

# **Snatched from their beds, taken on the streets - the young men in Myanmar forced to fight the junta's losing war**

Thursday 24 October 2024, by [J.Esther](#), [RATCLIFFE Rebecca](#) (Date first published: 28 September 2024).

**After a string of humiliating defeats, the army has turned to press-gang young men into frontline duty - leaving distraught families unaware of their fate**

Than Htun, 29, was still in bed when the men came to his home in Yangon to take him away. "He couldn't prepare anything. They just ordered him to bring his national identity card, a copy of his census registration and two sets of clothes," recalled his sister, Khin May.

The group of soldiers and local officials were forcibly conscripting Than Htun into Myanmar's military. He would be made to fight for the country's widely loathed junta in its fierce war against pro-democracy fighters and ethnic armed groups.

The Myanmar junta [implemented a mandatory conscription law](#) for the first time this year, a move that has evoked terror across the country.

Those with the means to do so fled immediately, selling everything they owned and taking on debt to fund their escape. Queues stretched for hours outside embassies and many travelled to areas of the country under the control of opposition groups.

People who remain in military-controlled cities such as Yangon live with a constant sense of fear, paying bribes to local officials to avoid being drafted.

Families from across the country have told the *Observer* of how their loved ones have been snatched from their homes and forced to enlist, or taken from the streets by soldiers.

Since April, when the military began the actual process of conscription, which it made mandatory in February for men aged 18-35, it is believed 25,000 have been taken away to training camps and that 5,000 of these men have been deployed to the frontlines.

For the military, facing a severe shortage of manpower after a stream of humiliating defeats and defections, the conscription law could be critical to its survival. More than three years after it [seized power in a coup](#), ousting the government of Aung San Suu Kyi, it is unable to halt armed groups opposing its rule and losing control of vast areas along the borders.

"The military is losing continuously," said Morgan Michaels, research fellow for south-east Asian politics and foreign policy, at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. "Those losses, if they continue at that level, that's not sustainable."

Military defeats have escalated since October last year, when a coalition known as the Brotherhood Alliance launched a surprise offensive in northern Shan state. The military was already struggling to

control anti-junta groups - called people's defence forces - that had been formed by civilians after the coup to oppose the dictatorship, often with support from some of the more established ethnic armed factions that have long fought for greater independence.

The entry of the Brotherhood Alliance into the conflict [stretched the military even further](#). Over the months that followed, thousands of military personnel, including entire battalions, [were reported to have surrendered](#).

Little is known about the training conscripts will be given. Many fear they will be used as cannon fodder or porters - in effect, human shields sent out to clear mines or shield soldiers from gunfire.

The soldiers reassured Than Htun's family, telling them he would be sent for training and then returned to Yangon to work as a security guard. "For us, it was such a relief to hear that," said Khin May.

But it wasn't true. Instead, he was sent to Rakhine state on the western border, the centre of some of the worst fighting, where the military is desperately trying to hold back the Arakan Army, a member of the Brotherhood Alliance.

Than Htun would call his family whenever he could get a phone signal. His sister remembers every conversation. At first, he was assigned as a security guard in a downtown area of the state capital, Sittwe. Then, he told them, he was required to board a ship to Maungdaw in the north of Rakhine, though a fierce storm left them stranded in the middle of the sea, preventing them from continuing. "Food had run out and they were forced to drink rainwater," she said.

Others faced a worse fate; many soldiers were wounded after one of the military's naval vessels was attacked by a drone. Than Htun told her of how his unit was sent to rescue them.

At the end of July, Than Htun called again one evening to say he had to take a speedboat to Maungdaw. "It was the last phone call he made to us. We haven't been able to contact him since then," she said.

The military has said it aims to conscript up to 60,000 people by the end of the year, with regime-controlled media saying this will help the junta eliminate its opponents, whom it considers to be terrorists seeking to destabilise the country.

In a statement on Thursday, the military said it invited "terrorist" groups to stop fighting and solve problems politically through elections - an unprecedented offer that is likely intended to show its ally China that it is committed to stability. Among the public, it was widely viewed as delusional and disingenuous. Hours later, the military carried out airstrikes in northern Shan state. Groups aligned with the pro-democracy movement want a complete removal of the military from politics - something the junta is unlikely to accept.

Than Htun was among the hundred of thousands who took to the streets to call for the return of democracy after the military seized power on 1 February 2021. The armed forces responded to their peaceful protests by opening fire and detaining, or even torturing and killing, anyone suspected of opposing junta rule, prompting people to take up arms.

The ensuing conflict has turned the country upside down. Basic services such as healthcare have collapsed, millions are displaced and poverty rates have soared. According to the UN, nearly half the population was living below the national poverty line of 1,590 kyats (about 50p) a day by the end of 2023, up from 24.8% in 2017.

Mandatory conscription, which has driven away young people, has only worsened economic hardship.

Saw John was another young man snatched from his home. He delivered food by bicycle for a living and was the only breadwinner in the home he shared with his elderly parents. He was taken to a police station for refusing conscription, then to an interrogation centre and later to a training camp in Shan state.

His parents were promised support, but it never came. Unable to pay rent, they were kicked out by their landlord.

Saw John's mother died at the end of August. "What I think is that she died of mental anguish after losing contact with her son," said her close friend Win Khaing. "After their son was arrested, they hardly talked to each other. I had to keep watching them at night, for a month, because I was worried that they might attempt suicide."

Win Khaing felt outraged, he said. "But I can't do anything because I am only human. I cannot protect myself from guns. I don't want to be tortured by the soldiers."

In the early days of conscription, some would agree to be drafted in exchange for financial incentives raised by others in their ward.

Reports suggest far fewer people are now willing to do this - and that the military has in turn resorted to greater numbers of arrests.

Among these was the 27-year-old brother of Thidar, who was returning from work on a peanut field last month when he and other labourers were arrested. Just two days later, they were sent to Taunggyi in Shan state.

"Now we are scared even of going to the forest near our village," Thidar said. The whole village was distraught. "Not only my younger brother and nephew but also all other conscripts are my cousins and relatives. My nephew has a wife who is pregnant," she added.

If they are to fight, she would rather they were doing so for the anti-junta resistance. "We do not have freedom any more. We are working for our livelihoods in fear - thinking of how the military may know where we are," said Thidar.

Like Than Htun's sister, she has no idea of her brother's fate. It is the poorest who are being targeted under conscription, according to Khin May, not the children of military officers or the wealthy, who have already fled abroad.

Than Htun's mother still believes he is alive and that it is possible he has been arrested and detained by the anti-junta forces. She has diabetes and hypertension, and her condition has worsened since he was taken in April. She prays continually, with tears in her eyes, asking for him to stay safe.

"We want to know exactly whether my brother is alive or [has] died," Khin May said. "If he [has] died, we want to get his body back."

*The names of interviewees have been changed throughout*

**Rebecca Ratcliffe**

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**P.S.**

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