

BURMA BULLETIN



A month-in-review of events in Burma



ALTERNATIVE ASEAN NETWORK ON BURMA
campaigns, advocacy & capacity-building for human rights & democracy

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- UN to send fact-finding mission to Burma/Myanmar; Tatmadaw rejects any international interference in “internal affairs”.
- Burma officials say that allegations of human rights abuses against Rohingya are exaggerated and call victims “liars”.
- Advisory Commission on Rakhine State issues interim report.
- Aung San Suu Kyi and the UNFC agree in principle on its proposal for the peace process, but UNFC later faces internal disagreements.
- Clashes between the Tatmadaw and MNDAA intensify, displacing over 20,000 people.
- UNHCR calls for equal treatment of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.
- Aung San Suu Kyi visits Kachin IDP camps.
- Authorities charge 50 protesters after Letpadaung mine clashes injure 10 people.
- Women’s Week celebrations: Invitations to increase female participation in the peace process and political leadership.
- Parliament approves privacy and security protection law; civil society calls it flawed.
- Parliament approves a K20.59 trillion budget for the 2017-2018 fiscal year, with Ministry of Defense receiving 14% of the total.
- Workers demanding better conditions destroy the production line of an H&M supplier.
- Denmark decision to block the sale of Burmese teak sets precedent for EU to follow.
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KEY STORY: UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL TO INVESTIGATE CRIMES IN BURMA/MYANMAR

On 24 March, the UN Human Rights Council decided to create an independent international fact-finding mission to investigate the human rights violations in Burma/Myanmar.¹ The mission would especially focus on the 9 October attacks in Maungdaw Township, Arakan/Rakhine State, and subsequent violence against the Rohingya minority [see *October Bulletin*]. Burma's ambassador at the Human Rights Council Htin Lynn rejected the move as "not acceptable".² Burma's Ministry of Foreign Affairs dissociated itself from the resolution as a whole, and said that the probe would worsen the situation.³

Prior to this decision, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar Yanghee Lee called for the establishment of a UN Commission of Inquiry. On 13 March, she presented her report at the 34th session of the UN Human Rights Council and urged Burma to reform the discriminatory 1982 Citizenship Law and strengthen the judiciary [see *Reports*].⁴ She expressed concerns in regard to the misuse of laws "to suppress voices of dissent" and multiple cases of killings of civil society actors for their involvement in human rights work and activism, cases often related to vested commercial interests or the military.⁵

Yanghee Lee emphasized concern for the escalation of violence and human rights abuses in Kachin, northern Shan, and Arakan states and said the "government may be trying to expel the Rohingya population from the country altogether". She stressed "a need for a new set of investigations which are prompt, thorough, independent and impartial" in Arakan State as well as other conflict affected areas such as Kachin and northern Shan states.⁶

In response, Htin Lynn called the allegations of atrocity crimes unverified and one-sided.⁷

On 27 March, the Tatmadaw celebrated Burma's 72nd anniversary of Armed Forces Day. Commander-in-chief Sr Gen Min Aung Hlaing warned against any international intervention in Burma. He said that the Tatmadaw would prevent any political interference in Burma's domestic affairs on the pretext of assisting refugees, and repeated that Burma did not have a Rohingya minority in the country – only "Bengali" illegal immigrants.⁸ The British colonial records showing Rohingya living in the region for hundreds of years were once more denied.⁹

Meanwhile, authorities continue denying human rights abuses

On 10 March, Burma's government officials told media that allegations of human rights abuses against Rohingya Muslims were "exaggerated", and just an internal – not international – affair.¹⁰

On 11 March, media disclosed the testimony of a Rohingya victim paraded by the Burma's government as a liar for telling the truth [see *February Bulletin*]. The Tatmadaw sexually abused the woman. She spoke out. Then she faced reprisals. The woman said that a governmental translator threatened to beat

¹ OHCHR (24 Mar 17) Human Rights Council decides to dispatch a fact-finding mission to Myanmar to establish facts on violations, especially in Rakhine State; Time (24 Mar 17) The U.N. Has Agreed to Investigate Myanmar's Alleged Abuse of Rohingya; Reuters (24 Mar 17) UN will investigate crimes against Rohingya in Burma

² Reuters (24 Mar 17) UN will investigate crimes against Rohingya in Burma

³ APF (25 Mar 17) Burma rebuffs UN probe of crimes against Rohingya

⁴ OHCHR (13 Mar 17) Statement by Ms. Yanghee Lee, Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar at the 34th session of the Human Rights Council

⁵ OHCHR (13 Mar 17) Statement by Ms. Yanghee Lee, Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar at the 34th session of the Human Rights Council

⁶ OHCHR (13 Mar 17) Statement by Ms. Yanghee Lee, Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar at the 34th session of the Human Rights Council; Reuters (13 Mar 17) UN expert fears Myanmar trying to depopulate Rohingya areas

⁷ Reuters (13 Mar 17) UN expert fears Myanmar trying to depopulate Rohingya areas; The Guardian (14 Mar 17) Myanmar may be seeking to expel all Rohingya, says UN

