

International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and States must work directly with civil society and other stakeholders on COVID-19: collaborating with the junta on public health would jeopardize Myanmar's COVID-19 response, legitimize the junta, and harm public health in the long term.

To the international community, and in particular, IFIs and States,

We are writing to urge IFIs and State donors to work directly with civil society, including ethnic health services, to ensure effective and sustainable response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the military's (Tatmadaw's) active undermining of the COVID-19 response last year, and the illegal junta's ongoing attacks on community resources essential to the COVID-19 response, it is clear that any aid to entities under the junta's control would constitute an attack on Myanmar's public health.

The Tatmadaw undermined Myanmar's COVID-19 response before seizing power, and continues to do so now, escalating attacks on peaceful protesters and civil society, targeting health workers and facilities and engaging in armed conflict in ethnic areas. It has actively suppressed COVID-19 efforts by civil society and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). The primary impediment to pandemic response in Myanmar is not a lack of funding, but the junta itself.

On 17 February 2021, we urged you in a [letter](#) to halt lending obligations, suspend disbursements, pending grants and loans across all sovereign and non-sovereign operations, until conclusive confirmation that these do not legitimize military rule. At best, funding the regime to provide healthcare—rather than supporting civil society and EAOs—would legitimize and fund the junta, force health care workers, civil society and the public to engage with it, and undermine Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). More realistically, funding to the junta would not be used on public health. The Tatmadaw's actions make clear it is not concerned about people's health or COVID-19 suppression in Myanmar—funding will not change this.

The CDM is a choice by millions of people, including large parts of the public health and medical communities, not to engage with the regime. An estimated 50,000 of 110,000 Ministry of Health and Sports staff have joined, including 70% of its Yangon headquarters. 357 of Myanmar's 1,162 public hospitals are closed. Statements from Myanmar health care workers highlight that a return to military dictatorship would be more harmful to public health than the pandemic.¹ The impact of COVID-19, as a public health concern, should be seen in context; Myanmar has recorded approximately 3,200 COVID-19 deaths; the same number die in Myanmar from [tuberculosis](#) every 6 weeks.

Recommendations in relation to the COVID-19 response:

- IFIs and States must not collaborate with or legitimize the regime, including through COVID-19 funding.
- IFIs and States must put in place mechanisms to work with civil society (as they did prior to 2010 and recently have in other [countries](#)²) and with EAOs that have long provided health care and social services in collaboration with communities in their areas of control.
- IFIs and States must support calls from civil society, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) and UN Special Rapporteur to place gas revenues into protected accounts, to be used for humanitarian purposes.

Sincerely,

225 Myanmar civil society organizations, international groups and individuals

¹ In a letter published in the Lancet, Myanmar medical professionals said: "50 years of previous military rule failed to develop our health system and instead enshrined poverty, inequality, and inadequate medical care."

² The World Bank, United Nations, and European Union announced an innovative model for disbursing aid to Lebanon that pools funds into a mechanism that empowers civil society and disburses funds directly to nongovernmental groups and businesses rather than the unaccountable government.

Background on COVID-19, CDM and Tatmadaw actions

Myanmar's chronic underfunding of social services means that most people rely on informal providers—civil society has been invaluable throughout the pandemic, providing food and monetary aid, medical equipment, and accessible, translated information. The junta has hindered this by raiding CSO offices, detaining CSO staff, and imposing movement restrictions, excessive curfews, and internet shutoffs.

CSOs that coordinated with the government on pandemic response, nutrition, gender-based violence, and other activities now refuse to work with the junta. Health workers initiated the CDM and have refused to work for the junta. Medical staff are refusing second doses of vaccines, fearing that the junta will force them to work for it if they return to the hospital.

The Tatmadaw has shown it is not concerned about people's health or COVID-19 suppression in Myanmar:

- Security forces gone on a [killing spree](#) between 1 February and 15 March, leaving 183 dead. They have injured hundreds and arrested at least [2175](#) politicians, activists, journalists, and others.
- They have assaulted and killed medical workers,³ targeted health care facilities and used them as military bases, and prevented medical care, including for those detained.
- Tatmadaw attacks continue against ethnic communities, including 89 new incidents during 1 February–5 March and fighting that displaced over 3,000 people in Shan and Karen States in February.
- For the entire duration of the pandemic, the Tatmadaw has undermined the COVID-19 response:
 - It refused EAOs' requests for ceasefires to focus on national reconciliation and on collectively combating the pandemic, stating that these were 'not practical.'
 - It attacked health workers, blocked humanitarian aid corridors,⁴ and dismantled ethnic health outposts set up for COVID-19 in [Karen](#), [Kachin](#), and Rakhine States.
- The junta purged government departments, including the Ministry of Health and Sports, and has effectively stopped COVID-19 guidance, safety measures, tracking, and the vaccination schedule. It has cut internet access, banned media outlets, and blocked social media websites heavily used for communication (e.g. Facebook), preventing sharing of information.
- New rules since 1 February prevent IDPs and victims of attacks and human rights abuses from traveling to get help; and prevent CSOs from traveling freely to conduct field activities.

