

Trade body to put cap on fuel prices

INSIDE BUSINESS



Can eco-tourism save the Irrawaddy dolphins?

INSIDE THE PULSE



HEARTBEAT OF THE NATION

500 Ks.

MYANMAR TIMES

WWW.MMTIMES.COM

DAILY EDITION

ISSUE 13 | WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25, 2015



FLEEING ROHINGYA FALL PREY TO TRAFFICKING GANGS

INVESTIGATION 7



CHINESE FIRMS MUSCLE IN ON PHONE MARKET

BUSINESS 10

Ankünfte Arrivals	12:25
11:55	12:25
11:55	12:25
11:55	12:25
11:55	12:25
11:55	12:25
11:55	12:25
11:55	12:25
11:55	12:25
11:55	12:25

UP TO 150 FEARED DEAD IN FRENCH ALPS PLANE CRASH

WORLD 19



PAGE

2

PHOTO: ZARNI PHYO

A Hindu pandit conveys a tilaka onto a worshipper at the Sarimari Yaman Hindu Temple on Insein Road in Hlaing township on March 23. A dispute has erupted between the temple's trustees and the All Myanmar Hindu Central Council over the dates for an annual festival at the temple, with the government-appointed council delaying the start until March 27, overriding the prognostication of its Brahmin astrologer and the wishes of its patrons.

20 freed ahead of court date

Another 20 people - mostly bystanders - who were detained by police on March 10 at Letpadan have been released from prison ahead of a second court appearance for more than 70 who remain behind bars. **NEWS 3**

TRANSFORMER, PANEL, CUBICLE & SWITCHGEAR PRODUCTION.



ASIA GENERAL ELECTRIC CO., LTD.

No.69, Room 1106/1107, 11th Floor, Yuzana Tower, Corner of Shwe Gon Daing Road & Kabar Aye Pagoda Road, Bahan Tsp, Yangon 11201, Myanmar.
Tel : (951) 551896/ 551897/ 8603046/ 8603047 Fax : 8603048 Hot Line : 09-5506710
Email : marketing@age.com.mm



66/11KV



Cast Resin



OLTC



Capacitor Bank



Metering Panel

Anger as Hindu festival delayed

The All Myanmar Hindu Central Council cites a one-day overlap with school exams as the reason for shifting astrologically approved festival dates, but worshippers who planned on marking the 135th anniversary of a Hindu temple call the postponing "a violation" of cultural rights



MYINT
KAYTHI

myintkay94thi@gmail.com

AN INTERNAL dispute has caused confusion among worshippers looking forward to the Sarimari Yaman Hindu Temple festival. The original dates fixed by the temple's religious authority, the Brahmin, were March 20-29, but the All Myanmar Hindu Central Council wants it to run from March 27 to April 5, citing a one-day clash with matriculation exams.

The government-appointed head of the council, who says he is both Buddhist and Hindu, has even warned that holding the festival on the earlier dates could cause an outbreak of communal violence.

"I know the Brahmin said the festival should start on March 20. But the god won't punish us if we hold it a bit later," said U Maung Shwe, president of the All Myanmar Hindu Central Council.

"This is the matriculation exam period, and I'm worried there may be violence so I decided to postpone the festival," he said, declining to elaborate as to why violence could be a concern.

U Maung Shwe responded angrily when asked why the festival had to be postponed a week even though the matriculation exams ended on March 20.

"I can't force the authorities to grant the permit on the day we want. I am not above the government! Are you above the government?"

U Maung Shwe said the council could not allow the temple's current trustees to organise the festival, as their tenure has expired.

Instead, the nine-member council, which is appointed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, applied to the regional government for a

permit to celebrate the festival on its preferred dates. It says the regional government recognises the council as having the authority to fix the dates.

Worshippers, however, say the council has no authority to organise the event. The temple's rules, which have been in force since 1914, state the festival must be conducted by devotees who live within a 2-mile (3.2-kilometre) radius of the temple, which is located on Insein Road in Hlaing township.

They plan to boycott the official dates and have accused the council of trying to oust the temple's current trustees due to a personal dispute.

They dismissed the concern of violence, saying there had been no conflict during previous festivals.

"I think they want to topple the current trustees. This is the only reason the council has interfered with the temple's activities," said temple patron SP Naathal.

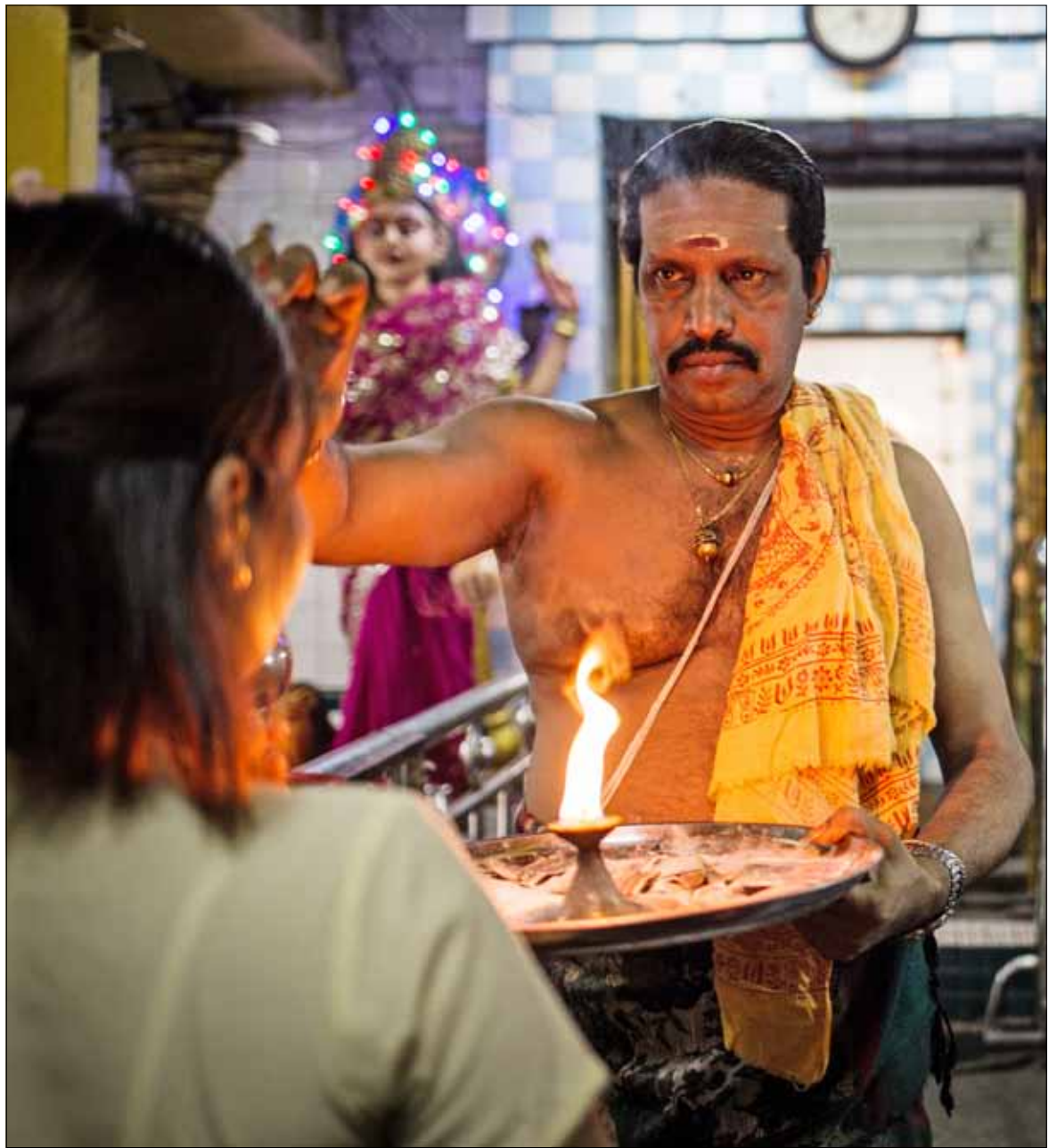
This year was to mark the 135th festival of the Sarimari Yaman, a Hindu temple for about 20,000 Tamil Hindu worshippers. Festivities include the ceremony of fire-walking, in which barefoot devotees walk over glowing coals.

It is now unclear when the festival will go ahead. With the first proposal rejected, the organising committee plans to ask the Brahmin to choose new dates, after which they will apply for another permit.

The committee also plans to send a letter to the council warning the council to steer clear of the festival.

U Kyaw Than Hlaing, a member of the festival organising committee, said he was angry at the council's interference in the temple's affairs.

"The postponement of the festival is a violation of our cultural rights. We [the committee] negotiated with the council but they gave no definite answer. If the festival is cancelled, it will be their responsibility," he said.



A Hindu worshipper receives a tilaka from a pandit at the Sarimari Yaman Temple on March 23. Photo: Zarni Phyo

Government called to answer for armbanded civilian force

YE MON

yeemontun2013@gmail.com
MRATT KYAW THU
mrattkthu@gmail.com

The government's recent deployment of notorious plain-clothed vigilantes has raised a furor, with media and politicians yesterday both demanding an explanation.

Independent MP U Nyo Nyo Thin requested the Speaker of Yangon's regional parliament call a debate on why the thugs-for-hire have been back on the streets attacking demonstrators.

"The regional government should not order a crackdown on protesters, and some women have been brutally beaten and harshly arrested," U Nyo Nyo Thin, representing Bahan's No 2 constituency, told *The Myanmar Times* yesterday.

Civilian forces wearing red armbands emblazoned with the word "duty" violently clamped down on both a garment worker protest and a student demonstration in the first week of March.

The use of untrained civilian auxiliaries triggered a public outcry over the resurrection of methods used by the past military junta to suppress demonstrations.

Following the attacks and a

swelling of social media postings, a President's Office official admitted on Facebook that the government had organised the civilian force, posting an image of the section of the colonial-era Code of Criminal Procedure that permits it to raise a male civilian force.

'The regional government should not order a crackdown on protesters.'

U Nyo Nyo Thin
MP Bahan

But protesters weren't the vigilantes' only victims. Two weeks ago a reporter from the *Popular News Daily* was allegedly beaten by members of Swan Arr Shin, a vigilante group associated with the former military regime.

Following the attacks on demonstrators, reporter Ko Aung Zaw Htoo went in search of a Swan Arr

Shin member to interview. After being taken to a private residence, the reporter was soundly cuffed by three plain-clothed men who also stole his recorder. His attackers have yet to be arrested.

"The process is still ongoing. It's difficult because the side of plaintiff couldn't give any names of suspects," Police Commander Than Myint Oo told *The Myanmar Times* yesterday.

The lack of police action left Asia Fame Media Group, which runs *Popular News*, with little optimism that the culprits will ever be held accountable.

"The situation is like what the police have done before: They say all the time that a case is 'still ongoing'. We all know who the Swann Arr Shin are and where they live, but it's complicated," said U Aung Khun Set, an executive editor from *Popular News*.

On March 10, President U Thein Sein ordered a commission of inquiry to investigate whether security forces acted properly in dispersing the protesters, and whether the authorities responsible acted in line with legal procedures.

The commission, which includes Brigadier Kyaw Kyaw Tun, deputy minister for home affairs, is supposed to submit its findings by March 31.

Tourism workshop sets sights on Kayah

EI EI THU

91.eieithu@gmail.com

THE International Trade Centre is training tour operators to build up Kayah State as a tourist destination. The three-day training, which is being carried out in cooperation with the Union of Myanmar Travel Association (UMTA) and Myanmar Tourism Marketing (MTM), ends today.

The centre supports the government and the private sector in developing the tourism sector, a major source of income and employment, said ITC executive director Arancha Gonzalez.

"This training will help operators to play a bigger part in the international tourism industry," she said.

The objective is to develop tourism in Kayah State with the help of the Netherlands Trust Fund, which is funded by the Dutch government, she said.

"We have two main challenges - hard and soft infrastructure - in Kayah State. Hard infrastructure is roads, airports and internet functions. Soft infrastructure is the quality of services like hotels," said Ms Gonzalez.

The growing number of tourists visiting Myanmar - more than 1 million visited in 2014, excluding border day-trippers - is putting increased strain on established destinations, such as Bagan, Inle Lake and Ngapali. There are concerns over the environmental and

cultural impacts, as well as the effect on the future of the industry if prices rise too high due to a lack of hotels and other facilities.

Tourism planners hope to spread the load more evenly by developing secondary destinations, which would also offer tourists more reason to come back for additional visits.

U Aung Myat Kyaw, chair of the UMTA, said the training is focused on capacity-building to improve the promotion of the cultures, foods and traditions in Kayah State.

"Western tourists are coming to Kayah State because of their interest in different cultures, races and traditions. Because of its nearness to Shan State, which also attracts tourists, we could create a bigger market in which Kayah State would become a tourist destination."

Hotel accommodation in Kayah will also increase along with tourist numbers, U Aung Myat Kyaw said, adding, "We aren't yet hearing of a hotel room shortage in Kayah State. But we need to ensure good service standards, or tourists won't come," he said.

Ms Gonzalez said that a five-year project was in place to help local government and communities in Kayah State to develop new products and services to meet the expectations of international tourists while respecting local traditions and the environment.

Ethnic armies support CSO peace role – after ceasefire

LUN MIN MANG

lunmin.lm@gmail.com

CIVIL society organisations should be brought into the political dialogue between the government and armed ethnic groups once a nationwide ceasefire agreement is reached, according to Colonel Khun Okkar of the Pa-Oh National Liberation Organization.

Colonel Khun Okkar, who is also a member of the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) representing ethnic groups in talks with the government, said the ceasefire process was a military matter that did not concern CSOs.

“However at the time of post-peace

political dialogue, their role will become more important and they shall be allowed to participate in such dialogues,” he said.

He was speaking after leading an NCCT team, together with General Gun Maw of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), in meetings yesterday with more than 50 representatives of Yangon-based CSOs.

The NCCT is scheduled to resume its seventh round of talks with the government and military on March 30, having adjourned on March 22. Both sides hope to reach a ceasefire agreement that would pave the way for a broader political dialogue.

Col Khun Okkar said the role of

CSOs would be to monitor progress in that peace process.

“CSOs need to watch the progress. They are witnesses to the agreement that is to be made between the government and armed ethnic groups. That’s why now is still not the right time for them,” he said.

Daw Naw Hla Hla Soe of the Karen Woman Empowerment Group said she had raised the issue of security for women in conflict zones during her discussions with the NCCT leaders.

“The inhumane rape and murder case of the two teachers is a huge concern to women in ethnic areas,” she said, referring to two young Kachin volunteer teachers killed in a remote

village in northern Shan State in January while working for the Kachin Baptist Convention.

Villagers suspect they were murdered by Tatmadaw troops stationed nearby, but police are investigating.

“I think although we had raised our concerns and issues in the meeting, the NCCT will not take this into account since they don’t want us to participate in this time in the NCA process,” Naw Hla Hla Soe said.

While the government has proposed six groups take part in the political dialogue process – the government, parliament, military, political parties, ethnic armed groups, and economists and civil society – the NCCT has de-

manded that the government, parliament and military comprise only one-third of the representatives at the conference, with the rest drawn from political parties, democratic forces and ethnic armed organisations.

It has refused to give civil society groups equal status, saying only that they could participate as observers. This has angered CSOs, but some said yesterday’s meeting had clarified their role.

“It’s quite clear,” said U Yan Kyaw, who attended the discussions. “The NCCT members said they would bring the issues raised by CSOs to the nationwide ceasefire process if the cases were directly relevant. But, if not, they said they could not do anything.”

Police release 20 more Letpadan detainees

WA LONE

walone14@gmail.com

POLICE have released another batch of the 127 people arrested during the crackdown on student-led protests in Letpadan as 20 residents of the area walked free from Tharyarwady Prison yesterday evening.

Students still behind bars following the March 10 crackdown are expected to appear before Letpadan Township Court in Bago Region today.

Ko Ye Min, a 29-year-old resident freed last night, said police told him he had not been charged. He said he was arrested while watching the assault by baton-wielding police.

“We all signed the release papers and police officers warned us not to get involved and watch any protests in the future,” he said.

Along with the students protesting against the education law, police also arrested more than 60 supporters and local residents, some of whom were observing the scene from the roadside or caught up in the melee by chance.

Police released 19 detainees from Letpadan township and one from nearby Minhla, but gave no further details.

Of the 127 people arrested, 77 are still believed to be in custody, together with four more students who were detained later in Yangon. Many are members of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions, while students already released are mostly from the University Students’ Union.

All of those arrested on March 10 appeared in court the following day.

U Tun Tun Oo said that his son and five other student protesters were still in custody, one with a serious eye injury. He is preparing to meet his son in front of the court. “The government shouldn’t exact a heavy punishment on the students even if they were guilty,” he said.

The government was widely condemned for the crackdown, which followed an eight-day standoff at a monastery in Letpadan during which police surrounded the demonstrators and refused to let them continue their march to Yangon.



Accused National League for Democracy official U Htin Lin Oo (right) arrives at Chaung Oo Township Court yesterday. Photo: Than Naing Soe

New judge in NLD official’s trial vows to ignore ‘pressure’

THAN NAING SOE

thennaingsoe@gmail.com

THE new judge in charge of the trial of a prominent National League for Democracy member who stands accused of insulting religion has promised he will not be influenced by outside pressure.

Chaung Oo Township Court Judge U Lin Min Tun made the comments yesterday, as he took over the case from his predecessor, U San Tint, who retired abruptly.

NLD member U Htin Lin Oo has been charged with two offences as the result of an hour-long speech he gave in Chaung Oo township in October.

U Lin Min Tun said a decision would be made “according to the law”.

“We are not facing any pressure over this case. We will do our duty,” he said at yesterday’s hearing, during which the complainant was summoned for questioning.

During the speech in October, U Htin Lin Oo reportedly criticised nationalist movements that have grown in strength as a political and social force in recent years.

“Buddha is not Burmese, not Shan, not Karen - so if you want to be an extreme nationalist and if you love to maintain your race that much, don’t believe in Buddhism,”

he was quoted as saying.

His speech drew censure from Buddhist nationalist groups, including U Wirathu’s Committee for the Protection of Nationality and Religion and the Patriotic Buddhist Monk’s Union.

Following protests from the groups, the head of the township’s Immigration and National Registration Department filed a complaint to police, after which U Htin Lin Oo was charged under section 295(A) - deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feeling of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs - and section 298 - uttering words with deliberate intent to wound religious feelings.

U Htin Lin Oo said yesterday he had no intention of insulting

‘Maybe some of his words were aggressive, but he didn’t intend to insult religion.’

U Thein Than Oo
Defence lawyer

religion. He said he should only be charged and judged by those who are well-versed in religion and can assess whether he had deliberately insulted Buddhism.

“A judge who just asks simple questions - ‘Did you say that?’, or ‘Is it true what you said?’ - will never find out the truth,” he said.

His lawyer, U Thein Than Oo, said U Htin Lin Oo was being targeted due to his affiliation with the NLD.

“He just freely expressed his views during the speech,” he said. “Maybe some of his words were aggressive, but he didn’t intend to insult religion at all.”

U Lin Min Tun set the next hearing for April 2, and said he was expecting a speedy end to the trial. “It may end in April,” he said.

Earlier this month three people - a New Zealander and two Myanmar citizens - were found guilty of breaking section 295(A) for distributing online a promotional flyer for a bar featuring an image of the Buddha with headphones.

They were sentenced to two years in prison, and received another six months for disobeying a civil servant.

Like U Htin Lin Oo, they were charged following a complaint from nationalist Buddhist groups.

- Translation by Zar Zar Soe

Anawmar owner takes to Facebook to dispel controversy

NOE NOE AUNG

noenoeag@gmail.com

THE general’s daughter at the centre of a social media storm over a party in the Secretariat has described the furore as a “misunderstanding”.

In a post on Facebook, Ma Thi Thi Tun, daughter of sacked former trade minister U Tun Kyi, said the March 21 event was not a birthday party, as it has previously been described by guests, including Ne Win’s grandson, U Aye Ne Win.

Ma Thi Thi Tun, who is an investor in Anawmar Art Group, which won a 2012 tender to restore the historic building, said the event was held to “meet and explain the project to our friends”.

“But there was a misunderstanding because of the meeting,” she wrote, in reference to accusations that holding a lavish banquet on the grounds of the Secretariat - where independence hero General Aung San was assassinated - was disrespectful.

She wrote that Anawmar was committed to restoring and maintaining the building, and the event was held to try and drum up financial support for the project.

“Museums are not popular in our country but the priority for our project is [to open a] museum. We need to find ways to get enough money to cover the expenses of restoring this building so we had to find and contact people who can support us,” she wrote.

Anawmar has already repaired sections of the building and had appointed “foreign experts” to provide advice.

Previously unknown before it won the tender, Anawmar has never revealed who its financial backers are. The cost of renovating the building, which occupies a full city block, has been estimated at \$100 million.

