

Leap Into Freedom

A Kyeekaan investigative report on those who leave the Tatmadaw



Of all the missing plaques, we specially miss this one:

This is for a man who refused to kill his fellow men.

- Kurt Tucholsky

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Glossary

AA - Arakan Army

CDF - Chinland Defense Force

CDM - Civil Disobedience Movement

CRPH - Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw

DSA - Defense Service Academy

DSMA - Defense Service Medical Academy

DSNPA - Defense Service Nursing and Paramedical Academy

DSTA - Defense Service Technological Academy

ERO - Ethnic Revolutionary Organization

KIA - Kachin Independence Army

KNDF - Karenni Nationalities Defence Force

KNLA - Karen National Liberation Army

KNPP - Karenni National Progressive Party

KNU - Karen National Union

LID - Light Infantry Division

MCTI - Military Computer and Technological Institute

MOD - Ministry of Defense

NUCC - National Unity Consultative Council

NUG - National Unity Government

OTS - Officer Training School

PDF - People's Defense Force

RCSS - Restoration Council of Shan State

SAC - State Administration Council

Introduction

The first defections started mere days after the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) staged a violent takeover of power from the elected civilian government on February 1st 2021. Following the military coup, protesters responded by chanting “Pyi thu ye! Pyi thu ye!” as they marched through the streets – “The people’s police! The people’s police!” The protestors even handed out flowers to soldiers and police as they guarded the streets.¹ However, the goodwill of the public quickly faded as security personnel across the country cracked down violently on peaceful protesters. The first confirmed fatality in the nationwide protests was Mya Thwe Thwe Khaing; a 20 year old woman who was shot on February 9th 2021 after participating in a demonstration in the capital city of Naypyidaw. As of January 27th 2023 (almost 2 years since the coup and subsequent emergence of the Spring Revolution), conservative estimates put the death toll at 2,894 people.² Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands have joined one of the many pro-democracy movement organizations and armed resistance groups. This includes many of the nearly 10,000 security forces - roughly 8,000 soldiers and 2,000 police – who have defected since the coup.³

Defections in the context of Myanmar’s Spring Revolution, is an act of defiance that ordinary servicemen and servicewomen can stage to express their disapproval of the coup regime, formally known as the State Administrative Council (SAC). Defections after the 2021 military coup can be understood as an act of political resistance and less of a tactical expediency that was common in the pre-coup landscape. This is reflected in the fact that many of the soldiers that have defected went on to formally join the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) for reasons of political or ethical conviction.⁴

¹ Philip Sherwell, “Burmese protesters raise flowers and three fingers against the might of the military junta,” *The Times* (February 7, 2021). <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/burmese-protesters-raise-flowers-and-three-fingers-against-might-of-the-military-junta-xmbmp0dkd>. Accessed January 28, 2023.

² Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), “Daily Briefing in Relation to the Military Coup.” (January 27, 2023). <https://aappb.org/?lang=en>. Accessed January 27, 2023.

³ Lian Bawi Thang, “How has Myanmar’s military stalled collapse from CDM-inflicted damage?” *Tea Circle Oxford* (2023). <https://teacircleoxford.com/politics/how-has-myanmars-military-stalled-collapse-from-cdm-inflicted-damages/>. Accessed January 20, 2023.

⁴ Independent Research Network, *Myanmar’s Civil Disobedience Movement: An analysis of the present situation and a framework for supporting future action*. (October 2022): 2.

Consequently, there is growing support among the revolutionary movement to encourage defections among military security personnel. The National Unity Government (NUG) has incorporated defections into its official offensive strategy,⁵ with the Minister of Foreign Affairs; Daw Zin Mar Aung publicly stating that “the defection program is an NUG priority and could lead to a turning point for the revolution”.⁶ While there have been some documented cases of defections in the past, this is the first time in our history that there has been a nationwide, concerted effort to encourage and support military defections.

In a 2008 paper titled; “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict”, researchers Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth highlight that large-scale defections are the strongest indicator of a resistance movement’s likelihood of causing regime change.⁷ The unprecedented level of defections in Myanmar today reveals how the Tatmadaw is struggling to hold its rank and file together, while facing nationwide popular resistance against its rule. In the country’s ethnic states, it has been reported that the Tatmadaw has lost nearly 90 military bases, “including 20 bases in Kachin State, 3 in Chin State, 19 in Kayah State, 12 in Karen State, and 36 in Rakhine State since the coup”.⁸ The military has also engaged in brutal “clearance operations” against anti-junta resistance militia in the Bamar-Buddhist heartland, traditionally the support base of the Tatmadaw and source of new recruits. As the Tatmadaw loses its grip on control in various parts of the country, we can expect these defections to continue.

However, leaving the Tatmadaw or any of its security apparatus (including police) – regardless of intent – is no simple feat. Security personnel who have given up their prospects and risked their lives and those of their family members to leave the service face immense obstacles in their quest to escape military control. Nonetheless, it is plausible to expect that large-scale defections will be the decisive step

⁵ Independent Research Network, *Myanmar’s Civil Disobedience Movement: An analysis of the present situation and a framework for supporting future action*, 28.

⁶ The Irrawaddy, “Myanmar’s Parallel Government Asks Foreign Governments to Accept Military Defectors.” (March 25, 2022). <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-parallel-government-asks-foreign-governments-to-accept-military-defectors.html>. Accessed January 28, 2023.

⁷ Maria J. Stephan & Erica Chenoweth, “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict.” *International Security* 33, no. 1 (2008): pp. 7-44.

⁸ Thang, “How has Myanmar’s military stalled collapse from CDM-inflicted damage?”

for bringing down the Tatmadaw's tyrannical dictatorship and leading Myanmar onto a democratic trajectory. This is supported by Marcos Degaut (2019), who argues that military defections "are a necessary condition for pro-democratic regime transition".⁹

In line with this, the following report explores the reasons for which these soldiers leave the military, and why some choose to stay. We first provide the reader with some context relating to Myanmar's history of military defections, and how this phenomena has developed in the post-coup landscape. Following this, our methodology used to conduct this research is outlined (including what kinds of sources we used to gather information and how this data was analyzed), before moving on to an examination of some of the key actors we have identified as proponents of military defection campaigns in Myanmar. Subsequently, we present our findings from our research, specifically: the support networks that exist for defectors, the obstacles to leaving the military, where defections have been most prevalent, which defection campaigns have been most effective, and why. The drivers and barriers to defection often overlap, and our findings illustrate how this is expressed in forms such as personal/family considerations, ethical and political standpoints, as well as financial concerns. Furthermore, this report looks at the role that large-scale defections play in the overall strategy to deny Tatmadaw legitimacy, and how the international community can support pro-democracy actors when it comes to facilitating military and police defections. Throughout this paper we have included graphs and charts reflecting the data we have gathered, as well as comments made by those we had interviewed.

⁹ Marcos Degaut, "Out of Barracks: The Role of the Military in Democratic Revolutions," *Armed Forces & Society* 45, no.1 (2019): 78-100.

Context

It is worth noting that defections from the Tatmadaw have been common in the past - even before the coup. According to past research, former soldiers gave testimonies of physical and psychological abuse, forced labor, terrible living conditions, and accounts of atrocities against civilians. Occasional runaways from the military was common every once in a while, but the February 1st 2021 post-coup landscape has set a precedent in the number of defections from the military. Defections are now occurring on a wide systematic scale along with the emergence of organizations facilitating said defections in the pro-democracy movement.

In the 90s and early 2000s, studies on military desertions and defections were meager. Human Rights Watch dedicated two comprehensive reports to the issue of defected former child soldiers and forced child conscription. In 2002, a report by Human Rights Watch titled, “My Gun Was As Tall As Me”, details the abuse that children who had been forced to join the Myanmar army (the Tatmadaw) endured.¹⁰ In 2007, a follow up report titled, “Sold to be Soldiers” was released.¹¹ These reports highlight a strong legacy of forced child conscription within the Tatmadaw, a tactic implemented when there are not enough volunteers to join the army.

Since the publication of these two papers, organizations from around the world have produced numerous reports and interviews focusing on testimonies from defected child soldiers, which have been uploaded to the internet.¹² These reports highlight a strong legacy of forced conscription within the Tatmadaw. As the number of military defections continues to rise, we may expect to hear more accounts of forced conscription.

According to Tatmadaw defectors who have organized themselves into CDM soldier groups, it is estimated that by early October 2021, there were 2,000 soldiers and 6,000 police officers who left their

¹⁰ Kevin Heppner & Human Rights Watch (Organization), *My Gun was as Tall as Me: Child Soldiers in Burma* (2002).

¹¹ Human Rights Watch (Organization), *Sold to be Soldiers: The Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers in Burma* (2007).

¹² Arakan Army, “POW” (August 7, 2020). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2adMKhUcDN0>. Accessed January 28, 2023. A video titled POW (prisoner of war) was uploaded to the Arakan Army’s official YouTube page on August 7, 2020. The video focuses on two child soldiers who fled from the Tatmadaw and sought the protection of the Arakan Army in 2019. One of the soldiers, Private Moe Htet (TA/559285) spoke of his experience being forced into the army, trained in military recruit camps, and eventually deployed to the frontlines.

posts in defiance of the military dictatorship.¹³ Defection groups such as People's Goals and People's Embrace have also gathered records and statistics such as the ranks of defectors, what messaging appeals to them, and more. There is more data to work with than ever before.

Past research on the inner workings of the Tatmadaw shows that there is a complicated web of push and pull factors that play different and often competing roles in the psyches of individual soldiers.¹⁴ Andrew Selth notes that the Tatmadaw maintains control over individual soldiers through a combination of indoctrination, provision of security, and cultivating a hawkish fear of civilians or ethnic forces, thus projecting an idea of a perpetual enemy to defeat.¹⁵

At the same time, soldiers themselves are subject to violence and injustice within the Tatmadaw. Sai Latt's 2016 PhD dissertation explores the institutional power dynamics and hierarchical nature of life in the Tatmadaw.¹⁶ Soldiers and their families are exploited through a dynamic web of military corruption, patron-client relations, gift-giving, arbitrary taxation, and unpaid labor. This culture of corruption and exploitation is endemic in the Tatmadaw's Defense Service Academy (DSA); members of the Tatmadaw officer corps have been "exposed and accustomed to violence, exploitation and various forms of injustice" since the beginning of their military careers, which they pass on to their juniors as they climb the ranks of seniors.¹⁷

As a result of the harsh repression carried out by the regime against the revolutionary movement, a whole new slew of reasons has arisen for soldiers and police officers to leave. Patterns have also emerged in the way security personnel defect due to the large number of occurrences. The Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) released a number of reports publicly on the state of defections and desertions for military and police after the 2021 coup.¹⁸ A diverse range of support mechanisms will help counter some of the obstacles utilized by the military to prevent soldiers from leaving, which in turn will facilitate future large-scale military defections. Hence, our own research project examines how

¹³ DIIS, Helene Maria Kyed & Ah Lynn, "Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup," *Danish Institute for International Studies Report 2021*, no.6 (2021): 9.

¹⁴ Andrew Selth, *Myanmar's Military Mindset: An Exploratory Survey*, (Queensland: Griffith University, 2021): 17-21.

¹⁵ Selth, *Myanmar's Military Mindset: An Exploratory Survey*, 25.

¹⁶ Sai Latt, *Depoliticization, Securitization and Violent Accumulation in the Integration of the Greater Mekong Sub-region*, (Simon Fraser University: PhD Dissertation, 2016): 129.

¹⁷ Latt, *Depoliticization, Securitization and Violent Accumulation in the Integration of the Greater Mekong Sub-region*, 137.

¹⁸ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, "Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup".

catalysts for defections can also serve as obstacles when considering the various support mechanisms encouraging soldiers to leave their posts.

Further context and a review of existing studies on defections and desertions is included in this report in Appendix I.

Research Methodology

This report is informed by a mixed methods approach that uses surveys distributed through interviews with military defectors, key stakeholder interviews, archive retrieval, and desk research. Before the interviews and surveys commenced, we conducted a review of Roundtable Discussions held by People's Goal, a group put together to support CDM soldiers and to share knowledge to the general public about the circumstances surrounding soldiers that leave the Tatmadaw. They hold weekly roundtable discussions, some of which contain relevant background information for structuring our research. Because these conversations are open to the public, we found that their conversations were not always forthcoming. Nonetheless, they provided necessary background information on both the sentiments of the soldiers themselves and the public sentiment on their role in the resistance.

Within a two month period, the Defector Questionnaire was distributed to 50 defected soldiers. The survey questions were designed to help us understand the incentives and challenges of defectors. We used Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis application designed for mixed methods research to examine the questionnaire responses. The interviewer connected with the defectors through civilian groups promoting defections and Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs). The survey participants were carefully selected to ensure diversity in terms of geography, education, economic background, rank, family status, age, and years of service. Before commencing the interviews, the team sought advice from recently defected soldiers, regional security experts, and experts providing psychosocial support to defectors on the framing of the questions.

Due to funding limitations, we were only able to interview 50 soldiers for the report. Possible data points and cross references that were possible with the existing data were omitted from this paper due to the limitation of scope and difficulty drawing strong conclusions from a small sample size. Should this research be scaled up, we would be able to draw stronger inferences and gather more detailed data points. The interviews conducted relied heavily on the soldiers self-reporting their personal experiences. As such, it was difficult to verify the information that they presented to us in this report and we accepted them at face value. We cross referenced some accounts of general trends across the 50 interviews in order to verify information and achieve consistency in our findings.

All of our research and interviews were conducted in Burmese, and was subsequently translated into English for the purposes of data tagging, analysis, and drawing quotations. During the analysis stage of our research, we used a cross-platform application for analyzing qualitative and mixed methods research called Dedoose to examine the answers provided in these interviews. We employed the qualitative data analysis software to tag and organize key quotes and concepts from the interviews. These key concepts were then sorted and analyzed against each other in order to identify key trends within the 50 defectors' detailed and often lengthy responses to each question. While translations can often yield inaccurate or confusing results, our entire research team can speak, read, and write Burmese, thus allowing us to reference the original interviews whenever necessary.

Next, the research team spoke with 10 key stakeholders from pro-democracy organizations, such as National Unity Government (NUG), People's Defense Forces (PDF), ethnic-revolutionary organizations (EROs) and groups encouraging and supporting defections. We also analyzed a diverse range of secondary resources, including: news articles, existing research reports on defections both in Myanmar and around the globe, as well as public statements from the military junta and organizations part of the resistance movement.

While conducting research in Myanmar creates significant risk at present, various steps were taken to manage this risk—including, but not limited to, an assessment of risk before each interview in consultation with the research team and advisors; anonymization of all key informant interviews; and use of the team's trusted networks to identify and contact appropriate interviewees. These interviews were supplemented by a review of other research and policy statements that have been issued since the coup.

We initially separated deserters and defectors into two different categories. However, after consulting with the National Unity Government's Ministry of Defense (MOD) and some Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs), we found that in the current conflict, there was little to differentiate between defectors and deserters; that is, deserters were being treated by all sides as de facto defectors, and were all being designated as defectors.

Our team faced some challenges in collecting responses from the soldiers. While we were able to collect responses easily from former soldiers who fled across the border into neighboring Thailand and India respectively, it was difficult to get responses from those inside Myanmar who were in active war zones or liberated areas. In the interviewing process, we found that some former soldiers were experiencing distressing emotional responses to the questions being asked. We paused these interview sessions and consulted with a mental health practitioner, who ran a small course for our interviewer on trauma-sensitive interviewing and psychosocial first aid practices. This was to ensure that the interviewer knew what to do when entering an emotionally charged situation, and that the interviewers themselves would not experience vicarious trauma through the interviewing process. The interviews went smoothly after this intervention.

The survey questions are included at the end of the report in Appendix II.

Key Actors

This section outlines some of the key actors and groups that have been providing various kinds of assistance to encourage defections among security personnel. All the groups interviewed have the capacity to work together, and there is already some level of coordination among most of the groups. Many of the defected soldiers we interviewed self-identified as members of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), and received various kinds of support from these groups. Others did not receive any support whatsoever in their defection or afterwards. Two key actors, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and Arakan Army (AA), declined to be interviewed for our research, but it is known that they harbor and support Tatmadaw defectors as well.

The key actors we interviewed can be divided into three broad categories: ethnic revolutionary and NUG actors, civilian-led groups, and CDM soldier groups. Some are mentioned more frequently by defectors as integral to their own defection and those of their comrades. Each group plays a different but vital role in the encouragement of defections, and provides different kinds of support offerings to defectors.

As revolutionary bodies, the National Unity Government (NUG) and Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (ERO) have tactical and strategic interests in encouraging Tatmadaw defections; they view the success of defections as part of their respective armies' larger offensive strategies to defeat the Tatmadaw. The civilian-led and run groups are primarily composed of activists and volunteers, and often arose out of the tactic of nonviolent resistance. These groups view encouraging and promoting military defections to be a way of supporting the revolution through direct action and civilian resistance. The CDM soldier groups provide for the welfare of defected soldiers and their families. These groups are integral to the overall strategy of the success of the revolution, but they are relatively new democratic actors and, due to their close and long standing military connection, often lack experience operating in the civilian space. One such CDM soldier group, People's Embrace, has close ties with the NUG and EROs, and is now functioning as a de facto defection unit of the revolutionary bodies. All these groups and actors play a vital role in the promotion of Tatmadaw defections.

NUG Ministry of Defense

The NUG Ministry of Defense (MOD) has stated a strategic interest in encouraging defections, and have included defections as a key objective in their offensive strategy. However, the reality on the ground and the resource limitations faced by the NUG prevents the defection strategy to be implemented in full. Our key interview with the NUG Ministry of Defense was conducted with a core member of their defection unit. The NUG representative stated the main goal of the Ministry of Defense in encouraging defections is to hasten the revolution with the least amount of bloodshed.

To that end, the MOD is actively working with groups of defected soldiers, specifically People's Embrace, to encourage further defections. People's Embrace, though it is a group established by and for the support of defections by CDM soldiers, has since its inception effectively been integrated as an active part of the NUG Ministry of Defense. With the support of People's Embrace, the NUG Ministry of Defense has been actively working to document these soldiers under the CDM registry, and to issue CDM codes to defected soldiers. Of the 3,000 estimated defected soldiers, MOD has registered 1,500 under the CDM registry; of the 7,000 defected police, around 3,000 have been registered by the MOD. As part of the registration, the MOD also occasionally interviews these soldiers for intelligence gathering and documentation.

The NUG issued statements in the past promising cash rewards to soldiers who have defected with their weapons, or alluding to the possibility of resettlement in third countries (specifically Australia) for defectors. However, the reality on the ground is very different from the messages that are disseminated. In part, this can be considered a strategic move, to convince those inside that life as a defector and outside of the military is comfortable and attractive. As those promises go unfulfilled, this may backfire to become a deterrent and slow down defections.

Many former soldiers we had interviewed stated the resettlement offer to Australia as a key push factor in their decision to leave.¹⁹ In reality, the number of soldiers that could possibly access the resettlement offer is miniscule. The MOD representative stated that defections that happen in the Northern front have fewer options to leave Myanmar for a neighboring or third country such as Thailand or India.

¹⁹ See "The Path to Freedom" section; specifically "Current Conditions" sub-section of this report's findings (page 61).

Those in the East and West have more chances to escape. For those who cannot leave, it becomes imperative for the NUG to cooperate with Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations to build safe zones for housing and absorbing the many defectors that are scattered around Myanmar in liberated areas.

The types of support and offerings that the MOD is able to give to defectors is severely limited. The MOD is able to support defectors by connecting them with some other aid programs such as the UN World Food Program for internally displaced persons in Myanmar, but the representative did not comment on how many people have actually been supported that way. As is the case with CDM support to striking civil servants, the MOD struggles to provide material support for the defectors that have officially joined the CDM registry. The Ministry is unable to guarantee the personal security, education, or healthcare of the police and military defectors or their families.

The MOD struggles to support the defectors registered with them as official CDMers in various ways. For example, the ministry cannot guarantee the personal security, financial support, education, or healthcare of police and military defectors or their families. As the price of goods rise inside Myanmar, especially in the conflict zones, we can expect the difficulties with resource allocation to amplify. As the NUG is unable to guarantee the safety and security of potential defectors and their families, the realistic offer for them to leave is poor. This results in the profiles of defectors either being strongly ideologically motivated to leave, or suffering from intolerable circumstances (such as personal grievances or witnessing injustice) in their current positions in the military.²⁰

Unless the NUG is able to somehow fulfill the promises made early on in the coup, or win significant military victories against the Tatmadaw, it is unlikely that we will see large scale defections in the near future.

²⁰ See “Motivations to Leave” section; specifically “Moral Conscience & Political Stance” sub-section of this paper’s findings (page 34).

People's Embrace

People's Embrace (*Pyi Thu Yin Kwin* ပြည်သူ့ရင်ခွင်) is a group founded by Captain Lin Htet Aung, a defected Tatmadaw soldier, to encourage soldiers to defect. People's Embrace differs from the other CDM soldier groups and civilian-led groups in their close ties with the NUG and other EROs such as the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force and the Karen National Union. Today, they operate under the administration of the NUG's Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration through the People's Embrace Central Committee. People's Embrace is made up of five different task forces: Task Force 1 responsible for organizing social media, Task Force 2 responsible for verification of the identities of defected soldiers and police, Task Force 3 responsible for sending supplies to liberated areas, Task Force 4 responsible for distributing supplies and providing accommodation for defectors in liberated areas, and Task Force 5 responsible for relocation of CDM soldiers to liberated areas.

