

PUSH FOR GREATER ENGAGEMENT WITH MYANMAR

Cambodia tests Asean

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

As Cambodia prepares to assume the chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) next year, Prime Minister Hun Sen is splitting with most of the bloc by looking to bring Myanmar's military leadership into the fold.

Since the military coup on February 1 in Myanmar, most Asean states have condemned the new government, notably blocking its attendance at both the Asean Summit in October and the Asean-China Summit in November due to the leadership's "insufficient progress" on carrying out a peace plan agreed with the regional bloc earlier this year.

But, despite concerns expressed by other Asean states, Hun Sen is now touting engagement with the military, also known in Myanmar as the Tatmadaw, as the best way forward.

As the first step in his engagement efforts, Hun Sen met with the military-appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wunna Maung Lwin, in Phnom Penh on December 7.

He also announced that he would be visiting Myanmar in 2022 to meet with the military's senior leadership, including commander-in-chief and coup leader Min Aung Hlaing, in what will be the first state visit by a foreign leader since the coup.

Charles Santiago, the chair of the Asean Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR), a network of parliamentarians advocating for human rights in the region, said Asean's approach towards Myanmar this year may not have been a "phenomenal success", but "there have been small successes, and one was to limit Myanmar's participation at the

Asean meetings".

And "now Hun Sen is trying to undermine [that approach]".

Aside from greater engagement with the Tatmadaw, it's unclear what the future Asean chair has in store for Myanmar. However, Hun Sen's recent adoption of "cowboy diplomacy", a term referring to risky and harsh diplomatic tactics, has worried many of his regional partners in Asean.

Cambodia announced on December 15 that it would be appointing Minister of Foreign Affairs Prak Sokhonn as the new ASEAN Special Envoy to Myanmar, in what appears to be a unilateral decision.

Cambodia's decisions on Myanmar has also prompted questions on whether the Kingdom is being influenced by external actors.

When he first announced his intent to visit Myanmar, Hun Sen mentioned that he had discussed the decision with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Indonesian Foreign Affairs Minister Retno Marsudi, implying that the state visit may be part of a greater multilateral effort.

But experts are doubtful that either country, especially Indonesia, which has been particularly vocal in its opposition to the military, holds any influence over Hun Sen's decision-making or the Myanmar military in general.

Interestingly, Hun Sen's about-face happened at approximately the same time as Chinese special envoy Sun Guoxiang travelled to Singapore and Brunei to lobby for the Tatmadaw's inclusion at the China-Asean summit in November, suggesting that longstanding allies Cambodia and China could be colluding once again.



MYANMAR JADE MINE TRAGEDY

This photo taken and received via an anonymous source yesterday shows rescue officials searching for missing people after a landslide at a jade mine in Hpakant, Kachin state. Fading light forced rescuers to call off a search for at least 70 people feared missing after a landslide that killed at least one person, emergency workers told AFP.

PHOTO: AFP

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Malaysia floods toll hits 27

The death toll from Malaysia's worst floods in years rose to 27 yesterday, as a clean-up operation gathered pace and residents assessed the damage unleashed by the disaster. Days of torrential rain caused rivers to overflow at the weekend, swamping cities, cutting off major roads, and forcing tens of thousands of people to flee their homes. Around 65,000 people have been evacuated, most of them in Selangor and Pahang, according to official data, which revised down by several thousand a figure released Tuesday. The Southeast Asian nation is hit by floods annually during the monsoon season, from November to February, but those at the weekend were the worst since 2014.

Libya delays Friday election

Authorities overseeing war-torn Libya's first presidential election have confirmed that holding it on Friday as scheduled is "impossible" and suggested a month-long delay. The vote was intended to mark a fresh start for war-torn Libya, a year after a landmark ceasefire and more than a decade after its 2011 revolt that toppled and killed dictator Muammar Gaddafi. But speculation of a delay had been mounting for weeks, amid bitter disputes over the vote's legal basis, the powers of the winner and the candidacies of several deeply divisive figures.

