



A photograph of a person's hand holding a rifle, partially obscured by dense green foliage and tree branches. The scene is dimly lit, with sunlight filtering through the leaves, creating a somber and tense atmosphere. The rifle is a dark, long-barreled weapon, and the hand is positioned near the trigger guard. The background is a dense thicket of green leaves and branches, with some light filtering through from the left side.

FORGOTTEN CONFLICTS

MYANMAR

How the most fractured nation
on earth is coming together to
overthrow a Goliath



Peace has long been elusive in Myanmar.

The country has been mired in conflict since it gained independence from Britain in 1948, but it has been gripped by an increasingly savage civil war for the past four years.

A military junta seized power in an audacious coup in 2021. Since then, at least 60,000 people have been killed, 27,400 detained for opposing the junta, and 3.3 million driven from their homes.

But many in Myanmar are also fighting back.

Thousands of civilians have taken up arms against the State Administration Council (SAC), as the military junta calls itself.

And while the SAC has struggled to find willing recruits to fight for the junta, resistance forces have a steady flow of people from all backgrounds appalled by the brutality of the regime and inspired to fight against it.

At a secret training camp in Karen State, new recruits learn the art of guerilla warfare.

Moe Moe, 29, left her job at a school in Yangon in March this year to take up arms alongside the rebel armies.

“I couldn’t stand the SAC administration and the way they treat the public any more so I came here to fight against them,” she said.

“I joined the resistance to stand with the public.”

Until now, Moe Moe had never fired a gun.

Now, she says, she’s prepared to kill.

“I will shoot, I will keep shooting. I will keep fighting with the people until the revolution ends,” she said.

Like many here, she’s optimistic that day will come soon.

“I think it won’t be too long if everything keeps going the way it is, we will win the revolution.”

While many of Myanmar’s youth have fled the country since the coup, others want to be part of this revolution.

Kindergarten teacher Jennifer, 22, came back to Karen State from Yangon at the start of the year.

She’s disappointed the world seems to have forgotten or ignored the plight of her country.

“I think we have to fight back ourselves so we cannot look to the other countries to give us help,” she said.

“It’s more important to do it ourselves and be prepared and that we fight for our freedom and democracy.



“But I want the world to know, please don’t ignore the situation and the military coup and what they have done to our country.

“We are very hopeful for about the future and also that 2025 will be a better year.”

The conflict-weary nation

Myanmar has long been beset by some of the world’s longest running armed conflicts, particularly in the borderlands where ethnic militias have long battled the military.

And while Myanmar is no stranger to war, what’s different this time is just how many people from the Bamar ethnic majority have fled the cities and joined the resistance.

It is the most fractured country on Earth, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project.

Hundreds of pro-democracy militias, ethnic armies and local defence forces have united against their common enemy and the common goal of overthrowing the junta.

The National Unity Government — Myanmar’s pro-democracy government in exile — is cautiously optimistic.

Spokesman Nay Phone Lat believes the resistance could win “in the near future”.

“Our revolution is at a very critical moment in our history,” he said.

“In our country, the ethnic resistance organisations have had to fight for their freedom and their rights for over 20 years.

“But now, in this revolution, not only the minority ethnic group, but also the majority Bamar are also included in this revolution. So we can say that this is the whole country revolution.”

He says the key to overcoming the military junta will be finding unity in diversity.

“It’s difficult, but it’s not impossible,” he says.

“We have our different backgrounds ... but now we can say that we have the same ambition, same vision for our future — federal democracy union.

“Another thing is we also have is a very big enemy.”

He has reason to be optimistic.

The military has been plagued by battlefield losses and defections — leading to its desperate move earlier this year to enact a conscription law to bolster its depleted forces.

The rebels have overtaken dozens of towns and military bases and the resistance now claims to control more than half of Myanmar's territory.

The situation is so fluid, it's difficult to get an accurate picture of what's happening on the ground, but this map reflects the latest data, which was collected up until April 2024.

But their pleas for weapons and support from the West to finish the job have been largely ignored.

With two devastating and deadly wars capturing international attention in the Middle East and Ukraine, Myanmar has been forgotten.

Academics Nicholas Farrelly, from the University of Tasmania, and the University of South Australia's Adam Simpson put this down to several factors: The absence of a charismatic wartime figure like Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the lack of a simple narrative, and the country's geography.

"In a global strategic sense, Myanmar has almost always been an afterthought in the West," they write.

"With Myanmar a far less important site of conflict, most of the international community (including the regional body of Southeast Asian states, ASEAN) have been reluctant to provide military support for the resistance fighters."

