

# Listening to Voices

*Perspectives From the Tatmadaw's  
Rank and File*



PHOTO: AFP/LAW EH SOE





Listening to Voices – Perspectives  
From the Tatmadaw’s Rank and File

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# Contents

<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Preface .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>A Brief History of the Tatmadaw .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Implementation and Method .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Findings in Brief.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Expanding Main Themes .....</b>	<b>23</b>
Peace and the peace process .....	23
Development needs included in negotiations .....	32
Life in the rank and file .....	34
The future: challenges and needs .....	36
<b>Overcoming Prejudice – insights from the listeners.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Conclusions and Opportunities.....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>45</b>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The young men and women who volunteered to work as listeners in this project hail from a range of community based civil society and activist organisations. Their personal stories make their starting point on a research project about the Myanmar Tatmadaw, nothing less than antagonistic. Nevertheless, they embraced this project with a commitment to give people in Myanmar, including those of the dreaded Tatmadaw, a voice. This willingness to engage with people who might be considered their arch enemies took courage and a heartfelt belief in humanity and social change. The result of their interactions challenged even them, was at times painful and surprising, and in their words they 'felt transformed' by the dialogues they had. Without their commitment to this project, the research would not be possible, and the voices of soldiers from the Tatmadaw rank and file might not be heard.

## PREFACE

The Myanmar peace process has focused on dialogue between multiple non-state armed groups and government actors in an attempt to increase the engagement of non-state armed groups in the political sphere, address their immediate needs and create ceasefire agreements. Progress has been made with the signing of numerous peace-related agreements since 2011, which has reduced fighting in some areas across the country and successfully created space for a more diverse range of voices to be heard in top-level discussions.

The Myanmar military, or Tatmadaw, backing the peace process is imperative to its success. The Tatmadaw has been a central figure in Myanmar's political and economic spheres for over six decades. The institution has shown support for the democratisation processes that have accompanied the peace process and more recently, they have engaged in formal negotiations between the Myanmar government and various armed groups. However, a commitment by Tatmadaw leadership to holistic and lasting engagement has not yet been made.

Broadly, three main challenges for the Tatmadaw remain within the scope of the peace process. Firstly, leadership needs to continue to commit to the peace process. Next, the institution as a whole needs to reform in areas relating to decrease of troop numbers and some form of assimilation or legitimation of non-state armed group forces in a union army. This is an area that is yet to be addressed. Lastly, the Tatmadaw will need to reform its image domestically and internationally. This will require more professional training focusing on relations with the public and the media. Myanmar civilians of all ethnicities across the country's diverse regions need to view the national

army as an institution whose primary concern is to protect the interests of the people of Myanmar. People in Myanmar and the international community often see the Tatmadaw as a monolithic institution whose reputation overshadows the fact that it comprises a diversity of individuals with varying opinions, experiences and desires.

The Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS) takes a conflict transformation approach to peacebuilding. CPCS focuses on supporting the transformation of relationships between groups involved in violent conflict and building inclusive engagement of all actors in peacebuilding and peace processes.

The idea to listen to soldiers from the Tatmadaw's rank and file grew out of observations and learning from the *'Listening to Voices – Myanmar's Foot Soldiers Speak'*<sup>1</sup> project, which spoke to 100 non-ranked soldiers from six non-state armed groups. On-going analysis and reflections that surfaced after this research and through working with various groups involved in the peace process identified that engaging the Tatmadaw is a key component for its lasting success.

This project aims to challenge the stigma that often surrounds discussions of the Tatmadaw, and listen to soldiers from their rank and file; to ask soldiers what they think about the peace process, and to listen to their perspectives, desires and challenges. Through listening to Tatmadaw soldiers, the project seeks to better understand how their experiences within the institution and being directly involved on the frontlines of conflict have shaped their opinions of peace and the peace process, and to better understand their concerns and desires for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Publication downloadable from: [http://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/Listening-to-voices\\_Myanmar\\_Foot-Soldiers-Speak.pdf](http://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/Listening-to-voices_Myanmar_Foot-Soldiers-Speak.pdf)

In carrying out the work, the team faced a number of challenges. Finding a way to speak to soldiers without creating unnecessary risks for researchers, or receiving opinions censored by the military leadership was the first challenge. To begin, it was unclear if it would actually be possible to speak to soldiers from the Tatmadaw's rank and file.

The research team decided to use listening methodology as the research method for this project. Conversations conducted by teams of 'listeners' who approached soldiers informally and asked if they were willing to share their opinions was the best way to try to gain access. This approach was used rather than attempting to gain permissions through formal channels.

Listening teams went to six different regions across Myanmar, where military bases were located and found that soldiers could, and wanted to, share their opinions, experiences and stories. In total, the project listened to 67 soldiers over one month in June, 2014. Soldiers were surprised and happy to be asked their opinions; a new concept to many who were part of a hierarchical structure where there was little space for individual voices. Soldiers shared a range of opinions and affirmed the project's underlying premise that the voices of the Tatmadaw rank and file should be heard, understood, and included in the peace process.

Through this project the attitudes and perspectives of the listeners themselves also began to transform. The listeners comprised individuals of various ethnicities including ethnic minorities and ethnic Bamar. Many had strong negative preconceptions about the Tatmadaw and were apprehensive about approaching soldiers. After meeting and listening to soldiers they began to see them as ordinary people who struggled to make a living and provide for their families. Listeners started to understand that the actions they had witnessed the Tatmadaw commit had been

based on orders from the institution and these orders were made in the context of warfare. This was perhaps the most important finding of the project: even on a small scale, Tatmadaw soldiers could be 'humanised' and viewed as ordinary people.

Listeners showed courage in their willingness to support this project by speaking to soldiers and being open to challenging their personal perceptions. It was not an easy task.

This project is an attempt to look at the Tatmadaw as an institution comprised of individuals, to build awareness, share personal perspectives and highlight the diversity of the institution. It was carried out with the hope to engage the Tatmadaw more holistically in the peace process in the future.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TATMADAW

The Myanmar Armed Forces, also known as the Tatmadaw, have shaped contemporary Myanmar more than any other institution in the country. They have significantly influenced the state through their prolonged military rule and campaigns, and have played an extensive political role during various phases of civilian or semi-civilian rule. Given their role and impact, one cannot claim to know the situation in contemporary Myanmar, without a comprehensive understanding of the past and present roles of the Tatmadaw.

