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AGRICULTURE MINISTER FACES LAND GRAB CLAIMS

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TOUGH RULES HOLD BACK GROWTH IN MICROFINANCE

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PROSECUTOR SAYS PILOT DELIBERATELY CRASHED PLANE

WORLD 26



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PHOTO: YU YU

A girl holds an infant in an unofficial camp for displaced Muslims on the outskirts of the Rakhine State capital Sittwe in January. The state's chief minister has told the United Nations he will only agree to a request to move 10,000 IDPs to higher ground ahead of the monsoon if they agree to undergo citizenship verification.

Upper house approves education law

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THE upper house (Amyotha Hluttaw) of parliament yesterday unanimously approved the draft law to amend the controversial National Education Law, which has triggered student protests.

Members of parliament said the amended bill includes 73 paragraphs discussed and agreed upon in four-way talks in February with representatives of parliament, the government, students and the National Education Reform Network. The bill was debated over two days.

"There has been nothing more democratic than this," U Myat Nyarna Soe, secretary of the Upper House Bill Committee which drew up the legislation, told reporters after the vote. The result, he said, was 77 percent successful, in reference to the proposed amendment by the Bill Committee.

During the debate, only one out of the 11 points demanded by the student unions was defeated by votes, he said.

Members of the pro-reform NNER had earlier accused the bill committee of reversing or watering down the changes to last September's national education law that had been agreed on in February at a time when the government was under pressure from student protests.

U Myat Nyarna Soe said the one point rejected by the Upper House concerned the education budget.

CONTINUING ON NEWS 4

YCDC elections face scrutiny

The election commission that oversaw Yangon's municipal vote in December has recommended voting eligibility be expanded to all residents over 18 years - but political parties seem reluctant to push for reform. NEWS 4

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editor **Kayleigh Long** | kayleighlong@gmail.com



THE INSIDER: Felicitations to all on Armed Forces Day

Once was Burma...

Archival material courtesy of Pansodan Gallery

First floor, 286 Pansodan, upper block, Kyauktada township



Socialist-era magazine *Forward* marks Tatmadaw (Armed Forces) Day in 1970



Billboard in the Shan capital of Taunggyi, November 2014. Photo: Page 2



Caption this: An image uploaded yesterday by his grandson shows Retired Senior General Than Shwe learning to use an iPad. Photo via Facebook

From Karen to Kurd

While the nefarious leadership of ISIS is probably rather busy contending with US-led air strikes on Tikrit, not to mention tending to the sort of tedious administrative tasks that are part and parcel of plotting the expansion of any caliphate worth its salt, they may have missed the announcement that cadres from the Free Burma Rangers – the quasi-militant missionary outfit who've bolstered the Karen resistance for the better part of two decades – have taken up the Kurdish cause.

Representatives from FBR recently flew to northern Iraq on a relief and training mission, and are planning to return. They've also recently completed a similar operation in South Sudan, lending their expertise to IDPs there.

The group has not abandoned its eponymous cause, but has simply

reached a point where they're established enough to expand operations.

"When we started FBR our teams were few, the attacks overwhelming and we could only hear the cries of those around us in Burma. Now we have many more teams and a strong core of indigenous leaders. Now we can hear the cries of others around the world and we have the capacity to send some of us to help."

Here on earth

If you're stuck for plans this Saturday night, don't forget that 8:30-9:30pm is Earth Hour, an annual event where you're supposed to turn off your electricity and ruminate in the darkness about the environment.

If you live in downtown Yangon, you may not have any choice. I personally

celebrate Earth Hour several times a week, sometimes for hours at a time – especially when the weather's hot and the grid is overwhelmed.

While you're at it, take a moment to remember that it's only around 33 percent of the country's population that has a basic electricity connection in the home.

Nice gesture

Speculation about Myanmar's student activists having adopted the symbolic and banned-in-Thailand *Hunger Games* salute gathered momentum this week, with a number of outlets reporting the story based on a few images of ne'er-do-wells raising their hands in the air with three fingers up.

Most of the images showed students holding three fingers up, separated – like a peace sign, but with three fingers

rather than two. The *Hunger Games* signal, however, is a little bit like a fascist salute, with the pinkie and thumb removed from the equation.

Whether or not the Myanmar students intended the gesture as a deliberate statement, it would appear they're doing it wrong.

Besides, as *Page 2* pointed out last year when activists in Thailand were getting arrested for pulling the three-fingered salute out the front of movie theatres in Bangkok, the *Hunger Games* series is based on themes that just wouldn't resonate here.

The successful book and movie franchise tells the story of Katniss Everdeen, a young woman who comes to embody the hopes of a nation, symbolising the rebellion against the oppressive central government in a dystopian totalitarian state.

In brief:

Guesthouse staff despair, wonder why foreigners struggle to follow basic written English instructions about not flushing toilet paper

Retired Special Branch officer says he now has time to dedicate to his true passion: editing a decade worth of outtakes for a *Funniest Home Videos*-style compilation

Next week:

Tax audit clears Yanghee Lee's name, disproving allegations she was turning tricks in order to support her human rights habit

Newly arrived expat points to surfeit of expensive new restaurants and bars as evidence of democratic progress

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Student demonstrators hold clenched fists in the air during a protest at Letpadan on March 10, shortly before a police crackdown. Photo: Zarni Phyo

Students expected to resume protests today

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STUDENT activists - including some recently freed from jail - will head back to the picket lines today to join a four-city demonstration demanding the release of those detained at Letpadan on March 10.

The protests will take place in Yangon, Mandalay, Hinthada in Ayeyarwady Region and Monywa, and will start at 10:10am.

The students are also demanding an investigation into the violent crackdown at Letpadan, which ended with the arrest of 127 people. Four student activists were also arrested later by police for their role in the demonstration.

After the government declared those who could prove their status as "real" students would be released, a

handful were sent home to their families. On March 25, 65 of the jailed students and activists were charged with five offences - including incitement to riot, unlawful association and obstructing police officers - that together could result in a six-year prison term. An additional 11 people on bail and four students in hiding were charged in absentia.

On March 25, the government said the four in hiding are "fugitives" and ordered them to appear in court.

According to the students, the four are leaders of the protest march from Mandalay, which began in January in opposition to the National Education Law.

"We're not fugitives but President Thein Sein is. They are the culprits," Ko Myat Thu, one of the four in hiding, posted yesterday on his Facebook page.

Rakhine chief takes tough line on UN request to move IDPs

Chief Minister U Maung Maung Ohn says displaced Muslims can move to safer ground ahead of monsoon season if they agree to undergo citizenship verification



GUY DINMORE LUN MIN MANG

A UNITED Nations request to move more than 10,000 "highly vulnerable" displaced Muslims out of two camps in Rakhine State before the onset of the monsoon season has met with a tough response from the chief minister, who said they must first comply with the citizenship verification process.

U Maung Maung Ohn told *The Myanmar Times* yesterday that the authorities would support the provision of aid, education and health to the camps, but balked at allowing them to move unless they went through the process of applying for Myanmar citizenship.

Most of the Muslims identify as Rohingya, but to apply for citizenship they must agree to register as Bengalis.

"If they do not cooperate with us in the process, the moving of the camps cannot be possible," he said.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said more than 6000 displaced people in low-lying Nget Chaung camp and more than 4,000 people in Ah Nauk Ywe - both close to the sea and east of the state capital Sittwe - were at a high risk from flooding, storm surges and winds.

They are among some 140,000 Rohingya living in what the UN has described as "abysmal" conditions in camps set up in the wake of communal violence that erupted between Muslims and the Rakhine Buddhist majority in June 2012.

Shelters at Nget Chaung camp, built on marshland, "are gradually sinking into the mud" while access to adequate clean water was a major concern in Ah Nauk Ywe, OCHA said in its latest Myanmar bulletin. Residents in both camps were scavenging materials from shelters, latrines, walkways and other camp infrastructure for fuel, it added.

International humanitarian organisations had asked the authorities to take urgent measures to improve living conditions and had requested the residents from both camps be moved to higher safer ground before the monsoon season arrived in May, the UN agency said.

10,000

Number of IDPs in two Sittwe township camps that the UN has requested to move to higher ground ahead of monsoon season

The UN has previously rejected any linking by the authorities of political process with humanitarian issues, but U Maung Maung Ohn was clear that Muslims displaced by the conflict would first have to comply with government demands that they renounce their claim to Rohingya ethnicity in applying for citizenship.

"Only those who get citizenship can have the rights of citizens. We cannot place them on the same level," the chief minister said.

"When I met the Muslim community, I asked them, 'Do you want

to be Rohingya or Myanmar citizens? If you want to be Myanmar citizens then we can talk. But if you want to be Rohingya, we needn't be talking as the government has announced that the name Rohingya is not recognised," U Maung Maung Ohn said.

He said there might still be enough time for the IDPs to hand in their "white cards" - temporary IDs - and go through the verification process by the end of May, when the monsoon rains will arrive.

One aid worker, who asked not to be named, noted the minister's tough remarks but said the government had begun allowing some displaced Rohingya to resettle while keeping the movements low-profile so as not to antagonise hardline Buddhist activists.

Many Rohingya refuse to renounce their claim to their ethnicity in return for some citizenship rights. UN officials note that the small numbers who did relent and were given citizenship status were still not allowed to leave their camp, with the Rakhine authorities saying their safety could not be guaranteed.

UN had high hopes some IDPs would be moved after a report that the president's private fund had allocated K200 million (US\$200,000) for building houses for IDPs in camps in Rakhine State. About 10,000 Buddhists also remain displaced because of the conflict.

Treatment of the Rohingya - estimated to number some 1.3 million - was among the five issues listed by US President Barack Obama when he was asked during his visit to Myanmar last November how he would measure progress in the country's transition from military rule to democracy.

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Rights group to submit land grabs to ICC

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MYANMAR'S long-standing land-grab issue is now to receive international exposure, as human rights activists prepare to file a specimen case with the International Criminal Court as a crime against humanity. Ko Zarni, a farmers' rights defender and a volunteer with the International Federation for Human Rights, is organising the move.

According to the report of Pyidaungsu Hluttaw's land confiscation investigation commission, 6 million acres of farmland were confiscated throughout the country while under military rule, of which only 237,615 acres have been restored to the previous owners.

"If we can file a land dispute with the court, we believe the farmers could score a moral victory and recover some dignity. But we're also afraid there may be retaliation," said Ko Zarni. "We just want the government to give back the land or to give reasonable compensation to the farmers. This can be resolved peacefully."

He said the international human rights federation, known by its French initials FIDH, was gathering data about land disputes all over the country prior to deciding which case should be filed. Practical difficulties include compiling exact and specific details of the seizures and the personal details of the farmers.

One possible case concerns the Myo Tha Industrial Garden. In 2011, the government seized 4000 hectares (10,000 acres) of land from farmers who say they were denied adequate compensation, Ko Zarni said.

He said it was the "most suitable" case to file first of those assessed because it was both recent and well-documented.

He said land-grab cases in conflict areas were not suitable for filing because of difficulties in gathering the necessary data.

U Nyan Zaw, a member of the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission, said land disputes were the most numerous cases submitted to the commission.

Bus lines, passengers seek to beat the Thingyan touts



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BUS lines have joined highway authorities in a clampdown on ticket touts. As people throughout the country prepare to travel to spend the Thingyan water festival with their loved ones, various measures are being put in place to make sure access to tickets is fair and reasonably priced.

JJ Express opened Thingyan ticket sales on March 15 and has already sold out, sales manager U Kyaut said yesterday.

"We wanted to avoid the creation of a black market," he said. "We asked customers to produce a national identity card when they bought the ticket, and again when they get on the bus. We're only selling to people who really have to travel."

Over the holiday period, which runs April 12-21, JJ is running three buses a day to Nay Pyi Taw, two to Mandalay and one each to Taunggyi and Bagan.

Another popular bus line, Elite, opened ticket sales on March 23 to customers who had been queuing since 3am. They also sold only to customers who produced their national ID. Photos showed large lines at the ticket counter.

"We queued at the ticket station in Mindhamma from about 7am. There were about 200 others in the queue. We're going to Mandalay on April 11. We paid K20,000 for two tickets for special seats, including travel insurance," said Ma Mee Mee of Mayangone township.

Other lines will not open sales until today, or as late as April 1.

"Some bus lines say customers have to come in person because they won't accept bookings by phone," said Ma Nandar of Thaketa township.

The new policy of releasing all tickets on a single day has received mixed reviews from travellers.

"This system is good, I think. We know in advance we will have a ticket. The only problem is having to



Passengers alight from a bus at Yangon's Aung Mingalar Highway Bus Station on March 24.
Photo: Aung Htay Hlaing

queue in the early morning," said Ma Zin Mar Hlaing from North Dagon township.

'We asked customers to produce a national identity card when they ... get on the bus. We're only selling to people who really have to travel.'

U Kyaut

JJ Express highway bus line

Ma Su Mon Mon Latt from North Okkalapa said it was only good for those who had made plans well in advance of the holiday.

"I plan to go to Mandalay but I still haven't got a ticket," she said. "I have heard some bus lines will sell tickets just one day before departure. It seems like every line has a different policy."

The Yangon Region Supervisory Committee for Motor Vehicles, better known by its Myanmar-language acronym Ma Hta Tha, says it has no authority to set the date of ticket sales or direct bus lines when to provide services.

"Some lines will close during the holiday. But we can't tell them to run buses in Thingyan, or ask them to put on more buses," said Ma Hta Tha chair U Nyunt Wai.

However, Ma Hta Tha does exert strict control over ticket prices. They

have already announced that passengers can complain to the authority about overcharging and apply for a refund.

"The bus line will pay that refund money to us and we will fine them K50,000 for every overcharged ticket," said U Nyunt Wai.

Price surges in advance of the water festival are a familiar phenomenon, say sales staff.

"Sometimes people are prepared to pay extra because they want to go back home. Thingyan is the only chance they get, so they don't mind paying more. Some bus lines sell tickets direct, and not through agents. But we can't overcharge passengers because the ticket price is fixed," said ticket sales agent Ma Ei Shwe Sin of Tarmwe township.

There are 180 bus lines and 1500 buses based at the Aung Mingalar Highway Bus Station.

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Education ministry blacklists contractors

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BUILDING contractors who perform shoddy work and fall below standards while building schools will face a crackdown from the education ministry, MPs have been told. Deputy minister U Thant Shin told the Pyithu Hluttaw that the ministry was blacklisting companies found to be at fault.

The deputy minister cited two companies, Klo Htoo Baw Construction and Tagaung Yar Zar, that had been forced to redo substandard work by removing building violations and providing new furniture in January and February this year. Building supervisors who collaborate with contractors in falsifying reports would also face action, he said on March 25.

"Our ministry will not give contracts to companies on the blacklist next year. We have shared the list with regional governments so that they can maintain standards in their projects," U Thant Shin told hluttaw.

"Supervisors who hide the real situation and present false information in collaboration with the companies will face action under departmental rules and regulations, if found guilty," he added.

U Than Oo, the MP for Myawaddy township, Kayin State, said construction companies sometimes used lower-quality materials. He gave the example of a middle school in his constituency, in Mae Hta Lay village, where "the doors were made with the wrong type of wood, the concrete piles were sub-standard, and the furniture was made from plywood instead of the *pyinkadoo* hardwood stipulated, as well as being too small."

