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NEWS 6

Govt, NGOs prepare for human rights battle

The government's human rights record will come under the spotlight at the UN Human Rights Council later this year, when its progress toward goals set in 2011 will be reviewed.

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Deficit to grow as govt seeks \$3b for pay rises

Spending is set to grow more than 7 percent in 2015-16, with proposed pay increases and a large rise in social spending set to expand the budget deficit amid slow income growth.



BUSINESS 26

Oil industry braces for impact from price drop

Myanmar is unlikely to be exempt as international oil and gas companies begin scaling back on their worldwide investment plans after a global price tumble, energy experts warn.

PROPERTY 34

Polo Club enters race to be the tallest structure

Another 34-storey building is set to rival Diamond Inya Palace in the race to build the country's tallest tower, sweeping past the current record-holders.

IN PICTURES

Members of Myanmar's second-largest Buddhist sect, the Shwegyin Nayaka, attend the opening of its biennial national conference in Yangon on January 27. The three-day conference in Hmawbi township brought together more than 800 monks and lay observers, including around 30 representatives from North America, Europe and elsewhere in Asia. Established in the mid-19th century, the Shwegyin sect is one of nine officially recognised Buddhist orders in Myanmar.

PHOTO: ZARNI PHYO

No return in sight for IDPs

The draft Rakhine Action Plan targets resettlement of the state's 140,000 IDPs in April and May, but camp leaders and humanitarian workers in Sittwe say there is little chance that displaced families will return home this year. **IN DEPTH 3**

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THE INSIDER: The local lowdown & best of the web

Murderous menstruation

DVB last week reported that eminent obstetrics and gynaecology specialist Dr Soe Lwin gave a speech at a health conference earlier last month in which he said, "Every woman at the time of menstruation should control herself." Dr Soe Lwin is apparently something of an authority on the subject, having penned a volume titled "Pre-Menstrual

Murderous Urges".

Not all have responded well to his work, with one woman saying he's "dumb and doesn't know what he's talking about and [she] want[s] to throttle him".

Nude salutin' and high-falutin'

Not much is known about this nude, saluting cyclist who went viral on



social media last week. He was reportedly riding from South Okkalapa to Thingangyun, and as yet he doesn't appear to have been taken in by the authorities. Many people speculated about what the salute could mean. Was it a poignant statement on the democratic transition, or was he simply riding into the sunlight? We'll be following the story (obviously) but there's a good chance this will remain, like so many things here, a beautiful mystery.

Police: just a normal massage parlour

Every now and then, one will hear others bemoaning the decline of the print media and the death of good old-fashioned investigative reporting. This, however, is simply not the case. Last week *Eleven* media dropped the second installment in its crusade to expose male massage parlours that provide sexual services, taking aim at one particular male-only beauty saloon. The article's headline was pure magic: "Police: Menbox just a normal massage parlour."

This was following on from *Eleven's* scoop of two weeks ago, which exposed this fact: "Male sexual service has been around for two years." Well, spank my ass and call me Judy - I had no idea! They explained the customers of he-whores are often sailors' wives and women whose husbands are away".

Their report revealed details about the requirements for prospective male sex workers, which were "height, fit body structure, good looks and patience", before pointing out the areas of downtown Yangon where men of the night are said to linger.

It also contained this allegation: "Most of the male-exclusive massage parlours provide sexual services to gays and women under the guise of health and beauty spa."

In order to prove this point, *Eleven* went gonzo.

"EMG's reporters posed as job seeker during the investigation. The manager

of Menbox said: "This is a spa-cum-massage parlour. We teach the new employees how to provide the service properly. This is a standard procedure. We will explain it in detail if you pass the interview. Sometimes, customers try to touch and hug the massagers and it depends on you. Basic salary is Ks. 30,000, plus a 15 per cent for each section. You can earn pocket money from customers."

Menbox, which has 143 reviews on Facebook and a very high customer satisfaction rating, has demanded a formal apology from *Eleven* Media Group. If this does not happen, they may resort to legal action. *Eleven* obviously sees the whole affair another way, saying that despite the evidence they presented, no official action had been taken against the massage parlours.

Police have sided with Menbox, saying that it's an above-board operation - which it seems to be. Their services menu says one can obtain a 'boyzillian' for K12,000 - clearly a bargain for such intimate depilation - as well as facials and relaxing massages.

Eleven wrote, somewhat petulantly, that the authorities are turning a blind eye to the sex industry, in a tone reminiscent of that used when they questioned whether or not a gay couple who'd recently tied the knot would be prosecuted under section 377 of the hugely outdated and wildly discriminatory British Penal Code.

Wirathu drops new single

This is a sentence I never thought I'd get to write: Wirathu dropped a rap single last week. Or, more accurately, a song he wrote while in prison called "Heart of the Earth" has been set to a hip-hop beat and rapped to by an as-yet-unidentified man. It's actually pretty catchy, but I'm still not entirely clear on whether or not it's okay to listen to it through headphones. Speaking with DVB, Wirathu said he felt compelled to tackle environmental issues following Cyclone Nargis.

In Brief

Leaked embassy cable reveals concerns that Tay Za, having recovered from a bout of uranium-induced radiation sickness, could have acquired superpowers. Sources say he is "glowing", and that his rumoured newfound invisibility and teleporting abilities have rendered sanctions against him "laughably futile"

Australia Day celebration invitation list reportedly modelled on the country's immigration policies

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Come on
Invent cure of HIV

...
The sky is the roof of this earth. The destruction of ozone. Huh. The ceiling of the earth is no longer safe"

- Lyrics from U Wirathu's "Heart of the Earth"

Journalist goes undercover to new massage place on 19th Street called "Spa by Willy", gets nothing of the sort

Foreigner complains that bar has "too many foreigners"

Next Week

Foreigner's fixation on finding a reasonably priced, high-ceilinged, natural light-filled colonial apartment leads real estate agent to diagnose of an Edifice Complex

Deviations in the reform process explained: "We were reading the Roadmap to Democracy upside down the whole time!"



Leaked photo, possibly of the new ambassador, on Australia Day

Once was Burma...

Archival material courtesy of Pansodan Gallery

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IN DEPTH

Despite action plan, IDP resettlement a distant dream

Political pressure and disagreements over citizenship verification make any return home in 2015 unlikely

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A GOVERNMENT resettlement program for IDPs in Rakhine State is not expected to move forward in 2015 as scheduled, aid workers and displaced people say, in part due to election-year politics and resistance to a citizenship verification program.

More than two years after riots tore through the state in June and October 2012, an estimated 140,000 people - mostly Muslims - remain in displaced persons camps. Previous efforts to move Muslim IDPs to semi-permanent shelters near Sittwe have faced fierce protests from Rakhine nationalists, who say the IDPs are foreigners who should not be allowed to own land.

The government's draft Rakhine Action Plan, which has not been formally released but was leaked late last year, schedules resettlement in April and May. Sources in the region say that "political pressures" make it unlikely IDPs will leave camps this year, however.

"I'm not seeing much ... progress [on resettlement] this year because of the elections, all of the political pressures that will be around for the government," said one Sittwe-based foreign aid worker, who asked not to be named because he was not authorised to speak to the media.

Residents and administrators of several Muslim and Rakhine IDP camps in the Sittwe area agreed. They said government officials have not visited their camps to explain or discuss the resettlement plan.

The Rakhine Action Plan, which was drafted in response to mounting international criticism of the humanitarian situation in Rakhine State and treatment of the Muslim Rohingya, is supposed to set out a blueprint for displaced persons leaving the camps and returning to their former lives.

A draft version obtained by *The Myanmar Times* said the resettlements would begin in April and continue through the end of May. However, only those with formal identification documents would be allowed to resettle. Muslims without documents could only get them by agreeing to be classified as Bengali, which is how the government refers to the Rohingya.

But the plan remains shrouded in uncertainty. Earlier in January Rakhine State Chief Minister U Maung Maung Ohn said the plan was being



Children stand beside temporary shelters in an IDP camp in Sittwe township in late January. Photo: Yu Yu

"updated" based on suggestions from the international community.

During a press conference on January 16, at the end of her 10-day visit, United Nations special rapporteur on human rights Yanghee Lee said she had been promised a copy of the updated plan, but had not yet received one.

Government ministries that have begun carrying out initial steps toward implementing the plan have already encountered resistance.

Residents and administrators Thek Kael Pyin camp on the outskirts of Sittwe said immigration officials visited on January 1 with copies of a citizenship verification form. Only those who agree to identify as "Bengali" rather than "Rohingya" are allowed to submit an application for verification.

'I think there is no government plan to settle us ... They want us here permanently.'

U Aung Win
IDP camp resident

While the immigration officials promised that filling out the forms could be the first step to some citizenship rights, camp administrators, such as U Noor Muhammed, said that nobody in the camps trusts the government to keep its word.

Deep suspicions of the process are not limited to the Muslim community. Rakhine nationalist groups have already staged protests against a citizenship verification pilot project in Myebon township, arguing that it enabled illegal immigrants to get citizenship.

While the aid worker stressed that opinions on the process are likely to vary between camps, distrust of the verification process will make it difficult to build momentum for the proposed resettlement. "The Rakhine Action Plan is linking returns to the citizenship verification process, and so it's unclear how [the government can] move forward," he said.

U Aung Win, a Rohingya activist based in Sittwe, said that he believed the Action Plan is more about placating the international community than finding a solution to the crisis in the camps.

"I think there is no government plan to settle us," he said. "They want us here permanently."

Some ethnic Rakhine who remain displaced as a result of the violence say they do not think it is safe

enough yet for them to be resettled. U Maung Kyaw Aye, who worked at an ice factory in Sittwe until his home was destroyed in rioting in 2012, said he would only feel safe if the government kept both communities strictly segregated.

"I don't have any hatred for all the Bengali people. I know there are good and bad people in every community," he said. "But I would only move back if we lived separately."

Given heightened political tensions in the state will only grow as the election draws nearer, the aid worker said that the state government is not likely to attempt anything too controversial with either resettlement or citizenship verification.

"I think the Union government is under pressure, which in turn puts pressure on the state governments. The chief minister is really looking at all the options he has to maintain stability - that's his main priority."

He said the humanitarian community in Sittwe is ready to help the government create and implement a long-term solution to the displacement problem.

"We're just trying to make sure that those in need get appropriate assistance until a time when it isn't needed anymore, and we hope that time comes sooner rather than later," he said. "But I think we're planning to be here for the next couple of years."

Constitution bill proposes changes to 59(f) and 436

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A CONSTITUTION amendment bill expected to go before parliament within days will propose amending section 59(f) and section 436 as opposition parties have suggested, a member of the committee that drafted the bill says.

"We changed almost all points [in the constitution] according to democratic criteria, but the final decision is up to parliament," said a member of the Constitution Amendment Implementation Committee, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "[The bill] will be discussed in parliament and then decided by a vote."

Many observers had expected that opposition from the majority Union Solidarity and Development Party and military MPs would rule out change to either section, but particularly section 59(f). The inclusion of the amendments in the bill leaves open the possibility they will be approved, but for that to happen they will need the support of more than 75 percent of MPs. The military holds 25pc of seats, giving it a veto over constitutional change.

In its current form, section 59(f) states that a presidential candidate must be a citizen, be born of parents who are both Myanmar citizens, and cannot have a foreign spouse or children. It appears to bar Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, whose two sons are British.

Section 436, meanwhile, outlines the process for amending the constitution. The proposed change would reduce the support threshold to two-thirds of MPs from 75pc.

The constitution committee member said the bill was drafted in cooperation with the Pyithu Hluttaw Legal Affairs and Special Issues Commission, which is often described as Thura U Shwe Mann's personal think tank.

The bill will be ready to submit "in a few days," the member said, but declined to give an exact date.

One MP from the Rakhine National Party said he did not think the amendments would be passed.

"Even though the committee proposed amending these two sections ... it will be difficult for them to be approved ... I don't expect too much," said the MP, who also asked not to be named.

Thura U Aung Ko, a Pyithu Hluttaw representative from the USDP, agreed it would be "very difficult" to pass the amendments.

He said there is a group of people opposed to change because they want to protect their own interests. He declined to elaborate further on which group opposes change, saying that "everybody can easily understand who I am talking about."

"Promoting the people's interests without harming the interests of these kinds of groups is the best way to move forward," said Thura U Aung Ko.

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The climb from Yathetaung to Kyaikhtiyo is set to get faster and easier once a cable car system comes online in 2016. Photo: Staff

Cable car set for lift-off

PILGRIMS and sightseers drawn to Mon State's celebrated Kyaikhtiyo Pagoda atop its golden rock will be able to visit by cable car from 2016, it was announced last week.

On January 7 the Myanmar Investment Commission approved a joint bid by Sky Asia and Sky International of South Korea, with Asia International Fisheries of Myanmar, to build the cable-car system, at an expected cost of US\$20 million.

Project spokesperson U Nay Lin said the route would run from the bus terminal at Yathetaung to Kyaikhtiyo Pagoda and would be complete by 2016. "We will operate eight months a year. There will be no service during the rainy season because of safety considerations," he said.

The company will install 43 cable cars, each able to carry up to eight passengers, and will charge K3000 for

Myanmar citizens and \$5 for foreigners. The duration of the ride would be 20-30 minutes, he said.

"Buses will still run between [Yathetaung] and the pagoda as they do now, so people can choose which route to take," he said.

Sky Asia Company has rented about 5.4 hectares (13.5 acres) of land for an annual fee of K100,000 per acre under a 50-year contract for the project from the Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry.

Ministry official U Win Naing Thaw said the seemingly low rental fee was approved because of the high investment required and low environmental impact.

"Under the contract, we will negotiate [the land rental] with the investor every five years and the cable car will be transferred to us after the contract ends," he said. - *Ei Ei Thu*

Religion bill sent back to committee

Speaker U Khin Aung Myint tells members to consider comments from 12 MPs



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AMYOTHA Hluttaw Speaker U Khin Aung Myint has sent a controversial draft religious conversion law back to the bill committee and instructed it to consider comments made by MPs during heated debate last week.

The speaker made the decision on January 28, after 12 representatives debated the draft law over three days, with most arguing in favour of the law.

However, several ethnic minority MPs spoke out against the law, describing it as a tool for those seeking to "exploit" religion for political gain. First proposed in 2013 by a grouping of conservative monks, the bill submitted to the Amyotha Hluttaw by Deputy Attorney General U Tun Tun Oo on January 19.

As *The Myanmar Times* has previously reported, one ethnic Chin MP has compared sections that would require those wishing to change religion to seek permission from township authorities to the Spanish inquisition.

During discussion on January 23, another Chin MP, U Paul Htan Htai, said the bill would cause tension between the government and non-Buddhists, and would potentially harm efforts to end long-running ethnic conflicts.

He said such a bill should only be discussed after this year's elections and federalism provisions have been enshrined in the constitution to protect the rights of minorities.

"This bill should not be put forward in an election year just because some politicians are trying to exploit religion for political gain," he said.

"Religion is very sensitive and delicate, and it needs to be handled carefully. Our country has already learned this the hard way."

In 1960, Buddhism was specified as the state religion. Just two years later, the military seized power in a coup amid growing tension between the elected government and ethnic minority groups, he said.

He said it was unacceptable for government officials to sit on township-level committees that would decide whether people could change their religion.

"This will lead to the breaching of people's human rights, including the right to practise their chosen religion freely."

In contrast, U Khin Maung, the representative for Rakhine State's No 3 constituency, said he saw no problem with the bill. He said Myanmar had ratified international rights conventions guaranteeing freedom of religion and the constitution recognised five different faiths: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and animism.

Moreover, section 34 of the constitution states that every citizen is equally entitled to practise the religion of their choice.

U Khin Maung Latt, representing Rakhine State's No 6 constituency, said the draft did not single out any religion or race, and was no different from similar laws adopted by other countries. The law was needed now because the country's economic and social development could lead to increasing numbers of people changing their religion.

"We need to enact laws in advance so that converts don't lose their rights," he said, adding that the bill's intent was to ensure equal rights for all citizens in practising their faith freely, and to protect those who wanted to convert. Summing up his support for the bill, he said the proposed

penalties for those who change religion without official permission were fair, because the jail sentences were not more than two years.

But U Zone Hle Thang, the MP for Chin State's No 2 constituency, said countries that enacted laws of this kind were very extreme, and endured frequent bloodshed. "I don't want to see our country become a land of religious extremes," he told Hluttaw, adding that its adoption would blacken the name of Myanmar before the international community.

'This will lead to the breaching of people's human rights, including the right to practise their chosen religion freely.'

U Paul Htan Htai
Chin MP

"Practitioners of the Christian and Buddhist faiths, who represent the majority in our country, are pretty moderate," he said, urging members not to let religion become politicised. The bill was not consistent with the constitution and would impinge on freedom and rights.

However, Daw Khin Wine Kyi, of Yangon Region's No 1 constituency, seconded the bill, saying it did not attack other religions. "Those who said the law is not in line with the constitution should review it section by section. It contains no weakness," she said. - *Translation by Thiri Min Htun*



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Tatmadaw issues warning against murder allegations

Army-run paper says soldiers were unlikely to be responsible for rape and murder of two Kachin women



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A NEWSPAPER owned by the army has concluded that Tatmadaw soldiers were “unlikely” to have committed the two rapes and murders of volunteer teachers in northern Shan State last month, as President U Thein Sein responded to concerns raised by a leading Kachin religious group.

Senior Tatmadaw figures have even threatened libel action against anyone who says otherwise, in apparent response to accusations by civil society groups in the area.

The Tatmadaw-owned *Myawady* newspaper said on January 29 that based on investigations conducted so far by Muse township police the involvement of soldiers was unlikely, but did not cite any evidence to support this claim.

While the article was included in the paper's news section, it seemed closer to a statement from the military leadership, as it had no name on the byline and neither quoted nor attributed the information to any military officials.

A spokesperson for the Kachin Baptist Convention, La Mar Yaw, criticised the statement, saying it was premature while the investigation was ongoing.

“We are concerned that any statement that the Tatmadaw is unlikely to be responsible could influence the investigation and subsequent trial,” he said.

The concerns were echoed by U Htay Oo, a lawyer on the National League for Democracy's legal team. “The Tatmadaw should not announce [that its members are not involved] before the investigation is complete, as it is tantamount to a threat against those investigating the case,” he said.

The two female volunteers, Maran Lu Ra, 20, and Tangbau Hkwan Nan Tsin, 21, were working for the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) in Kaung Khar village teaching children whose education had been disrupted by persistent fighting. Their naked bodies were found with stab wounds and head injuries after villagers reported hearing screams in the night.



A woman cries during a memorial service in Yangon on January 26 for two Kachin volunteer teachers who were found raped and murdered in northern Shan State on January 20. Photo: Thiri

Two days before they were killed, about 40 soldiers of the 503rd Light Infantry Regiment under Northeast Region Command had established a temporary base in Kaung Khar, about 100 metres (330 feet) from where the incident occurred. Local people have

‘We are concerned that any statement that the Tatmadaw is unlikely to be responsible could influence the investigation and subsequent trial.’

La Mar Yaw
Kachin Baptist Convention

accused the Tatmadaw, and said they had found an army-issue belt and boot-prints at the scene of the crime.

An officer from the 503rd Light Infantry Regiment offered K5 million to the families of the two deceased, but they declined, said La Mar Yaw.

The crime has sparked widespread outrage, in Myanmar and overseas, along with demands for a full, prompt and transparent investigation. At the women's funeral last week in Myitkyina, an estimated 100,000 people took part in the procession.

Muse township police this week refused to discuss their questioning of witnesses or the evidence, saying, “We are still investigating.”

The *Myawady* statement also warned that the Tatmadaw would take legal action against those who are accusing its soldiers of involvement in the killing of the two women.

Civil society groups have been outspoken on the need for justice, with the KBC writing to President U Thein Sein on January 26 demanding prompt action. “We want to see

an impartial investigation,” KBC secretary Reverend Samson Hkalam told *The Myanmar Times*.

On January 28, President U Thein Sein responded to the letter through the Kachin State chief minister, who met with KBC officials at the regional government office in Myitkyina.

La Mar Yaw said the president responded that the government was taking the case very seriously and he had instructed the minister for home affairs to investigate the killings promptly.

“We're satisfied with the president's reply. Now we are watching whether the government implements his response or not,” La Mar Yaw.

The international community is also pushing for action. On January 27, the UN's special representative on sexual violence in conflict, Zainab Hawa Bangura, called on the government to ensure that an impartial and effective investigation was conducted in order to ensure justice, reparations for the families and accountability for the perpetrators.

Kachin MP blames Min Aung Hlaing for clashes

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ARMY commander-in-chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing bears the most responsibility for repeated outbreaks of fighting in Kachin State, Amyotha Hluttaw representative J Yaw Wu has told *The Myanmar Times*.

“The commander-in-chief is the one who orders the fighting of a war. In this case, he is the person mostly responsible. The soldiers are not responsible. Soldiers just have to what their superiors order them to do,” said the Kachin State representative.

He said the fighting “raises the question of whether the commander-in-chief really wants peace or his manipulator behind the plan doesn't want peace”, he said.

On January 23, J Yaw Wu wrote to six political leaders, including the president, telling them he believed that a nationwide ceasefire agreement should be signed at the same time as the constitution is amended.

The government is currently negotiating a ceasefire with armed ethnic groups but a proposal to sign on February 12, when Myanmar marks Union Day, appears unlikely to come to fruition because of recent clashes in Kachin State's Hpakant township.

J Yaw Wu said the government and parliament had both worked hard over the past four years to achieve peace but their efforts were being sabotaged.

While he did not mention the Tatmadaw specifically, he made it clear that he held it responsible for the latest breakdown in negotiations.

“It is very clear who doesn't want peace, who wants to destroy it,” he said. “The fighting started again when we were on the verge of achieving national solidarity and mutual trust ... It is like they are trying to make sure the ceasefire is not signed because they don't want peace and don't want to welcome the ethnic group's trust.”

His comments come shortly after Senior General Min Aung Hlaing accused some ethnic groups of not wanting peace in an interview with Channel News Asia.

“Do they really want peace? If they really want peace, there is no reason why they should not get it,” he said on January 20.

- Translation by Thiri Min Htun

First phase of measles, rubella vaccine campaign ends

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PROTECTING children from highly infectious diseases, teams of health workers have been vaccinating school students in a nationwide campaign against measles and rubella. According to Ministry of Health statistics from 2012-13, only 85 percent of children are immunised for measles and 10pc for rubella.

The first phase of the US\$24 million mass immunisation program for measles and rubella was launched across the country on January 19 from the Ministry of Health, with support from international health organisations, to vaccinate basic education students as well as children in monastic schools.

The nationwide program aims to reach 17.4 million children between the ages of nine months and 15 years in all 14 states and regions. The second phase

of the program is scheduled from February 19 to 28 for children who missed the first phase, which ended on January 27.

The program is mostly funded by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, together with the Ministry of Health, the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund.

Health teams that performed the vaccinations first checked the children's eyesight, heartbeat, blood pressure and temperature and asked them about food allergies. “Once we confirm that the children are clear, we vaccinate them and keep an eye on them for half an hour,” said health assistant U Aung Moe Kyi. About 4pc of children are estimated to be allergic to the vaccine.

Daw Mya Mya Than, a teacher at BEHS 6 Botahtaung, said the school had already informed the parents of the campaign, and asked if their children have any allergies.

“Some parents want to see their



A health officer conducts a medical check on a student before administering an immunisation at a school in Yangon on January 27. Photo: Naing Wynn Htoon

children being vaccinated,” said Daw Mya Mya Than, as she called the names of ninth- and 10th-grade children to receive the vaccine.

Of the six vaccination teams operating in Botahtaung, only four had doctors because of a shortage of qualified medical staff.

Daw Nyunt Yin, the mother of a grade 9 student at BEHS 6 Botahtaung, said she was worried about side-effects. “I heard some children become feverish,” she said.

Another parent, Daw San from North Dagon township, said her child had been hospitalised after receiving the vaccine.

“My child had very high fever at night after he came back from school the day they gave the vaccination,” she said. “He has been in hospital for three days being treated for dengue fever. The doctors said he was vaccinated by health staff who didn't notice he had a fever.”

Dr Kyaw Kan Kaung, assistant director of the Expanded Program on Immunisation, said on January 28 that the vaccine campaign was 80pc successful in terms of parent cooperation. He said the vaccine, imported from India, cost \$5.50 a shot, and was safe for use through 2016.

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Govt, NGOs prepare to



SHWE YEE
SAW MYINT

THOMAS KEAN

THE battle lines are being drawn over Myanmar's human rights record ahead of a four-yearly United Nations review later in 2015. The process seems set to be dominated by questions of whether Myanmar's reforms have stalled, as the government's critics argue.

On January 15, the government formed a 21-member committee to draft a report on the human rights situation in Myanmar for submission to the UN Human Rights Council, while human rights and civil society groups are preparing their own submissions to the UN body.

The national report is required as part of a universal periodic review that the council conducts for each member country every four years.

Despite a number of important human rights-related reforms over the past four years, these NGO submissions are likely to be highly critical of the government's perceived lack of progress, with some contending that U Thein Sein's administration has "done far less than it claims" on human rights.

'The UPR is a trial by fire on human rights by peer governments ... That is a source of pressure that should not be discounted.'

Phil Robertson
Human Rights Watch

Myanmar's progress over the past four years toward meeting human rights targets it accepted in 2011 will be reviewed at the council's 23rd session, scheduled for November 2-13. The Myanmar government is required to submit its report to the council by July 20, while NGOs have until March 23 to make a submission to the council.

In a sign of the importance it is

attaching to the endeavour, the government's committee is headed by Minister for Home Affairs Lieutenant General Ko Ko. It also includes representatives from a range of government departments and other bodies, including the Myanmar Police Force, the Union Supreme Court, the Corrections Department and the Union Attorney General's Office.

The Myanmar National Human Rights Commission is not represented on the committee but will assist it in preparing the report, chair U Win Mra said.

The government also organised a workshop on January 20, with support from the Australian embassy in Yangon and Australian Attorney General's Department, that brought together departmental officials to provide input for the national report.

The Universal Periodic Review was created with the establishment of the Human Rights Council in 2006.

When the first periodic review of Myanmar was conducted in 2011, Human Rights Council members put forward 190 recommendations to promote and protect human rights in the country. In response, the government said it had already implemented 10 of these, but accepted another 64. It also agreed to consider another 46, of which six were later accepted.

Among its pledges, Myanmar undertook to "sign and ratify the core human rights treaties", such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. It also agreed to establish a national human rights body in line with the Paris Principles, to cooperate with the UN special rapporteur on human rights and to work with the UN to end the recruitment of child soldiers.

Another 110 recommendations were rejected outright because they "were couched in such a manner that acceptance of them would infringe on Myanmar's sovereign rights", Attorney General U Tun Shin told the council at the time.

Under the review, countries are required to have implemented or begun implementing accepted recommendations by the time the subsequent review is conducted.

However, the government has made progress toward or completed a number of these rejected recommendations, including allowing the ICRC to resume prison visits, removing restrictions on press freedom and releasing political prisoners.



Police officers attend an unauthorised protest in Yangon in June 2012. Photo: Ko Taik

U Win Mra said the government had successfully implemented a number of the recommendations, including ensuring freedom of association, improving rule of law and forming an independent human rights commission. "But I cannot say we have been totally successful in implementing [the] human rights [recommendations]," he said.

He said the human rights commission plans to meet with civil society groups to get their input on the report.

"Civil societies can give suggestions for the government report but the committee cannot guarantee that they will be included," he said.

Non-government organisations are also preparing to make their own submissions to the Human Rights Council on Myanmar's human rights performance. U Aung Myo Min, executive director of Equality Myanmar, said 30 civil society groups will submit a report to the council at the end of February as part of the period review process.

He said the government has failed to make progress in a number of human rights-related areas, including peace-building, rule of law and women's rights.

"Over the past four years the government did not keep its promise to sign the agreement on the prevention of torture. Some laws for women that it submitted to the huttaw do not uphold the rights of women," he said.

He attributed the government's failure in part to the widespread lack



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face off at UN on human rights



2011, Mr Robertson said it had only added one, on disabilities, over the past four years. He dismissed the caveat that U Tun Shin gave the council in 2011 – that ratification was contingent on cabinet and parliamentary approval – by pointing out that the government's party has an "overwhelming" majority in parliament, and opposition groups are hardly likely to oppose ratification.

"If something is a government priority, I don't believe for a second that they cannot get positive action to approve it by the parliament," he said.

Human Rights Watch is working on a submission for this year's periodic review. Mr Robertson said that while accepted recommendations cannot be enforced by the council in any way, the review was still an important process.

"The UPR is a trial by fire on human rights by peer governments from around the world and that is a source of pressure that should not be discounted," he said. "Most governments go to the UN and put their best foot forward, so getting a dressing-down on rights issues is something that they will go a surprisingly long way to avoid."

Former Australian ambassador to Myanmar Trevor Wilson, who visited Myanmar with human rights-related missions in September 2012 and March 2014, said Western governments will likely take a political approach to the process and be influenced by the strong criticisms from international rights defenders, who fear that many of Myanmar's reforms are being reversed.

Mr Wilson said most of the U Thein Sein government's human rights reforms, such as on freedom of speech, assembly and association, have yet to

be consolidated and fully developed, and this is unlikely to happen over the course of 2015. At the same time, situations that are a source of human rights abuses, such as domestic insurgency and communal conflict, remain far from resolved. "I do not currently see political will in Myanmar to introduce radical reforms ahead of the elections scheduled for the end of 2015," he said.

Myanmar took a cautious approach in 2011, and is likely to do the same in 2015, particularly given that the

110

Human rights recommendations that Myanmar rejected as part of the Universal Period Review in 2011

Ministry of Home Affairs will be coordinating the country's response, he said.

"Myanmar can afford to take a measured approach to its responsibilities, but should recognise that its long-term political stability now requires a government commitment to move forward in some of the ongoing problem areas," he said.

"At the very least, a nationwide peace agreement with satisfactory concrete provisions needs to be finalised, and the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission needs to find an effective reformist role for itself."

IN BRIEF

Nay Pyi Taw Council to build more staff housing

Nay Pyi Taw Council is to spend K20 billion (US\$19.5 million) on housing for its staff, says council member U Kan Chun. The funds were not included in the original budget estimates for financial 2015-2016, but will come from a capital expenditure grant from the Union Finance Commission.

Only 23,527 of the 35,086 government employees live in government-provided housing.

In the coming financial year those in government housing will also be exempt from municipal fees, including water, electricity and rubbish collection, he said.

Nay Pyi Taw Council has requested a budget of K71 billion for the coming financial year, while Nay Pyi Taw Development Committee has requested K51 billion.

Myanmar, Ethiopia to establish diplomatic ties

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia will become the 13th nation to proclaim ties with Myanmar under the U Thein Sein government – and the 116th overall. U Tin Oo Lwin, deputy minister for foreign affairs, made the announcement to the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw on January 22.

U Tin Oo Lwin said the establishment of diplomatic relations with Ethiopia has already been approved by the government. He said friendship with Ethiopia would pave the way for better relations with other African nations and the United Nations. – *Htoo Thant, translation by Zar Zar Soe*

IN DEPTH

of awareness about the Human Rights Council process and the promises made in 2011.

But Phil Robertson, deputy director of the Asia division of Human Rights Watch, which participated in the 2011 review of Myanmar, was more critical of the government, saying it had "done far less than it claims" on its human rights commitments.

"Closer examination of the pledges Myanmar accepted from other governments find plenty where there has not been any appreciable progress – like protecting human rights in northern Rakhine State, prosecuting soldiers committing sexual violence against civilians, bringing domestic laws into line with international rights standards, or ending discrimination and violence against ethnic and religious minorities," he said.

While the government agreed to ratify a range of rights conventions in

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Taungtha residents greet students marching from Mandalay to Yangon with bouquets and garlands of flowers on January 28. Photos: Maung Zaw



Students suspend march after securing February 1 meeting

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STUDENTS protesting against the national education law have agreed to suspend their demonstrations on February 1, the day scheduled for the opening of four-party talks on the controversy. Student leaders announced the decision following negotiations at the Ministry of Education on January 28 with the government and hlut-taw representatives while, along the route, cheering townspeople mixed with marching students before police barricades.

It was agreed at the meeting that further "constructive" talks should take place at Yangon's Diamond Jubilee Hall on February 1 to discuss 11 points put forward by the students, who say the new law is too restrictive and fails to reform education.

After the meeting, Minister for the President's Office U Aung Min told reporters that he welcomed the students' decision, which he said was a step toward democracy. "The students have agreed to stop protesting because we've reached agreement to discuss the law," he said.

Ko Min Ko Naing, leader of the 88 Generation student group and a

participant in the meeting, said the deal was a "good start" toward improving education.

"I expect both sides to honour the agreement they have reached and to find a solution to the problem through negotiation," he said. "This is a good start for all our people here and overseas who are serious about democracy and about education."

The deal meant the suspension of a march on Yangon by six separate columns of protesting students, comprising hundreds of marchers in all, from Mandalay and Ayeyarwady regions and Rakhine and Mon states.

Launched on January 20 in Mandalay, the marchers had been scheduled to combine with another group from Magwe Region as well as the Young Monks' Association before it was halted following the announcement of a deal. However, they warned it would resume if talks fail to yield the result they are seeking.

"As long as the government keeps its promise, we will have to keep ours. We will halt our protest for the moment. But if we can't reach an agreement through negotiations at the February 1 talks, we will resume," said Ko Pyae Phyo Kyaw, one of the protest leaders.

"We will stop the strike only on that day. We will keep marching until

we attain what we have demanded," said Ko Ye Yint Kyaw, an information officer from the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU). "We hope the government will not make a fool of us [for stopping]."

Along the route of the 800-kilometre (500-mile) Mandalay-Yangon march, townspeople and villagers last

'We will halt our protest for the moment. But if we can't reach an agreement ... we will resume.'

Ko Pyae Phyo Kyaw
Protest leader

week turned out in their thousands to greet the students - even as the police tried to obstruct them.

At Kyaukse and Nan Myint village, Taungtha township, police put up fences to block the march. On both occasions they were eventually allowed

to pass after a tense stand-off.

Daw Aye Khine from Taungtha's No 5 ward said the police blockade encouraged more people to come out onto the streets and welcome the students.

"We were worried they might be at risk, but now we know that people in our town love the truth," she said, as cheering and clapping residents mixed with students before a barrier of more than 100 police deployed to block the students' advance, decking them with garlands of flowers and giving them food.

"I love these students like my own children and I welcome them. I hope their demands will be met," said Daw Mya Kyi, a 60-year-old resident of Tamangyi village, Taungtha township.

Since the march began on January 20, the students passed through the townships of Tada-Oo, Kyaukse, Myittha, Natogyi, Myingyan and Taungtha. At Natogyi, high-school students accompanied the marchers.

"The people are always on the side of students, whatever the situation," said U Htain Win, 73, from Taungtha. "The government should know they are on the side of truth. Students have always stood up for the truth, even at the risk of their own lives. We won't tolerate it if anything happens to them."

- Translation by Thiri Min Htun

Mizzima pulls plug on daily paper as investors drop out

LUN MIN MANG
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MIZZIMA Media Group is to cease publication of its Myanmar-language daily, which will transform into an online paper, it announced last week.

Executives said on January 28 that the decision was made because the publication was making heavy losses. Dozens of staff have been laid off as a result and two key figures are also parting company with the publication. It will continue to publish its English-language weekly newsmagazine.

Board member U Sonny Swe

announced his departure, saying the daily operation had been unable to compete financially with its competitors in the crowded market.

"My participation will end on February 15," he said, adding that differences in management style were also a factor in his departure.

U Soe Myint, editor-in-chief and managing director of Mizzima, said its current business model was no longer working. "We've reviewed our strategy. If we continue to pursue our current business model, we will continue to lose money," he said. "We've had to cut costs and discharge some employees."

Tycoon U Theim Wai, also known as Serge Pun, is also ending his involvement with the paper. His company, Serge Pun & Associates, has invested several million dollars in the media group since 2013, according to sources familiar with the company.

Both U Sonny Swe and U Theim Wai have reportedly handed back their shares in Mizzima to U Soe Myint, whose wife has now joined the company as a director.

"U Theim Wai helped us a lot [but] both he and Ko Sonny will not be with us as we evolve," said U Soe Myint.

Founded in New Delhi in 1998,

Mizzima returned to Myanmar in 2012 to capitalise on the government's liberalisation of the media landscape. It was initially published as a weekly but became a daily in 2013, after the government began allowing private daily newspapers for the first time in five decades.

However, the crowded market has resulted in many newly launched dailies closing down or reducing their publishing frequency, and almost all are losing money. Currently about 10 are still publishing, with the last daily issue of *Mizzima* to be distributed on February 28.

NLD paper to relaunch this week after circulation decline

Party reshuffles editorial team at publication that was embroiled in claims of missing money in 2013



KO KO AUNG

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APPARENTLY gearing up for the general election later this year, the National League for Democracy will relaunch its party publication, *D.Wave*, in a bid to address declining circulation.

Sources say the publication's circulation has more than halved to around 30,000 copies a week, while in 2013 it was embroiled in a financial scandal after almost US\$200,000 went missing.

The instruction came direct from party leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi,

MILLION KYAT

185

Estimated revenue from *D.Wave* sales that reportedly went missing in 2013

said the periodical's editor, Nay Phone Latt.

The main objective of the changes is to improve relations between party and people, he said, but the journal's financial losses also appear to be a factor in the decision.

The weekly paper is currently considered a party periodical, covering news related to party activities and politics, but has applied for a licence from the Ministry of Information to change to weekly general news publication.

"The journal's circulation is in decline so we plan to renew and update *D.Wave* to feature ethnic affairs, parliamentary proceedings and a youth program," said editor-in-charge Monywa Aung Shin.

He said the paper would be easier for readers to find in the market and would contain articles by prominent authors.

The first issue will be published on February 2 and will mark the centenary of the birth of General Aung San, the country's independence hero and father of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

The editorial board will be expanded to include five new members, including writer Min Khat Ye and Nay Phone Latt. Former executive editor Pyapon Ne Lone Oo will become an advisory editor.

The opposition party periodical



A Yangon resident reads a copy of *D.Wave* last week. Photo: Zarni Phyto

was launched in January, 2012. Its name is a pun on the Myanmar word for tidal wave, while the "D" in the title also references democracy.

In September 2013, reports emerged that K185 million of income from sales of *D.Wave* had gone missing from the publication. Local media reported that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

had instructed senior party members to cover up the news, although this was later denied by spokesperson U Nyan Win. The party refused to comment on the missing funds last week but then-editor-in-chief U Ohn Kyaw - also a Pyidaungsu Hluttaw representative - has been removed from the editorial team.

Expert forum to focus on dry zone

AYE SAPAY PHYU

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SUSTAINABLE development in the nation's dry zone will be the focus of the fourth Green Economy Green Growth forum (GEGG 4) to be held in upper Myanmar in early February, said U Nay Htun, founder and patron of the non-profit organisation on January 26.

"The theme will be expanding cooperation and deepening integration for sustainable natural resources, social and economic development," he said.

The Nay Pyi Taw segment will address policy, strategy, economic and financing issues. The Mandalay segment will address science, technology, and management issues, focusing on dry zones, he said.

The forum will be held in Nay Pyi Taw on February 3-4, and the Mandalay segment will take place in Mandalay University on February 5-6. About 400 to 450 local and international participants are expected in both Nay Pyi Taw and Mandalay.

U Nay Htun said that the three topics of discussion would be green productivity improvement; green, resilient and smart built systems; and responsible and sustainable tourism.



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Thanlwin dams vulnerable to earthquakes, CSOs warn



LUN MIN MANG

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A SERIES of dams planned to harness the hydroelectric potential of the Thanlwin River could raise the risk of earthquakes as well as damaging the environment, putting at risk local residents and their farms, protesters say.

The 2800-kilometre (1730-mile) Thanlwin, also known as the Nu or Salween River, flows from the Chinese border to the Andaman Sea. UNESCO has declared a section of it in China a World Heritage Site because of the wide range of biodiversity the river supports, and it remains the last major undammed river in Southeast Asia.

Two months after the July 2003 listing, the provincial government of the Chinese province of Yunnan, which borders Myanmar, announced a plan to build 13 dams along their stretch of the Nu River, while Myanmar's Ministry of Electric Power is preparing to build up to six more along the Thanlwin.

These are the Kunlong Dam near Kunlong township, northern Shan State; the Nong Pha and Man Tong dams in Tang Yan township (east of Lashio), northern Shan State; the Tasang, also known as Mai Tong Dam in

southern Shan State; the Ywathit Dam near Bawlakhe township, Kayah State; and the Hatgyi Dam in Kayah State. The ministry says these could harvest up to 10,000 megawatts of electricity.

However, environmental groups say the river flows over two giant faults, posing the risk of major flooding in the event of an earthquake. They also say the dams will risk the environment and its biodiversity, as well as the agricultural livelihood of the local residents.

Representatives of the Burma Rivers Network used a press conference last week to urge the government to reassess the environmental and social impact of the dams before building them.

"From the Hatgyi Dam to the upper reaches of the Thanlwin, more than 40 villages are at risk. It is they who will suffer the consequences," said Ko Saw Thar Boe, a member of the civil society organisation. He said the regular opening and closing of the sluice gates could lead to seawater being mixed with the river near the Andaman coast, thus damaging local agriculture and residents' health.

The network also accuses the government and its partner foreign and domestic companies of lack of transparency in assessing the environmental and socioeconomic impact of the project.

"Last year, Chinese engineers surveyed the area. We had to insist on our



legal right to accompany them," said Ko Ral, a member of the Karenni Civil Society Network, who said the engineers later deleted recordings of interviews they had conducted with residents.

A resident of Hlaingbwe township, Kayah State, said the government had failed to provide local residents with enough information about the Hatgyi Dam project. "If this dam is built, can we still make a living from our farms?" U Saw Win Maung, of Myainggingu village, said at the press conference.

Deputy Minister for Electric Power U Myint Zaw told the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw last February that the ministry would work with local and foreign companies on building the dams through joint ventures or build, operate and transfer (BOT) agreements.

The Burma Rivers Network (BRN) has sent an open letter to the ministry and to the Thai and Chinese embassies, attaching copies of more than 60,000 signatures of local people who are opposed to the dams.

The letter urges the parties to conduct a practical assessment of the seismic risks entailed, citing the Chinese geologist Fan Xiao to the effect that the weight of the water in the dams could increase the stress on the faults that lay beneath the river.

The letter also recalled that fighting had occurred within the project area between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups, raising questions about security, and urged the government to apply international standards, maintain transparency, and explore other options for development.

MP U Thein Lwin, secretary of the Pyithu Hluttaw's Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation Committee, said the concerns raised in the letter should be considered.

"Electricity is needed for development," he said. "But the government has to make sure that such projects are truly in the interests of the citizens."

IN BRIEF

Police warn on lending of ID documents for car imports

Holders of Citizenship Scrutiny Cards and household member lists who rent out their official documents to unscrupulous car importers may face liability if the vehicles imported under their name are involved in accidents, police have warned.

In order to circumvent regulations, some importers rent the necessary documents for about K50,000. While there is no penalty for lending documents in this way, the deputy commander of Yangon traffic police, Lieutenant Colonel Linn Htut, said the registered owner of the car is liable if it is involved in illegal activity, such as a hit-and-run car accident or drug smuggling.

"Sometimes we find that the registered owner is a betel quid vendor or a water-carrier, or in some other occupation unlikely to be able to afford such a car," he said. - *Toe Wai Aung, translation by Emoon*

Medical student heads to Oz

A local medical student is set to begin post-graduate studies in Perth, Australia, next month after being chosen as the inaugural recipient of a new scholarship.

Launched in 2014 by the offshore oil-and-gas company, the Woodside Myanmar Postgraduate Scholarship will cover tuition and expenses for one student to attend a two-year Master of Public Health degree at the University of Western Australia (UWA). - *May Thinzar Naing*



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Vintage rally out of the blocks

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THEY'RE off. The second Myanmar-Burma Road Classic rally set off from Yangon in a screech of tyres on January 26, and will make its way through some of the country's major cities before returning on February 10.

Like the first rally, held in October 2013, it has been organised by rally director Bruno Leunen of Destination Rally.

The 22 drivers, from Belgium, France, Switzerland and Britain, will pilot a range of vintage and classic cars, including a 1995 and 1996 model Jaguar XK 140 DHC, a 1960 Mercedes 190 SL, a 1965 very limited Citroen DS 21, a 1966 Ford Mustang Cabrio, a 1970 Ford Mustang, a 1973 Ford Mustang Cabrio, a 1975 Bentley T1 and a 1978 Mercedes 450 SLC.

"It's better than last time. The routes are more scenic," said Mr Leunen. "You can fly anywhere in the country, but driving is the best way to appreciate the scenery. This rally is an adventure, a chance for the drivers to talk to each other about their own countries, have fun and make friends."

The route will take the drivers from Kandawgyi Palace Hotel to Nay Pyi Taw, Inle, Pindaya, Maymyo, Mogok, Mandalay, Monywa, Bagan, Popa, Magwe and through Ngwe Saung beach from Pyay before



A vintage Ferrari in Yangon for the Myanmar-Burma Road Classic crawls along in grinding traffic beside Kandawgyi Lake on January 25. Photo: Thiri Lu

returning to Yangon on February 10.

The organisers worked with Inspiration Myanmar to take care of accommodation and other needs along the route. "We get a lot of tourists, but very rarely a rally like this. It's a great incentive for people to visit," said rally operations manager Ma Khaing Sarni.

Logistics specialist Fabian Daffern of Bespoke Handling, who helped organise the event, said customs had been particularly helpful. "This time we passed easily.

Shipping the cars took 35 days from Europe and 38 days from England," he said.

Preparations also include the stationing of skilled mechanics and Belgian medical personnel along the route.

Rally drivers have spent US\$30,000 on the jaunt, including hotels, food and all other expenses, except fuel and tolls.

For 2016, Destination Rally is planning a trip taking in both Thailand and Myanmar.

Annual KNU meet to focus on ceasefire

EI EI TOE LWIN



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THE annual meeting of the Karen National Union (KNU) will be held in the first week of February to thrash out the party's stance on the peace process, especially the proposed signing of a draft nationwide ceasefire agreement.

The meeting, to be held at the Hlaing Bwe, Kayin State, headquarters, will also discuss the government's democratisation reforms, KNU general secretary Padoh Mahn Mahn told *The Myanmar Times* last week.

The government and leaders of the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT), which is negotiating the ceasefire agreement with the Union Peace-making Work Committee (UPWC) on behalf of 16 armed ethnic groups, proposed last month that the signing could take place

Union Day, February 12.

Padoh Mahn Mahn rejected suggestions that KNU would be prepared to sign the agreement in advance of other ethnic armed groups. "Important issues still need to be addressed, especially the basic principles of the political dialogue and the code of conduct," he said.

He added that KNU was seriously concerned at the removal in the latest draft of clauses previously agreed on, particularly those concerning the establishment of a federal system through political dialogue.

"We haven't reached agreement even on those basic points. So we will continue to search for ways to move forward effectively," said Padoh Mahn Mahn.

Two controversial issues - the reformation of its alliance with the United Nationalities and Federal Council (UNFC) and agreement to form a Kawthoolei Armed Forces (KAF) - are not on the agenda, said Padoh Mahn Mahn. "These issues will be discussed at the KNU conference in 2016," he said.

Land to be returned to farmers at Setse Beach

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A DISPUTE over farmland near Mon State's Setse Beach has been resolved after the intervention of the chief minister, U Ohn Myint.

The land near the Thanbyzayat township beach was seized by the Department of Labour in 1981, supposedly to build offices.

Residents say the chief minister, U Ohn Myint, visited the fields in question on January 24 and announced that it was time to restore the land. After being told the site was more than 25 acres, he decreed that the state should retain only 10 acres and the rest be given back, said Ma Myat Thida Tun, secretary of the National League for Democracy's Thanbyzayat branch.

However, farmers were later told that only 11 acres would be restored following a joint land survey conducted by the village administrator and the Settlements and Land Records Department.

After submitting a further complaint to the chief minister, U Ohn Myint held a meeting with the farmers in Mawlamyine on January 29. He told them that he had not been giving exact instructions, as his calculations were based on what the farmers had told him and not official records.

"I just said that if there are 25.27 acres, the labour department should get 10 acres ... I just told them an estimate and instructed them to tell me after they have measured the land. After the officials measured it, it was only 18.9 acres. So now I say that the farmers should get 9.9 acres. If they don't like my decision, they can take legal action," he said.

The farmers said they accepted the chief minister's revised calculation. They say they did not receive any compensation, either in cash or kind, when the land was taken.

- Translation by Zar Zar Soe

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Corruption, threats keeping child soldiers in Tatmadaw

Child Soldiers International says joint action plan to end underage recruitment needs to be strengthened

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CORRUPTION and fear of military officials are slowing the release of child soldiers from the Tatmadaw, an international watchdog group says. Child Soldiers International Asia program manager Charu Lata Hogg says that while significant progress has been made on the issue since the Ministry of Defence signed a joint action plan with the UN Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting (CTFMR) in June 2012, children are continuing to be recruited because of a lack of strong deterrents for recruiters.

In a report released on January 23, Child Soldiers International called on the government to urgently address serious gaps in age verification protocols, recruitment procedures and accountability mechanisms to ensure children are not recruited and used as soldiers in state forces.

Ms Hogg said despite training and directives from superiors, officers remain "loathe to admit underage recruits are present in their ranks and children are too fearful to come forward and declare they are underage."

"The few children who do come forward are reportedly intimidated by officers and withdraw their statement," she said.

When a documentation review is conducted, corruption within the township General Administration Department and pressure from military officials can result in age verification

documents being falsified.

"Accurate proof of age is seldom obtained. As a result, the Tatmadaw's progress in identifying children within its ranks has been slow," she said. "[T]o implement the joint action plan, the army is required to compile lists of suspected minors for the UN CTFMR to verify. However, we have received information which suggests that such lists are often incomplete or fail to include all suspected minors in the battalions."

The report also acknowledged some serious progress: From June 2012 to January 2015 the Tatmadaw released 595 children into a program aimed at reintegrating them into society. Of these, 70 percent were freed over the past year, including 42 on January 23, according to the United Nations. The military has also issued a number of important directives, focusing on age verification procedures, timeframes for introduction and punishments for those who fail to abide by the directives.

"There is no doubt that there is a reduction in the number of children being recruited into the Tatmadaw," Ms Hogg said. "A massive awareness raising campaign has been activated in 66 cities and correspondingly the number of complaints being made to the UN CTFMR has gone up."

The UN said in a statement to mark the January 23 release that a number of important steps had been taken in 2014 to strengthen the joint action plan, including in a number

of areas raised by Child Soldiers International. A "high-level" review in September provided the "opportunity ... to define essential remaining steps, particularly to strengthen oversight at all the stages of the recruitment process in order to prevent underage recruitment".

Both sides agreed to improve accountability for civilians or military officials who facilitate underage recruitment, increase legal protections and provide further training for military personnel on the issue.

595

Child soldiers released by the Tatmadaw since the signing of a joint action plan with the UN in June 2012

At the end of last year, the government's Committee on Prevention of Under-Age Recruitment was also expanded to include the ministries of immigration and information, it said.

Ms Hogg said senior Tatmadaw officials interviewed for the report were "without doubt ... committed to ending underage recruitment" and being delisted from the UN secretary-general's annual report on armed forces

that recruit and use child soldiers.

"The discussions were extremely frank and open and during these discussions officials admitted that age verification was a problem. They told us that the fact that children did not have birth certificates or other documents to verify their age was a contributing factor."

Outside the purview of the CTFMR, the government is working with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) on a birth registration program. According to UNICEF, about 1.6 million children are not registered, with 76 percent in Chin State lacking documentation.

Ms Hogg said underage recruitment was a "complex" issue and a range of measures are needed to end the practice.

"As a key step, the government needs to seek technical assistance to put in place the necessary strengthened recruitment procedures, age verification mechanisms and independent monitoring and oversight of all armed forces, including Border Guard Forces and other security forces, to prevent the unlawful recruitment of children."

In addition to the Tatmadaw, seven non-state armed groups are included on the UN secretary-general's list of "persistent perpetrators" in the recruitment and use of children.

Government officials could not be reached for comment last week. State-run media reported on January 24 that to the end of 2014 action had been taken against 327 military personnel for recruiting child soldiers.

Child-centred education a failure: experts

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ATTEMPTS to introduce child-centred education to Myanmar's schools have ended in tears, educators were told last week. A workshop heard on January 25 that the scheme, introduced in basic primary education schools more than 10 years ago with the help of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), has not been a success.

The Project for Strengthening CCA Education in the Union of Myanmar started in 2004, initially for three years, in 27 major townships.

But teacher shortages, overcrowding and a reluctance to abandon the traditional rote-learning approach to education have caused it to fail, education expert U Hla Moe told the workshop.

He said Myanmar's exam-based approach discourages teachers from child-centred learning techniques.

"CCA does not depend on exam results alone. But in our system, exams account for 100 percent of the final grade, compared to about 30pc in other countries, where more stress is placed on course-work evaluation," he said. "[CCA] requires children to think in class and to express themselves."

Daw Kyi Kyi Myint, a former teacher trainer and founder of Tha-mar-di private school in Meiktila, said that when CCA was launched in Mandalay it was supposed to be integrated into the geography, history and general knowledge areas of the curriculum. However, primary teachers had continued to stick to the old exam-based system.

'In our system, exams account for 100 percent of the final grade, compared to about 30pc in other countries.'

U Hla Moe
Education expert

"JICA provided the educational infrastructure for CCA. But while primary school teachers told us it was good, but in actual fact the children were being overloaded because they were trying to do both CCA and their usual work," she said.

She said resistance to new methods among teachers had always been a problem in Myanmar, with teachers quickly returning to their traditional methods after attending training programs designed to impart new techniques.

"Children study hard, but since they are judged on exam results, they learn parrot-fashion. They gear up for the month-long exam season rather than the continuous assessment. At the fourth- and eighth-standard exams, the children failed the test and cried a lot. This showed the approach was not appropriate," she added.

Phaung Daw Oo monastic school headmaster U Naryama said CCA was one of several attempts to reform the education system he had seen fail.

"The government keeps saying they will reform education, but children are still taught parrot-fashion," he said.

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Roadblock sparks clash between soldiers, locals

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SOLDIERS have been accused of beating and kicking civilians who complained about a roadblock set up by the military on a path in regular use. Two soldiers were also injured in the fracas, which occurred on January 27 at Kantomin in Yat Kwat Gyi, Pyin Oo Lwin township.

The surrounding land was reportedly seized by the Military Technological College in 1993; since then, residents have been allowed only limited access.

Last June, the military started fencing off the land. On January 27, soldiers put up an iron gate across a road leading to downtown Pyin Oo Lwin from nearby villages.

"We asked them not to close the gate and told them we'd submitted a petition to the army commander-in-chief not to cause inconvenience by blocking the way. But they said the gate would only be closed at night. While we were discussing it, they started to hit us with hoes and the fighting began,"

'Instead of giving [the land] back, they've fenced it off, and beat civilians who complained.'

U Myint Aung
Pyin Oo Lwin resident



Soldiers duck from the camera near a gate that prompted a clash between troops and residents of Pyin Oo Lwin township on January 28. Photo: Si Thu Lwin

U Myint Aung, a resident, told *The Myanmar Times*.

One of the many civilians injured in the fracas is still receiving treatment at Pyin Oo Lwin Hospital.

"They grabbed my hair and hit my face and kicked me. A lot of my hair came out," said Ma Yon Ei Phyu, a 10th-standard student who received medical treatment.

U Myint Aung said the military had failed to return the land as promised.

"The country is in a democratic transition and the army has publicly announced that all confiscated land now unused would be restored to its owners. They have not built on this land, but instead of giving it back, they've fenced it off, and beat civilians who complained."

Two soldiers injured in the clash are now being treated at a military hospital.

Last August, the Military Technological College also served notice on farmers in Nyankwal village to vacate land they had been cultivating, claiming it was owned by the military.

"This land has been owned by the military since 1952, in return for compensation with land in Moekyo and Moekyo Kwatthit villages," a sergeant at the college who refused to be identified told *The Myanmar Times*. "We've observed that some illegal land transaction have taken place on military land at Kantomin, and have filed lawsuits accordingly."

He added that the gate would not be closed permanently. "Access will be allowed day and night. Security will be posted there. There will be no building project. It is up to our superiors whether or not the residents can continue living there." - Translation by Zar Zar Soe



Congratulations to our daughter/sister Winnie aka Win Ei Khine, executive director of Maple Trading Co., Ltd and founder of Streamline Training-Learning Centre (STLC), for being awarded for the HIDA Success Story Contest at the 9th World Convention of HIDA/AOTS Alumni Societies which was held in Tokyo on 29th, October, 2014. We are so much proud to have you as our daughter/sister for your outstanding achievement.

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Brother - Tun Aung Win
Sisters - Thet Su Zin Win and Zin Mee Zin Win
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Members of the Tatmadaw take part in a parade to mark Independence Day in Nay Pyi Taw on January 4. Photo: Aung Htay Hlaing

Military proposes 5.5pc budget increase

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THE military has sought approval for a 5.5 percent budget increase in 2015-16, with the additional K137 billion to be used to raise soldiers' wages in line with a salary increase for civil servants.

Minister for Defence Lieutenant General Wai Lwin submitted the K2.750 trillion budget to the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw on January 26.

Of the proposed budget, 51.5pc is earmarked for salaries and allowances and 33.4pc for military expenditure. Construction spending will amount to more than 9pc, while 4pc will go on education and healthcare for soldiers' families, amounting to K17 billion and K90 billion respectively. The remaining allocations are for debt repayment and office equipment.

Spending on military education and healthcare will rise by K6 billion and about K3 billion respectively.

Lt Gen Wai Lwin said 29pc of the budget is earmarked for vehicles, warships, armoured cars and heavy weapons.

Parliament will discuss the budget proposal, as well as that of other ministries, over the coming weeks (**see related story below**).

In previous years, proposals to reduce defence spending have been voted down by military and Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) representatives, and the ministry's budget requests approved.

The Ministry of Defence budget was K1.181 trillion in 2011-12, K1.887 trillion in 2012-13, K2.222 trillion in 2013-14 and K2.613 trillion in 2014-15. While the military's total budget has increased under the U Thein Sein government, it has fallen sharply relative to the size of the overall budget.

In 2011-12 the military received about 23pc of the total budget but that had almost halved, to about 12pc, by 2014-15.

- Translation by Zar Zar Soe

Deficit to rise as government seeks \$3 billion for pay rises

National income fails to keep up with strong spending growth as government outlines big social spending plan



HTOO THANT

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PRESIDENT U Thein Sein's last budget before the election is a bonanza for the public. Spending will rise in education, health, water quality, the agricultural sector and electricity supply as the percentage of the budget spent on the military continues to fall.

Presenting the budget proposals to the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw on January 26, Minister for Finance U Win Shein said the budget also contained allocations to raise civil service and military salaries.

While both foreign debt and the budget deficit are set to rise, U Win Shein insisted they would remain at acceptable levels.

"As we seek to become a modernised and developed country, we cannot draw up a budget with no deficit. But we can keep it to about 5pc of GDP," he said.

National income is expected to increase only 0.65 percent this year, while spending is set to rise by 7.12 percent, pushing the deficit-to-GDP ratio out to between 4pc and 5pc of GDP, he said.

The deficit in 2015-16 is expected to be about K3 trillion (US\$2.922 billion) - with K17 trillion in income and K20 trillion in expenditure - and the total economy is estimated at about K73.3 trillion.

In a move likely to intensify interest in plans to raise government salaries, U Win Shein said the government would spend K3.039 trillion on rises for 1.4 million civil servants and military personnel.

In response to criticism that increasing civil servants' salaries is inflationary and hurts the rest of the population, U Win Shein called on "all sectors" to work together in finding solutions "to the difficulties that may arise as a consequence of raising salaries".

Foreign debt reached K20 trillion last September, up from K16 trillion when the government took office. The ratio between GDP and the foreign debt will be about 27pc, but the government will keep it below 50pc, he said.

The Ministry of Commerce has also predicted that the trade deficit for the coming year will exceed K4 trillion, with inflation predicted to reach as high as 8.1pc, and the kyat approaching K1020 to the dollar.

To increase electricity supply, the Ministry of Electrical Power plans to spend K2.465 trillion, including foreign loans, making it

the fourth-largest spender after the ministries of finance, energy and defence (**see related story above**).

The government has appropriated K1.702 trillion to fill the deficit in regions and states, and K119 billion in financial aid for a special fund for rural development.

7.12%

Increase in spending in the proposed 2015-16 budget, up from about K20 trillion in 2014-15

He said K1.4 trillion has been appropriated for education, up by more than K251 billion from last year's K1.1 trillion. The extra funding will go to hire more than 50,000 additional teachers, including 16,800 for primary schools, 30,000 for middle schools and 10,000 for high schools.

The free education system launched in recent years for primary and middle-school students will be extended to higher education in the coming year under the

National Education Law. More than K18.4 billion has been appropriated to provide free textbooks to primary school pupils, as well as exercise books and a uniform. Middle school students will receive K6.63 billion for their school fees and membership fees for Parent and Teacher Associations, and K3.93 billion for textbooks.

Another K14.5 billion has been appropriated for university stipends and scholarships, and K1.9 billion in support of students in government technical institutes and government technical schools run by the Ministry of Science and Technology.