The origins of the Tatmadaw can be traced to the creation of the Patriotic Burmese Forces in 1945, a combination of two separate militaries established in the late 1930s and early 1940s. One had been fighting for an independent Myanmar, and the other was formed by the British and comprised mostly of ethnic minorities. From Myanmar's inception as a post-colonial state in 1948, the Tatmadaw were engaged in battles against a number of armed insurgencies.<sup>2</sup>

The situation worsened soon after independence, following a mutiny of eight out of fifteen battalions when the unhappy marriage between the previously separate militaries of the Tatmadaw collapsed. Those who defected either joined with the communist insurgency, or participated in the launch of the Karen revolution, in pursuit of an independent state for the Karen ethnic group.<sup>3</sup> Since then, the Tatmadaw have fought internal wars with various non-state armed groups, most of which were formed along ethnic lines.

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<sup>2</sup> Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces Since 1948* (Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009)

<sup>3</sup> Win Min, 'Looking inside the Burmese Military' in *Asian Survey*, Vol.48, No.6 (November/December 2008) pp. 1018-1037

In the years following this mutiny, the Tatmadaw's command slowly solidified, establishing unity in the ranks, while maintaining their control of the country against communist and ethnic insurgencies. In 1958, the fragmented government began to weaken and requested intervention from the only stable institution in the country, the Tatmadaw.<sup>4</sup> This ushered in the first military government in post-colonial Myanmar. The 'caretaker government' of the Tatmadaw had widespread success in restoring a measure of stability, and in less than two years managed to quell the violence through military means and arrange a new multi-party election, subsequently returning civilian rule to the country.

General Ne Win overthrew the subsequent civilian government two years later, following renewed instability. The Tatmadaw attributed responsibility for this situation to the new leadership for dismantling policies and measures previously enforced by the caretaker government. This led to the establishment of absolute military rule in 1962: the constitution was abolished and all legislative, executive and judicial powers were put under Ne Win's control.<sup>5</sup> This period was characterised primarily by an immense show of force from the Tatmadaw, seeking to consolidate its control and maintain legitimacy as the only institution capable of establishing order in Myanmar.<sup>6</sup>

During the Ne Win era, the non-state armed groups were pushed back and relegated to border regions of the country. In 1960, the establishment of Buddhism as the State religion heightened ethnic divisions to include a religious element and provoked the creation of additional non-state armed groups such as the Kachin Independence Organisation. The country operated under the

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<sup>4</sup> Op Cit, Maung Aung Myoe (2009)

<sup>5</sup> Jalal Alamgir: *'Against the Current: the Survival of Authoritarian Burma'* in *Pacific Affairs* Vol.70 No.3 (Autumn, 1997)

<sup>6</sup> Mary Callahan, *'Making Enemies: War and Statebuilding in Burma'*, Ithica, Cornell University Press (2005)

control of senior military officers in the Revolutionary Council from 1962 to 1974, and subsequently under a one party system, the Burma Socialist Programme Party, also chaired by Ne Win until 1988. Both the Revolutionary Council and Burma Socialist Programme Party implemented the policy of *The Burmese Way to Socialism* where almost all aspects of society were nationalised. This period also brought increasing international isolation, limited freedom of expression and economic decline.<sup>7</sup>

In 1988, the combination of international isolation and limiting policy choices had pushed the country to the verge of economic collapse. Mass student demonstrations for democracy and reform gained such strength that the government had lost control of the situation and authorised the Tatmadaw to use force against the demonstrations. This opened the door to a coup d'état under the new military leadership of Saw Maung, and the establishment of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

An election was held in 1990, but without a functioning constitution, its purpose was unclear. No specific legislation detailed the election mandate, however, press statements and public speeches by SLORC articulate their intention for the election was to decide seats for a constitutional assembly to draft a new constitution, not to allocate seats for a parliamentary government.<sup>8</sup> [1] This led to confrontation between the National League for Democracy fronted by Aung San Suu Kyi who won 60 percent of the popular vote and 80 percent of the parliamentary seats. The National League for Democracy demanded a transfer of parliamentary power.<sup>9</sup> [2] SLORC stated that they would not transfer power until a new constitution had been drafted and continued to hold power.

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<sup>7</sup> William J. Topich, Keith A. Leitch, *'The History of Myanmar'* Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood (2013)

<sup>8</sup> Network Myanmar: 'The 1990 Elections in Burma' (Online) Available at: <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/index.php/34-uncategorised/61-the-1990-elections-in-burma> (Accessed on May 11th 2015)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

In the 1990s, the military almost doubled in size making it the second largest army in Southeast Asia after Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> SLORC brokered ceasefires with a number of armed groups, however some of these agreements broke down in the following decade, resulting in heavy fighting.

In 2007 and 2008, a renewed economic crisis in the country, associated protests in “the Saffron Revolution”, and the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis solidified the planned transition to elections. Since 2011, the new quasi-civilian government has passed democratic reforms, and engaged non-state armed groups in dialogue and negotiation processes.<sup>11</sup>

In this new system the military leadership has transitioned itself from being the forefront power holder to firmly maintain influence over political decisions, while benefiting from the impression of a transition to democracy.<sup>12</sup> Military dominance has moved from authoritarian rule to institutionalised control in many of the key government structures. The Tatmadaw has the prerogative to nominate three ministries: Defense, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs. The Tatmadaw maintains a firm influence over the National Defense and Security Council, the most powerful executive body in Myanmar, which has the authority to implement martial law, dissolve parliament, and take direct control of the government in cases of national emergency. According to the 2008 Constitution, one quarter of parliamentary seats are assigned to the Tatmadaw, granting it not only remarkable leverage over legislation, but also, and perhaps most importantly, veto power over constitutional amendments which requires a supermajority vote.<sup>13</sup> In this

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<sup>10</sup> Op Cit, William J. Topich, Keith A. Leitch, (2013)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Andy. P. MacDonald, ‘*The Tatmadaw’s New Position in Myanmar Politics*’ in East Asia Forum (May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013)

<sup>13</sup> Op Cit, MacDonald (2013), also see Andrew R.C. Marshall, Jason Szep, ‘*Special Report: Myanmar Military’s Next Campaign: Shoring Up Power*’ on Reuters (Online, November 16<sup>th</sup> 2012) Available at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/11/16/us-myanmar-military-idUSBRE8AF02620121116> (accessed on May 11th 2015)

sense, the Tatmadaw is still the core actor in Myanmar, with hardly any civilian oversight.

