

In Myanmar, a war no one watches

An embattled military junta continues airstrikes as the humanitarian crisis deepens

AMAYA VALCARCEL AND PAUL NEWMAN

The United Nations estimates that three million people are displaced across Myanmar and around 18.6 million need immediate humanitarian assistance. The internet is a luxury and often banned as the military junta does not want the world to know the gravity of excesses under the regime. This showcases the level of democracy the civilians enjoy in a country that has been under emergency rule since February 2021, after the military deposed the National Democratic League (NLD) and took over the government. Myanmar is the world's biggest jailer of journalists, after China. Around 60 journalists are languishing in various prisons in the country. This year, three journalists were killed by the state forces. Death penalties for anti-coup activists are common since 2022.

Pro-democracy protests that followed the coup have since taken the form of a formidable armed resistance under ethnic rebel groups. Frequently, the military junta has used drones to conduct raids in the central Sagaing region, leaving a trail of destruction and detaining dozens of civilians. The recent attacks were on the villages of Kyi Su and Kyauk Taing, destroying around 400 houses and two monasteries, as they were believed to be supporting the pro-democracy groups. Last week, six people, including three children, were killed. The military junta's crimes against the people have only intensified since the coup, in the form of airstrikes that target civilian areas including schools, internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, hospitals and clinics, religious buildings, and areas with a strong presence of pro-democracy activists.

In October, the junta unleashed lethal, indiscriminate airstrikes across Shan, Karen, and Karenni states and the Sagaing region. In Lashio, in northern Shan state, it conducted four consecutive days of airstrikes. In October and November, airstrikes were targeted against civilians in Chin, Shan, and Karenni states and Magwe, Sagaing, and Mandalay regions, killing 26, including a dozen children. In August alone, there were 350 airstrikes.

Unfair trials of pro-democracy activists and others regarded as opponents of the military authorities continue. More than 5,350 civilians were killed; 1,853 – including 125 women and 88 children – died in custody, 1,600 people have been sentenced to imprisonment, hard labour, or death.

The world looks away
The junta has perpetrated,

with impunity, a multitude of gross human rights violations and mass atrocities as the international community – reluctant to antagonise China, a great supporter of the military regime – looked away. In February this year, it was announced that compulsory military service would be implemented. Able-bodied men aged 18 to 35 and women aged 18 to 27 were required to serve two years under military command and professionals aged up to 45 were to serve for three years. This triggered an exodus of thousands of young people who are trying to reach safety in neighbouring countries.

IDPs are trapped in brutal violence, unable to cross the border to reach safety. Thailand has shut its borders, sending back people who managed to escape the violence. A few Chin refugees have managed to cross over to Mizoram in India. About 70,000 to 100,000 refugees from Myanmar live in Mizoram; these include refugees who fled the country after 1962.

Waves of displacement are part of the protracted refugee situation in the Rohingya community of the Rakhine state, of whom more than 960,000 are in the refugee camps of Bangladesh, 200,000 in Malaysia, and about 40,000 in India. The humanitarian situation, including the delivery of aid, has deteriorated since the coup as a result of heightened conflict and difficulties in accessing displaced communities.

A 2023 World Bank report said nearly a third of people in Myanmar are living in poverty. Meanwhile, the value of Myanmar's currency, the kyat, has sunk; many businesses are struggling and foreign investments are dwindling.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the largest regional organisation of which Myanmar is a member, has remained mute to these atrocities. On October 28, the UN special envoy to Myanmar, Julie Bishop, told the UN General Assembly's human rights committee – "Myanmar actors must move beyond the current zero-sum mentality... The Myanmar conflict risks becoming a forgotten crisis. The regional implications of this crisis are evident, but the global impact can no longer be ignored."

The world has failed to condemn the crimes of the military junta, and shied away from protecting civilians, demanding accountability, and seeking reparation for the victims. Now is the time for ASEAN, the UN, and the international community, especially India – an immediate neighbour severely affected by the entry of refugees, insurgents, and drug peddlers – to seize this opportunity and take immediate, decisive action to support Myanmar's efforts towards federal democracy.

(Amaya is a professor of Migration and Human Rights at Comillas University, Madrid; Paul is Principal, St Joseph's Evening College (autonomous) and an associate professor at St Joseph's University)