U Win Shein said K757.437 billion had been appropriated for health, an increase of more than K48 billion over this year's K708.949 billion.

This will fund the purchase of medical equipment, including two magneto-diagnostic machines, two X-ray machines and 50 electro-surgical machines for government hospitals.

The government will also train an additional 3153 medical staff - including doctors, dentists, and medical technicians - plus 1300 nurses and 2440 basic medical staff.

The health budget also includes K37.492 billion for free medical treatment for government staff.

- Translation by Thiri Min Htun

CRIME IN BRIEF

Actor to go stand trial for murder

The murder trial of actor-director Min Ote Soe will resume on February 4, after the Bahan Township Court transferred the case to the Western District Court.

Min Ote Soe turned himself in to Bahan authorities on December 25, telling them he had grown angry while talking to Ma Nu Nu Yin, aka Tay Nu Yin, 33, the editor of *Tarapar* magazine, about "social matters". He said he pushed, punched and kicked her, after which she collapsed. Attending the scene, Police Major Khin Maung Kyi found the victim dead in a bedroom with wounds all over her body. An autopsy conducted the next day showed she had suffered broken ribs and a badly damaged liver. Min Ote Soe was charged with murder. Contrary to initial reports that he was cousins with the victim, her family has told the media he is not a relative.

Police hunt alleged phone scammer

Police are investigating a report of a scam purchase of mobile phones between friends. A 44-year-old mobile-phone dealer from Pabedan township contacted police after he was asked by another man, whose identity was known to him, to sell him multiple phones.

The seller showed 14 models, 66 phones in all, with a total value of almost K1.2 million. Later the buyer picked up the phones and paid with a bag of what was thought to be 12 bundles of K1000 notes, each containing 100 pieces, before quickly departing in a taxi for Pyapon township, Ayeyarwady Region. On later inspection the K1000 notes visible from the outside were found to be bookending K20 notes. U Tin Soe, aka Escot, faces charges under section 420 of the Penal Code for dishonestly inducing delivery of property.

Police make series of drug busts

The arrest of a South Dagon man led to a string of drug busts in Mingalar Taung Nyunt township on the evening of January 19, according to police.

After U San Yu Maung was searched at the entrance to Mingalar Market, he was allegedly found to be carrying 15 WY-branded yaba, or methamphetamine, pills hidden in a plastic bag inside a cigarette pack. The investigation led police to inspect a taxi which arrived soon after at Bagan Lone Kyun in Tapyay Kone ward. When the driver of the vehicle tried to speed away, police pursued it to Yankin township and caught U Hlaing Kyaw Htun, 27, allegedly with 80 WY tablets in a plastic bag in his pocket at Moegaung Pagoda compound. Also arrested was passenger U Lin Lin Htike, 29, of North Okkalapa township, allegedly in possession of 200 WY tablets as well as K39,500. Similarly, Mingalar Taung Nyunt police have arrested U Than Htike Lwin, 24, of Tarmwe township, for allegedly carrying 10 WY tablets.

Man crushed by falling paddy bags

Bayintnaung police are investigating after a man was crushed to death when 20 paddy bags fell on him while he was working alongside co-workers.

Myo Thant, 33, of Hlaing Tharyar township was rushed to Insein Hospital, where he died during treatment. - Toe Wai Aung, translation by Khant Lin Oo



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New team resumes search for bell



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FOUR months after the latest search for the fabled Dhammazedi Bell resulted in claims of discovery, revelations of failure and accusations of fundraising fraud, a new team is having a go at the nation's favourite treasure-hunt.

A team led by former navy officer U Kyaw Win quietly began searching for the bell on January 12 in the waters near the Thanlyin oil refinery, at the confluence of Yangon River, Bago River and Pazundaung Creek. The search stopped on January 20, but U Kyaw Win has vowed to continue, using his own funds, until the bell is found.

"If I found the bell, I will first inform the government and then I will continue until the end [of the salvage effort] if they instruct me," U Kyaw Win said.

So far he said the expedition has cost him K40,000 a day for a ship rental and other expenses, plus K800,000 for a machine to measure the depth of the notoriously cloudy waters, as well as K250,000 a day for a dive team.

Cast in the 15th century, the bell is reputed to be the world's largest, at about 270 tonnes. However, it is thought to have laid at the bottom of the river since a failed attempt by the Portuguese in 1608 to take it from Shwedagon Pagoda to Thanlyin, where it was to be melted down and made into cannons.

No one knows exactly where it rests, however, and several attempts to find and raise it since the late 1980s ended in failure.

A 2014 search, organised by U San



Members of a team searching for the Dhammazedi Bell stand on a dredger in the Yangon River on August 27, 2014. Photo: AFP

Linn, U Soe Thein and U Win Myint, raised more than K150 million from corporate and private donations. The undertaking drew large, captivated crowds to the dive sight - even though there was nothing to see from shore - and involved not only local monks but also vegetarianism, a communion with a golden underwater dragon and divers brought in from Kawthoung, Tanintharyi Region.

After "asking permission from all noble persons and saints", U San Linn claimed on August 26 the team had found the bell and would raise it. But it soon emerged that no other member of the team knew what he was talking about, and the mission ended on September 18 with no bell found. At the end of the search, the only thing that had been raised was a number of questions over just what U San Linn did with everyone's money.

U Win Myint, who contributed to

that failed effort, said he has since been developing his own plan to locate the bell, but is willing to join forces with U Kyaw Win if required - or with anyone else with experience of the hunt.

"If he [U Kyaw Win] hasn't found it after one month has passed, I will apply for approval from the Yangon Region government and keep

'It is impossible to find the bell individually, whatever their search method.'

U Chit San Win
Historian and writer

searching for the bell. I do believe one day we will find it but we need to combine our strength. That's why I have already contacted U Kyaw Win and all who have been involved in previous searches," U Win Myint said.

One of those individuals is historian and writer U Chit San Win, who said not only cooperation but also input from experts will be needed if the bell is to be found.

"Actually, he [U Kyaw Win] should first take advice from historians to confirm the point where the bell really is. He should also work together with scientists and explore a wide range of possibilities," U Chit San Win said.

"As far as we know, the bell could be anywhere within a large area. Instead of working individually, searchers should work together after historians and scientists have worked to pinpoint a likely location," U Chit San Win said.

He dismissed the prospect of the bell being raised through supernatural assistance - an apparent rebuttal to the 2014 expedition and its otherworldly methods used to divine the bell's location.

"It is impossible to find the bell individually, whatever their search method," he said.

U Soe Thein, chair of the Mon Literature and Culture Committee, said the group was not getting its hopes up over the current expedition. "We've heard that U Kyaw Win hasn't enough funding and his searching methods look unlikely to find the bell. I would say it's just a distant hope."

U Kyaw Lwin Oo, director of the Department of Archaeology, National Museum and Library, refused to comment on the search, saying his department had not yet received any notification of the current round of hunting.

- Translation by Zar Zar Soe

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Youth centre on track for Union Day launch

A NATIONAL youth centre could open as early as Union Day, February 12, the government has announced. Addressing civil society organisations at Myanmar Peace Center last week, Minister for the President's Office U Aung Min said he looked forward to opening the Union Youth Centre as soon as possible.

Based at the Livestock and Veterinary University in Insein township, the centre will be used for youth-related activities and will feature a library, internet access, and meeting and conference facilities.

U Aung Min said the centre could serve as the forum for discussions between young people and the government about youth-related policy.

Centre organiser Ko Thet Swe said preparations were almost complete, but the date of the opening had yet to be selected. "We still have to choose a logo, but we aim to be open in time for Union Day, February 12," he said.

He added that while the centre is being built with government support on state-owned land, it will be run for the most part by young people independent of the government.

A 15-member board will comprise five representatives each from the government, young people, and experts agreed by both sides. Participants are expected to ensure that the concerns of young people are reflected in the formation of government policies on education, economic and social development, politics, the environment, and youth affairs. - Aung Kyaw Min

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KYAIKHTO, MON STATE

Ancient silver pieces found in Mon State

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RENOVATIONS are usually a money pit, but for one homeowner in Mon State they've turned up a valuable find.

U Maung Win, of Bo Yar Gyi village, Kyaikhto township, was digging a foundation for his house's new kitchen on January 20 when he discovered a 2-inch silver container shaped like a mythical animal. Inside were 16 coin-like objects made of silver. After examining them he reported the find to the Kyaikhto township administration office.



These 16 silver pieces were found in Kyaikhto township. Photo: Supplied

"The associate director of the Department of Archeological, National Museum and Library and I went to inspect," said U Min Nwe Soe, Mon State's minister for planning and the economy. "The Bo Yar Gyi administrator and team will keep the container found from the dig site permanently."

The silver pieces weigh 816.465 grams in total and will be bought by the state for a total of K960,000, U Min Nwe Soe said. "We will find a donor to buy them," he said.

The Bo Yar Gyi village administrator will keep the container temporarily until the government decides where the archaeological find should be kept.

U Aung Naing Moe, associate director of the archeology department, told *The Myanmar Times* that ancient artifacts are often found in this area. He also hesitated to label them coins.

"Those are silver block pieces, not coins and we haven't figured out the design. They can be called money only after the Ministry of Mines and experts inspect them," he said.

"We know they are ancient but there are few markings so it's hard to guess at the moment what era they come from."

- Translation by Khant Lin Oo



A police officer takes a photo of a former political prisoner staging a protest at the Chinese consulate. Photo: Si Thu Lwin

Solo Letpadaung protester eludes guards at Chinese consulate in MDY

SITHU LWIN
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A FORMER political prisoner last week eluded tight security to stage a solo protest outside the Chinese consulate in Mandalay.

Ko Yar Zar, an activist from

Monywa, took advantage of a 10-minute absence by the guards normally stationed outside the consulate to stage the January 16 protest, holding placards opposing the Letpadaung mine.

The placards also urged the government to resolve the country's

"political crisis", and he shouted slogans calling on members of the government and parliament to resign their posts.

When approached by a police officer Ko Yar Zar fled on a motorbike. He was later charged by police in Chan Aye Thar San township.

- Translation by Zar Zar Soe

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Cruise liner visitors hit a new record in 2014

EIEITHU



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A SURGE in the number of ocean cruise liners visiting Myanmar last year has spurred calls for a dedicated terminal for passenger ships to dock.

U Thet Lwin Toh, managing director of Myanmar Voyages, said he expects 20 cruise ships to dock this year, although a number are not yet confirmed.

Passenger cruisers started docking in Myanmar in 1995, but in small numbers. In 2011 the number grew to

11 ships, with 4558 passengers, and last year there were 18,611 passengers, according to the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism - by far the highest number to date in a single calendar year.

But accommodating the giant ocean liners is not easy.

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Increase in cruise visitor arrivals between 2011 and 2014

Thilawa can take both cargo vessels and cruise ships, but prefers freight, says U Thet Lwin Toh.

"They don't want to favour cruise ships because they need more security for passengers than for goods," he said.

"We would like a special terminal for cruise ships, but it will cost a lot. If we had the necessary infrastructure and services, more cruise ships would come."

He said their passengers would help to promote Myanmar as a destination to other potential visitors, particularly in the under-tapped North American market.

"American tourists are the most numerous among the passengers, and they will stay in Myanmar for up to four days if ships dock here," he said.



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Naga zone expansion plan sparks protests, petitions

Naga groups launch campaign to expand self-administered zone to include Khamti and Homalin



LUN MIN MANG

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A RECENT proposal to expand the size of the Naga Self-Administered Zone has provoked intense debate in northern Sagaing Region, with residents in Homalin protesting against being integrated into the autonomous region.

The proposal has split the region among ethnic lines, with non-Naga residents mostly opposed to the idea. However, it has been taken up by a local non-government organisation, the Naga National Affairs Council, which says it plans to begin lobbying the government and parliament on the issue.

The controversy began in November 2014 when two research papers on the issue were presented at the Naga National Conference (NNC) in Khamti. The papers said Khamti and Homalin townships had previously been part of what was known as the Naga Hills District and should be integrated into the self-administered zone.

The Naga Self-Administered Zone was created under the 2008

constitution and includes Layshi, Lahe and Nanyun townships.

The expansion proposal has prompted concern among some residents of Khamti and Homalin, who want the townships to remain under the jurisdiction of the Sagaing Region government rather than the ethnic Naga administration.

As well as ethnic Naga, the two townships are home to significant Shan, Chin and Bamar populations.

On January 11, thousands of residents of Homalin protested against the proposed expansion, according to U Naing Naing Kyaw, a member of a committee formed to oppose the plan.

He said attempts to expand the self-administered zone would exacerbate ethnic tensions in the area.

"Thousands of people in Homalin protested on January 11 and we have launched a petition that has already been signed by about 150,000 people from Homalin and Khamti," he said.

A copy of the petition has been sent to Homalin Pyithu Hluttaw representative U Aye as well as the President's Office, parliament and interested groups, he said.

Naga National Affairs Council joint secretary U Shuu Maung said the group had not asked the government to change the boundaries of the self-administered zone but planned to do so in the future.

"It is still just a proposal but we are considering how to move forward with it," he said. "We have the right to claim our lost land."

The Naga Self-Administered Zone is one of six self-administered areas formed under the 2008 constitution, and the only one in Sagaing Region.

The constitution gives self-administered zones and divisions their own administration - known as a leading body - with some governance responsibilities. Under the constitution, the president has the authority to amend the boundaries of a self-administered zone on the recommendation of the chief minister of the region or state.

Before pushing the regional and Union governments for change, U Shuu Maung said the council would first conduct an assessment to see whether incorporating Khamti and Homalin into the zone was practical.

"We will not just demand the expansion based on emotion. Instead, we will go step by step after conducting the work on the ground."

While he declined to say when the council would request the change, U Shuu Maung said that it would soon be raised with regional and national governments and parliaments.

"A lead committee will be given responsibility for making the request," he said.

U Shuu Maung said the council understands the concerns and fears of residents who protested against the proposal, but declined to comment further.

Bird species found in Myanmar for first time

CONSERVATIONISTS have identified 20 new species of birds found in Myanmar. Daw Thiri Dae We Aung, an executive member of the Myanmar Bird and Nature Society, said these included seven species never previously spotted in Southeast Asia.

She said they had based their study on the work of Craig Robson, the world-renowned Asian bird expert who has compiled a field guide to the birds of Southeast Asia.

"Robson's book lists a total of 1094 bird species in Myanmar, as of 2011. These new findings bring the total to 1114," said Daw Thiri Dae We Aung, who is also the conservation manager of the Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association.

The new species were found by members of Myeik University, the MBNS, the Wildlife Conservation Society, Bird Tour Asia, the Wildlife Sanctuary (Putao), and Flora and Fauna International between 2010 and 2014.

They hope the discoveries will be added to a forestry department list that currently includes just 1056 bird species.

MBNS vice chair U Thein Aung said they would send the updated list of species to the Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry's Nature and Wildlife Conservation Division. "If they agree with our list, the official bird list will be updated," he said. - *Aye Sapay Phyu*

Home rule: Myanmar's self-administered areas

Naga Self-Administered Zone
Leshi, Lahe and Nanyun townships, Sagaing Region

Danu Self-Administered Zone
Ywangan and Pindaya townships, Shan State

Pa-O Self-Administered Zone
Ho Pong, Hsi Hseng and Pinlaung townships, Shan State

Pa Laung Self-Administered Zone
Namhsan and Manton townships, Shan State

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				OK Duster Moo-Set 18in/ 24in 10% Off	LION STAR Living Broom with Handle 10% Off

AUNG SAN	☎ 01-253022, 394765 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	MYAY NI GHONE	☎ 01-510697 (9:00AM to 10:00PM)	THAMINE	☎ 01-654566 (9:00AM to 10:00PM)	19TH STREET (MANDALAY)	☎ 02-61139, 61240 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)
47TH STREET	☎ 01-200026, 299746 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	ZAWANA	☎ 01-564532 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	JUNCTION SQUARE	☎ 01-527053 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	maxfactory	
JUNCTION 8	☎ 01-650776 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	SHWE MYA YAR	☎ 01-294063 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	STAR CITY (THANLYIN)	☎ 056-23150/51/52/53 (10:00AM to 9:00PM)	maxfactory	
FMI CITY	☎ 01-682323 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	CHINATOWN POINT	☎ 01-215560-63 (9:00AM to 10:00PM)	AKK (SHOPPING MALL)	☎ 01-8500915 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	GOLDEN VALLEY	☎ 01-523840-43 (9:00AM to 10:00PM)
YANKIN CENTRE	☎ 01-400284 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	JUNCTION MAW TIN	☎ 01-218159 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	SOUTH DAGON	☎ 01-8100727 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	PARKSON FMI	☎ 01-246859, 240394 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)

Views

Wanbao must stick to its commitments

**DANIEL AGUIRRE
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MANY are questioning whether anyone will be held accountable for the killing of Daw Khin Win, who was shot during a December 22 protest near the Letpadaung copper mine. But what are the responsibilities of the mine's investors in relation to the dispute?

The Letpadaung mine is a joint venture between Chinese company Wanbao and the military-owned Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited. The mine operator, Myanmar Wanbao, has made a public commitment to sustainable development and human rights in the final draft of its comprehensive Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA), which was released on 25 June 2014. According to the company's website, the Letpadaung project "will play a role model in environmental conservation sector of the Union of Myanmar".

But what kind of role model for responsible investment will Letpadaung really be? The answer will provide vital clues to the direction of Myanmar's economic development, and whether the unlocking of the country's enormous resources improves the lives of millions of people or prompts another "resource curse" - whereby powerful political and economic actors scramble for wealth over the backs of ordinary people.

Residents of Monywa, some 100 kilometres west of Mandalay, have complained for years about unlawful land confiscations and environmental damage caused by the mine's operations. In November 2012, dozens of protesters were severely burned when riot police allegedly used white phosphorous.

One indicator of Wanbao's commitment to responsible conduct is how it responds to Daw Khin Win's killing and the protests over the mine's operation. Daw Khin Win was killed on December 22, when she and other residents tried to stop Wanbao workers from fencing off their land for development. The protesters faced company security as well as local police.

An initial investigation by the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission ruled that the police were responsible for the shooting and recommended legal action. So far, however, the authorities have been reluctant to investigate. Instead, they have prosecuted protesters demanding justice for Daw Khin Win. But the state's failure to protect human rights does not absolve the company of all responsibility, however.

Myanmar Wanbao promised that it would not come to this. The company's ESIA outlines its commitment to local laws as well as international standards on law enforcement in securing its operations. In the assessment, the company agreed to develop a security plan in order to prevent or mitigate any threats identified in its risk assessment. "The objective of the security plan will be to ensure that security is deployed in a way that respects and protects human dignity and human rights, avoids creating conflict and addresses security threats in as peaceful a way as possible," it said.

The agreement's social management plan goes into detail on Wanbao's responsibility in a section on "security and the use of force". The company has committed, in line with international standards,

to ensuring that force is used only as a last resort where necessary to proportionately mitigate risks identified in the company's risk assessment. They have agreed to provide the necessary training for security in this regard.

The company has acknowledged the concerns associated with project security in weak governance zones. Its ESIA states that government security services protecting its operations must respect international guidelines on the use of force. Wanbao also committed to conducting due diligence on all security providers in order "to avoid retaining the services of any group or individual that has previously been responsible for violations of human rights or humanitarian law". These are important preventative measures for any company operating in Myanmar, where the rule of law and human rights are not well developed.

Wanbao has repeatedly claimed that it has gone beyond its legal requirements. "Even though Myanmar Wanbao has met its legal requirements and has paid compensation and subsidies, the company has gone further to safeguard the livelihood and well-being of its community," it says.

Given the continued allegations of human rights abuse at the Letpadaung mine, it is important for Wanbao to demonstrate that it has conducted due diligence and undertaken the remedial measures outlined in its ESIA. Wanbao should make public its risk assessment and its security plan to avoid being perceived as complicit in human rights abuses. Its ESIA demands that a full report is submitted to its office if a firearm is discharged, as it was during the December 22 protest at which Daw Khin Win was killed. This report should be made public.

Now that human rights abuses related to security and the use of force have occurred, the company should make good on its commitment to create an effective community complaints mechanism. The ESIA explains that this mechanism would allow the community to express concerns about security. It also states that Wanbao will investigate allegations raised and take action to prevent their reoccurrence. It is vital that Wanbao be seen as implementing its own rules and helping the local community come to terms with recent events.

The establishment of this mechanism is important in Myanmar, where the police and judiciary are often unwilling or unable to address these issues. This has certainly been the case so far with the killing of Daw Khin Win.

Wanbao should work closely with civil society to improve its relations with the local community and ensure respect for their rights. It should immediately implement the terms of its ESIA. If it has done so, Wanbao should make this public and explain why events unfolded in a manner that has led to accusations of human rights abuses.

The latest violence at Letpadaung shows that the government needs to carefully monitor the implementation of ESIA's to ensure that they represent meaningful commitments and not just exercises in public relations.

Daniel Aguirre is the international legal adviser for the International Commission of Jurists in Yangon. Irene Pietropaoli is an independent consultant and legal researcher based in Yangon.

Avoiding conflict with investment that pa

Despite the conflict at Letpadaung, the interests of mining firms and communities



MIKE MARTIN ANDREA MALOUF

RECENT clashes at the Letpadaung copper mine that left one woman dead have pushed tensions in the area to breaking point. Neither side seems willing to make the concessions needed to end the conflict over the mine.

In light of these events, it is pertinent to ask how these types of problems can be avoided. The interests of mining firms and local populations are not always completely opposed: There is a way to negotiate mutually acceptable outcomes and although the business of understanding and negotiating with local communities is time-consuming and difficult, the philosophy is not.

It is also common sense. A little investment in understanding the population who live where you work will save you a mountain of reputational and security issues in the long run. Examples from around the world show us how this process should - and often does - work.

By way of slight caveat, it is worth noting that the period of the project has coincided with rapid political and economic change in Myanmar. The project was designed under the old, non-accountable system of government, and is being held to account under the new, rapidly evolving and slightly more accountable system. The Chinese operators of the project are also learning on the job: China is not a fully democratic country and does not place the same value on ordinary people having a say. In some ways it is still much like the form of government that Myanmar is moving away from.

First, some background. The Letpadaung project is a joint venture between Wanbao, a Chinese firm, the military-owned Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd (MEHL) and Mining Enterprise No 1 (ME1), part of the Union Ministry of Mines. The deal was originally signed between the prime ministers of China and Myanmar in April 2010 and by the end of that year the initial scoping of the project had begun near Monywa. Wanbao operates the project on the ground.

During 2011, land compensation was paid to villagers who were to be moved from their villages to make way for the project. This, however, was based on Wanbao's assessment of the land value, and was administered by township officials, who reportedly forced villagers to sign or thumbprint a "contract" without allowing them to see the document's contents. They were then allegedly further short-changed on the "agreed" compensation amount as well, with some K5000 notes swapped for K500 notes.

After a series of altercations between township officials and villagers - including arrests of protesters and replacement of anti-project village leaders - some decided to relocate. Others opted to remain in their homes, unwilling to accept the amount of compensation forced upon them.

Construction work on the mine started in March 2012 but was stopped in June that year due to civil unrest in



An activist speaks to Letpadaung area residents during a meeting on January 5. Photo: [unintelligible]

the area. To date, it hasn't restarted.

Wanbao then employed an international consulting firm to conduct an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA). Whether this was because ESIA's had been mandated for mining projects in the 2012 Environmental Conservation Law is not known. While the ESIA was supposed to have been based on international standards, the firm that conducted the assessment admitted in its report that these were impossible to achieve in the circumstances surrounding the project.

A little investment in understanding the population who live where you work will save you a mountain of reputational and security issues in the long run.

For example, the study was conducted after the project had started and people had been moved from their land. The government limited the villages that the study was allowed to talk to. The use of Wanbao interpreters and the presence of undercover government officials - who sometimes videotaped consultations with villagers - limited freedom of expression. These, as well as other issues, made it difficult for affected villagers to give what is

known in the industry as free, prior and informed consent.

The ESIA continued over the next 18 months, with Wanbao submitting a draft to the Myanmar government in December 2013. The delay was partly due to major civil unrest: In November 2012, police used white phosphorous grenades on protesting villagers and monks, some of whom suffered severe burns as a result.

In the meantime, President U Thein Sein appointed Daw Aung San Suu Kyi head of a special commission charged with investigating the project. The commission's report was released in March 2013 and recommended increases in land compensation (a total of US\$8 million has been paid to 441 landowners to date) as well as improved environmental and social protections. Wanbao began a series of relatively extensive corporate social responsibility programs that delivered schools, roads, electricity connections, water purification facilities and pagodas to affected communities.

In July 2013, amendments to the production sharing contract between Wanbao, the Myanmar government, MEHL and ME1 were made that decreased Wanbao's profits and increased the Myanmar government's.

ME1 and MEHL, which is owned by the Tatmadaw - an organisation notorious for land rights violations - were made responsible for all consultations with the community and land acquisitions.

In early 2014, the ESIA continued with the same Western consulting firm beginning a further community consultation exercise. It found that the most important issues were compensation for land acquisition, followed by concerns over the environmental

with communities: An ays off for mining firms

es can align – provided investors make a serious effort to understand an area's people and environment



Yu Yu

impact of mining, and opportunities for community development and employment.

The current issues surrounding the project are well known and culminated with the killing of Daw Khin Win on December 22. She was shot while attending a protest against the erection of a fence around land claimed by both the company and the local communities.

The relationship between Wanbao and at least some of the surrounding communities has completely broken down. Tensions are inflamed on all sides and there is no trust. This means that even when reasonable points are made by the communities or reasonable offers are made by the project operators, they are rejected out of hand. We are in a situation where outside activists are involved, a villager has been shot, other villagers have been attacked with white phosphorous grenades and relations between the Chinese and Myanmar governments are being affected.

So how should this process work?

It is not difficult – but it is time-consuming and involves putting more money and effort in at the beginning of a project life-cycle. However, this is repaid several-fold in terms of company reputation, security of the worksite and the absence of work stoppages.

Simply, as soon as a project deal is signed, operators have to launch their ESIA, as legally required. This is the company's opportunity to understand the communities in the area and their concerns. Generally this is part of the assessment, although the "social" usually plays second fiddle to the "environmental". This is because social impacts are usually much more complex than environmental impacts.

up or down depending on the rumours – and resulting in people moving into the area in anticipation of work. In short, social impacts start well before environmental impacts.

Open interaction will improve the operator's understanding of the community but also the community's understanding of the operator. Discussions will then naturally focus on how the community and the operator can work together. The possible interactions between the two are extensive, but include employment, training, social development and any possible land resettlements. It is to be expected that the project will cause significant impositions on the community but it is also to be expected that the communities will foresee benefit through increased opportunities for employment, training and up-skilling, and education. It is, after all, the local communities' project as well.

Following on from this process, and based on the outcomes of the ESIA and engagement process, corporations enact their corporate social responsibility programs – essentially what they are going to do for communities in return for them allowing the corporation to operate in the area. This ensures that communities receive what they want and need, rather than what the company thinks that they should have. Of utmost importance is that the community feels part of any CSR projects that will be implemented. If they are not, there will be very little impact in terms of increasing goodwill.

In reality, the ESIA and the CSR programs are one and the same: They are about understanding and working with the population and environment. Often they come under different budgetary lines but wise companies organise them using the same people and pay for them under the same budget.

Get it right and the company enjoys good relations with its communities – and hence its workforce and contractors, most of whom will come from those communities – as well as fewer work stoppages and less security issues. Security is generated by the communities having a psychological

stake in the project, not by guards keeping the communities away from the project. The opposite – having to pause the project while the population protests against you – costs companies much more than doing it properly in the first place. The costs to Wanbao to date must be astronomical – both to its reputation and bottom line.

Finally, the outcome of the extensive two-way discussions should be enshrined in a social covenant signed between the operator, the communities and the government before any physical construction begins on site. This will set out the responsibilities of the company to the communities and vice versa: The corporate social responsibility program will then be grounded in what the community actually wants. Sensible companies also build in grievance mechanisms, so that both the communities and the company can communicate in a way that minimises tensions. Get this right and the mutual outcomes are considerable.

Myanmar is a country that is "blessed" with natural resources. Dozens of extractive projects are already under way; within a few years there will be hundreds. The revenues that will accrue from these resources could fund the development of Myanmar and lift millions of its people out of poverty. But accusations of land grabs, human rights abuses and allegations of government complicity in both will scare away investors and responsible operators. Corporations must get on top of this. It is not enough to say that the Myanmar government is "handling these issues for us". If a corporation says this, it is its reputation that will inevitably suffer.

As a friend of mine working in mining investment remarked recently, "Not for 15 years will the reputational risk be acceptable [in Myanmar], and by then the Chinese will have taken all the good stuff!"

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A member of the Myanmar Alliance for Transparency and Accountability speaks to a man who was shot by police during a December 22 protest at the Letpadaung mine in Monywa Hospital on January 5. Photo: Yu Yu

Racism, bigotry remain a problem

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SEVENTY years ago on January 27, Allied forces liberated Auschwitz Birkenau, the German Nazi concentration and extermination camp.

More than a million inmates, primarily Jews, were brutally and systematically killed in the place where the Nazis introduced the monstrous concept of "industrialised murder". Among the other victims were non-Jewish Poles, political prisoners, Soviet prisoners of war, Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, disabled persons and Jehovah's witnesses.

Unprecedented in human history, this mass killing was motivated by the perverse, race-based ideology of the Nazis, who sought to track down and kill every last Jew and any others they considered to be inferior.

Humankind united to overcome the Nazi menace. Today, we are being tested again. Minorities everywhere often face bigotry. Sectarian tensions and other forms of intolerance are on the rise. Anti-Semitic attacks continue, with Jews being killed solely because they are Jews. Vulnerable communities around the world continue to bury their dead while living in fear of further violence.

Humankind united to overcome the Nazi menace. Today we are being tested again.

The mission of the United Nations was shaped by the tragedy of World War II and the Holocaust. We are committed to protect the vulnerable, promote fundamental human rights, and uphold the freedom, dignity and worth of every person.

For the past decade, the Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme has mobilised students and educators around the world to help us achieve these goals. We are grateful to our many partners – including Holocaust survivors – who have contributed to this work, which spanned 42 countries in the past year alone.

The violence and bias we see every day are stark reminders of the distance still to travel in upholding human rights, preventing genocide and defending our common humanity. We must redouble our efforts to eradicate the deep roots of hatred and intolerance. People everywhere must unite to stop the cycles of discord and build a world of inclusion and mutual respect.

.....
Ban Ki-moon is secretary-general of the United Nations.

Views

America does a 'good cop, bad cop' routine on Myanmar



ROGER MITTON

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A LOT of fuss is made over the provision that a quarter of the seats in Myanmar's parliament are reserved for the military. Yet relatively little fuss is made over the fact that 100 percent of the seats in Thailand's interim parliament are taken by military men, and 100pc of the ministers in Laos and Vietnam are members of the Communist Party.