President Thein Sein, in his inaugural speech on March 30th 2011, signaled the beginning of the peace process when he directly spoke of the need to address internal armed conflict and to prioritise national unity.<sup>14</sup> Former and current senior Tatmadaw officials have publically expressed support for the peace process on numerous occasions, including interviews with local and foreign media, and in public appearances. The Tatmadaw have actively participated in negotiations that produced ceasefire agreements with several armed groups.<sup>15</sup> In addition, The Tatmadaw's Commander-in-Chief, Min Aung Hliang, has met with senior representatives from non-state armed groups such as the Karen National Union and the Kachin Independence Organisation. Participation of high-ranking Tatmadaw officers in several rounds of peace talks with representatives from ethnic armed groups, has demonstrated willingness to engage in negotiations. Continued and increasing involvement of the Tatmadaw in peace negotiations is essential for the success of the peace process, given its central role historically and at present.

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<sup>14</sup> Harn Yawng hwe, *'Burma - National Dialogue: Armed Groups, Contested Legitimacy and Political Transition'*, in *Accord*, Volume 25, (London, 2014)

<sup>15</sup> Ei Ei Toe Lwin, *'Tatmadaw Seeks Peace, President Tells Kachin State'*, in *Myanmar Times* (Online, March 21<sup>st</sup> 2014) Available at: <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/9921-tatmadaw-seeks-peace-president-tells-kachin-state.html> (accessed on May 11th 2015)

## IMPLEMENTATION AND METHOD

This project seeks to elevate the voices of Tatmadaw soldiers. It was carried out with the aim of listening to soldiers from the Tatmadaw's rank and file to understand their experience, opinions of peace, the peace process, desires and challenges.

Listening methodology was chosen as the primary research method. Initially, it was developed by CDA Collaborative Learning Projects<sup>16</sup> in Cambridge, Massachusetts as a feedback mechanism for communities on the receiving end of humanitarian aid. CPCS has adapted listening methodology to be used in peace research since 2008 as an effective way to access and raise unheard voices in conflict settings.

Listening methodology is a qualitative, subjective-oriented approach that enables analysis based on the direct experience of identified groups of people. Listening projects create opportunities for individuals or groups whose voices are less heard to share their views on particular issues, situations and processes. The methodology consists of open-ended conversations with a wide range of people aimed at capturing, analysing and understanding their perspectives, experience and recommendation.

Through unscripted *listening conversations*, information is gathered from key informants who share their direct experience of a situation. The methodology provides a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the ideas and insights of people who live in, or are affected by, a situation such as violent conflict.

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<sup>16</sup> CDA Collaborative Learning Projects website: <http://www.cdacollaborative.org>

Listening methodology recognises that people living in any given context have first-hand experience, knowledge and the best understanding of contextual dynamics making them the most important people to listen to.

This research approach depends heavily on the support of individuals who form listening teams. With the help of local partners, individuals from the project area are invited to assist as listeners who will conduct the conversations. Listeners are chosen because of their familiarity with the context and ability to conduct conversations in the local language, facilitating more flexible conversations.

One challenge to gathering information in a conflict setting is people's reluctance to share information. Conducting informal conversations creates a space where participants feel comfortable sharing concerns and messages most important to them. This is important when working in conflict contexts where participants who are engaged in more formal interview based research often censor their answers. The use of conversations in listening methodology is aimed to overcome this challenge, creating a more relaxed environment where conversation can flow organically.

Instead of using scripted interview questions, listeners have set topic areas that should be covered during conversations. This ensures consistency across conversations and research reliability. Through a synthesis and analysis process, broad themes and common issues are identified and prioritised. In addition to these descriptive categories listening methodology seeks to listen more deeply for assumptions, expectations, changes, impacts, disagreements, feelings and attitudes.

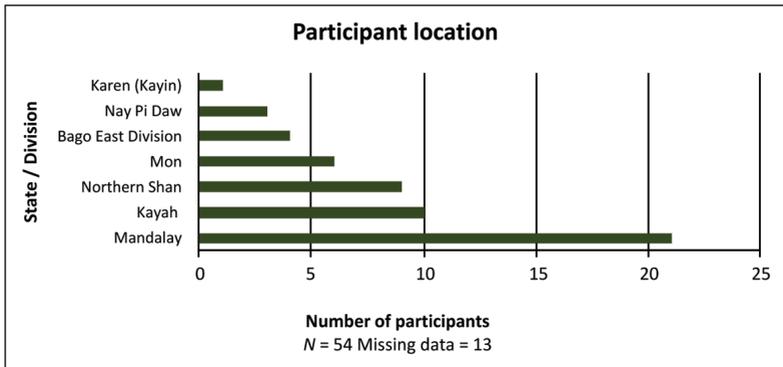
Using conversations instead of a more structured method allows for ideas and issues most important to a particular group of people to emerge and does not limit conversations to prescribed areas.

Four tools are used to record data from the conversations: notebooks, logbooks, quote banks and, where possible, a photo diary. Listeners are encouraged to avoid taking notes during conversations to ensure that participants feel comfortable. Instead, the details of each conversation are recorded immediately after every conversation in a notebook. Additionally, at the end of each day listeners use a logbook to record what they *heard the most* from all conversations that day. The use of logbooks acts as a daily debriefing and processing exercise where listeners sit together and discuss the themes they heard the most from the conversations. Differences and disagreements are also recorded in logbooks. If listeners hear a phrase during conversations that they felt captures the essence of a main point, they write it down in a quote bank during the conversation. A quote bank is a section of their notebooks reserved to record quotes. A photo diary is also used to capture images of the location in which they conducted conversations and which have some relation to a topic discussed during a conversation, for example road or housing infrastructure.

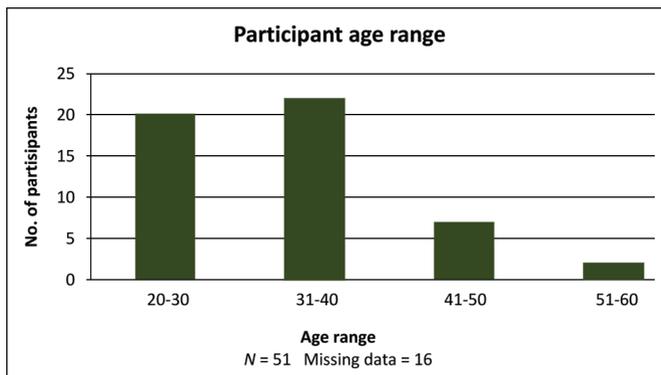
## **Scope and Limitations**

The '*Listening to Voices from the Tatmadaw's Rank and File*' project scope included 67 Tatmadaw soldiers in seven states and divisions across Myanmar. The intention of this project was to listen to non-ranked soldiers. While a small number of soldiers spoken to were officers, the vast majority had no military rank. All of the soldiers were male. The bar graph below shows the number of participants from each state/division. Not

all participants were willing to share their demographic details, resulting in some missing data, as noted in the tables below.



In June 2014 listeners travelled in pairs to various areas and reached out to a range of Tatmadaw soldiers of different ethnic backgrounds, ages and family status. Most soldiers were between the age of 20 and 40, as displayed in the column graph below.



Listeners who volunteered for this project were from various regions across Myanmar. A two-day workshop provided the training and skills needed to engage in listening conversations with research subjects. Listeners were given a set of conversation

guide questions with correlating key words (listed below), and were asked to memorise key words and try to cover these topic areas in their conversations. Guide questions were used as an example of the types of questions listener could ask related to the topic area but were not prescriptive.

Guiding Question	Key Word
What are your opinions and feelings about the peace process?	opinions, peace process
What is important to be discussed at the peace negotiations?	topics, peace negotiations
For you, what are the most important things that need to be included in the peace process?	negotiations, issues of importance
What do you hope to achieve from the peace process?	wants, peace process
What is your biggest concern/challenge in the peace process?	personal concern, peace process
What would help you to overcome these concerns/challenges?	overcome personal challenges, peace process
If there is no need to fight anymore, how would you feel about stopping being a soldier?	military reduction, opinion
As a soldier, what change do you want to see in your life?	personal change
If you reintegrate into civilian life, what assistance would you need?	reintegration, assistance
What is your general feeling about current developments in the peace process?	peace process, positive/negative

After conducting conversations over a one month time period, listeners reconvened for a two-day processing workshop. They shared conversation findings through a series of synthesis exercises drawing on written information from daily notebooks, reflective logbooks and quote banks recorded at the time of conversations. CPCS staff conducted a final stage of analysis. Through these analyses processes, common themes were identified and prioritised, and differences were noted.

One limitation of this project is the number (67) of soldiers that shared their opinions. While common themes and key issues were heard consistently across conversations the Tatmadaw is comprised of over 400,000 soldiers. Further research with a greater number of soldiers is an important next step.

This research is based on one conversation with each soldier who participated. Soldiers were not given time to prepare before the conversations and it is expected that ideas about some of the topics spoken about may have continued to develop after the conversations were finished. These opinions are not captured in this project.

Listening methodology is subjective. It relies on listeners to record what they heard from their memories. Several mechanisms are used to ensure reliability in recorded results such as the use of listening teams where two people have conversations together and record data separately. Additional techniques are used in processing workshop to triangulate results against findings from other listening teams. Even so, there is undeniably some subjectivity to the results that are recorded.

## FINDINGS IN BRIEF

As a preliminary stage of analysis listeners were asked to share what they had heard the most in relation to topic areas categorised by the guiding questions detailed on page 18. Below are the most prominent themes from each topic area.

**Achieving peace and the peace process:** Soldiers expressed their desire for real peace. Overall, soldiers expressed a low level of optimism in the outcome of the peace process. They were happy that peace talks were taking place but worried that peace would not be achieved. At the same time, many felt that peace was not their business and that they had limited knowledge about the peace process; they understood that leaders from the Tatmadaw and non-state armed groups should negotiate to achieve peace and that they did not have a role in this process. Some soldiers recognised improvements brought about by the peace process, while others felt that they had experienced limited tangible benefits.

**Important issues to discuss at peace negotiations:** Soldiers lacked specific information on the peace process and emphasised that it was the role of their leaders to engage in the peace process. Soldiers also explained, however, that the needs of the people, especially ethnic communities should be included in the negotiations. They highlighted the need for ceasefires and thought leaders from both sides (Myanmar government and non-state armed group) should moderate their positions to achieve peace.

**Desired outcomes of the peace process:** Soldiers desired national unity and hoped that if the peace process were successful there would be improvement in transportation,

freedom of movement and an increase in development infrastructure.

**Challenges to the peace process:** For soldiers, the ethnic nationalism of non-state armed groups was seen as the biggest challenge to the peace process. Non-state armed groups are seen as prioritising ethnic nationalism above concern for the country as a whole. Soldiers also highlighted that continued fighting in some areas was a challenge to the peace process, and potential misunderstandings between the government and non-state armed groups could lead to negotiations breaking down.

**Overcoming challenges:** Soldiers felt that many of the challenges they faced would be solved if the peace process could progress and if lasting peace was achieved. They suggested that further negotiations, cessation of fighting and exploring the needs of the community would help to strengthen the peace process and overcome some of the challenges.

**Staying in the military or reintegrating into civilian life, if peace is achieved:** When discussing the hypothetical situation where peace was achieved, soldiers had split opinions; some said they would like to leave the military and reintegrate into civilian life while others wanted to remain soldiers, especially if the Tatmadaw continued to provide economic, housing, education and healthcare services.

**Desired changes to their lives:** The most common response from soldiers was their desire for fighting to stop and to live a more peaceful life. Soldiers also expressed their want to live with their families as well as the need for broad reintegration assistance, ranging from vocational training, social assistance, housing and economic support. Additionally, soldiers desired higher salaries and would like the opportunity to undertake additional economic activities.

Soldiers also shared details about their daily living conditions and life as a soldier. Most viewed their role in the Tatmadaw as a job, just like any other. The welfare of soldiers' families including economic, health and education benefits provided by the Tatmadaw were a primary concern. Life as a soldier and battlefield experiences were difficult parts of their lives. Frontline fighting and loss of comrades was a source of on-going stress.

