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W E E K L Y

Transformational communication
Tensions soar over education law
Cheap smartphones boom
Police disperse protesting workers

A large graphic featuring the black silhouettes of a man and a woman shaking hands. The man is on the left, facing right, and the woman is on the right, facing left. They are both wearing suits. The background is white.

Shadow play

**The games
commence
in run-up
to elections**

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Transformational communication

It is easy to be cynical about mobile phone companies. Their raison d'être is to make hefty profits, right? But there is a whiff of social change to the outreach of Telenor and Ooredoo as they head up country in Myanmar on a mission to put a mobile phone – or at least a SIM card – into the hands of 40 to 50 million people during the next five years.

As we mention in a story in this issue of Mizzima Weekly, the mobile phone business is booming in the developing world, an outreach that is accelerating as costs come down, technology improves, and those without mobile communication clamour to buy a cellphone and be connected.

Myanmar is proving an exciting market for the two main players who have been pumping out promotional material and events in Yangon and Mandalay and are busy reaching out to smaller towns and cities upcountry.

In today's world, the telecom chief executive officer does not stay locked up in an air-conditioned office but joins his team out in the villages and fields. One such hands-on guy is Telenor Myanmar CEO Petter Furberg, who seems happy to dress up in the company blue and meet new and potential customers throughout the country.

High flyers such as Mr Furberg are convinced they are doing a social service. And indeed they are. Mobile phones are becoming more than a device to call a loved one or cement a business deal. They are facilitating a whole range of services, including internet connections with smartphone models, online banking, providing market prices of farm produce and other commodities, weather forecasts, useful snappy apps and schmoozing on social media. They are bringing the comfort and convenience of regular conversation to family members and friends who live far apart. They will help to empower farmers by keeping them up to date with market trends. In many ways mobile telephony is part of a revolution in how we live, love and support our families and businesses.

The change in Myanmar is telling. The country's mobile phone ownership was dismal only a few years ago, with three percent coverage and SIM cards costing exorbitant amounts beyond the reach of the mass market. Now coverage is up to 30 percent and a SIM retails at a mere K1,500. How times have changed.

The uptake of mobiles in Myanmar will happen much faster than in neighbouring Thailand almost two decades ago. Boonchai Bencharongkul, the chairman of DTAC, Telenor's partner in

Thailand, was hard-pushed to convince Thai farmers to buy the mobile dream. Back then, only seven percent of the Thai population had mobile phones. Almost every weekend, the millionaire businessman was out in the rice fields – sometimes literally in water up to his knees – planting rice and mixing with his future customers. It was something of a passion for him. Mr Boonchai went that extra mile and the reward for DTAC was a period in the early 2000s when it was signing about 30,000 customers a day.

There is little doubt that farmers in Myanmar will soon be dipping into their pockets to buy a phone and a SIM card. The growth in uptake is already phenomenal and both Telenor and Ooredoo are busy erecting transmission towers throughout the country and supplying shops with SIM cards and attractive promotions.

The bottom line is that mobile phone companies need to make a profit and shareholders clearly want to see a demonstration of that. But the profit-driven drive to connect 90 percent of Myanmar's citizens – and give them all the added useful applications – can be regarded as an essential social service. It is one that will make a significant change for the better to many people's lives. ■

mizzima
WEEKLY

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‘Are they demonstrating the brutality of this era? We cannot tolerate this at all.’

Ko Min Ko Naing

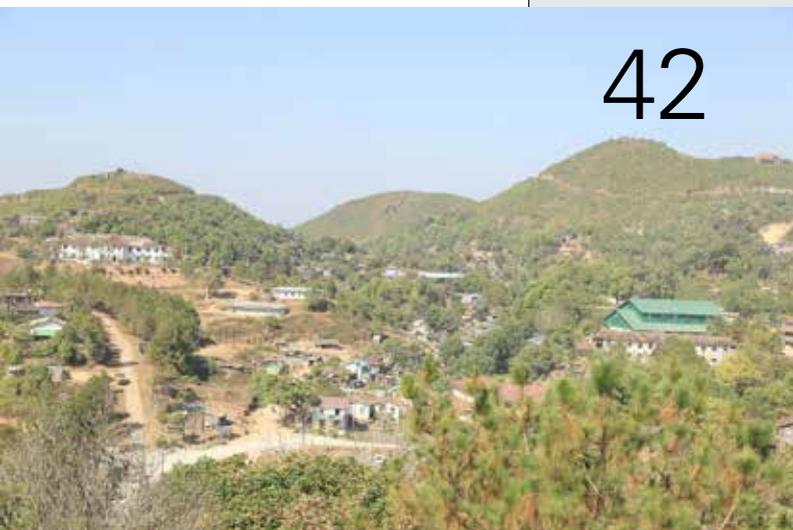
the veteran activist, who played a key role in the student-led national uprising in 1988 that was brutally crushed by the military and has spent nearly 20 years in prison for his activism.

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SEDN project manager



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Car-choked Yangon aims to ride the rails to transport revolution

Cover image: Mizzima

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Industrial unrest

Workers call for better pay, conditions

A garment factory worker addresses a news conference in downtown Yangon on March 8 about the dispersal by police and government vigilantes of protesters at Shwepyithar industrial zone on the city's outskirts four days earlier. About 15 people were detained on March 4 when workers began a march to Yangon City Hall in support of better pay and conditions. The news conference was held at Maha Bandoola Gardens, near City Hall, where police and vigilantes wearing red-armbands on March 5 violently dispersed a demonstration in support of students protesting for education reform. Photo: Hong Sar/Mizzima

Risk of further violence

Parliament urged to reject 'grossly discriminatory' laws

The Union parliament has been urged to reject or extensively revise four controversial laws involving religion and women, in a joint statement issued by human rights watchdog Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists on March 3.

The proposed laws “would entrench already widespread discrimination and risk fuelling further violence against religious minorities,” the joint statement said.

It said two of the four draft laws – the Religious Conversion Bill and the Buddhist Women’s Special Marriage Bill – were inherently flawed and should be rejected completely.

The remaining two – the Monogamy Bill and the Population Control Healthcare Bill – needed serious revision and the inclusion of adequate safeguards against all forms of discrimination before being considered, let alone adopted, the statement said.

“Myanmar’s parliament must reject these grossly discriminatory laws which should never have been tabled in the first place,” said Richard Bennett, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific director.

“They play into harmful stereotypes about women and minorities, in particular Muslims, which are often propagated by extremist nationalist groups,” Mr Bennett said.

“If these drafts become law, they would not only give the state free rein to further discriminate against women and minorities, but could also ignite further ethnic violence,” he said.



Photo: Mizzima

The statement said the tabling of the draft laws in parliament had come during a time of a disturbing rise in ethnic and religious tensions and in a nation where women experienced systematic discrimination.

“In this context, where minority groups – and in particular the Rohingya – face severe discrimination in law, policy and practice, the draft laws could be interpreted to target women and specific communities identified on a discriminatory basis,” it said.

“The passage of these laws would not only jeopardise the ability of ethnic and religious minorities in Myanmar to exercise their rights, it could be interpreted as signalling government acquiescence, or even assent, to discriminatory actions,”

said Sam Zarifi, the ICJ’s Asia director.

“The introduction of these discriminatory bills is distracting from the many serious political and economic issues facing Myanmar today,” Mr Zarifi said.

The statement said the bills do not accord with international human rights law and standards, including Myanmar’s legal obligations as a state party to the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

A legal analysis of the four laws by Amnesty International and the ICJ is available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa16/1107/2015/en/>

[Mizzima]

Altered movie poster image

Social media post: Photojournalist released after three days questioning

Photojournalist Ko Aung Nay Myo was released from police custody in Monywa on March 2 after three days of questioning over a social media posting that satirised a famous battle and showed altered images of prominent national figures.

The Monywa-based freelance photojournalist said after his release that police had questioned him over material posted on his Facebook page that included a

Photoshopped poster for a film made in the early 1970s about a famous battle between the Tatmadaw and an ethnic armed group in eastern Shan State known as “Kunlon 40”.

The poster had been altered to include Photoshopped images of President U Thein Sein, Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and parliamentary speaker Thura

U Shwe Mann.

Ko Aung Nay Myo was reported to have been detained after a complaint to police from a Special Branch officer.

A group of journalists wrote to President U Thein Sein in response to the arrest, saying the decision to detain Ko Aung Nay Myo was a threat to freedom of speech.

[Kay Zue]

TRAFFIC, UK embassy initiative

Wildlife trade reports win awards for five journalists

Five journalists whose reports have helped raise awareness about the wildlife trade in Myanmar have been honoured at an event held to coincide with World Wildlife Day, March 3.

The five won awards in a competition organised as part of a training program for journalists organised by the wildlife trade monitoring network, TRAFFIC, and the British embassy late last year.

The awards, for reports about elephant poaching, the sale of endangered species and restaurants serving wild meat, were presented by British ambassador Andrew Patrick, TRAFFIC said in a news release.

Htet Khung Linn of The Irrawaddy was awarded the top prize for a two-page special report titled Unsafe Wild Elephants, that examined the threats to Myanmar's wild elephant population.

His report drew on the detailed and disturbing accounts of officials involved in investigating the illegal killing of wild elephants.

It also covered issues such as the capture of young elephants for the ecotourism trade, the sale of ivory and growing demand for other elephant parts.

The article referred to poaching networks, illegal arms ownership and described the challenges of keeping wild elephants safe.

The report won Htet Khung Linn a trip to the Kaziranga National Park, a World Heritage site in India's north-eastern state of Assam. He will have the opportunity to see wildlife such as one-horned rhinos, elephants and tigers in an area where they face the threat of poaching to supply the illegal trade in Myanmar and beyond.

Second prize went to 7Day News journalists Zaynway Tun Tun and Khine Khine Soe for their report titled, What Would You Like to Eat?

It described the popularity of wild meat dishes in Yangon and an influx of Chinese and Vietnamese restaurants offering menus featuring wildlife.

An article in the Myanmar Times entitled Wildlife Trade Troubles Kyaikh-tiyo Pagoda won third prize for deputy editor Aye Sapay Phyu and journalist Myint Kaythi. It focussed on the open and illegal sale of endangered species at the pilgrimage site and its impact on animal populations in the surrounding jungle.

The "incredibly rich" biodiversity of Myanmar was under threat, Mr Patrick said in a speech at the awards presentation ceremony that praised the role of journalism in exposing the illegal wildlife trade.

"Climate change and deforestation are reasons, but the illegal wildlife trade is key," Mr Patrick said.

"Reporting on this important issue will be key to tackling it. I hope that our winners, and other journalists in Burma, will continue to raise this important issue in their writing," he said.

Mr Patrick's comments were echoed by TRAFFIC regional director Chris Shepherd.

"Raising awareness and advocating for better care for our natural world is paramount – it is not too late," said Dr Shepherd.

"The threat of illegal and unsustainable wildlife trade has never been so great. Myanmar stands to lose an untold number of species, which would ultimately have negative impacts on ecosystems, quality of human life, livelihoods, and important cultural symbols," he said. [Mizzima]

Conditions apply

New Thai guidelines permit migrant workers to extend stay

The Thai cabinet has endorsed guidelines that will enable migrant workers to extend their stay in the country for two years after their work permits expire in March next year, media reports said last week.

The guidelines apply to migrant workers who complete a nationality verification process by the end of this month, the Bangkok Post reported on March 5.

