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Military shifts strategy in Myanmar's far south

Myanmar's military is shifting its strategy in the country's southern Tanintharyi region, where it is battling dozens of ethnic armies and armed resistance groups, to lean on local fighters and isolate its opposition, according to residents and local defense forces.

Sandwiched between Thailand to the east and the Andaman Sea to the west, the narrow Tanintharyi region is the seat of the junta's Coastal Region Command.

But the country's southernmost region is also home to the ethnic Karen National Liberation Army, the Kaw Thoo Lei Army and its ethnic Kayin troops, and various anti-junta People's Defense Force paramilitary groups.

As many as 60 ethnic armies, armed resistance and pro-junta militia groups are currently operating in the region, according to a report published in September by FE5 Tanintharyi, a group formed by local news media and researchers.

With significantly fewer resources, anti-junta groups were forced to adopt guerrilla warfare tactics to stand a chance against the military after its February 2021 coup d'etat.

But an official of the Tanintharyi Region People's Defense Force, or PDF, who goes by the name "Star" told RFA Burmese that the tactics have been increasingly effective against the military and led to "many casualties on their side," forcing the junta to rethink its approach.

"To change the situation, [the military is] adopting a counter-guerrilla system," he said. "In particular, they began to use local troops ... [who] have better knowledge about the territory and access to information."

Star said PDF groups in Tanintharyi have launched “many offensives” against junta troops this year and that there had been clashes in the region “almost everyday” in October.

In response, he said, the military has turned to using heavy artillery to avoid direct engagement – firing shells from the water and bases set up in the regional highlands.

The strategy has allowed the military to establish control of Tanintharyi’s urban areas, Star told RFA, but the region’s countryside “remains in the hands of the armed resistance.”

‘Four Cuts’ targets supplies, intel

A member of the Palaw Township Defense Force said that the junta is now implementing its “Four Cuts” strategy in the region in order to weaken its opponents’ supplies of food, funds, information and recruits in the townships of Tanintharyi, Palaw, Thayetchaung and Dawei.

“They established checkpoints, cut food supplies and, in some areas like Palaw where the resistance is strong ... they impose restrictions on travel,” said the PDF member, who declined to be named, citing security concerns. “There are also limits on what you can transport – in some cases, you can’t even travel with a sack of rice.”

The restrictions have led to greater suffering for civilians who have fled fighting in the region, said a resident of Thayetchaung’s Yae Nge village, who spoke on condition of anonymity due to fear of reprisal.

“If we have food, we’ll eat and if not, we won’t eat,” said the resident, who is among an estimated 5,000 people from Yae Nge who were displaced by the conflict. “Similarly, if we have clothes, we’ll wear them. If not, we won’t wear them. Our most pressing concern is staying alive.”

Civilians targeted

Junta troops have also been inspecting, interrogating and arresting civilians along major roadways for their alleged ties to the armed resistance, residents said.

At least 3,203 civilians were arrested in Tanintharyi over the past 15 months, according to FE5 Tanintharyi, of whom 2,141 were released. The status of the remaining 1,062 is unknown, the group said.

Over the same period, 428 civilians were killed in Tanintharyi – 136 at the hands of junta troops or pro-junta militias, FE5 Tanintharyi said. At least 300 people were killed by resistance groups after being accused as

informants for the military, by mines or artillery deployed by unknown organizations, or were victims of unsolved murders.

Attempts by RFA to contact Tanintharyi region junta spokesperson Thant Zin for comment on the military's tactics in the region went unanswered Tuesday.

Some 82,200 people have been displaced by conflict in Tanintharyi region since the coup, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said in an Oct. 2 statement, up 7,000 from the agency's count a month earlier.

Translated by Htin Aung Kyaw. Edited by Joshua Lipes and Malcolm Foster.

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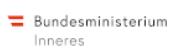
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RFA – Radio Free Asia (Author)

Five dead, over 1,000 trapped in Myanmar city battle

Fighting between the Myanmar military and resistance groups in Sagaing region continued Monday after junta airstrikes over the previous three days killed at least five civilians, one armed group told Radio Free Asia.

The battle began Friday, when three allied groups attacked a school campus and other buildings where junta troops were stationed.

