

International

Myanmar to free over 5,000 protesters after ASEAN snub

Regional bloc delivers a major snub to the military regime

YANGON: Myanmar's junta chief yesterday announced the release of more than 5,000 people jailed for protesting against a February coup, days after a regional bloc delivered a major snub to the military regime. There has been chaos in Myanmar since the coup, with more than 1,100 civilians killed in a bloody crackdown on dissent and more than 8,000 arrested, according to a local monitoring group. More than 7,300 are currently behind bars, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP).



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Junta head Min Aung Hlaing said a total of 5,636 prisoners will be freed to mark the Thadingyut festival later in October, without providing details on when they would be freed. The announcement comes on the heels of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' decision to exclude Min Aung Hlaing from an upcoming summit of the 10-country bloc over his administration's commitment to defusing the bloody crisis.

Min Aung Hlaing gave no details on who would be included in the list and prison authorities did not respond to AFP requests for comment. The Democratic Voice of Burma news website said three of its journalists, all held for around six months, had been freed. Myanmar authorities released more than 2,000 anti-coup protest-

ers from prisons across the country in June, including journalists critical of the military government.

Those still in custody include the American journalist Danny Fenster, who has been held since being arrested on May 24. Mya Nu, who said her daughter was arrested in April, was one of dozens waiting outside Yangon's Insein prison after the latest announcement in the hope their loved ones would be among those set free. "I didn't get a chance to meet her yet," she told AFP. "It's only through her lawyer that I know she's in good health."

More than 1,300 of those due to be released would be freed on the condition they sign agreements promising not to re-offend, according to the junta's yesterday statement. Such agreements were "basically a form of parole that entails constant menacing surveillance", David Mathieson, an analyst formerly based in Myanmar said. "It doesn't absolve the SAC (State Administration Council, as the junta dubs itself) of nine months of extreme violence." The AAPP monitoring group slammed the release as a "form of distraction" aimed at foreign governments. "The intention is not to relax repression," it said in a statement posted on Twitter.

Junta shunned

Foreign ministers from the ASEAN bloc on Friday decided to exclude Min Aung Hlaing, instead choosing to invite a "non-political representative" for Myanmar to the October 26-28 summit. The organization, widely criticised as toothless, took a stand after the junta rebuffed requests for a special envoy to meet "all stakeholders" in Myanmar - a phrase seen to include ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The junta slammed the decision, accusing ASEAN of breaching its policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states.



YANGON: Newly-released prisoners wave from a bus as they depart the Insein Prison in Yangon yesterday after authorities announced more than 5,000 people jailed for protesting against a February coup which ousted the civilian government would be released. — AFP

Myanmar, mostly ruled by the military since a 1962 coup, has been a thorn in ASEAN's side since it joined in 1997. Min Aung Hlaing's administration has justified its power grab citing alleged vote rigging in last year's elections, which Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party won convincingly. The coup snuffed out Myanmar's short-lived dalliance with democracy and the 76-year-old Suu Kyi now faces a raft of charges in a junta court that could see her jailed for decades.

Last week, her chief lawyer said he had been banned by the junta from speaking to journalists, diplomats or international organizations. The other lawyers on her legal team also faced a similar ban - effectively muzzling the key sources of information on court proceedings, from which journalists are barred. Nobel laureate Suu Kyi, who has spent much of her life resisting Myanmar's generals, is scheduled to testify in court for the first time later this month.—AFP

South Africa weighs need to save climate and keep lights on

JOHANNESBURG: When you fly into Johannesburg, solar panels seem to gleam everywhere, from the roofs of mansions and small township homes alike. But those glittering 21st-century panels mask South Africa's dependence on a dirty 19th-century energy source: coal. Like many developing countries, South Africa is struggling to meet growing energy needs yet avoid deepening Earth's carbon crisis - one of the many dilemmas besetting the UN climate talks, which resume in Glasgow on October 31.

South Africa's continuing addiction to coal has to be seen in the context of rolling blackouts that have been a part of life since 2007. Schedules for power cuts are shared on apps and in news reports, along with quotidian news like weather and traffic jams. "As a young South African I am scared," environmental activist Ditebogo Lebea said during a webinar organized by the think-tank South African Institute of International Affairs. "Our country is facing an energy crisis that needs urgent attention."

