

## International

# Hidden but hopeful: The youth of Myanmar's cloistered Wa region

## Authoritarian rulers virtually cut off the region from rest of Myanmar

**PANGHSANG:** High up in the eastern mountains of Myanmar bordering China, Wa is one of Asia's most remote areas - and not an easy place to grow up. Cloistered and highly-militarized, Wa's authoritarian rulers have virtually cut off the region from the rest of Myanmar. It has a special status within the country - free from the laws of the central state yet still tethered to the Southeast Asian nation.

But it looks to China, whose money, weapons and political heft has buttressed Wa's unique status. Checkpoints lock it off from the outside. Inside, authorities tightly control all aspects of life. Poverty stalks the mountainous zone - with many women prodded into massage parlours in the capital of Panghsang or other shady towns on the Chinese border, while men work on low wages in casinos, restaurants and building sites.

The currency is the yuan and the business language is Chinese - a challenge to many of the other ethnic groups in Panghsang for whom it is not a native tongue. Then there's conscription, all registered families in Wa must give at least one member to the region's 25,000-strong standing army. Young boys and girls, some barely teens, sign up. In return they earn around 200 yuan (\$30) a month and get free bed and board.

Regional drug police say the Wa run a nar-

co-state pumping out the world's largest amount of meth, claims local leaders vehemently deny. This week they opened their doors for a colorful military parade marking 30 years since they secured a ceasefire with the Myanmar army. It gave glimpses of life on the fringes, just out of reach of the economic miracle of 'big brother' China and cut off from Myanmar. As a party atmosphere enveloped the proudly ethnically diverse town, AFP caught up with a few young people - rare voices from a far away area.

### The soldier

Aung Aung, 20, an ethnic Shan, was conscripted to the United Wa State Army (UWSA) two years ago. "It's hard to say whether it's difficult being a soldier. It's life... if you say it's not difficult, it's not difficult. "I'm generally happy in the military. But I do get depressed as well. But today my stress has gone away. I danced and my stress disappeared."

### The worker

Nan Sai Lao, 19, an ethnic Shan, "I grew up here. I love my hometown. My friends and I often visit the nearby mountains. At night we cook and eat Wa curries, we dance at ethnic celebrations like this one. "I have finished my Chinese language school. I'm currently work-

ing at our family restaurant." "I haven't been to other places yet, but I want to visit a Myanmar state, maybe Bagan (home to Buddhist stupas)."

### The student

Nilar Oo, 19, ethnic Lahu-Wa. "I'm studying outside of Wa but I plan to move here. I like this place because my ethnic group are from here. I'm learning Chinese, I might come after I understand it better. "There is a disciplined society here and the environment is good. I want to do business here. "There are many places to have fun. There are many night clubs here and casinos. There is happiness here."

### The conscript

San Sai Aung, ethnic Shan, 17, a UWSA soldier like his father. "I want to be a doctor. I want to take care of patients. I can study here to be a doctor and work in the hospital here. "I try to learn by going to hospital whenever I have free time. I want to study how doctors take care of their patients."

### The outsider

Kyar Khor She, 24, ethnic Lahu. "I have been here since 2012 working as a cook. Many things have changed... there were not



**PANGHSANG:** People take photos during a ceremony in Panghsang to commemorate 30 years of a ceasefire signed with the Myanmar military in the Wa State. — AFP

this many houses when I arrived. Roads are better now. I'm happy to be here. Making money is easy here. "But I don't have many friends now... I barely go out at night. I want

to visit around. But I haven't got many friends." "I'm not going to stay here for good. I came here and I'm staying just for a while to earn money." — AFP

## Bring 'criminal Bashir' to justice, say Darfur victims

**NYALA:** Hawwa Yousef is still haunted by memories of the day when mounted gunmen swept through her village in Sudan's Darfur region in 2004, killing scores of villagers including her son. Then president Omar Al-Bashir unleashed the notorious Janjaweed militia on ethnic minority villages like hers in a scorched earth campaign to eradicate support for rebels who took up arms the previous year.

Now that Bashir is behind bars in a Khartoum prison after being toppled by the army last week, Yousef is determined to see him face justice. "The regime's militia attacked when women were collecting water for their families and livestock," said the 70-year-old, who still lives in a relocation camp.

"The villagers tried to chase the armed men but they killed eight villagers including my son," she told AFP in the sprawling Kalma camp outside South Darfur state capital Nyala. "I want Bashir to face justice. He is a criminal." A decade and a half on, hundreds of thousands of Darfuris who lost loved ones, homes and livelihoods in the brutal campaign of repression ordered by Bashir and his aides, still live in miserable conditions in camps.

Some 300,000 people were killed as the feared tribal militia, who covered vast distances on horseback or camels, eliminated anybody suspected of providing support for the rebels. Some 2.5 million people were crammed into makeshift relocation camps as the militia depopulated vast swathes of Darfur, a region the size of France, torching villages and crops and stealing or killing livestock. The Arab pastoralists recruited into the Janjaweed had a long-standing enmity towards the settled minority groups of the region's fertile uplands that Bashir and his lieutenants ruthlessly exploited.

### 'Real peace'

As protest leaders in Khartoum focus on securing a civilian ruling body to replace the current transitional military council, the dominant demand in Darfur is for justice for Bashir and his henchmen. "I want to see Bashir in court," said Yousef's daughter Khadija. "If the new government wants real peace, we want them to bring him to justice. "There was a pregnant woman who was pleading to be freed, but they shot her- they killed her and her baby right there."

Bashir, 75, faces charges from the International Criminal Court in The Hague of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide related to his government's response to the rebellion in Darfur. He has repeatedly denied the charges. Sudan's new military rulers have said they prefer that Bashir and any other citizen be tried in



**NYALA:** Hawwa Yousef, 70, a Sudanese woman who survived an attack by gunmen in 2004 which left scores of people dead including her son, is pictured in Kalma camp outside South Darfur state capital Nyala. — AFP

Sudan. But they have also said that Bashir's handover to the ICC for trial is a matter for a future civilian government they have pledged to forge.

Darfuris have differing views about where Bashir should be tried but all agree that he should face justice. "I lost my husband and my son when the regime's militia attacked my village Abu Jabra," said Ayesha Mohamed Hamid, 50, who lives with her five children in Al-Salam camp, south of Nyala, and now works in a brick factory. "Bashir has committed genocide. He must be brought to justice," she said. "I prefer he face justice in Sudan. That way we can exert our rights."

### 16-year wait

Posters of destroyed homes, burnt villages and women raped in Darfur have been put up outside army headquarters in Khartoum which has become the focal point of the nationwide protests. But many Darfuris feel that their demand for justice should be a bigger priority for protest leaders. The Janjaweed were largely formed and led by two leading figures of the Bashir government-Musa Hilal and Mohamed Hamadan Dagolo, widely known as Himeidi. While Hilal is now in custody, Himeidi is a leading figure in the military council that replaced Bashir.

His Rapid Support Force operates under the ambit of Sudanese army and its paramilitaries are routinely seen around the capital securing infrastructure. They are also tasked with securing the eastern border with Ethiopia and Eritrea. "I believe it's not only Bashir, but all those responsible for the crimes should be brought to justice," said Awatif Abdurrahman, a resident of Sakli camp, near Nyala. "Here we have waited for 16 years for justice... Not only Bashir, but all those responsible for the crimes should face justice," he said. "I'm calling on those people at the sit-in not to leave the square until we achieve our demand." — AFP

Israel. After a severe flare-up between Israel and Hamas last month the ceasefire was hammered out amid fears of escalation. Hamas said the truce would see Israel ease its crippling blockade of the strip in exchange for quiet. Israel has not publicly commented on the reported agreement.

### 'Accelerate the implementation'

Among measures to help Gazans was a plan to resume blocked aid from Qatar through a UN cash for work programs. In November, the Gulf state, which is a long-time Hamas ally, committed to around \$15 million a month in aid over six months. Part of the funds were originally used to pay salaries of Hamas employees, but this was stopped after political opposition in Israel.

Khalil al-Haya, deputy head of the Hamas political bureau in Gaza, told AFP Friday that the alternative plan was stalled at the UN. "The Qatari funds exist and the funds allocated by the World Bank (for the cash for work programs) exist," he said. "But the pace of the implementation of the United Nations mechanisms is slow," he said, adding an appeal to UN envoy Nickolay Mladenov. "We call on the United Nations and Mr Mladenov to accelerate the implementation." Two million Palestinians live in impoverished Gaza, crammed between Israel, Egypt and the Mediterranean.

Israel, which has fought three wars with Hamas, has blockaded the enclave for more than a decade, and Egypt often closes Gaza's only other gateway to the outside world. On April 1 Israel expanded the fishing zone around Gaza, increasing it in one area to the largest distance in years, in what Hamas officials said was the first step in implementing its "understandings" with the Jewish state. "The understandings are in place," al-Haya said. "Some of them are going well, such as fishing." — AFP

## Malian government quits; anger mounts over massacre

**BAMAKO:** Ethnic violence that has gripped central Mali has led to the downfall of the government, accused of failing to stem bloodshed that has claimed about 600 lives. A statement from President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita's office late Thursday said he had accepted the resignation of Prime Minister Soumeylou Boubeye Maiga and his entire cabinet. Maiga was appointed in December 2017 and renamed to the job only last September, after Keita was re-elected. But he became the lightning rod for anger, led by influential Muslim clerics and vocalized by mass

protests, over massacres in the Mopti region, an ethnic mosaic in the centre of the country.

On Wednesday, lawmakers from the ruling and opposition parties submitted a motion of no confidence blaming Maiga and his administration for failing to clamp down on the unrest. "A prime minister will be named very soon and a new government will be put in place after consultations with all political forces" from the ruling and opposition sides, the statement from Keita's office said.

In an address Tuesday, Keita said he had "heard all the anger, decoded all the signals, understood all the messages" from around the country. Maiga came under pressure over his handling of a flare-up of inter-communal violence which, according to a UN tally, has claimed some 600 lives since March 2018 and forced thousands from their homes. Public discontent escalated after a massacre on March 23 claimed 160 lives in the village of Ogossagou near the border with Burkina Faso. — AFP

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## Israeli aircraft and tank hit Gaza after cross-border fire

**JERUSALEM:** Israel struck Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip with tank and aircraft fire after troops were shot at on the Israeli side of the border, the army said yesterday. The Israeli military said in a statement that "no injuries to soldiers were reported" after its troops came under fire. Palestinian security sources in Hamas-ruled Gaza told AFP that the Israeli strikes hit Hamas military observation posts at three locations along the frontier. They said there were no reports of Palestinian casualties.

Palestinians in Gaza have for more than a year gathered at least weekly along the border for often-violent protests, calling on Israel to end its blockade of the enclave. The Israeli statement did not say if there were mass protests taking place at the time of Friday's incident. The Palestinian health ministry in Gaza later said in a statement that 15 people were wounded by Israeli fire during border demonstrations, including "two paramedics and one journalist". It gave no further information. At least 264 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed by Israeli forces since the protests began.

The majority were killed during clashes, with others hit by tank fire or air strikes. Two Israeli soldiers have been killed over the same period. Hamas on Friday called on the UN to speed up a plan to funnel Qatari aid into the Palestinian enclave, part of an Egyptian-brokered truce with