

Violent crackdown on Myanmar protests leaves 18 dead

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Protests against the military coup in Myanmar were violently attacked by security forces yesterday, leaving 18 people dead and more than 30 wounded, according to the UN Human Rights Office. The bloodshed signals a further shift by the military junta towards the use of repression to try to stamp out a growing nationwide movement of mass protests and strikes opposed to the dictatorship.

Police and soldiers opened fire on crowds of peaceful demonstrators, with live rounds and rubber bullets, in multiple locations across Myanmar. Large deployments of riot police, armed with batons and shields, charged into crowds in both cities and rural areas, indiscriminately attacking protesters and by-standers.

In Yangon, the nation's largest city and a centre of the anti-coup movement, police were out in force early and took up positions at the usual demonstration sites, detaining protesters as they arrived.

At around 8:30 a.m., police moved on thousands of marching doctors, nurses, and students from the city's medical universities, who had gathered near Hledan Centre intersection. Social media footage showed police beating protesters and shoving the injured into police trucks. Around 200 medical students were detained.

Similar assaults were conducted against a teachers' rally in the Yankin district and elsewhere throughout the city. After tear gas and shots in the air failed to disperse crowds, police began firing live ammunition at protesters. Dozens were shot and three young men died from their wounds. A woman also died of a suspected heart attack, after police set off a wave of stun grenades, her daughter and a colleague said.

In the south-eastern city of Dawei, at least four people were shot dead and 40 injured, the *Irrawaddy* reported. An ambulance driver in Bago, the site of

another bloody state clampdown, told *Agence France Presse* he had sent the bodies of two 18-year-olds, shot dead, straight to the mortuary.

As the day went on, a bystander on a motorcycle died after being shot in the head by police in Mandalay, Myanmar's second largest city. Several volunteers providing medical aid to protesters were shot and injured. Later in the day, another passer-by was shot in the head and died instantly.

Meanwhile in Pakkoku, Magway Region, a man attempting to hide from soldiers in the street was shot dead. Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State, also witnessed a determined crackdown in which 50 protesters were detained by authorities.

Despite such repressive measures, however, protesters were mostly undeterred by the deadly shootings and continued their marches in the afternoon. The exceptions were the towns of Lashio and Myeik, where police succeeded in breaking up protests.

The Myanmar protests have rapidly grown in scale over the past four weeks since the February 1 coup, when the armed forces—known as the Tatmadaw—seized control of the country and arrested leaders of the democratically-elected government, citing unfounded allegations of voter fraud in last November's election. Protesters have demanded the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and her National Democratic League (NLD) and an end to the military dictatorship.

The junta's methods of repression after the coup—internet shutdown, media censorship, a year-long state of emergency—took a decisively drastic turn on February 20, when a crackdown on a shipyard workers' strike in Mandalay involved the direct firing of live rounds at protesters, resulting in at least two deaths and over 30 injuries.

The repression was stepped up on Friday as a troop

of riot police charged protesters in the Hledan and Myaynigone districts of Yangon. Local media reported that shots were fired in the air near Yangon University, a main rallying point of the movement. Residents of the neighbourhood opened their doors to fleeing demonstrators. In Mandalay, four people were seriously wounded by shots from live rounds, with at least ten more injured by batons and slingshots.

In response, protesters and strikers have constructed barricades out of garbage bins and carts around areas of Yangon. They also began equipping themselves with hard hats, gas masks, and makeshift shields.

On Saturday, the crackdown intensified again. Police charges in Yangon targeted anyone in their path, including volunteer medics, trishaw drivers, and a pregnant woman. Bloody raids were reported nationwide. State-run television network MRTV announced that 479 protesters had been arrested on Saturday alone, among them numerous journalists.

In Monywa, the largest city of Sagaing Region in the northwest, one woman is believed to have been shot and seriously wounded. Witnesses of the Monywa protests, which comprised largely of teachers, told Reuters news agency that police surrounded the crowd and then used water cannon. Earlier, citizens of Monywa had reportedly declared a self-administrative city, accountable only to the representatives of the suspended parliament.

The current crackdown is taking place within the context of heightening political tensions. Thein Soe, chairman of the junta-appointed election commission, declared on Friday that the results of the November polls were officially invalid, despite the NLD's landslide victory. On the same day, Myanmar's Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun made a public appeal to the UN "to use any means necessary to take action against the Myanmar military." He read the statement on behalf of Suu Kyi and her cabinet, who, he said, were still the legitimate government.

In the meantime, uncertainty has grown over Suu Kyi's whereabouts, as the independent Myanmar Now website reported she was moved this week from house arrest to an undisclosed location. The next hearing in her case is scheduled for today.

It is not Suu Kyi and her NLD that are undermining the junta, but an extensive movement of the working class. The military is desperate to put a halt to a

growing movement of striking workers that threatens to bring economic activity to a standstill. Loosely organised under the leadership of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), the widespread work stoppages and walkouts have effectively paralysed major sections of the economy: the civil service, healthcare, banking, education, and transport.

UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar Tom Andrews has estimated that around three-quarters of the country's one million civil servants are on strike. Additionally, junta leader General Min Aung Hlaing revealed this week that one-third of the nation's hospitals are no longer functioning due to disruptions.

The power of this movement was demonstrated during last Monday's general strike, in which millions turned out and refused to work under the military regime. This drew together doctors, miners, electricity workers, garbage collectors, and supermarket employees.

After Monday, strikes appear to be expanding into new sectors. Truck drivers began a strike against the coup on Thursday, by refusing to transport goods from the docks at Yangon's four main ports. Joint secretary of the Myanmar Container Trucking Association said he estimates that about 90 percent of the city's 4000 drivers are on strike, and have promised to deliver only essential food, medicine and fabrics for factories.

The junta's deep fear of an imminent economic crisis underscores the violence now being used, to try to suppress the upsurge of the working class as quickly as possible. Economic growth for the financial year 2020–21 is expected to be just 0.5 percent, due partly to Myanmar's failure to attract significant foreign investment, but above all to the global downturn caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.



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