⁸ The Irrawaddy (27 Mar 17) Army Chief: Tatmadaw Will Prevent Political Intervention on Rohingyas' Behalf; RFA (27 Mar 17) Myanmar Military Chief Defends Crackdown Against Rohingya in Rakhine State

⁹ RFA (27 Mar 17) Myanmar Military Chief Defends Crackdown Against Rohingya in Rakhine State

¹⁰ BBC (10 Mar 17) Myanmar Muslim minority subject to horrific torture, UN says

her, and that Tatmadaw soldiers came looking for her. She realized it was not safe in Arakan State, and fled into Bangladesh across the Naf River.¹¹

On 21 March, the state-level investigation committee on the Maungdaw violence, chaired by Tun Aung Thein, submitted its final report, which perpetuated discrimination against Rohingya Muslims. The commission criticized the National Verification Card body for “wrongly issuing full citizenship” to 22 Muslims and offering naturalized citizenship to 37 others. Tun Aung Thein said that the issuance was wrong because the 1982 Citizenship Law did not state anything about Muslims’ full citizenship.¹² Commission member Zaw Zaw Myint rejected the Rohingya’s right to identify themselves, saying that they were “wrongly demanding to be identified as the Rohingya ethnic group”.¹³

The Advisory Commission on Rakhine State issues an interim report

On 16 March, the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State issued an interim report [see *Reports*]. Commission chairperson Kofi Annan specified that the commission’s mandate was not to investigate any violence or human rights abuse, but only to focus on “long-standing obstacles to peace and development in Rakhine State”, and said that the report contained immediate steps to be taken to address the situation.¹⁴

The report especially recommended guaranteeing full humanitarian and media access to the affected areas, implementing an independent and impartial investigation into the allegations of crimes committed by the Tatmadaw on and since 9 October 2016, and holding accountable the perpetrators of these crimes. Moreover, the report strongly suggested strengthening cultural dialogue, facilitating the resettlement of internal displaced persons (IDPs), and revitalizing the citizenship verification process to avoid statelessness and guarantee basic human rights for all human beings.¹⁵

On 19 March, hard-line Buddhists responded by protesting in Sittwe, Arakan State, against the government plan to give citizenship to Rohingya Muslims.¹⁶

HUMAN RIGHTS

People’s Tribunal indicts Burma/Myanmar leaders for atrocity crimes

On 6-7 March, the Permanent People’s Tribunal session on Burma/Myanmar state crimes against Rohingya, Kachin, and other groups opened in London. The Rome-based body is a non-binding organization designed to expose serious crimes not addressed by other established bodies. It features legal experts as its judges.¹⁷

Kachin and Rohingya representatives submitted oral testimonies of witnesses and experts, as well as written documentation. The Kachin group presented allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed against them especially since the end of the ceasefire in 2011, while the Rohingya group mostly focused on three periods: Dragon King Operation in 1978, escalation of violence since 2011, and ‘clearance operations’ after 9 October 2016.¹⁸ Kachin and Rohingya representatives worked together and expressed mutual solidarity.¹⁹ Kachin National Organization (KNO) representative Kai Htang Lashi explained the joint participation by saying that “[t]heir suffering is our suffering. We share

¹¹ BBC (11 Mar 17) Hounded and ridiculed for complaining of rape

¹² The Irrawaddy (22 Mar 17) Parliamentary Committee contests full citizenship for Maungdaw Muslims; Myanmar Times (22 Mar 17) Maungdaw-Rathedaung probe committee submits final report

¹³ The Irrawaddy (22 Mar 17) Parliamentary Committee contests full citizenship for Maungdaw Muslims; Myanmar Times (22 Mar 17) Maungdaw-Rathedaung probe committee submits final report

¹⁴ Advisory Commission on Rakhine State (16 Mar 17) Statement by Kofi Annan, chair of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State (interim report)

¹⁵ Advisory Commission on Rakhine State (16 Mar 17) Interim Report

¹⁶ Asian Correspondent (20 Mar 17) Burma: Hardline Buddhists protest citizenship for Rohingya

¹⁷ The Irrawaddy (09 Mar 17) People’s Tribunal Emphasizes Solidarity Across Ethnic, Religious Lines

¹⁸ Permanent People’s Tribunal (07 March 17) Closing remarks by the panel of judges. Opening Session on Myanmar’s State Crimes against Rohingya, Kachin and other groups

¹⁹ New Kerala (07 Mar 17) People’s Tribunal on Myanmar state crimes on Rohingya and Kachin victims to be announced; Chicago Monitor (09 Mar 17) People’s Tribunal indicts Myanmar leaders for genocide against Rohingya, atrocities against Kachin

the same perpetrator — the state, the military institution. One community is not more important than another community. We all suffer.”²⁰

The Burmese government did not join the hearings, but was encouraged by the judges to engage with the Tribunal in future. The judges concluded that the presented charges of serious crimes demanded adjudication by the Tribunal. The Tribunal would convene a full session within the next six months in order to produce a reasoned judgment.²¹

