

Myanmar - ‘We will win’: Northern Alliance doubles down

Monday 6 February 2023 (Date first published: 30 January 2023).

Some powerful ethnic armed groups are increasingly throwing their weight behind Myanmar’s pro-democracy movement, seemingly defying China and other allies to take on the military.

Contents

- [Splitting the FPNCC](#)
- [The three brothers](#)
- [Secrets revealed](#)
- [Back to camp](#)

A pickup truck with four-wheel drive rumbled down a small hill and then came to a sudden stop. For the past few hours, we had been winding through a long road in the northern part of Shan State, where the trees on both sides were so thick that we couldn’t see anything from the windows. I quickly jumped out of my seat, taken aback by the view in front of me.

What I saw was an abandoned military camp, looking particularly imposing in an otherwise empty valley.

The training yard was the size of a football field, with well-built dormitories large enough to accommodate thousands of recruits. There was a half-finished military hospital and a two-storey house with a swimming pool, believed to be the residence of top leaders.



In January last year, TNLA soldiers patrol territory newly seized from the RCSS. (Mar Naw | Frontier)

“I heard some rumours that there was even a Thai massage here,” quipped a soldier from the Ta’ang National Liberation Army.

In January last year, the TNLA [invited journalists](#) into their territory, partly to show off their recent gains against the Restoration Council of Shan State, which used this now abandoned camp as its northern headquarters. After signing the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement with the government in 2015, the RCSS pushed northward into territory controlled by the TNLA and Shan State Progress Party. But after the coup, the TNLA and SSPP were able to flush out the RCSS, gaining the upper

hand in Kyaukme, Hsipaw and Namtu townships.

“The Myanmar military helped them, and they were able to build a fortress using heavy machinery in the jungle,” alleged Tar Khun Haw, a TNLA officer based in Kyaukme Township. “Our military camps are a lot poorer and shabbier than this.”

We spent about an hour touring the camp, not knowing it would come back to life in 2023.

Splitting the FPNCC

After the coup, facing mass peaceful protests and then armed uprisings across the country, the junta made overtures to the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee, a negotiating bloc of seven powerful ethnic armed groups with ties to China, which had refused to sign the NCA.

The group includes the United Wa State Army (the most powerful non-state armed group in Myanmar), the National Democratic Alliance Army, the SSPP, the TNLA, the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and the Kachin Independence Army. The latter four are part of a separate, smaller group called the Northern Alliance.

A senior leader from one Northern Alliance group, who asked to remain anonymous, told *Frontier* the FPNCC was pressured by Beijing to meet with the regime in December 2021, with the negotiation taking place at the NDAA’s headquarters in Mongla. The same official said the regime tried to pressure them to sign a peace deal, which they rejected.

But the regime’s overtures appear to have caused a bit of a schism within the FPNCC. The UWSA, NDAA and SSPP have become increasingly open to negotiations with the junta, meeting with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing twice in 2022.

The UWSA and NDAA demanded greater autonomy and political recognition of the territories they control, while the SSPP made the slightly stranger request to consolidate all Bamar-majority regions into one state, to put it on an even playing field with the ethnic minority states.

The KIA, which is the second largest force in the FPNCC, has been the main outlier in the other direction. The KIA has openly aligned itself with the National Unity Government, a cabinet appointed by elected lawmakers in defiance of the 2021 coup, and fought alongside People’s Defence Forces against the military.

The KIA has also defied China and the UWSA, declining to attend an FPNCC meeting in Wa State in September last year, citing COVID-19 and heavy fighting.

“China is a powerful and important friend for us. But I understand that the Myanmar military is an evil enemy that the KIA must completely defeat,” said Mar J*, a KIA officer who lives in the group’s headquarters in Laiza.

The KIA says it has already given military training to tens of thousands of new resistance fighters, and supported PDFs in Sagaing Region, particularly the northern townships on the border with Kachin State. Mar J said he was once part of a deployment that travelled some 200 miles to fight alongside PDFs in Sagaing’s Katha Township.

“When we entered a village in Sagaing, at first the villagers didn’t dare to come out because of our uniforms. But when one of them shouted, ‘It’s the KIA! The Kachin soldiers are coming,’ everyone ran out and surrounded to hug us. They were dancing with happiness,” he told *Frontier* by phone in

January. "I was crying and kept saying repeatedly to them that we will fight till the end, we will win, we will win."

Mr Jason Tower, Myanmar country director for the United States Institute for Peace, said despite having a close relationship with China, the KIA is "more democratic" than some other armed groups, and therefore "has no choice but to often upset the Chinese and prioritize response to the sentiments of the Kachin public".

He also said the KIA benefits from Laiza being located on the Chinese border, because Beijing tends to react angrily if the military's attacks violate its territory.

"As such, this does work as something of a deterrent against military attacks right on the border with China, working in favor of the KIA," he said.



A two-storey villa with swimming pool at the camp visited by Frontier. (Mar Naw | Frontier)

The three brothers

The remaining three armed groups in the FPNCC are the TNLA, AA and MNDAA. Part of the Northern Alliance with the KIA, in recent years this trio has stood more on its own, known collectively as the Three Brotherhood Alliance.

While they haven't aligned themselves with the pro-democracy movement as explicitly as the KIA, they have become increasingly open about providing training and support to some resistance groups.

"MNDAA and TNLA have become MUCH more anti-junta in their public statements over the past two months," said Tower. "The MNDAA in particular has started referring to the military as the 'military coup regime,'" a common term in the pro-democracy movement vernacular.

