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Myanmar shadow govt claims hundreds of junta surrenders since end October

Hundreds of junta security personnel have surrendered to or been arrested by Myanmar's armed resistance since the start of an offensive by ethnic armed groups last month, according to the country's shadow government.

At least 377 junta soldiers – including two full battalions – and 56 junta police officers surrendered in battles across Myanmar in November alone, while around 100 other members of the junta's forces were arrested last month, said Maung Maung Swe, the deputy secretary for the Ministry of Defense for National Unity Government, or NUG, made up of former civilian leaders and other anti-junta activists.

Many of those held by rebel forces since Nov. 1 were taken into custody during "Operation 1027," an offensive launched Oct. 27 by the "Three Brotherhood" Alliance of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, the Arakan Army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army.

The rebels say they have made notable gains against the military in several key cities in Shan state and claim to have captured more than 170 military outposts since the start of the campaign.

In the aftermath of the initial offensive, anti-junta fighters have gone on to seize towns and cities in neighboring Sagaing and Magway regions where, according to the NUG's latest figures, nearly 900 civil servants – including some soldiers and police – have defected and joined the Civil Disobedience Movement in opposition to the military regime.

Prior to the start of Operation 1027, neither anti-junta groups nor the military provided official figures for the number of enemy combatants

who have surrendered to their fighters, and verifying claims by either side is difficult.

But given the disparate nature of the country's armed resistance – a patchwork of local People's Defense Force paramilitaries, ethnic rebels and Civil Disobedience Movement groups – and their access to resources, how are these detainees being treated in captivity?

Rules and directives

The NUG's Maung Maung Swe says that the groups which have pledged loyalty to his government and its goal of removing the junta from power are "handling the prisoners of war in accordance with international humanitarian law and the Geneva Convention."

"We have adopted rules and directives to keep POWs," he told RFA Burmese. "We have shared these principles with the ground forces at the frontlines. They strictly abide by the rules."

Maung Maung Swe acknowledged that the various anti-junta forces fighting for the NUG employ "their own practices" when it comes to the treatment of prisoners, but claimed that they all adhere to global standards.

The NUG recently released a video of Maung Maung Swe visiting junta POWs and explaining how it is the shadow government's "responsibility to care for you," while the captured soldiers described how surprised they were that they were treated humanely.

The NUG's account comes after U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights spokesperson Jeremy Laurence on Nov. 17 urged allied forces to treat those captured humanely and to avoid reprisals.

RFA investigations have revealed countless reports of the mistreatment of detained anti-junta fighters and civilians at the hands of the military since it seized power in a Feb. 1, 2021, coup d'état and embarked on a nationwide offensive against its opponents – including acts of murder, mutilation, torture, and rape.

The International Committee of the Red Cross responded to a request for comment on the treatment of surrendered and captured soldiers by referring to Common Article 3 of the Geneva Convention of 1949 and the International Humanitarian Law, which state that "arrestees in civil wars must be treated humanely and protected." The Red Cross called on all armed groups to adhere to the rules of war.

Attempts to contact junta Deputy Information Minister Major-General Zaw Min Tun for comment on the arrest and surrender of soldiers, as well as reports of the military's mistreatment of detained anti-junta fighters and

civilians, received no response. The junta has previously claimed that its soldiers do not subject detainees to abuse.

'Nothing short of exceptional'

RFA spoke with representatives of anti-junta groups who echoed the NUG's claims that military detainees are treated humanely.

Lt. Col. Mai Aik Kyaw, the spokesperson of the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, said surrendered soldiers are released "immediately," while arrestees are held as political prisoners.

"At present, we only have 'jails' in the jungle and the POWs are being held there," he said. "They are neither forced to work nor punished. They are essentially treated like political prisoners."

Mai Aik Kyaw noted that "some" POWs had been released, depending on security concerns, but did not provide a number.

Zachary Abuza, a professor at the National War College in Washington and an adjunct at Georgetown University, told RFA that the treatment of POWs by anti-junta fighters has been "nothing short of exceptional," noting that many rank-and-file soldiers have been provided with money and sent home after being disarmed.

"The different EROs [ethnic revolutionary organizations] and PDFs [People's Defense Force groups] are holding some people, but so far they have been kept in pretty humane conditions, given medical treatment and food," he said. "I have not seen any credible report about mistreatment yet."

Abuza said that the NUG and PDFs have received training through a program funded by the United States Agency for International Development, or USAID, and administered by the Washington D.C.-based National Democratic Institute on the importance of the humane treatment of POWs because it is expected under international law, but also because it "differentiates them from the [military]" and "encourages more defections."

If anything, he said, the NUG and PDFs have expressed concerns about "being overwhelmed with unit-level defections" because they are known to treat surrendering soldiers well.

POW accounts

Prisoners of war have also testified to their humane treatment at the hands of anti-junta forces.

RFA spoke with Private Thu Naing Oo, who was shot by a sniper while trying to rescue a fellow soldier and captured during a battle with ethnic Karen National Union, or KNU, fighters in Mon state's Kyaikmaraw township.

"I suffered serious wounds prior to our arrival at their camp, but once we arrived, I received medical treatment," said the junta soldier, whose location could not be revealed due to security risks. "The leaders of the resistance do not neglect me. They provided me with food, a blanket, a pillow, and a sleeping mat. We don't need to worry about food and I feel fine now."

According to the NUG, at least 23 junta troops surrendered to the KNU following the clash.

Salai Het Ni, the spokesperson of the Chin National Front, told RFA that seven soldiers, including a military commander, surrendered to Chin resistance forces during a Nov. 23 battle in the town of Rihkhawdar, in Chin state's Falam township.

A major in the military who was among those who surrendered in the fighting told RFA that he is now staying in provided housing in an undisclosed foreign country and is "living well," although he has some concerns about his long-term situation.

"I decided to surrender because I don't have complete confidence in the military," said the major, who also declined to be named for fear of reprisal. "An opportunity recently came up to join the Civil Disobedience Movement [as a military advisor], but I have no idea [what I will do] in the long run. I'll take any job I can get."

An advocate for POWs in Myanmar's armed conflict, who requested anonymity for security reasons, told RFA that junta soldiers should "consider their future and surrender."

"These two groups [those who surrender and POWs] have two different statuses under the law," he said. "POWs will not enjoy the same rights as those who surrender."

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

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