

Myanmar's Shan Civilians: Caught Between Three Armies

Written by Antonio Graceffo

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ANTONIO GRACEFFO, DEC 10 2024

The war between pro-democracy resistance forces and the Myanmar military has raged since 1948 but escalated dramatically after the 2021 coup that ousted the democratically elected government. Across Myanmar's ethnic states, ethnic resistance organizations, often supported by the People's Defense Forces, are battling junta forces while aligning with the exiled National Unity Government. Amid this conflict, civilians bear the brunt of the violence, with over 3.3 million internally displaced and at least 3-4 million having fled the country. Shan State, however, stands out as a particularly dire case, where civilians suffer not only under the Burmese army but also at the hands of the Shan State Army and the United Wa State Army (UWSA). While most people in Myanmar face a grim reality, residents of Shan State endure additional abuses from the very ethnic militias that claim to protect them. These residents face not only threats of violence but also overwhelming economic pressure, making life unbearable.

Forty-five-year-old Nang Seng Aung described the harsh taxation imposed by armed groups: "If you have family working abroad, the armed groups take half the money they send home." She went on to list the extensive taxes they face: "Concrete house: 7,500,000 kyat per year, bamboo house: 1,500,000 kyat, large truck (16 wheels): 15,000,000 kyat, small truck (6 wheels): 5,000,000 kyat..." Even bicycles, phones, buffalos, cows, and pigs are taxed. Unable to sustain such financial burdens or afford basic necessities, Nang Seng Aung said, "Finally, we had to sell everything at a cheap price and come to Thailand."

Sai Kungdala, a 48-year-old Shan man, arrived at a refugee camp in Thailand with his wife and two children, recounting the hardships that forced them to flee. "After the military takeover, the price of goods doubled, but our daily wages stayed the same," he explained. "Sometimes, the employer paid us half in yaba pills (methamphetamine) and half in cash." By 2024, the economic collapse had worsened to the point where employers began paying workers exclusively in drugs. This left ordinary working people in the desperate position of having to sell methamphetamine just to buy food. "However," Sai said, "the price of yaba was very low—only 200 kyat per pill—and it was hard to sell because everyone already had yaba."

The Shan State Army – North (SSA-N) and its political wing, the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP), are headquartered in Wan Hai village, Kesi Township, in central Shan State, while the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and its political arm, the United Wa State Party (UWSP), are based in Bang Sang, northern Shan State, near the border with China. The SSA and UWSA are two of the most powerful armed groups in Myanmar, maintaining a long-standing ceasefire with the government that borders on an alliance. For decades, these groups have collaborated with the Burmese military in business, trade, and mining while being granted extensive freedom to operate large-scale criminal enterprises, including opium plantations and factories producing methamphetamine (Yaba) and heroin. Some claim the UWSA is the largest drug trafficking organization in the world.

The UWSA's ties with China, rooted in historical connections to the Communist Party of Burma, have significantly bolstered its military and economic capabilities. China provides the UWSA with advanced weaponry, including helicopters, anti-aircraft systems, and armored vehicles, along with training and economic investments. In Wa-controlled areas, Mandarin serves as the lingua franca, and Chinese currency, infrastructure, and technology dominate local systems. This close relationship positions the UWSA as a critical player in maintaining stability in

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Shan State, a geopolitically crucial region for China's Belt and Road Initiative and energy security.

With China's backing and its powerful military, the UWSP operates as a quasi-state actor with near-complete autonomy. Both the Burmese military and the Chinese Communist Party view the UWSA as a pragmatic ally. Although the UWSA's primary objective is to preserve its autonomy, it maintains a ceasefire with the government and occasionally acts as a stabilizing force, countering certain ethnic armed organizations that threaten government interests. The UWSA also plays a key role for Beijing by ensuring security along the Sino-Myanmar border and fostering a favorable investment climate. Ironically, the UWSA operates a large weapons manufacturing industry, with its primary customers being ethnic armed organizations fighting against the Burmese government—a government that remains a client of China. This complex interplay of alliances highlights the intricate dynamics of power, business, and conflict in Shan State.

Many Shan State villagers report being taxed by both the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N) and the United Wa State Army (UWSA). When it comes to conscription, they face demands from as many as three armies—the UWSA, SSA-N, and the Burmese military—each requiring their sons and daughters to serve on the front lines. The constant threat of loss and violence, compounded by economic collapse and widespread drug addiction, is driving Shan people to Thailand in record numbers. The humanitarian situation inside Myanmar continues to deteriorate, while the number of displaced people in Thailand needing assistance grows daily. Unless the three armies somehow wipe each other out (an unlikely scenario), or a diplomatic solution arises, the crisis is only set to worsen.

About the author:

Antonio Graceffo, PhD, is an American journalist stationed on the Thai-Burma border, reporting on the war in Myanmar. His work has appeared in Al Jazeera, The Diplomat, South China Morning Post, Bitter Winter, Geopolitical Monitor, and other international outlets.