**Eighteen Killed in Myanmar’s Bloodiest Day of Protests Since Coup**

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SINGAPORE—At least 18 people were killed in Myanmar, the United Nations said, as security forces began their toughest crackdown yet against protesters who have taken to the streets for more than three weeks to oppose this month’s coup, signaling the military’s growing willingness to use lethal force despite international condemnation.

The deaths occurred Sunday in different cities across the country. In Yangon, Myanmar’s largest city, at least three people died from bullet wounds and 16 others were injured, including a 31-year-old man who was in critical condition, according to a senior doctor at Yangon General Hospital who is involved in treating the injured. Four people were also killed in the southern city of Dawei, according to an announcement on military-run TV, which said protesters there hadn’t complied with orders to disperse.

Images of bloodshed, chaos and, in some places, continuing protests flooded social media, capturing scenes that were corroborated by witnesses. Myanmar news organizations posted pictures and videos showing bloodied protesters surrounded by medics, Yangon’s streets filled with tear gas and crowds of men and women, many in hard hats and goggles, scrambling for safety.

The police action on Sunday wasn’t limited to one area or city, beginning early in the morning in many parts of the country and signaling a deliberate effort to use greater force. Myanmar’s military has a history of deadly crackdowns against pro-democracy protesters, including during mass demonstrations in 2007 and 1988.

“We strongly condemn the escalating violence against protests in Myanmar and call on the military to immediately halt the use of force against peaceful protesters,” Ravina Shamdasani, a spokeswoman for the U.N. Human Rights Office said.

Protesters are demanding that the Feb. 1 coup, which ended Myanmar’s decadelong transition to democracy, be reversed and civilian politicians be restored to power. Their marches and gatherings have grown during the past three weeks, drawing hundreds of thousands on some days, and including students, factory workers, bank employees, shopkeepers, tea sellers and civil servants.

Authorities have imposed nightly internet blackouts and detained hundreds, including politicians, activists, protesters and some journalists. More than 470 people were detained on Saturday and more than 570 on Sunday, according to state-run TV. Before Sunday, three people had died in connection with the coup—one in the capital, Naypyitaw, after a bullet fractured her skull and two at a demonstration at a shipyard in the central city of Mandalay.

The U.S. has repeatedly called on Myanmar’s military to relinquish power, release those who have been detained and restore Myanmar’s democratically elected government.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Sunday condemned the violence in a Twitter post, saying the U.S. would continue to “promote accountability for those responsible.”

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said the U.S. was preparing additional punitive measures against those responsible. “The United States stands in solidarity with the people of Burma, who continue to bravely voice their aspirations for democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights,” he said in a statement. “We will continue coordinating closely with allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region and around the world to hold those responsible for violence to account, and to reinforce our support for the people of Burma.”

The crackdown, recorded and circulated widely in Myanmar on social media, makes the country’s already uncertain path more fraught, with the military showing no signs of compromise. Many fear an even more heavy-handed response may be coming, as authorities accuse protesters of spreading anarchy and of breaking the law. Before they loosened their grip a decade ago, the generals controlled Myanmar for half a century, despite years of crippling international sanctions and pressure.

The military leaders now in charge have said they plan to hold elections, but few protesters believe any such vote, if it were to take place, would be free or fair. They are demanding that the national elections held in November, in which the country’s pro-democracy party beat its military-backed opponent by a huge margin, be honored, and have pledged to continue demonstrations despite the bloodshed.

Human Rights Watch condemned Sunday’s violence, saying the “clear escalation in use of lethal force” was outrageous and unacceptable. “The world is watching the actions of the Myanmar military junta, and will hold them accountable,” it said.

Hein Ya Za, a 29-year-old activist in Yangon, was on the front lines of a protest in the city’s Hledan neighborhood. When he arrived Sunday morning, he said, police were prepared and had already begun cornering protesters as they approached on smaller side streets. Before long, authorities launched tear-gas canisters into the crowds and gunshots rang out, causing many to run for nearby houses that were offering shelter.

“It was chaotic, very difficult to breathe,” he said. “But we weren’t afraid. We just washed out our eyes and our noses with Coca-Cola, some people used milk, and kept on.”

When police began firing live rounds, 22-year-old protester Soe Lay ran as fast as he could to a side street, he said. From there, he saw a man being struck by bullets and fall to the ground, where he lay motionless. Later in the day, Mr. Soe Lay returned to the spot and found a small memorial for the man, who fellow protesters said had died.

Maung Win, 48 years old, arrived at the scene after the shooting had stopped, to help get the injured to hospital. At least half a dozen people appeared to be hurt, including a young man bleeding from his right shoulder. Mr. Maung Win accompanied him to the hospital, alerting the man’s wife to the incident. Doctors said the 26-year-old man, who works at a noodle factory, needed surgery, his wife said.

In a different Yangon neighborhood, Ju Jue, 31, said she heard at least three gunshots as she was getting ready to leave her home for Sunday’s protest. Her mother ran to the window of their apartment and yelled, “Please don’t shoot the young people!”

Ms. Ju Jue and her brother had volunteered to maintain security at the protest, and were preparing to set out onto the street armed only with sticks. Instead they stayed indoors until the chaos outside had subsided. Protest organizers then called on crowds to reconvene about an hour later.

“They cut off the internet, they arrest people, they shoot people, we can’t accept this,” Ms. Ju Jue said.

In the smaller city of Dawei, police pushed their way into the center of an intersection where protesters had gathered, splitting them into two large crowds and firing shots in both directions, said Nu Nu, a 29-year-old who works for a women’s rights nonprofit. Protesters there had none of the protective gear seen in major cities like Yangon: no raincoats, helmets or goggles, she said.

They ran frantically toward houses that had flung open their doors to help them. Ms. Nu Nu ran inside a house and up the stairs to safety as others scrambled all around. She spent the rest of the day collecting tear-gas canisters, bullets and photographic evidence of the assault on protesters.

“We tried to protect ourselves, but from real bullets, you can’t protect yourself,” she said.