



JOURNALISM &  
**MEDIA**  
**SAFETY**  
IN MYANMAR

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4<sup>th</sup> QUARTER &  
ANNUAL REPORT 2024

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# OVERVIEW AND TRENDS 2024-25

Myanmar's military junta pressure continues to take its toll on the country's independent media sector and on journalists and media workers seeking to publish news on the post-coup crisis. As we assess the 4th Quarter of 2024 and the entire 2024, the numbers of arrests, sentencing, and deaths among media personnel has decreased, but the continuing threats to their lives and livelihoods serve as a reminder that attempting to publish the truth remains a dangerous undertaking.

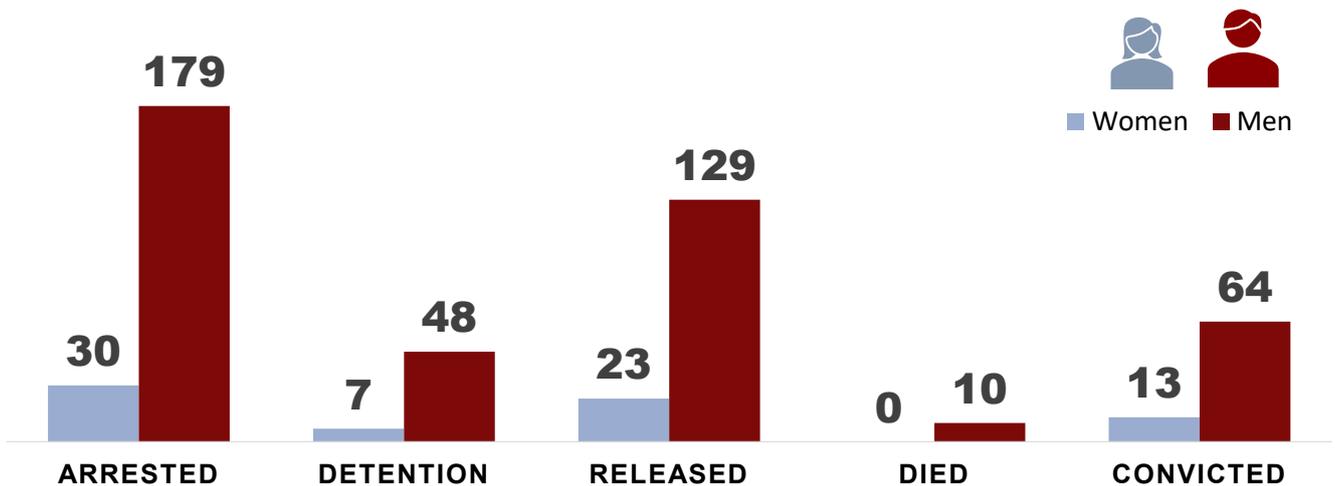
While the number of journalists caught in the cross-hairs of the Myanmar junta's war on the people may be down – comparing 2024 to the years 2021-23 – given the ongoing threats to press freedom, there is no room for complacency in protecting independent journalism in Myanmar. Arrests have declined to eight in 2024 from 139 in 2021 and 46 in 2022, primarily due to journalists fleeing into exile, leaving the industry, or adopting stricter security measures to navigate military threats. As Myanmar marks the fourth anniversary of the military coup on 1 February 2025, the prospects for reporters on the ground in Myanmar and the media personnel operating in exile remain difficult. The situation is exacerbated by waning donor interest, and tightening immigration restrictions in exile, which could see further media house cutbacks, salary reductions and layoffs.

On a world level, Myanmar remains one of the most hazardous places for press freedom. The independent media outlets are targeted, reporters are arrested, some even face fatal consequences and are killed.



**TOTAL NUMBERS OF JOURNALISTS & NEWS WORKERS ARRESTED, JAILED, RELEASED, CONVICTED AND DIED FROM 2021 COUP TO 2024 DECEMBER.**

**NUMBERS OF ARRESTED, DETENTION, RELEASED, CONVICTED AND DIED FROM 2021 COUP TO 2024 DECEMBER**



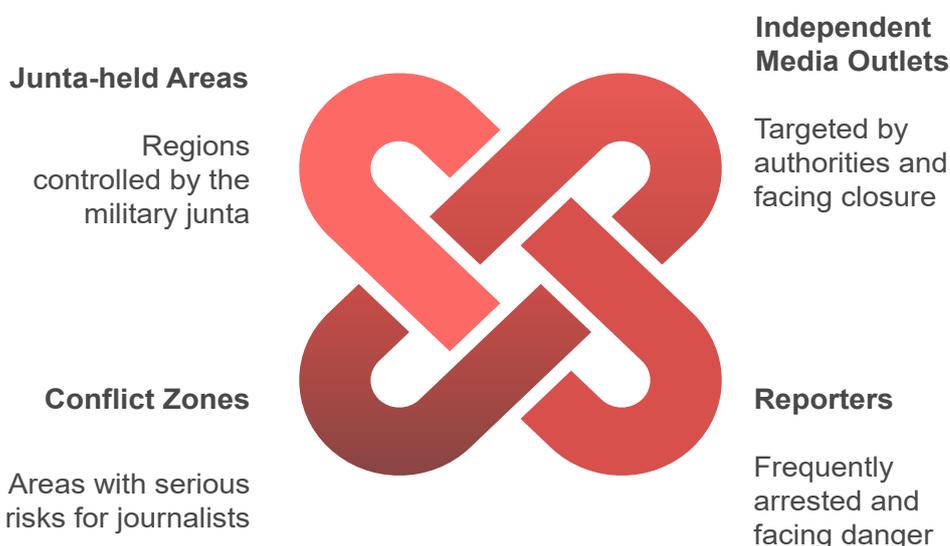
Those in conflict zones and junta-held areas face challenges, as the Myanmar’s military junta or State Administration Council (SAC) continues to struggle to cement its control over the country, and gets more desperate in the process.

