

# Disquiet on the Western Front: A Divided Resistance in Myanmar's Chin State

*March 2025*



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## Principal Findings

**What's new?** Since the February 2021 military coup, armed resistance groups have expelled regime forces from most of Chin State in western Myanmar. But deep divisions between two rebel factions have led to deadly clashes that are complicating agreement on statewide political, governance and justice matters.

**Why does it matter?** The conflict has displaced some 160,000 people – more than one third of Chin State's population – either internally or across the Indian border. Their return requires stability and safety as well as access to markets and essential services. Beyond these immediate needs, divisions in the resistance impede consensus on the state's political future.

## I. Overview

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Anti-regime armed groups have expelled the Myanmar military from most of Chin State, but deep divisions between two factions are preventing agreement on political and governance issues, while sporadic clashes between them could spill into broader conflict. For people displaced by war in this remote part of the country, a lack of trade, resources and donor support is making life increasingly difficult. The rival Chin National Front and Chin Brotherhood have committed to unite under a single political body. If they do not move to dampen the tensions between them as they pursue that goal, it will be hard to resettle the displaced, restart the economy and provide essential aid and public services.

Chin State witnessed some of the first major clashes between the military and resistance forces following the February 2021 coup. Since then, the resistance has driven the military out of most of the state. Its strength was in part the result of deep grievances arising from decades of neglect and discrimination by successive central authorities against the Chin ethnic minority – dry tinder that was ignited by the coup and subsequent military violence. Over the last four years, the conflict has caused extensive destruction and forced some 160,000 people – more than one third of the state’s population – from their homes. Most are internally displaced, while the rest have sought refuge in neighbouring India. Fighting continues, as resistance forces attempt to seize the remaining military bases in the state and the regime launches punitive airstrikes on towns and villages it has lost in an attempt to prevent its opponents from consolidating control.

While resistance forces have the upper hand, a legacy of rivalry among various tribal and geographic groupings in the state have led to tensions between rebel coalitions – led by the Chin National Front and Chin Brotherhood, respectively. Toxic relations between the two mean that misunderstandings or propaganda can easily flare into deadly clashes, as has happened on at least two occasions. The presence of the Arakan Army, an ethnic Rakhine group which controls the southernmost township of Paletwa and fights alongside the Chin Brotherhood elsewhere in the state, has aggravated matters. These tensions represent a major threat to peace, impeding the formation of local authorities that could provide vital services and craft a political future for the state. A 26 February agreement to unite the two rebel forces under a single political entity marks an important step forward. But should this plan move too slowly or come unstuck, the state could face a fresh bout of turmoil, while regime forces might scent the opportunity to retake territory.

## II. Longstanding Ethnic Grievances and Conflict

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Located in western Myanmar, along the India and Bangladesh borders, Chin State is one of Myanmar's least developed areas, with a pre-coup population of less than 500,000.<sup>1</sup> A combination of hilly terrain and poor infrastructure has long isolated the state from the rest of the country, while discrimination and neglect by successive central government authorities have contributed to its chronic poverty and food insecurity. Migration to other parts of Myanmar, as well as to India, Malaysia and other countries, has traditionally been an escape valve for the state's inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> For those who remain, livelihoods are rooted in subsistence agriculture. Low crop yields, however, mean that most households are unable to meet their annual food needs and rely on seasonal day labour and remittances from family members who have migrated for work.<sup>3</sup> Unlike many other parts of Buddhist-majority Myanmar, Chin State is predominantly Christian.

Most of the state's population is of Chin ethnicity, a broad category that encompasses many different ethno-linguistic and tribal groupings, which are sometimes referred to collectively as Kuki-Chin-Mizo.<sup>4</sup> While there have been various attempts to forge a pan-Chin identity over time, politics and society remain largely based on tribal affiliation, which has often translated into rivalry or division among tribal or geographic communities.<sup>5</sup> The list of 135 officially recognised ethnicities in Myanmar includes 53 Chin groups.<sup>6</sup> Demographers have long viewed this list as deeply flawed, however, as it conflates and confuses linguistic, ethnic, tribal and geographic groupings.<sup>7</sup> In addition to those in Chin State, there are Kuki-Chin-Mizo populations in the uplands of neighbouring states and regions, including Rakhine, Sagaing and Magway; there are also sizeable populations in adjacent parts of Bangladesh and north-eastern India, reflecting the arbitrary way in which colonial boundaries were drawn, artificially bisecting communities.

Until the February 2021 coup, there was little armed conflict in Chin State. The main armed group, the Chin National Front (CNF), was formed in 1988 amid the military's violent suppression of nationwide protests.<sup>8</sup> But financial and logistical constraints meant that despite deeply felt political grievances among Chin people, and a strong desire for autonomy, the armed group remained small and mainly operated in remote parts of the state near the Indian border, particularly in Thantlang township. By 2012, when the CNF agreed to a ceasefire with the military, the group had not engaged in major hostilities for more than a decade.

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<sup>1</sup> Myanmar census, 2014. Chin State is made up of nine townships (see the map in Appendix B).

<sup>2</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Chin civil society organisation representatives, May–October 2024. See also “UNHCR says ethnic Chin refugees may require continued international protection as security situation worsens in Myanmar”, UNHCR, 14 March 2019.

<sup>3</sup> See “The state of local governance: Trends in Chin”, UNDP Myanmar, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Kuki-Chin-Mizo is a linguistic rather than an ethnographic classification. The Kuki-Chin-Mizo languages are a branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Chin civil society organisation representatives, May–October 2024. For example, the Hakha-Thantlang tribal group has long been seen by other groups as having dominance over Chin affairs.

<sup>6</sup> That is, Chin itself and 52 sub-groups.

<sup>7</sup> Crisis Group Asia Report N°312, *Identity Crisis: Ethnicity and Conflict in Myanmar*, 28 August 2020.

<sup>8</sup> For details on the 1988 uprising, see Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps* (London, 2007), ch. 2.