The Arakan Army, Kachin Independence Army and People's Defense Forces attacked the school before dawn. The group also targeted a police station and administration office in Sagaing region's Kawlin township. The junta reacted by calling in airstrikes killing and injuring several civilians, said Kawlin city locals.

A junta jet attacked Hpa Le village in Kawlin township on Friday night, killing 34-year-old Naing Min Oo.

ecoi.net description:

Sagaing region, Kawlin township: Junta airstrikes leave at least 5 civilians dead; more than 1,500 people remain trapped in Kawlin city

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The following day, the junta carried out more than 10 airstrikes, damaging buildings and killing two people, according to Kawlin-based defense groups.

And on Sunday morning, a fighter jet enroute from Mandalay region's Tada-U township opened fire on Kawlin city.

Defense forces have reportedly rescued more than 10,000 residents trapped in the city since Friday. There were still more than 1,500 people trapped as of Sunday morning due to heavy airstrikes near the city's high school, a local resident who wished to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals told RFA.

"The situation in the morning was that they were still fighting with the junta army. A jet came often and opened fire. A jet dropped bombs in the morning," the local said. "People were trapped and some were injured due to the junta's aerial bombardment. When civilians were trying to leave toward the eastern part of the city, junta soldiers arrived and the locals were trapped."

Residents who could not escape had to hide in houses during the fighting, he added.

Aid workers are still trying to evacuate the people trapped in the city, said a rescue worker, who asked not to be named for security reasons.

"People are being evacuated as much as possible. Some were evacuated on Sunday morning. All the phone lines were cut, some people were outside [the war zone], but they were still out of contact," they said. "The junta troops are stationed around the city's general administrative office now."

Residents from Kawlin's surrounding villages also fled, bringing the total number of people forced to abandon their homes to nearly 100,000, according to the rescue worker.

Fighting has also prevented aid workers from collecting bodies in the area and they have not been able to accurately count the number of people who died since the initial blasts on Friday.

"Junta troops are stationed in high-rise buildings. They shoot people if they come out on the street," the rescue worker said. "There are people who have died due to the junta's shooting. They use

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people as human shields.”

The battle is taking longer than expected because of the combined junta ground and air attack, said a member of Kawlin township's People's Defense Force (PDF), who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons.

“There is a hospital next to the general administration office, and the Number Two High School is next to the hospital. The defense forces took up positions for more than 200 meters and are fighting fiercely to capture the junta’s camp,” they said.

“The four sides of the General Administrative Office were surrounded by our PDF troops. But we still can not get close because junta troops have strong bunkers and weapons. A jet came to open fire every 30 minutes, and we had to retreat when the jet flew in.”

The junta has not released any information about the attacks in Kawlin. RFA's calls to Sagaing region's junta spokesperson Sai Naing Naing Kyaw went unanswered on Sunday.

At noon on Monday, some allied forces and locals claimed that resistance forces had finally taken control of Kawlin city, but RFA has not been able to independently confirm this.

Translated by RFA Burmese. Edited by Mike Firn.

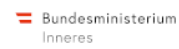
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RFA – Radio Free Asia (Author)

Four days of fighting in Myanmar's Kawlin city displaces 50,000

After four days of intense battles with the military in northern Myanmar's Sagaing region, armed resistance groups have occupied the city of Kawlin, but residents and aid workers say the fighting has displaced 50,000 people, stoking fears of a humanitarian crisis.

On Nov. 3, anti-junta People's Defense Force paramilitaries under the shadow National Unity Government and ethnic Kachin Independence Army soldiers launched attacks on a junta police station, general administration office and schools where troops were stationed in downtown Kawlin.

The attacks sparked clashes that lasted until Nov. 6, during which the military responded with airstrikes on the district-level city, an aid worker told RFA Burmese on Tuesday, speaking on condition of anonymity due to security concerns.

By the time the dust had settled on Monday, the People's Defense Force, or PDF, and Kachin Independence Army, or KIA, had assumed joint control of Kawlin, but at least 10 civilians were dead and 50,000 others had fled their homes to shelter on the outskirts of the city, the aid worker said.

