

# BURMA-INDIA SOLIDARITY

## NEWS FROM A BLOODSOAKED AND TATTERED BURMA

Two years ago, on 1 February 2021, the democratically elected government of AungSan Suu Kyi was overthrown in a violent coup. Since then, Burma has been reeling under military rule. Along with her ministers and leaders of other political parties, Suu Kyi has been detained in unknown locations under false, and sometimes absurd, charges. For instance, she has been charged with electoral fudging (a seemingly serious offence in a democracy) and possessing walkie-talkies (a frivolous offence under any imaginable regime). After the coup, the people of Burma protested by staying inside their houses and banging pots and pans. It was seen as a unique form of protest which spread across towns and cities. Doctors and nurses refused to work while the pandemic raged, seeking restoration of democracy. Journalists reported from the ground that tens of thousands of protesters, especially youngsters and students, walked on the streets, denouncing the coup.

In response, the junta cracked down. Doctors, nurses, journalists and students were arrested en masse. Even foreign journalists were arrested for merely doing their jobs. Hundreds were killed in cold blood. The internet also became a casualty.

As a consequence, thousands in urban and rural areas went underground and joined guerrilla forces, making alliances with the People's Defence Force and the National Unity Government—thereby effectively waging a war against the military regime. Currently, Burma is trapped in a ferocious civil war with the guerrilla forces gaining ground across the rural and urban landscape, and a frustrated army retaliating with relentless brutality against both combatants and non-combatants.



Photo credit: REUTERS

*'Burma-India Solidarity' is a monthly news and perspective update network of groups and individuals associated with the Burma-India People's Solidarity (BIPS) network and South Asian Solidarity Collective (SASC).*

## COUP AND THE INJUSTICE WHICH FOLLOWED



- Burma's 75th Independence Day (Diamond Jubilee) was on 4 January 2023.
- Since February 2021, over 19,000 people have been killed, 13,368 have been detained and 1,473,000 have been displaced. More than 34,000 religious buildings, houses, and educational and medical centres have been destroyed.
- A further 1.2 million people have been internally displaced, and over 70,000 have left the country—joining over one million others, including the bulk of the country's Rohingya Muslim population, who had fled from sustained persecution and attacks over the past decades.
- Between 7 and 23 January, the junta conducted a total of eight airstrikes in several areas in the Sagaing Region and Chin, Kachin and Karen states against the rising ethnic armed rebellions there. They also bombed healthcare centers which might have tended to those injured in the bombing. A school was also bombed and children were killed.
- The UNSC has passed a resolution demanding an instant termination of violence, and the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint.
- In November 2022, the Burma Act was passed by the US Congress to provide non-lethal assistance to the country. This is accepted by the National Unity Government and People's Defence Force.
- Retno Marsudi, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) envoy to Myanmar, said that the organization will try its best to help the country come out of its current crisis. However, despite international interventions, the junta has not deterred from its course. It continues attacking people; it has continued to keep Myint in the Taungoo prison (reportedly sentencing him to a total of 33 years).
- The junta has declared martial law in 37 townships and 8 states, with armed forces posted in all these regions to curb any kind of resistance. On 1 February 2023, they also extended the national emergency for another six months. This has been the junta's way of maintaining its dictatorship since February 2021. The reason given was that the country is not ready to hold a free and fair election because it lacks security and stability.
- A third of the affected townships are in the Sagaing Region, where the resistance of armed ethnic organizations is especially strong; Chin State and

Magway Region are also heavily affected. The rest of the townships in the midst of armed resistance and its armed suppression are located in Bago and Tanintharyi regions and Karenni (Kayah), Karen (Kayin) and Mon states.

- Over time, the junta has increased the number of townships under martial law. Initially, in 2021, it was only implemented in 11 townships. It slowly extended to all those townships where protests were held against the indiscriminate killings of civilians.

- In areas under martial law, regional commanders can set up military tribunals to hear cases involving 23 different offenses, for which sentences can include the death penalty and indefinite detention. The offenses include high treason, sedition, incitement, unlawful association, terrorism, murder and rape.
- Violations of immigration and media laws are also subject to the tribunals' judgments, which cannot be appealed. The government of Myanmar carried out an airstrike on 10 and 11 January which affected the people near the Tiau riverbed in the Farkawn village in the Champai district which falls on the India-Burma border.

## BAD NEWS FROM THE INDIA-BURMA BORDER

- Ten Burmese nationals were arrested in Manipur on 5 February for not being in possession of proper documentation. The police claimed that these Burmese citizens tried to flee arrest before being caught. They will be charged under India's Foreigners Act. N. Biren Singh, Chief Minister of Manipur, said that legal action will be taken against anyone in Manipur who harbours undocumented migrants. Since the coup, thousands of Burmese nationals have crossed over the border into northeast India to flee from the junta's increasingly violent crackdowns.
- Three Burmese refugees, who were detained in Manipur's Churachandpur district, have been missing from jail. They are Winmintay (28), Win Naing Thon (27) and Biaka aka Hengza (17). Winmintay and Win Naing Thon have been in jail since 4 April 2021, while Biaka was arrested on 29 March 2022. These people have apparently been arrested for the 'grave crime' of fleeing from their country during civil unrest.