After the coup, the CNF maintained its ceasefire for a time (see Section III.A). Local communities, on the other hand, formed numerous armed resistance groups across the state in reaction to the military takeover. Many of these called themselves “Chinland defence forces”, and while they had shared objectives – mainly to resist the coup and protect their communities from the regime – they operated largely independently. Other local forces born after the coup took different names. There are currently around 27 such groups operating in the state.<sup>9</sup> (See Appendix C for an annotated list of the armed groups mentioned in this briefing.)

Another important rebel group that has been operating in parts of Chin State since before the coup is the Arakan Army, one of Myanmar’s most powerful armed organisations, which is fighting for an autonomous homeland for the Rakhine ethnic people. Since late 2023, it has expelled the military from much of neighbouring Rakhine State.<sup>10</sup> The Arakan Army launched its insurgency in Rakhine State almost a decade ago from Paletwa township, in southern Chin State, which has long been territory contested between Chin and Rakhine communities.<sup>11</sup> The majority of its population is Khumi, a Chin sub-group, but the township also hosts a smaller ethnic Rakhine population.<sup>12</sup> In British colonial times, it was administered under the Arakan Hill Tracts, but following Myanmar’s independence in 1948 the area became part of the neighbouring Chin Hills – subsequently, Chin State – reflecting its majority ethnic composition.<sup>13</sup>

Paletwa was an important springboard for the Arakan Army’s insurgency in Rakhine State, thanks to its hilly, forested terrain and because it borders both Bangladesh and India. In Paletwa, the group was able to establish bases that were difficult for the Myanmar military to reach, but it retained access to supplies from across the borders. Its presence in the township, however, has alarmed many local Khumi people, as well as Chin leaders, who fear that the Arakan Army seeks to reclaim Paletwa as part of the Rakhine homeland.<sup>14</sup> Non-Rakhine groups in both Rakhine State and southern Chin State are generally suspicious or fearful of the Arakan Army due to its perceived ethno-nationalism and their experience of harsh treatment at its hands. Representatives of the Mro and other ethnic minorities in Rakhine State have spoken to Crisis Group in the past about wanting to raise militias to protect themselves, and there have been allegations of the Arakan Army committing atrocities against Rohingya Muslims.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group interview, Chin National Army commander, Chin State, September 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group Asia Report N°339, *Breaking Away: The Battle for Myanmar’s Rakhine State*, 27 August 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group Asia Report N°307, *An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar’s Rakhine State*, 9 June 2020.

<sup>12</sup> According to official statistics, the population of the township is predominantly Chin (83 per cent, mostly Khumi Chin), with a substantial Rakhine minority population (17 per cent). “Paletwa Township Profile”, General Administration Department, Government of Myanmar, January 2020 [Burmese].

<sup>13</sup> The 1947 independence constitution stated in Article 196 that: “There shall be a Special Division of the Chins comprising such areas in the Chin Hills District and the Arakan Hill Tracts as may be determined by the President”. In 1954, the area was reclassified as part of Chin State.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Chin analysts, May-October 2024.

<sup>15</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Identity Crisis*, op. cit., Section IV.C; and Crisis Group Report, *Breaking Away*, op. cit. On the Arakan Army’s treatment of the Khumi population in Paletwa, see also “Paletwa in peril”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 22 December 2024.

The Arakan Army denies that it mistreats minorities in areas under its control, stating that it has made efforts to include them in its local administrations.<sup>16</sup> It also denies that it is motivated by any historical precedent in seizing Paletwa, arguing instead that its strategic imperatives – which are focused on making Rakhine State an autonomous enclave – make the township vital to its struggle. It also points out that it fought the Myanmar military for control of the township, not Chin forces, who over decades have struggled to bolster their presence there.<sup>17</sup> That said, the Arakan Army and Rakhine nationalists have at times tried to legitimise their authority in Paletwa by noting that it was part of a 14th-18th century Rakhine kingdom and that the area still has socio-cultural bonds to Rakhine State.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond military strategy, Paletwa is important for Rakhine State's economic health, as it occupies a key section of the Kaladan valley that connects the state capital Sittwe with the Indian state of Mizoram. The valley would be an important trade corridor in the (not unlikely) scenario in which an autonomous Rakhine State governed by the Arakan Army has difficult relations with both central Myanmar and with Bangladesh – the only alternative land routes out of the state. It is home to a major Indian infrastructure and trade initiative – the \$500 million Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project – linking landlocked north-eastern India with Bay of Bengal ports.<sup>19</sup> Control of Paletwa thus gives the Arakan Army considerable leverage over India, as well as a possible source of revenue.

### III. Post-coup Conflict

Despite seeing only limited armed conflict in the preceding decades, Chin State became one of the main early sites for armed resistance to the February 2021 military coup. At first, the resistance was led by local people who took up weapons to protect their communities from an increasingly brutal regime. The leading armed group that was already in existence, the Chin National Front, maintained its ceasefire. Over time, however, the landscape of conflict became more complex and fractured, with the CNF joining the fray while numerous militias that had formed in different areas backed rival political and military factions.

#### A. Armed Resistance to the Coup

Chin State voted heavily for Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) in the 2020 elections, and after the 2021 coup there was strong popular participation in peaceful anti-regime protests across the state.<sup>20</sup> From late

<sup>16</sup> For details of Arakan Army administrative structures, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°325, *Avoiding a Return to War in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, 1 June 2022, Section II.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior members of the Arakan Army, September 2024.

<sup>18</sup> "Civilians pay the price of conflict in southern Chin", *Frontier Myanmar*, 10 March 2020; and "We have a common enemy": Paletwa dispute on hold but unresolved", *Frontier Myanmar*, 9 June 2023.

<sup>19</sup> "Implementation of the Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project in Myanmar at the revised cost estimate of Rs 2904.04 crore", *Business Standard*, 14 October 2015.

