DISCONNECTIONS AND VANISHING RIGHTS

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Athan – Freedom of Expression Activist Organization Background

Athan, established by Myanmar's young activists on 15th January 2018, aims to promote freedom of expression on a societal level. Mainly performing research activities, the organization regularly engages in advocacy and capacity building. The organization's broad scope of works includes exploring and recording the laws, customs, traditions, and events that hinder freedom of expression; supporting legislative reforms in line with democratic standards and grounded by conducted research and advocating in different stages and sectors for the full enjoyment of freedom of expression. Athan envisions a society that fully enjoys the freedom of expression as part of the democratic value.

Disconnections and Vanishing Rights Research Report

Excerpt

In the wake of the military attempted coup on February 1st, 2021, the military in Myanmar has utilized both short and long-term internet outages to cut off communication among the public for political purposes. Certain regions and states have experienced internet blackouts since August 2021, while these regions experienced phone line disconnection since mid-2022. These outages have been conducted for military purposes in some regions, while others have been impacted by delays in goods flow and fuel shortages due to restrictions on freedom of movement. Our analysis has revealed that mobile data and networks have been shut down in six states and regions of Myanmar by the brutal military as of 2022. As a result, there is a lack of information flow and the ability to access and share information among the public in a timely manner, leading to a risk of misinformation. Furthermore, cutting off internet access has a significant impact on the economy, education, health, and daily social life, resulting in job scarcity, rising commodity prices, and the lack of access to education and public health. This communication shutdown in Myanmar has also affected the ASEAN region's communication sector, disrupting the real-time information flow in the area.

Introduction

Athan's 2022 report, "Internet Access Amid Darkness and Living Under Threats," has detailed three ways in which Myanmar's internet access has been cut since February 2021.[1] Firstly, there have been instances of connection blackouts lasting several days. Secondly, there have been specific periods or days when the internet has been shut down. Lastly, the military junta has implemented restrictions on internet speed and increased internet fee rates. The report reveals that the military junta has been using more tactics to control information flow for their military and political purposes. As of mid-2022, the junta has also temporarily shut down phone line services in some rural areas and even in urban cities, particularly in conflicted areas. Restricted internet and phone line access have had negative consequences such as slowed transportation of goods, higher prices of commodities, and fuel supply shortages.

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[1] Athan (2022), 'Internet access amid darkness and lives under threats' | Source⚓

Loss of Connectivity in Armed Conflict Areas

On January 7th, 2023, the military junta in Myanmar shut down all mobile networks in Mindat and Matupi townships located in Chin State, where there was an ongoing conflict.[2] They also shut down all mobile networks even before and after conflicts. Mindat township in Chin State experienced mobile data and network shutdown for 20 days earlier before the military did air bombardment in the area on 21 January 2023.[3] Similarly, all villages in the Kawkareik township in Kayin State experienced the same internet blackouts during air strikes in October 2022.[4]

Blackout as the Aftermaths of Transport Restrictions

The military junta's restrictions on transportation access in some areas of Myanmar have severely impacted the supply of fuel and basic goods. The shortage of fuel has disrupted the operation of telecom towers, resulting in mobile data and networks being unavailable in some areas. In November 2022, the telecom towers in Maungdaw township of Rakhine State were not well functioning, leading to disconnections of phone lines.[5] Additionally, the military junta has blocked the troll gates at Matupi, making trucks impossible to enter. This has further exacerbated the fuel supply shortage and led the MPT telecom tower to stop functioning and the MPT services became unavailable.[6]

Internet Shutdown as Psywar of Military

Since 2022, it has been observed that the military junta is using the internet and network blackouts as a tool for mentally suppressing civilians for their political gain. The military Junta reopened internet access in Sagaing and Kachin where the internet has been cut off on National Significant Days such as Independence Day (4th January). People in these areas were excited and purchased phone sim cards and internet data packages to connect with their friends and relatives. However, all connections were shut down again at around 10:00 p.m. on 5th January, leaving the people in these regions frustrated and isolated.[7] The military junta is using these tactics to suppress the flow of information and restrict freedom of expression through psychological warfare.