The report said the guidelines would apply to about 700,000 of the estimated 3 million legal and illegal migrant workers in Thailand from Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and other countries.

Thai deputy government spokesman Major-General Sansern Kaewkamnerd said workers who cannot complete the verification process by March 31 will be required to report to the authorities before June 30 or face legal action and deportation.

Workers who register with the authori-

ties will be issued with a one-year work permit valid to March 31 next year, Maj-Gen Sansern said. If their verification process is completed by then they will be permitted to remain in Thailand for another two years, he said.

Migrant workers' children aged up to 15 are also required to report to the authorities by June 30 for permission to remain in the country or face deportation.

Existing procedures require migrant workers to return to their home countries after four years in Thailand and to wait for at least three years before re-applying to work in Thailand again.

In a related development, the Myanmar government said it was planning to issue identity documents to an estimated 645,567 undocumented migrant workers in Thailand, Myanmar Business Today reported.

The undocumented workers must be

issued with a temporary identity document known as a TR-38, or "baht card", from the Thai Labour Ministry before they can receive a certificate of identity from the Myanmar government, said U Myo Aung, the director general of the Department of Labour.

The report said Thailand began issuing TR-38 documents to illegal migrant workers in 2009 and they have so far been provided to about 1.7 million Myanmar migrant workers.

"Thai government urged migrant workers to get documented about eight months ago and we assume that almost all workers have registered with TR-38 by now," U Myo Aung said.

"We have reached an agreement with the Thai authorities to issue identity documents which will be valid only in Thailand," he said. [Mizzima]

Previous sighting in 1941

International team rediscovers 'extinct' grasslands bird

A grasslands bird long thought to have been extinct, Jerdon's babbler, has been rediscovered in Myanmar, the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society said in a news release on March 5.

A colony of the birds was found at an undisclosed location by a team from the WCS, the Nature and Wildlife Conservation Division of the Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry and the National University of Singapore, it said.

Jerdon's babbler [*Chrysomma altirostre*] had not been spotted in Myanmar since July 1941, when it was seen in grasslands close to the Sittaung River near Myitkyo in Bago Region.

The rediscovery was described in a recent issue of *Birding Asia*, the magazine of the Oriental Bird Club.

The team found the bird on May 30 last year while surveying an abandoned agricultural station that had grasslands habitat. After hearing the bird's distinct call, the scientists played back a recording and were rewarded with the sighting of an adult Jerdon's babbler. The team found more of the birds in the area during the following 48 hours.

The small brown bird, about the size of a house sparrow, was first described by British naturalist T. C. Jerdon in January 1862, who found it in grassy plains near Thayetmyo.

At the start of the 20th century, the species was common in the vast natural



grasslands of the Ayeyarwaddy and Sittaung flood plains but its population was affected by habitat destruction.

The survey was part of a larger study to understand the genetics of bird species in Myanmar and determine the level of its bird density, the news release

said. Myanmar has more bird species than any other mainland Southeast Asian country and the number is likely to grow, it said. [Mizzima]

July event in Nay Pyi Taw

Myanmar to host Asian junior wrestling championships

The Asian junior wrestling championships will be hosted in Nay Pyi Taw in the third week of July, China's state-run Xinhua newsagency reported on March 5.

It quoted the Myanmar Wrestling

Federation as saying that 10 young wrestlers were training hard under the guidance of three foreign coaches.

Wrestling teams from about 20 countries and territories were expected to compete in the championships.

Myanmar won three gold, three silver and six bronze medals in wrestling events at the 27th Southeast Asian Games it hosted in 2013. [Mizzima]

\$909,500 partnership**3MDGF, UNFPA working together to strengthen health system**

The Three Millennium Development Goal Fund has provided nearly US\$1 million for a partnership with the United Nations Population Fund to support plans by the Health Ministry to strengthen health care, the fund said in a news release on March 5.

The funding agreement for \$909,500 (about K944 million) signed on March 5 by UNOPS Myanmar director Sanjay Mathur and UNFPA country representative Janet Jackson will contribute to the ministry's work on information for planning and strategy planning and help to ensure enough trained staff are available, the release said.

UNOPS, the UN's operations agency, is the fund manager in Myanmar of the 3MDG Fund.

The release said the partnership with UNFPA will help to advance the development of health services focussed on the needs of women and children and support the design and implementation

of a costed action plan for the ministry's Health Workforce Strategic Plan.

With technical support from UNFPA, ministry staff will receive training on the use of Geographical Information Systems as well as data collection for the Myanmar Health Management Information System.

UNFPA will also work with the ministry on sector policy, strategy, and planning, and specifically on strategic plans on adolescent and reproductive health as part of the National Health Plan.

The funding is part of a US\$20.7 million initiative to support the strengthening of health systems in Myanmar in partnership with four UN agencies – UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF and the WHO, the release said. It will combine their expertise and resources to work with the Ministry and its partners towards the improvement of health status of the people of Myanmar, in particular for women, children and adolescents and

underserved communities.

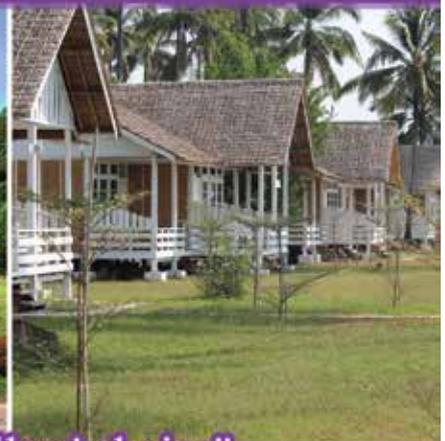
“With UNFPA's significant expertise in the areas of maternal and reproductive health, gender equality and population and development strategies, this partnership furthers the contribution of 3MDG Fund to strengthening health systems and responds to the Ministry of Health's priorities for attaining universal health coverage in Myanmar,” said Mr Mathur.

Ms Jackson said the ministry had recently drafted policies that will have a positive effect on reproductive health and rights.

“Funding from 3MDG gives impetus to this endeavour and extends farther the partnership, giving added opportunity for states and regions to get up-to-date and enable them to engage concretely in policy implementation. This will bring more consistency and strength to sector service provision on the ground, especially in the public sector,” said Ms Jackson.

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Last week in Nay Pyi Taw

Military tribunals in Kokang region given more powers

Sixteen days after martial law was declared in the Kokang special region, the Office of the Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief issued a new order that gives military tribunals the discretion to impose the death penalty.

The new military administrative order signed by Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on March 6 amends clauses in the previous instruction.

As well as giving military tribunals the discretion to impose the death penalty, the amendments also allow for violations of the law to be punished by jail sentences of unlimited duration.

President U Thein Sein declared a state of emergency in Kokang area on February 17 and handed over the executive and judicial powers to the Commander-in-Chief.

The original military administrative order, issued on February 18, concerns violations and sentences for such offences as high treason, libelling the government, offences under the Unlawful Association and Weapons acts, murder, manslaughter, rape, mugging, robbery and corruption.

Student group, NNER to get 'second chance' for talks, says panel chair

The Amyotha Hluttaw bill committee says it will give members of the Democracy Education Initiative Committee and the National Network for Education Reform a "second chance" for talks to discuss amendments to the controversial National Education Law.

The committee's chairman, U Khin Maung Ye, made the comment on March 6 after meetings with the groups failed to take place as expected on March 5 to discuss changes to the law agreed at four-party talks in February.

U Khin Maung Ye, a former regional educational officer, denied that the NNER had refused to attend the talks. It was his understanding that the NNER wanted to postpone the meeting, he said.

"Although the students cancelled their meeting, Amyotha Hluttaw Speaker U Khin Aung Myint has instructed us to hold the meeting anytime they prefer," he said of the talks with the Democracy Education Initiative Committee.

A leader of the DEIC, Ko Zeya Lwin, said the meeting was cancelled for a number of reasons but the student group hoped to have another opportunity to meet the bill committee.

Political parties call for increase in education spending

Political parties called for an increase education spending at a meeting with the Amyotha Hluttaw bill committee on March 6 to discuss amendments sought to the National Education Law by students and the National Network for Education Reform, MPs at the talks said.

Of the nation's 71 registered political parties, 17 were invited to participate in the talks but only 15 attended.

As well as increased spending on education, the parties also made suggestions concerning the university entrance system for students who have passed their matriculation, student assessments, the teaching of ethnic languages and student unions.

Most of the parties at the meeting agreed on a 20 percent increase in the education budget in the next five years, saying such a move would be an investment in national development.

National Democratic Force member Daw Tin Nwe Oo said about nine or 10 percent of the Union budget was allocated to education, including for universities and vocational training schools that were not under the Education Ministry.

"More state revenue should be allocated to the education sector and public healthcare services," said Daw Naw Angella Thuang, a central executive committee member of the Kayan National Party.

Regarding the university entrance system, the parties suggested that minimum scores be set in respective subjects to qualify for admission.

Some parties also discussed the use of ethnic languages at schools in areas where Myanmar is not understood.

Rakhine National Party chairman Dr Aye Maung said languages other than Myanmar should be described as ethnic languages rather than a group's mother tongue.

"The term 'mother tongue' may become controversial in the future so the term 'ethnic language' is more appropriate," he said.

President's Office orders measures to prevent unrest, says official

The President's Office has ordered that preventive measures against unrest be taken throughout the country, in an instruction issued on March 6 amid rising tensions over confrontations between the security forces and protesters opposed to the National Education Law.

"The order was issued because respective states and regions are facing protests and destructive incidents," a senior official in the President's Office told Mizzima.

The order came a day after police officers assisted by vigilantes wearing red armbands were accused of excessive violence when they dispersed students protesting against the law outside Yangon City Hall.

It came the same day that five students were arrested at Letpadan, about 90 miles north of Yangon, where hundreds of security forces have since March 2 blocked an attempt by protesters to continue a march to the commercial capital.

A report in the state-run Mirror newspaper on March 6 defended the use of force to disperse the protesters in Yangon the previous afternoon.

"The authorities repeatedly asked the people to disperse. But because the protesters fought back against the authorities, there was a crackdown and some protesters were detained," it said.

Information Minister and presidential spokesperson U Ye Htut denied that the Union government played any role in the crackdown, saying it involved the Yangon Region government.

There was no reaction to his comment from the Yangon Region government, but media reports contradicted the account of the crackdown in the Mirror, saying it began about 10 minutes after the protesters were given 30 minutes to disperse.

Draft law raises taxes on tobacco and alcohol products

Taxes on tobacco and alcohol will increase by between 10 percent and 20

percent under a draft law being considered by the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw joint bill committee, a panel member said on March 6.

U Thein Tun Oo said it was decided to increase the taxes on tobacco and alcohol in the draft Tax Law 2015 because of their detrimental effect on health and morality.

He said the draft law proposed a cut in taxes on gems and jewellery to "reduce the burden on this industry".

The new tax regime proposes that the tax on cigarette products rise to 120 percent in 2015, up from 100 percent last year.

The draft law proposes that taxes on jade, rubies, sapphires, emeralds, diamonds and other gems be cut from 30 percent to 15 percent and the tax on jewellery be reduced from 15 percent to five percent.

Ruling party MP calls for introduction of conscription

An MP with the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party has called for the introduction of conscription for military service.

