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Ethnic army overruns junta command center in Myanmar's Kokang region

Ethnic rebels have overrun a key military command center in northern Myanmar, taking control of the city of Laukkai and accepting the surrender of hundreds of soldiers, in what analysts called a stunning blow to the junta's grasp on power in the region.

Fighters with the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, or MNDAA, stormed the junta's Kokang regional command center, the largest base in northern Shan state near the Chinese border late on Thursday, prompting soldiers in the facility to lay down their arms, despite the military's attempt to defend the facility from afar with artillery fire and airstrikes.

Zachary Abuza, a professor at the National War College in Washington and an adjunct at Georgetown University who writes commentaries to Radio Free Asia, called the MNDAA's occupation of the Laukkaing Regional Operation Command "a significant development" in the conflict between the military and anti-junta forces.

ecoi.net description:

Shan State: Fighters of the ethnic armed group Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) overrun key junta command center, taking control of the city of Laukkai

Country:
Myanmar

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“This was the regional operational command headquarters, and that [the military] surrendered in the end without a shot being fired is both very significant and telling that the regime could not support them beyond airstrikes,” he said in comments emailed to RFA.

The MNDAA seized control of the facility in Kokang’s capital Laukkai despite military assets that included heavy weapons, armored vehicles and a vast stockpile of arms and ammunition, as well as soldiers from the junta’s 55th Division. The division was recently mobilized to contend with an ethnic offensive that has made significant gains in Shan state since its launch in late October.

A source close to the command of the junta’s Laukkaing Department, who spoke on condition of anonymity due to security concerns, confirmed to RFA Burmese on Friday that the MNDAA is now in complete control of Laukkai.

There are seven military battalions under the Regional Operation Command in Laukkai, and sources estimate that up to 2,000 soldiers and pro-junta militia fighters were based there.

The MNDAA, the Ta’ang National Liberation Army and the Arakan Army together are known as the Three Brotherhood Alliance of ethnic armies, which launched Operation 1027 against the military in late October and has since reportedly captured 10 townships in northern Shan state and seized control of more than 200 junta camps.

On Friday, the Three Brotherhood Alliance claimed that “around 2,389 troops and their families” had surrendered to its forces following the attack on the Laukkaing Regional Operation Command, without providing a breakdown of the figures, in a post to the social media platform X.

Troops withdraw to Lashio

A source with knowledge of the situation, who also declined to be named, said that following the surrender junta troops and their family members were sent to Lashio, the largest city in northern Shan state and the headquarters of the military’s Northeast Command, located some 200 kilometers (125 miles) northeast of Mandalay. Further details were not provided.

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Videos of junta soldiers surrendering to the MNDAA quickly made the rounds on social media, and a resident who lives near the border with China identified the location as Laukkai.

“The videos show junta soldiers handing over their arms and surrendering before leaving by car with their family members,” the resident said. Some of the soldiers were allowed to leave using their motorbikes, while their families were transported by trucks and private cars.”

Members of pro-junta channels on the social media platform Telegram claimed that the military had not entirely evacuated the Laukkaing Regional Operation Command, and that family members and injured soldiers from the base’s medical facility were taken to Lashio with the assistance of area charity groups.

Telephone and internet services have been cut off in the region, making it difficult to obtain information about the situation there.

Neither the military nor the MNDAA have issued an official statement about the surrender in Laukkai, and attempts by RFA to contact spokesmen for both factions went unanswered Friday.

Junta under pressure in Kokang

The junta has been under pressure to arrest members of the Kokang region administration for their suspected involvement in online scam syndicates and had recently replaced Myint Swe, the chairman of the Kokang Self-Administered Zone, as the region is officially known.

It was unclear whether the shake up had any bearing on the recent fighting and the junta’s readiness to defend the base in Laukkai.

The MNDAA made several moves in the lead up to Thursday’s seizure.

On Oct. 27, the date of the launch of Operation 1027, the ethnic rebels blocked all routes leading to Laukkai and on Dec. 5 seized a military outpost located just over 3 kilometers (2 miles) from the Laukkai Regional Operation Command. The MNDAA also occupied the villages of Yan Long Keng and Tar Shwe Htan near Laukkai, essentially surrounding the operation command base.

A military observer in Shan state told RFA that while the military carried out airstrikes and artillery attacks to defend the base, it was unable to deploy reinforcements or send military supplies to troops inside the facility, who surrendered without putting up a fight.

"In my opinion, the decision to surrender was made solely by the Regional Operation Command," said the observer, who also spoke on condition of anonymity. "They might have discussed a possible retreat of the military forces, after which arms and equipment were handed over to the MNDAA."

Aung Myo, a former military officer and a political commentator, noted that the Regional Operation Command in Laukkai was a base camp, which limited the junta's ability to respond to the attack.

"The operational command, which also housed families, was not a combat position on the frontlines," he said. "Even though the soldiers could have fought back, they had to consider the security of their family members. It was a poor military strategy to establish the base there in the first place."

An earlier attack by anti-junta forces on the base on Nov. 12 resulted in the surrender of 129 soldiers and 262 of their family members.

Shortly after the surrender of military forces in Laukkai on Thursday, the Three Brotherhood Alliance launched an attack on Hopang township in the Wa Self-Administered Region, located around 6.5 kilometers (4 miles) away from the town of Chinshwehaw in Shan's Laukkaing township, according to a resident. The MNDAA had taken control of Chinshwehaw after the launch of Operation 1027.

"Armed clashes started around 3:00 a.m., after which [anti-junta forces] carried out a search of the area for policemen, soldiers, militia fighters and members of online scam gangs," the resident said.

A resident of nearby Pang Long township said that on Friday, members of the United Wa State Army – Myanmar's largest ethnic army that in November had vowed to remain neutral amid Operation 1027 – occupied Pang Long and Hopang under MNDAA protection. The two townships are connected to UWSA territory.

'No control of northern Shan'

Abuza, of the National War College, called it wise for the MNDAA to allow an orderly withdrawal of junta troops from Laukkai to Lashio on Thursday, which he said "seems to be the SAC's new defensive perimeter," using the junta's official name, the State Administration Council. "They are acknowledging that they have no ability to control northern Shan State."

"It will be interesting to see if the Three Brotherhood Alliance now moves on Muse, which would give them substantial control over border trade with China," he added. Muse sits opposite the town of Ruili in China's Yunnan province and is a major hub for commerce between the two countries.

Abuza noted that the loss of the base in Laukkai would lead to "a significant loss of revenue" for the junta, including its ability to pay for border guards forces, and suggested that the MNDAA will move quickly to hunt down scam operators and individuals on China's wanted list "to prove to Beijing that they are a legitimate partner worthy of support."

Junta chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing personally led the military's occupation of Laukkai as regional commander in 2009, seizing the city from an outnumbered contingent of MNDAA soldiers without firing a shot.

Translated by Aung Naing. Edited by Joshua Lipes and Malcolm Foster.

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