- The Mizoram government has declared that it will not issue any birth or death certificates to illegal migrants from 30 January onwards, even if the births and deaths of these 'illegal aliens' has occurred within the country.
- About 40,000 Chin refugees from Burma have entered northeast India, in the states of Mizoram and Manipur. Due to the ongoing crisis in Burma, international human rights organizations have

requested neighbouring countries to offer refuge to the fleeing population. However, India has refused to accept these people and is arresting them for crossing the border. Due to limited or no help from like-minded organizations and NGOs, the refugees have become helpless. They have brought out a statement requesting urgent help and a dialogue with the Indian government. They have also requested human rights organizations, the UNHCR and ASEAN to intervene.

## ASEAN SEEKING DIALOGUE AND END OF VIOLENCE

- The military junta's widely rejected plan for elections this year, and their likely negative impact on the already deepening violent conflicts which have enveloped the entire country of 55 million people, should be highlighted.
- There is an immediate need to stop the violence in Burma that is threatening to envelop ever greater parts of the population.
- The post-conflict rebuilding of Burma should not be simply as a majoritarian democracy—dominated by the Bamar community which has strong links with the army and the political and economic establishment—but also as a federal political system with equal participation of all sections including all the ethnic communities who have been discriminated against since decades.



# BURMA AND THAILAND: DEEP CRISIS IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Many people who fled from Burma have been arrested by the Thai police and immigration officials. Since the coup two years ago, the Thai-Burma border town of Mae Sot has received a significant number of Burmese nationals who fled from the war and the junta's violent oppression. The town has historically been one of the main locations where Burmese people have taken

refuge from atrocities committed by Burma's previous juntas. Forty-nine Burmese nationals were arrested in western Thailand on 5 February, Thai news outlet Komchadluek reported. Moreover, most refugees fleeing political crises and war need humanitarian assistance. The authorities also need to stop arresting Burmese refugees and extorting money from them.

## INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

In Australia and the US, twin protests took place over the weekend in Melbourne and Washington, DC to condemn the military coup in Burma and its planned election

for later this year. In Australia, protesters demanded the government should deport family members of the military and its cronies back to Burma.

## TRAPPED IN A CIVIL WAR

### VIOLENCE AND TRAGEDY STALKS THE LANDSCAPE

There has been a serious sense of concern and unrest among the people and governments of Southeast Asia regarding the current situation in Burma. The violence perpetrated by the army and the resistance waged by the guerrilla forces of the National Unity Government—which is underground and comprises opposition politicians—have been relentless. Violence of one type or another has become the norm in the rural and urban landscapes.

As a counter to the guerrilla army, which has the widespread support of the people and ethnic communities of border states, the army has resorted to indiscriminate bombing, thus burning down entire villages and neighbourhoods. There have also been cases of carpet bombing by aircraft at peaceful gatherings.

Soldiers are being killed as well. Army camps and police stations are routinely targeted by guerrillas. Many urban areas have been under attack by the guerrillas. Sources are of the opinion that the military junta—led by a discredited General Hlang who was supposed to retire when he unleashed the armed coup and arrested Aung San Suu Kyi and all mainstream leaders in the democratically elected government—is under grave internal and external pressure. Suffering under sanctions and economic blockades amidst global criticism, the junta leadership, it is learned, has become weaker, but more rigid and stubborn. Repeated calls by ASEAN for ceasefire and dialogue have resulted in more violence, much to the angst and anger of the ASEAN leadership.

According to Mizzima News, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has asked Thailand to play a bigger role in bringing stability to coup-hit Burma, as diplomatic efforts to attain peace flounder. Anwar held his first bilateral meeting with Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha recently since the former won office late last year.

The Thai government has faced international criticism for maintaining normal ties with the Myanmar junta and for downplaying alleged atrocities in its neighbouring country following the putsch two years ago. "There's very little we can do except to continue this so-called constructive engagement with the Myanmar junta," Anwar told the Thai Prime Minister, "but I think you are placed, prime minister, in a better position to express many of our concerns."

Malaysia has felt the crisis deeply since thousands of Rohingyas, persecuted and brutalized by the Burmese army, started reaching the shores of Malaysia and Indonesia after dangerously long and difficult journeys across risky waters. More than one million such refugees live in abysmal conditions in thousands of camps at Cox Bazar in Bangladesh after running away from the genocide undertaken by the army in 2017. Anwar stated that over 200,000 refugees that have entered Malaysia have become a big burden on its economy and social fabric.



Photo credit: The Conversation

ASEAN, as stated earlier, has had a frustrating experience since no progress has been made on the “five-point consensus” which was signed with the junta in April 2021. The agreement had decisively called for an end to violence with immediate effect, and negotiations between the anti-coup pro-democracy forces and the junta. Anwar said ASEAN needed “coherent, concerted action”.