The ministry's admission comes after Amyotha Hluttaw Speaker U Khin Aung Myint sparked a war of words with the government in September 2014 by alleging that much of the additional funding allotted to education since 2011 had been wasted by contractors.

- Translation by Thiri Min Htun



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IN PICTURES

A man wheels a bicycle along a street in downtown Yangon during a rainshower at about 1pm yesterday afternoon. Myanmar's unseasonal rain continued yesterday, following on from the 0.91 inches received on March 24-25.

PHOTO: AUNG KHANT

EU-backed police media unit delayed

Police say lack of expertise means they have not been able to implement plans



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A SHORTAGE of trained staff is holding up the creation of a long-awaited media unit in the Yangon police force.

The European Union has been helping the police force set up the unit since October 2014 but police communication with the media has changed little.

"We have had no specific response yet from the Ministry of Home Affairs on the implementation of the media unit," said Police Major Pyae Sone, police chief of staff for Yangon Region.

"A Police Captain was assigned to release information in Yangon Region, but we need competent staff to launch the unit."

The unit would complement what the police are already doing in terms of issuing regular releases about cases and police activities, said Pol Maj Pyae Sone.

Another official said the head of the police force, Police Major General Zaw Win, was "enthusiastic" about the idea.



Women police officers use crowd-control techniques during a student protest at Letpadan on March 3.

Photo: Aung Htay Hlaing

"The Ministry of Home Affairs was urged to launch the media unit starting with Yangon Region ... but we don't have the resources," said U Nay Myo Naing, a senior consultant with the police reform project.

The EU did not respond to requests for comment.

The establishment of a media unit would complement the training the EU has been providing to the

police in an effort to make the force more transparent, efficient and democratic. That effort was called into question following the brutal police crackdown on unarmed student marchers at Letpadan on March 10, when sympathisers of the marchers accused the EU of having "blood on their hands". However, both the EU and the police agree that more training is needed.

"We are going to establish the media unit for Yangon Region to conduct information-sharing between the police and the public," EU ambassador Roland Kobia said at a October 29, 2014, workshop titled "A model MPF media unit".

"In this crucial year, it is important for the police to respond to media questions as much as possible," he said.

The EU said at the time that it intends to establish police media units throughout the country to provide journalists with press releases, conduct press conferences and deal with TV, broadcasting and social media.

"People misunderstood police activities in the past. We want to get people involved in community policing. Once the media unit is launched, we can better publicise our efforts," said Pol Col Thura Win Naing after the workshop.

- Translation by Emoon



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Warship to bring home detained migrants

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A MYANMAR warship has returned from an expo in Malaysia with an unusual cargo: 102 undocumented Myanmar migrants.

After taking part in the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition 2015, the Navy told Malaysia it had space on its vessel for some of the many migrants detained at work camps who might want to return home, U Sein Oo, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs director general said yesterday.

"It is because of the warship's space limitations that we brought only 102 people," said U Sein Oo.

The migrants, who were brought to the Navy vessel from six different camps in Malaysia, had been detained after entering the country illegally.

The warship is set to arrive back in Myanmar with its 102 migrant passengers on March 29.

The Myanmar embassy in Malaysia said in a statement yesterday that the return was the result of a meeting with Malay authorities during the visit of President U Thein Sein and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to Malaysia earlier this month.

It said it plans to repatriate the remaining detained migrant workers who do not have the money to return of their own accord. It has created a list of eligible detainees and is discussing how to bring them back with government support.

Between 250,000 and 500,000 Myanmar migrants are estimated to work in Malaysia, many without legal status.

The United Nations Refugee Agency estimated that more than 132,000 of the 142,000 asylum applicants in Malaysia as of 2014 were also from Myanmar.

The Malaysian government detains asylum seekers and migrants who lack a passport and valid visa documents.



CCTV footage shows a burglar leaving Htilominlo Pagoda after stealing money from donation boxes on March 17. Photo: Supplied

Bagan pagodas hit by a donation-box thief

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A SOLO thief plundered more than K1 million from donation boxes at two famous pagodas in the ancient city of Bagan this month, a police officer in Bagan has confirmed. The thefts were caught on security cameras at the pagodas and a suspect is being questioned.

Cash was taken from six donation boxes at Htilominlo Pagoda at about 2am on March 17, while four boxes were hit at Ananda Pagoda in the early hours of March 26. More than K1 million (US\$1,000) was lost at Htilominlo, while K100,000 (\$100) was taken from Ananda.

"We are now interrogating a suspect in the first burglary. I myself am doing the interrogation," Police Lieutenant Aung Kyaw Tun, head of the Bagan police station, told *The Myanmar Times* yesterday.

"We have also issued an instruction to increase security staff at pagodas and install CCTV at some pagodas. We detained

the [alleged] offender ... with the assistance of civil society groups and pagoda officials."

A pagoda trustee said CCTV footage of the incident indicated the late-night pilfering was conducted by an "experienced thief".

"We noticed it when a pilgrimage vehicle arrived at the pagoda at about 5:40am," said U Ye Myint, the treasurer of the pagoda.

"We think the thief might have come down from scaffolding inside the pagoda," he said.

U Aung Khant Maung Maung, managing director of Leo company, which has installed CCTV at some pagodas in Bagan, said trustees were now considering installing alarm systems triggered by movement.

"They also need to install better quality CCTV so the images can be seen clearly," he said.

Police said it was the first major burglary at a pagoda in Bagan for seven years. However, cases of snatching handbags or backpacks from tourists have been on the rise, an official said.

- Translation by Thiri Min Htun

Kokang rebels reject demand to surrender

After weeks of intense fighting, ethnic forces in Shan State continue demands for recognition



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ETHNIC Chinese rebels in northern Shan State have rejected demands by government forces that they lay down their weapons and surrender after more than six weeks of intense fighting in the Kokang border region.

"We don't believe it. It can be a trap. Anyway, we will not surrender our arms," U Tun Myat Lin, spokesperson for the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), said yesterday.

The *7Day Daily* newspaper quoted a Tatmadaw officer in the main town of Laukkai as saying that the military was distributing letters in Myanmar and Chinese calling on Kokang fighters to surrender their weapons. The report followed a lull of several days in the conflict with the rebel group widely quoted as saying it expected an imminent large-scale offensive by the Tatmadaw.

The government does not recognise the MNDAA as an ethnic armed force but sees it instead as an insurgent group, and has rejected its offer of ceasefire talks.

Spokesperson U Tun Myat Lin said the concept was wrong. "We are not rebels. We are revolutionary forces. This [fighting] will not end until we get ethnic equality and real federalism in our country," he said.

China's official Xinhua news agency quoted Tatmadaw headquarters in

Laukkai as saying by telephone that government forces had occupied all key strategic hilltops in the region, forcing the MNDAA to retreat. Laukkai had regained stability with some shops opening for business, Xinhua quoted the headquarters as saying.

An unofficial tally of reports by the military of its losses since fighting erupted on February 9 came to 112 dead and 287 wounded, Xinhua said.

'We are not rebels. We are revolutionary fighters. This will not end until we get ethnic equality.'

U Tun Myat Lin
MNDAA spokesperson

Even as relative calm was reported in Laukkai, a military officer told *The Myanmar Times* that the Northeast Region Command headquarters in Lashio - some 100 kilometres (62 miles) to the southwest - had been attacked by someone firing a rocket-propelled grenade, which landed in a field used by helicopters close to a barracks on the evening of March 25. No one was injured, he said.

He cited a witness as saying the RPG was fired from a group of two men and two women and that the town was being thoroughly searched. So far only their car had been found.

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Views

EDITORIAL

A nation of givers

RESEARCH and polling giant Gallup recently released results of what it calls the World Giving Index, which provides insight into the nature of giving around the world. The researchers posed three questions: Have you done any of the following in the past month: Donated money to a charity? Volunteered your time to an organisation? Helped a stranger, or someone you didn't know who needed help?

Gallup conducted the poll in 137 countries. The United States, one of the richest countries in the world, and Myanmar, one of the poorest, tied for the top position with 64 percent. Canada and Ireland were in second place with a score of 60.

An incredibly high proportion of people in Myanmar - 91pc - said they had donated. The high score reflects strong adherence to Theravada Buddhism and its practice of charitable giving, or *darma*, which is integral to religious observance.

That Myanmar improved from joint second place in 2013 shows a strong emphasis continues to be placed on the values of sharing and donating. We witnessed this recently at Letpadan: Protesting students were seen sharing snacks and water with police. Of course, it didn't last - the police eventually beat up the students a couple of days later.

But the World Giving Index shows that in some respects Myanmar people have not changed despite the at-times grim and tumultuous transition. It is one silver lining amid some truly dark clouds.

Getting the facts right on rape



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A REPORT out this week about riots in Mandalay last July highlighted the troubling role that rape rumours have played in outbreaks of communal violence in Myanmar.

The findings by the Justice Trust, a US-based rights organisation, came after the sentencing of five people to 21 years imprisonment and hard labour last week for provoking the riots that left two people dead.

From the major clashes in Rakhine in 2012 to smaller riots in other parts of the country - such as at Kanbalu in Sagaing Region in August 2013 - accusations of rape have been seen as an excuse for communal violence.

The Mandalay riots occurred after rumours of what was later reported to be a false rape allegation circulated on social media. The five alleged fabricators - including the woman who made the accusation - were recently sentenced under the Emergency Provision Act.

The Justice Trust report alleges that behind-the-scenes actors operating alongside hardline monks and their supporters deliberately used the rape claim to incite violence for political ends.

While there is scant detail on exactly who the alleged unseen manipulators alluded to in the report may be, the evidence for online provocation by extremists was writ large on popular Facebook pages. Calls for



Police in action during the Mandalay riots on July 4, 2014. Photo: Kaung Htet

revenge spread before there was any evidence the allegation was true.

Exactly what inspired the rape allegation in the first place remains somewhat murky. Given the social stigma that unfortunately still surrounds rape in Myanmar, it is particularly difficult to imagine most women would choose to make a false claim unless desperate or otherwise pressured.

According to reports of state television broadcasts in July last year, authorities found that Daw Phyu Phyu Min, the 30-year-old Buddhist woman who made the rape allegation

against two Muslim cafe owners, was paid and coached to do so by a local businessman who was seeking to discredit a competitor.

The rape claim came amid what locals in Mandalay say were long-running rivalries in which a previous allegation of rape - also allegedly false - had been made by other parties involved.

Daw Phyu Phyu Min's husband, according to reports at the time, was in prison for drug offences. She needed money, and was offered K1 million (just under \$1000) to make a rape claim against the Muslim cafe owners.

It remains uncertain whether Daw Phyu Phyu Min was aware that the allegations she made would be used to stir up sectarian violence.

There is no question that rape allegations should be taken extremely seriously. In many circumstances it is difficult for genuine rape victims to be believed let alone reach a successful prosecution. Highly publicised cases of false-rape claims, however rare, can only heighten the problems faced by those who have been genuinely assaulted.

Even if unaware of the potential for violence and death her accusation would unleash, Daw Phyu Phyu Min must at least have had some idea of the personal impact it would have on those who were accused.

Yet whatever Daw Phyu Phyu Min's motives, the calls for violence on the back of her accusation came from influential, educated men - most notably the monk U Wirathu, who has considerable resources at his disposal.

There is an extremely important issue here, which needs to be unpacked from this story: The concept of rape as an "honour" crime is being used by powerful community leaders to propagate political, religious or ethnic outrage.

Victims of rape too often have what is the most personal of violations taken over by activists who want to promote a specific cause. The names of those who have been raped, and often images of them, are widely published by campaign groups of various ethnic and religious backgrounds as examples of affronts against specific communities, rather than principally of crimes against individuals.

This is something that needs to be held up for serious scrutiny by activists, the authorities and mainstream media. That the vast majority of

rapes go unreported in this country, as in many places, is widely recognised. Those that are reported should be treated sensitively and accurately.

There is a particular and ongoing problem of rape by members of armed forces, as well as a prevalence of sexual violence in conflict areas. It is a serious issue and pressure needs to be put on those leading such organisations to stamp it out and seek justice for victims.

But in doing so, those groups addressing what is a very serious and specific form of violence need to ensure that the individual victims be treated with dignity and their privacy preserved if they wish it to be. These rights should not be sacrificed for any wider political aim.

Allegations against perpetrators in such cases also need to be made judiciously. Immediately following the brutal rape and murder of two teachers in Kachin State in January, a number of respected organisations reported as fact when yet unproved that the crimes had been committed by members of the Myanmar military.

It looks increasingly unlikely that the true facts of the teachers' case will emerge or those responsible will be brought to justice, and that underscores the need for strict and clear guidelines on how such cases are investigated. But it does no favours to those seeking to draw attention to such incidents and prevent sexual violence, when they mix up proven fact with unsubstantiated beliefs - however good the reasons they may have for believing certain people responsible.

It is to be hoped that false rape claims remain a rarity, but the spreading of unverified rumours online about sexual assaults is a growing problem. Meanwhile the misreporting of rape cases - or the diversion of attention from the individuals involved to the anger over community honour - not only risks stirring up conflict, but also does a disservice to the most important person, the victim.

Rape is an emotive crime, but it is also a personal one, and should not be used for political gain or for individual profit.

As Daw Phyu Phyu Min begins more than two decades of incarceration with hard labour after being convicted of making a false rape claim, those influential extremists who used her case to incite violence for political ends remain unpunished.

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Views

Beyond stalemates to peace in our time

Armed Forces Day is a reminder of the high expectations that the military faces from a war-weary public clamouring for an end to conflict

NICHOLAS FARRELLY



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TODAY the polished defence services battalions will take to the parade ground in Nay Pyi Taw to mark the 70th anniversary of resistance to Japanese occupation. We all know that since then the army has entrenched its supreme position in Myanmar society. The basic fact is that even after five years of erratic liberalisation former military men hold almost all of the levers of power. They have yet to fully surrender control.

But when the current generation of soldiers marches out today they will be carrying a greater burden than gleaming rifles and chests full of medals. The people of Myanmar are looking to military men to end the wars that have impoverished the nation and made its internal dysfunction a stark lesson in the costs of inter-ethnic conflict.

Offering some resolution to this strife has been a preoccupation since President U Thein Sein came to power in 2011. From east to west, north to south, negotiators have worked to foster compromise and bring an end to

what, in some cases, are the world's longest-running civil wars.

Some of these wars started right back in the 1940s. Up to a million people may have been killed, but nobody knows for sure. Even today, hundreds of thousands of displaced and often destitute souls struggle in camps across northern and eastern Myanmar, with countless others forced to find sanctuary in Thailand, India, China and Malaysia, or countries further afield.

The mind-boggling devastation of these conflicts is apparent on any casual journey into the mountainous corners of Myanmar's disheveled terrain. The wars provide one strong explanation for the country's least-developed country status and the overwhelming lack of infrastructure found in border areas.

Bringing an end to these wars is a fiendish challenge. There have been many efforts, over many decades, with too many ceasefire deals to count.

Making these deals is admirable work, requiring patience, finesse and good judgment. In recent times, members of the international community, most notably Norway, the European Union, Japan and Australia, have furnished resources. The Myanmar Peace Center and the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative have taken on a heavy load in the hope of motivating lasting

resolutions to the conflicts.