The Fall of Operators

Following the military attempted coup, all communication companies in the country came under military control in 2022. This included international companies such as Telenor Myanmar which has been sold to Shwe Byine Phyu Company, M1 Group with close ties to the military (and renamed as

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[2] မင်းတပ်နှင့်မတူပီမြို့နယ်တို့တွင် ဖုန်းလိုင်းများ ဖြတ်တောက်ခံထားရ (2023 Dec 9), The Irrawaddy, | Source⇧

[3] မင်းတပ်တွင် တိုက်ပွဲမဖြစ်ဘဲ လေယာဉ်ဖြင့် ဗုံးကြပြီးနောက် ဆက်သွယ်ရေးလိုင်းများ ဖြတ်တောက်ကာ သတင်းအမှောင်ချ (2023 Jan 23), Myanmar Pressphoto Agency | Source⇧

[4] ကော့ကရိတ်မြို့ကျေးရွာများ ဖုန်းလိုင်းဖြတ်တောက်ခံထားရ (2022 Oct 31), Mawkun Magazine | Source⇧

[5] မောင်တောမှာ စက်သုံးဆီပြတ်၊ နယ်က ဖုန်းတာဝါတိုင်တချို့မလည်ပတ်၍ ဖုန်းလိုင်းပြတ်နေ (2022 Nov 18), Border News Agency | Source⇧

[6] Salang Ban (2022 Oct 11). မတူပီမြို့တွင် စက်သုံးဆီပြတ်လပ်၍ ဖုန်းလိုင်းများပါ ပြတ်တောက် Mizzima-News in Burmese | Source⇧

[7] ကချင်နဲ့ စစ်ကိုင်းမှာ ဖွင့်ပေးထားတဲ့အင်တာနက်လိုင်းတွေ ပြန်ပိတ် (2023 Jan 6) RFA Burmese | Source⇧

ATOM Myanmar on 2nd June 2022), and Ooredoo Myanmar which had been sold to Nine Communications Pte Ltd. Media outlets reported that Nine Communications has close business ties to the military.[8]

The military Junta has cut off mobile data and networks across six states and regions in Myanmar. The following shows the current situation of six states and regions:

Mobile Data & Internet Blackout

Activated Area
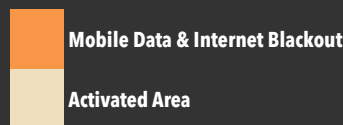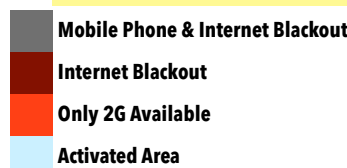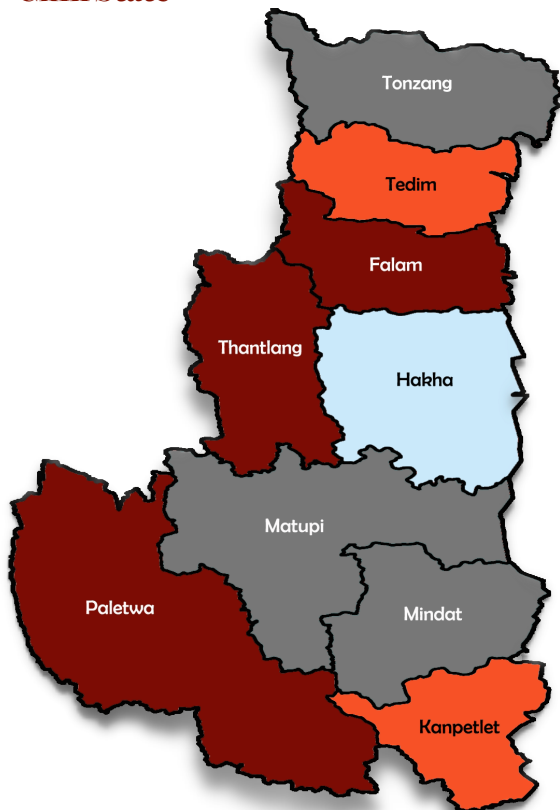
Chin State

The military junta has blocked mobile data and networks in several areas of Chin State, including Tunzang, Matupi, and Mindat townships. Additionally, Falam, Thantlang, and Paletwaa townships have no internet access. In Tedim and Kanpetlet townships, only 2G internet is available. It is important to note that in Matupi and Tunzang, only telephone services are accessible. Some areas in Tunzang township may have access to MPT services.

