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PHOTO: ZARNI PHYO

The mother of a student arrested at Letpadan in Bago Region during a police crackdown on March 10 calls out as the detainees are brought to Letpadan Township Court yesterday. Parents expressed anger and disbelief at the court's decision to charge 80 protesters with five offences, which a defence lawyer says could result in a six-year jail terms.

Govt gets tough on students

Letpadan Township Court charges 80 protesters with five offences as the upper house concludes debate on draft changes to the National Education Law that observers say have been watered down from a February agreement. **NEWS 3**

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Blame game begins as fighting slows in Kachin State

EI EI TOE LWIN

eiitoelwin@gmail.com

AFTER heavy shelling and air strikes on March 24, fighting between the Tatmadaw and the Kachin Independence Army slowed yesterday – but could escalate at any time, a Kachin official said.

“Just now the situation is quiet because [the Tatmadaw] launched serious air strikes ... around Kai Htik village. They attacked twice against the KIA's Battalion 27 by using three fighter jets,” said Duang Khar, head of the Kachin Independence

Organisation's technical team.

Government troops and the Kachin army have been fighting since clashes erupted March 21 in Kachin State's Mansi township. Both sides have pointed the finger at the other for starting the outbreak.

On March 24, the military-owned *Myawady* reported that Tatmadaw troops have fought nine battles with KIA from March 21 to 23 while trying to arrest illegal logging gangs. In the past three days, the Tatmadaw seized 23 trucks loaded with highly prized teak logs, according to the government

paper. The Tatmadaw has accused the KIA of backing illegal logging operations.

But Daung Khar of the KIO said the government was responsible for the trucks, which drove out of government-controlled areas – Sagaing and Mandalay regions – after negotiations with local authorities for foreign export.

“The trucks come into KIA-controlled areas to pass over the border. It is very clear – if they want to pass our area, we collect tax,” he said.

The recent fighting occurred just as a KIA delegation and fellow ethnic

armed groups joined government negotiators in Yangon in an attempt to hammer out the nationwide ceasefire agreement. The talks are on a momentary break and scheduled to resume on March 30.

La Nan, a KIA spokesperson, insisted yesterday that the fighting has not interfered with the peace talks.

“We had previously agreed to de-escalate the conflict in 2012. However, [the Tatmadaw] often invades our areas. It's not strange. Even though the attacks had hurt the KIA, we will try to conclude the ceasefire agreement in

upcoming talks,” he said.

“We don't want to solve the problem with arms, we want to solve it politically,” La Nan said.

The Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team, which is negotiating on behalf of 16 armed groups, including the KIO, discussed the fighting during the peace talks on March 21, according to an official present.

“We believe all problems will be solved after signing the NCA. That's why we have to try to conclude it in upcoming talks,” NCCT leader Naing Han Thar said.

Rakhine MPs form new probe into sinking

MRATT KYAW THU

mrattkthu@gmail.com

AS volunteer retrieval teams suspended their search for more victims of the sinking of the *Aung Takon 3* ferryboat, the Rakhine State parliament has set up a new inquiry into the disaster.

The new committee of inquiry, established on March 24, comprises four groups divided by geographical area.

“We need to make a new one even though the government set up its own investigation,” Rakhine National Party MP U Aung Mya Kyaw told *The Myanmar Times*.

“The government announcements are not reliable, they change all the time. We can't trust them.”

An investigation launched by Rakhine State Chief Minister U Maung Maung Ohn in the immediate wake of the March 13 sinking appears not to have reported any conclusions, after missing both the original March 18 deadline and an extension to March 21. Preliminary reports indicate that the cause of the disaster was overloading.

Rakhine government spokesperson U Win Myaing declined to comment, saying the commission's failure to report was “not the government's business.”

“The committee has its duty,” he said.

The four sub-groups of the new committee are the townships of Toungup, Thandwe and Ann; Kyaukpyu, Yanbye and Munaung; Myebon and Pauktaw; and Sittwe.

The committee will report to hluttaw on April 7.

Ko Tun Kyi, secretary of the Duwunkyel philanthropic organisation of Kyaukpyu township whose members have recovered several bodies, said they had ceased searching because they had found no more.

The death toll stands at 69.

Yangon auditor-general two years behind on govt accounts

Audited books for 2013-14 and 2014-15 have yet to appear in the hluttaw, MPs reveal ahead of budget session



YE MON

yeemontun2013@gmail.com

TWO members of the Yangon Region parliament – an MP from the Union Solidarity and Development Party and one independent – are calling for the release of audits into regional government spending for the past two years.

So far MPs say they have only received audited reports for spending in 2012-13 – the fiscal year that ended 24 months ago.

Independent Daw Nyo Nyo Thin is also seeking a detailed account of how the regional government spent more than K1 billion budgeted for poverty reduction and rural development in Yangon Region.

“The government reported how much they spent on poverty reduction, but not what they spent it on. I have asked, but received no answer,” she said.

“And the fiscal report of the auditor-general is very late. All we've seen is the 2012-13 report.”

An outspoken critic of the regional government, Daw Nyo Nyo Thin's complaints have been echoed by U Nay Myo Aung, the USDP representative for Seikkan.

He also wants to know why the audit reports on spending on Yangon Region are produced later than any other regional government, as well as the Union government.

“I will raise a question concerning the fiscal report to the auditor-general at the next meeting,” he said. “I think he should make the fiscal reports for 2013-14, 2014-15 and 2015-16 within this parliament's term.”

But Yangon Region auditor-general U Myint Aung said he needed more time to perform the necessary detailed checks on spending at every level. “It is very difficult to check [all reports] within this parliament's term,” he said.



Cars wait at a traffic light beneath an under-construction flyover at Myaynigone junction, which has cost the regional government more than US\$15 million. Photo: Zarni Phyo

The MPs raised their questions as they prepare to meet to consider the 2015-16 budget for Yangon Region. One item concerns a proposed allocation of more than K50 billion (US\$48.3 million) on three flyovers – projects opposed by Daw Nyo Nyo Thin.

“The cost is too high. The government should spend the money instead on low-cost housing for illegal residents,” she said.

The flyovers are intended for Tarmwe township, 8-Mile junction in Myaynigone township and Kokkine junction in Bahan township.

In September, Yangon Mayor U Hla Myint said that no more flyovers would be constructed after the bridge at Myaynigone junction, which is nearly complete. He said that similar gains could be achieved much more cheaply through better traffic management.

It is unclear why the regional government has changed its policy. Officials could not be reached for comment yesterday.

The regional government's draft budget is now being reviewed by the Financial Commission, after which it

will be submitted to the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw for approval as part of the Union government budget. The size of this year's draft budget has not yet been revealed.

In 2014-15, the Yangon Region government received 0.33 percent of the Union government budget, behind only Mandalay Region and Kayah and Mon states, according to budget figures released by the United Nations Children's Fund and the Myanmar Development Resource Institute's Centre for Economic and Social Development.

Ferry inspections launched to ensure seaworthiness

SHWEGU THITSAR

khaingsabainyein@gmail.com

FERRIES will be barred from leaving port if they are unseaworthy or fail an expert inspection, the transport ministry's Inland Water Transport unit has announced. IWT has formed an inspection team responsible for ensuring that ferries across the country are fit to sail.

The move comes in the wake of the March 13 sinking of the *Aung Takon*

3 ferry off the coast of Rakhine State, with the loss of at least 69 passengers. Many more bodies are thought to be still under the water with the sunken ferry.

Inspection teams comprising officers from Myanmar Shipyard, Myanma Port Authority and IWT itself will conduct the tests on IWT's 384 ferries, general manager U Maung Maung Lwin told *The Myanmar Times* on March 24.

He said the team would check if

the ferry is overloaded, if there are enough life-vests and lifeboats, and if the ferry is seaworthy.

Ferries can leave the port only after the team has given them the green light, he added.

Moreover, ferries will not be allowed to run at night or to carry excess passengers, and must carry all required communications equipment, he said. Preliminary findings indicate that the *Aung Takon 3* was lost due to overloading.

“The ferry must follow all requirements set in terms of the distance of the trip,” he said.

In Rakhine State, an investigation committee chaired by U Ko Ko Naing, the minister for Chin ethnic affairs in the Rakhine State government, has been investigating the sinking of *Aung Takon 3*.

“This tragedy would never have occurred if the cargo manager, captain and crew had performed systematic checks,” said U Maung

Maung Lwin.

He said new vessels were being brought into service to replace some of the eight already running in Rakhine State, adding that at least one foreign government was planning to donate ferries.

He said two ferries running between Sittwe and Toungup will be replaced by the *Aung Takon 7* and *Aung Takon 2*, the latter of which was launched only recently.

– Translation by Thiri Min Htun

IN DEPTH

Upper house to vote on watered-down education reforms

Bill debated over past two days differs significantly from version agreed on at four-way talks in February

GUY DINMORE
guydinmore@gmail.com
MRATT KYAW THU
mrattkthu@gmail.com
PYAE THET PHYO
pyaethetphyo87@gmail.com

CHANGES to the controversial national education law demanded by students - and agreed to by the government - risk being rejected or watered down by parliament where an amended bill is scheduled to go to a vote in the Amyotha Hluttaw today.

Following the violent police crackdown on student demonstrators in Letpadan on March 10, the bill committee of the Amyotha Hluttaw, or upper house, has taken a hard line in reversing the agreed changes.

Observers said the developments cast doubt on the sincerity or authority of the government when on February 14 it accepted demands put forward by students while a protest march from Mandalay to Yangon was gathering steam.

Student representatives and education reformers complained that they were not given enough time to explain their proposals during hearings before the committee last week. They say the committee has largely ignored the amendments agreed to during four-way talks, which also included representatives of parliament and the National Network for Education Reform.

The law passed by parliament last September ignited protests by students whose demands centred on removing government control of universities; giving freedom and support to student and teachers unions; extending compulsory education to middle school; vastly increasing the education budget; and allowing mother tongue instruction for ethnic minorities.

The law's establishment of a controversial Education Commission - which was removed in the February agreement - has been reinstated, with slight modifications on how its members are chosen. The bill committee conceded the right to form teacher and student unions but with a caveat attached that could undermine their real independence. Student representation on school administrative bodies was also rejected.

Commenting on the reintroduction of the Education Commission, Daw Nyo Nyo Thin, who represented the NNER in the February talks, said the bill committee's version "means all

education systems, curricula, administration is under that commission".

"We have been demanding to decentralise the government involvement in education system. But now we're back to [what it was] 50 years ago," she said.

"Now we wait and see what is going on after parliament finishes," she told *The Myanmar Times*.

She said members of the NNER were out of Yangon and could not meet each other or with students. A number of student leaders have also gone into hiding since the March 10 crackdown in Letpadan.

The impact of the crackdown and the absence of strong public support for the students might also encourage hardliners in government or parliament to believe that they could contain any backlash. Overt public support for the students has remained muted, in part because Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the opposition National League for Democracy, has remained largely silent over the issue while influential Buddhist leaders have voiced their disapproval of the student actions.

The Amyotha Hluttaw ended two days of debate on the amendments yesterday and is due to hold a vote today. If approved the legislation passes to the lower house.

U Phone Myint Aung, a lawmaker for Yangon's No 3 constituency, defended the need for student unions. He said the country had moved on from the past when their "intention was to topple or change the government", as in 1988 when mass protests met with a bloody crackdown and a takeover by a new military junta.

"It is essential to have the setting-up of student unions if their intention is for policy making, decision making, budget affairs and management affairs," he said.

Daw Khin Wine Kyi, who took part in the four-party talks in February, expressed her regret on hearing that the students did not believe in the government and urged the adoption of amendments agreed between them.

Military representative Major Aung Kyaw Zaw spoke in favour of increasing the state's education budget. "It is true that expenditure on education sector should be raised because human resources development is important," he said.

- Translation by Thiri Min Htun



A detainee is brought to Letpadan Township Court yesterday. Photo: Zarni Phyo

Bago court charges 65 protesters as relatives express anger outside

WA LONE
walone14@gmail.com



A GROUP of 65 students and activists arrested in a violent police crackdown two weeks ago were charged in Letpadan township court yesterday as relatives and supporters protested outside.

Colonel Phone Myint, police chief of Letpadan township, said a total of 80 people had been charged on five counts, including 11 people released on bail and four suspects in hiding who have been ordered to appear in court.

A total of 127 people were arrested on March 10 in Letpadan when riot police broke up a student protest against the National Education Law, drawing expressions of condemnation from Western capitals concerned that the government is backsliding on its commitments to reform.

The 65 appearing in court were charged with unlawful association, refusal to end their rally, incitement to riot, obstruction of police and defamation of the state. The judge set April 7 for the next hearing.

Lawyer Robert San Aung, who will represent some of the detainees, told

reporters the charges carry a maximum penalty of six years in prison. He said some of those arrested were minors and should be tried in a juvenile court.

The 65 prisoners were taken in three police vans from Tharyarwady prison to the court where a large crowd of relatives and supporters waited outside. The students sang

'My son is very young. He is a student so the government should release him.'

Daw Thein Nan
Mother of arrested 19-year-old

protest songs and waved three-fingered victory salutes from behind the grills while sympathisers threw flowers and applauded them.

Dozens of armed police kept guard during the hearing as families shouted angrily to be allowed to see them. Authorities allowed the media and one representative per family into the court, while a police commander

ordered his forces to show restraint.

As more residents and supporters gathered in front of the court, some demanded the release of the students and shouted out against the government for the brutality of the Letpadan operation.

Daw Thein Nan, mother of a 19-year-old student, said he had missed the standard exam this year and had joined the student protest in February. She lives in Myitkyina in Kachin State, 700 miles (1125 kilometres) from Letpadan but said she could not afford to stay away from home for long.

"My son is very young. He is a student so the government should release him. He didn't do any bad action to the government," she said.

Daw Thin Thin Khine said her son was only 17 and studying at Bago No 1 High School. "I brought the legal document showing he is a student," she said crying.

Police allowed the parents to see their sons and daughters for some minutes after the hearing.

Daw Li Li Htwe, a high school teacher, said her son Ko Thiha Win Tin was a leader of one of the student unions and that his health was good and that he could survive in custody and never give up fighting for a democratic education system.

"I am a teacher, I totally understand the situation of education is very low. I will always stand on the side of my son," she said.

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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
guydinmore@gmail.com
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
matt.d.roebuck@googlemail.com
Special Publications Editor MTE – Wade Guyitt
wadeguyitt@gmail.com
Regional Affairs Correspondent – Roger Mitton
rogermitton@gmail.com
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News & Property Editor MTM –
Tin Moe Aung
tinmoeaung.mcm@gmail.com
Timeout Editor MTM – Moh Moh Thaw
mohthaw@gmail.com

MCM BUREAUS

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)
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SALES & MARKETING

ads.myanmarimes@gmail.com
Deputy National Sales Directors –
Chan Tha Oo, Nay Myo Oo,
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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
kyawzayyarlin@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

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Telephone: (01) 253 642, 392 928
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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@myanmarimes.com.mm

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

HIV patients apprehensive about new treatment plans



SHWE YEE SAW MYINT
poepwintphyu2011@gmail.com

HIV-POSITIVE patients are concerned for the future quality of their medical options as the government takes control of HIV care and aims to largely decentralise treatment to the township level by next year.

The plan is meant to make treatment more accessible, but HIV-positive patients told *The Myanmar Times* their concerns range from the public health sectors' hygiene and the quality of drugs to potential extortion and poor quality of care.

"Government hospitals do not have enough staff and they haven't been trained very well to understand how to provide treatment confidentially. HIV patients will not have full services anymore and will face discrimination," said U Myo That Aung, chair of the Myanmar HIV-positive group.

Currently, anti-retroviral therapy (ART), which prevents transmission of HIV and slows the progression of the virus, is available only at specialised facilities. Most of the 139 ART treatment centres are located in Mandalay and Yangon, or in high-risk areas in Kachin and Shan states. To get the dispensaries, patients often must overcome expensive and lengthy travel barriers, a large factor behind why nearly half of the estimated 240,000 people living with HIV in Myanmar do not have access to treatment.

To expand HIV care provisions, the Ministry of Health began a decentralisation strategy in 2013, and plans to cover 140 townships by the end of 2015.

"I know most people do not want to come to the public hospitals for ART drugs, but they have to think long term. NGOs will not keep supporting ART if they finish their project," said



An HIV test kit is used at a medical laboratory. The Ministry of Health distributed hundreds of thousands of similar kits to rural public health centres in 2013. Photo: Supplied

Dr Htun Nyunt Oo, assistant director of the National HIV/AIDS Program at the Ministry of Health.

The government has pledged to provide free treatment to around half of the country's patients affected by HIV by 2016.

As the public facilities take over treatment, NGOs will refocus on finding new HIV patients and initiating treatment, according to Dr Htun Nyunt Oo.

UNAIDS, which is supporting the government strategy, said both NGOs and government health workers are well aware of patients' privacy

concerns, but added that decentralisation has a track-record for reducing discrimination and improving treatment rates in other countries.

"Some people do not wish to access treatment in their local area because of discrimination in the community so will be allowed to access it in another locality close to where they live," said Eamonn Murphy, country director for UNAIDS.

But an HIV-positive resident of Mawlamyine who volunteers at a private clinic – and asked not to be named for privacy reasons – said public sector facilities are so badly

equipped and funded that they have done more harm than good.

"Now we have the problem of second-line [drug-resistant] cases because government hospitals' counselling services are not good. Counsellors see many patients in a day and cannot speak with patients for very long, so people leave not knowing how to take the drugs properly or regularly," she said.

"For many reasons, most HIV patients do not wish to go to the public hospitals. They accept to get treatment there only when they have no money and no other choice."



Heavy rain was blamed for a deadly accident in Thailand on March 24. Photo: Bangkok Post

Truck-train collision kills 7

SEVEN people were killed and another two were injured as a truck and train collided amid heavy rain near Chiang Mai, Thailand on March 24

The occupants of the truck, including the driver, were all Shan State migrants, according to Thai-language newspaper *Khao Sod*.

The Myanmar ambassador to Thailand told *The Myanmar Times* yesterday that the embassy was still trying to verify the citizenship of the deceased.

"Some of them, let's say Shan, are holding hilltribe ID cards. Some of them are migrant workers here in Thailand ... We are identifying if they are Myanmar citizens or not. The names, addresses and working status are also still being identified," said U Win Maung, Myanmar ambassador to Thailand.

The embassy declined to provide

further details about the accident, and didn't comment on whether officials were in contact with the two people who reportedly survived the crash.

Police said the truck passengers and driver were construction workers at a nearby temple. They also quoted witnesses saying that a pickup truck carrying nine people had cut in front of the moving train but got struck and did not cross the tracks.

U Kyaw Thauang, director of the Myanmar Association in Thailand said such accidents highlight the need for a more proactive embassy presence in Thailand.

"The embassy should be more involved in handling and helping the Myanmar migrant workers," he said.

– Lun Min Mang, additional reporting by Bangkok Post

Ethnic parties to meet over elections strategy

LUN MIN MANG
lunmin.lm@gmail.com

MEMBERS of the Nationalities Brotherhood Federation – an alliance of about 20 ethnic political parties – will meet in the Chin State capital Haka tomorrow to discuss strategies for this year's election.

Talks during the two-day meeting are likely to focus on how the groups can avoid competing against each other, which would reduce their chances of winning due to Myanmar's first-past-the-post voting system.

U Saw Than Myint, a member of Federal Union Party – formed by ethnic parties to compete in majority ethnic Bamar regions – estimated that 60 representatives from 21 parties are expected to attend the discussions.

"The NBF does not support our members financially, just in electoral management, such as coordinating [which] constituencies [to contest]," he said.

He said NBF members plan to contest seats in every state and every region.

"I think we will run in more than 300 constituencies around the country," he said, adding that the

members' "theme" for the election was that they "must win every seat they contest".

Delegates will also discuss the peace process, particularly the political dialogue phase.

At a March 23 meeting in Yangon, members of the NBF presented

'I think we will run in more than 300 constituencies around the country.'

U Saw Than Myint
Federal Union Party

the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT), which is negotiating a ceasefire on behalf of armed ethnic groups, with the group's draft framework for political dialogue.

U Saw Than Myint said it was unclear whether the NCCT planned to take the draft into consideration. "We will discuss it with them during our next meeting," he said.

ချစ်သောဖေဖေအတွက် မွေးနေ့ဆုတောင်းလွှာ

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 မညည်းမည။ ကြည်ဖြူစွာ လက်ဆင့်ကမ်းပါလို့
 ပင်ပန်းတယ်မထင် အသက်ပင်မငဲ့ မနွဲ့စတမ်း
 ကျရာတာဝန်ထမ်းရွက်ခဲ့သူ...
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 ကိုယ်ကျန်းမာကာ စိတ်ချမ်းသာလျက်...
 သဒ္ဓါစာဂ ဆတက်ဆင့်ပွား ဘာဝနာတရားဖြင့်...
 ငြိမ်းအေးကမ္ဘာ တည်စေသောဝံ့။

သားသမီးများ

- (ဦးမျိုးဇော်ထွန်း)၊ ဒေါ်ထွေးထွေးချို
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*** (မေတ္တာဖြင့် ဖွဲ့ဆိုပေးသူ မြချိုးဖြူ (ပခုက္ကူ) အား
 ကျေးဇူးအထူးတင်လျက်)

မြေး၊ မြစ်များ

- မအေးမြတ်မွန်ထွန်း
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- ဒင်နီယယ်နေမင်းထွန်း
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- မြပွင့်ဖြူ (ခ) ပွင့်
- မောင်ကျော်ထက်
- မြင့်မိုရ်မောင်



Election body offers parties cheap rooms

Election commission promises further support for parties, but not all see the value the in offer

EI EI TOE
LWIN



eieitoelwin@gmail.com

LOCATION, location, location: that's the message from political parties, after the electoral authorities offered them the chance to rent or buy apartments on the outskirts of Yangon.

While some have expressed interest in the offer, announced on March 20, others said they were turned off by their location in the Shwe Lin Ban estate in Hlaing Tharyar township.

KYAT

40,000

Monthly rental fee for apartments offered to parties by the Yangon Region Election Commission

The Union Election Committee (UEC) said in an announcement that it had 24 rooms measuring between 468 and 484 square feet for parties to use as offices.

All 71 parties have been offered the chance to buy the apartments for between K11 million and K25 million, or to rent them for K40,000 a month. Those interested have been instructed to submit an application to the Yangon Region Election Commission by March 31.

Commission official U Ko Ko said yesterday it had not yet received any applications to buy or rent.

If the offer is oversubscribed it would conduct a lucky draw to decide the recipients, he added.

Reaction to the announcement has been mixed, although most

are supportive. U Aye Thar Aung from the Rakhine National Party said Hlaing Tharyar was unattractive for a party office due to its distance from central Yangon.

"It's not easy to meet each other there and hold meetings because it will take so long to get there," he said. "Most of our Rakhine people live in the downtown area."

Those who are interested say they would likely rent rather than purchase, citing the low rental fee.

Federal Union Party leader U Saw Than Myint said his party couldn't afford the purchase price.

The party, which has been registered by ethnic parties to compete in ethnic Bamar areas, plans to open offices in Hlaing Tharyar, Shwe Pyi Thar, Twante and Kungyangone, he said.

The National League for Democracy has not yet decided if it will apply, but an official said it welcomed the offer.

"It is not easy to rent a room with this amount, so we are interested but will make a decision at a central executive committee meeting next week," said senior member U Tun Tun Hein.

In May last year, UEC chair U Tin Aye submitted two proposals to President U Thein Sein asking the government to provide land for offices and car import permits to registered political parties.

He sent the letter at the request of some political parties, who complained they did not have the funds to develop party infrastructure.

It is unclear how the offer complies with the Political Parties Registration Law, which forbids parties from "directly or indirectly" using "money, land, house, building, vehicle [or] property owned by the state".

But U Ko Ko said the commission plans to expand its support to political parties in the future.

"This offer [of 24 rooms] is just the first phase. There will be another phase to provide more rooms to parties," he said.

Singaporean dies in apartment explosion

TOE WAI AUNG
linnhett.lt@gmail.com

A 35-YEAR-OLD Singaporean national was found dead inside his apartment on Bo Yar Nyunt Street in Dagon township on March 24, following what residents describe as a single explosion.

Residents of the building reported hearing a sudden blast shortly after 6:30pm.

"I heard the explosion sound. It was like a [short] earthquake shock, then I heard things falling and breaking on the floor. I looked out of the balcony and there it was covered

with black smoke," said one resident of the building, who asked not to be named.

Residents reported that the blast blew out a number of windows, sending large shards of glass into the stairwell. "It's lucky no one was [on the stairs]," said another of the building's occupants.

Fire trucks rushed to the scene, extinguishing the small blaze before 7pm. Police said they found Singaporean citizen Kyaw Htin dead on a bed in the apartment.

Sources familiar with the incident say the cause of the blast was one or more LPG tanks in the apartment

— something police declined to confirm, simply saying their investigation was ongoing.

However, they have indicated legal action may be taken against anyone deemed responsible under sections 285 and 304 of the law, which pertain to negligent conduct with respect to fire or combustible matter and causing death by negligence, respectively.

Police said Kyaw Htin lived alone in the apartment.

The Singaporean embassy did not respond to requests for comment yesterday.

— Translation by Khant Lin Oo



IN PICTURES

PHOTO: AUNG HTAY HLAING

Actor and director Min Oak Soe arrives at Yangon's Eastern District Court yesterday. He stands accused of murdering the editor of *Tharapa* magazine, Daw Nu Nu Yin, 33, at his home in Yangon on December 25, following a personal dispute. The hearing will continue on April 1.

Thunder, lightning as heavy rain sweeps across Myanmar

AYE SAPAY PHYU
ayephyu2006@gmail.com

UNSEASONAL rain, accompanied by thunder, lightning, hail and strong winds, drenched wide swathes of the country in the early hours yesterday, driving down daytime temperatures. More than 5 centimetres (2.5 inches) of rain fell in some areas of Mon State.

Ko Min Min, a resident of Aung Chantha quarter, Thanlyin township, Yangon Region, said strong winds shook his house about midnight on March 24, heralding an hour of rain.

"It reminded me of Cyclone Nargis. I didn't dare to sleep. But after about 30 minutes, the wind dropped and the rain started," he said.

The Department of Meteorology and Hydrology (DMH) announced on March 24 that due to the western disturbances and the intrusion of a high pressure area from China, scattered rain or thundershowers were likely in Bago, Yangon, Ayeyarwady and Tanintharyi regions, and Kachin, Shan, Kayah, Kayin and Mon states, with isolated outbreaks of rain in the remaining regions and states over the next 72 hours.

Thunder, lightning, rain and hail were reported from Pyin Oo Lwin, Mandalay Region, and Homalin, Sagaing Region, on the night of March 24.

Department deputy director general U Kyaw Moe Oo said such weather was unusual but not unprecedented.

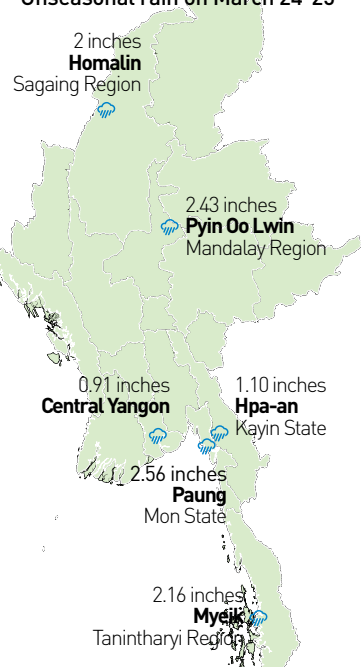
Daytime temperatures fell to about 37 Celsius in Yangon yesterday, after hitting highs of 41C in Nay Pyi Taw and 40C in Yangon on March 24, according to the department.

"I like today's weather because it feels cooler than previous days. My whole body was sticky with sweat before because I was working in the sun. I couldn't eat properly because I was drinking water all day," traffic police officer U Than Zaw, stationed at the junction of Yangon's Bogyoke Aung San and Thein Byu roads, said yesterday.

For Ko Wanna, a 35-year-old trishaw driver in Botahtaung township, it was one of those good-news-bad-news situations. "Carrying passengers in the hot sun was very tiring, but I had more customers. Now it's cooler, it's easier to pedal, but people don't mind walking," he said.

Wet weather watch

Unseasonal rain on March 24-25



Source: Department of Meteorology and Hydrology

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P.O. Box No. 26, Yangon.
Phone: 372416

Dated: 26th March, 2015

Views

American duplicity could scupper Philippines peace - and defence deal

In the scope of modern day calamities, the debacle on the night of January 25 this year, in the small municipality of Mamasapano on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, appears rather insignificant.

Thousands were not killed - just 44 police commandos, a few rebel insurgents and possibly a little-known terrorist, Zulkifli Hir, also called Marwan, though that has not been reliably confirmed.

Yet the ramifications of that police operation have so battered the administration of President Benigno Aquino that he remains under threat of impeachment.

As well, there are persistent whispers about a coup being orchestrated by the military top brass who are chagrined that Aquino sidelined them in favour of the police for the anti-terrorist raid.

Assessments of exactly what went wrong in Mamasapano when Marwan was targeted by elite police commandos have indicated a strong American hand in the attack.

On March 13, a Commission of Inquiry conducted by the Philippine police reported that intelligence, training and strategic planning for the raid was provided by the United States.

While US troops did not actively participate, the report noted that they supplied equipment, medical assistance and help for the commandos to "elude large enemy formations, thereby avoiding further casualties".

Four days later, a formal investigation by the Philippine Senate concurred with the findings of the police commission - essentially, the whole botched and lethal action had been conceived and run by the Americans.

That realisation ignited a firestorm of anger over the involvement of Washington in an operation on Filipino soil about which even senior members of Aquino's administration knew nothing.

What puzzles many Filipinos is why it was decided to go ahead with the attack at such a critical time.

Legislation to cement a peace deal between Manila and Mindanao's largest Muslim group by creating an



ROGER MITTON

rogermitton@gmail.com

autonomous Bangsamoro Islamic state was about to be debated. Icing Marwan could surely have waited till the law was passed.

Why was it not? Well, judging by this month's police inquiry and the senate report, the answer seems clear: It was due to pressure from Washington.

The US had two key objectives and they were strong enough to force Aquino's hand, although given his chronic wobbliness in crisis situations, it would likely not have been difficult.

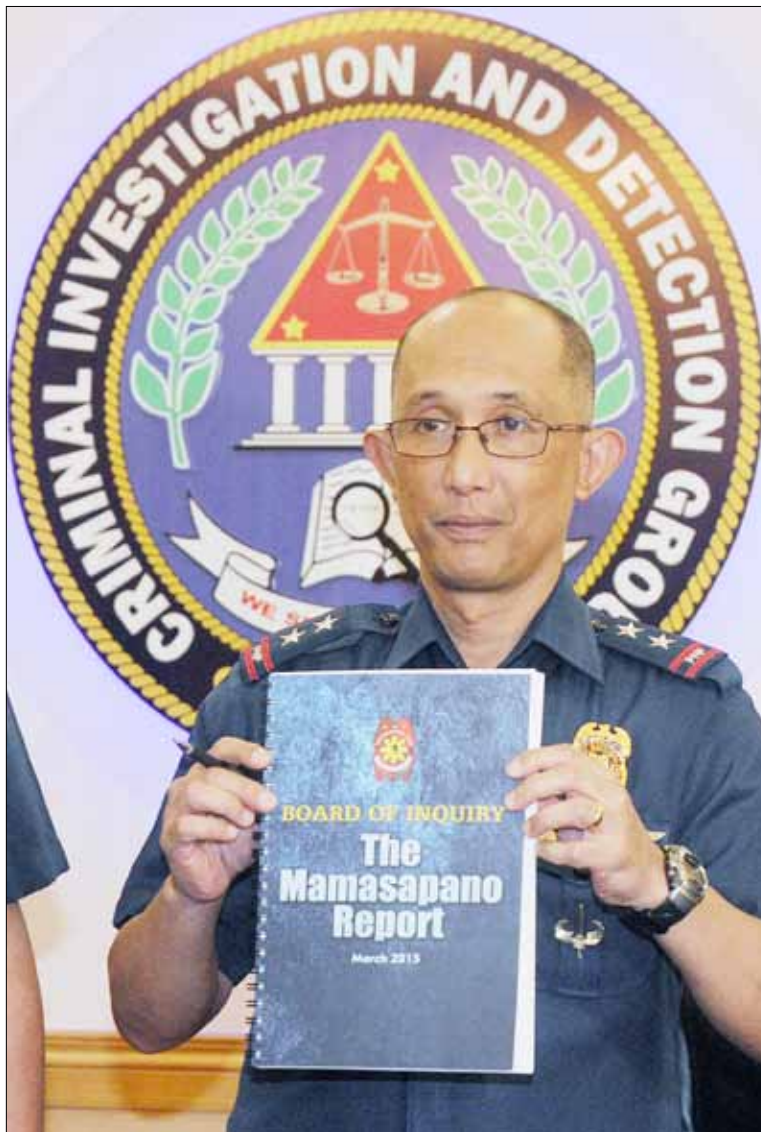
Washington's most obvious goal was to eliminate Marwan, a Malaysia-born terrorist and bomb-maker, allegedly involved in the 2002 Bali nightclub attack that killed over 200 young tourists, including seven Americans.

His location had been pinpointed by drones operated by US military advisers, who had been allowed by former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to be based on Mindanao to help hunt down insurgents.

Marwan was hiding with a unit of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, a well-armed group that had split from the larger Moro Islamic Liberation Front, which had signed the peace accord with Aquino last year.

That prickly detail did not faze the Americans. They wanted their man come what may - and, in the end, it appears they got him, but at a terrible cost in Filipino bloodshed and political credibility for the Manila government.

Which brings us to what most analysts view as Washington's second and more insidious objective: to



Police Director Benjamin Magalong holds a report into a botched January 25 mission against Muslim extremists in Manila on March 12. Photo: AFP

scupper the peace agreement, which was to have been Aquino's legacy achievement.

The rationale for this analysis is that it seems inconceivable that the US strategists would not realise that a night-time raid on a fortified BIFF camp would not result in heavy casualties on both sides.

And that all groups suffering these casualties would be enraged - the

national police chiefs, the generals in the Philippine Armed Forces, the Mindanao Muslim leaders and the nation's lawmakers.

Predictably, it was those very legislators in Manila, who had been kept in the dark about the operation, who were most appalled by the carnage and the subsequent dissembling by members of Aquino's inner coterie.

They are the ones who still need

to approve the Bangsamoro Basic Law, which will implement the peace deal between Manila and the MILF. Now approval seems doubtful, if not already off the table.

So the US wins on both counts. Marwan has apparently been killed and if the peace deal has not also been killed, then it has certainly been kicked down the road for a very long time.

The fact that Aquino has also, in a political sense, been killed is of little concern to Washington, which regards preventing the creation of an MILF-helmed Islamic caliphate on Mindanao as far more crucial.

Of course, the US is now skilfully covering its tracks and fostering a good guy image as it joins the Philippine Army in campaigns against the BIFF and other terrorist groups like Abu Sayyaf and the New People's Army.

These recent campaigns have been effective, but once again they have come at a terrible cost, with more than 80,000 civilians displaced and with mounting public disquiet.

But there's more. The ill-fated Mamasapano raid has not only crippled Aquino's presidency, it has also emboldened those opposed to the growing American military presence in the country.

Of course, the Philippines has always had a strategic culture of over-dependence on US military support, but there are now increasing calls for it to be severely reduced, if not ended.

A year ago, before the Mamasapano debacle, Manila and Washington signed an Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement which, if approved, will allow rotations of US ships, planes and personnel at Philippine bases.

Now, however, more and more lawmakers in Manila are having second thoughts about the wisdom of the agreement and it is currently being challenged before the Philippine Supreme Court.

It is not impossible that because of the horrors of January's ill-fated raid at Mamasapano both the Bangsamoro peace deal and the enhanced defence accord with Washington will both bite the dust.

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Business

Line's instant messaging software aims to take on local leader Viber

AUNG KYAW NYUNT
newsroom@mmtimes.com

INSTANT messaging service Line aims to give Viber a run for its money after launching in Myanmar on March 24.

The service is available on iOS and Android, and aims to woo users partly through its in-app innovations such as group chat and a range of emojis, or small graphics that can be interspersed in text conversations.

"People can send their emotions to other people or to friends with endearing stickers," said Line Myanmar general manager Dae Yun Hwang.

Line is far from the only application taking aim at local instant messaging.

MySQUAR, a Yangon-based social media platform, offers a service called MyChat it touts as being fully available in Myanmar and English languages. The firm also plans to raise US\$2.5 million on London's AIM exchange, aiming for a valuation of \$25 million, according to a report this week by Financial Times.

The messaging services are up against Viber, a messaging service with roots in Japan. Viber's messaging is a free-to-use service, though its VoIP service to offline phones requires a fee.

Ma Shwe Yee is a Viber devotee, saying it enjoys significant popularity among her friend.

The service's strong points including

working well with poor internet connects, as well as being easy to use and offering a range of stickers and emojis.

Line likewise offers free messaging and VoIP calls to other users when connected to the internet, though users say it may take some time to build up awareness.

"I think Myanmar people aren't familiar with Line yet," said potential user Ko Kyaw Win Aung. "Line should try to make sure the service is popular."

Line claims 230 million users from most countries around the world, with particularly strong adherence in Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, Taiwan and Spain, the company said.

Celebrity Ma Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein, a promoter of the brand, said Line can also be used with weak internet connections and is easy to figure out.



First ship arrives for strategic petroleum reserve program



AUNG SHIN

koshumgtha@gmail.com

MYANMAR has begun building a strategic petroleum reserve (SPR) program, hoping to take advantage of declining international crude prices to build up stocks.

The Ministry of Energy initially proposed the plan in a cabinet meeting, a member of parliament said in January. An oil tanker named MT Semu Sejati arrived at Thanlyin refinery near Yangon on March 16 carrying the first shipment intended for the reserve.

The Ministry of Energy has released the basic outlines of the program together with a photo of the ship, though no detailed information has yet been made public.

Several ministry officials declined to provide further information detailing the size and scope of the intended program.

An official from the Myanma Petrochemical Enterprise, a state-owned firm, said the initial idea is to import 18 million gallons (68 million litres) of petroleum for the strategic reserve. He also declined to detail the amount of petroleum imported in the first ship, and said the rates were market rates provided by private companies.

"We are likely to increase import volumes for the SPR program, as we have more storage capacity than 18 million gallons," he said.

While the program is a start, it is not nearly enough to make a large difference, said U Soe Myint, retired director general of the Ministry of Energy's Energy Planning Department.

"The amount of 18 million gallons is not enough. We should import

much more than that, enough for three or four months of consumption," he said.

U Soe Myint estimated annual imports usually total between 350 and 400 million gallons of diesel and 120 million gallons of petrol a year, though official figures from the Myanmar Petroleum Products Enterprise show higher volumes.

Myanmar is not alone in conducting an SPR program. China is currently importing 7 million gallons of petroleum a day for its SPR, while consumption totals 9 million gallons. India likewise is importing 2 million gallons a day for its SPR.

"This is a good time to start the SPR as our country has never had such a program," he said. "We should do this with larger volumes of imports, and private companies should also be allowed to do this with a tax incentive."

The international price of crude oil has fallen by over 50 percent since mid-2014. Yesterday, Brent traded at around \$55 a barrel.



The first strategic petroleum reserve shipment arrives at Thanlyin. Photo: Supplied

Myanmar produces large amounts of natural gas, but its production of crude oil falls well below its consumption.

'We are likely to increase import volumes for the SPR program.'

Official
Myanma Petrochemical Enterprise

The Ministry of Energy says current petrol demand is around 60,000 barrels a day, though onshore fields produce 8000 barrels of crude oil a day and 7000 barrels of condensate a day.

Central bank hopes to solve forex gap



AYE THIDAR KYAW

ayethidarkyaw@gmail.com

A GROWING spread between the Central Bank of Myanmar's reference rate for kyat-US dollar conversions and the market rate is unlikely to last long, according to a Central Bank official.

The Central Bank has left its reference rate for kyat-dollar conversions unchanged at K1027 for a month, while many private companies are now pegging the rate as high as K1085.

Yesterday CB Bank's rate for buying dollars was K1075 and selling at K1095, while KBZ's buy rate was K1078 and sell rate K1090.

The difference between the official and unofficial rates has steadily grown since February, but a Central Bank official said the institution is

studying the issue.

"We are considering whether the exchange rate is increase because of actual market demand or speculation," said the official, who declined to be named.

"If we [moved the reference rate] to the unofficial parallel rate, it make encourage too much depreciation and make the situation worse."

The Central Bank of Myanmar has moved to a managed float for the exchange rate. The official said banks and non-bank licensed financial institutions should follow the policy of staying within plus or minus 0.8, otherwise risks actions from the Central Bank's Foreign Exchange Management Department, he said.

Still, it is difficult to control the kyat-dollar exchange rate, as the US dollar is disproportionately larger in scope than the kyat.

"The strength of the US dollar is inevitable," he said. The official added international trends and local seasonal fluctuations are combining to lower the kyat's value. With

the fiscal year ending at the end of March, many departments and companies are making final purchases, which are often imported goods.

The official also downplayed concern Myanmar's foreign currency reserves may be getting thin due to the projected \$5 billion trade deficit this year. He said there is still significant inflows of foreign currency, such as earnings from foreign investments, which provide surplus inflows.

"Appreciation of the US dollar won't last forever. People who bought dollars with the intention of selling them again must think about the timing for possible depreciation," he said.

The exchange rate in September was K977 per dollar, later increasing to K1027 to K1085, depending on whether the unofficial or official exchange rate is used.

Still, the kyat has held up relatively well as the US dollar strengthened against most international currencies, with the Malaysian ringgit depreciating by 14pc and the euro by 18pc.

Imported consumer goods have

become more expensive, as they must be purchased from abroad in dollars - though some products like edible oil and fuel have become cheaper on their own merits.

KYAT

1027

Central Bank of Myanmar's official reference rate, compared to about K1080 parallel deals are offering

Ministry of Commerce director U Win Myint said appreciation of the US dollar against the kyat may help to cut the trade deficit in the longer term.

U Hnin Oo, vice chair of the Myanmar Fisheries Federation, said the

weakening local currency will likely not be enough to reverse the decline in his industry's export.

Fish exporters face a number of difficulties, and the dropping kyat is no exception. Importers and consumers also suffer, as the cost of many goods is increasing.

U Hnin Oo said the current imbalance between the official and parallel exchange rates mean businesses are having trouble routing financing through banks and other official sources.

With little interbank trading, often the Central Bank's daily auctions are the main way for banks to receive dollars. Yesterday, one local bank turned away a reporter seeking to change money, directing them instead to a money changer that acted outside its daily auctions.

U Hnin Oo said the difference between the official and parallel rates may drive many to informal sources.

"The informal market is bigger as it can supply as much as we want," he said.

Asian Development Bank says growth to pick up next year

BUSINESS 10



Hong Kong firm buys into United Kingdom mobile operator O2

BUSINESS 13

Exchange Rates (March 25 close)

Currency	Buying	Selling
Euro	K1129	K1135
Malaysia Ringgit	K280	K284
Singapore Dollar	K765	K770
Thai Baht	K32	K33
US Dollar	K1075	K1085

NAY PYI TAW



Goods await shipping at the Yangon port. Photo: Zarni Phyto

Export boost from first strategy



CATHERINE TRAUTWEIN

newrooms@mmtimes.com.mm

VICE President U Nyan Tun rang in the official launch of the first national export strategy for the country yesterday in Nay Pyi Taw, which experts hope may prove to be a boost to trade abroad.

The strategy, drafted primarily by the Ministry of Commerce with help from both the private and public sectors, will push Myanmar toward “sustainable export-led growth and prosperity”, according to a statement.

The plan’s official deployment signals Myanmar’s eagerness to expand on exports and look beyond selling the same products to the same markets. However, the country has struggled with its share of challenges. Arancha González, executive director of the International Trade Centre, characterised the starting point for the domestic economy as low value-added, low productivity and low quality in a March 24 discussion.

The National Export Strategy, which received technical assistance from the International Trade Centre and support from the German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development and the German Agency for International Cooperation, seeks to improve on these issues and to provide guidance for industry players that will lead to real-life benefits for Myanmar’s population.

“Myanmar now has a strategy, it has a plan ... to do two things: to

diversify its trade and to make sure the trade is more in value-added,” said Ms González at yesterday’s launch event. “These two ... want to use trade to generate more inclusive growth, more sustainable development and more decent jobs.”

“I am convinced that the implementation of the National Export Strategy would help achieve our main objectives of poverty alleviation, rural development and broad-based inclusive growth and will successfully lead our country to sustainable growth and prosperity,” U Nyan Tun said at the March 25 launch.

Ms González called Myanmar “a country on the move” and said its GDP per capita – right now at \$910 – could triple by 2030.

And though other speakers at the March 25 event mentioned Myanmar’s progress, their comments also reminded that the country had far to go with regards to its export practices.

World Bank country director Ulrich Zachau said Myanmar’s labour force and economic structure remain that of a low-income country.

Meanwhile, Commerce Minister U Win Myint said reforms had led trade volume to increase substantially, but it hadn’t reached full potential – and that Myanmar still mostly dealt in low-priced, low-quality products.

More than 40 percent of Myanmar’s exports don’t get too far from home when they leave the country, ending up in Thailand. Ms González also said 70pc of Myanmar’s exports are commodities – minerals and oils, logs and pearls.

While partners, products, quality and productivity have been limited,

Ms González said the National Export Strategy aims to diversify, add value to and boost the quality and yield of Myanmar’s offerings.

But the plan stays a collected batch of papers until actions have been taken. While Ms González said implementation has already started, other pledges have not yet become reality, as yesterday marked the official start of the implementation phase.

“[Yesterday] is the end of the plan. [Yesterday] is day one of implementing the plan,” Ms González said. “The important thing now is to transform it into action on the ground ... [as] part of the transformation of the economy of Myanmar, a transformation that we see needs to happen for the benefit of the people.”

‘The important thing now is to transform it into action on the ground.’

Arancha González

International Trade Centre

The five-year National Export Strategy focuses on rubber; rice; beans, pulses and oilseeds; fisheries; textiles and garments; forestry products; tourism; and four “cross-sector functions” – access to finance, quality management, trade facilitation and logistics, and trade information and promotion. It will be put

into practice with help from a group called the Myanmar Trade Development Committee.

The vice president said its creation is targeted at monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the export strategy and trade-related measures. Committee members presented at the March 25 launch, speaking about objectives for industry under the National Export Strategy.

Financing implementation could come from national resources, donor support, foreign direct investment or the private sector, according to Department of Trade Promotion deputy director U Aung Soe.

Speakers emphasised that export players will have to cooperate in order to ensure Myanmar continues to move forward.

“A plan is only valuable as long as it is implemented,” Ms González said. “I’m glad to say that Myanmar has already started putting the plan into action. Attention will now have to be paid to ensuring coordinating in action and coherence in the sense of direction.”

“We’ve got to all row in the same direction. There is no doubt that these are challenging times but I am absolutely convinced that we will rise to meet them to grow our economy, to shape our own future,” said U Nyan Tun.

Ultimately, it will be up to Myanmar whether to follow through on the plan, though ideally not alone.

“A traditional Myanmar proverb says travel not afar without a companion,” Ms González said. “The National Export Strategy we are launching today can be an extraordinary companion for Myanmar to become a regional trade champion.”

MIC gives nod to last foreign oil firms

AUNG SHIN

koshumgtha@gmail.com

THE last international oil companies that must still sign Production Sharing Contracts with Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise have now received permission from Myanmar Investment Commission, a statement said yesterday.

International oil firms have been signing the Production Sharing Contracts – which govern exploration and production activities – since December, following a bidding round for offshore blocks held last year.

The approval from Myanmar Investment Commission means seven international firms are likely to soon sign their Production Sharing Contracts. So far, 13 contracts have been signed.

The latest companies to receive approval include Australia’s ROC Oil, Tap Oil and Transcontinental Group, Reliance Industries from India, Eni from Netherlands, Petrovietnam and Canadian Foresight Group, said the March 25 announcement.

International companies working offshore or in shallow water must partner with local companies. These local firms include Smart E&P International, Century Bright Gold, United National Resources Development Services.

ROC and Tap Oil were awarded for shallow water block M-7, Transcontinental and Canadian Foresight jointly won M-15, Reliance Industries was awarded two shallow water blocks M-17 and M-18, and Eni is partnering with Petrovietnam in MD-2 and MD-4.

‘This agreement expands our partnership with MOGE and Myanmar.’

Scott Neal

Unocal Myanmar

There are also government connections between the Ministry of Energy and Myanmar Investment Commission – Minister Zayar Aung is also chair of the investment commission.

Supermajors Total and Chevron are among the companies that have already signed their Production Sharing Contracts.

American company Chevron’s subsidiary Unocal was the latest firm to sign a contract, inking the deal for block A-5 on March 24 in Nay Pyi Taw.

“We are pleased to have reached this milestone,” said Scott Neal, president of Unocal Myanmar Offshore Company, in a press release. “This agreement expands our partnership with MOGE and Myanmar. We have a 20-year history in Myanmar and we look forward to supporting the continued development of the nation’s energy sector through our exploration program.”

ADB predicts higher growth, inflation

SUPHYO WIN



suphyo1990@gmail.com

ECONOMIC growth is expected to pick up in the fiscal year starting April 1, but inflation and a rising budget deficit may weigh on the economy, according to economic experts.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimated GDP growth will reach 8.3 percent in the coming fiscal year, compared year-on-year, while it is at 7.7pc in the current fiscal year, according to its flagship annual economic publication.

"ADB also expects growth to remain over 8pc in fiscal year 2016, propelled by investments stimulated by the ongoing reforms, an improved business environment, and the country's integration into Southeast Asia," said deputy country director Peter Brimble at an ADB event in Yangon on March 24.

Inflation will likely accelerate to 8.4pc in the coming fiscal year, propelled by higher fiscal spending and expected higher wages, which will increase domestic demand. Consumer price pressures should then ease slightly in the 2015-16 fiscal year to 6pc, according to the 2015 Asian Development Outlook report.

"In [the current year], inflation is around 6pc, a bit lower than that, it is one of the serious issue in this year with the rapid growth ... [in] spending on education, health and

[civil servant] salary increases," Mr Brimble said. "We see that inflation will be up, but will be down in 2016 again."

Daw Sandar Oo, director general of the Central Bank of Myanmar's department of monetary management, said the salary increase for civil servants may have less impact on the inflation rate than is forecast by the ADB.

"As this year the Central Bank forecast inflation rates around 5pc, and there are a lot of large infrastructure projects underway, so inflation will be up on past years - but I don't think it will reach 8pc," she said.

As long as inflation does not increase by more than 2pc, it will not be a major concern, she said. Daw Sandar Oo added the Central Bank already has some measures in place to keep inflation in check.

The ADB noted a number of risks to the economic outlook, including thin external and fiscal buffers, ethnic and sectarian tension, vulnerability to bad weather and possible slowing of reform momentum ahead of the elections. It also noted there have been positive steps taken in 2014 in economic data collection, which is "badly needed to support policy formulation and planning".

"While the country has made big strides under its economic reform program, many development challenges remain including improving infrastructure, strengthening governance and public sector capacity, developing human capital, building a dynamic private sector, and



Children play in a river. The ADB highlighted the need to improve education for Myanmar's long-term economic well-being. Photo: AFP

revitalising agriculture," said ADB country director Winfried Wicklein at the event.

The ADB also warned that Myanmar was likely to see a major increase in the fiscal deficit - from 4.3pc of GDP in the year to March to an estimated 6.3pc in the coming year - since the government is expected to ramp up spending before this year's election.

Mr Brimble said that a jump to 5pc of GDP would be a high fiscal deficit, so an increase to 6pc of more may be something of a concern.

The ADB also said in its report there was a 10pc increase in business registrations in the first nine months of the 2014-2015 fiscal year,

indicating that "business confidence remains robust".

Foreign direct investment leapt to \$6.6 billion between April and December last year, compared with \$4 billion for the full year of 2013.

It also noted a number of general constraints in the report, including equipping young people for a modern economy.

"Many young people entering Myanmar's workforce are poorly educated and skilled. This undercuts efforts to achieve inclusive economic growth and threatens to trap the economy in a model that adds little value and depends heavily on exploiting natural resources," it said.

The report added that it appears

secondary education is the bottleneck, and broadening the ranks of graduates is a prerequisite to expanding and modernising industry and services. Improved technical and vocational education and training also needs to play a role.

It added the government is preparing its National Education Sector Plan, 2016-2020, to address these challenges.

Meanwhile, the World Bank also suggested removing some barriers to doing business to help the domestic private sector grow.

It highlighted access to finance as the top constraint for private enterprise, after interviewing more than 1000 foreign and domestic non-agricultural businesses. Only 1pc of fixed-asset investments are financed through bank borrowing, while 92pc is financed by own funds - "a higher percentage than in any other comparable country", the World Bank said in a press release on March 24. "Difficulties in getting land-use rights, power outages and inadequate workforce skills are other main barriers to business operation and growth in Myanmar," it said. World Bank chief economist and senior vice president Kaushik Basu said the country has potential for enormous growth.

"Creating a level playing field for the private sector will help unleash its potential," he said in the release. "Government's role is to provide an efficient regulatory system that encourages and facilitates individual creativity."

- Additional reporting AFP

To Our Chairman, U Thein Tun

*Very best wishes on your birthday
and
good health and prosperity
in the year ahead
from all the staff
of
The Myanmar Times.*



Congratulations to
APEX Airline Public Co.,Ltd.
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Myeik



Kawthoung

BEIJING

China dines at eurozone buffet

THE inexorable decline of the single currency offers ambitious Chinese firms a bargain buffet of eurozone business, analysts say, with this weekend's multibillion deal for Italian tyre-maker Pirelli only the latest course in an acquisition binge.

Less than a year ago the euro was worth nearly US\$1.40 on international markets. Earlier this month it stood at less than \$1.05, down by a quarter as the European Central Bank embarks on a massive stimulus program while the US Federal Reserve is widely expected to start raising interest rates.

By the standards of first-world forex markets it ranks as a collapse.

It has recorded a similar performance against China's yuan currency, falling from almost 8.7 yuan in May to bottom at less than 6.6 yuan. The yuan trades in a tight range against the dollar.

As the unit weakens it makes eurozone acquisitions cheaper for outside buyers and its biggest headline impact may come in terms of Chinese overseas investment, which surged past \$100 billion for the first time last year.

"For Chinese going into Europe it can't get better than this," said Joerg Wuttke, president of the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China (EUCCC).

"Chinese companies are eager to go outside China as its own domestic economy is slowing down," he said, adding that profit margins in the rest

of the world are higher than in China, according to EUCCC member surveys.

"So I can only expect a major push from Chinese companies to buy into the European company landscape."

The latest deal came with state-owned chemical giant ChemChina agreeing to buy out the largest shareholder in Pirelli, valuing the purveyor of Formula One accessories and race calendars at just over 7 billion euros (US\$7.6 billion) - now about 48 billion yuan, or 13 billion yuan less than in May. The euro has flirted with parity against the dollar in recent weeks - for the first time since 2002 - and while the euro rose to \$1.0964 on March 24 it remained within striking distance of more-than-a-dozen-year lows.

China's overseas direct investment pushed sharply higher in February, the commerce ministry said, driven by oil giant China National Petroleum Corp putting nearly \$3 billion into a Dutch transaction.

"The continued slumps in the euro's value against the dollar have led the price of eurozone assets to fall, creating an opportunity for Chinese companies to invest and carry out mergers and acquisitions there," said commerce ministry spokesperson Shen Danyang.

Beijing has accrued the world's biggest foreign exchange reserves and has been running record monthly trade surpluses, with the state-run *China Daily* newspaper saying in an



A citizen cycles past the headquarters of the China National Petroleum Corporation in Beijing yesterday. The inexorable decline of the euro offers ambitious Chinese firms a bargain buffet of eurozone business, analysts say. Photo: AFP

editorial the country "is itching to invest overseas".

Private companies are also taking a seat at the table, with billionaire Wang Jianlin buying 20 percent of Spanish league champions Atletico Madrid in January, the first mainland Chinese investment in a top European football club. Conglomerate Fosun declared victory in February in its long takeover battle for French holiday resorts group Club Med, having repeatedly raised its offer to 939 million euros.

Klaus E Meyer, a professor at the China Europe International Business School in Shanghai, said Chinese investing abroad generally take a long-term view and are driven by acquiring

technology or brands they can exploit domestically.

"The fact that assets in Europe are now cheaper because of the weaker euro means that this sort of asset-seeking foreign investment is likely to increase," he said.

The Pirelli deal was met with dismay but resignation in Italy, and Derek Scissors of the Washington-based American Enterprise Institute said that given its economic travails, the eurozone will not look askance on inflows from China.

"Most Chinese companies are now sophisticated enough to back off of outright acquisitions when there is political sensitivity, buying smaller

stakes in high-profile companies," he added.

Chinese firms may also already be taking advantage of the weaker euro to raise cheaper capital overseas.

Four China-based non-financial companies issued the equivalent of \$2.8 billion in euro-dominated bonds in January and February, according to Dealogic data, more than the \$1.9 billion raised in the whole of 2014.

Nonetheless the consequences of the euro's decline are not all one-way.

The 28-member EU is China's biggest trade partner while China is the EU's second-largest, and China ran a surplus of \$126.63 billion last year with the full group. - AFP

UNITED STATES

Bitcoin gets serious

THE biggest US stock exchange operators are taking steps to embrace bitcoin, spurring speculation the digital currency is coming up from underground.

Nasdaq OMX Group Inc. revealed March 24 that New York-based Noble Markets, a platform for trading bitcoin, has agreed to license Nasdaq's X-stream technology. Noble is adopting the same software used by securities exchanges around the world, and a related system runs the Nasdaq Stock Market, one of the biggest equity exchanges. The news follows the New York Stock Exchange's January agreement to invest in Coinbase, another platform for trading the digital currency.

Markets for buying and selling bitcoin took a reputational hit when one

of the biggest, Mt Gox, failed in 2014. Mt Gox filed for bankruptcy after discovering it had lost bitcoin belonging to customers and itself. Deploying Nasdaq's software could give Noble greater legitimacy.

"It is a vote of confidence in bitcoin the technology," said Nicholas Colas, chief market strategist at Convergenx Group. "Now that you are seeing big organisations providing technology, there's a feeling that bitcoin is here to stay."

While some bitcoin startups have recently built their own trading technology, Nasdaq's system has been battle-tested for years. "Nasdaq is open to providing its technology to other bitcoin exchanges," said Ryan Wells, a Nasdaq spokesperson. - Bloomberg

BEIJING

China capital to close last coal plant in anti-pollution drive

BEIJING, where pollution averaged more than twice China's national standard last year, will close the last of its four major coal-fired power plants next year.

The capital city will shutter China Huaneng Group Corporation's 845-megawatt power plant in 2016, after last week closing plants owned by Guohua Electric Power and Beijing Energy Investment Holding, according to a statement on the website of the city's economic planning agency. A fourth major power plant, owned by China Datang, was shut last year.

The facilities will be replaced by four gas-fired stations with capacity to supply 2.6 times more electricity than the coal plants.

The closures are part of a broader trend in China, which is the world's biggest carbon emitter. Facing pressure at home and abroad, policymakers are racing to address the environmental damage seen as a byproduct of breakneck economic growth.

Beijing plans to cut annual coal consumption by 13 million tonnes by 2017 from the 2012 level in a bid to slash the concentration of pollutants.

Shutting all the major coal power plants in the city, equivalent to reducing annual coal use by 9.2 million tonnes, is estimated to cut carbon emissions of about 30 million tonnes, said Tian Miao, a Beijing-based analyst at North Square Blue Oak, a London-based research company with a focus on China.

"Most pollutants come from burning coal, so the closure will have a clear impact to reduce emissions," Mr Tian said. "The replacement with natural gas will be much

cleaner with less pollution, though with a bit higher cost."

Nationally, China planned to close more than 2000 smaller coal mines from 2013 to the end of this year, Song Yuanming, vice chief of the State Administration of Coal Mine Safety, said at a news conference in July.

Coal is the most carbon-intensive fossil fuel and the leading source of carbon-dioxide emissions.

In the 10 years to 2013, coal demand globally grew by more than 50 percent, meeting almost half of the increase in the world's total primary energy needs, the International Energy Agency said in its annual energy outlook report last year.

'Most pollutants come from burning coal, so the closure will have a clear impact to reduce emissions.'

Tian Miao
China analyst

China was the principal source of the surge, the IEA said.

Closing coal-fired power plants is seen as a critical step in addressing pollution in China, which gets about 64pc of the primary energy it uses from the fossil fuel.

Coal accounts for about 30pc of

the US electricity mix, while gas comprises 42pc, according to Bloomberg New Energy Finance data.

Coal use is declining or slowing in China as policy makers encourage broader use of hydroelectric power, solar and wind. The nation is also pushing to restart its nuclear power program in a bid to clear the skies. China's electricity consumption last year grew at its slowest pace in 16 years, according to data from the China Electricity Council.

The nation's emissions of carbon dioxide fell 2pc last year from 2013, the first decline since 2001, signaling that efforts to control pollution are gaining traction, according to a Bloomberg New Energy Finance estimate based on preliminary energy demand data from China's National Bureau of Statistics.

Air pollution has attracted more public attention in the past few years as heavy smog envelops swathes of the nation including Beijing and Shanghai. About 90pc of the 161 cities whose air quality was monitored in 2014 failed to meet official standards, according to a report by China's National Bureau of Statistics earlier this month.

The level of PM2.5, the small particles that pose the greatest risk to human health, averaged 85.9 micrograms per cubic meter last year in the capital, compared with the national standard of 35.

The city also aims to take other measures such as closing polluted companies and cutting cement production capacity to clear the air this year, according to the Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau.

- Bloomberg

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P. O. Box 60, Yangon

E-mail: makhinkyi.law@mptmail.net.mm

Dated: 26 March 2015

LONDON

Hong Kong firm buys Britain's O2 mobile operator

SPAIN'S Telefonica said it would sell British telecom giant O2 to Hong Kong group Hutchison Whampoa for £10.25 billion (US\$15.2 billion) in a deal that could create Britain's biggest mobile phone firm.

"A definitive agreement has been reached after the finalisation of the process of due diligence on O2 UK," the Spanish firm said in a statement.

Subject to regulatory approval, Hutchison Whampoa will make an initial payment of £9.250 billion and a further £1.0 billion later once O2 reaches an agreed cash flow level, it said.

It hopes to wrap up the deal by June 30, 2016 – a deadline that may be pushed back to September 30, 2016, in certain circumstances.

It is the latest purchase in a spending spree by Hutchison's owner, Hong Kong investment tycoon Li Ka-shing, one of Asia's richest men.

Mr Li, 86, who is worth \$30.6 billion according to Bloomberg's Billionaires Index, announced a sweeping re-arrangement of his business empire in January.

Hutchison already owns Britain's Three mobile phone network – if he merged O2 with that company he would reduce to three the number of players in Britain's fast-consolidating wireless telecoms sector.

A statement from Hutchison said the agreement to buy O2 "will create the number one mobile operator in the UK".

Hutchison's group managing director Canning Fok described the deal as a "major milestone".

"The combination of Three UK and O2 UK will create a business with unmatched scale and strength that will allow us to better compete against other operators in the marketplace," Mr Fok said.

But some analysts have warned that a merger could lead to price hikes, owing to less competition.

Hutchison could "drive a lot of synergies" with the takeover, James Britton, a London-based analyst at Nomura Holdings Inc, was quoted as saying by Bloomberg News.

"Whether that really equips them to be fully competitive in a converged



People walk in front of an O2 shop in Britain. Photo: AFP

UK market remains to be seen."

It was the latest in a series of shake-ups in Britain's telecom sector.

British telecoms and TV firm BT had said in November that it was in preliminary talks to buy back O2 – its former domestic mobile phone division – from Telefonica.

Instead BT ended up buying another British mobile phone operator, EE, for £12.5 billion. British telecom giant Vodafone took over Spanish cable firm Ono on July 24 for 7.2 billion euros (US\$7.88 billion).

Telefonica, with operations across Europe and Latin America, is meanwhile looking to turn around its fortunes.

It reported a 35 percent plunge in net profits to 3.0 billion euros in 2014. Its debt stood at 45 billion euros at the end of 2014.

It said last month it plans to step up its value-added activities such as fibre-optic cable, pay TV and smartphones, and to focus on its main markets in Spain, Germany and Brazil.

The Spanish group wants to pull

out of the British market where it has been present since 2005, when it bought O2 for 26 billion euros.

Telefonica has already sold its operations in the Czech Republic and Ireland.

Hutchison's revamp is expected to pave the way for Mr Li's retirement and follows speculation of a handover to his son Victor.

Mr Li's shift away from a slowing Chinese economy to bargain hunt in Europe is seen as a further quest for stability for his vast empire. – AFP

SYDNEY

Australia considers joining China bank

AUSTRALIA will join a China-backed infrastructure bank if conditions such as multilateral and transparent governance are met, Prime Minister Tony Abbott said yesterday, flagging an announcement "in the next few days".

China and 20 other countries signed a memorandum of understanding last October to establish the Beijing-headquartered US\$50 billion Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) bank.

Britain, France, Germany and Italy have also announced plans to join.

But Washington has voiced concern about whether the bank would meet international governance, environmental and social standards.

The institution is expected to address the region's burgeoning demand for transportation, dams, ports and other facilities and is seen as a potential rival to US-based institutions such as the World Bank.

Mr Abbott said his government had approached China, Australia's largest trading partner, about how the bank would be governed and would be making an announcement soon.

"We have been talking to the Chinese to try to ensure that it is in fact a multilateral institution, that it is run in all important respects by a board, that its processes are transparent, that it is genuinely accountable and that it is not controlled by any one entity," the prime minister told parliament.

"Under those circumstances we would certainly be prepared to join."

Abbott said he had several conversations with US President Barack Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe about the AIIB.

The bank has support from countries including India, Singapore, Malaysia, Cambodia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

Mr Abbott's comments came days after International Monetary Fund (IMF) head Christine Lagarde said during a visit to China that she welcomed the AIIB's establishment.

She added that the IMF would be "delighted" to cooperate with it.

– AFP

SHANGHAI

China to add three more trade zones

CHINA has given the go-ahead for three more free-trade zones, state media reported, despite the country's first project in Shanghai proving disappointing 18 months after its establishment.

A meeting of the Communist Party's politburo hosted by President Xi Jinping late March 24 approved zones in the southern province of Guangdong, eastern province of Fujian and the northern city of Tianjin, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

China's commerce ministry had already announced in December that three FTZs would be set up in those locations.

State media have said the Guangdong FTZ aims to speed economic integration with neighbouring Hong Kong, a special administrative region of China. The Fujian zone is focused on Taiwan, which China considers part of its sovereign territory. The Tianjin FTZ is part of a push to better integrate the city with nearby Beijing and Hebei province.

Media reports originally gave March 1 as the official opening date for all three, but that deadline passed. Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* newspaper later reported that the Guangdong FTZ would launch on March 18, but no opening was announced.

A statement from the politburo said the establishment of FTZs aimed to "deepen reform" and "expand opening up to explore new approaches", adding the Shanghai zone had shown "positive progress" since its founding, according to Xinhua.

The Chinese commercial hub set up its FTZ in September 2013, promising a range of financial reforms, including full convertibility of the yuan currency and free interest rates, but they remain unfulfilled.

The American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai said this month that 73 percent of the 377 companies responding to its annual business climate survey said the FTZ offers "no tangible benefits" for them. – AFP

WASHINGTON

Amazon criticises drone rules

ONLINE giant Amazon told Congress the US government is lagging in implementing rules for commercial drones, making it hard to make plans for its quick delivery system by air.

Amazon's vice president for global public policy Paul Misener said in remarks prepared for a Senate hearing that the US approval granted last week for the company's drone testing program came so late that it had already moved on to a new technology.

Mr Misener said Amazon was grateful for the approval by the Federal Aviation Administration last week but noted, "We innovated so rapidly that the [drone system] approved ... has become obsolete."

"We don't test it anymore," he said. "We've moved on to more advanced designs that we already are testing abroad. [On March 20], we asked the FAA for permission to fly one of these advanced unmanned aircraft systems [UAS] in the United States, as well, and we are hopeful that this permission will be granted quickly."

Mr Misener said that while no country has approved the Amazon Prime Air plan for drone deliveries,

the company has been seeing progress in efforts in Europe and by multilateral aviation groups.

"I'm delighted to report that these aviation authorities with whom we met in the UK and at the multinational bodies are enthusiastically pursuing regulatory frameworks and operational rules for UAS," he said.

"The approach they are taking is eminently reasonable: It is risk- and performance-based, and it is mindful of the tremendous opportunities for innovation and economic benefits that UAS present."

But in the United States, he said, the testing approved "is more restrictive than are the rules and approvals by which we conduct outdoor testing in the UK and elsewhere".

"Obtaining permission took far too long, and certainly much longer – over half a year – than it took in other countries," he said.

Mr Misener said that the United States "is catching up in permitting current commercial UAS testing", but remains behind many other countries. The new FAA-proposed rule announced last month is a

step forward, "but it doesn't go far enough," he said.

The FAA proposal does not go beyond drone operations that are within view of the operator, or "visual line of sight".

The rule proposed "only briefly requests comments on whether the rules should permit operations beyond visual line of sight and, if so, how enabling technology should be evaluated," he said.

A report presented at the hearing from the congressional Government Accountability Office supported the notion that the United States is lagging.

The report said that drone rules have been in place in Canada since 1996 and in Australia since 2002.

As of December, Australia had issued over 180 drone operating certificates for aerial surveying, photography and other commercial operations. And in Japan, the agriculture industry has used drones to apply fertilizer and pesticide for over 10 years, and more than 1000 permits have been issued for commercial drones in Europe, the report said.

– AFP

World

WORLD EDITOR: Kayleigh Long

BANGKOK

Thailand rejects bombing suspect torture allegations

THE Thai government has denied allegations raised by Amnesty International in the UK over the possible torture of bombing suspects currently detained under martial law in Thailand.

"Those people are detained because they allegedly committed misconduct and investigations are needed to probe the allegations. No one has been beaten while under detention," said Gen Prawit Wongsuwan, defence minister and deputy prime minister in charge of security

'Martial law doesn't authorise any official to beat any suspect.'

General Prajit Wongsuwan
Defence minister

affairs, on March 24.

"Martial law doesn't authorise any official to beat any suspect," he said, defending the government's treatment of detainees allegedly involved in the grenade explosion on March 7 in the parking lot of the Bangkok Criminal Court.

Amnesty International stated on March 20 that two men, Surapol Lam-suwan and Wasu Lam-laor,

were in military custody under martial law.

Four others — Charnwit Jariyanukul, Norapat Lueapol, Sansern Sriounruen and Wichai Yoosuk — told Thai Lawyers for Human Rights they were given electric shocks, punched, kicked in the head, chest and back and threatened with assault during interrogation in military detention on March 9-15. At least one had visible bruises on his chest, and marks that appear to be left by electric shocks.

The detainees, now in Bangkok Remand Prison, are among an estimated 15 people in army detention. Deputy government spokesperson Sansern Kaewkamnerd said they will listen to any concerns raised "without a hidden agenda".

Maj Gen Sansern urged people to respect authority and trust information provided by the government, rather than by news sources who make vague accusations without any evidence to back up claims.

International NGOs should weigh the reliability of the distorted information they receive, or they may "offend the feelings of Thai people", he said.

The NCPO does not want anyone to speculate about events in Thailand, because they may have a negative view or be biased since they cannot understand the Thai context, Col Winthai said.

— *Bangkok Post*

JAKARTA

Bali 9 submit evidence in last-ditch appeal

LAWYERS for two Australian drug smugglers facing execution in Indonesia submitted evidence to a court yesterday as part of the men's latest attempt to avoid the firing squad.

A French death row convict had his appeal adjourned to next week.

Australians Myuran Sukumaran and Andrew Chan, the ringleaders of the so-called "Bali Nine" drug trafficking gang, were sentenced to death in 2006 for trying to smuggle heroin out of Indonesia.

Their appeals for presidential clemency, typically a death row convict's final chance of avoiding the firing squad, were recently rejected by Indonesian President Joko Widodo.

The men, in their early 30s, are expected to be executed at the same time as eight other drug offenders. In addition to the Frenchman, these include convicts from Brazil, Nigeria, Ghana and the Philippines and one Indonesian.

Jakarta initially said the executions would take place in February and nothing could stop them going ahead. However, authorities backed off following an international outcry and are now letting all pending legal appeals run their course.

The Australians' legal team, in its latest bid to avoid execution, are arguing against Widodo's decision to reject their pleas for clemency, saying he failed to assess their rehabilitation or give reasons for his

decision.

The Jakarta State Administrative Court dismissed the bid last month, saying clemency was the president's prerogative. The Australians' lawyers are now appealing that decision.

At a brief hearing yesterday, they submitted several documents to the court related to laws on the president's prerogative, said lawyer Leonard Arintonang without giving further details.

The lawyers will return to court on March 30 with an expert witness.

Mr Sukumaran and Mr Chan were transferred earlier this month from jail on Bali to Nusakambangan prison island off Java, where they will be put to death.

Serge Atlaoui, a Frenchman on death row since 2007 after being convicted of drugs charges, is also trying to avoid the firing squad by applying for a judicial review of his sentence.

But his case at the Tangerang District Court, outside Jakarta, was adjourned yesterday until April 1 after he failed to show up for the hearing to sign paperwork that will allow the case to be transferred to the Supreme Court.

Lawyer Nancy Yuliana said there had been a "problem with regard to the funding of transportation" to bring Mr Atlaoui from jail on Nusakambangan to the court. — *AFP*



IN PICTURES

Photo: AFP

Indonesian Hindu devotees carry giant "Ogoh-ogoh" effigies symbolising evil spirits and are burned in a ritual to purify worshippers from evil in Malang, east of Nyepi, the Hindu new year. In the nearby island of Bali, tourists are encouraged to take a day in reflection, free from daily routines including work and play, as a day in full solemnity.

PHNOM PENH

UN, Cambodia, Vietnam

THE United Nations' refugee agency met this week with representatives of the Cambodian and Vietnamese governments to "discuss solutions" to the recent influx of Montagnard asylum seekers, with repatriation touted as a possible answer, the *Phnom Penh Post* has learned.

Vivian Tan, regional spokesperson for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said the meeting, which took place on March 23, was aimed at finding a resolution "in line with international standards and agreeable to all parties".

Since October, dozens of Christian Montagnards — an indigenous group from Vietnam's Central Highlands — have fled to Cambodia citing religious persecution.

Their arrival has been met with varying responses. Thirteen have so far been granted refugee status, 10 others are seeking to process their asylum claims in Phnom Penh, 13 remain in hiding in the forests of

Ratanakiri province, and — in direct violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention — dozens more have been deported back to Vietnam without due process.

According to those sent back, their deportations were the result of coordinated efforts by Vietnamese and Cambodian authorities. While Ms Tan said that no conclusions had been reached from the talks, she acknowledged that voluntary repatriation had been proposed.

In 2002, Cambodia, Vietnam and UNHCR reached a trilateral voluntary repatriation agreement after UN officials were promised access to the Central Highlands. Three years later, a tripartite memorandum of understanding was signed to repatriate refugees under controlled conditions.

The 2005 agreement came under fire from rights groups and observers, who said it authorised the forced repatriation of recognised refugees who refused resettlement abroad, and had insufficient provisions for monitoring

and protecting returnees.

A 2006 report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) highlighted the issue of returnees being persecuted for leaving. It cited interviews with some who had "doubled back", that is, they had returned but "experienced such severe persecution that they fled a second time to Cambodia".

The report said the accounts "call into serious question the credibility of UNHCR's monitoring of returnees".

Phil Robertson, deputy director of HRW's Asia division, said yesterday that the group still has "serious concerns that it is not possible to systematically and sustainably monitor the conditions for return of Montagnards to Vietnam". He added that UNHCR now has "even fewer staff in Cambodia and less capacity to take on such a mission".

"If this is being discussed, that should set off alarm bells for those who care about refugee protection in the region," he said.

Sister Denise Coghlan of the Jesuit Refugee Service Cambodia said

Obama and Netanyahu remain divided on Palestine

WORLD 16



Recovery effort underway in French Alps crash

WORLD 17



Symbolising evil during a procession before they are
eastern Java island on March 20, 2015 on the eve
Christians and residents totally stay indoors for a day of
Indonesia's minority Hindu population marks Nyepi

... meet on Montagnards

'It's nine years since all of that happened, and it still seems that refugees and asylum seekers are claiming the same religious persecution.'

Sister Denise Cohlan
Jesuit Refugee Service Cambodia

the "root cause" of the problem still needs to be addressed.

"It's nine years since all of that happened, and it still seems that refugees and asylum seekers are claiming the same religious persecution,"

she said, explaining that until the persecution ends, it is unlikely that refugees will agree to return.

Government officials would not confirm details of the March 23 talks, while the Vietnamese Embassy could not be reached.

But according to Ms Tan, other possible solutions discussed in the meeting include resettlement and local integration. UNHCR, she said, continues to "advocate that individuals wishing to seek asylum in Cambodia must be able to access the national asylum system".

Interior Ministry spokesperson General Khieu Sopheak said that no countries have yet agreed to resettle the 13 Montagnards granted refugee status earlier this month. The ministry is "worrying about this now. We don't know where to send them."

The US embassy said it had not been approached about resettling the Montagnards, but called for "durable, practical solutions for refugees and asylum seekers in accordance with international

BANGKOK

Uighur detainees to learn fate soon

A FAMILY believed to be Uighur Muslims, among hundreds detained in Thailand since last year, will learn their fate tomorrow in a court case that has sparked a diplomatic wrangle between Turkey and China.

Both countries are seeking the repatriation of the family, who use the surname Teklimakan and claim they are Turkish.

They were detained by Thai police in March 2014 after illegally entering the country along its eastern border with Cambodia.

That same month dozens of migrants also thought to be from China's mostly Muslim Uighur minority were discovered during a raid on a suspected people-smuggling camp in the Kingdom's deep south and sentenced for illegal entry.

They similarly presented themselves to police as Turkish.

The 17 Teklimakan family members - including 13 children of whom two were born in custody - were is-

sued passports by the Turkish embassy while in detention. But China has insisted they are Uighurs from its restive northwest region of Xinjiang.

During a hearing at the Southern Bangkok Criminal Court on March 24, attended by both Turkish and Chinese officials, a judge said the case was "related to [international] relations", and a decision on whether or not to release the family would be made on March 27.

Uighurs, who number around 10 million in China's violence-racked Xinjiang region, are a Turkic-speaking ethnic minority who have long chafed under Chinese control.

Responding to pressure from Beijing, countries including Cambodia, Malaysia and Pakistan have all in recent years forcibly returned fleeing Uighurs to China.

At the March 24 hearing Ahmet Idem Akay, first counsellor for the Turkish Embassy, told AFP the Teklimakan family were Turkish citizens. "For us this is a humanitarian issue,"

he said.

Chinese officials at the hearing refused to comment.

There are 355 Uighurs currently detained in Thailand, Police Lieutenant Colonel Jitti Sangthong from Thailand's immigration bureau told the court.

He said both the Chinese and Turkish embassies had been asked to help establish the family's nationality.

Later he told reporters that members of Thailand's National Security Council are due to travel to China to discuss the "sensitive issue" after an earlier trip to Turkey.

The decision on whether or not to release the Teklimakans could have important implications for the other Uighurs detained in Thailand.

"I am hoping this case might set a precedent for other Uighurs," Kessarin Tiawsakul from the Office of the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand told AFP. "It's about human rights." - AFP

COLOMBO

Nasheed cries foul on appeal effort

JAILED former Maldives president Mohamed Nasheed yesterday accused authorities of scuttling his appeal against his controversial conviction and jailing for 13 years under tough anti-terror laws.

Mr Nasheed's spokesperson said the islands' first democratically elected president has been denied a copy of the trial proceedings which he needs to lodge an appeal.

"The criminal court has tried to block the appeal at every step of the way," his spokesperson Hamid Abdul Ghafoor told AFP. "It is not that he does not want to appeal, but he is not being allowed to file his papers."

The Maldives government has resisted international pressure to release Mr Nasheed, jailed this month for ordering the arrest of a chief judge in 2012 when he was president.

Western countries, India and the UN's human rights chief have expressed concern over "flagrant irregularities" in his trial, while his lawyers have said the case was aimed at destroying his political career.

The Maldivian High Commission in Colombo denied Mr Nasheed has been stopped from lodging the appeal.

"The court was not able to release the case report as former president Mr Nasheed has refused to sign ... and without the signature of former president Mr Nasheed, the report cannot be finalised," the High Commission said in

a statement yesterday.

But Mr Ghafoor said Mr Nasheed refused to sign the report because it contained testimony that he never made and included witness accounts which were not presented in court.

"How can president Nasheed sign off on something that he never said?" Mr Ghafoor asked. "This is a mockery of justice."

The decision to prosecute Mr Nasheed under terror laws has made his conviction particularly controversial and sparked a series of protests.

- AFP

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Dated: 26th March, 2015

NEW YORK

UN threatens sanctions in wake of collapse of peace talks in South Sudan

THE UN Security Council deplored the collapse of peace talks between South Sudan's warring factions, and once more threatened sanctions in comments made on March 24.

Peace talks held in Ethiopia, brokered by the east African regional bloc IGAD, have resulted in a string of broken ceasefires, and the last round of talks collapsed on March 7.

Since then, both sides have confirmed the outbreak of fresh fighting on several fronts in the oil-rich north of the country.

The Security Council has repeatedly threatened both sides with sanctions since the peace talks failed, although none has yet been imposed.

The Security Council expressed its "profound disappointment" that President Salva Kiir and his former deputy Riek Machar - whom he accuses of planning a coup - failed to agree on a deal to set up a transitional unity government.

"In this context, the Security Council reiterates its willingness to impose sanctions against those who threaten the peace, security or stability of South Sudan," the UN's international peace and security organ said in a unanimous declaration.

The punitive measures could include an arms embargo and the designation of senior officials "responsible for actions or policies that threaten the peace, security or stability of South Sudan", thus freezing their assets and barring them from travel, it added.

The Council accused Mr Kiir and Mr Machar of violating their obligations in pursuing hostilities.

On March 3, the Security Council adopted a resolution to set up a sanctions regime that would punish those who block peace efforts with an assets freeze and global travel ban.

A panel of experts is due to help a



An internally displaced girl carries firewood in Ganyiel village of Panyijar County of Unity State on March 21.

Photo: AFP

sanctions committee, due to meet for the first time yesterday, designate the relevant individuals and entities.

The UN Security Council pressed the African Union to make public "as soon as possible" a report by its commission of inquiry on South Sudan.

According to a draft of the report seen by AFP, the panel fiercely criticizes Mr Kiir and Mr Machar and calls for them to be excluded from power.

It recommends that the country be led in the interim by officials mandated by the UN and the African Union,

in order to prevent an "unaccountable political class" from leading the country.

The council's declaration was made public just as South Sudan's parliament voted to extend Mr Kiir's mandate by three years, formally

ditching any plans for elections this year.

In its declaration, the council made no mention of the decision, seen as going against peace efforts by regional mediators.

- AFP

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KANO

Goodluck, Jonathan

NIGERIA'S federal police chief on March 24 ordered restrictions on movement on election day this weekend, as the country goes to the polls.

Police said there would be a "total restriction" of vehicles between 8am when polling stations open, and 5pm.

Ambulances, fire service trucks and others on "essential duties" would be exempt, said Inspector General of Police Suleiman Abba.

Travel restrictions are commonplace for elections in Nigeria, where politically linked violence by roaming gangs of hired thugs has been common.

Abba said the measures were designed to "ensure adequate security" in the March 28 vote, in which President Goodluck Jonathan is hoping to win a second term of office.

Security has been a major concern for the general election, with Nigeria's electoral commission forced to postpone a vote scheduled for February 14 because of the deadly Boko Haram insurgency.

The decision was made after the country's national security adviser said soldiers deployed on operations to fight the Islamist militants would be unable to provide security if required.

Claimed military successes against the Islamist rebels over the last month have raised fears that they will revert to suicide attacks and bombings, including at polling stations. - AFP

SEYNE

Search resumes in French Alps Airbus crash

FRENCH rescuers resumed the search yesterday for the remains of the 150 people, including 16 schoolchildren, killed when a Germanwings Airbus slammed into the side of a nearly inaccessible mountain in the Alps.

Helicopters took off from a nearby improvised base, heading for the rugged area where flight 4U9525 crashed on March 24, spreading debris and body parts of the mostly German and Spanish victims over a wide area.

‘Ground access is horrible ... It’s a very high mountainous area, very steep, and it’s terrible to get there except from the air during winter.’

Francois Pie
Local resident

Officials are hunting for clues to why the plane, operated by German flag carrier Lufthansa’s budget subsidiary, entered a fatal eight-minute descent on its route between Barcelona and Duesseldorf.

No distress signal was sent and the crew failed to respond to desperate attempts at contact from ground control.

The cockpit voice recorder recovered from the wreckage has been found damaged and has been taken

to Paris for analysis, a source close to the inquiry said yesterday.

“The black box that was found is the CVR,” the source told AFP on condition of anonymity. The cockpit voice recorder (CVR) “was damaged. It has been transferred to Paris this morning.”

A second so-called black box, in this case recording flight data, has yet to be found.

Video images from a government helicopter on March 24 showed a desolate snow-flecked moonscape, with steep ravines covered in scree. Debris was strewn across the mountainside, pieces of twisted metal smashed into tiny bits.

Wreckage was believed to be scattered over 4 acres of remote and inaccessible mountainous terrain, hampering rescue efforts.

The plane was “totally destroyed”, a local member of parliament who flew over the site said, describing the scene as “horrendous”.

“The biggest body parts we identified are not bigger than a briefcase,” one investigator said.

More than 300 police officers and 380 firefighters have been mobilised for the grisly task of searching the site.

Lieutenant Colonel Jean-Marc Menichini said a squad of 30 mountain rescue police would resume attempts to reach the crash site by helicopter at dawn yesterday, while a further 65 police were seeking access on foot. Five investigators had spent the night camped at the site.

It would take “at least a week” to search the remote site, he said.

“Ground access is horrible ... It’s a very high mountainous area, very steep, and it’s terrible to get there except from the air during winter,” local resident Francoise Pie said.



Rescue helicopters search the area. Photo: AFP

Family members of the dead were to arrive yesterday at the rescuers’ logistics base in a village near the crash site.

French President Francois Hollande, his German counterpart Angela Merkel and Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy were also expected to arrive in the area yesterday.

The dead included six crew and 144 passengers, a majority of them German and Spanish. They included 16 German teenagers returning home from a school trip.

Their high school in the small German town of Haltern was to hold a memorial event yesterday to honour the victims.

“This is certainly the darkest day in the history of our city,” said a tearful Bodo Klimpel, the town’s mayor. “It is the worst thing you can imagine.”

Spain, meanwhile, declared three days of mourning and was to hold a minute of silence across the country at noon yesterday. Spanish King Felipe VI cut short his first state visit to France the day before minutes after it began when he heard news of the tragedy.

Opera singers Oleg Bryjak, 54, and Maria Radner, 33, were also on board,

flying to their home city of Duesseldorf. Radner was travelling with her husband and baby, one of two infants on board the plane.

French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve said yesterday, “[A] terrorism theory is not the theory we’re focusing on.”

Germanwings, the growing low-cost subsidiary of the prestigious Lufthansa carrier, had an unblemished safety record and there was still no clue as to what could have caused the disaster.

The rapid descent was “unexplained”, Marseilles prosecutor Brice Robin said.

Weather did not appear to be a factor in the crash, with conditions calm at the time, French weather officials said.

Lufthansa said it was working on the assumption that the crash was an “accident”.

“Anything else would be speculation,” Lufthansa vice president Heike Birlenbach told reporters in Barcelona.

She said the 24-year-old Airbus A320 had undergone its last routine safety check on March 23.

Germanwings executive Thomas

Winkelmann said the pilot at the controls had “more than 10 years of experience” and some 6000 flying hours on an Airbus under his belt.

It was the deadliest air crash on the French mainland since 1974 when a Turkish Airlines plane crashed, killing 346 people.

Germanwings said 67 Germans were believed to have been on board, while Spain said 45 people with Spanish-sounding names were on the flight.

Two Colombians, two Argentines and two Australians were among the dead, according to their governments, while Mr Hollande said Turks may also have been aboard.

Two Japanese were “very likely” on board, their government said. Belgium and Denmark said at least one of their nationals was on board, while Mexico said three of its citizens were believed to be among the victims and Britain said its nationals were also on board.

A Swedish third division football team booked seats on the fatal flight after changing flights at the last minute. “May they rest in peace,” Dalkurd FF goalkeeper Frank Pettersson wrote on Twitter. — AFP



IN PICTURES

Photo: AFP

Students gather at a memorial of flowers and candles in front of the Joseph-Koenig-Gymnasium secondary school in Haltern am See, western Germany on March 25, from where some of the Germanwings plane crash victims came. Sixteen German teenagers and two teachers on a school exchange trip were assumed to be among the 150 dead in the crash of a passenger jet in the French Alps, officials said.

WASHINGTON

Obama and Netanyahu split on two-state proposal

US President Barack Obama has insisted that his disagreement with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu represents a substantial policy difference and not a personal vendetta, in comments made on March 24.

As the Israeli premier works to build a new coalition government at home, he faces one of the worst confrontations in his stormy relationship with the White House.

He has tried to play down declarations he made during his recent victorious election campaign in which he ruled out the creation of a Palestinian state and stigmatised Arab voters.

But Mr Obama has not let him off the hook and, after White House leaks accused Israel of spying on US-Iran nuclear talks, he insisted the allies have more tough talking ahead.

"The issue is a very clear, substantive challenge," Mr Obama told reporters at a joint White House news conference with Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani.

"We believe that two states is the best path forward for Israel's security, for Palestinian aspirations and for regional stability.

"That's our view and that continues to be our view. And Prime Minister Netanyahu has a different approach."

Mr Obama denied it was a matter of personal animosity between himself and Mr Netanyahu, describing their notoriously cold relations as

"businesslike".

But he said the United States still backs the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, and that he would take the issue up with Mr Netanyahu's government once it is formed.

"This is a matter of figuring out how we get through a knotty policy difference that has great consequences for both countries and the region," he said.

Since Mr Netanyahu's party won Israel's March 17 election, not a day has passed without a US comment - official or otherwise - on the implications of his hardline rhetoric.

During campaigning he said he would block a Palestinian state and on polling day raised the specter of an Israeli Arab rush to the polls to drum up right-wing votes.

Although Mr Netanyahu has since tried to backtrack - denying he renege on the idea of a two-state solution and apologising for giving offence - the damage has been done.

In addition to Mr Obama's stern reminder, US officials have been feeding criticism of Israel's tactics to the American media.

In the latest headline, *The Wall Street Journal* reported US officials accusing Israel of spying on nuclear negotiations with Iran with the aim of thwarting an Obama foreign policy priority.

"It is one thing for the US and Israel to spy on each other. It is another thing for Israel to steal US secrets and play them back to US legislators to undermine US diplomacy," a senior official told the paper.

Current and former US officials quoted in the report said they believed Israel had passed on the information to US lawmakers in a bid to undermine support for the emerging deal.

In a sign of jitters in Israel - used to unquestioned close ties to its senior ally - Israeli officials rushed to deny the report, which caused little fuss in Washington, where Israeli espionage is accepted as a given.

Israel's Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman flatly denounced the report as "incorrect and inaccurate".

And Intelligence Minister Yuval Steinitz said, "We categorically deny these allegations. Israel does not spy on the United States, period."

Jonathan Rynhold, an expert on US-Israel relations at Bar Ilan University, called the level of mutual animosity "unprecedented".

"I don't think we've ever had as bad a relationship between a president and a prime minister, and of course that has policy consequences - will the US always use its veto for Israel?" he told AFP.

Last week, the White House said it may withdraw crucial diplomatic cover for Israel at the UN Security Council as



Israeli and foreign activists join Palestinian protesters on March 22 in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem to support the Sub Laban family, which is under threat of eviction from their house by Israeli authorities. Photo: AFP

part of a policy re-evaluation.

The United States has traditionally used its veto to block UN resolutions seen as unfairly anti-Israeli, such as those condemning its security tactics on occupied Palestinian land.

A withdrawal of US cover could prove tricky for Israel, especially if the Palestinians resubmit once again a resolution setting an end date for the Israeli occupation.

Mr Netanyahu angered the Obama administration this month, breaking diplomatic protocol to address the US Congress in a bid to scupper the White House-backed nuclear deal with Iran.

Then his electioneering comments only added fuel to the fire, putting Mr

Netanyahu firmly in the way of a decades-old US policy by placing Israel in open opposition to a two-state deal.

During the vote, Mr Netanyahu attempted to mobilize support by saying, "The rule of the right wing is in danger: Arab voters are going to the polls in droves."

This was widely seen as a racially divisive tactic and was roundly condemned by US officials, forcing Mr Netanyahu into a partial climbdown - he apologised for any offence caused.

Some in Israel, however, see the accusations and criticism coming from Washington as sour grapes from a US administration who would like to have seen Mr Netanyahu's coalition fall. - AFP

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IN PICTURES

Photo: AFP

Members of a coalition of fighters made up of local tribes, Popular Resistance Committees and supporters of the southern Yemeni separatists, all opposing the Shiite-Huthi movement, drive a tank at the Al-Anad airbase on March 24. President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi fled the country yesterday, according to a presidential guard, as anti-government forces advanced toward his refuge of Aden in the country's south.

PESHAWAR

US drone kills 13 militants

A US drone strike in eastern Afghanistan has killed 13 militants linked to the Pakistani Taliban in an area close to the countries' rugged border, officials confirmed on March 24, as the US negotiates its exit from the country.

The strike came in the Nasyan area of the eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar, close to the border with the Pakistani tribal district of Khyber.

Pakistani security officials said the militants belonged to the Lashkar-e-Islam, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Abdullah Azam Brigade and Haqqani network militant groups.

"The strike took place when an important meeting of militants was in progress and a car bomb was being prepared for some suicide attack," a Pakistani security official told AFP.

"There are two Haqqani network commanders and six TTP militants among the dead," the official said, adding the rest belonged to the two other groups.

The feared Haqqani network is frequently accused of sending fighters and suicide bombers against US and NATO troops in neighbouring Afghanistan. TTP is Pakistan Taliban's umbrella militant group, while Lashkar-e-Islam militant group is based in lawless Khyber tribal district bordering Afghanistan.

A NATO spokesperson in Kabul confirmed the strike and said it was carried out on March 23, but gave no details on the number of casualties.

"We can confirm there was a US precision strike during an operation in Nasyan district, Nangarhar province, 23 March," the spokesperson said.

The strike is the latest evidence of increasing cooperation between the two neighbours and US-led forces in combating TTP militants who have fled across the border from a Pakistani military operation.

After years of fractious ties and mistrust, Kabul and Islamabad are improving relations under new Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and both countries have agreed to take action against militants using their territory to launch attacks.

Pakistan's army chief visited Kabul after a deadly Taliban attack on a school in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar in December that killed 154 people, mostly schoolchildren.

The strike comes at a time when President Barack Obama is to meet with Mr Ghani, who has asked Washington for "flexibility" on the pace of US troop withdrawals from the war-torn country.

With the end of the US-led NATO combat mission in 2014, Afghan forces have taken over responsibility for security across the nation, still wrestling with a resilient Taliban insurgency.

In a stark reminder of the violence still racking Afghanistan, gunmen killed 13 bus passengers near Kabul early on March 24. - AFP

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Photo: Wade Guyitt

Remarkable stones tell tales of Chin ancestors



NYEIN EI EI HTWE

nyeineiehtwe23@gmail.com

IN stone, alabaster or in concrete, they stand alongside the winding paths, on bare and windswept hilltops and between the villages, mutely recalling those who made them. The remark-stones of the remote northwest have long been beacons of memory, showing travellers not just the pathways through space but also of time.

These hand-carved monuments – neither gravestone nor simple memorial – join the list of the unique customs of Chin State.

“Some of our great-grandfathers *So Bwa* [chiefs of tribes] wanted to record how they lived their lives, and what they owned,” says Salai Ceu Ann, a remark-stone maker from Haka city, Chin State. “So they kept notes, and when they died, their families put up these remarkable stones for them.”

Some chose to inscribe facts and figures on their stones: how many festivals they hosted, or how many pigs, cows and *mythun* (*na nauk* – a kind of hill cow) they slaughtered, or how many houses and fields they owned in life. Stones also commonly list the loved ones of the monument maker.

“The purpose of the stones is to teach future generations how their ancestors lived,” Salai Ceu Ann explains.

Because he is the only remark-stone maker in Haka, Salai Ceu Ann’s work can be found scattered the length of the State – from Tlangtang township in the north to Madupi township in the south.

In the 1980s, Salai Ceu Ann attended art school in Mandalay. After his training, he moved back to his hometown Haka to be an artist. He has worked hard to keep the Chin tradition of remark-stones alive.

“I found it difficult to have enough work just making remark-stones,” he says. “I tried to continue not only for business, but to keep our custom alive as well.”

The stones are ordered only after a death, which makes it hard to anticipate fluctuations in demand. “I can’t say how many I’ve made,” he said.

Though some used to lay remark-stones on their relatives’ graves – divided, in Chin State, into sections for Buddhists, Catholics and Baptists – these monuments are not headstones.

“If someone dies in another country, their relatives will set a stone on that person’s favourite place – somewhere he always visited when he was alive – to let other people know.”

While Salai Ceu Ann used to ask workers to find suitable stones for his work out in the hills, he now often resorts to cement, a less unforgiving canvas. It takes only one-and-a-half days to chisel script into, much less than for the living rock. “Real stones are made of sterner stuff, and more expensive, because I have to pay the workers to dig them up,” he explained. But each kind will stand for half a century or more.

True stone, measuring 75cm by 18cm (2 feet high by 1 foot wide), costs K100,000 (US\$96), twice as much as the cement version. But even in memorials there are fashion trends, and the hot new thing is alabaster, transported from Mandalay.

“Alabaster is shinier and more beautiful, but hard to inscribe. Wealthy people prefer it, though it costs the same as a real stone,” said Salai Ceu Ann.

He once tried painting the remarks, but they would wash off after a few years.

“So I chisel first, then colour in the words, usually in blue, which represents peace,” he said.

Not only for the dead, remark-stones commemorate festivals and significant events.

While his work is physically demanding, Salai Ceu Ann is happy he can maintain a Chin custom.

“My parents loved this work. When they died, I made stones for them and my Chin people,” he said.

Salai Ceu Ann wants to become more creative, and is now learning to design using computers.

“The stones are a mark of how each person lived their life, especially how our Chin people lived in the world. I am always satisfied to think my handiwork will help preserve our Chin history into the future,” Salai Ceu Ann said.

While many Chin people are moving to other countries for work and study, these small, thoughtful monuments scattered throughout the hills maintain a link for Chin people with their culture and land.



Photo: Salai Hung Tun Gei



Photo: Salai Hung Tun Gei

Furballs join the fight against cancer

JENNIFER HUGET

THE latest weapon in the war on cancer harnesses the power of a heretofore untapped resource: our love of funny online cat videos.

Cats vs. Cancer, a non-profit organisation and website launched in December by buddies Tom O'Connor and Eddie Peña, is counting on people's seemingly insatiable interest in online feline frivolity.

By posting cute and silly kitty videos, the two aim to garner enough page views to attract advertisers, with ad revenues going to a different cancer-related charity each month. Visitors can also make direct donations via a "Donate Meow!" button on the site. But simply watching the videos and spreading the word via social media is, O'Connor and Peña say, helping fight cancer.

In its first month, the site attracted about 130,000 visitors, O'Connor says. That's an admittedly tiny number in the grand scheme of internet hits: Some YouTube cat videos have millions of hits. But he says that's not bad considering there's been little promotion and no advertising other than a free placement on an electronic billboard in New York's Times Square, "a very generous donation from the company that owns the billboard", O'Connor says. The site's most-clicked-on video to

date? That would be "lazy cat can't reach arrogant pigeon."

In choosing organisations to receive their donations, O'Connor says, "We're looking at smaller charities that are doing good work

"you don't have to make a million-dollar donation to make a million-dollar impact."

Adam White

Co-Founder, Vickie S Honeycutt Foundation

and for which maybe our contribution will be a bit more meaningful" than for one of the major players. They also seek geographic variety, "to spread the love across the country", O'Connor says.

For now, the kitties subsist on the thin gruel of revenue from small ads that a Google service generates and places on the Cats vs. Cancer page. The company gets a small amount when an ad is clicked on. O'Connor says those pay only pennies per page view. O'Connor hopes that by next year the site will have enough visitors that he can sell ads directly to companies and raise more money for the project.

In December, he says, the ad revenue - several hundred dollars - went to the Vickie S Honeycutt Foundation in Charlotte, USA, which provides funds to support teachers battling cancer. Adam White, one of the foundation's founders, says, "Cats vs. Cancer is such a great gesture and a great idea. Tom [O'Connor] kept saying, 'I know it won't be much,' but I say you don't have to make a million-dollar donation to make a million-dollar impact."

Bridget Fitzpatrick, development director of Brent's Place in Denver, USA, which was earmarked for January's funds, says, "Cats vs. Cancer turned out to be a fun and engaging fundraiser for us. Our families have been following the cats" on the website for entertainment - and to help drive up the page-view numbers. As for the likely size of the donation, Fitzpatrick says that while she anticipates it won't be large, "It's the individual, small donations like this that keep our organisation running."

So how do they pick the videos?



Cats may be the new secret weapon in the fight against cancer. Photo: Wiki Commons

Same way we all do. "We go to YouTube and type in 'cat' and any other thing you can think of," O'Connor says. "Cat versus lemon" or "cat versus rice cooker." They also check the "cat stuff" on other popular video-sharing sites, trying to "stay abreast of trending videos as they begin to go viral".

What about dogs? Some recent

reports suggest dog videos have gotten more popular than cat videos these days. O'Connor says he wasn't aware of that trend. But he allows that if things go as planned with Cats vs. Cancer, dog videos could well come into play one day.

"We are Cats vs. Cancer," he says, "but we aren't anti-dog. We love dogs, too." - Washington Post

Struggling artist's lifelong dream comes true



U Phone Myint poses with one of his works. Photos: Naing Wynn Htoon

ZON PANN PWINT
zonpann08@gmail.com

THE dream of a lifetime has come true for a Mandalay artist. At the age of 60, U Phone Myint has opened his first solo exhibition of 43 paintings, from March 25th.

A graduate of the University of Arts and Culture, U Phone Myint spends alternate days working as a security officer at Myanmar Pharmaceutical Factory in Pyin Oo Lwin, earning the money he needs to pursue his hobby. He draws landscapes and portraits if commissioned.

Hmaw Kabyar (Magic Poem) is on show at Gallery 65 on Yaw Min Gyi Road, Yangon.

"I've been working for this for 25 years," he said.

The artist grew up in Pyay and met his wife in Mandalay. He once ran a gallery at nearby U Bein Bridge.

He said his love for his mother was the inspiration for his modern paintings. He also depicts the panorama of rural life in Mandalay, cow-carts driving down the dusty roads.

"An artist needs canvas and paper, brushes and paints. These are not cheap. Even for a professional with passion, it is a hard calling," he said.

It cost him K1.5 million (US\$1450) to produce his 43 paintings and another K500,000 (\$483) to have

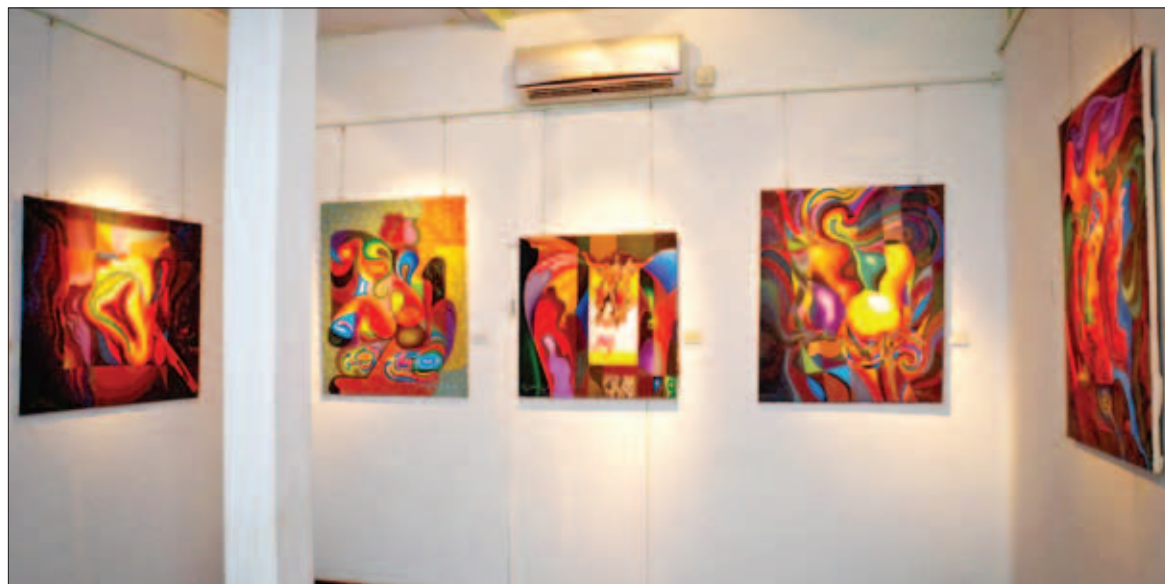
them transported to Yangon for the exhibition.

"Some of my colleagues have to abandon their passion in order to work for a living. Some fortunate ones earn enough from their art to pursue that passion," said U Phone Myint.

"Without money, the artist can't turn his inspiration and the beauty of nature into artworks for the viewers," he said.

When he graduated from university, he earned a living as an art teacher and sold a few landscapes. Sometimes he drew posters. But he couldn't earn much.

"I never abandoned my hobby. I continued drawing whether it earned well or not," he said.



Bringing poetry to the people

CHARLOTTE ROSE
charlottelola.rose@gmail.com

PITTED against a collective obsession with mobile gaming, karaoke and K-Pop, there is a sense that Myanmar's creative arts are losing their way; that artists are struggling to find the audience that, surely, they deserve. For poets in particular, this is not so much a local struggle than it is an international one: Throughout the world, poetry is a much-maligned, much-misunderstood art form that eschews mass appeal.

And no one is more aware of this than poets themselves.

"One of my friends once asked me what I do. When I told him I was a poet, he thought I was strange," said Maw Nwei, who describes himself as a "conceptual or post-modern" poet.

"Poetry is not popular because it is not entertainment. It's on the margin.

People are working hard every day to get by - they're not interested in intellectual art. They want to watch Burmese dramas and relax. Poetry is far away from the people," he added.

This is something that Maw Nwei, 25, and his poet friends, Hmuu Thit and Thu Ku Ma, want to change. With the help of a team of artists, they are hosting an independent poetry event, "The Cluster Art", which they hope will help to raise the profile of poetry in Myanmar.

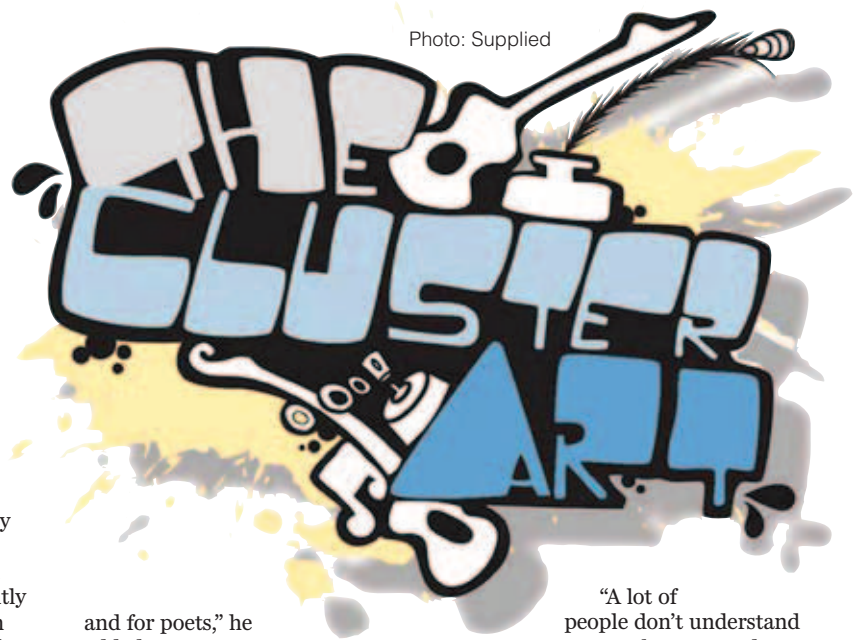
"Our main objective is to promote the value and role of poetry. In Myanmar, only poets visit poetry events, so we want to reach out to the general public," Maw Nwei said. "It's only the first step, and we know we won't change the way people see poetry overnight, but we just want people to see that Myanmar poetry is not bad. It is very high quality compared with other Southeast Asian countries," he added,

The event, which will be held on

March 27 at Yangon's Institut Francais, will include poetry recitals by 20 young poets, as well as well-known contemporary poet Zayar Lynn, organiser of Yangon's annual UNESCO World Poetry Day event, who was recently invited to perform at the London Southbank Centre's "Festival of the World".

The event will also feature performances by well-known punk-rock band Big Bag as well as other musicians, graffiti artists and performance artists, though Maw Nwei emphasises the main focus is on poetry.

"This is the first event of its kind in Myanmar. There are no poetry events with entry charges: Many poets read at events but they aren't paid, which shows a lack of respect for poetry," said Maw Nwei. "Do not misunderstand, this is not a commercial event. We do not want money, we want respect for poetry



and for poets," he added.

Maw Nwei says he hopes large numbers will attend the event - which he estimates has cost around US\$2000 to organise - but says he is "preparing for the worst".

"This is the very first event and a lot of people don't know about poetry so they don't want to come. Even my friends don't want to come!" he said.

"I just hope people will give it a try and come and listen to the poetry. I'll be pleased even if they just learn a little bit."

Maw Nwei admits that readers are often weary of overtly intellectual poems.

"A lot of people don't understand conceptual poetry and conceptual artwork. Even poets don't understand it. But I don't want people to know about conceptual poetry - I just want them to know about poetry," he said.

"I'm not anything famous. I'm just a normal poet. Some people might criticise me but I don't care. I just want to do my best to promote poetry in Myanmar."

The Cluster Art will be held at Institut Francais, 340 Pyay Road, on March 27 at 6-9:30pm. Tickets are available on the door and cost K3000.

BEIJING

Authorities make song and dance over performers



Members of a Yangko dance team perform by the street to celebrate the lantern festival in Jilin, northeast China's Jilin province. Photo: AFP

IN China, few activities escape the watchful eye of the state - and soon, that will include square dancing.

Ever-growing numbers of enthusiastic dancers - usually damas, or elderly women - have gathered on the streetcorners of China's cities in recent years to gyrate in unison.

Often clad in matching outfits and wielding fans or other props, they gather around dinner time, performing choreographed moves to sometimes thumping dance music piped through a portable boombox - or even a live band.

But if the General Administration of Sport and the Ministry of Culture have their way, the nightly routine will be strictly regulated.

"Square dancing represents the collective aspect of Chinese culture, but now it seems that the overenthusiasm of participants has dealt it a harmful blow with disputes over noise and venues," fitness official Liu Guoyong told the state-run *China Daily* newspaper on March 24.

Liu is the chief of the General Administration of Sport's mass fitness department.

"So, we have to guide it with national standards and regulations," he said.

According to the *China Daily*, Chinese authorities have hired an "expert panel" to choreograph 12 state-approved square dances.

The dances "will be introduced to local fitness sites in 31 provinces and municipalities in the next five months", the newspaper said, adding that authorities have yet to decide standards on music volume, dance times and venues.

Square dancing has become an improbably hot topic in China, with stories on dancing damas - not all of them flattering - lighting up state media.

Some urban dwellers have complained that the elderly groovers blast their music until late at night, disturbing the peace and quiet of local residents.

In the central Chinese city

of Wuhan, a simmering dispute between enthusiastic damas and their irritated neighbours made headlines in 2013 when the residents threw coins, rocks and - ultimately - faeces at the group in a bid to make them stop.

Last year, photos of a group of middle-aged Chinese women performing a square dance routine outside the Louvre in Paris set off a debate over whether the pastime had gone too far.

A video of several women attempting to perform a square dance on board a crowded passenger train in China went viral last year, sparking further controversy.

"All the negative comments on square-dancing are about reckless practising without caring about the public benefits," fitness trainer and square dancing expert Wang Guangcheng told the *China Daily*.

"The unified drills will help keep the dancing on the right track where they can be performed in a socially responsible way," he added. - AFP

What's on

TODAY

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 & University Avenue. Doors 5pm
Hmaw gabyar solo art exhibition by artist Hmaw Sayar (Phon Myint). Gallery 65, 65 Yaw Min Gyi Road (behind Parkroyal Hotel), Dagon. 9am-5pm

Tomorrow

First solo exhibition of Aung Soe Min. Pansodan Scene, 144 Pansodan, second floor - across from the Ganesh Temple. 10am-6pm
The Cluster Art Festival of poetry, essay, music, performance, live graffiti and digital poetry. Institut Francais de Birmanie, 340 Pyay Road. 6pm

Got an event? | List it in What's On! | whatsonmt@gmail.com



IN PICTURES

Photo: AFP

A couple stroll down the graffiti-adorned Hosier lane in Melbourne, Australia. The world-famous laneway is celebrated for its high-quality graffiti art, often revealing political statements.



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RIO 2016

500 days till summer

Rio races to be ready for the 2016 Olympics

As March 24 marked 500 days to go before it stages South America's first ever Olympic Games, Rio is straining at the leash to be ready - but a key target of dealing with pollution in the bay hosting sailing events is floating out of reach.

In having to overhaul crumbling infrastructure, polluted waters and protests notably over the choice of a nature reserve to host the return of golf to the Games, organisers could almost be forgiven for seeing the undertaking as one mammoth discipline - a giant obstacle course.

Last April, International Olympic Committee vice president John Coates slammed preparations as the "worst ever" and warned "the situation is critical on the ground" following several inspection visits.

Organisers responded by creating a taskforce to monitor progress and IOC president Thomas Bach insisted

'I think it is a shame Guanabara Bay has not been totally cleaned up. I think it is a missed opportunity,'

Eduardo Paes
Mayor of Rio



Olympic mascot Vinicius perched atop the Sugarloaf Mountain cable car in Rio de Janeiro to advertise 500 days until the start of the 2016 Games. Photo: AFP

he was "very satisfied" following last month's three-day meeting of the IOC's executive committee in Rio.

Although city mayor Eduardo Paes made combative comments on March 24 praising the city's efforts to get ready, he admitted to concern over the Games' environmental impact.

Green campaigners and athletes alike have slammed yachting site Guanabara Bay, picturesque but a smelly dumping ground for refuse amid an ongoing struggle to clean up waters which biologists say also risk contamination from superbacteria in adjoining rivers which are resistant to antibiotics.

State authorities admit Rio will struggle to meet its pledge to treat 80 percent of the raw sewage which floats into the bay, offering a stark contrast to the postcard image organisers offered up to mark 500 days in depicting Olympic mascot Vinicius perched atop the Sugarloaf Mountain cable car.

Paes himself admitted dissatisfaction over the bay clean-up, originally supposed to be total, then reduced to clearing 80pc of raw sewage, that now appearing more wishful thinking than a target with only around 49pc reached to date.

"As a Rio resident I think it is a shame Guanabara Bay has not been totally cleaned up. I think it is a missed opportunity," Paes told SporTV on March 23, while insisting competitor health would not be at risk with the Games being held in the cleanest part of the bay.

"Cleaning up the bay is an important legacy objective," organisers told

AFP in stressing the infrastructural and environmental legacy is "the primary focus" 17 months out from the August 5, 2016, opening.

The siting of the Olympic golf course in an ecological reserve has also enraged green campaigners, furious at the potential effect on wildlife.

Tuesday, Paes insisted the operation to build the course involved recovering a "totally degraded" area.

Paes also told SporTV the Olympics would greatly benefit urban mobility in Rio as new rapid transit bus services and a light rail system come on stream - although a new metro line is only scheduled to open weeks before the Games begin.

