

Commentary

How Many Mass Killings Are Enough Before the World Helps Myanmar?

Wednesday 14 April 2021, by [Naing Khit](#) (Date first published: 14 April 2021).

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Last Friday, Myanmar's military regime massacred 82 people in Bago Town, just hours before the UN Security Council held one of its informal, so-called "Arria formula", meetings. Who on Earth can stop these massacres and daily killings when so many protesters are fearlessly prepared to die?

The mass killing in Bago was one of the worst atrocities, and made Friday one of the three bloodiest days, since Feb. 1, when the regime led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing staged a coup overthrowing the democratically elected government of the National League for Democracy and declaring void the result of the 2020 election, in which the NLD was the landslide victor.



Funeral goes flash three-finger salutes of defiance as a mother mourns over her son who was killed by the regime's troops in Yangon in March. / The Irrawaddy

At dawn Friday, several hundred of the regime's troops started their attacks on four residential quarters in Bago, about 50 miles north of Yangon. For the whole day and into the night, the troops used automatic weapons and other explosives like rifle grenades to destroy sandbag roadblocks erected by the anti-regime protesters and to kill the protesters and residents in those areas.

The huge single-day death toll left the world shocked.

Prior to the Bago slaughter, Myanmar had seen two days that were even bloodier. On March 14 and 27, the regime's soldiers and police committed at least two massacres, killing at least 111 people and more than 150 people, mostly in Yangon and in Mandalay, respectively. A number of other days have seen mass killings by the regime's troops, with the daily toll typically amounting to two or three dozen per day.



An anti-regime protester tries to reach out to his colleague who was shot by the junta's troops in Yangon in March. / The Irrawaddy

But these massacres won't be the last. The coup leaders have simply ignored all condemnation and requests to halt the killings and oppression from world bodies like the United Nations and from individual countries, as well as from Myanmar's own regional grouping, ASEAN.

Over the past two and a half months since the Feb. 1 coup, the regime's troops have killed at least 714 protesters and innocent citizens, including about four dozen children, according to the death toll compiled by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) as of April 13. Killing has been the regime's daily job since Feb. 1, at the rate of about 10 people per day over the past 72 days.

Undoubtedly, we'll see many such massacres in the days ahead under this ruthless regime, which has applied relentless brutality, including the use of heavy weapons, to handle the nationwide anti-military dictatorship protests, without once ever pausing to consider any political or other civilized means of dealing with the crisis.

Who will stop these killings?

Under this regime, life in Myanmar alternates between bloody days and even bloodier days. The world, including Western countries, the United Nations and others, has repeatedly condemned the regime in the strongest terms. After two and a half months, however, their condemnations and diplomatic actions, including sanctions on the coup leaders, have had no impact at all—the junta's atrocities continue unabated.

At the UNSC's Arria-formula meeting on Friday night, repeated calls were made for immediate action against the regime over its brutal killings and its air strikes against ethnic armed groups, which attacked the regime's military outposts in response to the crackdowns on civilians in the cities.

On April 13, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet also urged the international community to take immediate, decisive and impactful measures to immediately stop the repression and killings by the military regime in Myanmar.

"There are clear echoes of Syria in 2011. The state's brutal, persistent repression of its own people led to some individuals taking up arms, followed by a downward and rapidly expanding spiral of violence all across the country," said Bachelet. "I fear the situation in Myanmar is heading towards a full-blown conflict. States must not allow the deadly mistakes of the past in Syria and elsewhere to be repeated."

She continued: "Statements of condemnation, and limited targeted sanctions, are clearly not enough. States with influence need to urgently apply concerted pressure on the military in Myanmar to halt the commission of grave human rights violations and possible crimes against humanity against the people," Bachelet continued.

Even before the Arria-formula meeting, the UN held several meetings in the wake of the coup and called on the regime to stop its violence against protesters and civilians. Obviously, however, these pleas have fallen on deaf ears. The daily killings and frequent massacres continue.

In a closed session of the 15-member UNSC on April 1, UN Special Envoy to Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener urged the council to consider “all available tools to take collective action and do what is right, what the people of Myanmar deserve, and prevent a multi-dimensional catastrophe in the heart of Asia.”