It seems that making a fuss over the lack of democracy in parts of this region is done in a curiously selective way by foreign observers, especially those in the United States, the ostensible leader of the free world.

It is a misguided policy and its shortcomings were illustrated by a couple of recent visits to this region by senior officials from the administration of President Barack Obama in Washington.

Before we go further, a caveat should be noted: It is possible that these two emissaries were instructed to play a "bad cop, good cop" routine in order to achieve their goals. If that was the case, then they may be excused. The facts follow - you be the judge.

The first visitor was US assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labour Tom Malinowski - the "bad cop", so to speak - who came here last month for a bit of diplomatic lecturing.

Malinowski's delegation focused on Myanmar's allegedly stalled reforms and other human rights issues.

"There is a great deal of scepticism in some quarters about whether the reform process is continuing and fears about tensions and other problems that might arise in a year in which the election will be first

and foremost in people's minds," said Malinowski.

During talks in Nay Pyi Taw, his team also discussed - verbally arm-twisted might be more apt - other contentious issues like the arrests of journalists and dissidents, the need for judicial reform, and land appropriations.

All well and good - except that Malinowski's message was heavy-handed and excessive, given the parlous state that the country was in less than five years ago, when reforms began. In a nutshell, he charged that President U Thein Sein's government still needs to do much more on the reform front - and do it pretty quickly or else there'll be repercussions from Uncle Sam.

Interestingly, his message was reinforced by a concurrent visit by the UN special rapporteur for Myanmar, Yanghee Lee.

These "you-guys-must-do-better-and-do-it-pronto" warnings provided fodder to those experts in Washington's think tanks whose analytical clairvoyance apparently extends more than 8000 miles.

Their views are valuable in an academic sense, of course, as I fondly recall from my lunches at the Thai Kitchen on K Street with US ambassador to Myanmar Derek Mitchell, when he was at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

But as with journalists, when the opinions of these guys start motivating legislators and driving policy then things can become vexatious.

Malinowski's visit has reinforced the notion that Myanmar's reforms are backsliding. They are not. But try telling that to DC's far-off eggheads like Joshua Kurlantzick, a senior fellow for Southeast Asia at Washington's Council on Foreign Relations.

He recently said, "There are concerns, both within Myanmar and among outside countries, that this year's critical national elections will be waylaid, not allowing the vote to go on freely and fairly."

Well, yes, fine, as could be said about most elections in this region.

But then he goes further and asserts that to ensure Myanmar's elections are held properly and that

other concerns about human rights are dealt with, strong retributive action must be taken - and taken now.

He urges the White House to go beyond Malinowski's public criticism and to freeze aspects of the bilateral relationship until after the elections have been held and a new, fairly elected government is in place.

Most importantly, he advocates stopping further restoration of military-to-military ties until the election is over, so as to signal to the generals that the people's will must prevail, even if the National League for Democracy wins a majority.

Now, let us contrast this bombastic haranguing with a different message, also delivered last month, by America's "good cop" visitor, Daniel R Russel, the assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific affairs.

Speaking in Bangkok, Russel's focus was naturally the lamentable political situation in Thailand, but he also touched on affairs in Myanmar - and did so with a far defter touch than Malinowski. Repeatedly lauding the benefits of a democratic system of government, Russel noted that "while significant challenges remain in Myanmar, we've seen a historic opening-up of that country after decades of isolation".

There was no hint that the historic opening has stalled or is in any way disappointing; rather, he extolled, "It's been dramatic and it's been difficult."

He admitted that there are major challenges ahead but he also declared that after what the reforms have already achieved, he was sure Myanmar's citizens would be unwilling to go backwards.

Said Russel, "I don't think that they want to retreat, and it is both an opportunity and a responsibility for the international community, for Myanmar's neighbours, and for partners like the United States, to help them succeed."

Now, there is a message that makes sense. Far better to take Russel's advice and accentuate the positive, especially when one looks at the backsliding into political medievalism that has occurred in Thailand and still prevails in Laos and Vietnam.

The ceasefire a



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THANKS to the sustained ceasefire in southern Myanmar since 2012, Metta has got its true meaning back.

"Metta" means love or loving kindness in Myanmar language. But it's also a small town in Dawei district, Tanintharyi Region.

Previously it was just a typical village of the kind that one sees throughout rural Myanmar - cows, chicken and pigs wandering among rickety bamboo houses with thatch roofs - with unmistakable signs of poverty, underdevelopment and backwardness.

Despite its beautiful name, Metta is in an area ravaged by war. Like hundreds of other villages scattered throughout the country's conflict areas, it suffered immeasurably over past decades.

Metta's men-folk were subject to forced recruitment by various armed insurgent groups fighting the government in the area. They were constantly on the run so as to avoid being drafted into military service. This meant they could not spend time with and take care of their families.

Fighting often erupted in and around the town. All kinds of illegal taxation were imposed on the villagers by various armed groups. Abuse was rampant. Despite its name, love, or loving kindness, was the rarest commodity in this town.

All of this changed as a result of the ceasefire signed by the government and Karen National Union in January 2012. Metta was to go through a makeover.

During a recent field trip to understand regional development initiatives, an official from the Myanmar Peace Center - himself a former soldier - was shocked to see the changes that had taken place in Metta. It was no longer a village. It is a town, with concrete houses, shops full of goods and satellite dishes.

Curious as to what prompted the dramatic transformation of the town in just a few years, he spoke to



Loikaw and other parts of Kayah State have

a woman - a shopkeeper with five young children. He quizzed her as to why she had so many children, to which she replied, "My husband was never around because of the conflict. It was not just my husband who had to stay out of town, but all of the other able-bodied males as well."

With a smile on her face, she added, "It has been a long time since I last heard the gunfire. We now have peace and my husband can stay with us all the time. That is why we have many children now."

During the visit, a KNU leader told peace centre officials that the group had even stopped its soldiers from hunting in forests near Metta "because the gunfire may frighten the villagers".

The conflict landscape has been transformed by ceasefires alone; official peace talks to resolve the long-standing issue underpinning these conflicts have not yet started. Yet

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Views

and a town called 'love'



benefited from ceasefire agreements signed with armed groups. Photo: Christopher Davy

Since peace returned, security checkpoints have been removed, including those that were manned by the KNU. Along with rice and batteries, other commercial items can now be transported freely. Mines are no longer in use. The price of rice is normal and roads are open 24 hours a day. Villages that were abandoned due to incessant fighting are being repopulated by returnees. Cultivation of commercial fruit, such as durian, has resumed. Commerce has returned and Thandaunggyi is now touted as a potential location for mountain resorts.

Because roads are open 24 hours, villagers do not have to stop in Thandaunggyi overnight when making a trip to Taungoo for shopping or medical treatment. Some rural residents have begun to receive electricity for the first time in their life.

Not all ceasefire areas are like the one in Metta. But through our travels and field trips we have learned that in areas where ceasefires have held the people are already moving on from the hardships they had to endure during the conflict. Most do not understand that it is just a ceasefire and that no formal peace has yet been established. In some areas, they do not care if the political dialogue can be initiated; all they want is for the status quo to remain.

Some villagers tell us that they still see soldiers and would prefer that police maintained law and order instead. They certainly do not wish to see checkpoints return. Sometimes, they ask us to tell the Tatmadaw to be patient and understanding because it is bigger and stronger - a message we often hear from ethnic groups as well.

I rejoiced when I heard the story of how Metta got its true meaning back. This is tempered by the sadness I feel over the fighting and loss of life in Kachin and northern Shan States, where a ceasefire has yet to be signed.

As someone who has been involved deeply in the peace process, I have seen the numerous upsides of the ceasefire and miseries associated with continued fighting. I just wish the "love" we now see in Metta could be emulated throughout Myanmar.

.....
Aung Naing Oo is associate director of the Peace Dialogue Program at the Myanmar Peace Center. The opinions expressed here are his own.

Metta has already got its mojo back. Thanks to cooperation between the government and the KNU, the truce has held. As a result, towns and villages like Metta have returned to normalcy. But it's not only villages in Tanintharyi Region reaping the dividends of ceasefires. In December 2014 I visited Kayah State for the first time. My conversations with shopkeepers, taxi drivers, vendors, monks, politi-

In areas where ceasefires have held the people are already moving on from the hardships they had to endure during the conflict.

cians and activists - a broad cross section of the community - all yielded evidence that the ceasefire there has brought many benefits to residents. They told me that a little over two years ago they did not venture to towns just 25-30 kilometres (15-18 miles) outside the regional capital, Loikaw. Now they can travel day and night without having to worry about security. Roads are being upgraded and commerce has returned. The region has been opened to tourism, creating additional job opportunities. Further south, in the Thandaunggyi area of Kayin State and eastern Bago Region, rice and batteries could not be transported during the conflict without the recommendation of village leaders and military authorities. Rice would be an invaluable supply for the KNU and batteries could be used to detonate bombs. Checkpoints established by both KNU and government security forces were too numerous to count. As a result, transportation was extremely difficult and everything was expensive.

Bo Kyin Maung: BCP leader, freedom fighter



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THOSE interested in Myanmar politics should have heard of the recent passing of Yebaw Tun, also known as Bo Kyin Maung, who was the leader of the Burma Communist Party (BCP). He had headed the BCP since a major split in 1989, when ethnic armed groups rebelled against its leadership.

Prior to joining the BCP he had been involved in the fight for independence from Britain and also the resistance to fascist Japanese rule during World War II.

The BCP was formed in 1939. National leader General Aung San was one of the founding members.

It went underground during Japanese rule. On March 28, 1948 - less than three months after independence - the BCP rebelled against the ruling Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League. However, because of errors by its leadership, the BCP had mostly been confined to the Chinese border by the 1970s.

They had seized this territory in 1968, with support from China, which was retaliating against the anti-Chinese riots the previous year. On January 1 of that year, BCP cadres in China and some ethnic armed groups, together with Chinese volunteers, attacked in force. They subsequently captured territory that became known as the Kokang, Wa, Mong La and Kachin War Zone 101 regions.

During this time Bo Kyin Maung was a member of the BCP politbureau and headed an underground movement in Myanmar. His group was a major player among those who incited the 1988 uprising that eventually spread across the country.

Just a year later, a coup launched by armed ethnic groups forced BCP executive committee members to leave their headquarters at Panghsang in the Wa Region

and take refuge in China.

Since then, Bo Kyin Maung has been the main BCP leader. He tried to re-enter Myanmar by forming an armed group, attacking from Chinese territory.

The first attack was focused on Kokang region. However, the Kokang armed group found out about the plan and invited government troops to help defend its territory. The BCP attack failed.

Later on, the remaining BCP troops tried to establish a foothold at Kan Pai Tee in Kachin State. The China Communist Party helped to transport its troops and heavy weapons from the Kokang area to Kan Pai Tee. But again the attack failed. The last fighting units were abolished and the BCP became an underground movement.

When the soldiers arrived in Kan Pai Tee, Bo Kyin Maung told them why he believed the party had failed. He said, "We should praise the spirit of never giving up and fighting until death, saying we will never lower our flag even if all that is left of the ship is the hull. It is a crime to have left the ship as a hull."

His words were clearly directed at the former party leaders - those who had left the BCP a shadow of its former self.

Bo Kyin Maung lived in China after 1989. He wrote until 2013, and his writings were collected and published in January under the name *People's Power*.

The BCP's underground movement remains covert, so it hard to say how strong it is or what is happening within its leadership. While U Thein Sein's government has held many meetings with armed and unarmed opposition groups, it has not had any meetings with the BCP. The government should allow the BCP to register as a political party. Voters can then decide whether the party will be successful or not.

The path to a successor for Bo Kyin Maung is unclear, as there are no more people from the independence fight left. It is likely that later generation communists - those who served time in the prison on Coco Island, such as Yebaw Phoe Than Gyaung, son of Ludu U Hla and Ludu Daw Amar - will head the BCP in the future.

- Translation by Thiri Min Htun

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Business

Brake on car sales comes with surprise parking policy



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CAR importers are complaining about delays with paperwork following Yangon Region changes to vehicle import policies.

Purchasers of imported cars must now obtain a recommendation letter from their local township administration officer proving they have adequate space to park a car.

The policy was put in place in December 2014 to attempt to limit the number of vehicles on the road, though industry insiders say in some cases it has become an unnecessary bottleneck for sales.

Officials say that some townships have taken very different positions on issuing these letters than others.

‘There are nine quarters at play in the township, but we have not issued any letter claiming there is parking space available.’

U Myo Naing

Kyauktada township representative

Downtown's Kyauktada township has lots of residents but has not yet issued a single recommendation for parking letter, according to township administrative officer U Myo Naing.

“There are nine quarters at play in the township, but we have not is-

sued any letter claiming there is a parking space available,” he said.

An effect of the requirement for a letter is to push importers to switch their system of imports.

One method that has become increasingly popular is the vehicle entrusting program, where a person can turn in a clunker to the government and receive a permit to import another vehicle.

This entrusting program has so far been exempt from the requirement for township proof of a parking space.

Aung Gabar sales supervisor Ma Zar Zar said customers have not been able to make purchases if they must get parking proof.

“Perhaps 10 customers are on the waiting list, but they have not been able to buy - though they have said they will return with recommendation letters,” he said.

Mercedes Myanmar head of sales U Aung Thet Lwin said he also has many customers who have had difficulty securing the letters from township authorities.

“Some are waiting for recommendation letters. They have already chosen the car they want from the showroom and paid in advance, but they can't take the car,” he said.

After waiting three weeks, some customers have been able to receive the recommendation letters and some are still waiting.

“I don't think people are sure yet about the procedure for issuing the letters, and the township administration offices seem to differ from one township to the next,” he said.

“Some have begun issuing recommendation letters after a wait of about three weeks, but others haven't given them out.”

Car imports have increased drastically to Myanmar following revamps to import policies after the transition to civilian government.

However, commuting times have increased for many residents, and there has been growing popular support for attempts to slow down the congestion.

IN PICTURES

Photo: Thiri Lu

Farmers are keen to maximise value out of their harvests, but are often forced to sell rice when prices are lowest. NGOs are working with ways to provide short-term credit so farmers can get more out of their harvest. *For more see Page 29*



Local energy projects w despite oil price collap



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INTERNATIONAL companies will not shy away wholesale from Myanmar exploration and production projects despite a collapse in global crude oil prices, according to experts.

A panel discussion at the 5th Myanmar Oil and Gas Conference in Yangon on January 29 discussed the possibility that industry players may pull back on investment plans.

While Myanmar is not immune to what happens on the international market, it also occupies a strategic position for foreign companies. Many of the projects are still at the earliest stages and are years away, while more existing production in the country is natural gas rather than crude oil, which will be somewhat insulated from the collapse.

Nevertheless, Myanmar will not be exempt from what happens around the world.

“The falling oil prices have global impact,” said Xavier Preel, Myanmar general manager of French firm Total E&P.

“Every oil company needs to

choose the best country to invest in. For Total, we are not going to reduce the production level [of our Myanmar offshore] Yadana project.”

Total is one of the world's largest oil and gas firms, and has been operating in Myanmar for over 20 years. Still, governments must appreciate that profit margins are being squeezed by tumbling prices, said Mr Preel.

“It is important that investors receive encouragement from the government to continue investing and exploring, even though there is no impact on our current production assets,” he said.

Internationally, crude oil prices had been relatively stable at over US\$100 a barrel until the middle of 2014, when it fell to less than \$50 within six months. As of January 30th, benchmark WTI traded at \$44.53 and Brent at \$49.13.

Around the world, oil companies have been reviewing their investment plans, with some suspending projects and cutting expenses, though so far there has been little impact in Myanmar.

“We will not go back,” said Tom Kelly, country manager of Berlanga International. The firm signed a production sharing contract for an offshore block in early December, and has revealed an investment plan calling for expenditures

of \$153 million over six years at the M-8 offshore block.

“We will continue with the commitment we agreed on with the government,” he said. “I don't think the price will be lower for the long term. It will come up.”

“We are very happy to be here in Myanmar.”

While most petroleum companies are so far adamant they are not scaling back their local plans, service companies say they also face significant risk.

“Service companies are always the first ones to be hit by a change in oil prices. A price below \$50 is such a surprise to the world, and here in Myanmar we are not isolated,” said Daw Hnin Phyu Phyu, managing director of Lion Energy. “The [foreign] companies will cut their costs, and perhaps we can provide services at a cheaper price.”

Outside of the panel, *The Myanmar Times* asked an official from state-owned Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise about the effect of falling prices.

“The will be some effects from international oil price fluctuations. International companies may be slow to continue their projects or investments, but we encourage them to continue as planned,” he said.

Already there have been tentative signs that some firms may

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Yangon airport landing plans for expansion by end of 2015

BUSINESS 28



Another contender enter race for the tallest building

PROPERTY 34

Exchange Rates (January 30 close)		
Currency	Buying	Selling
Euro	K1140	K1155
Malaysia Ringitt	K307	K308
Singapore Dollar	K758	K766
Thai Baht	K31	K32
US Dollar	K1024	K1027



ill continue e, say experts

slow down their plans.

Thai state-owned PTT Exploration and Production representatives have been quoted in international media saying they may slow investment in Myanmar's M-3 project as global prices continue falling.

Last week, PTT told *The Myanmar Times* in a statement, "PTTEP is not going to stop M-3 project but we may consider its investment plans to temporarily put a hold on new investment projects including M-3 if oil price is still volatile and continue to fall further."

The firm experienced minimal impact on existing operations in 2014 from falling prices as about 70 percent of its total sales are in gas, it added.

'A price below \$50 [a barrel] is such a surprise to the world, and here in Myanmar we are not isolated.'

Daw Hnin Phyu Phyu
Lion Energy

There are currently 17 onshore and four offshore oil and gas projects producing in Myanmar. The projects are owned by a number of companies, including heavy foreign involvement in the offshore projects.

Malaysian state-owned firm Petronas also claimed no plans at the moment to reduce production at its Yetagun project, one of Myanmar's large offshore gas production fields.

"We have a long-term contract with our customers and gas will be supplied as usual," it said in a statement.

Myanmar is currently producing 8000 barrels per day of crude and 55 million cubic feet of natural gas from onshore projects, and 7000 barrels of condensate and 2 billion cubic feet of natural gas from offshore projects, according to information from the Ministry of Energy.

The important offshore production sharing agreements, between international companies, their local partners, and Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, have been delayed for several months. The agreements will provide the rules under which exploration and production can take place.

A total of 14 onshore and four offshore PSCs were signed last year, but there are still 16 more offshore PSCs to go.

Tax stickers a restaurant headache

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BUYING food at a local restaurant is supposed to be subject to a 5 percent commercial tax, though it is still being unevenly applied.

Late last year the Internal Revenue Department began a program requiring restaurants to purchase rolls of stamps, which are then affixed to restaurant receipts to prove to customers they are paying tax.

Customers say not all restaurants are following the policy, with many trying to sneak around the rules by, for instance, not affixing stamps.

The individual stamps run from K50 to K10,000 each. So for instance a meal costing K1000 is required to affix a K50 label - though whether the restaurant does is another matter.

Some customers say they feel cheated when a restaurant includes a "tax" on the receipt, but give no stamps, and therefore no guarantee the taxes are actually being paid.

Internal Revenue Department



Yangon deputy director U Myo Min Zaw said the department has received complaints that some restaurants are not following the rules.

"Consumers should inform us when they find a restaurant not following official policy," he said.

Restaurants in Yangon Region under the auspices of Yangon City Development Committee are the first to be forced to pay the stamps, though eventually consumers in other states and regions will also be required to pay the tax at restaurants.

U Myo Min Zaw said so far there has not been a problem of insufficient labels, adding there are government teams investigating each restaurant for transgressors.

To date it is an education period, with restaurants able to receive two warnings before being charged a penalty on a third transgression.

Restaurant industry officials say enforcement of the tax and the stamps used to prove tax payment has been uneven.

Myanmar Restaurant Association deputy chair U Nay Lin said that while most restaurants are good corporate citizens, some are not collecting the tax.

"I hear some customers thinking we are cheating them without contributing to the government. This is not the level we are on. Most of us do not do this," he said.

It is unfair the enforcement seems to be focused on restaurants, when there are many tea shops getting away without paying - some of whom generate more revenue than larger restaurants.

Restaurants are also facing high costs for

electricity, water and land rentals, as well as income taxes, that many tea shops do not face, he said.

"We worry about these things now that we have to compete with international fast-food chains coming here," he said.

Some restaurants have also tried to avoid raising prices by directly including the cost of the tax in the old menu price, he added.

A manager of Y2T Restaurant in Kyauktada township said its customers are not being charged with a separate tax, though they reduced the cost of each meal by K50 to K100, with that amount then being added back in tax and sent to the Internal Revenue Department.

"The tax rate is only K1000 for a cost of K20,000," she said. "There are not many customers who spend K20,000 in our restaurants. Most of them use a smaller amount."

While there are restaurants not following the new rules on using stamps to prove tax payments, the Internal Revenue Department is receiving more revenue with this process.

It generated about K2.5 billion from restaurants out of a total K3 trillion last year, which included a range of taxes, said U Min Htut, an official from the Internal Revenue Department.

It cut the applicable restaurant commercial tax from 10pc to 5pc in 2012.

The department has targeted increasing tax revenues to K4 trillion in 2014-15 financial year, though about K1.9 trillion had been collected from April to October, U Min Htut said previously. The department will also charge a penalty of 10pc of tax value if someone fails to register or report starting a business in order to avoid or delay taxes.

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A 2015 finish planned for first part of Yangon airport expansion



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THE first part of the new Yangon International Airport terminal building will be completed this year, helping to alleviate strained capacity at the country's main international gateway, according to Sulaiman Zainul Abidin, chief operating officer of airport managers Pioneer Aerodrome Services.

Yangon International processed over 4 million passengers last year against an official capacity of 2.7 million. It is due for an upgrade as arrival and departure numbers through the

gateway continue to climb, making flying through Yangon an increasingly cramped experience.

"Most of the growth comes from international traffic coming in. It's consistent with a country opening up," said Mr Abidin. "The growth is to be expected but unfortunately the infrastructure is ... not able to keep up with the growth"

The original tender from the Directorate of Civil Aviation had called for a terminal building that can service

6 million passengers, but that figure may be too low given current high growth rates - 26 percent in 2013 and 20pc in 2014. Mr Abidin said Pioneer Aerodrome is currently reviewing its plans so that 6 million is the minimum rather than the target capacity.

Work is already under way on phase one of the airport expansion. A building skeleton is rising next to the existing domestic terminal, and is set to be completed by the third or fourth quarter of this year.

Ultimately plans call for that new building to be connected with the existing international terminal. The current outdated domestic terminal in the middle will be demolished.

Mr Abidin said the firm is still considering how traffic flows will work through the new building, adding the



The domestic terminal at Yangon International Airport is due to be replaced with a modern structure under the plan. Photo: Staff

current international terminal may or may not keep the same function in the future.

It is also difficult to build the new terminal building while keeping existing facilities operating.

"There are challenges in trying to expand, because the land is quite limited. And then the existing infrastructure surrounding the airport, including the roads, housing, military land, does not give us a lot of lee way to play around," he said.

'The growth is to be expected but unfortunately the infrastructure is ... not able to keep up with the growth.'

Sulaiman Zainul Abidin
Pioneer Aerodrome

Still, expansion is a must as Yangon's existing facilities were not designed for the increasing quantity of planes and passengers.

Current constraints at the airport include too little parking space for airplanes and not enough passenger queuing space and processing checkpoints. Mr Abidin said the new building will double the number of bridges connecting the terminal to airplanes from the current four to eight, meaning fewer passengers will be need to take buses out on the tarmac to em-

bark on their plane. Experts are also looking at ways to improve processing times, partly by adding more counters and streamlining passenger flows.

Officials from domestic airlines say it is crucial that capacity gets expanded at Yangon International.

"More tourists will come after 2015, so we need a bigger airport," said U Aung Kyi, commercial director of Yangon Airways.

The old terminal is out of date and simply not big enough to match increasing traveller flows, he said.

"We are encouraged and satisfied by plans to extend the airport," he said. "If airports become larger, airlines can also provide more services to customers, so it has an impact both for travellers and airports."

The new terminal project is run by Yangon Aerodromes, which in turn is led by Pioneer Aerodrome Services, part of the Asia World conglomerate. Pioneer is the investor, management company and building contractor for the new terminal building, as well as the manager of the existing airport.

It won a tender in August 2013 to build the project, competing against several regional firms in the process.


Mr Abidin said the completed building will have an updated feel, with Pioneer aiming to generate revenue by diversifying into non-aeronautical sources like shopping and food and beverage outlets at the airport.


The Myanmar government has also announced plans for an ambitious new airport further north in Bago Region. However, the Hanthawaddy airport is more of a long-term project, and Mr Abidin said Yangon International can easily cope with expected growth in existing traffic until at least 2020.



Work is under way at the new terminal at Yangon International Airport. The first phase is being built beside the existing domestic terminal. Photo: Thiri Lu

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AYEYARWADY REGION

IN DEPTH

Farmers counting on inventory credit

Program seeks to help farmers take advantage of higher rice prices later in the year by providing short-term loans after harvest season

SU PHYO WIN



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PRICES in staple crops traditionally vary significantly through the year. Rice, for instance, generally bottoms out in price after the main harvest in November and December, then gradually climbs through the year.

Farmers would like to sell their produce at the highest prices possible, but face a number of barriers keeping them from storing the crops until the price is right. Many are forced to sell earlier than they would like as they need to raise capital immediately after harvest in order to pay for debts used to finance the crop.

Some non-government organisations are looking to alleviate this problem through inventory credit systems. It will allow farmers to take out a loan from an organisation such as LIFT Myanmar for up to four months with the crops as collateral. The aim, officials say, is to use the fresh capital to pay off the short-term debt while still allowing the farmer to hang on to rice to sell at

the optimal time of the year.

Currently LIFT and the Group of Research and Exchange of Technology (GRET) are using the system in a few villages in Ayeyarwady Region, some of which are still recovering from Cyclone Nargis. Farmers say it also allows paddy to be centrally located, allowing bulk sales to traders and millers from a stronger negotiating position, generating higher prices.

LIFT, GRET and the consortium Welthungerhilfe have been supporting this program as part of a nearly US\$4 million initiative covering 150 villages in Bogale and Mawlamyinegyun townships in Ayeyarwady Region, though some industry experts say it would be tough to this kind of program as a for-profit company rather than a non-government organisation.

Still, farmers say it is making a local difference in their profit margins.

"We were never fully satisfied with past rice prices, as we had to sell paddy immediately after harvest, which is the period of lowest prices," said U Han Aye, who owns 22 acres of farmland in Kyee Chaung village, Mawlamyinegyun township, Ayeyarwady Region.

"This new system works well, and over the past two years has helped with certain profit."

The program started in Kyee Chaung village at the end of 2012. GRET field agent Daw Khin Thet Nwe said farmers with too much debt are not allowed to join the current system.

GRET takes the paddy from farmers at harvest and provides 65 percent of its value as loans immediately, with a 2.5pc interest rate and storage fee.

U Win Oo, a farmer with 8 acres of land, said the crops can be stored for three months after the November-December harvest and four months after the summer crop.

"Although we can't retrieve our paddy individually, the group of farmers can discuss the issue with each other. If there's common agreement, the paddy can be sold at the time we like."

The program may work in some villages, though experts say it may not be replicable across Myanmar.

Freedom Farmers League president U Thein Aung said the organisation instituting such a system must consider the time value of capital, interest rates and storage prices, adding it may be difficult for a non-NGO to implement.

"If such a system was controlled by a private company, the time to sell the crop would be up to them rather than the farmers," he said. "The interest rate also needs to be low, because



Farmers are keen to take advantage of higher prices further away from the harvest season, though often need to pay back loans immediately. Photo: Thiri Lu

if interest rates are above 10 percent [a year] it creates difficulty for farmers across the whole country."

Other private companies have publicly discussed similar ways to use crops as collateral. Yoma Bank and

Indian firm SLCM signed a memorandum of understanding for warehouse financing two weeks ago, while Myanmar Apex Bank and the Myanmar Rice Federation have also declared an intention to start warehouse financing.

IN BRIEF

State media confirms higher taxes coming for gems, sin items

State media has confirmed taxes will rise on gems as well as cigarettes and liquor under a draft law.

Commercial tax on unfinished gems will rise from 15 percent to 30pc, while finished gems and jewellery will rise from 5pc to 15pc, according to state-owned newspaper *The Mirror*.

It also confirmed plans for cigarette taxes to rise to 120pc from 100pc at present, while liquor tax will increase to 60pc from 50pc at present.

Minister of Commerce director U Win Myint said the Internal Revenue Department's plan is being put in place to cut cigarette and liquor consumption, adding a common international practice is to make the products more expensive.

As most liquor is imported without a permit at present, the ministry is also open to businesspeople being responsible to pay tax, he said.

The Commerce Ministry announced in late 2013 it would allow legal imports for liquor imports, after a crackdown on the previous grey-market methods of importing alcohol. However, no new rules have yet been released.

The fees that must be paid by local liquor businesses have also been increased, with authorities saying it is to begin next fiscal year.

— Aye Thidar Kyaw

Not all tariff lines to have lower taxes with ASEAN community start

Taxes on about 93 percent of tariff lines will be in line with the ASEAN Economic Community standards when it comes into force by the end of the year, though several sensitive products are still not included.

ASEAN Customs Cooperation Department deputy director general U San Lwin said already about 60pc of the total product lines meet AEC standards.

Several products will not have tariffs removed until 2018, however.

Ministry of Commerce deputy director general U Soe Win said there may be 11 items with tariff lines unchanged until 2018, including alcohol, jade and medicine.

— Nyan Lynn Aung

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Parliamentarian urges herd of elephant-foot yams for the country



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THE government ought to do more to support producers of the elephant-foot yam, according to Amyotha Hluttaw representative U Han Shein Bwae.

The crop, which is also known as the whitespot giant arum, is largely planted in Chin State in Myanmar, which is also the location of U Han Shein Bwae's No 8 constituency.

Although there is significant demand for elephant-foot yams on the market, farmers receive little support with growing the crop from government sources. U Han Shein Bwae said the Union government should support cultivation of the yams in the different states and regions.

"There is lots of demand for elephant-foot yams in the market, and the country can also generate foreign income from them," he said.

Specifically, U Han Shein Bwae called for government support on providing loans at cheap rates,



An elephant-foot yam flowers. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

support with technical aids and easier export rules.

"This is not only for Chin State but for all regions suitable for yam cultivation," he said.

"In our Chin State, people planting the elephant-foot yams receive better incomes. Some can even afford to pay the cost of boarding-school for their children."

There are three types of elephant-foot yam - white, yellow and red. The latter two are particularly popular as export items to China and Japan.

The current market price for elephant-foot yam in Chin State is K800 for one viss (1.6 kilograms or 3.6 pounds) of wet yam or K5600 for a viss of dry yam.

