

Frontier Fridays: The Top Stories in Myanmar this Week

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Welcome to Frontier Fridays. This week the junta announced a new cybersecurity law with many troubling elements, a third gas company pulled out of Myanmar dealing another financial blow to the junta, Hun Sen spoke to Min Aung Hlaing about involvement in future ASEAN summits, and videos of UWSA troops mobilising in Shan State sparked concern.

Junta announces new cybersecurity law

The military has developed a new cybersecurity law which would outlaw the use of VPNs to reduce internet access and limit connectivity and money flow to anti-junta groups, Nikkei [reports](#). The revised version of the law, which was first drafted in February of last year, now stipulates imprisonment of one to three years and a fine of K500,000 (US\$280) for anyone caught using a VPN. In a letter signed by Soe Thein, a permanent secretary of the junta's transport and communications ministry, and sent to industry sources with the revised editions, the law demands that service providers make available the personal information of users upon request from the authorities. While the law has technically not yet been passed, junta officials this week reportedly already began stopping people to check their phones for VPNs. One resident said that she was stopped while driving her motorcycle and once the junta confirmed that she did not have any VPN software on her device she was allowed to leave, but for others who did have a VPN, their phones were confiscated and some were reportedly even detained.

While the VPN ban is one of the more notable components of the new law, it is not the only dangerous element. Free Expression Myanmar [claimed](#) that the new cybersecurity law is worse than previous drafts, which could be "seriously threatening [for] the safety and security of Myanmar's digital space" and includes numerous additional restrictions that could impact the judicial system, businesses, and free speech. For one, under Article 66, prosecutors would no longer be required to present electronic evidence in court but could instead just claim that the evidence exists and the court would have to take the prosecutors' word for it. Not that Myanmar's current judicial system is anything close to free and fair, but the last thing it needs is additional measures to restrict due process. The law would also include additional measures the junta could take to block access to digital businesses. Articles 71 and 35(e) would allow the military to unilaterally block Facebook if it included just one post that criticised a junta leader. Again, this likely won't change very much in practice as Facebook is already largely inaccessible in Myanmar, but it would allow the military to make claims that the actions it is taking are legal, despite being anything but.

Regime struggling after third gas company pulls out in a week

Last Friday, both TotalEnergies and American-owned Chevron, two of the world's largest energy companies, [announced](#) that they would in fact be exiting Myanmar, citing "the situation of rule of law and human rights in Myanmar has clearly deteriorated over months". TotalEnergies said it expected its departure to be finalised within six months, but Chevron gave no timeline, saying only

that it had a “planned and orderly transition that will lead to an exit from the country.” Then, on Thursday, Australia’s Woodside Petroleum [announced](#) that it too would be pulling out of Myanmar at a cost of nearly \$295 million. The company had already suspended its operations in Myanmar shortly after the coup in February and analysts had reportedly placed “negligible or zero value” on the company’s Myanmar operations, where it was an active explorer in the Rakhine Basin. But the latest announcement will see the company formally exit its petroleum exploration permits as well as any contracts held with the state-run Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise. Woodside chief executive Meg O’Neill said that the company had been hopeful it could continue its joint venture participation to deliver energy but that it was “no longer a viable option for Woodside to continue its activities.” The timeline for the company’s departure is not yet clear.

And as these Western companies slowly back away, it looks like things aren’t exactly going well in the east either. While Min Aung Hlaing on Tuesday seemed to try and save face by visiting a few hydropower plants and pushing for more renewable energy in Myanmar, several Chinese firms that had been contracted to help with solar power production have been dragging their feet. [According](#) to The Irrawaddy, several projects, which were initially commissioned in May 2020 by the National League for Democracy, are now nearly 16 months behind schedule. Chinese companies had previously won bids to build 28 of the 29 available solar power plants, with the minimum investment set at US\$20 million. At the time of the coup, the bidders were in the final phase of signing the power purchase agreements, and in the nearly one year since, only one agreement has actually been signed, with all other firms postponing officialising the sale.

There has been some speculation that the firms are hesitant to follow through with the plans, given that some of the sites are based in Sagaing and Magway regions which have seen escalating clashes between junta forces and the resistance that could disrupt construction. According to the agreements, the firms would be liable to pay fines if they failed to begin operations within 180 days of receiving the letter of agreement. China had a close relationship with the NLD and seemed to take some time to come around to the junta, but has since maintained and even expanded some of its economic investment in Myanmar, even [developing](#) a ‘China-Myanmar New Corridor’ - a 200 kilometre railroad line that goes from Lincang to Yangon. But if these solar power plants are any indication, as the conflict shows no signs of slowing, Chinese companies may turn their attention - and money - to somewhere slightly more stable, which would deal, yet another, financial blow to the military regime.

Hun Sen walks the tightrope between ASEAN and the military

On Wednesday, in the latest development in the Cambodia-Myanmar-ASEAN circus, Hun Sen spoke again with Min Aung Hlaing. The purpose of the call seemed to be to relay the bloc’s position on engagement with the junta, specifically the regime’s inclusion at future ASEAN summits. A press [release](#) issued by Cambodia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs after the discussion, states that the two men discussed the “shared view on the need to make more efforts to improve the situation in Myanmar.” Hun Sen reportedly requested that the junta allow a visit from the ASEAN special envoy, which is likely to be Cambodian foreign minister Prak Sokhonn, though this is not yet official. As part of the five-point consensus, the special envoy is to “facilitate mediation in the dialogue process”, which could involve the envoy travelling to Myanmar. Former chair Brunei had been set to send its appointed special envoy Erywan Yusof to Myanmar in October, but [canceled](#) the visit at the last minute after he was told he would not be permitted to speak with Aung San Suu Kyi. It’s unclear from the press release whether Cambodia would have similar preconditions for sending Sokhonn. Meeting with “all parties concerned” is another one of the points of consensus, which Cambodia seems to be embracing anew, so Sokhonn would likely run into the same problems.

But, an “inside” source [reportedly](#) called yesterday’s meeting between Hun Sen and Min Aung

Hlaing a “failure”, claiming that the junta leader was not willing to compromise and was not cooperative. He also apparently turned down Hun Sen’s plan of developing a “troika”, a three-state group which would include the past, current, and future ASEAN chair. However, there was no mention of any disagreement in either the statement issued by Cambodia’s MoFA nor in the front page spread in this morning’s Global New Light of Myanmar, which simply said the two “frankly discussed the participation of Myanmar in ASEAN.” But Hun Sen’s harder line with engagement with the junta seems to have brought ASEAN states back to the table with regards to the bloc’s foreign minister summit, which had been slated for January 17 and is now [reportedly](#) set to resume “in three weeks”. This was revealed by Marzuki Darusman, a founding member of the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, a group of international advisors who promote the pro-democracy on the international stage. While the summit was officially postponed due to COVID-19, there had been widespread speculation that it was disrupted over disagreements on whether the junta should be allowed to participate, with Cambodia pushing for deeper engagement with the regime. We haven’t seen this yet reported or confirmed elsewhere, and Frontier hasn’t been able to independently verify the claim, but we do know that Cambodia seems eager to get the ball rolling and the schedule back on track in terms of its ASEAN obligations as chair.

UWSA mobilising in Shan State sparks concern

The Wa State Television, the official mouthpiece of the United Wa State Army, released a [video](#) on its Facebook page last Saturday vowing to crush any aggressors as tensions build with the Restoration Council of Shan State. The UWSA is Myanmar’s largest ethnic armed group, which controls a largely autonomous territory on the border with China, and has refrained from joining the anti-junta resistance movement. The nearly four-minute-long video, narrated in Chinese, includes images of the UWSA troops gathered in a field and marching while transporting heavy mortar shells. “We seriously warn those organisations and media outlets which smear the UWSA and deliberately stir up military tensions in the area not to cross our redline,” the narrator is heard saying. “We formally declare: the southern Wa people and Military Region 171 have the ability and determination to protect and secure the safety, lives and economic assets... We are ready to destroy those who seek to destroy us”.

Rumours circulated online that the UWSA was deploying troops in Khaing Lone, a town in southern Shan State, leading to speculation that there could be a clash with the RCSS. The RCSS is another of Myanmar’s most powerful armed groups, which has avoided major confrontation with the military since the coup, but has clashed with combined forces of the Ta’ang National Liberation Army and Shan State Progress Party, other Shan State-based armed groups. The RCSS is headquartered in Loi Tai Leng, adjacent to Khaing Lone. A source close to the RCSS [confirmed](#) to Mekong News that the UWSA has recently increased its presence in the area, but said “the intent is unknown”.

Residents from eastern Shan State said UWSA troops began stopping and checking travelers in territories under its control as of a few days ago, Mekong News reported. Rumoured tensions were also reported by The Irrawaddy, with the RCSS [reportedly](#) alleging that the UWSA has been assisting the SSPP. However, both the UWSA and RCSS spokespersons tried to downplay the recent developments. The spokesperson from the UWSA’s Military Region 171 [told](#) DVB that it was “just a normal practice of troop reshuffling and mobilization” and there was “no military escalation in the area”, adding if there were any, they would “resolve” the situation to ease tension. The RCSS spokesperson Major Kham San also told the outlet that “the situation is calm” as of January 22, and there was “no military tension”.

While it remains unclear whether the reports are in fact accurate, the RCSS has taken great efforts to [ensure](#) that no PDF forms in its territory and has shown little interest in engaging with the NUG. But if the UWSA were to enter the fray, this could have serious repercussions on conflict within Shan

State as well as across the country.

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