

# A Nation Divided: Myanmar's Rebel Forces Gain Ground, Weaken Regime's Grip

Monday 19 August 2024, by [HAZARIKA Sanjoy](#) (Date first published: 11 August 2024).

**As civil conflict ensues in Myanmar, and India tries to fence the border it shares with the country to stem the inflow of refugees and drugs, Mizoram is caught in the crosshairs.**

**Zokhawthar, Mizoram:** Wiry men, some hefting planks of wood, others struggling with heavy backpacks or sacks, move across the white and red-brown iron bridge, the spaces between its girders offering a clear view of the dirty Tiau river. The women are in colourful ethnic sarongs, blouses and slacks.

The 'river' is little more than a shallow stream, and can be easily forded by people walking across, or by trucks or horses. The floor of the bridge is caked with dust and sand, but this makes little difference to those marching purposefully over it. There's a narrow passage on the white side (India) through which travellers have to pass, but there are no such impediments on the Myanmar side.

A small unit of heavily armed Assam Rifles paramilitary keeps watch on the comings and goings of people and goods from the muddy road and customs post on the Indian side at Zokhawthar, the border town of Mizoram state that looks across at its twin, Rihkhawdar, which faces it from the opposite bank. From a strategic base high above Zokhawthar, the Assam Rifles commands a sweeping view of the narrow valley.

The paramilitary force is entrusted with guarding India's 1,600-km eastern frontier with Myanmar. Of this, Mizoram has over 500 km of rugged mountainous terrain. Zokhawthar is on the east of the dagger-shaped state, and lies in one of the serrated rows of hill ranges and dense forests.

Mizoram, then a district in Assam state, was the site of a [fierce anti-India rebellion](#) that began on March 1, 1966 with the Mizo National Front declaring independence and launching a series of coordinated attacks on government offices and security posts across the district. This triggered air attacks on towns under rebel control, sweeping army operations, and the displacement of nearly a quarter of a million people, retired military officials and those who were witness to this operation said.

The insurgents established strong links with China and Pakistan before a [peace agreement](#) with the Union government in 1986 ended the conflict. Unlike other states of the region, the peace accord has largely held even if the state has not prospered, with [poverty remaining high](#) and poor infrastructure development in the state, experts say.

## **Rout of junta troops surprises observers**

In Zokhawthar there are small, tented settlements dotting the small flatlands next to the Indian bank of the river. These house refugees of Chin ethnicity who have fled at least three years of fighting between the Myanmar army and ethnic insurgents in Chin state, the region across the river. A yellow JCB (excavator) and a truck stand alongside the river, dredging and carting away sand. The

green fields, narrow roads, untidy bazaar and light traffic do not tell the story that has unfolded over the past months.

Chin State (which the rebels now call Chinland) begins where the red and white bridge ends. Visitors pass under a sign announcing the Republic of Myanmar. Above the sign flutter three flags, each carrying a representation of two hornbill birds of the Chin National Front (CNF), not of the Myanmar government. The latter's forces have abandoned their posts to rebels, as they have in many villages and towns across the state and other parts of the country. Thus, the wooden shack that once served as an immigration post manned by bored Myanmar officials now announces itself as a check gate manned by local police drawn from the militia, who take down a visitor's name, address and other details.

[Chin State](#) is a sprawling section of rugged forested hills and narrow valleys, much of which has been freed from military control for the first time in over 60 years by a combined assault of Chin ethnic forces (a coalition of several splinter groups with the oldest and most powerful faction, the Chin National Army which is the armed wing of the CNF, leading the charge) and the PDF or Peoples Defence Front, the armed wing of the opposition government in exile, the [National Unity Government](#) (NUG).

Military units were routed by the rebel forces, and some 300 soldiers fled in disarray across the border into India in at least two batches, paramilitary officials said. The Assam Rifles disarmed them and kept them in safe custody, concerned about possible attacks from refugees who had suffered at the hands of the junta, as per paramilitary and state government officials.

