The Army of Poets and Students Fighting a Forgotten War

0:01

from The New York Times I'm Katherine

0:02

benold this is the

0:04

[Music]

0:12

daily Myanmar is home to one of the

0:15

deadliest most intractable Civil Wars on

0:17

the planet but something new and

0:20

remarkable is

0:21

happening an unusual wave of young

0:24

people from the cities including

0:25

students poets Baristas have joined the

0:28

country's Rebel militias

0:30

this Coalition is now making startling

0:33

gains against myanmar's military

0:38

dictatorship today my colleague Hannah

0:41

Beach takes us inside this surprising

0:44

resistance

0:45

[Music]

0:58

movement it's Monday June

1:00

[Music]

1:04

24th Hannah you've been covering a war

1:07

that is barely getting any attention in

1:09

the world we hear a lot about Gaza in

1:11

Ukraine but you've been covering this

1:13

war in Myanmar and now three years in

1:17

something is Shifting in a really

1:18

unexpected way tell us what's

1:21

happening I think when we imagine a

1:24

Civil War in Southeast Asia we expect I

1:27

don't know gorillas and combat fatigues

1:29

fighting in the jungle and yes you do

1:32

have those longtime Rebel Fighters but

1:35

what's happening now is that these

1:39

veteran soldiers have partnered with a

1:41

new and exciting Force which is young

1:44

people from the cities who have joined

1:47

together with these old guys and they've

1:48

decided to fight the good fight for an

1:51

ideal called

1:53

democracy and remarkably 3 years after

1:57

this Civil War began they're starting to

2:00

win wow and just for context remind us

2:03

how this war started where are we in

2:06

this story so for about 50 years Myanmar

2:10

was stuck in this kind of awful

2:12

preserved and Amber military

2:14

dictatorship and then about a decade ago

2:18

the mymar military leaders they started

2:20

to peacefully transfer some of the power

2:23

to a democratically elected

2:26

leadership and that civilian leadership

2:29

was led by I think the one Burmese

2:31

person that people might know D anang

2:34

suuchi she's a Nobel Peace Prize laurate

2:36

and she's very eloquent in English and

2:39

she was this kind of paragon of

2:42

democracy and nonviolent resistance to

2:45

this big bad military dictatorship yeah

2:48

I remember actually how she was

2:50

celebrated there were sort of pop art

2:52

posters of her fa and she gave lectures

2:55

in Oxford and of course even Obama

2:57

visited her exactly she was up there

3:00

with the Dal Lama with with Nelson

3:03

Mandela and so yes you're right

3:05

President Obama visited not once but

3:08

twice I mean to this little country in

3:10

Southeast Asia that people had barely

3:12

heard of but then the Myanmar military

3:16

Unleashed an ethnic cleansing campaign

3:19

against the ethnic minority ringa

3:22

Muslims and Onan sui who was constantly

3:26

under pressure from the military goes to

3:28

an international Court and defends the

3:31

military against charges of

3:33

genocide and it's at that moment where

3:36

all these world leaders who' wanted to

3:38

associate themselves with the great

3:40

things that were happening in Myanmar

3:41

were a little bit

3:43

embarrassed and foreign governments just

3:45

sort of backed

3:47

away right so Anan suuchi who

3:51

represented in a way the hope of

3:53

democracy to many in the west sides with

3:55

the military on persecuting the rohinga

3:58

and it's a embarrassment for all the

4:01

people that endorsed and supported her

4:03

yeah and I think that's the context in

4:05

which this cou happs right so February

4:08

2021 the military arrests the civilian

4:13

leadership of the country puts Don

4:15

Sansui in jail and the people who

4:19

suddenly lose so much from the

4:22

resumption of military rule go out on

4:24

the streets and there are millions of

4:25

people on the streets who are peacefully

4:28

protesting and the military does what it

4:30

has done over and over and over again

4:33

with Pro democracy movements in myamar

4:35

which is to shoot people on the

4:36

streets and that catalyzes a lot of

4:40

young people you know doctors and

4:42

lawyers and engineers and airplane

4:45

mechanics and Poets and civil servants

4:48

to do something

4:50

unprecedented which is to escape from

4:53

the cities and make their way to the

4:55

Borderlands of Myanmar where a bunch of

4:58

ethnic militias have for Generations

5:01

been fighting the military hun and they

5:04

join with these ethnic militias and form