CDM soldiers are verified of their status by Task Force 2, after which they are registered with People's Embrace and are eligible to receive CDM codes from the NUG. However, not all those who are registered have been issued a CDM code; a concern which was also voiced in our interviews with defected soldiers. People's Embrace has managed to support CDM soldiers under their care with 60,000 Myanmar Kyats (around US\$60) per month, and receive donations from interested parties. To date, People's Embrace has received around 100 million Myanmar Kyats in donations (around US\$48,000). They run Telegram channels that encourage soldiers to defect, and they offer support to “watermelons”²¹ and “pre-CDMs” (those who are informants for the revolution within the military, and those who wish to defect but not yet able or willing to).

In the beginning of the coup, they saw more auxiliary forces defecting (such as engineers, artillery, and office staff). Since escalation on the frontlines in 2022, they report more light infantrymen (LIDs) defecting as of late.²²

²¹ Those within the Tatmadaw are sometimes referred to as “watermelons” – “green” on the outside (symbolizing the color of the military) and “red” on the inside (suggesting support to the resistance movement).

²² This trend was also reflected in our interviews.

Karenni Nationalities Defense Force / Karenni People's Embrace

The Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF) formed in response to the 2021 coup d'état and is composed of local Karenni PDFs and militias. They operate under the NUG Defense Ministry's official defense policy.²³ As a relatively young and disparate organization, the KNDF struggles to acquire resources for their own struggle against the Tatmadaw, while contending with the influx of defectors into their territories as fighting continues in their region. We interviewed the head of the CDM department of the KNDF and the second in charge of the Karenni chapter of People's Embrace. He states that there are 60 CDM soldiers under his arrangement, with a total of 100 CDM soldiers in Karenni state, some waiting to go to a third country.

The KNDF and the Karenni People's Embrace have been continuing their propaganda campaigns against soldiers, supporting CDM soldiers, and rehabilitating them for civilian life. Their aim is to encourage mutiny on a larger scale (such as a whole battalion) through spreading messages to encourage defections. The KNDF has active efforts to spread these messages through social media, and encourage CDM soldiers to call their friends to convince them to leave. They found that many Tatmadaw soldiers have low morale after seeing news on social media and/or media. Karenni People's Embrace has also called individual soldiers themselves via mobile phone in order to facilitate defections.²⁴ At the time of the interview, KNDF was planning to send messages and leaflets encouraging defections via drone to forces on the ground.

The messaging is typical of the encouragement by the NUG Ministry of Defense. They try to show that when the soldiers defect, they will be treated well by the KNDF, that there is a pathway to moving to a third country, and a cash reward for defecting with arms. However, the KNDF representative noted that he did not find financial incentives to be very attractive to the soldiers; rather, the soldiers found respect, dignity, proper treatment and responsibility to be a more attractive offer.

²³ National Unity Government Ministry of Defence, "Defence Policy".
<https://mod.nugmyanmar.org/en/mod-defence-policy/>. Accessed January 28, 2023.

²⁴ The contact information for soldiers is closely guarded from those outside the military, and this is a special case of them possessing extremely valuable data.

The offers put forth by the KNDF to entice soldiers to defect, such as cash rewards or relocation, are unlikely to be realized; the KNDF themselves are struggling to support their own armed resistance, and the Karenni People's Embrace do not have any specific funds allocated to them to facilitate defections or to support the CDM soldiers after they have defected. This lack of a systematic mechanism to support defections leads to the defection team risking their own security and resources in order to facilitate and house defectors. Without access to further funds and resources, it does not seem likely that KNDF or Karenni People's Embrace will have the capacity to handle the kinds of large scale defections they are intending to encourage.

However, it is worth noting that the KNDF is on some of the toughest fronts of the resistance against the Tatmadaw, facing daily skirmishes and battles. As such, they are likely to see more defections, desertions, or surrenders from the front lines than other areas. While the number of defectors harbored by the KNDF and Karenni People's Embrace is small for now, we can expect those numbers to grow if the tides of battle turn in the favor of the resistance. In this case, the existing forces in the area lack the resources to absorb the number of defectors, which could lead to further unrest in the region. It is therefore of strategic and tactical importance that the KNDF and Karenni People's Embrace are equipped with the resources, both material and technical, to absorb defections in the area.

Karen National Union

The Karen National Union and KNLA play a pivotal role in the revolution against the Tatmadaw, one that their peoples have been fighting since January 31st 1949. The KNU played a key role in the opposition to the coup, sheltering protesters and striking civil servants, and training anti-coup militias and the People's Defense Forces (PDFs).²⁵ The KNU serves as a governance mechanism in the areas that it controls, providing services such as healthcare, education, and administration.²⁶ The KNU has established significant relationships with the NUG, working together on many levels, and many defectors and resistance fighters have sought shelter in KNU-controlled territory. The KNU, in turn, has dealt with complicated logistical considerations for resettlement and integration of these populations since the start of the 2021 coup. For this paper, we interviewed the former joint secretary of the KNU and a spokesperson of a key KNU brigade responsible for the resettlement of a large number of CDM soldiers and police.

The KNU views the institutions of police and military very differently; while police are treated like normal civil servants and employees, Tatmadaw soldiers are handled with more scrutiny and suspicion. Soldiers are taught to kill, torture, and inflict violence, and thus they must be treated with more consideration. The KNU has extensive experience in dealing with the difficulty of reintegrating military deserters from past wars.

KNU officials ensure that military CDMers are never housed alongside PDF groups for fear of violence breaking out in those villages. The KNU is playing a complicated logistical game, of dividing up their own villages to either house defectors or PDFs. Because of the difficulty of integrating defectors into civilian life, they only allow a maximum of 2-3 defectors per village. However, they are only housing a small number of defectors (in the hundreds). If there is a large-scale defection, such as a whole battalion, the KNU may not be able to accept them like they are doing now, and some other arrangement needs to be made. However, to date, what that arrangement is or should look like is unclear.

²⁵ Shona Loong, "The Karen National Union in Post-Coup Myanmar," *Stimson* (April 7, 2022). <https://www.stimson.org/2022/the-karen-national-union-in-post-coup-myanmar/>. Accessed January 28, 2023.

²⁶ Ashley South, "'Hybrid Governance' and the Politics of Legitimacy in the Myanmar Peace Process," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48, no.1 (2018): 50-66.

In the past, the KNU was able to send some military deserters home with some financial support; however, the latest wave of deserters cannot be sent back and they have no desire to return to their homes. Many defectors do not want to be identified as such; some have surrendered themselves as prisoners of war. In the eyes of the KNU, they are treated the same as defectors. If a soldier defects to join CDM, there is a significant risk posed to their families and their personal safety; whereas if they are captured as prisoners of war, their safety is more guaranteed. The KNU have ceased returning prisoners of war to the Tatmadaw like they have done in the past, and have urged other Ethnic armies to do the same.

The KNU have issued an official statement in which they will reward 2 million Myanmar Kyats (around US\$950) to any defector who surrenders with their arms. The KNU has considered the low morale and likelihood of defections of the Tatmadaw soldiers in their offensive strategy. Before attacking a Tatmadaw battalion, they make a public notice to warn those in the area that they are about to attack. This gives the enemy time to defect, run away, or back down, which reduces the number of skirmishes. The main strategy now of the KNU is to win the war without engaging in battle, and thus minimize casualty from both sides. Acquisition of arms through defectors is also proving to be a winning strategy for the KNU – while arms prices have escalated due to the high demand, the public fails to realize that by giving 2 million Kyats to a defector with a gun, one is essentially purchasing arms at a cheaper cost than buying arms elsewhere.²⁷

“Military CDM is very important for our resistance and we need international support to do so. Instead of spending money on arms, we would like to spend on assisting them.”

– KNU Representative

With the support of CSOs, they have been providing financial support to various defectors who want to go back to their homes. They are currently in discussion with People’s Embrace to support defectors with rehabilitation and to reintegrate them back into civilian life. Some defectors have joined with the KNU to fight against the military; so far, they have been providing training and allowing the defectors

²⁷ See “Barriers to Defection” section; specifically “Punishments for Defection” sub-section of this report’s findings (page 50) for information about acquiring weapons from defected Tatmadaw soldiers.

to fight alongside them voluntarily. However, there is a serious concern that the defectors who are allowed to bear arms may form their own militias, which can further increase instability in the region.

People's Goal

People's Goal (*Pyi Thu Pan Taing* ပြည်သူ့ပန်းတိုင်) was initially called People's Soldiers (*Pyi Thu Sit Thar* ပြည်သူ့စစ်သား), and was a group led by CDM Captain Nyi Thuta, who was the first military officer to speak out publicly against the coup in an interview that was streamed on Facebook. In January of 2022, they rebranded to People's Goal and shifted to a civilian-led organization model. People's Goal advocates a non-violent ideological revolution in order to achieve the goals of the revolution. Their Executive Team consists of 4 civilians (3 being women) and 2 former soldiers. They differ from other defection groups in that they work on creating public outreach through their talk show and media production on Facebook, Youtube, and through media outlets. We interviewed several members of the People's Goal team, including Thinzar Shunlei Yi, a member of their executive team.

People's Goal is providing material support for 470 defected soldier families and households. Many are based in Karen State, on the Thai-Myanmar border, and the India-Myanmar border, and the support team is led by eight CDM soldiers. However, funding challenges means that their support to these groups is limited. Currently, their support includes monthly stipends (depending on the availability of funding), and funds for relocation and emergency situations (such as medical needs). However, relying on small-scale donations and short-term (1 or 2 month) project funding means that they are unable to provide the large-scale support to defectors that is achieved by groups such as People's Embrace or the NUG Ministry of Defense. The most effective work conducted by People's Goal is their advocacy and outreach.

People's Goal have targeted both international and domestic audiences in their advocacy. For international advocacy, they have engaged with foreign embassies, international organizations, the UN, justice mechanisms (such as IIMM and Justice for Myanmar), and international media (by writing op-eds and engaging in interviews). For domestic advocacy, they are targeting military families and relatives, and spreading defection campaign messaging. They produce weekly Sunday talk shows (since June 2021) and Wednesday roundtable discussions which share the experiences of CDM soldiers to the

general population to establish more understanding and public support for CDM soldiers. As of January 2023 they have more than 70 episodes available to watch online, with their most popular video garnering 346K views and counting. Having shifted from a CDM soldiers-led group to a civilian group, they are uniquely positioned as they have the respect and support of defectors, as well as the eyes and ears of the general public. Through their public outreach, they are able to connect with currently enlisted soldiers, defectors around the country, and the general public to promote the interest of encouraging defections.

While they have been producing messages and content from various channels, they have been unable to conduct proper monitoring and evaluation of the content to evaluate the efficacy of the messaging. People's Goal representatives identified three key groups within the military now, two of which can be tapped into for encouraging defections and desertions: those who are actively supporting the revolution; those who are loyal to the Tatmadaw but disagree with the coup; those who are active coup supporters. The first and second groups can potentially be targeted with communications campaigns to encourage shirking, disobedience, and eventual defections within the military.

As mobile data becomes more expensive, media becomes more restricted inside; the Tatmadaw cracking down on the use of censorship circumvention technologies (such as VPNs), fomenting concern that audiences are getting harder to reach. There is a concern that currently enlisted Tatmadaw soldiers, especially those loyal to the coup, may not be reached through People's Goal's messaging; the Tatmadaw considers Facebook as the "enemy's [social] platform", and as such the messaging may not reach soldiers who tow the line and refrain from using unapproved social media. They are working with EROs to broadcast shortwave messages to the frontline and to distribute pamphlets via drone in order to reach frontline soldiers who may not be able to access social media or data.

Although they are an independent entity, People's Goal still collaborates with other defection and CDM organizations. Members of People's Goal are also members of the People's Embrace Central Committee, led by NUG leaders and ministers, and they have issued joint statements with other defection groups. Despite this cooperation, People's Goal still struggles to verify whether CDM soldiers and households that they are currently supporting are being supported by other organizations, due to a lack of information and data being shared between them.

Notwithstanding the organization's continued work since the early days of the coup, People's Goal still struggles to secure any long-term funding. Many members are working on a voluntary basis, and they have struggled to establish a fund to support all their members. Former soldiers face significant challenges in starting their civilian lives, and the team is working on developing a sustainable scheme or model to support them. Members of the People's Goal team struggled with mental health challenges, with many having to take leave from work in order to attend to mental health issues.

The People's Goal team provided some essential insights about the psychology of Tatmadaw soldiers and defectors, some of which is confirmed by our own research. They report that frontline soldiers have been fighting for around 2-3 years (for regulars), and over a year now for the battalions deployed after the coup. Nonstop and intense fighting, as well as deteriorating base conditions, have pushed many to desert. They comment that many officers join the CDM movement because of their own convictions and disagreement with the way the military operates. While civilian ministries have seen a slow down of members joining the Civil Disobedience Movement, defections remain active in the security sector and security sector personnel are still regularly joining CDM. People's Goal can confirm that there is at least one defection every week and many desertions.

Spouses of People's Soldiers

Spouses of People's Soldiers (*Pyi Thu Sit Thar Za Nee Mya* ပြည်သူ့စစ်သား ဇနီးများ) was formed in September 2021 with only 3 members in the team and an initial donation from Dr. Sasa and a few women's organizations. Today, their group has expanded to over 10 people and are currently supporting 50-70 families with monthly stipends and supplies. This group was formed under the premise that defections heavily depend on the support of wives and families. Founder Su Thit urged her husband to leave his unit after the coup, arriving to a safe zone in August 2021.

The group helps women in the Tatmadaw whose husbands have joined the Civil Disobedience Movement. They also urge wives of currently enlisted soldiers to apply pressure on the men to leave through Facebook posts, discussion groups, and weekly public conversations with the NUG's Women, Youth, and Child Ministry. As military wives, many of the women are able to share messaging to their direct networks inside the Tatmadaw through Facebook, Telegram, Youtube, and others.

They also provide livelihood skills training for soldier's wives, teaching them basic skills such as how to cook, sew, and other essential skills, and providing equipment for them to monetize these skills. Wives of soldiers are often homemakers or housewives who live with their husbands in military compounds, and families of soldiers and police are often single income households. Low salaries and pay cuts often mean that they do not own property or independent wealth, leaving them dependent on the military for housing, subsistence, education, healthcare, and other needs. The military ensures that soldiers are wholly dependent on the institution for support, thus serving as a significant barrier to defection. Comprehensive provisioning of alternative support for defectors, (including assurances that their survival and livelihood will be upheld) can be a very encouraging offer to push soldiers to leave the military.²⁸

²⁸ See "The Path to Freedom" section; specifically "Support Received" sub-section of this paper's findings (page 57) for more information.

Thuzar, a key member of the Spouses of People's Soldiers group, stated her and her husband's reasons for leaving:

“My husband told me that we are meant to protect civilians and to prevent unrest between the civilians and the SAC. But if there is an order to harm civilians, that he can't do it and he can't give the order to do it. He didn't want to harm civilians and couldn't give the order to do it. And I agreed because I know his personality.”

Other Initiatives

Blooming Padauk & Breaking Brainwashed

Blooming Padauk (*Padauk Phu ပိတောက်ဖူး*) is an initiative led by Htet Myat, a military Captain and a member of People's Soldiers working on encouraging defections, alongside his wife Su Thit who runs Spouses of People's Soldiers. This is a minor initiative that provides support for 20-30 people, providing around 300,000 Myanmar Kyats (around US\$142 at the time of writing) per person for subsistence. They have also released an eBook entitled Memories of 15 Years in the Military.

The group works on a blog containing stories from within the Tatmadaw called Breaking Brainwashed, which publicizes information on how the military indoctrinates their personnel, and a YouTube channel dedicated to combating Tatmadaw propaganda. 3 of our interviewees mentioned working with Breaking Brainwashed after their defection.

Tatxit

Tatxit is a small underground organization working to promote defections through the high risk effort of direct communications to those inside the Tatmadaw. They also provide psychological counseling for soldiers that are defecting, before and after they have left. They are one of the main groups that instigated the Watermelon Campaign, where they encouraged shirking and other forms of resistance to soldiers that are actively enlisted in the military. Because their main goal is to reach those inside the Tatmadaw and not advocate to the general public, they maintain a very low profile and rarely answer any interviews.

Civil Society Organizations / Non-Governmental Organizations

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have been providing assistance and support for defectors, as well as other CDMers. The kinds of assistance provided include basic living support such as housing, rations, and small stipends. However such groups do not support CDM soldiers exclusively, and while many are based on the Myanmar-Thai border, they are unable to support those inside the country, yet alone on the Myanmar-India border.²⁹

²⁹ Frontier Myanmar, “‘We are facing a crisis’: New law puts Myanmar NGOs in ‘impossible’ position” (December 14, 2022). <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/we-are-facing-a-crisis-new-law-puts-myanmar-ngos-in-impossible-position/>. Accessed January 28, 2023; The Irrawaddy, “Myanmar Refugees in India Lack Support: NGOs” (August 24, 2022). <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-refugees-in-india-lack-support-ngos.html>. Accessed January 28, 2023.

Interview Findings

The Defectors

We surveyed 50 defectors from around Myanmar to understand the incentives and challenges that they face in their life in the military and after defection. Our interviews were conducted online, with the interviewer connecting with defectors through civilian groups promoting defections and Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs). The survey participants were carefully selected to ensure diversity in terms of geography, education, economic background, rank, family status, age, and years of service.

Out of the 50 defectors we interviewed, 40 served in the Army, 7 in the Navy, 2 in the Air Force, and 1 in the Police Force.³⁰ Respondents' ages ranged from 23 to 46 with an average age of 30. The youngest age of enlistment was 13, while the oldest was enlisted at age 27. 19 out of the 50 soldiers (38%) were enlisted before the legal age of 18. Cross referencing the age of enlistment with the year, we saw enlistment of boys under 18 in the respondents up until 2015, after which we did not see any child soldiers enlisted. This matches up with the improvements made by the government in 2015 when Myanmar signed the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child regarding the use of minors in armed conflict.³¹

Survey respondents came from all over the country, with the largest concentration from Yangon (10), Ayeyarwaddy (9), and Bago (7) and Sagaing (7) regions, heavily Buddhist and Burman areas typically known to be recruitment strongholds of the military.^{32 33} Our respondents were mostly Burman (74%),

³⁰ The medical corps of the Tatmadaw are classed as serving in the army, even if they are positioned on a naval ship or air base. We interviewed several defectors who served in the medical corps, and they are classed as army defectors.

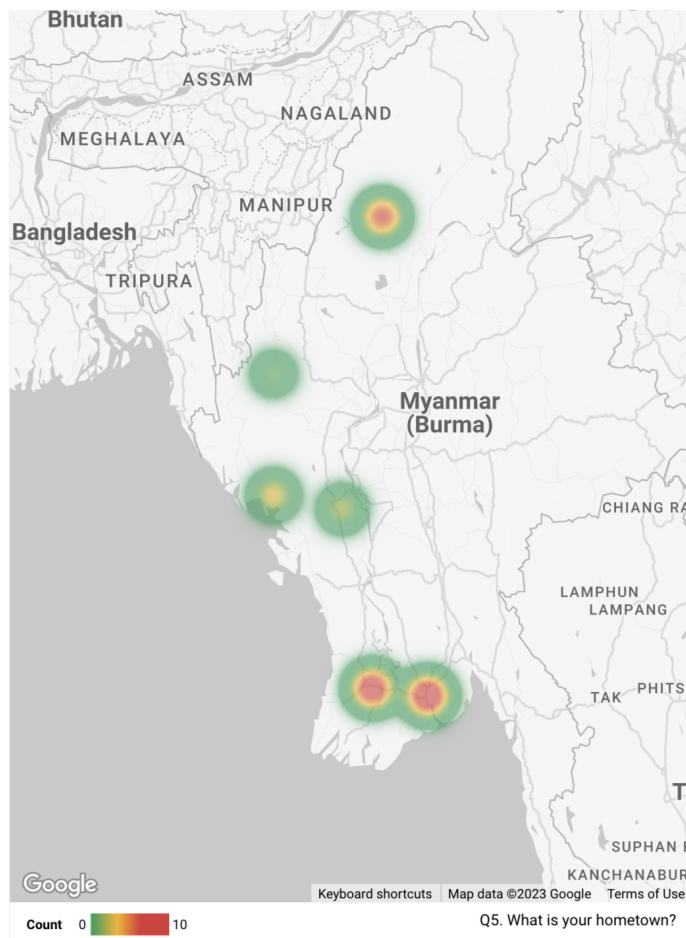
³¹ United Nations Treaty Collection (UNTC), "11. b Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict," *Chapter IV: Human Rights*. https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-11-b&chapter=4&clang=en. Accessed January 28, 2023.

