

Bloodiest crackdown yet on Myanmar protests

Owen Howell
15 March 2021

Myanmar's military regime launched a vicious crackdown on unarmed protesters on Sunday, in which at least 63 people were killed and hundreds injured by security forces firing live ammunition, making it by far the bloodiest day since the February 1 military coup.

Doctors and rescue workers fear that the present toll of over 150 deaths will continue to rise as many of the wounded victims are in critical condition. Reports are also surfacing of dead bodies seized by police, after protesters were unable to retrieve them.

As previously, demonstrations in towns and cities across the country were confronted early in the day by a massive show of force by riot police and soldiers. One protester was shot dead in Mandalay, the second largest city, and another in Hpakant in Kachin State. Two were found dead after gunfire dispersed a mass student rally in Bago: a young boy and a woman whose body was dumped in a drain by security forces.

However, the most shocking display of violence was in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, where at least 59 people so far have been reported dead. Military assaults were largely focused on the city's poor industrial suburbs, including Hlaingthaya, Thingangyun, Shwepyitha, Kyimyindaing, and South Dagon townships. Local hospitals were still filling with dead or seriously wounded protesters late Sunday night and Monday morning.

Health workers spoke to the independent news agency Myanmar Now of the devastation. A senior official at Yangon General Hospital claimed that seven of 56 people brought to hospital were pronounced dead on arrival, while Thingangyun Sanpya Hospital received around 18 dead and 70 injured, according to a striking doctor. In Hlaingthaya, which witnessed the bulk of the violence, 34 dead protesters were brought to the main hospital and 40 others admitted with serious

gunshot wounds.

The killing in Hlaingthaya Township, a working-class district on the western outskirts of Yangon, reportedly began after fires broke out at two separate garment factories early Sunday afternoon. Hlaingthaya is home to a large population of impoverished migrant workers from rural areas across the country.

The circumstances surrounding the factory fires remain murky. An official from the industrial zone explained that the factories, Global Fashion and Tsang Yih, were owned by Chinese and Taiwanese investors, and that the cause of the fires is still under investigation. No group has claimed responsibility.

Nevertheless, military-run Myawaddy TV stated that protesters, whom the junta is labelling "criminals," had set four factories and a fertiliser plant ablaze and stopped fire engines from reaching them. Additionally, the Chinese embassy said many Chinese staff were injured and trapped in the arson attacks, with Beijing-based CGTN later claiming people armed with iron bars, axes, and petrol attacked 10 factories in Hlaingthaya. In response, protest leader Ei Thinzar Maung has insisted on Facebook that only two factories were found burnt.

Military trucks swiftly rolled into the streets at around 1p.m. when soldiers opened fire on gatherings of peaceful protesters. The shooting continued all day and raged on into the night, residents said. Witnesses observed that troops used the nearby Aung Zeya bridge as a vantage point to fire on fleeing protesters, injuring dozens in the neighbouring Insein Township with sustained bursts of gunfire and rubber bullets.

Retreating protesters carried injured people where they could. Footage from the Democratic Voice of Burma showed some attempting to revive dying victims. Billows of black smoke covered much of the

district as police set fire to roadblocks constructed by protesters.

A Hlaingthaya protester told the *Irrawaddy* newspaper, “These shootings are totally unacceptable. They are not dispersing the protests. They are just murdering the people with violence.”

Video on social media showed that protesters demonstrated considerable courage, reconvening throughout the day. Mostly wearing hard hats and gas masks, protesters sprayed fire extinguishers as they fled, in order to smother tear gas and create a screen between them and police.

Atrocities also occurred elsewhere in Yangon. In Tamwe Township, police dragged the wounded body of a junior medical student lying in a pool of blood while kicking and beating a woman trying to save him. Hours-long shooting was also reported in South Dagon Township, where around 50 were injured and three confirmed dead, including a 15-year-old girl who was shot in the head and abdomen.

Martial law was later imposed on numerous Yangon townships where protests had been the largest: Hlaingthaya and Shwepyitha on Sunday night, and South Dagon, North Dagon, Dagon Seikkan, and North Okkalapa on Monday morning. More direct military control of security, instead of police, was also declared in several parts of Mandalay.

The announcement, broadcast on state-owned MRTV, said the junta was enhancing security to restore “law and order,” entrusting Yangon’s regional commander with administrative and judicial powers in the area under his command. Moreover, in an apparent bid to suppress news of Sunday’s turmoil, telecoms service providers were ordered to block all mobile data nationwide, two sources told Reuters, leaving all mobile internet inaccessible.

The bloodshed followed a week of heightened state repression. After the violence unleashed on March 3, authorities have relentlessly terrorised neighbourhoods in Yangon, conducting mass arbitrary arrests and nighttime police raids, during which they have beaten civilians with impunity, fired gunshots at buildings, set off stun grenades, and damaged cars and shopfronts.

In particular, these actions have targeted sections of workers who have played pivotal roles in the widespread strikes and work stoppages known as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), such as doctors,

civil servants, and railway workers. Thailand-based monitoring group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners confirmed that at least 2,150 people had been detained by Saturday, the vast majority of them workers associated with the CDM.

An onslaught of soldiers and police on Saturday killed 13 protesters, meaning the weekend toll is as many as 72 dead. Five were shot dead in Mandalay, two in the central town of Pyay, and a truck driver in Chauk, Magway Region died after being shot in the chest.

In Yangon, where five were killed and dozens more injured, soldiers occupied hospitals and prevented families from collecting their relatives’ bodies. The killings did not stop the mostly young demonstrators who crowded into a downtown commercial area intersection past the official 8 p.m. curfew to hold a mass candlelight vigil. Similar after-dark rallies were held in Mandalay.

Saturday’s protests were called online to commemorate victims of the 1988 uprising against military rule, which was crushed by the armed forces in a brutal crackdown that killed an estimated 3,000 people. It has become clearer after last week that the military is fully prepared to ramp up repression even further and oversee a crackdown on the scale of the 1988 massacre.

The junta’s use of violence has greatly intensified since February 20, when security personnel attacked striking shipyard workers in Mandalay, deliberately firing live rounds on protesters for the first time.

The mounting pressure caused by the nationwide strike movement—which has persisted for six weeks and paralysed major sectors of the economy—is also driving the military to adopt more drastic political measures.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact