



Before the launch of Operation 1027 in October last year, the NUG managed to collect taxes from around 38 townships. However, since then, the number of townships from which NUG collects taxes has risen close to 50. FILE PHOTO: AFP

How are Myanmar guerillas raising their funds?



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ALTAF PARVEZ

While the Tatmadaw in Myanmar is waging war using state funds, one may wonder: from where is the opposition, the guerillas, getting so many resources? What's the origin of their funds? The surprising fact is that, in their efforts to raise money, the guerillas have successfully established their very own bank—an extremely rare feat in the history of guerilla warfare.

How the 'guerilla bank' started its journey

Guerillas have different names in different regions of Myanmar. In the seven marginal provinces, the guerilla groups comprising non-Bamar tribes mainly raise funds through local businesses and contributions. These businesses involve everything, from timber to narcotics. The groups are quite experienced in this regard.

The situation in central Myanmar, however, is different. There, the Bamar youths, who went to war against the Tatmadaw to restore democracy, are novices in terms of both warfare and fundraising. These guerillas, collectively known as the People's Defence Force (PDF), have no bordering countries to conduct business with.

In the beginning, PDF's funds came from foreign supporters, and it was tough to bring the money home due to strict government monitoring. Many of these supporters refrained from making financial contributions, fearing that the government would uncover their identities. To avoid these problems and streamline transactions, the Bamar guerillas opened their very own bank.

In 2021-22, many citizens across the country left their government jobs to oppose the military coup. Accordingly, one of the objectives of the Bamar guerillas' bank was to bring these people under the guerilla administration's umbrella by paying them regular salaries and allowances for the cause.

Through such initiatives, the guerillas are constantly trying to stay one step ahead of the junta in terms of technology.

Guerilla bank working through 'guerilla technology'

Many may remember that elected representatives against the military coup named their movement the "Spring Revolution" in February 2021. That very movement has slowly transformed into guerilla warfare. Since the bank was created to finance the war, the National Unity Government (NUG) of Myanmar named it Spring Development Bank (SDB). Launched in July last year, around 1,000 individuals opened accounts with the bank on its very first day. That number now stands at one lakh. Akin to the PDF, the SDB operates in a guerilla-like fashion. Run using technology related to blockchain and cryptocurrency, this is a fully fledged digital bank. And this is why the junta is facing difficulties blocking guerilla financing.

A group of guerillas with expertise in this field have been assigned to further develop the banking system, and supporting it is Tin Tun Naing, planning minister of the anti-junta government-in-exile. At the time of establishment, SDB also took permission from the exiled government's "central bank." Through this move, the guerillas wanted to show that they were under the umbrella of a formal government, so the customers wouldn't have to worry about being defrauded.

Although SDB's primary goal is to finance the war of resistance, its second goal is to block finances to the military government.

This is being accomplished by obstructing the junta's tax collection system, influencing public opinion against the junta's financial products, and by trying to isolate it from the international currency exchange system. Through these efforts, Myanmar's state assets have been frozen in many countries.

While the bank is primarily based on cryptocurrencies, account holders can also transact in at least 10 currencies, from the US dollar to the Thai baht, and funds can be transferred internationally as well.

SDB, facilitated by currency swaps in the beginning, said in 2023 that it would connect to the international SWIFT system of financial transactions this year, and even obtain its own debit card. The government-in-exile is able to trade assets of the country through this bank alone. A "customer" can open up an account with the bank by disclosing very basic information, and SDB has over 100

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"relationship managers" across the world.

Last year, NUG raised over \$100 million, a large part of which was raised from the "bazaar" through SDB issuing treasury bonds. In November, the bank sold 10 percent of its stake and earned \$10 million in just 10 days. The guerilla warfare in Myanmar has reached its current heights due to these very funds.

Whose assets is NUG trading, and how?

Many are surprised to know that Myanmar's government-in-exile is trading the country's assets despite having no offices in the capital or in the country's other major cities. The NUG came up with this idea when it began its official fundraising programme. This involved virtual selling of the real estate of leading military generals, including the head of the junta, Min Aung Hlaing. NUG officials, who have acquired the necessary documents, have given buyers the assurance that if the Spring Revolution succeeds, it will hand the properties over to them. The programme was implemented with great enthusiasm and many properties were thus sold. In the process, the guerilla administration earned \$150 million.