Mobile Phone & Internet Blackout

Internet Blackout

Only 2G Available

Activated Area

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[8] အူရီဒူးမြန်မာပိုင်ရှင်သစ် ဈေးဟာသ်လုပ်ငန်းစုမှ ဇော်ဝင်းရှိန်ဖြစ်နိုင် (2022 Sep 9) Myanmar Now | Source ⚤

Kachin State

Mobile Phone & Internet Blackout

Internet Blackout

Only 2G Available

Activated Area

The military junta has disconnected mobile data in Hpakant, which is located in the Kachin State, since 20th August 2021. This town is among the places where mobile data has been disabled for more than a year.

Karenni State

Mobile Phone & Internet Blackout

Internet Blackout

Only 2G Available

Activated Area
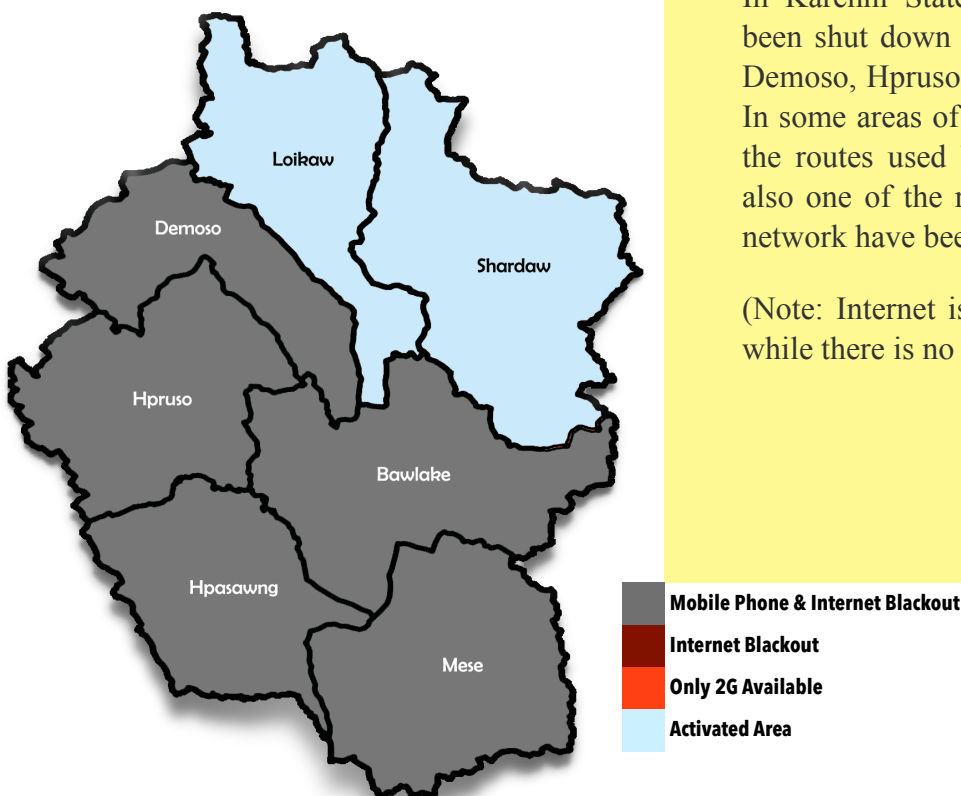
In Karenni State, mobile data and network has been shut down by the Junta in five townships – Demoso, Hpruso, Bawlakhe, Hpasaung and Mese. In some areas of these townships, the blockage of the routes used by the Junta to transport fuel is also one of the reasons why the mobile data and network have been cut.

(Note: Internet is often available in Hpruso town while there is no internet access in other areas)

Magway Region

Mobile network and data have been disconnected in Tilin township of Magway Region, whereas only mobile data has been shut down in Gangaw and Myaing townships. Taungdwingyi township has access only to 2G network. In Gangaw township, 2G internet is occasionally accessible, particularly at night, but it is not available

Legend:
- Mobile Phone & Internet Blackout
- Internet Blackout
- Only 2G Available
- Activated Area

Mandalay Region

The Junta has shut down mobile data in Myingyan township of Mandalay Region while only 2G network is available in Mogoke township. Although Wi-Fi is accessible in these two townships, the internet speed has been reduced, and some places face difficulty in surfing internet.

