

THAILAND

15- 28 February 2019

MEDIA MONITORING REPORT # 201

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Third Group of Myanmar Refugees Return Home from Thailand with UNHCR Support

This week more than 500 refugees in Thailand are expected to return to south-eastern Myanmar as part of a voluntary repatriation process led by the Royal Thai Government and the Government of the Union of Myanmar, with the support of UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, and its partners.



This is the third such movement, providing returning refugees a chance to rebuild their lives in their home country following decades of displacement in Thailand

The refugees will be departing from five refugee camps on the border and crossing from Thailand into Myanmar's Kayah and Kayah States. On reception by Myanmar authorities at the border, the returnees

will continue on to reception centres, where they will be provided with assistance including immigration support with documentation, and medical screening. From there, they will go on to their final destinations.

Recognising the improved conditions in parts of south-eastern Myanmar, UNHCR has been supporting this government-led process since late 2016, by helping refugees who have expressed a clear desire to go home to do so in safety and dignity.

Refugees have been provided with counselling and information on conditions in return areas by UNHCR and its partners. They are also receiving transport and initial reintegration support. In previous such facilitated return movements in October 2016 and May 2018, 164 refugees returned home from Thailand and UNHCR continues to monitor their reintegration and transition to life in present day Myanmar.

In recognition of the generosity of host communities in welcoming returnees, UNHCR and its partners will continue reintegration efforts including through the implementation of community based projects. Such initiatives are tailored to the needs of each community, and designed to create and support livelihood opportunities, facilitate access to basic services, as well as ease additional pressure on community infrastructure.

"Thailand has been a generous host, sheltering the refugees for many years. This latest facilitated return movement is an encouraging step, enabling refugees who want to return home to go back in safety and dignity," said James Lynch, UNHCR's Regional Representative and Regional Coordinator for South-East Asia.

"UNHCR will continue to advocate for a range of solutions towards ending the refugees' protracted displacement and encampment in Thailand."

There are currently more than 97,000 refugees from Myanmar living in nine camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, mainly of Karen and Karenni ethnicity.

<https://www.unhcr.or.th/en/news/general/pr/third-group-of-myanmar-refugees-return-home-from-thailand-with-unhcr-support>

Myanmar, Thai to Open No.2 Friendship Bridge in April

Eleven Myanmar, 23 February 2019

MYAWADDY- Myanmar-Thai (Myawaddy-Mae Soat) No.2 Friendship Bridge will be opened in first week of April, according to the sources.

The new Bridge is aimed at facilitating transport of people and goods and vehicle travel among the six member countries of the Greater Mekong sub-region: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and China.

With the aim to open the No.2 Friendship Bridge crossing Moeri River in Mae Soat- Myawaddy Border Area, authorities from both sides held a discussion at the briefing hall on February 21st and they agreed to open the bridge on April 3rd to 5th.



Thai Engineers had launched the bridge construction project on August 30th of 2015 and the bridge has four kilometers long in Myanmar side and 17 kilometers long in Thai area. The cost is Thai Baht over 4 billion.

Myanmar-Thai No.2 Friendship Bridge project is a national level project. It is drawn by foreign engineers to meet international standard. It is a strategic road connecting Great Mekong region countries such Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The government has given compensation to the houses, compounds and farmlands which fell under the construction of the Myanmar-Thai No.2 Friendship Bridge project.

Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge 2 will allow people, vehicles and goods to enter Myawady border town and continue travelling to Pha-an, Yangon and Patheingyi.

<https://elevenmyanmar.com/news/myanmar-thai-to-open-no2-friendship-bridge-in-april>

Nyaung Chaungtha Beach to be Opened on 23 Feb

The Global New Light of Myanmar, 21 February 2019

The Nyaung Chaungtha beach, which emerged as a natural, sprawling beach with beautiful bathing place six years ago in Yankin San Yar Village, west of Nyaungdon Township, Ayeyawady Region, will be officially opened for this year on 23 February.



