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Myanmar News & Insight

WEEKLY

Letting off steam on Thingyan

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SPECIAL HOLIDAY ISSUE



## WHAT COMES AFTER THINGYAN?

Trouble brews for a quasi-democracy

# Mizzima Digital Daily

First in Myanmar



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# What comes after Thingyan?

**T**hingyan is an opportunity for most Myanmar to relax, take a break and let off steam. Like its counterparts in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, the traditional New Year water festival in the midst of the hot season – based on a Buddhist version of a Hindu myth – has been transformed from a dignified ritual involving the gentle sprinkling of scented water to an exuberant, boisterous celebration in which water is thrown, squirted and splashed with abandon, and sometimes cruelly chilled with blocks of ice.

Myanmar needs to let off steam. The optimism that followed the change of government in 2011 has given way to growing disappointment and on some issues, even public anger, about the slow pace of reform. Once the water throwing is over, the enfranchised citizens of Myanmar face the prospect of participating in about six months in a general election that will be one of the most significant since independence. Looming over the election are doubts about whether it can be free and fair under the stringent campaigning guidelines proposed by the Union Election Commission. Or whether it will be held at all.

In an interview with Reuters newsagency in Nay Pyi Taw on April 3, National League for Democracy chairperson Daw Aung San Suu Kyi chose her

words carefully to convey unease about the general election due in November. Asked if the NLD would contest the election without amendments to the 2008 Constitution, she said her party – that boycotted the 2010 election – did not think a boycott was the best choice. “But we are not ruling it out altogether. We are leaving our options open,” she said.

Talk of a boycott set tongues wagging over its implications for the democratic transition process. The absence from the election of the party most likely to win it by a landslide would be a huge embarrassment for the government. But that is assuming there will be an election. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi expressed concern in her Reuters interview that the government might use the peace process with armed ethnic groups as a pretext to postpone the election. The surprise decision by the UEC last September to cancel by-elections in 35 constituencies later last year set a worrying precedent. Many political parties were sharply critical of the decision, which the UEC partly justified on the grounds of cost and the need to prepare for this year’s general election. The ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party said the UEC had no right to cite cost as a factor. The Shan National League for Democracy said the cancellation showed that the UEC could not make decisions independently. NLD central executive committee member Daw Nan Khin Htwe Myint said the

by-elections would have given the party an indication whether the general election would be free or fair.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s hint at the possibility of an election boycott must be regarded as an implied threat to amend the provisions of the 2008 Constitution that give unelected military members of parliament an effective veto over charter change and make her ineligible to contest the presidency.

President U Thein Sein and Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing have spoken publicly of the crucial role the election will play in the democratic transition but there seems little chance that the constitution can be amended before the end of the year.

There are uncertainties ahead. Some veteran observers of Myanmar affairs are speculating that the chances of the people going to the polls late this year are anywhere from 70 percent to 20 percent.

In her recent interview, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi stressed the importance of the general election due this year, saying it would be a “real test of whether we are on the route to democracy or not”.

It will also be a real test of the government’s commitment to the democratic process.

Unwind! Celebrate! Throw water! Laugh! Party while you can, because in this crucial year for Myanmar, the future is filled with uncertainty.

**mizzima**  
W E E K L Y

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**“I would like our military to look at the welfare of the country as a whole, and not just look at what they want, and what they think the situation should be.”**

Opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, speaking during a recent media interview

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(Photo – Festival Jane Heyn)

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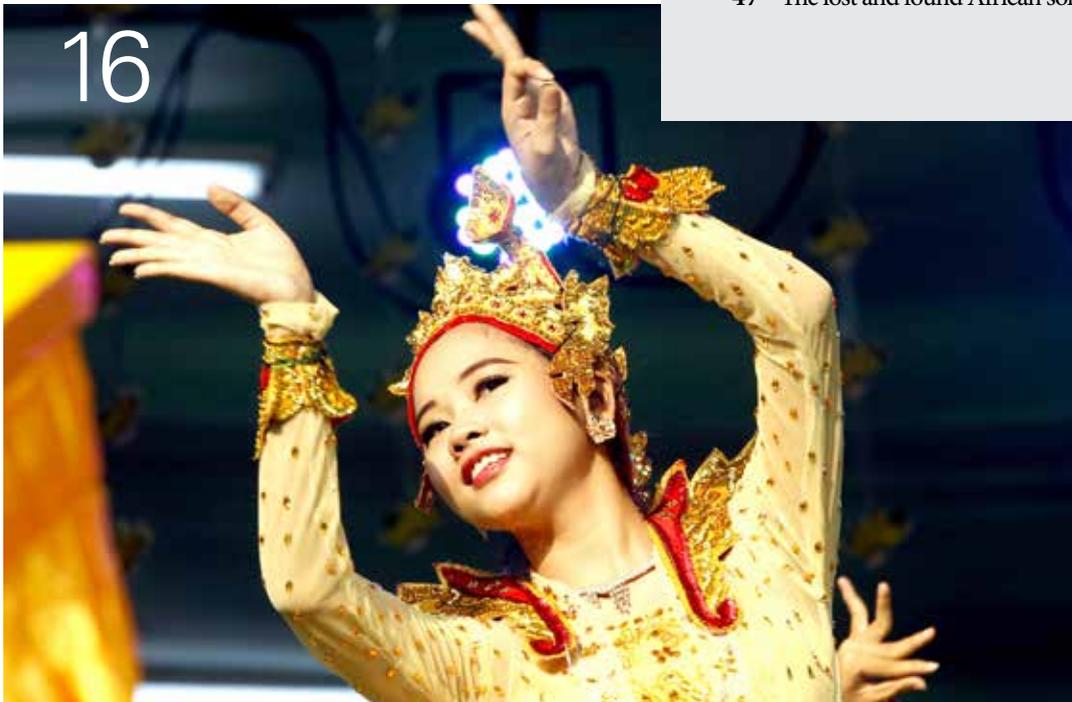
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## Jumping punks

Most people let their hair down during the Thingyan Water Festival and this group of punk rockers in Yangon show there is no exception. Photo: Lynn Bo Bo/EPA

## US links constitution change, credibility of democratic reforms

A failure to amend the 2008 Constitution would raise doubts about the credibility of the democratic reform process in Myanmar, says the United States.

The constitution should be amended to allow civilian control of the military and to give citizens the right “to elect freely the leaders of their choice,” a US embassy spokesperson told Reuters newsagency on April 7.

The Reuters report said the embassy did not link constitutional change to the legitimacy of the general election due late

this year.

“Ultimately, however, the viability and legitimacy of the 2015 election as a democratic exercise will be determined by the people of Burma,” the spokesperson was quoted as saying.

The leader of the opposition National League for Democracy, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, told Reuters in an April 4 interview that the party would not rule out a boycott of the election if the constitution was not amended.

She emphasised the importance of

the election for the transition process, saying it would be “the real test of whether we are on the route to democracy”.

The NLD has long campaigned for amendments to the constitution because of articles that give unelected military members of parliament an effective veto over charter change and make Daw Aung San Suu Kyi ineligible to contest the presidency.

[Mizzima]

## Indonesia forms team to probe fishing slavery allegations

The Indonesian government has announced it will form a special team to investigate allegations of slavery in the fishing industry, as officials prepare to return hundreds of foreign crewmen to their homelands, AFP newsagency reported from Jakarta on April 8.

The head of the fisheries ministry’s illegal fishing task force, Mas Achmad Santosa, said several fishermen had claimed that an Indonesian company, which employed more than 1,000 foreigners from several Southeast Asian nations, engaged in slavery and torture in the remote east of the country.

The issue was a priority when President Joko Widodo chaired a cabinet meeting late on April 7, with fisheries minister Susi Pudjiastuti declaring afterwards Indonesia must show it is serious about tackling the problem and stamping out illegal fishing.

“We must solve this. It should never happen again, because it is embarrassing for Indonesia,” she said, announcing plans for the special team.

The International Organization for Migration has estimated up to 4,000 fishermen may be stranded in remote parts of Indonesia, mostly dumped by illicit fishing operators.

It believes a large majority of those working in the illegal fishing industry in Indonesia are victims of trafficking.



Myanmar fishermen at the Aru Islands, Indonesia compound raise their hands as they are asked who among them want to go home. Photo: Dita Alangkara/The Associated Press

Fishermen from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand are among those said to have been forced to work on boats in Indonesia’s bountiful fishing grounds.

Santosa told AFP that more than 350 mainly Myanmar fishermen were transferred at the April 4-5 weekend from Benjina island, off the coast of West Papua province, for their safety.

There were fears they could face a backlash after speaking out about their treatment, he added.

The government has said it will return these men to their homelands.

Santosa said there was a “strong indication” that Indonesian firm Pusaka Benjina Resources, the company at the centre of allegations of mistreatment and slavery, was a shell company brokering permits for Thai fishing operators.

“The real operators of the fishing business here are Thai companies,” he said.

The Widodo administration has taken a hardline approach to illegal fishing, seizing and scuttling unlicensed vessels.

[AFP]

## President hold talks with political figures

President U Thein Sein held rare talks on April 8 with about 40 political figures including opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as she intensifies efforts to amend a clause in the constitution that makes her ineligible for the presidency, AFP newsagency reported.

The long-awaited talks in Nay Pyi Taw, which follow a similar meeting of key political figures in October, come as the country braces for elections seen as a key test of reforms in the former junta-run nation.

The closed-door talks – attended by the President, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, parliamentary speaker Thura U Shwe Mann and a few dozen other political figures – touched on a landmark draft ceasefire agreement forged the previous week with several ethnic armed groups, Information Minister U Ye Htut told reporters.

The NLD is expected to win by a landslide in the election in November, the first nationwide vote that the party will have contested in 25 years.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has received

a wide range of support, including from US President Barack Obama, for her campaign to amend the clause in the constitution that makes her ineligible for the presidency because of a foreign spouse or children. Her two sons are British, as was her late husband. The NLD has decried the constitution as “unjust” and the clauses on eligibility for the presidency written specifically to keep her out of power.

Observers say she has accepted that it is unlikely she will be able to become president at this time.

Last year the NLD said it gained five million signatures – about 10 percent of the population – in support of its bid to change another provision of the constitution that gives the military an effective veto over constitutional amendments. A vote to amend the constitution needs the support of more than 75 percent of the parliament in which non-elected military MPs hold 25 percent of the seats.

The army has indicated it will oppose any efforts to significantly change the constitution.

The country’s powerful parliamen-

tary speaker, Thura U Shwe Mann, last year ruled out any major changes to the constitution before the November polls, despite mooted a possible referendum as early as May on amendments approved by parliament.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi had previously pushed for “four-party” talks on the democratic transition, involving herself, President U Thein Sein, Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and Thura U Shwe Mann.

The President has resisted those calls, saying it would exclude ethnic minorities.

The former general has set his sights on an end to the ethnic insurgencies that have plagued the country for about 60 years as a key goal of his tenure.

The draft national ceasefire agreement signed by the government and armed ethnic groups on March 31 was hailed as a historic first step. The agreement awaits formal approval from the ethnic armed groups.

[Kelly Macnamara]  
(AFP)



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## Charter reform behind NLD poll boycott threat, say analysts

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi sparked controversy when she told Reuters news-agency in an interview on April 3 that National League for Democracy would not rule out a boycott of the general election due later this year if the constitution is not amended.

“We don’t think that boycotting the election is the best choice,” Daw Aung San Suu Kyi said when asked if the NLD would participate in the election with the constitution unchanged. “But we’re not ruling it out altogether,” she said. “We are leaving our options open.”

Political analysts and observers told Mizzima that the NLD leader raised the possibility of an election boycott to exert political pressure on the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party and President U Thein Sein over their apparent reluctance to amend the constitution.

“I think she planted a ticking time bomb for a speedy and substantial amendment of the constitution and expressed her thought of considering a boycott of the general election as a tactical line as part of the struggle,” said political analyst Than Soe Naing.

The NLD boycotted the 2010 general election as it claimed it would not be free and fair but it contested the 2012 by-elections, saying its objectives were amending the constitution, national reconciliation and internal peace and upholding the rule of law. The party triumphed, winning 43 of the 44 seats it contested in the by-election to fill 46 parliamentary vacancies. The NLD has 37 seats in the 440-seat Lower House, in which the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party holds 212 seats. The 2008 Constitution stipulates that 25 percent of the seats in parliament are held by appointed military representatives, who have an effective veto over charter change because it requires the support of more than 75 percent of parliamentarians.