5:06

a unified armed resistance so students

5:12

and other young people from the cities

5:14

join this armed resistance against a

5:17

real army with a brutal history it

5:19

doesn't really sound like they stand a

5:20

chance it doesn't and I think those of

5:22

us who've watched myamar for a while

5:26

sort of expected it to be a David and

5:29

Goliath story in which Goliath

5:31

wins but a few months ago I started

5:34

hearing something that surprised me

5:37

which is that a coalition of these

5:40

resistance groups these militias had

5:43

launched an offensive and within a few

5:46

months you had dozens of towns that

5:51

changed from hunda control to Rebel

5:54

control you had hundreds of yma army

5:58

outposts that changed hands to

6:01

resistance control and so by the time

6:04

the kind of dust settled you had a

6:06

situation in which more than half of the

6:09

territory of Myanmar is now in

6:13

resistance hands wow it is an

6:16

unprecedented rate of success for a rag

6:21

tag group some of whom two years ago had

6:24

never even picked up a gun I mean that

6:27

that's incredible so they basically W

6:29

back more than half of the territory and

6:33

and they did so in just a few months how

6:35

is that possible I mean what are these

6:37

Rebels doing yeah that's a question that

6:39

I really wanted the answer to as well

6:42

and that's the main reason that I worked

6:44

with our security team and my editors to

6:46

be able to organize a trip back to

6:49

Myanmar we're traveling on a road that

6:52

is often mined so the uh driver is

6:55

trying to be as careful as possible to

6:58

actually get there

7:00

um we went in a pretty convoluted route

7:03

because the main roads in the area where

7:07

we were which is called Karen states are

7:10

mostly within sites of the Myanmar

7:12

military and so we were worried about

7:15

being targets and so we had to take back

7:19

jungle

7:21

roads and all of a sudden I see in front

7:24

of me a very Brown Flat River and I'm

7:28

looking at it and I see absolutely no

7:31

bridge and we're in this pickup truck

7:33

and I think how in the world are we

7:35

going to cross this River so here is

7:39

a

7:41

boat and here is our

7:44

car and I see in front of me these sort

7:49

of long boats with engines on the back

7:52

and in between these boats they have

7:55

kind of a pieces of wood like planks and

7:58

apparently are

8:00

car is going to go on there which seems

8:04

like a mathematical impossibility but

8:06

we'll see how it goes and we go over

8:09

these two planks and I hope he's got

8:11

good driving

8:13

skills who here we go here we go here we

8:16

go and suddenly we have landed on top

8:20

and we're balanced in between the two

8:22

boats and this is our car

8:26

fairy a car fairy kareni Style

8:29

this is the kind of Ingenuity that

8:31

happens in times of War so we're back on

8:35

these jungle roads and our destination

8:38

is a place where a rebel group called

8:40

The k&f the uh keni nationalities

8:43

Defense Force is setting up a functional

8:47

government in a place that until really

8:50

recently had been the sight of

8:51

incredibly intense fighting and after

8:54

hour after hour of going either through

8:57

jungles or passing these empty Villages

9:00

suddenly we started seeing people and we

9:03

started seeing livestock and we started

9:04

seeing cars and we pull up in sort of

9:10

like a parking lot and a guy comes up to

9:13

me and he uses the former name from

9:16

myammar which is Burma and he says

9:18

welcome to Free Burma wow so you are now

9:22

in Rebel Health territory and what does

9:25

free Burma look like free Burma is this

9:31

weird combination of young students who

9:35

really want to engage in deep

9:37

conversations about Marxism and about

9:41

democracy except you're in the middle of

9:44

the Jungle and you know you hear mortars

9:46

every now and then and they've had to

9:49

build everything themselves they've set

9:52

up refugee camps for displaced people a

9:55

whole functioning government

9:57

Administration in the jungle Hill

9:59

of the poorest state in Myanmar and the

10:04

amazing thing is they've built all of

10:06

this without a functioning power grid

10:08

there's no running water there no phone

10:09

lines and there's no normal internet and

10:12

so photographer Adam Ferguson and I

10:15

traveled around and and we went to

10:18

wedding parties and we met with young

10:20

girls who were singing resistance songs

10:25

[Music]