Ma Thi Thi Tun described Anawmar as “a group that collect and preserve traditional art-crafts”, but provided no further details.

Anawmar Art Group did not respond to requests for an interview yesterday.

In a letter to parliament in July 2012, President U Thein Sein said Anawmar had been awarded a 30-year lease on the building by the Myanmar Investment Commission after agreeing to pay the government 3-5 percent of museum entrance fees, 15pc of the rent generated from leasing space for restaurants and offices, and 1pc of box office receipts for dance shows.

In January, Anawmar signed a contract with the government to open parts of the Secretariat to the public.

MYANMARTIMES

Chief Executive Officer

Tony Child
tonychild.mcm@gmail.com
Editorial Director – U Thiha Saw
editorial.director.mcm@gmail.com
Deputy Chief Operating Officer – Tin Moe Aung
tinmoeaung.mcm@gmail.com

EDITORIAL

Editor MTE – Thomas Kean
tdkean@gmail.com
Editor MTM – Sann Oo
sannoo@gmail.com
Chief of Staff – Zaw Win Than
zawwinthan@gmail.com
Editor Special Publications – Myo Lwin
myolwin286@gmail.com
Editor-at-Large – Douglas Long
dlong125@gmail.com

News Editor MTE – Guy Dinmore
Business Editor MTE – Jeremy Mullins
jeremymullins7@gmail.com
World Editor MTE – Fiona MacGregor
fionamacgregor@hotmail.co.uk
The Pulse Editor MTE – Charlotte Rose
charlottelola.rose@gmail.com
Sport Editor MTE – Matt Roebuck
Special Publications Editor MTE – Wade Guyitt
wadeguyitt@gmail.com
Regional Affairs Correspondent – Roger Mitton
rogermitton@gmail.com

Chief Sub Editor MTM – Aye Sapay Phyu
News & Property Editor MTM –
Tin Moe Aung
tinmoeaung.mcm@gmail.com
Timeout Editor MTM – Moh Moh Thaw
mohthaw@gmail.com

MCM BUREAUS

Mandalay Bureau Chief – Stuart Alan Becker
stuart.becker@gmail.com
News Editors (Mandalay) –
Khin Su Wai, Phyo Wai Kyaw
Nay Pyi Taw Bureau Chief – Hsu Hlaing Htun
hsuhlainghtun.mcm@gmail.com

DIGITAL/ONLINE

Online Editors – Kayleigh Long, Thet Hlaing
kayleighelong@gmail.com, thet202@gmail.com

PHOTOGRAPHICS

Director – Kaung Htet
Photographers –
Aung Htay Hlaing, Thiri, Zarni Phyo

PRODUCTION

zarnicj@gmail.com
Art Director – Tin Zaw Htway
Production Manager – Zarni

MCM PRINTING

Printing Director – Han Tun
Factory Administrator – Aung Kyaw Oo (3)
Factory Foreman – Tin Win

SALES & MARKETING

ads.myanmartimes@gmail.com
Deputy National Sales Directors –
Chan Tha Oo, Nay Myo Oo,
Nandar Khine, Nyi Nyi Tun
Classifieds Manager – Khin Mon Mon Yi
classified.mcm@gmail.com

ADMIN, FINANCE & SYSTEMS

Chief Financial Officer – Mon Mon Tha Saing
monmonthasaing@gmail.com
Deputy HR Director – Khine Su Yin
khinesu1988@gmail.com
Director of IT/Systems – Kyaw Zay Yar Lin
kyawzayarin@gmail.com

Publisher – U Thiha (Thiha Saw), 01021
Myanmar Consolidated Media Ltd.

CIRCULATION & DISTRIBUTION

Yangon – subscribe.mt@gmail.com
Mandalay – mdydistribution.mcm@gmail.com
Nay Pyi Taw – nptdistribution.mcm@gmail.com

ADVERTISING & SUBSCRIPTION ENQUIRIES

Telephone: (01) 253 642, 392 928
Facsimile: (01) 254 158

The Myanmar Times is owned by Myanmar Consolidated Media Ltd and printed by Myanmar Times Press (00876) with approval from MCM Ltd and by Shwe Myanmar (P/00302) with approval from MCM Ltd. The title The Myanmar Times, in either English or Myanmar languages, its associated logos or devices and the contents of this publication may not be reproduced in whole or in part without the written consent of the Managing Director of Myanmar Consolidated Media Ltd.



Myanmar Consolidated Media Ltd.
www.mmtimes.com

Head Office: 379/383 Bo Aung Kyaw Street,
Kyauktada Township, Yangon, Myanmar.
Telephone: (01) 253 642, 253 651, 392808
Facsimile: (01) 254 158, 392 928

Mandalay Bureau: No. 20, 71st Street,
Between 28th street and 29th Street,
Chan Aye Thar San Township.
Tel: (02) 24450, 24460, 65391. Fax: (02) 74585.
Email: mdybranch@myanmartimes.com.mm

Nay Pyi Taw Bureau: No (15/496) Yaza Htarni
Road, Paung Laung (2)Q, Pinyinmana.
Tel: (067) 25982, 25983, 25309, 21426
Email: capitalbureau@myanmartimes.com.mm

IN BRIEF

Indian film crew arrested for making fake banknotes

Members of an Indian film crew have been charged with currency offences after being caught at Yangon International Airport with fake kyat, which they said was to be used in a movie.

The notes were uncovered when the bags of the 13-member crew were being scanned with an X-ray machine shortly after their arrival from Bangkok on March 23.

Airport Security Department Police Major Myint Maung reported finding 36,392 fake K1000 notes, all bearing the same security code.

The crew explained they had been hired by Ngway La Min Film Distribution to work on a film and the notes were needed in a scene.

The company's art department downloaded an image of a K1000 note and reprinted it, clearly marking each note with the word "Specimen". The head of the crew said they regularly did this when working in countries where printing such notes might be difficult.

They have been charged under sections 105 and 106 of the Union Bank of Burma Act. – *Toe Wai Aung, translation by Khant Lin Oo*

NLD official questions election commission over voter list rules

EI EI TOE LWIN

eieitoelwin@gmail.com

A PROMINENT opposition party member has questioned rules set by the Union Election Commission for scrutinising voters' lists. The UEC announced yesterday that lists would become available for viewing in 10 Yangon townships next week.

The announcement came as seven civil society organisations prepared to observe the lists, which will be displayed in Botahtaung, Pazundaung, Dawbon, Seik Gyi Kha Naung To, Seikkan, Dagon, Latha, Kyauktada, Kamar-yut and Lanmadaw from March 30 to April 12.

"We will post the lists from 6am to 4pm daily, in ward election sub-commission offices. If people can't find their names, they can apply for a correction," said U Ko Ko, chair of the Yangon Region Election Commission.

But NLD member U Myo Yan Naung Thein, the founder of the Bayda Institute, said his party had formed a committee to scrutinise the lists. "The committee will focus not only on NLD

members, but also on anyone eligible to vote throughout the country," he said.

However, he added, the NLD scrutiny will have to be unofficial. "According to the code of conduct for local observers, the UEC does not allow anyone with links to a political party to observe the lists," he said, adding that no members of the military or the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party should be associated with the UEC. The commission's chair, U Tin Aye is a former member of the USDP appointed to his post by President U Thein Sein.

Voter education programs started on March 23 and will continue

7

Civil society groups conducting voter education programs March 23-27

until March 27 with the participation of seven CSOs – The Serenity Initiatives (TSI), Myanmar Independent Living Initiatives (MILI), Myanmar ICT for Development Organisation (MIDO), Creative Home, Peace and Justice Myanmar, Yang Chi Thit and New Myanmar Foundation.

"We will observe during these two weeks and report on individual townships," said U Thant Zin, program manager of the New Myanmar Foundation, adding that they would hold a press conference about the report before submitting it to the UEC. "We will note missing or double names, and report to the UEC what we see," he said.

Voter registration is now being carried out across the country and is expected to be complete mid-year, with a comprehensive list to be published in August.

The UEC published codes of conduct for local and international observers on March 20 stipulating that organisations wishing to observe elections must apply to the UEC for permission and have to sign a commitment to abide by UEC regulations.

Rakhine party eyes state hluttaw control

Constitutional change could also give the RNP a say in the regional government



YE MON

yeemontun2013@gmail.com

THE Rakhine National Party (RNP) will contest 75 constituencies in the November election in a bid to win control of the Rakhine State Hluttaw – and possibly the regional government, if the constitution is changed to give legislatures power to form them.

The party will select the candidates on April 2, senior member U Aye Thar Aung told *The Myanmar Times*, adding that he expects it can win all of the seats.

He said the RNP would contest every township in Rakhine State, including 17 Pyithu Hluttaw, or lower house, seats; 12 Amyotha Hluttaw, or upper house, seats; and 34 regional hluttaw seats.

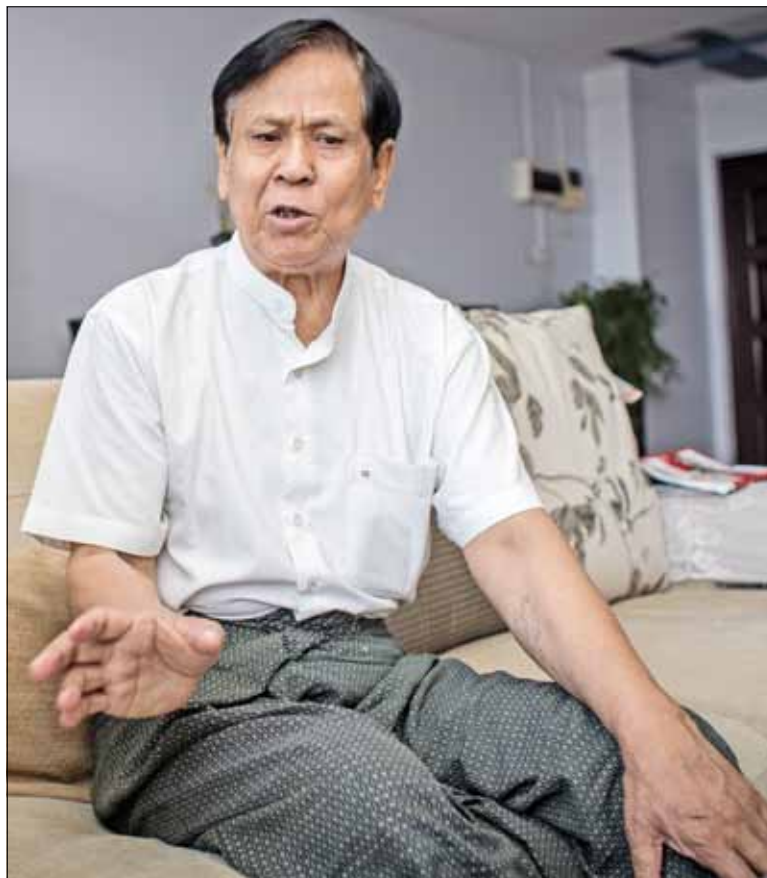
"We will also seek the posts of minister of Rakhine ethnic affairs in Yangon and Ayeyarwady regions," he said.

Under the 2008 constitution, minority groups with more than 0.1 percent of the national population – about 51,000 people – in a single state or region receive a dedicated minister in that state or region government.

The RNP will again support Yangon Region Minister for Rakhine Ethnic Affairs U Zaw Aye Maung to retain the post. It will also vie for the Rakhine minister position in the Ayeyarwady Region government.

'We will also seek the posts of minister of ethnic affairs in Yangon and Ayeyarwady regions.'

U Aye Thar Aung
Rakhine National Party



U Aye Thar Aung from the Rakhine National Party speaks during an interview with *The Myanmar Times*. Photo: Zarni Phyo

Party leader and Amyotha Hluttaw representative U Aye Maung said he plans to contest a Rakhine State Hluttaw seat, "but that could change in the meeting".

U Aye Maung is reportedly eyeing the chief minister position. Under the constitution, the president appoints the chief ministers of each of the 14 states and regions, who then form the regional governments.

However, constitutional change is expected to give the regional parliaments responsibility for forming government.

The RNP was born from a 2013 merger between the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party and the Ara-

kan League for Democracy. The party was formally established in March last year, and controls eight seats in Pyithu Hluttaw, six in Amyotha Hluttaw and 18 seats in the Rakhine Region Hluttaw.

The party's task will be made easier this year by the government's recent decision to cancel white cards, which will almost certainly strip at least 600,000 Muslims in the state of voting rights.

The RNP is likely to continue working with other ethnic-based parties on matters of common interest, including the amendment of the 2008 constitution, through the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation.

UEC to spend \$3m on poll staff

HTOO THANT

thanhtoo.npt@gmail.com

ORGANISING and supervising November's elections could cost as much as K3.458 billion in staff costs, the Union Election Commission has calculated. The money would go to state and region, district and township-level officials to be selected to staff sub-commissions, not just until election day but also in preparation for subsequent elections.

Commission member U Win Ko told the Pyithu Hluttaw yesterday that the money would fund salaries to "respected" individuals serving under the supervision of the commission. He said the monthly salaries, based on civil service rates, would amount to K200,000 for region state-level members, K150,000 for district-level and K100,000 for township-level sub-commission members, for an estimated total of K288.2 million a month, or K3.458 billion calculated annually.

U Sai Maung Tin, representing Leichar, Shan State, proposed amending the electoral law to compensate sub-commission appointees for continuing to serve after the election, in order to prepare for the next election, as well as being available for the resolution of any electoral disputes that might arise.

At present, the UEC reimburses the travel costs and expenses of sub-commission members at the rate of K5000 a day for the region and state level and K3000 for the district and township levels. Sub-commission members at the ward and village level will receive K3000 for polling day alone.

While the commission has not yet said who will fill the positions, during the 2010 election most polling station officials were Ministry of Education staff. – *Translation by Thiri Min Htun*

Amid red tape, migrants headed to Malaysia decline

A 70pc drop in demand has the government worried

NYAN LYNN AUNG
29.nyanlynnau@gmail.com

TIRED of butting up against red tape and a lengthy government approval process, Malaysia's demand for Myanmar migrant workers has plummeted this year, labour officials said.

Compared to December, Malaysia's quota for Myanmar migrants dropped 70 percent this month, from 3673 to less than 1000 so far, according to the Myanmar Overseas Employment Agencies Federation, the main industry body. The federation blamed the recent, precipitous decline on how long it takes the government to send workers.

"It is not because of problems such as the political situation or other issues. It is because of delays in the process," said U Kyaw Htin Kyaw, general secretary of the employment federation.

The lag time between the Myanmar embassy receiving a quota and the Labour Ministry rubber stamping the request adds about to 45 days, but the bureaucratic process has been known to take three months.

The approval process involves five steps and numerous bureaucratic levels, according to the employment federation. After the embassy inspects an employer's demand letter, the request is forwarded to the federation which then forwards it to the Labour Department. The Labour Department asks higher-level ministry officials to make a decision during committee meetings led by vice president U Sai Mauk Kham.

Unwilling to wait, Malaysia is turning to other, faster labour supplies like Nepal, said U Soe Myint Aung, vice chair of the employment federation.

"Now, Nepalese workers are taking an 80-90pc of share of the migrant market in Malaysia," he said.

In addition to losing out on the employment opportunity, Myanmar is missing out on a major source of revenue. The estimated 250,000 to 500,000 Myanmar migrants legally working in Malaysia send home remittances every year.

Myanmar's onerous approval system was put in place after recruitment agencies flouted regulations and submitted fake demand letters, according to Daw Khine New Oo, deputy director of the general labour department. She acknowledged that while the government needs to check all requests thoroughly, something must be done to speed up the process.

'Now, Nepalese workers are taking an 80-90pc share of the migrant market in Malaysia.'

U Soe Myint Aung
Myanmar OEAF

"We have plans to eliminate unnecessary procedures soon," she said.

Earlier this month, during President U Thein Sein's visit to Malaysia, the two countries pledged to sign a MoU to better protect migrant workers. Rights groups criticized the agreement as lacking any teeth to enforce it.

Undocumented Myanmar migrants face notorious abuse in Malaysia. Over 300 have been arrested since the beginning of this year with many more languishing in worker camps or detention centres.



Villagers pan for copper near the Letpadaung mine site in Sagaing Region on September 14, 2012. Photo: AFP

Police reject monks' copper mine lawsuit

WA LONE



walone14@gmail.com

POLICE yesterday dismissed a lawsuit filed by two monks who sustained severe injuries during clashes at a military-backed copper mine in 2012. The case against the Home Affairs Minister and police chief was rejected on the grounds that the officials are protected by the law.

In a letter declining the initial information report and, in doing so, preventing the lawsuit from proceeding, Police Second Lieutenant Than Zaw said no lawsuit can be brought against an officer who carries out duties in good faith.

But monks who were present at the protest when police allegedly fired off canisters of white phosphorous into a crowd before sunrise were outraged by the grounds of the rejection.

"They violated the law cracking down on a group of Buddhist monks using firebombs at 3am," said U Nay Thiha, a relative of one of the monks who filed the case, U Tikha Nyana, who suffered disfiguring chemical burns to 60 percent of his body.

More than 100 Buddhist monks were hospitalised following the November 29 crackdown on protesters outside the copper mine in Letpadaung. Nearly 60 monks are receiving long-term medical care and are permanently disabled as a result of clashes, but have received neither acknowledgement nor support from the government, according

to monks filing the suit. The government has denied using phosphorous to quell the protest even after chemical analysis of a grenade verified the presence of the substance.

U Aung Thein, a human rights lawyer at US-based NGO Justice Trust, said yesterday that the case will now be brought to the Supreme Court for consideration.

"We must show the people that we have the right to file the lawsuit," he said.

The Letpadaung mine, which according to 2007 estimates contains the largest copper deposit in Southeast Asia, is in part backed by subsidiaries of Chinese weapons manufacturer Chinese North Industries Corp, better known as Norinco. A major local military conglomerate also has a stake in the joint venture.



EVORA 3+2+1 Seater
Normal : 2300 US\$
Special : 1799 US\$



KESTEN (DOMO) 2.5 Seater
Normal: 1700 US\$
Special : 999 US\$

SPECIAL PROMOTIONS



SURF 2.5 Seater
Normal: 2700 US\$
Special : 1299 US\$



COPINE Dining Set
Normal: 1800 US\$
Special : 1099 US\$



MOURINHO L SHAPED
Normal: 1800 US\$
Special : 1399 US\$

OPEN DAILY : 9 : 30 A.M ~ 7 : 30 P.M
 No. (52), Kabaraye Pagoda Road, Mayangone Township, Yangon, Myanmar.
 Email : ommyanmarfurniture@gmail.com
 Customer Service Hotline : 09 254947373, 01-663082



extremelyfashionablefurniture.com

MPs decide no jail for retailers who hike lottery ticket prices

HTOO THANT

thanhtoo.npt@gmail.com

PARLIAMENT has removed possible jail terms for retailers who sell lottery tickets above the official price from a lottery bill, despite warnings that it will not work as a deterrent.

Drafted by the Ministry of Finance, the Aung Bar Lay Government Lottery Bill was approved by the Pyithu Hluttaw, or lower house, on March 24. The original draft had included a prison term of between six months and one year for retailers who jack up ticket prices, but MPs overruled the ministry on the grounds that such hikes were being driven by market forces.

Instead, they have included a fine of K3 million to K5 million for those who violate the law.

The decision did not impress



A customer browses for lottery ticket in downtown Yangon. Photo: Kaung Htet

deputy minister U Maung Maung Thein, who said possible imprisonment would be the only effective deterrent.

"People face difficulties because

of the street market price of lottery tickets ... That's why I added [imprisonment] in the bill. Even the wholesale price can be higher than the official retail price. These people would willingly pay a fine," he said.

Although the government sells tickets at K200 each, prices are regularly doubled, he said.

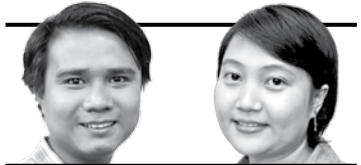
But Leve resident U San Win said yesterday it was not uncommon for retailers to sell tickets for K700 - more than three times the official price.

The bill will result in lottery tickets being sold through an electronic system rather than printed by the government and distributed.

It also allows foreign investors to run lottery businesses, although only through a joint venture with a local partner.

- Translation by Thiri Min Htun

More delays for social security system rollout



NYANN LYNN AUNG

SHWEGU THITSAR

THE government's revamped social security measures are struggling to gain traction with employers and workers. The Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security has admitted that uptake has been so sluggish for the Social Security Board-run programs that it has been able to roll out only half of the planned benefits.

Government officials blame thrifty employers for avoiding the system, but workers say miles of red tape and bureaucracy limit the social insurance scheme's effectiveness.

Of the six insurance schemes signed into legislation in 2012, only health insurance, retirement benefits and injury compensation are being offered, deputy minister Daw Win Maw Tun said during a March 13 conference on the scheme. The other benefits that have yet to be realised include unemployment, housing and a family assistance plan.

"We are reforming both the structure and [regulatory] body for the system ... and will push to have it in place in 2016," said Daw Win Maw Tun.

While employers are legally obligated to enrol permanent staff into

the social security program, only 780,000 people currently make payments. As a result, the system lacks the capital needed to expand, said Daw Win Maw Tun.

The deputy minister blamed this on employers who are unwilling to enroll their staff because they don't want to contribute. The health insurance plan requires workers to pay 2 percent of their salary each month, but employers are required to make a contribution of the same value. Similarly, the retirement benefit requires both employer and worker to pay 3pc of the employee's salary to the ministry, for a total of 6pc.

98.5%

Percentage of workers who do not contribute to the Social Security Board

"We must give special attention to employers who avoid making payments to the ministry," Daw Win Maw Tun said, adding that fewer than 70,000 people have so far received insurance benefits under the new law even though millions are eligible.

But workers and employers told *The Myanmar Times* they were either unaware of the insurance scheme or were unhappy at being enrolled.

"No one has relied on the social security board's clinic even though we had to pay taxes, because their clinics had no doctors and not enough medicine. The private clinics are clearly better than going to the board's clinics for treatment," said U Hla Myint, a 72-year old retired civil servant.

"It exists only on paper because the government has not done anything to promote public awareness," said Daw Mon Mon, a finance manager at Hein Media and Advertising Company. "And people who do know about it are not interested in joining because the regulations are complicated."

One office worker who used the health benefits program said the payments took too long to process and the service was abysmal.

Ma Moh said she had to wait more than three months to receive her cash payout after the birth of her first child. After eventually being told the money was ready to collect at the Social Security Board office, staff said they could not issue the payment until their manager returned.

Eventually the manager appeared after about two hours.

"There were lots of other people waiting, too. The staff were doing nothing, just frying up curry and cooking noodles in the office in front of all the people in the reception," she said.

"One of the staff was even having her horoscope read by an astrologer beside us."

SSB to work with private clinics

NOE NOE AUNG

noenoeg@gmail.com

THE Social Security Board is planning to open free-of-charge clinics for labourers in cooperation with private companies.

The board, which is under the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, aims to provide free medical treatment for workers if they are approved for benefits under the social insurance system, deputy minister Daw Win Maw Tun said.

"We aim to initially open three or four clinics in Hlaing Tharyar

township initially, as there is a dense population of workers there," she said. "We are trying to open them in cooperation with private clinics."

While Hlaing Tharyar's clinics will initially serve as a test case, there are plans for free clinics to be in place in a number of Yangon's suburban townships, including in Mayangone, Ahlone and Kamaryut, if the early indications are good.

"We are preparing the groundwork for the plan, and after this is done we can start the clinics," said Daw Win Maw Tun.

Workers will receive treatment

at the same standard as is provided by private clinics, claimed Yangon City Development Committee-owned newspaper *City News* on March 19. The Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security plans to pay back the clinics' expenses on a monthly basis, it added.

The clinics are one part of a planned revamp to the way social services are delivered.

The Social Security Board's structure and rules is also being reformed, while upgrades are planned to existing hospitals and clinics, as well as office space.



Believing they have no future in Rakhine State, tens of thousands of people are being recruited by human traffickers to get them to countries such as Malaysia.

BILL O'TOOLE

botoole12@gmail.com

THE last time U Yacob Ali spoke to his son was August 2014, when he received a panicked call on the family mobile from 20-year-old Salam Sayed begging his father for US\$1500.

Speaking to *The Myanmar Times*, 61-year-old U Yacob Ali, who identifies himself as Rohingya, said that his son described being beaten, starved, and burned with boiling water by a trafficking gang that had arranged his voyage from Rakhine State to Malaysia. The \$1500 was the price for securing his release.

U Yacob Ali and his family of nine have been living in a displaced persons camp known as Ohn Daw Gyi 3 North on the outskirts of Sittwe since their home was destroyed in June 2012 when violence between ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims swept the state.

Salam Sayed, the oldest of four boys, had planned to find work in Malaysia and send money back to his family. Instead his dream ended

EXCLUSIVE

up costing his family all the savings they had left, and more. U Yacob Ali sold some gold rings and ornaments he had saved from their family home, and borrowed the rest from family members around Sittwe.

He sent the money in September through an informal hundi banking network, but has not heard from his son or the gang since then. However, later that month, the son of another family in the Ohn Daw Gyi camp, who also fled Myanmar, reported to his family that he had seen Sayed Salam while passing through a detention center for unregistered migrants in Malaysia. This at least gives U Yacob Ali some hope that the gang followed through on their promise to free his son.

During a visit to Ohn Daw Gyi camp on January 20, *The Myanmar Times* encountered dozens of residents with similar harrowing accounts. U Yacob Ali could be considered an exception as he managed to pay the ransom and even has some secondhand information about his son's fate.

Most others reported that they had no means to gather the ransom

Seeking better life, fleeing Rohingya become soft targets



A man repairs a fishing net in the Ohn Daw Gyi 3 camp for displaced Muslims in Sittwe township, Rakhine State. Photo: Yu Yu

As thousands of Rohingya take to the seas each year at the end of the monsoon season, paying Malaysia. On arrival, however, many are held by gangs who demand payment for their freedom

money. Once that becomes clear, the traffickers stop calling, and families are left to wonder what became of their loved ones.

The stories of the Ohn Daw Gyi residents are consistent with reports from the United Nations and other international groups following human trafficking.

A UN Refugee Agency report on irregular maritime migration in Southeast Asia released in December 2014 estimated that 50,000 refugees had "departed from the Bangladesh-Myanmar maritime border, a 15 percent increase over the same period in 2013, and more than triple the number of departures estimated during the same period in 2012".

"Serious and often deadly criminal activity and human rights abuses are commonplace along this route in particular, with survivors saying that human smugglers and boat crews routinely kill passengers with impunity," the UNHCR report said.

It estimated that smuggling gangs working along the Bay of Bengal to Malaysia route netted a combined \$100 million last year, much of that from demanding "additional payments" from their victims.

"Calls to relatives demanding payment were accompanied by threats or, when payment was not immediate,

beatings and other acts of torture," said the report.

Residents and administrators in the Rohingya camps around Sittwe say that Ohn Daw Gyi 3 is especially targeted by human traffickers, with residents describing the gangs as a

'Calls to relatives demanding payment were accompanied by threats or ... beatings and other acts of torture.'

UN Refugee Agency report on irregular maritime migration

cross-section of Bangladeshi, Malay, Thai and even Rohingya smugglers who get easier access into the camps.

At least half of the 3000 people living in Ohn Daw Gyi 3 are not registered by the local authorities. Some are internally displaced persons who fled from other IDP camps in the north - places so isolated that even

the bare minimum of support found in the Sittwe camps was worth the journey.

Others are local Rohingya whose livelihoods were destroyed in the 2012 riots and were eventually forced to seek shelter in the camps. These residents are not officially registered with the state government as living in Ohn Daw Gyi 3, which in turn makes them easy prey for human traffickers.

The camp is only a short distance from the Bay of Bengal, allowing IDPs to slip to the unguarded shoreline with relative ease.

The desperation that drives residents of Ohn Daw Gyi to risk the sea voyage is common to many IDP camps, which collectively house some 140,000 people, mostly Muslim Rohingya. Yanghee Lee, UN human rights envoy to Myanmar, said after a visit in January that she saw "internally displaced persons in Muslim camps living in abysmal conditions with limited access to food, health care and essential services" and "unable to leave the camps due to the continuing level of tensions".

Ms Lee said human rights violations are "encouraging people smuggling and are generating large numbers of asylum seekers, often leading to tragic suffering and loss of life".

While officials declined to comment on the issue, the government

appears to have little interest in stemming the outflow of Rohingya from Rakhine State. In December 2014, the police force's Anti-Trafficking in Persons Division said it had made 216 arrests from a total of 108 human trafficking cases in the first 11 months of 2014 - but not a single case was registered in Rakhine State.

In November 2014, Thailand-based NGO Fortify Rights reported that Myanmar state security forces were complicit in the human trafficking and smuggling of Rohingya Muslims from Rakhine State. The group reported that security forces in Rakhine State have collected payments from those fleeing Myanmar by boats operated by transnational criminal syndicates. In some cases, the Myanmar Navy escorted boats operated by criminal gangs out to international waters, it said.

U Aung Win, a Rohingya activist based in Sittwe, said the lack of response from local security forces was only serving to make the problem worse.

He pointed out that while the local police stop Muslims from leaving the camps overland and entering Buddhist communities, they are apparently unconcerned about Muslims fleeing to the sea.

"The government's official policy," he said, "is to let these people go."



Portraits of Ohn Daw Gyi 3 residents who have lost contact with relatives after entrusting them to human traffickers. From top: Sama Raz; Sultan Mohamad; Satara Begum; Shabir Ahmed; and U Yakob Ali, who paid a gang US\$1500 to release his son in Malaysia. Dozens of residents in the camp had similar stories of missing family members. Photos: Yu Yu

Business



A mock-up of the Krisplaza development. Photo: Tin Yadanar Tun

Sales for Nay Pyi Taw's Krisplaza start in Yangon

TIN YADANAR TUN
yadanar.mcm@gmail.com

THE backers of Krisplaza in Nay Pyi Taw have launched sales of the project in Yangon, aiming to bring condo living to the country's capital.

The development is a joint venture between Krislite and First Myanmar Investments (FMI), marking the first time the latter company's retail arm has stretched beyond Yangon.

The two-tower, 10-storey development is slated to include 114 apartments, a car park, a swimming

pool and retail plaza. The units are between 697 and 1276 square feet, and the building includes a range of amenities such as an outdoor infinity pool, a lounge area, a gym, work-out area and a playground.

"Yangon sales started on the 20th of March, and Yangon customers are more interested in the apartments," said an FMI spokesperson.

Payments can be made over an 18-month period, with the first chunk of 30 percent due within 3 months. Krisplaza is located in Zabu Thiri township, near Nay Pyi Taw's gem museum.

Unocal's production deal marks the return of American energy



AUNG SHIN

koshumgtha@gmail.com

US energy giant Chevron inked a Production Sharing Contract with Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise yesterday for offshore block A-5 in Rakhine basin, said a Ministry of Energy official.

Unocal Myanmar Offshore, a subsidiary of Chevron Corporation, won the rights to the shallow water block in an offshore bidding round held in 2013.

The firm has pledged to invest US\$227.85 million in the block, while paying a \$3.5 million signature bonus and \$150,000 data fee, said the official.

Production Sharing Contracts define the terms under which foreign companies and their local partners can explore and produce at the blocks they have been awarded. The contracts have taken some time to be signed, as they form the legal basis for significant foreign investment in the energy sector.

The agreement with the US firm marks the return of American oil

and gas companies, after the country eased its economic sanctions against Myanmar.

Unocal also has a long history operating in the country, though faced a number of economic sanctions. A number of US federal laws and president executive orders were aimed at business and investment with Myanmar between 1990 and

and shortly afterward it was acquired by Chevron.

A government official told *The Myanmar Times* that Unocal kept its stake in Yadana offshore project since 1998, though it had not otherwise expanded its operations.

The firm owns a non-operating 28.3 percent stake of Yadana, with French oil giant Total is the operator with 31.2pc. PTT of Thailand holds 25.5pc and MOGE 28.3pc.

Myanmar Investment Commission approved a permit for Bermuda Island-registered Unocal earlier this year, before the Production Sharing Contract was signed.

Unocal holds a 99pc interest in block A-5, with its local partners Royal Marine Engineering holding the rest.

The shallow water A-5 block is one of the largest offshore blocks by size that were up for auction in 2013, with acreage of more than 10,000 square kilometres.

Signing the Production Sharing Contracts between MOGE and international companies has been ongoing since December.

So far 13 contracts have been signed with companies including Oil India, Ophir, Berlanga, BG Group, Woodside Energy and supermajors Shell and Total.

MILLION US\$

228

Size of Unocal Myanmar's investment in the A-5 offshore block, according to Ministry of Energy officials

2008.

A lawsuit was also filed against the firm in a US federal district court in 1996 over the company's complicity in dealing with Myanmar's military government.

Unocal agreed to compensate the plaintiffs in 2005 to end the lawsuit,

IN PICTURES

PHOTO: THIRI LU



A man gesturing while making a phone call out front of a Yangon handset shop. With the rapid spread of mobile services, a range of international handset makers are trying to make their mark in the local business.

For related article see page 10

No easy task for financial industry's future growth

BUSINESS 10



Greece and German leaders vow to turn the economic corner

BUSINESS 13

Exchange Rates (March 24 close)		
Currency	Buying	Selling
Euro	K1140	K1150
Malaysia Ringitt	K280	K284
Singapore Dollar	K775	K780
Thai Baht	K31.4	K31.6
US Dollar	K1075	K1085



Garment factories like this one are being urged to adopt a code of conduct to boost overseas orders. Photo: Thiri Lu

Garment code to boost buyers' confidence



CATHERINE TRAUTWEIN

newrooms@mmtimes.com

GARMENT industry manufacturers met with European Union company representatives on March 24 to talk over enacting an apparel industry Code of Conduct, a social compliance step that could placate international buyers.

The roundtable discussion came as part of a weeklong study mission by an EU trade delegation of 16 brands, a press release said. Members of the ministries of commerce and labour also attended the talks.

A statement based on the discussion from the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association (MGMA) - the group behind the industry Code of Conduct - called for the Myanmar government to conceive and carry out "a consistent policy framework on labour-related laws", and said the MGMA would concentrate on improving systems instead of "just issues".

MGMA's activities and the Code of Conduct's continuing implementation process come as the garment industry gathers speed in Myanmar. Once severely diminished by sanctions, the sector has moved toward social compliance and measures that can increase foreign buyers' comfort in sourcing from the country.

The process behind putting the Code of Conduct into practice started with EU-backed garment industry program SMART Myanmar. The initiative, launched in 2013, sought to facilitate the creation of an apparel industry Code of Conduct with the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association - a group with more than 300 members, the lion's share of them factories.

An early workshop with the association's elected executive board produced a loose charter, but progress

stalled when the group took time to think over industry issues.

The code was eventually ratified last December. MGMA's executive board put together a subcommittee to drive the drawing-up of the document, and then voted to put the charter into practice in January. The end result: a non-binding set of guidelines for the apparel industry that MGMA project manager Jacob Clere called "a living document".

The code touches on sensitive issues in the Myanmar market, including child labour and providing a minimum wage for workers, and compliance can go a long way with foreign buyers.

MGMA vice chair U Aung Win said international importers are very happy with the Code of Conduct.

"We have a lot of responsible EU brands that really want to get behind this kind of document," Mr Clere said. "They want to use it as a template to establish minimum standards for Myanmar's garment industry."

This year, the European Union could reclaim its position as the Myanmar garment industry's number one buyer, jumping Japan and South Korea in the process. The EU and the United States used to be the market's top two buyers, something sanctions changed.

In 2003, the United States cut off contact with the Myanmar garment sector. Its sanctions "devastated the industry": 100 factories closed and 80,000 people lost their jobs, Mr Clere said. Meanwhile, "the EU didn't impose blanket sanctions, but did pull back significantly, so the Myanmar garment industry changed its production style," he added.

Asian markets moved into the spots Western countries vacated. Japan and South Korea soon became the country's two biggest importers.

"Japanese and Korean buyers haven't always had the same ideas about social compliance as Europe and the US," Mr Clere said. "Myanmar missed out on what was basically at that time a trend toward

increasingly responsible manufacturing from early 2000 to the present ... that's why there needs to be so much education to bring them up to speed."

MGMA general secretary Daw Khine Khine Nwe said creating a Code of Conduct was about helping workers and making Myanmar more competitive, rather than attracting importers.

"It is not for the buyer, it is for our workers and it is for our workplace, the factory," she said. "Eventually, if that is good for the worker and the workplace, the buyer will come ... We always said we want to be on a level playing field with the international businesses when the country opened up, and we found out this is one thing we have to do."

The Code of Conduct's translation into Myanmar language has been finalised, though the process was lengthy due to the sensitive nature of the document's wording, according to Mr Clere. MGMA also hopes to get the charter translated into Korean, Japanese and Chinese later on.

Though garment industry players are not currently required to comply with the Code, that could change. However, some have expressed approval for its voluntary status.

Lars Doemer, global sustainability manager for clothing brand Linde, called the code's current voluntary status "a positive thing because it shows ownership".

Meanwhile, Mr Clere said the Code didn't have to force players to abide by the Code to have an impact.

"It's not going to be a requirement in the near future but maybe in the medium term it would be, or even without being a requirement it could still take on a medium weight," Mr Clere said. "If factories decide they want to go through this process of publicly endorsing the Code of Conduct, and if MGMA can develop a mechanism for checking that, which is possible, then it takes on a much greater relevance."

"But at the moment we're in this kind of educational stage," he continued.

Ministry of Energy promises lower prices at the pumps

SU PHYO WIN

suphyo1990@gmail.com



THE Ministry of Energy has promised action to force lower petrol prices after consumer complaints that drops in international crude costs have not been reflected at Myanmar's pumps.

Petrol sellers throughout the country could soon face a price ceiling set by the Myanmar Petroleum Trade Association.

"We want the price to go up or down in accordance with international prices, but this hasn't happened in recent months," said deputy energy minister U Aung Htoo. He referred to a general drop in international crude prices since September, as oil has fallen by about 50 percent on international markets in less than a year.

"Rather than the ministry forcing through a fixed price, it would be better if the public and traders accept a common price announced by the association," he said at a press conference on March 21.

Currently there are about 50 to 70 licensed importers and more than 2000 petrol retailers across the country, according to Myanmar Petroleum Trade Association secretary U Win Myint.

Its efforts to set a price ceiling are already under way. The association has spoken with representatives from fuel importers and received agreements from most of them.

"We will make an announcement on a weekly basis and then on a daily basis," he said.

"No shops will have the right to sell above a fixed price. If they refuse to back down, the last punishment will be to suspend them from being a member of the association, as it is important to be a member of the association to get support from the ministry."

Experts and members of the public alike have voiced concern that the local price at the pump has not fallen as much as it could have with the international drop in oil. Ken Tun, chief executive officer of Parami Energy, previously said that for consumers in the United States for instance, if crude prices fall, petrol prices also drop automatically.

In Myanmar though there is a lag, with local prices not as responsive to the international cost of crude oil. He said in Thailand, the government stays on top of the international price, the cost of importing fuel and the local

price, while in Myanmar the policy can be restrictive, allowing too few companies to control the situation.

"So the public doesn't fully profit from the price fall," he said previously.

Although petrol stations set their prices independently, prices have generally fallen somewhat. Diesel at one station in Taungoo now costs K700 per litre, while it cost K960 per litre in September, before crude began its steep decline of about 50pc. Similarly, at the Taungoo station, 92 Octane is now K680, whereas it was once K970.

New Day Energy Limited managing director U Hla Myint Maung said using the price ceiling would still allow for some profitability, though he added concerns the big companies would respect the price ceiling and smaller shops would avoid it.

"We will probably follow the indicated price, as I don't think it is too rigid," he said. U Hla Myint Maung said there are more factors than the price of crude that determines prices at the pumps.

For instance, logistics for importing and exchange rate fluctuations are also important for profit margins.

'Rather than the ministry forcing a fixed price through, it would be better if the public and traders accept a common price.'

Aung Htoo

Deputy energy minister

"People lay blame, saying when crude oil prices drop, local petrol stations take too long to drop their price. But even with the price of crude down by half, the exchange rate has been moving against us," he said.

U Hla Myint Maung added that for the ceiling to be successful, it is important that petrol stations keep watch on each other for transgressions.

U Aung Htoo also confirmed the ministry is considering plans to allow joint ventures between international downstream petroleum retailers and the government in a bid to professionalise the industry.

ADVERTISEMENT

Youth Development Programme, Myanmar Medical Association Call for "Activity Proposal or Expression of Interest"

The Youth Development programme would like to call activity proposal from youth-led organizations or self-help groups who can implement the activities targeting young people both urban and rural in promoting access to adolescent sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention information. For detail information, please contact to Youth Development Programme, Myanmar Medical Association, 249 Theinbyu Road, Mingalartaungnyunt township, Yangon, phone 01-399020, email: youthdpm@gmail.com, website - ydpmma.org.

Busy signal for handset market

Traditionally the phone market has been dominated by Huawei, but there is a surge in other companies testing their luck



AUNG
KYAW
NYUNT

aungkyawnyunt28@gmail.com

RAPID growth in the number of domestic mobile users is creating opportunity for mobile handset makers to expand their sales.

While the local handset market has traditionally been dominated by a handful of brands, several new entrants are pushing their products in the hope of growing market sharing in a rapidly expanding business.

A June 2014 survey by On Device Research placed Chinese manufacturer Huawei as the brand of choice for the country's consumers, followed by international heavyweights Samsung and Apple.

Yet other companies - often based in China - are also attempting to make their mark with consumers.

Customers like U Khin Maung Win have used Huawei because of the cheap costs for their smartphones, while maintaining strong quality levels.

"People like buying Huawei because it's cheap compared to the rest of the market," he said.

Yet the smartphone market is changing, spurred by growing competition from the top to the bottom ends of the market.

Apple began allowing at least four local retailers to sell its iPhones in February, after years of grey-market iPhones being the only local option. Samsung has also made a push for market share, though its models appear to tackle a wider swath of the market than the American brand.

At the mass-market end of the spectrum, a number of Chinese brands, such as Vivo, Oppo and Xiaomei, have recently begun offering smartphones at affordable prices.

Vivo first entered Myanmar and several other ASEAN countries last year, but hopes to become the third-most popular smartphone within three years, its chief executive Wang Chang Miao told *The Myanmar Times* at a Nay Pyi Taw event last week.

"Vivo is trying to take 7 percent of Myanmar customers to be our customers during three years," he said.

The firm has rapidly expanded its



Mobile phones with a multitude of branding are a common sight on Yangon's streets. Photo: Thiri Lu

branding, claiming to be sold at 1000 shops and employing 1000 staff across the country.

Vivo last week launched its X5 Max handset, including a number of features demanded by local consumers - such as two quality cameras.

Shopkeepers say different brands appeal to different market segments.

U Tun Tun, owner of A Mobile Shop, said Samsung is becoming more popular with affluent urban consumers, though Huawei does well more budget-conscious buyers.

"I'd say 70 percent of mobile buyers make their decision off of price, and 30pc by appraising quality," he said.

U Tun Tun said he recommends different models of mobiles depending on what users are looking for - for instance, he says some of Nokia's products work well for those who are less technologically savvy.

One striking element of the local handset market is the massive popularity of smart phones. While smart phones may start at around K80,000, feature phones still allow internet access for K20,000. While statistics are hard to come by, phone shops say their

customers overwhelming clamour for the expensive smartphone option.

Ma Moe, an employee of Mr Fone Telecom Centre, said customers want options. Women are keen to buy handsets with good cameras, while a certain type of customer is keen on making sure the handset they buy is the latest.

Industry observers said the main factor in the rapid changes in mobile handsets sales is increased connectivity. Incumbent telco MPT has significantly improved its coverage, while rivals Ooredoo and Telenor now have six months of operations in the country.

'I'd say 70 percent of mobile buyers may their decision of price, and 30pc by appraising quality.'

U Tun Tun
A Mobile Shop

Mobile penetration rates have likewise shot up. Most estimates had mobile penetration at around 10pc before the August launch of Ooredoo - meaning for every 100 people, there were 10 phones. Earlier this year, deputy telecoms minister U Thauung Tin said penetration stood at about 30pc at the end of 2014, a rate which has likely only increased.

With all the growth, industry leader Huawei is attempting to stay on top.

It is moving into novel product lines such as wearable technology, planning to begin selling its TalkBand B2 and TalkBand N1 fitness-focused wearables and a Huawei Watch in Myanmar this year. An official from the Myanmar Huawei office said TalkBand B2 will likely arrive in May, TalkBand N1 in June and Huawei Watch in July or August. Still, wearables represent a new frontier in consumer technology, not only in Myanmar but around the world. The jury is still out on whether consumers will be as quick to purchase them as they are smartphones.

While wearables still need to impress, the smartphone market is only getting busier.

VOX POPS



Daw Hla Hla Thwin
Age 52, Huawei

"I use Huawei because it has a good price. I think the rate of use among Myanmar people is very high. People can buy Huawei mobile phones in every shop - so I like Huawei."



Ko Kyaw Win Hlaing
Age 27, HTC

"I use HTC One X+ because I like listening to music. It has a good audio system. I also like medium-sized screens. Some people like large-screen smartphones, though. Currently, internet use is expanding. Each brand has its strong points, but I like HTC."



Ma May Phyzo Zaw
Age 29, Samsung

"I use Samsung S3 because I like the camera from the smartphone - and it also has large storage of 32GB, so I can store many pictures on my phone. I also like the iPhone and Samsung handsets that I see for sale. Smartphones are very important in my life because it's only way people can connect. They can also search for information with a smartphone using an internet connection."

ANALYSIS

JEREMY MULLINS

jeremymullins7@gmail.com

YANGON may once have been something of a financial hub for the area, though there is a long way to go before the sector can again rival those of its regional peers.

Regulatory restraints, low rates of financial inclusion and a fragmented banking industry are a few of the many constraints industry players must deal with, according to experts.

In the 1930s, Yangon rivalled Shanghai as a financial centre, presidential economic adviser U Aung Tun Thet told the Myanmar-ASEAN Forum, organised by the Singapore Institute of International Affairs on March 23.

"We are now trying to make sure that Myanmar becomes the next financial and banking hub in Southeast Asia," he said.

While U Aung Tun Thet offered one of the more optimistic takes imaginable on the future potential, it is clear there is a long way for the financial sector to go.

While the 1930s may have been golden years for Yangon's banking sector, the road since has been anything

but smooth. Following nationalisations in the 1960s, private banks only began to re-emerge in the early 1990s. In 2003, several major institutions were wiped out by a severe crash, and while the sector is growing, it still lags behind its neighbours in most measures.

Estimates put the unbanked at around 90 percent of the population, while most local banks are much smaller in capitalisation and size than regional peers.

Last year, Sean Turnell, an economist at Australia's Macquarie University, put Myanmar's private credit to GDP ratio at about 8 percent. Cambodia's, meanwhile, is around 25pc, Laos' at 27pc, Vietnam's at 120pc and Thailand's at 150pc.

The scope of the challenge is clear, but future growth relies on the banking sector stakeholders.

"I think the foreign banks and the local banks have a monumental task if we are going to talk about financial support to the economy," said Serge Pun, a prominent entrepreneur and chair and CEO of Yoma Bank.

While local banks by and large realise the challenges they face and are as a whole gearing up well, many of

the smaller banks are not taking the challenges as seriously as they could, he said. There are also a large number of local banks, with the Central Bank listing 23 private banks and more expected to open.

Still, Mr Pun said at the conference, the overall situation is "very encouraging", though he added that lots of change is necessary for future growth.

"To start with, we need regulatory-side impetus," he said. "I feel the Central Bank has led us to now, but we need a lot more leadership."

Banks must also shore up people's confidence in banks, he said.

One of the most visible changes to banking in Myanmar is the awarding of nine licences to foreign banks, which are to set up this year.

Ian Wong, managing director of group strategy and international management at UOB, a Singapore-based bank which won one of the nine licences, said the bank recognises the need to open up the financial sector, but that it must be done in a sustainable fashion.

"I think liberalisation has to be done, but it has to be done sustainably in stages," said Mr Wong at the

forum. He added that it was important for the country to remain mindful of development in neighbouring countries, because in a way they are competing for the same investments and talent pools.

Foreign banks which have been awarded licences will initially be restricted from certain areas, notably from entering the consumer space.

Still, banks like UOB can help in areas like facilitating foreign direct investment.

It is not only the foreign banks which are changing the local face of finance.

The Yangon Stock Exchange is slated to open later this year.

U Aung Thura, CEO of Thura Swiss, a Myanmar-based research, consulting and capital markets company, said that two years ago, if you asked people what constituted the financial sector, most people would say banking.

"Now with the stock exchange coming up at the end of the year, we see much more interest," he said.

U Aung Thura also said it was best to compare the market's potential to Vietnam rather than Laos and Cambodia. Though there are differences

between Myanmar and Vietnam, in many ways the situation is comparable, he said, adding that Vietnam's main market opened in 2006, and within a few years had more than 200 listed companies.

Myanmar's banking sector is less developed than Vietnam's was, meaning local firms might be more inclined to access capital through the stock market. U Aung Thura added that while many state-owned companies were listed in Vietnam, in Myanmar it would likely be private companies looking to join the exchange.

He also said that international investors appreciate the transparency brought by listing, adding it was important that investors enter the market not to launder money, but because they believe in the fundamentals and in the economy.

After years of little change in the financial sector, it is beginning to change.

Yet while U Aung Tun Thet's hope to become the next financial and banking hub in Southeast Asia certainly seems optimistic, at least the challenges are becoming clearer. However, there is a long way to go to achieve the goal.

Long way to go to reclaim banking glory

BEIJING

Manufacturing slows down in China

CHINA'S manufacturing activity contracted in March at its fastest rate in almost a year, HSBC said yesterday, suggesting worsening conditions in the world's second-largest economy and putting pressure on leaders to further ease monetary policy.

The British bank's preliminary purchasing managers index (PMI) came in at 49.2, it said in a statement, below the break even point of 50 and the weakest reading since last April, when it hit 48.1.

It also slumped from a final reading of 50.7 in February and was far below the median estimate of 50.5 in a Bloomberg survey of economists.

The index, compiled by information services provider Markit, tracks activity in China's factories and workshops and is regarded as a barometer of the health of the Asian economic giant.

The sluggish reading "signalled a slight deterioration in the health of China's manufacturing sector in March", said Markit economist Annabel Fiddes in the statement.

"A renewed fall in total new business contributed to a weaker expansion of output, while companies continued to trim their workforce numbers," she said, adding that "relatively muted client demand" had led producers to cut prices.

Liang Hong, an economist with investment bank China International Capital Corporation, noted the sub-index for employment - a key consideration for macroeconomic officials - fell to its lowest level in six years.

"The pressure on the government to stabilise growth and support employment has increased," Mr Liang said in a report.

The March PMI is likely to add to fears that Chinese growth, a key driver of the global economy, may slow further.

The economy expanded 7.4 percent last year - the slowest pace in nearly a quarter of a century - and official data earlier this month showed production, consumption and investment growth had all fallen to multi-year lows.

'We expect the deceleration in growth to moderate in coming months.'

Julian Evans-Pritchard
Capital Economics

"The deteriorating PMI confirmed that downside risks to China's 2015 growth have started to materialise," Barclays' economists said in a research note.

Julian Evans-Pritchard, an economist with research firm Capital Economics, said that the figure indicated that China's economy "likely slowed sharply" in the first three months of the year.

"We expect the deceleration



A worker produces hygiene supplies in a factory in Hangzhou, east China's Zhejiang province. Photo: AFP

in growth to moderate in coming months as policymakers step up fiscal spending and carry out further cuts to the required reserve ratio and benchmark interest rates in order to prevent growth this year from slipping too far below their annual target," he said.

The government has reduced its growth target for this year to "approximately 7pc", the lowest since a similar goal in 2004.

Underlining official concerns over the economy, the central People's Bank of China cut benchmark deposit and lending interest rates in late February

for the second time in three months.

Authorities have so far avoided big-ticket incentives to bolster growth as they seek to transform the economy from decades of double-digit annual growth to a slower but more sustainable one, a stage that they have branded the "new normal". - AFP




Thingyan Special Promotion

No Interest (or) **Big Discount**
Hire Purchase Program Cash Purchase

ELANTRA

SHARP & ELEGANT SEDAN

- 🏆 2013 Car of the year in USA
- 🏆 2013 Canadian car of the Year



• Gamma 1.6 MPI engine (Gasoline) • 6-Speed (A/T)

Special Gift

Hyundai Car Showroom ကို လာလည်ရင်း မြန်မာ့နှစ်သစ်ကူးသင်္ကြန်အထူးလက်ဆောင်များကို ရယူနိုင်ပါပြီ...



Auto Lease Program You can lease Brand New Santafe without down payment. ... Hot Line : 09 2500 100 10

Yangon : No. 2/6, 2 Quarter, Corner of Insein Road & Thamine Station Road, Mayangone Township, Yangon, Myanmar.
Showroom : (01) 653271, 09 42 100 2051 Service Center : (01) 653273 Fax: (01) 653274

Mandalay : No.10, 40th Street, Between 78th & 79th Street, Maha Aung Myay Township, Mandalay, Myanmar.
Office : (02) 36797 Service Center : 09 4500 60009 (Mandalay Star)

www.hyundaimm.com

info@hyundaimm.com

www.facebook.com/hyundaimm

JAKARTA

Indonesian reserves dwindle

INDONESIA'S foreign-exchange reserves, the smallest in Southeast Asia relative to economic output, are coming under scrutiny as the central bank starts to combat the rupiah's slide to a 16-year low.

"Indonesia is not in a comfortable range when it comes to reserves," said Michael Every, head of financial markets research at Rabobank International in Hong Kong. "It makes more sense that they would like to build reserves and see the trade-weighted rupiah continue to weaken."

The central bank left interest rates unchanged at a policy review last week and pledged to "beef up measures" to stabilise the rupiah, including by intervening in the market. That marked a change from the February meeting when borrowing costs were cut unexpectedly and the monetary authority indicated it was comfortable with a weaker currency, comments that helped spur US\$1.1 billion of outflows from stocks and bonds this month.

While declines in interest rates and the rupiah will help revive an economy expanding at the slowest pace in five years, central bank Governor Agus Martowardojo risks driving away global capital that's needed to finance the current-account deficit. Bank Indonesia's ability to support the rupiah is constrained by foreign-exchange reserves that, relative to gross domestic product, are less than half the size of those in Malaysia, Thailand or the Philippines.

The rupiah rallied 0.6 percent last week to 13,118 per dollar as the central bank voiced its support for the currency. That followed five consecutive weeks of declines in which it sank 4.4pc, Asia's worst performance. The currency will drop to 13,540 by year-end, the weakest level since 1998, according to the average of seven forecasts compiled by



Women purchase staple foods from street vendors at a traditional market in Jakarta. Photo: AFP

Bloomberg that were updated last week.

While Indonesia's foreign-currency reserves rose 12pc in the year through February to \$115.5 billion, they still account for just 13pc of GDP. That compares with 40pc in Malaysia, 39pc in Thailand and 26pc in the Philippines, data compiled by Bloomberg show.

The central bank has no intention to "pile up" reserves and its focus is "clearly on stabilisation" of the rupiah, spokesperson Peter Jacobs said March 19 in Jakarta. The government will coordinate with Bank Indonesia to strengthen the rupiah, Finance Minister Bambang Brodjonegoro told reporters in Hong Kong on March 23.

"It's going to be a challenge for Bank Indonesia if they need to support the currency over a prolonged period, considering the reserves," said Irene Cheung, a currency

strategist at Australia & New Zealand Banking Group Ltd in Singapore. "Credibility is something that needs to be rebuilt over time, so we'll be watching Bank Indonesia's actions and comments closely going forward."

Bank Indonesia raised its benchmark interest rate to 7.75pc at an unscheduled review in November after the government lowered fuel subsidies. Its cut on February 17 was

'There's a lot of political pressure for central banks to ease.'

Joel Kim
Blackrock

the first in three years and came after declines in global energy prices outweighed the scrapping of gasoline subsidies in January, leading to lower retail prices.

BlackRock, which oversees \$4.65 trillion, is a "bit cautious" on Indonesia at the moment, said Joel Kim, head of Asia Pacific fixed income in Singapore.

"Clearly the rate cut they did last month wasn't well received" by the foreign-exchange market, he said. "There's a lot of political pressure for central banks to ease."

More than 20 monetary authorities around the world, including in South Korea, India and Thailand, have cut borrowing costs this year to help boost economic growth. Unlike Thailand, which had a current-account surplus of 3.8pc of GDP in 2014, Indonesia recorded a 2.95pc deficit.

"The economy is structurally different to neighbours like Thailand that cut rates," said David Sumual, chief economist at PT Bank Central Asia, Indonesia's largest lender. "Indonesia is dependent on capital inflows to plug the current-account gap, so it can't let go of the rupiah's stability in favor of growth."

Southeast Asia's largest economy expanded 5.02pc last year. The government is targeting 5.7pc growth this year, while the World Bank is forecasting 5.2pc. President Joko Widodo, who took office in October, wants to boost annual expansion to 7pc before the end of his five-year term and increasing non-commodity exports is a key part of his strategy.

A weaker currency hasn't left Indonesian exporters looking any more competitive, and dilapidated infrastructure and onerous labor market regulations are likely to remain major obstacles, Capital Economics wrote in a March 16 research report.

— Bloomberg

SEOUL

Koreas block zone after fire

SOUTH and North Korea blocked access to their Kaesong joint industrial zone after a fire broke out near a cross-border road and spread across the closely guarded frontier, officials said.

The blaze started on the North Korean side of the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) which surrounds the border, and spread quickly along the road leading to the industrial complex in the North, the South's unification ministry said.

The blaze has yet to reach the complex itself but South Korean personnel working in Kaesong are now unable to leave. Scores of South Koreans commute via the cross-border road every day. "Both sides are now trying to control the blaze after blocking access to the Kaesong industrial park," a ministry official said.

The South's defence ministry said South Korean soldiers had spotted the blaze in a vegetable garden near a North Korean billet shortly before noon.

"Due to strong winds, it has spread quickly through the DMZ," a ministry spokesperson said, adding South Korea mobilised 11 fire trucks, seven helicopters and dozens of firefighters to put out the fire only on the southern side of the buffer zone.

As of March 23 there had been no reports of casualties or property damage, the ministry said.

Bush fires are common in the dry spring season in and near the 4-kilometre-wide DMZ, which was established at the end of the 1950-53 Korean War.

Some 54,000 North Koreans work at 125 South Korean firms in the Seoul-funded Kaesong complex, which opened in 2004 as a rare symbol of cross-border cooperation. The two Koreas are currently locked in a row over wages in Kaesong. — AFP

HONG KONG

Commodity trader to sue former analyst

ASIAN commodity trading giant Noble Group said it would sue a former analyst whom it alleges damaged the company by spreading "false and misleading information".

The company said Arnaud Vagner, an employee until 2013, and Enlighten Ace Limited, a company based in the Seychelles, "conspired" to drive down its share prices this year.

It made the allegations in a writ filed to a Hong Kong court.

The legal action follows a series of reports by little-known Iceberg Research alleging irregular accounting practices at Noble, though the company did not elaborate on any link between the two explicitly in the filing.

Iceberg's latest report, released on March 21, said Noble understated its debts, while previously it alleged that profits were inflated.

'Their actions and their timing have been calculated primarily to inflict damage.'

Noble Group statement

Noble is seeking an unspecified sum in damages and an injunction against the publication of any further statements from Vagner and Enlighten Ace.

Singapore-listed Noble said Vagner was a credit analyst from 2011 to 2013 before he was dismissed by the company, according to the writ.

A public relations officer working for the Hong Kong-based firm declined comment on the writ.

Earlier on March 23 the company said in a statement to Singapore's stock exchange that Iceberg Research had released three reports that were "inaccurate, unreliable and misleading," adding they would sue.

"Iceberg are not the independent research house they claim to be. Their actions, and their timing, have been calculated primarily to inflict damage rather than to facilitate the distribution of research," the statement said.

Bloomberg News reported that shares in Noble, Asia's largest commodity trader by revenue, had fallen about 25 percent in Singapore since the first Iceberg report was released on February 15.

When contacted by AFP on an email address listed on Iceberg Research's website, a respondent said: "We consulted our lawyer and we are extremely confident."

— AFP

ROME

Pirelli takeover sparks resentment

THE takeover of tyre maker Pirelli by a Chinese firm sparked feelings of bitterness and resignation in Italy, as the cash-strapped country prepared to relinquish an iconic part of its industrial heritage.

Pirelli's largest shareholder Camfin said on March 22 that it had signed a deal with ChemChina under which the state-owned chemical giant will buy into the world's fifth-biggest tyre manufacturer in a 7.4 billion euro (US\$8.07 billion) deal.

It calls for ChemChina to eventually hold a controlling stake of at least 50.1 percent of the company renowned for its Formula One equipment and racy calendars.

Under the proposed terms, the company's headquarters and research centre would remain in Italy with current CEO Marco Tronchetti still in charge. Pirelli would eventually be split into two companies, one dedicated to high-end tyres, the other to industrial ones.

Mr Tronchetti told employees in an internal note on March 23 that the takeover was "a growth process which will take time, but in which I strongly believe and will engage in as both manager and shareholder."

ChemChina's bid "will allow us to take our growth strategy further with greater vigour", he said.

His optimism failed to rub off on Italy's main business leaders, most of whom appeared to accept that the eurozone's third-largest economy, gasping for investment after the economic crisis, had little choice but to put up



Tyres are lined up at the Nurburgring racetrack in Nurburg ahead of the German Formula One Grand Prix. A Chinese state firm agreed on March 23 to buy just over a quarter of Italian tyre maker. Photo: AFP

and shut up. "Yesterday, one of the rare big Italian businesses changed owner," former centre-left premier Romano Prodi said.

"Today, industrial policy is made in Beijing ... [But] we're happy because before this even the Chinese didn't come to invest in the country," he said, calling on Italy to snap out of it and recover its own "strategic industrial policy".

The bitter pill for Italy, which has struggled to kick-start growth, comes just weeks after the announcement that Qatar's sovereign fund is to become sole owner of a prime area of real estate in the northern city of Milan.

Pirelli is a flagship company for the Italian economic capital, where it began business in 1872 by making bicycle wheels before moving into the nascent car industry.

Now a mainstay of the Formula One racing circuit, the company is equally well known for its calendars that have featured stars from Sophia Loren to Brigitte Bardot to Penelope Cruz.