To their credit, ethnic resistance leaders have been prepared to sit down and look for opportunities to re-arrange the political landscape. It is slow and frustrating. Sometimes such peace-building efforts require a particular spark. On occasions, peace negotiations have been shunted along by a specific tragedy, even a natural disaster. These negotiations can also benefit from well-judged external interventions and pressure. There is often the hope that a magic wand will be waved.

Recent experience in Myanmar suggests, however, that there is no magic wand. While goodwill and confidence have increased, there are still profound misgivings about the shape of negotiations, particularly while violent flare-ups are possible at any time.

In June 2011 when war re-ignited between the Kachin Independence Army and the Tatmadaw, U Thein Sein's government was still young. As that war dragged on, hard questions were asked about the president's commitment to peace-building and his sway over the military high command. Such questions reverberate in the wake of recent fighting against the Kokang in northern Shan State.

These wars, which continue to simmer even as peace negotiations take place, are stark reminders that resolv-

ing Myanmar's history of civil conflict will not come easily or cheaply. For now, the international community remains inclined to support efforts to create peace. Many judge that this is a precondition for the success of Myanmar's transformation, and particularly for the fuller inclusion of ethnic minority politics in Nay Pyi Taw's corridors of power.

This struggle for Myanmar is hardly unique: many countries manage to survive with long-term wars within their borders. Looking to Myanmar's neighbours, both India and Thailand weather serious battles. In northeast India, right along the border with Myanmar, dozens of armed groups have resisted integration with that country's political system. Southern Thailand's rebellion is another exam-

ple. A defiant and shadowy armed group, inspired by religious and ethnic sentiments, has made life dangerous for what they consider "occupying" Thai forces. Since 2001, more than 6000 people have been killed.

None of these wars show any sign of ending. Negotiations in both Thailand and India are stop-start affairs, and often hamstrung by unwieldy, centralised bureaucracies unable to make meaningful concessions to groups they can't defeat on the battlefield.

In Myanmar, the right concessions are only coming gradually, but they are accompanied by occasional surges of enthusiasm. On a day like today, long quarantined on the calendar for the glory of men in uniform, we continue to imagine that the next deal, the big breakthrough, is just over the horizon.

The history of peace negotiation tells us such optimism alone is not sufficient to end long-running civil conflicts. Sometimes bold and decisive action, and tolerance for new kinds of risks, is the only way to get past stalemate.

While goodwill and confidence have increased, there are still profound misgivings about the shape of negotiations.

Nicholas Farrelly is a partner at Glenloch Advisory and a fellow at the Australian National University. His current Australian Research Council-funded project deals with Myanmar's political cultures.

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Business

Apex to launch at end March

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MYANMAR'S newest carrier Apex Airlines will begin operations from the end of March, making it the 10th airline to enter the country's increasingly crowded skies, officials said yesterday.

Apex Airlines will be based in Nay Pyi Taw, and will initially fly to domestic destinations such as Yangon, and destinations in Tanintharyi Region including Dawei, Myeik and Kawthaung using a new ATR 72-600 aircraft.

The firm held its launch event at the Novotel Yangon Max last night.

Chief operations officer Selva Kumar said Apex's second aircraft will arrive between June and July, and the third aircraft will arrive in the September to October timeframe. The additional aircraft may help it expand to other domestic destinations it has in its sights, including Sittwe, Myitkyina, Mandalay, Bagan, Thandwe and Heho.

Mr Kumar said the airline is also keen to promote Nay Pyi Taw as a destination, particularly as a MICE venue.

He said the airline will promote Nay Pyi Taw as destination especially as MICE destinations.

Myanmar has nine other domestic airlines at present: Air Mandalay, Yangon Airways, Air KBZ, Mann Yadanarpon, Air Bagan, Asian Wings Airlines, FMI Air, Golden Myanmar Airlines and Myanmar National Airways.

Among the nine domestic airlines, Air Mandalay has been suspended since the end of December, but has announced plans to resume flying as a charter operator by early May.

"As part of our larger expansion plan with an upgrade fleet and a refreshed outlook, two Embraer ERJ-145 have been brought in from the US. Our message to the public is, 'Get on board, we're back in business,'" said U Sai Kham Park Hpa, acting chief operation officer of Air Mandalay.

He added the airline will launch a schedule and details of routes before the airline re-launches.



Impromptu real estate offices in the area of the New City popped up at the height of the speculation frenzy last year. Photo: Yu Yu

Yangon New City forgotten by most but residents still hopeful



MYAT NYEIN AYE

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THE area of the once and possibly future Yangon New City project has been irrevocably changed following its announcement by Yangon mayor U Hla Myint last September 22.

His surprise statement in regional parliament that Yangon would build a multi-billion dollar expansion on 30,000 acres across the Hlaing River from the main city initially set off a speculation frenzy.

When he announced several days later that the project was suspended indefinitely to give authorities more time to assess the project, some speculators were left holding the bag - some land had been driven up in value a few times over in the intervening few days.

Locals say they are still hopeful the project will be built despite little discussion on the New City project. Some are pointing to local changes in the sparsely populated area to the southwest of Yangon across the Hlaing river as improvements, with many still hoping the project arrives.

Experts have cast doubt on whether the New City project is viable, however, with some saying it is unlikely to be built - though some are not dissuaded.

In the intervening months since mayor U Hla Myint's announcement, the area has seen electricity distribution installed and lamp posts built. Concrete roads are also being put in place, according to U Than Htay, a resident of Tamar Tagaw village.

"We are seeing some preparation for the New City," he said. "It must be for a city's character, because it's been a very long time our villages have not had electricity. Now, electric lamps have arrived, but it is not an easy thing to connect our area with the city."

The area is also criss-crossed with smaller streams, many of which are now receiving bridges. Water channels are also being added to prevent flooding and control streams in the area.

"We don't know who is doing the digging, but YCDC is building the bridges," he said. "There are always some changes in our village, even though nothing big is happening. I think the project was stopped verbally but not in action."

While the area may be improving, the local property market has not recovered.

Transactions have come to a halt. A year ago, a typical acre of land cost K7 million (US\$6775), though some land shot up as high as K100 million, and even hard-to-reach land was selling for K15 million an acre.

Taman Gyi village resident U

‘There are always some changes in our village, even though nothing big is happening.’

U Than Htay
Area resident

Win Myint said there has been few transactions since New City was suspended.

"The market has been totally stopped; there are no more people coming from the city to buy farm land," he said.

Many farmers sold out during last year's speculation, though others were left holding on to property that is worth little more than it was before the craze.

Local agents say properties which would have sold for K60 to K70 million an acre during the height of speculation now cost K18 to K20 million acres.

U Win Myint, who is a farmer, said many farmers who sold their land have stayed on as tenant farmers. He added the area's land is not particularly rich, so rice yields tend not to be too high.

"The paddy land is yielding about half as much rice as it was 10 years ago," he said.

Local residents are keen to see the New City project implemented, as it will improve their livelihood. They have even protested three times, according to U Than Htay - but they are still left hoping.

Parliamentarians say there are no current plans for the New City to go ahead.

Daw Nyo Nyo Thin, a member of parliament from Bahan township, said the government has said they would withdraw the project.

"They committed in parliament to withdrawing the New City project," she said.

"Parliament is not a playground. If you go ahead [with the project] they are being dishonest."

She added the current government term is ending soon. If it decides to continue with the project, it is likely the next government would not take up responsibility.

Daw Nyo Nyo Thin added some local people in the area had asked for support from MPs, worried their land would be the subject of land grabs.

Large-scale projects must also be implemented transparently, she added.

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Strict rules on funding for microfinance prevents industry growth plans

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Experts fret lack of attention to land in draft investment law

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Exchange Rates (March 26 close)		
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US Dollar	K1060	K1065

Offshore PSCs to finish before water festival

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THE signing of the remaining Production Sharing Contracts (PSC) for offshore blocks will be completed before the water festival begins, say officials.

A total of 19 international oil companies were awarded exploration and production rights for oil and gas in 20 of the 30 blocks in offshore bidding in 2013. Only a few companies are left to sign the PSCs.

"We have confirmed some PSC signings next week and are negotiating with other companies to finish the process before the Thingyan festival begins" on April 13, said an official in the Ministry of Energy. The signings are to take place early next month in Nay Pyi Taw.

The last international oil companies yet to sign are Norway-based Statoil, US-based ConocoPhillips; Australia-based ROC Oil; Tap Oil and Transcontinental Group (TRG); the Canadian Foresight Group (CFG) based in North America; Reliance Industries of India, European firm Eni; and Petrovietnam.

The signing with TRG is to take place on March 30, with Eni and Reliance set to sign the following day, the official said.

"Now we are finalising the exact date for ROC Oil and Statoil to sign,

at the end of March, or in April before Thingyan," he added.

TRG, partnering with the Canadian Foresight Group, has been awarded the shallow-water block M-15, the most sought-after in the bidding round.

A local furniture company, Lin Win, is the local partner of TRG, while Century Bright Gold, a subsidiary of Kaung Myanmar Aung (KMA) Group of Companies, is partnering with CFG.

Reliance Industries of India was awarded two shallow-water blocks, M-17 and M-18, and will partner with United National Resources Development Services.

Eni, which won two deepwater blocks, is to sign its PSC contract for blocks MD-2 and MD-4 in Moattma offshore on March 31.

Australia's ROC and Tap, partnering with Smart E&P International of Myanmar, will sign for block M-7, and Norway's Statoil, partnering with ConocoPhillips, was awarded deepwater block AD-10 off Rakhine.

The remaining 13 contracts have already been signed: with Oil India, Ophir, Berlanga, BG Group and Woodside Energy, also including super majors Chevron, Shell and Total.

The offshore PSC signing between Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) and international companies began last December 2014.



Lovebirds nestle below Hong Kong's skyline. The city aims to be a portal for trade. Photo: AFP

Hong Kong touted as window to world trade



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A HONG Kong business delegation visiting Myanmar touted the special administrative region as a gateway to commerce throughout the world.

The Hong Kong Trade Development Council and assorted Myanmar and Hong Kong businesspeople met for a networking event yesterday at the Sule Shangri-La Hotel in downtown Yangon.

"Mainland Chinese companies make contact with the outside world through Hong Kong. Chinese consumers see it as a window to the world," said Stephen Liang, director of the Hong Kong Trade Development Council.

"Myanmar companies want to go to the outside world for products and brands. I invited you to look to Hong Kong and use it as a path to do business in China, throughout Asia and the rest of the world," he added.

Mr Liang also spoke about the

Council's footprint, as it has more than 40 offices in Asia, with most in China. He said his organisation could help Myanmar companies find partnerships in Hong Kong and to identify market opportunities in Asia.

The Hong Kong delegation to Yangon - the eighth of its kind - comprised 27 CEOs and other business leaders from a variety of industries, including financial services, logistics and trade.

The trip signals Hong Kong industry's eagerness to draw Myanmar businesses so that the developing nation will turn to Hong Kong as a gateway to international trade.

U Philip, general manager of Uni Asia Company, supported the idea of participating in Hong Kong trade fairs "as a medium to go to the outside world".

"Sometimes it is very difficult to go it alone and to get trust from others," he said. "By using the Hong Kong Trade Development Council as a conduit we can get trade partners or markets and our product will be known to others."

Trade between Myanmar and Hong Kong has grown in 2014 to reach US\$227 million. Hong Kong ranked seventh on Myanmar's list

of trading partners. The island's businesses has also invested nearly \$7 billion in Myanmar.

Though trade is increasing between Myanmar and Hong Kong, concerns have arisen around competition with the country's other trading partners. Hong Kong companies of small to medium size, which often lack government backing, will have to do battle with the likes of Japan and Korea - a task they might not be up to.

"Myanmar can use Hong Kong as a window to go international trade," said Winthaw Leung, director of Macrowide Group. "It has huge potential to develop, but I think Hong Kong is a little late to come to Myanmar compared with other countries like Korea and Japan." For the most part, Myanmar trades with China, India, Japan, Indonesia, Germany and Hong Kong. Its top imports include fuel, vegetable oil, pharmaceutical products, construction equipment and machinery.

This past fiscal year, foreign direct investment into Myanmar spiked to surpass \$8 billion. The jump has been pinned to dynamism in energy, manufacturing and telecoms.

MPT extends promo prices for Swe Thahar

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MOBILE operator MPT has extended a promotion for its Swe Thahar users, claiming a positive customer response on the deal that cuts internet costs.

The plan has run for most of March, but will now continue into next month. It gives a 50 percent bonus on internet use, and will now run indefinitely until otherwise announced.

MPT deputy general manager U Thein Hote said the promotion has relied on customer feedback.

"If customers like the Swe Thahar promotion, we plan to continue the promotion," he told *The Myanmar Times*.

MPT introduced its new Swe Thahar plan in January, which among other things began pricing internet on volume rather than amount of time it was used.

Users had criticised the initial plan

in part because phone calls in most cases are most expensive on a per-minute basis than rivals Telenor and Ooredoo, which charge K25. Under the current promotion, MPT users can call three other MPT users at K25 a minute, though other calls are K35.

MPT users who have not signed up for the new Swe Thahar plan are not receiving the promotional pricing. As of mid-March the firm claims it has 5 million subscribers using the plan.

"This announcement is a new sign that MPT is willing to become more competitive, more customer-oriented and that it is fully ready to move Myanmar forward," a press release said.

The firm, which is state-owned but with a operations agreement with Japan's KDDI and Sumitomo Corporation, plans to have 100pc of its towers offering 3G by mid-2015. It also claims 70pc of Myanmar's territory will have MPT coverage by the end of 2016.

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Microfinance stagnates due to tough rules



JEREMY MULLINS

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THE domestic microfinance industry is being held back by a number of constraints on funding, preventing more small-scale loans from being disbursed, according to industry insiders.

A microfinance law was passed in November 2011, one of the first new pieces of legislation brought in by the civilian government. The industry had previously been closed to all but a handful of institutions, but following the law a number of international players entered and local organisations began looking at expansion.

Yet much of the early excitement around the potential for microfinance has been held in check, as cumbersome regulations have meant the industry is growing much slower than many would hope.

Acleda is one of the large foreign organisations that entered in the wake of the microfinance law. The Cambodian firm, which transformed from an NGO to becoming Cambodia's largest microfinance institution (MFI) and bank, has had a Myanmar presence since early 2013.

Acleda Myanmar managing director and CEO Kim Bunsoscheat said that while it is able to offer the small-scale microfinance loans on a limited scale, it has so far been unable to borrow from abroad to fund an expansion of its services.

The problem is not on the business end – a number of well-known organisations such as the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and Blue Orchard have discussed extending financing to Acleda – but rather that the loans are not being approved by the Central Bank of Myanmar.

“We are told our interest rates can't be above 8 percent for dollar loans, 10pc for Myanmar kyat loans, but it is hard to borrow at these rates from creditors from abroad,” he said. Acleda's rules mean nearly all of its borrowing must be in local currency.

“Most international institutions say around 12 to 15pc [for kyat loans], while dollar loans are at 7 to 9pc.

“I think this is still a constraint.”

Acleda has so far been unable to receive funding from foreign sources, and is instead limited to lending out its initial capital, hampering its ability to lend to those who could use the funds.

Microfinance means the provision of microcredit, defined in Myanmar's microfinance law as loans without collateral to reduce the poverty of grass roots people and to improve their socio-economic life.