Legend:
- Mobile Phone & Internet Blackout
- Internet Blackout
- Only 2G Available
- Activated Area
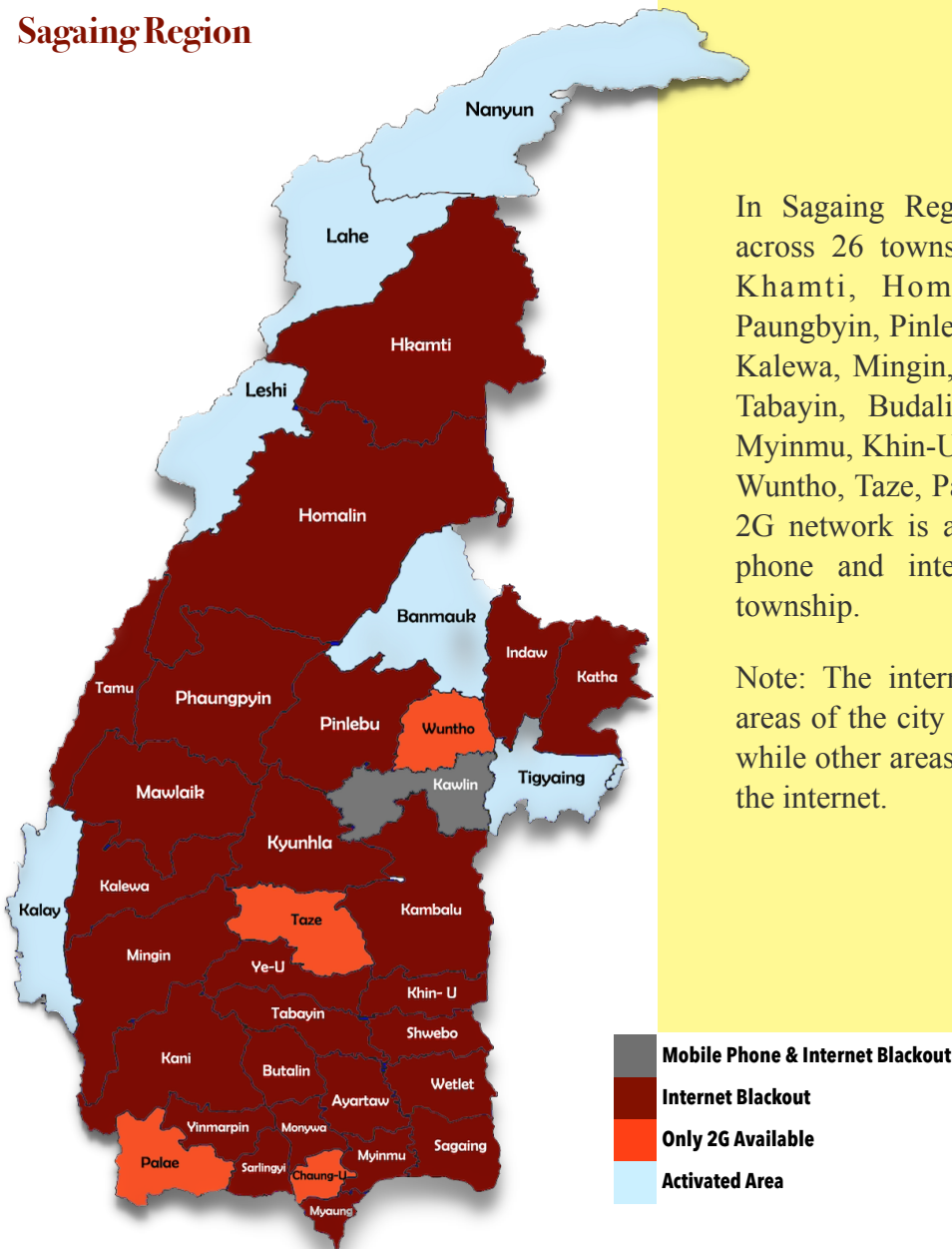
Sagaing Region

In Sagaing Region, mobile data has been cut across 26 townships. These townships includes, Khamti, Homalin, Indaw, Katha, Tamu, Paungbyin, Pinlebu, Mawlaik, Kyunhla, Kantbalu, Kalewa, Mingin, Kani, Yinmarbin, Saligyi, Ye-U, Tabayin, Budalin, Monywa, Myaung, Ayadaw, Myinmu, Khin-U, Shwebo, Wetlet and Sagaing. In Wuntho, Taze, Pale and Chaung-U township, only 2G network is available. Moreover, both mobile phone and internet has been cut in Kawlin township.