In addition to the physical dangers, mental health challenges affect not only reporters operating in the dangerous battle zones but also media personnel residing in exile with questionable immigration status and facing difficult financial positions. In one recent case in Thailand’s border town of Mae Sot, media colleagues proved quick to act to prevent a Myanmar reporter from committing suicide. Addressing mental health is challenging, and the problem may only become apparent during a mental breakdown. In many cases, media personnel are separated from their families, and the families may experience pressure from the junta authorities. Families might be pressed to inform about the whereabouts of reporters or forced to pay bribes. The difficulties may weigh heavily on families to call on their family member to give up their media career.

The worsening operational environment for independent media personnel coincides with the growing importance of the work they do to carefully track and publish political, social and economic developments in Myanmar. It can be argued that independent media houses are even more vital as we enter 2025 with the SAC ratcheting up its military attacks on its opponents - namely the National Unity Government (NUG), People’s Defence Forces (PDFs), and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), while at the same time offering “peace talks” and the promise of an election. The Myanmar junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing is using a “carrot-and-stick” approach, seeking to stifle resistance to his rule, following serious military losses, and maintain a hold on the country through what critics dub as a planned “sham election” and a military-engineered democratic process under the 2008 Constitution. The SAC understands the threat independent media poses to their rule and continues to work to track down and arrest journalists.

The SAC junta has been aggressively suppressing independent media, with journalists facing- arrest, torture, harassment, and imprisonment under draconian laws, such as those criminalizing so-called “fake news” or sedition. The military frequently imposes internet blackouts and surveillance, especially in conflict zones, hindering real-time reporting. Journalists must operate under these restrictions while protecting their sources and data from interception. As this report and earlier reports have noted, journalists are at risk of being targeted by the military, detained, or even killed. Accessing conflict-affected regions controlled by ethnic armed groups or the junta involves significant danger, including landmines and active combat zones.

## Challenges to Press Freedom in Myanmar



In this polarized environment, disinformation campaigns by the military and its allies aim to discredit independent journalism. Media houses must combat this while ensuring their reporting remains accurate, credible, and balanced. As noted, many journalists and media outlets have been forced into exile, making on-the-ground reporting more difficult. Operating from abroad limits direct access to local events and increases reliance on local sources, which can pose verification difficulties. Reporters who do report on the ground face serious security and communication challenges.

That said, not all pressure on journalists comes from the SAC and its militia allies. EAOs and PDFs can also pose difficulties for journalists, including instances of arrest, and the imposition of EAO “reporting guidelines” that may hamper journalists’ freedom to report.

According to a reporter interviewed for this report, working in the northern border area, numerous armed organizations operate in his area, and as a journalist who has reported extensively on human rights violations, he has received threats from these groups. “While high-level officials often say we can report freely, in practice, local authorities impose significant barriers. We also frequently receive online blackmail (messages),” he says.

“Before the coup, we could travel freely by obtaining permission from the relevant armed groups. Now, however, we avoid areas controlled by specific organizations because of the critical reporting we have done about them. Requesting travel permission feels risky, so we often resort to taking unapproved routes. When the junta troops were present, we had to avoid them carefully while traveling. Now that they are gone, we feel slightly more secure,” he adds.

Myanmar’s independent media houses, many of which operate in Myanmar but have bases in Thailand and India, face the challenges of operating safely, publishing news and insight. They are heavily reliant on dwindling funding from foreign donors. Over the last three or more years, the media houses have been forced to cut back on costs, resulting in substantial layoff, salary reductions and delayed freelance payments.

The funding crisis has prompted an innovative drive to develop a variety of revenue sources including social media revenue – but with only limited success. These sources of income cannot make up for the pre-coup advertisement and partnership income that some media houses relied on operating as commercial entities. For example, one media house that ran TV, radio and online output was working commercially at break-even just prior to the 2021 coup, but now has to rely on donors for 90 per cent of its significantly cut-back post-coup funding – forcing staff layoffs.

Overall, 2025 is poised to present Myanmar’s independent media with ongoing challenges and safety concerns, with the mission remaining clear: to continue publishing the truth as the SAC military junta intensifies its pressure.

FOURTH QUARTER REPORT OF 2024:

# ARRESTS, SENTENCING AND DEATHS



	2024		Since the 2021 coup until 2024		
	Oct-Dec	Jan-Dec	Total	Women	Men
<b>Journalists &amp; news workers</b>					
Arrested	1	5	209	30	179
In detention/serving jail sentences	-	-	55	7	48
Released	4	14	152	23	129
Died	-	4	10	-	10
Convicted	-	8	77	13	64

## News and other licences

News licences cancelled	-	15			
Printing/publishing permits revoked	4	15			

## ARRESTS

An unnamed journalist from Mandalay who works for a national media organization, not named, was arrested in September 2024. Although news of his detention did not appear in the media, sources confirmed that it lasted less than a week, and the junta authorities released him later. Due to the risk to the individual and related persons, the identity, background, and other details about the journalist are being kept confidential.

## RELEASED

[Kyaw Swar Tun](#), a photojournalist and fact checker from Mizzima, was released on 14 November as he had served his sentence under Section 505 (a) of the Penal Code. He was arrested on 8 September 2022 while he was taking photos using a drone in Yangon.

Journalists [Ta Lin Maung and Naung Yoe](#) were released by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) on 28 October. They were arrested by the KIA on 29 September, 2024 as Tar Lin Maung mentioned an allegation about a KIA officer in the Hpakant area being corrupt on his social media account. Naung Yoe heard about the detention of Tar Lin Maung. He went to the KIA base camp and he was also arrested.

An unnamed journalist from Mandalay who works for a national media organization – as mentioned in the Arrests section - was released after being detained within the same month in May. His release did not appear in the media though strong sources confirm his release.

## DEATH CASES

There were no reported deaths or convictions cases of Myanmar journalists or media workers during the fourth quarter of 2024.