An incentive for such a programme is that those who are buying these properties are supporting the guerilla warfare for their own gains. Some mineral resources have already been sold in advance within the framework. But the guerilla economy is not entirely virtual.

According to various sources, before the launch of Operation 1027 in October last year, the NUG managed to collect taxes from around 38 townships. However, since then, the number of townships from which NUG collects taxes has risen close to 50, according to sources, because of their operational successes.

There have been cases of alleged coercion taking place because of such measures. However, the NUG's financial capacity is still quite weak compared to that of the junta. It can now spend up to \$5 million a month on the guerillas for warfare purposes, but the junta's budget is many times larger. However, for the junta, the financial backing that the guerillas are getting is a permanent challenge.

The NUG once called for a boycott of about 111 products and organisations of various companies run by the generals, which weakened the junta's financial strength. On December 12, news agency AP published the results of a survey and stated that various cloth manufacturing companies in Myanmar were producing only 60 percent of their capacity. Meanwhile, the exchange rate reached about 2,100 kyats per US dollar, which was 1,300 kyats below the military coup.

The fall of the kyat's value and the dwindling income of state institutions, as well as the rising value of cryptocurrencies, is good news for the PDF guerillas, as SDB is enjoying double the benefits.

Recently, as the Tatmadaw's grip on the bordering areas with Bangladesh, India, and Thailand is loosening, the junta's income from inter-country trade has gone down, and continues to go down. Meanwhile, the guerilla groups' income is rising through various types of legal and illegal businesses in these areas. Although the bulk of this money will go to non-Bamar guerillas, the Bamar-PDF has friendly relations with them. The declining junta control over border trade is also good news for the NUG.

The many faces of contributions

Many may know that lotteries are very popular in Myanmar, and the government itself used to conduct lotteries. Banking on this, since the beginning of the guerilla war, the NUG has also been raising funds by issuing various types of lottery tickets. It is through this initiative, and the need to make lottery payments, that the idea of the digital bank occurred to NUG organisers. Although funds raised from lotteries may not be much, they still help finance the cause and, at the same time, hurt the junta's fundraising efforts. While Naypyidaw rulers are still outmatching the guerillas in terms of ammunition, the latter's ingenuity is chipping away at the junta's armour.

Many local artists are also donating money to the NUG by selling their artworks at open auctions through social media. In addition, in different countries of the world—especially Thailand, Singapore, Australia, and Japan—Myanmar expatriates are organising musical events and selling T-shirts and various cultural products to raise funds. To help in whatever way possible, many even sell homemade noodles at these events. Youngsters, meanwhile, are selling Myanmar-related mobile games to send money back home.

Since Myanmar's guerilla groups are not listed as "terrorist" organisations in Europe and the US, supporters are facing no problems in raising public funds. The money is not only being used to buy ammunition from the illegal market, but also to run hospitals and educational institutions in the free zones, and even to entice government soldiers to switch sides. Besides the Bamars, the Karens, Kachins, and Rakhines are also raising a lot of money this way. All this is being done to help the guerillas, even if a tiny amount, and fight for the cause.

Translated from Bangla by Shoaib Ahmed Sayam.

Voices in captivity



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Do not read. What's the point of writing this if you don't listen to me? You have read it already, haven't you? You are free to do so in your own space—inside your brain. What happens when you voice out such acts of violation? Worse yet, what if you can't take action? What is the point of reading, writing, or thinking?

The choice is simple: stay imprisoned in our thoughts or act on them at the risk of crossing some lines. We humans are a bundle of paradoxes. We crave freedom, yet we desire control. To make sense of this riddle, we only need tips from the father of psychoanalysis. Freud identified two impulses that run parallel in us: Eros, the life drive for love and creativity, and Thanatos, the death drive for aggression and destruction. The life force's desire for group happiness has led to the rise of civilisation. However, embedded in civilisation is its discontent—its mechanism to suppress the individual's happiness. As a defence mechanism, society looks for scapegoats and often targets dissenters, marginalised voices or minorities. The authorities devise various control mechanisms to punish them in order to maintain the illusion that everything is under control so that the rest can remain happy.