“Nyaung Chaungtha is one of the famous beaches in Myanmar. We have made some safety arrangements for visitors so they can venture into the water and it is a place with a car access to the beach. We have also fixed the entrance fees, hotel rents, and rates for chairs and food. The beach will be officially opened for this year on 23 February,” said U Aung Myo Win, the chairman of the Nyaungdon Township Municipal Committee.

“The Nyaung Chaungtha Inland beach, which was first opened in 2013, is crowded with beach-goers annually

during the high season for tourism. The number of visitors who came to the beach has increased year by year.

This year, visitors can venture into the water across the 500-feet-wide flat sandbank. The township supervision committee is making arrangements to ensure the safety of visitors,” said U Aung Naing, the deputy township municipal head, who is in charge of the Nyaung Chaungtha beach supervision committee.

The committee has constructed buildings for 50 food shops to be opened around the beach. Visitors can breathe in the fresh air, go into the water, and order fresh food at the beach.

Local and foreign visitors have been coming to Nyaung Chaungtha beach as it is not costly like Chaungtha and Ngwe Hsaung beaches. Additionally, the beach can be reached in one hour by car from Yangon.

<http://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/nyaung-chaungtha-beach-to-be-opened-on-23-feb/>

Airport in Chin State to Open By September 2020

Myanmar Times, 27 February 2019

Surbung Airport in Falam Township, Chin State, the first major airport in the state, will open in September 2020, said U Ye Htut Aung, Deputy Director General of the Department of Civil Aviation.

Construction of the K 30 billion airport, which began in 2016-17, had originally been scheduled for completion in 2021-22. Last month though, State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint gave instructions for construction to be completed in 2020 and for the airport to begin operating in September.

To complete the project within the deadline, more funds will be needed. “We currently have a budget of K5 billion a year. Another K10 billion will be needed to complete the project on time. We need to ask the ministry for the funds,” U Ye Htut Aung said.



The construction of the airport is being carried out across 1289 acres of land in Falam. The runway is expected to be about 2000 metres feet in length.

There are nine townships in Chin State. However, it is hard for people to move within the state due to the lack of reliable transport infrastructure.

<https://www.mmmtimes.com/news/airport-chin-state-open-september-2020.html>

NGO, Private Sector Cooperates to Improve Livelihoods in Labutta

Myanmar Times, 19 February 2019

Myanmar Awba Group (Awba), Mercy Corps, and Golden Sunland have formed a coalition with the objective of improving the livelihoods of paddy farmers in Labutta town, Ayeyarwady region, via a project called Link to Labutta Market.

The project, which aims to raise the farmers’ earnings, was initiated by Mercy Corps, the international non-government organisation (NGO), as a humanitarian programme to rebuild Labutta in the wake of cyclone Nargis, which took place in Myanmar 11 years ago.

The project will bring benefits to all parties. Awba, Myanmar’s leading agricultural company, will make input product sales, while Golden Sunland, a Singapore-based agricultural firm, will purchase high quality paddy, ultimately enabling farmers to earn more income.

Golden Sunland, which also promotes responsible farming from seed to harvest, signed a contract farming agreement to purchase paddy grown based on Good Agriculture Practice from Labutta paddy farmers at a price higher than the market average. The firm will then export the procured paddy internationally.

There are currently 40 farmers and families farming across 200 acres of land in Labutta working under the project. The programme is expected to improve their livelihoods by 30 percent. If successful, it will also demonstrate the effective integration of the agendas of both NGOs and the private sector.

<https://www.mmmtimes.com/news/ngo-private-sector-cooperates-improve-livelihoods-labutta.html>

Yangon Govt Opens Property Centre

Myanmar Times, 26 February 2019

The Yangon Region government has opened the Yangon City Gallery to help the public easily enquire about the prices and locations of housing built by the government, said Yangon Region Chief Minister U Phyo Min Thein.



