

# Frontier Fridays: The Top Stories in Myanmar this Week

Friday 28 May 2021, by [Frontier Myanmar](#) (Date first published: 28 May 2021).

**Welcome to Frontier Fridays. This week fighting broke out in Kayah State, concerning signs emerged of a potential third wave of COVID-19, Chevron and Total ended some payments to the regime and the resistance stepped up assassinations of junta officials, especially in Yangon.**

## Clashes in Kayah

We start in Kayah State, where fighting dramatically escalated this week, spilling over into parts of southern Shan State as well. Clashes first erupted on Thursday morning, when Tatmadaw troops reportedly tried to enter Karenni Army territory, where the ethnic armed group is believed to be harbouring and training civilian resistance fighters. A joint force between the KA and the Karenni People's Defence Force, which is loyal to the civilian National Unity Government, clashed repeatedly with the Tatmadaw over the following week. Fighting was reported in Demoso, Bawlakhe and Loikaw townships in Kayah State, as well as Pekon Township in southern Shan State. Resistance fighters claimed around 40 soldiers and police officers were killed over the weekend, while four more policemen were taken prisoner.

By Sunday evening, the Tatmadaw sent armoured personnel carriers and helicopters into the area to subdue the uprising, leading to several civilian casualties, including four people [killed by an artillery strike](#) while sheltering in a church in Loikaw Township. On Wednesday, Radio Free Asia also reported that snipers [shot four people](#) fleeing conflict in Kayah State on motorbikes, killing three and injuring one. But the increased military presence doesn't seem to have deterred the civilian fighters, who [launched yet another attack](#) against a police station in Demoso on Tuesday morning, and subsequently ambushed reinforcements. RFA Burmese reported that the Tatmadaw lost five fighters in those clashes, while two KPDF fighters were killed and three remain missing.

The fighting is unique not only because it represents the first major clashes in the state, but also because it seems to be the first time an ethnic armed group has openly staged an attack with a PDF. The situation appears to be getting under the junta's skin, as the Minister of Home Affairs Lieutenant-General Soe Htut was [been sent](#) to the region to meet with police officers, Tatmadaw soldiers and their families in Loikaw and Pekon.

While Karenni forces have fought admirably so far, that shouldn't distract from the continued need for more coordination among resistance forces if they hope to compete with the Tatmadaw long term, or even achieve their ultimate aim of overthrowing the military government.

## A third wave?

There are some indications that COVID-19 may be circulating in Myanmar undetected, which could compound the crisis already facing the country.

First, a charity group said 50 to 100 people had become ill with an [unidentified respiratory disease](#) in the small town of Kyikha on the India-Myanmar border in Tonzang Township, Chin State. The group said patients are suffering from a “COVID-19-like infection” that causes “difficulty breathing”. While cases haven’t been particularly high in the Indian states on the Myanmar border, given the massive scale of India’s coronavirus outbreak, and its own limited testing, it’s very easy to imagine that the virus could be more prevalent in border areas than the numbers suggest, and may have made its way across into Chin State.

Myanmar’s own testing remains woefully inadequate, but yesterday’s caseload was alarming despite the limited sample size. The junta’s Ministry of Health and Sports reported 96 new COVID-19 cases from 1,788 tests yesterday, the highest tally since the coup. (Of the 96 cases, 24 came from Kyikha). That also comes out to a positivity rate of 5.3 percent, which is high enough to be concerned. At the peak of Myanmar’s second wave, we were regularly hitting 8 or 9pc, but didn’t start breathing easier until we were down to 2 or 3pc. The civilian government had just managed to get the outbreak under control, with cases dropping off and positivity rates dwindling shortly before the coup. Since the Tatmadaw took power, restrictions were eased and testing rates collapsed from around 20,000 per day to around 2,000, leaving the country largely in the dark.

### **Chevron, Total take first step**

Chevron and Total [announced](#) that they have decided to suspend “cash distributions” to shareholders of the Moattama Gas Transportation Company (MGTC), which includes Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise, the junta’s largest source of foreign currency in the formal economy. But before you get too excited, activists have said the move is a welcome first step, but not quite as significant as it sounds on first blush.

This helpful [statement](#) from Justice For Myanmar explains that MOGE will still receive the “vast majority of payments” it received before from “gas revenue, royalties and cost recovery from the Yadana gas field operation and corporate income tax from MGTC”. Environmental watchdog Earthrights International [estimated](#) that the decision will cut off “less than 10% of the revenues that the Yadana project generates for the regime”.

Still, many activists have been invigorated by the news, not because they think Chevron and Total have done enough, but because they see it as a sign they may be pressured into doing more. Earthrights argued that Total and Chevron have essentially acknowledged that providing funds to the junta is wrong, so they should halt revenue from other sources as well (such as Yadana). We can expect this discussion to continue – as many have pointed out, the decision indicates that Total and Chevron are susceptible to public pressure, so it will encourage activists to put even more pressure on them to cut off the junta’s access to funds. Some of this pressure appears to be coming from within, too, as civil society groups found in [recent interviews](#) with 10 Yadana gas field workers, who all said they want Total to block payments even if it puts them at risk or results in electricity cuts locally.

### **Guerilla warfare in Yangon**

As fighting escalates in some areas, targeted assassinations of junta officials via explosions and drive-by shootings have increased in others.

Yangon has seen a spate of death this week, including what we believe are the first killings of soldiers in the city. One soldier was reportedly [shot and killed](#) in Thingangyun Township last Friday, while another was killed in a similar incident in Kyimyindaing Township yesterday evening. In Yangon’s Sanchaung Township, an explosion reportedly killed two police officers who were

providing security at a ward office on Friday afternoon. Also in Yangon, early yesterday morning, the junta-appointed ward administrator in Thaketa Township was [shot dead](#) by unknown assailants, with locals accusing the victim of being a “junta informer”. In a particularly gruesome incident, a bomb targeted a wedding party, killing four people, including the bride. Several local outlets reported that the parcel bomb was disguised as a gift and exploded during the ceremony. While the motive is unconfirmed, rumours spread on social media that the groom may have been a junta informer or member of a pro-military group.

Elsewhere, a policeman was [killed in a blast](#) on Friday afternoon in the Shan State capital Taunggyi after inspecting a package dropped in the road, which then exploded. The chairman of the pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party in Mon State’s Bilin Township was [killed](#) in a drive-by shooting while walking to his farm on Thursday morning. And finally, a soldier providing security for the general hospital in Meiktila Township, Mandalay Region was shot dead in a similar incident on Thursday night.

It’s hard to blame resistance fighters for wanting to inflict damage on security forces while avoiding head-to-head confrontations with a significantly larger and better equipped military. But these types of attacks will inevitably lead to accidental civilian casualties and some morally questionable incidents, like the wedding party attack. Still, the Tatmadaw must take the lion’s share of the blame for these unfortunate incidents, since its brutal crackdowns on demonstrations created the violence and instability we see today. The unpredictable violence will also contribute to the impression that Yangon isn’t safe for foreign tourism or businesses, which will hamper the junta’s efforts to return to business as usual.

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