Hate speech and propaganda continue in Burma

On 26 February, extremist monk Wirathu thanked Ko Ni’s assassins on social media for killing the constitutional lawyer who was Muslim. He expressed sympathy for the families of the suspects, and “relief for the future of Buddhism”.²² On 28 February, Myanmar Now journalist Swe Win shared a Facebook post that criticized Wirathu. The journalist reported that senior monks thought encouraging murder was an “unforgivable offence in the monastic practice”.²³

On 8 March, Ma Ba Tha supporter Kyaw Myo Shwe sued Swe Win under article 66(d) of the Telecommunications Law for criticizing Wirathu on social media.²⁴ The journalist questioned why authorities accepted opening the defamation case against him, but did not take any action against Wirathu’s hate speech and propaganda. He also suggested that authorities cooperated in filing the lawsuit against him due to his extensive investigation on Ko Ni’s assassination.²⁵ On 9 March, Kyaw Myo Shwe said he withdrew the charge after his mother requested him to do so, but warned that someone else would sue Swe Win for criticizing the Ma Ba Tha.²⁶ Some monks immediately started collecting signatures for a petition to take legal action against the journalist.²⁷ Media reported that at least 43 cases were filed under article 66(d) of the Telecommunications Law last year.²⁸

On 10 March, Burma’s top Buddhist body Ma Ha Na banned Wirathu from giving public sermons for repeatedly delivering “hate speech against religions to cause communal strife and hinder efforts to uphold the rule of law”.²⁹ Ma Ba Tha nationalists said that the decision was an unjust censorship of Wirathu’s “truth”. Wirathu protested by posting videos of himself with his mouth covered by tape, with previously recorded sermons on the soundtrack.³⁰

Letpadaung clash injures at least 10; police sues farmers afterwards

On 24 March, police and locals clashed near the Letpadaung copper mine, injuring at least 10 people.³¹ The conflict broke out when police fired rubber bullets at protestors blocking trucks on the road, which connects the mining site with the Wanbao mining company. A resident said that protestors from Moegyopyin village fought back firing slingshots and throwing rocks at the police.³²

In response to the incident, township authorities banned local villagers from forming assemblies of more than five people, blocking the road, and carrying swords, machetes, slingshots, and inflammable

²⁰ The Irrawaddy (09 Mar 17) People’s Tribunal Emphasizes Solidarity Across Ethnic, Religious Lines

²¹ Permanent People’s Tribunal (07 March 17) Closing remarks by the panel of judges. Opening Session on Myanmar’s State Crimes against Rohingya, Kachin and other groups

²² The Irrawaddy (01 Mar 17) U Wirathu Takes to Social Media to Thank Suspects in U Ko Ni’s Murder

²³ RFA (8 Mar 17) Myanmar Journalist Faces Defamation Case after Slamming Nationalist Monk; RFA (09 Mar 17) Ma Ba Tha follower withdraws lawsuit against Myanmar reporter

²⁴ The Irrawaddy (09 Mar 17) Ma Ba Tha Takes Aim at the Media

²⁵ RFA (8 Mar 17) Myanmar Journalist Faces Defamation Case after Slamming Nationalist Monk; The Irrawaddy (09 Mar 17) Myanmar Now Journalist Suspects Authorities Involved in Lawsuit

²⁶ RFA (09 Mar 17) Ma Ba Tha follower withdraws lawsuit against Myanmar reporter

²⁷ RFA (30 Mar 17) Myanmar Monks Move to Take Action Against Editor For ‘Insulting’ Influential Religious Leader

²⁸ RFA (09 Mar 17) Ma Ba Tha follower withdraws lawsuit against Myanmar reporter; RFA (13 Mar 17) Myanmar’s Ma Ba Tha nationalists slam government over Wirathu speech ban

²⁹ The Sydney Morning Herald (12 Mar 17) Myanmar monk Wirathu, dubbed ‘face of Buddhist terror’, gagged by authorities; AFP (12 Mar 17) Wirathu banned from sermons after celebrating U Ko Ni assassins

³⁰ RFA (13 Mar 17) Myanmar’s Ma Ba Tha nationalists slam government over Wirathu speech ban; The Irrawaddy (21 Mar 17) Despite ban, U Wirathu vows to continue ‘silent sermons’

³¹ RFA (24 Mar 17) As Many as 10 Myanmar Villagers Injured in Shooting at Letpadaung Copper Mine

³² The Irrawaddy (25 Mar 17) At Least 15 Injured in Letpadaung Clash

materials.³³ On 27 March, Sagaing Region Chief Minister Dr Myint Naing suspended the Letpadaung mine to prevent further tension.³⁴ On the same day, government authorities charged 50 farmers with assault, illegal assembly, and destruction of state property for blocking the road to Letpadaung.³⁵

Other developments:

2 Mar: Farmers from Hpakant, Mongkaung and Tanaing, Hukaung region, Kachin State, protested against the land grabbing by Yuzana Company Ltd. They said that the company took more than 270,000 acres a decade ago and they requested their land back.³⁶

13 Mar: Minister of Labor, Immigration and Population Thein Swe revealed that Burma has 1.2 million child workers. He said authorities would implement a plan to reduce child labor and prohibit the employment of children in hazardous occupations. However, he was also concerned that families of child workers could face hardship as the result of such policy.³⁷

24 Mar: The trial started for the suspects charged in relation to Ko Ni's assassination [see *January Bulletin*]. The court charged Kyi Lin, Aung Win Zaw, Zeya Phyoo and Aung Win Tun with multiple offences. Former Lt Col Aung Win Khaing remained at large and police submitted a request for a warrant of arrest.³⁸

WOMEN RIGHTS

Women's Week celebrations and talks

On 6 March, Aung San Suu Kyi attended the opening event of the Women's Week celebration. On 9 March, she called for 50% female participation in the peace process. Women's rights activist May Sabe Phyu welcomed the invitation, but said that in reality Burma/Myanmar women could still not participate to the 30% requested by rights groups and indicated in government guidelines.³⁹

On 8 March, Minister of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Win Myat Aye, who also chairs Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs (MNCWA), said that Burma needs more women's participation in politics, and that the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2013-2022 (NASPAW) would significantly improve the situation of women and women's rights.⁴⁰

Other developments:

12 Mar: Mon Women's Organization (MWO) urged the government and all the armed groups "to take responsibility for the lack of women actively participating" in the peace process and political leadership.⁴¹

23 Mar: The Ministry of Health and Sports reported the results of the first Myanmar Demographic and Health Survey (MDHS) 2015-16. The MDHS collected information on fertility levels, marriage, fertility preferences, awareness and use of family planning methods, breastfeeding practices, nutrition, maternal and child health and mortality, awareness and behavior regarding HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, and other health-related issues. The MDHS showed that one in five women experienced domestic violence.⁴²

³³ RFA (27 Mar 17) Myanmar Authorities Charge Farmers in Roadblock Protest of Lepadaung Copper Mine

³⁴ Eleven (27 Mar 17) Letpadaung copper mining suspended as tension mounts

³⁵ RFA (27 Mar 17) Myanmar Authorities Charge Farmers in Roadblock Protest of Lepadaung Copper Mine

³⁶ RFA (02 Mar 17) Myanmar Farmers Protest Decade-old Land Grab in Kachin State

³⁷ The Irrawaddy (13 Mar 17) Labor Ministry: Nearly half of Burma's 1.2 million child workers are at risk

³⁸ Irrawaddy (24 Mar 17) Trial Begins for Men Charged in Prominent NLD Lawyer's Assassination; Myanmar Times (27 Mar 17)

Four alleged suspects in U Ko Ni murder to go on trial

³⁹ Myanmar Times (06 Mar 17) Myanmar celebrates the power of women this week; The Irrawaddy (09 Mar 17) Daw Aung San Suu Kyi encourages women to participate in the peace process

⁴⁰ The Irrawaddy (08 Mar 17) Social Welfare Minister: 'I Will Always Campaign for Gender Equality

⁴¹ The Irrawaddy (12 Mar 17) Mon Women Urge Strong and United Voice for Equality

⁴² The Irrawaddy (23 Mar 17) Health Ministry: one in five women experience domestic violence

23 Mar: The Human Rights Foundation Monland (HURFOM) published a report titled “Cracks in the Silence”, documenting cases of sexual violence in Mon State and surrounding areas [see *Reports*]. HURFOM coordinator Mi Htao Chan said that cases of sexual violence against girls and children significantly increased since 2013.⁴³

ETHNIC AFFAIRS AND CONFLICT

NCA updates: UNFC meets with Aung San Suu Kyi

On 1 March, the Delegation for Political Negotiation (DPN) - the negotiating body of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) - met with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi.⁴⁴ Media reported that they agreed in principle on the UNFC 9-point proposal to put in place guarantees for signing the ‘Nationwide’ Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).⁴⁵

On 16 March, UNFC leaders said that there was internal disagreement on the peace process. UNFC spokesperson Nai Hong Sar specified that some armed groups wanted to negotiate peace in line with the NCA, while others (Kachin Independence Organization and Shan State Progress Party) wanted a new path to peace in line with the Panghsang Pact [see *February Bulletin*].⁴⁶

On 29 March, media reported that five UNFC members were likely to sign the NCA: New Mon State Party (NMSPP), Karenni National Progressive Party, Wa National Organisation, Lahu Democratic Union and Arakan National Council.⁴⁷ Kachin Independent Organization (KIO) vice chairman Gen Gun Maw responded that UNFC members were still discussing the issue, and they would sign the NCA only after agreeing upon its points.⁴⁸ The decision would reportedly be taken at the UNFC conference scheduled for May.⁴⁹

Clashes between the Tatmadaw and the MNDAA intensify, China affected

On 6 March, clashes between the Tatmadaw and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) broke out in Laukkai, Kokang self-administered zone, northern Shan State. Military sources said that insurgents, wearing police uniforms, launched a surprise raid on the Yanlone Kyine police station in Laukkai, killing about 10 people – five traffic policemen and five civilians.⁵⁰ The Tatmadaw launched immediate clearance operations and said that it found 20 burned bodies and 10 weapons. The MNDAA said it was responding to “continued military pressure” from the Tatmadaw.⁵¹ On 10 March, the government imposed a curfew in Laukkai and Gongyang.⁵² The fighting displaced at least 22,000 people [see *Displacement*].

On 23 March, the Ministry of Defense said that the Tatmadaw killed 28 insurgents, and accused MNDAA members of raping, abducting, and killing hotel workers. It said the MNDAA abducted about 120 women and 150 men working at the Pal Sein Hotel, and forcibly conscripted about 160 of them as soldiers.⁵³ The Northern Alliance denied these allegations, saying that the number of casualties was likely closer to 10, and that it brought all the workers to Nan San to save them from the fighting.⁵⁴

⁴³ HURFOM (23 Mar 17) Cracks in the Silence: Sexual Violence Against Children and Challenges to Accessing Justice in Mon State and Mon Areas of Southeast Burma; The Irrawaddy (24 Mar 17) Child Abuse on the Rise, Says Mon Human Rights Group

⁴⁴ Myanmar Times (01 Mar 17) DPN meets with State Counsellor

⁴⁵ Mizzima (04 Mar 17) Government agrees on UNFC’s 9-point proposal

⁴⁶ The Irrawaddy (16 Mar 17) UNFC affirms internal disagreements; S.H.A.N. (21 Mar 17) UNFC vows to hold on

⁴⁷ The Irrawaddy (22 Mar 17) New Mon State Party likely to sign NCA; Myanmar Times (29 Mar 17) Five more groups likely to sign NCA with government; The Irrawaddy (29 Mar 17) UNFC Members Divided Over NCA

⁴⁸ RFA (29 Mar 17) Interview: ‘The Messages Aung San Suu Kyi Got Are Wrong’

⁴⁹ The Irrawaddy (29 Mar 17) UNFC Members Divided Over NCA

⁵⁰ RFA (06 Mar 17) Attack by Kokang Fighters in Myanmar’s Shan State Leaves 30 Dead; Reuters (08 Mar 17) Thousands flee Burma army clashes with insurgents near China borders, official says; Global Times (13 Mar 17) Curfew imposed on Myanmar’s conflict-hit Kokang region in northeast state; Frontier Myanmar (16 Mar 17) Dozen killed after fresh clashes in Kokang

⁵¹ Reuters (21 Mar 17) Exclusive: China’s AgBank suspends account being used to crowdfund Myanmar rebels

⁵² Global Times (13 Mar 17) Curfew imposed on Myanmar’s conflict-hit Kokang region in northeast state

⁵³ The Irrawaddy (14 Mar 17) Northern Alliance rejects Defense Ministry’s abduction allegations

⁵⁴ The Irrawaddy (14 Mar 17) Northern Alliance rejects Defense Ministry’s abduction allegations; The Irrawaddy (24 Mar 17) Northern Alliance member rejects Defense Ministry report on Kokang conflict

The clashes raised tensions with China, which feared the fighting would spill over the border.⁵⁵ Chinese residents in southwestern Yunnan province said that they could hear the mortar firing just across the border and that some Tatmadaw shells fell on Chinese territory. The shells damaged buildings, killed a Chinese teacher and injured three Burmese men.⁵⁶

On 21 March, Tatmadaw Commander-in-chief Sr Gen Ming Aung Hlaing summoned the Chinese ambassador to Burma/Myanmar Hong Liang in order to discuss the situation in Laukkai and ease relations between the two countries. Sr Gen Ming Aung Hlaing said that “they must cooperate to create peace and stability”. Hong Liang said that hostilities affected residents and bilateral border trades, and called for a cessation of fighting in the area.⁵⁷ On 21 March, media reported that the Agricultural Bank of China (AbBank) suspended an account used to by the MNDAA.⁵⁸ On 22 March, Burma’s government expressed appreciation for this suspension.⁵⁹

Other developments:

10 Mar: The United Wa State Army (UWSA) withdrew troops from Mongla region and handed the bases back to the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), ending their six-month-long standoff [see *October Bulletin*].⁶⁰

14 Mar: The Tatmadaw clashed with the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) in the village of Nam Phat Kha, Kutkai Township, northern Shan State. The fighting killed a Ta’ang ethnic mother and her 5-year-old daughter, and injured two others.⁶¹

DISPLACEMENT

Conflict in Kokang zone displaces over 20,000 people

Since 6 March, fighting between the Tatmadaw and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) in Laukkai, Kokang self-administered zone, northern Shan State [see *Ethnic Affairs and Conflict*] displaced over 22,000 residents.⁶² At least 20,000 refugees crossed the border into China, and 1,600 people fled to Lashio, northern Shan State.⁶³