“This helps people fulfil their dreams of people acquiring a home for themselves and their families. With this building, the government aims to help those searching for homes,” said U Phyo Min Thein, during the opening ceremony of the gallery on Sunday.

The gallery is located at the ground floor of the Yangon Region Urban and Housing Development Department’s office.

It took about six months to renovate the building as the government wants everyone who visits the gallery to feel comfortable, said U Phyo Min Thein.

If the government implement affordable housing projects on its own land and sell homes without factoring in the cost of the land, then only will the public be able to afford homes at a reasonable price, said the chief minister.

The Yangon City Gallery, Yangon Region Government, Yangon Metropolitan Development Committee and the Ministry of Construction will be working together to solve the housing issues of the people. Activities related to urban and housing development, sales exhibitions, property fairs, seminars, talks, and records will be centralised at the Yangon City Gallery, said U Min Thein, director general of Department of Urban Housing Development.

[HTTPS://WWW.MMTIMES.COM/NEWS/YANGON-GOVT-OPENS-PROPERTY-CENTRE.HTML](https://www.mmtimes.com/news/yangon-govt-opens-property-centre.html)

Rakhine Opens New Beaches for Hotel, Tourism Investments

Myanmar Times, 26 February 2019

The Ministry of Hotels and Tourism and the Rakhine State Government will open up new beaches along the Rakhine coast for new hotel projects in order to draw more tourism investments into the state, said U Ye Aung Moe, director of Ministry of Hotels and Tourism.

So far, the ministry has designated the Gyite Taw, Maw Yone and Maung Shwe Lay beaches as new hotel destinations. The beaches are located near Ngapali Beach and Kantharyar Beach in Gwa Township, which is in southern Rakhine.

Currently, an eco-tourism project involving a 150-room hotel is being implemented at Manaung Island, which also has a small airfield, by Manaung Public Company. The firm has been collaborating with Yangon-listed First Myanmar Investment since 2016.



In 2018, more than 60,000 foreign tourists to Rakhine State mainly visited Ngapali Beach and the Mrauk-U historical site.

Investors said that while there are opportunities for beach hotel projects and tourism in Rakhine, one of the barriers to entry is high land prices and poor transport infrastructure, according to a survey conducted by the Myanmar Investment Commission, Rakhine State Government and Myanmar Survey Research.

<https://www.mmtimes.com/news/rakhine-opens-new-beaches-hotel-tourism-investments.html>

Myanmar Investment Commission approves seven investment proposals which will create over 3,500 job opportunities

The Global New Light of Myanmar, 21 February 2019

The Myanmar Investment Commission (MIC) meeting (3 / 2019) was convened at the meeting room of MIC in Yangon on 20 February 2019. U Thaung Tun, Chairman of MIC and 10 members attended the meeting.



The meeting approved seven projects in parent stock farming from the Netherlands, cultivation, production and sales of hybrid variety rice seeds by contract farming from China, manufacturing of knitted wear on CMP basis from Hong Kong, development and operation of industrial complex (phase-1) from South Korea, generation of 90 mill electricity from gas engine, supply

and sales of electricity from Hong Kong, wholesale and retail services from Thailand and retail and warehouse from Singapore.

The amount of USD 182.629 million have been approved for above projects which will be create 3,572 job opportunities for citizens.

[HTTP://WWW.GLOBALNEWLIGHTOFMYANMAR.COM/MYANMAR-INVESTMENT-COMMISSION-APPROVES-SEVEN-INVESTMENT-PROPOSALS-WHICH-WILL-CREATE-OVER-3500-JOB-OPPORTUNITIES/](http://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/myanmar-investment-commission-approves-seven-investment-proposals-which-will-create-over-3500-job-opportunities/)

Belt and Road Initiative Brings Opportunity to Myanmar: Myanmar State Counselor

Myanmar Business Today, 27 February 2019

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could bring opportunities to Myanmar and the region, Myanmar State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi said here on Monday.

At the first meeting of the steering committee for implementation of tasks relating to the China-proposed Belt with the country's national priorities and said that the welfare of the people will be counted while and Road Initiative, Aung San Suu Kyi also stressed the need to work on the projects under the BRI in harmony implementing the projects.



The BRI could promote cooperation in all sectors including infrastructure, the state counselor added.

Vice-President U Myint Swe called for the engagement between respective ministries and regional governments for better implementation of projects under the framework of BRI and highlighted the need to choose the right projects which can promote the development of the country and its people.

The steering committee which was formed in the end of September, 2018, is chaired by State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi. Vice-President U Myint Swe serves as vice chairman and other ministers and regional chief ministers are the members.

The committee is tasked to implement works relating to the establishment of Myanmar-China economic corridor and Myanmar-China border economic cooperation zone under the Belt and Road Initiative.

<https://www.mmbiztoday.com/articles/belt-and-road-initiative-brings-opportunity-myanmar-myanmar-state-counselor>

Myanmar's 1st Elephant Museum to Open Next Month

The Irrawaddy, 26 February 2019

YANGON—Myanmar's first Elephant Museum will open in Yangon on March 3—World Wildlife Day—to raise awareness of the nature and behavior of elephants and the threats they face today, as well as the measures being taken to protect them.



The museum will be operated by the Forest Department as part of the Yangon Zoological Garden's Natural History Museum.

The elephant museum will educate visitors about the role of wild and working elephants in Myanmar's history; the basic conflicts between humans and elephants, and possible solutions to them; offenses and penalties concerning the treatment of wild elephants; elephant saddles and other accessories; and more.

"Wild elephants have faced worsening illegal trading and killing in recent years, with at least one a week being killed. So, if we don't raise public awareness, elephants will disappear in Myanmar within the next 10 years. I think this is the perfect time to open a public museum to raise awareness of the elephants' plight," said U Thein Toe, director of the Yangon Region Forest Department.

Fully funded by World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF-Myanmar) the museum was designed by the young Myanmar architect firm WEER. It will include dynamic learning spaces to accommodate visitors of all ages and backgrounds, who will participate interactively with audiovisual displays and hands-on exhibits.

For the first three months, admission to the museum will be free for all visitors. Later, a reasonable entrance fee will be collected.

The museum opens March 3 and will be open from 8 am to 5 pm daily.

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-1st-elephant-museum-open-next-month.html>

LAND AND PROPERTY

Rising Public Concern over Vacant Land Law Amendment Goes Unaddressed

The Irrawaddy, 21 February 2019

CHIANG MAI, Thailand – The six-month window for the registration of vacant, fallow and virgin land for the use of agribusiness in accordance with the newly amended Vacant, Fallow and Virgin (VFV) Land Management Law will come to a close on March 11.

One month after the amended law was passed by the Union Parliament last September, the government began efforts in raising awareness about the law, using state-run media to urge the public to register land despite a lack of information on specific bylaws.

The law gave rise to public outcry from those who condemned it as unfair and a threat to land rights of the ethnic minority groups who practice traditional customary tenure and who fear losing their lands which they own without legal statutory tenure.



Likewise, hundreds of civil society groups and land rights networks from ethnic Karen, Kachin, Shan, Chin, Karenni and Mon communities have been expressing their concerns over the laws.

Many of those in the ethnic areas want to continue their practice of shared land ownership which includes freehold lands, community forest reserves and customary tenure for rotational farming practice.

For example, in KNU-controlled areas in Tannitharyi Region and Karen and Mon states, there is an estimated 3 million acres of land regarded as community forests, wildlife sanctuaries and forest reserves, according to Padoh Mahn Ba Tun.

Which amendments to the law are causing concern?

The amended law stipulates that lands under customary tenure do not need to undergo registration. Article 30 (a and b) of the amended law specifically mentions that lands to be registered would not include (a) those under customary tenure of the local indigenous people or (b) public land including religious compounds, socio-economic buildings and roads.

