

Frontier Fridays: The Top Stories in Myanmar this Week

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Welcome to Frontier Fridays. This week, fighting broke out between the Tatmadaw and civilian resistance in urban Mandalay for the first time, Min Aung Hlaing went to Russia to shore up defence ties, the UN General Assembly condemned the coup as more Western sanctions rolled in, and the COVID-19 third wave continued to surge.

Contents

- [Clashes in urban Mandalay](#)
- [Min Aung Hlaing in Moscow](#)
- [International community \(...\)](#)
- [COVID-19 across the country](#)

Clashes in urban Mandalay

Fighting broke out between Tatmadaw and the Mandalay People's Defence Force in Chan Mya Tharzi Township on Tuesday, with reports indicating casualties on both sides, the first such clashes to take place in the city. Mandalay has served as the heart of anti-coup resistance for months, and was one of the first places where the junta employed deadly crackdowns to quell peaceful protests. While the city has seen massacres of civilians in the past, this is the first reported incident of a sustained shootout between soldiers and civilian resistance.

A PDF spokesperson [told](#) Myanmar Now that the junta had "received information about where we were", but the PDF had also received a warning beforehand, and so was prepared for the fight. When the security forces approached the house, PDF members opened fire and the Tatmadaw troops called for reinforcements. The PDF told The Irrawaddy that the junta troops used grenades, snipers and armoured vehicles during the fighting. Videos appeared to show a rocket-propelled grenade being fired, which Irrawaddy also referred to in their Burmese-language article.

There are some conflicting reports about the number of casualties, but this appears to be largely a result of the junta's dishonesty. Military-run Myawaddy TV claimed eight PDF members were killed, four in the fighting and four in a car accident while fleeing the scene. The report said eight more were captured alive and a search of the building turned up homemade bombs, hand grenades, small arms and light weapons. Myawaddy did not mention any deaths or injuries on the Tatmadaw side. The PDF disputed this report, saying only two of its members died while six were captured, all students and striking civil servants. The spokesperson also claimed they were able to kill a lieutenant-colonel and another foot soldier.

Local outlet Shwe Phee Myay, though, has [accused](#) the junta of lying in its statement about the four men who died in the car. The outlet reported that none of them were members of the PDF, but rather four men visiting Mandalay from northern Shan State on business. They were reportedly heading to a poultry farm outside the city when they encountered security forces, who suspected them of being involved in the fighting and gave chase, resulting in a car crash. But the wife of one of the men who died also disputed that they were killed in the crash – she insisted that they “were not dead when the accident took place”, which seems to suggest some foul play.

Several Western embassies in Yangon released statements calling for an end to the violence. The United States [said](#) it was “tracking reports of ongoing fighting in Mandalay” including “possible civilian casualties” and called for “a cessation of violence”. The French embassy also released a statement, saying the incident “highlights the emergent need to build a credible and sustainable crisis recovery process” in the country.

The violence didn’t end with the firefight in Chan Mya Tharzi – the same day, a policeman was also shot dead near the Mandalay Region police department in Chan Aye Thar Zan Township by unknown assailants on a motorbike. Residents reported tight security for the rest of the week, with soldiers and police searching pedestrians and vehicles across the city.

Min Aung Hlaing in Moscow

Min Aung Hlaing went to Russia this week – his second trip abroad since the coup – for meetings with high-level defence officials and to look over the weapons he might soon get the chance to use on his own people.

Upon arrival, he was greeted by deputy defence minister Alexander Fomin and later met the secretary of Russia’s Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, and a director-general of Rosoboronexport, Alexander Mikheev. The Security Council is headed by Russian President Vladimir Putin and is tasked with overseeing issues of national security and defence. “They frankly exchanged views on cooperation in security measures,” the [article](#) in Global New Light of Myanmar said, adding they “plan to enhance the existing friendly relations between the two countries and the two armed forces”.

Rosoboronexport is a state-run weapons export firm that has been [under US sanctions](#) since 2015 for selling weapons to Iran, North Korea and Syria. During this meeting, GNLM said they discussed “cooperation in military technologies”, which sounds like the Tatmadaw is hoping to get its hands on some of that military tech. Min Aung Hlaing also attended the Moscow Conference on International Security, where he got to look at more deadly toys. “The Senior General together with those attendees to the conference viewed military weapons displayed by Rosoboronexport Company and other companies,” state media reported.