Peace and Social Justice Organization executive director Dr Thauang Tun told Mizzima that he assumed that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD were frustrated by the delay in amending the constitution and the weakness in cooperation by the



Daw Aung San Suu Kyi out on the campaign trail. Photo: Hong Sar

ruling circle in this regard.

However, President U Thein Sein and Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing have both said separately that they would not allow the 2015 general election to be derailed.

Than Soe Naing said there were three main reasons why the NLD had not ruled out an election boycott. He said they were that articles 436 and 59(f) of the charter were unlikely to be included in the Constitution Amendment Bill to be approved by parliament soon; the six-party talks were being delayed by President U Thein Sein and were unlikely to resolve the amendment issue; and the United States and other Western countries were emphasising the importance of the election and were weak in talking about amending the constitution.

Article 436 provides for military appointees to hold 25 percent of the seats in the nation’s parliaments and Article 59(f) makes Daw Aung San Suu Kyi ineligible to assume the presidency because family members are foreign citizens. Her two sons are British.

“I speculate that according to Daw Suu’s basic vision, an election without

amending the constitution cannot be free and fair,” Than Soe Naing said. “In the meantime, the ruling party and government are trying to prolong their rule. Under these circumstances, there can be little hope of a free and fair election,” he said.

Political analyst Kyaw Lin Oo agreed that the NLD leader raised the possibility of an election boycott to exert pressure on the government because she wanted the constitution amended before the election.

The NLD has formed a party campaign committee and a central electoral roll scrutinising committee in the event it decides to contest the general election.

NLD central executive committee member and the chair of the central electoral roll scrutinising committee, U Tun Tun Hein, said that if the election could not be free and fair there was a likelihood it will be boycotted.

“But judging whether the election is free and fair depends on the party central executive committee’s decision. I have no authority to decide on it,” he said.

[Min Min]

## KIO's Maj-Gen Gun Maw urges greater efforts to finalise ceasefire accord

A leading member of the Kachin Independence Organisation says the government and armed ethnic groups should make greater efforts to finalise a national ceasefire agreement, China's state-run Xinhua newsagency reported on April 5.

The call by Major-General Gun Maw, a central committee member of the KIO and the deputy chief of staff of its armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army, followed agreement on the draft text of the accord at talks in Yangon on March 31.

The armed ethnic groups' Nationwide Cease-fire Coordination Team and the government's Union Peace-Making Work Committee had overcome many difficulties to conclude the text of the draft accord after 17 months of negotiations, Maj-Gen Gun Maw told Xinhua in an exclusive interview.



Kachin Ethnic group leader, NCCT member Gwan Maw speaks during a meeting on seeking a ceasefire in Yangon MPC building August 18, 2014. Photo: Hein Htet

Both sides needed to make greater efforts to reach the next step in the process, the formal signing of the national ceasefire agreement, he said.

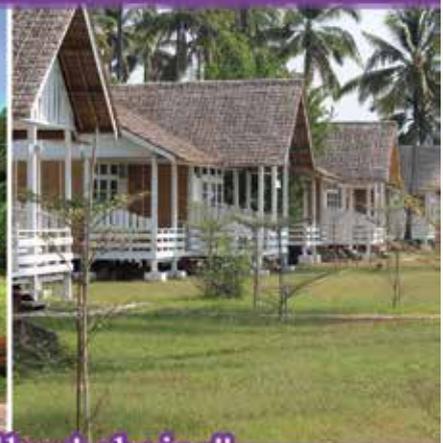
Maj-Gen Gun Maw said the NCCT wanted all armed ethnic groups to be involved in signing the accord and in the ensuing political dialogue to realise

lasting peace in Myanmar.

The NCCT had proposed a summit conference of all armed ethnic groups to approve the draft accord, he said, but added that a formal signing was not possible this month.

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### Myanmar workers being considered

Indonesian workers using a water-spray gun to clean up a fishing boat at Tamsui Port, in New Taipei City, Taiwan, April 11. Taiwan, to ease a labour shortage, plans to import foreign workers to pick tea and fruits, and to work on pig and cattle farms and in slaughter houses, with Myanmar being considered as one of the worker-supplying countries. Taiwan currently imports workers and maids from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, the Philippines and Mongolia. Photo: David Chang/EPA

## Myanmar hires US lobbyists ahead of elections

The government of Myanmar has hired lobbyists in Washington for the first time in more than a decade, signing a contract worth US\$840,000 (K840 million) with the Podesta Group, reports The Hill, which covers US politics, on April 16.

The contract comes ahead of crucial

elections in the country later this year that could go a long way toward determining whether the country's rapprochement with the United States continues.

The contract between Podesta Group and the Myanmar government, which has been signed by representatives at the embassy, will last 12 months. Each

quarter, the country will pay the firm \$210,000 — a relatively minor sum compared to other FARA deals.

Documents say that the lobby firm “will provide strategic counsel to the principal on strengthening the principal's ties to the United States government and institutions.”

## Soldiers die in offensive near China border: report

Sixteen Myanmar soldiers died in a major offensive to flush rebels from a strategic hill-top in the northeastern region bordering China, state media said April 16, as fighting with ethnic insurgents nears its tenth week.

Scores of soldiers and ethnic Kokang rebels have died since conflict erupted in the remote region of Shan state on February 9, while tens of thousands of people have fled across the frontier into China.

Myanmar air strikes have since drifted into Chinese territory, killing several civilians and prompting a rebuke from Beijing which scrambled its fighter jets.

The conflict has also overshadowed a wider bid to secure a nationwide ceasefire with a host of other rebel groups - excluding the Kokang - as the country edges towards breakthrough elections after decades of junta rule.

"Sixteen soldiers and officers from the Tatmadaw gave their lives for the country

and another 110 soldiers and officers were wounded," a report Thursday in state-run Burmese-language newspaper *The Mirror* said.

The troops were taking part in a 10-day operation which ended April 15, reclaiming a key hilltop and destroying dozens of rebel bunkers, it said.

The newspaper added that two dead bodies of Kokang rebels were found, alongside small and heavy weapons. Rebel spokesmen could not be immediately contacted Thursday for comment.

The Kokang region has been blanketed by a state of emergency imposed in the days after the fighting broke out.

Myanmar government-run media initially carried detailed daily updates of the conflict against the Myanmar Nationalities Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the main insurgent group of the Chinese-speaking Kokang.

But information has dried up in

recent weeks as the fighting continues.

There are also no clear figures for the number of civilians killed or wounded in the remote, rugged area, while humanitarian access has been severely hampered by several attacks on relief convoys.

Last month President U Thein Sein hailed a historic draft peace deal with a host of rebel groups to end decades of civil war.

Although the Kokang are not directly involved in peace talks, the ongoing fighting has drawn condemnation from the coalition of rebel groups at the negotiating table, who are yet to formally ratify the draft of the ceasefire deal.

Another ethnic armed group, the Shan State-based Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) is also supporting the Kokang rebels, who were driven out of Myanmar by the army in 2009 before suddenly returning in February.

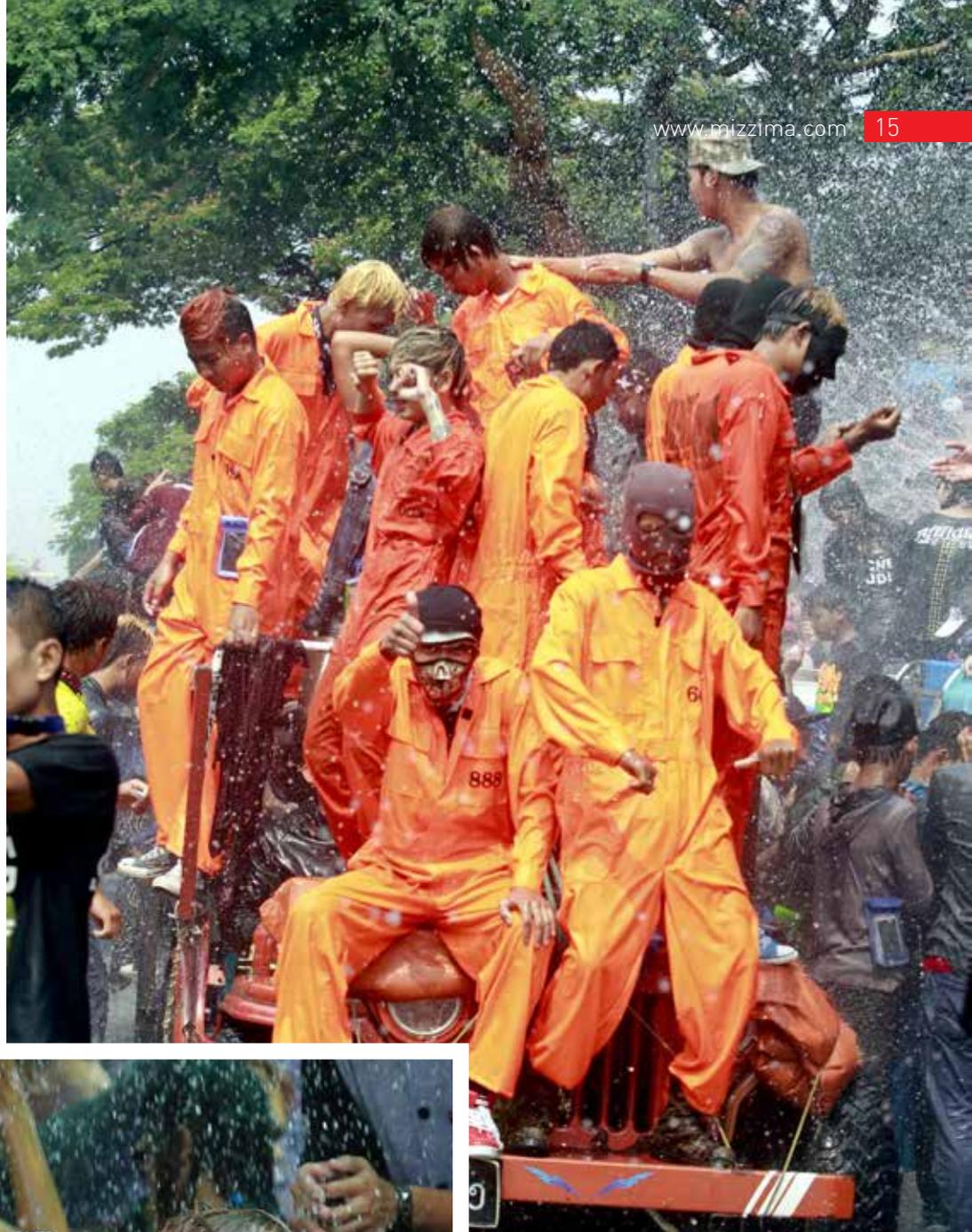
[AFP]



### Return from the Russian seas

Sailors who survived a Russian trawler sinking off the Kamchatka Peninsula in Russia's Far East arrive at Yangon International Airport, Yangon, Myanmar, April 12. The wreck of a trawler off Russia's far eastern Kamchatka Peninsula left at least 56 dead, reported the Tass news agency. The Russian vessel had a 132-member crew consisting of 78 Russian nationals and 54 others from Myanmar, Ukraine, Lithuania and Vanuatu. Photo: Nyein Chan Naing/EPA

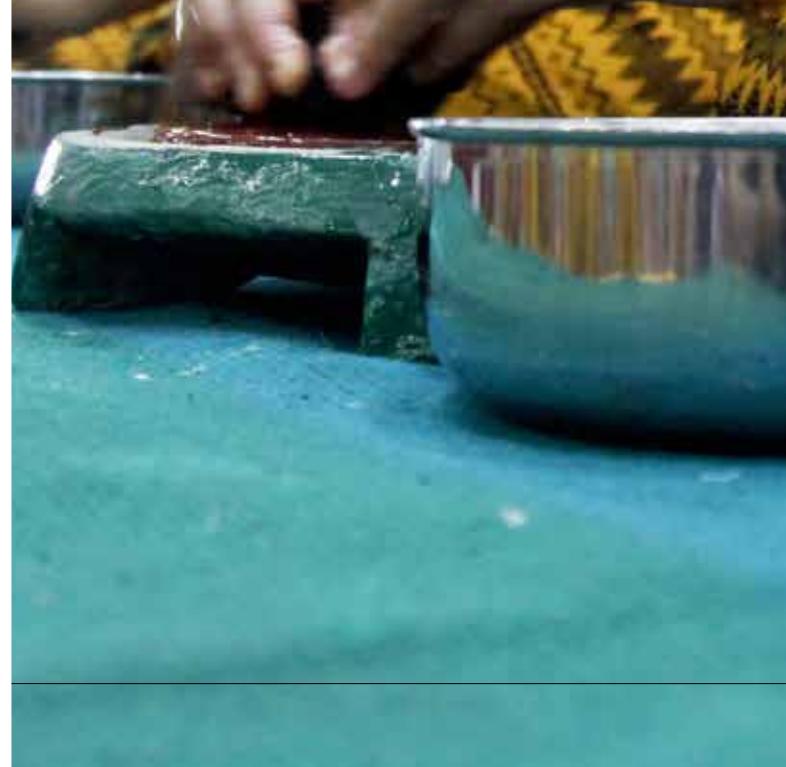




### Celebrating Thingyan

## Making merit and throwing water

Thingyan, the Myanmar New Year Water Festival, falls around mid-April and has grown from a sedate Buddhist festival into a chance to let off steam in the midst of the hot season. In the major cities, water throwing and wild behaviour are the norm, despite occasional efforts by the authorities to damp down the enthusiasm.