<sup>20</sup> The NLD won all twelve upper house seats in Chin State, the only state where it achieved a clean sweep. The party also won eight of the nine lower house seats and sixteen of the eighteen state legislature seats – its best state tally by proportion of seats. "The 2020 General Election

February 2021, the military deployed front-line troops to quash dissent in Yangon and other major cities with violence and arrests, prompting many protesters in these areas to go underground and form armed resistance groups.<sup>21</sup> But in many provincial towns and rural areas, including Chin State, people were able to continue protesting longer without facing such crackdowns. As they saw the death toll mount in other areas, however, Chin protest leaders began taking steps to defend themselves if necessary. Thus, they were able to respond quickly when the regime's forces began to use harsher methods.<sup>22</sup>

On 4 April, two months after the coup, protest groups in Chin State's nine townships agreed to form a Chinland Defence Force (CDF). Although intended as a show of unity among the multitude of local armed cells that were being formed, it never coalesced into a single entity. Rather, the cells evolved into independent militias, sharing a common nomenclature (CDF-Mindat, CDF-Thantlang and so on) and an anti-regime orientation, but no overarching leadership.<sup>23</sup> At this point, the CNF was still observing its ceasefire with the military and was not actively confronting the junta, although it did start providing military training to a number of CDF cells and other post-coup resistance forces that had begun forming at the local level (see Appendix C). A strong culture of hunting among the Chin meant that many already had ready access to traditional flintlock hunting rifles and good knowledge of local terrain.

The first flashpoint occurred later that month in the southern Chin township of Mindat when regime authorities refused to release seven peaceful protesters they had arrested. Larger demonstrations ensued in the town to demand their release, which turned violent when a policeman fired into the crowd; the CDF branch in Mindat responded by shooting dead three members of the military.<sup>24</sup> Hostilities rapidly escalated, with the army sending several convoys of reinforcements, which CDF-Mindat ambushed, seizing a large quantity of weapons. In mid-May 2021, the military resorted to an airborne offensive on the town, forcing CDF-Mindat fighters to retreat into the surrounding hills, from which they continued to harass regime forces; most residents fled the town.<sup>25</sup>

A few months later, in September 2021, fierce clashes broke out for control of Thantlang town.<sup>26</sup> By this point, the CNF had ended its ceasefire and was expanding its own ranks as well as fighting alongside post-coup resistance forces that it had been training at its Camp Victoria headquarters, adjacent to the Indian border in Thantlang township (see the map in Appendix B). On 21 September, the CNF and CDF-Thantlang jointly attacked a military base in the town,

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in Myanmar: A Time for Ethnic Reflection”, Transnational Institute, December 2020; and Crisis Group analysis of the official results.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°168, *Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw: The New Armed Resistance to Myanmar's Coup*, 28 June 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interviews, community organisers in Chin State, May 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interview, CDF-Mindat spokesperson, May 2021.

<sup>24</sup> “Military ‘uses rocket launchers’ in attack on resistance fighters in Chin State”, *Myanmar Now*, 27 April 2021.

<sup>25</sup> To this day, only a few residents have returned. For a detailed account of the battle for Mindat, see Crisis Group Report, *Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw*, op. cit., Section III.A.

<sup>26</sup> For an account of a recent Crisis Group visit to Thantlang town, see Richard Horsey, “Inside Chinland: Picturing the Struggle for a Free Chin State”, Crisis Group Commentary, 7 October 2024.

inflicting heavy casualties.<sup>27</sup> The military responded with indiscriminate artillery fire upon the town centre; nearly all Thantlang's 10,000 residents fled. Troops then returned on several occasions over the following weeks, systematically burning down more of the deserted town, including homes, businesses and churches.<sup>28</sup>

Since then, various anti-regime armed groups have clashed regularly with the military across Chin State. November 2023 marked a sharp uptick in fighting as anti-regime forces tried to take advantage of Operation 1027 – a major offensive launched that 27 October by rebels elsewhere in the country – which left the Myanmar military overstretched.<sup>29</sup> That month, the CNF captured Rikhawdar town in Falam township, one of only two legal trade posts on the India-Myanmar border.<sup>30</sup>

The same month, the Arakan Army broke its year-old ceasefire with the military, launching attacks in several locations across Rakhine State, as well as in Chin State's Paletwa township.<sup>31</sup> It eventually took control of the whole township in January 2024, seizing a huge arsenal of weapons, including armoured vehicles, trucks, a multi-launch rocket system, heavy artillery pieces and North Korean-made Grad rockets, in addition to light arms and ammunition; it also captured a regime brigadier general. Taking the heavily fortified township then enabled the Arakan Army to overwhelm regime forces in half a dozen townships farther south, along the Kaladan river corridor in Rakhine State.

Today, almost four years after the coup, the CNF and other anti-regime armed groups control most of Chin State, although the military is holding on in several key towns, including the state capital Hakha. The CNF and allied resistance groups made a fresh advance in May 2024, capturing the town of Tonzang – and most of the surrounding township, the northernmost in Chin State – from regime forces and their Zomi Revolutionary Army allies.<sup>32</sup> Other armed factions have also had battlefield success, particularly the Chin Brotherhood, a CNF rival consisting of several post-coup resistance forces that is allied with the Arakan Army (see Section III.B below).<sup>33</sup> In June 2024, a combined Chin Brotherhood and Arakan Army force launched attacks on Matupi town – a strategic location linking northern and

<sup>27</sup> For a detailed account, see “Burn it all down’: How Myanmar’s military razed villages to crush a growing resistance”, *Washington Post*, 23 December 2021.

<sup>28</sup> The army’s actions in Thantlang are the subject of a war crimes case against ten members of the military, brought in the Philippines under universal jurisdiction. See “Victims of Myanmar junta file war crimes charges in Philippine court”, *The Diplomat*, 26 October 2023; and Lorenz Dantes, “Crimes against International Humanitarian Law in Myanmar: Will the Philippines Impose Universal Jurisdiction on Behalf of Burmese Refugees?”, *Harvard International Law Journal*, 9 April 2024.

<sup>29</sup> For details on Operation 1027, see Richard Horsey, “A New Escalation of Armed Conflict in Myanmar”, Crisis Group Commentary, 17 November 2023; and Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°180, *Ethnic Autonomy and its Consequences in Post-coup Myanmar*, 30 May 2024, Section II.B.

