

Burma

Myanmar Ethnic Armed Groups - Signatories of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement Snub Myanmar's Armed Forces Day

Wednesday 24 March 2021, by [The Irrawaddy](#) (Date first published: 23 March 2021).

Yangon — Some signatories of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) say they will not attend an event organized by Myanmar's military to mark Armed Forces Day on March 27.

The military regime's invitation to the Karen National Union (KNU) to attend the event spread widely on social media, prompting the ethnic armed group to tweet: "The KNU will only attend ceremonies that reflect dignity, humanity, justice and freedom for all."

A KNU official said: "The event coincides with the meeting of the central committee. The meeting will last for a month so it is unlikely that we will attend the Armed Forces Day event."

Military tensions are escalating between the military regime and KNU Brigade 5 in Papun District, Karen State, with casualties and residents being forced from their homes.

The KNU has provided security for protests against the military dictatorship.

U Than Khae, chairman of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), which also signed the NCA in 2015, said the armed group would not attend the event.

"I haven't received a personal invitation. It might have been sent to the ABSDF office. We have no plans to attend," he said.

Another signatory, Pa-O National Liberation Organization (PNLO), said it would not attend the event. Major Kham San, spokesman for the Restoration Council of Shan State, said he does not know if the armed group has been invited and the central committee has not made a decision.

The NCA signatory has offered asylum to anti-regime protesters, military personnel, police and government employees participating in the civil disobedience movement in its territory. It said it has already given asylum to some individuals.

The New Mon State Party (NMSP)'s internal affairs officer Nai Banyar Leh said he did not know if the party headquarters has received an invitation and could not say if the group would attend the March 27 event.

The Peace Process Steering Team of the NCA signatories announced in February that it fully supports the strikes against the military regime and has halted political dialogue with the military council.

The ABSDF, Arakan Liberation Party, Chin National Front, Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, KNU, Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council, PNLO, RCSS, NMSP and Lahu Democratic Union signed the NCA with the government in 2015.

Armed Forces Day, also known as Resistance Day, is celebrated annually on March 27, the day Myanmar's army pushed back Japanese forces in 1945. The event was canceled last year due to COVID-19. Myanmar's military is planning to organize the event this year.

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Dissidents Fleeing Myanmar Junta Find Shelter and Support with Ethnic Armed Groups

An increasing number of activists, dissidents and politicians have sought refuge in Myanmar's eastern borderlands with ethnic armed groups, in particular the Karen National Union (KNU). But this situation is not new for the ethnic armed groups. In 1988, thousands of students and activists fled to the Thai-Myanmar border and the border with India to seek shelter and to take up the armed struggle against the then junta. Those areas were known as "liberated areas."

Now hundreds of newly-arrived activists (including journalists fleeing the military regime) have taken refuge in insurgent-controlled areas in Karen, Kayah, Mon and Shan States along Myanmar's eastern border with Thailand.

On Monday, military-owned Myawaddy Television announced that the regime was looking into reports that many NLD members and supporters had fled to KNU-controlled areas in the country's southeast.

Military information team leader Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun said during a press conference on Tuesday that more than 1,000 people had fled to border areas in the country's southeast to evade arrest.

Known as ethnic armed organizations (EOs), the ethnic groups have publicly denounced the junta's Feb.1 coup and the rule of the military's State Administration Council (SAC). Karen insurgents in Karen State deployed troops to protect peaceful anti-regime protesters.

The Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) has stated publicly that it will shelter and support any victims of the SAC and the military.

Several ethnic groups, with the notable exception of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), in the north of Myanmar along the border with China are supportive of the coup and will likely focus more on signing ceasefire agreements with the military.

Most notably, a parallel government – the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) – has formed in the areas under the control of the EOs. The CRPH is made up of elected lawmakers

from the ousted National League for Democracy-led (NLD) government.

The same thing happened in 1990 after the then military regime refused to hand over power to the elected representatives of the NLD following its 1990 election victory. Then, many MPs fled to the eastern borderlands to escape imprisonment and the junta's crackdown. Those MPs formed the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB). That government in exile was known to be ineffective but received backing from the US and the West. The exiled government was dissolved in September 2012.

Talks between the CRPH and several ethnic groups in the south are ongoing. Sources said that without military representatives sitting in the meetings, there is a free flow of discussion between the CRPH and EAOs without fear.

There has been some talk on social media about the idea of creating a "federal army". Just like in 1988, some young activists who have fled to areas controlled by the EAOs now want to receive military training from those ethnic armies. But it is not known how and where they will find support and resources.

A number of new EAOs, such as the Arakan Army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) have emerged in the last 10 years, but initially they received assistance and backing from the KIA and, subsequently, from other powerful ethnic armies along the Chinese border. They have been allowed to open offices and to run businesses in China.

The SAC has warned ethnic groups not to establish contact with the CRPH. But a member of the Peace Process Steering Team along the Thai-Myanmar border said that the two sides continue to hold talks. Last week, the CRPH removed all EAOs in Myanmar from the terrorist and unlawful associations list. Several ethnic armies have had unstable relationships with the NLD government in the past.

The junta has now invited EAOs to attend the upcoming Armed Forces Day on the 27th of March in Myanmar's capital Naypyitaw. Many have declined the invitation.

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