These loans are small-scale in nature – Myanmar has a \$5000 limit on microfinance loans, having changed a



Customers wait at the counter of one of Yangon's modern microfinance institutions. Photo: Thiri Lu

previous policy of limits of \$500 after industry criticism. Still, the loans are tiny by most measures. Acleda's average loan size in Myanmar is \$230, about a tenth of its average Cambodian microfinance loan size of about \$2500.

The amount of loans MFIs can offer is directly affected by the size of their funding – more funds means more loans.

Debt financing is one of the main methods of funding microfinance, though it has become nearly impossible for foreign institutions in particular to access funding.

New rules stipulate that the local MFIs cannot borrow internationally or from private banks, and can only borrow from state-owned Myanmar Economic Bank inside the country. The rules also say that foreign MFIs cannot borrow locally, but can turn to foreign banks or institutions for funding – if the funds can be brought into the country.

Several government officials responsible for microfinance declined to comment or did not return request for comment on this article, including U Win Aung, head of microfinance regulatory body Financial Regulatory Department (FRD).

So far MFIs have been able to grow primarily with donor money, but several of them are on a scale where donations are no longer a solution.

One official from a foreign MFI in Myanmar said the entire industry is disappointed with the rules restricting

borrowing. “Basically the industry was growing rapidly and needed to grow more – but now no one can borrow,” he said.

The intention of Central Bank of Myanmar is honourable but the cap is misplaced for several reasons, according to Jerome Pirouz from The Currency Exchange Fund (TCX), a fund that provides instruments to hedge the currency risk between international investors and local borrowers in less-liquid emerging and frontier markets.

The statement, sent in response to questions from *The Myanmar Times*, pointed out that the Central Bank auctioned 3-month treasury bills last month at a yield of 8.19pc – the riskless rate of return that is an indication of where is the cost of funds for risk-free assets in kyat for 3 months – as evidence that caps of 10pc on “unsecured” wholesales loans to microfinance were untenable.

Additional funding is necessary to meet borrowers' needs.

“Demand for microfinance in Myanmar exceeds supply [by] four times,” the statement said. “MFIs crave funding to expand their balance sheet as they scale up operations.”

Currency of loans also matters. Myanmar MFIs cannot lend to their customers in US dollars, as then the customers are on the hook for currency risk if the exchange rate moves against them. As a result, MFIs are reluctant to take US funding, particularly as apart from TCX there are likely

no institutions willing to provide the hedging that ensures the MFIs are not exposed to currency risk.

Yet debt is only one component of the mix that local MFIs use to finance their activities. MFIs also make use of equity, deposits and grants – though each stream has its own challenges.

Equity financing for its part is expensive and limited.

MFIs can also be funded through deposits – though in Myanmar this is difficult. Deposit accounts must pay a minimum 15pc annual interest in the country – compared with 8pc at commercial banks – while MFIs are capped at 30pc a year for loans. Representatives from several MFIs told *The Myanmar Times* that the spread between the 15pc rate on deposits and 30pc rate on loans is generally uneconomical given the local costs they face, which are particularly high compared with other countries.

In many instances, debt is the preferred method of financing.

While Acleda has been at the fore of attempts to receive debt financing from foreign sources, a number of other MFIs are also looking at ways to fund future expansion. BRAC, a Bangladesh-based development organisation, has an ambitious business plan to open 120 branch offices in Myanmar by 2018, according to its country representative Faisal Bin Seraj Kazi. At the moment it has 12 branches in the country, though it hopes to increase that number to 30 by the end of the year.

BRAC has pursued a mixed approach to funding. It has equity investment from its parent organisation, as well as accepting deposits and is applying for grants. It may also turn to the debt market in the future.

While this year's plans are funded, its rapid plans for expansion mean it will need to diversify its funding sources in the future.

Current restrictions mean it cannot borrow from local banks, and must instead turn to foreign entities if it borrows.

“For us it would be better if we could get a loan from the local bank in local currency,” said Mr Kazi. “That would help us have [insulation] from currency exchange rate fluctuations.”

Still, Western sources of funding are often important.

“Even if you have a South-South approach, for funding you need a West-South approach,” he said.

The IFC, which would like to provide debt finance to local MFIs, said in a statement replying to questions from *The Myanmar Times* that debt to MFIs is usually priced using three components – country risk, project risk and cost of swapping US dollars to kyat.

Country risk estimates the risk of the country in terms of political stability, regulatory environment and ability to repatriate funds. Project risk covers the institutional risk of an MFI. The cost of swapping US dollars by a hedging provider like TCX a function of the risk they see for bearing the foreign exchange risk on their balance sheet.

It added several recommendations for policy changes in the country to allow MFIs to grow.

“MFIs should ideally be allowed to borrow at market rates – the interest rate MFIs borrow at should not be subject to caps that are inconsistent with how the market would price MFI risk,” the IFC said. Additionally, in many other markets globally, strong, well-capitalised MFIs are allowed to accept deposits at market rates from the public at large, not only credit customers and not necessarily at a pre-determined floor, as is currently the case in Myanmar.

“IFC and many other stakeholders are providing MFI global practice examples from other countries to show how the sector funds itself. We are trying to send a consistent message from many stakeholders to the Central Bank, Ministry of Finance and Financial Regulatory Department,” it said.

“Until MFIs are allowed to borrow, the sector is likely to stagnate.” However, it added that credible international lenders are best placed to assess and price this risk and it is the responsibility of the regulators to ensure that borrowing is responsible and consistent with prudential norms followed in other similar markets where there is a thriving microfinance sector.

– Additional reporting by Su Phyo Win

MANILA

Cebu Pacific flying high after recording bumper year

THE Philippines' largest airline yesterday reported a 67 percent rise in profits last year, with strong growth in domestic passenger numbers and swift success on a new Australia route.

Cebu Pacific posted a net profit of 853 million pesos (US\$19 million) in 2014, up from 512 million pesos in 2013.

The country's pioneer budget airline flew 16.9 million people last year, as passenger traffic grew 17.5pc, it said in a statement.

Cebu Pacific's Manila-Sydney route had 30pc of the market by the end of last year, after launching just three months earlier, chief executive

advisor Garry Kingshott told reporters in a conference call.

Mr Kingshott also said he expected growth on routes to Dubai and Kuwait, which were opened in the fourth quarter of 2014.

“We've seen positive uptake in the first quarter with fairly solid bookings for the March to April period ... my sense is that we're over the hump on the long-haul operations,” he said.

“With true price competition, we can stimulate traffic. There's demand there that's going to be served because of legacy carriers' [higher] prices.”

The Manila-Dammam route, how-

ever, will be suspended from next week due to weaker-than-expected demand and aircraft will be rede-

‘There's demand that's going to be served because of legacy carriers' [higher] prices.’

Garry Kingshott
Cebu Pacific

ployed to the Manila-Doha route, he said during the conference call.

“We do need to give some of these routes sufficient time to mature,” he said, adding that they are “under constant review”.

Domestically, where Cebu Pacific has a market share of around 60pc, Mr Kingshott predicted growth would continue with first-quarter numbers looking “pretty solid”.

Banking on a tourism boom, the airline will increase flights to Puerto Princesa, gateway to popular white sand beaches and diving spots, and Legazpi, which is home to the spectacular Mayon volcano.

International tourist arrivals to

the Philippines rose 3.25pc to 4.8 million in 2014.

The government is on an aggressive promotional campaign to bring the number to 10 million by the time President Benigno Aquino steps down in mid-2016.

Cebu Pacific carrier said full-year profit in 2014 rose despite a 1.2-billion-peso loss in the fourth quarter, as a drop in world oil prices caused fuel hedging losses.

Cebu Pacific is owned by tycoon John Gokongwei, the Philippines' fifth-richest man, according to *Forbes Magazine*.

It flies to 34 domestic destinations and 28 overseas. – AFP

Customers clamouring for microcredit



SU PHYTO WIN

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WHEN the people with the money arrive, all the women in the little room rise to greet them, like school-girls. The 100 or so village women are mostly middle-aged and elderly, with thanaka on their cheeks and flowers in their hair. The room is hot and cramped.

Kyee Chaung village, Mawlamyeingyunn township, is 11 kilometres (7 miles) by water from Bogale township, Ayeyarwady Region. Its 515 inhabitants work mostly in agriculture and fisheries, small trading and casual labour.

Daw Ohn Myint Kyi, a 57-year-old mother of three, wants a new K450,000 loan from Pact Global Microfinance Fund (PGMF), the country's leading microfinance

fund. She has been borrowing from Pact since 2009, when the fund managers arrived in the village after Cyclone Nargis had destroyed most of it.

"When Nargis reduced my home and my 6-acre farm to ground zero, I got a K70,000 loan from Pact. Now I can get K450,000. I've never failed to repay the loan or the interest," she said proudly.

"I will grow 3000 betel plants, worth K450,000. It will be popular in our village, so I want to try it," she said.

In 2009, women could borrow K70,000 at 36 percent annual interest, later 30pc. "We can lend up to K100,000, rising to K500,000 after four years," said Daw Khine Khine Oo, a loan officer with PGMF, which has a K4 billion fund.

PGMF activities in Bogale cover 51 townships with 904,674 members and the repayment rate is 99.13 percent. The fund also operates in Labutta and Mawlamyeingyunn townships.



A farmer in Bogale township tends his fields. The local customers are keen for microfinance. Photo: Thiri Lu

Although Daw Ohn Myint Kyi had borrowed K300,000 from MADB, she also needed a loan from Pact. "I'm growing 500 betel plants with a Pact loan that I have to repay at the rate of K18,000 capital and K2700 interest every two weeks. I've already repaid the K300,000 loan from MADB. We have to survive on debts and loans. I can't even rebuild

my home after Nargis," she said.

Daw Khin Hnin Wai, 31, who also has three children, with a loan she took from Pact in 2012, did manage to rebuild the house Nargis destroyed, though the new house was not as good as the old. "I had a snacks and jam business before Nargis. I got back on my feet with the Pact loan, but it took a long

time to rebuild my house," she said. She could also afford the thin gold necklace she wears.

Pact beneficiaries gather in the little room every 14 days to repay their loans and interest, or to apply for new loans. The women are organised in groups of five, all of whom take joint responsibility for the group's loans.

LONDON

Dubai exchange sells share

BORSE Dubai has sold its significant stake in the London Stock Exchange, sending the British group's share price plunging yesterday.

"Borse Dubai has ... sold its shareholding in London Stock Exchange Group plc, representing approximately 17.4 percent of the share capital in the company," said a statement issued by the Gulf group, which was the biggest single shareholder in the LSE.

The stake is worth £1.53 billion (US\$2.29 billion) according to the LSE share price at the close of trading on March 25, at 2538 pence.

BILLION US\$

2.29

Value of the stake in Borse Dubai that was sold to the London Stock Exchange

In deals following the announcement yesterday, LSE crashed to 2288 pence, down 9.85pc on London's benchmark FTSE 100 index, which fell 1.15pc to 6910.79 points overall in morning deals.

"While details remain scant, the sale was probably worth around £1.5 billion and ends a ... reduction process designed to crystallise handsome gains thanks to many years of hopes of another round of exchange mergers, which have seen LSE shares double from 2007 levels," said Mike van Dulken, head of research at trading group Accendo Markets.

The Qatar Investment Authority takes over as the biggest LSE shareholder. QIA cut its holding to about 10pc from 15pc last year according to Bloomberg News. - AFP

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NEW DELHI

Dirty money looms over India real estate

SIDDHARTH Sharma, a salaried aviation consultant, was looking to buy an apartment near New Delhi. Of the eight projects he viewed, developers of three expected part-payment in cash, an illegal but common demand in India.

"With my salary, I don't generate much cash," said Mr Sharma, 43. "For me, to cough up so much was impossible. I had to cross those builders off my list."

The practice of investing in real estate with untaxed income or unaccounted wealth is prevalent in India. That may be about to change if Prime Minister Narendra Modi has his way. His government is planning a new bill to curb "black money" that has inflated property prices, narrowed options for buyers like Mr Sharma and kept homes beyond reach for many Indians.

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley told lawmakers last month that he plans to introduce a revamped version of a lapsed Benami Transactions (Prohibition) Bill in the current session of parliament. *Benami* means anonymous, and such deals often involve concealing the identity of the true buyer or

the seller. "The first and foremost pillar of my tax proposals is to effectively deal with the problem of black money which eats into the vitals of our economy and society," Mr Jaitley said. "This law will enable confiscation of *benami* property and provide for prosecution, thus blocking a major avenue for generation and holding of black money in the form of *benami* property, especially in real estate."

Data provided by Mumbai-based Liases Foras Real Estate Rating and Research show the real estate industry accounts for a large share of illicit deals in the South Asian country, with an estimated 30 percent of transactions done with black money.

That's high for a sector making up 6pc of India's US\$1.88 trillion economy and for an industry forecast to grow fivefold to \$676 billion by 2025 and 13pc of GDP by 2028, according to KPMG.

If enacted, the law could mean a "healthy" correction to property prices, said Samir Arora, founder of Helios Capital Management, a Singapore-based hedge fund.

"The biggest beneficiary of black



Traffic passes in front of residential buildings in the Chembur area of Mumbai.

Photo: AFP

money in India is real estate," Mr Arora said. "The government looks all serious on this bill. Once you make the rules tough, somebody will get caught.

When a few get caught, then others will freeze." The proposed bill will seek to prohibit accepting cash of 20,000 rupees (\$319) and above for the purchase of immovable property while buyers will have to provide their income tax identification numbers for property transactions exceeding 100,000 rupees.

"In principle, the more checks and balances they bring, the better for the industry," said Rohit Gera, managing director of Pune-based Gera Developments. "Every time one talks of black money, it's always linked to real estate.

We are an easy play because of the perception we are a dirty industry."

Mr Gera, differentiating "reputed" builders from others, said his company accepts only checks and never any cash. The prevalence of unaccounted wealth being pumped into real estate is more acute in land deals rather than in developed housing, said C Shekar Reddy, president of the Confederation of Real Estate Developers' Associations of India.

"Where developers are concerned, I can say black money in residential transactions is almost nil," Mr Reddy said. The passage of the bill hinges on Mr Modi's ability to push it through the upper house of parliament, where his Bharatiya Janata Party lacks majority. In his first legislative victory since becoming prime minister in May, lawmakers this month approved a proposal pending since 2008 to raise the cap on foreign investment in local insurers.

After the government failed to notify an original law in 1988, another version of the bill was introduced in 2011, which lapsed a few years later. That draft recommended jail terms ranging from six months to two years and a fine of 25pc of the fair value of the property held in *benami*.

As for Mr Sharma's search for a suitable property near New Delhi, he says he hasn't seen a happy ending yet.

"Property prices have become unaffordable in India, and with some developers asking for cash, it's pricing people like me out of the market," he said.

— Bloomberg



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COLUMBO

China works to warm Sri Lanka relations after construction halt

CHINESE President Xi Jinping worked to mend relations with Sri Lanka yesterday as state-run media warned the island nation's new government against shutting off billions in investments from Beijing.

Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena is on his first state visit to Beijing since taking office in January and is working to renegotiate more than US\$5.3 billion worth of Chinese deals signed by his predecessor.

'Mr President, you are an old friend of the Chinese people.'

Xi Jinping
President of China

He has already suspended construction work on a major Chinese-funded "port city" commissioned by his predecessor Mahinda Rajapakse, who relied heavily on China to rebuild the country's infrastructure during his decade in power, raising concerns in India.