10:32

I don't speak Burmese but I'm listening

10:34

to these songs and the melody is sort of

10:36

transporting me and then as I was

10:38

listening to the lyrics It Was burmes

10:40

burmes burmes and all of a sudden I hear

10:42

the words

10:43

[Music]

10:49

democracy heard it in songs and I heard

10:51

it in basic training by these recruits

10:55

to the CDF

11:04

and I asked around and it turns out that

11:06

the phrase democracy doesn't really have

11:10

a translation in burmes this is

11:13

something that people were laying their

11:15

lives for but they were also singing it

11:19

and saying it in English and it kind of

11:21

underscored to me how powerful this

11:23

ideology was for

11:25

[Music]

11:26

them and so I wanted to go and embed

11:29

with this force and see what they were

11:32

doing and understand the motivations of

11:35

some of these people who had joined this

11:37

Rebel

11:38

[Music]

11:45

Force we'll be right

11:51

back Hannah you said you wanted to embed

11:54

with these Rebel forces where did you

11:57

end up going so for all of karani State

12:00

there's essentially One hospital to

12:03

which all casualties are taken and to

12:07

get there you travel down a jungle path

12:10

and you bump bump bump bump in there are

12:13

buildings some of them are made of brick

12:16

but mostly it's

12:19

bamboo this is a secret Hospital in the

12:23

jungle somewhere in ki State and sort of

12:27

out of nothing out of the forest

12:30

they've built uh an emergency room over

12:33

there here's an operating

12:36

theater uh over there and there is a

12:39

functional hospital that has been built

12:42

by Young doctors and nurses and Medics

12:46

from the cities who all came with a

12:48

common purpose which was to join the

12:51

resistance

12:52

movement and one of the people who made

12:56

the biggest impression on me was a young

12:58

woman Nam named lenon and she she worked

13:01

as a medic treating wounded soldiers and

13:05

victims of landmines everybody know

13:08

misle yes so know she's been part of the

13:11

resistance in kenni since the very

13:13

beginning and she was really striking we

13:17

were in the canteen which was this Shack

13:20

with a dirt floor and she was wearing

13:22

these pink pajamas and fluffy slippers

13:25

so she has a very big social media

13:27

presence I yeah she does she does knows

13:30

not that much yeah and Lynn was from a

13:35

big city in Myanmar how did you decide

13:38

uh to join the resistance movement and

13:42

uh what what propelled you to do

13:45

that um you know like I am just 25 years

13:49

of Youth I have she describes herself as

13:52

just a normal

13:54

kid she sold Cosmetics online she went

13:57

to med school yeah

13:59

um on 2021 February I joined to the

14:03

produ and um like when the coup happens

14:09

she joins a protest Movement Like many

14:12

young people they started shooting and

14:15

starting killing the people you know but

14:18

when the crackdowns happened most of her

14:21

friends she says just went home and kept

14:24

their heads down so they told me not to

14:27

do so just go back to the university and

14:29

just fin your

14:31

degree and there was something in Lynn

14:34

that was not able to just go back to her

14:37

old life so I choose my way you choose

14:40

your way and yeah and so she made this

14:44

decision to run away and became part of

14:49

this resistance movement and what was

14:52

that transition like I mean that's quite

14:55

a big thing to go to the jungle and

14:58

completely change your

14:59

life I think it was really really hard I

15:03

mean it is an intense experience for a

15:07

comfortable City girl to end up in the

15:09

middle of jungle

15:11

warfare and she has been working she

15:14

actually doesn't have her medical degree

15:16

because she left before she was able to

15:18

get it but every day she is working

15:22

triage and she is wrapping bullet wounds

15:26

and getting pieces of shrapnel out of

15:29

wounded

15:32

soldiers she has a saw that she uses for

15:35

amputations for the victims of landmines

15:38

a saw a saw yes yeah everybody has their

15:42

own

15:43

saw and she is getting kind of a medical

15:46

education that you would never get you

15:48

know in the theoretical world of a

15:50

Medical

15:51

University she is trained to plunge her

15:56

hands into the chest cavities of wounded

15:59

soldiers to extract pieces of

16:03

shrapnel and what she has is a

16:07

commitment to this idea of

16:10

democracy um that that I think is

16:13

extraordinarily powerful and she is

16:15

literally laying down her life for that

16:18

cause and Lynn is just one member of

16:23

hundreds of groups with tens of

16:25

thousands of people in them in this

16:27

resistance which at this moment of time

16:30

seem to really be turning the tide

16:32

against the

16:33

[Music]

