

December 5, 2023 | Myanmar

## **JFM calls on GMS countries to cancel conference to be hosted by Myanmar junta; ADB will not attend or support event**

The illegal Myanmar military junta is set to host the 26<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Conference of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) program, on December 15 in Naypyidaw, according to Justice For Myanmar sources.

In a welcome move, the Asian Development Bank, which acts as the GMS Secretariat, has told Justice For Myanmar that it will not attend the Ministerial Conference and will not provide any support. In response to an email, an ADB spokesperson told Justice For Myanmar, “The Asian Development Bank (ADB) will not attend the 26<sup>th</sup> GMS Ministerial Conference. In addition, ADB will not provide any funding for the event, nor provide logistical or advisory support. ADB also will not finance the costs of any developing member countries’ attendees.”

Justice For Myanmar calls on GMS countries to cancel the conference and ban the junta from the GMS program. The ADB should reconsider its support for the GMS program while it continues to engage with the junta.

The conference is planned to take place as the junta continues to lose control of Myanmar, is rapidly losing territory and is waging a campaign of terror against the people, committing mass killings, carrying out indiscriminate air strikes and shelling, arbitrary arrests, torture and mass displacement that has surged to more than 2.5 million.

The conference host is Kan Zaw, the junta’s minister for investment and foreign economic relations, who is sanctioned by the US and EU. The EU noted that Kan Zaw “takes an active role in supporting the military’s efforts to attract foreign investment, thereby contributing to securing the financial needs of the military regime. Therefore, he is responsible for undermining democracy and the rule of law in Myanmar/Burma as well as for engaging in actions that threaten the peace, security and stability of Myanmar.”

According to Justice For Myanmar sources, Kan Zaw has invited China’s finance minister, Lan Fo’an, Cambodia’s deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs and international cooperation, Sok Chenda Sophea, Lao’s planning and investment minister, Khamjane Vongphosy, Vietnam’s planning and investment minister, Nguyen Chi Dung, and Thailand’s deputy finance minister, Julapun Amornvivat to the conference.

The conference is being organised by a steering committee headed by the junta’s deputy minister for investment and foreign economic relations. The committee also includes a member of the military conglomerate Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) as the sole private sector representative, according to Justice For Myanmar sources. MEC is sanctioned by the US, UK, EU, Canada and Australia.

The junta-controlled Myanmar Police Force is providing security for the conference, overseen by the deputy police chief who is also a member of the steering committee. The junta’s police force is directly responsible for killings, torture and arbitrary arrest, which amount to crimes against humanity. The junta is preparing to maximise propaganda from the conference, having formed a committee to manage the release of information to control journalists.

The conference is being held at the Grand Amara Hotel, which is part of the junta-linked crony conglomerate International Group of Entrepreneur (IGE) owned by Ne Aung, the brother of the junta's navy chief. The junta is covering the accommodation of delegates, their flights between Yangon and Naypyidaw and hosting a gala lunch.

The upcoming conference comes after Min Aung Hlaing participated in the 7<sup>th</sup> GMS Leaders' Summit hosted by Cambodia in 2021. The ADB told Justice For Myanmar that they had provided Cambodia with advisory support to prepare documentation for the summit, which was held virtually.

The Leaders' Summit, which is the program's highest body, was featured prominently in junta propaganda. In a speech at the summit, Min Aung Hlaing defended his illegal coup attempt and falsely stated that the 2020 election was rigged and that the coup attempt was constitutional.

At the 2021 Leader's Summit, Min Aung Hlaing illegitimately endorsed the GMS Strategic Framework 2030, which aims to promote investment and tourism that would help generate revenue for the junta, which it needs to finance its terror campaign.

In 2022, Laos hosted the 25<sup>th</sup> GMS Ministerial Conference, in which the junta was also wrongly allowed to participate. In the conference, the junta illegitimately endorsed the GMS Regional Investment Framework for 2023-2025, in which the junta has proposed US\$208.3 million in projects in sectors that include energy, information and communications technology, tourism and agriculture, mostly to be funded by unspecified "development partners".

The GMS program was established in 1992 under Myanmar's previous dictatorship, and has focussed on promoting trade and the development of economic corridors and infrastructure, including in ethnic areas of Myanmar.

As part of the Myanmar junta's chairing of the GMS, the junta linked Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI) is leading the GMS Business Council, a grouping of chambers of commerce from GMS countries. The GMS Business Council is currently chaired by Zaw Min Win, a former UMFCCI president and the chair of the Myanmar Industries Alliance, which invests in the mobile operator Mytel with the military conglomerate MEC.

**Justice For Myanmar spokesperson Yadanar Maung says:** "It is unfathomable that the GMS program and its members are not only inviting the illegal junta to participate but are even appointing it as host of a ministerial conference.

"The junta is a terrorist organisation that is committing war crimes and crimes against humanity with total impunity. The military's coup attempt is failing and the GMS program and its members are making a serious moral and strategic error in legitimising it and attempting to facilitate investment that will help it generate revenue and further fuel atrocities.

"GMS members should immediately cancel the planned conference or, failing that, refuse to attend. The junta must be barred from the GMS program, which should instead recognise and support the National Unity Government, which is the legitimate government of Myanmar.

"We welcome the decision of the ADB to withdraw support for the Ministerial Conference and to refuse to attend. The ADB should now reconsider its institutional support for the GMS program as long as its members continue to legitimise the illegal junta.

"The involvement of UMFCCI and the junta-linked crony Zaw Min Win in the GMS Business Council is alarming and is a further sign that the junta and its cronies are using the program to

promote investment that can strengthen the junta and worsen the crisis in Myanmar caused by the military's illegal coup attempt.”

**More information:**

Justice For Myanmar, a group of covert activists campaigning for justice and accountability for the people of Myanmar, is calling for an end to military business and for federal democracy and a sustainable peace.

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