"We will continue to make efforts toward building the relationship toward a new era in the traditional friendship between China and Sri Lanka," Mr Xi said during a meeting with Mr Sirisena. "Mr President, you are an old friend of the Chinese people."

China wants to "deepen the mutually beneficial cooperation in all spheres, push forward genuinely helping each other in our strategic

partnership", Mr Xi added at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.

Mr Sirisena's comments were not translated to the audience.

Sri Lanka has complained that it is paying too much interest on the Chinese loans funding its infrastructure development.

The \$1.4 billion "port city" land reclamation scheme in Colombo suspended by Mr Sirisena was considered a security risk by neighbouring India.

China has said any disruptions to the project will spook foreign investors and an op-ed in the *Global Times*, a paper affiliated with the Communist Party mouthpiece *People's Daily*, reminded Mr Sirisena that "Sri Lanka needs foreign investment more than ever".

"A consistent policy is crucial for attracting foreign investment," wrote Lan Jianxue. "Sri Lanka's strategic goals will be better guaranteed if Colombo can integrate them with China-backed projects."

Mr Sirisena has also ordered a review of other Beijing-financed projects and loans amid allegations of corruption.

Mr Sirisena made India - rather than China - his first foreign trip after winning elections in January, seeking to rebuild ties with Delhi.

India was reportedly furious after Chinese submarines were allowed to dock in Colombo last year when Mr Rajapakse was still in power.

Beijing has been accused of seeking to develop facilities around the Indian Ocean in a "string of pearls" strategy to counter the rise of rival India and secure its own economic interests. — AFP

Civil society frets land with investment law



KO KO AUNG

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CIVIL Society is concerned that land rights may be left behind as the two main existing investment laws are to be replaced by a new law.

The new investment law is to combine the Foreign Investment Law and Myanmar Citizens Investment Law into one document, aiming partly to move discrepancies between how foreign and local businesses are treated.

The former Myanmar Citizens Investment Law includes provisions for leasing land from the Union government in Chapter 13, laying out a maximum of 50 years plus two possible 10-year extensions, as well as a few other rules on land use, such as priority to ethnic people within 10 miles (16 kilometres) of the border.

Some civil society members say the current draft of the new investment law does not include provisions dealing with these leases, leaving open the question about what the rules will be.

"In the old law we can find land-

related issues, but in the new investment law we do not see explicit statements on land leases, so we are worried about it," said Daw Than Than Aye, a lawyer from Earthrights International, at a public consultation. "Now how do we connect other land laws and a renovated investment law."

Directorate of Investment and Company Administration deputy director general Daw Cho Cho Win said in a seminar that authorities are increasingly focused on avoiding land disputes. She added that the revamped investment law is still in the consultative period.

"Compared with the old Myanmar Citizens Investment Law, I agree that the revamped investment law still lacks land usage rules," she said. "We will negotiate with other [bodies] and add rules on land usage very soon."

The Directorate of Investment and Company Administration is receiving support for the new Myanmar Investment Law from International Finance Corporation. It has been holding seminars in Yangon and Nay Pyi Taw, aiming to receive input from community organisations, NGOs and experts, with consultations ending yesterday.

A number of civil society groups have expressed concern about land



grabbing, leading some to highlight land issues at the forums.

"If there are not exact laws regarding land affairs, it will become a problem one day," said Ko Moe, chair of social development organisation Light House. "With no laws, we can do nothing."

Ko Moe pointed to a possible land grabbing situation in Mandalay Region as well as the Letpadaung copper mine as examples of the importance of clear rules.

The government has moved to

make it more difficult for land to be seized from farmers, and formed a commission to handle these issues, though the situation can also be exasperated because of a lack of written titles.

Legal and policy expert Sufian Jusoh, who is working on the new law, has said that authorities want to make sure they take into account the opinions of public and private sector stakeholders as well as the international commitments of the Union government in trade and investment when

formulating the new law.

Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch yesterday criticised the government in a press release, saying it "has failed to engage in meaningful public consultation on a draft investment law that could have a profound impact on human rights in the country The government should extend its March 26, 2015, deadline for public comments and engage in genuine consultations with civil society organisations before submitting the draft law to parliament."

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ကြည့်ရှု

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- Excellent communication and liaison skills;
- Good knowledge of modern office procedures, practices, methods and equipment including use of standard computer software programs such as Microsoft Word and Excel;

The application form, selection criteria and position description can be obtained from the Australian Embassy, 88 Strand Road, or downloaded from the Embassy website at:

<http://www.myanmar.embassy.gov.au/rang/aboutus.html>

Applications should be lodged at the Embassy or emailed to austembassy.yangon@dfat.gov.au together with a statement of claim not exceeding two pages, addressing the selection criteria and a copy of your CV, with one recent passport sized photo. Statements should detail suitability to perform the duties of the position including personal qualities, experience, skills, and knowledge relative to the selection criteria.

The closing date for applications is **4:00 pm on Thursday 9 April 2015.**

Note:

1. The Australian Embassy does not discriminate in regards to race, ethnicity, gender and age.
2. Only those candidates whose qualifications and experience are of further interest will be contacted for an interview.



The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Myanmar is seeking for qualified applicants to fill the following position:

- 1) Senior Data Management Assistant PN 10003185, GL-5 (UNHCR Contract - FTA, Hpa-An)

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The detailed Terms of Reference for these positions are available on request from UNHCR offices in Yangon, Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Sittwe, Myitkyina, Bhamo, Mawlamyine, Hpa-An, Loikaw, Dawei and Taungoo.

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NEW YORK



Heinz and Kraft tie-up a mega deal without a mega bank

WHAT'S missing from the largest takeover of the year? Wall Street's biggest investment banks.

As they worked on a deal to create the third-largest food and beverage company, H Heinz and Kraft Foods Group tapped just one financial adviser each: Lazard Ltd and Centerview Partners.

The US\$46 billion merger is the largest in at least a decade to exclude every so-called bulge-bracket firm, big banks such as Goldman Sachs Group or Morgan Stanley that dominate the market for M&A advice.

Small firms are rarely alone in the final accounting of advisers on large transactions because only the big banks can write checks to fund a deal. In this case Heinz's backers, Warren Buffett and 3G Capital, are playing that role.

"When you see a big deal like this

you're used to seeing a bulge bracket," said Jeff Harte, an analyst with Sandler O'Neill & Partners. "Given the lack of need for external funding, it made more sense" that boutique banks were alone in advising.

Lazard's role on the deal answered one question that's been floating around Wall Street ever since the departure of its global head of investment banking Antonio Weiss. Mr Weiss is now a counsellor to Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew, and his departure had some wondering whether Lazard would be able to hold onto banking relationships he had fostered.

For Lazard, the deal was spearheaded by Alexander Hecker, a German native who has been with the bank since 2000 and advised 3G Capital and Warren Buffett in earlier deals.

Centerview's work on the deal was led by Blair Efron, a former UBS banker who co-founded the firm in 2006. Other large deals that the bank has advised on this year include Pharmacyclics' \$20 billion sale to Abbvie Inc.

For its work on the deal, Centerview could receive \$75 million to \$100

million, Jeff Nassof, a vice president at researcher Freeman & Co, estimates. Lazard could be paid about \$50 million to \$60 million, he said.

Nassof's basing those estimates on a deal value of over \$40 billion. The ultimate size of this deal - in which Kraft shareholders will wind up owning almost half of a new publicly traded entity - is a moving target.

The \$46 billion value is based on the dividend Kraft shareholders will receive, in addition to the market value of the company ahead of the March 25 announcement, and excludes the value of debt.

Advisers on the deal valued Kraft at around \$50 billion to \$52 billion, a figure that includes the dividend payout and a premium for Kraft shareholders, two people with knowledge of the matter said.

- Bloomberg

BILLION US\$

46

Value of the proposed merger between Heinz and Kraft foods

MONTREAL

Cirque du Soleil bids due in a week

BIDDERS have until next week to submit offers for a majority stake in Cirque du Soleil, estimated to be worth US\$2 billion, a Canadian newspaper said late March 25.

The circus troupe's founder Guy Laliberte holds 90 percent of the private company he founded in 1984, and according to the daily *Globe and Mail* his stake would be reduced to only 10pc in a sell-off.

"Last June, Guy Laliberte announced his intentions to find a strategic partner. That process is underway but is very long," said Cirque spokesperson Renee-Claude Menard in an email.

Mr Laliberte originally wished to sell just a small piece of the firm that grew from a ragtag troupe of street performers to an entertainment giant presenting some 20 circus shows simultaneously around the world.

But the *Globe and Mail*, citing sources familiar with the negotiations, said buyers pushed for control of the company.

"Mr Laliberte will take all the time he needs to evaluate bids," Ms Menard noted.

Bidders include mostly foreign entertainment companies and private equity funds, the *Globe and Mail* said.

Some suitors, including private equity firm BC Partners, have withdrawn their offers after looking over Cirque's confidential financial documents, which reportedly point to dwindling profits.

For the first time ever, Cirque posted a loss in 2012 and subsequently cut 1000 out of 5000 staff globally.

Notably, its eight Las Vegas shows are responsible for half of its revenues, while its others, including travelling tent shows, have struggled to be profitable.

Mr Laliberte has reportedly blamed slack internal spending controls during his absence while he trained for a flight into space and to spend time with family. - AFP

BEIJING

Chinese influence climbs as US thwarted on global bank

SEVEN decades after the end of World War II, the international economic architecture crafted by the US faces its biggest shakeup yet, with China establishing new channels for influence to match its ambitions.

Three lending institutions with at least US\$190 billion are taking shape under China's leadership, one of them informally referred to as a Marshall Plan - evoking the postwar US program to rebuild an impoverished Europe. Also this year, China's yuan may win the IMF's blessing as an official reserve currency, a recognition of its rising use in trade and finance.

China's clout has been expanding for decades, as its rapid growth allowed it to snap up a rising share of the world's resources, its exports penetrated global markets, and its bulging financial assets gave it power to make big individual loans and purchases. Now, the creation of international lending institutions is leveraging that economic influence closer to the political and diplomatic arenas, as US allies defy America to back China's initiative.

"This is the beginning of a bigger role for China in global affairs," said Jim O'Neill, British-based former chief economist at Goldman Sachs

who coined the term BRICs in 2001 to highlight the rising economic power of Brazil, Russia, India and China.

Chinese President Xi Jinping's vision of achieving the same great-power status enjoyed by the US received a major boost this month when Britain, Germany, France and Italy signed on to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The AIIB will have authorised capital of \$100 billion and starting funds of about \$50 billion.

Canada is considering joining, which would leave the US and Japan as the only Group of Seven holdouts as they question the institution's governance and environmental standards.

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott's cabinet approved negotiations to join too, according to a government official who asked not to be identified as the decision hasn't been made public. Founding membership will be finalised as soon as April 15, said a Chinese official.

"China's economic rise is acting as a huge pull factor forcing the existing architecture to adapt," said James Laurenceson, deputy director of the Australia-China Relations Institute in Sydney. "The AIIB has shown the US that a majority in international community support China's aspirations

for taking on greater leadership and responsibility, at least on economic initiatives."

Asian Development Bank president Takehiko Nakao said on March 25 the institution would seek to cooperate with the new Chinese lender.

"Once it formally starts, I plan to cooperate with it," Mr Nakao said in Tokyo. "It would be impossible to be hostile. Lots of countries need funds, and it is natural that we will cooperate. It would be to the benefit of international society, the region and Japan."

The new China-backed institutions - the infrastructure bank, a \$50 billion development bank in conjunction with fellow BRICS nations and a \$40 billion fund to revive the ancient Silk Road trade route - are being set up after years of frustrated attempts by China and other emerging nations to revamp the existing international financial institutions to better reflect the shape of the global economy.

A key sticking point is the US's failure for more than four years to approve shifts in the International Monetary Fund's ownership structure, which would give emerging markets more influence and install China as the third-largest member nation, up from sixth.

The changes have been held up by the refusal of the US Congress to ratify them, even though the White House and governments around the world support them.

The US still has veto power on major decisions made by both the IMF and the World Bank, and a lock on selecting the president of the World Bank. Both institutions are increasingly unrepresentative and undersized compared with demands they face.

"The real tragedy is, compared to the billions we spend on defense to support US global leadership, Congress undermined it by refusing to provide the chump change needed to reform the IMF," said David Loevinger, former US Treasury Department senior coordinator for China affairs and now an analyst at TCW Group in Los Angeles. "Congress can abdicate its international responsibilities. What it can't do is stop China from playing a bigger role in managing the global economy."

Regarding the new infrastructure bank, US Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew told lawmakers last week the administration is concerned that the institution may not adhere to the same standards as other international financial institutions.

Part of China's international-development push stems from economic self-interest. With much of the nation's almost \$4 trillion in foreign-currency reserves earning little, "they see this as an opportunity to improve their rate of return over Treasuries," said Nicholas Lardy, who's studied China for more than three decades and is a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington.

Andrew Polk, Beijing-based economist at the Conference Board, said China's push to set up these new institutions is driven by its desire to "stoke markets" to which it can export industrial overcapacity.

China plans to spend \$40 billion to revive the centuries-old Silk Road trade route between Asia and Europe, an idea raised by Mr Xi in a 2013 speech in neighboring Kazakhstan.

Some analysts have likened the plan to the postwar effort to help Europe that helped establish the US as a regional economic power.

Announced in July, the BRICS' New Development Bank, to be based in Shanghai with initial capital of \$50 billion, is the third building block of a China-centered international economic architecture. - Bloomberg



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KRAFT OREO Sandwich Cookies -Chocolate/ Biscuit Ks. 2,450 2,300	OVALTINE Sandwich Cookies Chocolate Cream 360g Ks. 4,150 3,720	LOCKER Wafer Cubes with -Hazelnut/ Coconut/ Chocolate 250g Ks. 1,450 1,330	POTAE/ PAPRIKA/ CORNAE -Potato Snack 85g/ 95g -American Corn Snack 80g Ks. 1,450 1,330	AMANOYA Rice Cracker -Kabukiage 11 Mts 132g -Ebi Salad 108g Ks. 950 850
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GA BI Rice Cracker 150g Ks. 950 750	TOP Cashew Bittle 240g Ks. 680 600	TOP Cashew Nuts -Salted/ Roasted 40g Ks. 1,450 1,230	MISTER POTATO Crisps 160g Ks. 1,600 1,430	LAY'S Potato Chip Classic -Noris seaweed/ Original/ Sour Cream & Onion 75g Ks. 950 850
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TAO KAE NOI Seaweed Big Sheet -Original/ Spicy/ Soybean 12's 48g -Spicy 48g Ks. 1,650 1,480	HERO BOY Mixed Fruit Jelly 660g Ks. 850 750	YO YO Jelly -Assorted/ Berry/ Grape/ Strawberry/ Cola 80g Ks. 750 680	COWHEAD UHT Milk Full Cream 1 Ltr Ks. 1,800 1,700	FOREMOST UHT Milk -Plain/ Low Fat/ Chocolate/ Sweetened 4's x 180ml Ks. 1,600 1,430	LACTASOY Soy Milk Sweetened Original 1000ml Ks. 950 850
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NESCAFE Ice Coffee -Espresso/ Latte 180ml Ks. 1,650 1,480	SUNDAY Ice Coffee 230ml Ks. 850 750	7 UP/ PEPSI/ MIRINDA ORANGE 330ml Ks. 1,600 1,430	7 UP/ PEPSI/ MIRINDA ORANGE 450ml Ks. 1,600 1,430	7 UP/ PEPSI/ MIRINDA ORANGE 1.25 Ltr Ks. 950 850
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RED BULL Energy Drink 250ml Ks. 1,650 1,480	COCA COLA -Coke/ Sprite/ Max Plus Orange 24's 330ml Ks. 9,300 8,000	COCA COLA Zero 330ml Ks. 1,650 1,480
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COCA COLA -Coke/ Zero/ Sprite/ Max Plus Orange/ Lime 1.25 Ltr Ks. 800 750	MALEE 100% Fruit Juice 1 Ltr Ks. 2,050 1,850
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POKKA Pulpy-C Orange 240ml Ks. 1,700 1,530	VIVOS Aloe Vera with Apple Drink 1.5 Ltr Ks. 1,700 1,530	EVA Juice Non Alcoholic Sparking -Apple/ Whitegrape 750ml Ks. 1,650 1,480
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47 th STREET ☎ 01-200826.298746 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	ZAWANA ☎ 01-564532 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	JUNCTION SQUARE ☎ 01-527053 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	SHWE PINLON ☎ 01-580130.8010248 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)
JUNCTION 8 ☎ 01-650778 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	SHWE MYA YAR ☎ 01-294063 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	STAR CITY (THANLYIN) ☎ 056-23150/51/52/53 (18:00AM to 9:00PM)	marketplace.com.mm
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YANKIN CENTRE ☎ 01-400284 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	JUNCTION MAW TIN ☎ 01-218159 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	SOUTH DAGON ☎ 01-8100727 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)	PARKSON FMI ☎ 01-246859.240394 (9:00AM to 9:00PM)

World

WORLD EDITOR: Kayleigh Long

PHNOM PENH

Hun Sen knocks Obama visit

CAMBODIAN Prime Minister Hun Sen took aim at Michelle Obama on March 25, accusing the US first lady of making false promises, while suggesting her visit last weekend was more about hopeful rhetoric rather than implementing concrete improvements in the country's education sector.