- Translation by Emoon

Plan to bring more people onto the grid

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SOME 1.7 million people could gain electricity access - at a cost of US\$670 million, according to Minister for Electrical Power U Khin Maung Soe.

The ministry has drawn up plans with help from the World Bank to extend electrification, while looking at the costs, he said at the opening of a hydropower workshop in Nay Pyi Taw.

Myanmar will apply to the World Bank for loans for \$400 million of the funds, he said.

The minister said \$300 million of the total \$670 million will be extended to generation and distribution, while another \$90 million will be earmarked for the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Rural Development to provide access in rural area. U Khin Maung Soe did not detail where the remaining \$280 million will be spent.

Demand for electricity is rising about 15 percent a year, as the state works to extend the grid into previously unconnected areas. The state is currently capable of generating 4700 megawatts.

Still, about two-thirds of Myanmar's 9 million households do not have access, he said.

Speaking at the hydropower conference two weeks ago, International Finance Corporation vice president Asia Pacific Karin Finkelston said Myanmar has enormous hy-

dropower potential of 100,000 megawatts, or 30 times its current installed capacity.

"Electricity is essential to reduce poverty and to raise living standards of people in Myanmar. Hydropower is an important part for the future of the state's energy sector, but it needs to be compatible with social life and not to damage environment in implementing it," she said.

The five-year National Electrification Plan, drawn up by the Ministry of Electrical Power and the World Bank, calls for projects to be carried out that distribute electricity to half of all households by 2019.

The plan calls for 205,000 households to be added to the grid in 2015, 227,000 in 2016, 337,000 in 2018 and 507,000 in 2019.

Beyond the grid's reach, another 200,000 households could be added using micro-generation, including technologies such as solar, wind and bio energy under the auspices of the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Rural Development.

Some villagers say they have increasingly relied on solar when living off the grid.

U San Win, from Letpandan village in Nay Pyi Taw's Lewe township, said solar panels from China are often not expensive.

"If we have K150,000 we can have light," he said. "However, to power a television it costs K300,000 or K400,000 for solar panels."

- Translation by Thiri Min Htun

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HURRY!
Stocks Limited

\$1 billion local investment in pipeline

Myanmar reveals it has invested over US\$1 billion in a controversial crude oil pipeline, formed in a joint venture with a Chinese state company



AUNG SHIN

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MYANMAR has invested US\$1.204 billion in the China-Myanmar Crude Oil Project in keeping with its 49 percent stake in the project, according to officials.

The total project has cost \$2.4532 billion to switch on, with the other half of the funding coming from state-owned China Petroleum Corporation, which owns 50.9pc. Myanmar state-owned Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise owns the rest.

"The major constructions of the crude oil pipeline were completed in early 2015," said U Nyan Tun, vice president and chair of the National Energy Management Committee.

He was speaking during a launch at Yangon's Inya Lake Hotel on January 28 officially closed to Myanmar private-sector media. However, *The Myanmar Times* was able to secure a recording of the presentations.

The January 28 ceremony marked the soft opening of the pipeline itself as well as the crude oil unloading

terminal on Made island in Rakhine State. Made island is one terminus on the controversial pipeline, which then works through Myanmar before ending at another terminus in southern China's Yunnan province.

The aim of the pipeline is to make it easier to ship oil to China from the Middle East and Africa, as currently it must be shipped by oil tanker through the Straits of Malacca past Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

U Nyan Tun said the project provided \$13.26 million for corporate social responsibility programs, as well as contributing employment opportunities and building the country's economy.

A 300,000-ton crude oil tanker docked at Made deep seaport last week to fuel a test-run of the pipeline. It is designed to transmit 22 million tonnes of crude annually.

There will be five processing stations on the 771-kilometre (479-mile) long pipeline, according to a

press statement from the South East Asia Crude Oil Pipeline Company (SEAOP), which is the company created by China National Petroleum Corporation and Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise to manage the pipeline.

Made Island is a vast project site including oil storage, a dockyard and seaport that can be used to off-load crude for transport through the pipeline to Yunnan in China, according to a press release.

SEAOP touted Made Island seaport as Myanmar's first international oil unloading terminal, being 480 metres in length and able to dock vessels with 300,000 tonnes of capacity. There are

also 12 oil storage tanks with capacity of 22 million gallons (83 million litres) each.

"This project will promote our country's economy and development in the area the pipeline crosses," said U Nyan Tun.

US BILLION
\$2.5

Total amount of money invested in the South East Asia Crude Oil Pipeline Company by China and Myanmar.

A twin natural gas pipeline entered full operation last year with investment from a consortium of Chinese, Myanmar, Indian and Korean firms. So far it has pumped a total of 3.92 billion cubic metres of natural gas to China and 147 million cubic metres for domestic supply.

So far it has been running under capacity. It is declared to be capable of transmitting 12 billion cubic metres of natural gas a year, with plans originally calling for an initial capacity of 5.2 billion cubic metres in the

first phase of its operations. Myanmar was to receive 2.5 billion cubic metres for domestic use.

Myanmar stands to generate annual revenue from both the natural gas and crude oil pipelines, though so far it has been unclear by how much.

The deal between China National Petroleum Corporation and the Myanmar government on the crude oil pipeline was first inked in 2008. Full-scale construction began in 2011, and full operation is expected to start in mid-2015.

Pipeline ceremony closed to local media

Chinese and Myanmar state media was invited to the pipeline launch in Yangon, but Myanmar private media was kept out.

Officials have speculated it was a high-level decision made by senior government officials following controversy over other Chinese-funded projects in Myanmar.

Myanmar and Chinese authorities did not invite local media to the events which were held in Yangon on January 28 and Made Island on January 30.

The Myanmar Times was able to acquire a recording of the presentations from the Yangon event, which was held at the Inya Lake Hotel.

A SEAOP official told *The Myanmar Times* before the event that media invitations would be carried out by the Ministry of Energy. So far the ministry has not officially explained why the ceremony was held in secret, with only a few, mostly government officials allowed to attend.

"It is likely because of recent protests on Chinese projects in the country," said one official from the Ministry of Energy, who requested anonymity. "Maybe the Union minister or others in cabinet are trying to keep it silent." - Aung Shin

Norway to take stake in MFI

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THE Norwegian Investment Fund for Developing Countries (Norfund) has acquired the right to take up to a 25 percent stake in local micro-finance company Myanmar Finance International.

The microfinance firm is owned by AIM-listed Myanmar Investments International as well as Myanmar Finance Corporation.

Norfund is Norway's main vehicle for combating poverty through private-sector development.

"Norfund is an experienced investor in microfinance businesses in developing countries where they provide equity and debt financing. We welcome their experience to help build MFIL into a leading Myanmar microfinance company," said Myanmar Finance International managing director U Aung Htun in a press release.

A third tranche of financing, of US\$750,000, is due to be contributed by Myanmar Investments and Myanmar Finance Corporation to their microfinance joint venture in February 2015, with a fourth tranche of \$2.05 million expected in 2015, according to a filing on the AIM exchange.

Norfund will be able to exercise its option when the fourth tranche is called, which would see Myanmar Investment and Myanmar Finance Corporation's ownership of the microfinance firm drop to 37.5 percent each. Norfund's option is valid until September 2016.

Myanmar Finance Corporation was formed in 2012, and as of mid 2014, it claimed 10,000 clients and a loan portfolio of about K800 million (\$780,000).

The microfinance industry has been attracting increased interest, with business and non-profits rushing into the sector following a 2013 law on the industry.

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ATHENS

Titans message Greek leader

ECONOMIC powerhouses Germany and China warned Greece on January 29 against reneging on reforms tied to its massive international bailout, as most European markets fell on fears Athens could default on its debt.

Germany, which has shouldered most of the multi-billion-euro EU rescue plan for Greece, said the country's new anti-austerity government could not make changes "to the detriment" of other European citizens.

China, which has a major investment in the main Greek port of Piraeus, said it was "highly concerned" after the government of 40-year-old Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras abandoned plans to privatise the harbour, one of Europe's busiest.

On its first day of business on January 28, Mr Tsipras' "national salvation" administration rolled back several austerity reforms, including the privatisation of the ports of Piraeus and Thessaloniki, main electricity provider PPC and petroleum refiner HELPE.

Mr Tsipras, leader of the Syriza party which swept to victory in Sunday's election, also underlined his determination to achieve sweeping cut in debts stemming from Greece's 240-billion-euro (US\$269 billion) bailout program.

The announcements sent Greek stocks diving by more than 9 percent on January 28, with major banks losing more than a quarter of their value on a turbulent day.

On Thursday, the Athens market opened with modest gains of 2pc, but London and Frankfurt both slipped.

European Parliament head Martin Schulz will hold talks with Mr Tsipras on January 29, the first leading European official to get a closer view of a government determined to reverse many of the unpopular austerity measures that underpin the bailout.

He will be followed by Jeroen Dijsselbloem, president of the Eurogroup club of eurozone finance ministers.

US President Barack Obama phoned Mr Tsipras to congratulate him on his election victory, but closer to home, the warnings to Athens from its European peers were coming in hard and fast. — AFP

DAVOS, SWITZERLAND

'Freer' but not 'free' movement for ASEAN

ASEAN will officially call itself a single market by year's end, but "big things" like seamless travel within the 10-nation bloc would only come in 2020, Malaysia's trade minister said.

"We're going to declare ourselves as an ASEAN Economic Community," said Mustapa Mohamed, whose country holds the rotating presidency of the Southeast Asian bloc this year.

"We don't have complete integration or harmonisation yet, 2015 is laying the stage for bigger things to come," he said on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos.

"We're going to get almost there by 2015 but the big things like seamless travel ... would come in 2020.

"What's important is that we're committed, I'm not saying that we're backtracking," added the minister.

The Southeast Asian bloc, a market of about 600 million people, had set

2015 as a deadline for integrating the region's vast economies into a single European Union-style market, with tariffs abolished and free movement of skilled workers. But there is much scepticism that the targets could be met, as the bloc is made up of countries in vastly different stages of economic development.

Myanmar, for instance, is just opening up its economy after decades of isolation over its outright military rule which came to an end in 2011. At the opposite end of the spectrum is Singapore, which ranks among the world's richest nations.

Mr Mustapa acknowledged that it would only be "in 2020 that you'll see more progress in ASEAN economic integration" in term of the abolishing of non-tariff barriers and flow of skilled labour. By year's end, there will be "freer movement of goods

and services but not free movement of goods and services." The business community has been pushing political leaders to move faster on integration, but Mr Mustapa said the ASEAN model is gradual. "The business community wants ASEAN to be integrated as one entity. The fact is that there are border issues, customs, immigration, and different regulations," he said.

In addition, there is little understanding among the general public on how a single market can change their lives. "Some fear that they would be robbed of their jobs, that come December 2015, I'll be out of job because my Malaysian friend is coming over," he said.

Mr Mustapa added that "from day one, we know that we're not going to adopt the EU model", when asked about the European bloc's risks following the Greek elections. — AFP

NEW YORK

Alibaba sales slump with gov't pressure

ALIBABA posted disappointing quarterly sales on January 29 as the e-commerce giant hit back against "unfair" Chinese government allegations that it failed to crackdown on illegal transactions.

The online shopping platform posted a 40 percent jump in sales to US\$4.219 billion, but that missed the \$4.45 billion in revenues that analysts were expecting.

China makes up by far its biggest market with sales of \$3.429 billion, as Alibaba operates the country's most popular online shopping platform Taobao.

'We felt compelled to take the extraordinary step of preparing a formal complaint to the SAIC.'

Joe Tsai
Alibaba vice chair

But the company this week came under unprecedented attack from a powerful regulator in China.

The State Administration for Industry & Commerce (SAIC), charged with maintaining market order in China, on January 28 accused Alibaba of allowing "illegal operations" to flourish on its online shopping websites and ordered the company's executives to "overcome arrogance".

The sharp criticism came after a SAIC survey published last week on Taobao that found only about a third of products sampled to be genuine.

"We believe the flawed approach taken in the report and the tactic of releasing a so-called white paper specifically targeting us was so unfair that we felt compelled to take the extraordinary step of preparing a formal complaint to the SAIC," said Alibaba vice chair Joe Tsai.

Headquartered in the eastern city of Hangzhou, Alibaba completed the world's biggest IPO with its \$25 billion listing on the New York Stock Exchange in September, making its founder Jack Ma into China's richest man overnight.

Mr Ma, who started the company in 1999, last week told business and political elites gathered in Davos that he wants to take Alibaba beyond China and turn it into a global e-commerce platform serving two billion customers.

Alibaba now counts 334 million active buyers.

In November, Mr Ma said he planned a "global version" of Taobao, allowing buyers and sellers in different countries to connect with each other.

Taobao's foreign efforts to date have focused mainly on overseas Chinese communities but Alibaba has launched a US shopping website, 11 Main.

Although Alibaba is often described as the Chinese version of eBay, it bested the US platform more than a decade ago. Its earnings also far surpass that of US e-commerce giant Amazon, which has been posting massive losses after a series of product launches including phones, tablets and television programs.

Alibaba has been investing in apps to attract users of mobile devices.

Revenues generated from such mobile devices leapt five-fold (448pc) to \$1.035 billion for the third quarter, to make up 42 percent of total sales. This figure has been rising steadily, from 36 percent in the previous quarter and from 20 percent one year ago. — AFP

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Energy Specialist (Vacancy # 150017)

The World Bank office in Yangon is looking for a dynamic, committed and capable individual to work as an Energy Specialist for its Myanmar Program. This is a locally- recruited position with a 2- year Extended term appointment with extensive opportunity for career development and advancement within a growing program.

Summary of Roles and Responsibilities:

The Energy Specialist will be an integral part of the team responsible for promoting long-term business relationships with national and local stakeholders through policy dialogue; facilitating program development, task management; supporting communications and outreach activities on energy issues to ensure that best practices and lessons learned are reflected on the unit's operations. Specifically, the responsibilities of this position will fall into the following categories:

- **Policy Dialogue and Donor Coordination:** Support the Bank's energy sector policy dialogue with relevant stakeholders in the Southeast Asia region with a focus on Myanmar, particularly with regard to sector organization and policy, access to modern energy services, energy efficiency, renewables and climate change. S/he will also support donor coordination activities in the energy sector;
- **Business Development:** (i) Support the Bank business development in line with the Bank's country sector strategy and in close collaboration with other units at the Bank, (ii) provide inputs to Country Partnership Framework and other cross-sectoral products, (iii) as a technical specialist in the energy sector, make a substantial technical contribution to both investment project and analytical and advisory activities; and, (iv) liaise with the country team and the Global Practice Manager to oversee and review the operational and budgetary aspects of ongoing and proposed investment projects;
- **Project Preparation:** Support task teams in project identification, design and preparation by: (i) advising clients on feasibility studies, technology choice studies, cost-effectiveness analyses and implementation reports;(ii) reviewing and assessing implementation capacity of project implementation counterparts and supporting institutions/agencies; (iii) defining appropriate benchmarks/indicators and establishing project assessment and monitoring frameworks to assess progress and outcomes; and (iv) carry out stand-alone tasks as agreed with the team lead and practice manager.
- **Project Implementation Support:** Provide implementation support to the Bank clients for projects and programs under implementation to ensure implementation quality and timeliness and consistency with project objectives. Implementation requirements will cover financial, disbursement, procurement, social and environmental guidelines and agreements typical of World Bank supported projects/programs;
- **Client and Stakeholder Network:** Coordinate/participate as part of the World Bank Group's team at national forums, workshops and conferences focusing on energy issues. The selected candidate will establish and maintain networks with public, civil society, academic and private sector professionals in order to expand the World Bank's dialogue on the energy agenda in the Southeast Asia region with a focus on Myanmar.

Selection Criteria:

- Academic qualifications of a minimum of a Master's Degree, with training that supports engineering and technical, financial and economic skills applied to the energy sector;
- At least five years relevant operational experience following a graduate level education, of which most should be in the energy sector, especially electric power;
- Knowledge of broader energy sector issues including drivers and determinants of energy demand and supply from a technical economic perspective, and regulatory, financial and institutional considerations;
- Familiarity with energy systems both on-grid and off-grid technologies as well as the institutional arrangements;
- Proven track record of innovation in Bank operational or AAA work and active engagement in knowledge sharing across countries and regions;
- Exceptional ability to identify long-range goals and objectives, develop strategic approaches, and conceptualize a multi-year plan to operationalize these strategies;
- Proven ability to build client relationships involving multiple stakeholders;
- Demonstrated ability to effectively coordinate activities involving multiple disciplines and organizational units, as well as to maintain high service standards under pressure, meet deadlines, and accommodate simultaneous demands from various sources;
- Proven teamwork and leadership skills, working with multi-disciplinary teams across different sectors, across operational boundaries within the World Bank Group and outside it;
- Skill at managing donor engagements; and
- Excellent oral and written communications skills in English and Myanmar languages.

Details (vacancy #150017) are available in the World Bank Careers website:www.worldbank.org/careers. All applications must be submitted through this website. The World Bank Group is committed to achieving diversity in terms of gender, nationality, culture and educational background. Individuals with disabilities are equally encouraged to apply. **Closing date is February 12, 2015.**



PATH, an international nonprofit organization, currently seeks qualified candidates for the **Project Manager** position (01) in our Yangon office.

The PATH program in the Mekong is currently implementing a broad portfolio of activities on a range of health issues. This includes work on vaccine and immunization, nutrition, reproductive, maternal and child health, and infectious diseases. PATH is seeking to locally recruit:

- a dynamic **Project Manager** (Job code #6468) to support the management team with our three project outputs: 1) a supportive rice fortification advocacy and policy environment 2) sustainable supply chain production and distribution, and 3) sustainable demand generation. This position will report to the Myanmar Program Team Leader.

On-line application submission will be proceeded in the principle of "first come, first serve".

For full job descriptions and information on the application process, please visit the jobs section of the PATH website (www.path.org).

Deadline for on-line submission: February 13th, 2015.



MARIE STOPES INTERNATIONAL Myanmar

Vacancy Announcement – Operations Director

Marie Stopes International (MSI) is a marketing-focused and result-oriented social business that uses modern management and marketing techniques to provide quality family planning and reproductive health services in more than forty countries worldwide. Marie Stopes International Myanmar is a social business working with local partners and the government of Myanmar to provide quality, affordable and accessible Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) information, commodities and services; and supporting environment conducive to better SRH for Myanmar population. MSIM is part of the MSI global partnership, and works to improve the health and quality of life of women, men, and their families.

MSI Myanmar is looking for the Operations Director, will be based in Yangon, Myanmar.

Closing date: 13th February, 2015

Application should be addressed to: Head of HR, Marie Stopes International Myanmar, 524/10, New University Avenue road, Bahan Township, Yangon

Email to: hmr.msims@gmail.com

Please check the detail information on: <http://www.themimu.info/jobs-for-myanmar-nationals>, <http://www.themimu.info/jobs-for-internationals>

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Property

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Polo Club to compete as tallest building



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LOCAL conglomerate HSL Group has announced a large-scale project planned for East Race Course Road in Tarmwe township that could vie for the crown of Myanmar's tallest building.

The first phase of the Polo Club

STOREYS

34

Proposed height of both the Polo Club Asia and Diamond Inya Palace buildings, which are currently the tallest proposed in Myanmar.

Asia Residence is to be 34 stories, the same number of stories for Diamond Inya Palace, which is under construction. The country's tallest building by stories is currently Centrepoint Towers, at 25 storeys.

Polo Club Asia's second phase will be offices and a serviced apartment tower, and the third phase is a five-star hotel, said Polo Club Asia Residence sales manager Ma Wah Hlaing.

HSL has decided to move forward under new branding Golden Glory Group for its real estate arm, according to its website. Both are chaired by businessperson U Khin Maung Aye, who founded Lat War Garment Factory.

The entire Polo Club project is to take six years to develop, with the two residential towers coming online first in June 2018. The two buildings will include 373 units and a shopping mall on the ground floor. The last part to be completed is the hotel.

The land was previously home to the National Library, which was opened in 2002 but then damaged during Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and



The site of the Polo Club Asia Residence building, with the former National Library at centre. Photo: Zarni Phyo

moved to Yankin township. There is also a National Library branch in Nay Pyi Taw.

Ma Wah Hlaing said the former library has been renovated, with the ground floor in use as a showroom and the rest used as office space or rented out to restaurants. She added it is likely to eventually be demolished to make way

for the five-star hotel, though no final decision has yet been made.

The sales gallery for Polo Club Asia Residence opened in December 2014. Company officials claim to have already sold 90 units, ranging from US\$300 to \$500 a square foot, with units between 700 and 2600 square feet.

The land is owned by Myanmar

Economic Corporation, meaning customers will be signing long-term leases for 70 years rather than purchasing property.

The project is being worked on by a number of international companies including China State Construction Engineering Corporation and as well as a list of several Singaporean companies.

Urbanisation rates increasing but behind regional countries

MYAT NYEIN AYE

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MYANMAR'S cities may be growing, but they have a relatively long way to go to catch up with urbanisation rates in some nearby countries, according to the World Bank.

The country's urbanisation rates during the 2000 to 2010 period generally lagged its neighbours, likely due to the country's economic isolation, according to the World Bank's "East Asia's Changing Urban Landscape: Measuring a Decade of Spatial Growth" report released last week.

Despite being twice as large as Vietnam or Malaysia in size, its total urban area is less than one-third the size of Vietnam and one-fifth the size of Malaysia. The total amount of urban land in Myanmar increased during the 2000s from 760 square kilometres to 830 square kilometres by 2010, an increase of about 0.8 percent a year.

Yet while urban areas may not be growing in size very quickly, they are attracting lots more people.

Urban areas started 2000 with 4.7 million people, increasing by about 2.8pc a year to 6.2 million in 2010. Density of urban areas went from 6200 people per square kilometre in 2000 to 7500 per kilometre by 2010. This density is higher than average for the region, and the second-highest after Indonesia.

Between 2000 and 2010, the country's urban population increased, though there was not significant construction of new urban areas. However, even Myanmar's largest cities are smaller than some of the huge cities in the region.

Yangon and Mandalay, the country's first and second largest cities, do not meet the World Bank's criteria for large urban areas, as they did not have 5 million people by 2010. Instead the two cities are classified as medium-

sized, with populations between 1 and 5 million by 2010.

Yangon is Myanmar's largest city, but spatially it barely grew at 0.5 percent a year from 2000 to 2010. Its population grew by a more rapid 2.6pc to end 2010 at 3.4 million people.

World Bank country manager Abdoulaye Seck said urbanisation is likely to continue in Myanmar, so it best be prepared.

"The rate of people moving to urban areas in East Asia was very high, so there needs to be strong management for the country," he said.

Overall, almost 200 million people in East Asia moved to urban areas in the decade to 2010, creating a massive challenge to the region's planners.

About 36pc of people in the region - which under the World Bank's definition includes Northeast and Southeast Asia - were living in urban areas as of 2010, up from 29pc ten years before.

This suggests the region will see

decades more of further population shifts, the World Bank said in the report released January 26.

The report contains data gathered through satellite imagery and "geospatial" mapping which the bank said should help planners ensure that policies will benefit a larger number of those moving to cities, especially the poor.

The data shows that urban areas in East Asia expanded at an average rate of 2.4 percent per year during the decade, with urban land reaching 134,800 square kilometres (71,043 square miles) in 2010.

China's Pearl River Delta, which includes Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Foshan and Dongguan, has overtaken Tokyo as the world's largest urban area both in size and population, it said.

As of 2010, the report stated that there were 42 million inhabitants in the Pearl River Delta, a population larger than that of Argentina,

Canada or Malaysia.

World Bank urban development expert Abhas Jha said he hopes the report will push policy makers to a shift from a "car-centric" to a "people-centric" strategy in growing cities like Jakarta and Bangkok.

"Massive traffic congestions in urban cities calls for a new paradigm shift in urban planning to move from a car-centric to people-centric urban plan," he told reporters in a video conference from Singapore adding that a more efficient public transportation system could be one way to alleviate this problem.

The report however said that despite the population shift, data shows that only less than 1 percent of the total area studied is urbanised.

"Only 36 percent of the total population is urban - suggesting that the region's urban expansion has only just begun," it said.

- Additional reporting by AFP



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“International companies may be slow to continue their projects or investments, but we encourage them to continue as planned.”

- Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise official

Malaysia declares its missing jet is officially an accident

WORLD 40

HOUSE OF THE WEEK

Wonderful penthouse with Shwedagon view



have been completely renovated and decorated with designer fixtures, with the design by Amelie Chai of Spine Architects. They come semi-furnished, decorated throughout with teak.

There are two bedrooms, one shrine or office room, a spacious living room and two bathrooms in both. The highlight, however, is the panorama folding doors that open from the living room to the huge terrace with stunning views of nearby Shwedagon.

- Jeremy Mullins
Photos: Naing Win Tun

Location : Top floor of 12-storey Shwegondine towers, Tower A, East Shwegondine Road, Bahan tsp
Price : \$4900 per month rental for either (negotiable)
Purchase price 5400 lakh for Shwedagon view (west side), 4900 lakh for east side
Contact : Ko Chan Thar
Phone : 09-450038912
Email : kochanthar11@gmail.com

Shwedagon is Yangon's main landmark, the centre the city revolves around. Catching a glimpse of the distinct golden structure is a highlight to Yangon living, though this glimpse is often too fleeting. This week's unique apartments in Bahan township offer the chance to take in a breathtaking view of Shwedagon

whenever you wish, while still boasting a tasteful interior and an excellent location.

The twin penthouses featured this week are mirror images of each other. Both look over Shwedagon, though the west side has the more direct view.

The interiors of both penthouses

Donation made for Yangon's future

MYAT NYEIN AYE

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CITIES Development Initiative for Asia will contribute a grant of up to US\$350,000 to support what it calls a "heritage-led regeneration initiative" in a pilot area in downtown Yangon.

It will partner with the Yangon City Development Committee and Yangon Heritage Trust, it said in a press release.

The program will see the investment used to detail opportunities and challenges for infrastructure improvements and upgrading and renovating individual properties, while following heritage conservation practices.

Cities Development Initiative for Asia head Shrinivas Sampath said in the press release the aim of the assistance is provide a development alternative that respects the city's historic fabric while providing affordable real estate.

Yangon City Development Committee director of urban planning U Toe Aung said the program will take up to five months, and will help improve the work of the committee as well as Yangon Heritage Trust.

"This is a unique collaborative effort between government and civil society: to protect the city's invaluable heritage, promote investment in historic buildings, improve infrastructure, and enable the downtown economic development," said U Thant Myint-U, chair of Yangon Heritage Trust. "Finding the right formula that integrates conservation into an urban renewal strategy is the key."

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The future is still far off

One of Myanmar's last hurdles to leapfrogging will be a slog to clear: development



CATHERINE TRAUTWEIN

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THOUGH there is lots of buzz about the potential to pay and bank through mobile phones, the country won't go cashless until weighty problems get solved, according to attendees at a Yangon conference last week.

There are banks in Myanmar that have already tackled mobile banking, which caters to customers with bank accounts. But across financial institutions, it's still early days for mobile money services.

On the uphill slog towards solutions – and in the end, financial inclusion for Myanmar's rural unbanked – the government, banks and other industry players will be forced to confront a swath of issues around infrastructure, financial literacy, interoperability and more.

While a distinction between mobile banking and mobile payment may be messy, attendees at last week's Mobile Money and E-Commerce Summit 2015 explained the services can be aimed at two different market segments: the banked and the unbanked. While mobile banking gives customers access to a bank's services, mobile money extends past those that hold accounts and into a vast population of people that don't – more than 95 percent of the country, as previously reported by *The Myanmar Times*.

"In Myanmar's case, our banking penetration is very, very low, so if you look at all the tick boxes, there's no reason why mobile money versus banking should not work here," said U Thura Soe Paing, managing director of Frontier Technology Partners, which offers a mobile money solution called myKyat. "It is an ideal situation for that. However, because it is an ideal situation doesn't mean it's going to be successful."

The mobile money system requires banks establish agent checkpoints – "human ATMs" – all over the country. Take an unbanked rural farmer that gives an agent cash, which then gets converted into virtual money and stored in an electronic wallet. With mobile money, the farmer can pay for goods and services with his phone, or "cash out" at agent checkpoints, clearing out his mobile wallet and receiving kyats in exchange.

On a mobile money system, customers will be able to pay in and cash out of e-wallets through a network of agents and use virtual money to pay for bills, said U Myo Win Yee, general manager of e-channels at Ayeyarwady (AYA) Bank.

Reaching Myanmar's majority rural populations through mobile money services – an alternative to the time-consuming and costly process of building new bank branches – will require

the construction of an entire ecosystem and wide-scale industry cooperation.

Kanbawza (KBZ) Bank international banking division COO Dexter Tan, speaking on a panel at the Mobile Money and E-Commerce Summit 2015 on January 28, used an acronym to sum up the challenges facing the industry: IUSAACS.

If critical factors – interoperability, ubiquitous acceptance, security, affordability, awareness, convenience and swiftness – are present, "I think we have a game to play and it will be a successful game," Mr Tan said, emphasising his statements were his personal opinion.

Infrastructure and mobile money must go hand in hand, as customers can only use financial services where there is connectivity coverage – which telcos can provide by putting up towers.

"Mobile money can never outgrow [mobile] penetration," said U Aung Aung, Myanmar Citizens Bank board member, who said Myanmar needs 100pc mobile penetration for mobile money to win out.

['if] we don't interoperate, this whole thing is designed to fail.'

U Aung Aung
Myanmar Citizens Bank
board member

Mobile penetration has been growing. After the Myanmar government made moves to semi-privatise the telecoms industry, bestowing bids to operate on international telcos Ooredoo and Telenor, the country has seen unprecedented mobile adoption. The firms, competing with state-owned incumbent MPT, have pushed out of the cities and into the countryside in the attempts of making good on promises of near-universal coverage within five years. However, connectivity – which powers communications spanning SMS texting to 3G coverage – still proves a formidable challenge.

Meanwhile, telcos might be helping to build infrastructure inroads, but where to go once users start driving is another story.

"The ecosystem as a whole is very difficult to build. The key is you need to have places to spend e-money or to make payments or to withdraw cash," U Aung Aung said. "That is very expensive and time-consuming to set up. And if we do it pocket, pocket, pocket, at the end, [if] we don't interoperate, this whole thing is designed to fail."

U Aung Aung and others stressed the importance of interoperability – which encompasses the idea that banks should serve all users through their agent network.

He expressed the need for centralisation, with a player ensuring low costs and cooperation – a sentiment echoed by Mr Tan, who said mobile success in Myanmar must come from a "national agenda".

"If you look at mobile banking or mobile financial services rollout in any other countries, it's always been a failure. Why? Everybody had their own agenda," he said. "There is a lot of duplication of services, a lot of vendors that compete; the interoperability is not there, ubiquitous acceptance points are not there."

"If you have everything creating an ecosystem that can enable all this, I think it would [work]," he continued. "And Myanmar is in the right place, right time."