## PRINTING AND PUBLICATION LICENSE SHUT DOWN

[Shwe Naing Ngan](#) publishing house's license was revoked by the junta information ministry on 14 November. The ministry provided as a reason that the house failed to comply with Section 11(b) and Section 18 of the Printing and Publishing Enterprise Law.

The junta information ministry revoked the licenses of '[Right Printing House](#)' and '[The Destiny Book House](#)' printing houses on 14 November with the claim that two books printed by these two houses contained pornographic content. This was done under Section 8 (c) of the Printing and Publishing Enterprise Law.

[Maple Printing House](#) closed down on 19 December, with the claim being that two books printed by this house contained pornographic contents. This was according to Section 8 (c) of the Printing and Publishing Enterprise Law.

## CONFISCATION

On 25 October 2024 the junta authorities confiscated the property of [Ko Ko Zaw, chief editor of Than Lwin Times](#) in Mawlamyaing, Mon State. The authorities claimed that the reason for the confiscation was his alleged links to terrorist organizations but no further information was shared. Normally, the authorities mention the phrase "connected with terrorist groups without mentioning the exact sections of the law. Typically, these cases are under Sections 50 (a) and 52 (j) of the counter-terrorism law. After the coup, his house was searched on 28 February 2021, though he managed to escape.

## GENDER-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

Female journalists often encounter additional obstacles, such as gender-based discrimination, cultural expectations, and safety concerns while working undercover, or as a reporter in resistance-held areas.

They face unique challenges, including gender-specific harassment and threats of sexual violence. This extends beyond physical danger to include digital threats. They face online abuse, surveillance, and hacking attempts, making it crucial for them to employ strong cybersecurity measures.

According to a female media worker: “Female journalists in Myanmar encounter numerous challenges while working undercover, including gender-based discrimination and harassment, safety and security concerns, lack of support systems, cultural expectations, and safety issues during conflict areas.”

A female journalist from the media house Myaelatt Athan, Nyein Chan Su Kyi (aka) Nyein Chan May, and her partner, were allegedly physically attacked by a civilian, Win Kyaw, on 14 December in Ayadaw Township, Sagaing Region, controlled by resistance forces.

The perpetrator reportedly attacked them physically and made derogatory remarks about her career and her media house. Despite filing a complaint with local resistance forces, the matter was not taken seriously, reflecting systemic neglect of gender-based violence – both within the resistance and junta circles.

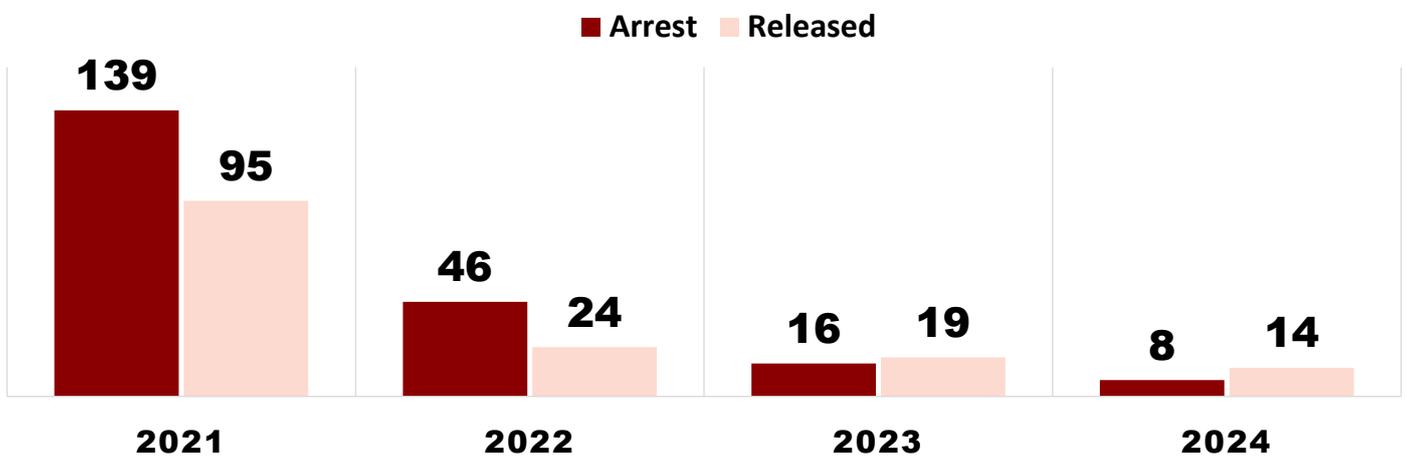


# MEDIA CHALLENGES FOR 2024 AND BEYOND

## QUANTITATIVE COMPARISON

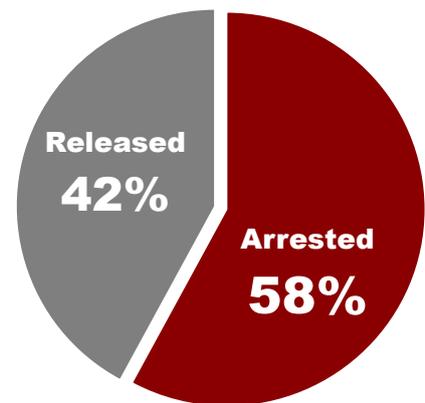
Since the 2021 military coup, Myanmar has become one of the most dangerous countries for journalists, with at least 10 killed and 209 detained. Independent media outlets face relentless persecution, and those arrested often endure brutal interrogation. The intensifying civil war further endangers journalists, who are frequently caught in the crossfire. Over the years, arrests and releases have fluctuated—139 journalists were arrested in 2021, compared to just 8 in 2024, reflecting shifting repression patterns. Despite occasional releases, targeted crackdowns on the press persist, making safe reporting increasingly difficult.

### QUANTITATIVE COMPARISON



This threat of violence, arrest, and harassment looms large for media workers who dare to cover human rights abuses, ethnic conflicts, or anti-junta resistance movements, while “pro-junta media” tend to “stay in their lane” and avoid reporting critical of the junta. While the main threats to the media come from the junta or SAC, there have been occasions where journalists have been arrested by EAOs, or pressured to adhere to certain reporting guidelines provided by such groups.