While Prime Minister Matteo Renzi did not comment on the ChemChina deal, Labour Minister Giuliano Poletti applauded Pirelli for being open to change and drawing in much-needed foreign funds. — AFP

BERLIN

Tspiras and Merkel vow to make nice

GREEK Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and German Chancellor Angela Merkel urged an end to the vicious "stereotypes" and name-calling that have threatened to rip the eurozone apart.

After weeks of bitter acrimony between the new radical-left government in debt-mired Greece and the eurozone's effective paymaster, Germany, both leaders were at pains to stress their common ground on the debt crisis.

Mr Tsipras, making his first visit to the German capital since taking office in January, told reporters "Neither are the Greeks lazy louts nor are the Germans to blame for Greece's ills - we have to work hard to overcome these stereotypes."

Ms Merkel, 60, said she agreed that Europe must "surmount these types of stereotypes" about good and bad eurozone members to ensure the future of the currency.

"We both have a vested interest in building cooperation based on trust," said Ms Merkel late on March 23.

Mr Tsipras, 40, praised the German leader, who has been caricatured as a bloodthirsty Nazi in Greece for her insistence on swinging reforms, as a straight-shooter.

"Ms Merkel listens and wants to make progress in discussions," he said.

But entrenched differences surfaced during the 35-minute press conference between an initial round of talks and a working dinner at Merkel's imposing glass-and-steel chancellery.

Mr Tsipras said the budget cuts and structural reforms demanded over the past five years in exchange for two bailout programs had not been a "success story" but rather brought his country down to its knees.

The austerity path Ms Merkel has championed has had "horrible effects" including mass unemployment, widespread poverty and social unrest in Greece.

"A new political mix must be found," he insisted while pledging more decisive action than his predecessors on fighting corruption and tax evasion.

Ms Merkel repeated her frequent refrain that the only sustainable solution to the debt crisis is fiscal discipline.

"What is crucial is that the economic fundamentals are there. What types of reforms are implemented can be discussed with the institutions," she said, referring to what was formerly called the "troika" of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the Inter-



German Chancellor Angela Merkel, at right, and Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras address a press conference. Photo: AFP

national Monetary Fund.

She dismissed the frequent portrayal of the Greek debt crisis as a zero-sum game between Berlin and Athens.

"Germany is not the institution that decides whether the reform program is correct or sufficient," she said.

But she added, "We want a Greece that is economically strong, we want growth in Greece and - this is key - we want to reduce the very high

unemployment among the young."

As tensions have flared, painful historical memories have resurfaced, with Mr Tsipras's government reviving reparation claims for the Nazi occupation of Greece in World War II.

In his opening statement, Mr Tsipras stressed that Greece did not see the case as closed, insisting that it was a "moral issue" that must still be resolved.

But he distanced himself from

calls in Athens for the Greek government to seize German property to settle wartime claims, such as the Goethe Institute cultural centre.

"You can forget that - that doesn't apply," he said, adding, "Yoday's Germany has nothing to do with the Germany of the Third Reich which spilled so much blood."

Ms Merkel said she saw the issue of reparations as "politically and legally resolved" but said Germans were aware "of the atrocities we committed" and took their responsibility for the crimes of the Nazis "very, very seriously".

Greece's creditors agreed in February to extend its 240 billion euro (US\$260 billion) bailout by four months in exchange for promises of further reforms.

At an EU summit last week, Athens lobbied Brussels to release vital funds left in the bailout package to help it make payments to creditors in the coming days, and avoid bankruptcy and a possible sudden exit from the euro.

Instead, the EU offered 2 billion euros in unused development funds to Greece after Mr Tsipras vowed to clarify reform pledges demanded by the country's creditors. But that money will not go into government coffers. - AFP

BEIJING

Net profits slump at Sinopec

CHINESE energy giant Sinopec said net profit slumped 29.7 percent in 2014, blaming a "precipitous" drop in global crude oil prices and issuing a first-quarter profit warning.

Net profit for 2014 was 46.47 billion yuan (US\$7.56 billion), down from 66.13 billion yuan in 2013, it said in a statement to the Hong Kong stock exchange.

The figure fell short of a consensus forecast of 53.5 billion yuan in a survey of analysts compiled by Bloomberg News. "In 2014, the global economic recovery remained weak and China's GDP grew by 7.4 percent," Sinopec said.

The country's GDP growth last year was the slowest in nearly a quarter of a century.

"International crude oil prices fluctuated at a high level in the first half of the year and plunged in the second half with a precipitous drop in the fourth quarter," the company said.

PERCENT

29.7

Size of the slump in Sinopec's net profits in 2014 compared to 2013

The Chinese government cut its state-set prices for oil products 11 times in the second half of 2014 as international crude prices plummeted, it said.

The company's revenue slipped 1.9pc to 2.83 trillion yuan in 2014, according to the statement.

Sinopec also issued a profit warning for the first quarter of this year, as international oil prices are expected to remain weak.

- AFP

FREE SEATS

Book now till 29 Mar 2015 | Travel from: 1 Sep 2015 - 31 May 2016

Fly from Yangon / Mandalay

→ **Bangkok** → **Kuala Lumpur**

.....

✈ Fly-Thru from Yangon / Mandalay (via Bangkok / Kuala Lumpur) to

Chiang Mai • Phuket • Krabi • Ho Chi Minh City • Siem Reap

Hong Kong • Macau • Tokyo • Osaka • Perth • Sydney & many more destinations

FLIGHT+HOTEL

HOTEL + FREE SEATS

Book now @ AirAsiaGO.com

Start discovering @ airasia.com

facebook.com/AirAsia

[Exclusive FREE shuttle to & from Mandalay Airport](#)

*Airport taxes & fees apply. No Fuel Surcharge. Promotion seats are only available for online booking at www.airasia.com and may not be available on all flights, public holidays, school breaks and weekends. A payment processing fee is applicable to all payments made via credit, debit or charge cards. Our other terms and conditions of carriage apply.

World

WORLD EDITOR: Kayleigh Long

TOKYO

Japan and Indonesia to boost ties

JAPANESE Prime Minister Shinzo Abe met with Indonesian President Joko Widodo on March 23 to forge tighter economic and defence ties, as Tokyo works to court friends in the face of a rising China.

The two nations agreed to tighter cooperation on coastal security, regular talks between their respective defence and foreign ministers, and greater Japanese investment in Indonesia.

"We wish to contribute to the peace and prosperity of this region and the international community by strengthening our strategic partnership with Indonesia, which, like Japan, is a maritime nation and democracy," Mr Abe told Mr Widodo as they began their talks.

Mr Widodo's visit to Tokyo is a part of his week-long tour of Japan and China, aimed at attracting investment and forging closer political ties.

The visit came as Mr Abe actively courts Southeast Asian nations to join Japan to create a counterweight to China, which is locked in territorial disputes with Japan in the East China Sea and with Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea.

Mr Widodo has previously told Japanese media that China's claim to virtually all of the South China Sea has no legal foundation.

Indonesia "is ready to play a role of mediator" between Tokyo and Beijing, Widodo told NHK before his trip.

Roughly 1,500 Japanese firms are operating in Indonesia, and Tokyo is Jakarta's top aid donor.

Indonesia, by contrast, counts Japan as the number one destination for its exports, particularly its energy sales.

During his stay, Mr Widodo, who took office in October, will also meet with Japanese business leaders, including executives from Toyota, the world's biggest automaker that has major operations in Indonesia.

Ahead of his visit, the Indonesian leader told Japanese media that he was interested in Japan's assistance to build key infrastructure, such as power plants, highways, and railways. - AFP

BANDA ACEH

Indonesian intel officers shot dead

TWO Indonesian intelligence officers were found shot dead yesterday, a day after being kidnapped by gunmen in the former separatist rebel heartland of Aceh in the country's west, a military spokesperson said.

The bodies of the two soldiers were found face-down and half-naked in a remote area in northern Aceh, said spokesperson Machfud. The hands of one soldier had been bound behind his back.

"Authorities found the bodies this morning in a jungle close to the location where they were kid-

napped," Machfud, who like many Indonesians goes by one name, told AFP.

Police had yet to determine a motive for the killings, or the identities of the gunmen.

Witnesses said a group of gunmen ambushed the soldiers as they returned from questioning residents about former rebels considered active in the east and north of the province on Sumatra island's northernmost tip.

Their car was found abandoned a short time later.

Machfud denied the military was questioning local residents, saying its presence in the province was limited to "social work such as helping farmers in paddy fields".

The episode was a reminder of the fragile security situation in Aceh a decade after a peace deal ended a 30-year separatist insurgency in the province that left some 25,000 people dead.

Attacks on soldiers are now rare in Aceh, although gun-related violence is not uncommon. - AFP

BANGKOK

Trafficking on the wane, says committee

THAILAND has made significant advances to deal with human trafficking, and is working toward developing a case system to track data and statistics, according to the government's anti-human trafficking committee.

A dearth of information on human trafficking cases is a key reason the United States continues to view Thailand negatively, said Panitan Wattanayagorn, adviser to Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan on security affairs.

"Without statistics and data collection, the US sees us as inactive on the issue. This year is the first year we have developed statistical data on human trafficking cases," said Mr Panitan.

The US is keen to obtain data which shows how much progress Thailand is making in the fight against trafficking, though Thailand also appears eager to obtain the information itself.

Mr Panitan said about six to 10 major human trade networks are linked to the more than 200 human trafficking cases currently being prosecuted.

He said Thailand is plagued by two additional dilemmas which contributed to Washington's decision to downgrade Thailand to the worst rated human trafficking situation - Tier 3 - in the annual global Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report.

The passivity of policymakers in the past and the alleged involvement of officials in human trafficking cases are both major issues, said Mr Panitan.

Thailand is aware of the mess and has made significant progress towards solving it, he insisted.

Human trafficking-related cases are declining after months of strenuous government efforts, he said.

However, the US authorities want Thailand to have the data and figures to back up the reduction, as they are

'Without statistics and data collection, the US sees us as inactive on [trafficking].'

Panitan Wattanayagorn
Government adviser

currently working on the latest edition of the TIP report.

The first draft of the 2015 TIP report will be wrapped up next month and forwarded to US President Barack Obama for his final say.

Up for consideration is whether Thailand can be upgraded from Tier 3, Mr Panitan said.

Gen Prawit, also defence minister, said Thai people need to help solve human trafficking too.

He said Thailand is preparing a report that will provide American

authorities with an update on Thai initiatives before Washington decides on Thailand's next status over its efforts to combat human trafficking.

The government cannot work alone if it wants to make Thailand's efforts more recognisable to the US and the international community, he said.

The problem should be treated as a common concern across all sectors in society, Gen Prawit said.

"Everyone, from authorities to ordinary civilians, must cooperate to put an end to human trafficking."

The deputy prime minister is planning to make Thai people become more aware of the problem by asking Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha to announce the issue of human trafficking as part of the national agenda.

It is an alternative approach to the problem after the country has carried out many measures to fix its plunging image after the US downgraded Thailand last June.

The TIP report will not lead to trade barriers, but it can affect trade-related assistance to Thailand and carries with it the possibility that the US may ask major global financial institutions not to lend money to the country.

The report brands Thailand as both an "origin and destination" country for human trafficking, following warnings over the issue by the US and the European Union for more than 10 years, Gen Prawit said.

- Bangkok Post



People pay their respects at Singapore General Hospital following the death of Lee Kuan Yew.

SINGAPORE

A Singapore in m

THE death of Lee Kuan Yew has generated calls for Singapore to escape the shadow of its authoritarian founder and his "culture of fear", and begin a debate on embracing freedoms needed to power growth and innovation.

But observers say the current crop of leaders will resist any change to the status quo that has for decades insulated them from criticism, particularly as they face a new generation of voters with a different vision for the future.

The 91-year-old patriarch who died on March 23 transformed Singapore into a high-tech industrial hub and financial centre but also entrenched a system notorious for one-party rule, the muzzling of the press and curbing of political liberties.

But opposition to government policies has become more strident in recent years after the Internet afforded Singaporeans an alternative venue to vent their frustrations outside the tightly controlled mainstream media.

And while there has been an outpouring of affection for Lee since he was hospitalised in February, even he was not immune to virulent online attacks from disillusioned citizens complaining about immigration, the cost of living and other hot-button issues.

Younger, better-educated Singaporeans have become increasingly vocal about reforms and the pursuit of economic gain above all else, and some analysts hope Lee's passing will spark a national debate on the need to loosen up.

One of them is Lim Jialiang, a 24-year-old activist and sociology student at Nanyang Technological University who said many young people have little emotional attachment to the city-state's founder.

While they are saddened by his death, "what is important is that we find ways to get away from the myths about him after all this".

But prominent Singaporean activist and blogger Alex Au said Lee's death could have the opposite effect on the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) which is now led by the patriarch's son, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

"Especially because Lee Kuan Yew has passed on, it is quite

'Singaporeans by now have realised that you don't have to trade your civil liberties with economic prosperity, especially the young. It's a false trade-off.'

Martyn See
Independent filmmaker

Terms of disengagement: US-Afghan talks continue

WORLD 16



African elephants under threat from wildlife trade

WORLD 17



former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore on March Photo: AFP

mourning reflects

possible to imagine that the government under his son might feel even more insecure, and insecurity is a strong argument for keeping controls in place," he told AFP.

Mr Au earlier this month was fined by the High Court for "scandalising" the judiciary in an online court case, for which he also apologised.

"In the long term if you look across different countries, liberalisation happens when either the popular pressure becomes irresistible or when a leader feels secure enough to want to leave it as his legacy. I don't think these two conditions are in place in Singapore," he said.

Independent filmmaker Martyn See said Lee's death is expected to lift "the culture of fear that has dogged Singapore civil society for decades" but expects the government to resist any pressure toward greater freedom.

"The strongman is gone, the fear is lessened, there will be more people speaking up than ever before," said Mr See, whose films have been banned by the government because of their political content.

"The authoritarian instinct will rear its head but it will not be prolonged because Singaporeans will decide that enough is enough."

But respected Singaporean academic Cherian George, an associate professor at the Hong Kong Baptist University, said the country's political controls are so entrenched they are no longer dependent on Lee's presence.

"The current leaders find it just too convenient to continue with a

system that insulates them from the kind of contention and pressure that leaders in more open and competitive democracies face," he said.

Analysts say there is a strong economic incentive for Singapore to loosen up as it shifts to high-value industries that require creativity and innovation, and that while Lee's firm hand guided it to prosperity, those same values are now holding it back.

The tropical island also wants to shed its image as a dull, rules-based society develop a vibrant local arts scene and attract more universities, think tanks and international research centres.

"Freedom, transparency and competition in the economy are essential drivers and expectations of a high-end economy," said Bridget Welsh, a senior research associate at the Center for East Asia Democratic Studies at the National Taiwan University.

"Singapore has hampered its growth by holding onto an old model," she told AFP, adding that openness is essential "for economic dynamism".

Mr See, the filmmaker, said the examples of Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea "have proven that democratic freedoms can co-exist alongside economic prosperity".

"Singaporeans by now have realised that you don't have to trade your civil liberties with economic prosperity, especially the young. It's a false trade-off."

- AFP

MANILA

US marine trial to proceed in Manila

THE murder trial of a US Marine accused of killing a transgender woman in the Philippines began on March 23 after plea bargain negotiations fell apart.

Private First Class Joseph Scott Pemberton appeared in court dressed in a black suit and dark tie for the start of the trial, five months after he allegedly murdered Jennifer Laude in a red light district hotel.

Prosecutor Emilie Fe de los Santos told reporters there had been plea bargain discussions between both sides to settle the case, but no agreement was reached by March 23 so the trial began.

Laude's relatives said they had been offered 21 million pesos (US\$468,000) in exchange for their approval to lower the charge from murder to homicide.

"No amount of money could pay for the years I spent raising my child," Julita Cabillan, Laude's mother, told reporters.

"What they did to my child was gruesome. Just because we are poor doesn't mean we can't fight for justice."

However one of Pemberton's lawyers, Benjamin Tolosa, insisted the marine's legal team did not offer any money.

"It has been insinuated the demand came from us and that's absolutely false. It's contrary to what happened," Mr Tolosa told reporters at the end of the first day of the trial.

Mr Pemberton, aged 19 at the time of the killing, would face 40 years in jail if found guilty of murder.

The maximum penalty for homicide in the Philippines is 20 years in jail.

He declined to enter a plea at pre-trial hearing last month, as his appeal to have the case dismissed is waiting to be heard in a higher court.

However the local court in the northern port city of Olongapo entered a not guilty on his behalf last

month, so the trial could go ahead.

Laude, also known as Jeffrey, was found naked with strangle marks on her neck in a cheap motel room at Olongapo's red light district in October last year, according to a police autopsy report.

Mr Pemberton, who had just finished training exercises between US and Philippine marines near Olongapo, checked into the motel with Laude, aged 26, shortly after meeting her at a bar, prosecutors said.

The prosecution's first witness, a bellboy, testified on Monday that he saw Pemberton at the motel on the night Laude was killed, according to Mr de los Santos.

However the proceedings were closed to the media, and scant details were only initially available via Mr de los Santos.

She said that, although the plea bargain offer negotiations had bro-

ken down, it could be revived and introduced "anytime" during the trial.

But lawyers for Laude's family accused Mr de los Santos of promoting a plea bargain deal, and separately filed a request with the justice department on March 23 asking for her to be replaced.

Laude's death re-ignited long-simmering anti-US sentiment in the Philippines, a former American colony that still allows a significant American military presence via joint training exercises.

Court cases are only rarely closed to the media in the Philippines. Mr de los Santos said the judge in the Pemberton case had ruled it be held behind closed doors, but did not explain why.

A spokesperson at the US embassy in Manila declined to comment on the case on.

- AFP



Protesters rally near the court building in the Philippine city of Olongapo, some two hours outside Manila on March 23, where US Marine Private First Class Joseph Scott Pemberton faces the first day of his trial for the murder of transgender Filipina Jennifer Laude. Photo: AFP



IN PICTURES

Photo: AFP

An Indian "toddy tapper", who collects the sap from palm trees to make arrack, climbs a tree with clay pots to fill up the liquid, at Bibi Nagar in Nalgonda District, some 40 kilometres (25 miles) from Hyderabad on March 23.

ADEN

Yemen on the brink, following clashes

YEMEN'S Shiite militia sent reinforcements south and clashed with local fighters on March 23 after the United Nations warned the country is on the brink of a protracted civil war. Security sources said the militiamen, known as Huthis, had sent thousands of troops and clashed with Sunni tribes, with their sights set on the main southern city of Aden, where President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi fled from the capital last month.

The militia on March 22 seized the airport and a nearby military base in Taz, 180 kilometres (110 miles) north of Aden and seen as a strategic entry point to Hadi's southern refuge. Yemen, a long-time US ally which borders Saudi Arabia, is increasingly divided between a north controlled by the Huthis, who are allegedly backed by Iran, and a south dominated by Hadi supporters.

Mounting unrest - including suicide bombings claimed by the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group that killed 142 people in the Huthi-controlled capital Sanaa on March 20 - have raised international concerns and prompted an emergency session of the UN Security Council on March 22. Its 15 members voiced their unanimous support for Mr Hadi, with UN envoy Jamal Benomar warning that without immediate action the country will slide into "further violence and dislocation". "(Recent events) seem to be leading Yemen to the edge of a civil war," Mr Benomar told the meeting by video link from Qatar, warning of a protracted crisis like "a Libya-Syria combined scenario".

The Huthis seized Sanaa in September and have been expanding their territory, clashing with Hadi loyalists, local tribes and Sunni Islamist groups including al-Qaeda. Since taking over Taz airport, the militia has pushed toward Aden, security sources said, although two convoys were repelled in overnight clashes with tribespeople. It was not immediately clear how many Huthis or tribesmen may have been killed or wounded in the clashes near Al-Abd, about 40 kilometres from Taz, and Al-Maqatara, 80 km from the city.



A picture taken on March 23 shows the aftermath of a suicide attack which targeted the Al-Hashush mosque in northern Sanaa. Photo: AFP

The Huthis have also deployed some 5000 militia forces and more than 80 tanks to an area of neighbouring Ibb province, 30 km northeast of Taz, local and military sources said. The reinforcements have converted schools into barracks, the sources said. Troops and southern paramilitary forces loyal to Hadi have also reportedly deployed in Lahj province, north of Aden, to ward off any Huthi advance.

Huthi leader Abdulmalik al-Huthi in a televised speech March called for his supporters to mobilise for an offensive in the south, condemning Mr Hadi as "a puppet in the hands of

forces of evil, led by the United States". Western countries and Sunni Arab Gulf monarchies have backed Mr Hadi as the country's legitimate ruler. On March 23, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal reiterated calls for Huthis to "obey an international consensus on rejecting the coup," in reference to their seizure of power in Sanaa. Yemen has been a key US ally in the fight against al-Qaeda by allowing Washington to carry out drone strikes against jihadists on its territory. Washington announced on March 21 it was evacuating its remaining personnel from Yemen, underlining fears in the West of growing insecurity.