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Sagaing region, Kawlin: 50,000 people displaced in 4 days of fighting between armed resistance groups and junta troops

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“About four or five ... people were also injured by small arms and shelling,” he said, adding that the bodies of the 10 dead were discovered as rescue workers cleared debris from city streets on Nov. 6.

Anti-junta forces are providing medical treatment to the injured, although the exact number of casualties is still being determined, the aid worker said.

‘Afraid of airstrikes’

A woman who fled the city on Nov. 4 as airstrikes and artillery strikes intensified told RFA that the displaced “don’t feel safe returning home” amid a lack of security.

“Our family left by motorbike for rural areas to be safe amid the conflict,” she said, adding that they couldn’t bring any of their belongings “except the clothes on our backs.”

“We dare not return home as we are still afraid of airstrikes,” she said. “I hope the situation will return to normal as soon as possible. I have never experienced such chaos in my lifetime.”

The woman said that the nearly 50,000 people who fled Kawlin are staying in areas “nearby the city” and that the armed resistance has been providing the displaced with some food and shelter.

However, the military has blocked routes to Kawlin, leaving those who fled without access to adequate amounts of food, medicine and fuel, residents said.

Aftermath of clashes

In the meantime, the armed resistance is working to solidify its control on the city and to push forward into nearby towns, a member of the Kawlin PDF told RFA.

“We are trying to maintain the city, which is an extremely difficult task,” said the PDF member, who also declined to be named. “We had to carry out many difficult missions to occupy the city. We retreated many times, but we took control of it in the end.”

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The Kawlin PDF member said that he hopes his group's success inspires other anti-junta forces to do the same in other parts of Sagaing, which has seen some of the fiercest fighting in all of Myanmar since the military seized power in a Feb. 1, 2021, coup d'état.

Attempts by RFA to contact junta Deputy Information Minister Major General Zaw Min Tun and Sai Naing Naing Kyaw, the junta's ethnic affairs minister and spokesperson for Sagaing region, for comment on the military's loss of Kawlin went unanswered Tuesday.

Than Soe Naing, a political commentator, called the seizure of Kawlin by the armed resistance forces "the first stage" of capturing other cities in Sagaing.

"The resistance forces in Sagaing region need arms and ammunition, rather than manpower," he said. "If [they can] control more areas with sufficient arms and establish better collaborative efforts, we could see more success for the armed resistance in coming months."

More than 1.6 million civilians have fled their homes due to fighting since the February 2021 coup, according to figures released by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) at the end of last month. The agency said that the number of displaced in Sagaing has reached at least 813,500.

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

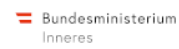
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RFA – Radio Free Asia (Author)

Myanmar shadow govt vows accountability in extrajudicial killings

Myanmar's shadow National Unity Government, or NUG, on Monday vowed to hold the perpetrators of extrajudicial killings accountable amid an increase in the number of people slain by rebels after being accused of working as informants for the military regime.

In the two and a half years since the military seized power through a coup d'état there have been 212 complaints referred to the NUG's Central Commission for the Investigation of Military Crimes related to the killing of alleged junta informants, of which 24 have been resolved, Maung Maung Swe, deputy secretary of the NUG's ministry of defense, told RFA Burmese.

The NUG is made up of leaders in the former civilian government and other anti-junta activists.

At least 100 of the complaints are still being investigated, he said, including those filed against the anti-junta People's Defense Force paramilitary group, local PDF groups, People's Administration

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212 complaints of alleged junta informants being extrajudicially killed by rebels since the February 2021 military coup

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Organizations governing territory controlled by the armed resistance, and People's Security Organizations formed to protect local communities against junta attacks.

Several of the groups have sworn allegiance to the NUG in its declaration of war against the junta, although they are loosely organized and the extent to which the shadow government exercises control over them is unclear.

Extrajudicial killings by armed resistance groups represent a minority of the civilian deaths in Myanmar's post-coup conflict. According to Thailand's Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), junta forces have killed at least 4,174 civilians since the takeover amid a scorched earth offensive against its opponents.

Among the killings referred to the NUG, some were carried out against victims who were later determined to be innocent of the accusations against them, Maung Maung Swe acknowledged.