During a speech at the National Institute of Education, Hun Sen told the US Embassy and USAID to make good on alleged scholarship promises and front some actual cash if they want to truly make an impact on education reform in Cambodia. The prime minister was referring to Ms Obama's visit to the country on March 21, in which she met with 10 female students in Siem Reap to push the White House's "Let Girls Learn" initiative.

"Her [Ms Obama's] mission is very good, but I suggest the United States should help completely and not play like this," he said. "It is just playing around - it is not good. What if she

chose 300 students? It would be death. I don't have that money to give."

Hun Sen's comments came after Education Minister Hang Chuon Naron on March 24 requested state university scholarships for the 10 girls, whose education through grade 12 is being funded by NGO Room to Read.

Hun Sen said that he provided each student US\$1500 per year to go toward their four years at university, but mentioned he was under the impression the US was going to foot the bill for the girls' education. Now, he said, the Cambodian Ministry of Education was left to pay for them.

"I thought the United States would give scholarships to those students until they complete university, but that's not [the case]," Hun Sen said. "I had strongly hoped [that was the situation], but she just came here to choose people and then [left] it to the Ministry of Education."

The prime minister stated that it was not his intention to slight the US, though he was concerned that the Let

Girls Learn initiative was simply a way for the US to take credit for reform while publicly critiquing the Cambodian government.

"I am sorry ... but this is just my opinion," said Hun Sen. "It will become a political matter in the long term. The children will say in the future that the US assisted them in completing university, while Hun Sen will be known as a man who doesn't work."

US embassy spokesperson Jay Raman yesterday denied that Ms Obama had made any pledges regarding scholarships, stressing that the Let Girls Learn initiative was primarily focused on breaking down barriers to education by promoting awareness of access inequalities.

Mr Raman also stressed "It's not just about awareness, but also action, particularly through USAID programs that support girls' education and at the community level through our Peace Corps volunteers and their local counterparts." - *Phnom Penh Post*



A woman carries a bunch of bananas she found on the banks of the Noai river, 70

PATTANI

Horses for forces in restive Thai south

A PARAMILITARY unit has deployed a new weapon to fight insurgents in restive Pattani - horses.

The horses were bought by Sub Lt Somchai Sripthrom, chief of the 4409th Battalion, for 200,000 baht (US \$6145) from his own purse and put into service on patrol duty in the Sai Buri area.

With 12 years' experience in the region, he believes horses can help with the peacekeeping mission.

"It has built a friendly atmosphere in the villages. The villagers wave their hands when they see officers galloping on horseback," he said.

Assistant district chief Nantharat Buayaem of Sai Buri said entering the villages by horse gives a better impression than barrelling in on motorcycles or military vehicles.

Ahamad Sueresor, a villager at Ban Paseyawor, agrees. "I feel they are more



Rangers patrol a village in Pattani province. Photo: Bangkok Post

friendly on the horses compared with the humvee," he said.

The Thai government has spent 209 billion baht on tackling the insurgency in Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala and some parts of Songkhla since violence broke out in 2004. The budget includes devel-

opment projects.

More than 6000 civilians and authorities have been killed in the conflict, according to figures supplied by Deep South Watch, until the end of last year.

- *Bangkok Post*

PORT VILA

Urgent aid app

THE United Nations has launched an urgent appeal for nearly US\$30 million to provide life-saving assistance in Vanuatu after the island nation was ravaged by cyclone Pam.

The UN's humanitarian organization announced on March 24 it had launched a flash appeal for \$29.9 million to help 166,000 people in the Pacific archipelago after it was hit by the cyclone on March 13.

"That is more than half of the population of this island nation," OCHA spokesperson Jens Laerke told reporters in Geneva.

Severe Tropical Cyclone Pam, a maximum category five storm,

destroyed homes and crops and contaminated water supplies in Vanuatu, increasing the risk of the spread of infectious and water-borne diseases.

An estimated 110,000 people have no access to safe drinking water, while some 75,000 urgently need shelter, according to OCHA.

Mr Laerke said the money would be used to provide life-saving assistance, including food, water, health care and shelter to people in all of the affected areas, covering 22 of Vanuatu's some 80 islands.

In the two hardest-hit provinces, Shefa and Tafea, "all crops ... have been damaged or destroyed and

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Pilot locked out of cabin prior to French Alps crash that killed 150

WORLD 26



Combined forces strike against anti-government advance in Yemen

WORLD 28



kilometres north of Vanuatu's capital Port Vila on March 21. Photo: AFP

Deal for Vanuatu

food is running out as I speak," Mr Laerke warned.

In other provinces, as much as 90 percent of shelters, he said "have been wiped out, while roads are impassable and debris is still being cleared."

A full \$8.2 million of the appeal would go to help bring food assistance to communities where reserves are running dangerously low, he said.

Mr Laerke said donors had already funded 8 percent of the requested amount, or \$2.3 million, "which is a good start".

The UN's children's fund meanwhile said \$4.8 million of the overall UN appeal would go to helping some 82,000 children, or two-thirds of the youngsters in the country, in desper-

ate need of humanitarian assistance.

"Children, especially those in the hardest-to-reach islands, are in serious danger right now," UNICEF's Pacific representative Karen Allen said in a statement, pointing to the "significant risk of disease" due to the acute water shortages, limited medical care and poor sanitation.

Schools have officially reopened, but 80pc of school buildings were damaged in the storm, UNICEF said.

The International Organization for Migration also launched an appeal on March 24 for \$1.0 million to help the Vanuatu government return people to their communities as evacuation centres gradually empty.

- AFP

SYDNEY

Australia and Cambodia close in on controversial asylum seeker deal

AUSTRALIA and Cambodia sealed a second deal on immigration cooperation yesterday, vowing to tackle the "growing security threat" of asylum-seeker smuggling just months after agreeing to transfer refugees to the Southeast Asian nation.

The new memorandum of understanding will see the two nations exchange information on people-smuggling activities, building on September's deal to transfer refugees held by Australia on the remote Pacific island of Nauru to Cambodia.

Under Canberra's hardline immigration policy, asylum-seekers who arrive on boats are denied resettlement in Australia and sent to Papua New Guinea and Nauru, even if they are

genuine refugees.

"The agreement represents the renewed determination by Australia and Cambodia to work closely to counter the growing security threat posed by transnational crime and illegal migration practices," Immigration Minister Peter Dutton said in a statement as he welcomed Cambodia's Deputy Prime Minister Sar Kheng to Canberra.

Sar Kheng said the agreement reflected Phnom Penh's commitment to "develop our capacity to fight this growing international criminal activity" of people-smuggling.

The deputy prime minister also defended Cambodia's reported deportation of 36 Vietnamese Montagnards last month after they

were arrested while trying to seek asylum.

The mainly Christian ethnic minorities in Vietnam's mountainous Central Highlands have crossed in to Cambodia in recent years to escape discrimination.

"If we are able to identify those individuals who are illegal immigrants then we implement the immigration law, whereas (if we) identify those who are refugees we implement the convention," Kheng said in Canberra, the Australian Associated Press reported.

Australia has attracted criticism, including from the UN, over the deal.

Refugee advocates say asylum-seekers are not interested in the deal.

- AFP

BANGKOK

Homecoming for Thai fishermen

TWENTY-ONE Thai fishermen are set to be repatriated today thanks to cooperation between Thailand and Indonesia.

Led by Social Development and Human Security Ministry adviser Sukritchai Anekwieng, Thai officials are scheduled to go to Ambon Island today to help the remaining fishermen stranded there. Since October last year, a total of 146 fishermen have been brought home. Seventy of them were on Ambon Island.

The Thai government has, in the past months, accelerated efforts to bring back fishermen who were left in Indonesia as part of its bid to demonstrate Thailand's efforts to fight human trafficking and assist workers who were left in for various reasons.

Defence Minister Prawit Wongsuwon said Thailand is working with Indonesia to solve the issue.

"Thai workers are safe and well taken care of. The Thai government is trying to make concrete progress, while explaining to the international community about steps that we have made in fighting human trafficking and illegal labour," said Gen Prawit.

Gen Prawit said Thailand also plans

to sign a memorandum of understanding with Indonesia to prevent illegal fishing in Indonesian waters. It was not immediately known how many fishermen are being detained for fishing illegally.

About the owners of illegal fishing vessels, Gen Prawit said, "If the owners committed wrongdoing, related agencies such as the Fisheries Department and Harbour Department will have to take action against them. We have to abide by international rules."

Viriya Sirichai-ekawat, chair of the Thai Overseas Fisheries Association, said the association has urged its members to follow labour protection regulations. He added that he believed more than half of the fishing labour force have legal contracts.

The number of the association's members has risen by 20 percent over the past year.

Several hundred Thai fishermen are living on Ambon and Benjina islands. Some escaped the boats and could not return home themselves because they did not have any ID or money.

Earlier this week, Channel 3 reported the discovery of a graveyard containing fishermen from Thai fishing

vessels on Benjina.

Thapanee Ietsrichai, a Channel 3 reporter, accompanied Labour Rights Promotion Network Foundation (LPN), a Thai non-governmental organisation, to Indonesia.


LPN has worked with the Thai government and various agencies to gradually return Thai fishermen. Thapanee told the *Bangkok Post* that she saw the graveyard on Benjina where local people said half the people buried there were fishermen from Thai trawlers.


"I saw more than 60 graves with names to identify the bodies, in addition to about 10 unmarked ones," she said.

She said the bodies were buried between 2006-2014.


The details on each grave consist of the name of the deceased, his date of birth and death, his religion, his hometown and his seaman identification number.

An official from LPN urged the governments to identify the bodies in the graves, even ones with names, because many fishermen went to Indonesia with falsified seaman's papers. - *Bangkok Post*





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SEYNE-LES-ALPES

Co-pilot 'deliberately' crashed plane

THE young co-pilot of the doomed Germanwings flight appears to have "deliberately" crashed the plane into the French Alps after locking his captain out of the cockpit, but is not believed to be part of a terrorist plot, French officials said yesterday.

In a chilling account of the last minutes of Germanwings Flight 4U 9525, lead prosecutor Brice Robin said 28-year-old German Andreas Lubitz "deliberately" initiated the plane's descent while alone at the controls.

Lubitz appeared to "show a desire to want to destroy" the plane, Robin told reporters, basing his initial findings on recordings made by the Airbus' cockpit flight recorder in the final minutes before the crash that killed all 150 passengers and crew on board.

Robin said the 144 passengers died "instantly" and probably were not aware until the "very last moment" of the impending disaster.

"The screams are heard only in the last moments before the impact," said the prosecutor.

"The co-pilot was alone at the controls," he said. "He ... refused to open the door of the cockpit to the pilot."

The pilot, believed to have gone to the toilet, made increasingly furious attempts to re-enter the cockpit, banging on the door, the recordings show.

There was no immediate clue as to the motive of the co-pilot, but investigators appeared to rule out terrorism.

"At this moment, there is no indication that this is an act of terrorism," Robin said, adding that Lubitz had no



French soldiers patrol near the site where a Germanwings Airbus A320 crashed on March 24 yesterday. Photo: AFP

'Usually when you commit suicide, you do it alone. When you're responsible for 150 people, I don't call that suicide.'

Brice Robin
Lead prosecutor

known terrorist connection.

Germany's interior minister echoed this, saying there was so far no indication of "a terrorist background".

However, Robin also said he was unwilling to use the word "suicide" and could not guess at Lubitz's motive.

"Usually when you commit suicide, you do it alone. When you're responsible for 150 people, I don't call that a suicide," he said.

The co-pilot, who deliberately set the controls "to accelerate the plane's descent" into the side of a mountain

in a region famous for its ski resorts, "was conscious until the moment of impact", Robin said.

"This action can only be deliberate. It would be impossible to turn the button by mistake. If you passed out and leaned over on it, it would only go a quarter-turn and do nothing," he said.

"He didn't reply to a thing. He didn't say a word. In the cockpit, it was utter silence."

Lufthansa chief executive Carsten Spohr said he was "stunned" by the revelations and had "no indication" on

the motives of Lubitz.

He added that no security "system in the world" could have prevented the co-pilot's actions.

Spohr said Lubitz had passed all psychological tests required for training and underwent regular physical examinations.

The shocking new information was released as families and friends of victims were travelling to the remote mountainous crash site area, where locals have opened their doors in a show of solidarity with the grieving relatives.

Two planes arrived in southern France yesterday from Barcelona and Duesseldorf with families and friends.

Tents were set up for them near the crash site area to give DNA samples to start the process of identifying the bodies of loved ones, at least 51 of whom were Spaniards and at least 72 Germans.

"We're all pitching in of course. There's no such thing as nationality, no such thing as religion," said one local volunteer, Charles Lanta.

Meanwhile, the remains of victims, found scattered across the scree-covered slopes, were being taken by helicopter to nearby Seyne-les-Alpes, a source close to the investigation said.

A mountain guide who got near the crash site said he was unable to make out recognisable body parts.

"It's incredible. An Airbus is enormous. When you arrive and there's nothing there ... it's very shocking," said the guide, who did not wish to be identified.

The crash site, which is situated at about 1500 metres (5000 feet) altitude, is accessible only by helicopter or an arduous hike on foot.

French President Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel flew over the site to see the devastation for themselves March 25. Spain's Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy also visited a crisis centre near the scene.

Rajoy said he was "deeply shaken" by the prosecutor's findings.

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

Lufthansa said the aircraft was carrying citizens of 18 countries. Three Americans and three Britons were confirmed among the victims.

Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Colombia, Denmark, Holland, Israel, Japan, Mexico and Morocco also had nationals on board, according to officials.

The dead on board flight 4U 9525 included two babies and 16 German school exchange pupils. They were flying from Barcelona to Duesseldorf.

A second black box, which records flight data, has not yet been recovered. - AFP

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ADEN

Coalition launches air strikes in Yemen

SAUDI Arabia carried out air strikes against Huthi rebels in Yemen yesterday, launching an operation by a regional coalition to save the government of embattled President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi as the country teetered on the brink of civil war.

At the time of printing, upward of 13 civilians were confirmed as having been killed in the air strikes on capital of Sanaa, which had fallen to the Huthi anti-government rebels. Pro-Hadi forces recaptured the international airport in his southern power base Aden early yesterday.

Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States announced from Washington that a coalition of 10 countries, including five Gulf monarchies, had been set up to protect the Yemeni government.

Washington said President Barack Obama had authorised the "provision of logistical and intelligence support" to the military operation.

Jordan, Egypt, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and the UAE have joined the Saudi effort, "to answer the call of President Hadi to protect Yemen and his people from the aggression of the [Shiite] Huthi militia".

Saudi envoy Adel al-Jubeir did not name the other countries involved in the coalition.

Saudi SPA state news agency said Pakistan, Morocco and Sudan had all "expressed desire to participate in the operation" against the rebels, which the kingdom dubbed "Firmness Storm".

Mr Al-Jubeir told reporters in Washington that the operation "is to defend and support the legitimate government of Yemen and prevent the radical Huthi movement from taking over the country".

He said that for the moment the action was confined to air strikes on various targets around Yemen, but that other military assets were being mobilised and that the coalition "would do whatever it takes".

"The Royal Saudi Air Force has taken out the Huthi air defences and destroyed numerous Huthi fighter planes," a Saudi adviser said, adding that the air force "has pretty much secured most of the Yemeni air space and is now consolidating a wide no-fly zone".

Military sources said the raids had hit rebel positions at various locations in Sanaa, including at al-



Civilians search the rubble of buildings destroyed during Saudi air strikes against Huthi rebels near Sanaa airport on March 26. Photo: AFP

Daylami airbase and the adjacent international airport in north Sanaa, as well as the presidential complex seized by the rebels in January.

Huge explosions were heard in Sanaa as strikes hit the airbase at Sanaa airport and other locations in the capital, an AFP correspondent reported.

In the south, residents reported hearing large blasts at Al-Anad main airbase, north of Aden, which was seized by anti-government forces on March 25.

The rebels' television station Al-Massira aired an urgent call for medics in Sanaa to head to hospitals.

The Saudi adviser said his country's defence minister warned the son of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, "who is commanding the attack on Aden that his

forces face 'obliteration' if they continue their push toward Aden".

Saleh, who resigned in 2012 following a year of nationwide protests, is accused of allying with the rebels, relying on the loyalty of many army units that he built during his three-decade rule.

Acting foreign minister Riyad Yassin had warned in Egypt that the fall of the second city Aden would mean the "start of civil war" as he drummed up Arab military support for Mr Hadi.

His comments came on March 25 as army units switched allegiance to the rebels and seized Aden's international airport.

Aides to Mr Hadi said that the Western-backed president had been taken to a safe haven "within Aden", where he fled last month.

Washington said it had been in

touch with Mr Hadi and that he was no longer at his residence, but it was unable to say where he was.

Yemen has been gripped by growing turmoil since the Shiite Huthi rebels launched a power takeover in Sanaa in February.

The strife has raised fears Yemen could be torn apart by a proxy war between Shiite Iran, accused of backing the rebels, and Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia, which supports Mr Hadi.

The escalating turmoil in the country - which borders Saudi Arabia and lies close to key shipping routes - has also pushed up world oil prices on fears it could threaten Middle Eastern petroleum producers.

Oil prices jumped in Asia yesterday following the air strikes, with fears growing that a spiralling crisis in the country could threaten key crude producers in the Middle East.

Mr Hadi appealed to the UN Security Council on March 24 to "shoulder its responsibilities ... to safeguard Yemen from sliding into more chaos and destruction".

One of Mr Hadi's advisers said Mr Saleh was the man pulling the strings as the rebels advanced.

"The Huthis are puppets in the

hands of Saleh," Riyadh-based Yassin Makkawi told AFP.

Dozens of people have been killed as the Huthis, backed by troops allied to former strongman Mr Saleh, have clashed with pro-Hadi forces as they push southward.

Mr Yassin warned that domination by Iran would be a "dagger in the side of Saudi Arabia and the rest of countries of the Gulf".

His comments came after the Huthis said they had captured the defence minister in their push southward deep into Lahj province, adjacent to Aden.

General Mahmud al-Subaihi, who escaped house arrest in Sanaa this month, had been seen as a vital ally of Mr Hadi in charge of organising Aden's defence lines.

Missiles were fired from an unidentified warplane at Mr Hadi's complex in Aden on March 25, but only hit an abandoned building, a presidential security official said.

Yemen has allowed Washington to wage a long-standing drone war against al-Qaeda in the country.

In his letter to the Security Council on March 24, Mr Hadi voiced concerns that al-Qaeda would "seize the current instability to spark further chaos". - AFP

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WASHINGTON

Iran nuclear deal in sight, says US

A NUCLEAR deal with Iran capping over a decade of talks is in sight by a March 31 deadline, US officials said, but they remained cautious as top diplomat John Kerry prepared for down-to-the-wire negotiations yesterday.

Mr Kerry will push Iran to agree by March 31 on the outlines of the long-elusive deal disabling parts of its nuclear infrastructure, in return for an easing of crippling global sanctions, at renewed talks in the Swiss lakeside town of Lausanne.

"We very much believe that we can get this done by the 31st," a senior State Department official told reporters travelling on Mr Kerry's plane.

"We can see a path forward here to get to an agreement, we can see what that path might look like... that doesn't mean we'll get there," the official cautioned.

World powers – Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States – have set the March 31 deadline to agree a political framework on paring back Iran's nuclear ambitions and stopping it developing an atomic bomb.

The framework is meant to lay out specific ways to step up international monitoring and reduce Iran's nuclear capability in order to cut off its pathways to a bomb, in return for an easing of crippling sanctions.

Experts will then have a final few months to grapple with the complex technical details of a comprehensive accord set to be agreed by June 30.

It remains unclear how detailed the framework between Iran and the six powers will be, particularly with the United States and France

appearing split on the issue.

A senior European official also said any deal may only be an internal document, a fact sheet – or not a text at all.

The State Department official said the format of any deal was under negotiation.

"We believe and know that we will have to share as many specific details publicly as we can, with the caveat that the work of doing annexes is very tough work," the US official said.

"March 31 is a real date and it is an important one," the official said, but acknowledged any framework deal would have to be fleshed out by a wealth of detailed, technical annexes by the end of June.

Mr Kerry is under pressure from a hostile Congress to pin down something concrete after 18 months of intense talks with the Islamic Republic.

But Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has criticised the two-step process.

And France, seen as the most hawkish among the six powers, has also expressed misgivings.

France's ambassador to Washington, Gerard Araud, said on Twitter last week that aiming to agree something by March 31 was a "bad tactic" creating pressure to get a deal "at any price".

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who met with Mr Kerry yesterday, hit out at the group of six for not being able to "coordinate its stance".

The March and late June target dates were set after negotiators failed in November – for the second time – to meet a deadline to turn a

November 2013 interim deal into a comprehensive accord.

Such a deal could also boost relations between Iran and the West after decades of acrimony, potentially including more cooperation fighting Islamic State militants in Syria and Iraq.

But Iran, which denies wanting the bomb, is loath to dismantle any of its nuclear facilities unless in return the powers dismantle painful UN, US and EU sanctions that have choked its economy.

The six powers counter that they can only be suspended – not terminated – over a long period, allowing them to be "snapped back" if Iran violates the deal.

Even before a deal is agreed, critics have been lining up to say that it will not do enough to stop Iran getting the bomb.

These include Israel, the Middle East's sole if undeclared nuclear power, as well as Sunni Muslim Gulf monarchies like powerhouse Saudi Arabia, Shiite Iran's main regional rival.

But the main thorns in President Barack Obama's side have been his Republican opponents, who sparked a furore by warning Iran in an open letter that Mr Obama does not have the power to conclude a durable agreement without their backing.

Republicans are also readying legislation that could impose fresh sanctions on Iran and oblige Mr Obama to get any deal approved by Congress.

Talks were due to start yesterday at 10am (0900 GMT), with a US official saying the schedule was being kept "incredibly fluid". – AFP

TIKRIT

US launches air strikes against IS in Iraq

US aircraft launched bombing raids to support Iraqi forces fighting to recapture Tikrit from the Islamic State group on March 25, after Baghdad issued a request for air power.

The offensive to take back Tikrit has stalled over the past week with jihadists defending their positions with homemade bombs.

"I can confirm that the government of Iraq has requested coalition support for operations in Tikrit," Pentagon spokesperson Colonel Steven Warren said.

An Iraqi special forces lieutenant colonel told AFP; "International coalition forces bombed four areas in the centre of Tikrit city."

Strikes hit an area around a palace compound area and near the Tikrit hospital, he said.

Days earlier, US aircraft including drones began carrying out surveillance flights to support the Tikrit operation against IS militants.

Other countries in the US-led coalition were taking part in the air strikes, officials said.

"These strikes are intended to destroy ISIL strongholds with precision, thereby saving innocent Iraqi lives while minimizing collateral damage to infrastructure," said Lieutenant General James Terry, who oversees the command in charge of the US war effort.

Although the US and its allies have conducted air strikes elsewhere in Iraq, the Baghdad government had not previously asked for American help for the Tikrit offensive.

Instead, long-time US foe Iran has played a prominent role, providing artillery and deploying advisers to the Iraqi Shiite militias also taking part in the operation.

But the assault has become bogged down, even though the Iraqi forces far

outnumber the IS militants.

US officials and officers made no secret of their view that Iraq had made a mistake in not asking for US air power from the start and relying solely on Iran's assistance.

At a Pentagon briefing earlier on March 25, spokesperson Colonel Steven Warren said the Iraqis had made confident predictions when the offensive on Tikrit was launched earlier this month, but he said "urban combat is difficult and slow" and the coalition had unmatched military power to offer.

"Reliable, professional, advanced military capabilities are something that very clearly and very squarely reside with the coalition."

President Barack Obama's administration has insisted it does not coordinate military operations directly with Iran and until this week the countries have operated in separate areas in Iraq.

But the US surveillance flights and air raids in Tikrit illustrate how Washington is moving toward greater collaboration with Tehran, albeit indirectly, despite the intense distrust between the two arch-foes.

The bid to retake Tikrit, which involves thousands of Iraqi soldiers, police and forces known as Popular Mobilisation units, which are dominated by Shiite militias, began on March 2.

The operation is seen as a test for the Iraqi forces, which collapsed in retreat last year against IS, despite billions of dollars worth of weapons and years of training from the US.

The battle for Tikrit could clear the way for a much larger offensive to eventually retake the northern city of Mosul, which US and Iraqi commanders view as a pivotal fight that could alter the course of the war. – AFP

LOS ANGELES

Salton Sea a manmade 'environmental time bomb'

AT first sight the Salton Sea looks putrid, with dead fish scattered among patches of fetid water in a vast salty lake in the middle of the Californian desert.

In the fourth year of a historic drought in the western United States, some say the wetland is an environmental time bomb.

But, on closer inspection, its beauty and fertility come through.

As the sun sets on the sea – a former upscale vacation playground – hundreds of pelicans, seagulls and ducks perform an aerial ballet against the iridescent sky, reflected in the mirror-like water.

"The reputation of the sea always smelling, ringed by dead fish or dead birds is wrong," said Bruce Wilcox, an official with the Imperial Irrigation District, a local water-management agency.

The sea, which sees some 400 species of migratory birds pass through, was born from a civil engineering accident in 1905, which led to an overflowing of the Colorado River.

It lies 71 metres (233 feet) above sea level, south of Joshua Tree National Park, some 250 kilometres (155 miles) southeast of Los Angeles.

In the 1950s and 60s, the banks of the Salton Sea were a playground for southern California's rich set, who would come for water-skiing, yacht-racing and fishing.

At the time it was more than 50 kilometres in length and 20 wide.

"There used to be lots of skiing and fishing, four marinas, and so many people you couldn't put a towel on the beach," said Larry Wienebock, a retired trucker, sitting in the garage

of his small house on Bombay Beach.

This former seaside resort today looks like a ghost town, its beach marred by an earth mound and scattered with the wrecks of cars and rusting metal of all sorts.

From 1970, the Salton Sea began to shrink, leading to a surge in salinity and a reduction in depth which ended its days as a fishing and boating haven.

The yacht club, fishing stores and other shops closed, in an ever-accelerating decline.

"California is in the midst of an historic drought," said Tim Krantz, professor of environmental studies at the University of Redlands.

To make matters worse, in 2017 a complex agreement which shares water from the Colorado River comes to an end, leading to an expected further decrease in water flowing into the Sea.

Mr Wilcox said the body of water will lose a third of its surface area in just a few years, while its bed of sand mixed with sediments of cadmium, phosphates, fertilizer and insecticides will spread further, carried by frequent storms.

Mr Krantz said; "The Salton Sea is like a soccer field with only 2 centimetres of water in it. It is supersensitive on any reduction of inflow.

"It would be an air quality disaster unparalleled in the world," he said, a stark warning in a region inhabited by some 1.5 million people.

Cases of asthma, lung cancer and other respiratory conditions could surge in an area where they are already four times the national average. Not to mention the billions of dollars in agricultural revenues threatened,



The remnants of an abandoned marina are seen at Salton City beside the Salton Sea, California, on March 1. Photo: AFP

and real estate prices which risk collapsing.

"If the sea dries up it's going to be inhabitable because of the dust here, throughout the whole Coachella Valley," said Randy Rynearson, the salt-and-pepper grizzled owner of an ironmonger's store in Salton City.

The consequences for the ecosystem could be even more catastrophic, decimating the few fish who remain in

the sea, as well as birds deprived of a key stopping off point on their migratory flight path.

Local public bodies, environmental militants and researchers are trying everything to convince California's government to act, and to free up funds.

Numerous projects have been launched – some more realistic than others – such as the construction of

pipework bringing water from the Pacific or the Gulf of California.

These projects would cost between US \$5-10 million.

But a study by the Pacific Institute said the cost of inaction would be even higher, at \$20 billion to \$70 billion, not to mention the risks of interminable legal action by residents falling sick from a long-expected disaster.

– AFP

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SEA GAMES SHORTS



BRUNEI

Football

The nation's U23 football side will commence their qualification efforts for the 2016 AFC U23 Championships this week when they travel to SEA Games rivals Indonesia to face the host nation and fellow minnows Timor Leste.

All three Southeast Asian sides will not only get a look at each other between March 27 and March 31 but will also get a run-around from leading Asian side South Korea.

But the *Brunei Times* reports that the sultanate's coach Stephen Ng Heng Seng believes his team will fight and develop experience as a team that will improve their play at the regional games.

"We are taking the qualifiers very seriously. But as much as we want to qualify, we have to be realistic," said Ng.

"This is a tough group and will be a good test as we are in the process of developing our players.

