



Tackling Ongoing Violence and Human Rights Abuses in Post-Coup Myanmar

Visalaakshi Annamalai*

Abstract: After the recent military takeover, Myanmar continues to suffer. Hundreds have been killed or injured, thousands have been arrested or have fled across borders while millions face shortages of food, water and medical supplies. How can the international community help?

After the recent military takeover, Myanmar continues to suffer. Hundreds have been killed or injured, thousands have been arrested or have fled across borders while millions face shortages of food, water and medical supplies. How can the international community help?

* Visalaakshi Annamalai is a researcher in labour mobility, gender, migration, environment, climate change and refugee issues in Asia-Pacific. She is currently a consultant for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on return and re-integration of migrant workers in the Pacific, and she is helping the gender-inclusion research group, Includovate, with a project aimed at ending Child, Early and Forced Marriages (CEFM). She previously worked for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Labour Organization (ILO). Visala is an alumna of the [Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation in Asia Pacific \(APMA\)](#).

[Myanmar announced a state of emergency](#) on 1 February 2021 following a military coup against Aung San Suu Kyi's democratically elected government. Suu Kyi and other senior members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) party, including president Win Myint, were detained at unknown locations. The southeast Asian state with a population of 54m is a former British colony previously known as Burma. It has suffered decades of ethnic strife, only emerging from almost half a century of military rule in 2011. The NLD won landslide majorities in 2015 and again in 2020 but the coup came after weeks of rising tensions when the Tatmadaw (army), which has remained a powerful force this past decade, accused the civilian government of fraud in the [November 2020 elections](#). Military leader General Mi Aung Hlaing promised elections after initially imposing a state of emergency for one year, but this has now been [extended](#) to August 2023 with no firm date set for any future poll.

In the early hours of the coup, communication networks were restricted throughout the country and mobile phone systems were down. NetBlocks, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that tracks internet shutdowns, reported severe disruption, which forced banks to suspend services. Citizens rushed to shops to stock up on supplies, not knowing what to expect from the sudden change. Queues formed at markets, shops and [ATMs](#), while troops gradually took up position in Myanmar's largest city and former capital, Yangon. The already [failing economy and the devastating impact of COVID-19](#) have severely exacerbated the situation.

What happens to ordinary citizens embroiled in such political stand-offs, when communication lines are down, basic amenities are scarce or unavailable and the military is violating their human rights? The government they knew no longer exists, at least for now, so whom do they approach for help and support or for redress? This post will shed light on the hardships people in Myanmar are facing amidst political instability and ongoing violence and reflects on the international community's response, while calling for better human rights preparedness to help combat this and future crises.

Thousands die, flee homes in ongoing military violence

Soon after the coup, people rallied against the military, holding peaceful [protests](#) but hundreds, including children, have lost their lives while thousands more have been driven from their homes in ongoing violence. An [OHCHR report](#) detailed the scale of widespread human rights violations against citizens by the army. The report covers the period from the coup until mid-July 2021, drawing on interviews with 70 victims and witnesses as well as credible independent sources, remote monitoring and a range of stakeholders.

Soldiers initially used less-lethal weapons to conduct neighbourhood raids, creating an atmosphere of fear. But this [quickly evolved](#) into reliance on lethal force:

disproportionate strength was used to [disperse](#) protests while army snipers with semi-automatic rifles systemically targeted and killed protestors.

Continued violations by the junta have [revived bloodshed](#) in [Chin State](#), where in early September 2021 the [shadow government](#) declared a revolt and called for its newly-formed militia to attack the junta. The [documented human rights violations](#) by the military junta have [systematically destroyed civil and political rights](#), including freedom of expression, freedom of association, the right to privacy, the right of access to justice and a free press.

Millions deprived of aid as agencies denied access

Access to food, water, shelter and medical care remains a top priority in the list of immediate needs. The [World Food Programme has warned](#) that millions in Myanmar are facing growing food insecurity, amid poverty, economic crisis and political unrest. The military junta even sought to make the [COVID-19 pandemic a tool of oppression](#) by hoarding oxygen, opening fire on crowds seeking medical care, arresting and prosecuting doctors and collectively denying Myanmar's citizens their right and access to basic health services.

This has sounded alarms regarding the protection of human rights of the people of Myanmar. Many of the international aid organisations are being denied access to those in need, hampering delivery of urgent supplies, already aggravated by COVID-19. Time is of essence: every day, thousands more are placed in danger.

Response and reaction

The international community was caught off guard by the situation in Myanmar.

International response to the coup has come around, without much teeth to the actions. For example, the UN Security Council has called for an immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar, after condemning the coup previously. Several countries have individually condemned the coup, and some have responded with [sanctions](#). More recently, several giant foreign investor [companies have suspended and withdrawn business](#) in Myanmar in light of gross human rights violations in the country. In the absence of concrete UN action owing to its own structural defects, it falls on other actors, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to take action. Clearly, ASEAN also has its limitations, in the sense that it is an association based on consensus, and there is no action that could possibly have a concrete impact on Myanmar's leadership.

Myanmar was one of the first UN Member States to adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Reminding Myanmar of its commitment to the Declaration, some people at the [General Debate at the UNHRC](#) have called for the country to resume cooperation with the [Special Rapporteur's mandate](#) (Special Rapporteur on

the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar to the Human Rights Council) and grant unrestricted access throughout the country.

It is shocking to see [videos and photographs](#) showing the destruction and chaos. Some footage shows domestic animals wandering the streets deserted by people fleeing violence. With communication lines down and food and medical supplies depleting, huge uncertainty lies ahead. More Myanmar citizens will undoubtedly decide to leave home and cross borders in search of safety and support.

Sustained pressure on the junta may be one way in which the international community can help the people of Myanmar. If not addressing sensitive issues of Rohingyas, civil war and democracy in the country, what the world can at least try is to get the current regime to commit to humanitarian relief and ending violence. Is the world community capable of rendering justice to the people of Myanmar?

The UN writes reports, commissions research, and calls for aid and relief, and arguably, these efforts have had some success. For example, a statement from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has mentioned that [less than half of the money required](#) for the emergency response plan has been received. Even that money is better than nothing, when we imagine that it will bring help to at least some of the affected population.

Nine months on, there is a [changing trend in the country](#). With minimal income-generating activities, many households have started 'eating less food'. School drop-out rates have increased. Some households are selling their belongings to make ends meet, as savings are exhausted. There is a possibility that a massive part of the population will sink into poverty, and the middle class might just disappear. An already battered nation, with people struggling to rise up, is on the fall again. Does the world have no responsibility whatsoever towards the plight of these people? Can the world community come together to fulfil the emergency requirements, and punish impunity to start with, and worry about restoring democracy in Myanmar a little later?