"A conscription law should be enacted because every citizen is responsible for protecting and safeguarding their country and sovereignty," the USDP's U Mann Kan Nyunt said in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw on February 26.

U Mann Kan Nyunt proposed that a clause providing for a conscription law be added to Article 340 of the 2008 Constitution, that states: "With the approval of the National Defence and Security Council, the Defence Services has the authority to administer the participation of the entire people in the security and defence of the Union. The strategy of the people's militia shall be carried out under the leadership of the Defence Services."

U Mann Kan Nyunt said conscription could help to promote mutual respect and understanding among the national people while serving the tasks of the military.

A conscription law was enacted dur-

ing the presidency of Mahn Win Maung from 1957 to 1962 but was mainly concerned with conscripting doctors to serve in the military.

NLD MP urges review of four Industry Ministry projects

A National League for Democracy MP has called for a review of four out of six projects proposed by the Ministry of Industry on the grounds that they are not viable.

Daw Sandar Minn said the ministry's proposals to build bigger trucks at a factory in Yangon, as well as a car axle plant and factories to make diesel engines and steel at Thargaya and Pinpat respectively, had little market potential and would operate at a loss.

The truck factory was making three-tonne trucks on a trial basis and plans to make trucks of up to 15 tonnes capacity, Daw Sandar Minn said during a debate in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw on February 26.

However, she said none of the trucks made at the factory had been bought by the government or the military and long-term market prospects for the vehicles were unfavourable.

The ministry had proposed to upgrade the truck factory at a cost of K28 billion.

Daw Sandar Minn said the ministry had proposed spending K86 billion to produce axles for 25-tonne trucks made at a factory at Magwe and double-cab vehicles produced at the Htonebo auto factory. Imported double-cab vehicles were available at reasonable prices, she said.

Daw Sandar Minn also predicted there would be little demand for products from the proposed diesel engine and steel factories that would require big investments on high-technology equipment.

Reporting by Nay Pyi Taw bureau. ■

Tensions soar over education law

Outrage as red armband vigilantes beat Yangon protesters

Nan Myint, Hein Ko Soe

Weeks of rising tensions over protests against the National Education Law burst into violence late last week when security forces made arrests in Yangon and in the flashpoint town of Letpadan.

Security forces violently dispersed a demonstration in downtown Yangon on March 5 attended by about 50 people who had gathered to show solidarity with protesting marchers halted by the authorities at Letpadan, about 90 miles north of the commercial capital.

More than 100 riot police and plain-clothes vigilantes wearing red armbands

bearing the word “duty” used batons against the Yangon protesters, eight of whom were arrested and dragged into trucks.

Those arrested at the protest outside City Hall, included members of the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society movement.

The eight were released on March 6, when tensions rose again

after police arrested five students in Letpadan, where about 200 protesters have been involved in a standoff with the authorities since they were blocked from continuing a march to Yangon on March 2.





Police and civilians wearing red armbands beat protesters in Yangon on March 5. Photo: Hong Sar



Local and international rights and political groups have complained about the rough handling of the non-violent protesters. Photo: Hong Sar/Mizzima

Reports said those arrested included members of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions, who were using a megaphone to tell Letpadan residents about the arrests in Yangon the previous day.

The students in Letpadan are from one of the biggest columns of protesters who began marching to Yangon from Mandalay on January 20 to demand changes to the education law.

After students from other cities began marching on Yangon in defiance of warnings from the authorities, the government began four-party talks that included the students' Democracy Education Initiative Committee and the National Network for Education Reform over changes to the law.

The negotiations produced an agreement last month to amend the law, that

is opposed by the DEIC and the NNER because they say it limits university autonomy and bans students and academics from forming unions.

The DEIC and NNER did not meet members of an upper house committee as scheduled on March 5 to discuss amendments to the law.

In Yangon, there was outrage among protesters after the March 5 crackdown.



In solidarity with the students protesting against the National Education Law. Photo: Hong Sar/Mizzima

Reports said the protesters were warned after they gathered outside City Hall that the gathering was illegal and would be dispersed.

The move against the protesters by the police and the vigilantes began about 30 minutes later.

"I was quite scared," said Ma Su Yin Lin, 17, a student. "A policeman hit me with a baton, he was aiming for my head but he hit only my arms," she told a hastily arranged news conference.

"He hit me once and then another student pulled me away," Ma Su Yin Lin added, a bruise visible on her left arm.

The protesters included the chair of the Yangon University Students' Union, Ma Ei Swe Myat, who said the "violent crackdown" was an indication of the attitude of the authorities towards students.

Ma Ei Swe Myat said the use of force against protesters had made her wonder if the government was genuine in showing a willingness to amend the National Education Law.

A similar concern was aired by student Ko Aung Kyaw, who said those opposed to the law had hoped the changes agreed at the four-party talks would be implemented as soon as possible.

"We did not expect a violent crackdown, which is a violation of democratic principles," said Ko Aung Kyaw.

"We will peacefully demonstrate to get our demands," he said.

Information Minister and presiden-

tial spokesperson U Ye Htut sought to distance the Union government from the use of force against the Yangon protesters.

The deployment of civilians wearing red armbands to help disperse the protesters had been arranged by the Yangon Region authorities, he said.

"It was not done by the Union government," U Ye Htut said.

The 1945 Police Act provides for civilians to be appointed as reserve police with the power to make arrests.

"We will definitely respond with another movement," said student leader Ko Min Thu Kyaw, who was at the Yangon protest. But he said the group would wait for the next move by the government.

Ko Min Ko Naing, a leader of the 88 Generation Peace and Open movement, displayed a printout at the news conference showing a young woman protester being held around the neck by a civilian wearing a red armband.

"Are they demonstrating the brutality of this era?" asked the veteran activist, who played a key role in the student-led national uprising in 1988 that was brutally crushed by the military and has spent nearly 20 years in prison for his activism.

"We cannot tolerate this at all," said Ko Min Ko Naing.

Additional reporting by AFP ■

March to City Hall thwarted Police disperse protesting workers, 15 detained

Police detained 15 people after protesting factory workers at Shwepyitha industrial zone on Yangon's outskirts began a march to the city on March 4, media reports said.

About 100 workers from the E-Land Myanmar garment factory in the industrial zone had begun marching for City Hall after negotiations over a pay rise collapsed, reports said.

The 15 people were detained when police "with the help of locals" dispersed the crowd, the Global New Light of Myanmar reported on March 5.

The report said those detained included two reporters from the Democratic Voice of Burma and 7Day News who were later released after receiving a warning "about observing media ethics".

The remaining detainees were being investigated by the Yangon Region government, the report said.

The dispute was the latest of a series over pay and conditions at factories in industrial zones around Yangon. [Mizzima] ■

President, NLD leader discuss charter reform, elections and what else?

Geoffrey Goddard

Speculation has been rife about what might have been discussed at the March 2 meeting between President U Thein Sein and opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi apart from constitutional reform and free and fair elections.

“It was a one-on-one meeting and they discussed matters concerning constitutional amendments and holding a free and fair election,” Information Minister and presidential spokesperson U Ye Htut said in a post on his Facebook page.

Some political analysts were sceptical that the discussion was limited to those topics and there was speculation the talks could have focussed on rising tensions over the student-led protests in support of changes to the National Education Law.

“I think there would have been more topics discussed than mentioned on the Facebook page of U Ye Htut and they will possibly have focussed on the student protests,” said Rakhine National Party chairman Dr Aye Maung.

“The President might have asked for the intervention of Daw Aung San

Suu Kyi in the student protests,” Dr Aye Maung said.

Since it came to power in 2011, the government has demonstrated extreme sensitivity to protests over issues that attract broad support.

Education is one such issue, which may explain the lengths to which the government went last week to prevent student protesters halted at Letpadan, about 90 miles (145 kilometres) north of Yangon, from continuing their march to the commercial capital.

Another such issue was the Myitsone dam project that President U Thein Sein halted in 2011 in response to an escalating and broadly-backed protest movement headed by environmentalists and civil society groups.

Some political analysts suggested the 30-minute meeting was likely to have discussed in general terms how to prevent political unrest ahead of the general election due late this year.

They also speculated, on the basis of the unexpected decision by the Union Election Commission in September to cancel by-elections due later last year, whether Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was

likely to have urged that the election not be postponed.

U Ye Htut did not say in his Facebook post what specifically was discussed at the sixth meeting between the President and the NLD leader since their first historic encounter in August 2011.

But as the meeting involved constitutional reform it was sure to have touched on Article 436 of the 2008 Constitution and the approval given by U Thein Sein last month for a referendum on constitutional reform.

“This is a rare meeting in which Daw Aung San Suu Kyi [might have been expected] to negotiate with President U Thein Sein about amending Article 436,” political analyst U Kyaw Linn Oo told Mizzima.

Article 436 gives non-elected military MPs an effective veto over charter change because they hold 25 percent of the seats and amendments need the support of 75 percent of the parliament.

A petition circulated last year by the NLD and the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society movement was said to have attracted about five million signatures in support of amending articles 436 and



SHADOW PLAY – Some observers wonder whether the meeting between President U Thein Sein and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was part of a government game in which the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party seeks to retain control of the country – the 2015 general elections still not a certainty.

President U Thein Sein meets with chairperson Daw Aung San Suu Kyi of the National League for Democracy in Nay Pyi Taw ON March 2, 2015. Photo: Lynn Bo Bo/EPA

59(f).

Article 59(f) makes Daw Aung San Suu Kyi ineligible to contest the presidency because her two sons are foreign citizens.

Political analyst Dr Yan Myo Thein said the meeting should have been intended for the good of the country and the people but expressed disquiet about a lack of progress on constitutional reform.

“Discussions over constitutional amendments have taken more than 700 days so far, but no amendment bill has been presented to the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw,” said Dr Yan Myo Thein.

“If the stakeholders considered the

welfare of the country and the people, a bill should be ready for the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw,” he said.

Dr Yan Myo Thein also questioned whether the election could be free and fair unless changes were made to the UEC.

“I believe the election will be free and fair only if there is a complete reshuffle of the Union Election Commission,” he said.

Apart from the speculation about what was discussed at the meeting, some observers were wondering if it could be prelude to six-party talks approved by the parliament last November.

The proposed talks would bring together the President, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the speakers of the both houses of parliament, Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and the representative of an ethnic minority.

In a letter to President U Thein Sein on January 22, Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Speaker Thura U Shwe Mann said the six-party talks would help to produce stability, peace, national reconciliation and democratic reform and urged that they take place at the earliest possible date. ■

From the history vault

The 2010 election: Further adventures in censorship

Geoffrey Goddard

Controversy erupted last year when the Union Election Commission released draft regulations for political parties planning to contest the 2015 general election.

The control mindset inherited from the years of military rule was clearly evident in the regulations, which imposed draconian restrictions on election campaigning.

One of the draft rules required candidates to apply to township authorities 15 days in advance for permission to hold campaign events. The request for permission was required to include a list of the proposed speakers, the event's location and the expected number of participants.

Another draft regulation required candidates to advise the UEC of their planned activities for the duration of the campaign period.

"These rules and regulations are unprecedented in Myanmar politics," U Win Myint, an executive committee member of the National League for Democracy, told journalists in May last year.

Among the likely reasons for a tightening of election campaign rules is the absence of another form of control that the authorities were able to wield for the ballot in 2010. I am referring to the control over the media through pre-publication censorship that was not abolished until August, 2012.

