

Martial law imposed in Myanmar cities as death toll rises

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Only days after the deadliest crackdown since the February 1 coup, tens of thousands of protesters across Myanmar have continued to demonstrate against military rule, even as authorities are stepping up their use of repression to defeat the anti-coup movement.

Martial law was imposed on several parts of the country's two largest cities, Yangon and Mandalay, along with a day-long shutdown of mobile internet. The districts being targeted by the military are working-class suburbs which have proven to be strongholds of the nationwide movement of strikes and work stoppages.

State broadcaster MRTV declared that military commanders in Yangon would take over administration of districts, including the courts. The courts martial have the authority to issue the death sentence or long prison terms for a range of offences, while those sentenced to death can only appeal to the Yangon regional commander or the junta leader, General Min Aung Hlaing.

The offences include treason and sedition, obstructing the military or civil service, spreading false information, and ties to "unlawful associations"—all of which the junta and its media outlets have accused protesters of doing since the anti-coup movement began.

Reports that many critically wounded victims of Sunday's violence have succumbed to their injuries in hospital, along with further killings on Monday and Tuesday at the hands of state security forces, have brought the death toll soaring to at least 216, with many more feared dead.

Protests across the nation on Monday—in Mandalay, Yangon, and the towns of Aunglan, Gyobingauk, Bago, Monywa, Thabeikkyin, and Myingyan—were brutally attacked by police and soldiers, who fired live ammunition on crowds of protesters, killing an estimated 23 people.

"One girl got shot in the head and a boy got shot in the face," an 18-year-old protester in Myingyan told Reuters

journalists over the phone after police ended protests there by killing three and injuring dozens more. "I'm now hiding," the protester said.

Smaller villages on the outskirts of Mandalay were also scenes of military violence. At least five people were killed in Singu Township. A 16-year-old girl, Ma Thida Aye, was shot twice by a sniper while in her house in Chaunggyi Village, her father told the *Irrawaddy*.

Protesters have gathered daily near Chaunggyi, at a junction leading to Mogok, Thabeikkyin, and Mandalay. On Monday, soldiers used gunfire to break up demonstrations, firing at passers-by from a military truck. Some villagers managed to pull over the truck and detain two soldiers, but three others escaped and later fired shots from a nearby hill with a sniper rifle, killing the girl and wounding her friend.

In Yangon's Dawbon Township, security forces attacked a night-time rally. A video showed soldiers shooting a man, removing his clothes and dragging him away, while firing shots at the neighbourhood. Late night assaults also happened in South Dagon Township, where one was killed and three wounded when shots were fired after 11 p.m.

The violence continued on Tuesday, claiming the lives of at least two protesters. One was shot dead in the central town of Kawlin, where hundreds of protesters returning home were set upon by riot police. That night, a demonstration gathered outside a police station demanding the release of three detainees, according to media in Sagaing Region. Police and soldiers opened fire on the crowd, wounding two.

Families of dozens of the 74 protesters killed on Sunday attended funerals Tuesday. Some mourners told media that security forces had seized the bodies of victims, but they would still hold a funeral. Hundreds of young people in Yangon attended the funeral of medical student Khant Nyar Hein, 19, with many fellow medical students in

white lab coats chanting: “Our revolution must prevail!”

Tensions continue to escalate in Hlaingthaya Township, one of the Yangon industrial districts under martial law, where 40 people were killed on Sunday in a ruthless military onslaught provoked by fires breaking out at two garment factories. Hlaingthaya is mostly inhabited by poor migrant workers who fled their rural hometowns around the Irrawaddy Delta after Cyclone Nargis struck in 2008.

The military is clamping down hard on Yangon, the protest movement’s centre. Barricades built to protect protesters in Hlaingthaya were set alight Tuesday and volleys of gunfire sounded across the neighbourhood. Downtown areas previously flooded with mass protests are now all but deserted, under heavy patrol by military vehicles.

Security forces have threatened residents in Yangon and Mandalay under martial law, saying they will shoot into every house if residents do not remove roadblocks which have been put in place to prevent access by soldiers.

The UN Human Rights office has drawn attention to disturbing new developments. While some 37 journalists have been arrested, with five major news outlets having their licences withdrawn, five people have died in detention and “deeply distressing” reports of torture in custody have emerged. Spokeswoman Ravina Shamdasani also mentioned signs of “enforced disappearances,” saying “hundreds of people who have been unlawfully detained remain unaccounted for and have not been acknowledged by the military authorities.”

Attacks on workers associated with the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) of strikes and work stoppages have significantly increased.

Over 200 employees of the Central Bank of Myanmar, ranging from assistant directors to cleaners, were suspended for refusing to work under the military regime. Meanwhile, ten civil servants were sentenced Monday to prison terms for joining the CDM, including two young police officers and eight staff from the Cooperative Department in the capital city Naypyidaw.

Around 1,000 workers and their families living at Myanmar Railways staff quarters in Yangon fled their homes last week after security forces raided their neighbourhood. Similarly, healthcare workers at the Sao San Htun Hospital in Shan State’s capital Taunggyi who have joined the CDM were threatened with eviction from staff housing unless they returned to work immediately. About 70 doctors and health workers from the hospital moved out rather than return to work, as several went into

hiding to avoid arrest.

Doctors, engineers, teachers, railway workers, and civil servants are chief among the more than 2,100 protesters who have thus far been detained by the authorities, as well as people who provided food or shelter to protesters. On Wednesday evening, eleven young workers at a Yangon tea shop were detained by a large police contingent. Their whereabouts are still unknown.

The junta is desperate to intimidate workers from joining the growing movement, which has stifled economic operations for over a month. This was demonstrated in an incident Tuesday morning, when four customers at a Yangon private bank were detained by police for allegedly inciting bank employees to join the CDM. The dramatic arrest was broadcast on all the military-run television channels. Video footage, however, appears to show they were simply withdrawing money.

As mounting economic pressure tightens on the junta, food and fuel prices have spiked due to the freezing of business activity, and could provoke further unrest as larger sections of the population sink into poverty amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The UN World Food Programme said the price of rice had risen as much as 35 percent in the country’s north, while the cost of fuel had increased by 15 percent since February 1.

The economic and social crisis is also fuelling the strikes and protests against the seizure of power by the military on February 1. While protesters undoubtedly recall the previous junta that severely restricted workers’ rights, they should also recall that the current oppressive social conditions are also the responsibility of Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) which governed in tandem with the military.

The NLD represents sections of Myanmar’s capitalist class hostile to the military’s domination of the economy, but which are just as fearful that any mass movement of the working class will undermine bourgeois rule. The political subordination of the oppositional movement to the NLD is paving the way for its betrayal, as was the case in 1988 when Suu Kyi sought to rein it in on the basis of a phony promise of elections, opening the door for a bloody military crackdown.



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