Members of the ethnic minorities have decried the lack of details on how the customary tenures would be exempted and through decades of experience with difficult bureaucratic structures, many do not trust on the laws.

Lands in Myanmar are constitutionally owned by the state in accordance with the 2008-military backed Constitution and every land user is required to seek registration from the land records department.

Some 45 to 50 million acres of land in Myanmar is regarded vacant, fallow or virgin. Some 82 percent of this land lies in the ethnic states, according to a November statement published by Land In Our Hands, a non-government land rights group which cited data from the government's department of farmland management and statistics.

The law says the government is carrying out the land registration process with the aim of boosting economic development in the country and to create job opportunities for landless citizens by using the vacant, fallow and virgin lands for agriculture, animal husbandry, mining and other legal businesses. The main crop is to be rice grown for both export and domestic consumption.

As of May 2018, figures from the agriculture ministry show 5.9 million farmers were given certificates to use 24.86 million acres of farmland after they registered their lands.

The law says small hold farmers can apply for up to 50 acres of land for their home business of agriculture or animal husbandry.

The law stipulates punishments for those who fail to register their land—those found working or living on unregistered land will be considered trespassers and could also face a punishment of up to two years' imprisonment or a 500,000-kyats fine.

The deputy permanent secretary of the agriculture, livestock and irrigation ministry U Myo Tint Htun recently told The Irrawaddy that the ministry is doing their best to get the information about the updated law to the people in rural areas because many are still unaware of the amendment.

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/rising-public-concern-vacant-land-law-amendment-goes-unaddressed.html>

LAW AND GOVERNANCE

Joint Committee to Amend Constitution 2008 Holds First Meeting



The Global New Light of Myanmar, 21 February 2019

The first meeting of the Joint Committee to amend the Republic of the Union of Myanmar Constitution (2008) was held yesterday at Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Building (D) in Nay Pyi Taw yesterday.

Present at the meeting were Chairman of the Joint

Committee to amend the 2008 Constitution Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Deputy Speaker Pyithu Hluttaw Deputy Speaker U Tun Aung (alias) Tun Tun Hein, Deputy Chairman of the Joint Committee to amend the 2008 constitution Amyotha Hluttaw Deputy Speaker U

Aye Tha Aung, the Joint Committee's Secretary, joint secretary and members who are political parties' MPs and officials from Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Office.

<http://www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/joint-committee-to-amend-constitution-2008-holds-first-meeting/>

NLD Cuts Salaries of MPs, Ministers, Saves Nearly K6b

Myanmar Times, 25 February 2019

The ruling National League for Democracy has collected nearly K6 billion (US\$3.92 million) from the 25 percent compulsory cut in the salaries of all its MPs, U Zaw Myint Maung, senior vice president of the NLD, said at a press conference on Sunday.

The amount, which has reached K5.88 billion since the NLD became the dominant party in parliament in 2016, will be used to pay for its offices and the 2020 election campaign.

All MPs and government ministers have to accept the salary cut.

The president's salary is now K5 million, while the vice president's is K4 million. The Speaker of the Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House) gets K3.5 million while the Speaker of the Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) earns K3.5 million. The speakers of the regional and state hluttaws get K3 million each. The chief ministers receive K3 million and the other state and regional ministers get K2 million.

Myanmar MPs get K1 million while regional and state MPs receive K500, 000 each.

U Zaw Myint Maung said the amount saved will be used to fund NLD offices in 196 townships, which will receive K15 million each per month, while state and regional offices will get K70 million each.

The remaining surplus, estimated at K2 billion, will be used for the election campaign starting next January, he added.

<https://www.mmtimes.com/news/nld-cuts-salaries-mps-ministers-saves-nearly-k6b.html>



PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

Rebel Group Alliance Proposes Ceasefire with Myanmar Military

The Irrawaddy, 26 February 2019



Mon State — the four ethnic armed groups of the Northern Alliance say they offered the Myanmar military a ceasefire during their first meeting with the government's National Reconciliation and Peace Center (NRPC) in Yunnan Province, China, on Monday.

