGGLES AND DESPAIR ACROSS SOCIAL CLASSES IN CHINA

SUN LEE

China's economic woes are pushing people to seek refuge in unusual places. With bans on living under bridges, many find shelter in 24-hour KFCs and public restrooms. Social classes across the spectrum are struggling and pessimistic about the future. A media report highlights how KFC, open around the clock, becomes a night refuge, not a dining spot. Staff dim lights, offering warmth and politeness to homeless individuals, without forcing them to leave, regardless of whether they order food.

Local media highlighted the harsh reality of Guangzhou's food delivery workers, forced to sleep under freezing bridges due to unaffordable living costs. High rents drive them to seek refuge outside, racing to deliver food by day and resting under bridges by night. Despite enduring hardships to support their families, authorities cleared the areas following media attention, exacerbating their plight. Their perseverance amid adversity remains striking.

An overseas observer noted that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) tends to eliminate issues entirely, often by removing the source. Others mentioned that tents under bridges were dismantled similarly to the forcible quarantine of COVID-positive residents. In Guangzhou, rental costs exceed 1,000 Yuan, while office job salaries are slightly above 3,000 Yuan monthly.

China's streets are filled with countless homeless and disabled individuals who often vanish after being arrested. Economic decline has hit migrant workers hard, but they are not alone in their struggle. Across the nation, middle-aged and young urban residents battle to survive. Many ex-middle-class citizens, facing business failures or job losses, have turned to food delivery or ride-hailing jobs. With rising youth unemployment, even university graduates enter these tough industries, intensifying competition amidst bleak job prospects. Despair pervades online communities.

In Beijing, the first half of 2024 saw a dramatic 49.7% increase in food delivery workers compared to the same period in 2023. However, restaurant industry profits dropped by nearly 90%. A local resident noted that authorities in Jiangsu welded steel bars onto benches to prevent workers from sleeping overnight, under the pretext of maintaining the city's appearance. Similar measures have been implemented nationwide, seemingly aiming to leave the homeless without any place to sleep.

It was noted that if individuals were financially stable and had housing, they wouldn't choose to endure harsh conditions by sleeping on benches or under bridges, which only the most desperate members of society do. Chinese citizens are viewed as lacking human rights, with CCP officials prioritizing control over assistance. The installation of barriers, such as concrete spikes and welded benches, aims to prevent prolonged stays, appearing to enforce city cleanliness and order while treating ordinary people as criminals.

There is a pervasive sense of uncertainty and despair about the future, overshadowing even the fear of homelessness. As China's economy declines, life becomes increasingly difficult, even for those with shelter. Hope seems distant. Shopping malls are often empty, and many small business owners have shut down, unsure of their next steps. One business owner considers himself fortunate but acknowledges that many others may not survive the year due to the lack of money in the market.

While ordinary people struggle, the CCP elite continue to indulge in extravagance. Every year, Beijing hosts lavish banquets, even as the government claims that the party must set an example by living frugally and ensuring a better life for the people. Yet, while the public is forbidden from even sleeping under bridges, the CCP is constructing luxury retirement resorts for its former high-ranking officials, funded entirely by taxpayer money.

By October 2023, the Ministry of Civil Affairs reported over 66 million low-income individuals, or 4.7% of China's population, according to the national dynamic monitoring system. Contrastingly, in May 2020, then-Premier Li Keqiang revealed that 600 million people earned 1,000 Yuan (around \$137 USD) or less monthly, insufficient for mid-sized city apartment rent. Nevertheless, Chinese leader Xi Jinping declared a

complete victory over poverty in early 2021, highlighting the disparity between official statements and realities.

A university professor estimated that approximately 65% of China's population hasn't reached the middle-income level, translating to about 900 million low-income individuals. The CCP established a national low-income monitoring system in 2021. However, recent revelations of widespread fraud and corruption within the welfare system have surfaced, exposing that many affluent individuals are deceitfully claiming low-income benefits. These disclosures highlight significant inefficiencies and abuses in the system meant to support those in genuine need.

An economist raised concerns about whether the financial aid would truly reach those in desperate need. Another individual bluntly asserted that the policies' purpose isn't to help people but to maintain stability by preventing the unemployed, disillusioned, and desperate from uniting against the government.

