

# Frontier Fridays: The Top Stories in Myanmar this Week

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**Welcome to Frontier Fridays. This week a rare protest broke out in Insein Prison as the COVID-19 situation continued to spiral out of control, major flooding hit multiple states and regions, security forces allegedly ran rampant in Sagaing Region, and the junta officially annulled the 2020 election results.**

## COVID-19 outbreak worsens, prisoners protest

There's no good news on the COVID-19 front this week, as cases and deaths continue to mount, with Myanmar reporting its highest positivity rates to date on Friday and Sunday, and its highest single-day death toll on Tuesday. In total, there were 35,969 cases this week and 2,419 deaths, bringing the total death toll to 8,552. The percentage of tests coming back positive twice broke the 40 percent mark, the highest of any country in the world right now. While these numbers are grim, they don't even tell the full story: the real number of cases and deaths is far higher than the junta is reporting.

In a sign that the military regime is fully aware that the death toll is far worse than its official numbers, state media [announced](#) on Tuesday that 10 new crematoriums are being built at cemeteries in Yangon. The new facilities will reportedly be able to cremate more than 3,000 bodies per day, while another newly built crematorium can process 1,000 bodies per day. This would seem hardly necessary if fewer than 400 people were dying per day nationally of COVID-19, which is what the official statistics say.

The other big news on the COVID-19 front is that a protest erupted in Insein Prison last Friday, reportedly inspired by the lack of proper healthcare in the facility, where scores of cases have been reported.

"The protest reportedly began because prisoners have not been provided with medical care, and neither have prison staff been given protection from COVID-19," [said](#) the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which also claimed some prison staff participated in the demonstration. The statement also expressed "great concern that the protests in Insein Prison will be viciously suppressed and there will be a massacre and rampant use of torture". While there were some initial reports that soldiers killed prisoners following the protest, we've been unable to confirm this and remain sceptical of the claims without further evidence.

Soon after, state media reported that 610 inmates in Insein were vaccinated against COVID-19, while simultaneously denying there was any outbreak - this despite the junta previously admitting that high-profile political prisoner Nyan Win died after contracting COVID-19 in the prison. While the article did not name him, Australian economic adviser to the overthrown government Sean Turnell can clearly be seen receiving a shot in the photographs. We of course can't confirm it's a legitimate vaccination and not a staged photo-op (he also [looks](#) extremely sunburnt).

## Fatal flooding grips Myanmar

Already gripped by post-coup chaos and one of the worst COVID-19 outbreaks in the world, now many in Myanmar are also grappling with [major flooding](#). Dangerously high water levels have been reported in Kayin, Mon and Rakhine states, Tanintharyi Region, and the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, affecting tens of thousands and displacing thousands.

In Kayin State, more than 1,400 people were relocated to relief camps in Myawaddy Township, while another 100 had to be evacuated from Hlaingbwe Township, and some 500 were evacuated in Kyaikmayaw Township in Mon State. Tragically, some of the most vulnerable have been among the worst affected: several camps for the internally displaced have been flooded in Rakhine State, as have Rohingya refugee camps across the border in Bangladesh. Around 1,700 people in a camp in Mrauk-U Township have again been [relocated](#) after water levels rose in the camp on Wednesday.

At least six Rohingya refugees were [killed by a landslide](#) or swept away by water, with four children among the victims, and two people were reported missing following landslides in Paung and Chaungzon Townships in Mon State.

Perhaps even more concerning, the flooding is disrupting local COVID-19 responses, putting extra strain on an already crumbling healthcare system. Hospitals are flooded, rescue workers are having difficulty reaching patients in order to treat them, and there are fears that [flooding might cut](#) the flow of essential medical equipment from Thailand, particularly life-saving oxygen.

## Carnage in Sagaing Region

More [bodies have been found](#) in Kani Township, Sagaing Region, including that of an elderly man hanging from a tree by a noose. As of today, locals have reportedly recovered eight corpses, but believe there are more dead, citing difficulties excavating the graves which they suspect are rigged with explosives. A [video](#) from Khit Thit shows people recovering the bodies (warning: it's very graphic). The gruesome discovery comes some two weeks after 15 bodies were found in the same township, many tied up and bearing signs of torture.