The power cuts are a headache for residents and disastrous for businesses, undermining efforts to bring down a 34 percent unemployment rate. When the crisis first erupted, entire cities were unexpectedly plunged into darkness, prompting angry finger-pointing. The government sifted through every conceivable solution to try to resolve the problem. Steep discounts - up to 100 percent - were offered for homes to adopt solar water heating. Wind farms sprouted up. A desert blossomed into Africa's largest solar farm.

But the country also decided to build not one, but two gargantuan coal-powered plants, each producing about 4,800 Megawatts. Operating as a unit, they will form the biggest coal power complex in the world, topping even China's massive coal expansion. By comparison, the solar farm produces 50 megawatts of power. The first new plant has come online in fits and starts, dogged by design flaws and corruption at the state power company Eskom. The second is still under construction.

Zuma effect

Coal already provides 80 percent of South Africa's power, making it the world's 12th largest greenhouse gas emitter in 2019, according to Global Carbon Atlas. Yet South Africa enjoys 2,500 hours of sunshine per year on average - around 600 more than solar power champion Germany. "Everyone acknowledges renewable energy is a massive opportunity in South Africa," said energy analyst Argon Poorum of the non-profit GreenCape. The country has tried to tap that opportunity. In 2010, South Africa launched an avant-garde renewable power auction system to attract private investors. Five years later, Eskom unexpectedly pulled the plug, claiming renewable power was too pricey. Chaos in energy policy was fuelled by former president Jacob Zuma, who took office in 2009. He tossed out solar plans and tried to negotiate a back-channel, one-trillion-rand (67-billion-dollar) nuclear energy deal with Russia.

That plan was thwarted by activists, the opposition and a rebellion within Zuma's own cabinet, but the damage was done. Greenhouse gases rose 10 percent from 2000 to 2017, according to government figures. Zuma's successor Cyril Ramaphosa is steering a new course. He revived the renewable energy scheme last year, and made it easier for companies to generate their own solar and wind power. Nuclear remains part of the mix, and three licences have been approved for floating power plants that use natural gas, a fossil energy that is far more fuel-efficient than coal.

Eskom has meanwhile set out to gradually decommission old coal plants over the next three decades, aiming to balance the new plants' emissions. Coal retains some political heft. Energy Minister Gwede Mantashe has championed controversial "clean coal" technologies, partly to retain badly needed mining jobs, in a sector that overall employs around 500,000 people, according to latest official figures.—AFP



GOMA: Photo shows an aerial view of debris engulfing buildings in Bushara village after a volcanic eruption of Mount Nyiragongo that sent thousands fleeing during the night in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. — AFP

People try to rebuild lives after DR Congo volcanic eruption

GOMA: Residents are trying to rebuild their homes and communities five months after the deadly volcanic eruption in eastern DR Congo, and despite the ever-present threat of a repeat performance by Mount Nyiragongo. Sixty-year-old Edmond's family plot in Buhene, a working-class village to the north of the city of Goma, once included two houses.

When the family returned to the area two weeks after the disaster they found one of the wooden homes completely looted but intact. The other dwelling had disappeared, like so many others, under a huge blanket of lava. Nyiragongo's eruption on May 22-23 spewed out lava that buried homes in its wake, stopping just short of the north of Goma, the capital of North Kivu province in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

An estimated 400,000 of the 600,000 residents of Goma left the city after the eruption of Nyiragongo, a strato-volcano nearly 3,500 meters tall that straddles the East African Rift tectonic divide. Over 30 people died from lava burns or asphyxiation, and in accidents during the panicked exodus from the area as the eruption destroyed hundreds of homes. Most of those who evacuated have returned to their homes and been able to resume their former lives, although others have not.

'Took us by surprise'

"What happened is natural," said Edmond, a small man wearing oversized clothes donated by neighbors. But he, like many others, is upset that the population did not receive sufficient warning which could have prevented deaths and allowed residents to save some belongings. "The volcano took us by surprise," admits Adalbert Muhindo, director general of the Goma Volcanological Observatory (OVG). From his window, the majestic cone of Nyiragongo is visible 15 kilometers away as the crow flies, as is Nyamuragira, another

volcano whose activity is monitored by the OVG.

However Muhindo denies that the equipment used to measure tectonic movement was faulty. "To say that we didn't have any equipment is false," he insisted, rejecting claims that the volcano hadn't been monitored for months before the eruption due to a lack of resources. In another OVG building, Honore Ciraba, head of the geodesy (Earth measurement) department, shows off the panoply of measuring and monitoring equipment available to the observatory, including inclinometers, satellite data, and laser beams.

'No such thing as zero risk'

One problem for those monitoring Nyiragongo was that, unlike eruptions there in 1977 and 2002, the 2021 eruption was not preceded by any earthquakes. This time they came afterwards. According to Muhindo, the data collected before the disaster in May did not point to an imminent risk of eruption. Some OVG scientists note that an internet blackout from October 2020 to April 2021, due to the end of World Bank funding, prevented real-time collection of data from sensors on the volcano during that period.

Since the events of May monitoring has been stepped up, with additional equipment sent to the observatory. "A modern laboratory is going to be built" said Muhindo, who plans to host an international conference of volcanologists next month. "The aim is for our observatory to work to international standards," he says. "To monitor, warn the population, but also to advise the authorities on land use," on where and how to build structures. But "there is no such thing as zero risk in Goma," he warns. "No part of the city is 100 percent certain to escape a future eruption."

In Buhene, five months after the eruption, the lava layer is still hot in places. Men, women and children wearing simple plastic flip-flops collect small lava aggregate to sell as building material, an activity that has become a source of income for the volcano's victims. Building on the lava field is officially prohibited. But low walls are already going up, as residents wait for the authorities to give the green light for full construction. Like the house that Edmond and his family plan to build, on the exact site where the old one was swept away.—AFP



GOMA: Lava from the Mount Nyiragongo surrounds a house in Goma, in Democratic Republic of Congo. — AFP

Kinshasa cleanup: Plastic means money, a mission

KINSHASA: A basin of plastic waste on her head, Jeanne Bopena places it on the scales. They show six kilos. Smiling, she comes out with 1,500 Congolese francs - or 75 US cents. "Today, I didn't sell much," says the 39-year-old mother of two. "Since this factory opened, I come to sell them all kinds of plastic waste. It helps me to feed my family."

Beneath the large hangar of the Clean Plast company in Kinshasa, about 20 men wearing green T-shirts and red gloves sift through the waste and sort it by type of plastic and color. A teeming city of at least 12 million people, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo is notorious for heaps of garbage and rivers choked by plastic bottles. So much so that its nickname "Kin the beautiful" has turned to "Kin the trash can".

"We collect, we treat, we recycle all types of plastic waste from Kinshasa, with the objective of cleaning up the city," says Alexander Bamanisa, managing director of the company established in 2018. Located in the working-class and deprived neighborhood of Kingabwa. Clean Plast employs about 100 people and its plastic recycling plant is still operating "at only 20 percent of capacity", according to technical director Jagdeep Pandya. In partnership with Kinshasa City Hall, the company has set up 15 plastic waste collection sites in the city, taking in about 10 tons every day.

Garbage mountain

The goal is to set up at least two sites in each of the capital's 24 communes and collect 4,000 tons of waste per month, says Bamanisa. Like Bopena, other local residents come to sell plastic waste in relatively small amounts that they carry by hand or push on carts. Behind the factory, a huge pile of waste has been brought in by vehicle.

Everything is there: bottles, bags, chairs, tables, cans, dolls. In the enclosure, mountains of compacted plastic bottles stand next to giant bales of crushed waste. On the right side of the plant, a worker operates a shredder. Another dumps bags of new plastic bottles into a compactor. "This is factory waste sent in by a local manufacturer. We have partnerships with major plastic manufacturers. They send us their waste, and we make reclaimed material from it," Pandya says.

'Sustainable'

"Our goal is to have a range of 100 percent recycled products made in Kinshasa," adds Bamanisa. The crushed and compacted materials are in turn driven on a metal conveyor belt to the cleaning plant. They are then melted and poured into a granulator. Depending on the color, the regenerated material is placed in white bags and stored, ready to be sold to the plastic manufacturing industry. In Kinshasa, there have been many private initiatives by environmental protection organizations, but the problem has not been solved.

From 2008 to August 2015, the European Union had injected \$1 million a month into a project to dispose of household waste. In October 2019, President Felix Tshisekedi launched "Kin Bopeto" (Clean Kinshasa). Since then, only a few garbage cans have been installed in some neighborhoods of Kinshasa, where 9,000 tons of waste are produced daily, according to the city council. "It was important for us to contribute to finding a sustainable solution to this waste management problem," says Bamanisa.—AFP