The forces allied with the Huthis include members of the former central security force, a unit seen as loyal to ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh. Saleh was forced from power in early 2012 after a year-long popular uprising and has been accused of working with the Huthis to restore his influence.

Human Rights Watch on Monday accused the Huthis of an increasing number of attacks on journalists, including arrests and alleged torture.

"There has been an increase in arbitrary arrests and violence against journalists and other media workers" by Huthis, HRW said.

The Huthis reportedly killed one

protester in Taz on March 22 when they fired on thousands demanding they withdraw.

Activists said several thousand Taz residents protested on March 23 outside a camp of pro-Saleh forces. Witnesses said four demonstrators were wounded.

Elsewhere, IS claimed responsibility for an attack last week in Lahj that killed 29 police, in a sign of its growing activity in Yemen.

The attack came on the same day that two Shiite Huthi mosques were bombed in Sanaa. On March 23, IS posted pictures of what it said were the five Yemeni suicide bombers on the internet. - AFP

PESHAWAR

Abductions, extortions and AK-47s: A doctor's lot in Pakistan

WHEN Pakistani doctor Mehmood Jafri gets ready for work in the morning, the first thing he does is put his AK-47 in the car.

Then, after briefing the armed guards at his home, he sets off for the hospital where he works in the troubled northwestern city of Peshawar with his most trusted relative beside him as an escort.

After surviving one murder attempt and one kidnap bid, Mr Jafri takes no chances with his personal safety.

He is one of hundreds of Peshawar doctors living with the daily threat of being killed or abducted for ransom by Taliban militants or criminal gangs.

The doctors' association in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, of which Peshawar is the capital, estimate that in the past three years around a dozen doctors have been killed and more than 30 kidnapped, while up to 3000 have fled in search of a peaceful life elsewhere.

Guns have become as important as stethoscopes at clinics and guards watch over doctors' homes.

Doctors are seen as relatively easy targets in Pakistan. They are well paid, but often lack the protection of influential connections that wealthy businessmen might enjoy.

"I was lucky that I survived two attempts because I sensed the threats

moments before they tried to attack me and I escaped," Mr Jafri told AFP as he finished surgery at Peshawar's main hospital.

"Many other colleagues were not so lucky and they were either shot dead or kidnapped."

Provincial health minister Shehram Khan Tarakai confirmed the kidnapping of 30 doctors and the killing of "a couple".

The problem is not confined to the northwest - the medics' association in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city, says 20 doctors have been killed in targeted attempts in the past 14 months while 10 have been kidnapped in two years.

AFP has changed the names of all the doctors in this story for their own safety.

Kidnapping leaves most of the medics deeply traumatised after their release and unwilling to speak about their experiences for fear of retribution from their abductors.

"They stop interacting with others and restrict themselves to their homes and clinics as the kidnapers tell them they will find them if they ever reveal any details at all," Amir Taj Khan, senior vice president of the Provincial Doctors Association, said.

"They don't even come to our meetings. It's impossible for them to tell their stories publicly even if you pay

them 100 million rupees (US\$1 million)."

Mr Khan said that of the 32 doctors who had been kidnapped, only two had confided in him what had happened to them.

They told of being tied up with ropes and taken to lawless North Waziristan, for decades the stronghold of al-Qaeda and Taliban militants.

The abductees were isolated from human contact, suffered illness and went untreated, Mr Khan said.

3000

The estimated number of doctors who've fled the Taliban in Peshawar

A major offensive launched against militant strongholds in North Waziristan last June brought fresh anxiety.

With the military wading in with artillery barrages and air strikes on insurgent positions, kidnapers and kidnapped became scared, never knowing if the next shell would kill them.

One detainee was moved repeatedly, Mr Khan said, until finally an \$80,000 ransom was agreed for his release.

Even the best-laid security arrangements do not always work. One doctor said his kidnapers simply disarmed him and he ended up paying \$130,000 for his release.

Most doctors in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa now simply pay the Taliban and criminal gangs, Mr Khan said, making the extortion and kidnapping business a hugely lucrative revenue-earner for militants.

"Almost 100 percent of senior doctors pay extortion to avoid kidnapping and killing - they know there is no other way to survive," Mr Khan said.

Hanif Afridi, a successful eye specialist with clinics in several cities, pays \$2500 each month to Mangal Bagh, a feared warlord in Khyber tribal region.

"I am paying extortion since 2010. I know I am doing wrong but there is no other solution. Security forces are unable to protect us," Mr Afridi told AFP.

"I have to keep Taliban happy for my own security and security of my business. Besides the monthly fee, I pay them around \$5000 when they demand more money for 'special assignments'," he said.

Mr Afridi says he is sometimes taken to the tribal areas for the treatment

of Taliban commanders.

Militants pick their targets carefully, carrying out sophisticated undercover surveillance before striking.

"They know everything about everybody. Many Taliban visit our clinics in the disguise of patients and assess how rich we are, so we have to abide by their demands," Mr Afridi said.

The pressure has become too much for many doctors and a steady stream have left Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, putting further stress on an already weak healthcare system serving an extremely poor part of Pakistan.

"They have migrated to the Gulf, Dubai, Saudi Arabia, UK, USA, Canada, Islamabad and Punjab," Mr Khan said.

"Up to 20 doctors are moving out every month. I think around 3000 have left [the province] within three years."

Aside from the extortion, there is a sectarian aspect to the doctors' plight.

Most of those targeted, including Mr Jafri, are members of the Shiite Muslim minority that makes up around 20 percent of Pakistan's population, which is predominantly Sunni.

Sectarian violence, mostly perpetrated by Sunni extremists, has risen sharply in recent years, with attacks on professionals such as doctors fuelling fears of a Shiite "brain drain" from the country. - AFP

TUNIS

Museum reopening delayed after attack

THE reopening of Tunisia's National Bardo Museum was delayed yesterday, following on from last week's jihadist attack that killed 20 foreigners.

The decision to delay reopening was taken due to security concerns, its head of communications Hanene Sfarfi told AFP.

"We have been surprised at the last minute, but the interior ministry says that for security reasons we cannot receive a large number of visitors," she said, adding that an official ceremony marking the reopening of the museum would still go ahead.

Officials at the Bardo Museum had planned to allow the public back in yesterday, six days after an attack claimed by the Islamic State group killed 21 people.

Museum officials said the reopening, which will be marked

with a ceremony, was "a message" to the gunmen who killed the tourists and a police officer there last week.

"It's a challenge but also a message... we want to show that they haven't achieved their goal," museum curator Moncef Ben Moussa said.

The museum was due to reopen with a ceremony organised by the culture ministry, including a concert by the Tunis symphony orchestra.

Tunisia fears that last week's carnage claimed by the Islamic State group - the deadliest assault on foreigners in the North African country since 2002 - will hit its vital tourism sector.

In a move aimed at restoring confidence on March 23, Prime Minister Habib Essid sacked the heads of police for Tunis and the area around the museum, after finding "several deficiencies" in

security.

Mr Essid, himself a former interior minister, "decided to fire a number of officials including the Tunis police chief and the police chief for the Bardo", his communications director Mofdi Mssedi told AFP.

A police officer in charge of

'It's a challenge but also a message... we want to show that they haven't achieved their goal.'

Moncef Ben Moussa
Bardo Museum curator

security at the museum has been arrested, judiciary spokesperson Sofiene Sliti told AFP, without disclosing the charges.

In a reminder of the fragile security situation in the country credited as the birthplace of the Arab Spring uprisings, a soldier was killed and two wounded late March 22 near the border with Algeria.

Tunisia has struggled to quell a wave of extremist attacks on the police and army since a 2011 popular uprising that toppled long-time strongman Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

President Beji Caid Essebsi, who served under Mr Ben Ali, said Tunisia was hunting a third suspect in the Bardo massacre.

"Two were killed, but there is one who is now on the run," he told France media iTele television and Europe 1 radio on March 22.

Officials had previously named

two gunmen shot dead by security forces after the attack and said they had received training at militant camps in neighbouring Libya.

Authorities say as many as 3000 Tunisians have gone to Iraq, Syria and Libya to join jihadist ranks, raising fears of returning battle-hardened militants plotting attacks.

The Bardo attack was the first claimed by IS in Tunisia after the militant group's apparent expansion to strife-torn Libya from its Syria and Iraq strongholds.

With feeble growth and a graduate unemployment rate of 30 per cent, Tunisia relies heavily on tourist income.

"Our country is experiencing a serious economic crisis and the strategy of the terrorists is to add to this problem," Mr Essid wrote in the March 23 edition of the French newspaper *Le Figaro*. - AFP

KASANE, BOTSWANA

African elephant population wavers

AFRICAN elephants could be extinct in the wild within a few decades, experts warned on March 23 at a major conservation summit in Botswana that highlighted an alarming decline in numbers due to poaching.

The Africa Elephant Summit, held at a tourist resort in Kasane, gathered delegates from about 20 countries across Europe, Africa and Asia, including China - which is

accused of fuelling the illegal ivory trade.

"This species could be extinct in our lifetime if the current trend continues ... within one or two decades," Dune Ives, senior researcher at Vulcan, a philanthropic organisation run by US billionaire Paul Allen, said.

"In five years we may have lost the opportunity to save this magnificent and iconic animal."

The conference heard the latest figures from the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which reported that the African elephant population had dropped from 550,000 in 2006 to 470,000 in 2013.

East Africa has seen the worst decline, from 150,000 to about 100,000.

"The overall objective of this meeting is to secure commitments at the highest political level to effectively protect the elephants and significantly reduce the trends of

THOUSAND

80

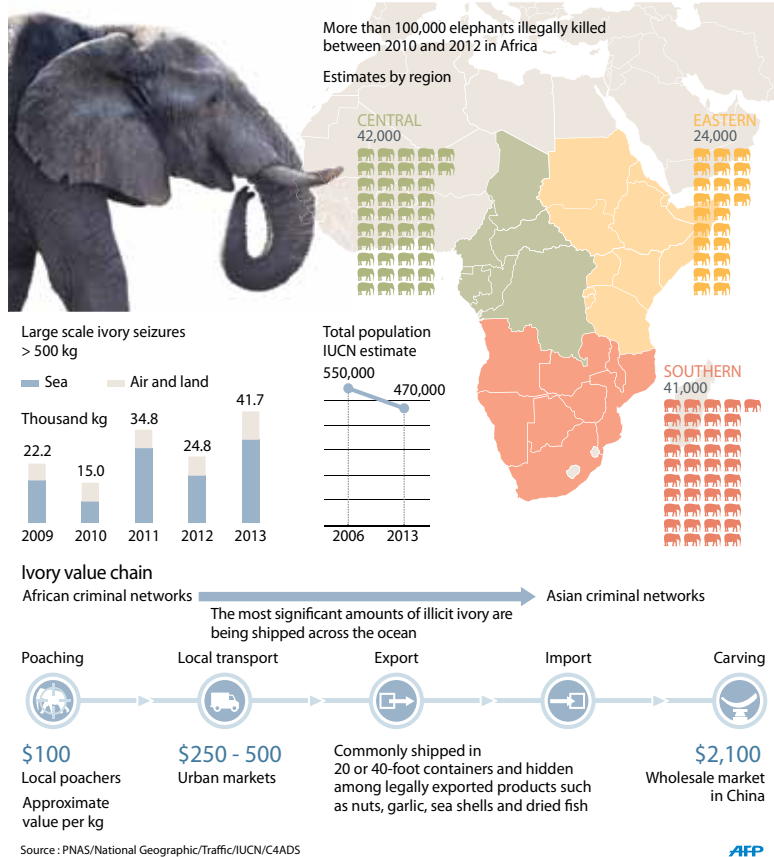
The approximate drop in the African elephant population between 2006 and 2013



Raw elephant tusks and other items made of ivory, totalling more than six tonnes, are stacked for burning outside Addis Ababa on March 20. The ivory was collected from seizures at the airport as well as from poaching in Ethiopia. Photo: AFP

The hunt for African elephants

Elephant hunting is often organised by international criminal networks to supply the illegal ivory market



killings of elephants," said Elias Magosi, from the Botswanan environment ministry.

"The current killing rate is unsustainable and the population of African elephant is in danger."

Elephant hunting is often organised by international criminal networks to supply the illegal ivory

'These [illegal wildlife poaching] syndicates take advantage of conflicts, social unrest, poor governance...'

Elias Magosi
Botswana environment ministry

market, mainly in Asia, with some profits thought to fund regional conflicts and militants.

"These syndicates take advantage of conflicts, social unrest, poor governance," Mr Magosi said.

TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring group, said ivory trading routes showed the flow from Kenya and Tanzania to transit countries including Malaysia, Vietnam and Philippines, before going on final markets in China and Thailand.

"Thailand is still a country of great concern," Tom Milliken of TRAFFIC said.

"(But) China is the most important country that we are dealing with in the world with respect to illegal ivory trade."

The conference follows up a 2013 meeting when 30 countries adopted a set of urgent conservation measures, including a call to unite against poaching and for improved criminal prosecution.

Today, the Conference on Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) will also meet

in Kasane to focus on the trafficking of all threatened species - an illegal trade worth \$19 billion a year, according to the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

Ivory is reportedly bought at \$100 per kilogram (\$45 per pound) from poachers, and sold for \$2100 in China.

Julian Blanc, an elephant specialist for the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), said the link between poverty in Africa and poaching highlighted one way to tackle the illegal killing of elephants.

"We have monitored a direct correlation between human infant mortality [a measure of poverty] at district level and levels of poaching," he said.

"In places where there is high level of infant mortality and poverty, we monitored the highest level of elephant poaching ... so addressing poverty is a significant component of elephant conservation."

- AFP

CAMP DAVID

Disengaging: US-Afghan talks continue

PRESIDENT Barack Obama is set to meet today with his Afghan counterpart Ashraf Ghani, who has asked Washington for "flexibility" on the pace of US troop withdrawal from the war-torn country after a presence of more than a decade.

With the end of the US combat mission in 2014, Afghan forces have taken over responsibility for security across the conflict-scarred nation still wracked by a militant insurgency.

With the spring fighting season looming, Mr Ghani has asked for some "flexibility" as the US prepares to pull out the remaining 10,000 American troops by the end of 2016, drawing them down to about 5500 by the end of this year.

Mr Obama is "actively considering that request", Secretary of State John Kerry told reporters on March 23, after a day of talks in the presidential

woodland retreat of Camp David in Maryland.

The two countries turned the page on years of distrust, mapping out a new vision for future ties as Washington vowed to fund Afghan forces through 2017 to help shore up stability.

Hailing a day of "productive talks", Mr Kerry said the two countries shared "a commitment to security and peace and a desire to promote prosperity and social progress".

Earlier, Mr Ghani warmly thanked US troops for more than a decade of sacrifice since the 2001 overthrow of Taliban rule by a US-led invasion.

"We do not now ask what the United States can do for us. We want to say what Afghanistan will do for itself and for the world," said Mr Ghani, turning around a famous phrase of former US leader John F Kennedy.

"And that means we are going to put our house in order," he told soldiers and senior US officials at a Pentagon ceremony on his first official visit to Washington.

The issue of troops is set to top the bill at White House talks with Mr Obama, and Mr Ghani diplomatically refused to be drawn when asked how many soldiers he would like to see remain.

Yesterday, before his meeting with Mr Obama, Mr Ghani was scheduled to head to Arlington National Cemetery, where many of the 2300 US troops killed in Afghanistan are buried.

"The question on numbers is a decision for the president of the United States, and that decision will



Afghanistan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani, US Secretary of State John Kerry and US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter hold a news conference after a day of talks at Camp David March 23. Photo: AFP

solely be made by President Obama," Mr Ghani said.

It was a new tone compared to that heard from former Afghan president Hamid Karzai, who had had a tempestuous relationship with Mr Obama and repeatedly criticised US officials for interfering in his country.

In a sign of America's "unwavering commitment" to a strong, strategic partnership, Washington agreed to ask Congress to fund the level of Afghan security forces at an "end strength" of 352,000 through to 2017.

"Pinning" down the number of Afghan security forces would provide "some stability ... as they otherwise undergo this very significant tran-

sition," said Defense Secretary Ash Carter, while stressing that remained Mr Obama's intention to pull out most US troops.

Mr Carter also praised Mr Ghani's remarks at the Pentagon which "underscored the extent to which the United States now has a revitalized partnership with Afghanistan's new unity government."

In a separate initiative, the US will commit up to \$800 million to a new development partnership to promote sustainable and transparent economic reforms, Mr Kerry said, adding he would return to Kabul some time this year to kick-start resumed bilateral dialogue.

Despite the pledges of US support, Mr Ghani vowed his country would not "be a burden" to the international community saying his unity government shared a "sense of urgency" of the need for reforms to be able to be self-sustaining.

After years of battling with the mercurial Mr Karzai, Washington has welcomed the arrival of Mr Ghani and chief executive Abdullah Abdullah as a breath of fresh air.

They took office in late 2014, in a power-sharing deal negotiated by Mr Kerry in a 48-hour mission to Kabul, widely credited with preventing the bitter elections flaring into open conflict. - AFP

'We do not now ask what the United States can do for us. We want to say what Afghanistan will do for itself and for the world.'

Ashraf Ghani
Afghan president

Myanmar's only award-winning paper

Delivered to your home or office, five days a week



Never miss a copy. Subscribe now.

FREE DELIVERY in Yangon, Nay Pyi Taw and Mandalay **CALL NOW 392928 or 253642**

Or email: subscribe.mt@gmail.com, mdydistribution.mcm@gmail.com, nptdistribution.mcm@gmail.com

LONDON

Calls for UK to boost defence capabilities

BRITAIN must urgently rebuild defence capabilities abandoned after the Cold War to face growing global threats, including from Russia, a committee of lawmakers warned yesterday.

The Commons Defence Committee, which examines the spending and policy of the defence ministry, said nuclear capacity, tanks, warships and aircrafts were needed to deter Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"The world is more dangerous and unstable than at any time since the end of the Cold War," the report said, making specific reference to Russia's annexation of Crimea and seizure of swathes of territory by Islamic State and Boko Haram militants.

"But the UK's current defence assumptions are not sufficient for this changed environment ... The UK must rebuild its conventional capacities eroded since the Cold War."

The report comes as a truce between pro-Russian rebels and Ukrainian forces was tested in east Ukraine, in a conflict that has damaged relations between Russia and the West and has claimed 6000 lives since April.

The committee said it would be necessary for Britain to stick to its NATO commitment to spend two percent of GDP on defence, but that this would "not be sufficient".

"It is vital to rethink the fundamental assumptions of our defence planning, if we are to help arrest the descent into chaos, which threatens to spread from the Western Mediterranean to the Black Sea," the report said.

It pointed out weaknesses in NATO's defence, saying that Russia could deploy 150,000 troops in 72 hours, while it would take NATO six months to do so.

NATO's newly announced "very high readiness joint taskforce" could deploy 5000 troops in 48 hours, but would not be ready until 2016, the report said.

The report said it was difficult to mobilise "critical mass" in the air as Britain's Royal Air Force had been cut to seven squadrons from 33, while the Royal Navy's frigates and destroyers fleet had more than halved since 1990.

However, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon dismissed the report, saying the Conservative-led government of David Cameron had plugged a "black hole" in the defence budget.

"The UK has the second largest defence budget in NATO and the largest in the EU," Fallon said.

"We are the US's largest partner in the coalition air effort against Isil [Islamic State] - bearing more of the load in terms of strikes in Iraq than we played in either of the Gulf wars." - AFP

PARIS

148 feared dead in French Alps crash

A GERMAN-OWNED Airbus A320 plane that crashed in the French Alps yesterday had 148 people on board including six crew members, civil aviation officials have confirmed. French President Francois Hollande said no survivors were expected. Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve told the press debris from the plane had already been found.

The official said there had been "a loss of radar of Germanwings flight GW18G", which is thought to have been carrying 142



A photo taken on August 29, 2014, at Berlin's Tegel airport shows an Airbus 320 aircraft of Lufthansa's low-cost subsidiary Germanwings. Photo: AFP

Airbus crash

148 people on Duesseldorf-bound Germanwings A320



passengers, two pilots and four stewards.

The plane was travelling from the Spanish coastal city of Barcelona to the German city of Dusseldorf when it went down in the Barcelonnette area, about 100 kilometres (65 miles) north of the French Riviera city of Nice.

The pilots issued a distress call at 10:47am (0947 GMT), sources told AFP. The crashed A320 is 24 years old and has been with the

parent Lufthansa group since 1991, according to online database airfleets.net.

Germanwings is a low-cost affiliate of the German airline Lufthansa.

Shares in Airbus, the European aerospace giant, slumped almost immediately following news of the accident, down 1.77 percent to 58.94 euros (US\$65.64) at 11am GMT after briefly sliding 2pc.

- AFP

THE MYANMAR TIMES DAILY SUBSCRIBE NOW!