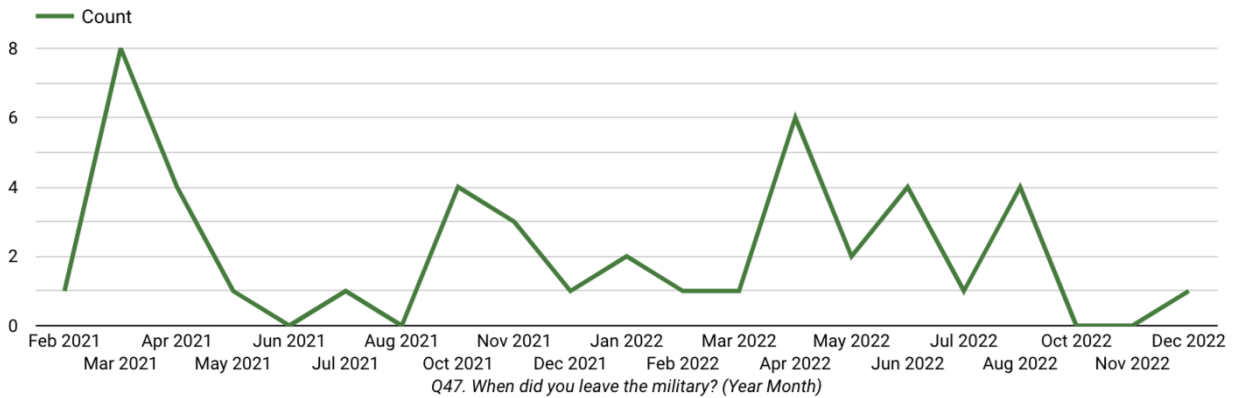
³² Michael Martin, "Is Myanmar's Military on Its Last Legs?" *Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)*, (June 21, 2022). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/myanmars-military-its-last-legs>. Accessed January 28, 2023.

³³ However, since the military has begun engaging in brutal "clearance operations" against anti-junta resistance militia in the Bamar-Buddhist heartland, traditionally the support base of the Tatmadaw and source of new recruits; youths are abandoning the enlisting in the Tatmadaw in favor of joining their local PDFs. As the Tatmadaw loses its grip on control in various parts of the country, we can expect these defections and desertions to continue.

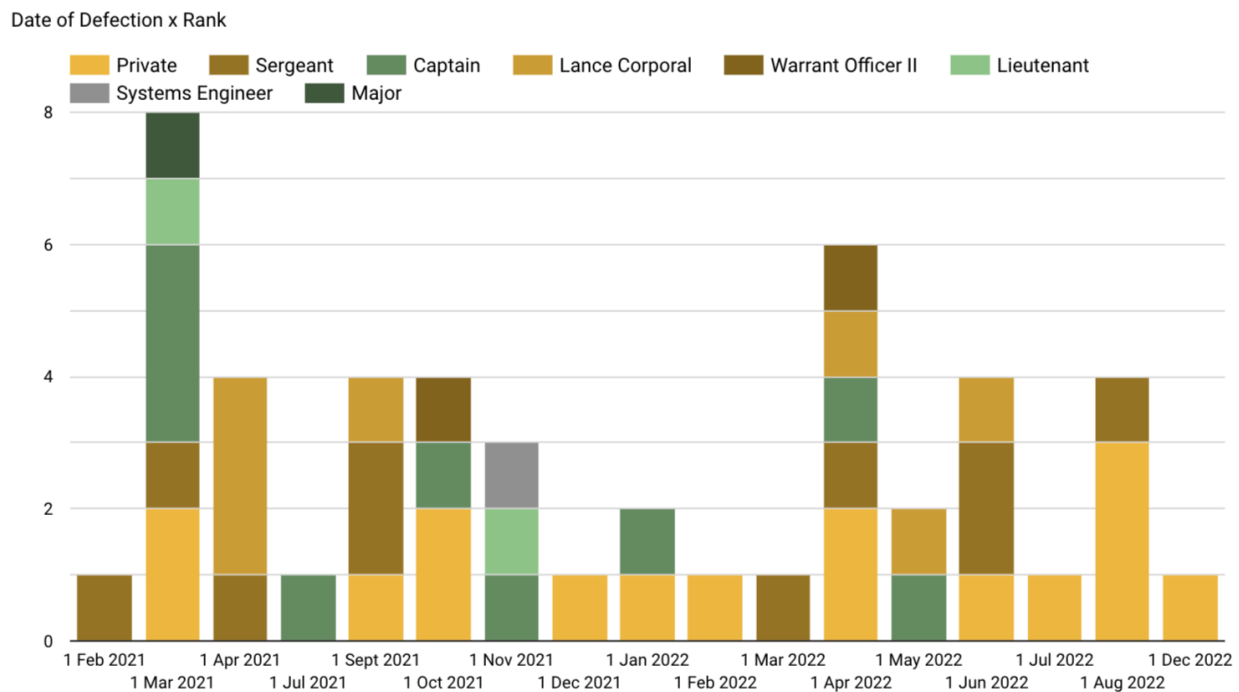
with some identifying as Arakan (3), Chin (3), Karen (3), and mixed Burman and Ethnic heritage (3). As the demographic of the Tatmadaw is mostly Burman, it made sense that most of the defectors are Burman as well. 45 out of 50 respondents identified as Buddhist (90%), with only 5 identifying as Christians (10%). The Christians were Chin or Karen. Around half (51%) of those surveyed were married, and 15 had children.

The education levels of the defectors varied widely, and were strongly correlated with their rank. 11 out of 50 respondents had not completed their basic matriculation, having attained only a primary or middle school education. 10 were high school graduates, 9 attended some university, and 10 had attained Bachelor's degrees. 3 attended some technical or defense service school, and 3 had a masters degree. Ranks varied widely as well, with 13 officers, 20 insignia-wearing staffers, 16 enlisted soldiers without rank, and 1 system engineer without rank. Middle and Primary school graduates are often assigned to combat roles with low or no rank (Sergeant and below), while higher education was correlated with higher rank and being given technical, medical, and administrative assignments.





Most of those surveyed had left right after the coup between February and March 2021, between September and November of 2021 when the fighting had intensified heavily nationwide, and steadily between April and September of 2022. September 7th, 2021 marked the declaration of the people's defensive war by the National Unity Government, whereby they announced a hard deadline for any civil servants looking to join the Civil Disobedience Movement.³⁴



³⁴ Sebastian Strangio, "Myanmar Shadow Government Declares 'National Uprising' Against Military Rule," *The Diplomat*, (September 7, 2021). <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/myanmar-shadow-government-declares-national-uprising-against-military-rule/>. Accessed January 28, 2023.

Our research found that the higher level defections of officers happened in the early days of the coup, between February and April 2021. September 2021 to August 2022 saw a steady stream of defections from insignia-wearing staff to enlisted soldiers. Captains were the most common rank to defect from the officer class.

Joining the Tatmadaw

While there is a history of forced recruitment and child soldiers in the Tatmadaw's past (and some of the soldiers were recruited under age 18), many of the soldiers, when asked, stated fairly mundane reasons for joining the Tatmadaw. A personal desire to serve and seeking job and education opportunities were the leading reasons for joining the military.

“I had no idea what to do when I passed matriculation in 2011. When I was thinking of going to university, my friend in Tedim showed me an advertisement in the newspaper—calling for an application for Computer Diploma Sergeant Clerk. I was very interested. I didn't have any particular ambition in my mind. I just wanted to work in a nice office wearing a nice uniform. I didn't know about the military nor their bullying culture so I happened to enlist.” – P22

Poverty and problems in their personal lives also incentivized many young men to sign up for the military.

“My family forced me to join the military. They're in poverty. When my grandpa died and no one was around to take care of our future, I was asked to apply for a DSA. I refused. Later I was forced to join the military and ended up at the military technology institute in Hopong.” – P24

“I had a quarrel with my parents before passing the matriculation. I had made a wrong choice. I enlisted not because I knew anything about the military. I realized that I should not have done so after I signed up. I was not even 17 when I enlisted in the army. I tried to quit, explaining to them about my age, but did not succeed.” – P23

Myanmar closed down all universities for two years after the 8888 uprising (1988); student protests between 1996 and 1998 similarly led to the closure of all universities across Myanmar for another three

years.³⁵ Many young men ended up enlisting in the military during that time. 3 of our respondents, recruited between 1997 and 2001, reported the closure of universities as the main reason they joined the military – at the time, the only way to receive a university education was through enlistment.

“Back then there was a student riot and universities were closed so I had no choice [but to join the army].” – P43, enlisted in 1997

“Universities were closed most of the time and there were not many job opportunities either ... The country’s economy was not favorable to us so we had to struggle a lot if we decided to join other universities. There were not many universities to choose from either. These were the main factors [that pushed me to the military].” – P8, enlisted in 2001

As the state of education declines across Myanmar due to the current military dictatorship and protests against the coup, many youths and students are in a similar situation, where they have few options for education and furthering their careers. However, the Civil Disobedience Movement has encouraged students, teachers, and civil servants in general to exercise non-compliance to any military-backed initiatives.

And it is evident that the Tatmadaw is now facing such recruitment challenges. Prior to the 2021 military coup, senior officials were known to receive bribes ranging from \$1,000 to \$2,500 for recruitment, as there was a high demand for employment in the government. This is at odds with recruitment in the post-coup landscape, in which the SAC has had to reduce the standard for entry into civil service and security forces. As noted by researcher Lian Bawi Thang (2023):

“The acceptance rate of Myanmar’s three military schools —the Defense Service Academy, the Defense Science, and Technology Academy, and the Defense Service Medical Academy—had been around 10% [prior to the coup]. These schools also received a high volume of applications – approximately 12,000 annually. After the coup, they received around 100 applications in 2021, primarily from military families. As a result, the schools extended the deadline hoping to receive more applications. The entry requirements were also relaxed in an attempt to rebuild the medical

³⁵ Monique Skidmore & Trevor Wilson, “Dictatorship, Disorder and Decline in Myanmar,” *Australian National University Press* (December 2008). <https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/dictatorship-disorder-and-decline-myanmar>. Accessed January 25, 2023.

community. On June 9, 2022, the regime's Ministry of Health issued a statement encouraging students who passed the matriculation exam but did not meet the criteria for admission to medical universities to apply anyway.”³⁶

This shows that despite the poor economic situation in Myanmar, and the decline in education opportunities, youths are still choosing alternatives to joining any military institution. Youths who do not have the opportunity to continue their education instead are more likely to join the PDF and EROs across the country to fight the military.

When we asked the former soldiers if they received any military training from foreign instructors, only 10 out of 47 (21.3%) responses said yes. Interestingly however, when we asked those 10 respondents where the foreign instructors were from, the most frequent answers were China and Russia (both with 5), closely followed by India (4). This collaborates with findings from a recent report published by Justice for Myanmar (2023), titled: *Developing a Dictatorship: How governments and international organizations are supporting the illegal Myanmar military junta - and what needs to be done to stop this*.³⁷ While it is common knowledge that China and Russia are two of the main suppliers of weapons to the junta, this report highlights China and Russia's increasing involvement in training Myanmar security personnel.³⁸ Some analysts have questioned if Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine has led to a decrease in military support provided to Myanmar. This is a plausible concern, but the aforementioned report argues that “the pace of Russia's involvement in Myanmar has [in fact] increased ... while proposing Myanmar as a market that Russia can potentially use to circumvent economic sanctions.”³⁹ It is not yet entirely clear if Russia's commitment to supporting the SAC continues to entail military training support, but this deserves close monitoring in the coming months.

³⁶ Thang, “How has Myanmar's military stalled collapse from CDM-inflicted damage?”

³⁷ Justice for Myanmar, *Developing a Dictatorship: How governments and international organizations are supporting the illegal Myanmar military junta - and what needs to be done to stop this* (2023).

³⁸ Justice for Myanmar, *Developing a Dictatorship: How governments and international organizations are supporting the illegal Myanmar military junta - and what needs to be done to stop this*, 53.

³⁹ Justice for Myanmar, *Developing a Dictatorship: How governments and international organizations are supporting the illegal Myanmar military junta - and what needs to be done to stop this*, 48-49.

Motivations to Leave

To get a sense of what could push them to defect, we asked defectors a series of questions to understand why they left, what challenges they faced in the military, and how they defected.

Civil Disobedience Movement

Overwhelmingly, soldiers mentioned the Civil Disobedience Movement (21 out of 50) as a motivating factor for leaving. This was possible due to the initial defections by CDM soldiers Captain Nyi Thuta and Captain Lin Htet Aung who subsequently founded the People's Goal and People's Embrace institutions respectively.

“[I left] to join CDM. I had the idea to leave a while ago, but didn't dare to tell anybody as situations were not favorable. I didn't like what they're currently doing so I had been secretly planning to leave all by myself.” – P3

The Civil Disobedience Movement began when healthcare workers from state-run hospitals instituted a labor strike on 3 February, a mere 2 days after the coup. This led to a cascade effect, where hundreds of thousands of civil servants from government sectors resigned in opposition to the coup. CDM soldiers and police were initially faced with scrutiny and mistrust by the other strikers, but gained steam as the NUG and strike leaders welcomed defecting soldiers as legitimate members of the resistance against the coup.

Surprisingly, a few soldiers mentioned that they themselves took part in the pro-democracy demonstrations after the coup.

“I took part in a demonstration in July and felt sympathy for the people. I knew that the system was wrong and must stand on the side of people. That's why I defected.” – P44

“When the coup occurred, I was still outside so joined the demonstration for three days. My parents always trained me not to lose the track of reality outside. After the coup, the battalion commander didn't let us go outside. We were brought back to the compound. I went back and waited for a chance to flee to the liberated areas.” – P23

The CDM, as a nationwide movement that swept every corner of the country, managed to reach soldiers. Many mentioned access to outside information as reasons for why they defected, suggesting that communications channels are reaching military personnel despite the Tatmdaw's crackdown on communications.

“I snuck out to use the phone and check what’s happening on the internet during a military operation in Lashio. I saw what’s happening outside on the internet. I contacted my uncles, verified what’s going on outside. When I was sure what’s happening I felt enraged. That’s why I fled.” – P33

It appears that access to independent information and close contact with civilians played a major factor in people’s decision making process. Throughout the interviews, we encountered 14 instances of soldiers mentioning access to outside information as reasons for defection, suggesting the importance of different ways of communicating with and reaching soldiers that are still inside.

Moral Conscience & Political Stance

Many soldiers referred to moral conscience (20) as a motivating factor for leaving. Many cited the killing and torture of protesters after the coup as a primary motivator.

“Because crackdown upon strikes were getting more and more violent. They killed people and justified what they were doing in a press conference. I hated it so much.” – P10

Many soldiers bore witness to atrocities committed by the military in the crackdowns against protesters, destruction of property, and crimes against civilians. Some learned about these through access to media or other forms of investigation.

“I heard the news that the military burned over 30 people alive. I investigated the news. When I went out for scouting I asked the people and IDPs. I found out that these people thought soldiers were just murderers.” – P44

Some had a personal political stance that went against the Tatmadaw, many were anti-coup and anti-dictatorship. In 17 mentions of political stance as a motivator, there were 8 mentions of anti-coup,

5 mentions of anti-dictatorship, 4 mentions of pro-democracy. Some mentioned the military's fraudulent overturning of the election as a significant factor.

“They had no relevant reason for the coup. They announced the coup in the drilling arena. I knew that the country was going to collapse while it's already on its way to progress. I'm very disappointed and enraged.” – P9

“When the NLD came to power in 2015 to 2020, there were some changes in the military. Their traits were not completely transformed but there were slight changes. You can talk back when you think you're right. After the coup, they just shoot and kill the innocent people, raid homes and arrest people at night, and bust the windows of the car parked on the street. I didn't have the stomach for injustice. I didn't feel right to continue staying there so I left.” – P24

The military has now engaged in brutal “clearance operations” against anti-junta resistance militia in the Bamar-Buddhist heartland, traditionally the support base of the Tatmadaw and source of new recruits. As the Tatmadaw loses its grip on control in various parts of the country, this can be a motivating factor for Burman Buddhists to leave the Tatmadaw. Two of the soldiers we interviewed responded that the killing of one's own ethnic group was a motivating factor in their own defection.

Many of the defectors reported illegal or wrong actions being taken by the military during their service. 57% of respondents mentioned being ordered to perform work that they considered illegal or wrong. 71% said they witnessed actions that were illegal or wrong performed by their colleagues, and 70% mentioned illegal actions performed by their superiors. Of those, many mentioned instances of impossible or unjust orders (16), unlawful detention or imprisonment (13), beatings and torture (6), and five mentions of unlawful killings.

“They burned houses in the frontline. I know that they should not be doing it. It is not easy for a person to own a house. They would be angry. The military just finds an easy target because they can't find the enemy. Some burned houses in order to make a clear shot. Sometimes when the enemy took shelter in the house and shot at Tatmadaw soldiers, they would burn the house. The rank and file soldiers would say that they are ordered by the officers. The officers also get the command from their superiors.” – P45

Of these instances, 72% of them were performed following orders given by superiors. 80% reported illegal drug use in their battalion or company, and 98% reported heaving drinking in their battalion or company.

Though in cases of these unlawful orders, some respondents reported shirking orders they considered unlawful or unreasonable before they defected. It is not clear whether the shirking was tied to a moral objection to the orders or reluctance to engage for laziness or other reasons, but nonetheless, the reports of shirking, partial obedience, and lying are common across the interviews.

Peer and Family Pressure

The decision to defect is not one that is made lightly by military men and peer and family influence plays a significant role in soldiers' decision to defect. When asked, 70% of respondents reported that they did not make the decision to leave by themselves. 42% said they were encouraged to leave by their friends or family.

“My girlfriend frequently sent me video clips of the military killing people in demonstrations ... When the revolution occurred, she said that she would keep on dating with me only if I joined CDM. ” – P4

Many stated they consulted colleagues or superior officers when deciding to leave. Some soldiers who did not have such friend or family support mentioned that they hesitated to defect when there were no support groups available. The presence of support groups like People's Goal and People's Embrace helped soldiers develop the courage to leave.

“I've been wanting to join CDM since April. Back then there was no organization like People's Soldiers⁴⁰ so I didn't know where to go.” – P44

Injustice in the Military System

When asked about what were the challenges while they were in the military, an overwhelming majority (72%) mentioned the injustices in the military system. These included mentions of corruption, discrimination, organizational dysfunctionality, food insecurity, forced labor, poor living conditions,

⁴⁰ Now known as People's Goal.

personal mistreatment, mobility restrictions, lack of a support network, failing to serve the nation or people, other forms of oppression, rights violation, and being required to obey unjust orders. Still others had faced heavy personal mistreatment in the military, and saw other rank and file being mistreated in the institution.

“We’re supposed to have twice annual leaves per year on paper. That’s not the case in reality. Salary is low. We don’t have enough food to eat. Living conditions are quite depressing too. Battalion commanders make commands every day and it’s really frustrating. Officers use the labor of rank and file soldiers without paying. We have to do household chores at the battalion commander’s house and work at the chicken farm. Soldiers at the frontline are supposed to rotate every six months but they don’t do that either.” – P6

While there are some comforts associated with the free education, healthcare, and other services available to those in the military, those who grew up in the system see the injustice faced by their own family members. 81% of the respondents claimed that women and children are treated badly in the military. Wives of soldiers, especially lower-ranking ones, are often subjected to forced labor to serve in the homes of higher ranking officers. Sai Latt mentions this in his dissertation when talking about the power dynamics within the military, where he mentions that “senior officers physically abuse and financially exploit their subordinates for personal wealth”.⁴¹

“Soldiers wives are buy-one-get-one free item of a slave trade and they are aware of the fact. That’s what my mother used to say when we’re young.” – P15

“Since I grew up in the military, I saw that my mom had to wash the clothes of officers’ wives. I don’t want to say this to my mom but she was like their house maid. Children were also subject to discrimination in terms of parents’ positions. They raised the children just to become like them. My mom worked for them like a slave. That’s the reason I didn’t bring my wife to the base.” – P21

These problems have been endemic in the military system likely since its formation; yet, the institution has persisted until this day. Sai Latt examines the culture of corruption and exploitation taught in

⁴¹ Latt, *Depoliticization, Securitization and Violent Accumulation in the Integration of the Greater Mekong Sub-region*, 129.

military training schools; particularly in the Tatmadaw's Defence Service Academy (DSA). Through interviews with DSA graduates, Latt identifies a *kogyi-nyilay* (senior-junior) culture, which instills "complete loyalty and unquestioning obedience to senior members".⁴² This *kogyi-nyilay* culture subjects military training school students to "extreme poverty, forced labor and the endurance of physical violence" inflicted by their seniors.⁴³

"I've been wanting to leave a while ago as things happening in the military were not in the ways I expected. I didn't like the way they ran the military, the way they managed, the way they exploited the labor of rank and file soldiers in their own businesses or personal affairs which had nothing to do with the military." – P4

Seen in this light, members of the Tatmadaw officer corps have been "exposed and accustomed to violence, exploitation and various forms of injustice" since the beginning of their military careers, which they pass on to their juniors as they climb the ranks of seniors.⁴⁴ Accordingly, dissatisfaction with the Tatmadaw's internal system, including low pay, forced labor, and discrimination has served as a motivating factor for soldiers to defect, and thus escape conditions of oppression and exploitation.

In contrast, some of the soldiers who defected mentioned the kind treatment they received at the hands of the EROs, many of whom they were actively fighting for years:

"When I was in the military, I was under oppression. Food in there was pretty bad. Ever since I arrived at this ERO, I can have a shower every day and three meals a day. I can drink water as much as I want. As long as I'm in good behavior and being honest with them, they provide me security." – P31

The juxtaposition of the poor treatment one receives at the hand of the Tatmadaw with the kind treatment one could receive at the hands of the resistance is also a tactic now used to entice defections.

