Junta uses control over military families to prevent defections, say army insiders

Soldiers disgusted by the regime's murder of civilians fear their families will pay the price if they join the CDM

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Regime forces crack down on peaceful protesters in Yangon in early March (Myanmar Now)

Soldiers appalled by the Myanmar junta's brutal treatment of civilians are reluctant to leave the military because they fear for their families' safety, according to people familiar with the situation.

Despite these fears, however, a number of military officers have already defected to avoid serving under a regime that has so far killed more than 700 protesters and bystanders since seizing power on February 1.

In the past month, four soldiers, including a captain from Light Infantry Division 77, which has carried out crackdowns in Yangon, have joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Others have also deserted and are now on the run.

Many more would be willing to disobey the dictatorship if their families weren't effectively held hostage by the junta—or "kidnapped by a gang", as one of the recent defectors put it.

"That is the situation right now. Those living in military compounds have basically been kidnapped. They use soldiers' family members to control them so they can't act freely. If a soldier wants to run, he has to take his family with him," explained Capt. Lin Htet Aung, who joined the CDM this week.

The captain, who served with Light Infantry Battalion 528 under the Triangle Region Command in eastern Shan state's Mong Ping township, told Myanmar Now that many soldiers are uneasy about the crimes they have been ordered to commit.

They know the regime is arresting, torturing and murdering innocent civilians, he said, but they are too worried about the safety of their own families to risk doing anything about it.

"They know it isn't fair, but they have to look out for their families. They're aware of the injustice and I'm sure they feel uncomfortable about it. And yet they have to close their eyes," he said.

Now in hiding in territory controlled by an ethnic armed organization, he estimated that around 75% of troops would leave the military if their families were to receive protection.

Not free to speak

Even before the coup, the movements of soldiers' family members were restricted, especially if they lived on military bases, according to the wife of an officer stationed in Mandalay.

Since the coup, however, the situation has gotten much worse, both for the soldiers themselves and for their families, she said.

“It’s been two weeks since I last had contact with him,” said the woman, who does not live with her husband. “They can’t go out except for security purposes. They line up every day and night to give their names, since some are defecting.”

Because she doesn’t live on the base, where she can be more easily controlled, she has been denied access to her Facebook account and has also been forced to give up two phone numbers she previously used, she told Myanmar Now.

“I never lived in a military compound, so he never really tells me anything in detail, because he doesn’t want to get in trouble. But he says they threaten him, asking if he wants a promotion or one or two years in prison. They’ve been saying I’m in the way of his prospects,” the woman said.

Her husband, who is a graduate of the Defence Services Technological Academy, has wanted to leave the army since before the coup, she added.

But not everyone in the military is disillusioned with the regime, she noted. There are still many who believe anything the generals say, due to their lack of access to news from outlets that are not controlled by the military.

“There’s no internet access and they believe that everything they see on Myawaddy is real,” she said, referring to the military-owned TV station that the regime uses to spread disinformation about the coup.

“They genuinely believe this coup was staged due to electoral fraud and that there will be another election in a year to transfer power,” she said of families living on bases.

When Myanmar Now contacted the wife of another officer to ask about her current situation in a military housing compound, she simply responded that she did not feel safe speaking on the phone. She added, however, that she did not mind not being able to speak freely.

‘Tatmadaw is just a name’

In an effort to stem the steady trickle of defections, the junta has stepped up its efforts to close ranks and keep both military personnel and their families in line.

During a visit to a military training school in the Mandalay region town of Yamethin last Saturday, the regime's vice chair, Vice-Senior General Soe Win, warned soldiers and their family members that they should "only go where one should go, only discuss what one should discuss, only do what one should do, and only associate with those one should associate with."

Vice-Senior General Soe Win is seen with military officers, soldiers and their family members in Yamethin on April 10. (Office of the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services)

He also told them to not believe the reports of CNN, the US-based news network that the military invited to the country as part of its campaign to win international acceptance of its rule.

"Be careful of propaganda on social media, and continue building unity within the Tatmadaw," he told his audience, referring to Myanmar's armed forces.

Ironically, the military appears to expend less effort enforcing discipline among troops on active duty, who are often left to their own devices when faced with an enemy capable of fighting back.

Saw Baw Kyaw Heh, the deputy commander of the Karen National Union (KNU), told Myanmar Now that recently captured soldiers were simply given their orders, without any form of support or guidance from their senior officers.

They are also completely cut off from the outside world in other ways, he added.

"They have no contact with their families, no access to social media, and no benefits. To some extent, this affects their mental health," he said of soldiers interrogated by the KNU after the group overran their base late last month.

This lack of concern for rank-and-file soldiers, as much as the regime's indifference to the suffering of ordinary citizens, helps explain why many in the military would consider defecting if they thought they could do so without endangering their families.

"The Tatmadaw is just a name. If I have to choose between the Tatmadaw and my country, I choose my country," said a sergeant who was stationed at the Hmawbi air force base in Yangon region until he defected last week.

Now sheltering in an area controlled by an ethnic army along with two other sergeants who joined the CDM in the past week, he added that the only thing preventing many others from joining their ranks is concerns about their families' safety.

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