Naga Nyi Naung killing

In one incident on June 23, six members of the local defense force known as Naga Nyi Naung, or Brother Dragons, arrested and executed Kyaw Win, 52, and his wife Cho Win, 42, in Mandalay region's Madaya township.

A member of the victims' family told RFA Burmese that the couple, who sold sebesten leaves used as wrappers for cheroots, left behind five daughters and an elderly mother.

Kyaw Win and Cho Win "were civilians" and had "never acted as informants" for the junta, said the family member, who spoke on condition of anonymity, citing fear of reprisal.

While a complaint was lodged with the Madaya Township PDF district officer in July, the case was not investigated until October, they said.

"My understanding is that the revolution is for brothers and sisters, family, and community," the family member said. "If [the armed resistance] continues to act disorganized like this, more people will be killed ... Going forward, I hope the revolution will proceed in an orderly manner."

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Attempts by RFA to contact the Naga Nyi Naung for comment on the killing went unanswered Monday, but the group had claimed responsibility at the time, referring to the two victims as “informants.”

Shooting in Wetlet township

Another extrajudicial killing took place in Sagaing region’s Wetlet township on Aug. 31, 2022, when the township’s PDF confronted a local defense group led by Bo Kyar Gyi for allegedly collecting unofficial tolls on an area waterway.

Bo Kyar Gyi told RFA that the PDF opened fire as soon as it arrived, killing two members of his group – Yan Lin Tun and Soe Maung Maung.

“As soon as they jumped out of the truck, they shot at us and there was no time to prepare,” he said. “They claimed that they shot at us because we started shooting at them. I am one of the people fighting the junta. If I shot back at them like an enemy, I would definitely have hit them. We didn’t fire back a single shot.”

After the shooting stopped, the PDF carried the bodies away in a vehicle and arrested 12 people, including the wife of one of the victims, who works as a teacher with the anti-junta Civil Disobedience Movement, or CDM, Bo Kar Gyi said.

The victim’s wife, who declined to be named due to security concerns, told RFA that she and the others arrested by the PDF spent some five weeks in detention being interrogated before they were finally released.

“My husband was shot right in front of my eyes,” she said. “He was unarmed and on sentry duty, with just a phone in his hand. When I tried to go to him, he was already in a pool of blood ... It was the last chance [to be together]. I begged them but I was not allowed to be with him.”

The victim’s wife said that she has yet to retrieve her husband’s body, despite making multiple requests over the 15 months since he was killed.

No action has been taken against the Wetlet Township PDF in connection with four complaints of robbery and murder made to the NUG in September 2022, according to Bo Kyar Gyi's local defense group and family members.

Controlling armed groups

Maung Maung Swe, the deputy secretary of the NUG's ministry of defense, told RFA that the shadow government is "already planning to resolve" the killings in Mandalay and Sagaing regions.

"Regarding the case in ... Sagaing region, the [NUG] ministry of defense is working to form a military court after completing an investigation," he said. "There has been no complaint filed with us regarding the case in [Mandalay's] Madaya township in June. We have contacted the person in charge of the region about this case."

Maung Maung Swe said that while a code of conduct has been established for the country's PDF groups to follow, "there may still be disputes, due to the complexity of the situation on the ground," and he called for better oversight to minimize such incidents.

But a member of the PDF in Magway region told RFA that while the perpetrators of such crimes are supposedly arrested by local defense groups and "sentenced to prison by courts," the reality of law and order in post-coup Myanmar is that "there are no courts, prisons or lawyers to prosecute these cases."

The PDF member, who also spoke on condition of anonymity, said that in cases where the perpetrators belong to a powerful group, "there is no way to take action" against them.

Activist Hnin Thet Hmu Khin said that the NUG needs to do more to ensure its subordinate groups follow its code of conduct.

"Accountability is needed for the victims," he said. "If an incident happened because of you or your forces, you must document what day it happened and how, and take responsibility."

He said that when mistakes are made, they should be acknowledged and publicly apologized for, and that steps should be taken to prevent such incidents from happening again.

“If you can’t solve the problem right away, then you must explain how you will be held accountable for it later,” she said.

Translated by Htin Aung Kyaw. Edited by Joshua Lipos and Malcolm Foster.

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