Injustice has been entrenched in the military system since its founding, and while many soldiers mention it as a motivating factor for their defection, many remained in the system for years, suffering

⁴² Latt, *Depoliticization, Securitization and Violent Accumulation in the Integration of the Greater Mekong Sub-region*, 136.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

the various abuses enacted by the institution and their superiors. The punishments and barriers are high. It took the 2021 coup and the subsequent atrocities to push many soldiers to make the move.

“There have always been reasons for me to leave. I always knew that the institution was wrong. I have received unjust orders and experienced them. Though I wanted to leave, I never had a chance. For people like me who had no backup, it’s impossible to find a route to escape. Main motive was the coup itself. When they took the coup, my decision to leave was confirmed.” – P43

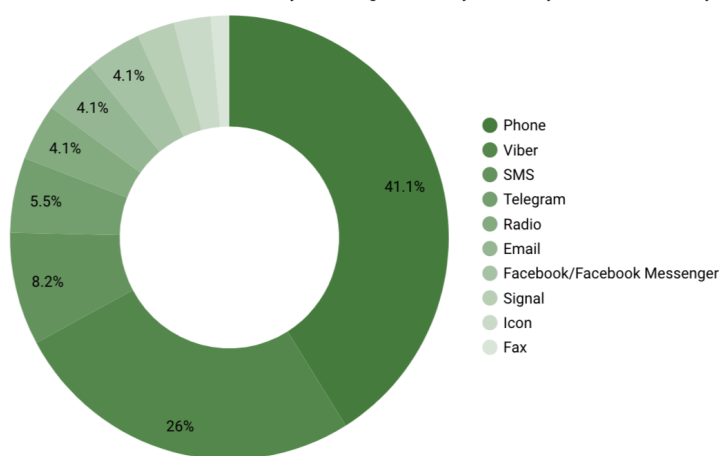
The cascade of defections which occurred after the coup was a combination of the strength of the Civil Disobedience Movement and the resistance itself, the injustice of the coup, and the opportunity which arose when other members of their corps or their peers expressed the desire to defect.

Barriers to Defection

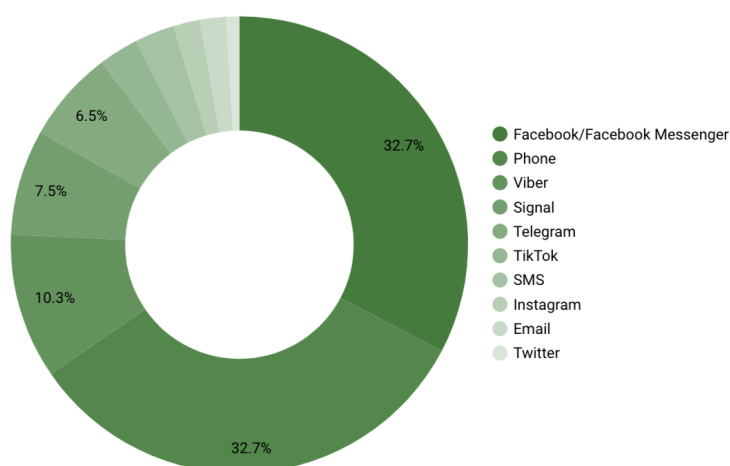
Communications & Surveillance

When asked about the communication channels used to speak with fellow Tatmadaw soldiers, a large number said they were communicating by phone (30) and through the Viber application (19). Others mentioned (in order of frequency) SMS, Telegram, email, Facebook, radio, an application called Icon, and fax. When asked about the communication channels used in daily life, phone calls and Facebook Messenger were mentioned most (both with 35).

Q70. What communication channels did your colleagues normally use when you were in the military?



Q71. What communication channel do you use in your daily life?



It is expected that the military closely monitors these communication channels when used by soldiers for work-related purposes. Interestingly however, the military also appears to monitor communications channels used by soldiers (and even their families) when they are off-duty. 31 respondents (62%) stated that non-work related communications of theirs are monitored on a daily basis. There were 20 mentions of military collecting social media and email accounts (including names and passwords), 16 mentions of digital surveillance (with 7 specifically mentioning military surveillance teams dedicated to monitoring soldiers' online activity), 10 mentions of not being permitted to use phones or social media at all, and 9 mentions of

the military conducting physical searches on devices. Some also mentioned being instructed to listen to their peers on a call in order to monitor them, and some had their devices confiscated or were questioned about their online activity.

“Soldiers as well as their wives and children’s phone numbers, Facebook and Gmail accounts were listed... A family member is monitored on social media as much as the soldiers. They [the military] formed surveillance teams and operated online.” – P48

“According to Code 38, if you leave your military outpost for more than 21 days, you will have to serve 5 to 7 years in prison. Now they [Tatmadaw] are afraid of ‘watermelons’. ... Therefore, the adjutants sometimes do surprise checks on your social media accounts. If your family members live in the base compound, their accounts would also be checked.” – P4

In line with this, it is understandable why some military personnel who consider defecting are hesitant to use communication channels such as phone calls, Facebook, and emails to seek assistance from support groups (People’s Goal, People’s Embrace) and even former colleagues/friends who have already defected. It was revealed in early January 2023 that the Israeli investigative analytics firm Cognyte, formerly known as Verint Systems, “won a tender to provide monitoring services for Myanmar’s state telecommunications agency, just before the 2021 military coup ... [which allowed] the Myanmar military to tap calls in real time, aiding and abetting its atrocity crimes.”⁴⁵ This is only expected to get worse in light of the recent deal between the Tatmadaw and NSO Group Technologies, the creator of the Pegasus spyware system.⁴⁶

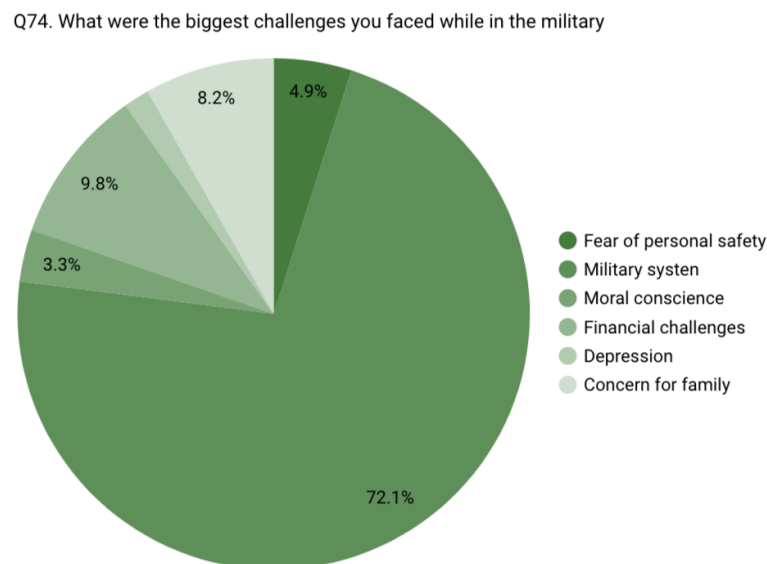
Correspondingly, there were repeated instances of responses mentioning lack of information/misinformation when asked about the obstacles to defect and why they think many of their colleagues have chosen to remain in the military.

“Those who were fighting in the front line with poor internet connection didn’t know about the coup at all. They have no idea what’s going on.” – P2

⁴⁵ Ellery Roberts Biddle, “Newsletter: AI advances shock and awe regulators, Saudi Arabia jails Wikipedia editors, Myanmar’s spyware deal,” *Coda Authoritarian Tech* (January 19, 2023). <https://www.codastory.com/newsletters/myanmar-mobile-data-spyware/>. Accessed January 28, 2023.

⁴⁶ Biddle, “Newsletter: AI advances shock and awe regulators, Saudi Arabia jails Wikipedia editors, Myanmar’s spyware deal.”

As mentioned in Latt’s research, there is a strong kogyi-nyilay (senior-junior) culture instilled into the military system. This involves absolute obedience towards one’s superiors throughout the military hierarchy in the form of following orders and committing favors while threatened and punished if not performed to the correct standards. When we asked the defectors in our interviews whether or not they had ever been ordered to perform a work they considered to be illegal or wrong during their service, 28 out of 49 responses (57.1%) said yes. This figure rose to 35 out of 49 responses (71.4%) when we asked if they had seen any action that they considered illegal or wrong performed by their colleagues. We followed up by asking the former soldiers more specifically what actions they committed or witnessed that were illegal or wrong. The most frequently mentioned response (16) was difficult and/or unjust⁴⁷ orders given to them by their superiors. With this in mind, it is understandable why the military system has been a significant source of discontent among most of the defectors we interviewed when asked about the biggest challenges they faced when serving in the Tatmadaw (44 out of 48 respondents).



That being said, our research suggests that while this kogyi-nyilay (senior-junior) culture is the source of strong dissatisfaction among soldiers, this system also binds rank and file soldiers with their superior officers so firmly that it makes it all the more difficult to break away from the SAC (both physically and

⁴⁷ “Battalions regularly receive thousands of gallons of oil in each quota. They sell them off for profit. I can’t stop them by saying these are public property. They didn’t do me any harm but whenever I see such kind of scenes, I feel my blood boil.”
– P23

mentally). This is heightened by one the Tatmadaw's most infamous qualities: spreading a military nationalist ideology to both their soldiers and the Myanmar population more widely. The Tatmadaw's "deep ideological beliefs about its superior guardianship of the nation and Buddhism", as well as "perpetual enemies that threaten the integration of the nation" run deep within the military system.⁴⁸ Beliefs in this ideological programming and military-backed propaganda thus constitutes yet another barrier to defection, one in which many soldiers who decide to stay in the military lack any moral concerns over the violence so ruthlessly inflicted upon Myanmar citizens—especially when these are the people who are conceived as existential threats to both the nation and Buddhism.

Accordingly, the Tatmadaw maintains control over soldiers through a combination of: indoctrination via the dissemination of military-backed propaganda, isolation of external information, framing those who resist the dictatorship as perpetual enemies, provision of security, a hierarchical system of rewards, promotions and punishments, as well as threatening and intimidating soldiers to remain in the military.

"Married soldiers have to think about their wives and families. The light infantry soldiers are threatened that if they join the CDM, their wives and children will be sent to jail or murdered."
– P30

When asked why they think their colleagues still remain in the military, this is what two of the respondents had to say:

"With blockage of news media access, they [Tatmadaw] preach their propaganda during the assembly, and soldiers tend to believe it due to peer pressure, attachment (your own intake, own battalion/company), and an inability to differentiate right from wrong." – P4

"For some, it's like the Burmese proverb: Even if you do not love him, hold your breath and kiss him." – P2 (တချို့လည်း မချစ်သော်လည်းအောင့်ကာနမ်းပေါ့။)

Furthermore, the extreme isolationist policies that the Tatmadaw has placed on serving members of the military constitute another set of barriers for soldiers to defect. This includes implementing structural obstacles such as checkpoints, guards at the front of housing, curfews, prohibitions to leaving the compound, and placing their families into the military compounds, which makes it harder for them to

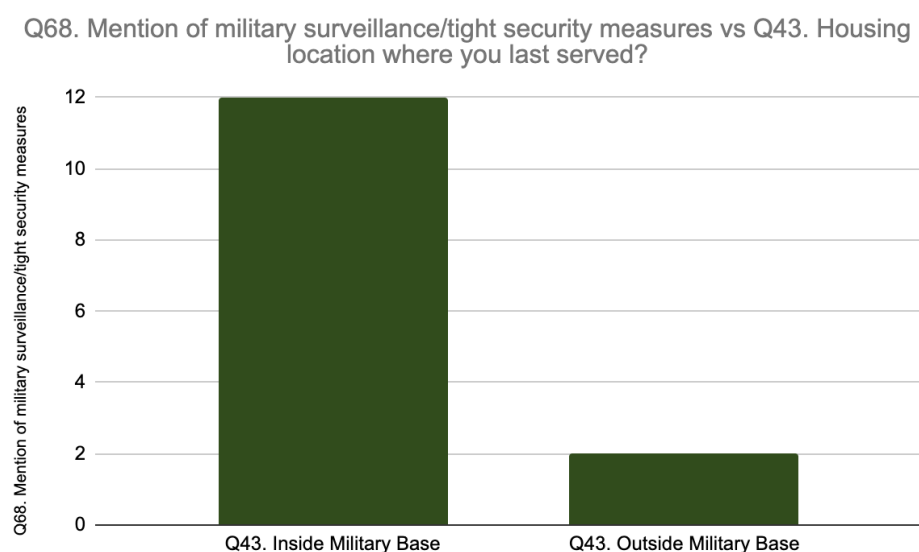
⁴⁸ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, "Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup," 98.

defect with their families let alone leave the military base unattended. When asked what kind of support would make defections easier, 9 respondents mentioned facilitating travel from military outposts; the second most frequent answer after personal security (12). This was reinforced when we asked what they think the obstacles are for soldiers considering defecting but who have not yet left their positions. The most frequently mentioned obstacle by our respondents was military surveillance/tight security measures (14), including: guards and checkpoints in front of the compounds, monitoring of communication channels including phone calls and social media, restrictions and even downright bans from leaving the base.

“Security measures are even tighter these days. There are guards at the front of housing for married soldiers and tighter security measures at the gate too.” – P2

“The military has its own plan to restrict defections: if they have suspicion over an individual, they would never leave him alone, and instead assign three to five other soldiers who strongly support the military to monitor them. In this situation, soldiers dare not talk about their defection plan with their own colleagues. There is always a chance that they will get reported to the commander, so they don’t dare give a hint about how much they are sick of the military.” – P22

Notably, among the 14 respondents who mentioned military surveillance/tight security measures to be a key obstacle for soldiers to defect, 12 of these respondents lived inside a military base while only 2 lived outside prior to defecting.



The Tatmadaw's use of seclusion as a tactic for keeping soldiers in the military is not a new phenomenon,⁴⁹ but these measures have certainly been heightened since the 2021 coup. Today, serving members of the military and their respective families are met with significant practical obstacles to defect, which are only made worse by rigorous military surveillance in the form of isolation of external information from the wider Myanmar population and news organizations, monitoring communication channels used by soldiers and their families, instructing peers to eavesdrop on peers, and even cutting off the internet.

A barrier to defection which was not mentioned in our interviews but should be highlighted is the challenge of civil servants and soldiers leaving the country via the airports. Under Myanmar law, all government employees are required to hand over their passports to their departments, and get permission from the State to travel abroad.⁵⁰ The relevant ministry will look into their reasons for travel, and if this is deemed appropriate, they will be issued with their passport identifying them as a government representative.⁵¹ This serves as a key obstacle, which prevents members of the military who have the financial means necessary to leave Myanmar by plane (specifically in the officer corps) from doing so.

Financial Considerations

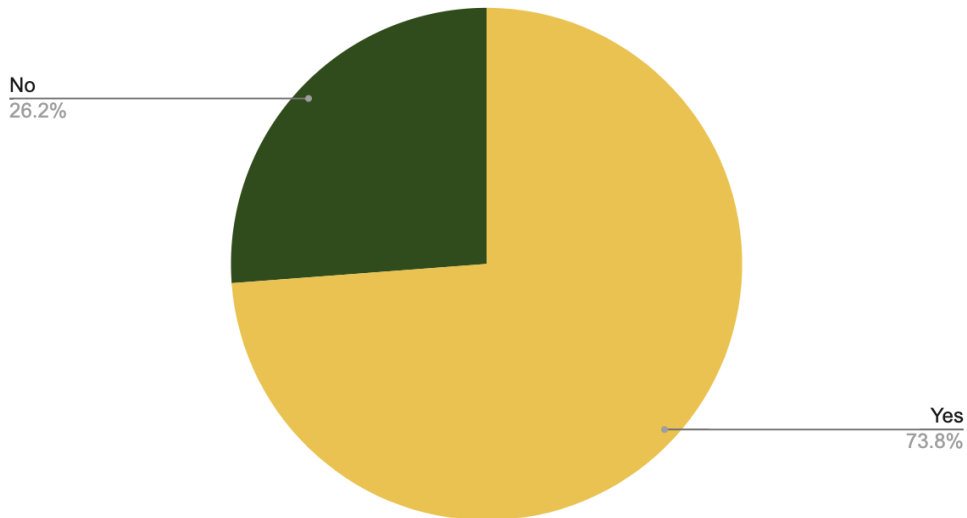
Another barrier to defection which was repeatedly mentioned throughout our interviews with security personnel defectors was the financial implications of leaving the military and thus their primary source of income for themselves and their families. When asked why they think their colleagues still remain in the military, 8 mentioned financial security to be a driving factor. This was backed up when 31 out of 46 respondents (73.8%) said that they know of other soldiers who want to defect, but when asked what they think the obstacles are for these soldiers to leave, the third most frequent mention after military surveillance (14) and family considerations (12) was financial security (6).

⁴⁹ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, "Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup."

⁵⁰ Frontier Myanmar, "Striking civil servants still face regime's wrath, 18 months on" (August 3, 2022). <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/striking-civil-servants-still-face-regimes-wrath-18-months-on/>. Accessed January 28, 2023.

⁵¹ Any civil server is issued with a special type of passport (green in color), which differs from the regular red colored passports issued to Myanmar citizens.

Q66. Do you know any other soldiers who want to defect?

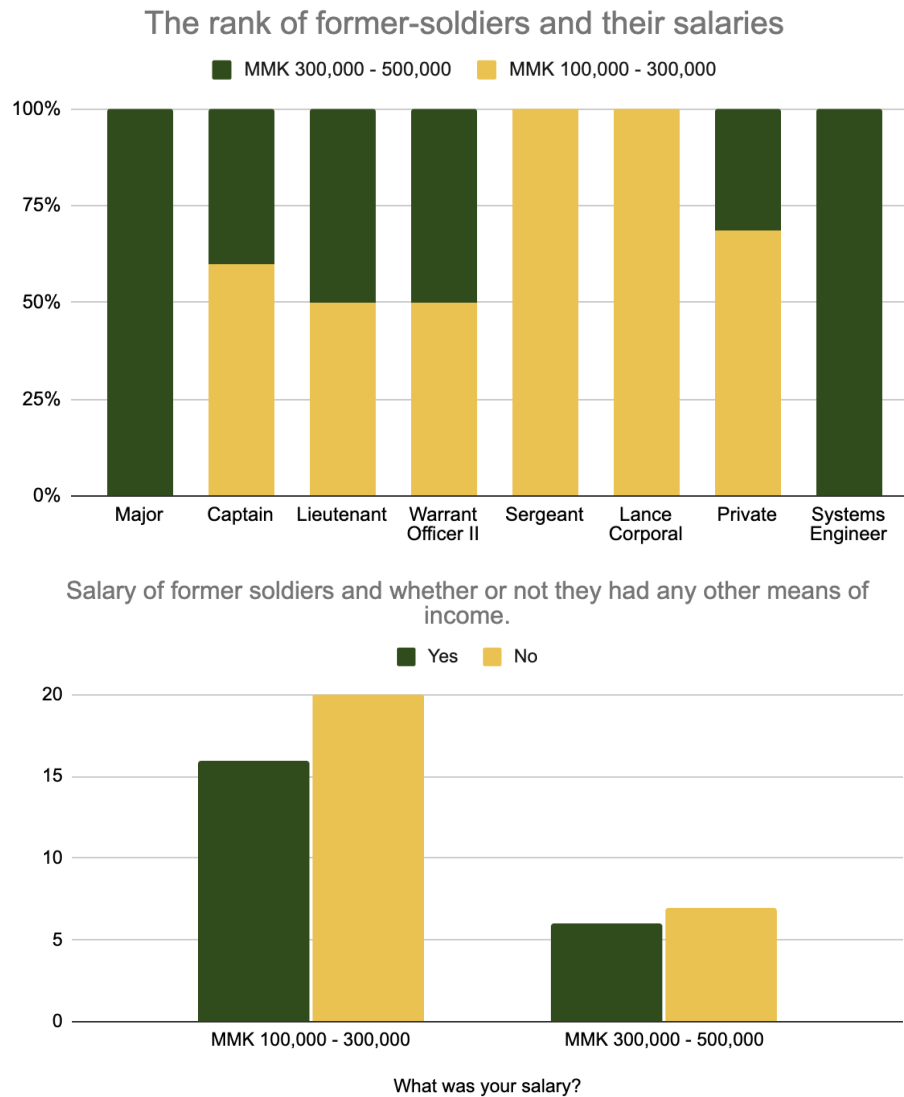


The official salary for those in the SAC varies from position to position. That being said, it is rare for low to mid-ranking soldiers to have a comfortable salary. Unless their superiors permit them to steal from civilians during operations, only high-ranking officials are known to have a salary deemed comfortable. Among the defected soldiers we interviewed for this research, 36 out of 49 (73.5%) respondents said that their salary was between 100,000-300,000 MMK (around US\$47-142), and 13 saying that theirs was between 300,000-500,000 MMK (around US\$142-240). When we cross analyzed the defected soldiers' salaries with their ranks in the military, 28 out of 36 who said that their salary was between 100,000-300,000 MMK had one of the 3 lowest ranks among the respondents (Sergeant, Lance Corporal, and Private).⁵² 7 out of 13 who said that their salary was between 300,000-500,000 MMK had one of the top 4 ranks among the respondents (Major, Captain, Lieutenant, and Warrant Officer II in descending order).