MYANMARTIMES
HEARTBEAT OF THE NATION

NORMALLY (ONE YEAR) - 156,000 Ks

NOW ONLY - 97,000 Ks

(US dollar also acceptable at current rates)

name national ID card number

address

township division/state

email phone fax

Yangon: 379/383, Bo Aung Kyaw St, Kyauktada Tsp.

Mandalay: No. 20, 71st St, Between 28th & 29th St, Infront of Nandaw Clinic, Chan Aye Thar San Tsp.

Nay Pyi Taw: No. 15/496, Yarza Htar Ni Road, Paung Laung 2 Qtr, Pyinmana.



FREE DELIVERY in Yangon, Nay Pyi Taw and Mandalay **CALL NOW 392928 or 253642**

Or email: subscribe.mt@gmail.com, mdydistribution.mcm@gmail.com, nptdistribution.mcm@gmail.com



Can eco-tourism save the Ayeyarwady Dolphins?



Tun Naing casts his fishing net in the Ayeyarwady River. Photos: Rachna Sachasinh

RACHNA SACHASINH

THE dolphins of the Ayeyarwady River have some new allies in their fight for survival.

The Department of Fisheries (DOF) and Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) are preparing to launch a community-based ecotourism project in the Ayeyarwady Dolphin Protected Area (ADPA).

Expected to kick off in late 2015, the proposed ecotourism project will create viable income opportunities for communities located in the ADPA and support on-going dolphin conservation efforts.

Created in 2005, the ADPA encompasses a 74-kilometre (46-mile) stretch of the Ayeyarwady River between Mingun and Kyaukmyaung. However, the range of the Irrawaddy dolphin in Myanmar is known to extend north to Bhamo in southern Kachin State.

Data collected by the DOF indicates ongoing threats to Irrawaddy dolphins, even in the protected area. In 2012 during an annual monitoring trip from Bhamo to Mingun, DOF recorded a population of 86 dolphins. By 2014, this number fell to 58. The persistence of electric fishing, gillnets and heavy-metal pollution from gold mining are the contributing factors for population and habitat loss.

The fate of the Irrawaddy dolphins is inextricably linked to the welfare of “cooperative fishermen”. In Mandalay and Sagaing regions, generations of dolphins and fishermen forged a remarkable relationship. By using voice and fluke signals, the Irrawaddy dolphins communicate with the fisherman and help corral small fish towards the fishermen’s boats. In doing so, the dolphins feed themselves and help fisherman fill their nets.

To date, six villages within the ADPA still participate in cooperative fishing. A total of at least 60 fishermen rely on cooperative fishing as their primary livelihood. Cooperative fishing requires tremendous skill in casting the nets, along with an ability to develop and nurture intimate relationships with the dolphins.

Cooperative fishing is also more effective. In 2006 and 2007, DOF and WCS conducted a study which found that dolphin-assisted fishing resulted in fewer empty nets and higher weight and value of the catch.

The practice of electric fishing – the use of electricity in water to stun fish – continues to be a critical factor both in the

decline of the dolphin population and in the depletion of the river’s fish supply. Some fishermen feel that a significant part of this stems from the fishing licenses offered by the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Rural Development. The competitive bidding process and the short-term length of the fishing contracts encourages over-fishing, to the detriment of both dolphins and the cooperative fisherman.

From 2011 to 2013, cooperative fisherman experienced a 17 percent drop in income. Over 40pc of the fishermen say they have no other source of income, while about 38pc rely on additional income from farming. Agricultural income is susceptible to seasonal shocks, which make it inconsistent from year to year.

The DOF began working with WCS in 2002 to monitor and observe the Irrawaddy dolphins. Conservation efforts were amplified in 2007 and subsequent agreements see the collaboration between the two agencies extended through 2017. Part of the DOF and WCS’s conservation efforts include implementing a community-based ecotourism program with funding from the EU, to create viable secondary income for cooperative fishermen and their communities.

Deputy Fishery Officer of the Department of Fisheries, Mandalay Region, U Han Win says, “I hope that ecotourism will assist us in achieving dolphin conservation. By developing community-based ecotourism, not only will fishermen become more in love with and value dolphins, but also villagers and the general public will also become more aware and interested in conserving and protecting dolphins.”

“We have two target groups,” states Paul Eshoo, WCS conservation enterprise adviser, “the cooperative fisherman and the electric fisherman.” According to Mr Eshoo, ecotourism can help offset financial losses for cooperative fisherman and abate the lure of electric fishing.

Presently, several tour companies and private boat operators lead dolphin-watching tours that depart from Mandalay. Because there is little or no collaboration with the cooperative fisherman, these tours often return without seeing any dolphins. Additionally, all the money spent by tourists is pocketed by boat operators.

“We want to spread tourist expenditure by offering lodgings, meals and handicrafts in the villages. In this way, everyone involved can participate and benefit,” says Mr Eshoo.

Mr. Eshoo, who helped design and implement WCS’s award-winning Nam Et Phou Louey Night Safari, a community-based conservation and livelihood program in northern Laos, is optimistic that a similar approach will work in the ADPA corridor.

“In order [for ecotourism] to be effective, we have to make sure that dolphins are not adversely impacted. And, this means our efforts have to be coordinated and well-planned,” adds Mr. Eshoo.

WCS Ecotourism Manager U Thant Zin worked with DOF to scope the feasibility of an ecotourism program and to build a coalition among the projects’ stakeholders, including the cooperative fishermen, village chiefs, national and regional tour companies and the Mandalay-based tour boat operators.

WCS conducted in-person interviews with 45 cooperative fishermen to understand existing challenges with current tourist activities along the ADPA and in villages. WCS also sought the fishermen’s opinion on the types of ecotourism activities they wished to host. An additional survey queried tourists and Mandalay and Yangon-based tour companies and guide associations to see what types of cultural and ecological activities appealed to travellers.

In January, 2015, WCS presented their findings at a stakeholder meeting attended by the cooperative fishermen, village chiefs from cooperative fishing villages, the Department of Fisheries, private tour companies, the River Police and the Tourist Police.

Leaders of the cooperative fishermen and the village chiefs were unequivocal in their desire to host ecotourism programs. The private sector and government also expressed their support for an ecotourism agenda that would both mitigate electric fishing and expand income opportunities.

In order to mitigate negative impacts from tourism, WCS is working with village leaders and tour operators to agree on basic guidelines for dolphin watching, such as recommended boat speeds and group sizes.

A village-development fund will be established to provide incentives and assistance to communities to reduce threats in the ADPA.

“Our second meeting will be with the cooperative fishermen to decide how to use the village-development fund,” according to U Thant Zin.



Cooperative fisherman Tun Naing, 31, began fishing at age 15.



Cooperative Fisherman explain where they have seen dolphins that morning.



WCS ecotourism coordinator U Thane Zin (left) helps tourists spot dolphins along the Ayeyarwaddy River.

"In the next meeting, the exact program will be sketched, with agreements from participating villages on experiences offered, prices, group sizes, the exact nature of tourist participation," adds Mr. Eshoo. "Then we will create the program, implement a test phase and build it out."

Electric fishing allows fishermen to kill a lot of fish quickly, with very little effort. For some, the lure of quick cash that electric fishing offers is simply too hard to pass up.

By capitalising on tourists' interests in culture and conservation, the ecotourism project hopes to introduce new sources of income for villagers. The ADPA ecotourism project will reduce the economic pressures that drive electric fishing, according to U Han Win.

Ultimately, the ecotourism project hopes to restore the population of Irrawaddy dolphins and to reinstate cooperative fishing as a profitable and secure livelihood.

NEW YORK

In eye-opener, NY Philharmonic plays Fukushima children

NEW YORK Philharmonic musicians are accustomed to playing the most demanding works, but they are also performing some that are deceptively simple - composed by children from Japan's disaster-hit Fukushima.

In an exchange that has fascinated participants, children unschooled in musical theory are producing pieces that are transcribed and performed by Philharmonic musicians.

The project is part of the Philharmonic's "Very Young Composers" project, which since its launch in 1995 has spread around the world with a mission to take children's music seriously rather than passing it off as cute.

"I've seen so many hundreds of pieces written by very young composers and I'm just astonished, again and again, by how interesting and innovative the pieces are, because of course the children have none of the constraints that those of us who have studied composition have," said composer Theodore Wiprud, the vice president for education at the Philharmonic.

Nine children from Fukushima between ages 10 and 14 are visiting New York as part of the project. Musicians from the Philharmonic will premiere the children's chamber works at Lincoln Center on March 24, following inaugural concerts of Fukushima children's works in February 2014.

Takehito Shimazu, a professor at Fukushima University who led the project locally, said that the children chose to express themselves in various ways, with not all of them directly referencing the March 2011 quake-tsunami that killed almost 19,000 people in Japan's worst post-World War II disaster.

Shimazu also noted that the children came from the city of Fukushima, and not the worst-hit coastal area.

The children were told to



Musicians from the New York Philharmonic, accustomed to playing the world's premier works, are setting upon a musical experiment by performing compositions of children from Japan's disaster-hit Fukushima. Photo: AFP

experiment with instruments and to pursue the sounds that appealed to them.

To give a common thread, the youngsters were asked to work off the melody of "Choucho", or "Butterfly", a children's song that is known in the United States as "Lightly Row". Butterflies in Japanese culture often symbolise living souls.

The Japanese children sent their compositions to students their age in the United States, who offered their own musical responses that will also be performed by the Philharmonic.

The Very Young Composers program, started by composer and bassist Jon Deak, began at schools around the United States and has expanded internationally to countries including Japan, China, South Korea, Finland and Venezuela.

The Philharmonic enters at the invitation of school systems that are pursuing similar concepts. Venezuela is famous for its "El Sistema" plan that provides a public education in music to children across income lines.

Wiprud said the Philharmonic was open to expanding its program.

"The Fukushima experience does suggest that children who have been

exposed to trauma at some level may benefit from the opportunity to express themselves in the abstract form of music," he said.

The Very Young Composers program also showed, he said, that the quality of children's work was consistent around the world, despite their surroundings.

In the case of Fukushima, he said, "Despite the cultural differences in the way young people typically interact with their elders in Japanese society, once we had given kids there permission to be creative and to tell professional musicians what they want to hear, we got great results."

The compositions from around the world could offer valuable material to musicologists, linguists or other scholars looking at how children's minds function and whether cultural differences begin early.

Wiprud said that he often noticed pentatonic melodies, common in traditional Chinese music, from students in Shanghai. But not always.

"Sometimes you think you're hearing it," he said of cultural differences in the music. "But then it gets contradicted by the next kid."

- AFP

WASHINGTON

Angelina Jolie has ovaries removed over cancer fears

HOLLYWOOD megastar Angelina Jolie announced this week that she has had her ovaries and fallopian tubes removed over fears of a hereditary form of cancer, following her double mastectomy two years ago.

The actress, who has lost her mother, grandmother and aunt to the disease, said she had the procedure last week after results from a blood test raised fears that she may be in the early stages of cancer.

Jolie's publicising of her double mastectomy pushed the issue into the spotlight, sparking a debate about the pros and cons of the procedure as a preventative measure.

The announcement could do the same for ovarian cancer, which is the deadliest cancer of the female reproductive system, according to the American Cancer Society.

Although tests showed she was not in fact in the early stages of cancer, Jolie said she chose to go ahead with the surgery because of her family history and because she carries a gene mutation that had given her a 50 percent risk of developing ovarian cancer, the same mutation that put her at 87pc risk of developing breast cancer.

"I did not do this solely because I carry the BRCA1 gene mutation, and I want other women to hear this," Jolie wrote in an op-ed piece in *The New York Times*, the same way she announced her double mastectomy two years ago.

"A positive BRCA test does not mean a leap to surgery," said Jolie, who is married to fellow Hollywood heavyweight Brad Pitt with whom she has six children.

Her doctors said that she should have the preventive surgery about a decade before the earliest onset of cancer in her female relatives.

"My mother's ovarian cancer was diagnosed when she was 49. I'm 39."

Jolie said that she had been preparing for the possibility of ovary removal ever since her double mastectomy, but thought she had plenty of time to plan the procedure.

But two weeks ago, she said, she got a call from a doctor who said her blood test results had "a number of inflammatory markers that are elevated, and taken together they could be a sign of early cancer".

She was told to see a surgeon immediately.

"I went through what I imagine thousands of other women have felt. I told myself to stay calm, to be strong, and that I had no reason to think I wouldn't live to see my children grow up and to meet my grandchildren," Jolie wrote.

"I called my husband in France, who was on a plane within hours. The beautiful thing about such moments in life is that there is so much clarity. You know what you live for and what matters. It is polarising, and it is peaceful."

She went to see a surgeon, the same one who had treated her mother and whom she last saw on the day that her mother died.

The examination and ultrasound were regular, so she waited for five days, saying she tried to stay calm and focused as she attended her children's soccer game and went about her daily life. Then scan results came back clean.

"To my relief, I still had the option of removing my ovaries and fallopian tubes and I chose to do it," she said.

The surgery has put the mother of six into menopause.

"I will not be able to have any more children, and I expect some physical changes. But I feel at ease with whatever will come, not because I am strong but because this is a part of life. It is nothing to be feared.

"It is not easy to make these decisions. But it is possible to take control and tackle head-on any health issue. You can seek advice, learn about the options and make choices that are right for you. Knowledge is power."

Ovarian cancer often runs in families and is one of the deadliest forms of cancer because there are often no symptoms in the early stages.

Hollywood star and Bond actor Pierce Brosnan lost his first wife Cassandra Harris in 1991 and his daughter Charlotte in 2013 to the disease. Harris's mother also died of ovarian cancer. - AFP

Pulling the strings to save an ancient art



Photos: Staff



ZON PANN PWINT
zonpann08@gmail.com
NANDAR AUNG
nandaraung.mcm@gmail.com

AN exhibition now under way in Yangon could hold the key to a revival of one of the country's most celebrated traditional crafts: puppet making. The "From Craft to Art" expo, which has been running from March 21 until today, showcases the dancing puppets built by puppet-maker Ko Aung Htike Soe, and his masters.

In their 19th-century heyday, puppeteers performed before the royalty and nobility, raising laughs and causing gasps with their witty irreverence. Arguably, the art has been in decline since King Thibaw was ejected from his Mandalay palace at the start of the colonial era.

Modern audiences prefer to watch rock bands rather than dancing puppets, and the future of the profession seems to rest in the hands of foreign tourists, practitioners lament. But the shortage of parts and the withering of the old skills seem to threaten even that niche market.

"Professional puppet-makers are becoming rare. Some have found other careers because the prospects are so poor," said Ko Aung Htike Soe, a puppet-maker from Mandalay. "Are the prices too high? Do people still care? I just don't know the answer."

Even in the Mandalay heartland, marionette-making lacks professional artisans. Raw materials such as copper spangles together with the gold embroidery that used to adorn the puppets are hard to find, he said.

Ko Aung Htike Soe says puppeteering prospered until 2005,

until the twin blows of Cyclone Nargis and the worldwide recession cut the strings that held the market up.

Heartened by interest from Thailand, he began to export across the border, even after he found that his customers were reselling his work as their own for much higher prices.

'Puppet-makers are becoming rare. Some have found other careers because the prospects are so poor'

Ko Aung Htike Soe
Puppet maker

But now, as tourism rates have been increasing in Myanmar year after year, local prospects are brightening, and he is trying to revive the market here. A 75-centimetre (25-inch) dancing puppet can fetch at least K50,000.

Ko Aung Htike Soe has been making marionettes in Mandalay for 10 years, and still hopes traditional

approaches and their artistic heritage can survive.

U Htwe Oo, founder of Htwe Oo Puppet Theatre, said, "Decades ago, the puppeteer himself would sculpt the marionette. Now that puppets are attracting attention from tourists, local craftsmen are returning to the art of making puppets for their living."

The work is not easy. "Most can't craft a dancing puppet with proper proportions between the head, the upper and the lower parts of the body. It is a very difficult and painstaking task," he said.

U Htwe Oo, whose performances recently enthralled commuters on the Yangon Circle Line, said tourists might appreciate the carved dolls hanging in the souvenir shops, but only puppeteers would spot their flaws. "Foreigners complain that when they pull the strings, the puppet can't move. The proportions are all wrong," he said, adding that he takes pains to explain to customers who order a marionette the complexities involved.

A puppet made for dancing must be built around a hollow teak core, with arms, legs and head finely graded in size and weight to allow for free and precise movement. "Some puppet-makers reduce parts to save money and time," he said.

In July, Htwe Oo Myanmar Puppet troupe will take part in a workshop in Singapore to study contemporary string-puppet making.

"After the trip, I plan to build a workshop in Yangon to teach the art of making modern and traditional string-puppets, so that we can preserve our traditional arts and produce new masters," he said. Until he succeeds, Myanmar's puppets are dancing on the edge.

What's on

TODAY

An evening of songs: Schubert, Brahms, Butterworth. Goethe Villa, 8 Ko Min Ko Chin Road, Bahan Township 6:30pm

Jazz music and dinner. Rendez-Vous restaurant and bar, Institut Francais, Pyay Road 7:30-9:30pm

TOMORROW

Folk on Fire with LN'R band. Mojo Bar, 135 Inya Road, Bahan 9:30pm

EDM Music Festival. Venue: CBC Ballroom, 5th Floor, CBC Tower, corner of Sayar San and University Avenue (Indoor Festival) Doors 5pm

Got an event? | List it in What's On! | whatsonmt@gmail.com



IN PICTURES

Photo: AFP

A Balinese couple embrace as they are doused in water during the kissing festival known as Omed-Omedan at Sesetan in Denpasar on Indonesia's resort island of Bali on March 22. The annual ritual is held one day after the Balinese Day of Silence, or Nyepi.

Fashion focus

Days of future pastel



Pastels ruled the runway at Tokyo Fashion Week last week, where Japanese designer Yu Amatsu sweetened up the catwalk with her cupcake-coloured tailoring. Avoid the cutesy look by mixing creamy lilacs, peaches, corals and pinks with grey for a more contemporary effect.

Photos: AFP/Yoshikazu Tsuno



You can meet the founder of the Free Software Movement

Harvard graduate, veteran of MIT's Artificial Intelligence lab and president of the Free Software Foundation, **Dr Richard Stallman**, developer of the GNU/Linux free operating system, will speak to educators, students, computer professionals and anyone interested in protection from internet surveillance about the importance of software and internet freedom.



FREE AS IN FREEDOM



6-8pm, Tuesday, April 2, Phandeeyar, the Myanmar Innovation Lab, 11th floor, MAC Tower, 561 Merchant Road, Yangon

Dr Richard Stallman is one of the world's foremost authorities on how people can protect themselves from surveillance on the internet. His arrival in Myanmar is aimed at helping people understand the meaning of FREE Software and how FREE Software can benefit Myanmar people's lives. The event is free of charge and those who would like to donate to covering the cost of Dr Stallman's visit may purchase FSF stickers and other items. A special fundraising dinner will also be offered the following night for those who want to meet Dr Stallman. Interested organisations and individuals may contact Stuart Alan Becker at *The Myanmar Times* at stuart.becker@gmail.com or by telephone on 09-975027347



WRESTLING

Japan grapples to ready Sudan

In a crumbling Khartoum sports hall, a dozen Nuba men in sweat-faded singlets practise wrestling moves under the critical gaze of their Japanese coach, 23-year-old Kosuke Sunagawa.

Wrestling has been a part of the religiously and ethnically diverse Nuba culture for millennia, and many of the sinewy young athletes entered the ring as soon as they were old enough to walk.

But coach Suna, as he is known, a Japanese youth wrestling champion, has been tasked by his country's Khartoum embassy with delivering a first in Nuba history - building a medal-winning Olympic team in time for Tokyo 2020.

The wrestlers "really have excellent physical strength," the stern-faced coach says, but little else has worked in their favour.

Behind him in the sweltering hall, two wrestlers grappled as their colleagues watched silently, eager to glean new skills.

Olympic wrestling is well-established in Japan, which has won a rash of medals at recent games.

But Tokyo's interest in Nuba wrestling started in 2013, when a diplomat from its embassy challenged some of the local champions.

Yasuhiro Murotatsu lost all six of his matches but the bouts proved popular, attracting hundreds of spectators.

Japan seized on the interest he created to try to build ties with a country it sees as a relatively stable island in a tumultuous region.

The embassy sees the US\$50,000 it has put up as worthwhile - an easy way to connect with a government wary of foreign influence.

But Suna's task is no small order. Sudan has won just one Olympic



Nuba wrestler Kiri (left) faces off against Japan's Kusaka Sunagawa at the Hajj Yousif wrestling arena, Khartoum. Photo: AFP

medal since 1960, and while Suna's squad members have wrestled since they could walk, the Olympic rules are new to them.

In Nuba wrestling, played in sandy arenas, a competitor wins simply by throwing his opponent to the ground.

The Olympic version awards points for different moves, and a player wins automatically by pinning his opponent to the mat.

"I am exerting every effort to unlock their potential as much as possible through creating tailor-made programs," Sunagawa said at the

session, the last of his month-long visit to Khartoum in February.

