

Burma

# Australia's Embrace of Defectors Sends Shockwaves Through Myanmar Military

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**The Australian government's granting of protection to defectors from the Myanmar regime's armed forces has elicited interest even among senior officers, especially those who oppose military rule in the country. Some have already quit the military, which has become notorious for killing its own people.**

The Sydney Morning Herald reported last week that the Australian government has accepted defectors seeking asylum down under since January [1].

Since the coup in February last year, Myanmar's military has been struggling with an unprecedented and rising number of striking soldiers. According to some army defectors, the main reason is the people's hatred of soldiers due to the regime's brutal crackdowns on protesters following the takeover. So far, the junta has killed more than 1,600 people mainly for anti-regime activism. Another reason is the growing and effective popular armed resistance and guerrilla warfare against the regime's troops. As a result, soldiers no longer dare to step out of their units alone in uniform. Whenever army casualties are reported, people are elated.

Given this situation, the Myanmar military has started to see strikers quitting their battalions since the middle of last year. The number keeps growing. According to Myanmar's parallel National Unity Government (NUG), the number of army defectors so far is nearly 3,000, including some battalion commanders—the highest position among those to defect so far.

Then came the news about Australia's acceptance of army strikers last Friday, which has caused interest in defecting to rise, said Nyi Thuta, a former army captain who left his unit right after the coup last year and now helps his fellow soldiers to defect via his Facebook page People's Goal, formerly known as People's Soldiers.

"In three days, I have received hundreds of enquiries about defections from people who are still in the service," the ex-captain told The Irrawaddy on Tuesday.

Unlike before, he said, there were some senior level officers whose ranks were higher than lieutenant colonel showing interest.

"But they have someone else ask about it for safety reasons. Also there are some who previously were hesitant to leave," he added.

Lin Htet Aung, an ex-army captain who is on strike and now helps soldiers to defect via his Facebook page People's Embrace, told The Irrawaddy that Australia's granting of asylum to army defectors has sent shockwaves through Myanmar military circles, adding that he has received hundreds of enquiries—including, "Is it true?"—within days of the news, even from senior officers.

"We can say that it's good news for those trying to join the Civil Disobedience Movement [CDM, a movement of civil servants and others striking against the regime]," he said.

The former captain, who left his unit last year, said there are two types of defector: those who leave their battalions to join the people's armed resistance against the regime, and those who leave behind the notorious army just to live in peace with their families.

"The asylum news is really encouraging, especially for the second type," he added.

## **Huge incentive**

Dr. Miemie Winn Byrd, a professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) in Hawaii, said military defection is really an important strategy for a successful resistance, especially in Myanmar's case, in which the army has unrivaled fire power.

"Weapons don't get up and shoot themselves if they don't have a human behind it. You can deprive the trigger pullers. The resistance side doesn't have fire power but you can tackle it from a different perspective by depriving soldiers," she said.

It has long been known that there are many in the military who are reform-minded and are sick of the institution's deteriorating image. In reality, the military's restrictions, including on the freedom of movement of individual members, as well difficulties like accommodation and how to make a living after defecting, make even those who are eager to join the CDM hesitate.

Ex-captain Nyi Thuta said a lack of guarantees for their wellbeing is a great obstacle for soldiers who want to join the CDM. He recalled the rise in defection enquiries last year after the National Unity Government (NUG) called for a nationwide armed struggle against the regime in September [\[2\]](#).

"I received hundreds of messages at the time but no significant number of defections followed," he said.

But this time seems different.

Dr. Byrd said that according to previous studies, a third country incentive is really important in defection, and the Australian government's offer of asylum to defectors is great for those who want to leave the army.

"This is a huge development for the people's side while a huge negative for the military side. When Australia [\[opens\]](#) themselves, other countries may open up as well, including other European countries," she added.

Daw Zin Mar Aung, the foreign minister of the NUG, agreed that a third country incentive is also an effective tool in the fight against the regime.

While she admitted the NUG's limited budget meant it was unable to offer monetary incentives for army defections, the shadow government has engaged with some countries to provide asylum for defectors.

"We asked them, if you can't assist us with arms, please accept defectors because it's also supporting the revolution in another way. That's why some countries have already welcomed defectors, but not publicly," she said.

“My message to possible defectors is countries have their limit for annual refugee acceptance. So, the earlier you leave, the earlier you will get to a third country,” the foreign minister added.

Meanwhile, the regime is struggling hard to hold on to its men. Ex-captain Lin Htet Aung said that since Australia’s asylum news broke, the junta has tightened restrictions in the military.

“They launched a peer-to-peer scrutinizing system while imposing restrictions on the use of mobile phones and social media as well as the freedom of movement,” he said.

The recent defection of a battalion commander, Myo Min Tun, was a huge blow for the junta because he was the highest-ranking officer to defect so far. The lieutenant colonel left his troops on the front line in Karen State in February, according to Nyi Thuta, adding that the number of defecting battalion commanders so far has risen to nearly five.

Unsurprisingly, the junta’s No. 2 man, Vice Senior General Soe Win, labeled army defectors as “deserters” who violated the rules and ran away from their unit fearing punishment. He also blamed some countries, local resistance groups and the media for destroying military unity by “praising the deserters as democracy heroes.” Coincidentally, his comments came on the same day as the Australian asylum news broke.

Nyi Thuta said the battalion commander’s defection reflected just how badly the situation within the military had deteriorated.

“After seeing the lieutenant colonels’ defection, I wouldn’t be surprised if there were more, or even some from higher levels,” he said.

“The more third country incentives, the more defections from senior levels there will be,” he added.

## **The Irrawaddy**

*Editor’s Note: Dr. Miemie Winn Byrd’s comments in this story do not represent the positions and policies of the US government or any other agencies.*

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## **P.S.**

- The Irrawaddy. 23 March 2022:  
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/australias-embrace-of-defectors-sends-shockwaves-through-myanmar-military.html>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/australia-issues-protection-visas-to-myanmar-military-defectors-20220316-p5a53v.html>

[2] <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-shadow-govt-declares-war-on-military-regime.html>