Note: The internet is only accessible in certain areas of the city in the aforementioned townships, while other areas may have limited or no access to the internet.

■ Mobile Phone & Internet Blackout

■ Internet Blackout

■ Only 2G Available

■ Activated Area

Loss of Internet Shutdown

The internet shutdown in Myanmar has caused significant socio-economic loss for the people. Although the military junta uses the shutdown as a means of consolidating their power, it is the public who are experiencing difficulties and losses in various aspects of their lives, including the economy, education, communication, and access to information. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has reported that the coup, combined with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, has resulted in increased job losses and an overall rise in the unemployment rate. Private companies, financial services, and other service providers that rely on digital platforms have been severely impacted by the internet shutdown imposed by the Junta. According to the ISP Myanmar's Netblocks website, the internet shutdown in Myanmar has resulted in a daily loss of approximately USD 24.19 million. The Border Project estimates that the internet shutdown in 2021 alone has caused a loss of USD 2.8 billion in Myanmar.[9] According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), women have experienced a more pronounced impact from job losses than men.[10]

[9] Zawistowski, Anna. (2022 Sep 12). MYANMAR'S INTERNET SHUTDOWNS EXACERBATE POVERTY, The Border Project | Source ⚥

[10] New ILO estimates show Myanmar remains deeply affected by job losses in first half of 2022 (2022 Aug 1) International Labor Organization | Source ⚥

Deterioration of socio-economic lives

The internet and mobile network shutdowns in conflict areas of Myanmar have resulted in a severe lack of access to news and information. This has had deadly consequences for many civilians, particularly in areas where the military is engaged in conflict with local People's Defense Forces (PDF). With no means of being informed of military raids or approaching convoys, civilians are at increased risk of being caught in the crossfire and suffering harm or death. One villager from Gangaw township reported that the military had conducted raids on their village, burning homes and killing civilians with impunity due to the lack of information flow caused by the internet shutdown. Although civilians have captured photos and videos of military crimes against them, they cannot easily share them with others due to the lack of internet access. As a result, the military continues to commit human rights violations against civilians, who have no means of reporting or sharing their experiences.

In an interview answer with the RFA news agency, a villager from the Hnan Khar Village, Gangaw township said that *"the attack always comes once a month or sometimes twice a month after the internet shut down. Due to the lack of information flow, the sudden attack makes civilians got caught easily, detained, tortured, and even killed. In my experience, the attack conducted raids by burning down houses and killing civilians as they wish."* Civilians suffer a lot as they have no access to mobile data and network. Although civilians keep photos and videos of the military crimes against civilians, they could not share to others easily as there was no internet access, and later those records were deleted as they were afraid to store for long time.[11] The armed forces of Junta are blatantly engaging in acts that constitute violations of the laws of war, while the general populace is experiencing severe limitations in disseminating accurate information, resulting in grave infringements on human rights.

Internet at Extreme Fee

Although there is not heavy fighting observed in Hpakant of Kachin State, the internet has been shut down over 500 days. The ones who want to use internet need to go to the internet shops at a cost of 5,000 to 10,000 kyats per hour.[12] At the same time, the military rapidly has been installing a vast amount of Mytel Wi-fi instead of mobile data.[13]

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[11] အင်တာနက်အဖြတ်ခံထားရတဲ့ တစ်နှစ်အတွင်း စစ်ကိုင်းနဲ့ မကွေးတိုင်းမှာ ၈၀၀ နီးပါး သေဆုံး (2022 Sep 28) Radio Free Asia | Source⇕

[12] ကချင်နဲ့ စစ်ကိုင်းမှာ ဖွင့်ပေးထားတဲ့အင်တာနက်လိုင်းတွေ ပြန်ပိတ် (2023 Jan 6) Radio Free Asia | Source⇕

[13] ဖားကန့်မြို့နယ်တွင် စစ်ကောင်စီက ဖုန်းအင်တာနက်အစား Mytel Wifi တပ်ဆင်နေ (2022 Nov 3) Kachin News Group | Source⇕

