



1 April 2021

Myanmar: Brutal crackdown and targeting of human rights defenders and civil society continue

Front Line Defenders, Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), Progressive Voice, Civil Rights Defenders, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (OMCT-FIDH) and Reporters Without Borders condemn the gross human rights violations committed by the military against human rights defenders, journalists, peaceful protesters and other members of civil society in Myanmar, following the military coup on 1 February 2021.

The military has been conducting a campaign of attacks and intimidation against human rights defenders and civil society groups in order to silence all forms of protest and dissent. Following the coup, thousands of people across the country gathered peacefully to protest the power grab and to call for an end to the military dictatorship. Two months on, while the demonstrations calling for the restoration of the elected civilian government in the country continue, violent, and often deadly, reprisals against protesters have also increased. The police and military are using unnecessary and disproportionate force, arbitrarily arresting and detaining peaceful protesters, and subjecting many of them to torture and other acts of ill-treatment, including blocking protesters access to the medical treatment. Over 500 civilians have been killed in the ongoing crackdown.

On 14 February 2021, the junta amended the Code of Criminal Procedure Amendment Law to make several offences non-bailable and subject to arrest without a warrant. These include provisions that criminalise protesters for exercising their fundamental right to the freedom of expression; anyone criticising the military coup via any medium is liable to be punished. These amendments have further led to indiscriminate arrests, with over 3,000 people detained over the past two months. While many of those detained have been charged, many others are facing outstanding warrants, and other persons are believed to be missing or disappeared. Several have died in custody. While the brutal crackdown on the protests has been well-documented, the impacts on human rights defenders organising the protests, assisting the injured and recording human rights violations have been less well covered.

Civil society organisations, human rights defenders and journalists who have been documenting the atrocities committed by the military have been beaten, detained, threatened, fired from their jobs or had their homes or offices raided. The military has adopted a twin strategy of ruthlessly silencing independent voices while attempting to spread disinformation to confuse people. Constant internet shut-downs and disruption of service aimed at discouraging the protests and the Civil Disobedience Movement¹ have made it more difficult to access reliable and prompt information. In addition, digital surveillance and curfews have further hindered attempts to verify and publicise information. With the transfer of funds blocked and the banking infrastructure severely curtailed, it has been increasingly difficult for civil society organisations to sustain their vital work.

¹ A peaceful resistance and refusal to obey the commands of the military, without resorting to violence or active measures of opposition.

The targeting of human rights defenders has forced them to flee their homes. Arrest warrants have been issued against several defenders and members of civil society, and many have been declared fugitives. Family members of human rights defenders have also been subjected to relentless threats, intimidation and harassment by authorities. About 40 journalists reporting on the protests have been detained, and several media outlets have been banned or shut down. Human rights defenders in rural areas, including the Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Chin and Mon areas, have also been subjected to attacks. Offices of human rights organisations in these areas have been raided and ransacked by security forces and defenders have been detained, or even killed, as can be seen in the killing of woman human rights defender Ma Ah Khu from Women for Justice. Unlike some of their colleagues in urban centres, human rights defenders have found it more difficult to move to safer places because of more limited resources.

On 27 March 2021, on Armed Forces' Day, over 110 people were killed by security forces nationwide, in the deadliest day since the coup. A day earlier, on March 26, state-run MRTV warned protesters that they could be "shot in the head and back." As of the end of 30 March, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) reported a death toll of 521 since the military coup in February.

On 25 March 2021, in a statement, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar Tom Andrews warned that the situation in the country "will likely get much worse without an immediate robust, international response in support of those under siege."

Front Line Defenders, FORUM-ASIA, Progressive Voice, Civil Rights Defenders, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (OMCT-FIDH) and Reporters Without Borders echo the calls of the people of Myanmar for federal democracy, and the people's rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of association, and freedom of expression. We call for the immediate release of all those who have been arbitrarily detained, including human rights defenders, journalists, and members of civil society. We call for the specific targeting of, and reprisals against human rights defenders, journalists, and members of civil society and their families to cease. The military must respect the popular will expressed by the people in the 8 November 2020 election. We also urge the international community not to recognize the military junta as Myanmar's legitimate government, impose a global arms embargo on Myanmar, support the referral of the situation of Myanmar to the International Criminal Court, activate all the necessary measures to urge the military to step down, and to help protect human rights in the country.