2015 Traditional dance as  
Yangon festival  
Photo-Nyein Chan Naing



2015 Rakhine ethnic women grind Natha (the bark of the fragrant sandalwood tree) during Nathe Grinding Festival, part of the Thingyan water festival in Sittwe. Photo- Pyae Sone Aung

# 'It is difficult to see how the talks can move things forward unless views are changed'

## Constitutional reform and the politics of obfuscation



Geoffrey Goddard

In late November 2013, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi wrote to President U Thein Sein in her capacity as chair of the National League for Democracy to ask that he convene high-level four-party talks to discuss constitutional reform. She proposed that the talks involve the President, herself, Union parliament Speaker Thura U Shwe Mann and Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

Then the politics of obfuscation

took over. That can mean a long time in Myanmar.

On November 25, 2014, the Union parliament approved what was described as an “urgent” proposal for high-level six-party talks to discuss constitutional reform and other national issues. They took place on April 10 and produced agreement to meet again after parliament reconvenes in May.

The six-party talks in Nay Pyi Taw brought together President U Thein Sein, Upper House Speaker U Khin Aung Myint, Lower House Speaker Thura U Shwe

Mann, Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and Rakhine National Party chairman, U Aye Maung, who participated as a representative of ethnic minority groups.

They are reported to have discussed a 116-page report submitted to parliament in October by the Parliamentary Constitutional Amendment Implementation Committee, which comprised 31 MPs. The committee was appointed by the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw in February last year to consider the findings of the 109-member



Daw Aung San Suu Kyi out campaigning. Photo: Lynn Bo Bo/EPA

Parliamentary Constitution Review Joint Committee, which was appointed in July 2013 and considered more than 28,000 submissions, many of which favoured constitutional reform.

Responding in early December 2013 to the NLD leader's call the previous week for four-party talks on constitution reform, presidential spokesperson U Ye Htut referred to the role of the constitution review joint committee appointed five months earlier.

He also, not unreasonably, said pro-

posals from the 57 other political parties should be sought as well.

In a major setback for Daw Aung San Kyi, the NLD, and all supporters of constitutional reform, Lower House Speaker Thura U Shwe Mann told a news conference on November 18 last year that it would not be possible to amend the constitution until after the election.

The constitutional amendments long sought by the NLD, and backed last year by about five-million signatures on a petition it organised jointly with the

88 Generation Peace and Open Society Movement, would change provisions that make Daw Aung San Suu Kyi ineligible to hold the presidency and challenge the military's grip on power by eliminating its effective veto over charter change. Constitutional amendments require the support of more than 75 percent of the parliament in which non-elected military MPs hold 25 percent of the seats.

It was always going to be a challenge for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to get her way on constitutional reform.

Perhaps the NLD's decision in 1996 to boycott the national convention formed by the junta in 1993 to draft a new constitution was a tactical error. The NLD's anger and disappointment over the outcome of the 1990 election, in which it won more than 80 percent of the vote, is understandable. As an expression of the people's will, the election was a triumph for the NLD. But it was not an election for a parliament. It was an election for a constituent assembly, as acknowledged by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in an interview published by Asiaweek on July 1, 1989.

"Whoever is elected will first have to draw up a constitution that will have to be adopted before the transfer of power," she said.

"They haven't said how the constitution will be adopted," the NLD leader said of the military government. "It could be through a referendum, but that could be months and months, if not years."

She was right about the delay.

The convention committee lay dormant until it was roused by the unveiling in August 2003 of the junta's carefully choreographed seven-point roadmap for a transition to a "discipline-flourishing" democracy. The first step of the roadmap required the reconvening of the convention committee, which had been suspended since 1996, to draft a constitution. The committee reconvened in 2004 at a retreat on the outskirts of Yangon where it met intermittently until its draft of the constitution was released on April 9, 2008. In most of the country, the draft was put to a referendum on May 10, only days after the Ayeyarwaddy Delta was devastated by Cyclone Nargis, with the loss of tens of thousands of lives. Despite domestic and international appeals to postpone the referendum and focus on a relief effort, the junta refused to countenance a disruption to the previously-scheduled vote and it went ahead as planned in most of the country, though it was postponed in many townships in Yangon and Ayeyarwaddy regions until May 24. On May 15 the government said the constitution had been approved by 92.4 percent of voters. (Mizzima, then an exile-media organisation, reported from Chiang Mai

on May 2, 2008 that an opinion survey it had conducted in Myanmar of 416 respondents found that 71 percent said they did not understand the constitution, 64 percent said they intended to vote in the referendum and 52 percent said they would vote yes).

After having devoted seven years to drafting a constitution that ensures it retains a decisive grip on the reins of power as part of its meticulously planned transition, the military has no immediate interest in charter reform. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD are stymied.

"The military are talking from a position of strength," Myanmar analyst and former British diplomat Derek Tonkin told Mizzima Weekly in an email interview.

"Though US financial sanctions continue to create technical difficulties for many foreign investors, the extent of international economic management has made a renewed sanctions campaign well-nigh impossible," said Mr Tonkin.

The NLD leader was well aware of this, which was why she has not given the "slightest hint" of reverting to a sanctions campaign, he said.

"She has in any case lost the support of many in the West through the tactical compromises she has made on human rights issues in pursuit of her own personal political agenda," said Mr Tonkin. "Her failure to at least show compassion to those who have suffered in Rakhine State and elsewhere has disappointed many."

Exercising an option to boycott the election would also be a fraught strategy for the NLD.

"The military would be only too delighted if she were to seek to boycott the elections this year," said Mr Tonkin.

"The NLD would almost certainly split, far more seriously than it did in 2010, and Suu Kyi would find herself in the political wilderness again as failure by the NLD to contest seats in the elections would lead to their demise as a registered political party," he said.

"But a boycott might give Suu Kyi the opportunity to revive her tarnished image and assure her international political legacy as a true champion of democracy which many believed her to be until she started to operate in the political arena."

Meanwhile, the talking continues about constitutional reform and other key issues. There's been a lot of it. As well as the next expected round of six-party talks after parliament reconvenes in May, there's also been the 14-party talks arranged by President U Thein Sein last October, and the April 8 meeting hosted by the President with more than 40 political party leaders and senior officials. In December, the Yangon Region parliament proposed 12-party talks.

A criticism by President U Thein Sein of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's initial proposal for four-party talks was that they would not be inclusive enough.

The NLD leader maintains that if too many are involved in talks on constitutional reform they will be unwieldy.

But why did she exclude a representative of the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party and of an ethnic minority party from her proposal for four-party talks?

"She has always seen herself as the moral equivalent of the President, before that the Senior General [Than Shwe]," a veteran specialist of Myanmar politics, Professor Robert Taylor, told Mizzima in an email.

"It is her way of demonstrating her assumed support at home and abroad; other leaders would be of less stature in her view, I guess," Prof Taylor said.

Asked why he thought the NLD leader's proposal for four-party talks was not successful, Prof Taylor said he guessed it was because the idea did not have the endorsement of the parliament, as did the six-party talks.

Prof Taylor said time constraints meant it was unlikely the constitution could be amended before the election, though it was possible a referendum on charter reform could be held simultaneously with the vote.

He doubted whether the six-party talks could contribute to the constitutional reform process.

"Since the issues are well known, and previous positions taken, it is difficult to see how the talks can move things forward unless views are changed," Prof Taylor said.

# Myanmar's malaise and an Indian emperor's message



Violence erupts in Mandalay. Photo: Mizzima

Khin Zaw Win

A Western diplomat said recently that there are two cancers eating away at Myanmar society – one is the ethnic war and the other is religion-based violence. When the disturbances began, I knew it was unconscionable to let it happen, and became part of the not-too-large number of people addressing it. I have spoken out when others did not because I have long been disturbed by communal violence in Myanmar.

Any writings or comments on this kind of societal malaise are of interest to me. An essay titled “Fascist Assemblages in Cambodia and Myanmar” was posted on the New Mandala website at the Australian National University on March 26. I recommend it. It was written by Tim Frewer, a doctoral candidate at Sydney University. In describing fascism, he

draws on the works of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. I don't want to put on airs. After reading this essay I made an effort to look up the two books by Deleuze and Guattari. They were first published in 1972 and 1980, respectively, and are of the French highbrow intellectual tradition.

I am indebted to Frewer for making those writings accessible. He interprets them this way:

... I want to briefly consider this question by looking at fascism as an assemblage of desire, discourse and state power, and argue that there is nothing particularly unique about fascism – but rather that it is a particular configuration of desire and power – or a ‘diagram of power’ that is manifested or actualised according to particular trajectories of nationalism, racism and state interests.

For Deleuze, the most important thing about fascism is that it always takes a molecular or populist form. It is

cancerous, in that it replicates and grows beyond what states are able to regulate. It is an investment of desire into nationalist/ ethnic/religious identities that goes well beyond state-led nationalist projects. This is what differentiates fascism from authoritarianism – it is a movement away from orderly, state discipline and passivity, towards a radical, yet reactive nationalism. For Deleuze it is a jumbling of the state coding machines – where individuals become policeman, judge and juror all-in-one.

Frewer refers to the rise of anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia and anti-Muslim feelings in Myanmar and asserts that both are manifestations of fascism. Generations of Myanmar people had been told as part of the official gospel that fascism had come with the nasty Japanese militarists and that impressionable young men such as Aung San and the Thirty Comrades had fallen for it. To a certain extent it did, but this does not

account for the fascism latent in Burman society. Fewer and people like me are more concerned with this. At the same time, he says that people he spoke with in Yangon said they saw government policies creating tensions more than any intra-communal issues.

A Nordic Buddhist friend and co-worker has been trying consistently to revive the Rock Edicts of Emperor Asoka, who ruled India's Mauryan Empire in the 3rd century BCE and embraced Buddhism after a battle in which tens of thousands were slaughtered. Especially Edict XII, in which Asoka urged respect for all religions. Wrapped in scepticism and angst, one could ask what real impact did Asoka's Rock Edicts have, with the Subcontinent still mired in communal hatreds and periodic rampages?

One could do the same with philosopher Deleuze and his writings of the past century and decry what is happening in France and Europe with all that

Islamophobia and resurgent right-wing politics. But history and society and life itself cannot be reduced to a project logframe and its linearity. Asoka was a man and a monarch much ahead of his time, and for all times. Deleuze and Michel Foucault, who has praised the former's writings, still make one's heart beat faster. A fellow-political prisoner and leftist poet once said to me that "we are in politics because of our heartbeats". He had an unfortunate life. Not only was he in poor health following interrogation by Military Intelligence (those people had a special regime for the left) but after his early death, his family was ignored by the mainstream opposition.

If you think Asoka and his edicts belong only to archeology, you are wrong. At a recent seminar on what is happening with Buddhism in Myanmar, an elderly monk demanded to know why it was relevant to discuss the Asokan edicts. The answer is plain if he would only think:

respect other religions as you would your own. It was valid two millennia ago and it is valid now.

