



FORCED TO FIGHT: THE REALITY OF MILITARY CONSCRIPTION IN MYANMAR

A REPORT BY THE MINISTRY OF HUMAN RIGHTS
NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT



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Foreword

The imposition of forced conscription in Myanmar represents one of the most pressing human rights crises facing the country today. The military junta's systematic use of coercion, abduction and violence to compel individuals into service is both a gross violation of human dignity and an urgent matter of international concern. These tactics have been widely applied across various ethnic groups and have disproportionately targeted returning students, ethnic minorities, and vulnerable populations.

This report analyses forced conscription in Myanmar since February 2024, drawing on a series of interviews with victims and survivors. It aims to give agency to those affected by presenting their testimonies as evidence. While its focus remains on the experiences shared in these interviews, it does not seek to provide a broader scope at this stage.

The report sheds light on recruitment methods, the lived experiences of those conscripted, and the wider humanitarian and legal implications. By amplifying the voices of victims and survivors, we seek to bring global attention to the widespread abuses perpetrated by the military junta.

This report serves as both a record of these injustices and a call to action for international bodies, including the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council (HRC), to take decisive measures to end this practice.



Executive Summary

In February 2024, the junta unlawfully activated the 2010 People's Military Service Law, mandating military service for men aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27, with penalties of up to five years in prison for evasion.

This report documents the widespread coercion, violence, and human rights abuses linked to forced recruitment under this law. Key findings include:

Systematic Abductions & Coercion: Young men, particularly from ethnic minority communities, are forcibly taken from homes, workplaces, and military checkpoints.

Extortion & Bribery: Families are forced to pay bribes to prevent their relatives from being conscripted.

Severe Human Rights Violations: Recruits face forced labour, psychological trauma, and in some cases, child recruitment.

Between February 2024 and February 2025, over 14 million individuals were deemed eligible for conscription, with 560 documented forced recruitment cases out of 886 recorded incidents (63%), according to the National Youth Congress (NYC).

At time of writing, these forced recruitment tactics have been used against young men only. However young women are now eligible to be compelled into the military, and if the battlefield situation for the junta worsens, we can confidently expect that women will be the next target.

Forced conscription in Myanmar is not only a violation of international law but also exacerbates the country's humanitarian crisis, fuelling displacement and instability. This report contextualizes the findings within Myanmar's historical and legal framework and calls for urgent international intervention.



Introduction

Myanmar has a long history of military rule, ethnic conflicts, and democratic struggles. Since gaining independence in 1948, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military) has maintained an outsized role as a political arbiter, imposing its will across the country at the end of the gun and through authoritarian and oppressive measures. Forced conscription has been a longstanding practice against the Rohingya and amongst other minorities, used to sustain military ranks, particularly in times of internal conflict and resistance.

Attempts to formalize conscription date back to 1955 with the introduction of the National Service Bill, though it was inconsistently enforced. Following the 1988 pro-democracy uprisings, forced recruitment became widespread, with reports of minors being forcibly enlisted. The 2010 People's Military Service Law made military service mandatory for men aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27. However, due to strong public resistance and political considerations, it was never enforced—until recently.

Forced Conscription Today

In February 2024, the military junta unlawfully determined to enforce the 2010 conscription law on young people aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27, making military service compulsory and imposing penalties of up to five years in prison for evasion.

This move has triggered widespread fear and mass evasion attempts, with thousands fleeing to neighbouring countries, particularly Thailand.^[1] Reports indicate that recruitment is increasingly carried out through coercion, abduction, and intimidation, with young men forcibly taken from homes, workplaces, and military checkpoints. Many are given little or no training before being sent to the front lines.^[2]



International organizations, including the UN, have condemned these practices, documenting numerous cases of child conscription, forced labour, and abductions.

^[1] Forced conscription not only violates fundamental human rights – such as the right to liberty and security, the prohibition of forced labour, and the rights of children - but also exacerbates Myanmar’s ongoing humanitarian crisis, fuelling displacement and destabilizing communities.

This report examines the mechanisms of forced recruitment, its impact on individuals and communities, and its broader legal and humanitarian implications. By shedding light on these violations and abuses, we aim to contribute to international efforts to hold the Myanmar military accountable and advocate for urgent policy interventions.

Methodology

A qualitative interview approach was used to collect firsthand accounts about military recruitment, training, frontline experiences, and the journey of escaping to the pro-democracy Revolutionary forces. All interviews were conducted in Burmese language online via Zoom, allowing participants to join from a safe and comfortable space, which was especially important given the sensitive nature of the topics. The methodology was designed to ensure data reliability and ethical standards, with open-ended questions encouraging participants to share their experiences in their own words.

Interview Process

The interviews were conducted in collaboration between the Ministry of Human Rights, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Labour. A total of 31 individuals were interviewed. The interview process followed three main stages: preparation, conducting the interviews, and addressing ethical concerns. An interview guide was developed to structure discussions around key themes:

1. Recruitment Process – Questions explored how participants ended up in the military, whether through voluntary enlistment or coercion, the criteria used for selection, and the personal circumstances influencing their recruitment.
 2. Training Regimen – Examining the physical and psychological challenges faced during military training.
 3. Frontline Experience – Investigating combat experiences, unit organization, and the overall discipline among soldiers.
- Escape narrative – Understanding the motivations for desertion and the challenges of transitioning to the Revolutionary forces.



Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Ethical principles were prioritized, with participants informed of their rights and the voluntary nature of participation. Informed consent was obtained, and special care was taken when discussing sensitive topics. If participants displayed distress, interviews were paused or terminated as needed, with referrals to support resources provided.

The study faced limitations, including difficulties in identifying defectors due to security risks, potential inconsistencies in recollections due to trauma, and technical challenges associated with online interviews. Despite these challenges, the study sought to capture participants' experiences accurately and respectfully.

Means and Methods of Recruitment

Forced recruitment by Myanmar's military junta has been carried out through systematic abduction, and violent intimidation. Interviews and evidence collected reveal patterns of arbitrary arrests, deception, extortion, and forced signing of documents designed to create a façade of legitimacy for unlawful conscription. *"[...] during the night, I was forcibly taken by a man disguised as a taxi driver to the Danyin Gone Military Recruitment Center, where I was threatened with death if I tried to escape".*

Victims reported being forcibly taken from their homes, workplaces, and even educational institutions.

"They forcibly captured and took me to a military camp to participate to military activity against my will. I was heading home after work, they beat me, tied my legs with wire and kept me in isolation until I was transferred to a military camp".

Police and military units frequently conducted raids under false pretences, arresting individuals under fabricated charges or alleged administrative infractions, such as failure to pay checkpoint fees.

"I was informed by the administrative officer and members of the militia that if I did not serve in the military, I would be sentenced to two years in prison".

In several instances, detainees were deceived with false promises of release after performing minor tasks, only to be immediately re-arrested.

Many victims also described extortion schemes, in which detainees were forced to pay exorbitant sums for their release. Those unable or unwilling to pay were subjected to compulsory enlistment. Additionally, reports indicate that some migrant workers deported from neighbouring Thailand were transferred to the junta, raising concerns about the vulnerability of returnees to forced recruitment. *“In August 2024, the Thai police, along with 25 other young people, transferred us to the authorities in Kawthoung, where we were taken under the command of soldiers, including senior officers and troops fully equipped with weapons. We were moved from Kawthoung Port to Kawthoung Township (262) Battalion, where we were held under strict surveillance to prevent any escape”.*

A recurring theme in victims’ testimonies was the forced signing of documents under duress. These included ambiguous contracts that falsely promised citizenship or employment rights upon the completion of military service. Such coerced agreements were obtained through threats, physical violence, and psychological intimidation, effectively depriving conscripts of any genuine choice in their recruitment.

“I was forced to sign a military service contract without my consent, stating that I had to serve for two years. I had no idea what the contract contained”.

Experience in Military Training Camps

Once conscripted, victims were transferred to military training camps where they faced harsh conditions, systematic abuse, and coercive control.

“During the training, strict measures were imposed [...] being forced to sit under the scorching sun, having clothes, phones and money confiscated, being deprived of food”.

Training facilities were overcrowded, lacked adequate resources, and had unsanitary conditions, resulting in serious health consequences and, in some cases, fatalities for forced conscripts.

“Along with approximately 300 trainees, we reached the training school in Palauk Town, where we ate rotten meals and suffered health issues, causing some to lose their lives. Those who became seriously ill were beaten and sent to medical treatment, and those who could not be treated for diseases were shot and killed”.

The military recruited not only able-bodied adults but also individuals who were particularly vulnerable, including children, the sick, and people with disabilities.

“The camp had approximately 700 trainees, including one person with tuberculosis, one drug addict, one mute person, ten individuals with mental disabilities, and around ten underage children”.

Some interviewees reported that fake IDs were registered for under 18 years old trainees.

“Minors under the age of 18 were enlisted using fake IDs, with the registration form filled under the close instructions and supervision from G-1 to the district officials, allowing them to receive training alongside the adults”.

The training regimen was intensive, covering weapons handling, combat tactics, fortifications, mine deployment, and drone operations. Trainees were subjected to extreme physical punishment for minor infractions or escape attempts, including beatings, prolonged confinement, exposure to harsh weather, forced labour, and, in the most severe instances, execution.



“I was deeply dissatisfied with being forcibly conscripted and had confided to a friend about my situation. When the authorities discovered this, they beat me and punished me by placing me in solitary confinement for two months”.

Multiple accounts described arbitrary punishments inflicted by intoxicated officers, public humiliation, and collective punishment methods, all of which contributed to a pervasive atmosphere of psychological trauma and fear.

“Those who attempted to escape were immediately shaved their heads off, beaten, and placed under direct hot sun and finally in detention. Trainees who engaged in quarrels during training were punished collectively, where each member of the company had to hit them”.

Trainees frequently witnessed brutal reprisals, including executions and severe punishment for escape attempts, reinforcing a climate of intimidation and absolute compliance.

“Some trainees attempted to escape the training school, and around 20 of them died during the escape attempt stepping on landmines. Those who were recaptured were shot dead”.

Experience on the Front Line

Following minimal and often inadequate training, conscripts were rapidly deployed to active combat zones and checkpoints, where they faced extreme danger and hostile conditions.

“My duties included clearing roads for convoys, removing landmines, and conducting ambush operations every two days”.

Victims reported being assigned critical and high-risk military tasks, including frontline combat, checkpoint security, tax collection, forced labour in constructing military fortifications, and participation in the destruction of civilian properties.

“Trainees who failed to perform tasks, were subjected to punches, forced exercise, verbal abuse, and humiliation. [...] were punished by being stripped down to their longyi, soaked in water and beaten with banana leaves”.

Testimonies described instances in which conscripts were coerced into burning civilian homes, seizing local resources, and engaging - directly or indirectly - in actions that may constitute war crimes.

“We were tasked with confiscating gasoline tanks brought by civilians [...]. Although it was not my choice we had to demand beans and peas from the locals”.

The lack of adequate rations, uniforms, and basic support further exposed these conscripts to severe hardships, including starvation and exposure to harsh environmental conditions. Many reported being forced to survive by scavenging or consuming inadequate food supplies such as wild roots and fruits.

“We were forced to eat small portions of rice that we barely had enough of. When the rice ran out, we had to survive by eating fruits and food like palm tree roots to satisfy our hunger”.



Conscripts were frequently placed in morally and psychologically devastating situations, witnessing or being forced to participate in atrocities against civilians, including forced evictions, killings, and systematic arson. These experiences compounded their trauma and contributed to their decisions to defect or escape.

“I witnessed the military taking supplies and belongings from civilians’ homes, setting them on fire, firing heavy weapons, and killing women”.



The impact of forced recruitment on young people

The consequences of forced conscriptions into the Myanmar military are profound, multifaceted and enduring.

Physically, survivors have suffered from lasting injuries, chronic illnesses, and permanent disabilities resulting from brutal training conditions and frontline combat. Psychologically, they have endured severe trauma, often manifesting as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders, depression, and a profound loss of personal agency and hope.

The disruption to education and career development is significant, with many conscripts facing permanently derailed opportunities, severely limiting their future prospects. Socially, survivors often encounter stigma due to their forced involvement in military operations, further marginalizing them and complicating their reintegration into civilian life and community structures.

The cumulative impact of these experiences extends beyond individual survivors, contributing to generational trauma that fractures community cohesion and undermines efforts toward reconciliation, peacebuilding, and sustainable development in Myanmar.

Urgent international intervention is needed to mitigate these long-term effects and provide essential support for rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.

The Human Rights Perspective

Forced conscription in Myanmar constitutes a serious violation of fundamental human rights, contravening both international legal standards and widely recognized humanitarian principles. The practice strips individuals of their autonomy, subjecting them to coercion, intimidation, and violence. Victims of forced conscription are deprived of their autonomy and subjected to harsh military conditions, frequently involving physical abuse, forced labour, and psychological trauma.

Violations of International Human Rights Law

Myanmar's forced conscription policies violate multiple international legal instruments, including both treaty law and customary international law, which apply regardless of ratification status.

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) prohibits slavery and forced labour (Article 4) and protects individuals from arbitrary arrest and detention (Article 9)—practices commonly associated with forced recruitment in Myanmar.
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) prohibits servitude and forced labour (Article 8). While Myanmar has not ratified the ICCPR, its provisions are widely considered customary international law, meaning they are legally binding regardless of ratification.
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, both of which Myanmar has ratified, explicitly prohibit the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. Despite this, the military continues to forcibly enlist minors, exposing them to exploitation, combat exposure, and lifelong trauma[4] .