I saw the ragged and dispirited deserters who were transported to Mizoram's Lengpui airport last October, where they boarded Myanmar military transport aircraft bound for safe zones in their own country. One of the transport planes crashed during takeoff without casualties, and is still lying in a meadow near the tarmac.

The [areas under opposition control](#) are expanding, not just in Chin state but across all border areas in this [poor](#) and [deeply conflicted nation](#) that has dropped off the headlines following the war in the [Middle East](#) and the [Ukraine-Russia](#) conflict. [One estimate](#) is that rebels control over half the country, mostly the border regions where ethnic communities dominate. The junta with its air power and artillery, which the rebel forces don't have, is fighting furiously despite suffering reverses, and has held on to major townships.

One of the most important strongholds to fall to the resistance forces was the post at the top of a hill overlooking Rih Dil, a lake that is sacred to the Chin-Mizo-Kuki communities and lies about 10 km inside Myanmar, rebel commanders said. The fortified position controlled a clear view of the countryside, but the defenders first ran short of food, then water and ammunition. A resistance leader who participated in the attack said the army men were overwhelmed by a non-stop barrage unleashed by the rebels, firing from their positions on the banks of the heart-shaped lake.

An Assam Rifles official in Zokhawthar, who asked not to be identified as he is not authorised to speak to the media, said he was surprised by the manner in which the Myanmar military caved in. "They held the heights — one just can't understand why they gave up like that."

### **Government goes 'Missing in Action'**

After the crossing, a kind of orderly chaos reigns in the shabby but bustling Rihkhawdar town, with heavily loaded trucks groaning their way up narrow lanes, managing not to graze rows of neatly parked Chinese and Indian mopeds and motorbikes. Men on foot, or two or three squeezed on the

seemingly flimsy yet sturdy Chinese mopeds (known as 125 because of their engine power) move through the small lanes.

Roadside shacks sell noodles, and beer bars abound on either side of the uneven main street. Wooden and cement stores are packed with both cheap and mid-price merchandise, ranging from Chinese goods to international liquors. The latter are popular with visitors from Mizoram state, where a [prohibition policy](#) is in place although many Mizos are known to drink privately. [Alcoholism](#) is a major health issue in the state.

The lanes of Rihkhawdar meander across the town, which grows haphazardly. On three sides, the green Chin hills jut above the town. Most of the shops are small and shabby. A new row has just been set up but hasn't opened yet. A dilapidated hospital where wounded soldiers, pregnant mothers and ailing children are treated sits on a hill, with its tired-looking sole doctor and staff. There is no power, and the cries of a child in pain ring through the corridors.

There are churches and godowns but little sign of a central governing authority, although opposite the police post is the local office of the PDF. This is, as we said, the armed unit of the opposition government in exile, the National Unity Government, whose members are scattered across Thailand, Myanmar and other parts of the world. There are no functioning banks, no ATMs — it's a cash economy, and every bit of the town resonates its hardscrabble conditions, bearing the spirit and imprint of a rough frontier town.

A pungent aroma of areca nut, one of the most profitable commodities to be [smuggled across the border](#), wafts across the still, humid air into the office of the PDF. Here, a PDF leader says that the rebels are putting a civil administration in place to fill the vacuum left by the junta's retreat.

The capture of the strategic region means that the PDF and other insurgent groups (one Indian security official in Mizoram said there are no fewer than seven rebel groups controlling different parts of Chin state) call the shots on goods crossing the border, including areca nut which comes from not just Myanmar but as far south as Indonesia and Malaysia, and feeds India's vast and wealthy gutka and paan masala industry. The craving for mouth fresheners is not confined to India but spans continents, being exported to the Middle East, Europe, North America and other parts of the world.

### **Fight for freedom, democracy, and areca nuts**

The fall of Rihkhawdar was marked by the ringing of church bells and celebratory services giving thanks to god, while local people rejoiced with feasts in halls, homes and fields, a PDF leader said.

"We fight for freedom and democracy," said Rodinga, the slim, boyish looking PDF representative, who goes by one name, seated in his large, bare, one-room office a few metres from the border. An assistant brought steaming cups of black coffee, brewed from beans grown in Myanmar's highlands.

