

All work and no play, Myanmar's children prop up economy

AFP, Yangon

Twelve-year-old Myat Noe dashes between tables taking orders and sweeping up cigarette butts, working for around a dollar a day in Myanmar, which has one of the worst records for child labour in the world.

There are millions like Myat Noe -- child workers are widely accepted in the former junta-ruled nation -- who prop up everything from tea rooms to factories. But pressure is building for a change of attitude and law.

Weeks away from the landmark November 8 election a coalition of campaign groups are seizing the opportunity for debate and urging lawmakers to provide universal, compulsory and free education within five years.

Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, is expected to make major gains in the election, and has identified education as the cornerstone in reducing poverty, but so far hasn't committed to this demand. A quick glance along Yangon's streets reveals there is some way to go.

Streetside tea shops -- the busy jumbles of plastic tables and chairs usually patronised by chain-smoking men -- are mostly staffed by children, some as young as seven-years-old. "I come from the countryside and I have to help my parents, because they don't have enough money," Myat Noe -- whose name has been changed to protect her identity -- told AFP.

Like many of the child workers in Yangon she comes from one of Myanmar's poor ethnic minority groups and has worked for around a dollar a day since she was nine.

Child workers often toil 14 hours a day, seven days a week, sleeping in large dormitories with other children or on makeshift beds made from the plastic tables which they wait on by day.



A boy sells flowers on a road on the outskirts of Yangon.

There is no time for school let alone play, condemning most child workers to a lifetime of manual labour and poverty.

According to data from the 2014 census, Myat Noe is one of an estimated 4.4 million under-18s who do not attend school in Myanmar.

The impoverished country is the world's seventh worst for child labour, according to risk analysts Verisk Maplecroft, just ahead of India and Liberia.

The rates look set to rise as the economy booms four years after opening up to the world, with new hotels, cafes and factories providing jobs to willing workers, irrespective of age. A tangle of labour laws do not ban children from work, says Piyamal Pichaiwongse of the International Labour

Organization (ILO) in Yangon.

"There's nothing clear on the age at which you can start work and the laws are not applied," she says.

In 2013, Myanmar joined an ILO convention which outlaws the worst forms of child labour such as forced work, including in the army or sex industry.

The government says it wants to address the situation but until a binding law is crafted, children will remain ever-present in the workforce.

"As parents are poor, they send their kids to tea shops to make money," Win Shein, of Myanmar's labour ministry, told AFP.

In an attempt to reach working children, several organisations provide free schooling on the job.

Three nights a week for the last six months, 15-year-old Naing Lin Aung has attended class after a full day working the teashop tables.

"I don't know what will happen to me in the future so I want to learn some English, some computer skills, some knowledge of health in case I get sick," he said, his eyes red with fatigue.

The Myanmar Mobile Education project (myME), teaches 600 children in Yangon and Mandalay, holding classes inside teashops after closing time. For youngsters working at 24-hour establishments they run an improvised classroom in a converted minibus parked up outside.

Some attend for basic literacy and mathematics while those with a bit of schooling under their belt want to improve their English and computer skills.

Teaching over-worked youngsters is no easy task. "Most of the children work all day long so sometimes they can't focus on the lessons. It's a challenge," teacher Thaw Wai Htoo told AFP. Another organisation, Scholarships for Street Kids, compensates parents for the income they lose from their child leaving work.

"This country is really poor and the education system destroyed... so it's hard to value education and to persuade the parents to send their kids to school," says John McConnell, the group's founder.

It has provided around 300 scholarships so far, but for every child they reach, many more have little choice but to work in a nation where the education system was ravaged by decades of junta under-funding.

For Tim Aye-Hardy, founder of myME, a whole generation is being sacrificed by poverty. "What kind of jobs will they get, what kind of future is open for them and for the country?"

Japan PM heads to Central Asia to cement business ties

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on Thursday left for a week-long tour to Mongolia and five Central Asian nations, eyeing billions of dollars in business deals as China boosts its influence in the resource-rich region.

The conservative leader, who has been pushing to kick-start the world's number three economy, was accompanied by representatives of about 50 Japanese firms.

He is to arrive in Ulan Bator later in the day, his first visit to Mongolia since 2013.

He will later travel to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and make the first-ever official visit by a Japanese premier to Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

"Mongolia and Central Asia are at the centre of Asia and very important geopolitically," Abe told reporters at a Tokyo airport ahead of his departure.

These countries "have relied on exports of natural resources, but now are seeking high-quality infrastructure as they aim for an economy based on high value-added" industries. "I'd like to take a huge step in boosting ties with each country."

Abe has gone on a whirlwind global tour since sweeping to power in late 2012, visiting dozens of countries in a bid to boost Japan's economy.

During the tour, Japanese engineering firm JGC and four other companies are expected to sign a one trillion yen (\$8.3 billion) deal in Turkmenistan for the construction of a plant linked to natural gas fields, the leading Nikkei business daily said.

As rival China seeks to tap the region through its new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Abe has pledged to triple infrastructure orders from Japanese firms globally, including in Central Asia, to 30 trillion yen by 2020.

The AIIB is seen as a rival to the Washington-based World Bank and the Manila-based Asian Development Bank, which has been headed by biggest donor Japan since it was founded in 1966.

The US and Japan have notably declined to join the China-led AIIB.

Observers say China's influence in Central Asia has been growing as Russia's has declined, with Beijing becoming the region's leading trading partner.



