

March 29, 2021

To: Antony Blinken, Secretary of State

CC: Jake Sullivan, National Security Advisor; Linda Thomas-Greenfield, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations; Jeff Zients, White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator; Samantha Power, USAID Administrator Nominee

Secretary Blinken:

We write as concerned human rights organizations, humanitarian organizations, medical professional associations, labor organizations, and refugee rights organizations to urge you to take immediate additional actions to address the public health and human rights crisis in Myanmar.

It has now been two months since the Myanmar military executed a coup d'état to overthrow the country's democratically elected government, prompting widespread peaceful protests demanding a return to democracy. The military's security forces have responded with an increasingly brutal crackdown defined by some of the worst human rights violations imaginable: unlawful and arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture, and extrajudicial killings. The last few days have seen the bloodiest crackdown yet: more than 110 civilians have reportedly been killed by security forces, among them children as young as five years old.¹

Myanmar's health care workers, in particular, have been systematically targeted by the military for participating in the civil disobedience movement and providing care to injured protesters.² Many health care workers have been forced into hiding, kidnapped in night raids, or detained arbitrarily pursuant to spurious charges.^{3 4} More than 100 medical students and health care workers have reportedly been arrested since the start of the coup.⁵

The military has escalated its assault on Myanmar's health care system by forcibly occupying at least 36 hospitals in an apparent attempt to arrest injured protesters, or health care workers who are providing care to them.^{6 7} Doctors have been threatened with arrest if they do not return to health facilities under military control, and some providing care in military-occupied hospitals have reported being hampered by fear of threats and attacks.^{8 9} Among the abuses, security forces have opened fire at a hospital's maternity ward, stormed several hospitals and forcibly evacuated the patients and health workers, and opened fire on protesters at a hospital, injuring a hospital worker.^{10 11 12} Health workers who provide care to injured protesters in charity or private hospitals and clinics outside of military control have been brutally beaten, shot at, tracked, arrested, and detained.^{13 14}

Since February 1, at least 510 people have been killed and at least 2,574 have been detained by the Myanmar military, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, in an apparent effort to quash the civil disobedience movement and coerce people to return to work.¹⁵ The military has also denied access to independent doctors and potentially lifesaving, critical treatment for those in detention, a violation of international law.^{16 17} A dire and desperate situation has only gotten worse as reports have surfaced suggesting that Myanmar military and security forces have engaged in extrajudicial killings through sniper fire, indiscriminate shooting into crowds, torture of detainees, and airstrikes in residential areas.^{18 19 20}

The military's crackdown is also generating a public health crisis with potential regional and international impact. By occupying hospitals by force and by persecuting healthcare workers and public health officials, the military has critically impeded Myanmar's health care system – including its COVID-19 testing, treatment, and immunization efforts.^{21 22} As public health experts have noted, the COVID-19 virus does not stop spreading at national borders.²³ Inadequate vaccine coverage in Myanmar and disruptions to local disease response mechanisms could seriously compromise global COVID-19 containment efforts if immediate action is not taken.²⁴

The most pressing needs right now are for protection for protestors and human rights defenders – including health care workers – who are being targeted, and access to independent monitoring and health care for those in detention. We urge the United States to immediately launch a global effort to offer additional protection, support, and services to people being targeted in Myanmar and to refugees who have fled the country. It is also critical that you work with other global leaders to exert the necessary pressure to secure access to detainees for the International Committee of the Red Cross or other independent health care providers.

We appreciate your ongoing effort to identify and sanction members of Myanmar's military responsible for abuses and urge you to lead an effort to build a global coalition in support of targeted sanctions and potential effective arms embargoes so the military cannot continue perpetrating human rights abuses with other sources of weapons and funding. Similarly, we urge you to provide a surge of humanitarian aid and assistance – including for health services such as COVID-19 vaccination efforts – to help the people of Myanmar without bolstering the military. The United States should place a particular focus on securing the cooperation and support of regional partners that have unique capacity and influence – such as member states of the Association for South East Asian Nations – to advance these global human rights and humanitarian responses.

Importantly, you must continue to speak out – loudly and often – against the human rights violations that the Myanmar military is committing against the people of Myanmar, including its health care workers. It is critical that you use the full authority of the United States government to bring the military's brutal crackdown to an end and advance justice and accountability for the full scope of international crimes committed against the people of Myanmar. The leaders of Myanmar's military have for many years demonstrated that they are willing to commit widespread and systematic human rights violations to stay in power. There is no reason to believe that they will stop now, unless the international community, with your leadership, acts to stop them.

Sincerely,

¹ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/dozens-killed-in-myanmar-during-protests-against-military-coup-including-children>

² <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/from-covid-19-to-the-coup-myanmars-doctors-are-risking-their-lives/>

³ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-medics-hiding-regime-targets-hospital-led-disobedience-movement.html>

⁴ <https://www.dw.com/en/myanmar-coup-neighborhood-groups-block-night-arrests/a-56557135>

⁵ <https://aappb.org/?p=13942>

⁶ <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2021/3/25/myanmars-post-coup-healthcare-breakdown>

⁷ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)00656-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)00656-5/fulltext)

⁸ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/3/myanmar-medics-risk-lives-to-treat-injured-in-anti-coup-protests>

⁹ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/from-covid-19-to-the-coup-myanmars-doctors-are-risking-their-lives/>

¹⁰ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Myanmar-Coup/Myanmar-coup-latest-US-halts-all-trade-engagement-with-junta>

¹¹ <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/junta-troops-open-fire-on-fleeing-protesters-at-yangons-asia-royal-hospital>

¹² <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/fresh-clampdown-03082021172256.html>

¹³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/3/myanmar-medics-risk-lives-to-treat-injured-in-anti-coup-protests>

¹⁴ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/03/29/might-get-killed-just-job-myanmar-medics-set-secret-clinics/>

¹⁵ <https://aappb.org/?p=13942>

¹⁶ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/deputy-bank-governors-location-unknown-since-military-detention-wife.html>

¹⁷ <https://aappb.org/?p=1364>

¹⁸ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/11/myanmar-juntas-systematic-killing-spree-targeted-protesters>

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/15/the-death-of-zaw-myat-lynn-allegations-torture-used-on-opposition-activist-in-myanmar>

²⁰ <https://apnews.com/article/myanmar-border-airstrikes-thousands-flee-2035dae56e9ee2556a1d7b6805731372>

²¹ <https://www.bmj.com/content/372/bmj.n704/rr-0>

²² <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2021/3/25/myanmars-post-coup-healthcare-breakdown>

²³ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2021/01/31/how-covid-mutating-and-futility-closing-borders-column/4290527001/>

²⁴ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)00656-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)00656-5/fulltext)