On 8 March, the Myanmar Red Cross Society said that it transferred 200 internally displaced persons (IDPs) to the Chinshwehaw IDP camp, near Laukkai, and that it would transfer other 300 in the next days.⁶⁴ On 10 March, Myanmar government imposed a curfew in Laukkai and Gongyang.⁶⁵ On 13 March, Buddhist monk Kaythaya said that about 30,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) remained around the China-Burma/Myanmar border area.⁶⁶

Other developments:

20 Mar: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) called for equal treatment of all Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. UNHCR Representative in Bangladesh Shinji Kubo said that they

⁵⁵ Frontier Myanmar (16 Mar 17) Dozen killed after fresh clashes in Kokang

⁵⁶ RFA (8 Mar 17) 20,000 Refugees Flee Myanmar’s Kokang Conflict across the Border into China; RFA (10 Mar 17) Chinese Man Dies in Cross-Border Shelling by Myanmar Government Troops; RFA (13 Mar 17) More Myanmar Refugees Seek Safety in China from Kokang Conflict

⁵⁷ RFA (22 Mar 17) Myanmar military chief seeks China’s cooperation in forging peace in Northern Shan State

⁵⁸ Reuters (21 Mar 17) Exclusive: China’s AgBank suspends account being used to crowdfund Myanmar rebels

⁵⁹ Reuters (22 Mar 17) Myanmar praises China for suspending rebels’ bank account

⁶⁰ DVB (10 Mar 17) UWSA withdraws troops from Mongla territory

⁶¹ The Irrawaddy (16 Mar 17) Two civilians killed in clashes between Burma Army, TNLA

⁶² RFA (8 Mar 17) 20,000 Refugees Flee Myanmar’s Kokang Conflict Across The Border Into China; Reuters (08 Mar 17) Thousands Flee Burma Army Clashes with Insurgents Near China Border, Official Says

⁶³ RFA (8 Mar 17) 20,000 Refugees Flee Myanmar’s Kokang Conflict Across The Border Into China; Time (09 Mar 17) ‘This will be the worst war’: Fears of mass displacement as thousands flee conflict in Myanmar’ northeast

⁶⁴ Reuters (08 Mar 17) Thousands Flee Burma Army Clashes with Insurgents Near China Border, Official Says

⁶⁵ RFA (13 Mar 17) More Myanmar Refugees Seek Safety in China From Kokang Conflict

⁶⁶ RFA (13 Mar 17) More Myanmar Refugees Seek Safety in China From Kokang Conflict

advocated for a joint verification of the new arrivals to ensure them access to protection and assistance.⁶⁷

23 Mar: The Thai government said that it would ask 70,000 refugees to return to Burma on a voluntary basis.⁶⁸

24 Mar: Saw Nyar Tae, chair of Ee Tu Hta IDP camp in Hpapun Township, Kayin/Karen State, said that donors would guarantee support only until September 2017. The cut would affect four other IDP camps in Karen and Shan states. IDPs feared the imminent risk of no livelihood options.⁶⁹

28 Mar: State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, Home Affairs Minister Lt Gen Kyaw Swe and Border Affairs Minister Lt Gen Ye Aung visited IDP camps in Kachin State. Kachin public representatives said that they discussed the peace process and humanitarian issues.⁷⁰ Aung San Suu Kyi said that Kachin IDPs would be able to return home only if they pursued ethnic peace with the Burmese majority.⁷¹

DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE

Parliaments passes new privacy law, earns criticisms for vagueness

On 1 March, the National Parliament approved the enactment of privacy and security protection bill. On 8 March, President Htin Kyaw signed the legislation. The law prescribes a punishment of imprisonment of up to three years and a maximum fine of K1.5 million (about US\$1,000) for anyone who violates the provisions of the law.⁷²

The law prohibits intrusion on an individual's "privacy" to freedom of movement, residence and speech. It also protects the "security" of houses, buildings, premises, properties, private letters, parcels and communication data without permission, order, or warrant in accordance with existing laws, or the permission of the President or national government. Civil society groups referred to it as a "flawed legislation". Instead of providing full protection to citizens' privacy and security, several provisions of the law might even affect freedom of expression.⁷³

Judiciary reports improved performance in one-year period; Lower House describes judiciary as corrupt

On 14 March, state-run newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar (GNLM) reported the success of a case flow management system introduced in three courts — Toungoo District Court, Hlinethya Township Court and Hpa-an Township Court on 1 July 2015. Between July 2015 and June 2016, GNLM said there was a 66% rise in the satisfaction of all stakeholders, as compared to 2014.⁷⁴

Lawyers and legislative committees rejected these claims and said that there was no significant improvement in the overall performance of the judicial sector under the National League for Democracy (NLD)-led government. Former Chairman of the Myanmar Lawyers' Network (MLN) Kye Myint said that corruption remained the most serious issue in the judiciary.⁷⁵

On 7 March, the Lower House of Parliament approved a proposal allowing the Parliament to oversee the judicial system, following a heated debate between the Supreme Court Chief Justice and Lower House lawmakers urging the government to fix a judicial system which they described as corrupt. Twenty-five lawmakers also suggested the adoption of a jury system to improve the judiciary. Chief

⁶⁷ UNHCR (20 Mar) UNHCR (20 Mar 17) UNHCR seeks equal treatment for all Rohingya in Bangladesh

⁶⁸ Bangkok Post (24 Mar 17) Government to ask 70,000 refugees to go home

⁶⁹ Karen News (24 Mar 17) IDPs fearful as food rations set to end

⁷⁰ The Irrawaddy (28 Mar 17) State Counsellor visits IDP camps in Kachin State

⁷¹ RFA (28 Mar 17) No Resettlement of IDPs Without Ethnic Peace in Myanmar's Kachin State: Aung San Suu Kyi

⁷² The Irrawaddy (15 Mar 17) Critics Skeptical of New Privacy Legislation

⁷³ The Irrawaddy (15 Mar 17) Critics Skeptical of New Privacy Legislation

⁷⁴ GNLM (14 Mar 17) Performances in One-Year Period

⁷⁵ The Irrawaddy (23 Mar 17) Legal Experts Reject Govt Claims of Judiciary Reform

Justice Soe Nyunt denied the accusations of corruption and said that only less than one percent of judges were found guilty of corruption charges.⁷⁶

Other developments:

19 Mar: The Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population said that it was planning to increase the minimum wage following claims that the current K3,600 daily wage was not sufficient. Minister Thein Swe said that the ministry would get information and feedback from employers, workers, experts and other related parties, and then decide how to move forward.⁷⁷

PARLIAMENT WATCH

Parliament approves budget for 2017-2018

On 17 March, the National Parliament approved a K20.59 trillion (US\$ 15.2 billion) budget for the 2017-2018 fiscal year. This was lower than the original budget proposed of more than K20.89 trillion (US\$15.4 billion).⁸⁰

The National Parliament agreed to the recommendations of the joint bill committee to cut the budgets of 17 ministries and 12 union-level organizations. The budget cuts did not apply to the ministries of defense, tourism or information, and to the Constitutional Court.⁸¹

The Ministry of Defense received an estimated budget of K2.9 trillion (US\$2.14 billion) for 2017-2018, or nearly 14% of the total budget requested.⁸²

National Budget Highlights		
	2016-2017 ⁷⁸	2017-2018 ⁷⁹
Total Budget	K23.62 trillion (US\$18.28 billion)	K20.59 trillion (US\$15.2 billion)
Sector	% budget	% budget
National planning	20.8%	22%
Electricity & energy	24.3%	20%
Defense	14.3%	14%
Education	8.1%	7.8%
Health	4.2%	5.2%

Other developments:

20 Mar: The National Parliament suspended 33 government-owned factories in an effort to trim the budget deficit, following an earlier proposal from lawmakers during a discussion on the National Planning Bill for 2017-18. The lawmakers proposed cutting support to loss-making factories for not being economically viable and instead reallocate funds to community development projects.⁸³

ECONOMY

Labor dispute results in violence for H&M supplier in Burma/Myanmar

On 3 March, Reuters reported that workers demanding better conditions and benefits destroyed the production line of Chinese-owned factory Hangzhou Hundred-Tex Garment (Myanmar) Company in Rangoon/Yangon. The company is one of the 40 suppliers in Burma/Myanmar of Swedish-based

⁷⁶ The Irrawaddy (08 Mar 17) Lawmakers Vote to Fix 'Corrupt' Judicial System

⁷⁷ Myanmar Times (14 Mar 17) Labour Ministry plans to raise minimum wage

⁷⁸ Ministry of Finance (28 Sept 16) Myanmar Citizen's Budget (2016-17)

⁷⁹ The Irrawaddy (17 Mar 17) Parliament Approves Reduced Budget for 2017-2018

⁸⁰ The Irrawaddy (17 Mar 17) Parliament Approves Reduced Budget for 2017-2018

⁸¹ The Irrawaddy (17 Mar 17) Parliament Approves Reduced Budget for 2017-2018

⁸² The Irrawaddy (17 Mar 17) Parliament Approves Reduced Budget for 2017-2018

⁸³ Frontier Myanmar (20 Mar 17) NLD lawmakers shutter dozens of state factories

company Hennes & Mauritz (H&M). This was reported to be one of the most violent labor disputes in Burma in years.⁸⁴

The dispute started with a labor strike in January because of the firing of a labor union leader. On 9 February, dozens of female workers attacked a Chinese manager. In late February, hundreds of workers went to the factory and damaged facilities including textile machinery, computers, and surveillance cameras.⁸⁵

H&M group said that its business relationship with the factory was put on hold because of the dispute, but declined to discuss the impact on its global supply chain. H&M assistant manager San Htwe said that the damage would cost around \$75,000, and the company would demand compensation from Burma's Labor Department.⁸⁶

Other developments:

14 Mar: Planning and Finance Deputy Minister Maung Maung Win told the Lower House of Parliament that ministers are currently reviewing 60 out of a total of 101 Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs), which the government signed between 2011 and 2016. Maung Maung Win did not give further details.⁸⁷

NATURAL RESOURCES

Denmark blocks sale of Burmese teak, sets a precedent

On 15 March, Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) announced that authorities in Denmark blocked the sale of Burma/Myanmar teak in the country's market.⁸⁸ The decision was based on evidence submitted by the EIA that Danish timber company Keflico violated the European Union Timber Regulation (EUTR).⁸⁹ The case filed by EIA focused on the due diligence requirements of the EUTR requiring companies placing timber on the EU market to identify and mitigate any risks of illegality within their supply chains.⁹⁰ The EIA said that it was not possible for any company to successfully apply due diligence to teak from Burma because of lack of transparency by state-owned Myanma Timber Enterprise.⁹¹ Authorities in Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, and the UK are now expected to follow the precedent set by Denmark on the 12 other cases submitted by EIA.⁹²

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Burma/Myanmar rises 5 points to achieve medium human development status

On 23 March, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reported that Burma/Myanmar achieved a new status as a medium-ranked member of the human development index (HDI).⁹³ Burma now ranked 145th out of 188 countries, with an HDI of 0.556, compared with previous year figures of 150th and 0.524 respectively.⁹⁴ Burma remained the lowest-scoring ASEAN country on the index, behind Laos (138th) and Cambodia (143rd).⁹⁵ Burma recorded the second-lowest rate of public health

⁸⁴ Reuters (07 Mar 17) H&M factory in Myanmar damaged in violent labor dispute

⁸⁵ Reuters (07 Mar 17) H&M factory in Myanmar damaged in violent labor dispute

⁸⁶ Reuters (07 Mar 17) H&M factory in Myanmar damaged in violent labor dispute

⁸⁷ The Irrawaddy (16 Mar 17) NLD Govt Reviews Thein Sein-Era Foreign Investment MoUs

⁸⁸ Frontier Myanmar (20 Mar 17) Danish decision blocks sale of Myanmar teak, says watchdog

⁸⁹ Frontier Myanmar (20 Mar 17) Danish decision blocks sale of Myanmar teak, says watchdog

⁹⁰ Frontier Myanmar (20 Mar 17) Danish decision blocks sale of Myanmar teak, says watchdog

⁹¹ Frontier Myanmar (20 Mar 17) Danish decision blocks sale of Myanmar teak, says watchdog

⁹² Frontier Myanmar (20 Mar 17) Danish decision blocks sale of Myanmar teak, says watchdog

⁹³ Myanmar Times (24 Mar 17) Myanmar moves up to medium ranking on HDI; Frontier Myanmar (23 Mar 17) Challenges remain as Myanmar rises on key UN development benchmark

⁹⁴ Myanmar Times (24 Mar 17) Myanmar moves up to medium ranking on HDI; UNDP (2014) Human Development Report 2014. Note: the UNDP report for 2016 uses 2015 figures ie 150th out of 188. 2014 figures rank Burma/Myanmar at 145th.

⁹⁵ Frontier Myanmar (23 Mar 17) Challenges remain as Myanmar rises on key UN development benchmark

expenditure (1%) and the highest number of internally displaced persons (644,000) among ASEAN countries.⁹⁶ The HDI based the countries' performance on education, life expectancy, and income.⁹⁷

Israeli government rejects petition to ban military export on Burma

On 15 March, the Israeli government rejected a petition by a group of human rights activists calling for an end to weapons sales to the Tatmadaw [see *January Bulletin*]. In its letter, the Israeli government told the Supreme Court that exporting weapons to Burma was a political matter beyond the court's authority.⁹⁸

Philippine President Duterte visits Burma

On 19 March, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte arrived in Burma for a two-day official visit.⁹⁹ During the trip, President Duterte met with top Burma's officials including State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Htin Kyaw, and Tatmadaw Commander-in-chief Sr Gen Min Aung Hlaing.¹⁰⁰

President Duterte donated US\$300,000 for humanitarian efforts in the Arakan/Rakhine State. President Duterte and Aung San Suu Kyi also signed memorandums of understanding on food security and agriculture.¹⁰¹

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⁹⁶ Frontier Myanmar (23 Mar 17) Challenges remain as Myanmar rises on key UN development benchmark

⁹⁷ Myanmar Times (24 Mar 17) Myanmar moves up to medium ranking on HDI

⁹⁸ The Irrawaddy (20 Mar 17) Israel Rejects Petition for Military Export Ban on Burma

⁹⁹ Eleven (20 Mar 17) Philippine President Duterte visits Myanmar

¹⁰⁰ The Irrawaddy (20 Mar 17) Philippine President Offers Humanitarian Aid to Arakan State

¹⁰¹ The Irrawaddy (20 Mar 17) Philippine President Offers Humanitarian Aid to Arakan State

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