## EXPANDING MAIN THEMES

Further analysis of the conversations identified three major themes: soldiers' opinions of the peace process, the desire for soldiers to share about their daily lives and experiences, and their desires and needs for the future.

### **Peace and the peace process**

#### ***Differing levels of awareness on the peace process***

*If you ask me about peace, all I know is that I truly want it. We are fighting to get peace; I just found out about this recently.*

Awareness of the peace process varied significantly among soldiers. Some soldiers could not understand the phrase *peace process* or stated that their knowledge was limited to their observations of recent reductions in frontline fighting. One soldier explained, "We haven't learned anything about peace so we don't know what peace is...it is not our job or our business". Some soldiers explained that they did not have access to the Internet or newspapers and thus had no way of accessing information on the peace process or current political events, "We don't have a computer or Internet or books to read so we know nothing about peace".

Many soldiers who spoke about their limited knowledge of the peace process explained that information they have was gathered outside the camp and that they did not have the right to talk about this information inside the camp. One soldier explained, "I don't know about peace in detail. I don't have a

chance to study it and to be honest, I don't even have the right to talk about it".

Other soldiers had a more substantial understanding and were aware of discussions between the government and armed group leaders, specific agreements, and had followed the negotiations on television. Gaining information at teashops was also common. One soldier stated, "No one talks about peace here. I only know about it from reading articles and journals from the tea shops". One soldier expressed he had "...heard that the leaders are at the negotiation table", while another more confidently stated, "I know precisely about peace. I've seen the peace conference between the government and the armed groups on Sky Net". It was also common that soldiers knew that ethnic rights were discussed in the peace process.

*We can only talk about the subject of peace outside. No one dares talk about it in the army. They make us feel like we have nothing to do with peace, but I want peace.*

### ***Desire for peace***

*I want to have peace and development in Myanmar. I think everyone, no matter if they are a soldier or civilian, wants peace.*

Soldiers shared a strong desire for peace. One soldier expressed this sentiment, "Everyone wants peace. I want to experience a peaceful life", another explained, "The faster the wars end, the better it will be for the country" while another said, "Every country needs peace. If there is peace, there will also be freedom".

Desires for peace were combined with soldiers' belief that their lives would improve if peace was achieved and they would be given more freedom, economic opportunities and have access to better communication and transportation infrastructure. Expressed by one soldier "when Myanmar gets peace it will develop immensely".

*If we are going to get peace, losing one leg is worth it. Soldiers want peace the most.*

Some soldiers explained they desired peace to end the stress and worry their families experienced while they were fighting on the frontline. One soldier explained, "Of course I want change. While I am here risking my life to fight in a battle, my family is back home waiting for me to come out alive. They pray every day for my safety, so of course I want to live with my family in a peaceful house". Some soldiers also expressed concern for their own safety while they were on frontlines and involved in open combat.

Many soldiers spoke about their desires for peace but simultaneously shared their lack of optimism about the possibility of actually achieving it. Active fighting prevented soldiers from being more hopeful, and many soldiers explained that they had seen limited changes in their daily lives (explained further on page 23/24). The peace process lacked stability for many soldiers, who were still required to fight on frontlines. They explained that they must have "guns loaded all the time".

## ***Top-level engagement in the peace process***

*My experiences tell me that the group leaders have peace; meanwhile people on the ground are still fighting against each other.*

Many soldiers identified that they did not have a role to play in the peace process and engagement was limited to the leadership of the Tatmadaw. They recognised their minimal knowledge of the peace process and negotiation topics because engagement was strictly at the leadership level.

Diverse opinions were expressed regarding Tatmadaw leaders' engagement in the peace process. Some soldiers expressed confidence in their leaders, as they "know what to include in the peace negotiations" and were satisfied with efforts made by leadership. Others expressed more uncertainty. Soldiers noted a lack of consistency between what leaders were saying in the peace process and the continued fighting they faced on the ground. Some thought that peace could be achieved with true commitment, but thought Tatmadaw leadership was not taking the process seriously, as expressed by one participant, "The authorities are not having serious discussions".

The need for leaders from both sides to be more open to compromise to achieve peace was another theme identified in conversations. A common perception was that the desire for personal gain or power of leaders from both sides was impeding upon the peace process. One soldier explained, "both sides are hungry for power." Another soldier said, "The main reason that we don't have peace is that both sides are stubborn. If leaders are very nationalistic the multiple groups will continue to fight each other. We need [to prioritise] ceasefires".

## ***Obeying orders***

*If wars happen again, we have no choice other than to go out to the battlefield and fight as commanded.*

One strong theme that emerged from conversations was the obligation of soldiers to obey orders. While obeying orders is a requirement of all militaries and some soldiers were content to obey orders and carry out tasks, others expressed frustration and felt their personal freedom was restricted. One soldier explained, “As a soldier, I do not even own my life”. Another soldier said, ‘I don’t think it will be easy to overcome the challenges [in the peace process]. If we have freedom of speech things would be different, we would be able to overcome it’.

*We do not have any rights except to obey the commands from authorities. If they command us to fight, we fight. If they command us to die, we die. We have to sacrifice our lives.*

Soldiers explained that the obligation to obey orders and the strict hierarchical nature of the army limited their ability to express their opinions. It also meant their own personal desires for peace were inconsequential when commands were given to fight on the frontline. One soldier explained, “There are always commands for us to fight, which we have to obey, however we don’t hate them [non-state armed group soldiers].”

Soldiers also shared restrictions they have in their day-to-day lives. They explained that they get limited time off and feel dissatisfied that they are not allowed to visit their families or places outside the camp. One soldier expressed, “A soldier has many difficulties. Trying to obey every command is not always

easy. We are not free. Sometimes I can't sleep when I want to, or I can't eat when I am hungry, it is suffocating".

### ***Preventing foreign invasion and the need for unity***

Soldiers considered their main role in the Tatmadaw was to protect Myanmar from foreign invasion. One soldier expressed, "There needs to be an army to protect from foreign attacks", while another stated, "The responsibility of soldiers is not only to fight but also to protect from foreign invasion, maintain sovereignty of the country and do things that are beneficial for the people".