One has to go about creating and strengthening bulwarks against extremism of any kind. Intellectually, Myanmar is at a juncture. The university system is being thoroughly shaken up and can be said to be in a state of catharsis. Perhaps the crackdown that began at Letpadan can be compared to Paris in 1968, but we haven't come anywhere near the end of the story. (For the moment, one grows to detest the very sight of a grey police uniform).

We hope that universities in Myanmar can become the universities they should be (and have been in the past) and assume a role in the country's intellectual life that has been neglected for decades.

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**'It's a textbook example of persecution'**

# Anxious Rohingya grapple with an identification dilemma

Simon Lewis and John Zaw, in Sittwe

**H**olding up a small white card, the only form of identification he has ever possessed, Sultan Ahmed is steadfast.

"I will not hand this card over to the authorities," said the wiry 16-year-old Rohingya Muslim, interviewed by ucanews.com in late March at Thae Chaung camp for internally displaced persons in the Rakhine State capital, Sittwe.

Up to 900,000 people in Myanmar held the temporary identify documents known as white cards. By presidential decree, the cards expired on March 31 and those who hold them have two months to surrender them to the authorities.

"I'm going to hold onto it, even if it is not valid," said Sultan Ahmed. "I'm afraid that if the government takes this from me, they might do something to harm me later."

In June 2012, when the shanties of Sittwe's Muslim neighbourhoods burned as violence raged between Rakhine's Muslim and Buddhist communities, Sultan Ahmed was fortunate to be away from home, visiting friends in another village.

"My parents lost their documents in the fire. I only have it because it was in my pocket," he said. "I still hope that I will be able to use it again in the future."

White cards and the claims to citizenship they represented are a highly charged political issue in a country making a faltering transition from centralised military rule to democracy.

The ethnic Rakhine Buddhist community opposes the presence in the state of the people who called themselves Rohingya. Rakhine Buddhists – who share with other indigenous ethnic minorities grievances about their treatment



Documenting undocumented people in Rakhine State.  
Photo: EPA

by a Bamar-dominated regime – insist that most Muslims living in Rakhine are recent illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. The Myanmar government does not recognise the Rohingya as one of the country's 135 "national races" and has blocked most of them from acquiring citizenship, although many say they have lived in Rakhine for generations.

After the Union Parliament decided on February 2 to enfranchise white card holders for a referendum on constitutional reform, protests by Rakhine Buddhists, monks and other Buddhists began immediately.

The decree to invalidate the cards came within days. In the February 11 decree, President U Thein Sein said the cards must be surrendered within two months of March 31 in a process he promised would be "fair and transparent". But some fear that if officials try to seize the documents, they will risk sparking further unrest.

In the past, white cards enabled Ro-

hingya to move freely between villages, access some education and health services, and offered a crumb of hope that they may one day gain citizenship.

But the more than one million Rohingya in Rakhine do not now have much opportunity to use identification. In most of the state, segregation is enforced by security forces who restrict their movements, and Sittwe remains a town divided on ethnic and religious lines.

More than 100,000 Rohingya IDPs, as well as Rohingya host communities, are confined to a cluster of small villages and 20 official camps sited precariously between strictly maintained police checkpoints and the Bay of Bengal, across which tens of thousands have attempted a perilous escape by boat to southern Thailand and Malaysia.

Although most Muslims in Sittwe are believed to hold white cards, the majority reject the idea of handing them over to officials.

During visits to camps, ucanews.com reporters were told by dozens of residents that they had been unable to take their cards when they fled their homes in 2012.

“Some people here have white cards but they won’t tell you they have them,” said U Ba Kyaw, a camp committee member in the sprawling Ohn Daw Gyi camp. The camp is home to about 12,000 people living in four adjacent settlements of 15-metre-long huts. Each “long-house” provides cramped quarters for 10 families, most of which have at least five members.

“People here are scared they might have to hand their white cards over to the government and they will be left with no papers,” U Ba Kyaw said, adding that the president’s announcement did not specify whether replacement documents would be distributed. “If the officials come, they will say that they don’t have their cards.”

In the ethnic Rakhine neighbourhoods of Sittwe, where vandalised mosques are guarded by police, residents have raised the Buddhist flag outside their homes to signal opposition to voting rights for white card holders. Crude posters declare: “We don’t accept the Union Parliament’s decision on the White Card issue.”

The President’s intervention suggests that they will get their way, but Rakhine leaders insist that the Rohingya must be denied voting rights in the referendum and in the general election due in November. The Rakhine, along with the government and most Myanmar, refer to the Rohingya as “Bengalis” because they believe they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

“After the remarks of President Thein Sein, it is a relief for us, but we are still waiting,” said former teacher U Than Tun, a leading member of the Rakhine community, adding that other legislation and electoral rules should be amended to exclude white card holders from politics. “The poster campaign is the first step. If the government allows them to vote, we will boycott the national election.”

White cards were initially issued beginning in 1993 as a temporary measure pending a process to verify residents’ claims to citizenship against criteria in Myanmar’s 1982 Citizenship Law. They

are also held by Myanmar of Chinese or Indian descent living throughout the country, but most white card holders are believed to be Rohingya.

Many have held the cards for more than two decades, but the ire of Rakhine Buddhists was stirred by the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party when it issued an unknown number of new white cards ahead of the 2010 general election. The decision by the National League for Democracy to boycott the election enabled the USDP to win in a landslide, including most of the seats representing Rakhine State.

U Than Tun, who also sits on a state-level committee that scrutinises aid projects in Rakhine, said Muslims bear responsibility for the conflict in the state. He spoke of alleged incidents of rape and attacks on Buddhists in the Muslim-majority northern part of the state, which sparked the tit-for-tat attacks that have led to claims of ethnic cleansing.

Most members of the Muslim community were not entitled to citizenship under the law, he said. “They are not citizens. These people are lucky to be allowed to stay in these camps,” he said. “No other country will accept this Bengali community. Why should we?”

While Rakhine leaders keep up the pressure, authorities in Sittwe appear to have taken steps to prevent the Rohingya from organising themselves.

In Thetkeyyin village, residents have repeatedly asserted that they wish to identify as Rohingya, despite government efforts to deny them that option.

In April 2013 officials visited the village to conduct a population registration exercise. Village resident Ibrahim Khalil, 53, said the officials ran into trouble at the first house, when they asked a teenage boy to confirm his ethnicity as Bengali.

“He said, ‘No, I’m Rohingya,’” Ibrahim Khalil recalled. “School was coming out at that time and the students started chanting: ‘We are Rohingya! We are Rohingya!’ Soon, others joined in and there was a big protest.”

Ibrahim Khalil said that when some people threw stones at army personnel, Rohingya elder U Kyaw Myint tried to protect the officials.

However, U Kyaw Myint, community

leaders U Ba Thar and U Hla Myint, as well as Ibrahim Khalil’s brother, U Kyaw Khin, 45, were detained on charges of “rioting,” “causing voluntary grievous hurt to a public servant in the discharge of his duty” and “banditry”.

After their conviction, they each served seven month jail terms before being released in 2014. However, after legal appeals by the state, they were rearrested in March and three had their prison sentences extended to eight years. U Kyaw Khin, who is the official administrator of Thetkeyyin, was sentenced to an extra five years.

Ibrahim Khalil insisted that neither his brother nor the other community leaders were violent toward the officials during the 2013 incident. Amnesty International has declared the four men prisoners of conscience and called for their unconditional release.

“These are the leaders of this community,” Ibrahim Khalil told ucanews.com. “When there are no leaders in the village, there is confusion over what to do about the white cards.”

In a statement highlighting the case, international campaigners Fortify Rights said the charges were “trumped-up”.

“The authorities are sending a clear message to Rohingya that any form of resistance will be met with reprisals,” Fortify Rights executive director Matthew Smith said in the statement. “This is a thinly veiled attempt to undermine the community’s social and political structures. It’s a textbook example of persecution,” he said.

Rahana, 41, the wife of the U Kyaw Khin, said her husband had been taken away from her for no good reason. He is an honest man, she told ucanews.com, adding that her husband had been selected as the community’s leader by its residents.

“He’s not a troublemaker,” Rahana said. “He’s a simple man, he doesn’t want to be involved in any trouble. We have five children and my husband has now been taken away twice. This is very painful.”

(Mizzima Weekly acknowledges with thanks permission from www.ucanews.com to republish this report).

# The Debate

## When does sound become noise pollution?

(Mizzima acknowledges with thanks permission from the Democratic Voice of Burma to use comments made during its discussion on noise pollution, broadcast on April 11).

Music bands are involved in campaigns. Lottery sellers use carts with loudspeakers. Some people make noise at religious events. While I was living in the downtown area, I got frustrated by loud noises. As my home is next to a religious community hall, a loudspeaker was attached to the verandah of my home whenever religious events were held there. I got upset about horrible noise.

**Attakyaw**  
(Writer)

The permit for using loudspeakers is concerned with rules and regulations issued by administrative offices at villages and wards. Local authorities may prohibit the use of loudspeakers if the level of noise is awfully disturbing the neighbourhood.

**Dr Aye Min**  
(Yangon City Development Committee)

Noise at 55 decibels in the daytime is not a problem. However, noise at 70 decibels can harm human beings. This level can pose problems for health. Humans can tolerate noise of 90 decibels for only one hour.

**Dr Aung Lay Tin**  
(Myanmar Engineering Society)



We are surrounded by noises every day. Loud noises, like those coming from generators, can harm people by causing distress.

**Dr Soe Min**

The hluttaw should create a law to ban loud noise in residential areas.

**U Myint Swe**  
(Union Democracy Party)

Old loudspeakers are no longer used in developed countries. Instead, sound boxes are being used. They have less impact on humans. The use of such loudspeakers should be banned for any occasion.

**Nya Lei Moe**  
(Poet)



Traders buying jade and precious stones to export. Photo: EPA



Export surge needed

**National export strategy seeks  
trade boost to strengthen economy**

Theresa Henne

An export strategy aimed at integrating Myanmar more broadly into the world economy has been launched by the government with the support of an international trade organisation and the German government.

The nation's first National Export Strategy was launched by Vice President U Nyan Tun, Commerce Minister U Win Myint and International Trade Centre executive director Ms Arancha González at a ceremony in Nay Pyi Taw on March 25.

The five-year strategy was developed by the Commerce Ministry, with technical support from the ITC, a joint agency of the World Trade Organization and the United Nations, financial assistance from the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and implementation support from the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ).

The ITC has been working at three levels – with government and policy makers, trade and investment support institutions and small and medium enterprises – to help develop the strategy.

Discussions during the last 18 months among the ITC and the public and private sectors resulted in the selection of seven priority product categories with strong export trade potential. The NES will focus on increasing production and value-adding in the seven categories: beans, pulses and oilseeds; fisheries; forestry products; textiles and garments; rice; rubber; and tourism.

The process “obviously [is] going to have bumps along the road,” said Ms González, who added that Myanmar's trade potential was challenged by what she called the three lows: low value adding, low productivity and low quality.

Ms González said low quality was a big issue for a country with high foreign trade potential in processed fisheries and forestry products. Market access was also

limited by the lack of a quality verification process.

A further challenge was Myanmar's need to develop greater diversity in its trading partners. Thailand accounted for 43 percent of exports, while China and India share another 30 percent but there were good opportunities in the wider global market.

“There is no way you can move up the value chain, there is no way you diversify, there is no way you move up your productivity, without increasing levels of salaries and reducing the labour cost differential”

As well as the European Union and the United States opening to Myanmar exports, China and India also provided duty free and quota free policies for least-developed nations such as Myanmar. But these opportunities were unknown to most of the small and medium enterprises that account for 98 percent of the economy.

There are 4,300 enterprises registered with the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chamber of Commerce and Industry, of which 90 percent operate in and around Yangon, and the NES is also aiming for a more inclusive national trade network to improve the socio-economic situation throughout the country.

Another challenge was that most exports were unprocessed natural resources such as gas (that accounts for 42 percent

of exports) and wood (11 percent), an issue linked to job creation because adding value to products created more employment opportunities.

“This country has relied too long on exports of commodities,” said Ms González said. “If you increase the export of commodity goods by about a third, you don't increase your labour by the same proportion,” she said. “You increase your labour if you add value.”