The office has been strategically chosen, he smiled. It's so close to the Indo-Myanmar border that, unlike other spaces which are in the open countryside, there's no threat from the government's jet fighters and artillery.

Myanmar opposition leaders, rebel commanders and retired Indian diplomats say these are the key advantages that government forces enjoy: Their heavy weapons and aircraft supplied by Russia and China, which do not want to see a Balkanization of the Asian nation that has long borders with China, India and Thailand.

A state government with a chief minister, a cabinet, a police force and judiciary has begun

functioning in Chin state, says Rodinga, a former physics student from Kalewa who turned to peaceful protests after the Junta staged a coup in 2021, tossing democratic leader Aung Sang Suu Kyi and most of her cabinet as well as other lawmakers and political leaders in jail.

Street protests were met with [brutal force](#) and hundreds are said to have been killed in the initial months of the crackdown. Thousands more have reportedly died in the fighting that followed, especially in Junta air strikes and artillery barrages that also set townships and villages ablaze.

The coup upended a promising peace process under Suu Kyi between Myanmar and its contesting ethnics, and the rebel armies resumed their war against the military.

Many young people fled to neighbouring Thailand. A large number of Burmese youth from the Buddhist majority [joined](#) the large ethnic tribal armies that have long fought the forces of Myanmar in an enduring conflict that in some cases has lasted 70 years. Many joined the PDF in different locations.

The young recruits included professionals and students including musicians and techies. Recent news [documentaries](#) show how technology such as locally fabricated drones are being used to drop bombs on army targets (including attacks on military targets at the national capital of Naypyidaw). Reportedly, it is making a difference to outcomes on the ground.

“Non-violence did not work, we needed to bear arms against the government,” said Rodinga, who joined the PDF, but then was shifted to a political post in Rihkhawdar once it fell. The aim now is to restore democracy through an armed struggle.

The loose coalition that is fighting across all border regions of Myanmar does not have a common army, but have focused on their traditional areas of strength — although news accounts show that they are [coordinating](#) better than in the past.

Yet, even with a string of victories in Chin state that has put the Junta on the defensive, the PDF leader acknowledges that rebels do not control the whole state but only close to 60-70% of it.

He cites three reasons for the manner in which the Myanmar forces have held out: They have clear control of the skies with air power; their artillery can hit targets at long range and in addition, “They have cash.” He and others are clear that defeating the Myanmar Junta is not going to be easy despite these initial wins. “We will break them, but it will take time, they’re not prepared to sacrifice their lives and morale is very low.”

On the bustling and chaotic streets of Rihkhawdar, the tough realities of the daily hustle has encouraged smuggling across the Tiau river. This is one of the major entry points, Indian security officials say, for heroin and other drugs into Mizoram and beyond, through Assam, to the Indian market. In addition, as in other drug shipment routes, transit spots have become user hotspots, leading to what social scientists in Mizoram call an epidemic of addiction, adding to the existing problem of [alcohol and substance abuse](#).

The illegal export of rare and endangered species is also a money spinner. I have seen trucks carrying herbs and exotic plants moving from Moreh in Manipur into Myanmar in one of my earliest trips to the country in 2002. *The Economic Times* [reported](#) that when Assam Rifles personnel intercepted a vehicle in the state’s Champhai district, where Zokhawthar is located, they were surprised by the consignment. “... Indonesian salmon-crested cockatoos, South American marmoset monkeys, lizards, snakes and even an Aldabra giant tortoise, native to the Seychelles.”

**Fenced boundary not a solution**

The military gains are coming at a cost. Chin leaders acknowledge that sharp rivalries and differences have emerged among different groups including the Chin National Army and others like the Zoro Revolutionary Army (ZRA). Competition is not just about turf but also over control of the lucrative irregular trade routes, including drugs.

The ZRA is seen by some as an interloper — a Manipur hill-based group of Kuki tribals that has muscled into the Myanmar theatre. Clashes have been reported between the groups and Rodinga says that the Chin rebel units want the ZRA to go back to Manipur. “They want to build a Zomi state, we want to build a Chin land. We do not want them here,” he said while accusing the group of controlling the drug trade.

