

Death toll in Myanmar tops 700 after ruthless military crackdown on Bago city

Owen Howell
12 April 2021

The Myanmar military junta's security forces reportedly killed at least 82 protesters Friday in a brutal assault in the city of Bago, 65 kilometres northeast of Yangon. The confirmed death toll is expected to rise over the coming days as more casualties are verified, according to the Thailand-based monitoring group, Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

The violence has brought the official death toll soaring to 701 protesters and bystanders killed in state crackdowns on anti-coup protests since the military seized power on February 1. Around 50 children have been killed, the youngest being five-years-old, while almost 3,000 people have been detained by authorities.

The Bago crackdown was the highest number of deaths on one day in a single location, despite numerous bloody attacks on Yangon protesters last month. It began before dawn Friday morning when soldiers and police opened fire on peaceful demonstrators, with gunfire lasting until the afternoon. The assault was focused on the city's three eastern wards of Shinsawpu, Hmawkan, and Nantawyar, where residents had erected makeshift barricades and established anti-coup strongholds, centred in Ma Ga Dit Road.

Troops sprayed live rounds of ammunition and fired powerful explosives at protesters' defensive lines, protected by sandbag barriers. Local media said heavy weaponry was used to break up protests, including rocket-propelled grenades and mortars.

The dozens of severely wounded were deliberately denied medical assistance by soldiers and rescue workers were threatened with being shot if they intervened. Meanwhile, the closest public hospital had been seized and occupied by soldiers and police, locals said.

Witnesses described the shooting as relentless and

indiscriminate. Protest organiser Ye Htut told *Myanmar Now*, "It is like genocide. They are shooting at every shadow." Video footage shot early on Friday showed mostly young protesters hiding behind sandbags wielding homemade rifles, as loud explosions could be heard in the background.

"They piled up all the dead bodies, loaded them into their army truck and drove it away," a resident told Agence France-Presse, adding that authorities then proceeded to arrest people around the community.

Myanmar Now further wrote that dead bodies quickly accumulated in the morning and were collected by the military and dumped inside the compound of a Buddhist pagoda cordoned off by soldiers. An anonymous eyewitness told the news outlet he saw bodies stacked in both the Zeyar Muni pagoda and a nearby school. Injured people were piled up amid the dead and could be heard moaning from the mass of corpses.

By the next day, security forces had carefully destroyed all evidence of the carnage. The pagoda's grounds were washed clean and all military forces had packed up and left. This is believed to have been carried out after township authorities cut off electricity in Bago from 7p.m. until 10p.m. Friday night, during which period soldiers further terrorised residents through raids on homes and mass arrests.

Many Bago residents have subsequently fled the city, including hundreds from the most affected wards—impoverished working-class districts like Pon Nar Su, Inn Winn, Alin Yaung, and Hmawkan. All of these areas were long known by armed forces to have defence teams established by workers to protect anti-regime strongholds.

After the killings, state-owned television network Myawaddy TV announced 19 protesters were sentenced

to death for allegedly killing an associate of an army captain on March 27, the first such sentences since the February 1 coup. The alleged killing took place in North Okkalapa Township, one of six districts in Yangon currently under martial law, allowing military courts to pronounce sentences. According to Human Rights Watch, Myanmar has not carried out an execution in over 30 years.

The junta's media outlets have claimed that the nationwide movement of protests and strikes are beginning to dwindle after more than two months. Junta spokesman Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun told a news conference on Saturday in the capital Naypyitaw that the country was returning to normal and government ministries and banks would resume full operations soon.

He also said the military had recorded only 248 deaths and absurdly denied that automatic weapons had ever been used against anti-coup protesters, whom he labelled "violent terrorist people." State-run newspaper *Global New Light of Myanmar* blamed the Bago crackdown on "rioters," and reported only one death.

While it may be true that protests have grown smaller and shorter since the March 27 crackdown, which left 164 people dead, the junta's dramatic escalation in recent weeks of lethal violence and repression has failed to prevent daily demonstrations from continuing across Myanmar.

Whenever protests do emerge, they are quickly targeted by security forces with indiscriminate attacks on residents and bystanders. Amid the internet blackout imposed by the junta, social media has revealed that a Bago doctor was abducted Sunday morning while working at a volunteer health clinic. Similarly, a student from Bago who worked as a medical volunteer providing aid to wounded protesters was announced missing.

Even after Friday's bloodshed in eastern Bago, protesters in the western part of the town—including the Kyaukkyisu, Ywathit, and Zinetaung wards—again initiated marches against the regime on Saturday. At the same time, university students and their professors marched through the streets of Mandalay and the nearby city of Meiktila, holding eugenia flowers, a symbol of victory.

Protesters in Yangon, as well as in Monywa, the capital of Sagaing Region, wrote political messages on

leaves including "We must win!" and calling for UN intervention to prevent further bloodshed and reinstate deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her party the National League for Democracy (NLD), presently detained by the junta.

Moreover, protests have spread to broader rural areas, with "dawn strikes" erupting across the country on Saturday. Educators in Kyauktada Township, Kayin State, posed for photos holding placards expressing their refusal to work under the junta—an example of recent signs that new sections of workers are joining the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) of strikes and work stoppages.

The military regime remains deeply fearful of the powerful strike movement, which has effectively paralysed large sections of the country's economy. Last Wednesday, it announced that 83 striking staff members from the Ministry of Investments and Foreign Economic Relations were dismissed for participating in the CDM.

To challenge and overthrow the junta requires the mobilisation of broad layers of the working class as well as the rural masses to fight, not just for democratic rights, but for improved social conditions that have been under attack, not just by the junta but by the NLD government headed by Aung San Suu Kyi. By limiting demands to appeals to reinstate Suu Kyi and making futile appeals to the major powers, the protest leaders act as a barrier to the broader involvement of working people fighting for their own class interests.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact