

# Burma : Ethnic armies rescue Myanmar's democratic forces

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**Parallel CRPH government opposed to military rule has taken sanctuary and is building alliances in ethnic rebel-controlled areas.**

Myanmar's post-coup crisis is teetering towards a breaking point as security forces ramp up brutality against unarmed protesting civilians with over 250 deaths and 2,200 arrests recorded across the nations since the military's February 1 democracy-suspending coup.

As international condemnation of the military crackdown mounts and leaders of the protest movement go into hiding to avoid reprisals, a parallel government is quietly forming in areas controlled by ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), a sanctuary that could give the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) of deposed lawmakers a fighting chance.

A growing number of those in the anti-military Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) resistance have sought refuge in Myanmar's eastern borderlands with EAOs who have long battled the military-dominated central state, including Kayin, Kayah and Mon armed groups and particularly the Karen National Union (KNU).

These EAOs have publicly denounced the coup and the military's newly formed State Administration Council (SAC) and have at times deployed troops to protect the CDM's right to peacefully demonstrate.

The rebel Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), for one, has publicly stated it will shelter and support any victims of the SAC and Tatmadaw, as the military is known in Myanmar. A military council announced today that the CRPH is considered by the SAC as an "unlawful association."

This picture taken on January 31, 2015 shows soldiers from the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)'s Seventh Brigade parading as part of celebrations marking the 66th Karen Revolution Day at their headquarters in Myanmar's eastern Kayin state. The KNLA is the armed wing of the Karen National Union (KNU) and is believed to have between 3,000 to 5,000 active fighters in its ranks. The KNU signed a ceasefire agreement with Myanmar's central government in 2012 but fighting has continued sporadically in several border areas, undermining the authorities' hopes to reach a nationwide ceasefire with all of the country's armed ethnic groups ahead of the 2015 general elections scheduled for the end of the year.

Aid workers who spoke with Asia Times estimate several hundred, including high-ranking leaders of the toppled National League for Democracy (NLD) Myanmar Police Force members and soldiers who have defected from isolated bases have taken shelter in EAO-controlled areas. They say many middle-class professionals have also sought refuge in peripheral ethnic areas and more are anticipated to flee as urban area violence escalates.

Of Myanmar's five international borders, only two are viable for sanctuary. India has already

received several hundred people, including scores of defecting police, and officials in bordering Mizoram state have vowed not to force anyone back. There is no safety for those fleeing the SAC in China, nor secure shelter with northern EAOs who seem so far to be sitting out the coup or at least not publicly condemning it.

That's apart from the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which has stated its support for the right to protest and in recent weeks has fought the Tatmadaw in multiple northern areas.

This leaves the eastern borderlands with Thailand, the traditional sanctuary spaces for dissidents and insurgents for decades, where previous umbrella organizations such as the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) had headquarters in KNU "liberated zones" during the 1990s. Thai authorities have announced contingency plans for constructing some 20 shelters along the border in likely areas where people could cross.

Talks are ongoing between the CRPH, the NLD-dominated parallel government established soon after the coup, and the Peace Process Steering Team (PPST), which represents the ten EAO signatory groups to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) as well as other armed groups and ethnic political parties.

The CRPH's appointed foreign minister, Zin Mar Aung, told the Myanmar Now news outlet on Friday, "We're discussing how we can work collectively in a situation like this. We are trying to have one united voice. There are still some suspicions left from the past. We are working together to erase them and build trust. We have slowly begun to establish some common ground now." CRPH Foreign Minister Zin Mar Aung in a file photo. Image : Facebook

A parallel government of "national unity" with roots in ethnic areas could soon emerge in some form. Many involved want to achieve some sort of understanding before the end of March to accord with the timetable for a new government to form under the constitution after last November's elections, which the NLD won in a landslide.

Some have suggested that rather than creating a formal structure that could easily bog down in past antagonisms that instead a genuine partnership is formed among a multitude of actors with stated common goals.

One model to possibly emulate is the General Strike Committee of Nationalities, a group formed by a number of younger and dynamic ethnic nationalities who have recently staged demonstrations throughout Myanmar and are already developing what they call an "intersectional revolution."

"Unity" in Myanmar is often used as a synonym for subservience, and many ethnic groups will rankle at being ordered around by Bamar elites now fleeing urban areas for ethnic area refuge.

The CRPH recently removed all EAOs in Myanmar from their terrorist and unlawful associations list, which is a welcome gesture, but many groups will wonder why the NLD didn't grant more of these good-will gestures while in power from 2016-2020.

Significantly, speculation of the formation of a Federal Army is spreading on social media, with snappy insignia and core objectives already produced : all they need now are recruits and resources, which will obviously be the hard part.

Some young activists are openly discussing armed resistance, emulating the formation of the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) following the 1988 pro-democracy uprising that was likewise brutally put down by the Tatmadaw.

This would be difficult to mount under current conditions and it is doubtful neighboring countries would look favorably on increased armed conflict on their borders.

However, under the right conditions, new and disciplined armed insurgent forces can rise : the Arakan Army (AA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) both formed in 2009 as start-up insurgencies under the KIA's tutelage and have since grown into two of Myanmar's deadliest EAOs.

Rising calls for a global arms embargo on Myanmar, if also applied to EAOs, would make their continued resistance problematic. The regional small arms market is unlikely to sustain any new anti-SAC armed group, especially if opposed by Thailand and China, which are both key weapons suppliers to not only the Tatmadaw but also many EAOs.

International donors have prioritized support for peaceful resistance and cautioned against any new armed group taking shape, which would simply fuel the carnage and more deeply entrench the Tatmadaw.

Myanmar's crisis is by now a full-blown humanitarian and human rights emergency. Western donors have a moral imperative to support the resistance in the name of democracy.

To atone for the abomination of money pits such as the Western donor-funded Joint Peace Fund (JPF), which squandered tens of millions of dollars on bankrupt pro-government processes that for years privileged the Tatmadaw. Western donor funds could now be repurposed and redirected to provide aid for anti-SAC networks, including in urban areas and emerging EAO safe zones.

Humanitarian action, including the provision of food, shelter and health, is now a priority. But activists also need communications tools, above all access to the internet and telecommunications to maintain networks of clandestine cells across the country.

Western humanitarian actors, many of whom are now decamping from Yangon, could effectively support ethnic service providers from neighboring Thailand, though the focus should be supporting those already on the ground and doing the job.

They are few and far between. Western donors hollowed out cross-border assistance a decade ago, privileging Yangon-based groups and insisting on formal registration with the government in their zeal to ingratiate the government of then-president Thein Sein. This included many media groups that had operated in exile and are now being targeted for their independent reporting by the Tatmadaw.

Many border-based groups already have a high level of capacity after years of experience of responding to Myanmar's civil wars and are well-placed to provide assistance for people displaced by the coup and crackdown.

The international community will soon need to decide whether to support and ensure that ethnic communities who have already suffered oppression and patterns of militarized violence now being savagely applied to people in Yangon, Mandalay, and other places, do not suffer further for sheltering anti-military resistance networks.

All Myanmar people mobilizing against the coup are in urgent need of sustained outside support. If the West fails to provide humanitarian assistance after years of boondoggle spending on hapless and hopeless Tatmadaw-manipulated peace initiatives, their failure to do so will be tantamount to betrayal, if not de facto association with crimes against humanity.

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• Asia Times. March 22, 2021

<https://asiatimes.com/2021/03/ethnic-armies-rescue-myanmars-democratic-forces/>

Map not reproduced here.

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