But serendipity won't ensure mobile money moves forward; guidance is required.

"Regulation needs to [be] set up so that mobile network operators give their services out at whatever the lowest minimum thing to help," U Aung Aung said.

Although regulation has come down from the Central Bank of Myanmar green-lighting bank-led mobile banking models, no mobile payments-type legislation has yet been released. Confusion still swirls about when it will be created, but it is necessary before many companies can begin operations. And U Oo Thein Myint, deputy general manager of CB Bank, said though the bank is officially allowed to offer mobile banking, it needs permission from above – the Central Bank – to engage in mobile money services.

"So the big question is how to make mobile money profitable. How to make it work," U Aung Aung said. "The quick answer ... is that you need to make it 10 times better."

Income for providers – banks, retailers and agents – as well as benefits and the solution all need to improve, he continued.

In return for rolling out mobile money, banks could acquire business, according to U Myo Win Yee. "The panel discussed financial literacy is currently very weak," he said. "If [people] use the mobile money system, they may have improved financial literacy and become our banking customer."

Banks also benefit by enabling universal financial inclusion, Mr Tan said, adding the moves around mobile money could drive a tide that lifts all boats.

"I think, majority, when these so-called ecosystems open [all stakeholders] will profit," Mr Tan said.

U Aung Aung put it simply: "The answer is do it together or fail."

Jihadists head to the web's -dark side

AFTER having used the internet profusely for propaganda and recruitment, jihadist organisations have realised that investigators are gleaning crucial information online and are increasingly concealing their web presence, experts say.

Apart from recent orders given to fighters to limit their exposure, erase the footprint of their online activity, and avoid revealing too many place names or faces, the Islamic State and Al-Nusra Front groups are increasingly using the so-called "Dark Web" – the hidden part of the internet protected

by powerful encryption softwares.

"Sometimes we get the geographical location of some fighters thanks to Facebook," Philippe Chadry, in charge of the fight against terrorism at France's judicial police, said last week.

But now, those who just months ago had happily posted on Facebook videos or photos of themselves holding Kalashnikovs or of beheadings have realised that they were single-handedly building a case against themselves, if they ever decided to come home. "We are starting to notice the beginnings of disaffection with Facebook – they have

understood that's how we get incriminating evidence," said Mr Chadry. He also said that jihadists were increasingly using the "Dark Web."

"That makes our probes much more complicated. The terrorists are adapting; they understand that the telephone and internet are handy, but dangerous."

Last autumn, the Islamic State group (IS) asked fighters not to tweet precise location names, to blur faces and stop giving too many details about ongoing operations.

– AFP

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K395,000



S View Cover for Galaxy A5
K31,200



Samsung Gear Circle
We've done the rounds, and Samsung's Gear Circle seems pretty cool to *Gadget Review*. The stylish around-the-neck wireless has magnetic clasp controls and offers voice notifications. Its vibration feature also notifies users of an SMS or a call. Both men and women will appreciate its sleek and light design - plus long-term battery life and water and sweat resistance make it a durable buy.

K83,000

- Translation by Thiri Min Htun

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Gaming: a new social network



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HEADING online can help some gamers relax, form friendships, and even learn English. But some have concerns about how online behaviour affects of-line lives - and what happens when too much of a good thing goes bad.

The first thing Yangon online gamer Ko Kyaw Myo does if he's on the internet is go play games - Facebook and other web pages come after, he said.

"Gamers chat with other gamers in online games, so they get close with other gamers by playing," he said.

The online gaming community has seen its numbers grow as connectivity spreads through Myanmar, spurred by the semi-privatisation of the telecoms market and mobile network rollouts. The amount of games played last year doubled over the year prior, according to U Myint Kyaw Thu, chief technology officer at Myanmar games company Total Gameplay Studio.

The firm recently made more room for the gaming community to hang out online, having introduced a unique "social network platform" for gamers, *otakus* - a Japanese word that can mean "geek" - and teens, according to U Myint Kyaw Thu.

Unlike social spaces for the masses, Total Gameplay Studio's network aims to pinpoint an audience.

"Facebook and Twitter are very much general," U Myint Kyaw Thu said. "I think we need specific social networks built around specific user groups."

The platform, now in beta, deepens users' connections within the world of play. "[It's] linked with our

games so you can perform meta-gameplay such as challenging another player or coordinating attacks within a clan right inside the social network," he said, noting 5000 users test the network each day.

Online gaming can give users a place to sit back and socialise. But what some might call a leisure pursuit can also help players engage their brains, according to some.

"Students or schoolboys should play online games to relax because if schoolboys play online games their brain quality can increase," said U Khin Maung Oo, who owns Best Solution internet cafe in Kyauktada Township.

And U Myint Kyaw Thu said games with stories that progress in English can help players learn words in the foreign language.

However, he also warned that gamers shouldn't spend too much of their life online.

One mobile user expressed concerns about a perceived trend away from IRL (in real life) interaction. "Once young people shared their experiences and told jokes in tea shops. Now young people are playing mobile online games there," said Ko Thein Htoo Aung of South Dagon. "I don't like that because the tea-shop culture involves sitting and talking."

Though online gaming has increased steadily in popularity, visits to local tea shops prove the internet hasn't replaced offline communication overnight. And like many activities in life, gaming gets the "okay" when used in moderation.

"I think games are a good form of entertainment to relax after a long day of work or study. But like other things, if you are addicted to gaming, then you got a big problem," U Myint Kyaw Thu said. "I hope gamers can avoid game addiction and balance their lives between gaming and hard work."

Telenor expands beyond big cities

TELENOR Myanmar has broken out of Myanmar's cities with recent network rollouts in Sagaing, Magwe, Ayeyarwady and Bago regions.

The regional launches, announced January 22, add to Telenor's network coverage as the telco makes its way to covering half of Myanmar's townships by this month's end.

Telenor's moves mark the first time the telco has deployed its services outside Myanmar's three largest cities - Yangon, Mandalay and Nay Pyi Taw. To slake demand, the firm

has begun issuing 1.5 million new SIM cards into the market monthly, a release said.

Telenor started services in Bago with 108 towers to cover seven townships in East Bago and with 16 towers for nine townships in Taungoo, the release said. Meanwhile, Magwe's network, launched on 60 towers, brings coverage to Magwe township. By the end of January, Telenor hopes to hit six additional townships in the region.

Telenor has upped its tower count in Yangon and Mandalay since roll-

out, but more towers are needed to improve quality of coverage in big and small cities, Telenor Myanmar CEO Petter Furberg said in a press release. The telco will be busy in February, as Kayin and Mon are next on the list for service launches and the firm estimates a connectivity boost will arrive this month.

"We are also close to finalising our fibre link to Thailand and expect to open it in February," said Mr Furberg said in a statement.

- Catherine Trautwein

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WORLD EDITOR: Fiona MacGregor

BRUSSELS

EU extends sanctions against Russia

Europe announces new constraints on Russia as Gorbachev warns of armed conflict

THE EU agreed last week to expand its sanctions against Russia as Ukraine's warring parties announced fresh truce talks to end a surge in fighting between Kiev and Kremlin-backed rebels.

Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev warned meanwhile that the threat of further sanctions risked turning the new Cold War atmosphere into a globally destabilising "hot" armed conflict between Moscow and the West.

'The one thing I can be happy about is that we have kept our unity.'

Federica Mogherini
EU foreign policy chief

During emergency talks called after dozens died in fighting in the east Ukrainian port of Mariupol, EU foreign ministers overcame

reluctance from Greece's radical new government to reach a deal to tighten sanctions.

"I cannot say I am happy that we have taken this decision because the situation on the ground is nothing to be happy about," EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini told a press conference in Brussels.

"But the one thing I can be happy about is that we have kept our unity."

The United States welcomed the EU move, and warned Russia that it is mulling fresh sanctions of its own.

State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki said the EU agreement was "a further sign that the actions of the last several days and weeks are absolutely unacceptable and that there will be new consequences put in place".

Kiev and local officials said six civilians and five Ukrainian soldiers were killed over the previous 24 hours, adding to the UN's confirmed death toll of 5100 for the conflict in the former Soviet state.

The EU ministers agreed to extend, by six months until

September, a series of targeted sanctions hitting more than 100 Russian and Ukrainian figures, which were introduced after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, according to a statement after the talks.

They also agreed to come up with more names to be hit with the travel bans and asset freezes within a week.

The EU ministers further agreed to start work on further "appropriate action" if Moscow and the rebels keep breaching a largely disregarded peace deal signed in Minsk, Belarus, in September.

That could open the door for the widening of much tougher sectoral sanctions hurting the Russian economy which were introduced after the shooting-down of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine in July.

Greece's new Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, who is close to Russia, had raised doubts about the need for more sanctions earlier in the week, but fears that Athens could veto new measures failed to materialise.

The West says Russian forces are in Ukraine supporting the rebels - a charge the Kremlin denies - and has urged Moscow repeatedly to respect the Minsk deal.

In a new development, the contact group of representatives of Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE were set to hold further peace talks in Minsk on January 30, the Belarus foreign ministry said.

Ukraine's Western-backed President Petro Poroshenko had earlier called for urgent talks, saying they should lead to "an immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the line of contact".

Pro-Russian militants had the previous week pulled out of peace talks and announced a new offensive that was followed by a rocket attack on the strategic port of Mariupol in which 31 civilians died.

Mr Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader, appeared to pin the blame on the West for the worsening situation, saying sanctions which had cut Russian access to US and European capital markets threatened to spiral into open warfare.

"Where will that lead all of us? A Cold War is already being waged openly. What's next?" the 83-year-old Nobel peace prize winner asked. "Unfortunately I cannot say for sure that a Cold War will not lead to a 'hot' one."

Russia's resurgence has alarmed eastern members of the EU that used to be in the Soviet sphere of influence.

Poland, which has taken a harsh tone against Moscow, said on January 29 it will soon allow civilians to sign up for military training as it boosts its defence system due to anxiety over events in Ukraine.

The Ukrainian rebels have made good their threat to push into the important eastern industrial lands that still answer to Kiev, with fears that they could open up a land corridor linking Russia to the annexed Black Sea peninsula of Crimea.

Combined with a slump in oil prices, the Western sanctions have plunged Russia into recession and seen Standard and Poor's slap a "junk" rating on Moscow's debt.

- AFP



CAIRO

Egypt suffers d

MILITANTS fired a barrage of rockets and set off a car bomb last week killing at least 26 people, mostly soldiers, in Egypt's North Sinai province, where security forces are battling a raging Islamist insurgency.

The deadly assaults on January 29 were swiftly claimed by the Egyptian affiliate of the Islamic State group that has captured chunks of territory in Syria and Iraq.

Jihadists have regularly attacked security forces in the Sinai Peninsula since Islamist president Mohamed Morsi was ousted by then-army chief and now-President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in July 2013.

They say this is in retaliation for a bloody government crackdown against Morsi supporters that has left hundreds dead, thousands jailed and dozens sentenced to death after speedy trials that the United Nations says are "unprecedented in recent history".

The main focus of the January 29 attacks was El-Arish, the provincial capital, where a military base, a police headquarters, a residential complex for army and police officers, and several army checkpoints were targeted in the biggest such simultaneous assaults since October, officials said.

Twenty-five people, mostly soldiers, were killed when several rockets and a suicide car bomber

'Terrorist elements have attacked several police and army headquarters.'

Egyptian military statement

struck the targets within minutes.

"Terrorist elements have attacked several police and army headquarters and facilities using explosive-laden vehicles and rockets," the military said in a statement, adding there was an exchange of fire between troops and militants.

The Islamic State group's Egyptian affiliate, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, claimed the assaults in a Twitter account linked to it.

Egypt's deadliest jihadist group said it "executed extensive, simultaneous attacks in the cities of El-Arish, Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah" in North Sinai.

Security officials said militants first fired rockets at the El-Arish police headquarters, the military base and the housing complex, which was followed quickly by a suicide car bombing targeting the rear gate of the military base.

They said the death toll was high in El-Arish as a group of soldiers and officers were gathered at the rear gate of the military base when the car bomber attacked.

Militants also attacked a military checkpoint south of El-Arish, wounding four soldiers.

In a separate assault an army officer was killed when a rocket struck a checkpoint in the town of Rafah, on the border with the Gaza Strip.

Overall, officials said at least 62 people were wounded in the attacks in North Sinai.

In another incident a police officer was killed when struck by a bomb in the canal city of Suez, while a suspected militant mistakenly blew himself up in Port Said while planting a bomb.

The El-Arish attack was the deadliest since an October 24 assault, also near El-Arish, when militants killed 30 soldiers and wounded scores more.

It came despite a series of



European Foreign Ministers attend an emergency meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council at the European Council headquarters in Brussels on January 29. Photo: AFP

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Dated: 2 February 2015



Malaysia jet tragedy declared an "accident"

WORLD 40

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WORLD 42



Cat conundrum as thousands of illegal felines seized

WORLD 47



IN PICTURES

Photo: AFP

Members of the Greek presidential Evzoni Guards arrive at the Presidential Palace in Athens for the swearing-in ceremony of the new government on January 27. The election of the Syriza leftist party has raised fears of a possible Greek exit from the single currency area after it vowed to reduce the huge debt payments Greece has to make following its international bailouts.

ADDIS ABABA

African leaders focus on conflict

AFRICAN leaders met on January 30 for their annual summit with conflict topping the agenda, especially Nigeria's Boko Haram insurgents, as well as efforts to stem Ebola.

While the official theme of the African Union meeting was women's empowerment, leaders from the 54-member bloc were once again beset by a string of crises across the continent.

Preparatory talks last week ahead of the two-day meeting at the AU headquarters in the Ethiopian capital have seen promises by AU chief Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma to drum up "collective African efforts" to tackle the Islamists.

The AU Peace and Security Council has called for regional five-nation force of 7500 troops to deploy to stop the "horrendous" rise of the insurgents.

More than 13,000 people have been killed and more than one million made homeless by Boko Haram violence since 2009.

Leaders were also expected to elect Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe

to the organisation's one-year rotating chair, replacing Mauritania's President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz.

Mr Mugabe, a former liberation war hero who aged 90 is Africa's oldest president and the third-longest serving leader, is viewed with deep respect by many on the continent.

But he is also subject to travel bans from both the United States and European Union in protest at political violence and intimidation.

With over a dozen elections due to take place this year across Africa, the talks were also expected to focus on how to ensure peaceful polls.

The Institute for Security Studies, an African think tank, warns that "many of these are being held in a context that increases the risk of political violence".

Wars in South Sudan and the Central African Republic, both nations scheduled to hold elections, as well as in Libya were also due to draw debate.

South Sudan's warring parties met on January 29 in the latest push for a

lasting peace deal, with six previous ceasefire commitments never holding for more than a few days - and some-time just hours - on the ground.

Tens of thousands of people have been killed in more than a year of civil war, with peace talks led by the regional East African bloc IGAD due following the summit.

Also topping the agenda was the question of financing regional forces, amid broader debates on funding the AU, a thorny issue for the bloc, once heavily bankrolled by toppled Libyan strongman Moamer Kadhafi.

African leaders were also due to discuss the economic recovery of countries affected by the Ebola virus, setting up a "solidarity fund" and planning a proposed African Centre for Disease Control.

The worst outbreak of the virus in history has seen nearly 9000 deaths in a year, almost all of them in the three west African countries of Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone, and sparked a major health scare worldwide. - AFP

eadly assaults

security measures implemented by the authorities in North Sinai since the October attack.

That attack prompted the authorities to build a buffer zone along the Gaza border to prevent militants infiltrating from the Palestinian enclave.

The authorities have also imposed a state of emergency and night-time curfew in parts of North Sinai since October.

US State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki condemned the January 29 attacks, and vowed that Washington "remains steadfast in its support" of Cairo's efforts to combat terrorism.

Late last year Washington delivered 10 Apache helicopters to Egypt for joint counter-terrorism operations in the Sinai Peninsula.

The Egyptian military said January 29 attack was the result of "successful operations" carried out against jihadists by the security forces, and "the failure of Muslim Brotherhood ... in spreading chaos on the fourth anniversary of the

25 January revolution", which was marked on January 25.

On January 25, 2011, millions of Egyptians protested against then leader Hosni Mubarak, forcing him to step down.

On that date this year, Egypt marked the anniversary of the revolt. Clashes between protesters and police left 20 people dead, mostly in Cairo, triggering fresh tensions in the capital.

Since Mr Mubarak's ouster Egypt has been rocked by political and economic turmoil, leading to a security vacuum in the Sinai Peninsula.

Jihadists have killed scores of police and soldiers, mostly in the peninsula, but the authorities have blamed these attacks on Mr Mubarak's successor Mr Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood movement.

The Muslim Brotherhood denies the charges.

The army has poured troops and armour into the peninsula to fight the insurgency that has rapidly flared since Mr Morsi's ouster.

- AFP



The chairperson of the African Union Commission, Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, and Chinese vice foreign minister Zhang Ming exchange memorandums of understanding in Addis Ababa on January 27. Photo: AFP

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KUALA LUMPUR

Jet's disappearance declared 'accident'

AFTER months of uncertainty, Malaysia on January 29 formally declared flight MH370's disappearance an accident and its passengers and crew presumed dead.

The move is expected to allow claims for compensation payments to be launched, but it has angered some relatives who are demanding proof of what happened to the missing jet.

Malaysian authorities and the airline had until last week refrained from drawing firm conclusions about the fate of the plane and its 239 passengers and crew, as many desperate next-of-kin continue to insist it may have landed safely somewhere.

But the January 29 declaration was essentially a formal announcement that the plane had indeed crashed somewhere after its disappearance on March 8 and that all aboard had perished.

"It is therefore with the heaviest heart and deepest sorrow that on behalf of the government of Malaysia, we officially declare Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 an accident," civil aviation chief Azharuddin Abdul Rahman said in a televised announcement.

"All 239 of the passengers and crew on board MH370 are presumed to have lost their lives," he added.

Urging relatives to move forward, he said it was "important that families try to resume normal lives".

Malaysia Airlines later said it would begin contacting families to proceed with a "fair and reasonable" compensation process.

But Sarah Bajc, whose partner Philip Wood was on board the plane, was one of several relatives who poured scorn on the announcement.

"I think they are lying," she said of the Malaysian government and airline.

"It could very well be that the plane crashed. But there is no evidence, and until there is evidence we just can't believe them. It is impossible to bring any closure until we have proof."

Many relatives have consistently accused Malaysia's authoritarian government and its flagship carrier of a chaotic and bungled response to the plane's initial diversion that allowed the jet to disappear, and a subsequent cover-up. Those charges are strenuously denied.

The plane vanished en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing in one of history's great aviation mysteries.

Malaysia's government says satellite data indicates the plane inexplicably detoured to the remote southern Indian Ocean, which they suspect was due to "deliberate" action onboard.

But no evidence has turned up as to the fate of the plane, despite an ongoing Australian-led search of the supposed crash region - the most expensive search-and-rescue operation in history.

Whatever happened, aviation analyst Gerry Soejatman said the declaration is important to allow all parties to move forward in the baffling case.

"Unless the declaration is made, it will be tough to initiate certain legal steps for insurance matters to take place," he said.

"It's a hard step for [the families] to accept, but they have to bear in mind that someone has to pay them and everyone has to move on somehow. It's not easy but this is a fact."

Two-thirds of the passengers were



A relative of a passenger of the missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 holds a picture of Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak with the writing "Please bring back my husband" after the Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) decided to cancel a press conference in Putrajaya on January 29. Photo: AFP

Chinese nationals, and their furious accusations that Malaysia had concealed information drew China's government into the fray, straining bilateral ties when Beijing criticised the disaster response.

Speaking after Mr Azharuddin's announcement, Chinese premier Li Keqiang called the loss of MH370 a "great misfortune".

"We also hope Malaysia can keep its promises to continue the investigation of the event, pay compensation and also comfort the families. But most importantly, they should use all means to try to find the victims," he said.

Malaysian authorities say they launched investigations immediately after the disappearance, but they

have so far released no findings, infuriating families.

Ms Bajc said she was never contacted by Malaysian authorities, and knows nobody who was.

Many also question the theory that the flight veered toward the Indian Ocean. Mr Azharuddin, however, said Malaysia would "forge ahead" with the search effort.

The government's awkward handling of last week's announcement also angered relatives, who have accused authorities and the airline of insensitivity in the past, and drew harsh criticism on social media.

A hastily scheduled press conference to announce the news was abruptly abandoned earlier on

January 29 after several family members rushed to the venue demanding to know why they were not briefed ahead of the public announcement.

The government later said separate arrangements had been made to communicate with kin, but relatives who spoke to AFP said they had not been contacted.

Elaine Chew, whose husband Tan Size Hiang was on the missing flight, said Malaysia's declaration is a blow to suffering families.

"I have a six-year-old daughter. I have told her that her father is missing. She wants him back for her birthday on March 14. How do I explain this to a six-year-old girl, all of a sudden?" she said. - AFP

'It's a hard step for [the families] to accept, but they have to bear in mind that someone has to pay them.'

Gerry Soejatman
Aviation analyst

DHAKA

Bangladesh boat sinks

AN overloaded fishing boat carrying migrants to Malaysia sank in strong currents off the coast of Bangladesh on January 29 and 24 passengers are missing, police said.

Emergency workers rescued 32 Bangladeshis in the Bay of Bengal after the boat capsized some 2.5 kilometres (1.5 miles) offshore, but others remained unaccounted for, police said.

"Around two dozen people are still missing. The coast guard and police are continuing their rescue operation. The rescued passengers told us that the boat had up to 60 people aboard," local police chief Masud Alam said.

"All the passengers are Bangladeshi and they were heading to Malaysia by sea illegally."

Estimates varied on the total number of passengers, with private TV station Somoy saying 100 had been on board when it sank near the Bangladesh island of Kutubdia.

The boat hit strong currents shortly after leaving a coastal town near the southern port city of Chittagong, Mr Alam said.

Thousands of poor Bangladeshis and ethnic Rohingya refugees from Myanmar try to migrate to Malaysia every year on a perilous and sometimes fatal 3200-kilometre (2000-mile) journey.

Rights groups say thousands have perished along the way, while thousands more have fallen into the hands of people-traffickers. - AFP

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SYDNEY

Police gunfire killed Sydney siege victim

RICOCHETS from police gunfire killed one of the two hostages who died in a 16-hour siege at a central Sydney cafe in December, an inquest into the deadly stand-off heard last week.

Barrister and mother-of-three Katrina Dawson, 38, died along with cafe manager Tori Johnson, 34, and Iranian-born gunman Man Haron Monis, 50, when police stormed the financial district cafe in the early hours of December 16.

"Ms Dawson was struck by six fragments of a police bullet or bullets which ricocheted from hard surfaces into her

body," counsel assisting the coroner's inquest, Jeremy Gormly, said.

"I will not detail the damage done to Ms Dawson other than to say that one fragment struck a major blood vessel. She lost consciousness quickly and died shortly afterwards."

Seventeen hostages were holed up in the Lindt chocolate cafe, with the New South Wales Coroners' Court likely to call on those who survived to give evidence during the inquest, Mr Gormly said.

"Difficult as it may be for them, it seems unavoidable that they will be asked to give evidence.

"They are our eyes and ears and memory of what happened during those hours inside the Lindt cafe," he said.

The inquest will outline what happened, hear about the hostages' experiences, investigate how NSW Police managed the siege, and delve into the background and motivations of Monis.

A separate investigation commissioned by the federal and New South Wales governments is set to submit a report in the next few days. The inquest will review the report's findings.

The stand-off shocked Australians, with thousands laying bouquets at a



Photos of Katrina Dawson and Tori Johnson are displayed at a memorial in Sydney, Australia, on December 23. Photo: AFP

large makeshift memorial near the Lindt chocolate cafe.

Mr Gormly said Mr Johnson was shot in the back of the head by Monis with a sawn-off shotgun just moments after several hostages escaped.

"Johnson was made by Mr Monis to kneel on the floor of the cafe. After a short lapse of time, Mr Monis simply shot him without further notice or warning in the back of the head," he said.

"The end of the barrel was about 75 centimetres [30 inches] from Mr Johnson's head at the moment of discharge."

Outside the court, one of the hostages who escaped in the first few hours, 82-year-old John O'Brien, told news.com.au it was "upsetting" to hear about Mr Johnson's final minutes.

Mr Gormly said the killing was witnessed by a police marksman, which led to the order for police "tactical operatives" to storm the cafe.

Some 22 shots were fired by the officers after 11 flashbangs were thrown into the room, while Monis fired two shots, the hearing was told.

"Bullets and fragments of bullets hit Mr Monis, who was, it seems, killed instantly," Mr Gormly said.

"At least two bullets, police bullets or bullet fragments, hit Mr Monis in the head and 11 other bullets, police bullets or fragments, hit him in the body."

During the stand-off, Monis fired a total of five rounds from his shotgun, which he took into the cafe on December 15 at 8:33am.

None of the rounds struck anyone

apart from Mr Johnson, "although he appears to have been trying to do so", Mr Gormly added.

The inquest will look into Monis's claims his actions were an attack on Australia by the Islamic State group and whether he had any terrorist associations.

But Mr Gormly noted "at present it seems he had not established any contact" with the militant organisation.

Questions raised in the siege's aftermath about why Monis, who had a history of extremism and violence, was free on bail, despite facing serious charges including abetting the murder of his ex-wife, will be explored.

"If there were defects in the management of the siege, they will be exposed," Mr Gormly said. - AFP

'The [other hostages] are our eyes and ears and memory of what happened at the cafe.'

Jeremy Gormly
Coroner's counsel



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SEOUL

Art deal far from picture-perfect

AFTER years of flying to North Korea with "bags full of money" and returning with hundreds of works of art, investor Frans Broersen believes he has pre-emptively secured a lucrative slice of a market so specialised it barely exists.

Some critics describe Mr Broersen's strategy as more akin to carpet-bagging than collecting, and dispute the overall quality of the works he purchased during the course of seven trips to Pyongyang beginning in 2005.

Mr Broersen says he cajoled and bribed his way into top artists' studios, met with painters' widows who brought canvasses to his hotel room, and doled out hundreds of thousands of euros in cash.

The result is a collection of around 2500 pieces of contemporary North Korean art, including some by renowned painters like Son U-Yong and Jung Chang-Mo.

A selection of nearly 150 paintings form an exhibition that opened in South Korea on January 29 at the Kintex Centre north of Seoul.

Mr Broersen, by his own admission, had "never seen a North Korean art work" before heading to Pyongyang, and is quite candid about the motives for his buying spree.

"We want a return on our investment," he said of his foundation, set up with two fellow Dutch investors. "We're not philanthropists."

Mr Broersen is following a strategy he honed by buying up Russian art around the time of the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, when prices shot up as the new market opened.

"The whole collection is a huge, long-term investment, speculating that one day the Koreans will unite, the market will open and the value of the works will rise very sharply,"

'We're not philanthropists.'

Frans Broersen
Art dealer



South Korean workers carry a North Korean painting before an opening of the art exhibition in Goyang, north of Seoul, on January 28. Photo: AFP

he said.

"At the moment, there is practically no market for North Korean art, because the works are not really being traded," he added.

The North's art scene is tightly controlled. There is no abstract art, which is regarded as anti-revolutionary by authorities, and artists are graded by the state, with the highest level being "People's Artists" like Jung and Song.

For any serious collector, there are numerous potential pitfalls.

"Provenance is always a big issue," said Carey Park, an art expert at South Korea's National University of Cultural Heritage.

Star artists often produce multiple copies of their most popular works which are also copied by other artists, so that more people can see them.

"That's one of the things that is so unique about the North Korean system," Mr Park said, noting that it

also cranks out a lot of works specifically tailored for foreign consumption. This makes finding high quality pieces, with a clear provenance and with genuine roots in the fabric of North Korean society, extremely difficult.

Koen De Cuester, an expert on North Korean art from Leiden University in the Netherlands, stressed that a hefty bankroll was no substitute for expertise and inside knowledge.

"Just because a painting hails from North Korea does not make it representative of North Korean art," said Mr De Cuester.

"They produce a lot that caters explicitly to foreign tastes, or what they perceive foreign tastes to be, and the artistic merit of those works is questionable, no matter how well executed," he added.

Mr De Cuester pointed specifically to one painting in Mr Broersen's show depicting a bikini-clad woman

and child paddling in water.

"That is not an art work that would be shown in North Korea. It is exclusively painted for the foreign market," he said.

In Mr De Cuester's opinion there are only two or three top-quality private collections of North Korean art.

"And they have been built from years or even decades of working on North Korean art, being exposed to it, knowing the artists and having familiarity on the ground," he said.

Mr Broersen started buying on just his second trip, when he got through 300,000 euros (around US\$340,000 as current rates), relying on his "intuitive" nose for quality.

"I literally arrived there with bags full of money and spent it in what, for them, was an incredible way," he said, recalling a visit to Son U-Yong's studio.

After agreeing the price for a certain size of painting, Mr Broersen told them he wanted "this one, that one, that, that, that ... and so on".

"I bought up to 25 or 30 paintings. Their mouths fell open of course. I spent God knows how much money," he said.

One consequence of Mr Broersen's largesse was that the next time he went, the prices he was quoted had shot up, sometimes ten-fold.

By his third trip, Mr Broersen said artists and the relatives of painters who had recently died started seeking him out in his hotel room with works for sale.

"There were widows and pensioners and young artists. They brought rolled-up canvasses and we communicated [prices] with hands and fingers," he said.

Mr Broersen's last visit was in 2010.

Despite the perennial tensions between the two Koreas, Mr Broersen's show is by no means the first of North Korean art in the South.

At one point such exhibitions were quite common, although they dried up after 2010 when contact was essentially frozen following the sinking of a South Korean naval vessel. - AFP

PHNOM PENH

Cambodia bans virgin surgery

THE Cambodian government has ordered a hospital to stop advertising so-called virginity restoration procedures, saying it harms the "morality" of society.

A number of Cambodian clinics quietly offer hymenoplasty - a procedure commonly sought after in countries where a woman's virginity is prized - but Phnom Penh's Victoria International Hospital is unusual in publicly advertising their services.

In a letter dated January 23 and seen by AFP on January 29, Information Minister Khieu Kanharith told the hospital to "halt the advertisement offering virgin surgery".

"Your hospital has been advertising services about the technology of virgin surgery and altering women's vaginas on radio, TV, and in newspapers with excessive commentary which affects the long-lasting morality and beautiful traditions of Cambodian society," Mr Kanharith said.

He added that the adverts also harmed "the dignity of other patients" who come to the hospital for unrelated treatment. He did not directly condemn the surgical procedure itself.

In a separate letter, Mr Kanharith ordered all media outlets in the country to immediately pull the adverts.

The hospital did not respond to requests for comment.

Cambodian women are under intense pressure to retain their virginity until marriage, as in many societies in Asia. Some seek procedures to restore their hymen, despite the fact that the presence of an intact hymen, which can easily be broken without engaging in sexual activity, is not regarded as an effective way to test virginity.

