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Myanmar: Stop Recruitment, Use of Child Soldiers

Underage Recruits Sent to Military Training, Front Lines



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Military personnel participate in a parade on Armed Forces Day in Naypyidaw, Myanmar, March 27, 2021. © AP Photo

(Bangkok) – The [Myanmar](#) military’s recruitment and use of child soldiers has surged since the 2021 coup, including a significant number recruited after the junta enacted a conscription law in February 2024, Human Rights Watch said today. On June 19, 2025, the United Nations Secretary-General [reported](#) that the UN had verified 2,138 grave violations against children in armed conflict in Myanmar in 2024, including recruitment of children, with about 1,200 additional violations pending verification.

Since the coup, the UN has verified over 1,800 cases of recruitment of children as young as 12 by junta and affiliated forces, though noting that “cases are likely significantly underreported due to monitoring challenges and the fear of retaliation.” Local civil society groups and opposition activists told Human Rights Watch that child soldiers have been found among captured combatants and military defectors. Military recruiters have abducted or opportunistically recruited children when unaccompanied, displaced, or working, and then concealed or failed to verify their ages. The military has sent children to the front lines and used them as guides, porters, and at times as human shields.

“The Myanmar military has a long and appalling history of using children as porters, guides, and in combat roles,” said [Shayna Bauchner](#), Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The junta should immediately stop using child soldiers and cooperate with UN officials to release all child recruits from their forces.”

The Myanmar junta is the sole state actor listed by the UN Secretary-General for five grave violations against children in armed conflict: recruiting and using child soldiers, killing and maiming, sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, and abduction. This annual listing of state forces and non-state armed groups is commonly known as the “list of shame.”

“I’m shocked at the level of violence endured by the children of Myanmar and by the sharp increase in grave violations committed by all parties to the conflict, in particular by the Myanmar Armed Forces,” Virginia Gamba, the UN special representative of the secretary-general for children and armed conflict, said [in April](#).

Fighting between Myanmar junta forces and alliances of anti-junta and ethnic armed groups has escalated throughout the country since late 2023. In February 2024, the junta activated the 2010 People’s Military Service Law, enabling the conscription of men ages 18 to 35 and women ages 18 to 27 for up to five years during the current state of emergency. Although excluded under the law, children have been increasingly swept up in conscription drives as the junta has faced growing losses of troops and territory.

The military has reportedly recruited 14 batches of conscripts since April 2024, totaling an estimated 70,000 based on its plans for 5,000 per batch. The Myanmar Defense and Security Institute, an independent research group run by military defectors, reported that underage recruitment has increased since the seventh batch, along with abusive conscription tactics such as abducting young men and boys and detaining family members of missing conscripts [as hostages](#).

Two recent military defectors told Human Rights Watch that children have been recruited in growing numbers due to rising pressure from senior leaders to meet conscription quotas, as well as a lack of clear instructions and oversight across the chain of command. An unknown number of young men have fled the country to escape conscription.

The Myanmar Defense and Security Institute documented 23 child recruits, including some as young as 15, from among three rounds of conscription being trained at four separate camps, based on camp rosters and accounts from military trainers.

Military recruiters have deliberately falsified or ignored children’s ages. In some cases, children lacked identity documents or were taken when adult relatives on conscription lists were not found.

A 17-year-old boy told [local media](#) that he was abducted late at night in September 2024 on his way home from work in Yangon. He was taken to an immigration office where officials issued him a National Registration Card stating that he was 19, despite his insistence on his correct age and date of birth. He trained for three months and was sent to Brigade 101 before managing to desert.

The military’s recruitment methods have disproportionately targeted the urban poor, displaced people, people without documentation, and ethnic and religious minorities, including Rohingya Muslims. The junta has [unlawfully recruited](#) thousands of stateless Rohingya, who cannot be conscripted under Myanmar law because they are denied citizenship.

Since the coup, the military has recruited children across all 14 states and regions, compared with only 4 previously. Junta forces have also abducted and tortured children for alleged association with opposition forces.

Children have been among the combatants captured by anti-junta and ethnic armed groups.

An official from the Karenni Interim Executive Council, which governs opposition-controlled Karenni State, said that they captured at least three soldiers who were 17 when they were recruited by the junta. One had been abducted, while the other two were recruited when separated from their families – one had run away from home and the other was working.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) reported [in September 2024](#) that families in Myanmar increasingly resort to child labor to keep their children from being recruited. “Children who are

near or of recruitment age live in fear, not only of being forced into military service but also of being used in violent actions against those opposing the military,” the ILO reported [in March 2025](#).

In June, the ILO [invoked](#) the rarely used article 33 of its constitution in response to Myanmar’s failure to comply with its recommendations, including “to end any forced recruitment into the military, including the forced recruitment of children.”

In 2012, the Myanmar military signed a [joint action plan](#) with the UN to end recruitment and use of children. On February 6, 2025, the junta defense minister said the military had released 1,057 child soldiers to their families since the plan was signed. On March 19, the UN [announced](#) that the Myanmar military had released 93 people recruited as children.

The UN Secretary-General also listed seven non-state armed groups in Myanmar for recruiting and using child soldiers. An adviser to the opposition National Unity Government said that there are many child soldiers within resistance-controlled areas, some of whom volunteered to join the opposition.

In September 2019, Myanmar ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which establishes 18 as the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities and prohibits any forced recruitment or conscription of children under 18. The 2007 Paris Principles, which Myanmar has endorsed, prohibits the use of children as porters, cooks, messengers, or for sexual purposes. Myanmar’s 2019 Child Rights Law also forbids recruiting anyone under 18 into the armed forces or non-state armed groups.

“Concerned governments with influence over the junta or opposition forces in Myanmar should urge the end of this harrowing exploitation of children,” Bauchner said. “Donors should work with local groups to provide support and rehabilitation for all child victims in Myanmar.”