Economic Decline and Internet Shutdown

Samuel Woodhams, a leader of Global Digital Rights from Top 10 VPN told the ASEAN Post that "*Internet shutdowns hurt the entire economy: from small businesses to large multinational banks. As the digital economy continues to grow, the costs of internet shutdowns continue to worsen. Internet shutdowns represent a significant act of economic self-harm.*"

He also stated that "*Through highlighting the economic impact of internet shutdowns, we hope that governments will be less inclined to implement this counterproductive measure. Additionally, internet shutdowns represent a flagrant disregard for fundamental human rights, including the right to freedom of expression and right to information, which are universal and inalienable.*"[14]

The internet shutdown in Myanmar has had a severe impact on the country's economy, with unemployment and lower household incomes being among the most significant consequences. The agriculture sector has also suffered, as farmers were unable to access updated market prices to trade their crops.[15] Moreover, in areas with mobile data shutdowns, firefights frequently break out, making it difficult for locals to farm, which has led to concerns about rice scarcity in the coming year. Additionally, the shutdown has delayed the flow of commodities and blocked transport, which has contributed to the risk of rising prices.

Internet Shutdown and Collapse of Health and Education Sectors

In education sector, schools are not normally operated, and students fled without attending schools due to the conflicts in areas with mobile data shutdown. On the other hand, they do not have access to any online learning as the internet is cut off. During the post-COVID period, international students from middle and high schools to university level are learning through virtual or in person exchange programs whereas Myanmar students could not even do self- learning and lose their right to education. The loss of the right to education is just one example of how the crisis in Myanmar is more than just a political problem. It is imperative that international educational organizations take notice of this issue and work together to restore the right to education for Myanmar's children.

The collapse of the public healthcare sector in Myanmar is a direct result of the internet shutdown and ongoing conflicts. The public healthcare system was already in a precarious state following the attempted coup in 2021. The lack of internet access means that people in areas without connectivity are unable to access reliable health-related news and information. This has resulted in a significant number of individuals having no access to basic public healthcare services, as well as being unable to search for important health information.

Impact on ASEAN Region

The association aims "*to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and to promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries in the region*". However, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), which is based on the principle of non-interference in the

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[14] Louis, Jillian. (2020 Jan 14) Internet shutdowns could cost ASEAN deadly. The ASEAN Post | Source⚲

[15] Zawistowski, Anna. (2022 Sep 12). MYANMAR'S INTERNET SHUTDOWNS EXACERBATE POVERTY, The Border Project | Source⚲

internal affairs of member states, appears to provide support for the Myanmar military to continue their undemocratic and human rights-violating actions without consequences. Additionally, even within the ASEAN region, the equal right to access communication channels is being violated by the military.

The internal political situation in Myanmar has resulted in a contradiction between the objectives of ASEAN and its fundamental principles, as well as a delay in the implementation process for resolving the situation. The military's violation of the regional equal right to use communication channels goes against ASEAN's goal of accelerating economic growth, social progress, and cultural development in the region while promoting peace and stability. Furthermore, the military's disregard for democracy and human rights by shutting down internet access has hindered progress in these areas. The non-interference principle makes it challenging to implement the objectives of ASEAN, including resolving disputes peacefully and promoting diversity.