Opposition lawmaker and former minister of women's affairs Mu Sochua said hymen restoration procedures should be banned and urged officials to check whether hospitals had doctors qualified to carry out such procedures.

"[Such] surgery can seriously harm reproductive health ... if it is not done professionally," she said. - AFP

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OPINION

Obama pivots to India? Time to hear a strategy

NO return visit yet to Myanmar, but a visit to India last week by US President Barack Obama may signify that South Asia is, like Southeast Asia, finally getting some well-deserved US attention as part of the so-called American rebalance - or what was once known as the "pivot" - to Asia. That's a welcome change as America and America's policymakers wake up to the obvious, namely that there is more to Asia than China, and that an Asia strategy is more than a grab bag of programs seeking to match China's efforts.

Yet, in his State of the Union address to the American public on January 20, Mr Obama gave short shrift to Asia, while proclaiming past successes and outlining an agenda for further improving the US economy. "The shadow of crisis has passed," he declared, "and the state of the union is strong."

Pointedly, the US president chose not to use his 70-minute annual address to explain what can be a critical part of his economic agenda. That is, increased engagement and strengthened trade relations with the entire Asia-Pacific region, including nations, such as India, that rarely make the US headlines. Too often, East Asia alone has seemed the predominant focus of the US policy pivot eastward. Perhaps, it is understandable that there was no mention of Myanmar with Mr Obama focusing on his plans to normalise US relations with Cuba. But there also was no mention even of his then-upcoming visit to India. Americans may well have wondered where their president had gone so soon after concluding his State of the Union address.

Now, fresh from India - the first time a sitting US president has visited that nation twice - Mr Obama has some easy explaining to do when he lands back in Washington. Indeed, a real opportunity for expanded engagement is at hand, as ties improve between the United States, the world's oldest democracy, and India, the world's largest democracy.

US State Department statistics about the benefits of US-India trade provide a rationale and a context for why Mr Obama was back in Asia, and in India in particular:

- US-India bilateral trade expanded from US\$19 billion in 2000 to \$95

billion in 2013, with US goods exports to India totalling \$35 billion, supporting an estimated 168,000 U jobs;

- Cumulative Indian investment in the United States totalled \$9 billion in 2012, supporting 100,000 jobs;
- More than 850,000 Indians visited the United States in 2013, and more than 1 million Americans visited India, the largest group of international tourists; and
- Approximately 100,000 Indian students, the second-largest group of foreign students, studied in the United States for the 2012-13 academic year, contributing more than \$3 billion to the US economy.

With the International Monetary Fund expecting India's economy to grow by 6.3 percent in 2015 and by 6.5pc in 2016, outpacing that of China there is good reason for the US pivot to head southward, to India. These figures will grow if reforms take hold in India.

But, India should be only one part of comprehensive US engagement with an Asia-Pacific region that is wary of China's growing assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea. China is already engaged across the region, economically of course, but also through development assistance, cultural exchanges, and educational programs. Myanmar knows China's involvement firsthand.

What might an expanded US pivot to all Asia - a rebalance of the rebalance if you will - include?

First, the United States must embrace a business pivot that goes beyond the large China marketplace, and that looks to opportunities that exist in South Asia and Southeast Asia. Already, US investment in Southeast Asia surpasses that in all four BRIC nations - Brazil, Russia, India and China - and can be built upon. This would entail a concerted effort to geographically rebalance US efforts across the region, with a particular emphasis on strengthening economic ties with India and Indonesia among others. Longtime allies with which the United States has defence ties, including Japan, the Philippines and South Korea, must also be reassured that the United States is here to stay.

Second, the Obama administration and US Congress must work

to advance trade and commercial efforts that work for all involved. A bipartisan effort is needed to ensure adequate resources for a trade policy and a US Foreign Commercial Service that benefits small businesses, not just big multinationals.

Additionally, Washington must also set an example for the rest of the world by ensuring that intellectual property rights are protected, and that tax policies do not discourage business success by its own citizens, particularly American entrepreneurs, whether working directly in Asia or exporting product from America.

Third, US companies must also do their part by acting responsibly in every market they operate. This may well entail going beyond the letter of the law in such emerging markets in Southeast and South Asia as Myanmar but also Bangladesh, Cambodia and Sri Lanka, where regulatory deficiencies make it challenging to operate, but where US investment and good practices can have a significant impact.

A central benefit of peace and stability in Asia—a stated goal of the U.S. rebalance to the region—is greater commercial opportunities throughout Asia. Trade and economic ties can be part of the means to a strategic solution in the region, and not just the ends.

State visits to India, State of the Union addresses and participation in Asia's annual array of summits may provide for beautiful photos, but what really matters is the hard work that follows. America certainly matters to Asia, but building the support of the American people and US Congress for strengthened economic and trade ties with not just India but the entire Asia-Pacific region - Myanmar and the rest of the soon-to-be ASEAN Economic Community included - will also require US leaders who are serious about also explaining and showing that Asia matters to America.

Curtis S Chin, a former US ambassador to the Asian Development Bank, is a managing director of advisory firm RiverPeak Group. Jose B Collazo is a Southeast Asia analyst and an associate of River Peak Group. Follow them on Twitter at @CurtisSChin and @JoseBCollazo.

BANGKOK

Junta leader 'upset' by US comments

THAILAND'S junta chief said last week he was "upset" by comments from a senior US diplomat during a recent visit criticising the military regime, as Washington's top envoy in Bangkok was summoned for a meeting with Thai officials.

On January 26 US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel urged Thailand's generals to implement a "more inclusive political process" after meeting ousted former premier Yingluck Shinawatra.

He added that moves against Ms Yingluck since the military takeover, which have included a retroactive impeachment by the country's rubber-stamp parliament, and corruption charges, could be perceived as being "politically driven".

But the visit and Mr Russel's decision to meet Ms Yingluck have hit a raw nerve with Thailand's junta rulers, who took over in a May coup strongly condemned by Washington.

"I have instructed the foreign ministry to convey the message that we are upset over the comments and that they [the US] have not understood how we work," junta chief and premier Prayut Chan-O-Cha told reporters on January 28, placing his right hand on his heart as he spoke.

His comments were echoed by Deputy Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai who said Mr Russel had "wounded the hearts of many Thai people", adding that he had "invited" the current head of Washington's embassy in Bangkok, charges d'affaires W Patrick Murphy, to talk about the visit.

The military's takeover of Thailand,

which has been accompanied by martial law, a ban on political protests and severe curtailments on free expression, has strained Washington's relationship with its longtime ally.

The US suspended US\$4.7 million in security-related aid to Thailand, roughly half of its annual assistance to the kingdom, following the coup.

The previous week Ms Yingluck was impeached by a junta-stacked parliament, meaning an automatic five-year ban from politics, and prosecutors announced corruption charges that could see her jailed for 10 years.

During a speech at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Mr Russel, the most senior US official to visit Thailand since the coup, said "the perception of fairness is important" while stressing the US was not taking sides in Thai politics.

"When an elected leader is deposed, impeached by the authorities that implemented the coup, and then targeted with criminal charges while basic democratic processes and institutions are interrupted, the international community is left with the impression that these steps could be politically driven," he said.

Last week also saw the leader of the opposition Red Shirt movement to two years in prison for defaming a former premier, a move analysts said was the latest attack against critics of the military regime.

The court convicted Red Shirts chair Jatuporn Prompan on two counts of defamation against former royalist prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva during speeches he made in October 2009. - AFP



Ousted Thai prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra attends impeachment proceedings at the parliament in Bangkok on January 22. Photo: AFP

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HANOI

Cat conundrum for custom officials

THOUSANDS of live cats destined "for consumption" have been seized in Hanoi after being smuggled from China, police said on January 29, but their fate still hangs in the balance.

Cat meat, known locally as little tiger, is a popular delicacy in Vietnam, and although officially banned is widely available in specialist restaurants.

The truck containing "three tons" of live cats was discovered in the Vietnamese capital on January 27, an officer from Dong Da district police station told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The truck driver told police he had purchased the cats in northeastern Quang Ninh province, which

borders China, and that they had all been sourced from the neighbouring country.

He told police the cats were destined "for consumption" in Hanoi, without specifying whether they would be sold to restaurants.

The officer said that according to Vietnamese laws on smuggled goods, all the cats would have to be destroyed.

"But we have not made up our mind what to do with them" because of the large volume of animals, the policeman said.

Photos on local media websites showed the smuggled cats crammed into dozens of bamboo crates stacked on top of one another.

Vietnam has long banned the

consumption of cat meat in an effort to encourage their ownership and keep the country's rat population under control.

But there are still dozens of restaurants serving cat in Hanoi and it is rare to see felines roaming the streets. Most pet-owners keep them indoors or tied up in fear of thieves.


Such is the demand from restaurants that cats are sometimes smuggled across the border from China, Thailand and Laos.

Cat meat is not widely eaten in China but can be found at some restaurants, particularly in the south, where it is sometimes considered a speciality.

- AFP



Cats poke their paws out of cages in a seized truck in Hanoi on January 27. Photo: AFP








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the pulse

The art of conjuring is more than just tricks and 'abracadabra'...

it's a kind of
magi





Photo: Yu Yu

NANDAR AUNG

nandaraung.mcm@gmail.com



DO you believe in magic? Conjuror Ko Khaing Myat, who once made his safe but mundane job with an NGO vanish in a metaphorical puff of smoke in order to follow his dream, still hopes to perform the ultimate trick: winning over a sceptical public.

Now aged 40, it has taken him much of his life to get even his parents to believe in his grand illusion. They shared the older generation's common prejudice about tricksters, card-sharps and prestidigitators whose quick hands deceive the unwary eye.

"When I was young, they told me magicians are swindlers who live by cheating people. And their life is tough," he said.

Ko Khaing Myat's home in Kyeemyindaing township, Yangon, which he shares with his wife and their 7-year-old son, as well as his parents, is also where he stores the artefacts of his arcane trade in tottering piles of coloured boxes. Upon entering, a visitor is struck by the scent of his menagerie of bird and animal familiars - the pigeons, parrots, falcons, snakes, hamsters, dogs (which can play with fire) and rabbits whose cages fill the house.

The life of a traditional magician in the middle of the last century was a difficult one. At home only in the rainy season, the family spent the rest of the year on the road travelling from one pagoda festival to the next, along with the vendors of local or exotic snacks and itinerant entertainers - nomadic carnival folk who trudged or trundled from village to dusty village, trekking across the paddy fields to the next golden spire to peddle their wares and amuse the faithful.

It was as a teenager that Ko Khaing Myat first embarked on learning the art of conjuring, gathering magical tools and materials by day or by the dark of the moon, acquiring magical treatises, watching foreign movies on the dark arts and secretly performing - with or without smoke - in front of the bathroom mirror. When the travelling circus came to town, he could not resist the force that directed his feet to the conjuring sideshows, and he strove to infiltrate their mysterious world.

His parents, however, urged him to go to college in search of a more prestigious profession. After graduating with a degree in zoology, he supported his family by working for an NGO. But his secret desire to enchant and deceive stayed with him.

"I can't forget the day I first made magic before my colleagues. I can't sing or dance but when I entertained them with my tricks I was proud of myself for the first time in my life," he said.

The dawn of this magical career was World Red Cross Day, 2005, held at Yangon's University of Nursing, attended by then-Prime Minister U Khin Nyunt.

That same year, Ko Khaing Myat had chance to appear on television. His performances were shown on MRTV, MRTV-4 and 5 Network while, at weekends, he entertained visitors to the National Zoological Gardens.

Five years on, in 2010, he quit his NGO job to embrace all things magical on a full-time basis. Last year, he signed a contract with Champs Kid Tonic Company and organised events and celebrations for local businesses. His parents no longer looked unfavourably on his work and even told their friends about their son, "Magic Ko Khaing".

Peering into his crystal screen, he scoured international magical websites for new illusions, developing a particular interest in fire. He learned at the feet of Sak Kaw Ma, Myanmar's greatest magician and the author of arcane works on illusion.

"I don't care what people think of magicians. Your great magician is a genius," said Ko Khaing Myat. "The true master of magic must be sharp of wit and hungry to know more. Most important is perseverance. We don't give up easily."

Practitioners of the art also need to be skilled carpenters, joiners, welders and mechanics, and to have mastered origami. They become steeped in the physical

and magical properties of different kinds of wood and metal as they engineer their artefacts for stage purposes. You cannot buy sorcery supplies at the hardware store.

"Aptitude in the use of all these technical skills is essential. And then, there's the staging technique," he said. It isn't just misdirection and patter. A master magician must be a commanding presence, capable of directing the attention of the audience to where he wants it to go, and diverting and distracting their eyes from things that should remain hidden, right there in the limelight. Such artistry is the result of years of study and practice, and cannot be had just by waving a wand.

Experience has taught Ko Khaing Myat that there are three orders of magician in Myanmar. Some are professionals who perform on the formal stage amid coloured lights in front of prosperous audiences of businesspeople. Then there are the journeymen itinerants playing at *zat pwal*, charging the locals a K1500 entrance fee. Inhabiting the lowest circle are the light-fingered amateurs, conjurers or compilers of tricks for everyday magic books. Some even sell snacks.

All tend to be solitary, retiring to their homes to work on their illusions alone, wary of sharing their art with others.

But the wind of change has begun to lift the dark cloak, and Ko Khaing Myat thinks attitudes may be changing. He has recently found that many young magic lovers meet to share their passion for conjuring, even making videos to share their secrets and their tricks through social media.

"It amazed me to find this. I was delighted, because it means the number of magicians will grow," he said, adding that he now teaches a magic class for aspiring conjurers.

Zin Ko, a 16-year-old student and enthusiastic sorcerer's apprentice from South Dagon, said, "Too many magicians are still using old materials and old tricks that they've shown more than a hundred times. That doesn't interest us. We're looking for something new. The old ways have to change."

In a society that has seen the number of young singers, models, footballers, designers, hairdressers, actors and directors multiply, the number of popular magicians and illusionists is sadly unchanged.

Young audiences want movies, sport and fashion, rock and hip-hop. They won't spend K3000, let alone K10,000, to see magic tricks.

"We have to prove to them that magic is precious, and worth the price of admission. We have to try harder to cast our spell on the audience," says Magic Ko Khaing.

One perhaps prosaic way of doing so is by creating a professional association, along the lines of the Myanmar Motion Picture

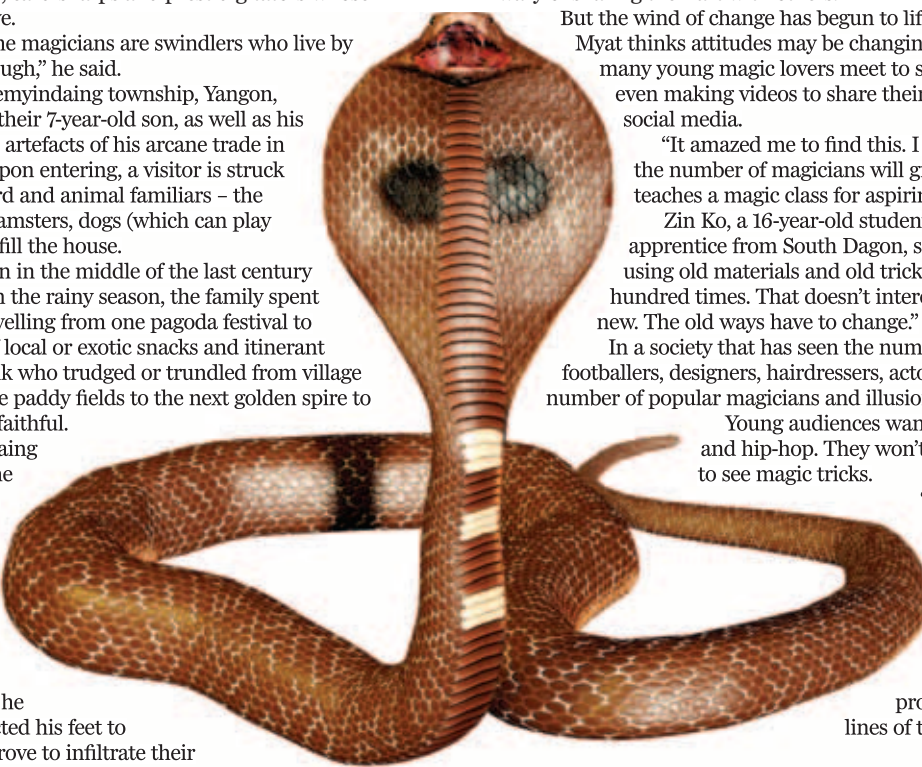
"The true master of magic must be sharp of wit and hungry to know more. Most important is perseverance. We don't give up easily."

Organisation and the Myanmar Music Association that superintend their respective industries. In the absence of a Wizards' Union, magicians face ignorance and lack of interest.

By official decree, magicians and circus artists must join the Myanmar Theatrical Association and hold an MTA card, and discuss their shows with the association.

"If we united to found a Myanmar Circus and Magic Association, we could arrange some incredible shows and exchange tricks with each other. It could breath life into the industry," he said. "But for now, we all work separately."

In the mind of Magic Ko Khaing there is a splendid vision of coloured lights and swirling mystery. On a high stage before thousands of eyes, the silver-tongued conjurer produces startling effects through his command of intricate concealed machines and the most cunning sleight of hand. A Myanmar version of the great illusionist David Copperfield, he is surrounded by bewitching young women in sequins and spangles, and with an "abracadabra" he can conjure \$100 dollar bills out of the audience's pockets in exchange for a ticket. As if by magic.



Saving the city's strays

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If the city's stray dogs could speak, they would have a sorry tale to tell: canine companions killed by unscrupulous car drivers, puppies left to drown in sewers, sick and injured dogs lying lifeless and uncared for on the streets of Yangon.

Most simply ignore them, stepping over them in the street and taking no notice of their cries for help. But animal rescue charity Shwe Yaung Hnalone Thar seeks to save the lives of these four-legged friends. Animal lover Ma Hnin Si - along with veterinarian Dr Aung Thit Oo and three of their friends - established the charity in July after finding a sick dog in the street suffering

from a skin disease.

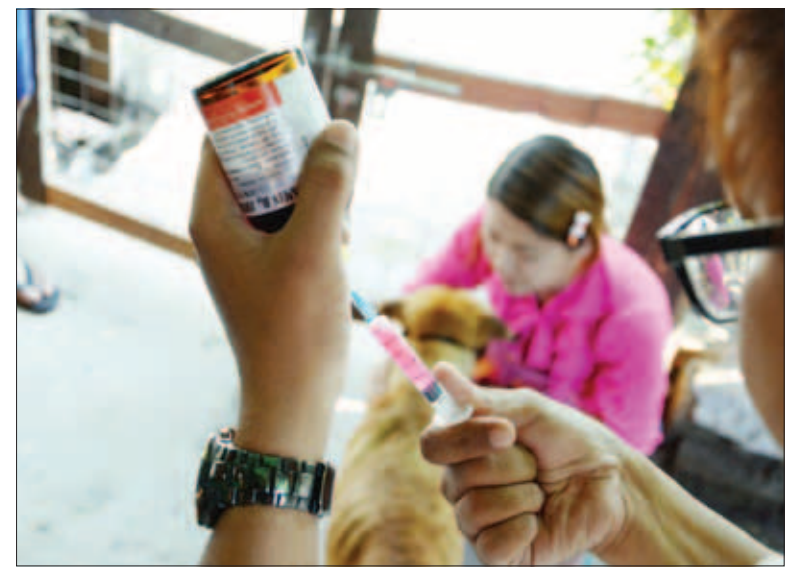
"My friend and I found him lying on the street in North Okkalapa. His whole body was covered with puss-filled wounds. We brought him to the veterinary clinic," said Ma Hnin Si.

The vet, Dr Aung Thit Oo, treated the dog for free.

"We used to talk about the problem of stray dogs when we were in the clinic, and Dr Aung Thi Oo shared our sympathy for them. After the dog recovered we decided to start a charity that cures sick and injured stray dogs," Ma Hnin Si said.

Dr Aung Thit Oo works at his clinic in North Okkalapa until noon every day, before heading out to look for stray dogs with Ma Hnin Si and their group on the streets of Yangon. The most common problems they treat include tumours, skin diseases, venereal disease, paralysis and hernias. They provide medication and vaccinations for dogs suffering from diseases, including chemotherapy to those with cancer. If a dog is seriously injured and requires an operation, they take it to the clinic.

Ma Hnin Si posts the group's activities on Facebook in the hope of attracting donors. Instead of donations, she gets over 20 calls a day from Yangon residents concerned about sick dogs. Half of the calls the charity



Dr Aung Thit Oo prepares to vaccinate a stray dog. Photos: Aung Htay Hlaing

receives concern dogs that have been injured by cars.

"Some drivers think it doesn't matter if they kill a dog. Some even intentionally hit the dogs with their cars. More often than not, the animals sustain leg and head injuries," Dr Aung Thit Oo said.

The group takes X-rays of dogs that get hit by cars and perform surgery if they have broken bones. If the dog requires intensive care after an operation, Ma Hnin Si cares for it at her home.

"If a dog is able to survive on the street, we free it. But most handicapped dogs can't survive, so we look for people to adopt them," Dr Aung Thit Oo said.

It's not easy finding people to adopt stray dogs. But there are some who are willing to give them a home.

"There is a rich man who shelters stray dogs that have been injured in accidents. I take them to him," said Ma Hnin Si. "Dogs that have been in accidents don't usually live for long, so he usually has space to house more dogs," she added.

Cars aren't the only threat facing the city's strays. Dr Aung Thit Oo also treats dogs that have been injured as a result of deliberate cruelty.

"There are people who love stray dogs but there are also people who throw stones at sleeping dogs

intentionally," he said.

"We found a dog whose head was broken because a resident hit him, and a dog that was stabbed with a knife," Ma Hnin Si said.

In order to reduce the growing population of stray dogs and to prevent the spread of rabies, YCDC carries out a monthly cull of stray dogs. According to the committee's Veterinary and Slaughterhouses Department, around 1052 dogs have been killed by poison or castrated this month alone.

"If the department receives complaints from residents about dogs causing danger to passers-by on their street, the department clears them. Some residents want us to poison them," a spokesperson from the department said.

But Dr Aung Thit Oo disagrees that this is the best way to deal with the problem. "Culling stray dogs is not the solution. A better solution is to castrate them to stop them reproducing," he said.

Dr Aung Thit Oo hopes that by continuing to save the lives of Yangon's sick and injured dogs, the group will change people's attitudes about stray animals.

"I hope that our activities will create sympathy for stray dogs and encourage drivers not to put their lives in danger," he said.



Ma Hnin Si (right), founder of animal rescue charity Shwe Yaung Hnalone Thar, checks the health of a stray dog.

Italian filmmakers document nat spirit tradition

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IN the small village of Kyaukmyaung, near Shwebo, Sagaing Region, back in 2010, Italian documentary filmmaker Valeria Testagrossa first learned of the importance of nat spirits. She knew she had to return with a film crew and make a documentary about the subject.

Last week, she and fellow director Nicola Grignani spoke to *The Myanmar Times* about their experiences during more than a month of shooting in Kyaukmyaung with their colleague Andrea Zambelli.

What impressed her most was villagers' sense of connection with the spirit world around them.

"Things like this don't exist in Italy," said Testagrossa, 28. "And with my anthropology background, I was fascinated. Nats have symbolic ritual importance for the community. In Italy, this kind of thing has been totally lost and that makes people individualistic because there is nothing more to unite them."

According to Myanmar Buddhist belief, nats are the spirits of people whose lives were interrupted, usually by a violent death.

"It seems Buddhism and animism can go together without any problems. In Italy, if you are Catholic you can't believe in witches. The synchronism between Buddhism and ancient culture makes Myanmar really special," she said.

"When people ask the nats to help them, they are actually sharing with other people and asking for advice. This is something we have lost in our culture. The community gathers and creates a space in which something can happen because the symbolic meaning becomes real. And it works."

Despite being fully immersed in the modern world - with a motorcycle and a mobile phone - the village shaman still has the power to communicate with the spirit world. "It is really interesting how the nats communicate with the shaman and take possession of his body," Testagrossa said.

She found nat traditions to be a powerful force in village life. "People have the chance to help each other and to know each other," she said. "We in the West live in individualistic societies where people don't know their own neighbours and are just fighting for more and more things."

"In the past human beings were really more like animals, with big families living together with no privacy. It's very important to have a means of helping each other. The nat rituals are part of this way of living in Kyaukmyaung and they are indispensable for the maintenance of the community," she said.

After several weeks of filming in the village, she said she didn't feel like a foreigner at all.

"The villagers always protected me and welcomed me and I love

these people. I never had to worry about anything when I was there. And there was good food, rice and curries."

All three filmmakers are from towns near Milan - Bergamo and Pavia. Their previous documentaries include *The Art of Displacement* (2013) about urban exercise art form parkour, a holistic training movement that consists of running, climbing, swinging and jumping, originally developed in France. Shot in her hometown of Bergamo, the film shows an encounter between Italian and Palestinian practitioners.

Another of their films, *Strip Life*, was filmed on location in the Gaza Strip in January 2013.

The crew spent about 45 days working with Palestinian filmmakers. "The tragic events in Gaza are well known, so our aim was to tell another Gaza story," said Testagrossa. "We show the everyday, normal Gaza life in a place where nothing is normal."

Completed in November, 2013, the prizewinning film was shown at 60 festivals.

The group's documentary-style films are somewhat unusual in that there is almost no dialogue - just images and natural sounds, sometimes with a little background music.

The low-budget film won so many accolades that it was shown in cinemas in Italy - a notable achievement as most cinemas don't usually feature documentary films.

Valeria, whose parents are both



Italian filmmaker Valeria Testagrossa poses for a photo at The Myanmar Times Mandalay Bureau on January 22. Photo: Stuart Alan Becker

teachers, said, "I always had the urge to tell stories. Philosophy, poetry, images, narration - everything that I love goes into that language of video."

If a film is successful, they get a contract with a cinema which owns

and distributes the film and sells it to television, cinemas or home videos.

But mostly she is forced to do commercial filming to make a living. She and her crew flew last week to Honduras to shoot a reality show.

WEEKLY PREDICTIONS

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AQUARIUS | Jan 20 - Feb 18



Prioritise your time carefully this week to ensure you devote enough time to the things that matter. A judicious combination of hard work, clear thinking, humour and self-confidence will be the key to getting things done. Challenging your beliefs about yourself and recognising areas for self-improvement will result in a positive change.

GEMINI | May 21 - June 20



Don't take negative words or actions personally. Part of being a spiritual being is dealing with the human experience with courage and enthusiasm. If you've been feeling held back from where you want to go lately, you can find the culprit in the mirror. You have commitments that are non-negotiable, but ultimately you're the only one who is keeping you from doing what you'd like to.

LIBRA | Sept 23 - Oct 22



You are soon to experience some intense ups and downs. Try to maintain emotional stability and remember that flexibility can save your sanity when nothing feels predictable. Take steps to boost your self-esteem, as feeling good about yourself will help you to focus better on others. Take the initiative in dealing with a project later in the week.

PISCES | Feb 19 - March 20



You resolved to study this year, and now is the time to do something about it. Yesterday's training is not sufficient to meet tomorrow's challenges. A recent problem may have been buried for now, but remember that a quiet river does not mean the crocodiles have left. Resolving the issue will lead to greater peace-of-mind in the long term.

CANCER | June 21 - July 22



Others may find your habitual skepticism or blind optimism frustrating this week. Remember to look at both sides of a situation, especially when an opportunity comes your way around the 6th. Remain calm, unflappable and professional and you will impress someone important. Express your emotions within reason.

SCORPIO | Oct 23 - Nov 21



Be gentle with yourself. You know that no one is perfect, so why are you holding yourself to such an impossibly high standard? Take some time for self-reflection this week to discover what is important to you in your spiritual journey. But don't spend your time wishing you had more, as this may lead you to lose what you already have.

ARIES | Mar 21 - Apr 19



A lot is changing at the moment which may be the cause of some anxiety. Approach each new challenge as it comes and know that, in the long term, change will build resilience and open doors. Persistence and a clear mind will be the key to success toward the end of the week. Don't be afraid to show your emotions to someone close to you.

LEO | July 23 - Aug 22



This week, concentrate your attention on people and activities and maximise your social interactions. Do more: more studying, more writing, more talking, more exercise. Balance is still important, but don't limit yourself. And explore possibilities outside of your own culture and comfort zone.

SAGITTARIUS | Nov 22 - Dec 21



All positives have a corresponding negative, so you need to accept the fact that every silver lining has a cloud. Be adaptable in social relationships, and take the time to help someone who needs it this week. Your effort will be rewarded in the long run. Focus on the bright side and keep a positive perspective.

TAURUS | Apr 20 - May 20



This week, focus on developing your intellectual life. Read, listen and approach information with a critical mind. When faced with a difficult challenge it is usually not very wise to stick your head in the sand. However, this week it would do you little harm to pretend that the problem doesn't exist. Find solace in your own interests and self-confidence.

VIRGO | Aug 23 - Sept 22



Accept the challenge that comes your way at the beginning of the week and focus your energy on overcoming it. Try to develop your self-control, but at the same time live life with a sense of freedom. Good things are about to happen which will open up a world of new opportunities. Approach them with enthusiasm.

CAPRICORN | Dec 22 - Jan 19



You are surrounded by communication this week. Focus on improving the quality of your communication to save time for other things. Limit the time you spend sending emails and pay special attention to starting the conversations you need to start. But watch out for clues that someone might not be telling the whole story.

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What's on

FEBRUARY 2 - 8

Got an event?
List it in What's On!
whatsonmt@gmail.com

ART

Jan 31-Feb 2 "Art+Plug" Featuring works by Han Sann, Myint Soe Oo, Myint Thura, Thoe Htein and Wunna Aung. Entrance K500. Gallery 65, 65 Yawmingyi Street 9am-6pm

Until Feb 21 "Muted Consciousness." An exhibition of black and white photographs, paintings and documents from the 1950s. TS1 Gallery, between Lanthit Jetty and Kaing Dan, Transit Shed 1, Oo-Pa-Sa Street 10am-6pm

Until Mar 31 "Global City: Yangon's Past, Present and Future." Exhibition of photographs capturing Yangon's past, present and future. Yangon Heritage Trust, 1st floor, 22 Pansodan Street (lower block) 9am-5pm daily.

FILM

Start times at Mingalar (1, 2), Top Royal, Shae Shaung (1, 2) and Nay Pyi Taw cinemas are 10am, 12:30pm, 3:30pm, 6:30pm and 9:30pm.

Start times at Junction Square and Junction Maw Tin are 9:30am, 12:30pm, 3:30pm and 6:30pm daily and 9:30am, 12:30pm, 3:30pm, 6:30pm and 9:30pm on Friday and Saturday.

