

International

Myanmar army chief's rhetoric fuels fears of a military coup

Army alleges widespread voter irregularities in Nov election

YANGON: Myanmar's army chief has raised the prospect of scrapping the country's constitution as fears swirl about a possible coup by the military over electoral fraud concerns.

The army has for weeks alleged widespread voter irregularities in November's election, which Aung San Suu Kyi's ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) won in a landslide. The civilian administration has been in an uneasy power-sharing agreement with the army generals since Myanmar's first democratic elections in 2015, as dictated by a 2008 junta-authored constitution.

An army spokesman on Tuesday refused to rule out the possibility of the military seizing total power to deal with what he called a political crisis. And yesterday General Min Aung Hlaing—arguably Myanmar's most powerful individual—appeared to echo that sentiment in a speech published in the military-run Myawady newspaper. The army chief said the 2008 constitution was “the mother law for all laws” and should be respected. But he warned that in certain circumstances it could be “necessary to revoke the constitution”.

The comments follow repeated demands by the army for Myanmar's election commission to release final voter lists from the November polls, a demand that has not been met. The military says the lists are required to cross-check for irregularities. It alleges there were 8.6 million

cases of voter fraud nationwide.

The polls were only the second democratic elections Myanmar has had since emerging in 2011 from a nearly five-decade military dictatorship. Long a popular figure in Myanmar, Suu Kyi's run for power in historic 2015 elections was curbed by several constitutional provisions.

One provision barred any citizen married to a foreigner from becoming president. Suu Kyi, who married a British citizen, sidestepped that rule after the 2015 election win by becoming state counsellor—a de facto leadership role created by her government. The NLD also then pushed for changes to the constitution in their first term, a process that has made little progress. Political analyst Soe Myint Aung said the army saw “major loopholes (in the constitution) that has caused its detriment”. “The coup rhetoric is not merely a bluff or empty threat,” he said.

Even if it does not orchestrate a “fully fledged” takeover of power, “it is likely the military will take some action unless the (election commission) and the government redress the election-related grievances.” Suu Kyi has made no direct comment on the military's polling complaints.

The last time the country saw its constitution revoked was in 1962 and 1988 — both when the military seized power and reinstated a junta government. — AFP



In this file photo, Myanmar military chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing arrives for the oath taking ceremony of newly appointed Myanmar President Win Myint in the parliament in Naypyidaw. — AFP

Hundreds of Rohingya missing from Indonesian camp

JAKARTA: Hundreds of Rohingya are missing from a refugee camp in Indonesia and are believed to have been trafficked to neighboring Malaysia, officials and sources said yesterday.

Just 112 refugees remain at the makeshift camp in Lhokseumawe on Indonesia's northern coast this week, well down from the almost 400 that arrived between June and September last year. Neither local authorities nor the UN could account for the whereabouts of the refugees from the stateless Muslim minority from Myanmar, who are feared to have enlisted traffickers to help them cross the Malacca strait into Malaysia.

“We don't know yet where they went,” said Ridwan Jalil, head of the Rohingya taskforce in Lhokseumawe. “But they'll escape if they can find any hole to leave because that is their goal.”

A Myanmar military crackdown in 2017, which UN investigators said amounted to genocide, forced 750,000 Rohingya to flee across the border into Bangladesh's southeast coastal district of Cox's Bazar, where many ended up in sprawling refugee camps. Thousands have since paid smugglers to get them out of Bangladesh, enduring harrowing, months-long sea journeys punctuated by illness, beatings by traffickers and near-starvation rations to reach Indonesia and Malaysia.

At least 18 Rohingya from the Lhokseumawe camp and over a dozen suspected traffickers were recently caught by police sev-



The deserted refugee camp is seen in Lhokseumawe, Aceh province on Wednesday after several hundred Rohingya refugees left the camp. — AFP

eral hundred kilometers south, in Medan city, a frequent staging point for illegal crossings into Malaysia. Relatively affluent Muslim-majority Malaysia is the main destination for Rohingya fleeing refugee camps. More than 100,000 now live on the margins of society there, registered as refugees but not allowed to work, forcing the men into illegal construction and other low-paid jobs.

Some Rohingya men in Malaysia pay smugglers to bring over their families, or new brides from arranged marriages. The refugees in Indonesia were repeatedly asked to stay in the camp, the UN's refugee agency said. — AFP

India eases curbs further as COVID cases tumble

NEW DELHI: India has further eased coronavirus restrictions, bucking the trend in many other countries as the huge Asian nation's infection and death numbers fall sharply.

Government figures yesterday showed that, in the previous 24 hours, 123 people died from the virus in India, with 11,666 new infections. By comparison, the United States has posted daily death counts of more than 4,000 in recent weeks, while Britain and Brazil have seen daily totals of well over 1,000.

In September, at the peak of the outbreak in India, the country of 1.3 billion people was recording almost 100,000 new cases and more than 1,000 deaths per day. Addressing the gradual reopening, Home Secretary Ajay Kumar Bhalla said: “The number of active cases in the country have been declining steadily over the past four months.” But he noted the “need for maintaining caution and strict surveillance”.

India imposed one of the world's toughest lockdowns last March. But with the economy one of the worst hit worldwide, India has gradually relaxed rules, allowing most economic activity and even its famously lavish weddings to resume—albeit with numbers capped. Recent months have seen mass religious festivals, and the new guidelines announced late Wednesday included opening swimming pools and allowing more than 50 percent capacity in cinemas. Experts warned though that India could see another wave of infections and that it could be hit by new variants of the virus, as has happened in Brazil, Britain and South Africa. — AFP