

Critics Warn of Deception as Myanmar Military Returns to Facebook After 2018 Purge

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Myanmar military spokesmen Major General Tun Tun Nyi (L) and Major General Soe Naing Oo (2nd from L), Major General Thaung Naing (2nd from R), the deputy judge advocate general, and military spokesman Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun (R) attend a monthly military press briefing in Naypyidaw, Jan. 23, 2020.

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Myanmar's military has resurfaced on Facebook nearly two years after the social media giant removed numerous army accounts for spreading hatred following a United Nations fact-finding report that accused the armed forces of war crimes for its expulsion of 740,000 Rohingya Muslims.

The army's reappearance on the popular platform in Myanmar, which was condemned by human rights groups, came as authorities extended until August a controversial internet shutdown in parts of conflict-affected Rakhine and Chin states, citing security reasons.

The military has opened two Burmese-language Facebook accounts called "Tatmadaw True News Information Team" and "Zaw Min Tun," military spokesman Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun told RFA on Wednesday.

The military opened the accounts on Facebook — the most popular social media platform in the country, with 33 million users — to counter what he called misinformation and fake news, he said, adding that the army would follow Facebook's community standards.

No agreements were made between the military and Facebook prior to the creation of the two new accounts, he said.

"Facebook is popular in Myanmar, [and] media and civil society groups release information via Facebook," Zaw Min Tun said. "We decided to use Facebook to provide timely and accurate information related to the Tatmadaw [Myanmar military] because real and fake news are being mixed together on Facebook."

A Facebook spokesperson responded by email late Wednesday to RFA's request for comment, saying that the company banned about 20 individuals and organizations in Myanmar from the platform in 2018 "to prevent the spread of hate and misinformation on Facebook."

"This was part of several steps we took to keep the platform safe. If content on any Facebook page or account violates our policies, we will remove it," Facebook's statement said.

Facebook also said that it has made significant investments in Myanmar and updated its technology, teams, partnerships, and policies during the past two years to address the issue and to prevent the abuse of its services.

In August 2018, Facebook removed the 20 accounts and more than 50 pages associated with the military, including the account of defense forces chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, accused of war crimes for being the architect of a brutal military-led crackdown in 2017 that left thousands of Rohingya dead and drove hundreds of thousands of others out of the country.

At the time, Facebook had been criticized for allowing posts that spread hatred against the Rohingya, a persecuted Muslim minority in predominantly Buddhist Myanmar.

The Myanmar military turned to Russian social media service VK, available in multiple languages, following Facebook's ban on its accounts. The army also continued to maintain websites for the military chief and its information team, as well as the defense forces-owned Myawaddy television network.

'Propaganda pages'

Rights activists have raised concern over the military's reappearance on Facebook, saying that the top brass will use the platform to try to sway public opinion as it faces international war crimes charges.

"This is more about trying to get back into the information stream that Burmese people are looking at to try to influence their opinions about what is happening in Rakhine state, Kachin state, and Shan state, and other areas where the Tatmadaw is involved in conflicts with armed insurgency groups," said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director of Human Rights Watch (HRW).

Mark Farmaner, director of Burma Campaign UK, said the military set up the two new "propaganda pages to spread lies" as it faces legal action on genocide-related charges in three international courts, including the U.N.'s International Court of Justice (ICJ).

"They are under pressure, and obviously they want to convince people in Myanmar that the evidence against them is not true," he said. "They want to build more support for their actions."

On Wednesday, attorneys bringing a case before the ICJ accusing Myanmar of genocide against the Rohingyas asked a U.S. district court to order Facebook to release posts and communications of the country's military and police, Reuters news agency reported.

Nickey Diamond, a Myanmar human rights specialist with the Southeast Asia-based NGO Fortify Rights, said the Myanmar military can issue information to the public via other means such as news conferences.

“Using Facebook to release information appears to be a move to counter news reported by the media rather than to provide accurate information,” he said.

“We can’t trust the military and its capacity to provide genuine information,” he added.

Internet shutdown extended

The Myanmar government, meanwhile, has extended the suspension of mobile data network services in eight townships in northern Rakhine state and in Paletwa township of neighboring Chin state until the beginning of August, said Soe Thein, permanent secretary of the Ministry of Transportation and Communications, on Tuesday.

“Since we have imposed the internet shutdown because of a situation that can harm the public interest, as defined in the Telecommunications Law, we will reopen once we are certain that it will not harm the public interest,” he told reporters at a news conference in Naypyidaw.

“The shutdown will continue until Aug. 1,” he said. “We will lift the shutdown depending on the situation with conflicts on the ground.”

Rights groups have criticized the move, saying that the communications shutdown places civilians at risk by preventing them from accessing coronavirus information and from contacting humanitarian aid organizations amid intensified fighting between the Myanmar military and AA soldiers during the past 17 months.

The government-ordered shutdown of mobile internet traffic affects roughly 1 million people, according to HRW.

Khin Saw Wai, a lawmaker from Rathedaung township, urged the government to end the internet service block so people can use their cell phones to receive information about the COVID-19 pandemic and how to prevent its spread.

“It is not acceptable that the internet shutdown will be lifted only when the conflicts are over,” she said.

“We would like to appeal to the authorities to end the internet shutdown for the sake of the local people, so they can have access to information about COVID-19 and the latest news about the armed conflicts,” she said.

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