Background on IFI Loans

As of February 2021, the following project finance (combined amount of current and pipeline projects with IFI commitments via loans, grants, guarantees, financial intermediaries, other financing modalities), support to COVID-19 response, and other financial transactions have been noted:

- World Bank (IDA): 41 projects, roughly US\$4 billion.
- International Finance Corporation (IFC): 38 projects, roughly US\$850 million
- Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA): 9 projects, roughly US\$1.22 billion
- Asian Development Bank (ADB): 97 projects, roughly US\$2.7 billion
- Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB): 1 project, US\$20 million
- International Monetary Fund (IMF): US\$689.24 million for outstanding loans and purchases
- Consolidated COVID-19 response support from World Bank (\$818.53M), ADB (\$394M) and IMF (\$356.5): roughly US\$1.6 billion

Development finance and related country partnership strategies can only succeed if supported by: (1) the rule of law; (2) functioning democratic institutions; and (3) protected rights of people, rights defenders and free media. In contrast, the military coup d'état beginning on 1 February conferred [full legislative, executive, and judicial powers](#) unto the Tatmadaw—and specifically its leader, General Min Aung Hlaing. He and the Tatmadaw have long carried out atrocity crimes and rights abuses, documented by the [Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar](#), and subject to scrutiny at the [International Criminal Court](#) and [International Court of Justice](#).

³ For further information, see [ALTSEAN-Burma \(11 Mar 2021\) Burma/Myanmar: Junta's attacks on civil society & health workers are killing domestic COVID-19 response](#)

⁴ Covid-19 and conflict in Myanmar briefing paper series, No. 2, The Asia Foundation

Lenders should comply with their own policies and commitments, such as the World Bank's [Environmental and Social Framework](#); or ADB's [safeguard policies](#) on involuntary resettlement, indigenous peoples, and the environment. They should also comply with responsible business practices, such as the OECD's [Responsible business conduct for institutional investors](#) and the UN's [Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#), which require investors to identify potential adverse impacts and use leverage to influence recipients. At the very least, lenders should fulfil the objectives [outlined](#) at the 2020 Finance in Common Summit, which include promoting sustainable, inclusive and equitable development.

Oversight and risk assessment as contemplated in the above-referenced frameworks (and others) should raise the following critical issues, at a minimum:

- The junta has directly attacked civil society organizations, such as [seizing](#) Open Society Foundation's Myanmar bank accounts and targeting its staff, threatening IFIs' commitments against reprisals.
- On 25 February, the World Bank [announced](#) it had put a hold on disbursements for ongoing projects, and would not be processing withdrawal applications received on or after 1 February. On 10 March, ADB [announced](#) it had put a hold on sovereign disbursements and new contracts effective 1 February. However, it is unclear whether their private project loans, loans through financial intermediaries, and other financial instruments will continue. Meanwhile, the other banks noted above have remained silent.
- Within days of the 1 February 2021 power grab, workers went on strike all over the country, including at the Tatmadaw-controlled Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, Myanmar National Airlines, railways, mines, and government ministries, as well as construction sites, garment factories, and schools.
- In January 2021 the government [called for public donations to support COVID-19 vaccinations](#). Meanwhile, it [purchased](#) two military aircraft for USD 38.6 million from Jordan (Dec 2020), and [purchased](#) radar stations, self-propelled short-range air-defense systems, and unmanned aerial systems (likely totaling tens of millions of dollars) from Russia (Jan 2021).
- Myanmar's Covid-19 Economic Relief Plan (with USD 2.5 billion budgeted) is [unlikely to help the country's most vulnerable, and is likely to harm](#) communities by encouraging large-scale infrastructure projects with decreased safeguards, which have displaced tens of thousands in the past. This, and the military in control, raise serious concerns about [billions of dollars in IFI loans](#) and hundreds of millions in bilateral assistance (e.g. [United Kingdom](#), [United States](#), [European Union](#), [Japan](#), [China](#) and [Korea](#)).

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