The SAC has used arrests and imprisonment as tools to suppress critical reporting. Journalists and media people are often charged under draconian laws such as the Electronic Transactions Law or anti-terror legislation – some laws dating back to British Colonial times. Many have been detained under brutal conditions, with reports of torture and denial of legal representation.



**TOTAL**  
**ARRESTED : 209**  
**RELEASED : 152**

For those working in ethnic minority areas, central conflict areas or border zones, the risks typically intensify due to active conflict, landmines, and difficult security environments. In junta-held cities or towns, journalists face significant security risks and have to maintain a low profile. The tense environment has not been helped by a junta military conscription drive that began in February 2024, resulting in the drafting of young people – largely males, but also females – that adds to the fears of independent media workers.

While less common, independent media can face arrest or harassment by EAOs in ethnic controlled areas of the country. As cited in this fourth quarter 2024 evaluation, two reporters were arrested in 2024 by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), one of whom is alleged to have published a claim of corruption involving a KIA officer on his social media.

Threats to journalists are not confined to physical dangers. Digital harassment, online abuse, surveillance, and hacking attempts are rampant. These issues necessitate robust cybersecurity measures and mental health support for affected media workers.



# SAFETY & SECURITY THREATS

## CONFLICT-RELATED RISKS

Journalists in Myanmar face life-threatening risks as the country's civil war intensifies. Many are caught in the crossfire, detained, or even killed, while the military junta systematically targets the press. Many are caught in the crossfire, detained, or even killed, while the military junta systematically targets the press. Independent media outlets such as *The Irrawaddy*, *Democratic Voice of Burma*, and *Mizzima* continue to report on the conflict despite severe restrictions, operating with minimal resources inside the country and relying on exiled teams.

That said, reporters continue to face extreme risks operating in areas under military control or near clashes between junta and resistance forces, according to a report in *The Diplomat* entitled: [Myanmar's Braveheart Journalists Persist Amid Immense Pressure](#).

The military junta has weaponized laws against journalists, using charges such as incitement or spreading false information to imprison them. Despite the risks of torture, imprisonment, and death, many journalists remain determined to document the ongoing violence and human rights abuses, reflecting their critical role in maintaining access to information during the conflict.

According to a Chiang Mai-based Western analyst, questioned for this report, the security challenges for media workers are as follows: "In the cities and towns in Myanmar the main threat is being discovered as a journalist working for an exile media organisation and potentially being arrested by the SAC or a pro-SAC militia. In conflict areas there is the threat of being caught in fighting between the resistance and the SAC or in an area under artillery or air attack."

## TARGETING OF CITIZEN JOURNALISTS

In addition to professional journalists, Citizen Journalists - or CJs as they are known - are at the forefront of documenting the ongoing civil conflict in Myanmar, particularly in areas where professional media outlets are barred or find it hard to operate. These individuals often risk their lives to capture critical evidence of military atrocities, human rights abuses, and the impact of war on civilians. Their reports are essential in providing real-time updates and ensuring that the international community remains informed about the crisis, according to [The Diplomat](#).

However, CJs may face heightened risks without the institutional support afforded to professional reporters. They may lack access to safety training, legal assistance, or resources like secure communication tools. Like their professional counterparts, many CJs operate in secrecy to avoid detection, relying on pseudonyms and encrypted platforms to share information. The military junta has targeted CJs with arrests, violence, and even execution for their reporting. For instance, those caught documenting protests or military actions are often accused of incitement or espionage, facing severe consequences, according to [The Diplomat](#).

Despite these challenges, their resilience underscores their commitment to the truth. CJs rely on informal networks and international advocacy groups for limited support, but the absence of institutional backing can in some cases leave them particularly vulnerable. Their work remains critical in amplifying the voices of Myanmar's oppressed communities, often at great personal cost. They form an important element in the independent media houses' news gathering operations.

## DIGITAL AND PHYSICAL SURVEILLANCE

Myanmar junta authorities have intensified surveillance efforts to attempt to monitor journalists' communications and track their movements, significantly heightening the risks for those reporting on the conflict. Since the 2021 military coup, the junta has used advanced technology to intercept calls, monitor online activities, and exploit spyware to identify and target journalists. These tactics allow authorities to locate reporters, confiscate their equipment, and arrest them under vague charges such as "spreading false information" or "incitement".

Digital surveillance plays a critical role in this junta crackdown. The authorities have imposed strict controls on internet access and banned Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), which many journalists rely on to shield their identities and bypass censorship. Social media platforms and encrypted messaging apps are also under constant scrutiny, forcing journalists to adopt sophisticated digital security measures, according to [news reports](#).

As one female reporter noted, she makes sure her phone has no incriminating evidence on it when she goes out. Those who fail to take precautions risk exposure, harassment or detention.

On occasions, physical tracking has been reported, with authorities surveilling journalists' movements, particularly in conflict zones or during protests. Such actions create a climate of fear, limiting journalists' ability to report freely and compromising the safety of their sources. This extensive monitoring not only endangers journalists but also undermines press freedom, silencing critical voices in Myanmar's increasingly repressive media environment.

# Economic Constraints

## FINANCIAL INSTABILITY

Myanmar's independent media outlets are grappling with significant financial pressures stemming from a major reduction in advertising revenues, decreased donor funding, and rising operational costs. Since the 2021 coup, many outlets have been forced to operate clandestinely in the country and from exile, cutting off traditional income streams like print subscriptions and in-country advertising, including TV ads. Commercially viable media houses prior to the coup have seen their financial model turned upside down – and the financial downturn is telling. The suppression of independent reporting by the military has further limited access to domestic financial support, according to a report by [the Global Investigative Journalism Network](#).