<sup>30</sup> The other is Moreh-Tamu on the border between India and Sagaing Region.

<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Breaking Away*, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interviews, CNF leaders, September 2024. See also “Resistance captures Cikha and Tonzang in northern Chin State”, *Khonumthung News*, 23 May 2024. See Appendix C for an annotated list of armed groups.

<sup>33</sup> While the group is often referred to as the Chin Brotherhood Alliance, its leaders told Crisis Group that they prefer Chin Brotherhood, as it is made up of Chin groups whom they see as brothers, not merely allies. Crisis Group interview, September 2024.

southern Chin State, as well as Paletwa with central Myanmar – and seized it after three weeks of fighting.<sup>34</sup>

As in many parts of Myanmar, one of the consequences of the shift from post-coup protests in Chin State to armed struggle has been the marginalisation of women among resistance forces. Following the coup, women played a prominent role in demonstrations and civil disobedience across the country, but they have since been increasingly sidelined as the resistance movement moved to the battlefield.<sup>35</sup> While they have joined armed groups, and many are keen to fight alongside men, conservative cultural norms around gender roles have mostly left uniformed women carrying out non-combat duties such as cooking, tailoring, nursing and administrative tasks.<sup>36</sup> As a result, they question whether they are contributing to the revolution. These women's promotion prospects are also damaged, and they attain less varied types of experience than men of equivalent rank who have seen front-line combat.<sup>37</sup> The gendered roles, and the lack of respect they entail, can also leave women more exposed to sexual harassment by male superiors.<sup>38</sup>

#### B. Political Divisions and Conflict Risks

Four years after the coup, Chin forces are broadly aligned around two competing military and political groupings, dominated by the CNF and the Chin Brotherhood, after attempts to forge a single political body failed. The relationship between the two is toxic. There have been sporadic deadly clashes between them, and online rhetoric among their supporters in Myanmar and the diaspora is highly charged, with the airing of grievances against each other now more prominent than complaints about the military regime.<sup>39</sup> Despite a unification agreement in February 2025 (see below), there is a real risk of further bloodshed. The fraught political environment, meanwhile, is an impediment to essential coordination not just on military matters, but also on governance in Chin State and relations with neighbouring India.

The deterioration in relations between these Chin groups has been gradual but inexorable. In April 2021, the CNF along with Chin parliamentarians elected in the 2020 elections, local political parties and anti-coup strike committees formed a political body to coordinate their activities in Chin State, the Interim Chin National Consultative Council (ICNCC).<sup>40</sup> That September, the CNF and seventeen other anti-regime armed groups in the state also formed a military coordination structure, the Chinland Joint Defence Committee.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Chin Brotherhood leaders, September 2024. See also “Chin forces seize Matupi, advance on Myanmar Junta ordnance factories”, *The Irrawaddy*, 1 July 2024.

<sup>35</sup> For detailed discussion, see Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°174, *Breaking Gender and Age Barriers amid Myanmar's Spring Revolution*, 16 February 2023.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interviews, women and men members of Chin armed groups and civil society organisations, September 2024.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interviews, women members of Chin armed groups, September 2024.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interview, representative of civil society organisation providing psychosocial support services, September 2024.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interview, Chin analyst, July 2024; and Crisis Group social media monitoring.

<sup>40</sup> “Interim Chin National Consultative Council formed”, Khonumthung News, 16 April 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interview, Chinland Joint Defence Committee member, September 2024.

Recognising that these two bodies needed to be brought under some form of interim governance structure for the state, Chin leaders formed a coordination committee drawn from the two bodies in September 2022, with the objective of developing a charter and forming an interim government for Chinland, as the Chins refer to their homeland. Progress was slow, and the CNF withdrew from the ICNCC in April 2023 due to what it says were frustrations over the deadlock; others have suggested that it withdrew because it could not impose its own agenda.<sup>42</sup> The CNF then launched a separate consultative process in late 2023, to which it invited Chin civil society and armed group leaders to form an apex political body, the Chinland Council, and draft a Chinland constitution.

Efforts to form a single interim government for the state nevertheless failed. The consultative process for the new Chinland Council fell apart, with some leaders declining to attend and others saying they needed more time to consider the various proposals on the table. The CNF and its allies then dissolved the joint defence committee in December and moved ahead unilaterally with forming the Chinland Council and approving an interim state constitution.<sup>43</sup>

In the aftermath of this move, the rival Chin Brotherhood was established on 30 December 2023. It was formed by six armed groups that objected to forming the Chinland Council, and which have continued to assert the political legitimacy of the rump ICNCC, rejecting the new council and constitution.<sup>44</sup> The Chin Brotherhood allied itself with the powerful Arakan Army, boosting its confidence and combat prowess.

The reasons underlying this dispute are contested. Some delegates and analysts told Crisis Group that the CNF was too overbearing and had carved out a disproportionately powerful role for itself in the Chinland Council.<sup>45</sup> The CNF and its allies stated, however, that the groups that objected were acting as spoilers and could have raised their concerns within the process, rather than rejecting it.<sup>46</sup> At the core, it was not disagreements over substance that doomed the unified body, but longstanding tribal and geographical divisions and grievances that got in the way of finding consensus.<sup>47</sup>

A further aggravating factor has been the presence of the Arakan Army in Chin State. Soon after the coup, the Rakhine armed group began training and arming new resistance groups that were forming to fight the regime. It did so mostly in areas bordering Rakhine State, including Chin State and Magway Region, giving it future opportunities for force projection beyond the state's borders. In Chin State, it was more willing to support new resistance forces operating in the southern townships bordering Rakhine State than was the CNF, which at the time had yet to revoke its ceasefire with the central government and embrace renewed armed struggle.<sup>48</sup> The relationship between the CNF and these southern groups was also constrained by a degree of mutual suspicion, reflecting deeper tribal and geographical cleavages.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Chinland Council and Chin Brotherhood leaders, September 2024.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> The Chin Brotherhood has replaced the CNF as the military representation within the ICNCC.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interviews, July-September 2024.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interviews, CNF and Chinland Council leaders, Chin State, September 2024.