One of the projects implemented by ITC has focussed on tourism sector development in Kayah State. The region's potential for attracting travellers from throughout the world has been demonstrated by the flourishing tourism economy on the Thai side of the border. Yet Kayah State faces fundamental problems to develop tourism, including travel restrictions, a huge military presence and areas with landmines. Ms González said discussion had focussed attention on the problems and they could be addressed.

She said the tourism sector nationally is in desperate need of training programs for hotel and hospitality industry employees to raise their skills to international standards.

“The recipe that the public and private sector thinks is the winning one for Myanmar mixes intelligently university education with technical education,” said Ms González, adding that there would be increased emphasis on technical education and vocational training to overcome shortages.

Ms González said one of the main benefits of an increase in exports would be more opportunities for the poor to acquire jobs and raise their living standards.

“There is no way you can move up the value chain, there is no way you diversify, there is no way you move up your productivity, without increasing levels of salaries and reducing the labour cost differential,” she said.

## Biz Briefs

Capital Diamond Star Group Ltd and Mitsubishi Corp are forming a joint venture to make and distribute food products in Myanmar, the companies said in a joint statement on March 30. Mitsubishi will acquire up to 30 percent equity in CDSG businesses to form the joint venture, Lluvia Limited, that will leverage the expertise and experience of both companies, the statement said. Lluvia aims to invest more than

US\$200 million during the next three years in various businesses in the food value chain in Myanmar, it said. Lluvia is the operating company for CDSG's food sector businesses, including wheat flour and beverages. CDSG said the investments Lluvia intends to make in the food value chain will “significantly benefit the country's food and agriculture industries”.

### 'Security clearance' needed

## British mining company eyes opportunities in Kachin

British mining firm Aurasian Minerals Plc is reported to be waiting for "security clearance" before entering Kachin State's jade-rich Hpakant area, the Kachin Newsreported on April 6.

Aurasian Minerals said in an update to shareholders in January that it had the previous month delivered "three applications for mineral exploration licenses to the Myanmar mining authorities".

Although the company did not name the areas involved it did say the applications were for areas with "jade and

gem-mining concessions," Kachin News said.

It said the only known commercially viable jade deposits in Myanmar are at Hpakant, an area where there have been repeated clashes between government forces and the Kachin Independence Organization since a 17-year ceasefire collapsed in June 2011.

In its January progress update, Aurasian Minerals said its exploration applications for gold, copper and silver were "pending" with Myanmar authori-

ties "due to the current security situation in the relevant areas". "When the areas have been given security clearance the authorities have indicated that they will then process the AuM applications after excising," the company said.

More than 20 percent of Aurasian Minerals' shares are reported to be owned by US mining giant Newmont Mining Corporation, which mined for gold in Myanmar in the 1990s.

[Mizzima]

### Log ban impact averted

## Strategic planning pays off for Indian plywood maker

Shares in an Indian plywood company that took strategic action to avoid a ban by Myanmar on log exports have risen eightfold in the past year, business dailyLiveMint reported on April 5.

It said Century Plyboards Ltd had established a semi-processing plant in Myanmar to insulate itself from the impact of the ban, which took effect on

April 1 last year.

LiveMint said that while Century Plyboard's competitors were affected by soaring timber prices in the aftermath of the ban, the company was able to export semi-processed timber from its Myanmar facility.

The report said Century Plyboards' earnings growth had nearly doubled and

net profit had doubled in the first nine months of the financial year to March 31.

The company's main competitor in India, Greenply Industries, had since established a processing plant in Myanmar, LiveMint said.

[Mizzima]

### Bilateral trade doubles

## Vietnamese companies take a shine to Myanmar

Vietnam has been actively promoting investment opportunities for its public and private sectors, Singapore-based business news website Deal Street Asia reported on April 6.

It said bilateral trade reached almost US\$480 million (about K514 billion) in 2014, double the figure of two years earlier.

The governments of Vietnam and

Myanmar expect bilateral trade to hit the \$500 million mark this year and plan to accelerate collaboration in such sectors as agro-forestry, fisheries, finance, banking, telecommunications, transport, oil and gas, and tourism, the report said.

Myanmar has agreed to allow the Bank for the Investment and Development of Vietnam to open a branch, the Vietnam National Oil and Gas Group to

expand oil and gas exploration, and the military-run telecom provider Viettel to set up a joint venture with Yantanarpon Teleport.

It has also called for more support from Vietnam in its rubber and food production industries while seeking investment for its three special economic zones, including at Thilawa near Yangon.

[Mizzima]

The first foreign banks to operate in Myanmar in more than 50 years are planning to open branches in Yangon later this month after receiving final regulatory approval from the Central Bank of Myanmar on April 2, media reported. They are Japan's Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi and Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation and Singapore's OCBC

Bank.

They are among a total of nine banks, from Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, China, Japan and Australia, that were awarded provisional banking licences last October. The licences restrict the banks to one branch and to providing foreign currency loans to foreign companies. Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi said it

planned to open its branch on April 22. The two other banks plan to open their branches on April 23, reports said.

**'Many opportunities'****Big Thai construction firm eyes greater Yangon region**

Thailand's second-biggest construction firm, Ch Karnchang Plc, is studying infrastructure development opportunities in Myanmar with a focus on the greater Yangon region, the Bangkok Post reported on April 7.

The company is particularly interested in electricity, dam and highway projects and was awaiting the completion of an investment feasibility study, the report said.

"There are many opportunities in Myanmar, and we're ready to take the initiative, but the study must be com-

pleted before we enter the country," Mr Vorapote Uchapaiboonpong, CK's executive vice-president for accounting and finance, told the newspaper.

Mr Vorapote said it would be difficult to estimate the amount CK was prepared to invest until the study was completed.

"We conducted thorough studies in Laos before investing in that country. We're adopting a similar approach for Myanmar," he said.

He said CK's investment framework in Myanmar could involve either a construction-based procedure or forming

a joint-investment partnership with the Myanmar government.

Investment risks in the country include rules and regulations for investment and other associated risks, Mr Vorapote said.

He said CK subsidiary Thai Tap Water Supply Plc was conducting a feasibility study into investing in tap water development in Mawlamyine, Myanmar's fourth-largest city, and this could pave the way for CK to explore future investment incentives there.

[Mizzima]

**BuildTech trade show set for Yangon in May**

BuildTech Yangon, the definitive trade show for the building and construction development sector, returns this year with a larger exhibition from May 27 to 29 at the Myanmar Convention Centre in Yangon.

Organised by SPHERE Exhibits, a subsidiary of Singapore Press Holdings, and co-organised by Myanmar Construction Entrepreneurs Association, the three-day trade show aims to serve the construction development of Myanmar with a focus on infrastructure, residential and commercial buildings, transportation, manufacturing and trading, according to a press release issued on April 19.

The three-day trade show will feature an exhibition of 12,000 square metres with a showcase from some 150 exhib-

iting brands from around the region namely Myanmar, Germany, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

U Tha Hthay, Chairman of Myanmar Construction Entrepreneurs Association, said: "BuildTech Yangon is an important trade show for the building and construction industry to equip our local professionals with the necessary knowledge and training to excel in the field, especially in areas such as high-rise construction. With this trade show, we aim to drive the adoption of new technologies and building materials that will elevate construction industry standards and skills of our workforce, and hasten the further development of key infrastructure, new homes, factories and satellite towns over the next few years."

Myanmar's construction industry is growing exponentially with a compound annual growth rate of 14.52 percent from 2009 to 2013, due to the country's rising population and strong economic growth. The Myanmar Ministry of Construction targets to build more than 1 million houses within a period of 20 years to meet the demand for residential real estate. In the second quarter of 2014 alone, the Yangon City Development Committee tripled the number of approvals for high and low-rise buildings in the city as compared to 2013. The encouraging market conditions have spurred many players from the region including companies from Indonesia to invest in this promising market.

[Mizzima]

**Biz Briefs**

Japanese automaker Suzuki plans to invest tens of millions of dollars to build a second assembly plant in Myanmar at the Thilawa Special Economic Zone, the Nikkei business daily reported on April 4. It said building work on the company's 50-acre plot at the SEZ would begin later this year and the facility was due to go into production in 2017 and employ 300

people. Suzuki would use imported parts to assemble a planned 10,000 vehicles a year at the plant, the Nikkei business daily said. Suzuki resumed production last year at an assembly plant in Yangon that makes about 150 Carry mini-trucks a month.

## Thai events organiser cancels Myanmar projects

Index Creative Village Plc, Thailand's largest event organiser, has temporarily suspended its Myanmar projects due to stricter licensing requirements by that country's government, reports Bangkok Post on April 18.

The move comes amid growing political uncertainty in Myanmar this year that has prompted the government to impose stricter guidelines against people gathering in a bid to prevent potential protests.

Mr Kriengkrai Karnchanapokin,

co-founder and co-chief executive, said Index thus decided to suspend its planned events there until the political situation eased.

Index events for the Thingyan holiday have been skipped this year. The company organised events for the occasion in the previous two years.

Index's first Thingyan event in 2013 drew 700,000 visitors in Yangon and even more last year.

Other events such as trade shows have also been suspended.

"We're still confident in the bright future of Myanmar, but change and reform will naturally see some protests," Mr Kriengkrai said.

Index was the first Thai media and event-organising company to enter Myanmar, debuting in the neighbouring country in 2010 by forming a joint venture, Myanmar Index Creative Village, with local partner Forever Group.

[Mizzima]

## World Economic Forum on East Asia kicks off

The 24th World Economic Forum on East Asia, being held in Jakarta this week, is slated to push for greater public-private partnership initiatives and increase trust among economic players in East Asia in the face of an ongoing global economic slowdown and numerous geopolitical crises.

The event is being held from April 19 to 21 with more than 700 attendees, including representatives from multinational companies like Chevron, Credit Suisse and Hitachi.

Attending the event are regional country leaders, including Myanmar President U Thein Sein.

"As the world's only international institution for public-private cooperation, the World Economic Forum is holding this meeting at a time where enhancing trust will be a defining factor in eliminating societal and political polarization," Mr Sushant Palakurthi Rao, senior director and head of Southeast Asia at the World Economic Forum, said at a press conference in Jakarta.

Leaders from major Indonesian conglomerates like Astra International, Gunung Sewu Kencana, the Lippo Group, Sinar Mas and Royal Golden Eagle are listed as participants at the forum taking place at the Shangri-La Hotel.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo gave the keynote address at the event, whose theme is "Anchoring Trust in East Asia's New Regionalism."

The "Grow Asia" food security partnership will be of particular focus of the forum as food security becomes an increasingly pressing issue in the region.

The East Asia region has been considered resilient to the problems plaguing developed economies in Europe and North America, ranging from slow economic growth to high unemployment.

The region's economy, projected to grow at a rate of more than 7 percent this year, remains one of the world's fastest growing, with star countries including growth driver China and developed economies like Japan and South Korea.

Emerging economies from Indonesia

to Myanmar are said to offer attractive opportunities for global investors.

Still, political, social and economic tensions have affected stability — the key over-arching theme.

"To meet the needs of East Asia's fast-growing economies, partnerships are essential to address people's rightful demands for greater access to education, meaningful employment and political representation," Mr Rao said.

He added that the World Economic Forum was committed to creating more "opportunities of responsible investments" in the region, including in Indonesia, Southeast Asia's largest economy.

"When you have a forum like this, it is a tremendous opportunity. [...] The World Economic Forum is working closely on a wide range of public private partnerships to have a great impact across the nation," he said.

Reporting from Jakarta Globe, World Economic Forum and Mizzima

[Mizzima]

The Japan International Cooperation Agency has provided a grant of ¥1.72 billion (about US\$14.3 million) to modernise the port of Yangon, JICA said in a statement. The Myanmar Port Authority and the Transport Ministry signed an agreement with JICA on the port modernisation project in Nay Pyi Taw on March 26, the Japanese development

agency said. It said the project would improve a range of procedures on the Yangon docks, including berth allocations, logistics monitoring and statistics management. The two-year project is aimed at helping to accelerate Myanmar's economic growth by modernising cargo handling systems and operations at Yangon Port, JICA said.

The textiles and garment industry has set an export earnings target of US\$2 billion (K2.050 trillion) for the current fiscal year, the sector's peak body said on April 6. The Myanmar Garment Manufacturers' Association also said foreign investment in the sector was 90 percent and it had created more than 100,000 jobs in the fiscal year to March 31.





