Myanmar military unleashes bloodiest crackdown since coup

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7 March 2021

The military regime in Myanmar is escalating its use of lethal force and unrestrained violence against protesters, after launching a deadly crackdown last Wednesday that killed at least 38 people and wounded many more, according to the United Nations. Implementing a variety of methods, the junta's repression is aimed at intimidating protesters and halting the nationwide movement against the February 1 military coup.

Mass arrests, night time raids, and brutal assaults on protests have become more frequent over recent days in the lead-up to a planned general strike today. An alliance of nine major trade unions called on members and "all Myanmar people" to participate in a "full extended shutdown" of economic activity, the *Straits Times* reported.

Wednesday's bloodshed surpassed the vicious crackdown on February 28, only three days earlier, which resulted in the deaths of at least 18 protesters. As previously, riot police and combat troops armed with assault rifles mounted a coordinated offensive early Wednesday morning in towns and cities across the country, firing live rounds on peaceful demonstrators with little warning.

In Mandalay, the second-largest city, three protesters were shot dead as police and soldiers broke up a rally of around 1,000 teachers and students. One of the victims, Ma Kyal Sin, 19, was reportedly shot in the head by a rooftop sniper after she busted a water pipe so that protesters affected by tear gas could wash their eyes. Before attending Wednesday's demonstration, Kyal Sin posted on Facebook her blood type, a contact number, and a request to donate her body for medical science, prepared to risk possible death at the hands of the military.

According to data compiled by an analyst who spoke anonymously to Associated Press, two deaths were also reported in the town of Salin, Magwe Region, while Mawlamyine, Myingyan, and Kalay each had one death. In the central city of Monywa, the scene of several large protests, eight protesters were killed and at least 30 injured. Moreover, multiple medics claimed to have seen two other bodies dragged away by security forces, but could not confirm if they had died.

Yangon, the country's largest city and centre of anti-coup protests and strikes, saw the worst of the violence with an estimated 18 people killed. In response to a recent wave of state crackdowns across the city, protesters have erected barricades from tyres and barbed wire to block major roads.

In Yangon's North Okkalapa Township, a morning march of over 1,000 people was quickly targeted by security forces, who chased and detained hundreds. Protesters hiding in nearby residences could hear continuous gunfire. Myanmar Now news agency reported that one protester heard conversations between soldiers and police outside: "We heard them saying, 'Can't you shoot? What are you afraid of? Shoot them all! Kill them all!'"

Social media footage showed lines of young men, hands on heads, filing into army trucks as soldiers stood guard. Video taken by North Okkalapa locals, observing from above, showed a man who was pulled out of a building by police and executed on the spot before his body being dragged away.

That afternoon, residents gathered together and urged police to release the numerous wounded detainees inside prison trucks. Soldiers armed with semi-automatic machine guns turned on the crowd and fired non-stop for around five minutes, witnesses said. Stun grenades and tear gas were also used amid the chaos before the trucks finally left.

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Outrage erupted on social media after a widely circulated video taken from CCTV footage was published by Radio Free Asia, showing a mob of police officers brutally kicking and thrashing three ambulance crew members with rifle butts—in retaliation for providing medical aid to injured protesters. In general, police appear to be singling out medical workers for arrest because the healthcare sector was among the first to resist the military junta and establish the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) of strikes and work stoppages over a month ago.

Later that night, soldiers continued to terrorise residents as 20 military trucks entered the township and started firing indiscriminately. Eight people were confirmed dead from the North Okkalapa crackdown, while another 73 sustained serious injuries, some of them life-threatening.

"It's horrific, it's a massacre. No words can describe the situation and our feelings," young protester Thinzar Shunlei Yi told Reuters of the military's assault in Yangon.

Aid agency Save the Children said that four children were among Wednesday's fatalities, including a 14-year-old boy who was reportedly shot dead by a soldier on a passing military convoy. The troops loaded his body onto a truck and left the scene.

Nearly 1,700 people have been arrested since the coup, according to UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet, among them 29 journalists. In reality, the number is far higher, as state-run media previously said 1,300 people had been detained on February 28 alone.

Despite the dramatic intensification of the military's crackdown on protesters, continued have continued undeterred around Myanmar every day since Wednesday.

On Thursday, police dispersed gatherings with tear gas and gunfire in several cities, but their repression was more restrained than the day before. More protesters came equipped with hard hats, motorbike helmets, facemasks, and makeshift shields. The CDM's Twitter account released a video of young protesters conducting drills with shields, in anticipation of future military onslaughts.

A crowd of thousands of engineering students marched through Mandalay on Friday, the day after Kyal Sin's funeral drew tens of thousands from around the city. The crowd chanted, "We're not scared because you threaten us." Police opened fire on the protesters and then on nearby houses with guns and slingshots.

One resident, Ko Zaw Myo, 26, who attempted with fellow neighbours to block a road and protect protesters from police, was shot in the throat and died, leaving behind his pregnant wife and son. His death brings the number of those killed by security forces—as currently indicated by domestic media outlets—to at least 60, although this figure likely underestimates the real death toll.

The situation in North Okkalapa remains tense, as internet connections were shut down Saturday night and police set barricades and residences on fire. Meanwhile, police are regularly making late night arrests around Yangon, raiding homes and using stun grenades.

Ahead of Monday's general strike, some of the biggest protests in recent weeks were held on Sunday. Tens of thousands joined mass sit-in protests in Yangon's Thanlyin Township and in Mandalay, where thousands of doctors, engineers, and teachers went on a joint strike. Military repression continued as live ammunition was fired on protests in the ancient temple city of Bagan, leaving a young man badly wounded.

According to reports and witness accounts on social media, police and soldiers performed a raid on Monywa University, arresting lecturers and students and causing a large crowd of concerned locals to assemble around the campus in protest. Similar operations are being undertaken to occupy 52 universities across Myanmar with the aim of both repressing students—a key component of the protest movement—and establishing temporary bases for security personnel. Soldiers have currently set up camp at five universities and two public hospitals.

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