<sup>47</sup> Examples include tribal divisions among the Hakha-Thantlang, Tedim and Falam Chin, as well as geographical divisions among communities in the north, centre and south of the state.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Chin Brotherhood leaders and Chin analysts, May-September 2024.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

The Arakan Army, as a large, well-funded and well-armed group, also had a huge advantage over the CNF in the scale of support that it could provide to these newly created resistance groups.

The presence of the Arakan Army thus provided tribal groupings unhappy with CNF leadership – and the long-perceived dominance over Chin affairs of the Hakha-Thantlang tribal group that underpins it – with an alternative source of support. This support proved to be transformational. In addition to training and weapons, the Arakan Army embedded large numbers of experienced fighters in the Chin Brotherhood's ranks, allowing it to take strategic targets such as the town of Matupi – in an operation that, though ostensibly led by the Brotherhood, mostly involved Arakan Army fighters.<sup>50</sup> But despite these battlefield victories over regime forces, CNF supporters were outraged to see Chin groups joining forces with what they viewed as a predatory Rakhine nationalist force that was occupying Paletwa township and could well have further territorial ambitions in Chin State.<sup>51</sup> The Arakan Army denies that it has any such aims.<sup>52</sup>

Tensions between the two sides have already led to deaths. In June 2024, during the battle for Matupi town, clashes erupted between fighters from the Chin Brotherhood (supported by the Arakan Army) and the CNF (backed by local allies).<sup>53</sup> Violence broke out after the Chin Brotherhood detained a CNF fighter, leaving two Brotherhood combatants dead and others wounded.<sup>54</sup> The two sides exchanged fire again in Matupi on 11 November, with each issuing a statement blaming the other.<sup>55</sup> More deadly fighting took place in the same township in late January 2025.<sup>56</sup>

Tensions between the two sides appeared likely to escalate, sparking concern among the Chin's ethnic kin in India's Mizoram state, because of their attachment to Kuki-Chin-Mizo unity, as well as the possible spillover of clashes. Mizoram's government and the local Zo Reunification Organisation civil society group sought to broker a resolution between the two Chin groupings – an important initiative given the absence of formal communication channels between the factions.

The two sides gathered in Mizoram's capital, Aizawl, in September 2024, at a meeting chaired by the political adviser to Mizoram Chief Minister Laldohoma,

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interviews, CNF, Chin Brotherhood and Arakan Army leaders, June and September 2024.

<sup>51</sup> Fear that the Arakan Army could be eyeing further territorial expansion in Chin State is present even among Chin Brotherhood supporters. Crisis Group interviews, CNF and Chin Brotherhood leaders and supporters, May–September 2024. CNF supporters pointed to other sources of tension besides territory, including the Arakan Army's alleged abuses of Chin people (something the group denies) and its kidnapping of a Khumi Chin legislator – an upper house representative for Paletwa – in November 2019. The lawmaker was released in January 2020, thanks to intermediaries including Zoramthanga, then the chief minister of the Indian state of Mizoram. Crisis Group interview, Zoramthanga, Aizawl, September 2024.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Arakan Army leaders, June and September 2024.

<sup>53</sup> CDF-Matupi – the local armed resistance group – has split, with Brigade 1 forming part of the Chin Brotherhood, whereas Brigade 2 is allied with the CNF.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interviews, CNF and Chin Brotherhood leaders, September 2024.

<sup>55</sup> "Fighting resumes between Chinland Council and Chin Brotherhood in Chin State's Matupi Township", Chin World, 15 November 2024.

<sup>56</sup> "Clashes between Chin revolutionary forces result in deaths and injuries", *Myanmar Now*, 5 February 2025 [Burmese].

which resulted in an agreement to hold more talks, but no substantive breakthrough.<sup>57</sup> A second meeting in late February 2025 yielded an in-principle agreement signed by the two factions to come under one political umbrella, in a grouping to be known as the Chin National Council, and to work on an interim state constitution acceptable to both.<sup>58</sup> But the stubborn divisions may rear their heads yet again, as illustrated by previous failed attempts to forge a single political body. While leaders of both sides express a commitment to unity, they recognise that it will not be achieved quickly or easily.<sup>59</sup>

### C. *Humanitarian Needs and Public Service Challenges*

Armed groups in Chin State have succeeded in expelling the military from most of the state, but at a great cost that has left major governance challenges. It is estimated that at least one third of the state's population – more than 160,000 people – have been displaced since the coup, both internally within the state as well as to north-eastern India, mostly in Mizoram.<sup>60</sup> In both cases, some are living in makeshift camps and others in pre-existing towns and villages. With international aid limited by access and other constraints outlined below, what little relief internally displaced people receive mostly comes from the Chin diaspora. As for the rest of the population, while the Chinland Council and the rival ICNCC aspire to provide services and support to communities in areas they control, the resources at their disposal are extremely limited, and most of these – including a large share of diaspora funding – go to the armed struggle.<sup>61</sup>

Another challenge is the limited capacity of Chin civil society. While the Chin people have long had a vibrant, effective civil society – which came together in impressive ways to respond to major flooding in 2015, for example – many of the groups were based in Yangon rather than Chin State itself. Since the coup, many members of civil society organisations in both locations have joined the armed resistance, reducing their ability to operate.<sup>62</sup>

Perhaps the most important obstacle to delivering aid and providing public services is insecurity in Chin State. Although resistance forces have “liberated” many areas, they remain at risk of regime airstrikes and long-range artillery attacks, preventing any large-scale return of displaced civilians. The danger has stopped Matupi town residents, for example, from going home in any numbers, even though resistance forces expelled the Myanmar military from the area over six

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<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interviews, CNF, Chin Brotherhood and Zo Reunification Organisation leaders, September 2024. “Zo” (or “Zomi”, meaning “Zo people”) is a term coined by Kuki-Chin-Mizo speakers as a common identity label, though it has not been universally adopted.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Chin leaders and civil society representatives, March 2025. The two sides posted the text of the agreement to their respective Facebook pages.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Chin leaders and civil society representatives, March 2025.