Soldiers felt that conflict with non-state armed groups was distracting from the more pressing task of defending Myanmar from foreign invasion. Some soldier's expressed frustration with non-state armed group leadership and felt that ethnic nationalism and their lack of commitment was disrupting the achievement of peace. One soldier explained "I am a soldier and my job is to defend the country but the soldiers from the ethnic groups are only protecting their areas and ethnic group, they are not worried for the nation", while another attributed "ethnic nationalism from the various groups" as the biggest challenge to the peace process. He expressed, "for example the Karen say they have their territory and for Chin they have their own territory, with this ethnic nationalist spirit in place it is difficult to get peace".

Many participants expressed the need for national unity and for all armed groups (non-state armed groups and Tatmadaw) to work together. Soldiers felt this would strengthen national loyalty and would help the peace process to progress. One soldier said "The most important thing in the peace process is for all armed groups to respect, understand and empathise with each other." Another soldier explained, "They [Tatmadaw and

non-state armed group leadership] should talk about unity and focus on it to prevent disintegration of the country and promote unity of all ethnicities”. One soldier highlighted the diversity that exists within the Tatmadaw, he said, “[There are] not only Bamar in the Tatmadaw, there are all kinds of people. We need to change the stereotype”.

*I want to see a peaceful relationship between the National Armed Forces and the ethnic armed groups.*

Soldiers explained they did not want to fight soldiers from non-state armed groups. One soldier expressed, “I am tired of fighting against my own people. It is different if there is a foreign invasion”. This was particularly difficult for soldiers from ethnic minority groups. One soldier stated, “I am Kachin. I joined the army a long time ago. Fighting other Kachin soldiers is very painful for me.”

*If the whole country has peace we won't have to kill our own people. Instead we can focus on the country's development.*

### ***Impact of the peace process***

Soldiers have observed some improvements since the beginning of the peace process, but more commonly reported that their daily lives were unchanged. Several soldiers noted that there was “more peace” now. They observed the presence of fewer ethnic armed groups, decreased confrontation on frontlines, greater freedom of movement, and the ability to live freely. One soldier explained, “Since the ceasefire, things are much better here”.

*It did improve. Before, there were many ethnic armed groups but now there are fewer and there are so many new people surrendering. We could say things are improving since the shootings are on hold.*

Improvements such as an increase in tourism, foreign investment and business were noted, as well as improved transportation and communications such as phone and internet access. In particular, many soldiers highlighted greater access to free primary education for their families and communities as one direct impact of the peace process and as an important development.

*Peace is a long way away so we don't have interest in peace. The improvements we see are projects in the village. The military built a monastery in the village and gave communities contributions for development.*

Other soldiers felt that there were very few or no tangible benefits from the peace process.

*If you ask me what I think of the peace process, I don't see peace anywhere, because they are still fighting with ethnic armed groups. On the other hand people are talking about peace. So now people loose trust.*

One soldier explained that frontline battles continued and his daily life remained the same; orders to fight on the frontline were on-going as combat in Kachin and Karen States continued.

## Recommendation for the peace process

*I want every ethnic group to participate in the peace process. It is important to talk about how to respect each other's culture and traditions. In the peace process we need to discuss dissatisfaction, why people use weapons to fight, and how we can solve all those problems to finally achieve peace.*

Conversations with soldiers revealed a range of suggestions and recommendations aimed at strengthening the peace process to build sustainable peace.

### ***Continue negotiations***

The main recommendation from soldiers for the successful outcome of the peace process was for negotiations to continue. Many suggested the need for leaders from both sides to compromise, build trust and view each other as equals. Soldiers thought that if trust could be built between parties then they could discuss the causes of conflict.

One soldier explained, "At the negotiations they should talk openly about their differences and the root causes of current problems", while another stated, "We will have to compromise".

*If you know the disease, you can find the remedy. Similarly, only if we know the mistakes can we find the solution.*

Soldiers thought that discussion about the root causes of conflict would contribute to mutual understanding between all parties.

One soldier expressed, “There should be a mutual sharing of perspectives to develop common understanding between the two sides”.

### ***Development needs included in negotiations***

*I think there should be equality in the peace process. For example, if a father gives 10 kyat to his elder daughter and gives only 5 kyat to his younger son, there won't be peace. That's why there should be equality.*

Soldiers also suggested that business and social development should be discussed in negotiations. One soldier explained, “I think we need to discuss and negotiate how to develop business, how to develop the country and how to help those who are in poverty with no food and shelter. To have a ceasefire for ethnic groups to live in peace, we need both sides to sit down and negotiate”.

### ***Strengthening ceasefires***

Many soldiers emphasised the importance of maintaining ceasefires and were concerned that they would breakdown. Some shared experiences of ceasefire agreements breaking down in the past, which led to concerns that it could happen again. One soldier expressed, “I am afraid the past will repeat itself. Last time I thought we had peace but we had to fight again. I don't want to experience that again”. Another soldier conveyed, “If fighting escalates, not only will the situation worsen in rural areas, but it'll damage all the hard work we've put into the peace process.” Concern was also shared that misunderstanding or frustration might lead to a derailment of the peace process and people to abandon peace efforts.

Soldiers felt that further efforts to adhere to stipulations in ceasefire agreement would help to strengthen them. One soldier expressed, “It’s important for both sides to follow and implement agreements.” Another reinforced this point, “The main point of peace negotiations is to not only abide by the agreements at every level, but to also keep promises”.

### ***Including the needs of communities***

Many soldiers talked about the importance of including community needs in the peace process. One soldier explained, “I want the best interests of the people discussed in peace negotiations. If there aren’t any changes for citizens then it is worthless”, while another soldier said, “At peace conferences, I want them to discuss the needs of citizens”. Another soldier explained the need for community participation in the peace process, “Everyone, even the grassroots citizens, should be able to participate in the peace process”.

Some soldiers specifically expressed the need to include the needs of all ethnic groups. One soldier stated, “At peace negotiations the voice of ethnic people is very important. We need to clearly understand what they want and what we want. If the army really does that, peace will come”.

*In peace negotiations we have to mainly discuss what ethnic people want, need and their definition of peace. To overcome challenges we will have to work together.*

Soldiers spoke about the poverty and difficult conditions that they have observed for civilians in different states and regions across the country, and advocated for the need to improve community living standards and their economic situation. They talked about the importance of including issues such as

improvements to education, health and transportation systems, as well as the landmine problem and the need to discuss demining at peace discussions.