Furthermore, 20 out of 36 respondents who said that their salary was between 100,000-300,000 MMK were also the sole breadwinner of their family. While higher ranking military personnel certainly stand to lose more in economic terms if they defect, the fact that many do not have any other alternative means of generating income – yet alone knowing if groups encouraging defections will provide them

⁵² The 3 lowest ranks (in descending order) among the respondents were Sergeant, Lance Corporal, and Private. Systems Engineer is not included in this rank hierarchy as it is a separate position specifically catered to members of the Engineering Corps.

with any financial support – also presents an obstacle to defection among lower ranks. With such low salaries and no other means of income from themselves or their families, they are reliant on the SAC to provide basic living support, including housing, education and food.



“Some are worried about how they would make a living in the outside world. They ask what are the job opportunities? Will they get paid? What will they be doing after they defect?” – P47

Safety Concerns

When interviewing the defectors and in our interview with CDM Soldier's Wives, they mentioned the reliance of military families on the Tatmadaw for subsistence, shelter, and other necessities. Those who have close and intergenerational ties within the military face more challenges when they decide to leave. 16 out of 50 (32%) of the defectors had family members or relatives that served in the military. Of the 5 that grew up in military housing, all attended primary schools that were in the military compounds. For them, their main concerns were for the safety of their family who were still in military compounds. Even those who did not have family in the military compounds saw the threats their families could face should they be discovered as defectors.

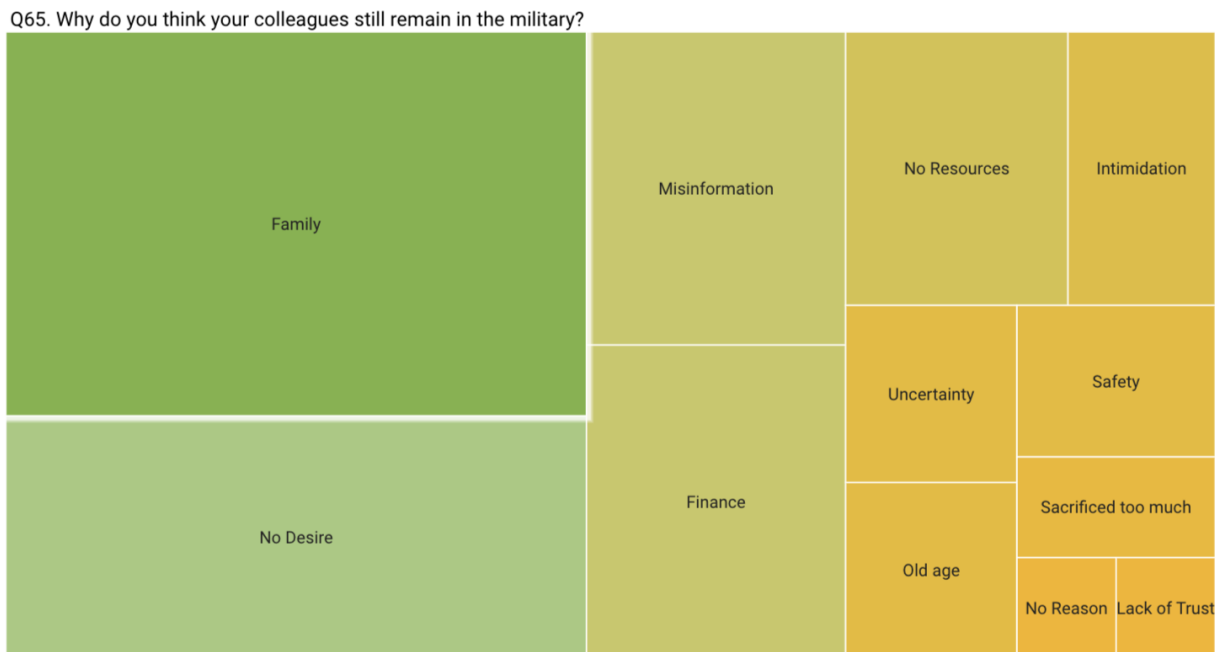
Many respondents worry about their family being interrogated or otherwise harassed by the military should they have been found out to have defected. Some mentioned this as a reason for why their defection took longer than expected. When asked what their concerns were when they defected, 29 mentioned family safety. Additionally, 15 mentioned that both themselves and their family are not safe in their current place, and 3 mentioned that they themselves are safe but their family are not.

“As soon as I left, I’m just a deserter to them ... The soldiers would arrest parents when they couldn’t find the children. I’m very worried that they would take my mother as hostage.” – P24

“There are many things they have to consider before defection. They have many concerns to come out this side. Elderly sergeants also wanted to come but they have children and a family. They have no idea how to make a living when they come out. When we defect alone, we’re worried that they [Tatmadaw] will capture our families. Staying in the military is a safe zone for us. We just need to work at the office, take the salary and live comfortably. In the end everybody thinks of themselves.” – P10



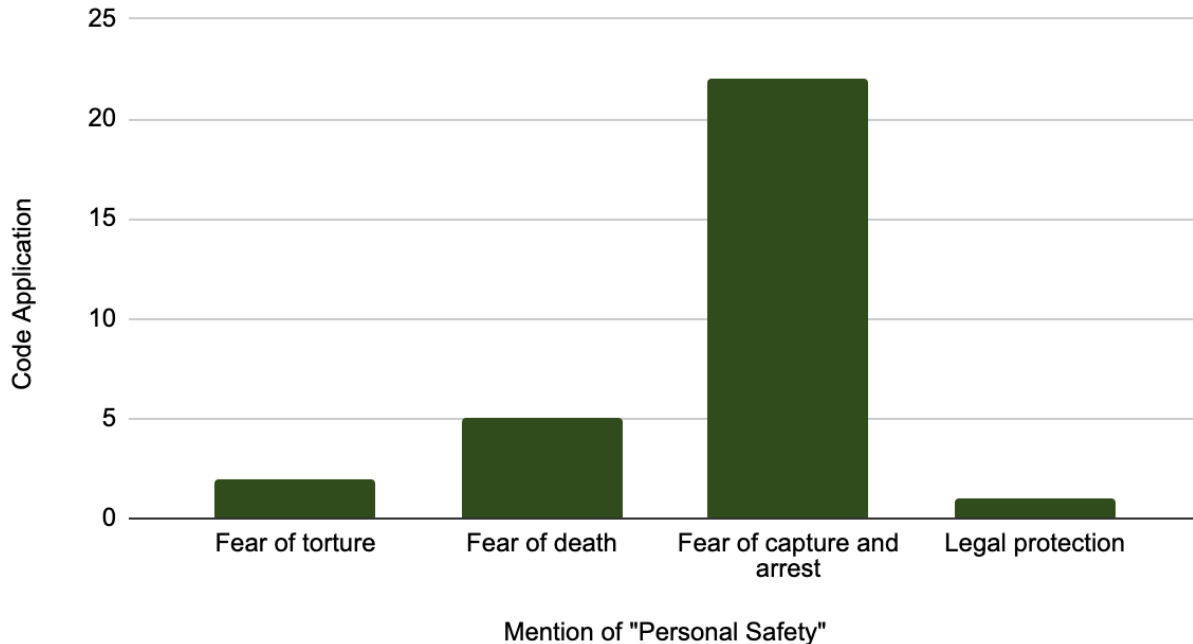
Additionally, when we asked why they think their former colleagues still remain in the military, the most frequent response was due to family considerations (22). Within these responses, most mentioned the anticipated threats to their family's safety if they were left behind in the military bases.



In addition to concerns over their family's safety, it is of no surprise that defectors are equally as concerned about their own personal security. 28 mentioned personal safety as being a top concern for

them once they defected, including more specifically (in order of frequency): fear of capture and arrest (22), fear of death (5), fear of torture (2), and the need for legal protection (1).

Q59. Mention of "Personal Safety"



Punishments for defection

Despite being ethically and/or ideologically discontent with the violence inflicted by the Tatmadaw against civilians, and in mind of all the other driving factors for defection outlined previously, the implications on one's family and their own safety certainly serves as an obstacle to those soldiers who wish to leave the military. Punishment for defection is also high, and the Tatmadaw is reputed for tracking down defectors and punishing anyone with close ties to them.

The punishments for defectors and simultaneous repercussions on one's family are also extremely serious, and several former soldiers that we interviewed provided us with personal accounts of the Tatmadaw attempting to track them down after leaving.⁵³ When we asked these former soldiers what the punishments are for defection, the most frequent response expectedly mentioned imprisonment

⁵³ "They [the Tatmadaw] put a tracking device on us. They put it in my gun and I didn't notice it at first [when I defected]. I noticed a red light blinking when I put the gun on my waist. I destroyed it and left the gun when 14 troops were getting closer to my position. They eventually found the gun and left." – P45

(38), followed by death sentence (19). 16 responses also highlighted that the punishments for defection depend on the situation/circumstance.

If we look at the 16 responses that stated how the punishments for defection depend on the situation/circumstance, 8 mentioned that whether you defect with arms or not is the determining factor for one's punishment if caught. Below are two responses which reflected this:

“Desertion would previously cost you five to ten years in a military prison. Due to the current political upheaval however, a shooting order has been issued against anyone who attempts to defect. The military has been sharing this information to soldiers via telegram channels.” – P47

“Whether you desert from a base or from the frontline, it's a very minor case if you leave without a weapon...In these cases they are sent to prison for a short period and then sent back to the frontline. But since we joined the CDM, we would at least receive a prison sentence. The gravity of our case is not so serious however because we didn't defect with our weapons.” – P37

While the punishments of defection are significantly higher for those who leave the military with their arms, this is a far more affordable way for the armed resistance movement to acquire weapons. As previously mentioned in this paper,⁵⁴ resistance groups struggle to build up their arsenal by relying on the black market. The depreciation of the Myanmar Kyat has led to a price inflation for weapons and ammunition, which has made it difficult to sufficiently supply armed resistance groups, including the PDF. There are already several reward schemes in place, which provide cash prizes to military personnel who defect with arms. The amount of money awarded usually depends on what kind of arms they leave with. For example, it was reported by the Khit Thit Media that one soldier and one policeman in Chin State defected with their guns and received an undisclosed cash prize.⁵⁵ The exact sum awarded to those who defect with their guns is not clear, but some estimates have put the cash prize at the equivalent of roughly a thousand dollars.⁵⁶ With the price of a second-hand AK-47 or M-16 being

⁵⁴ See “Key Actors” section; specifically “NUG Ministry of Defense” sub-section (page 14) for more information.

⁵⁵ Khit Thit Media, Burmese (September 26, 2022). <https://www.facebook.com/khitthitnews/>. Accessed January 24, 2023.

⁵⁶ International Crisis Group, “Crowdfunding a War: The Money behind Myanmar's Resistance,” *Asia Report no.328*, (December 20, 2022): 6. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/328-myanmars-resistance.pdf>. Accessed January 28, 2023.

reported to cost at least 10 million kyat (around \$3,000) at market rates,⁵⁷ acquiring weapons for resistance groups by awarding defectors who leave with their guns with a \$1,000 prize is undeniably a pretty good deal.

One existing reward system providing cash incentives for soldiers who defect with weapons is from the NUG. On April 7th 2022, the NUG announced a nine-point reward system, in which rewards ranging from \$100,000 to \$500,000 will be given to soldiers who defect with military supplies and vehicles.⁵⁸ This is an interesting prospect, which may lead to large-scale defections in the future. However, it must be noted that as of August 2022, no such reward has been given. If defections with military resources are to be used as an incentive for more soldiers to defect, and thus supply resistance groups with more affordable means of acquiring weapons, monetary reward systems offered by organizations must be able to sustainably hand out these prizes. In our recommendations we will offer several insights into how this can be carried out most effectively.

Implications from defecting

When we asked the former soldiers in our interviews what they lost once defecting, the most frequent response was nothing (18). This was interesting, as we expected the most common responses to highlight the loss of safety and security, a stable income, as well as their savings stored in military-run banks.⁵⁹ If we look more closely at the kind of responses for those who did not have any particular sense of loss, a recurring theme was the ethical and moral discontent with the way in which themselves and their colleagues have treated Myanmar civilians in the post-coup landscape. Mentions of dissatisfaction with the military system and its insufficient handling of the country in the past two years were also reasons for why many did not feel like they lost anything by defecting.

“Leaving the military does not make me feel any sense of loss. I did not do the right thing when I was serving as a soldier.” – P18

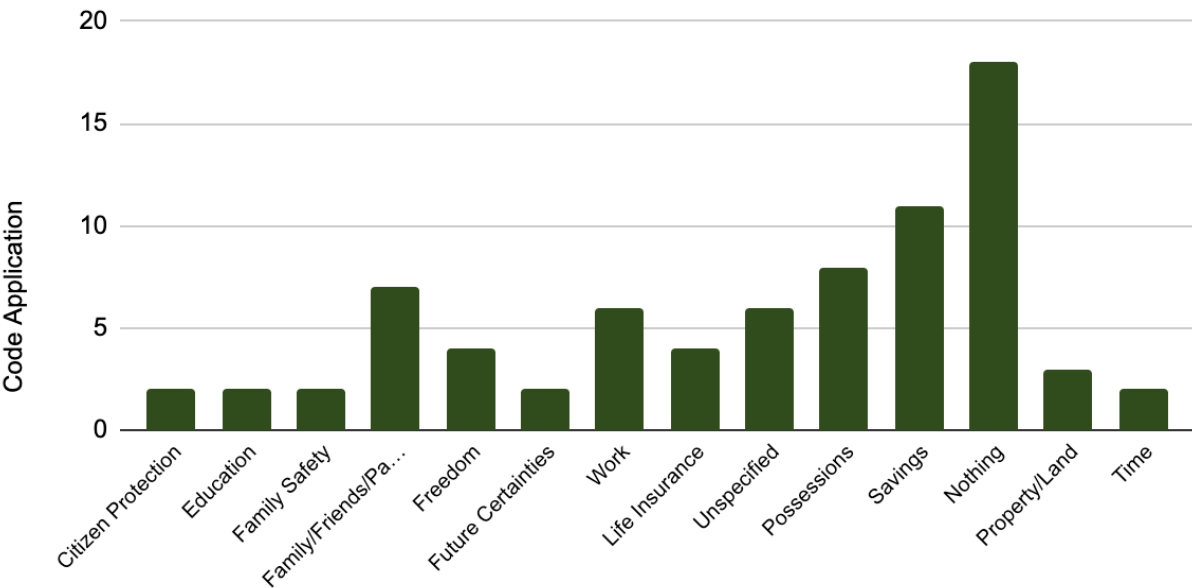
⁵⁷ International Crisis Group, “Crowdfunding a War: The Money behind Myanmar’s Resistance,” 6.

⁵⁸ Mizzima, “NUG announced that they will offer \$500,000 for defections with an aircraft or helicopter, and \$100,000 for a tank or armored car” (translated from Burmese to English) *Facebook* (April 7, 2022). https://www.facebook.com/216265185075061/posts/5468108869890640?_rdc=1&_rdr. Accessed January 29, 2023.

⁵⁹ Granted, the second most frequent response mentioned losses of monetary savings (11).

“Since the military was not doing its own job, our country has become the poorest in Southeast Asia. As a result, I do not feel like I have lost anything by leaving the military.” – P22

Q62. What did you lose after the defection?

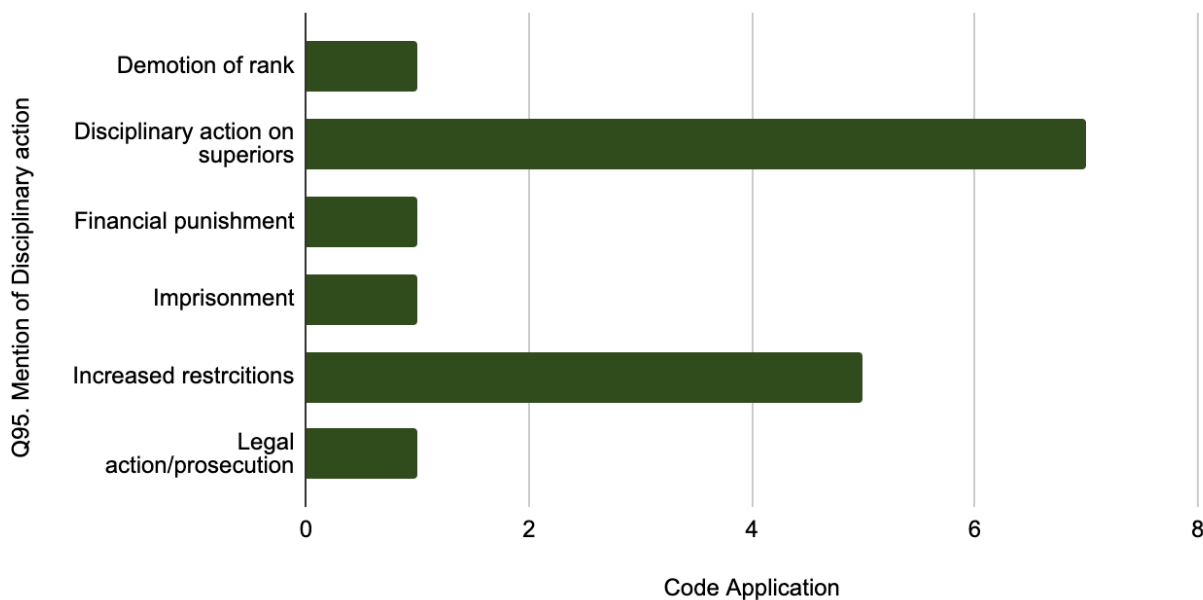


Q62. What did you lose after the defection?

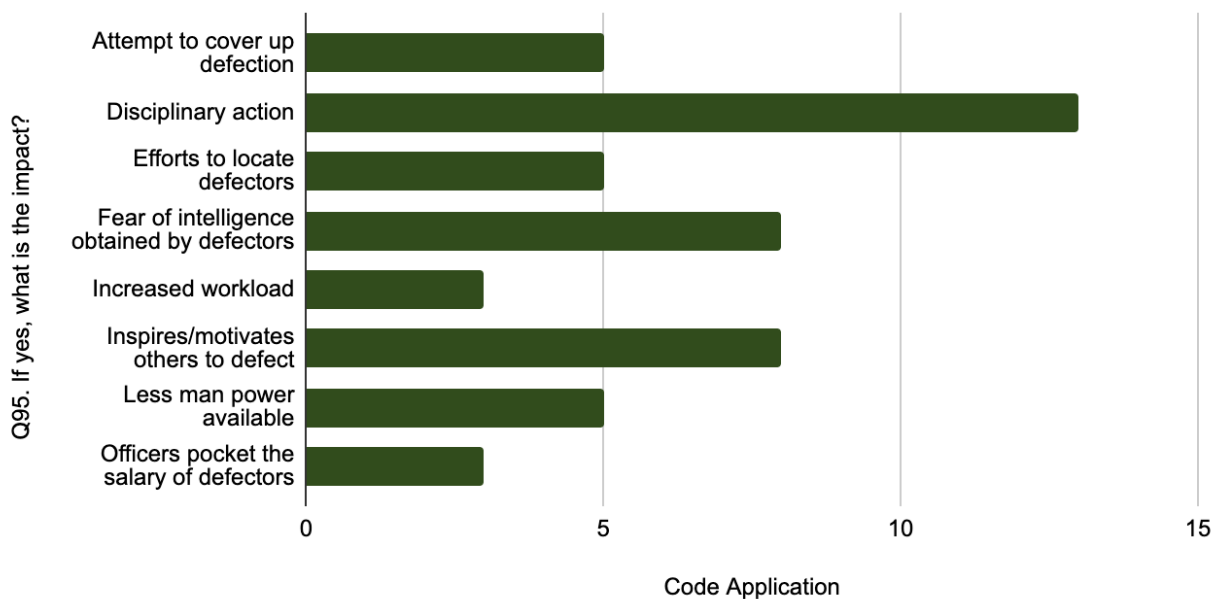
Following our question about the losses former soldiers experienced once leaving, we asked about the implications their defections had on their battalion/company. 44 out of 48 respondents (91.7%) said that their defection did have an impact on their former colleagues; the most frequent response mentioned disciplinary action (13), followed by fear of intelligence obtained by defectors, and providing inspiration for other soldiers to abandon their positions with 8 mentions respectively. By motivating others to defect, those who leave engage in an act of defiance which challenges the internal stability of the military system. Among the 13 respondents who highlighted disciplinary action taken against their colleagues, 7 mentioned disciplinary action taken against their superior officers.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ “Due to my defection, every responsible party (including the battalion commander) has experienced legal repercussions. Battalion and company commanders underwent a trial. I feel both empathy and sympathy for them. I left the army because of the crooked leaders at the top, but I would like to extend my apology to those who suffered for my defection.” – P33

Code Application vs Q95. Mention of Disciplinary action



Code Application vs Q95. If yes, what is the impact?