<sup>60</sup> “Myanmar Displacement Overview”, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 11 November 2024. According to these data, there are 70,100 refugees from Chin State in India (mostly in the state of Mizoram, but some also in the state of Manipur), and 90,600 internally displaced within Chin State (a small number have also gone to other locations in Myanmar).

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Mizo and Chin civil society organisation representatives, local journalists and Chin refugees, Mizoram, September 2024. See also Crisis Group Asia Report N°328, *Crowdfunding a War: The Money behind Myanmar's Resistance*, 20 December 2022.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Chin civil society organisation representatives, Mizoram, September 2024.

months ago.<sup>63</sup> Another major impediment is the presence of landmines and other explosive remnants of war in areas that witnessed heavy fighting.<sup>64</sup>

Those who have fled across the Indian border to Mizoram have generally fared somewhat better, since they are safe from the threat of regime attack and have been mostly welcomed by local communities – with whom they share kinship ties – as well as the state government, at least in the early days. Their children can attend government schools, they have some access to health services and, in certain cases, they can earn an income from low-paid jobs.<sup>65</sup>

Even so, there are no systematic or properly funded support programs, either domestic or international – a contrast with the very professional support infrastructure for Myanmar refugees that has evolved in Thailand over the last several decades. Inevitably, as time has worn on, the mood of native residents has also started to sour, leading to increased calls for the refugees to leave.<sup>66</sup> As a result, Mizoram government policy could become less resistant than it has been so far to Indian central government reflexes, which are far more hostile to refugees being given sanctuary.<sup>67</sup>

#### IV. Managing the Present and Looking to the Future

The most pressing concerns facing local communities in Chin State revolve around immediate threats of violence and economic hardship along with the lack of humanitarian support. Over the medium term, greater stability in the state will likely depend on handling the challenges of a divided resistance movement and finding a way to overcome geographical constraints that have long hindered development and now make it difficult to achieve budgetary autonomy.

##### A. A Troubled Interim for the State

Anti-regime forces have come close to expelling the Myanmar military entirely from Chin State. Whether they can take full control of the state depends partly on factors beyond their control, including the trajectory of conflict elsewhere in Myanmar and the extent of the regime's determination and ability to prevent it from happening, in a context where it has many other competing priorities.<sup>68</sup> But even if anti-regime forces take full control on the ground, they are still likely to face

<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Chin Brotherhood leaders and Chin civil society organisation representatives, September 2024.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. See also “Myanmar Military’s Human Rights Abuses against Chins during the Four Years since the Coup”, Institute of Chin Affairs, 1 February 2025.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Mizo and Chin civil society organisation representatives, local journalists and Chin refugees, Mizoram, September 2024.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> India, which has not acceded to the refugee convention, has announced that it will fence the India-Myanmar border, end the “free movement regime” that allows borderland residents to travel unimpeded across the frontier and conduct biometric registration of refugees as a likely prelude to repatriation. Crisis Group interviews, Mizoram government officials, Mizo civil society organisations representatives and analysts, Aizawl and Delhi, September 2024.

<sup>68</sup> For example, in November 2024, the regime reinforced its garrison in the state’s capital, Hakha, and attempted to move down the road toward Thantlang to relieve its beleaguered troops, with limited success. Crisis Group interview, local analyst, November 2024.

airstrikes intended to disrupt the stabilisation of areas lost by the military to resistance forces and the return of displaced residents, as other parts of Myanmar under the control of non-state forces have already witnessed.<sup>69</sup>

Meanwhile, the antagonistic relationship between the Chin National Front and the Chin Brotherhood constitutes a major threat to the immediate future of the state's residents. While the February 2025 agreement between the two sides could represent a turning point if it is handled wisely by the respective leaders (see Section IV.B), there remains a major risk of further deadly clashes between the two groupings, which would undermine stability and could give regime forces opportunities to retake territory.

Finding the money needed to govern Chin State in this interim period – including return or resettlement of displaced people, support for health and education services, repair of physical infrastructure, and numerous other governance functions – will also be a huge challenge. Much of the diaspora funding goes to the armed struggle, leaving little for provision of public services.<sup>70</sup> The state's financial straits are exacerbated by the cost of basic commodities. While prices of goods have long been high in Chin State as a result of its remote location, which makes transport expensive, and the market's small size, it now faces a blockade as part of the regime's strategy for asphyxiating its opponents.<sup>71</sup> Imports from India have been hampered by the fact that the regime no longer controls the only official border trade post in Chin State, at Rikhawdar, which closed during the COVID-19 pandemic and has never reopened, leaving informal trade and smuggling as the only means for goods to enter.<sup>72</sup>

Development funding to Myanmar from international donors has also declined sharply since the coup, and Chin State has been hit particularly hard. The Trump administration's termination of most U.S. overseas aid, along with Europe-wide moves to make defence the top priority, are likely to squeeze funds even more.<sup>73</sup> Compared to other areas of Myanmar that have fallen out of government control, the state receives little humanitarian aid due to access and logistical constraints. Many donors are in any case reluctant to support non-state administrations for legal and procedural reasons.<sup>74</sup> Those that are willing to do so have reservations in Chin State's case, due to the dispute between rival administrations – the ICNCC

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<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°180, *Ethnic Autonomy and Its Consequences in Post-coup Myanmar*, 30 May 2024.

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interview, local analyst, July 2024.

<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Chin State, September 2024. See also “Junta stops all official fuel supplies to Chin State”, Chin World, 19 November 2024.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interview, journalist, Aizawl, September 2024. See also “Closed borders with India cause food, fuel shortages in western Myanmar”, Radio Free Asia, 12 August 2024.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Chin civil society figures, Chin State and Aizawl, India, September 2024. Donor humanitarian budgets in Myanmar are under strain due to major crises elsewhere in the world, and levels of development assistance have been slashed since the coup. For example, the European Union has already reduced its development budget for the country by around 70 per cent. See “Myanmar: The Death Throes of Min Aung Hlaing's Regime”, Crisis Group Commentary, 15 October 2024.