The increased reliance on digital platforms like Facebook and YouTube has allowed these media to maintain visibility and grow their audiences, but it brings challenges. Many outlets face difficulties monetizing their digital content due to restrictive platform policies and limited technical expertise. Revenue generated through social media, while helpful, falls far short of covering operational expenses. Additionally, reliance on digital advertising revenue is precarious, as platforms may penalize outlets for breaching community guidelines, even inadvertently, [MDIF reports](#).

To offset these challenges, some organizations have implemented creative strategies, such as producing Public Service Announcements (PSAs) for international NGOs or focusing on niche reporting topics. However, the reliance on external donor funding remains critical, yet such support has declined significantly, leaving many outlets struggling to remain operational.

Despite the significant challenges faced by independent media, they continue to find innovative ways to sustain their operations and engage their audiences, even amid substantial staff and freelance layoffs. Many have set up shop in Thailand and to a lesser extent India, with some operating as far away as Australia. For a significant number, the move into exile is a “return” to exile as they operated abroad before 2010, when Myanmar began opening up.

Independent media outlets are increasingly leveraging digital tools to expand their reach, according to a report by the Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF) entitled “[The Business of Independent Myanmar Media Post Coup: Experimenting with business models inside the country and in exile](#)”. Platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok are critical for disseminating information, particularly in a country where print media is no longer possible for independent journalism – with publishing and printing licenses removed by the SAC. Citizen Journalists and smaller outlets in ethnic regions, such as Mekong News and Kantarwaddy Times, have also emerged, benefiting from international funding and the growing use of mobile-based internet access by the public.

In some cases, media outlets face declining audience engagement due to algorithm changes on platforms like Facebook and frequent internet shutdowns. Additionally, the junta's crackdown on virtual private networks (VPNs) has made it harder for audiences to access independent news. To counteract these obstacles, many outlets are diversifying revenue streams by monetizing content through YouTube, donor grants, and audience-driven initiatives like memberships and donations, [MDIF reports](#).

While international donor support remains a lifeline – accounting for 80-90 per cent of funding of media houses in some cases – some outlets are experimenting with new business models, including partnerships with small businesses and international collaborations, subscriptions, and income from YouTube. Others are focusing on creating high-quality, niche content for diaspora communities, which may be monetized more effectively outside Myanmar.

Compounding the donor funding problem is the fact that western governments are under growing pressure to turn inwards and reduce foreign aid, due in part to domestic financial problems.

The drive by independent media houses to explore new forms of revenue generation are laudable, but these new income streams typically generate far less than 50 per cent of the operating costs of the independent media houses, according to one editor. The finance shortfall in 2024 bodes ill for these operations in 2025 and beyond.

## **JOB INSECURITY**

Myanmar's independent media industry is under immense pressure, leading to widespread layoffs and salary reductions for journalists as media outlets struggle to stay afloat. Since the 2021 military coup, many have been forced to downsize or shut down entirely, leaving countless journalists unemployed or underpaid. While no study has been carried out on the downsizing, anecdotal evidence suggests the total downsizing has been as high as 30 per cent or more. Many are grappling with donor withdrawal and severe restrictions imposed by the military junta. Media operations have become increasingly risky and expensive, with reporters often needing to relocate due to security threats or operate from exile, further straining financial resources.

The situation has left journalists vulnerable, not only to the financial impacts of layoffs but also to deteriorating morale and burnout. Journalists who remain employed frequently face reduced salaries, delayed payments, and an increased workload as newsrooms operate with skeleton staff. Despite these obstacles, many continue their work under immense personal risk, often relying on freelance opportunities or external support networks, according to a report by the [International Journalists' Network \(IJN\)](#).

Efforts to support journalists, such as capacity-building programmes and emergency funds, are limited and insufficient to address the widespread layoffs or financial challenges. Without a revival of donor support and a stable operational environment, the future of independent journalism in Myanmar remains precarious, reports IJN.

Job insecurity is set to get worse as 2025 unfolds and donor funding constraints grow acute.

# Exile Operations

Many independent media outlets operate from exile. These 40 or more organizations face significant logistical and financial challenges in their mission to provide accurate information to audiences within Myanmar, and to an international audience.

According to a Western analyst with close to three decades of monitoring Myanmar, there are three challenges for media houses now operating in exile. "The first is navigating the host countries laws and regulations as a media organisation to ensure the host countries authorities do not decide to shut the organisation down. The second concern is ensuring staff are able to get proper visas that allow them to stay in the country without running afoul of local immigration authorities. A third concern is that without the ability to raise money through advertising and other traditional methods, media organisations need to find alternative ways to maintain adequate funding."

## Legal and Logistical Issues

- These media organizations must follow the laws of the countries they are in to avoid being shut down. They also need to help their staff get the right visas to stay legally.

## Funding Problems

- Many traditional ways to make money, like advertising, are not available. As a result, these outlets struggle to find other ways to raise funds, often relying on donations that may not cover all their costs.

## Distance from Sources

- Being far from Myanmar makes it hard for journalists to gather firsthand information. They face difficulties in verifying news and connecting with sources, especially since those still in Myanmar are at risk of arrest and surveillance.

## LEGAL CONSTRAINTS

Operating from exile presents substantial logistical obstacles for Myanmar's media outlets. Journalists and media personnel have relocated to neighbouring countries such as Thailand, India, and Malaysia to evade persecution by the military junta. This displacement disconnects them from their home networks and the communities they aim to serve, complicating the gathering of first-hand information. Reporters remaining in Myanmar face constant threats, including arrests, surveillance, and violence, making communication between exiled outlets and in-country sources both risky and challenging.

The physical distance also hampers the production of timely and accurate reporting. Without direct access to events on the ground, journalists may rely on secondhand sources, which can compromise the comprehensiveness of their coverage. Verifying information becomes time-consuming, especially as misinformation proliferates in conflict zones.

That said, many media houses have risen to the challenge and now run relatively secure and useable communications channels and reporting practices.