For both the AA and TNLA, 2022 was a time of relative peace after years of brutal fighting. The TNLA had finally expelled the RCSS from northern Shan, while the AA mostly observed a ceasefire with the Tatmadaw after major clashes from 2018-2020, with only a four-month window of fighting last year.

Both groups used the peace and the Tatmadaw's distraction to build up administrative control in their territories and prepare for future fighting.

"In 2022, I had to attend extracurricular courses. Commando combat training was quite tough and lasted for seven months. I believe many well-trained and good fighters will emerge this year," said a soldier from one of the three groups who asked not to be identified.

The TNLA has gathered thousands of new troops in Tangyan, Kyaukme and Hsipaw townships, where it says it has launched local administrations, judiciaries, schools and a Federal Law Academy.

The MNDAA's information department told *Frontier* that since the coup, the group has launched administrative functions in some parts of Kutkai and Hseni townships, the Mongko area of Muse Township and some rural parts of the Kokang Self-Administered Zone.

The group also claimed it was able to establish a fully "liberated area" in one village tract in the Kokang SAZ, which was lost during the 2009 Tatmadaw offensive that defined the career of Min Aung Hlaing.

U Than Soe Naing, a political analyst, said that the military strength and fighting ability of the Three Brotherhood Alliance could be a gamechanger in the battle against the junta. He said that the ethnic armed groups may be carefully preparing for this rare opportunity.

While many PDFs were initially disappointed by the Three Brotherhood Alliance's silence on the pro-democracy movement, the curtain has slowly raised over the last year, exposing more and more of what they've been doing behind the scenes.

In December last year, fighting suddenly exploded in Namshan Township, where the TNLA is headquartered, after the military airdropped more than 100 soldiers. The raid appeared partially botched, with some Tatmadaw troops dropped in the wrong place, suffering heavy casualties. The TNLA claimed it killed around 48 enemy soldiers, while the junta said it seized and destroyed a cache of weapons, which the TNLA denied.

TNLA Secretary General Tar Bone Kyaw told local media that the group's position on the junta had been cemented after that battle. "The oppression of the military council is too lawless," he said.



Inside a dormitory at the camp which was seized from the RCSS by the TNLA early last year. (Mar Naw | Frontier)

Secrets revealed

On New Year's Day, the MNDAA made its own big reveal, announcing the formation of a new brigade, which included secondments of soldiers from resistance groups formed since the coup.

The group's information department confirmed to *Frontier* that the brigade includes soldiers from the prominent Bamar People's Liberation Army and also works with members of the mass strike known as the Civil Disobedience Movement and protest leaders.

The MNDAA said the newly formed brigade will join its other three in fighting to overthrow the military, claiming the group has engaged in 800 battles since the coup, with clashes taking place every month. The MNDAA said its two goals are to recover its lost territory and eradicate the military junta.

In 2009, the military forced the MNDAA out of its Kokang territory, which it failed to retake in a 2015 offensive. The MNDAA said at the time, it seemed most people in Myanmar sided with the Tatmadaw.

“They didn’t understand our feelings because the Kokang region and central Myanmar are too far away, and because of the language barrier,” said the information officer. Most Kokang people speak Mandarin as their first language.

The MNDAA said it would welcome any group that understands the political aspirations of the Kokang people and is willing to work to a common goal but wouldn’t accept anybody who wants their help with nothing in return.

“Now everyone is welcome to walk the same road, but if someone comes to you only after you achieve your victory, it’s dishonest,” the information officer warned.

Despite its increasing support for the broader pro-democracy movement, he said that the MNDAA has no relationship with the NUG and criticised the parallel government’s weak outreach to ethnic armed groups, echoing [comments](#) made earlier by the TNLA.

Back to camp

In January, Mandalay-PDF, under the NUG’s chain of command, held a special reception and military parade, which was publicly covered on social media. Members of the NUG’s Ministry of Defence met with five PDF battalions and discussed plans for this year.

“2023 is the year when we are determined to win. We are now stronger politically and militarily than the junta,” said Mandalay-PDF leader Storm in a statement posted by the NUG.

From a glance, the name of the bustling old military camp, now full of PDF recruits, was clear to this reporter. The TNLA refused to comment on the matter, and told *Frontier* that while it sometimes meets with the NUG’s committee on alliances, it still has no direct contact with central leadership.

“It’s an important time for us. It’s a time for balancing and recalibrating. Because the military is very harsh, war news must be very secretive,” TNLA spokesperson Colonel Tar Parn La said.

Since early 2022, *Frontier* understands that Mandalay-PDF troops have been receiving training from the TNLA, and going on to attack junta forces in Pyin Oo Lwin, Naung Cho, Mogok and Thabeikkyin townships, on the border between Shan State and Mandalay Region. But TNLA sources said PDFs are not allowed to launch attacks in their territory.

Many resistance forces are hoping 2023 will be the year to turn the tide of the war against the military regime, and the entrance of the TNLA and MNDAA could be one factor in making that dream a reality.

“Hey, mister reporter, you will hear earth-shaking news from Shan State this year, that’s all I can say,” my source from the TNLA said before hanging up the phone.

FRONTIER

** Denotes use of a pseudonym for security reasons.*

P.S.

- FRONTIER MYANMAR. JANUARY 30, 2023:

<https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/we-will-win-northern-alliance-doubles-down/>