### A rite of passage

## In every Buddhist man's life there comes a time to enter the monkhood

Novitiation ceremony at an internally displaced peoples' village in Kyutgyi Township, Bago Region on April 1. Buddhist novitiation ceremonies around Myanmar differ, with various forms of transport, from horses to elephants.

Photo: Hong Sar



## Making merit

This is said to be the world's largest reclining Buddha statue, built through donations from Bhadhanta Kesara, a senior Mon monk, and well-wishers, and set in the Win Sein Forest Retreat of Kyauktalone village, Mudon Township in Mon State.

The 600-foot-long reclining image is located at the peak of Jina Sukha Aung Chanthar hill, and it is structured with eight stories and 182 chambers decorated with wooden sculptures depicting the former lives of Buddha. Photos by Hong Sar (Ramanya)







# A literary brew

## The Irrawaddy Literary Festival lives up to its reputation

*The Irrawaddy Literary Festival is an annual not-for-profit event, founded in 2013 by Ms Jane Heyn, wife of (then) British Ambassador to Myanmar, Mr Andrew Heyn, under the patronage of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.*

*The festival seeks to attract the best international writers to the country, and to promote an exchange with their Myanmar counterparts. The festival shines a light on the literary talent alive in Myanmar and to introduce to the Myanmar people a wealth of modern literature, which had been denied to them for so long. The festival is said to have been successful in its ambitious goals.*

*The third festival was held at the Mandalay Hill Resort Hotel in Mandalay from March 28 to 30 March.*

*Current British Ambassador Mr Andrew Patrick has called the event "the most talked about international cultural event in Burma."*

## A potpourri of the best Festival director sees growth in interest

### Jane Heyn, director, Irrawaddy Literary Festival

**N**ovelists, poets, cartoonists and artists from Myanmar and throughout the world gathered in Mandalay for the third Irrawaddy Literary Festival from March 28 to 30. As well as prominent Myanmar literati, the festival was attended by more than 30 international writers. The venue for the festival was the Mandalay Hill Resort Hotel and the program included book readings and panel discussions. Mizzima Weekly's Mark Yang spoke to the festival's director, Ms Jane Heyn, who was instrumental in organising the first Irrawaddy Literary Festival in Yangon in 2013.

#### How do you feel after the closing ceremony of the festival?

I'm really happy. I'm delighted that there has been such a well-received event. The participants and the audiences have seemed to enjoy all the sections. It has

happened exactly as we wanted: some of the best Myanmar authors and some of the best international authors. It's really lovely to see that happening.

#### How do you plan and organise the festival?

That's a very big question. Bit by bit all the way through the year ... We follow more or less the same model for each festival. It has been very carefully thought out and we made certain decisions ahead of the festival. It's a matter of gathering together with the international team and the local team on a regular basis, communicating what we want, what we all want. Then, everybody comes together. There are a lot of different things in the planning of the festival.

#### What are some of the biggest challenges you face?

Well, it's logistics really. We had

secured the participation of Ian McEwan this year, who is perhaps one of the most well-known and greatest writers we have in the English language in the West. Unfortunately, because we had to move the date of the festival, Ian McEwan was not able to attend, but he has promised very warmly that he will take part in 2016. So the main challenge is to make the festival date work for as many people as possible. That is definitely the biggest challenge.

#### Were there any difficulties arranging the participation of Myanmar authors?

The answer is no. This year we had a joint effort and the coordination of Mandalay and upper Myanmar authors was organised by Dr Aung Myint. Rangoon and north Burma authors were organised by Dr Khin Maung Nyo. So for me, I didn't even actually take part in the process. They did all of that work. And they did that beautifully. They managed



Jane Heyn (L) and former ambassador to Myanmar, Andrew Heyn (R), with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi during a previous event. Photo: Irrawaddy Literary Festival

to combine a really wonderful group of some of the best authors all around the country.

**Will the festival be held in Mandalay next year?**

Well, certainly there will be 2016 festival. And I feel probably it will be in Mandalay again. But that depends on a lot of factors. We held it again here in Mandalay because this [Mandalay Hill Resort Hotel] is a great venue. The venue is probably one of the main factors, the cost of the venue. In fact, Mandalay Hill Resort Hotel is free to us this year. That is really an influential factor.

**Why do you think the festival is such a success?**

The Irrawaddy Literary Festival has been voted one of the top five literary fes-

tivals in the world. It's got some unique features, such as interpretations of readings and panel sections. It's a wonderful opportunity to showcase your work. It's unique in Myanmar. If you want to reach a wider audience, this is the only festival that can do that for you in this country.

**The festival was your idea, but where did it come from?**

The idea came to me because when we first arrived in this country in 2009 there were many restrictions in the literary world. For readers and writers, things were incredibly difficult. When I first had the idea of having a festival which would celebrate the written word, it was a dream. But now it's a dream that come true.

**Do you have a message for the festi-**

**val patron, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi?**

I am really so grateful to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi for agreeing to be the patron because through her patronage we managed to achieve the goals we set out to achieve. There is no doubt at all that it was her interest in the idea of this festival, her participation, which gave us really instant success.

**What is your opinion of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi?**

What a wonderful person! Actually, it turns out we became good friends. It's such a privilege and honour to be able to say that, of someone who is an icon, a heroine to so many people. To be able to say I am a friend of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is an immense pleasure and honour. It's a privilege.

# Testing the boundaries

**Giles FitzHerbert, Irrawaddy Literary Festival board of directors, former British diplomat**



**R**etired former British ambassador to Venezuela and to the Dominican Republic Giles FitzHerbert is no stranger to literary events or to many of the world's best writers. Mr FitzHerbert's "literary networking resources" are one reason why he has played a key role in the Irrawaddy Literary Festival since its inception, making the arrangements for the participation of some of the world's best-known authors and poets. Mizzima Weekly's Mark Yang interviewed Mr FitzHerbert in the lobby of the Mandalay Hill Resort Hotel, the venue for the three-day festival late last month.

**How do you feel about being in Mandalay for the festival?**

Well, I'm enjoying it very much. I have been particularly involved with the international authors. It is very good to see the work that we planned now coming to reality. It's always a pleasure to be back to Mandalay. This festival is a very enjoyable experience and also very interesting. And it's instructive.

**Is it difficult arranging the participation of international authors?**

No. International authors are interested in Myanmar. It's an interesting

country. It's at an interesting stage of its political development. It's not so well known in the outside world.

**Is it difficult obtaining approval for the festival from the Myanmar authorities?**

We have had no difficulties with the government. At the beginning, [for the first Irrawaddy Literary Festival] in 2013, we had no real difficulties but we were not sure how it would go that time in Yangon. In fact, there was no problem. So I think it's now accepted that you can have a festival like this; people speaking freely with international participation. I

think it has been now clearly established that it is possible and we welcome that.

### **Why are foreign authors interested in Myanmar and this festival?**

We have two very well known authors, Anne Enright and Louis de Bernieres, who have both won important international literary prizes. They didn't really know Myanmar before and they were interested to come here. They have been to other literary festivals around the world. I think they find it very stimulating to come to a new place like Myanmar to meet some literary people, poets and writers. I think it also gives them ideas. For example, Louis de Bernieres has written about other countries that he got to understand very well. I'm not sure he will write about Myanmar but he's always interested in and engages with a new culture, a new experience. So, yes from that point of view, it's quite a pleasure coming to a nice place like this, not a very good time of the year, but I think there is the intellectual excitement which they enjoy. The enjoyment to communicate with the audiences and have very good exchanges of questions and answers and discussions: formally in the sections, informally around the lobby and the outside. I think it's a very valuable format for a literary festival, not necessarily a festival, this is ... more like a conference. And it is quite high quality: the level of discussions, the variety of topics and the variety of participants.

### **Would it have been possible to hold the festival before 2013?**

It would not have been possible ten years ago. It was not possible to write and talk freely. Now, of course, it's possible to have a festival like this. It is the result of the political changes. And I think in a way, particularly in our first festival, it helped to develop this new situation of open discussions.

### **Which organisations provide financial support for the festival?**

We don't have enough. We have very little money. We have been supported by, for example, Melbourne University in Australia, various embassies; the British embassy, the American embassy. The

American embassy has also supported American writers to be here and the British embassy, British writers. The Irish embassy supported Booker Prize winners from Ireland, where I live. The Irish ambassador was here yesterday. The Indian embassy, the ambassador came and supported the festival, too. Indirectly from Daw Suu, we have support as our patron.

We don't make money. We don't charge entry fees and it's free to everybody. We work with volunteers. We are not paid. I'm not paid. We are not interested in money. But, we would like to have a little bit more to finance this festival.

### **How will raise funds for next year?**

Well, I'm not sure. Each year is new and different. We haven't thought about next year yet. Things may change. Education and educational authorities like the connection with the University of Melbourne. We would like to develop connections but the universities in Myanmar are now in a difficult moment. University reform is under discussion. There is a certain amount of uncertainty about the future.

### **How do you define freedom of speech and freedom of expression?**

Well, I think they define themselves in a way. It means that you are not frightened to say what you think and you are not frightened by the threat of prosecution or intimidation or being driven into exile. And therefore, these threats have to be removed before people will speak freely. And you've known in Burma how it was when you did not have freedom of speech. But I hope that's in the past. You know better than I do.

### **What is the level of free speech in Myanmar?**

I think it's difficult to define. There are different levels. One thing you need is to have the protection of the law. You need a legal system which provides for free speech, which prevents the authorities from acting in an illegal way. I mean you can't just close down a newspaper in England, for example, because the law would prevent it. And there would

also be a political protest. Here, the legal framework probably needs to be developed to protect free speech both in writing and speaking. Free speech and free expression grows in a way like a plant. You grow it bit by bit, little by little. And since 2012, there has been a gradual improvement I think. But, there is room for more.

But, I think you have to keep trying. You have to keep testing, testing the boundaries, expanding the boundaries; not going too far in one jump because it may upset things too much. And of course, you are having an election later this year. I suppose the result of the election would be quite important as far as free speech is concerned. If the NLD is successful, that would be another step forward for free speech.

### **Do you have a message from this festival for the Myanmar people?**

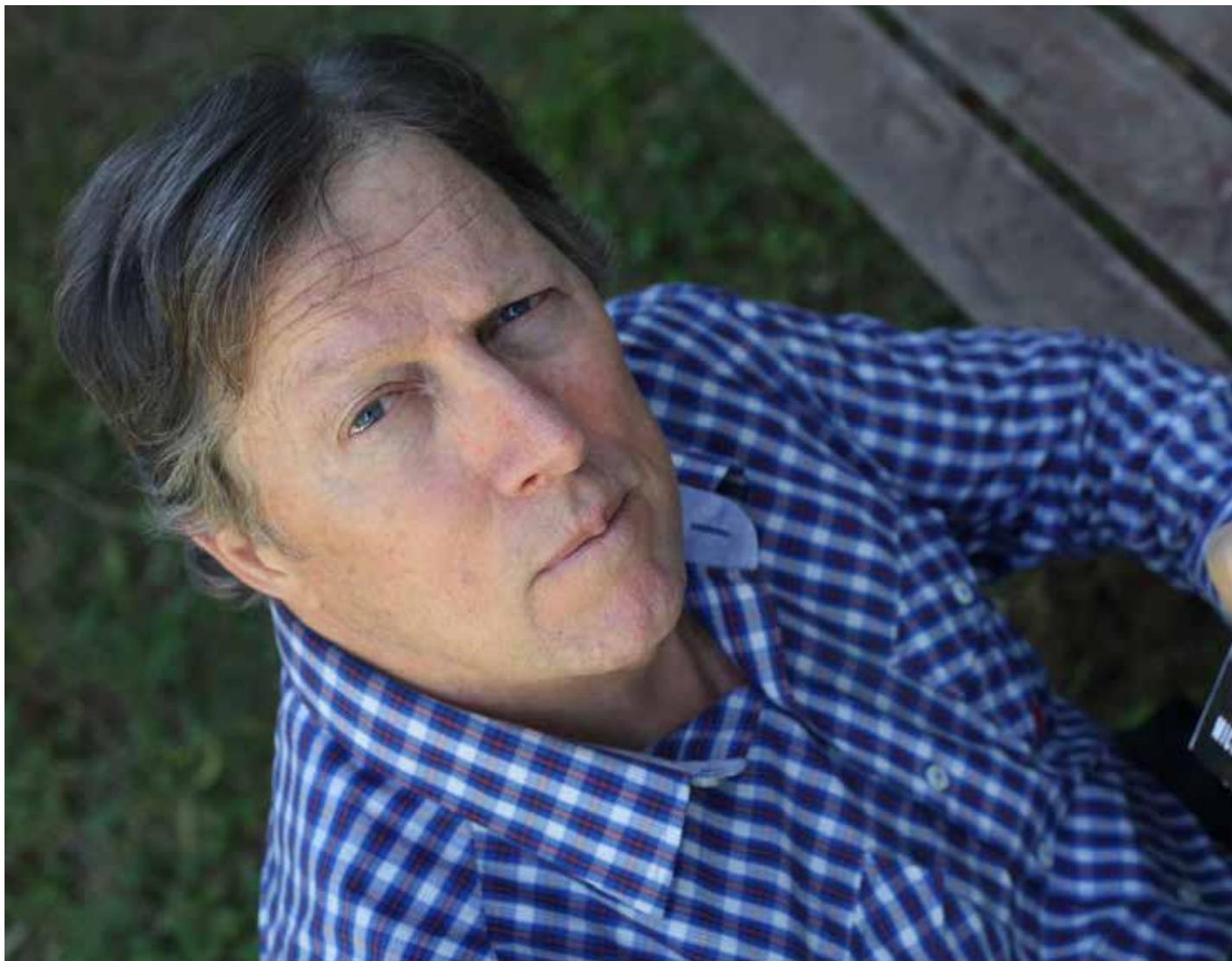
My first message would be a message of thanks. And I also very much appreciate the fact that the situation has evolved to an extent which has made this festival possible. We hope this process of evolution will continue. We hope these become permanent features of Myanmar as it goes forward.

