

Frontier Fridays: The Top Stories in Myanmar this Week

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Welcome to Frontier Fridays. This week the National Unity government formally declared war on the junta, the international community tried to encourage dialogue and a ceasefire, resistance fighters launched attacks against military-backed telecommunications company Mytel, and ultranationalist anti-Muslim monk Wirathu was released after around 10 months in prison.

NUG declares war

After months of rumours of an impending “D-Day”, the National Unity Government’s acting President Duwa Lashi La broadcast a livestream on Facebook, in which he said the parallel government is launching “a people’s defensive war against the military junta”. The NUG went on to declare a state of emergency and announced that all ministries and departments under the military government are shut down. The announcement seems more symbolic than anything. The NUG doesn’t appear to have significantly scaled up its capacity to wage war, and Duwa Lashi La still referenced a seemingly decentralised approach to the conflict.

He called People’s Defence Forces to take control of their areas and protect people, and for junta-appointed officials to immediately resign. “Arrange to protect the safety or lives and properties of the people in your respective villages and towns,” he said. He had similar words for ethnic armed organisations, asking them to immediately attack the Tatmadaw and “control your lands”. The framing here is crucial as he is basically acknowledging that these lands belong to ethnic people and encouraging the armed groups to fight their own battles there. He also mentioned Border Guard Forces and other military-allied militias, urging them to “join with the people”.

While we aren’t seeing any nationwide, coordinated attacks yet, the announcement has seemingly emboldened guerrilla fighters to escalate assassinations and bomb attacks. Incidents were reported across Yangon this week, including a bomb attack in Sanchaung Township that reportedly left two soldiers dead. There were reports of the Karen National Liberation Army clashing with the Tatmadaw in Tanintharyi Region, the Kachin Independence Army fighting along the border of Kachin State and Sagaing Region, and the Karenni Army attacking a police station in Kayah State alongside civilian resistance forces. While there have been a lot of clashes and attacks, none of them seem particularly different from what we were seeing before the declaration.

Controversial calls for dialogue

The declaration came just days after ASEAN’s special envoy on the Myanmar crisis, Erywan Yusof, said the Tatmadaw had agreed to a four-month ceasefire for the delivery of humanitarian aid. He admitted at the time that he did not speak with pro-democracy forces, despite his mandate requiring him to consult with all parties involved. The junta later denied that it ever agreed to the ceasefire, and it seems like a moot point now that the NUG has declared war.

Both the United States and United Kingdom expressed mild opposition to the announcement, with the UK's new ambassador, Pete Vowles, [tweeting](#) that the UK "supports peaceful efforts to restore democracy" and calls on "all parties to engage in dialogue". An unnamed spokesperson for the US State Department, meanwhile, [said](#) that the US "does not condone violence as a solution to the current crisis in Burma and calls on all sides to remain peaceful". More damaging for the NUG, the chair of the Karen National Union's Dooplaya District [called](#) on the parallel government to withdraw its declaration of war. Saw Shwe Maung has grown increasingly hostile to the NUG, warning Karen people in May not to be "taken advantage of" and then ordering his subordinates not to accept PDF fighters and NUG members in their territory. But Saw Shwe Maung's position also represents an internal schism within the KNU, with the group's general secretary, [telling](#) Karen News that the KNU "will work together with any organizations that oppose the military dictatorship", calling all opponents of dictatorship "our friends".

The NUG responded to some of this criticism, essentially arguing that it had no choice but to declare war and that it cannot negotiate with a party that is unwilling to make any concessions. "Every experienced person focused on peace building and conflict studies knows that there have to be pre-conditions before dialogue can happen. A period of time is needed. A change in political circumstance is needed before dialogue can happen. Such conditions and changes need to come first. Until then, we should not be pressured to hold dialogue," said the NUG's foreign affairs minister Zin Mar Aung. Kyaw Moe Tun, Myanmar's ambassador to the UN who is loyal to the NUG, also said as a diplomat he would prefer to pursue dialogue for a "peaceful settlement", but said the military's "cruelty" has gone "beyond what we can tolerate". Both Zin Mar Aung and Kyaw Moe Tun blamed the international community's lack of action for forcing them to this decision.

Telcos under attack

Telecommunications companies were under attack this week, both literally by guerrilla fighters and figuratively by military regime restrictions. State media accused "political extremists and terrorists" of setting fire to a Mytel tower in Sagaing Region's Yinmabin Township, a military-linked telecommunication company, on September 4. From there, the attacks only escalated, with 11 more towers reportedly [destroyed](#) in Budalin Township in the same region. These attacks were fairly well coordinated - most were destroyed by simultaneous explosives, some of which were caught on [video](#). DVB [claimed](#) that four more Mytel towers were destroyed in Pale Township and another [destroyed](#) in Taze, both of which are also in Sagaing, while [one more](#) was hit in Magway Region's Pauk Township.

The rampant attacks on telco towers will only confirm in the minds of Telenor executives that they made the right decision to exit the country. Unfortunately for the Norwegian operator, executing that plan is proving a little difficult. [Sources told Nikkei](#) that the military junta is reluctant to approve the sale of Telenor's Myanmar subsidiary to Lebanese company M1. The sale has been opposed by activists, who claim it would be irresponsible of Telenor given M1's track record, but the junta obviously has different concerns. "For various reasons, probably including reluctance to see more telecom infrastructure controlled by foreigners, ministry officials have made it very clear they are not comfortable with M1," one industry source was quoted as saying. As Nikkei points out, M1 is owned by Muslims and based in a Muslim-majority country, which previously [caused problems](#) for Qatari telco Ooredoo. This could be a smokescreen, of course: the junta may have a different buyer in mind - say, someone from a friendly country to the north - or it may just not like the optics of the pull out, given the fire-sale is obviously an indictment of the coup and the business environment. Either way, it will delay M1's recently [announced](#) plan to invest \$330 million over three years.

Wirathu released, Tay Za pushes back

The junta finally got around to [releasing anti-Muslim monk](#) Wirathu, more than 10 months after his

arrest and seven months after the coup. According to Myanmar Now, his sedition charges have been dropped, after three agreements were made with the junta. He is not allowed to tell people he has been set free (cat's already out of the bag there), is not allowed to give any public interviews, and the junta is responsible for his security. Myanmar Now also reported that he is still recovering from a severe bout of COVID-19 and is also suffering unrelated ailments in both of his arms. It also seems The Irrawaddy's earlier claim about the case not being able to be dropped wasn't quite right, as a military spokesperson confirmed the Yangon Region government dropped the case. BBC Burmese reported that Wirathu will be ordained as a monk again in a ceremony expected to be held in the next few days in Yangon.

In other (alleged) military ally news, Tay Za's Htoo Group of Companies issued a preliminary response to the United Kingdom's sanctioning of the tycoon and his businesses, saying it "does not agree" with the reasons for the decision. It also questioned the lack of publicly available evidence to support the UK's assertion that Tay Za has been "providing financial support and arms" to the Tatmadaw. It's true that the UK didn't offer much explanation for its accusation that Tay Za is continuing to serve as an arms broker for the Tatmadaw. The available public evidence we've seen are two Irrawaddy articles relying on anonymous sources. One accused Tay Za of accompanying a military delegation to Russia, while the other [said](#) Tay Za is close to the alleged arms broker connected to the assassination plot against UN ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun. Neither are particularly well stood up, and we imagine if Tay Za had any involvement in the Kyaw Moe Tun plot, the United States would have moved against him first.

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