Another interesting response provided from this question about the implications for their former colleagues was the underreporting of defections (5). When soldiers abandon their positions, their officers may not report their absence due to fear of the repercussions handed to them by their superiors. Additionally, unrecorded defections can serve the officers well, whereby they can collect the

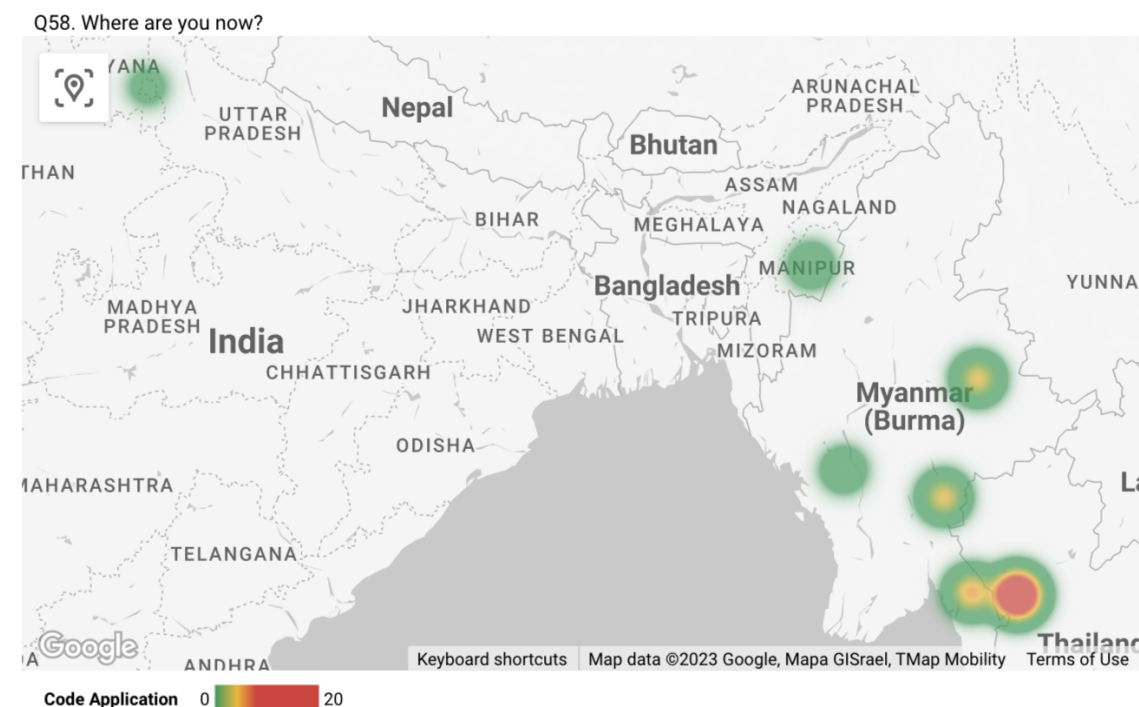
salaries of these deserters for themselves. This corresponds to 3 of our respondents who mentioned highlighted this:

“Each time we set out for an operation, we have around five deserters. The military won’t report the cases but put the salaries into their pockets. That’s how the military works.” – P20

“If someone deserts from the frontline, the officers are supposed to put them in casualty list. But the commander would normally only put the name on the list after one or two years. Meanwhile, he would take the salary of these deserters. I have had my share of this money during my service. My battalion commander gave it to me. When the audit was about to come, we rushed through and faked the data.” – P45

The Path to Freedom

Other CDM sectors have slowed down but the security sector still experiences a steady stream of defections in the year since the coup. The defectors we interviewed all undertook perilous journeys to attain freedom. While some braved the journey alone, many had outside support of some kind. While the high barriers to defection still prevent many from leaving, our research finds that providing effective support for defection mechanisms could significantly improve the chances of soldiers to defect.



How They Left

The mobility of the soldiers varied greatly depending on their rank, if they were on a frontline, or if they were on leave. 48% of respondents left in the company of others, 15 people mentioned colleague(s) while 13 people mentioned family and/or friend(s). Two defectors mentioned they left with a superior officer.

“A sergeant who patrolled with me half-jokingly said he wanted to desert. He didn’t know that I was an officer. Since he had been talking about it already, we fled together.” – P45

Others mentioned that they received support from their seniors or other soldiers when they made the decision to defect.

“My senior knew that I was leaving. They tried to stop me but since I was very determined they decided to help me.” – P1

However, the seniors or alumni that helped him defect are still in service One soldier mentioned the defection of their superior officers which facilitated the escape of four soldiers.

“Our squad was assigned last duty because our captain deserted. If he was there, we wouldn’t have the chance to leave. Now he deserted first so only two under his command remained. We convinced them that we brought no equipment to spend the night on the way so we had to go back and collect rain shelters. Two soldiers under my command reported the issue, and they were permitted to go, leaving their weapons behind. Two pairs of us left twenty minutes apart.” – P37

Many took the chance to escape while they had an excuse to be away from duty. Some never reported back after going on leave. Others fled from the frontline or surrendered themselves to EROs. Others still simply walked or drove off their base as they had the opportunity to do so.

“I was an office staffer so no one really cared about me. I said I was going to go out for betel nuts. As soon as I arrived at the betel shop I rented a trike motorcycle taxi and went to [another town]. There were no checkpoints.” – P7

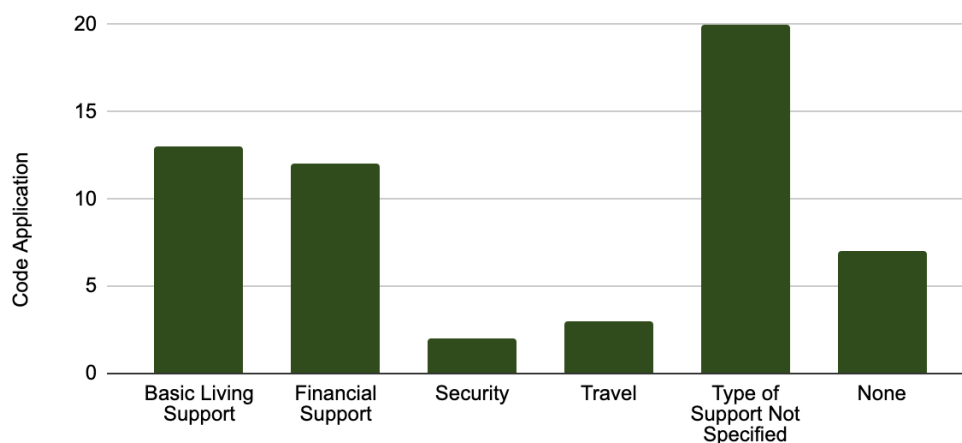
Support Received

Many soldiers received help from outside sources; only 7 stated that they did not defect with the support of any outside help or organization. Of the defectors, 7 mentioned family and friends helping them to leave. 7 mentioned People's Goal/People's Soldier, and 6 mentioned People's Embrace. 5 defectors mentioned that their seniors or other colleagues that were still in the military assisted in their defection. Some (4) contacted other soldiers that they knew had defected. Some cases received multiple sources of support along the way.

“When I left the army compound, a colleague gave me his motorbike. I drove the motorbike to the spot where a car was waiting for me. When I was outside, my childhood friends supported me for my living expenses. One of my friends brought me with him to his house. Later I reached out to the People's Soldiers. In Mae Sot, I made contact with a lady [offering support] through my friend's connection.” – P24

“When I discussed leaving with my friends, they supported me. As soon as I left the military compound, my old school mates came and fetched me. They let me stay with them.” – P18

Q63. After you decided to defect, what kind of support did you receive from other people?

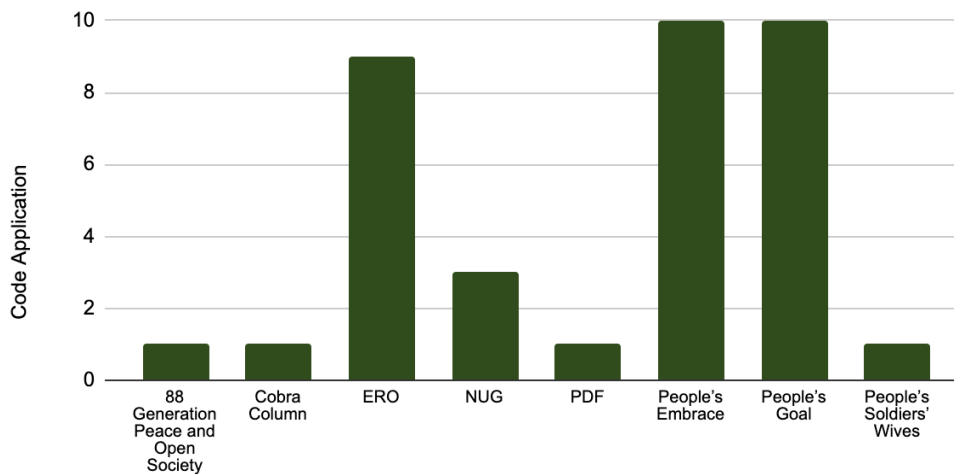


When asked how they got in contact with support for their defections, 13 mentioned that they contacted support by phone. 8 were in touch through personal networks or contacts, while 7 mentioned reaching out through Telegram. 4 reached out on Facebook and 3 on Signal. This shows

that despite the communication crackdowns conducted by the military to stem the tide of defections, soldiers are still able to reach out for support even through their regular phone lines.

Indeed, when asked what kind of support they received from other people after their defection, many mentioned basic living support (13) and financial support (12). Others mentioned security (2) and travel (3) support. 26 respondents mentioned the name of organizations where they received support. The groups mentioned included People's Goal (10), People's Embrace (10), NUG (3), PDF (1), Spouses of People's Soldiers (1), KNU (3) and KNDF (2); all groups we had interviewed for this report. There were also two mentions of RCSS, one mention of Cobra Column,⁶¹ and one mention of the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society, a peacebuilding organization operating in Myanmar. Soldiers also mentioned receiving support in various ways from friends and family (8) and locals in the area (5) after their defection.

Q63. Mention of support group name(s)



Only 7 mentioned that they did not receive any form of support. The 7 who did not receive support also correlated with the ones who did not defect with the support of any outside help or organization.

“I’ve received no help from other organizations. I needed to ask for bus fare and accommodation fee from my parents. I didn’t even know that this kind of organization existed. Three of us receive no help from others but our parents.” – P33

⁶¹ Cobra Column is a special operation unit of the KNLA and PDF.

This suggests that soldiers who did not receive any support in their defection also had not managed to reach out to groups that were offering aid. Some mentioned that they did not even know of the existence of defection support groups. This may mean that more outreach is necessary to reach defectors that have already left but are not connected to the wider network of support.

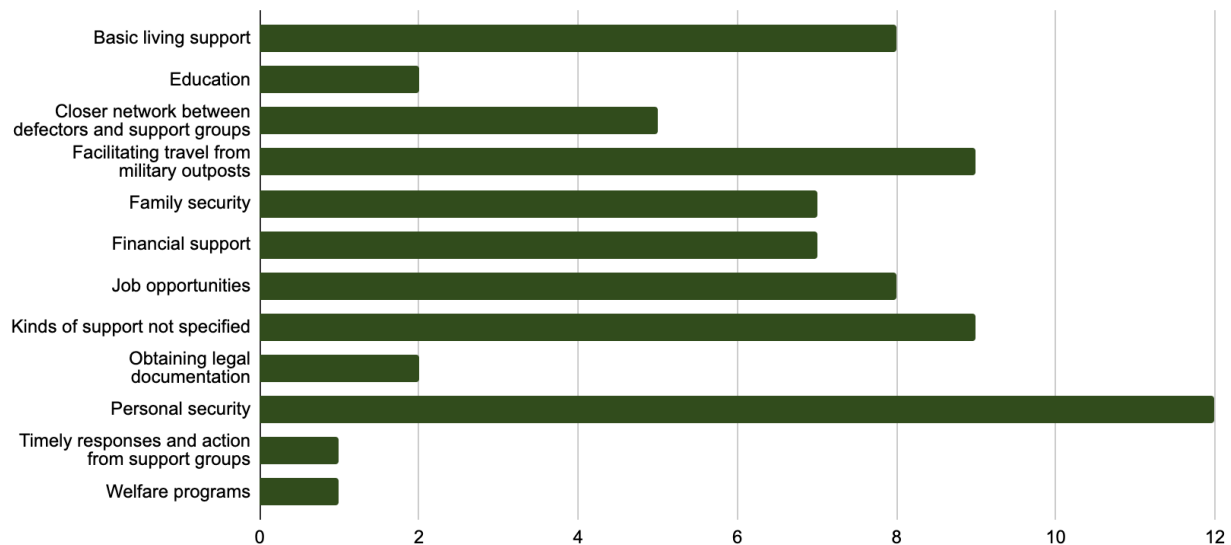
Support Needed

When asked what kind of support would have helped them in their defections, respondents mentioned ensured personal security (12) and facilitated travel from military outposts (9) as the main things that would have aided them. Many of the respondents defected at great peril to their own personal safety.

“...we brought guns and ammunition with us but the soldiers chased us down shooting. I wore a vest and the bullet hit the magazine. That didn’t kill me but made me unconscious. The soldiers thought I was dead and stopped shooting. Before long they started their assault. I left my gun and ran away.” – P45

Many suggested basic living support (8), financial support (7), welfare programs (1) or job opportunities (8) as factors that would have aided them in their defections. Others mentioned ensuring the safety of their family (7), the need for a closer network between defectors and support groups (5), and one person mentioned the need for timely response and action from support groups. While support groups are currently operating to support defections, their teams are small and their funding is limited. Few organizations have the resources or manpower to aid defectors in all the ways that they require.

What kinds of support would have helped you easier to defect?



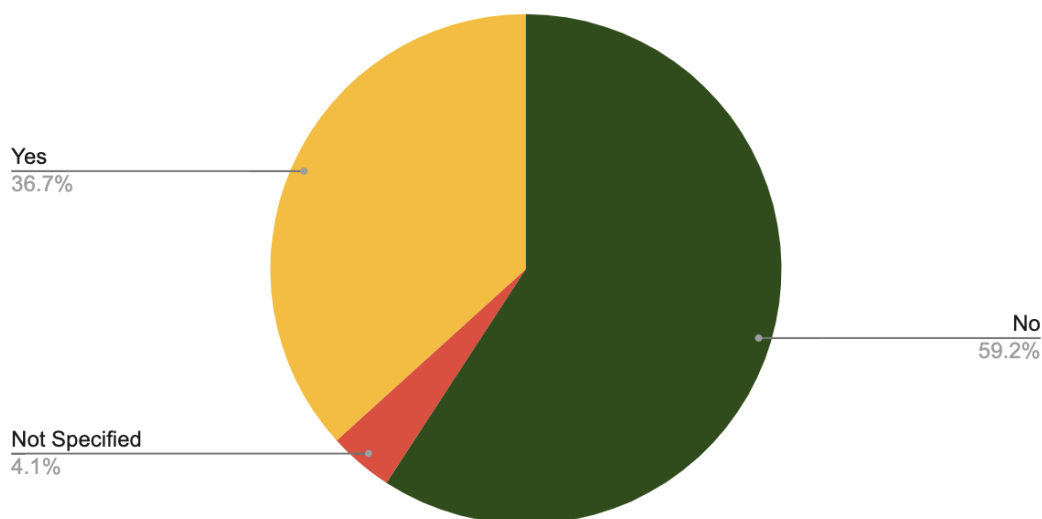
Many defectors mentioned education (24) and job opportunities (16) as key support they would need for transitioning to civilian life. Most respondents (70%) were willing to join a training (ie, vocational, computer, or language training) that can be useful in their transition to civilian life. Alongside reskilling and retraining for defectors to integrate better into civilian life, support for obtaining legal documentation is equally important. Many former soldiers have sought refuge in Thailand, but lack proper identification documents. Therefore, they experience difficulties in obtaining a work permit card (also known as a ‘pink card’), which requires disclosing their personal information and professional background to the Thai authorities. If one was to do so, there is a risk that this information could be shared with the SAC back in Myanmar. Because defection carries significant punishments (as outlined previously), few risk disclosing their personal information to the Thai authorities, thus preventing them from obtaining a legal work permit card.

When asked, nearly 37% of soldiers said that they or their family members and friends may need psychological support for traumatizing experiences that they underwent.

Many soldiers knew others who also wanted to defect. We asked our respondents what kind of support these soldiers needed to make the move, and many mentioned facilitating travel from military outposts (9) and ensuring their safety (6). Basic living support (7), financial support (9), family support (8), and job opportunities were also frequent mentions as good offers for soldiers to leave. Some mentioned

acquiring legal documentation (4) and resettlement to a third country after defecting (3) as factors for them to leave.

Q90. Do you need psychological support for traumatizing experiences that you underwent?
Or do any of your family members or friends who defect with you need such kind of psychological support?



Current Conditions

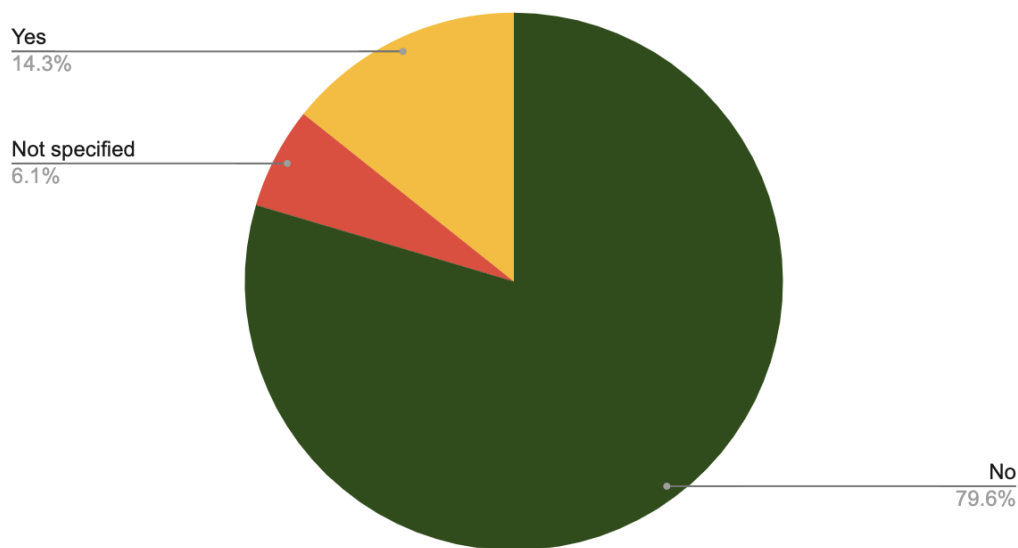
Among the 50 defectors we interviewed, 15 people remain inside Myanmar, 24 people are outside of the country, 2 are residing somewhere along the Myanmar-Thai border, and 8 not specifying their current location. Within the 24 respondents who said that they are now outside of Myanmar, 3 people are in India, and 20 are in Thailand, primarily in Mae Sot (17).

When asked about their future plans, most of the defectors mentioned continuing to work on the revolution in some capacity, with 10 specifically mentioning that they would continue to take up arms against their former comrades in the military.

“For the sake of our future, the revolution must prevail. We could only have a better life when we succeed in this struggle. That’s why we are fighting it hard. People need to keep supporting the revolution in terms of finance. We need both fighters and financiers to win this war. I’m a Christian so I want to become a preacher. I have no more interest in serving in the military.” – P31

Many are not keen to sit idle, and would like work (21) to find a job, make a living, or start a business. However, many struggle to find gainful employment, or are doing low-wage menial labor or service sector jobs. They struggle with mistrust in the community, where locals are unwilling to give them work in the community, especially inside Myanmar. 80% of the respondents did not have a job or an income at the time of our interviews. Most of the soldiers, due to their low incomes, did not have savings. Of those who did, 3 had less than 100,000 Myanmar Kyats (around US\$476 at the time of writing).

Q88. Do you currently have a job or an income?



Thuzar from Spouses of People's Soldiers elaborated on this in our interview:

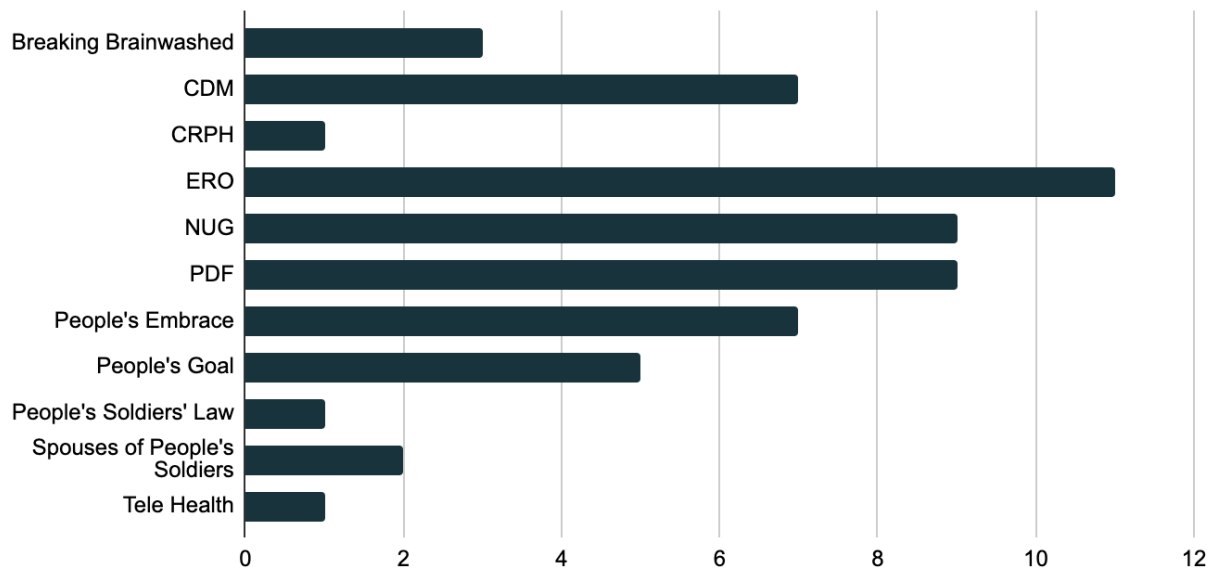
“There are 7 or 8 CDM soldiers who have to go out to work in the rain every day that pass in front of my house. In the village, CDM soldiers are digging toilets, doing small jobs, and are being blamed and mistrusted.”