In the run-up to the first parliamentary election in Myanmar since the 1960, the censorship of stories about the campaign in 2010 was unusually sensitive to any criticism of the process or the junta.

There was also heavy censorship of stories about the Union Solidarity and Development Party, perhaps because the censors were under instructions to ensure no impression was given that it might have an advantage over other parties.

In 2010 I was working for the Myanmar Times and kept a weekly record of red pen rulings about election stories.

The mutilation of the front page lead story announcing the date of the election was an indication of what was to come: it was cut from 22 paragraphs to 12.

The story, from the August 16, 2010 issue, is reproduced in its entirety with the censored sections in bold:

THE government ended months of speculation last week when it announced that Myanmar's first election in 20 years will be held on November 7.

The announcement, broadcast on MRTV-4 on August 13, gave political parties 77 days to prepare for the election.

The long-awaited decision drew a mixed response from political parties, with some saying they were ready to contest the election **and others saying it did not allow them enough preparation time.**

The government had declared on February 9, 2008, that the election would take place this year.

The chairman of the Union of Myanmar Federation of National Politics, U Aye Lwin, said November 7 was earlier than he expected and the party would not have enough time for campaigning.

"We are just building our party," said U Aye Lwin, adding that the Union

Solidarity and Development Party would have an advantage because it had more members and better financial resources.

"I have to reconsider whether we should participate in the election," said U Aye Lwin, adding it would be difficult for the party to attract voters in the time allowed.

His comments were echoed by the chairman of the National Democratic Force, Dr Than Nyein, who said the party would not have enough time to prepare for the poll, in which he also felt USDP would have an advantage.

The main problem facing the NDF was a lack of time to register candidates to run in the election, Dr Than Nyein said. "We have just 17 days to submit the list of candidates. How can you find candidates within such a short period of time?" he said.

Dr Than Nyein was speaking on August 13 ahead of a meeting of the NDF's central executive committee to discuss the party's future.

However, the information officer of the Democratic Party (Myanmar), U Hla Myint, said his party was not surprised by the announcement as it had expected that the election would be held in November.

U Hla Myint said the party was concerned about the cost of campaigning, because of regulations requiring each candidate to pay a registration fee of K500,000.

The fee was required to be paid by August 30, he said, which would make it difficult to raise such an amount by the deadline.



A spectacle vendor and a poster with the images of the USDP's four candidates outside a market in Yangon's Tarmwe Township constituency, in a file photo taken on October 12, 2010. Photo: Mizzima

U Hla Myint said that while the November 7 date provided for a short campaigning period it would be enough time for the party because of the support it was receiving from the public.

"We have already opened offices in Mandalay, Bago and Ayeyarwady divisions and it shows that we have support from public," he said.

The chairman of the Union Democratic Party, U Thein Htay, expressed hope that the Union Election Commission would allow parties to campaign freely in the more than two months before the election.

"The time is not enough if we get restrictions, if not, then it is okay," he said.

A spokesperson for the National Political Alliance party, U Ohn Lwin, said there was no point complaining about the election date, even though it was too early for parties to be ready.

"You cannot expect a lot in the first election in 20 years," he said, **adding that it was time to change from military rule to civilian rule.**

The announcement of the election date was welcomed by the chairman of the Chin National Party, U Zon Zam.

"The party is ready to contest the election and we warmly welcome the announcement," he said, **adding that he felt sorry for those parties which had failed to receive approval from the Union Election Commission to contest the poll.**

The Union Solidarity and Development Party declined to comment on the announcement. (Ends).

The following week's issue provided evidence of the government's sensitivity about coverage of the USDP. A 16 paragraph story about the mass opening of USDP offices was cut in half. A frustration of working under a censorship regime was cuts ordered to stories for no apparent reasons. What is sensitive about a political party launching its campaign for an election? Why conceal from readers the title of the mayor of Yangon, unless there was concern that his position might give him an advantage over other candidates? Here is the story:

UNION Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) opened more than 400 party offices across the country simultaneously on August 20, a senior official from the party's Yangon Division branch said last week.

The offices were opened at about 9:30am, the official said, adding that 50 were opened in Yangon Division, including 45 township offices, four district offices and one divisional office.

The mass opening marked the official start of campaigning for the party, which is based on the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) and boasts 18 to 20 million members across the country.

"The number of party members is increasing day-by-day and most of the USDA members have decided to also become USDP members," he said.

The USDA, founded in 1992 as the military government's civilian arm, boasts 26 million members. However, a significant proportion of these – mostly government staff and students – are presently ineligible to join the USDP.

Senior members include Prime Minister U Thein Sein and Minister for Agriculture and Irrigation U Htay Oo.

The official said the party would focus campaigning on winning support among the “grassroots” of society, followed by the middle class.

“To be able to fund our party activities, since before the association transformed into the USDP, we have been carrying out social activities like giving out low-interest loans to the grassroots people. Because of these loans and the interest they generate the financial situation of the USDA has slowly built up and the party will use these funds to support its political activities,” he said.

He did not disclose if the USDP has any party-owned businesses.

The official said the USDP had already selected 149 candidates for Yangon Division – the maximum permitted for a single party – of which 45 were for Pyithu Hluttaw constituencies, 12 for Amyotha Hluttaw constituencies and 90 for the Yangon Regional Hluttaw. An additional two USDP candidates will stand for the Yangon Regional Hluttaw as representatives of the Rakhine and Kayin ethnic groups, which both get to elect a special representative in the regional legislature as they have more than 60,000 residents in Yangon.

The official said the candidate list was ready to submit to the Union Election Commission and candidates would pay the K500,000 registration fee themselves.

Mayor U Aung Thein Linn, the head of the USDP’s Yangon Division Central Executive Committee, will contest the Pyithu Hluttaw in the South Okkalapa constituency.

“[USDP] candidates for this year’s general election need to be experienced and have strong spirit,” the official said.

“The USDP is the heritage of the USDA; the party is based on the association and will act in accordance with association’s aims,” he said.

The majority of articles in the USDP’s constitution, released in May 2010, are taken verbatim from the USDA’s constitution.

“We were preparing systematically for a long time to form the USDP,” the official said. (Ends)

The same issue carried a report about



the opening of the USDP’s Mandalay headquarters. It also demonstrated a sensitivity to mayoral roles as well as the liberation of helium balloons:

THE Union Solidarity and Development Party cut the ribbon on their Mandalay headquarters on August 20, in a ceremony attended by the city mayor U Phone Zaw Han and Health Minister Dr Kyaw Myint.

Both are planning to contest seats in Mandalay at the election on November 7.

Before the ceremony, which took place at precisely 9:54am, U Aung Kyaw Tha, joint secretary general of the Mandalay USDP, told reporters the party has one million members in Mandalay Division and hopes to double that figure during the campaign.

The new USDP base is the former office of the Union Solidarity and Development Association, which will move to a new four storey building – still under construction – on the same block. About 150 people attending the launch, including members of Kokang, Mon and Shan ethnic organisations.

The two-storey office is located on 73rd Street.

Outside the building, helium balloons were released and the crowd was led in a chant: “The election must be successful! The USDP must be victorious!”

When asked if and when the USDP would begin campaigning in Mandalay, Dr Kyaw Myint stated only that the party was just continuing to operate as normal.



Left - Necessary instructions for little minds? A USDP poster in a school at Mandalay, in an image taken in September 2010. Photo: Mizzima

Right - Mandalay Mayor U Phone Zaw Han (first from right) and Health Minister Dr Kyaw Myint (third from right) opening the Mandalay headquarters of the Union Solidarity and Development Party, in a file photo taken on August 20, 2010. Stories about the opening of USDP offices ahead of the flawed 2010 election were heavily censored. Photo: Mizzima

“We have been doing good for the people for a long time,” he told *The Myanmar Times*. “[Our campaign activities] are not anything new.” (Ends).

The red pen was always poised to strike at any story involving the leader of the National League for Democracy, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

A 12-paragraph report in the September 27, 2010 issue about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi being included on an electoral roll, was slashed to four paragraphs. The report was placed on the front page but the censor directed that it be moved inside the paper. For the sake of relevance, some paragraphs have been cut from this example of censorship:

DAW Aung San Suu Kyi has been included on electoral rolls released on

September 20 despite being under house arrest.

The daughter of former Myanmar leader General Aung San and leader of the deregistered National League for Democracy party was included on the list of voters in Shwe Taung Gyar 1 ward in Bahan township with the serial number 2833. Her National Registration Card number, date of birth, the names of her parents and her address were included on the electoral roll, as seen by *The Myanmar Times*.

Her two live-in staff, Daw Khin Khin Win, 67, and Daw Win Ma Ma, 43, were also included on the electoral roll, which was signed by the chairman of the Ward Sub-Commission.

The chairman of the Ward Peace and Development Council told *The Myanmar Times* on September 24 the government would allow Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to vote but because she is under house arrest she could only cast her vote in advance, not on November 7.

“But the [Election Commission] hasn’t announced the date for voting in advance yet. The voters who will cast their votes in advance need to apply to the sub-commission,” he said.

The Ward Peace and Development Council chairman said U Ye Naing Win, the son of the former General Khin Nyunt, was also included on the list of voters.

An unnamed official confirmed the news to AFP. “[Daw] Aung San Suu Kyi and her two live-in maids will get the right to vote. ... But they will not get permission to go outside on election day,” the official said. “The authorities might ask them to vote in advance.”

According to the Pyithu Hluttaw Election Law Article 6(b), a person whose name has been included in the voting roll of their respective constituency is eligible to vote.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s lawyer, U Nyan Win, said he was unaware her name was on the electoral roll.

“If she is on the electoral roll, I think the authorities will contact her to let her know.”

He said he could not say whether she planned to vote or not. (Ends).

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest on November 10, three days after the election, that the NLD boycotted. ■

LET ME TELL YOU A STORY

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'Relations may change, but we will not become enemies'

U Sein Win Aung, former Myanmar ambassador to China

Relations between Myanmar and China have been strained by the fighting that erupted in the Kokang region on February 9 between government troops and forces loyal to Pyone Kyar Shin, who heads the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army. It is the most serious fighting in the region since 2009, when the MN-DAA was ousted from power in fighting that followed its refusal to form a border guard force under Tatmadaw command. Mizzima's Kay Zue discussed the relationship between Nay Pyi Taw and Beijing in an interview with U Sein Win Aung, who was Myanmar's ambassador to China from 2000 to 2003.

How would you describe the bilateral relationship when you were ambassador to China?

During that time, Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Myanmar once. Myanmar leaders also made visits to China. The two countries had a very good relationship then.

What were China's main investments in Myanmar at that time?

There were some Chinese factories, making or assembling such products as paper, tractors, sewing machines and shoes. The Chinese also invested in heavy industry and the agricultural sector. There was no Chinese investment then in natural resources, except drilling for oil offshore.

What was the relationship between Myanmar citizens and Chinese people in Kokang region when you were ambassador?

The Kokang and Wa people are genuine Myanmar nationals. The Wa people lived in the area around Mongla. The Kokang people were also living in this area.

Do you mean there was no infiltration by Chinese people into those areas at that time?

Correct. The Communist Party of Burma was also based in that border area. Except for the Kachin Independence

Army, the other forces were under the influence of the CPB, which moved its base to Ruili, China. The Kokang was the first group to fight against the KIA.