The inherent conflict between freedom and restraint is depicted by Romantic poet William Blake, who writes, "A Robin Redbreast in a cage // Put all Heaven in a Rage."

Can you cage a poet or artist who sings freely? Even the gods will be unhappy if you throttle a free bird's voice. Then again, why should the red robin complain when it is placed in safety with no worry over food or predatory attacks? Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood, a long-time exponent of freedom of speech, tells us that while Blake's caged red robin has "freedom from" hunger and insecurity, it doesn't have the "freedom to" fly or sing. Such restrictions go against the norm of heaven—the source of all norms.

To justify the restrictions, governments run a fear factory. In the olden days, fear of a man-eater kept us from going out at night.

broke the police lines to chant against those who stifled our mother tongue. The day now belongs to the world, encouraging everyone to protect the language of their mothers. The day symbolises, as our prime minister has rightfully said, not bowing down.

News reports from the same day tells us about the catch and release of a graphic designer in Mymensingh, who made some posters that criticised the development work of the former mayor, who is re-running for the post. The graphic designer, Shamim Ashraf, was arrested under Section 54 for his alleged propaganda that would have smeared the mayoral campaign. The judge later granted him bail. The posters that were made offer us no recourse. It is therefore difficult to decide how many lines Ashraf crossed to irk the politician by criticising development work that infringed upon nature. What does it tell us about our democracy, which does not have any room for dissent?

The writing is on the wall. Two students of Jahangirnagar University have been expelled for creating anti-rape graffiti. They are accused of repainting an old image of Bangabandhu on a wall of the new arts building of the university. The anti-rape graffiti depicts a defeated woman's figure drowned in a dash of blue, with six skulls lying under our national flag. "Freedom from rape and tyranny" cries out the accompanying text in bold red.

The protest art voices against the rape of a female visitor by a former student of the university who was running a drug racket on campus, using his party affiliation as a shield. The Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) has already nabbed the culprits in this sensational case in which a Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) leader was accused. Just when you thought all was well and justice was in the process of being served, we have this distraction.

Another BCL leader started a hunger strike, seeking punishment for the artists who allegedly violated the sanctity of the father of the nation. The university's syndicate consented. They handed a suspension order to two leaders of the Chhatra Union who posted the protest. A defamation case against



The protest art at JU voiced against the rape of a female visitor by a former student of the university who was running a drug racket on campus, using his party affiliation as a shield. PHOTO: COLLECTED

Then there were the thugs and dacoits. Then there were the political extremists and terrorists. During the Covid-induced lockdown, the fear of the disease was prevalent. Control is the prescribed remedy, but does it outweigh the disease? Atwood asks, "How much of our own freedom must we sacrifice in order to defend ourselves against the desire of others to limit that freedom by subjugating or killing us, one by one?"

In an interview that Atwood gave to *Index on Censorship* magazine, the Booker Prize-winning author of *The Handmaid's Tale* expressed one wish. She wants to commemorate the martyrs who have been killed for free speech, going all the way back to Socrates, by raising a statue or a wall with all their names on it. This can be located in London's Hyde Park, which boasts a free speech corner, she envisions.

Lucky for us, we in Bangladesh already have a monument of that sort: the Central Shaheed Minar. The barefooted morning rally to offer floral wreaths at the altar in the early hours of February 21 is a celebration of those red-breasted robins who

these students is underway.

One of the accused, Amartya Roy, said, "Before the painting of Bangabandhu, there was anti-corruption graffiti during the time of former Vice-Chancellor Farzana Islam. That graffiti was a protest against corruption in the university." Roy is implicated in the shelf life of graffiti. The previous painting was apparently in a ruinous state. Do you see the symbolic significance? There was graffiti against the university administration, which was conveniently replaced by the image of Bangabandhu, who gave his entire life protesting against social wrongs. The new image was then painted over, as nobody was curating the real image of Bangabandhu. An unnerving image has found its place on the wall.

The bird that can see the pattern cannot sing from its cage. The caged bird has the option of singing hymns in exchange for protection and food. Or it can attract predators if it starts shrieking in pain and agony.

And the audience has the option of not listening or thinking. And you, my reader, have the option of not reading.