

STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS & SANCTIONS IN MYANMAR

AUGUST 2023 REPORT

Summary. This report reviews the August 2023 developments relating to human rights in Myanmar.

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I. Coup, Crackdown on Protests and Civilian Resistance

Former State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi was pardoned of five out of the 19 charges that were brought against her by the military government, reducing her prison sentence from 33 years to 27 years.¹ Aung San Suu Kyi is still in the process of appealing the remaining charges against her. Former President Win Myint's prison sentence also received a four year reduction after two of his charges were pardoned.² The Aung San Suu Kyi pardon was announced around a week after she was moved from prison to house arrest³ and on the same day that more than 7,000 prisoners, some of which were political prisoners, were released.⁴ These events were timed to mark Dhamma Cakka Day or Waso Full Moon Day, which is a Buddhist religious holiday.⁵ In addition, more than 500 prisoners, 40 of whom were political prisoners, were released from five prisons in Bego region.⁶ Most of the prisoners reportedly were towards the end of their sentences and only had six months or less left of their sentences to serve.⁷

On July 31, the military regime extended the country's state of emergency six more months,⁸ citing the need to restore stability in the midst of resistance against the military government.⁹ A couple of days later, the State Administration Council announced a shuffle in cabinet positions.¹⁰ The military has also been facing changes in their organization due to an increase in desertions. According to the National Unity Government ("NUG"), desertions from the Myanmar military have risen over the past few months as the military increases the frequency of their attacks and village raids against resistance groups.¹¹ Nearly 500 desertions from the army took place over the past four months, and more than 50 soldiers have deserted their posts since early August alone.¹²

The NUG and its advisory body, the National Unity Consultative Counsel, issued a joint statement laying out the "common position" of anti-regime organizations and stressed that the ultimate goal of their fight against the junta is not only regime change but also the establishment of a federal union.¹³ "To achieve the ultimate goal [building a federal union], we strongly believe that it's necessary not only to wipe out the military dictatorship but the military's involvement in the country's politics and its tendency to stage coups," it said.¹⁴

According to the NUG, the military regime has committed at least 144 massacres over the past two years and killed 1,595 civilians around the country.¹⁵ The NUG's Ministry of Human Rights reported evidence that the junta committed 11 massacres of five or more people in 2021, 85 massacres in 2022, and 48 massacres between January and July of this year.¹⁶ The resistance stronghold of Sagaing Region has experienced the highest death toll, suffering 90 massacres in which a total of 920 civilians were killed over the two and a half years.¹⁷

The NUG also claims that 3,012 junta soldiers were killed and 4,021 wounded during clashes with its armed wings and ethnic rebel allies in the first half of 2023.¹⁸ A total of 935 clashes were reported between junta forces and the NUG's People's Defense Forces ("PDFs") and allied ethnic armed organizations from January to June, said the NUG's Defense Ministry.¹⁹ The clashes saw PDF groups and allied ethnic armed forces seize more than 30 junta bases, including 10 in Kayah State, six in Sagaing Region, and 19 in the lower part of the country.²⁰ Resistance groups also seized 15 police stations and 10 outposts of the junta's border guard forces, as well as 14 bases of the pro-junta Pyu Saw Htee militia.²¹ The Defense Ministry

did not reveal resistance casualties, but numerous resistance fighters were also reported killed during clashes and regime raids over the same period.²²

According to Data for Myanmar, almost 75,000 homes have been incinerated in six regions and seven states by junta forces and affiliated militias since the February 2021 coup.²³ Junta forces have been using arson attacks to deter and retaliate against those who oppose military rule, with their frequency highest in resistance strongholds.²⁴ Arson attacks accelerated rapidly in the second year after the coup, according to figures provided by Data for Myanmar.²⁵ Junta forces torched at least 2,111 homes in 2021 and 46,905 in 2022, the group said.²⁶ And the group reports that as of the end of July 2023, junta forces have torched 25,858 homes so far this year.²⁷ Sagaing Region has been hardest hit. Rural and urban areas of the region accounted for 77% of all homes torched since the coup.²⁸

At least 51 military forces were killed in clashes that took place from August 24-27 in Magway and Sagaing Regions and Chin, Shan and Kayin States.²⁹ According to the Kyaukse District PDF Battalion 1, 30 military regime forces were killed on August 26 in Ngwe Din village, Ayadaw Township, Sagaing Region.³⁰ Another 50 or so soldiers were killed in the following three days, August 28-30, in clashes in Chin and Shan States and Magway and Sagaing Regions.³¹ In late August, more than 10,000 people across ten villages fled their homes in Ye-U Township due to ongoing raids and attacks in the area.³²

Military forces continue to raid and attack villages across Sagaing Region. At least four civilians were injured and 8,000 residents were displaced following a military raid in Khin-U Township on August 8.³³ From August 12 to 13, a column of around 70 troops raided a village in Budalin Township, burning down a clinic and around 40 residences.³⁴ On August 14, military troops raided a village in Myinmu Township, during which they shot and killed four internally displaced people who were seeking refuge in that area.³⁵ From August 22 to 26, a column of around 100 soldiers raided multiple villages near the border between Sagaing and Wetlet Townships.³⁶ Nine people, including five teenagers or young adults who were members of the area's PDF, were killed.³⁷ They also attacked a monastery in Kyi Kan village, where they killed four people, arrested six, and stole around 51,500,000 kyats from the 30 or so people who had sought refuge at the monastery at that time.³⁸

The NUG has blacklisted 49 government officials in Yangon Region, including former military personnel transferred to the civil service and deputy director generals and directors of the Yangon City Development Committee, for collaborating with the junta to persecute striking civil servants.³⁹ The 49 personnel on the blacklist have threatened striking civil servants, filed lawsuits against them or dismissed them from their posts, the announcement said, adding that they had also implemented all junta plans they were told to execute in Yangon Region.⁴⁰

A prominent pro-democracy activist, Min Ko Naing, is calling on people within and outside Myanmar to open a new front in the war against Myanmar's junta by boycotting eight products produced by companies it controls, including beer, rum and cigarette products.⁴¹ The activist said that the boycott will help cut off funding to the regime.⁴² "The time has come for us to launch a war on the financial and economic [front] at the highest level, which will cut off all sources of income of the terrorist [junta]," he said.⁴³

II. Political Developments

A. **Rohingya Refugee Crisis**

At least 17 people drowned when a boat carrying Rohingya refugees fleeing Myanmar's Rakhine State broke up at sea during the week of August 6.⁴⁴ Byar La, a rescuer from the Shwe Yaung Metta Foundation in the town of Sittwe, said more than 50 people were thought to be on the boat heading for Malaysia when it got into trouble in heavy seas on August 6.⁴⁵ "We found 17 dead bodies... as of [August 9]," he told *AFP*.⁴⁶ Rescuers are still trying to find those unaccounted for, he said, although the exact number on board is not known.⁴⁷ More than 3,500 Rohingya in 39 vessels attempted crossings of the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal in 2022, up from 700 the previous year, according to the United Nations refugee agency's January data.⁴⁸ At least 348 Rohingya died or went missing at sea last year, the agency said, calling for a regional response to stop further drownings.⁴⁹

Myanmar's junta has strongly rejected international remarks on the sixth anniversary of the Rohingya genocide, slamming them as "politically motivated" statements that failed to recognize the root cause and context of the violence.⁵⁰ The junta instead blamed the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army ("ARSA") for triggering the violence and insisted that the military's actions accorded with rules of engagement and were taken to restore peace in response to ARSA's attacks on police outposts and a regimental headquarters.⁵¹ Countries including the UK and U.S. joined international organizations and local civil society groups in releasing statements on the 2017 exodus of more than 730,000 Rohingya forced out of Rakhine State into Bangladesh by the Myanmar military's so-called 'clearance operations.'⁵² The statements reaffirmed solidarity with the Rohingya community in the pursuit of justice and accountability for victims and survivors.⁵³ United Nations human rights chief Volker Türk also reiterated the call for accountability and justice for hundreds of thousands of Rohingya driven from their homes in 2017, in what has been described as "textbook" ethnic cleansing.⁵⁴

ARSA, which is active on the border with Bangladesh in Rakhine State, abducted two Muslims in Maungdaw Township, western Myanmar, on August 12.⁵⁵ A Maungdaw town resident said, "We all know that ARSA abducted the men. Muslim villagers said that it was ARSA that abducted them. We guess the abduction was motivated by money. Maybe they refused to pay extortion money."⁵⁶ Villagers said the two abductees were taken into the Mayu mountains and junta forces have not looked for them.⁵⁷

Myanmar authorities arrested nearly 150 Rohingya suspected of attempting to flee the country because they are not considered citizens and require permission to travel.⁵⁸ The 127 Rohingya men and 18 women were arrested on August 11 near the village of Waekhami in southern Mon State.⁵⁹ "They have been detained since then and under investigation according to the immigration law," Aung Myat Kyaw Sein, spokesperson for the Mon State Administration Council, told *AFP*.⁶⁰

On August 25, several thousand Rohingya gathered at camps in Cox's Bazar to demand justice for the August 2017 Myanmar military crackdown as well as recognition of their rights and sustainable and dignified repatriation.⁶¹ "We want our justice and citizenship rights and to be repatriated to our original land," said Sayed Ullah of the Rohingya representative committee.⁶²

B. Corruption

The military has appointed at least 20 of its officers to high-ranking positions at Myanmar Economic Bank (MEB) this year, and they were put in charge of overseeing branches in at least five regions and two states in July.⁶³ Five majors were appointed as managers and 15 captains were also appointed as assistant managers at MEB's headquarters.⁶⁴

C. International Community / Sanctions

Myanmar will not assume the rotation chair position of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations ("ASEAN") due to the ongoing conflict.⁶⁵ Instead, the Philippines will hold the rotating chair position this year, with Myanmar slated to assume the role next year.⁶⁶

Myanmar's home affairs minister, Lieutenant-General Yar Pyae, attended the 17th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime in Indonesia.⁶⁷ ASEAN has barred the junta from attending top-level ASEAN summits and foreign ministers meetings after it failed to implement the regional bloc's peace plan for Myanmar, known as the Five-Point Consensus, which includes an immediate end to violence in the country.⁶⁸

On August 23, the United Nations ("UN") Security Council condemned the Myanmar junta for its "unrelenting violence" across Myanmar.⁶⁹ "The last months have seen unrelenting violence across Myanmar. We strongly condemn the killing of civilians and in particular the continued use of airstrikes, and reaffirm the need to respect international law and protect civilians," the statement reads.⁷⁰ "More than two and a half years since the state of emergency imposed by the military in Myanmar on February 1, 2021, we remain deeply concerned at the situation in Myanmar and its impact on the people of Myanmar," the Security Council members said.⁷¹ China and Russia did not sign the joint statement.⁷²

UN investigators announced in early August that they had gathered strong evidence of surging war crimes in Myanmar, including mass executions and sexual violence. The UN said it has evidence that the junta and junta-affiliated militias are "committing increasingly frequent and brazen war crimes."⁷³

The UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator met with junta generals in Myanmar in mid-August, reportedly discussing the severe humanitarian aid restrictions imposed by the junta.⁷⁴ In response to the meeting, the international community expressed shock and concern, with the former U.S. Ambassador to Myanmar Scot Marciel posting "What on earth is the UN thinking?" on social media.⁷⁵ Critics have also questioned why the UN is not delivering aid through the NUG instead of through the junta.⁷⁶

A U.S. State Department spokesman said that the U.S. is "deeply concerned" by the decision to extend Myanmar's state of emergency for six months.⁷⁷ The extension will delay the elections the military had pledged to hold in August as it battles anti-coup fighters across the country.⁷⁸

The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control expanded sanctions on Myanmar by placing Khin Phyu Win and Zaw Min Tun and three companies that supply jet fuel to the regime's military on its Specially Designated Nationals List, which prohibits U.S. nationals and companies from doing business with them.⁷⁹ The three companies - P.E.I. Energy Pte Ltd, Peia Pte Ltd and Shoon Energy Pte Ltd. - are linked to the two sanctioned individuals.⁸⁰

Sonali Bank, a Bangladeshi state-owned bank, froze the accounts of the Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank and the Myanmar Investment and Commercial Bank after the United States embassy in Bangladesh sent a letter to the Bangladeshi government requesting its compliance with U.S. sanctions.⁸¹ The U.S. imposed sanctions on both Myanmar banks in June 2023.⁸² The United States has also closed the window for businesses to wind down all transactions with the banks; a U.S. Department of State spokesman said that the United States will continue to monitor compliance and scrutinize the two banks' transactions.⁸³

Singapore's United Overseas Bank, which is known as the offshore bank of choice for junta generals, announced that it will cut off all ties with Myanmar banks by September 1, restricting all incoming and outgoing payments to and from Myanmar.⁸⁴ This restriction is seen as a response to pressure from the United States on Singapore to curb offshore banking and financial support for the junta regime.⁸⁵ The advocacy group Justine for Myanmar also called on the Singaporean government to expel junta affiliates from Singapore and do more to stop Singaporean businesses from providing the junta with funds, arms and military equipment.⁸⁶ Further, more than 200 civil society organizations jointly called on Singapore to take concrete action to block the Myanmar junta's access to arms, dual-use goods, technology and funds.⁸⁷

Shwe Byain Phyu Oil and Gas Co Ltd, a subsidiary of Shwe Byain Phyu ("SBP") – the major supplier of fuel to the Myanmar military – was liquidated on August 10 under Myanmar's Insolvency Law.⁸⁸ Owned by Thein Win Zaw, SBP has interests in gas stations, gem mining, telecoms and logging and it is one of the regime's top taxpayers.⁸⁹ Many of Thein Win Zaw's businesses have been hit by sanctions imposed by European Union, the United Kingdom and the United States and some observers have suggested that Shwe Byain Phyu Oil & Gas was liquidated to avoid further sanctions and that it may resume operations under another name.⁹⁰

Myanmar's junta leader Min Aung Hlaing and Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, who also seized power in a coup, exchanged messages on August 24 to mark 75 years of diplomatic ties.⁹¹ The Thai ex-general reaffirmed Thailand's support for Myanmar's pursuit of a peaceful and prosperous democratic federal union.⁹²

Myanmar's junta expelled East Timor's top diplomat in the country over a meeting with the NUG, which the junta has designated as a terror organization.⁹³ East Timor condemned the expulsion order, reiterating in a statement "the importance of supporting all efforts for the return of democratic order in Myanmar."⁹⁴ East Timor Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao has said that the country would reconsider its goal of joining ASEAN if the bloc is unable to find a resolution to the conflict in Myanmar.⁹⁵

III. Civil and Political Rights

A. Freedom of Speech, Assembly and Association

Myanmar's military regime cut six years from detained leader Aung San Suu Kyi's 33-year combined sentence as part of a general amnesty.⁹⁶ The amnesty, marking an important Buddhist religious day, Dhamma Cakka Day, also saw a four-year reduction in the sentence of ousted President Win Myint of the National League for Democracy ("NLD") government, which was toppled by the military coup in 2021.⁹⁷ The regime announced pardons for Aung San Suu Kyi in five criminal cases filed against her in 2021 for alleged offenses including incitement and violations of the disaster management, telecommunications and export-import laws.⁹⁸ She has been convicted in a total of 19 cases.⁹⁹ The 78-year-old continues to serve a combined 27-year sentence from the remaining 14 cases.¹⁰⁰ Win Myint was pardoned in two cases—incitement and breaching the disaster management law—and continues to serve the sentences handed down in six others.¹⁰¹ Kyaw Zaw, a spokesperson for the NUG said that the pardons were nothing more than "cosmetic" and called for the unconditional release of Aung San Suu Kyi, Win Myint and all political prisoners.¹⁰²

In addition to the reduction in sentences for Aung San Suu Kyi and Win Myint, more than 120 political prisoners were among the 7,749 inmates freed in the general amnesty, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners ("AAPP").¹⁰³ However, those granted amnesty were only a tiny fraction of the thousands of pro-democracy supporters detained by the military regime since the February 2021 coup.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, the AAPP said that the released political prisoners had only months left to serve on their sentences.¹⁰⁵

According to a spokesperson for the Political Prisoners Network-Myanmar, 31 political prisoners, including 15 women, were beaten and placed in solitary confinement in Bago Region's Tharyarwaddy Prison for commemorating Martyrs' Day.¹⁰⁶ As of July 17, seventeen of the political prisoners remained in solitary confinement.¹⁰⁷

A jailed doctor was killed and another political prisoner was critically injured when a Myanmar junta convoy reportedly hit two mines during a transfer from Monywa Prison on August 15.¹⁰⁸ More than 100 political prisoners were being taken from Monywa to Myingyan and Obo prisons in five trucks when their trucks hit a mine on the Mandalay-Monywa highway.¹⁰⁹ "We are sad about the loss. No matter which group [is responsible], it shouldn't have happened. The junta unjustly detained the political prisoners so it is responsible," said a member of the Monywa People's Strike Committee.¹¹⁰

Three protesters were arrested in Sagaing Region's Monywa Township on August 8 after regime forces opened fire on six young activists commemorating the 35th anniversary of the 1988 pro-democracy uprising via a flash mob protest.¹¹¹ According to the Monywa People's Strike Committee, the three other protestors escaped and were not harmed.¹¹² The fate of the three arrested activists remains unknown.¹¹³

At least 16 people were detained in Mandalay from August 9 to 15 after pro-Myanmar-junta Telegram channels shared their photos and addresses.¹¹⁴ Among those detained were doctors and teachers who joined the civil disobedience movement, philanthropists, business

owners and a betel nut vendor who allegedly complained on TikTok about inflation under the regime.¹¹⁵

Two pupils, their father and two teachers at an online school run by the NUG in opposition to military rule remain in junta detention after Myanmar's regime arrested them on July 27.¹¹⁶ Among the detainees are two children aged around eight and 14, their father Kyaw Min Htay, who is a striking employee of Myanma Railways from Sagaing town, and two striking teachers, Daw Myint Myint Than and Wai Yan Min Htike from Mandalay, who ran the online Bright Future Federal School.¹¹⁷ An NUG spokesperson said, "Children have the right to choose what type of learning they want to receive. Arresting children attending an NUG-linked school harms children's right to learn freely. It is a violation of the right to education, which is unacceptable."¹¹⁸

Three Mandalay civilians were arrested for allegedly funding resistance groups.¹¹⁹ A Mandalay University of Distance Education academic and her husband, a retired ophthalmologist, and another civilian were accused of supporting the civilian NUG.¹²⁰ A resident said, "The family lives peacefully in the neighborhood. I was shocked about their arrest. The doctor is retired and the professor is a CDM participant and perhaps that's why they were targeted."¹²¹ The junta has repeatedly raided private hospitals and clinics to root out striking doctors and nurses.¹²² Private hospitals have been sealed off and their owners detained for allegedly employing CDM doctors and nurses from the public sector.¹²³

Two of four people sentenced to death by a military tribunal in Sagaing Region's Indaw Township have gone missing and are feared dead, residents say.¹²⁴ One woman and three men were sentenced to death on terrorism charges on August 18.¹²⁵ A member of local resistance group Indaw Revolution said, "According to judicial procedures, they should be sent to prison after the ruling was made. They should be sent to Katha Prison. But they have not yet been sent there. Kyaw Swar and Myint Myint remain at a junta base outside Indaw. The whereabouts of the other two remain unknown."¹²⁶

An anti-regime people's authority in Magway Region flogged two women for allegedly being abusive during a village meeting.¹²⁷ The deputy head of the Pa Ka Pha (people's defense team) in Kyauk Htu town ordered the caning of the women on July 21 for sneering while members of the people's authority and Pa Ka Pha addressed a meeting on July 19 in Hnaw.¹²⁸ Residents said the beating of civilians, particularly women, by organizations fighting the military dictatorship for democracy is unacceptable. They called on the NUG to stop the punishments.¹²⁹

The chairwoman of a Mandalay-based charity was rearrested by Myanmar's military regime on August 9 after being freed from jail some two months ago under an amnesty.¹³⁰ Shwe Mahar Nwe, also known as Nwe New Win, who leads Shwe Mahar Nwe blood donors association and Mandalay's branch of the Myanmar Rescue Federation, was released in May after being imprisoned for two years.¹³¹ A family member of Shwe Mahar Nwe said her whereabouts remain unknown and authorities had offered no information about her detention.¹³² On August 9, pro-junta Telegram channel 'Han Nyein Oo' called for the arrest of Shwe Mahar Nwe, alleging she had participated in activities to mark the 35th anniversary of the pro-

democracy 8888 Uprising.¹³³ Within hours, the channel posted a photo of Shwe Mahar Nwe blindfolded and wearing a mask inside a private vehicle.¹³⁴

B. Freedom of the Press and Censorship

On July 31, the military junta raided karaoke lounges and arrested more than 60 people in Sittwe Township.¹³⁵ The junta arrested 49 employees from White House KTV and 15 employees from Sweet Dream KTV, for allegedly violating section 32 of the Television and Video Law.¹³⁶ A military tribunal conviction under this statute can result in a fine of 100,000 kyats and/or a prison sentence of up to three years.¹³⁷

As of August 1, all television scripts must be sent to a junta censorship committee for approval before filming, according to *Le Monde*.¹³⁸

French network Canal+ is facing criticism for complying with junta censorship measures and relaying propaganda, hate speech and disinformation.¹³⁹ Canal+ produces content for Myanmar television in partnership with the Forever Group, a private company with close ties to the Myanmar military.¹⁴⁰ Yadanar Maung, a spokesperson for Justice for Myanmar has called on Canal+ to “take responsibility and respect human rights” and “stop facilitating junta propaganda.”¹⁴¹

On August 7, the junta arrested Swiss filmmaker Didier Nusbaumer and 13 amateur actors for allegedly defaming Buddhism in the film “Don’t Expect Anything.”¹⁴² The film, posted online on July 24, emphasizes the importance of the Buddha’s teachings over the worship of Buddhist iconography and criticizes monks who do not follow Buddhist precepts.¹⁴³ Swiss diplomats in Myanmar have reportedly been in contact with local authorities regarding Nusbaumer’s case.¹⁴⁴

On August 23, Myanmar hip-hop artist Byu Har was sentenced to 20 years in prison for criticizing the military junta over Yangon’s rolling blackouts.¹⁴⁵ To date, this is the most severe sentence the military junta has imposed on any celebrity for dissent.¹⁴⁶ Byu Har was arrested shortly after he posted a Facebook Live video in May calling Min Aung Hlaing “incompetent” and the electricity minister a “fool.”¹⁴⁷

On August 26, an award-winning anti-junta short film “The Way” debuted in the United States at a fundraising event.¹⁴⁸ The musical film, created by Myanmar filmmaker/musician Lynn Lynn, was entirely shot on two mobile phones.¹⁴⁹ In 2021, the junta issued arrest warrants for Lynn Lynn and his wife, Chit Thu Wai, for opposing the coup.¹⁵⁰ They remain in hiding due to threats of arrest and violence.¹⁵¹

IV. Economic Development

A. Economic Development—Legal Framework, Foreign Investment

Hongkong and Shanghai Hotels, the operator of the luxury The Peninsula Hotels chain said that its stalled US\$130 million project in Myanmar has not been canceled and that a decision to resume the project would depend on economic conditions.¹⁵² The hotel construction project in

Yangon has been halted since June 2021.¹⁵³ The project is a joint venture with two companies controlled by Myanmar tycoon Serge Pun's Yoma Group: Singapore-listed Yoma Strategic Holdings and Yangon-listed First Myanmar Investment.¹⁵⁴ Hongkong and Shanghai Hotels owns 70% of the joint venture.¹⁵⁵

Prices of food and other basic necessities continue to soar in Myanmar despite the recent formation of a committee designed to combat the problem.¹⁵⁶ The Union Steering Committee to Stabilize Commodity Prices, led by Commerce Minister Aung Naing Oo, was formed in the last week of June.¹⁵⁷ The panel has been tasked with stabilizing prices of basic products like rice, cooking oil and other kitchen commodities.¹⁵⁸ It is also responsible for monitoring the balance between domestic production and demand of basic foodstuffs.¹⁵⁹ Since the February 2021 coup, prices of necessities have doubled or even tripled under the military regime's economic policy.¹⁶⁰

New price controls to combat the surging cost of rice are already disrupting the quality and supply of Myanmar people's staple, according to wholesalers.¹⁶¹ The military regime fixed prices in August and warned of legal action against price gouging.¹⁶² Wholesale rice prices set by the regime range from 72,000 kyats (around US\$19 at the market exchange rate of 3,800 kyats per dollar) to 125,000 kyats per sack depending on quality.¹⁶³ Retailers have been warned not to charge more than 10% over the fixed prices.¹⁶⁴ A rice wholesaler and retailer told *The Irrawaddy*, "The order means we can sell at any price lower than their set prices, but not higher than that. So, [retailers] are now selling at fixed prices, but selling inferior stocks."¹⁶⁵

Junta security services arrested the chair and four members of the Myanmar Edible Oil Dealers' Association on accusations of violating price controls set by the junta as the regime struggles to quell the soaring price of edible oil.¹⁶⁶ The five were arrested for selling imported palm oil at prices set according to the US dollar exchange rate in the market rather than the junta's official rate, explained a member of the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry.¹⁶⁷

As the kyat continues to depreciate, the Central Bank of Myanmar revoked the licenses of 13 more currency-exchange companies on August 14, raising the number of such licenses revoked to 45 within the last 10 months, according to announcements from the junta-controlled central bank.¹⁶⁸ Economists and currency traders describe the move as an effort by the junta to gain more control of foreign currency flows within the country and a futile effort to prevent the national currency from depreciating further.¹⁶⁹

The junta appears to be blaming certain banks for Myanmar's currency crisis and accusing them of disloyalty.¹⁷⁰ In a press conference held by the military junta's State Administration Council in Naypyitaw, spokesman General Zaw Min Htun said, "We have been giving great assistance to the banking system so that it does not collapse. Some banks even had to get support from the Central Bank. But some of them are not so loyal."¹⁷¹ He did not name the disloyal banks but warned that—in response to soaring foreign exchange rates—the regime will continue monitoring the activities of banks as well as the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry.¹⁷² The federation is Myanmar's largest private-sector advocacy group.

Foreign direct investment in Myanmar fell by more than 60% year on year between April 1 and July 31 to about US\$467 million, according to figures released by the Directorate of Investment and Company Administration (“DICA”).¹⁷³ Foreign direct investment in Myanmar totaled US\$1.22 billion in the same period last year, according to DICA.¹⁷⁴

The Australian National Contact Point for Responsible Business Conduct, which is managed by Australia’s Department of the Treasury, has found that the Australian mining firm, Mallee Resources Limited (“Mallee”), failed to consider the human rights impact of its ownership of the Bawdwin mine in Namtu Township, northern Shan State, upholding a complaint by rights groups.¹⁷⁵ Mallee held an ownership interest in the mine through a joint venture with Win Myint Mo Industries Co Ltd (“WMM”), which has links to individuals previously sanctioned by the U.S. for alleged drug trafficking and funneling cash to Myanmar’s military.¹⁷⁶ Mallee sold its entire stake in the mine in August 2021 to WMM, saying the “situation in Myanmar has undermined the confidence of markets.”¹⁷⁷

The fast-fashion company H&M announced on August 17 that it will phase out its presence in Myanmar.¹⁷⁸ The world’s second-largest fashion retailer sources directly from 41 factories in Myanmar and, as of March 2023, it employed almost 42,000 workers at these factories, according to its website.¹⁷⁹ The factories that it directly sources from also outsource some of their work to other factories, H&M says on its website, but it does not disclose their names, number, or the number of workers these factories employ.¹⁸⁰ Many workers in the factories that supply H&M are worried about job loss and finding a replacement source of income.¹⁸¹

China has 597 investment projects in Myanmar totaling US\$ 21.863 billion in value, junta investment and foreign economic relations minister Dr. Kan Zaw told the Greater Mekong Sub-region Economic Corridor Governors Forum held in China’s Kunming in August.¹⁸² Chinese investment accounts for 23.5% of total foreign investment in Myanmar, the majority of which is in the electricity sector, the minister added.¹⁸³

B. Economic Development—Infrastructure, Major Projects

On August 1, the United Wa State Party implemented a mining ban aimed at safeguarding the state’s remaining mineral resources.¹⁸⁴ The ban suspends all mining and excavation activities until more robust mining regulations and monitoring systems are established.¹⁸⁵ However, despite the ban, there are reports of ongoing clandestine mining operations.¹⁸⁶

Local anti-regime strike organizations in Sagaing Region have called on Chinese mining firms Wanbao and Yang Tse to halt their collaboration with the Myanmar junta, which is committing atrocities and destroying civilian life and property across the region.¹⁸⁷ A total of 17 local strike bodies in Monywa, Salingyi and Yinmarbin Townships issued a statement accusing the companies of giving junta troops a base in their compounds and providing food and resources as well as vehicles for the soldiers to raid villages in the township.¹⁸⁸ The statement also alleges that Wanbao has allowed the military to use its company compound as an artillery base that shells surrounding villages.¹⁸⁹ With this support, junta soldiers are able to arbitrarily kill

travelers on the Nyaung Pin Gyi-Salingyi road, plant landmines near lampposts and in residents' farms, and burn their houses in nearby villages, according to the statement.¹⁹⁰ Furthermore, junta troops are forcing residents along the Patheingyi-Monywa road to leave their villages whenever the two companies transport cargo or Chinese workers.¹⁹¹ Even before the 2021 coup, the mines had long been a source of public fury for destroying the environment and seizing people's land.¹⁹²

China and Myanmar are pushing ahead with a border economic cooperation zone in northern Shan State, according to junta commerce minister, Aung Naing Oo.¹⁹³ The cooperation zone, which was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, would be established at the border of Muse in Myanmar and Ruili in China.¹⁹⁴

C. Land Seizure

A Chinese-owned mining firm seized farmland in Sagaing Region.¹⁹⁵ Wanbao, the mining firm, fenced off farms to the east of their existing mining operations.¹⁹⁶ The fenced off areas were previously the subject of a dispute between the mining company and farmers, who had refused a previous offer from Wanbao to vacate their land.¹⁹⁷

Newly released data shows that more than 16,500 homes in large cities and towns across the country have been destroyed by the junta since the February 2021 coup.¹⁹⁸ The junta has made various claims about the homes, saying that some of the homes were built on land belonging to various government departments and that others were on land zoned for infrastructure.¹⁹⁹ Families claim that they are suffering hardship as a result of losing their homes, including homelessness for some.²⁰⁰ UN officials have stated that the razing of homes is a violation of basic human rights and a war crime.²⁰¹

V. Peace Talks and Ethnic Violence

A. Ethnic Violence

Two pro-junta militia members were killed when the Ta'ang National Liberation Army ("TNLA") ambushed a junta convoy carrying soldiers and allied local militias in Muse Township, northern Shan State on August 2.²⁰² TNLA troops attacked 10 junta vehicles carrying over 100 soldiers and militia members near Auktungkhan village, between Muse town and 105th-mile border trade zone on the border with China.²⁰³ The TNLA also clashed with Myanmar regime forces near Nar Htan and Gaung Yar villages in Muse Township on August 2.²⁰⁴ The TNLA claimed that ten regime soldiers were killed and 13 were injured.²⁰⁵

Three clashes broke out in Lashio and Kutkai Townships, northern Shan State on August 19 when the junta conducted offensives against TNLA bases.²⁰⁶

The residents of four villages fled near Mount Loi Tay Mein in Muse Township due to fighting between the junta and the TNLA on August 30.²⁰⁷ Three villages were seized by TNLA troops.²⁰⁸

Two civilians, including a teenage boy, were killed and three wounded when junta forces bombarded territory controlled by the Karen National Union (“KNU”) in Bago Region on August 2 and 3.²⁰⁹

Heavy clashes between the junta and Shan State Army - North, the armed wing of the Shan State Progressive Party (“SSPP”), resumed in Laikho Township, Shan State on August 6, according to the SSPP and local media reports.²¹⁰ An SSPP official told local media outlet *Shan News* that their forces had detained two junta soldiers and seized two weapons and a military vehicle.²¹¹ Around 20 regime troops were killed in the clashes, the resistance official said.²¹² Before the clashes, the junta had repeatedly demanded that the SSPP quit its ten bases in the township, but the Shan rebel group refused.²¹³ On August 4 and 5, regime forces shelled SSPP bases in the township.²¹⁴

On August 5, junta airstrikes killed at least two members of the Karenni Army in eastern Kayah State as regime troops attempted to seize Mese Town near the border with Thailand, according to local resistance forces.²¹⁵ Fierce fighting has continued to rage in the area since July when the junta sent heavy reinforcements to Kayah State in an attempt to regain lost territory.²¹⁶ The junta conducted air strikes on both civilian targets and conflict zones for four consecutive days between August 10 and 13, according to the Karenni Human Rights Group.²¹⁷ No civilian casualties were reported, according to the group.²¹⁸ Clashes have rocked Loikaw, Demoso and Hpruso Townships since early August when three columns of junta forces began advancing along Pyidaungsu Road between Demoso and Hpruso Townships.²¹⁹ On August 13, combined resistance forces of the Karenni Army and the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force seized a large quantity of weapons and ammunition after ambushing junta troops stationed in Htee Thaw Ku Village in Hpruso Township.²²⁰

Almost 20 junta soldiers, including two captains, have been killed and 34 others wounded while attempting to recapture a strategic hilltop base seized last month by resistance fighters near the Thai-Myanmar border, according to the KNU.²²¹ The Karen National Liberation Army (“KNLA”), an armed wing of the KNU, and resistance allies attacked the junta’s Lat Khat Taung hill camp in Myawaddy Township, Kayin State on July 21 and seized a large cache of weapons, ammunition and communication devices.²²² Junta troops have responded by calling up reinforcements to launch daily offensives to retake the hill camp.²²³

At least four regime soldiers were killed in Kyainseikgyi Township, Kayin State on August 16 when the KNLA attacked troops stationed at a police outpost in the township, according to the KNU.²²⁴

Clashes broke out between junta forces and resistance fighters led by the KNLA on a mountain in Pyinmana Township, Naypyitaw from August 10 to 14.²²⁵ An estimated 50 regime troops and three resistance fighters were killed and the junta conducted airstrikes in response.²²⁶

The Chin National Army (“CNA”), the armed wing of the Chin National Front, and two other Chin resistance groups claimed to have penetrated the headquarters of a military battalion in Falam town, Chin State on August 12, inflicting junta casualties and seizing an arsenal.²²⁷ In the clash, six regime forces were killed and nine injured, claimed the CNA official.²²⁸ In

retaliation for the resistance raid, the junta used fighter jets to bomb Ramthlo Village on the Falam-Hakha highway, 35 km south of Falam town, destroying some houses and a church, according to Chin media outlets.²²⁹ Seven residents suffered injuries in the air strikes.²³⁰ On August 14, junta fighter jets also bombed Khuafu Village in Thantlang Township, destroying at least three houses and a church.²³¹ On August 28, thirteen Chin resistance fighters were killed and more than ten others were injured in a failed attempt to occupy junta bases near Thantlang town.²³² According to the CNA, an estimated 30 regime troops and many others were injured during the battle.²³³ Junta fighter jets conducted airstrikes to protect the military bases and artillery units.²³⁴

Beginning on August 20, junta troops shelled villages near Mindat Town, southern Chin State and indiscriminately fired when leaving their base.²³⁵ The CDF responded by closing the road linking Mindat and Kyaukhtu to prevent additional troop dispatches from traveling to the area.²³⁶

Two junta soldiers guarding a China-backed oil and gas pipeline in Magway Region were killed by the CDF on August 20.²³⁷ CDF fighters ran out of ammunition after 30 minutes of fighting and were forced to retreat as junta soldiers from nearby hills arrived.²³⁸ Junta reinforcements from Ngape then beat and arrested ethnic Chin men from Myelet village near the scene of the clash.²³⁹

B. Peace Talks

At a press conference on August 10, the KNU said that it no longer abides by the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (“NCA”) because the junta has already abandoned the NCA principles by engaging in the military coup and subsequent brutal crackdowns, violence, atrocities and war crimes.²⁴⁰ This is not the first time the KNU has declared the NCA to be defunct. It officially stated in September 2021 that the agreement was no longer valid due to the military coup.²⁴¹

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