<sup>74</sup> See Richard Horsey, “Myanmar is Fragmenting – but Not Falling Apart: Why Outside Actors Should Work More Closely with Non-state Groups”, *Foreign Affairs*, 31 May 2024. The donors' position is driven by several factors, including legal restrictions on aid to rebel forces; conflict sensitivity frameworks that make it difficult to assist them; and fiduciary requirements for recipient organisations to have official registration or bank accounts.

and the Chinland Council – particularly given that the two sides are shooting at each other sporadically. Donors are concerned about practical questions of aid effectiveness as well as policy questions about whether assistance in this setting might contribute to Myanmar's fragmentation, indirectly stir conflict or contradict their commitment to "do no harm" given the intra-Chin tensions.<sup>75</sup>

## B. *Addressing the Challenges*

### 1. Governance

The February 2025 signing of an in-principle agreement to unite under a single political structure represents an important opportunity for the CNF and Chin Brotherhood to scale back the tensions between them. A final political agreement, however, will be hard to achieve and likely take some time. The level of animosity among their members, allies and supporters is a major impediment, as is the presence in Chin State of the Arakan Army, a powerful ally of the Chin Brotherhood. Both Chin factions know that it is in their interest – and the Chin people's – to temper hostilities and end division. Achieving that will require farsightedness from their leaders, as well as concrete steps to deal with flashpoints that arise.

One major impediment to reducing tensions is the lack of formal communication channels between the two sides. Current contacts are ad hoc, often via individuals who happen to have personal connections, or via third parties, including Chin civil society groups and the Mizoram authorities in India. Establishing an institutional communication channel – for example, between designated contact points on both sides – would help ensure information flow, avoid misunderstandings that carry risks of conflict, provide a mechanism for toning down hostile rhetoric and, over time, contribute to building trust. As a corollary, leaders should commit to avoiding inflammatory rhetoric on social media, which can exacerbate tensions between the groups and further polarise their respective constituents.

Just as important is the need to design more structured deconfliction mechanisms between fighting units that could address incidents – standoffs, near-misses or exchanges of fire – in real time. These could include reporting protocols and direct communication channels between the respective ground commanders, as well as issuing lists of dos and don'ts to fighters. Some deconfliction is already happening in some areas and at certain checkpoints run by one faction that fighters from the rival group need to cross in order to reach their areas of operation. But these channels remain ad hoc and could be made more robust.

Beyond de-escalation, forging a single political and governance structure will be indispensable for Chin State's future. The February 2025 agreement in which both sides committed to this outcome is therefore very important. Given the extent of divisions and mutual distrust, this process will probably be long and difficult. Both sides could take concrete steps in the meantime that can help create a conducive environment for progress on the overarching political objective. For example, the different authorities – the Chinland Council and the ICNCC – might explore avenues for practical engagement on technical issues that are less contentious than political concerns, for instance humanitarian support, education policy, health protocols or the justice system. Constructive exchanges between the sides would also reassure donors that the lack of unity does not necessarily

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<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interviews, donor and NGO representatives, December 2023-September 2024.

mean that effective service delivery mechanisms cannot function in the state. The existing facilitation provided by the Mizoram authorities and civil society (see Section III.B above) could help move such a process forward.

For its part, the Arakan Army could make an effort to improve relations with the CNF. While it may not see rapprochement as a priority given the scale of its battlefield successes in Rakhine State, and it may even welcome intra-Chin divisions as a way to weaken a potential adversary, neglecting these ties would be shortsighted. One potential risk for the Arakan Army, which has never been so close to its objective of establishing a quasi-independent Rakhine homeland, is that of a Chin-led insurgency in Paletwa township. That development would be counterproductive for the group at a time when, having secured control of an enormous territory, it urgently needs to focus on delivering services to the estimated two million people living in areas it runs. Better relations with the CNF, and a less imperious stance toward the Khumi Chin community in Paletwa, would help.<sup>76</sup>

Given the close ethnic bonds between the Mizo and the Chin, having a more constructive relationship with the CNF would also benefit the Arakan Army's relationship with the Mizoram authorities in India as well as influential civil society groups there, something it has identified as a strategic priority now that it controls a large stretch of the Indian border.<sup>77</sup> The CNF should likewise work to find a modus vivendi with the Arakan Army, which is going to be a neighbour for the foreseeable future.

All armed groups should also reconsider any policies or practices that prevent women soldiers from taking on combat roles. In addition to the impact on the individuals concerned, such policies and practices can also mean that women are less likely to be promoted to senior ranks and decision-making positions. The risk is then that women will be left out of conflict resolution initiatives, future peace negotiations and post-conflict peacebuilding, all domains where they have a critical role to play.<sup>78</sup>

## 2. Resources

Achieving territorial control and improving security are only the start of the process of building a self-governed homeland that can protect and provide for its people. The political vision for the future, at least as set out by the Chinland Council, is an autonomous state with its own government, constitution and military.<sup>79</sup> This setup is nevertheless intended to be an interim one, responding to the realities of Myanmar's fragmentation; the aim is to incorporate the state into a future federal structure. In this respect, the objective contrasts with the aspirations of groups in some other parts of Myanmar, such as neighbouring Rakhine State, where the Arakan Army is committed to the goal of quasi-independence. One reason for Chin

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<sup>76</sup> The Khumi have complained about the Arakan Army's forced recruitment and harsh taxation, as well as its plans to use the Rakhine language in education.

<sup>77</sup> The Mizo are closely related to the Hakha-Thantlang tribal grouping, from which the CNF draws much of its support.

<sup>78</sup> These reasons for women's inclusion have been recognised by the Women, Peace and Security agenda. See UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), subsequent relevant resolutions and related reporting.

<sup>79</sup> The Chin Brotherhood has not yet articulated a detailed political vision for Chin State as a whole. Crisis Group interview, Chin Brotherhood leaders, September 2024.

