

# Frontier Fridays: The Top Stories in Myanmar this Week

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**Welcome to Frontier Fridays. This week Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen arrived in Myanmar for a state visit, the junta zoned in on Sagaing, fighting broke out between the military and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, and the regime has started showing signs of financial stress.**

## Hun Sen arrives in Myanmar

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen touched down in Myanmar this morning, becoming the first foreign leader to visit the country since the coup. The Global New Light of Myanmar ran a short announcement of the trip on its front page, stating that the “two leaders will hold a bilateral meeting to discuss and exchange views on matters pertaining to the promotion of bilateral relations and cooperation.” Cambodian government spokesperson Phay Sipphan confirmed to Frontier that Hun Sen is accompanied by his son Hun Manet, who is expected to become Cambodia’s next prime minister when his father retires, but could not confirm whether he will attend the meeting with Min Aung Hlaing. Cambodia media also [reports](#) that foreign affairs minister Prak Sokhonn and other “senior government officials” are on the trip. A [live stream](#) was broadcasted showing Hun Sen descending onto the tarmac, and being greeted by junta foreign minister Wunna Maung Lwin upon landing in Nay Pyi Taw while delivering some COVID-19 protective equipment. We’re all now watching with bated breath to see what exactly, if anything, comes from his conversation with Min Aung Hlaing, expected to take place later today.

Hun Sen has [come under](#) significant attack in recent weeks for his decision to visit Myanmar and meet with the coup leader, with protests erupting across the country ahead of his arrival. Myanmar netizens have also expressed their disappointment on social media by flocking to the comment section of a [January 5 post](#) on Hun Sen’s official Facebook page. “As a citizen of Myanmar, I strongly object the trip of Hun Sen that would lend some legitimacy to the terrorist military council and its leader Min Aung Hlaing,” wrote one commentator. “Hun Sen, don’t come to Myanmar. You are not welcomed here,” wrote another.

Infamously opaque in his plans, Hun Sen has not been forthcoming in what he intends to discuss with the regime’s leadership, except to say that he believes engagement to be the best course of action. While we know that Hun Sen plans to meet with Min Aung Hlaing and likely other members of the junta leadership, if the Cambodian strongman had been hoping to engage with groups other than the military, this does not seem likely. The junta, which previously blocked former ASEAN special envoy Erywan Yusof from meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi just before a planned visit in October, seems to be continuing with their policy of keeping pro-democracy leaders in international isolation. Junta spokesperson Zaw Min Tun told RFA that the regime would not allow Hun Sen to meet with resistance figures, claiming that “there are limitations for those who are still facing legal charges.” It’s unclear whether Hun Sen had made specific demands to meet with leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi and Win Myint, and Cambodian foreign ministry spokesperson Koy Koun said he did



not have any information on a meeting either. Yusof ultimately refused to visit Myanmar at all without the guarantee of meeting Aung San Suu Kyi, a policy Hun Sen is clearly not considering imitating.

## **Junta zones in on Sagaing Region, again**

The junta has appointed a new head of its Northwestern Regional Command, Major-General Than Htike, which oversees units in Chin State and Sagaing Region. The leadership change-up potentially points to a shifting trust within the Tatmadaw and increasing paranoia as more resistance groups take form and clashes escalate with ethnic armed groups in the area. The former commander, Major-General Phyo Thant, was ousted three months ago due to his “low performance” following the junta’s significant losses in Chin and Sagaing, Myanmar Now [reports](#). There had also been reports in October that Phyo Thant had been arrested after reportedly trying to defect when hundreds of soldiers under his command were killed by resistance fighters, but these rumours may have been untrue, or have since been swept aside, as he was promoted to deputy minister for border affairs yesterday. The new commander, Than Htike, was announced as the replacement on Thursday.

The leadership reshuffle comes after the junta has stepped up its attacks in Sagaing. Most recently, in Natchaung village in Kalay Township at least 20 civilians were killed and 38 homes destroyed, following military airstrikes and clashes in the area beginning at the end of December, Myanmar Now [reports](#). Subsequent clashes were reported between junta forces and the Kalay PDF (loosely affiliated with the National Unity Government) and the Chin National Defense Force on December 22. At least 10,000 people have fled from nearby villages in the last week but the junta has not yet commented on the clashes or killings. The junta also conducted an airstrike in Indaw Township on Tuesday, dropping eight bombs, killing one woman and forcing 1,000 others to flee their homes.

The regime also seems to be preparing for another airstrike campaign in Sagaing. On Wednesday, they [distributed](#) pamphlets in villages in Htigyaing Township, warning the public of an imminent air strike in the area. According to a pamphlet, which was reported on by BBC Burmese, the junta asked residents to mark religious buildings with the letter “M”, hospitals and clinics as “H” and schools and buildings belonging to social welfare groups as “S” so as to avoid these locations being targeted in the upcoming attacks. We haven’t yet heard about whether the attack was carried out, but internet access in the area is spotty. If the attacks are confirmed, it would be yet another example of the junta ramping up efforts in the region.

## **Fighting broke between military and TNLA**

Fighting [broke out](#) in Namkham Township in Shan State between junta forces and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army Wednesday morning. According to a local who spoke to RFA Burmese, junta forces stationed near the township opened fire when three vehicles carrying TNLA soldiers entered the urban part of Namkham. The artillery shells fell into civilian areas, hitting a house and injuring six locals including two children, aged two and four. The fighting started at 9am yesterday and ended around 2pm. During the clashes, at least four junta soldiers were killed and six more were injured, local media outlets [reported](#). Photos of junta soldiers lying on the ground lifeless went viral on social media, with many netizens cheering the TNLA for killing the soldiers. The day before, two TNLA soldiers collecting taxes from local businesses were shot dead, but it is not clear who was behind the attack or if the killings on Tuesday and the clashes yesterday are related.

These clashes are significant, given the TNLA is one of the strongest ethnic armed groups to avoid sustained fighting with the junta since the coup. The TNLA joining the fray could further overwhelm an already stretched military, especially if it coordinates with its Northern Alliance allies like the Kachin Independence Army or Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, both of which have



clashed regularly with the junta.

## **Junta shows signs of financial stress**

In recent days, the regime has made a number of announcements that reflect the pressure the coup has put on its finances. Yesterday, state newspapers announced a “Public request regarding lower electricity production rate of power plants” (available [here](#) on page 5), in which the regime’s Ministry of Electricity and Energy warned of a power shortage, and said that there would be rolling outages at peak usage times in the mornings and evenings. The notice said this was because of reduced production at hydropower dams, maintenance on offshore gas fields and reduced output of gas-fired power plants. On the last point, the notice said the military regime has suspended two emergency power projects totalling 750 megawatts because a four-fold rise in prices of imported liquefied natural gas (this claim [does actually check out](#)) made them too expensive. In a line that could have been written by Min Aung Hlaing, who once [dreamed](#) of manufacturing electric vehicles and trains, the notice urged households to switch off lights whenever possible. It doesn’t sound like the situation is going to improve any time soon, which is worrying considering consumption hasn’t yet peaked – it is normally highest in March, April and May, when temperatures are hottest.

And today, the regime announced new taxes on internet services and the registration of mobile SIM cards through an amendment to the 2021 tax law. The amendments were published in today’s edition of the junta’s mouthpiece newspapers. Users will have to pay an additional K20,000 to activate a SIM card (the standard price is K1,500, so buying a SIM will now cost K21,500), while internet service providers will be required to charge customers a 15 percent commercial tax (rather than the standard 5pc). The fees for SIM card activation are a one-time payment, while the increased commercial tax is ongoing through to at least the end of the fiscal year. In a separate announcement, the junta said the use of internet services in the country is “relatively high” and imposing the measure could increase income. It also seemed to suggest it would have social benefits, claiming it would counteract “the effects triggered by extreme use of internet services on the employment of the people and physical and mental sufferings of new generation students”. That’s a bit rich coming from a regime that has used the internet to spread hate speech while committing human rights atrocities. But this comes after the regime doubled the floor price of mobile data, making it significantly more expensive to access the internet. The motive seems more likely to be financial rather than to reduce internet use, as the higher charges are hardly likely to dissuade anti-regime activists from going online and could also make it more difficult for people to switch SIM cards easily.

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