She told the council she believed “a bloodbath is imminent” in Myanmar due to the military’s intensified crackdown on protesters. But the UN hasn’t been able to come up with effective collective action because of opposition from China, Russia, India and Vietnam.

Though Bachelet, Schraner Burgener and representatives of the Myanmar people have repeatedly urged the world and individual states to act, it’s highly unlikely we will see any meaningful action emerge from the UNSC or other concerned nations, including the US.

Washington, which has repeatedly condemned the Myanmar regime and punished the coup leaders with targeted sanctions since their power grab, has been trying to work with its Asian partners, especially ASEAN (of which Myanmar is a member), to resolve the crisis.

If history is any guide, however, that approach is unlikely to work. Due to its political culture and history dating back to 1967, ASEAN and its individual members lack such capacity, or any moral authority. Its traditional non-interference policy is one among numerous built-in weaknesses when it comes to dealing with Myanmar’s political crisis and the gross human rights violations in the country. Most members of ASEAN themselves are non-democratic countries, including Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Singapore. In the decades after Myanmar joined the grouping in 1997, ASEAN served as a diplomatic umbrella shielding Myanmar’s previous military regimes and their human rights violations from criticism from the international community, led by Western countries.

Anyone—be it global superpowers like the US or individual observers—who thinks ASEAN can handle the crisis in Myanmar is fooling themselves.



Anti-regime protesters take up positions to confront the regime’s troops in Yangon in March. / The Irrawaddy

In a commentary in The Bangkok Post on Tuesday, veteran Thai journalist on regional affairs Kavi Chongkittavorn wrote: “Today, ASEAN is the only organization that can handle the crisis in Myanmar in a sustainable way. Obviously, the bloc will proceed cautiously so that the level of trust and engagement can incrementally strengthen. The global community must be patient as the bloc is dealing with an unusual situation with the die-hard ... cruelty of the armed forces. The ugly truth remains that only when the Tatmadaw [Myanmar’s military] is confident that the domestic situation is under control and the running of day-to-day government tasks has returned to normal, will tangible frameworks for outside engagement be forthcoming. It can take weeks or months.”

Such an observation ignores ASEAN's history and isn't practical at all. How many hundreds of protesters will be killed in massacres like the one that occurred in Bago last Friday while the world waits until "the domestic situation is under control", as the columnist put it, so that ASEAN can act?

In this kind of crisis, ASEAN is always almost divided and unable to deliver a consensus. Regarding the coup in Myanmar, while Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have demanded that the regime end its violence against protesters and take a number of political steps, Thailand and Vietnam, among others, have stuck firmly to the grouping's non-interference policy.

Historically, ASEAN has never stepped in to take action against a regime in Myanmar or in any other member country. ASEAN cannot be relied upon by the international community to act on its own initiative, though it might support global action against the brutal coup leaders led by major countries like the US and its ally Japan.

How many deaths needed?

As things stand now, no country or world body seems prepared to take action that would really and immediately stop the murderous Myanmar regime from continuing with its daily killing. In truth, many people in Myanmar understand this. But they continue to call for meaningful intervention from the international community, like a drowning man who clutches at a straw.

There is another grim truth Myanmar's people seemed to have grasped—that they will need to die in even greater and more shocking numbers, day in and day out. They are undoubtedly determined to continuing their anti-military dictatorship movement at any cost; they are prepared to die, whether they are killed protesting peacefully on street or while taking up rudimentary arms to fight the regime's powerful forces. That's why they continue taking to the streets, though they know that each time they do they face death (let's call it by its real name: execution) by the regime's forces.

In case you'd forgotten, the regime has killed over 700 people over the past two and a half months.

Given the people's determination to keep fighting at any cost, and the regime's willingness to launch ever more intense crackdowns on them, the world should be prepared to see many more deaths every day in Myanmar—likely many hundreds in the coming weeks and months.

At the moment, the death toll so far and the degree of brutality shown by the regime don't seem sufficient to elicit from the international community anything stronger than condemnation and limited targeted sanctions. It appears that only a significant increase in the already horrific rate at which people in Myanmar are being slaughtered will prompt meaningful action of the kind that will bring a total halt to the crimes of this murderous regime.

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P.S.

• The Irrawaddy. 14 April 2021:
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/many-mass-killings-enough-world-helps-myanmar.html>