

International

Rohingya wary as Myanmar's anti-junta resistance reaches out

Rohingya in Myanmar are widely seen as interlopers from Bangladesh

SITTWE: A shadow government is breaking taboos in Buddhist-majority Myanmar by welcoming Rohingya into its anti junta coalition, but many in the long-persecuted Muslim minority are wary after living through decades of discrimination and deadly violence.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the government of Aung San Suu Kyi was ousted in a February coup, sparking huge pro-democracy protests and a bloody military crackdown.

Dissident lawmakers from her party dominate a "National Unity Government" in exile, rallying support for the resistance among foreign governments and on international news broadcasts.

Last month they invited the Rohingya to "join hands" to end military rule, promising to repatriate those who fled to Bangladesh after a deadly 2017 military assault on their communities in western Rakhine state.

They also pledged to grant citizenship to the minority, which has long been stateless after decades of discriminatory policies.

The use of the word "Rohingya" was new — wary of sentiment among the mostly Buddhist, ethnic Bamar-majority population, Suu Kyi's government had referred to the community as "Muslims living in Rakhine."

But suspicion lingers among those Rohingya still in Myanmar, where they are widely seen as interlopers from Bangladesh and have been denied citizenship, rights and access to services.

"Giving a promise and then getting support from abroad — it's like putting bait for fish," said Wai Mar, who has been living in a displacement camp for almost a decade.

Reached by a bumpy, potholed road from the western city of Sittwe, the wooden huts of Thet Kay Pyin camp shelter Rohingya chased or burnt out of their homes during earlier clashes with ethnic Rakhine Buddhists in 2012.

"We're worried we exist only to be human shields or scapegoats," Wai Mar added.

Mother of four San Yee, who struggles to provide for her children even with the remittances her husband sends from Malaysia, agrees.

"We can't put all our trust and expectations in them because we've been oppressed for so long."

Despite the overtures, there are no Rohingya representatives among the National Unity Government's current 32-member cabinet.

Genocide charges

"We understood that we wouldn't get everything overnight" after Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy swept a military-backed party aside in 2015 polls, another resident of the camp, Ko Tun Hla, told AFP.

"But we even didn't get basic human rights, for example, freedom of movement, becoming a citizen, returning to our original homes — we didn't get any of those."

From the camp they heard reports of a horrific crackdown that sent 700,000 of their kinsfolk across the border to Bangladesh, bringing tales of rape, arson and murder.

The Myanmar public was largely unsympathetic to the Rohingya's plight, while activists and journalists reporting on the issues faced vitriolic abuse online.

After the military was accused of genocide, Suu Kyi travelled to The Hague to defend the generals at the UN's top court. Months later they deposed her in a coup.

'Not Rohingya'

With anti-junta protesters in majority Bamar cities like Yangon and Mandalay shown no quarter by the military, many in Thet Kay Pyin are fearful. "As they are killing their own people cruelly and brutally without any hesitation, they would do more to us since they don't care about us," said Tun Hla, another resident of the camp.

A few days after the February coup, soldiers came to Thet Kay Pyin and held a meeting, at first



SITTWE: File photo shows, internally displaced Rohingya walk at a market area in the Baw Du Pha IDP Camp in Sittwe in Myanmar's western Rakhine state. —AFP

reassuring people and asking them to stay calm, Win Maung said.

"But when we asked for our rights, they spoke in a threatening way."

"They said we are Bengali, not Rohingya, and they threatened to shoot us too." Bengali is a derogatory term for the Rohingya in Myanmar which falsely implies they are recent immigrants from Bangladesh.

Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing — who was head of the armed forces during the 2017 crackdown — has dismissed the word Rohingya as "an imag-

inary term".

For many in Thet Kay Pyin, after almost a decade of limbo, political allegiance comes second. "If they will give our rights, we will cooperate with the military, NLD or NUG," said Ko Tun Hla.

"If our rights will be given, we will cooperate with anyone." Added San Yee: "I want to go back and live my life as before — that's my hope. "But when will our expectation and hope come true?" she sighed. "Only after we die?" —AFP

French surgeon behind world-first face and hand transplants dies

LYON: A pioneering French surgeon who undertook the world's first successful hand and face transplants has died at the age of 80, a friend told AFP on Sunday. Jean-Michel Dubernard, who became one of France's most famous medics during his career working in southeastern Lyon, collapsed at Istanbul airport on Saturday night while travelling with his family, the friend said, asking not to be named.

Dubernard led the world's first hand transplant in September 1998 on a man from New Zealand, creating a sensation in the medical world that brought him global recognition. Heading an international team of specialists, Dubernard and his fellow surgeons joined the patient's arteries, veins, nerves, tendons, muscles and skin after pinning together the two bones of the forearm during a 13-hour operation.

He followed up this feat with the first double hand and forearm transplant two years later on a Frenchman who had been holding a home-made rocket when it exploded. In November 2005, Dubernard reached the height of his fame with the first partial face transplant, which saw him graft on

the nose, lips and chin from a brain-dead donor onto French divorcee Isabelle Dinoire, who had been mauled by her dog.

Dinoire appeared at a remarkable news conference three months later in the full glare of the global media, wearing thick makeup to disguise the scars but with an otherwise restored face. "We want to launch these new techniques to give hope to other people all over the world," Dubernard, then aged 64, said. The first full face transplant was performed by a Spanish team in March 2010.

Complications

Dubernard, a rugby fan and father of three, was known for his remarkable work ethic and passion for his profession. He credited his decision to become a doctor to a bout of appendicitis as a child and his interest in transplants on hearing about the first successful organ graft-of a kidney-in the United States in 1954.

"My only motivation is to advance our understanding of medicine. I do it for my patients," he told Le Monde newspaper in 2005. He also wrote widely in medical journals about his expertise, as well as the challenges of transplants for recipients, both physical and psychological.

"Psychological consequences of hand and face allografts (transplants) show that it is not so easy to use and see permanently a dead person's hands nor is it easy to look in a mirror and see a dead per-

son's face," he wrote in an article for European Urology in 2006.

His high profile and methods also meant that his patients and his work were subjected to intense scrutiny and occasionally criticism. The National Order of Doctors condemned the release of images of Dinoire after her face transplant and it accused the medical team led by Dubernard and fellow surgeon Bernard Devauchelle of attention-seeking. —AFP



LYON: File photo shows, Professor Jean-Michel Dubernard (L), who had directed the world's first two-hand transplant on Denis Chatelier (R), take part in a press conference, on January 24, 2003 at the Edouard Herriot Hospital in Lyon. —AFP

showing pictures of a road blocked by fallen rocks. Heavy rain was holding up efforts to clear the road, according to state TV.

Children stayed home as the city's kindergartens, primary and secondary schools closed yesterday. Popular attractions including a part of the Great Wall were also shut, with some districts suspending rural homestays.

Some of Beijing's automatic driving trains will be operated manually instead, state media said. Rainstorms also hit neighbouring Tianjin city, where state TV showed electric scooters driving through flooded streets and black skies lit up by regular flashes of lightning.

Weather authorities have warned of floods in 14 rivers, including tributaries in Sichuan and Shaanxi. Floods are common during China's rainy season, with higher water levels in August last year washing away roads and forcing tens of thousands from their homes.

But the threat has worsened over the decades, due in part to widespread construction of dams and levees that have cut connections between the river

capacity. "The situation is worrying," said Health Minister Anutin Charnvirakul.

"We have a big toll of new confirmed cases and the Delta strain has spread to other provinces that are home to factories." Health authorities also said they are monitoring seven people who have contracted both the Alpha and Delta variants.

In addition to the capital, nine other provinces that have seen steady upticks in infections saw more restrictions bite. Checkpoints sprung up across Bangkok in the early hours of yesterday as a 9 pm-4 am curfew came into force, with police wearing masks and facial shields stopping cars in the centre of the capital.

Residents are barred from gathering in groups of more than five people, while public transport networks will shut from 9 pm. Supermarkets, restaurants, banks, pharmacies and electronics stores within malls will be able to stay open but other shops have shuttered.

Authorities yesterday also approved the use of administering the Chinese-made Sinovac jab as the first dose and AstraZeneca as the second. It did not elaborate why the decision was taken but it came after officials announced Sunday that nearly 900 medical staff-the majority of whom had received Sinovac shots-tested positive for the virus. Health authorities added that medical staff who had already received two Sinovac doses will get a booster AstraZeneca or Pfizer-BioNTech shot.

Anger over new restrictions

The government of Prayut Chan-O-Cha has come under vociferous criticism for its handling of the pandemic—from the management and procurement of vaccines to ad hoc enforcement of restrictions—and anger is high at the new measures.

"The government decided to impose a lockdown but they don't have compensatory measures

for the people whatsoever," said restaurant owner Arphawan Larangam. Some say the restrictions should have come sooner.

"The government does everything so slow. If they really wanted to impose a lockdown, they should have done it a lot sooner," said Jit, a university student. The outbreak has hit Thailand's poor communities the hardest, especially those living in Bangkok's slums, where social distancing is not possible.

Long lines of people waited at two free testing clinics to get swabbed last week, with local media showing people camped under a tollway in Khlong Toei district—where the city's largest slum is located—as they waited for negative results before going home to their families. One temple on the outskirts of Bangkok providing free funeral services to those unable to pay has been overwhelmed with bodies, and its crematorium is barely able to handle the demand. —AFP

Nepal court ousts premier

KATHMANDU: Nepal's top court ousted the sitting prime minister and reinstated the dissolved parliament yesterday, plunging the Himalayan nation into further political uncertainty. The country has been in a political crisis for months amid infighting between Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli and senior leaders of his party.

"The dissolved parliament will be reinstated," the court wrote in its judgement. Oli first moved to dismiss parliament in December, but it was reinstated by the Supreme Court, which called his move unconstitutional.

The 69-year-old then lost a vote of confidence in the lower house of parliament. But he was reinstated as PM after the main opposition parties were unable to obtain a majority of support in the bicameral parliament.

Oli tried again to dissolve parliament in May, but his decision was challenged by lawmakers and political activists in the top court. The court said in its judgement that the main opposition leader Sher Bahadur Deuba should replace Oli by today, as he had presented "a claim (of majority)... as the prime minister".

Deuba has to win a vote of confidence in the lower house within a month to retain the prime ministership. Deuba, the head of the Nepali Congress, earlier claimed to have the support of 149 members of the 275-seat lower house.

The Oli government came to power in 2018 with a two-thirds majority. There was optimism that his strong mandate at the polls would end years of instability and short-lived governments exacerbated by a devastating earthquake in 2015.

Deuba was elected as Nepal's prime minister four times between 1995 and 2018, including during the brutal, decade-long Maoist insurgency. —AFP

Flights cancelled, schools closed as Beijing hit by storm

BEIJING: Hundreds of flights were cancelled in Beijing as schools and tourist sites were shut due to torrential downpours and gale-force winds yesterday. City authorities issued warnings to residents to stay home as the Chinese capital faced its biggest storm this year.

As much as 100 millimetres of rain is predicted through the day in some areas, and aviation tracker VariFlight recorded some 700 flights cancelled at the city's two airports.

Weather authorities warned of "extreme rainstorms" plus thunder and lightning from late Sunday to Monday evening in Beijing and neighbouring areas. A landslide was recorded in one of the city's northern districts, with state broadcaster CCTV

Thailand imposes tougher COVID-19 curbs, curfew

BANGKOK: More than 10 million people were placed under fresh COVID-19 restrictions and a curfew in the Thai capital yesterday, as the kingdom battled a surge of cases worsened by the highly infectious Alpha and Delta variants. Thailand has so far recorded more than 345,000 cases and 2,791 deaths—with the bulk of them coming in this latest wave that started in April.

First detected in clubs frequented by the Thai elite and politicians at an upscale Bangkok nightlife district, the surge has been exacerbated by a slow vaccine rollout and limited testing