“The ZRA is being isolated by the rest of the freedom fighters,” Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma told *IndiaSpend* in May 2024.

“If they (Chin groups) manage to get a couple of kilos of heroin or other hard drugs across, they’ll make many times what a truckload of rice or timber would fetch,” said an Indian paramilitary official, who declined to be named under ground rules of a briefing. He said that although the Assam Rifles was guarding the border, its main focus was on external threats and not internal patrolling.

“The Assam Rifles doesn’t have the manpower to check hundreds of trucks, which can enter from any number of routes, especially the small ones, to get them to unload, search and then reload,” said the official.

However, both Indian and Mizoram officials say that a [recent Indian government announcement](#) to [fence the border](#) is unrealistic. “We will be losing land along hundreds of kilometres because we have to create a buffer or land corridor for patrolling before putting the fence down,” said a senior security official. He pointed out that the rugged terrain, sharp cliffs and turbulent streams made fencing even more challenging, unlike the Indo-Bangladesh border or the Indo-Pakistan border, especially in Rajasthan.

Chief minister Lalduhoma, who took office last November, says that the borders and border trade needed to be better regulated because of the inflow of narcotics. Lalduhoma, a former police official who went into politics in the 1980s, said that he had “conveyed our feeling that we are [against](#) the lifting of the [FMR](#)” (Free Movement Regime, which enables Indians and Myanmar nationals at the border to travel into each other’s territories for a distance of 16 km to trade and visit relatives) to the Union government. No passports are needed for day trips, just official identity cards suffice.

According to a 2018 [agreement](#) between India and Myanmar, residents of the two countries living within 16 km of the border are issued border passes, which they must carry at all times after crossing the border. They can stay on the other side for up to 14 days. Earlier, in 1950, India amended its passport rules to allow the tribespeople residing within 40 km around the border to travel to India and stay for a maximum of 72 hours.

The FMR is a set of rules framed to acknowledge the deep kinship between communities on either side. Cross-border marriages are common, as are the holding of properties by nationals of either side.

“These are our brothers and sisters, we cannot be separated from them,” Lalthanhawla, a former chief minister who travelled into the Chin areas during his tenure, told *IndiaSpend* in May 2024. Both the current and former chief ministers said that British colonial rule had divided one people, the Mizos and Chins, between three countries — India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. “The dream is that all groups can come together again, although that is not politically feasible or practicable,” said

Lalthanhawla, one of the builders of modern Mizoram, who held office five times over a span 20 years.

Mizoram is fiercely [opposed](#) to the Indian government's plan to build a border fence, saying it will lose land, and farmers will lose valuable paddy fields in the creation of a buffer zone on the Indian side. "It will be very difficult to continue cultivating the fields for paddy," the current chief minister said.

The idea of fencing is seen as part of India's strategy to control cross-border crime, especially narcotics, and the access of the remaining insurgent groups especially in Manipur and Nagaland to bases in Myanmar.

Recently, hundreds of Mizos converged on Zokhawthar's border gates to announce their [opposition](#) to the proposed fence and plans to dismantle the FMR, and issued warnings of a new uprising in Mizoram if either were to happen. In addition, the new dispensation on the Myanmar side, the rebels, does not regard the gesture as a friendly one.

When I visited Rih Dil lake in early June, the place was peaceful but for the sound of wind, thunder threatening heavy rain, and the chatter of visiting students from a college in Mizoram. It was hard to believe that a major gunfight had taken place in the area, one that essentially changed the control of a long stretch on the border in Myanmar.

Mizos, Chin and Kukis believe that after death, their souls migrate to Rih Dil for some time before moving beyond earthly spaces. In fact, Mizos comprise the largest number of visitors to this spot, where families and friends set out picnics and go boating on the lake. For purposes of entertainment, there's a bare shack that sells strong Myanmar beer and whose owners serve up noodles with meat and soup.

A local police officer, in plainclothes and with a revolver stuck in his belt, smiled laconically when asked about the problems of law and order in his town. "Mostly it's dealing with drunks and breaking up their fights."

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