In a recent dialogue in Jakarta last week, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi appealed to the ASEAN countries to make a collective and united effort regarding the peace plan.

## ATROCITIES BY THE JUNTA ON LGBTQIA+ COMMUNITIES

The National Unity Government said in a report dated 17 May 2022 that 17 LGBTQ+ people were killed and at least 85 people have been detained since February 2021. Although this list is the only official information available, experts believe that many more have been tortured and killed as a result of the junta's violence against gay people.

The report noted that gay and transgender people who have been arrested have experienced different forms of sexual harassment while in police custody, or when being held in detention by the regime's forces. “LGBTQ+ people protesting from early on were arrested like

everyone else. But LGBTQ+ people are persecuted more,” said Aung Myo Min, the first openly gay minister of the parallel government in the country. He has received seven international awards for work in human and LGBTQ+ rights.

According to Outright International, which deals with human rights abuses and violations of LGBTQ+ people, bullying by the police and military for being LGBTQ+ increased manifold since the coup. Discriminatory laws, deliberate persecutions and prejudiced policies against people from the LGBTQ+ community are rampant in the ruling establishment. It is also rooted in the cultural and

social consciousness of some sections of the populace, including Buddhists, who believe that sexuality is a consequence of moral transgressions of the past.

A retired police officer, who worked for 20 years in a police station, said that he and his colleagues used to single out

gay and trans people for extortion. "They're easy to bully," he said. "When the police officers need something to do, they grab a gay person. That's what the situation was like in the past, but it's even worse for a gay person who is being arrested for politics. Nobody gets in trouble for beating up a gay person," he said under condition of anonymity.



Photo credit: AP Photo

## ECONOMY IN CRISIS

### SALES OF MINERALS AND PRECIOUS METALS DOWN

There are media reports that mineral exports from Burma from 1 April 2022 until 31 January 2023 amounted to US \$234.477 million, as per the information given by the military government's Ministry of Economy and Commerce. About US \$23.43 million worth of minerals were sold by the government and the rest were sold by the private sector.

Significantly, for the same period, the total sales in the previous year were \$564 million. Mineral exports from Burma, a mineral-rich country, currently under the economic dominance of China, include precious gems, jade, diamonds, pearls, gold, tungsten, zinc, copper, silver, other minerals and metals, and, of course, coal.

The junta government seems unable to stem this crisis. Sources say that faced with such an enormous crisis, the junta will be compelled to bargain cheaply with China, Thailand, etc. in terms of selling out its rich natural resources.

Meanwhile, news reports point out that an investigation by 'Justice for Myanmar' has found 22 international oilfield service companies active in Burma since the coup. The oil and gas sector is illegally controlled by the once-powerful army which used to call the shots even during the democratic rule and has had strong interests in business deals, including arms deals. The oil and gas section is the topmost source of foreign revenue for Burma, which, critics point out, helps in filling the deep pockets of the military top brass.

According to reports, eight of the companies identified are either fully or partially based in the USA, including the biggest companies in the sector: Halliburton, Schlumberger, and Baker Hughes, which have offices in Burma even now and are actively working to enhance their business.

At the same time, the US government has initiated sanctions against the junta. These contradictions continue to stalk the Biden administration which is now fully concentrating on Ukraine and has largely ignored the crisis in Burma. Critics point out that the flourishing business of American companies has been reportedly backed by the US Department of Commerce's International Trade Administration.

'Justice for Myanmar' spokesperson Yadanar Maung said: "Oilfield services companies in Myanmar have blood on their hands for operating in an industry that bankrolls the illegal Myanmar military junta, as it wages a campaign of terror against the people. It is deplorable that giants such as Halliburton, Diamond

Offshore Drilling, and Schlumberger which are listed on US stock exchanges have maintained operations in Myanmar, helping to keep oil and gas revenue flowing to the junta. Their business has helped the junta purchase the bullets, bombs, and jet fuel that it needs for its indiscriminate attacks. These companies have breached their international responsibilities and are complicit in the junta's war crimes and crimes against humanity by knowingly servicing oil and gas projects that fund the junta's atrocities. We call on all oilfield services companies to suspend operations on projects that are funding the junta. The activities of US oilfield services companies following the military's coup attempt demonstrate a failure of the US government to take decisive action against the junta and its terror campaign. The Biden administration's contradictory approach to Myanmar has allowed US oil and gas corporations to continue business as usual in Myanmar, enabling the junta's international crimes. We call on the US and its allies Australia, Canada, and the UK to stand with the people of Myanmar by imposing sanctions and helping to cut the flow of funds to the junta."

## BURMA-INDIA PEOPLE'S SOLIDARITY NETWORK

Burma-India People's Solidarity (BIPS) network is a collective of journalists, academics, filmmakers, students and women's groups, trade unions, among others. This update is largely based on media reports unless mentioned.

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