

1992-2021: French oil giant still bankrolling Myanmar junta

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Total, which operates Myanmar's largest offshore gas field, is continuing to provide a revenue stream for the military regime, say company staff



Caption: Employees from Total E&P Myanmar walk along the offshore platform of the Yadana gas field in May 2017 (Supplied)

French oil company Total is still providing significant revenue to Myanmar's ruling military council, employees say, despite the French government's condemnation of both the February 1 coup and the regime's continued deadly crackdowns on protesters.

At the time of reporting, Total E&P Myanmar was under pressure to suspend its operations in the country, where at least 710 civilians have been killed in less than three months by the junta's armed forces, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

Members of Total's staff spoke to Myanmar Now on the condition of anonymity, and said that income from gas exports continues to be channeled to the state-owned Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), which is controlled by the military.

"There is no suspension [of operations] at all. Natural gas is still being produced and exported for sale, and the generated income has not been seized. It is being transferred to MOGE. It is surely reaching the junta," an engineer who has been with Total for nearly 15 years said.

The company's local employees have demanded that oil and gas revenue not be paid into the military's coffers, in accordance with a March 5 appeal put forward by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), a body made up of elected lawmakers ousted in the coup.

However, employees told Myanmar Now that Total has refused to honour this request.

"We demanded that the company's management stop gas delivery to Thailand- then there would be no income from gas exports for the junta," a local employee said, referring to natural gas from the Yadana gas field in the Andaman Sea, the country's largest.

"Another option is to freeze income from gas sales by at least holding it until the democratic government returns. But the company's management failed to follow our request," the employee

added.

In late February, Australian oil company Woodside Energy announced it would suspend its drilling operations in Myanmar, including in the A6 offshore block in the Rakhine Basin.

Woodside and Total each hold a 40 percent stake in the project, but Total holds a non-operator role.

Total's Chief Executive Officer Patrick Pouyanné released a statement on April 4 in response to calls for the company to stop funding the junta, announcing that Total would discontinue drilling in the A6 block.

However, a Total employee in Myanmar dismissed the CEO's declaration, describing it as a "trick."

"A6 is operated by Woodside— Woodside suspended operations, not Total," the staff member said.

Apart from the A6 site, Total's drilling campaign in the Yadana gas field has continued throughout the current crisis. The staff member explained that company management within Myanmar had said that they would stop drilling for additional wells at the site by May, but the employee noted that the decision was not made in response to the lethal crackdowns carried out by the coup regime.

"The truth is, the drilling was already going to be done by this time," he added.

The employee pointed out that Total is slated to continue extracting and selling gas from the Yadana field, even as the drilling of new wells halts.

In 2019 alone, the company brought in nearly \$230 million in revenue to Myanmar, more than three-quarters of which went to the MOGE and the rest paid in taxes, Reuters reported.

"One thing to note about Total is that they came to Myanmar in 1992, just after the 1988 uprising," a staff member told Myanmar Now, referring to the widespread pro-democracy movement that was brutally crushed by the military regime. "It is operating in war-torn regions and countries where dictators rule, because it is more beneficial for them," he added.

Staff have also raised questions about their rights as workers being violated. The company employs some 300 people, an estimated 90 percent of whom are locals. One of these employees who spoke to Myanmar Now reported that management had forced at least one staff member to resign after he asked to take unpaid leave amid the ongoing regime crackdown.

"At the moment, we are on four weeks of work and four weeks of rest at home by rotation. One employee couldn't resume his work due to the current situation in Yangon," the staff member said, referring to shootings and arrests perpetrated by soldiers and police across the commercial capital. "He requested unpaid leave. But the management didn't allow it, and instead made him resign. He had to submit his resignation letter voluntarily."

Leaders of the CRPH have urged workers across all sectors nationwide to join the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and refuse to work under the military dictatorship. However, participation in the CDM has yet to catch on among Total's 300 employees, nearly all of whom are locals, a staff member added.

"In early March, we tried to organise to mainly demand that [Total] suspend paying taxes to the junta, but it didn't happen. Senior staff who have been in the company for so long went to work instead of joining the CDM," he said.

The employee remained hopeful that if the staff joined the CDM as a united front, they might be able to stop Total's operations.

"If we all go into the CDM, the company's operations could surely be stopped. [We] cannot be replaced easily," he said, adding that Total would likely try to bring in overseas contractors to take over their jobs. "Each offshore platform has a different nature to it, and requires familiarity with the site. They can't [learn] that all at once," he explained.

In addition to operating the Yadana gas field and holding shares in the offshore drilling block A6, Total also works on at least three other deepwater blocks in the Andaman Sea, and the Yetagun West Block.

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P.S.

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