

STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS & SANCTIONS IN MYANMAR

JULY 2024 REPORT

Summary. This report reviews the July 2024 developments relating to human rights in Myanmar.

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I. Coup, Crackdown on Protests and Civilian Resistance

Min Aung Hlaing extended the state of emergency for another six months on July 31, saying he and his regime need more time to bring “stability and security” to the country.¹ The extension of the state of emergency came just days after Min Aung Hlaing took over the presidential duties from Myanmar’s acting president, U Myint Swe, who took medical leave.² The transfer of presidential duties was widely criticized by legal experts as a violation of the 2008 military-drafted Constitution, which contains no provision authorizing the transfer of presidential duties.³ Legal experts pointed out that the junta chief’s move was tantamount to declaring himself acting president of the country.⁴

According to a report by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, around 1,076 civilians were killed during the first half of the year due to the attacks and bombings by the military government.⁵ Sagaing Region had the highest number of fatalities with 313 deaths.⁶

On July 20, the Mandalay Peoples’ Defense Forces (“PDFs”) claimed to have taken complete control of Singu Township in northern Mandalay Region after approximately 20 days of fighting with junta forces, marking the first town seized by the Mandalay PDF.⁷ The Mandalay PDF continued to attack surrounding junta force positions and seized nearly 30 junta bases, including an Air Defense Battalion headquarters as part of its participation in Operation 1027 with the Brotherhood Alliance.⁸

According to the Mandalay PDF, as the junta loses more ground in upper Mandalay, it is relying more and more on bombing civilians.⁹ The junta shelled villages north of Madaya town at least six times on July 9, residents said.¹⁰ The regime also carried out an airstrike on Oak Phoe village east of Madaya, killing a child, according to The Voice of Wetlet Madaya, an anti-regime group monitoring fighting in Madaya Township.¹¹ The regime also reportedly carried out an air raid on Pak Phoe Lay village, shells fired from rocket launchers landed near Sakyin village north of Madaya town and junta troops shelled Yenantha village also north of Madaya town.¹² On July 18, Myanmar junta aircraft bombed Hseni’s crowded market in northern Shan State, killing eight civilians and injuring eight others, according to Shan civil society organizations.¹³

Around 100 Myanmar border guards and soldiers crossed into Bangladesh on July 11 after being defeated by the AA in northern Rakhine State, according to Bangladeshi foreign ministry sources.¹⁴ However, some of the personnel have reportedly returned across the border into Myanmar.¹⁵ According to Bangladeshi officials, the Myanmar government promised that none of the guards and soldiers would face any intimidation or legal charges.¹⁶ On July 14, Bangladeshi authorities refused entry to around 60 Myanmar junta armed forces personnel who tried to enter Bangladeshi waters on boats.¹⁷ The junta personnel returned to Myanmar after drifting for several hours on the international boundary in the Naf River.¹⁸ In February, Bangladesh announced a closed-border policy.¹⁹ Thomas Andrews, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Myanmar’s human rights, on May 10 wrote to the Bangladesh authorities about reported allegations of civilians being pushed back at the border.²⁰

Myanmar’s regime appointed Major General Htein Win as its navy commander-in-chief following the alleged interrogation and arrest of his predecessor Vice Admiral Zwe Win Myint who resigned in early July.²¹ In June, the Myanmar navy was blamed when four relatives of

retreating border guards drowned when their boat capsized off the coast in Maungdaw Township, Rakhine State, near the Bangladeshi border.²² The boat allegedly capsized after coming under fire from a naval landing craft that was supposedly sent to rescue them.²³ A junta soldier filming the incident said the naval vessel abandoned the troops and their families, only rescuing some of the officers.²⁴ Zwe Win Myint was arrested for failing to obey orders during the fighting.²⁵ Zwe Win Myint was reportedly ordered to use landing craft to transport troops to the beach but was told not to use artillery to prevent damage to lavish hotels along the beach.²⁶

II. Political Developments

A. Rohingya Refugee Crisis

There have been no material updates since the prior report.

B. Corruption

On July 13, the *Irrawaddy* reported that Aung Hlaing Oo, a businessman in Myanmar with deep connections to the country's military and its arms procurement, has facilitated the acquisition of sophisticated weaponry and technology from Ukraine and other former Soviet Bloc states for Myanmar's military.²⁷ Aung Hlaing Oo has been rewarded with substantial commissions on arms sales and has been involved in joint ventures with China National Aero-Technology Import & Export Corporation and Chinese truck company Sinotruk.²⁸ His wife, Khin Nwe Mar Tun, has also been in the spotlight due to high rents paid by international organizations for properties owned by individuals with military connections.²⁹ Despite the controversy and criticism surrounding the high rents paid by UN agencies and others to military-connected landlords, Aung Hlaing Oo and his associates have profited from Myanmar's opening up and the ongoing conflict. In 2023, he and his companies were sanctioned by the United States and the European Union for their role in supplying weapons to the junta.³⁰