### **Do you have a message for the Myanmar government?**

The message would be to continue with the process of reform and not to stop. To carry forward reform and the opening of the system here. Not to allow it to stop.

### **Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is the festival's patron. How does she support it?**

She supports it by her moral support. She is not able to be here this year because she has been unwell. Last week, she was not well. At the first two festivals, of course, she drew big crowds. And that's why there are not too many people here this year. Daw Suu is not here. If she were here, there would be many more people here. But her support is very important. We would not want to be here in this festival without her support. We are very proud to have her as our patron.



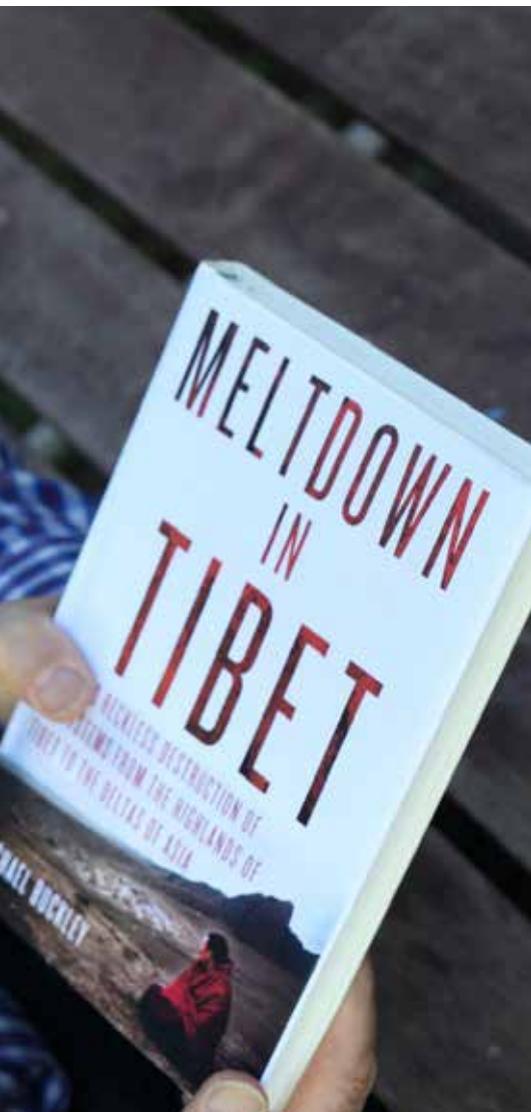
## 'If you start altering the rivers, you have serious consequences'

**Michael Buckley, travel writer and documentary maker**

**I**n late 2005, travel writer Michael Buckley visited Tibet to update a travel guide and learned about plans by the Chinese to dam the region's rivers. On his return to Vancouver,

he could find nothing in the Western media about the plans to dam the rivers, which include the Mekong, the Thanlwin (Salween) and the Brahmaputra. To publicise China's dam building

plans, Mr Buckley made a 40-minute documentary called *Meltdown in Tibet*, released in 2009, and followed it up with a book of the same name. Subtitled *China's reckless destruction of ecosystems*



u get

from the highlands of Tibet to the deltas of Asia, the book was published last November. Mr Buckley gave a presentation on his book during the Irrawaddy Literary Festival late last month in Mandalay,

where he was interviewed by Mizzima Weekly's Mark Yang.

### **What are the biggest environmental challenges in Tibet?**

The biggest is the melting glaciers. But that's actually man-made because the melting is much faster than other parts of the world. It's because of the increased CO2 in the atmosphere, but also black salt. And black salt is coming from biomass burning and from cooking fires, home fires. There's a population of 1.37 billion in China and 1.27 billion in India; that's a lot of people using those fossil fuels.

Actually, black salt burn is solvable because if you use alternative forms of energy, there wouldn't be black salt. Black salt is the tiny little black particles that land on the glaciers. Black salts absorb heat. That would be the biggest overall problem. But, in terms of other man-made disasters, I would say the dams are the really biggest problem.

### **Do the rivers that rise in Tibet have high potential for big dams?**

The rivers in Tibet have the highest potential in the world to build big dams. They have the greatest elevation drops; that's what dams need. Tibetan rivers have the biggest elevation drop in the world. That's why they are so much interested in dams in the Himalayas. It's not just China, it's also India. And you have Bhutan building dams and Nepal building dams because of the altitude, the elevation drop. So all these countries in the Himalayas have very high hydro potential. But Tibet has the greatest of all. So in terms of potential, yes, there is a lot of potential to build the big dams. And also a lot of potential to destroy the rivers.

### **Who is building the dams?**

It's the Chinese state-owned companies, such as the Three Gorges Corporation and Sinohydro. There's half a dozen of them. They are financed by state money. There are not private companies. It's a state-run consortium. If you want to point a figure at anybody, point a finger at the Chinese leadership.

Li Peng, one of the former premiers, he is the one who got the Three Gorges Dam, which is 22 gigawatts, to get started. The Huaneng Group is run by his son, Li Xiaopeng, and his daughter runs another power company. Huaneng Group has been running projects on the Mekong. Any project to dam the Mekong has to go through Huaneng. It's like they virtually bought the river.

### **How do dams damage the environment?**

The biggest issue is the amount of water coming through. Flooding is part of a river's natural cycle, especially the Mekong. It has annual flooding. China claims that damming the Mekong could control the flooding. But this is not what you need. You need natural flooding to support fisheries. This is on the Mekong. Cambodia relies on the annual flooding. If you don't get the flooding, you are whacking up the ecosystem.

The next issue is fisheries. If you have a dam, you wipe out the fish migration. And to some extent, that is mitigated by aquaculture because aquaculture has taken off quite significantly in these countries as they couldn't get a lot of fish anymore. If you put a dam on a river, it's going to block a lot of fish transits. So, a lot of people turn to aquaculture. But aquaculture has its own environmental problems.

The biggest problem, the third issue, is silt, which is the nutrients that are carried by the river. Take the Brahmaputra, for example, an enormous amount of silt comes down every year. It supports agriculture, it supports the mangroves. Silt is sediment with a lot of nutrients in it. It's like a cocktail of all the elements for growing things.

The silt comes down to the deltas where the rivers meet the ocean. If the silt doesn't come down, the delta won't be built up and it will start to sink. So it's not just agriculture being affected but also the delta itself.

We have got half a dozen very important deltas, very big deltas. You have one in Burma: the Ayeyarwaddy delta. If you don't have the silt coming to build up the delta, it will start sinking and salt water



will come in and it's going to ruin your crops because you don't have salt-resistant rice yet.

The dam makers don't want silt. They'll be happy to let it through because it blocks the turbines. But, they have never figured out a way to do that, the same as they can't find a way to let the fish through. So when you put a dam on a river, it's like a huge blockage. Small dams are not a problem. Big dams are a problem because they damage the rivers. If you start altering the rivers, you get serious consequences.

#### What are the consequences?

Fertility downstream decreases which means the farmers have to use artificial fertilisers. Production costs rise because you have to buy the fertilisers. Beyond

that, there's great potential for disasters when you tinker with these natural systems. For example in Bangladesh and Myanmar, there's a lot of mangroves. Mangroves are the front line of defence against rising sea levels and the best natural defence against cyclones.

#### Why is the Himalayas region unsuitable for dams?

One reason is the risk of earthquakes. The Himalayas is an unstable seismic zone. So there are a couple of possible consequences. One is that building a dam in the region could trigger an earthquake and the other is that if an earthquake destroys a dam it is going to cause an inland tsunami that is going to wipe out entire towns downstream. After the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, the Chinese rushed

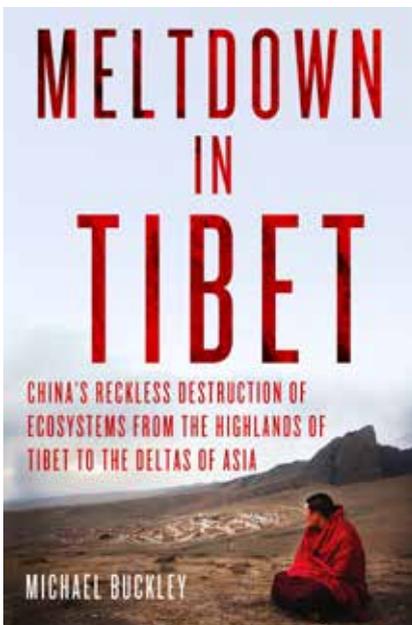
to empty quite a number of dams because they were afraid of cracks in the dam walls. But they forgot to tell the people downstream, where there was massive flooding. But it was unexpected, so there were casualties.

#### Is Myanmar affected by China's plans to build dams on rivers that rise in Tibet?

Sure, you got rivers like the Salween [Thanlwin]. The Chinese have started to build five dams on the upper Salween and they will be big dams, mega dams. They will take three to five years to finish them. But, once they are in place, it will have the same effects like what's happening on the Mekong. They will disrupt the fish migrations, the flow of silt and the water supply can be erratic. The fisher-



An upper Mekong dam underway. Photo: Michael Buckley



men who live on the Salween what will they do? Will they turn to aquaculture or fish farming? And then you've got the delta where the Salween enters the sea. The delta won't be in good shape when the dams have been built.

The other river that the Chinese want to dam is the Ayeryawaddy, which doesn't actually rise in Tibet but some of its tributaries do. The Chinese plan to build seven big dams on that river, including the Myitsone dam. It will all be done by one company, China Power Investment Corporation.

Any big dam will disrupt your ecosystem, and any kind of dam will be bad news for the delta. The Ayeyarwaddy delta will not be in good shape after the seven dams have been built.

**Have you been to the Myitsone dam project site?**

Yes, I have been there in a boat. I've seen the Chinese workers are still there. They are not going back home. The Thein Sein government says the dam will be postponed during the president's term in office, which ends this year. I have two questions about the Myitsone dam. Why are the Chinese workers still there? Why are the people who lived there not allowed to come back?

**Do you have a message for the Myanmar government and the Chinese companies that build dams in Myanmar?**

You have got to put the environment ahead of everything. You have to do environmental impact statements before you



build any dams. You have to figure out what are the impacts on the environment. Mother Nature does not recover sometimes. And you can't put profit ahead of the environment.

**Should the projects to dam the Thanlwin and the Ayeyareaddy be halted?**

Yes, of course, because they don't benefit the Burmese people. In several cases, the energy would be exported to China: 90 percent of the energy from the Myitsone dam was to be sent to China. Why destroy a river and a valley if your country is not getting any benefit. Myanmar has some serious energy problems but the electricity from the dams is not

going to Myanmar.