*If possible, I want them to discuss our needs and the development of education and health for poor people. They are still very backwards. I hope they talk about citizens' health and educational developments, because they are still under-developed. It would be very good if they could improve it. I want improvements to education, health and our living situation.*

## **Life in the rank and file**

Throughout conversations soldiers showed a strong desire to share information about their lives. Soldiers spoke about how they viewed their role as a job and much discussion surrounded the challenges they faced. They shared varied levels of satisfaction with their lives; some soldiers were very happy with their lives, while others felt frustrated. Much of the discussion consisted of comparisons and positive and negative elements of belonging to the Tatmadaw.

### ***Simply a job***

*I get my salary and it's enough to live.*

Most soldiers saw their role in the Tatmadaw as a job like any other. Many had joined the military for economic security and the regular salary that the Tatmadaw provided. Previous experience of poverty and the lack of economic opportunity

motivated many soldiers, one soldier explained, “I joined the army because I didn’t have a job and I didn’t have enough food to eat... if business was good, I wouldn’t have joined the army”.

Many soldiers joined the Tatmadaw to support their families. One soldier explained “[If I leave the military] I will no longer be able to support my mother”. Lack of education was another reason soldiers joined the army. Another soldier stated, “I joined the army when I lost both my parents, not because I am interested in the job”, and explained he had a low education level (6<sup>th</sup> grade) and no alternative income options.

Soldiers appreciate the reliable income and benefits provided by the Tatmadaw, particularly electricity and water. Exemption from taxes as well as a pension was another economic incentive. Aside from salary and economic advantages, healthcare and education for soldiers and their families was one of most highly regarded benefits of being in the Tatmadaw.

### ***Risks, job hazards and challenges***

*I thought being a soldier was only about holding a gun, but in reality it is very hard to be a soldier.*

Soldiers spoke about the risks they face, especially fighting on the frontlines and the fear they feel. One soldier said, “The experiences that I got from this operation were indeed terrifying”. Another shared, “I was assigned to be on the frontline immediately. I was just a trainee so I was scared. The battle scenes and sounds are not pleasant. About ten people from my side died. Even though I made it through my first battle it took one of my legs because I stepped on a landmine.”

Another soldier explained, “We lacked food because we spent most of our time in the forest”.

The fear of being on the frontline is ongoing for many soldiers who had not recovered from their battle experiences. “I only experienced one battle and it was terrifying. I do not feel safe even though the shooting has stopped”. Many soldiers shared additional concerns for their families and feared they would be left without support if they were killed at the frontline.

Soldiers also spoke about being discriminated against by communities. “Villagers do not want to welcome us because we are Tatmadaw soldiers”. Soldier’s children were discriminated against if they attended schools outside of the military camp, and found it difficult to make friends. Soldiers explained that the negative perceptions against them were due to the misconduct perpetrated by some soldiers, such as looting, raping, stealing, or taking villagers’ domestic animals.

Soldiers expressed concern about discrimination and wanted to live peacefully with communities. One soldier expressed his desire to “live with the people peacefully”. Many soldiers are concerned for the wellbeing of community members and hoped that communities’ living standards would improve soon.

## **The future: challenges and needs**

### ***Soldier’s reflections on their needs***

As the possibility of lasting peace in Myanmar is discussed at all levels, the impact of this prospect intimately affects the lives of Tatmadaw soldiers. Soldiers were split in their desire to stay or leave the Tatmadaw in a post-conflict era. About half of the Tatmadaw soldiers said they would prefer to remain in the military, while the other half expressed interest in reintegrating into civilian life.

## ***Desire to stay in the military***

*I will not quit if I get enough support here [the camp]... I want to live as a well-respected soldier with dignity and be a good soldier for the people.*

The most common motivation for soldiers to stay with the Tatmadaw in a post-conflict situation was their strong desire to protect Myanmar from foreign invasion. One soldier explained, “I didn’t join the army just to fight in battles. Even if all wars stopped, I would still serve in the army for my country’s security”. Another expressed, “If there are no internal threats, we still have external threats, so we will stay to protect the country. When the military is strong the country will also be strong”.

For many, the benefits that military life provides, coupled with their lack of employable skills also factored into the desire to remain in the military. Income security, retirement pension, housing, food, and educational benefits were frequently mentioned as reasons soldiers wanted to remain in the Tatmadaw. This was particularly important to those with families. One soldier said, “Even if I want to resign, it will be hard for me to earn enough money outside the army to support my family”. Another expressed that “Here in the army, they give us a small apartment to live in... and I have hope for my children when I receive a pension”. Many soldiers felt they lacked alternative skills and that life as a soldier was their only option. One soldier explained, “I am not a skilled person. In the end, I am just a soldier and we are here to fight”.

## ***Desire to reintegrate***

*As a soldier, to reintegrate into civilian life means I will have to start from the beginning, which I do not think will be easy.*

Soldiers who indicated a desire to reintegrate into civilian life saw the appeal of an end to fighting and living a peaceful life. Many explained that they did not wish to fight anymore and dreamt of other opportunities. Soldiers who wanted to reintegrate often expressed a common theme about wanting to help people, for instance, using their military skills to provide support for civilians during natural disasters. Overall, they expressed a strong desire for change and improvements to their lives. Returning to their families, starting a small business or farm, having a house and living a normal and happy peaceful life like other civilians were desires for many.

### ***Skills and livelihood support***

Soldiers explained they do not have the skills to obtain employment elsewhere or create their own businesses. Some soldiers explained they have farming skills but most identified that they only have skills to be a soldier. One soldier said, “As an ordinary soldier, I don’t even know how to think. To live my life as a civilian I will need a lot of support, because I do not have any basic skills. I will have to start my life from scratch”. Soldiers expressed the need for vocational training and other livelihood support, as well as job opportunities for reintegration into civilian life.

Many soldiers expressed that they needed assistance to set up a small business or would need economic opportunities. Entrepreneurial soldiers envisioned possibilities such as opening a computer shop or a garage to repair vehicles. Others thought

about possibilities such as becoming a taxi driver, bus driver, or security guard.