Six of the best - four players and two trainee coaches - will travel to Japan in April for training but much needs to be done to nurture a full team.

Suna first visited in November. Things went well and he returned to Japan at the end of the month.

When he returned in February he found many had stopped training.

The Nuba in Khartoum originally come from Sudan's war-torn South Kordofan region, which was

devastated by Sudan's 22-year civil war and then hit with an insurgency in 2011, when former rebels complained they were being marginalised by the Arab-dominated government.

The students had to return to work to support themselves, making it difficult to find time for wrestling.

"There is a lack of adequate training; there is a lack of facilities," said Ahmed Hashim, secretary general of Sudan's Olympic committee, as he watched the practice.

"All that we have is very old traditional Nuba wrestling."

Half the windows in the hall are smashed and there is no air conditioning, but it is the best facility the embassy and Sudan's wrestling federation could find.

Yet Hashim has high hopes.

His first goal is just to qualify for the Olympics - either Rio de Janeiro in 2016 or Tokyo in 2020.

"The long-term target is to have wrestling as an established sport which will be continuously running for medals."

Diplomat Masayuki Sorimachi said the program wasn't just about Sudan winning medals or Japan building ties, but improving troubled community relations inside Sudan.

"People can get united together through doing sports, so maybe this could represent a symbol of the peace and stability and unity of the Sudanese people," he said, watching as Suna finished up his final session.

And for the wrestlers, the program is a chance to develop skills they have learnt since childhood, first watching champions in the southern Khartoum neighbourhood of Hajj Yousif.

The down-at-heel suburb is home to Khartoum's wrestling ring, a patch of sand surrounded on Fridays by crowds cheering on champions as they tussle and kick up clouds of dust.

Sitting ringside two days after the final training session was one of Suna's students, Wissam Mohammed, an 18-year-old local butcher who has been picked to travel to Japan because of his skill and strength.

"The Japanese came here and trained us and gave us some skills, and we benefited from these," he said.

"I want to participate in the 2020 Olympics. If God wills it I will bring back a bronze medal and raise the flag of Sudan," he said.

FOOTBALL

UEFA opposes World Cup compensation for European leagues

UEFA will not back any legal action by Europe's football championships seeking compensation for moving the dates of the 2022 World Cup, secretary general Gianni Infantino said on March 23.

"Of course not," Infantino told a press conference when asked whether UEFA would support the threat made at the weekend by the European Professional Football Leagues.

"They are pretty much alone in this stance and even amongst themselves they are pretty much divided," he said.

UEFA backed an accord made by FIFA and Europe's top clubs which will see a payment of US\$209 million made for 2022.

But Infantino said Europe's top leagues have to "come a little bit back down to earth" and accept the dates for 2022 with a final now scheduled for December 18.

"Everyone can plan its competitions around it and we will do that," he said.

The EPFL passed a resolution at a meeting on March 21 which slammed the move from a traditional summer World Cup.

"The EPFL is ready to support any legal actions that the individual leagues may take in this respect in the near future," said French league president Frederic Thiriez.

Infantino meanwhile called FIFA's accord with the European Club Association "positive".

"Two hundred and nine million dollars when you have revenues of more than \$5 billion - it is not a huge amount," he said. FIFA makes more than \$5 billion from its flagship World Cup every four years.

"We think it is absolutely normal that FIFA is letting the clubs benefit from the revenues," the UEFA official added.

UEFA expects to make more than \$2 billion from the 2016 European Championships in France and has promised more than \$150 million for clubs who release players.

FOOTBALL

Brazil investigates German claim of Cup graft

BRAZIL said on March 23 it has ordered an investigation after a German company said it had unearthed evidence that a subsidiary paid bribes to officials in connection with World Cup contracts last year.

The justice ministry told AFP that Justice Minister Jose Eduardo Cardozo would examine some \$6.5 million worth of contracts with German engineering firm Bilfinger involving alleged compliance violations.

In a statement, Bilfinger said it had received internal information last year prompting it to investigate possible violations of the Group's compliance regulations regarding orders for the

supply of monitor walls and software for security control centres at several Brazilian sites.

"The company immediately launched a comprehensive investigation," the firm said in its statement.

The allegation relates to suspected bribery payments from employees of a Bilfinger company in Brazil, Helmut Mauell, to Brazilian public officials and employees of state companies.

The firm added it had commissioned auditors Ernst & Young "to conduct a comprehensive securing of data in Germany and Brazil," furthermore bringing in auditors Deloitte and a specialised law office in Brazil to clarify the case.

AMERICAN FOOTBALL

Rio touted as destination for Pro Bowl 2017

ONLY five months after the Rio de Janeiro Olympics, Brazil could be welcoming the National Football League's top players for the 2017 Pro Bowl, Fox Sports reported March 23.

The sports television network's website, citing an unnamed source, said the league is considering Brazil among a set of potential host sites for the American football all-star game.

The Pro Bowl has been played in recent years in late January on the Sunday before the Super Bowl, mostly in Hawaii but this year it was staged in

the host stadium for Super Bowl 49 in suburban Phoenix, Arizona.

The game will be staged next year in Honolulu but NFL club owners meeting in Phoenix this week are looking at alternatives for 2017 beyond Super Bowl host city Houston that include Brazil, the host of last year's FIFA World Cup as well as next year's Summer Olympics.

Growing NFL interest in South America and a sense that the exotic locale would attract players to participate were cited as points in Brazil's favour as a host site in the report.

GOLF

Tensions heating up between caddies and Professional Golfers' Association

A RIFT between caddies for some of golf's greatest players and US PGA Tour officials, which has resulted in a lawsuit by the bagmen, appears to be growing wider.

Duane Bock, a caddie for US PGA player Kevin Kisner, says a tour official scolded him for wearing salmon-red shorts last weekend at Bay Hill during the Arnold Palmer Invitational.

Bock tweeted March 23 about his Facebook posting March 21 following the third round of the tournament, with a photo of him in knee-length

shorts and a message.

"This PGA Tour is at it again. Apparently they had a problem with the color of my shorts today," Bock said. "After the round, I was told in the scoring trailer by a PGA Tour official that these shorts are not an acceptable color. Funny how I've been wearing these shorts every week for the last 14 tournaments but now they have a problem."

Bock noted that regulations require "solid-color, knee-length tailored shorts" and then made his best guess

as to why the colour might not have pleased PGA rulemakers.

"Guess the color of my shorts is taking attention away from that MasterCard symbol I'm advertising on my back for FREE," Bock said.

Bock was among 167 PGA caddies who filed a lawsuit last month against the tour, claiming restraint of trade and seeking a share of the income from sponsor-logo bibs with player names that all caddies are required to wear, serving as human billboards while carrying player clubs.

CRICKET

Waqar fears 'death' of Pakistan cricket

WAQAR Younis warned on March 24 that cricket could die out in Pakistan if rival teams continue to boycott the country where international tours have not taken place since 2009.

There has been no international cricket in Pakistan since the militant attacks on the Sri Lankan team in Lahore in March 2009 which killed eight people and injured seven visiting players.

"The biggest hurt is that we are not able to stage international matches," Pakistan head coach Waqar told AFP.

"I fear the game might die out as we lack talent at junior level and it's tough to indulge kids in cricket. It's a very important aspect. We have to bring international cricket back and the government has to help in this regard."

The Pakistan Cricket Board managed to bring minnows Kenya for a short one-day series last year and are negotiating with Zimbabwe for a visit in May this year.

Waqar believes Pakistan's quarter-final exit from the World Cup at the hands of Australia showed there is a lot of hard work to be done on

the country's cricket set-up and infrastructure.

"If we want to save Pakistan cricket we have to lift our domestic game because there was a big difference in standards at the World Cup. We were well behind other teams.

"We can't delay it, we need power-hitters like there are in other teams and players who can score 300-plus runs," said Waqar, whose team only crossed the 300-mark once in seven games at the World Cup – against the amateurs of the United Arab Emirates.

"Cricket is changing fast and we have to keep pace with that. If not we will be left far behind."

Waqar stressed Pakistan needed good batsmen.

"Bowling has never been our problem," said Waqar, himself a great fast bowler. "I think we should feel proud of our bowling at the World Cup.

"But it's the batting where we have been struggling for a long time now and after Misbah-ul-Haq and Younis Khan – whenever he quits – we will have a big vacuum.

"It is a matter of putting things in order. It's not only about winning the World Cup but also improving our ranking by lifting our standards."

– AFP



Pakistani cricket fans stage mock funeral prayers for the team during a protest in Multan on March 20. Photo: AFP

FIGURE SKATING

'Unfathomable pressure' for Hanyu at Worlds

OLYMPIC figure skating champion Yuzuru Hanyu returns from his latest health setback to defend his world title in Shanghai this week under what Japanese sports officials have labelled "unfathomable pressure".

Japan's 20-year-old pin-up has not been in competition since comfortably defending his Grand Prix Final title in Barcelona in mid-December, two weeks before he underwent surgery for stomach pains.

Hanyu is the only Olympic titleholder and the only defending champion to compete at the World Figure Skating Championships, which are being held in the Chinese commercial hub over four days starting March 25.

Last year's Sochi gold medallist returned to training following his operation but has since suffered an ankle sprain, which remains a concern.

"His right ankle is not 100 percent but gradually he's been able to increase his workload in training," said Japan Skating Federation technical director Yoshiko Kobayashi.

Hanyu is making "final preparations" in Japan for the championships, Kobayashi said, adding that the national team was trying to relieve the psychological burden on the young star heading into the tournament.

"Everyone has high expectations, but he's not completely fit yet and there is unfathomable pressure on him," she said. – AFP

SWIMMING

New doping rule may see Korean pool idol miss Rio 2016

THE 18-month suspension handed to South Korea's four-time Olympic swimming medallist Park Tae-Hwan for failing a dope test could see him miss the 2016 Olympic Games, even though the ban ends before the Rio event.

A Korean Olympic Committee official confirmed on March 24 that Park – a national icon in South Korea – could fall foul of a new rule barring any athlete suspended for doping from competing with the national team for a period of three years.

"Should the rule be applied as it is, Park would be unable to take part in next year's Olympic Games," the official, who declined to be identified, told AFP.

The rule, instituted by the KOC last July, states that the three-year ban on representing South Korea in competition begins on the date the doping suspension expires.

Park's 18-month ban was handed down by world swimming body FINA on March 23.

The 25-year-old swimmer, known as "Marine Boy" in South Korea, tested positive for a banned anabolic steroid at an out-of-competition control before the Asian Games on September 3 last year.

The ban for his first doping violation will run until March 2, 2016, which rules him out of this year's world championships in Kazan, Russia, from July 17 to August 2, but should have allowed him to compete at the Rio Olympics.

The KOC official stressed the three-year rule had yet to be tested and added that the committee had not taken any position on whether it should be applied to Park.



Park Tae-Hwan in the pool at the 2014 Incheon Asian Games. Photo: AFP

"There is always room for flexibility," he said.

Park has 21 days to appeal against the FINA suspension with the Court of Arbitration for Sport, although FINA executive director Cornel Marculescu told AFP he did not expect the swimmer to challenge the decision.

All Park's results after September 3, 2014, have also been cancelled which means handing back the three bronze medals he won at last year's Asian Games in Incheon, Korea.

The positive test sent shock waves through the sport in South Korea where prosecutors last month announced charges against a doctor for giving Park an injection without disclosing it contained the banned steroid testosterone.

Park blamed the injection – administered last July – for the positive drug test on urine samples he provided in September.

Park – who has six Asian Games titles to his name – won 400m freestyle gold and 200m freestyle silver at the Beijing 2008 Olympics, becoming South Korea's first Olympic swimming medallist.

He also won silver in both events at the 2012 London Olympics, along with 400m gold in the world championships in 2007 and 2011.

But Park, who began swimming aged five in a bid to control his asthma, has struggled to repeat that form and failed to win a title at his home Asian Games in September, competing in a pool that bore his name. – AFP

SEA GAMES SHORTS



MALAYSIA

Wushu

Loh Ying Ting, Malaysia's gold medal winning Wushu athlete at the 2014 Youth Olympic Games is excited to make her senior debut, reports *The Star*.

It has been seven months since her victorious performance and the young *changquan* [long fist] specialist has not competed since the Nanjing Games.

Loh Ying Ting twice won the Asian and World Junior Championships but is not arrogant about her step up to the senior level.

"But I'm not setting myself a lofty target as it'll be my first senior-level competition and there'll be so many formidable and experienced opponents there. A podium finish would be a decent start for my senior debut," she told *The Star*.

In her bid to be the first Malaysian to medal in the event since the 2005 Manila Games, the opponents for the young martial artist may include Myanmar's Sandi Oo, a silver medallist at the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games and Tan Yan Ni, Singapore's bronze medalist at the 2014 Incheon Asian Games.

Rugby

The Malaysian Rugby Union will try for their SEA Games gold at the June event, reports *The Star*.

The Union's best result was dual silvers in the Sevens and 15s competitions of the 1995 Chaing Mai Games. During Rugby's last appearance they were defeated in the bronze-medal match by neighbours Singapore.

"The team have been training hard

for the last two months and will play a few Test matches against the Singapore national team this weekend in preparation for the SEA Games," said MRU president Datuk Wira Amiruddin Embi at a press conference on March 23.

In late April, the side will visit Australia for a 10-day training camp that will include a friendly against a side from Super Rugby outfit the Melbourne Rebels before heading to Bangkok for a number of friendlies against the Thai national team.

Eight countries – Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei, Laos, Cambodia and Singapore – will contest this year's Rugby Sevens competition to be held at Choa Chu Kang Stadium.

PHILIPPINES

Athletics

The 2015 Philippine National Open Invitational Athletics Championships held at the Laguna Sports Complex in Santa Cruz, Laguna, introduced five promising new Filipino-American faces likely to find their way to the Singapore Games, reported *Manilla Standard Today*.

They were led by Caleb Stuart who threw his way to three field event golds. He did so with a shot put of 16.52 metres, won the discus by over 5 metres by throwing 48.17 metres and smashed the national record hammer throw with distance of 64.81 metres.

That hammer throw if replicated at SEA Games would surpass the current Games record of 62.23 metres set by Thailand's Tantipong Phetchaiya in the 2013 SEA Games.

The Manila Standard Today added the country's national coaches were in discussion as to whether they would enter Stuart in all three events.

– Matt Roebuck

Sport

Japan throws Sudan an Olympic wrestling challenge

SPORT 26



FOOTBALL

FA bid for permit change to improve homegrown development



FA chair Greg Dyke believes his solution will allow more players like the current Premier League top scorer Tottenham's Harry Kane to flourish. Photo: AFP

ENGLAND'S Football Association chair Greg Dyke has unveiled a plan to encourage Premier League clubs to unearth their own homegrown stars by making it harder for foreign players to secure work permits.

Stricter rules, approved by the home office on March 20, will come into force from May 1 and intend to reduce the number of non-European Union players, who are seen as blocking the way for English youngsters to breakthrough into Premier League teams.

Only 35 percent of those currently playing in the top flight are English and Dyke wants that figure to rise to around 40 percent in the next five years.

Dyke also wants to persuade the Premier League to drop the number of non-homegrown players allowed in a 25-man squad from 17 to 13 and to adjust the definition of "home grown" so that players only qualify if they are registered for three years prior to turning 18, rather than 21.

The Premier League are understood to have serious reservations about both changes to the homegrown players rule, including whether there would be legal implications.

But Dyke plans to use the example of Tottenham's young striker Harry Kane, who has scored 29 goals in all competitions this season to earn a first call-up to the England squad for their

forthcoming matches.

"We will go round [the clubs] and try to convince them. We will ask, 'Are you sure you haven't got a Harry Kane playing in your youth side?'" Dyke said on March 23.

"It must help negotiations, mustn't it? Suddenly an English kid who was out on loan at four different places, who was touch-and-go to get a game in the first team, is suddenly the top scorer in English football.

"It's great news. How many more Harry Kanes are there out there, who just can't get a game?"

The new work permit rules, which apply across the Football League as well, will see prospective non-EU players given points for various criteria including the agreed transfer fee and wages, international caps, and the level of league and club they are joining from.

The player must be an international from a country ranked in FIFA's top 50, rather than the top 70 as it is currently, and the number of caps required will be staggered depending on the country's status.

"The Premier League has already embraced the idea of Home Grown Player requirements, but the current rules are not having the desired impact," Dyke said.

"These proposed changes will encourage clubs to play the genuine homegrown talent that is being developed through their and other academies." - AFP

FIFA rankings, FA rules and Asian football

AS Greg Dyke pointed out, the English Premier League is not doing its part for the development of the English footballer and the English national team.

Discussing his plan he said "In 2014 just 23 English players appeared in any Champions League group matches, compared with 78 Spanish players, 55 German players and 51 Brazilian players."

The development of stricter "homegrown" rules will, Dyke hopes, improve the development of the English national side but may have a detrimental effect on the development of Asian football.

If a player is from a non-EU background and does not meet the "homegrown" criteria then to receive a work permit he must be an international from a country ranked in FIFA's top 50 - on average over a period of two years - and the number of caps he must have received in that time will be staggered depending on that country's ranking.

This reduction from FIFA's top 70 may well have an impact on Japanese, South Korea and Australian players, all of whom find their respective sides sitting between 50th and 70th position following the latest FIFA rankings released on March 12. Only Iran - currently sitting 42nd - makes the top 50.

This could lead to further controversy over the FIFA World Ranking system that has come under regular controversy over its accuracy and predictive capacity.

Jan Lasek in his study "The predictive power of ranking systems in association football" found that "it is possible to outperform the official ranking procedure by using relatively simple algorithms."

He added "on the other hand, the FIFA methodology used for ranking women's teams, based on the ELO rating system, is indeed a very competitive rating method."

The ELO method - originally designed for ranking chess players - currently places Japan in 27th, Korea in 30th and Australia in 32nd. Iran place 34th and the United Arab Emirates also make the cut at 47th.

There is one additional impact the new rules may have on the development of player academies in Asia. Currently in order to be considered homegrown a player must have been registered with an FA-affiliated club by the age of 18. With the new rules this cut-off period reduces to 15. How this will effect operation's such as Vietnam's Hoang Anh Gia Lai - Arsenal JMG Academy, built in co-operation with the Premier League side - is yet to be seen.

- Matt Roebuck

GOLF

Myanmar Tour to expand for 2015

KYAW ZIN HLAING
kyawzinhlaing.mcm@gmail.com

THE Myanmar Golf Tour promised to return bigger and better in 2015 when the list of events planned for this year was announced yesterday.

But while the number of courses and the overall prize fund for each leg of the tour has increased, amateur and ladies golfers will no longer be competing for a share of the cash.

"I expect a new generation of golfers to rise over the course of this tour," said U Ko Ko Aye, president of the Myanmar Golf Federation, at a press conference held at Yangon's Central Hotel.

Each leg of the professional circuit will have a total prize pot of K38,500,000, with the winner taking K3,000,000 and prize money shared among the top 20.

Last year the combined prize pot for all three competitions was less, at K24,600,000, with the top amateur securing K750,000 while the leading lady took home K500,000.

The 2015 tour is the second consecutive year for the competition after it folded in 2011 due to a lack of sponsorship support.

This year's tour, organised by the MGF and the Myanmar Professional Golfers' Association, will feature a number of courses new to the circuit, with nine events planned, up from last year's six. Hantharwaddy Golf Club in



Union Minister U Tint Hsan tees off at 2014's Nay Pyi Taw competition. Photo: MGF

Bago and Taunggyi's Ayetharyar Golf Club are among the newcomers, while Bagan's Nyaung Oo Golf Club will miss out this year.

"Myanmar's top professionals will be on display at these tournaments," added U Ko Ko Aye. "The opportunity for some of our best juniors to develop experience and gather knowledge from their opponents will be valuable."

U Ko Ko Aye added that junior golfers still had time to impress before they selected their squad for June's SEA Games.

"We will choose our athletes from this tournament and past SEA Games squads," said the president. He added that some of the country's juniors had been training in Australia and the United States.

Realistically, only those teeing off at the opening April 2 event at the Royal Myanmar Golf Club in Nay Pyi Taw will come in time to influence selection.

The season will culminate back in the capital for the tour final at the Zayar Thiri Golf Club on December 6.

April 2 - 5, 2015
Royal Myanmar Golf Club, Nay Pyi Taw
May 7 - 10, 2015
Hantharwaddy Golf Club, Bago
June 2 - 5, 2015
Defence Services Golf Club, Yangon
July 23 - 26, 2015
Yedaung Taung Golf Club, Mandalay
August 27 - 30, 2015
Pyi Oo Lwin Golf Club, Pyin Oo Lwin
October 8 - 11, 2015
Ayetharyar Golf Resort, Taunggyi
November 3 - 6, 2015
Yangon Golf Club, Yangon
November 19 - 22, 2015
Shwe Mann Taung Golf Club, Mandalay
December 3 - 6, 2015
Zayarthiri Golf Club, Nay Pyi Taw