"The boys will gain from the experience of having to play the giants of Asia and I believe that we can put up some good performances, he added.

The team has been together for intensive training since February which recently included a training tour of Thailand.

"They have made a big improvement [in their performances] in comparison to a couple of months ago," said Ng. "They are more confident and composed.

INDONESIA

Fencing

Seoul, South Korea, is the destination for as many as 24 fencers who will depart for a two month training camp from April 2, before heading to the Singapore Games reports Antara News.

Performance director, Muslimin di Samarinda told the news agency that his athletes were scheduled to spar with university athletes in Korea and enter an Open Championship in preparation for the June event.

The athletes will be under the supervision of Korean coach Yun Inchul.

"We hope Mr Yun will be able to develop the athlete's experience as well as improving their techniques, both physical and mental during their time in Korea," added Muslimin.

Tennis

Indonesia's SEA Games men's squad will have the benefit of the country

staging three Futures tournaments over the next month.

From March 30 the Gubernur Kalimantan Utara F1 Cup will be played in Tarakan before the F2 Mayor's Cup Open in Tegal Tegal on April 6 and the Indonesia F3 PGN Cup in Jakarta on April 13.

"Indonesia will be represented by Christopher Rungkat, David Agung Susanto, Aditnya Hari Sasongko and Sunu Wahyu Wirajati," a Tennis Indonesia spokesperson told Antara News.

SINGAPORE

Swimming

Tao Li, Singapore's most successful swimmer, has told *The New Paper* that the SEA Games will most likely be her final multi-sport event.

She achieved Singapore's best result in swimming when she finished 5th in the women's 100m butterfly and in the process became the Republic's first swimmer to qualify for an Olympic final.

"I'm still considering my options but as of now I'm leaning towards completing my studies over competing at the next Olympics," said Tao.

She has also tasted glory at the Asian Games with two golds, two silvers and two bronzes, all in the 50m and 100m butterfly events.

"I'm unbeaten at the 50m fly and 100m back at the SEA Games, but it's not going to be easy. I have to focus and give Singaporeans something to cheer about. Four out of four [50 and 100 fly and 50 and 100 backstroke] would be the perfect farewell."

PHILIPPINES

Archery

On their return from their victorious performances at the Asian Archery Cup in Bangkok, the Philippines' Archery team told *The Philippine Star*, they would remain on target for the SEA Games.

The squad won both the women's and mixed compound events in Thailand, where veteran Amaya Paz Cojuangco starred in both teams before taking silver in the individual event.

"We have a good chance in the SEA Games and the world tournaments," said Cojuangco at a victory party hosted by the Philippine Archers National Network and Alliance.

"I guess we're doing things right," said Fred Moreno, head of PANNA.

- Matt Roebuck

POLO

Beach Polo draws the elite to the 'Dubai of Africa'



A chukka on the beach in Nigeria. Polo is part of the upmarket image for Lagos' Eko Atlantic development. Photo: AFP

CECILE DE COMARMOND

PORSCHES and Jaguars are parked in the sand while businessmen and their partners, in high heels and hats, sit in the sheltered grandstands, glass of champagne in hand.

The scene could be Dubai or Miami but this is Lagos - Nigeria's biggest city and financial hub - and the first beach polo tournament in Africa.

Hundreds of kilometres from fighting between the Islamist group Boko Haram and the Nigerian Army and a week before closely fought elections, entertainment is the name of the game.

Teams of three and their mounts, instead of four as in traditional polo, compete on a sandy polo ground slightly smaller than the classic grass version.

"Beach polo is similar to arena polo," said Habeeb Fasinro, president of the Lagos Polo Club, which was set up in 1904 under British colonial rule.

"It is usually played off-season, when you're not playing on grass, just to keep the horses in shape," he told AFP, still dressed in his white trousers and leather riding boots after one game.

"But now it's turned into something very big. You have the world beach polo tournament as well in Miami, you have it in Dubai, in Ibiza."

The competition, which finishes on March 29, has been organised on the vast stretch of sand known as Eko Atlantic, which is currently the biggest real estate building site in Africa.

Work began in 2008 to drag

millions of tonnes of sand from the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean to create a 10-square-kilometre (3.86 square-mile) city within a city.

Developers predict that when it is complete in the next 15 to 20 years it will be "the Dubai of Africa" and accommodate some 250,000 people.

The first two buildings are currently being built. Roads, bridges, street lights and even small palm trees have also emerged on the sand, which is annexed to the upmarket area of Victoria Island.

"The idea was to start to create a

'We want to associate Eko Atlantic, the new city for Lagos, with the sport of kings'

Brent Sadler
the project's spokesman

bit of activity in this new city," said Ronald Chagoury Junior, vice-president of Eko Atlantic, who admits to liking the parallels with Dubai.

His father, Ronald senior, and uncle Gilbert - both of Lebanese origin and well-established in Nigerian business - founded the multi-billion dollar project through a subsidiary of their company, South Energyx.

A beach football tournament, "Copa Lagos", has been held on the sand of Eko Atlantic for four years.

But with polo - a sport traditionally associated with the elite - the development's promoters sensed an

investment opportunity.

"We want to associate Eko Atlantic, the new city for Lagos, with the sport of kings," said Brent Sadler, the project's spokesman.

"We want to show that we're producing a professional quality, prestigious city that people will enjoy living in and people will understand what we're doing here by coming to watch polo."

The new city aims to become a hub for business across Africa and the promoters are hoping to bring in international entrepreneurs as well as the moneyed, local elite.

In a dark designer suit with round, horn-rimmed spectacles, Chima Anyaso, admits that he knows nothing about polo - and even less about the beach version.

"I got an invite that was sent to my office and I also got three extra cards, so I brought along my friends," said Anyaso, who heads a company in the oil and gas sector.

"I have been [to Eko Atlantic] two times, just to look at the project and prospect, as a prospective buyer."

Polo isn't a recent sport in Nigeria and has remained popular among the wealthy even after the country gained independence from Britain in 1960.

"We have at least 30 polo clubs in Nigeria, and then there are private clubs as well. At Lagos Polo Club we have between 80 to 100 players," said Fasinro.

"There's a very long tradition of polo in Lagos. We've attracted the best players who've come here and played with us. And we've had Nigerian players also playing abroad quite frequently.

"A good number of us played in Europe this season, in England mostly." - AFP

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SEPAK TAKRAW



Indonesia playing Myanmar at the 27th SEA Games in Nay Pyi Taw. Photo: Staff

Sepak takraw

Created in the Southeast Asian jungles more than 500 years ago. It was formalised with rules in the early 1900s

The court
 Net height at centre
 Men's: 1.55m
 Women's: 1.42m

Objective:
 ▶ Players volley the ball over the net without using hands or arms
 ▶ Each side is allowed 3 contacts with the ball to get it over the net

Sepak means "kick" in Malay and takraw means "woven ball" in Thai

The ball
 Woven synthetic fibre

The serve
 The ball is hand-tossed to server inside the serving circle, volleying it into play with a single kick

The spike
 Powerful shot into opponent's court
Roll spike
 Player jumps with back to net, rotates in the air, and kicks the ball over opposite shoulder

The block
 Defensive jump to divert a spike

AFP 141209 Source: Doha 2006

AMERICAN FOOTBALL

NFL safety, replay rule changes adopted

NATIONAL Football League team owners this week approved changes to rules involving safety and television replays as well as unveiling plans for a 50th Super Bowl celebration, the league announced.

A medical timeout will be added to stop action and allow medical officials to remove a player observers think is injured or has suffered a concussion. The player would be removed and undergo a concussion protocol exam on the sidelines.

Independent medical observers debuted last season to watch from stadium media areas and identify players who might be injured, complete with video replay equipment and devices to contact sideline medical officials.

Also added were new standards on peel-back blocks and tighter enforcement of chop blocks plus a ban on pushing teammates at the line of scrimmage, measures largely aimed at linemen, and greater protection for receivers who leave themselves vulnerable to hits as they try to make catches.

Many replay tweaks were put forth by clubs but the only measure approved by owners allowed for replay review of the game clock at the end of the second and fourth quarters and overtime periods if more than one second remains.

The NFL also announced a season-long celebration of the Super Bowl called "On the Fifty" on the way to the 50th Super Bowl, set for February 7, 2016, in Santa Clara, home of the San Francisco 49ers.

Gold will be a theme with midfield numerals and the NFL logo painted gold in every NFL stadium and golden accents on sideline clothing plus gold hues for logos at special events, including the NFL Draft in April, the season-opening game in September and next January's playoffs. - AFP

Takraw tournament starts search for stars

KYAW ZIN HLAING

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SEPAK Takraw hopes to receive a boost from a new tournament designed to encourage the next generation of Myanmar's athletes to play this gymnastic ball sport.

The Sepak Takraw 4 TV Cup, organised by the Myanmar Sepak Takraw Federation in partnership with the Forever Group, will be held at Yangon's Thuwunna Indoor

Stadium from March 30 to April 5.

The sport - sometimes better known as "kick volleyball" - can be seen on roadsides across the country and it is that popularity that the organisers hope to tap into.

"Sepak Takraw is second only to football in its popularity in Myanmar," said U Khin Lin Maw, speaking on behalf of the Forever Group.

"This tournament will be a great stage for amateur athletes to have their ability recognised and so our hope is to organise this event on an

annual basis," he said at the press conference that launched the tournament on March 25.

The tournament will comprise of two mens' Regu events, an open tournament and an U16 event. "Regu" is a Malaysian word meaning team. Squads are formed of four players: three starters and one reserve.

Current national level players will not be able to enter this event, so amateur teams - who will pay a K2000 registration fee - have the chance to take home a prize of K700,000. Runners-up

will receive K500,000 and K300,000 for second and third place respectively.

The prizes in the U16 competition will be K500,000, K300,000 and K200,000.

This tournament aimed to uncover new talent Sepak Takraw athletes for the national Sepak Takraw team.

"A lot of people are playing Sepak Takraw in Myanmar, so this tournament will help us identify new talent for our national side," said U Kyaw Zin Moe, general secretary of the MSTF.

FOOTBALL

MNL-2 prepares for midseason break

THIS weekend sees the Myanmar National League Division 2 finish the first half of its season's fixtures with the teams relegated from last year's premier in pole position to return to the top table.

Southern Myanmar, who suffered

a surprise poor season last year, are the only team to remain undefeated while GFA look set to become Myanmar's yo-yo club if they can hold off Mawyawadi.

The second half of the season will begin in June. - Matt Roebuck

27/3	Mawyawadi FC	V	Horizon FC	Padonmar
	Silver Stars FC	V	GFA FC	Sa Lin
28/3	Pong Gan FC	V	Best Utd FC	Padonmar
	Sth Myanmar FC	V	Myawady FC	Sa Lin

MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION Myanmar National League - 2 (2015)									
Team	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts	
Southern Myanmar FC	8	7	1	-	19	2	17	22	
GFA FC	8	5	1	2	13	5	8	16	
Mawyawadi FC	8	5	1	2	13	7	6	16	
Horizon FC	8	4	3	1	21	8	13	15	
Dagon FC	9	4	3	2	17	7	10	15	
Myawady FC	8	3	2	3	19	19	-	11	
University FC	9	1	3	5	15	17	-2	6	
Best United FC	8	-	5	3	9	18	-9	5	
Silver Stars FC	8	-	4	4	8	19	-11	4	
Pong Gan FC	8	-	1	7	5	37	-32	1	



IN PICTURES

Photo: MFF/
Facebook

The Nippon Foundation U15 Cup started on March 25 and will run until April 9. Schoolboys representing their states and regions will compete, with a K2 million prize for the winners.

Sport

Chukkas on the beach in Lagos, Nigeria



SPORT 34

TENNIS

From Open champion to SEA Games contender



Zaw San Oo valiantly returning in an effort to stay in the game.

Photo: Naing Wynn Htoon

KYAW ZIN HLAING
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AUNG Kyaw Naing cruised through the final game of the Myanmar National Open to lift the silverware for the Men's Singles on March 25, completing his victory 6-2, 6-2 over Zaw San Oo at Yangon's Theinphyu Tennis Stadium.

In the women's tournament Nilar Win defeated Amy Htun 6-4, 6-4. All four players will now travel to China from April 4 to 30 to join a training camp in preparation for this June's SEA Games.

"Four men and three women players will travel to China," said U Aung Maw Thein, president of the Myanmar Tennis Federation.

Tennis did not feature at the SEA Games in 2013, when Myanmar hosted, but the Ministry of Sport did build a tennis facility on

the Wunna Theikdi complex in Nay Pyi Taw.

Tennis was last played at the Palembang 2011 Games when Indonesia dominated on home turf, sweeping the men's events and winning the women's singles to secure four of the seven gold medals on offer.

Thailand won two gold in the Women's Doubles and Team event and it is they who rank the highest as a nation in both the Men's Davis Cup and Women's Fed Cup.

"We will aim to bring home a bronze medal," U Aung Maw Thein told *The Myanmar Times*. "But competition there will be tough."

With that in mind, it is a Thai coach, Chalongrat Prasanphak, who Myanmar have engaged to deliver their national team training.

This year may be too early for Myanmar to consider medalling in the SEA Games tennis competition but the 143 competitors that entered the National Open also included a number of junior events at the U10, U12 and U14 age groups.

"We hope a new generation of athletes will emerge from the junior events," said U Aung Maw Thein.

In addition to the Open Singles, Doubles and Mixed Doubles, the event hosted a number of senior categories at the over 35, 45, 55 and 60 level.

One notable appearance in these categories was Zaw Zaw, chair of Max Myanmar Group of Companies, competing in and winning the Men's Doubles Over-45 tournament with his partner Aung Moe.

Now president of the Myanmar Football Federation, the tycoon who is known as a keen sportsman also once served as president of the MTF.

NORTH KOREA

Kim Jong-Un urges 'guerrilla-style' sport tactics

NORTH Korea's young leader Kim Jong-Un has urged athletes to adopt "guerrilla-style" tactics in an effort to boost the nation's underwhelming impact on the global sporting stage.

In a letter to a national meeting of sportspeople and officials, Kim, who is known to be an avid sports fan, lamented the fact that North Korea was "trailing behind the world" in sports science and strategy.

The message - couched in militaristic rhetoric - said sport provided a crucial opportunity to promote North Korea overseas.

"At times of peace, only athletes can fly the DPRK national flag in the sky of other countries," Kim said in the letter cited by the official KCNA news agency yesterday.

Promising state support that would turn North Korea into a sports powerhouse "within a few years", Kim said inspiration should be drawn from the fight against Japanese colonial rule over the Korean peninsula.

"Sports officials and coaches must implement the tactics of anti-Japanese guerrilla-style attacks in each sport event in order to take the initiative in every game and triumph," he said.

North Korea's sporting record has largely failed to fulfil its aspirations.

The four golds it won in 2012 in London - all in weightlifting or judo - equaled its best-ever tally.

In October 2013, Kim introduced a new policy rewarding successful athletes with luxury apartments in recognition of their achievements.

In his letter, Kim said priority should be placed on those sports where North Korean athletes have already known success, including women's football, weightlifting, boxing, judo and archery. - AFP

AFC U23 Championship Qualification			National Stadium Kaohsiung, Taiwan
(also acts as the first round of 2016 Olympic qualification)			
March 27			
14:30	Australia  V  Hong Kong		
17:30	Myanmar  V  Chinese Taipei		

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