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Myanmar draft-dodgers fear retribution against families

Myanmar nationals who have fled the country to avoid conscription into the military are afraid that junta authorities will target their family members with legal action, they said on Wednesday.

Under the People's Military Service Law, enacted by the junta in February, men between the ages of 18 and 45 can be drafted after junta forces have suffered battlefield defeats to rebel forces. The announcement triggered a wave of [killings](#) of administrators enforcing the law and drove [thousands of draft-dodgers](#) into rebel-controlled territory and abroad.

At the end of last month, Gen. Maung Maung Aye, the vice chairman of the Central Body for Summoning People's Military Servants, said that the junta would use the country's courts to go after those who fail to join the draft.

Ko Lin, 23, who fled to neighboring Thailand after his name was included in a list to join military service, told RFA Burmese that he and other draft dodgers are "worried about threats and large cash fines against our parents."

"We also feel sorry that it is impossible for us to return home at all, but it is absolutely impossible to accept [the draft]," he said. "[Junta chief Senior Gen.] Min Aung Hlaing is sacrificing innocent young people like us."

Junta authorities recently concluded military training for a second round of draftees and is now "recruiting" for a third.

According to the junta's People's Military Service Law, anyone who fails to join military service without a legitimate reason can be sentenced to prison for up to three years, fined, or both. The law does not stipulate punishment for family members of draft dodgers, but it does say that

anyone who “encourages or assists” in the violation of military service can be sentenced to up to one year in prison and fined.

A father of two sons who are on the list for service in Yangon told RFA that he has no options other than to receive punishment if action is taken against him.

“We were asked for money to substitute our sons with others and we paid 20,000 kyat (US\$9.50) per son [but they were still listed],” he said. “We have no other choice except submitting to legal action. We are just rural people, and we have been held like water in their [the junta’s] hands.”

Pressuring family members

Members of the junta’s local administrative bodies are also putting pressure on the family members of those who flee military service.

A young man who asked to use the pseudonym Kyaw Swa due to security concerns, told RFA that he fled to Thailand after being drafted, but said his family members at home are “under threat.”

“After I arrived here, they [junta authorities] kept calling my family at home to bring me back,” he said. “I asked [my family] if I should come back, but they said they don’t agree with it [conscription] and told me that they will ‘address any issue here.’”

Kyaw Swa said junta authorities call his family “every two days” and ask about him, and have also demanded 2-3 million kyats (US\$950-1,430) for a military service substitution.

“If we don’t go back, they will pressure our family members,” he said. “But we aren’t willing to fight for those who are mad with power.”

Attempts by RFA to contact junta spokesperson Major General Zaw Min Tun about demands by village administrators and junta forces for money to avoid military service went unanswered Wednesday.

In the meantime, residents of Ayeyarwady region’s Ngaputaw township told RFA on Wednesday that junta authorities are “distributing letters” calling on draft-eligible youths to register for military service and warning that if they fail to do so, “action will be taken against their families.”

Rare protest in Yangon

On Wednesday, students staged a rare protest in Yangon calling for the nullification of the People’s Military Service Law and an end to the political crisis caused by the military’s February 2021 coup d’etat.

Members of the All-Burma Federation of Student Unions, the Youth for a New Society, the Mayangone Democratic Front, the Kyimyindaing Networks, Lin Yaung Ni (Youth Organization) and the Owl Community joined the protest at a popular market in the city, carrying signs that read “Oppose the illegal conscription law! and “End the military dictatorship!”

A person who participated in the protest told RFA on condition of anonymity that they joined despite the threat of arrest “to bring a resolution to the crisis facing the people” because of military rule.

The junta initiated the People’s Military Service Law to shore up growing troop losses in its multi-front war with rebel groups around the country.

According to a May 29 report by the Burma Affairs and Conflict Study, the junta set up 21 schools to train members of the first and second rounds of the military draft, which were attended by around 9,000 people.

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

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