16:35

military it's so clear that these Rebels

16:39

are fighting for something they really

16:41

believe in but how is this Coalition how

16:44

are these groups like The kdf you spent

16:46

time with actually winning territory

16:49

back from a professional

16:52

military yeah I mean you're you're right

16:54

the Myanmar military is very well

16:57

equipped it has fighter jets it has big

17:00

bad War making machines but one of the

17:03

things that the rebels have is kind of a

17:07

game Cher and an equalizer in Modern

17:10

Warfare and that's a cheap homemade

17:13

drone you mean like a very simple drone

17:16

the kind that I bought for my daughter

17:18

at Best Buy yeah so if you take that

17:21

drone that you got for your daughter at

17:23

Best Buy and you hand it to a k Rebel

17:26

Soldier and they go on the internet

17:29

and they start communicating with

17:31

somebody in Ukraine they take that very

17:35

simple drone and they start adding bits

17:38

and pieces to it and they change

17:40

something that is used for photography

17:44

and they turn it into a machine that can

17:47

drop bombs on the enemy front lines wow

17:53

so they're actually communicating with

17:56

other pro-democracy Fighters if you will

17:59

in Ukraine and other places about how to

18:01

do this yeah and it was really

18:03

remarkable because when I went to the

18:05

Drone base of the k&f they were using

18:09

laser cutters they were using 3D

18:11

printers and they were creating kind of

18:13

a modern Fleet of drones that has the

18:17

potential to fight against something

18:20

like a fighter jet and that really is a

18:22

game Cher it's interesting so these

18:24

Rebel drones are clearly proving to be a

18:26

real headache for the military

18:29

is that the main reason or is there

18:31

anything else that explains the rebel

18:33

success I think the main reason is this

18:37

really unlikely Alliance that has formed

18:40

between the kids from the cities who

18:43

have come to the jungles and this array

18:47

of ethnic militias some of these ethnic

18:50

militias in a complicated way don't like

18:53

each other and so not only are they

18:55

fighting the hunda but they're also

18:57

fighting themselves and what has changed

18:59

for the first time since the coup is

19:02

that these ethnic militias that had

19:05

these kind of

19:06

interesing problems have decided to

19:09

unify for a common goal which is to

19:12

fight the Hunter and they're beginning

19:14

to train and help the young people who

19:17

are coming from the cities and that's

19:19

really something that's never happened

19:20

before mhm most of these young people

19:24

from the cities may have played video

19:26

games and that was their experience of

19:28

War beforehand and then they're coming

19:31

into the jungle and they don't know how

19:32

to fight I mean they shouldn't know how

19:34

to fight but they were given training

19:38

and weapons and kind of military knowhow

19:41

how to throw a grenade how to protect

19:45

yourself basic first state all of these

19:47

things were being taught to them and

19:50

these City kids have been fighting and

19:53

dying alongside members of these ethnic

19:56

militias and I think this TR that has

19:59

developed between them um has really

20:01

changed the tenor of the war so you know

20:05

given that they're gaining territory

20:07

given that this Alliance for the first

20:09

time seems to be holding is there a

20:12

chance that they actually win that's a

20:15

very good question as difficult as what

20:17

has happened has been for the resistance

20:20

I think it's the easy part capturing

20:23

remote areas is a lot easier than moving

20:26

into the heartland of country where the

20:29

big cities are and that's going to be a

20:32

really difficult thing for the

20:33

resistance to be able to push into and

20:36

claim so what lies ahead is the really

20:40

tough part oh yes let's say somehow the

20:43

resistance is able to push in and put

20:47

the Hun on its back heels in the

20:49

Heartland and kick them out of some big

20:52