The groups — the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Arakan Army(AA), and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDA) — proposed a bilateral ceasefire with

the military, an offer the NRPC said it would relay to senior officials, said TNLA Maj. Tar Aike Kyaw, who joined the meeting.

“It was an informal talk. Each side proposed its ideas for the peace process, so there was no agreement. We told them that we will have a bilateral ceasefire first, then we will sign the NCA,” he said, referring to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement.

“We asked them to sign a bilateral deal with our four armed groups at the same time and at the same place,” he said.

A source inside the Northern Alliance who asked to remain anonymous said the NRPC proposed that the four groups first make a stronger commitment to eventually signing the NCA.

The Northern Alliance and NRPC did agree to meet again in Yunnan next month.

Ten armed groups have signed the NCA to date, but none are members of the Northern Alliance, which boasts some of the largest fighting forces in the country.

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/rebel-group-alliance-proposes-ceasefire-myanmar-military.html>

OTHERS

Kayin Starts Demolishing DKBA Houses in Myawady

Myanmar Times, 25 February 2019

The Kayin State government has demolished 30 houses that were illegally built on forest land in the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army's (DKBA) new town project in Myawady Township, a government official said.

U Kyaw Myo Thu, spokesperson of the Forest Department, said the houses were demolished on Friday because the owners of the structures did not dismantle them after receiving two weeks' notice. The structures were built beginning last July.

The land problem started in “Shwe Mya Sandi Town” in early 2017 when the DKBA began building in the area, allegedly through the efforts of Major Saw Nyi Nyi, the group's security chief.

But the state government never approved the project and warned Maj Saw Nyi Nyi not to pursue the plan, said U Saw Myint Oo, state Agriculture and Irrigation minister.

He added that the Kayin chief minister had warned in April 2017 that the houses would be torn down as they were illegal. He said that at the time there were 203 structures on the contested land, but now there were 5000 houses, so the state government asked the department to take action.

The land was originally owned by residents in the area who had no title deeds. When the DKBA started to implement its new town plan, they started selling the land to non-residents.

The DKBA is a splinter group of the Christian-led Karen National Liberation Army, the armed wing of the Karen National Union, which signed a ceasefire with the government in 1994 in exchange for military and financial assistance provided that it supported government offensives against the KNU and its allies.

<https://www.mmtimes.com/news/kayin-starts-demolishing-dkba-houses-myawady.html>

Thousands Rally in Myanmar's Yangon to Change Army-Drafted Constitution

The Straits Times, 28 February 2019

YANGON (REUTERS) - Thousands of people rallied in Myanmar's commercial capital on Wednesday (Feb 27) in support of constitutional reform, amid mounting tension between the ruling party and the military over changes to the charter that enshrines the army's role in politics. Protesters gathered in the centre of Yangon to hear speeches by veteran democracy activists while singers led the crowd in chants of "take a rest, military dictatorship", in the second demonstration in the city in a week.

Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party launched a surprise bid in January to change the charter, pushing through Parliament a proposal to form a committee to devise amendments despite objections from military-aligned lawmakers.

The proposal was Ms Suu Kyi's biggest challenge to the army's power in nearly three years, and sparked a protest in the legislature from green-clad military appointees, who stood in silence for several minutes to show their opposition.

It was later approved by Parliament, where the ruling NLD commands a large majority.

Under the charter, the military is guaranteed a quarter of seats in Parliament and any change requires a vote of more than 75 per cent of members, giving the army an effective veto.

The charter also gives the military control of ministries responsible for security, including defense and home affairs.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thousands-rally-in-myanmars-yangon-to-change-army-drafted-constitution>



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Links: Thailand-Myanmar Cross Border Web Portal: www.commonservice.info



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