A sizable population of defectors mentioned resettlement to a third country (17), specifically Australia, as part of their future plans. In the early days of the coup, a handful of CDM soldiers and police were accepted for resettlement in third countries.⁶² The Sydney Morning Herald published an article in March of 2022 which stated the Australian government's issuance of protection visas for defectors

⁶² Independent Research Network, *Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement: An analysis of the present situation and a framework for supporting future action*, 2.

from Myanmar.⁶³ There have been few accounts of defectors being accepted since then, but the offer still remains attractive to many soldiers who mentioned that resettlement was a part of their future plans and a motivation to leave.⁶⁴

Q96. What organizations are you now helping with?



As they adapted to life outside of the military, many of the defectors we interviewed were, in some way or another, helping out with different organizations involved in the resistance. Many joined up with EROs (11) such as CDF, KIA, KNDF, and KNU. Still others mentioned working with the NUG (9) and PDFs (9). Others worked with defection groups such as People's Embrace (7), People's Goal (5), People's Soldiers' Law (1), Breaking Brainwashed (3), and Spouses of People's Soldiers (2). A CDM soldier who served in the medical corp volunteered for an online tele health service.

⁶³ Chris Barrett, "Australia issues protection visas to Myanmar military defectors." *The Sydney Morning Herald* (March 18, 2022). <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/australia-issues-protection-visas-to-myanmar-military-defectors-20220316-p5a53v.html>. Accessed January 29, 2023.

⁶⁴ However, if more soldiers realize that this offer will not pan out, this is likely to deter future defections.

Conclusion

“We left because of our conscience, but not everyone can do this. Nobody will take the path of losing their title, position, income, and respect if [becoming destitute] is the only outcome of becoming CDM.” – Thuzar, People’s Soldiers Wives

The servicemen and women who have sacrificed their security and careers as an act of defiance against the Tatmadaw have undertaken significant risks in order to leave the institution. However, many are finding themselves in impossible situations where they are at risk of arrest or detention by the Tatmadaw, and by immigration authorities in neighboring countries.

The lack of testimonies from high-ranking officers is attributed to the fact that there have been few defections from the officer corps. By mid-October 2021, “there had only been one example of a top-level officer – a regional commander – who had attempted to defect but without success”.⁶⁵ Many of the resistance movement leaders’ former colleagues remain in high-ranking positions within the military regime. If there is an increase in defections from the Tatmadaw officer corps, it could provide the encouragement needed for large-scale defections to take place.

The key actors interviewed for this paper have worked in various ways to promote defections since the start of the 2021 coup, with varying degrees of cooperation between the different actors. The CDM Soldiers’ Registry, organized by the National Unity Government and People’s Embrace, attempts to catalog all CDM soldiers in order to assess the volume of defectors and adequately deliver aid. While (by their estimates) nearly half of defected soldiers have joined the registry, there are still many more to serve. Meanwhile, the KNU reports that there are a lot of soldiers who do not wish to be identified with CDM for security reasons; for those soldiers, it is easier to desert, go missing in action, or presume to be killed. People’s Goal suggests there are far more soldiers that are defecting or deserting than officially registered. While other government sectors have slowed down in their efforts to join CDM, defection groups are still seeing an average of 1 defection per week.

⁶⁵ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, “Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup,” 9.

The key actors interviewed in our research provide a variety of support for defections, including: creating communications products and content to encourage defections across online and traditional media channels; providing cash incentives and rewards for soldiers that defect with their arms; guiding and assisting in the defectors' journey to safe places; providing material support such as for basic living and monthly stipends; providing psychological counseling to soldiers and their family members; retraining defectors to prepare them for civilian life. The key actors mention that they lack human and financial resources to address the current needs of existing defectors, suggesting that they are only able to cover a small portion of the total population of defectors. They also lack the resources to continue these activities at scale, and should there be a large-scale or cascade of defections as hoped for by the revolutionary forces, there would be no institution or mechanism in place to absorb these numbers. This can lead to unrest and instability if adequate support is not provided to the groups facilitating defection.

Of the defectors we interviewed, a gap in the assistance being offered is evident, whereby some are able to utilize many of the resources while others are not being reached at all. We identified gaps in the support being provided with regards to facilitation of secure escape routes, basic living support, mental health, job opportunities, reskilling and training,⁶⁶ and relocation to a third country. Few skilled jobs are available to defectors, and while manual labor work is acceptable for many rank and file soldiers who are more familiar with hard labor, the educated officer classes often report feeling underutilized. On the other hand, many soldiers have been in the military since their teens, and often lack the skills to work or live outside of the institution of the military. Defected soldiers constantly highlight their aspiration to seek asylum in a third country; specifically Australia as the desired port of call. However, to date, only a small handful of soldiers have made the journey there, and it is highly unlikely that any of these soldiers will have the opportunity to arrive at their desired destination.

Defections are still a viable and active part of the Civil Disobedience Movement and resistance against the Tatmadaw, but if not managed well, it could lead to poor outcomes in the regions where defectors are based. The role of creating and then absorbing the desired number of defections poses challenges

⁶⁶ Many CSOs are providing such reskilling and retraining initiatives along the Myanmar-Thai border, but with not enough resources their efforts are limited.

for EROs, NUG, and civilians. Tatmadaw soldiers are likely to have a history of violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and there are valid concerns about reintegrating them back into communities, and how such programs will be perceived by civilians who suffer daily at the hands of the Tatmadaw. Established methods for managing and rehabilitating violent extremists exist in various parts of the world, and some of these methods can be used to deradicalize defectors and reintegrate them as functioning, safe members of society.

Our findings in this paper so far show that the overall defection efforts, while having in strength and structure since the start of the coup, is still in its infancy and has much room for growth. Yet there is the potential for defections to be highly influential and has strategic importance to the resistance against the Tatmadaw. Defections have the potential to become a key deciding factor for the revolution should it receive adequate technical and material support from regional and international actors.

As mentioned in the Methodology section, our project was only able to interview 50 soldiers due to funding limitations. We hope to conduct future research with a larger sample size in order to have more data points to work with and strengthen the body of research on the topic of defections.

Recommendations

Channel support to existing groups and communities that are encouraging and assisting defections.

The NUG and People's Embrace have the largest reach to current defectors and ought to be supported so that they can provide aid to defectors. They are also the most likely candidate to develop a comprehensive plan for deradicalization and reintegration of defectors into civilian life.

EROs deal with the physical and material burden of defectors living on their territories and in their villages; they face the danger of defectors forming militias in their controlled territories, which leads to increased instability for their own people. Therefore, EROs have a pressing strategic need to deal with the “what-ifs” of large scale defections.⁶⁷

Local communities in ethnic and ERO areas also deal with the social and material burdens of hosting defectors and CDMers, and humanitarian actors should ease the burden by providing more support for the growing humanitarian crisis that is occurring in these regions due to mass displacement since the coup.

Independent groups encouraging defections, especially those formed by former soldiers and those that are regionally based, are able to reach those still remaining in the Tatmadaw. For soldiers that may be distrustful of the NUG or EROs but still interested in defecting, reaching out to these independent entities may be a more appropriate avenue. Hence, smaller defection efforts facilitated by these independent groups should also be supported, as they are able to have a more regional and targeted reach.

⁶⁷ The Tatmadaw claims to have a fighting force of around 300,000 troops. Should even a tenth of the institution defect, it will create a social and humanitarian crisis in the regions they defect to. The KNU has suggested the creation of border camps, specifically in neutral but protected territories to house defectors.

Increase communication between different groups supporting and encouraging defections.

Independent groups encouraging defections, especially those formed by former soldiers or are regionally based, are able to reach soldiers that are still in the Tatmadaw. Networking opportunities should be provided for smaller bands of defectors or minor and regional defection efforts with the larger groups such as People's Goal, NUG, and EROs. There should also be efforts to encourage cooperation between the independent groups and NUG/EROs; many of these groups are heavily composed of people who are distrustful of the NUG/EROs. This should be remedied quickly in order to increase the chances of soldiers in different regions being able to access defection offers.

Increase communication efforts aimed at pre-CDM or enlisted personnel.

Develop and communicate mechanisms for military personnel to know and consider what kinds of support may be available for them if they decide to defect. This can be done through social and traditional media campaigns, leaflets and flyers, and infiltrating existing networks of soldiers to share information.

Existing efforts at communication to soldiers and the general public should be supported, and expert advice should be provided for these channels. Many of these communications channels are run by teams with little to no media training or skill, and this is an opportunity to support new media initiatives which are strategically important for the resistance.

Opportunities should be created for communicating to soldiers in the Tatmadaw within independent and mainstream media. Soldiers on the frontline and across the bases frequently listen to radio and, despite restrictions, use social media. Access to information acts as a significant factor in their defections. Incentives can be provided to independent media to report on and keep sharing information about defections and the military's actions. The international community should support and fund satellite internet for unrestricted access in communities across the country in order to increase information flow.

Upskill and train defection-assistance groups on rehabilitation and integration.

Our key actor interviews revealed how groups actively working on encouraging and supporting defections operate. However, many of them formed as ad-hoc affiliations with little to no experience in social work, humanitarian assistance, or mental health support. These groups frequently consist of volunteers and former soldiers who wish to support defections for ideological reasons. Groups supporting defections can learn from historically successful international efforts working on deradicalization and defections in other areas in order to develop comparative data on how other regions are resolving the situation of defectors.⁶⁸

Provide specific reskilling and retraining for soldiers to integrate better into civilian life.

The Tatmadaw is an institution which exerts cult-like and near-total control over its members and their families. Those who join quickly find themselves in a jarring system that is traumatic to escape from. It is common for those with prestige and rank to stay in the military for a lifetime, and even spanning generations. These soldiers have a relatively decent living inside the Tatmadaw, but due to the military's strict isolationist policies, they lack the skills to survive in civilian life.

While there are groups at the Myanmar-Thai border retraining CDMers for life as a migrant, the experiences of a soldier is different enough from other civil sectors that we believe reskilling and retraining should be provided specifically for former soldiers. Support should also be provided to spouses and children of soldiers in order to increase the pull of the offers for defections. Many soldiers join the military for access to jobs, education opportunities, and financial stability, and seeing them available elsewhere when they leave may be a very attractive offer for defection.

⁶⁸ For example, the 2002 Yemeni model of the Committee for Dialogue; a pioneer program in deradicalization, which prioritized dialogue and intellectual debate, and aimed to persuade those detained on terrorism charges of the error of their ways and promoted an understanding of Islam that delegitimize violent extremism. One could also consider the relatively successful defection and reintegration programs in Colombia, which targeted members of *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), as well as the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC).

Develop clear roles that defectors can take part in.

Based on the responses from the 50 defectors we interviewed, it is clear that many feel useless and lost without a job and source of income. While many would benefit from any kind of employment, it would also be useful to develop initiatives and projects where military defectors can participate in. Defectors have already been involved in combat, medical, logistic and tactical trainings for PDF forces; but this has not been carried out on a large enough scale. While many are hesitant to involve defectors in their operations against the Tatmadaw because of the understandable lack of trust and risks to security such as infiltration and spying, military defectors are often equipped with skills that other actors in the resistance movement do not have. It is important that these skills are utilized. One alternative way could involve a skill swap or share program, where defectors can participate in a volunteer program that helps them establish meaningful contact with civilians and integrate them into society.

Providing humanitarian support for the migration issue.

EROs and border areas need humanitarian assistance and international support to absorb the numbers of defectors. They need to be housed away from strategically significant areas, and need mechanisms in place to move them onwards. It is recommended that UNHCR should provide defectors with Person of Concern (POC) status in order to offer a layer of protection. Many defectors are on the Myanmar-Thai border, and there should be some advocacy aimed at the Thai government to improve the situation for refugees from Myanmar (including defectors).

Offer resettlement programs in third countries to former-soldiers.

The international community has the opportunity to play a vital role in facilitating high-ranking defections by offering them asylum. The biggest barrier we have seen to defections is the lack of a clear pathway out. Many defectors mention the Australian offer for resettlement as a strong incentive for leaving the military. When there is a clear path before them, many more soldiers will be willing to leave the institution. We encourage other international bodies and actors to follow Australia's approach in order to facilitate further defections.

Support the development of transitional justice mechanisms.

Soldiers are likely to have either witnessed or committed some acts of unjust violence and torture against civilians or enemy combatants. Some mechanisms should be implemented to document and respond to such accounts. There should also be mechanisms in place for the safe surrender of Tatmadaw soldiers who wish to defect such as amnesty, fair treatment of prisoners of war, clear prohibition of extrajudicial killings, and guarantees for surrender.

Support further research on defections.

Any communications efforts that target defectors need to be backed by evidence on the efficacy. More research should be conducted to collect baseline data and analytics on existing communications aimed at defections. Desk research ought to be conducted on defection strategies across the world and communicated, in Burmese, to existing defection efforts so that they can test different strategies for the local context.

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APPENDIX I - LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature on desertions and defections in the context of Myanmar's Spring Revolution paints a striking picture – one of soldiers and police officers risking it all under threat of persecution by the junta to abandon their service. In our preliminary research, we reviewed existing literature on Tatmadaw defectors, and a series of public roundtable discussions conducted by People's Goal; a group encouraging defections in the Tatmadaw. The roundtable conversations provide up to date first-hand accounts from recently defected CDM soldiers.

In the 90s and early 2000s, studies on military desertions and defections were meager. Human Rights Watch dedicated two comprehensive reports to the issue of defected child soldiers and forced child conscription. In 2002, a report by Human Rights Watch titled, “My Gun Was As Tall As Me”, details the abuse that children who had been forced to join the Myanmar army (the Tatmadaw) endured.⁶⁹ In 2007, a follow up report titled, “Sold to be Soldiers” was released.⁷⁰ These reports highlight a strong legacy of forced child conscription within the Tatmadaw, which is a tactic implemented when there are not enough volunteers to join the army. Since the publication of these two papers, organizations from around the world have produced numerous reports focusing on testimonies of defected child soldiers, and videos and interviews with former child soldiers have been uploaded to the internet. For instance, a video titled POW (prisoner of war) was uploaded to the Arakan Army's official YouTube page on August 7, 2020.⁷¹ The video focuses on two child soldiers who fled from the Tatmadaw and sought the protection of the Arakan Army in 2019. One of the soldiers, Private Moe Htet (TA/559285) spoke of his experience being forced into the army, trained in military recruit camps, and eventually deployed to the frontlines. These reports highlight a strong legacy of forced conscription within the Tatmadaw. As the number of military defections continues to rise, we may expect to hear more accounts of forced conscription.

Past research on the inner workings of the Tatmadaw have been few and far between. The Tatmadaw has often been described as an “intelligence black hole” by foreign agencies. Andrew Selth attempts to

⁶⁹ Kevin Heppner & Human Rights Watch (Organization), *My Gun was as Tall as Me: Child Soldiers in Burma* (2002).

⁷⁰ Human Rights Watch (Organization), *Sold to be Soldiers: The Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers in Burma* (2007).

⁷¹ Arakan Army, “POW” (August 7, 2020). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2adMKhUcDN0>. Accessed January 28, 2023.

shine light on some of the recent practices of the Tatmadaw in his 2021 “Myanmar’s Military Mindset: An Exploratory Survey”.⁷² He collects data from three valuable (but flawed) sources of information: 1. Deserters - whom he deems to be mostly low-ranked soldiers, 2. Defectors - whom he deems to be better educated and higher ranked than deserters usually to serve a specific political purpose in defecting, and 3. Memoirs of former soldiers. Selth urges readers to take their comments with a grain of salt, as there are incentives for deserters and defectors to alter their accounts to cater to those offering them refuge. He attempts to draw on previous research and contributions by “well-informed and objective observers” to get a general idea of the institution albeit with “incomplete data and informed guesswork”.⁷³ With this data, he is able to partially construct an idea of what it is like inside the institution of the Tatmadaw. As deserters and defectors are integral sources for Selth, we can also get an understanding of the mindsets and struggles of the defectors themselves, and the impact of the institution on their psyche. Selth’s chapter on the personal impact of the Tatmadaw on its members is valuable to our research in this regard.

On the personal level in Chapter 4, Selth breaks down the characteristics of individuals within the Tatmadaw into broad categories: Patriotism, Deference & Loyalty, Individualism, Ambition, Fear, Economic Self-Interest, Buddhism, and Personal Feelings.⁷⁴ These categories play different and often competing roles in the psyches of individual soldiers, creating some degree of cognitive dissonance in what they are ordered to do with their individual values. Selth portrays the different weights that each category plays in the decision-making process of individual soldiers under the institution, and the ways that the Tatmadaw attempts to override individual and religious values for soldiers to serve the institution. This implies that there are competing forces vying for primacy in the decision-making process of individual soldiers. In Selth’s report, the Tatmadaw maintains control over individual soldiers through a combination of indoctrination, provision of security, and cultivating a hawkish fear of civilians or ethnic forces, thus projecting an idea of a perpetual enemy to defeat.⁷⁵ In our research, it may be important to see the different weights that each category plays in the decision making process when soldiers choose to defect.

⁷² Andrew Selth, *Myanmar’s Military Mindset: An Exploratory Survey*, (Queensland: Griffith University, 2021).

⁷³ Selth, *Myanmar’s Military Mindset: An Exploratory Survey*, 6.

⁷⁴ Selth, *Myanmar’s Military Mindset: An Exploratory Survey*, 17-21.

⁷⁵ Selth, *Myanmar’s Military Mindset: An Exploratory Survey*, 25.

Another insight into the internal institutional makeup of the Tatmadaw and their ideological and social ongoings can be seen in Sai Latt's 2016 PhD dissertation; "Depoliticization, Securitization and Violent Accumulation in the Integration of the Greater Mekong Sub-region".⁷⁶ Chapter 6 of this PhD dissertation titled "One Blood, One Voice, One Order! A Micro-level Socioeconomic Analysis of Extractive Power Relations, Violence, and Poverty" provides some useful insights for our research on military defections in Myanmar. This chapter investigates whether it is possible for soldiers as implementers of violence to also be viewed as victims of violence. Latt explores this by detailing the institutional power dynamics and hierarchical nature of life in the Tatmadaw, not just for the soldiers but also extending to their families. These dynamics include military corruption and exploitation through a system of patron-client relations, gift-giving, arbitrary taxation, and unpaid labor. Accordingly, low-ranked soldiers and their families are subjected to an almost fixed state of poverty, where "senior officers physically abuse and financially exploit their subordinates for personal wealth".⁷⁷ As a result, one reason behind the soldiers' incessant looting and stealing may be "to mitigate their own poverty, and to counter the exploitation and oppression they faced within the military by offloading their burden onto civilians".⁷⁸

Correspondingly, Latt examines the culture of corruption and exploitation taught in military training schools; particularly in the Tatmadaw's Defence Service Academy (DSA). Through interviews with DSA graduates, Latt identifies a kogyi-nyilay (senior-junior) culture, which instills "complete loyalty and unquestioning obedience to senior members".⁷⁹ This kogyi-nyilay culture subjects military training school students to "extreme poverty, forced labor and the endurance of physical violence" inflicted by their seniors.⁸⁰ Seen in this light, members of the Tatmadaw officer corps have been "exposed and accustomed to violence, exploitation and various forms of injustice" since the beginning of their military careers, which they pass on to their juniors as they climb the ranks of seniors.⁸¹ This is something which the other papers examined in this report have failed to convey. Despite completing

⁷⁶ Sai Latt, *Depoliticization, Securitization and Violent Accumulation in the Integration of the Greater Mekong Sub-region*, (Simon Fraser University: PhD Dissertation, 2016).

⁷⁷ Latt, *Depoliticization, Securitization and Violent Accumulation in the Integration of the Greater Mekong Sub-region*, 129.

⁷⁸ Latt, *Depoliticization, Securitization and Violent Accumulation in the Integration of the Greater Mekong Sub-region*, 156.

⁷⁹ Latt, *Depoliticization, Securitization and Violent Accumulation in the Integration of the Greater Mekong Sub-region*, 136.

⁸⁰ Latt, *Depoliticization, Securitization and Violent Accumulation in the Integration of the Greater Mekong Sub-region*, 137.