Start times at Mingalar San Pya are 10am, 12:30pm, 3:30pm, 6:30pm and 9:30pm.

Nay Pyi Taw Cinema, near Sule Pagoda

Seventh Son. Directed by Sergej Bodrov. Fantasy film.

As Above So Below. Directed by John Erick Dowdle. American horror film.

I Fine Thank You Love You. Directed by Mez Tharatorn. Thai comedy drama.

Mingalar Cinema 2, at Dagon Center 2, Myaynigone

I Fine Thank You Love You.

Shae Shaung Cinema, Sule Pagoda Road, Kyauktada

Taken 3. Directed by Olivier Megaton. Action thriller.

Night at the Museum: Secret of the Tomb. Directed by Shawn Levy. Adventure-filled family film.

Junction Square Cineplex, Kamaryut

Kantemir. Directed by Ben Samuel. Mystery thriller.

Junction Mawtin, Lanmadaw

Spirit of Evil. Directed by Oleg Stepchenko. Dark fantasy film.

Mingalar San Pya Cineplex, Phone Gyi Street and Anawrahta, Lanmadaw

I Fine Thank You Love You.

MUSIC

Feb 2 Monday Blues. Mojo Bar, 135 Inya Road, Bahan 9:30-11:30pm

Feb 5 Folk on Fire with LN'R band. Mojo Bar, 135 Inya Road, Bahan 9:30pm

MISC

Feb 3 Gallery conversation and drinks. Pansodan Gallery, 289 Pansodan Street, Kyauktada, 7pm-late

Feb 7 Burmese Language Club. Pansodan Scene, 144 Pansodan Street, 2nd floor, Kyauktada 4pm

Feb 6-8 Myanmar International Fashion Week. Popular local and international designers will showcase their designs. Free entry. Dagon City 1, U Htaung Bo Circle (near Zoological Garden Road), Dagon 6-9pm

Until Feb 27 Funky Disco Night at Club Rizzoli. Dance the night away with Latin expert dancer Gisbrt. Music by DJ Bay Tar. Free entry. Club Rizzoli, Chatrium Hotel, 42 Natmauk Road, Tarmwe 7pm

Until Feb 28 Myanmar cultural show. An enchanting evening of Myanmar performing arts, taking you on a journey into the very heart of Myanmar history and culture. Sein Lann So Pyay Garden, Inya Road, Kamaryut 7-9pm. Tickets US\$13-19

The Global Gossip

FLORIDA

Colombia's Paulina Vega wins Miss Universe title

Colombia's Paulina Vega was crowned Miss Universe on January 25, beating out contenders from the United States, Ukraine, Jamaica and the Netherlands at the world's top beauty pageant in Florida, which was watched by around 600 million worldwide. The 22-year-old model and business student triumphed over 87 other women from around the world, and is only the second beauty queen from Colombia to take home the prize.

Vega, wearing a long silver sequined gown, was beaming and tearful as she accepted her sash and crown from reigning Miss Universe, Venezuelan Gabriela Isler.

She edged out first runner-up, Nia Sanchez from the United States, hugging her as the win was announced.

"We are proud. This is a triumph, not only personal, but for all those 47 million Colombians who were dreaming with me and were part of this whole process," she said after the win.



Miss Colombia Paulina Vega is crowned Miss Universe 2014 during the 63rd Annual Miss Universe Pageant in Florida on January 25. Photo: AFP/Timothy Clary

LOS ANGELES

Benedict Cumberbatch sorry for 'coloured' remark

Oscar-nominated actor Benedict Cumberbatch apologised on January 27 and said he was "devastated" after he referred to black colleagues as "coloured" in a US television interview.

The Briton, recently nominated for an Oscar for his role in *The Imitation Game*, said that he "sincerely" apologised.

"I'm devastated to have caused offense by using this outmoded terminology," he said in a statement.

Cumberbatch, who shot to prominence for his role in the British TV series *Sherlock*, said that using the sensitive term while talking about racial inequality made the blunder even more "shaming".

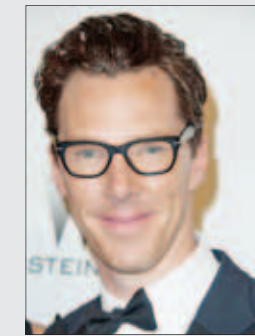
"I make no excuse for my being an idiot and know the damage is done," he added.

"I can only hope this incident will highlight the need for correct usage of terminology that is accurate and inoffensive."

Cumberbatch was speaking about a lack of racial diversity in British culture compared to the US on the PBS network when he used the word.

"As far as coloured actors go, it gets really difficult in the UK and I think a lot of my friends have had more opportunities here than in the UK, and that's something that needs to change," he said.

The controversy comes weeks before the Oscars, where Cumberbatch is nominated for best lead actor.



Benedict Cumberbatch arrives at the Weinstein Company & Netflix 2015 Golden Globes After Party in Beverly Hills on January 11. Photo: AFP/Valerie Macon

TAIPEI

Taipei mayor apologises to British minister over watch gaffe

The mayor of Taipei apologised to a visiting British minister on January 27 for joking he would send a watch she gave him for scrap - compounding embarrassment after she broke a cultural taboo by presenting him with the timepiece.

The double diplomatic gaffe came when Ko Wen-je, the newly elected mayor of Taiwan's capital, was given the watch on January 26 by British transport minister Baroness Susan Kramer.

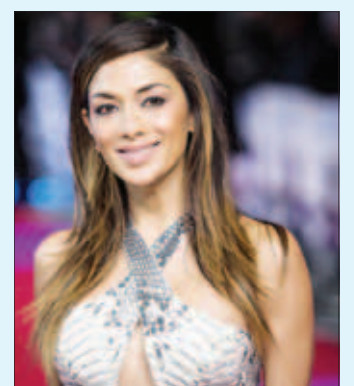
She was apparently unaware that giving clocks or watches as presents is seen as bad luck in Taiwan, due to the similar pronunciation of "giving a clock" and "attending an old person's funeral".

Ko - who has a reputation for off-the-cuff remarks - responded by telling a reporter he would "sell it to a scrap metal dealer for some money, because it would be useless to me", sparking an avalanche of criticism.

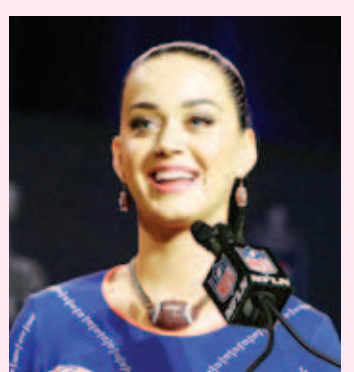
"I would like to apologise to Mrs Kramer for what I said, which was inappropriate from the diplomatic protocol and etiquette perspective," Ko said at a press conference.

He added that he needed to "take a lesson" in diplomacy, although could not suppress a smile.

But Kramer said she was "not offended" by what she described as Ko's "humour". - AFP



US singer Nicole Scherzinger arrives for the European premiere of the film *Selma* in London on January 27. Photo: AFP/Jack Taylor



Singer Katy Perry speaks during the Pepsi Super Bowl XLIV Halftime Show Press Conference at the Phoenix Convention Center on January 29. Photo: AFP/Mike Lawrie

PARK CITY

Makers of Scientology film fire back at critics

MICHAEL THURSTON

THE team behind a new Scientology documentary making a splash at the Sundance film festival hit back on January 27 after leaders of the controversial group slammed the movie as one-sided.

The firestorm erupted after the world premiere in Park City of *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief*, directed by Oscar-winner Alex Gibney.

Based on a book by Pulitzer prize-winning writer Lawrence Wright, the movie makes allegations about the Church of Scientology and blames high-profile members Tom Cruise and John Travolta for not exposing alleged abuses.

"We hold people like Tom Cruise and John Travolta and others responsible for not demanding change inside that church," Wright said.

The premiere screening in the Utah mountain resort was held amid tight security and speculation about possible protests, although in the end nothing materialised.

In a statement issued on January 26, the church took direct aim at the filmmakers and US network HBO, which is set to air the film.

"The accusations made in the film are entirely false and alleged without ever asking the church," it said, noting that it had taken out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* last month to denounce the movie.

"Despite repeated requests over three months, Mr Gibney and HBO refused to provide the Church with any of the allegations in the film so it could respond," added the statement.

It called Gibney's sources "the usual collection of obsessive, disgruntled former church members kicked out as long as 30 years ago for malfeasance, who have a



Pedestrians walk past the Church of Scientology on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, California on July 9, 2012. The church lashed out at a film about the controversial group at the Sundance Film Festival on January 26.

Photo: AFP/Frederic Brown

documented history of making up lies about the church for money".

Gibney rebuffed the suggestion that he had not reached out to the church for comment to be included in the film.

"We reached out for interviews with the people that were relevant to our story. Scientology wanted to send us a delegation of 25 unidentified individuals, presumably to smear the people in our film," he said. "I wasn't interested in that."

Last week's screening of *Going Clear* was packed, leaving many festival-goers literally out in the cold.

The film includes interviews with former church members, and raises questions about the treatment of members and the organisation's non-profit, tax-exempt status.

It also recounts Cruise's marriage to fellow A-lister Nicole Kidman in detail.

A former top church official claims in the film that Cruise

distanced himself from Scientology while married to Kidman, and alleges the church ordered him to "facilitate the breakup" of the couple.

Journalist Tony Ortega, an acknowledged expert on Scientology, said the church was making a mistake by trying to smear the filmmakers.

"We have to think that's going to backfire in Hollywood, where these are respected figures, and there is going to be some serious discussion about this movie among the people of film-land," he said in a blog post.

"Just keep smearing people, Scientology. At some point, Tom Cruise and John Travolta are going to have to answer for that, along with all the rest."

Gibney won an Academy Award in 2008 for best documentary feature for his film *Taxi To the Dark Side*. He was also nominated in 2006 for *Enron: the Smartest Guys in the Room*. - AFP

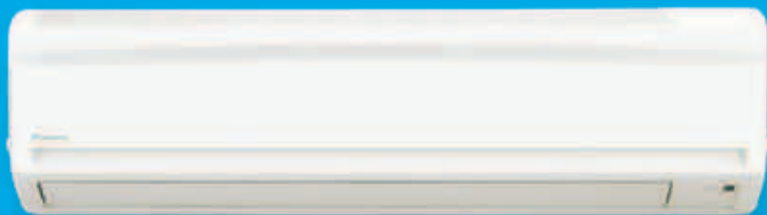
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EVERYWHERE WITH YOU

Fashion focus

Motion Picture Organization chair re-elected amid waning interest

CHIT SU
suwai.chit@gmail.com

AS interest in the management of Myanmar's film industry appears to be flagging, a reluctant Lu Min was last week re-elected as chair of the industry's professional body, despite his earlier promise to step down. The number of both voters and candidates in the Myanmar Motion Picture Organization (MMPO) also fell dramatically. Observers say most of the 20 "new" executive board members announced on January 29 are essentially recycled former members. To win a place on the board, a candidate must be one of the two highest vote-scorers in each of the organisation's 10 professional subgroups.

"Anyone who doesn't like the way the chair runs the organisation can

stand in the election. But nobody wants to. So Lu Min got re-elected," said the patron of the MMPO, U Soe Moe. The chair is elected by the executive board.

According to the MMPO commission, only 600 people voted in the January 22-24 poll, down from 1900 at the last election in 2012. In the video subgroup, only eight out of 60 eligible voters cast a ballot.

In 2012, Sin Wine was elected chair, and Lu Min, an actor, was elected as secretary. When Sin Wine stepped down in mid-term for health reasons, Lu Min took over. "I thought hard about standing for re-election. I had announced that I wouldn't, and I've been criticised for backtracking. But I decided the organisation still needed me. I'm not doing this for my own sake," said Lu Min.



Flower power

One of the stand-out themes at this year's Paris fashion week was flower power. Flowers popped up in many shows (literally in the case of Chanel, where mechanical blooms opened in the middle of the circular catwalk) and on many garments there were floral prints and abstracts. And then there was Naomi Campbell, dressed up as a bouquet herself at the end of a wedding-styled parade. Photos: AFP

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- Menu Engineering
- Recipe Development
- Business Setup
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food

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- 1 part balsamic vinegar
- 2 parts extra virgin olive oil
- 2 small garlic cloves
- 1 pinch sugar
- 2 pinches salt

Put all of the ingredients into a jar. Screw on the lid tightly and shake well.

Photo: Phyo

A classic combination

THIS week I'm sharing with you one of my quick-fix weekday dinners. I always keep some meat in the freezer in case I have a surprise guest or I don't have time to go shopping during a busy working week, and this dish is perfect for whipping up in a hurry. Prepared in under 15 minutes, this recipe is perfect for either a weekday dinner or hassle-free dinner party.

Pork and apple is a classic combination as the sweetness of the apple complements the meat

perfectly. Pork chops are one of the easiest meats to cook: my tip is to buy boneless, trimmed pork chops (available at Pro Mart and Capital hyper market) which will save time trimming the fat off the pork.

PAN-FRIED PORK AND APPLE IN SHERRY

6 servings

- 450-500g pork chops (6 pieces)
- 5 tablespoons sherry
- 6 Granny Smith apples
- 1 small fennel bulb
- 20g butter

- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Put the pork into a glass bowl and pour over 4 tablespoons of sherry, leaving a tablespoon aside for later. Leave the meat to marinate for 30 minutes.

Slice the fennel bulb thinly. Peel and core the apples and cut into wedges (6 per apple).

Add half of the butter to a non-stick frying pan and melt over a medium heat. When the butter has melted, add the pork to the pan with the apples and sliced fennel bulb (if

you are cooking for 6 you will need to fry the ingredients in batches).

Brown the pork for 3 minutes each side together with the apples and fennel. Next, add the leftover sherry to the pan and fry the ingredients for a further 15 minutes.

Place one piece of pork with 4-5 apple wedges on a plate. Drizzle over a few teaspoons of the balsamic vinaigrette. For this dish, I used the balsamic vinegar recipe shown above but I replaced the garlic with ½ teaspoon ground nutmeg.

Garnish with a handful of salad leaves.



PHYO ARBIDANS
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Restaurant Review

New Indian restaurant ranks among the best

DOWNTOWN Yangon has no shortage of Indian food options, but it's safe to say that newly opened India Kitchen on Mahabandula Street easily ranks among the best.

Located directly across from the old Secretariat building, the eatery specialises in North Indian cuisine. Vegetarian dishes are the specialty, but the menu still boasts an ample selection of meat dishes for the discerning omnivore.

The dining area is fairly basic: six booths and four tables in a single room. It's not the most charming locale, but nor is it sterile enough to detract from the food, which is all-round superb.

The palak paneer (K4000) deserves special kudos for its expertly blended real spinach taste in a delicious, creamy, buttery sauce. Also excellent was the mushroom masala (K4000), which was powerfully sweet and spicy with impressively large mushrooms.

While rice is perfectly fine, for the best accompaniment your meal you really need to try the chef's fresh naan bread. I preferred the plain, but those looking for a decadent lunch should go for buttered.

Despite being slightly more expensive than other restaurants in the area, you can get a curry, rice, roti or naan and a soft drink for less than K6000. The portions are large (my guest took half of her curry home) and, overall, excellent value.



Photos: Charlotte Rose

The beverage selection is limited to soft drinks and a small selection of coffees and teas. The traditional coffee is recommended as the perfect way to top off your meal.

In typical Myanmar style, there seemed to be one waiter for every table in the dining area during my visit. The result is excellent

service and friendly staff keen to ensure you enjoy your meal.

While the new downtown branches of Harley's and Lotteria's may have foodies despairing over the future of the Old City's restaurant scene, one need only to look to India Kitchen to feel optimistic about the city's restaurant boom.



299 Mahabandula Street, Yangon

Restaurant Rating
★★★★★

Food	9
Beverage	7
Service	8
X-factor	7
Value for money	8



Art exhibition draws a crowd



Than Thar Palae Thwe and guests



Yangon's art lovers gathered to view artwork by Nay Sun at the opening of his exhibition "Illusion" at the Yangon Gallery on January 24.



Wannabe models strutted their stuff on the catwalk in a bid to become the "face of Myanmar" in the final round of the Asia New Star Model Contest 2015 at the Strand Hotel on January 24. South Korean actor Seo Ha Joon was one of the judges. Htet Htet Win was awarded "Miss Face of Myanmar 2015" and Thi Ha won "Mister Face of Myanmar 2015".



Than Thar Palae Thwe, Lynn Wut Hmone and staff

Faces of Myanmar





Lwin Mg Mg, Aung Htet Myat and Hein Latt

“January Morning” exhibition opening



Shun Wint Aung and Soe Naing

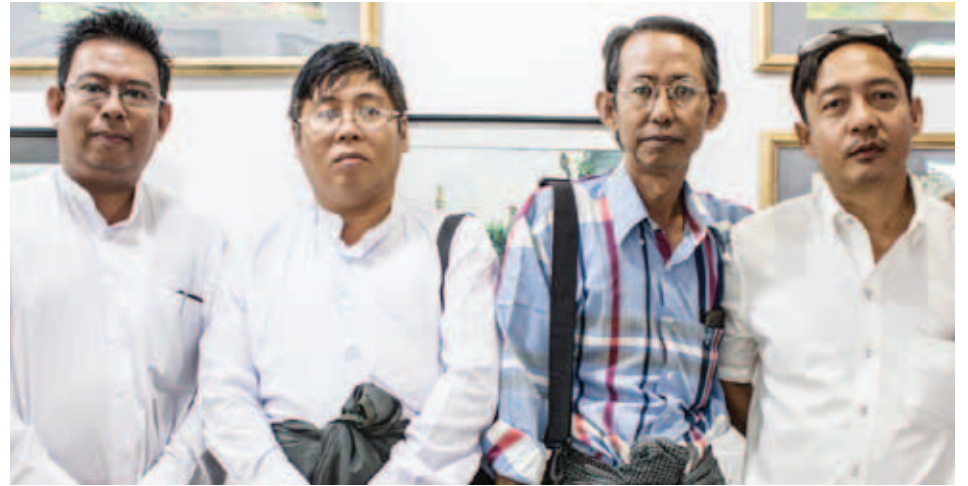
Guests viewed work by 13 local artists at the “January Morning” exhibition at Think Art Gallery in Dagon on January 23. The four-day exhibition featured over 100 paintings of scenes from Yangon and Bagan.



Zaw Paing and Ko Ko Naing



Ko Nay Myo and Myat Su Paing



Moe Nyo, Maung Oo, Ko Maung Kyaw Than and Kyaw Thu Rein



Yu Thandar Tin



Htwe Htwe



The' Naw Zar



Shwe Yay Chal

Up all night to get lucky

Guests kept their fingers crossed at the Le'Skin lucky draw at the Chatrium Hotel on January 23.

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Universal Crossword

Edited by Timothy E. Parker

SALUTE THE GIS By David M. George

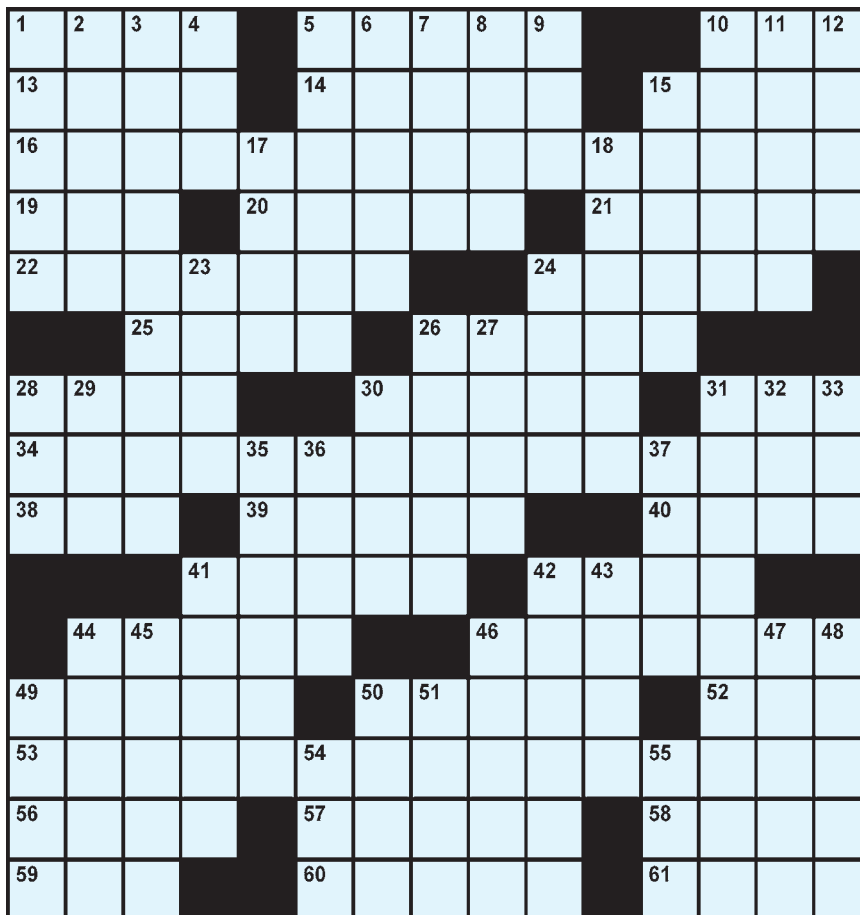
ACROSS

- 1 Football part
- 5 ___ lazuli (blue mineral)
- 10 Burst open
- 13 Annoying smell
- 14 Plain, in Spain
- 15 "Whale" or "herring" attachment
- 16 Wide-ranging appeal
- 19 Withdraw (with "out")
- 20 Telltale signs
- 21 NBA legends Archibald and Thurmond
- 22 Bouillabaisse cooking vessel
- 24 Fee for grazing cattle
- 25 Does and ewes
- 26 "Curb Your Enthusiasm" star
- 28 As many as
- 30 Former Russian leader
- 31 "What did I tell you!"
- 34 More than merely owing
- 38 "... Bojangles and ___ dance for you"
- 39 Circulatory trunk
- 40 Silver State destination
- 41 English Lit assignment
- 42 Con's knife
- 44 Prepare Parmesan cheese
- 46 Monster in Greek mythology
- 49 Related on the mother's side
- 50 Arrogant
- 52 San Francisco's ___ Hill
- 53 Like a soldier's gear
- 56 Prayer finisher
- 57 Dwelling
- 58 Big name in cereal
- 59 Animal lair
- 60 Pre-stereo recordings
- 61 Bugs on a hill

- 4 "... ___ he drove out of sight ..."
- 5 Docile creatures
- 6 Host before Paar and Carson
- 7 Advil target
- 8 Getaway spots
- 9 Barroom elbow-bender
- 10 Erato's group
- 11 Genesis
- 12 Domesticated animals
- 15 Make pigtailed
- 17 It may be skipped
- 18 Wankel's creation
- 23 "Stop right there!"
- 24 All fired up

- 26 Object of worship
- 27 King of Siam's employee
- 28 "Disgusting!"
- 29 "Before," if before
- 30 Constellation containing Vega
- 31 Eisenhower opponent
- 32 Suffix for "Hallow"
- 33 Tokyo, previously
- 35 Winery employee
- 36 Finish in last place
- 37 Cup part
- 41 Finished, as a meal

- 42 Young hogs (Var.)
- 43 Stereo system of yore
- 44 Dwarf of folklore
- 45 Black bird
- 46 Upscale living quarters, briefly
- 47 Awaken rudely
- 48 Acts as a lookout
- 49 "Heavens to Betsy!"
- 50 Pulpit of yore
- 51 Boxer Spinks
- 54 "Miss Saigon" setting, briefly
- 55 Healthy vacation spot



DILBERT

BY SCOTT ADAMS



PEANUTS

BY CHARLES SCHULZ



CALVIN AND HOBBS

BY BILL WATTERSON

SUDOKU PACIFIC

Complete the grid so that every row, column and 3x3 box contains every digit from 1 to 9 inclusively.



2/5

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

WONDERWORD

By DAVID OUELLET

HOW TO PLAY: All the words listed below appear in the puzzle — horizontally, vertically, diagonally, even backward. Find them and **CIRCLE THEIR LETTERS ONLY. DO NOT CIRCLE THE WORD.** The leftover letters spell the Wonderword.

GROUNDHOG DAY

Solution: 9 letters



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PUZZLE SOLUTIONS



Mountain bikers invade NPT



The second round of the year-long Cycle and Make a Difference Charity Series was held in Nay Pyi Taw on January 24 and 25, featuring races for both road cyclists and mountain bikers. The road race on January 24 was short and fast, starting with 35 kilometres (21.7 miles) on flat roads before tackling the steep, unrelenting 8km climb to the peak of the inaccurately named Mount Pleasant. Chit Ko Ko, 23, was first across the finish line in the men's race with a time of 1 hour, 15 minutes and 55 seconds, while the women's event was won by 24-year-old Thu Zar (1h 22m 20s).

The mountain bike race on the following day consisted of five laps of the tough 4.5km 2013 SEA Games circuit, for a total of 22.5km. The event was won by 18-year-old Mann Tin Khung (1h 3m 55s). No women entered the mountain bike event.

The next round of the six-race series, sponsored by Myan Shwe Pyi Tractors (MSP) and the Myanmar Cycling Federation, will take place in Mandalay in late March. Photos: Supplied/MSP



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Irrawaddy Green Towers, one of the leaders in construction of cell phone towers in Myanmar, has sponsored a one-year subscription of Myanmar Times in both English and Burmese to 54 schools in Mandalay and Upper Myanmar, including orphanages, monastic schools and government schools as part of IGT's corporate social responsibility program.

Pictured here, with glasses, is IGT's CSR Manager Tin Tun Zaw with a group of headmasters and staff from various schools in Upper Myanmar at the Myanmar Times new Mandalay Bureau.

This special educational program – aimed at poor and rural students – is offered at a discount subscription rate and is open to all companies, NGOs and associations that promote literacy and English training for needy students anywhere in Myanmar. If your company would like to participate in our NEWSPAPERS IN EDUCATION program, please contact Myanmar Times Subscriptions Manager Thuzar Winn at thuzarwinn@gmail.com or by telephone on 392928 or 253642. We will stamp each newspaper with your company logo and we can help locate needy schools for you in a specific areas of Myanmar where your company would like to support education. This is a great way especially for foreign companies coming to Myanmar to engage in effective CSR.

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Sport

Charity mountain bike race held in Nay Pyi Taw

SPORT 66

New faces join battle to unseat FIFA president

Myanmar unveils SEA Games sports list

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LAST week, the Ministry of Sports officially announced the 31 events that Myanmar nationals will contest at the 28th Southeast Asian Games, which are scheduled to be on June 5 in Singapore.

"We will compete with around 300 athletes in these games" said U Thaug Htike, the Vice Minister for Sports, "I believe our athletes will be try their best."

In addition to traditional events like volleyball badminton, this year's games will see Myanmar fielding athletes for several events for the very first time. These events include tennis, triathlon, bowling, and squash.

"We aim to get [new] experience for our athletes," said U Thaug Htike, although he was quick to emphasize that winning medals will remain "a priority" for the ministry and the athletes.

In the last SEA Games, held in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar came in second for overall medal count, winning 86 gold, 62 silver, and 85 bronze medals.

At the upcoming games, athletes and members of the ministry are hoping to firmly establish themselves as a force in regional sports.

Singapore previously hosted the Games in 1973, 1983 and 1993. This fourth time hosting is especially significant to the republic as it celebrates its 50th year of independence in 2015.



A member of the National Wushu team competes at 2013 SEA Games. Photo: Staff



Candidates for FIFA's next president: (left to right) French ex-football player David Ginola, Chair of the Royal Dutch Football Association Michael van Praag, former Portuguese football player Luis Figo, Jordan's Prince Ali bin al-Hussein and Former FIFA deputy general secretary Jerome Champagne. Photo: AFP

THE race to dethrone FIFA president Sepp Blatter took a new twist last week when Luis Figo joined the list of candidates which already includes fellow former player David Ginola.

Former Portugal and Real Madrid star Figo is now in the running along with Asian Football Confederation vice-president Prince Ali bin Al Hussein, Dutch football chief Michael van Praag, ex-FIFA executive Jerome Champagne and former French winger Ginola.

However, Harold Mayne-Nicholls, the former head of the Chilean football association, had still not entered the fray as expected on January 28.

Blatter is bidding for a fifth term when elections take place on May 29.

Van Praag argued that under Blatter's watch, football's governing body had become ridden with suspicion, conflicts of interest and allegations of nepotism and corruption.

"FIFA has lost all credibility. FIFA has its back turned on the future," said Van Praag, who sent his candidacy letter to FIFA's headquarters in Zurich on January 27.

His letter was accompanied by backing letters of the five national football associations of Belgium, Sweden,

Scotland, Romania, the Faroe Islands - and the Netherlands.

"I believe the time has come to follow the strength of my convictions, to take responsibility. For this reason, I have put myself forward as a candidate," said Van Praag, who also announced he planned to stand for one four-year term only.

'I care about football, so what I'm seeing now regarding the image of FIFA ... I don't like it

Luis Figo
FIFA presidential candidate

"I care about football, so what I'm seeing regarding the image of FIFA - not only now but in the past years - I don't like it," the 42-year-old Figo told CNN.

"If you search FIFA on the internet

you see the first word that comes out: scandal - not positive words. It's that we have to change first and try to improve the image of FIFA. Football deserves much better than this."

"I've been talking with so many important people in football - players, managers, president of federations - and they all think that something has to be done," added Figo, who won the Ballon d'Or in 2000 and was voted FIFA World Player of the Year in 2001.

"Last year was the World Cup, I was in Brazil and I saw the reaction of all the fans regarding the image of FIFA and I think something has to be changed.

"Change in leadership, governance, transparency and solidarity, so I think it's the moment for that"

Blatter, 78, is overwhelming favourite to retain the presidency in the vote by the 209 member FIFA executive.

But he has faced intense pressure over the vote which gave the 2018 World Cup to Russia, and particularly the following tournament set for Qatar.

Qatar won the 2022 race despite warnings about the dangers of playing games in the Gulf's searing summer temperatures.

Moving to a winter World Cup for the first time faces major opposition from Europe's top clubs who would be forced into an eight week mid-season break.

The Chilean had told the website of CONMEBOL, the South American confederation: "Once you decide to be a candidate you have to convince 105 of 209 countries who are members of FIFA, because that is what is needed to win.

"We would have to develop a strategy in which, obviously, CONMEBOL is very important but from which we can also seek votes in the other confederations because [South American support] is not enough to win."

He added that he had called for "fresh air" in FIFA's leadership in a column written for Spanish newspaper El Pais this year.

"What has happened lately has not served the image of FIFA or, indirectly, football.

"There is a complete disconnect between what the fans think is needed and the administration of the game.

"That leads me to believe that you can both accomplish change while maintaining what works well. I do not think it is wise, in the long term, to maintain both the same individuals and structures." - AFP

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