AstraZeneca, Oxford to produce Omicron-targeted vaccine

AstraZeneca Plc said on Tuesday it is working with Oxford University to produce a vaccine for the Omicron coronavirus variant, joining other vaccine-makers who are looking to develop the variant-specific vaccine. The Financial Times first reported the news, citing Sandy Douglas, a research group leader at Oxford. A lab-study last week found that AstraZeneca's antibody cocktail Evusheld retained neutralising activity against the Omicron variant. Vaccine makers Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna also previously said they were working on Omicron-specific Covid-19 vaccines.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

From Everest to Mariana Trench Study finds microplastics are everywhere

AFP, Paris

From Mount Everest to the Mariana Trench, microplastics are everywhere - even high in the Earth's troposphere where wind speeds allow them to travel vast distances, a study showed Tuesday.

Microplastics are tiny fragments -- measuring less than 5 millimetres -- that come from packaging, clothing, vehicles and other sources and have been detected on land, in water and in the air.

Scientists from the French national research institute CNRS sampled air 2,877 metres above sea level at the Pic du Midi Observatory in the French Pyrenees, a so-called "clean station" because of the limited influence exerted on it by the local climate and environment.

There they tested 10,000 cubic metres of air per week between June and October of 2017 and found all samples contained microplastics.

Using weather data they calculated the trajectories of different air masses preceding each sample and discovered sources as far away as North Africa and North America.

The study's main author Steve Allen of Dalhousie University in Canada told AFP that the particles were able to travel such distances because they were able to reach great altitudes.

"Once it hits the troposphere, it's like a superfast highway," he said. The research also points to microplastic sources in the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean.

"The marine source is the most interesting," Allen said. "Plastic leaving the ocean into the air that high -- it shows there is no eventual sink for this plastic," he said.

"It's just moving around and around in an indefinite cycle." Allen said that it also shows that disposing of plastic by shipping it abroad is a flawed strategy.

"It's going to come back to you," he said.

Dozens missing as migrant boat sinks off Greece

AFP, Greece

A massive search and rescue operation was underway off the Greek island of Folegandros yesterday, after a dinghy carrying migrants sank, killing at least one person, Greek authorities said.

The coastguard said it had rescued 12 people, including children. The body of one dead person was recovered.

But there were conflicting reports about exactly how many people had been on the boat, with some survivors putting the number at 32, while others said as many as 50 were on board, a coastguard official told AFP.

Four coastguard vessels, two navy and air force helicopters, a military transport plane, five nearby ships and three private vessels were all taking part in the search and rescue operation, the coastguard said.

Those rescued -- seven Iraqis, three Syrians and two Egyptians -- were all transferred to the hospital on the island of Santorini.

Nearly one million people, mainly Syrian refugees, arrived in the EU in 2015 after crossing to Greek islands close to Turkey.

The report comes as the International Organization for Migration said on Tuesday said that at least 160 migrants had drowned off Libya's coast after their boats sank over the past week.

'My children are cold' As aid dries up, brutal winter hits Syria refugee camps

AFP, Kafri Arouk

Umm Raghad's children don't have proper clothes or a furnace at home to stay warm during Syria's bitter winter so they burn scraps of garbage to keep the biting cold at bay.

Winter usually spells tragedy for northwest Syria, home to more than three million people, nearly half of whom have been displaced by a decade-long war that has killed nearly half a million.

In makeshift camps in the country's last major rebel enclave, streets turn muddy, tents leak and inhabitants die of hypothermia or in fires caused by unsafe heating methods.

Widowed by war, Umm Raghad moved to the Kafri Arouk camp three years ago to escape fighting in other parts of Idlib province.

The harsh winter is unbearable for her family, which doesn't have enough money for even the most basic necessities, she said.

"I can't afford to buy a furnace or to feed my children," Umm Raghad said.



"My children are cold. They don't have proper clothes."

Snowfall and sub-zero temperatures are not unusual in northwestern Syria.

Aid agencies often help insulate tents and provide blankets and clothes, but donor funding is struggling to keep up with growing demand.

According to the UN's refugee agency UNHCR, \$182 million are required to finance growing needs in

winter assistance across Syria this year but only half of the amount has been secured.

In the Kafri Arouk camp, a rudimentary furnace set up in Umm Raed's tarpaulin tent attracts dozens of people looking to keep warm.

Last year, a group of people donated the heater to Umm Raed, whose eight children include three with special needs.

Advertisement for Bangladesh Bank recruitment. It includes the bank's logo, name in Bengali, and details of a recruitment drive for various positions. The ad lists 101 positions with their respective names, job IDs, and other details. It also provides information on how to apply, including online registration, CV ID numbers, and payment verification steps.