

Urgent Appeal to the UN Secretary-General

H.E. Mr. António Guterres
United Nations Secretary-General
United Nations Secretariat
42nd Street,
New York, NY 10017

23 July 2021

Re: Urgent UN coordinated humanitarian intervention to combat the catastrophic COVID-19 crisis in Myanmar

Your Excellency,

We, the undersigned, write to urge you to immediately brief the UN Security Council and intervene to address the latest catastrophic wave of COVID-19 in Myanmar in accordance with the UN Security Council Resolution 2532 calling for a global response to combat the pandemic, with the “United Nations playing a key coordinating role.”¹ The catastrophic third wave of the COVID-19 is not only a threat to Myanmar; it is a threat to global health security with a particular impending effect on the region. The military is deliberately exacerbating the current COVID-19 crisis for its own political and strategic gain, while collectively punishing the public for rejecting the coup. We echo the alarm bells sounded by Tom Andrews, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar that the current conditions will result in “significant loss of life” unless the international community steps up to respond to this humanitarian crisis.

Against the backdrop of continued brutal killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, detentions, and displacement orchestrated by the Myanmar military junta, COVID-19 is now ravaging Myanmar. Cases have [escalated](#) rapidly since 27 May, affecting 90% of the country’s townships. Hospitals are lacking human resources and medical supplies, while many have closed or at overcapacity, forced to turn away patients in critical conditions. On 22 July, the Myanmar military junta-controlled Ministry of Health and Sports (MoHS) reported a total of 6,133 deaths and 253,364 infections, including detecting the Delta strain. Test positivity rates have consistently stayed well over 30%, suggesting that testing remains significantly limited and the number of infections is likely to be far higher as testing has collapsed since the coup. At least 375 people have been [confirmed](#) to have COVID-19 in prisons across the country, with a politician among the COVID-19 deaths in prison. [Accounts](#) from media suggest over the bodies of 700 people dead from COVID-19 were cremated in Yangon district on 14 July alone.

The illegitimate and brutal military junta is weaponizing the COVID-19 pandemic for its own political gain, hugely exacerbating loss of life, while continuing to wage a terror campaign against the people of Myanmar for categorically rejecting its attempted coup. The UN must immediately intervene through a coordinated response in order to curb this catastrophic third wave of COVID-19, reaching all those who are in dire need. To that end, we urge you to immediately brief the UN Security Council on the situation of COVID-19 in Myanmar to coordinate a UN emergency response as a matter of extreme urgency.

The junta has restricted the sale of oxygen by private producers, requiring recommendation letters from local healthcare professionals, while some private plants were ordered to shut down. With the COVID-19 treatment centers at overcapacity, the general public relies almost entirely on home care and private oxygen supplies to keep their loved ones alive. On 13 July in Yangon’s Dagon Township, soldiers on motorbikes arrived at a factory

¹ S/RES/2532 (2020), 1 July 2020

providing refills of oxygen and opened fire at a crowd of people lining up to refill oxygen cylinders. The soldiers had been [ordered](#) to disperse the crowds and ensure that the oxygen cylinders are provided exclusively to junta-run medical facilities.

The junta's unlawful coup attempt on 1 February and campaign of terror has destroyed the already fragile and severely underfunded public healthcare system. As of 1 July, there have been at least 240 [attacks](#) against healthcare personnel and facilities by the junta, which led to at least 17 deaths of medical workers. Doctors and other healthcare personnel on strike have had to go into hiding for fear of retaliatory attacks and arrests. On 19 July, a military official pretending to be a COVID-19 patient lured three doctors to a home in South Okkala Township, Yangon where upon arrival, junta troops [arrested](#) the medical workers, and subsequently raided their office, arresting two more doctors and confiscating their oxygen.

Military troops have also occupied dozens of medical facilities, which has prompted the people to stay away for fear of being detained or shot. These attacks against medical workers and facilities are in violation of international human rights and humanitarian law as well as UN Security Council Resolution 2286 on the protection of medical care personnel in armed conflict, and are a deliberate attempt at hampering efforts to provide comprehensive care and respond to COVID-19. The Director General of the World Health Organization has [called](#) for an end to these attacks against health facilities and workers in Myanmar during a global media briefing on 15 March.

Since the attempted coup, at least 230,000 people have been [displaced](#) as a result of the junta's attacks against ethnic minorities, including airstrikes, artillery shelling and destroying ethnic local structures meant to prevent the spread of COVID-19, breaking the ceasefire agreements signed with Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). The displaced population face additional challenges, including lack of social distancing in internally displaced person's camps, undersupply of personal protective equipment (PPE), masks and sanitation, putting them at higher risk of contracting COVID-19. Your calls for a global ceasefire to focus on combating the COVID-19 pandemic have gone unheeded by the junta.

We urge you to immediately assist the people of Myanmar to combat this crisis in a way that does not further embolden the military junta, which is the root cause of the health, human rights, and humanitarian catastrophes currently unfolding in Myanmar. To this end, the UN, donors, humanitarian aid organizations and the international community must work in partnership with and provide assistance to ethnic health providers, civil society and community-based organizations, and health workers who are an integral part of the democracy movement and who are struggling to save lives under grave risk of contracting COVID-19 on one hand and risk of attack from the military junta on the other. We further urge you to coordinate with Myanmar's neighbors – Thailand, India, China, Laos and Bangladesh – to ensure these vital supply lines are opened. Such a response requires UN coordination to ensure that all support reaches those who are in immediate need of oxygen concentrators, ventilators, medical supplies, PPE, other COVID-19 related assistance and humanitarian needs. Furthermore, this assistance must be coordinated in partnership with the [COVID-19 Task Force](#), formed by Ethnic Health Organizations (EHOs) and the National Unity Government – the legitimate government of the people of Myanmar.

We therefore strongly urge you to request to immediately brief the UN Security Council under Resolution 2532 and 2565 on the situation of the rapidly unfolding COVID-19 catastrophe in Myanmar as a matter of extreme urgency.

We would kindly request a response at your earliest convenience and would welcome the opportunity to present you a situational update with our documentation, alongside key medical and humanitarian colleagues on the ground, to further inform your briefing. We look forward to your swift response to our urgent appeal.

Please accept the assurances of our highest consideration.

Sincerely,

443 Myanmar Civil Society Organizations

**Please note: Due to serious security concerns, names of 443 local civil society organizations who endorsed and signed this letter cannot be disclosed. The signed CSOs work on a range of humanitarian, human rights protection, and rights-based issues in Myanmar.*