President Vladimir Putin made an appearance via a pre-recorded video clip, followed by a speech from defence minister Sergey Shoigu, who Min Aung Hlaing also met in private. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov [said](#) “no meetings with [Putin] are planned”, which has been interpreted as a snub by some. Russian state media [articles](#) have also avoided identifying Min Aung Hlaing as the leader of Myanmar, instead referring to him as “commander-in-chief”. If it is a snub, it’s a fairly minor one, as Russia still seems happy to give the Tatmadaw weapons, which is far more useful to Min Aung Hlaing than a handshake with Putin.

Defence minister Shoigu made up for Putin’s aloofness, reportedly welcoming Min Aung Hlaing with a “Guard of Honour” at a private meeting on Tuesday evening. The Global New Light of Myanmar

article said the two sides agreed to cement “existing friendly relations between the two armed forces of both countries” and promote “cooperation in military technologies”. In Russian [state media](#), Shoigu called Myanmar a “time-trusted strategic partner and reliable ally in the Southeast Asia and Asia Pacific Region”. “Our Army has become one of the strongest in the region, thanks to the Russian Federation,” Min Aun Hlaing reportedly said, thanking Shoigu for his support.

International community condemns

Min Aung Hlaing’s trip to Russia came just days after the UN General Assembly voted to condemn the coup and “stop the flow of arms into Myanmar”. The resolution was passed with 119 votes in favour and just one against, but 36 countries also abstained, including Russia and China. Despite this, Russia clearly has no intention of honouring the admittedly non-binding resolution, instead seemingly rewarding Min Aung Hlaing with a shopping spree.

The one vote against came from Belarus, which is facing a similar crisis to Myanmar; unusually, even Myanmar’s representative voted in favour, as UN ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun has continued to represent the civilian government. Brunei, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand were among the ASEAN countries to abstain, while Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore and the Philippines all voted in favour. As is its custom, the junta rejected the resolution, saying that it was “based on one-sided sweeping allegations and false assumptions”. “Any attempt infringing on the state sovereignty and interference in the internal affairs of Myanmar will not be accepted,” it said in a statement. The regime also said Kyaw Moe Tun’s continued representation of Myanmar is “illegal” and his participation in the vote was “illegitimate and unacceptable”.

The European Union and United Kingdom also introduced new sanctions against the regime, with the EU taking some unprecedented steps. The UK sanctioned Myanmar Timber Enterprise, Myanmar Pearl Enterprise, and the State Administration Council, the junta’s governing body, all of which are already facing some degree of Western sanctions.

The EU also [sanctioned](#) MTE and Myanmar Gems Enterprise, which had already been sanctioned by the US, Canada and UK. But the EU further sanctioned another state-backed timber company, which means there is “no legal source for timber, including precious teak, to be imported from Myanmar into the EU”, [according](#) to the Environmental Investigation Agency. The EU is also the first to sanction the Myanmar War Veterans Organization, which it said serves “as a reserve force of the Tatmadaw and takes part in shaping the national defence and security policy.” Finally, the EU sanctioned eight individuals, including attorney general Thida Oo, deputy defence minister Major-General Aung Lin Tun, and deputy information minister Brigadier-General Zaw Min Tun, none of whom are facing other sanctions that we are aware of.

COVID-19 across the country

The junta’s health ministry announced 3,946 new COVID-19 cases this week, and each of the past four days saw a record high new cases for this third wave. There were also 25 more deaths this week, bringing the total death toll to 3,275. Even more alarming than the raw numbers is the positive percentage rate, which is hovering around 12 percent, and the widespread dispersal of cases.

The World Health Organization sees a test positive rate of 5pc as concerningly high; we’re well past that and it’s likely that scaled up testing would reveal the virus is far more widespread. Myanmar is

also finding cases all over the country, not just isolated to a few states or regions. While western Chin State and Sagaing Region served as the epicentre of the new outbreak, which is believed to have crossed the border from India, we're seeing cases rise elsewhere as well. For example, Nay Pyi Taw reported 74 cases on Saturday, Mandalay had 93 on Tuesday, and Bago had 104 on Wednesday.

The junta is ordering hotspots into lockdown, declaring stay-at-home orders in Letpadan and Phyu townships in Bago and the Shwe Kokko construction site in Kayin State, and closing markets in Shan State's Lashio Township. But at the same time, the coup has crippled the healthcare sector, fighting has displaced thousands across the country, and the junta has shown no sign it will prioritise healthcare over its own desire for total control. Case in point: security forces [raided](#) a civil society organisation where two political dissidents with COVID-19 were isolating, almost certainly exposing others to the virus.

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