

Burma

Facebook Urged to Remove Military-Linked Co. Pages



(From L to R) Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing, Minister of Transport and Communications U Thant Sin Maung, Minister of Electricity and Energy U Win Khaing and Minister of Planning and Finance U Kyaw Win attend a ceremony inaugurating Mytel's network on Feb. 13, 2018. / Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing / Facebook

By **MOE MYINT** 5 June 2019

Yangon—Burma Campaign UK on Wednesday called on Facebook to ban nearly 30 pages belonging to the Myanmar military and military-backed companies including telecom operator Mytel; Myanmar Brewery, the brewer of Myanmar Premium, one of the best-selling beers in the country; and the military conglomerate Myanmar Economic Holdings.

Among the pages singled out by Burma Campaign UK, those for Mytel and the Myanmar Air Force both possess the blue ticks that signal them as verified accounts.

The UK-based lobbying group reiterated in its statement that Facebook has recently been criticized by the United Nations (UN), the U.S. Congress and the British Parliament for its failure to prevent hate speech that contributed to the spread of and incitement to violence against the Rohingya, the minority Muslim group in northern Rakhine forcibly expelled by the Myanmar military in what the UN has called genocide.

Although Facebook had previously removed military pages, fake accounts and military mouthpiece pages, the statement said, more than 25 military and military-backed companies' pages are still hosted on the platform. Pages are both directly and indirectly controlled by the army, but some reproduce military propaganda, the statement said.

"It [Facebook] is hosting an organization the United Nations has stated should be prosecuted for genocide. The military Facebook pages, with close to 300,000 followers, can be used at any time to incite hatred and build support for further military offensives against ethnic and religious minorities," it reads.

A UN fact-finding mission recently urged international companies to financially isolate the Myanmar military and its associates. Some military Facebook pages, or military-owned or controlled businesses, could use the platform to promote their strategic or business interests and profits, which could be channeled to the military, the statement said.

“Whether the Facebook pages are spreading military propaganda or promoting military-owned businesses, either way they are promoting part of an institution” accused of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, Burma Campaign UK director Mark Farmaner was quoted as saying in the statement.

Office of the Commander-in-Chief spokesperson Brigadier-General Zaw Min Tun, asked about the statement, told The Irrawaddy by phone Wednesday that he is aware of Facebook’s policies on hate speech. He defended the business pages, which he said mostly post advertisements and promotions.

“I just want to know what sort of hate speech is being spread by the MEC [the Myanmar Economic Corporation, a military-owned conglomerate] and Mytel Facebook pages? As far as I know, there are no racial [incitements] or hate speech on their pages at all,” he said.

Ko Myat Thu, an experienced and independent social media watchdog based in Yangon, said the latest call to ban military-affiliated Facebook pages is a reasonable demand from a human rights perspective, but from a technical point of view, it is up to Facebook to determine whether a page’s content violates their terms and conditions.

“If the pages are running military propaganda, then it could be removed,” he said. “But, if their actions are only for business purposes, then it will be tough to take them down, because Facebook thinks like a business,” he said.

Banning or removing the Facebook pages of military-run or backed companies would not effectively address hate speech, Ko Myat Thu said, but it could hurt audience engagement “a little bit” for some commercial enterprises in Myanmar, who he said use the Facebook platform extensively—and sometimes solely—for their promotional strategies.

“I don’t think being removed from Facebook would have a huge impact on companies like Myanmar Brewery, which already has a solid customer base across the country,” said Ko Myat Thu.

The companies listed in the Burma Campaign UK include the MEC, Myawaddy Bank, Myanmar Brewery Ltd., Mandalay Brewery, Dagon Beverages, Shwe Gandamar Wholesale, MECTEL, Kan Thar Yar Hospital, Myanmar Mobile Money, Indoor Skydiving Yangon and Shwe Pe Oo Tea, as well as Myawaddy Television and the Myanmar Navy and Air Force.

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