Myanmar should weigh the consequences of bringing in mega projects which means mega dams and mega mining projects. I mean this is chaos. If you have a very big mine then you will start to pollute the rivers and you going to have serious consequences. If you can't control it, it is better not to do it.

**Development can result in damage to the environment. How can the Myanmar government find the right balance?**

It's better not to be greedy. It's like the story of the golden goose. The goose lays golden eggs and eventually the farmer becomes too greedy and kills the goose to get the eggs. And there's no eggs

anymore. When people get too greedy, it creates problems.

**Is there any evidence that the government is too greedy?**

If you look at what they're doing to the rivers, yes. I mean there's no reason to build a cascade of seven large dams on the Ayeyarwaddy River. Why do you need seven large dams for a population of 60 million. You don't need seven large dams, you need only one or two. Even then, they would damage the river. You have to weigh up what's more important: the river or having the power you could sell somewhere else.

# The lost and found African soldiers of the 'Forgotten War'

Jessica Mudditt



Troop inspection in Nigeria.

The unforgettable story of two African soldiers who were hidden in a Rohingya family's simple home for eight months during World War II went unknown for more than six decades.

It wasn't just these two soldiers who were forgotten.

Despite comprising a million men and inflicting a crushing defeat on the Japanese, the Fourteenth Army was often known as the 'Forgotten Army' because

the Allied campaign elsewhere in the world attracted more attention.

Journalist Barnaby Phillips highlighted the role of African soldiers in the Burma Campaign in a 2011 documentary for Al Jazeera about two men, one from Nigeria and the other from Sierra Leone, and their role in an extraordinary tale of human fortitude and kindness. The information he compiled was so fascinating that he followed-up the documentary by

writing *Another Man's War*, published in 2014.

In an interview with Mizzima at the Irrawaddy Literary Festival in Mandalay on March 30 Mr Phillips said of the Africans: "They were fighting a war between a fading empire and the Japanese – neither of whom was the rightful owner of the country in which they were in."

More than 100,000 troops from East and West Africa fought in the Fourteenth Army, from such British colonies as Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia, Gold Coast, Sierra Leone and Nigeria.

Mr Phillips quotes Burma Campaign veteran Captain Charles Carfrae as writing that the Nigerians "found themselves in a forbidding country pitted against strangers altogether irrelevant to them, a people they hadn't known to exist and with whom they could have no conceivable quarrel until we made our enmity theirs..."

For Nigerian Isaac Fadoyebo and Sierra Leonian David Kargbo the decision to enlist was less an ideological decision than a practical one; war was seemingly the best option available to them at the time. Soldiers were promised a shilling a day, which was more than a teacher earned in Nigeria, and they were also attracted to the prospect of learning new skills, such as operating a radio. Isaac was only 16 when he signed up in 1943 to become a medical orderly.

"There was no military band, no cheering, they were just shipped out uncelebrated," Mr Phillips said.

Isaac arrived in Burma a year after Rangoon had fallen to the Japanese. The British were determined to continue fighting because, as Mr Phillips writes: "A successful offensive would not only



Recruiting in northern Nigeria.

remove the threat of a Japanese advance up the Bengali coast to Calcutta, but could also provide a launch pad for the British to make an eventual attack on the Burmese capital, Rangoon.”

Of the 120,000 Nigerians who enlisted during World War II about a third served in Burma, with most deployed in what was then Arakan State. Isaac was among them, as was David.

“The Africans were sent to an area where malaria, typhoid, dysentery and the like were rife and the vegetation extremely harsh,” Mr Phillips said in a talk at the literature festival. “The theory was that Africans were good at fighting in jungles – even though they’d spent their

lives in dry savannah,” he said.

The conditions endured by Allied troops in Arakan were made tougher by the necessity of having to rely on supplies dropped from the air.

On March 2, 1944, the Fourteenth Army was ambushed by Japanese soldiers on the opposite side of the Kaladan River. Isaac was hit in the leg and watched comrades fall dead around him. As he lay writhing in pain, a medical officer, Captain Richard Brown, returned to tend the injured and dying at great personal risk. While he was treating Isaac, the Japanese crossed the river and captured Capt Brown. He was never seen again and is presumed to have been executed.

Recalling that incident was one of Isaac’s most painful memories when he spoke to Mr Phillips 67 years later.

Isaac was bleeding heavily and believes the Japanese ignored him because they expected him to die. “He told me he wasn’t worth a bullet to finish him off,” said Mr Phillips.

Many Burmese, including residents of Arakan, supported the Japanese because of their propaganda promise to create “A greater Asia co-prosperity sphere” and their disdain for British colonial rule. Rohingya Muslims supported the British against the Japanese occupation.

Isaac was fortunate to have been injured near a Muslim village, whose

residents hid him in a makeshift jungle shelter and provided him with food. Isaac believes that when the villagers brought in another wounded soldier, the Sierra Leonian David Kargbo, it was because they understood he would welcome the company. Isaac continued his slow and painful recovery from an infected wound to his femur. The two soldiers were stranded in Japanese-controlled territory and slowly accepted that it would be many months before the dry season and any possibility of being rescued.

Isaac and David passed themselves off as Muslims in the hope it would foster a stronger sense of brotherhood in a desperately precarious situation. They were painfully aware of how easily they could be turned in. They became anxious when a villager stole their uniforms, which they assumed would be presented to the Japanese as evidence of their existence. Then, the villagers, who were desperately poor, stopped providing parcels of food and herbs. It was 12 days before a villager named Shuyiman visited their shelter and, concerned at their plight, did what he could to help. Initially, that meant repairing their crude shelter, but then Shuyiman took them to his home. Had David and Isaac been discovered by the Japanese, Shuyiman and his family would almost certainly have been executed. There were some close calls, because Japanese soldiers routinely conducted village patrols. But with one exception, Shuyiman concealed the level of danger he was in from his two guests, whom by now he considered his friends.

Isaac and David sheltered in the village for nine months before being rescued after Allied forces liberated the area in December 1944. They were flown to India to be treated for their injuries before returning home to heroes' welcomes.

"The West Africans' campaigns were barely covered by the Allied war correspondents and photographers, for whom they had no glamour," said Mr Phillips. "British soldiers in Burma famously dubbed themselves 'The Forgotten Army', but what did that make West Africans? John Hamilton wrote with frustration that they were the 'forgotten flank of the forgotten corps of the 'Forgotten Army.'"

When Isaac and David returned

home their families were convinced they were ghosts because they had been listed as missing in action. Isaac's family allayed its fears by throwing dust at him; David wasn't allowed inside until he lit a cigarette on the doorstep.

Undaunted by an injury that had left him permanently maimed, Isaac set about building his post-war life with determined enthusiasm.

"What I like about his story is that Isaac moved on after the war; he went on to become a successful civil servant and travelled to the UK in the sixties and seventies," Mr Phillips said.

"He had a car and nice house, and was able to provide his children with opportunities he'd never had. He wasn't a victim and he didn't die a bitter man," he said.

However Isaac did have some regrets and the biggest was a lack of contact with Shuyiman and his family, for whom he felt intense gratitude. Isaac died in 2012, the year he built a home in his ancestral village dedicated to the family's memory.

Mr Phillips heard about the 'Burma Boys' when he was the BBC's Nigeria correspondent between 1998 and 2001.

"I was intrigued but didn't do much about it to be honest, I left Nigeria and later, Africa. It ate away at me until the late 2000s when I realised it would be great material for a book or a documentary," he said.

Mr Phillips found Isaac's 60-page memoir in London's Imperial War Museum and promptly contacted David Killingray, the historian in whose hands it had ended up and who wrote the foreword.

Mr Killingray said the last time he'd spoken to Isaac was a decade earlier and they both doubted he would still be alive. But Mr Phillips asked a friend in Nigeria to deliver a letter to an address at which Isaac was listed, and was overjoyed to discover he was alive – and had a phone.

"I called the number and a strong voice came through in fluent English. I explained who I was and he cut me off and said, 'Mr Phillips, when are you coming?'"

Mr Phillips returned to Nigeria in 2010 to film the documentary and travelled to Myanmar the next year with the

faint hope of tracking down Shuyiman's family to deliver a letter and photographs from Isaac.

Despite having only a rough idea of its location, Mr Phillips succeeded in finding the village. Shuyiman and his wife had died several years earlier but their children remembered the two African soldiers and recalled how their parents had often spoken of them. They cried when they saw Isaac's photo.

We have been thinking of him all these years, they said.

Isaac was overjoyed that his letter was delivered to the family to whom he owed his life. He was finally able to express his gratitude in person when Mr Phillips arranged a phone call between Lagos and Rakhine using a translator based in London.

Mr Phillips' book is fascinating because of the surprising parallels he draws between contemporary Myanmar and Nigeria, which for decades after independence was affected by political turmoil and corruption but for which much optimism is now held.

Mr Phillips says the victims of the story are the members of Shuyiman's family.

"Their lives haven't changed for the better and they remain a persecuted minority" he said, adding they continue to live as poor farmers in the same village, that he declines to name.

Mr Phillips said that although the family had not been relocated to camps for the internally displaced after communal violence ravaged Rakhine in 2012, it felt imprisoned in the village.

"When I spoke to them in 2012, they said, 'This is our land, we will stay here.' But by mid-2014 Shuyiman's grandson was saying they were going to leave, perhaps to Bangladesh, where they are not welcome," he said.

"That is the sad part of the story."

***(Another Man's War is available on Amazon; the paperback edition will be released in June. The 45-minute documentary The Burma Boy won a Golden Eagle award in 2012. It can be viewed on YouTube.)***

**MoU update sought****Migrant workers need better protection in Thailand, says official**

Efforts are being made to improve the rights and protection of Myanmar migrants working legally in Thailand, army-run daily Myawaddy reported on April 3.

The stipulations contained in a memorandum of understanding with Thailand on Myanmar workers need additions and amendments for their protection, said a top official of Labour Department.

All angles were considered in drafting the MoU, but like all other contracts, it needs to be updated, said the department's director-general, U Myo Aung. Myanmar has discussed with the Thai side the sections of the agreement needing amendment, he added.

The number of Myanmar sent to Thailand as legally registered workers under the MoU exceeds one million.

The amendments are aimed at guaranteeing more rights for the Myanmar migrant workers.

The report said Myanmar needed a policy covering the large number of migrant workers in Thailand and the emergence of the Myanmar Overseas Employment Agencies Federation was a step in the right direction.

[Mizzima]

**Ministerial meeting****India seeks road travel agreement with Myanmar, Thailand**

Road travel to Myanmar or Thailand from northeastern India may soon become a reality if the two countries approve a motor vehicle agreement proposed by New Delhi, the Hindustan Times reported on April 5.

The newspaper said the transport ministers of India, Thailand and Myanmar would meet in the southern Indian city of Chennai on April 18 to discuss the details of the agreement, which is in line with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's push to strengthen cooperation with Southeast Asia.

The framework of the proposed

agreement, being prepared by the Road Transport Ministry, would open the door for "seamless transit of passenger and cargo vehicles" among the three countries, it reported.

"Once the framework is agreed upon, it would be just a matter of time before a formal agreement is signed; it would give a big boost to trade and economy in the region" the newspaper quoted an Indian government official as saying.

The proposed agreement is similar to a BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, India) agreement that New Delhi plans to sign with the three countries in June.

The official said that after an agreement was signed with Myanmar and Thailand it would be integrated with the BBIN corridor.

India has bilateral motor vehicle agreements with Nepal and Bangladesh but a multilateral pact would go a long way in strengthening trade and tourism in the region, the newspaper said.

India is also set to launch a weekly cross border bus service between Imphal in Manipur and Mandalay.

[Mizzima]



## What's on?

### Myanmar Offshore Summit 2015 Conference and Exhibition

Where: Summit Parkview Hotel, Yangon  
When: April 21-22  
Website: [www.myanmaroffshoresummit.com](http://www.myanmaroffshoresummit.com)

### Myanmar Power Utilities Congress

Where: Summit Parkview Hotel, Yangon  
When: April 23-24

### Myanmar Medi-Pharm Expo

Where: Tatmadaw Hall, Yangon  
When: May 10-16

### The Myanmar Summit

Where: The Strand Hotel, Yangon  
When: 9:00am- 6:00pm, May 15

### The Myanmar Oil & Gas Conference

Where: Sule Shangri-La Hotel, Yangon  
When: May 19-20



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