Rupali Chowdhury, managing director of Berger Paints, and Stéphane Norde, managing director of Nestlé, pose at an agreement signing ceremony at Nestlé Bangladesh's head office in Dhaka on Tuesday. Jenson and Nicholson (Bangladesh) Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of Berger Paints Bangladesh, will supply metal containers to Nestlé.

China's Xi promises no 'hard landing' for economy

AFP, London

Chinese President Xi Jinping promised "no hard landing" for the world's second largest economy despite its slowdown, during a state visit to Britain focused bolstering business and trade ties.

It comes after data showed Chinese growth slowing to 6.9 percent in its third quarter, its worst performance since the 2009 financial crisis and a confirmation of slowing in an economy accustomed to double-digit growth.

"As the world biggest emerging economy, China has entered a new normal in its economic develop-

ment," Xi told the UK-China Business Summit during his trip, the first by a Chinese president in a decade.

"The Chinese economy does face some downward pressure and structural problems, but such adjustments look inevitable when the economy reaches a certain stage after years of high growth."

He added that China would seek to boost growth through domestic consumption, rather than through exports and investment as before.

Highlighting the heft of the Chinese economy despite recent turbulence in its financial markets, Xi said that over the next five years China would import the equivalent of

\$10,000 billion worth of goods and that 500 million Chinese tourists would travel abroad.

A clutch of business contracts said by British Prime Minister David Cameron to be worth almost £40 billion (\$61.6 billion, 54.4 billion euros) have been announced during Xi's visit, as well as the launch of the first yuan-denominated bond in London as China seeks to internationalise its currency.

Xi said that China and Britain would collaborate in financial services, rail and energy infrastructure, as well as emerging sectors such as bioenergy, smart cities, information technology and e-commerce.

Indian festive demand for gold sluggish, discounts widen

REUTERS, Mumbai/Singapore

Festive demand for gold in India got off to a tepid start, with local prices still at a heavy discount to the global benchmark, a bad sign for a period when buying is typically strong.

Though sales picked up this week with the onset of the festival season, demand was lower than usual, retailers said, even as jewellers splashed newspapers across the country with ads promising good deals and discounts.

Following the nine-day Hindu festival of Navratri, India celebrates Dussehra on Thursday, when buying of gold jewellery, coins or bars is considered auspicious.

The fourth quarter is typically a strong period for gold purchases in India, the world's second biggest bullion consumer, due to festivals and weddings.

"This year fewer customers are visiting our showrooms compared to last year," said Tanya Rastogi, a director at Lala Jugal Kishore Jewellers in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

"For the last two to three years, gold has been giving negative returns. It has badly affected investment demand," Rastogi said.

Still, next month India will celebrate Dhanteras and Diwali, when demand could improve, she added.

Global gold prices are on track to post their third straight annual loss this year, already down nearly 40 percent since hitting a record high in 2011.



A saleswoman shows a gold earring to customers at a jewellery showroom in India.

Chinese star Xiaomi aims beyond smartphones

AFP, Laguna Beach

Leading Chinese smartphone maker Xiaomi is aiming for a future as an Internet company with the potential to cross swords with titans such as Alibaba.

Xiaomi co-founder and chief executive Bin Lin on Wednesday shared a vision of a future that includes Segway-like self-balancing scooters and smartphones and a role for the company in e-commerce, digital movies and games.

"We'd rather be called an Internet company," Lin said during an on-stage interview at the WSJD Live technology conference on the Southern California coast.

"We are really focusing on building out smartphones as the center of all these smart devices that are launched."

Xiaomi smartphones can be used to control the company's recently introduced Ninebot mini scooter. China-based Ninebot, owned by Xiaomi, bought US rival Segway early this year.

The Xiaomi handsets can also be used to remotely control a new Mi TV model, according to Lin.

"We think of the TV as yet another smart device," Lin said. "It is almost like a phone except it is a much bigger display."

The path ahead for Xiaomi includes providing online services and digital content, like games, rather than just selling televisions or smartphones, according to Lin.

While most of Xiaomi's revenue now comes from hardware sales, he predicted that would shift as Xiaomi gets deeper into online services, content, e-commerce, and even financial services.

That vision would have Xiaomi challenging Chinese e-commerce colossus Alibaba.

"On the hardware side, we think we have advantages over Alibaba," Lin said.

Xiaomi tailors free Google-backed Android



Bin Lin, co-founder and president of Xiaomi, speaks on the Ninebot Mini, a personal transportation device, at the Wall Street Journal Digital Live conference in California.

software to power devices. Getting Xiaomi smartphones in people's hands provides opportunity to have software easily connect people to the startup's online offerings.

Apple, a winning model when it comes to combining the power of mobile device hardware and software, is already a thriving rival to Xiaomi in the premium smartphone market in China.

Lin brushed aside a suggestion that Xiaomi copied features from iPhones.

"For every single tiny similarity between us and Apple, I can probably point out a hundred differences," Lin said.

The Chinese smartphone market is shifting to a flat, if not declining, upgrade scenario after

boom years of people snapping up their first handsets, according to Lin.

He said that Xiaomi is doing well in India, and has sold more than three million smartphones there since expanding to that country last year.

In just five years, the Chinese firm has become the world's number three smartphone vendor, behind only Apple and South Korea's Samsung, with rapid growth in emerging countries.

It has yet to introduce its handsets to the US market but it has opened an online accessory store in the United States and major European countries, selling fitness bands headphones and other gadgets.