Residents said that some of the bodies were members of the People's Defence Force, while others were non-combatants who had sought shelter in the woods. Six members of the PDF were killed during the battle, but it's not clear exactly how many PDF members were among the bodies that have been discovered. Regardless, the treatment that the victims seem to have been subjected to is truly shocking. According to Myanmar Now, which said it had viewed videos of the bodies, one of the civilians had an eye gouged out and his hands tied. Others reportedly had bruises on their shoulders and chins that were likely inflicted by beating with rifle butts. The local PDF also accused the Tatmadaw of beating and executing its fighters after capturing them, including a 17-year-old. The brother of a different PDF fighter said his head had been "smashed to a pulp" and "half of his head was completely crushed".

Also in Sagaing, 57 PDF members were [captured](#) following clashes in Mingin Township, after being tricked by the junta. PDF fighters reportedly clashed with members of the paramilitary Pyusawhti group on Wednesday, with the pro-military militia allegedly waving white flags of surrender. But it was all a ruse: when the PDF fighters dropped their weapons and entered the village, they were surrounded and arrested by security forces. A group of 18 PDF members refused to enter the village, believing (correctly) that it was a trap.

Given the junta's treatment of other captured PDF fighters in the region, the general public is understandably very concerned for their safety. Yesterday, photos went viral on social media

showing some of the PDF fighters forced to kneel down with their hands tied behind their backs, which drew comparisons to photos of 10 Rohingya men who were massacred in Inn Din village in September 2017. A Mingin PDF spokesperson said the junta took five of its leaders to Northwest Military Command headquarters in nearby Monywa. It seems at least some of the fighters have been killed – state television announced last night that three PDF members died during the fighting and 53 were arrested.

The region has also continued to experience a high number of targeted killings of junta-appointed administrators and alleged informants and Pyusawhti members. In the past eight days, two alleged Pyusawhti members were beheaded in [Taze](#) and [Khin-U](#) townships, with the Khin-U victim's body also reportedly displaying both gun and knife wounds.

## **Military annuls election it lost**

The military regime officially annulled the November 2020 election, which the National League for Democracy won in a massive landslide, citing its unsubstantiated allegations of voter fraud. The decision comes as little surprise given the allegations are the entire justification for staging the coup in the first place, so the junta could hardly go back on that now.

The statement said there were a total of 11,305,390 “voter lists irregularities across the country”, with inspections finding “missing and illegal ballots at every polling station”. It's hard to take the junta's numbers seriously, but it is likely there were many irregularities in the voter lists, as there were in the 2015 and 2010 elections administered by the military and its proxy party. However, as we've pointed out here before, an irregularity in the list itself is not evidence of fraud. The junta has claimed that if somebody was registered in two different townships this is essentially fraud, despite not giving us any concrete evidence of somebody actually voting twice. Even if somebody were registered in Yangon and their rural hometown, for example, it would have been extremely difficult for them to vote twice, both because of the indelible ink marking the fingers of voters and because of the travel restrictions in effect at the time due to COVID-19.

The NLD has unsurprisingly rejected the annulment. Aung Kyi Nyunt, chairman of the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw and a member of the NLD central executive committee, [said](#) the move is “an insult to the people”. “These people in the election commission appointed by the military council just undermined the people's desire and legal frameworks,” he continued. The Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, one of the biggest parties in the country and a staunch opponent of the coup, likewise [objected](#) to the ruling and said it would continue to recognise the election results.

More surprisingly, the Arakan National Party, which has collaborated with the junta since the coup, was also critical of the decision. The party released a [statement](#) saying things are moving in a “totally destructive direction” and the decision will “only exacerbate the situation”. The statement also calls for a stronger response to COVID-19, a more durable ceasefire than the junta's monthly extensions, and the creation of a “political situation inclusive to all stakeholders”. A member of the ANP, which is another of the country's largest parties, serves on the junta's State Administration Council. Back in May, the party said it was considering cutting ties with the regime, but far as we know, they never actually followed through. Still, there are clearly cracks showing in the relationship.

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