C. International Community / Sanctions

On July 3, the International Court of Justice allowed Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Britain and the Maldives to intervene in Gambia's Myanmar genocide case.³¹ The case, filed by Gambia in 2017, accuses Myanmar of committing genocide against the Rohingya, a minority Muslim group in Myanmar.³²

On July 4, the research and advocacy group, Assistance Association for Political Prisoners released a report asserting that "Myanmar's current military junta is by far the most homicidal in the country's history."³³ The report found that a rising number of the deaths of those detained by the junta, including children, were the result of bullets and that the unarmed prisoners who were shot dead were said by their captors to be attempting to escape.³⁴ The report went on to say that the number of people dying while in the current junta's custody is seven times higher than the number who died in custody under successive regimes during the 22 years after the 1988 uprising.³⁵

The United Kingdom released a statement on July 4 calling on all parties to the Myanmar conflict to "prioritize the protection of civilians and allow unimpeded humanitarian access" and

noting that the “UK has provided more than £150 million in life-saving assistance to the people of Myanmar since the coup.”³⁶ The statement also urged others to join the United Kingdom “in supporting local civil society organizations, who are the most able to reach conflict-affected communities.”³⁷

On July 15, Indian Ambassador to Myanmar, Abhay Thakur, met with the junta’s planning and finance minister to discuss cooperation in the banking and finance sector, loans and technical assistance from India, and more training for officials in Myanmar.³⁸ The Indian Ambassador also met with the Central Bank of Myanmar governor, Than Than Swe, to discuss rupee/kyat direct payments to promote bilateral trade.³⁹

On July 24, a Thai foreign ministry official said that Thailand’s central bank and anti-laundering office would investigate claims that Thai commercial banks facilitated transactions linked to weapons purchases by Myanmar’s junta.⁴⁰ The investigation comes in response to a June report by a UN expert stating that the junta imported nearly US\$130 million in weapons and military supplies from Thailand-registered suppliers in the year ended March 2024.⁴¹ In his comments on July 27, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar called the investigation “a real step in the right direction and a sign that Thailand is really taking this seriously and efforts are being made to stop these weapons transfers.”⁴²

Also on July 24, the Burma Human Rights Network “called on the United States Congress to pass two critical bipartisan bills: the Rohingya Genocide Accountability and Protection Act and the BRAVE Burma Act.” In their statement, they noted that the two measures were “essential for holding Burma’s military junta accountable for its atrocity crimes and supporting the people of Burma in their fight for justice and human rights.”⁴³

On July 28, Thai Foreign Minister Maris Sangiampongsa announced, during the 57th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting and Post-Ministerial Conference in Laos, that Thailand has pledged US\$250,000 in humanitarian assistance to help solve the Myanmar crisis.⁴⁴

On July 29, two United States Senators called on the U.S. State Department and USAID to take action over the political and humanitarian crisis in Myanmar and expressed concerns regarding “what appears to be a failure to meet the moment regarding the evolving situation in Burma.”⁴⁵

III. Civil and Political Rights

A. Freedom of Speech, Assembly and Association

A religious boycott against Myanmar’s military regime has spread to 20 townships in four regions since its launch in Sagaing Region’s Chaung-U, following the junta’s slaying of a senior Buddhist monk.⁴⁶ Sayadaw Bhaddanta Munindabhivamsa, an abbot, prominent teacher and author, was shot dead on June 19 as he traveled by car through central Mandalay Region.⁴⁷ State media initially blamed his killing on the resistance.⁴⁸ Min Aung Hlaing, however, was forced to publish an official apology after the junta’s cover-up was exposed by another monk who was traveling with the victim when he was killed.⁴⁹ On June 23, Buddhist monks from Chaung-U Township declared a boycott over the killing of the monk, who was also a retired member of the State Sangha Nayaka Committee, the highest Buddhist authority in Myanmar.⁵⁰

The boycott involves refusing alms from those who have committed offenses against the Sangha (clergy) or religious principles, while also denying them religious services like funerals and weddings.⁵¹

On July 5, Australian economist Sean Turnell, who worked as an advisor to Myanmar's ousted civilian National League for Democracy ("NLD") government, alleged that the junta regime and its bankers were using international law firms to block the publication of his forthcoming book on the thwarted reform plans of the NLD government, "Best Laid Plans."⁵² The economist said that the same group had previously issued threats against the publication of his Myanmar prison memoir, "An Unlikely Prisoner."⁵³

B. Freedom of the Press and Censorship

Throughout July, the junta continued to actively block virtual private networks to restrict Internet access.⁵⁴ Oliver Spencer of Free Expression Myanmar estimates that "millions and millions" of people are being denied access to information and electronic communication.⁵⁵ According to Simon Migliano of Top10VPN, the ban "poses a major threat to press freedom, activism and the ability of people to hold their government accountable."⁵⁶

