Myanmar junta chief visits key ally China

AFP- Myanmar's embattled junta chief arrived in China Tuesday – his first reported visit since leading a coup in 2021 – but analysts say the invitation is only a lukewarm endorsement from his key ally and could backfire.
Min Aung Hlaing was in the southwestern city of Kunming for a summit of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) – a group including China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia – starting Wednesday.

The junta shared photos of the senior general addressing a gathering of Chinese business leaders, and he is also expected to hold talks with officials.

When the military ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's elected civilian government in 2021, Chinese state media refused to describe it as a coup, preferring "major cabinet reshuffle".

China has stood by the junta since, even as others shun the generals over their brutal crackdown on dissent which opponents say includes massacring of civilians, razing villages with air and artillery strikes.

Richard Horsey, Crisis Group's senior Myanmar adviser, said Min Aung Hlaing had been lobbying for an official invitation ever since the coup, as a public show of support.

But Beijing has stressed the regional focus of the Kunming gathering, saying it wanted to consult "all sides" against "a background of a weakening global recovery and geopolitical turbulence".

"While this (invitation to the summit) still implies recognition as head of state, it does not have the same diplomatic weight as a bilateral invitation to visit Beijing," Horsey told AFP.

– Battlefield losses –

Ming Aung Hlaing's trip comes with the junta reeling from a devastating rebel offensive last year that seized an area roughly the size of Bosnia – much of it near the border with China.

Analysts say Beijing is worried about the possibility of the junta falling and suspicious of western influence among some of pro-democracy armed groups battling the military.

Myanmar is a vital part of Beijing's trillion-dollar Belt and Road initiative, with railways and pipelines to link China's landlocked southwest to the Indian Ocean.

"Beijing has now made clear its intentions for the Myanmar military to succeed," said Jason Tower of the United States Institute of Peace.

China has been reluctant to give a clear show of official recognition since the coup, Crisis Group's Horsey said, but this may be changing.

"China has pivoted to greater support for the regime – not because it is better disposed with the regime or its leader, but out of concern at a disorderly collapse of power in Naypyidaw," he said.

– Deep mistrust –

But the relationship is wracked by longstanding mistrust.

The junta's top brass are wary of China, insiders say – stemming from Beijing's support for an insurgency waged by the Communist Party of Burma in the 1960s and 1970s.

China gave its tacit backing to last year's rebel offensive, military supporters say, in return for the rebels dismantling online scam compounds in territory they captured.

Those compounds were run by and targeting Chinese citizens in a billion-dollar industry and major embarrassment for Beijing.

But the rebels pushed further and in August captured the city of Lashio – miles from the scam compound heartland and home to a regional military command.

The fall of Lashio, home to around 150,000 people to the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) was a step too far for Beijing, said Tower.

China has since cut electricity, water and internet services to the MNDAA's traditional homeland on the border with Yunnan province, a source close to the group told AFP.

A visit to China is "unlikely to resolve Min Aung Hlaing's internal troubles," said Tower.

"If anything, it could create new problems, as the general is likely to be perceived as making major economic and geo-strategic concessions to Beijing in exchange for Chinese assistance," he told AFP.

One demand from Beijing will be speeding up elections the junta has promised to hold, said Tower – polls China's foreign minister announced Beijing's backing for in August.

Opponents of the polls say they will be neither free nor fair while clashes continues across the country and with most of the popular political parties banned.

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