### ***Land and housing support***

*We joined military service because we had nothing to eat, but if we had land and a house we would have wanted to live a normal life.*

Land and housing support was another need identified by soldiers during conversations. Some older soldiers, who had spent most of their lives in the army, did not have any housing or land outside of the camp. They expressed their need for a house and a plot of land to reintegrate successfully.

*Things will only be easier if I have a place to stay. It is hard to earn money on a daily basis. I need help and support. It is hard to live [outside] if there is no shelter and not enough food. It would not be possible without help.*

Some soldiers recognised that support for reintegration would not come only from the government, but that they would also need social and economic support from their communities as well. A soldier expressed, “If I resign from the army, I will need support from other civilians to help me start a new life. My life will only be easier if they support me with food, clothes, and shelter”. With regards to behavior, soldiers explained that they needed support to “relate to others in the community”, because they had lived a military lifestyle for many years. One soldier explained, “I have lost all contact with the outside world, and thus it will take a long time for me to settle down as a civilian”.

## OVERCOMING PREJUDICE - INSIGHTS FROM THE LISTENERS

Speaking to soldiers from the Tatmadaw posed many challenges for the listeners. The listening teams comprised individuals from different states and regions across Myanmar representing multiple ethnicities, including Bamar and various minority ethnic groups. For many, this was the first time they had engaged with soldiers from the Myanmar Military. Most recognised before beginning the project that they had overtly negative perceptions of the Tatmadaw as an institution and of Tatmadaw soldiers as individuals.

Listeners were asked to reflect on what they learned from this experience. They shared the following:

- I learned a lot about military people and their lives. We have a stereotype of the soldiers, and now we have seen how people are. I learned that we have similar ideas and similar concerns as some of the soldiers.
- I learned about their lifestyle and about their difficulties. I learned that these people are not a threat. They are not monsters to be afraid of.
- They [Tatmadaw soldiers] want to express their feelings but they cannot do it. But you could tell they have feelings like ordinary people. Regular people can say whatever they want, but soldiers can't. So in a way I feel sorry for them.
- When I look at the whole process, at the beginning I told myself *I will really try*. Then I thought *this is really impossible*. Everyone said that they don't communicate with soldiers very much. They're afraid of them, they

don't talk to them very much. I had mixed feelings about it: between not wanting to go there and finishing my task. Now I feel like we are friends, and for my work, future, and activities I feel like I can relate to them. I recall the statement of Aung San Suu Kyi: if you're not afraid then it's not bravery. But if you are afraid and still carry out the task then it is bravery. Now we have many friends, we've met many people. After this training I will see these people again. Instead of speaking from below, we spoke at the same level. There was no fear.

- People hate soldiers so much. So when I took on this role, I thought I would still hate them, but this is my role and I'll take it on. When they told us about their lives, I sympathised with them. Their life is very bad, five to six times worse than ordinary people. These soldiers said, "I don't want to shoot ethnic people, but since we are ordered to do that, we have to do it. So we are victims of the system". So after all, my level of hatred towards the soldiers reduced. I started seeing the difference between the soldiers and the military leadership.
- In the beginning I thought we were going to go there, make the conversation, and then go. But when I was actually there I felt I was part of it. When we talk about peace, we are in a process. So now we go out and we spoke to soldiers, and this is part of the process. Our attitude towards them has changed.
- Before 2010 there was a lot of fighting in our area, and all armed groups and the Tatmadaw were fighting. When the fighting was going on, the community suffered, civilians were often taken as human shields. But now I understand they [soldiers] have to obey the orders. I started to feel empathy for them and to understand their situation. On the other hand, when I look back at

what they do I feel angry again. But knowing them now, I can start to forgive. We have a saying in Burmese, *if one fish in a bowl is rotten; all the fish in the bowl die*. That's what I thought of the army. Now I understand it's not like that. There are good people in the army. I feel proud, I feel happy, I feel pleased because before I had fear but I was able to overcome that fear and talk to the soldiers. If I had not faced my fear, I could never have overcome it. Now that I faced it, I'm over it. I don't fear anymore. I had to use my head and my brain a lot. This was also a way to re-claim my brain.

Some spoke about the uneasy transition they experienced; they still hated Tatmadaw soldiers because of the way they had seen their communities treated but at the same time they could see that they were just normal people who struggled economically and wanted to look after their families. The process of listening and hearing the voices of Tatmadaw soldiers provided an opportunity for listeners to begin to view soldiers as people; as more than the institution and legacy of violence associated with Tatmadaw soldiers.

## CONCLUSIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Through the act of listening, this project reveals the ‘human face’ of soldiers. Soldiers in the Tatmadaw are relatable and understandable. They are individuals with varied opinions, who face economic challenges and have concern for their families. Soldiers articulate their fears as they face the frontlines and want fighting to stop.

Across the board, Tatmadaw soldiers support the peace process and have some level of empathy with ethnic issues. Of course, there were some soldiers who felt that ethnic leaders and their desire for ethnic nationalism was disrupting the peace process but for most this was surpassed by their desire for peace.

Soldiers also possessed a high level of self-awareness. They expressed awareness that communities feel animosity towards them. They were also very aware of their own personal limitations, whether in the area of education, job skills or social skills relevant outside of the military structure.

The aim of this project was to examine the Tatmadaw, as an institution, more deeply, and to expand the understanding of individual soldiers that make up this institution. To share opinions, experiences and hopes for the future of individual soldiers. How the public views the Tatmadaw will largely be determined by the Tatmadaw’s institutional policy such as its communication policy and the resulting behaviour and treatment of civilians by soldiers. However, this modest study demonstrates there is real potential for the Tatmadaw to transform its image in the eyes of the public and to be understood differently.

Historically, and currently, the Tatmadaw plays a prevailing role in Myanmar's military and political spheres. This influence is due to engagement in military and political affairs that has lasted over six decades. The peace process requires similar attention. On-going commitment is needed from Tatmadaw leaders and all groups involved in the peace process to understand the institution, where it has come from, where it is now and what motivates its on-going policies and position in relation to the peace process. Identifying the 'human face' of soldiers through listening and the potential for the Tatmadaw to transform its image, seen in this project, show that there are opportunities for future engagement of the Tatmadaw in the peace process.

This project highlights the need for all groups working for peace in Myanmar to continue to ask questions. There is a need for greater understanding between groups involved in conflict, and to challenge assumptions that prevent collaboration and engagement.

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