The dark side of the resistance

In the absence of support from the West and the lawlessness of war, some resistance forces have turned to illegal activities like the drugs trade, gambling, and scam centres.

Others face serious allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

One of the few ways for journalists to get into Myanmar is with an invite from one of the rebel armies that control the borderlands.

The ABC embedded with the Kawthoolei Army, one of the country's newest and most controversial resistance groups.

It's led by General Nerdah Bo Mya who created the army after he was three years ago stood down from the KNDO — the main defence organisation in Karen State — when troops under his command were accused of massacring 25 unarmed prisoners.

It's an accusation he doesn't deny.

"I didn't give the order, but I look at the situation, I think they're not wrong because it happened during the fighting," he said.

"The intelligence information showed that they're working with the Burmese military intelligence."

General Nerdah claims the men who were killed were spies for the junta. The military denies that.

Regardless, the laws of war clearly state that unarmed combatants should not be killed.

General Nerdah stands by the decision of his men.

"Well, it happened during the fighting. I think they made the right decision because otherwise those people would come back and attack our villagers," he said.

Human rights group Fortify Rights was the first to publish the allegations against General Nerdah, and the report's author John Quinley says a formal international investigation should take place.

"From our understanding at the time, when these more than 20 people were captured, they were in the custody of the KNDO and that means you cannot execute people," Quinley said.

"Even if they're military, even if they're spies, civilians, the capturers cannot summarily execute people in their custody.

"I understand it's a wartime setting, and it's really complicated, but from our investigation, these 20 people were not fleeing the scene or not actively fighting the KNDO at the time."

Myanmar's military is also accused of horrific and widespread war crimes including torture, rape and air strikes on schools and hospitals.

John Quinley says the resistance forces need to ensure they're not committing the very crimes Myanmar's military is also accused of.

"During wartime, it's really needed for groups to try to protect civilians and to not indiscriminately attack civilians or people that they take capture, prisoners of war and others," he said.

"You know, these are things that the armed resistance movement really needs to think about as they take more territory and as they command more governance structures."

General Nerdah says he'll cooperate with any investigation but that will likely have to wait.

Just last month, after the ABC's visit, fresh accusations emerged against the Kawthoolei Army that its forces have killed at least six civilians in the last 12 months.

General Nerdah claims his soldiers deny they were involved.

Children of the revolution

While Myanmar remains mired in conflict, life continues on here.

At the rebel army camp, a young couple tries to soothe their new baby boy.

The pair met here after fleeing the bustling city of Yangon separately following the coup.

Myo Myint Aung lost dozens of friends in the protests that followed.



“I was very heartbroken because many of my friends were killed,” he said.

Myo Myint Aung and Phyto Ei Khaing Lin with their son Eitha.

“We lived in the same area and we were like brothers. That’s why I came to the jungle.”

At the start of this year, among so much death, the young couple welcomed new life — a son named Eitha.

The joy and excitement of motherhood for Phyto Ei Khine Lin was tainted by trepidation.

“At first I didn’t want to have this child because we live in the jungle in the middle of the war,” she said.

“But when I came to think about it, I was happy to give birth to him because he is a baby of the revolution.

“If we die, I’m worried about him but when he grows up, he will be proud of his parents and that he grew up in the time of revolution.”

Not far from the rebel training camp, children at a tiny Karen village are continuing their studies.

Like kids the world over, you can hear the excitement and laughter, boredom and chair scrapes before you even enter the classroom.

Sitting at rows of old-school wooden desks, the children recite the spelling of English words.

“B-I-R-D Bird!” they shout in unison.

But unlike kids in other parts of the world, here, the children don’t dream of being astronauts or firefighters.

“My parents are soldiers and I want to be a soldier like my dad too,” says 10-year-old Saw Eh Kaw Soe.

The wet season has brought a welcome pause to the fighting, but when the skies re-open, the constant threat of air strikes will return, a harrowing experience for kids like him.

“When the jet fighters come, I am very afraid but I just stay with my parents,” he said.

Classmate Naw Say Say Hel also dreams of being a soldier.

“The reason I want to be a soldier is because we don’t have freedom in my country,” she said.

“I want to stay peaceful, but I also see that my people are suffering.”

At just 13, she’s well aware of the war that often sends her scurrying into a bunker.

“I don’t want the [junta] soldiers to come here. I want to live happily and peacefully. I want to see my people united and love each other.” R

Article reproduced by permission of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation – Library Sales DocuSign
Envelope ID: 2B52AD5D-8DD6-4530-878A-73247FEDD819

Lauren Day © 2024 ABC

Image reproduced by permission of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation – Library Sales

Fletcher Yeung © 2024 ABC

First published Sunday 10 November