The Chinese government has insisted it has no involvement in the Kokang conflict despite accusations from the Tatmadaw of Chinese involvement.

When did Chinese people start mixing with people from Myanmar?

The mixing began in the prehistoric period and involved people whose ancestors originated in the Tibet plateau.

There have been accusations that Pyone Kyar Shin's group has a close relationship with China. Do you think the fighting will affect diplomatic ties between Myanmar and China?

The accusations cannot be confirmed without firm evidence. It is possible that there are fighters on the Kokang side who are mercenaries recruited by Pyone Kyar Shin. If the accusations escalate it will lead to complications in bilateral relations.

What is the likely outcome of tensions in the relationship between Myanmar and China?

We can overcome all the problems if both countries adhere to the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence.

The Chinese government has insisted it has no involvement in the Kokang conflict despite accusations from the Tatmadaw of Chinese involvement.

The state-run media did not accuse the Chinese government of being directly involved but mentioned suspicions about

the involvement of Chinese mercenaries, not Chinese soldiers. The meanings are not contrary to each other. But one should not say things baseless allegations.

What affect could the fighting have on bilateral relations?

If the accusations from this (Myanmar) side cannot be stopped, bilateral relations will be tarnished. Relations may change, but we will not become enemies. Relations between the two countries have developed into a strategic partnership. Mutual understanding is important. Maybe we need to regain mutual understanding.

Could the situation develop into an obstacle for Chinese investment in Myanmar?

Mutual trust has declined. China has a large population of 1,500 million, while Myanmar has just over 50 million people. The two countries have different political situations and administrations. Things will not change dramatically and immediately due to these differences. Myanmar helped China to become a member of the World Trade Organisation, ASEAN + 1 and the United Nations. Myanmar helped China to strengthen its relationship with ASEAN. They remember this with gratitude. China will not do anything to strain the relations.

What is your perspective of bilateral relations based on your experience as a former ambassador to China?

We have established a good relationship as neighbours over decades. Myanmar and China signed an agreement to adhere to the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence [in 1954]. I do not believe either side will damage this good relationship. But, one should not emphasise the policy only based on big nation status as well. Myanmar shares borders with China and India, both big countries with large populations. It is to Myanmar's advantage to share borders with these countries. We should think about things based on present situation and circumstances. ■

Coordinated measures

Western embassies outline election support strategy

Western embassies in Myanmar have outlined a comprehensive package of support aimed at helping to ensure that the election due late this year is inclusive, credible and transparent.

The embassies of Australia, Denmark, the European Union, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States outlined the coordinated measures in a joint statement issued on March 3.

The success of the election “will be measured by the integrity of the electoral process and an outcome that reflects the will of the people,” the joint statement said.

“Credible, transparent and inclusive electoral processes require long-term engagement with all stakeholders throughout the electoral cycle,” it said.

“We understand that building confidence in an election starts well before election day and includes confidence in the integrity of international election support.”

The countries that issued the statement said they were coordinating their support to government and non-government organisations for the electoral process based on international best practice.

“As donors and partners, we also commit to adhere to the principles of transparency, inclusiveness and equity,” the statement said.

“Our assistance aims to support and institutionalise the democratic process and does not support any specific party or candidate,” it said.

The statement listed a series of “critical steps to an inclusive, credible and transparent election”. It noted that while each donor was not involved in all of the listed activities, assistance was being coordinated to address five key elements of the electoral process.

They were identified as promoting international standards, establishing a framework for election observation,



strengthening the capacity of stakeholders to promote democratic political competition, supporting civil society groups and the media to improve voter education and participation and encouraging increased dialogue among all stakeholders.

“We are providing the Union Election Commission with technical support on international best practices as it relates to electoral administration, including an updated voter list” to promote international standards, the statement said.

To establish a framework for observing the ballot, the donors were supporting the training and deployment of domestic and international election observers to enhance transparency and build voter confidence in the integrity of the election.

“International experience shows that election observation can increase accountability, reassure voters and help deter fraud and intimidation,” said the statement.

Strengthening the capacity of stakeholders to promote democratic political competition involved providing them

with the tools they need to participate in the process and build organisations that are responsive to the people, it said.

Assistance was also being provided to civil society groups as they continue to promote voter registration and conduct voter education campaigns.

“We are also supporting media training to help ensure accurate, impartial and reliable information about the elections is widely available to the public,” the statement said.

Efforts to increase dialogue among stakeholders included encouraging the UEC, civil society groups, the media and political parties to exchange views regularly on the regulatory framework, organisation and management of the electoral process.

“In addition to our targeted elections support, we will continue to promote a peaceful and inclusive election environment,” the statement said.

“Freedom of the media, freedom of expression, non-discrimination and protection of human and associated rights are central to a credible election process,” it said. [Mizzima] ■

'I did not understand poverty before'

Women working together for progress and equality

Rachna Sachasinh

Deep-seated patriarchy and years of military rule have kept Myanmar society from the rest of the world. It has also kept the country's citizens, particularly women, at a distance from each other. Within civic and development sectors, Myanmar's young women are discovering effective tools for personal and professional growth. In doing so, they are opening the interior and exterior doors of the country.

The development sector, comprised of community-based and non-government organisations, brings ethnically diverse women from town and countryside together in ways that are unprecedented. For some women, this is the first time they are collaborating outside their own social and cultural networks. Together, the

women are redefining traditional roles and working alongside each other in pursuit of progress and equality.

The Social Economic Development Network, operated by ActionAid Myanmar, is one such organisation. Based in the central dry zone, SEDN staff work with village-based women to access vocational training and markets for handicrafts. SEDN also supports the creation of social networks that links women to each other and to markets.

Through their involvement with SEDN, the young women are gaining perspectives that transcend ethnic and socio-economic divisions. They are questioning and evaluating their individual experience and their collective experience as women in Myanmar. In a society desperately searching for

women leaders in both urban and rural areas, these young women serve as roles models for current and future generations.

Here we profile Myo Myint Myat Htun and May Thinzar Kyaw Soe, two SEDN leaders who reflect on their experience of coming of age and working in a country undergoing a rapid transition.

Myo Myint Myat Htun (MyMy)

"It is difficult to talk about 'woman's experience' in Myanmar," said SEDN project manager Myo Myint Myat Htun (MyMy). "We are from different backgrounds and different parts of the country. How we grew up, what we experience in the countryside, how we live in town is not the same."

MyMy, 28, grew up in Pyin Oo



SEDN project manager Myo Myint Myat Htun (MyMy), seen here on the right with her group.

Lwin, a charming hill station east of Mandalay. MyMy's upbringing was stable and secure. Her father owns a construction company and her mother worked at home caring for MyMy and her four sisters. The family was not rich but it did not lack for anything. MyMy and her sisters all went to school and attended university.

Although MyMy enjoyed a tranquil upbringing, the family enjoyed some social pressures. MyMy's father is Chin and her mother is Kachin, an alliance as unusual today as it was 35 years ago, and the marriage caused strife within the extended family. Neither side approved a cross-cultural marriage. MyMy's parents persevered and forged a life together based on mutual respect and understanding.

The challenges that MyMy's par-

ents faced influenced their parenting choices. They did not want their children to face alienation or limitations and actively encouraged their daughters to go to school and university.

"I knew from early on that my family is different," said MyMy. "My best friend's father told her not to expect any support from him. He would leave all his money to his sons. Not many families help their daughters go to school. My parents were really different."

MyMy graduated with a B.Sc. in Geology from Yadanabon University in Mandalay. When a friend suggested working with ADRA, an NGO in Yangon, MyMy submitted her application and was accepted as a staff accountant. A quick learner with good management skills, MyMy quickly

moved through the ranks and in 2013 was selected to be a project manager for an SEDN project in Nyaung Oo, near Bagan.

Working with an NGO exposed MyMy to an aspect of Myanmar that she never really knew or understood. In Pakkoku and Myaing townships, where poverty rates are as high as 40 percent, the vast divisions that separate Myanmar society became evident. "I did not understand poverty before I came here," MyMy said. "You know that people struggle, but when you know them personally and work with them, you are affected differently than seeing it from a distance," she said.

"I remember talking to a woman who married someone from another village. When you marry outside your village, then you cannot come back to



May Thinzar Kyaw Soe (TeTe), a young SEDN coordinator, left, and right working with a group.

the village unless the village chief gives you permission. This woman's mother died and the village chief would not give her permission to come back."

MyMy recounted this story to demonstrate that it could well have been that of her parents. The rural women with whom MyMy works are culturally obligated to fulfill roles where they have no agency or voice. Without education and an inclusive, supportive social structure, women's choices are severely limited, MyMy said. "My parents were able to make their own money, so they could support us," she said. "For the women in the village, they have no money and no say in anything. They have to do whatever others tell them to do."

"I want to change this. We have to change this," MyMy said, although she contends that change is a process that requires multiple concurrent changes within social structures and social relationships. "How my parents raised

me had a lot to do with who I am today," she said. In villages and urban areas, it is not simply about access, but more about roles, perceptions and expectations. "The government has a responsibility, but society and women themselves have to think differently," said MyMy. "And families have to raise their daughters to have confidence and be willing to be independent."

May Thinzar Kyaw Soe (TeTe)

"What should I do? What do I want to be?" are not typical questions for Myanmar women. But they are what TeTe asked herself. At the time, TeTe was working as an English language translator for MRTV. With a degree in Library and Information Sciences from East Yangon University, TeTe was restless in her job and decided to leave.

Resigning from a secure job is also not typical for Myanmar women (or men). Yet, in order to get the experi-

ence she wanted, that is what TeTe did.

TeTe was born in Saigaing Region and was raised in Lashio, where her father worked for Myanmar Railways. TeTe's father and mother endured a bitter relationship that created strife and struggle for the family.

"I was very angry with my father for what he did to my mother," said TeTe. "But I was also angry with my mother for not saying anything," she said. "My father was a good father, but not a good husband."

This experience left an indelible mark on TeTe and she committed herself to understanding the dynamics of male-female relationships and to emancipating women from the traditional forms of patriarchy. However, TeTe had no information or awareness on how to accomplish this. Domestic abuse and family dynamics are not discussed openly and even while at university, TeTe did not find any guidance or resources.

An internship at ActionAid was a tremendous opportunity, said TeTe. She received training and began to develop skills in community development and gender training.

In the central dry zone, TeTe began to understand the depths of poverty and isolation that village women experience. She also met women who endured domestic violence in circumstances much worse than that of her own family.

“I have a much better understanding of what it means to be a woman,” TeTe said. “We are caught between culture and religion on one side, and having freedom on the other,” she said. “And, this makes me understand my mother’s choices better.”

TeTe says women in Myanmar have common struggles, but geography, politics, religion and culture keep them segregated and marginalised. “In Myanmar, it is easy to only see what happens to you, and you don’t really know what is happening in other parts (of the country).”

At 23, TeTe is one of SEDN’s youngest program coordinators. She works directly with the village producers to link them to public services, to foster social networks within the community and to access markets. “Making and selling (handicrafts) is the easy part, but changing social behaviour is difficult,” said TeTe.

In her two years with SEDN, TeTe has seen real impact. “They (the village women) are talking more, sharing more openly and are more confident. Before, no one dared to talk.”

TeTe said it is very important for young women to receive an education.

“It gives you more things to think about. When your world opens up, you have more possibility,” she said.

“Even when women struggle, it is difficult for them to leave their situation. They don’t think they have the power or ability to change their own lives. Men, like my own brother and my boyfriend, think that women have to accept who they are. But I don’t believe that. They think my thinking is too big. But I don’t think so. I want to think big.” ■

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE VILLAGE

The central dry zone is characterised by high rates of female-led households and out-migration. Fear of falling victim to human trafficking is palpable among young women. The lack of established social networks for women outside of their families, coupled with little or no income opportunities, isolates women socially and economically. For many women, there is little or no access to the outside world. Their perspectives are shaped by family expectations, culture and religion. The Social Economic Development Network (SEDN), operated by ActionAid Myanmar and funded by the Livelihoods and Food Security Trust (LIFT), includes a social business component called the Craft Producer Network (CPN) that provides village-based women with vocational training in sewing, rattan and weaving. After being trained, women are encouraged to organise themselves into ‘women producer support groups’ (WPSG). Group members work collectively to produce high quality textiles and handicrafts for tourists. The products are sold at MBoutik, a social business in Nyaung Oo. All of the profits from the sale of the products return to the women producers. Of this amount, 40 per cent is deposited into a collective savings account for the WPSG members. There are 38 women producer support groups, with a total of 400 members, ac-

tively producing in Pokkokku and Myaing Townships. Leaders of the WPSGs, along with government and private sector representatives, have formed a CPN committee that meets regularly to address production and marketing challenges. It is expected that the management of the day-to-day operations of the social business will be turned over to the committee. This holistic model for development creates social links among women and forges a working relationship between the village-based women producers, government officials and private businesses and tourism associations.

Government agencies are enthusiastic about this partnership, because it supports the government’s overall goals of poverty reduction, access to public services and inclusive growth. Businesses are eager to collaborate with producers to meet the demand for high-quality textiles and handicrafts, made from local materials, for the tourist and possible export market. The handmade and social business components of the program also carry considerable market appeal among travellers. For the village-based women, these networks are unparalleled and transformative. They are developing leadership and entrepreneurial skills and broader social and political awareness. ■

The Game

Making peace, buying time

Nicholas Farrelly

At the Defence Services Museum in Nay Pyi Taw there are cabinets devoted to the peace-making exploits of President U Thein Sein. When he wore an army uniform, especially during his time as chief of the Shan State's Triangle Command, he was responsible for negotiations with ethnic minority armies.

This is an experience he shares with other senior officers of his generation. They achieved high rank when ceasefire agreements with ethnic armies and militias were the defining feature of Myanmar's political landscape. Deals with rebel groups – large and small – helped put the peace into the mandate of the State Peace and Development Council.

We shouldn't forget that these agreements were a long way from final peace deals. They remained vulnerable to changing local conditions, the whims of new commanders and orders from on high. The most effective were welded together by a peculiar mix of booze-soaked friendship, mutually assured attrition and commercial self-interest.

While some decision-makers still harboured ambitions of striking a long-term, nation-wide and comprehensive peace, most knuckled down with the immediate tasks of enrichment and re-positioning. U Thein Sein experienced these trends during his years in Shan State.

While such arrangements were far from elegant and some battles continued in the hills, most corners of Myanmar were relatively calm. Areas with heavy fighting – such as southern Shan State and large parts of Kayin and Kayah states – were far from the experience of most Myanmar citizens.

Through those years, the government mouthpieces would occasionally herald the surrender of new splinter groups and small militias. From the vantage of

With trust in short supply, it would take an audacious set of moves to ram through a comprehensive peace agreement this year. The President may have missed his chance to secure this part of his legacy.

tatmadaw strategists, it seemed that the hard realities of post-ceasefire fragmentation and personal greed would eventually bring an end to ethnic conflict.

After the 2010 election, the new political system naturally gave extra impetus to peace-making work. Money flowed in from all directions and especially from Europe and Japan, to help foster a climate of conciliation and compromise. New institutions, such as the Myanmar Peace Center, were created to shoulder the load.

The basic message was that the wars should end. That message was badly bruised by the resumption of fighting with the Kachin Independence Army in mid-2011.

This year it has taken a further blow with the escalation of fighting in northern Shan State. Scores of tatmadaw troops have died in one of the many messy, unresolved conflicts that continue to fester.

This sends a blunt message to ethnic leaders who are unsure of their status leading up to the 2015 election. The optimists among them had long anticipated that the President and his strategists would come up with an answer to the ethnic questions. They still talk of federalism, self-government, local education and cultural independence.

But it is the ethnic pragmatists who now have the upper hand in these discussions. Having long warned of the duplicity of central government negotiating tactics they are vindicated by U Thein Sein's failure to secure a national deal. Recent fighting at Laukkai only reinforces their sense of betrayal.

So they are waiting to see who may replace him after the 2015 election. Negotiating with a new president has plenty of appeal, especially for those anxious to ensure that the final peace will serve their long-term interests.

With trust in short supply, it would take an audacious set of moves to ram through a comprehensive peace agreement this year. The President may have missed his chance to secure this part of his legacy.

Yet it is not through lack of creative effort that a resolution has proved elusive. Ethnic leaders are still buying time in the hope that a better deal will gallop into view. Such hope has fathered a hundred ceasefire pacts and a thousand broken deals.

(Dr Nicholas Farrelly is a partner at Glenloch Advisory and a Fellow in the Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University). ■

The Debate

When public debate heats up *Mizzima* reviews the landscape of opinion and prints the most poignant quotes in favour and against.

Which promises has the government kept?

“One of the government’s promises was to release all political prisoners. However, figures released by the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners show there are 180 political prisoners in the country’s jails as well as 200 political prisoners in detention on political charges. These figures show that the government does not keep its promises.”

Naing Layi Tama
(General secretary, Mon National Party)

“It is an undeniable fact that there are some political prisoners though there is no agreed definition of ‘political prisoner’. Members of our Karen National Union cannot read or write Myanmar but government authorities forced them to sign confessions that were used against them in court in a case involving explosives. Because of the charges brought against these KNU members they are not regarded as political prisoners.”

Pado Mahn Nyein Maung
(central executive committee, KNU)

“Our country faced civil wars for years and the people were under military rule. The government cannot solve the consequences of the past.”

Pado Mahn Nyein Maung

“I disagree. Mutual trust plays a crucial role between the government and the people. I do not accept the idea that the government cannot solve the consequences of the past.”

Dr Aung Naing Oo (chairman,
Hluttaw committee for questions,
proposals and legal affairs)

“The government has not fulfilled its promises of ‘clean’ government and good governance. It is because of the perpetuation of the old administrative system by former officials, that is creating little hope for success.”

Pado Mahn Nyein Maung



Naing Layi Tama
(General secretary, Mon National Party)

“The government has implemented some of its promises. The black market for US currency has disappeared and grass-roots people can now use low-priced SIM cards.”

U Zaw Tun (Mawlamyine Township Supporting Group)

“Despite the poverty alleviation program of the government, there is still illegal 2D [Thai lottery] gambling as well as beer stations throughout Mon State. I want to know how the government will use abundant foreign financial support for poverty alleviation.”

Zaw Min Oo (Southern Myanmar Journalist Network)

(Mizzima acknowledges with thanks permission from the Democratic Voice of Burma to use comments made during its discussion on promises made by the government broadcast on March 7).

Sales rose 23% in 2014

Emerging markets drive a global boom in cheap smartphones

Laure Fillon

Phone and internet firms are rolling out cheaper handsets and may turn to hot-air balloons to boost network coverage in developing countries, where sales of smartphones are booming.

Even though mobile network coverage is generally weaker in the developing world, firms are mining a gold rush of new clients in China, India, Myanmar and beyond, as smartphone demand slows in the rich world.

Several top phone and Internet companies at last week's Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, the biggest wireless telecom fair on the planet, have unveiled new products aimed at developing markets.

Smartphone sales grew by 23 percent worldwide in 2014 to 1.3 billion

units, showed a study by German research institute GfK.

As demand has slowed in smartphone-saturated markets such as Western Europe, Japan and North America, it has exploded in Latin America, Southeast Asia and Africa.

In response, US online giant Google has launched a low-cost smartphone in India for US\$105 [about K108,000].

Its US rival Microsoft says it plans one that will cost \$29 while the Mozilla Foundation, owner of the Firefox search engine, plans one for \$25.

The world's biggest seller of smartphones, South Korean firm Samsung, has also launched products tailored for the Indian market, as its major US competitor Apple focuses on its higher-end iPhone line.

The rise of budget smartphones has also been driven by manufacturers such as Xiaomi of China, which overtook Samsung for sales in the Chinese market last year.

By 2020 about three quarters of the world's smartphones are expected to cost less than \$100, consulting group Gartner estimated in a study.

"You get good lower-end smartphones for \$20 and the higher end for the mass market is now around \$60," said Mr Sigve Brekke, Asia director for Norwegian telecom group Telenor, which operates in six countries in the region.

"We think that we will see these prices continue to fall this year."

He forecast there would be smartphones connected to the 4G mobile



network – currently the most advanced – for \$45 by the end of this year.

It's not just about the price, though.

In areas where home computers are scarce, "a smartphone is often the only way to get on the internet," said Ms Annette Zimmermann, a telecom specialist at Gartner.

Smartphone users in such markets typically demand common messaging and social applications such as Facebook and Whatsapp, online radio, a torch light, text messaging and a reliable battery, she said.

Consumers in developing markets also often want a phone with two or three SIM network cards so they can switch between different telecom operators to get the cheapest rates, or share

the phone with other users.

Network coverage infrastructure still puts limits on what smartphones can do, however.

Many districts, particularly rural ones, only have the 2G coverage standard, which offers relatively low capacity to transfer data. It can handle emails and basic versions of apps, but not much more.

Some 60 percent of users in African are restricted to 2G, said the GSMA world phone sector consortium.

It expects the number of smartphone users in the world to swell to more than three billion by 2020, up from 2.2 billion in 2013.

To improve coverage in remote parts of the world, Google has also

proposed deploying hot-air balloons or drones equipped with network cells in areas without telephone lines and towers.

The giant US-based social media network Facebook has also partnered with several telecom companies to expand internet coverage for customers in developing rural areas.

"We're trying to help people connect with other people and share with each other," Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg told an audience at the Mobile World Congress on March 2.

©AFP ■

Resurgent interest in a Kra canal poses threat to Dawei project

Gordon Brown

China is showing interest in reviving long-standing proposals for a deep-water canal through the narrowest part of Thailand's long peninsula to link the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea.

It's a move that, if implemented, could pose a threat to the viability of ambitious plans for a special economic zone at Dawei on Myanmar's Andaman Sea coast. It also puts a question mark over the recently opened 800-kilometre pipeline that delivers crude oil from a terminal at Kyaukphyu in Rakhine State to China's Yunnan Province.

The Isthmus of Kra narrows to about 27 miles (44 kilometres) wide south of the Thai coastal city of Chumphon, opposite the southernmost tip of Myanmar. A canal across the isthmus has been talked about for hundreds of years and has more recently been the subject of several feasibility studies. It has never gone beyond the drawing board, mainly because of cost and lack of international backers.

However, a Thai government-linked group, the National Committee for the Kra Canal Project, has dusted off the idea and together with a Thai-Chinese business association has been working on a feasibility study with researchers at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing.

The canal idea was on the agenda at the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road

Initiative, a two-day conference at Quanzhou in China's southern Fujian Province in February.

China's central government is busily promoting the establishment of two modern-day "silk roads" to emulate the ancient trans-Asia land trade route.

A canal across Thailand would be of interest to China as an alternative, and safer, route for its growing volumes of crude oil imported from Africa and the Middle East.

At present about 60 percent of China's crude imports have to pass through the narrow Strait of Malacca.

Beijing has long had strategic concerns about having to rely on energy supplies shipped through the Strait, which is one of the main reasons why it built parallel crude oil and gas pipelines across Myanmar to Yunnan Province.

China's concerns are underlined in a new study by the Maritime Institute of Malaysia that predicts the Strait will become heavily congested in the next ten years, with annual shipping traffic of up to 1400,000 vessels. That's 18,000 vessels more than its capacity, said the institute, and would lead to costly shipping delays.

A pre-feasibility study by Thailand's National Committee for the Kra Canal Project has estimated that it would cost about US\$20 billion to build a canal. It would stimulate regional trade by reducing shipping times between the South

China Sea and the Indian Ocean by at least two days, the deputy director of the economic section at Thai-Chinese Cultural and Economic Association, Pakdee Tanapura, told Bangkok newspapers.

There are several possible locations for a canal across Thailand, but it would have to be deep and wide enough to take the monster oil tankers known as very large crude carriers (VLCCs).

The pipeline across Myanmar has eased China's energy security concerns but it still needs to rely heavily on crude shipped via the Malacca Strait.

The pipeline, built by the China National Petroleum Corporation, has a capacity of 440,000 barrels a day, which is small compared to the volumes being shipped through the Strait.

One VLCC can carry 2 million barrels.

The Quanzhou conference at which a Kra canal was discussed was sponsored by China's supreme State Council and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and attracted representatives from 30 countries, said state-run Xinhua news agency. It appears, though, that no conclusions on a canal were reached at the meeting.

The Thai-Chinese Cultural and Economic Association has proposed that ports at each end of a canal could become economic zones linked with import and export businesses. A large port and transshipment terminal for oil, gas, chemicals



Construction underway at the Dawei Special Economic Zone site. Photo: Mizzima

and other raw industrial commodities would compete with the much-delayed plans by Thailand for a port and industrial complex at Dawei.

Two new factors are now at play that could bring to reality the proposals to revive a canal project.

The first is that the military government that seized power in Thailand last May is making bold steps for big infrastructure projects to stimulate the economy. Bangkok has already commissioned China to build a high-speed railway system in Thailand.

The other factor is China's interest in greater economic connectivity in Asia, which is a rationale behind its Maritime Silk Road concept. To support its development plans for the region Beijing recently established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which aims to imitate the Asian Development Bank but without Western constraints.

One of China's proposals for a so-called Silk Road trade route would weave across central Asia to Europe and the other would seek to create a maritime trade route linking major ports in East Asia with other parts of the world.

The AIIB was established with 21 signatory countries in Shanghai last October and will have an initial capital of US\$100 billion, half of which China has pledged. The signatories include India and the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

As China's economy changes, Beijing is seeking major overseas projects for its state-owned enterprises.

PriceWaterhouseCoopers recently forecast that Asia will spend \$5.3 trillion on infrastructure by 2025.

In addition to the AIIB, China recently launched a \$40 billion infrastructure fund to promote regional development, focusing on the so-called Maritime Silk Road, reported the South China Morning Post.

"The Kra Canal across an isthmus in southern Thailand, whose construction, funded by Chinese, may begin soon, will draw the Maritime Silk Road closer ... reducing the significance of the Malacca Strait," said Artyom Lukin a professor at the School of Regional and International Studies in Vladivostok, writing in *The Diplomat* about China's growing regional influence.

Mr Pakdee has said there would no security concerns over the canal because it would be within one country. However, there is a simmering Muslim separatist insurgency in the far south of Thailand, where a canal has been proposed on the edge of the four provinces bordering Malaysia. This predominantly Thai Muslim region has suffered from a hit-and-run insurgency that has claimed more than 5,000 lives since 2004.

Any decision by the Beijing-led AIIB must take this problem into account in deciding whether – and where – to back a canal development.

Previous surges of interest in a canal across the Isthmus of Kra suggest the proposal would be unlikely to proceed further than a feasibility study, except that this time Beijing's new objectives of pulling East Asia together through major infrastructure developments could make a difference.

As long as China needs to continue importing vast quantities of crude oil from the Middle East and Africa, the Malacca Strait will continue to provide Beijing with a headache. The Kra canal might just be the panacea. ■

Building materials factory

Thai steelmaker granted licence to invest in Thilawa SEZ

Thai steelmaker Millcon Plc says it expects to begin operations in Myanmar next year after being granted a licence to build a factory in the Thilawa Special Economic Zone, the Bangkok Post reported on March 5.

The newspaper quoted the company's president and chief executive officer, Mr Sittichai Leeswadtrakul, as saying the building materials factory was due to be completed by the end of the year and begin commercial operations early in 2016.

He said Millcon had formed a joint venture with Thai concrete materials maker General Engineering Plc to build the factory.

Millcon owns 45 percent, General Engineering 45 percent and Myanmar partners 10 percent, said Mr Sittichai. Millcon invested US\$7 million (about

K7.265 billion) and expects the project to break even within seven years, the daily reported.

Mr Sittichai said the joint venture was the first partially-owned Thai company to receive a Myanmar SEZ investment licence.

The construction materials factory is projected to earn 900 million baht [about K29 billion] in revenue in 2016 and 1.2 billion baht by 2018, when it reaches capacity. Millcon's total revenue is projected to reach 20 billion baht in 2016.

"Although steel demand in Myanmar is small, around two million tonnes last year compared with 18 million tonnes in Thailand, the demand in Myanmar doubles every year," Mr Sittichai was quoted as saying in the report.

He said the factory in Myanmar

would be a production base for several grades of commercial steel products.

"We will focus on downstream products because they require a smaller investment budget than upstream products and their prices are less volatile," said Mr Sittichai.

Millcon had a previous joint venture with Myanmar's Thiha Group to establish Mill Thiha, a trading company for steel and other construction materials. Mill Thiha is seeking opportunities to expand investment in construction materials and engineering services, which remains underdeveloped.

Millcon also says it plans to invest in power generation and logistics businesses. [Mizzima]

6,672-acre industrial park

Agreement this month to launch first phase at Dawei SEZ, says Thai company

The Myanmar government is expected to sign an agreement soon with two Thai construction companies to start developing the first phase of the Dawei megaproject, the Bangkok Post reported on March 3.

Mr Somjet Tinnapong, managing director of Dawei Development Company, a subsidiary of Italian-Thai Development Plc, said a signing ceremony

was expected this month for Ital-Thai and Rojana Industrial Park Plc.

The first phase will cover 27 square kilometres (about 6,672 acres) at a cost of 20 billion baht [K666 billion], he said.

The first phase of the project is expected to be completed in two years and provide facilities mainly for light industries to establish operations in the

industrial park.

Myanmar and Thailand agreed in June 2013 to set up the Dawei SEZ Development Company with an equal shareholding and initial investment of 12 million baht, far below the 100 million proposed earlier. The company is registered in Thailand. [Mizzima]

Biz Briefs

The Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development's

Directorate of Investment and Company Administration is drafting a new Myanmar Investment Law with the assistance of the International Finance Corporation, reports Myanmar Business Network.

Daw Win Win Tint, the managing director of City Mart Holdings,

has become the first Myanmar businesswoman to be included on Forbes Asia's list of the region's 50 most powerful businesswomen. The list was published in the magazine's March edition, reports Myanmar Business Network.

Tax revenue key to addressing budget deficits, say experts

Htin Linn Aung

The government needs to adopt sound and appropriate policies to generate more tax revenue for the national budget, experts said at a workshop in Yangon on March 6.

The workshop was organised by the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry and Action Aid Myanmar to enable lawmakers, economists, civic groups and other stakeholders to share ideas about the 2015-2016 budget, that will soon be debated in the Union parliament.

The use of a budget for national development relied on revenue earned from government enterprises and taxes on businesses, commercial transactions and individuals, participants were told at the workshop.

The workshop, the third such event held to promote transparency and public awareness about the budget process, heard that business policies needed to be improved for the country to create more tax revenue.

“Tax revenue plays a key role in budget allocations,” economist U Saw Naing told the workshop.

“The businesses of local entrepreneurs are fundamental for increasing revenue and policies on business play an important role in this issue,” he said.

U Saw Naing also said it was important that taxes be collected in border areas as well as big cities but acknowledged



From left: Mr Tauhid Farid, ActionAid Myanmar; Mr Upendranadh Choragudi, project manager, Promoting Just and Democratic Governance, ActionAid Myanmar; U Than Lwin, senior advisor, KBZ Bank; U Zaw Pe Win, principal, Human Development Institute; Mr Shihab Uddin Ahamad, country director, ActionAid Myanmar; U Hnin Oo, senior vice president, Myanmar Fisheries Federation; and U Soe Myint, Editor-in-Chief, Mizzima Media Group. Photo: Hong Sar/Mizzima

that cost issues were involved.

“For example, they may need to spend K1.2 million to go to border areas and collect taxes of K1 million,” he said.

“Moreover, only if the businesses of the national ethnic people are good will they be able to pay taxes,” he said.

Myanmar Fisheries Federation vice president U Hnin Oo said that although

the government had made political reforms, the production sector had declined.

The country had not managed to promote the domestic production sector that was essential to generate more tax revenue, he said.

A systematic approach was needed to earn more revenue from the agricultural,

Google has introduced Myanmar language support to its email service in a move that Google product manager Brian Kemler said in a blog post coincides with “an explosion of people coming online” after the country’s opening, reports Myanmar Business Network.

Shell Myanmar Energy is poised to spend US\$1.2 billion on offshore oil and gas exploration and provide \$61 million as a signature bonus to state-run Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), the Energy Ministry said, reports Myanmar Business Network. The company has two blocks off Rakhine State and one off Tanintharyi Region.

The Construction and Housing Development Bank (CHD Bank) has issued more than K80 billion (\$77.6 million) in loans to developers of affordable housing projects. The bank is also planning to provide loans to home buyers in future, its managing director, U Win Zaw, told Myanmar Business Today.



The pre-budget consultation in session.
Photo: Hong Sar

livestock and industrial sectors, said U Hnin Oo, adding that policies were needed to improve the business environment for domestic companies so they could contribute more tax revenue.

He expressed concern about the “many difficulties” involved in establishing small and medium-sized enterprises.

An Independent member of the Yangon Region Assembly, Dr Nyo Nyo Thin (Bahan, constituency 2), said that although most government enterprises were running at a loss, some ministries continued to seek budget allocations for their projects.

The workshop was told that for the period from the start of the current fiscal year last April 1 to February 27, Myanmar’s total trade volume was US\$25,172 million but a weak export sector – except for natural resources – had resulted in a trade deficit of nearly \$5,000 million.

A senior consultant to Kanbawza Bank, U Than Lwin, outlined possible direct and indirect affects on citizens of government measures to deal with a big budget deficit.

“If a budget deficit is huge, the government needs to increase taxes and that



U Than Lwin, senior advisor with KBZ Bank, with journalists after the meeting.
Photo: Hong Sar

will affect citizens,” said U Than Lwin, a former deputy chairman of the Central Bank.

“If the government does not get enough tax revenue, it can borrow from foreign countries but the money that the government will use to repay the loans will be taxes paid by citizens,” he said.

“If the government prints more currency to solve the problem, inflation will increase resulting in higher commodity prices that will affect the citizens,” U Than Lwin said. ■



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A chance for a quiet sojourn - Thandaung Gyi.
Photo: Aurelia Rusek

Getting away

Thandaung Gyi, a picturesque hill station off the tourist trail

Oliver Slow

Near the top of the Dawparkho mountain range in Kayin State, at the end of a road that runs east from Taungoo is Thandaung Gyi, one of the less well known of the hill stations established during British colonial rule.

Retreating to hill stations to escape the searing summer heat of the plains was a tradition established by the British in India and replicated in Myanmar, most notably at Pyin Oo Lwin, formerly Maymyo.

Thandaung Gyi, a quaint, picturesque town in which most of the population are

Karen Christians, is in an area of Kayin State that had long been off-limits to foreigners because of civil conflict.

The return of peace to the area has seen travel restrictions eased and

Thandaung Gyi is attracting small numbers of visitors keen to explore destinations off the beaten track.

You'll find no tourist centres or hawkers selling tacky trinkets in the town, that can be reached by a two-hour motorbike journey from Taungoo, in neighbouring Bago Region. The road climbs into the lush countryside of this region of northern Kayin State. Just outside the town is

a police checkpoint where the officer on duty was utterly baffled by the sudden appearance of myself and a foreign travelling companion. We were a bit apprehensive ourselves because we were not sure if we would be allowed to proceed. But after a brief exchange with the smiling police officer, an assurance we would not be staying overnight and the handing over of copies of our passports, we were waved through.

The presence of Naw Bu Baw Mountain and its legend hovers over the town.

According to the legend, Naw Bu Baw was the beautiful daughter of the king

What's on?

Myanmar Hospitality and Tourism Conference

The third annual Myanmar Hospitality and Tourism Conference, under the patronage of the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, will take place at the Sule Shangri-La Hotel, Yangon, from March 25 to 27. New

and exciting activities are being planned at this mainstay event for the hospitality and tourism sector. The program also features networking sessions, exhibitions and a lucky draw.

(A-MCC members 15% discount)

of the sea who married a local prince, Saw Thaw oh Khwa. Her foreign status, coupled with the fact that she possessed a magical comb that could make her invisible, led to her being distrusted by the local people. When her husband went to war and the magical comb she gave him was unable to save his life, Naw Bu Baw was dragged to the mountain's summit and put on trial for witchcraft. She was found guilty and lived out her life in a dusty rock cavern that locals will be happy to show you.

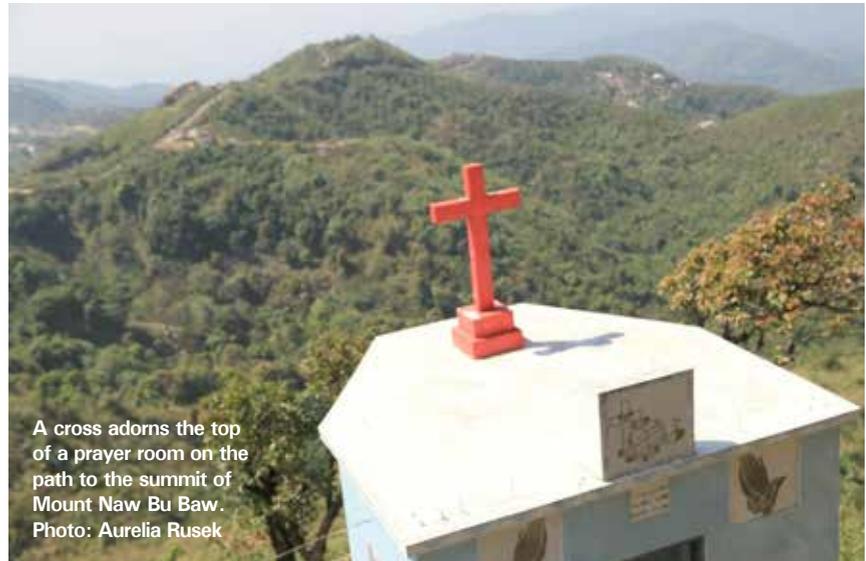
This grim legend is easily forgotten as you stand on the peak and admire the panoramic view of the surrounding jungle-clad mountains.

Most of the buildings in the small area that comprises "downtown" Thandaung Gyi were built of teak and some have been well maintained. One of the most impressive buildings dominates a small hill at the end of a dusty track. It's a large structure behind a bamboo fence and the Myanmar flag flutters at the front of the property in an area where the blue, white and red flag of Kayin State hangs above almost every door.

We couldn't resist a closer look but were threatened by three growling dogs. An elderly man limped out of the front door with his wife and shouted a command at the dogs that transformed them into and until an elderly man limped out of the front door, shouted at the dogs

Three dogs growled as we approached on the motorbike, scaring me enough to almost topple into a ditch, but then an elder man limped out of the front door with his wife, shouted a command at the dogs and they withdrew.

The building was established during the colonial period as a tea factory that after independence had supplied the Tatmadaw. The elderly man, a former captain in the Tatmadaw, was the manager of the factory that employs a few dozen of the town's residents. Given the history



A cross adorns the top of a prayer room on the path to the summit of Mount Naw Bu Baw.
Photo: Aurelia Rusek

of tension between many Karen people and the Tatmadaw, I asked about his relationship with the local people given his military background.

"No problem at all, my wife is Karen," he said.

During British rule, the building had processed and exported tea to Europe. Tea plantations, as well as those producing coffee and the leaves used to wrap cheroots, still thrive in the hills around the town. On another hill above the town, there's a decaying teak structure nestled among the jungle that could have been the summer home of a wealthy tea merchant.

We could find only one functioning restaurant in Thandaung Gyi. It is in a small bamboo hut and is run by an elderly woman of Nepalese descent and her family. The woman said the small Nepalese community in the town was the legacy of labour brought in by the British to work at the tea factory.

Because of its small size, there are few activities in Thandaung Gyi to keep visitors entertained apart from strolling

its charming streets. The attractions include old churches, some charming teak houses and well-manicured gardens. The pedestrian traffic in the streets includes families of waddling ducks.

Thandaung Gyi is easy to reach from Taungoo, 27 miles (43 kilometres) away. The road is steep but in good condition all the way and cars and motorbikes can make the journey in about two hours. It must be one of the most scenic journeys in Myanmar. If you opt to hire a motorbike from Taungoo it will cost K10,000 a day.

There is debate about whether it is possible to spend the night in Thandaung Gyi and those hoping to do so should check in advance with the relevant authorities to avoid disappointment.

Accommodation is available at the Zion Hill Church guesthouse but it is basic, with no beds and a few blankets. The view at dawn from its hilltop site would more than compensate for an uncomfortable night's sleep. ■

BuildTech Yangon 2015

BuildTech Yangon 2015 is the leading trade exhibition platform for the construction industry in Yangon, with a focus on infrastructure, residential and commercial buildings, transportation, manufacturing and trading.

Dates: April 2-4.

Venue: Myanmar Convention Center, Min Dhama Road, Mayangone Township, Yangon.

Myanmar Infrastructure Summit 2015

Dates: April 1-2.

Venue: Sule Shangri-La Hotel, Yangon.

Website: www.myanmarinfrastructure-summit.com

'It is the right time to start thinking about the future transport system'

Car-choked Yangon aims to ride the rails to transport revolution

Kelly Macnamara

Trains chug around Yangon's circular railway at a stately pace barely faster than a brisk walk, but this creaking relic of colonial times is at the heart of plans for a public transport revolution in the traffic-choked city.

Rush hour spills a throng of passengers towards Ma Kyi Kyi Win's cigarette stand at a downtown station and the tobacconist says she has seen more commuters using the trains since changes were introduced to the city's long-neglected network.

"Only poor people used to use the train because the tickets were very cheap," she told AFP as she prepared quids of betel for sale at San San Aye station.

Upgrades, including higher-priced air-conditioned carriages, have attracted wealthier passengers, delighting Ma Kyi Kyi Win who says the average spend on her betel has soared from K50 a person [about five US cents] to K200.

Built under British colonial rule, the 30-mile (50-kilometre) railway carries about 100,000 commuters a day from sleepy

rural suburbs into the heart of Myanmar's commercial capital.

Its ponderous pace – less than 10 miles an hour (15kmh) – has for years made the circle line the last resort of those too poor to afford a car or wearied by the city's overcrowded and dangerously speedy buses.

But moves to revive the service have seen travellers return to rail.

"I always feared for my life on the bus and the traffic was very bad," said U Tin Tin Win, who switched to commuting by train two years ago, when the upgrades began.

The new air-conditioned carriages – plastered with advertisements for Red Bull and Myanmar Beer – were added shortly before the launch of a tram that trundles along the city's riverfront Strand Road.

They are all part of a plan to entice people off the roads, which have been choked by an influx of vehicles under an import liberalisation process that accompanied the country's opening to the world after decades of military rule.

The gridlock seems likely to get worse. The Japan International Cooperation

Agency, working with Myanmar on several nationwide transport projects, has warned that Yangon's roads will be "paralysed" without urgent improvements to infrastructure.

It predicts the city's population will double to about 10 million in the next 20 years and the number of cars clogging Yangon's roads will quadruple to about one million.

"It is the right time to start thinking about the future transportation system," Mr Tanaka Masahiko, who heads JICA in Myanmar, told AFP.

He says developing the country's public transport system, particularly rail, lies at the heart of solving its infrastructure woes and in turn attracting foreign investors.

Yangon officials appear to be heeding the advice, saying they plan to replace more of the city's rusting old trains and to computerise control and safety mechanisms.

"We are particularly focused on getting trains to be punctual, cheap, and easy for passengers to travel into the city," said U Htun Aung Thin of the Ministry of Rail



Yangon is going to get more clogged with traffic before grand city planning solutions are brought into play. Photo: Mizzima

Transport.

But luring people off the roads is still a major challenge – only one percent of Yangon journeys were made by rail in 2013. Some 50 percent were on buses and about eight percent each in taxis and private vehicles.

Public transport, like other services including health and education, was chronically neglected under Myanmar's military rulers and the bus network is run by private firms, creating a complex array of overlapping services.

Ms Megan Quirk, an urban planner who has worked with Yangon authorities, said road congestion could be eased with small changes such as networked traffic lights to replace police using walkie-talkies

– and public education campaigns.

For the circular railway to reach its potential it would need to be better integrated with plans for the city's booming property development allowing it to connect densely-populated neighbourhoods, she told AFP.

But recent proposals such as lifting a junta-era ban on motorbikes in Yangon would likely make things worse by tempting people off buses, rather than persuading car drivers to take to two wheels.

Meanwhile large projects – such as a proposed subway system – would be disruptive to implement.

"Things are going to get a lot worse before they get better," Ms Quirk said.

Myanmar is eager to avoid the traffic

jams that plague other Southeast Asian cities.

But the plans to upgrade its transport network are expensive: JICA estimates countrywide improvements would cost about \$20 billion to 2030.

The task will also stretch the planning authorities, closeted from modern technologies during the country's isolation and still often working without computers.

For vendors such as Ma Kyi Kyi Win, a busier station means more business and a safer neighbourhood – and she's positive about the changes.

"I think things will be even better in the future," she said. ■

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