cities at a certain point I think

20:55

members of their Alliance are going to

20:57

realize that they have fundamentally

20:59

different goals some of the ethnic

21:01

militias want to become independent of a

21:04

country called Myanmar some of them want

21:07

to control the gains of inlisted economy

21:12

myamar is one of the biggest producers

21:14

of methamphetamine of fentanyl of opium

21:19

and then there also some people who

21:21

really want democracy and so it's very

21:24

hard to imagine even if they succeed

21:27

militarily for these groups to be able

21:31

to agree on what they Envision Myanmar

21:35

to look like so does that mean the idea

21:39

of some future United democracy is not

21:43

actually

21:45

realistic across these different groups

21:48

everybody agrees the idea of federal

21:51

democracy is a good

21:54

thing I don't know when it comes down to

21:58

actually forming a new government should

22:02

the resistance be able to do so whether

22:06

the temptation of power will prove to be

22:11

a a more potent Force than this Gauzy

22:14

idea of federal democracy and I think

22:17

the reality right now and even should

22:21

the resistance win is a myammar that is

22:25

fractured and splintered so what does

22:28

that mean mean for the young people

22:29

fighting in the jungle are they talking

22:32

about this are they conscious of the

22:34

risks of their country being fractured

22:37

and splintered and are they prepared for

22:39

such an outcome you know it's very easy

22:42

for political theorists to talk about is

22:44

this a fractured state or is this a

22:46

splintered state or is this you know a

22:48

functioning

22:49

democracy but I think for the people who

22:53

are actually on the ground they are

22:56

fighting for very specific things which

22:58

is a resumption of their lives as they

23:01

were before the the coup and that was a

23:04

life in which things were slowly getting

23:06

better and they had certain freedoms and

23:08

they were able to vote and they were

23:10

able to participate in a yes flawed

23:15

democracy but a democracy nonetheless

23:18

and that is what they're fighting

23:21

[Music]

23:26

for and revolution s fail and they fail

23:31

and they fail until they succeed and I

23:34

think for the young people who are in

23:38

Myanmar they are willing to give their

23:41

lives for what maybe to me seems a slim

23:46

chance but for them it's what keeps them

23:48

going day after day in the jungles to

23:51

fight for a better future for young

23:55

people and for all the people in Myanmar

23:58

[Music]

24:01

Hannah thank you thank you

24:04

[Music]

24:18

Katherine we'll be right back

24:35

[Music]

24:36

here's what else you need to know today

24:39

on Sunday Israel's prime minister

24:41

Benjamin Netanyahu lashed out at the

24:43

United States for the second time in a

24:44

week Netanyahu accused the Biden

24:47

administration of withholding weapons

24:49

for the war in Gaza his comments came as

24:52

Israel's Minister of Defense arrived in

24:54

Washington for meetings with senior us

24:56

officials

24:58

tensions over Israel's conduct during

25:00

its war in Gaza have been rising between

25:02

Netanyahu and Biden in recent weeks a

25:05

day before Nan's latest complaints

25:07

Israeli soldiers tied a wounded

25:09

Palestinian to the top of a military

25:11

vehicle in the West Bank the scene was

25:13

captured on video and quickly went viral

25:15

causing

25:16

outrage the Israeli military set the ACT

25:19

violated military procedure and that

25:21

there would be an investigation

25:23

[Music]

25:27

[Applause]

25:29

today's episode was produced by Shannon

25:31

linnn Nina Feldman relle bonja with help

25:34

from ASA

25:35

chatra it was edited by MJ Davis Lynn

25:38

with help from Patricia willins contains

25:41

original music by Dan Powell and Diane

25:43

Wong and was engineered by Chris Wood

25:47

our theme music is by Jim brunberg and

25:49

Ben lansor of wandy

25:51

[Music]

25:55

[Applause]

26:01

that's it for the daily I'm Katherine

26:03

benold see you tomorrow

English (auto-generated)