State's preference for a federal system is its lack of economic resources, which has traditionally made it more reliant on central government funding of its budget. Under the NLD administration, much of the state's \$170 million annual budget was provided by the centre.<sup>80</sup>

There is no obvious source for the funding that would be required to administer Chin State independently, pending an overarching federal solution for Myanmar as a whole. Nevertheless, international donors can and should do more. As mentioned above, many have been wary of funding non-state actors as they fear empowering them could contribute to Myanmar's fragmentation. Many have now come around to the understanding that they have no other way to reach civilians in large parts of the country, developing more pragmatic approaches as a result. So far, however, Chin State has been largely forgotten in funding allocations due to its isolation and other difficulties of providing assistance there, including access challenges and limited civil society capacity. Humanitarian assistance is also very limited for similar reasons.

All the Chin civil society organisations that Crisis Group spoke to noted how challenging the funding environment was, compared for example to the Thai-Myanmar border, where decades of refugee and cross-border aid operations have created a sophisticated aid system.<sup>81</sup> But the difficulties should not be an excuse for donor inaction and nor should divisions in the Chin resistance. It is certainly possible to work with Chin civil society to reach communities in need, and greater funding opportunities would undoubtedly spur the expansion of or creation of new civil society organisations to address the huge needs that exist. An added benefit would be to promote stronger civilian voices in a context where armed groups have come to dominate.

Although it is not a traditional donor, India has a clear interest in improving humanitarian conditions and livelihoods across its border. New Delhi could deploy significant resources in Chin State if it chose to – at a fraction of the cost of its controversial, impractical \$3.7 billion plan to fence the border.<sup>82</sup> Without stability in Chin State, India is likely to face a continued flow of refugees to Mizoram and Manipur, with limited prospects for their return. Although the number of refugees remains relatively small, these flows are already straining local resources, sowing a degree of anti-refugee sentiment among some communities and civil society organisations, particularly in Mizoram. In Manipur, it is adding a layer of complexity to the ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo, with some Meitei accusing refugees of siding with the Kuki-Zo and participating in the drug trade.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interview, Chinland Council members, September 2024. The exact proportion of central funding is difficult to know due to the opaque nature of resource allocation in Myanmar. See, for example, "Fiscal Decentralization in Myanmar", The Asia Foundation, June 2014.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Chin State and Aizawl, September 2024.

<sup>82</sup> "Will fence Myanmar border like that of Bangladesh, says Home Minister Shah", *Economic Times*, 20 January 2024. On the controversy and impracticality of the plan, see "In northeast India, a border fence could cut through villages, houses and lives", Associated Press, 28 February 2025.

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group Asia Report N°346, *Finding a Way Out of Festering Conflict in India's Manipur*, 14 February 2025.

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## V. Conclusion

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Chin State faces immense challenges, including dealing with a humanitarian crisis in the midst of war and with limited external support, rapidly developing non-state service delivery and governance mechanisms, and crafting the overarching political structures to support these. These difficulties mirror those faced across much of post-coup Myanmar, where the state's fragmentation following the military's seizure of power and deep uncertainty about the future means that, in practice, there is no alternative to a messy process whereby subnational territories must formulate political and economic solutions that are improvised and imperfect.

Stability in Chin State is likely to hinge on making good the February agreement to unite its two main armed factions, whose disputes have threatened to prompt a wave of violence and tempt the military to try reconquering the state. But with much of Myanmar falling under the writ of non-state administrations, it is also vital that neighbouring countries and international donors engage with and support these fragile emerging authorities. While capitals and institutions accustomed to working with state bodies may have difficulty doing so, achieving their developmental, diplomatic, economic and security objectives in places such as Chin State depends on their willingness to adapt to state fragmentation.

**March 2025**

## Appendix A: Map of Myanmar



International Crisis Group / KO / Dec 2015. Based on UN map no. 4168 Rev. 3 (June 2012).

Appendix B: Map of Chin State



## Appendix C: Armed Groups in Chin State

The following are the armed groups in Chin State mentioned in this briefing:

### **Arakan Army**

A large ethnic armed group mainly operating in Rakhine State. The group also controls Paletwa township, the southernmost township in Chin State, and operates in other parts of the state in alliance with the Chin Brotherhood.

### **Chin Brotherhood**

An umbrella for six armed groups, allied with the Arakan Army and a rival of the Chinland Council/Chin National Front. The six are: CDF-Kanpetlet, CDF-Matupi (Brigade 1), CDF-Mindat, the Chin National Defence Force, the Maraland Defence Force and PDF-Zoland.

### **Chin National Defence Force**

A post-coup resistance force operating in Falam township.

### **Chin National Front (CNF)**

Its armed wing is the **Chin National Army (CNA)**. The CNF/CNA, established in 1988, was long the main pre-coup armed group in Chin State, but it lay dormant for many years until the coup. It dominates the Chinland Council and is a rival of the Chin Brotherhood.

### **Chinland Council**

A political body dominated by the CNF/CNA and a rival of the Chin Brotherhood. In addition to the CNA, allied armed groups include CDF-Mara, CDF-Matupi (Brigade 2), CDF-Thantlang and more than a dozen others.

### **Chinland Defence Force (CDF)**

A generic term for some of the mostly autonomous anti-regime armed groups established in Chin State after the coup; groups typically add the township they operate in, or another geographic or tribal designator, to distinguish themselves from other CDFs.

### **Maraland Defence Force**

A post-coup resistance force drawn from the ethnic Mara community in south-western Chin State. Part of the Chin Brotherhood. Not to be confused with CDF-Mara, a rival group allied with the CNF.

### **PDF-Zoland**

Also known as **Zoland Defence Force**. A people's defence force formed after the coup in Tedim township. Part of the Chin Brotherhood. There have been tensions with the ZRA. ("Zo" – or "Zomi", meaning "Zo people" – is a term coined by some Kuki-Chin-Mizo speakers as a common identity label.)

### **Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA)**

An armed group formed in 1993, which has operated in India's Manipur state and Tedim and Tonzang townships in Myanmar's Chin State. It agreed to a ceasefire with India in 2005. Following the coup, the group began attacking anti-regime groups in Chin State and has fought alongside regime forces