## **FINANCIAL BURDENS**

Exiled media outlets operate on limited budgets, often relying on grants from international donors or crowdfunding campaigns. Securing these funds is increasingly competitive, with many organizations vying for the same resources. Donor priorities can shift, leaving outlets vulnerable to funding gaps. The cost of operating in exile is significantly higher than within Myanmar, with expenses such as renting office space, acquiring equipment, paying staff, and securing legal protection in host countries quickly accumulating. Additionally, investments in tools to circumvent censorship, like secure communication platforms and encryption software, further add to the costs.

Salaries for journalists and staff are often minimal, with many working on a volunteer basis. This financial instability jeopardizes the sustainability of these outlets and limits their capacity to expand coverage or innovate in their reporting. Reports have surfaced alleging some instances of exploitation and abuse within exiled news outlets, raising concerns. However, most of the outlets maintain good levels of professionalism and accountability, with donors demanding careful accounting and oversight.

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## **AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT AND ACCESSIBILITY**

Reaching audiences in Myanmar remains a critical yet challenging priority for exiled media houses. Many rely on social media platforms, such as Facebook, as primary distribution channels. However, the junta's restrictions on internet access and surveillance capabilities make it difficult for audiences to access independent news without fear of reprisal. Media outlets have by and large built their trust with their audiences from abroad. However, junta disinformation campaigns aim to discredit exiled journalists, labeling them as foreign agents or traitors. Overcoming this junta narrative requires consistent, reliable reporting and efforts to engage with Myanmar's diverse communities.

# MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

In Myanmar, the constant exposure to violence, security concerns, coupled with the stress of operating under relentless pressure, takes a significant toll on journalists' mental health. Covering traumatic events such as massacres, displacement, and the suffering of civilians can lead to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. The fear of arrest or retribution often exacerbates feelings of hopelessness and isolation. It is important to recognize that mental health support for journalists in Myanmar is not just a necessity but can be considered a lifeline. According to a Myanmar media worker, journalists in Myanmar operate under extreme stress due to the threat of violence, imprisonment, or even death.

"This is impacting their mental well-being. With many journalists forced into exile or operating underground, feelings of isolation are common. The financial constraints faced by journalists are significant. The impact of mental health challenges weighs on their ability to maintain relationships, family life, and personal well-being. Overexposure to traumatic content, covering violence, and dealing with emotional distress can take its toll."

According to a Western analyst, ways need to be found to address media workers' mental health challenges and to maintain adequate funding that keeps journalism competitive with other opportunities. "As the conflict drags on, some people may become burned out and may feel like they want to find other potentially better paying work" – though it is unclear whether better paying opportunities exist in the current environment. Media houses do what they can to address mental health issues. In one recent case, a journalist living in Thailand's border city of Mae Sot was prevented from committing suicide by their vigilant colleagues, according to a media worker.

Organizations like the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) offer assistance programmes, including emergency support and temporary relocation for those in imminent danger. Groups like Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma provide specialized training in trauma awareness and resilience. Additionally, peer support networks within journalist communities are invaluable for sharing experiences and coping strategies. Providing safe spaces for journalists to discuss their experiences and seek help is crucial. Equally important are institutional commitments from media organizations to prioritize mental health by incorporating regular check-ins, offering counseling, and promoting self-care practices.

Making sure those reporting can do so safely and sustainably is essential to protecting press freedom and the flow of information from Myanmar's conflict zones. While the picture is mixed, independent media houses recognize their responsibility to keep mental health in mind.





## PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS

Journalists can suffer from the traumatic nature of their work and the oppressive circumstances under which they operate. These journalists frequently encounter harrowing events, including brutal killings on both sides of the conflict. For instance, reports of two PDF members being burned alive in Magway Region, children being wounded or killed in airstrikes, and PDFs executing SAC informers by dismemberment have been particularly distressing to journalists involved in reporting the incidents.

The emotional toll is compounded for those working in exile, separated from their families and homes. This isolation intensifies stress, leaving many journalists feeling unwell throughout the day and unable to sleep at night after processing distressing facts, videos, and images. While talking to friends can provide temporary relief, many prefer solitude, struggling with feelings of helplessness over Myanmar's dire situation. Even in exile, journalists are deeply aware of the ongoing suffering of their loved ones back home, creating a constant emotional burden.

One photojournalist from Karenni State, known by the pseudonym Ko Min, describes his experience vividly: "My trauma is cyclical. When I am almost recovered, I witness new cases again. I am tearful while I am taking photos [of airstrike victims]. I think I am going crazy. I feel stressed and have to see a psychiatrist."

Despite his extensive experience, Ko Min finds that the grim realities of post-coup Myanmar have severely affected his mental health. According to an ISP-Myanmar report, 20% of the SAC's airstrikes targeted the Karenni State, filling Ko Min's camera with images of suffering and destruction. He explains, "Taking [photos] one time is no problem. When it becomes several times, every time piles up trauma. A journalist has to do his job, but I cannot tolerate this stress anymore."

Such experiences are not uncommon. Many journalists suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), characterized by symptoms like bad dreams, insomnia, stress, lack of concentration, irritability, and dissatisfaction. Unlike others who can distance themselves from violent news, journalists must repeatedly confront it, often at great personal cost.

Psychiatrists warn of "infectious trauma," where journalists absorb the suffering of their sources and subjects. If left unresolved, this secondary trauma can accumulate, leading to severe stress and emotional instability.

Ma Khine Yin, a journalist from Rakhine State now living in Thailand with her family, shares her struggles with traumatic news: "I cried out loud to release [my emotions] when I saw children's dead bodies from airstrikes. I also had nightmares, such as running during battles while dragging my children." Her husband, also a journalist, has experienced similar emotional challenges, illustrating how the trauma from reporting the news can permeate family life.

Another journalist now residing in the USA admitted, "I cannot even read news even though I am a journalist. I had to meet with a counselor."

Journalists reporting from conflict zones, such as those under EAO control, face not only emotional distress but also physical insecurity. One female journalist described the terror of living in an area targeted by junta airstrikes: "I could not manage to get a single night of good sleep as my colleagues and I rushed to bunkers whenever we heard the planes' roar. I was traumatized by the sight of destroyed houses and the sound of explosions."

Exile also brings its own set of challenges, including undocumented status, language barriers, lifestyle adjustments, and feelings of entrapment. Many journalists find themselves unable to move forward in their new environment or return to Myanmar, compounding their sense of helplessness.

Many independent journalists covering Myanmar are exposed to traumatic news daily. Their courage and resilience come at a high cost, as the cumulative weight of their experiences takes a heavy toll on their mental health.

## **LACK OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT**

Both journalists residing in Myanmar and those in exile face significant barriers in accessing adequate psychological support. Despite the high levels of trauma they endure, resources to address their mental health remain scarce.

Efforts have been made to equip journalists with the tools to cope with their challenging work. For example, a journalism professor from Carleton University has conducted capacity-building workshops focused on trauma-informed reporting for Myanmar journalists. While such workshops have proven effective, particularly for reporters covering conflict zones, their reach remains limited and unable to meet the growing demand.

Some journalists, like Ko Min, have turned to online mental health services for support. According to a report by Frontier Myanmar, Ko Min participates in a programme offered by Tele Kyanmar explaining, "Normally, I take the programme one time in three weeks. But when things become worse, I take it every week. The programme is effective for me. However, when I feel a bit of relief, I face a new case again, and it is cyclical."

For others, the nature of their work leaves them resigned to the inevitability of trauma. One reporter shared, "We cannot avoid these traumatized scenes as these are our work nature. We need to accept it and have to understand it. We cannot solve those issues."

The lack of comprehensive and accessible mental health support underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to help journalists cope with the cumulative emotional toll of their work. Without such support, many will continue to struggle in silence, bearing the weight of both their responsibilities and their unresolved trauma.



# VIEWPOINTS:

## Interview with Border and Cross-border Journalist

The following is an interview with a journalist who reports in the northern border area of Myanmar.

### **What are your biggest challenges in accessing and reporting from the Myanmar-China border area?**

Our region has been a conflict zone even before the coup, so we have always faced significant challenges as journalists. Numerous armed organizations operate in the area, and as a journalist who has reported extensively on human rights violations, I've received threats from these groups. While high-level officials often say we can report freely, in practice, local authorities impose significant barriers. We also frequently receive online blackmail (messages).

Before the coup, we could travel freely by obtaining permission from the relevant armed groups. Now, however, we avoid areas controlled by specific organizations because of the critical reporting we have done about them. Requesting travel permission feels risky, so we often resort to taking unapproved routes. When the junta troops were present, we had to avoid them carefully while traveling. Now that they are gone, we feel slightly more secure.

### **How do you navigate language barriers and cultural differences when interacting with local communities and sources in these regions?**

Since our team includes members from multiple ethnic groups, we can communicate in the various languages spoken in northern Shan State, so language is not a barrier for us. The main challenge lies in building trust with our sources, as they often fear repercussions for speaking to journalists, even when we guarantee anonymity. This fear has intensified since the coup.

## **What strategies do you use to maintain journalistic objectivity while covering highly emotional or politically sensitive issues?**

We strive to process and report every piece of news ethically and without omission. However, we do consider the potential impact of sensitive news on the situation and our reporters' safety. Although we often seek shelter in areas controlled by resistance forces, we have agreements allowing us to report freely, except for matters involving their secret military operations.

Northern Shan State has faced hardships for decades, even before the coup, with conflicts among various ethnic groups. Since the coup, the situation has worsened with casualties among junta troops, resistance forces, and civilians, including children and pregnant women. Witnessing these tragic scenes has deeply affected us. It disrupts our sleep and appetite, and we often experience nightmares. As journalists, we endure these emotional burdens to fulfill our responsibilities. After particularly distressing events, my colleagues and I comfort one another to cope.

## **Do you receive mental health care?**

Our organization provides mental health support to reporters, especially after the coup. However, I have not been able to benefit from this as I am often traveling.

## **What specific safety risks do you face when reporting in conflict zones or militarized border areas?**

The risks vary depending on the news we are covering. If the news poses no immediate danger to the organizations or reporters, we report it promptly. For more sensitive stories, we wait until we are in safer locations. Using pseudonyms for risky reports is another strategy we rely on.

Since Operation 1027, reporters in the area have faced heightened risks while covering battles. We have encountered artillery shelling from junta troops, including RPG attacks. For instance, in Manton Township, our vehicle hit a landmine, which exploded. We've also experienced airstrikes. In one incident, an airstrike targeted the house we were staying in, causing deaths and injuries among resistance soldiers. A fellow reporter from Than Lwin Khet suffered a severe leg injury, while I sustained a minor back injury. Thankfully, I have not faced life-threatening injuries yet.

## **Why do you think the junta targeted that house?**

I don't believe it was because they knew reporters were there. The house was a known safe zone for resistance soldiers, and many were present at the time. I suspect it was the result of a leak in information. While the strike targeted the house, the explosion occurred outside, which minimized the damage to us.

## **How do you ensure your own safety and the safety of your sources when covering sensitive or dangerous topics?**

Northern Shan State has always been a conflict zone, so we have practiced caution in reporting since before the coup. Previously, we cited our sources by name. Now, to protect them, we only refer to "a close source". Even if a source permits us to use their name, we carefully assess the ground situation before deciding whether to include it. Ensuring the safety of our sources is always a priority.

# VIEWPOINTS:

## Interview with the Director of a Journalism Support Group

The following is an interview with the director of a journalism support group that provides training for Myanmar journalists and media personnel.

### **What are the most significant obstacles independent journalists face when covering the Myanmar crisis, particularly in conflict areas?**

The biggest challenge is the security. Independent journalists often lack adequate training to navigate conflict areas safely. Many undertake on-the-ground reporting out of passion, exposing themselves to substantial risks. Additionally, reporting from conflict areas is heavily censored, limiting their ability to convey the full story. Another major obstacle is insufficient knowledge of “war reporting” techniques and weak analytical skills regarding security risks posed by various armed forces. Furthermore, resistance forces, concerned about their own security, impose additional restrictions on journalists, further complicating their work.