⁸¹ Latt, *Depoliticization, Securitization and Violent Accumulation in the Integration of the Greater Mekong Sub-region*, 137.

this dissertation before the February 1st 2021 military coup, the conditions of exploitation and corruption among the Tatmadaw illustrated in this chapter have enabled us to understand the relationship between low-ranking soldiers and their commanding officers. Hence, chapter 6 of Latt's PhD dissertation has helped us understand how military violence can be seen as a symptom of socio-economic relations, "in which some are empowered and enriched, while some are impoverished and disempowered".⁸²

That being said, Latt's explanation of an extremely uneven, top-down power relation between low-ranking soldiers and their senior officers, which is the cause of soldiers' violence against Myanmar civilians can be perceived as problematic. Latt's explanation does not account for the numerous war crimes and acts of terror inflicted on innocent civilians. Such acts amount to crimes against humanity,⁸³ which cannot be rationalized by examining the Tatmadaw's internal institutional makeup. Latt falls into the same trap as the other papers examined in this report, in which the agency and responsibility of these soldiers is removed from them and attributed to something else. A deeply ingrained hierarchical system among the Tatmadaw may explain why some soldiers commit crimes such as looting, but this does not resonate for the soldiers' use of rape, torture and murder. Our research will strive to make soldiers accountable for their actions, while simultaneously attempting to understand the more intricate reasons behind why they commit the war crimes they do. Through this, we hope our findings will assist organizations encouraging large-scale defections to better understand some of the obstacles in place which hinder defections.

In November of 2021, the Danish Institute for International Studies released a report titled "Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup".⁸⁴ In it, researchers Helene Maria Kyed and Ah Lynn lay down a compelling analysis on the conditions required for large-scale military defections to occur. The report compiles numerous testimonies from defected soldiers, their wives, and activists who were part of defection campaigns between May to October 2021. Through these narratives, Kyed and Lynn examine the multifaceted conditions that

⁸² Latt, Depoliticization, *Securitization and Violent Accumulation in the Integration of the Greater Mekong Sub-region*, 156.

⁸³ Human Rights Watch, "Myanmar: Coup Leads to Crimes Against Humanity" (July 31, 2021). <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/31/myanmar-coup-leads-crimes-against-humanity>. Accessed October 14, 2022.

⁸⁴ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, "Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup."

either serve as potential drivers or catalysts for defection versus the obstacles preventing soldiers from defecting.

This report identifies varied individual motivations for military defection, such as “moral concerns for the violence against peaceful civilian protesters after the coup, ... dissatisfaction with the Tatmadaw’s internal structures of corruption and oppression that negatively affects lower ranks”, and the availability of support mechanisms from the political opposition, which provide exit options for soldiers considering defection.⁸⁵ In addition to this, Kyed and Lynn suggest that one’s rank and status within the military serves as another factor. On the other hand, several obstacles to military defection are identified; including the dangers that they and their families may face if they leave the Tatmadaw, ideological programming, in which the military instills “deep ideological beliefs about its superior guardianship of the nation and Buddhism”, as well as constructing “perpetual enemies that threaten the integration of the nation” in order to justify the violence they inflict against anti-coup supporters.⁸⁶ Another obstacle to defection identified in this report includes a hierarchical system of rewards, promotions, and punishments within the Tatmadaw. Kyed and Lynn argue that this system “works as an obstacle to defections among lower ranks: fear of losing pensions, means of survival, and access to future and current benefits, for soldiers and their families are key pragmatic factors that inform this obstacle”.⁸⁷

As a result of the harsh repression carried out by the regime against the revolutionary movement, a whole new slew of reasons has arisen for soldiers and police officers to leave. Patterns have also emerged in the way security personnel defect due to the large number of occurrences. The sheer scope opens a whole new realm of research possibilities. Reports such as Kyed and Lynn’s are crucial in helping piece together a model of defections efforts in the revolution. This report analyzes the different types of support mechanisms and exit options and acknowledges how access to social media and online information play a significant role in encouraging military defections. Furthermore, social media scraping has helped collect even more testimonies. News organizations have also picked up and are heavily trying to sell people on the topic of defections. Defected soldiers themselves have also

⁸⁵ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, “Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup,” 61.

⁸⁶ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, “Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup,” 98.

⁸⁷ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, “Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup,” 12.

encouraged others to do the same “by using social media groups, video clips on Facebook, Telegram groups and by giving interviews to national and international media such as CNN”.⁸⁸

While potential drivers and obstacles to military defections are mutually exclusive, this paper recognises that there are multiple overlapping factors, which can both encourage and hinder one’s decision to leave the Tatmadaw. One such factor is the flow of information, whereby “access to the internet and social media not tied to the military significantly facilitate(s) defections”.⁸⁹ However, the Tatmadaw has also “heightened efforts to prevent soldiers from defecting ... by increasing the closure of information flows”.⁹⁰ This allows them to censor information supporting the opposition and instead sustain the narrative that they are the guardian of the nation and Buddhism. Accordingly, this paper provides an insight into the necessity for support mechanisms encouraging defection to be diversified. A diverse range of support mechanisms will help counter some of the obstacles utilized by the military to prevent soldiers from leaving, which in turn will facilitate future large-scale military defections. Hence, our own research project will consider examining how catalysts for defections can also serve as obstacles when examining the various support mechanisms encouraging soldiers to leave their posts.

However, this report’s use of Tatmadaw brainwashing as a justification for why many soldiers commit the atrocities they do is flawed. Many low-ranked soldiers within the Tatmadaw are forced conscripts with little option other than to obey orders from their commanding officer. This is a result of the Tatmadaw’s systematic instillation of fear, which “has made lower-ranks more prone to being bullied by seniors and to what the defectors today describe as brainwashing”.⁹¹ Other soldiers are forced to live in isolated army barracks with their families, where the Tatmadaw restricts social connections with ordinary citizens and controls the flow of information arriving from the outside.⁹² That being so, Tatmadaw defectors are never perfect victims, and justifying their previous actions through military brainwashing is not always appropriate. Kyed and Lynn’s 2021 report fails to acknowledge that military brainwashing is not an appropriate excuse when referring to the educated officer corps. These soldiers are commonly graduates from the Tatmadaw’s Defence Service Academy (DSA), who have had access

⁸⁸ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, “Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup,” 20.

⁸⁹ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, “Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup,” 12.

⁹⁰ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, “Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup,” 68.

⁹¹ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, “Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup,” 74.

⁹² DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, “Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup,” 21.

to education and information available online. It is these members of the Tatmadaw where the notion of brainwashing is not appropriate. Accordingly, our forthcoming research will consider all who claim to be the victim of military brainwashing, but we will not take this lightly. We will remain objective and examine the individuals' past circumstances in the military to see if this is an appropriate justification for their previous actions.

Kyed and Lynn's 2021 report is complemented by another report published later that year, titled "Police under the military coup in Myanmar: Between Violence, Fear, and Desertion",⁹³ which deals with the issue of police defections. Researchers Nyan Corridor and Helene Maria Kyed focus on the estimated 600 police officers who have defected to the CDM or are quietly resisting by refusing to participate in violent crackdowns or by providing those actively resisting the Tatmadaw with intel that they can utilize.⁹⁴ The findings are based on two interviews with police officers and four wives of police officers, secondary media, and social media sources. Most respondents from secondary media and social media sources were non-Bamar, and were in different regions of Myanmar, such as Kachin State, Mandalay, and Sagaing. This makes for a wide and varied set of data, but unfortunately all respondents were low-ranked civil or security police – thus meaning that the findings set out in this paper "cannot be generalized across Myanmar, and must be read as preliminary insights into the ambiguities and fears (at least some) police officers are facing now".⁹⁵

Helene Maria Kyed writes the introduction to this special issue of the *Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship*'s, titled "Soldier Defections Since The 2021 Military Coup".⁹⁶ Kyed explores the memoirs of fifteen military defectors and three military spouses, which have been ghost-written into narrative form from interviews.⁹⁷ The majority of these testimonies are from those belonging to the Bamar majority ethnic group, which reflects the general composition of the Tatmadaw.⁹⁸ This paper is similar

⁹³ Nyan Corridor & Helene Maria Kyed, "Police under the military coup in Myanmar: Between Violence, Fear, and Desertion," *Danish Institute for International Studies Report 2021*, (2021).

⁹⁴ Corridor & Kyed, "Police under the military coup in Myanmar: Between Violence, Fear, and Desertion," 1.

⁹⁵ Corridor & Kyed, "Police under the military coup in Myanmar: Between Violence, Fear, and Desertion," 2.

⁹⁶ Helene Maria Kyed, "Soldier Defections Since The 2021 Military Coup," *Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship* 1, (2022).

⁹⁷ Kyed, "Soldier Defections Since The 2021 Military Coup," 7.

⁹⁸ Kyed, "Soldier Defections Since The 2021 Military Coup," 7.

to Kyed's 2021 report with DIIS and Ah Lynn referenced earlier,⁹⁹ in that it attempts to identify how and why military defectors left the Tatmadaw between February and November 2021.

What distinguishes this paper from Kyed's 2021 report with DIIS and Ah Lynn is its examination of third-wave defections. Unlike the first wave of Tatmadaw defectors who came immediately after the February 1st 2021 military coup, and the second wave, which began after the surge of clashes and skirmishes with opposition forces, the third wave includes soldiers involved in post-coup military violence for over a year. Kyed acknowledges that some of these third wave defectors may have left the Tatmadaw because of moral concerns, but were delayed in doing so for reasons such as fear of capture by military informants.¹⁰⁰ However, Kyed attributes the majority of third wave military defections to "combat fatigue and self-interest in the form of fears for their own and their family's safety", and to a "growing disbelief in the military's capacity to defeat or repress the armed resistance".¹⁰¹ Corporal Aung who left the Tatmadaw in 2022 encapsulates this in his testimony to a BBC reporter, in which he admits: "If I thought the military would win in the long run, I wouldn't have switched sides to the people".¹⁰² This is an important finding, for it answers some questions that Kyed's 2021 report with DIIS and Ah Lynn acknowledge but fail to comment on. Kyed's analysis on third-wave defections suggests that the increase in violent resistance has not in fact been a key obstacle preventing soldiers from leaving, but rather that some soldiers are simply "weighing the extent to which they perceive the resistance to be able to defeat the army or not" before defecting.¹⁰³ This discovery helps inform our research on some of the reasons behind soldiers who are considering defecting but have not yet done so.

Another key finding in this paper is Kyed's examination of the National Unity Government's (NUG) reward system. On April 7th 2022, the NUG announced a nine-point reward system, in which rewards ranging from \$100,000 to \$500,000 will be given to "soldiers who either destroy military supplies or join the People's Embrace with military supplies and vehicles".¹⁰⁴ This is an interesting prospect, which may lead to large-scale defections in the future. However, Kyed is quick to recognise that as of August

⁹⁹ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, "Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup."

¹⁰⁰ Kyed, "Soldier Defections Since The 2021 Military Coup," 13.

¹⁰¹ Kyed, "Soldier Defections Since The 2021 Military Coup," 13.

¹⁰² BBC News, "'I can't forget her' - Myanmar's soldiers admit atrocities" (July 2022).

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-62208882>. Accessed October 14, 2022.

¹⁰³ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, "Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup," 13.

¹⁰⁴ Kyed, "Soldier Defections Since The 2021 Military Coup," 18.

2022, no such reward has been given.¹⁰⁵ This is attributed to the fact that no soldiers have defected with such military intel, but another question must also be considered; does the NUG even have the resources to hand out such large sums of money if a large-scale wave of Tatmadaw defections were to happen? This is an important question which our own research will attempt to answer.

The papers examined in this literature review highlight multiple research findings, which we will consider in our own research. Nevertheless, these papers are not without their limitations, and we have identified two general flaws that cut through all the aforementioned reports. The papers examined above were reviewed because of their relevance in informing us on how to encourage and support large-scale defections. However, military defection is a long process, which does not end once a soldier leaves the Tatmadaw. One must also consider the reintegration and rehabilitation stages, and how the safety of these defectors will be guaranteed if any large-scale defections will ever take place. Unfortunately, these papers fail to make any substantial considerations on the practical aspects of how defectors are integrated into a society composed of the military opposition. Kyed and Lynn's 2021 paper with DIIS is the closest account we have identified which acknowledges the following steps taken after one leaves the Tatmadaw. This paper briefly focuses on the complications of reintegration, where "there is a real and deep concern that after having fought the people, soldiers would find it difficult to defect because they worry that they will not be trusted and welcomed by the people".¹⁰⁶ Despite this, Kyed and Lynn's report abruptly concludes this train of thought by stating that to encourage more defections requires a relationship built on trust, in which soldiers can be guaranteed protection and prospects if they choose to leave the Tatmadaw.¹⁰⁷ No attention is given to the practical aspects of how to build and sustain this trust-based relationship. By recognising this gap in the existing research around military defections in Myanmar, our own research will attempt to cast more light onto the practical aspects of how reintegration and rehabilitation can be successfully achieved.

Lastly, the papers analyzed in this literature review are predominantly based on the voices of low-ranked soldiers. This makes the findings biased towards identifying the conditions required for possible large-scale military defections among low-ranked soldiers. The lack of testimonies from

¹⁰⁵ Kyed, "Soldier Defections Since The 2021 Military Coup," 18.

¹⁰⁶ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, "Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup," 58-59.

¹⁰⁷ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, "Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup," 99.

high-ranking officers is attributed to the fact that there have been few defections from the officer corps. By mid-October 2021, “there had only been one example of a top-level officer – a regional commander – who had attempted to defect but without success”.¹⁰⁸ Despite this, there is a possibility that large-scale defections among low ranked soldiers may serve as a catalyst that eventually encourages higher-ranked officers to also defect. Thus, our research will attempt to identify the driving factors for defections which are shared by both low-ranked soldiers and their superiors, while also trying to identify some factors which may be more relevant to those who are part of the Tatmadaw officer corps.

¹⁰⁸ DIIS, Kyed & Lynn, “Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and obstacles following the 2021 military coup,” 9.

APPENDIX II - SURVEY

Introduction

We are a group of researchers currently working on a study on the motivation for military and police defections. We are trying to understand the current state of the defection campaign and what kind of messages resonate with potential defectors and how best external actors can support the defection campaign and defectors, if at all.

Eventually we aim to provide recommendations to stakeholders such as the NUG, EROs, and international organisations for facilitating and supporting better conditions for military and police defectors and their families.

We appreciate your time and consideration, and your involvement in this research. We understand how sensitive this is, and your responses and identities will remain confidential. As such, this research will not include any information about your name, rank or badge number. All data will be de-identified. The final report will not include any information that could personally identify you.

You can stop the interview at any time, and of course, you can skip any questions that you are not comfortable answering.

Do you have any other questions about our research before we start?
Is there anything we can do to make you more comfortable?

As a first question, would you like to tell us a little about how life has been for you since you left the Tatmadaw?

Now some more specific questions:

Demographics

- How old are you?
- Which ethnicity or ethnicities do you identify yourself as?
- What religion, if any, are you?
- Where is your native town/ hometown (Open question)?
- What is the highest level of education you have achieved?

Last position within the Tatmadaw

Would you please tell us about your last position within the Tatmadaw:

- What was your rank?
- What was your position?
 - What were your responsibilities in the Tatmadaw?

-
- Which unit/ department were you in?
 - Can you explain the chain of command in your last unit or department?
 - Who and what rank was your superior?
 - What name and rank was the head of your unit?
 - Which command did they report through?
 - What name and rank was that Commander?
 - How were you given instructions/ orders?
 - Verbally?
 - In typed orders?
 - Otherwise?
 - How was your performance measured?
 - What were you rewarded for? Can you please give an example?
 - What were you punished for? Can you please give an example?

Enlisting in the Tatmadaw

- When did you join the Tatmadaw? (Year)
- Why did you join the Tatmadaw?
- Was your father or another close relative in the Tatmadaw?
 - If so, did you grow up in a military barracks?
 - If so, did you attend a military primary school?

Education in the Tatmadaw

- Which training school did you attend?
 - Defence Services Academy
 - Officer Training School
 - Officer Training College
 - Defence Services Technical Academy
 - Defence Services Military Academy
 - Other: _____
- Have you attended further training in the Tatmadaw, such as specialised airborne training, naval training, language training, staff college, etc?
 - If so, can you list the trainings you have attended?
- Have you attended any training overseas?
 - Russia
 - India
 - China
 - Pakistan
 - Bangladesh
 - Other: _____
- Have you attended any other specialised training seminars or short courses?
 - Were any of these also attended by international trainers?

Livelihood

- What was your monthly salary?
- Did you or your immediate family have any other sources of income?
 - If so, what are they?
- Are Tatmadaw officers allowed to run businesses?
 - If so, what were the rules for running a business?
- Do you own MEHL or MEC shares?
 - Did you have to pay monthly to MEHL or MEC for shares? Was this paid for you or taken out of your wages? Or did you have to pay for it yourself?
 - How many shares do you own?
 - How much did you pay per share?
 - Do you receive any dividends/ profits from your MEHL or MEC shares?
 - If so, how often did you receive them?
- Do you have life insurance?
 - If so, was this paid for you or was it taken out of your wages?
- Can you access your savings now?
 - Where are your savings kept?
 - In a military bank?

Family Situation

- Are you married?
- If not, do you have a partner (girlfriend/ boyfriend)?
- If yes, was there any process in the Tatmadaw before you were able to be married? (i.e. to approve your wife)
- Do you have children?
 - If so, how many and what age are they?
- Which schools do your children attend?
 - Government school
 - Private school
 - Government schools located inside military compounds (Military primary/ secondary school)
 - Religious school
 - University
- Where is your barracks / military housing? Which No.?
 - How many residents were in your military housing?
 - Were family members together with you in the military housing you were in?
 - If so, how many of your family members lived in military housing?
 - Were family members living in military housing elsewhere?
 - If so, where? (No need for specifics)

Leaving the Tatmadaw

- When did you leave the Tatmadaw?
- Why did you leave the Tatmadaw?
 - Did you make the decision to leave alone?
 - Did you receive influence from friends or family to leave?
 - What other factors influenced your decision to leave the Tatmadaw?
- How did you leave the Tatmadaw?
 - Did someone help you organise to leave? (Please do not identify who helped)
 - How did you communicate to organise this?
 - What kind of help did they provide?
- Did you leave with anyone else?
 - If so, who were they? (Colleagues, family etc)
- Where are you now? (No need for address or specifics)
- What were your concerns/worries when leaving the Tatmadaw?
- What were your challenges/barriers to leaving the Tatmadaw?
- What is the punishment for leaving? For defecting?
- What did you lose by leaving?
- What kind of outside assistance did you receive after you decided to leave the Tatmadaw?
- What additional support would have made leaving the Tatmadaw easier?
- Why do you think your former comrades continue to stay in the Tatmadaw?
 - Do you have any other colleagues in the Tatmadaw who want to leave?
 - What are their reasons for staying?
 - What are their barriers to leaving?
 - What assistance would they need to leave?

Communications

- What communication methods did you use to contact your Tatmadaw comrades before the coup? (tick all that apply)
 - Telegram
 - Signal
 - Facebook Messenger
 - Radio
 - Phone
 - Text Message
 - Viber
 - Tiktok
 - Instagram
 - Face to Face
 - Email
 - Other _____

-
- What communication methods did you use to contact your Tatmadaw comrades after the coup before leaving the military? (tick all that apply)
 - Telegram
 - Signal
 - Facebook Messenger
 - Radio
 - Phone
 - Text Message
 - Viber
 - Tiktok
 - Instagram
 - Face to Face
 - Email
 - Other _____
 - What communication methods do you use in your personal life before the coup? (tick all that apply)
 - Telegram
 - Signal
 - Facebook Messenger
 - Radio
 - Phone
 - Text Message
 - Viber
 - Tiktok
 - Instagram
 - Face to Face
 - Email
 - What communication methods did you use in your personal life after the coup before leaving the military? (tick all that apply)
 - Telegram
 - Signal
 - Facebook Messenger
 - Radio
 - Phone
 - Text Message
 - Viber
 - Tiktok
 - Instagram
 - Face to Face
 - Email
 - Other _____
-

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- Were your personal communications monitored?
 - If so, how were they monitored?
 - What communication methods do you use in your life after leaving the military? (tick all that apply)
 - Telegram
 - Signal
 - Facebook Messenger
 - Radio
 - Phone
 - Text Message
 - Viber
 - Tiktok
 - Instagram
 - Face to Face
 - Email
 - Other _____

Experiences in the Tatmadaw

- What did you find most difficult about being in the Tatmadaw?
- What did you like about being in the Tatmadaw?
- Which groups, if any, did you feel were respected?
- Which groups, if any, did you feel were disrespected?
- How were women and children treated?
- Were you ever given any orders that you felt were illegal or wrong?
- Did you ever see other comrades do anything that you felt was illegal or wrong?
 - If so, what did they do? (List as many examples as you feel are relevant and important and feel comfortable sharing)
 - Of the actions that you just described, which ones were undertaken to follow orders from superiors, and which ones were done spontaneously?
 - Did you ever see any of your superiors do anything you felt was illegal or wrong?
 - Have you seen or heard others in your military unit use any drugs?
 - Have you seen or heard others in your military unit drink alcohol?

Future plans

- Where do you hope/ plan to go next?
- How do you hope/ plan on earning a living now you have left the Tatmadaw?
- Do you have work or an income now?
- How much funds do you have access to now?
- Do you need psychological support for traumatic experiences? Or members of your family with you? Or others with you?

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- What kind of help would you need to reintegrate back into civilian life?
 - Do you want access to further education or training to make it more comfortable to reintegrate into civilian life?

Morale

- Do you think the Tatmadaw is weaker or stronger now, compared to before the coup?
- Will your defection have an impact on your unit and the Tatmadaw as a whole? If so, what do you think that impact is?
- Are you a member of any other group, in contact with or supportive of other groups? Such as, CDM, CRPH, EROs, PDFs etc. Please elaborate.