On July 15, the military junta blocked the Signal app across Myanmar, which was the last remaining secure communication channel in the country.⁵⁷ Signal is used for messaging, calls and sending images, videos and other files.⁵⁸ Since the coup in 2021, Signal had been widely used by media workers, activists and resistance forces.⁵⁹ The junta previously banned access to Facebook, Instagram, X and WhatsApp.⁶⁰

On July 21, 18 townships in Kachin State experienced a widespread phone and mobile services blackout, leaving only Wi-Fi networks and Starlink operational.⁶¹ According to *Burma News International*, the junta is deliberately triggering Internet and phone blackouts to restrict the flow of information in areas of increased armed resistance activity.⁶² In June, flash flooding compromised Kachin State's communications systems, but operation was gradually restored prior to July 21.⁶³

On July 28, journalist Nay Lin Htike died of cancer after he was transferred from Daik-U Prison to Insein Prison.⁶⁴ Until 2021, Nay Lin Htike was a freelance reporter for *Democratic Voice of Burma*.⁶⁵ He was arrested by the junta in February 2022, convicted on charges including defamation and terrorism, and sentenced to nine and a half years in prison.⁶⁶ Fearing the junta, Nay Lin Htike's family members were unable to visit him in prison.⁶⁷ Since the coup, 208 journalists have been detained and over 50 remain imprisoned by the junta.⁶⁸

IV. Economic Development

A. Economic Development—Legal Framework, Foreign Investment

Singaporean investment holding company, Avarga Limited, has announced that it is pulling out of an energy generation project in Myanmar after more than a decade in the country.⁶⁹ The company announced that it is selling its 100% stake in the Ywama power station in Yangon to another Singaporean company, GreenGen Pte. Ltd., for around US\$10 million.⁷⁰

According to a public announcement, China’s state-owned COOEC Offshore Oil Engineering Co., Ltd. has been authorized to carry out phase 4 of the Shwe natural gas project off the coast of Rakhine State.⁷¹ POSCO, the South Korean company operating the project, signed a contract with COOEC worth US\$523 million for the construction of a new gas well.⁷²

B. Economic Development—Infrastructure, Major Projects

There have been no material updates since the prior report.

C. Land Seizure

There have been no material updates since the prior report.

V. Peace Talks and Ethnic Violence

A. Ethnic Violence

Since resuming Operation 1027 in late June, the Brotherhood Alliance, consisting of the Arakan Army (“AA”), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (“MNDAA”) and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (“TNLA”), has seized over 80 military bases in Mandalay region, Shan State and Rakhine State.⁷³ Within the first week of the resumption of Operation 1027, the TNLA seized over 30 military bases, police stations and battalion headquarters,⁷⁴ targeting bases in Kyaukme, Nawngkhio and Mogok towns.⁷⁵ Within two weeks, 80 military bases and battalion headquarters had been seized.⁷⁶ The TNLA and Mandalay PDF targeted bases in Madaya and Singu townships in the Mandalay region.⁷⁷ The Mandalay PDF says it seized 11 Myanmar junta bases in Singu Township, Mandalay Region in eight days, in a move to control the Mandalay-Mogok road.⁷⁸ Military bases in northern Shan State have also been targeted.⁷⁹

By July 18, the AA had nearly captured most of Thandwe town near Myanmar’s premier beach, Ngapali.⁸⁰ It was reported that the AA were allowing residents in groups of five to leave their homes and evacuate the town as the AA continued to fight junta forces in Jeiktaw, Linthar and Myapyin wards along the southern stretch of Ngapali Beach.⁸¹ Civilian casualties in Ngapali and Thandwe are rising as the junta continues to bomb the beach and town areas from air and sea following the AA’s seizure of the Thandwe Airport and military bases.⁸²

On July 25, the MNDAA announced that it had seized a major regional military headquarters near the border with China and taken Lashio in northern Shan State from the junta.⁸³ The seizures were later confirmed by the junta.⁸⁴ The offensive by the MNDAA followed the collapse of the Chinese brokered ceasefire in June.⁸⁵

Following the MNDAA’s occupation of Lashio, it was reported the United Wa State Army (“UWSA”), another well-equipped ethnic rebel group with close ties to China, moved personnel into Lashio on July 27.⁸⁶ A spokesman noted that the UWSA security members were sent into Lashio town to protect the group’s external relations office and properties in the town,

as the UWSA has stayed out of the fighting between rebel groups and the junta that arose out of the 2021 coup.⁸⁷

B. Peace Talks

Two ethnic armed groups within the Brotherhood Alliance, the MNDAA and the TNLA, initially reached a ceasefire agreement with the junta from July 14 to July 18, a period of four days, in the northern Shan State.⁸⁸ They further extended this ceasefire agreement to July 31.⁸⁹ The third member of the Brotherhood Alliance, the AA, refused the ceasefire.⁹⁰ The ceasefire also did not encompass the neighboring Mandalay region, where fighting between the Brotherhood Alliance and the military continues.⁹¹

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