### **How does the current political and military environment in Myanmar affect the ability of independent media to operate safely and effectively?**

Independent media faces severe suppression under the current political and military environment in Myanmar. In areas controlled by the regime, independent journalism has been replaced by state propaganda. Only news agencies that align with the regime’s narrative are allowed to operate, while others face significant risks.

Journalists identified as independent or critical of the regime are at high risk of arrest and are often sent to interrogation centres, where they may endure life-threatening conditions or prolonged imprisonment. This hostile environment has created a climate of fear and severely undermined the ability of independent media to function safely and effectively.

### **What role does misinformation or disinformation play in the Myanmar conflict, and how can independent journalists combat it?**

Misinformation and disinformation play a significant role in the Myanmar conflict, primarily driven by the junta. The regime has dedicated teams systematically producing false information as part of psychological warfare and propaganda efforts. These campaigns aim to manipulate public perception and discredit resistance movements and independent voices.

Independent media actively counter this disinformation by providing accurate and reliable reporting. Despite the regime’s systematic efforts, its disinformation campaigns have limited success as independent journalists, expose and debunk their false narratives. However, the challenge remains ongoing, emphasizing the importance of continuous vigilance and fact-checking by independent media.

## **How can independent media sustain their work financially and professionally while reporting in such a dangerous environment?**

Independent media operating from liberated or exile regions face significant financial challenges. International organizations providing aid to independent media often cannot offer sufficient funding to meet their needs. Despite these limitations, journalists continue their work driven by passion and commitment to uncovering the truth.

However, the lack of adequate financial support restricts their ability to produce high-quality content, such as investigative or in-depth reporting. To sustain their work, independent media must seek diverse funding sources, including partnerships with international organizations, crowdfunding, and collaborations with other media outlets. Strengthening professional networks and investing in capacity-building initiatives can also help them maintain resilience and improve the quality of their reporting under these dangerous circumstances.

## **What are the best practices for independent journalists to protect themselves physically when working in conflict zones or militarized border areas?**

Training and safety gear are essential for journalists operating in conflict zones or militarized border areas. Comprehensive, in-person safety training is particularly effective, as it equips reporters with the practical skills and situational awareness needed to navigate high-risk environments.

Providing safety gear, such as helmets and bulletproof vests, is equally crucial to ensure their physical protection. Regular updates on local security conditions and access to experienced mentors or advisors can further enhance journalists' preparedness and resilience. Ensuring these resources are available is vital to safeguarding independent journalists in dangerous settings.

## **What digital security measures should journalists adopt to safeguard their work, communications, and the identities of their sources?**

I have seen progress in the digital security sector as reporters received training and a rise in digital knowledge. For example, the majority of journalists now use secure messaging applications like Signal, which offer strong encryption and minimize the risk of chat history being traced. However, there are still gaps in encryption and secure file management, only a few are doing it.

## **How should journalists respond if they are detained, harassed, or threatened while covering the Myanmar conflict?**

First things first, journalists should have a clear plan or backup story to explain their activities if questioned. However, if they are taken to interrogation centres, it is crucial to reveal their real careers. Concealing their identity could raise suspicions and lead to severe consequences, including life-threatening situations.

## **How should journalists protect news sources?**

Trust and transparency are crucial for communication between journalists and news sources. Journalists need to identify themselves and have to follow the specific rules of the respective conflict areas. On the other hand, respective resistance forces should be aware of the value of media and should be educated about media communication.

## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This is a further update up until the end of the fourth quarter of 2024 on the challenges and threats to press freedom and media independence in Myanmar, safety issues around journalists and individuals in the news profession, and relevant events and issues in the country's news and information environment since the military coup of 1 February 2021.

This brief is produced using verified information, including the tracking of incidents and discussions with journalists and media professionals, to document and provide context for a better understanding of the country's news and information situation. By and large, the true names of the reporters, editors and analysts are kept secret for the safety of the media workers.

### Some definitions

In the monitoring work for this series of updates, an incident is a verified event that involves action against a journalist due to his or her journalistic activities or background, such as arrest, detention, prosecution, death, torture and acts of violence, surveillance, harassment and/or threats.

Incidents include similar actions against other individuals working in independent newsrooms and news-related operations, such as news management and other administrative, creative and support personnel who are part of the production and distribution of journalistic products. They are called "news workers" in these monitoring updates.

Also included in incidents are actions taken against newsrooms, news organisations and their websites and online spaces, independent associations of professional journalists and press clubs. These include the cancellation of publishing licences, raids on news outlets' premises and their prosecution and the blocking of websites.

In this series of updates, a journalist is an individual who is engaged in gathering and reporting, taking photographs or video footage, editing or publishing and presenting news that has been produced using professional and independent journalistic standards and methods.

A journalist may be in news work as a livelihood, whether paid or not, in different types of media and platforms, and have different types of professional arrangements, such as being full-time staff, freelance, a stringer or occasional contributor.

Included in the journalists covered by the monitoring work are individuals who have been described as being former journalists, or who have left their news organisations. This is for two reasons: first, being or having been a journalist in Myanmar by itself is a risk, and persons have been targeted or arrested because of a past affiliation with a news outlet; second, safety considerations can require an individual's description as a former journalist.

"Journalist" in this monitoring work likewise includes Citizen Journalists, given that many news organisations in Myanmar work with them on a regular basis. In the Myanmar context, the term "citizen journalist" or CJ typically refers to a person who contributes news – whether in the form of raw content, including photographs or video, or full stories. He or she may or may not be paid for contributions and may or may not have had some news training – although there are a number of journalism and safety training initiatives being provided by independent media houses.

After the 2021 coup, news outlets began using materials sent voluntarily by Citizen Journalists after restrictions and arrests made news-related activities dangerous for professional journalists.