Customary International Law and Humanitarian Protections

Even beyond treaty obligations, customary international humanitarian law (IHL)—as codified by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)—prohibits the forced recruitment of civilians and children into armed forces.

- Rule 95 of Customary IHL (ICRC) explicitly prohibits forced labour, which includes military recruitment under coercion.
- Rule 136 of Customary IHL states that children must not be recruited into armed forces or armed groups.
- The 1949 Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols prohibit the forced enlistment of protected persons, including civilians in occupied territories.

Despite these well-established norms, the military junta's conscription practices flagrantly violate international humanitarian law, further reinforcing the need for international legal intervention.

International Condemnation and Legal Accountability

The UN and human rights organizations have repeatedly condemned the Myanmar military's conscription practices, calling for accountability and an immediate cessation of forced recruitment. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has documented Myanmar's systematic use of forced labour and military conscription, calling for urgent reforms and international oversight.

As a state party to various international treaties and a participant in customary international law, Myanmar's military cannot evade its legal obligations. Ensuring accountability under international law is a crucial step toward justice, civilian protection, and the upholding of fundamental human rights.

Recommendation to HRC

The Need for Strengthened International Action Against Forced Conscription

Given the scale and severity of forced conscription in Myanmar, the international community should take urgent and coordinated measures to hold the military junta accountable. Diplomatic pressure, targeted sanctions, and strengthened legal mechanisms must be reinforced to prevent the continued recruitment of civilians into military service against their will.

United Nations

- The UN should formally and unequivocally condemn the Myanmar military junta for its systematic use of forced conscription, which has directly resulted in:
 - Enforced disappearances
 - The recruitment of child soldiers
 - Extrajudicial killings
 - Other widespread human rights violations
- The UN Security Council should adopt a follow-up resolution to UN Security Council resolution 2669 (2022) that introduces: punitive measures that target junta members and their businesses and associates; an embargo against weapons, munitions and jet fuel imports; and supports international accountability efforts, including through a referral of the situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court. The new resolution should also specifically address forced conscription and establish mechanisms to monitor and report violations and abuses.

ASEAN and Neighbouring Countries

ASEAN member states and Myanmar's neighbouring countries can play a crucial role in mitigating the impact of forced conscription by ensuring that those fleeing this practice are protected under humanitarian principles. They should:

- Condemn the junta's use of forced conscription and end all engagement with the Myanmar military.
- Formally engage with the National Unity Government, Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations and Myanmar civil society.
- Recognize individuals fleeing forced conscription as victims of human rights violations rather than irregular migrants.
- Implement safeguards to prevent Myanmar nationals from falling victim to human trafficking or forced labour.
- Adopt and enforce a non-refoulement policy, ensuring that individuals are not returned to Myanmar, where they risk being forcibly conscripted.
- Strengthen cooperation with international organizations to facilitate documentation and protection mechanisms specifically for those escaping forced conscription.

International Community

The international community should take concrete actions to pressure the junta to end forced conscription and to weaken the junta's ability to sustain it, including:

- **Diplomatic measures:** Ending engagement with the military junta to delegitimize its forced recruitment policies.
- **Targeted economic sanctions and asset freezes:** Expanding sanctions specifically against military units and individuals directly responsible for forced conscription as part of a broader suite of enhanced punitive measures targeting the junta and its businesses and associates, to block access to financial resources that fund recruitment efforts.
- **Arms embargoes and technology restrictions:** Preventing the junta from acquiring resources used to enforce forced conscription.
- **Humanitarian assistance:** Directing cross-border aid, including through established ethnic and civil society channels, to displaced individuals and communities affected by forced conscription, ensuring assistance does not indirectly support the junta.
- **Support for resistance efforts:** Strengthening legal and financial support for groups documenting and resisting forced conscription, including civil society organizations.



Accountability and Reparation Mechanisms

To end impunity, international bodies should establish mechanisms specifically focused on documenting, verifying, and prosecuting forced conscription in Myanmar. This includes:

- Specifically requesting the IIMM and mandating OHCHR to collect evidence of forced conscription.
- Supporting international courts and countries exercising universal jurisdiction to pursue prosecute perpetrators.
- Ensuring that survivors of forced conscription have access to justice and reparations.

By implementing these measures, the international community can take concrete steps toward eradicating forced conscription in Myanmar and ensuring justice for its victims.

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