In response to a recent increase in random attacks on people, Chinese leader Xi has mandated more stringent risk prevention measures throughout China, heightening surveillance on the unemployed, the homeless, and those facing financial hardships. According to various experts, the CCP's initial reaction to widespread incidents tends to be forceful suppression, which only serves to exacerbate social tensions.

Sun Lee is the pseudonym for a writer who covers Asia and geopolitical trends.



SINGAPORE CONSIDERS CANING AS SCAM CASES SURGE

Singapore on Tuesday said it would consider caning scammers as the city-state doubles down on swindling syndicates following record high scam losses.

Police figures show that at least Sg\$1.1 billion (\$817 million) was lost through scams in 2024 -- 70 percent more than the previous year.

"We will consider...caning to be prescribed for certain scam-related offences, recognising the serious harm they can cause," said Minister of State for Home Affairs and Social and Family Development Sun Xueling.

Although several protective measures are already in place in the banking industry, scammers have upgraded their playbook.

"They have started asking victims to convert their money to cryptocurrencies prior to performing the transfers, thereby evading our banking safeguards," she said, adding that crypto-related cases accounted for nearly 25 percent of all scam losses.

She advised Singaporeans "to steer clear of cryptocurrencies."

Sun said the number of reported scams occurring via messaging platform Telegram, which provides anonymity to users, almost doubled in 2024.

She urged Telegram to adopt stronger verification

measures, adding that the government was exploring "legislative levers to ensure compliance."

In recent years, Singaporean authorities have intensified public education efforts against scamming, including setting up a national scam hotline.

In 2020, the government introduced the "ScamShield" app which allows users to check suspicious calls, websites and messages.

Last year, then-premier Lee Hsien Loong told local media he had been scammed as an item he ordered online never arrived, highlighting how the issue affected all sectors of society.

Cyberscam centres -- which lure foreigners in to work in scam hothouses swindling people with online romance and crypto investment cons -- have proliferated across Southeast Asia in recent years.

The United Nations estimates that up to 120,000 people, many of them Chinese, could be working in Myanmar's many scam compounds.

Last month, hundreds of Chinese nationals were sent home from Myanmar to their country via Thailand and there are plans to repatriate thousands more stranded in camps at the Thai-Myanmar border, part of a crackdown on transnational crime.

AFP



THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

Why did Jay leave a comfortable life in Australia to join the resistance against the Burmese military in Karenni state? "I would just say it's the crimes against the children," Jay gives as a way of a response. "I have a child myself, and we're extremely lucky to be in a Western country where my child can grow up relatively safe. Seeing the reels and videos about children being murdered pulled on my heartstrings, big time. That was the driving factor of me wanting to do something."

Jay's involvement in Myanmar resistance stems from a profound sense of humanity and duty. Originally trained in combat trauma in the Australian Army, Jay had minimal exposure to Southeast Asia prior to his mission in Myanmar, although had been involved in some humanitarian missions elsewhere in Asia. His path to becoming deeply involved with Myanmar's struggle began with a chance encounter in social media, where he was exposed to the atrocities committed by the military junta. Seeing images of children murdered and reading about families torn apart deeply resonated with him, especially as a parent himself. This emotional connection fueled his commitment to not only learn about the crisis, but to take active measures to support the resistance.

Jay's initial connection with the Burmese resistance developed through interactions with the Karenni diaspora in Australia, through local charity events and organizations. Jay described being profoundly moved by their resilience, kindness, and openness, traits reminiscent of communities he had encountered in

Papua New Guinea during his earlier humanitarian work. The Karenni community welcomed him and his expertise, and eventually they discussed the possibility of him proceeding on the ground in Myanmar to help where it was most needed.

Jay smuggled himself into Karenni State via a journey fraught with logistical, physical, and emotional challenges. He had prepared for the trip by as best he could; while his base level of fitness was still more than adequate from his army days, he undertook rigorous physical training in order to be able to navigate the unforgiving hilly terrain.