"Everybody knows Rio has many problems and won't be perfect in 2016 - but it will be much better," said Paes, who insisted the 37 billion reais (US\$11.8 billion) bill has been carefully costed with around half private cash.

A total of 7.5 million Games tickets will go on sale on the official website www.rio2016.com from March 31 with prices ranging from 40 reais (\$13) to 1200 (\$383).

Those who have registered online over the past month will from March 31 be able to buy, with some two-thirds of tickets expected to be distributed in July and August lotteries.

A full program of test events involving 7800 athletes was unveiled last week, as Sao Paulo's Corinthians Arena was confirmed as one of seven football venues in six cities, including Manaus in Amazonia.

Rio needs planning, not Games, says economist

RIO de Janeiro needs proper planned investment, rather than rushing through improvements tailored to a three-week Olympic Games in August next year, a top US authority on major sports events planning said March 24.

"The Olympics are not the investment you need, or maybe 20 percent. Why not spend 80pc of your money on the stuff you do need? Resources are scarce," Andrew Zimbalist, professor of economics at Smith College, told AFP.

Zimbalist, whose recent book *Circus Maximus* is a study in the benefits - or otherwise - of staging World Cups and Olympics, noted the London Games of 2012 had required less in terms of infrastructure investment than Rio, which is spending roughly US\$11.8 billion a mix of private and public cash on the event.

"Rio is much more dislocating and expensive and more of a strain on the system. There's much more commotion" in displacing people from some residential areas being given over to the Games and connecting four different districts via new bus and light rail services.

"I am confident they will find a way to pull off the events," predicted Zimbalist, who has worked as a consultant in Latin America for the United Nations Development Programme.

But he expressed concern at the febrile political atmosphere which last week saw hundreds of thousands of protesters take to the streets to express anger at a huge corruption scandal at state oil firm Petrobras which has left the government of President Dilma Rousseff reeling.

Two years ago Brazil saw even larger protests over rising living costs and the cost of staging the World Cup whose price tag was similar to the Olympic tab.

"This is pushing Brazilians to a tipping point as most of the costs will not be recovered. They are helping to create a large budget hole" at a time when the economy is struggling, Zimbalist warned in a negative assessment ahead of South America's first-ever Olympiad.

"Look at the recent public protests - [hosting the Games] is taking a very fragile and exposed system

and making the wounds rawer than before."

Dubbing the Games a "poor excuse for investment," he added, "Brazil needs to learn in the long run how to plan without the Olympics standing over its heads with a cudgel."

Zimbalist indicated in a telephone interview that Boston, chosen as the US candidate to host the 2024 Summer Games, would face similar arguments over cost effectiveness, given the International Olympic Committee exercises a monopoly in selling Games rights.

Recent bids have attracted dwindling numbers of candidate cities - the 2022 Winter Games has just two bidders in Almaty and Beijing - amid concerns that costs will spiral out of control.

Zimbalist praised IOC president Thomas Bach as "innovative, intelligent" for seeking to encourage more modest bids and overhauling the movement with his Olympic Agenda 2020.

But the economist worried that might in itself bring more cities to the table looking to trump those trying to keep spending down.

CRICKET

Spin or seam? India confident of passing Sydney test

INDIA will go into today's World Cup semi-final against Australia in Sydney confident of success irrespective of whether the wicket took turn or assisted fast bowlers, opener Rohit Sharma said.

The wear and tear at the end of a long season was evident when the covers were removed at the Sydney Cricket ground yesterday, revealing a dry, brown pitch that would glad- den India more than their rivals.

South African spinners Imran Tahir and JP Duminy shared seven wickets to bowl out Sri Lanka for 133 in the quarter-final at the SCG last week, setting up a nine-wicket win for the Proteas.

But the bat dominated the ball in previous World Cup games at the venue, with Australia piling up 376 for nine against Sri Lanka and South Africa smashing 408 for five off the West Indies' attack.

Australian coach Darren Lehmann predicted a high-scoring game, but Sharma said India were not sweating over the nature of the wicket.

"It does not worry us what sort of wicket we get because we are confident of doing well on any surface," said Sharma, who scored a century in the quarter-final against Bangladesh in Melbourne.

"We have taken 70 wickets in seven matches, bowled out the opposition every time, so we know what we need to do.

"Our seamers have done well and so have the spinners. We are ready for anything that we get."

Mahendra Singh Dhoni's men have confounded critics by recovering from a winless bilateral tour of Australia before the World Cup to brush aside all-comers in the tournament.

Starting with two wins against

Pakistan and South Africa, India won all six group matches to top Pool B and then downed spirited Bangladesh by 109 runs in the quarter-finals.

Besides bowling out their rivals in all games, India have piled up 300-plus scores every time they have batted first.

India have beaten Australia just once in 35 years in a one-day international at the Sydney Cricket Ground and the hosts have won all six semi-finals they have contested since the inaugural event in 1975.

Sharma, who had heated on-field exchanges with David Warner during the preceding tri-series, said he expected a fiery contest between two strong rivals.

"Look a bit of sledging is okay as long as boundaries are not crossed," he said. "The Indian team will not cross the line, but we will not back down either." — AFP

YACHTING

Chinese boat keels over in Southern Ocean 'mayhem'

CHINESE entrant Dongfeng Race Team was one of four boats in the Volvo Ocean Race fleet to keel over in the Southern Ocean on March 24 as the fleet experienced its roughest conditions since the event started last October.

The all-women's crew of Team SCA (Sweden), Dongfeng and MAPFRE (Spain) all suffered "Chinese gybes" — with the boats briefly tipped on their sides — during 12 hours of drama as they headed towards Cape Horn.

Another competitor, Abu Dhabi Ocean Racing, also endured a drama-filled night, reporting "a massive wipe-out", although it was not pitched on its side in the same way as the other three.

Miraculously, no injuries from any of the crews were reported although the boats were assessing how much damage had been done in the incidents after they were returned upright.

Charles Caudrelier, the French skipper of Dongfeng, also gave a graphic description of the toppling of his boat.

"This will be a great and amusing story to share over a beer or to my grandchildren in a few years' time — but last night it was hell," he wrote.

"Laid flat on the water with the boat heeled at 90 degrees at 48 degrees South, with 40 knots of wind (75 kilometres an hour) and five metre seas is really not fun at all."

MAPFRE's Onboard Reporter Francisco Vignale described the scene on the Spanish boat.

"Due to a big wave, our boat was completely lying on its side. We were on deck and it was I who was closest to the water. Xabi [Fernández] grabbed my jacket and helped me get out of this terrible situation," he wrote in a message to shore.

"Inside the boat, the situation was not very good either. The members of the crew who were sleeping were crushed between the berth and deck."

A Volvo Ocean Race spokesperson said, "For a while, it was real mayhem but fortunately, none of the sailors were hurt. All four boats were later able to return to sailing through the most treacherous waves encountered since the six-strong fleet set off in Alicante last October."

They have now covered more than 2000 nautical miles of the 6776nm fifth leg. Team Brunel (Netherlands), which avoided any major problems, led at 12:55 GMT by 11.1nm from overall race leaders, Abu Dhabi Ocean Racing.

Team Alvimedica (Turkey/US), another boat to stay upright throughout, were third, 28.8nm adrift of Brunel, with MAPFRE, Dongfeng Race Team and Team SCA trailing them.

The boats are still expected to arrive in their leg five destination, Itajaí, Brazil, around April 4, having left Auckland, New Zealand, on March 18.

In all, they will cover 38,739nm, visiting 11 ports and every continent. There are nine legs in all. — AFP

CRICKET

Court rejects life ban petition for Pakistan's Aamer

A PAKISTANI court on March 24 dismissed a legal petition seeking a life ban on fast bowler Mohammad Aamer, just weeks after he returned to domestic cricket following a spot-fixing suspension.

The International Cricket Council gave permission for the left-arm-er to return early to domestic cricket from his five-year ban over the infamous spot-fixing episode in a Test against England in 2010.

Lawyer Rana Faizul Hassan filed a petition in the Sindh High Court in February calling for the 22-year-old to be banned for life to stop him damaging the image of Pakistan

and cricket.

But on March 24, the court threw out the application after Hassan repeatedly failed to show up for hearings.

"The Sindh High Court today rejected my petition of demanding lifetime ban on Mohammad Aamer on non-persecution basis," Hassan told AFP.

Hassan said he had not been able to appear before the court because of his "busy" schedule and a two-judge bench dismissed the case.

Aamer made his comeback in Pakistani grade-two cricket, one rung below first class, on March 13, tak-

ing three wickets in his first spell of bowling.

He was one of three Pakistani players banned from cricket for at least five years for arranging no-balls to order, in the Lord's Test against England in 2010.

He was also jailed in Britain in 2011, along with former capital Salman Butt and Mohammad Asif.

Aamer's ban was due to expire on September 2, 2015, but the International Cricket Council used discretionary powers to allow him to return to domestic cricket early.

— AFP



IN PICTURES

A two-year-old Indian girl Dolly Shivani Cherukuri — conceived through surrogacy after the death of her brother, an international archer and coach in 2010 — became the youngest Indian to score 200 points over 5- and 7-metre distances.

Photo: AFP

SEA GAMES SHORTS



THAILAND

Volleyball

A second-string volleyball side will be sent to defend Thailand's SEA Games title in the women's competition.

The side did not drop a set at the 2013 games and the only resistance they have seen in the last three editions of the games has been from the Vietnamese.

"The only threat is likely to be Vietnam who are trained by a Japanese coach," Somporn Chaybangyang, president of the Volleyball Association of Thailand was quoted as saying on March 25 in the *Bangkok Post*.

The first team will instead focus on the qualifiers for the Asian Championships, a tournament they have won twice in 2009 and 2013.

MALAYSIA

Aquatics

In June, the Amateur Swimming Union of Malaysia hope to turn 13 into a lucky number, as they set that number as a target for their SEA Games expedition reports *The Star*.

In 2013 the nation swept the diving board with eight gold medals from eight events and it is a feat they intend to repeat.

The Star reports that ASUM is likely to take a punt on pairing youngsters Mohd Syafiq and Adeline Chin with Ahmad Amsyar and Wendy Ng in the men's and women's 3m springboard synchro events respectively.

The women's 10m platform synchro will reunite the Glasgow Commonwealth Games bronze-winning pair of Pandelega Rinong and Nur Dhabitah Sabri.

Pandelega will not compete in her favourite 10m platform individual event and instead Malaysia will bring on board 2014 Nanjing Youth Olympics silver medallist Loh Zhiyi.

The Star reports in the synchronised swimming events, Malaysia will likely only put up serious competition for one of the three gold medals available.

ASUM has engaged Chinese coach to train the likely final pairing of Katrina Ann and Lee Yhing Huey for the duet technical and free routine combined event.

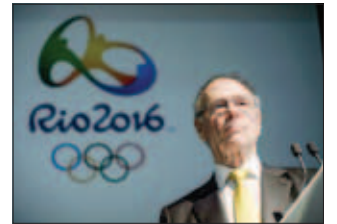
Malaysian swimmers grabbed four gold medals in the last SEA Games but this year's competitors will not be finalised until after the Malaysian Open which starts tomorrow.

— Matt Roebuck

Sport

Rio deals with economics and the environment

SPORT 26



SEA GAMES

No dopes at SEA Games, promise Malaysia



The suspension of Lee Chong Wei has put focus on Malaysia's drug testing procedures. Photo: AFP

DOPING IN SPORT

ALL Malaysian athletes participating in the Southeast Asian Games in June will undergo a mandatory doping test before departing for host city Singapore, a report said citing a senior sports minister.

Khairy Jamaluddin, Malaysia's youth and sports minister said the measure was necessary to overcome any possible abuse of banned substances by the country's athletes.

"I have ordered the Malaysian Anti-Doping Agency to conduct doping test on every athlete going to the SEA Games," he was quoted as saying by Bernama news agency on March 25.

Malaysia has been hit by two high-profile doping cases recently.

The country's badminton star and two-time Olympic silver medallist Lee Chong Wei was suspended after failing a doping test at last year's badminton world championships.

Lee tested positive for the banned anti-inflammatory drug dexamethasone at the world championships in Copenhagen last August.

Lee, 32, claims he received dexamethasone during stem cell treatment for a thigh injury last July.

In Amsterdam on April 11, the player's lawyer will submit documents to a three-man Badminton

World Federation panel. He faces a maximum two-year ban if found guilty.

"Hopefully it will be over soon. I am waiting for positive news. The Olympic qualifying period starts on May 1 and I hope to be cleared by then," he was quoted as saying by the *Star* newspaper.

Asian Games organisers last September expelled Malaysia's wushu gold medal-winner Tai Cheau Xuen after she tested positive for a banned stimulant after winning Malaysia's first gold at the Games.

Tai, who has returned her gold medal, was banned until March 20 and is among the Malaysian athletes heading to Singapore.

Khairy said previous doping tests were only conducted on 30 percent of the athletes picked at random before they take part in a major sports events.

Sieh Kok Chi, Olympic Council of Malaysia secretary general, hailed the move, saying it will deter athletes from using banned drugs.

"It is a deterrent. This is to ensure no Malaysian athlete is tested positive," he told AFP.

Sieh confirmed that wushu exponent Tai will participate in the Games since she has completed her four-month suspension period. - AFP

CYCLING

Armstrong accuser celebrates victory

BETSY Andreu, one of the first to attest disgraced cyclist Lance Armstrong took banned substances, told AFP that despite him "trying to destroy" her life she felt like she had won by testifying to the World Anti-Doping Agency on March 24.

Andreu, wife of former Armstrong teammate and fellow doper Frankie, added that because of her and her husband being among the few people to testify about Armstrong and doping in the sport they were still not welcome among the American cycling fraternity.

"He [Armstrong] tried to destroy my entire life and during 10 years he tried to destroy my reputation," she told AFP after speaking in front of WADA members at a meeting in Lausanne, Switzerland.

"But the truth has emerged and it's a victory for me to be here today and to talk to WADA's members," added Andreu, who has been subjected to years of pressure by Armstrong and his inner circle.

Andreu, who with her husband testified under oath in 2006 that Armstrong was doping as early as 1996, said being cold-shouldered by the cycling community was especially hurtful to her husband, who rode with Armstrong in both the Motorola team in the early 1990s and the US Postal team from 1998 to 2000.

"We are still *persona non gratae* in American cycling," she said.

"Cycling is my husband's passion. He's been riding since he was 10."

Andreu, who saw her and her husband's courage in coming forward rewarded in 2012 when Armstrong was given a life ban and stripped of his seven Tour de France titles, said the impact on their three children had been to turn them away from the sport.

"Education is important. They should start testing juniors," she said.

"What happened to Frankie is a lesson to my kids. He did wrong but he admitted to it. He wanted to be a clean cyclist but Lance said 'No'."

"We have two boys and one girl. The eldest, Frankie Junior, plays hockey, our girl plays soccer and the last one plays baseball, but no one does cycling." - AFP

SWIMMING

Korea debates allowing Park to swim at Olympics

THE 18-month suspension handed down to South Korean swim star Park Tae-Hwan by world swimming body FINA on March 23 sparked debate at home over whether the four-time Olympic swimming medallist should be allowed to take part in next year's Olympics in Rio.

The FINA ban ends in March 2016, which theoretically gives Park time to prepare for the Olympics, but a new rule instituted by the Korean Olympic Committee last year could see him miss the Rio event.

In an editorial yesterday, South Korea's largest circulation daily, the *Chosun Ilbo*, said the country was torn over the fate of its first Olympic swimming medallist.

"People feel uncomfortable with

the idea of ending Park's life as a sportsman," the newspaper said.

"But then, we may see a downgrade in our reputation abroad if we resort to an expedient to send him to the Rio Olympics," it added.

The KOC rule bars any athlete suspended for doping from competing with the national team for three years. In Park's case, that would bar him until March 2019 - by which time the 25-year-old would be past his best.

KOC officials have suggested there might be room for "flexibility" in enforcing the regulation.

But Lee Kee-Heung, head of the Korea Swimming Federation, said the issue of reinstating Park, a national icon in South Korea, could be discussed only after the swimmer made

a full, public apology.

"First and foremost, Park Tae-Hwan should apologise to the people that he's let down and plead for their forgiveness, and take time to reflect on himself," Lee told reporters as he returned home after attending FINA's hearing in Switzerland.

Park's agency issued a brief apology on his behalf on March 24.

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.

All Park's results after September 3, 2014, have been cancelled which means handing back the three bronze medals he won at last year's Asian

Games in Incheon, South 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.

He also won silver in both events at the 2012 London Olympics, along with 400m gold in the world championships in 2007 and 2011. - AFP

No. 328-A, Pyay Road, Sanchaung P.O. (11111), Yangon, Myanmar. Tel : (95-1) 534216, 527705, 501429, 011222498