The current political situation in Myanmar has led to a major challenge for ASEAN in terms of the violation of digital rights, which are considered to be basic human rights. The internet is a crucial tool for global development and it is impossible to cover up injustices committed by the military junta in this digital age. However, the Military Junta is using the principle of "the most weapons always win" to kill thousands of civilians and cut off the internet, in order to conceal their brutal violence against humanity. This disharmony has a significant impact on ASEAN, as it is the closest association to Myanmar. If action is not taken promptly to address the violations of democracy and human rights, it will likely result in the worst violations of human rights. As Myanmar is an important part of the ASEAN community, the continued violation of equal access to communication channels will ultimately lead to disharmony in the regional communication sector, making it difficult to collect and validate accurate data on the people of ASEAN.
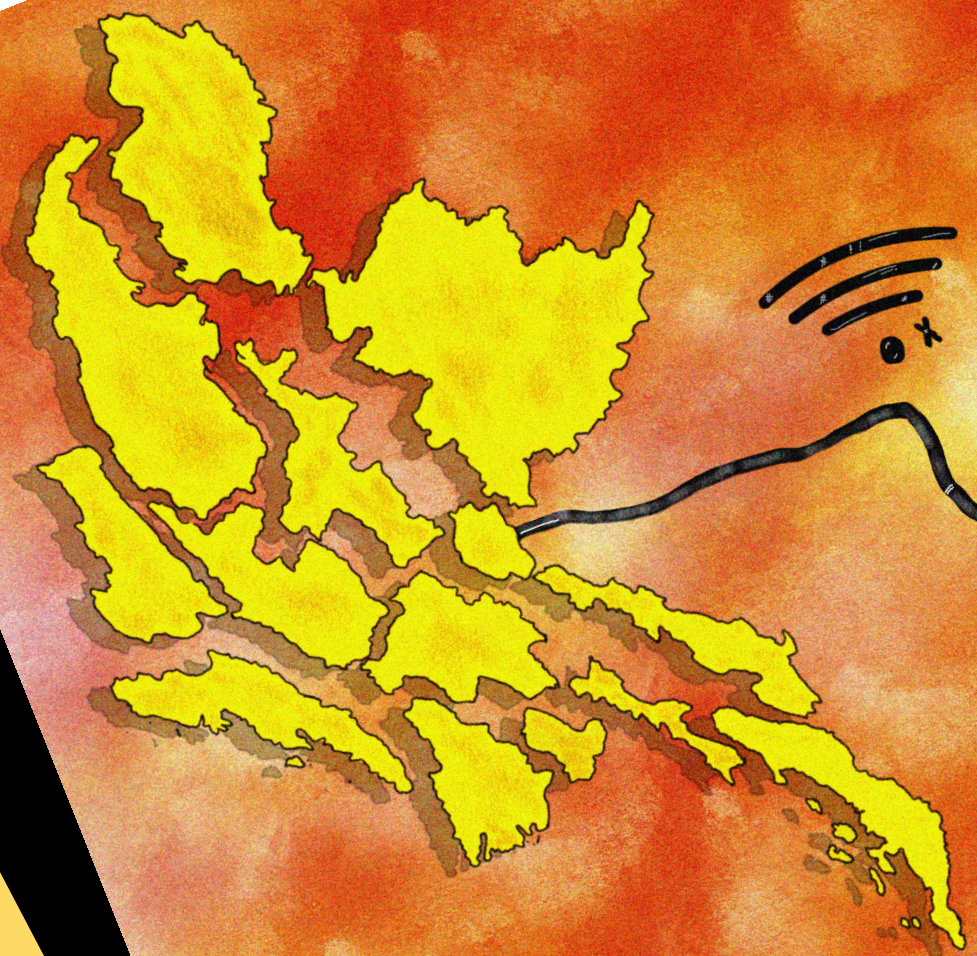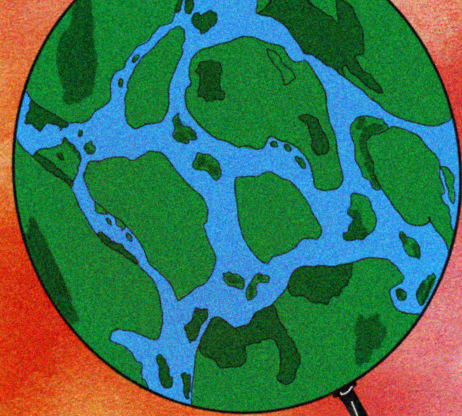
Conclusion

In today's world, the internal affairs of a country have a significant impact not only on its neighboring countries but also on other countries with strong and deep relationships. The primary objective of a country's sovereignty is to protect the interests of its people and community within its borders, which has become a controversial issue in the case of Myanmar. Despite foreign countries' attempts to provide humanitarian assistance for the loss of life and property within the country's sovereign borders, their efforts are limited by the principles of Myanmar's sovereignty as it exists as an independent country. As a result, the people of Myanmar suffer significant losses due to this lack of power.

Research Methodology and Challenges

This research paper focuses on the impact of the mobile data and network shutdown in several townships across Myanmar following the attempted military coup. The data was collected from ground information and 46 online media daily monitoring and highlights the resulting damages and losses in socio-economic areas, as well as education and healthcare rights. However, due to conflict in some regions and the shutdown of mobile phone lines, the researchers were unable to conduct on-site surveys and had difficulty in contacting locals during the time of the shutdown. It is possible that there are more regions affected by the information blockade that have not been included in the data gathered by the team.

Disconnections and Vanishing Rights