In the end, however, he realized that nothing could have fully prepared him for the stark realities of the conflict zone; again, although he had army training in combat trauma, he had never actually been in a combat situation. Right away, Jay witnessed the devastating consequences of the junta's military tactics; almost minutes after he crossed the border his group was hit with mortar fire! Moreover, the resistance forces he joined, though determined and resourceful, were woefully under-equipped. The medical facilities consisted of little more than a hut with an oxygen tank. Despite this, local medics demonstrated remarkable resilience, often improvising solutions with minimal resources. One of the first experiences that struck Jay was the sight of a makeshift clinic and the immense pride of a head medic in its limited supplies—a stark contrast to what Jay was accustomed to in Australia.

In chillingly descriptive language, Jay describes harrowing moments amid combat and the carnage. He was present during multiple crises, including one where a vehicle carrying several Karenni fighters struck an anti-tank mine. The explosion killed two instantly, and severely injured others; one victim's leg had been almost entirely severed. Jay and the local medics worked tirelessly to stabilize the wounded, often with inadequate instruments and supplies. But despite the team's best efforts, one soldier succumbed to his injuries during transport.

CATCH THE PODCAST

Read more or listen to the Insight Myanmar Podcast here:

<https://insightmyanmar.org/complete-shows/2025/2/18/episode-315-the-devil-you-know>



Min Aung Hlaing shows finger after voting in the 2020 election. Photo: AFP

MYANMAR JUNTA'S ANNOUNCEMENT OF ELECTIONS 'DELUSIONAL' SAYS HRW

NGOs and commentators claim the Myanmar junta's plans cannot be considered as credible.

Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing has announced plans to hold general elections between December 2025 and January 2026, claiming 53 political parties have registered to participate, according to reports.

The announcement came while visiting Belarus, where he also invited Belarusian observers to monitor the proceedings.

The proposed vote would be the first since the Myanmar military seized power in February 2021, overthrowing the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi, who remains imprisoned with a 27-year sentence. Her National League for Democracy party, which won landslide victories in 2015 and 2020, has been forcibly dissolved by the junta.

Human Rights Watch dismissed the announcement as "delusional," noting that any credible election would require ending violence, releasing political prisoners, and allowing all parties to participate. Critics widely view the planned vote as a sham designed to legitimize military rule through proxy political parties.

The junta controls only about half the country after suffering significant losses to resistance forces and ethnic armed groups. The planned elections would initially cover fewer than half of Myanmar's 330 townships.

The military's brutal crackdown since the coup has resulted in at least 6,231 civilian deaths according to UN reports, including over 1,800 women and children.

Meanwhile, China and some Southeast Asian neighbours have offered support for the planned election, with Beijing offering assistance in organizing the elections.



Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand.
Photo: Supplied

SOCIAL MEDIA USERS CONDEMN JUNTA'S FOREIGN WORKER BAN

Myanmar social media erupted with criticism after news broke that the military junta suspended overseas work permits for unskilled labourers. Facebook users called the policy "heartbreaking" and accused junta leader Min Aung Hlaing of "plotting new ways to harm the people."

According to a source at the Ministry of Labour in Naypyidaw, all foreign worker deployments were temporarily halted on February 14. The ministry now only approves skilled workers and Government to Government (G2G) arrangements after careful screening. Most critically, the issuance of Overseas Worker Identification Cards (OWIC) for unskilled workers remains suspended.

The ministry source said that the ministry is still approving OWICs for skilled workers and those under G2G programmes, but permissions for unskilled workers remain suspended.

The main issue is that Myanmar workers abroad aren't fully contributing tax revenue, and very few are

returning home, creating labour shortages and human resource losses, said the ministry source.

The restrictions began after Min Aung Hlaing appointed Chit Swe as Labour Minister on January 31. Currently, only skilled workers bound for Japan and Russia, plus G2G workers heading to Laos, receive approval, according to reports.

"I love my country, but the (Myanmar) military's actions make me feel like I'll have to live in a foreign country as a foreigner forever," wrote a Facebook user.

Another commented, "The 2014 census showed 68 percent of Myanmar's population was under 35. We could have become an Asian tiger with our human resources."

A third user simply said, "Min Aung Hlaing spends each day plotting new ways to harm the citizens."

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.